

# the Escapist

**Next-**  
**GENERATION**  
**STORYTELLING**

by Warren Spector

**ALSO:**

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

**STAFF PAGE**



**Playground** PIRACY  
AND THE **SCHOOLYARD** OF  
**CRIME.**

by Kieron Gillen

**Video Vegas**

Slot machine or videogame?

It's getting hard to tell

by Allen Varney

**FORMULA**  
**FUTURIST**

by Jim Rossignol

**CHINA and U.S.**  
**DEVELOPERS:**

**Clash or Collaboration?**

by Doug Mealy and Horace Xiong

## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

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

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

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

This week, Jim Rossignol discusses *Wipeout 2097/XL* and how it defined the under-represented genre of futuristic racers. Kieron Gillen returns to tell of his own experiences with software piracy ... on the playground. Doug Mealy and Horace Xiong talk about obstacles Western companies face in the Chinese market. Allen Varney explores the difference – or lack thereof – between videogames and the increasingly complex slot machines of Vegas. And Warren Spector wraps up his four-part series on the state of storytelling in games. Find these articles and more in this week's *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**In response to "Pro-Choice" from The Escapist Forum:** It hadn't occurred to me until I read this article that from the perspective of the consumer dealing with DRM, games are a lot more like movies and e-books than they are like

music. What I mean by that is what happens the \*second\* and subsequent times one goes to use a piece of media one has purchased.

If I buy a song, the second, third, fourth...hundredth time I listen to the song, it's as good as the first time; in fact, I've found with songs and albums the most enjoyable 'listens' aren't the first or second, but the couple after that. If the song doesn't wind up overplayed on radio and stays a deep album cut, I can be as much into a song \*years\* later as I was the first time I heard it.

On the other hand, movies and books and games are almost always the most fun that first time through. I guess if I was really into film as an art form that might be different, but, I think when it comes to the average consumer the \*novelty\* of the plot is an essential part of the enjoyment, however much they may enjoy the mechanics of gameplay or the special effects of a movie or the clarity of a piece of writing.

We use the word "library" for books most of all, and sometimes for film, games, and music; I think, however, music gets





used in a library-like fashion more heavily and by more people than any of the others.

So what does that have to do with DRM? Well, it means the consumer has way, way more to lose when they run into DRM problems affecting their music library. Obviously on a first play DRM problems are equally bad no matter what it is. However, I lose a lot more if I only get to listen to a song ten, twenty, even fifty times before DRM makes my old music files useless than if the same things happens to a game or a movie or an e-book, even if that's only the second or third time I'm using my e-book/game/movie file. ... I think that's a big part of why getting DRM out of music is a much, much bigger deal than it is with games/e-books/movies. When a person goes to buy a piece of music, they're thinking a lot more about the use they'll get out of this over the years as a piece of a library than they are when they buy games and e-books and movies. And DRM makes people feel like they don't have a library-it's more like a bookmobile, and you never feel safe that they aren't just going to drive off with all your media one day.

- **Cheeze\_Pavilion**

**In response to "Third World Pirate" from The Escapist Forum:** An excellent article, with some tweak in the details about failed economic policies, it would apply perfectly to Brazil (where I come from) as well. We did not have an economic crisis on the same scale as Argentina, but the government switched from a 0-import duties policy to one that essentially doubles the price of any imported game, while the local distributors sell the same games charging slightly less than the price of a legally imported game.

In this case, it is clear that the big software companies *could* use a rational pricing policy, and yet they choose to maximize their profits by selling few high-priced games than selling a large number of reasonably priced ones.

I, for one, buy the originals, since after getting my degree I've been way too busy to be able to play everything that comes out, so I can afford to buy a game every couple of months, but I'd think the average teenage gamer in Brazil (with a lot of time in his hands and a broadband connection) would find it much easier to use Bittorent or Emule to download

games and cracks to his heart's content rather than try to convince his parents to spend a large portion of their household's income in a "toy".

- **Meneguzzi**

**In response to "The Johnny Depp Factor" from The Escapist Forum:** Got to throw in my current movie genre of choice here: Westerns

Now, to say cowboy raised a suspicious eyebrow, because it's so easily linked to old John Wayne movies. A clean-cut badass doesn't exactly sound like a good time to our modern "gritty" loving audience. Not that Wayne isn't a tough guy, but he's just not tough enough for the current rising crop. But, that's why I'm not talking about the West with John Wayne. I'm talking about the West with The Man with no Name: Mr. Clint Eastwood. One of two men absolutely required if you want to make an epic Spaghetti Western.

You can't watch Eastwood in *Fistful of Dollars*; *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*; or even *Unforgiven* without dreaming of owning a couple six-shooters and riding around collecting

# the Escapist

bounties, governed only by your own fuzzy morals.

There have been a couple of games already built around this version of the west: Gun and Red Dead Revolver. Red Dead Revolver takes a number of stylistic cues from Sergio Leone's Man with no Name trilogy.

Not only are there games already out there using the genre and style, but Johnny Depp has also been in a sort-of Western movie: Once Upon a Time in Mexico (the name bears a strikingly resemblance to another very influential Leone film, One Upon a Time in the West). Granted Rodriguez is more of a quick paced action guy, so the film isn't your run of the mill western themed movie. Still, I think Depp could easily pull off the mysterious stoic character needed to front a really great western.

Just a quick quote from Eastwood here in Fistful of Dollars: "I don't think it's nice, you laughin'. You see, my mule don't like people laughing. He gets the crazy idea you're laughin' at him. Now if

you apologize, like I know you're going to, I might convince him that you really didn't mean it."

- **Blaxton**



## Next- GENERATION STORYTELLING

by Warren Spector

*"The stories we tell reflect and determine how we think about ourselves and one another. A new medium of expression allows us to tell stories we could not tell before, to retell the age-old stories in new ways, to imagine ourselves as creatures of a parameterized world of multiple possibilities, to understand ourselves as authors of rules systems which drive behavior and shape our possibilities."*  
- Janet Murray, "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama," *First Person*

The quote above really speaks to me — and to the importance of game narrative. Murray's comments speak to the personal and cultural uses of stories, to the new stories afforded us by a new medium, to the ways in which narrative structures remind us that we live in a world of infinite possibility, even to the ways in which each of us is the master of his or her fate. I can't read that quote without feeling like I'd be wasting my time if I didn't at least **try** to bridge the gap between game and story.

I draw further inspiration from yet another Janet Murray quote, this one from "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama":

*"[W]hy are we particularly drawn to discussion of digital games in terms of story?...[I]t is a medium that includes still images, moving images, text, audio, three-dimensional, navigable space — more of the building blocks of storytelling than any single medium has ever offered us."*

How could anyone **not** look at the state of the art and wish for more?

So, how **do** games tell stories, and what does the future hold for us? And is next-gen technology really the answer?

In this four-part series, I've discussed the elements of storytelling, how they are (and can be) used to tell stories in games, the importance of characterization and character interaction, and the concept of a virtual dungeon master or storyteller. In this, Part Four of the series, I'll be discussing how next-gen hardware can help and hinder the cause of making great games, and what we can do to ensure that the next-generation of games isn't actually a step backward in terms of design.

**Next-gen Hardware and Story Games**

Sure, more powerful hardware offers new possibilities. We will certainly be able to create more believable actors. We're already seeing next-gen visuals get better. And there's at least the possibility that some of our horsepower will go toward more robust NPC behavior. This could allow us to tell better interactive stories.

And more horsepower could mean better simulations and more interesting worlds. If you believe, as I do, that one of the best ways to empower players is to allow them to craft their own experience, their own narratives through simulation, more horsepower will be a godsend.

Simulations — of environments, of objects or character behavior — offer players the opportunity to reason with our worlds, identify problems and solve them the way they want. Simulation enhances our ability to offer significant player choices, unique outcomes, perceivable consequences. And more powerful hardware clearly makes deeper simulation possible.

But, fundamentally, next-gen hardware isn't the solution to our story problems. The 360 and PS3 and Wii seem (to this

basically non-technical guy) to be about equivalent to high-end PCs, in terms of their capabilities — falling short in some ways, surpassing them in others, but basically equivalent. And it's not like story and character interaction problems have been solved in the world of PC gaming. In fact, it may be that next-gen hardware will make it **harder** for us to accomplish our story goals.

Not long ago, I had a conversation with Doug Church, secret master of gaming, where he said something like this: A story is constructed of sentences, strung together in a coherent, dramatically significant order. Game "sentences" are the actions available to and selected by a player. The more sentences we allow players to construct (in other words, the deeper the pool of options we offer), the cooler and more numerous the story possibilities **will** be. To that extent, a robust world and character simulation — both made possible by next-gen hardware — will allow us to tell a better story. But there's a hitch: all the graphics power of the new platforms.

We've made — and, thanks to the new hardware, will continue to make — great strides in the fidelity with which we can

portray a world. Our characters will look even better. Our worlds will look and feel much more convincing than they ever have. And audiences will come to expect a certain level of believability in the worlds they explore. They will expect the world to look and behave the way the real world does. ("It looks real; it'll act real.")

All of that means AI — cornerstone of creating great characters and, therefore critical to great story games — becomes even more challenging. And here I'm just talking about the fundamentals of navigation and base level interaction. We've made great strides in AI over the last few years, but you'd hardly know it — the advances have come in the service of "just keeping up" with graphical and simulation enhancement.

Back in the day (that is 20, 10, maybe even five years ago), NPC's just had to navigate through a 2-D world or a simple 3-D one. Now, even in a relatively simple game, they have to deal with highly complex 3-D spaces.

Again, Doug made the point the **other** day: "We didn't used to have to worry," he said, "about a glass full of water getting knocked over, wetting the pants

**// MORE  
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**But,  
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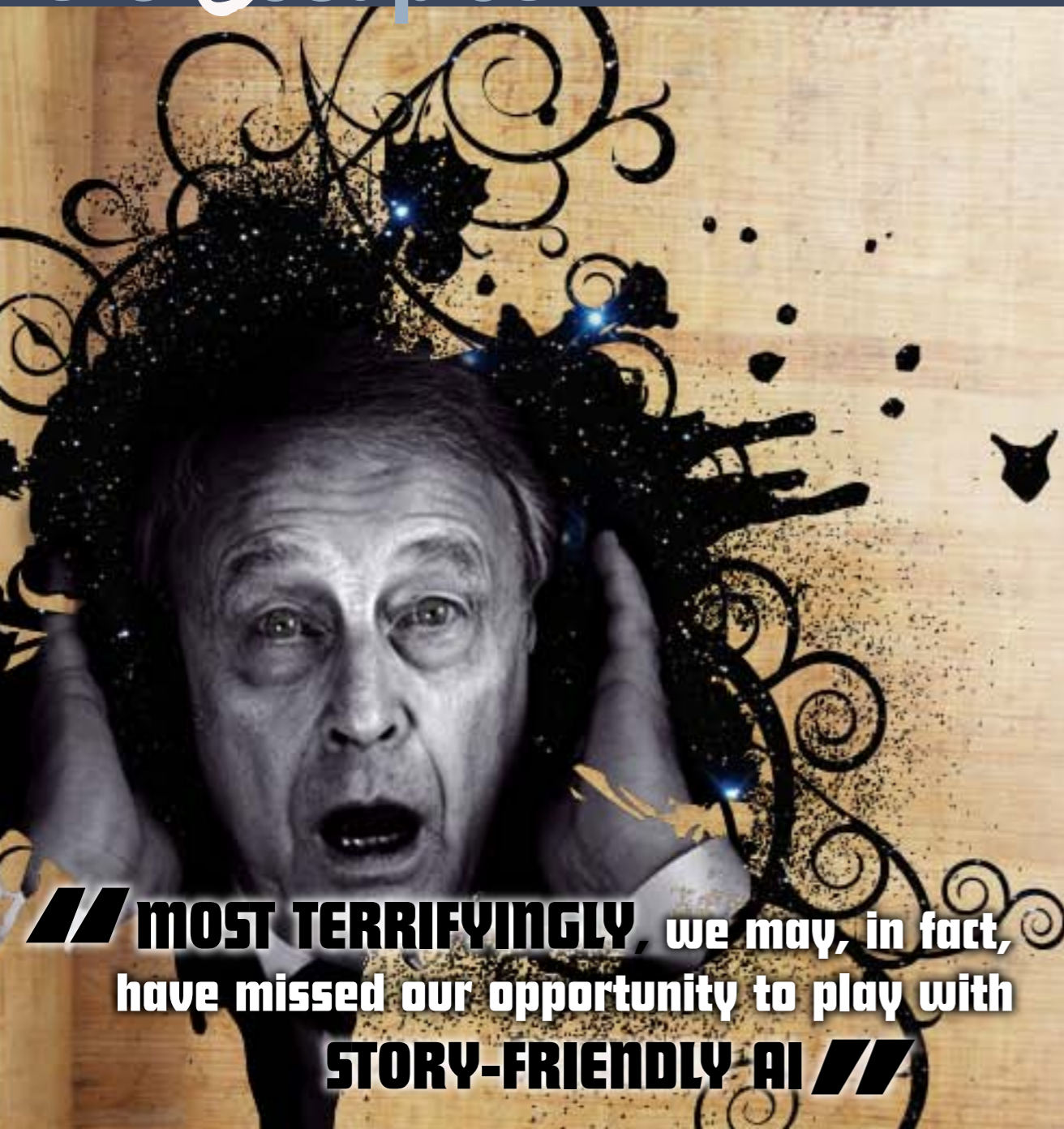


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**// MOST TERRIFYINGLY, we may, in fact, have missed our opportunity to play with STORY-FRIENDLY AI //**

of a character seated at the table and then having to deal with the NPC's response, other characters' responses or the player's potential responses." Now, or soon, players will expect the AI to react believably to **all** of that.

Once we can create beautiful, photorealistic spaces, players will expect us to do so, and then we'll have to teach our NPCs how to navigate through and interact with ever-more complex worlds appropriately. Rapid advancements in graphical fidelity and depth of simulation have always left AI and design playing catch-up. That problem seems likely to get worse, not better, in the next few years.

Most terrifyingly, we may, in fact, have missed our opportunity to play with story-friendly AI and procedural story generation. That moment may have come and gone back in the day of lower-fidelity world sims. Now that we're in a world of high-fidelity worlds, all of our energy is likely to be sucked up just maintaining the levels of AI we already have! The cause of non-navigational/non-combat AI will take a backseat again.

In the short term, at least, next-gen hardware will allow us to make prettier

games (at great cost) but not **better** games, and there's nothing inherent in the hardware that makes better stories more or less likely.

### **What Do We Do About It?**

Those of you who know me — or know my games — know I can't have just one endgame. That's too limiting for players.

Similarly, I can't have just one conclusion to this article. Buckle up, read on and pick the conclusion that best fits your prejudices and beliefs.

### **Conclusion 1**

Stories have been around forever. The success of story games tells me current players are vitally interested in them and will reward us for taking story games to greater heights.

But we want to look beyond current gamers to the **vastly** larger potential audience of (current) non-gamers — an audience we have no chance of attracting if all we have to offer are prettier, louder versions of what we've done before.

To grow our audience to match our ballooning next-gen development and



marketing costs, we have to broaden the range **and** increase the quality of stories we tell. We need to lure people in with things that are familiar and comforting, and we must take interaction out of the realm of the abstract and into an area they already understand — emotionally satisfying stories about recognizable people, stories that illuminate and enrich their lives.

## Conclusion 2

Obviously, I think the road to more compelling stories involves learning to share authorship with players.

If I could have one thing, one wish granted, for our business, the thing I'd most like to see is more developers making games that offer players freedom to explore story spaces within constraints imposed by a dramatist. We'd let players off the rails a bit more. We wouldn't settle for offering tactical choices, challenging puzzles and movie-inspired cut scenes.

Instead, or in addition, we'd offer players opportunities to explore more freely and to delve deeper into the inner lives of their characters in ways that don't involve killing them. In other words,

we'd offer players real choices, with real story and character consequences.

Great story games are only partly dependent on technology. They're **hugely** dependent on will and creativity — on the **need** to engage in dialogue

## Conclusion 3

The industry can't do this alone. It'll take the efforts of people inside **and** outside the mainstream game business.

To be clear, I think industry's doing a pretty decent job. Any medium that can

Cool as those industry efforts are, even the most daring of pre-existing games is just a baby step toward the goal of a truly compelling, interactive story. Face it: The home team's coming to the plate and swinging for singles.

I don't fault any of the developers represented here for that: Swinging for the fences story-wise would probably be commercial suicide, in the short-term, requiring an R&D effort far beyond anything I've ever seen or heard about in the game business, with no guarantee of success.

Publishers — our only realistic source of funding — have to be profitable. To do that, they have to ship games. On a regular basis. To stay in business, developers have to give publishers what they want. And the audience seems to like games, and game stories, the way they are. It seems unlikely publishers are going to invest in multiyear, blue-sky research efforts to change the way we tell stories - efforts that may or may not succeed. And who's going to fund a three- or five-year research effort into natural language processing or more compelling NPCs when the marketplace isn't demanding it?



**// Games can be about something more than killing, fighting and puzzle solving. This doesn't require new technology - it just REQUIRES NEW THINKING. //**

with culture, problems and players. Games **can** be about something more than killing, fighting and puzzle solving.

This doesn't require new technology — it just requires **new thinking**.

boast of having produced games like *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, *Indigo Prophecy*, *Psychonauts* and so on has a lot going for it. We **are** making progress.

I truly believe this leads to one, inevitable conclusion: We need outsiders, indie developers, academics, two guys in a garage somewhere, to point us in new directions, to show us a new way to involve players in stories and take this medium to a new level. And there **are** academics, researchers and even some expatriate game developers like Chris Crawford working on some cool stuff.

Frankly, a lot of industry types, even the most creative industry types, look askance at the work of the outsiders, but I'm finding myself more and more drawn to the schemes some of these guys are coming up with.

When you find yourself reading whitepapers and interviews and such with these guys, and feeling more kinship with folks with the letters "P," "H" and "D" after their names than you do when you hear what your peers have to say, there's something weird going on. I've been arguing for years that industry and academia need to work more closely together and this — the need to develop tools for collaborative and truly interactive storytelling — seems like a great opportunity to do so.

I'm not going to pretend to understand how universities work, but I kind of get that academics have as profound a need to find funding as game developers. I believe there are, however, a couple of things they **don't** have to worry about — commercial success and 12- to 36-month development windows. And **that** positions them pretty much perfectly to tackle hard problems that will take a

long time to solve — longer than we industry-types can afford to devote.

We're already seeing some of this in the work of folks like Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern, Chris Crawford, Ken Perlin and Katherine Isbister (and others I'm sure I've just offended by not mentioning them). These people are asking **great** questions, tackling many of the right problems and making some progress.

Even if you think these guys are nuts, or their belief in procedural storytelling is misguided, or their specific approach is a dead end, you have to respect the fact they're tackling hard problems. You have to respect their audacity and their commitment. And I, at least, respect them for looking further downfield for their inspiration than developers typically can. Even our most "out there" story efforts are still mired in action-movie tropes — our rallying cry might as well be "Let's make an interactive *Star Wars*! **Yeah!**"

The Outsiders are looking to *Moby Dick*, to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, to *Scenes from a Marriage*. That takes chutzpah of a sort I find sorely lacking in even the most daring "insider" efforts to transform storytelling in games. These

guys may strike out, but they're swinging for the fences, and to a guy another of whose mottoes is "Fail gloriously!" that's worth a lot.

#### Conclusion 4

*"I think of the writer ... as a moral agent ... someone who thinks about moral problems: about what is just and unjust, what is better or worse, what is repulsive and admirable, what is lamentable and what inspires joy and approbation."*

- Susan Sontag, *At the Same Time*

Susan Sontag, in a posthumous collection of essays and lectures, *At the Same Time*, called on writers to "be serious" and to act as "moral agents." She urged them to think about moral problems; about what is just and unjust, what is better and worse, what is repulsive and admirable.

Change "writer" to the more generic "storyteller" or the more appropriate for us "game developer," and how can any of us **not** step up to that kind of challenge?

How can any of us be satisfied with offering players nothing more than the opportunity to leap from cover point to



**// We need outsiders,  
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POINT US IN NEW  
DIRECTIONS //**

cover point as they kill bad guys? Or give players tools to move blocks around on a screen until they reach some arbitrary end state? How can we allow them to manipulate puppets on a virtual football field in the service of nothing more than having one virtual team beat another virtual team in a virtual sporting event?

How can anyone who lives, eats, sleeps and breathes games, as we all do, **not** see that games alone among media can allow players to explore the “just and unjust” for themselves instead of simply being told about them?

We have tools at our disposal — experiences and rules and spaces and characters — that allow **us** to allow **players** tell stories **with** us. And that allows each player to become his or her own “moral agent,” to decide for himself what’s repulsive and what’s admirable. At the very least, we have an obligation to offer players stories that have a bit of subtext, stories that are **about** something. Hard though it may be, we **have** to do this. We just have to **decide** that interactive story is a problem worth tackling. We need the will to become the medium we can — we must — be. If we

do this, the world of interactive stories will blossom.

## Conclusion 5

As in all things, the reconciliation of story and player experience lies in balance. People who think games have no business telling stories are nuts; people who believe their creativity is more important than the player’s creativity are equally crazy.

The key to successful story games is to **use** narrative to enhance the play experience, to balance the players’ need for choice and power with the positive aspects of a well-told story.

What makes us unique is that story in games can be the result of **player** creativity, expressed through play itself. We can make authors of each and every person who takes keyboard or controller in hand. And that is really something new in human history.

Of course, if that were easy to facilitate, everyone would just do it. It’s not easy. It’s insanely hard. But that doesn’t make it any less essential.

We have the potential to create not just a new medium and not just a new community of authors but a new culture of creators, a participatory, individualized culture in which we all share in the definition of experience, of humanness. Instead of being talked to, we discuss; instead of being lectured, we debate. This new medium is the first democratic narrative force we’ve ever had. Let’s hope, someday, we use it for something more compelling than we have so far.

*“We tell ourselves stories in order to live”*  
- Joan Didion, *The White Album*

“Next-Gen Storytelling” is a four-part series. Parts One, Two and Three can be found at The Escapist Daily. [COMMENTS](#)

*Warren Spector is the founder of Junction Point Studios. He worked previously with Origin Systems, Looking Glass Studios, TSR and Steve Jackson Games.*



**// How can any of us be satisfied with offering players nothing more than the opportunity to leap from cover point to cover point as they KILL BAD GUYS? //**



## Playground Piracy AND THE SCHOOLYARD OF CRIME.

by Kieron Gillen

When reading about Todd Hollenshead's GDC presentation arguing that some funds from pirate organizations financed terrorism, I couldn't help but think of the friend of mine who'd be dead if I hadn't taped him a copy of the Sinclair Spectrum version of *Bard's Tale*.

This was back in the '80s, when our games existed primarily on tape rather than diskette, let alone CD or direct download. The Spectrum version of *Bard's Tale* was relatively late, the definition of a niche game. Most people were completely unaware of it. The rich kids with their early PCs had already been playing it, but the geekiest brand of rubber-keyed urchins who hadn't been anywhere near anything even **vaguely** like computer roleplaying games were hungry for *Bard's Tale*. That was us.

My home town of Stafford, being the perennial cultural backwater it always is, we weren't in much luck. There were no copies to be found. The only copy in the entire school was mine. It was my birthday, and my mum had somehow had the incredible foresight to actually **order** the game. Somehow, word got around, bounced across a couple of

social groups and reached my future-comrade in arms.

He sidled up to me in Biology. "You got the *Bard's Tale*, yeah?" "Yeah." "Tape me one?" "Sure."

Been friends ever since.

A few years later, he was hit with crushing teenage depression. Unknowingly, in my default, charmless, buffoonish way, I helped him through it; that copy of *Bard's Tale* gave him something to focus on other than his adolescent problems. Now, he says – in a matter of fact way, which still chills me with its casual resignation whenever I recall it – that he'd be dead today if it wasn't for me.

No piracy, no friend. I can't bring myself to feel too bad about it.

So, yeah, I pirated games as a kid. Didn't everyone? Computer games – as opposed to console games – have always been rife with piracy. That's why we bought things with keyboards rather than joypads anyway. You tricked the initial purchase from parentals with

# the Escapist

promises that it'd help your schoolwork and then were able to keep on playing games all year via the cheaper games and pirate copies to fill in the gaps. Which is the core of it: In terms of playground piracy, the industry lost no money from us. They already had all the money we had to give.

In Hollenshead's case, linking piracy to terrorism is just counter-productive. In the same way kids are bombarded with dire warnings of what happens when you have the vaguest association with drugs, and when they or their friends experience no such immediate damnation, they disregard all the advice. What's more, companies like id wouldn't be around if it weren't for pirate networks. id came from the shareware scene, whose model was pretty much entirely based around someone passing someone else a disk with a cut-down version of a game to get people hooked. What particular network of people-passing-stuff-on-which-they-like did they think they were exploiting back then?

Because piracy back then was primarily a social thing. In the relative isolation of pre-internet game culture, you pretty much gave a pirated copy of a game to

your mate, just so you'd have someone with whom to talk about it. Sometimes it was formalized, with computer clubs at schools avidly swapping their games. Other times, it was illicit – not because of fact it was illegal, but because of the nerd-stigma of being a gamer. Here were secret meetings before school to swap games, the product of the iconic Saisho double tape recorder.

The tech was the other side of it – the further you go into the '80s, the more a dual-cassette deck was a rare and beautiful thing. Ownership of such item in a family was a route to a technological demi-godhood. "I knew about two people who actually had one," said one of my correspondents when talking about this. "[It was] like they actually had the monolith from 2001 in their bedrooms. There **was** a lot of begging. Thinking back, it was probably the only way they could convince people to come to their houses after school. Their mums thought they were so popular."

While playground lore only had a mug trying to put more than one game on each side of the tape – just too inefficient, too fiddly – there was the gaming equivalent of mixtapes; big C90s

// In the relative isolation of pre-internet game culture, you pretty much gave a pirated copy of a game to your mate, just so you'd have **SOMEONE WITH WHOM TO TALK ABOUT IT.** //



// Team 17's *Alien Breed 3D* code book was **BLACK VARNISH** printed on **BLACK PAPER**.



In practice, it was actually **EASIER TO READ AFTER YOU'D PHOTOCOPIED IT.**

filled with pretty much random games, and my earliest Spectrum education was just working my way through these endless experiences. I came to computers relatively late – I was 10 by the time I owned anything – and it pretty much acted as my Liberal Arts education in the form.

Then there was the issue of copy-protection. For just casual playground copying, circumventing the manual protection was almost part of the game. The Spectrum classic *Jet Set Willy* featured an enormously convoluted grid with a color in each square. People would sit down with graph paper and manually copy it out with crayons, a square at a time. There's few images in my head as nostalgically iconic early piracy as someone coloring on graph paper. In later eras, other devices were pragmatically disassembled. The beautiful LucasArt code wheels were dismantled, photocopied, and then assembled into functional facsimiles – to the distress of the original owner of the game. Sometimes the copying process uncovered something interesting. For instance, Team 17's *Alien Breed 3D* code book was black varnish printed on black

paper. In practice, it was actually easier to read **after** you'd photocopied it.

Connection with the actual "real" pirate community was only ever peripheral. When the Amiga-era sent dual-cassette decks to the great copyright infringement graveyard in the sky, disk copying software proliferated. Those with trickier systems were cracked by mysterious men in mainland Europe, and a copy worked its way through the one guy at the school whose older brother actually had a **modem**. The continental origins of much of the software had some strange effects on the gaming gene pool.

One person I talked to only passed his GCSE French because of a pirated game. Because he couldn't stand the rote memorization required to learn a language, he was trailing in the subject, before acquiring a copy of the legendary action-game *Flashback*. He was obsessed with its rotoscoped glory, but there was one, small problem: It was only in French. He played through the entire game with a French-to-English dictionary beside him and somehow ended up with a functional enough vocabulary to scrape

through. Saving the world **and** his education. That's some doing.

Retelling anecdotes like that, I can't help but feel **romantic** about it. Videogame piracy wasn't about funding terrorism or prostitution or dirty nihilists who want to blow up Sweden. It was like scrumping apples. It was innocent. We just liked apples a lot.

The obvious argument is the nature of piracy has changed in a peer-to-peer world. It almost certainly has. But the nature of a core of pirates almost certainly hasn't. They pirate games because they're compelled to. They may get it from BitTorrent, but they're still passing BitTorrent links to friends. And people, if they had the money, would still rather buy an actual copy.

It may be illegal. For most moralities, it's wrong. But like underage sex, I'm not going to be swift to condemn it too strongly. It's an act born of love (or lust, which is another unappreciated emotion). As long as games are too expensive for a big chunk of consumers to purchase as regularly as they'd wish, they'll turn illicit means to satisfy their desires. Hollenshead should look around the

# the Escapist

office, even. Famously – see *Masters of Doom* for further details – John Carmack actively broke into a computer laboratory when he was 14 to steal an Apple II. Somehow I doubt it was to just pawn it.

Similarly, when researching this article and talking to my peers, an odd realization struck: Any game journalist of any note I'd talked to had, at one point, been a pretty serious pirate. Then I had another realization: Why do I know a lot about games? Because I played a lot of games. How did I play enough games to know enough? I bought all I could, then pirated the rest. Why? **Because I cared too much about games.**

If it's true of the proto-game-journalists, it's just as true of game designers. If they weren't rich – to acquire the mass of knowledge of videogames to be any good whatsoever – they'd almost certainly be pirates. Due to the sheer cost, any game designer wishing to be properly literate in the form will almost certainly involve some manner of copyright infringement.


Developers can be angry at pirates now that they're all grown up, which is completely understandable – especially the militant cracking and hacking

communities. But, in amping up their vitriol and linking all piracy to the worst things in the world, it's just too much. The majority of pirates aren't monsters. They're your consumers who find themselves short this month. They're your kids and kids' friends. Some of them are your future peers and the future of the medium. And when you paint them as abominations in league with terrorists, it does make you think, at the least, you don't remember the intensity of passion which once drove you. And at the worst, it makes you suspect maybe – just maybe – you never had it at all. [COMMENTS](#)

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



// Any game journalist of any note I'd talked to had, at one point, been **A PRETTY SERIOUS PIRATE.** //



You've seen all the *Star Wars* computer games, but have you seen the *Star Wars: A New Hope* slot machine? Sit down at the cabinet, put a penny in the slot, push the big lighted SPIN button and watch the video screen. While John Williams plays, five columns of images spin upward, then slow to a stop, revealing pictures of Chewbacca, droids, starfields and planets. If three or more pictures of Luke, Han or Leia show onscreen, they animate to show a movie clip, and the jackpot bell brings a clatter of pennies. But that's not all.

If Darth Vader shows up on reel 1, and Ben Kenobi on reel 5, they duel. By pushing a button, you pick one to win, and if you pick right, you win more pennies. But that's still not all.

Atop the machine cabinet, mounted on an axle, stands a big plastic Death Star. When you line up three Death Stars onscreen, the reels vanish and Han Solo appears, chased by stormtroopers. You push buttons to choose two stormtroopers; this lights two arrows on the Death Star globe. The globe spins, and the arrows point to bonus numbers that are added to your winnings.

But wait! If an arrow points to the Death Star's superlaser, another round begins. You target enemy TIE Fighters chasing the *Millennium Falcon*; corresponding arrows light up, and the Death Star spins. If you get the superlaser again, you can now join a Rebel Alliance run on the Death Star. Target more TIEs to spin the globe a third time. If you get the superlaser, you destroy the Death Star and win the spoils of victory, 10 dollars.

Yes, this is a real casino slot machine (or, for British readers, a fruit machine) – a genuine, Lucasfilm-approved gambling

device licensed and manufactured by International Gaming Technologies. IGT has a couple of other slots in its *Star Wars* series: *Dark Side* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, the latter featuring a big plastic Yoda. Gotta love the advertising poster for the *Empire* machine: "Become a hero you must. Win a million you could."

Have you gone to a casino lately? Most slot machines are now videogames, with graphics and sound right out of casual games, licensed movies, TV shows and even food. IGT's "Game King" machine licenses include not only *Star Wars*, but *The Price Is Right*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Kenny Rogers The Gambler*, *Creature From The Black Lagoon*, SPAM, TABASCO and (get this) *Amazing Live Sea-Monkeys*. IGT's *Soul Train* slot machine, based on the 1970s music show, features the voice and image of host Don Cornelius, plus "an extensive cast of animated disco divas that dance to well-known R&B songs." And while you drop nickels in the *Alien* slot machine, you can relive nostalgic memories of chest-bursters and facehuggers.

All these slot machines, as well as many hundreds of other non-licensed brands from a dozen manufacturers, have the

# Video Vegas

**Slot machine or videogame?  
It's getting hard to tell**

by Allen Varney





same gameplay: Drop the coin; push the button; repeat. Like *Star Wars*, when you hit certain combinations, some machines offer little mini-games, which involve – pushing the button. Yay. What’s interesting is their insanely various frenzy and clamor and flash, their multifarious glitzed-up beckonings that could jump an ICU patient out of his coma. These video slot machines feel so much like old arcade games, you just **know** whoever makes them grew up playing *Pac-Man* and *Defender* and *Frogger*.

Hey, wait. These slot machine makers – they **made** *Pac-Man*, *Defender* and *Frogger*. Bally! Williams! Konami! What’s more, many of those who design and code today’s slot machines come from the hallowed early days of video and computer gaming.

Why?

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Companies in the gambling industry – confusingly, they call it “the gaming industry” – tend to suffer at least mild disrepute, for reasons that hardly need rehearsing. But on their websites, slot-

machine companies present upbeat corporate histories that read like *Candide*: Innocent entrepreneurs, just trying to make ends meet, repeatedly encounter tumult and calamities. Yet despite setbacks, these companies, being hardy and resourceful – they might say “scrappy” – pick up and move on, like gypsies.

Take Bally Technologies and WMS Gaming (formerly Williams). Though Bally has built slot machines since its start in the 1930s, both companies found their early fortune making pinball machines. In the late '70s, coin-op video arcades devoured the pinball market, and these scrappy multi-million-dollar corporations (along with a new startup, Konami) adapted to the new business. (Bally/Midway: *Space Invaders*, *Tron*; Williams: *Joust*, *Robotron*; Konami: *Gyruss*, *Time Pilot*, *Super Cobra*.) They all made big bucks until the arcades dwindled, and then, as before, they moved on – to the richest field yet.

EGMs (electronic gaming machines) are a far, far bigger market than our own little computer and videogaming business. The gambling industry, of

which EGM is a major part, is global. North America is the primary market, with gambling revenue of \$84 billion in 2005. Forty-eight U.S. states, all but Utah and Hawaii, permit lotteries or other forms of gambling. The casino market in Europe is large, and the fast-growing Asian space includes Southeast Asia, the Philippines, Japan and, soon, Taiwan. But common wisdom has it that the world’s most fanatical gamblers are Chinese. Macau, a former Portuguese colony near Hong Kong, is now the world’s largest gambling haven; its 2005 revenues of US\$6.9 billion outstripped the \$6.5 billion earned in Las Vegas. And all these casinos buy hundreds or thousands of slot machines and Video Lottery Terminals.

The arcade game makers were well positioned for this market. The first video poker machine appeared in the same year as *Space Invaders*, 1979. In both fields, manufacturers constantly pushed their technology, and over time they basically converged. Slots added microchips to improve randomness, while arcade stand-ups developed ever glitzier graphics. By the late '80s, if you could make an arcade game, turning it

# the Escapist

into a slot machine meant hardly more than adding a payout trough.

Williams sold its first video slot in 1991. The next year Bally, which had already pioneered electromechanical slots in the 1960s, introduced *Game Maker*, which offered multiple video slot games in one cabinet. Konami survived the arcade bust better than the others and only entered the slot business later, in 1996. Konami has since made a splash of sorts: In February 2007, the government of Ontario pulled Konami machines for flashing subliminal jackpot messages.

Almost all new slot machines made today are video slots. Bally leads the market, along with IGT, Aristocrat Technologies and Atronic; smaller players include Konami, Williams and a dozen others. One of these, in Austin, Texas, has become a refuge, a reliable paycheck, for more than a few computer game developers: Multimedia Games.

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Slot manufacturers occupy different niches in the gambling ecosystem. IGT is big in Nevada and Atlantic City; Aristocrat owns Australia. Multimedia

Games sells mainly to America's largest market, Native American reservations, and to the fast-growing \$10-billion industry of "charitable" gaming (i.e., bingo). For years, the top-grossing slot on the reservations was Multimedia's *Meltdown*, the first to feature music by none other than computer game music legend George "The Fat Man" Sanger. The Fat Man has since scored many Multimedia slots, including *Good Mojo* and, uhhh, *Cash From Uranus*.

Sanger contrasts slot creators with computer game developers. "Both groups are wonderful. In my experience, the casino guys are more businesslike and kinder. Crunch time is more gentle; there is more emphasis placed on loyalty and on the importance of family and charity. Their world is somewhat less rocked by the many ghosts of disappointments and failures that haunt the videogames workplace.

"On the other hand, with a few exceptions, the casino crew are even more inclined than videogame people to follow trends set by successful products. There is somewhat less pressure to innovate, and more pressure to make an airtight, bugless game."

Why such pressure? Like all slot makers, Multimedia has gone heavily into networking. "Progressive" slots offer top jackpots that increase as people play, and "wide-area progressives" link hundreds or thousands of machines, across a casino or a whole country, to offer giant aggregate jackpots. All the networked machines communicate with a back-end server.

Programmer Phillip Eberz writes server code for Multimedia. Like some other Multimedia coders, Eberz is an Origin alumnus; he worked on the *Ultima* series. He describes some differences between computer games and slots. "Video gambling development includes significant transaction validation and recording. A bug here can result in hundreds of thousands of dollars in

**Become a hero  
you must. Win a  
million you could.**

**-The Empire Strikes Back  
slot machine  
(promotional poster)**



erroneous payouts or lawsuits. As financial systems, they also require extensive monitoring and control. Many gaming systems store screen captures of every gameplay result to aid in dispute resolution.

“Of course, federal and state law governs video gambling systems much more tightly than most other gaming.

Occasionally, legal restrictions limit functionality. For example, the law tightly constrains whether a video gambling system can include skill-based play – e. g., hand-eye coordination play, or trivia knowledge tests.” Slot makers pay testing companies like Gaming Laboratories International (GLI) to certify their software. Bids and contracts often specify a GLI compliance level, like GLI-11 or GLI-13.

Aside from legalities, slot designers must also think about the user experience in a way different (or is it?) from computer game developers. “The game payout matrices can become very complex when dealing with multiple betting options on multiple concurrent games,” Eberz says. “The amount and frequency of the payout greatly affects the users’ experience and enjoyment of the game.

“Suppose you and 99 other people play a lottery game for a one-dollar buy-in. In one version of the game, 45 people double their money, receiving \$2. In another, only one person wins, but wins big, taking home \$90. Which would you rather play? In either case, the game pays out the same amount – 90 dollars, or 90 percent of the pay-in. But each feels much different. A lot of marketing and complex analysis goes into deciding payout percentages.”

One wonders how such analysis differs, if at all, from, say, Blizzard’s analysis of loot drops in *World of Warcraft*.

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Given the similarities between computer game and slot machine design, what can we learn from the gambling industry? Theoretically, computer game designers could pick up pointers on creating addicted players – though that is a touchy subject. Game security expert Steven Davis, on his PlayNoEvil blog, commented, “Game addiction is going to be the next big legislative target, now that game violence is a proven failure.”

A better lesson? Videogame concepts and technologies are spreading widely into society. Video slot machines are a symptom of this propagation – likely an early symptom. In the years ahead, expect more devices to look and sound game-like. And if they sound like slot machines, be ready to buy earplugs.

[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.*

**When I first wrote for games, it was as though I was writing music for the machine that tells you the McDonalds french fries are done. “Why in the world would anybody want to do that?”**

**Music for slot machines is the new “Why would you write that?” music. Fewer people see it as glamorous, and it has just as much creative potential as game audio.**

**- The Fat Man**



# FORMULA FUTURIST

by Jim Rossignol

Futuristic racers seem to embody something essential about videogames: fluid, neuron-firing challenges for our coordination and dexterity, explosions of color that meld high-concept science fiction with the vertiginous thrill of accelerated speed and kinetic violence. Complete with whirling missiles and magnetic humming, futuristic racers are iconic, vibrant experiences that could **only** be videogames. Titles like *Wipeout* are routinely selected for montage clips intended to encapsulate the spirit of contemporary videogaming: the speed, the violence, the spectacle. Yet when you look closely at this genre it becomes clear that the future racer is actually a neglected, unfulfilled genre. You'd expect futuristic racers to be defining, obligatory

gaming experiences, yet only a few turn up in each generation of gaming. What is wrong with the game of flying cars?

In 1996, Sony's marketing spawned something unusual: a worthwhile videogame that was also a product of corporately manufactured cool. *Wipeout 2097*, or *Wipeout XL* as it was known in North America, was the result of a deliberate attempt to associate a rare sub-genre of racing games with contemporary dance culture. The game's atmosphere was heavily weighted by the inclusion of music from The Future Sound of London, Photek, The Chemical Brothers and Underworld. What the first *Wipeout* game had lacked was a sense of style, and now Sony had supplied that, too. These electronic musicians were just far enough outside the mainstream to be seen as cool and cutting-edge, but also getting enough radio play for everyone to know who they were. Videogames were, by force of smartbomb marketing, becoming cool.

*Wipeout* was exuberant, colorful and gifted with a twitchy, amphetamine pace. It merged perfectly with the dance music scene. Its velocity allowed it to be the

perfect game in a cultural environment where games and pop culture were colliding. Electronic music and videogames matched well, and the marriage created new media for mainstream consumption. Rather than being exported quietly to some geek-chic ghetto, *Wipeout 2097* was part of the opening barrage of Sony's attempt to bring gaming to the forefront of popular culture.

But there was more to it than that: *Wipeout 2097* had the balanced challenge and the velocity to genuinely command the attention of hardcore gamers. We spent weeks honing our nervous systems on this thing, pushing and pushing until we could lap each of the opening tracks without a fault. It was **electric**.

There had been futuristic racing games before - *Powerdrome* on the Amiga and Atari ST (later unsuccessfully "remade" later for the Xbox and PlayStation 2) being a prime example - but it was *Wipeout 2097* that suddenly charged the genre. It seemed to matter, and would become one of the era's psychic landmarks in gaming. It was an experience that everyone remembered from that time in their lives, like the

# the Escapist

biggest pop records on the charts, or the loudest Hollywood movies in the cinemas. It was spectacle, an event to be recorded.

And then there was nothing. A few half-hearted futuristic racers turned up here and there, botched and clumsy in their polygonal paintjobs, but there was nothing to replace *Wipeout 2097/XL*. Even the *Wipeout* games to follow that 1996 game lacked the same inertia and fidelity of that second, peerlessly produced *Wipeout* game. *Wipeout 3* failed to return to the scintillating standard set by its progenitor, then most crippling of all was the inevitable PlayStation 2 follow up, *Wipeout Fusion*. *Fusion* was arguably a disaster for the franchise: sloppy handling, an ill-conceived array of weapons, and a lack of cohesion in track design and game modes - it all combined to deliver a ruined experience. Anyone who came to futuristic racing at the time of *Fusion* could be forgiven for never picking up the pad to tweak another speeding rocket-car, it was **that** flabby and weak.

The Xbox meanwhile opened up the throttle on its own *Wipeout*, with the visually wondrous *Quantum Redshift*.

Clearly, to compete with PlayStation legend, the Xbox had to prove it could hit all the same high notes, and a futuristic racer was crucial to such a display of gaming eminence. While my own weakness for the genre means I enjoyed *Quantum Redshift* more than its overall lackluster critical reception might have suggested, I still knew it was a flawed and doomed project. It tried to be everything that *Wipeout* had been, and simply could not recreate the moment. Whatever you thought of *Quantum Redshift's* lavish imitations, its water-beaded camera and hyperbolic, spandex-carved pilots, the facts of its critical and commercial slump are undeniable: The follow-up game was cancelled by Microsoft, and the development team, Curly Monsters, disappeared into the silent ether of redundancy and dissolution.

Perhaps the fate of *Quantum Redshift* explains the fate of the genre as a whole. It tried to live entirely within the shadow of its predecessor. *Wipeout* was so iconic, so vital, as to dictate what it meant to be a futuristic racer. The future racer genre suffers from the same problems as the MMOG genre: There is one game that all others are forced to ape if they want to make a pass at

success. Just as *EverQuest* and then *World of Warcraft* have defined how the majority of MMOGs have been implemented over the last decade, so few futuristic racers have been able to escape the gravity of the *Wipeout* series.

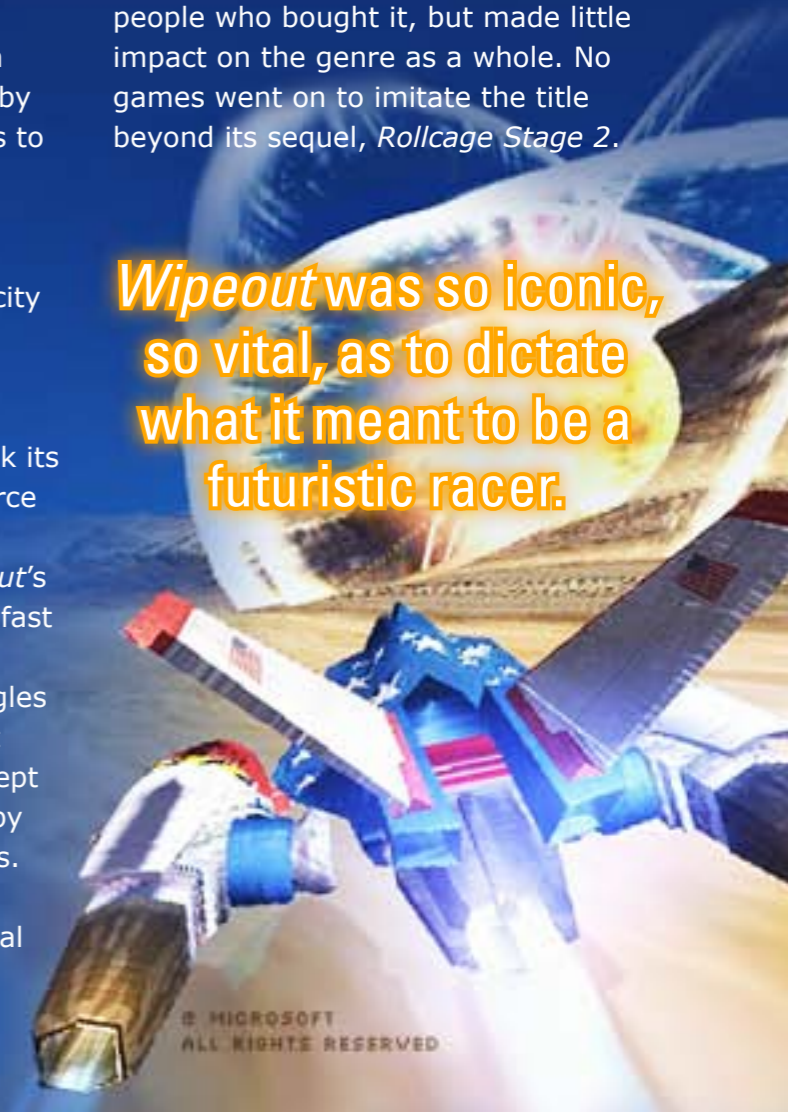
The future racer, then, has been both best exemplified and worst shackled by *Wipeout*. Its initial success seems to have engendered a chronic lack of experimentation within future racing games. Of course, there were some exceptions to the rule, but their scarcity only drives the point further home.

*F-Zero GX*, *Quantum Redshift's* contemporary on the GameCube, took its inspiration from quite a different source and was the last great future racing game. It managed to sidestep *Wipeout's* impact by having its own wide, ultra-fast tracks, weird environments and fantastical backdrops. Impossible angles and unlikely courses that raced off at right-angles to the plane of gravity kept things flying, but still it was dogged by its pack of appeal, its lack of newness.

Then there was the 1999 experimental racer, *Rollcage*. Although not well received by critics, the game showed

some definite flair for moving outside the *Wipeout* template. The cars were attached to the course, but were also able to play with physics - driving along walls and ceilings with absurd aplomb. It was a game that hooked dozens of the people who bought it, but made little impact on the genre as a whole. No games went on to imitate the title beyond its sequel, *Rollcage Stage 2*.

**Wipeout was so iconic, so vital, as to dictate what it meant to be a futuristic racer.**



# the Escapist

Also without any progeny was 2001's left-field, ultra-high-speed *Ballistics*, from the Swedish team GRIN (who went on to create the recent *Ghost Recon* games). *Ballistics* did **speed** and little else and soon vanished into obscurity. Two thousand kph down steel tubes, sound barriers breaking, outrunning the noise of your own engines. Flawed, yes, but it was a game that did something new, did something that belonged to that single game. It moved outside the *Wipeout* template and, inevitably, was lost.

The same could be said of the criminally underrated *Star Wars Pod Racer*. Seldom is a single set piece from a film able to create such a strong concept for a game. Hurtling through the *Star Wars* universe and fixing exploding pods as you travel were rare experiences, and a wealth of ideas were once again lost to the churn of videogame fashions.

These few experiments represent the suffocated spirit of experimentation within fantastical adventure games, and their like should be encouraged without reserve. They offer a portal into an alternate world, where *Wipeout* had not smothered the category and science

fiction racing had been the most vital and inventive of game genres.

And so we racers lament the passing of a genre. There has been no great future racer for five years, and there are none on the horizon. From my perspective, as a burned-out, disillusioned sci-fi speedster sifting through a collection of not quite classics, I can see that what the next generation of consoles needs is a future racing revolution. We can't afford to lose this iconic genre, but it also has to change, to shed a skin that is hardening into a death mask. It needs to be faster, brighter and more fashionable than anything that has gone before. But it also needs to not look to *Wipeout* for validation, and should seek out the ideas of other genres for new and exciting angles on getting around a racetrack at high speed.

For that next futuristic racer, the one to replace *Wipeout* in those exciting video-montages, we need some of that reality bending that games are getting so good at: portal racing, or teleporting rocket-ships, or a racing game that does for racing what *Steel Battalion* did for giant robots - giving us an absurd peripheral

around which to base our playful speeding antics might not make financial sense, but damn, it'd be fun. Or more practically, what about a future racer that threw even more conventions out of the window and ended up being something like *Test Drive Unlimited*, an online future city where impromptu street-racing events were the lifeblood of a persistent racing persona? Or what about a different kind of future - a decent post-apocalyptic racer in the dust storms of Australia, or a simulation based on telekinetic engineering? What about survival/horror racing, where outrunning the undead is all you can do to stay alive? (Surely a racing game can be

scary, too?) Something, anything, **just make it fast.**

Science fiction speed-freaks as yet unimagined, we salute you. [COMMENTS](#)

*Jim Rossignol is a writer and editor based in the South West of England. He writes about videogames, fiction and science.*



**Something, anything,  
just make it fast.**

## China and U.S.

### DEVELOPERS: CLASH or COLLABORATION?

by Doug Mealy and Horace Xiong

A few years ago, the question was **if** Chinese and U.S. developer collaboration would ever occur. Now that top MMOGs have begun penetrating the China market, the new question is **how successful** such collaborations will be in the long term. Will the success of these collaborations be the result of overcoming cultural battles, or the result of mutual respect? Cooperation by Chinese and American businesses in general is long established, but East/West collaboration in the world of game development is largely uncharted territory. Despite *EVE Online*, *World of Warcraft*, *Dark Age of Camelot* and others' presence in China, dual-culture collaboration is in its infancy.

This article provides some guidelines on how two culturally diverse development teams can best collaborate to create games with global appeal. The authors provide input from two cultural viewpoints – Horace Xiong from the Chinese point of view (Horace heads the Shanghai-based support team for CCP Games' *EVE Online* presence in China and pre-production of future products) and Doug Mealy, who heads an online marketing and PR firm that has launched 280 games and has contributed to the

successful PR campaigns of MMOGs *Dark Age of Camelot* and *EVE Online*. Comments from the U.S. perspective are in white; **comments from the China point of view are in yellow.**

#### **Challenges in Dual-Culture Collaboration: Language and Translation Issues**

Creating good games is difficult and risky; creating successful MMOGs is orders of magnitude harder, as evidenced by the 50 percent (or higher) mortality rate of MMOG developers. Add to these levels of challenge the mixing of different cultures, different languages and different work practices, and the project becomes even more complicated and difficult. The first stage in collaboration is to address the challenges of communicating with each other.

**Language.** Probably one percent of U.S. game developers are fluent in Mandarin, the language of business in China, while a higher percentage of Chinese developers are fluent or competent in English.

**In mainland China, since the 1980s, English became compulsory lessons for students starting at age 12. So, a person in his 20s in a position such as a Business**

Development Manager, for example, should have basic English reading and writing skills. But, due to lack of exposure to an English-speaking environment, his oral and listening proficiencies may be somewhat limited. So, don't expect every senior Chinese executive to be 100 percent fluent in English.

**Simplified vs. Traditional Mandarin.** There are two formats of Chinese used around the world: The Simplified version is used in mainland China (95 percent of the population) while the Traditional version is used in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

**American slang.** Americans use a lot of slang terms, which we define as phrases that don't translate literally into foreign languages (e.g. "screwing up big time"). U.S. developers need to refrain from using slang in their emails and in voice communications and use words and phrases that are direct and allow the least likelihood of being misinterpreted or mistranslated.

**Translation issues.** A lot of product names and programming terms in English are used freely in Mandarin and don't need translation, such as PC, CPU, CD-ROM, etc. But, translation is needed

for almost everything else. U.S. developers and game marketers can use translation services in China (outsourcing which is sometimes assigned to students who may have a limited understanding of the business and/or a limited linguistic expertise), U.S.-based translation services (with the same potential problems of accuracy) or use free or commercially available translation software (which sometimes translate with 80 percent accuracy).

You should be very careful when choosing the right translator services, because a poorly translated term or expression can give your targeted reader a completely different impression. Specifically, when you plan to localize your product for the Chinese market, be sure to ask well-known and experienced professionals in the industry to do all the naming and supervision work. We advise against using any general translation agency - they may have senior experts in traditional fields like finance or law, but it's likely they will have difficulty with all the gameplay-related keywords.

In any of these scenarios, U.S. developers and marketers are at risk for one obvious

reason: They can't proofread any translated work for final approval.

Developing Business Partners in China: Essential for Success

A local partner is essential for any foreign game company that plans to do business in China, no matter what type of product they want to sell. The Chinese game industry is quite young, where the local enterprises are too small to compete with foreign giants. To cope with the possibility of instant failure, the government issued lots of unbreakable protection policies, such as forbidding fully foreign-owned companies to operate an MMOG. Furthermore, laws and regulations for the industry are still under development. There is no supervision mechanism or any product rating organization. The whole industry is regulated by many national ministries who sometime issue conflicting policies. This is confusing and even dangerous for any foreign company, if they attempt to work without a Chinese partner or in a joint-venture structure.

How Basic Marketing Activities Compare: Know What to Expect



“ don't expect every senior Chinese executive to be 100 PERCENT FLUENT in English. ”



“The whole industry is regulated by many national ministries who sometime issue **CONFLICTING POLICIES.**”

The obvious goal of any dual-culture collaboration is a game that sells, and that requires an investment in marketing. Here is an overview of some basic marketing efforts of public relations, advertising and exhibiting at trade shows so you'll know a little more about how things are done in China and what they might cost.

#### **Public Relations/Media Relations.**

There are about 80 credible game web sites in English, but you only need to interact with the top 15 or 20; the rest of the sites will post links to published press releases so there is a good chance that if you send press releases to those 15 or 20 top sites, that you'll get coverage on many of the other sites.

The media ecosystem in China is similar. Only a few (perhaps 10) big game portals dominate most new release sources and public attention and thus attracts largest share of marketing budget from clients, while smaller sites can copy and paste.

The challenge U.S. developers have is finding out what the top China game sites are and the name and the email address of a specific editorial contact.

That information is available through PR agencies in the U.S. with clients in China, and from China-based PR agencies, but there aren't many of them.

**Advertising.** Advertisement sizes and specifications are easily accessible in both countries simply by visiting the publication's web page.

In China, there are no strict rules for game ad content or message, because neither the regulating authorities nor the readers take "game stuff" seriously. The fact is game companies always use exaggerated expressions, even "aggressive comparisons." Some weak products even use bold comparisons to an influential title to "borrow" the marketing strength from known titles.

**Trade Shows.** Arguably, the biggest marketing investment new development studios make is exhibiting at trade shows. In some cases, this expense may be as high as 50-60 percent of their annual marketing budget.

The exhibit space cost for a standard 10'x10' booth at U.S. shows ranges from \$12 to \$53 per square foot of exhibit space, so a 10'x10' space can cost from

\$1,200 to \$5,300, whereas most U.S. shows offering 10'x10's in the \$3,500-\$4,000 range.

Building a booth in China is quite different than building one in the U.S, both in process and in cost. **In China, you can have your booth custom built on site. Local craftsmen set up shop around your booth space and build walls, lighting, etc. right in front of you.** Here's a rule of thumb: The ratio of space cost vs. booth building cost in China is 1:1, while the same ratio in the U.S. is 1:5 (minimum).

Shipping your booth to China is risky business, and expensive. Rose Faler, Account Director of AccesTCA, one of the largest exhibit companies in the world, says, "When U.S. companies choose to ship their custom booths to China for a trade show, it is a highly calculated choice. The risk of damage, loss, delays or theft is high. The transportation infrastructure in China is developing. The majority of the shipping trucks are small. Minimal storage is available, and those storage 'areas' are sometimes nothing more than a parking lot or field with a large tent overhead, and are often unprotected and not secure. Most companies prefer to work

with U.S. exhibit agencies with offices or partnerships in China. These agencies work collaboratively with their Asian counterparts to achieve the marketing objectives of their clients. Generally, this approach is the most worry-free option."

Given all the booth options in China, it may make sense to rent smaller booths and custom build larger booths onsite.

Go East, Young Man

So there you have it - some basic information on how Chinese and U.S. game developers can begin partnerships with one another. If our two game cultures can better understand how things work in each other's world, the chances of clashing will be minimized, and collaboration will prevail.

[COMMENTS](#)

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**“ Shipping your booth to China is RISKY BUSINESS, AND EXPENSIVE. ”**

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