the Escapist

The Lost GENERATION
by Russ Pitts

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

The Situation: The close of the 2005-2006 Hardware Battle, of the better-known Great Console Wars.

Ladies and Gentlemen, another round of the on-going war between hardware developers to control the hearts and minds of console gamers everywhere has come to a close. In the last 18 months, action on the front has heated up as each side rallied and delivered new blows, introducing new consoles to the gaming public.

The Parties: Microsoft, Nintendo and Sony

Over the past several decades of battles, three major powers have emerged to dominate the field.

Microsoft – One of the newest competitors on the scene, Microsoft started shakily and gained footing over time, slowly building a fanbase, and bolstering their efforts with solid developers allying to create a wide selection of desirable games. Microsoft has released their second foray into console development with this round's Xbox 360. Their big idea: **Do everything we were already doing, but bigger and better. And beat others following this same plan to the punch – on both release date and price.**

Nintendo – The "old guard," if there is such a thing in this realm. It depends which country one is in to measure it, but Nintendo has now released about half a dozen consoles. The latest, the Wii, showed Nintendo's willingness to take a gamble and take the less obvious, and more risky, route to victory. Their big idea: **Fun. Make the Wii fun for all people of all ages. Increase the Nintendo lovers' ranks by winning them over with unassuming, uncomplicated fun.**

Sony – In the previous round of battles, Sony was the clear victor, gaining more ground than the other two major powers combined … and then some. In this round of battle, however, Sony's PlayStation 3 is starting a bit behind their second place rival in the previous showdown, Microsoft. Their big idea: **We didn't beat them on price or release date, but we'll beat the others on sheer brute force and shiny gadgetry.**

The Objective: In this issue of *The Escapist*, "Launch Telemetry," our elite corps of writers analyze this round of the Great Console Wars. Please continue reading for the in-depth briefing. Enjoy!

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "The Gamer Within" from The Escapist Forum: I'm on the marketing/advertising side of gaming and not only have I noticed that there are more woman gameplayers out there, many of them are moving from casual games to MMOGs. We just to produce games that interest them.

- trosaire

In response to "The Gamer Within" from The Escapist Forum: When a person says of games, "What's the point?" or "This story is terrible," this is what they mean. The story is just a knowing wink and an excuse to go out and do what everybody knows you're coming there for (in this case, killing boars because a person told you to so you can go kill better boars). If you don't

already know that you want to go kill boars, then either the story will bore you because it's a tailor-made excuse to kill boars, or it will betray you because it goes on about all this great stuff that's happening, and then it tells you that your part in the story is to go and kill boars.

Civilization lets you interact with the story in a way I don't think any other kind of game has, which in my opinion is why it was the closest to a success in the little experiment. *Lumines* doesn't make excuses. *Black and White* doesn't make excuses. The game is the setting is the story. We can make games like that now, and more than anything else I think that's what we should be pursuing. It makes sense.

- Bongo Bill

In response to "The Future of Massively Multiplayer Isn't You" from The Escapist Forum: The primary difference between hardcore and casual gamers is their willingness (and desire) to fully explore all the options a game provides. It is also a question of skill and experience.

Time is not a factor, in my mind, when determining the difference between a hardcore and casual gamer; hardcore gamers may be more willing to dedicate a lot of time to a game in general, but casual gamers can spend a ton of time playing games, and hardcore gamers can spend little.

For example, I am a hardcore min/max style gamer. I almost never spend more than 10 hours a week playing any given MMO these days, but the time I do spend is carefully approached and maximized for efficiency.

On the flip side, while I was a Community Relations Manager on EverQuest II, I met a number of gamers I would consider casual, in that they spend most of their time in the game hanging out and slowly advancing, but they played the game 4+ hours a day. They never maximized efficiency, watching TV while playing or wandering in and out of the room in which they played, casually chatting with friends, looking around, etc.

I understand part of this can be that what I view as a hardcore player has different goals than a casual player (character advancement being one of them), but I look at a casual player as being someone who simply doesn't put forth a great deal of effort while they are playing a game as compared to a hardcore player (whether their motives are character advancement, monetary gain, socialization, or otherwise).

- Ryan Shwayder

In response to "The Future of Massively Multiplayer Isn't You" from The Escapist Forum: I think, Ryan, you are defining a "Power Gamer" which is not the same as a "Hardcore Gamer". My friends are definitely more hardcore, in my opinion, but they have a strong focus on developing a character in terms of background, social relations, etc. They are "Hardcore Role Players".

I, on the other hand, spend less time in the games that I play but I spend almost all of it leveling up. My play style of choice is "power gaming", but I have trouble considering myself a "hardcore gamer". I feel that my style reflects what I like to do in the game, not necessarily how devoted to it I am.

I agree, though, that the statement is an over-simplification. We can't boil down the formula into time played = level of hardcore.

- Blaxton

In response to "Business Casual" from The Escapist Forum: I'd like to verify the sales figures that you list in your article about the *Buzz!* games. You mention in your article that 4 million units have been sold. I'd love to know the breakdown of that number in terms of US sales vs. Europe in 2005 and 2006.

I've done quite a bit of research to try to get these figures but to no avail. Perhaps you can help?

- Laurie

Editor's Reply: Thanks for your inquiry (and your interest).

The figure you mention was printed as a direct quote from David Amor, Creative Director of Relentless Software, developers of the *Buzz!* series of games. It is, therefore, a reflection of how many units **he** believes were sold of his game, rather than an estimate of our own.

The closest we came to editorializing on the number of units of *Buzz!* sold was the suggestion that it was the PS2's best-selling title of 2005, which, it would appear, is a typographical error. *Buzz!* was "one of the" best-selling titles of that year, but not number one. That error has since been corrected. Mr. Amor's words, however, are his problem.

- Russ Pitts

Backing the Winning Horse

by Kyle Orland

In a 2005 *Esquire* essay, Chuck Klosterman talks about the cultural betrayal we feel when others don't agree with our tastes. The essay was inspired partly by a passage from Gina Arnold's *Route 666: On the Road to Nirvana*, in which Arnold describes her excitement at hearing *Smells like Teen Spirit* on the radio. "Nirvana being on the radio means my own values are winning," Arnold wrote. "I'm no longer in the opposition." Klosterman, upon reflection, found that most people think the same way about

most every personal decision in their lives. "They don't want people to merely *hold* their values," Klosterman wrote, "They want their values to *win*."

And so it goes every few years with console videogames. It's not enough to buy a system and enjoy the games available; we want the system we buy to **win**. More than that, we want our chosen system to dominate the market, utterly and completely, like the Atari 2600 and NES did way back when.

Sure, millions of people bought the Xbox and the GameCube and no doubt spent a good deal of time playing the many games available on each. But a significant portion of these players spent just as much time on the internet, decrying the fact their system wasn't the most popular. The injustice! It's in our nature to want our personal choices validated by popular culture; to be afraid of picking wrong and somehow being on the losing side of a popularity contest.

And here we are, in early 2007, at the start of the most hotly contested battle for videogame market supremacy since the days of the SNES and Genesis. Three consoles have never had equal chances

to win the hearts of gamers. Never before has the likelihood of a truly equitable, three-way market split been plausible. Never before have more people paid attention to the back-and-forth horse race of sales numbers and analyst speculation that makes up the core of the console war.

Who's in the lead so far? It depends on who you ask, but some general patterns are unmistakable. Microsoft has parlayed the Xbox 360's first-to-market advantage in North America and Europe into a significant worldwide sales lead. The system's unchallenged incursion into previously untapped markets like India has only helped in this regard, and plans to launch in China will only enlarge the system's footprint.

But Japan still holds the soul of gaming for many, and Microsoft has failed to improve upon the original Xbox's tepid performance in the land of the rising sun. Despite some recent interest in the high profile *Blue Dragon*, Microsoft has trouble selling 2,000 Japanese units in an average week. The reasons for this poor performance have been endlessly debated – the internet has it that it's either Japanese nationalism or

Microsoft's inability to adapt to non-Western audiences. But whatever the reason, Japan remains Microsoft's Achilles' heel. The Japanese game market may be a relatively small part of the much greater worldwide pie, but Microsoft's comparative failure in the country gives its competitors an opening.
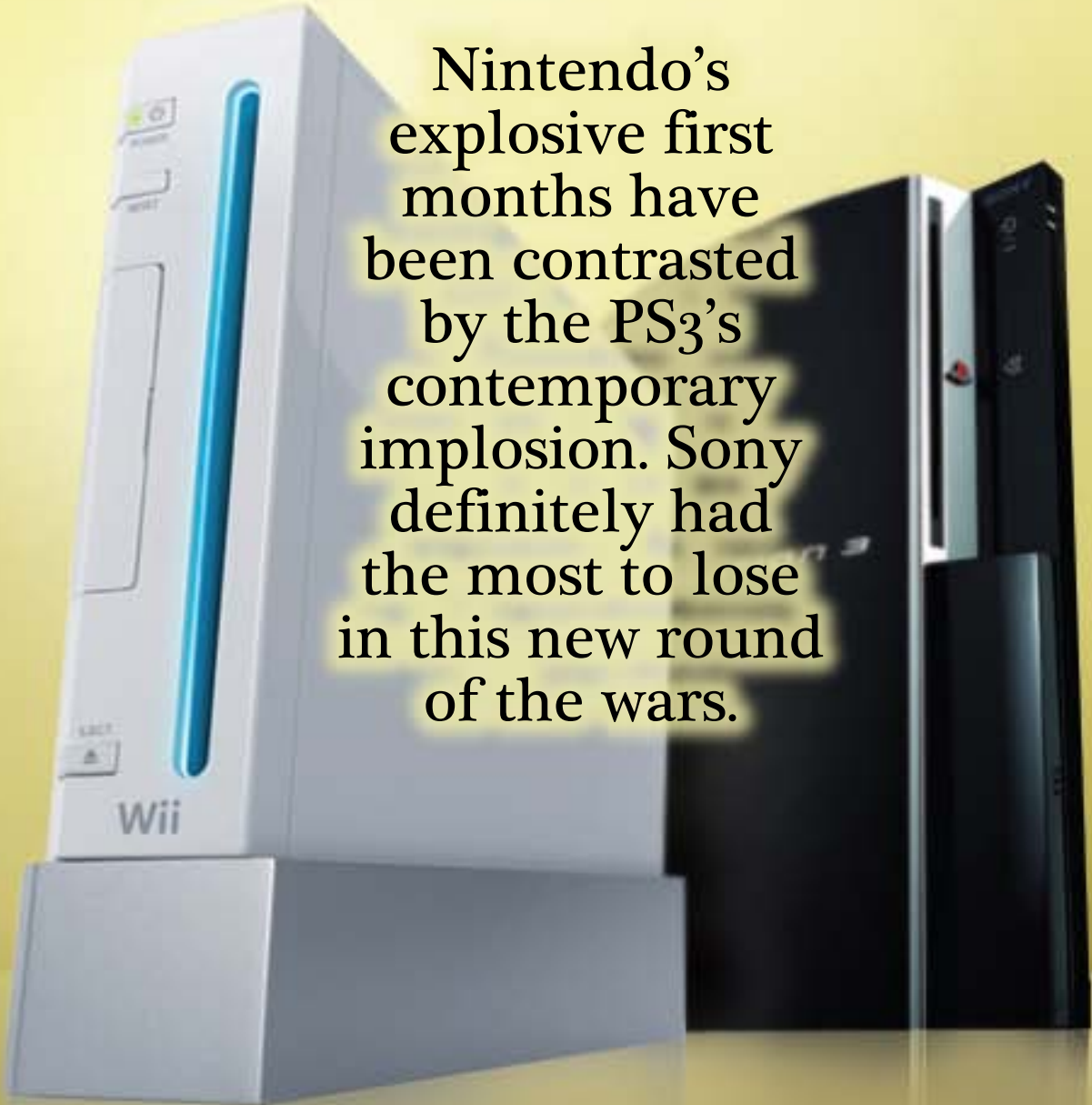
Nintendo is exploiting that opening to full effect. The Wii took Japan by storm – the system overtook the year-old 360 after just five weeks on the market. The system's quick growth tracks the amazing success of the Nintendo DS, which in the last year has become a must-have item among Japanese youth. Wii shortages have gotten so dire, Japanese gamers are sometimes paying more for a used system than a new one.

The Wii's early success has been mirrored in America and Europe, where extreme system shortages have similarly lasted for months after launch. Anecdotal evidence from retailers suggests they can't keep systems on the shelves, and people are still lining up outside stores to get their hands on the console, even now.

Nintendo's explosive first months have been contrasted by the PS3's contemporary implosion. As the undisputed winner of the last two generations' sales battles, Sony definitely had the most to lose in this new round of the wars. After 10 years of utter dominance, anything less than a commanding start would be seen as abject failure.

Even without the high expectations, the numbers Sony has put up thus far are disappointing by any standard. Production issues with the system's blue laser diodes caused a European delay and ensured the system would be hard to find during the American holiday season. The shortage cleared out just as the holiday rush was ending, leading to widespread reports of stores loaded with the once hard-to-find system.

Right now, Sony's great white hope is Europe. The company has already stockpiled one million systems for the March 23 rollout, and the strong European brand identity of system exclusives like *SingStar* could boost sales

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on the continent. Still, Sony will have to deal with millions of European consumers who have already invested their gaming dollars in a competing system.

Of course this is all speculation, which is more abundant than hard facts at this early stage of what is sure to be a multi-year battle. This hasn't stopped analysts from throwing out wildly divergent guesses on who will eventually take the crown. Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft all have their boosters among the pundit class, and the justifications for each system's impending dominance seem relatively well-founded. The 360, as the first system to reach 10 million units sold worldwide, has proven to publishers it can provide a massive market much sooner than its competitors. Nintendo, with the innovative Wii controller, has a product that seems poised to catch on with a new market of casual and non-gamers. Sony, despite early stumbles, still has brand recognition and big-name exclusives like *Final Fantasy XIII* and *Metal Gear Solid 4* coming down the pike.

But each company has potential pitfalls to overcome, too. Microsoft has its relative inexperience with console transitions and the shadow of the Xbox's underwhelming sales performance. Nintendo has the small but growing impression that their control scheme is a gimmick that will soon lose its novelty. Sony has a historically high price for its high-powered system and a bad reputation engendered by a series of PR blunders.

But in the end, whoever ends up selling the most systems, you can bet some players who chose "wrong" will treat everyone else's choice as a personal affront. But those more in control of their humanity will decide not to tie their self worth to a piece of electronics. They'll happily while away their free time playing games they like on a system they like, ignoring the rants and raves around them. They'll be the real winners of the console war. At least until they read a message board. **COMMENTS**

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Sony's great white hope is Europe.

The Lost Generation

by Russ Pitts

*"Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us -- if at all -- not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men."* - T.S. Eliot, The Hollow Men

The new consoles were rumored to be in short supply. Undaunted, legions of gamers lined up to buy what few units were available, hoping against hope they'd be among the lucky few to walk home with the season's most sought after technological wonder. A shortage of electronic components had threatened to sabotage the launch before it even began, and technical glitches were delaying hardware certification, but the manufacturer promised the shelves would be full, in spite of last-minute shipping problems. They were only part wrong; the shelves weren't full, but they were occupied with gleaming console boxes, waiting to be carried home in the arms of lucky gamers. As for big launch titles, there was only one, really, but it was a doozie; a game familiar to everyone who played games - a bona fide console-seller.

This scenario should sound familiar to anyone who's lived through a console launch. In 2005 the Xbox 360 launched under similar circumstances, and a year later both Sony and Nintendo launched their next-gen machines in an almost carbon copy of the exercise. Five years or so prior, all three companies danced the same dance around their Xbox, PlayStation 2 and GameCube machines, with a special guest appearance by the Sega Dreamcast (just before that company's hardware division went supernova). But the situation described above happened before these companies were even in the game. Long before.

The machine? The Coleco Telstar, the third home videogame console ever made. The technological doodads in short supply weren't blue laser diodes, but the General Instruments chips allowing the device to play multiple games with one chip. The launch title? A version of *Pong*. The Coleco Telstar launched to rave reviews and, although it ultimately lost money for the company, helped kick-start the home console revolution started by Baer's Odyssey a few years prior. The only thing missing, it seemed, were more games, and somebody was already working on that problem.

The year was 1976, and the first console war had begun. Like learning that our parents also had sex (once), the idea that console wars of the past were just as bloody, just as lopsided and just as meaningless is lost on most gamers. As is the one lesson learned by the losers (and winners) of each and every console war, from Atari vs. Intellivision to PlayStation 3 vs. Xbox 360: It's the games, stupid.

Here We Go round the Prickly Pear
Coleco started life as a leather goods manufacturer, eventually moving into the realm of play products by way of above-

ground swimming pools. I had one. It was awesome. My father's prized rose bushes were leveled in order to clear ground for the beast, but the resulting swim-hole-out-of-a-box was well worth the destruction of a few beloved thorny flowers. The **Co**nnecticut **Le**ather **Co**mpany discovered they enjoyed making children smile so much (with water) that they stretched their legs a decade or so later with handheld LCD games and, eventually, the Telstar home game console. A "generation" later, they made it big with a "programmable" home console called ColecoVision and a little game by Nintendo called *Donkey Kong*.

I had one of these, too. I was what you might call a Coleco fanboy. Well before web forums and message boards, I'd gather with my friends on the playground during recess, behind the gym after school or down in the canals on weekends to shoot the bull, trade stolen porn mags or fish for carp, all the while debating the pros and cons of our respective console machines.

The venerable Atari 2600, as we now know, was the clear winner of that war, but this didn't stop those of us with "lesser" machines from fighting the good

fight. The Intellivision, for example (Doug had one of these) had far better games than Scott's Atari 2600. Imagic's *Microsurgeon* was just about the coolest game in the world. And *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*? Forget about it. A thousand *Pitfalls* wouldn't even come close. My ColecoVision had even better games, and the ports of arcade classics like the aforementioned *Donkey Kong* and *Zaxxon* made every boy who owned one an arcade hero (in his own home, no less).

But the 2600 had the numbers. By 1980, the year Mattel launched the Intellivision and two years before Coleco made it to market with their ColecoVision, Atari had already installed nearly 3 million of their consoles into American homes. Intellivision would score a distant second place in this, the second true console war, and ColecoVision, in spite of key distribution deals with then third-party developers like Nintendo and Sega, would come in third. But the story doesn't end there, as you well know. In fact, it doesn't even begin there.

Long forgotten by the time the videogame market crashed in 1983 was the Fairchild Channel F, the first of the programmable consoles. Released in

1976, a year before the Atari 2600, the Channel F was a primitive machine, but it did what no other console had yet managed. In addition to sporting a number of built-in *Pong*-like games (via a GI chip similar to the one in Coleco's Telstar), the Channel F allowed one to play a theoretically unlimited number of games by inserting game "cartridges" - large, yellow things resembling the popular audio media of the time, the 8-track tape.

I had one of these, too. Before I was a Coleco fanboy, I was a Fairchild fanboy. I'd drool over the bright yellow cartridges at Montgomery Ward's, begging to be allowed to take one home. The Fairchild's *Pong* clone was incredible, and the drag racing game? Forget about it. But the Fairchild, in spite of its innovations and a timely hardware redesign, ultimately failed to capture enough market share to stave off the Atari juggernaut, which, quite simply, had the games, stupid.

But a Whimper
Then, in 1983, something interesting happened to the videogame industry - something all of the fledgling MMOG makers (boutique or otherwise) chasing the tail of Blizzard would be wise to

> "I was what you might call a COLECO FANBOY."

I'd moved to a new town, and my mother, perhaps as a consolation, bought me a NES,

heed: The market became so flooded with knock-off consoles and second-rate third-party games, the average consumer got confused. **Why** is the Intellivision a better machine than the 2600? And why does ColecoVision outpace them both? Why isn't the Bally Astrocade just as good? And why doesn't *Pac-Man* look the same on the Atari as it does in the arcade? (And why was *E.T.* such a piece of crap?)

Doug, Scott and I debated these points endlessly, but we had the time and magazine subscriptions to form (relatively) educated opinions on the minute details of each console's construction and game selection. We

were true console warriors. But most people didn't care that much, or didn't **know** enough to care, and so just bought whatever machine struck their fancy. Or didn't buy anything, as happened more frequently, and as a result, hordes of developers went out of business, mountains of games went un-purchased and company after company closed its doors.

Games, it appeared, were finished. It would take a savior from overseas to correct that notion, introduce a whole new generation to the wonder of home game consoles and remind those of us who'd been there from the beginning of what was most important: the games, stupid.

This is the Dead Land
In the meantime, those of us with a game-playing bent had migrated to home computers, following a wave of programmers and publishers who'd done the exact same thing. Apple, Atari, Commodore, Tandy and a slew of other companies had been making relatively low-cost home computers for years, and following the crash of the console market, these machines were poised to take advantage of the sudden influx of game-starved youths.

Marketing their machines as "great for school" (a refrain that would prove catchy among computer manufacturers for decades), Commodore and Apple in particular established wide beachheads in the homes of America, opening the door for a game invasion, the rise of the adventure game genre and (eventually) providing a fertile ground for the development of distributed networks (aka the internet).

My friend Doug, ever the trend-setter, had a Commodore 64. My family, suddenly cost-conscious, had purchased the lesser-powered Vic-20. I maintained my friendship with Doug, therefore, mainly to play *Gunship* and *Impossible Mission* at his house instead of missile command knockoffs (or, God forbid, doing homework) at mine. Thankfully, for my own sanity (and the state of the industry), this situation was not destined to last. Utilizing a clever bait-and-switch ploy, Nintendo infiltrated the game-shy American market with their insidious 8-bit NES machine, alleviating the home console drought, kick-starting the third generation of home game consoles and establishing themselves as a videogame powerhouse.

I'd moved to a new town, and my mother, perhaps as a consolation, bought me a NES, otherwise known as 'The No-Friend-O." I also made new friends, one of whom, Adam, owned a Sega Master System. His machine's specs, he would claim, made the Master System the clear winner in this particular war. "No Adam," I would say. "It's the games, stupid."

And the NES had them in spades. *Duck Hunt*, HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Excitebike" \o "Excitebike" Excitebike, Hogan's Alley, Kung Fu, *Super Mario Bros.* … the launch list alone held gems still fondly remembered (and playable, via GameBoy advance cartridges and the Wii's Virtual Console) today. But the list kept getting better. By the time I got my hands on an NES, the

otherwise known as "THE NO-FRIEND-O."

catalogue had expanded to include *Bionic Commando*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Metroid*, *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out*, games that saw me through some of the most tumultuous years of my adolescence and convinced me that if there was one thing I'd be doing for the rest of my life, it would be playing games.

Sega sold over 13 million units of Adam's Master System in that war, but Nintendo conquered all, unleashing 60 million of their NES machines onto the market, many of which still reside under countless televisions, carefully maintained, loved and crowed over. Mine is not among them. Or if it is, I wouldn't know it. I sold it in 1994 (for beer money) while watching my college roommate play *Cybermorph* on his Atari Jaguar, the venerable company's erstwhile entry into the 64-bit console war. It was a fine machine, but would ultimately be a distant last-place finisher in that, the fifth console war. The winner was the 100 million-selling Sony PlayStation, obliterating all comers with a low-cost machine sporting a seemingly never-ending supply of third-party game titles. Like the Atari 2600 and the NES, it was a bullet train of commerce winning the war on the strength of the games, stupid.

In the Twilight Kingdom
War never changes.

It's been more than three decades since the first console war, but we still fight, still struggle. Sides are still chosen for one reason or another, banners still unfurled, weapons still unsheathed, fortunes lost and gained; lives thrown away in the never-ending pursuit of perfection.

We should curse the men who set us on this course - the men who designed the first machines of war - but instead we celebrate their names, building monuments to their ingenuity, writing histories of their contributions to society. Our society. The cult of the game. The Industrial-Entertainment complex within which we are all just cogs in the great, money churning machine.

I took a time out from fighting in the console wars after I retired my NES, but I still played the games, still enjoyed watching the reports from the front of who'd skunked who, and who'd be back for revenge next time around. I would eventually return to the field of battle as an adult, but by that time I was able to buy whatever console I wanted, even if that meant buying all of them. I

currently own five, each of which is still connected to my television.

Can I say for sure who's winning the wars? Well, numbers don't lie. My PlayStation 2 is but one of over 46 million residing in American homes as of the end of last year. The Xbox, one of more than 20 million. Sony would seem, therefore, to have won that round, based don't he numbers. But *Guitar Hero* is what sealed it for me. Since that game arrived, the Xbox has been gathering dust. Once again, it's the games, stupid.

The same will be true for the current generation, of course. The Xbox 360 is currently leading the fight, with around 10 million units sold to the Wii's 6 million and the PS3's just over 2 million. But the games aren't all in yet. The shooting war has yet to start. These days we have countless websites, blogs and message boards keeping score for us (or attempting to), so if there ever is a winner, we should know it with CNN-like suddenness, the sales figures lancing out across the web like tracer fire over Baghdad. But it won't matter as much to me. I'm an armchair general now. I've retired, and am content to simply enjoy the fruits of other soldiers' labors; to

play the games, in other words. Stupid.

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He has written and produced for television, theatre and film, has been writing on the web since it was invented and claims to have played every console ever made. His blog can be found at www.falsegravity.com.

> "The cult of the game. The Industrial-Entertainment complex within which we are all just cogs in the great, MONEY CHURNING MACHINE."

The PlayStation 3 DEADPOOL

by Allen Varney

Sony's November 16, 2006 North American launch of a mere 400,000 PlayStation 3 consoles indisputably provoked at least two shootings, riots and multiple armed robberies. A Wal-Mart manager in Milwaukee forced waiting PS3 customers to play musical chairs, causing several injuries. The Medialoper blog catalogued the mayhem, though most of its news links are now dead - like the mania for the console itself and like community college student Peyton Strickland of Durham, North Carolina.

It's arguable whether to count Strickland's December 1 killing toward the PS3 launch's increment of human misery. On launch day, a University of North Carolina college freshman filed an armed robbery report with the New Hanover county sheriff's office. He had waited in line for three days at Wal-Mart to get two PS3s, but two guys in a Pontiac drove up, beat him up and stole the consoles. Investigating, police identified Strickland and an accomplice. The police looked up Strickland's page on an online social network, a Facebook clone called Campus Blender; he, like 50,000 other 18-year-old suburban white boys on Facebook and its clones, had posted a photo of his friends posing with

(legally owned and licensed) firearms. Assuming from this that Strickland was armed and dangerous, the sheriff's office sent its Emergency Response Team – 16 heavily armed officers, including Sheriff's Corporal Christopher M. Long - to Strickland's home with a search warrant. They used a battering ram to break down the unlocked front door. Strickland was inside, unarmed and playing *Tiger Woods PGA Tour* with a friend on one of the stolen PS3s. Corporal Long, mistaking the sound of the ram for a gunshot – that's right, his own team's battering ram - panicked and fired, blowing out Strickland's brains and thereby sparing the public a trial to determine his guilt. Long also killed Strickland's dog, Blaze, who had not been involved in the robbery.

Ordinarily, this would be just another day defending the peace in North Carolina. Unfortunately for Long, Strickland's father is a lawyer. Long was fired; the district attorney charged him with second-degree murder, but a grand jury declined to indict. The New Hanover sheriff's office later admonished several deputies who sold raffle tickets to raise money for Long's family, calling it "most inappropriate" to offer as a prize the

season's hot new must-have gift item, a brand-new Sony PlayStation 3.

Not to trivialize these grim episodes, the most dramatic casualty of the PS3 launch is the console's godfather, Sony legend Ken Kutaragi. As engineer of the original PlayStation and mastermind of its successors, Kutaragi had guided the line from strength to strength. Its success vaulted him to the top of Sony Computer Entertainment International, where, as chairman and CEO, he made SCEI, for a time, the sprawling megacorp's most profitable division.

Live by PlayStation, die by PlayStation. The PS3's six-month production delay and launch supply difficulties, among many factors, contributed to Kutaragi's sudden removal from day-to-day operations in November 2006. His replacement as CEO was Sony veep Kazuo Hirai, who ran Sony Computer Entertainment America; Hirai's replacement was Jack Tretton, co-Chief Operating Officer of SCE America. Both are Sony marketing veterans, both stoutly champion the PS3 and in public interviews both dismiss, as trivial carping, complaints about the PS3 launch.

Meanwhile, partisans in the console war passionately debate whether the next casualty of the PS3 launch will be the PS3 itself.

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Some call the PS3 launch "disastrous," but even with the body count to date, it's not a genuine disaster - yet. Sales are sluggish, but a genuinely terrible product launch scorches the earth, annihilating hope of recovery. This hasn't happened to the PS3 - yet. In contrast to past launch disasters - the Ford Edsel, the Susan B. Anthony dollar - the PS3, as a product, has earned from neutral parties a measure of respect, if not enthusiasm. *The New York Times* called the console "over-engineered," not the worst insult imaginable.

Yet incessant news coverage chronicles the continuing aggrieved outcry over the PS3's $599 price, quirky high-def support and sub-optimal backward compatibility, plus a number of smaller technical glitches. Hundreds of stories fan the flames of a high-definition religious war between supporters of the PS3's new disk format, Blu-ray, and fans of the Xbox 360's HD-DVD.

"Live by PlayStation, Die by PlayStation."
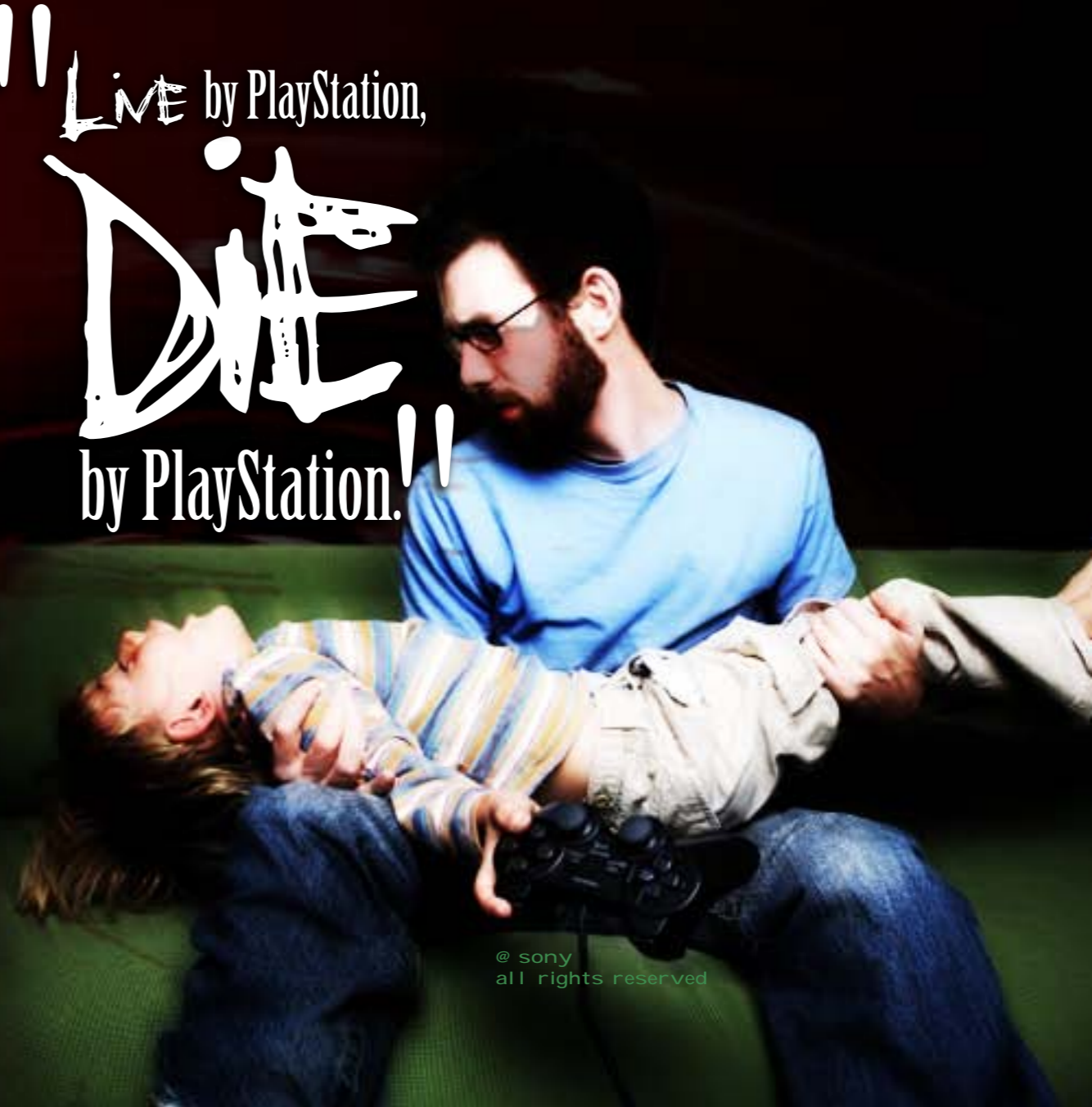
So sensitized is the audience, even measured statements draw flames. The February 23, 2007 installment of David Carnoy's "Fully Equipped" column on CNet is provocatively titled "Ten Things I Hate About the PS3," though he immediately backpedals: "I think the PS3 is a very nice piece of gear -- but it also has some issues that need to be addressed." His mild-mannered list would seem to reflect pure consensus: price, high-def support, smaller tech glitches. Yet apparently the mere act of writing "PS3" summons the fanatics, for the column's comment thread is as bloodthirsty as any on Kotaku or Joystiq.

An early comment is titled "Hope your house falls off in a gigantic mudslide."

You could speculate on the reasons for this passion - assuming you've never owned a video console. You might wonder if the anti-PS3 faction is reacting to, say, Sony's criminal mistreatment of its customers in the 2005 rootkit debacle. Or maybe they're annoyed by Sony executives' relentlessly specious yet oddly ungrounded spin; see, for example, GameDaily's February 2007 talk with SCE Worldwide Studios president Phil Harrison, where he claimed the PS3s that sit unsold on store shelves, even as Nintendo's Wii

continues to sell out, simply prove Sony manages its supply chain better.

You might wonder in this way - unless you know. Unless you spent your formative years playing a PlayStation or PS2 hours every day. That long affinity, more familiar and intense, in a way more intimate, than your relationships with most of your friends ... it left strong feelings. To see its successor so strangely handled, to wonder whether you can continue that relationship, or whether it will be destroyed by senseless decisions beyond your control ... it feels almost like betrayal.

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Is the PlayStation 3, so soon after launch, already in trouble? Despite all the noise, it's still too early to tell.

The launch shortages are now history, which is good (no playing musical chairs for Wal-Mart managers) and bad (weak sales). According to sales data tracked by the HYPERLINK "http://www.npd.com/corpServlet?nextpage=profile_s.html"NPD Group, the PS3 is the poorest-selling of the new consoles, moving only 244,000 units in North America in January 2007,

compared to 294,000 for the Xbox 360 and 436,000 for the Wii. In Japan, according to Media Create, the PS3 is selling only 20-30,000 units weekly, compared to about 50-100,000 for the PS2 at the same point in its life cycle. In fact, in both regions, the venerable PlayStation 2 still tops the charts.

From October to December 2006, Sony's game division posted a loss of 54.2 billion yen ($460 million), way down from the year-ago quarterly profit of 67.8 billion yen. Sony blamed PS3 startup costs and the decision to sell the console below manufacturing cost.

Obviously, demand will improve once Sony drops the price. But Sony faces other challenges, such as the dearth of world-beating exclusive PS3 games. True, there's no shortage of mere product; Gamestop's "Coming Soon" pages list about 80 PS3 games scheduled for release through the end of 2007, compared with about 90 for the Xbox 360 and 46 for the Wii. But as blogger Bill Harris observes, "In the U. S., through the end of May, there's one non-Sony-developed exclusive: *Coded Arms Assault* by Konami. The only other *Coded Arms* game came out on the PSP

> **" a genuinely terrible product launch scorches the earth, ANNIHILATING HOPE of recovery. This hasn't happened to the PS3 - yet. "**

and has a 60.7% average review score at Game Rankings. Ouch."

The longer Sony waits to cut the price, says the common wisdom, the more developer exclusives they will lose. The PS3's installed base grows by the week, yet it falls ever farther behind the Xbox 360 and, especially, the Wii. If the gap widens too far, and if Blu-ray doesn't win big, the PS3 might never gain dominion to match the PS2. For a console so expensive, so (what was the word?) over-engineered, even middling-good sales could constitute failure.

If the console does need rescue, Sony can still pull that off. The PS3 sells fewer units than the cheaper Xbox 360, but not much fewer; this may indicate pent-up demand from legions of buyers waiting only for a price drop. Though it may cost Sony over $800 to build each PS3, the company can nonetheless afford to drop the price at any time - this summer in particular, after the release of *Spider-Man 3* makes Sony rich.

Meanwhile, even now, the ongoing PS3 launch still makes waves. The March 23, 2007 European release (weeks in the future, at this writing) excited early

condemnation when Sony removed PS2 hardware compatibility from the European PS3 - the "Emotion Engine" - in favor of software emulation. Sony seems committed to reducing the madness and fatality rate of the PS3's European launch in comparison to North America's, through a curious yet, nowadays, increasingly Sony-like tactic: They make customers less eager to buy it. **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.

> "Though it may cost Sony over $800 to build each PS3, the company can nonetheless afford to DROP THE PRICE at any time - this summer in particular, after the release of SPIDER-MAN 3 MAKES SONY RICH."

Frostbitten
IN FLORIDA

by Dan Dormer

Four years to the day after the GameCube's launch - four years of frustration with Nintendo's software draughts, four years of turning to my PS2 or Xbox to keep me company while I waited six months between meaningful Cube releases - I was outside the Target on Apalachee Parkway in Tallahassee, Florida, waiting in line to purchase a Wii. The good news: The store, according to reports would be getting 24 units, and I was No. 23 in the line. The bad: It was very, very cold.

My friend Jon and I found an urban campout in our Wii line, where campfires and s'mores were replaced with laptops and alcohol. I was impressed at how Nintendo's new machine had garnered this much support. The whole ideology surrounding the console was a tad contrived: "While the code-name Revolution expressed our direction, Wii represents the answer. Wii will break down that wall that separates video game players from everyone else."

However, looking at the line, no one looked like they were on the other side of Nintendo's wall; 1UP tee-shirts adorned their bodies, and Nintendo DSes

looked fused to their hands. Where were the non-gamers? Perhaps that segment of the market wasn't interested in waiting more than a few minutes in line for a Wii, let alone overnight. But those of us who opted to brave the Floridian cold were there for more than just the Wii, we were there for *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*.

While most of the people in line were buying *Twilight Princess* on faith, I had at least gone to the mountain, having played *Twilight Princess* at E3. And really, I was underwhelmed. The aiming was weird, the controls awkward. And I didn't like the way Nintendo opted to handle distribution. Originally announced as a GameCube title to be released in late 2005, the game was delayed until 2006 because "the development team has requested extra time to new levels, more depth, and even higher quality," which ultimately meant they wanted extra time to port it over to the Wii. Just like with the GameCube's *Super Mario Sunshine* the Nintendo 64's *Super Mario 64*, Nintendo convinced us to purchase their latest entry in the console market because of one game. And hey, it worked. I didn't like what I saw six

months earlier, and here I was in line with everyone else. Like I said, faith.

Luckily, my leap was rewarded. *Twilight Princess* is a great game. But while *Twilight Princess* ended up being worth the wait, the software release pattern is beginning to hearken back to previous generations. Its four months after the Wii's launch, and Nintendo has released four first-party titles: *Wii Sports*, *Twilight Princess*, *Wii Play* and *WarioWare: Smooth Moves*. The next scheduled release, *Super Paper Mario*, was originally slated for the GameCube, and the much anticipated *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption* might not make it out before 2008.

However, that really doesn't matter to most people - they have *Wii Sports*, Nintendo's media darling, to keep them entertained. Traditional outlets lined up to laud praise over the Wii and the console's pack-in. Most included tales of how wives, girlfriends, coworkers or parents - those non-gamers in our lives - were instantly able to join in the fun of virtual bowling or tennis.

What's more, Nintendo is regularly updating the Virtual Console with old school classics from consoles past,

including the Sega Genesis. NES titles are the cheapest at $5 apiece, and Nintendo 64 titles cost the most, at $10 per. The title selection has been, for the most part, fantastic. Nintendo has released over 70 titles on the service to date, including *Tecmo Bowl*, *Super Castlevania IV* and *Mario Kart 64*. People have complained about Nintendo's refusal to modernize the games, though. Rather than taking a page from Microsoft's book and implementing online multiplayer and co-op into these old games, Nintendo has opted to leave them as is, possibly betraying an incomplete online strategy.

But given two straight months of NPD reporting the Wii's booming success over both the Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation 3, Nintendo doesn't have much to worry about. They can't keep the things on the shelves; Nintendo has moved 6 million units in the time it's taken Sony to sell 2.7 million. And with a year head start, the Xbox 360 has only sold 9.66 million. Nintendo has done exactly what they set out to do: get non-gamers gaming.

Now that we're four months removed from the launch and I'm no longer outside a Target finding creative ways to

stay warm, I ask myself whether or not purchasing a Wii was a good idea. Sure, *Twilight Princess* was great, and the Virtual Console is tickling my nostalgia, but until Nintendo ramps up their release schedule, hardcore gamers like me are eventually going to head back to the 360 or PS3 they like less but use more. After four years of waiting for GameCube games and four months of waiting for Wii games, I have to wonder if I'll be standing in the cold for Nintendo's next console. COMMENTS

Dan Dormer is a videogame freelancer who keeps a poorly updated blog at his personal site. He's also afraid of seeing scary movies. True story.

Given two straight months of NPD reporting on the Wii's booming sucess over both the Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation 3, Nintendo doesn't have much to worry about.

goin' 'Round n' Circles?

by Bryce Edison

The Xbox 360's performance in Japan has been rocky, to say the least. The numbers aren't great, and Japanese games seem to reject all but a few of Microsoft's offerings. Most pundits have all but written them out of Japan's gaming history.

But Microsoft hasn't given up. They still put on a solid show at the Tokyo Game Show, sell out the special *Blue Dragon* combo pack and received high scores from Japanese gaming magazine *Famitsu*. But, there's still a problem: Sony and Nintendo are already ahead, by far, despite the Xbox 360's one-year head start.

Blue Dragon debuted on December 7, 2006, and Microsoft expected to sell 200,000 copies in Japan, elevating them above punch line status, and it looked like their predictions were right. Approximately 80,000 copies sold on day one, and 30,000 people bought a 360 in that week. To date, more than 133,000 copies of *Blue Dragon* have made it into Japanese homes, more than any other Microsoft-published game ever has. Unfortunately, other games aren't experiencing the same success. Capcom's *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition*, while it sold over a million units in the U.S., hasn't performed nearly as well.

Why does the 360 sell so terribly in Japan? It's not a hardware issue. The machine performs admirably, and Xbox Live works just as well in Japan as it does elsewhere. It's not advertising, either. Microsoft aggressively made its presence known months before release, just like everywhere else. Their ads are all over Japanese cities, encouraging gamers to "step in."

But they can't, and this is why.

The first problem is Microsoft's reputation. Let's face it, when Microsoft entered Japan with the original Xbox, they had no idea what they were doing. They gave Japanese gamers absolutely no incentive to stick with their system. Microsoft boasted an exclusive contract with Tecmo, but beyond that, every company the average Japanese gamer holds dear was firmly entrenched elsewhere. What's worse, their internal teams, Microsoft Game Studios, weren't ringing anyone's bell. Rather than trying to cater to the new demographic, MGS translated the games American players loved and expected the money to roll in. It didn't; in total, 475,000 Xboxes ended up in Japanese homes.

And then there's the elephant in the room all too many forum denizens are willing to discuss: prejudice. Microsoft is the first American company to take a major shot in the console business, and they're attempting to make a go of it in Japan. While a lot of Westerners love Japanese titles, Japan seems to have a much harder time appreciating some of our stuff — like shooting Nazis. An Xbox signifies American games, and even with

support for Japanese gamers, it's still an American console.

Microsoft went blindfolded into a console war in Japan. Now, they're taking another shot, a little older and a little wiser, but with a black eye the size of a manhole cover. But it's not all bad. *Blue Dragon* at least intimates Microsoft has finally gotten their act together. And they plan to keep on keepin' on. They've signed on with respected RPG developers like tri-Ace and tri-Crescendo to keep luring Japanese gamers to their camp.

In the end, Microsoft has all but won the hardcore console war in Europe and North America. Japan is all that stands between them and global dominance. While that would be nice, they can afford an incomplete victory. But we're talking about Microsoft, here; when have they ever admitted defeat? COMMENTS

Bryce Edison is the Editor-in-Chief and Co-Founder of Access Gamer.

Joe Blancato and Nova Barlow contributed to this article.

Microsoft went blindfolded into a console war in Japan.

the Escapist

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