

# the Escapist

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

When I began thinking about what to write for this particular letter, I started with the issue theme, "Season's Gaming". Why is it that so many of us tie games into the holiday season? Sure, all the game companies push out massive quantities of stuff – consoles, games, guides, etc. to catch the holiday spending spree from parents. But so do a lot of other companies.

As a child, I remember, starting in early November, watching my usual shows become more and more saturated with commercials pimping the most wonderful and glorious toys starting in early November. But games stand out as more important players during the actual holidays. And I don't mean just videogames, but really any games; Trivial Pursuit, Cranium and Bridge are a few of my family's traditions.

So, why games, as opposed to movies or books or other such entertainment devices? And then it occurred to me what the holidays are about: Being with those close and important to you. And if you can't be with them, you call them or

email them or send a text message. You get in touch with them. You **interact** with them.

Interaction. It is the one thing that games have above every other entertainment form out there. They do interaction so well – and in fact, most games do not work without some manner of interaction. A few years ago, game makers Milton Bradley started a "Family Game Night" campaign. Yes, it served their purpose, but really, they were right. Games are a great way to connect with family. And friends. And co-workers.

So, with this in mind, we bring you this week's issue of *The Escapist*, "Season's Gaming". Here, our authors share their own special gaming memories. We invite you to think of your own, even share them in our forums and get in the mood for some great gaming time with family and friends in this holiday season. Happy holidays and merry gaming to you and yours from us here at *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I enjoyed your Boutique MMOGs **article**. Naturally I agree that such smaller games represent a great opportunity for developers. However, I wish to point out that *Puzzle Pirates* was made for **approximatey** US \$750k, not the 'paltry \$3M' your article mentions in the same breath. If we'd had the foresight not to include the kitchen sink it might have been even cheaper, but then again, we might have eaten better, too. I would hate to make aspiring ramen-eaters think that a game of PP's scope requires multiple seven figures.

- Daniel James, CEO, Three Rings

**In response to "The Industrialization of Play" from The Escapist Forum:** I can understand the desire to keep your in-game economy truly and permanently in-game, but personally the only ways I can see to prevent it from expanding outside the game world are by either excluding the economy altogether, or letting the

developers take total control of the transactions.

- Bongo Bill

**In response to "Club Xanadu" from The Escapist Forum:** A fascinating article. I love how the article was titled "Club Xanadu" in reference to "Citizen Kane" which in turn was about ... ah



whatever ... (and since when do game monsters have DNA?)

This whole article sounds so incredibly surreal, it sounds like its straight out of an old Sci-Fi channel film from the 70's or something, or the *Twilight Zone*. I really wonder how successful this guy will be because of this, though. I personally think it won't grow much beyond where it is now, but I could be wrong, and this could explode in a few years time.

## -Darkpen

### **In Response to "A Better Way to Play" from The Escapist Forum:**

Attempting to change the mainstream, push-button control style that has dominated the past two decades or so is kind of a big deal (to me at least). Maybe the change doesn't seem like a big deal right now. The games are still first gen for the console cycle (and are subject to all the problems that go along with that). They will get better; and, I hope, they will bring gaming to a new standard of control.

We don't think of it now, but where would we be without the analog stick? It seemed like a small difference at first, but it has made a huge impact in gaming (imagine *Halo* with just two D-pads). I expect motion sensitivity and pointing control to do the same.

## - Blaxton

### **In response to "Little, Red Yen"**

**from The Escapist Forum:** It looks like the 360 has a chance to get some sales this time around, with *Blue Dragon*.

Although it's just hit the streets in Japan, people are already saying that MS is still underperforming in Japan. Getting huge sales RIGHT NOW isn't a realistic strategy or expectation, but now that MS has tasted hither-to unknown success in Japan, someone needs to wake up and continue courting big-name Japanese developers to take a chance on their hardware.

Get Japanese developers to produce products for the Japanese market (which even to me, who is not a marketing ninja, is such a painfully obvious move),

and not only will they move in Japan, but they'll also sell well in the US.

## - Scopique



# Christmas behind the cash register

by Sean Sands



"Where are the foot massagers?"

It's six in the morning, the Saturday before Christmas 2004, and my first customer of the day is Methuselah in poorly pressed slacks and a tan windbreaker, as conspicuous in front of the *Grand Theft Auto 3* display as a Daughters of the American Revolution outing to the Apollo. His eyebrows are mangled, overused scrub brushes superglued to his forehead, and he fixes me with the kind of expression a bad poker player wears when trying to buy the pot on a pair of threes.

"This is Electronics Boutique," I explain, naively possessed of the illusion that this will be information enough. An uncomfortable moment passes. I wait for him to cogitate. He waits for me to sell him a foot massager. Eventually I add, "We sell videogames."

"No." This is not a response for which I am prepared. "I bought a massager here two years ago. It broke. I need a new one."

It takes me five minutes to explain that I know my 400 square foot store's inventory well enough to know we don't sell, nor have we ever sold, foot

massagers. As I finally usher Methuselah out the door and down the escalator to Brookstone, a half dozen bleary eyed customers, the stink of holiday panic wafting from them like skunk road kill, have wandered in and begun to pick the remaining meat off the shelves.

It's my twelfth consecutive day of work. In the preceding week, I've personally transacted roughly \$50,000 worth of videogames, put in 65 hours of work and come to think of time in terms of the piped-in music that jams holiday cheer down the ear-hole of anyone within range. I know that Barbara Streisand's staccato *Jingle Bells* means it's time to open, Garth Brooks's *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* means it's time to close and the cacophonous electro-pop-synth nonsense by Manheim Steamroller means it's time to jam a DS stylus through my eardrums.

It is eight in the morning. The store has been open for two hours, and I'm still alone. The checkout line is averaging six people deep. A desperate father, one among many, asks if I have the brand-new Nintendo DS in stock. I consider it good customer service that I don't point at him and laugh. Instead, he buys a

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copy of *Tak 2: The Staff of Dreams* for the PlayStation 2, a random shot in the dark chosen like a number on a roulette wheel. Normally, I'd help him make a better selection, but were I to show such time-consuming initiative, the five people in line behind him might rise up as one to lay fiery, furious siege to my register.

I see in their impatient expression that they imagine we are like county workers,

and for every one person manning the actual job, there must be four more in the back room smoking and looking at pornography. Unfortunately, this isn't true.

I can only track the three remaining hours until my crew comes to my aid, and people stop looking at the second unused register with the kind of contempt usually reserved for death-row inmates and Green Party candidates.

The day after Thanksgiving gets all the press. And it may be true that the total volume of shoppers is larger on that aptly named Black Friday, but the Saturday before Christmas is historically more productive from a sales perspective. Desperate gift givers make great customers.

**Customers flow through the front door like tiny blood cells, fat with cash liquidity instead of oxygen, feeding the beating heart of specialty retail.**

It is 2:30 in the afternoon now. The day is flying by in giant moon-leap bounds. A woman has just come in and hurriedly parked her kids in front of the interactive machines with strict instructions that they stay here until she is done shopping. Historically speaking, it's a reasonable estimate to say that those children will be in my store for at least an hour and a half and will eventually camp out in a corner ripping out-of-date magazines from their plastic covers or asking if I can put a different game in the Gamecube. I will have to ask them not to sit on the floor in front of the PlayStation 2 New Release section at least four times.

Finally, I have my full crew on the clock. Customers flow through the front door like tiny blood cells, fat with cash liquidity instead of oxygen, feeding the beating heart of specialty retail. The day is in full motion, and I feel a strange kinship with George Bailey fighting off the run on the bank at the Bedford Falls Building & Loan.

My assistant manager, June, is a girl of some 20 years, Midwestern in every way that a person can be, paying her way through technical college on a salary I

know to be obscenely small. Many assistant managers mitigate this unfavorable sum by reducing the amount of work they actually do to more closely match their pay scale. June is unusual in that she does all the work, complains very little and succeeds at almost any task I put before her. Unfortunately, the district manager doesn't care much for her, and that pretty much means that she has reached the ceiling of her upward mobility.

My other full time employee, Adam, is an awkward man-child who is exactly the kind of person you might cast in the role of retail clerk were you doing a treatment for an episode of Cliché Theater. He is wearing a black button-up shirt with red Japanese characters emblazoned down the right side that I think might mean "I'm With Stupid." I adopt a don't ask, don't tell policy on the translation. His black denim pants strain at his girth, and his face is pudgy and coated with a thin layer of something that I suspect could be harvested as an industrial lubricant. As we work, he proselytizes with impassioned, almost academic rhetoric that graphic novels should be counted as serious literature.



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The third member of my team is Katie. Katie is 16 and working at her first job because her parents thought it would teach her important life-lessons about responsibility. She is approaching the task with the kind of casual detachment one can only achieve as an adolescent or a corpse. Her friends wander past the door, pointing at their watch or cell phones, clearly describing great plans in what I assume to be some kind of adolescent sign language. I don't let Katie work the registers.

"I want to trade in my PlayStation 2 for an Xbox." A kid, who would be offended that I think of him as a kid, lifts up a grocery bag and sets it unceremoniously on the counter. At some point it has become afternoon, and until now, the pulse of the store had been healthy. This transaction is the retail equivalent to throwing an embolism.

**It's 7:00 at night.  
I try to remember  
if I ever ate lunch.**

The paper bag is filled with PlayStation 2 parts and a stack of games that wouldn't move even if I offered them for free with candy. The system itself has a marijuana sticker centered on the console, and the smell wafting from the clutter makes me wonder if that particular sticker is scratch-and-sniff. Behind the kid, nine waiting customers unanimously adopt a boy-did-I-get-in-the-wrong-line expression.

"Does it work?" I ask.

"Yeah," he answers with a degree of certainty I wouldn't find credible had he announced that gravity is what makes water flow downhill.

An all too familiar dance begins, as impatient fathers slowly merge into the single moving line like LA rush hour traffic in a construction zone. I explain I will test the system. He explains that maybe it doesn't always work, but usually it does. I explain that we consider that to be a broken system and can offer only \$30. He has the temerity to be incredulous that we would only offer him \$30 for a system that doesn't work with a pot sticker on top. I apologize, not meaning it in the

slightest. He still has me tally up the total amount I can give him for the broken system and games no one wants. I waste 15 minutes of everyone's time to come to an offer of \$51. He declines and leaves. The music fades, and with a flourish of paper bag and sullen expressions, the dance ends.

The clot having been excised and the blood flow now restored to normal levels, the afternoon rolls into evening, as nameless holiday shoppers shuffle briefly in and out of our lives with half-hearted well wishes and desperate desires to be anywhere but here; a sentiment I increasingly share.

The tide ebbs, and after a remarkable four hours the mother returns for her sons who have formed their own shanty town between the used DVDs and the magazine rack. I stopped hassling them out of pity hours before, even changing the Gamecube game just the one time. Remarkably, the line which had wrapped around the checkout counter is gone, and we are all surprised to find in the aftermath that the sun has set, and it's 7:00 at night. I try to remember if I ever ate lunch.

I send Katie home early and spend the next 45 minutes fixing everything she touched. On her way out the door, impossibly bubbly and cheerful, she apparently secretes some tidal wave of young pheromones, and a group of passing boys absorb her whole and make way for the food court. Adam is next off the hook with his jacket on and keys in hand, before I've taken a second breath after dismissing him for the evening. June stays for a while, straightens up the store, alphabetizes the remains of the Xbox section, which looks as though it had been ransacked by determined cops with a search warrant. Eventually, I tell her to leave as well.

It seems right to close the store myself. A day this long should be experienced on its bookends alone. I start to look forward to counting the cash, tallying up the final numbers of the day and enjoying a store empty of customers and chaos. The hours that had darted by like passing cars on a busy highway are now minutes that creep along with interminable persistence. I try to keep myself busy, to recapture that chronological detachment that makes the day sweep past, but I keep eying my watch until 10:00 finally comes.

"I'm just browsing," says the only customer in the store. He is wearing a nice suit, five o'clock shadow and cologne. I explain that I'll be closing the store in just a few minutes, words which I actually see go in one ear and out the other. Then I partly close the gate, the universal mall symbol for I want to get the hell out of here. He wanders aimlessly around the store, as though willfully rejecting my hints. I remind him that we are closing, and he looks up as though surprised. I expect him to apologize and leave. Instead, he asks for advice on which system he should buy for his son.

And then, a strange thing happens to me. I lean against my yellow counter, and instead of ushering him out the door with a baleful glare and mumbled profanity, I ask probing questions, get a feel for what he's looking for, find out about his son and what kind of games would be appropriate. I invest myself in this man and his Christmas gift, partly because I realize he's not going to leave anyway, but more because I haven't had time to really sell anything all day, and by God, when I want to be, I'm good at it. He loosens up, and we talk along a few tangents and minutes start to slip by

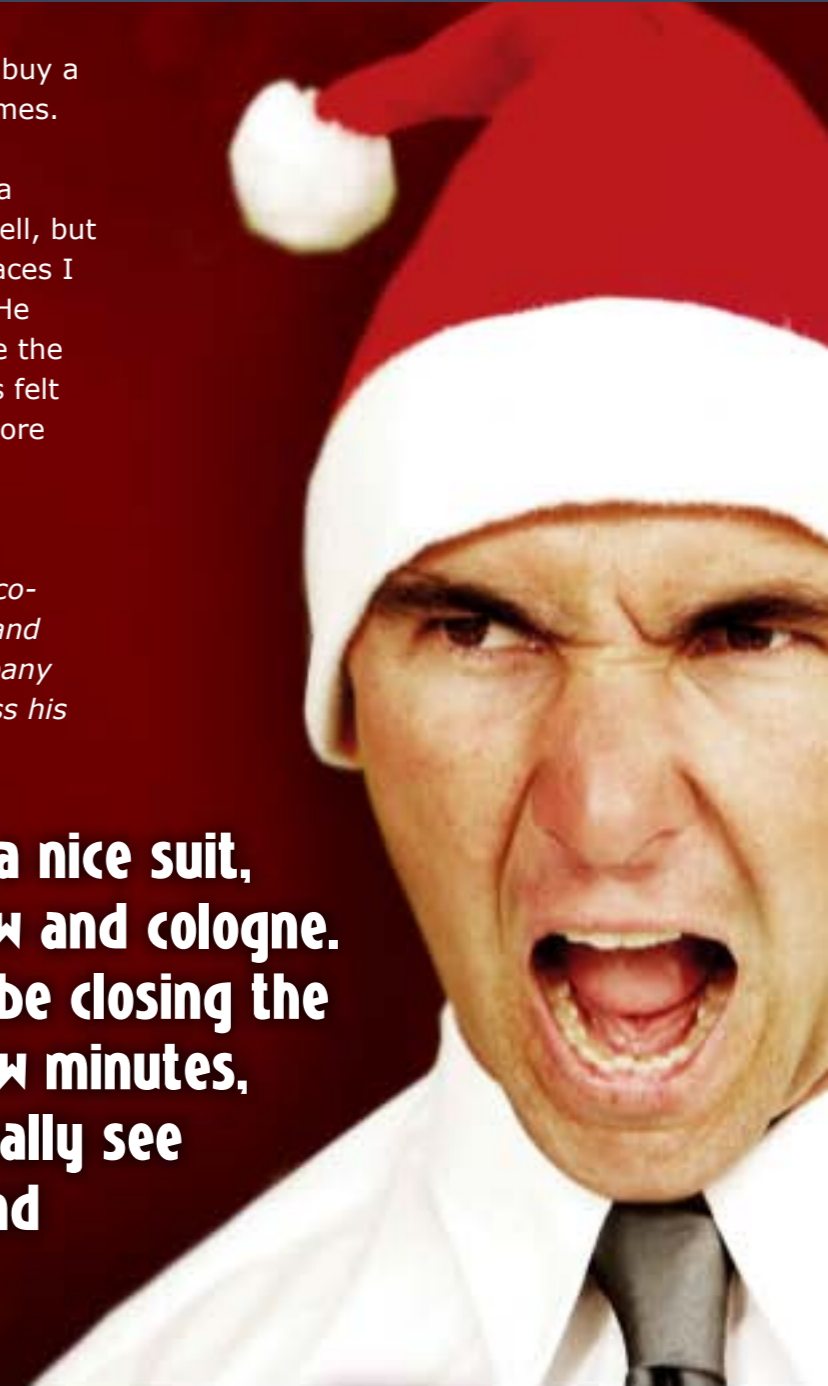
again. It's 10:20 when he asks to buy a PlayStation 2 and half a dozen games.

I apologize, because I don't have a single system left in the store to sell, but I give him a line on a couple of places I know should have them in stock. He thanks me for my time, wishes me the first Merry Christmas all day that's felt genuine and wanders out of my store into the largely empty mall.

#### COMMENTS

*Sean Sands is a freelance writer, co-founder of Gamerswithjobs.com, and owns a small graphic design company near Minneapolis. He does not miss his stint in retail even a little.*

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## "Maajh Ladies"

by Lara Crigger



My grandmother is a quiet woman, often overshadowed by boisterous children and a husband who cracks fart jokes as if they were sonnets. When she does talk, she converses like one unaccustomed to speech: Her stories have no endings, or, for that matter, beginnings. Instead, she releases a tide of words that rambles through logic and grammar with little concrete connection, something like an e.e. cummings poem or a transcript of someone flipping TV channels. But her laughter is clear and unmistakable: a sudden, frequent surge of belly-shaking, eye-crinkling mirth. Once you hear it, you'll never forget it.

Don't be fooled, though. Her blithe, unassuming nature is a careful distraction, concealing deep wiliness and cunning. You can't pull one over on her before she'd pull five over on you.

Nowhere is this more evident than when she plays mahjong.

Named after sparrows, mahjong (or "maajh" to many American players) is the Chinese equivalent of gin rummy,

except it's played with tiles instead of paper cards. You draw and discard tiles in an attempt to arrange a suitable 14-card hand, which usually includes at least one three- or four-card straight, three or four of a kind, and one pair. There are three numbered suits - dots, bams and craks - as well three dragon suits and four winds; rounding off the set are 16 "flower" tiles and a variable number of jokers. Unlike the freeform Chinese version, the American version usually includes a card of Standard Hands to which all winning mahjong hands must be compared; if your hand isn't on the card, it isn't valid. Additionally, every American game starts with a "Charleston," or the passing of three unwanted tiles from one player to another in a shuffle around the table.

How Jewish women in particular intercepted a Chinese game from the 1800s is still something of a mystery, even according to most official histories of the sport. But the game is one to which all Jewish women, devout or no, will eventually be drawn; it's like some inevitable phase of the life cycle: birth,

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bat mitzvah, mahjong, menopause, death. My mother plays, just as her mother before her, and her mother's mother, and so on. Indeed, even before there was mahjong, there was mahjong in our blood, and I suspect that while Moses futzed with stone tablets and mountaintops, Zipporah lounged in a tent with her sisters and aunts, peering at a row of tiles before pausing, smirking, tapping the ledger once, then twice and drawling in a smoky voice, "Maajh, ladies."

But my grandmother could put ol' Zippy to shame. I first played maajh against my grandmother when I was 7, and I still remember the day when she broke out her wooden box with the ornate carvings on the sides. As she opened the set for my aunts and me, I looked upon the shimmering ivory tiles and lusted with an unfamiliar, instinctual greed. Instantly, I knew that this game was my game, that it had always been my game. It had been designed with me, and only me, in mind, that all toys and religion and human history - indeed, all evolution, even the dinosaurs - had been intelligently designed so that one day, I

would encounter and play this perfect game and make the universe complete.

On the surface, this reaction shouldn't have been surprising. When I play board games, I appear incredibly competitive, even blinded by my own aggression; I'm the kind of person who trash talks Scrabble opponents and body-checks bridge partners. I become a woman possessed, speaking in over-the-top smack-talk tongues and swearing, spitting and scheming my way through the game. I do it mostly for fun, of course; I only cheat when I know I'll get caught, and I only talk trash when I'm about to lose.

But staring at those ivory tiles, I knew something was different about mahjong; something important that I'd never felt before. Suddenly, I didn't want to joke around - I wanted to win. And I didn't just want to be victorious - I wanted to crush my opponents like a 16th century conquistador, with smallpox blankets and lightning-god guns. That little Pandora's Box had conjured within me genuine competitiveness, and to my surprise, I was hooked.

It was only after I lost seven straight hands of mahjong to my silent, smirking grandmother that I learned that this competitive streak was hereditary. The truth was I'd never even stood a chance.

My grandmother is a champion mahjong player of some local renown. Every month, she hones her skills against unsuspecting raisin-women at the local Jewish Community Center (or JCC), memorizing the card of Standard Hands and testing out strategies for intelligent discards. Last year, she placed third in the mahjong tournament at the JCC Senior Olympics (the kind where bridge and canasta are listed as full-contact sports). That wily old broad beat out dozens of track-suited biddies - even a few Chinese gals - to score \$50 and a bronze medal, which she displays with pride above her sewing machine.

Among her family, whom she engages far more often, my grandmother is a notoriously difficult opponent (my cousin Devon calls her "the end boss"). She plays mahjong as if it were war, sparing no quarter for youth, illness or closeness of blood relation. She crushes a 7-year-old as easily as a 70-year-old, never

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I've even heard her mumble "East" in HER SLEEP. I can recognize OBSESSION when I see it.

sweating, never stopping. Every holiday, from Yom Kippur to Hanukkah, she holds court at a rickety card table with her ivory mahjong set, schooling us all in the art of defeat.

I think it took me more than 15 years to beat my grandmother at mahjong. I can't say for sure, because I don't remember the first time I won against her. I know it must have happened, because I have won (occasionally) against her in the past. But the original event occurred with so little ceremony and lasting sense of triumph that I've long since forgotten it. Maybe it's her fault. Maybe she's so good that

whenever she loses, she has the power to instantaneously erase her opponents' memories; to convince them they didn't actually win, that it was just a blip in the space-time continuum.

The secret to my grandmother's talent, of course, is that she is always playing mahjong, even when she isn't. I see the doodles of Chinese characters adorning shopping lists. I've noticed the books on mahjong strategy that used to, but no longer, appear in her library book basket. I've even heard her mumble "East" in her sleep. I can recognize obsession when I see it. But more than that, mahjong carries into other aspects of her life. I even know why her stories make no sense. She Charlestons with words, thinking several discards ahead before she speaks, which confuses anyone who converses with logic or a consistent timeline. But not me. I know her secret. She doesn't ramble; she speaks in Maajh.

That first impression of mahjong I had was incorrect. This game was not designed for me. It was custom-crafted for her.

Aside from that first game, I have few concrete recollections of playing against my grandmother, just vague impressions circling like the stories she tells: meandering, bleeding into one another, with no beginning or end. But every game feels the same. The hands change, the tiles differ, and yet she and I return again and again, rebuilding the wall, throwing out East, Charlestoning again and again.

Maybe one day I'll be as good as she is, and someone will feel about me the same way as I do about her. (Probably not. She's too damn good to brook comparison.)

But I know that once you know how to read her, she's an open book. My grandmother rarely speaks when she plays, but she does laugh as she peers at her tiles, tapping the ledger once, twice, before calling out in a smoky voice, "Maajh." [COMMENTS](#)

*Lara Crigger is a freelance science, tech and gaming journalist whose previous work for The Escapist includes "Playing Through The Pain" and "How To Be A Guitar Hero." Her email is lcrigger@gmail.com.*

# a clichéd console CHRISTMAS

by Spanner

Christmas in Britain is heralded not by sleigh bells, the first flake of snow, a date on the calendar or an extra bucket of coal for the fire. You know it's officially The Season when you hear Slade's time-honored, glam-rock anthem "Merry Xmas Everybody!" floating on the stale, thrice-recycled air of the overcrowded shops.

But when you hear Noddy wailing his winter war cry as Halloween decorations still litter the shelves, it becomes increasingly harder to get into the Christmas spirit once December finally rolls around. People are full of sagely advice on how to recapture the essence and excitement once felt around this time of year, but it generally involves some kind of charitable volunteer work, baking cookies, shoveling the snow off some lazy pensioner's driveway or going to church for a fresh head full of Christian guilt. That might be alright for people who care, but what about the rest of us?

Well, just like every other problem we Escapists face throughout the year, this one can be solved by videogames. Gamers are fortunate enough to be able to bend the haughty, altruistic Christmas pseudo-wisdom of the socially conscious

to our selfish needs by applying their Dickensian doctrines to our computers and consoles. So, for all you forlorn gamers out there who've lost the spirit (or had it taken from you), here's a few tinsel-topped tips to rejuvenate your Chrimbo charisma.

## Visit Old Friends

The best place to start is getting right back to your gaming roots. The majority of us who've grown up with games did so because of those computers and consoles we unwrapped one unfashionable Christmas morning in the '70s or '80s.

Times have changed considerably, and these days, whenever we want something, we just buy it on the tick. There's no saving up, waiting for birthdays or holding out for the commercial season to roll around. As much as our must-have-it-now society has made kings and rich men of us all, it's also robbed us of the excitement which comes from eager anticipation.

Back in the day (when only the wealthy owned credit cards), the months of painstakingly waiting for December 25th

increased the value of our desired systems dramatically. The long weeks of absence while waiting for the wrapping paper to come away instilled a fondness that's still going strong today, and one that's distinctly lacking from any game system we've acquired in recent years.

With any luck, you'll still have your old warhorse stashed away in the attic, and there's no better way to kick off your Christmas buildup than by blowing the dust off an Atari 2600 or a tape-loading, 8-bit computer that lit up your holiday season two decades ago.

Of course, back then, there weren't widely available online multiplayer games or wireless networking. Those square eyed memories will come flooding back all the more vividly if you can get some other likeminded 30-something with a gap in his soul to come round and play a few sweaty-palmed, white-knuckled games of *Target: Renegade* or *Commando*. Classics from a Christmas long forgotten – waiting to take you back to a simpler time when games were 2-D, sheep were scared and men were proud.

And don't be tempted into using an emulator. Waiting 10 minutes for a game

to load from an audio cassette is a major part of reliving the experience (not dissimilar to the enduring wait for the computer in the first place), and a few games of "dead arm" or "slaps" while the loading screen of *Green Beret* taunts you from the 14-inch TV screen will be almost as nostalgic as the game itself.

### **It's the Thought that Counts**

Each year offers you another chance to recreate that long lost feeling of seasonal satisfaction.

If your family's anything like mine (and I'm sure it is, with perhaps a few less alcoholics, if you're lucky), no one has any idea what to buy each other. Maybe your parents got tired of storing your childhood in their spare room and gave away that old computer or console, so asking them to take to eBay's virtual high street and track down another is a pretty decent way to put some of the excitement back into your cold, gray December.

Despite being something of a manufactured sentiment, a self-inflicted wait for your computer controlled youth to begin again on Christmas Day will be well worth it, and also offers you the

opportunity to spend time researching and acquiring games (again, not emulated, but on their original media), and poring over old magazines to whip you up into the prerequisite, pre-Christmas frenzy.

### **Oh Baby, It's Cold Outside**

Reliving the past is not the only way videogames can bring you closer to Christmas, of course. Modern titles offer something older games cannot: visual realism.

What with global warming, overpopulation and mass poverty bumming out the holiday season, it often simply doesn't **feel** like Christmas. The blazing hot winter sun, the decorations

**And don't be tempted into using an emulator. Waiting 10 minutes for a game to load from an audio cassette is a major part of reliving the experience.**

being on show for quarter of the year and people stressing out about overbearing family commitments at the beginning of November all conspire to make Christmas feel like any other month. But by carefully selecting your videogames to match the time of year, a certain "winter wonderland" essence can ring throughout your well decked virtual halls.

It may sound obvious, but throwing up some powder on the slopes of your favorite snowboarding title goes some way toward making up for the lack of real snow outside. Any variant on this theme (like snow mobiles or sleds) can



be equally suitable, and should a few flakes of the real stuff actually start to fall, the effect is exponentially increased. Snowboarding games also serve to remind us – in our ever increasingly sensible adulthood – of the fun side of snow, and stems the downbeat grumbling about muddy sludge, wet feet and frozen car windshields.

This harsh side of winter is also well represented in games such as *Max Payne*; which eloquently waxes lyrical of the biting wintry sleet and is replete with satisfying, crisp, crunching sound effects of the snow underfoot. The morbid theme of the game would undoubtedly help the statistically increased number of manic depressives who appear around Christmas to reminisce about a less cheerful seasonal experience. We cater to everyone, at *The Escapist*.

Special mention has to go to the wonderful Sega Saturn Christmas special of *NiGHTS Into Dreams*. This was a modified demo of the original *NiGHTS* game, which was initially a little tricky to get hold of. It was bundled with the console in Japan around Christmas '96 and was either given away with other full

price games or on the cover of official Sega magazines. The demo made excellent use of the console's internal clock, and when December 1 rolled around, the scenery took on a winter wonderland theme.

It also changed at other times of the year and was replete with hidden extras, but the real charm is in the magical Christmas fantasy dreamed up by Sega's finest. *Christmas NiGHTS into Dreams* reappears every year on eBay, so get bidding.

#### **When a Child is Born**

Much as I endeavor to avoid the fact, we're all growing up. Inevitably, this makes parents and people of increased responsibility out of many of us, but a cunning gamer can put this side effect of maturity to good use.

Some friends of mine were around the other day with their 4-year-old, and the way she took to my Xbox 360 was a matter of some astonishment to her parents. Indeed, she quickly had us all involved in her game in one way or another, and very soon, my friends were wondering if a console might be a more

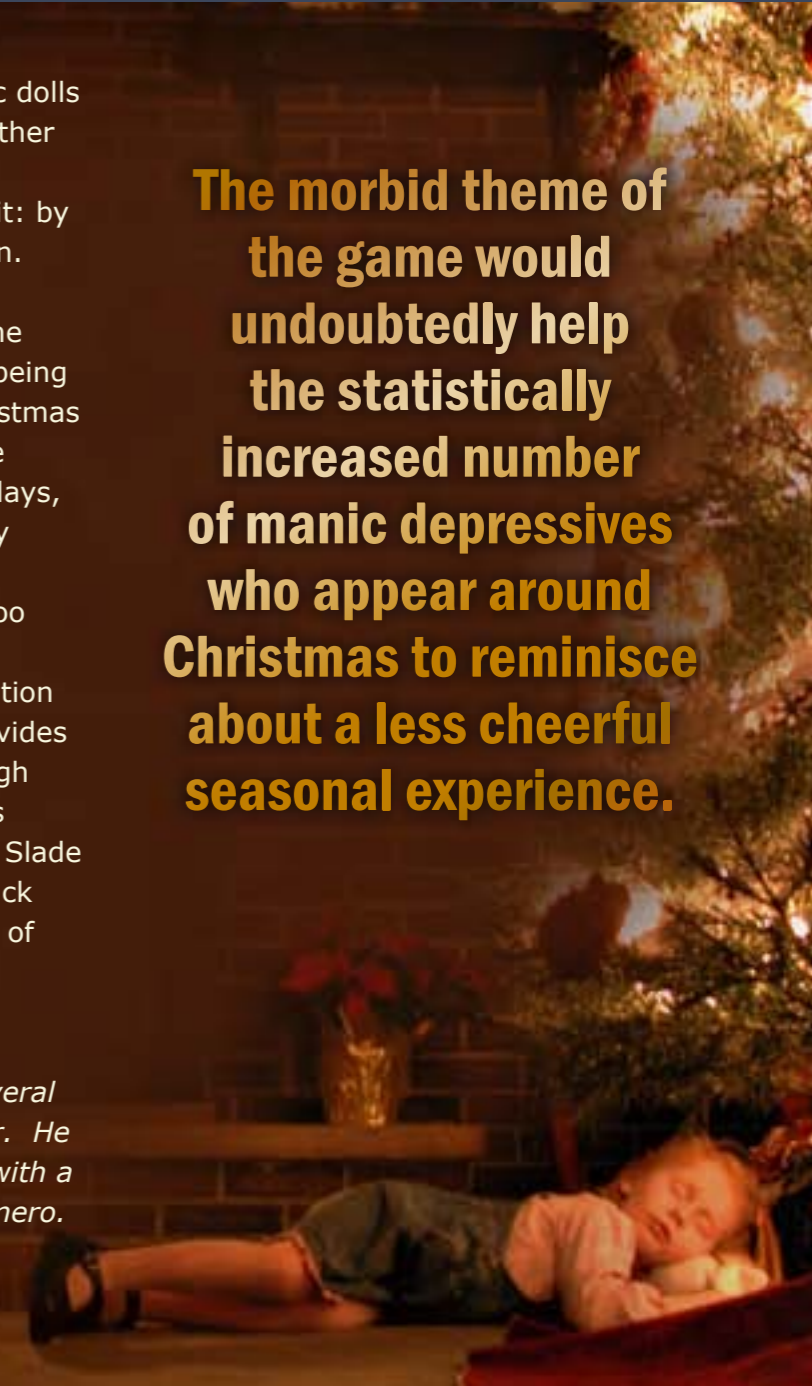
sustainable and family-oriented Christmas gift than yet more plastic dolls in pink cocktail dresses. This is another way in which we can revive the videogame-oriented Christmas spirit: by passing it along to a new generation.

By getting our kids excited about the prospect of a computer or console being rammed down the chimney on Christmas Eve, we can apply everything we've discussed for rejuvenating the holidays, while also enjoying them vicariously through the new experiences of an uninitiated gamer. It shouldn't be too difficult to get them excited about games, once they see your anticipation building alongside their own. It provides them with a wonderful portal through which they can relive the Christmas experience in years to come (when Slade will undoubtedly be heard at the back end of July), and keep the tradition of seasonal gaming going strong.

#### **COMMENTS**

*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.*

**The morbid theme of the game would undoubtedly help the statistically increased number of manic depressives who appear around Christmas to reminisce about a less cheerful seasonal experience.**



## All I want for CHRISTMAS

is

# Wii

by Darren Sandbach

Hopes and dreams: Hey, they're wonderful things. They get us through bad times by giving us something to look forward to, and they prevent us from being complacent by making us yearn for what the future brings. I'm currently focused on the next year of my life, within which I aim to relocate, change jobs and totally re-adjust my life and my priorities. Among the plans I'm putting in place to ensure that happens, it would be easy for me to miss simple pleasures, to ignore what can make me happy in the interim. And Christmas is coming!

Now, my birthday falls at the end of November, a mere month from the celebratory date assigned to the greatest child ever born. I like to think that such closeness indicates possibilities of miraculous greatness in my own life, but some 29 years of evidence suggest otherwise. In fact, all it does is make other people really struggle with what to get me to show me that they love me, even when Nintendo is releasing a new console. My father called me just the other day, telling me that I am pain in the neck to buy for and asking if I

wanted a joint present for my two great occasions this year. He asked if I wanted "one of those bloody Wii things."

Of course I want one of these bloody Wii things! Yet, freezing like a skittish, hungry bear that's stumbled across a fast food restaurant's bin, I panicked. I handed the phone to my wife and told them to work it out among themselves under the premise that I wanted a surprise. A few days later, I received some scarves (plural), gloves and pajamas. They are brushed cotton pajamas, and they breathe really nicely, but y'know, I can't play videogames in new and innovative ways with them (or can I ... ?). All they've done is raise the question about what they actually agreed to get me. I mean, I was offered a Wii – granted, it wasn't actually available to buy at that point – and I turned it down and got some clothes. Is one of the Nintendo wonder-consoles still within my grasp, I wonder?

This all makes me sound so horribly materialistic though, doesn't it? I'm not, I promise.



I don't want a Wii out of selfishness. I look at it as something that's going to finally get my family playing together. I watched the videos on the Nintendo site the same as everyone else, but the marketing ideal of "look at all these people who will buy our console" was lost on me. All I could see were the possibilities of my own family laughing and smiling like the people in the tiny movie. All I could envisage was me, off camera, laughing and joking and watching them enjoy themselves.

I know it sounds daft. But, hey, I've had great success with similar things. A couple of years ago I bought a board game called Play That Tune. There's a roll-out piano that you step on to play notes (badly), and other people have to guess what the whole arrangement is. My grandparents were around on Christmas Day, and my grandmother wasn't really able to stand on the piano. Instead, we rolled it out across both of their laps, and they pressed the buttons instead. As her hands were pressing keys that were, well, laid across his "bits," the pair of them were giggling and laughing like a couple of school kids. Afterward, everyone said how much fun

it had been and how lovely it had been to see them having fun instead of sitting around just being in the company of others on Christmas Day.


Imagine if a Wii achieved that. Imagine if my granddad did a round of golf, and got satisfaction from doing so. Imagine if he and his son completed an inning of bowling together, something that neither of them probably imagines ever happening again now. How ace would that be?

It's not all about the Wii, though. My sister and I have chipped in together to give my dad the opportunity to be the Rock god he's always wanted to be. We've bought him the Guitar Hero controllers and the sequel to the most rocking game ever! The night I'll be spending there plays in my mind constantly, me and my old man riffing together, experiencing the glory of the stage and, if we're lucky, the love of our groupies.

This is the kind of thing we should be expecting from games and consoles constantly: recognizable and intuitive interfaces that allow a coming together of people, a way for generations to connect and enjoy one another's

company. My granddad doesn't understand the design philosophy of the latest Mario game, but he does know how to swing a golf club. My dad has no concept of how to take on the Third Reich as a one-man army of righteousness, but he does get how to hit buttons on a guitar in time to flashes on the screen. My only fear is that the complex button mashing of traditional consoles will only translate into complex hand waving that will only serve to confuse my grandparents in new ways.

But, hey, there are going to be plenty of great games that don't overdo the new control method. And with any luck, five years from now, I'll be asking my father if he wants "one of those bloody Wii 2 things."

 COMMENTS

Darren Sandbach is a freelance videogame journalist who spends too much time playing multiplayer games all alone. It does give him a sense of belonging, though, so that's ok. He hangs out at [www.alwaysblack.com](http://www.alwaysblack.com)

“ This is the kind of thing we should be **expecting** from games and consoles **constantly:**

recognizable and intuitive interfaces that allow a coming **TOGETHER OF PEOPLE**”



## Going Home for the HOLIDAYS

by Michael Zenke

In late December of 2005, I found myself with little to do on a cold Friday evening. My wife works late, and since it was just a day before Christmas Eve, many of my friends were occupied with holiday obligations. Desiring to be anywhere other than the ice-blasted plains of the Midwest, I searched for solace in the virtual worlds I'd traveled to over the past year. Though it took me most of the evening, I managed to kindle some holiday cheer, receive a few presents and even catch up with a few old friends.

When I sat down at my PC, I merely intended to keep the shadows on the wall at bay. I loaded up World of Warcraft (WoW). Zoning into Iron Forge, I received well wishes from my guildmates, other holiday refugees seeking escape. Grateful for the (albeit digital) human contact, I greeted them and considered what elements of the Winter Veil (WoW's version of Christmas) quest I had left to accomplish. Rather than focusing on character advancement, the Winter Veil quest line rewarded players with snowballs, eggnog, cookies and so on. One quest I hadn't yet completed centered on rescuing Metzen the reindeer from kidnappers.

In exchange for returning him to his rightful owners, I would receive a piece of holly that would turn my horse into a reindeer for a short while. I could hardly think of something more Christmas-y, and decided an evening spent liberating a four-legged fuzzy thing from the forces of evil, with guildmates, was just the thing to cheer me up. Enthused, I queried my guild chat channel to see if anyone else was interested in participating.

Silence. My guild channel was silent. I was used to quick acceptance of any sort of group offering, and the lack of response seemed very much out of character for the guild. Confused about the silence, I opened my social window to see who was online. As I scanned the names in my guild window, I grew even more confused. The guild leader no longer appeared to be a part of the guild. My friends list revealed he was online, and so I asked him what the deal was. I discovered, much to my sorrow, that in the week I'd been offline, the guild had changed directions. Rather than a raiding guild, the guild's focus was now "hardcore RP." The former leader told me he'd been overthrown in a Christmastime coup. I wish I could say I was shocked. After being bounced from guild to guild all year by bad luck, though,

# the Escapist

I could do little more than remove myself. No one even asked why I'd left.

Unsurprised but a little sad, I set out to save Metzen and win my prize alone. Following the helpful directions of some Christmas-themed goblins, I tracked Metzen's kidnappers to Searing Gorge.

The spawn site for the kidnappers was so overrun with players that they hardly had the chance to take a swing or two before they died. Some sort of impromptu party was going on. Someone had even set up a streaming server to broadcast Christmas-themed dance music, and the call was going out to the rest of the server: PARTY IN SEARING GORGE!

I wanted holiday cheer, but the online version of a Christmas rave wasn't really what I had in mind. Dejected, I rescued Metzen and headed back to Ironforge, but I couldn't shake my holiday blues. Even running around on a horned deer didn't make me feel better. The mood in the air was festive, but having to leave behind yet another guild (my third or fourth for the year) was just too depressing.

Back to the desktop. My wife was due home in an hour, but I wasn't quite

ready to give up yet. As if on a mission, my mouse cursor went to the games folder, and selected the small black icon with the yellow star. The game launcher flashed onto the screen, and all the baggage I'd been carrying around came right back to the surface. My mouth tightened, and as I entered my username and password I breathed a frustrated sigh.

I was returning, once again, to Star Wars Galaxies.

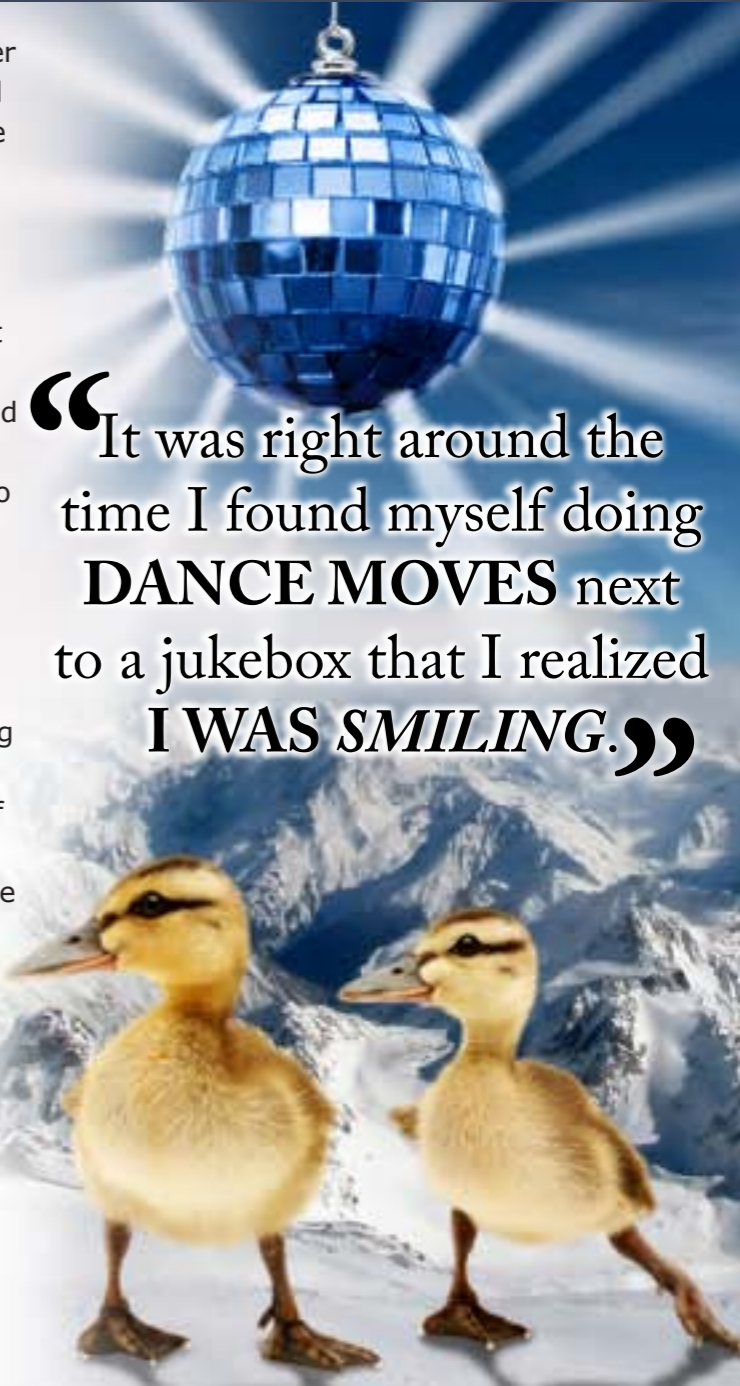
While the game was patching, I noticed the community manager had thoughtfully listed player-run holiday events for each server, and beneath my server name something caught my eye. My old player association (guild), a group I'd fed and clothed for months in 2004, was holding a holiday party. And they were holding it as of about 10 minutes ago. I quickly logged in to check out the festivities.

The orchestral strains of the Naboo theme rose from my speakers as my Mon Calamari tailor stood up from the couch in his palatial home. I was no longer formally a part of the PA, but apparently my presence didn't go unnoticed: I'd

hardly finished getting my hotbar in order when the first private message appeared in my chat window. What I'd hoped to be a low-key zip around the galaxy was about to turn into a homecoming.

Truth be told, I wasn't sure I was ready to say hello to old friends, but after that private message, I didn't have much choice. The PA's hunt leader had just had remodeled her house with one of the new Mustafari bunkers, and I just had to see what she'd done with the fountain. With private messages scrolling up my screen, I put on the best duds I could find and set off for the starport.

As I made my way to the PA's burgeoning city, I couldn't help but reflect on planet Rori's beauty. The city was a reflection of the natural wonder the designers had envisioned for Naboo's sister satellite; the PA's architect (and mayor) loved fountains, and cascading water was everywhere. Familiar landmarks guided me toward the city's center. Just off the main square, I found myself in the first crowd I'd seen off of Tatooine in quite some time. Almost 20 people were gathered to catch up, hang out and survey the new digs the hunt leader would now be calling home.



“It was right around the time I found myself doing **DANCE MOVES** next to a jukebox that I realized **I WAS SMILING.**”

After a long and mostly lonely night, the response I received when I pulled up on my old banger of a speeder was nothing short of jaw dropping. I'd been gone quite a long time, but I was not forgotten. Enthusiastic emotes began flooding my window, and the disconnected malaise I'd been experiencing washed away in the outpouring of goodwill. Old friends, business partners, hunting buddies and even the clique of drama queens who had forced me out of the PA in the first place were all expressing their appreciation for my return.

It was right around the time I found myself doing dance moves next to a jukebox that I realized I was smiling. A bunch of people had gone off to hunt, but there were still six or so of us left behind grooving and talking about old times. Many of them were dressed in Christmas red and green, and the theme from the Mos Eisley cantina played on. As I took a moment to look at the scene from outside myself, I realized how incredibly dorky the whole experience was, but my smile didn't dim a bit. These were people I'd never met and wasn't even that close to, but just the same, we

were having something very closely approaching a Christmas party.

With my wife due home shortly, I made my goodbyes. I was tired, exhausted really, by the memories my tour had dredged up. I'd done what you're not supposed to be able to do: I'd gone home again.

I promised to try to come back more often, but even as I said it, I knew I was lying. What I loved about Star Wars Galaxies had long since been removed. As a parting gift, I set off a fireworks show I'd had riding around in my pack for about a year, lighting up the sky above their city for something like two full minutes. I couldn't just log out, either. For some reason, I physically had to get on my speeder and drive away, to distance myself from these people and their place, before I could really leave the game.

When I finally did log off, my Mon Cal was sitting proudly in his home again, his back straight in the old couch he'd made himself. When I dropped back to the desktop for one last time, I knew it was time to call it a night. I sat back in my chair to collect my thoughts, and heard the jingle of keys outside my apartment door. My wife was home.

For most of the year, we take our virtual worlds for granted. We never reflect on the spaces we inhabit, or truly realize how much those virtual spaces inhabit us. For better or worse, the "reality" of the massive games we play extends beyond the PC, Ventrilo server and guild forum. Games in this genre have the ability to change the way we think, the way we feel and most tellingly, the way we interact with others. During the holidays, when the games themselves change to reflect the season, it's a great chance to reconnect with what makes them fun to play. It's not the raiding, and it's certainly not the epic loot. The reason we play World of Warcraft or Star Wars Galaxies is the same reason we travel home for the holidays: We need to connect with people that can make a difference in our lives. [COMMENTS](#)

*Michael "Zonk" Zenke is Editor of Slashdot Games, a subsite of the technology community Slashdot.org. He comments regularly on massive games at the sites MMOG Nation and GameSetWatch. He lives in Madison, WI (the best city in the world) with his wife Katharine. Michael is not a game journalist.*

“the "reality" of the **MASSIVE GAMES** we play extends beyond the PC, Ventrilo server and guild forum.”

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