the *Escapist*

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by Julianne Greer

Self-awareness is understanding the concept of existing as an individual having thoughts feelings and ideas, and that those are separate from those of others around you. And from this self-awareness, the age old questions of identity were born: Who am I? Why am I?

And over time, in an attempt to answer these questions, to give meaning to life, to help take meaning from life, we have found tribes of people with whom we identify. And with these people, we spend time, develop outward identities to include apparel, body art, or none, find homes away from home where like others congregate. In these second homes, we engage in the activity particular to a tribe, be it discussing religion, experimenting with various substances, playing a sport or perhaps, videogames.

And this last, videogames, is a defining feature of our tribe. Not **the** defining feature, but certainly one. But what else is there? Who are we? What is our place in the world? This week, the writers of *The Escapist* explore, expound and experiment in an attempt to help shed light on these questions. Enjoy!

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Gentlemen, Welcome to Shoot Club - Part One" from The Escapist Daily: Welcome, Gentlemen indeed! Ecstatic to see a site wise enough to stoke the Shoot Club furnace. Weekly updates? It's a dream come true.

Here's hoping the new guy can handle his first shoot. See you next week.

- grendelpete

In response to "A Lack of Faith" from The Escapist Forum: Re Left Behind, the book itself is largely devoid of pain or serious contemplation of what it would mean to lose all the Earth's children in the twinkling of an eye. The fact that the game is so vapid (and terrible) is not shocking considering the thoughtless plot-focused literalism of the novel.

RPGs, of course, offer the best route for ethical/spiritual investigation but they are hamstrung by gamers themselves. But Job himself complains that rain falls on good and evil alike; that ethical behavior is no guarantee of reward and RPGs as currently constructed are about a string of rewards (usually for pathological behavior). Designing a religious game as an effort at witnessing, therefore, runs into the fact that gamers will optimize their solution to get the reward, if that means mindlessly following the "Good Path" then they will do that. Planescape was deeply philosophical and strongly written - for a game. But for me it had all the take away of a good Babylon 5 episode.

I often think about doing a design doc for a pseudo-historical strategy game based on the biblical histories of Israel and Judaea, but you run into the problem of how to work the prophets, Yahweh and the Assyrians into the same game. How do you respect the Biblical idea that lack of faith condemned those nations without making "Tear Down Asherah Poles" the magic bullet train to success?

- Troy Goodfellow

In response to "Jesus Was Not a Gamer" from The Escapist Forum: Anyway, my own version of why Jesus didn't play games (with which I agree) is perhaps a bit controversial... but I'll say it anyway.

I think that Christianity more so than other modern religions, and certainly more so than ancient pagan religions, has a concept of fearing God (hence the frequent use of the term "God-fearing" in Christian vernacular). Which makes the explanation simple: when God is something to be feared, or, lets say, fearfully respected, you don't want to bring him into your games so much, since that might be misconstrued as disrespect on the part of the Almighty - and here is your hall pass to hell. Contrast this especially with relationships that the ancient Greeks, Egyptians and Romans had with their Gods - they (the relationships) were much more easy-going and thus conducive to play.

If I was to generalize, I'd say that if you look at the evolution of religious thought in general, it evolves to be more and more serious and somber in the later phases of mankind's development, and so some of the youngest religions such as Christianity are already so serious as to make mixing religion and games simply inappropriate.

- vaga_koleso

In response to "Jesus Was Not a Gamer" from The Escapist Forum:
The question at the crux, I believe, is one that has bothered theologians for millennia.

Do you - does the game designer, does the game player - believe that God has knowledge and control of particulars. I think a passage in the Bible goes something like, 'God knows when a single hair on your head moves'.

If someone works with that as part of their core beliefs, then they must surely believe that God plays a role when a Hail Mary pass is thrown. God can surely give an athlete the strength, the clarity of purpose and mental fortitude for a moment, i.e., inspire the athlete.

And let's not forget the name Hail Mary has some religious connotations.

Anyway, my point is this. For Christian game designer designing Christian games, to incorporate doubt and crises of faith, would be seen as yielding to temptation.

In conjunction, let's not forget what Jesus' response was when Satan tried to tempt him a second time by suggesting that Jesus throw himself off the temple so the people milling about below could see a miracle...

- DaXIthR

In response to "Paladins can Loot?" from The Escapist Forum: How much longer will it take for game designers to realize that there is no such thing as absolute good or evil, there's only actions and consequences? "Good" and "evil" are labels people assign certain deeds to reflect their personal attitude towards it. And this is where the trouble starts - if most of us can agree on basic things like killing/saving life being good or evil (and even then - what if you save a life of someone who was going to kill someone else? Is that good or evil? Or even lawful/chaotic?), the more "gray" you go, the more subjective and personal the labels become. What is seen as "evil" by the designers might be seen as "good" or at least "neutral" by the gamer. Even further - what might be seen as "evil" by both designer and player, might be seen as "good" by the game characters given a certain context (say, killing a guy who beats his wife).

IMO what game designers should focus on is choose-consequence, action-reaction model, abstracting from subjective and uncertain labels like "good", "evil", "lawful", "chaotic", etc.

- shadowbird

ALONE

IN THE CROWD

by Leigh Alexander

I live in Manhattan, a city piled wall-to-wall with people. Commuting, strolling, traveling - there are so many people that before long, you cease to notice individual features. We don't do eye contact here; wrapped in our destinations, we hardly even speak to each other. And yet, we all want to identify, to be identified.

The woman with the Kate Spade bag and Jimmy Choo heels is a fashionista. Baseball fans proclaim allegiance, either Yankees or Mets, by their ball caps and sports jerseys; during the season, the Branded exchange conspiratorial (or confrontational) nods. A successful marketing exec knows when it's the season to make an impression with a lavender tie, and the coffee houses are overrun with hipster chic - a veritable movement to which the young telegraph their fealty with wristbands, ballet flats and tousled hair.

The man across the aisle on the train with the tweed jacket, reading the *Observer*? If you assumed "professor," you're probably right. What does a biker look like? An artist? A rapper? Chances are, you can guess.

But what does a gamer look like?

The popular stereotype about us is we're all socially maladapted geeks. That we escaped into digital fantasy because we can't integrate with society. Are we all, then, utterly nondescript, in an effort to keep our secret? Or does every single one of us stick out like a sore thumb, in those awful oversize shopping mall shirts emblazoned with Japanese characters? Isn't **that** just a stereotype?

In the human crush of New York City, the constant invasion of personal space, I know there must be other gamers in the crowd - mild-mannered and well-comported by day, wild-eyed console jockeys by night. Maybe you can't tell by looking. But the fashionista, the professor, the Yankees fan — couldn't they all be gamers, too?

The odds are on my side. Recent Nielsen data shows that over 50 percent of the population has a console in the home. Of these, 20 percent are serious players, clocking five or more hours in a day. In a city of 8 million, then, one could safely estimate I share this tiny slice of America with 1.6 million other "hardcore" gamers. But how would I identify them?

How would they identify **me**?

OK, so maybe I own some videogame shirts. Generally, though, we don't broadcast our passion in our external presentation. Maybe the surest way to find other gamers is actually the simplest: Look for people who are playing.

And then, I get an idea. Maybe my games can do the broadcasting for me.

The Nintendo DS is Wi-Fi enabled, which means where it can find a wireless hotspot, it can find a fellow gamer. Users on the same wireless network can play the same game together, even when only one user has the cartridge. The DS is also embedded with the PictoChat firmware, which lets up to 16 users create profiles and chat. This kind of capability creates an idyllic mental image: gamers young and old, casually bumping elbows in this increasingly wireless world, pausing for a little head-to-head.

I've never used it. I've never even tried. But what would happen if I did?

Suddenly inspired, I check out Nintendo's Wi-Fi page and enter my zip code, to find hot spots near me. My itinerary set, I prepare to strike out. With my DS as my beacon, I decide the best strategy is just to look approachable. I style myself nattily, in heels, lipstick and cute pants, put my DS case in my of-the-minute metallic purse, and head out on the town. This time, I leave the headphones behind — I'm about to play it loud and proud, fellas. If there's anyone out there who still thinks gamers are light-starved, style-less and maladapted, I'm about to blow their doors off.

The nearest hotspot is just a few blocks from my home. I can hardly believe it; all this time, everything I've been looking for might have been right here, in a Spanish Harlem McDonald's. Who knew? It's a gorgeous afternoon, even a little warm for the season, the promise of spring on the air. I feel intrepid, an undiscovered hero.

On the way, I pass an outdoor shrine to the Virgin del Carmen and the open storefront of a local business that sells live poultry in cages. Inside the McDonald's, which probably looks like every other McDonald's, Latin music pipes in over the speakers. I take a seat upstairs - beside a deserted PlayPlace

> **" I STYLE MYSELF NATTILY**, in heels, lipstick and cute pants, put **MY DS CASE IN MY** of-the-minute metallic **PURSE**, and head out on the town. **"**

> ## "As night falls, I ride the subway home. I've traveled OVER 200 BLOCKS, and I HAVEN'T ENCOUNTERED ANOTHER GAMER."

and a Hamburglar painting - and take out my DS.

PictoChat, displaying the signal bars of a successful connection, offers me four chat rooms. Each can hold 16 participants, but it looks like right now I'm the only one. With my stylus, I scribble "hello?" And beam it out into the universe. Just in case.

There's no answer. Not a fellow unit to be seen. Just a roomful of Spanish-speaking families eating French fries and stealing sidelong glances at the girl in the corner holding the light-up box.

I'm patient. I'm not to be discouraged. I play for a little while anyway, competing with the cacophony of ketchup-flinging toddlers, attempting the ambitious undertaking of scoring an "S" ranking on every stage in *Elite Beat Agents'* Hard Rock mode. The kids' moms - overweight, tired, harried - pass me gazes of curiosity that evolve into irritation. As they work and I play, I feel their resentment.

I'm sitting beside a McDonald's PlayPlace, tapping, scribbling and grinning, and parents are staring at me. I pack up and hit the streets again.

At a café among the austere brownstones of the Upper East Side, just a few blocks away from the Madison Avenue fashion Mecca, I'm all alone again, watching BMWs and businessmen glide by on the other side of a pane of glass. On a park bench in Union Square, my music is drowned out by the dogged bongo stylings of a group of barefoot young bohemians with bad dye jobs dancing awkwardly on the plaza stairs. At a Starbucks in the Financial District, my dual screen is just another light among a sea of iMacs capturing the studious attention of a smattering of solitary suits.

I send out my signal again and again. The big zero where I'd hoped to see other users mocks me every time. Passersby and patrons stare. They're unfriendly expressions, disdain at a young lady occupying space with no other purpose but to play. Maybe they think I'm an arrested juvenile, a hopeless escapist. They want no part of it.

As night falls, I ride the subway home. I've traveled over 200 blocks, and I haven't

encountered another gamer. Though there are no wireless signals underground, I break out the DS one last time for the day, just for me. My Balm in Gilead.

A crowded subway train is not a gamer-friendly environment. I'm squeezed into my seat, my stylus hand jostled, and I can't hear *EBA*'s beat over the din. All around me people focus diligently on not making eye contact with one another, heavy with the weariness of the day. I'm on the verge of surrendering to their contagious misery.

And then, I hear something. A voice from above me says, "Yo, check it. She's got mad skills." I lift my head, and two guys - rapper types - standing by the door are watching me play.

"You have this game?" I ask breathlessly, unable to restrain my eagerness.

As his friend snickers, the admirer nods. "Sure," he says. "I love that game. I beat it a ton of times."

I light up. I start to babble. I ask him what his favorite level is, and I'm met with blank silence. Then his friend starts to laugh.

"He's lying," he says, shaking his head. "He ain't got no videogames."

As I reassess their expressions, it dawns on me that my cute outfit and my "approachability" strategy might not have been the most constructive game plan.

I laugh it off and go back to my game, but I miss too many beats. The Elite Beat Divas fall on their butts, and I'm more frustrated and discouraged than ever. But then, I look up and around one more time.

A semicircle of commuters has gathered around me, all of them watching the screen in my lap. A middle-aged blue-collar type, a leather jacket girl, an elderly man. I have an audience that spans the style spectrum, and they're smiling.

"That looks cool," says the middle-aged guy.

"It is," I reply, and I return the smile. "You should try it."

So maybe the world just isn't made for us gamers; maybe I didn't see any handhelds in my travels. And, you know, the idea of a private underground empire is kind of cool. But I'm keeping it in mind

— half of all the people I saw today, from Harlem to the Brooklyn Bridge, are going home to their consoles tonight. There's hope. **COMMENTS**

Leigh Alexander is a freelance tech, entertainment and culture writer, who met her boyfriend of eight years in a Final Fantasy VII chat room.She currently writes for an NYC gossip site, reviews games for Paste magazine and maintains her gaming blog. She can be reached at leigh_alexander1@yahoo.com

> "A semicircle of commuters has gathered around me, all of them WATCHING THE SCREEN in my lap."

Digital FOOTPRINTS
(or: Do they have laptops in heaven?)
by Tom Rhodes

NOTE: Some names and identifying details have been changed for the privacy of the individuals involved.

A few months ago, a friend of mine sent me a picture he had snapped while traversing a beach on the California coastline. It was a double-exposure of footprints in the sand, the waves just touching them and washing them away. In the distance, at the end of the tracks, was the ghostly figure of a semi-transparent woman running away from the camera. I found it striking, but not nearly so much as recently.

In December of 2006, one of my fellow alumni killed himself, violently exiting this world courtesy of a handgun. Let's call him Mark.

In school, I hadn't known him very well. There was the occasional class we shared and some brief conversations we had, but that was it. We ran in different circles.

When I heard the news through a friend of a friend of his I was shocked but not really impacted. It did haunt me a bit, since this would be the fourth member of our class that had died, and it brought up all these thoughts of mortality and the fragility of life. For me, I had to cope with only my own philosophical meanderings and existential questions; for his family and friends, I couldn't imagine how horrible it must have been.

I've counseled people who were severely depressed before, and I don't wish for anyone to have to suffer through that, as I had once done. Unfortunately, it does happen; we need only recognize the signs of it.

I decided I needed to see what my fellow classmates were saying about this tragedy, so I went snooping around the usual internet haunts. Not finding much (the news was still fresh), I Googled Mark's name and stumbled upon an online profile of his. He was, apparently, a frequent MMOG player, partaking in *World of Warcraft* and several others, not to mention his high frag ratio for *Counter-Strike* and others like it. It was a whole side of him I hadn't known or seen.

The great surprise, however, was his MySpace page. It was strange to be

there, seeing his words speak as if he were still around and might update his blog later in the day.

"Hi, I'm Mark. I currently work with my dad at his manufacturing company and plan on starting my own after college." It was bizarre to read these carefree words for the future and yet know they will not come to fruition.

Though I didn't know him well, I had an idea of who he was. I learned about him through friends over the years, and through our casual conversations. He was the typical high school jock but without the self-important asshole factor. He was kind to his friends. Girlfriends stayed around for awhile, and he remained friends with them after breakups. (Melissa, his most recent ex, was the first to post.) This was the kind of person he was. It made me wish I had gotten to know him better, despite whatever pain I would be feeling now.

I scanned his pictures and discovered one that was taken just days before he died. He was staring directly at the camera, his blue eyes catching light from a nearby window, a small smile on his face. I wondered, was there sadness in that gaze?

I decided it wasn't worth thinking about and clicked back to his main page, only to discover something even more uncanny: The comments section was filled with the sorrow of his friends and family. This didn't surprise me, of course; but what I hadn't expected was the way in which they were commenting.

"Oh my God, Mark, i cant believe it! i was going to cook u dinner later this week. this is so awful."

"Hey Mark...just heard. I just wanted to say you'll be missed by so many people..."

"mark, u were my boy and u always treated everyone with repect and i dunno what im going to do without u man, ill miss u. i cant wait to see u again"

They were all writing as if he were upstairs, logging onto his computer and checking out what his friends had to say to him. As if, somehow, MySpace had become a portal for afterlife

They were all writing as if he were upstairs, logging onto his computer and checking out what his friends had to say to him. As if, somehow, MySpace had become a portal for afterlife communication.

communication. Some were even just joking around, like he had moved overseas:

"one day every one will meet again.... and when i get off parole, im gonna blaze a fatty for you, lol"

The imagery was funny and sad all at the same time. I could imagine him and his comrades smoking up in a basement rec room somewhere, laughing and talking of how they got messed up last weekend and tipped over a cow (as is an occasional drunken pastime in Ohio). It reminded me of my more adventurous evenings with my friends, and I couldn't help but laugh at the thought.

It brought out so much in me to read all the myriad things they had to say to him. But it was more than just some of the casual ways they were "talking" with him, it was how MySpace was an epitaph now. And not just that, either. His gaming page, his number of "frags," the messages he left on the pages of his friends and family. These words – sometimes stupid, often amusing – were his digital legacy, blazing a trail of that which was uniquely him across the internet.

The comments continued with people who had carried his coffin, writing out that "it helps that i got to carry u, just like i know if it was me, u wouldve carried me to my grave." Why did these people, having been to the funeral, feel the need to post these words on this page of intangible bits and bytes? Were they thinking it would be more likely to reach him, that talking to the sky or a photograph would have been less substantial somehow? Perhaps it was all catharsis, a way to remove the pain and pretend it was all right. After all, how could it not be, with that frozen, big-toothed grin of his staring back at you.

It would be like getting that girl on the sand to come back for another picture, if only to get a better look at her. And if you can't do that, you're just fighting the tide, trying to make sure the ocean doesn't wash away all that's left.

`[ COMMENTS ]`

Tom Rhodes is a writer and filmmaker currently living in Ohio. He can be reached through Tom [dot] Rhod [at] gmail [dot] com

Why did these people, having been to the funeral, feel the need to post these words on this page of intangible bits and bytes?

Strangers in a strangeland

by Susan Arendt

Ellen and her husband had gone to the local nursery to pick out some bushes for their back yard. Natalie had taken her two young daughters to a play date at the zoo. So began the Monday round-robin discussion of weekend events, as I settled down with my bowl of soup on a bright but cold afternoon. As Julie's tale of scouring Lowe's for just the right ceiling fan for her spare bedroom wound down, I sighed quietly to myself, knowing what was coming. The three 30-something women peered at me over their fat-free dressing decorated salads: It was my turn. I explained that I had spent the bulk of my weekend shooting my friends in the head while playing some *Gears of War* online. To my workmates' credit, their expressions of polite interest dropped for only a few seconds, but those few seconds were

enough to reveal the disdain, revulsion and full-blown pity each of them was feeling toward my idea of a "good time."

It's a scenario I've become more and more accustomed to as the years have gone by. While I'd like to say these women are shrewish harpies, the truth is they're perfectly nice, normal folks. They, unlike me, got married at appropriate ages, saved their money to buy the appropriately-sized house and then proceeded to fill it with the appropriate number of children and appropriately-groomed pets. They want to relate to me, if for no other reason than to be civil, but there just isn't an entry in the Surburbia 101 Text Book for the 30-something Female Gamer. So they fall back on vacant smiles, polite nods and none-too-subtle changes of subject, hoping, perhaps, I'll follow their lead and change my ways. I am an aberration in their world - an outsider - and we all know it.

But I'm not alone.

At GamerchiX an all-female gaming forum hosted at Xbox.com, I found a number of other "old" gaming females

who've been forced to endure the confused smiles and awkward silences from judgmental or misguided coworkers over the years. I found they shared many of my frustrations. "I'm not considered an adult in the office or with co-workers," says lachica38 (screen names are being used to maintain privacy). "Most non-gamers judge my leisure time harshly as a waste. I've resorted to not talking about my gaming outside of my gamers."

Simply avoiding the topic — dodging it altogether or telling flat-out lies to avoid scorn and mockery — seems to be the defense mechanism favored by many gaming women. "My family and friends thinks [my gaming habit] is weird," says Trixiebelle67. "I used to keep it pretty quiet at work because I felt embarrassed when I would get the strange looks and the comments about wasting my time on a kid's game. But now I figure if they can spend all their time watching TV every night and talking non-stop about it, I can wear my geekdom with equal pride!"

With little first-hand information or experience, non-gamers tend to rely on what they've seen in movies or TV

shows, those caricatures that paint gamers with a uniformly unflattering brush. Many non-gamers are genuinely surprised to learn that not everyone who loves to play games is a Cheetos-stained slacker whose eyes have gone glassy from too many late nights in front of the monitor. This lack of understanding can lead to some annoying generalizations sure to send a gamer's eyes rolling skyward. "Besides people not understanding that video games are an advanced form of entertainment over idly watching TV, I also encounter several 'So do you go to Star Trek conventions too?' comments," says iTara PMS. It's certainly not the most offensive question a gamer has ever been asked, but it belies a basic lack of understanding. And so it is that we, as strangers in a strange land, are constantly asked to explain and justify our hobby, a requirement rarely placed on those who choose trips to the movies or pickup games of basketball as their pastimes of choice.

Non-gamers will stand, mouths agape, demanding to know how we can sleep at night spending "so much money on

games." Upon overhearing Lou P Lou's description of her gaming weekend, a coworker asked her how she could justify the cost of videogames. "I asked her if she had any hobby that she spends money on, scrapbooking, reading, computers… anything. She admitted that she did. So, I explained to her that gaming is my hobby, an escape from the stress of working in ICU with critically ill patients all day. That I work for my money and if I decide to spend that money on gaming so be it. [But] no matter how I 'plead my case' they seem to think that I waste my money. Guess you have to be a gamer to understand."

Sadly, relatives aren't much more supportive. Though we might hope to at least enjoy some unconditional support and understanding from our families — they are, after all, stuck with us — they are sometimes the very people from which we earn the most scorn and criticism. It's a rare woman who doesn't feel pressure from her family to get married and have children, and when that doesn't happen, gaming makes a handy target for misplaced anger and disappointment. "My sister-in-law

actually had the balls to ask me when I was going to grow up, and have a kid already," explains Xbox Betty. "When the family came to visit, and I was showing my brother *Blazing Angels*, she forcefully moved my niece away from the TV, explaining really loudly that her kids wouldn't grow up to play those 'terrible' video games and waste her life."

It's ironic that an activity that might open the doors of communication between a mother and her children —

Many non-gamers are genuinely surprised to learn that not everyone who loves to play games is a Cheetos-stained slacker whose eyes have gone glassy from too many late nights in front of the monitor.

a shared love of gaming — oftentimes causes so many people to call her parenting skills into question. xSkx Nightstar's son is just 5 months old, but her family is already doubting her ability to raise him "properly" if she keeps on gaming. "I have had my family tell me that I can't play anything because it's 'not right for a mother or wife to play games with a child to raise.' Even [after] explaining that I don't play any games unless my son is asleep they still remain in that mindset. Many people will have their opinion on the 'traditional' way that women in general should not play …but I won't change my outlook on gaming; I'm still going to play for years to come until

It's tempting to file this all under "Us vs. Them," but non-gamers aren't usually trying to be confrontational, they're just bowing to basic human nature.

I can't hold a controller anymore." Deanna the Geek faced similar flak from her mother: "My mother tells me I need to spend more time being a mother and housewife than playing games. 'Games are for kids,' she's always telling me."
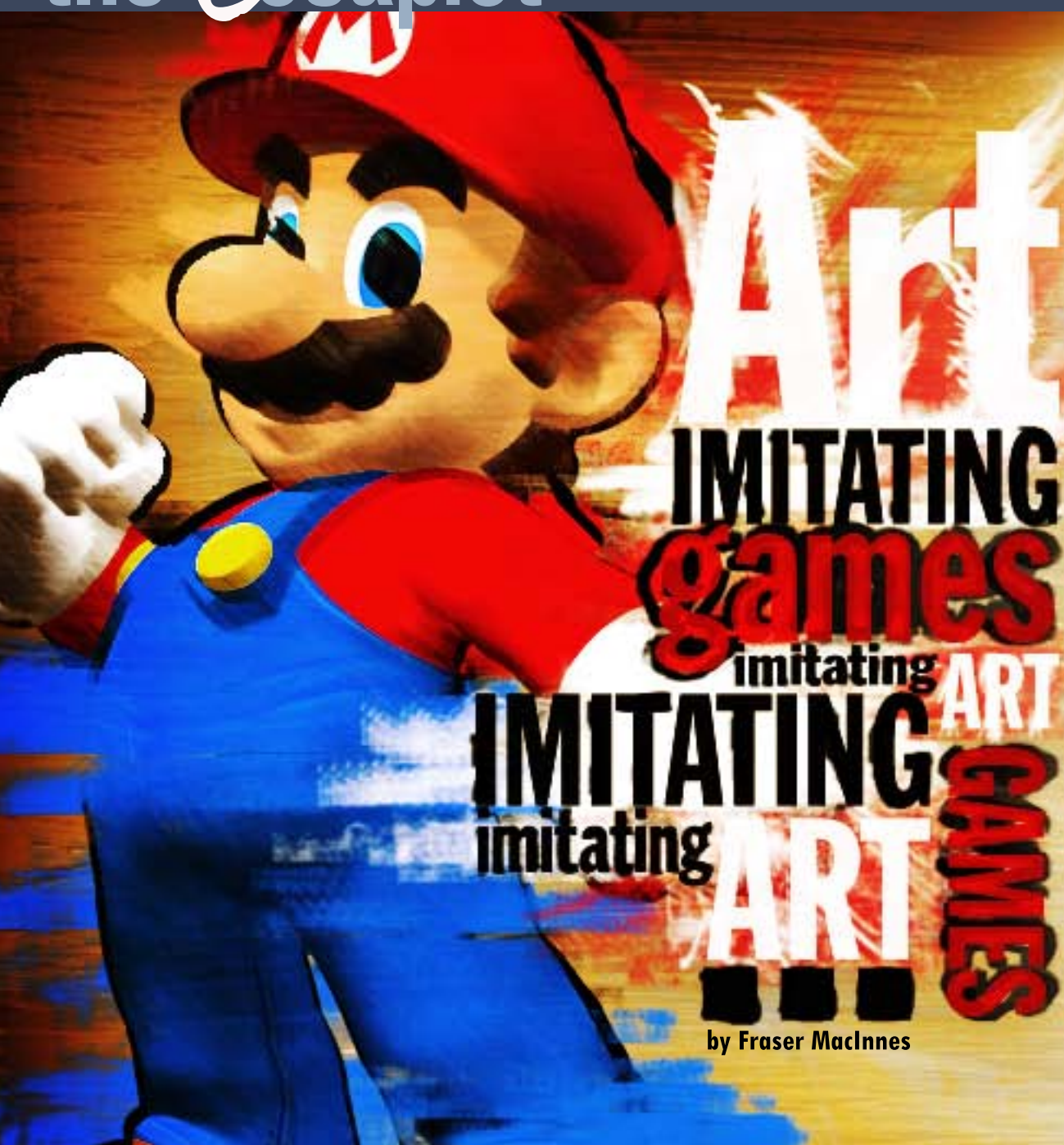
It's tempting to file this all under "Us vs. Them," but non-gamers aren't usually trying to be confrontational, they're just bowing to basic human nature. When confronted with something they don't understand, they do whatever they can to fit it into terms with which they're more familiar. A woman paying $130 for a pair of shoes is one thing, but one paying $130 for the Legendary Edition of *Halo 3* is something else altogether — something confusing—so our loved ones try to persuade us to fit a mold with which they can more easily identify. "Friends think I need to grow up and do something productive like take classes, etc.," scoffs NBG Julia343. "There's nothing I want to take. I can and do read the texts on my own without paying $300 + materials and stress for the semester. Or painting. OK, I could be a fifth-rate painter and end up with a ton

of fifth-rate art work around. I do my best painting with a roller. Or teach piano again, when I scare the kids, and when the area is flooded with teachers? I'm single and in my early 50s. I just enjoy gaming on the 360."

Still, Kiki Kat looks on our role as strangers as a golden opportunity. "A benefit of being an older gamer, I think, is that if I start talking about games people will usually listen for a while whereas if a teenager starts talking about games people will zone them out right away," she says. Perhaps she's right, and we should make every effort to educate and inform the non-gamers in our life. Maybe the responsibility is ours to help bridge the gap between ourselves and those who don't understand us, but who, in all likelihood, truly do want to. Who knows? Perhaps we'll even get them to pick up a controller and play someday.
`[ COMMENTS ]`

When Susan Arendt isn't writing the news at Wired's Game|Life or feeding her Achievement Points addiction, she's training her cat to play Beatmania.

Art
IMITATING
games
imitating ART
IMITATING ART GAMES
imitating ART GAMES...

by Fraser MacInnes

If there is one thing gamers and journalists are absolutely sick of hearing about it's the "are games art?" discussion. Favored by the preachy and the vain, it's an intellectual dead end as fruitless and tired as the "what is art?" debate. However, last month while scouring the internet for some blog-worthy morsels, I came upon something intriguing: A quirky news snippet that flippantly turned the debate on its head, shrugging off years of bombastic dialectic like a bad dream and reigniting my interest in the relationship between art and games in the process.

The snippet in question featured a photograph of a dilapidated building that had its grid windows vandalized to resemble *Tetris* blocks. Shortly after emerging on a well-known game site, a handful of smaller gaming blogs got whiff of the photo, and it spread virally throughout the tubes, reported whimsically as the exploits of a creative *Tetris*-obsessed vandal.

A glut of comments later the authenticity of the photograph was called into question. As it turned out, the photo was the work of a talented Photoshop prankster. Cue blog comments flaring with shouts of "I knew they were fakes" and "just someone trying to fool gamers." It seems some of the gaming contingent missed the point. Even so, viral digital graffiti raises an interesting issue about the broader topic of game art.

Fake or not, the fact someone went to the trouble of creating the image is - for lack of a better phrase - a sign of the times. The recent trend of popular gaming icons in contemporary art is an indication of gaming's gradual puncturing of popular mainstream culture.

When approaching a topic as contentious as game art, distinguishing between what is intended as a form of artistic expression and what is merely the output of an obsessed fan is necessary, pointless and impossible all at once. LEGO statues of consoles and popular gaming characters may expose a certain artistic flair, and if I wanted to wax lyrical about the whole thing I could go as far as equating the LEGO blocks to pixels and come to some ostentatious conclusion about the meaningful nature of the medium's relevance to the subject matter. But what is more likely is that

the majority of LEGO sculptures or photoshopped images are fashioned as one-offs, tributes or pranks and not as measured attempts at expression or even the pursuit of creating something beautiful and intriguing.

But let's give our photoshopped *Tetris* picture the benefit of the doubt for now. As a case in point, this sort of digital graffiti does brandish artistic virtue by the manner in which it finds an audience. As an art form, graffiti has an immediacy that sets it apart from the verbose foreplay favored by the cocktail academics and quick-fix lipstick dinner dates of the art world. The public nature of graffiti is a congenital aspect of its artistic message or expression, completely at odds with the sterility of a gallery. In this sense, digital graffiti is just as much a product of its environment as its real world counterpart.

It would be easy to overanalyze the tenets of photoshopped game art or digital graffiti, but there is a dualism inherent in the process, which is strikingly irrespective of the presence of artistic motivation. The digital world is a characterization of the real in both games and photoshopped pictures and in

this sense there is a uniquely modern, profound relationship between medium and subject matter.

Of course, there are examples where artistic intentions are more clearly drawn. Fake screenshot artists such as Brody Condon leave no room for debate about the specific artistic motivation behind their works. There is often a thread of knowing references to the phenomenon of fanboy propaganda, and even quasi political dissent woven throughout the various entrants in fake screenshot competitions. But even in the face of such an obvious and deliberate ruse, faked screenshots can still be taken out of context by a daily gaming news source. What begins life as a statement about the war-hungry nature of gamers may end up editorialized as "look at these leaked images of how incredibly lifelike war games will look on next-gen PCs."

It is hard to know to what degree the artists responsible for game-themed art welcome this idea of independent dispersion. It can certainly have its benefits, and there are doubtless those that hinge an aspect of their work on that very dynamic. There are also sure

to be others who don't even consider themselves artists at all and react indifferently to their LEGO sculpture/ Photoshop prank/pervy *Mario* drawing reaching an unintended audience. Still others use actual game visuals to make

poignant statements. Sprites are a fantastic base subject matter; their retro appeal goes way beyond their aesthetic temperance. The uncomplicated blocky sprites from the *Mario* series offer a simple and congenial pluralism when

utilized as an artistic subject matter. They are cute and elicit nostalgia, but when blown up as a painting or assembled as a collage they become poignant reminders of a simpler time in gaming's past.

Turning this innocence on its head is an obvious source of artistic fascination, and the likes of *Mario* and other cutesy gaming characters have often been featured in an array of less than childlike misadventures. Paintings that incorporate real-life humanity into game art are mainstays of the medium's biggest annual exhibition, "I am 8 Bit," and it's easy to understand why. There is a perverse joy to be had in taking a character like *Mario* and adding a moral or human dimension; what is his sex life like, what if Koopas could bleed, what if Princess Peach ran off with Luigi?

Distinguishing between the puerile daubing of a gifted teen bent on luridly sexualizing his world and the true thematic exploration of more dedicated artists is never easy, especially given the obsessions with sex and death many artists share with their lower brow brethren. Some game artists have side-stepped this issue by farming their creations from the ground up, giving birth to their own game characters specifically for the purpose of presenting them in a paradoxical reality. Revered "I am 8 Bit" regular Luke Chueh is famed for his anime inspired art, which features hordes of cutesy characters in an endless array of ill-fated predicaments, many of which pertain directly to the typical mechanics and glazed-over moral truisms of the world of videogames.

This is where game art has the scope and potential to be truly explorative, expressive and beautiful, but contemporary games are yet to surface as subject matter. And is it any wonder? As game developers pander more and more to the goal of achieving hyper- or photorealism, there is much less of the artistic to be extricated from the games themselves. Even those that have made concerted attempts at establishing the notion of the artistic (Okami, Killer 7, Shadow of the Colossus) were absent, and yet I found a bounty of creations that borrowed heavily from the 8-bit era.

The icons that define the industry are near inexhaustible, considering gaming's short history. Add to that the emergent trend for convergence between game worlds and real life, and trying to squeeze game art under a single umbrella seems as absurd as placing all games under one genre. In this sense, gaming culture and history is fecund with opportunity for artistic interpretation. Yet as the game industry approaches an apex of visual realism, it seems that art about games looks much more likely to peak before games are ever truly considered to be art themselves. But then, who knows? Perhaps 10 years from now virtual photographers will exhibit their best snaps of the Crysis world, or maybe some sort of Henri Cartier Bresson-alike will come along and immortalize the PS3's Home with a series of cunningly observed images of digital social interactions. In an exponentially evolving digital world, anything's possible. [COMMENTS]

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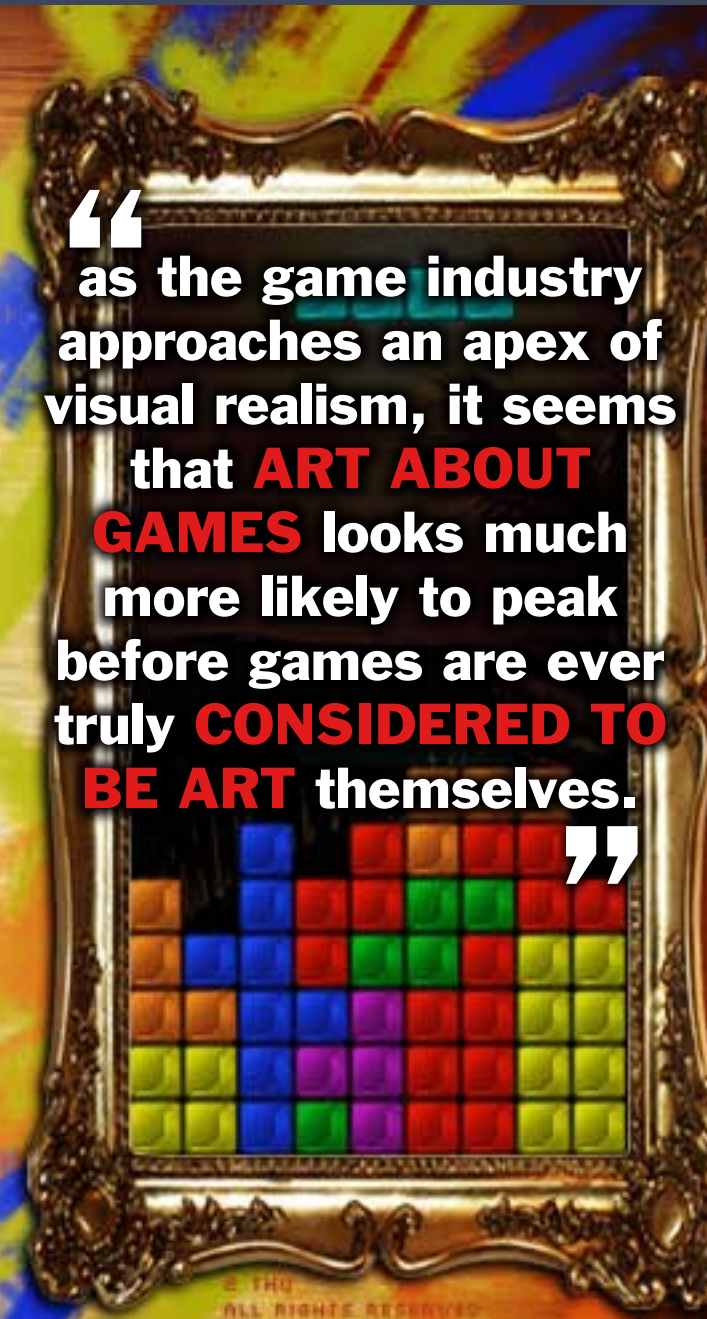
I'd Rather GAME Than READ a BOOK

(And Here's Why) by Vincent Kang

In a 2002 *New Yorker* essay titled "Mr Difficult," author Jonathan Franzen of *The Corrections* fame argued that in the face of increased competition from movies, videogames and (oddly) extreme sports, fiction should mainstream itself. Fictional literature was under siege by figurative barbarians, and by perpetuating literature's difficult and inaccessible, the literary establishment was alienating potential readers. An intrepid reader might, at the suggestion of the literary establishment, pick up a "lyrical" book, only to trudge through page after page of unnecessary adjectives. For fiction to survive, according to Franzen, it has to cater to readers, the consumers who actually purchase and consume the product.

I'm here as a Visigoth, banging on the gates of a doddering imperial Rome. Videogames have the potential to tell narratives and deliver experiences that fully outstrip those told by film, poetry and, yes, fiction. Yet, in terms of cultural respect, videogames are marginalized. The great film critic Roger Ebert once opined that videogames are not art because they have not produced anything comparable to the works of great artists from other media. Ebert has a vested interest in film's continued success. Older narrative forms film and fiction possess intrinsic virtues, but, in relation to videogames, a large portion of the cultural and critical respect bestowed upon them amounts to little more than inertia.

The cultural perception gap between fiction and videogames begs the question: What is the fundamental purpose of entertainment? Why are books seen as a positive virtue? Are books read in the same way mothers tell their sons to eat broccoli, or are they read to deliver a story? Is it exercise, or is it fun? Can it be both?

Do you go to the supermarket to talk to the clerk and walk the aisles, or do you go to get food?

Literature is equipment for living. The cultural critic Kenneth Burke wrote those words in his 1974 book, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. In a utilitarian sense, the stories we tell each other in books, movies and videogames help shape our consciousnesses in a way a straight recitation of facts cannot. Little Red Riding Hood teaches us to not trust strangers in a way that simply saying "don't trust strangers" cannot.

Narratives are the key. The format, be it film or books or videogames, acts as a wrapper by which the substance, the story, is delivered. They help shape the story by setting the boundaries of the playing field in which the story plays itself out.

As of today, fiction has more variety than videogames. It's a matter of simple economics: The high costs of videogame development prevent more niche titles from appearing. On the flip side, anyone can write a book for little or no money. However, in the few areas where videogames and fiction go head-to-head,

videogames offer a more compelling, and ultimately, a superior experience.

Science fiction is one such field. For the purpose of argument, let us compare the critically-acclaimed *Star Wars* videogame, *Knights of the Old Republic*, to the universally loved *Star Wars* novel, *Heir to the Empire*.

Reading *Heir to the Empire*, I usually sit. My eyes are concentrated intently on the text, and my face deadens as I process the strings of text. The descriptions act as cues for imagination. I have a murky image of spaceships with descriptions juxtaposed onto them. At their best, the descriptor adjectives show an aesthetic relationship between two seemingly disparate entities; "The TIE fighters pulled up like an exotic fountain." I see the inner thoughts of the characters, their musings, their regrets, their joys. I find myself speculating what's going to happen in the later chapters of the novel.

Playing *Knights of the Old Republic*, I usually sit. My eyes are concentrated intently on the television screen. My face deadens as the audio-video presentation washes over me. The graphics are beautiful to look at, and I marvel at the technical and artistic proficiency it takes to create a living, breathing *Star Wars* metropolis. The controller rests in my hand. The fluidity of the controls has a subliminal effect on me. I forget what my hands are doing, and a relationship forms between my eyes and the character on the screen. Soon I'm exploring this new environment for myself. I push a button, and the lightsaber swings. Just like in the movies, it's a kinetic arc of light. I navigate my way through the city, making mental notes as to what's where and where I am. As I begin to interact more with the characters on-screen, I find myself wondering about their motivations, if they're going to betray me or if I can betray them.

The stories in both *Heir to the Empire* and *Knights of the Old Republic* are both well-crafted, with clever twists and turns to keep the user on his toes. Yet I find the game more satisfying. Books are limited by what the reader has to draw upon in imagining scenes. Adjectives are subject to diminishing returns. Timothy Zahn, the author of *Heir to the Empire*, could write 100 adjectives in 100 sentences, and he still wouldn't be able to describe every last pixel in every last corner of a single moment in *Knights of the Old Republic*.
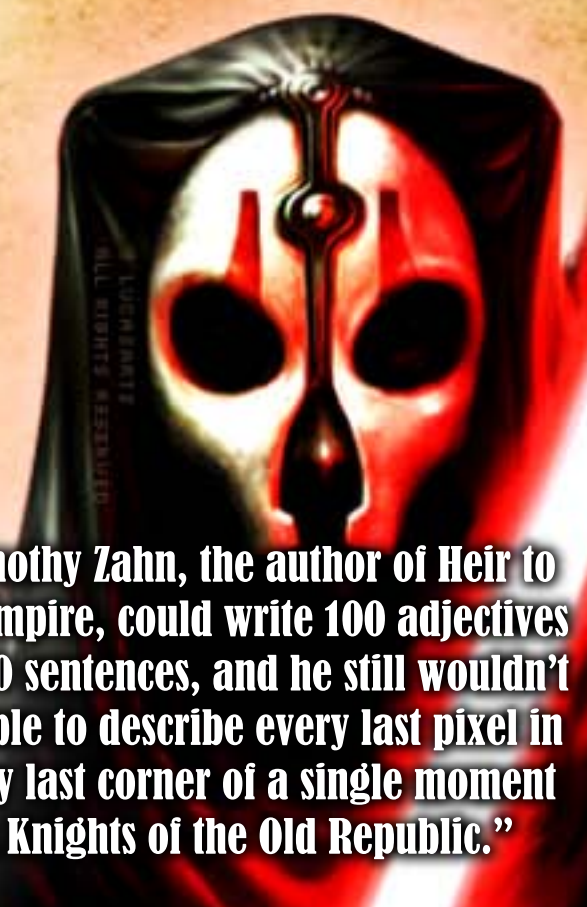
The great fallacy in the knee-jerk prestige granted to books is the notion that an imagined story is somehow superior to a realized one. Apply this reasoning to other art forms, and it soon becomes ridiculous. What if, instead of painting the *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo da Vinci had written a description of what the painting might look like? What if Francis Ford Coppola had decided *The Godfather* was best left as a novel? What if the Beatles, instead of releasing albums, released sheet music? Videogames are an amalgam of painting, sculpture, filmmaking and yes, book writing. Why should they be treated any differently?

If videogames can outshine books in sci-fi storytelling, how might they fare in other fields? Could there ever be a videogame that delivers the same impact as Franzen's *The Corrections*? With metaphor substituting for thought, yes, I think so. As technology advances and development tools become more accessible, the technical barriers to transforming visions into videogame will fade away. Perhaps, instead of asking if fiction is too hard, Franzen should be pondering a jump to the new storytelling order: the lowly videogame. [COMMENTS]

Vincent Kang is a freelance writer for The Escapist.

"Timothy Zahn, the author of Heir to the Empire, could write 100 adjectives in 100 sentences, and he still wouldn't be able to describe every last pixel in every last corner of a single moment in Knights of the Old Republic."

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