the escapist

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by Julianne Greer

We hear from a lot of people on a weekly basis wishing to write for the magazine. Some just like the magazine's style and want to be involved. Sometimes, they've already looked at our editorial calendar and have an issue in particular for which they'd like to write. And some come forward with fully fleshed out pitches or articles, great ideas, but not at all related to our calendar.

It is these orphan articles which cause us the most difficulty. You see, we're suckers for a great article, but we have designed, and love, our editorial calendar. It is the foundation upon which the whole of The Escapist is built. However, we have learned in our first year of publishing The Escapist that sometimes it is best to have a little flexibility built into the mix.

It is this need for flexibility that has brought forth the recurring Editor's Choice issues you'll find scattered throughout the calendar. These issues are literally a mix of some of our favorite Homeless Articles over the last few months – and this one is no exception.

This week, Bruce Woodcock shares his experiences and preferences for playing a female in online worlds. Joe Blancato discusses with the founders of Troika the ideas behind the company, and eventually, the fall of one of the most original and often underappreciated game developers. Phillip Scuderi explores Maxis' sim games and their mark, not on just the gaming world, but for those who've played them, their mark on our understanding of the world around us. Gearoid Reidy uncovers the unsung heroes of the game industry: the localizers. And Erin Hoffman offers, in her article, that parents might just be the best game developers. Enjoy these articles and more in this week's The Escapist.

Cheers,

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ITo The Editor: Tonight i finally found the time to read the mobile edition of the escapist, which i was looking forward to, knowing the nice articles you usually have.

Have to say that i'm really disappointed.

Somehow, the issue kinda missed most of the mobile point (except for the eric goldberg part, which was solid, and the first article, which made some good points). it reads like what people who know only about other gaming platforms would write about mobile. i guess it might be a good read for some people, but for people who are actually in the mobile trenches it was largely disappointing.

- Jeff Valadares, Production Director, Digital Chocolate (Sumea)

In Response to "Going 'Home' for the Holidays" from The Escapist Forum:

This gave me some pretty severe warm fuzzies. Almost made me wish I could find an MMO that I could put up with for long enough to experience this sort of thing. Oh well. I'm still holding out for World of Starcraft.

- Bongo Bill

In Response to "'Maajh, Ladies'" from The Escapist Forum:
Is this some kind of a x-mas joke? I mean, ok, your grandmother (when she does exist, anyway) plays mahjong. And what? What's the higher meaning? Or the connection to the (electronic) gaming?

...gee, next time i am going to write about the terrible chess trials with my granddad...and terrible they were...

Carc

In Response to "Christmas Behind the Cash Register" from The Escapist Forum:

This article describes the Holiday retail experience accurately. As the store was described I was constantly bringing up images in my head from the past two years to match each detail. Everything from the parents that believe retail stores are daycare centers to the frustrating, incompetent teenage help was present in my own personal outing in the retail business.

I will never understand the passionate anger that people feel while waiting on line. Most people browse the store for a half hour or more; but when it comes to waiting on line time becomes precious.

I just hope that people that read this article will, if they don't already, treat retail employees with more respect and patience during the holiday season. I still love the holidays, but work is significantly more taxing. There can't always be enough cashiers to fill every register, and there aren't always enough salesmen to assist each sale with the detail that they would normally offer at any other time of year.

-Blaxton

the Escapist

Confessions of an MMOG Cross-Dresser

by Bruce Sterling Woodcock

Hello, my name is Bruce, and I like to play female characters in online games.

It wasn't always this way. I had my first exposure to internet gaming in 1989, while I was attending Purdue University. Oh, I had been playing computer and videogames for years before then, and I had even done my share of time in the BBS scene, but the revelation that the internet allowed me to connect, in real time, with complete strangers thousands of miles away, **for free**, was truly staggering. My discovery of the various tools of early net communication progressed rapidly, from email to Usenet to finger to talk. By 1990, I had fully immersed myself in the growing phenomenon of TinyMUDs, an offshoot of the original line of Multi-User Dungeons that had started back in 1978 with Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw. We didn't care that we were limited to just text. We were making virtual worlds! We were engaged in a cyberspace revolution!

My early characters were universally male and, perhaps out of ego, usually looked just like myself, albeit an idealized and empowered version of the computer geek I actually was. But like many nerds of that era, I was a social outcast even among my peers and lacked the adequate social skills to communicate effectively in the real world, let alone a virtual one. But in those virtual worlds were **girls**, **real girls**, and they actually wanted to talk to me. At least, they did until I fell into the hidden, precarious traps of social communication, the plethora of unknown and unavoidable faux pas that inevitably led to making a bad first impression. Still, I muddled through and actually did manage to make some friends and even find romance, in the wild whirlwind of those early days. Soon, I had even become involved in the practice of TinySex, a TinyMUD version of what later internet generations would call "cybering."

But there was one woman, in a virtual world named Islandia, who enchanted me more than any other. Her character went by the name Faerie, and she was everything a man could want: mystery, beauty, charm, intelligence and devastatingly sharp wit. And if the rumors were true, she was the best of the best when it came to TinySex. I was completely smitten with her, but due to my earlier social fumbling, she would have nothing to do with me. She had many other friends on the MUD, though, including a few from real life who went

to the same college, and one of them had recently changed his character's in-game gender from male to female. I was partly to blame for it; since MUDs were text-based, when you entered a room of people all you saw was a list of names, not each individual description of each character, and I had kept mistaking him for female since he had a very feminine-sounding name. We all had a good laugh, and he adopted the female persona in game as his "sister."

Faerie, as it turned out, actually preferred the company of the fairer sex, and with my recent exposure to the idea that **men** could actually pretend to be **women** in the game, I began to hatch a plan. I would create a new, female character, one that would not have the historical baggage my male character had. I would carefully craft her to behave and act like just the sort of woman Faerie would lust after. She was designed, specifically, to seduce Faerie, and to allow me to experience a new social relationship I would never have otherwise been able to enjoy. I decided, for the sake of ethics, that I would not lie about my new character's player; I would simply say I preferred to keep it a secret.

And thus, Lorianna was born, and in due time she and Faerie had become quite the item, just as I had planned. We were both enjoying each other's company, and Lorianna had become quite popular MUD-wide. But I was not prepared for how those virtual experiences were becoming increasingly substantive. Could I actually turn our virtual relationship into a real one? What if she had a boyfriend? Would she still accept me once I told her my terrible secret? What chance would a long distance relationship between two teenagers have, anyway? I had to find out more about who Faerie really was.

I put my newly acquired internet-fu to work. I knew that Faerie's real life friends and fellow MUDders went to Berkeley, and so I began my search there. Back in those early days, the UNIX finger command could be used to see who was logged into a machine, even from across the internet. I got the names of a few undergraduate machines at Berkeley and began monitoring them. Whenever Faerie would log into the MUD, I would see what accounts were logged in on the servers, paying close attention to which ones that had just recently done so. When Faerie would log out, I would check the list of accounts again, looking for who was logging out. After only a couple of nights, I had narrowed the list of potential candidate logins to just one: **Trip**.

I was shocked. Was Islandia's most renowned femme fatale actually a guy? It was almost inconceivable. Sure, the high frequency of virtual cross-dressing had become an accepted fact on TinyMUDs by then, but **Faerie**? After days of nervous tension, I couldn't take it anymore – I had to tell Faerie the truth, and the whole truth. That night, we had a long talk online, wherein I revealed to her who really was, and what I had done, and how I had discovered who she really was, too. And then she told me about her player, Trip, and how he enjoyed playing female characters, and how this sort of virtual gender bending was just another exercise in roleplaying.

Trip and I remained friends, both online and off, for many years thereafter, and I even got him a job where I worked. But as a result of that early experience, I began to play female characters more and more frequently, and my male ones less and less. With the rise of Massively Multiplayer Online Games in 1996 and

"I was not prepared for how those **virtual experiences** were becoming **INCREASINGLY SUBSTANTIVE**"

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> "there were noticeable differences in how male and female **characters were treated** in online games, even when everyone knew there was a good chance the **FEMALE'S** player was **REALLY A GUY**"

1997, virtual worlds had finally become graphical, and once again I dived right in. But I soon found that there were noticeable differences in how male and female characters were treated in online games, even when everyone knew there was a good chance the female's player was really a guy.

Female characters are often given free stuff, either from males looking to impress them, or from females looking to help out their own. They're more likely to receive help and assistance in game when they ask, and less likely to get ganked by fellow players. Male characters, on the other hand, are often viewed with more suspicion by females, and as a competitive threat by their fellow males. And there are other forms of more subtle gender discrimination. The true extent of these elements in virtual worlds, and their psychological origins, are a subject of frequent debate. I can only speak for myself when I have found them to be generally true in my experience.

But there are other, far more visible reasons for males to play female characters in modern graphical MMOGs. Let's be blunt – female video game characters are frequently **hot**, and a sexy girl on the cover of your retail box can help sell your videogame. And it's not just games like Tomb Raider and Dead or Alive – look at the box covers for the MMOGs *EverQuest, Lineage II, Guild Wars* and *World of Warcraft*, not to mention those notorious *Anarchy Online* ads. Who doesn't want their character to look good? As one fellow player once put it to me, "If I have to stare at an ass in game for hours and hours every day, it might as well be a female ass." And don't the game developers know it. This year at E3, while playing the upcoming MMOG title *Soul of the Ultimate Nation* from Webzen, I was positively giddy to discover that the half-skirt on the female Elementalist character actually **flips up** when she jumps into the air, exposing her shiny panties underneath. Talk about your fan service!

Of course, playing a female character in an MMOG is not without its drawbacks. Sometimes I have to fend off the clumsy, amorous desires of young males with no social skills – the very same sort of people I once was, so many years before. More frequently, though, I have to deal with the accusation by a fellow player that I'm really male. How to handle such situations? Trying to take

the high road and claim you want to keep your real life private or that real life shouldn't matter only makes your status even more questionable. A protest of innocence and a little white lie about one's true gender can work in some situations, but is it ethical? Often requests for proof can escalate, from questions about bra size to solicitations of pictures to requests for phone calls. And a straight-up admittance of the truth can just as frequently lead to jibes, insults, and bruised emotions.

And virtual cross-dressing is becoming ever more difficult. Many guilds now use third-party voice software to coordinate and communicate during their raids, and an increasing number of MMOGs are shipping with integrated voice chat. Will fellow players accept the busty dark elf babe who sounds like Pee-Wee Herman? For how long will the response "Uh, I don't have a microphone" be an acceptable excuse? Perhaps I can lie and claim I'm a mute. Some people have pointed to voice masking as the answer, but unless voice masking is mandatory, people can still request that you turn it off for proof of real gender. Not to mention the fact that a lot of voice masking makes it difficult to understand what the other person is actually saying.

But still, I soldier on, playing my female characters and enjoying every minute of it. Oh, sometimes I like to switch things up and play a studly male Paladin, but more often than not, I'm watching the virtual world from behind a shapely feminine form. And I am not ashamed. But the next time you wonder if that girl in your party is really hot irl, do everyone a big favor and don't ask.

Just sit back and enjoy the view.

COMMENTS

Bruce Sterling Woodcock is a computer and videogames industry analyst, researcher, consultant and author, focusing on massively multiplayer online games. He is best known for his ongoing tracking and analysis of MMOG subscription numbers on his web site, MMOGCHART.COM. He enjoys going to the mall, cuddling, and long walks along virtual beaches.

"Will fellow players accept the busty dark elf babe who SOUNDS LIKE PEE-WEE HERMAN?"

the Escapist

The RISE AND FALL OF TROIKA

How Interplay's Golden Boys **Struck Out** on Their Own

by Joe Blancato

When I discovered Troika Games, I had never heard of the company's three founders, Leonard Boyarsky, Jason Anderson and Tim Cain. I didn't know they were legends in the gaming field, responsible for Interplay's *Fallout*. I just knew they blew up my computer.

Troika's last game, *Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines*, was modeled after the World of Darkness universe created by tabletop developer White Wolf, and a game within that universe, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, was my first real introduction to what gaming could be.

My cousin, visiting from college one summer, inundated my 10-year-old head with words like Malkavian, Caitiff, Prince and Diablerie. Every night during his stay, we'd sit hunched over a table in a room lit only by a candle, and he'd weave a story where I could influence the world, grow powerful, even stop a minor god from destroying the world. Until that point in my life, I'd played nothing but sports games; **participating in a story** was entirely new to me.

Bloodlines was love at first install. The game perfectly captured *Vampire's* spirit, demanding your avatar to make the best of multiple bad decisions; make allies and betray them; and ultimately choose between trying to save every vampire in the city, or to control them. I couldn't stop playing. Just four hours into the game, I was addicted.

I'd already prepared my fake cough to call in sick to work the next day when it happened: As I was navigating Los Angeles, trying to gather some intelligence on a vampire with too high a profile, I heard something inside my computer click. The click turned into a grind, and then my computer shut down and wouldn't turn back on. At all.

By the time I'd replaced all the parts that went blooey, it was December, and the first thing I did was re-install *Bloodlines* - along with a newly-released patch.

It was January before I'd finished my first go through the game, and after coming up for air, I headed over to Troika's official site to see what else they had planned. Despite the computer nuking, they had earned themselves a very loyal customer. I was shocked to learn that they had laid off all but their three founders, although in hindsight I suppose I shouldn't have been; the last

> "If Baldur's Gate hadn't hit big, Interplay might well have **IMPLODED** much **EARLIER**"

patch they released for *Bloodlines* was the final official bit of code Troika would ever produce.

"Great Ideas. Never Enough Testing."

Boyarsky, Cain and Anderson's creative vision first came together at Interplay. Together, the three worked on *Fallout*, the critically-acclaimed, post-apocalyptic RPG that has lived on in the hearts and minds of PC gamers as a sterling example of gaming done right. Cain was credited as Producer, Boyarsky as Art Director and Anderson as a Lead Artist.

Work began on a sequel, but the three "were unable to come to an agreement with Interplay as to how our next team should be structured," says Jason Anderson. The three also ran into a lot more corporate attention after *Fallout's* success, Leonard Boyarsky tells me in a separate interview. Between that and Interplay's growing pains - the company's expansion was turning the culture bad - Anderson, Boyarsky and Cain struck out on their own.

Boyarsky says, "Interplay had been a great place to work, and we felt that it was losing a lot of what we felt was great about it, and that they were making a lot of bad decisions that would destroy the company. We were about five or six years early on that, but we saw the writing on the wall. If *Baldur's Gate* hadn't hit big, Interplay might well have imploded much earlier, but we left about a year before BG was even released."

And so, Troika was formed. They each shared the CEO title, which worked for a while because "we each had our specialty," Anderson says, "Tim being a talented programmer, Leonard a talented artist and I have a knack for technical things allowing me to develop ways for the programming and art to merge together."

The company they describe sounds like a slice of dot com era heaven. "Our basic goal in leaving [Interplay] was to create a company that felt like 'old Interplay,'" Boyarsky says. Anderson described the workplace to me: "We had a casual environment, open hours, kept the fridge and kitchen fully stocked with sodas and snacks, had weekly lunch catered in (or BBQ's on the patio), took everyone to movie premiers, matched their retirement plans a full 3 percent with no vesting period, had very competitive pay scales and put most of the employees into offices rather than cubicles, had a lounge with couches and console games, a big screen TV, game nights, etc."

Somewhere in there, they managed to get work done on their first game, *Arcanum*, an isometric-view, non-linear steampunk RPG. Think *Fallout* with monocles and zeppelins. The game, which released in 2001 to good reviews (though many complained of niggling bugs), came straight from Boyarsky, Anderson and Cain's skunkworks, says Boyarsky: "For the initial design of *Arcanum*, it was just Tim, Jason and myself for five months until we landed a contract." The contract they secured was with Sierra, which let them expand the company to 12 people.

Expecting a team of 12 to crank out a fully-featured game with a homemade engine is fanciful, to put it lightly. Keeping things small was "a decision that would cost us a great many nights and weekends," Boyarsky says, and it would mean the company was nearly in a constant state of crunch mode (a development state in which workers put in well over the standard 40 hours per week to meet deadlines). "The process of taking an idea from the design doc all

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Just recently, CES opened the Gaming TechZone, sponsored by **GameDaily** – a gaming-specific exhibit area – in its newest venue, The Sands Expo and Convention Center/The Venetian. CES has several exhibitors lined up for this area, including **Majesco, GameLoft, PC Gamer, Maximum PC, Game Quest, Wolfking** and **Novint Technologies**. But there's still space available, so secure it now!

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the way to a 'polished' feature involves a lot of iteration to be done correctly, as even the greatest ideas on paper may fall flat when implemented. Since we were in crunch mode so much of the time for any number of reasons, some due to things we should have done differently, and some completely out of our control, we would end up trying to iterate features before they were fully implemented," he tells me. "We always felt like we were under the gun."

And they were. During Troika's seven-year existence, they never worked with the same publisher twice, and the company was constantly criticized for releasing inspired but bug-ridden work. Running with such a small team was partially to blame, but Troika also ran into a lot of problems with their numerous publishers. "One of our titles was even pulled out of our hands so that it could sit in a box for four months while [the publisher] finished translations. All we could do was work on the patch during that time. Adding insult to injury, a final production copy was leaked out and passed around on the Usenet for those four months," Anderson says.

But that's how things are for the low man on the totem pole, especially when big publishers are concerned. Boyarsky was hoping Troika could avoid constantly being the "new guy" from the onset. "Troika's original goal had been to just be exclusive to one publisher, kind of their external RPG dev team," he says, "so we wouldn't have to always be scrambling for contracts. At first, Sierra seemed to be that publisher – even when they weren't sure about an *Arcanum* sequel, they had us working on something else. But then Sierra had its own problems, and that was the end of that."

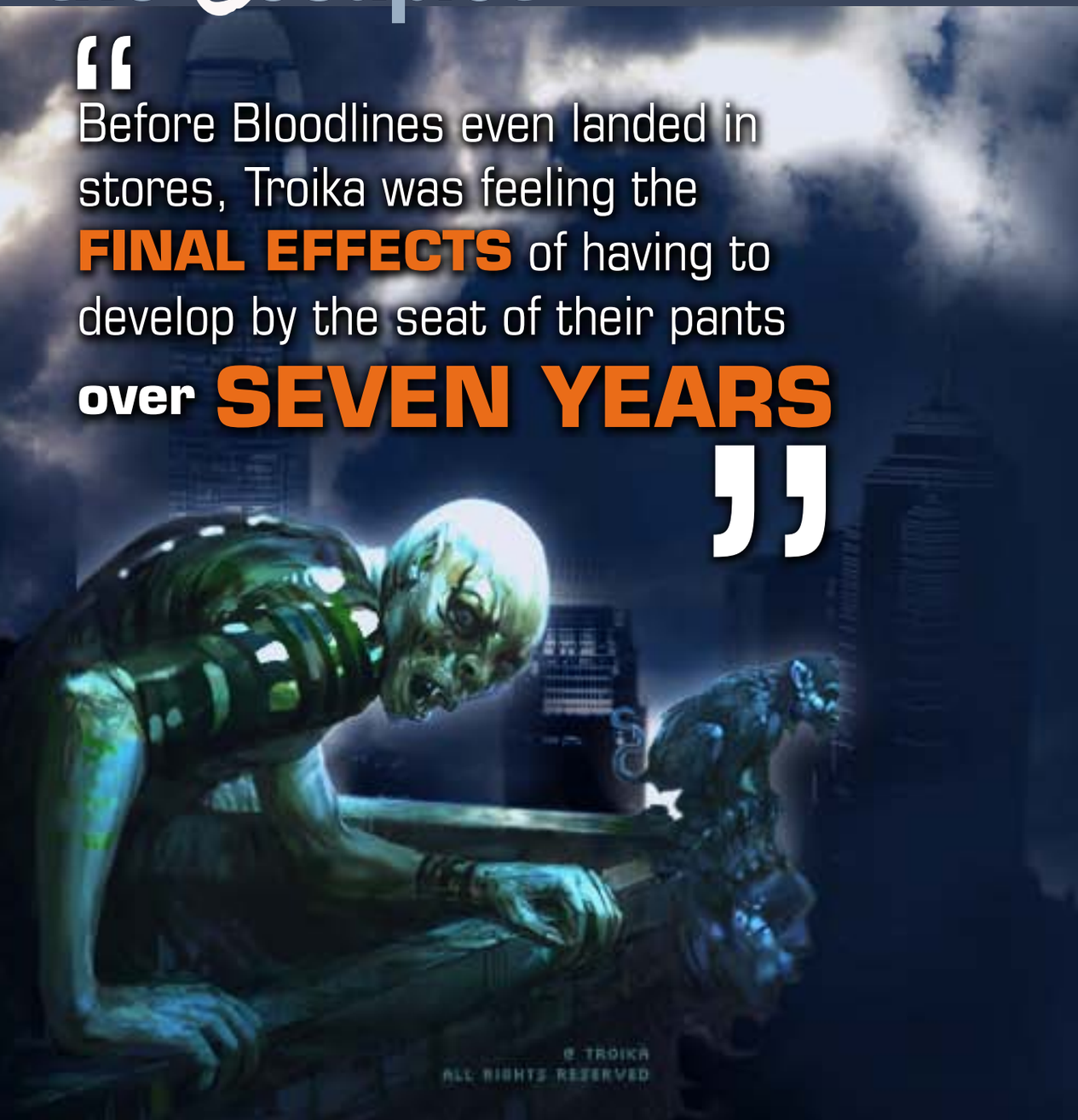
When Sierra went under, Troika found quarter at Infogrames/Atari, working on *The Temple of Elemental Evil* (*ToEE*), a computer remake of a famous Dungeons & Dragons story module, in 2001. The game released in 2003, and like *Arcanum*, was buggy (this one ran a chance of clearing your hard drive), but reviewers praised Troika's adherence to the original module's story and the game's faithfulness to the 3.5 Edition D&D rules. Cain was the lone founder on the project; Anderson and Boyarsky had recently won the license to *Vampire* and were already at work on my beloved *Bloodlines*, to be published by Activision.

Developing *Bloodlines* was troublesome for the company. They found themselves having to wade through nearly government-level red tape to accomplish anything. Compared to the relative freedom they had with *Arcanum*, "design, by necessity, had to become a lot more structured in a game like *Vampire*, where we had to run everything not only by White Wolf but by the publisher as well." On top of that, they were using a prototype of the Source engine, one that didn't yet have Valve's high-class AI built in, and Troika's AI code didn't play very nice with Source.

Activision, fearing their license was in jeopardy, advanced Troika more money in 2003, to allow the *ToEE* team to move over to work on *Bloodlines*, hoping Troika would be able to complete the game by 2004 by sheer force of mass.

Troika managed to push the game out in time for its November 16 release date, but at a severe cost in man hours. According to Anderson, "It might be better to think of [*Bloodlines*' development] in terms of non-crunch time. *Arcanum* had about a year of non-crunch time and *Vampire* about one or two months. I am not kidding," he says.

> "Before Bloodlines even landed in stores, Troika was feeling the **FINAL EFFECTS** of having to develop by the seat of their pants **over SEVEN YEARS**"



The game took nearly four years to develop. That means the team was working normal hours for roughly four percent of the development cycle. Comments in the source code provide a glimpse into the late nights the team had to work: "#TJP: SEPT 15th I'm drunk. Hasn't this game shipped yet?"

And, in form with their previous two releases, *Bloodlines* made lasting impressions on all who reviewed it. It was again praised for the subject matter but slammed for all the bugs. Like the one that killed my computer. This recurring theme is, in Anderson's mind, what led to Troika's downfall, though he contends most of the blood is on the publishers' hands. "Right or wrong, we just needed more time to test and polish the games, and none of our three publishers were willing to give it to us. Each and every game was pulled out of our hands before we were through with it. In all fairness, I have to say that we were late and over budget, but that still does not justify giving the public an unfinished product."

Boyarsky offers a bit more insight into what was happening inside Troika's doors: "As I said before ... a large part of Troika's existence was 'crunch mode' with important decisions being made on the fly without the time needed to fully assess the impacts of those decisions."

Before *Bloodlines* even landed in stores, Troika was feeling the final effects of having to develop by the seat of their pants over seven years. Boyarsky (now the sole CEO) and team were unable to secure new deals with Activision or other publishers, presumably due to what had then become a track record of great design with poor implementation. They pitched a variety of ideas to a few different publishers, Anderson's favorite being "Dreadlands, an [MMOG] set in mythical mid 19th century Eastern Europe." The team was also working on the spiritual successor to *Fallout*, but couldn't find anyone willing to bite on the end of their line.

After two waves of layoffs, Troika was down to just its founders before New Year's 2005. In February of '05, they officially closed the company's doors for good.

Looking back, Anderson says, "Publishers aren't interested in games from developers that consistently turn out B titles. Unfortunately, although our games

had depth and vision, we were never able to release a game that had been thoroughly tested and rid of bugs. The large quantity of errors in our product automatically rendered them B titles." Additionally, both echo the sentiment that they found their management roles unfulfilling. "We should have found someone to run the business aspect of Troika," Boyarsky says, "so that Tim, Jason and I could have focused all our energy on the games."

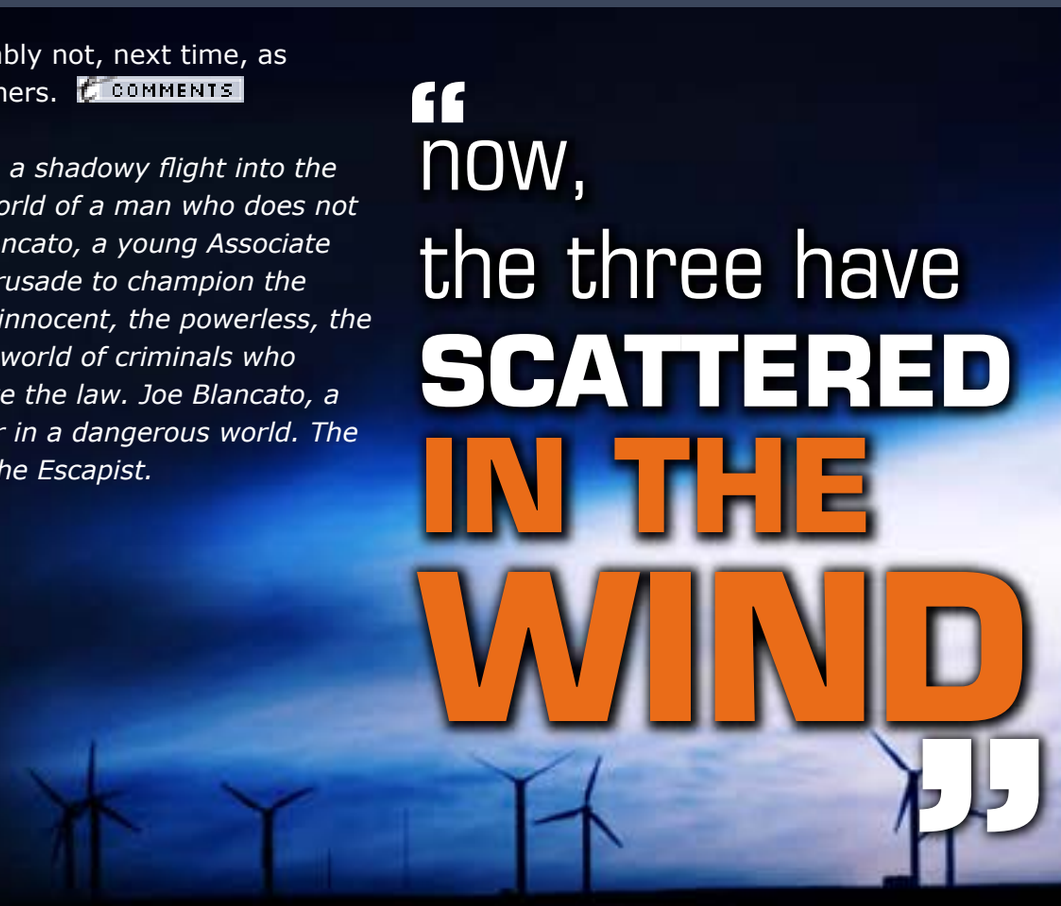
They both say they went after funding the wrong way. "After the lessons we learned on *Arcanum*, I think a better way to go would have been to get independent financing for the bulk of the dev cycle for a game, and then bring it to publishers when it was more than half finished to help bring it to market." Boyarsky tells me, but since all of their games released in the midst of the dot-com bust, game production wasn't really a seller's market.

And now, the three have scattered in the wind. Boyarsky works in the industry, but wouldn't say where on record. Cain is also in the field, and told me (through Boyarsky): "I am staying in the industry but keeping a much lower profile than I did at Troika. Instead of talking about making games or trying to convince people to play (or publish) my games, I am doing what makes me very happy - making games." And Anderson is in Phoenix with his significant other, selling real estate, though he's "getting the itch to return" to games.

While they might not still be working together, their collective influence has carved a deep mark into gaming. *Bloodlines* is a perennial resident on my hard drive, and a third *Fallout* is in the works at Bethesda (when I asked Boyarsky what he thought about Interplay selling the rights, he said, "It felt as if our ex wife had sold our children that she had legal custody of," but he admits to being very "possessive" of the property), which was the talk of E3 2006. Additionally, Interplay has returned from the depths and recently announced a *Fallout* MMOG.

That alone seems like it could be a rallying cry for the three to return triumphant to their very first baby. When I asked Boyarsky and Anderson if they'd consider getting the band back together, they both said they would "love to," though probably not, next time, as company owners. 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.



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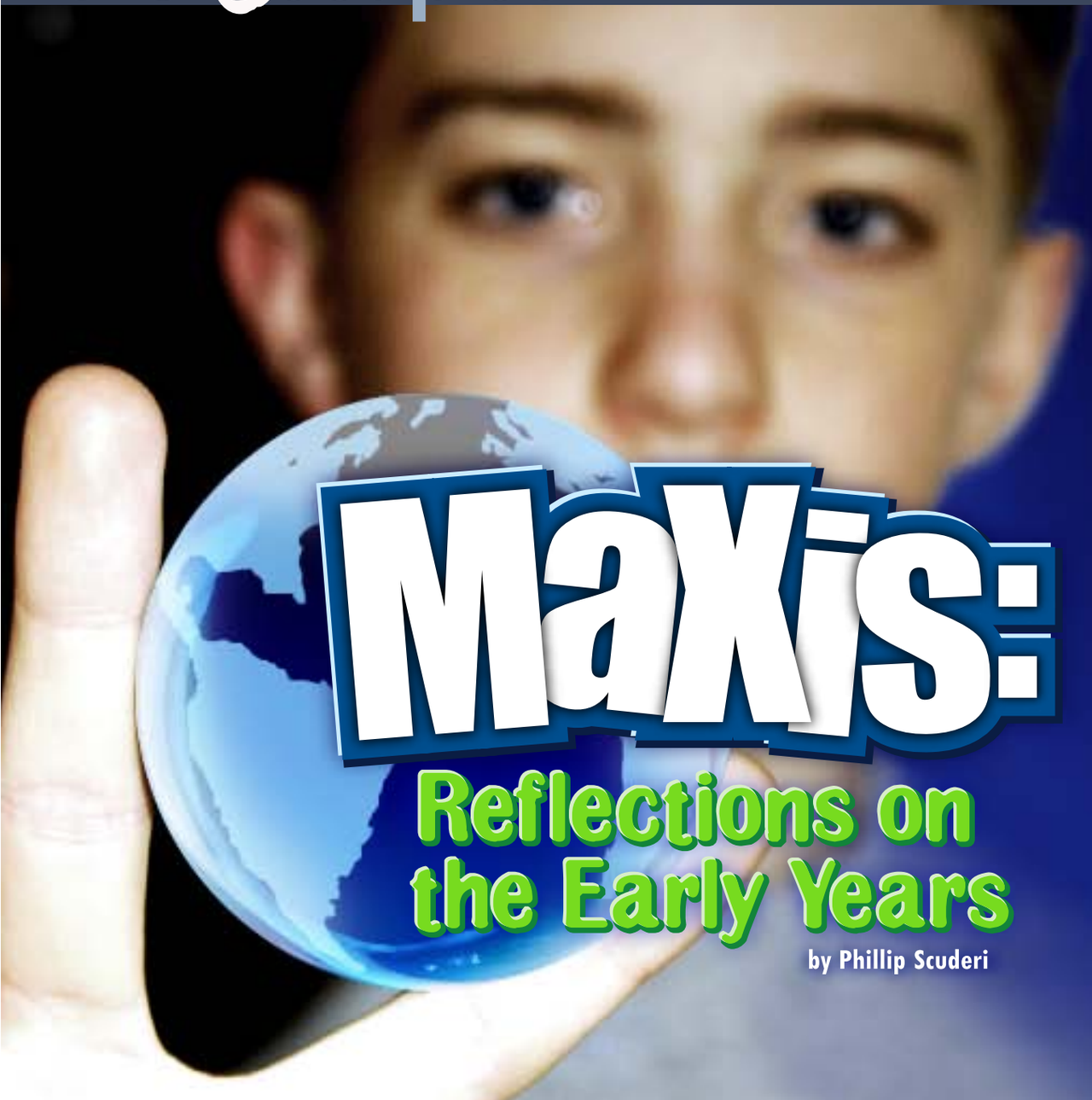


Maxis: Reflections on the Early Years

by Phillip Scuderi

From simulating human cities and ant colonies to the evolution of planets and the genesis of life itself, let no one claim Maxis Software has lacked for range or profundity. At the very mention of a classic Maxis title — *SimEarth*, say — my eyes are known to slip their focus as my mind wanders back and forth across billions of years of game-time. In such moments of fervor, I like to think Will Wright's hands are magic, but in fact, the salient charm of Maxis' games is more akin to science.

Wright and company won their early fame by making games that built on environments or natural biology and erected a framework of rules, within which the player had complete freedom to experiment. 1989's *SimCity* was the first of an esteemed line, and it laid the foundation upon which a legacy of outstanding games would build. In a burst of creative output, Maxis published a slew of simulations in the succeeding years, including *SimEarth* (1990), *SimAnt* (1991) and *SimLife* (1992). In simulations such as these, the experimental mode of thought comes easily. A little food spilled here, a quick spray of pheromones like so, and then watch as the ants scurry and writhe; a tweak of the gene-pool on one continent, a meteor impact on another and see whether life persists. Leave the simulation running for an hour while you shower and eat, then return to see how well the world has managed on its own. If scientists were giants, this is how they would play.

While Maxis has moved on to newer and even more successful franchises, we still have much to learn from these early games. They suggest a way in which we should live our lives: as oriented outward, not inward. They embody attributes of reverence, learning, whimsy and humor, and they are appropriate aids for addressing the central human problem of how we fit in the world we inhabit.

Manual Instruction

"*SimCity* is the first of a new type of entertainment/education software, called system simulations. We provide you with a set of rules and tools that describe, create, and control a system." These calm, inauspicious words at the fore of 1989's *SimCity's* instruction manual illustrate the stark simplicity of Maxis'

approach to games. The classic Maxis simulations are certainly impressive for their realism and attention to detail, but more important to their success is their infectious enthusiasm for knowledge. There is a reciprocal relationship between what one knows of the world and what one can learn about it from a Maxis game: As either increase, so, too, does the other.

Considering the common non-fictional theme of Maxis' run of hits, it's fair to say that the company's early market niche was educational games. These days, when "educational" is applied to computer games, it indicates the antithesis of fun (and perhaps more to the point, the antithesis of marketability). But the market climate that existed in the late '80s and early '90s was more congenial to titles that encouraged (or on occasion even required) players to engage in old-fashioned book learning in order to excel. Indeed, the very instruction manuals to the early series of Maxis titles stimulate gamers to incorporate studying with their playing.

Today, it would seem silly to suggest that reading should go hand-in-hand with gaming, but Maxis went to great lengths to make sure it's player base knew what made their games tick.

For *SimCity*'s manual contains a lengthy essay by Cliff Ellis entitled "The History of Cities and City Planning," which explains everything from the original motivations behind city-building in prehistoric times to the peculiar economic and social concerns of the modern industrial city. None of this information has any direct bearing on how to play *SimCity*; it is only present as a matter of topical interest. There follows an extensive scholarly bibliography and a suggested reading list for children, the latter comprised of both fiction and nonfiction books. Today, it would seem silly to suggest that reading should go hand-in-hand with gaming, but Maxis went to great lengths to make sure its player base knew what made their games tick.

For *SimAnt,* Maxis' Michael Bremer saturated the game's manual with entomological knowledge. Rather than simply including a distinct educational essay in the rear of the book, Bremer incorporated relevant real-world information on ants all throughout the book's 176 pages. The resultant tome seems equal parts game manual and textbook. It contained detailed explanations of ant anatomy, behavior and communication; retellings of ant-related myths from cultures around the world; dozens of quotes from famous writers and poets on ants; a discourse on the relationship between ants' emergent intelligence and computer-based AI systems; and a thorough glossary explaining such technical terms as *stridulation* and *trophallaxis.* The latter consists of one ant transferring food to another by direct regurgitation or defecation into the mouth, thereby resolving the enigmatic exclamation on the back of the box: *Experience the joys of trophyllaxis!*

In the early '90s, it was common for companies to publish long, lovingly crafted game manuals. But even in an era of big manuals, Maxis' devotion to edification was outstanding. By no means was it necessary for a player to read external sources in order to understand or enjoy Maxis' games (nor even to read the manuals themselves, so intuitive were the interfaces), but Maxis took every opportunity to reinforce the value of doing so. After all, the deeper

the rabbit hole, the grander the promise of reward — and for many gamers, the promise is what matters most.

Art and Artist United

Of course, it would be misguided to think *SimCity* provides a thorough examination of the structure of human societies, or that *SimLife* explains the details of evolutionary biology any better than a rudimentary textbook. In fact, Maxis' games teach little in the way of traditional, propositional knowledge. Their educational value is not in explicit theories or formulae, but in the motivation for further study that they instill in the player. Sometimes, the motivation to learn can be very simple: The player has fun considering certain rules of biology in the game, and so begins to associate biology with fun. But the early Maxis titles are often more stirring than that to the player's soul. At their best, the games take on the aspect of art, with all the heady implications that word has come to entail.

Like the gardens at Versailles, in which vivid plants grow within rigidly prescribed geometric designs, Maxis' simulations show how intrinsically chaotic factors can operate within overarching, orderly constraints. In one light, the juxtaposition is gross; in another, it is sublime. The player cannot decide what's more impressive: the sheer complexity of the world or the fact that humans have begun to grasp it. The marvels of the universe become mirrored in the player's own face, its very laws grasped as tools in hand.

One noteworthy contrast between the Maxis games relates to their conceptions of perfection as a goal. *SimCity* and *SimAnt* presuppose certain attributes as desirable: the efficient layout of a power grid or design of an ant burrow, for example. Some designs are plainly not as effective as others, and these will lead to an unhealthy and unappealing society. *SimEarth* and *SimLife* are of a different kind, since the large-scale features of entire planets and ecosystems do not usually involve any kind of social order. Decisions here come down to aesthetics, and it's hard to tell whether a jungle landscape is more beautiful than permafrost or if reptiles are lovelier than birds.

In the end, whether one enjoys a simulation of many individuals cooperating as a social unit, or a simulation in which individuals are rendered inconsequential, there is no choice but to surrender the sense of one's own individuality to the game. To play these games is to receive a fuller sense of oneself as part of a greater whole. Our race is building toward something, even if it's only a more complete knowledge of the universe. As Bertrand Russell wrote, "It is in such profound instinctive union with the stream of life that the greatest joy is to be found." COMMENTS

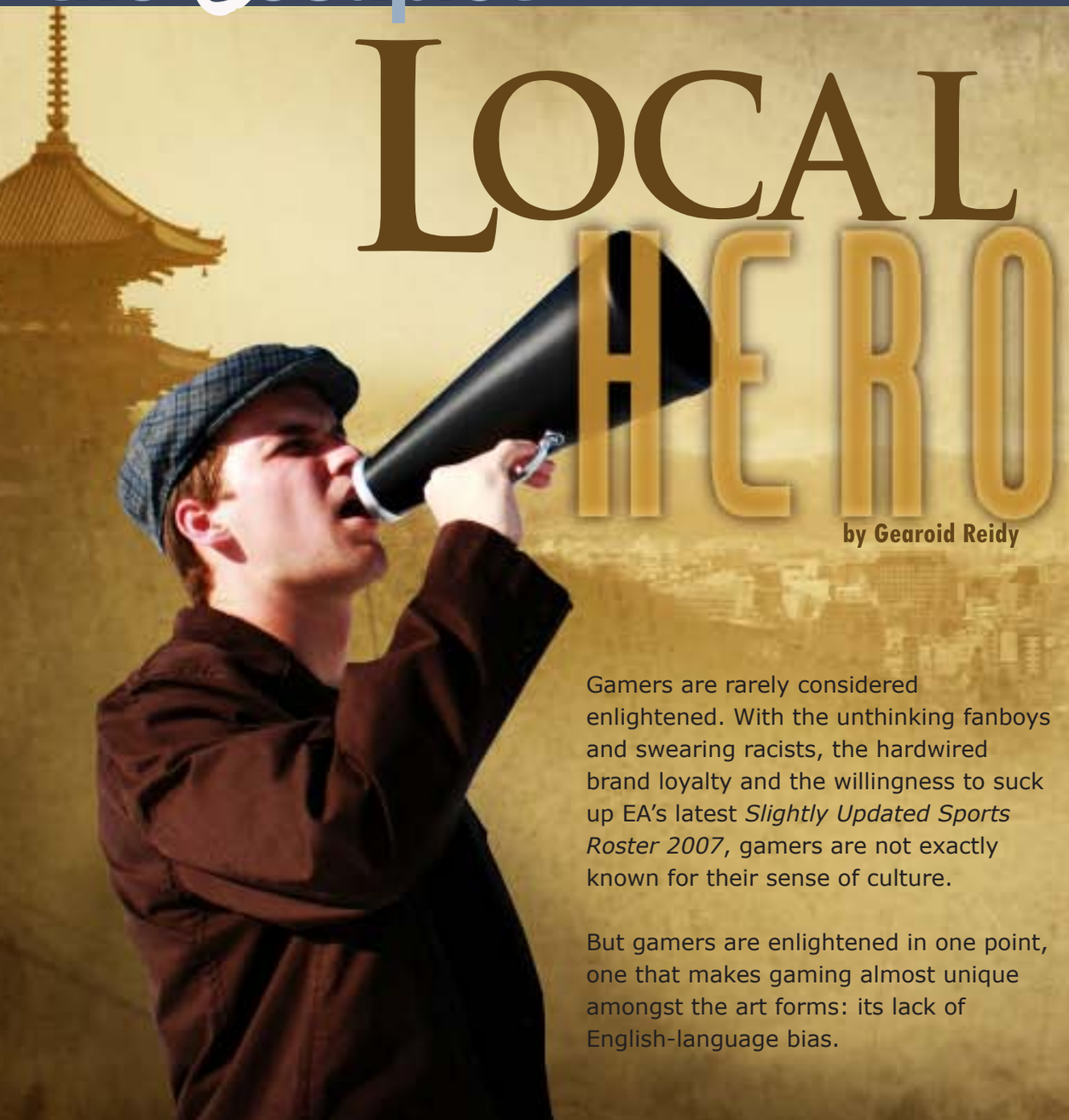
Phillip Scuderi writes for Gamers With Jobs, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of South Florida. Beyond this, his loyalties remain uncertain.

At their best, the games take on the aspect of art.

the Escapist

Local Hero

by Gearoid Reidy



Gamers are rarely considered enlightened. With the unthinking fanboys and swearing racists, the hardwired brand loyalty and the willingness to suck up EA's latest *Slightly Updated Sports Roster 2007*, gamers are not exactly known for their sense of culture.

But gamers are enlightened in one point, one that makes gaming almost unique amongst the art forms: its lack of English-language bias.

When was the last time you read a book translated into English, watched a movie with subtitles or listened to foreign language music? For the vast majority of consumers, that answer is "never." But gaming is dominated by non-English language companies - and the average customer couldn't seem to care less. Put simply, foreign games sell in a way that foreign movies, books and music just don't.

For this global industry to overcome the fate of the Tower of Babel, there is a small army working behind the scenes. These are the localizers, the unsung heroes who make modern gaming possible. Yet good localization is something that's only appreciated when it's missing. Get it wrong, and the best you can hope for is to live in infamy as the butt of another internet joke – a world where a winner is you, and all your base are belong to us. But get it right, and a good localization can turn an otherwise obscure Japanese niche title like *Katamari Damacy, Phoenix Wright* or *Animal Crossing* into a beloved worldwide hit.

As early as two generations ago, localization was an afterthought. In the dark days, it was commonplace to have an eight-month wait for companies to release an English version of a surefire hit like *Mario Kart 64.* Now, we live in an international gaming world – a world where a Japanese-developed hit like *Zelda: Twilight Princess* appears in English two weeks **earlier** than the Japanese version.

Publishers have finally awoken to the reality of the global marketplace – but most gamers still know nothing about the process that turns zany Japanese nonsense into the latest best-seller.

Word for Word

The average English-speaking gamer is much more likely to encounter a Japanese to English conversion than any other. But converting Japanese to English is, linguistically and technically, one of the most challenging processes in the translation field. Japanese and English are just about as different as two languages can be.

"There are a lot of differences between English and Japanese," says Ben Judd of Capcom. Currently a producer at Capcom's headquarters in Osaka, Japan, Judd is also responsible for the creation of Capcom's new internal localization

team - as well as being the voice of DS lawyer Phoenix Wright. "[Japanese] polite language has multiple levels hidden within levels and is certainly not limited to 'please' and 'sir.' There are ritualistic expressions that just cannot be translated into English and vice versa: '*itadakimasu*,' 'God bless you,' usage of the word 'sorry.'"

Take a simple word like *onigiri*. For a Japanese speaker, it's an everyday word. It's a rice snack with about as much variation as a hamburger. But good luck explaining *onigiri* in the middle of a dialogue-heavy videogame. Do you translate it into some awkward construction like "rice balls"? Do you, as the *Pokemon* cartoon infamously did, ignore reality and call a ball of rice a donut? Or do you, like anime fansubs, leave the Romanized word and add a two-line footnote describing it as a ball of rice containing fillings like salmon, wrapped in nori. Blast, now you have to explain what nori is, too!

Now, multiply this by the 100,000 or so words you might find in a text-heavy game, and you have an idea of what the average game localization looks like.

"Sometimes, there just aren't good solutions to these problems," says Judd. "Oftentimes, we don't get the luxury of footnotes in games. Handhelds often have insane space restrictions and manuals cost per page, so usually we can't even use that real-estate to help non-anime users understand. You walk a fine line and you can never forget to shoot for the middle ground."

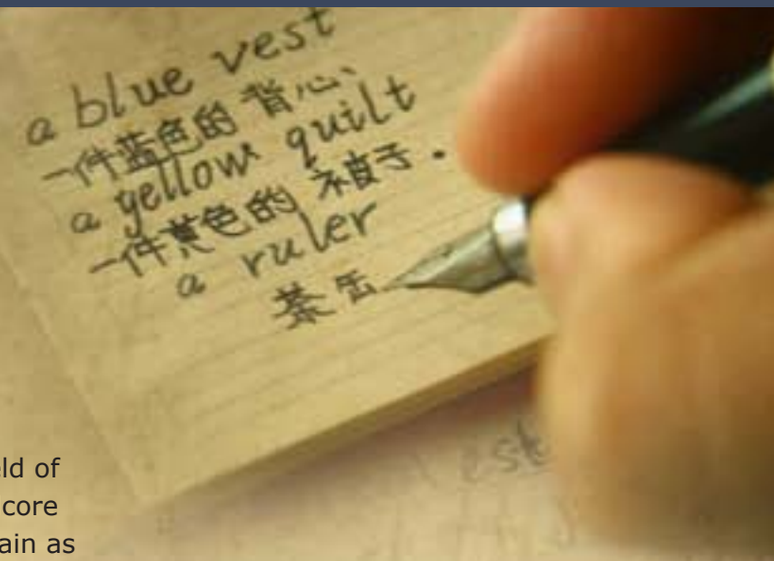
Location, Location, Location

Easier said than done. Localizers also have to consider just **who** is standing in that middle ground.

"The baseline for localization work is to instill in the localized product the same look and feel as the comparable local product," says Minako O'Hagan, a lecturer in Japanese and a researcher in translation technology. "At the same time, with some Japanese games, overseas fans may like the game because of its Japanese flavor, [and] therefore the translation should not kill the unique cultural touch."

"This is a complex issue," says Carmen Mangiron, a translator who works on converting the *Final Fantasy* series into Spanish and a researcher in the field of videogame translation. "Many hardcore gamers prefer that the games remain as Japanese as possible. Other casual gamers would prefer that everything is localized and explained to them."

Localization is far from mere word-to-word translation.



"You can't please everyone," says Judd. "On one hand, we have the '1337 gaming purists.' They want games to feel like art, and they want to know the games have been unaltered. It's a fine line, but localization is, by its nature, going to end up altering the base content. Some will shout, 'Why is he not called Rockman? That was a perfectly good name!' Others might have said, 'Why do they call him Rockman if he doesn't have a guitar? That blue suit is hardly rockin'!'"

Culture Shock

Even if it were a simple task, localization is far from mere word-to-word translation.

"What do you do when you have a character that speaks incredibly polite Japanese?" asks Judd. "How about dialects? Humor? Most of these areas **do not** translate directly into another language, so you cannot rely on translation to get you by. That is where 'localization' comes in. You need to rely on your own sense in all these issues in order to create content based on the original without being constricted by it."

Any liberties taken with the source material are a gamble. Minako O'Hagan gives the following example from *Final Fantasy X.*

"The last scene shows the main female and male characters, Yuna and Tidus, bidding farewell. They had developed a strong affectionate feeling toward each other, but all Yuna says to Tidus in the original is '*arigato*' [thank you]. This was translated into 'I love you' for the American version, because the American translation team felt 'thank you' just did not do it, and also that 'I love you' fit better with the lip synch for the original Japanese sound. Interestingly, however, there was a reaction against this decision from the fans, who realized that the original was more in keeping with the way Yuna had been portrayed as a reticent Japanese girl."

Every country has its own cultural fixations. The U.S. is notoriously gun-happy yet sex-shy. Japan is quite the opposite: While there's no problem with sexualizing schoolgirls or transvestites in children's cartoons, even Japanese-developed titles like *Resident Evil 4* and *Dead Rising* often have their violence toned down for the Japanese release.

Any liberties taken with the source material are a gamble.

O'Hagan says, "When *Crash Bandicoot* was being localized into Japanese, at the insistence of the Japanese side, [the outsourced localization team] had to change the main character from having three fingers and a thumb to having four fingers and a thumb. One can speculate this had to do with the association with Japanese mafia, which is often represented by gang members missing a finger as a result of ritual punishment.

"Such cultural issues are likely to have gone completely unrecognized if the localization company had not consulted their Japanese counterpart. These issues are beyond the matter of translating what's there and call for an astute attitude to hidden cultural traps."

Technically Speaking

"If you are working on an RPG with 100,000 words of text, it is going to take one translator about 50 days to translate it," says Heather Chandler, the author of *The Game Localization Handbook* and the founder of Media Sunshine, a videogame consultant firm. You can have a team of translators working on it, but it will still take about 30 days, because one translator would have to read through it all.

"Leaving the task of translation to the end is going to put the rest of the localization behind schedule," she says. "Once you receive the translated text, you need to get it integrated back into the game. You also have to schedule time for recording localized voiceovers – which means time for auditioning and casting actors, recording the lines, putting them in the game. Then you need to spend several weeks linguistically testing the game."

The localization process is complicated even further by the need to work across different platforms and several different languages, all for simultaneous release.

"Releasing simultaneous localizations can be very challenging," says Chandler. "Each language requires a team of translators, voiceover actors and testers. Some companies are now working on up to 10 simultaneous localizations. When

you add in multi-platform releases, this greatly increases the workload."

The process of videogame localization is far more technically complex than a movie or TV show.

"Videogames are, by nature, interactive, allowing for player variables to fit in the predetermined text strings," says O'Hagan. "Many games allow players to make up the name of a character. Then, the name has to appear every time it is mentioned and may be embedded in a phrase or a sentence. Similarly, the player may choose to go down a particular path by inputting their selection, which needs to be understood by the game software, in turn affecting the translation of the predetermined text strings. This can be particularly challenging with highly inflected Roman languages with gender distinctions and gender agreements of nouns and verbs."

Highs and Lows

For a translation master class, check out *Phoenix Wright* on the DS, which features the work of one of the industry's foremost translators, Alex Smith. With the ability to switch between Japanese and English, the Japanese versions offer a rare insight into the localizer's craft.

"*Phoenix Wright* was a fantastic and utterly frightening game to work on, because let's face it, *Phoenix Wright* **is** all about the text," says Judd, who worked on the game. "Fortunately, they allowed us ample time to determine different speaking styles for the characters, names and even touch up some of the graphics to fit the U.S. Alex Smith, genius that he is, offered us many great suggestions. Of course, Takumi Shu's base text was also exceptional – it **never** hurts to have quality base text to work off of."

But as a brief look at the wonderful *Audio Atrocities* makes clear, even high-profile titles still slip through the net.

"I guess the bar on quality has increased over the past few years so there really aren't as many examples as before," says Judd. "Of course, *Resident Evil 1* will live in infamy for its poor voice acting and awkward sentences. I have to admit the 'Don't come' [Japanese: *Kuru na*] voice in Sega's *House of the Dead 2* still cracks me up to this day."

"The translation of *Final Fantasy VII* into European languages is notorious for the bad quality of its translation," says Mangiron. "One example commonly quoted is that 'party,' which refers to the group, was localized as 'fiesta' in Spanish."

Localization, Localization, Localization

While the slip-ups are still funny, the days when bad translations were something to be expected are thankfully behind us.

And while it's the producers that get the high-profile interviews and the artists that get fans salivating, it is the localizers we have to thank for bringing us the games we need – and for that, localizers, we salute you.

A hero is them. COMMENTS

Each langauge requires a team of translators, voiceover actors and testers. Some companies are now working on up to 10 simultaneous localizations.

Gearoid Reidy is a journalist working in Asia. His website is www.gearoidreidy.com - but don't come! Don't come!

the Escapist

WHO'S YOUR DADDY?

Why parents make great Game Developers

by Erin Hoffman

Parenting and politics are two things you don't talk about in polite company because they reach down into the core of human issues that provide driving forces in our lives. These two topics have only begun to germinate in the gaming world, and it's a sure bet that they start fires wherever they go.

In a recent Slashdot discussion responding to a student who asks whether he should get a Master's degree in game development or computer science, one commenter notes that "[t]he fact of life in the videogame industry is that once you been in the industry for 10 years and/or over 30 years old [sic], you're no good to the cheap bean counters who run a lot of these game companies."

This sentiment runs deep through game development, and with over half of developers expecting to leave the industry within the next 10 years, a frightening mass exodus has already begun. While many studios are working to deliberately create a family-friendly environment for the benefit of their family-minded game-makers, no one really talks about why studios ought to be stepping up to the plate for families for the benefit of their **games**.

And they should. Parents tend to be more in tune with target game demographic trends, enforce saner development practices that provably improve reliable product delivery and keep a project focused to achieve goals faster – so that they can go home. We ought to be talking about this, and we **also** ought to be talking about how **game developers** make some of the best **parents** around.

Trend Setter, Bellwether

Gamers and kids have an intuition for what's "in" that borders on being a sixth sense. Developers are frequently working way too hard to keep up with all of the latest games, much as we try. Ask around - the number of years a person has spent in the industry will be inversely proportional to the number of new titles on their shelves, **unless** that developer has kids. We "free agents" try, and we're always aware of the big ones, but no one knows trends like a tween, and parents absorb that knowledge through sheer (often unwilling!) osmosis.

Kids typically figure out games faster and play games more thoroughly than adults. Simply by virtue of having been raised on the technology, children are adapting with startling quickness to new forms of gameplay and game control; we are witnessing another phase in intellectual evolution in the rapidness with which they take up new technologies. *Defender* was a challenge back in the day, but now? I stand in awe to think of the future capacities of a kid raised on *Gradius V*.

Tobi Saulnier, CEO of 1st Playable Productions, notes that kids have an edge on creativity. "Young children have a way of keeping you creative since they see things without as many layers of rules: as my daughter once speculated: 'A long time ago people didn't have cars and roads, so ... they had to fly

everywhere!' Hearing the way your kids look at things helps stimulate your imagination and be willing to disregard convention." Kenneth Yeast, Director of Engineering at Los Angeles-based 7 Studios, agrees; having kids, he says, gives developers "a place to see play in a way that they don't see it in the adult environment."

Developers with kids also provide access to enthusiastic instant test groups. There's a lot to be said for growing technology, but for sheer fun value, you need a "testing unit" that can smile, laugh and roll its eyes at you – *pssh*, Mom, that's so **yesterday**. (Yep, we get family to do testing. And we get their friends, too.) Much as we'd like to think a gamer stays young forever, the inescapable truth is that the target demographic mojo starts rolling off of you somewhere around 14 and has faded away entirely by 25.

But being an unthinking barometer for what's hip is only the tip of the parenting iceberg.

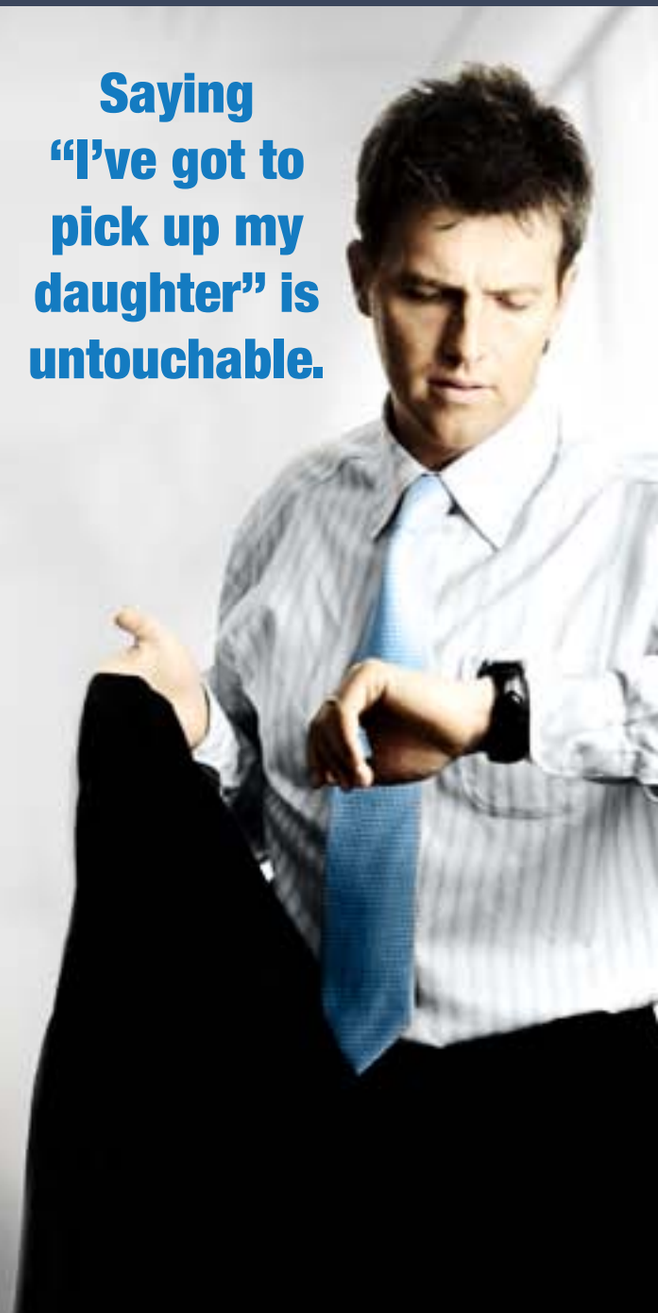
Setting the Bar

Families make us saner. Families are a "safe" obligation no one can challenge. This mystical priority allows developers an "honorable retreat" from crunch mode, putting the brakes on a process that can all too easily get utterly out of control.

It's been said before, and it's true: Crunch mode itself has value. In an ideal world, we would all have exactly the amount of time we need to make fantastic games, and no more. But the real world involves human beings, and human beings make mistakes, so even with the best team on the best project, some crunch is inevitable. Our bodies crunch; when the going gets tough, your suprarenal glands fire a shot of epinephrine into your blood, and away you go. And that's what crunch is: It's a shot of adrenaline. The problem is adrenaline also addles your brain. It impairs judgment. And if you keep going, keep burning on adrenaline and nothing else, your heart explodes and you die.

Saying "I've got to pick up my daughter" is untouchable. It's a magic phrase. No one on Earth is going to say, "No, Bob, I'm sorry, but you can't pick up your child." **No one.** Developers at hard-edged workplaces get guff for everything from deaths in the family to long planned honeymoons, but **not** for taking care of their children. This is a double-edged sword in that some workplaces will have the audacity to discriminate against interviewees by asking about their marital or family status (and developers should be well aware of their rights - such questions are illegal). But parents in the studio bring so many benefits that they ought to be actively **pursued**, not shied away from.

Saying "I've got to pick up my daughter" is untouchable.



Some are actually bothered by the parenting "silver bullet." There really isn't anything inherent that makes a parent's time more valuable than a single person's. But socially, it is acceptable – even expected – to stick up for one's children where it isn't as acceptable to stick up for a planned ski trip, no matter how long it's been in the works or how long you've gone without a vacation.

Parenting, more than perhaps any other profession, also requires flexibility. Saulnier says, "As a parent your kids are always throwing you curve balls that you just need to adapt to. 'Hey mom, I missed the bus and I need a ride' or 'Your child is sick, come get him from school.' You get pretty good at re-planning and adapting to what happens, even if in games it might be 'the movie has been moved up three months' or 'the lead artist's hard disk crashed and we need to rebuild the machine' or 'we need 10 screenshots by end of day for Marketing!'" So the unpredictability that pulls parents out of the office is often a not-so-disguised asset; when bad things happen, the parents are the least surprised.

In the case of crunch, on an immediate level, some silver bullet is better than no silver bullet, because the fact is, going home is good for the game.

Don't Make Me Turn This Game Around

We know going home is good for our ultimate productivity. It's been established in software engineering for years. But we hate to admit it. It's counterintuitive in a sense ("What? **Leave?** Right **now**? But we're **so close!**") - and especially when you're riding the adrenaline wave, it seems like the **sensible** thing to keep going until the job is done.

The problem is you're never "**so close**" when you think you are. You're usually about six hours from "so close," and that curve becomes exponential with exhaustion. Despite knowing this, despite being rationally aware of it, no one wants to be the one to send people home. Yeah, it's stupid, but it's the way things go - even though most of us have had the strange and heady experience of suddenly realizing the answer to a problem that's been plaguing our (fuzzy, sleep-deprived, shut down) minds for the last several **tens** of hours once we get a shower or a little rest.

Setting baselines for working practices is slowly percolating through the industry. It starts simple; in adverse conditions, Yeast says. "Very quickly, productivity begins to decrease, and there's a point at which it dives. I guarantee you, if you take away the weekend for people, that'll kill it." Like everything else, managing productivity becomes part of a large strategy that must remain flexible, but baselines are key, Yeast says, as a metric to measure your working strategy against.

Making the call to go home is great, but the real problem needs to be solved long in advance. Because parents have a stake in going home, they tend to be more likely to enforce reasonable development practices, such as code reviewing, continued learning (including shared technology and techniques) and unit testing. You know, the stuff we really ought to be doing all along. The passionate, fiery, bravado-stuffed code cowboy will scoff at such things: no, we don't want to use someone else's code! We'll build it ourselves! We don't have **time** for unit testing! Commenting code **takes too long!** You should be able to understand it by **looking** at it!

I'm harsh on programmers, but this attitude is everywhere, and it is plain and simple immaturity. Enter the parents. Not only are they practiced in foresight, they're also practiced specifically in countering impatient attitudes. Parenting leaves no room for illusions; because they have a very real and unflinching stake in **going home**, they'll be on the lookout for better ways to make the development process smoother. Find a game with low ratings and you will have found a game that spiraled into (or started from at the outset) deathmarch and out-of-control management **every time**. And increasingly, find where the parents are happy – find where they're **staying** – and you'll find studios reliably delivering games.

Yeast and Saulnier both agree that the greatest asset a parent brings to a team is perspective. Knowing when to let go is a major, if sometimes painful, part of the parenting process. Saulnier says, "It's corny, but as a parent you learn to care for what evolves, even if it is not what **you** would do. You appreciate your kids for what they are growing into and enjoy the process of seeing how they grow and the people they turn into. This is very similar to a game title for me - with all the input from the team, the licensor, publishing partners, the particular challenges, creative and technical. So, like kids each grow differently, and have different strengths and weaknesses."

Yeast adds: "When you're doing work and you're being productive and trying to make decisions, trying to be wise about your decision-making, you have a broader perspective on things, and you end up making some wiser choices. You can look at [a project] and realize what you need to get done and what you can cut away."

A game developer parent, by sheer definition, is going to be in an older age bracket, and that usually means they've spent more years directly in the game industry. Any software engineer anywhere can tell you that an experienced programmer is worth any five - or **more** - junior programmers. Both have their place; the most cutting edge development methods balance the strengths of youthful energy and flexibility against experienced gravity and wisdom, but there's no question that most coding nightmares come from lack of experience. Historically, when hiring new developers, the barrier to entry is not a college degree, discovering new algorithms or even the number of years worked - it's the number of titles shipped, as many a breaker-in laments. It's **experience**, because "Oh, I've seen that before, it's like **this**" is a musical, magical phrase. And it is a catastrophic hypocrisy that we are systematically driving out those that possess the most of the one thing we're **always** looking for.

It is long past time for the last barriers between parents and the game industry to fall, because we need each other, and we make each other stronger. The process toward change will be like rock climbing: arduously inching up the mountain with sherpas like Seven showing the way. Lone studios practicing development methods with baseline quality of life standards, in addition to attracting parents, will allow developers as a whole to be more discerning in their choice of workplace. And with a growing body of studios placing their focus on positive work environments, Yeast says the community will look back and realize, one hit at a time, that inhuman working conditions were peripheral, not integral, to the process of making great games.

The industry is progressing through a critical maturation process, and can come through it in full bloom with careful effort. You hear that, **you kids**? COMMENTS

Erin Hoffman is a professional game designer, freelance writer, and hobbyist

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Issue 77, © 2006. The Escapist is published weekly by Themis Group, Inc. Produced in the United States of America. To contact the editors please email editor@escapistmag.com. For a free subscription to The Escapist in PDF format please view www.escapistmagazine.com