

# the Escapist

Be  
**Men,** NOT  
DESTROYERS

A DEFENSE OF SUPER COLUMBINE  
MASSACRE RPG by Kieron Gillen

**ALSO:**

EDITOR'S NOTE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

STAFF PAGE



SHADOWS <sup>OF THE</sup>  
**COLOSSUS**

by Erin Hoffman

MINING  
**the game:**

When marketing and gaming meet,  
they do a lot more than advertise

by Sara Grimes

Do **Degrees**  
**MATTER?**

by Mur Lafferty

creative

**HARA-KIRI**

by Blake Schreurs

## EDITOR'S NOTE

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 that 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, Mur Lafferty returns to discuss the rising number of game design degree programs with various industry insiders. Newcomer Blake Schreurs shares the trials of an indie game designer trying to get noticed by a publisher. Sara Grimes explores a potential outcome of child-focused advergaming: datamining. Erin Hoffman jumps in to give the history and explain the importance of those in the bright T-shirts at GDC, the Conference Associates. And Kieron Gillen addresses the oft-maligned, rarely understood *Super Columbine Massacre RPG*. Find these articles and more in this week's *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**In response to "What's in a Name?" from The Escapist Forum:** I probably know even less about marketing than the author, but it seems to me very apparent that the reason of Sega's troubles is the good ol' greed.

That explains the fast moving forward and cutting off anything left behind tactic ("we don't need anything that doesn't make us money"), as well as the clinging to the Genesis system ("it made us more money than any other attempt, so we must try and milk it for all it's worth") and expensive(-ity of) add-ons.



It's a greedy game company's smart move to allow autonomy for the developers, since that will produce best games which will establish a base for success (and thus - money) in the long run (think franchises), it's too bad they didn't think of others - customers and 3d party developers - more.

- **shadowbird**

**In response to "Uwe Boll and the German Tax Code" from The Escapist Forum:**

The fact that game company's continue to agree to let Boll make these movies must also demonstrate the huge amount of payoffs going on behind the scenes. Let's face it: if you're a small-time development studio struggling to make it, it's got to be pretty tempting to accept a large sum of money from Boll's company. Plus, it's publicity for the game, no matter how much the movie ends up sucking. I mean, does anyone actually think Postal will be anything but a trainwreck?

- **Quintin Stone**

**In response to "All Hail Sonic!" from The Escapist Forum:** Sonic is odd for me. I loved the fast movement that

# the Escapist

came from the Genesis games, but I was SNES kid back then, so I didn't play it much. The first time I really got into it was Sonic Adventure 2: Battle for the Gamecube. Initially, I was "is this what Sonic turned into"? But as I played, I found that it was fun, at least when I was playing as Sonic(or Shadow). A lot of the game, though, I got the thoughts "why did they bother with this"? With the story, I felt that they were trying to make things too epic. With the gameplay, I felt that they were trying to do too much. It seemed like the developers went into this trying to create the biggest game ever, without the time or resources to pull it off. Everything felt like it could've been done better, and everything else felt like the game was better off without it.

When I got the game, I was assuming I was going to get a new(from my perspective) Sonic game. What I got was a half-assed attempt at something more.

- **Meophist**

**In response to "Killjoy" from The Escapist Forum:** Anyone else remember the 'good ol days'? On the original Bard's Tale (C64), the manual

told you to use your favorite copy program to copy your characters. If your party wiped in the game, they were dead. Your latest game save loaded up with a party or corpses. Now, you could revive them by creating another character, getting enough gold, and then taking each one to the temple, but it wasn't easy or fun. It did, however, make things much more tense during big battles, especially when you realized that it had been a while since your last backup.

it's hard to say what the 'right' solution is here, but something that would bring that level of risk/reward/punishment back seems to be the place to start.

- **Boucaner**





## Be Men, NOT DESTROYERS

A DEFENSE of Super  
Columbine Massacre RPG

by Kieron Gillen

You suspect that if Danny Ledonne knew what the fallout would be from uploading his 23 MB RPG Maker-constructed game to his website in 2005 ... well, he'd have just gone ahead and done it anyway. You don't make a game called *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* if you're that worried about getting attention.

In literate circles, it's probably the most controversial game of recent years. To mention it is to beget an argument. In the mainstream, despite some sporadic coverage, it's barely a blip for a variety of obvious reasons. As an indie game, it's not popular. As a freeware game, there's no money to be had from ambulance-chasing lawyers. But where a game as castigated as *Bully* was generally defended by gamers who knew the mass media was misunderstanding a game built on a sound premise, *SCMRPG* doesn't have it that easy. It's constructed in a primitive videogame engine, taking the form of an old-school RPG. Its subject matter remains a highly charged issue. It's widely rejected on either the charge of bad taste or bad craft, often both.

Well over a year after its initial release, it's still being talked about, growing ever more infamous. Its notoriety reached a

peak as 2006 turned into 2007, when it was forcibly ejected from the Slamdance Guerrilla Gamemaker Competition, after being selected for the shortlist of finalists by the panel. This precipitated a walkout of a sizeable proportion of other contestants - an act of solidarity.

With so many issues, it's difficult to know what to think about *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*

Let's see if we can do anything about that.

### **Is there any place for a subject like this in a videogame?**

There's a mass of films and books on Columbine, whether directly about the events or exploring it through thinly veiled analogues. Why is one cultural form allowed to comment on a tragedy and another one not? It's clear by the strength of the reaction that the mere idea of a game that places you in the shoes of murderers provokes powerful emotions.

The outrage comes from a couple places. First, games are for children. Ergo, a game of a serious event must, by its very nature, trivialize it. More sophisticated positions argue that it's the act of **becoming** Klebold and Harris, the

perpetrators of the massacre, glamorizes what they did. A book doesn't ask you to pull the trigger and make you complicit. The former argument can be rejected by simply restating the truism that not all games are for kids. The latter argument makes the assumption that if you're pulling the trigger, you'll find it enjoyable. In actual fact, this is simply untrue. *SCMRPG* is as uncomfortable as gaming gets.

In regard to Columbine, I'd actually argue to the contrary on games' suitability. In fact, the computer game may be the most appropriate medium to explore the situation. After all, it was the pair's favored one. The music cited as influential on Harris and Klebold are cult, peripheral acts. *Doom*, which Harris even made levels in, was absolutely mainstream for the form. While game creators have no direct responsibility – like all creators – it's entirely natural for them to try and examine why they actually had this worm in their apple.

## **I'm clearly never going to play the bloody game. What actually happens in it?**

It's basically divided into two sections. The first half of the game, opening with

the art theorist Andre Breton quote, "The purest surrealist act would be to go into a crowd and fire at random," retraces Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's final morning. One calls the other; they meet up; they record a final video. They place two homemade propane bombs in a canteen and set the timer for lunch, then retire to the hill overlooking the school and wait for the bombs to go off.

They don't. The game then proceeds into a more combat-orientated RPG, where the boys tool up with weaponry from the trunk of their car and move through the school, confronting groups of student stereotypes – Preppy Girl, Nerdy Girl, Black Boy, Jock Boy. No one has any real chance against the boys' automatic weaponry. Most don't even fight back. As you work through the school, you experience various narrative vignettes, some purely fictional but directly illustrating events leading up to the attack, others actual occurrences in the school. For an example of the former, Eric reminisces about his telephone confession to the 20-something Brenda Parker he was dating that he's actually a teenage boy. For the latter, they fire shots at police from school library window, before the final double-suicide.



*SCMRPG* is as  
**UNCOMFORTABLE**  
as gaming gets.

## **Should SCMRPG have been kicked out of Slamdance?**

This is a question that confuses the issue. Of course, Slamdance can invite or kick out whoever they want from their award. It's their award, and cries of censorship are simply misplaced. The game exists, and will continue to exist, no matter what Slamdance decided.

The real question is credibility. Removing a selected finalist purely because of its subject, for whatever reason, makes it difficult to take the organization seriously. Not selecting something to avoid controversy is one thing. Backing away from its decision in public simply tarnishes the award, no matter what reason. As described in their public statement, Slamdance argues they'd have faced legal and commercial annihilation if they didn't reverse course on *SCMRPG*, which makes you understand why they chose critical annihilation instead. It still doesn't make the critical annihilation any less absolute.

As an indie game award, it'll be fine. But that's all it's going to be. As a forum for games-as-art, no one will take Slamdance's selections seriously for the foreseeable future. The only moral here

# the Escapist

After a sequence of Eric's fantasies – from idyllic ones of Antipodean islands away from the “fuckheads” to ones of mass death and violence – the scene fades to black. Fade up on tiny pixelated corpses. The cartoon image swaps for real photos of the two boys, lying in the library with gaping head wounds.

You presume it's over. In fact, the second half opens. The game restarts, and we're in Hell. The *Doom* music strikes up. The Hell they're stuck in is populated by the cast of that iconic, violent game, which now you're stuck in a proper fight with. Exploring, you eventually discover an island of lost souls equally damned – from Mario to Ronald Regan to John Lennon to Confucius – and finally hook up with existentialist philosopher Nietzsche, who in exchange for a copy of *Ecce Homo*, gives a little lecture of how their actions fit entirely into his philosophy of the Genius. Heading on, you meet and beat Satan, who then accepts a tasty Devil Cake and shows the pair what's happening back on Earth.

**That seems terribly confusing.**

Yeah, it is a bit. *SCMRPG* is nothing but confusing. It's got many problems, but

the key one is it's trying to say so many different things simultaneously.

The game's points can be divided into two rough categories. First is the documentary-styled recapitulation of the events of the day and Ledonne's portraits of the two killer's motivations. The second is a satire on the events of the day and the mass of hypocrisies and knee-jerk reactions surrounding it, as well as a more general satire on videogames.

The first part is arguably the most successful. Fundamentally, what happens in the actual game is what actually happened in the day. If you complete *SCMRPG*, you will know more about the events and the personalities of Harris and Klebold than you would have if you hadn't played, in a more memorable way than the average dry news report. It is well researched, with much dialogue lifted from actual records. Not that it's a pure documentary; there's a lot of convincing fiction filling the gaps in an attempt to answer the key question almost all art surrounding Columbine asks: “Why?” That is, why would some kids want to do this? Ledonne, at school in Colorado at a similar period, uses the evidence to create his take.

is: Be sure of your list of finalists before going public.

But all of this is completely irrelevant to the merits or failings of *SCMRPG*. It'd be just as detrimental to the festival, no matter what game was unceremoniously removed from their ceremony.



# the Escapist

The satire in the game is obvious, even in the title, recalling all things Mario and the classic age of Nintendo RPGs, of which its graphics are strongly reminiscent. What could be more videogame than defeating hundreds of people in combat? By its existence, it asks the question, Why is playing one sort of killer acceptable and the other beyond the pale? What's the difference between *American's Army* and *Under Ash*? That it's an obvious hypocrisy doesn't make it any less poignant, but Ledonne covers his bases a little by avoiding glorifying the actual killings themselves.

**Seriously. You have a game where you're wiping out an entire school of kids. How can this not glorify violence?** Because it's no fun.

This is where the "bad craft" arguments fall apart. They imply that the game may

have actually been ok if they'd made wiping out the kids more entertaining, as if *SCMRPG* could have been *Medal of Honor*, if only Ledonne tried harder. Nothing could be further than the truth. A designer chooses the mechanics required to create the desired emotional response. If you want to make a game about a massacre and capture the core disgust, the last thing you want to do is make it fun. Starting with the RPG Maker's limited combat, its mechanics are tweaked appropriately.

In the actual fights, you're loaded with weaponry and find increasingly devastating firearms as you progress. You can return to your car to replenish ammunition whenever you want. The vast majority of the students and teachers don't even fight back. Maybe you'll take a couple of hits from jocks to begin with, but soon it's all just embarrassingly perfunctory. You can kill as many as you

want and be hailed ironically as "brave boys" every time you do it. All of this conspires to underline the meaninglessness of their slaughter. And fundamentally, while it's not much fun, the one bit of craft it gets right is the basic *Final Fantasy*-esque compulsiveness of improving statistics. The grind is the key mechanic which addicts people to RPGs. There's only vestigial pleasure in it, per se, but you can't stop doing it. Here, it's harnessed for more existential reasons. You're not enjoying it, but you go from one pointless fight to another, the alienation mounting along with the experience points.

It's cold. It's really cold. As cold as what the pair of them did to the people in that school, and you're struck at a profound level of how **sad** it is. Not just that people would die like that, but more because the horror of the mindset you'd have to enter to treat real human beings

as nothing more important than two-dimensional sprites. Why would someone go and do something so **pointless**?

While videogames didn't make them do it, it's clear the repetitive brutality of a videogame is a good metaphor for how they viewed the world. By showing the absolutely hollow, tedious nature of the pair's fantasies, it can't help but critique them. Even for Harris and Klebold, living out their fantasy wasn't all they hoped it'd be. Not that it can be found in the game, but the pair are reported to have talked about how, near the end, shooting got too boring, and they thought about switching to knives.

As the death toll of "Preppy Girl" or "Nerd Girl" is inching into the hundreds, you feel likewise. This is the game at its formalist best, in how it subverts classical mechanics to make its point.

It's cold. **IT'S REALLY COLD.**

**OK. I get it. But if you had to say one thing about *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* what would you say?**

In 1995, in the 10th anniversary book of *Calvin and Hobbes*, creator Bill Watterson inserted little pieces of commentary onto some of his favorite strips. In a Sunday one, Calvin attacks his school in an F-16 "loaded with tons of every conceivable missile," reducing it to "smoldering crater." "I got some nasty mail about this strip," he noted. "Some readers thought it was inexcusable to show a kid fantasize about bombing his school off the face of the Earth. Apparently, some of my readers were never kids themselves." Five years later, such opinions were conspicuously absent, but the truth remains. Lots of people didn't like school. Lots of people fantasize one way or another about doing something about it. Lots of people would love a game where they'd be able to annihilate it from the face of the Earth.

This isn't it.

Rather than a means of acting out these fantasies, the alienated slog of *SCMPRG*, warns against it, while trying to argue why someone would want to do it in the first place. It's not a celebration. It's a lament.

The game ends with the lyrics from one of the pair's favorite bands, KMFDM: "He represents the problem – no, he emboldens the problem. If he is expelled, the problem will go away." Except not: "He is not in this alone. He is not the problem." *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* isn't the problem. It's certainly not the solution – that's society and the people within it - but it's not a problem. It's something worth having an opinion on. It sits on the boundaries of what videogames have become and could become.


You won't enjoy it, and for that you should be grateful. [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.*

“He is not in this alone.  
He is not the problem.”  
*Super Columbine  
Massacre RPG!* **ISN'T  
THE PROBLEM.**

”





If you've been to the colossal Game Developers Conference, you've seen them around, lurking in doorways, roving the hallways, a look of busy confidence transfixing tenacious features. Despite their fluorescent T-shirts, the average attendee's eyes slide right over them, unless the attendee is in need. The catastrophe falls swiftly; Sid Meier is speaking in 15 minutes, and you're lost amid the labyrinth of hallways and strangely dystopian fabric dividers. But nigh, a fresh-faced youth in brilliant garb cometh, galloping at speed to your rescue! Graciously they rush you to the session just in time, only to vanish into the sunset, leaving you fleetingly to wonder: Who was that gallant stranger?

They are the few, the proud – the shadows of the colossus.

### **Not So Colossal Origins**

The GDC began in 1987 as the Game Design Symposium, a gathering of 26 developers in Chris Crawford's living room. That initial meeting proved so kinetic, plans for a second conference started before the first had ended. By the following year, it was officially the Computer Game Developers Conference,

and by 1992 it boasted 600 participants, outgrowing one home after another.

In 1995, the CGDC was purchased by the Miller Freeman Game Group (MFI), which in 2000 purchased and adopted the CMP Game Media Group name and brand that currently marks the since-1999 name-shortened Game Developers Conference. Last year, it drew over 12,000 attendees, and now, with the fall of E3, it officially reigns as the largest industry-only videogame event.

An event this big needs a crack support crew. When the CGDC was purchased by MFI, the volunteer conference staff, previously thrown together by the CGDC steering committee, was formalized by Tim Brengle – an original attendee of the first conference, and one of only a handful of individuals who have attended every conference in the organization's history – into the Conference Associates program. Originally publicized via word of mouth and staffed by altruistic volunteers, the CA program grew out of early management of the conference into a virtual army of enthusiastic, capable volunteers hand-selected from hundreds of applicants by Brengle and Ian MacKenzie.

# the Escapist

The sense of community established in the early years of the CGDC lives on in the CA program. Joel Gonzalez, programmer with 1st Playable Productions and CA since 2002, says, "When I'm a CA, I feel that I have an extended family of 150 for a week. There's a lot of camaraderie between CAs and that keeps me coming back. It's unlike any volunteer program I've been in."

But the program is also staffed by an array of industry veterans, Ph.D.s, IGF winners, and even GDC speakers. Bruce Harlick, a senior designer at LucasArts, says of the program, "I love going to the GDC, because I love working with the CAs. It's such a great group of people; it's a true pleasure to get a chance to spend a very intense week with them every year."

## From the Earth to the Moon

The GDC is also perceived by many hopefuls as one of the quickest and surest routes into the industry, for good reason. Access to the conference attendees is undoubtedly a big part of this, but due to its growth out of the very origins of the GDC, the CA program provides one of the best networking opportunities for young developers – not,

as one would suspect, for its access to the conference job fair, but for access to hardworking developers within the CA program itself.

And the work is hard; CAs prove their worth to their fellows by performing approximately 20 hours of work across the week-long conference. By the numbers, this may not seem like much, but even without considering the program's culture – which rewards and selects for those who will go above and beyond the call of duty – those 20 hours of corralling, guiding and instructing a horde of well over 10,000 game developers are an exhausting test of personal fortitude.

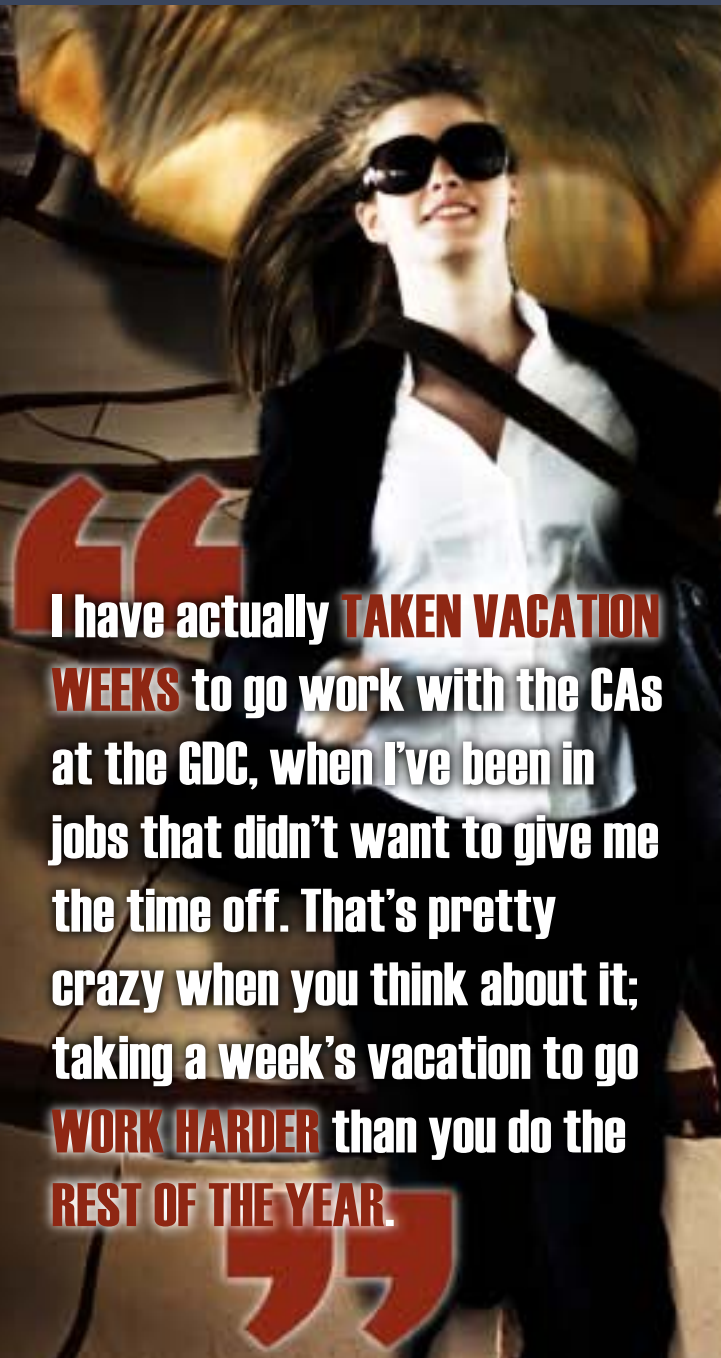
But for many program veterans, they're worth it, even when you need to pay your own way. Harlick says, "I have actually taken vacation weeks to go work with the CAs at the GDC, when I've been in jobs that didn't want to give me the time off. That's pretty crazy when you think about it; taking a week's vacation to go work harder than you do the rest of the year."

The personal challenges are intense. CAs must possess the ability to think fast and

act smoothly, often juggling the disparity between bulging session attendance and the fire department's maximum occupancy ratings, all without dropping their poise. If you meet a veteran CA, ask them about staffing Will Wright's annual lecture – you'll get a good-natured, but thoroughly exhausted, earful.

Still, Link Hughes, graduate of Full Sail's game development program and also a programmer at 1st Playable Productions, calls the program the "best networking tool for young up-and-comings in the industry." He adds, "If you're a positive, upbeat person, it's really a way to rocket start your career."

Gonzalez agrees. "It was a decision that changed my life. I don't mean that I became a Power Ranger or found the cure to cancer. It put me in the right frame of mind to start making opportunities for myself. So I guess I owe the CA program my current career in the game industry. It put me on the right track to get in the industry and gave me insight into how it ran. When I was ready for a job, I found my first in the GDC Job Fair and my second through another CA."



**I have actually **TAKEN VACATION WEEKS** to go work with the CAs at the GDC, when I've been in jobs that didn't want to give me the time off. That's pretty crazy when you think about it; taking a week's vacation to go **WORK HARDER** than you do the **REST OF THE YEAR.****

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His experience is neither uncommon nor a coincidence. Harlick says, "The CAs in our program are talented and fun people, and I always view them as a valuable resource when my company is looking to hire more people." Program veterans such as Harlick know that when they're hiring a CA, they're not just getting the skill-set on the resume, but the vote of Brengle and MacKenzie, as well as a proven track record of reliability, non-stop enthusiasm, social grace and problem-solving – four things employers are almost always searching for, but won't fit on a demo reel.

## What You Want, Baby I Got

"People who treat the CAs as run-of-the-mill volunteers are making a big mistake. That person in the [conference] shirt is your next stellar employee, co-worker or even boss," Harlick says. As a freshman CA in 2004, I was astonished at the number of industry veterans enthusiastically putting in their time with the bright shirts. This will come as a great shock to many gaming starlets, but the industry is not always that stable; the company I'd worked for had folded, and, though technically a full-time developer, I joined the program out of

financial need. But for many vets, this isn't the case.

"Some of the CAs continue to volunteer even after their employers would be happy to send them to the show to just attend. Working the GDC as a CA is too much fun, and it's just plain hard to stop." Harlick, who has been with the program since its formal inception and with the GDC since its not-for-profit days, says that the culture of the group itself, guided by Brengle and MacKenzie, makes it a one-of-a-kind experience. And though the application and program information are just a Google search away, few seem to know what they're getting access to when they sign up. Harlick adds, "I've been enjoying that the CAs have become more social between shows; they really are a community now." He's referring, in large part, to the CA alumni mailing list, a boisterous and upbeat online community made available to CAs after their first term.

"It's kind of a game industry fraternity organization, in a way," Link Hughes says. The sense of "family" is something many CAs will return to again and again, and value even above the rush of the conference itself.

The fraternity atmosphere is sometimes necessary. Despite the now intensely competitive application process, most conference attendees don't recognize or appreciate the skills and challenges represented and addressed by the CAs on a daily basis. Let's face it: Game developers can be kind of surly, and when it comes to the GDC and the after-parties, the atmosphere can get a little wild.

"A lot of people don't really 'get' CAs," Hughes says. "People who have been CAs know that CAs are somehow a higher caliber of people. People who

never had to go through the program ... people who have become important and never had that start sometimes will look down on CAs, consider them 'the help.'" It's an easy mistake to make; most conferences have guides or security, and most assume they're being paid to take abuse. While the CA program does offer participants a full pass to the GDC – a value definitely not insignificant these days; we are a long way from the \$75 entrance price of CGDC II – any CA could tell you that in terms of monetary reward, it would be far less work to pay one's own way.

“The alchemy of youthful energy, can-do attitude and passion for game development also makes the CA program a BREEDING GROUND FOR GAME INNOVATION.”

## In the history of the GDC,

### Free Range Game Development

The alchemy of youthful energy, can-do attitude and passion for game development also makes the CA program a breeding ground for game innovation. "I've gotten in the best discussions about games, game design, making games, etc. It's a group charged with creativity, who all are there because they want to be in the industry (or are already there)," Harlick says.

Maurine Starkey, a veteran industry artist and longtime friend of the CA program, adds, "From as far back as the Westwood days, I've always liked being around energetic and creative minds. Being a CA puts me into a type of incubator." And that incubator, whether it created or simply drew excellence to it,

has seen a series of IGF finalists and, in 2004, winners: *Savage*, winner of the Technical Excellence, Audience and Seamus McNally Grand Prize awards, had two CAs on its staff, and finalist group Flashbang Studios was also composed of CAs that year. The following year, another CA team made the finalist list.

The persistent performance of CAs as independent developers is, again, no coincidence. The program's open atmosphere, spirit of kinship and intense pursuit of excellence all lend themselves to a homegrown attitude toward gaming and game development that arguably preserves a piece of the soul of the industry.

### Scaling the Colossus

Every year the GDC continues to grow, and now, as in its early days, it has once more outgrown its home. There are mixed responses from long-time conference attendees to the move from the San Jose Convention Center to the Moscone in San Francisco, but the simple fact was the conference had grown too big for the SJCC to handle. And now, with the Expo floor more than doubling in size, some are calling it "G3."

The CA program also continues to grow, though not in proportion with its popularity. Over 900 hopefuls applied for just under 300 CA positions this year, a number up from 600 applicants in 2005. Despite its growing size and the increased challenge of a larger, busier conference, the CAs remain undaunted. "We know that whatever challenge comes, we'll rise to meet it," Hughes says.

This sense of positive energy, which for many embraces the core of gaming and game development culture, makes the CA program far more than a bunch of volunteers in neon T-shirts; they are a team, and, through careful cultivation over the years that the program has been in operation, a perfect ecosystem blending youth energy and veteran wisdom.

In the history of the GDC, not much has remained consistent: Boards have come and gone, the entire conference has been sold and then had its parent company sold again. Though its coordination has changed, its support in the trenches hasn't; as an organization, the CA program is perhaps the only aspect of the conference with a memory that goes back to the very beginning. Far from being the chaotic group of

whoever-we-could-get volunteers that staff other conferences, the GDC's working lifeline is unique in possessing a history of its own, and an identity singular even within the industry itself. It is a resource and a community, a stepping stone and a friendly helping hand – and the heartbeat of the game industry's largest event. [COMMENTS](#)

*Erin Hoffman is a professional game designer, freelance writer, and hobbyist troublemaker. She moderates Gamewatch.org and fights crime on the streets by night.*

## not much has remained CONSISTENT,



# MINING the game:

When marketing and gaming meet,  
they do a lot more than advertise

by Sara Grimes

With industry analysts heralding advergaming as the revenue model of the future, and success stories like last fall's Burger King Xbox promotion capturing headlines left and right (and selling two million units in four weeks), the hype around advergaming is becoming all but unavoidable ... whether you buy it or not. As this industry segment matures, the questions it raises about commercialization and the future of regulation in digital gaming could fuel debate for years to come. And yet, despite all the fuss, the hubbub, the unresolved tension between players and advertisers, I'm already feeling done with all this advergame talk.

The root of my ennui has a lot to do with the way the term has been used by both the press and academics in discussing what should be seen as the slow-but-steady integration of marketing tactics into videogames. But instead, we seem to be stuck scratching at the surface, focusing on how advertising will affect gaming instead of questioning how gaming might transform the twin fields of advertising and marketing. While it's important the "adver" part of advergaming is getting attention, we now need to expand our thinking to

include its less obvious implications, as well. Namely, once marketing is merged with the interactivity inherent to gaming, we're suddenly dealing with something much more complex than what we're used to.

Just as adware often incorporates spyware, games can also be used to gather various types of user information. Through data-mining, chat analysis and other forms of automated surveillance, player input can be turned into valuable market research data. This can range from statistics on player demographics and in-game activities to more nuanced findings about the ideas and opinions players communicate while gaming or participating in related forums. With advergaming, this transformation can also lead to direct and detailed feedback on the effectiveness of particular ads and techniques. The feedback loop between advertiser and player is thereby brought full circle, from market research to reception analysis and back again.

I spend a lot of time thinking about this stuff as a result of a professional interest in kids' online game culture, which seems to have become somewhat of a safe haven for marketers to experiment

with new techniques. Here, the analysts' predictions have, in many ways, already come true. For the past five years, advergames (and websites featuring advergames) like *Neopets*, CartoonNetwork.com and Barbie.com, have dominated both Hitwise and Nielsen//Netratings' listings of sites most frequently visited by kids. They also feature prominently among children's own top-rated online destinations. Kids are spending a lot of their time online playing advergames, and the children's industries have certainly taken notice.

The most overt example of data-mining in advergames can be found in one of the most popular sites on the internet, Neopets.com. *Neopets* constructs and sells extensive youth trend reports based on information gathered through the games, polls and forums featured on its site. By "immersing" clients' advertisements and product placements into the very fabric of *Neopets'* gameplay, the site is also able to track players' exposure to specific ads and then solicit their opinions about them. With over 30 million members, 39 percent of which are under the age of 13, *Neopets* offers its clients unprecedented access to the minds (and

possibly wallets) of an otherwise hard-to-reach demographic. While most sites are likely to keep the results of their data-mining activities in-house, the information gathered can nonetheless be tremendously valuable for future advertising design and product development.

Kids' online games present a particularly rich case study for understanding the mechanisms of advergaming because — for the most part — they have been allowed to flourish there unchallenged. Even though children's personally identifiable information, like their names and addresses, is protected in many regions under national privacy legislation, there is currently no legal framework in place that regulates the online collection of other types of data — even though consumer trends and opinions are often what interest marketers the most. And unlike the realm of adult MMOGs, where intellectual property (IP) ownership has become the issue of heated debate as a result of real money trade, children's advergames are very rarely thought of in terms of IP and authorship issues.

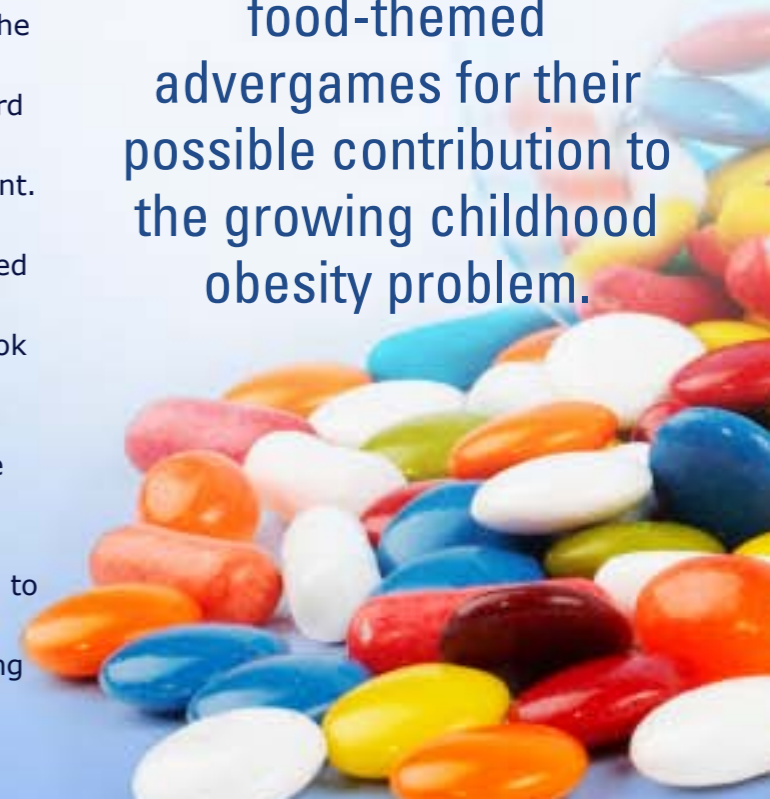
Instead, public attention to children and online games is usually concentrated on


the moral panic du jour. Most recently, politicians in the U.S. and Europe have begun targeting junk food-themed advergames for their possible contribution to the growing childhood obesity problem. As with similar campaigns against violent and sexual content, the focus always seems to stay fixed on the possible effects of exposure to said content while ignoring the two-way dynamics of interaction. This oversight reflects a deeper dependency on portraying children as "helpless victims," which comes up whenever conflicts arise (as seen repeatedly in the game-ratings cases). Meanwhile, kids are left to fend for themselves in regard to their potential rights as the collaborative producers of game content.

As a result, norms are being established within these sites that are extremely industry biased. I decided to take a look at the games' terms of service (TOS) contracts and end-user license agreements (EULAs), since these have been so central to the IP conflicts with MMOGs. What I discovered was most kids' advergames require their players to agree to many of the same clauses in adult-oriented MMOGs' EULAs, including transferring ownership of any and all

contributions they've made on the game's site — everything from direct feedback and avatar customization to uploaded materials and forum replies. If these items are to be data-mined and used for business purposes, it's better to secure ownership first, right?

**Politicians in the U.S. and Europe have begun targeting junk food-themed advergames for their possible contribution to the growing childhood obesity problem.**





The agreements themselves are long and complicated, written in a mix of legalese and hyperbole, with sentences like: “We exclusively own all now-known or hereafter existing rights to Submissions of every kind and nature throughout the universe until the end of time, and are entitled to unlimited use of your Submissions for any purpose we can think of.” If it’s difficult for a layperson to make sense of TOS contracts, you can imagine how impossible it is for a kid — assuming he reads the thing in the first place (which, let’s be honest, hardly anyone does).

Admittedly, a number of the contracts I reviewed did list the parent as an assumed agreeing party, but none of them did any follow-up to ensure the parent actually read and agreed to the terms. In the one case where written parental consent was mandatory (*Neopets!*), very few details were provided about why kids’ information

**It doesn’t seem to matter that contracts made with minors are legally void. Nor has the issue of unconscionability.**

was being collected or how it might be used. And yet these contracts are clearly supposed to stand in for the informed consent procedures that are normally required when enlisting a child to participate in research activities.

It doesn’t seem to matter that contracts made with minors are legally void. Nor has the issue of unconscionability — a legal defense used when unfair contracts place one party at a disproportionate advantage over another — come up in any significant way, even though sweeping claims like “for eternity” and “throughout the universe” are undoubtedly susceptible to such a challenge. Thus, while it’s highly unlikely that the TOS agreements found in children’s advergames are valid, the lack of opposition seems to have given the writers of the agreements carte blanche.

But all this may soon change. A small controversy has now erupted around *Battlefield 2142*, a “T”-rated futuristic wargame that not only features dynamic in-game advertisements (i.e. ads that can be updated and changed over time) but also data-mines its players. Allegations that the game contains

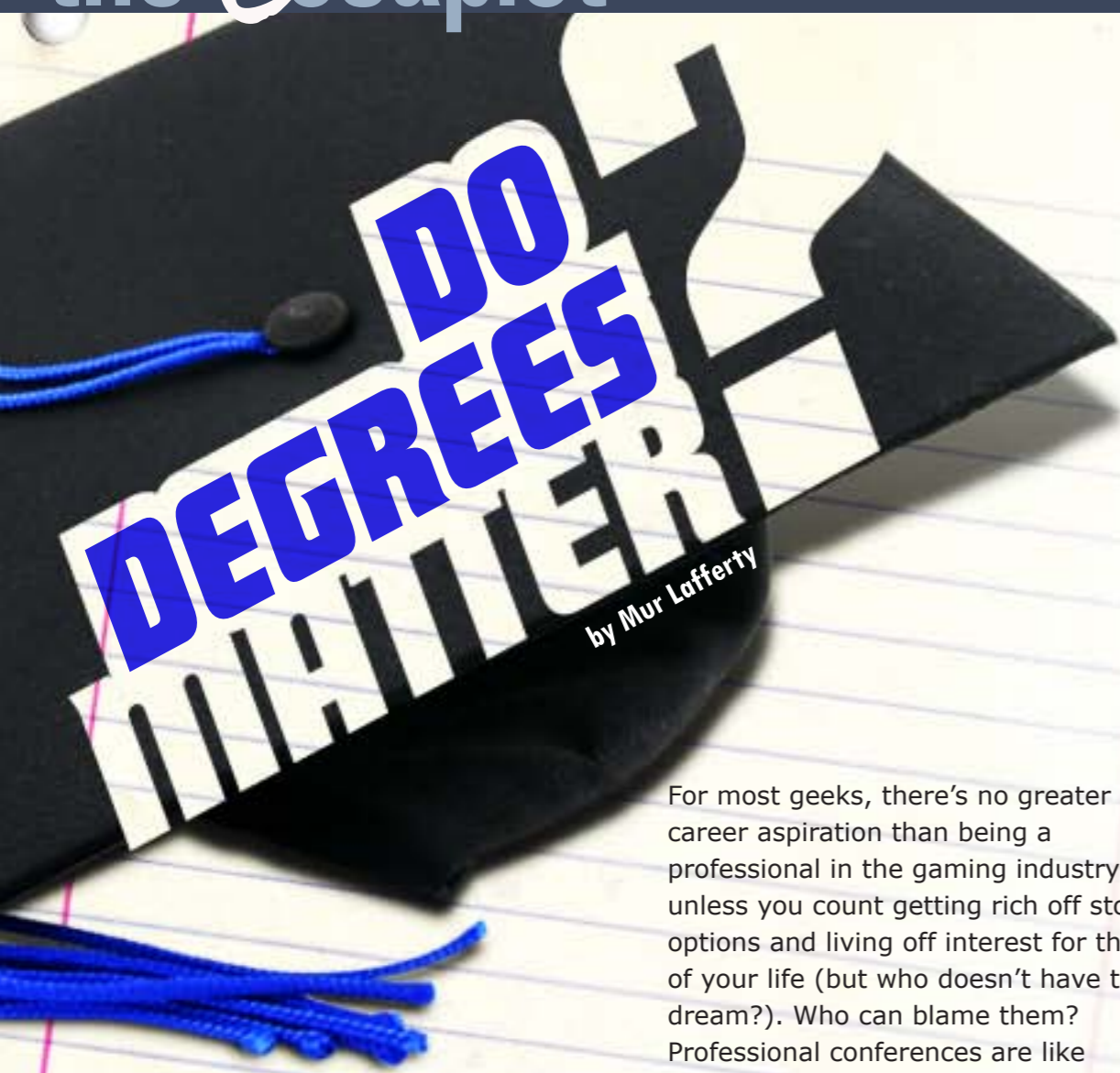
spyware have prompted California Assemblywoman Lori Saldana to announce plans to draft a new bill making it illegal for companies to embed spyware in their games.

The irony here is this time around it might actually take some adult “victims” for these gaming practices to attract public scrutiny. While it’s nice to see a game-related debate that doesn’t revolve around the old “kids-in-peril” trope, it does seem like a bit of a lost opportunity for a long overdue validation of kids’ contribution to game culture. The idea of children as content producers also challenges many of the underlying assumptions of political campaigns that seek to “protect” kids from videogames. The omission of child players when it comes to IP issues reveals an important contradiction: Despite their prominence within videogame debates, kids’ own interests are actually rarely considered.

 **COMMENTS**

*Sara M. Grimes is a doctoral student in communication at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. She researches children’s culture, digital games and the role of play in society.*





by Mur Lafferty

For most geeks, there's no greater career aspiration than being a professional in the gaming industry – unless you count getting rich off stock options and living off interest for the rest of your life (but who doesn't have that dream?). Who can blame them? Professional conferences are like Disneyland for adults, meetings with vendors brings T-shirts that you'd actually like to wear, and we all get to make true the Gary Larson's *Far Side*

cartoon from 20 or so years ago, the one with the parents dreaming of all the money their son would make in computer games.

Tell people game design is a regular job, with the usual problems on the corporate level, and they'll scoff. Remind them that "playing games all day" consists of playing a **broken** game over and over again to find and replicate bugs, and they'll call you a killjoy. Fact is, and we all know it, a videogame career is pretty damn cool.

One of the most popular questions gaming industry professionals receive is, "How can I get into the gaming industry?" And in the last few decades, some institutions have come forward to answer that question.

Many people simply don't know what skills you need to get into the industry. What do the engineers need? Artists? What if you just want to design, or produce? Until recently, traditional colleges didn't typically focus their degrees toward videogames, so it can be confusing. And heck, when perusing the job postings for the industry, college degrees are often mentioned as "preferred" instead of "required," if they're mentioned at all. Several industry veterans

have no degree at all. And so, academic institutions have been established in recent decades to address this need.

These programs look to be answers to everyone's prayers. First, you have professors who will tell you exactly what skills you need to pursue your desired career. Second, you'll be among peers who have the same ambitions you do. What's more, some schools offer degrees in two years, allowing you to save the time – and expense – you would normally spend at a traditional four-year college.

Industry veterans see the value in such programs. Having someone enter a company with experience in how a game gets put together is important; most job listings require some sort of experience. Richard Dansky, Design Manager at Red Storm Entertainment as well as Central Clancy Writer for UbiSoft, thinks degrees are a positive thing. "It gives [students] context and an understanding of what some of the expectations are. They've been through a form of game development process and have a better idea of what it actually takes to make a game as a result," he said. "It's a great thing there are programs developing. It's a young field and there's a lot of making

it up as we go along, and training people in what is expected and needed is a real positive in terms of integrating new developers into the workforce smoothly.”

Jim Van Verth, Senior Engineer at Red Storm, echoes the pros. “If [game design programs] are designed properly, they give you lots of good experience in working on game projects and working on a team, which is not always something you get in a normal academic course. So you definitely get a good sense of what it’s like to work in that sort of environment. And of course, [students] are going to work on skills that are going to be useful in that environment.”

Self-described “recovering game developer” David Weinstein says, “Any degree-focused education gets you three things. It gets you the opportunity to learn; how much of that you take advantage of is up to you. ... It provides networking opportunities. A theater program in Manhattan offers a lot more networking opportunities than one in Dubuque. Here is where the better game-oriented degree programs (for example, DigiPen, Full Sail and the Guild Hall) have a great deal to offer - all three of those schools have superb contacts

throughout the game industry. The third thing the schools offer is a credential. It is a loan of reputation from the school to the graduate.”

On the downside, there is some concern that these colleges are too narrow in their focus. The Full Sail program offers two-year degrees in recording arts and film as well as game design. While their website boasts many success stories of their students going on to succeed in their chosen career, the credits students have gained toward their degree are non-transferable to most four-year universities. This means any attempt to build on their education may place them squarely at the freshman level of most colleges.

“I would still strongly advise that you get a traditional CS [computer science] degree from the best school you can get into, and work your ass off,” Weinstein says. “Learn everything you can (and not just CS - that makes you one-dimensional and boring). This is your chance to learn from world experts in a whole range of fields; take advantage of it. Get a strong, balanced education, and work on game development skills in class projects when you can, and outside of them when you cannot. And work on those people skills.

When you are looking for an entry-level job, the two things that are important are the light behind the eyes, and how well you work with others.”

Not all gaming programs are two-year degrees. The Nintendo-affiliated DigiPen Institute of Technology, in Redmond, offers a rigorous four-year degree, along with a Master’s degree in computer science. They are working on a Ph.D. program, as well. DigiPen is one of the most popular schools in the field, and the top students have an excellent chance finding a career in gaming.

Dansky cautions, however, that while the degrees may teach you much about game development, the degrees are not a magic bullet into a job in gaming. “A game design degree is no more a pass

into a job in the industry than a degree in any other industry. It’s just one more thing you can put in your toolkit. ... At this point, experience still trumps any sort of formal degree.”

Van Verth worries about the long-term value of the degrees. “The big problem, as I see it, is that the game industry can be a rough place to work. Turnover can be high. Some people just drop out. At one point, you were a veteran if you had worked in the industry for five years. So by signing up for a program that focuses entirely on game development, you’re banking your future that that is what you want to do for the rest of your life. If you decide you want to do something more lucrative [in engineering], like write financial or database software, it’s going to be tough.”

“there is some concern that these colleges are **TOO NARROW** in their focus.”

But traditional universities are getting in on the business, too. The Global Gaming League, a worldwide leader in live videogame events, listed the top 10 gaming colleges. Established schools filled out eight of the 10 spots, with University of Texas topping the list, followed by Penn State University and Rochester Institute of Technology. Full Sail came in at No. 10 and DigiPen at No. 5.

Steven Jacobs, a faculty member of RIT, says they offer a standard undergraduate degree, requiring the liberal arts classes and other courses that round out a full degree. Marq Singer, an eight-year industry veteran in game engineering, lectures occasionally at RIT. He says the four-year (or more, as RIT offers a Master's degree in gaming, as well) programs offer a strong foundation for those who wish to go into gaming. "I know it's cliché as hell, but I say get in the fundamentals. The industry changes so rapidly, you need to be able to adapt. ... You come out of a university/college program knowing how to be a good engineer/artist and know a thing or two about games."

Andrew Phelps is the Director of Game Design and Development at the RIT

College of Computing & Information Sciences. He also emphasizes the importance of a well-rounded education. "Several of our students that have opted not to work in the game industry have successful careers in fields like military simulation, edutainment and visualization. Others have gone on to successful [gaming] careers."

**The future looks  
BRIGHT**

The academic focus on gaming is something new, and it's still evolving, says Dansky. Red Storm Entertainment has employed people from both DigiPen and Full Sail, and he says he's happy with their work. "[The question of value is] less that the program stamps you out

with a degree and more what the degree represents. You've been through a version of the process, and you can give me samples, and I can evaluate you in that context."

The future looks bright for more academic institutions focusing on gaming, however. As students demand

**for more academic  
institutions  
FOCUSING ON  
GAMING,**

more access, and game companies demand more experience out of new employees, the academic institutions will have to step up. These days, you can ask your college of choice if they offer any degrees in game design, and there's

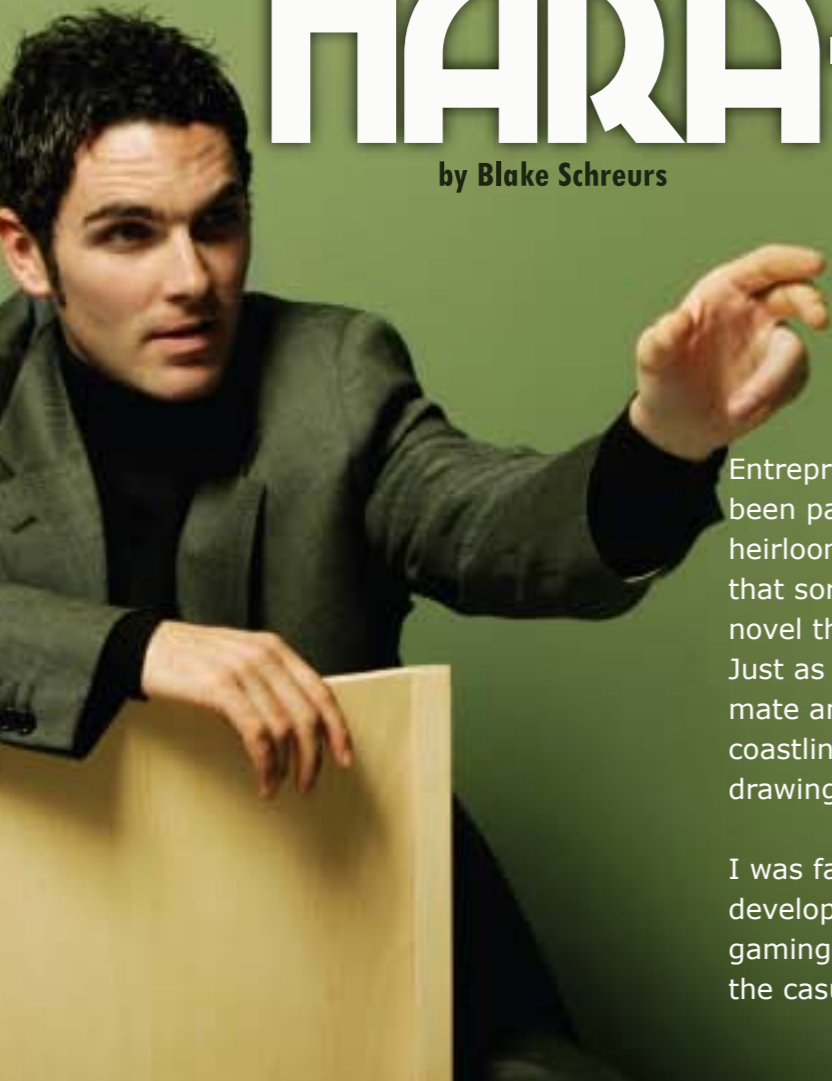
a good chance someone can give you some information on it.

"As this goes along, I would hope that the programs will continue to get better and better and will do a better job of training people in what's actually needed," Dansky says. "Each side will get an improved sense of what the other needs, which can only help both the programs and the developers. We've had folks come straight out of various programs and do good things for us, and it's something I would like to see continue. Applicable education is always a good thing." [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.*

## creative HARA-KIRI

by Blake Schreurs



Entrepreneurship and creativity have been passed down in my family like heirlooms. If there is genetic code for that sort of thing, the desire to build novel things is a festoon on my DNA. Just as a male praying mantis finds its mate and lemmings leave to explore the coastline, my notebooks fill with arcane drawings of games never played before.

I was familiar with commercial software development, but new to the commercial gaming industry. I decided to focus on the casual game market, where smaller

budgets and the desire for novel games allow for more experimental titles. I visited a few publishers' websites to learn what they were looking for in a game submission. In most cases, the tips they provided merely discussed the quality of submissions, but didn't provide anything substantial about the game design or style. But I kept getting one vibe from everyone: They wanted to see something new.

With the publishers' guidance in mind, I began developing my game. My experience in the field of software engineering provided me most of the tools I needed. My aesthetic ensured this was not some garish result of a free-time whimsy. My eye for quality kept it from becoming shambling machination, like those often created by energetic students. My drive to create something new flared, eschewing clones and derivatives of existing games. When I created the final build, I was ecstatic. I had simultaneously written a game by myself and invented a new type of game.

My game concept was fairly simple: I wanted to make a drawing game that graded players on the technical aspects of their drawings. Every single art game

I could find was conceptually related to *Pictionary*, where stick figures are rewarded over drawings which involve more thought and realism. I wanted to make a game that helped expose the underlying rules of drawing in a challenging and non-embarrassing way. In effect, I wanted to make a game that would help people draw better by playing it. After some intensive programming, that's precisely what I had. The next step: Find a publisher to unleash my creation on unsuspecting artists-to-be.

Though not a member of the industry yet, I was familiar with the four-step publication process: Go to a publisher, submit your game, get rejected, repeat. It's a fairly simple cycle, and honestly, isn't that bad if you don't take the rejection personally. I steeled myself and tried to open a dialog with the publishers whose sites had offered me submission advice months before. I went through website after website, filling out contact forms and sending e-mails. The sites often said to wait a week to a month for a response.

The response (well, the lack thereof) I received was unexpected. Weeks passed, and my inbox was as barren as a desert.

In most cases, the publishers I contacted didn't even send an automated reply e-mail. I couldn't even tell if my missive had been received.

A touch put-off, I decided to look a little deeper into this phenomenon. What I found was alarming: I quickly learned I wasn't alone. On a few developer-focused sites, I started reading how other submissions went unacknowledged, too. "If after a month you haven't heard anything ... assume that we aren't going to publish the title," wrote one employee.

It's strange, from my viewpoint. Independent studios spend months writing games based on publishers' suggestions. They submit the game on the publisher's terms. In many cases, though not all, they are told to expect a response and feedback in a short amount of time. Instead, the majority of publishers opt to ignore developers they don't know completely. That kind of response isn't just unprofessional or rude, it's insulting. Considering what some people do to create these submissions, it's almost cruel. And this is an industry-wide phenomenon.

I pondered the situation for a few days. I thought about my interactions with these firms and their employees over the past months. Up until the point I wanted to get a game published they were polite, friendly and helpful. These weren't some executive big-wigs who were dismissive of game studios. Something had gone awry.

I decided it was time to make some phone calls. In every case, the publisher hadn't made its phone number available - unsurprising, given the types of calls they'd receive with a public number. But without industry contacts, I had to get **technical**. After a bit of computer wizardry, I managed to snatch a couple of numbers from the internet.

It took some convincing, but I was able to finally speak with a few producers. It turns out I had done some things very well from the beginning of the development process; my game was innovative and unique. Unfortunately, some of my mistakes during game submission prevented my game from coming to light.

My folly wasn't that I had invented something new, but that I treated the

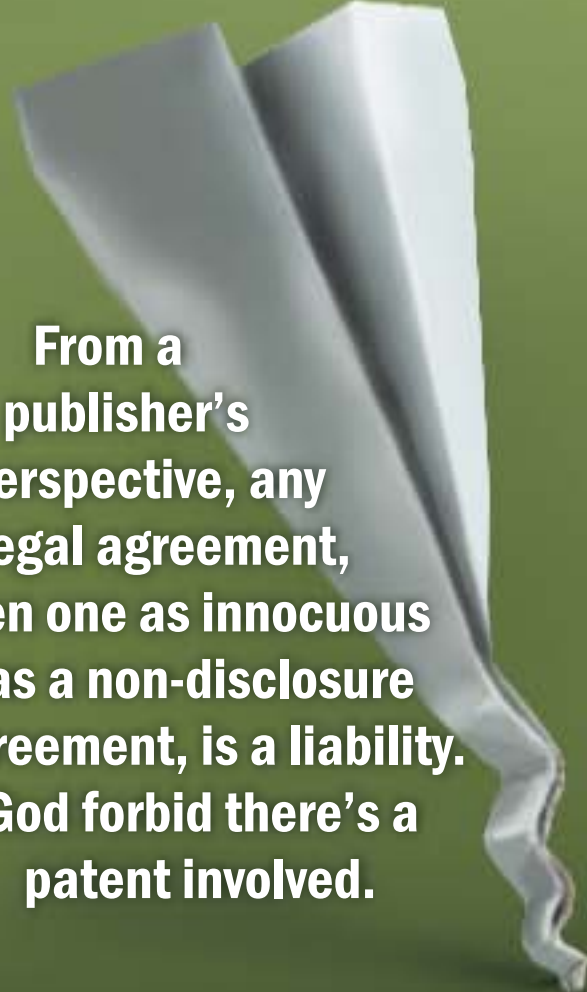
fruits of my labor as an invention. A new invention has to be guarded closely, protected by an assortment of complicated legal agreements. From a publisher's perspective, any legal agreement, even one as innocuous as a non-disclosure agreement, is a liability. God forbid there's a patent involved. Patents can be risky for game publishers. Some publishers even fear a patent arms race, the hoarding of intellectual property over any minor invention, which could stifle creativity and destroy innovative game design.

And, since seeking a legal agreement delays the submission process and introduces risk for the publisher, they're definitely not going to look at you if it's your first pitch to them. But it's a catch-22, because you have to be mindful of your intellectual property, and make sure the full game is not leaked to the public at large.

I remain bemused that an industry which eagerly seeks innovation cannot fully protect creativity early in the publication process. At this point, I am resigned to being treated less like an inventor and more like an author. But I find comfort knowing that so long as

people have fun playing my game, my genetic imperative to create will be fulfilled. [COMMENTS](#)

*Blake Schreurs is a web applications guru who starts projects outside of his area of expertise, because he hasn't learned to fear failure yet. He writes in loving memory of his older brother, Brian.*



**From a publisher's perspective, any legal agreement, even one as innocuous as a non-disclosure agreement, is a liability. God forbid there's a patent involved.**

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