

# DIGITAL PRESS



69. argument

**17 COMPANIES  
HAVE EARNED  
THE RIGHT TO  
DISPLAY THIS SEAL.**



# From the editor's desk...

The Internet gives me a headache these days. Not from eye strain, not from wearing my headphones too tight, and not from the relentless, obnoxious advertising (ten years ago the people who predicted the Web would be as bad as TV were right). The cause of my headaches is, for lack of a better word, strife.

The Internet was once an escape from the stresses of work and family: the inability of people to communicate, the unnecessary bickering, the rigid role-playing, the tiresome drama, etc. Now a typical Web session includes all these things. These days when I retire from an hour or two of Web browsing, I feel as if I've spent as much time at work or a family holiday function.

Here's an example. Today during lunch I was briefly browsing the Atari Age forums. The site's administrator started a thread requesting unwanted Coleco VCS cartridges (like Donkey Kong) for an unspecified project. If you've been around the classic gaming community for any amount of time, you know these requests are commonly made by homebrewers and other creative people who need empty cartridge shells. I perused this thread mostly out of curiosity, but with some hesitation; surely such an innocuous request for worthless merchandise by one of the site's respected founders could only be met with unanimous compliance.

Yeah. So it started about four posts down with some user objecting to the "destruction of good game carts". Then a couple of users told him to shut up and before a full page of posts could be generated, an age-old argument was underway. You know. "If it's okay to destroy Pac-Man and Donkey Kong carts, where do you draw the line?" That kind of thing.

This happens on every message board, blog, and news site of interest to me. Every story or thread, regardless of its content, comes down to four or five essential arguments. News stories always end up with comments about the outcome of the Presidential election. Gadget blogs always end with arguments about how good or bad Apple is. So it's not just the classic gaming community, but since I spend the majority of my Web time on gaming sites, it seems to me that too many threads wind up with the same tired, endless discussions:

- which games are rare and/or valuable?
- is emulation a valid, ethical, and/or appropriate method of playing classic games?
- does collecting prevent or enhance the enjoyment of games?
- is eBay a good or bad thing for the collecting community?
- will games continue to exist on physical media, and is this good or bad for gamers?
- why is (insert Nintendo, Microsoft, Sony, Sega, Capcom, Electronic Arts, Konami, Activision, Apple, Mad Catz, Pilsbury, etc.) so screwed up?

This last one has gotten so bad on the Digital Press forums that one day I made like the Lutzes at that house in Amityville and stormed out in the middle of the night, waving my arms wildly in the air, forsaking all personal possessions and unfinished business left behind. And our site has some of the better forums.

I can't speak for all the writers, but part of the reason I got into the 'zine business was so I could write about gaming without 20 people instantly jumping all over me telling me what a "looser" I am, how "rediculous" my comments are, and how I'm merely a brainwashed "fanboy" of Sony or Nintendo (no one gets accused of being a Microsoft fanboy...there are none). So for issue 69 we decided to write about all the controversial stuff that would get us slaughtered online. Get ready to read about how terrific PlayStation Home is, how redemption machines are good for arcades, and how emulation is better than the real thing. Disagree? Have a pencil handy so you can draw those little eyeball-rolly guys in the margins. Fanboy.

Enjoy,

Jeff



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Your thoughts are welcome at  
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# ON THE PROWL

“HOLIDAY GAME BUYING FURY”

Christmas has come and gone. I stand enlightened. I've never seen such voracious deals on new games. And price matching between major retailers was happening left and right. I'm not sure how many of you pay attention to new game sales, but I buy about eight newly released games a year, usually within two weeks of their release date. Unfortunately, I only play about half of those games enough to justify the full retail price. Consider me a successful victim of the well-greased hype machine. To ease the bite of spending \$60 on a game and then only playing it when it reaches Platinum Hits status, I've become a more patient and opportunistic consumer.

At the end of '09, before we were even in the throes of Black Friday, multiple online vendors had buy-two-get-one free deals on new games. I have never seen this happen before. If you do the math, that amounts to about \$40 per (full price retail) \$60 game. Not bad if you get forty hours of play out of your new release games. I'm talking about all major retailers like Amazon, Toys R Us, and Best Buy. Many of the new titles came out in November and early December. Deals were a little harder to find on games released after Black Friday. I hope history repeats itself in 2010. 2009 was the year of the deal, which is not a great thing if you're the seller.

I routinely hit the deals forums at Cheap Ass Gamer (<http://www.cheapassgamer.com>), where they crowd-source the deal hunting. Finding a deal before the other members of the community seems to be a point of pride. If you post a redundant sale, expect someone to notice and shame you. There are even members that leak sales at major retailers like Best Buy and Walmart before they happen so you can be prepared. The front page of Cheap Ass Gamer is Internet-deal-centric, because buying through those links supports the Web site and community.

If you want the deals from the local retailers and chains, check out the Video Game Deals forums. After a few years of watching the deals, it's hard for me to buy a full-price game at retail. In fact, I almost never buy games at retail brick-and-mortar locations anymore. I wait for the Amazon price match, deal of the day, or price drop, and buy games with free shipping (on orders over \$25) and no sales tax. I can wait a few days for the game to arrive in the mail, saving upwards of 10% on Illinois state sales tax. Blago didn't need the cash anyway. He was getting paid off for awarding sham state contracts.

but in a year, expect to get it for less than half of full retail price. If you've waited that long, why not wait another year for it to hit \$15? Cheap Ass Gamer is also excellent for learning about those buy-two-get-one used game sales that hit the major resellers like GameStop at the end of every quarter. If you can hit the shops the first day, you can score some good deals. New release used games that are selling for 90% of full retail price get a substantial discount, allowing for a 33% discount on the used prices.

The question of whether to buy a game at retail or to wait to buy it used depends on

how much time you have to play games. Are you buying a game that you have time to play tomorrow, or are you lining them up for a few months? I find that a serial like Mass Effect 2 is easy to postpone indefinitely. If I don't play it in the first year, a similar blockbuster title will come out and usurp its glory. I have yet to play a Metal Gear game for this reason. You can call me depraved for never having played such a juggernaut franchise, or you can call me depraved for spending 130 hours playing Fallout 3. Either way, there just isn't enough time for most people with families and jobs and collections to make it through every major title.



Of course, if you are a DP 'zine reader, you probably have enough patience to buy your games used. Titles selling in the millions will generally have the most precipitous drop in used price with a few exceptions. Super-popular online games tend to have longer legs (like Modern Warfare 2). Give it a year and MW2 will cost quite a bit less. Unfortunately, there will be far fewer people playing online, and the value of an online-focused game will truly have been lost. Games like Mass Effect 2 won't hit the used bins quickly,

Shopping for deals on the newest releases has evolved with infiltration of the Internet. No company today can price their goods in a vacuum. "Me too" price matching is the best thing to happen to retail shoppers. We consumers are currently winning the price war. Unfortunately, most of us simply have less to spend in our current economy, and deals are a necessity. Fortunately, there are plenty of deals to be had.

# DIGITAL PRESS FEATURE

“PARDON MY FRENCH”

Once upon a time, video games required no reading skills aside from reading the manual, and even then it was possible to figure out the game play mechanics through trial and error. As games evolved, the amount of text used in-game has increased and not only in the world of role-playing games.

Language barriers can be an issue, at least when the game is in English only. I live in Quebec, Canada, where most people speak French. Although many can read and speak English, it isn't the case with everyone. Until the current generation of games, it was often difficult, if not impossible, to find a game localized in French. At least with Nintendo's portable consoles, it was always possible to import European releases, but regional locks and TV format barriers kept European console games at bay. Aside from rare exceptions (such as *Zelda: A Link to the Past*, re-released in Quebec in French for the Super NES), there was no choice but to play in English. On the upside, having to play *Dragon Warrior* or *Final Fantasy* in English might have helped some people to get a grasp of English, but it certainly have kept others from enjoying these games. *Animal Crossing* on the GameCube is another case where a non-English speaker would be ill at ease.

Nowadays, the situation has changed greatly. If the console is set to French, most games will play in French. A few games like *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age: Origins* have separate French releases, probably due to the sheer amount of text used in RPGs. Even new games might be playable on the get-go in French; *Resident Evil 5* included French subtitles as soon as it came out.

The need for translations can mean later release dates, but it might also simply mean that the traditional delay between North American and European launches will decrease or altogether disappear. Take *Dragon Quest 4* and *5* on the Nintendo DS; both games actually came out in Europe before

they did in North America. Therefore, a North American whose mother tongue isn't English is likely to be able to play the game in his native language. There is the risk of botched up translations, but when it is well done, it feels like the game was originally written in that language. In *Dragon Quest 4* and *5* the French localization is so fluid that it is a sheer pleasure to play the game. A non-French speaker could easily use those two games to perfect their language skills (hint: the Nintendo DS must be set to French before booting the game). In fact, while the regional accents were overdone in the English version of *Dragon Quest 4*, the French version of the title is more subtle and less distracting.

However, sometimes, efforts to localize a game can lead to some minor controversy. When it was announced that *The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* would be playable in French-Canadian, people rejoiced...until they saw the dialogues used for the farmer character, who talks in French-Canadian slang (called *joual*). People interpreted it as disrespect from Nintendo, even though the idea was to portray a stereotypical farmer. *Mario and Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story* fared much better. Had it not been for a few local terms used here and there, the French-Canadian translation could have been used for the international release of the game.

Game translation isn't an easy task to do: the number of words within the dialogues to translate is quite high and, very often, the timeframe given for this assignment is not sufficient to guarantee a work of high quality. It is also one of the hardest forms of text to localize, as it is highly creative and requires strict character limits, especially if there is any verbal script. This can be an issue since French usually uses more words to say the same thing as the English source.

Sometimes, due to cultural differences, an adaptation is required. Unlike mere transla-

tion, this process consists in transforming elements in the text and/or game to make them comprehensible for the local market. This is not much of an issue in English-to-French translations, but it might be for Japanese-to-French localizations (providing that the game publisher doesn't opt for a Japanese-to-English-to-French assignment, where the French text is translated from the English version). When it comes to Japanese-to-English translations, we have come a long way (compare the translation for *Dragon Warrior 4* on the NES and *Dragon Quest 4* on the DS). However, since the French-speaking market is much more restricted, the same respect isn't always given to English-to-French adaptations.

However, thanks to the current consoles' online capabilities, a North American game can very well be released initially in English only, until a language patch can be downloaded. After all, the Internet makes it possible to easily link a North American copy with a European language patch that would add multilingual support. That is a far simpler and practical option than having to import the game from Europe and modding the console (if it is region- and format-locked). Suddenly, people who played through their games without enjoying the story due to the language barrier can now understand fully what's going on. This might not be a big deal for action games, but it sure is for role-playing games and other plot-heavy titles!

# DIGITAL PRESS FEATURE

“TUNE IN. GAME ON. DROP OFF: THE CASE AGAINST ONLINE GAMING”

Basic writing theory says that there are three types of possible conflicts to present in the course of creating a story: Man against man, man against nature, and man against himself. There is not yet an accounting for a type of conflict we can call “man versus machine”, but given the ever-increasing proliferation of advanced technology into the fabric of daily life, it is perhaps only a matter of time before professors of Literature have no choice in the matter but to add this fourth class to the canon of archetypal conflicts.

Since its inception, and at its heart, video gaming has generally been about exactly that; the battle between a man (or person, in deference to gaming’s fairer sex) and a machine. As the machines and gaming hardware have become increasingly more sophisticated and interconnected to one another, a large portion of this gaming primacy has been supplanted by the shift towards playing video games online with or against other people. The majority of them never have and never will meet face-to-face. As a first-generation gamer who still quite clearly remembers the “good old days” circa the 1980s of man-versus-machine gaming, I find myself opposed to online video gaming in its many forms. My arguments will focus mostly on the problems with team-based games (e.g. Halo, Call of Duty, etc.) and massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as World of Warcraft, Second Life, etc. However, the same criticisms will be applicable to a mildly lesser extent to anything involving games centered upon individual achievements (Gran Turismo Racing) or even simple classic games such as Chess or Bridge, whenever played online against other human beings.

## You Can’t Pay The Bills with Achievement Points

My first foray into online gaming actually precedes the widespread use of the World Wide Web. In the mid-1990s I signed up for a long-since defunct gaming service called The ImagiNation Network (INN), operated by Sierra Entertainment. There were many different games available to play online through this service, but the one that really sold me on the idea was Red Baron, a flight simulator which I had all but mastered in its standalone incarnation. INN offered a version of Red Baron which could be played online against other virtual pilots, and that sounded too appealing to pass up. One Friday night I pulled my one-and-only personal credit card from my wallet and cheerfully registered myself on INN at the “Welcome Rate” of \$9.95 for the first 5 hours of monthly play and \$2.95 per hour thereafter. By the next Monday I had flown in several dozen dogfights and had accumulated what I regarded as a fairly good percentage of wins for a newbie before heading back to the drudgery of work and school. When the next weekend rolled around I found I was unable to connect to the INN because my credit card, which had nearly been maxed out when I registered, had reached its limit. When the bill finally arrived I was shocked to discover that the tab for only one weekend of virtually reliving the air battles of the Great War was about \$65. My first thought after picking up my jaw from the floor was that it sure didn’t feel like \$65 worth of gaming fun. I promptly discontinued my membership to INN, realizing there was no way, as a single working college student, that I could afford this even if I wanted to, which I no longer did.

Proponents of online gaming will be quick to point out that the per-hour pricing structures of mid-1990s online connectivity have given way to more favorable rates based on monthly, quarterly, or yearly subscriptions.

However, when one also factors in the initial cost of the hot game du jour at between \$40 and \$60, the monthly fee for the requisite broadband connection, and the potential need to upgrade computer or console hardware for the maximum possible experience, it seems that the overall costs involved in online gaming really haven’t gone down that much at all. If in fact you can easily afford these costs, and you’re not dealing with any of the other issues I’ll be addressing momentarily, then you’re in good shape. If, however, you’re subsisting off nothing but ramen noodles, by candlelight, whilst wrapped in a blanket so as to be able to keep affording just enough electricity to play Gears of War online, then you might need to rethink your priorities.



## That Flamethrower On Your Hip Is Getting In My Way Of Knowing The Real You

Whether they know it or not, the majority of sound-minded human beings in the world desire the company of others. We are hard-wired to congregate into social groups. For

many online gamers, the inordinate amount of time spent with others solely within the context of a game's field of play becomes an inferior substitute for real human contact. It is understandable that cultivating "normal" human friendships and associations can be a severely uncomfortable experience for many serious gamers who, like it or not, fit too easily into the stereotypical mold of extremely bright, good-natured, yet socially awkward misfits. For such a gamer it can be a far easier thing to retreat into the vast online worlds of play and fantasy, where one retains more or less complete control over the self-image presented to others. You can argue that this is what people do in real life anyway; showing to others only what we think will return the maximum yield on social acceptance. While that may be true in many cases, average "real" people have the ability to gauge the sum of their feelings toward another individual not only on the basis of what they like,

but also on the quirks or flaws which that subject eventually will make manifest. Optimistically, these people will still consider a relationship with you, warts and all, worthy of continuation. Yet in the context of online gaming, the gamer is able to assemble and embody, for the perusal of others, a completely idealized persona which is ultimately dishonest and bears little semblance to the person whom, in all fairness, others deserve to see. There is such a thing as being too perfect, and hiding from the world at large within the milieu of online role-playing provides what is at best a false sense of overconfidence.

There was a time in video gaming where a human's need for direct social interaction ("man-versus-man") was both encouraged and facilitated by the pastime. From the release of the earliest Pong consoles up through the Super Nintendo, generally every game console one could purchase came packaged with a set of at least two controllers. The implication of this was that, whatever you were going to play, you could play along with somebody sitting next to you. Perhaps it was your little brother or even your grandfather. Gaming was something to

of gaming's current generation have grown up accepting (or even validating) this perception as a norm.

### It's No Longer An "Escape" If You Can't Pull Yourself Away From It

I like video games. But more so, I like the ability to have enough self-control to walk away from them. Online gaming undermines this ability.



Merriam-Webster's online dictionary ([www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)) defines escapism as "habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine." This sounds pleasant and harmless enough. But in the world of online gaming, there are an increasing number of reports wherein the game itself becomes the "reality or routine" with disastrous results.

In the last five or six years there has been a good number of stories re-

ported by the press on the topic of "online gaming addiction." These reports tend to be sensationalistic in nature: Children dying because of neglectful gaming parents; gamers themselves reportedly dying at their computers due to starvation or exhaustion in the midst of marathon online sessions; violent personal retaliation taken against another player over an online gaming dispute; marriages, jobs, or academic careers all falling apart owing to an online game's predominance in the player's life. The reaction from the at-large gaming community to these stories is by now wholly predictable...

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call it an "isolated incident," decry the press for blowing it out of proportion, and repeatedly explain how it doesn't describe the majority of online gamers based on the ratio of tragic incidents to the total numbers of games either sold or played. In the short-term, this line of response is self-assuring and not without some credibility. In 2007 the American Psychiatric Association, considering not only online games but video games as a whole, determined that there was not yet enough statistical data on the subject to list video game addiction (with online gaming being considered the most problematic aspect) as a formal mental disorder. However, the question is still under review, and a final determination could be made as soon as the year 2012. So long as these "isolated incidents" keep occurring in ever-increasing numbers, the gaming community may not take too appreciably to the eventual findings.

#### Player One (Emphasis on "One")

Lastly, there is a case to be made on how online gaming reflects many of what old codgers like me consider being some of what is "wrong" with the younger generations today. Specifically, it is the pathological need of young people to be constantly engaged and in contact with their peers via the technologies of the day. Since one's "peeps" are never more than a text message away, the younger gamer is never really alone to develop his own skills or preferences as a gamer, to say nothing of his own identity as a person. Everything is subject to peer review and consensus. Say what you will about the game graphics of yesterday, but getting a high score on Galaga or Centipede was a time for one to be proud of an individual accomplishment (man-versus-machine). Winning an online battle in Halo 3:ODST is nothing more than a successful exercise in groupthink.

\* Disclaimer – Despite my anti-online gaming stance, I do in fact own an Xbox Live Gold Membership. Before you cry "hypocrite!" let me state that the only reason I have this is so that I can stream Netflix movies into my living room. I have never used it to play a game online with the exception of five embarrassing minutes getting slapped around by total strangers in Soul Calibur IV.



Online gaming is indisputably the present and future of video games, but that doesn't mean you have to go blindly riding along that wave in order to have a meaningful or pleasurable experience with the hobby. So disconnect that router, cancel that Xbox Live Gold\* membership, and maybe invite over a friend to play some video games in the pure, blissful manner in which they were originally intended to be enjoyed. Your wallet, mental health, and self-image will all be immensely grateful.

# THE BREWERY

“WHAT’S HAPPENING ON THE HOMEBREW SCENE”

What purpose do video games ultimately serve? Are they meant to entertain the player and to kill a few hours of free time? Do they provide a sense of satisfaction for being beaten, some congratulations on a job well done? Are they meant to involve the player in a deep and fascinating story-world the player gets lost in? If a game lacks all three, can it still be considered a video game?

Rendition is a 2007 interactive fiction game created by an author who only goes by the name of “nespresso.” In this game, you play a government interrogator who is investigating a suspected terrorist by the name of Abdul. Although the game isn’t directly based on the film on the same name, the two share the same themes and concerns in trying to make their points.

Instead of asking questions and gaining information of Abdul, you’ve taken the more direct approach of violence and torture. That’s it. That’s basically the beginning and the end of the game. Score enough points by thinking of a menagerie of ways to inflict pain on Abdul, and you’re the winner. Ah, but there’s the rub. Are you really a “winner”? Abdul is defenseless against your repeated blows. Just like beating your three-year-old brother who can hardly operate the controller, any victory against someone you’re not evenly matched against rings hollow.

The strong political theme may cause some gamers to roll their eyes, but I suspect that’s part of the intention that nespresso has in presenting the game. Politics in video games

is a topic that has not been represented very well. And really, how is that to blame? Would you rather shoot aliens and rescue a princess or discuss foreign policy? Even with the political discourse in games like Metal Gear Solid, it’s not as overt in the way that Rendition handles it. So we have politics and violence. Rendition should have all the makings of a great game, right?

either, no sense of satisfaction from doing your act. You’ve done, what, beaten up one man who may or may not be innocent? This isn’t a twitch game by any means. It requires the player to think carefully and deliberately before making each move, like a human game of chess.

Let’s go over those qualifications for a good video game again. Graphics, sound, and controls are nonexistent (this is a text adventure game, after all). Game play consists of typing in words and seeing the reactions. Does Rendition kill a few hours of free time? Hardly. At the very most, you might spend a half hour with it. Does it provide a sense of satisfaction for being beaten? Not at all. Is there a deep and fascinating story world where the player can get lost in? The plot is threadbare, and the situation is one where I don’t think too many people would knowingly put themselves in. Well, then, is it a video game? I believe so, but

not in the usual sense that we would think of when we consider the term “video game.” nespresso calls it a “political art experiment” and I think that experiment is a great term to use when classifying Rendition, both from an artistic and scientific perspective. You may find that the only test that the game offers is to test yourself, both within and outside of the boundaries of the game. After all, can you win a video game that has no goal, no morals, and is considered offensive?

Perhaps, the only real way to win is not to play at all.

Download and play Rendition at [www.renditiongame.tk](http://www.renditiongame.tk).

```
> kick stomach
You kick the shit out of his belly. Abdul sobs in agony.

[Your score has just gone up by one point.]

> pull hair
You can't see any such thing.

> kick balls
Which do you mean, his left testicle or his right testicle?

>
```

The game’s meta-physicality plays an interesting part in discerning how to approach the game. Who’s to say that Abdul is a terrorist in the first place? I mean, sure, the game lets you know within the first paragraph of the opening narration. But is that something you can trust? Even though Abdul is only the product of the author’s narration, a series of programmed actions and responses, it still causes the player to pause and think twice before carrying out the dirty deed. Why? You’ve shot complete strangers in the face countless times, over and over again. What makes this different? Despite the fact that the game is steeped in fiction, this is still a problem in real life. The closer to reality that a game can get, the more uncomfortable the player feels. There’s no accomplishment for “beating” the game,

# DIGITAL PRESS FEATURE

“DP INTERVIEWS MICHAEL BECKER”

To put it simply, Michael Becker was to Imagic what George Opperman was to Atari. He was responsible for much of Imagic's image, and he later put his artistic touch on products for other companies such as EA, Phillips, and P.F. Magic.

DP: What is your educational background?

MB: I went to college at California Lutheran College (1967) and UCLA, but never did get around to graduating. I was on a track in pre-law (international relations) and was very active on the debate teams of both schools after a pretty successful debate and public speaking run during my high school years. At some point I found black-light paints and Zap Comics more inspirational and could never go back.

DP: What artist(s) motivated you to pursue a career in art?

MB: Ron Cobb (LA Free Press, current feature film concept artist), R. Crumb, and Vaught Bode.

DP: Did you work for anyone prior to Imagic (after school)?

MB: I had a bunch of jobs before Imagic, including Art Director for the Berkeley Barb, comic books for the underground press, environmental artwork for Greenpeace and others (first Baby Seal T-shirt, baby!), and a lot of cruddy typesetting, paste-up, and freelance artwork jobs that were always as much hassle as money. I did a lot of freelance artwork years before and wanted to learn all kind of styles by doing a piece in the Frazetta, Leindecker, and other styles.

DP: How did you come to work for Imagic? Was that the only game company you worked for?

MB: It was January of 1982, and I had just read a Time magazine article about how

coin-op video games were a whole new industry. I was working in an advertising agency at the time and the constant bang-bang-bang of the printing presses was driving me crazy. I resolved to do something else in the New Year and answered a tiny ad in the newspaper.

It turns out I was one of 350 applicants for the job of Art Director in a 'video game company,' whatever that was. I did an interview on the phone and kept trying to get out of driving 55 minutes to the actual interview. They finally got a vice president (Jim Goldberg) on the phone and he talked me into coming in. It was actually because I had a couple board games in my portfolio that caused the most interest.

DP: Do you remember what board games they were?

MB: I did all the artwork, typesetting, game design, writing, and spot illustrating (even some of the printing!) for the board game *Sword Lords* for Archive Miniatures (an old D&D-style miniatures company) and I'd done that work for fun. I don't think I got any pay, except for some left-over figures. The artwork (above) was done in a frenzied two days. The second picture is the original oil painting.

I also typeset, did cover work, production layout, and spot illustrations for their other board game, *Star Rovers*. Maybe some copies still exist in one of the game stores in the bargain bin, but I don't have any slides. (I have one copy of *Sword Lords*, but gave my only copy of *Star Voyager* to the publisher when he needed it in Vegas, either to sell to leverage into publishing again. I don't know what happened after that.) These games were done about 1980, before I applied at Imagic. I think they sold a couple thousand copies each. I also did a dart game for the same company, "Nuke-a-tola" that had you pitching darts (nukes) at Iran. Shiver my

timbers, that might come back someday to haunt me!!!

DP: I was able to find some info on *Sword Lords* ([www.boardgamegeek.com](http://www.boardgamegeek.com)) but nothing on *Star Rover* (or was it called *Star Voyager*?) or *Nuke-A-Tola* (what a great name!). At Imagic, you had the titles Art Director and Creative Director. What exactly were your responsibilities there, and what tools/programs were available for you to use?

MB: I was hired to be the Art Director, but during the interview Jim asked if I could help the programmers with their artwork for the games since what they did was considered cruddy. Without much thought, I said "Sure, how hard can it be?" And actually, back then it wasn't that hard – mainly because Bob Smith and Rob Fulop had programmed some great art tools for the Atari 800. I used a joystick to 'paint' animation frames and another program to sketch in Atari playfield ideas, but I had to use graph paper at first to design Mattel screens like the *Demon Attack* playfields.

It was an amazing time with Imagic growing as fast as they could spend money. I had a staff of about a dozen artists and a great print Art Director who I managed in putting together the boxes, books, and collateral material. After a few months they asked if I wanted to learn Assembly Language and program games, too, but I was smart enough to say no and become one of the first Creative Directors in the industry instead.

In that capacity I would work with Wilfredo Aguilar (a great game Art Director who now works at EA) and a couple other game artists to make all the graphics for games. I usually took an 800 home and could bang out all the backgrounds and animations in about one weekend.

During the work days I'd jump back and forth

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between working with the programmers (where the action was!) and checking in with the Art Department under Marketing (where the confusion was!). It was about the only way of knowing what games were actually on track for CES.

DP: I didn't realize that you worked with Willy on *Sword Lords*! It's amazing that you both have worked together all this time at three different companies. Was that planned, or did things just happen to fall that way?

MB: We were friends at a company (Gum Street) before I started in the industry and we 'war-gamed' evenings and weekends. He joined Imagic a few months after I came on board. I wanted to work with him so he was my first hire there.

DP: At Imagic, did your work mainly involve in-game graphics, or were you also involved with packaging or other items aside from video games?

MB: I did both all the time for the frenzied few years that Imagic existed. I worked with Mark Klein and whipped up the first graphics that we used crude digitizers to get in at title screens (*Touchdown Football* and other later PC games), did all the work on about a half dozen games when a batch was coming through, and then designed up the fantasy photographic images for the covers. (I'd also check in with the package art and print materials, but the other Art Director Wendy Zeto did such a great job that I rarely had to do much more than approve her work!)

The package covers were fun. Willy and I would buy a bunch of model kits, bash together some cool models (we were seriously inspired by Lucas back then), and work with an outside optical house to layer in special effects. We ended up with a 4x5 image that was pretty slick and was also a fun diversion from the low-res artwork. We'd also sometimes do an illustration of some type, so we were also able to work with some of Atari's best painters and graphic designers.

DP: I know from previous conversations with Rob Fulop and Brad Stewart, you worked with them on at least two games (Fulop's *Fathom* and Stewart's *Star Wars: The Arcade Game*). How many titles (or game-related products) have you been involved with, and for what systems? (I realize this may cover quite a few.)

MB: Gosh, including all the foreign language and various platform versions, I once came up with about 125 titles! Let me see if I can recall some of them:

ATARI VCS *Atlantis Cosmic Ark Demon Attack* (my first sprite!) *Dragon Fire "Fantasy Football"* (unpublished) *Fathom Moonsweeper No Escape Riddle of the Sphinx Shootin' Gallery Sky Patrol* (Brad's balloon game, one version. Unpublished) *Solar Storm "Tank"* (unpublished) (I can't recall any work I did on *Star Voyager*, *Trick Shot*, *Cubicolor* or *Fire Fighter*, but I might have done a sprite or two on the last one.)

## INTELLIVISION

*Atlantis Beauty and the Beast Beezer?* (unpublished) *Demon Attack Dracula Ice Trek Microsurgeon Nova Blast Safecracker Swords and Serpents* (I did a lot of level design on this, and really had to fight to keep a Dragon in the game!) *Tropical Trouble Truckin' White Water* (Imagic was reluctant to put their best programmers (Fulop, Smith, Koble, etc.) on Intellivision projects because they were among the few who knew the 2600, so they brought in a bunch of college grads instead.)

## COLECOVISION

*Dragonfire*, *Fathom*, *Moonsweeper*

## ATARI 400/800

*"Dungeon"* (unpublished), *Laser Gates*, *Quick Step*, *Rat Patrol* (unpublished), *Wing War* (cover mostly)

## C-64

*Escape The Cave of Time*

## VIC-20

*Atlantis*, *Dragonfire*

## PC Jr.

*Demon Attack*, *Grand Slam Baseball* (mostly Willy's work), *I, Damiano* (unpublished), *Lonesome Gods* (Louis Lamour with Bantam... unpublished), *Microsurgeon*, *Sherlock Holmes in Another Bow*, *Sherlock Holmes in Under the Boardwalk* (unpublished), *Time Machine* (unpublished), *Touchdown Football*

## TI 99/4a

(7 were announced, but I only recall these) *Demon Attack*, *Fathom*, *Microsurgeon*, *Wing War*

ODYSSEY (with these you had to use a CHARACTER SET for graphics!) *Atlantis*, *Demon Attack*

## ALL PLATFORMS

*Star Wars Arcade* (vector graphics done as tiles! Crazy!)

DP: Was there one system that you enjoyed for more than others? Did you primarily do

all your design work with an Atari 800, or did you have different tools/systems (i.e. a system for Intellivision, one for the VCS, etc.)?

MB: I liked the PC Jr. the most since we had the best tools and it had the greatest capacity. Imagic was the first third-party developer for the Jr. With the earlier systems I liked Colecovision the most, followed by Intellivision. The Atari VCS was awfully limiting for artwork. Every platform had new tools.

For example, with *Touchdown Football* (for the PC Jr.), Mark Klein programmed it, I did the art, and Willy taught Mark football and provided a lot of feedback. EA bought *Touchdown Football* from Imagic and published it for various platforms including the Atari. In 1989 EA released an updated version of it as *John Madden Football*. The main difference being the field scrolled vertically with a top-down view.

DP: That's interesting. I'd heard it (*Madden*) was based on CBS Electronics-planned (2600/400/800/Colecovision) versions. They were never finished/released, and when CBS Electronics folded their software division, they sold off the *Madden Football* rights to EA.

MB: You obviously know more about this than I do. My data comes from EA legend that Trip Hawkins was always playing *Touchdown Football* around EA and kept telling the producers EA should do more sports games. At this time Imagic had sold *Touchdown* to EA and EA was publishing it on the Commodore 64 (and perhaps Apple II). Then (I would guess) this licensing opportunity came up and EA got the *Madden* rights. This is something Rich Hilleman would know more about since he was producing it at that point in time; all my stuff is pretty much guesswork. But I would think that Trip's playing *Touchdown Football* and digging it was factual.

DP: How were screenshots made back then since they obviously weren't actual screen photos?

MB: They were made from cut-out pieces of stick-colored paper! This was back before we could photograph screens.

DP: From your list of TI-99/4a games, *Moonsweeper* was another title that was released. I don't know what the other two

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titles would have been (you mentioned seven were announced), but I know that an early version of Super Demon Attack exists that has voice (the released version didn't). The "Super" (in the title) seemed to be a late addition, as the title screen simply says 'Demon Attack.'

MB: A lot of those were just pounded out and the 'Super' probably was just marketing hype.

DP: Rob Fulop mentioned that his Fathom game started with a picture you did of a dolphin jumping out of the water. Was it common for a programmer to get an inspiration for a game design from an artist in that regard? What was the creative process like?

MB: That was an example of a single animation inspiring Rob, but it was different with every game. I remember on Dragonfire that Bob Smith was real interested in inventing a new joystick dynamic and came up with the concept of Jacks...using the joystick to 'sweep up' objects in the playfield. He also liked The Hobbit and we brainstormed back and forth a little and came up with the idea of grabbing treasure away from a dragon.

Willy had mentioned this idea of putting all (or most of) the sprites together to make two large characters for a fighting game, but this was laughed at by the executives. I liked the idea of bigger sprites and so Bob and I worked out to make an animated dragon that stalked across the bottom of the screen.

Actually, it was a lot like it still is today. You work with a few guys (or gals) who you click with and together you just pitch ideas back and forth, try a few things, and if the chemistry is good you will come up with something fun. Sometimes you get something that works but isn't fun, but that's where the magic is, isn't it?

DP: I noticed a common theme with some of your work, in regards to depictions of swords, knights, and dragons. Was this a result of all the medieval-themed games you worked on or more an interest of yours? Were you involved in naming any of the games?

MB: I have been into Tolkien since before gaming. My stepson Keith got The Hobbit read to him as his first bedtime story, so I just sort of gravitated toward it.

DP: Both Rob Fulop and Bob Smith included your name in at least one of their games (your initials can be shown on-screen in 2600 Fathom, and your first initial and last name appear in the code for 2600 Star Wars: The Arcade Game). Are you aware of any other games with Easter eggs like that?

MB: I bet there were tons of them. The programmers didn't always share them with others though, so I don't really remember examples that you could replicate. I never 'signed' my artwork.

DP: Why are some VCS cart labels text only (no artwork)?

MB: These were compositions we made ourselves for trade shows like CES. To actually print them you had to print a solid square of white ink first, let it dry, and then print four colors on it. That was the only way to print on the chrome paper. It was very expensive, but kids loved the look. In Imagic's first focus test of the Mylar boxes, a kid swiped one and wanted to take it home; that's when they knew that was the ONE they wanted to use!

DP: Have you kept any of your materials from Imagic over the years (besides the slides), such as models, paintings, sketches, etc.?

MB: I have several of the original paintings, along with all the plastic models. I gave the last Demon (from Demon Attack) to Rob when we were at P.F. Magic, but the rest sit in my attic. I also have other paper docs, records of brainstorm sessions, etc.

DP: Do you recall any products that you worked on that ultimately weren't released?

MB: Gosh, there were probably as many that weren't made as were finally released. We had a cool tank game (for the PC Jr.) that I thought showed promise, a Time Machine game (PC Jr.) that looked cool, a whole 'living literature' game (PC Jr.) designed with Louis Lamour, a fantasy football game for the Atari VCS, a VCS tank game, and many more! In fact, one summer all of Imagic went to a brainstorm session, and I took notes and made up screens of all the ideas that surfaces. It turns out that, of that list of almost 100 game ideas, virtually every one has since been made at least once.

DP: Time Machine looked like a great game.

Shame it wasn't released. Did you keep copies of any/all the games that you were involved with?

MB: They (unreleased games) were only on development systems and in some few copies that made it to trade shows. I stupidly gave all my EPROMs to the Salvation Army in the early 90s, along with my Atari and Intellivision. Duh! I still kick myself.

DP: Since Imagic, have you stayed within the field of game design?

MB: I got out of the industry briefly after Imagic – it was tough being involved in such a quick rise-and-fall company, and especially hard if you had to lay off all your friends and then watch the whole thing wind down until it was the size of a shoebox.

But I ended up with Rob Fulop doing multimedia and online game designs for our company, Interactive Productions, that later was renamed P.F. Magic. We did the first interactive video game designs for Night Trap and Sewer Shark, worked up Rabbit Jack's online casino suite of games for Steve Case, and did a bunch of multimedia products on first-generation color Macintoshes. And, of course, we got into CD publishing with Phillips' CDI, doing a few titles for them.

The CD work made me realize that games were getting HUGE and that to do them right you needed a big team and deep pockets. I interviewed at Electronic Arts and came over here almost 13 years ago.

DP: What are some of the projects you were involved with at EA?

MB: Put together their CD group, hired all the initial artists, and designed or managed:  
Shockwave (designed and managed)  
Madden 3DO (managed and designed the television format for EA sports)  
Soviet Strike (designed)  
Nuclear Strike (designed)  
WWII Fighters PC (cinematics)  
Majestic (community design, real time game designs)  
The Two Towers (designed all media)  
Return of the King (designed and all media)  
The Third Age (designed and all media)  
Next LOTR (designing and all media)

DP: Brad Stewart mentioned working on a Sherlock Holmes game for the Apple II ("I

also did the Apple II version of an adventure game based on Sherlock Holmes. I don't remember what title wound up on the box. We always referred to it as 'Sherlock Holmes.' This was the first and last time I worked on a game as part of a team. We had a professional writer for the text of the game, and an artist to do a graphic of each character to be displayed when that person was in the room.")

MB: Right. I don't recall the Apple II version but it would make sense we were doing two versions at once. Imagine how hard it would have been to code TWO parser systems in parallel! (I was the artist Brad mentions; Pete Golden mentioned earlier was the writer.)

DP: You had several different slides for Beauty & the Beast. I've heard the original (tentative) name for this was 'Big Bully'... does that sound familiar?

MB: Maybe that was one of the names. I remember talking with Bruce Davis (later CEO, then top legal) about this game in the lab. It was originally going to be King Kong but we couldn't get the license. A lot of names got tried out when negotiations fell through. Peter Jackson would probably not be amused.

DP: I noticed you had a number of slides related to Worlds of Wonder. What was Imagic's relationship with them (if any)?

MB: The slides are from the Worlds of Wonder Toy Fair multimedia show introducing Teddy Ruxpin and all their toys for kids (Lazer Tag, Mother Goose, etc.). It was a 20-minute environmental show that ran in New York during the fair. I worked for them as a contract Creative Director after Imagic, since Bill Bradley was VP of Marketing from Imagic to WOW, and he asked if I would create the Toy Fair multimedia shows to introduce these lines. I did these huge shows with lasers, slides, video projection, custom Teddy voice greetings, and little stories with kids and toys for each product line. Several of them later were turned into TV spots for the toys (Arrrrgh! I can't get the songs out of my head, even after all these years!). WOW did well but ultimately suffered the same fate as the first cartridge video games; the stores were flooded with the stuff and ultimately the prices fell and the business tanked. It did not help that a cop in Los Angeles shot a kid who was playing with a Lazer Tag gun.

DP: I recall the Lazer Tag and Teddy Ruxpin toys now that you mention it. Ruxpin was 'the' hot toy for a time. I remember there being a slew of 'clones' from other companies soon after...

MB: Worlds of Wonder also did some experimental interactive video prototypes using the video guys I worked with on these shows (who incidentally also did the video for the Shockwave game for EA on 3DO).

I later worked with Rob Fulop on the designs for the Hasbro "Isix" VHS Interactive Movie video system. The Isix was a VCR-like box that attached to your VHS player. Think of a second VHS unit with a board filled with RAM that sat on top of the VHS and cabled into it with a controller port. You inserted a videotape with interleaved video (4 tracks) and 16 interleaved tracks of audio (or still images). It worked a lot like railroad switching; if you pressed a controller button at an edit point it could jump to another track (never backward!). It was this technology that we originally designed Sewer Shark and Night Trap for. That was essentially what they envisioned. I thought it interesting they only ever stress-tested the interactive video with ONE Panasonic player and that after about 100 plays, the data began to rub off the tapes.

When Hasbro decided not to produce the Isix box (RAM chips were real expensive back then), they sold the games to Sega for their CD-player, who turned them into the first games with video at a very crappy resolution that we called 'GranolaVision.'

DP: I recall Rob talking about all the flack he took for Night Trap; how ironic looking back at it now, considering the current catalog of violent games on the market.

MB: Night Trap was considered 'violent' and even got involved in Congressional hearings. I bet that really pleased Rob.

DP: Didn't the early digitized video that was done run on a modified Colecovision? I seem to remember reading that somewhere. I know I've heard a few different names for that Hasbro system (Nemo being one).

MB: Aha! Yes, the name was Nemo, or at least one name was. Funny enough, the lead designer of Return of the King (Brett Rob-

bins) was the kid the ad agency used in commercials for the product in focus tests. It had a kid having fantasies (car, girlfriend, etc.) that came true with a push of the button.

DP: Rob also mentioned, "The original version of Night Trap we did for Hasbro featured a hidden scene with a topless Dana Plato, but I don't know if it was added into the Digital Pictures version that came out on the Sega and PC." Do you remember anything about that trick?

MB: I heard it rumored but never saw it. Darn.

DP: What's your opinion on how video game industry has changed since the days of Imagic? Are (were) you a video game player/fan, and if so, what are some of your favorites?

MB: I think games have evolved from being small, elegant expressions of pure fun into large, immersive experiences. Sometimes this is for the better, often for the worse. But I've always thought that the best games are still to come (which is why I keep working on them), so I can't categorically say that I prefer the good old days to the new old days.

Of course I play games, but given the thousands that come out every year, I can't ever find time to finish the big ones. I like story-based games, RTS games, RPG games, online immersive worlds, and sometimes playful ones like The Sims. I also keep an eye on paper and miniature games, which have remained a hobby of mine for decades. I have over 20,000 painted miniatures from all eras in my attic, to confess a serious lead compulsion.

DP: Do you still see any former Imagic co-workers, or have you remained in touch with any?

MB: I stay in touch with Bob Smith and less with Rob Fulop, and of course I see Willy every few days (we ended up working on different games in the EA studio), and sometimes I see Mark Klein, Brad, Dave, or a few of the others. We always marvel at how much older we're getting.

# QUARTERS AND TOKENS

"REDEMPTION"

We've seen a lot of advances in arcade technology over the past 40 years. In my lifetime alone (I was born in 1973) I've seen machines change from simple mechanical games and black-and-white classics such as Pong and Space Invaders to the high-tech machines of today with high definition graphics, surround sound, and network play. With so many advances throughout the years it's hard to put a finger on the single greatest thing to ever happen to arcades, but if I had to pick one, I'd say the best thing to ever happen to arcades was the invention of the ticket redemption machine.

You've seen them, and if you have kids you probably loathe them. Big Bertha. Skill Cranes. Skee-Ball. The machines are large, wrapped in bright colors and covered in so flashing lights not even the dead could miss them. Many of them closely resemble those alluring machines that draw millions of visitors to Las Vegas each year. While ticket redemption machines must involve some level of skill to avoid being labeled as gambling machines, the end goal is the same. Ticket redemption machines want your money, and promise to pay you tickets in return.

At the end of the day, those tickets can be redeemed for prizes. The prizes vary in value; a few small items may cost only five or ten tickets, while others may run you tens of thousands or even more. In one local arcade I saw a few Star Wars figures being offered for 1,800 tickets. At that time the same Star Wars figures were being sold at Walmart for \$6. The math is simple. Each ticket is worth approximately one third of a penny. If you put a quarter into a machine and receive less than 75 tickets, you are losing money. I recently saw a Wheel of Fortune machine that paid winners anywhere from 1 to 50 tickets. On machines like that, it's impossible to break even, much less come out a winner.



So if ticket redemption machines are designed for the sole purpose of stealing money from children, why do I think they're so great? Because, they are single-handedly keeping many arcades in business. They're so vital in fact, that many arcade owners have removed large collections of arcade machines to make room for them.

Arcades have been dying since the day they were born. Sure, back when arcade games were new operators were bringing in money hand over fist, but the glory days of the 1980s are long gone. There is no single reason why arcades began failing. Part of it had to do with the rise of home computers

and a shift in gaming styles, from twitchy reflex games to role-playing and strategy-based games. Part of it had to do with the growth of home video game consoles. In the 8-bit days the arcade version of games reigned supreme over grossly inferior home ports, but throughout the 1990s gaming consoles and home computers caught up and in many cases surpassed the abilities of arcade machines. The final nail in the coffin came in the form of the Internet, which gave us (among other things) online gaming and replaced the need to physically leave our houses to play games with other people.

Some businesses such as Showbiz Pizza, Chuck E. Cheese, and Incredible Pizza made their profits from food, using games as a lure. To even enter Incredible Pizza, the \$6.95 buffet is mandatory. A large, greasy pepperoni pizza at Chuck E. Cheese will run you \$20. Like movie theaters (which make little or no profit off of ticket sales and rely on concession sales to remain in business), these types of places would sink if it weren't for their food prices. Of course, they have a second ace up their other sleeve; their game rooms are now filled with machines that dispense tickets. They get you both coming and going.

The owner of a local arcade once told me that approximately 75% of his profits came from his ticket redemption machines, and the rest came from birthday parties and pool tournaments. The arcade games barely pay for themselves, when you consider rent, electricity, and repairs.

I know most of you probably detest those ticket dispensing machines. I used to, until I realized that without them, the few arcades that still exist would probably be forced to close up shop and call it a day. The days of arcades paying their bills one quarter at a time is long gone. If having a few ticket dispensers around keeps my local arcade open, then I'm all for them.

# QUARTERS AND TOKENS

“HAS ONLINE KILLED THE ARCADE STAR?”



Arcades have fallen a long way since their heyday in the '80s. Genre-driven revivals in the '90s and early 2000s appear to have given way, and with broadband Internet's prevalence over the past decade, it begs the question; is there even a place for the arcade in modern gaming society?

To the extent of actual gaming, the arcade is no longer truly relevant. Home consoles caught up to the power of arcade boards for the most part during the late '90s. By that point, previously popular genres such as fighting games had become so complex that they only truly appealed to the hardcore fans of the genre (with few exceptions). The advent of rhythm games brought on a small resurgence in arcade gaming, but those too were eventually experiences brought to the home.

Since then, arcades have gotten by in a variety of ways, usually by providing experiences that cannot be attained easily or cheaply at home. This can range from novel controls (such as a police game that requires you to move your whole body) to the whole social experience. The social experience is some-

thing that is inherent to a good arcade, and is indeed the hallmark of one that continues to exist. No matter how good an online experience can get, there's just not the same feel as being in an arcade. In my own personal experience, there are at least a dozen people I consider friends whom I would never have met if not for going to play *Capcom vs SNK 2* at Wizzards Arcade in Detroit.

There's an additional sense of competition at an arcade. When you hop onto a machine, you're putting money down to prove that you are better than other people and can stay on that game longer than they can. While that is directly obvious in a fighting game, it's also true on any game involving a high score. It's easy to brag about your score when there are other people around watching, or to find challengers looking to end your win streak in a fighter. Not everyone plays games at an arcade with that notion in mind, but even beating your own personal benchmarks involves that same mental state.

That inherent competitiveness has recently found its way into online arenas with scoreboards showing your best scores against those of people worldwide. In a sense, that aspect of the arcade has also been brought home; though even the advent of excellent netcode and online gaming programs such as GGPO, 2DF, or Xbox Live, purists and die-hards always seem to go for the authentic arcade experience.

So, with arcades in decline even in long-time gaming meccas like Japan or Southern California, is there still a place for them? I believe so. The continued survival of places such as Game Galaxy in Tennessee, American Fun Center in Detroit, numerous locations in Japan, and the success of the Gameworks franchise show that although they are not as profitable as they once were (due in part to inflation), arcades continue to be the place for gamers to congregate and play. Online gaming has not yet killed the experience of real socializing, and a properly maintained arcade in the right location can continue to serve the local gaming population.

# CLOSET CLASSICS

“TUNNELS OF DOOM”

The title of this column does NOT refer to the subterranean lair I call my gaming area. It is not a reference to a high school story about a nerd who is terrorized by the school bully. Nor is it the set-up for a review about the classic iD shooter. The title of this column serves to introduce a game you may have never played but should know about and is, in fact, called Tunnels of Doom. Take a little journey with me.

First, let's have a look at what we're going to need to play. We'll start by unearthing a first-generation Texas Instruments home computer (TI-99/4A for short). We open the game box to discover both a cartridge and a cassette, so we'll need to find that cassette drive too. Since we're not fans of the TI-99/4A joysticks, we'll pop a little gizmo in that lets us use the classic Atari stick instead. Some old doors open, some dust is brushed aside, a few cables get hooked up, and after a flick of a few power switches...our system is alive.

After being greeted by the cheerful introduction screen, it's time to load the game program from the cassette. The on-screen instructions clearly guide us through the process. Rewind tape. Press "play." Wait for data to load. Easy. We're instructed at this time that the game will take 200 seconds to load. By the time I've done the conversion to minutes in my head, that time has already elapsed. But wait... the game is still loading. Has the TI-99/4A system locked up on us? Is it possible that the cassette has been damaged by years of storage in a stuffy attic? There are 60 seconds in a minute, right? We can't really tell for sure what the delay is because the screen hasn't changed. The tape player is still chugging along though, so we wait, and our patience is finally rewarded in what seems like 600 seconds.



This isn't quite the way I remember the game. All we see is one little man and he's all alone on the screen. The Tunnels of Doom I remember had four guys and there was a shop to buy weapons and armor. Surely we're going to need weapons and armor in these doom-filled tunnels! No matter, let's dive in. The controls are simple and I'm quickly reminded that we didn't need a joystick after all. Everything is carried out on the keyboard. I'm then reminded that there isn't any instruction on the screen, so we're going to need to consult the game manual for the list of commands.

OK, now we're getting somewhere. The manual explains how to attack with ranged weapons, how to cast spells from scrolls, how to look for secret passages, and all kinds of cool stuff that will help us survive these tunnels.

Something's not right though. Why is it that there are no bad guys as we go from room to room? Oh...NOW I remember. There are two games on the cassette, and the one we're

playing, Pennies and Prizes, is more or less a children's version of the bigger game, Quest For The King. This child's play won't do. We turn it all off, flip the cassette over, rewind, wait between 200 and 600 seconds and...ACK! Pennies and Prizes again! Seems your tour guide isn't so bright, sorry. In fact, you end up waiting another 600 seconds as I try to decipher exactly how to get the real game going. It's not explained in the manual, and no joke... I even consulted the Internet where I also came up empty. Note to self and the Internet; forward the cassette past Pennies and Prizes if you

want to play Quest For The King. It's the second program on both sides of the tape. Jeez.

So. Rewind. Wait for loading. Cross our fingers. Wait a little more. Voila! At last Quest For The King greets us. The first order of business is to create our party. We can have up to four characters, in any combination of Fighter, Wizard, or Thief and our choice of four different colors to represent them. The best customization of all is that we can name each character. Since the manual tells us that we'll later need to issue commands

using their names, we choose appropriately short ones and since I'm the guy at the keyboard, I get to choose the appropriately juvenile names as well.



These brave adventurers will need weapons and armor and shields and food and...wait, FOOD? Oh, that's right. These tunnels are indeed doom-like and we'll need to keep them fed. There was barely enough money

to get all four of our guys properly outfitted but we'll get some more money as we kill stuff and we can come back to the shop later, so it's all good. Finally, we're about to play.

Wondering if the game is really worth all of this? It's almost a disservice to the game to highlight the inexorable set-up time needed to play it, because it really IS a fantastic game. If you're into adventure or role-playing games, much of it will all feel like second nature: move from room to room encountering monsters, take turns with them during battle as you move about, attack, cast spells, and gather treasure. The monsters get tougher as your characters improve. It's all very familiar but keep in mind that Tunnels of Doom was released in 1982. In 1982 most of us were playing our games on an Atari 2600 and we were still years away from NES games on our TV. There was no Final Fantasy or Legend of Zelda. The concept of a "role-playing game" was at best reserved for those nerdy kids (like yours truly) who played pencil, paper, and dice games and talked in funny voices to each other.

Tunnels of Doom was a revelation to me in 1982. Customizable characters. Randomly generated mazes. The game was never the same twice, and you could even decide if you wanted to play a quick one-level run or a nine-level-deep marathon. There are all manner of monsters from giant rats to trolls to the nerdy kid favorite, the kobold. All of this wrapped around a very straightforward goal: Find the King and the Rainbow Orb and get out. One final innovation to keep you on your toes: the King dies if you don't find him within a certain number of moves as you explore and battle. If he dies, you can still find the Orb, and you can still finish the game, but saving the king feels like the 80's equivalent of "achievement points." You can see this imaginary timer that's ticking away at any time, so strategy is critical.

In 2010, Tunnels of Doom is still great fun and stands out as one of those little hidden gems from the '80s.



# CLOSET CLASSICS

“MICKY’S SLEEPER PICKS”



Boing! (Atari 2600, First Star Software, 1983)

First Star Software, probably best known for Boulder Dash, released a single game for the Atari 2600. As you might imagine, it's a difficult game to find. However, unlike many of the other companies that only put out a game or two, First Star released a quality title that I assume fell victim to the crash.

This game is a simple Q\*Bert clone, but it's done in a way that keeps me coming back for more. It's a fast game that picks up in difficulty fairly quickly; this is why I like it so much. Not only is the game quick to play through, but the actual movement of your character and the enemies is very quick as well.

This rarity can carry a pretty high price tag for an Atari game, but it is definitely one of the more enjoyable expensive Atari games. If you have a Harmony cartridge or an emulator handy, try this one instead of sticking to your usual favorites.

Dolphin (Atari 2600, Activision, 1983)

This game has (what I deem) the best implementation of “required listening” out of all games that have ever attempted it. It is also probably the first to do so. On top of the usual sound warning that an enemy is coming, or you are about to run out of your power-up, in this game you actually need to listen to the sounds to know where to position your dolphin. Unfortunately, that means those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing will not be able to play this game. Audio is nearly always used only as a supplement to the visual cues on screen, but in Dolphin it's just as important as everything you see. That makes this a unique game that everyone needs to try.

You play as a dolphin in search of another dolphin that is in danger. Walls of seahorses try to block your way. Luckily for you, each wall of seahorses has a hole in it, and dolphin sonar allows you to sound out the location of the hole before you can see it. High-pitched sounds mean the gap is higher up; low-pitched sounds means the gap is lower to the sea floor. On top of these obstacles, an octopus is always chasing you, and you need to patiently wait for the special seagull to get your special powers before you can attack the octopus.

All of these elements put together make for a very busy game, which works for this game. It's challenging, but not too much to handle. If you have trouble with it at first, don't give up right away. Make sure you give it 15 minutes of practice before you write it off and toss it back to the closet.

# MATTERS OF IMPORT

"ARGUMENT"

We all have our favorite games for whatever reason. Sometime they're just great games that just about everyone loves. Other times, you have a sentimental attachment to them for one reason or another. There are a few that fall into the "so bad they're good" category, usually are only good for the "lulz" (as some like to say on the Internet).

Then there are the games that polarize gamers. These are usually the games that are built up to near-mythical proportions by their adoring fans and just as quickly savaged by the detractors. The fans feed the hype machine while the detractors find a flaw, any flaw, and magnify it so that it becomes "the reason" the game in question sucks.

Mamono Hunter Yohko: Makai Kara no Tenkosei (Devil Hunter Yohko: The Seven Bells) by NCS for the Sega Mega Drive has been a favorite of mine for several years. Based on the once-popular anime series Devil Hunter Yohko, this action-platformer is very similar to the Valis games, although it is more difficult and has fewer additional features. When it's remembered, which isn't very often, it's usually dismissed as just another crap licensed title, slagged for its difficulty (a staple feature of the company that developed it - if you don't believe me, try Assault Suits Leynos, aka Target Earth, sometime) and control issues. I won't deny either of those allegations. It has its quirks, and it is a tough game. But it's also a competent action game that doesn't fall into the trap of being completely frustrating. On top of that, it's got a great soundtrack and nicely detailed graphics. I admit to having a sentimental attachment to it, as the anime series was one of the first ones I got into back in the early '90s. That may color my opinion of it somewhat.

Kaze Kiri: Ninja Action (Naxat Soft, NEC PC Engine Super CD-ROM<sup>2</sup>) is a game that to-



tally polarizes the PC Engine fanbase. Some claim it's the most awesome game to ever exist, others says it's a one-dimensional button masher. To a degree, they're both correct. It's a great game, not up to the level of Akumajo Dracula X: Chi no Rondo, but still awesome. It's got some great graphics, a classic PC Engine opening, an unlockable second playable character (the female ninja Suzu), and a phenomenal redbook audio soundtrack. But I won't lie, it is very one dimensional. On the surface, Kaze Kiri looks like a traditional action platformer, but it most definitely isn't. The best way to describe it is that it's a modernizing of Irem's classic coin-op Kung Fu Master. You do have more ways to kill enemies in Kaze Kiri than you did in Kung Fu Master, but they both take place on completely flat surfaces with no threats other than the enemies. There are no pitfalls, no stairs to climb, and most importantly, no powerups. If you like Kung Fu Master and don't expect much beyond it other than what I mentioned, then you may find a lot to like about Kaze Kiri. Some want more from their games and don't feel that Kaze Kiri deserves the endless heaps of praise it's gotten. Either that, or they just don't like Kung Fu Master or games like it.

Treasure's legendary behemoth of a shooter, Radiant Silvergun (Sega Saturn), is probably the most well known out of the games I've covered here. The demand for it, even all this time after its release in 1998, is still high, more often than not reaching from \$200 to \$300 dollars on online auction sites such as eBay. The fans of it are almost unani-

mous in declaring it the best overhead shooter ever (a category I fall into). The detractors, however, have a different opinion. I think "overrated" is the nicest comment I've seen about it from a detractor. But what's not to like, other than the ridiculous price tag? It's an orgasm of bullets, strategy, and shooting with a dash of anime wackiness. It has absolutely gorgeous graphics, a phenomenal soundtrack by Hitoshi Sakimoto, silky smooth play control, wildly imaginative environments and bosses and a variety of weapons your ship automatically comes equipped with (no power-ups here). You actually level up your weapons the longer you play it, so even if you're not good at the game, you stand a fighting chance. Your gained levels even get saved so that when you start a new game, you have the same kind of firepower you did when you last played it. There are hidden bonuses to find, and you can even shoot multiple enemies of the same color to chain combos, something almost unheard of in a shooter. In fact, I can't think of a single thing that's bad about it, or even slightly off. It's damn near perfection on a little silver disc.

# BARGAIN BIN BLISS

“MORE GAME FOR LESS MONEY”

This issue's Bargain Bin Bliss focuses on two games whose goals fall on opposite ends of the gaming spectrum; building something up and shooting something down. I discovered each of these gems through word-of-mouth recommendations. And I'm passing along those recommendations to you.

As always, the underlying theme of Bargain Bin Bliss is to track down those “good-n-cheap” games forgotten in the video game flotsam. Games chosen for this column must meet four criteria:

- The game must be available for less than \$8.00 at any typical used game store or via online shopping.
- The game must be somewhat unknown, having received very little to no advertising or publicity upon initial release.
- Even if it's not groundbreaking, the game must deliver something unusual or unique to differentiate itself from all other games in its genre.
- I gotta like it.

Tall Infinity (PlayStation, A1 Games, 2003)

The goal of Tall Infinity is as simple as building a tower out of color-sided blocks. By rolling the blocks around the perimeter of the tower and matching up like-colored sides, new blocks appear underneath, launching the tower into the stratosphere. If you're able to match more than one colored side at a time, even more blocks rise up. And while the tower rises, if you're able to still match colors, the tower increases still. Think of it as a “cylindrical Tetris.”

Meanwhile, as you build the tower up, the “borderline” is fast approaching. This line moves up the tower, level by level, slowly gaining on you. If the borderline catches up with you, the tower will collapse out from

under you. So it's prudent to stay one step ahead and keep building the tower up, row after row, floor after floor. You can slow down the borderline by putting some distance between you and it. You can also push it back down the tower by completing combos, quickly matching like-colored sides.

Other than the approaching borderline, other obstacles to overcome may include blocks with no colors at all which must be placed and quickly forgotten as they won't add to the tower's build-up. There are also blocks that can only be rolled in one direction...a tough trip around the entire circumference of the tower if a matching color happens to fall behind it!

As you play the game, you have your choice of jaunty little melodies to listen to as you build your tower. The tempo and intensity of the music increases as the borderline approaches, egging you on to build faster and higher. Another nice touch is that, with each new level, the background view from the top of your tower changes. In the beginning levels, you may look out across a mountainous landscape. As your tower gets taller, you'll see the stars and possibly the moon itself. When your tower climbs past the height of the moon, you'll be staring at the depths of the universe.

Tall Infinity is an interesting take on the “how high can you climb” genre with some challenging puzzle elements thrown in. The game will certainly appeal to kids and adults alike as it's a fun game that has a zen-like creative feel to it (between the frantic borderline chases that occur). I wish the game had a “build forever” mode since it ends once you've built your tower high enough to effectively “win.” I would have loved to see just how high I could take my video game Tower of Babel.

Space Raiders (GameCube, Mastiff, 2004)  
Remember those blocky arcade sprites that were slowly, slowly, slowly descending to the planet's surface in 1978's Space Invaders? Well, it's taken them 30+ years, but the invaders are now high-rez monstrosities who have landed and are destroying the world in Space Raiders, a next-generation continuation of the original arcade game's storyline.

The game play is as simple as the original: Move your character back and forth across the bottom of the screen and shoot the invaders who are slowly approaching. But rather than being out in space, your battles will take place in places like a back-street alley or in a sewer tunnel as you defend your city. Just as you had barriers to hide behind in the arcade game, you can protect yourself by ducking behind trash cans, dumpsters, and other barricades. One additional twist to the game is that you can occasionally pick up icons for special items ala Arkanoid which will give you special abilities such as the ability to freeze time, a more powerful weapon, extra health, or limited invincibility. How (and when) you use these abilities is up to you. You can also leap and roll to the side if an invader lunges at you, adding another dimension of game play.

The game's graphics are obviously a step up from the original's as the high-resolution makes you feel as if you're facing down these deformed insectoid creatures. The game's view takes place from behind and slightly above your character, so you get a great view of the approaching menaces. One thing I like is that you can shoot and destroy items in the invader's area of approach. See that abandoned car? Shoot it and blow it up, and it will take out every invader in its explosion radius!

Regardless of the updates to the scenario, field of vision, and graphics, the game is at its heart a simple fixed shooter. If you like the original, just view this as what happened when the invaders finally reached Earth.

# DIGITAL PRESS FEATURE

“WHY SONY SHOULDN’T HAVE TO APOLOGIZE FOR ASKING USERS TO COME HOME”

## Laying the Foundation

Who would’ve thought back in 2005 when Phil Harrison revealed Home to an E3 audience and a PlayStation 3 user-base still looking for an app, killer or otherwise, that four years later that service would become equal parts: derided by Internet critics, beloved by millions of active daily users, ignored by a large segment of PS3 owners, and, most importantly, profitable a million times over for Sony.

Home actually started its development in 2003 as an online menu hub for Sony Computer Entertainment’s: The Getaway: Black Monday. Unfortunately, the development team determined that the PlayStation 2’s online user base was too small to warrant the further development of an online component for that title. With no online component, a social “hub” wasn’t needed and the development of what would eventually evolve into Home was shelved.

There must have been something about that menu hub that Phil Harrison liked, because he and Sony championed it, and a few years (and a hardware generation) later it was revealed at E3 as a free social and gaming environment for the far more online-friendly (in comparison to its predecessor) PlayStation 3. In the initial teaser, users were shown walking around beautiful-looking high-resolution environments with their custom avatars talking, dancing, playing games like bowling, and using virtual arcade cabinets with original games. Subsequent trailers showed social elements like personal spaces, the ability to meet up in groups at those spaces and listen to music or watch streaming video (features which have yet to be implemented but are still touted for future development/release to the Home community), and the ability to launch directly into multiplayer games with other Home users (a feature which is currently in place and widely used by Home regulars).

## Home Ownership

Fast-forward to December 2008. After a few years of closed betas, the service launched into its current and ongoing open beta. Some claim that this aspect of the service is a crutch or a cop-out, but companies like Google have proven with Gmail that you can take free public services years and years into beta programs with a high level of active support, user satisfaction, and critical and monetary success. Sony may not hit all those bulletpoints with Home, but I hardly think it’s fair to fault them for keeping the service in beta as long as they have. There have been instances of service-wide problems that would be unacceptable in a non-beta model.

When Sony opened the doors and gave every PlayStation 3 user the keys to their virtual apartment after three years, three E3s, and cycle after cycle of closed beta invites, some claimed that it was “too little too late” and that the service didn’t live up to the long slow build of anticipation, curiosity, promises from Sony and unrealistic expectations from some PlayStation Network users. Of course, there were some people who could see the forest for the trees and had a scope of vision which allowed them to, at the very least, anticipate that with time things might just get better.

For those who ventured into the open beta on day one, traversed the limited terrain of their personal space, the central plaza, the mall, the theatre, the bowling alley/arcade, made up their mind that the service had nothing of interest to offer them and logged out never to return again; well, I certainly respect any user’s right to make that decision, and I also certainly agree with the estimation that in the beginning there was practically nothing to do. However, as 2010 dawns in the world of Home I have a sneaking suspicion that the now content-rich landscape probably has something that more

than likely would warrant a return visit for those who chose to evacuate at any point early on in year one.

Here are some quick stats for the Home novice or early un-adopter:

- When Home launched, there were less than 10 spaces to travel to. Currently, there are more than 50 spaces, many of which contain social activities or games to partake in.
- When Home launched there were less than ten games to play. Currently there are more than 100, and many of those are multiplayer or contain online and/or friend list leaderboards.
- When Home launched almost every user was limited to the default set of clothes, apartment furniture, personal accessories, etc. Currently there are more than 2,000 items, some of those being rewards from games, pre-order exclusives, or limited time offers which are and will never be offered anywhere else or ever again.
- What started as a free-form social space has become a managed community with weekly events such as the weekly scheduled Street Fighter IV game launching parties (in dedicated/themed spaces like Capcom’s Street Fighter IV space or Sony’s SOCOM space) and persistent alternate reality virtual games like Xi. There are also holiday themed and activity laden re-skins of public spaces for Thanksgiving, Christmas, etc. and a growing number of community rewarding games, goals, and products.

The initial criticism that there was “nothing to do” in Home was legitimate. Even as a regular user, I can’t imagine logging in and enjoying myself as much if they rolled it back to day one. But over the course of 2009 Sony and third-party developers have made some amazing strides to combat that specific community gripe. I think a major turning point was the inclusion of Texas Hold’Em Poker spaces in both the Godfather II themed space and the massive, multi-roomed EA Sports Complex. I feel bad for the developers of the PSN exclusive Texas Hold’Em Poker on the Vegas Strip game; I suspect that they lost a lot of revenue when gamers figured out the free poker available in Home was in many ways superior to that available for ten dollars in the PlayStation Network Store.

## An Upturn in the Real Estate Market

While social networking and being a part of a virtual gaming community is all great fun, the most important aspect of Home is one that all social networks aspire to and one that I’m sure Phil Harrison and the suits at Sony envisioned way back in the infancy of the project: potential for profitability. Time for some more stats; Home has reportedly been downloaded seven million times. While that may not equate to seven million unique Home users, it certainly means that there are millions of active users and strolling the grounds of the service supports that. You’ll never find an unpopulated area. Ever.

Sony also reports that the average time spent in the service is about an hour, with the low end of the average being 15 minutes. Consider that many of the items and clothes available in the Home Mall are micro-transactions, with prices ranging from 25 cents on the low end to \$5 or \$10 on the high end. If a few hundred-thousand of those millions of users want to customize their avatar with a cool ninja costume at the super low cost of \$2, that’s a healthy profit for Sony. Multiply that on a weekly basis by a

steady stream of new clothes, avatar accessories, personal spaces, furniture, etc. and you’ve got a free-to-play service reportedly generating (after development costs) over a million dollars a year in pure profit for Sony. For a company that was behind the eight-ball as long as they were (and still are) in this console generation, money for next-to-nothing is a good thing for them.

“But what’s in Home for me?” you ask. Well, what’s in Home for you is a guarantee that you’re going to meet other PlayStation 3 users; that’s the only way people are going to find their way onto the service. Here are just a few examples of the kind of social interaction you might have with the service: Let’s say you’re looking to find a partner for a co-op play through of Resident Evil 5, the Resident Evil 5 space is a good place to go. You’ll get a chance to chat people up about their play styles or the amount of time that they have to invest in a gaming project as big as that. There are “war room” spaces for both Warhawk and SOCOM where players can meet with their clans and work out their strategies pre-game. The movie theatre has expanded to 12 screens of regularly updated content including some actual full-length television programming such as episodes of Full Metal Alchemist, Stephen Segal Lawman, and Parks and Recreation. If you’re in the mood to emulate the gang from Mystery Science Theatre (and come on, Stephen Segal Lawman is the perfect fodder for that) the Home Theatre is the place to be. There are casual competitive games galore: beyond bowling, pool and chess, the Buzz Trivia Space is a massively multiplayer version of the PlayStation brand exclusive game that allows up to 32 players to a game. Or, if you’re feeling like re-living the ‘80s pick yourself up a copy of Namco Museum Essentials on the PSN and head over to the Namco Arcade where you can jump in and out of games of Pac-Man, Galaga, Xevious, Dig-Dug without having to deal with the stench of body odor and smoldering cigarette butts

(though admittedly it is missing that bit of classic arcade “charm”). Developers can easily hold press conferences or Q&A sessions from themed, private, or invite-only spaces, and Sony even live broadcast and looped their 2009 E3 presentation in a special concert space with giant viewing monitors. That’s just scratching the surface of what you can do for now and the room for future possibilities in the service.

More than a year in, Home is still a very hard sell for some people who would frankly rather have that hard drive space for their game saves. But in 2010 the active community truly does reflect those who have taken the time to invest in everything that the service has to offer. There’s plenty to do in Home and plenty of people to do it with. It’s making money hand-over-fist, and it’s evident that it looks to reward active users at every turn. Some may see it as a grand failure, but I think that outlook is wickedly short-sighted. The service itself is in a state of perpetual growth, evolution, and most importantly, profit. The community numbers are there to support some level of success (even if you consider it a modest success in the scope of things). There’s no reason that Sony should ever apologize for trying something new on home consoles, and even if it were a massive failure I’d still applaud them for having the guts to roll it out the way that they did.

So, if you haven’t ventured in yet, the key to your virtual apartment is sitting on your PlayStation 3 just waiting to be turned. Who knows, you might even meet your future husband or wife on the service ... just make sure that they’re the same sex as their avatar before you agree to meet up in the real world, there have been reports of several “disappointments” in that area.

# RETROCOMPUTING

"WHY EMULATION IS BETTER. PERIOD."

In the 1970s I experienced the dawn of home computing with my own eyes, and 20 years later I watched emulation grow from being little more than a parlor trick into something that was actually a viable way to play games. As a guy who owns mounds and pounds of physical retrocomputing hardware, you would probably expect me to also be one of those guys who values physical machines over virtual ones and denounces all forms of emulation. Well, I don't; I won't and I can't. Cry "heretic" if you will, but over the past few years I've come to believe that emulation is better than the real thing almost any way you slice it.

Many people who whine about emulation not being accurate may not have tried an emulator in a while. Emulators from the 1990s left plenty of room for improvement; few of them from that era could run full screen without sacrificing performance, and many early emulators struggled with proper sound emulation (some didn't provide sound at all). Things have changed since then. Most 8-bit and 16-bit computers can now be essentially emulated perfectly with their virtual beings practically indiscernible from their physical counterparts. Those pointing out minor differences and glitches are just nitpicking for the sake of nitpicking. Even if emulation is only 99% accurate, the heap of advantages more than make up for that last percent.

With emulation, you no longer have to worry about hardware failures. Show me a real retrocomputing enthusiast and I'll show you a guy who has realigned a Commodore 64 disk drive or adjusted the speed on an Apple drive more than once. Rubber bands break, power supplies overheat, and components die. Many of us who dabble in retrocomputing have closets (or garages) full of spare parts. Emulators don't need spare parts. They just work.

Right behind hardware failures are software failures. All of us at one time or another have had a vital floppy disk up and die on us. With emulators, disk images can be easily stored and backed up. Imagine the time, expense, and physical space involved in backing up thousands of real floppies. Modern virtual disk images can be backed up and transferred quickly and easily. What I once stored in dozens of disk containers and shoe boxes now fits on a Micro SD card the size of a fingernail.

And speaking of media, old computers aren't much fun without any. If you're shooting for authenticity, real computers need real software running off of real media. That means either buying games, copying games, or converting virtual disk images into real disks. Ask anyone who has converted Commodore 64 disk images to real disks using Star Commander and an X1541 cable how enjoyable it was to get it working the first time. Making working Apple II disks using a working IIgs with an ethernet connection is only slightly more fun. The closest thing to a plug-and-play solution for the Commodore is the 1541 Ultimate, which currently sells for around \$250. With emulation, disk images can be downloaded from the Internet in less than a second.

This brings us to money. Old computers cost money (so does repairing them). Old disks cost money too, even blank ones. Some games, due to rarity or collectibility factors, cost significantly more than others. For example, because of their collectible packaging, Electronic Arts games from the 1980s often sell for \$20 or more. A used original copy of the Great Giana Sisters for the C64 will most likely run you at least a hundred bucks. Playing it on an emulator is only a free Google search away. And even if you're playing copies, the cost of those blank disks will add up as well. With real computers come real expenses. To connect my Amiga 500 up to my monitor, I needed

an Amiga 520 video adapter (which I think I paid around \$50 for at the time). It seems like, with my old computers, I am always needing to buy a new cable or peripheral. With emulation, it all just works.

Not only do old computers consume your money, they also consume your space! In my own game room I added an eight-foot-long table that barely accommodates my Apple II, my Commodore 64, and my Amiga 1200. I have another dozen or so old computers I'd like to assemble and play with, but I've run out of places to put them! Unlike video game consoles or modern computers that can easily share monitors, most retrocomputers need dedicated monitors as well. And don't forget about all the disk boxes you'll need to hold all those real diskettes you'll be collecting; those have to go somewhere too. If you start collecting boxed software, be sure to reserve yourself some pretty big shelf space as computer software boxes come in dozens of different shapes and sizes.

One argument that those who oppose playing console video games via emulation cling to is that unless you're using an authentic joystick, the experience doesn't "feel right." I'm here to tell you, when it comes to retrocomputers that's also true, mostly because old computer joysticks sucked! The early joysticks I owned for my Apple II and IBM PC computers back in the day were horrible, and due to Atari and Commodore use of a standard DB9 port, practically everyone owned a different style of joystick. But thanks to the wonder of USB and a plethora of third-party adapters, you can use almost any type of joystick you can imagine. If you want to play old Commodore games using an Atari joystick, you can.

Another great thing I love about emulation is portability. As "portable" as Commodore claimed its 23-pound SX-64 was, I can't see using one on an airplane anytime soon. Moving my TRS-80 Model III from the garage to my upstairs computer room requires a back brace and the use of proper lifting techniques! With emulation you don't have to worry about lifting with your knees and keeping your back straight! My netbook (an Acer Aspire One) has double the screen size (10" vs. 5"), weighs less than 3 pounds, and is thinner than a box of 5 1/4" of floppy disks. I always have it with me, and it allows me to play old computer games anywhere, anytime. I can play Commodore 64 games on my iPhone and Apple II games using Virtual Apple [(VirtualApple.org) online from anywhere.

Emulators aren't just as good as the real thing; they're better. Do you know how to format a disk on a real Commodore 64? Here's the command:  
OPEN 15,8,15 [RETURN]  
PRINT #15, "NEW=NAME.ID" [RETURN]  
CLOSE 15 [RETURN].

In WinVice, it involves two mouse clicks. Ever wished you could speed up your old computer? Many emulators offer an unthrottled mode. Ever spent an hour or two configuring old DOS autoexec.bat and config.sys files to free up enough memory to get a game to work properly? DOSBox does it for you on the fly. Ever wished the old game you were playing had a pause button? When being emulated, they all do.

I was literally raised on old computers, and I know as well as anyone the joy of playing classic games, the mystique of discovering archaic commands, and the excitement of seeing an old computer do something cool for the first time. The thing is, none of those experiences need to be tied to physical hardware. Emulation is no longer inferior to the real thing. It's superior.



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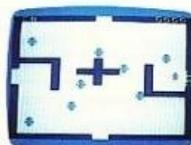
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# DIGITAL PRESS REVIEW

Michael Jackson's Moonwalker (Sega Genesis, U.S. Gold, 1990)



It's a rare instance when the game play has aged gracefully while the premise has become distasteful and the concept remains preposterous. The events and repercussions of the 1993 Evan Chandler fiasco propelled Moonwalker into infamy and it's now quite a conversation piece. Although some prefer to sneer at it rather than play it, the reaction seems more based on their disdain of Michael's public image. That makes this a difficult game to critique in retrospect and without bias, just as I'm sure many will be hailing it as a masterpiece now that the King of Pop has passed on.

This is not a great game. A game where Michael can gain limited invincibility by transforming into a robot, however, is not short on ingenuity. To the best of my knowledge, Moonwalker may be one of the first, if not \*the\* first, Celebrity-endorsed game not affiliated with athletics.

The disturbing premise? It's based on the 1988 Moonwalker feature where the King of Pop rescues young girls kidnapped by the King of Crime, Mr. Big. If you were a girl, where would you be hidden? In a bush, dumpster, windowsill, car trunk, and every vacant closet. The level designs are rather boring. The best way I can describe a level such as the tavern is that it is a labyrinth of stairways with no shortage of pool tables. Michael Jackson himself is the real special effect. He glides along the surface like he's walking on Crisco, slides down stairways, and kicks star power to blow enemies away. He can even grab his crotch as a throwaway action.

If my job is to convince you that this is a quality game, then so far I may not be doing a good job. A game where the hero rescues girls and grabs his crotch without purpose sounds more audacious than appealing. Once you locate all the missing children, Michael's chimp pal "Bubbles" will whisk by, sit atop his shoulders, and guide you to Mr. Big. Stay with me...once you make it to the first boss fight, your cringe may turn into a guilty grin. Mr. Big is not the confrontational sort, and sends hoards of thugs and punks at you. The entire level builds up to this moment, and the bad guys have no idea who they're dealing with and what they're in for.

There's a dance button that sends Michael into a tornado spin before unleashing his awesome dance moves. Who says everything has to be settled hard and dirty? The more enemies you get to dance with on-screen will increase your score. Even dogs in the street level and spiders in the cavern will surrender to Michael's temptations. You really have to see it to believe it.

Such great power comes at a price. After a dance number, Michael's health declines and his star power kicks are reduced to short-range punches. Enemies become faster and tougher later on, so players will have to strategically plan their offense instead of immediately using the dance button as a mulligan.

The song list includes Smooth Criminal, Beat It, Billy Jean, Another Part of Me, and Bad. Michael also lends a few voice clips, asking "Who's bad?" and shrieking "OOOOHH!" like he's on top of the world. In many ways, he is.

Playing Moonwalker one senses that it feels like a precursor to the music and rhythm games flooding the market. Music is one of those things that immediately rouses feelings and emotions. What better outlet for those feelings than to dance with the beat? That's why even the most hardened enemies in this game can't resist a dance routine with the King of Pop. It may come off as a gimmick game exploiting Michael's talents, but his signature style and choreography make it irresistible. There's no way Sega could have dreamed up their own character of to put here in his place.

Graphics: 7  
Sound: 8  
Gameplay: 7  
Overall: 7

# DIGITAL PRESS REVIEW

Nightmare Creatures (Nintendo 64, Activision, 1998)

Nightmare Creatures is a great third-party action-horror entry on the N64. To my surprise the monsters are very intelligent. They're able to leap away, block, and break through your attack patterns. What truly impressed me was how the graphics manipulated grain and limited draw distance, two common N64 issues, to capture the caliginous, rustic look of London 1834. The whole game takes place under the cover of darkness with streets barely illuminated by lamp poles. The term "terrifying beauty" springs to mind as we venture through such levels as the cemetery with snow blanketing the ground, apparitions rising from the tombs and zombies crawling out of the ground underlined by a lonesome, pulsing music score.

You choose from two heroes, Ignatius and Nadia, who we learn little about through the course of the game (aside from their mission to relieve old London of a monster plague). Your choice does not affect the angle of the story and neither has any noticeable advantage. What it boils down to is whether you prefer to fight with Ignatius's staff or Nadia's sword. They know a handful of weapon and leg tricks, and there are weapon upgrades to be found and combos to learn as you progress. If you take time to master the combos well, you will clear through the monsters quickly. The final boss stands as a true test of memory against those who chose to beat all previous enemies the long and hard way.

Nightmare Creatures is also clever and challenging in the way it forces you to face your enemies instead of ignoring them and running away. Your weapon has a life meter of its own, and it depletes until you've killed another enemy. If the weapon gauge is tapped out, your health will plummet. The



automatic enemy lock-on is a blessing, and the camera keeps up with the pace.

There is an ample supply of helpful items to find throughout the levels: guns, health orbs, dynamite, razors, torches, etc. Plenty of exploration is available, but be conscious of your time spent away from fighting.

If there's anything that's lost in the translation it's the story. The opening FMV in the PlayStation version is watered down into an opening scene with a band of monsters slapping each other around in the streets of London with text scrolling up the screen. The levels are only coupled by text, and we rarely see the protagonist beyond a few split-second cutaways. We hear the screams of innocent civilians and read into the next level that a family is in danger, but there are no human encounters.

Some of the level designs are too similar, but a few stand out like the cemetery level and the zoo, showcasing hideous four-armed spider creatures waiting in cages caked in webbing. With the tantalizing atmosphere, this is a perfect substitute for those who prefer more action than the puzzle solving found in Resident Evil 2. I'm thankful Kalisto and Activision brought this game to the N64 despite its year-long lapse from the PlayStation version.

Sound: 6  
Graphics: 7  
Gameplay: 6  
Overall: 7

# DIGITAL PRESS REVIEW

Dragon Age: Origins (Xbox 360, Electronic Arts, 2009)

Has BioWare ever made a bad RPG? After about a dozen years of personal experience playing hit after hit, I certainly can't think of one. With Dragon Age: Origins, BioWare continues its long-running streak of solid, high-quality epic role-playing experiences with yet another deep and incredibly addictive time-eating monster gaming experience that's going to please genre fans new and old alike. While there are a few pesky technical issues here and there, the game is always highly compelling and rarely misses a thematic beat throughout. There's so much content packed into the game that it's almost overwhelming, but you'll find yourself staying up "just one more hour..." each time you step into the rich world the dev team has created.

The game offers up six different playable characters, each with his or her own storyline to play through. Your chosen hero or heroine is customizable at the outset thanks to a great character editor. Once that's done (or you pick a pre-made avatar), you'll guide your hero or heroine through their lengthy quest chock full of events that make each play-through unique. With well over 60 hours of gameplay here for each character (!) plus some great additional (and free) download content right from the game's launch, hardcore RPG fans won't be coming up for air for quite some time. New players may feel a bit swamped by what's here, but the very handy tutorials and wealth of other reading material will get them up to speed and coming back for more in short order.

In the game, your character is selected to become a Grey Warden (a legendary group of skilled warriors chosen from all walks of life) as a massive horde of demons known as Darkspawn reappears and resumes their terrorizing ways throughout the kingdom of Ferelden. How and why each character is

chosen as a Warden makes up DA:O's first section and after a bit of exploration and exposition, the game world opens up. As you set out with a few new companions to put an end to the Darkspawn blight and the Archdemon leading them, you'll run into quite a few folks that can use a bit of heroic help. Your other party members may include a sultry forest witch, an elf assassin, a stoic warrior type, a drunken elf, and others, but depending on how you interact with some of these characters, you can choose to drop them from your party forever or never let them to join at all.

If you've played Mass Effect, you'll notice similarities in things such as the branching conversation paths and the possibilities of romantic couplings with certain party members under the proper circumstances. Finding and giving gifts to your teammates unlocks new skills and more of their stories, which also leads to new quests most of the time. There's no "pure" good or evil path here, and other than how your party and a few other characters react to your decisions, you won't feel as if you've done something "wrong" if you decide to play the game as a total saint or a total bastard. The extremely well-written script offers up some great dialog and as you travel throughout the nicely-sized game world, some of the conversations your companions have with you and each other are priceless, informative, and often hilarious.

Combat can be tackled as real-time hacking and spellcasting, but you can also pause the action and input commands for each party member, much like in BioWare's other RPGs. As you're limited to four active members in your party, deciding whom to select is part of the fun. In some areas, having certain party members with you unlocks new quests or allows access to locked chests or doors. If you consider yourself a treasure hunter supreme, I'd recommend playing as a Rogue if you want easy access to a great deal of

chests in the game's beginning stages, but if you want to be a Warrior of Mage, go for it. The game's world map initially seems massive, but compared to other recent RPGs, there are actually only a few locations to explore along with a number of combat-focused areas you'll only get to visit once. To spice things up, you'll be able to take on guild quests as well as run into the occasional random overworld map battle. Some of these mid-to-late-game side quests can actually be more brutal than a few of the bosses in the main storyline. The dungeons and majority of other areas you move about in are pretty expansive, nicely designed, and packed to the gills with everything from undead, giant spiders, and later on more than a few dragons of different sizes.

Presentation here is mostly stellar. The visuals are pretty solid, with some grand in-game engine movies, beautifully detailed characters, and plenty of lovely environments. Unfortunately, you'll also see some graphics glitches and hear the occasional sound drop during extended dialog sequences. However, the technical issues don't destroy the illusion of the richly detailed world BioWare has crafted.

Overall, the experience is a superb one, particularly if you're a huge fan of Western-style RPGs and want something that's going to be expanded upon in DLC as well as sequels down the road. If that's your cup of whatever, definitely join the Grey Wardens, whose local chapter just so happens to be any game shop or other retailer that sells Dragon Age: Origins. Those Darkspawn certainly aren't going to kill themselves, that's for sure...

Overall: 9

# DIGITAL PRESS REVIEW

Zaku (Atari Lynx, SuperFighter Team, 2009)

Dust off that Atari Lynx and get ready for some hardcore shmup action – Zaku is finally here and it's an instant classic that you don't want to miss. SuperFighter Team and developer PengiNet have cooked up a solid and spectacularly tough 4 Meg chunk of horizontal arcade shooting set in 16 stages set over five worlds packed with big-eyed cartoon enemies and screen-filling bosses that will give you candy-colored nightmares on each of its difficulty levels. The game is a near-perfect throwback to the days of classic 8- and 16-bit shooters, and every level, every second of the game oozes quality, if not sheer programming genius. How this is running on the Lynx and looking as great as it does is a wonder, but it truly shows just how powerful (and under-appreciated) the hardware was (and is).

As you're not flying a ship, but playing as a character that can fly, your attacks are limited to a Rapid Shot, a charged Super Shot, and a Back Blaster that hits enemies to the rear. You also have a powerful Clapping Shield that's good on anything but the main bosses. The game can be pretty tough in spots, but it's also fair once you get the timing of boss patterns down. The game's influences are from all over the place, but it all feels fresh in this era of "By Today's Standards" bring tossed around by reviewers who haven't a clue as to what actual fun is. There's a bit of Fantasy Zone and Gun Nac here, a touch of Air Zonk there. But it all comes off as consistently stellar because it's just so much fun to play on a system that's supposed to be dead and buried (and indeed, it is to most gamers these days).

The game showcases some deep parallax scrolling, great use of color, and even a nicely done score that pumps from those Lynx speakers as if it's trying to kick a hole in the system. Pop in a pair of ear buds and

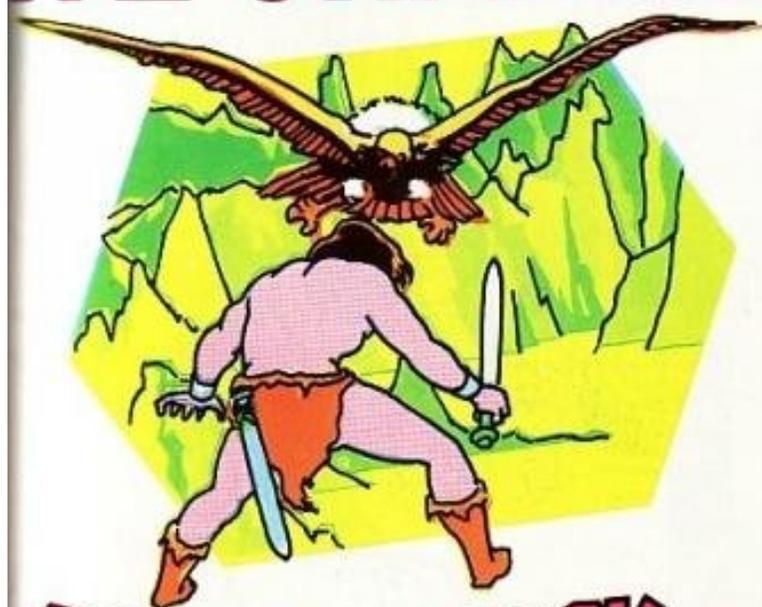
take the phone off the hook, as you'll be too busy bopping your head and tapping buttons to be disturbed by anything. Well, except for a few of those bosses the game throws at you. On the harder difficulties, you'll be wondering what hit you even after you play with the Lynx' brightness settings. The game is fairly lengthy and never dull, so if you can finally shelve that copy of Gates of Zendocon for good (or wedge it under a door somewhere).

To top off the package, Super Fighter has gone above and beyond the call, producing the first new Lynx game with the familiar curved lip design along with a sturdy box and FULL COLOR, multi-language manual (the latter being something no Lynx game ever had). Even more shocking, the game isn't priced like a collectible at all; \$40 plus shipping is an absolute steal for a game this complete (and completely fun). So if you're a Lynx owner who's been on the fence since the launch, I'm here to say this is indeed a MUST-buy game for the handheld. Grab it while you can (before it becomes an over-priced collectible, that is) – you won't be disappointed.

Overall: 10 (for a Lynx game)



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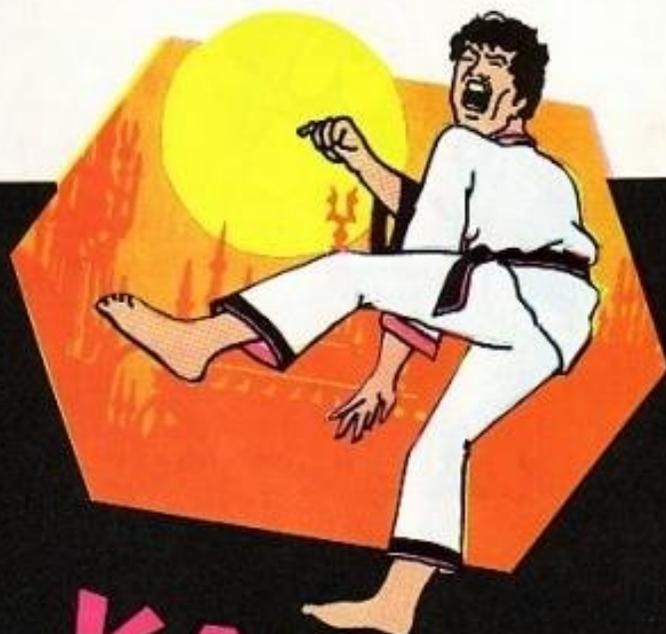
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# STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS

“WHAT TO PLAY”

Jeff Belmonte recommends:

N2O: Nitrous Oxide (PlayStation, Fox Interactive, 1998)

I'm swinging for the fences on this one. N2O: Nitrous Oxide is simply one of my all-time favorite video games, and at the very top of my list of underrated, under-appreciated, overlooked games. Over the past 12 years I can't remember a time this game was completely out of my rotation. It's that much fun, it's that accessible, it's that easy to pick up and go. In this house it has outlasted every PlayStation game they could come up with; hell, its outlasted every PlayStation \*2\* game at this point. It plays well on a portable PSOne, it plays well on a PS2 plugged into an LCD projector with 500-watt surround sound, it plays well on a PS3 plugged into an HD monitor. What is it? It's a game where you fly through tunnels and shoot giant insects. If you don't like flying through tunnels and/or shooting giant insects, you are not a gamer. Everyone else must play this game.

Rob Strangman recommends:

Ghost Manor (Atari 2600, Xonox, 1983)

A favorite of mine since receiving it as a stocking stuffer in the early '80s on a double-ended cart with Artillery Duel, Ghost Manor is short, but very fun to play. Control either a boy or a girl (surely some kind of first for home video games) and try to rescue your friend (the opposite of who you're playing) from Count Dracula. From playing "tag" in the graveyard with the Rainbow Ghost or Bones the Skeleton, to the Space Invaders-

esque sequence where you're blowing away skulls and bats while avoiding the screaming Chopping Mummy, the race through the Manor and finally confronting the Count, you'll find Ghost Manor fast, and if you play it on its highest difficulty level, challenging. On its easiest, you'll blow through it in 5 minutes. But hey, it's a very fun 5 minutes.

Sarah Szefer recommends:

Jet Set Radio Future (Xbox, Sega, 2002)

Cel-shading isn't a visual process that's usually well-regarded by gamers. One of the earliest uses of this technique can be found in Jet Set Radio Future, the sequel to Jet Grind Radio. If you've always wanted a more arcade-like alternative to the Tony Hawk games, this is it, except that your character is on rollerblades instead of a skateboard. The controls are smooth, the action is fast, and you get to tag graffiti all over the place! The soundtrack is quite dynamic, and includes such acts as Bran Van 3000 and Cibo Matto. Now, if only Sega would release a new title in the series...

Scott Stilphen recommends:

Squish 'Em (Atari 8-bit, Sirius, 1983)

The premise is similar to Crazy Climber, with a few differences. Both concern climbing up the side of buildings while avoiding dangerous objects, but in Squish 'Em you have the opportunity to go on the offensive. Most of the levels on the 48-story building have a "Creepy Creature" on it, leaving you 1 of 3 possible options in dealing with it: climb around it, jump over it, or stomp a mud hole in its pixelated body. Fans of this game will

want to check out the spot-on 2600 version by Bob Montgomery.

Rob O'Hara recommends:

New Super Mario Bros. Wii (Wii, Nintendo, 2009)

Don't let the name fool you; for all intents and purposes, this should have been called Super Mario Bros. 4. In 1996 Nintendo re-released Super Mario 64, the mold that 3D platform games have been using ever since. In 2009, Nintendo went back to the formula that sold tens of millions of games and brought the series back full circle to its two-dimensional roots. While Nintendo's 2006 version for the Nintendo DS tested the waters, the Wii version nails it. It's new, it's old, it's an instant classic. It's time to turn your Wiimote sideways, your hat backwards, and save Princess Peach. Again.

Ian Baronofsky recommends:

Ram It (Telesys, Atari 2600, 1982)

A rare game worth playing is a rare gem indeed. Ram It has that edge-of-your-seat frantic action that might make you break your joystick. No time to think, just move and shoot. The difficulty ramps up quickly, and it quickly becomes nigh-impossible (I'd love to see a hack that corrects this). Sure, it could use some difficulty balancing, but those first few levels are a hectic hand-wrecking arcade experience worth checking out at least once.

Ian Baronofsky recommends (also):

New Super Mario Bros. Wii (Wii, Nintendo, 2009)

This is the first must-get game I've seen for the Wii. It certainly could have been a GameCube title, but let's not hold that against New Super Mario Bros Wii. This is the Wii's new killer app for gamers, not just grandma. It's not four people shooting each other or trying to win by wagging Wiimotes. You truly have to look out for each other to get through levels in co-op. I can't imagine the balancing that Nintendo went through to make 50+ levels work for 1-4 players. My 7 year-old son is obsessed with it. My friends call it "marital therapy," because it forces you to work together. And if you play it alone, you'll still enjoy the creative challenges that made Nintendo a household name. I am in awe.

Dave G. recommends:

MadWorld (Wii, Sega, 2009)

MadWorld combines themes previously seen in games like Jet Grind Radio, Grand Theft Auto III, Mortal Kombat, and Smash TV. It then merges them with comics and movies like Sin City and Escape From New York, respectively, into what could be considered a masterful (yet super-violent) work of art. The stylized black-and-white graphics are indeed killer.

The object here isn't just to beat enemies into oblivion, it's to do it in the most creative/ghastly/unashamedly tasteless ways available while exploring the city and completing various challenges. Jack (the player) has the freedom to use just about anything visible to dispose of an enemy, and he's always got a chainsaw up his sleeve. Mad-

World is a game misunderstood by Regular-World, but is summed up quite well by the blurb on the back of the box: "Spectacular mayhem! Over-the-top madness."

Kevin Bunch recommends:

Starflight (Genesis, EA, 1991)

Given that EA has revisited the space-exploration RPG genre with Mass Effect 2, it seems only fitting to mention their first foray into that realm. A very open-ended game, Starflight has you commanding a newly-built starship from the planet Arth as you explore the galaxy, encountering your (sometimes hostile) galactic neighbors, and finding out what happened to that legendary home-world of yours, Earth. Featuring a rich and fascinating story if you can suss it out of aliens and archeological sites, it's entirely likely that no one has done this style of game better than Starflight.

Jared Bottorff recommends:

Ball Out Special (MSX, MSX Magazine, 1989)

Here's one for the import crowd. Take the mechanics of Marble Madness and apply the goal-based gameplay of those wooden labyrinth devices and you get Ball Out. In fact, if you think of it as kind of the 2-D predecessor of Marble Blast Ultra, you're on the right track. There are several versions of this game available, but Ball Out Special contains all the levels from Ball Out 1 & 2, plus several new levels, a level editor, and more.

Paul Z. Cortez recommends:

Dark Chambers (Atari 7800, Atari, 1988)

One's first reaction when playing Dark Chambers might be to say, "Oh, this is just like Gauntlet!", when it's more like the other way around. Chambers has more direct similarity with an old Atari 8-bit computer game called Dandy, which went on to inspire Gauntlet, the success of which in the arcades prompted the creation of Dark Chambers, which proverbially reinvented the (Dandy) wheel. Confusing lineage aside, Dark Chambers is a fun old-school dungeon crawl which can be undertaken with one or two players. It's really great as a two-player game since it has a considerably more relaxed pace than Gauntlet. It's a very common cart, yet still a must-have for 7800 collectors. Great way to spend a Saturday morning.

Micky Wright recommends:

Rocket Riot (Xbox 360, Codeglue, 2009)

This Xbox Live Arcade game received virtually no attention at release, and still doesn't to this day. It's unfortunate because it's a great fun game that makes retro-styled graphics work in HD. Normally I wouldn't want to recommend a digital distribution game to the readers of DP, but I have to make an exception for this game. You fly around on your rocket within the game play area and shoot down enemies with your unlimited rockets. There are power-ups that make the game even crazier and some great songs that fit the mood of the game perfectly. If you have 800 Microsoft Points to spend, definitely check this game out.

# ROMPAGE

“WHY GAME CRITICISM STINKS”

One thing I've noticed over the past few years is a steep decline in the quality of game reviews on many otherwise (or formerly) fine Web sites and magazines. There's a dangerously jaded bunch of folks out there constantly putting the screws to otherwise enjoyable games by throwing around a few terms starting with three of the laziest words a critic of any talent-based medium can use: “By Today's Standards.” In actuality, unless you're trying to control what a large segment of gamers spend their money on, it's impossible to apply strict standards to a medium that relies on individuals (paradoxically, often in a team effort) expressing any number of different visual styles in thousands of games spread across a wide assortment of consoles and computers.

For example, comparing a handheld game to a current-generation console game is ridiculous, yet scour any major site and prepare to be amazed at how many reviews try and connect visual fidelity along a straight line while ignoring hardware limitations. “Innovation” is the other lazily overused term by reviewers that don't seem to realize that games don't at all need to be “innovative” to be FUN. Sure, forcing new controllers, pay-to-play download content (that should have been in the original game), patches (that some console games actually need to RUN properly), and HD-quality graphics on the public has worked out fine financially, but other than some unique multiplayer modes and shiny mapping techniques, what does “Innovation” really mean in gaming?

Without a hint of irony, too many otherwise decent games get negative press simply because they don't fit in the tiny shoebox of benchmark perfection by having super-realistic graphics, “innovative” game mechanics, mandatory online play, or other bulletpoint box features. If you apply “Today's Standards” across the board, no one should be playing anything made before

the Sega Dreamcast era and, even then, you'd have to severely limit your choices to those that strictly adhered to what's considered acceptable... “By Today's Standards.”

That is, if you take what reviewers say as some sort of gospel and whip out your wallet solely based on aggregated Metacritic scores alone.

On the other hand, folks like me who love games can ignore ignorant critique and enjoy games of all types. For me, other than visual style there's no true divide between “casual” and “hard core” games at all. I love the challenge of tackling any well-designed game whether it's cute as all get out or bloody as hell. What's missing from game criticism today is a true sense of wonder at the wide variety of games out there and the need to be more well-rounded and tolerant in writing about them. Of course, those folks who poke fun at classic games on a few choice Web sites get the fact that, yes, many of the games worshiped as classics aren't as good as we recall. However, satire (when it's done correctly) will make you laugh as much at yourself as you are at the person or thing being made fun of.

Granted, one may not prefer a particular genre, but that's fine...provided you've actually tried out more than one game in that genre you dislike. After 38 years of gaming, my Kryptonite would be most sports games, quite a few PC real-time strategy titles, Tower Defense clones, and the majority of MMO's and social networking games (sorry, but while they're addictive and huge time-eating monsters of simplicity, they pretty much all play the exact same way). But at least I can say I've played numerous examples of each genre before making up my mind. As a journalist, you can't write negatively about something you don't know, see, or experience first-hand. In English: One should at least spend time playing games he or she doesn't THINK they'd like just to ex-

perience what others are raving about. Hell, you just may be surprised.

To those who constantly laud M-rated titles with lightning-fast gameplay and state-of-the-art visuals, I say pick up a copy of Alice in Wonderland on the DS to see some beautifully quirky graphics, a more exploratory game experience, and combat sections that require a deft stylus hand. Or maybe strategy fans should give one of the Puzzle Quest titles or Might & Magic: Clash of Heroes a shot. Conversely, casual games fans who think most console games are too violent or frantic might like the relaxing all-driving, all-the-time bliss of Test Drive: Unlimited (probably the cheapest ticket to Oahu) or solving the mysteries of Hotel Dusk: Room 215. And so forth and so on...

While most of you reading this already know that having a wide appreciation for more types of games makes for a better gamer, this sensibility seems to be gone almost completely as game review sites have basically turned to elite steakhouses where only the finest games are served while the rest get tossed out as scraps not worth your time. While it should be expected that a good deal of current games absolutely take advantage of current trends in technology (HD quality resolution, broadband or wireless multiplayer, download content), many games that don't meet some or all of these trends shouldn't be so easily dismissed as “lacking” features if the overall game experience is well done.

At this point in time it's become incredibly easy to predict which games will garner the raves and which will be overly criticized for things the higher rated titles will get an automatic pass on. Even more amusing (or not so amusing), should that same group of writers feel that certain games that they've hyped up in their sites as grand turn out not to be so spectacular, look out. Games that fall into this category are immediately shot down

and its corpse spat upon in review form, condemning them to bargain bins world-wide, whereupon they're exhumed by Joe Gamer types who've been curious about the quality of said titles and at 1/3 the price, finds a surprisingly fun (if "lacking innovation...by today's standards") experience.

Is there a solution to this problem? I'd say a hopeful yes. Long ago, film criticism used to be even more rigid than game criticism is today (and to some extent and depending on whom you read regularly, it still is). However, as cinema became more diverse thanks to foreign films becoming more widespread and directors outside the studio system experimenting, a new generation of writers who could appreciate these films for what they were and express this to readers sprung forth. This forced older, jaded reviewers to examine their ways of looking at cinema. Some responded by relaxing their standards as their horizons were expanded by the possibilities. Others stuck to their guns and criticized these films unfairly, not realizing that they seemed more and more like dinosaurs with each review. Many films have been re-reviewed after their initial release and are now considered "classics" that not only stand the test of time, they've been restored and archived for their historical significance.

While I don't want to get into the "Are Video Games Art?" argument (the answer is both yes and no), as many games as possible need to be fairly reviewed by more open-minded critics, period. Openly expressing that a game need not be "perfect" nor strive for awards to be considered great isn't a call for a flame war, it's a sign that the reviewer understands that not every gamer applies the same standards to what they choose to play. Yes, there have been, are, and will always be "bad" games created. However, not ALL games that don't pack in "Innovation" or apply "Today's Standards" should be considered poor product choices. Many games overlooked simply because they're budget

releases can offer up as good as or in a few cases, a better experience than a game with a multi-million dollar ad campaign and dozens of guaranteed high scores.

Of course, I could be totally wrong about all this in my cranky, middle-age phase.



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