SAVE POINT

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Save Point

Reporting from a video game industry in transition, 2003 – 2011

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Introduction

As I write this introduction in 2021, we're just about a year away from the 50th anniversary of *Pong*, the first commercially successful video game and probably the simplest point to mark the start of what we now consider "the video game industry." That makes video games one of the newest distinct artistic mediums out there, but not exactly *new* anymore.

To put that number into some context:
- 50 years after the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1450, the publishing industry had only recently seen the introduction of *italic type*.
- 50 years after the invention of the phonograph in 1877, songs like "Ain't She Sweet" and "Someone to Watch Over Me" were topping the music charts.
- 50 years after the first commercial film showing in 1895, movies like *Gone with the Wind*, *Citizen Kane*, and *The Wizard of Oz* were less than a decade old.
- 50 years after the first filmed dramas started broadcasting on British television in 1930, David Letterman, *The Young and the Restless*, and CNN were just starting their decades-long runs.

As the commercial video game industry approaches its 50s, it's fair to say the medium is approaching maturity in its middle age. Culturally, games are a major pastime; the ESA estimates 70% of US men aged 35 to 54 play games on a console, while 78% of US women aged 35 to 54 play games on a smartphone. Commercially, tracking firm IDC estimates the worldwide game industry was worth $180 billion in 2020.

Artistically, an explosion in the number of indie developers has meant games are telling more complex stories from more perspectives than ever (even if many of them are still rooted in the language of juvenile power fantasies). Technologically, advances in virtual reality and ray-tracing are making the virtual worlds we inhabit more visually immersive and convincing than ever.

If video games are currently reaching their middle-aged maturity, this book covers the industry's late adolescence. Between 2003 and 2011, the industry as a whole was just starting to get past its overwhelming focus on children's entertainment, attempting to grow with the audience that had spent its youth with the games of the '70s, '80s, and '90s. Many of the trends that are apparent in the modern game industry can find their roots in this period, when technological, cultural, and business forces forced the industry to change faster than ever before.

The articles in this collection examine some of those changes from the inside, as they were happening. Some reflect on the growing and myriad communities that were popping up around different subsets of gaming at the time. Some analyze the games of the day and look for lessons from the past and for the future. Still others look at how the business of selling and marketing games was evolving alongside the explosive growth of the Internet and downloadable games .

All of these stories serve as a snapshot in time, capturing a fast-changing video game industry in the process of transforming into the cultural and economic powerhouse it is today. I hope looking back at those snapshots is as interesting for you as collecting them was for me.

-Kyle Orland

COMMUNITY

Infinite Princesses

(Originally published in The Escapist, Feb. 14, 2006)

Author's Note: Looking back on this piece in 2021, the idea of connecting to other people through single-player games feels more relevant than ever. After all, that's what thousands of players are doing at all hours of the day through Twitch and other livestreaming services. More often than not, these games serve as a kind of conversational white noise -- background sights and sounds that allow a thriving community of chatters to interact with the players in the ultimate parasocial broadcast.

While I haven't really gotten on the livestreaming bandwagon, since this piece was written I have played *Super Mario 64* and many other single-player games while my now-six-year-old daughter watches. All these years later, I find it's still a great way to connect with the special people in my life.

A lot is made these days about the new "social revolution" in video games. The conventional wisdom goes something like this: Games used to mainly be a solitary experience for socially reclusive, nerdy kids who preferred sitting in a dark basement to interacting with the outside world. Today, though, online first-person shooters and massively multiplayer RPGs allow gamers to come out of the basement and forge relationships in the warm cathode light of LAN parties and dungeon raids.

Anyone who actually grew up with games knows this is a bunch of hooey. Social interaction has always been an integral part of gaming. From drunken frat boys betting on *Pong* tournaments to school kids fighting side by side as Ninja Turtles to crowds of eager teens placing their coins on a weathered *Street Fighter 2* cabinet, the socializing influence of multiplayer games predates recent telecommunications advances by decades.

But discussions of the deep, personal connections that can be made through multiplayer gaming usually gloss over the deep, personal connections that can also be made through single-player gaming. In fact, one single-player game in particular helped me connect to two of the most important people in my life. I didn't even realize quite how powerful this connection was until I played *Super Mario 64 DS*.

Let me preface this by saying I'm a fan of *Super Mario 64* the same way that Picasso was a fan of painting. This is a game I've happily spent hundreds of hours playing, watching, talking about, and [writing about at length](#) as a hobby. So, the announcement of a portable Nintendo DS remake of the game was exciting, to say the least.

Once I actually got my hands on the game, though, the initial thrill of a portable, 3D Mario experience quickly gave way to a surprising boredom. I tried to blame my sudden disinterest on any number of mitigating factors—the portable version's difficult controls, the crushing weight of my own high expectations, the numbing passage of time and overexperience. But when I really analyzed it, there was one overwhelming factor that made playing *Super Mario 64* on the small screen so much less fun for me than playing it on the big one:

The lack of other people.

When my sister was four, she would find nearly any excuse to spend time with her 15-year-old big brother. For a few months after I got *Super Mario 64*, this usually meant sitting and watching me work toward 120 stars while she tried in vain to get me to play more directly with her instead. Sure, she would watch with mild interest as I played through Tick-Tock Clock for what probably seemed like the millionth time, but the way she saw it at the time, she was battling for attention with the little plumber on the screen.

The tables turned once she saw the game's ending. Anyone who has seen it can probably imagine the delight it can provide for a four-year-old girl: the soaring music; the beautiful princess descending from the heavens; the rising flock of birds; the chaste kiss with the swooning hero; the giant cake. The ending sequence amazed and delighted my sister like nothing before (or possibly since).

Thus, for the next three years of my life, the words "Save the princess, Kyle" became a common refrain in my house. This one goal usurped all others in the game, from my sister's perspective. She had no interest in seeing Mario run through the desert, or fly through the air, or swim underwater. Who had time to waste time on such things? There was a princess to be saved!

And I was the one to save her. Again. And again. And again. Until the vagaries of that final level were seared into my subconscious. Sure, I had other games to play, and other things to do, but the smile on my sister's face as she watched that ending sequence seemed like a good enough reason to put them off for another run at the end of an old favorite. After all, there was still a princess to be saved, no matter how many times I had saved her before. And I was the one to save her. Again. And again ...

When I met the love of my life in the fall of 2000, she had barely touched a video game controller in a decade. Like pretty much every American kid in the '80s, she had owned an NES, but somewhere in the intervening years she had let the gaming world pass her by. I was determined to bring her back into this world, as much out of a desire to be with her as a desire to validate the last 10 years of my life. So, after an initial courtship (in which I downplayed my video game obsession to an absurd degree), I made a case for her to try out my favorite game, *Super Mario 64*.

To say she took to it would be an understatement. Every chance we had some time together would be another chance for her to suggest we break out the good old Nintendo 64. At first, I was overjoyed that this wonderful woman took so easily to my favorite game. But the joy quickly turned to frustration for me, usually because it turned into frustration for her.

The years of video game atrophy had taken their toll, and her desire to explore ran up against her inability to complete the next objective. I would try to give helpful advice at first, but that only seemed to add to the frustration. I would try to turn my attention elsewhere when I couldn't bear to silently watch her struggle any longer, but she'd insist I stay and watch while she played. "It's no fun if you're not here," she'd tell me. What could I say to that?

But what early love doesn't go through a rough patch? Despite the problems, watching the woman I loved play the game I loved made me feel like I was playing for the first time, even though I never touched the controller. Mario's trials became hers, and her trials became my own, and we connected through shared digital struggle.

It may seem counterintuitive to say a single-player game helped me connect with the people close to me more than any multiplayer game ever has, but it's true. As I wrapped up my time with the jazzed-up portable version of *Super Mario 64* on the Nintendo DS, I realized it was this interpersonal connection that was missing this time around. There was no look of joy on the subway rider next to me when I beat Bowser yet again. There were no shared shouts of triumph after a hard-earned star. It was just me and my favorite game, alone in the crowd.

I often worry that, as I get older, my ability to play and enjoy games will diminish as my reflexes slow, my fingers stiffen, and my body generally gives way to the ravages of age. But then I picture an old man sitting on a couch as a new, hungry generation of gamers tears into some new digital world or other. The old man laughs and screams and winces and throws tantrums right along with the children on his floor, living vicariously through the vicarious lives of a new generation. And I smile.

WebGame 2.0

(Originally published in The Escapist, Sept. 18, 2007)

Author's Note: When I wrote this piece, we were still two years away from actor Ashton Kutcher becoming the first Twitter user to reach 1 million followers. Today, a celebrity like Barack Obama, Justin Bieber, or Rihanna can easily command over 100 million Twitter followers.

By posting these follower/viewer counts publicly, for all to see, social networks create a de facto high score list that makes even non-celebrities feel they're on the same spectrum as these mega-stars. The appeal of that very game-like loop of effort and social reward was still relatively new in 2007, but has since become perhaps *the* primary factor driving Internet society as a whole.

"Haha, I have more friends than you."

The schoolyard taunt in my PC's instant messenger box was pretty easy to dismiss. For one, it was coming from my 12-year-old cousin, who is always trying to find some petty way to get under my skin. For another, the taunt was based not on a deep, insightful discussion of our social lives, but from a quick perusal of our competing MySpace pages.

I was a latecomer to the MySpace craze, signing up primarily to view the profiles of a few close friends and family members. My cousin, on the other hand, had quickly made MySpace the center of her middle school social life. A quick conversation confirmed that her impressive-sounding list of 180-plus friends consisted mostly of classmates she barely knew, random strangers that spammed her with friend requests, and a few "friends" that were actually her friends in real life.

But all these mitigating factors didn't really help me shake the annoying feeling I got when comparing her massive friend count to the paltry dozen or so friends on my list. It was an unmistakable feeling at the pit of my stomach that would be familiar to any gamer with even a hint of ego; a feeling that combines the shame of failure and the shame of caring so much about something so trivial.

I felt like I was losing. At MySpace, of all things.

In a way, the web has always been a game. Anyone with an internet connection could participate by simply viewing a web page, raising the hit counter (score) of that site's creator. Advanced players could grab an HTML editor and some free web space and create a home page (avatar) that represented them in the online universe. The goal, as it so often is in life, is to gather more attention (links) and prestige (Google ranking) from your fellow players.

The revolution in interactive, social/collaborative web sites commonly referred to as Web 2.0 didn't change the basics of this game. But it did make it easier to get caught in the virtual attention-seeking madness.

There has never been so many ways to categorize your popularity score on the web. MySpace doesn't just let you show off how many friends you have, but also practically forces you to rank your favorites in a personal "Top 8" list (leaderboard). Facebook lets people coalesce into groups (clans) of like-minded players, including many competing groups whose sole purpose is to be the "largest facebook group ever." LinkedIn not only publicizes your professional connections (corporate buddy lists), but also keeps track of colleagues that are two or three steps removed from you. At some point, these networks look less like socializing platforms and more like *Pokémon* games. Gotta catch 'em all!

But Web 2.0 isn't just about who you know, it's also about what you know. Or, at least, how much you share what you know. "Wikipedia is such a good resource, it seems a shame to let gaps remain unfilled, or errors go by uncorrected," Richard Farmbrough said in [a *SMITH* magazine interview](#) about his more than 163,000 edits to the online encyclopedia, the most of any human user. Farmbrough says he's driven more by an "obsession with continuous improvement" rather than any drive to be No. 1 on the [list of top Wikipedia editors](#), but he does recognize an obsession with rank among other users. "'Editcountitis' is a well-known affliction in the Wiki community," Farmbrough told *SMITH*, "and to try and reduce it, I would freely state that I consider many editors have made more valuable contributions to the 'pedia than I have."

Yes, even an academic endeavor like Wikipedia can turn into a game for some editors. Wikipedia's own page on "[editcountitis](#)" describes one of the classic symptoms as "thinking of your position in The List as a competition." The page helpfully reminds sufferers "there is no prize for making 1,000, 2,000, 3,000, 10,000, or even 2^{16} (65,536) edits." That doesn't hinder the obsessive editors, some of whom will submit pages without checking for typos just so they can raise their edit count by fixing them later. "Remember what we're all doing here is building an encyclopedia, not competing to see who makes the most edits," the page reminds readers.

Quantity isn't the only measure of success on the web, though. Increasingly, sites are turning their content into a popularity contest by letting users vote for their favorite submissions. Take

Digg, a link-sharing community where the criterion for front-page news placement isn't accuracy or relevance but the number of votes from other users.

And what's a popularity contest without a list of winners? Digg creator Kevin Rose explains in a blog post that the site's "Top Diggers" page was created "when there was a strong focus on encouraging people to submit content." Mission accomplished. A May 2006 study by Jason Calacanis found that the top 10 Digg users combined to spend roughly 3,400 hours of unpaid work submitting content to the site in about a year. It seems a little crazy, unless you compare it to the thousands of hours top *Halo 2* players put into their favorite pastime. For the top performers, submitting to Digg is less of an unpaid job and more of a game.

"Digg's public top submitter list didn't drive my submissions as much as it gave me a barometer to gauge my success by," says Andy Sorcini, better known as MrBabyMan, the top submitter on the current incarnation of the Top Diggers List. Sorcini achieved success with Digg early on— his fifth ever submission got enough votes to make it to the front page—and while Sorcini says he didn't change his submission strategy after that, this small recognition did drive him to stay active. "I've always submitted stories that have appealed to me personally. By that time, however, I was hooked. I did want to see more of my stories on the homepage."

Sorcini insists Digg's real appeal is "exposing other users to sites and news I find interesting," but he admits there is also a social and competitive aspect to the proceedings. "The top submitters all do know each other and are in constant communication with each other," Sorcini said. "There is rivalry, too, as many are highly competitive, but it's usually pretty friendly."

It's not always just friendly competition, though. Some of these Web 2.0 interactions can have implications for real-world business. Amazon.com has turned product criticism into a contest of its own by letting readers rate the "helpfulness" of the thousands of user reviews on the site.

Much like Digg, recognition on Amazon's top reviewers page (which comes with a small badge next to your name on every review) encourages many people to play the reviewing game almost obsessively. "When I started to review on Amazon and watch my ranking, I think I debuted around 25,000 or so," writes Top 300 Reviewer Tom Duff. "That would have been late 2003. My goal was to get into the top 1,000 by the end of 2004. I ended up in the top 500. This year, I wanted to end up around 250, but I'm already at 269. Breaking 200 is probably more realistic."

While Duff says his improved writing is the main benefit of his prolific reviewing, there's also a more tangible reward for his efforts. "Now that I'm in the upper rankings, I often get email requests from authors (both tech and fiction) asking if they can send me a review copy of their book," Duff writes. Think of it as a redemption game writ large; Skee-Ball for literati.

Of course, like any game, there are those that try to exploit the system. A [programming glitch](#) in 2004 revealed many authors using Amazon's review system to post anonymous praise for their own work. To the authors, it's just a way of fighting back against a virtual enemy that's threatening their real-life livelihood. "That anybody is allowed to come in and anonymously trash a book to me is absurd," author John Rechy told *The New York Times* after being caught writing an anonymous rave for his own book. "How to strike back? Just go in and rebut every single one of them."

Even if there isn't a personal stake, the popularity contest can drive reviewers to game the system or pander to the audience's tastes. "My positive reviews are rated as 'useful' far more often than my critical reviews," [writes Amazon reviewer John Gordon](#). "This may represent human limitations, but it's trivially easy for persons associated with a vendor or retailer to downrate critical reviews and uprate positive reviews. I'd say this qualifies as cheating on a reasonably impressive scale."

And that's the thing about the new trend towards interactivity and game-like design on the web. When everyone's a potential creator, everyone's also a potential cheater. Or a winner, or a loser, or just a competitor.

One thing is clear: In the new web, everyone's a player.

@TopHatProfessor Layton and the Curious Twitter Accounts

(Originally published in Crispy Gamer, July 23, 2009)

Author's Note: When this piece was written, the idea of marketing a game on social media was still a novelty left to clever individual accounts without any real professional relationship with the games and publishers in question. Today, every publisher worth paying attention to has an entire social media team coordinating meme-worthy posts to try to grab just a small slice of our increasingly fragmented attention.

I feel like this piece captures the beginnings of that marketing machine, but also an interesting new way for the fan community to engage with the characters and scenarios of a game's world.

> "Frankly ... I'm ashamed. I have made myself a Twitter page and officially joined the world of technology. Perhaps Luke may help me update."

With those words on June 29, 2009, what had been just a fictional character in a Nintendo DS game became a fixture on Twitter. Over the coming days and weeks, the @TopHatProfessor account would post dozens of riddles and brainteasers of the type found in 2008's *Professor Layton and the Curious Village* and the upcoming *Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box*, soliciting answers from his slowly growing cadre of followers. Along the way, the professor happily answered questions about the upcoming title and shared little slices of life from his day, all without ever breaking character.

Many followers, this reporter included, were bemused and intrigued by what they assumed was a clever new viral marketing campaign put on by Nintendo ahead of *Diabolical Box*'s August release. In reality, though, the @TopHatProfessor account was the work of a lone college student and amateur game journalist, trying to get attention for a game he felt was being sorely neglected by publisher Nintendo and the media at large. The network of followers and related Twitter accounts that @TopHatProfessor eventually attracted highlight the evolving effect that social networks are having on game journalism, PR and even fandom itself.

The man in the hat

"I figured that if Nintendo wasn't going to make the U.S. release of the second game known, I was going to take matters into my own hands."

That was all the motivation needed for Roger DiLuigi, the man behind the @TopHatProfessor account, to start up what he thought would be a "fun side project." A theater and English major at the University of Illinois, Chicago, DiLuigi definitely had some experience with playing roles. And as a Nintendo-focused journalist for GamingVice and Kombo, he said he was perplexed by Nintendo's relatively lax promotion for the upcoming *Layton* sequel.

"It all started when I found assets and an August release date for *Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box* in my E3 2009 press kit after just coming back from the Nintendo [press] conference," he said. "At the very least, I was shocked that Nintendo didn't even give a passing mention to the game at their media briefing, especially since *Curious Village* had a resurgence in sales early in the year."

What started as a solo effort began to grow into something more on July 1 with [the introduction of Layton's apprentice Luke into the Twitterverse](#). The expansion was the idea of Infendo writer Will Thompson, a friend of DiLuigi's who joined in when he found he knew the person behind the @TopHatProfessor account.

Thompson said he created the Luke account "on my own initiative as a fan of the game, and ... to solve some riddles in the process." Soon, Thompson and DiLuigi were responding to each others' tweets in character and gaining dozens of followers each day (the @ApprenticeLuke account was eventually given over to DiLuigi to manage, Thompson said). "I didn't expect in a million years that it would grow into what it eventually became," DiLuigi said.

DonofScience

✓ Following

From the three finalists, I will choose a winner to convert to the path of EVIL! Get puzzling!

about 4 hours ago from web

What it eventually became, among other things, was the basis for a rumor that got a lot of Nintendo fans unduly excited. In a [series of tweets](#) on July 1, DiLuigi, as Layton, hinted that the professor had been invited to a "Grand Smash Tournament" where he had been asked to fight "a blue robot boy, a possessed doll, and a tiny boxer." These tantalizing hints, coming from what many assumed to be an official Nintendo marketing campaign, were enough to lead to some breathless headlines about the characters' potential appearance in the Smash Bros. series from the likes of [Cubed3](#) and [IGN](#) (the latter of which went so far as to ask, "Why would an official Nintendo promotion online make such implications?").

DiLuigi, for his part, was shocked that anyone could have mistaken his Twitter account for an official Nintendo promotion. "If there was any doubt, I thought the *Smash Bros.* tweets with Layton meeting Mega Man, Geno and Little Mac would've been evidence enough for people to say, 'Okay, this is definitely a fan. Nintendo would never do that.'" (Editor's Note: Since this was written, Little Mac and Mega Man have become a part of the *Smash Bros.* roster, though Geno is still nowhere to be found) Whether or not the *Smash Bros.* hints let any of DiLuigi's followers in on the act, though, the publicity surrounding the *Smash Bros.* rumor helped take the saga in interesting new directions.

The inspector

> "Enjoying a nice slice of my wife's scrumptious pistachio cake with butter cream icing and a cup of tea. A delightful midday snack."

When Canadian math student Jordan Grant heard a new *Smash Bros.* game was being teased by a couple of Twitter accounts, he assumed the leaks were coming from an official Nintendo viral marketing campaign. So when he put together his own Twitter account, he figured he'd used it as a test of sorts for the supposed marketers at Nintendo.

"My plan was to take another person from the Layton universe and start contributing tweets in character," Grant said of the [@SombreInspector account](#), quoted above, which roleplays in-game Layton colleague Inspector Chelmey. "Not only would this be entertaining, it would help me figure out the nature of the Layton experience. If they were an official advertising campaign, I assumed I would receive some sort of notification to cease and desist. If not, then I'd get to join in on the fun."

When he didn't receive any such letter, Grant realized that playing along with the growing Twitter storyline was a great creative outlet. "For a little while now, I had been entertaining the notion of an engaging Twitter narrative. Unfortunately, I could not conceive of a method to properly create enduring characters and environments in 140 characters per tweet. ... However, the Layton experience uses already established characters, which removed that hurdle. Furthermore, the whole riddle dynamic provides a simple framework for the narrative, and allows the audience to actively engage with the story as it unfolds. It was perfect. In fact, I cannot imagine a more suitable story to unfold through Twitter."

Grant said he was impressed with the devotion of the other Layton role-players—with whom he rarely interacted out of character—and relied on them for improvisational cues to inform his role. "Everyone involved has stuck to the mannerisms and motivations of their characters really well," he said. "Our commitment to the characters has helped to ground them in reality. This has created a great atmosphere for audience participation where anyone can join in without feeling absurd. It reminds me of those quaint dinner-theater performances. The audience is vaguely aware that what they are watching is fiction, but they cannot fight the urge to indulge in the fantasy and join in on the fun."

It was another character, though, that would break the performance out of the Twitter theater and into the proverbial streets of the Internet.

The nemesis

> "@TopHatProfessor I've found you, Layton, and I have a puzzle for YOU! See if you can figure out THIS little beauty I dreamed up if you dare!"

While the first three Layton-related Twitter accounts had recreated the game's puzzling riddles and charming atmosphere, they needed a conflict to really drive the narrative along. Enter [Don Paolo](#) (aka @DonofScience), Layton's arch-nemesis who showed up on Twitter July 6 to [challenge Layton](#) with some of the hardest puzzles the story had yet seen.

The man behind the DonofScience Twitter account (who goes by LordHuffnPuff elsewhere online but requested to remain otherwise anonymous) also heard about the TopHatProfessor account through the *Smash Bros.* rumor reports. But unlike Grant, he was no stranger to Twitter-based role-playing. "I had previously tried a character Twitter with SomethingAwful's [PokeTwitter](#) and found it a bit boring," he said. "However, as a puzzle-lover I thought I would give the idea a second chance. I figured the worst that could happen would be that I got bored and moved on to something else, after all."

He decidedly did not get bored. In fact, LordHuffnPuff's efforts gave the evolving story one of its most interesting twists: a coordinated, staged kidnapping of Layton himself. After [announcing that Layton had been captured](#) on the @DonofScience account, HuffnPuff directed his followers to [a puzzle-filled message board](#) appropriately named "Don's Hideout." The rules were simple: Posters had to agree on the solution to a series of incredibly tough riddles within 36 hours. If they did, Layton would be freed and back to regular tweeting. If not ... well, best not to think about it, I suppose.

Surprisingly, the entire kidnapping subplot was almost entirely made up on the spot. "A day or so after I started interacting publicly with [@TopHatProfessor's] account, I got a single private message from him that said 'You've kidnapped me. Go with it,'" LordHuffnPuff recalled. "I had the idea to set up the Don's Hideout Web page, but the entire scenario was pretty much improvised minute-to-minute."

"I was stunned at the reaction of the fans," he continued. "People dedicated some serious time and effort into solving the puzzles I proposed, not many of which were especially simple. There were a few that required some fairly advanced mathematics. ... I was just unaware that there were that many people who'd dedicate such a significant portion of their time, with which they could be doing many more important things, to what is essentially an interactive story or role-play via Twitter."

Indeed, in rapid succession the Don's Hideout forum got hundreds of posts from dozens of individual posters (including yours truly), eager to participate in what they saw as an innovative and fun marketing campaign. "I've always rolled my eyes at most (mis)uses of Twitter by large companies, but in the case of this here Laytonfest, I've been genuinely impressed," said Don's Hideout user mrhaydel in a post. "More companies should do these kinds of things with their fictional characters," added poster Ink Asylum. "I think this is one of the most fun things I've ever had fun with on the Internet," quipped poster Darkstar Runner. "I'm actually at the point where I can't keep believing that it's fictional. It's so realistic."

LordHuffnPuff said that, until these posts started popping up, he had no idea how many people thought he was working for Nintendo. "I thought it was fairly clear [that we were not officially sanctioned]," he said. "If it were official, the forum would have been hosted on a Nintendo Web page, not a Zetaboards free forum. Likewise, the image of Layton I posted would have been on Nintendo's server, not my personal Photobucket."

If they hadn't figured out the real story up to that point, they would learn it soon enough...

The revelation

> "My name is Roger DiLuigi. I am a game journalist and I was proud to bring you all the character[s] of Professor Layton. This was in no way affiliated with Nintendo and while we asked for their permission, we never received a response."

The bombshell admission above, posted to the @TopHatProfessor account in the late hours of July 9 (and later removed), likely came as a shock to most of the over 2,500 followers DiLuigi had amassed up to that point.

The first and most obvious question: Why break the fourth wall? Why, after staying in character for weeks, shatter the illusion for thousands of fans? "I was getting a little nervous since I hadn't gotten a response from Nintendo on whether I was allowed to do this Twitter and, just in case, I wanted to be safe," DiLuigi said. "I decided I had to close the Layton Twitter, and ... I realized that I also had to let everyone know this was never official."

While the reaction on Twitter was mostly positive and appreciative of DiLuigi's efforts, the reaction on gaming message board NeoGAF, where DiLuigi was a devoted member, was more negative. A user turned up the fact that DiLuigi had used NeoGAF to promote the

@TopHatProfessor account without disclosing his role in creating it, which went against the board's rules. As such, the moderators decided to ban DiLuigi from further posting.

"Nothing says more professional than faking a twitter as being some sort of pseudo official thing for Nintendo," wrote NeoGAF user shuri. "You did something stupid and then added layers of stupid on top of it. It was like a stupid cake. And now you're eating it," added user ShockingAlberto. "Why is a 'game journalist' viral marketing for Nintendo for free?" asked user Tiktaalik.

On that last point, DiLuigi defended his actions by arguing there was no real conflict of interest. "While I am the main Nintendo writer for Gaming Vice, I will not be doing the review or any sort of preview for the upcoming *Layton* game," DiLuigi said. "Those will be given to someone else due to the fact that I admittedly have a bias towards the series."

Despite his unorthodox methods, DiLuigi compared the Twitter account to the efforts of any other journalist trying to get more attention for an under-appreciated game in which they believe. "Professional game journalists (i.e. people who do this for a living) do this all the time, to a lesser extent than @TopHatProfessor of course."

As for the response of the posters and moderators on his beloved NeoGAF? "Honestly, those reactions were perfectly justified," he said. "I just wanted people to take note of the game's existence and, as evidenced by the Twitter page, I did my job. ... I was banned from an Internet message board. Life goes on."

The future

For the others taking part in the Twitter storyline, DiLuigi's public unveiling was disappointing but not devastating. "The only thing that bothered me about the reveal was my concern that we would lose the dinner-theater atmosphere," Grant said. "People are now more readily aware that they are reading four people playing five roles. Yet, our audience has continued to surprise me. Old readers have stayed faithful. New readers are joining every day. The level of commitment from the audience is staggering."

LordHuffnPuff agrees that the revelation hasn't destroyed their cause. "When people learned that we were not official (as I never made any effort to hide), I think they actually liked it more, from the responses I've read and posts on the Hideout's forums. I've noticed a fair jump in followers for @DonofScience since then ... the account is over 700 followers now."

And since revealing his identity (and getting an implicit endorsement from Nintendo's Twitter account as "fans who want to spread the word of Layton"), DiLuigi has decided to return to the role he originated at @TopHatProfessor, continuing to post daily puzzles to over 2,600 followers, Don Paolo and Inspector Chelmey among them. As of this writing, DiLuigi is giving @TopHatProfessor a short break from Twitter, but promises "a quick resurgence in the Twittersphere come launch day of *Diabolical Box*."

Wherever the story goes from here, the puzzles in Layton's next Nintendo DS adventure will be hard-pressed to top the drama and intrigue caused by a single fan and a "fun side-project."

Madden in the Mist

(Originally published in Crispy Gamer, Aug. 21, 2009)

Author's Note: There are very few gamers that have equal and comprehensive knowledge of every genre; everyone has their personal preferences and their personal blind spots. But the sports game genre as a whole, while extremely popular, is widely ignored by a vast swath of the video game playing populace. It's the video game industry's version of music's "I like all music except Country."

This piece was my extended, anthropological attempt to bridge the gap between me and this major piece of the gaming landscape. I can't say I've gotten any more interested in *playing* sports video games in the 12 years since I reported this story, but at least I now feel like I understand the people who do play them a little better.

By any measure, the *Madden NFL* series is a bona fide videogame phenomenon. Since its start on the Apple II way back in 1989, the series has consistently been at or near the top of the year-end video game sales charts, generating over $2 billion in cumulative sales for publisher EA Sports. The game is a favorite among sports stars and celebrities, who frequently mention it as a favorite time-waster at home and during long performance tours.

Madden's popularity has spawned the Madden Challenge, a nationwide tournament with thousands of *Madden* players competing in 18 cities for a $50,000 top prize, and "Madden Nation," a reality-television competition entering its fifth season on ESPN2 this fall. The *Madden* curse, an urban myth surrounding the unlucky fate awaiting anyone picked as a *Madden* cover athlete, has become a household term. A 2005 deal with the NFL has turned *Madden* into the only officially licensed version of America's most popular sport.

This is a game that is almost impossible to ignore. And yet, for most of my life, I have successfully ignored it.

It might seem odd for a lifelong gamer and full-time video game journalist to avoid such a large part of the gaming and pop-culture landscape, but it's a lot more common than you might think. Many so-called "hardcore" gamers, in fact, seem to share a barely contained disdain for sports games in general and *Madden* in particular. "I think sports games are viewed as being a bit outside of the hobby," said Crispy Gamer's resident sports expert Bill Abner. "It's one of the

genres that brought in the mainstream player. I think that is why they are looked at a bit differently."

Indeed, disdain for the *Madden* games often bleeds into disdain for *Madden* players themselves, who are often caricatured as dumb jocks that only enjoy simplistic, violent, "mainstream" games. The general stereotype is aptly captured in [a recent VG Cats comic](#) featuring over-the-top, *Madden*-loving fratboys crushing beer cans on their heads and screaming at the top of their lungs about how much they love "FOOTBAAAAAAAALL!"

Some characterize the gap between sports gamers and "hardcore" gamers as simply an extension of the age-old battle between the popular kids and the outcasts. "I think there's this nerd-versus-sporto mentality that's pervasive, and unfortunate," said game journalist and sports-game expert Todd Zuniga. "Like the people who like sports games are going to beat up the RPG lovers, or something." If *Madden* players were on the football team, as the stereotype goes, hardcore gamers were on the chess team.

While I was definitely on the chess-team side of the divide growing up, I spent my springs and summers growing up playing youth soccer and Ultimate Frisbee and semi-organized camp sports. And while I wasn't a hardcore sports fan, my dad did his best to share his love of televised baseball, basketball, and football with me.

But my sports fandom was initially held back by my inability to keep up with the day-to-day movements and statistics for dozens of teams and hundreds of players that so fascinated my dad. Eventually I found I was able to enjoy sports from another perspective—as an extension of my interest in games, and my love for the rules and systems that made for a well-balanced battle between offense and defense. I especially loved the situations at the edges of the rules— the unpredictable, once-in-a-lifetime plays and bloopers where pure athleticism bumped up against the simple guidelines for what was and was not allowed.

The only *Madden* game I've ever played seriously was the 1992 edition, for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System. My dad bought it for me one holiday season, I think as an attempt to bridge his love of sports and my love of video games. But while he quickly got frustrated trying to control the virtual players, I became surprisingly engrossed in the game. Back then, of course, *Madden* was less an accurate football simulation and more a vague approximation of a real football game. The primitive artificial intelligence of the day had some truck-sized holes, which I figured out and exploited to the point that I was shutting out All-Pro teams with nothing but a series of outside halfback sweeps and up-the-middle quarterback sneaks.

Because I felt I had already mastered the single-player game—and because my friends were more likely to discuss an elegant *Magic: The Gathering* combo than an elegant block—I found no need to upgrade with the annualized *Madden* releases. By the time I realized *Madden* was growing into the mega-phenomenon it is today, I had been out of the game for over a decade, left behind by a series that had been slowly evolving into a completely different beast.

When I made a half-hearted attempt to re-engage by picking up a used copy of *Madden 06*, I was completely out of my depth. By that pont *Madden* has become less of a video game and more of a lifestyle. Trying to experience that lifestyle by playing a used copy by myself was like trying to learn about rave culture by installing a strobe light in my basement.

With [Madden NFL 10](#) marking the series' 20th anniversary this week, I felt it was high time to learn a bit more about this lifestyle. I wanted to see for myself what millions of gamers see in this extremely popular series, and find out if it was something I could make myself see, too.

More than that, though, I wanted to investigate what makes sports gamers tick. Are they really the stereotypical, mainstream jocks that some in the gaming community make them out to be? Could non-sports fans appreciate the *Madden* games purely as games, outside of the context of football fandom? Could the gap between nerdy gamer and sports gamer be bridged?

To find out, I was going to need a guide.

Standing outside the Eat'n Park restaurant in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood, waiting to meet the man who is going to reintroduce me to the world of *Madden*, I find myself surprisingly nervous.

At this point my only interaction with Brandon Neufeld, a 20-year-old Penn State business major staying at home in Pittsburgh for the summer, has been his email response to my Craigslist post looking for someone who "has played Madden for years, will be lined up at the store midnight on Aug. 14, and who will be able to explain to me what makes the game so appealing to them." Brandon seemed nice enough in his email, and genuinely excited by the opportunity to share his love for *Madden* in a pre-launch-day interview.

In his email, Brandon said he'd been a serious gamer for years. But the stereotypes had made their mark deep in my mind. Despite my passing knowledge of football, part of me is afraid

Brandon will see me as just another gaming dork, a nerd that isn't equipped with the right experience or mindset to keep up with his love of "FOOTBAAAAAAAAALL!"

It may not look like much of a Madden school...

Luckily, my fears are unfounded. My natural curiosity and Brandon's ability to wax excitedly about *Madden* for hours at a time mesh well. As we chat over burgers, Brandon details what's made Madden so appealing to him since he started playing it with the '97 edition on the original PlayStation.

"Because it's real," he says matter-of-factly. "For example, the statistics, the overall ratings, it's based on how good they are in real life—their speed, their strength, all this stuff is measured by how they performed on the field and how they did on the combine." Brandon goes on to talk up the little realistic touches outside the game itself: the coach calling up to the booth before challenging a play, the "chain gang" coming out to measure the yardage for a close first down, the full complement of seven referees that will be on the field in this year's game (instead of the five that have been in previous editions). "As a fan, this stuff takes it to the next level, because we care about it. It's just a bonus."

As Brandon goes on to detail the many, many ways the series has evolved during my absence, I realize his attention to detail captures a lot of gameplay nuance that a casual fan might not notice. "In previous games, if there was an idle player that didn't blitz, if there was an opening, he wouldn't rush; he'd just strafe," he tells me. "Now they think for themselves. Even if they have their set playbook and are supposed to do certain things, they improvise during the game."

Brandon tells me about previous *Madden* games where quarterbacks would be able to throw perfect passes even while being bumped about by offensive linemen. Now, however, "there

might be an errant pass, he might get sacked, he might fumble the ball ... that's a big offensive lineman getting pushed into you!"

Not all these nods to realism are accepted by the community, though. Take Quarterback Vision Control, a new feature in *Madden 06* that used a cone-shaped area to show where on the field a passer was looking for his open receiver. Brandon was in the minority that actually liked the feature because, he said, it reminded him of his experience as a quarterback on the local Allderdice High School football team.

"Realistically, when you're on the field and there's 90,000 fans and there's already enough pressure and you have a helmet on that blocks your vision, you can't see a guy on the other side of the field. But [in earlier *Madden* games] they'd still throw a perfect pass [even without looking]. A lot of people never played football; they just play the game, so [when they tried QB Vision] they were like 'What is this?' They got the option to turn it off, which was lame."

These constant tweaks to achieve just the right balance of realism and playability are old news to series veterans, of course, but many outside observers continue to dismiss the annual *Madden* releases as simple graphical and roster updates. This dismissiveness irritates Brandon.

"Are [people who diss *Madden*] sports fans or are they video game fans?" he asks rhetorically. "There's actually a lot more to it than a lot of people think. ... People will [say]...'Oh, it's just sports, what's so great about sports?' But realistically, you have to have so much prior knowledge and so much experience. I don't go and say that your game is garbage because I don't like it and I don't play it, and I play a lot of games."

Brandon says he thinks this kind of *Madden*-hatred is driven by people who don't have the skill to play the game well. "It's immaturity, because lo and behold, not only can I beat [the *Madden*-haters] at *Madden*, but I can probably beat him at his game, too."

To hear Brandon tell it, high-level *Madden* play has all the depth of a chess match and all the quick-reflex decision-making of a good fighting game. "When you get to the line, good players have already set the audibles and the hot routes before the game," Brandon says. "A lot of people won't do that; they'd just play, [but] I would pick the same play over and over again ... and every time I came to the line I'd change the play, because you have five other plays you could do [as audibles]. They'd have no idea, and if they ever caught notice I'd pick a different play and change it. Sometimes I would reset back to that play because I did pick it. And then you set hot routes and you fake 'em out—you might set five hot routes before a play and then just run the ball, and they'd be like 'What? But he just sent all these guys everywhere!'"

The importance of these feints and reads becomes apparent when I ask Brandon to discuss his finest *Madden* accomplishment. It was a 17-17 overtime game in a late round of a Madden Challenge tournament and Brandon was coming off an accidental intentional grounding penalty (due to a misinterpreted pump fake) for a third-and-long play from deep in his own territory. He details the sequence of events as if they're happening in slow-motion right in front of him:

"I knew he was double-teaming [receiver Randy] Moss on the play because he called zone [defense] and then he switched to man [defense]. You can tell, sometimes, when they switch to man—on defense you can cheat your linemen up for fake blitzing, you can drop 'em back, you can move 'em over and fake the double team, you can do bump-and-run, or play back on the corner, or you can get right in their face, or you can play cushion. It's really intense; you have to recognize these things while you're changing your play and setting up what you're going to do, while keeping an eye on the play clock so you don't get a penalty. I'm used to it at this point; it's nothing for me...

"So I see him playing his zone, but he audibled to man because both of his guys came right up to Moss, and there's no way [Moss] could have gotten the ball, because he had the double team *and* the safety deep, so I was like 'all right.' He was using the Dolphins; they had a great defense, Sam Madison and Patrick Surtain and all that, whoever else -- Jason Taylor was good, too -- and he had a blitz with the linebackers, so pre-play I decided to put Kelly Campbell in the slot -- you can switch where you want the receivers before the play. All I remember is, I audibled to a running play; he went to man, so I audibled back to a pass. Then I switched Kelly Campbell from going up the sideline to slide in as a slot receiver.

"I snap the ball, he ran an out route. I had other guys going deep; my running back was in a swing for like a screen; he was all by himself, and just as Culpepper gets drilled by Jason Taylor I threw it. And I just remember shaking three guys—he was 'usering' [taking manual control of] everybody on defense and I just juked. Back then you could juke without juking; you could stop, stutter, jump back really quickly because the physics were crazy. I must have, manually, just with the analog stick, just deked three guys. I broke two tackles with a stiff-arm; I must have shaken off five guys and I got this perfect block from Moss, and he just dove and I jumped over him and into the end zone.

"And everybody was watching the game and everybody was screaming like 'Ahhhh!' because I won! There must have been a dozen people watching. I went to the guy and I shook his hand and everything. I was really young ... just a freshman in high school, getting cheered by dozens of spectators..."

Quick, almost unseen strategic maneuvering. Dramatic 80-plus yard passes. Cheering fans. *This* was the *Madden* experience I was looking for!

As I make a mental note to go and check out the Madden Challenge this year, I also begin to despair that I'll never be able to personally experience *Madden* at the level Brandon does. Sure, I can follow the action when I'm *watching* a football game, but I could barely keep up with all the layers of hidden complexity Brandon described in *controlling* just that one play!

For Brandon, the kind of deeply ingrained football knowledge he throws out without a thought just became innate over time. "I played it so much that it just sunk in," he explains. "I grew smarter, I played football, I watched football, I played fantasy football, I watched more football, I went to football games, I learned the mentality of it ... it's just patience, just through playing, basically. It comes naturally the more you play it."

Well, then, I guess I'd better start playing it.

When I drive past the Squirrel Hill GameStop at around 11 p.m. on Aug. 13, an hour before *Madden 10*'s release, there are only three people loitering outside in a makeshift line. When I get to the Waterworks strip mall in Pittsburgh's Fox Chapel neighborhood around 11:15, there are nearly two dozen people lined up and waiting.

Brandon tells me the Fox Chapel location is a regular hangout for Madden fans on release night. He tells me about his history with the *Madden* launch night line, which he's been in every year since 2002. He describes the scene from 2005, the last year of the "PS2 era," when the line swelled with 400 or 500 people, looping past the Joanne Fabrics and turning the corner around the far end of the Wal-Mart. He lays out the disappointing showing in 2007, when "everyone had just transferred to the PS3 and everyone was like, 'Should I wait, should I get it for the PS2?' To each his own... I'm always going to be here."

Ready for Madden.

Brandon introduces me to his friends: Zack Carr, 18, who just got off a double shift working with kids at the zoo and is ready to relax with a new *Madden* game; Alex Demarco, a talkative, spirited 19-year-old who has strong opinions on just about everything; and Martel Brooks, 19, who seems rather reserved and quiet as we wait. The foursome has grown up with Madden together over the years, always waiting for the midnight releases together and refining play strategies with each other over the months to come.

I'm no stranger to midnight GameStop campouts for systems like the Nintendo Wii and PlayStation 3, but there's a different vibe to this one. For one thing, there's a snack table out front with a few dozen personal-sized bags of chips and some sodas. I only see one desperate patron take any snacks, but still, it is there.

For another, it's a slightly more diverse group than the nerdy, early-adopter techie crowd that camps out for a game-system launch. There's a heavyset guy in an Eagles jersey sitting behind us, reading a *Madden 10* guide in preparation and shyly looking up every so often to see if he can cut into the conversation. In front of us, a quartet of pre-teens sit in vinyl travel chairs, chatting about this and that with their heads buried in smartphones. A quintet of kids in colorful hooded sweatshirts hold skateboards against their hips as they wait. Others spill into the empty parking lot and throw a ball around to pass the time. I spot only three women in the line by the time the doors open, two of whom I mentally caricature as somewhat reluctant girlfriends and another that I assume is the world's nicest mom.

And everyone is talking. There was some polite early-morning patter in the lines for the PS3 and Wii launches, but that was nothing compared to the party-like atmosphere here. Everybody seems to be having an animated conversation. "It's all about being the first group of people to get the game," Brandon had explained to me the week before. "Everybody comes out ...

everybody's got their own opinion, everybody's talking the whole time they're there. It's just really intense ... there's nothing to do except talk to everybody."

In the 45 minutes we're waiting, the foursome I'm with talks about a wide range of topics. They talk sports, of course. They discuss Michael Vick's just-announced controversial pick-up by the Philadelphia Eagles (I'm told that's Martel's team, but Martel remains largely silent on the matter). They talk about who will win the AFC championship this year (Zach breaks Pittsburgh orthodoxy by suggesting the Dolphins will "demolish" the Steelers' offensive line). They talk about the Bowl Championship Series and whether or not there's a better way to determine the best team in college football. They talk about the utter boredom they feel watching pro basketball and its cadre of overpaid superstars. They talk about Alex's legendary hatred of Tiger Woods, because the famous golfer apparently said something bad about hockey at one point.

But mainly they talk about *Madden*. Zach, the only one of the group who's played the demo for the new game, starts preparing his friends for the changes facing them this year. You can't control the lead blocker any more, he says, because apparently that was too complicated ("If you graduated high school, you know when to hit circle," Zach says derisively. "It's not physics.") The game has been significantly slowed down from last year and the AI still has its issues. This discussion somehow leads to an epic argument between Zach and Brandon about the QB Vision cone, which still angers Zach despite being long gone from the series. The *NFL Street* and *NFL Blitz* series come up, and the group discusses how those simplified versions of football compare to *Madden*. As Zach and Brandon start arguing over whether the PlayStation 2 or the original Xbox was the better system of the last generation, I can't help but join in the discussion.

When the GameStop doors finally open at midnight, there are 50 or so people in line. Brandon says it's a short line overall, but one of the longest of the "PS3 era." By 12:05, Brandon's group has obtained three copies of the game (Martel, lacking a PS3, will be relying on friends for his *Madden* fix). By 12:07 we're at the Wendy's drive-thru, where half the group grabs some quick protein for the night ahead. By 12:20 we've made it back to Brandon's parents' house, where he's staying for the summer break.

You'd think the rush would be on, at this point, to get straight to the TV and get playing, but that's not exactly how things work out. First we're greeted by Brandon's siblings: Cody, 11, who's a bit aloof, and Kayley, 12, who bounces around like a pinball and repeatedly directs us to the array of chips, dip and sodas that have been laid out in preparation for our arrival. "Where's this *Madden* game?" Kayley asks. When Brandon shows her, she gets even more excited, if that's possible. "Why's the Steelers on it? 'Cause they went to the Super Bowl?" Brandon urges her to be quiet so as not to awaken his sleeping parents. "Jeez... It's one in the morning and people are acting like it's one in the afternoon!"

We head upstairs to Brandon's room to start the festivities, but it seems there's a lack of charged PS3 controllers handy (and no one wants to play tethered to a short USB cord). So while Alex heads down the street to grab his controllers, we head back downstairs to wait by the chips. The Disney channel show Kayley is watching provides an odd backdrop as Zach and Brandon discuss some fantasy football strategy that goes way, way over my head.

When Alex finally returns it's already 12:45, and the group isn't quite ready to actually play. First, they have to go through the stats. I should have been prepared for this—back at the Eat'n Park, Brandon told me "the first thing we do is look at all the teams, check out all the rosters, and we think in our minds—pick like three or five teams that we think are really good." But I'm still not really prepared for the level of obsessive attention they pay to these numbers, which determine the specific strengths and weaknesses of all 1,696 NFL players on a 1 to 100 scale. My eyes are glazing over after five minutes, but the four of them excitedly sort and move through the rankings for 40 whole minutes.

If you can figure out what's going on here, you're probably better at Madden than I am.

I capture it all on video: the pointing, the shuffling, the animated discussions over who got robbed and who got pumped up in the rankings. They look at the starters, but also the depth chart for each team. The Steelers look good, of course, but the Patriots, the Broncos, and the Eagles also have decent lineups that the local players think they can do something with.

By the time Martel's Broncos kick off against Zach's Eagles, it's been nearly an hour and a half since the GameStop doors opened. House rules get discussed soon after: Brandon asks if they should "play hardcore" and always go for it on fourth down. Zach says he usually only does that if it's three yards or less. "Even if it's fourth-and-two at your own 15?" Brandon asks, supposing a situation where not punting the ball away would be exceedingly risky. "I don't care; it's just a game," answers Zach, getting a bit philosophical about virtual competition.

The group establishes a house rule to always go for fourth-down conversions in the fourth quarter, but it's quickly forgotten and ignored for the rest of the night.

What seems like the first score of the night, a 34-yard field goal by Zach's Eagles, is called back on a holding penalty. This will be a common theme for the night, and a common complaint from the players about just how frequently holding seems to get called during field-goal attempts. The worst part, it's agreed, is that there's nothing to be done about it. There's nothing a player can do to prevent a holding call—it's just a random programming fluke, and something they'll have to live with until *Madden 11*, or, hopefully, a downloadable patch.

The actual first score comes when Martel absolutely demolishes Zach's returner as soon as he catches a punt, leading to a fumble and excited screams of "GET IT, GET IT, GET IT" from the spectators. After Martel recovers the ball and walks it in for a touchdown, Zach makes what will be the first of many self-deprecating comments about his special team skills. He's perfectly fine

at both offense and defense, but whenever he has to return a kick or prevent someone else from doing the same, for some reason he just falls apart.

The philosophy of the game comes up again near the end of regulation time, when Brandon starts deriding Martel for some lax clock management. Instead of running the ball up the middle to tick off as much time as possible and secure his lead, Martel simply plays with a normal mix of runs and passes, stopping the clock frequently and giving Zach a chance to get back in it. Martel says he'd feel bad if he won by running safe, unspectacular plays and just watching the clock tick down. Alex argues that he shouldn't be ashamed to win any way he can; "it's all about the W." Zach counters that "it's all about playing the game," and toying with the clock is antithetical to this ideal.

Of course, Zach might be a little biased, because Martel's bad clock management has given him the ball and a last-minute chance to pull out a W of his own. The game comes down to the last play, as I'm told it always does when Martel and Zach play. After working the ball down the field with incredible speed, Zach's hurry-up offense has left his Eagles with two yards to the end zone and two seconds left on the clock. He could kick an easy field goal to send it into overtime, but Brandon goads him into going for the touchdown: "One final play, you win or you lose."

Stare at this screen for 40 minutes. You now have some idea of my midnight Madden experience.

Zach hikes the ball and gives it to Westbrook for a quick inside run. He struggles through the pile for a few feet, then gets lost in the scrum. It's close. The on-screen referees confer at the goal line ... he didn't make it! "No!" Zach screams as he throws his controller down in frustration. The room explodes into exclamations of incredulity that it could come down to something like that. The replay confirms it ... the ball didn't break the plane of the end zone. Everyone celebrates over a great game to kick off the new *Madden* title.

With the first game done, Brandon and Zach get into another argument about the effect of this year's changes. "It's a more running-oriented game," Zach says. "You can't just have shootouts;

you need to run the ball a little bit." Brandon adds that this is "more realistic," obviously appreciative of this nod to offensive balance.

"This is definitely the most realistic *Madden*," says Zach. "I'm not saying that's a good thing." Zach complains that the new realism has slowed the game down, making it too sluggish. Brandon says the new pace "gives you time to think." Zach says he doesn't want time to think!

In general, whether the changes are good or bad, they both agree that they'll get used to them. "We're rusty now, but by the end of the night we'll be scoring five touchdowns easy," Brandon says. And Zach, despite his frustrations with the new timing, insists that you can "give me a weekend and I'll be good."

After finishing out an offensive slugfest with Martel for the night's second game, Alex says he's crashing and decides to head home to bed around 3:30 a.m. At some point, the remaining players ask me what I think of the game. I say it's interesting, but I admit I'm having trouble understanding what exactly the players are doing just from watching. It's at this point they insist I actually play a game with one of them to get a feel for modern *Madden*.

After the displays of football prowess I've just witnessed, I'm pretty down on my chances here, but Brandon tells me I've "got to have a mindset [that] you're going to win." I get to play as the superior Patriots while Zach gets the merely decent Packers. "This could be ugly, or you might find it easy," Brandon says, hedging his encouragement a bit.

Before we get going, Zach and Brandon give me a crash course on how to play. I just ask for "the basics," but the pair immediately launch into a detailed discussion of some of the game's finer control points. Some stuff I remember from my long-fallow Madden experience, like diving tackles and using buttons to identify receivers and dashing with the R2 button. But then they're telling me about how to call hot routes and pump fakes, and juking, and the truck stick (for massive hits), and stiff-arms, and spinning ("Think of a circle button like spinning a circle," Brandon says) and jumping ("Triangle is jump; think of it as coming to a point, like going up"). I nod and give noncommittal grunts of understanding, but I think they can tell I'm a bit overwhelmed. "Maybe it's just better if you just play," Brandon says at one point.

Maybe it's not. My very first play is a high, arcing pass that almost gets picked off by three separate defenders. Apparently I didn't press the pass button hard enough, meaning the pass sailed high instead of traveling laser-straight to the receiver. So, apparently, not only do I have

to pay attention to what button I press, but *how hard* I press it as well. Given the 50 million other unfamiliar things I'm trying to pay attention to, I am definitely in over my head.

While the rest of the room seems to have every team's playbook memorized, and know immediately exactly what each situation calls for, I find myself taking the full 30 seconds to sift through and look for the right play to call. On passes, no matter how open the guy seems when I throw it, he's always deep in coverage by the time the ball gets there, leading to a host of interceptions. My running game is consistently stopped at or near the line of scrimmage, no matter how much I jam on the spin and jump buttons (I've completely forgotten about stiff-arms and juking by this point). I can get off relatively safe screen passes, but they don't earn many yards. Even when I string together a few decent plays and get decent field position, I'm a bundle of nerves and shank my field-goal attempt wide right.

My defense is even worse somehow. I'm told I'm calling decent formations in reaction to the situation on the field, which is nice to hear, but not enough to stop Zach from running freely wherever he wants. It seems that whichever player I've taken control of on any play is the one that's somehow out of position and leaving an open man for a big pass.

When I try to make the kind of diving tackles I'm used to from playing *NFL Blitz*, they end up as slow, awkward flops that leave the player flat on his face. I feel like my dad must have felt years ago, fumbling with the controller in *Madden 92*, wondering if he wouldn't be better off just letting the computer take control of things. It's like playing chess against a grandmaster—I can understand the moves after the fact, but he can see them coming a mile away.

I do get pretty good at punting, though, putting up some good height and distance on each kick. So that's one bright spot.

I eventually score on a fluke fumble and runback at the end of the game, but the final score of 38-7 tells the tale. The group asks me what I think of *Madden*, and I'm forced to admit that it's a bit too much for me at this point. I have trouble keeping track of the position of all three or four downfield receivers while also watching out for my quarterback—just tracking *one* receiver is almost too much. Brandon commiserates, and says it just takes practice and instinct to figure it out. Martel tells me the only way to get good is endless practice against the hardest, "All-Madden" computer opponents. He should know: He tells me he's played through the 30-year franchise mode four complete times, completing nearly 500 distinct games against the computer.

FIVE. HUNDRED. GAMES. That's a lot of practice!

Of course, it doesn't feel like practice if you love what you're doing. But while I can enjoy the game-like parts of football—the set of rules, the balance between offense and defense—I don't think I'll ever be able to muster up the passion for the game that leads Brandon and his friends, and millions of other *Madden* players, to buy an update year after year. I'll never pore over the stats of all the players for 40 minutes at a time. I'll never bother to set five audibles so that I can react to whatever sort of defense my opponent throws out there. I'll never have enough love of football to guide my team through 120 years of cumulative virtual play just to see what would happen if I was the coach. I'm afraid that kind of all-consuming passion has to develop when you're young, and it might be too late for me already.

Of course, maybe that deep commitment isn't completely necessary to enjoy the game. Maybe I've been diving into the deep end before even learning how to doggie-paddle. Maybe if I slowed down and truly took the time and energy to learn about football from the ground up, I'd become as engrossed with the sport as most *Madden* fans already are.

Based on my one night with *Madden*, though, I don't think that's the case. For me, trying to get into *Madden* would be like trying to learn Swahili just so I can read a translation of "The Cat in the Hat"—why bother, when I can get essentially the same enjoyment from more familiar games without nearly as much work? Even for casual football fans like me, the *Madden* franchise seems to have grown into something too complex and bloated to just casually wade into. At this point, it's a simulation so full of statistics and strategies that you need the mind of an NFL coach just to appreciate it. If you haven't already been playing *Madden* for years, it's not going to get any easier to start now.

The same thing that happens in other gaming genres, of course. From fighting games and shoot-'em-ups to dancing games and real-time strategy, I've seen plenty of series start simple and get slowly more complex, and more focused on pleasing existing fans, until they reach a point where it can be hard for a casual interloper to catch up.

Just because non-sports gamers have been left behind by the advance of *Madden*, that doesn't mean there's nothing to it. What's become apparent, in staying up until 7 a.m. doing nothing but watching and playing *Madden 10*, is that this series has much more strategy and depth than most non-players give it credit for. After sharing a launch night with these serious sports gamers, it's apparent that they have the same obsessive attention to detail, and the same passionate love for competition, that all gamers do.

What's become apparent is that sports games and other games are two parallel paths. There may be a wide, impassable gulf between those two paths, but in the end, they both point in the same direction.

Pinball Wizards: A Visual Tour of the Pinball World Championships

(Originally published in Crispy Gamer, Aug. 26, 2009)

Author's Note: I made it back to the PAPA Pinball World Championships one more time after this piece ran, and saw a lot of the same faces you see in these photos. Keith Elwin, who won his second PAPA championship at the 2009 tournament discussed here, has since gone on to win three more times in 11 years. Tournament organizer Dave Baach now makes a living creating custom tables as part of Tilt Warning Customs. And Joshua Henderson, 11 years old when he was featured in this piece, went on to win PAPA's B Division in 2010 and the Juniors Division in 2012.

Pinball never became a breakout televised hit like poker, but a few determined livestreamers are keeping the hobby alive with explanatory streams and new camera rigs that show the playfield from multiple exciting angles. That includes tutorials and event coverage that you can find on [PAPA's own YouTube channel](.).

Take the 376 West through Pittsburgh, then go down 279 South five miles or so, out to the sleepy suburb of Carnegie, Penn. Cruise down the four-lane Main Street, past the abandoned used car lot and the Wheel and Wedge sandwich shop ("Foot-long sub special: $3.99 + tax"). Hang a left across the Hammond Street Bridge to the industrial park on the other side of Chartiers Creek.

For 360 days out of the year, the big white building next to the Clark-Fishman Flooring Solutions warehouse looks like just another underused industrial property. But for four days in August (and a one-night charity event in February), the warehouse opens its doors to reveal over 30,000 square feet containing 400 immaculately maintained pinball machines and classic arcade games. Welcome to the annual World Pinball Championships, put on for the 12th time in 2009 by the Professional & Amateur Pinball Association (PAPA).

It's a sign of pinball's recent tough times that the game's premier tournament has to take place in such a remote and seemingly inauspicious setting. But it's hard to feel gloomy about pinball's fate standing inside the sprawling PAPA headquarters, listening to hundreds of pristine, playable pinball tables dating back to the '40s fill the air with their clanging. There's a nervous energy as hundreds of attendees mill about the wide aisles, feed tokens into random machines, gently jostle cabinets to avoid gutters, talk strategy with old friends, or simply look on respectfully as the best of the best show off their skills.

For the 2,000 fans and nearly 400 competitors that will stream through the doors over these four August days, this obscure warehouse is the center of a vibrant, competitive pinball subculture that is far from dead. This is the story of just some of those people.

Plainfield, Ill., petroleum engineer Mark Henderson, 48, leans over a "24" table with his 11-year-old son, Joshua, during a split-flipper mini-tournament, where one player controls the left flipper and another controls the right.

Despite his relatively small age and stature, Josh is currently ranked 111th out of the thousands of players tracked by the World Pinball Player Rankings. While most kids would probably be thrilled to be that good at something, Josh's goal is to work his way into the top 100 by age 13.

To that end, Josh travels with his dad to 10 tournaments a year, from Maine to California, trying to qualify for a spot in the top division finals and a chance to compete directly with the pinball legends ranked ahead of him. "The schedule and stress can be hard for an 11-year-old," Mark says, "but I don't push him. He's just driven."

Mark says his son faces unique challenges in competitive pinball because he has "different sensory perception" and lacks the "upper body strength to move the machine around" to affect the movement of the ball, a crucial skill at this level of play. But he hasn't let these problems stop him, Mark says. "He really does have the skills ... every time he plays he builds his skill set. People don't understand the concentration involved [in pro-level pinball]. It only takes a split-second to lose a ball."

But Mark says Josh also has an advantage because some opponents "write him off as a little kid." In fact, Mark says, some competitors have thrown tantrums after losing to Josh. "For a 30-

or 40-year-old guy, it can be emotionally difficult to lose to a kid," Mark said. But more often these days, Mark said, most people see him coming. "They say 'The kid's gonna be trouble,'" he said.

Molly Atkinson shows off the muscles that she says let her "compete with the big boys" at pinball's premier competitive showcase. "I think part of the reason I do OK is that I'm not afraid to get physical with the machine," she said.

A 30-year-old costumer and tailor from Los Angeles, Atkinson said she was instantly attracted to pinball at a young age when her neighbors forbid her to play their machine for fear she would break it. When she actually got to play pinball for the first time in her early teens, she found the constantly moving silver ball matched her nature.

"I'm the kind of person that's very emotional, very stressy, always bouncing around," Atkinson said. "I have a super-frenetic lifestyle ... but it calms me right down when I get up there. I have to focus, I have to snap into it, I have to let all my craziness go, but I still get my bells and whistles; I get the lights flashing, so that keeps me going."

After playing casually for years, Atkinson said she got into competitive pinball when she heard about a nearby tournament while attending a wedding reception in Las Vegas a couple of years ago. "I walked in there and my eyes almost fell out of my head just to see all the people who actually love it ... for a long time I thought I was the only one." There, she paired up with a stranger, a woman who came over from a roller-derby convention next door, and won her first trophy in a split-flipper tournament.

Since then, Atkinson has taken to the pinball scene in a big way, attending eight to 10 tournaments a year and obtaining five pinball machines that have crowded out the tables and

sofa in her small Los Angeles apartment. She's helped in her obsession by Keith Elwin, now a two-time PAPA World Champion, who comes in from nearby Carlsbad to coach Atkinson on her game. "You'd think after a decade or so of playing I would have figured out all the tricks, Atkinson said. "But every time I play with him I learn something new, and every time I leave his house after playing for a couple of hours, I'm significantly improved."

Despite finishing 32nd in the lower C Division at this year's tournament, Atkinson said she was still the unofficial "female champ" for the event—not an incredible feat given the general scarcity of women at the event. Still, she's glad PAPA doesn't split the few women off into their own division. "[Having a women's division] is a good way for me to win," Atkinson said, "but I want to be on an even playing field with everyone. The thing I like about pinball is that everyone is in on the same level. The guys here don't really treat me like a girl. It just doesn't matter what you look like, it doesn't matter how much money you have, it doesn't matter what you're wearing. None of that matters; it's all about your love for the game, and I don't know of any other arena where that's the case."

Adam Lefkoff, 42, takes a picture of the "Fish Tales" score that will help earn him a trip to the semifinal round of the mid-level B Division tournament. Lefkoff caught the pinball bug early, when he was five years old, in the midst of what he calls "the age before arcades. ... I went to a guy's house once when I was little and I still remember he had three machines. I was like, 'Oh my god, you have pinball machines in your house? I want pinball machines in my house when I grow up.' [Eventually] I bought one, then I bought three, and the next thing I know..." Today Lefkoff houses 19 machines in his basement, a collection he estimates is worth $100,000. Since joining the competitive scene five years ago, Lefkoff and his fellow Boulder, Colo., league players have traveled as far as London, Dallas, and California to attend tournaments. Despite the competition, though, he calls PAPA "the absolute mecca of pinball ... it's the best facility in the world, the best machines in the world." Lefkoff also appreciates PAPA for its unique qualification system, which averages out scores from qualifying attempts and makes it impossible to "buy your way in," in effect. "It rewards consistency, and that's the hardest thing to do in pinball," he said.

Lefkoff compared pinball to poker, where the results are seemingly driven by luck but it actually takes a lot of specialized knowledge to do well. "The more skill you have, the more consistent you are," he said. "It seems like there's a lot of randomness [in pinball] until you watch the pros. They cut down on the randomness. The same guys win every year, the same guys qualify every year. It's not luck."

Despite his appreciation for pinball skill, Lefkoff seemed willing to leave his fate in the tournament to more supernatural forces as he waited to hear the final results of his quarterfinal match. "If the pinball gods feel that I am not worthy to move forward to the next round because I missed three opportunities to win games ... it's not in my hands," he said.

Justin Bath, 34, poses next to one of his favorite pinball games. An electronic technician from Baltimore, Md., Bath has been playing competitive pinball going on 15 years, ever since he got effectively "scouted" by a competitive player in College Park, Md. "I was playing in a mall one day, just racking up the usual replays," Bath said, "when a guy comes up to me and he says, 'That's a pretty good game there. Not bad, sir. You know, we're having a pinball league...'"

Bath stuck with competitive pinball, he said, partly because the competition always remains friendly. "It's a great community," he says. "Even the best guys—like this guy Bowen [Kerins]— even the best guys are humble enough to give you a hand and answer questions about a game. Even in a tournament, you want to see other people do good."

In fact, Bath got a chance to show off pinball's spirit of camaraderie during the tournament, when Adam Lefkoff accidentally launched Bath's ball during a semifinal match in the B Division. Lefkoff quickly realized his mistake and handed the game off to Bath, who, according to the rules, had the option to force Lefkoff to take a score of zero for the game. "Ultimately, they said it's up to you, to give the guy a zero or let him go and play again," Bath said. "I was fine with [letting him play], and I'd do that again if I had to. I got no problem with that. ... There's gonna be

some people that would have done the same, and some people that wouldn't have, but overall it's a great community."

Unlike most other players I talked to, Bath said he actually likes traditional video games, playing racing games and *Call of Duty* regularly on his Xbox 360. While the general perception is that these games helped kill pinball, Bath thinks casual pinball players who come to a tournament would be surprised at the vibrancy of the scene. "It never really died," he said. "It'll keep going. We'll never let it die."

Tournament Organizer Dave Baach (left) preaches the gospel of pinball to a fellow player. When he's not delivering vegetables part-time, Baach acts as PAPA's only paid full-time employee, fixing and maintaining the collection of 400 machines throughout the year. "The philosophy is a game a day," Baach says of the repair schedule.

Baach found out about PAPA when he was recruited to help clean up its original location after it was decimated by a flood in the summer of 2004. "I was like ... how did I not know this place existed?" Baach said. "I'm just a young 20-something guy playing in the back of [Pittsburgh coffee shop and pinball hangout] The Beehive, [and] once I found out this place existed, I thought that everybody in the world needed to know about it. So I go about telling them."

Baach is effusive about the power of pinball, and can get rather intense when talking about the game. "I get sick of the games that people play, but I still have the urge to play games," Baach said. "But I'm fucking done with people. Pinball is a socially acceptable way to walk into a room full of folks and just turn my back on everyone. And I have a game to play, art to look at; it's a

full-on interactive experience. ... It's the grandfather clock of the arcade, the first machine that kept score for you."

For Baach, the appeal of pinball is a bit zen. "[These competitive pinball players] have all fallen in love with something outside of themselves that isn't human," he said. "They have absorbed themselves in a world that we share, but we don't have to talk about. Action is the conversation ... just go play."

The physicality of the tables is also a big part of the appeal for Baach. "When you're holding a PS3 controller in your hand, and it shakes, it's like 'Ooh, that's what it'd feel like if it was really real.' But pinball's really real! It's a physical game."

With PAPA attracting its biggest crowd ever this year, I asked Baach if competitive pinball is set for a resurgence. "It doesn't need to explode," he says. "I think more people just need to grab onto it, because it's solid. ... It's going to stay solid and stay true and people are going to come to it. A pinball machine, it doesn't go anywhere ... it has legs but it doesn't walk. You have to go to it. It doesn't go to Wal-Mart and find a way to your house. You have to go to a bar or go to an arcade and seek it out. The Internet, everything ... you don't have to leave your room, and, like, fuck, it's too convenient, you know? Pinball is a reason to go out. It's a reason to go find a game to play. It's something to do."

PAPA President Kevin Martin tinkers with a Taxi machine that was randomly tilting during the Division A finals.

The owner of Web hosting company pair Networks, Martin gives about 30 of his employees comp time to help run the four-day tournament each year. "It wouldn't exist if we weren't crazy enough to put the work in," he said. While the tournament pays for itself, Martin says he sinks thousands of dollars into maintaining the PAPA location throughout the year, as a way to share his love of the game. "When we get people here, they're turned on to it, and that's the key," he said.

While Martin says he'd love to be able to keep the PAPA warehouse open to the public year-round, he doubts the remote Carnegie, Penn. location would bring in enough regular players to make up the costs of running the facility. Martin says it would take heavily increased exposure, likely through poker-style television coverage, to make pinball popular enough to sustain a location like PAPA year-round.

"The biggest challenge [with televised pinball] is, the rules are hard to understand," he said. "People can understand basically, yeah, you have to keep the ball in play, hit the targets; but the deeper strategy, they just won't get it. Maybe it can be one of those weird sports on ESPN3 or something, but I don't know..."

Still Martin is working hard to put the facility to good use by shopping it around as an event location for local corporations and charities. But while Martin said he's heartened by the continued success of competitive pinball events like PAPA, he thinks the game might be on the way out with the general public. "Video games dealt a strong blow in the '80s ... and now there's competition from video games, satellite TV, Tivo and the Internet... In another generation, what's going to happen? I don't know if it'll ever recover."

Two-time PAPA Champion Keith Elwin (right) receives a check for $10,000 from PAPA President Kevin Martin. A graphic designer for a pinball operator in Carlsbad, Calif., Elwin has been playing pinball competitively since the early '90s, when he heard about a tournament in Arizona on the nascent Internet. "In 1993 I went out there... I didn't win but I did pretty well. Following year I went out there and I won, and here we are now...."

Elwin says it takes some special skills to succeed at pinball. "You really need a deep knowledge of every game," he said. "You've got to get used to standing on your feet for four days straight... During the finals I was sitting down probably the first time all weekend. You have to learn the skills, nudging, shaking. I think that's what really separates the novice player who just kind of stands there from [a pro who's] really into it, ready to shake it."

While Elwin laments the dropoff in pinball's relative popularity in arcades, he thinks the market is growing for home use. "It's kind of hard for someone just getting into [pinball] to get good, because it's hard to find. But if they want to invest the money in a cheap machine and build their way up, they could get good real fast."

Elwin said he wasn't particularly surprised by the record turnout for this year's tournament, saying that competitive pinball will only get more popular as more people find out about it. "Plenty of people have been playing [pinball] for years and they just didn't know about [tournaments]," he said. "And now they go online, they see them, and they say 'I can do that.'"

A Zombie of a Chance: Looking Back at the *Left 4 Dead 2* Boycott

(Originally published in Crispy Gamer, Nov. 19, 2009)

Author's Note: In the 12 years since this was written, we've seen many additional examples of organized fan communities trying to bring change in the game industry. The most famous example might be the outcr around the conclusion of *Mass Effect 3*, where the developers actually release a downloadable patch changing the conclusion of a franchise-sweeping narrative to placate vocal fans.

In the social media era, de facto mobs can form around a common interest incredibly quickly and easily. Major game companies now have whole teams devoted to dealing with the potential fallout that can come with that. Placating a group of fans by inviting a couple of "leaders" to a tour of the development campus seems almost quaint in comparison to the rapid-response damage control a modern video game social media team has to go through regularly…

In general, gamers aren't very effective at organizing to effect change in the game industry. Sure, there are hundreds of online petitions demanding everything from [a *Full House* game](#) to a generalized [end to game hacking](#), but the vast majority fail to garner much attention or support. Even well-organized and well-publicized efforts, like those seeking [LAN support in *StarCraft 2*](#) or [further support for the Earthbound games](#) are met with official responses ranging from [polite refusal](#) to [teasing hints](#), and rarely with real change.

But this year, many gamers took a different tack to protest what they saw as a betrayal of a publisher's past promises. Mere hours after Valve announced the planned November release of *Left 4 Dead 2* (*L4D2*) at June's Electronic Entertainment Expo, a group calling for an [*L4D2* boycott](#) popped up on Valve's Steam user community. The group's [first public message](#) asked a simple question that would come to define its cause: "Where's all the content and the updates you promised for [the original *Left 4 Dead*], Valve?"

The somewhat impolitic logo for the boycott group.

By casting their disagreement in the form of a boycott, the tens of thousands of gamers that joined the *L4D2* boycott group immediately set themselves apart from the Internet petitioners that came before them. A petition is just a polite request for someone to change their mind, if they would, please. A boycott is a statement of collective action—a way for a group to flex its economic power to *force* change. It's a way for a community to effectively put its money where its mouth is and demand that its case be heard. It's a cause that brings up images of patriotic movements, civil rights struggles, international incidents and other events more momentous than an argument over the release timing for a video game sequel.

Now that *Left 4 Dead 2* is actually available for sale, can those that took part in the boycott argue they achieved their goals? Was this boycott more effective than any of the other failed grassroots petition efforts undertaken by gamers over the years? Did Valve change its plans to gain the approval of the masses, or did it effectively pacify the Internet throngs with nothing more than a couple of plane tickets and a hotel reservation?

In other words, was the boycott successful?

Well, it depends on what you mean by "successful."

An explosive start

From the start, the *Left 4 Dead 2* boycott effort succeeded at attracting a lot of attention, at least. Thanks to mostly bemused coverage from gaming websites during the high-traffic E3 news window, 5,000 Steam users signed up for the group in its first three days of existence. "We gave interviews to just about anybody that asked," said Walking_Target, the pseudonymous founder of the *L4D2* boycott group, in a recent interview with Crispy Gamer. "[We] responded to questions from our members and benefited from a lot of press exposure,

even if a lot of it was negative. In the end, it was so successful [at attracting members], because this was a group made mostly of Valve fans who just wanted to let Valve know that they expected more for *L4D*."

But getting people to click a button and sign up for an Internet protest group is simple. Getting them to actually organize for effective action is the tough part. Luckily for the group, Walking_Target seemingly realized this early on in the process. "To simply talk about the release of *L4D2* and the issues we have with it are not enough," he wrote in a [June 4 message](#) to the group. "It is only half the battle. A storm of words without action is no more potent in its ability to move our cause forward or make our goals happen. It is time we took some action as a community."

But first they had to figure out what those goals were. So, after a quick poll to gauge the group's ["official concerns,"](#) the boycotters put together a [325-word manifesto](#) that laid out their commitments, beliefs, and requests for Valve. Crucially, the manifesto started off by recognizing Valve's need to make money off its games, and acknowledged that "judgment cannot be passed on the quality of *Left 4 Dead 2* until its release."

But those concessions didn't dampen the impact of the group's demands: "That Valve honor its commitment to release ongoing periodic content for *Left 4 Dead*;" that "*Left 4 Dead 2* not be released as a stand-alone, full-priced sequel but as either a free update to *Left 4 Dead* or an expansion with full compatibility with basic *Left 4 Dead* owners;" and "that *Left 4 Dead* owners be given discounts for *Left 4 Dead 2*, should it be released as premium content."

While the requested changes to the price and format of the sequel were important, it was the idea that Valve was somehow abandoning the original *Left 4 Dead* that animated the most passion in the boycotters. "*Left 4 Dead* has not yet received the support and content which Valve has repeatedly stated will be delivered," the manifesto argued.
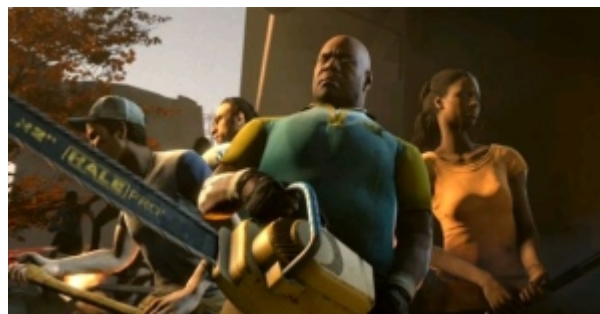
A scene from the trailer that led to the boycott.

It was an argument that had some justification behind it. In an [October 2008 interview with VideoGamer.com](#) before the original game's release, Valve Co-Founder and Managing Director Gabe Newell compared *Left 4 Dead* to Valve's own *Team Fortress 2* (*TF2*), a multiplayer staple that has received frequent free updates since its late-2007 release. Newell said that these updates had proved key to the continued success of *TF2*'s online community, and that *Left 4 Dead* would receive the same kind of continued attention. "We'll do the same thing with *Left 4 Dead* where we'll have the initial release and then we'll release more movies, more characters, more weapons, unlockables, achievements, because that's the way you continue to grow a community over time," he said.

When Valve announced *Left 4 Dead 2* in early June, this was beginning to look like a bit of an empty promise. By that point, the company had only released a collection of small tweaks and new modes as a *Left 4 Dead* "Survival Pack" and had provided a beta version of a Software Development Kit for eager modders. These tepid additions didn't come close to matching the robust updates being provided for a game like *Team Fortress 2*.

The depth of Valve's support for *TF2* may have actually set a precedent that's come back to bite Valve during the slow rollout of new *Left 4 Dead* content."I do think that a bit of the issue falls on Valve for training us for such good free content," said Brent Copeland, host of The Safe House, a *Left 4 Dead*-focused podcast. "I almost think if *L4D* came from a different company that there wouldn't be as big of an issue."

Walking_Target agreed that Valve's handling of *TF2* led people to think of it as a different kind of company. "It made a reputation for Valve as a company that supports their games. It was probably a bad idea to compare support for *L4D* to *TF2* so early on, though."

Fair or not, Walking_Target and his growing group expected Valve to live up to its reputation for supporting existing games, rather than quickly abandoning them for sequels. What's more, they wanted to give Valve a chance to explain itself. In another split from the petitioners that came before them, the *L4D2* boycotters worked hard to start a conversation with Valve—a company that they still respected for creating the first *Left 4 Dead*—rather than simply shouting their demands into the Internet ether.

The group sent its manifesto as an open letter to the company, and followed it up with further requests for information and dialogue as the boycott went on. "It's never been 'us versus them,'" Walking_Target recalled later. "People took the wrong view of it. We've been talking with Valve since the first few weeks of the boycott, because in the end, the only way to get anywhere is to work with the people who you have an issue with. Whining at them gets you nowhere."

Valve's first public response to the controversy came in a [statement to Kotaku](#) on June 10, nine days after the group's creation. At that point, the group had already swelled to include nearly 25,000 members. In the statement, Newell tried to allay the growing group's fears by arguing that nothing had really changed. "Doing a sequel in one year is new for Valve," Newell admitted, but "providing ongoing support for our titles after the initial launch ... has been part of our philosophy since *Half-Life* was released ten and half years ago," he wrote. "We see no reason to change that and will continue to support the over three million customers in the *L4D* community. Some in the community are concerned that the announcement of *L4D2* implied a change in our plans for *L4D1*. We aren't changing our plans for *L4D1*."

But the boycotters weren't satisfied with what they saw as a vague assertion of support. Less than 10 hours later, a [posting](#) by boycott group co-moderator Agent of Chaos answered Newell with a polite demand for more concrete information.

"While we are excited about the idea of new content, we are still in the dark about it," he wrote. "What sort of content is it? For all we know, it could be a new main menu screen. Is it a new map, is it new monsters, is it new weapons, etc...? We'd like to know what is going to be in this new content. Furthermore, when will this content be released? Is there any sort of timetable within which the content will be made available? These are all questions we would like Valve to elaborate on."

Looking back on that moment now, on the eve of *Left 4 Dead 2*'s release, Walking_Target theorized that Valve could have nipped the entire boycott movement in the bud at this point, simply by providing those requested details. "If Valve had simply talked to people more about what kind of plans they had [for *L4D* support] and approximately when it could be expected, the boycott would never have gotten off the ground," he said.

But when Valve actually did announce more new content for *L4D*, over two months later, the boycott's leaders were not mollified.

Crash Course crashes the party

The announcement of *Left 4 Dead*'s *Crash Course* downloadable content (DLC) pack on Aug. 4 addressed many of the boycotters' requests for details about continued support for the original game. The DLC, set for a September release, promised "new locations, new dialogue from the original cast, and an explosive finale," as well as balancing tweaks for the game's competitive Versus mode. While the content was likely in the works before the boycott started, the August

announcement was exactly the kind of concrete information the boycotters said they were looking for.
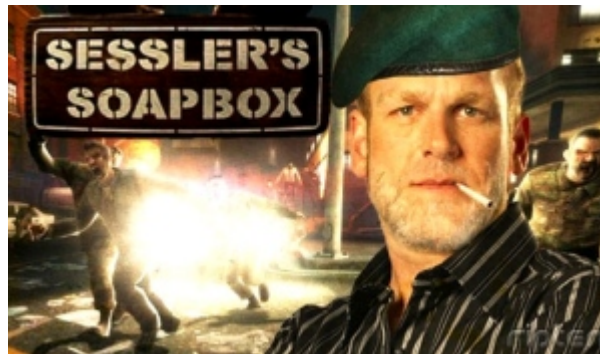
G4's Adam Sessler was not one of the boycott's biggest supporters, to say the least.

But it wasn't enough for some. While Agent of Chaos did acknowledge the announcement of a new campaign as "a good thing," he went on to argue that they deserved more. "Only two chapters?" he wrote. "Come on now. Are your employees on vacation? Is that good enough for our eight months of patience? I'm sorry, but it's a really bad attempt to get away with your past promises. ... How about something valuable that can extend *L4D*'s replay value in a broader way? New special infected, and weapons? 4v4 matchmaking? Bug fixes? Personally, I'd take any of the aforesaid over two new chapters any day." He even joked that, in this case, DLC actually seemed to stand for "delayed lackluster content."

While many rank-and-file boycotters wrote comments echoing Agent of Chaos' anger, the *Crash Course* details seemed to take some of the wind out of some boycotters' sails. "After the announcement the number of new members dropped off sharply," Walking_Target admitted later.

The boycott's comment threads after the announcement help show why. "[I] think we should *maybe* give Valve a little bit of breathing space and actually indicate that this is a very big step towards the kind of support for *L4D* that we have been looking for," commenter [UCF] TerranUp16 wrote. "Really, if you maintain this kind of ambivalence, if Valve has already [sic] not just said 'FU' they surely will," he added. "I don't think this is a very good thank-you," commenter Crunchie wrote. "Valve [has] listened to us and [is] clearly trying to please us. Be thankful that they even bothered at all. ... If we really want to get the message across, you must stop being so arrogant," they continued. Commenter Kabolte put it more succinctly: "I've lost respect for this group. See you guys."

But the official announcements from Walking_Target and Agent of Chaos kept up their indignant, occasionally conspiracy-laced tone. "By not adding anything in the way of meaningful content [to *L4D*], they still hope to interest us in buying *L4D2*," Agent of Chaos wrote in one

post. The group had gotten a bit bolder with its demands by this point, asking for limited access to the *L4D2* demo shown to press at E3. "In fact, the only reason I could see not to give certain members of the community access [to the *L4D2* demo], is that *L4D2* is *not* that different [from] *L4D*," Walking_Target wrote.

At this time, Walking_Target was also growing somewhat suspicious and tired of the increasingly negative coverage his boycott was receiving in the wider gaming media. The tone of this coverage was perhaps best exemplified by G4's Adam Sessler, who, in June, posted a scathing video where he argued the boycotters were being "kind of juvenile" and that their actions reflected "this amazing sense of entitlement that exists in the gaming community." Walking_Target saw these reactions as a sign that the media was in Valve's pocket. "Main stream [sic] gaming media won't run an intellegent [sic] piece on us because they are scared of losing money; all we get is a knee-jerk reaction to avoid angering their main source of income," he wrote.

Through their statements, the boycott leaders were building up their reputations as hard-to-please, outside-the-mainstream firebrands. The us-versus-the-world rhetoric arguably animated more members than it turned off, and the supportive comments and members continued to flood in. When the group's membership swelled to a high of over 40,000 members in early August, the boycotters were probably at the peak of their righteous fury. They saw themselves as angry outsiders beating on the metaphorical castle walls, and they wouldn't be happy until they were let inside.

So it came as a bit of a shock when Valve opened the doors and, literally, let them inside.

"The Trip" and the beginning of the end

On Aug. 14, Walking_Target hinted to boycott members that "there may be something else coming up in the near future, but we can't discuss that right now because the details are vauge [sic]." By Sept. 5, they were teasing that their "big announcement" had to be delayed by a few days. But on Sept. 8, the boycott leaders could finally reveal what they'd been working on. As Walking_Target memorably put it, "Valve took the course of Facta Non Verba [deeds, not words] in dealing with myself and Agent of Chaos. Rather than trying to explain everything via email, they invited us out to their offices in Bellevue, Washington."

Boycott leaders Walking_Target and Agent of Chaos with Valve Co-Founder and CEO Gabe Newell (center).

It was an unprecedented move for Valve, or for any game publisher dealing with an Internet protest. Absent overwhelming numbers (or wider support and pressure from the media), the safest thing a company can do in handling any sort of protest group is to politely ignore it. To do anything else risks giving the protesters the attention and appearance of influence they crave.

Even at 40,000 members strong, Valve probably could have followed the standard playbook and ignored the boycotters' concerns without much consequence for the bottom-line sales of their sequel. Instead, it threw open its doors and its wallet, purchasing flights and hotel rooms for two guys who, four months before, had just been a couple of random *Left 4 Dead* fans on the Internet.

Looking back in an interview with VideoGamer, Valve Writer Chet Faliszek, who initially extended the invitation to the boycott leaders, said he felt it was important to show they were paying attention. "We have 3.5 million people playing *Left 4 Dead 1*. 40,000 said something," he said. "They are passionate about our games. They play our games. So we always take the feedback seriously, because we're gamers as well, and these are people who are playing our games and will probably play our games with us. So we always want to make sure we're listening and understanding the issues."

Newell later explained his rationale for offering the trip in an interview with GameSpot. "We tried to find people who were sort of articulate spokespeople for that skepticism [about the sequel] and bring them in here and show them what we were doing and say, 'Look, this is exactly what we're doing, these are the people who are doing it, ask them whatever you want, play the game.' And that proved to be a pretty effective way of communicating with these really hardcore members of the community and reassure them this was a good thing rather than something they should be skeptical and worried about."

So, depending on your perspective, the trip was a huge concession to the power of a new kind of Internet protest, a powerful demonstration of Valve's commitment to maintaining good relations with its fans, or a shrewd move to pacify the company's most vocal opponents. In the end, it was probably a bit of all three.

It was definitely the trip of a lifetime for the two boycott leaders. After a guided tour of the studio, which Waking_Target described as "kind of a cross between an office and a LAN party filled with modders and an art studio," they got a chance to sit down with Newell, Faliszek and Software Developer Steve Bond to discuss their concerns. The pair came away with assurances that the bug fixes and more substantial DLC they were seeking for the original *Left 4 Dead* were indeed in the works.

This time, Walking_Target seemed more willing to take these assurances at face value. "They have every reason to [follow through with their promises]," he wrote shortly after the trip. "Not to mention that they would look like fools if they did not follow through with it at this point, after having invited Agent and I out to talk to them. Any short-term gains they would have made by inviting us out would be cancelled out by the betrayal that folks would feel after being lied to directly."

During the trip, the boycott leaders also got a chance to try out the *Left 4 Dead 2* demo that they had been clamoring to see since July. After the short play session, both leaders reported back surprisingly positive impressions of the game they had spent the last three months loudly protesting. "As for *L4D2*, things seemed balanced and 'tight' and did not feel like a rushed job," Walking_Target wrote. "What we can say with confidence is that the quality of gameplay in *Left 4 Dead 2* is not in question; and it will only get better." Agent of Chaos added that the game "carries *Left 4 Dead* gameplay which we all love, and our long-requested bug fixes / content. It's exciting stuff..."

The rank and file boycotters definitely noticed this post-trip change in tone and focus. Many of them were far from happy about it. "Guys, what happened to your believes [sic]? You're a sellout!!" commenter Icelander wrote. "Screw this boycott, the leaders betrayed us. ... Pathetic. I shoulda known these assholes would evetually [sic] succumb." wrote user vvnew. "Really hope you are not selling out over a free trip... because that is what I am getting out of it," added Comrade_Jasper. "Awesome, our boycott founders abandon us. We fail," wrote [FI] Kharmasi. "THEY DRANK THE KOOL AID!!!!! IT'S ALL OVER!!!!" wrote an excitable NightStalker.END.

A promotional image for the Crash Course DLC for the original Left 4 Dead, announced in August and released in September.

The reaction from his fellow boycotters obviously got to Walking_Target, who responded with a somewhat passive-aggressive answer to the charges that he'd been somehow bought off with the trip. "It doesn't matter what course of actions we could have taken, or how 'assertive' we were with Valve, you folks would not be pleased," he wrote. "If we refused the invitation, you would say we aren't doing our jobs. Accepting an invitation got us called 'Traitors'. Complaining and whining is not going to get you anywhere, because nothing we could possibly do would make you happy and I'm through trying."

But the damage was done. By opening their doors, Valve had effectively co-opted the leaders' message, giving the consummate outsiders the appearance, at least, of being fawning insiders. As Ars Technica's Ben Kuchera noted at the time, the trip marked "the shift from boycotting the game because of the timing to feeding the group's followers information about the game." He accurately predicted that "that the air will likely be taken out of the movement. The two men who used to rally gamers into avoiding the game now seem enthusiastic about the title, and will begin to share their enthusiasm with their readers."

The boycott effort continued after the trip to Valve, but the fire seemed to go out of the fight. Agent of Chaos continued to argue halfheartedly that a discount on sequel purchases for *L4D* owners "shouldn't be out of the question," but he had to concede that the full, standalone release for the game that the boycotters were fighting against was "inevitable." Despite this concession, he seemed mostly satisfied that Valve was "close [enough] to their original promises ... to tackle most important issues."

Walking_Target seemed similarly pacified by the trip. "We're going to continue to talk to Valve and ask questions as needed," he wrote. "However if the frantic pace which we had seen people working at is any indication, we're not going to be left in the dust. The staff seemed to honestly love the original four Survivors and many said that 'we're not done with them yet.'"

But Walking_Target also insisted he was still in it for the long haul. "We're not giving up just yet though," he wrote. "We will both be here up until our individual concerns are addressed and sticking with you folks. I'm not leaving, I'm not satisfied with the support of *L4D* yet and I'm definitely not going to be buying *L4D2* until Valve shows that they are supporting *L4D*; Nor will I be buying *L4D2* at full price. ... I don't believe in an 'all or nothing' stance, but that doesn't mean I'm satisfied either."

Through late September and early October, though, the leadership's announcements to the boycott group started focusing more on general *L4D* community news and less on ways to advance the boycott's cause. Announcements posted after the late September release of the bug-laden *Crash Course* DLC assured readers that Walking_Target "just spoke to the guys from Valve" and that "Valve will not allow obvious bugs to persist." Comment threads increasingly were taken up by trolls, flame wars and spam. The rank of members shrank from over 40,000 to a current level just above 35,000, and it's unclear how many of those remaining were still active in the boycott effort.

Redefining Success

On Oct. 14, Agent of Chaos and Walking_Target finally gave up the ghost. "Effective Wednesday October 21st 2009 at 12:00 PM Eastern Standard Time, this group will be closed," Agent of Chaos wrote in an [announcement](#). Despite the closure, Walking_Target still urged members to use their wallets to vote their consciences. "Does the closure mean that you should go out and buy *L4D2*? No, it certainly does not," he wrote. "The boycott has served its purpose and it is now up to you all as individuals to decide what is right for you." Indeed, in the immediate wake of the game's Nov. 17 launch, many boycotters [seem to be following through](#) on their promise not to buy or play the game.

It's easy to see the boycott's early closure as a sign of its ultimate failure. Now that the sequel has been released, the boycotters failed to achieve two of their three original explicit goals—that "*Left 4 Dead 2* not be released as a stand-alone, full-priced sequel but as either a free update to *Left 4 Dead* or an expansion with full compatibility with basic *Left 4 Dead* owners"; and "that *Left 4 Dead* owners be given discounts for *Left 4 Dead 2*, should it be released as premium content."

Valve Writer Chet Faliszek, who extended the trip offer to the boycott leaders.

But as the leaders officially shut down the boycott they had started four-and-a-half months before, they focused instead on the successes the group had achieved. "We have accomplished everything we can on our manifesto," Agent of Chaos wrote. "Our goal wasn't to steer people away from *L4D2*, it was to get Valve's attention and have them support original *L4D*. We succeeded and that's where our mission ends; nothing more or less." He added that Valve's promised updates were "as good as it can get, people."

It could be argued that the release of *Crash Course* and the promise of more DLC for the original game removed the initial motivation for the boycott. As Walking_Target wrote back in July, "we also dropped the hint that a decent DLC at the end of summer would probably go a long way to making people happy. If they provide at least one meaty DLC before *L4D2* drops then it will go a long way towards their promise of continued support and updates." By that standard, the threat of the boycott could be seen as creating an unmitigated success.

But even on this point, it's not clear that the boycott actually affected the change it claims. After all, Valve had promised to provide such updates from the start, and was seemingly working on the *Crash Course* DLC long before the sequel announcement or boycott (a Valve representative did not respond to a request for comment for this story). "As for forcing a change in planned support, no one knows that but Valve," Walking_Target told me later. "We did get Valve to open up and talk to their community, that's all we're going to claim we did. Anything else is speculation."

While opening up that community discussion was an important victory, it's hard to argue that the boycott was able to do what most successful boycotts are able to—flex its members' economic might to force change. Valve certainly hasn't seemed to pay much of a price for ignoring the

boycotters' two sequel-related demands. In an [October interview with GameSpot](#), Newell revealed that Valve data showed boycott members were *more* likely to reserve the sequel than non-boycotting owners of the first game. Agent of Chaos tried to spin such preorder reports by saying "[*L4D2*'s] successful sales only confirm that we'll get to slaughter more zombies in future, not that we have failed," but the argument rings a bit hollow for a group created specifically to convince people to *not* buy the sequel.

Looking back on his fateful trip to Valve, Walking_Target argued that the group simply ran into a brick wall on its two unmet demands. "We presented the requests for a discount on *L4D2* for current *L4D* owners and were told it was not going to happen," he said. "We also asked about the possibility of it being brought out as DLC or an expansion pack on PC and were told it could not happen, it was implied that this was in part due to technical limitations of the Xbox 360. There's no point in arguing the point further if the CEO of the company says it's not happening. Myself and Agent of Chaos came to terms with this, so did many of our members, other people didn't."

In the end, it was coming to terms with the fact that there's "no point in arguing" that really killed the boycott. When a truly powerful boycott movement faces resistance to some of its core demands from the powers that be, it digs in its heels. It galvanizes its membership to be strong in the face of adversity and urges it to make sacrifices to prove its point. It exercises the power of its numbers and shows its economic strength. Instead, the *Left 4 Dead 2* boycott group effectively accepted that some of its demands would never be met, and settled for the ones that arguably had.

Perhaps that was the right call. With Valve meeting the boycotters in the middle with open promises of continued support for the original game, ending the boycott on a compromise doesn't seem so crazy. "*L4D2* is beside the point," Walking_Target said in an [interview with the Escapist](#) after his trip to Valve. "The reason we're boycotting *L4D2* is because we feel that *L4D* has been supported poorly when compared to what Valve said was coming." In other words, Walking_Target believes the group achieved its most important goal, even if it didn't achieve all of its goals.

And given the complete lack of success for most other gamer protest movements, even this partial victory can be seen as a breakthrough. The success has already spawned imitators: *Modern Warfare 2* saw a collection of hastily arranged boycotts in response to the late announcement that the publisher would not provide dedicated servers for online play. These efforts never really had enough time to grow, however, and those that signed up seemed [less than fully committed to the cause](#).

In his interview with the Escapist, Walking_Target said he wasn't sure what his group achieved was entirely replicable. "I don't honestly know if the boycott will lead to more open and assertive discussions with game developers," he told the site. "I don't know how likely it will be in the future due to certain unique circumstances in our case. Our community has benefited exposure, excellent timing and most importantly, a few talented and mature people at the outset. Without any one of those, we would not have been as successful."

But addressing the members of his boycott in his final announcement back in October, he was a bit more optimistic about the impact his boycott might have on the future of the industry. "As a collective we have done more than achieve a few goals," he wrote. "We have paved the way for Developer-Community relations in the future. No matter what the press or other gamers say, we have made an indelible mark upon the future of this industry. You should all be proud, we certainly are."

The Making (and Unmaking) of a Nintendo Fanboy

(Originally published in The Escapist, Feb. 8, 2011)

Author's Note: This is probably the most personal piece I've ever written, and maybe the one I'm most proud of as a result. There's a level of personal investment with a company and its products that's hard to develop outside of childhood (though companies like Tesla are currently proving that it's possible). It's an almost religious conviction, a feeling of loyalty that's probably akin to a first crush or the love felt for a childhood pet.

If you didn't experience that when you were young—when every experience was fresh and every feeling was at its newest and most intense—then you'll probably never understand what it was like. But I tried my best to get that feeling across here anyway.

In the late '80s, playing games on a TV meant owning a Nintendo Entertainment System. Heck, back then simply being a young boy meant owning an NES, as far as my friends and I were concerned. If you had an NES, you were *somebody*. If you didn't have an NES, you spent an entire year riding your bike up the street to hang out with the usually intolerable Paul Paboojian (named changed to protect the intolerable) just to get a chance to play as Luigi because your STUPID PARENTS didn't realize that owning an NES was the SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE UNIVERSE until your seventh birthday when a trip to Circuit City granted you your rightful place in suburban childhood society.

ahem

In those blissful, early years of my gaming education, Nintendo's position was so dominant that the phrase "play Nintendo" was at least as common as the phrase "play videogames" in popular parlance, and was understood to mean the same thing. The Atari 2600 was practically obsolete before most kids I knew were born, and while we were all dimly aware of the existence of the Sega Master System, the fact that I didn't know anyone who knew anyone who had one meant it may as well not have existed. Back then, Nintendo meant video games and video games meant everything.

I don't remember the date, but I clearly remember the day, sometime in 1990, when that simple equation got a little more complicated. I had dragged my parents to Toys "backwards R" Us and rushed to the Nintendo-filled aisle 2, as usual, when I happened upon a display featuring the

Sega Genesis and a copy of *Altered Beast*. Five minutes of play later, I was already utterly convinced of two things.

First, it was clear that the NES wasn't going to hold up much longer on purely technical terms. This much was unavoidable. When I first saw *Altered Beast*'s human protagonist transform into the titular beast via that [iconic full screen animation](), I was quite sure I had never seen anything so amazingly cool-looking on a home video game console in my short life.

Second, playing *Altered Beast* convinced me that Genesis games just weren't as fun to play as Nintendo games. The simple walk-forward-and-punch-stuff gameplay didn't even hold up to a simple brawler like *Double Dragon II*, much less to the elegant design and endless imagination of *Super Mario Bros. 3*.

It was patently, obviously unfair to evaluate an entire system's library and prospects based on five minutes spent with a single game in a crowded Toys R Us. But you know what they say about the importance of first impressions. From that day forward, I was sure, as only a seven-year-old could be, that Nintendo represented all that was true and good in videogames while Sega and its Genesis were just trying to fool people into playing stupid, unfun games using flashy graphics.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't a system bigot. When I got the chance to spend three straight, uninterrupted hours playing through *Bonk's Adventure* on the TurboGrafx-16 at day camp that summer, I took it. When I visited my best friend Mason and he wanted to play *Joe Montana Sports Talk Football* on his Genesis rather than *Mega Man 3* on his NES, I humored him, even though I didn't really see the appeal.

But my first Genesis experience, combined with the steady stream of propaganda-filled previews filling my monthly edition of *Nintendo Power*, convinced me that my gaming future rightly lay with the Super NES. Like a virgin waiting for the wedding night, I knew with metaphysical certainty that waiting would be worth it in the long run. I knew a few more months replaying *Super Mario Bros. 3* four billion more times would pay off in years of gaming bliss once I was [playing with Power... Super Power!]()

I had to be absolutely certain, because there was a lot riding on my choice. My parents were reluctant enough to let me use a year's worth of saved-up allowance money to buy a single 16-bit system, much less hedge my bets by investing in both of the top two contenders. "What's wrong with the Nintendo you've got?" they'd ask when I'd bring it up. "Will this new one work with your old games? You mean you need to buy all new cartridges? Do you realize how many

NES games you could buy with $199?" My parents' limited indulgence was only going to give me one shot at this, so I had to make it count.

Of course, my increasingly rabid interest in everything associated with video games made the decision harder than it had to be. The appeal of games like *Sonic the Hedgehog* was self-evident, as was the wacky brilliance of early Genesis titles like *ToeJam & Earl*, *Streets of Rage*, and *Kid Chameleon* that I was exposed to by my Genesis-owning friends and magazines like *Electronic Gaming Monthly*. I couldn't stand the fact that I had to choose between owning games like those and having the opportunity to own titles like *Super Mario World*, *Super Castlevania IV* and *Gradius III*.

But I'd made my decision to wait, and I did my best to ignore the nagging voice in my head that suggested maybe I was missing something by not buying a Genesis. Usually, that voice belonged to Tim, a friend-of-a-friend who sat at my usual lunch table in sixth grade. Tim was practically my polar opposite: loud, rude, and an unabashedly outspoken Genesis supporter.

Long before the internet became an integral part of my life, Tim became my first troll, bad-mouthing the Super NES and its games in a way that seemed perfectly designed to get my ire up. I remember us almost coming to blows during a heated argument over the relative merits of *Street Fighter II* and *Eternal Champions*, despite my never actually having played the latter game. As time went on, the growing association between Tim and the Genesis ended up increasing my somewhat irrational hatred for both.

But the Genesis was also associated, in my head, with an adolescence I wasn't really ready for at the time. The Genesis was the blood-code-infused version of *Mortal Kombat*, while the SNES was the care-free childishness of a game like *Clay Fighter*. The Genesis was the dark palettes and war imagery of *Jungle Strike*, while the SNES was the bright colors and sci-fi ridiculousness of *Mega Man X*. For most kids, this comparison probably made the Genesis even more desirable, but I was a late bloomer, and eager to hold on to a system that let me hold on to a youth that I felt slipping away, even then.

By seventh grade, I had transferred to a new, Tim-free school, where I found a group of friends that had all made the same gratification-delaying decision on the Super NES. It was a bit of a sheltered environment, as far as the console wars were concerned, and one where we could easily revel in games like *Link to the Past*, *Street Fighter II Turbo*, *Star Fox*, and *Contra III* without even thinking about the Genesis games we might be missing.

But a change of scenery didn't change the flow of history, and by high school the time came to choose what system would succeed the Super NES on our TVs. Even with years of unflagging

Nintendo support under my belt, I had to admit that the store displays for PlayStation games like *Destruction Derby* were a lot more compelling than *Altered Beast* ever was. Nintendo's decision to stick with expensive, outdated cartridges for the Nintendo 64—scaring off crucial SquareSoft game support in the process—was worrisome both to me and to the editors of *Next Generation* magazine, whom I was increasingly coming to trust to inform my important pending console choice.

But while my friends all moved on to PlayStation purchases, I stubbornly decided to stick with the company that had been synonymous with videogames for my entire young life. Partly I was convinced I was sticking with a proven performer in the video game industry, rather than an upstart newcomer. Partly I let *Nintendo Power* convince me that CD loading times would be a much bigger issue than they ended up being. Partly I was clinging to the promise held in a grainy, postage-stamp-sized preview video of *Super Mario 64* downloaded from my family's AOL account. It all added up to me clinging to my Bar Mitzvah money through an entire year of Nintendo 64 delays, once again sure that my decision would pay off in the end.

And while I could point to *Super Mario 64* and *Goldeneye 007* with pride in the years to come, the rest of the paltry, early Nintendo 64 library gave me increasingly little ammunition to convince my friends that sticking with Nintendo had been the right choice. Thus I became the guy at the lunch table laughably arguing that my access to *Killer Instinct Gold* somehow made up for missing out on the *Tekken* series, or that *Earthworm Jim 3D* was worth looking forward to just as much as the next *Final Fantasy*, *Gran Turismo*, *Crash Bandicoot*, and *Resident Evil* combined. And this time it wasn't just Tim's grating voice pushing against the wisdom of my arguments, but a whole group of light-hearted, well-meaning, and frustratingly, obviously correct friends.

I'd like to say it was a dawning maturity that made me realize the foolishness of holding blind allegiance to Nintendo's lost cause, but really it was the extra income from my first summer job that gave me the freedom to acknowledge my error and buy a PlayStation. Even then, it was hard to admit that I had been wrong; that the company that had introduced me to video games had let me down; that I had wasted so much money and gaming time on what was, to some extent, a cartridge-based dead end in the constantly branching path of the console wars.

Today, when my colleagues see console fanboys arguing fruitlessly in comment threads, they see a group of illogically territorial misanthropes more concerned with winning an argument than enjoying games. But that's not what I see. When I see a fanboy, I see someone eager to relive the joy of their first exposure to videogames by sticking with the company that brought it to them. I see someone who's invested an important part of their identity into what a video game

company has come to represent to them. I see someone trying with all their might to convince themselves that they're not missing out on anything over the rich kids whose parents can buy them all three major consoles and dozens of games every year.

When I see a fanboy, I see the person I was—someone trying to recapture a simpler time, when video games meant only one thing and also meant everything.

Alone in the StreetPass Crowd

(Originally published in The Escapist, Aug. 1, 2011)

Author's Note: With the 3DS now giving way to the Nintendo Switch in the marketplace, the StreetPass era is truly behind us. But I hope Nintendo hasn't given up on the idea of this kind of passive social gaming experience for good. The idea of using physical proximity as a key component of connection for portable games was a good one, and one that Nintendo or another company could take even farther in the future.

The game I played most on the E3 show floor this year wasn't featured in any press conference. It wasn't promoted with gaudy, costumed booth babes or sequestered behind closed doors, to be played by a select few. In fact, it wasn't highlighted on even one of the hundreds of demo stations publishers set up for the show. Yet I and hundreds of other attendees found themselves sampling the title in a way only a gathering like E3 could make possible.

The game in question was the Nintendo 3DS' *StreetPass Mii Plaza*, a title that shows off both Nintendo's penchant for unique ideas as well as its seemingly utter inability to provide a meaningful online experience.

StreetPass Mii Plaza makes use of the 3DS' unique StreetPass feature, a bit of hardware and system software design wizardry that lets the system's WiFi antenna communicate with other nearby 3DS units, even if both systems are closed and in sleep mode (which might now be better termed "semi-awake mode"). In *StreetPass Mii Plaza*, this communication involves the exchange of cartoon-like Miis that have been pre-designed and pre-designated for sharing by each owner, along with basic information like hometown, last-played game and selections from a pre-set list of life goals and hobbies (not surprisingly, "playing video games" was a popular hobby choice among E3 attendees).

StreetPass seems like an idea tailor-made for Japan, where a large proportion of the population makes daily commutes to, from, and within dense urban areas on packed trains, and where Nintendo has already sold 3.46 Nintendo DS systems for each living citizen (only a slight exaggeration). As a 3DS early adopter in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, though, my invisible StreetPass beacons went cruelly unanswered for weeks, no matter how many times I walked to the corner store for a bottle of Mountain Dew.

Through those early days of StreetPass disappointment, I looked forward expectantly to E3, where I was sure thousands of other game industry professionals were similarly waiting to use their 3DS to perform an automatic, invisible digital handshake with me. If StreetPass couldn't prove itself to me in such an environment, it seemed clear it would never prove itself at all.

I discovered the first of what would be nearly 200 bites on my StreetPass lure as I was speeding away from the Los Angeles airport to my hotel. James—or his Mii, at least—was a bespectacled, shaggy-haired, red-shirted fellow who enjoys *Street Fighter IV*, my 3DS told me. As soon as I spied that Mii's cartoony face I was able to identify his likely creator—a tall, lanky guy who had been standing behind me in the cab line! At the time I had taken his too-wide grin as simple excitement at attending what I imagined was his first E3 (he looked the type), but now that I thought about it, he might have been grinning at the white 3DS case I had hanging from my belt loop (don't judge me). Maybe he had also been relishing the possibility of his first StreetPass connection at that very moment!

This initial experience captures one of the main problems with the StreetPass system: the feeling that all it's good for is gathering missed connections. In sleep mode, the system had no way of notifying me that there was a digital kindred spirit nearby. Even if I had happened to be playing *Street Fighter IV* in that cab line, the system wouldn't have notified me that James—who was standing three feet away—was up for a friendly match (unless I happened to hop to the Home menu and then the StreetPass Mii Plaza, I guess). Instead, I learned that I had met my first fellow 3DS owner well after I had actually met him!

You might think the 3DS could store James' system details, so that I could reach out to him through the magic of the internet at a later time ("I couldn't help but notice your goofy grin in the cab line, but I never imagined that grin might be for me and my 3DS. Up for a quick match?"). Unfortunately, Mii Plaza provides no mechanism for this kind of after-the-fact communication. In fact, the only way I could communicate further with Jason at all would be if I ran into him a second time, at which point I could set a personalized message that would be sent *the third time* we passed each other (despite using StreetPass amongst the closed group of E3 attendees all week, I never got to try out this feature across three chance meetings).

Some StreetPass users I ran into tried to get around this limitation by including email addresses or personal web URLs in the "personal message" that Miis share upon meeting. Since that information isn't stored permanently in the Mii Plaza, though, you'd better have a pad of paper handy if you want to make use of it.

I can kind of understand Nintendo's reluctance to let this kind of follow-up communication happen easily. It would only take one pedophile making illicit contact through a 3DS StreetPass encounter to create headlines that could cause billions of dollars in PR damage. Still, without the option for further follow-up, collecting Miis from strangers in *StreetPass Mii Plaza* felt a bit like collecting elegant porcelain dolls fashioned after the people you pass in the park, and then pretending those dolls are your friends.

And that's for complete strangers. The StreetPass experience is even weirder when interacting with people you know. Throughout E3, I found it exceedingly odd to open my system and find an online acquaintance or former colleague staring back up at me, making me realize that I must have been within ten feet of them without actually picking them out of the crowd. Odder still was the sensation of meeting someone in person for the first time, and then hours later finding out we had exchanged Miis without either of us consciously thinking about it (not to mention the oddness of learning my new acquaintance's dream is "to get fit!"). And then there is the case of the Mii I acquired named [Yuji Naka](), which made me wonder if I had walked by the legendary Sega game designer or just a fan of his work.

It didn't really matter. Famous or not, the Yuji Naka Mii I received was a static, lifeless shadow of the person it represented, useful mainly as fodder for the pair of simple mini-games Nintendo loaded into the Mii Plaza. The first such mini-game, *Puzzle Swap*, is barely a game at all, acting simply as an excuse to copy and share pieces of Nintendo-themed images between 3DS systems. Since Miis can only give copies of pieces they've already obtained from someone else, the game is most interesting as a lesson in viral propagation patterns and the relative popularity of the specific characters in the featured pictures (those Mario puzzles seemed to fill in a lot quicker than the Pikmin puzzles).

The other game, *Find Mii*, is marginally more interesting—a simplified RPG that uses collected StreetPass Miis as one-time-use warriors in a series of turn-based battles. There's a thin sheen of strategy involved in choosing when to attack and when to use magic, as well as what specific order in which to use each Mii. The Miis are even personalized to an extent, with magical abilities based on their favorite colors and power levels based on the number of times you've met them via StreetPass.

For players without StreetPass friends, *Find Mii* lets you trade in play coins (earned by using the system's built-in pedometer) to hire generic, cat-like Miis, which are just as effective in battle. This again highlights how impersonal StreetPass encounters actually are. Collected Miis in *Find Mii* aren't fellow 3DS owners that you might want to meet and know, but mere resources to be

collected and exploited for progress in a game where they can literally be replaced by virtual cats.

StreetPass has the seeds of what could truly be a revolutionary social networking system—one where connections are first based just on proximity, but have the potential to blossom into deeper relationships based on shared interests, comparative game lists, and voice chats held over internet game matches. It could be like Xbox Live with the location-based physicality of FourSquare thrown in.

As it stands now, though, StreetPass seems destined to be nothing more than a novelty. A pity that a feature based on being close to other 3DS owners so far ends up only making them seem more distant.

CRAFT

Steel Battalion and the Future of Direct-Involvement Games

(Originally published in GameSpot, July 28, 2003)

Author's Note: Looking back now, I really hate the term "direct-involvement games" that I tried to coin here. It's clunky and doesn't really describe what I'm talking about. "Full-immersion games" or even just "motion-controlled games" would work much better, if I was rewriting the piece today. But I've left it as is for historical accuracy.

Whatever you call it, though, the idea of controlling games with more than a few thumbs and fingers has come a long way since 2003. The Wii Remote and *Wii Sports* took the concept of motion controls mainstream, and Microsoft's Kinect tried to take it to the next level. Today, virtual reality provides much more accurate hand and head tracking, along with a stereoscopic 3D world that can make you forget the room you physically inhabit. The titles discussed here were the proto-examples of these trends, which seem set to continue into the future.

I saw the future of video games the other day.

There I was, eating stale pizza and drinking warm soda at a Microsoft promotional event being held at my college, when I saw a nondescript computer science student walking by the rows of dazed *Halo* players. No one else seemed to take notice of the huge, almost impossible controller in his hands, but I recognized it immediately as the exclusive two-joystick, 27-button, three-pedal interface for *Steel Battalion*.

After setting up the controller and fielding questions from a growing group of stragglers, the owner let me have a try at the game. As he gave me a crash course in mech physics, I tried to absorb the function of every button, knob, and gear shift he could throw at me. I clicked the ignition in time with the start-up sequence. I shifted the beast into first gear. I was off and lumbering out into my first mission.

At first I felt confused and slightly overwhelmed by the massive array of options at my fingertips, but I gripped the joysticks for support and pressed on. Eventually, I got the hang of using the turbo boost, executing precision turns, and using the view change button to lock on to incoming enemies. I couldn't believe it. I was actually using this monstrosity of a controller to pilot a mech.

It was loads of fun, but, more importantly, *Steel Battalion*'s unique interface made that darkened lecture hall more immersive than any video game experience in recent memory.

Steel Battalion is part of a growing trend in gaming that I like to call direct-involvement games. Unlike games that use a basic thumb-waggling handheld controller to approximate real-life actions (for example, hitting the A button to jump), direct-involvement games provide an interface that is closer to one you might use in a real-world situation. Using the X button to accelerate your car is not direct involvement. Using a facsimile gas pedal to accelerate is.

At first, this may seem like a trivial distinction. After all, why should it matter how you make a virtual car move, as long as it actually moves? But direct involvement can make all the difference in turning a relatively dull gaming experience into a great one. To see how much of a difference, simply compare the experience of playing *Hydro Thunder* in the arcades with that of playing the console version. Without the rumbling of the seat beneath you, the speakers blaring engine noise directly in your ears, and the feeling of the throttle in your hand, the home version seems rather dull. It's the experience of being inside a "real" hydroplane that makes the arcade version so engaging.

Direct-involvement games are not a new phenomenon. Since the early days of arcades, there have been sit-down racing and flight simulator cabinets that put you in the pilot's seat. Early virtual-reality headsets and gimmicks like the Nintendo Power Glove jumped the gun in trying to provide completely virtual worlds before sufficiently advanced technology was available. Even light-gun games gave some level of direct involvement by actually giving you a plastic gun to aim at the screen.

To see the growing popularity of direct-involvement games, one has only to walk into a modern-day mega-arcade like Dave & Busters or ESPN Zone. It's becoming increasingly difficult to find any games in these arcades that don't have some element of direct involvement (outside of the odd *Ms. Pac-Man* or ticket redemption game). In a single location, there may be titles that let you pedal bicycles, ride horses, go white-water rafting, hang-glide, snowboard, skateboard, street luge, Jet Ski, water-ski, and snow-ski. Even the classic direct-involvement light-gun genre has been updated with games that put you behind a sniper's scope or use cameras to track your body as you bob and weave away from bullets.

And then there is the epitome of the direct-involvement games: *Dance Dance Revolution*. Here, the game itself is practically nothing—just a catchy J-pop song and a series of flashing, scrolling arrows—while the real-life actions of the player are everything. Anyone who has tried playing

DDR with a hand controller will tell you that the experience is good for little more than mindless thumb exercise. In *DDR*, the experience of the dance *is* the game, drawing you into the experience physically and emotionally in a way that a handheld controller simply can't.

Direct-involvement games are growing in popularity partially because they remove a large barrier of entry for those who aren't already intimately acquainted with gaming. My girlfriend had trouble figuring out how to perform the complex thumb movements required to direct Mario's water pack in *Super Mario Sunshine*, but she would have no trouble with the basics of sitting down in a *Daytona USA* cabinet and just driving around the track.

I think another key to this growing trend's popularity is the feeling that you're actually doing something when you play a direct-involvement game. Instead of living vicariously through a joystick and an onscreen avatar, you are actually taking part in a more-direct simulation of a virtual experience. One review I read of *Steel Battalion* (which I can no longer track down) said that playing the game made the reviewer feel like he was actually accomplishing something. Unless you're a race car driver, a police officer, or a mech pilot in real life, these direct-involvement games are the closest you're going to get to that feeling of accomplishing the feats associated with those roles.

The success of costly home accessories like racing wheels, deluxe DDR pads, and (to some extent) the $200 Steel Battalion controller shows that people are willing to pay extra for this level of direct involvement in the comfort of their own homes. In the future, technologies like lightweight head-mounted displays, motion-sensing body suits, and others could further revolutionize how we interact with the games we play. Who knows—one day we may be playing *Quake 20* in our own personal holodecks.

Regardless of the form it takes, though, direct involvement is the future of gaming. These types of gaming experience probably won't fully replace the handheld controllers we know and love, but they will definitely be a permanent part of the video game landscape of the future.

A Horse of a Different Color

(Originally published in The Escapist, July 26, 2005)

Author's Note: This really captures the end of an era for location-based gaming in the United States. These days, the few arcades left in the country are either glorified bars filled with nostalgia-tickling retro games or glorified casinos filled with redemption games that spit out prize tickets instead of dollars. There's little space left in the market for a unique game like *Derby Owners Club*, which leverages the unique opportunities of the arcade space to encourage a type of in-person social gaming that isn't really possible in the same way at home.

Heather Dubé knows horse racing inside and out. In her short career she has done it all: picking out sires and dams to produce winning foals; working her horses through a specialized training regimen; even selecting carefully controlled diets to maximize her steeds' potential. Heather also works as a jockey, utilizing an early whipping strategy that she says "leaves them in the dust in the end."

Heather's latest horse, a chestnut-colored thoroughbred named Crypto's Fate, has gotten most of her attention recently, and has quickly become a favorite, despite winning just six of his 33 races. But Heather has plenty of time to improve her horse training skills. After all, she's only been training horses for two days, and has only been alive for 13 years.

The game that turned Heather into a horse owner, trainer, and jockey practically overnight is Sega's *Derby Owners Club* (*DOC*). The massive machine she plays sits along a dark sidewall of Jillian's arcade/restaurant/dance club/Japanese hibachi megacenter at Arundel Mills Mall in Anne Arundel, Md. The game is set far apart from the arcade's lines of beeping ticket-redemption games, auto-racing simulations, and shoot-'em-ups in terms of both location and subject matter.

If you haven't been to one of the mega-arcades that are the only locations large enough to house a full *DOC* setup, you are missing out on a unique experience. The *DOC* arrangement includes eight individual 19-inch screens, comfortably spaced in two rows of four. Each screen faces up at a 45-degree angle for players seated in attached, padded, doublewide stools.

On these individual units, first-time players can create a new horse to race and returning jockeys can insert a thin, magnetized card containing the data of a horse from previous sessions. A thriving and steady market has shown up on eBay for 'trained horse' cards, which

can be transported between machines. According to Sega, there are anywhere from 75 to 300 horses available to bid on at eBay at any time.

Each player then trains their horses in one of 10 exercises, and feeds it a good meal in an effort to maintain good health and a good relationship. Happy horses will whinny and gallop appreciatively on-screen, while unhappy horses might kick over the feeding trough.

Then it's off to the races, where the action transfers to two 50-inch widescreen monitors hanging above and in front of the smaller screens. An animated bugler sounds the call and the horses are off, with an excitable announcer calling the positions and screaming things like "Go, baby, go!" in the background. Players use large, brightly lit "whip" and "hold" buttons on their units to control the speed of their horses. A sliding scale on each screen shows the whip's effectiveness, which goes down with each strike but increases with time, according to the horse's stamina. When the race is over, players are awarded virtual prize money and get the opportunity to give the horse encouragement or derision, based on its performance on the track.

(With its close affiliation to horse racing, *Derby Owners Club, World Edition* came under fire in Minnesota, where it was considered a form of gambling by state authorities. Sega waged an intense legal battle in response, and earlier this year the Minnesota Gaming Act was modified to state that "a video game that simulates horse racing and does not involve a prize payout is not an illegal video game of chance." This permitted *Derby Owners Club, World Edition* to be legally operated throughout the state, an obvious big win for Sega.)

The game then asks players to pay another $1 to $2 (depending on the arcade) for another race, which they often do. "It's not uncommon for players to remain on the game for over eight hours, in some cases taking their lunch and dinner right at the game," said Peter Gustafson, Sega Entertainment USA's director of sales and marketing, in a press release announcing the game's 2002 US release (following success in Japan). "In fact, one of the most loyal players, a man in his early 50s, owns a stable of over forty horses. He keeps track of [them] on an excel spreadsheet. I'm not familiar of [*sic*] any other video game that elicits this kind of passion."

On a random Thursday night when I visit Jillian's arcade, Heather and her dad Keith, 44, are showing this kind of passion. They've already dumped eight hours and hundreds of dollars into *DOC* over two nights of play, and they're just getting started. Heather is visiting her dad on a summer vacation trip from South Carolina, where she lives with her mom, and the pair is making the most of their time at the machine. Heather is on her fifth horse already, while Keith is on his second (horses are usually good for 20 to 40 races before they can't keep up with their younger competitors).

When Keith first saw the game, he said he "didn't think it'd be interesting at all," but his horse-loving daughter, a four-year show jumping veteran, dragged him over. Now he admits he's hooked. To Keith, there's a sense of pride in developing a good relationship with his horse, indicated by a series of small hearts at the bottom of the screen. "I like to see the hearts. I take the card with me. It's *my* horse."

Keith's pride has extended into the real world, where he's showed his personalized trainer's card to his coworkers and, as his daughter laughingly admits, "the video store guy." Explaining what the card was took a little doing, according to Keith, but once people understood it "they thought it was pretty cool. I told them, 'if you go once, you'll be hooked.'"

Both Heather and Keith say they play lots of games on their PlayStation 2 at home—Keith prefers sports games while Heather enjoys fantasy and adventure. Keith says he enjoys *DOC* because "it's not as stressful" as other games, but it still gets exciting. "It gives you a break occasionally and allows you to enjoy your horse. You can go back to your farm and relax, train it a little. When the race comes in the blood pressure goes up and…"

"It's got a lot of tension," Heather finishes the thought.

The game's unique premise and loyalty-building memory card system can attract a pretty varied audience. "Players representing every demographic you can think of are spending time on *DOC*," Gustafson said in the same press release, and the crowd at Jillian's seems to confirm it.

Among that crowd are Mike and Scott Diurso, gruff-looking 40-somethings who are playing the game for the first time. Mike admits he doesn't really know what's going on, but says the point seems to be "just trying to make the horse happy so it makes you money." Mike has named his horse "A' Bird," after his grandson's nickname. Scott has named his horse "KickMikesButt," in honor of his stated goal of "just beating [Mike], really."

Victor Lagunez, a pre-teen in a red basketball jersey, sits to their left. Victor said he has been playing the game for over a year, spending roughly $20 each time he plays. His current horse, (which he named with a string of capital A's because he "was in a hurry,") is "pretty good ... but other horses were way better. I trained them better, [but] they were getting too old, and they stopped winning, so they had to be retired." His voice remains steady as he says this, but you can sense a hint of regret as he describes his past accomplishments.

Fernando Lagunez, Victor's dad, sits in front of his son. He doesn't play many video games, but admits that this game "could be addictive." His early performance hasn't encouraged him, though - in his first three races he's had one 11th place finish and two 13th place finishes in 13 horse fields. He's not sure whether or not he'll keep his horse card to continue the futility later. In the end "I'd rather watch them play," he says.

Danny Ripple, a white-bearded tractor-trailer repairman from Glen Burnie, sits on the opposite side of the setup, nursing a Bud Light. His wife stands to his side, looking on with a mix of confusion and excitement. Danny admits to knowing nothing about the game when he sits down, but he's plenty confident when it gets to the feeding portion. "I figured that horse would like carrots," he says. "I've been around farm horses. They like carrots."

As each of these players drop in and out of the game's periphery, Keith and Heather remain seated in the two front-row center seats, whipping their horses for at least an hour after Keith says they're "probably finishing up for the night." Heather laughs as her dad describes their friendly competition, which "hasn't been friendly all the time," Keith says. Despite a focused training strategy and careful jockeying, Keith admits he usually isn't able to keep pace with his daughter's horses. Heather is quick to console her dad, reminding him of a recent neck-and-neck race that Keith actually won.

Players like Keith and Heather provide a healthy antidote to the usual stereotype of the solitary childish gamer, sitting alone in a darkened room for hours at a time with no interaction with the outside world. The laughing, talkative racers at the *Derby Owners Club* provide a new vision for a more social, connected kind of play as the industry continues to grow.

Sympathy for the Devil

(Originally published in The Escapist, Oct. 31, 2006)

Author's Note: In recent years, mega-hit titles like *Detroit: Become Human* and *The Last of Us Part 2* have shown there's a growing willingness among big-budget studios to break out of a single-protagonist narrative to tell a story from multiple viewpoints. On the indie side, groundbreaking FMV games like *Her Story* and *Telling Lies* have shown the potential of ambiguous narratives where multiple narrators can't be trusted.

These types of storytelling forms might not be completely unique to video games, but games might be better equipped than any other medium to help the audience fully experience multiple viewpoints within a single work.

"Know thy enemy, know thyself, know victory."

As tactical advice, Sun Tzu's famous maxim applies to a majority of video games. Knowing that Piston Honda blinks just before throwing an uppercut helps you know victory. Knowing that the mothership fires two small shots before throwing up its shields helps you know victory. Knowing how many whip strikes it takes to defeat Dracula helps you know victory.

But what about the kind of knowledge that transcends the tactical—the kind of knowledge that lets you truly understand your enemy's motivations and background, their hopes and fears? As far as a whole lot of games are concerned, such knowledge is unimportant. The enemy exists only as a part of the environment—a set of pre-programmed rules to be figured out and bested. It's enough to know that Piston Honda wants to send you a "TKO from Tokyo" or that Cats thinks you have "no chance to survive make your time." Games ask us to know the enemy, just not, y'know, *personally*.

This is in stark contrast to other forms of storytelling media, which routinely include antagonists that are known for more than tactical brilliance. Conflict is inherent in every story, but most well-told tales are not just a simplistic battle of good vs. evil. A hit TV series like *Friends* might feature characters with competing goals, but there are no characters that are completely morally reprehensible. A hit game series like the Mario games, though, can get by for decades with an antagonist that kidnaps royalty and casts destruction upon the land seemingly out of sheer boredom.

Even in stories where there is a clearly-defined evil, we can usually understand the bad guy's motivations, even if we don't agree with their methods. Most viewers can at least relate to the revenge and greed driving Simon Gruber in *Die Hard: With a Vengeance*, even if we would never attempt murder and grand theft ourselves. Other stories actively encourage the audience to root for the bad guy, finding the underlying humanity in normally vilified characters like mobsters (*The Godfather*) or psychopaths (*The Silence of the Lambs*).

As a medium, games are different in this regard. In games, the bad guy is, almost by definition, the one you're not controlling—the "other" that is trying to destroy or limit you. If you're controlling a cop, the gangsters are the bad guys. If you're controlling a gangster, the cops (and, sometimes, the other gangsters) are the bad guys. There is no moral ambiguity—most games are designed so it's you and your character(s) against the world by default.

No wonder so many game makers create paper-thin, cartoonish justifications for their virtual enemies. No matter how well-defined and believable a game villain is, his motivations will almost always pale in comparison to that of the protagonist you're actively controlling. Knowing the misunderstanding that causes Sephiroth's psychosis and rage in *Final Fantasy VII* doesn't prevent you from preventing him from destroying the Earth in the final battle. Knowing that Otacon will be crushed by the death of Sniper Wolf in *Metal Gear Solid* doesn't give you the option to spare her life and sit down to a tea party.

Like a Greek tragedy, most game narratives march inexorably toward the final condition of "you win" regardless of what this might mean to the fate of a likable, non-playable bad guy. Given this inherent rule of standard game design, the question regarding enemies becomes not "Why are they doing this?" but rather, "Do we really want to know?"

How can a game designer/storyteller get around this problem? Open-ended game design is a solution, but often only a partial one. Yes, you can spend days being a law-abiding pizza-delivery boy in *Grand Theft Auto III* or a humble fisherman in *The Legend of Zelda*, but if you want to move the story along, you have to go down the relatively narrow path the game proscribes, which eventually involves defeating an antagonist.

In games, getting rid of the predestined defeat of the enemy often means eliminating the story altogether, leaving the narrative and goal to be defined completely by the player, as in most simulation games. In theory, this opens the game up to unlimited scenarios, but in practice all it really does is add a "you lose" ending to the "you win" finale of more linear games. Allowing your people to be overtaken in *Civilization* does indeed subvert the traditional storyline, but not in a way that's fully satisfying to most players. ("I'm glad the Romans sacked my capital. They obviously wanted it more.")

But *Civilization*'s multiple selectable nation-states demonstrate one way to make a sympathetic antagonist in a game—namely, making him the protagonist. While videogames are limited by forcing the avatar's point of view on the player, they also allow the player to truly experience a conflict from all sides. While a movie can let you into the mind of a villain, a game can let you truly walk a mile in his shoes.

Multiplayer games have exploited this advantage for years—while it's possible to argue that *StarCraft*'s Zerg or *World of Warcraft*'s Horde are the "evil" side of those games, it's not an easy argument to make to a devoted player of either race. Even simpler games can exploit this difference—M. Bison is an unplayable "bad guy" in *Street Fighter II*, but once you can control him in *Championship Edition*, he becomes just another potential avatar in the fight against all comers (even though his ending reveals that he wants to wrap the world in "the darkness of one man's evil").

Single-player games make balancing the morality calculus more difficult. While it's easy enough to allow players to choose between a good or evil character at the beginning of a game, this choice again locks the player into a single point of view, requiring the player to replay the game multiple times to fully experience all sides of the equation. Games like *Fable* and *Black & White* partially fix this problem by allowing a player's alignment to change throughout the game, but at any one moment the player is still only experiencing one side of the dichotomy.

How do you combine the personal experience of the game and the detached gaze of the camera? One of the most daring experiments in this regard is *Indigo Prophecy* (*Fahrenheit* to our European readers). Though players start the game as possessed murderer Lucas Kane, the point of view jumps quickly and often between him and police officers Carla Valenti and Tyler Miles, who are investigating his case. Actions performed as one character affect the success of future missions by the others, and in the beginning it's unclear to the player which character, if any, they should be rooting for.

Are the police the bad guys because they try to thwart you as Lucas, or is Lucas the bad guy because he's trying to thwart you as the investigators? It's impossible to choose, because they both represent you, and what self-respecting person thinks of themselves as the bad guy?

More than multiple viewpoints, though, *Indigo Prophecy* succeeds in having believable characters because it is focused on human interactions rather than endless battles. Far too many games feature hordes of expendable enemies that are barely around long enough to form a wisecrack; good luck forming a believable character structure around them. The ones that do stick around longer are usually just more powerful versions of the throngs of chattel, similarly waiting to destroy or be destroyed.

To truly understand your enemies, in virtual life as in real life, you need to be able to engage them in conversation as well as battle. Games like *Indigo Prophecy* and *Knights of the Old Republic* use branching conversations to engage non-player characters, but this method inherently limits what you can say and how the characters can respond. Every path in the question-and-response tree is predetermined, each discrete branch penned beforehand by a writer. The volume of writing can quickly get out of hand, if you let the player make any significant conversational decisions.

To really introduce moral ambiguity into a game, you need a system like that in *Facade*, an art/research project by two artificial intelligence experts. The game invites you into the home of Grace and Trip, a couple in their 10th year of a deeply troubled relationship. The evening starts pleasantly enough, but the resentment between the couple threatens to destroy the civility and possibly the relationship.

You are forced into the viewpoint of the guest, but you aren't limited in what you can say or where you can try to lead the conversation. You can take Trip's side and harp on Grace's insecure need for validation, or you can comfort Grace and defend her from Trip's passive-aggressive barbs. Or you can strive for a balance, picking apart both parties for their petty concerns. Or you can make a pass at the hosts, earning a quick dismissal.

Facade is notable because neither non-player character is the clearly defined bad guy. You're not caught in a battle between good and evil, but between two deeply flawed, deeply sympathetic people. The conflict is more awkward than that of most games, and also more real.

Why aren't more games like this? Well, it took a team of people five years to develop the 20,000 lines of dialogue in *Facade*, and even then, the two main characters tend to repeat themselves after only a few plays. Apparently, it's a lot easier to design a good gun than to design a good, free-flowing conversation.

But despite their limitations, games like *Facade* and *Indigo Prophecy* show that there is at least the potential for videogames to allow players to divine personal as well as tactical knowledge of an enemy. There is potential for a future where game villains aren't just remorseless killing machines, where the bad guy is a sympathetic character that's striving for acceptance and understanding, just like us. When the "love thy enemy" ideal becomes truly integrated in our games, we'll be able to [grok](#) our villains so fully, we won't be able to bear destroying them.

It's enough to give you preemptive nostalgia for the days when Soda Popinski's only goal in life was to "make you feel punch drunk."

The Slow Death of the Game Over

(Originally published in The Escapist, June 5, 2007)

Author's Note: Since this piece was written, the Game Over screen has regained new importance in a few key genres. Death is so central to the ultra-tough *Dark Souls* series (and its imitators) that its famous "You Died" screen has become a meme in addition to a frustrating indication that you need to retreat to the last distant save point and struggle to recover your in-game body.

The growing universe of roguelike games also stress the importance of the Game Over, restarting players back at the beginning of the entire game with a new random seed determining what enemies and items will await them on the next attempt. It just goes to show, in gaming, there are no dead gameplay concepts, just concepts that need to find a new way to be fashionable again.

When was the last time you were really distraught about seeing a game over screen?

Think about it. If you've been playing games for any length of time, you've probably seen hundreds, maybe thousands of game over screens. At one point, these straightforward messages could be taken at face value; as distinct separators between one game and the next. Yet over the last few decades, the game over screen has slowly morphed from a full stop to a perfunctory pause in most games; from a period to a comma in the constantly unfolding gameplay story.

Sure, modern games still penalize failure, but often in the most trivial ways. Getting caught by the police in *Grand Theft Auto III* will roll back your bank account, but will barely do the same to your progress in the game. You'll never see a game over screen in *Jak and Daxter*—the worst punishment there is being sent back to a few hundred feet to the edge of the current environment. Going into a *Metal Gear Solid* boss battle? Just use the codec to save your progress and you can die as many times as you want without having to retrace your steps.

It wasn't always this way. Back in the day, game over screens were a business necessity for arcade owners. More game overs meant more turnover, which meant more quarters and more profit per machine. There was a financial incentive for designers to make games where each play session was nasty, brutish, and short.

Early console games kept this convention going, even though the financial incentive for failure was gone. Getting eaten by a duck-shaped dragon in *Adventure* meant a trip back to the beginning of the maze. Losing all your lives in *Super Mario Bros.* meant going back to the simple, familiar World 1-1 yet again. It was a little tedious, but it gave players a great incentive to get better quickly if they wanted to see that *final* game over screen (You know, the good one. The one where your character doesn't die). The strict punishment for failure also helped stretch out the total play time for games that were severely limited by cartridge storage technology.

As games started to get bigger, though, it was clear that primitive negative reinforcement wasn't going to work anymore. After all, what good is packing dozens of levels into a game if most players will never live long enough to see them. Save systems, passwords and continues became the order of the day, letting players work their way through an epic game piece by piece over many play sessions. The game over screen was slowly changing from a death sentence to a brief setback.

It was still a setback, though—most designers still made sure death had serious consequences. Losing that last heart in *The Legend of Zelda* meant heading all the way back to the beginning of the dungeon. The password system in *Mega Man 2* would only take you to the beginning of Dr. Wily's brutally hard five-stage fortress. Many games offered a limited number of continues, and some that offered infinite continues often had no save system to retain your inevitable progress once the system shut down. Games that were too long to be endurance sprints were instead often into stair-step climbs through a series of breath-catching plateaus.

The beginning of the end for this era came in 1993 when *Doom* burst onto the scene. The seminal first-person shooter popularized many concepts that still impact the gaming world today, but the most insidiously revolutionary was its pervasive save system. Sure, PC simulations and roleplaying games up to that point had routinely let players save their progress at any time, but *Doom* (and its predecessor *Wolfenstein 3D*, to a lesser extent), popularized the idea of the save-anywhere action game. Suddenly, the first time you killed an enemy could also be the last time, provided you remembered to bring up the save window after every significant kill.

It was impossible at the time to appreciate how revolutionary this change would be. On the one hand, the save-anywhere system meant an end to the often tedious process of replaying familiar, already-conquered areas—surely a step forward. On the other hand, the system ruined the tension of not knowing when an errant bullet would ruin all (or at least some) of your careful progress.

With the save-anywhere system, you could always rush in, shooting first and asking questions later, knowing that if you failed you were just a few keystrokes from rushing in again from the

exact same point. Overnight, the stair-step approach to longer games became more like an escalator, albeit one that occasionally stuttered to a stop for a brief game over screen.

In the wake of *Doom*, games slowly but surely became more forgiving and less likely to knock you back more than a few paces just for failing a challenge. *Super Mario 64* allows players to save after every collected power star, rendering the franchise's signature 1-UP mushrooms practically meaningless. Action games like *The Getaway* and *Gears of War* allow injured characters to heal some or all of their health back just by kneeling behind some cover. Player-coddling found its standard-bearer in the quicksave, the one-button immortality machine that became a reflexive part of many post-*Doom* first-person shooters. Kill an enemy, tap "F3." Repeat until you win. Yawn!

The ripple effects of the quicksave revolution aren't all bad. It's easy to wax nostalgic about the game-over-bred familiarity of *Super Mario Bros.*' signature World 1-1, but let's face it, restarting from the beginning every time you died was annoying. Where's the fun in spending hours working through the first four levels of *Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, only to be thrown back to the beginning by a tricky passage in the fifth? Gaming in the days before pervasive saving was often a masochist's errand, and one of limited appeal to anyone who wasn't willing to put in hours of mind-numbing practice.

Still, it's easy to feel that today's gamers are being a bit coddled by the overly forgiving nature of many action games. For evidence, look no further than the tepid critical reaction to a *Dead Rising* save system that actually forced players to (gasp!) find infrequently placed save points. "An awkward save system bogs down your progress more than the repetitious play," moaned a [1UP review](). "Potentially forcing players to replay sections because of an overly punishing save system is the polar opposite of fun" whined a [Gamespot review]().

Still, some writers recognized the importance of limiting a player's outs. "It forces you to put some skin in the game," said *Wired*'s Clive Thompson in a [commentary on the game](). "That's why people seek out life-threatening sports like sheer-face mountain climbing and skydiving. In situations of genuine danger, your senses snap open and you experience things more fully—or, as any extreme athlete would boast, you live more fully."

And even in the age of the quicksave, some games are still trying to capture that extreme sensory snap, God bless 'em. Much of *Resident Evil*'s tension comes from the limited number of saves offered through typewriter ribbons scattered about the game world. *Maximo: Ghosts to Glory* cumulatively raises the cost of each continue, meaning it's possible to run into a brick wall of progression after hours of play and dozens of play sessions. *Steel Battalion*, in an extreme example of negative reinforcement, actually deletes your save file if you fail to hit a pyrex-encased eject button on the game's massive joystick before you die.

Are these systems annoying? Sure. Do they sap the fun out of a game? Occasionally. But in an age where everyone seems to run from responsibility, it's nice to see some games are willing to let you know that screwing up has consequences. So here's a toast to the punishing, brutal, unforgiving, masochistic games of the world—the kinds of games brave enough to have game over screens that actually mean the game is over. For those about to die, we salute you!

The Game at the End of the Bar

(Originally published in The Escapist, Aug. 14, 2007)

Author's Note: It turns out the games described in this piece weren't "the future of the arcade" as I suggested. The era of touchscreen games on a bartop couldn't survive the era of everyone having a touchscreen game machine in their pockets. Megatouch LLC retired the brand for good in 2014, after 35 years of entertaining bar patrons. JVL's iTouch line eventually evolved into the flatscreen Echo, but the social media accounts for the machine's official US distributor haven't been updated since 2016.

There's still a small community of restorers that maintain and sell old Megatouch machines for the nostalgic few that remember them fondly, but there isn't much demand for new machines these days. That makes this piece an interesting time capsule looking at the under-remembered coin-op phenomenon that helped set the stage for today's mobile gaming revolution.

The American arcade industry is dying. Sure, there are still some signs of life in the huge, multifaceted family entertainment centers like Dave & Busters, and your local mini-golf course or bowling alley might have a few antiquated games, but the conventional wisdom today maintains that the real action in American gaming can be found inside the home.

But what if I told you there was an arcade revolution going on right under your nose? What if I told you American manufacturers were putting out svelte, flatscreen machines with dozens of games, flashing LED exteriors and 3D graphics? What if I told you the top manufacturer of these machines currently has 250,000 units on the market, rivaling the imprint of mega-selling classics like *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong* in their heyday, and brings in over a billion dollars a year?

What if I told you there was probably one in your neighborhood?

The arcade isn't dying. You just have to change your idea of what an arcade is.

To see what I mean, head down to your nearest drinking establishment. Sit down, order a drink and steal a glance over to the end of the bar. More than likely, there'll be some sort of countertop touch screen unit sitting there with a name like Megatouch or iTouch emblazoned on the side. You may even remember sticking a dollar in one a few years back, when you had nothing better to do.

But these machines have plenty of devoted players that stick in more than just an errant dollar. Some sit there alone, feeding dollar after dollar into the machine and tapping at a simple card game in an effort to beat the high score of a stranger from across the country. Some will gather around the unit on Friday night with three or four of their closest friends, yelling out the answers to trivia questions that would be simple if they weren't so drunk. Some hunch over the screen distractedly, killing time with a quick jigsaw puzzle as they chat with a co-worker and wash away the memory of the workday.

This is the future of the arcade; beer-soaked, extremely social and super casual.

How did it come to this? "The arcade got too complicated," says Steve White, editor of coin-op industry magazine *RePlay*. "Designers were designing for themselves, for other designers, for top-end players. ... They forgot that the vast majority of game players have and always will be casual players."

White sees today's touchscreen games partly as an attempt to capture the essence that made arcade games popular in the first place. "Look back at the glory days of video," he says. "*Pac-Man*, *Donkey Kong*, *Space Invaders* ... they're all pretty simple games to play, but hard to master. I think you see that tradition living on in some of the software in the touchscreen games today."

"When I was a kid, I used to love to go to the arcade to play *Defender* and *Robotron*," says Colin Higbie, Director of Marketing for Merit Entertainment, which controls the lion's share of the touchscreen countertop market. "But would I go there today when I can play *Knights of the Old Republic* at home on a giant screen with Surround Sound? No. But if I'm at a bar, I'll throw a few dollars in the pool table, the jukebox, or a Megatouch for a game of *Photo Hunt* or *Dodge Bull*."

Since 1977, Merit has been focused on producing casual games for the bar and restaurant market. In 1981, they introduced *Pit Boss*, a six-in-one casino game and the first countertop arcade unit. In 1994, they introduced their first touchscreen game, the *Super Touch 30*. During its tenure, Merit has fended off challenges from many competitors, including Midway, whose now-defunct *TouchMaster* arcade game series was recently revived as a Nintendo DS game. Merit currently holds 70 to 85 percent of the coin-operated touchscreen market, with much of the remainder belonging to up-and-comer JVL Entertainment and its iTouch line.

Higbie says Merit's success has come from their simple game design mantra. "We ... love games that we can play with one hand, while drinking a beer with the other." On that score, Merit's games succeed with flying colors. Not one of the dozens of games available on a single Megatouch unit requires more than one finger to play masterfully, and most have rules that can be summed up in a sentence or two. "As players, many of us love some of the more complex

games, *World of Warcraft*, *Oblivion* and so on," he says, "but as developers, we have a real talent for writing very simple games that play out well in just a few minutes of play."

Some might call it a real talent for appropriation. Like many casual PC games, most Megatouch games can trace their lineage back to real-world analogues or classic hits like *Breakout* and *Bejeweled*. The "Strategy" selection on the Merit Megatouch Aurora, for instance, contains highly innovative titles like Battle Command (*Battleship*), Big Time Roller (*Yahtzee*) and Backjammin' (you get three guesses).

What Merit's games lack in originality, though, they make up for in execution. "They've consistently developed good software that has wide player appeal," *RePlay*'s White says. "What they've been able to do over time is develop games that are easy to play but have a compelling hook that kind of keeps you coming back."

These simple hooks, when combined with plenty of alcohol for lubrication, can lead to a deep connection between player and machine. "If you go into a bar and you talk to somebody, people won't say, 'I like to play the Megatouch,'" White says. "They'll say, 'I like to play the blah blah blah, [a specific game on the unit]. They really come to identify with the software."

On a recent "research" crawl of Laurel, Md. area bars (during which I found five Megatouch machines and two JVL iTouch units), I ran into Brian, who was already on his sixth beer. Brian sat next to me while I was in the middle of a particularly close Megatouch air hockey battle and promptly started cheering me on against my buxom computer-controlled opponent.

At first, Brian said he "never" played those games, then he admitted he sometimes played "when I'm waiting for someone." After about five minutes, he finally owned up to a minor addiction to *Conquest*, a surprisingly complex contest of board control involving jumping and cloning adjacent octopuses on a hex-field. A challenge was quickly issued and accepted, and while the match itself wasn't very interesting (owing mostly to our very different levels of inebriation), the camaraderie we built over the game reminded me of similarly quick friendships forged over *Street Fighter* or *DDR* in old-school arcades.

Granted, any game is gonna seem interesting at a bar with lots of alcohol and little else to do. Could these touchscreen games succeed in massive location-based entertainment complexes, where they might have to compete with go karts, laser tag, and flashy upright cabinets? Some think they could.

"When a family comes in, it's nice to have games for all ages," says Jon W. Brady, Vice President of Brady Distributing and Chairman of the American Amusement Machine Association. "You have to find the content that will keep not only kids happy, but also mom and dad. Our biggest challenge is just convincing a location that they need a countertop product."

The touchscreen's appeal to women is also a big selling point. "What you'll notice more in a location that has a countertop, you'll see a female warm up to that a lot quicker than she would a normal videogame," he says.

Younger teens show the least interest in the touchscreen games, but Merit is also working on this problem. In 2005, the MegaTouch Ion Elite Edge kept the touchscreen but added a miniature joystick and two action buttons to the front of the unit. Games for the unit include a penguin-based *Frogger* clone, a basic 3D racer (complete with first-person view option) and an *R-Type* style space shooter. "With almost 200 games currently on our system, we thought we could reach out to another segment of players who really wanted to play these action games, especially as the classic arcade games became harder to find elsewhere," Higbie says.

Merit says there's been a strong response to the joystick, but not everyone agrees. "The joystick games haven't been received as well as they would have liked," Brady said, "but I really think there's some content there that's needed."

So what's next for these titans of the bar gaming scene? Online gaming is a key growth area, Higbie says, and Merit would like to expand beyond its 10,000 or so connected machines to allow more players to compete in head-to-head competitions and online high-score tournaments. "Tournaments really drive gameplay," Brady says. "Patrons really like to compete, to have your name on that leaderboard, being king of the location or the region as the case may be. That's just human nature."

The World in a Chain Chomp

(Originally published in The Escapist, April 19, 2011)

Author's Note: Ten years after the publication of this piece, *Super Mario Bros. 3* remains the quintessential Mario experience to me. More recent Mario games have added plenty of new features and clever new twists on the formula, but none have really had the same capacity to surprise.

A lot of that is simply because *SMB3* came first, and defined what it means for a Mario game to *be* surprising. But a lot of it also has to do with the specific elements discussed in this piece, which show a creative team at the height of its imaginative powers willing to push the hardware in new ways.

Everything that makes *Super Mario Bros. 3* truly special is exemplified, for me, by a single image: A chain chomp breaking free of its bonds and bouncing off the screen.

You'd be forgiven if you didn't know that chain chomps—the toothy, black, ball-on-a-chain-meets-guard-dogs that first appear in level 2-5—could actually break free from their eponymous chains. A chomp has to lunge a full 47 times for its silver chain to start flashing a distressing red, and it takes three more lunges for the chomp to finally break free and bounce towards Mario. The entire process takes about 175 ticks of the in-game timer, depending on how much Mario goads the chomp. That's easily seven times as long as even the slowest of players usually takes to jump past those snapping teeth and on to the next challenge, without a second thought for the poor, imprisoned enemy they're leaving behind.

On first glance, this hidden extra seems like a relatively meaningless addition to the game, the kind of pointless Easter egg a bored programmer might have thrown together during a coffee break without anyone else on the development team noticing. But taken in the context of the game as a whole, that chain chomp's potential for freedom is emblematic of the way *Super Mario Bros. 3* subverts players' expectations to make a game that feels truly magical.

It starts in the very first level, with an item block that's stubbornly attached to the ground. Immediately, the player has to throw out the notion ingrained by the original *Super Mario Bros.* that all such blocks must be attacked with a jump from below. Then there's that familiar diagonal line of coins over the game's first major gap, inviting the player up into the sky, practically

begging them to figure out how to fly higher than they've ever been able to go, unassisted, in previous Mario games.

The game hints at this potential with another seemingly meaningless touch—the way Mario sticks his arms out, like a child pretending to be an airplane, when he's achieved liftoff speed. Even without a raccoon tail equipped, Mario's jumping animation is slightly different when he leaves the ground at this speed; his feet coming to a graceful V behind him, his body rounded to achieve maximum aerodynamics.

It's important to note here how rare such animated touches were at the time *Super Mario Bros. 3* came out. Due to a combination of limited digital storage space, tight project deadlines, and the difficulty of evoking detail with small, pixelated sprites, most early NES games had decidedly limited character animation. The average platform game character of the day was lucky to have three distinct frames of running animation, one of which might have been reused as a jumping pose. Mario's few frames of extra animation somehow made him seem more real, more alive than other videogame characters of the time.

Mario's animation in *Super Mario Bros. 3* has been touched up in a number of other subtle ways. When powered by an invincibility-granting Starman, for instance, Mario adds a tight mid-air somersault to his jump. When launching into the air after a steep downhill slide, he flutters his legs in a sign that he's uncharacteristically not really in control of his own momentum.

The game's wide variety of enemies, too, seem to go out of their way to constantly show they're more than virtual automatons. It starts in the first moments of World 2, when a leaping micro-Goomba first camouflages itself in a seemingly routine stack of blocks. It continues later in World 2 when an angry-looking sun spends the first half of the level masquerading as a harmless background decoration, before transforming in the second half into a swirling and swooping menace that dive bombs Mario at the most inopportune moments. The enemy surprises last until the very end of the game, when a set of harmless-looking statues in the game's final level spit lasers at Mario with a shrill sound effect that still startles me to this day.

Super Mario Bros. 3 is also full of enemies that have evolved from their similar forms in the original *Super Mario Bros.*, from fire-spitting piranha plants to Hammer Bros. that now throw boomerangs to the fearsome Big Bertha, an over-sized fish that can swallow Mario whole, power-ups and all.

But some enemies even show evolution within the game itself. Take the mother-and-children groupings of squid-like bloopers, which travel in straight, zig-zagging patterns for much of the game, before suddenly exploding in a starburst attack in World 6. The familiar Bullet Bills evolve

into Missile Bills late in the game, with the added ability to turn in mid-air and hone in on Mario. And of course World 4 produces an entire set of levels where once-familiar enemies have become gigantic (though Big Bertha has, hilariously, been replaced by a relatively harmless Cheep-Cheep in level 4-2).

Again, it's important to remember how rare this kind of enemy variety was in the context of the games of the time, which had limited storage space to waste on countless enemies with unique attack patterns. Even *Super Mario Bros. 3* is guilty of this, throwing in perhaps too many Goombas and Koopa Troopas than are strictly necessary in some parts. But the slight variations on the familiar forms made the game world feel like a truly diverse ecosystem, where spotting the rare, fire-spitting Nipper Plant in World 7 could make you feel like the star bird-watcher at the Audubon Society.

Remember, too, that *Super Mario Bros. 3* came along just before games were suddenly all-but-required to include a save feature. The limited lives and the prospect of starting over from the beginning of a world made each power up and coin-filled secret area in the game all the more worthwhile.

Exploring each level with a fine-tooth comb wasn't just a matter of wandering through a high gloss virtual movie set, as with so many of today's games. Exploration was a survival strategy—a way to build up an edge for the punishingly tough levels you knew were coming. Even if you used the common trick of bouncing on Goombas endlessly to get 99 lives in level 1-2 (and really, who didn't?), knowing the location of a hidden raccoon leaf could spell the difference between spending minutes or hours on a tough level.

That basic difficulty would invariably fade with countless playthroughs and developing reflexes, of course. But there was something about the world of *Super Mario Bros. 3* that draws you back in long after you're able to speed through all 90 levels in a couple of hours (or use warp whistles to polish off the game during a shortened lunch break). Even if you're good enough to dash through the game like that, chances are that won't be the only way you revisit the game. That's because just running to the end of the level as fast as possible means failing to appreciate so many little touches that make the game special.

Rushing through means forgoing the opportunity to lounge around in the coin-filled floating oasis hidden atop level 2-4. It means not stopping to swim in the floating waterfalls of World 4, or appreciating the random Cheep-Cheep that bounces between icy puddles in World 6. It means not spending a half hour and dozens of lives trying to collect 78 coins in level 6-7 to unlock the

white Mushroom House with the near-worthless anchor (an meta-goal that predated the Xbox 360's Achievement system by at least 15 years).

Rushing through also means missing out on [Kuribo's Shoe](), gaming's equivalent of the Girl Scout cookie. Found exclusively in level 5-3, the Shoe is a tasty treat, but its abilities are relatively plain. The Frog Suit provides the same high jumping and awkward forward movement, after all, while a Fire Flower can just as easily dispose of those Spinies and Piranha Plants that Kuribo's-shoe-equipped players can safely leap on with glee.

But, like Girl Scout cookies, we revel in the experience of the Shoe because we don't know exactly when we're going to get to experience its particular flavor again. Just getting to level 5-3, even with warp whistles, is a process that takes ten minutes or so for most *Super Mario Bros. 3* players. Once the level's complete, you can't climb in the Shoe again without starting the entire world over. Later, save-file-equipped re-releases changed those timing equations a bit, but the sheer ephemeral nature of each level in the original *Super Mario Bros. 3* made it an experience you wanted to savor before it was gone for good.

Which brings us back to that escaping Chain Chomp. The more I think about it, the more I think that broken chain was a part of a conscious effort by the developers to pack the title with as many unexpected, memorable moments as possible. I think of it as part of a pattern of design decisions intended to impart to the player that nothing in *Super Mario Bros. 3* is necessarily what it seems. Here is a world where what's coming around the next corner might not be like what was around the last one, but it'll definitely be worth seeing.

To me, that broken chain represents the Mario development team breaking free of the genre conventions they themselves had created, and pledging that a Mario player will never be able to take anything for granted.

Retro-Colored Glasses

(Originally published in The Escapist, July 13, 2011)

Author's Note: Video game nostalgia is probably bigger now than it ever has been, with the generation that grew up on 8- and 16-bit games growing into the parenthood and disposable income that comes with middle age. As such, a whole new generation of young gamers are being exposed to games that their parents played well before they were ever born. Surprisingly enough, some of them are getting hooked on these classic games, forming communities around speedrunning, ROM hacks, and simple fan appreciation of the whole aesthetic.

While Atari 2600 games have their charm, they might be gaming's version of the silent film era; notable for artistic and technical achievements in their own right, but of limited appeal to a modern audience used to basic technological upgrades. Maybe video games reached an inflection point in the mid-'80s that allows for truly "timeless" games to continue finding new audiences over the span of years and generational change.

I've always found people who love the Atari 2600 a little bewildering. Sure, I can understand the power of nostalgia, and on a purely intellectual level I can see their rose-tinted love for Atari's first home console mirrored my equally rose-tinted love of the Nintendo Entertainment System, which I played obsessively while growing up in the late '80s and early '90s.

Looking at things as objectively as I could, though, I just couldn't see what Atari lovers saw in their system. I recognized that genre-spawning games like *Pitfall!* and *Adventure* were revolutionary for their time, but their limited, one-button gameplay and blocky graphics seemed decidedly worse than the likes of *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda*, not to mention the countless, fully realized 3D worlds they eventually spawned. Much as the iPhone 4 is better in every way than the original iPhone, I felt that Atari 2600 games had been rendered obsolete by subsequent titles that were strictly superior in every way.

This phenomenon was a bit troublesome to me as a supporter of the inherent, artistic value of games. After all, plenty of people still love classic novels, classic rock, and black-and-white movies made decades before they were born. Shakespeare and opera and Renaissance painting and classical music have all survived as celebrated works that can move people centuries later, so why couldn't I appreciate the value of a console that died off as a market force just a few years before I started playing video games?

Will kids growing up today see my beloved NES as a similar anachronism that can't hold a candle to the Wii titles they grew up with? Does the force of nostalgia make anything that came before a player's first video game experience defunct by definition?

That's what I wanted to find out. So, with as open a mindset as I could muster, I decided to track down an old Atari 2600 system and some games, hook them up to my old, underused cathode ray tube TV, and immerse myself in a generation of home gaming that I had previously given only the most cursory and dismissive of glances.

The Escapist's Susan Arendt [recently wrote](#) about the simple, magical joy she found as a child, learning she could control what happened on her TV for the first time. I was going to find out if a 28-year-old—with a lifetime of gaming experience but without the benefit of such Atari-related childhood memories—could capture that same magic roughly three decades later.

"I think it's one of those 'you had to be there' things," said Gozillajoe, a poster on the fan community forums at AtariAge.com, when I [asked for help learning to love the Atari 2600](#). "For those of us who lived through this period of history I think there's a kind of innate understanding that we have that may be difficult to communicate [to] the generations who came after," agreed poster almightytodd. "In much the same way that some people can't appreciate certain art movements because they can't broaden their horizon of what art is, some people will simply be unable to appreciate the 2600 experience," wrote a poster by the handle RevEng.

Not exactly the most encouraging words to launch my project. But other posters were more helpful in recommending favorite games to track down, and many tried to help me get in the right headspace to understand the Atari 2600. The most important suggestion may have been from a poster who recommended blasting '80s tunes to fill in the lack of background music in most Atari games (if Pandora's 'Journey' station doesn't make you want to grab an Atari joystick, nothing will).

A more common suggestion, though, was to first change the way I think about why I'm playing games in the first place. A poster going by the name Amstari spoke for many in summing up the Atari difference: "The objective in a lot of games on the NES was to finish the game, but many 2600 games don't have an end, the goal is to improve your high score."

Luckily this is something I've had experience with, both as a frequent childhood visitor to the arcade cabinets at my local Chuck E. Cheese and as a sometimes obsessive player of score-oriented NES games like *Pinball* and *Balloon Fight*. (I even briefly held the Twin Galaxies world record in one mode of the latter.) Learning to tolerate games that always end in player failure wasn't something I was going to have a problem with.

The most difficult, yet necessary, mental adjustment would surely be suppressing my natural urge to compare Atari 2600 titles to those that came afterwards. Game researcher and Georgia Tech professor Ian Bogost, who co-wrote the technically-focused Atari 2600 appreciation book *Racing The Beam*, urged me in an email conversation to ignore the technical and design advancements that came after these classic games and instead try to appreciate them in the context of their time.

"You can't go back, and to judge [Atari 2600 games] based on today's standards is folly," he said. "The only way they will 'hold up' is given a more complex approach to evaluating them than just playing them without sentiment."

But when I argued back that such sentiment would be practically impossible for me to manufacture without the benefits of nostalgia, Bogost grudgingly agreed.

"It has to be an intellectual experience, for better or worse," he conceded.

My intellectual response to the first evening with the Atari 2600 was an aching wrist. Not only did the massive, rubberized block that is the system's standard joystick take ridiculous amounts of force to move a tiny amount (perhaps due to sticky aging plastic), but the directional input it sent to the system was often not the one I had intended. The wrist pain would ease as I changed my grip and learned to moderate my movements, but the fact that I had to make these adjustments at all highlighted the size of the generational gulf I was trying to cross.

It took about a week to weed out the duds from the motley collection of a few dozen Atari cartridges I'd obtained from bulk online purchases. First out were the games that were too screen-flickeringly ugly for me to even look at, no matter how hard I tried to accept them as "a product of a different time" (*Pac-Man, Asteroids*). Next out were the games that were too maddeningly abstract for me to understand how to play well, even after looking up instructions online (*Star Raiders*, *Superman*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). Then there were titles I just found too painfully limited compared to the well-remembered arcade originals I couldn't help but wish I was playing instead (*Donkey Kong*, *Pole Position*).

Some titles had little technical quirks that I found myself unable to forgive, like the way the ball went through the sides of bricks in *Breakout* rather than bouncing off at an angle, as in every other version of the title I'd ever played. Other titles, like *Golf* and *Video Pinball*, had physics engines that felt like they were trying to power a space shuttle with a single abacus—admirable for their effort, but doomed to failure.

With the duds out of the way, though, I was surprised to find I still had quite a few games that provided that just-right mix of simplicity, tight control, and subtle randomness to form a truly addictive high score challenge. Even more surprising, they weren't all just rehashing the same basic gameplay. There was pure, zen-like reflex testing in games like *Enduro* and *Kaboom!*; more deliberate, strategic path-finding in titles like *Berzerk*, *Frogger*, and *Ms. Pac-Man*; targeting and visual acuity challenges in *Missile Command* and *Space Invaders*; and tight battles of positioning in *Joust*, *River Raid*, and *Yars' Revenge*.

The immediate appeal of all of these titles came down to the clear link between a death and an easily preventable mistake I knew I had made. I found myself so obsessed with reviewing my actions and kicking myself for my errors that I barely cared that the games mostly looked and sounded like something the cat dragged in. In fact, the abstract blockiness of those graphics made it somewhat easier to relax my concentration and enter that rarefied zone where the next correct move seems to flow naturally without thought ... until it doesn't and you die yet again, of course.

On the one hand, the simplicity of these titles meant I wouldn't unearth many hidden strategic depths after hours of play, as I might in a modern real-time strategy game or even a first-person shooter. On the other hand, I never needed to wonder if a suboptimal mining strategy was the real reason for my loss or figure out where an unseen sniper's bullet actually came from. In a world of modern games where presentational cruft and needless complexity often gets in the way of simple comprehensibility, there's something to be said for titles where everything you need to know can be boiled down into one screen of blocky, brightly colored pixels.

After spending a fortnight or two devoting a little time each day to the Atari 2600, I began to see what made the system such a success in its time. Though the general reaction to the technology has slowly morphed from "Oh my God, that's amazing!" to "Oh my God, people thought that was amazing?" over the decades, the game design that lets players ride that fine line between success and failure has held up surprisingly well, for those that take the time to find it.

But Bogost and the AtariAge posters were also right in that you can't truly recreate the context that established these games—that of childhood. Had I been around during the Atari 2600's heyday, battling friends in a *Combat* tournament or trying to post the highest *Berzerk* score on the block would have likely been my all-consuming passions. Today, my friends are too busy playing *Starcraft 2* or *League of Legends* to really indulge me in any such battles (though I did attract some interest when I busted out competitive snake-game *Surround* at a recent party). I

could capture some of that feeling competing with unseen strangers online, but it wouldn't be the same.

And my own circumstances have changed just as much as my environment. When I was eight, I'm sure I'd have been happy to spend an entire after-school afternoon mastering the precise timing and positioning needed to hop on those damned crocodile heads in *Pitfall!*. These days, I find myself crankily blaming the game's touchy jumping controls after becoming a meal for a few dozen crocodiles, and worrying about the errands and deadlines that would suffer if I stayed up too late improving my performance.

This gets into why I feel my beloved NES games have aged better than the Atari 2600 titles that are, to me, just a few weeks old. The classics of the NES library retain the simplicity of form and function of the previous generation, but add a technologically enabled internal variety that lets players move through a slowly evolving experience over many nights. Squeezing an hour of *Metroid* into a busy work week might get me a new item and one step closer to the eventual goal of Mother Brain. Squeezing in a similar hour of *Space Invaders* might get me a new high score (if I'm lucky) but no closer to any kind of novelty in the experience.

I'd like to say that these differences are independent of my nostalgic memories, and that the NES just stands the test of time better than its predecessors. But that's impossible for me to say for sure. What I can say is that while it seems I've missed my chance to love the Atari 2600 with the fervor of the nostalgic generation that grew up with it, at least I no longer find that generation quite so bewildering.

Do *Arkham City*'s Language Critics Have A Right To 'Bitch'?

(Originally published in Gamasutra, Oct. 28, 2011)

Amidst the glowing reviews and strong sales that surrounded last week's release of *Batman: Arkham City*, one little issue stuck out for a fair number of players.

Kotaku's Kirk Hamilton referred to the problem succinctly as the game's "weird 'bitch' fixation," arguing the male characters' frequent use of the word to describe female characters like Catwoman and Harley Quinn crossed the "fine line between edgy dialogue and forced, angry overkill."

"It comes off like the writers are either misjudging their audience, or possibly aren't comfortable portraying fearsome female characters without having the male characters attempt to belittle them with the world's most famous gendered insult," he wrote.

The reaction to the idea among people I've read and talked with online ran the gamut. For some, that single word was enough to sour their entire experience the entire game, or at least dissuade them from plans to play it with children present.

For others, the word passed by without note—just part of the kind of background language they hear in their everyday lives. Others still thought it was ridiculous to even be discussing the use of a mild curse word in a game that already features depictions of torture, murder and general property destruction.

And, as Hamilton noted, it's not just the cursing itself that has been the issue for some, but specifically the repetition of the word "bitch," a word that carries such misogynistic connotations.

Those different reactions highlight how the perception of cursing is highly dependent on the sensitivities and experiences of the specific audience member, according to Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts cognitive psychology professor and "Why We Curse" author Timothy Jay.

"I think it's dangerous to make blanket statements about the effect of a medium on people when we all have different sensibilities on these things," Jay told Gamasutra. "It depends on the level of literacy of the person playing the game. For some people they're going to be distracted by it

and bothered by it, and other people are going to report that it's really not that notable. Perceptions are going to be variable."

While some curse words, especially the "explicit" ones dealing with sexual and excretory function [i.e. "fuck" and "shit" -ed.], have maintained their strong offensive power pretty consistently for hundreds of years, others like "hell" or "goddamn" have gradually lost much of their effect over the years through frequent, everyday use. Jay said he thinks the same process may be happening with the word "bitch" as it has increasingly entered mainstream use through hip hop and rap culture over the past few decades.

"[Bitch] is pretty common," he said. "Even using it as 'I'm gonna eat that sandwich, yeah I'm gonna eat that bitch.' It's used as a punctuation point. ... We went through this with the word 'sucks.' When I was in school, sucks meant cocksucker. Now we've got a whole generation of people growing up with the word meaning 'I don't like it.' The word bitch might go through its fad use now, it might become less powerful and take on a different meaning."

Of course, one of the reasons "bitch" stands out so much in *Arkham City* is the general lack of other cursing throughout the game (unless you count even milder words like "ass" and "bastard" as curses). A word like "bitch" wouldn't even register as a blip amidst the high-frequency, over-the-top profanity of an M-rated game like *Bulletstorm* or *House of the Dead: Overkill*. But in a T-rated title set in a classic comic book universe, should players expect even somewhat weakened profanity like this?

"There's really no formal set of rules or policies dictating that specific language will result in a certain rating or content descriptor," the Entertainment Software Rating Board's Eliot Mizrachi told Gamasutra. "Just as with other media like TV and film, there's a contextual element in dialogue that matters in terms of assigning ratings. So it's impossible to say that the presence of a particular term, or a given number of instances of that term, will inevitably produce a certain rating."

That said, Mizrachi notes that the [official description for a T rating](#) includes the possibility of "infrequent use of strong language," and that [the rating summary for *Arkham City*](#) mentions cursing and includes a "Mild Language" content descriptor.

"So it shouldn't necessarily come as a surprise, particularly given the presence of the other types of content in the game and its overall nature and tone," Mizrachi said. "Besides, it's not uncommon to find [bitch] used in many other products rated for a 13+ audience, including movies and TV shows."

While Mizrachi says cursing alone probably wouldn't raise the rating of a game that already has other potentially objectionable content, salty language can prevent an otherwise squeaky-clean game from getting the family-friendly "E for Everyone" rating that applies to the vast majority of releases.

But this brings up the question of why cursing should factor into a game content rating scheme at all. Are we really protecting anyone when we make it a little bit harder to play a game with a few curse words thrown in?

"In general, nobody's going to learn the word 'bitch' by playing a video game," Jay notes. "They all know what it is, probably by the time they get to elementary school."

And there's even a certain marketing logic to pushing that language barrier. "These media are manufactured to make money," Jay says. "You can bet your boots if people hear that this has bad language in it, that's going to be a method of attraction for a lot of kids. Not so much for their parents, but you know teenagers—they'll find *Grand Theft Auto*, they'll find an R-rated movie, and some kid at somebody's house will have that and then kids will use it and they will be titillated by the adult content. That's the way it's been forever."

The question of whether to include cursing in a game's dialogue is all about context. While a family-friendly *Mario* game would sound ridiculous with coarse language of any kind, a hard-bitten game like *Gears of War 3* would sound just as ridiculous without it. *Batman: Arkham City* runs into problems because, to some extent, it tries to inhabit both worlds—the game wants to appeal to today's hero-worshipping kids without coming off as too watered-down for the hero-loving adults that yesterday's children have grown into.

Threading the needle like this isn't impossible, but the brouhaha over *Arkham City*'s "bitch fixation" may prove that gently pushing the language barrier, without breaking all the way through it, may actually represent the worst of both worlds.

COMMERCE

Hard Drivin', Hard Bargainin': Investigating Midway's 'Ghost Racer' Patent

(Originally published on Gamasutra, June 18, 2007)

Author's Note: It's a little weird to think of common game mechanics as patentable ideas on the order of the light bulb or a steam engine, but it's a surprisingly common phenomenon in the game industry. In addition to the examples cited here, game elements like *Mass Effect*'s dialogue wheel and *Eternal Darkness'* sanity meter were all granted patents limiting copycats.

This can have some heavy implications for what developers can do with their games. The idea of a mini-game that plays during a loading screen, for instance, was patented by Namco back in 1995, creating a monopoly on the idea that didn't expire until 2015. This despite the fact that plenty of prior art existed that implemented the same basic idea decades before Namco's *Ridge Racer* did so on the original PlayStation. But none of those developers thought to file a patent, so here we are...

If a patent is filed in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and no one is around to enforce it, does it make any money?

This somewhat zen query actually hides a serious business question about the best way to extract value from a video game patent. Sure, there's some prestige associated with publicly staking your claim to a game design idea before anyone else. But prestige doesn't pay the bills. It takes a significant investment of time and money to get a patent—between 18 and 30 months and thousands of dollars in filing fees on average, according to PatentInfo.com. That's a big investment to make if you don't have a clear plan for turning a profit.

In the video game world, there are two indirect ways to make money off a game-related patent. You can hold the patent over the heads of potential competitors like a Sword of Damocles, using the threat of litigation to secure a lucrative monopoly on a hot genre or technology. Or you can be more active about the legal threat, bringing suits against infringers to extract favorable settlements from defendants who are usually unwilling or unable to defend their use of a patented game element in court.

But there's a much more direct way to make money from that moldy old patent—by renting it out in the form of license fees to other companies. At least one company has been using this method since at least 2001, making money off a set of patented designs that traces its lineage back to a game from the late '80s.

Look carefully at the legal fine print associated with games like Sony Online Entertainment's *GripShift*, Namco's *Ridge Racer 6* and Sega's *Outrun 2006: Coast 2 Coast* and you'll find the following cryptic bit of legalese: "US Patent Nos. 5,269,687; 5,354,202 and 5,577,913 used under license from Midway Games West Inc. All rights reserved."

See if you can guess what these patents cover based on this easy-to-follow excerpt from patent '913:

> "A first driver responsive software having a buffer, wherein the first driver responsive software is representative of a first user and responsive to said position information provided by the first user, and wherein the first driver responsive software stores in the buffer a first route of said simulated vehicle taken by the first user through said simulated environment, replays the first route on said video display, and stores at least one parameter indicative of a performance characteristic of the first route in the buffer; and
>
> A second driver responsive software representative of a second user, wherein the second driver responsive software is responsive to said position information provided by the second user for a first time, and wherein the second driver responsive software displays a second route of said simulated vehicle taken by the second user through said simulated environment and determines at least one parameter indicative of a performance characteristic of the second route;
>
> Wherein said first route is replayed simultaneously with said display of said second route on said video display; and
>
> Wherein a best route through the simulated environment is selected by comparing route parameters indicative of the first and second routes."

If you were able to condense this mouthful of a description down to "a ghost mode in a racing game," you win a prize for succinctness that a patent lawyer could never dream of winning.

The patents Midway is licensing derive from the [1989 Atari Games arcade hit *Hard Drivin'*](#), the first racing game to let players race against a translucent, ghost-like recording of their previous

run. In 1993 and 1994, *Hard Drivin'* Project Manager Rick Moncrief and programmers Max Behensky and Stephanie Mott filed the patents cited above on behalf of Atari Games. The patents were all granted by 1996, just in time for Midway to buy up the remnants of Atari Games, including their patents, from Time Warner.

Midway spun the Atari Games division off into Midway Games West in 2000, and the renamed company updated its claim by filing U.S. patent 6,755,654 for a "system and method of vehicle competition with enhanced ghosting features" in 2002.

The updated patent was granted in June of 2004, though the licensing language for the older patents first appeared in the instruction booklet for Microsoft's *Project Gotham Racing* in 2001. Since then, Midway has gathered "about a dozen or so licenses for its ghosting patents," according to its legal team.

"It's more of a unique [patent] than other things I've seen," said Debbie Minardi, vice president of corporate development at Global VR. Minardi acquired one of those dozen or so ghosting patent licenses for a "Shadow Attack" mode in the arcade version of *Need for Speed: Underground*.

While Minardi acknowledges that the ghost mode is more original than some of the "you've got to be kidding me" patents she's come across, she says it still probably doesn't deserve full legal protection. "If it was me I'd never have given them a patent on it," she said. Taking that conviction to court, though, is another matter entirely. "Patents like these probably are easy enough to argue against, but it's expensive," she said.

How expensive? A 2001 survey from the American Intellectual Property Law Association put the median cost of high-stakes patent cases at $1.5 million. Even if you can afford to defend your case to the end, there's a good chance you'll lose—a 2002 U.S. Dept. of Justice Special Report showed plaintiffs winning 59.3 percent of patent infringement cases and getting a median $2.3 million in damages for their trouble.

"Patents have a presumption of validity when they're issued from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office," said Ross Dannenberg, an attorney at Banner & Witcoff and editor-in-Chief of PatentArcade.com. "In order to infringe a patent, someone has to perform every element of at least one claim. If you infringe just one claim, you infringe the patent."

But that applies to patents for physical products and inventions. Can a patent on an abstract gameplay feature really hold up in court? It's hard to generalize, Dannenberg says, because such cases are pretty rare—one comes to court roughly once every two years. Most such cases

are settled out of court before a judgment can be rendered, making it hard to draw meaningful statistics from the available case law.

Most patent litigation hinges on the idea of obviousness—whether an idea is truly original or is just a simple, immediately apparent extension of prior art. It's a fine line, and one that game patents can easily fall on either side of.

Magnavox's original patent on its Odyssey console—and the idea of *Pong*-style games in general—has held up well in three different patent infringement lawsuits against companies including Mattel and Activision. But a loss in court can leave a company with a weaker patent, as happened in 1994 when Capcom failed to prove Data East's *Fighter's History* infringed on its *Street Fighter* franchise.

The Global VR team learned of Midway's ghost mode patents not through any legal threat, but through an ex-Atari employee who remembered his old employer's claim on the idea while working on *Need For Speed: Underground*. On the urging of the employee, who really wanted a ghost mode in the new game, Minardi and her team did a cost analysis to figure out how much the feature was worth and how many more units it would sell.

In the end, the value to Global VR ended up being almost exactly what Midway was charging for the license, an amount that Minardi described as "pretty reasonable." Neither Midway nor any company we talked to for this story would comment on the exact price for such a license, but Dannenberg estimated it could run "anywhere from thousands of dollars to millions of dollars." In other circumstances, Minardi said the team could have saved some money by tweaking the gameplay just enough to avoid infringement, but "instead of coming up with that creative approach, with a time crunch you do that cost analysis."

What about companies that don't stumble across the patent on their own? Midway's legal team says the company "aggressively polices and protects its patent portfolio," but a few games inevitably slip through the cracks. "I'm sure there's people infringing," Minardi said of Global VR's own technology patents. "The question becomes: OK, do I have the time to go out there and find it."

And when you do find the odd infringer? "What happens in most cases is people don't even know they're infringing," Minardi said. "Anytime I've seen that stuff happen, people have been really good. People just want you to be aware of it." And maybe make some money while they're making you aware of it.

Indie Game Store

(Originally published in The Escapist, Nov. 20, 2007)

Author's Note: When this piece was written, independent game stores were facing crushing competition from big box retailers and the game-focused behemoth of Gamestop. Today, the big box stores are themselves threatened by the ascendance of Amazon while Gamestop is threatened by the growing number of gamers who simply download digital games directly from the console maker or a PC storefront like Steam.

Indie game stores, meanwhile, are increasingly focusing on retro games, trading on nostalgia and on the rarity of titles that were rarely considered collector's items in their time. As long as there are people who remember the warm glow of a cathode ray tube and blowing into a cartridge, at least a handful of these shops will continue to hang on.

The comic book and video game industries are pretty similar. Both rely on niche support from big-spending, highly dedicated fans. Both are slowly expanding in the mainstream market. Both have been revolutionized by the internet and are struggling to find a business model that includes digital downloads.

Yet while independently owned specialty shops dominate the brick-and-mortar comic book business, the video game retail space has increasingly become synonymous with one name: GameStop. The slow conglomeration of mini-chains like Babbage's, Software Etc., and FuncoLand came to its monolithic conclusion in 2005 when GameStop's merger with EBGames gave them a full 25 percent of the video game market (a share that's surely increased with the chain's nonstop expansion in the years since). The remainder is almost entirely taken up by big box retailers that sell video games alongside unrelated products like electronics and home supplies. For most consumers, the small, mom-and-pop game shop is a thing of the past, if it was ever a thing at all.

"Independent retailers are definitely decreasing," says Kevin Halligan of game distributor Mecca Electronics. "In my five years I've seen a lot of independent guys go out of business. ... It's really hard to compete against GameStop, because GameStop is everywhere, in every neighborhood."

The competition is that much harder because it's not really a fair fight for independent stores. "The No. 1 disadvantage for independent retailers is the whole industry of price protection,"

Halligan said. Big retailers can order games directly from the publishers and get a refund when those publishers inevitably lower a game's asking price. Independent stores, which overwhelmingly get their products from distributors or wholesalers, are out of luck when the publishers decide to lower the MSRP. And those price drops tend to come faster and faster these days.

"[This year's] PS2 *Madden*, EA dropped the price in four weeks," Halligan said. "That was a game where people were confident, they had no problem buying 120 pieces on day one; they figure it's definitely not going to drop because this is *Madden*. A lot of places really got burned on that."

Even if the price doesn't drop, the margins on new games are so low—around 15 percent—it's nearly impossible for an independent shop to stay in business without trading in more profitable used games. But that doesn't mean you can just ignore the new games, either. "The only two [independent stores] that I've known that have not succeeded did not carry new merchandise to the extent that people would trust that they would have the new games," said Jason Graham, owner of Brockport, New York's Game Players Unlimited. "I seriously spend so much money on new games that I don't make *any* money on new stuff. But it brings in the trade-ins. How am I gonna get *NHL '07* if I don't have *NHL '08*?"

Just because you sell a company's games, though, doesn't mean they'll help you out with promotion. "Even little things like getting point-of-purchase promotions, [publishers] don't want to send that stuff to us," says Doug Demotta, owner of Reading, Pennsylvania's MicroPlay. "A little poster is a big deal to us. Our competition will get big, thousand-dollar displays of systems, consoles they can put on the floor, and people can try and play. We don't get anything like that."

Out-of-store promotions can be tough, too. Independent stores might have a small budget for local cable or movie theater ads, but they can't compete with the mega-chains' marketing muscle. "Every Sunday you open up the paper and see these circulars for Circuit City and Best Buy, and it's a downer," Halligan says. "Every holiday season, Toys 'R' Us does this buy-two-get-one-free videogame thing. That kills everybody. All the independent store owners go to Toys 'R' Us, and they buy tons and tons of stuff. With that deal it's cheaper than buying it at wholesale."

It all adds up to a nearly impossible market for an independent store to break into. "There's no uniqueness," says Beverley Liedler, co-owner of southern New Jersey's Game Zone stores. "If you're in the apparel industry, you can have a certain look in your store, you can be targeting a certain audience that is not gonna be in the big box retailer or the chain. It's very hard to have a unique product in the video game business because we don't create the demand, the television

does, the publishers do, and you can't be more attractive price-wise because there's nothing to work with there."

So how do the independently owned stores set themselves apart? Just being knowledgeable about games and the industry can be a big help. "When people come in, they know that they can trust what we tell them," says Demotta. "I know there were some dog systems that have come out, like the N-Gage. We just steered people away from them, whereas other places had a big display of it and had to sell it. It's part of their corporate mandate; they had to do that. We could tell them, 'This is going nowhere, avoid it like the plague.' And sure enough, it disappeared."

Building a sense of community also helps. Chicago's Game Champs store has 11 flat-screen TVs and hosts tournaments to create a social hub for the area's gamers. "We try to put an atmosphere here for gamers where people like to come in and try the games out and play them," says Game Champs manager Michael Jones. "We're building a more community-based atmosphere than a small cubicle to come in and go home to your own little world. ... I like to have gamers come in, talk about a game, play with each other. It turns it into more of a social thing."

Building up a unique selection can also work. Videogames New York owner Giulio Graziani says his store has become a place people seek out because of its extensive gaming collection. "If you come in our store, there's probably 60,000 games. A lot of the stuff is touchable, so a lot of people feel the chance to touch a little bit [of] history, that is what makes us so unique. We are like something between a museum and a videogame store. ... When you don't find something, you come to us, always. That's what we're famous for. It might be more expensive, but we have it. That's what we're building out reputation on."

Despite all the challenges with running an independent store, there are cases where it can be helpful to be smaller and more nimble. "In some ways it's easier for us," Liedler says. "We have three stores, and when you're trying to get a quantity of Wiis for three stores - 60, 100 pieces - is a lot easier to obtain than 100,000 if you have 5,000 stores. We have more flexibility in trying to obtain the products we need."

That flexibility can also let you take advantage of opportunities, if you're sharp enough to see them coming. "Sometimes you've got to be bold," Demotta says. "There's a game called *Sniper Elite* for PS2. The game's been out of print for a long time. We found a supplier that was selling them, we brought in 20 copies, and it took a while, about a year, but eventually all 20 sold. You make your money on that stuff because nobody had it. If we were a public company and somebody said, 'Why are you buying this obscure title? When do you think it'll sell, a year from

now? I'm not gonna do that. It's a waste of time.' [With a big company] you have to make money every quarter, not four quarters from now."

Even so, the independent retailers that have stuck around are pretty pessimistic about the future of their small slice of the market. "The risk is too high compared to the benefits," Graziani says. "Between me and you, there's too much bullshit in this business. If you are opening a video game store today, I'd give you an 80 percent chance of failing in three years."

"There's a lot of businesses you could go into that would be a whole lot easier than this one," Liedler says. "Our business is getting narrower and narrower as far as number of competitors, and they're just getting bigger and bigger. Between the chains and the big box it's just not an easy business to continue being successful in, and the number of stores that have been successful is shrinking. It's a shame because it kind of takes some of the uniqueness away from the business."

But there are some who manage to stay positive. "Since the day I opened nine years ago my sales have gone up every year," Graham says. "I'm not rich or anything, but my customer base is expanding, my sales are growing every year, I just opened a new store and we're going to open a third store. ... Let me tell you, if you walk around in your store all day long selling video games, saying, 'Woe is me, sales suck, I hate this place,' people aren't going to come back. You've got to be upbeat, you've got to be positive, you've got to feel good, you've got to be smiling, you've got to be happy, and your customer's going to feel that when they walk in the door. This is really a super-positive place to walk into."

Holiday Rush

(Originally published in The Escapist, Dec. 4, 2007)

Author's Note: In 2021, the biggest games still tend to be clustered around a holiday release window, fighting for the additional gift spending at retail. But the rise of game downloads has upended the calendar a bit as well. Games like *Pokemon Go*, *Rocket League*, or *Fall Guys* routinely become viral hits after launching in the middle of the summer, to cite just a few recent examples. Even for bigger games, it's not uncommon to see a game like *The Last of Us Part 2* launch in June, or *Doom Eternal* to launch in March.

It may have taken a while, but publishers are finally figuring out that there are actually 12 viable launch months in a year.

The last three months of the year tend to fit the Dickensian cliche as the best of times and the worst of times for gamers. They're the best because a ridiculous number of high profile games come out—this year's season saw the release of highly anticipated games like *Call of Duty 4*, *Crysis*, *Super Mario Galaxy*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Mass Effect* and *Rock Band*, all in a *three-week period*. It's the worst of times because, well, a ridiculous number of high profile games come out. A game aficionado has to spend a fortune and divide his attention to a ridiculous degree just to keep up.

Sure, there are worse problems for a gamer to have. But that glut certainly seems like a waste come April, when the holiday games have finally been played out and the shelves are practically empty. People play games throughout the year, yet publishers by and large seem to think people will only buy the biggest games during a small window near the end of the year. Why can't publishers spread those AAA titles throughout the calendar a little bit more? Why can't the video game release calendar be a little more balanced?

"Unfortunately the videogame industry has kind of gotten itself trapped in this cycle where everyone waits to put out their $25 million games on top of each other in a 12-week period," says Chris Kramer, Senior Director of Communications and Community for Capcom US. "That really can't be good. Even if you are the game of the moment, in [the holiday season] there probably was another game of the moment a week or two before you and probably another game of the moment a week or two after you."

To Kramer, publishers' focus on the last quarter of the year is a result of horribly circular logic. "It's one of those things where people tend to go and crunch a lot of numbers and say, 'Look at

all these games that sold in the month of November. We must put our game in the month of November, because that is where all the games sold,'" Kramer says. "Well, no, the fact is, in July and August, only crap came out, so no one went and bought any games because there were only third-string licensed titles coming out for Game Boy Advance."

It's no wonder that the last quarter of the year sees 50 to 60 percent of the year's industry revenues when 50 to 60 percent of the good games come out during that period. If those same games came out at different times, Kramer says, they'd probably sell just as well, if not better.

But some say it's not just industry habit driving things. There could be good economic reasons for thinking games will sell better if they're forced into a crowded holiday market.

"In some ways, it's which came first, the chicken or the egg?" says Michael Goodman, Director of Digital Entertainment for the Yankee Group. "I'd hypothesize that the reason why [more games are released in the holiday season] is because this is the time period when people are entering the marketplace. From January to September you're predominantly selling directly to the gamer market. Outside of birthdays, you don't have non-gamers buying games. During the holiday season, you expand the market to moms and dads and gift givers." Even with the increased competition, game companies stand to make more by taking a smaller slice out of the much bigger holiday pie.

Not everyone is so gung-ho about throwing themselves into the holiday maelstrom, though. 2K Games, for example, felt that even a marquee release like *Bioshock* was better off coming out in the usually game-barren month of August this year. "We knew the holiday was going to be extremely crowded," says 2K Games VP of Marketing Sarah Anderson, "and we felt it was important for new intellectual property to have its own moment, so it could get full attention from press and consumers. We wanted to be the first big title to hit for the season. ... We knew *Bioshock* was amazing and wanted it to have its time to shine. We feel like we launched at the perfect time globally."

Besides helping the game sell over 1.5 million units so far, the decision to release *Bioshock* in August also helped people enjoy the game more, Anderson says. "During the holidays, the commercial volume gets turned up, and our lives become filled with messages about things to buy and play and see," she says. "By shipping in August, which is typically before the official holiday rush, gamers worldwide were consumed by *Bioshock*'s awesomeness—partly because it is an amazing game that had great reviews and word of mouth, but also partly because they had the time without so many other distractions to fully let themselves experience it."

It's not just big new names that can benefit from a move outside the fourth quarter window, either. Capcom thinks smaller, licensed titles like *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law* will do better

in January than November, just through sheer competitive economics. "Someone in planning here at Capcom actually sat down and figured out what the release schedule was going to be for the month of November in terms of games," Kramer says. "There's something close to 250 games coming out in the month of November. Granted, not all of these are AAA titles ... but there are a significant amount of titles such as *Assassin's Creed* or *Call of Duty 4* or *Rock Band* that were definitely taking up a lot of the air in the room in the month of November. ... The thought was 'Why compete in such an incredibly crowded space when you don't have to?'"

Historically, though, it's usually the big, well-hyped titles that can afford to avoid the expanded holiday market. "If you truly have a breakout title like a *Bioshock* or a *Madden* or a *Halo 3*, it doesn't matter when you enter the marketplace, you're going to do well," Goodman says. By the same token, though, those big-name games are also the ones big enough to stand out in the holiday rush. "If we wanted to bring out *Resident Evil 5* in the fourth quarter, that title will be big enough to warrant whatever particular date we felt would make the most sense," Kramer says.

And if you save your big name for the holidays, it has the added bonus of taking attention away from your competitors. "One product is gonna suck the dollars out of a gamer's wallet," Goodman says. "If I've just gone and gotten *Guitar Hero III*, chances are I'm not going out next week and buying another game."

It's a tough balancing act, and one that causes some companies to sprinkle their big releases both inside and outside the fourth quarter. "We have so many big games launching that we like to space them out a bit," says Perrin Kaplan, Nintendo of America's outgoing Vice President of Marketing and Corporate Affairs. "That's why you have *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption* in August, *Super Mario Galaxy* in November and *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* in February. Release them all at once and you force consumers to choose one. But spacing them out lets them all stand on their own while giving gamers time to enjoy them. So far, sales have been going strong, and naturally we expect to see them increase during the holidays."

When publishers bring out their big guns, they also have to watch out for other companies' firepower. "It becomes more of a marketing issue than anything else," Goodman says. "If you had a *Metal Gear Solid* and a *Halo 3* coming out simultaneously, you'd have a harder time generating buzz, and they'd wind up cannibalizing each other; they're going to hurt each other's sales."

Not all big-name game conflicts deserve a wide berth, though. "Launching *Pokemon* and *Halo* on the same day, go ahead and do it because they're two fundamentally different audiences, so there is no overlap between the two of them," Goodman says. "Launching *Guitar Hero III* and *Rock Band* on the same day would probably be a bad idea. You have to think what are the

genres, who is the target audience and factors like that. You have to look at the marketplace dynamics when you decide who's going to launch when."

Is there hope for a more balanced release calendar going forward? Capcom's Kramer certainly thinks so. "More companies are beginning to realize that people aren't just buying video games in the fourth quarter, that there is a year-round market for it, and they're trying to get out there. I think it's a hard habit for some people to break, but you are seeing some people put on their thinking caps."

But others think the holiday glut is here to stay. "That's the status quo," Goodman says. "Until some major gift-giving holiday emerges in March, I don't see this dynamic changing."

What If?

(Originally published in Crispy Gamer, Nov. 4, 2008 and Nov. 4, 2009)

Author's Note: It's striking to think how much of video gaming's short history has hinged on just a few major inflection points, where a single decision changed the way we play games for decades hence. While I can't guarantee these counterfactuals would have shaken out exactly as I suggested here, it's a whole lot of fun to imagine how one small change could have sent ripple effects through gaming history.

It's sometimes comforting to think that the way things are is just the way they were meant to be—that events were simply fated to turn out the way they did. But any honest look at history shows that a few small decisions at key moments had a profound impact on the state of the world today. This is no less true in the 40-odd-year history of the video game industry, which has already had its share of truly momentous moments.

In this feature, I examine what might have happened if some of those moments had turned out just a little bit differently.

For each hypothetical here, I tried to imagine a semi-plausible situation that could have caused these seminal events to go in a different direction. While not all of these situations are equally probable given the path of history, I tried to give each "What If?" at least a minimal, plausible grounding in reality. These stories are meant to be entertaining thought experiments, not definitive historical takes.

With that, let's take a trip into an alternate universe where nothing is quite as we know it.

What if Atari never released the arcade version of *Pong*?

Undeterred by the commercial failure of the overly complex *Computer Space* (the first coin-operated video game), Nolan Bushnell bullheadedly pushes on with the release of *Computer Space 2* in late 1972. The sequel runs on more powerful hardware, which Bushnell puts to work towards more realistic physics modeling for the game's black-and-white spaceships. *CS2* is even more complicated than the first game, with new buttons and switches added for directional retro-thrusters, multiple missile launchers and even a limited-use cloaking device. After an amazingly successful test run in a bar frequented primarily by MIT physics students, the game goes on to receive an incredibly poor reception amid the jukeboxes and mechanical games at coin-op trade shows. Less than a dozen units are eventually ordered and produced, and none of them grosses more than $10 in its original location.

Magnavox, meanwhile, starts to find some niche success with its Odyssey home video game system, thanks primarily to intense, focused holiday marketing. In February 1973, an enterprising young bar owner in Lansing, Michigan, struggling to attract new patrons, brings in the Odyssey he got for Christmas and hooks it up to an old, underused black-and-white TV in the corner of his bar. Word of mouth starts to attract lines of curious, thirsty players to the end of the bar. The drunks seem especially taken with the Odyssey's simple, built-in *Tennis* game. The bar owner starts charging 25 cents a play just to keep the crowds manageable.

Other Lansing bars quickly start to emulate the play-and-drink idea. The micro-trend leads to a major lifestyle story on the front page of the *Detroit Free Press*, which then gets picked up by the *New York Times*. Spurred by the article, bars nationwide experiment with their own corner Odyssey stations.

Magnavox, intrigued by this totally unintended use of its hardware, quickly creates and markets a set of "do-it-yourself" instructions for installing an Odyssey system and a TV in a free-standing wooden "cabinet," complete with a coin slot and money box to free up busy bartenders. The idea is a smashing success, not just in bars but convenience stores, doctors' waiting rooms, airport terminals, and other open areas where people congregate. The success of the 25-cents-to-try cabinets drives demand for the home system, which quickly becomes hard to find at retail. Magnavox creates an Odyssey division that quickly grows to rival the size of its venerable TV production unit.

Following the money, other electronics companies try to copy Magnavox's success, including an underfunded Atari. Magnavox will have none of it, though, unleashing its massive legal department to defend its patents against anyone with the temerity to try to create an interactive game designed for the television. This strident legal wrangling gives Magnavox a near-monopoly over the domestic videogame market for over a decade. In Japan, however, a traditional card and toy company has developed a videogame system of its own...

What if Atari had avoided the "crash" and faced Nintendo head-on?

In early 1982, a forward-thinking Nolan Bushnell begins to recognize that an increasing flow of low-quality third-party software could cause permanent damage to the image of the Atari 2600. To extend more control over the market, Bushnell spearheads development of what will become

the Atari 2700. The new unit plays all old Atari 2600 games but also introduces a new, more-powerful chipset and supports an improved two-button joystick.

The 2700 also includes a revolutionary "lockout" chip, which allows Atari to block games from companies that don't pay a hefty licensing fee. The system launches in time for the 1982 holiday season and quickly becomes a must-have item thanks largely to *Pitfall!*, an amazing new run-and-jump game developed by Atari's first wholly owned subsidiary developer, Activision (rumor has it that Atari paid over $50 million to acquire the fiercely independent company). Soon, games designed for the 2600 are considered "old-fashioned" and "boring," and a dozens of third-party developers are clamoring to pay for access to the 2700's new chipset and constantly growing base of gamers.

By 1985, when Nintendo first tests its new Entertainment System in America, Atari has had uninterrupted control of the lion's share of the home console market for nearly eight years. At first, the NES fails to cause much concern at Atari, but the company slowly begins to take notice when the revolutionary *Super Mario Bros.* starts dominating industry chatter and racing up the sales charts. Shaken by this brash foreign newcomer, Atari speeds up its plans for the long-planned Atari 2800, an incremental update to the 2700. The newest Atari system is technically slightly less powerful than the NES, but it comes with a lower price tag (subsidized by years of Atari profits) and a copy of *Pitfall III*, the sequel to the first videogame to sell 10 million copies.

In the great console war of the late '80s, most game-makers are forced to stick with Atari's proven success, thanks to restrictive non-compete clauses in the Atari 2700 licensing agreement. Still, Nintendo attracts support from Japanese companies like Capcom and Konami that have never operated in America, thus securing exclusive rights to the home versions of some of the biggest arcade hits of the late '80s. Nintendo also attracts some new up-and-coming American developers, who use the NES' power and lower licensing fees to experiment with bold new experimental gameplay genres.

While "in-the-know" gamers tend to prefer the unique, import-infused library for the NES, the masses prefer Atari's well-known domestic brand, which is bolstered by a massive advertising campaign that buries Nintendo's largely grassroots efforts. By 1990, Nintendo has managed to carve out a niche that represents roughly 25 percent of the market. But Nintendo has a new system in the works…

What if Nintendo never released the Game Boy?

With sales of its once-popular Game & Watch units starting to flag by 1989, Nintendo decides to abandon the portable market and focus its efforts on the extremely lucrative NES. Atari's Lynx, a clunky, overpriced, battery-hog of a portable system that had attracted minimal interest at first, gets a new lease on life when Atari acquires the exclusive portable licensing rights to an addictive little Russian puzzle game called *Tetris*.

To capitalize on the surefire hit, Atari designs the Lynx Lite for the 1990 holiday season. This new version of the system is the same on the inside, but sports a much smaller form factor, longer battery life, a brighter screen and, most importantly, a copy of *Tetris* included in every box. Sega's Game Gear puts up some token resistance, but the *Tetris*-powered Lynx takes off, selling 5 million units during the 1990 holiday season alone.

Some investors begin to push Nintendo to create a portable system of its own, but the Big N decides it can't afford to take on the Lynx while also defending the newly launched Super Nintendo Entertainment System against the threat of the suddenly hot Sega Genesis. Third-party developers increasingly decide to create simplified, portable Lynx versions of their games alongside those for the Super Nintendo and Genesis. Nintendo and Sega eventually come to the same conclusion, effectively ceding the portable market to Atari by publishing portable versions of their top franchises for the Lynx.

By 1994, the Lynx has a library of over 600 games and near-uncontested control of the portable market. Nintendo decides that it's suddenly not too fond of letting another hardware maker profit from its hottest software franchises (flagging cash reserves from the punishing home console wars might have something to do with this). The company quietly slows down development of games for the Lynx as it prepares to take the portable market by storm with a new kind of system—one that has a stereoscopic, 3-D, head-mounted display.

The Virtual Boy makes a minor splash when it's first released, but the system's clunky design and headache-inducing display fail to attract the support of both gamers or third-party developers. A year later, Atari releases the Lynx Next, a traditional 16-bit portable with a backlit screen that cements Atari's control of the ever-growing portable segment of the market.

By 2000, Sony's PlayStation has effectively sucked up the majority of home console gaming dollars. Without an alternative revenue stream, Nintendo is forced to team up with an equally ailing Sega to release the DreamCube, a desperate joint effort to compete against the Sony juggernaut. When inter-company infighting between Sega and Nintendo causes the DreamCube to predictably fail, the cash-strapped companies decide to drop out of the hardware business and focus exclusively on software. Shortly after dropping out of the hardware race, the newly software-focused Nintendo and Sega announce major new releases for the just-announced Lynx DS, a dual-screen portable expected to be in stores by the end of 2005.

What if there was a single, standardized videogame system?

By the great video game crash of 1983, Ralph Baer's [patent for a "television gaming apparatus"](#) had earned Magnavox much more money than the defunct Odyssey and Odyssey[2] ever had. Licensees like Atari, Mattel, and Coleco had to pay tribute to Magnavox for the right to sell and market their systems in the United States.

When a Japanese company named Nintendo starts teasing its Famicom system for an American release in 1985, Magnavox feels it is time to take a more active role in the market. Wielding its patent like a finely honed weapon, Magnavox presents Nintendo with a choice: Sign over the exclusive American rights to the Famicom for a small percentage of the profits, or resign itself to being locked out of the American market forever.

Nintendo balks at Magnavox's restrictive terms, deciding instead to fight the patents in court. When the court rules in Magnavox's favor, though, Nintendo has no choice but to agree to the deal, figuring a small slice of the profits from the massive American market is better than no profits at all. The renamed Magnavox Odyssey[3] becomes a huge hit with Americans as soon as it hits the market, riding interest in revolutionary new games like *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda* to bring the domestic video game market back from the brink.

By 1997, the names Magnavox and Odyssey have become synonymous with home videogames in the United States, in much the same way VHS became synonymous with home video recordings. The aging Odyssey^3 has sold over 100 million units, and many more hundreds of millions of game cartridges representing thousands of games that push the system to its limits. A few competitors try to break Magnavox's lock on the market in the intervening years, but the company's legal team has a perfect track record defending its broad patent and defending its system from any undue competition.

But many industry watchers are unhappy with Magnavox's stewardship of the domestic game industry. They point to the arcade market, where technology has advanced well past the kinds of games that can be effectively ported to the Odyssey^3's now-ancient technology. They point to Japan, where the lack of patent protections has led to a robust, competitive market, including new systems from Sony, Sega and even Nintendo.

All three companies say they'd be happy to release their latest systems in the United States, but Magnavox is reluctant to introduce a new standard into the American market. Sure, the new systems with their fancy graphics and CD-based storage might represent the cutting-edge, but the Odyssey^3 was familiar, dependable, a known quantity. Why confuse the market with a new system that won't work with the hundreds of millions of Odyssey^3 games sold so far? Why ask gamers to spend hundreds of dollars on a new system when games for the Odyssey^3 are still selling at a healthy clip? Why risk alienating the established base of consumers when there's no risk of competition?

What if Sony finished developing its SNES CD-ROM drive for Nintendo?

It's hard to imagine a bigger marketing blitz than that for the SNES-CD, released in the Summer of 1993. In development for nearly two years as a joint venture between Sony and Nintendo, the CD-based add-on for the Super NES was heralded as "the future of gaming" in fawning press previews and seen as a much more viable product than Sega's already faltering Sega CD add-on.

But the highly anticipated launch failed to live up to the sky-high expectations. All but the hardest of hardcore early adopters were turned off by the $250 price tag and early reports of extremely slow loading times for the early CD drive. The software library didn't exactly sell the system either—Nintendo's *Super Mario World+* was largely seen as the half-hearted, rushed expansion pack that it was, and cautious third parties saved their major releases for the established customer base and proven technology of the SNES base unit.

Over the next two years, the SNES-CD would mainly play host to a selection of barely interactive full-motion-video-heavy games (many ported directly from the Sega CD) and tepid spin-offs to established Nintendo series. Few if any must-play games would emerge for the system.

By the spring of 1995, CD-ROM technology has become a running joke in the game industry. Most publishers and consumers see the technology as a costly, unnecessary upgrade that didn't add much, if anything, to the state of the art in gameplay. Nintendo officially gave up on the SNES-CD in April 1995, focusing instead on the Nintendo 64. Sega similarly abandoned its growing array of Genesis add-ons to focus on its cartridg-ebased Saturn. Sony, stung by the reaction to its first foray into gaming, retreated to more familiar consumer electronics like VCRs and TVs.

As Sega and Nintendo's new systems battled each other to a virtual standstill out of the gate, the cartridge format was threatening to burst at the seams. Big-name games for the Saturn and Nintendo 64 increasingly required more and more memory to hold 3D graphics textures and complex programming routines. The cost and size of cartridge memory fell much more slowly than the demand for more storage space, leading to cartridges stacked tall with arrays of ROM chips, rising like obelisks out of their top-loading systems. Prices for the big-budget games slowly crept up to keep up with the cost of materials, topping out around $100 in late 1997.

But not everyone has given up on CD-ROM technology for gaming. Panasonic, after learning its lesson from the do-it-all CD-i, marketed its 3DO system solely as a new direction in gaming. Sure, the system stumbled out of the gate in 1993 with a shockingly high $700 price point and no real system-selling games, and Panasonic struggled to attract interest from publishers and consumers, slashing the system's price and spending a fortune on marketing, all to no real effect.

That all changed in 1996, when SquareSoft shocked the world by announcing its next Final Fantasy game wouldn't come out for the Nintendo 64, as expected, but exclusively for the 3DO. "Only the 3DO's CD-based storage can contain the grand vision we have for *Final Fantasy VII*," the company declares in a press release. The announcement sent shockwaves through the gaming world. When *Final Fantasy VII* was released to universal critical acclaim, gamers began to snap up the now-$200 3DO in record numbers.

Many publishers, tired of seeing slowing sales for their $100 cartridges, gave Panasonic's system a second look. Developers begin to realize that CD storage could be used for more than grainy video and CD-quality soundtracks. By 2000, when Panasonic announces its follow-up M2 system, they've carved out an impressive 30% of the market with games like *Metal Gear Solid*, *Gran Turismo,* and *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*.

Making a "Bundle" off of Indie Gaming

(Originally published in *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, June 2010)

Author's Note: Over ten years after this article was written, it's hard to remember just how revolutionary the idea of a "pay what you want" game download bundle was back in 2010. Retail games had cost roughly $50 or $60 for years, and even the idea of selling smaller downloadable PC and console games for $20 each was still a new, unproven idea.

Humble Bundle proved that there was money to be made by decreasing the average price and heavily increasing the volume of sales in the new world of game downloads. Their success here presaged a "race to the bottom" pricing battle across the industry, amid a glut of thousands of game releases each year that all struggle for even the slightest bit of attention.

At first glance, the set of five independently developed computer games that went on sale as a downloadable bundle on May 4 didn't seem especially noteworthy. Even the collection's name reflected its lack of pretension: The Humble Indie Bundle (HIB)—containing PC, Mac and Linux versions of indie favorites *World of Goo, Aquaria, Lugaru HD, Gish*, and *Penumbra* (plus late donation *Samorost 2*)—wasn't trying to revolutionize the way indie games are sold and distributed. It was simply "a unique kind of bundle that we are trying out," as the official Web page put it.

But when the bundle was taken off the market 11 days later—after attracting over 138,000 purchases and nearly $1.3 million in revenue—that built-in humility started to look a little ridiculous. Those numbers would be a drop in the bucket for a big-budget developer, but for the relatively small world of indie games, the HIB was a veritable blockbuster.

"When you're an independent game developer, and there's no publisher or other middle-man, you only need a tiny amount of sales in order for it to be a gigantic success," said Jeffrey Rosen, co-founder of Penumbra publisher Wolfire Games and one of the men who organized the HIB.

The HIB wasn't the first indie game collection on the Internet, but it had a few unique features that helped make it such a success. Most notable, perhaps, was the bundle's pay-what-you-want pricing model, which allowed consumers to get the game for an online donation of as little as one penny.

Offering $0.01 downloads might seem like a counterintuitive way to make a lot of money, especially in a PC game market that's already plagued by serious piracy issues (in fact, Rosen says server data shows about 25 percent of HIB downloaders pirated the bundle rather than paying literally one red cent). But the indie community by-and-large ended up giving way more than the minimum, averaging a $9.18 donation for each bundle downloaded. In fact, at least ten deep-pocketed purchasers donated at least $300 to the cause. One big-spending indie gamer spent $3,333, or over $555 per game.

"A lot of people saw the bundle as a way to get some awesome games for cheap, but I think when it came time to dust off the credit card, people wanted to support us," Rosen said.

Not everyone was as impressed by the community's generosity, though. "[The $9 average donation] is less than $2 per game, which is great if you sell hundreds of thousands, but not great if you sell thousands," said Georgia Tech game researcher, professor, and indie game developer Ian Bogost.

To Bogost, the HIB is probably best seen as "just a fancy sale" and reflective of a prevailing attitude that indie games aren't worth buying until they're discounted much farther than their big-budget counterparts. He worries about a "race to the bottom effect" in the indie games market and fears those that bought the bundle are "seeing it as 'these games are worth $2 and not a penny more.' ... People had heard of and wanted these games but been crushed by the stupid 'I won't pay $15 for an indie game' thing."

Other developers don't see the more consumer-friendly pricing model as a problem. "I think it's one of those volume things, because there are so many people that at least gave some to it," said Alex Austin, who designed and programmed the HIB's *Gish*. "I think there are a lot of people that would like to legally buy these games, but they can't afford it. ... Instead of getting nothing from them and just getting piracy, you're actually getting something from them, which is nice to say."

It's also nice for gamers to say they're supporting a good cause when they donate money. The HIB made this easy by letting buyers commit any portion of their donation to two gamer-focused charities—Child's Play and the Electronic Frontier Foundation—rather than to the developers themselves. In the end, nearly $400,000—over 30% of the total revenue—ended up going to charity.

For Rosen, including the charities was a prototypical example of doing well by doing good. "If the charities were not there, the developers would get a larger cut," he said, "but the fact that the charities were there helped spread the bundle."

There are plenty of other relatively unique factors that could have contributed to the HIB's success—the lack of any digital rights management, the popularity and name-recognition of the underlying games, and even good old-fashioned platform fanboyism may have played a part. But whatever the reason, the HIB had no trouble going viral, with over 20,000 tweets, 25,000 Facebook shares and hundreds of blog posts helping to spread the word.

Rosen said it was much easier to market these five old indie games as a collection than it would have been individually. "Normally, people don't really talk about your [indie] game very much," he said. "But when you bundle it, suddenly that's a newsworthy event and a ton of new people check it out."

While the success of the Humble Indie Bundle has some seeing a new way forward for indie game marketing and distribution, some wonder if the next bundle will make the same kind of splash, especially if the games involved aren't already well-established. "There's probably going to be a lot of people trying to copy this, and it's going to become 'Another pay what you want bundle' or something like that," Austin said. "I don't think they'll be as successful because they won't have that novelty of the first one."

But even if bundles like the HIB don't become the dominant distribution method for indie games, they're bound to play a unique role in the market going forward. "You remember those packs of tiny sugar cereals you could get?" Bogost asked rhetorically. "I'd like to think the bundle could work like this. The excitement of 10 different crazy cereals your mom won't let you get! ... The bundle serves as a way to get something into your hands that wouldn't otherwise have had a chance, but then it also helps you form future tastes, so to speak."

My OS is better than your OS!

Since all six games in the Humble Indie Bundle were available for Windows, Mac, and Linux, the sales data helps provide an interesting picture of the indie games market. While Windows users unsurprisingly made up the largest share of the HIB market—representing over 2/3rds of all purchasers and just over half of all donations—they also turned out to be the biggest cheapskates. Windows users chose to give just over $8 for the bundle, on average, compared to over $10 for Mac users and nearly $15 for Linux users.

Bogost said he thinks many Linux users gave generously as a way to support the DRM-free nature of the games on offer in the bundle. Rosen, on the other hand, jokingly suggested that Linux users were simply spending the money they saved on their free operating system.

But there's some evidence to show that good old platform pride may have driven the increased donations by Mac and Linux users. "Once we posted the average price breakdown between platforms, the [overall] average went up from $8 to $9.14, while originally it was going downwards," Rosen said. In other words, no one likes looking cheap in front of "the competition."

Portal Goes Potato: How Valve And Indie Devs Built a Meta-Game Around *Portal 2*'s Launch

(Originally published in *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, July 2010)

Author's Note: The Potato Sack ARG might seem like a footnote now, but looking back, I feel like it marks the end of the era where independent game developers saw themselves as lone iconoclasts and the beginning of the era where they started banding together for common causes and cross-promotion in a big way. That trend continues to this day, with indie game characters making guest appearances in "competing" games with some regularity.

At first, it just seemed like a harmless—if confusing—April Fools' Day joke. Starting on April 1, random potatoes started popping up all over the 13 indie games available as part of Valve's new, heavily discounted "Potato Sack" Steam bundle. The secretive spuds showed up everywhere from title screens to out-of-the-way corners of the game worlds.

But an attentive group of fans quickly noticed that the potatoes appeared to be more than just a prank. Hidden audio and graphics files, coded messages, and weblinks started appearing in hard-to-find locations throughout the games. Further updates unlocked new levels and challenges, and provided hints to unlock even more. Everything pointed toward a larger narrative of a multigame infection by *Portal*'s famously lethal GLaDOS.

All these clues built to a mysterious countdown page that showed a timer ticking down to 9 a.m. Pacific on Friday, April 15. That's when GLaDOS@Home—a parody of popular joint-computing efforts like the alien-life-form search SETI@Home—launched, urging fans to play the Potato Sack games and contribute computing power toward GLaDOS' boot-up. The reward for a weekend's worth of dedicated play? A *Portal 2* Steam launch roughly nine hours earlier than expected.

The Potato Sack was far from the first alternate-reality game built to attract attention to a traditional game release—titles such as *Halo 2* and *Tron: Legacy* saw similar promotions. But the coordination between Valve and 10 indie developers made the Potato Sack ARG an achievement in cross-marketing execution and community building.

It all started last December, when Valve e-mailed a select group of indie developers out of the blue with an offer to come to their Bellevue, WA offices and talk about a potential cross-game promotion. Only when the participants arrived for the two-day summit did Valve managing director Gabe Newell explain the project's goals: getting new players interested in indie games, giving existing players new content, and giving fans a sense of investment in *Portal 2*'s launch.

"What [Newell] wanted was for the indie devs to organize it and plan it ourselves," says Jeff Pobst, founder and CEO of *Defense Grid: The Awakening* developer Hidden Path Entertainment. "Valve brought us all together and would give us access to their [content] for whatever crazy ideas we wanted to do, and [they] would help make sure we could update often on Steam. It was completely unexpected, and the whole room was energized."

The developers got pretty creative with the opportunity and access. *Portal 2*'s Cave Johnson appeared in "help wanted" posters in *Super Meat Boy*; *Portal* protagonist Chell appeared atop the surfboard in *Audiosurf*; familiar *Portal* turrets appeared as obstacles in Teotl Studios' *The Ball*; and the voice of GLaDOS herself delivered backstory in Dejobaan Games' titles.

"The meta-fiction of GLaDOS testing the world [on whether] they were ready for the release of *Portal 2* was a great excuse to add all sorts of different puzzles—or tests—in our games," says Hessel Bonenkamp from *Toki Tori* developer Two Tribes. "We then went all-out to create a whole variety of puzzles involving GPS coordinates, Braille, photos, and surveillance cameras."

Then there were the content updates that were originally intended to be something of a red herring by the developers. Frictional Games' Thomas Grip says the Egyptian-looking hieroglyphics his team put into an early update for *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* were meant to be a red herring that didn't lead to any specific ARG revelations—not that this stopped many

ARG watchers from spending many sleepless nights trying to decipher them. "We made the glyphs part of a puzzle in the second update so that the players wouldn't feel like they had wasted their time completely," Grip said.

Of course, plenty of ARG followers seemed to have an abundance of free time to devote to the games' puzzles. Dejobaan studio lead Ichiro Lambe said players picked apart his games' source codes and even tried to track him and his team down in person to help solve some of the puzzles. Bonenkamp remembers players climbing a streetlight outside his offices in the Netherlands to catch a clue placed on a hanging poster.

That kind of community dedication translated into measurable sales spikes for the indie developers lucky enough to participate in the ARG (though the reduced prices from the Steam bundle might've had something to do with it as well). Pobst says the increased sales more than covered the costs of generating new content for the ARG. Lambe reports a "multifold sales increase" that let him hire some contract workers to help with game development.

More than that, though, the ARG proved to some indie developers the power of uniting for a common purpose.

"As indie developers, we don't usually do massive cooperation with other companies or have an opportunity to do experiments that, by default, get a huge user base to try them out," says Frictional Games' Jens Nilsson.

For other developers, though, it was just a great opportunity to break out of the stale marketing machine that's become standard for a big release. "It demonstrated to the universe that Valve's willing to try funky new ways to get the word out," Lambe says. "Compare this to a blitz of advertisements alongside commercials for toilet-bowl cleaner. Boring. GLaDOS infecting 13 games? Exciting!"