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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

There's no doubt mobile gaming is one of the hot, heavily-trafficked areas of gaming and game development. Many of the big players, in and out of the games community, are dabbling in mobile. Why? Many theories have surfaced: Mobile games are less expensive to make; we are a much more mobile society than even 10 years ago; cell phones have exploded onto the gaming scene, increasing the potential audience of mobile games exponentially.

As time goes on, the mobile gaming business becomes less that of early adopters, and more of the mainstream. Along with that, the difficulties are growing: Games for cell phones and for handheld gaming devices are becoming more expensive to make, as the demand rises; the sheer number of ports to be made for each game on a cell phone is staggering, when one takes into account all of the carriers' proprietary signals and the various handsets' requirements.

But, as you'll find in Joe Blancato's article, "The Free Future of Mobile Gaming," the business continues to be at least a $2 billion a year cash cow – and that's just on cell phones. And while the cell phone games may not be deep or robust right now, Allen Varney speaks with Eric Goldberg of Crossover Technologies about when and how these games will become more engaging in "Un-laming Phone Games." And while we wait, handheld consoles provide a library of classic games, provoking fond, if somewhat bittersweet, memories, as highlighted by Russ Pitts in "Mario Smells Like Mothballs." Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Turning the Tables" from The Escapist Forum: It's amazing how many people EA employs and how few great titles they try to make. Nintendo manages to push out a ton of games with only 1,500 while the most EA seems to have is the *Burnout* series by Criterion. I must be missing some, but Ubisoft is a huge third party company that puts out a lot of really good games, mainly the *Splinter Cell*, and *Assassin's Creed* games. It's hard to think of good EA games, but I think they own Maxis so that's pretty huge. It still seems like EA could at least try to give a [*christmas tree*].

- Gpig

In response to "Turning the Tables" from The Escapist Forum: Having worked at Maxis PRE and POST absorption into the EA mother ship, I can tell you that Maxis as a creative body no longer truly exists outside of Will Wright (who is of course, still a genius). Most of the core developers at Maxis either left the company once EA took complete control or were moved from Walnut Creek to EARS and are now working at their satellite studio in Emeryville working on *Spore*.

I really loved working at Maxis when they still had hands-on control of their company. EARS is a corporate cesspool where creativity goes to die. Just look at what they did with the *Sims* console titles following the takeover. No one asked for *URBZ*, *Sims 2* on PS2, *Sims 2 Pets* on PS2, but there they are, primarily to pad the VPs console portfolio presented to stock holders. "The Sims franchise is one of our strongest performers on the PC. Oh yes, we also have that franchise on the consoles." It's too bad EA can't develop IDEAS outside of their own company, rather than just buying companies that do and turning them into franchise spewing zombies.

- player66

In Response to "The Perception Engineers" from The Escapist Forum: I don't really understand the need for jobs like this to exist. Everything they "discovered" that was wrong with the game is just a common element of **game design**, and should be handled by the development team. But my definition of a game designer includes paying careful attention to focus groups and random testers, and having an innate or learned ability to judge when something is or is not "fun".

I guess there still aren't any trained game designers out there. Everything is still done based on intuition and experience and working up the ranks from programming or making maps.

Maybe in a few years we'll start seeing so-called Game Design schools like Fullsail offering psychology/ludology courses.

- Mumbles

In Response to "The Perception Engineers" from The Escapist Forum: This article couldn't have come at a better time for me. I'm a fourth-year University student, about to graduate with a BA in Cognitive Systems (Psychology). I'm also about to be interviewed for a job with a local game developer, and I've been struggling to figure out how to explain what it is I can offer them, skill-wise. This is it. *This* is what I am educated and prepared to do, this is what I *want* to do. Thank you, Escapist, and thank you, Spanner.

- Voxaryx

In Response to "EA Talks Microtransactions, PS3 Network" from The Escapist News Room: Microtransactions are something that really rub me the wrong way as a gamer. People are paying $60 for current generation titles and companies want to fleece them for more money? It is ridiculous. I just hope that any great games that come down the pipe in the future will not have a microtransaction system implemented. I would hate to miss out on a great game, just because the publisher wants to squeeze the consumer for every penny they got. I'm looking at you *Halo 3*! As if expansion packs and episodes weren't enough.

- heavyfeul

In Response to "EA Talks Microtransactions, PS3 Network" from The Escapist News Room: I don't have a problem with microtransactions when they are truly "micro." I mean, a quarter here, a dollar there, sixty cents for this, that, and the other. Five bucks is not a microtransaction. Five bucks is a plain old regular transaction.

- Bongo Bill

In Response to "EA Talks Microtransactions, PS3 Network" from The Escapist News Room: I can understand mini expansions or episode content for a good $5-20 but when it comes to little extras like skins and models I think it's a rip off just like a collectors edition will have the same kind of things such as an extra skin or a middle of the road goofy power up for a price of $55 instead of the regular $50. I really hope this doesn't become the norm for online RTS or FPS games because I won't be paying a couple extra dollars to use the weapon that will let me kill more effectively.

- triumph

A Better Way to Play:
Mobile Games Bring Back the Fun
by John Scott

From the titles and roles of its employees to the credit scroll at the end, the game industry has aped the movie business from its inception. Each new advancement in technology has created room for new imitations. Gameplay and fun have given way to storytelling and mood. Games are no longer just made to be fun, but to be experienced.

Instead of creating new and interesting concepts, the arms-race between Sony and Microsoft has culminated in the creation of a "New Hollywood." As the cost of creating games rises and the fascination with Hollywood increases, the risk of creating original intellectual property wanes in favor of regurgitating established brands such *Madden* or an old-time favorite of the industry: the movie tie-in. Recently, publishers have begun searching even further into the Hollywood catalogue for established ideas and IP. *Scarface*, a videogame remake of the Brian De Palma film from the early '80s, was released earlier this year and just announced sales of more than a million units.

One exciting ability of next-generation consoles is the ability to create realistic human characters with real emotions. Certainly, exploring emotion isn't a bad thing, but when it is one of a game's main features, you can bet there hasn't been much focus on actual gameplay. There are only so many hours in a programmer's week, after all.

As console developers continue their Holy Grail quest for realism and virtual movies, where does that leave the actual games? The truth is, gamers are going to have to go elsewhere to get their gaming satisfaction. Graphical realism and movie tie-ins are in. Fun and gameplay are out. While New Hollywood creates interactive movies and creepy-real Tiger Woods, gameplay continues to exist on a much smaller scale. Handheld games, once the Sandra Bernhardt of the industry, have taken the gaming flag and gamers are flocking to it.

Overlooked in the post-launch hubbub, a recent article by James Surowiecki of *The New Yorker* delivered some promising news regarding the state of

gaming. While Sony and Microsoft engaged in a modern caveman fight for supremacy of your living room and market share, Nintendo quietly became the only company out of the three to achieve profitability. And it's not even close.

Nintendo's success can be attributed to the fact that they have stated a desire to stay within their competency: videogames. When the DS first launched in the U.S., it was met with overwhelming skepticism. It was an underpowered machine with a gimmicky premise. Third-party publishers dismissed it at first and swore allegiance to the upcoming Sony PSP, a more-powerful, sleeker device that promised to deliver console realism in a handheld.

But a funny thing happened: The mass market discovered the joy of puppy love. *Nintendogs*, a game where you adopt and play with a virtual puppy, became a smash hit, helping the DS top 27 million units worldwide. Nintendo followed up the success of *Nintendogs* with *Mario Cart DS* and *New Super Mario Brothers*. All achieved remarkable success, critically and financially. The DS was the console to own, and it showed everyone

that gameplay mattered more than graphics and realism. Just like that, fun was back.

While the DS has taken off into orbit, the PSP has been a bit of a disappointment for Sony and the third-party publishers that supported it. Trumpeted as the future of handheld gaming at launch, the PSP quickly gained the status of expensive paperweight to many gamers due to a paucity of attractive titles. Most of the PSP's catalogue were ports of games that could be found on the PlayStation 2. Original titles were few and far between. With a collective yawn, gamers voted with their wallets and put the PSP in a distant second behind the DS.

However, after seeing the success of original titles on the DS, Sony and PSP developers have realized that the market is in demand of original games. New, quirky titles such as *Locoroco, Work Time Fun* and *Hot PXL* have made or are making their way to the PSP. Once the bastion of console ports and ill-suited shooters, it is now becoming the home to creativity and uniqueness.

On an even smaller scale, companies like Digital Chocolate and Gameloft offer some unique and fun titles for the cell phone. Limited graphically, these companies get by on ingenuity to create games on the go. Despite being littered with low-quality ports and *Tetris* clones, the mobile industry is budding with optimism and has a bright future.

While the big kings of industry fight their console wars at the expense of fun, the mobile and portable field is taking gaming to new and exciting places, either by way of new input medium or by returning to tried and true low-tech methods of game design. One has to wonder how much market share they're going to have to take (mobile gaming is the fastest growing sector in the game industry) before everyone else starts listening. COMMENTS

John Scott is a contributor to The Escapist.

" the mobile industry is BUDDING with OPTIMISM and has a BRIGHT FUTURE "

un-laming
PHONE GAMES

Eric Goldberg says your phone's games will get better

by Allen Varney

If mobile phones are the hallmark of our high-tech networked age, why do most of their games date from 1987? Check this June 2006 list of best-selling phone games (.PDF), compiled by Telephia, a performance measurement research firm in the mobile biz: *Tetris, Ms. Pac-Man, Galaga, Monopoly, Frogger, Solitaire, Scrabble* – hello, what year is this?

"Mobile gaming is the only game platform where backlist is often more powerful than frontlist," says Eric Goldberg, Managing Director of Crossover Technologies. "*Tetris* is arguably still the most popular game sold in the world, certainly the most popular in China. *Tetris* sales alone would make it the third or fourth largest mobile game publisher in the Western world. It makes it harder to introduce new titles."

Why do classic games rule our phones? "Because you have one tiny little screen to show your game," Eric says. "It's worse than Wal-Mart, where you at least have 250 visible shelf facings in the game section. A phone's entire merchandising area is less than one-sixteenth the size of a PC screen. It's 'the tyranny of 18-25 characters'" – the space for the game's name. Only strong, instantly recognized brands can dance on so small a pinhead. "And even if you're on the deck [the phone display], the question is, as with newspapers, whether you're above or below the fold." Eric can cite studies about how many phone customers see your game based on your location in the phone menu hierarchy. If your game is three screens deep, players locate it four times more often than at four screens deep. The deeper you're nested, the more you're hidden.

In years past, as board member for and advisor to publishers, Eric has worked to bring innovative games to the mobile platform, but for now, he's tabled that ambition. There's too much headwind.

"The first issue [for publishers] is making sure the carriers will place their game, so their first priority is coming up with a name people will recognize. The problem is that the market forces them to become very conservative. In 2005, I was asked on the E3 and GDC stages, what were the main issues determining success in 2005-06 in the mobile gaming industry. I said 'carrier relations and post-production.' They asked, 'What about creating innovative games?' I said, 'You'll notice I didn't say anything about that.'"

Even so, Eric believes the mobile field in the medium term "still has magnificent potential. I believe it has a good chance to become the dominant game platform."

It's a carrier world; the rest of us just live in it.

Before we get there, though, the whole system has to change. The questions are when and how. Eric has some ideas.

* * *

In the 20 years I've known Eric Goldberg, he has sounded persistently short of sleep.

A lifelong New Yorker, Eric started designing games in 1977, at age 16, at the legendary tabletop wargaming company Simulations Publications, Inc. I met him in 1984, when he was the hard-working R&D Director for the paper-game company West End Games. He co-designed (with his longtime collaborator, Greg Costikyan) the original edition of the satiric roleplaying game *PARANOIA*, then commissioned me to write one of its early adventures. In 1989, Eric started Crossover Technologies, an early – and impractically premature, it turned out – online game company. Crossover's biggest success was *MadMaze* on the Prodigy service, the first online game to gain a million players.

On a trip to London in summer 1999, Eric noticed people sending SMS messages by cell phone, a practice still unusual then in America. "At the time it cost 10P per message, roughly 15 or 16 cents, to do that," he said in a 2002 interview. "At the end of 1999 there were a billion SMS messages being sent in the British Isles each month at 10P a crack." After studying cell phone installed-base projections that predicted hockey-stick growth, Eric raised a million in venture capital and, with Greg Costikyan and Jonathan Zamick, started a "Silicon Alley" tech company, Unplugged Games. His timing was better here; Unplugged launched games with Verizon in December 2000 and Sprint in January 2001. However, Unplugged ran aground for two reasons: too little money and extremely bad luck. Unplugged secured new financing, but scheduled it for September 18th, 2001 – "which, as a date to be in New York City and trying to get things done was, shall we say, poor timing."

Selling Unplugged to Zamick, Eric became an advisor and strategist for mobile gaming firms such as Digital Chocolate, Kayak Interactive, (M)forma (now Hands-On Mobile), In-Fusio, Reaxion, Vindigo and Warner Music Group. He travels a lot: In mid-November, he visited Beijing, where he gave the keynote speech at the first China Mobile Game International Summit. When I finally connected with him, he had just returned to his Park Avenue apartment and was unspeakably jet-lagged. For Eric, that's basically normal.

What is he advising about nowadays? "They [mobile gaming publishers] generally want to know what the carriers are going for, what are the trends. ... One or two are concerned about M&A [mergers and acquisitions]. (I advised Centerscore on its sale to Vivendi Games earlier this year.) They all care about the carriers – which things sell well, strategies for deck placement, carrier network connectivity.

"It's a carrier world; the rest of us just live in it. We love the carriers' customer acquisition – we just wish they would share it more often." But carriers have little interest in catering to publishers' whims; "carriers measure their game revenue in tenths of a percent of their total income."

Even so, "mobile gaming worldwide was a $2 billion industry in 2005 – in the U.S., half a billion; in Europe maybe half a billion, probably slightly under; Asian markets over a billion, with Korea and Japan leading. It is arguably the second largest delivery medium for games, after consoles. Many well-funded new entrants are swarming into the market: Vivendi, EA, RealNetworks. Growth has slowed in the leading markets, but that's mostly a consequence of the law of large numbers: it's easier to have large percentage increases in a $50 million market than in a half-billion market."

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Even when not piling up frequent-flyer miles to China, Eric thinks in global terms.

● "Korea and, to an extent, Japan are playing in a different league from everyone else. They're much more advanced in technology, business models, value chain, you name it. In Japan, the dominant players are Bandai, Square Enix, Namco – the native players, who have best-selling games from other media like *Pac-Man* and *Final Fantasy*. Korea tends to do games that are highly consumable, with the market life of a mayfly, perhaps as little as four to six weeks. This is a barrier to entry for Western publishers; the games you introduce will cycle through the market far too soon for you to be ready with the next releases. In Japan and Korea, Western companies are trying to come in. But just as the experience of Japanese and Korean companies in America has been dismal – a handful of Japanese companies have achieved success in the U.S. market, usually after three years of failure – there has been no comparable U.S. success in the Japanese market, with a couple of notable exceptions like *Tetris*.

● "The BRIC countries are coming – Brazil, Russia, India, China. China is a huge potential market; though its mobile game numbers last year (2005) were not greater than US$30 million, there are 400 million mobile phone users. Almost everyone has tried to go into China, because it's 'going to be really, really big,' and discovered that the market has yet to produce really big revenue numbers. Also, the Chinese government has restricted foreign ownership. A further major issue with China is that less than half the handsets are game-capable. The per-capita income is below $10K annually, perhaps in the $6-7K range, as in India.

● "The Indian market is impressive, but they still have the remnants of the 'license Raj'; they're stuck in more red tape than even the Chinese market. India does have a more diverse and freewheeling mobile carrier environment – five or seven effective carriers, as opposed to China, which is basically an effective duopoly of China Mobile and China Unicom."

Great – but what about the games? Any prospects cooler than 1980s arcade games? Basically no, Eric says. Not yet.

Why is it so challenging?

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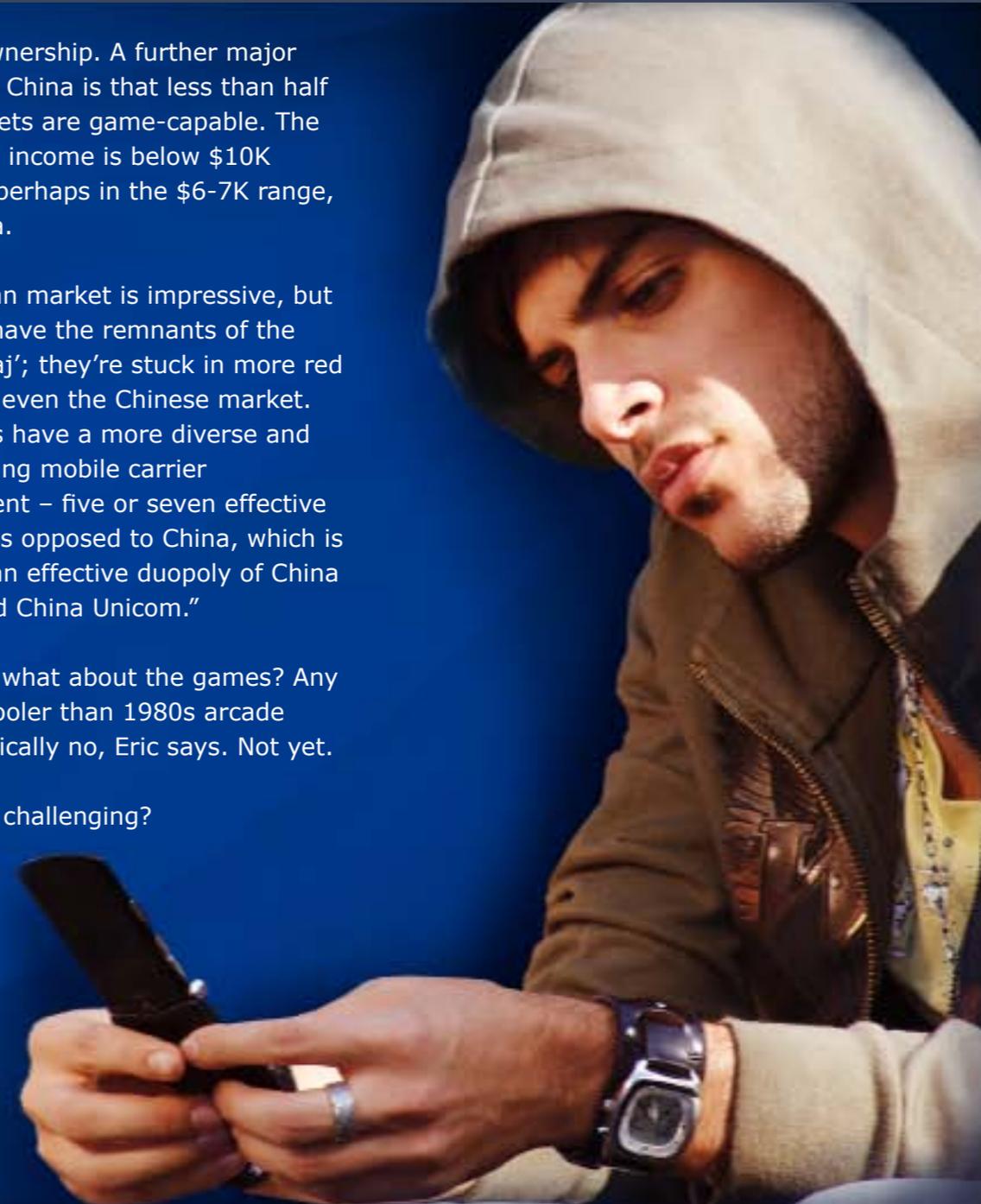
The cost of entry into mobile gaming, once dirt cheap, has grown formidable, not so much in production but afterward.

"Post-production, which includes porting, as of a year ago, was a higher cost than game development. In 2004, to launch an A title worldwide, you needed to do 500 [ports] – different versions for Sprint, Verizon and Cingular, then a different version for each handset. In Europe, you have to do it for T-Mobile or Vodafone, then one English version, one German, one Dutch." (Gaming god John Carmack, who recently created the mobile titles *DoomRPG* and *Orcs & Elves*, has blogged about the irritations of cell phone game programming.)

Eric sees some signs of improvement. "Nokia, with its Series 40s and 60s, has made sure there's relatively little need for porting needed between phones within these series. And there are companies making porting tools that make it easier, like Tira Wireless and Mobile Complete.

"But the situation is 'less worse' rather than 'better.' And it cannot be fully automated, no matter what anyone tells you."

What about funding all these ports with the PC world's cash cow, online games? "Nobody has particularly figured out how to make multiplayer work as a business model. Many European carriers don't support subscription revenues. Without subscriptions (or a similar continuing-revenue model such as advertising), there's no obvious way to make multiplayer games work in the marketplace."

Great. So why does Eric still think mobile can surpass consoles to become the dominant gaming platform? How can he be so excited about mobile?

"From a business viewpoint, it's easy: It's a $2 billion market. There are over 200 million wireless phone subs in the U.S. The mobile phone is ubiquitous, portable, networked and is voice-capable. It's a field that works – though right now it's going through consolidation, the pain that happens when the companies discover that everyone is crowding into their space.

"Against that, it's not a game platform. On the network side, it's networked to optimize one-on-one activity, mirroring the voice phone call – but that doesn't mean it can't support new technology.

"There are some carriers who are doing some good work – game-friendly stuff. But at the end of the day, the games tail will not wag the carrier dog. As long as the carriers are essential, rather than dumb pipes, they block the way to a more application-friendly environment. Their business preferences create an environment where things don't talk nice to each other, so they maintain more control. Their nightmare is that they become just dumb pipes, like ISPs have become for the internet.

"The main bottlenecks resulting from the carrier infrastructure and business culture will eventually be removed by WiMax or one of the other standards. In all likelihood, by 2011-12 you'll see the functional equivalent [on mobile platforms] of the current internet."

Speed the day. *Tetris* is a great game, but another five or six years of falling blocks is enough. [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.*
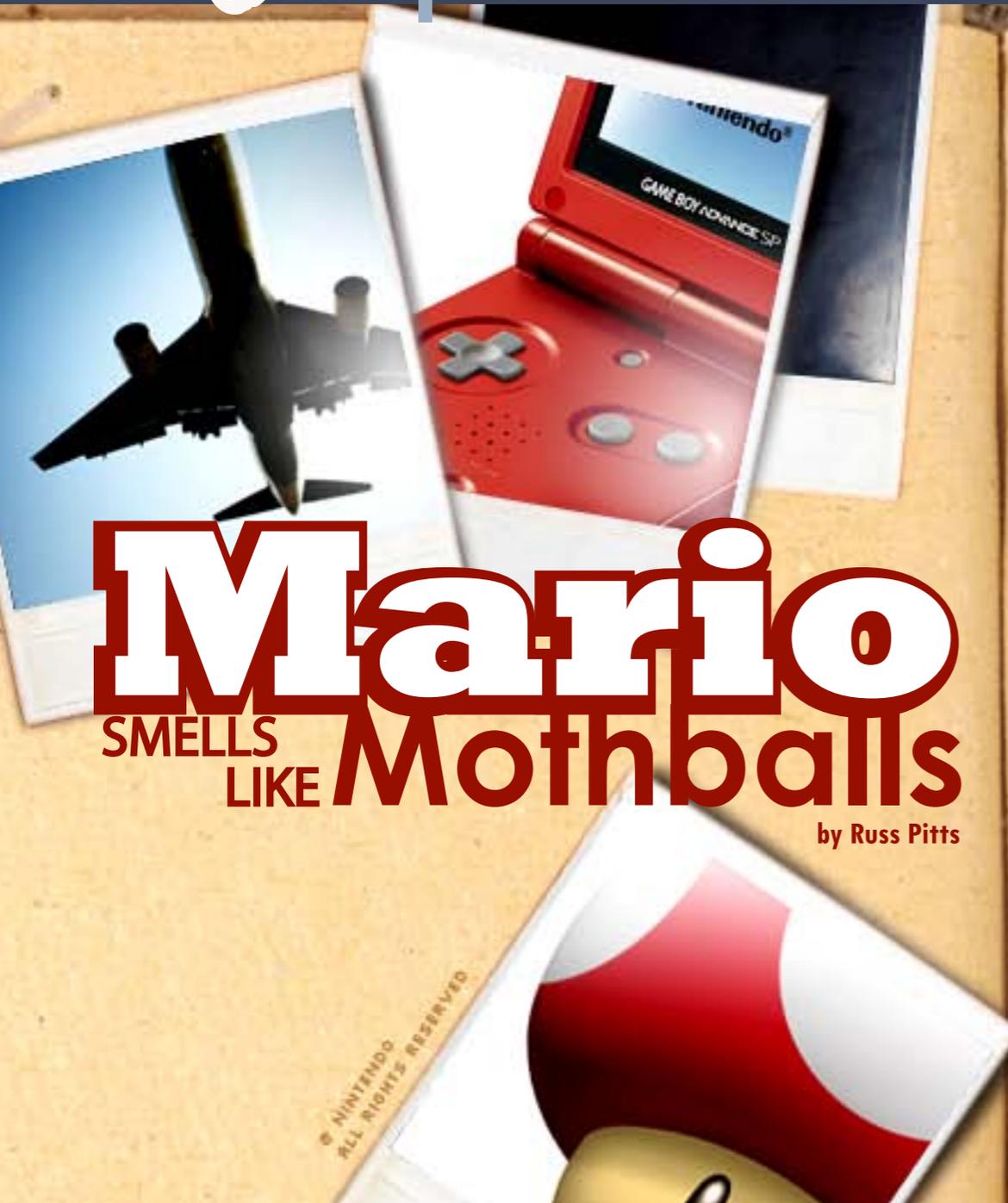
Mario
SMELLS LIKE Mothballs

by Russ Pitts

Boston's Logan International Airport is more than 80 years old. This comes readily to mind every time one flies into or out of Boston. It's apparent in the dilapidated structure, barely-sufficient terminal access and the many absent amenities hard to put one's finger on, but which, when present in other airports, make the whole experience of traveling much more pleasant. Logan, to put it bluntly, is a miserable airport.

Boston itself is hundreds of years old, and to be fair, the city's considerable age shows just as well (or as poorly) as the airport's, but you have to give a city with a history and culture like Boston's a bit of a break. Besides, if the crumbling buildings, too-narrow streets and countless miscellanies associated with life in a historical monument get you down, you can always move. The downside there, of course, is that you would then have to drive even further to get to Logan; which is the situation in which I found myself last Christmas.

I lost nearly an hour of my life riding shotgun on I-90, playing Mario on my GBA as I was driven to the airport (The Drive). Shortly thereafter, I lost another

hour waiting in line to be screened for explosives and/or carpet knives (The Screening), and prior to settling in to lose still a third hour waiting for my flight (The Wait), I set off in search of what is known in the traveling trade as "The Seat."

Back when Logan was last renovated, sometime in the 1980s, electrical outlets were only good for plugging in the occasional vacuum cleaner and were located on walls or columns easy for cleaning workers to locate … and away from most of the terminal seating. Therefore, most often, The Seat is not even a seat at all, rather a space of floor near an outlet upon which a power-seeking passenger must squat. But every once in a while, a Logan traveler will come across a Seat that is exactly that: an honest-to-Vishnu chair near a power outlet.

In the past decade or so, these Seats have become as rare as unicorns, and last Christmas, as I trundled from The Screening to The Wait, I spotted one. It was empty. I almost wept. And then I ran.

> ## "it occurred to me that MARIO

As I flung myself into The Seat, bags flapping around me like dislodged feathers, I emitted a barbaric yawp of glee and reached into my bag for my GameBoy Advance SP. It was nearly dry from The Drive, and after The Wait, I was in for a long "The Flight" down to Texas. I wanted to be sure I had enough

juice; there was a lot of Mario to be played, after all, and now, thanks to The Seat, I could juice it up from the comfort of … well, The Seat. In that exact moment, when I'd plugged my GBA into the providential outlet, fired up Super Mario World and thought about Texas, it occurred to me that Mario evoked the smell of mothballs and that mothballs smell like Galveston, Texas.

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Galveston is a sleepy little town on the Texas Gulf Coast. Once the gateway to the almost-fertile, wide-open expanses of one of the nation's newest states, Galveston, in the 1800s, welcomed ships from the old world with open arms. Countless scores of European immigrants were added to America's melting pot by way of Galveston, lured by the smell of prosperity and the hope of the American Dream. But that was before The Hurricane.

In 1900, the deadliest storm ever recorded struck Galveston head on. Known as "The Galveston Hurricane of 1900" or, colloquially as "The Hurricane," the storm took more American lives than

any other storm either before or since and officially ended Galveston's halcyon days as a major metropolitan city. The city would never recover from "The Hurricane" and today it is home to little more than a flotilla of shrimp boats, a small army of retirees and the headless friend of a member of the Dupont family. The aroma of prosperity has been replaced by the smell of low tide mixed with mothballs.

It was this smell which greeted me when I arrived in Galveston for the first time in 1985, shortly after the death of my grandfather. My mother, my grandmother and I were in town to visit some relative or another, and retrieve photographs of the deceased. I'd never met this relative, and quite honestly, from the age of the photographs in which she appeared, I assumed her to be dead. When I got my first noseful of Galveston's briny air, I silently wished she were.

My grandfather worked at a spring factory, had lost most of his right hand in an accident, had served in the 101st Airborne Regiment in WWII, and had been shot down over Germany and spent time in a German prison camp. He would

come home from work on Fridays with a case of beer on each arm, ice them both down in a big red cooler on the porch and then sit outside drinking beer with salt sprinkled on the top of the can, smoking cigarettes one after the other. I'd sit with him, and together we'd watch the light fade from the Earth until the only thing I could see was his face, highlighted in orange as he took a drag from his cigarette. On those nights, it felt like we were the only two people on the planet.

He gave me my first taste of beer, taught me how to ride a motorcycle (mainly by watching) and in more ways than I can

> ## evoked the smell of MOTHBALLS"

> "I have his hat in my closet and *carry his KNIFE* in my pocket. **Cancer** took his life and *left me the* KNICKKNACKS"

count, showed me what it meant to be a man and a Texan. I have his hat in my closet and carry his knife in my pocket. Cancer took his life and left me the knickknacks. As the aroma of Galveston struck me full-on, I wished I was spending time with him instead of digging through old boxes in a stupid little town in an ugly old house with a person I'd never met. I knew it was wrong, but to my child's mind, the trade made perfect sense. "I'll trade you an unknown old lady card for the grandfather." But life doesn't work like that.

If the eyes are the window to the soul, the nose is the back door. Our memories of things, places and events are inextricably tied to our memories of their smells. Sharing space in my mental repository with other suggestive aromas is the putrid stench of decomposing aquatic life mixed with the chemical tang of naphthalene. The combined power of these heady nasal irritants literally took away my asthmatic breath in 1985, but today, owing to the electrochemical voodoo of my mind, I associate their smell with one of the most unexpectedly

best times of my life from which a succession of great, somewhat-related memories which have followed.

To explain the first step on the road to Mario smelling like mothballs, allow me to share a secret about assumed-to-be-dead relatives: They usually have lots of cool stuff lying around, and my great-something-or-another in Galveston was no exception. A few moments after my mother and I arrived in her home, I was presented with a box of Archie comics, which had been waiting in a secret closet of mystery on the off chance that a child might happen by with a few days to kill. And so, while my mother and my grandmother retired with Mrs. Assumed-to-be-dead to dig up photos of the deceased, I ensconced myself in a spare bedroom, in this house, in the town that smelled of mothballs, and set about escaping into a box full of wonder.

Archie comics aren't Great Literature by any stretch, but Archie, Jughead and Veronica seemed to me to be ambassadors from a forgotten age, wooing me with their hints at a life that used to be. Half of the jokes barely made

sense almost 30 years after their publish (Archie stands behind Veronica's latest suitor, preparing, the suitor assumes, coffee for his guest. "One lump or two," Archie asks, his upraised fist clenching a cudgel), but the clarity of the narrative and brightly colored panels spoke to me; took me away from my pain, transporting me to a place where even conflict is funny.

It was, not to put too fine point on it, as close to Nirvana as I'd yet gotten, before I even knew what that word meant. My mind began to consider the possibility that not all surely-dead relatives are created equal, that even the worst pain will pass and that sometimes, the memories of the past can help heal the wounds of the present, and however we cherish those memories, however we preserve them, we're better off for their presence. Mothballs, in other words, can sometimes be a good thing.

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The terminal slowly filled to maximum occupancy levels. Mothers, daughters, aunts, uncles, crying babies, gun-toting

National Guardsmen, frustrated airline workers and potential terrorists were all cramming as close as they possibly could to where they guessed the line would form once the gate attendants started collecting boarding passes, sharing breath in one of the oldest cities of what was once the melting pot of the world. Most failed to notice that they held "Zone 237" tickets, and would inevitably be in the way of the 200 some-odd passengers ahead of them in line. Either that or they didn't care. Holiday travel tends to send altruism straight out the window.

I made rude comments to myself about the nature of selfishness, completely failing to note the irony as I monopolized the terminal's entire allotment of power plugs by recharging my laptop and GBA simultaneously. I also, I must admit, was barely aware of the hubbub, having spent The Wait escaping into the mothball-scented Land of Mario, via an assortment of GameBoy cartridges assembled from the entire lifespan of the device's various incarnations.

I'd spent the previous weeks visiting every game store within driving distance, asking permission to look through their used GameBoy game cabinet and returning home with bags full of treasures for a song. Each expedition, each venture into each locked cabinet and each triumphant return reminded my mind's nose of the preservative tang of naphthalene, and the postponed joy and borrowed memories made possible through that singularly noxious miracle of science.

That memories of Galveston should also fill my mind during the Christmas holiday (at Logan Airport of all places), is no mere happenstance. Nor is it coincidence that my fondest memories of escape seem always to be tinged with the deepest pains of grieving, and among the most putrid smells imaginable. For as I occupied The Seat, dwindling away the long minutes of The Wait, I enjoyed my latest escape, and tried not to think too much about my latest, perhaps deepest loss. One which I knew I'd survive (perhaps better off), but which hurt nonetheless. I didn't know my wife as long as I knew my grandfather, and she's certainly not deceased, but I loved her, and she's nevertheless lost to me.

As I flew that day to the only place left that felt like home, I spent time with my old friends Mario and Zelda, catching up on their adventures and laughing at old jokes. I was 10 years old again, and working hard, again, to exhaust a seemingly inexhaustible supply of serial entertainment in the hope of finding peace through escape. I was on a plane smelling faintly of old upholstery, peanuts and kerosene, but in my mind it smelled like mothballs. 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.

the Free Future of mobile gaming

by Joe Blancato

I don't often have occasion to carry my GBA SP, so the majority of my on-the-go gaming takes place on my phone. If I'm ever bored, all I have to do is hop online and navigate over to Cingular Games, and $5 later, I'm milling through a text-based adventure game, a *Breakout* clone or computer chess. The only problem is, $5 is a pretty big price tag to put on a five-minute diversion.

Doesn't "free" sound a lot better? Greystripe, Inc.'s Gamejump offers over 300 free cell phone games for download, in exchange for about 30 seconds of your time. Download as many games as you want, turn over your email address and zip code, and instead of charging per-download, the games display short, targeted full-screen ads every time they're booted up.

To get a better perspective on Gamejump, I spoke with Michael Chang, Greystripe's CEO. Chang's background would intimidate Wall Street investment bankers. In his time with Gadzoox Networks, a networking hardware company, he brokered a lucrative partnership deal with Microsoft and oversaw a product line with a $65 million profit margin. He also clocked time at a

venture capital firm, and recently picked up his MBA from Duke University.

Chang is out to change the mobile gaming world. "We truly believe [ad-supported downloads are] a revolution in mobile gaming," he says. "The market we play in is currently a $3 billion a year market. ... What's exciting for us is, by providing a free business model to that entire market, we're not only going to grow it but change how the industry delivers content." They call the technology that powers that business model AdWRAP. It was envisioned as a new way to get content into the hands of mobile users. By removing the financial barrier — that $5 fee — the amount of potential downloads skyrockets. Gamejump has "hundreds of thousands of users," says Chang.

However, hundreds of thousands of people is a tiny slice of the mobile gaming pie. With over 150 million cell phone users in America alone, and nearly all of them in long-term contracts with major carriers, until you're on a carrier deck (that little page that shows up when you visit the web on your phone, usually powered by your service provider), you're nobody. Chang says

they're "on trial with a couple carriers," but wouldn't say which ones. For now, Gamejump is their proof of concept, and it also pays the bills. They charge advertisers a $30 CPM (cost per thousand impressions or views) and share that revenue with developers and publishers. A developer makes between $0.50 and $1 per download, which is about 20 percent of what he could expect to make if he were on a carrier's for-pay deck, but Chang claims developers "make it up in volume." And besides, making it onto a carrier's deck is a big "if" for a lot of the guys Greystripe works with. "The smaller the publisher gets, the more valuable our service becomes, because it's those publishers that have the hardest time getting any sort of distribution," Chang says. Since AdWRAP works in the volume business, Greystripe has more of an incentive to work with everyone, little guys included, whereas a for-pay model is better served by pushing proven concepts users have already bought.

While they're trying to make it in the majors, Chang is also shopping AdWRAP to other game companies, specifically casual game providers that want to go mobile. "We would be backending another game provider, maybe a casual game provider, with our catalog, with our mobile game offerings," he says. Their current focus is expanding their game catalogue to offer more to people outside their current core group: 13- to 34-year-olds, two-thirds of which are male. Chang says the normal mobile gaming demographic skews a bit older and more female, mostly because "the concept of free downloads is a little bit new, [so] it may skew a little bit younger for people that are a little bit more familiar with the technology. And mobile gaming in general skews a little bit older and more female because much of that [activity] is coming through the … carrier deck, which is more accessible to the general public." Indeed, Chang believes the AdWRAP technology is the way of the future. "We look at [ad-supported downloads] as the way carriers will be moving." And when the carriers finally do come shopping for an ad-supported solution, there's really only one show in town: "We saw this fairly early and have been able to maintain our lead," he says.

Part of maintaining that lead is keeping an eye out on mobile gaming's future. I asked him what things will be like when the DS2, Nintendo's inevitable follow-up to the highly successful DS, can make phone calls. "[There will] be a little bit of a blur; once you have the connectivity, is it also a phone?" he asks. "[But] the primary purpose [of a portable gaming machine] won't be a phone, so you still will have these two different markets. I don't think one's going to take over the other any time soon." Of course, Chang also thinks the connected future of gaming systems means there's a future for AdWRAP there, specifically in the digital distribution scene. "There are a lot of things that need to be worked out for digital distribution on those types of platforms," he tells me. "I think it's a little ways out, but definitely, once it's there, our service will be, too."

[COMMENTS]

The Escapist, a shadowy flight into the dangerous world of a man who does not exist. Joe Blancato, a young Associate Editor on a crusade to champion the cause of the innocent, the powerless, the helpless in a world of criminals who operate above the law. Joe Blancato, a lone crusader in a dangerous world. The world ... of The Escapist.

With over 150 million cell phone users in America alone, and nearly all of them in long-term contracts with major carriers, until you're on a carrier deck, you're nobody.

The Tao of Pikachu

by Gearoid Reidy

Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, once wrote: "Too much success is not an advantage. Do not tinkle like jade, or clatter like stone chimes."

Lao Tzu's words speak directly to the essence of *Pokémon*. There is such a thing as too much success, and *Pokémon* has it. This is the Tao of Pikachu.

Pokémon is, along with *Mario* and possibly *Tomb Raider*, one of the few gaming franchises that just about everybody knows - it's not exactly the first game that comes to mind when one thinks of overlooked gems. In its various incarnations, it has sold well over 100 million games, second only to the Mario series, and is far and away the most successful mobile game of all time.

And yet, for all its sales, when they draw up the all-time greatest game lists, *Pokémon* doesn't rate. Not a single game on the list appears on the latest IGN Reader's Top 100 games list, a list that features, among other highlights, *Smackdown vs Raw 2006* and two separate *Ratchet and Clank* games.

If it does show up, it's always an afterthought: No. 70 in 2005 and No. 72 in 2003 in the IGN Editor's lists, behind such luminaries *as NCAA Football 2003* and *Rayman 2*. Not that The Escapist itself fares any better – this is the 74th issue of The Escapist and the first time *Pokémon* has been more than a passing reference.

The problem lies in the Tao of Pikachu. *Pokémon* became so much more than a game. It became one of those ludicrous kids' phenomena, a Tickle-Me *Harry Potter* that inspired media hype and religious hate across all boundaries and creeds, that its soul – one man's dream encapsulated in a Game Boy cart - was forgotten.

Forgotten, not just by the general public but, shamefully, by those who call themselves gamers. It became so associated with children that we gamers, a group as concerned with our image as a roomful of pimply teenage Goths wearing last year's fashions, ostracized it.

Compared with Harry Potter, the multi-billion kids' franchise that succeeded it, the reaction to *Pokémon* is put into stark contrast. Despite its massive success, indeed oftentimes even because of it, adult fans who enjoyed the books have stuck with it. They proudly state that they enjoy children's literature; at worst,

they half-hide their reading behind the "adult" covers.

Pokémon, by comparison, is sniffed over; it's that thing kids play. We'll be over here, running down hookers in *Grand Theft Auto* because, you know, that's what maturity is.

Gaming loses. Again.

A Journey of a Thousand Miles …
As the *Pokémon* tsunami engulfed the West, the great mouth of popular culture swallowed up a little game, originally created to let city-born kids experience the same joy its creator experienced collecting bugs in a then-rural part of Tokyo.

A game that was originally about kids collecting and trading together, a game in which no blood was spilled, no wardrobes malfunctioned and which emphasized loyalty and friendship became associated with schoolyard stabbings over trading cards, litigious accusations about racketeering and animal rights whining.

You can only imagine how Satoshi Tajiri, the game-loving creator of *Pokémon*, must have felt as his labor of love became not just ignored by serious gamers, but a lightning rod for mentalists, both amateur and professional.

Tajiri is a genuine otaku done good, a bug-loving computer geek who played Space Invaders so much the arcade gave it to him to take it home; who rose from making his own fanzines on photocopiers to finding himself rich beyond his wildest dreams. And he remains a true nerd: The first question asked by *Time*, one of the few Western outlets to gain interview access to the reclusive Tajiri, was, "Are you OK? You look pretty tired."

By the time the money-making machine was done with it, Tajiri's little game was all but forgotten. The trading cards, the cartoon series, the movies – and the hysteria, the epilepsy, the accidental "swastikas," the supposed racism, the bad journalism and the downright sickening lies – all combined to overshadow the essence of *Pokémon*: a simple, charming little game, one that changed the course of the entire game industry.

… Must Begin From the First Step
Would Nintendo now be sitting once again on the precipice of market domination were it not for the billions Satoshi Tajiri gave them? Consider when *Pokémon* was first released in Japan, as *Pocket Monsters Red and Green*: February 1996, four months before the release of the Nintendo 64.

The Game Boy, a seven-year-old piece of technology, was on its way out. After a solid launch, the software-starved N64 would soon fall behind Sony's flashy new PlayStation brand and remain there for a decade.

Pokémon's success was vital both to Nintendo and to portable gaming. This was the dominant era of graphical flash – when if it wasn't in three dimensions, it wasn't worth playing.

The secret of *Pokémon*'s success is well known: the ingenious decision to release two copies of the game, each with different *Pokémon* to collect, tapped into the collecting impulse hard-wired into every schoolboy's brain. From there, all Japan fell for *Pokémon*.

The elementary schoolkid word of mouth that led to its success in Japan can be seen more recently in Sega's *Mushi King*, a decidedly less cute form of insect battling game. Yet *Pokémon* remains

The problem lies in the Tao of Pikachu. Pokémon became so much more than a game

> ## "Most Western game companies can't design a single cute character... Pokémon, in contrast, had 150"

superior, its combination of cuteness and fighting making it appealing both to boys and girls.

That appeal is carefully crafted. The main quest, a boy setting off to discover the world, is refreshingly free from evil armies, stolen kid sisters or any of the other stereotypes that dog most RPGs when it comes to "setting off on a quest time." It straddles that perfect line between reality and fantasy, the kind of thing that could happen to a small boy in a world seen just a little bit sideways, filled with the exotic.

Most Western game companies can't design a single cute character on which to base a game – and although they hardly try much anymore, *Pokémon* was released in the heyday of second-rate scribbles like Crash Bandicoot, Spyro and Gex.

Pokémon, in contrast, had 150; and one of them was Pikachu, a Hello Kitty for a new generation, the kind of iconic character that will probably still linger in the media 50 years from now when the Game Boy is not even a memory. Pikachu's rise to stardom was never part of the plan – that was a work of genius by the creators of the anime – and goes

to show just how much care each part of the game was given.

Just as in the later *Nintendogs*, it is the sense of loyalty and friendship engendered in these fuzzy, pixelated creatures that makes people love the game. As sappy as it sounds, I can still remember the names I gave to first generation *Pokémon*, although I played it almost eight years ago. I still recall the sense of entirely irrational but very real pride I felt from watching my cleverly named Bulbasaur, Sauron, grow into a fearsome Venasaur.

And that's not even to mention the carefully-crafted combat system, the revolution of trading between players that became a key feature of the DS and the influence it had in making RPGs one of the mainstays of Western gaming.

In terms of innovation, influence, soul and sheer old-fashioned playability, those little red, green and blue *Pokémon* carts had far more than the vast majority of today's multi-million dollar blockbusters.

Straw Dogs
Above all, it's the connection to our heartstrings, that sense of freedom and

the feeling of adventure that makes *Pokémon* a cut above its rivals; and for all its cash-ins, a truly deserved success.

So put aside your snobbish maturity, your that's-for-kids attitude and your image fears. *Pokémon* is a series that ranks at the very top of what this industry can do in terms of influence, design and sheer fun. It is a game that you owe yourself to play and a franchise that deserves your respect.

As for Nintendo, with every spin-off from *Pokémon Colosseum* to the recent *Pokémon* XD failing to capture the heart and charm of the original, perhaps a different quote from Lao Tzu might be more appropriate:

"One must know when to stop. Knowing when to stop averts trouble."

COMMENTS

The first step of Gearoid Reidy's thousand-mile journey began in Japan and continues into China. It is irregularly chronicled at www.gearoidreidy.com.

the Escapist

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