the Escapist

GOLDEN TICKET

the Escapist

THIS GOLDEN TICKET ENSURES SALES.

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Russ Pitts

We do a lot of writing here at *The Escapist*. While it's true that the vast majority of our content is produced by writers for hire, the backbone of any editorial enterprise, we here at Team Humidor do our fair share. Day in, day out, we dredge the bottom of gaming's vast lake to find where the bodies are hidden. But sometimes that lake goes dry.

Call it writer's block, lack of sleep, excess of bourbon or simply not caring, but we, too, occasionally run out of ideas. We can understand, then, what it's like to be a game designer.

Starting a studio is easy: Sell someone with money on your idea and then release a hit game … OK, so maybe not so easy. To make matters worse for first-time designers, it can be devilishly hard to even get the word out about your game - even if it's good. Still, anybody can get lucky once, make a game that's not only good, but well-received and profitable. But to do it again and again and again requires planning, patience and skill, commodities usually sold separately - if at all.

It's been said that all games are the same basic frame plastered with different art, and although there's truth behind that lie, the fact is dreaming up a game idea is almost as hard as building the game itself. Thank Vishnu, then, for licenses.

From comic books, movies, toys and games, the stacks of games based on hit properties is almost as high as the copies of *ET: the Extra Terrestrial* buried in the New Mexico desert - and many of them are just as bad. Licensed games are relatively inexpensive to make, easier to finance than "some guy's" vision and almost guaranteed to make money. This makes them an attractive alternative to going it alone, staking your career (and studio) on an unproven, unknown idea, and when you're dealing with a property people already like (or at least know about), the battle is halfway won. Plus, it gives us something to write about, which is always a good thing.

In this week's issue of *The Escapist*, Issue 104 "Golden Ticket," Kieron Gillen talks to the creators of *LEGO Star Wars*; Shawn Williams peeks under the hood at Turbine, the developers behind *Lord of the Rings Online*; IGDA President Jason Della Rocca looks at the financial realities of original IPs vs. licensed properties; and Erin Hoffman examines the role of football in game design.

Russ Pitts

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "The Korean Invasion" from The Escapist Forum: Korean games don't work in Western markets because of one very simple reason: Korean MMOGs actively encourage credit farming. Western players don't like games in which their game experience is held hostage by folks who play for the express purpose of making money.

- Beery

In response to "The Korean Invasion" from The Escapist Forum: The thing with Korean games, I think, is that they have an unabashedly monotonous and elongated grind. The way you play when you sign in is consistent, and the novelty comes from the playstyles of the other people you're with rather than from new circumstances. It's more like *Counter-Strike*, then. Which means it's very unsuitable for the more individualist Western audiences, who appreciate the value of a world populated by other

living beings, but find it quite distasteful to depend on the competence of Random Internet Fuckheads to provide an interesting experience. (Or, at least, that's what I think). When you make an MMO for Westerners, you *need* to make your world varied and interesting, so that the value of the options available to a given avatar depend less on strangers and more on the avatar's history and location.

Being friends with people in the game completely invalidates all of that, but once you get 'em to that point, you're left with the people who already made that decision.

- Bongo Bill

In response to "WoW's Magic Number" from The Escapist Forum: Being one who has played many an MMO, and who has played and left WoW, I am still, to this day, flabbergasted at WoW's popularity. I have many friends who have gone from general video game consumers to WoW-only zealots (one friend has a saying: "If it's not WoW, it's meh"), and I frequently ask them what it is that they do once they reach the "end game." More often then not, when they vocalize their answer, their faces reveal

that their explanation doesn't even make much sense to them.

- Scopique

In response to "WoW's Magic Number" from The Escapist Forum: This is not growing a genre. This is just growing the market. Essentially, WoW does nothing more than rehash the same old stuff with a minimal set of well-tied and polished simple rules. This makes it accessible, but extremely superficial, much more than the already average and stagnant pool of MMOs.

Well, anyway, to my eyes, this genre is just uninteresting and blight, a pure waste of time, and you can't even count on the studios which have the bucks to make it evolve... to even do it.

MMOs are just like cigarettes.

- Arbre

In response to "Game Magazines Have Sucked for Forever" from The Escapist Daily: Even just a few years ago, you'd still see a few of the larger revelations broken in mags, despite the growth of online sites at that point. But

now that element is weakening as well. It's affecting sites, too, in some regards. Developers and publishers of said big games are realizing they don't even need a middleman, they can have their own event (or previously use E3 as a soapbox) and release everything directly themselves online.

StarCraft 2 was the perfect example of this. The exclusives may follow, but the big revelation skipped the middleman. It went from Blizzard directly to the gamer.

- KyanMehwulfe

PLAYING the Spread: INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL IP

by Jason Della Rocca

What **hasn't** been said about the "stagnant" state of the game industry, with our reliance on licensed properties from other entertainment sectors and sequels galore? Where has all the innovation gone, and why is there no love for original ideas?

The always outspoken Scott Miller of 3D Realms never misses an opportunity to push the value of IP ownership and control, stating in a Gamasutra interview:

"For most studios, [developing licensed IP is] just not as fun as doing something original. ... If the studio owns a valuable IP, then they have lots of leverage and clout. They can reap financial rewards, call their own shots and make better deals. It changes the game for them."
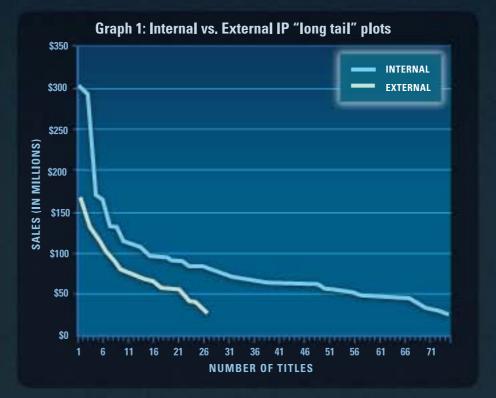
Not wanting to retread the same arguments, I turned to NPD, the folks who track retail sales across the U.S. The first thing I looked at was the list of top 100 selling games over the past seven years, across all platforms.

I manually tagged each game as based either on "external" intellectual property (IP) (licensed from outside the industry, like *Madden* and *Spider-Man*) or "internal" IP (ideas and properties "born" from within the game industry, like *World of Warcraft* and *The Sims*). Additionally, I tagged games as either "new" if it was the first or only game (e.g. *Halo*, *Gears of War*), or "old" if it was a sequel or part of an ongoing franchise (e.g., *Halo 2*, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*).

The internal vs. external IP distinction (instead of original vs. licensed) is an important one. It is easy to debate whether a game based on Mario should be considered "original," or if it is in fact an "intra-license" within the industry. But no one would say the Mario IP wasn't born within the game industry. Plus, the word "original" often gets intermingled with innovation, and it's not fair to assume innovation can only occur in one form of IP.

In that context, I'm less interested in the debate over brand-new, "original" IP. Bigger picture, it comes down to a question of control and wealth generation for the industry. Assumedly, internal IP should offer greater economic potential. All things being equal, selling a million copies of *Halo* is more profitable than selling a million copies of *Madden*, since there's no external license or royalty to pay on the *Halo* IP – it's ours to begin with.
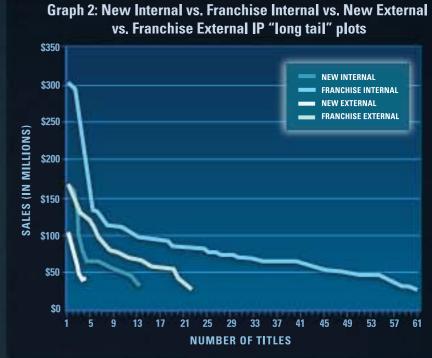
Rational economic behavior suggests companies would lean toward developing games with the greatest potential for profit. And they are: EA recently announced their plans to rely more heavily on their ability to generate internal IP. But that's only one publisher, and even they aren't completely abandoning external revenue streams.

Aside from comparing the sales results between internal and external IP more generally, I wanted to see if there was some overwhelmingly compelling economic motivation driving game industry execs to favor external IP. Put another way, were investors justified in

loading up Brash Entertainment with $400 million in funding to primarily produce videogames based external movie, television and music properties?

A long-tail style plotting of the sales data (Graph 1) initially demonstrates a healthy picture for internal IP. The highest point on the internal IP line

(~$303 million) is nearly twice that of the highest external IP point (~$168 million). We have to step down about six internal IP titles before we hit that external IP high point. Furthermore, it's not until the very last internal IP title (74) that we drop slightly below the lowest point on the external IP curve (~$26 and ~$28 million, respectively).

When we split the data between new and sequel/franchise titles on top of internal and external IP (Graph 2), we see marked differences. While the internal franchise curve looks nice and meaty, the new internal titles don't fare as well, which makes sense, given how it took *GTA* three iterations before it struck big.

Graph 1: Internal vs. External IP "long tail" plots

Legend: INTERNAL, EXTERNAL

Y-axis: SALES (IN MILLIONS) — $0, $50, $100, $150, $200, $250, $300, $350

X-axis: NUMBER OF TITLES — 1, 6, 11, 16, 21, 26, 31, 36, 41, 46, 51, 56, 61, 66, 71

Graph 2: New Internal vs. Franchise Internal vs. New External vs. Franchise External IP "long tail" plots

Legend: NEW INTERNAL, FRANCHISE INTERNAL, NEW EXTERNAL, FRANCHISE EXTERNAL

Y-axis: SALES (IN MILLIONS) — $0, $50, $100, $150, $200, $250, $300, $350

X-axis: NUMBER OF TITLES — 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, 33, 37, 41, 45, 49, 53, 57, 61

So, what's going on here? Why isn't everyone on the internal IP bandwagon?

Crunching the raw numbers starts to tell a slightly different story (Table 1, Table 2).

OK, lots to explore here. First off, internal IP's wealth contribution to the industry far exceeds what we're generating from external properties. Though, when divided by the number of titles in each category to get an average-revenue-per-title amount, the difference is somewhat less striking – albeit still in favor of internal IP.

Finally, here comes the internal IP bandwagon, let's jump on! But wait …

The key numbers in all of this are the standard deviations in each category. Generally speaking, standard deviation serves as a rough measure of uncertainty. As a representation of risk, the higher the number, the greater the potential variation a result is.

Looking back at Table 1, internal IP makes, on average, $4 million more (or 5 percent) than external IP. However, that extra money comes at a steep cost of additional uncertainty; the standard deviation is 19 percent higher. So really, when you're making internally-created content, you're 19 percent more uncertain you'll make 5 percent more

than going with an external license. And executives don't like to gamble.

Jumping back to Graph 1, this means the tight clustering of the external IP tail is more attractive than the greater spread and unpredictability of the internal IP tail, even though the greater predictability of the external IP curve means you have no chance of reaching the sky-high numbers of the few internal IPs that hit it really big.

Reviewing Table 2, we can similarly evaluate the risk/reward disparities between the different categories. Interestingly, new IP of either variety is

What's going on here? Why isn't everyone on the internal IP bandwagon?

Table 1: Internal vs. External IP Sales (in millions of dollars, rounded)

	INTERNAL IP	EXTERNAL IP
TOTAL SALES	$5,997	$2,007
TITLES	74	26
AVERAGE SALES	$81	$77
STANDARD DEVIATION	$52 (64%)	$35 (45%)

Table 2: New Internal vs. Franchise Internal vs. New External vs. Franchise External IP Sales (in millions of dollars, rounded)

	NEW IN' IP	FRANCHISE IN' IP	NEW EX' IP	FRANCHISE EX' IP
TOTAL SALES	$949	$5,049	$261	$1,746
TITLES	13	61	4	22
AVERAGE SALES	$73	$83	$65	$79
STANDARD DEVIATION	$40 (55%)	$53 (64%)	$25 (38%)	$35 (44%)

less risky, though less successful on average, than sequel/franchise IP. That does seem to speak to the especially hit or miss nature of long-running franchises.

Of course, gross sales numbers can't tell the full story. The profit margin on games based on internal IP is likely higher in most cases, meaning it may be easier to hit your sales mark on external IP games, but it may cost you more to get there. However, there's probably a counterweight when you factor the "free" marketing that comes along with riding the coattails of a major movie release.

So, do the suits have it right? As with personal investing, it comes down to a question of how much risk you are willing to bear along with your objectives. If you are super risk averse, don't expect to make massive returns – T-bills do not the millionaire make. Fundamentally, this boils down to modern portfolio theory, using diversification to optimize a publisher's range of IPs (internal and external, as well as new and franchise).

But, what's the right mix? How many of each type of project makes for a sufficiently diverse portfolio? It all depends. My interpretation of the industry's collective wail is publishers are too heavily invested in external IP. While this may satisfy the short-term demands of Wall Street, it does put into question the future wealth generation potential of the industry as a whole – both financially, as well as creatively. Should we be content to serve other entertainment sectors for more predictable, but overall less, revenue – a big portion of which exits the game industry? Hell no! COMMENTS

Jason Della Rocca is the executive director of the International Game Developers Association. (Opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the IGDA.) As a closet economist, you can find him crunching numbers at his blog, Reality Panic.

Executives don't like to gamble.

BRICK by brick:
THE MAKING OF LEGO STAR WARS
by Kieron Gillen

LEGO Star Wars' success managed to both be a surprise and entirely predictable. On the positive side, how could a mix of two of the most popular brands in the world of play not be a success? On the negative ... oh, for God's sake. **LEGO Star Wars**? Who takes such bastard children of capitalism seriously? Well, its creators, for one. *LEGO Star Wars* proved to be an enormously popular and quietly radical game – one whose innovations were often overlooked due to its veneer of adorability. But how did they do it? The clue is in the name. It's called *LEGO Star Wars*. The LEGO comes first.

Its roots lie back way before there was any connection to a galaxy a long time ago and far, far away, with an internal team at LEGO Company. Its mission was to explore everything that made LEGO a brilliant toy and see how its lessons could apply to videogames. Ex-Codemasters Jonathan Smith was a member. "LEGO Company doesn't work like other businesses," Smith – later Producer on *LEGO Star Wars* - explains. "In particular, it doesn't work like the way the videogame industry works." It's privately owned. It's fiercely proud of its 75-year heritage. Unanswerable to the

market, it has no obligations to anything but itself and a distinctive internal culture based on children's play.

"That gave us a completely new way of looking at the task of making a game," Smith says. "It just set us free a bit from the typical industrial occupations to consider, with greater freedom and a greater focus on young players that was really energizing." To that end, they spent a lot of their time working with children. "Genuinely listen to what they're saying," he advises. "[Don't talk] to them to make sure your game is just good enough to make it in the time available, or hoping you'll find they'll put up with whatever you've put into the game already, but at the start of the process with a completely open mind." Alongside this, they worked with LEGO academics and experts from the toy side, and a theoretical grounding began to crystallize.

First off, everyone gets frustrated. A child simply deals with frustration differently than an adult. "It's a very unpleasant thing to see," Smith says. "It's not just 'I don't like games – sometimes they're too hard.' It's genuinely very upsetting for children. It's like in a classroom environment – which

is a learning environment, much like a game, where you're trying to live up to its expectations – to be told all the time you're a failure. ... It's frankly fairly abusive, if you were to translate that to the classroom metaphor."

In addition to being more accommodating, a LEGO game would have to step away from the industry rhetoric about **making** players do things – trying to lead them along the next step toward a necessary conclusion. The play needed to be more like **play**. "What can be conventionally thought of as failure can be rewarding," Smith says. That philosophy appeared most noticeably in the health mechanism, where a player wasn't punished for experimentation. Instead, they developed a positive reward system based around gathering tokens, which are lost when struck. A second application of their theory was the importance of cooperative play – or rather, people playing at the same time, not traditionally cooperative or competitive, but sharing a gaming space, like on a playground. "What we always hoped for, and eventually delighted to find, was parents playing with their children," he says.

But this was a long way in the future. As it was, they had a set of worryingly abstract design principles, which were hard to make attractive to anyone. "One of the characteristics of LEGO is that you can make anything out of this set of bricks. That's its beauty," Smith says. "But that can become elusive – asking for a lot of work to be done for someone willing to engage." Put simply, as a game, something just offering LEGO looks like a lot of work for your pleasure. It needed something else.

The something else came from a brainwave from Tom Stone, the project's leader, who came up with the idea to introduce LEGO's free-form play to *Star Wars*' engaging world.

"Suddenly everything crystallized," Smith says. "Not only do we have interesting ideas of what we can do with LEGO, but it's linked energetically to nothing less than the world's favorite characters and stories." It allowed them to seduce people in a way LEGO alone wouldn't. There was a prior relationship between the LEGO Company and Lucas, stretching back to the *Phantom Menace*,

While the demo was rudimentary, Lucasfilm fell in love with it. They could walk around. They could turn their lightsabers on and off, with appropriate noises.

when the first LEGO *Star Wars* playsets appeared. As the game gestated, LucasArts was beginning to market *Revenge of the Sith*. With a demo version, they approached Lucasfilm. "It was immediately received very kindly by the Lucasfilm group. It was the credibility of being part of the LEGO Company that gave us that trust."

Well, that and the demo. The LEGO Company forged a relationship with children's action game specialist Traveller's Tales, who'd previously worked with Pixar and Sony, to develop the game. While the demo was rudimentary, Lucasfilm fell in love with it. They could walk around. They could turn their lightsabers on and off, with appropriate noises – though they couldn't swing them. But still, the game's charm showed through. "For all that it was limited, it was immediately

This was a publishing company that lavished all its attention on creating one game.

technically accomplished at the engine level and crucially fun to play," says Smith. "The characters were just fun to walk around. And they had to be, as you couldn't do much else with them. To have nailed that at the start, it was only ever going to get better. ... We stared with pure fun."

Once the game got its go-ahead, things started to change, and the LEGO Company was having trouble working with Traveller's Tale on day-to-day operations. Eventually, members of the LEGO Company splintered off and formed Giant Interactive Entertainment, to create games on the LEGO Company's behalf. "It became clear to us that this business of creating games required specialized attention and focus," Smith says.

This wasn't a traditional publishing company. This was a publishing company that lavished all its attention on creating one game, passing off any issues not directly connected to making that game onto others. (For example, Eidos handled its distribution.) In some ways, it's reminiscent of the "production company" model Wideload used when they created *Stubbs the Zombie*. (For more on

Wideload's production method, see "The Wideload Way" by Allen Varney.)

One element they kept in-house was marketing. In the case of *LEGO Star Wars*, that's proved relatively tricky, even with the *Star Wars* name attached to it. "Throughout the course of developing *LEGO Star Wars*, almost every meeting [we went] into, people had not known what to expect," Smith says. "They were, to some extent, confused to what a *LEGO Star Wars* game **could** be. How did it fit in with LEGO? How did it fit in with *Star Wars*? How did it fit in with the gaming market at the time? Was there a place for it?" That lasted until they actually saw it. People played it and understood. "Our job was to get as many people as possible to play the game. The risk was that it wouldn't be found, people wouldn't encounter it."

Up to release, there was a lot of coverage, but there were understandable jitters leading toward launch day. "We'd staked a lot on it, from a publishing side, on its success. It's a very costly business," Smith says. "The moment a game goes on sale and all that work

translates to a commercial reality is always unpredictable." The launch was a mild success, but its sales continued, a factor Smith attributes to word of mouth. Eventually it was "much more successful than any of us had ever hoped," he says. "We knew we loved it, and we'd set out to make a game with broad appeal ... but we didn't really know what that would mean commercially."

Great reviews and retail success was one thing. Perks, like receiving e-mails from parents saying it was the first game they ever played with their children, or when they see people laugh at the game for the first time, are something else. "That was always incredibly heartening," he says. "And we were very privileged and lucky to have those experiences." After Giant Interactive's achievements, they retain the rights to LEGO gaming, and they eventually joined with Traveller's Tales to form a single entity, TT Games. They've since gone on to create a highly successful *LEGO Star Wars* sequel and have moved on to future projects together, including *LEGO Batman*.

But what's the game's secret? "Seeing people laugh" is something that sticks

with Smith, which surprised him at first. "One of the most important things about *LEGO Star Wars* is that it's funny," he says. "That wasn't something we initially set out to do. ... Because so few games are funny, it's not something we identified ourselves as. Perhaps that's one of the reasons we were able to. I think it'd be quite hard to just set out to 'be funny.'"

A lot of that comes from the playful juxtaposition of *Star Wars* and LEGO, but that's not to say it works as a parody. "That'll be something quite different and quite knowing and more ironic and reliant on a close knowledge of the source material," Smith says. "We find that our game is so widely played, especially at the younger age group, that there's many younger players who are encountering LEGO for the first time in the game. And even encountering *Star Wars* for the first time. There's no necessary knowledge of the movies. The characters are engaging in their own right."

The game's humor more comes from – perversely – the faithfulness. By simply trying to render *Star Wars* in LEGO, it changes things. "Inevitably, it was going to have a fresh take. When we looked at

the drama of the movies and put them into LEGO, then brought them to life as energetic game characters ... they tended to act not exactly as they did in the movie. They tended to fall over quite a lot more." Cue physical comedy, double-taking and – always popular – things being smashed up. Which, in terms for recipes for success, seems likely to remain a solid one. COMMENTS

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

But what's the game's secret? "Seeing people laugh" is something that sticks with Smith.

All writing is hard

by Shannon Drake

For a writer, the dilemma is Faustian. Someone with a lot of money — say, Paramount — has a property they want to push into a new area — a roleplaying game, a novel — and they come to you for it. You'll get paid decently, and your books will sell (that's pretty much guaranteed by the big words on the cover) but people won't be reading because of the story you labored to put together in those long, lonely nights, and they probably won't notice your name in tiny print far below the picture of Captain Picard looking badass. It's a dream — a steady check is a rare enough thing in freelance writing — and a writer's nightmare.

Robin D. Laws is a prolific game designer and writer, with original designs including *Feng Shui*, *Hero Wars* and *Rune*, but he's also a well traveled licensed-product gunslinger, with licensed work including the roleplaying game based on Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth*, the tabletop RPGs for *Star Trek*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, Star Trek: The Next Generation* and the *City of Heroes* novel *The Freedom Phalanx*. His position is unique, not quite famous enough to be stopped on the street, but so omnipresent his work — especially for such luminaries as Wizards of the Coast, White Wolf, FASA and Atlas Games — has probably touched your gaming life somewhere along the way, and his extensive experience dabbling in other people's stuff gives him a unique insight into the world of writing guns for hire.

Being creative and building a world of your own is hard enough, but working within someone else's and playing by the rules he sets down is even harder. "Working on a project as a primary creator," he says, citing *Feng Shui* and *The Esoterrorists*, "is clearly easier, in that you're establishing the tone and content of the setting. Instead of asking yourself whether element 'X' or 'Y' matches the spirit of an existing property, you're deciding what that tone and content will be. It requires somewhat

less analysis before you get to the purely creative part of the process, and can be a more intuitive act of invention."

By contrast, in dealing with a licensed property, you're necessarily playing by someone else's rules. No matter how much it would fit the story, the *Enterprise* is never going to sport 20-inch spinning rims and cruise down to the LBC. The secret, he says, "is to find a meeting point between the IP and whatever it is that keeps you personally inspired, so that you're both honoring peoples' expectations of the work and giving them something new and fresh that comes from the heart. ... That's also the hard part. But all writing is hard."

In addition to doing what they've been hired to do, such as writing a novel or building a roleplaying game, writers working with a license have to deal with the licensors' expectations and, in the case of properties like *Star Trek*, an audience that will tear their work to shreds looking for any flaws or inconsistencies, a dilemma with which Laws is familiar. "During my brief sojourn at Marvel, I observed the catch-22 facing writers hoping for unconditional love from the hardcore fan base," he says.

The problem they face is "longtime fans of a property are both jaded and resistant to change, which is a tough combination. If you do something similar to what has gone before, they yawn at the unoriginality of it all. If you push the property in a new direction, they greet you with confusion and indifference, because they want the comfort of the familiar." What hardcore fans want is "to recapture the experience they had when they were young and discovering a character or world for the first time. By definition, that's never going to happen again. So, you have to put your head down, serve the story you're writing and believe in the value of your own work. Reader response is a useful benchmark, but if you rely on it for personal validation, you'll drive yourself crazy."

As for the license holders, he says he hasn't had many problems. "I've pretty much managed to dodge the bullet on that front." However, some of his success has come down to good timing. "License holders go through phases," he says, citing Paramount as an example: They had a reputation for being very tough on people working in the *Star Trek* universe,

but during his time on the RPG, they "were very laid back and extremely helpful. More often, the problem is simply one of schedule: Roleplaying material is very dense, and an approvals person used to taking a few minutes to give a thumbs-up or down to a Spock keychain or Tribble plush toy suddenly finds himself confronted with tens of thousands of words full of numbers and rules and stuff. The newer and hotter the property, the harder it is for the approvals person to plough through [his] workload and get back to you with change requests."

Working with a license seems like thankless work. Knowing something like the *Star Trek* RPG would probably be more popular than something he'd sunk his heart and soul into developing struck me as demoralizing. "If you find a way to both express the ethos of the IP and to bring something of yourself to the work, you bridge that fulfillment hurdle," he said. "Working on an established property can put your name in front of a very wide audience. Only a tiny fraction of those people will follow you to other projects, but being read is much better

than the alternative." He admits "it's easy to find ways to make yourself nuts, which I try to steer clear of by [maintaining] both a positive attitude and a sense of detachment. I can't imagine spending my days thinking bitter thoughts because *Star Trek* is more popular than I am. Life is too short to devote yourself to absurd regrets. Better to try to live it as best you can, and keep struggling to produce your best work, whatever the circumstances."

When it comes to picking projects, he says he loves writing fiction — "which is much harder to get right than roleplaying design" - and cites the *Dying Earth* RPG as one of his favorite projects, though, "my favorite project is whatever I'm working on at the moment you ask me, plus whatever's coming next. Part of the job is finding a way to love what you're working on," which is the secret to success in any field. COMMENTS

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

I can't imagine spending my days thinking bitter thoughts because *Star Trek* is more popular than I am.

INTERCEPTION: GAMING ON THE GRIDIRON

by Erin Hoffman

The jock. He's six and a half feet tall, 300 pounds marinated in Coors Light, blue and white greasepaint covering two halves of his face respectively. The thought conjures up gut level revulsion from a majority of geeks, gamers and nerds, and so by extension the rise of sports gaming is regarded by much of the Mario set as a mysterious irritant, an emblem of the commercial aspect of the gaming world that is more comfortably forgotten.

But I am here to tell you it's all right. **It's all right** to like football. Because, as a form of play, it synthesizes key elements of hardcore game design ethic and exemplifies the drives that reach back through human history to the heart of recreation itself.

The Gridiron
Although its status as cultural phenomenon is undeniable – even college games can attract hundreds of thousands of fans – significant buy-in from the game industry was regarded in its early days as a business risk, even though much of the history of game development itself retains a deep connection with sports sims. Even *Pong* (and its predecessor, *Tennis for Two*), at its core, is a sports game, and more directly, *Electric Football* in 1949 – nearly 10 years before *Tennis for Two* – became the first game to incorporate electricity into its design.

In basic design, football is a well-oiled machine. Its rules, incorporating play length, number of plays, number of exchanges, areas required to advance and variations that disrupt a natural rhythm, combine to form a fast-paced action adventure that hits its audience with regular but unpredictable shots of adrenaline at edge-of-your-seat intervals. And from a physical action standpoint, football incorporates nearly every track and field discipline. Small wonder it was one of the earliest game sims.

Compared to many other sports, football is carefully balanced in terms of pacing and score. This comes down to numbers (the literal score) that regulate the adrenaline distribution of a game's phases; hockey is intense but an average game will generally not gross more than a limp five points, while basketball is high-speed but so quick to score that any individual goal lacks the dramatic impact of a rarer victory (or one with a greater potential to be game-altering). Time figures in, as well, and there football separates itself from America's No. 2 sport, baseball, a game that can literally be never-ending. Mainstream "golden ticket" football is also largely kept more dynamic through its salary caps and distributed draft process, resulting in a season-long narrative progression toward finding out which two teams will reach the Superbowl.

Although football itself did not rise to ascendancy until the early '70s, fantasy footballwas born in the early '60s and still thrives today, while Parker Brothers introduced board-based football simulation even earlier, in 1925. The Strat-O-Matic games that influenced thousands of young players – and many future game designers – are living proof that sports simulation needs no graphical input to engage the mind and imagination.

In terms of modern football viewing and discussion (a truly remarkable phenomenon involving, as far as I can tell, a language entirely separate from English), fans primarily engage in complex cognitive speculation about manager strategy, fantasy team-building, long term seasonal team trajectory and the potential outcomes of player chemistry and skill interaction on the field. This is a version of what James Paul Gee refers to as the "probe, hypothesize, reprobe, rethink" process – otherwise known as the scientific method, and key to the cognitive engagement that drives game passion.

Tell Me A Story
But it isn't all numbers. Despite the success of stat-based sports simulations – and from a game history standpoint it is necessary to note the RPG itself owes its existence to these predecessor simulations – the progression of a sports season, and the progression of a given player's career trajectory, ultimately tells a story. And with football making it onto the silver screen nearly every year since its rise in the '70s, it becomes difficult to argue against the dramatic tension that emerges from the carefully balanced mechanics of the game. This is a keystone to the role of storytelling in interactive media: Mechanics create tension, and tension creates drama, the heart of compelling narrative.

That's right. Football is the guy's soap opera. Listening to an enthusiast talk about his engagement with a modern football simulator makes this abundantly clear. He's engaging in the exploration of possibility in variations through time, starting with a core interest point through which they have an emotional connection – usually a hometown. And the "home" effect on football is huge; most fans feel a family connection to teams from their hometowns, or even vicariously explore a loyalty to a desired living place through support of its sports teams. When a player picks up *ESPN NFL 2K5*, is he cognitively engaging to determine the most intellectually interesting possibilities among the options available? No. He's

Football is the guy's SOAP OPERA.

moving immediately to select a favorite team; that has a lot more in common with selecting a *Second Life* avatar than a golf club.

Bottom line, electronic football enthusiasts are engaging in narrative play. It may not involve expansive voiceovers or branching dialogue, and that is exactly why it is the form of narrative most unique to video gaming: the kind of narrative that emerges from mechanical complexity.

But it isn't just about relationships or Tiki Barber thumbing his nose at the city of San Diego, only to get traded for a defensive lineman that nearly took the Chargers to Super Bowl XLI. It's a rags-to-riches story, too.

The American Dream
It goes without saying that football's dominance is unique to the U.S., and some readers may only recently have realized I'm talking about the sport with the spandex and leather, not the shorts and the sphere. It is no coincidence, and American football will never be a truly international sport purely by dint of the expense of its maintenance; soccer requires a ball and a big field, while

football involves a good 20 pounds of equipment per player, if not more, to say nothing of the rules complexities currently mediated in large part through technology.

But as can be seen in many traditional narrative interpretations of the sport, the story of football is one of team achievement **and** individual achievement. A football celebrity is unique among all other American celebrities for his origins (rarely are they glamorous) and his skill. The rise of an individual star athlete is inherently a story of will, talent, achievement, hardship and, in many cases, temptation. It is a story of carving a life of humble beginnings into one of obscene wealth: the American Dream.

First And 10, Do It Again
While it's easy to dismiss the popular, it is often of greater benefit to analyze its popularity, since so often its roots are in elements central to human behavior that games so uniquely access and ignite. But the question remains, is there uncharted territory in this oldest of ludological franchises? A compelling game element is a compelling game element, but is there room for competition? Are there wells of compelling narrative, gameplay and

strategy into which we haven't yet dipped? Ultimately, the power of a license or franchise is it is palpable economic acknowledgment of a compelling idea – and the roots of that idea rarely require permission for execution.

The gaming world, like any other, is an ecosystem, and the presence or even profusion of one game type does not threaten others; the game ecosystem is not zero-sum. The success of one game type creates further demand for that same genre, allowing other games to flourish and new competitors to arise. And one thing that games have always

shown us is that wherever there's a big tree, there's always room to grow.

COMMENTS

Erin Hoffman is a professional game designer, freelance writer, and hobbyist troublemaker. She moderates Gamewatch.org and fights crime on the streets by night.

> " The rise of an individual star athlete is inherently a story of will, talent, achievement, hardship and, in many cases, temptation. It is a story of carving a life of humble beginnings into one of obscene wealth: **THE AMERICAN DREAM.** "

ONE LICENSE TO RULE THEM All

by Shawn Williams

"There is only one Lord of the Ring, only one who can bend it to his will. And he does not share power." – J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

Among the intellectual properties in the world, there is perhaps none so broad, so significant, so sought after as *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*). More than simply a "work of fiction," J.R.R. Tolkien's legendary epic forged not just a setting but schools of study, languages, even an entire genre: "high fantasy."

The elements gamers and fantasy aficionados take for granted in modern times owe a great deal to Tolkien: elves, orcs, dwarves, magic swords and – especially – magic rings. While these weren't new concepts in the fantasy world, Tolkien brought them a new significance.

The license for most of *LOTR*'s intellectual property is owned by Tolkien Enterprises, a trading name for the Saul Zaentz Company (SZC). Saul Zaentz himself is a film producer holding Oscars for his work in adapting novels to the silver screen. Zaentz acquired the rights to the franchise in 1976.

So when the time came to create Middle-earth as a playable environment for a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG), it wasn't simply a matter of slapping some hobbits into the Unreal engine and letting them loose. *LOTR* isn't simply an intellectual property, it's a vision near and dear to millions of people around the world.

One Does Not Simply Texture Mordor
"I think this is something that happens with a lot of license properties," says Jeffrey Steefel, Executive Producer at Turbine, creators of *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* (*LOTRO*), "thinking that [once you have a license,] somehow the majority of the important job is done. You just have to wrap the game around it and you'll be there."

LOTRO is anything but a wrap job. When Turbine took over the sole rights to what was then *Middle-earth Online* from Vivendi, it wasn't a simple matter of acquiring a popular license. The *LOTR* intellectual property represented a deep, well defined, popular world the creative team at Turbine held near to their heart. They worked hard to demonstrate to SZC that they weren't just interested in the license, but in the content the license

represented. They wanted to make Middle-earth live and breathe. Turbine had to convince SZC that not only were they serious about doing the license justice, they were intent upon demonstrating the sort of attention to detail for which Tolkien was famous.

When they began designing the world, the developers would start by running their concepts past SZC, getting approval of their ideas before they started with any serious design work. "We over-submitted to them in the beginning." Steefel says of their initial partnership with SZC. "We actually submitted for approval probably 10 times more stuff than we were required to do - intentionally. They didn't even ask for it; we really wanted them to get a sense of what we were doing."

There were two types of creation, each with its own challenges: detailing existing and well-documented areas, and creating new areas that either weren't mentioned or were only mentioned in passing.

While the better-known areas were more detailed in existing lore, they still provided a serious challenge: The area had to live up to not just the incredibly

detailed descriptions in the books, they had to compete with people's expectations from Peter Jackson's film adaptation. And while your general fans might get upset with something not looking as they'd expect it to, they were introduced to Middle-earth on a whole new level when it became populated with their fellow players. What's more, the MMOG angle made things even more daunting: Although many videogames were created since 1982's *The Hobbit*, this was the first time fans would be able to complain about Bree being too laggy.

"SZC knows about [videogames], but we still took time to point out how online gamers can be different." Steefel confesses. "We still had to say, 'Hey, we just introduced Angmar, Angmar didn't really show up as we're portraying it [in the books] in the Third Age - you guys should be prepared, you might even get letters from angry fans telling you that Turbine is destroying the license.' And you know what? They did."

Consult the Book of Armaments!
In many ways, working within Middle-earth is extremely structured, even when you're creating new areas. Tolkien was so structured in his fiction, so careful in

> " this was the first time fans would be able to complain about Bree being **TOO LAGGY.** "

his creations, the world has a very unique, strict style.

Steefel is quick to agree. "The thing that's great about Tolkien is that he's so consistent about what he does. ... If you study [Middle-earth] a lot and you spend a lot of time with it, and you really pay attention, you start to learn what kind of things would exist in this world - even if they didn't - and what kind of things wouldn't. That means that even new things that we created out of the blue aren't entirely out of the blue, they're created inside that mythology and that rule set, and they're things that make absolute sense being there."

Things like weapons and armor follow similar sorts of guidelines. Dwarven-crafted armor has a very distinct style – solid, enduring and practical – that separates it from elven-crafted armor, which tends to look much more intricate.

Most gamers, however, don't spend their time closely examining weapons. Instead, they're off in search of the Fellowship.

These Are Not The Hobbits You're Looking For

Everyone wants to be Aragorn or Legolas or Gimli - possibly even Frodo. So, when it came time to adapt the *LOTR* license into an MMOG, the individual player's role was called into question. A player wants to feel he's significant in the story, and if he can't be one of the main actors or meet the Fellowship, he at least wants to be able to get involved somehow.

"The story isn't just about the Ringbearer," says Steefel. "The story is about the War of the Ring and the war between the free people of ... Middle-earth and Sauron that's been going on for thousands of years." To that end, Turbine took cues from what was going on in the background. Although *LOTR* focuses primarily on the Fellowship and their part in the War of the Ring, there are numerous smaller stories going on. The trick lies making these smaller stories feel important.

And in the License Bind Them
Introducing a faithful reproduction of a license in a new format creates more interest in the license and can reach people that weren't previously interested. The Peter Jackson movies have grossed almost $3 billion dollars worldwide; while *LOTRO* probably won't come close to that

figure, Jackson's success goes to show what great work and a great license can combine to achieve.

Working with a major license can be a frightening experience, but the rewards can be hugely satisfying. Beyond simple financial success, it's a chance to connect with a new audience and show them what you can do with a world they love.

And to do it without a single reference to "dwarf-tossing" is superb. COMMENTS

Shawn "Kwip" Williams is the founder of N3 (NeenerNeener.Net), where he toils away documenting his adventures as the worst MMOG and pen-and-paper RPG player in recorded history.

> "Although LOTR focuses primarily on the Fellowship and their part in the War of the Ring, there are **NUMEROUS SMALLER STORIES** going on.

the escapist

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