the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

As far as conveying a story, pulling a person into a world and mythos, games have kind of a raw deal. Goes against what most people think, huh? Oh sure, the **potential** for blowing every other medium out of the water is there for games. But right now? Not just yet.

The potential is high because of the interactivity of games – how better to draw someone into a world that to allow them to interact with it, affect it, take part in it? But if you attempt to wrap your head around a truly interactive, mutable, participatory game or storyline, you realize the possibilities are endless. A player must be able to talk to **every** person, must be able to move **every** object, even hit any object with any other object, must be able to go **everywhere**. That's a lot of decision trees that need to be written. And coded. And actual fully-designed-from-all-angles 3D models. Oi.

And then, there's the player inputs to be considered. Can one really feel involved in a swordfight, or a motorcycle chase scene, or a sneaking infiltration while sitting hunched over on the couch, mashing buttons? Not likely. Yes, some people are making some interesting forays into "true interactive motion," (Nintendo's Wiimote, anyone?) And others have made some fun attempts at virtual reality (Try Disney's *Aladdin's Magic Carpet Ride* at Disney Quest.) But the ability to gently flick a wrist and achieve the same result as a wide-arced arm swing, or sitting astride a motorcycle seat instead of on a flat magic carpet is still not **quite** there yet.

The potential is grand. But not everyone's a visionary, not everyone understands that potential, or even what makes that potential so special. Right now, we've just not reached it – there's yet so much more to go. And that's pretty exciting, to work and be around a field with so much room to grow and innovate. But along the way, the game industry has made some pretty grand attempts at reaching that interactivity that can bring alive a mythology of a world. And that's what this issue of *The Escapist*, "Moon Chases Sun," is all about. Enjoy!

Cheers,

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor: I had a gentle reminder a little while back on your forums of how difficult it is to bite one's tongue and remain respectful. I was "discussing" some WoW related lawsuit and near the end of it, I really just wanted to call the other guy out and settle it like (arguably immature) men. However, I remember quite a few times where undeniable idiots (maybe I'm one of them) have posted on your site and you guys have remained admirably levelheaded.

I'm just saying that I completely respect how The Escapist conducts itself with touchy subjects and opinionated people in an environment swarming with all walks of life. Very professional… and very appreciated.

Keep on truckin', Escapist. ;-)

-- Echolocating

In response to "Blowing up Galaxies" from The Escapist Forum: This article was actually a fairly good summation of the disastrous screwup that was SWG from pre-launch to post NGE. It even hammered on what was truly the most important lesson to be learned from the whole sordid tale, and that was NOT "don't change the game after launch", important though that lesson is. By far the most important lesson, and one which is all too often ignored or even denied by developers, is "don't release buggy, incomplete crap". Sony and SWG are the prize poster children for this lesson, and game developers refuse to learn this lesson at their peril.

- CountNerfedalot

In response to "Blowing up Galaxies" from The Escapist Forum: I thought the article was well written and an accurate representation of the nightmare SOE put its subscribers through.

At the end of the day those who, like myself, had been in game since Beta enjoyed the challenge that building a character offered. The diversity that the 250 point character template offered made it a challenge and required careful consideration in order to build a strong character template.

I was a Master Swordsman/ Master Doctor that was a nearly invincible combination of capabilities. It was an epic accomplishment to unlock the force side of your character and build him up through the Jedi ranks. Aside from the treasured reward of unlocking the force in your character, being able to have a multifaceted character of your own design was what most veterans miss the most. I have been in and out of game at nearly every phase of the game and I can only say this, I truely do miss the original game. I still occasionally play the new versions as they are released, I do however find them lacking.

I for one AM one of those who does mistrust SOE and still feels betrayed at being sold out, and having all my efforts (and subscriber fees) wiped away on the basis of greed.

- Beebo Oprek

In response to "The Great Gaming Moral Panic" from The Escapist Forum: This has to be the most depressing article I've ever read regarding gaming, humanity, folk devils, and scapegoats. You always have to wonder if people will ever realize these things, and evolve beyond them. Is evolution even possible at this point of the human race? Can we, as a society, learn to be peaceful?

Closed societies and neighborhoods are the scariest when it comes to these subjects, and it seems that the same rules apply even on the global playing field. Imagine what will happen when we finally come in contact with aliens? Or when robots form their own society? The ignorant and fearful outcry will be fueled by greedy headline writers, as well as twisted experimenters that want to see the outcome. Its more than just fear that grips people, as the mixture of sadism, greed, and curiosity play a large role for people that have the power to make a difference for the better, but decide not to.

- Darkpen

In response to "Will Bobba for Furni" from Then Escapist Forum: I think it is quite interesting to think in hypotheticals and discuss the differences and similaries between in game and physical rape, but juxtaposing an online rape victim with a physical, real-life rape victim is sick.

Speaking of theories is one thing, but using specific instaces with actual people, there is no comparison. Not one to be easily offended, I am actually a little offended here.

I understand the possible psychological stresses online assaults can have. I'm not ignorant when it comes to the fagility of the human mind. I won't discredit the damage that can be caused by in-game actions; however, it is more like harrassment than rape.

- Blaxton

In response to "Will Bobba for Furni" from Then Escapist Forum: Sorry Russ, but this reads like hyperbole to me.

I'm surprised you didn't scream "Why won't someone think of the children!" at the end of it with a picture of Helen Lovejoy...

I suggest you read Gearoid Reidy's peace and get back to me, because all I see is you contributing to the absurd Moral Panic about video games and the internet.

- FunkyJ

In response to "Will Bobba for Furni" from Then Escapist Forum: Let's flip it around. Let's talk about whether phone sex is 'real' sex. Or whether in-game, *consensual* sex is 'real' sex.

If we decide that virtual sex is a form of real sex, why isn't virtual sex without consent a form of real rape, when the only line between sex and rape is consent? Or are we saying that consent *isn't* the only line between all sex and all rape? In other words, are we saying that rape is *some* forms of sex--the forms that involve physical contact of some degree--when consent is missing? Are we ready to do that, to tell one person 'your experience of sex without consent isn't rape,' while telling another person--a person with maybe *less* emotional damage both during the attack as well as afterwards in the form of long-term stress--that theirs was?

Maybe the issue here is that we're not working with a clear definition of rape in the real, off-line world to begin with. Isn't that always the case though? That the real problem with discussion of virtual/digital issues is that the issue is cloudy in the real world to begin with?

- Cheeze_Pavilion

RICHARD GARRIOTT: THE ESCAPIST INTERVIEW

by Dana Massey

Few names are as storied in the hallowed halls of game lore as Richard Garriott, or Lord British, if you're like that. The creator of the *Ultima* series, founder of Origin and wearer of ruffled cuffs is now working on an MMOG, *Tabula Rasa*, which, he hopes, will expand gaming's horizons and bring to reality his singular vision of making games in which morality has meaning and characters are more than just extensions of the player's mouse.

The Escapist recently spoke with Garriott about his past, his present, his plans for the future and why he thinks most games just aren't good enough.

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The Escapist: Tell us about your early goals for Brittania and the *Ultima* series.

Richard Garriott: When you use the word Britannia, that of course to me implies *Ultima IV*. Because, prior to *Ultima IV*, really was the era that I describe as "Richard Garriott learns to program the computer and make games in their simplest form." And so the ideas that were put into the *Ultima* series pre-*Ultima IV* really were a scattershot of things that I saw in entertainment that inspired me at the time.

I can give you very direct influences of things that were happening around me or to me at the time. The cloth maps and time travel that showed up in *Ultima II* really were directly inspired by the movie *Time Bandits*. Similarly, if you look at *Ultima I*, [it] wasn't even strictly speaking medieval fantasy. It had spaceships and lightswords; that really was everything from *Star Wars* through Tolkien crammed into one game. It really wasn't until *Ultima IV* that I finally sat down and said that I now at least believe I can do the physical aspects of making a game, I now need to pay much closer attention to the content. Not only do I want to do a better job of the content, but I want to do content that is my own content. And that is when I began to create and craft the world of Britannia.

What's interesting about the creation of virtual worlds is that there [are] sensory aspects, and I've pursued that in the limitations of the technology we see by trying to make the world as reactive as possible. If I see a telephone on the desk, it shouldn't be just a prop, I should be able to pick it up and dial a number,

and if I dial random numbers, I should occasionally get someone. Or, you know, if there is a cannon and there's a door and I fire the cannon and it's a wooden door, it sure as heck should break that door. If I'm going to stop that I better find a steel door to try and resist it, if you know what I mean. And so I tried to make sure that world was very completely and realistically simulated to the degree that we could.

But then there's the second aspect of what makes a virtual reality interesting or relevant, which is "Why am I there, why do I want to be there, why do I care to be there and why is it important to be there?" And so I tried to attack that problem, especially starting with *Ultima IV*, where I came to the realization or decision that a major problem I saw in most gaming – especially most fantasy roleplaying gaming – is that they all still, to this day, have the same general plot. Which is, you're the hero and you know that because you're told so in the introduction. Your job is to kill the bad guy, and you know that because you're told so in the introduction.

In general, having played those games, the bad guy doesn't do anything particularly bad other than he just waits for you in the final level for you to come and fight him and kill him. And in fact, what you as the player do is you pillage, plunder, maim and steal and do whatever it is you can to do to become as powerful as you need to be to come and knock off the supposed bad guy.

After telling that story myself through the first few *Ultima*s, that was another one of those things where I said, "Look, we've got to do better than this, and I believe we can do better than this, and I believe doing something more meaningful, something with more depth, would make a truly better game and therefore a game that more people would appreciate and like."

TE: You mentioned that generic storyline. In the introduction to our last issue on this theme we mentioned "The Hero With 1,000 Faces," the basic story that all these games and all this literature follows, do you subscribe to that or do you feel a different way?

RG: Yep. I am a big believer in what I'll call the Joseph Campbell version of "The Hero's Journey." My simplification and retelling of it goes something like this: Your main character is usually someone who finds himself facing the ultimate challenge that they're ill-equipped to even begin to face because of their lack of personal preparedness. Even though ostensibly the story is about accomplishing the great goal of solving the world's problems, the real and important story is about the main character, where that main character actually has to grow and rise above their own personal demons, personal challenges or personal failings to become the person that is worthy and capable of solving the Great Problem. And so the Great Problem is really secondary in a way. That is what I think most games missed out on.

Yeah sure, they start you out at level one, where you're physically wimpy and you pillage and plunder and kill and maim in order to become physically powerful, but I think that misses the point. The point is not whether you have strong enough muscles or big enough guns to win, the issue should be: What have you learned? What wisdom have you gained from the beginning through to the end that really means you're now the appropriate person to solve the problem? Why are you worthy, not why are you tough enough? And most gaming is about how you become tough enough, not how you become worthy.

TE: When you set out to create this new universe for *Tabula Rasa*, what was your larger goal in that world?

> "We really wanted to create a living, breathing, **COMPLETE REALITY FROM SCRATCH**, to the depth of the later *Ultima*s, but all in one fell swoop."

RG: What's interesting about *Ultima* is that when I first started down this path, the state of the art of gaming was relatively simple, and so the sophistication of these systems was relatively minimal. If you look at the intellectual property that you might consider the bedrock of the *Ultima* series now, that bedrock evolved over 10 or 15 years, starting really with *Ultima IV*, but all the way through *Ultima IX*, those systems become more and more sophisticated, more and more consistent, more and more in depth over time.

One of the real tricks with *Tabula Rasa* [was] that we were really ready to start a whole new world over from scratch. It wasn't going to be Tolkein-esque; we were going to avoid medieval fantasy, because we've done it for 20 years. It might be sci-fi, but it was not going to be *Star Wars*-ian or any other obvious touchstone you can pick up. We're going to invent our own reality from scratch. But as games have become more sophisticated now, we basically had to accomplish 10 or 20 years of *Ultima* all in one cycle. It's one of the things that have taken us such a long road to really get things done right, especially here with *Tabula Rasa*. We really wanted to create a living, breathing, complete reality from scratch, to the depth of the later *Ultima*s, but all in one fell swoop.

TE: You've described, in speaking about the evolution of *Tabula Rasa*, what you call "ethical parables." How do these expand the play possibilities over typical MMOGs? Are they essentially missions that give people a chance to examine both sides of a problem?

RG: Exactly. When I started *Tabula Rasa*, in addition to things like the language, we also set off to build a virtue system very much like *Ultima*'s, but not *Ultima*'s. We really broke it down to its individual circumstance and its individual needs. So some of the tests and factions you might engage have fairly deep and sophisticated levels of interactions, if appropriate, and others are even a very small thread of an issue to showcase.

When I look back across the whole later *Ultima* series, starting with *Ultima IV*, each game had, [at] the core of its story, some contemporary issue that I would mutate into a medieval setting and put in the game in a way where honestly I am not sure how many people would recognize it as being inspired by the contemporary social issue that was plaguing the world where I lived at the time. But **I** knew, and I felt it made for a rich and poignant storyline.

We filled *Tabula Rasa* with these kinds of story threads. We've taken a wide variety of contemporary issues and built story arcs out of them. One issue is drugs, another major story thread is ecology and another has to do with principals of war and when is a war worth fighting? At what cost is it worth fighting?

For all of these issues, which are really quite contemporary issues, what I've tried to do is represent them without regard to my opinion. … We show [players] both the good from the choice that they did make, and also what happens to the people who lobby for or live on the other side of that issue. If you don't end up supporting or favoring them, they really will see some loss and we expose that to you.

In the real world, we're often kind of sanitized away from seeing other people's perspectives or the ramifications of our actions. If you do not give to the poor, you generally do not have to watch the poor starve to death. In our game, if you

think the poor have been served well enough, and you don't think it's appropriate to pay more taxes or whatever it might be, we will support that decision as is reasonable from certain perspectives, but then we'll also show you ... those downsides too. The goal is not to evangelize about one side or the other of any of these issues; the goal is to make people sit back and notice the ramifications of these decisions and to provoke thought. I'm a big believer in challenging people's assumptions.

> "most people creating games are far more worried about the next physical puzzle, **THE NEXT TREASURE TO LOOT**, the next creature to kill, ... than they are about doing something more sophisticated"

TE: Emotion is **the** buzzword these days. How do you think games can be made to bring about more of an emotional response?

RG: Where and why and how I think [most] games fail has to do with character development. If you look at emotion in a linear narrative, it usually comes first of all from creating characters and situations and places that the player, or the reader has a fondness for or is tied to in some way, and then having a change or catastrophe occur to that person, place or thing. Developing characters that you become invested in is the first step for generating any kind of emotion in my mind. I'm not sure if that is literarily accurate, but that is my personal, perhaps oversimplified take on it.

In a book or a movie you can take the time to dwell on a handful of main characters who not only emerge over and over again in the script, but act precisely as is written. In the case of gaming, you have the additional problem that the person who you might think of as the main character – the reader, or the player in this case – can almost immediately turn 90 degrees, walk away and go somewhere else or hit the space bar and skip past most of their dialogue.

So the ways we build personal attachment to characters and places in a game has to be done in a more sophisticated way. I don't think it's an impossible way by any means.

A big part of it is some fairly simple steps go a long way. Some things like making sure the bad guy, instead of just waiting for you to come kill him in the final level, gets out into the game and mixes it up with NPCs and even mixes it up with player prior to the finale, to where the player gets to know them personally and gets to know why they might dislike them, or why they're working against them, or why is that guy worthy of being your opponent, or why is that guy appropriate to be your opponent. The same thing would be true of love interests or comic relief or almost any of the other kinds of emotional strings that you might want to pull. I think that most people creating games are far more worried about the next physical puzzle, the next treasure to loot, the next creature to kill, … than they are about doing something more sophisticated, more difficult, but also more worthwhile, which is to take much more care in your story crafting.

TE: As a designer and storyteller, you started in RPGs and then moved to MMOGs. Why do you feel that that is the best place for you to tell stories?

RG: Oh, I think MMOGs are actually a particularly challenging place to tell stories. I would not describe it as the best, or definitely not the **easiest** place to tell tales.

As a game designer, of course there are a wide variety of reasons why you might want to play in different genres or play in different models like MMOGs. For me, the compelling reason to be in MMOGs vs. solo-player games comes from what I believe is a fundamental human need to share experiences.

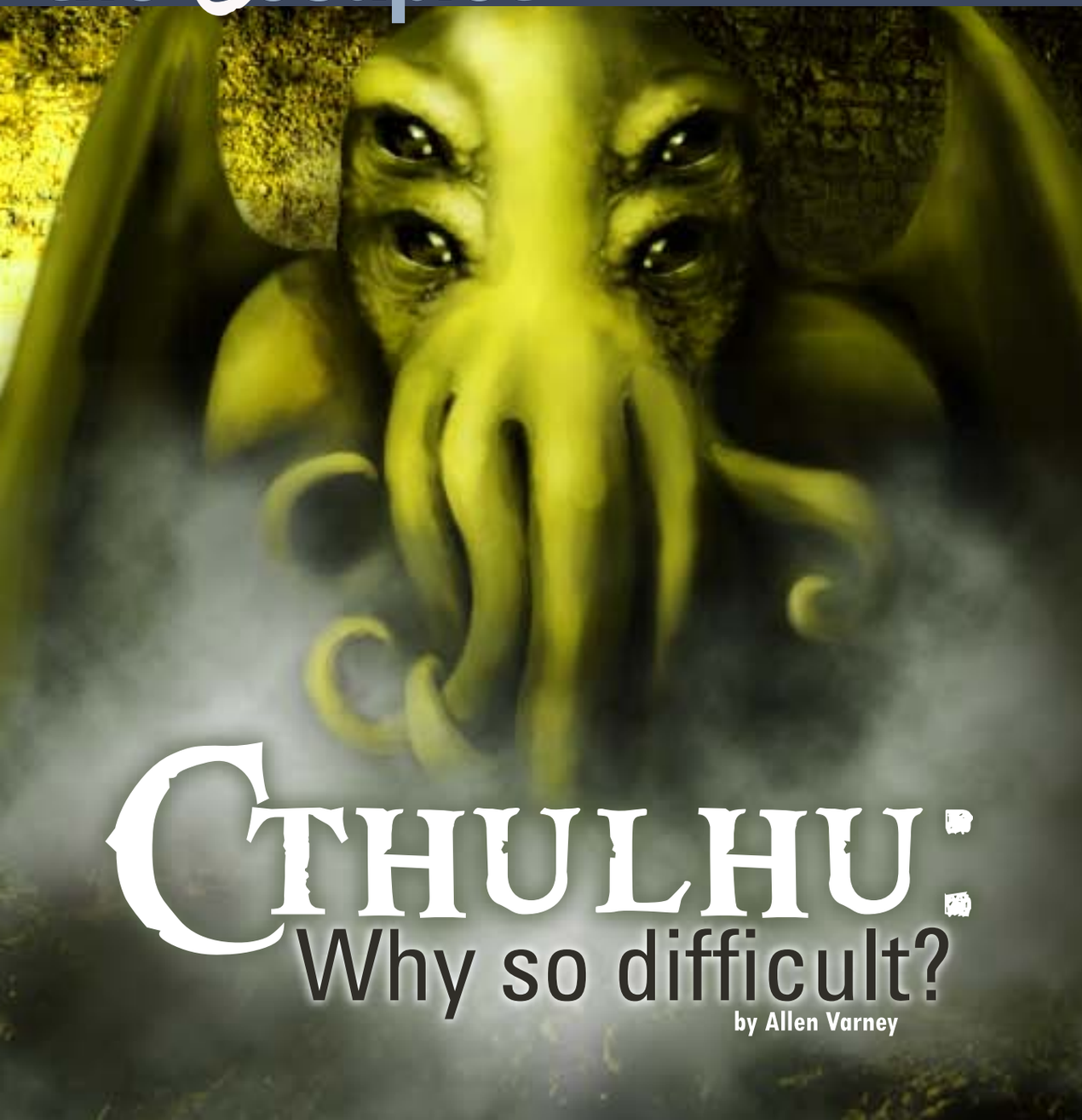
People don't even do extraordinarily passive things like going to the movies by themselves, generally. The vast majority of people don't go to the movies unless they have a friend that they can take with them … even though in a movie theater, people just end up staring at the screen, so to speak, and [don't interact] with the friend they brought with them, until the end of the movie. But still, that compulsion to be with your friends and share those experiences with other members of the human race is incredibly strong. And so, in spite of the difficulties of telling stories in a massively multiplayer setting, I think the importance of being in the massively multiplayer setting outweighs the additional challenge of trying to tell stories there.

TE: Do you think you'll ever go back to working on single-player games?

TG: I would still very much enjoy doing single-player RPGs. By all means, that would be highly desirable, but it is also not necessary for me. If for some reason, after I spend a few years playing in the MMOG space, I could easily see my self jumping back into single-player or picking up whatever the next trend is and trying a crack at it in whatever the next new genre is. COMMENTS

Dana "Lepidus" Massey is the Senior Editor for WarCry.com and former Co-Lead Game Designer for Wish.

"I would still very much enjoy doing **SINGLE-PLAYER RPGS.**"



Cthulhu: Why so difficult?

by Allen Varney

It shouldn't be **so** hard – though it seems, by all evidence, terrifyingly hard – to create computer games based on the Cthulhu Mythos horror stories of H. P. Lovecraft.

You'd think publishers would be interested, because Lovecraft's work has serious legs. Nine-tenths of the bestselling novels of the 1930s have quietly drowned; meanwhile, for the last 50 years, this prim, eccentric antiquarian gentleman of Providence, who published in fanzines with two-digit print runs and died in 1937, has unfalteringly sold better every decade. To put that another way, each of the last four decades was, in its turn, the biggest Lovecraft ever had – and this decade is bigger yet. The critics who dismissed HPL as "sub-literary" must now confront three Penguin Classics Lovecraft collections. Today, Lovecraft still profoundly influences each new generation of readers and gamers. People will be reading him long after they've forgotten (look in your heart, you know it's true) Ernest Hemingway. In the literature of cosmic horror, Lovecraft remains the epitome, the writer to beat.

HPL's ideas have also crept into a few films. No, not *Hellboy,* where the key to defeating the tentacled boss-monster is a few sticks of dynamite, and **definitely** not Stuart Gordon's gore-fests *Re-Animator* or *From Beyond.* But fans may recall the 1991 made-for-cable movie *Cast a Deadly Spell*, and true aficionados own the H. P. Lovecraft Historical Society's ultra-low-budget (and silent!) 2005 adaptation of "The Call of Cthulhu."

From a game design viewpoint, the Cthulhoid vibe includes many neat ingredients: cool monsters; vile, degenerate cultists; bizarre texts and magic; vivid alien settings; and deserted cities. For computer games, "deserted" is always good. Chaosium's classic 1980 *Call of Cthulhu* tabletop roleplaying game, still the chief popularizer of Lovecraft's work today, has spawned dozens of scenario books, each a stupendous source of plots. There was a decent CCG (*Mythos*) and two dozen Cthulhoid boardgames. These games bring with them a ready-made audience. Well, at least the ones still in print.

Mythos ideas permeate game-geek culture, marked by active fansites like Yog-Sothoth.com and, perhaps more telling, by a crawling horde of parodies. See, for instance, John Kovalic's

Pokethulhu and John Hansen's slideshow "Tales of the Plush Cthulhu." ("The stars were right again and a band of innocent stuffed animals had released Him into the world by accident. 'Uh, oh,' said Baby Boy Fluffy Bunny.") "Tales" stars one of many Chthulhoid dolls, hats and slippers from ToyVault.

So there's interest. Lovecraft's works are in the public domain. What's stopping the game publishers?

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For Lovecraftian computer games, the stars have never really been right. Of the entries in the skimpy MobyGames Lovecraft games group, the only high-rated game is Michael S. Gentry's 1998 *Anchorhead* – a text adventure. Wikipedia's Lovecraftian videogames list is littered with trivial cases, passing mentions and feeble pretenders. The high points are few:

- *CoC* designer Sandy Petersen left Chaosium for id Software, where he worked on the original *Quake*. The game's final boss is the monstrous Elder God of fertility, Shub-Niggurath.
- The first game in the long-running *Alone in the Dark* series had a Chaosium *CoC* license attached early in its development, but the connection was dropped before publication in 1992. Too bad, for this pioneering 3-D adventure was the era's closest approach to Lovecraft. The player's spooky search through a monster-haunted house turned up a back story right out of HPL's novel *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. Later *Alone in the Dark* installments abandoned the Cthulhoid connection for ghost gangsters, zombie cowboys and modern-day private eye action. These later entries inspired, if that's the word, Uwe Boll's staggeringly bad 2005 film adaptation *Alone in the Dark.* Soon Atari will publish, for some reason, *Alone in the Dark 5: Near Death Investigations*. (Beware the annoying *Alone 5* Flash site.)
- Remember the two licensed *Call of Cthulhu* computer games from Infogrames? The DOS point-and-click pixel-hunt adventures, 1993's *Shadow of the Comet* and its 1995 sequel, *Prisoner of Ice*? Me neither, but both were scripted by *Alone in the Dark* writer Hubert Chardot. Because all three games share minor characters, some fans consider them a loose trilogy.
- A recent low-budget French game, Frogwares' *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened*, is a "first-person sleuther" that sends the great detective in search of kidnappers whose trail leads into a mystery with a thin, mock-Lovecraftian flavor. Though the game is tainted by StarForce copy protection, it – hey, wait, where are you going?
- The 2005 Xbox RPG *Dark Corners of the Earth*, another *CoC* license, is this list's real tragedy. The game got okay reviews (76% on Game Rankings), despite graphics badly dated by a crippling five-year gestation. "*Dark Corners of the Earth* is the best Cthulhu game I've played, and it was clearly a labor of love," says longtime *CoC* designer John Scott Tynes. "Walking the streets of Innsmouth was a blast. Unfortunately, it was ruined by excessive difficulty." The assault on the Marsh Hotel in Innsmouth was thrilling, he says, but "it lost its charm after the 20th time." Developer Headfirst Productions entered bankruptcy in

The fate of specifically Cthulhoid games mirrors the larger field of horror games. Aside from zombie shooters, they're dwindling like teens in a slasher flick.

Lovecraft's investigators actively seek answers to mysteries, yet this usually brings them to a terrifying realization of ultimate futility: Humanity's reign is temporary and must inevitably fail.

March 2006, the same week the PC port appeared.

As in every game genre, there were other, aborted attempts: *Tainted Legacy* (cancelled); Headfirst's sequel to *Dark Corners*, *Destiny's End* (unpublished); and, most heartbreaking, a planned adaptation of Tynes's tabletop *CoC* supplement *Delta Green*. Now their nullity has spread, like a "Colour Out of Space," to the entire field. Fan site Calling Cthulhu, "Your Lovecraftian Gaming Source," shut down in April 2007. Wrote the admin, Nyarlathotep: "With *Dark Corners of the Earth* being released and no other real Lovecraftian games on the horizon, there is no point in keeping this site alive."

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The fate of specifically Cthulhoid games mirrors the larger field of horror games. Aside from zombie shooters, they're dwindling like teens in a slasher flick. What do horror fans have nowadays, non-zombiewise? The *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil* franchises, *F.E.A.R.*, *Bioshock*, Clive Barker licenses ...

"The real problem with horror games is much the same as the problem with horror novels," Tynes says. "You can't maintain an intensity of terror across many hours. At best, you can alternate long stretches of plot with occasional moments of fright. The *Silent Hill* games have amazing art direction and concepts and feel really menacing – for about 15 minutes. Then it's just endless bludgeoning of demon dogs and monster nurses, and all the mood drains away. If *Silent Hill* was 20 minutes long, it'd be the scariest game ever made."

Though it enjoys fads, horror may be fated to remain a niche market. But it's interesting that the Lovecraftian games have succeeded almost inversely to their fidelity to the Mythos. The less Cthulhoid they are, the more the market likes them. Why?

- You'd think a computer game has at least one leg up right away, given that – hurrah! – it can bypass the cliched HPL vocabulary (squamous rugose gibbous nefandous eldritch *bloop bleep blup!*). But a game nonetheless must depict monsters the author routinely calls "indescribable," not to mention weird other-worldly colors and "angles neither acute nor obtuse." So, text adventures aside, graphics are a challenge – at least until Microsoft releases its sanity-blasting trans-dimensional DirectX APIs.

- Speaking of sanity-shattering, exactly how does that work? *Dark Corners* took a shot: "A loss of sanity can be represented in many ways, such as hearing mysterious voices, hallucinating or suffering visual impairments (double vision and inability to focus)." It was probably worth a try. But a convincing simulation of insanity, even if possible, may not be desirable. Insanity implies a failure of perception, a distorted sense of available options. A player who acts based on false information, then suffers a horrible fate, won't feel insane – unless you consider him insane when he throws his controller at his television.

- Lovecraft's protagonists aren't two-fisted heroes but alienated, antiquarian intellectuals. (Hmm, wonder why?) A Mythos tale is an investigation, a painstaking piecing together of clues.

"Throwing tentacles into your game doesn't make it Lovecraftian," says Tynes. "His terror is interior. The fear comes from sudden comprehension of a hideous truth, not from a monster at the door." This makes for, shall we say, rarefied gameplay, not to mention poor re-playability.

- One key Lovecraftian theme is corruption of the self. The narrator is shocked and horrified to discover he's really a Deep One, possessed by the Great Race, etc. How would the gaming audience greet this revelation? "Cool! What powers do I get?"

That last point highlights the deepest, and perhaps fatal, difference between pure Lovecraft and pure gaming. Gameplay is about, not "powers" as such, but **agency** – the ability to actively influence the environment. Lovecraft's investigators actively seek answers to mysteries, yet this usually brings them to a terrifying realization of ultimate futility: Humanity's reign is temporary and must inevitably fail; in the immensity of space and time, we are powerless and trivial. The Mythos entities, the Elder Gods who once ruled and will rule again, are not "evil" (a narrow human concept) but inscrutably alien. Humans can't comprehend them, and the attempt brings madness and death.

Yet in a computer game, you want to comprehend and gain influence. By some definitions, that's the entire point of playing a game! Futility may be a fact, but it isn't fun.

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Game designer Jeff Grubb observes about Cthulhoid lore, "Nobody makes any money off this stuff." He means, not reprints of Lovecraft's work, which can be lucrative, but new pop-cult Mythos spinoffs. Jeff speculates:

> I don't think we're ever going to hit that sweet spot, that over-the-top moment where Cthulhu rises over the western ocean like *Pokemon* and turns into a national craze. Instead, I think it will enter our popular culture of the "things people know without really knowing," that Sheldrake/Gaia level where everyone knows that Supes is Clark Kent, and *D&D* uses a Dungeon Master and has levels and hit points. It is mired in its own hobby-dom, the realm of those more interested in it as a subject than as a marketing plan. And, all things considered, I'm OK with that.

Lovecraft's message will never be popular, either in computer games or society. But like Jeff, we should be OK with that. The insight embodied in the Cthulhu Mythos stories will still keep attracting disciples with its one fundamental, undeniable strength: Like it or not, it's true. We remember great writers because they convey what we call "timeless truths"; Lovecraft unblinkingly conveys truth, with its awful implications for humanity, on a time scale of thousands, millions of years.

And just as in Lovecraft's stories, the truth – unlike his doomed protagonists – survives. COMMENTS

Allen Varney designed the PARANOIA paper-and-dice roleplaying game (2004 edition) and has contributed to computer games from Sony Online, Origin, Interplay and Looking Glass.

The insight embodied in the Cthulhu Mythos stories will still keep attracting disciples with its one fundamental, undeniable strength: Like it or not, it's true.

the Escapist

GAMING'S FRINGE CULTS

by Joe Blancato

Ever have a game just **stick**? One where you grimaced as the credits rolled, knowing you'd never play anything like it again? Imagine it didn't end there. For some people, those old games to which you've said goodbye are just as alive, and in some cases thriving, as they were when you walked away to bigger, newer things.

Gaming's "fringe cults," those who've elevated a game to the status of a modern deity, exist to make sure other people hear the stories their favorite games tell. Typically insular communities on old-school message boards and WordPress blogs, their ranks rehash gameplay tips, find ways to manage download servers and create mods on old software, all to keep themselves and perspective converts interested in games that, by all rights, would've been forgotten by time years ago.

I spoke to representatives from three such "cults," whose fanatical dedication to the games they love has bloomed into a huge niche mod scene, one of the most feared message boards on the planet and even a player-run massively multiplayer online game. Their stories are different, but the message is the same: It's the community, stupid.

From *Battlestar* to *Wing Commander*: Hard Light Productions

Originally launched in 1998, Volition's first-person space sim *Descent: FreeSpace - The Great War* and its 1999 sequel *FreeSpace 2* were the spiritual death of games of their ilk. While critics picked up on what the game had to offer, neither game sold especially well. Of the people who **did** find their way to the *Freespace* universe, few wanted to leave.

"Aside from the impressive graphics, I really enjoyed the ambience of the game," says Alex "Kalifreth" Avery, Operations Manager at Hard Light Productions, a bustling *FreeSpace* fan community based around modding the game. "Volition had clearly put a lot of work into making everything work together nicely, from audio effects to the interface and flight mechanics in game - it all merged together well."

Hard Light, Avery says, formed in 2001 because they "noticed something of a niche gap in the FreeSpace franchise coverage revolving around a place for modders of the games to congregate and pool resources." And they've filled that niche incredibly well. Hard Light's community, 4,300 strong, has either

participated in or collaborated on three major products - *The Babylon Project*, based on the *Babylon 5* TV series; *Wing Commander Saga*, a re-imagination of the Origin's *Wing Commander* games; and *Beyond the Red Line*, based on the new *Battlestar Galactica* series - and a host of other, smaller user-created mods and campaigns. "It's truly quite incredible to compare the original *Freespace 2* engine and what we've got available for free download right now."

What's most impressive about *FreeSpace*, though, is the 10-year-old game's following is growing. "On any one day there's typically over 150 people stopping through," he says. And on April 15, 2007, *The Babylon Project* announced it served over 100,000 downloads of the demo, just two weeks after releasing it to the public.

Of course, they've had some help from Volition along the way, albeit indirectly. The company always had a progressive way of doing business: In an age where companies are afraid to release games without crippling malware and online CD key verification, Volition opted to use the "sneakernet" rather than fight it. In *FreeSpace 2*'s end-user license agreement, the company stated, "You may make copies of the Software for your personal noncommercial home entertainment use and to give to friends and acquaintances on a no cost noncommercial basis." And in 2002, they released *FreeSpace 2*'s source code, which opened the door to things like *The Babylon Project* and *Beyond the Red Line*. Avery believes Volition's open-mindedness has given the game "fantastic drawing power, as what you can basically get here is a game that's still seeing a lot of active development from some very talented people. Best of all, it's free! "

It's also guaranteed the community will be around for the foreseeable future. "If you had asked me a couple of years ago whether I could imagine the community still being together and putting active work into the games, I wouldn't have been sure," says Avery. "But things are still going strong and show no signs of stopping. It looks like Volition has created a great set of games for us, as well as the tools and opportunities to make what we want of them, and it's really a pleasure to be working on that. "Who knows where we'll be in five years' time?"

Internet Curmudgeons with Hearts of Radioactive Gold: No Mutants Allowed

In 1997, the videogame world trembled as a titan was birthed from a nuclear apocalypse, and lo, the legend was named *Fallout*. The brainchild of Leonard Boyarsky, Jason Anderson and Tim Cain of Interplay, *Fallout*'s mix of incredibly dark humor and terrifying wasteland

But things are still going strong and show no signs of stopping.

setting captured the heart of everyone who sat in front of a computer in the late '90s. Its sequel, *Fallout 2*, though it didn't quite bear the mark of the first's creators, enjoyed even **more** widespread appeal, but the franchise endured nearly a decade of bad cash-ins and worse attempts at humor until recently, now that the storied Bethesda has thrown in its hat to give a true third edition of the game a proper showing.

And through it all, No Mutants Allowed was there.

Started on Geocities nearly a decade ago by a Serbian named "Miroslav" (who only left the site due to the Bosnian War), NMA has built a reputation as the definitive, and most vocal (read: kinda mean), *Fallout* community on the web. And to hear Thomas "Brother None" Beekers, Sebastian "Silencer" Lenartowicz and Sander Philipse - NMA's administrators - tell it, they're not going away any time soon. "With the times, our goals have changed," Beekers says. "Originally, we were formed to be as supportive as we could be of *Fallout*, and this was great between *Fallout 1* and *2*, before *Tactics*' release dashed our hopes of a good spin-off and no new release was forthcoming (there were two *Fallout 3* start-ups that were cancelled before *Van Buren* [Black Isle's *Fallout 3* tech demo, hosted on NMA]).

"Now, we're mostly evangelists of recreating the original *Fallout* experience. We try to convince the media and publishers that there is a viable niche market for *Fallout*-like games that has been under-serviced for years."

Acting as a non-profit, grass-roots PR and marketing campaign for the better part of a decade speaks to a zeal not often observed outside of holy crusades and message board flame wars. What is it about *Fallout* that inspires people to continually sing its praises?

Philipse says, *Fallout*'s world felt more, well, worldly than anything that's come before or since. "There are many games today that offer you sandbox-like gameplay, but very few of them also make you feel the consequences of the choices you are offered. If you muck something up, you'll have to play with it. Most games either stop your game, or offer you an odd explanation as to why things did work out anyway. *Fallout* offered you the choices, and had the game world react to those choices."

"Also," says Lenartowicz, "the character creation and development system was friggin' sweet."

In terms of the NMA community, all three admit that while it has grown every year, it does suffer some pitfalls of age: Primarily, the folks there have refined arguing down to a brutal science. "I dislike a bit that this sometimes means there's too much (sometimes enforced) consensus on anything concerning *Fallout*, and not always enough freedom for creative thought," Beekers says. "What I dislike a lot more is that our often abusive attitude always attracts a lot of ne'er-do-wells and ill-thinking pre-adolescents. … I think those types also contribute disproportionally to [our] bad reputation."

However, the good far outweighs the bad, according to Lenartowicz. "Our visitors are an educated and wholesome bunch, [that makes] this community worth our time. There's a lot of expertise to be gained here, I should know first hand. Having joined the community fairly

Regardless of what the future holds, Beekers remains optimistic for NMA.

Binford admits he's thought about giving up his responsibilities "a few times."

late (around the time *Van Buren* was cancelled), I have really benefited from it in terms of *Fallout* and gaming lore."

In terms of the future, all three share reservations about Bethesda picking up Interplay's ball. "Part of me is happy that the franchise didn't die with Black Isle Studios," says Beekers, "but for the most part I realize *Fallout* is only a name, and the fact that Bethesda's *Fallout 3* is called *Fallout 3* doesn't mean anything unless they make it a *Fallout* game. If they don't, I'm guessing I and other fans will be about as upset as we were with the release of *Fallout: BoS* [*Brotherhood of Steel*]."

However, regardless of what the future holds, Beekers remains optimistic for NMA: "Considering we're still that active on a set of decade-old games that were never enormous hits, I don't think we're going anywhere, anytime soon."

Heirs to an Empty Kingdom: The *Continuum* Team

Released in '97, Virgin Interactive Entertainment's (VIE) *SubSpace* was a victim of its novelty. Just barely scraping the traditional MMOG qualifier (64 or more players on one server), the top-down space combat game - along with *Meridian 59* and *Ultima Online* - laid the foundation for online gaming. The game played a bit like *Counter-Strike* or *Team Fortress*, only with spaceships: Players battled over flag capture points and for bragging rights, and thanks to a robust chat system, people didn't even need to log out to torment their victims.

However, in 1997, those ancient times Before Broadband, back when some people were still paying by the hour for flaky internet access, the idea of paying an additional fee to log into a virtually non-persistent world with little record of your existence beyond a name and a win-loss record just didn't take. By 1998, VIE had lost its funding from parent company Virgin, and the *SubSpace* license went un-purchased, leaving the remaining community with little support.

Players were able to create their own servers, but without a unified developer to patch the game in an official capacity, cheating ran rampant, which pushed the game even further underground. If *SubSpace* was going to survive, it needed something bold to happen. Enter Priit "PriitK" Kasesalu. Kasesalu, who would later go on to design Kazaa and Skype, reverse-engineered *SubSpace* and renamed it *Continuum*, the version of the game most people play today. Since then, Kasesalu maintains a few servers, but has handed over the day-to-day responsibilities to the community he saved.

One of the leaders in the community is Scott " PoLiX" Binford. A nine-year *SubSpace* vet, Binford runs SSCentral.com and acts, in a way, as the game's publicist. "I am a lone man in some ways ... keeping what I can together while trying to get a new face and grow the site again." Binford says he, like many other of the game's diehard fans, grew

up playing *SubSpace*. "I've known many of the players I consider friends since the time I began, and some I have worked with for years now building the websites."

Sometimes, all the work he and the rest of the team does can be exhausting and frustrating. Binford admits he's thought about giving up his responsibilities "a few times. It has gotten frustrating being the last general site for the game … but I still keep the sites up and running and keep my active user base happy. I know I am the media for the game, and without our websites, we would slowly die."

But the death of *SubSpace* is the last thing on anyone's mind. Even they were hit hard by *World of Warcraft*'s arrival, but the team plans on rolling out the PR wagon to draw new people to the game. They intend to focus on how varied the game can be - "In what other game can you go from playing an *Unreal Tournament*-style game to an *Infantry*-style game?" - as well as how working on a collaborative development can lead to paying jobs within the industry. "Many of our players … have now gotten jobs in programming, or designing," he says, "and have said they found *Continuum* an easier jumping leap than any other game, as so much more programming is needed, and you're starting literally from bare scratch in many places."

Whatever the marketing outcome, Binford is extremely confident in the team's lasting survival. "Honestly, this game will never die as long as we keep playing it and enjoying it, so I see it lasting until our 20-year anniversary and beyond."

Go Tell It on the Mountain

The one question I had when I first reached out to these community spokespeople was, "Why?" In a medium where anything is a dinosaur after its fifth birthday, dedicated, hardcore gamers are spending huge amounts of time on something most people won't be able to run on a modern computer in a few years. What keeps them so committed?

Everyone's answer settled on three things: The game resonated on a special, nostalgic frequency; overwhelming confidence in the game's staying power; and they've grown close to the people who feel the same way. "There is no alternative if you love this kind of game," says NMA's Philipse. Hard Light's Avery does put emphasis on the game, but "on the verge of sounding quite sappy now, but it honestly has to be the people. I've not seen any other community where so many people have put so much hard work into a game that - in all honesty - isn't likely to see a sequel." COMMENTS

Joe Blancato is an Associate Editor for The Escapist*. He quotes* Wayne's World *and* Dr. Strangelove *too much. But someday, it will be funny. Oh yes, it will be funny.*

The one question I had when I first reached out to these community spokespeople was, "Why?"

Blood and Trumpets in the Rastan Saga

by Christian McCrea

Taito's 1987 classic *Rastan Saga* (or simply, Rastan) begins in the best tradition of Robert E. Howard's *Conan* series; the hero drops out of the sky and trumpets blare a Wagnerian tribute to gore. Within seconds, lizardfolk are screaming and disintegrating beneath the hulking arm of Rastan, our eponymous hero. The horizontal swing of the arm is accompanied by a shrill creak of the sound controller that was the closest thing to the actual sound of a sword's clash arcade gamers had heard.

Yet even though a handful of screens offer only the barest narrative refrain, the epic tone of *Conan* is imparted with one of fantasy's most enduring images - the protagonist-King recounting the events you're about to witness from his cold throne: "I used to be a thief and a murderer. Otherwise, I could not survive in such difficult times. Sit beside me and listen to my story of days filled with adventure." This screen also features as the game's teaser mode the King on his throne without the text, the title screen appearing with a sword clash, and then 12 seconds of silent gameplay.

Only when you dropped a coin into the machine would he explain the rest of the story; "I succeeded in obtaining the consent of the Princess of the Kingdom 'Ceim' to exchange the dragon's head for all the treasures in the Empire. I started on my quest to the dragon's lair." The genius of this passage being in past tense is that an otherwise simple game is suddenly turned into a type of manifest destiny. I am the King recounting his victory; of course I am going to insert more coins to grease the storyteller's palm!

Paint It Red

The original music by Naoto Yagishita and Masahiko Takaki is so distinctive and powerful that you instinctively knew this was fantasy for **men**, in the Howard tradition, broadswords and baby oil rather than Tolkein's magical elves and hobbits. A nanosecond after the game's theme completes, the monitor fades up to reveal your falling hero landing on a stone platform; behind him is a wall painted from the same texture. His past is literally closed off; only the bloody path ahead remains. The background is a mottled blue carved open by treacherous peaks. As the song builds drama near the end of the first level, the sky turns blood red. In 1987, this was a revelation – real thought had gone into

the world, a visceral, muscular fantasy painted red.

Perhaps none of this would have mattered or ever impacted arcade culture the way it did if the original *Rastan Saga* cabinet was not one of the loudest arcade machines of all time. The input screens can usually tone down the volume, but no such luck for arcade operators in mid-to-late 1987 who had to contend with a machine that made as much noise as its hero.

Nothing in the arcades of 1987 could compare to the presentation and grandeur of the cabinet, with grim-faced bats and dragons surrounding the screen window. Games were facing a generational problem, as the audience enjoyed films (especially the swords-and-sorcery genre that lit up with *Conan the Barbarian*) that were more gory, more epic, more dangerous and nasty than ever before. The big arcade hit at the time was Taito's *Bubble Bobble* (released 1986), and even though horror and fantasy games like *Gauntlet* held the fort, they lacked the teenage-boy psychopomp that was rampaging through the rest of popular culture. Enter the dragon slayer

The World of the Dark One

Robert E. Howard's "low fantasy" is never going to be mentioned in the same breath as Tolkien's "high fantasy." Whereas the latter specialized in rich worlds with deeply emotional narratives steeped in history, Howard's scenarios were brutish, bloody, and very alpha-male – what language the lizardmen spoke was never an issue. These two approaches of high fantasy and sword-and-sorcery sit on sides of a spectrum best described as that between destiny and free will.

Joseph A. McCulloch writes, "The heroes of sword and sorcery become the true representatives of free will, and through their stories, readers are able to imagine the capabilities and the triumphs of men who are completely free to chart their own destiny." Where Tolkein had the heroes of the realm respond to a great threat, Robert E. Howard's heroes are self-motivated outsiders come to make their mark and tell their own story. The worlds they inhabit are different in scope in order to make this possible; the Fellowship responds to a threat to the status quo; *Conan*, well, he's come to cut off the status quo's head.

The Howard mythos is an exaltation of the individual talent; King Kull screams, "By this Axe, I rule!" smashing the table which represents the law. Heroes have no real origin; they come from a distant land, raised by wolves. The very last words of Howard's story *In the Forest of Villefère* are the perfect example of his heroic brutes looking after their own skin: "Fearing madness, I snatched up the thing's own sword and hacked it to pieces. Then I flung the sword away and fled." Which is incredibly telling but hardly has the pomp and circumstance of the ending lines of *The Dark Man*: "I am King Turlogh of Bal-Sagoth and my kingdom is fading in the morning sky. And therein it is like all other empires in the world – dreams and ghosts and smoke." Everybody gets to

make his mark. As long as "everybody" is a white male barbarian with a penchant for decapitation.

The sun-baked earth, the grim-faced enemies of nameless races; they're just background information. What matters is that our heroes - *Conan*, Kull and the others - are free to forge their own little epic narrative. While Rastan has no official connection to Howard's writing, the lineage is not a simple genre mash-up with cute music. Rastan is not even homage; it's an interactive love letter to the grim world of *Conan* and its antecedents.

Silver Coins for the Storyteller

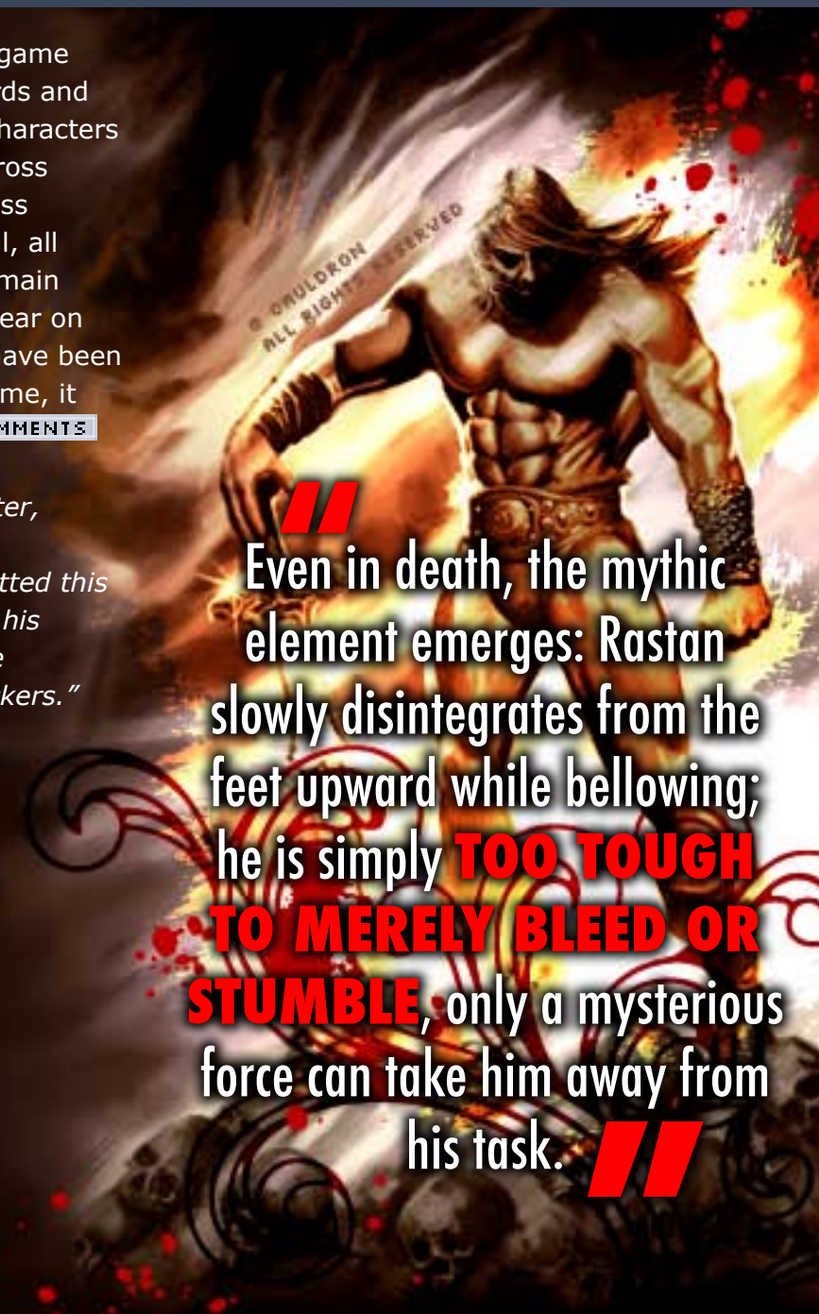
The monsters ahead begin simply enough; a static grimacing lizardman armed with a club and an assortment of bats that require timing to effectively smack out of the air. The third enemy type, however, is some sort of Vedic nightmare, a Hindu god come to life, spewing fire. Luckily, they're just as easily put down as the lizardmen. You bounce from platform to platform, occasionally finding a new weapon or power-up. Of course, this is taken from the world of Robert E. Howard, so the magic potion sometimes hurts you, and the damned healing potions barely do anything at all.

Magic is the work of politicians and mumbling law-givers – hardly the muscular world-breakers Howard idolized. Even in death, the mythic element emerges: Rastan slowly disintegrates from the feet upward while bellowing; he is simply too tough to merely bleed or stumble, only a mysterious force can take him away from his task.

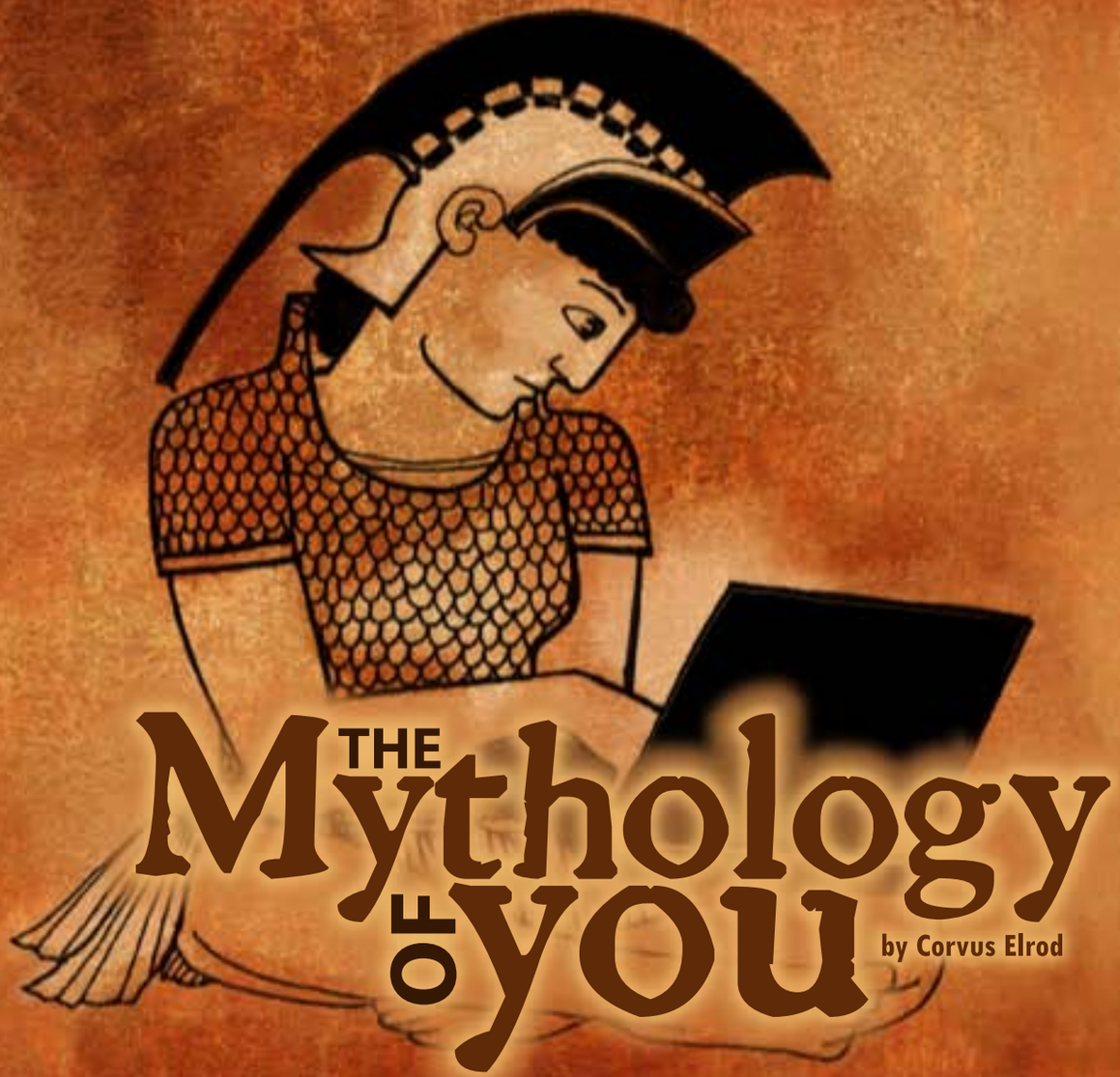
After each outdoor area, the game becomes more of a platformer, where the rabid *Conan* fan might imagine Arnie moving through caverns and swinging from trap to trap. Yet for all the greatly mythological gameplay, it's the aesthetic and aural touches that elevate Rastan into the realm of myth. With mood carefully planned and distinguished, the mental glue cools and players weave a mythological fabric more detailed than the 8-bit game could ever push out. In Rastan, moving the player around was secondary to head banging and whistling to the music and getting far enough into the game to experience the sunset. Such as it was, it became a more perfect love letter to Howard's world than the *Conan* film on which it capitalized so well.

Myths are not stories; they are living, playing, bleeding memories - from our lives and from history. In each game since Rastan that features swords and hulking muscle, I rename the characters Rastan; the quest continues across platforms, across eras and across companies. His rage is immortal, all because of a haunting, driving main theme and simple refrain you hear on the first level. The music may have been technically rudimentary, but to me, it was blood and trumpets.. COMMENTS

Christian McCrea is a game writer, academic and curator based in Melbourne, Australia. He submitted this article with the threat to "drive his editors before him and hear the lamentations of their spell-checkers."



"Even in death, the mythic element emerges: Rastan slowly disintegrates from the feet upward while bellowing; he is simply **TOO TOUGH TO MERELY BLEED OR STUMBLE**, only a mysterious force can take him away from his task."



The Mythology of You

by Corvus Elrod

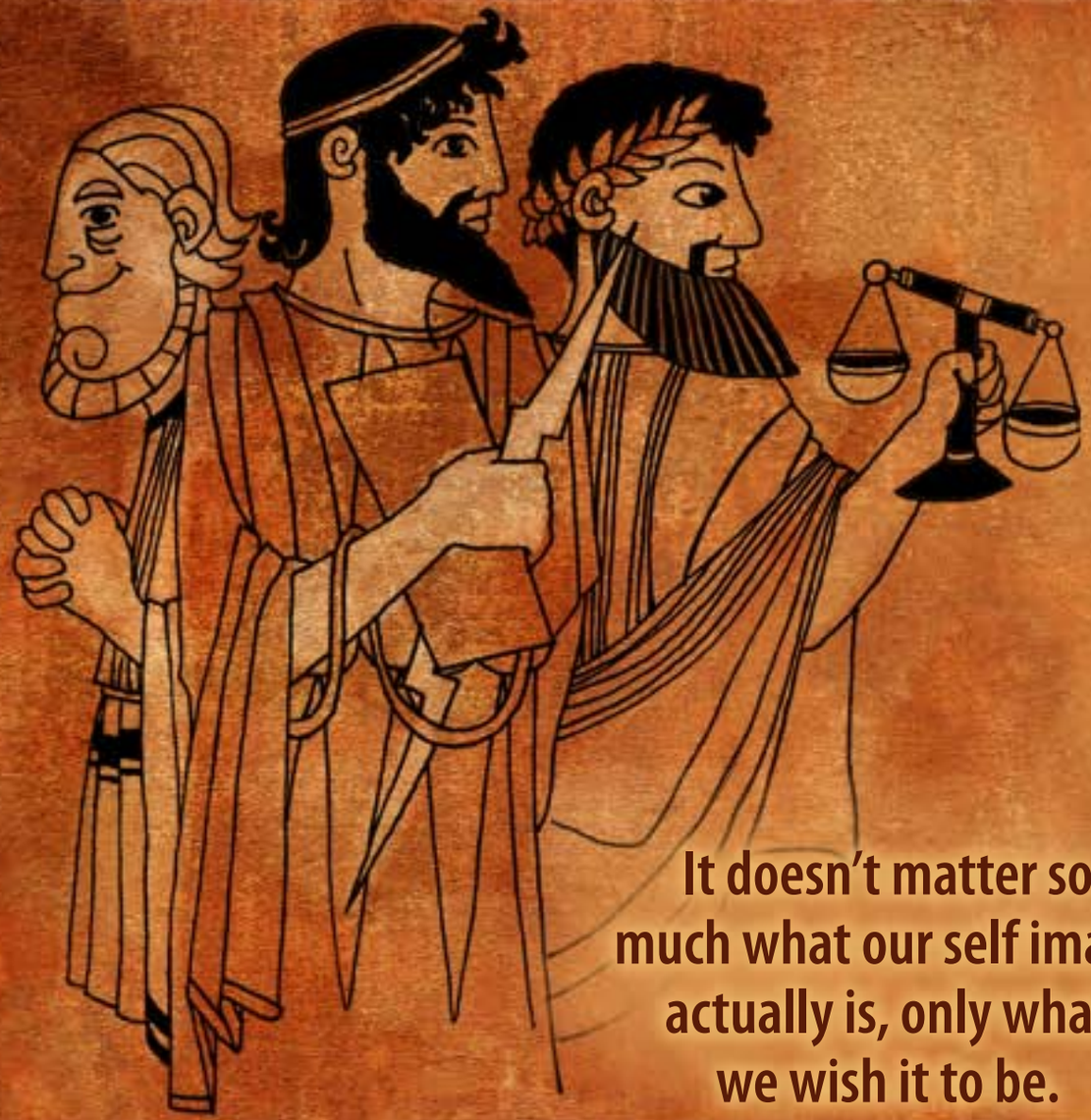
Sophil gazed out across her once proud realm, desolate and silent now, no longer teaming with the life and laughter of her people. Once these halls rang with the triumphs and despairs of hundreds of her kin - Terkon the True, Golvar the Wise, Branchel the Strong. They were all gone now, all gone forever.

Sophil knew she'd had a hand in this. If only she'd been more accepting of Trozl. If only she'd been more tolerant of his peculiarities, he'd have been less inclined to side with the hordes when they arrived. But when the hordes stormed the gates, Trozl turned on all his old friends, driving each of them away, one by one. Eventually, even Lolkats, ever a source of light and joy, could withstand the onslaught no more and fled. Now there was only Sophil, and after today, not even she would remain. One last speech, one last indictment against the banality that ruled the day, one last bitter tirade, and she too would leave. From now on, it would be up to Google and the Wayback Machine to recall the former glory of the realm she once ruled, her old gaming message board.

Mythology is the stories a culture tells about itself. Their choice of gods, heroes and the struggles they face speak volumes about the society's ideals, dreams, fears and understanding of the world. Norse mythology speaks of its people's struggles against the elements and isolation. Greek mythology, while in many ways no less brutal, speaks of a complex social structure, exemplified by rivalries and conflicts within the pantheon. Egyptian mythology is fractured and sharp-edged, with a focus on the sun and death, the two inescapable facets of desert life.

Gaming communities tell their own stories and build their own mythologies, too. Each is unique, yet each shares common themes with the others. And while ancient mythology can certainly add depth and resonance **within** a game, it's the modern mythology that **surrounds** the game that truly captures gamers' imaginations and sparks their passions.

When we become members of an online gaming community, we are free to ignore the constraints of our everyday reality.



It doesn't matter so much what our self image actually is, only what we wish it to be.

We choose what aspects of ourselves we're going to share and what roles we're going to play. It doesn't matter so much what our self image actually is, only what we wish it to be. Our interactions take on a mythic cast. The roles we choose and the selves we project speak volumes about our culture.

The elder gods arrive first. They are typically the hopeful, the dedicated followers of the studio or the genre. They bring with them an optimism and faith unmatched by all the minor deities who follow, at times unmatched even by their forebears, the developers themselves. It is these first comers who determine the mood and size of the pantheon.

These pantheons need not be limited to a single game, or even a single studio. Often they outlive and outgrow the product or team that gave them birth. They've even been known to migrate to their own Asgards and Olympuses when the realms they previously inhabited are struck down. Regardless of size, location or strength, if you've ever participated in an online community, you're sure to recognize some of these pantheon members. Perhaps you've even played one of these roles yourself.

The Allfather. This god is rarely very active in the community, but when he does speak, he's greeted enthusiastically by the elder gods. He often stops in for official announcements, either about the development process or the community itself. While he may not always be an employee of the studio, he is usually responsible for the official web site and forums.

The Arbiter. This god is often a forum moderator. Sometime he is someone affiliated with the studio, other times he is merely one of the first levelheaded community members to prove himself to the Allfather. Regardless, his even temperament is respected by the other gods, even when they don't agree with his decisions.

The Wise Elder. Iconoclastic, witty and willing to dispense the lessons learned from a long life. The Wise Elder often does not want the hassle of official

involvement in the community, preferring to remain an unofficial authority. If anyone is going to post long, drunken philosophical ramblings, it's the Wise Elder. Although he can provide great insight, he's often acerbic or obscure and prone to fits of extreme grouchiness when faced with disrespectful behavior.

The White Knight. This is the god most concerned with noble behavior. He's often the first to communicate with the other gods via instant message or e-mail. Betraying a tender heart, he's the first to ask you if you're alright when your posts seem a bit cranky, and the first to call you to task if you're being mean. The White Knight is often loved and respected by all members of the community.

The Fool. The fool can't seem to get anything right. He posts old news and false rumors; he tells bad jokes. Despite never quite fitting in, he is rigorously defended by the rest of the pantheon.

The Trickster. It can be easy to confuse the Trickster with the Fool at first. Unlike the fool, this god revels in the confusion he creates with nonsensical jokes and off topic threads. His use of sarcasm and irony is often so subtle as to be transparent, and he delights in leading the hot-headed on a merry chase. If anyone is going to open the gates to the enemy when Ragnarok arrives, it will be the trickster. Even when the pantheon is amused by the Trickster's wit, their suspicion runs deep.

The Warrior. Unlike the White Knight, the Warrior simply likes to fight. Direct, lacking in subtlety and arguing in straight lines, the Warrior steadfastly clings to his beliefs on anything and everything, regardless of opposing evidence or logic. The Warrior is often the most fanatically dedicated of the entire pantheon, lacking the judgment needed to question or temper his beliefs. He may be dedicated to the game or studio whose realm he inhabits, or he may be dedicated to another game altogether. Most of the pantheon finds the Warrior tiresome even when on the same side of an argument. Only the Trickster delights in his presence, steering him in directions sure to result in maximum carnage.

There are also Placaters, Hopeless Dreamers and the Disconnected. Whatever the game, however large the community, each message board hosts a mythic band of erstwhile gods, forming alliances that eventually fall apart due to misunderstandings and entropy.

But until they do, remember: The gods are watching. So the next time you stop by a message board to ask about hardware requirements or release dates, show some respect, or at least some good old fashioned fear. After all, you're in divine company. COMMENTS

Corvus Elrod is a storyteller and game designer who is working on bringing his 16 years experience into the digital realm. He has a habit of taking serious things lightly and frivolous things seriously, a personal quirk which can be witnessed on his blog, Man Bytes Blog.

Remember:
The gods are watching.

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