the Escapist

EDITOR'S NOTE
by Julianne Greer

I saw a preview for the movie *300* not too long ago. Being a history major, with a concentration on ancient, with an affinity for the Greeks of the time, I was naturally intrigued. And so, I looked into the background and making of the movie.

And lo, *300*, the movie, is an adaptation of Frank Miller's five part graphic novel of the same title. Frank Miller's *300* (the graphic novel) received acclaim and awards, including three Eisner awards in 1999, the year after publish. And no doubt, Miller's (*Sin City*) gritty, dark style will play heavily on the movie, bringing the gritty and dark story an interesting depth.

But from where did Miller pull inspiration for his graphic novel? From the ancient historians? Nope. As a young child, Miller watched a 1962 Rudolph Maté film entitled *The 300 Spartans* which sparked desire to create his graphic novel.

At this point, all signs point to the original works of Herodotus and others who recorded the deeds of those 300 hundred Spartans millennia ago as the influence for *The 300 Spartans*. But who

knows, Maté may have had other influences for his telling of the Battle at Thermoplylae.

Will there be further adaptation of this story? Have no doubts about it. There is already an adaptation underway for a Playstation Portable title in the near future. *300: March to Glory* seems to be an action/brawler promising lots of blood and guts. Which, I suppose, is an element of what happened at Thermopylae…

Some might say, "When are we going to get some original material?" when looking at the lengthy chain of adaptations and licenses such as the one following behind those 300 Spartans. Others, might note that as one of the more stirring battles in ancient history, if not of all time, and it is a story that can and should be told over and over. Still others fear deeply what each new iteration of the tale might do to break the memory of this epic moment in history.

These are but a few of the issues facing creative media when making new films/ games/TV series/graphic novels/etc. To license, or not to license? That is the question. And it is the question that

supplies the subject of this week's issue of *The Escapist*, "Silver Screen, Gold Disc." Inside you'll find our authors discussing some of the complexities, troubles and highlights of licensing and adapting materials from one media to another. Enjoy!

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "In 3-D" from The Escapist Forum: Allen, Thanks for taking the time to clarify [the questionable language]. However, the word "pussy" is so often used in a derogatory way towards women that it didn't even cross my mind that you were going for a different image. The words "queer" and "bitch" also have harmless origins, but I would hope that, as a jounalist, you would use those words with a little more caution.

- mkt

In response to "In 3-D" from The Escapist Forum: Why are we discussing the word pussy more than 3D games?

- ReedRichards

In response to "Bittersweet Symphony" from The Escapist Forum: This is very resonant (music pun! har!) with me, as it was just Saturday I was in the audience at Video Games Live. Canceled out from under my feet *twice*, it was (and I'm still complaining), but it was well worth the wait.

I listen to a lot of video game music, and I relish any opportunity to go see an orchestra perform, so this was a sort of chocolate-and-peanut-butter combination.

- Bongo Bill

In response to "Play On" from The Escapist Forum: As a music composer from the "other side" (i.e. non mass-media related music) I am very excited about the possibilities in music for computer games. I believe music has always progressed in a manner parallel to the main expressive art forms of the times it was made in: The symphony at the age of the novel, modern scores (Stravinsky, Bartok etc.) at the age of cinema, post modern music at the age of T.V. I think computer games and other modular forms of dramatic narrative are the art-form of today.

The question is: how is music progression to follow? Consider film music for a moment: Film music has its start in the Piano accompanist for silent film, usually improvising music to the events on the screen, having to change style and mood on a dime as the action on the screen dictates. The progression of the music - the way the music "Goes" - has necessarily been re-configured radically. When sound came around, this new approach got necessarily blurred somewhat with the employment of "serious" composers, coming from Europe and landing jobs in the film industry, who were crafting scores that harkened back to their training and musical backgrounds, namely "common era" European music. The great majority of film scores, therefore, became instant imitations of great orchestral music from the late 19th century: Majestically orchestrated, with "big sound" and a slavish attitude towards the notion of "theme"- a theme for every character, a battle theme, a love theme and so on.

Those guys were NOT the only ones making scores for film, though; consider Carl Stalling, who composed the music for all the Looney Tunes animations:

Sheer non-linear brilliance. Consider also Ennio Morricone, the composer of spaghetti westerns, whom, though usually theme based in his score writing due to professional necessity, still blurred the line between sound and music, ,making music that is equal parts sound effects and notes. There are many other examples.

In the gaming world, the piano accompanist equivalent is the guy who made music for *Super Mario Land*, say, or 1943, little loops of FM synthesized sound that changed on a dime, broke off, reconfigured and blended with the sound effects triggered by player actions.

Now, musicians are in on the deal, and the same process of copying occurs- only now it's a copy of a copy: From late 19th century romantic scores, to film scores, to game scores. What's missing is a composer that would take the form of interactive action and modular progression, and run with it. To make music that is wholly modular - bits that fit together any which way and make musical sense, short segments of music that operate well in the beginning, middle, and end of sections, and still

sound beautiful. The potential is endless and could inform the music world at large.

I guess this is my main source of frustration: I believe computer games present the form of the now, and their music doesn't follow.

- TricklIE

In response to "Reward Card" from The Escapist Daily: I enjoy the competitive side of Gamerscores amongst friends. Where a few of us have all downloaded *Contra*, for example, we are all trying to get an achievement that none of the others have for bragging rights. If I log on and see that one of them has just one-credited the first level, for example, competitive nature kicks in and I have to equal them.

- rjwtaylor

In response to "Reward Card" from The Escapist Daily: I can offer one reason why I don't play a lot of games all the way through: at some level, they're all the same. I stopped playing

Oblivion because, after I got past the cool graphics and amazing world, it was just another finish-the-quest RPG. I could list other similar games that I stopped playing when I could no longer ignore the fact it was just another stock game, dressed up in cool graphics, storyline, game quirks, or whatever else it had.

To say it differently, my issue is not that there are not enough carrots, but that many of the carrots are as old as D&D: save the world, rescue the princess, live happily ever after, or whatever. Real carrots that are 25 years old are impossible to find: they've decomposed. Somehow, however, some people in the gaming industry believe that 25 year-old virtual carrots are still fresh. Those people, as far as I am concerned, are dead wrong.

I don't want to save the world, or destroy it: I want to change it in small ways I can feel. I don't want to rescue the princess: I want to see what she does to the kingdom after I save her. And sorry, but true heroes don't live happily ever after:

name any great hero that does, real or fictional. I can't. All the ones I can name either die when they're done, or they go on to do something else heroic.

- ZacQuickSilver

Waaaay down with Jack Thompson and StarForce copy protection, German filmmaker Uwe Boll occupies the lowest circle of the gaming community's pantheon of demons. Though many producer-directors across the decades have made unwatchable films, the work of Dr. Boll (he has a 1995 doctorate in literature from the University of Cologne) has inspired in many gamers a singular contempt.

There are two main reasons. First, Boll strikes close to home; he has relentlessly chosen to adapt popular computer and video games:

● *House of the Dead* (2003; Rotten Tomatoes score 4 percent, Metacritic 15 percent)

● *Alone in the Dark* (2005; Rotten Tomatoes 1 percent, Metacritic 9 percent)

● *BloodRayne* (2006; Rotten Tomatoes 5 percent, Metacritic 18 percent)

● and forthcoming films based on *Dungeon Siege* (as *In the Name of the King: A Dungeon Siege Tale*), *Postal* and *Far Cry*.

Second, perhaps more important, Boll is unrepentant. He cannily exploits, not to say "revels in," reviewers' aggrieved reactions. In September 2006, in a highly publicized stunt christened "Raging Boll," the director challenged four film critics to boxing matches in Vancouver. Having chosen his opponents for their lack of training, Boll (an experienced fighter) handily defeated them all. He plans to include footage from the bouts on the *Postal* DVD.

Like that of his companion devils, Boll's work provokes heated condemnation in gaming forums, as well as on film hobbyist sites such as BollBashers. Noting his dismal and declining box-

Uwe Boll and the GERMAN TAX CODE
Why people keep giving him money to make movies
by Allen Varney

office grosses – *BloodRayne* grossed less than $3.6 million worldwide – bewildered viewers often ask, "Why do people keep funding his movies?"

Thus – uniquely in the history of film – consideration of Boll leads quickly and naturally to a discussion of the German tax code.

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In 2005-06, Edward Jay Epstein wrote the "Hollywood Economist" column for *Slate* magazine. His April 25, 2005 column, "How to Finance a Hollywood Blockbuster," showed how Paramount financed the second *Tomb Raider* movie, budgeted at $94 million, for only $7 million out of pocket. The rest came from cable and overseas sales, and most of all from wealthy German investors seeking tax shelters. Epstein has documented movie financing at length in *The Big Picture: The New Logic of Money and Power in Hollywood* (Random House, 2005).

In Epstein's articles, and similar pieces in *Forbes* and the *Los Angeles Business Journal*, we discern an explanation for Uwe Boll's career.

Tax shelter accounting can be tough reading. To make it worth your while, I'm giving you 100 million euros. The catch is, you must become a native German investor.

Having just made 100 million euros, you have only moments to celebrate before your German tax accountant tells you the bad news: You're in a 45-percent tax bracket, so you must pay the government 45 million euros. *Ach!* That leaves you only 55 million. Can nothing be done?

Now I – a high-flying Hollywood movie producer, well tanned from California's summer sun – visit you. For 90 million euros, you can have the copyright to a film I want to make. To encourage native cultural industries, your country's German Tax Fund makes film production costs immediately tax-deductible. You'll write off the 90 million as an instant loss and pay taxes only on the 10 million euros left.

Nein, your accountant tells you, that deduction only applies to films made by German companies. But fear not! I, the producer, advise you to set up a shell corporation in Munich that "owns" my film, wink-wink nudge-nudge. The shell will lease back to my studio all rights for 15 years, in a "production service agreement" and a "distribution service agreement." After the lease expires, I'll buy back the film, cheap. With only 10 million left after you take the loss, you pay tax of only 4.5 million euros, leaving you 5.5 million.

Ach du lieber! You've lost nearly 95 million, right? No, we're not done yet. Follow me closely here: Under the German

For 90 million euros, you can have the copyright to a film I want to make. Your country's German Tax Fund makes film production costs immediately tax deductible. You'll write off the 90 million as an instant loss and pay taxes only on the 10 million euros left.

OK, so you've invested 90 million in my film and taken a loss. Now, you may ask, what happens if my film makes money?

You're only out 10 million, plus the 4.5 million you paid in taxes. You still have over 85 million left! And after you paid me 90 million, and I paid you 80 million back (most of which I got by pre-selling foreign and cable rights to my film), I'm 10 million up on the deal, and I'm not taxed in Germany. Sweet.

OK, so you've invested 90 million in my film and taken a loss. Now, you may ask, what happens if my film makes money? Under our contract, I pay you the profit between seven and 20 years from now. You'll pay taxes on the profit then. All seems well.

tax code, you can take the full 90-million deduction, then have your Munich shell company charge me (the American producer) 80 million to lease back the rights to my movie. Because you just took a 90-million loss, you don't have to pay taxes on the 80 million you recouped.

But wait! Your accountant has just noticed that, effective January 2006, the German government tightened the German Tax Fund to apply solely to native German filmmakers and production companies. You and I stare in dismay. Oh no! What shall we do?

If only we knew a **native German film director** with his own **German production company** ...

Of course, this example oversimplifies a lot. These complicated deals can involve nonrecourse loans (the investor borrows money to put into the shelter, then writes off the loan fees); equity in the film; distinctions between "tangible" and "nontangible" assets; and lots of middlemen – usually German banks and leasing companies. (The middlemen's hefty fees are also deductible.) And though German tax shelters funded major hits like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Mission: Impossible 2*, Hollywood usually reserves this method for its second-string films, the ones with low profit expectations. As *Movie City News* editor David Poland pointed out, if a studio expects big profits, it wants to keep the film for itself.

The point is, this shelter is entirely legal, as long as a German production company makes the film. Because film investment is a capital transaction, investors could normally deduct only depreciation; this arrangement gives an immediate 100 percent write-off in order to pump funds into the film industry. In 2004, such targeted relief schemes sheltered $750 million that investors would otherwise have paid as taxes. The film funding arrangement is just one of many kinds of "cross-border leasing" between Germany and America, documented in February 2004 by the PBS investigative series *Frontline*. *Frontline* offers a tax shelter FAQ.

Germany has, or had until 2006, the most generous shelters for filmmakers. Many other Western countries have similar filmmaking tax incentive programs, extolled by funding consultants such as Peacefulfish.

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Blogger Stuart Wood, among many others, speculates Boll's films are intended to lose money. Were this theory true, it could help explain egregious

expenses such as the accidental (?) shipment of 5,500 excess prints of *BloodRayne*. From a studio's perspective, might "Hollywood accounting" make it desirable to push a given film from break-even to tax write-off? Not so, Epstein tells *The Escapist*. "No, it is never advantageous to lose money, though a tax shelter may time-shift tax losses to a later year." Given Boll's career to date, and his likely performance ahead, that is weak consolation.

Still, we may at least take heart that, even in the extremely modest German film industry, it's possible to build a successful career in independent film. John Boorman, who directed *Deliverance* (not to be confused with Boll's forthcoming *BloodRayne II: Deliverance*), wrote in the British newspaper *The Guardian* (September 6, 2003) about the travails of the modern indie filmmaker in "the arthouse ghetto of low budgets and deferred fees":

"The independent film has to squeeze into margins and corners not occupied by the bullying blockbusters. The finance is cobbled together from co-productions, tax shelters, territorial pre-sales and, if you are lucky, as I was with my film *Truth* [released in 2004 as *Country of My Skull*], money from the [lottery-supported United Kingdom] Film Council. (I won £2m on the lottery without buying a ticket.)

"It took 18 lawyers to reconcile the contracts of all the participants. During those long weeks, as I waited in South Africa with my cast and crew, the picture teetered on the verge of collapse. A feature of independent films is that most of them fall apart, often days before they are due to start shooting, and, even sadder, sometimes a week or two after they have begun."

We don't like to think about it, but Uwe Boll represents a canonical indie success. Through shrewdness and persistence, Dr. Boll has successfully gamed the system and earned millions doing exactly what he wants. Tax shelter schemes for filmmakers have reduced barriers to entry and helped level the playing field for everybody – which means, unfortunately, everybody.

On the bright side, this proves a positive lesson: If he can do it, you can too. **Anybody** can. COMMENTS

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

We may at least take heart that, even in the extremely modest German film industry, it's possible to build a successful career in independent film.

The Sincerest Form of IMITATION

by Kieron Gillen

Games' relationship with cinema is pretty simple: Games rip it off.

Games are, hugely, a derivative art-form. Their best visual motifs and scenarios are taken directly from one movie or another. What's amazing is how relatively few in number these are. This article evolved from a conversation with a designer friend of mine when we tried to work out the smallest number of films we'd have to remove from existence to destroy the game industry in its current state. With a short-list of six thrown into the void, the industry would be barely recognizable, full of designers stroking their chin and thinking, "You know, I know we have to drop our soldiers from an orbital vessel to the ground in some manner of ship, but God knows what we could use."

Clearly, cinema is derivative culture, too. Films echo films all the time. But at least a filmmaker had a bright idea somewhere along the line. Games echoing film just implies that game developers aren't smart enough to think up ideas themselves. That films are now taking from games doesn't particularly help address the imbalance either. Taking games' derivative plots, settings and mores and turning them into cinema only ends in concentrated derivativeness; a photocopy of a photocopy. The actual original bits of game culture integrated go no further than the occasional first-person shot in a movie like *Doom*.

The real hopes for turning parasitism into symbiosis lie outside the films, which are directly licensed. The games that resonate most are those which **make themselves** influential, like *NHL* being used sociologically in *Swingers*. And if you look outside of cinema, games' cultural mores weigh heavy on comics, like *Scott Pilgrim*, or TV series, like *Spaced*.

But, this process is relatively new and has a long way to go yet. At the moment, the conceptualists of videogames are often indebted to cinema to the point of creative bankruptcy. Admittedly, some fare better than others. Even if cinema is stripped away totally, specific genres walk away with relatively few scars. Until *Lord of the Rings*, fantasy cinema was only a small influence on Western Fantasy games. They took either from a literary source or good-ol' *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Eastern fantasy games' influences are equally hard to tie down to a direct singular influence. Outside fantasy, sports games would be pretty much untouched. However, it's interesting to speculate what sports games would look like if you didn't draw from modern television's coverage of sporting events.

Some other sub-genres are left bereft. Fantasy games can get away without movies, just about. Science fiction games just fall apart. For as long as videogames have been a rising cultural force, the primary way science fiction has been consumed is on the silver screen. While *Halo* quietly took some

pieces from Iain M. Banks' *Culture* novels, its more celluloid-inspired riffs were more obvious. Irrational's forthcoming *BioShock* – inspired by objectivist classic (yes, I know: contradiction in terms) *Atlas Shrugged* – really is in a minority.

The following list is our best attempt to collate those who have been pillaged so often by games, it's almost reached the point where we've forgot where the component elements came from. In terms of series, we're taking the film which was taken from most.

If any of these films had never happened, the game industry would be so screwed they'd even have to – ladies, hold your man, gentlemen, pour a stiffening brandy – try being original for a change.

Mad Max 2

Mad Max manages the rare trick of both being enormously influential and curiously ignored. In terms of its look - once described by JG Ballard as "Punk's Sistine Chapel" – it entirely cemented the idea of what anything even vaguely post-apocalyptic should look like. Yes, come the end of the world, everyone will

immediately attach bits of car tires to their shoulders and apply a car-grease foundation to their features.

Dawn of the Dead

When the game shops are full of games which take from George Romero movies, the dead will walk the earth. It will come soon enough. Especially in certain sub-genres – anything that marches with a shuffling gait beneath the banner of the survival/horror game – the images of society falling apart (shortly followed by the remaining humans) lingers in many a designer's mind. It would probably be cruel to suggest that the zombies have inspired a considerable number of AI programmers over the years, even when not programming zombies.

The Matrix

For all its success, *The Matrix* arguably would have scored higher if it was a less derivative work itself. For example, the trench coat and shades was already a post-cyberpunk cliché, and visible in Matrix-contemporary games like Deus Ex. And we didn't see anyone try bullet-time until the Wachowski brothers showed how cool it was, despite the fact the Wachowskis had to arrange a million cameras in a circle in a particularly

laborious process. To get bullet-time working in games, developers just had to stop the game's progress and waggle the camera around a bit.

Full Metal Jacket

Pre-1970s war movies are rarely influential on videogames. It took America's disillusionment with Vietnam to mix up the genre until it made more sense in the modern world. But of those classics, it's *Full Metal Jacket* whose shadow in games is longest.

> **In short: Hero kills HORDES OF MONSTERS, makes wise-cracks and wields chainsaws. WHAT COULD BE MORE VIDEOGAME?**

Why? Because it's the most fun. As much as the depths cut through you while watching it, the memories people take from *Full Metal Jacket* are the ones which – whisper it – entertain. While R. Lee Ermey's drill instructor is one of cinema's greatest sadists, he's a fun sadist to be around, and as such it's rare to see a drill sergeant in a game **not** reference his performance.

The Terminator

RoboCop or *The Terminator*? *RoboCop* or *The Terminator*? *RoboCop* almost made it, through the simple beauty of its ED-209 design, which will be re-used as long as a designer needs a robot to have the dual abilities of carrying enough firepower to flatten an average town and looking a bit like a gawky chicken. In the end, *The Terminator* pulls clear, with the design of the titular robots being regularly pillaged – though perhaps its panoramas of the mankind's future war proved even more influential, for all their brief appearance. Tangentially, the first-person views of *the Terminator* (and *RoboCop*) are clearly in mind when any developer has strove to make the HUD an atmospheric part of the experience rather than mere decoration.

Saving Private Ryan

Spielberg's reinvention of the modern war movie acted as a sharp kick in the head for games' World War II games. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was the ground-level chaotic battle scenes that were most influential. It's easy to compare pre-*Ryan* WW2 games to ones after it and note the phenomenal increase in spectacle. The action games pre-*Ryan* were like *Hidden and Dangerous* – stately boys-own adventures which were often almost understated. Post-*Ryan*, you're in Allied Assault's recreation of the film's opening. Even the more strategic games – like this year's peerless *Company of Heroes* – are aware that it's those minutes that are affixed in the majority of gamers' minds when it comes to What War Should Look Like.

Perhaps most interesting is Saving Private *Ryan*'s influence on games outside of the period. Its low-level shaking hand-camera view of the action can be seen in other action games attempt to ground the action. Consider *Gears of War*'s run function, complete with camera-shake.

Evil Dead 2

In short: Hero kills hordes of monsters, makes wise-cracks and wields chainsaws. What could be more videogame? While Romero's films have had more influence in a smaller number of genres, *Evil Dead*'s influence reaches further, especially in the early '90s, when id Software was doing the closest videogames have come to articulating the inchoate cry of the teenage metalhead by bringing album covers to life. The more extreme demonic energy of *Evil Dead* was a clear inspiration to Doom's gates to hell. Of course, elsewhere in the world of first-person shooters, 3D Realms took the lighter tone – and lifted lines – to create *Duke Nukem*. While the *Dawn of the Dead* is what action games turn to when they want to take themselves a little bit seriously, when the dials are turned to 11, a developer is certain to consider digging out an old VHS Copy of *Evil Dead*.

Blade Runner

Put it like this: *Blade Runner* invented the future. While others' view of the future is clear fantasy, as Ridley Scott's world unveils in front of us, there's a nagging worry that we may end up living there. Clearly, *Blade Runner* is a film that has had huge cultural impact on how everyone portrays the day after tomorrow.

Star Wars

If we were looking across the whole life of videogames, it's arguable that *Star Wars* would be the single most influential movie in the industry's history. Its release in 1977 provided inspiration in everything from high level ideas like game types (Space Invaders was created in 1978. Space remained the natural adventure-playground for games for years afterward) to the base implementation (even if videogame tech could have made more realistic noises, with *Star Wars* influence, it's entirely possible they'd still have applied an exciting and iconic array of bleeps). A virtual sub-industry has been created around the *Star Wars* franchise, and when a developer wishes to present an enormous space battle, he's thinking of matching what Lucas managed.

Aliens

Ironically, while *Alien* was the original, it's *Aliens* where the majority of developers go when their creative well runs dry. For example, Giger's original design for the body-horror, genitalia-phobic organic alien has inspired anyone who sat down to work out something icky to shoot, but the implementation in games owes more to *Aliens*. An alien's lifecycle is too iconic to take without being too obvious, but the more generalized egg-laying queen has been used time and time over. Any alien race, if they're not taking from the "Grays" of urban folklore, is more often than not Giger-derived.

But that isn't even the primary influence. Instead, the movie's Colonial Marines provide the backbone for everything from Halo to *Command & Conquer*'s view of the future. Where in even the dirtiest parts of the *Star Wars* universe are elements of romance, the Colonial Marines take their own visual cues from a post-Vietnam military with its array of firepower, gung-ho slogans and omnipresent wise-cracks. The Colonial Marine's weaponry provides the backbone of most shooters. Hell, if they managed to cram a mini-gun into the movie, they'd have a majority shareholding in weapons stocks in any given shooter.

It goes on an on, and watching *Aliens* can feel like an advertising video for game hardware. The drop-ship design specifically is borrowed whenever an orbital landing is called for. Actually pre-empting *Full Metal Jacket*, the easy, brutal camaraderie is reprised time and time over. Developers make use of the Marines' hand-scanners, which chirped faster the closer the enemy way, to build tension. The specific design of the armor, all clasps and hard edges, shows up everywhere. Even the use of dropped flares as a cliffhanger comes from *Aliens*. The billowing smoke and blue light that director James Cameron fills the corridors with are modern games' default atmosphere.

If we removed *Aliens* from existence, the list of games left without a premise could have filled this article. To badly paraphrase Voltaire: If *Aliens* didn't exist, someone would have had to invent it. And really, that would just be too much work, wouldn't it? `COMMENTS`

Kieron Gillen has been writing about videogames for far too long now. His rock and roll dream is to form an Electro-band with Miss Kittin and SHODAN pairing up on vocals.

> " **ANY ALIEN RACE**, if they're not taking from the "Grays" of urban folklore, is more often than not **GIGER-DERIVED** "

X-STRIKING
a blow for the fans
by Susan Arendt
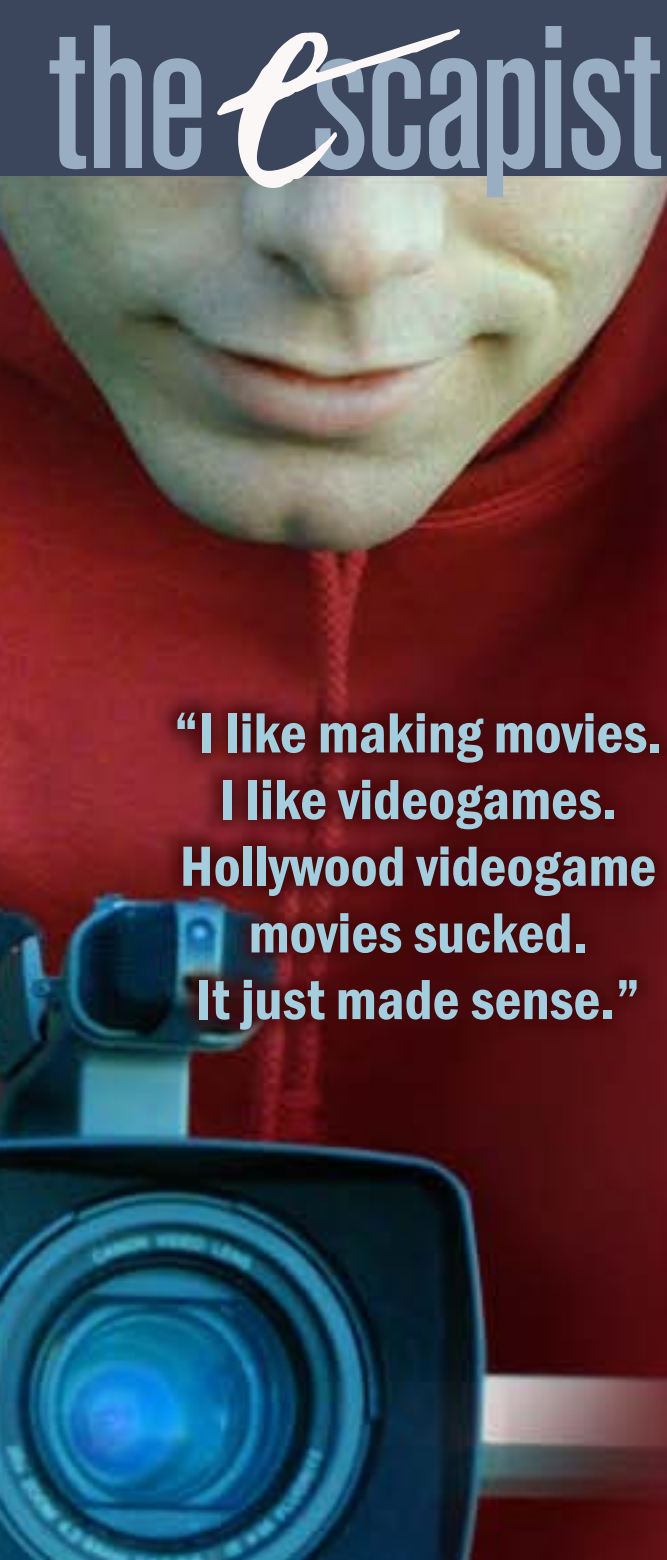
The cops were a bit unexpected.

After several years of guerilla filmmaking, Tim Ekkebus and the rest of the X-Strike crew were used to a certain amount of police involvement, but they weren't anticipating any difficulties here on the University of Buffalo campus. The shoot this day was for X-Strike's production based on the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise, and the scene being filmed was a relatively simple one featuring the movie's villain and a pair of genome soldiers capturing our hero, Snake. The crew was running through yet another take when they were suddenly surrounded by several UoB police cruisers, complete with shotgun-toting, Kevlar-wearing officers.

Looking back on the situation, Ekkebus realizes that perhaps some prior warning to law enforcement might have been a good idea. "A genome soldier to us is just a part of the movie, but a guy in a black ski mask holding a fake machine gun looks like a terrorist to the rest of the world. Albeit a terrorist who has a camera guy with him and keeps doing the same thing over and over again, but a vile terrorist nonetheless," he sagely observes.

My first encounter with X-Strike Studios was at a videogame convention last October. Although most of the other booths had piles of games and systems for sale, all that X-Strike seemed to be offering was two young men sitting quietly behind a folding table, the typical underfed, sleep-deprived 20-somethings you expect to see roaming a videogame convention. The men were rapt in conversation and paid me no mind as I lingered around the booth. When neither of them made an introduction, I began to walk away, but a stack of obnoxiously orange T-shirts caught my eye and raised my eyebrow. Proudly declaring "I Hate Uwe Boll," they lured me back to X-Strike's booth, where I finally noticed the tiny portable DVD player perched somewhat precariously on the edge of the table.

That they had a movie playing wasn't a huge surprise; many booths at gaming conventions use them as a gimmick to attract passersby. What was surprising was that it wasn't the typical gamer bait of *Street Fighter* or *Resident Evil* or some hacked to ribbons anime, but rather a homebrew homage to *Metal Gear Solid*. More surprising still was that

it was actually quite good; well acted and sharply written, it suffered from none of the self-indulgence and in-jokes that typically plague fan-made films. When I looked up from the DVD, the man who I would later learn was X-Strike's founder was grinning broadly at me. Though he looked exhausted, Tim Ekkebus' enthusiasm for X-Strike's movies radiated out of him in waves that, if properly harnessed, could end our country's dependence on foreign oil.

Ekkebus started X-Strike with Juese Cutler, Ben Lathan and Chad Williams a few years ago, after he parted ways with another company called Low Budget Pictures. "Deciding to go into videogame movies was a pretty natural decision for me," he explains. "I like making movies. I like videogames. Hollywood videogame movies sucked. It just made sense." Since then, much like a rolling Katamari, X-Strike has collected more and more people who just sort of end up sticking around, including Darrin DeMarco, who joined after penning a script of his own, and Rich Durham, who signed on after Ekkebus asked him to play a role in X-Strike's first feature. Rory O'Boyle, who was helping Ekkebus man the booth that

> **"I like making movies. I like videogames. Hollywood videogame movies sucked. It just made sense."**

day in October ostensibly handles the art department and costuming needs, though everyone on staff typically ends up doing a little bit of everything.

As with most fan-based organizations, everyone involved with an X-Strike project is a volunteer, donating time, money, transportation, talent or just plain good will. The lack of financing is a running theme in X-Strike's work; the source material for X-Strike's first movie, *River City Rumble*, was chosen because it had a simple story, location and costumes. *Low Budget Espionage: Project Snake*, the movie that attracted the attention of the University of Buffalo's finest, ironically has the honor of being X-Strike's highest budget film, topping out at around $2,000, not counting the price of printing the DVDs.

The need to keep the bills paid and the electricity running does create some problems with production schedules, though. Filming has to be squeezed in when day jobs and real life schedules permit, so it can take as long as two years for a project to make the journey from script to finished DVD. A labor of love is one thing, but after a certain

point, one has to wonder why the X-Strikers go to all the trouble. Why spend so much time, effort and money on something that so few people will ever see? After all, even if one of X-Strike's DVDs sold a million copies, a goal from which they are still very, very far, that's a mere fraction of the audience that big-budget titles like *Doom* and *Tomb Raider* enjoy, so why keep up the fight?

According to Ekkebus, it's quite simple and boils down to their love of games. "One: It's fun. Two: For the fans. Big studios are [so] preoccupied with trying to make the videogame property appeal to a mass market that they forget to cater to the fans almost at all, so what ends up happening is that the mass market doesn't go because they hear it's a 'videogame movie,' and they don't care. … The gamers end up going and hating it because it makes a mockery of what they love."

Durham's stance is more of an irate preemptive strike aimed at the Uwe Bolls of the world: A "videogame movie can only be made once before it's … defined as 'bad.' If we don't do it first, then the bigger studios will worry so much about

making a return on their investment that they'll butcher it. That's what happens when you go into surgery with shaky hands, and that's what happens when you cast big names for no reason and neuter a story for a general audience."

As for DeMarco, his reasoning is perhaps the most pure of all. "I'll offer a list as my answer: *Super Mario Bros.*, *Double Dragon*, *Wing Commander*, *House of the Dead*, *Alone in the Dark*, *BloodRayne*." Not the sort of rationale that easily opens itself up to counterargument.

Despite how it may sound, X-Strike doesn't hate all of Hollywood's attempts at marrying videogames and cinema. Says Durham, "*Silent Hill* worked, I believe, because [director Christophe] Gans knew which elements of the game would translate to a more passive story, and which ones would need to stay part of a game rather than a movie." DeMarco agrees, saying, "*Silent Hill* has come the closest in terms of capturing the essence of the source material. They captured the world of *Silent Hill* very well visually in the film." He still sees plenty of room for improvement, however, observing that the movie had "a very watered-down script, with some lame dialogue and storytelling.

It is a step in the right direction, but there is still some ways to go."

X-Strike will keep doing its best to keep videogame movies pointed in the right direction with its next project, *Sidequest*, which parodies "all things RPG, from *Final Fantasy* to *Earthbound*," as DeMarco puts it. Production had been shut down for a while due to severe scheduling (those darn day jobs again) and costuming issues, but everything is back on track now, to the point that Ekkebus hopes to start X-Strike's very first sequel this summer. "*Resident Horror* picks up some time after *Silent Horror* ends and has much more of a basis in the *Resident Evil* world," he explains.

So long as Hollywood keeps getting it wrong, the team at X-Strike will keep working around uncooperative schedules and squeezing every last dime until it screams in order to do right by gamers, but what if they didn't have to? If time and money were no object, what would their dream game movie be? Ekkebus taps some all-time favorites, saying "*The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, *Chrono Trigger* and *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse*. All absolutely amazing games from the past that would … need

to be done perfectly to satisfy the fans." DeMarco also would like to do a Belmont tale, but in a slightly different, vaguely terrifying sort of way: "Personally, I am still in love with the idea of doing a *Castlevania* rock opera." Eek.

X-Strike features may not have big budgets, eye-popping visuals or even particularly good lighting, but they do treat their subjects with genuine respect and affection, something yet to be accomplished by any videogame movie that's ever made it to the metroplex. Let's just hope they give the cops a heads up next time, or their next DVD

might have to be based on *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*. COMMENTS

When Susan Arendt isn't writing news at 1up.com or her weekly gaming column, Token Female, she's training her cat to play DDR.

> "If we don't do it first, then the bigger studios will worry so much about making a return on their investment that they'll butcher it."

MEGA MAN
GOES GLOBAL
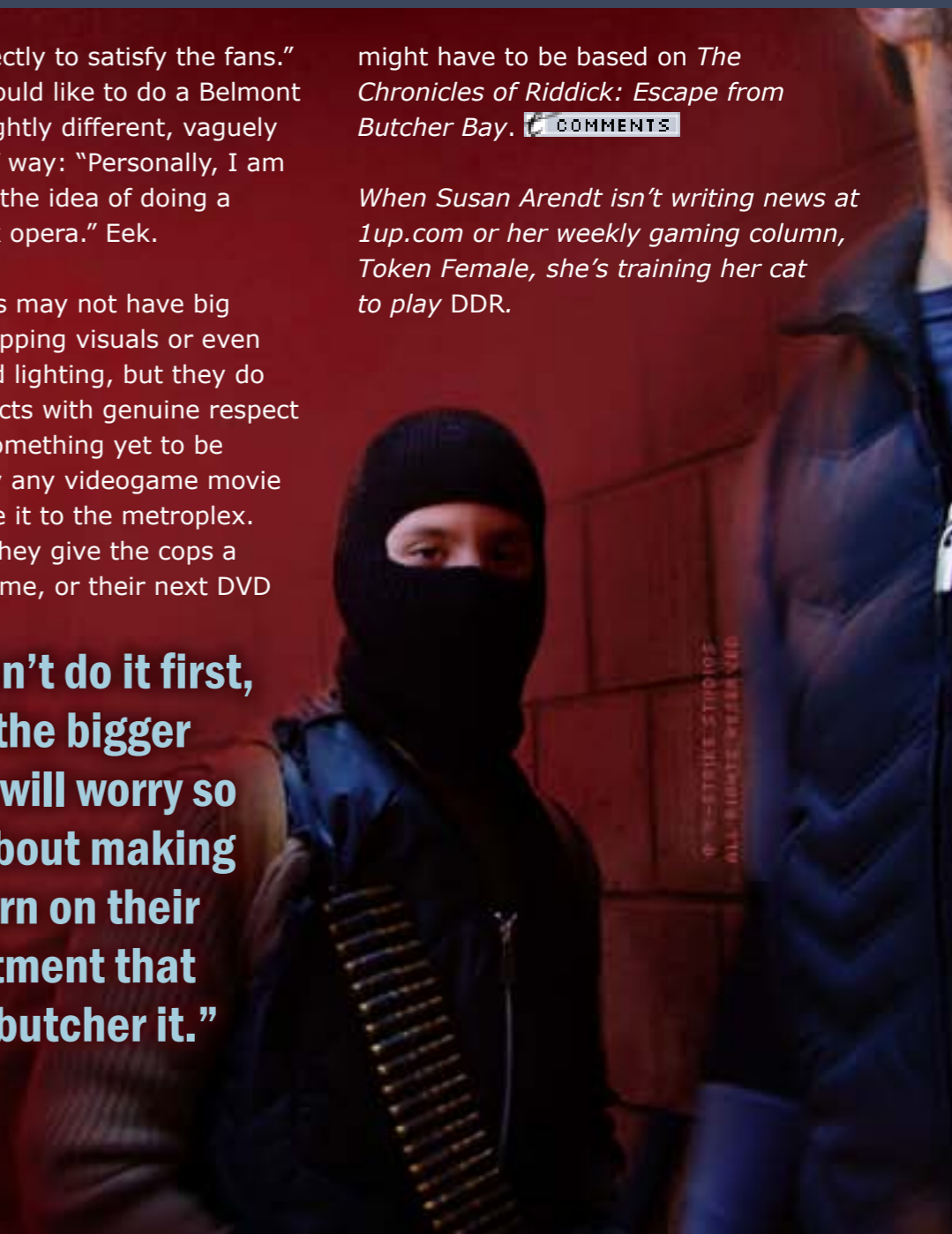
by Jon Schnaars

As one of the grandfathers of the side scrolling action genre, *Mega Man* serves as the perfect example of how simple but clever design can overpower a lack of spectacular technical accoutrements. More than its contribution to how games were played, it is by looking at the growth and evolution of the *Mega Man* series, as well as some of videogames' other timeless properties, that one gets a strong sense of how outfits like Capcom have been able to draw on their past to expand their offerings beyond the realm of videogames, while at the same time creating new titles that loyalists can enjoy and new players can appreciate.

In the beginning, the story was really quite simple: Man creates robots. Man turns evil. Robots turn evil. Good robot must save man. That structure, plus or minus a couple of side plots, accounted for the first handful of *Mega Man* games. But while he may have kept the plot relatively sparse, in developing his blue robot hunter for the NES, series creator Keiji Inafune relied on inventive level and boss design to hook gamers.

Inafune, who still oversees the creative aspects of the *Mega Man* series, explained that, especially in the early years, the technical limitations of home consoles played a major role in shaping the face of *Mega Man*. "One of the biggest driving forces behind the evolution of the *Mega Man* series is the available hardware," he said. "Back in the Nintendo Entertainment System days, there was only enough space to accommodate a simple story of good vs. evil like the one with *Mega Man* squaring off against Dr. Wily's army of robots. Now, with greater capacity and expression capabilities on hardware, we can put together much more complicated stories, like the ones in [*Mega Man*] *ZX*."

Truly, if one had put down the controller after *Mega Man 3* and only now picked up one of the Game Boy or PS2 games, much would prove unrecognizable. Quantum leaps in graphical capabilities and memory storage have allowed Inafune and his team to make the *Mega Man* story denser and richer, and to push at the bounds of the side scrolling action genre.

Mega Man, of course, is not the only franchise to see its structure and lore change dramatically with an improvement in technology. Nintendo's Mario and friends have also benefited immensely from collaboration between

old faces, new technology and just the right blend of nostalgia and creativity.

Super Mario Bros. broke onto the scene with the familiar story of a pair of heroes — plumbers in this case — out to rescue a kidnapped princess. From those humble beginnings, Nintendo allowed their designers to build this simple structure into an entire world, the Mushroom Kingdom, populated with various goombas, koopas, toads and Yoshi.

Nintendo of America's senior director of press relations, Beth Llewelyn, explained that changes to the *Mario Bros.* franchise come from many different people within the company: The goal was always to keep things fresh, but at the same time stay true to the games' roots. Much like *Mega Man*, developers allowed Mario to change as the hardware improved. "In *Super Mario World*, they found that it was really fun to fly Mario around, so they gave him a cape. Of course, *Super Mario Bros. 3* had several other costumes that gave Mario special abilities. And in *Super Mario 64*, the change to 3-D gave Mario several new ways to interact with his environments, and the environments themselves were dramatically new," Llewelyn said.

Successfully progressing from one generation of console to the next is an admirable feat in itself, but making the leap from successful game franchise to ubiquitous marketing icon isn't always an easy one, especially in today's incestuous and highly self-referential cultural landscape. At least in the case of *Mega Man* and Mario, this process occurred naturally with personalities created relatively early in the console boom (1987 and 1985 respectively). In these situations, early popularity begat increased exposure, a greater variety of titles and, eventually, more popularity. From there, it was just a matter of some savvy marketing, and game characters suddenly became television stars.

Managing this process is an important aspect of Nintendo's operation. "Mario has also been a huge licensing success for us over the years – appearing on licensed products or in other entertainment properties. Mario is a beloved character among kids and adults," Llewelyn said. "Nintendo goes to great lengths to ensure we are managing this character franchise effectively by maintaining the appropriate level of exposure to fuel his popularity."

Similarly, *Mega Man*'s father, Inafune, keeps a tight hold on the intellectual property that has proved so profitable for Capcom. "All of the [*Mega Man*] cartoon and movie scenarios are checked over carefully by the game team to ensure consistency, so there is a lot of coordination between the games and cartoons," Inafune said. "When we are making the games, for example, we send off a list of new characters to help the cartoon creators incorporate them into their shows. We have a great working relationship. In the credits for the cartoons, my name is always listed as supervisor, and that shows how close myself and the rest of us on the game side are to the making of the series."

As Inafune and his team relied on increased technical horsepower to improve on *Mega Man*'s gameplay, Capcom was able to lean on newly created scenarios, more complex plots and a surfeit of new enemies to populate the Mega Man television programming. Likewise, Nintendo has allowed the natural progression of the *Mario Bros.* legend to drive "non-traditional" Mario expressions, which include games like *Mario Party* and *Super Mario Strikers*, but

Mario is a BELOVED CHARACTER among kids and adults," Llewelyn said. "Nintendo goes to great lengths to ensure we are MANAGING this CHARACTER FRANCHISE effectively

also a cartoon, a debatably ill-conceived film and literally thousands of toys.

Unlike Capcom with its handling of *Mega Man*, Nintendo has seemed to truly walk a tight-rope of over-saturation, with many critics and industry wonks openly questioning whether the market might be reaching a tipping point on the Mushroom Kingdom. But, as Llewelyn noted, if game sales are any indication, it seems that the public's desire for products driven by Mario and company has hardly abated.

"Mario games sell very well, and we have not seen any kind of fatigue among consumers. The great thing about Mario is that while he and the characters from his universe might be familiar, every game is completely different. *Super Mario Strikers* is a soccer game, but with crazy *Mario* twists that fans love," she wrote.

This point also resonated with Inafune's experience with the *Mega Man* franchise. He pointed out that while a consistent narrative is an important part of keeping fans happy, it is of even greater importance to maintain a consistency of style. "If [narrative] consistency is maintained just for the sake of

consistency, and it makes the game boring, then it's pointless. We try to reinvent the series and evolve it to make it interesting over time. Of course, we always work to make sure that it keeps the unique feeling that makes it a '*Mega Man* game,'" he said. It is through this line of thought that we are able to draw a line between the original *Mega Man*, *Mega Man X* and newer games like *Mega Man ZX* or the Battle Networks series.

It is in transferring the style of these properties from game systems to more passive media like television or video that developers run the highest risk of losing this feeling of unity. Games are unique in their ability to leverage various stimuli (visual, audio, gameplay and control) to affect our experiences. Often, television shows featuring these characters (of which, both Mario and *Mega Man* have had several) attempt to compensate for this lack of interaction with improved or re-imagined visuals, an effect that often pulls gamers further from the source material and therefore further from their initial reason for engaging the other media in the first place.

It is not uncommon to hear gamers or game critics bemoan the glut of franchise

games or tie-ins, but in fact it is often these very franchises that drive innovation. Strong game properties, while they may be accused of a lack of depth in terms of design (think: *Mega Man*s 1 through 6), actually allow developers greater freedom to explore aspects of game design they may otherwise shy away from. The ideal example of this is The Legend of Zelda, which continues to be a source of creative design. It was only through pushing at the boundaries of what the franchise had to offer that developers came up with Z-targeting or showed the full capabilities of cell-shading. Similarly, Super Mario 64 and *Mega Man Battle Networks* were able to take leaps only by drawing on established characters and game scenarios, all the while utilizing a style that was distinctly their own.

With *Mega Man*, Keiji Infune created not only a cash cow, but also a corporate logo. While companies like Capcom benefit from the recognition and marketability of franchise characters, these same franchises allow for greater exploration between both media and the games themselves. The outcomes of these experimentations might not always

be successes, but it is through both the successes and failure that developers and gamers alike learn about where they've been and where they might be headed. **COMMENTS**

Jon Schnaars is a freelance writer with interests in genre and representation in gaming. He blogs full-time about issues in psychology and mental health for Treatment Online.

> while a **CONSISTENT NARRATIVE** is an important part of keeping fans happy, it is of even greater importance to maintain a **CONSISTENCY OF STYLE**

Read Any Good Games Lately?

by Mur Lafferty

I have a confession to make. I'm not proud, but I have to tell the truth. I was one of the five or so people in the world that thought the movie *Hudson Hawk* was wonderful. I thought the satire was well done and hysterical. I liked it so much, I actually went out and bought the GameBoy game *Hudson Hawk*. At that point, I realized none of the qualities I saw in the movie were in the game. It was dreadful, easy and I finished it in about half an hour.

Thus was my rude introduction into franchise games, the games designed to go along with an established license. Frequently, the games are weaker than stand-alone games, as they can rely on the draw of *Harry Potter* or, uh, *Hudson Hawk*, instead of sheer game design.

Board games are no different. The popular gaming database and website, boardgamegeek.com, lists over 200 games based on novels. These include games such as a 1938 classic based on *Ferdinand the Bull* and the 1973 game *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Games based on novels include at least nine games based on *Lord of the Rings* (including one based on *The Hobbit*) and at least five games based on *Harry Potter*.

Speaking of the boy wizard that bought J.K. Rowling a castle in Scotland, I fell for the bait again and bought the *Quidditch Card Game*. I liked card games and was looking for something nice and portable to take on a trip. It was a dreadful game that, in theory, must have been fun, but I had no idea because the rules were so frikkin hard to figure out. There's something annoying and humbling about two adults having trouble figuring out the rules to a kids' game.

So, burned by *Hudson Hawk* and *Harry Potter* alike, I turned my back on franchise titles. I ignored all licensed videogames and board games for several years, until my husband bought *Lord of the Rings*, designed by famous German game designer Reiner Knizia. We figured it had to at least not suck. The people who licensed the game knew what they were doing; they not only got Knizia to design it, but it

A Boardgame of J. R. R. Tolkien's

LORD of the RINGS
THE CONFRONTATION

A Complete Boardgame For 2 Players

First, we had *Lord of the Rings* place the players as hobbits with Sauron advancing toward them, and shortly afterward we had games where the players could band together to fight the elder god Cthulhu or Dracula.

was also illustrated by John Howe, the same concept artist that worked on Peter Jackson's movies, which gives the game some of the best art in board games, hands down. For fans of the books and movies, the game was immersive, gorgeous and well worth the price of admission. It was also cooperative, which was a breath of fresh air, as well as quite difficult to win.

Large, sprawling epic struggles against an outside supernatural force seem to translate well into cooperative games. First, we had *Lord of the Rings* place the players as hobbits with Sauron advancing toward them, and shortly afterward we had games where the players could band together to fight the elder god Cthulhu or Dracula (although in Dracula's case, someone does get to play the bloodsucking count against all the other players).

Arkham Horror and *Fury of Dracula* put the worlds of HP Lovecraft and Bram Stoker, respectively, into board games. The interesting things about these games is they tend to inspire one to read the books and stories behind them, if only so you can know what a shoggoth is

or why "the color out of space" is supposed to be scary. Frequently in *Arkham Horror*, you will end up in a situation where "The pinkish rays almost get you," and it's good to know exactly why that's scary. Sure, the god of the bloody tongue is not someone you want to mess with, but the pinkish rays?

Licensed games attempt to capture the feeling of the property – some, like *Lord of the Rings*, are designed to have you retrace the adventures in board game form. See if you can avoid the Nazgul the way Frodo did! They have to bring across the humor or the desperation or the excitement of the book. Others attempt to give you an original story based in the world, like *Arkham Horror*. You don't go through the plots of the stories, but you are a character in Arkham dealing with Lovecraftian monsters. You could encounter Cthulhu, the color out of space and the Dunwich Horror all in one game (but I wouldn't recommend it).

Some people find the story walkthroughs as lacking in excitement, since they already know what's going to happen. This flaw is inherent in the game *Sherlock*

Holmes, Consulting Detective, which pits you against Holmes in 10 scenarios where you try to find the right clues and solve the puzzle before (or, more realistically, at the same time as) the great detective himself. The main problem is that once you play the whole game through, you're done. There's no way you can play a mystery twice, since you already know the answers going in (unless you're one of those people who likes to cheat, and then you can get a sense of false superiority when you beat Holmes).

Licensed games are, honestly, just like regular games. There are some wonderful ones, and there are some real dogs. The issue is if we like the license, we expect everything connected to it to be wonderful, too, down to the plastic Burger King cups. Even if we know in our hearts that the novelization of a science fiction movie isn't going to be as good as the movie, we still hope and expect it to be. And that's what the marketers want.

It's easy to slap a *Harry Potter* on something and hope it will succeed. Often, these products are purchased not by the user, but by a well-meaning relative or friend. "He likes that hobbit movie thing, so he'll probably like the shot glasses with the four hobbits' heads on them. It'll match those hobbit sheets I got him last year." But marketers don't care where the money comes from, they just care that it does. So licensing works.

Kids' games are a different animal, however. Studies have shown that kids will prefer green ketchup simply because it's green, even though taste tests show it doesn't taste as good as regular ketchup. Novelty goes a long way, and if kids are drowning in passion for *Eragon* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, they will probably enjoy anything you give them with those stamps on it. On the other hand, kids also have a sharp eye for crap and will turn up their noses to something that doesn't meet their mysterious standards as they slather their fries with green ketchup.

Gamers need to consider what they want out of a game; do they want to retell a popular story or do they just want to run amok in the world they'd enjoyed reading about?

And really, like with any big purchase (don't laugh; many board games are $50 or more these days) you'll want to do your research. Check out boardgamegeek.com for ratings, check out your Friendly Local Gaming Store for opinions. And if all the ratings say it's crap and you simply **must** have the game based on the latest werewolf chick lit, well, you might still like it. I liked *Hudson Hawk*, after all. [COMMENTS]

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

It's easy to slap a *Harry Potter* on something and hope it will succeed.

the escapist

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