

# the Escapist

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

You know that dream, the one in which you can change your environment, your circumstance, to suit your needs or to make your life better or happier? Staples ran with this blissful notion with their most recent marketing campaign – the bright red Easy Button. Movies have offered solutions from completely erasing a person from your mind to having God's powers offered to you. Science-fiction and fantasy books sometimes offer views of future utopias with all problems solved.

And then of course, there are those who take these dreams and work to make them realities – well, at least the general reality of making life easier or perhaps more fun. Someone, one day, decided to pre-slice bread before he packaged and sold a loaf (creating a new UI?). It's now the industry standard for everyday bread, in the U.S., anyway. And it was all because some guy, somewhere, wanted to make life a little easier.

More recently, the internet has given many more people a voice and a platform from which that voice might be

heard. These people create and share and enrich others' lives, collaborating, growing, learning while producing fantastic, original content. Most everyone can find content on the internet provided by peers that answers dilemmas, incites laughter or joy, or simply makes one feel as if they belong.

These creators of mods, the builders of addons, the designers of new UIs – these are some of the digital-age's civilian inventors, those who march to their own beat, those who see the box and don't just think outside of it, they often live outside of it. And there are groups who create and throw those creations onto the internet to join the chorus/cacophony of other voices, sharing their talents, giving depth and texture to all of our lives. And it is these people, and their inventions and unique voices on whom this issue of *The Escapist* is focused. Enjoy!

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**In response to "Formula futurist" from The Escapist Forum:** I was the producer on Wipeout 2097, and the producer/co-designer on Quantum Redshift. It's great to know that those games were loved as much as they were, so thanks for the article.

If you want something new, that still pushes all the future racer buttons, then you should really try my most recent title "GripShift" on the PlayStation3 (downloadable title, only \$10). It has multi-player weapon enhanced racing around crazy floating roller coaster tracks (and at the top end of the game, it has future racer speeds).

But it also introduces whole new elements of in-air control, physics stunt skills and platform/puzzle driving that offers something truly different. It doesn't set out to be the icon that Wipeout2097 was - but it does set out to offer something different in the fantasy-driving genre.

And as for the future of future racers ...

- andysat

**In response to "Video Vegas" from The Escapist Forum:** As an ex-arcade guy who now works in the slot machine business, I would like to point out the statement that "Bally leads the market" is incorrect. They are sort of a middling player at this point.

As far as American marketshare for "class 3" (class 3 being games that you would find in Vegas) goes:

IGT is the market leader. They had what I would call a near-monopoly at one point during the 1990s. Probably close to 95% of all gaming (ahem) machines bore an IGT logo, mostly due to patents involving "virtual reels," which have recently expired. However, their reluctance to embrace video slots caught up with them. They picked up the pieces eventually, but due to the fact that the five-reel video format has no patent protection (and conveniently gets around the pesky virtual reel patents), it enabled many other companies to get into the business. Still, it seems that IGT

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probably still holds anywhere between 50% - 70% of the casino floor positions.

Next up would be Aristocrat and Williams (now called WMS).

Aristocrat is an Australian-born company that is known as really bringing the 5 reel video format to the forefront. However, due to some issues with the core management at the time (early 90's), they were never allowed licenses to operate and sell their games in the larger casino markets, such as Nevada. Which meant that they were only selling games into the Native American market. (They did fix their management issues, and as such, now have licenses to operate everywhere.)

Which brings us to WMS. Desperate to break into the market, but with licenses everywhere, they copied the Aristocrat format and were able to sell it into Nevada and Atlantic City. So, they wound up being the company that "mainstreamed" the format (while most of the other players in the industry dismissed the video slot craze as a fad). They were pretty much poised to take over the casino, except for a bunch of software bugs that slowed them down A

LOT. This allowed everyone else to play catch up.

Bally sort of fits between the top three and the group of "second tier" players, which at this point, would include Atronic, Konami, and Progressive. AC Coin probably goes in this group, too, but they are a rather unusual outfit, as they are more of a retro-fit type company (they develop top box bonus games on top of pre-existing games), as opposed to a pure developer.

Multimedia is a huge player in "Class 2" (Bingo-based Indian Reservation Gaming and networked lottery systems), I'm glad to see them getting some amount of mention. Usually, you only read interviews from the "Vegas guys."

- meeplecheese

## **In response to "Next-Generation Storytelling" from The Escapist Forum:**

To do justice to the game medium, what we're really talking about is reinterpreting what we mean by the word "story". Many times, when I hear about people talking about storytelling through games, I get the image of them trying to ape the accomplishments of

books and movies. I don't think that's the best use of the game medium because, at least in theory, games are capable of so much more through the player's freewill.

Freewill can ruin a good story. How many of us, through the freewill that we express in our lives, end up with a good story? The good stories come afterwards through a retelling that edits out the drudgery and, perhaps, adds sparkle with a few judicious lies. (How many good story tellers are not liars?) The footage on the cutting room floor far outweighs the final edit. Games don't have the luxury of that much editing. That's why I think that it's important not to get too caught up in the storytelling paradigm. It's too easy to reduce games down to movies or books. It can be done, but I don't think that it's the best use of the game medium.

As much as I like what Warren has to say, I don't think that the word "story" is the best word to capture the creative vision needed to surpass the limits of books and movies. I prefer to think in terms of alternate world modeling, but maybe that's a byproduct of the type of playing and exploration I like to do.



- Nordstrom

## **In response to Playground Piracy**

**from The Escapist Forum:** I have to admit, this article brought up some nice memories; writing this from Croatia, where (sixteen years ago) you couldn't buy an original copy of a game even if you had the money. Back then I thought Razor 1911 was a game developer!

And, yeah, I owe my good (in Croatian terms) knowledge of the English language to computer games, especially Lucas Arts and their fabulous adventures. But originals were nowhere to find, and to my surprise - it was the publishers who refused to go to our market. They feared piracy.

- bazooka\_joe

## **In response to Playground Piracy**

**from The Escapist Forum:** In the Netherlands there's an organization called BIG (Ban Illegal Games & software) that aired a commercial with a high tech FBI-like team that searched out illegal gamers! With sirens and in black suits with black sunglasses and high tech red lasers (why?) they would find all illegal gamers.

They resorted to scare tactics, spewing various lies (they don't search out illegal gamers, they just try to prevent it with... well there's no better word for it than propaganda). It is very much aimed at this 'playground piracy', as can be seen from their various posters in schools.

And as helpless as developers are as each of their copy protection mechanisms get swatted away like flies, I can understand the desperation of their side. I can understand the reaction to resort to fear tactics, but I don't think it's an effective solution.

As Kieron Gillen said, essentially playground piracy is an act of love, while lying to get people to pay for games is an act of fear (which is an interesting duality as the one is a crime, while the second is born of a sense of justice).

The solution for developers, is to accept reality as it is and either produce games for free with a Paypal link or bank account to allow contributions or go the other way and make sure your game can't be played without being connected to your server (with unique key of course).

- Capo Taco



## OMEGA MAN:

### The OUT OF HELL Mod

by Russ Pitts

If making games was as easy as playing them, we'd all be developers, there'd be millions more games on the market and most of them would suck. One need only look as far as YouTube to prove this theory; yes, you'll find the occasional talented amateur effort (alongside ripped TV shows and commercials) but the vast majority of "user" made content blows chunks.

Modding games is no different. For every amateur developer capable of turning out a *Hexen* or *Counter-Strike*, there are countless more whose names will go unpublished, whose levels will go unplayed and whose efforts, tireless and dedicated they may be, will go unrecognized. The fact is, making games isn't as easy as playing them, and although a considerable number of PC games now ship with a generous pack of dev tools and most people (with a little effort) can learn to use them, making a game with them isn't as easy as playing one - not even close - although this fact certainly hasn't stopped many modders from trying.

Enter: Long Nguyen.

"I'm a huge fan of all things horror, but I especially love zombies and the 'zombie

take-over' scenario," says the 27-year-old Nguyen, creator of the much anticipated *Out of Hell* mod for *Unreal Tournament*. "Before I started on *Out of Hell* I was really obsessed with the *Resident Evil*, *Doom* and *Silent Hill* games, and as a result I wrote some short stories about a zombie apocalypse."

Nguyen, like an Umbrella Corporation of one, took the seemingly dead *Unreal Tournament* and, riding the current cultural obsession with all things recently-deceased-and-yet-still-living, molded it into a horrific creation of his own, then added in a few demons "for the sake of the story," he told ModDB..

"I've loved videogames ever since I was 10 and had always wanted to create a game one day," Nguyen recently told *The Escapist*. "With the release of modern games and their tools and editors, something I had only previously dreamt about became a possibility. Because I'd always vented creativity in one way or another, whether it was painting, writing stories, drawing comics or making boardgames, this became the next step in that whole process because it's all of the above rolled into one!"

“by delays, Long means **“YEARS.”** **FOUR OF THEM,** to be precise.”

And twice as complicated, as Nguyen immediately discovered. Like many would-be game designers, he had absolutely no idea how to build one when he started, aside from a general understanding of how to make computer-generated graphics. What he did have, however, was a vivid imagination and time.

“A lot of my time ... was spent self-teaching,” he says, “reading tutorials and building things from scratch. Because I began to develop better techniques for doing things and my art improved, I couldn’t help but go back and overhaul what I had done previously, a habit that eventually attributed to the delays.”

And by delays, Long means “years.” Four of them, to be precise. Over that time the game has gone through several iterations and acquired something of a cult following, with over 9,000 registered users at the mod’s official web forum and over 25,000 downloads of the game’s demo, representing tens of thousands of fans all clamoring, like the undead at the door, to know when they can get their hands on the product of Nguyen’s brains. If Nguyen has anything to say about it, they won’t be waiting for long.

“I hope to release it this summer so that I can begin branching out and pursuing other projects,” he says. But delays and unsatisfied fans aren’t all Nguyen has accumulated over the years. He’s also zombified an employee of sorts (unpaid) in the form of composer Justin Lassen, whose credits include a stint as a remixer for such artists as Madonna, Robert Miles, Lenny Kravitz and NIN; he’s also a former employee at Interplay.

“*[Out of Hell]* had everything that I love about games,” says Lassen. “Atmosphere, texture, moodiness, rust, decay, blood, resonance, subtle details and not so subtle details. I’m a huge fan of the post-apocalyptic genre. Plus, I was floored by the fact that it was created by one person. The mod community unfortunately suffers from its share of big, bulky teams, and Long is a breath of fresh air.”

Mods, it would seem, ironically suffer from many of the same issues plaguing commercial game design, such as feature creep, group think and unreasonable egos stifling creativity. As humans, we bring our horrors with us whether we’re being paid or not. Long, although his project ultimately suffered

from many of the above-described ills in spite of his sparse development team, wanted to avoid all that.

“I wanted to learn as much as I could in all aspects of making a small game,” he said in a recent interview with ModDB. “I also liked having the control over the direction of the content while avoiding some of the problems that could arise with disagreements in a mod-team setting.

“The disadvantages (and there are many) are that it takes way longer to create. As opposed to being only a texture artist or a prop modeler and making only those things and then giving them to the mapper to put together, I’d have to do every single thing myself.”

He tells *The Escapist* that through the experience, he’s “gained a more appreciative attitude toward games/mods and the people that make them. It’s a lot of hard work, a totally alien concept that I just didn’t have before because ‘hey, it’s making and testing games, and that’s easy!’ So I would play a game and just label it as being good or crappy, go on a rant, and think nothing else of it. Now I know that a game that didn’t turn out the way the developers



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wanted was still the result of a lot of hard work and dedicated individuals had to go through stress, late nights and crunch-time, despite what I thought about it. It definitely casts a new light on my approach to games and outlook on people [making them]."

This isn't news to Justin Lassen, who's worked on his share of mod projects.

"I have always supported the independent game development scene," he told *The Escapist*. "I've modded and worked in teams doing various roles for just about every engine. ... I tend to act as a creative producer in mod projects, part biz, part design. *Out of Hell* is one of those rare gems where I didn't have to do either. Long's totally got his act together. This let me focus on composing, and it was really refreshing.

"I got one of my favorite collaborative experiences with *Out of Hell*, where the music and art end up influencing each other in a kind of dance. For instance, I was initially inspired by the screenshots, but then I started adding ambient effects in the tracks that gave Long ideas about what might be causing those sounds,

and that influenced the game design. I love that back-and-forth."

But back and forth takes time, especially when your development team consists of one full time programmer/producer/artist/coder/mapper ...

"*Out Of Hell* has gone through numerous overhauls throughout the years and ended up taking much longer than I had anticipated," says Nguyen. "Though there were many factors involved, I believe the biggest issue was just that I was never happy or content with what I had created. Because it was all a learning process, each time I found a better way of doing something, I would decide to go back and bring everything else up to par with the current work.

"[But] the visuals weren't the only aspects that I kept overhauling. ... Initially, *Out Of Hell* played very much like a standard FPS in that it was a straight-through, linear presentation. ... I've recently implemented a new idea where the game will follow a set story arc, with other maps that you could choose to play in-between in order to replenish supplies. Though this has gone back to a more linear presentation as



"As humans, **WE BRING OUR HORRORS** with us whether we're being **PAID OR NOT.**"



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was originally intended, I hoped the decision would add just a bit more variety than the standard method, and I'm happy to say that it all finally works."

Which should mean it's time to kick the baby out of the nest, right? Not so fast. *Out of Hell* is, after all, a labor of love, and Nguyen still has a lot of love to give it. After four years, three story arcs, two engines, a professional score and a brutal course in the school of hard knocks game design, Long Nguyen has paid his dues by any accounting, but will the game be any good? Only time will tell, but even if it plays like *Daikatana* and looks like ass, Nguyen will be satisfied that he at least did his best and had a great time doing it.

"I kept thinking to myself, 'Alright, enough is enough, people won't wait forever so let's just release it and release fixes and improvements with patches over time,'" he says. "But despite this and the friendly prodding of many people who wanted to see this project come to fruition, I always came back to the same conclusion that kept me from just letting it go.

"I have to make sure ... the full version justifies the long wait and is as

memorable an experience as possible. ... Though I've committed a lot of time and resources to *Out Of Hell*, I have no regrets on what has gone into the project because I've loved (almost) every minute of it. It's an investment in that I hope it will make a strong enough portfolio piece (this is the sort of work that I eventually want to get into) to get my foot in the door, but it will only be a huge bonus because I just like doing this kind of thing for fun anyway!"

[COMMENTS](#)

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

"it's time to kick the baby **OUT OF THE NEST**, right? **NOT SO FAST.**"



# Textual

## PLEASURE: Parsing the Annual IF Competition

by Lara Crigger

It's 3:00 on a particularly bright, sun-dappled afternoon. Outside, a few birds chatter amongst themselves, and at my feet, my dog snoozes lightly. The coffeepot gurgles tunelessly in the kitchen. All in all, it's a cheerful, peaceful, quiet Tuesday; the kind best spent napping in the sun, where nothing bad or unpleasant will ever happen.

As I stare at my laptop, I think I'm going to throw up.

I've just finished playing *Vespers*, a text-based adventure written by Jason Devlin that won the 11th Annual Interactive Fiction Competition (affectionately known as the IF Comp). From the description I found online, the game sounded fun: A story about a monastery

like *The Name of the Rose*, except with fewer gay monks and exploding libraries. Boy, was that reviewer wrong.

Set in a 15th century monastery beset by the plague, *Vespers* follows an abbot driven increasingly insane as he watches his feverish monks perish one by one. It's a nauseating, deeply frightening game, like survival/horror without the survival part, and it clings to me like a bad nightmare I can't shake. I'm thoroughly grossed out by it, physically, emotionally and morally.

*Vespers* is one of the best games I've ever played, text-based or no.

But I should have expected that. The IF Comp, an annual contest to see who can write the best text-based game, offers a vast treasury of interactive fiction, and many of the entries over the past 13 years are truly fantastic. Some, like *Vespers*, are lit-geek works of art, putting the bulk of commercial games to shame.

Over the years, the IF Comp has transformed from a small Usenet-based competition to the largest event in interactive fiction circles. It's easy to see why: The contest has breathed new life

into the community, giving it definition and a collective purpose. No longer are IF fans simply survivors from the Infocom days. The contest has helped to establish a community independent - or, at least, separate - from its *Zork*-infused past.

That makes sense to Stephen Granade, founder of adventure gaming website The Brass Lantern and organizer of the IF Comp since 1999. "Back in 1995, when the competition started, people were still saying, 'Do you think we'll ever be able to write a game as good as Infocom?'" he says. "That's just not a criterion anymore."

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Once upon a time, as the story goes, a little gaming company called Infocom hit it big. In the days before 3-D modeling or sprites or anti-aliasing effects, Infocom made games solely in text-based form. Their titles were famously addictive, and their library covered every genre imaginable: hard sci-fi, swords & sorcery, romantic fantasy, detective noir, even sex farce. Some of these titles, like *A Mind Forever Voyaging* and *Trinity*, are still considered among the best games ever written.

For a few short years, Infocom had it all, perched atop the infant gaming industry, distributing grues and zorkmids to the masses. But one failed business venture - a database package named *Cornerstone* - sowed the seeds for the company's financial ruin, leading to an eventual buyout by Activision. By 1989, within 10 years of its founding, Infocom had shuttered its doors for good.

The end. Or was it?

After Infocom's demise, text-based gaming itself seemed to face the same quiet, forgotten death. The gaming landscape had changed irrevocably. Consumers, appetites whetted by games with sexy graphics like those offered by Sierra and LucasArts, finally lost their patience with text adventures. The genre also seemed hopelessly old-fashioned to younger gamers, who were lured by the burgeoning home console market.

But fans of the genre refused to let it die. Text-based gaming went underground via the internet, where, in those days, textual environments like MUDs and BBSes still reigned supreme. In 1987, David Malmberg and Michael J. Roberts respectively released AGT and

TADS, two programming languages designed specifically for text adventure creation. Those tools allowed enthusiasts to continue writing games, independent of any commercial venture. Additionally, later that year, fans formed the Usenet newsgroup rec.arts.int-fiction (RAIF), dedicated solely to the discussion of playing and writing text adventures. An infant interactive fiction community was solidifying, slowly but surely.


In 1993, Graham Nelson, part-time poet and mathematician, released Inform, a programming language reverse-engineered from the virtual machine Infocom had used for its games. Eventually, Inform would surpass its predecessors in popularity, becoming a kind of *lingua franca* for the text adventure world. But back then, Nelson's language was just one of many lost in the mix. To showcase Inform's power, Nelson released *Curses* (still considered one of the IF classics) in 1993, and the game met to wide critical acclaim. But Inform still needed greater exposure to gain acceptance.

A poster on RAIF suggested that Nelson hold a game writing competition to bring attention to his new language, but the

idea languished on the boards for many months without effect. That is, until 1995, when Kevin "Whizzard" Wilson, himself a text adventure author, seized upon the idea and decided to organize the first Annual Interactive Fiction Competition. Wilson's logic was clear. "IF as a hobby cannot survive," he wrote in his original announcement, "unless there are people out there writing and playing it."

Wilson instituted only one rule that first year: All entries had to be solvable in under two hours. The "One Rule," as it later became called, was implemented to attract as many games for the contest as possible, as well as judges to manage it. To further entice authors, Wilson opened the contest up to TADS entries, too.

Just 12 entries were submitted that first year, many of which were clear knock-offs of the Infocom style. For example, Andrew Plotkin's *A Change in the Weather*, the winning Inform entry, relied heavily on time-sensitive puzzles, which required the player to restart the game over and over again until she found the exact sequence of commands necessary to win.



“After INFOCOM'S DEMISE, text-based gaming itself seemed to face the same quiet, FORGOTTEN DEATH.”

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However, the contest managed to attract the attention of Activision's Laird Malamed, then technical director of *Zork: Nemesis*. Excited by the competition, Malamed arranged for Activision to include the top three games in both categories onto the 1996 text adventure compilation, *Classic Text Adventure Masterpieces of Infocom*. (The company did get something in return: Many of the authors lent Activision their pristine, mint-condition Infocom feelies to scan for the game, since the corporate supply, suffering from heavy wear and tear, were mostly second- and even third-generation copies.)

Wilson administered the contest for two more years, before time considerations forced him to pass along management

duties to David Dyte in 1998. Dyte also found the IF Comp to be too much work, so he handed it off to Stephen Granade, who has managed the contest ever since.

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Response for the contest was overwhelming, and plans quickly solidified for next year's event. Rules tightening judging and entry procedure were enacted, and the division between the two programming categories was dropped. In its second year, the IF Comp attracted more than double the number of entries than it had previously, and by 1999, that number had more than tripled. A new tradition had started, and people were taking notice.

Despite the IF Comp's growing popularity, however, authors still struggled to reconcile the games they were writing with the legacy Infocom had left behind. Titles like Graham Nelson's *The Meteor*, *The Stone* and *a Long Glass of Sherbet* (the second year's winner) were stylish and enjoyable, but they also borrowed heavily from Infocom games, mimicking their dungeon-crawling atmosphere and complicated puzzles.

Some experimentation with fancier prose and philosophical themes did occur, such as Lucian P. Smith's 1997 winner, *The Edifice*, a monkey-makes-good tale about human evolution. But even Smith struggled with the idea that interactive fiction was a function of its puzzles, rather than the other way around.

It wasn't until *Photopia*, the 1998 winner, came along that authors had the precedent they needed to break free of the this idea. Adam Cadre's melancholy, beautiful story of a young girl as told by the people who loved her most was an obvious choice for first place. The writing alone surpassed most of what Infocom had ever released. But startlingly, *Photopia* offered no puzzles whatsoever. Instead, the game was essentially an interactive short story; Cadre's extremely linear narrative carried the player along, like a twig unable to influence the stream in which it drifts. No one had ever written such an unapologetically linear game before and had it so highly regarded by the IF community. *Photopia* proved that interactive fiction didn't need to rest on its puzzles to work.

and by 1999, that number HAD MORE THAN TRIPLED.”

However, despite the game's warm reception, *Photopia* was still a little too linear and experimental. It's no surprise that the next year's winner, *Winter Wonderland*, was a return to the Infocom archetype: a lighthearted, epic adventure complete with fetch-quests and complicated maps.

Still, authors continued to experiment, and over time most of the community has agreed that the best games are the ones that strike an even balance between puzzles and prose. Titles like *Slouching Toward Bedlam* and *Vespers* skillfully mesh both action and words, gameplay and narrative. "There have been a lot more consciously literary games, but that's not to say that every game is an exercise in high-art

“In its second year, the IF Comp attracted MORE THAN DOUBLE the number of entries than it had previously,

techniques,” explains Granada. “Some authors craft the best puzzle games they can. Some try to tell stories. Some play with the medium and try to push what can be done.”

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These days, explains Granada, the IF Competition has blossomed. “[It] has become a center of gravity around which the community orbits,” he says. While other competitions like the XZZY Awards and the Spring Thing exist, the IF Comp is undeniably the largest and most popular event of its kind. Regularly it attracts attention from Slashdot, Blues News, even the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

In fact, so much attention is lavished on the contest and its entries, says Granada, that games released outside the event are generally ignored. “That’s terribly disappointing, to spend all this time writing a game and then to have no one talk about it,” he says. Therefore, fewer people release games outside the competition, and many of the entries shoved through to the judges are nowhere near ready for public consumption.

In addition, the IF Comp’s popularity means authors have less incentive to create longer games, titles that might take 20, 30, even 40 hours to complete. Games longer than the two-hour, snack-sized contest limit have almost gone extinct. “Imagine writing an Infocom-length game and no one playing it or talking about it,” says Granada. “Nearly 10 years ago, I wrote an Infocom-length game. I wouldn’t dream of doing that today.”

Still, overall the competition’s popularity has been a boon for the small IF community. Granada estimates that these days, each contest entry gets downloaded between 1,000 and 2,000 times. That’s not much in Steam or Gametap terms, but for a genre that most gamers believe died 15 years ago, such a response is astronomical.

The community itself has evolved, and many of the newer gamers don’t struggle with the same Infocom-related hang-ups that older authors faced. “Infocom has been dead for 20 years. We’ve got young members of the community who weren’t alive when Infocom was a going concern,” explains Granada. “The community has matured.”

As I think back to *Vespers*, I believe him. Infocom never would have dreamt of making a game like this; after all, only so many possibilities were available for a company that needed to keep its lights on. But more importantly, the fans never would have thought of it either. It took almost 10 years for the community to break out of the Infocom way of thinking, but thankfully they did. Games like *Vespers* are the result.

Leaning back on the couch, I figure that now that I’ve finished *Vespers*, I ought to test out the 2006 winner, *Floatpoint*. I’m not sure what to expect, judging by how spectacularly wrong the description I found for the last game was. But one thing’s for sure, Toto: I know I’m not in Frobozz anymore. [COMMENTS](#)

*Lara Crigger is a freelance science, tech and gaming journalist whose previous work for The Escapist includes "Mind Over Matter" and "Searching for Gunpei Yokoi." Her email is lcrigger@gmail.com.*

“  
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”

## THE BURNT-OUT CRUSADE

by Greg Tito

In the winter of 2005, a *World of Warcraft* player with the handle Lozareth released a UI add-on for the game, which he called Discord Action Buttons. The add-on let the user replace Blizzard's default action bar with one infinitely more customizable, and thousands of users downloaded the mod. Lozareth soon wrote Discord Unit Frames, Discord Frame Modifier and finally Discord Art. With these tools, informally called the Discord Suite, *World of Warcraft* players were able to sculpt their user interface into any shape imaginable. A vibrant community grew at Discordmods.com, where users could share and rate others' interfaces. Loz dutifully updated his mods

for each patch and continually added new features. That is, until the fall of 2006.

Lozareth disappeared.

No explanation. No news post. No whisper on his forums. Just gone.

I call it mod burnout. The job becomes too big; the responsibilities too ginormous. With thousands of people depending on one individual, some mod authors just cease. They evaporate into the interweb vapor, never heard from again.

Think about it in terms of scale. The early days of *WoW* were marred by its own success. Blizzard didn't have sufficient servers or bandwidth to support the huge number of players jumping through Azeroth. But the company, flush with new money hats, was able to hire more workers and buy new hardware to compensate. Within a few months, most of the problems were ironed out. *WoW*'s backside looked presentable again, if not starchy stiff.

Now imagine that scenario occurring with each mod. A product is released, it's buggy, and the creator must correct the problem. In an organization as big as Blizzard, that's not insurmountable. But what if the organization is one dude sitting in his basement, wearing tighty-whities, drinking Dr. Pepper and coding until 4:00 in the morning? No one mod is used by every *WoW* player, but, if download statistics are a measure, the more popular ones have hundreds of thousands of users. While authors depend on their users for bug reports, not every dude on the internet is a great QC tester. Some commenters make impossible demands at best, while a vocal minority can slander or insult the author. If something doesn't work, it's the author's fault. That stress can break him.

The *WoW* UI add-on author is a rare human being. Usually coders of some kind as their day job, they find something in game that bothers them, and they fix it. What can start as a side project, though, can quickly eat up gobs

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## **Mazlefizz felt betrayed by the community. It wasn't pleasant having such a small issue be the most discussed portion of MuzzleUI.**

of time. "Over the last 15 months, I have literally spent thousands of hours working on UI development," says Mazlefizz, author of a complete mod package called MuzzleUI.

He goes on to postulate why someone would devote so much time to modding, the hobby within a hobby. "Part of it is letting down users and part of it is 'protecting' the time [already] spent on it. It's like *WoW* itself," he said. "You

invest so much that you could have spent on other things, you don't want to just quit and make all that effort seem like a waste of time."

Mazz released his package in February of 2007. Response was mixed. While most people liked it, there was a vocal minority who criticized MuzzleUI relentlessly. "I've had lots of really negative experiences with users on the forums," Mazz said. "People posted with criticisms of everything under the sun including, believe it or not, whether I thanked people fast enough after they made a donation. Post-release, I've had some very negative experiences as well. A lot of it is the normal variety, but some of it was a bit odd, like the whole Muzzlelegasm fixation and all the unfair accusations that went along with it."

The Muzzlelegasm refers to his mod auto-sending a "/yell" in game after completing the setup of MuzzleUI which read, "I just had a Muzzlelegasm!" It was a cheap throwaway joke, sure, but some

humorless people didn't take it well. The ethics of an add-on performing an action on behalf of an unaware user was questioned, as well as inane parental complaints that "Muzzlelegasm" sounded a little too close to "orgasm" for their young child's fragile ears.

After he put so much into the compilation, Mazlefizz felt betrayed by the community. It wasn't pleasant having such a small issue be the most discussed portion of MuzzleUI. "There's just so many young, immature kids, so many bloated egos and such a high degree of self-entitlement. Complaining and criticizing are just the status quo," he said, before adding that not every experience he's had with users was awful. It's just "the negative aspects have outweighed the positive aspects lately and have caused me to ... question the time and effort I put into developing my add-ons." To date, MuzzleUI hasn't had any significant updates. Mazlefizz keeps busy collecting bug reports and has gone back to just playing the game.



Not all authors, however, escape without real harm. Gello is the venerable creator of ItemRack, Recap, TinyPad, TrinketMenu and many others. One of the problems of being so prolific is the need to translate mods into other languages. "I had spent a couple very intense months working on the localization of Recap," Gello said. "It got so I could understand combat logs in German." He eventually convinced native-language modders to finish the job. "It was just causing way too much stress and time for something I would never see or use."

Soon after that, two French users demanded that Gello localize WaterBoy, a mod that helped mages summon and distribute water for raids. He refused to spend so much time translating again and asked that they mod it themselves. "Then the flame emails began," Gello recounted. "When I stood by my position (probably not in the nicest terms), they continued in earnest. I got an email with an attachment I thought was safe and

apparently it wasn't." The modern computer nightmare had come true for Gello. "I basically abandoned the email address, formatted my pc, ditched the mod and didn't look back."

On December 5, 2006, Blizzard released *World of Warcraft* patch 2.0 which used a new version of LUA (the programming language mods are written in) and introduced many API changes that rendered popular mods obsolete. According to Blizzard, the capabilities of certain mods had exceeded what was good for the game. Blizzard spokesperson Tyren stated in October, "Essentially, we don't want UI mods to make combat-sensitive decisions for players and as such, we've made some changes that block functionality that we feel is counter to the spirit of these philosophies. As such, AddOns and macros can't make decisions on who to target or what spells to cast."

The practical upshot was that everyone's mods were broken. Each author had to

review his work and make sure "protected" functions weren't called. Fortunately, there was an extensive beta period where authors could test their mods with the new API.

After a few months of silence from Lozareth, a new post appeared December 2 on the front page of Discordmods.com which simply read, "**DISCORD MODS WILL NOT BE READY ON 12/5.**" That was it: a clear, succinct message that Loz had stopped coding. It's still there today. But the veterans at Discordmods.com wouldn't

**Everyone's mods were broken. Each author had to review his work and make sure "protected" functions weren't called.**

let the mods die. Forum denizen Mud dutifully posted band-aided versions of Discord that functioned with *WoW* 2.0, albeit with limited performance. Still no response from the author; the release of the *Burning Crusade* passed with nary a peep from Lozareth.



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The commandeering of another author's mods is a common practice in the community. If the original author burns out, it's likely another will pick up the code and start squashing bugs. For example, there was huge fallout after *WoW* 2.0. "I have picked up two add-ons that were abandoned by other authors. Specifically, I think it was the 2.0 API changes that really pushed them to the edge," Shirik, co-author of RDX.cid, said.

Most authors allow and even expect other writers to review their code for memory leaks or inefficiency. The Ace community grew specifically with this purpose in mind. Ace is a common set of libraries a large group of mods share in order to conserve memory resources. Since so many mods rely on it to function, the people working with Ace have become a tight-knit network.

Having such a community has helped burnt out authors get back to coding. Nymbia wrote a very popular mod called, imaginatively, Nymbia's Perl Unitframes,

but the notorious commenters on Curse.com soon overwhelmed him. "The feature requests and bug reports piled up too high when I had too much real life stuff on my hands, I stopped writing publicly-released addons for a solid year," he said. "Things have been much more easy to handle this time around, in large part thanks to [the Ace] community."

In the past, Lozareth wouldn't allow anyone else to modify his code, but recently his thick candy shell has begun to crack. He has become more of a presence on his forums, creating a tiered moderator system and posting joke threads entitled "I suck. Discuss." He has offered links to .zips of his code on the forum, both for transparency and evidence that he is in fact working on it. He sees others as resources and inspiration instead of as threats.

As of press time, though, Lozareth still hasn't released his new meta-mod, Discord UI Builder. But it's possible opening up a bit and getting involved

with his community will help Lozareth get interested in modding again, to reinvest himself into making the game he loves more enjoyable for the hundreds of thousands of people who depended on him. [COMMENTS](#)

*Greg Tito is a playwright and standup comic residing in Brooklyn, NY. He is currently splitting time between World of Warcraft, a new D&D 3rd edition campaign and finishing one of his many uncompleted writing projects. He also blogs semi-regularly at [onlyzuul.blogspot.com](http://onlyzuul.blogspot.com).*

**In the past, Lozareth wouldn't allow anyone else to modify his code, but recently his thick candy shell has begun to crack.**

# Limit and MEASURE:

WELCOME TO THE WORLD  
OF ART MODS

by Christian McCrea

The art and game worlds, virtual as they both are, share a great deal in common. They have fanatical devotees and yet tend to scare off as many as they attract. Both are fascinated and driven by new technologies of display but haunted by their past lives. Their connection is increasingly complex, as the lines between gamer and artist increasingly blurs. Some hook up PlayStations to electrodes to shock bad play in fighting games (*Tekken Torture Tournament*, Mark Allen and Eddo Stern, 2001), or perform art-style interventions in online games, like speaking the names of dead U.S. marines in America's Army (*dead-in-iraq*, Joseph DeLappe, 2006-present).

Game art and mods also have their own dedicated curators and academics, working to link institutions together to make public showings possible, promoting the best works and getting into arguments with the art world where necessary. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image is just one of a growing number of art institutions that have permanent game art spaces, showing mods alongside themed exhibits of famous independent and commercial games.

Rebecca Cannon and Julian Oliver run Selectparks.net, a website that acts as a gallery of game art and art mods. They have written on and spoken about game art for years and produced some of the most interesting game art in the meantime; Cannon's *The Buff and the Brutal* of 2002 is a machinima soap opera between the often gay and always emotionally conflicted characters of *Quake III: Arena*. Which doesn't seem odd for a single second if you have played first- or third-person action games and wondered why the costuming, dialogue and acting is straight out of hardcore pornography.

The line between tradition and modification really begins in classical history, as the Latin word *modificare*, meaning to *measure or limit* in a contract, suggests a mod is not always just an add-on. The measure of a game is just as important; modders change rules rather than add them, or even delete game data to offer players a new experience. The reason this is such an important distinction is clear when we enter the very surprising and fascinating world of art mods.

## Early Players

Art has a long tradition of its own in modification, going back hundreds of years, as artists were commissioned to articulate classic themes in new works. A rich patron often wanted a portrait in the same pose as a Roman emperor, or a portrait of a mistress using the same pose his wife chose in an earlier painting. With the advent of mass production, however, artists had to switch things up to stay relevant under the onslaught of cheap images.

Enter the grand modder himself, French artist Marcel Duchamp. Already reputed as someone who would exhibit monocle-popping nonsense, Duchamp unveiled his *L.H.O.O.Q.* in 1919. It was a small, poorly-printed image of a sitting woman with a pencil mustache and goatee, which would have been fairly unremarkable if it weren't the woman from *The Mona Lisa* sporting the facial hair. He had modded the most famous painting in history, and you could hear the dropped champagne glasses around the world.

Duchamp had taken meticulous care to produce a poor version of the image, and

then drawn the facial hair on, ostensibly as a mere joke. Even in 1919, however, questions about Leonardo's sexuality and the identity of the sitting woman were broad public controversies which Duchamp was able to tap. Most of all, Duchamp was sending up how art assigns worth; why was his version any less valuable? All of these issues had come to a head in a simple child-like act of vandalism, the classic mod.

By the time the Pop Art movement had come along in the 1960s, such modification had its own tradition, and the wry irony of the age meant riffing on popular topics could always win an audience. Andy Warhol took industrial designs like Campbell's soup cans from the world of advertising, repeated them on a silkscreen and sold them as his own. Roy Lichtenstein took the Benday Dots technique from mass-produced comics, traced images to begin his most famous works and ended up with giant canvas explosions straight out of 1960s boys' own adventures.

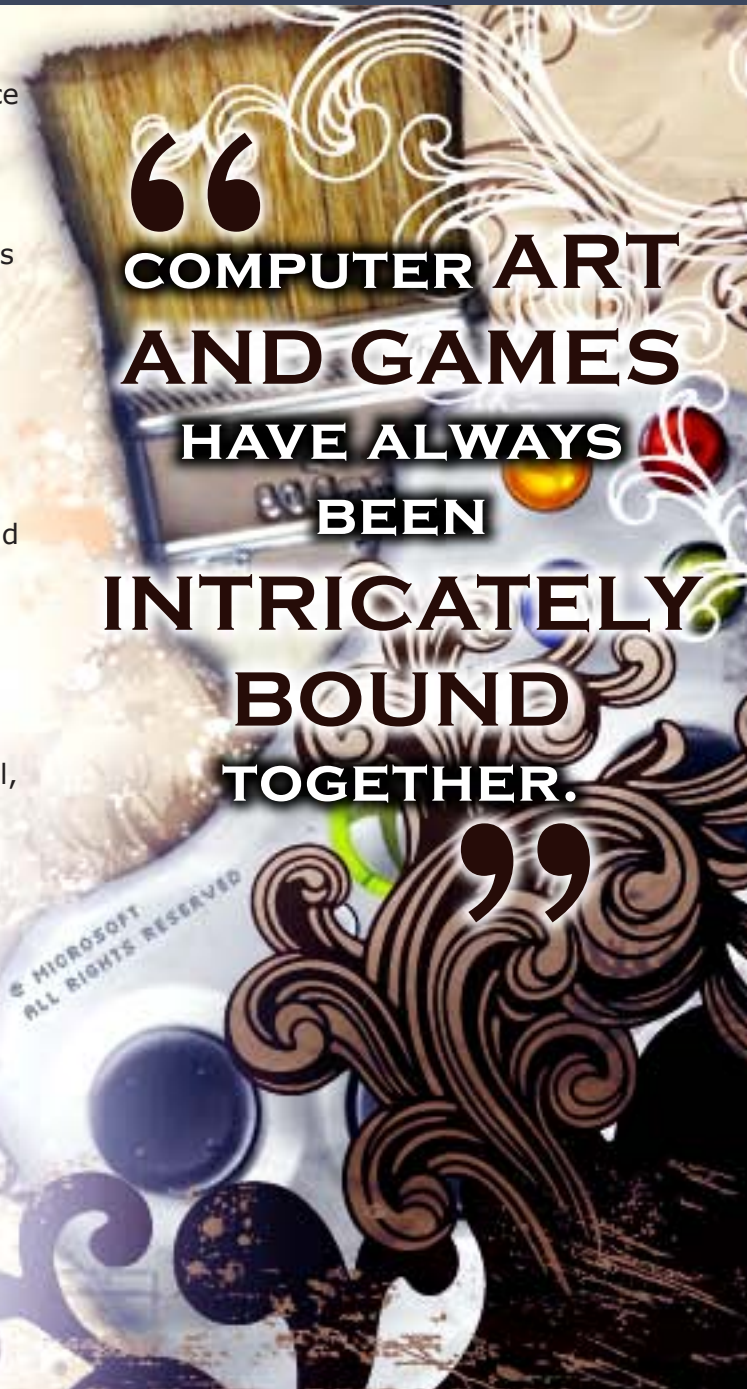
It didn't take long for artists to see the opportunities computers gave them for exploring the changing media world. In fact, computer art and games have

always been intricately bound together. Before *Spacewar* turned heads at science shows, visual screen hacks of varying degrees of use(lessness) had been taking over the million-dollar machines, much to the amusement of the scientists sitting at the consoles. Experimentation with hacking visuals often led to letting people control them. In these early, weird arty hacks, computer games had their primordial soup.

In the 8-bit days of the Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum, pirates and hackers often distributed copies of games with non-interactive demos and intros, displaying their mastery over the technology.

Meanwhile, the "proper" (or professional, if you like) art world began to show projections of digital art, and some art shows in Europe had arcade machines between the works to contrast the collapse of high and low culture.

But as mods began to impact computer game culture in earnest, artists took up the reins as quickly as those looking to sneak their way into the game industry. This is mostly because the art world is an industry, too, and works using



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modern technology have always been great for business.

Where mods add costumes, levels and alternate scenarios, art mods often strip things away to bare essentials or even less, or reassemble the game engine around an artistic statement or idea. The varieties of art mods are as varied as the games that influence them. Art mods are sometimes hacked, sometimes simple plug-in extensions and sometimes real-world additions to a computer game that permanently change the way you look at them.

#### Selecting the Players

Brody Condon's use of games in many of his artworks fulfills all the requirements to be called both modding and art, and usually questions the nature of both in the process.

*650 Polygon John Carmack* of 2004 is precisely what it claims to be; a model of John Carmack as modeled by the *Quake III* engine, but produced to scale in the physical world with polyurethane. Technically not a mod, it still extends the logic of the game in important ways and works with the same logic; build your

own model, use the system of the game, make it playable.

*deRez\_FXkill < Elvis*; of 2004 is a plug-in that uses the Karma physics engine, originally used to generate grisly death sequences in real-time, to make multiple versions of the king of rock 'n' roll twitch and shiver in a very weird floating pink afterlife.

*White/Picnic/Glitch* of 2001 is a series of 12 highly modified situations within *The Sims* with heavily distorted character models, acting out bizarre parodies of the suburban dream. Kids twitch in glossolalia in a park, while the father-character flips burgers with his massive, oversized arm.

Condon's mods, like those of many game modders and game artists, aren't usually downloadable but playable only in a gallery setting or viewable on video. While this can seem to be antithetical to the whole point of mods, keeping the work confined to a gallery is as much a statement as anything else. Perhaps one of the famous art mods, *Waco Resurrection* of 2003 (by Condon and an art collective known as C-Level) used the Torque engine and some C++ coding to

let players resist the destruction of their cult's compound with special powers and a range of weapons. The game was presented to players and gallery-goers with a David Koresh mask, made in polygon-derived form. To really play *Waco Resurrection*, you had to don the mask before you took to the keyboard.

Cory Arcangel has been taking another route with art modding, delving into the hardware to end up with almost existential results. For example, *Super Mario Clouds* of 2002 deleted all the game information from the original NES cartridge, but kept the passing clouds and sky. His *Space Invader* of 2004 narrowed down the hordes of attackers to only one alien. Lonely business, that invasion racket.

What seems to bind all these works together is they strip away some of the games' basic elements and ideas, rather than adding on or multiplying the things you can do. In that sense, art mods pull back the technology a little to reveal the little human decisions we take for granted. Violence is slowed down, exaggerated and poked fun at. Sexual politics in games are examined, mocked and re-organized. The ingrained mania

for control and power over the game universe we think is so normal and basic is pulled like a loose thread.

So, if anything, art mods **limit and measure** games, drawing the players and viewers to the little questions - "Hey, don't you think it's odd to have a 'sexy' voice option in UT2004?" "Don't you feel weird when you curb-stomp someone in *Gears of War*?" - questions gamers are all too familiar with, and may otherwise have no place to be answered.

What surprises so many is these works are radically popular with gamers on first contact. It could be because it is intensely satisfying to see our much-maligned medium getting complicated and legitimizing itself. What's more likely, however, is game art speaks directly to the gamer psyche.

By the same token, we constantly daydream alternative plots and scenarios for games that go far beyond fandom or idle mental drift; they are the continuation of the mind playing on without us. So it is that game art affects us immediately on an instinctual level. In the case of art game mods, the thirst for chaos and anarchy the game industry

sublimates is quenched by weird deviations and weirder possibilities.

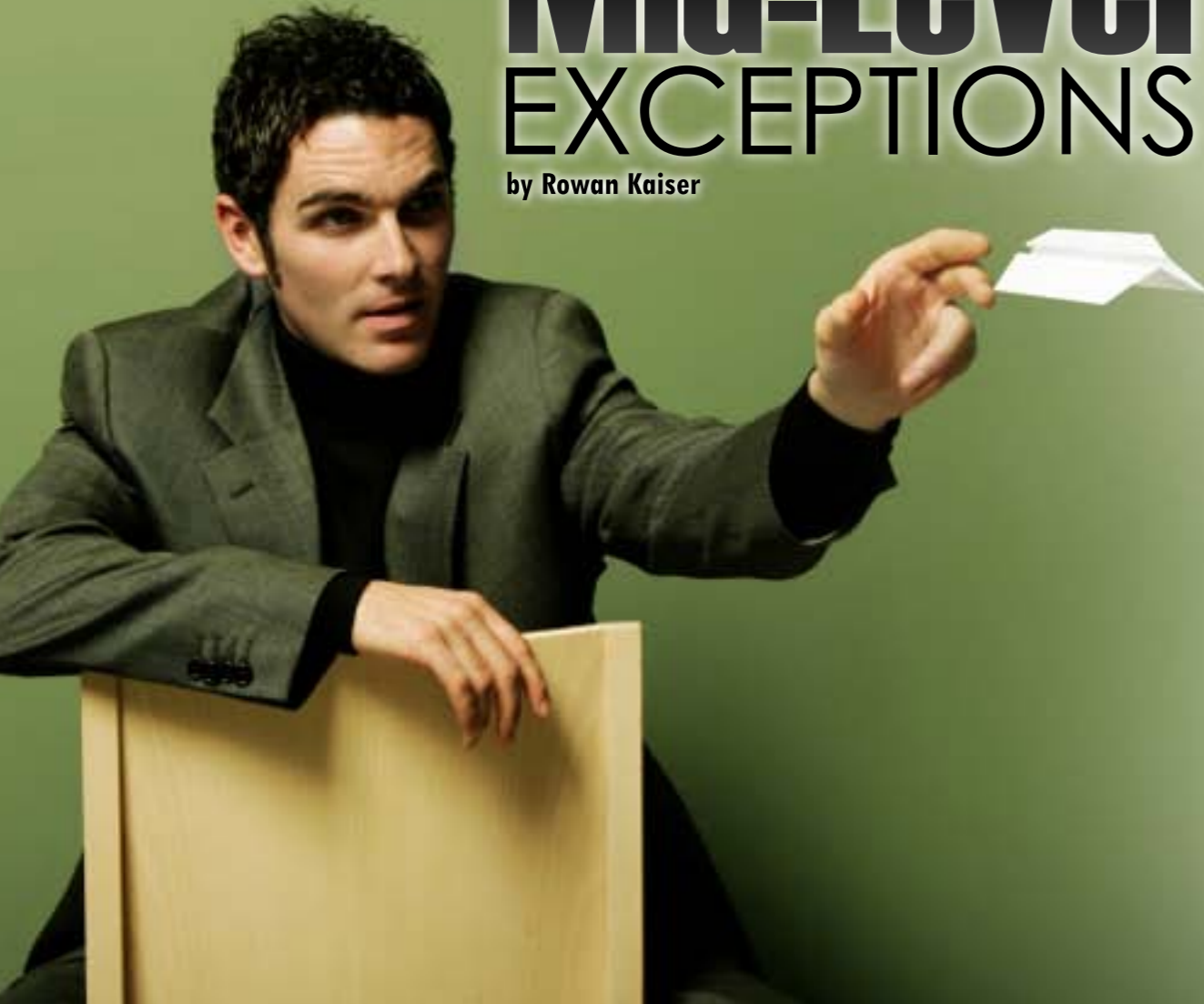
[COMMENTS](#)

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**“ HIS SPACE INVADER OF 2004 NARROWED DOWN THE HORDES OF ATTACKERS TO ONLY ONE ALIEN. LONELY BUSINESS, THAT INVASION RACKET. ”**

## Mid-Level EXCEPTIONS

by Rowan Kaiser



The process of imagination drives our culture's most compelling narratives. Be it *Lost*, *The Wheel of Time*, or *Star Wars*, these stories convey enough information to be interesting and entertaining but hide enough information to encourage fans try to fill in the missing parts. This can take the form of theories on message boards causing lively debates; fan-fiction, which deliberately fills in those gaps; or another story, later released, which answers those questions. These stories are generally fantasy and science fiction, which makes sense, in that these genres are the closest thing we have to modern mythology.

Videogames, due to their scope of creating an entire universe within a single storyline or narrative structure, have the ability to provide both the information required to move the direct narrative forward and to populate the game-world with back stories. The player's story is the most overtly important story, but the game universe contains its own implicit stories and histories. A roleplaying game follows the main character on her path, but the antagonist has her own history, part of which is generally revealed, but not as directly as the player character's. In

*Final Fantasy X*, we see Tidus' pilgrimage from start to finish, but only have brief glimpses of Braska and Jeht's. In a sports game, we play our team's games, but the other teams play their own games, which have their own results just as much as the player's games do. They must be imagined, however: Perhaps that Atlanta 9-0 start in the 2008 season means Michael Vick has finally reached his potential? - I wouldn't know; I'm playing as Denver.

A select few games reach the level where they demand the player to use her imagination. I tried to narrow down what games these were; what qualities made them special. What videogames have I played that made me imagine the story of the game? What qualities drove me to do the gaming equivalent of writing fan-fic? I knew the games - they were the ones where I muttered to myself while playing; writing the history, imagining conversations between characters, acting as pundit. In one memorable case, *Rome: Total War*, I wrote e-mails to a friend on the rise of Pontus as a Mediterranean power. A more complete list of these games turns into a murderer's row of all-time classics: *Rome*, *Diablo*, *Civilization*, *Jedi*

*Knight, Championship Manager, God of War, Jagged Alliance II, Dynasty Warriors, Wizardry VIII, The Sims.*

I found some interesting similarities between all these games. They are, by genre and platform, very different games. The traits most commonly assigned to videogames - genre, platform, marketing clout - vary widely within the list, so clearly the answer cannot be found within conventional boundaries. *God of War* was a very recent console-based big-budget, high-tech, hyper-violent, heavily-marketed hit. *Championship Manager* is a strategic soccer simulation series in which the player acts as club manager. There's virtually nothing in the way of graphics or sound, and the games are not well-known in the U.S. - quite the opposite of *God of War*.

So what, then, is the commonality making these games similarly great? These games are all missing a chunk of the story! A game narrative takes place on multiple levels, upper-level, mid-level and low-level. The upper level is the plot, the overarching story. In *Diablo*, it is the story of the assault on the town of Tristram; in *Dynasty Warriors*, the tale of

the collapse of the Han Dynasty and the machinations of various warlords replacing it. The lower level is the precise detail of what is happening; the click that causes the character to attack a skeleton, or to sell a shield in order to buy a bow. The missing level of narrative in these games is the middle level, that of narration. *Dynasty Warriors* is based off the popular *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* novel, and while it uses the same plot, characters and a few events from the novel, it does little to provide the larger context of the story. However, there was **something** there, a story I was missing, and I quickly sought out the novel from a library.

Paradoxically, as in the case of my experience with *Dynasty Warriors*, the games are technically weaker because they are missing mid-level narrative. Even though I consider *Diablo II* to be a better game than the original *Diablo*, the original captured my imagination, and my playing time, far better than its technically superior sequel. *Diablo II's* storyline was so much more significant to the gameplay, the goal of the game was to finish and see what would happen next, whereas in the original, the gameplay itself was the goal. In

*Championship Manager*, I would find myself wishing for more historical background, or announcers to describe what was happening. However, since I didn't have that context, I would invent it myself, murmuring in an English accent about the astounding turnaround at Aston Villa since I took over - my imagination was filling in the gaps to create a more fulfilling and personal experience.

Here, then, is a challenge for game designers: Don't give everything to the player. Take away parts, important parts, of your games. Take away the protagonist's speech telling squadmates what to do, so the player mutters orders and the squad moves from cover to cover.

But in order for these cards to be taken away without the house falling, there must be a strong foundation: the lower level. The player must receive consistent, strong feedback for every action taken. In *Civilization*, every possible choice is explained in detail. Specific information, such as the amount of production available from any piece of land, or the specific bonuses of any building choice, is readily available to the player. When the details of the lowest level are clear like this, frustrations and



“there was  
**SOMETHING**  
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guesswork are eliminated, and the player's mental energy can be spent constructing a personal narrative within the game's setting, instead of a narrative about how the game isn't working right, doesn't make sense or is too difficult.

Having a strong overarching story at the highest level is equally important for mentally preparing players to create their own story. The game universe must be compelling enough for the player to want to fill in the gaps herself. The strongest universes are in the real world, which is why sports games or historical games have an instant advantage – we already know the characters, the styles and the music. Games with strong licenses have an intrinsic advantage, as well. We know *Star Wars* for its characters and styles, as much or even more than any historical game. A more fictional game can succeed, but the pump is primed more for historical or license games, because we as a player already **want** to be part of that universe, and do not require as much convincing.

In the end, the removal of the game's narration follows one of the oldest tenets of creative writing: "Show, don't tell." When the player is in a game that makes

sense at the lowest level, and motivates her at the highest level, then she will tell their own story. Game designers who aspire to create games that become obsessions for their players can use these concepts as a guideline. Creating gaps, for the player to fill in with her own imagination, is the key to having a game they'll be telling stories about for a long time. [COMMENTS](#)

*Rowan Kaiser is a freelance writer for The Escapist.*



“ Show, DON'T TELL. ”

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