THE GAMER'S QUARTER

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Annivesary
—Matthew Williamson

Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistance was released on the exact one-year anniversary of issue 1 of *The Gamer's Quarter*. The synchronicity pleases me; it was our first cover after all. I went though quite a few hoops to get myself the limited edition that Konami shipped in such short supply. I am pretty happy with it, even though I have not had a chance to even open it yet.

Here we are. One year later. Three hundred sixty-five days ago, we released the first issue of *The Gamer's Quarter*, and looking back, we seem to have come a long way in both quality and content. Initially, we were swept up in the gaming press's buzzstorm of New Games Journalism. It boosted our readership, I am sure, so I can really say it was a bad thing.

It did earn us some negative feedback, though: "These guys need to get their dicks out of my hobby." Some of the staff at the time donned their flame-retardant suits and proceeded to march in at the defense of *TGQ*. It was a modest attempt.

But here I am, one year later, not much different. I think that my overall interest in gaming has started to wander outside the beaten path (like it hadn't already). I have started picking up odds-and-ends titles such as *Zombie vs.*

Ambulance and *Rule of Rose*. Nothing ground breaking, but something about them caught my interest. Hopefully, soon, I will get to play a game that another person who was on a similar quest recommended me: *Romance of the Three Kingdoms X*.

Looking back, everything seems a blur. I think I am more tired after doing this issue. They seem to cut closer and closer to the deadlines, and I seem to be having less and less free time to work on the magazine. I gained this magazine, I lost my way, and I found it again. Right now, I toil far from my wife and love. Yet I still game through it all. It takes the edge off of life.

In issue 3 (the last issue of our freshman layout and design), I wrote an article about emulation and the PSP. And just last week I finally updated the firmware of my PSP. I did so in the persuit of possibly one of the cutest and best Mega Man games ever: *Mega Man Powered Up*. With the addition of *Exit* and *Maverick Hunter X*, it took the bite out of never being able to play NES games on the system any more.

Living in suboptimal conditions isn't so bad when you have your GBA and *River City Ransom*. When you can take your tiny 14" TV and turn it on its side to play *Ibara*. Even when you can just lose yourself in the absurdity that is *Final Fantasy VIII*.

No, things aren't so bad. TGQ
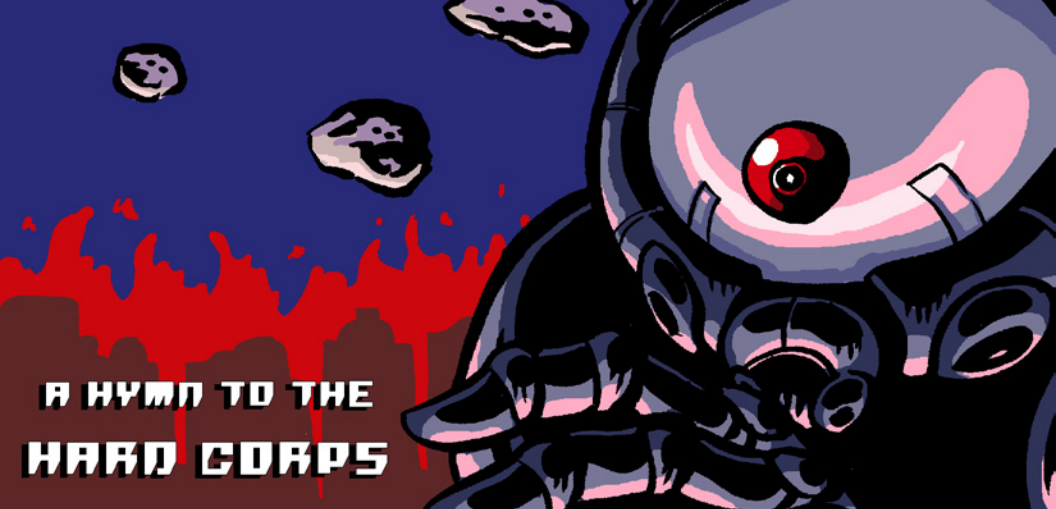
A HYMN TO THE HARD CORPS

Contra: Hard Corps—GEN

—Sergei Servianov

CONTRA: HARD CORPS is the finest Contra game ever made. It is also the greatest work of current series director Nobuya Nakazato.

Nakazato, a wry, pompous man, once humbly noted, "I made the two masterpieces of the 16-bit age." This wasn't vulgar bragging; it was merely earned pride for work well done. And while I'm reticent on the status of CONTRA III: THE ALIEN WARS as a work of genius, I can confidently state that no run-and-gun design team has ever come close to emulating the sheer brazen skill with which HARD CORPS was made. No other action game has ever inspired a shred of the emotions that HARD CORPS brings to mind.

Some games have refined and improved upon certain aspects, yet they've all ended up genre pieces, unfit for true reverence; all them, without exception, drown in HARD CORPS' depths.

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I first encountered CONTRA: HARD CORPS on the pages of GAME LAND magazine in 1995. It was a five-page strategy guide of the first three stages. Those guides! As a twelve-year-old I read and reread them like I would now read novels. My parents had refused to buy me any of the newer consoles floating around Moscow at the time, so I had to derive as much enjoyment out of those guides as I could, memorizing countless strategies for bosses that I would never fight and imagining darting through stages that I would never visit. I particularly liked it when a guide would have pictures of the ending. It meant that I could continue studying the magazine without that lingering feeling of unease that not knowing a game's ending has always brought out in me, a feeling somewhat similar to waking up at the most exciting moment of a dream.

Unlike SPARKSTER, BARE KNUCKLE 3, etc., I actually did get to play HARD CORPS a few months later. It was at one of the Western-style supermarkets that began to appear in Moscow a few years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A greasy, balding businessman had set up shoddy, hastily-glued arcade cabinets running SNES, Famiclone, and Genesis/Mega Drive games (for some reason all the systems in Moscow were Chinese knock-offs of Japanese consoles, except for the SNES). The control sticks were flimsy and often broken, and playing the games was quite expensive, especially by boys' standards. You paid by the minute and the money needed to reach the end could run into a few dollars—an

amazing sum for a twelve-year-old. Boys would often come in groups and take turns playing the two-player games. I would often watch them from a safe distance, somewhat frightened of the thought that they might beat me up and take my pocketful of coins. In this way, I got to see STREETS OF RAGE 2 from beginning to end and had a chance to watch numerous fatalities in the Mega Drive version of MORTAL KOMBAT. I would spend hours there after school, even when I had no money, admiring the title screens and demos until somebody would finally come and start playing. It was here that I first saw HARD CORPS in action.

I tall adolescent had bought ten minutes worth of time on one of the Mega Drive machines and I casually slunk over to it with him. And so I first laid eyes on that most glorious beginning.

A few berserk robots race around the screen with a big spider robot seemingly hovering above them. This scene continues for a few seconds. With amazing aplomb, a huge RV-looking truck bursts through the wall, exploding all the robots in its path, and crashes into a wrecked car. A wolf somersaults through the window, shooting flaming red dots. At that age, it was about the coolest thing I'd ever seen.

And it didn't let up for a single moment after that.

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The first four Contra installments skillfully handled two things crucial to the success of an action game: music and explosions. The first two Contras had explosions that were pleasing orange halos and featured insanely energetic soundtracks. They had also set the pattern for future Contra releases (at least if you examine the series from the vantage point of the " true canon," which excludes CONTRA FORCE and the two Playstation games). The original CONTRA was a mix of robot-themed science fiction and the aesthetics that H.R. Giger used in ALIEN,

framed by a corny, blustering kill-'em-all '80s-action-movie momentum set in a Latin American jungle. It was, if anything, a compelling mix, as the hours I spent playing the game at my school's videogame club as a five-year-old can attest (as well as the numerous coins I pumped into the arcade version at a Dublin airport ten years later).

SUPER C was a much more deformed and depraved beast: an eerie terror-inducing creature from my worst nightmares, especially grotesque after coming off the adrenaline high of the original CONTRA. If the original CONTRA was a werewolf beamed out of an alien space-ship in a red bandana with a machinegun tied to its back, then SUPER C was that same werewolf after two acid trips and a speed crash. Like the fascist poet/news writer Aleksandr Prokhanov, it was sick and hard to look at without wincing and trembling, especially at the tender age of seven, but, goddamn, did it handle itself well and, goddamn, was it compelling. The original CONTRA was the straight man, a talented purveyor of sweaty controller-gripping action, while its brother was the insane weirdo, a soothsayer promising creepy bosses and unsettling music, with a fucked-up desire to keep you off your feet at all times.

The 16-bit sequels followed a similar pattern. THE ALIEN WARS was a tech demo, showing off the SNES's splendid graphical capabilities while delivering diamond-hard action gameplay that referenced the first two Contras and improved upon the template of the first; no sick stuff, just a meaty steak of an adventure with many bright colors and a few satisfying scenes. It was a good demonstration of Nobuya Nakazato's

directing talents and gave him the confidence to tackle his next—and most legendary—project. In the 16-bit era Konami was firmly pledged to the cause of the Super Nintendo, placing most of its more famous series there. And while they kept the "official" sequels to CONTRA, CASTLEVANIA, and other games on that platform, they also deigned to make a few side stories for the Mega Drive. What makes these side stories so interesting was that the creators were allowed much more leeway in tampering with established series rules. And while this produced some curious failed experiments (CASTLEVANIA: BLOODLINES), it also yielded games that could not have been made in any other milieu. The list of those games is short, and does not need to be repeated here, for one title stands above them all, the unjustly unworshipped CONTRA: HARD CORPS (at least when compared to the jubilant internet forum-spew that ALIEN WARS receives).

Nakazato, pleased with himself and honored after the success of ALIEN WARS, wanted his next project to be something different, something that would be a SUPER C to his ALIEN WARS. In other words, a game that would combine everything good about the Contra series: rabid, twitchy action, energetic soundtracks, and take it a step higher, while running the formula into the same weird, self-conscious extreme that SUPER C aspired to. It would accomplish everything that SUPER C wanted to accomplish while at the same time having Nakazato's own stylistic stamp over it. With a nervous-yet-assured hand,

Nakazato began penning the scenario for HARD CORPS. Instead of two personality-deprived fools in cutaway jackets and headbands, he'd have four characters, each with distinct weapons and styles and personas. Thus, he came up with Ray, the grizzled criminal badass white male, and his counterpart Sheena, the tough-as-nails female in an iron bikini; characters that the normal kids would want to play as. For the freaks, he made Browney, a diminutive SD Gundam-style robot with a cute red eye, and the best of all, Brad Fang, a cyborg wolf in sunglasses with a Gatling gun in lieu of a right hand, wearing biker boots and jeans. Philip K. Dick would've had a hard time imagining as eclectic a cast as this, and even he'd find it difficult to figure out what to do with them. Nakazato didn't have this problem. He knew exactly where to place them; in a gritty cyberpunk-ish future a few years after the Alien Wars, in the aftermath of an aborted coup by Colonel Bahamut, one of its heroes. The setting is a hybrid of previous Contra locales with a wealth of influences from MAD MAX, most visible in the third-stage junkyard and its motorcycled robot enemies, and BLADE RUNNER, especially prevalent in the second stage's pyramid-shaped buildings in the background.

Everything about CONTRA: HARD CORPS is wonderful; its pacing and unmistakable style have yet to be emulated successfully, not even in Nakazato's later works. But first I must mention its explosions, because in a run-and-gun shooter explosions are key. They're jovial blooming roses of screen-shaking flames. Each dead robot, exploding with a grated crunch, feels like an accomplishment, each defeated boss a bigger accomplishment at that. For an action

game to be satisfying, each destroyed enemy needs to feel unique. And *Hard Corps* does this with every death animation, from the epileptic trembling of the first level's Godzilla-sized robo-cyclops to the agonized faces and geysers of blue blood bursting from the aliens in Colonel Bahamut's base, there really hasn't been a more diverse palette of death in any action game save for *Metal Slug*.

And that's really the only series that's ever come close to Nakazato's "16-bit masterpiece," yet *Hard Corps* swallows it whole, ably reproducing and improving upon every aspect of SNK's famed shooter. Because *Metal Slug* can only generate one emotion: humor at its extremely cartoonish violence (and, well, a certain level of tense nervousness through its difficulty). *Hard Corps* is certainly much more difficult and handles the violence in a much better way. Unlike *Metal Slug*, which knows all too well how ridiculous it is, meaning that it accentuates and underlines the funnier moments, keeping them on screen as long as possible so as to ring *all* of the comic material out its well-timed visual jokes, *Hard Corps*'s humor works so well precisely because of how deadpan and serious and downright surprising it is. This is most aptly demonstrated in a scene in stage 2. Your character is racing down a ruined highway on a hover-bike, firing at floating robots sent out of the bowels of a purple blimp-shaped airship in the background. After defeating the needed amount of robots, the ship crashes into a skyscraper in the distance and promptly disappears. The game doesn't linger on that scene—it's almost easy to miss—or the humorous deaths of your enemies, at that moment you have enough

trouble as it is, avoiding a sprinting robot about to toss a torpedo at you. The whole scene is not so much funny—though it certainly is very much in retrospect—as it is relentless and insane. The gigantic robot that jogs alongside the train in stage 5 and the vile mutant that eats the professor in stage 4 are similarly surprising and gross. This then leads me to another aspect of the game: its breakneck lunacy.

Few games have ever tried to reproduce the pure, unrelenting rush of *Contra: Hard Corps*. Every stage throws another series of surprises at you. Cataloguing all of them would be pointless, as they're something that should be enjoyed on their own without some "new games journalist" muddling them up with clumsy praises. I'll just note one my favorite moments here, for my own pleasure.

One of the game's paths will lead you to a missile launch (*Hard Corps*'s branching paths really are some of the most satisfying in videogames' history). Your character is riding on the tip of a rocket, pursuing a bio-missile blasted off by a dying Colonel Bahamut. Dead-Eye Joe, your honorable cyborg nemesis, suddenly appears wearing a jetpack with a plasma cannon in his hands. He floats around the screen like a beetle, firing sporadically, with your character dodging his blasts by jumping from missile to missile. Defeating him brings about the most satisfying boss death I've ever seen, with Dead-Eye Joe exploding in whirlwind of blue-orange flames.

Of course,
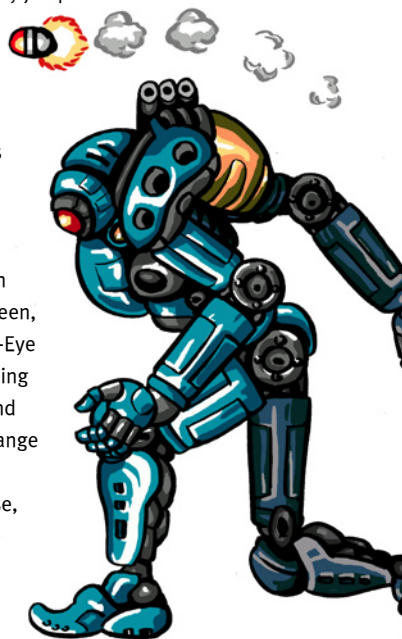
the scene wouldn't work as well without the flute/synthetic electric guitar mix wailing in the background. And that's really another genius aspect of the game; its complete and utter dependence on musical cues. If played properly each explosion in the game acts as a sort of comma, a persistent beat underscoring every riff and chord of its soundtrack. Each shift of scene and location, each miniboss, is punctuated by a sudden shift in the melody, signifying another completed section. So the whole game plays out as a sort of weird adaptation of a live rock and roll concert, as if the thoughts and feelings inspired by it are being projected into your TV. You're never quite sure if it's the game on screen that's producing the music or if the soundtrack itself is generating the action.

Though the soundtrack is capable of much more than generating a pleasing sense of madness. Its alien themes are some of the most unsettling I've ever heard: "The Foggy Cave in Darkness" and "Guillotine" make great use of the original CONTRA's alien stage music and improve upon it. They use the refrains and basic melodies of those compositions and make them more nervous, more disconcerting, as if hinting at some great discovery being made by the player, which works great thematically because the player is, in fact, discovering artificial aliens being created by humans themselves for use as biological weapons, a fact infinitely more disquieting than another alien invasion.

There's also a great moment that occurs if you take another one of the game's paths, perhaps my favorite of all. After defeating the traitorous professor's ostrich-legged/robot suit hybrid, your character is stuck alone, in a space elevator

riding into open space, to face Colonel Bahamut in his fortress at the top. There's this sudden sadness as the sky slowly turns from blue to black, and you're treated to a view of the world from space; the Earth is cold and uninviting, yet awe-inspiringly beautiful. It demonstrates very well how HARD CORPS can generate a sudden feeling of pathos. Your character then fights the Colonel, who attacks while encased in a claw attached to a jar containing a creature that resembles METROID's Mother Brain. Beating him brings about the destruction of the space station and the death of your character. A pensive, downhearted jazz rendition of the first stage's music plays while the credits role and you're left with a profound sorrow at accomplishing your mission, yet bitter at the loss all the same. The theme is called "The Hard Corps Blues;" it fits perfectly. And serves as the moment that most defines CONTRA: HARD CORPS, at least to me, as an experience.

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I played the game everyday after school, often imaging what my arms would look like if they were turned into the metallic ones that Brad Fang had. At least it would rid me of these annoying mosquito bites, I reasoned. And then, all of a sudden, at the beginning of summer, when I hoped to have more time to play the game, it disappeared. The business wasn't generating enough money, so the slimy entrepreneur cut his losses and took off to some more hopeless, more videogame-deprived town to peddle his
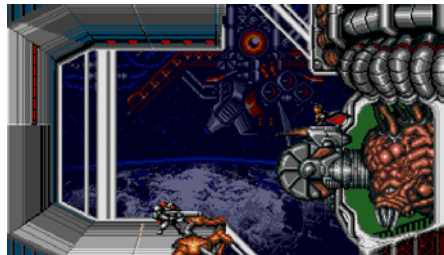
arcade cabinets. My hopes for an interesting summer were dashed.

I ran into *Hard Corps* again at a thrift shop a few weeks later. The cartridge was displayed under glass at the front of the store. I marveled at the box art. I still hadn't discovered anime, so I didn't quite know what to make of the strange and oddly pleasant designs. The rage of Fang, the proud arrogance of Colonel Bahamut, Ray's smirk and the sexiness of Sheena's legs and her elf-like hair, with the katakana lettering at the bottom appearing like some interstellar prophecy to my twelve-year-old mind: it all looked as mysterious as an ancient artifact found in some fecund Asian jungle. I wanted to hold it in my hands, and fantasized about the days when I would own my own Mega Drive. I didn't say anything to my mother; it's not like she was going to buy it for me. For now I'd just be content with my dreams.

I spent that summer in the Russian countryside, digging up potatoes and racing around the dirt roads and tall grass with my aunt's German Shepherd. When I finally returned, I was very surprised to find that my cousin had bought a Mega Drive while we were away. He didn't seem to play it much; he only rarely used it for *Road Rash* and a forgettable soccer game. He seemed to have bought it on a whim and ignored it since; it had a noticeable amount of dust when I first saw it. I asked him if he had any more games. He said no. I played the ones that he had for a few days, and asked him again.

"Why don't you go talk to my neighbor, he has a bunch," he said, annoyed. My cousin was four years older than me and was busy with girls and drinking and doing all the things that cool

adolescents do—he was no nerdy videogamer.

I, on the other hand, was. So I walked over to the neighbor's door with a thumping heart, nervous about what I was going to say. A gnome-like young man with a mess of brown hair opened the door with a mean look on his face. I had apparently woken him up or interrupted an intense bout of masturbation. I could think of nothing else that could provoke such a displeased glare in my direction.

Hearing my reasons for disturbing him he beckoned me into the living room and allowed me to peruse his collection. I immediately grabbed a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles game and—I was utterly stunned—in the middle of the pile was *Contra: Hard Corps*.

I grabbed it with trembling hands and asked him if I could borrow it. He shrugged his shoulders in response.

"No, no, you don't understand . . . ," and I began.

Somewhat puzzled by my enthusiastic tirade he told me to leave if that was all that I needed.

Oh, yes, I did indeed have everything that I needed now.

I played the game everyday for god knows how long. I would have breakfast in my aunt's kitchen in the morning, eating Bolshevik brand wafers and drinking tea out of a saucer, while her German Shepherd would pleadingly stare at me. I'd sometimes throw her a wafer, anything to get those eyes off me, though that would only encourage her to be more pitiful.

At this point, my cousin would wish us all a good day and be off to work on his motorcycle and hang out with his friends. My aunt would sometimes force him to take me along, though

we both resented this forced bit of unneeded social interaction. He'd leave, promising to buy me a candy bar on the way back, and I'd return to his room, a cave-like dwelling, dimly lit in a way that recalled the inside of a Russian church.

I'd jump into his bed and hit the Mega Drive's on switch. At this point the dog would come in and collapse in the center of the bed with a satisfied grin, pleased after having stuffed itself full of breakfast oats and stolen wafers. That dog was one clever, sneaky bitch; she'd never even think of getting on the bed unless my cousin and uncle were away and she'd jump off the second she heard my cousin's footsteps approaching the front door. I would try to shoo her away, but my tiny hands would have no effect. Resigned, I'd prop my feet up on her ribcage—she didn't seem to mind—and begin a game. I'd continue playing till the sky turned dark outside the window, lying transfixed for hours with only my feet slowly going up and down, moved by the irregular, tired breathing of the old dog.

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This wouldn't continue for long, though, as my mother would complain about my spending too much time indoors and whisk me back to our apartment. After a few days of irritating complaints, she'd allow me to return to my true home.

I would leave our Yasenovo apartment, situated in a veritable forest with apartment blocks sprouting up like toadstools. I would pass the shopping center and go down the gradually declining, lumpy asphalt, staring at the Foreign Intelligence Service building in the distance, a weird mystical tower surrounded by woods.

I'd walk through the market next to the subway entrance, looking at the cigarette brands in the kiosks—a forbidden adult pleasure—and examine the new PC games that the pirates had gotten in.

Upon descending into the subway it suddenly

became cooler and smellier. The Moscow subway has a certain tragic sense about it, a GRAVITAS that's hard to convey to those who haven't seen it. It feels like the tombs of the Soviet State, an impression that's best illustrated by the thought of the pyramids of Egypt still being used everyday by the inhabitants of that country. Each station of the Metro is sacred; a testament to the bygone might of the Soviet Union, underground cathedrals that become more and more ornate as one travels to the center.

At October Station, I'd walk under the low ceilings and admire the hammer-and-sickles carved on the rectangular columns, and switch to the ring line, patiently toiling towards Taganskaya, my favorite station of all.

Taganskaya was one of the stations built after the Great Fatherland War: a marvelous structure of marble, brass, and white plaster with the massive, grim chandeliers filling it with a haunting orange light. Each column had a placard with the words "Glory to the Hero—[artillerymen, partisans, infantrymen, pilots, etc.]" and white busts in profile of the type of soldier described chiseled under it. Below those profiles were small battle scenes. I would always stop to stare at the column honoring the tankists and remember my grandfather, a short man who had loved to wear jackets and trousers with officers' riding boots. He had spent the second half of his life recalling the war that he'd spent seven years in: from the icy snows of Karelia to the steps of the gutted and shattered Reichstag. It was no surprise that he viewed the rest of his life as kind of a comedown after the hellish graveyards of Kursk, Warsaw, and Berlin.

I would step onto the first set of escalators

(the Russian Metro was designed to serve as a bomb shelter, so it is very deeply underground), and before stepping onto the next set of escalators, I'd look at the mural on the ceiling, a rotund starry sky with a Soviet banner in the center. It always turned me sad, as if I was somehow to blame for the dreams of another generation turning to dust.

I'd then board the second escalator that would take about a minute to bring me to the surface.

I'd leave the station and board a bus to my aunt's home.

In the Middle Ages, men had to kneel in prayer all night before being granted knighthood; similarly I had to go through this sentimental journey before I could descend into the catacombs of my aunt's apartment and begin playing *Hard Corps*. It was a holy rite and one that made playing it all the more special.

Before nodding off to sleep I often liked to imagine myself as Brad Fang, during one of the game's more optimistic endings, leaving the final base on a jet motorbike while a bubbly theme called "The Blue Gale" plays in the background, uncertain at the journey's end, yet hopeful of the future.

Though playing through the game now, eight years later, in my New York apartment with a coffee mug full of cigarette butts sitting on a pedestal of J-pop CDs next to my computer, I understand that a much more accurate description shall always be myself rising through the space elevator going up to meet Colonel Bahamut, the source of my pain and worry, that unattainable goal I've been seeking all this time. I don't know if I'll be able to defeat him, though I rise up, viewing the Earth from orbit, having gone too far at this point to give up and head back. ▣

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I SHOOT THEREFORE I AM

Contra—ARC, NES, SNES, GEN, PS2 (MSX)
—Francesco-Alessandro Ursini

Disclaimer: If you're looking for information, you're reading the wrong article. In this work of mine, I rant about my navel and its relation to a series of videogames produced by Konami: Contra. To the horror of completists, I will only rant about some of the games with our buddy Bill Rizer. And I don't even think that Bill appears in *Contra: Hard Corps*. (I swear I'll check when I write the part on *Hard Corps*.) In any case, I think that this disclaimer is necessary, because here at *The Gamer's Quarter* we do like to give you some serious content about the facts of games and, more importantly, of gaming.

But personally, I'd like to share my point of view with you. There are other times and places for facts and methods, for discovering the mathematical intricacies of gaming. This is more about my chunks of life spent with these curious hybrids of Art and Science. I'm trying to give you a rendition of what I felt and thought when I played these titles. I can't honestly say that you can exploit this information for any useful increase of knowledge. Perhaps you can, simply by knowing the experiences, ideas and feelings of someone else. Maybe you'll find them funny (which would make me very, very happy), or maybe you'll look somewhere else for some

more serious content. But I'm not going to be serious, here; I have other goals.

And now, on with the show!

I Shoot, Therefore I AM: The Legacy of Contra

I remember getting *Contra: Shattered Soldier* in 2002, on the third day I was in Utrecht, Netherlands. It was a rainy day, and I had a shitty life, and every day in my future looked rainy and shitty. I put the game in my Playstation 2, and I went to piss. Suddenly, a nasty, ruvid heavy-metal tune invaded my urinating privacy, and I wondered if World War III had started. Done with my needs, I went to see what the hell was going on. Chaos, death, a world on the brink of collapse. And Bill Rizer.

Huh? Wasn't he dead?

Let's go back to the beginning.

Contra, the original, is a nice little platformer by Konami. Maybe not entirely a platformer; it makes me think of *Shinobi* and *Rolling Thunder*, but with the platform aspects greatly downplayed. The game itself isn't particularly gory. In fact, it's rather colorful, though it has a bizarre undercurrent of Reaganophilia in it. Just look at the attract screen[1]. There's a blonde guy chomping the cigar (Bill "Mad Dog" Rizer) and a dark-haired guy (Lance "Scorpion" Bean)
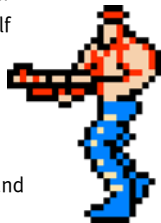
standing back to back. But for us innocent souls growing up in the Reagan era, they were the Aryan bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Italian-American brawler Sylvester Stallone. And these two cheesy rip-offs of characters from uber-pro-America action movies are fighting against the mysterious Red Falcon organization. Red? Probably not a coincidence!

But back in 1987, CONTRA captured my childish attention easily. An Arnie clone shooting in eight directions and doing quadruple somersaults? Of course I'm in! After the first easy stage, you're treated to an over-the-shoulder section with electric barriers and a bizarre vertical boss fight. Next there's another vertical section where you have to get to the top of the screen by jumping. Then another over-the-shoulder section, and finally the Contra style kicks in, in stage 5. It's a forest at night, covered with snow. There are a few enemies and then a mid-boss. Then a few more enemies and another mid-boss. Repeat a few more times, and you're in the core of Red Falcon's lair, straight out of James Cameron's ALIENS.

CONTRA is easy, regardless of all the wimps who cheer at anyone who 1-lifes the NES version. I was nine, and on my first try, I reached the last
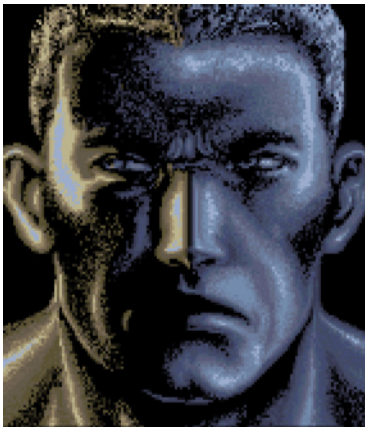
stage without too many difficulties. A few more credits, and I finished the game. A few more days of practice, and I could 1-credit the game:

soon, I could 1-life it at will. And in the years of Reaganomic self-satisfaction, I really enjoyed finding a nice and easy title; I was happy to build my self-esteem by shooting baddies dressed in red and somersaulting around in the name of justice. In the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal, I played these propaganda-embedded titles even while chuckling at my dad's strips of DOONES-BURY and BLOOM COUNTY. And soon, Konami gave us a sequel: SUPER CONTRA.

Now, I thought CONTRA was a rather cute game with nice art, cool music and whatnot; but the first time I saw SUPER CONTRA, I was completely mesmerized. The game was the cherry on the cake of the year 1988 (or the icing, or whatever you like to put on top of cake). SUPER CONTRA is a quantum leap in visuals and sound, compared to its predecessor. I put in my coin, and I felt completely in the heat of the battle. Soon I was facing a tank that would crush me if I couldn't take it down as quickly as possible. And after a few more enemies and explosions, a HUGE helicopter descends into the screen, and the main theme, in its epic style, became something more sinister and up-tempo, which told me clearly that something weird was going on.

SUPER CONTRA (much like GRADIUS II) was setting a standard for the series: the standard of the boss-battle extravaganza. The next stages follow the same pattern of a few enemies trying to place a cheap shot followed by a quick mid-boss, repeated two or three times, for five stages.

But SUPER CONTRA really becomes amazing in the last two stages, with the brilliant design of the Hive and populated by Red Falcon's minions, who show a striking resemblance to the creatures of Acheron[2]. The garish explosions and

1: I mean the arcade attract screen, not the NES, since I endorse the AWO (the Arcade World Order, that is). Actually, I think that the console version has an identical attract screen, so you should know it anyway.

2: I swear, I will never understand how Konami got away by plagiarizing Giger here and Gradius II. Maybe all the profits from the tie-in ALIENS, went directly to Giger.

the barren landscapes of war quickly give way to a much more morbid setting of living walls and nightmarish creatures. The slow and dramatic crescendo before the final battle with Red Falcon is one of the most cinematic moments of those years. There you are, in front of the most dangerous threat to humankind's survival. The gray walls are made of bones. The suffocating deep of Red Falcon rhythmically haunts you as you finally banish him (or her, or it) to its dark moon—for the freedom of the earth.

Funny how *FREEDOM* appears in the most improbable contexts. Because *SUPER CONTRA*—like all other Konami arcade games—is most defined by coercion. If we look at the arcade Gradius games, or the arcade Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle games (or the arcade Contra games, since we're already here), coercion is the *FILE ROUGE* throughout these titles: the levels demand memorization, simple tactics must be rigorously perfected, and there are no decent weapons unless you can complete the game in one life. *SUPER CONTRA* is Konami memorization taken to the next level, so to speak. Its stages are manifestos against free will; you are forced to do as the game says if you want to survive, and that's that. And once you have the enemy sequence hard-wired into your brain, every cheap shot and every lame ambush, you win easily. But that's the price we pay—for freedom.

The two arcade Contras had a kind of optimistic Manicheanism—us good, them bad. But the next chapter obliterated that colorful dualism, and threw humankind into a barren wasteland of concrete jungles, mutating monsters, and dark and hopeless cities full of the menacing occupiers. Contra became a much darker cosmos, humans were nothing but animals struggling for survival. *CONTRA III: THE ALIEN WARS* saw light on the SNES in 1992[3], and the new Contra, much like the new decade, didn't promise a superhero triumph of apple pies and liberty. Red Falcon was resurrected,

and Bill Rizer and Lance Bean were dead. Their heirs had to rise and fight this cruel dictator.

My first impressions of *CONTRA III* were mixed. On one hand, I wasn't particularly impressed by the overall look, though the SNES effects were groovy (I always liked scaling and rotations). The sound effects were rather bland, but the music perfectly suited the new darker settings. But when I played a few credits, I realized something that I'd had in mind for a while: stages are lame; bosses are what I really enjoy. This game delivered a new flavor of action, more like the boss-battle blowouts normally associated with Treasure. A few more plays, a few more exposures to this new approach to gaming, and my mind was decided on this issue; and something in me, as a gamer, started to change, rather quickly.

And, of course, victory was mine, again. But there was something about *ALIEN WARS*, something grim and brooding, something that still leaves me a bit depressed and nostalgic every time I play it. There's a despair and a sense of drab hopelessness that clearly wouldn't have been possible if super-Ronnie could have really triumphed over evil. And there's something sad about the cruel twist of the series' milieu, something that made me sigh, "Another world turned into a post-apocalyptic nightmare." All my glorious dreams of freedom and supremacy were shattered, the fragments swept away.

There was a *GAIDEN* (side story) to *CONTRA III* on the Sega Genesis (Mega Drive for the non-American audience), *CONTRA: HARD CORPS*[4]. It was good, it was fast, it had lots of bosses, but it was somewhat soulless, for reasons that I still have to understand. Something that never grabbed me as alluring and disturbingly charming, but rather a flawless and cold exercise in boss-fest.

And a boss-fest it is. My friends would invite me into their houses to clear the game that is

making them crazy, and the number of boss battles and the mechanical rigor they demand gave me a robotic pleasure.

But what is it that is missing in this short but intense Treasuresque series of violent fights? I'd say it lacks a vivid moment. Consider that I can still watch, through the eyes of memory, my first experiences in the first Red Falcon lair in *Contra*. And I can still feel the gray netherworld of *Super Contra*'s final stage; the slow pulsating beat echoes in my ears when I think of the fight against the devilish alien.

Then, everything was lost—not in the literal sense, perhaps. The series went over to the consoles, and I while I appreciated the violent careen in a boss-fest direction, the appeal of the series disappeared. The next games were made by western groups, and I left the series.

But then, into the darkest period of my life, the darkest Contra came: *Contra: Shattered Soldier*.

The first thing that I noticed is that Bill Rizer had become a pawn. He'd always been something of a pawn, but he had clearly been proud of it before. Now, the apocalypse is past, men have been judged, and three old men join together for a firmer grip on the few superstates. They unite themselves like supercomputers that formed AM; they become the Triumvirate, to obtain absolute and final submission of all of earth. And the final swing of the pendulum, the last boot on the last upturned face, is our hero, Bill Rizer.

It always was this way, actually. No one has lived in the past. No one will live in the future. The present is the only form of life. Poor blond fool, did you really think that you were building something great? Fighting for freedom? Ah, so puerile, your stupidity disgusts me.

We help Bill Rizer and the android Lucia in their futile quest against Lance Bean, another hero turned puppet? Now a renegade leader of "Blood" Falcon? Now dressing in an SS uniform?

No. Stop it. Nothing's making sense.

Contra used to be filled with that shallow, shiny sense of benevolent supremacy. It was about easy settings and making a lot of noise with automatic weapons. this Contra has no sense of democracy whatsoever. Its gameplay is absolutely fascistic in nature: place yourself at point x, shoot with weapon y, repeat or die[5]. No choice, no independence, nothing but the bleak landscapes of a world which is itself a fascist dictatorship. Work, produce, eat, sleep, and get drunk in your ghetto trying desperately to copulate with some other damned member of the hive, Nimdok.

And the pervasive mantra encoded in this exercise intotalitarianism made game. The mantra consists of learning religiously every single moment of the game, and repeating it as fast as you can. Day by shitty day, you learn the jumps and the charge shots, and you progress in the quest to defeat the AM-like Trimurti, and their insane attempt to awaken the power of the Moirai, the ancient triune Fates.

3: It is true that I played an arcade version, but it was a bizarre format that was basically an arcade SNES.

4: And now that I have come to this game, I can see that I was right about Bill Rizer's absence.

5: This definition is courtesy of Bloodflowers of Shmups.com.

No room for creativity, no one asked you for that. Learn their rules, and become their own game. This is the way the AM has designed itself, and the world, and the game. And then there's the horrible reality check. The Triumvirate, the ones who sent you in the name of freedom and justice, they were never the good guys. They used you to completely fuck over the planet, then accused you of the worst possible crime, the murder of your best friend, Lance. And after all the lies and the propaganda and the deaths, humankind barely surviving, they send you again to confront a final enemy. Lance is not dead, he's just the last remaining resistance, and you fight and kill him, your friend, the only one who could help you to destroy the true enemy. They, Them, the Three, the Trinity, the Fates, the Trimurti, the Triumvirate, AM.

Contra has gone from blind, bright optimistic propaganda to bitter, apocalyptic despair. Along the way, I went from dreaming its cheesy Aryan dreams to fighting for anything other than my dreams. And through it all, Bill Rizer, the shining Aryan hero at my side; Bill Rizer, the lone wolf with the dead blue eyes; Bill Rizer, an emblem of eternal battle.

And what of the future? Well, Bill has another sequel in which to star, *Neo Contra*, but that's already old news. You and I, we have to get rid of our juvenile dreams, before it's too late. But at least we still have the option that Bill and Lance and Nimdok and Ted lack: we can always scream.

THE REAL NEXT GENERATION

Ultimate Spider-Man and the Future
—J. R. Freeman

The setting is my bedroom. The time is somewhere between 6:00 and 7:00 in the evening. I'm sitting at my computer chatting with fellow Gamer's Quarter contributor Sergei Servianov. He's just set up that new Google Chat service, a part of Google's bid to take over the Internet, and he's testing it out on me for the first time. We're talking about stuff, mostly about being writers and all the problems associated therein.

Sitting next to me on my floor is my four-year-old nephew, who we'll call Jeffrey because that's his name. Due to his parents only having a single car and living in the town next to the one I live in, arrangements are set up so that we usually pick him up from daycare in the afternoon and watch him until his parents arrive after work. My sister having a job in this town facilitates this setup nicely. He has come into my room suddenly because, well, I guess because that's where he wanted to be at the time. Can't blame a kid for knowing where are all the cool hangout spots are in the house. Or maybe he was just tired of watching cartoons in the living room like he usually does.

"Hey buddy," I say, curious because he rarely comes into my room at all, much less any part of the house that isn't the living room/dining room/kitchen trifecta. "What's up?"

He just shrugs his shoulders like little kids do sometimes, looking around my room. Then he sits down on the floor next to where I'm sitting in my computer chair.

"You want to sit on my bed?" I ask him. I don't really have anywhere to sit in my room, other than my computer chair and my bed, was why I asked him.

"No." He says firmly. "I want to sit here."

I ask him if he wants to play with some of my old GI Joe toys. He likes that idea.

"Wanna watch TV?"

He shakes his head vigorously.

"No. I wanna play right here." He says firmly. Then he adds, "Next to you."

My heart is warmed.

A lull in the IM conversation with dear old Sergei approaches, and I take the opportunity to spend some time with my nephew like any decent-hearted uncle would. I ask him if he'd like us to play with some of my old Spider-Man action figures, of which I have a few sitting around. He thinks this is a grand idea. I know by the way he eagerly nods his head and widens his eyes.

I reach over to my makeshift bedside table (two comic book boxes stacked on top of each other) and grab the two Spider-Men and one

Terminator. So they're not all Spider-Man toys, bite me. He's not old enough to know the difference either way yet. One of the Spider-Men is a cyborg, from the McFarlane storyline from when he was drawing and penning his own Spidey title from the early '90s. I got it for Christmas ten years ago when I was 12. The other Spidey is a more spindly shaped figure from five or six years back. The Terminator is an older figure, vaguely crafted after Arnie's likeness. He wears a tattered yellow tank top and his cyborg bits are showing through torn skin. I got him a year or so after I got the first Spidey from a friend I had in 6th and 7th grade, back when kids traded toys with each other.

None of these details are important compared to the five minutes of fun I had with my little nephew. I did most of the talking, setting up the storyline like I used to for myself when I played with those figures regularly. The two Spider-Men are in the future battling an evil Terminator and trying to change history. My Spidey is the future Spidey, his is the present day one. The battle climaxes as both Spider-Men work together to lure the cyborg aboard a space shuttle and blast him off to the moon. The clock for the launch is counting down as the evil cyborg chases both Spider-Men up and through the holding structure of the space craft. I pop the door open as Jeffery distracts the bad guy, and then he lures him in the craft. I web my nephew and pull him free at the last moment as the engines shudder and the ship takes off. Victory is had and good triumphs over evil. Most of the battle here is imaginary, with the both of us playing out the roles with our action figures. It feels good to be a kid again, if only momentarily.

I notice his Spider-Man's more modern, spindly shape and start thinking about the newest Ultimate line of Spidey funny books. Then an idea crosses my mind.

"Hey," I ask him. "You wanna play my Spider-Man videogame?"

Again, he thinks this is just a grand idea.

"Both of us?" He asks.

"Well, it's only one-player, but I'll let you play too." I respond.

I get up and mosey on over to my PS2, where I take out *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* and replace it with the copy of Treyarch's *Ultimate Spider-Man*. Initially, I wasn't too pleased with how they had tampered with the swinging mechanics. In my mind they were near perfect as they were in *Spider-Man 2*, and the changes made seemed only to serve to dumb down the game for a newer audience. Nothing wrong with that, but at the time I was thinking as a fan and not an outsider. This is an important distinction to make, and one I would soon realize after seeing how Jeffery took to the game.

I had just loaded the game off my previous save and was putting the controller into his small hands when his daddy walks into my room with a tiny jacket and matching pair of shoes.

The game starts with Spider-Man standing on a rooftop at night. It looks pretty much like the comic book it it based off in videogame form.

"Hey buddy, it's time to go now," he said. He looked tired, as any working dad would with a 9-to-5 job as a systems administrator for a rather large database and technology manufacturing company.

" I don' wanna go!" Jeffery squeaked belligerently. "I wanna stay here!"

I saw a frown cross his tired father's face, yet I also a glimmer cross his eye and a smile start to creep across his face when he saw his son sitting there holding the controller as the game started up. Like me, he grew up with videogames, and being a few years older, he was more finely tuned to the likes of *A Link to the Past* on the SNES at a time when I was still discovering *Super Mario Bros.* on the mere NES. Now here his pride and joy sat, taking in the wonders of our little hobby for almost the first time.
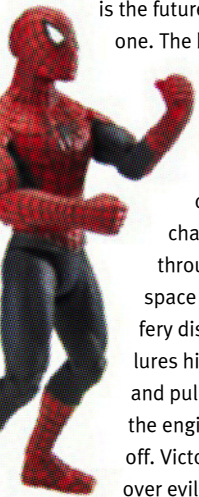
We spent the next ten minutes coaching Jeffery on the function of the controller's buttons. First he learned how to make Spider-Man move using the left analog stick. The left sticks camera control threw him for a moment, but he soon learned to ignore it as it didn't seem to serve any useful function other than to disorient him. Next he learned how to jump, and then double jump. Then he learned how to swing Spider-Man's fists to punch bad guys. Finally he learned how to crawl the walls and swing around. He took great joy in controlling Spider-Man up and down along the sides of those buildings. Watching him move and seeing the avatar do whatever a spider could, all in the grasp of his tiny fingertips, his hands barely able to hold the controller. I cannot adequately describe the joy felt at seeing someone so innocent discover the sheer wonder of a videogame. It is a memory I will always cherish.

Eventually, though, it was time for him to go home and I coaxed Jeffery into leaving with his parents by letting him borrow my videogame. "You can play it on the big TV in the living room." His daddy says to him. He thought that idea was just swell.

Fast forward to the next morning. My sister—Jeffery's mother—makes her daily stop at the house to get a ride into town after her husband drops her son off at daycare and takes the car into work with him. I come out of my room after spending the night working some more on the latest novel I'm writing. I'm a night owl, and the time when everyone else is asleep is usually the best time to get that sort of work done, I've found. I walk into the kitchen as she's telling my father—who is busy making omelets—about how her son stayed up until 11:00 o'clock last night playing that Spider-Man game. She turns to me and with a smile she says, "He even beat the first guy."

I'm flabbergasted. She means he beat the first boss, which if memory serves me correct is either Wolverine during the tutorial stage or Venom after that. Either way I'm impressed because it's not like either of those fights are pushovers for a first timer, at least not one that's four years old. Well, maybe Wolverine, but still. He can barely hold the freakin' controller.

"Really?" I ask, still unable to overcome my astonishment.

"Oh yeah. We just got his little blue chair from his room and set it up for him in front of the TV, and he just sat there playing until after his bedtime. He even fell asleep with the controller in his hands." Then she added, "I might have to buy you another copy of that game because I doubt he'll want to let go of it any time soon."

Oh no, I think to myself. I've created a monster.

Like many I discovered videogames at a very young age. Much time was spent playing on the family computer with games like GHOSTBUSTERS and MINER '49ER. I don't remember how old I was when I first started to play videogames, because they were always around from the time I was old enough to maneuver a keyboard or controller. I must have been four or five when I started gaming, roughly around Jeffery's age.

*   *   *   *   *   *

Political pundits often find technology and the aspects of the impacts it has on our modern day lives frightening. Well, to them I say that I have seen the next generation and it is good. The future is safe, Washington. Videogames do not make violent murderers. In fact, they are a source of joy in our already dwindling, joyless lives. Right now as I type my mind is swirling with thoughts and emotions. I'm trying to remember the videogames that were even around when I was four years old, much less what I was playing or even if I was playing anything at all. Off the top of my head I can recall things like Q*BERT and PAC-MAN. Single screen games with

simple blocky avatars and control systems that pale in comparison to the complexity and depth of a recreated Manhattan playground open to the minds and hearts of today's youth. I can't imagine trying to grapple with a controller with 12 buttons at four years of age, much less figuring out how the actual game itself works. Then again, I must remind myself that we're talking about a boy who has opened up sub-directories on the family computer that his father didn't even know were there. My mind floats towards the subject of videogame violence, and I can only recall the violence seen and experienced in games like *Contra III: Alien Wars* or *Castlevania: Bloodlines* as being no more desensitizing as that seen on the 9 o'clock news, then as well as now. More realistic, accurate depictions of violence don't change a thing because at their core, all healthy minded human beings know where fantasy ends and reality begins. It is the parent's responsibility to foster a healthy mind in a child, not some politicians'. No law or legislature could ever hold a candle to the things our parents taught us and still teach us today. Politicians never seem to realize that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

When did this country become such a nanny state? When did people start feeling that it is all right for a governmental body of outdated, out-of-touch old fogies—with their own interests in mind and the interests of the people they are representing coming in second—to decide how to raise children? The only people you ever hear getting angry about the kind of legislation that is making the rounds in politics are the gamers. Not the rest of society, because to them videogames don't really apply to their lives. To them they're just novelties of the digital age. Only a parent can decide what is right for their child, not a bunch of half-hearted regulating policy makers. The only way a government can ever really please the people it's representing is by staying out of their lives as much as possible and trusting them to make the responsible decisions that adults are capable of.

I'm trying to think about how many children Jeffery's age there are in this country, and I'm also trying to think how large a percentage of those children have parents who played videogames when they were children. You hear about it on the Internet once a month with articles that detail the statistics of videogaming age demographics. Already we see content marketed to children my nephew's age with tie-in games to popular franchises like SpongeBob SquarePants and Stuart Little, to name only a few. But it is true that videogames are a part of our larger culture, and I have seen the proof. They are deep inside our children now, as I come to realize they have been for the last twenty years. Pretty much everyone I know within my age range and younger has played modern-day videogames on modern-day videogame hardware. My thoughts drift fondly towards a time when my grandchildren will someday recall our current considered masterpieces of the medium like *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* as "that game my grandpa used to play." Seeing my nephew's completely innocent, youthful exuberance towards my favored hobby has restored my faith in the medium at large. Our children are our greatest miracles that we as human beings are capable of performing. It is not mere technology that the future holds, and it is up to us right now starting today to pass on the things we know and cherish most. Until recently, videogames weren't a large part of that for me.

I can see the clouds forming on the horizon. I can sense a real revolution forming in the air, and it isn't just that one from Nintendo. Now that I think about that, though, I can't wait for the future even more.

SEEN IT ALL IN A SMALL TOWN

***Animal Crossing: Wild World*—NDS**
—Ancil Anthropy

There are really two ways to play *Animal Crossing*.

My father was a Gamer, and I ended up sharing a town with him. I would turn on the game to find that months had passed since the day before; he had been messing with the clock, advancing the date so that fruit would grow back and the ground would be re-seeded with fossils. Both could be sold for money, and money could be spent on your mortgage, earning you a bigger and bigger house and, eventually, a gold statue of yourself in front of the train station.

Though the game styles itself as a "life simulator," there have always been rewards for Gamers. This is game where your interior design is scored, every day, and the person who's claimed the highest score to date has a house so stuffed with furniture that there is literally no room to walk. And certainly no room to *live*.

Meanwhile it was increasingly difficult to attempt to live a normal "life" within the town. Neighbors would complain of not seeing me in months, roaches would claim my house every day, characters would come and go without my seeing them.

Eventually my father moved to his own town, and some semblance of normalcy could return to mine. I could go on designing clothes, painting signposts, and getting to know my quirky computer neighbors.

There are only so many times you can listen to the same line of dialogue with a random nickname appended to it, though. Your neighbors in *Animal Crossing* are liars. They will insist that you go on shopping trips with them, but they'll never follow up on it. They can't; it's not programmed into the game.

Eventually I fell out of playing. There just weren't, it seemed, nearly as many rewards for the player who wanted to role-play—who wanted interaction, character development, and creative exercise—as there were for the Gamer. I made a quaint tea room, where chimes and bells rang softly while a single visitor, my mother or father, could sit on one of the many chairs lined against the walls, and then I set the game aside.

Some time later, Nintendo announced its plan to bring its DS portable online. Shortly after, they announced that one of the first games to take advantage of the new online network would be an *Animal Crossing* sequel—*"Wild World"*.

Needless to say, my curiosity was piqued. I

got a copy of the game shortly after its release, and my mother picked up her own copy a little later.

I was immediately pleased with the steps the developers had taken to reward the player who wants interactions that are less fiscal and more meaningful. My first week, a penguin in my town, who I was quite fond of, insisted that I show her the inside of my house; after all, I'd seen the inside of hers. She asked me what time was good, and we set the date for early the next morning. The next morning I was in my house at the appointed time, and lo and behold, she knocked on my door and stepped inside.

She hung out for a few minutes, looked around, roamed past my tabletop arcade game and pinball machine, commented on my choice of decor. Eventually she expressed a desire not to overstay her welcome, bid me goodbye, and left. It was great. She didn't give me any new furniture or help me pay off my mortgage. We set a date, I kept it, and unusual and pleasant interaction occurred.

The best events in *Wild World* are like this: neighbors mailing you invitations to their birthday parties, and expecting you to show up with a present, or running through town searching for someone who knows the password to get into Redd's black market.

The best event of all is the Flea Market. The Flea Market occurs on a Sunday, and during that day you can walk into the house of anyone in town (provided they're home), find a piece of furniture you like, and ask them to put a price on it. And while you're home, people will come to visit, peruse your belongings, and spot something they like. And then you get to haggle.

It's remarkably simple, and it works remarkably well, not only because it encourages interaction and gives you an opportu-

nity to acquire things you may have noted while visiting neighbors but never been able to find, but because it is a scene you get to play from both directions. You can buy from your neighbors and they can buy from you; it reinforces the feeling that you are a member of this town and community just the same as the computerized animals are.

Unfortunately, it seems like the developers didn't learn this lesson as well as they could. There's an event in midwinter called the Bright Nights, a week during which everyone decorates their houses with lights and attempts to win the title of "Bright Star," Everyone, that is, except you.

My mother and I spent the whole week trying to figure out how we could get lights for our houses and participate, but ultimately it seemed that there was no way beyond voting every night on whose lights we thought were best. All that the event accomplished was to alienate us from the other residents of our towns.

The experience was saved, however, by the arrival of my Nintendo USB Wi-Fi connector, and the transformation of *Animal Crossing* into an online game, the "wild world" promised in the title.

And indeed it seems the fulfillment of the promise of *Animal Crossing*; unlike in the Gamecube game, where a single person sitting in the room with you could visit your town and talk to your neighbors while you yourself were inexplicably absent from town, now people even from other parts of the country can visit your town, and more importantly, you. Your neighbors will retreat into their houses, leaving your town a playground for you and your guests, to shop together, to play hide-and-seek, to chase each other with axes under the starlight.

Human visitors not only provide the kind of interactions the computer neighbors are incapable of, but they also provide an audience—someone to see and appreciate the crazy

street-art projects you've embarked upon using the new options for decoration the game has given you. I recreated the statues from Zelda's dungeons on my front lawn; another staffer created a *Space Invaders* diorama.

Right now, the DS online library being as small as it is, *Wild World* is positioned as the primary venue for casual player interaction on the handheld. And it delivers in a way its Gamecube (or Nintendo 64) predecessors never could. This is the game that *Animal Crossing* should have always been. 🎮
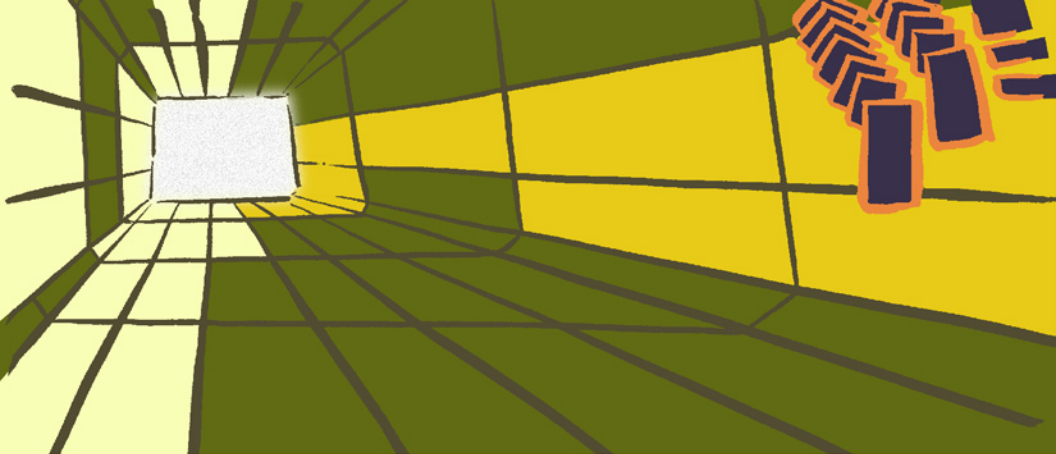
Rez — PS2, SDC
— Matthew Williamson
Art By: Benjamin Rivers

Michigan has one of the largest state parks in the nation. In it, there's a hill overlooking Lake Michigan. I took my dog there sometimes just so we could climb a certain hill. This was best done right before sunset.

You'd start out by walking up a nice gentle incline that would become steeper and steeper. You'd arrive at a point where you'd have to use the pine trees to pull yourself up, their bristling needles pricking your hand gently. When you'd get to the top you'd see this wonderful glowing sun that reflected ever-warm shades of an orange that quietly slipped into red across a lake that filled the horizon. As the sun meets its reflection on the lake and the red fills the sky and water, the trees finish out the borders and edges of the world. It seems to fit into a perfect unison of color and composition.

This is *Rez*.

Take any piece of the game separately and you have nothing remarkable or new; on-rail shooting, music creation, flat shaded polygons, levels, and bosses. In doing this, though, you can't see the forest for the trees. *Rez* is a videogame that combines all elements of gaming into perfect unison. The outcome is something extraordinary.

"Go to Synaesthesia," the game invites you. It asks of you to "open your senses," "feel it, don't think."

Start out slowly and take it easy. Target the enemies, feel the beat. Like that hill, this game builds upon itself in increments. Heading deeper into the terminal it increases pace, adding layers to the music, part of which is created by you. Upon finally making it to the end of the terminal you will encounter a Gigas, the videogame equivalent of reaching the end of a trail into a beautiful landscape.

I can't help but smile every time I reach a Gigas. Swirling in a weightless environment akin to THE LAWNMOWER MAN, the beat quickens your controller pulses, and your eyes dilate. Your senses are open and you feel it. Gentlemen, welcome to Synaesthisa. Each journey lasts a euphoric and glorious fifteen minutes. I don't remember the last time I smiled this much during a game, and it happens no matter how many times I have completed a session.

Rez is something that comes up in videogame conversations frequently. Most likely there is a fanatic of the game whom you know or happen to run into at your local videogame store, trying to work the game into a conversation any way that he can. As of this year, the game is five years old, yet still looks gorgeous.
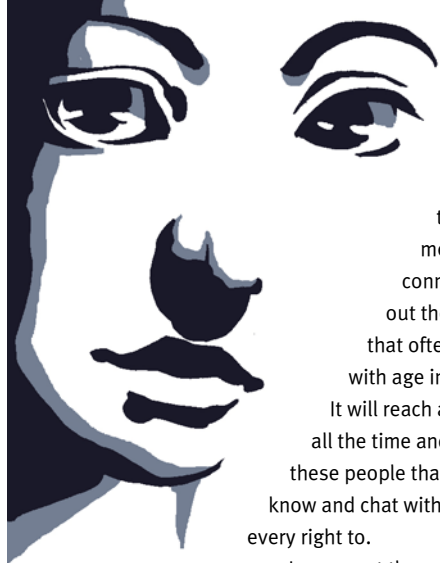
Its emotion and message connect without the barrier that often comes with age in games. It will reach a new fan all the time and create these people that you know and chat with. It has every right to.

I never got the game because of its price and these fanatics who go on about how it is the most unique and masturbatory experience in gaming. The videogame scared me a little, even. With a print run in the low thousands, nowhere near enough copies were made to get into everyone's hands. Prices skyrocketed into the $90 range. I can understand why now: any person who owns this game will most likely keep it in their collection for that semi-frequent journey up the hill. I did not understand this before, and coupled with the fanatical preaching, I held off for five years.

Cult games with high price tags can often be a gamble. Frequently the people that connected with them did so under very specific circumstances. This could be the worst $90 I ever spent. Knowing that *Rez* is very short never helped with the fear and the gamble weighed heavily on my mind. Coincidentally someone must have found out about this game that had quite a bit of money and good communication skills. Recently *Rez* was reprinted and is fairly easy to obtain in the United States for a standard retail price. Really though, it is hard to put a price on an experience.

Electronic music pulses through your head.

Floating though a hard-lined vector style world, body pulsing, you spin and release your artillery, sounded by a choir and visualized with a burst of light. Color is pulsing, synchronized with the music and enemy movement. The code is decrypted and beams of light are emitted out of a cube like sunlight passing through a prism. The world collapses on itself, as the screen blurs and the beat quickens, though this really only leads to a new creation.

The experience is all you have after the details fall away from memory. I can still feel the wonder in my heart as I looked upon the sun dipping into Lake Michigan as though to extinguish itself. I will always feel this, much like I will always feel the culmination of sight, sound, and control that *Rez* creates to a euphoric perfection. I can't rightly put a price on that. 🐞
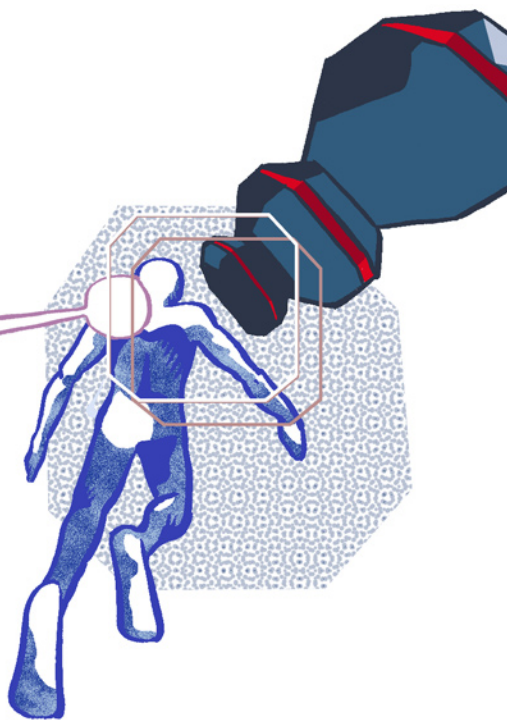
THE VICISSITUDES OF HOTROD MACHISMO AS APPLIED TO GRAPHICS CARD MESSAGE BOARDS

Building Your Own PC
—M. O'Connor

I can understand now why my father never approved of my spending so much time fiddling with hand-me-down computers. Not only did he know little of what they did, it also seemed all I ever did with them was play games. Which was largely true, though in the process I learned quite a bit about how PCs work, mostly through accident and companies like Origin always pushing the architecture. There also loomed the depressing prospect of more money to be spent on mere games, money he didn't have in the first place. I learned to cobble together bits and pieces from old books and old hardware, and made do with a lot of help from an aunt who worked at Chemical Bank (now part of the Citi-Group). As an analyst, she was required to keep up on the latest and greatest. A lot of formerly late and great hardware found its way to my basement, as well as a few toys like the interesting TRS-80, which mostly served to teach me that BASIC was not my future.

I only threw this back in his face once years later, after I'd completed a lengthy and lucrative freelance contract for a percussion-instrument company, designing and writing their annual catalog. I felt like I was owed for all those years of being told to go outside, to get off my fat ass and the like, though in truth he was largely right. No one could have reasonably guessed in 1988 that years of adolescent fiddling would turn into actual skill set, translated into even more actual income. It has also translated into carpal tunnel syndrome and a post-football physique best described as retired, but unlike every other male in my paternal bloodline family since 1880 or so, I don't have to work with my hands. This is far more important for my father than for me; when I told him I was going to Baruch College for a master's degree last year, his brain stopped processing at "Baruch College," something that's translated into his head as "business school." For someone who spent 30 years of his life loading boxes into trucks, the idea that his son is going anywhere near a business school to do anything but unload boxes is a validation of existence. You have won, because your progeny have won, and everyone who ever tried to fuck you over can eat shit and die.

At that point I felt like the world's biggest asshole, because I can never understand what it must be like to find validation like that after all the accidents and rage and wrong turns, a lifetime of grind, grime and disgust punctuated by bouts of misery and the past creeping up in the gray shadow of old age. Amidst the screams of pain from the past, a great victory comes out

of fiddling.

My father was mostly upset about the games thing (we'd played Atari 2600 games together during the first few years of my life, often to great success on his part) because at that point sending his children to college seemed an impossible dream, and one way to ensure someone else would pay for it, and not just saddle me with loans, would be to get me into some school on a football scholarship. I wasn't a good enough player to even sit bench on a Division I team, but I did get scouted by a few schools on the Division II level, most of which I sabotaged by asking stupid questions about scholarship terms and injuries and the like. I don't think he minded that much at this point, because I'd secured some academic funding from odd groups through essay contests (Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Ancient Order of Hibernians in particular), and I assume he had resigned himself to watching his lumbering boy-child make all sorts of wrong turns.

Things are wildly different now; he's retired, and I'm married, for starters. When my uncle—his brother, who looks like a younger, beardless copy of my dad—and my father get together to install a cabinet or otherwise help "the kids" out, I respond in turn. I build computers for relatives, fix problems, troubleshoot hardware and the like; my uncle's daughter now gets my hand-me-downs, and I have taken on a new life as a one-stop shop for answers to odd questions. My obsession is no longer an obsession or a hobby, but a legitimate means-producing sidebar to my life. I finished school without dropping out or

fucking up, passing the first hurdle that no one else in my family ever had. I racked up no out-of-wedlock children, no arrests (formally), no AIDS, no jail time, no fuck-ups. I did everything I was charged with, and to boot, I make my extended family's Gateways and Dells work better than they have any right to.

I consider this a more-than-fair trade for a lifetime of honest, if emotionally draining, correction. To say any more would be ungrateful.

*   *   *   *   *   *

Having never been religious, I can't help but envy people who truly do fall from grace to doubt, much less those who take on the role of violating those taboos for the advancement of whatever it is they may be. Everyone believes in something, even if it's the most secular and supposedly serious set of rules, with a degree of fervor that can only be measured by the panic invoked in breaking those rules. For me, spending money on a new computer or something only vaguely related to utility has always been something akin to a Black Mass for a nominally Catholic person; a deep sense of wrong lies beneath a surface where one can calmly and rationally explain that nothing truly terrible is happening. If God and Satan are just constructs, parts of our mind, or components of a pre-rational emotionalism that gives flavor to a world of geometry, physics and algebra, what's to be worried about? It's just some blasphemy and some slightly weird sexual acrobatics.

If done correctly, it's always more than just some.

And so I check and re-check my list, my finances, and my desires. I play them against each other like a warring gang of one-note character actors from a bad fantasy film. Nausea and panic pass, eventually, and even if they cannot be killed, these urges can certainly be reigned in. As far as handicaps go, this is a blessedly minor one, and mostly a benefit in disguise. Amidst the credit-happy zeitgeist, restraint from frivolity is

a virtue, even if it must be repeatedly beaten in at childhood. It may be a sick and twisted virtue to some, but it beats drowning yourself in a pit designed to punish the foolish, the helpless and the stupid.

As such, I have some thoughts on the process of PC building in general, and on *F.E.A.R.* in particular.

Step 1: Research

The great thing about hardware message boards is the vast store of knowledge available detailing an immeasurable amount of information about almost every possible hardware and software combination. In some cases, they come with links to drivers and solutions painstakingly written by the clever and the frustrated.

Rendering Purity

I crossed the line when I began posting to my GPU distributor's message boards about the phenomenon of brand-identification battles between Nvidia and ATI zealots. (Mostly in the context of "Isn't this completely insane?") It is simply not the appropriate venue for pet projects unrelated to case modification, much less the examination of what drives people to such lengths.

But even less appropriate is the behavior of those who choose to troll a forum for the sake of disparaging the product created by that company. The nadir of that nadir is a blitz in the name of a rival manufacturer for a component of a product. That's punching your neighbor's mom in the face for something he did in one of your dreams.

I assume they're not all stealth-marketing operatives—though some of them simply must be—but rather an example of rampant emotionalism unbound by the chains of decorum and good taste. In other words, it is a microcosm of the Internet.

So what's the payoff here? *CUI BONO, E*

PLURIBUS UNUM, *ETC.*, *A PRIORI* and so forth!

Ideological trolling makes some sense. There are stakes involved—beliefs to uphold, attachment to a way of life, a moral and ethical framework. Things that people have historically fought over. I think fighting over brand identification is, in some ways, an attempt to approximate a moral framework worth fighting for—at least as it concerns the values of a particular hobby. This is not that crazy—people do attach a complicated but coherent way of life to certain companies, like Apple or Nintendo, which they feel matches with their view of how things should be. It's a mutually beneficial feedback loop, so endow it with as much or as little moral heft as you see fit.

Trolling feeds off of devotion and the simple simian joy of pushing buttons from a safe distance. Hoo-ray for monkey boy.

Step 2: Not That, Not This, Not Yet

If you work for a living, do more research than a little. Somewhere between "far too much" and "I'm a little bit sick of this." It'll help deflate the urge to jump at temptation.

Set a firm budget. Be reasonable. Don't go into debt, even in the short-term, to buy a computer to play games on, unless games pay your bills. Then write those off on your annual tribute settlement with Great Leviathan. Live within your means, think globally, act locally and all that good stuff.

If you want to play games, and don't want

to spend too much money, take a look at the lowest rung of the most recent series of graphics cards from whatever manufacturer strikes your fancy the most, gauge the price/performance payoffs with personal anecdotes and reviews from trusted sources and take a look at all of the technical problems reported on the retailer's message board. Don't skimp on the power supply or the system RAM, and find a motherboard that seems to work well with the video card you have your eye on.

Be Just Fearful Enough

I've only ever really screwed up one PC build, and in the process I lost a hard drive and every single thing I'd written since the age of 14. The casting into oblivion of many megabytes of bad poetry and exposition was the result of a stupid mistake—forgetting to change the channel select on the back of the hard drive to slave caused all sorts of weird grinding noises on boot. After discovering the problem, the drive had to be reformatted and has worked fine since; it now lives in a computer in northwestern New Jersey that belongs to my little cousin.

Now, herein lies a rub-a-dub that applies to some of the trickier aspects of building your own PC. I have been told that the incorrect jumper setting should not have damaged the hard drive. I've also been told that it most certainly would. Every manual I've ever read on the subject speaks of unspeakable evils from beyond the void, though the only black starless space of undying horror they seem to concretely invoke is

the one that fotzes your warranty.

It is entirely possible I did something else that damaged the drive. I may have forgotten to ground myself before picking it up, or I was too hasty in unplugging it and didn't give the drive enough time to spin down. Who knows?

The important things are that my cousin may some day save written efforts to this drive and much of my past has been erased. It was mostly a part not worth saving.

Step 3: If You Don't Know What You Are Doing, You May Be Doing It Wrong

Don't bite off more than you can chew. Take care to avoid writing checks your body can't cash. Other clichés may apply to your particular situation, but pay heed to the basic idea that while it is OK to be afraid, conquering fear is a vital component of a non-wussy life. However, one must consider that fear can be a kind of warning from the part of our brains that doesn't spend all day telling pretty lies.

There's almost always someone out there who has done what you're doing, so go find their website and study their photos for a bit longer. You get used to how things fit into their respective slots, and worry begins to fade.

Pay Attention to Your Surroundings

When you're flat on your back against a cold linoleum floor, you have time to think about where things went right and where things went

wrong.

I've installed a fair bunch of CPU heatsink-and-fan combinations in my life, and it never ceases to be stressful. There's a point where I always worry about the PCB snapping in half, a problem no doubt rooted in the childhood trauma of being punished for breaking an Atari 2600 joystick through overzealous repetition. (Even worse than the punishment was the knowledge that a very serious boundary had been transgressed, and lasting damage to the family had been caused. An understanding is reached, and it is wholly negative. Do not go into debt to buy games.)

Or perhaps I realize the electronics industry is littered with tiny people with very small hands. And so I worry. I know the board bends temporarily, and I know the heatsink clips require a fair bit of force to slide into place. But I have always given it a go the first time around by telling myself that nothing is going to happen and I'm just being paranoid. And every time I have failed on the first try.

But I've never messed up so badly I broke either the motherboard or the heatsink clips or any parts in between. I win every time.

I was flat on my back because I was so busy thinking about winning I'd never considered moving the motherboard's smooth plastic coffin from its spot on the floor. My socks were slippery, my floor was manufactured in the 1970s and my head was trying to remember how much force the AMD video demonstrator had used in getting that seemingly flimsy slotted metal clip over that plastic, toy yellow peg.

Even this was a perfect save, as I threw all of me (as considerably as possible) away from the table with the good expensive stuff on it. I didn't break any bones or damage any parts, and I came away from it a slightly more pained person than before. My wife came running into the room at the thunderous thud of my falling, and I looked at her, heatsink raised in my right hand.

Step 4: Some Positive News

The end result may have much thanks to give to the tinkering impulse, picking away at a hobby with love, or at least fervor. You do get the impression of a league of heated hot-rodders from PC hardware message boards; they are a tremendous learning resource and a place of terrible aesthetic peril.

After a few hundred dozen badly Photoshopped banners, you begin to wonder just what the hell is going on. But dorky is as dorky does, and understanding the difference between moral and aesthetic weight can save one a lifetime of heartache. There are definite parallels to be drawn between the bulk of people who tinker with cars along well-traveled lines and people who build PCs from stock parts (not the people who build custom parts for either group; these saints of techne are on another kick entirely). Each mistake made and discovery uncovered was a future misstep I didn't have to make, and so I thank them, though I would never hire them to decorate my home.

They Celebrate the Fruits of Their Labors

The end result of a hard day's build is, at its best, satisfaction. This most recent build made me, if not a "graphics whore," then at the very least someone who was willing to spread his legs for a prettily rendered face. Lighting tricks add a great deal to presentation and are strangely immersive. It struck me after a recent snowstorm that every single shiny surface could

be endowed with that overpowering glow. Hear the Good Word: Bloom Is True! The Reflection Is Upon Us!

Those snowy blind spots had far more in common with the ridiculously bright warehouse of any FPS (the warehouses are still omnipresent, but they're getting better with every major title) than I'd ever thought.

Step 5: And So We Return to the Beginning

When you get married you're not only legally and emotionally (in theory) joined together, you also share a similar financial fate. Her debts become his liabilities, and vice versa. So I can understand the grinding frustration and anxiety my wife felt when every attempt to play a DVD on this newfangled system—with an even new-erfangled widescreen monitor—would stutter.

Once again, the Internet braintrust was tapped for a thousand hours of experience in the blink of an eye. Since all my software settings were normal, and videos played from DVD rips directly to the hard drive worked fine, I assumed it was a firmware thing, another example of a rebranded Lite-On drive causing problems. However, in this case there are a whole slew of message boards and domains for this particular brand of DVD-R drive, and within 20 minutes I had found several different firmwares to try out. Success was mine, even if this victory was tempered with the knowledge of a full-blast New Year's Eve screening of THE SOUND OF MUSIC.

The Following Is a Very Short Review of F.E.A.R., in Which the Author Attempts to Convey the Essence of the Title Without Wasting Too Much Time on Unimportant Trappings, Cutting Directly to the Heart of the Meat of the Matter at Hand

In one playthrough of one section there were two soldiers hiding behind two crates. There was a chasm with two boiler-lookin' things sitting in the middle[1]; I entered this room on the catwalk above that runs around the edges of the room. The enemy response routines[2] are indeed uncanny, and each playthrough was somewhat different. Anyway, wielding two pistols I entered "bullet time"[3]; jumped onto the first railing and started shooting the guy on the left while leaping to the second boiler. He screamed "fuck!" or "backup!" and died. Still in slow-motion - of course - the guns were turned on the second dude while jumping to the crate by his head; Mr. Second Dude flopped to the ground just as the "bullet time meter"[4] ran out.

F.E.A.R. is a game saddled with two things; a dumb name and lazy plotting which only gets decent close to the end. Everything else is a hoot. 📺

1: These old warehouse sets are populated with things that are never actually utilized. Why? Are they afraid to show how industrial employment works in this alternate universe?

2: Calling it an AI would be tacky.

3: This feature is explained by your preternaturally fast reflexes. These reflexes are explained by the circumstances of your birth. Everything beyond that will be explained in the sequel—F.E.A.R 2: FERDINAN SYNDROME COMPLEX.

4: It has an actual name, but it is clearly not compelling enough for me to remember or look up.

Lucid Dreaming

Final Fantasy XI—PS2, WIN, 360
—Heather Campbell

I used to work at the beach. Well, the Valkurm Dunes, actually. I wasn't a lifeguard, or even a refreshment-stand vendor. I was an exterminator. Talk about glamorous. I killed off indigenous insects that were in danger of overrunning the local farming community. Huge bugs, really. Damselflies, thread leaches. Yeah. I lived in a small town near the ocean, and we had a bit of a fly problem. So I cleaned up the beach.

Thing is, I'm pale. I burn easy. I'm a *PUSSY*. Also, I get heat sickness, and you have to wear pretty heavy protective gear when you're an exterminator. Thick gloves with big cuffs, long pants. Tall boots. Hats. Hot gear. So I worked nights.

It didn't pay any better, but the temperature made all the difference. I'm pretty sure if I'd spent that summer in the sun, I would now have some extraordinary medical condition. Or a skin disease. Whatever the case, I bet it would make me throw up all the time. Ugh. I hate throwing up.

Now, I was 17, and I didn't have a license, so when my shift ended, I walked home. Every morning, at about 4 a.m., the sand would change colors from grey to blue to orange. I headed back to my apartment with the sun rising behind me, my shadow leading the way. It was amazing, and a little bit romantic. I was pretty young, so maybe everything felt like that.

And you know what? No matter how tall your boots are, you can still manage to fill them with sand. There was this low brick wall near my house, and every morning I took my boots off there, knocked them out, and put on sandals. By the end of the summer, there was an anthill burrowed into the sand I'd brought back from the beach. Those ants had a luxury resort.

When that summer ended, I turned 18 and moved to my first big city, Jeuno.

And at first, I thought I was going crazy.

I rented this furnished apartment, and my first night there, I met one of my neighbors. Short guy with a beard who lived in the same complex. I asked him if he knew anywhere nearby that was hiring, and he just yelled at me. At the top of his lungs, he just started *YELLING*.

I was, like, five feet away from him.

But as loud as he could, he shouted, "LOLZ uUR GAY."

Next, he fell silent. And *DISAPPEARED*.

I stood there, frozen in my tracks, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Had I passed out? The whole world seemed to stutter, and then, the bearded guy reappeared about thirty feet away. He started to run, and then he

ran all the way down the block, until he was out of sight.

I didn't want to throw up, but I thought I might. God, do I hate throwing up.

That night, I went to bed and slept with my eyes open. I stayed in my apartment for three days. I didn't leave. I was terrified. I thought I was going crazy.

A couple days later, I finally gathered the courage to head outside. In the gangway behind my apartment was a cute girl who was always wearing the same tight pants; I had seen her from my window. She didn't seem like a prostitute, but she had this trashy, unfinished look.

I gathered up all of my courage and asked, "Hey, do you know where the nearest convenience store is?"

For a moment, she said nothing. She didn't even look at me. Then she spoke, but with really lazy pronunciation.

She said, "What. U wants auction house or someting?"

Maybe it was an accent.

I said, "Umm . . . sure?"

Girl With Tight Pants: "get a map noob."

Her language, her disengagement, her very presence was jarring. I had trouble looking at her and not feeling . . . detached.

And then, as she turned and walked away, I noticed that her feet weren't planted on the ground. She was moving forward, but her pace wasn't in concert with the cadence of her steps. As she moved away from me, she shouted to no one in particular:

"TELEPORT DEM I GIVE YOU GILZ!"

What she said barely made any sense to me. I blinked. As if her sudden outburst wasn't surreal enough, The Girl in Tight Pants then ran directly into a wall.

I flinched, but she was completely unaffected. In fact, she kept running in place, face pressed to the stone. The effect wasn't just unsettling. It was *HORRIBLE*.

She repeated, "TELEPORT DEM I GIVE YOU GILZ!" and the more she repeated it, the more disconnected I felt—to her, to the whole city.

I stared at The Girl in Tight Pants. I began to notice things about her.

Her shoulders weren't round; they were pentagons with soft edges. Her belt had a strange visual quality to it; the leather was jagged, and disappeared into her skin as she ran against the wall. Like the belt was a part of her, painted onto her, and it was folding into her flesh as she jogged in place.

"TELEPORT DEM I GIVE YOU GILZ!"

The floor beneath her was foggy and out-of-focus. The wall she continued to run at was lit by a nearby lamp that flickered with metronomic inevitability.

Flicker.

Flicker.

Flicker.

"TELEPORT DEM I GIVE YOU GILZ!"

I looked at my hands, desperate for some emotional anchor. My fingers were over-long, and ended in sharp points. They seemed disjoined at my wrists. I looked up, and she continued to run at the wall.

"TELEPORT DEM I GIVE YOU GILZ!"

Somewhere behind me, someone shrieked, "SHUT UP!"

Suddenly, I realized everyone was running. In every direction. Their footsteps all clicked on the pavement with the same beat. Click, click, click. The lamp. Flicker, flicker, flicker.

And then a blue line rose out of the ground. Casually, arrogantly, it filled my field of vision. It was filled with letters, which poured over it like an alphabet waterfall.

I cried out in panic, and below me, my name appeared in the blue line. What I was yelling was printed in huge, white words:

Saeriel: Help me!

"TELEPORT DEM I GIVE YOU GILZ!"

And suddenly, I ceased to exist. Or maybe everyone else did.

I had only been playing a game.

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Final Fantasy XI is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, or an MMORPG. You pay a monthly fee, and share a game world with thousands of other adventurers.

It's unique among other Final Fantasy games in that it is conceptually endless. *FFXI* has a narrative, but the story evolves when the game content is updated, bi-monthly. This world of *Final Fantasy Online*, called Vana'diel, will exist until it isn't financially feasible for Square-Enix to run the servers anymore. Until then, one can log on and explore the universe indefinitely. There are no forced, scripted events to propel you through Vana'diel. The game does not drop you off with a time limit, nor does it birth you into a battle. You could log in and stand in one place until the game ceased to exist, and Vana'diel would change around you. You have the freedom to explore or exploit the world in any way you wish. If you subscribe to *FFXI*, you can log on simply to be.

When *Final Fantasy: Online* was announced in 2001, I was initially angry. I love the offline Final Fantasy games for their stories as much as their **atmosphere. They're scripted** journeys through a very specific place. But *FFXI* scared me. **I feared there wouldn't be a point to** the game, an arc **or a narrative.**

To be honest, I didn't warm up to the game until the fall of 2003, when I first stumbled on a live feed of *Final Fantasy XI* at the PlayOnline website. Called the "Vana'diel Wind," it was a streaming video glimpse into the ongoing, online world. The camera would pan through all sorts of unfamiliar and dynamic locations; sometimes they'd be desolate, empty and seductive. Sometimes they'd be filled with adventurers, running from quest to quest, gathering parties, battling.

It dawned on me: **There was a Final Fantasy world, and it was happening, right then. I** wanted—I needed—to exist there. **Square-Enix**

had taken a huge risk: they had effectively asked me (and every other adventurer) to write the story of their new Final Fantasy game for them, with them. We were the narrative, the protagonists and the sidekicks. Hell, we'd even be the mini-games.

I had a copy shipped to me in Europe, and began to play in early December, 2003, a month and a half after the North American release.

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Unfortunately, what the **Vana'diel video feed** doesn't show you is what everyone in Vana'diel is saying. The Vana'diel Wind is like a closed window, and beyond the glass is a complete, consistent world. Everything you can see belongs in Vana'diel: the trees, the creatures, and the rising and setting sun. When an Elvaan warrior charges an Orc, you remain blissfully unaware of what he may or may not be yelling. You can't read the words.

And Th**e** **Words make all the difference. See,** when you drop in a copy of the decidedly offline *FINAL FANTASY VIII*, you can **march Squall up to** anyone in Balamb, and they'll **talk to you/him**

about their siblings, their schoolwork, their crush on a teacher. They'll tell you they really want hot dogs from the cafeteria. They'll relay some honest anxiety about their world because they believe they're there.

But very few people believe in *FFXI*. They don't want to exist in Vana'diel; they want to stomp through it, littering it with things **they've** brought from Earth. **When that Elvaan warrior** draws his sword, he might announce some lyric from a Linkin Park song, or a reference to *LOST*, or mash out some misspelled homophobia. As a lumbering Galka rails on a Goblin Fisherman, you might even be lucky enough to hear the old standard, "I'm Rick James, bitch!"

Despite this, I've played *FINAL FANTASY XI* for two years. I've spent most of my time deep in dangerous territory, shuffling through spells which temporarily render me silent and invisible. I've gone out as far out into Vana'diel as I can.

Now, MMOs aren't designed with this sort of exploration in mind. Instead of allowing you instant access to the entire game-world, online RPGs force you to invest huge amounts of hours into strengthening your character, which in turn rewards you with the ability to head deeper into new, **monster-infested territory. The fights you** endure to make your avatar more powerful are typically referred to as "The Grind," which is an appropriate measure of the fun these battles offer. **Heading out into higher-level areas before** you're strong enough to fight the monsters there will not only get you killed—it will de-level your character, undoing the grinding that you've suffered through.

Regardless, I've risked killing **Saeriel again** and again, and headed out into the wilderness because I've been desperate. My exploration of Vana'diel wasn't just born of curiosity; I've been driven into the wild by two-year-old pop-culture references. I'm being forced to escape within my escapism.

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Now, to clarify, I'm not some role-playing fascist. I don't want the Dark Knights of Vana'diel to talk in Fake-speare. "Thy steed awaits, m'lady" belongs in Jeuno as much as references to *Pimp My Ride*. I'm not hungry for the pageantry of a LARP. All I'm asking is for some shared suspension of disbelief.

I'm asking for a little faith. Be. Live. And Believe.

Unfortunately, if you show some interest in existing in Vana'diel, you're singled out for harassment. Reference a legitimate feature the San d'Orian countryside, or point out a scenic place along the Sea of Zafmlug, and you're not only misunderstood, you're ostracized. For a while, I tried simply handing out flowers—it's harmless, and for fans of Final Fantasy, has resonance. It seemed like a way to be a part of the world, without trying to *force* others to believe. But when I wasn't ignored, I was berated. Hanging out in the city, handing out flowers, was like a social Grind, with no reward in sight.

Maybe I just don't understand what everyone else's Final Fantasy is. Maybe people daydream about yelling "sweet damage roxorz," or maybe a life-side emasculation clutters their fantasies with an overbearing misogyny. I always read vulnerability into my Final Fantasy heroes, but perhaps the vulnerability of public dreaming is too much for most real people to bear. It's easier to talk about how hot Pam Anderson is than it is to appreciate the beauty of an in-game waterfall, or a star-filled virtual sky.

Regardless, I've still engaged *Final Fantasy Online*. Vana'diel was designed with adventurers like me in mind. I swear it. For every ham-fisted cut scene, there is an unexplained graveyard, or a locked doorway. For every NPC paragraph, there is a mysterious ruin, unmentioned by any in-game prose. The world has history, and it is possible to lose yourself in it.

For a short while, I even found a small band of adventurers who shared my thirst for immersion. Playing the game with them was a satisfying, lucid dream—like a campfire story, or

the holodeck. Unfortunately, they left the game to exist on *World of Warcraft*'s role-playing servers, or they were drawn into the unflinching fiction of *Dragon Quest VIII*, or *Shin Megumi Tensei*. Two years after I started playing *Final Fantasy XI*, I can name only one other adventurer who remains in Vana'diel. Thank you, Gin Kumo. I'm endlessly grateful to not be there alone.

I'm not about to quit, though. I have faith that eventually, those who Live in Vana'diel will outstay those who are just playing. In fact, I *know* it.

See, last summer, I visited Japan by myself. For almost two weeks, I wobbled around Tokyo, sometimes heading to specific shops in Shinjuku, sometimes just aimlessly wandering through Harajuku for hours on end. I spoke just enough Japanese to get by; I'd had only two years of language classes in college. Often, I'd get lost, in both conversation and location, and I'd have to pull out a map and point. Tokyo was like a high-level area, and I hadn't done enough grinding.

One afternoon, while looking for a place to eat in Akihabara, I found myself lost in a labyrinthine and ultimately dead-end alley. Before I pulled out my map, I noticed something out of place.

At the end of this alley was a sheet of paper, taped to a wall.

It said, "FFXI." And had an arrow. *Pointing up*.

There was only one way up. So, I nervously crept up a fire-escape staircase, and found

another sign, about 5 stories later. It, too, read "FFXI," and had an arrow. Finally, at the top of this white flight of stairs was a single door, with an engraved plaque. In gold letters, it read:

REAL VANA'DIEL.

Cautiously, my heart actually racing, I opened the door and peeked inside. Clean, bright walls were decorated with framed *FFXI* posters. A library of Final Fantasy manga and guidebooks was on one side; a small shelf of T-shirts was on the other. In the center of this room was a counter, emblazoned with mirrored letters declaring, again: Real Vana'diel. Below this confirmation was a young girl, in the full costume of a Mithra—a race of cat-people found in *FFXI*.

I'd found a dedicated Final Fantasy Internet café. There were 60 or so powerhouse computers running only *FF: ONLINE*. There was even a life-size, real-world replica of an in-game location. You could play *FFXI* and then head into this Mog House to rest or grab a bite to eat. Real Vana'diel wasn't a Square-Enix project; it was a fan-made temple, a twenty-four hour shrine for those who believe.

My eyes watered.

The Mithra behind the counter smiled, and said in Japanese,

"Welcome home."

A couple of older guys turned away from their monitors and grinned. Behind them, their characters stood in place, waiting to be re-inhabited. And these adventurers weren't all high-level battle-junkies. One guy's Tarutaru was just standing out by a river, fishing.

Yeah, I'm guessing that we'll still be in Vana'diel long after the vacationers head out. They're just playing a game. We're there to Be. To Live. To Believe. 🐤
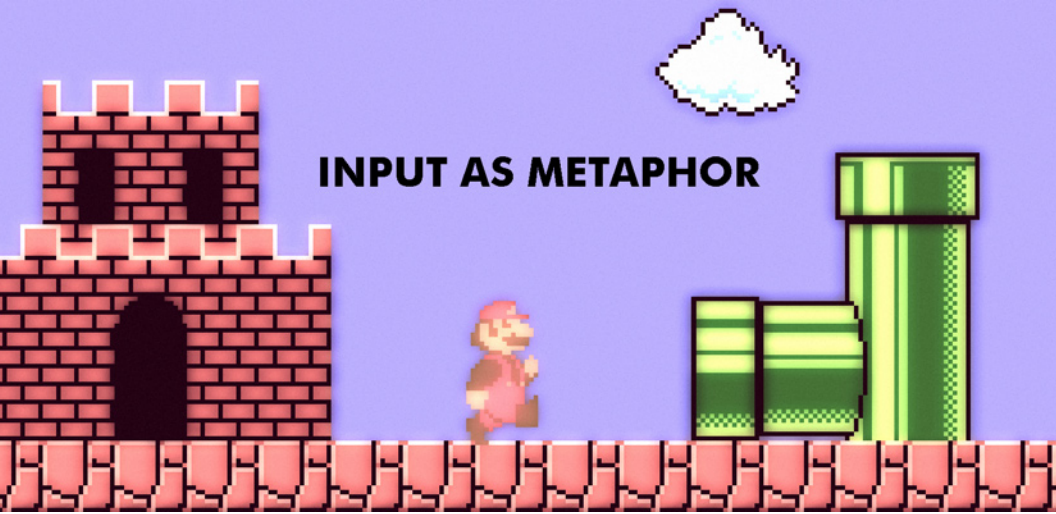
INPUT AS METAPHOR

Input as Metaphor
Describing "Walk"—3 Credits, Fall
—David Hellman

One regularly finds games talked and written about as technology and as commodity; conversations carried out at a sophisticated level. However, when journalists attempt to address games as expression, as storytelling, or even—to employ an abused and dilapidated term—as *ART*, the discussion usually goes in one of two directions. The first direction is that of personal anecdote (how the game made the writer feel). Such accounts speak of the nature of games as a participatory form but fail to advance the discussion of games beyond that of hermetic absorption. The alternative is to focus on the aspects of the game that are similar to other media. There exist well-established languages for discussing cinematography, acting, character, and plot. These are as sensitive and integral as any element of a videogame, but to discuss the "video" without the "game" falls short of an enlightened approach to the medium.

We need an approach that considers player involvement and visuals as one. The most important cinematography in a game is not found in cut scenes, but in the perspective chosen to display the

gameplay action. The most important acting in a game is not the automated quips fired off by the sarcastic hero, but the behaviors manipulated by the player.

Let's consider two well-known and influential games and observe how their respective control and camera systems are not merely functional solutions to character movement and display, but express the games' personalities and themes.

.   .   .   .   .   .

Doom puts the player in the eyes of its protagonist: a squinting, square-jawed space marine. His primary verbs for walking are *FORWARD*, *BACKWARD*, *TURN LEFT*, and *TURN RIGHT*. To diagram the marine's movement potential, imagine a line parallel to the ground, intersecting his head, extending infinitely in front and behind. This line expresses the "intention" of the forward and back keys; the turning keys assist by reorienting the line to contextually change the meaning of forward and back. The line also illustrates another verb: *FIRE*. Unlike *STARFOX* or other third-person aiming games, the first person view places the cross hairs right at the perspective's vanishing point. Moving, looking and shooting are all overlayed and equated, creating a

very focused and intense mood of purpose and aggression.

The marine has no visual representation besides his gun. Everything else the player sees—walls, doorways, and pugnacious hellspawn—is "other." The protagonist is not depicted as part of his surroundings; his only contribution to the world is the ammunition he launches into it. The marine's stance is "me against everything." There is a sharp division between him (centered, vulnerable, and rooted in a limited, subjective perspective) and the environment (sprawling, surrounding, threatening, and dark), therefore his means of locomotion are similarly self-centered. The marine moves in terms relative to himself: FORWARD, BACKWARD, TURN, etc. These terms do not depend on the environment from which he struggles to escape; their definitions, relative to the marine, stand absolute. Because the player is isolated in a dangerous environment where his emotional range centers on fear, paranoia, and aggression, the perspective and control style in *Doom* makes sense.

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When *Super Mario 64* came around and introduced a slew of new game camera ideas, it was an evolution of early 3-D games like *Loaded!* and *Bug!* Those games viewed their worlds from above, with the camera angled variously to the ground (the horizon may or may not have been visible), and always facing in the same direction, presumably north. These cameras were the obvious 3-D adaptation of the view from *Pac-Man* (or, if you prefer: *Adventure*, *Dragon Quest*, *The Legend of Zelda*, etc.). In all of these games, instead of FORWARD, BACKWARD, and TURN, we have UP, DOWN, LEFT, and RIGHT—all terms relative to the game board or screen. It doesn't matter which direction the player's character is facing; DOWN will always take him south, and never in the direction his back is facing.

Mario 64's chief innovation in terms of

perspective was simply allowing the camera to reorient itself, to rotate around the protagonist. This addition allows the player's eye to roam (sometimes nauseatingly) while Mario runs in a straight line relative to the ground. Landmarks drift into view, potentially to distract the player and redirect the story. Appropriately, Mario is a very distractible guy, scrambling around like some kind of attention-deficit menace. The game is about exploration, using 3-D spaces to surprise the player and arouse curiosity. By allowing the camera to rotate, UP, DOWN, LEFT and RIGHT are freed from the compass; they no longer possess an objective, static orientation. The controls are entirely subjective and contextual. Every time the camera turns, UP means something different. *Mario 64* introduced a control scheme which was player-centric (commands are relative to the player's view), but not protagonist-centric (*Doom*) and not tied to objective compass directions (*Pac-Man*).

Doom gives the player the option of going BACKWARDS, away from whatever lies in view. Mario does not walk backwards. He only walks towards. Every command for Mario to move—tilting the control stick any direction from center—is a command outward, into the world.

At the outset of *Mario 64*, the player is shown a castle. What does one instinctively do, despite years of pressing RIGHT to advance? One presses UP—towards the castle. A moat enters the view. The player is curious; he presses towards the moat. There's a tree; towards the tree. *Mario 64*'s controls are meaningless without an environment. In *Doom*, one can move FORWARD even in the dark. The need to move on, to escape, is ever-present. Mario has no FORWARD, only towards. Towards: the castle, the bridge, the door, the star.

Again, the controls in *Doom* are protagonist-centric because the player's only concern is his survival. The marine is rooted in himself, always looking warily outward, defending his autonomy from the environment.
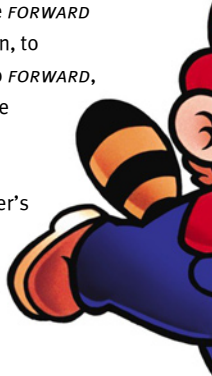
In *Doom*, one only reaches out to escape or to destroy a threat. In *Mario 64*, however, one reaches out in innocence and curiosity. Mario climbs trees, skips up ramps, etc. The player is well cared for in *Mario 64*; the game often introduces new challenges in a safe context where the player may experiment before confronting more treacherous iterations later on. The camera follows at a protective distance, supervising Mario's exuberance like a dogged parent. One camera behavior which strikes me as particularly parental occurs when the player leans the stick left or right. The camera does not match Mario's action step-for-step. Instead, it saves its energy and pans, like a turn of the head, to watch Mario run circles below.

Contrary to the easy assumption that a third-person view interrupts identification with a protagonist, the player bonds closely with Mario through the supremely responsive control, and by voluntarily supplying Mario's emotional responses (fright at physical danger, joy at acquisition of treasure, etc.). The sense of parental oversight suggested by the third-person camera overlays the close identification with Mario. It's another expression of *Mario 64*'s child-like tone, a playful atmosphere where a tumble into molten lava results only in a cartoonish yelp.

There is no observer in *Doom*, no one watching over. The camera provides no image of the beleaguered marine; we do not see him performing energetic moves; we take no pleasure in his vitality or skill. The marine performs no gratuitous actions, only what his self-preservation demands. *Doom* is about abandonment, isolation, and survival. The only satisfaction of *Doom* is in one's own resourcefulness.

⁂

Walking is the common denominator between *Doom* and *Mario 64*, but the execution and depiction of that act differs enormously. This results in two different ways of maneuvering an obstacle course, but it also distinguishes the marine and Mario as personalities and elaborates on their motivations. It's a mistake to consider utility and style as separate. As in all media, every creative decision that impacts the player is not only technical, but also evocative. The story of a game is its emotion, and this emotion resides in its tactile structures and reactive systems, not in its cutscenes. 🎮

CONVERGENCE OF TIMES

Outrun 2—XBX (Modified)

—John Szczepaniak

I recently bought my second modded Xbox. The chip was installed by a man I cannot name, and the ultimate reason I bought it is too convoluted to reveal. I also asked for *Outrun 2* to be put on the standard retail HDD that remained within. It's not that I don't own the game—it's currently sitting on my shelf—rather, this machine was to be used for traveling purposes, and I didn't fancy the idea of trying to install a retail game myself. It also came with the latest standard assortment of emulators and ROMs, a fine selection in fact.

Some argue it's more sensible to buy a PC for emulation, due to the extra functionality. I already have a PC, and I've never enjoyed playing old games on it. There is a tangible satisfaction to be had sitting in pajamas on the couch in front of a TV. Pajamas and computer monitors do not mix. Others meanwhile will argue it's better to use Xbox Live Arcade for older style games rather than illegal ROMs. Unfortunately I don't have broadband, and therefore I don't have Live. A modded Xbox perhaps sits somewhere between the two.

Back on the Road

When I had originally bought *Outrun 2* so many months ago, I never gave it much time. There were far too many other new games desperate for attention. In truth, I probably spent only an hour with it. A few arcade races, and a couple of challenge missions later, and the game was consigned to my small pile of Xbox games. *Otogi 1&2*, *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, *Jet Set Radio Future*—were these the only games I liked? I didn't even own *Halo*, since I didn't find it fun at all and . . . [Excised—No 1500-word diatribes against *Halo* in an article about *Outrun 2!*—Ed.)

It was only with the arrival of my new Xbox, with *Outrun 2* pre-installed, that I really started to appreciate the game. I remembered a forum joke I'd once heard, comparing it to *Burnout 3*. They said *Outrun 2* was like fine champagne, meant to be sipped and enjoyed occasionally, while *Burnout 3* was like a tramp's gin—it gave the desired effect but was still nasty underneath all the self-induced euphoria.

Perhaps they were right, since on this second occasion something clicked. The problem had been spending too much time on the challenge missions, which, while fun, are not intended as the main attraction. *Outrun 2* isn't a racing game in the strictest sense.

While there are other sports cars in arcade mode, it really is just about you and those roads. As the game itself states, it's all about that magical journey. Speeding and drifting around those roads in arcade mode, I felt for the first time in ages a true sense of, "this is next generation gaming." It also made me reconsider upgrading to the 360, not only because *Outrun 2* wasn't listed as backwards compatible, but also because why upgrade hardware when the old dog was still managing to impress me? Those wide roads are something special, voluptuous even. They invite you to drive unhindered, to slide recklessly around corners, to swerve over every inch of road like an irresponsible wino. There is a raw satisfaction to be had just driving freely.

Wanting to enjoy the shameless splendor of those roads even more, I decided to walk the 15 minutes to my parents' house in order to use their much larger television. The Xbox was set up, the internal fan motor humming as well as any American-built motor vehicle would, and the beautiful journey continued. For the record, it turned out that *Outrun 2* is the only modern game my father enjoys playing. The two of us spent much time competing, racing along those sandy beaches and tree lined mountain roads in the multiplayer party mode.

A Meeting of Enlightenment

One day he walked into the lounge, while I was playing *Zak McKraken* on a C64 emulator, and asked, "Why didn't you have more games like that racing one put on the hard drive? You shouldn't have wasted space with these old games, a modern

football game might have been nice."

Annoyed at losing my concentration, I briefly thought to myself, "Why can't he be more like other fathers who leave their families for solitary pursuits like fishing?" before suddenly realizing that some of my best childhood memories were of playing games with my father. We would play the original *Pinball* on Nintendo's Famicom for what seemed like hours. Sometimes competitively, but mostly as a team, trying in tandem to reach higher scores. I discovered years later that we'd actually beaten the Twin Galaxies world record by several thousand points, though of course we have no evidence to prove it. We'd also play Othello, though he'd always manage to best me.

Returning to reality, I pointed my finger at an empty section of wall where I imagined my game-lined cabinet could be sitting. "Because I actually own this, see it's over there," my eyes remained fixed on the TV as I pointed to the imaginary pile of games, "it wouldn't have felt right asking for games I didn't own," which was only half the truth. In reality it was because I owned nearly everything I actually liked on Microsoft's jolly green behemoth, and there was little need requesting something that would only eat up the limited drive space.

"Oh . . . So, you also own all these old games?" he asked innocently, referring to the several thousand ROMs that were present. Damn! My old man had bested me again. He had bested me the same way he did at Othello years before, and had unsuccessfully tried to at *Outrun 2*. My gaming skills had improved over the years, but he still had the advantage when it came to sheer wits.

I had to improvise, "Yes
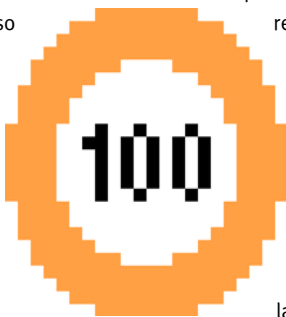
. . . Yes, yes I do! Yes . . . " I said while nodding.

"Oh, right," he said, easing himself onto the sofa next to me.

He had won that round. He knew it, I knew it, he knew that I knew it. I offered some of the commercial games in the collection, but none grabbed his interest. "Nah, I only like the racing game, it's fun hurtling down those wide roads."

"How about *Pinball*?"

"Sure! Haven't played that since you were a kid."

We never did beat our old scores, or Twin Galaxies' record.

"What a wonderful machine," I pondered— all the games I knew from my youth, plenty I'd never played, and a magical journey down spacious roads. But it was also the first time I'd played videogames with my father in years, and it put the whole generational difference (both human and console) into perspective. There I was playing classic games with someone who didn't like modern titles, but who enjoyed the racing game I provided. It also showed me I didn't yet need to update my hardware, since both I and my father were more than satisfied with the visual quality of *Outrun 2*. The bulky green box from Microsoft had become like an intersection for history, the present day and an unknown future. I hoped that my future kids would take an interest in games, and again a father and a son could be sitting in front of such a box with old emulators and modern titles resting side by side.

Every System an Island

Console Systems
—Colin "Wilkes" Booth

If I were to do something totally useless, like assign religions to videogame companies, I would pen Nintendo as the new pop Christianity people are always talking about. I think they would probably liken themselves similarly, if ever the top brass went totally insane and suggested absurd things like that.

That's what they want, though—to be an accepting, accessible organization for everyone in a non-threatening, sensible way that can be picked up as easily as it is discarded with good feelings for aftertaste. Wasn't always so. Before, they catered to the "gamer."

Though, now, damn. It's the Touch Generation. The age of the Revolution controller is soon to present itself, with changes upon changes. The hope to unite all generations of people—not "gamers"—under the house Nintendo is confronting us from our sides. Where did this come from?

Nintendo relearned how it was meant to sell videogames; knowledge that, when first exercised, hit at a frightening pace. Personally, I experienced this through buying the same NES game three or four times in an eight-month period. At that point, I like to think, Nintendo was just flexing their new muscle. Dabbling with

their newly discovered powers like a shrimpy middle school kid thrown headlong into some DRAGONBALL Z shit.

At that point, Nintendo began to understand what it meant to be Nintendo. What Nintendo could mean. The breadth and girth of Nintendo. The weight of Nintendo. From here on, Nintendo will have you paying for videogames that you very well could have already owned. More likely they'll be selling these older games to the generation that missed them the first time around. Those who want to experience them on a Nintendo system.

Nintendo no longer suffers the confusion that afflicted the Nintendo 64's way of thinking. There is no balance-of-hardware-and-software, middle-road Buddhist bullshittery; they already made that mistake. When the Nintendo 64 was launched, Nintendo was primarily Buddhist, I figure.

Now, Nintendo has come to understand that the hardware follows the games. There are three successful iterations of the Game Boy Advance.

There will be six total systems on which you are able to play Game Boy Advance games by year's end. Six methods to play the same goddamn software. In this sense, Nintendo truly defines the difference between the videogame industry and reality.

The Nintendo 64 was, ultimately, unsuccessful because it was alone and unnecessary. It changed very little about videogames and wasn't particularly good at anything. You could say the Nintendo 64 was an island. It connected to nothing and had no bridges.

Videogame systems like the Nintendo 64 and Dreamcast have excuses for their underscored success. They were among the first systems to cross the technological divide. They made the jump from either crude 3-D to rational 3-D or made the jump from 2-D to 3-D all at once. Each system

needed to start fresh. They each needed to be their own island.

What is truly different about the Revolution—control scheme far aside—is the dedication to the resolve of the past. With Nintendo homage infiltrating the very design aesthetic of the system, easy to see they were developed from the ground up with the past and future of Nintendo fully in mind.

Media has narrowed down to optical and digital. Older games are small enough to download and newer games are all on discs compatible with the Revolution. Combine this with diverse means of controlling any game and the package is most full. Nintendo has left little room for excuses to be thrown their way.

The Revolution and the DS are the future as Nintendo sees it. It's the future that no one predicted and no one saw coming—the future that has a place in the future.

Now, it isn't fair to say Microsoft can't make a videogame system correctly.

Then again, it's not fair that I have a stack of Xbox games and no means to play them.

The Xbox 360 is the future of videogames as it was predicted. Magazines and analysts and IGN made predictions of what videogames would be like in the year 2005 and people like Peter Moore took those predictions, wrote them down, and handed them to a design team atop a check with eight zeroes.

Microsoft spent their efforts on trying to get the hardware for the 360 up to futuristic proportions—hardware that they could safely label "next generation" without fear of rebuff or a direct defeat in terms of their hardware.

Microsoft thought of their past with a sense of resentment. The Xbox 360 isn't the successor to the Xbox—it's the Xbox upgrade. The Xbox 360 replaces the Xbox because the Xbox has a replacement. There's no need for the old, what with the new already here.

Have you heard of the HD era? It's quite exciting, really.

Though, heck, some games will still work on

that Xbox 360. A tall stack. I mean, the games Microsoft is told people still want to play. Or, well, the games that were easiest to put on right away. And, yeah, that stack hasn't gotten any taller since December.
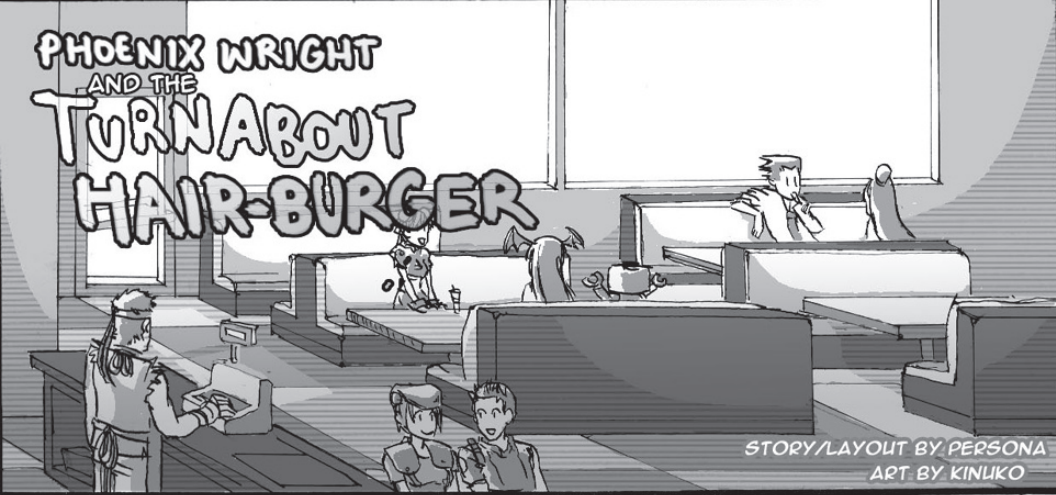
Every system Microsoft will ever make will likely be alone—each its own island. An island lacking both bridge and peninsula. Something for Microsoft to call the new standard. A trickle of what made the preceding system will find its way into each new one. That trickle will be determined by numbers and focus groups. Not enough to lay claim to a devotion to the past. Not enough to be considered respectful.

That they consider losing money on every system an "investment" is very interesting. That they disregard their past in favor of the latest hardware is telling of their future in an industry as truly strange as that of the videogame industry.

The homogeneity of the last generation will not apply to this one. The differences in competing companies' objectives will be brought to the forefront. The new systems will be judged on a higher platform than before. A moral platform. Damn near a religious one. 🎮
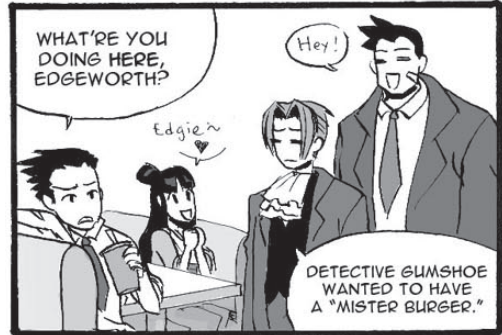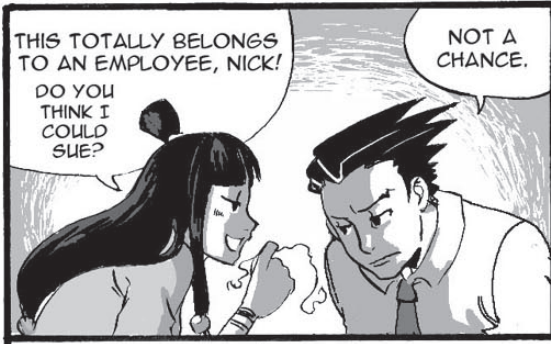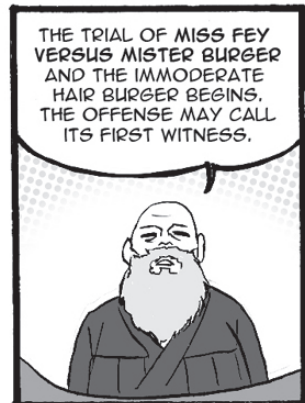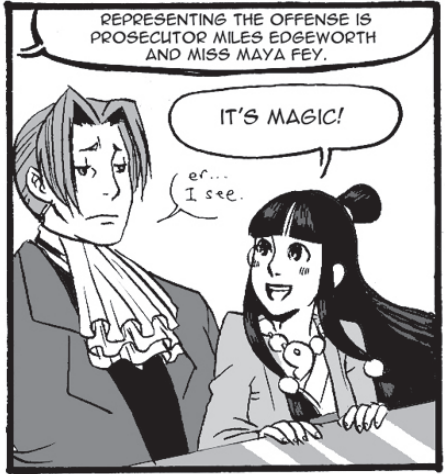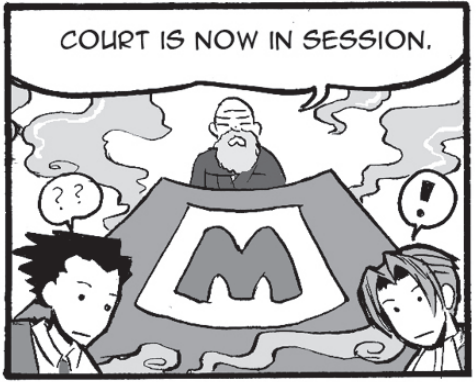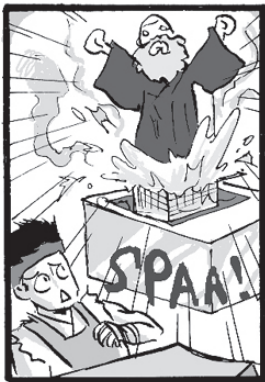
PHOENIX WRIGHT AND THE TURNABOUT HAIR-BURGER

STORY/LAYOUT BY PERSONA
ART BY KINUKO

OF ALL THE PLACES TO GO, WHY DID YOU WANT ME TO TREAT YOU TO A "MISTER BURGER" JOINT, MAYA?

BECAUSE THE BURGERS HERE ARE REALLY SUPER TASTY, NICK!

slrp...

mnch!

yum yum

naa...?

OH GOD, THERE'S A HAIR IN MY BURGER!!

AND IT'S REALLY, SUPER LONG!!

IF ALL THE EMPLOYEES HERE HAVE THE SAME HAIR, WHAT KIND OF PROOF DO YOU HAVE THAT IT WAS MY CLIENT WHO'S HAIR WAS IN THAT BURGER, EDGEWORTH?

ZUUM

tut tut

AT Field?!

YOU'LL NEVER LEARN, WRIGHT.

FOR OUR NEXT WITNESS, THE OFFENSE WOULD LIKE TO CALL TO THE STAND...

DETECTIVE DICK GUMSHOE!

...me?

TOK!

NOW THAT WE'VE DEDUCED NOTHING BUT OUR LAST WITNESS'S INCOMPETENCE, WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE OUR CASE?

AHEM.

IT LEADS US BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED, YOUR HONOR.

I'm confused.

IF EVERYTHING MR. RYU HAS SAID IS TRUE, THE MISTER BURGER CORPORATION NOR ITS EMPLOYEES COULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR HAIR INCIDENTS.

UNLESS ROBOTS HAVE HAIR.

THIS LEADS TO ONLY ONE POSSIBLE CONCLUSION...

IT WAS YOU, MR. WRIGHT!

WAAGH!

PSHHOO!

BUT... BUT WHY ME?

PHOENIX

THAT WAS A SHINKU HADOKEN! IMPRESSIVE.

tan

DO YOU SEE ANYONE ELSE IN THIS COURTROOM THAT HAS THE SAME COLORED HAIR AS THE ONE FROM THE BURGER?

black

blue

ooh, what?!

brown

...OR SHOULD I SAY, MR. DID IT?!

FREE TALK

FROM PERSONA:
HEY ALL! I DID THE STORY AND LAYOUT FOR THIS COMIC BECAUSE KINUKO REALLY WANTED TO DRAW THE PHOENIX WRIGHT CHARACTERS, PARTICULARLY EDGEWORTH. I ALSO DID MOST OF THE TONING AND THE LITTLE COMIC TO THE LEFT HERE. IT'S FOR EVERYONE WHO REALLY LOVES PHOENIX WRIGHT. **REALLY.** ...ALTHOUGH I STILL THINK EDGEWORTH IS **TOTALLY** A TOP.

ORIGINALLY, THE COMIC WAS ABOUT ZOMBIES ATTACKING A CITY WHILE PHOENIX AND FRIENDS HAD TO SOLVE A CASE ABOUT WHO CREATED THE T-VIRUS. IT WAS GOING TO BE A GIANT CAPCOM FAN-ORGY... BUT THEN I CHANGED IT BECAUSE IT SEEMED SO IMPERSONAL AND UN-PHOENIX WRIGHT-Y. OH WELL.

FROM KINUKO:
THIS TOOK LONGER THAN IT SHOULD'VE. IT WAS FUN TO DO THOUGH, DESPITE THAT I WAS USING A NEW INKING PEN AND IT WAS HARDER THAN I THOUGHT. MY ART ISN'T THAT GREAT, BUT I HOPE EVERYONE ENJOYED IT REGARDLESS.

YEAH, I LIKE EDGEWORTH. HE'S TOTALLY A BOTTOM.

I THINK I LIKED THE ZOMBIE IDEA MORE, BUT THEN AGAIN I'M A SUCKER FOR ANYTHING RESIDENT EVIL/ZOMBIE RELATED. THE BURGER THING TURNED OUT OKAY TOO, THOUGH. (BUT THE TITLE IS PRETTY AWFUL.) HMM.

ANYWAY, HOPE YOU ALL HAD FUN!

VISIT US AT:
WWW.MECHAFETUS.COM

the road to sorrow is paved with happy points

Chibi-Robo — GCN
—Wes Ehrlichman

Chibi-Robo, a game about a small robot who does chores for a family named the Sandersons, is one of the most *REAL* games I've ever played. This is not hyperbole, the game deals with issues I haven't seen before in any game, let alone a game that plays so well, and doesn't abandon its gamedom to get these issues across. Not only does the game's world feel realistic, but the problems its characters deal with have a universality that makes *Chibi-Robo* a game everyone can and should appreciate.

Before I get into the game, let me say that I probably should never have bought *Chibi-Robo* in the first place. Certain months are more difficult financially than others, and this February was particularly gruesome. I had to pay $230 for my plane ticket to March's Game Developer Conference, $70 for contacts, $1197 for my rent, $430 for a new monitor, and $900 for car insurance. That doesn't include Valentine's Day presents, gas for my car, my cell phone bill, food, or any of life's other necessities. Additionally, my future fiancée Christina has

been keeping track of every single item I buy, making sure I realize that each purchase brings me further and further away from being able to afford an engagement ring.

Despite my lack of funds and several average reviews (even a few strongly negative ones), I convinced myself that it was OK to buy *Chibi-Robo* upon release. I'm not sure why. I knew that paying for it then would mean that I'd pay for it later, and pay for it I did; when Christina found out, she didn't speak to me for days and began to give me the evil eye whenever I put the game in my Gamecube. Fortunately, this resentment gave me time to actually play the game, and I was surprised when I found out that Mr. Sanderson was in a similar situation.
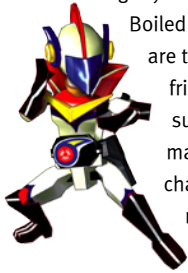
The game opens with Mr. Sanderson presenting Chibi-Robo — a small, cute, miniature robot — to his daughter Jenny for her birthday. Beneath this opening scene are layers of subtlety. It is revealed that Mrs. Sanderson is upset at Mr. Sanderson for spending a lot of money without first getting the OK from her, and that Mr. Sanderson has a habit of buying toys with money the

family doesn't have. We also find out that Jenny dresses like a frog every day and refuses to say anything but "ribbit." Despite how dysfunctional everything seems, you can still sense the love this family has for one another. Each character oozes charm, and it is difficult to dislike any of them in spite of their eccentricities.

As Chibi-Robo explores the Sanderson's home we are introduced to many other characters whose personalities are just as vibrant as the Sandersons themselves. There's Plankbeard, a wooden pirate toy who needs a crew; Bebe, the dog toy who has a secret crush; the Hard-Boiled Army, a bunch of eggs who are training to avenge their fallen friend; Sunshine, a teddy bear suffering from addiction; and many more. This diverse group of characters has one thing in common: they suffer from realistic problems in much the same way as the Sanderson family. Whether it is looking for love, searching for acceptance, dealing with death, or a desire for freedom, each character needs your help coping with life's realities.

All of this has been translated into a video-game through a design that is part *Zelda*, part *Shadow of the Colossus*, part *Pikmin*, and part something new altogether. Chibi's goal is to become the best Chibi-Robo in the world and get crowned with the title Super Chibi-Robo. As he helps the house's inhabitants deal with their issues, he is given "happy points" that help him to improve his Chibi-Robo ranking. As each day comes to its close, an LED screen in his diminutive house displays how close Chibi has come to his goal.

As Chibi finds new abilities he can explore the house more thoroughly, meeting new characters and solving their issues along the way much like in a Zelda game. The Zelda comparisons can also be found in the way he moves. Much like in a Zelda game, Chibi can't jump, and therefore must traverse the landscape primarily through the use of items that he collects in his travels. In Chibi's case he must climb strategically placed steps and float down from heights with his Chibi-Copter. Despite the fact that one of the items he receives is a Chibi-Blaster, Chibi fights very few enemies on his travels. His gun is used to open holes in the wall that have been covered up by one of Jenny's stickers just as often as it is to fight the evil Spydorz.

So where does the challenge come from? Well, to be honest, there isn't a lot, and what little challenge there is vanishes a few hours in. Instead of playing for challenge, the game compels you forward with constant rewards. Everything you do, from picking up trash to scrubbing stains with Mr. Sanderson's toothbrush gives you at least a few happy points, with major events like helping to solve characters' problems providing much greater rewards. These happy points work with the happy visuals to lighten the heavy reality created by the problems the game's characters carry with them.

Other rewards are less tangible. Because Chibi-Robo is such a small robot, the game carries with it a sense of scale that is similar to that of *Shadow of the Colossus*. A quasi-retro-styled house and enormous family members replace the rolling countryside and huge monsters, but the indefinable reward found in reaching an out-of-the-way area is almost equal. The indescribable feeling of satisfaction that comes from climbing atop a giant temple and staring out at the vast landscape in Shadow of the Colossus is somewhat replicated here, but replace the temple with a refrigerator and add a new ability to your character as a reward for thorough exploration. The receipt of these new abilities, happy points, and new story segments are important to the appeal of Chibi-Robo and the game provides moments like these in spades, layering these videogame-style rewards on top of intangible eye-candy that only

serves to reinforce the feeling of accomplishment.

What's most interesting is how the game calls attention to the fact that it is a game by casually rewarding happy points even when what you're doing might actually create more problems for everyone. Early in the game, Mrs. Sanderson notices that the finances aren't adding up correctly and asks Chibi to find a receipt she thinks Mr. Sanderson might be hiding. She warns him that finding the receipt will get Mr. Sanderson into big trouble and you, as the omniscient player, are faced with a dilemma. You know that giving Mrs. Sanderson the receipt will hurt their daughter Jenny, their dog Tao, and—of course—Mr. Sanderson himself, but the nature of the game requires you to give it to her anyway. This could be thought of as constricting the way the player can choose to play the game, but the decision was likely made for thematic reasons. Chibi gains happy points for turning in the receipt to Mrs. Sanderson, but by doing so he creates a spiral of so much unhappiness that the turmoil created from it won't be undone until the game's conclusion.
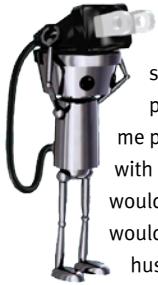
After Christina's anger subsided a bit from my unauthorized purchase, she began watching me play. She immediately identified with Mrs. Sanderson, as I knew she would, and whenever Mrs. Sanderson would start complaining about her husband Christina would nod her head in sisterly understanding. A few days after she started watching me play, Christina called me up while I was working late and asked me where she could find a GameCube memory card that she could use to start her own game. She probably didn't see it, but I got a few happy points from knowing that our issues over *Chibi-Robo* had finally been resolved. The game has made me think about my own relationship with her and how often I walk the line between doing what I desire at the moment and what is best for our life together. I'm not going to stop

buying toys any time soon, but I know that I don't want to end up sleeping out in the hallway like Mr. Sanderson. If I can keep racking up the happy points, I know everything will be OK.
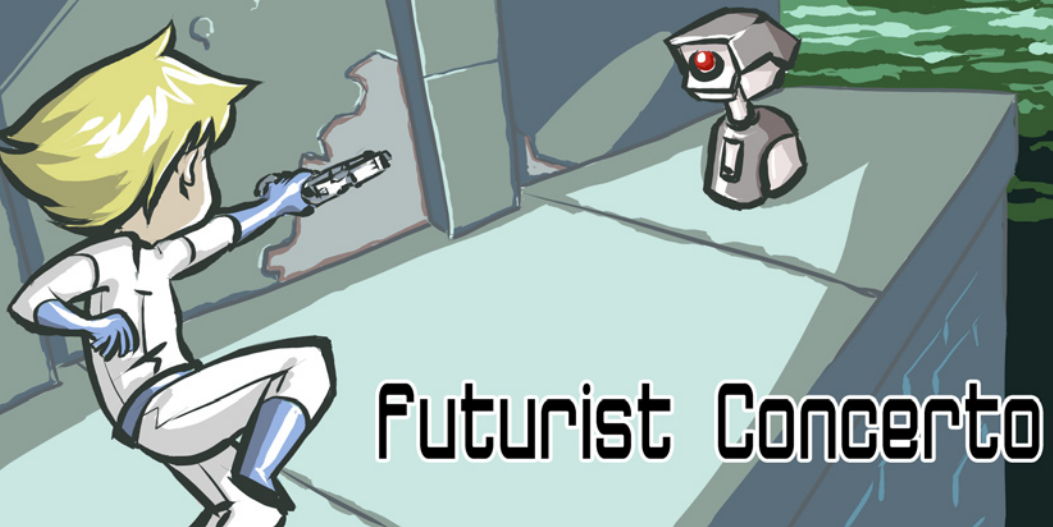
Futurist Concerto

Journey to Silius — NES

—Sergei Servianov

> *You know, Ilia, I perceive the future life like a distant, magically beautiful music. Just as one sometimes hears it in sleep . . . Do you hear music in your sleep? It is not a separate, slender melody, but a mighty, growing, perfectly harmonized hymn . . . It seems to me that if I die in the struggle . . . and if death is not instantaneous, then the last thing I shall feel will be that triumphant, disturbingly beautiful music of the future.*

—Mikhail Sholokhov, *And Quiet Flows the Don*

. . . . . .

The appeal of most NES games seems to lie in how unfinished they feel. The black sparseness of their backgrounds, the disproportionate brightly-colored representation of most of their characters, the minimalist music, the constant bugs and glitches, and the way they completely eradicate a game's own already ridiculous logic—it all creates the impression of looking into someone's dreams and nightmares projected through a camera obscura of raw code. This is most apparent when one

ventures to play a game by one of the system's lesser-known developers, such as Hudson Soft, Tengen, or Sunsoft. One draws a very unsettling pleasure from playing these games, one that seems absent in this era.

There was also, of course, the pleasure of surprise. In those days, one couldn't log on to the Internet and discover everything there was to know about a given game. One only had the cover art and a few inconclusive screenshots on the back of the box to help him decide if the game was worth purchasing. One could also ask his friends, though it was unlikely that one would buy a game that one of his friends already owned, because he could easily borrow it instead. There were also magazines, though their garbled and unclear copy said much less to my prepubescent self than the screenshots that accompanied it.

Super Pitfall was a game that I acquired because of its cover art. It depicted the protagonist pressed against a cliff, seemingly inches away from the molten red spikes below, in what appeared to be the uniform of the People's Liberation Army of Vietnam (a pith helmet and a beige tunic and pants), his Mongolian-featured face locked in pure terror at the snake winding through the eye socket of a skull next to his foot. My second-grade art teacher had also recommended it to me for some reason.

The game's glitches gave me nightmares, like some 8-bit proto-*Silent Hill*, though I gather that these effects were unintentional—enemies would often pass through walls, items would sometimes disappear from areas altogether. I could never be fully calm when playing it, because the game had a tendency to freeze up every other time. It didn't help that its weird color scheme created a frightening, surreal air, similar to the one created by accidentally stumbling upon a childhood cartoon on TV at two in the morning ten years after last seeing it and thinking it creepy as hell for no reason. (This happened with *Sailor Moon* four years ago in my Moscow apartment; I ended up pacing around my room for two hours, continually looking over my shoulder for imaginary imps.) I only continued playing it because it was one of the five games that I owned at the time and I knew that my parents weren't going to buy me anything new for at least another year.

Though *Super Pitfall* was a momentary lapse of my childhood instinct for picking compelling videogames based on their cover art. This instinct did after all lead me to *Ninja Gaiden, Kirby's Adventure, Super C*, and a justly forgotten, yet still endearing run-and-gun shooter from Sunsoft called *Journey to Silius* (an Engrish misspelling of Sirius).

Sun-Denshi, or Sunsoft in the US, was a company devoted to developing and publishing brutally difficult games based, for the most part, around movie licenses. What made Sunsoft particularly interesting as a company was that it employed an astonishingly talented composer named Naoki Kodaka, whose soundtracks for *Blaster Master* and *Batman* have been known to administer tearful nostalgia in grown men with a heroin-like efficiency. You can keep your piddling, forever remixed and recycled Mario and Zelda themes, syrup for dull-witted diminished esthetes and hipster nostalgia-mongers alike, *for I have seen things you people can't imag-*

ine. I struggled through many Sunsoft games (a process that involved months of constant practice), because I found the prospect of hearing the music of the next stage that intriguing (how disappointed I was to find that the fifth stage of *Journey to Silius* pathetically reused the theme of the first). Or I should say that I enjoyed Kodaka's soundtracks despite the generic and frustratingly difficult games that they came with. I distinctly remember the music in the first stage of *Batman*, remember leaving the controller on the floor and listening to it loop for half an hour or so; it was the first time a videogame soundtrack had stirred some feelings of an indefinable hunger for adventure in me. I was seven years old.

Journey to Silius was originally supposed to be a *Terminator* game, though for reasons that remain unclear Sunsoft lost the license late in production. They ended up doing the sensible thing and releasing the game anyway, with a slipshod (even by NES standards) story tacked on at the last minute, which had Jay, a typically futuristic *Doug*-nosed adolescent with a helmet of orange hair and a handgun seemingly welded into his hands, seeking revenge against the robot terrorists that had killed his father, intent on stopping the establishment of a space colony in the Silius star system, of which boy's father had been the project head.

The game wouldn't be particularly exciting to play without its soundtrack; it was no *Contra*, and the only stage that was truly captivating was the first one, with its background of green city ruins and ominous black skies with glinting ka-

leidoscope-colored stars above them. Cannons would often flash in the distance, sending white energy blobs into the air, which, after disappearing from view completely for a second or two, would crash spectacularly next to Jay. The rest of the game, in the visual sense, wasn't really interesting.
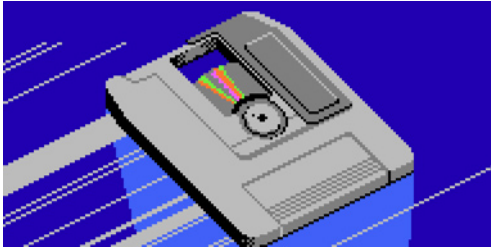
What forced me to play it year after year was the wonderful, wonderful soundtrack. It is both Naoki Kodaka's greatest work and a series of themes that have had an indelible influence on my life. I can think of nothing, outside of his other soundtracks, that could come near the sheer, brazen power of its whirling, incessant vigor and cybernetic romanticism, save a few of the more memorable compositions from the *MEGA MAN X* series. If *NINJA GAIDEN 2*'s "A Long Way to Go" is my favorite NES piece, and probably the composition that most defines the NES as a platform, with its wistful yearning and buoyant, dogged optimism expressing everything that was beautiful about my childhood, then *JOURNEY TO SILIUS*'s entire soundtrack encompassed everything I wanted the future to be. Kodaka's work was mysterious and mechanized, poignant, and articulated something about the very nature of a future that the eight-year-old playing it saw as inevitable. It was my own veritable "Warsaw Song" and Red Banner hammered into the shape of an NES cartridge. At my most optimistic moments, when I would try to picture exactly where I'd like life to take me, I'd have a hard time coming up with images—usually I'd settle for the desert war zones and urban battlefields that occupy most young boys' minds—yet there'd

always be Kodaka in background, acting as a troubadour to my winsome mind.

At that age I believed in time travel, aliens, ghosts, demons, monsters, Christ and a whole wealth of other things that the superficially mature Sergei Servianov has no need for. I still didn't have the capacity to draw a clear demarcation line between reality and the videogames that I played. I thought that videogames were merely another part of a reality that I hadn't quite been able to locate, though I was certain that a future of adventure would eventually be upon me. *JOURNEY TO SILIUS* would do for now, it would be a sort of training for when the robot aliens would appear. If it seemed somehow strange and frightening, like most NES games were to me, then it was because that was the nature of the approaching future. The game was created by people who were most definitely telepaths trying to draw their visions of a place imminent and sacred. They seemed to be trying to impart something urgent to me, something that would guide my life in the right direction.

It's all still there, in Kodaka's music: in the hurried, optimistic drive of stage 1, the swampy murkiness of stage 2, the cyborg melancholy of stage 3, and the powerfully insane momentum of stage 4. The music of the ending does what all great ending themes should do: instill a sense of accomplishment in the player and make him feel, for the two minutes that it lasts, that he's at the end of something magnificent (though the second part of it brings to mind high-school discos for reasons that I can't quite articulate).

And then there's the czar of them all: the title screen theme. On certain days I'd come home from school, toss off my backpack, turn on the game and let it sit at the title screen for an hour while I lay in bed, contemplating. It was a completely assured, arrogant, enigmatic, futuristic and noble yet, at the same time, pure

and romantic music; an 8-bit wordless piece of Stalinist oratory coming from my twelve-inch television's mono, inspiring me to greater and greater victories against a world that was utterly indifferent to my existence. I wanted, and still want, to live in that music, to live in its atmosphere of endless, idealistic striving. Yet, when I ventured out my room, the world would be oddly unchanged by the fierce determination that it exploded in my soul; it would be the same old scolding about bad grades from my mother and the same old miserable humiliations at school. If

there were any colorful ruins, they existed only at the site of the bombarded Duma in the center of Moscow and in the rusting T-34s honoring the dead of the Great Fatherland War on the outskirts of my neighborhood, and the only adolescents with guns were the starved, dirty conscripts that patrolled the city in the wake of the '93 "Red and Brown" rising.

The world has changed little since then. I've become older and bitterer, I guess. Though I can hardly blame Naoki Kodaka and Journey to Silius for that. 🎮

TOTAL ELLIPSIS OF THE HEART

. . .

—Tim McGowan

I recently played through *Final Fantasy VIII* again. While discussing it with the editor of this fine magazine, he asked how "!!!" is pronounced. I guessed, "Probably the same way '. . .' is pronounced." My guess was that if ". . ." meant some sort of pause or silence, that same punctuation bolded meant an angry or excited pause or silence.

So what is ". . ."? It is punctuation called an "ellipsis," and is composed of three periods, each separated by a space. It is most often used to indicate missing words in a quoted passage. It is most often abused to indicate a pause or trailing thought of any kind. The editors at TGQ forbid us from using it in this second way for good reason. Unfortunately, this is difficult for those of us who grew up playing Squaresoft games.

In most Squaresoft RPGs, the ellipsis is recklessly abused. Countless times throughout *Final Fantasy VIII*, Squall responds to questions and events with the simple declaration, ". . .". The other characters chide him for not sharing his feelings. Often, when the game is indicating a long pause before a character says something, it will insert three whole ellipses—nine periods—before any actual speech

appears. It is horribly awkward, yet strangely addicting. Scour any videogame message board for some time and you will likely find someone throwing an ellipsis between sentences or paragraphs, often in the middle of a sentence in which the person wants to indicate they have carefully contemplated the next word. That works fine for the Internet, but in professional writing it's a no-no. The Japanese apparently never learned this lesson.

For a time, the videogame ellipsis made sense. All dialogue appeared in text boxes, and creative punctuation gave dramatic flair to a character's words. If the player read them aloud, they would make as much sense as those shoddily translated things could.

The ellipsis hit a new low during the Play-station era. *Final Fantasy VIII* continually uses them, even though it is never needed. During storyline sequences, new text boxes are given dramatic pause with simple delay. On those occasions where the game uses nine periods to indicate a pause, the scrolling of the text actually pauses between each three—if the text box opened and paused for a bit before giving the text, or if there was a long pause after a single ellipsis, or if the opening of the box itself was simply delayed, ellipsis abuse could be completely eliminated. *Xenogears* is an even bigger mess. The text scrolls very slowly. To give us the

dramatic effect, the text also pauses after each sentence. When the game abuses ellipses—as it often does—it pauses for painfully long times. My first play through *Xenogears* took me over eighty hours. I estimate at least five hours could have been knocked off by allowing me to read at my own pace. The game would lose the effect of some of its presentation, but it would be balanced out because so much of this presentation is already overblown, melodramatic, horribly wordy, and often misplaced.

Xenogears is possibly the pinnacle of Japanese ellipsis absurdity, but the punctuation's oddity hit me the hardest while playing *Metal Gear Solid*. Every line of text is accompanied by very competent voice acting. All dramatic pauses, silences, and otherwise are handled by the actors, leaving little need to misuse punctuation in the end product. But like a stealth-action hero, the ellipsis sneaks its way into a couple of sequences. Worse yet, rather than treat it as a silence, the characters pronounce it as "hmm." It's awkward in every instance. I refuse to believe that for all those years the videogame ellipsis meant characters were hmming. Imagine if, for every "..." Squall pumped out, he was actually making odd grunting sounds? Rinoa would probably chastise him for something quite different than not being open enough.

I realized the nature of the awkward ellipsis and began mocking it in my own writing. Every time I use one outside of its proper connotation, I am making an in-joke: "I grew up on Squaresoft games." Yet, like an ironic indie kid who turns out to genuinely enjoy most of Journey's songs, the ellipsis became a regular staple of my writing. I now have to force myself to create stronger sentences rather than rely on dramatization.

I feel like some scenario writer somewhere had my number. 🎮
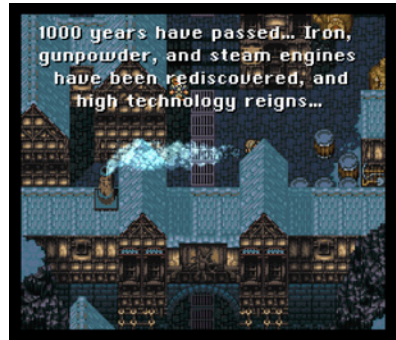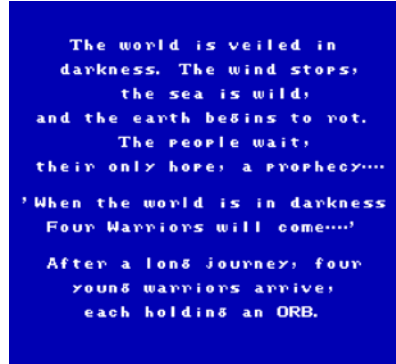
# MY EYES ARE BLUE, BUT I KNOW SAMURAI'S SPIRITS

Samurai Shodown—ARC, NEO (PS1, XBX, PS2)
—Chris Harback

It's 1788. On the docks of what for the past 8 years has been the Spanish town of San Francisco, two men stand facing one another. One, a blond American is dressed in a blue ninja outfit and gaiters and wears a long, flowing scarf that cracks in the wind. His scarred husky snarls at their opponent, whose long blue hair stirs in the breeze. Dressed in a white kimono and blue hakama, he doesn't deign to face his enemies. As the last of the day's sun dips below the horizon, the black robed referee's flags fall. The blue-haired man's blade breathlessly slips from its scabbard, almost exhaling. It traces a wide arc that catches his opponent at the height of his leap. The smoke clears, and the blond man has been replaced by a log wrapped in a scarf. He dives with his blade exposed from the sky, landing behind his enemy. His sword cuts a wide, bloody gash into the man with blue hair. The match is finished.

It's 1993. I can't recall a hotter summer in Maryland. Once or twice a day I brave the smoke and disgusting fried meat and cheese smells of the local sub shop to play what becomes one of my favorite games of all time, *Samurai Shodown*. While *Street Fighter II* was at best a distraction, SNK's sublime weapon-based fighter defined the genre for me. The bland world warriors could never measure up to the exquisite character design of the gaijin-ninja Galford and his dog Poppy, or to Charlotte, the armored French fencer, or even to the gargantuan thief Earthquake. Fighting on the crimson-carpeted floors of a gilded Versailles pavilion, or in a barren Texas canyon, or in the snowy forests of Hokkaido, where a battle could be decided in a second, when a full third of your life-bar would drain away with a well-timed hard slash. You'd fall to the ground gracefully, in slow motion, the hilt of your weapon slipping from your fingers. *Samurai Shodown* is nothing but class, from the koto-and-samisen-driven soundtrack, to the bonus stage that sees you slicing pratice dummies in half—the cut half slides gracefully to the ground. Its rigorous attention to detail at a time when fighting games were a dime a dozen was incredible: Earthquake, easily five times the size of the other fighters, couldn't be thrown,
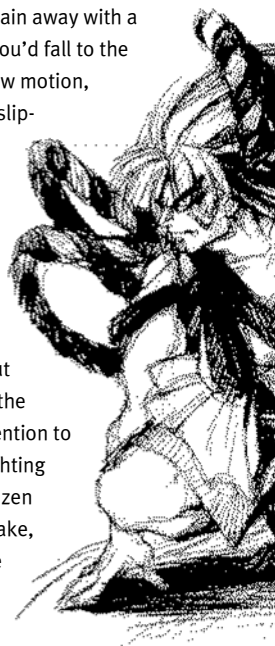
the apple tossed into the air and sliced to pieces by Tachibana Ukyo's Hiken Sasameyuki attack would simply fall to the ground uncut if it was interrupted mid-motion. My favorite, though, was the beautifully rendered character art by Eiji Shiroi, which successfully blended the thick, broad ink strokes of Sumi-e with modern, early nineties character design cool. Haohmaru, the SNK stand-in for Miyamoto Musashi, drips cockiness with his outrageous head of spiky black hair. The French fencer Charlotte is drawn in a more subdued, elegant manner, beautiful but frigid: her blond hair falls gently across her polished steel armor. In victory the counterpoint is reinforced as she laughs cruelly while blood fountains from your body. The bizarre scimitar-wielding Tam-Tam, from South America's Green Hell, is wild-eyed in his grinning red mask. These weren't just fighting game stereotypes: these were individuals whose stories were fascinating, but were left just vague enough to encourage curiosity—to make you want to finish the game to find out any slight scraps of detail about them.

But character design always was the strong-point of the series. The fighters are a mix of real-life figures, slight variations on manga and anime characters, and original designs. Just as Haohmaru is representative of Musashi, Tachibana Ukyo is a re-imagining of his rival Meiji-era swordsman, Sasaki Ko-jiro. Hattori Hanzo and Yagyu Jubei, real life individuals as well as staples of Japanese historical dramas, appear essentially unchanged. Amakusa Shiro Tokisada, very liberally based on the Christian leader of the Shimabara rebellion, appears here in the game as an androgynous magician. Shizumaru Hisame and Minazuki Zankuro, the hero and boss of *Samurai*

Shodown 3, are liberally borrowed from the manga *Rurouni Kenshin* by Nobuhiro Watsuki, who in turn was strongly influenced by the first *Samurai Shodown* game, and in fact went on to design four characters in *Samurai Shodown V*: Tokugawa Yoshitora, Majikina Mina, Kusarigedo, and Yunfei Liu. Shiranui Gen-an, a hunched green goblin with a bladed claw-weapon, and Kusarigedo, an enormous leering ghost who fights with the exposed arm-bone of his right hand, are both drawn from Japanese legends. Two particularly original creations from *Samurai Shodown 2* are Neinhalt Sieger, a bald German knight with a red hot, mechanical arm, and Kibagami Genjuro, a purple-haired, bare-chested swordsman who drinks from a bowl of sake after each victory, and whose attacks are based around Hanafuda cards.

A year later came what would be considered by many to be the best of the series, *Samurai Shodown 2*, and this time I was ready with my own Neo Geo cart system. No longer forced to endure the smoky sub shop and often-damaged joysticks, I was able to explore the game to the last detail using my own lovingly cared-for arcade joysticks in the comfort of my own room.

Absolutely packed with graphical improvements, *Samurai Shodown 2* is not so highly praised for nothing. The black robed judge, Kuroko, a hidden character, uses special techniques drawn from fighters in SNK's other games. He can be challenged (by a means I've long since forgotten) at his own stage high in the Himalayas, in a dojo filled with dozens of other Kurokos. The backgrounds are more vibrant: In Sieger's Prussian castle stage, lightning strikes continuously behind the Kaiser and his atten-dant knights. Caffuin Nicotine's temple steps are shrouded in thick mists, with shimenawa-draped trees at either side. Galford's San Francisco now comes complete with breakable barrels, cheering sailors, and better-rendered ships. The moments of insight into the characters' lives are even more poignant. At the start of each match, Galford calls his dog with a cheerful, "Hey

Poppy!" If he wins, Poppy's four pups come out to celebrate the victory, but if he loses, Poppy lets out a mournful howl and bows her head at the loss of her master. Ukyo, chased by his many female admirers in his victory pose in the first game, now collapses, coughing up blood from the tuberculosis he has contacted since last we saw him. Also stunning (and even grisly) are the ways in which a defeated character falls. A killing blow might hit a vein, causing a spray of blood to fountain from his or her chest. When finished off by an especially hard slash, your fighter may even be sliced in half, leaving only their weapon sticking out of the ground. But most often the fallen is carried from the battle by two Kurokos, on a stretcher covered with straw.

But the series had reached its zenith, and it was downhill from there. Short on cash, I sold my Neo Geo shortly before the release of *Samurai Shodown 3*, a mediocre game that introduced little to the series, aside from having two different versions of all the characters, sometimes with radically different styles of play; by this point the Neo Geo platform, introduced in 1989, was showing its age. *Samurai Shodown 4*, as well as two 3-D titles on SNK's ill-fated Neo Geo 64 system and a laughable 3-D effort on the Playstation came out over the next few years. Fans of the series had to get used to being disappointed by SNK's chronic lack of attention to the series. Or perhaps it's that the company's flagship series, the King of Fighters, got so much attention during the very years that the Samurai Shodown properties were reduced to the occasional guest appearance in dream match games like Capcom vs. SNK. Maybe it's that SNK has gone on to produce a more modern feeling—and technical—weapon based fighter, the Last Blade.

In 2003 the now-renamed SNK-Playmore released *Samurai Shodown V*, followed shortly thereafter by *Samurai Shodown V Special*. *Samurai Spirits Tenkaichi Kenkyakuden*, which arrived in arcades on the Atomiswave platform in 2005 and on the Playstation 2 just

this year, collects all of the fighters from all six previous games into one. Even Kuroko, absent as the fighting judge since Samurai Shodown 4, is back and is playable again. All the bosses, all the characters, and even four new fighters are there, along with an approximation of the game engines from each game—think Capcom vs. SNK's "grooves." On paper it sounds like a dream come true for a real fan of a venerable, if neglected, landmark fighting game series.

But it just feels like the series swansong.

I suppose that SNK-Playmore, ever known for packaging and repackaging their Kings of Fighters each year, could produce another, even more grand iteration of the series. Add four more fighters. Or eight. Or try again to make it work in three dimensions. But it won't matter. As it is, *Tenkaichi Kenyakuden* is huge and unwieldy. There are too many fighters, too many styles, too many choices to make. While it hauls the series forcibly out of the mediocrity it had settled into for a decade, the focus and clarity of *Samurai Shodown 1* and *2* is gone, replaced by a torrent of both the successes and the failures of all the games, but lacking any real innovation. How can SNK-Playmore improve Samurai Shodown? By letting it end gracefully at last. 🐾
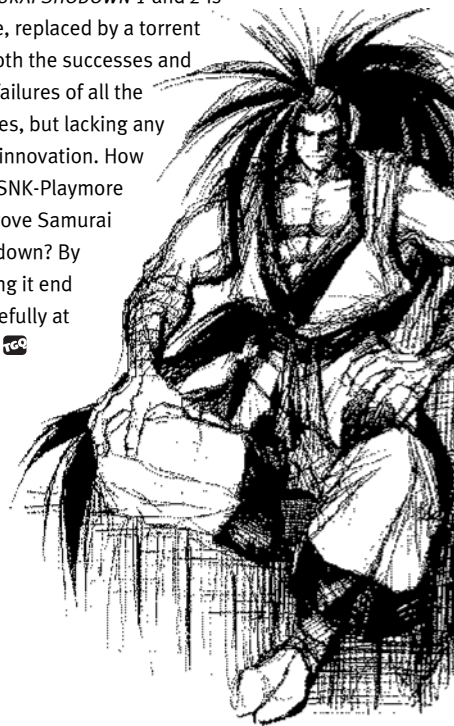
PLEASE GIVE TIM SCHAFER YOUR MONEY

Psychonauts—**XBX, PS2, WIN**

- Jeremy Penner

In *Psychonauts*, your character, Razputin, is a boy who has run away from the circus to join a psychic summer camp.

If you were to believe the average game reviewer who wrote up *Psychonauts*, you would think this situation is the funniest thing you've read all day. Run away *from* the circus? But kids run away from home to *join* the circus! Oh, Tim Schafer, you lovable nut, you!

Now, I want to be perfectly clear—I laughed gleefully, loudly, and often while playing *Psychonauts*. It's funny. But most of it was not in the form of easily repeatable context-free jokes told in cut scenes. Reviewers were at a loss to convey just what made it so damn funny. It's kind of subtle.

The same was said about the actual gameplay. Most dismissed it as a "standard platformer." I couldn't disagree more. There are interactions with other characters beyond "Fetch me the Staff of Selkirk and I'll give you a magical Elfin Orb that you need to power your Nerd Buggy." There's no Sokoban crate-humping puzzles. (Erik Wolpaw co-wrote the thing, so you can be damn sure there are no crates at all.) There are levels in *Psychonauts* without enemies, for crying out loud. It's an adventure game with an unusual set of verbs. The filler puzzles used to pad out most adventure games have been replaced with the physically challenging exploration you would find in an excellent platforming game.

And the puzzles that are left are excellent. They're so well integrated that you don't think of them as puzzles. Again: the effect is subtle. They are the final bit of brilliance that completes an extremely compelling whole.

Psychonauts is a game about characters. It has a simple premise: you enter a character's mind, and your surroundings reflect that character's personality. Not only that, but you can make meaningful changes in a character's personality by doing things inside their mind which the character himself is unable to do.

Let's talk about my favorite character. His name is Boyd, and he is a guard at an old abandoned

insane asylum. He resembles nothing if not a more rotund version of Barney Fife, only instead of being a lovable idiot, he's a paranoid lunatic whose mind long ago suffered a complete meltdown. He spouts a continuous stream of randomly-generated dialogue, making spurious connections between completely random things, tying everyone he's ever encountered together into a grand conspiracy, all centering around a mysterious figure, known only as "The Milkman."

His milk, we are told, is delicious.

He's also the only one with the key to the damned asylum, so into that crazy mind of Boyd's you go, to piece together just who this Milkman is, and where you might be able to find him. And what a mind it is! A suburban dystopia, with streets as twisted and convoluted as Boyd's own misfiring synapses, black helicopters flying overhead, and mailboxes following you around. Even the pink lawn flamingos in people's yards have hidden security cameras inside.

And everywhere, everywhere, are agents of the Milkman Conspiracy, dressed in trench coats and fedoras, pretending to be normal members of society by trimming hedges or working on the road crew. "I am a telephone repairman," one might say, his deadpan monotone and the fact that he's lifting a telephone receiver like a barbell giving him away. "I could listen to any conversation that I want, but do not because of my sense of professional responsibility."

Yes, everyone is in on this conspiracy; even the little girl selling Rainbow Squirt Cookies, who calls you a pervert when you ask her suggestively if she knows where you could find some milk. For your cookies. You'll see her later, whispering intel into a bush.

Heaven help you if you find yourself in an area where only authorized sewer workers or hedge-trimmers are allowed to tread. You will quickly end up detained, being grilled by agents of the Milkman Conspiracy. What do you know about the Milkman? We know who's paying you! What's in the milk?

Fortunately, these frauds are straightforward to outwit. Somewhere along the way, you might find a bright red stop sign. Holding it up, you might remark to a fellow road-crew worker, "I am on the road crew. This is my stop sign." And he might reply, "Yes. We are all on the road crew. Our backs are killing us," before remarking to his fellow road-crew workers, "Look at those woman's breasts. They are large." Then you would jump across the broken bits of road, from pavement fragment to pavement fragment, to the other side of the restricted area, pressing forward and digging ever deeper into the Milkman conspiracy.

Let's step back for a moment and examine exactly what we've just described, here. PSYCHONAUTS has intertwined an engaging setting, entertaining level design, an interesting character, and meaningful puzzles. Each element contributes to all of the others. On its own, the stop sign puzzle is kind of stupid and really not that interesting—just a straightforward lock/key puzzle. But it's precisely the kind of oversimplification that Boyd's mind makes. These guys are transparent fakes, whose only real job is to keep up appearances. Of course all you need to outwit them is to hold up a stop sign. They're robots! Mere pawns in the grandest of nefarious plans!

In short: What you, the player, have to do, meshes perfectly with the obstacles in your way, which reflect perfectly on the character whose head you're in. (Not to mention Scott Campbell's glorious art direction, whose skewed perspectives and sketchy designs fit the tone impecca-

bly.) Everything works in concert, and the result is an experience far greater than the sum of its parts.

I'm not going to tell you that *Psychonauts* is flawless, and you've probably heard about these flaws already from other sources. They're easy nits to pick. It inherits some of the worst collect-a-thon traits of the platforming genre. While it gives them more than adequate justification in the narrative, it can still get pretty tedious to have to scour an empty, dark campground, collecting psychic arrowheads, when what you really want to do is move on to explore the next bizarre mind. Some of the platforming bits can be pretty grueling—Google for "meat circus" if you want to see a bunch of people cursing Tim Schafer's children. Perhaps its most heartbreak-

ing failing is simply that it takes a while to get its hooks into you. It doesn't really get going until you enter the mind of the lungfish, easily an hour into the game, after three extensive training levels. I know people who've bought it and put it aside before reaching that point—a colossal shame.

The thing about these flaws is that they don't generally show up most of the time. Never do you think, "I'd be having a great time right now, if only it wasn't for this one nagging thing." They're flawed moments in between vast stretches of brilliance. *Psychonauts* succeeds in an awful lot of places, and where it succeeds, it succeeds more thoroughly than anything that came before it. ■

RUNNING THE SHADOWS
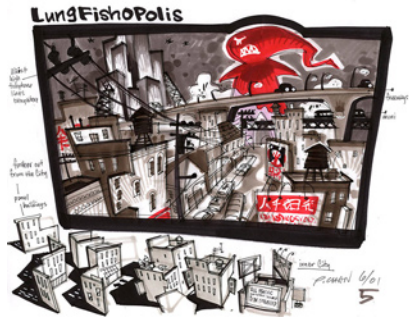
Shadowrun—GEN, SNES, SCD

—John Szczepaniak

Licensed games, especially those from the 8-bit and 16-bit eras, have the reputation of being poorly crafted and of a very low quality. Often a trademark would be licensed simply to elevate an otherwise terrible game out of commercial failure by cashing in on familiarity with the brand. Sometimes the games have very little to do with the source material, and so we have Arnold fighting shark-like blobs in *Predator* on the NES. Other times the source would be used extensively, but not in a way that lends itself to good game design—leaving us with titles that contain many elements from a license which simply do not work within the framework of the game. Very rarely is a license utilized in a way that benefits good design ethos. In short, Shadowrun videogames simply shouldn't work.

However, and despite being created in the West, the Shadowrun games stand as two of the finest examples in console history of titles that actually matched and to a degree bested their Japanese contemporaries. Despite this, the origins of the series are unknown to many players while the license now lies in shreds, torn apart by corporate takeovers and partial buyouts. The Internet has further obscured the truth by rampantly spreading factual inaccuracies and

proclaiming rumours as fact.

Shadowrun was conceptualised by several people at FASA Corporation (founded by Jordan Weisman and Ross Babcock) in 1989 as a tabletop pen-and-paper RPG, not dissimilar to *Dungeons and Dragons*. The universe of Shadowrun can be described as a fusion of Tolkien and the futuristic cyberpunk world of *Blade Runner* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*: cybernetically enhanced Yakuza mercenaries brush shoulders with magic-spell-casting elves, and dragons soar the skies of decaying 2050 Seattle. Over 60 years' worth of plot covers the entire planet and its many warring factions, their customs, cultures and slang. This solid foundation would enable the Shadowrun videogames to reach high levels of quality and much deserved critical acclaim.

Toward the end of the '90s, long after the Shadowrun videogames were released, FASA began to falter. Microsoft acquired FASA Interactive in 1998, and all rights that went with it. Microsoft now makes all official decisions with regards to any Shadowrun videogames, MMORPGs and skins/modifications to existing games. FASA Corporation finally closed its doors for good in 2001. It was WizKids, Inc. that then acquired all the Shadowrun intellectual property rights.

The history of the videogames themselves

is no less complicated, with three non-sequential games on three different systems, developed by three companies and published by at least three other publishers, each with its own interpretation of the Shadowrun universe and wildly different gameplay mechanics. There are additional fan-made pieces of work including a poorly named Commodore 64 game and an Australian University student's IT project. Plus there is the plethora of unconnected but seemingly related games available for Windows systems. Despite the promise of further Shadowrun-related videogames, only the three officially licensed titles will be acknowledged by a purist.

The first to be released was *Shadowrun* on the Super Nintendo in 1993. It was published by DataEast, but was developed by an Australian software company called BeamSoftware. BeamSoftware ran Melbourne House as a European distributor, and was a highly successful Australian development company famous for text-adventures based on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien that reached high sales in Europe.

This first Shadowrun game went on to be localized and released in various European countries (the only console version to reach Europe, actually) and also in Japan. Instead of actually replacing the English text, they simply subtitled *everything* into Japanese, making it one of, if not *the* most import-friendly RPGs available in Japan.

A year after the initial SNES release, in 1994, the Genesis version of *Shadowrun* was released in the USA. Contrary to many misconceptions,

the Genesis version is *not* the sequel to the SNES game and has no relation to it other than the title and licensed source material. It was developed by Blue Sky Entertainment Inc., of which there is very little documented information, and who has proven very difficult to contact. The game, despite critical acclaim and many fans, did not receive a Mega Drive release in either Europe or Japan.

Despite vocal fans who will claim that either the Super Nintendo or Genesis game is superior, both can be enjoyed on their own merits and for what they do individually. The Genesis version's open-ended gameplay and random mission generation allows for almost total freedom throughout the whole of the game—some people go as far as to compare its freely explorable city sprawls to *Grand Theft Auto*. The SNES meanwhile has a far more linear, though much larger, world to interact with, closely resembling traditional JRPG design. I personally prefer the SNES version due its tighter narrative and unique battle system.

Both were undeniably innovative in what they did. They also share many great traits, such as the bold visuals when interacting with different characters and a setting that stood out among the more fantasy-styled RPGs of the time. Special note must also go to the music, with a variety of genres ranging from heavy rock and techno to some very atmospheric and ambient sounds. Both games convey an atmosphere that is dark and foreboding, while simultaneously being familiar with to the inclusion of orcs, dragons and elves.

The third game in the series may be the most interesting, however. *Shadowrun: Tokyo*
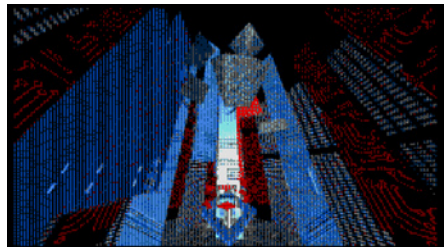
was released only on the Sega CD for Japan in 1996, making it not only the final *Shadowrun* videogame, but also the last sanctioned game ever to be released on the Sega CD.

It was developed by Group SNE (who had previously worked on SFC RPGs), was published by Compile, and features music composed by LMS Music. This game too takes a unique approach to recreating the Shadowrun world, not least because it forsakes the traditional Seattle setting in favour of Tokyo. The gritty tone of the earlier games was merged with some truly beautiful anime styling and art direction, giving the game a unique atmosphere which is enhanced by subtle touches such as the humorous explanatory sketches in the manual.
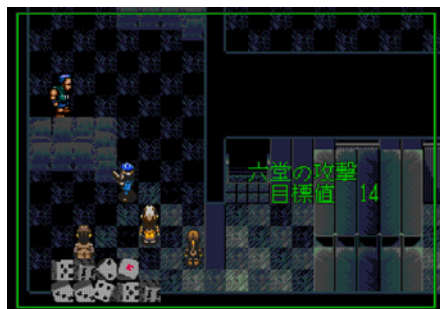
The game is divided into four different styles of play, though all of them work surprisingly well together. The first is easily recognisable—an interactive digital comic that plays exactly like *Snatcher*. At each section you're shown a view of the surroundings with menu options for examining things and speaking to people. Occasionally the game will switch to a more traditional top-down viewpoint where you can move the four main characters around at leisure, exploring and investigating.

It's normally from here that any battles start—while there are no random fights, the enemies can be seen standing motionless, and venturing too close will trigger a battle scene. These take their cue from *Shining Force*: the screen is divided into a grid with each character taking turns to move and perform actions. Mao the Street Shaman can cast magic, while

the other characters rely on guns. Attacks are decided by a dice system, a throwback to the old tabletop *Shadowrun* game. Anywhere between four and ten dice are rolled. What effect the dice have on the outcome of the attack is never clear, and the results can seem almost random. Battles can on occasion frustrate since the SCD version has more stats that need to be managed than either of the other games, with the weapons alone having close to a dozen slots and numbers that affect performance. Fights are thankfully infrequent and easily avoided most of the time, and have little affect on your overall status or money earned for the mission.

The final portion of gameplay is the Matrix-hacking sections (*Shadowrun*'s Matrix is the equivalent of the Internet, and the term was coined long before anything the Wachowskis created). Exploration of the Matrix is handled much like the *Snatcher* sections, except instead of hand-drawn surroundings the player is faced with some very crudely rendered CG images. Combat in the Matrix is similar to that found in the Genesis version, with a menu of various attack and defense programs to use against enemies. Unfortunately the CG-rendered FMV used in these sections are some of the poorest found on the Sega CD, with poor compression and a low resolution, though interspaced between the various other sections of the game, these parts are enjoyable to play.

The game is divided into chapters, each chapter being a single "shadowrun," or mission, that needs accomplishing. After completing (or failing) the given mission, you regroup at the Sil-

vermoon bar, count your pay and then proceed to the cybernetic, magic and weapons stores to gear up for the next "run." Access is also granted to the info-net to view news stories that develop in-game. Phone calls can be made to local contacts for info or to buy special pass codes. Everything gives you a feeling of control over the situation, and every mission has multiple paths that can affect how that mission progresses. Players are often faced with the choice of either talking or blasting their way through an NPC encounter; breaking into a building and fighting security or stealing a pass card and sneaking in; hacking files from a computer or bribing someone to give them to you.

For all the praise that can be given the game, few people outside of Japan will get to experience it unless they import. The good news is that it has been officially confirmed to work with the invaluable SCD patching program "ConvSCD" (http://www.retrodev.com/), meaning anyone who has the game and a little technical skill with CD burners can make a new patched version that will run on a locally bought Sega CD machine. This doesn't solve the problem of the language barrier, since at least basic Japanese knowledge will be needed for things such as inventory management and weapons upgrades. There is hope on the horizon though, as there are rumours among translation groups of creating an English-language patch.

The entire trilogy of Shadowrun videogames is without doubt a shining example of good game design and the ability to actually put a license to amazing use, though it did help that the original tabletop games lend themselves so well to the world of videogames. Perhaps no other license before it had ever managed to do so much justice to the source material while also keeping fans happy.

But what of other games and the future of Shadowrun? Many have guessed that because of Microsoft's attempted acquisition of the trademark, they are planning a Shadowrun title for the Xbox much like they did with *Crimson Skies*. After contacting Microsoft, they stated that they have "no statement to make at this time." Still the rumours persist, with the corners of the Internet rattling with gossip of a 360 version being planned.

With so much rumour and so little fact, it seems that much like its name and styling, *Shadowrun* is destined to remain hidden in the shadows of the MegaCorps. TGQ

Advance Guardian Heroes — GBA
—Ancil Anthropy

ADVANCE GUARDIAN HEROES is a solid, tightly paced game, with extravagant, inventive set pieces, refined mechanics, and satisfying gameplay.

Treasure fans hate it.

To understand why we must remember that AGH is a sequel - perhaps Treasure's first game to wear the label so unequivocally. It is the sequel to GUARDIAN HEROES, Treasure's first piece of software for Sega's Saturn console, released 1996.

Essentially, GUARDIAN HEROES is a brawler, not unlike FINAL FIGHT or DOUBLE DRAGON. The heroes march from left to right, slogging through crowds of nameless enemies — the enemies are knights and goblins, so most of the slogging is done with swords and spells.

It's not very hard. You have a choice of four (later five) different characters, who range in playing style from very simple to somewhat tricky. You're also aided by an enormous, invincible warrior who is happy to whale on opponents while you hang back and catch your breath. If you lose, you're allowed to continue as many as nine times from the very spot of your demise, with all your health restored.

You get experience points for defeating enemies, and between stages you get to invest them in statistics like "strength," "vitality," and "magic." You usually won't have to deliberate much. If you're playing the big, strong one, you invest in strength and vitality. If you're playing the little, wizardly one, you invest in vitality and magic. Whatever you choose, you continue slogging. After not very long, you reach a final boss, and a few more slogs gets you the credit roll.

Treasure at this point in their history as a developer could not be content with a single final boss, and so there are five in GUARDIAN HEROES. The game branches through thirty different stages, almost every one offering from two to five different choices of how to proceed.

Two years later, Treasure would release another Saturn title — RADIANT SILVERGUN. SILVERGUN features 18 branching stages with an extravagant number of bosses and a large

arsenal of combinable, upgradable weapons.

Radiant Silvergun got a follow-up in 2001, *Ikaruga*. *Ikaruga* has five stages, a greatly constrained arsenal, and game mechanics that have been refined to a point approaching perfection. It wasn't necessarily a sequel—set in a world very different from *Silvergun*'s—but it was a follow-up, a refinement of an earlier concept. It was the first of many.

Not content to leave an earlier idea untouched and unrefined, in 2004 Treasure released the greatly anticipated follow-up—(here we can even justifiably call it a sequel) to their much-beloved *Guardian Heroes*—*Advance Guardian Heroes*, on the Gameboy Advance.

AGH left many fans of the original disappointed, upset, angered, or confused. These people had clearly been expecting something other than what they were given. Likely they were expecting something that was more like what *Guardian Heroes* had been—a slogfest. If so, they had obviously not been paying attention to Treasure for the past several years.

Advance Guardian Heroes is not a slogfest. It is a game that requires skill, and practice, and a close understanding of the mechanics that govern the game. It is a game that requires the player to be prepared to start a stage over from the beginning in order to proceed. You do not get nine continues in *AGH*—when you lose, you continue from the last checkpoint you passed, with as much life as you had left when you got there, or you start the stage over from the beginning.

When you die there is an offer of an invincible body that you can have for a short time, one that will not be fazed or damaged by enemy attacks. But do not be deceived—its purpose is not to enable slogging, but to allow you an opportunity to learn the patterns of enemies. When it is over you will have to start from where you had died originally; you will have to use the knowledge you have gained while invincible.

This knowledge is important because understanding the timing of enemies' attacks is

crucial if you are to "counter" them. Countering is a critical technique in *AGH*—hit the R trigger at the precise moment an enemy attack connects with you and not only will the attack be blocked but the enemy will be stunned, unable to deflect your follow-up attacks. For some enemies, this is the only time you will be able to attack them. If you cannot counter, you will not be able to pass the first stage.

And here is probably the reason why so many staunch fans of the original cannot abide the sequel—in *Advance Guardian Heroes* there are times when defending is more important than attacking if you wish to proceed. *Guardian Heroes* has a "block" button, yes, but you can finish the game—without a single death—without having touched the block button once.

Advance Guardian Heroes ends after six fast, hard, and brilliant stages, not with one of five kick-punch boss battles, but with a volley-ball contest for the fate of the world. In this last challenge, you are required to counter an attack within a window of one-tenth of a second to save the world and see the credits. Your final test is one of technique, not of fighting ability.

As with *Ikaruga*, Treasure has chosen to prioritize skill and technique over a grand and showy battle that anyone with enough continues can witness. It is a tradition that would continue in 2005 with the release of *Gunstar Super Heroes*—refining gameplay by taking away player choices, forcing the player to play by the game's rules, and causing older fans who just wanted to mash buttons to throw up their hands. 🔳

UNTOLD TALES OF THE ARCADE

Konami's Finest
—Francesco-Alessio Ursini

Everyone knows Konami, as long as we keep it on the console side. You immediately think of the Belmont clan, Solid Snake, the snatchers, and tons of other games which are cool and whatnot. But not arcade games.

I decided to dedicate an entire installment of this column to Konami's arcade efforts. Why? Because some of their arcade titles are really great (albeit not the scoring frenzies of complex gameplay mechanics I so often praise). I'll start with just names, so you can get an idea: *Gyruss*, *Surprise Attack*, *Aliens*, *Gaiapolis*. No bells ringing? Damn. I blame you, Simon Belmont! These games are truly small gems, and in many ways, they were cornerstones of my gaming history.

Gyruss—Toccata and Fugue

You know *Gyruss*, I hope. It's a tube shooter like *Tempest*, a geometric exercise on the *Space Invaders* theme. And it's by Yoshiki Okamoto, the guy who made *Time Pilot* and who later moved to Capcom and made *1942*, *Ghosts 'n Goblins*, and the Street Fighter series. *Gyruss* was everywhere in 1983, and Bach's "Toccata and Fugue in D Minor," in

rocking digital glory, was its background music. There was no copyright problem, of course, and it gave the game a 20% bonus in coolness.

But the true point of the game was its omnipresence. I can't remember a place that didn't have *Gyruss* between 1983 and 1984, And I quickly developed an addiction from excessive exposure. I could get a fix of *Gyruss* at every damn place around the city. And I did. I spent a small fortune and tons of hours on this title. I loved the basic plot and the trippy gameplay, and I craved the ultra-fast pace.

By now, I think that everyone and their dog knows that I'm all for fast gameplay. I don't really need to cover it again; I like it fast. *Gyruss* is fast, too. It's three stages of destroying all enemies who appear onscreen in formations, and ultimately proceeding from Pluto to Earth, our Final Destination. The combo of "Final Destination Earth" and "Toccata

Untold Ta

and Fugue" was enough to pump up the emo feelings of a sci-fi freak. (I was five years old and already a nerd, yeah!) *Gyruss* made me carefully plan my routes when going around the city, in order to have free time for a few fixes every afternoon.

Now, if you've faithfully followed this column since day one, you might wonder: "But, what about your uncle's arcade?"

Well, my uncle's arcade was off-limits for this title. There were two cabinets, but they were *always* busy. That is, they were busy whenever I could go to my uncle's arcade, so in my child's mind they were *always* busy. And my uncle always had a third cab right beside the register, so he could sneak a play while not busy. But my uncle's dedicated cab was off-limits to me too!

So I spent my free time wandering everywhere, with two places being my favourites: the small cozy bar near my house, where I also played *Chack'n Pop*[1], and a pool club with a few arcade cabs. This club was actually a cool place, and the owners never thought that perhaps it wasn't the best idea for a kid to be sneaking into a shady dive to play videogames. But that's material for another story, trust me.

Instead, *Gyruss* at the small bar near my house was another of my prototypical memories, if that expression makes sense. Aside from playing my "love and tenderness" *Chack'n Pop*, I also enjoyed the wintry dark afternoons in a dramatic battle against time, bizarre enemies and a peculiar geometry, with the sense of impeding doom summoned by Bach's masterpiece, in order to reach our final destination, Earth.

1: Which I praised the virtues of in TGQ #1.

2: Please don't take me seriously on this, but he does look like Rutger Hauer in Blade Runner. And besides that, it has the peculiar graphic style of other Konami games, like the brawlers Crime Fighters and Vendetta, where everyone looks a little like a movie actor.

3: At least, I suppose it's the US. I never figured out exactly which flag is on the sergeant's arm.

Surprise Attack—The *Shinobi* of Space

So, we all love sci-fi, don't we? Picture a 21st century with moon bases, satellites, all the usual stuff. Somehow, some weirdos called Black Dawn manage to take control of a moon base. Of course, their goal is domination of all humanity, and they have Rutger Hauer as their boss[2].

Now, obviously, instead of sending one gazillion troops to *crush* the terrorists, the US sends a single sergeant of the elite forces to defeat the nasty guys[3]. I mean, it would be too easy, otherwise, no? In any case, the point is this: take *Shinobi*, but then add a low-gravity effect. The game is set on the moon, with a weaker gravity than Earth, so your character has a peculiar way of jumping, even worse than Tiki in Taito's *The New Zealand Story*. And then add deadly collisions (i.e., you die when you touch an enemy) and a special attack that shoots lightning around!

The rest is, for the most part, pretty straightforward and *Shinobi*-esque. Still, it's set in space, and trust me, if you want to know how it feels to be a space marine shooting people to save Earth, you seriously need to play this game. This is the space version of *Rolling Thunder*, in

terms of unadulterated coolness. Why? You're this sergeant with a shagadelic '60s space suit going around shooting improbable space terrorists with bullets from your hands. That's right, bullets from your hands. Well, technically you shoot them from your space-suit glove, but still, this is stylish enough to make the game cool. And it has deep, infinite space as your background. Think of some of the cool flicks of the '60s, the ones that exuded cheeshe in every scene. Add a SPACE 1999 atmosphere. Add a kid who's nuts about ROLLING THUNDER/SHINOBI-like games, and his eternal passion for deep space. And it goes without saying that you'd add the skies of winter that I'm still so fond of. And then, as always, add my uncle's arcade.

But let me warn you: the game has these stupid bonus rounds where you must play a quiz minigame. So, in winter, in late 1990, I walked into my uncle's arcade and first discovered this cool game while someone else was playing the dumb minigame. A quick look at the screen and I thought, "Ack, Konami has done a quiz game!" I went to have a few rounds of Taito's CADASH (which could be the start of another article), and when I got back I discovered that I had been fooled!

So I dropped a few coins, and all of a sudden, the epic combinations of space opera, pseudo-platform gameplay and that peculiar Konami style hypnotized me. At once, I was the almighty space sergeant against a bunch of freaks trying to dominate the cosmos but who don't realize that they have to go through ME, the toughest of the space marines!

And, I'll admit that I actually like the quiz parts a bit. But don't spread it around, okay?

Aside from the trivialities, I'd say that SUR-PRISE ATTACK was more the ROLLING THUNDER of space: speed of gameplay and elegant level design are its core aspects, with some pretty cool boss battles thrown in. And then there's the background music of stage 7-1.

It's true that my gaming experience is intertwined with my musical experience, and many times, great background music has meant as much to me as great gameplay. And the cool, fast-paced theme of stage 7-1 fully evokes the oh-so-Bondesque sense of an epic, urgent battle to save Earth, all compressed in two minutes of stage. A miracle of balance, and one of the coolest sequences in my gaming life.

For the Earth! For the moon! For the cosmos! And all in MOONRAKER style!

Aliens — Two Mothers Clash

In the same cold winter that I played SURPRISE ATTACK, I also played ALIENS. On one side, then, campy sci-fi; on the other, the dark, brooding morbidity of space, the vast, cold nothingness of eternity. Maybe it's embar-rassing to confess it, but I was scared by the creatures in ALIENS. There is something about these creatures and their universe, the sense of hopelessness that steams out of the garish world of violent colors and stark settings, of gritty industrial ruins snarled with the beautifully putrescent bodies of the infected colonists of Acheron. ALIENS was my most violent nightmare. And it was also my most beloved succubus. Maybe I like fear? Maybe I'm just morbid. (Let me hide my Giger posters, in any case).

The gameplay isn't bad, but it's not much

more than *Contra* without jumps. And unless you're a masochist, you'll only ever use the flamethrower. But I had the sensation, when playing the game, of suddenly falling into my deepest nightmares. In stage 2, I walked through a vast complex of organic material, the nest of the aliens. Lights flashed while the colonists died, watching alien larvae explode out of their chests.

But also, there was something attractive. Music, of course, as always. Slow percussions, bizarre sound effects, and then a crescendo of epic and majestic darkness, so strong and deep that it evokes the solitude and horror of the forsaken colony on Acheron, and the cruel battle of a woman to avenge her lost life with her daughter by destroying another mother and her children.

In the director's cut of the movie *Aliens*, Ripley confesses that she had been a mother. But in the 57 years she'd been in space, her 11-year-old daughter grew old and died while Ripley was frozen in an ageless deep sleep. And in the comic book *Aliens: Earth War*, published by Dark Horse Comics, Ripley clearly wanted revenge on the creatures from the void because of her loss. I played this game while I was reading the comics. So, for me, the story of the videogame *Aliens* was Ripley's vendetta against the alien queen, played out against the morbidly fascinating music, and the cool graphics by Hiroshi Iuchi[4].

The queen's lair is criant, all in orange and red and some purple as well. A bizarre choice for a game supposedly "dark," but sometimes garish colours can tell much more of horror, than black. And, in this case, the violent oranges and the putrescent greens and the sunset of the penultimate stage prophesy the total annihilation of Acheron and its monster; and the background music promises an ultimate apocalypse (in the first meaning of the word: revelation).

4: Though his art was more of a guest appearance, on this title.

I remember, as a kid, the final battle. And I remember the confrontation between Ripley and the alien queen. Once the apocalypse is complete and we're aboard on the spaceship Sulaco, the giant nemesis is waiting for us; and there, I was finally entangled in the web of nightmares.

See, the final battle between Ripley and the queen was merely the beginning of my journey. I remember, upon seeing that the game loops, deciding to play the nightmare more and more, over and over. And I thought that I could nuke, from orbit, my nightmares by destroying their electronic sigils, metaphors for the shadows and the parasites that had started growing inside my teenage mind. Winter slowly turned into spring, and soon I was the only one interested in this rather simple Konami title. After a while, I had to wander the city to find the game, because my uncle had decided "Nevermore!" like Poe's dark omen.

And summer came, but the sun and warmth didn't wash away the cold, bloody sunsets of Acheron, nor the night-gaunt phantasms, nor their eternal fight, nor my scared and confused teenage self. After years, I have to say, I still have nightmares. Sometimes, in the dark and brooding nights of winter, I have to hunt them down again, wondering if they are, after all, truly the cancerous doubts I have inside me.

Gaiapolis — The City of Earth

Gaiapolis is a game that truly and absolutely bewitched me. I was more than speechless; I was in some kind of rapture the first time I saw it. It was an epic tale, a great game, and a superb soundtrack put together in one of the most evocative arcade games I have seen so far.

My first memory of this game is from one lazy August morning. I entered my uncle's arcade, as always. But this time, my eye was captured by an attract mode that seems to be pretty interesting. Fantasy? No. It's something else. And then I see it: the city in the sky.

Laputa?

No, it's not a game based on Hayao Miyazaki's *Castle in the Sky* or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Still, a few images, and I'm totally lost in the superb coils of its art. There are three fighters: a prince fighting for the future of his reign, a brave humanoid dragon seeking justice, and a fairy Amazon avenging her tribe. Together, they journey across the planet fighting against the forces of evil (oh, how original) and witness wonders and perils beyond their wildest imaginations . . .

Part of my fascination with *Gaiapolis* lies with its anime style. Recall, we're speaking of Konami here, and they, together with Taito,

were the most "international" of the gaming companies in terms of design. But at some point during the early '90s, the anime style became commercially viable. So Gaiapolis was one of the first titles that looked like the other Japanese art I enjoyed.

But the Miyazaki-esque art style (the connection is tenuous, but there's something similar) is the least important part of the game. *Gaiapolis* is also a nice (and pretty rare) vertically oriented hack-and-slash brawler. Throw in some RPG-like elements, a possible sub-plot, leveling up, secret attacks, and a few other nice but useless gimmicks.

But the music . . . Well, *Castle in the Sky* has a few epic sequences by Joe Hisaishi that have inspired virtually every Japanese game under the sun (a lot of shmups, for instance). But this is not *Castle in the Sky*, one of the most incredible movies I can think of — this is *Gaiapolis*, an elegant rip-off but also a distinct work of art in its own right.

I played the game a lot as a kid. Playing it again in MAME, years after that glorious August of '93, makes me realize that the gameplay isn't the hottest ever. It's nice and all; you can parry with your shield, use special moves, and discover various secrets; the standard fare, nothing to write home about. But the soundtrack and

the overall atmosphere? I can't remember the composer, but I will never forget the first time I reached Gaiapolis itself, the vibrant theme, a musical panorama of revelation and wonder.

Then the various stages: the mystery of the long tunnel below the continents; the battle against the giant dragon, the angry spirit of the netherworlds; the high-road stage with its smart musical homage to the Police's "Synchronicity"; the diverse orchestral pieces commenting on the epic quest of our heroes.

And the boss battle theme. I have empirical evidence proving that good games have good boss battle themes. A boss battle is when you stop dealing with trivialities like cookie-cutter enemies, and you make it personal, you and the boss. And this time, it's to get the keys to Gaiapolis, the city of Earth, so no less than the fate of the world is at stake (like always). And there is a final theme, a reprise of the theme that plays when you discover the grave of humankind, near New York. It sings of the foolishness of man, fool enough to wage war and misery, and visionary enough to build the city of Earth as a city in the skies, Gaiapolis.

And, of course, all of this is fascinating exactly because it gives us a chance, in a way, to play *Castle in the Sky*. As a 15-year-old, I was simply enraptured by being able to fight for the future of humankind and the city in the sky, just putting a coin in a cab, in those glorious and sunny days of August.

Time passes, and I look back at *Gaiapolis* and *Castle in the Sky*; both aging well, even if *Gaiapolis* shows some rust, gameplay-wise. I think on the words of Muska, the shady villain of *Castle in the Sky*: "This is the dream of mankind." And indeed it is. One of our strongest and most powerful dreams. And I cherish the possibility to live, somewhat, this dream of mine.

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I have played a lot of games in my life, and when I think of Konami, I have to say that these games fascinated me because of their overall settings, with gameplay merely a secondary element. It doesn't matter, though; these games will always be part of my gaming experience. After all, what matters is the possibility to live out epic battles and majestic adventures, a trademark of Konami games.

And so, I will see you on our next journey, up in the skies of gaming stardom! 🎮

Guitar Hero — PS2
—Scott Stephan
Art by: Mariel Cartwright

I am awful at waiting for things. I remember being six and CALIFORNIA GAMES for the NES just having shown up at the rental store. While the drive couldn't have been more than ten minutes, my mother reports that I literally pulled my hair out on the ride home, in a display of psychotic anticipation for Frisbee-throwing and roller-skating down the boardwalk. So when my girlfriend's vehement opposition to GUITAR HERO manifested itself in the form of an impossibly long package several days before Christmas, I could not bear the weight of her instructions. I opened it well before the intended day.

GUITAR HERO comes in a broad, black box bearing its name in a hell's breath of flame and gothic block lettering. It slides open loosely, like a rifle case, the interior dominated by the Mini-Gibson controller, while the game itself is relegated to an unassuming corner of the box, an afterthought. There is no mistaking this for anything else and, without hyperbole, lifting the controller for the first time feels a little bit like yanking the sword from the stone. That's not to say it's heavy—it isn't—but the feeling it gives is intense and immediate.

For someone like me who has next to no experience actually playing guitar, the simulation seems reasonably complete. Colored circles scroll down the screen, I press a fret key and click the strum bar and noise happens. Early difficulty levels represent a group of notes with a single strum, but as someone without a musical ear, it's easy to feel like I'm playing right along. Of course, the larger implication here is that the user is not so much PLAYING guitar as being RESPONSIBLE for it; the controller itself implies as much. There's no mistaking the five fret keys in Fisher-Price-bright colors for the six strings and mile-long stretch of frets on an actual guitar. As a peripheral, it speaks volumes about not only GUITAR HERO's essential philosophy, but also about the meta-narrative of gaming.

The point is not to learn to play guitar. The point is to rock out as hard as you possibly can. Even having completed the game on expert difficulty, I feel no more ready to pick up a real guitar than I do to run NSA secret operations after finishing SPLINTER CELL. It isn't that the game lacks a skill necessary to complete it, it's just that the skill is much more proprietary than you'd expect. In that sense, GUITAR HERO gives an excellent sense of what it is to be a guitar god. Forsaking years of practice, you'll have blasted through "Iron Man" less than 40

minutes from the first time you smack the start button. What this lacks in real accomplishment, it makes up for in the visceral, vicarious world of rock 'n' roll. Tearing through a solo against the roar of a frothing crowd of metal heads, as opposed to my adoring, if slightly embarrassed, girlfriend, is something I will probably never get to do in the real world. This is what *Guitar Hero* and videogames do so well: they elevate the player. By simplifying the difficulty several orders in magnitude, it gives the ability to do what you never could when the power goes off.

This is fine by me. Even at its most social, gaming is essentially an escapist hobby. No matter how many of your friends ride alongside you in Azeroth, you're still not hanging out on the street corner. The hottest clubs in *Second Life* are, well, still in *Second Life*. So, it's no surprise that *Guitar Hero* lacks the complexity of an actual guitar. It needs to. Escapism should be easier than real life. That's why you get shot more than once and punch the "Retry" button afterwards. *Shenmue*'s crate-stacking day job was more than enough rote life-sim for me. And for all the grousing about the speed of *The Sims* clock, there's no way I'd want to spend 24 hours with those "people."

But what about the non-gamer? Rhythm games have developed something of a reputation as the genre for people disinterested in videogames. Something about the more intuitive nature of using our bodies as opposed to a distended peripheral. *Guitar Hero*, while requiring a controller of sorts, preys on the very human need to succeed. Few other games seem to convince otherwise reticent parties that gaming could be fun for them, too. At a recent birthday party, I interrupted the music to go a few rounds against my girlfriend. Trading riffs on Boston's "More Than a Feeling" was a showstopper that graduated into a tournament of sorts. The drunker we got, the harder we rocked. By the end of the evening, two of us had to stalk down to the basement and kill the power before people would leave.

So when the daydream ended, I was a little surprised. I skipped playing one day and then the next, eventually sliding through an entire week before I bothered to skim through *Bark at the Moon* on my lunch hour. But something changes when you've played the same 50 songs on the same five keys for six weeks. You start to want the endless frets for the textual complexity of making, not imitating, music. When I first attempted to explain the game to several of my more musically oriented friends, they scoffed, even derided the game. One of them went as far as to suggest that *Guitar Hero* might rob me of any ambition to actually play music.

While I refuted the idea at the time, I started to see what he was getting it. *Guitar Hero* is pure sugar, all energy. I had never stopped to think about what thin ice it actually walked on. It relies on the player's desire to skip the work and head to the result. It is, in more than one way, a giant cheat code of sorts. My sudden 180 on the game might be related to my need to always keep doing something, but the essential truth of the situation remains the same; reality has crept in and poisoned my blood.

Guitar Hero is still the best game of 2005, but it has been relegated to the party scene. This is a far cry from New Year's Eve when I charged through 25 songs, drunk and fleet-

fingered, completely unaware that the year 2006 had arrived. In histrionic fits, I would yank the controller from it's port and the game would suggest, "You may be rocking out a bit too hard," and I would reply, to no one at all, "I have not yet begun to rock." My new feelings are not a concession to the leagues that would advise me that almost all gaming is a waste of my time, but I do feel like it's a fool's errand to waste so much in a fantasy country of nebulous success when honest satisfaction is right around the corner. In fact, I feel like it's an outright refutation of that argument. *Guitar Hero* did what no record collection could do; it gave me the guts to pull the real thing out of my closet. 🕹
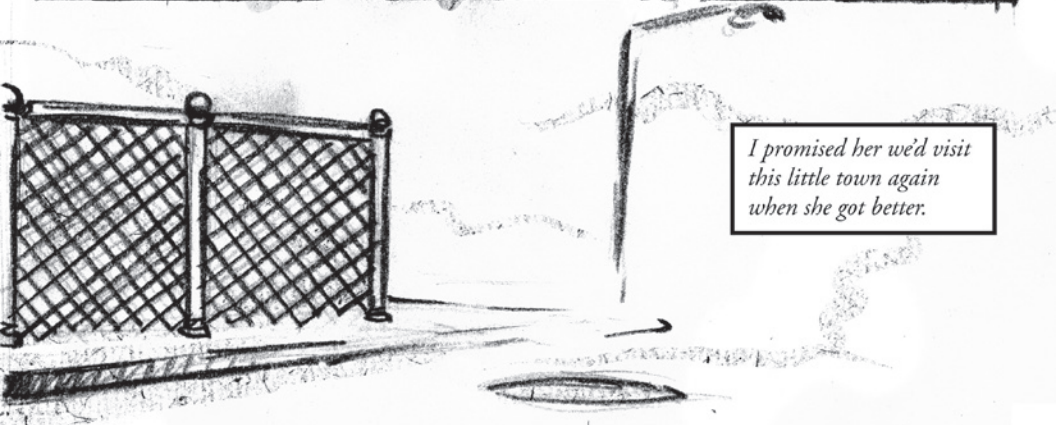
CHASING GHOSTS

By Benjamin Rivers

Three years ago, I lost my daughter.

She was in Sick Kids for the last eight months of her life.

I promised her we'd visit this little town again when she got better.
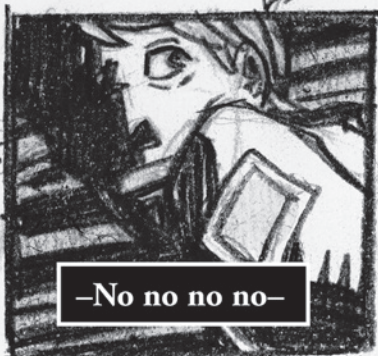
We would always come here together in the summer, stay at a cottage, play on the little beach.

–No no no no–

It gave her strength, that promise–

–but not enough. The despicable thing is, by the end of it, I was almost glad to see her go.

I was emotionally drained. I was finished. What more could I do? At least then she could have peace.

But she was tenacious, even to her last day.

"Don't worry, daddy," she said, and then she was gone.

Two days ago, I found myself compelled to come here, to this little resort town.

–God God God God–

So here I am.

A DEFENSE OF
SILENT HILL 3

Silent Hill 3—PS2, PC
John Overton

Silent Hill 3 is a monument to consumerism. It's been lashed for not being as deep or interesting as its predecessors. It's the game you get when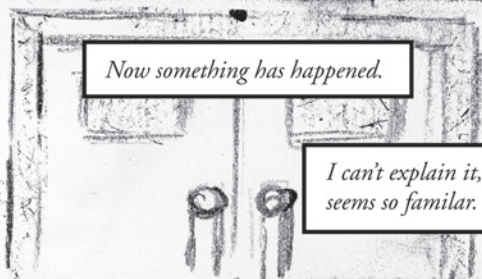 designers listen to fans. Fans want more weapons. Fans want to stare at pretty girls. Fans want a secret ending that is gotten by beating an arbitrary number of enemies with a light saber in a magic girl outfit. *Silent Hill 3* began as something deeper than it became and bits and fragments of what could have been litter the landscape. This seems to be the source of a lot of the hatred regarding the game: what it is not.

This hatred misses the point of *Silent Hill 3*.

Yes, it is disappointing. If you read GameFAQ's plot exposé, there is a giant section regarding Valtiel, the thing that turns levers and cranks whenever Heather, the main character, transfers to the Nightmare world. According to the *Lost Memories* DVD, Valtiel is responsible for resurrecting Heather every time she dies. That's a reasonable assumption from an official source of information on the series. The game reinforces this reasoning through special death cutscenes depending on where you are killed. If you are killed by the nurses in the Hospital, a cutscene plays that shows Valtiel carrying Heather's body away. He looks like *Silent Hill 2*'s Pyramid Head, but without a mask.

If Valtiel is both the way Heather crosses over to the Nightmare World and the method of resurrection, then he plays the role of the game's rules. The game's plot has relatively little to do with Valtiel's drudgery, but he is ultimately more important than the plot. He's

making sure we see more of the game. I don't buy the entire plot analysis the aforementioned FAQ, but Valtiel's work is believable because it's what gets me to the next set-piece.

"Do they look like monsters to you?"

The previous games' monsters all seemed to come from the character's psyche: In SILENT HILL 1 the monster are culled from Cheryl's consiousness. We have the hateful schoolchildren, pterodactyls (what kid does not love dinosaurs), and others. All the monsters of SILENT HILL 2 are easily identified as James's torture, sense of being traped, and wish for punishment. In SILENT HILL 3 we'd have to jump through a lot of hoops to get something that is related to Heather. This excludes the first enemy you combat in the game: a penis with legs, and the boss of the first section: a significantly larger penis without legs. This giant beast pulls in and out of vaginal holes and we can certainly tell what's on Heather's mind. The rest of the game's creatures are not so connected to the mind of a teenage girl. They are creations of the game's need to have monsters. For the most part, these monsters are eloquently rendered, disgusting beasts.

If you can stand bleeding walls and decaying bodies, the environments of SILENT HILL 3 are easier to look at than the monsters. The places you visit in this game are the prettiest the series has ever seen; from the setting sun in the cafe at the beginning, to the SILENT HILL 1-story-recap in a car during a rainstorm, this is one gorgeous game. The car ride stands out the most. The awkward silence, cold foggy windows, and fall-

ing rain gather up to give us a moment that feels real.

SILENT HILL 3 is a video game. As a video game it has a sewer level. A sewer level that is rather boring the first time through. It, for the most part, takes place in the "real" world. In SILENT HILL 3, the real world versions of levels are boring, bland affairs. Valtiel gives us an escape into the dangerously beautiful. The first time through, he doesn't seem to be around in the sewer. In the New Game+ however, he's around in full force. This time around, the sewers constantly shift between the Nightmare and the "real" world. The nightmare sections are completely shrouded in darkness, and this state of flux makes them all the more poignant and terrifying. A thought occurred to me when walking through this area: "Why wasn't it like this the first time? This is terrifying." There's no real answer outside of either laziness or madness on the development team's part.

"Ever thought about cutting yourself?"

In SILENT HILL 3 it's easy to keep yourself alive, and the game will even help you out in this regard by offering plentiful ammo and a variety of weapons. Despite this, the large number of death cutscenes makes you think that you should want you to kill yourself. It never tells you to die outright, but the game teases you into thinking this way by forcing certain deaths upon you. Take the subway train for instance; you can go out the backdoor and see the train travel to nowhere forever, but if you take a step forward, you plummet to your death. Why would the

developers allow you to kill yourself there?

To understand this, we must look at the moments before you board the train. In the Subway, the only unopenable door is contained on the tracks of the railway. In order to get to this locked door you must jump down from the platform and walk along the track lines. Walking up to the door and hitting X makes your throat drop. The door lock is broken and a train that wasn't there before is heading towards you. The train's horn blares, a zebradog latches onto your leg, and hitting X while facing the curb does nothing. You think, "When was the last time I saved? I don't want to do this section again." The screen fades to black and a cutscene is played that shows the train arriving with Heather alive and well. The section that immediately follows your wish to live provides you with the ability to kill yourself willingly. If the plot was anywhere as interesting as that segment, we'd have a classic game, but as is we only have a spectacular game.

The trick to enjoying *Silent Hill 3* is to see it as a string of set-pieces. It is in effect the antithesis of *Silent Hill 2*, which was a relatively boring game whose story added up to more than the sum of its parts. In contrast, *Silent Hill 3* is a game with a boring plot and many interesting touches to make up for it.

"This isn't scary, it's just annoying."

In *Silent Hill 3* we go back to Brookhaven Hospital from the second game. The nurses are more broken than before as if James had just finished shattering their skulls. This is a nice touch;

however the redesign of the hospital is lazy. Nearly all the same rooms that were locked in 2 are locked here. The only significant reconstruction is that the whole area is pitch black and full of monsters. This tactic is done to make you feel trapped and lost, but instead of claustrophobia we are given anger. You aren't struck directionless. You are ushered down a straight corridor, blindly running into nurses that jump out at you in a Resident Evil-style scare fashion. The screams of this section are not of terror, but of rage.

Then comes the mirror room. Unlike the rest of Brookhaven Hospital, in the mirror room almost the entire room is visible. When you walk over to the mirror you see your reflection. The room contains no items other than this mirror, and as you start to leave it, bloody lines begin to form along the walls. Your mirror image ceases to move and you find the door unable to open. Your controller starts vibrating like a heartbeat, going faster and faster. You start randomly pressing buttons while running around the room looking for something. Your heartbeat matches the controller's. You swing at your mirror image and try the door again as your life reaches critical.

Suddenly you find yourself back in a very poorly lit hallway.

The thought of suffocating blackness is lost in the hospital and gained in the sheer terror of the mirror room. *Silent Hill 3* loses its overall meaning by establishing many set pieces. The plotline is merely the vessel by which we see the game. Not to say that the plot is all that bad, it is mostly just a retelling of *Silent Hill 1*. Some

of the dialog is fantastic. Almost all of Vincent's (the pastor for the evil cult) dialog is quotable even without context. The above "They look like monsters to you?" is a cruel joke he plays on Heather. It's also the one moment the game becomes deep. Vincent quickly dismisses the notion as a joke and the park ride continues to its conclusion in which—in glorious RPG fashion—you kill a god.

The detective, Douglas's dialog following the first boss fight (In which he was not present) is, "What was the deal with that monster?" This can be taken two ways: one is that he saw the giant throbbing penis; the other is that he saw a monster of his own creation. The game's world does not change depending on what monster he saw. The wish for *Silent Hill 3* to be a meaningful game is a misguided one. The game is clearly not designed for such thought. If all the various trails of thought were perceived as the truth then we'd have a game with a bigger plot mess than *Killer7*. It is best to consider all of this through Occam's razor: like the environments, fan service, and set pieces, the plot is window dressing.

Heather at one point states, "I've gotten used to this world." If one understands the lack of a larger point to *Silent Hill 3*, then they can extract the most enjoyment out of the game. So Douglas, there is no deal with that monster. It exists so that Heather can kill it, so that Valtiel can keep the ride moving smoothly. TGQ
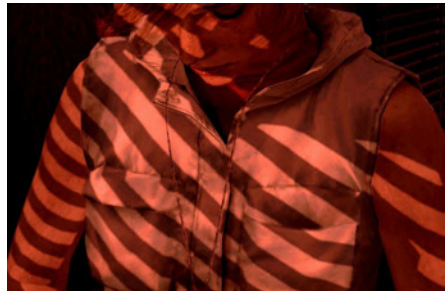
ONLINE PHOBIA

Gaming Online

—Brian Roesler

I have tried existing in worlds not of my own in several massively multiplayer universes, each brimming with vibrant colors, remarkable sounds, exotic architecture, and, most importantly, life. These seemingly alien worlds, other identities, and existences temporarily allowed me to take a departure from myself until the fantasies they presented were slowly distorted into ugliness. The possibilities that these worlds presented is beyond that of imagination. Unfortunately, I find that as I spend more time traversing them through my virtual self these possibilities often become more constricting. These travels were far from pleasant and—perhaps due to a few bad seeds—what many claim to be an "enjoyable and fun" experience became something unsettling . The idea of interacting with another being on a screen, with their avatar trying to kill me or rob me of something that I earned for their own personal gain became more depressing than enthralling. Despite these negative experiences, I can't help but double-click the icon for *Gunbound* every so often. It's a shame that clicking this icon far too often leads to regret.

I find that there are many barriers preventing me from having fun with an experience that all should be able to enjoy. First off, most competitive MMO games feature an alarmingly oppressive learning curve. For the first few days each battle feels as if it's over before it ever even starts - there is no mercy, no feeling of "better luck next time." Your only hope is to stick with it, hoping that you become better, and praying that when you do become better the higher-level player will be worth the effort. Perhaps because I've never put in enough time to reach this upper level I am not knowledgeable about games that involve "player killing" or "pwning noobs." But then, I have no desire to truly understand the sub-culture of this way of thinking.

Non-competitive MMO games feature an oppressive learning curve as well, but in a different way. The games are often incredibly complex—complex enough to keep someone busy for months or even years. No doubt because of this, discovering where to begin can be difficult. Simple things such as telling the difference between player characters and non-player characters are hidden behind at least one layer of abstraction and deciphering them requires either a thorough read-through of a large instruction manual or at the very least an attempted conversation with another player—a player who may or may not even know the answer, and if they do they are just as likely to

complain about your lack of knowledge as they are to provide you with the answer.

There are a lot of reasons why one should get involved in such majestic worlds, such as taking part in wonderful adventures with close friends. But sometimes there is simply an awkward player, one that is just there to try and have fun and ends up being singled out. In most cases this is me. I am the defective variable amongst games that require interaction with other living beings.

Another barrier for me in any type of online game is the lack of communication in actual English. The mass amounts of unintelligible dialogue that pops up onscreen while traveling just never seems to fit right. I sometimes see this "online phobia" extending over to other online actions, such as forums and message boards. This phobia is, to an extent, a sort of technological agoraphobia. I'm afraid to leave the context of a world that is populated by nothing but artificial intelligence and myself. The strange contradiction between fear of other humans and acceptance and comfort from a machine only further adds to online phobia's mystery.

We've all heard the horror stories of kids that don't take their medicine and become so involved with the game that they go on killing sprees and the ones about other players getting serious revenge in real life for an action that took place in an online world. These stories—true or not—serve as a warning of sorts, a safeguard and reminder to be kind to your fellow players and respectful to new players who have yet to experience life in an online world. As adults playing these extremely competitive games, one would think that a certain level of maturity would abound, with these safeguards and rumor mills serving to maintain order, however, one must consider that it takes but a single incident to craft a news story. One 13-year-old, singled out from all the positive players, brimming with immaturity and searching for a way to release it. It could also be an adult who suffered a terrible day and is searching for an ends to the means.

Certain freedoms are granted with anonymity, and with those freedoms come advantages and disadvantages.

Of course considering the variety of genres available in online games, we are faced with the one common aspect that unites them all: time. Time in itself is a controlling and domineering aspect in many of these games. Online games arguably require much more attention than offline ones. The attention required can become drastic in its extremes. An MMORPG requires attention to detail, conversation, class building, and at certain times, level grinding. Action games or online FPSs require a different level of attention: perfection. You must master aiming with a mouse, fixing hotkeys to perform a desired combination of actions, and learning the overall engine of the game while focusing on how to improve your own skills in order to move up the ladder. The time rates are different for both classes of online game, but when the player has a falling out of sorts with the game, or worse yet the company holding the game's online content disables its servers and erases hundreds of files at once, the player is then forced into a loss of

time. That game play experience can no longer be seen except in memories. The scenarios, conversations, and actions have all lost their purpose. Looking at a character creation screen and no longer seeing the legendary character that you spent hundreds of hours working with exists as a cruel reminder of all of the time poured in. It's a depressive bout after that. Even the heaviest of addictions can be cut off when the source of the matter no longer exists, and personal empires have been torn to the ground, their remnants burnt to ashes by things as small as server crashes. Time then becomes a ghost, and the player can do nothing but look back on it.

Recently, *Star Wars Galaxies* players were outraged to find that the hundreds of hours they poured into the game would soon be completely useless as the game was undergoing an extreme re-formatting by switching from a straight RPG to an action/adventure game with some remaining RPG elements. The mass absorption of time and the ghost it leaves behind can haunt players, but in the case of *Star Wars Galaxies* some players would feel even more at home with a more controlled combat system or a simplified way of traveling or working in the game. These worlds, with their constant changes, have the potential to leave behind hundreds of players while recruiting hundreds more. The more an

online game evolves for the company's profit or from the player's recommendations and complaints, the more extremes are created. Facing the extinction of an online world can be hard. However, there is always a different means to that existence and another world can always be visited in exchange for an additional fee and the expense a few "recreational" hours.

It's easy to become involved with a world that is essentially under our control. In some sandbox environments the addiction stems from the player's control over the worlds. This control can take the form of something as simple as buying your own house in an online game or something as complex as amassing a large army and burning down a village. With control we gain an upper hand and allow ourselves to be placed on a pedestal that we could never reach in real life. Through hours of work and gallons of non-existent cyber sweat it does pay off. I learned this through my experience with *Gunbound*. I had the clothes I wanted, I had awesome armor, and I was getting pretty good at the game. Unfortunately, the cruel criticism of a misguided shot and the delicate situations that came from a lost team battle sometimes became too stressful to handle. After a while, I gave up on it all.

Those that have truly been addicted to something in the past fear the addiction aspect of MMO games. Facing the real world and pulling yourself away from a cyber fantasy can be the hardest part of one's day. Facing the real world day-to-day is much too difficult. We seek entertainment; we seek escapism through any form necessary—through reading, writing, drawing, cinema, and of course videogames. We find ourselves seeking a way to end the day in a positive light. The draw, the beauty of the online gaming movement is that we can now coexist in a social world within the context of a videogame, a world with real people just like ourselves staring back from the other side of the monitor wondering who's on the other side—wondering if that female character is really a female, if that male is really male. We spend all day at work

looking forward to our meetings with online friends to finally get the coveted artifact of the month, daydreaming in class, letting our social lives suffer. We pray that when we get home no one will interrupt an activity that was meant to be fun and now has taken on the form of a near-ritualistic obsession. There's a careful contrast that one must consider between real life and a game, a delicate flower that can easily be crushed under it's own weight. If it is our mind's desire to crave acceptance for our chosen hobby, then the flower's stem is our own psyche, which if over-abused will suffer for it.

Some can handle this. They can balance their lives using a meticulous form of time management, while never appearing to have any vices of any kind. They keep it cleverly hidden from sight, and are only known by their online friends by they're chosen name, and never give away details of their real life. It is a state of mind that needs a balance, and finding it can be hard. It's easy to be tempted, and it's easy to dismiss something because of one negative experience. No one should be expected to know how they feel without giving these games a try, without realizing that it's easy to become addicted to anything, offline or online.

I had bad experiences; I hardly enjoyed the games I did play. Currently, I can't even stand to talk about it. Looking back, reflecting on all of these experiences really means that through it all I haven't discovered anything about myself except the obvious . Alas, Online Gaming, I never knew you well.

Maybe it's better that way. 🎮

SHADOWS

Shadow of the Colossus — PS2
—Brian N. Wood

THEY WERE ABSTRACTIONS, VAGUE SHADOWS OF CONTINGENCY. I MEAN, I ALREADY WAS MYSELF, WASN'T I?

Apophenia. Cognitive dissonance. Pattern recognition. "Congealing the superparadigm." The paring down of experiential data to a meaningful essence, perhaps even where there is no inherent meaning—no real connection but that which we subjectively perceive. What do these things have to do with videogames?

Before we get too far along, here, a warning: if you have not yet played Fumito Ueda's *Ico* or *Shadow of the Colossus* or read Haruki Murakami's *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, they will be thoroughly spoiled for you here. I'm about to draw some very subjective conclusions, and in doing so the conclusions of these works will be revealed. If you've yet to experience them for yourself, tread lightly!

Most of us have completed *Ico* and *Shadow of the Colossus* by now; at the very least, we're familiar with them. They are, to some, the pair of videogames that most fully represent the ideal state of the form in its current zeitgeist. While they feel like new and utterly unique experiences, and in many ways they are, they also derive from zeitgeists of the past in ways that are both obvious and nuanced.

Ico presented a refreshing take on the save-the-princess (and finally princess-as-salvation) lore of gaming tradition, and even before *Shadow of the Colossus* drew comparisons to the land of Hyrule, it furthered the ideas set forth by Link's confrontation of his shadow; his antitype; himself.

At the very beginning of *Ico*, the titular young boy is brought to a mysterious, haze-shrouded castle surrounded by forest, to be shackled and locked into a sarcophagus as a sacrifice. He has been born with horns, a curse that condemns him to this fate. "Don't be angry with us," says one of his masked escorts as he shuts the door of the funerary stone encasing. "It's for the good of the village." Shortly after he is left to die, a sudden quake sets him free, albeit only to find himself in the heart of a larger prison.

Very soon Ico will meet Yorda, the proverbial princess in need of saving; a frail creature of light that speaks no language he can understand. A mutual bond is immediately formed—they must escape. After light comes shadow, in

the form of inky spirits that relentlessly swarm and scurry to recapture this girl, their prize. Initially one might assume that these must be demons sent by some greater power—perhaps the castle itself. By the time Ico and the girl's escape seems imminent, though, one realizes that these eidolons are something much more disquieting—they are Ico. Rather, they are not Ico himself; they are his ancestors, the hordes of cursed horned boys whose fate he would have shared, and they too long for Yorda. The effect is undeniably stunning—Ico must defeat his kin, his shadows, just as Link must face Shadow Link at the end of *Zelda II*. Most people, upon this realization, feel a pang of reluctance. This is cognitive dissonance.

In *Shadow of the Colossus*, the wanderer's purpose is clear from the start. Just as Zelda rests upon an altar under a spell of deep sleep and Link sets about his perilous adventure to save her (and, indeed, to save himself), *Shadow*'s enigmatic wanderer carries his fallen beau atop his loyal equine companion Agro to a temple in a desolate and forbidden land, determined to do anything it takes to bring the nameless girl back to life. He will even slay sixteen colossi, mountainous beasts of quiet sentience and awing power, coping with feelings of guilt and anxiety (cognitive dissonance once again), in the process freeing their essence: shadowy spirits that turn out to be fragments of Dormin, the voice in the temple that guided (or, rather, manipulated) the wanderer—the user's avatar, which is to say *the user*—along the way. When Dormin is fully resurrected, it possesses the body of the wanderer and changes him:

he grows horns and becomes a shadow of his former self, metaphorically and literally speaking, yet still reaches desperately for the girl on the altar. As a consequence of his desires and efforts, he becomes the shadow of the colossus.

∙   ∙   ∙   ∙   ∙   ∙

I like to imagine what world-renowned postmodern Japanese writer and novelist Haruki Murakami might come up with if he were to design a videogame. Actually, the videogame we of the Occident know as *Earthbound* could have been his creation—it's possible that he had some degree of influence on Shigesato Itoi, since they'd previously collaborated on a collection of short stories. Given the nature of his own books, I believe Murakami would certainly appreciate videogames that understand both themselves and their users, and this is why he would appreciate *Ico* and *Shadow of the Colossus*—*Zelda II*, perhaps not as much, but he would probably get it just the same. To know this, one must only read his book *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, which itself borrows from Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, a dark and sometimes surreal novel (featuring a protagonist named "K," which is also the name of the male protagonist in Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart*) about alienation and man's hopelessness in facing "the system."

Murakami's book is unique in that it is split into two distinct halves—two distinct worlds, that is, and two distinct characters at the center of each. These worlds are known respectively as the "hard-boiled wonderland" and the "end of

the world," each chapter alternately switching between them. The two characters, both of them men, are never named—none of the characters are, much like in SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS. In the "hard-boiled wonderland," a dystopian future setting, the man is a "Calcutec," a human data processor/encryption system who uses the uniquely divided faculties of his mind as the encryption key. The man's assignment as a Calcutec is to help a mysterious scientist study-ing "sound reduction" by visiting a laboratory in the labyrinthine sewers of Tokyo, avoiding the shadowy subterranean creatures called INKlings, and encrypting the information given to him. He will eventually meet a beautiful woman—a librarian.

The man in the more dreamlike even-num-bered chapters meanwhile approaches the place known as "the end of the world:" a village encircled by enormous stone walls, surrounded by a forest where golden unicorns live. It is a place (in my mind, at least) with a languid, luminescent atmosphere much like the castle in *Ico* (which more than anything else leads me to wonder whether Fumito Ueda reads Murakami; it seems likely, given Murakami's status in Japan, but this may still qualify as some form of apo-phenia). When the man arrives at the village he is separated from his shadow, the embodiment of his "mind," as shadows are never permitted to enter and are to be held captive within the

Shadow Grounds, a small fenced-in area near the Gate. Everyone in this village must have a role, and he is given the job of "dreamreader." Near the center of the village is the Library, where the librarian (the only woman in the whole place) assists him with reading dreams from unicorn skulls, trying to regain the memories he has lost along with his shadow.

Eventually, these two worlds begin to col-lide. Everything seems to be going wrong for the Calcutec in the "hard-boiled wonderland," and the dreamreader in the end of the world is begin-ning to understand his situation; his "mind" finally starts to return. Only by reuniting with his dying shadow can these two men be saved; they are one and the same—the end of the world exists within the Calcutec's mind. If he can't free himself, his conscious self of the "hard-boiled wonderland" will die, and his "mindless" uncon-scious self will go on existing in "the end of the world," immortalized in a tautological dream. The Gatekeeper of the village (otherwise known as "the big guy") is not unlike the Queen of the castle in *Ico*, or perhaps the men that have sealed Dormin away in the temple in SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS—he holds the man's shadow cap-tive, and in its weakened state, much like Yorda depends upon Ico, the shadow will depend upon the dreamreader.

In the end, the man and his shadow are ready to make their getaway. To escape and return to the world of consciousness, they must leap together into the Pool along the southwest edge of the Wall. "There's a whole world on

the other side of this Pool. Ready to take the plunge?" At the last moment, the man tells his shadow that he has decided to stay. The shadow is disappointed, but concedes. "This is my world," says the man. "The Wall is here to hold ME in, the River flows through ME, the smoke is ME burning. I must know why." The end of the world is the man's Silent Hill; the hole in his wall that he can't stay away from.

. . . . . .

What do these things have to do with videogames? These works that some of us flail to define as art, that we invest our selves in so deeply, show us how worlds of imagination and "shadow" mainline to our innermost selves. A videogame, in requiring the user invest his mind in its world, demonstrates how these avatars are extensions of one's true id. While they exist within the videogame's world, they also exist within the walls of our minds. They cannot survive without us. We are their shadows.

I exist in two different worlds of mind. Which is "the most me"? Which side is closest to my soul? On one side, I feel this "inner world" self is the most me, but this may conflict with my "hard-boiled" conscious self, or the self that I show the world, creating a slightly different form of cognitive dissonance. I'm earning low wages with a part-time job back in my hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan, dealing with having left behind a wonderful solitary existence in San Francisco, wondering what I'm going to do with my life. If I stay in that "end of the world" for too long, my real world self suffers for it. The key is to understand that it's not about escapism. It's about truly understanding oneself and his place in the world. Without the proper balance of these two selves, of "dreamreader/wanderer" and "mind/shadow," we exist in an empty world with no meaning. All of it is absolutely vital. 🎮

NOT NEW GAMES JOURNALISM MANIFESTO

The Last Time *The Gamer's Quarter* Talks about New Games Journalism

—J. R. Freeman

There really is no such thing as New Games Journalism. The term itself means something quite specific, yet repeatedly we only see it used as a catchall phrase for anything that isn't considered "mainstream" videogame writing, such as scored reviews and the like. As such, it has become something used to pigeonhole something else. A phantom that pops up in public debate to wreak havoc whenever someone writes anything even slightly alternative to what has already come before and is considered the accepted norm. I had the chance recently to speak with two prominent figures/writers in the games-journalism industry, Kieron "Mr. New Games Journalism Himself" Gillen and Jeremy "Old Games Journalist Extraordinaire" Parish. What follows is extrapolated from the conversations I had with both.

First, let's look at what the whole NGJ thing actually is. Gillen described it to me as "feature-based anecdotal games writing", usually taking place within the game itself, "As opposed to the "autobiographical open-diary" stuff, which completely *isn't*. Though he is quick to add, "Not that I don't mind it." He makes a point of directing me to the Wikipedia entry on New

Games Journalism, which for all the debate and raging flame wars puts the definition back square on what he was describing in his little "manifesto" two years ago. "Obviously someone was listening," he says, amused. Okay, I'll buy that, my dear readers. So let's make this little essay here more interesting. I'll use NGJ itself to describe the rest of the interesting bits of my conversation with Gillen, because that will be a lot more interesting than coming up with dry ways to keep repeating an instant-message log. Interesting for myself at least, because after all I'm the one that has to write this thing and keep it entertaining. You're just along for the ride. Sorry.

An Exercise in New Games Journalism via *World of Warcraft*

I meet with Kieron Gillen in the Ashenvale region of Mist's Edge on the way to Blackfathom Deeps, a dungeon on the Spirestone PvP server of Blizzard's megahit MMORPG. I am a warrior and he is a rogue—fitting, I think, given our respective personalities. We're also both at level 60, so the dungeon itself isn't really a necessity or a challenge, just a meeting place where we could converse and make a little extra money, and maybe find a few epic items to sell back at the auction houses. On the way to the instance

portal, after which it will be just Gillen and I tackling the dungeon, I decide to chat him up a bit for the little "manifesto" I'm writing for the latest issue of *The Gamer's Quarter*.

"There really is no such thing as New Games Journalism, is there?" I ask him after a bit of silence, as we ride our mounts through the wooded glen of Ashenvale.

"Depends on the minds of whoever's saying it," he says back to me. "Obviously people mean something by it."

"Well, yeah. From where I'm sitting it's just a convenient label used to pigeonhole anything that isn't supposedly standard," I reply.

"Yeah, that's how a fair chunk of people are using it. Including anything which doesn't mention the game by the end of the first paragraph."

"But it's just pigeonholing," I say. "I can see games-related writing going in so many different directions at this point that it just seems to be holding people back."

"There are millions of ways games writing can go," He tells me. "The in-game-anecdote one seemed particularly fresh a couple of years back, so I wrote a bit about it and how I wanted to read more of it. It kind of rolled from there."

We approach the dungeon, a cave set deep in the woods. The virtual sun is setting, casting a slight glow over everything before darkness falls sullenly. He doesn't speak again until a minute later when we reach the instance portal, a transparent, swirling blue ethereal barrier between what lies inside and the rest of the world outside.

"Yeah. I mean, you're right—NGJ is now just something people lob around stupidly. But that's not really the point—the point was the debate."

As we cross over into the caverns of Aku'Mai he says, almost amused, "As much as people may growl about the term, they'll all happily read the best of the pieces. Generally, in helping precipitate a debate about games journalism the 'manifesto' served its purpose too."

"Where does it go from here?" I manage

to get in before we encounter our first group of demons, serpent like monsters that inhabit the dungeon. After mopping them up with our high-level characters, he responds.

"I dunno—compare the state of games writing now to two years ago. In terms of people willing to actually *pay* for more left-field stuff, we're miles ahead. Not that the paying is essential, but part of the point that I was saying is that *this is commercial*. It's not just a tiny ghetto."

Coming across an open area in the cavern, one filled with water and various obstacles that must be traversed before continuing, I seize the opportunity to serve a meaty question.

"If it's really true that reviews don't affect sales, as some have said, then does game journalism (either old or new) do more to drive the game industry or the game *journalism* industry? If we only exist to drive the game journalism industry, does it really matter whether journalism takes a new or traditional form?"

"Good question." He manages to say right before being attacked by a large group of monsters. Being a rogue, he is better equipped to fight monsters from afar and from behind. Even at such a high level, a chunk of his health gets chipped away before I have a chance to cast a Lesser Healing spell on him before rushing to his aid with my tank-like warrior. He responds after everything is finally dead, and we both go about looting the bodies. "I'd argue that reviews affecting sales very much depends on the game

you're talking about. I mean, I'd use *Uplink* as an example. *Uplink* wouldn't have even got in the shops if I hadn't given it a good review. There, it *absolutely matters*."

I ponder this while he goes on, and we both continue through the water and the obstacles, deeper and deeper into the dungeon.

"Can a games magazine break EA's latest game? Nah, probably not. But that doesn't matter either—can the music press destroy Mariah Carey's new album? Can the film press destroy the latest Michael Bay?" Then he flips it around on me. "The games which sell games magazines aren't necessarily the same things which sell in shops."

As we approach and then enter a massive stone temple, the large room before the boss's lair, he is attacked constantly by the demon spawn of the dreaded Aku'Mai, yet he is also on a roll and so continued talking. Killing them all off isn't so much a problem in itself, more that there are so many of them swarming us I have trouble keeping track of things.

"So—for example—traditionally, football games sell like bastards in the UK, but you don't stick them on the cover as no one buys magazines with them on. Closer to the hardcore market, when I was on *Gamer*, the average-selling AAA FPS sold half what the average-selling AAA RTS sold. Even less, in the UK, anyway. However, in terms of magazines, despite the sales, you'd always go for the FPS on the cover."

"Ah, because the FPS people were the ones buying the magazines." I manage to type off between healing him and fielding attacks. His character stood motionless among the onslaught as he continued to speak.

"Yes. Or rather, they were the ones who appeared to be interested in buying the magazine. It's important to note that this is in the UK—it's a different sales model than the US. Most US magazines sell through subscriptions primarily. Most UK are newsstand-based. That means that what goes on the cover is given a hell of a lot more thought, as you gain and lose people issue by issue depending on that choice. The lesson being, games magazine—like music magazines, film magazines and anything else specialist and consumer—aren't for the "average" gamer. Because the average casual gamer doesn't give a fuck about games enough to actually *buy a magazine about it*."

"The elusive 'casual market.'" I type with gritted teeth. The demon spawn still keep pouring in, and I begin to wonder just how much longer he is going to keep talking.

"People have tried to make the casual games magazine for years, and they've always failed—because there's no such thing as a casual specialist magazine. It's a contradiction in terms."

"So in that context NGJ or OGJ or whatever doesn't really matter." I say.

"Yes."

Seemingly satisfied with my comments thus far, he takes control of his character again and together we mop up the final few minions, and then light the four green-flamed torches in the center of the chamber, thus opening the door to the boss's lair. Aku'Mai is a large three-headed dragon hydra. The battle between the three of us lasts less than a minute with our high-level characters. Afterwards, we take a small break and continued the discussion.

"All that matters is whether the audience of people who buy magazines want to buy magazines. To that end, it's about creating a magazine that appeals to people who actually care enough about games to buy one." He says as he loots the corpse of the hydra.

"Which isn't such a huge market to begin with, in the larger scheme of things." I ponder

as I look upon him fondly. He is so methodical in his role-playing, I decide that a rogue was a good character class for him to pick.

"My take? With average fact-based reviews all over the web, games magazines have to do different stuff to what's out there. This is why you're seeing increasing amounts of non-preview/review coverage in magazines . . . because they're having to think about other ways of making people want to read them. What I term NGJ is one of those approaches, but as you noted earlier, there's dozens of others. It's about giving people who want to read about games *SOMETHING TO READ*."

Before we part for the evening, he tells me there are a few points he wants to make explicitly clear for my readers. I tell him to shoot. "Firstly, one thing about the whole NGJ commentary is people just misreading my manifesto completely, in the 'An End to Reviews?' sort of way. News posts start with that line. People comment saying that they quite like some of it, but they still like reviews. And so on. Of course, I said *EXPLICITLY* that it's in addition to more traditional approaches, not a replacement. But this still happened. Why?"

I tell him probably because gamers are a finicky, xenophobic bunch, at least the hardcore.

"Well, maybe. Also that the idea of 'Writing on Games' had so devolved that the idea of something that didn't fall into the preview/review mould threw them entirely. Second point:

The 'Oh, it's NGJ' stuff has been thrown at certain pieces which completely surprised me."

I ask for examples and he mentions most of the stuff he has done for Eurogamer, a European videogame-review website.

"Like—say—the *BOILING POINT* review. Obviously that's not NGJ in how I defined it. But it's not even NGJ in the 'It's so pretentious' way. Those sorts of pieces are written in the direct tradition of British games magazines like *AMIGA POWER* and *YOUR SINCLAIR*. In that, the idea that you're writing to entertain and be playful is *TOTALLY* a British tradition. The point being . . . I dunno. This was *MAINSTREAM* games writing in the UK ever since the '80s. There's a culture-clash thing between these English games writers and a demographic who are used to reviews just being a list of paragraphs on GAMEPLAY then GRAPHICS and SOUND." He then goes on to tell me about how an anonymous British games journalist whom everyone knows as Ram Raider, an opponent of NGJ and who savages Gillen for comedic effect liked the *BOILING POINT* review. For a brief moment, I almost think I saw his avatar smirking. "I mean, I'm not being dismissive to the American press," he makes perfectly clear. "Especially at the moment, it's getting increasingly interesting. Both of the major PC magazines are excellent. It's just that *ALL* British games magazines are heavy on their personality, and there's a line of thought that equates 'personality' with 'unprofessionalism.' I don't

personally agree."

Since this wouldn't be an appropriate essay on New Games Journalism without bringing the infamous poster child Tim Rogers into the mix, I decide to bring him up in our conversation and ask Gillen what he thinks.

"Bless Tim." Is his short reply.

I go on to tell him that what I find most interesting about the man is that none of what he has done so far was done seriously. It has all been a way for him to create a kind of "literary character" via games writing and the Internet; he only chose games writing because he figured he was better than the majority out there at the time. That he has caused quite a stir speaks volumes of the state of things.

"Tim's a classic case," says Gillen. "As I tell my friends who don't like him, I don't think it really matters. He's a unique voice writing on videogames, for an audience who appears to dig him. I wouldn't silence anyone's unique voice. We need more people writing about games in ways which are true to them. I always compare Rogers to Richard Meltzer, the music journalist from the '60s who wrote *The Aesthetics of Rock*, which regularly turns up on the worst and best music books ever lists."

I tell him that I think someday the case of people like Rogers will be the norm rather than the oddity.

"Heh," Gillen replies. "I don't know; there'll only ever be one Tim Rogers. Besides, 70,000 words on Korea was pushing it."

We parted ways and I headed back to the Deepwater Tavern in the contested territory of the Wetlands, my half of the loot salvaged safe in my bags until I could make my way to the auction house.

Now, an Exercise in Not New Games Journalism aka The Parish Perspective

If Gillen was the British side of this little discussion then I feel safe in naming Parish as his American counterpart, though really, to be perfectly honest they weren't all that different from each other. Parish currently writes for Ziff-Davis, owner and operator of such prominent gaming websites and publications as 1up.com and *Official Playstation Magazine*, to name but a few.

It was a warm, pre-spring night when I was finally able to speak with Parish via an instant-messaging service. He's a busy man it would seem, but once we got to talking the words flew back and forth like the cool breeze wafting in through my open window. I sat at my computer desk, like usual, smoking way too many Black & Mild brand pipe-tobacco cigars and drinking a cold can of Dr Pepper, my preferred writing drink due to the high sugar content. My mind is already a nonstop locomotive veering dangerously close to skipping the tracks at all times. I like to have that extra edge sometimes that a controlled substance such as sugar or tobacco can give me.

The Parish Perspective, as I have decided to call it, can be summed up thusly: "The idea of New Games Journalism is a little bit silly." He's right too, it's not like there is a New Games Journalist Guild where writers from across the globe group together to discuss the latest trends in the field and how they can further infiltrate the mainstream gaming media, despite the ranting of some paranoid gamers. The idea itself is an intangible and not an actual practice used by many self-professed New Games Journalists. In fact, as Parish notes, there really is no such thing

as the New Games Journalist. "Most of them seemed to have been dragged unwittingly into the category regardless of consent."

Of course, names like Lester Bangs and Hunter S. Thompson get mentioned. "What made their work so compelling," Parish writes "is that they lived a certain kind of lifestyle, and experienced so much of what they were writing about first hand. They spent time with the musicians they were critiquing." Something we don't see very often, much less at all, with videogame developers because, as Parish so properly puts it, "game developers don't go on tour for 6 months at a time, and game creation is a much more closed experience. The creators are kept away from the media by publishers and PR agents, which means that the closest you can really get is passing encounters with Hideo Kojima or Tomonobu Itagaki."

The biggest problem with NGJ, and Parish recognizes this too, is that of perception. "People see these Internet geeks writing incredibly lengthy essays about themselves and, oh yes, some game, and think, 'What an ego trip.' But there's really no reason that ego trips are automatically a bad thing. Ego-driven writing can be very interesting if the ego in question is unique enough." See also: Thompson, Bangs, etc. Most people rarely read books that talk about the writing "living within the reader" though that's what every good book should aspire to do. What is happening with games writing now is that people are trying to express that line of thinking in a way that applies to their own lives. However, this kind of writing has never exactly been mainstream, and therein lays the rift. Or, as Parish puts it, "The average reader is going to have trouble dealing with a Tim Rogers novella when all they want to know is whether or not Burnout 5 plays well."

It's all a matter of simple economics. Gaming magazines and websites are going to try to appeal the broadest audience possible, and therefore give them the kind of content they are

clamoring for, this is why we see mainstream publications going in the direction they have been going. Yet the Internet frees writing from the constraints of economics and allows for more creativity in the form of niche scenes. Parish says, "I don't really think 'NGJ' as such exists, but what I do see is a revitalization of the fanzine scene where writers can afford to be a lot more ambitious than they were 10 years ago. I think this current scene is just a reflection of the divide between 'pro' and 'amateur' writing, or 'mainstream' vs. 'indie,' or 'for the masses' vs. 'personal,' however you want to label it."

I make it a point to tell Parish of the specific definition for NGJ that does exist out there, but I also know that he's right. It really is just a phantom that largely exists in the minds of the people who keep talking about it.

The Final Chapter
A Denouement

My conversation with Parish shifted to some other places that really have nothing to do with New Games Journalism as a concept, yet were somehow strikingly appropriate given the climate of today's alternative games writing scene. I asked him if a game had ever spoken to him, much like a good book often speaks to the reader. "Lots of games," he says and then mentions the original ZELDA and METROID, games that "taught me how enormous and devious games can be." Talking about a videogame, or any piece of art, in such a manner is not "New Games Journalism," and if you happen to be saying that, then you really honestly have no clue as to what the term means and are simply slinging mud, intentionally or not. I am not trying to rail against NGJ so much as I am trying to rail against ignorance and complacency, the two most deadly sins in my book.

To say that NGJ does not exist is easy because, while it may have once meant something specific to someone, today it's just another term ignorant people use

to pigeonhole anything that somehow manages to offend their conservative sensibilities. It is getting to the point where it is doing more harm than good as far as the general public is concerned, because it is so off-putting in the general context of discussion. Once someone mentions it then minds are shut off and the mental roadblocks erected.

Over the past decade, videogames have become assimilated into the larger culture. If you want proof just look at the legislation as politicians take notice; even the academic sector is pricking its collective ears up. The whole silly debate over a simple smarmy term is even greater proof of the cultural divide, as British and American sensibilities collide. All the hemming and hawing is so silly. How do people become so invested in mere entertainment? Videogames must really mean a lot to some people, enough that they would defend their games and their games journalism anonymously against perceived threats from random strangers.

I can see the future, and it falls out in an exciting way. I see the niche publications gaining credence through the Internet, where only the strong will survive, and eventually becoming assimilated into the mainstream publication sector once it becomes profitable enough. By then I can see New Games Journalism being just another part of the larger web of things. Actually, I can already see it like that right now.

WHY GAME?

Reason #4: Roger Ebert Don't Stress Me
M. O'Connor

I mentioned that I recently spent a lot of money on videogames to an attractive female friend of mine, and she laughed and responded, "You're such a nerd!" It was an affectionate gesture, but on the other hand I can't deny I felt that familiar sting of alienation, driving the urge to justify why I spend so much time and money on the things.

—Andrew Toups, "Show Me Something Gorgeous," *The Gamer's Quarter*, Vol. 1, Issue 4

A way back—before I was able to read and before most of our readers were born, Eris be praised—certain academics tried to build a theoretical justification for the artistic and cultural legitimacy of "rap music" by citing the existence of oral traditions in Africa. I'm sure some enterprising African Studies theorist even cited the presence of bass drums in Africa as a precursor to the deep, chest-rattling thunder of the TR-808 kick. Hell, I have a friend who swears he sat in on an African Studies class at a major state university where the instructor taught that the Egyptian pyramids were built using extra-terrestrial anti-gravitational devices—a notion as ridiculous as it is demeaning.

"Rap music" was and is legitimate because it exists. Much like the mentally ill instructor alluded to above—assuming he existed and was not some sort of anthropological boogeyman conjured up by my friend to illustrate the wasteland that is cultural studies—those who tried to justify the form by glomming it onto something older (and therefore better) were inadvertently insulting an entire style of music and musicians.[1]

To believe otherwise is to accept the absurdity of authority. To try and legitimize is to debase the already legitimate; that is to say, wasting your time convincing unbelievers of the beauty of a form they cannot begin to comprehend. Would you rather die on your feet or live on your knees?

Art schools are good for producing children brimming with entitlement and drug problems, and critics do their jobs of filling in valuable column inches that would otherwise be sacrificed to public service announcements reminding our unenlightened brethren that children should not be beaten with sticks until they are dead or badly injured—but neither of these population groups confer legitimacy upon human endeavor.

Mr. Toups is indeed correct in saying that neither time nor energy should be wasted on

grabbing collars and speaking the gospel of obsession to unwitting or unwilling audiences. This is annoying in the same way that the avatar of sloth (the college pothead) is when he says, "But you can't understand Band XYZ until you've heard them when you're high, man!" Spare us the histrionics, Cheech; you can't replicate the blinding truth inside your fuzzy little noggin anymore than I can convince you of the sublime glory of reading a Jorge Luis Borges short story collection in the Clark St. Station at three in the morning while a head of stout and exhaustion make sense of the beautiful senselessness.

The proof lies in the pudding of the previous line—my example demands the understanding of several factors to even be able to make a reasonable comparison between the two situations. One has to understand what Borges wrote about and how; have some idea what "Clark St. Station" refers to; know what "stout" refers to; and try to reconcile an obvious love of the magical unrealism of Borges with the label "beautiful senselessness."

It's hopeless.

You are what you are. That's as true of sexuality as it is of your sense of art and beauty and what the word LOVE means to you. And it is double damn true of your pastimes and passions. Games are just games; they are also the expression of many layers of your personality. And you're probably stuck with it until you die.

Now to play my AARP card: I've been playing video games for longer than most of you have been alive, much less cognizant. That weighs heavily on my mind as of late. It is terribly irrelevant, but frankly, console title package design grosses me out. I didn't buy a number of games this holiday season for a number of platforms because the cartoon cleavage screaming at my inner lizard offends me.

I just don't need this stuff. I have no patience for it. I am not a child.

FINAL FANTASY X freed me of this terrible burden of "games" in many ways. Mostly by being a tedious example of the terrible "Screw you, dad!" plotline that seems—to my untrained eyes—to be the center of nearly every JRPG and most anime to boot. I know nothing about anime, frankly, and I don't really care to learn. I don't hate my dad. I moved out of my parents' house over ten years ago, and I haven't worried about "liking a girl" for at least seven of that fateful decade past. GRANDIA II may have convinced me the mechanics of the JRPG are sick and decadent—in the paleocon[2] sense of the word—but FFX broke my desire. Breaking desire is very difficult; the attachments of the past often never leave us alone, even if they cease to control our actions.

Then I played MORROWIND and remembered how much I had forgotten. God bless America.

We are the sum of our desires. We are doomed to drown in the past, in one sense, and only the most dedicated egoist or occultist—assuming they are truly separate—can try to pry apart the bricks of personality to create something new. I assume, based on a few years of experimentation, that at best you can use the stones of the old to build the temple anew, but you are still stuck with the same base material. Love it, or leave it by the barrel of a gun.

So be proud of what you are; and if you are not what you wish to be, dedicate yourself to that most difficult path and accept the potential to fail without fear. It is better to hang yourself from a tree of rebirth than one of utter death.

And now for the short version:

Why Game?

Reason #4a: Bad Taste
—M. O'Connor

> *Providence, in the form of the New Jersey State Lottery Commission, visited upon my tiny self the gift of an Atari 2600. This happened just as Atari itself was beginning its transformation from can-do-California-hippy-dopehead-path-finding-mutating-into-a-corporate-behemoth-con-job-headed-straight-into-the-pit-of-failure. Providence—as the State Lottery Commission—saw fit to guide my father—as Moses—to a toy store—as Mount Sinai.*

—"Why Game? I Have Bad Taste" (unpublished manuscript, 2006)

My idea of a good time these days is to toss in a first-person shooter, roll a blunt, turn on the Christmas lights, turn down the bed, mix up some bahama mamas, dim the lights, lock the doors, extract some mescaline, seal the windows, read cheap potboilers, engage in wanton speculation and the foul demon lust, and then kill shit.

Screaming and killing shit is a really good time. Ravenholm was a whole evening and a half of cursing and killing pixels with my PC, headphones cranked up high. "Fuck you, zombie fucks!"—when mentally altered or occupied I'm burdened with a salty vocabulary, as befits the station of my birth.

I also suck at games a great deal. For someone who has been playing for nearly a quarter of a century, I should be far better than I am. I should also be far more cultured than I am.

I am none of these things.

I have really bad taste in games. I mean, really bad. I wish I could reach out and touch you, all fourteen of you, and say, "Hey, no, I really fucking mean it, dude. It's not just *Halo*. The tastemakers are OK with *Halo*. You can defend *Halo*. I bought"—and here I pause to draw more closely, feebly attempting to hide the shame racking my body—"*Area 51* for twenty bucks. On a gift card."

A fucking gift card. I was ripped off in every sense of the term. It's terrible!

Have you ever shot someone with a toilet or a steel pole in a *Half-Life 2* deathmatch? It's absolutely fucking hilarious. You will literally LOL until you puke down the front of your trousers. The toilet careens off the body of your adversary and flies off in one direction while the arms and legs flop around like a ragdoll. Ragdoll! How apt!

I'm installing *Painkiller*. I need some of that old time zombie-blasting religion.

Voiceover: *In a world where one man is taken from the woman he loves—*

In a time when good must rise up to face unspeakable evil—

In a place between Heaven . . . and Hell.
You get the idea.
I love that stuff. 🎮

1: Not as insulting as insinuating Egyptian culture was unable to use slave labor and geometry to build Really Big Things without the help of aliens, of course. I will charitably assume that if the above actually happened, it was due to a desire to dance around the existence of slavery in Africa and pre-Alexandrian Egypt and not a belief that an ancient culture couldn't build such structures.

2: Paleocon—short for "paleoconservative." A somewhat insulting term for old-school, isolationist, small-government conservatives in the vein of the early 20th century American right. They are the mortal enemies of the modern neoconservatives.

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