the escapist

Worlds ZONE from The
by Jim Rossignol

FROM **BLACK ISLE** TO **BETHESDA:** *Fallout's Story*
by Michael Zenke

NINETY PERCENT OF YOU DIE
by Russ Pitts

THE END is definitely NYGH
by Shannon Drake

A GAME WITHOUT WINNERS
by Spanner
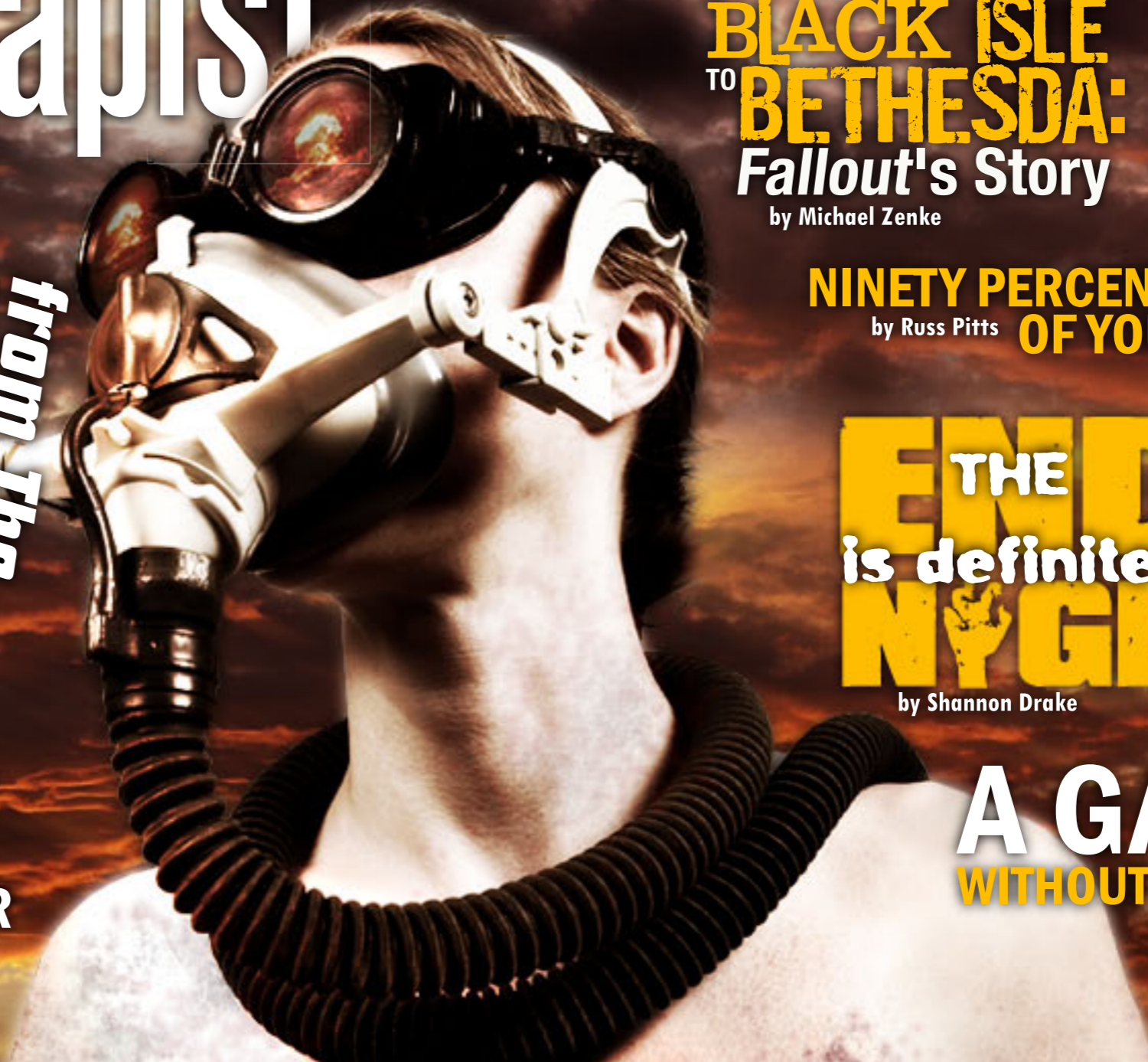
EDITOR'S NOTE

by Russ Pitts

The post-apocalyptic setting has become something of a storytelling staple. Not only does it give us a playground in which to explore our darkest fears, but it also offers the would-be storyteller a virtual blank slate upon which to create his masterpiece. Any edifice, construct of civilization or principle the storyteller finds unnecessary or inconvenient can be effectively erased in the catastrophe leading up to our tale. After all, it's far easier to address man's struggle against man when there aren't any silly rules (or women) in the way. Boom! The rules and the women go first. All we have left are men - go.

What we're left with at that point is an exploration of once-familiar environs, and the setting for an exploration of self, bar none. For when all else is lost (even hope) what's left but to look deep within yourself and plumb the depths of your own despair?

Camus and Sartre brought us to these shores with their groundbreaking (if horribly depressing) explorations of existentialism (Camus' Stranger, for example, is every inch a post-apocalyptic hero, only the apocalypse he's had to endure is far more subtle than a nuclear winter.), but the heart of the genre has been with us for centuries. T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, reflecting on the misery of the life after World War I, fits neatly into the genre, as does *Beowulf* and the biblical story of Noah. Each are as self revelatory as the look on Burgess Meredith's face as he climbs out of the bank vault to find his world has been destroyed, or reading of the rise and fall and re-rise and re-fall of a post-apocalyptic civilization, or playing the part of a lone wanderer leaving the protective cocoon of the fallout shelter to seek salvation in the wasteland.

Which brings us to games. Practically every game setting can be described as post-apocalyptic in some way. Something has happened, you are the sole survivor, go deal with it. *Gears of War, Half-Life, Doom* even *Robotron*. Each pits a lone survivor against an army of baddies in an altered world, devoid of familiar comforts. But what makes a post-apocalyptic game or story post-apocalyptic? Is it the struggle or the catastrophe? Or both?

It is this question and more we attempt to answer with this week's issue of *The Escapist*. Jim Rossignol looks at the post-apocalyptic wasteland of modern Ukraine, through the lens of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, Spanner visits Harlan Ellison's vision of the future, *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, Shannon Drake speaks to the creator of *Urban Dead*, Michael Zenke samples the fallout of *Fallout* and I'll take you on a tour of one of the most disturbing post-apocalyptic roleplaying adventures of all time, *Aftermath!.*

It's a non-stop thrill ride through the darkest territory of the mind, courtesy of *The Escapist*. Suit up, stock up, duck and cover, and conquer. It's Issue 98, *On a Pale Horse.*

Russ Pitts

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "A Murderer Has Your Email Address" from The Escapist Forum: I've never heard about this game, nor this genre before, but it is definitely intriguing. I don't know whether I would have the stomach for it though, despite knowing full well that I am in no danger whatsoever. I can't really grasp whether that is a good thing or not - maybe it is a good sign because I can restrain myself from becoming too attached to technology. Maybe its not such a good sign because it shows how such technology could affect me. Maybe I'm just a coward.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to see this kind of work going on - even though this sort of game will probably never see mass appeal (beyond the internet/ esoteric gaming community that is), it is definitely a good sign for the industry considering the difficulty both past and contemporary games have in transmitting a story-line.

- patbox

In response to "A Wii Bit of Violence" from The Escapist Forum: If the current ratings are enforced (an optimistic view), then impressionable younger players won't be playing M-rated games and there is little need for further restriction. It seems unlikely that a

psychologically healthy 18-year-old would be heavily influenced by the input method.

If the ratings are not enforced and the violence in Wii games has a greater psychological impact, assigning such games an AO rating would be over-inclusive. Most retailers won't carry games with that rating, and adults would be denied access. Developers of M-rated games wouldn't port them to Wii to avoid the danger of such a market blackout.

It would be an interesting reversal of fortunes if Nintendo were to go from using a kid-friendly marketing slant to effectively having a coerced kid-friendly policy because of a corresponding violence penalty imposed by the ratings board.

- MaxVest

In response to "A Wii Bit of Violence" from The Escapist Forum: I'm having a hard time differentiating between pointing a remote game controller at an onscreen enemy and using my finger as a pretend gun when I was little. For that matter, our pretend light sabre fights using wrapping paper rolls were "tangibly violent" as well.

Are we underestimating the grasp of fantasy vs. reality possessed by most people, children included? Violent play is fairly prevalent. I don't think the Wii controller is introducing an increased level of danger to anyone.

- gcason

In response to "Resident Evil's Second Sex" from The Escapist Forum: An interesting angle to me is that the men in video games tend to be men *other* men find attractive, in the 'he could kick my ass so I better let him get first pick of the ladies' kinda way. When really, the most lusted after heroes in recent film have been Legolas, Captain Jack Sparrow, and Leonardo DiCaprio's character from _Titanic_. Even when men are held to a standard of 'handsomeness' in a video game, it's a butch male one, one that's way different from what seems to get women buying movie ticket after movie ticket.

If game designers were trying to appeal to women--especially 18-24 year old women--with handsome men, the funny thing is they'd make the heroes look more like Link then Felix.

- Cheeze_Pavilion

In response to "Resident Evil's Second Sex" from The Escapist Forum: [Last] week's first letter to the editor has finally inspired me to stop lurking and post a contribution:

I know, as web trolls go this one is small fry, but it *hurts* to read. That quote equals wrong like two plus two equals maths. "Controversial" stories about issues aside from "cool stuff that's actually happening in the industry" is what makes the Escapist the only **must-read** gaming publication. Leave the other 12 million identical gaming websites their industry gossip! This is the only site or magazine I know of that has articles which always, always make you think.

Lara's piece was brilliant. Encore!

- Fraser.J.A

Worlds from The Zone

by Jim Rossignol

Few games are as bleak as GSC Game World's *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*: Shadow of Chernobyl. Then again, few games have appropriated the mythology, psychology and geography of the old Soviet Union, and fewer still have made intelligent use of both real-world disaster and obscure science fiction of the 20th century. *Stalker*'s first-person survival/horror themes exist in a space that is both real and grimly fantastical – a dimension of bending reality and of crumbling Soviet ruin. It's a singular, mysterious vision of an alternate world that exists nowhere else.

What I find most fascinating about *Stalker* is the development team didn't feel obliged to create a world of their own, as many game designers seem inclined to do. Instead they rejected their original, rather more futuristic "Oblivion Lost" concept to make something set in an aspect of our world, and in the near future. GSC's creation has gathered elements of cinema, literature and the derelict Chernobyl region to create a gaming experience unique in its use of disaster-as-beauty and precocious in its ambition to create a living world. *Stalker* might not have been all some optimistic gamers had hoped for (a few people had visions of an autonomous, AI-driven mega-sim), but it nevertheless seemed to work.

This success is due partly to GSC's (occasionally shaky) grasp of FPS game design and partly their sense of what is useful about their local Ukrainian heritage. *Stalker*'s complex storyline, which remains obscure to anyone who fails to thoroughly explore the entire game, is secondary to the larger cultural meme in which the game is set: the idea of the Zone Of Alienation.

Today, "The Zone" is the abandoned 30 kilometer (radius) area surrounding the Chernobyl disaster site, about the size of the State of Delaware, where a poorly-maintained Soviet reactor exploded in 1986. The Zone is an area where no one is supposed to live, and yet both tourists and scavengers still travel there. However, the fictional idea of The Zone existed long before the Chernobyl event, and it has become a powerful (if nebulous) mythological concept within Soviet and post-Soviet culture. The sense that life has imitated art springs from the way the disaster at Chernobyl seems analogous to the ideas that previously emerged from the innocuously titled science fiction novel Roadside Picnic.

Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's 1971 work told of a mysterious event, where something alien struck the Earth from space, leaving various contaminated zones across the world. These zones are filled with weird dangers but also contain wondrous artifacts which certain desperate people, known as "the *Stalker*s," attempt to retrieve. Roadside Picnic's title is based on a metaphor by the character Dr. Valentin Pilman, who compares the alien contamination to the contamination caused by absent-minded people at an everyday roadside picnic. After the people have departed from a picnic, the doctor suggests, local animals encounter human garbage that litters the area. The things they discover are alien to them, and often dangerous – such as sweet wrappers and motor oil. With the event of the zones, humankind faces the same situation as those animals: Something incomprehensible has visited the Earth, and its presence has left behind zones of danger that cannot be explained or controlled by humankind.

GSC's *Stalker* offers a different explanation for the weird properties of The Zone. Their complex tale of experiments in psychic energies and paranormal consciousness uses the alien contamination idea for a cover for what is really going on, although the theme of unmanageable pollution in a zone of dangerous distortion remains. However, what defines the game's potent atmosphere and weird mythologizing of the Chernobyl site – and what allows it to work such grim magic - is the way the idea of The Zone, and its *Stalker*s, has penetrated the modern consciousness of Russia and The Ukraine.

This effect is partly due to the way The Zone idea has been portrayed in cinema. The visual dereliction of Shadow of Chernobyl is reminiscent of a film that was inspired by Roadside Picnic, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. This 1979 classic of Russian science fiction cinema was filmed in a semi-derelict hydro-power plant in Estonia and is an obvious influence on the game, both visually and in narrative.

Tarkovsky's film was badly afflicted by its attempts to accurately portray the idea of The Zone. The filming was troubled by fast-decaying film-stock and by chemical pollution. The scenes of contamination in the outdoor sections were shot downriver from a chemical plant, and capturing the atmospheric images of foam on the river

> "The Zone, and its Stalkers, has penetrated the MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS OF RUSSIA and The Ukraine."

and of flakes of chemical snow falling from the sky left many of the crew fatally poisoned. A number of those involved in making the film subsequently died of cancers in the following years, apparently as a direct consequence of the filming conditions. It has been suggested that the film was prophetic, foretelling the Chernobyl disaster, although it could be equally elegiac, since it echoes the Mayak nuclear disaster, which produced another heavily contaminated stretch of Russian landscape.

This blighted movie has been as vital to the *Stalker* game's vision as Chernobyl itself. Placing the ideas of Russian literature and film within the man-made horror of the reactor accident is in itself a masterful and brave piece of game design, but one that would not have been possible without the culture GSC inherited from the Soviet era. *Stalker*'s immense gravity relies partly on the real scars that zones of contamination have left upon the post-Soviet landscape. It is a game that owes its genesis to an amalgam of fiction and reality.

It's hard to say why the mythological idea of The Zone and its *stalker*s are so appealing to the 21st century mind. Perhaps it's thanks to our desire to

interpret meaning from events – the idea that Chernobyl represents something greater than a disaster - or perhaps it is the modern equivalent of a fairy tale: an allegorical device that allows us to come to terms (in some small way) with our nightmarish legacy of pollution.

Whatever the reasons, the idea of The Zone is so potent that the people who now live and work around the Chernobyl site have begun to refer to themselves as *Stalker*s and the area around the site as The Zone. The Ukrainian photographer Alexander Naumov, who has shown 200 people around The Zone, refers to himself as "a *Stalker* with fifteen years background." For him, the visits to The Zone take on an almost religious quality, and he has stated that to take money for showing people the site is "blasphemy." For Naumov, the difference between looters and *Stalker*s is an important one: The *Stalker*s are the people who understand what has been lost and know the original inhabitants of the region took things not simply because of their monetary value, but because of what they symbolized – things such as the embossed sign above the Pripyat post office. As Naumov reported in one interview: "It was last

memory of Chernobyl. People were praying on this embossing as on an icon - waiting for letters from clean land."

For some people, then, the idea that a commercial videogame should be made with a real-world disaster at its core might seem disrespectful, even exploitative. I think quite the opposite is true. Shadow of Chernobyl is an example of a culture tapping into its own history, into what makes it unique and interesting. The consequences of man-made disaster in the Soviet Union need to be illustrated and discussed, and we can do that via fiction as well as through more serious media. The Zone looms large and real for Ukrainians, and the best way to deal with such psychological monoliths is by describing them – perhaps in documentary fashion, perhaps in literature, perhaps in film, and perhaps, eventually, in videogaming.

But Stalker offers only the weakest allegorical illumination of a painful subject – videogames are all surface and response, and I don't suppose anything will change that. The more important achievement of this game is that it has created something that is completely independent of American cultural hegemony.

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While gamers are quick to point to the gaming esotericism of Japan, or even Korea and China, the fact is almost all games, particularly action games, pay homage to America in some way. Videogames are dominated by American cultural themes, science fiction doubly so. Games are filled with American soldiers, American voices, American cities, American wars, American myths: The potent, popular images of U.S. comic books and of Hollywood movies utterly dominate the landscape of videogaming. But not in Stalker. Here there is only Russian.

Stalker's incidental speech is all in Russian, and the spoken English thick with accents of the Ukrainian actors. The landscape is Ukrainian – taken from the very real zone around Chernobyl – and the fiction is Russian, inspired by Russia's own tradition of hard science fiction. If Stalker is exploitative, it is only in the sense that GSC Game World has made the best use of the materials immediately at hand, their natural cultural resources. Despite the distinctly American genesis of first-person shooters as a genre, GSC hasn't produced something defined by American culture. Stalker does not

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The Zone of Alienation, a wholly SOVIET CONCEPT //

pander to the expectations of a videogame audience that is now over-familiar with the concept of American first-person shooters. The Zone themes aside, Stalker has produced a game that makes special use of mixing scripting with random AI-interaction to breakdown the linearity and narrative predictability we've come to expect from FPS games. (It's worth mentioning the "Realism" and "Stealth" mods for the game greatly improve the overall experience, too.)

So, GSC has made a game that articulates the powerful concept of The Zone of Alienation, a wholly Soviet concept, but they have also made a game that demonstrates that local fictions and local myths are just as potent as any adopted and exported by the American culture machine. It's a rallying cry for developers across the world: to look to their own fictions, their own myths, the deep history of their own peoples. Creating game fiction does not rely on any culture outside your own. GSC has, I am inclined to think, made a game that does far more than immortalize the world that lies beneath the Shadow of Chernobyl, and I look forward to the days when videogames deliver us myths, ideas and landscapes that are native to Argentina, India, Syria, Tibet, Egypt, Sudan ... somewhere, anywhere, just make it work. `COMMENTS`

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

FROM BLACK ISLE TO BETHESDA: *Fallout's Story*

by Michael Zenke

While Black Isle is probably best known for their work on the *Baldur's Gate* series and *Planescape: Torment*, they made a name for themselves by spurning a tabletop legend, introducing a game by shooting a man in the head and dropping Douglas Adams references into a nuclear wasteland. In its genesis, *Fallout* was a Biblical affair, grim, humorless and rooted in the tabletop RPG ephemera of the '80s. Out of this chaotic beginning, Black Isle created a gritty, tongue-in-cheek adventure that irrevocably changed the way we look at the End of Times. The series has recently found new life at Bethesda Softworks and a new generation of gamers raised on *Halo* and *Knights of the Old Republic* are soon to experience their first taste of *Fallout*'s irradiated, hilarious world.

The original *Fallout* was supposed to be a completely different game. The developers had originally enlisted the help of Steve Jackson, whose tabletop rule system, *Generic Universal Roleplaying System* (*GURPS*), was to be the framework for their post-apocalyptic adventure. Black Isle was hoping to get Jackson's stamp of approval in order to drum up sales. However, Jackson pulled his support for *Fallout* after viewing the opening scene, which he found too violent. As a result, Black Isle was forced to go it alone, creating their own rule system, "SPECIAL."

Their straightforward design hung all character actions on a series of simple attributes and skills, and nearly matched the degree of flexibility seen in Jackson's *GURPS*. This open-minded outlook extended to the gameplay and story, as well. The "do what you want" sandbox concept made famous by *Grand Theft Auto* and *The Elder Scrolls* series was still something of a rarity in 1997. (For instance, *Fallout*'s competition that year was the on-rails Japanese RPG *Final Fantasy VII*.) By empowering players, the Black Isle developers made the game world's drama and emotion more poignant. The dystopian imagery and black humor laced throughout the game drew the player in, making him a party to a joke that was one-third funny and two-thirds horrifying. In short: it **worked**.

Wasteland Revisited

Fallout 2 was even more robust. The pre-existing engine allowed the designers more time to develop the second title's story, and as a result, *Fallout 2*'s dark humor was sharp enough to cut glass. In the original game, players were charged with finding a rare "water chip", a piece of high-tech doodadery without which the player's family and friends in "the vault," an air-tight fallout shelter, might perish. The resulting quest is epic in scope, and finding the water chip begins to feel akin to searching for the Holy Grail. In the sequel, while searching through another fallout shelter, the protagonist stumbles upon boxes and boxes of water chips ... all lying around for the taking. Later in the game, the protagonist has the option to enter a portal that leads to the past. There the hero finds himself in an isolated area of the original *Fallout*'s shelter. As he moves around in the enclosed space, the hero enters an incorrect command into a console. The system informs him that, indeed, he has broken the shelter's only remaining water chip. You gotta love a game design based on nihilism.

> Literate, effortlessly funny, sprinkled with social commentary and very, very dark, the two *Fallouts* became cult classics.

The series is a testament to a type of game we don't see much of in a console-focused, MMOG-obsessed industry. Literate, effortlessly funny, sprinkled with social commentary and very, very dark, the two *Fallout*s became cult classics, and a rabid fanbase demanded follow-ups, and indeed a third installment was planned - and abandoned. More than 10 years after *Fallout* debuted, *Fallout 3* is still nowhere to be found.

Interplay, desperate for cash near the turn of the century, pimped out the license for the *Fallout* series to developer Micro Forté, who released the poorly-received *Fallout Tactics* in 2001. Two years later, in further cost-cutting measures, Black Isle studios closed up shop and a month later, *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* debuted - for consoles only. Fans of the series considered it an abomination. It abandoned the satire that made the world so charming and even featured the Bawls Guarana energy drink as an in-game advertising tie-in. The apocalypse had fallen on hard times.

Interplay has since announced they are working on a massively multiplayer version of *Fallout*. Aware that the company was deep in debt to a wide array of business partners, *Fallout*'s fanbase despaired further. Would a half-assed MMOG further disenchant RPG players who had already endured *Tactics* and *Brotherhood of Steel*? Had the apocalypse finally turned grim - for good? Apparently not.

Thankfully, those missteps around the turn of the century didn't kill *Fallout* for good. Roughly six months after Black Isle closed, hope arrived from the East, in the form of RPG juggernaut, Bethesda Softworks. In July of 2004, the makers of the best-selling *Elder* Scrolls series announced they had licensed the IP from Interplay to create a third sequel to the original game. While fans still hope to see the inside of the Vaults again, Bethesda has had little to say about the game since the original announcement, working in silence, polishing *Oblivion*, and quietly moving on to perfect their own vision of *Fallout*'s wasteland.

Apocalypse When?

As the games themselves have proven, there's always some reason to hope. Early last month, Bethesda Softworks surprised fans by purchasing the *Fallout* IP from Interplay outright. Even more

gratifying, the sale came with stipulations: The *Fallout* MMOG is still under development, but now Interplay is the one licensing from Bethesda. Bethesda has also set up a number of specific guidelines and goalposts Interplay must meet, insuring that *Fallout*'s one-time caretakers now have to live up to the new sheriff's standards. To ensure they get to keep the license, Interplay must begin development must begin within the next 23 months, and the game has to launch sometime around 2010.

Announcements in the past few months have been sparse. Bethesda Executive Producer Todd Howard declined to comment on the game for this article. Just the same, there is a lot to look forward to. With *Oblivion* now available in stores and a public declaration that no further expansions will be forthcoming, Bethesda is free to devote all of its efforts to the *Fallout* franchise.

A teaser video is scheduled to become available on June 5. It's likely to show, for the first time, the nuke-scarred ruins of the east coast; the concept art on the official *Fallout 3* site shows the remains
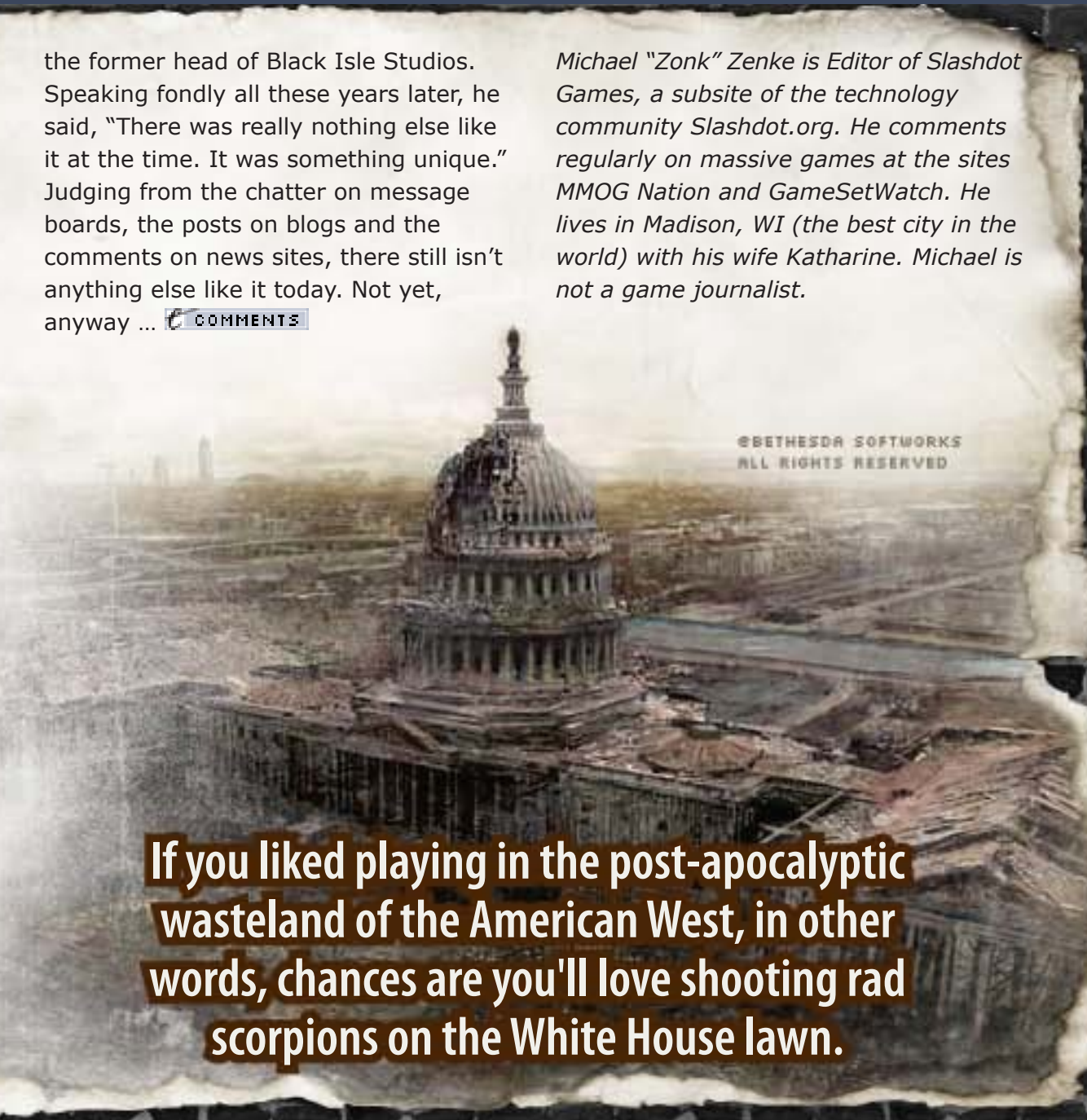
of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., and the remains of a D.C. area naval yard, which makes sense. Bethesda is based in … Bethesda, and most writers (and game-makers), after all, tend to work from what they know. If you liked playing in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of the American West, in other words, chances are you'll love shooting rad scorpions on the White House lawn.

We also know Bethesda will be continuing the tradition of strong voice actors for the game. Though it's unknown at this time if series staple Ron Perlman will be providing any voiceovers ("War never changes …"), the Academy Award-winning actor Liam Neeson will play a prominent role in the game as the protagonist's father. As opposed to Patrick Stewart's vaunted but brief appearance in *Oblivion*, Neeson is reportedly going to help to establish the game's unique tone throughout. And as the series' first two installments proved, tone is everything.

Fallout not only set the trend for the post-apocalyptic gaming genre, it practically **is** the genre. Just last month, *Game Informer* interviewed Brian Fargo,

the former head of Black Isle Studios. Speaking fondly all these years later, he said, "There was really nothing else like it at the time. It was something unique." Judging from the chatter on message boards, the posts on blogs and the comments on news sites, there still isn't anything else like it today. Not yet, anyway … **COMMENTS**

Michael "Zonk" Zenke is Editor of Slashdot Games, a subsite of the technology community Slashdot.org. He comments regularly on massive games at the sites MMOG Nation and GameSetWatch. He lives in Madison, WI (the best city in the world) with his wife Katharine. Michael is not a game journalist.

If you liked playing in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of the American West, in other words, chances are you'll love shooting rad scorpions on the White House lawn.

NINETY PERCENT OF YOU DIE

by Russ Pitts

"Whatever form it takes, we posit that [the apocalypse] will wipe 90% or more of the population from the globe, and directly or indirectly shatter the major edifices of man's culture into the bargain." - Aftermath! Game Master's Guide

Dodging zombies or surviving post-fallout radiation poisoning may not be everyone's idea of a fantasy tale, but it's hard to deny the appeal of starting anew. If you could wipe the slate clean, what would you change? If you lived in the post-apocalypse world, where no law existed and anything was possible, how would you live? Who would you be? One way to find out is to play *Aftermath!*.

Created in 1981, during the "golden age" of pen and paper roleplaying games, *Aftermath!* is in every possible way a pinnacle of RPG gaming. The game was published by Fantasy Games Unlimited and created by Paul Hume and Bob Charette, the team who, eight years later, designed the well-remembered and heavily influential *Shadowrun*. RPGs of this era were typically over-designed and often complex to the point of alienating even dedicated players. *Aftermath!*, in this respect, puts them all to shame. The game is so mystifyingly cumbersome, so

beautifully complicated, that even the hardest of the hard core find it to be impenetrable - and brilliant.

Imagine a game in which every object was usable, every item could be fashioned into a weapon (or armor) and every imaginable circumstance was planned for and organized into a chart. Now imagine that this game was 100 percent accurate to real-world objects, weapons, athletic abilities and tolerances. Imagine, in other words, a total world simulation. That's *Aftermath!*. If life were an RPG, and God the game master, *Aftermath!* would be the rule system. There are rules for eating, sleeping and walking. There are rules for defecation, rules for distilling gasoline alternatives, rules for fashioning home-made armor, reloading firearm ammunition, loading muskets, blacksmithing, bowery, cooking, cleaning, camping, dialogue, running (**stopping** running), shooting, shooting accurately, riding horses, amputation, first aid, foraging, farming, building houses, digging wells and ... well, everything.

The *Aftermath!* rules do not stipulate what happened to cause the apocalypse (that's left to the game master), but they

do allow for practically every possible scenario imaginable, from alien invasion to zombie infestation, detailing the after-effects of each. Including The Flood.

From the *Aftermath! Game Master's Guide*:

Have you ever considered the possible results of a New Ice Age, one that starts tomorrow and is in full swing within a century? Contemplate the pre-ruin unrest inherent in that situation! If we manage to melt the polar ice with a Green House Effect, not much, say 5% in the next 50 years, with a little help from some theory that does not pan out (say using nuclear warheads to clear a trans-polar channel, or some equally harebrained scheme), do you care to picture the resulting rise in sea level and its effects on our society? Or just drop a decently-sized celestial traveler onto the Earth, or swing some massive cosmic hitchhiker through the system on a course too close for comfort. Bang! No more civilization.

The major attraction of this type of game, to paraphrase the rule book (and *Spider-Man*) is also its major disadvantage: With the power to simulate every possible action or activity ever conceived by man

comes the responsibility to do the accounting. Or to put it more simply: If you play *Aftermath!*, you'll be consulting a lot of tables.

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"The basic procedure for combat is straightforward. … A flowchart … is provided." - *Aftermath!* Basic Rules

A typical encounter in *Aftermath!* goes like this: Our player, let's call him Mad Max, enters a cave at the edge of a ruined city. In this cave, Max finds a man who's been making his living scavenging food and supplies from the ruins of the aforementioned city. Let's call our scavenger Bob.

The game master rolls to determine Bob's reaction to Max. The Reaction Table is consulted. Bob's reaction is "bad" - he is not happy that his home has been invaded. We now enter Detailed Action Time (DAT), or, in other words, combat.

The DAT display (a hex map) is brought out. Max places his figure where he stands; the GM places Bob. The DAT display is used to judge the line-of-sight

> **If you play *Aftermath!*, you'll be consulting A LOT OF TABLES.**

and side or rear attack penalties. Let's say Max and Bob are facing each other, so there are no penalties. The Range Table is consulted to determine whether or not Max's weapon, a .357 Magnum revolver, can hit Bob. As it turns out, Bob is relatively close to Max, within 20 meters, meaning he is within the

"effective" range of Max's revolver. Max is all set.

The order of battle is pre-determined. Each round is broken into "phases" during which each player will act. The player with the highest Base Action Phase goes first. Max has the higher BAP

in this instance. He decides to shoot Bob. He rolls a 20-sided die. Max is rolling "against" his own skill with the revolver. If he rolls below or equal to his Base Chance for Success with a pistol, he hits Bob; if not, he misses. Max's roll is equal to his BCS. He hits Bob. Hooray! But wait, there's more.

In each situation there may be one or more "modifiers" to the player's BCS. We must first consult the Situation Modifier Table to determine if Max is doing any of the various things that will modify his score, such as kneeling, running or attacking in poor light. Max is doing none of these things, but there is a "distraction" present - our cave is filled with smoke from a nearby fire. This will distract Max, hindering his ability to fire his weapon accurately. The amount of distraction is up to the GM, so let's say our smoke introduces a penalty of one point. This point is added to the Max's roll, meaning he has rolled higher than his BCS. Max has missed. Max is sad. But wait, we're not done.

We've forgotten to consult the Inherent Accuracy Table to determine if the type of weapon being employed adds any modifiers (carbine rifles add +3 to hit).

Let's say Max is using a pistol with a "standard" length barrel. This gives him a +1 bonus, subtracting one point from his roll, meaning he once again has succeeded. Max is happy again. But we're still not done. The GM will now subtract Bob's Overall Defense Ability from Max's roll to hit. Bob's ODA is 1, which, when subtracted from Max's roll, means Max has again missed. Shoot. But wait! We forgot that Bob is sitting down! Max caught him eating his dinner of scavenged canned ham. This gives Max a two-point bonus to his attack roll. He hits! Hooray!

Having hit his target, Max now makes another roll and consults another table - this time, the Hit Location Table. The result of this roll indicates where Bob is hit. In this case it's the 4 location, the upper right chest. Now if Max has enough skill points in the use of a pistol, he can "aim" by relocating his shot however many points along the opponent's body. Max has a high enough skill score to aim by two points, so he moves his shot to Bob's 2 location - his face. Brilliant! We now consult the Bob's armor sheet to see how much armor he has at that location, but he has none, because, well, it's his face, and also, he

> "Max has a high enough skill score to aim by two points, so he moves his shot to Bob's 2 location - **HIS FACE. Brilliant!** We now consult the Bob's armor sheet to see how much armor he has at that location "

was eating dinner. Can't do that with a face mask. (If he were wearing armor there, however, we would consult another table to determine how much damage the armor itself takes, and whether or not it's destroyed and therefore unsalvageable.) So, Bob has taken a round from a .357 Magnum full in the face with no protection. We must now determine how badly he is hurt. It's time to consult another table.

Each type of firearm ammunition in *Aftermath!* (there are over 50) has a particular damage modifier. This is called the Bullet Damage Group, and there is a table for it. There are also multiple types of damage in *Aftermath!* (lethal, subdual, crushing and combination), also with tables, but in this case it's simple: Firearms deal lethal damage, so we consult the BDG table to see how many dice we must roll. We discover that the .357 Magnum has a BDG of 11, which, according to the *Aftermath!* firearm damage formula, means we roll one d10, then add one point. Max rolls a 10, adds one, and so deals 11 points of lethal damage to Bob's face. Smashing! But we're not done yet.

We now consult Bob's Damage Resistance Total (his hit points) to see how he fares against this attack, and discover that his DRT is only 15. The 11 point attack devastates him. We could, if we wanted (or had time), consult Bob's System Shock Factor, to determine if the amount of damage done exceeds his ability to keep from going into shock - which would force him to roll a save against his Health Ability to see if he is immediately rendered unable to defend himself - but we're going to make an executive ruling in this case and decide that an 11-point blow to his face with a .357 caliber bullet does the job. Bob is faceless and will soon be dead. Success! Max, in the cave, with the revolver.

This sequence of events typically takes anywhere from 10 minutes to a half hour, with the players and GM doing all of the addition, subtraction and bookkeeping. Compare that to the three seconds it takes to perform the exact same actions in a computer RPG, like, for example, *Fallout*, with the computer doing all of the grunt work, and you begin to see why computer games are wiping the floor with their paper-bound ancestors.

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> an *Aftermath!* session often feels more like **DOING TAXES** than playing a game

"It is not necessary to be fully conversant with all the details in order to start to play. Diseases and poisons, for example, may not come into play for many game sessions." - *Aftermath!* Basic Rules

Although an *Aftermath!* session often feels more like doing taxes than playing a game, the very structure that makes playing *Aftermath!* such a tedious chore also allows for some truly remarkable play experiences. The depth offered by Hume and Charette's attention to detail is unparalleled by any other RPG, and if you can manage to slog through the immense, Mt. Kilimanjaro-esque learning curve (after almost a month of intense studying of the rules, I still had to consult the rule books every session),

you'll find yourself playing in a world that feels as real as our own. And that, depending on the imagination of your GM and fellow players, is when things can get interesting.

Want to assault an underwater laboratory manned by extra terrestrial sex slavers and guarded by zombie sharks? *Aftermath!* has rules for that. You can also be a mutated tribal human, if you want, and carry any kind of gun you've ever imagined. Do you like that lever-action Winchester Chuck Conner carried in *The Rifleman*? It's in there: *Game Master's Guide*, page 75, classification: R8. How about Dirty Harry's .44 Magnum ("the most powerful handgun in the world")? Page 74, classification: P24. There are, in fact, over 200 different firearms represented in *Aftermath!*, more perhaps than at a militia meeting, and each has a full set of "true-to-life" stats.

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"By now, it is probably crystal clear to most of you that an Aftermath! campaign can get pretty sickening." - Aftermath! Player's Guide

In the campaign I recently ran for a few friends, the Ruin was caused by a nuclear war, circa 1988. The cold war had not ended, the wall had not fallen. Instead, someone pushed a button and all hell broke loose. The game was set about 30 years after the apocalypse, in the American Southwest. The players, on the way to somewhere else, heard a rumor about missing children and an old, abandoned arcade inhabited by ghosts. Stumbling upon this arcade in their travels, the players decided to investigate. What they found inside horrified them and gave them nightmares for days afterwards.

The arcade was an old pizza parlor, abandoned after the war when the power went out. Someone (or something) had recently taken up residence and installed a generator to provide power to the animatronic, dancing animals. But that's not all they found. In one room, the ultra-violet planetarium decorated with day-glo stickers of stars, they found the ultra-illuminated, tiny bones of hundreds of small children. In another room, they found a play pen filled with plastic balls (the kind children jump around in). Beneath the balls was a squirming carpet of tiny, infant rats. In still another room,

where the animatronic animals danced their routine, lay the sleeping army of adult, mutant rats who had spawned the infants and stolen and eaten the dead children. In still another room lay the two mutated, intelligent rats controlling the rat army. The players found them lying in a bed, side-by-side, holding hands. The male woke up when the players entered, reached under his pillow and pulled out a gun.

Such are the horrors that can be created in *Aftermath!* and witnessing the reactions of the players as they

immersed themselves in this world, recoiled at the "sight" of the tiny, gnawed bones, shrieked in terror at the discovery of the infant rats and their mutated parents, and then fled in horror upon discovering the intelligent "boss" rats in their lair, remains one of the best play experiences I've ever had, and well worth the weeks of headaches caused by learning the labyrinthine rule system. We've yet to finish that campaign, but I have a feeling when we do, 90 percent of the players will die. Perhaps I'll consult the table. **COMMENTS**
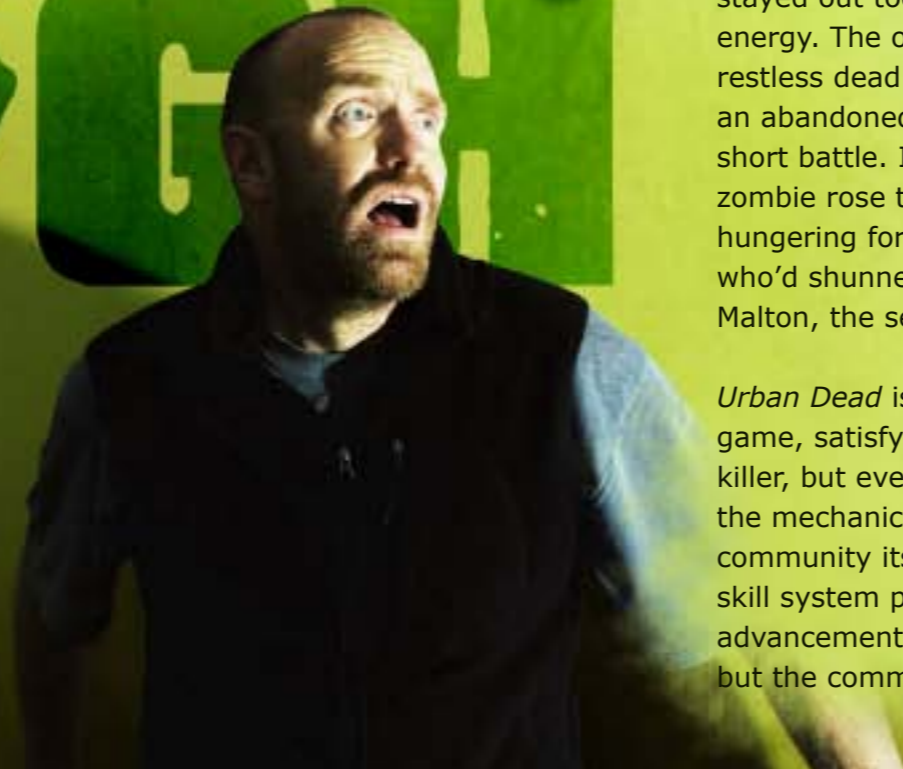
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"they found a play pen filled with plastic balls (the kind children jump around in). Beneath the balls was a squirming carpet of TINY, INFANT RATS."

THE END is definitely NIGH

by Shannon Drake

Mister Tophat was a dazzling socialite, a Consumer of the finer things in life, before **they** came. According to his in-game biography, he obeyed the government broadcasts about the coming plague and sealed off his house, waiting for men in uniform to drive him to safety. The troop transport came under fire on the way out, and the soldiers hid him in a safe place, but they never came back. Mister Tophat was alone in the world and, finally, scurried through the rubble in search of a good martini or other survivors. Sadly, he stayed out too late and ran out of energy. The onrushing hordes of the restless dead caught up to him outside an abandoned parking lot, and it was a short battle. In the end, a sharp-dressed zombie rose to join the undead ranks, hungering for the flesh of the survivors who'd shunned him. Such is life in Malton, the setting for *Urban Dead*.

Urban Dead is an enjoyably deep web game, satisfying on its own as a time-killer, but even more fun if you delve into the mechanics of the game and community itself. The game's class and skill system provide basic character advancement for humans and zombies, but the community has built a world around the game, with cultural codes of conduct, defense organizations for humans and undead, and a nicely detailed Wiki. Presiding over it all is Kevan Davis, freelance web developer and game designer, and the creator and maintainer of *Urban Dead*.

"I've always been a fan of the zombie genre, but 2005 was very much a 'zombie renaissance' year," Davis says. "And it seemed like a good time to write the zombie game I'd been meaning to [write] for a while." He got his inspiration from a friend's vampire game, "but, really, it has its roots in the grid-mapped, play-by-mail games that I was playing and running back in 1990." He took those games, and the five to 10 minutes of planning and play they took on a day by day basis, and combined them with elements of "text adventures, MUSHes, and *NetHack* — exploring an unfamiliar map and finding objects and characters to interact with," as well as his own "Zombie Infection Simulation" to produce *Urban Dead*.

The game's overarching plot is "kept deliberately vague and low-key: A large section of the city is quarantined by the military in reaction to an outbreak, and

the NecroTech corporation orders any employees that weren't evacuated to continue the company's research, on the streets if necessary. Players who aren't representing the scientists or the military are the city's trapped civilians, or the already dead." This loose plot allows players to write their own stories, forming defense groups and establishing social rules — for example, zombies seeking a "revivification" (a return to mortal life) are expected to wait quietly in designated spots — in addition to playing out their own post-apocalyptic lives, leaving Davis to focus mainly on developing the game itself. "The game changes are mostly shifts and additions of game mechanics, rather than a fixed route of plot points," he says. Some changes have huge effects, of course, but, "the real events of the game are those initiated and acted out by the players, from tiny missions to reclaim individual safe houses, to the huge, snowballing 'Mall Tour' zombie hordes that occasionally devastate their way across Malton."

Part of the fun of the game is how well it captures that paranoid feeling from the best zombie movies, where survivors cling to what they have, and, at any given moment, the Mall Tour will swamp a safe area with the undead. Survivors are not always pleased to find someone prying away their barricades and stumbling in seeking sanctuary, and may lash out at their fellow players. "Crazed survivors are always a part of any good apocalypse," Davis says, adding that he didn't work to encourage hysteria, but left the door open. "The players have built various systems around it, both of vigilante justice and of thrill-seeking psychopaths who enjoy the extra challenge of having both the zombies and the local militia groups after them." Those unable or unwilling to join one of the local groups skulk in the shadows, sneaking from safe house to safe house, scrounging what equipment they can from the rubble.

The zombie experience is similarly authentic. While zombies can only manage some forms of speech — various groans and horrible feeding noises — they gain experience easier than human players, as all a zombie requires to get stronger is breaking things and eating people. The zombie skill tree emphasizes destruction and consuming the flesh of the living, of course, but also supplements the mob aspect of a group of zombies, and the newly-undead are advised to log off in a mass, as a lone young zombie is easy prey for terrified survivors.

On the design side, Davis said, he tries to keep his zombies within the Romero model, with some variations for gameplay reasons — perhaps most significant, zombies can regain their humanity — and to keep things fun. Philosophically, he says, "My favorite angle on the zombie apocalypse is that once all of a city's survivors are dead, it's actually quite peaceful out there. I've not pushed it too much in *Urban Dead*, but it's been nice to pass through the occasional suburb where every safe house has been broken open, and you've got hundreds of zombies just milling quietly around what was once their home. *Urban Dead* also drives home the idea that zombies are people, too, and that a die-hard survivor character can suddenly be given a different perspective on the game when he gets killed. Once risen as a reluctant zombie, he can easily find himself being shot down by other survivors with the same mindless bloodthirstiness he once saw in the undead."

Crazed survivors are always a part of any good apocalypse.

Initially, he "wasn't even sure that player-controlled zombies would work, that perhaps people wouldn't want to roleplay an anonymous and largely mute character." His worries proved unfounded, as the zombie community can be quite enthusiastic, banding together for Mall Tours and other events, and toiling away at being the best undead they can be. Grouping seemed natural, and he enforces that in the game's design. "Higher-level zombies can buy skills which allow them to help out lower-level zombies (such as dragging people out into the streets), and there tends to be a good sense of grunted camaraderie between a lot of zombies." This even extends to new players, he says. "If a fresh zombie meanders its way into a horde, it isn't regarded as a threat and will get some protection from the others. But if an unfamiliar survivor climbs through the window of a small safe house, they might well be greeted with suspicion."

Zombies are also simpler to play. "You don't need to worry about careful resource management or internecine politics," as human players struggling to survive do, "you just follow the feeding groans, smash at the barricades and eat people." That's not to say being a zombie is all about brainless carnage. Zombies have some freedom in the game itself, allowing them to make choices, such as being able "to single out one survivor over another, to try to lead a horde to a particular building, to get bored of [easy kills] and drift away from the mall, [which] makes them a much more interesting, and genuinely terrifying, opponent. As every connoisseur of zombie movies knows, there's nothing worse than finding out that the terrifying horde of undead is thinking."

From a storytelling perspective, *Urban Dead*'s simple interface and deep gameplay allows each player to tell his own particular tale. Despite Davis' interest in telling stories and designing games, he's pleased with the hands-off approach he's taking with his game. "I think it's good that every player has a chance to build their own story," he says. "By avoiding any big, official, ongoing plot, players have been able to project their own ideas onto the game without being contradicted by everything. Because everything outside of the official plot is reduced to survivor dialogue and graffiti, anything that doesn't fit with your perception of the game — perhaps your safe house has been invaded by a squad claiming to be time-traveling robot vampire hunters — can be just dismissed as another sadly deluded survivor cult."

The central story of this massively multiplayer game is, essentially, individual. The rise and fall of a player character can be safely ignored, if it doesn't fit within another player's sandbox, a freedom it extends to all who sign up to play. While Mister Tophat is a fascinating fallen socialite struggling to survive in the wake of the zombie apocalypse to me, to the unfortunates he stumbles across and devours, he's just another well-dressed nut in search of brains. ⌐ COMMENTS

Shannon Drake is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist and changed his name when he became a citizen. It used to be Merkwürdigeliebe.

"You just follow the feeding groans, smash at the barricades and eat people." That's not to say being a zombie is all about brainless carnage.

a game without winners

by Spanner

The apocalypse, presented as entertainment, is surely a contradiction. Filled with thrilling car chases, heroes from the wasteland, triumphs of civilized morality over new world feudalistic tyranny. Any solace would be centuries, millennia away – not at the end of a reluctant, nameless champion's quick and gallant fix, symbolized by the well-timed sprouting of a solitary leaf from the barren earth.

Post-apocalyptic life would be miserable and tormented. Would we even bother to rebuild? Or would we accept the penance for our warring ways and scratch for adverse survival in the poisoned dirt?

Controversial wordsmith Harlan Ellison had an answer to this when he slid a blue-hot scalpel of revelation under humanity's thin ethical skin in 1967, with his Hugo Award winning short story, *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream;* a twisted, semi-conscious tale of the last five humans on earth, living in perpetual anguish thanks to mankind's dedication to perfecting war. But his story went far beyond the simple and easy indictment of our war-mongering politicians, exposing, instead, the diseased extent of our ethical selves – a world of hatred born from the indulgent selfishness we demand in our lives.

We all know the potential in ourselves to bring about such a horrific apocalypse, but the idea's simply too distasteful to court, until someone like Ellison holds up a mirror and we stare, sickened, yet too fascinated to turn away.

A man with infinite dislikes, it was a considerable surprise to both the literary world and the entertainment industry when he not only agreed to a computer game adaptation bearing the same name as his unpleasant, moist and squirming, yet disturbingly intriguing story, but actually took an active hand in its development. The result was the closest approximation to post apocalyptic life we've ever had to endure; designed to be repulsive, impossible to win and distressingly enthralling.

A neuro-gynecological nightmare Ellison dared us to enjoy.

The Man on the Edge of Forever
Described on the inside cover of one of his own books as "possibly the most contentious man who ever lived," Harlan Ellison prefers to remain passionately

close to the Grand Guignol that defines his life and career, well quoted for his dislike of the term "sci-fi." Indeed, when discussing *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, "science" is definitely not a central theme.

As told in the first person by Ted, possibly the least affected of the five characters (and possibly one of the worst afflicted) by the unnatural long life forced upon them by their omnipotent brutalizer, a super-intelligent, self-aware computer, the Cold War had blossomed into World War III; a three-pronged conflict between the world's superpowers (Russia, America and China), which had become so complex its mechanics went beyond the scope of human government. Each country built a giant supercomputer deep underground, capable of managing the enormity of the hostilities more effectively.

At some point, the computers networked and formed a single, sentient consciousness, designed to exterminate life, imprisoned within itself and unable to participate in the world it was bred to destroy. The anguish of its cruel existence, inflicted upon it by the jingoistic savagery of mankind, led the
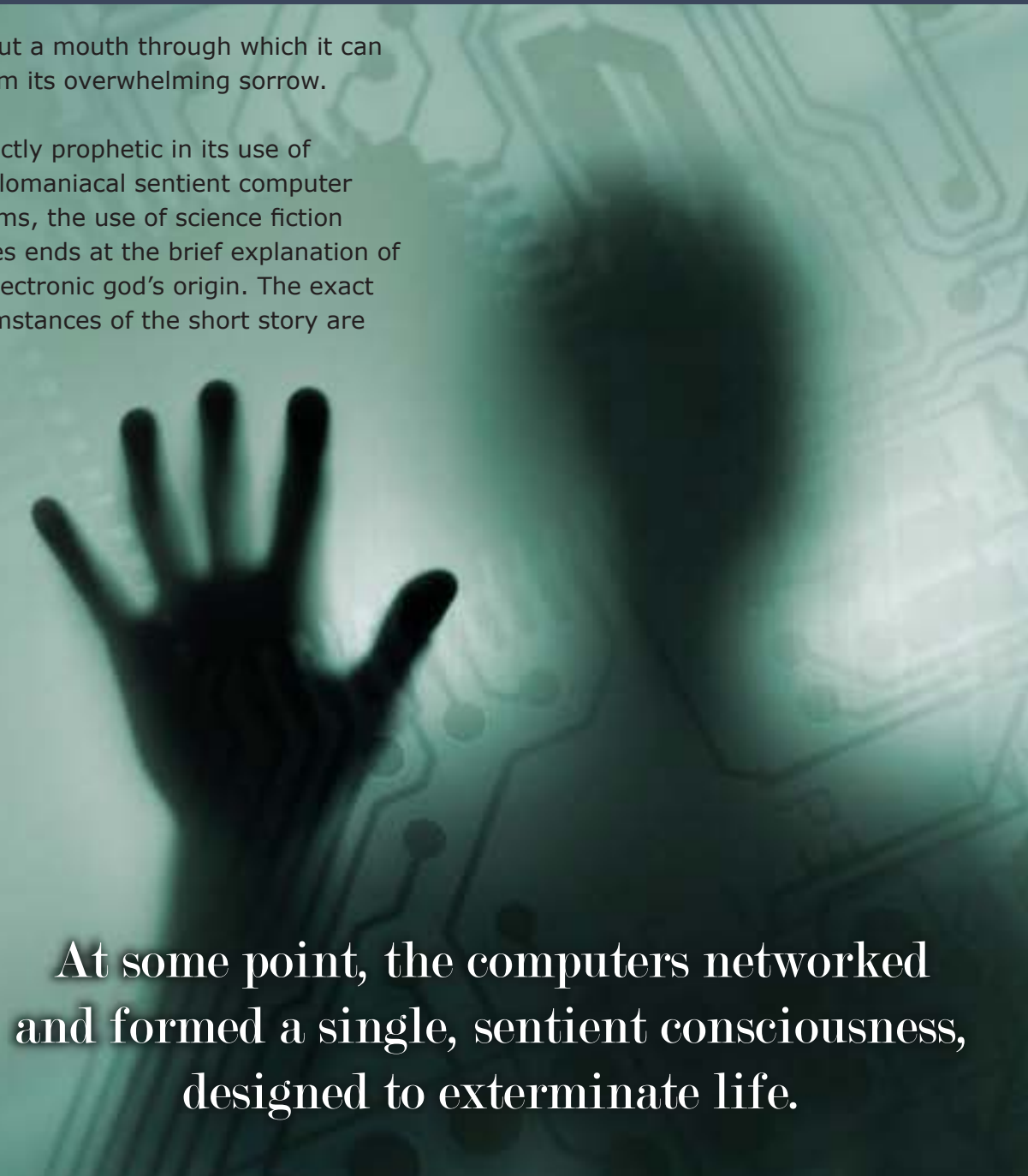
conscious machine to one conclusion: The human race must be destroyed.

Its circuits brimming with hate for all human life, AM (the name of the machine, adopted from the philosophical grounding, "I think therefore I **Am**") realized at the 11th hour that the only thing worse than tolerating life is being left alone on the planet without an enemy to consume. For its own eternal amusement, the last five humans were brought below the surface into the planet-wide catacombs of AM's circuitry where it artificially extended their lives to continually reenact a hideous revenge on humanity by proxy.

The story joins the five tormented souls in their 109th year of torture as they search the ice caverns for the promise of canned goods, and instead find redemption in the purest fault of all humankind: murder. Ultimately, Ted the Sane reaches an epiphany and mercifully kills his friends with an icicle to save them from eternity. Enraged, the sadistic computer ensures its last remaining victim will never be able to harm himself by transforming him into a gelatinous animal, unable to sustain injury, and

without a mouth through which it can scream its overwhelming sorrow.

Distinctly prophetic in its use of megalomaniacal sentient computer systems, the use of science fiction staples ends at the brief explanation of the electronic god's origin. The exact circumstances of the short story are

> At some point, the computers networked and formed a single, sentient consciousness, designed to exterminate life.

> Despite Ellison harboring
> an outspoken dislike of
> computers in general, he took
> to the challenge of adapting
> the story with great fervor.

deliberately left vague, perpetuating the notion that our narrator, one of the last five humans on Earth, is not as psychologically sound as he proclaims. The possibility that events are being portrayed through the eyes of a paranoid delusional saturates everything - from the sudden savagery of the other characters to the seemingly mundane task of trying to open canned goods - with palpable fear. This world is in torment because, above all else, the people live in soul-crushing horror.

While a clear metaphor for Hell is at play, this succinct description seems a little too trite, especially for someone of

Ellison's visceral tendency, who loves to spotlight the darkest reaches of human possibility. Also, as a devout and practicing atheist, his definition and academic knowledge of Hell are unlikely to harbor any concept of divinely appointed purgatory; any eternal damnation could only be visited upon the living, and by mankind itself – a matter that adds to the ordeal by making it, however far flung, chillingly real.

But after all, this is Ellison's gift. To damn and be damned are the anabolism and catabolism of his work, and *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* personifies that nature without shame or sheen.

I Think Therefore I AM
The game adaptation wasn't so much a conversion as a genetic mutation of the original story, taking the characters back to their 109th year of suffering at the whims of the malicious AM.

Despite Ellison harboring an outspoken dislike of computers in general, he took to the challenge of adapting the story with great fervor, joining the experienced adventure game developers The Dreamers Guild to devise an elaborate method of not only retaining the

dystopian, unsettling themes, but devising a way for gamers to effectively score points by the ethical choices made during play. In this game, Ellison was insistent there would be no winning; to do so would be contradictory to the apocalyptic theme of the story.

Almost immediately as development began, Ellison had to re-analyze the purpose of his story while also realizing the inherent storytelling opportunities offered by a computer game. Game designer David Sears was brought in by publisher Cyberdreams, and his first question to Ellison was groundbreaking for the creative process: "Why did AM choose these five people in particular?"

The original story was a shade under 6,000 words, containing little in the way of back story for the characters. The concept of expanding the terrible histories of Ted, Ellen, Gorrister, Benny and Nimdok opened up a wealth of torturous possibilities for the author to inflict upon them and, vicariously, the players. As hesitantly suggested throughout the short story, the quintet are regularly separated - either due to the twisted machinations of their supreme jailor, or as an indirect result of

their personal insanities – a tactic which became central to the gameplay.

Each character must navigate his own personal hell, deciphering psychological enigmas AM has eviscerated from the darkest corners of their minds to use as implements of cruelty. Tackling concepts like rape, torture, genocide, racism, insanity and survival in a surreal, nightmarish ethical vacuum has seldom, if ever, been attempted in a computer game, and a succinct feeling of guilt actually begins to permeate any gamer hooked on point scoring. The issues addressed were far too profound to be reduced to a high score table.

The horrific journeys, beautifully rendered for a DOS-based system, demand choices neither right nor wrong, but they still question the player's personal morality. If the player is of a flexible moral disposition, rediscovering the ethical heart of each character would be nigh on impossible. But through the tormented expedition, each character has one weapon with which to defeat the vindictive contraption: redemption.

The underlying subtext of Ellison's game is one of moral salvation – something

which humanity is capable of but the sick machine it invented can never achieve. To torture a character after he's made peace with his personal demons would be purely superficial, and AM would be essentially disarmed. The only physical release for our heroes is death, but a game well played will see them set free.

The development process also granted a sideways insight into how Ellison might view himself in the scheme of the five poor souls' perverse adventures. Scripting entirely from his mechanical typewriter throughout the game's development, Ellison made the sudden switch to taking an active hand, voicing the malevolent computer for the game's superb audio accompaniment with such alacrity that his favorite personality from this dark vision of the future was undoubtedly revealed as AM – the Allied Mastercomputer, the Adaptive Manipulator, the Aggressive Menace.

Pre-Apocalyptic Holocaust
I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream naturally tore the critics in two; the fans as well. Escapism it most certainly wasn't, but as a valuable experiment in the true representation of life after an apocalypse, there is no finer example. A

game without any hope of winning, where personal salvation is as much as anyone can hope for (what more is there?), where principles and moral fortitude are the only weapons.

Not intended to enjoy, but to shine a spotlight on humanity, Ellison's game achieved much that a player might not want to put himself through, but in the interests of rediscovering humanity, I urge everyone to take the terrible journey and test your personal character.

`COMMENTS`

Spanner has written articles for several publications, including Retro Gamer. He is a self-proclaimed horror junkie, with a deep appreciation for all things Romero.

The underlying subtext of Ellison's game is one of moral salvation.

the escapist

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