

the Escapist

LEGO GAMES

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

A few days ago, as I was in the kitchen making some dinner, I noted one of my favorite movies of all time was coming on the TV: *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. Naturally, as I watched Ferris' slacking antics, my own progress toward a hot meal slowed. As he explained to the audience the importance of stopping to looking around in this fast life lest you miss something, I found the speed with which I sliced zucchini dropped substantially. Well, it would have been rude not to have paid attention ... he was talking to **me**, after all. Right?

I was engaged.

Another time, for a couple of friends' birthdays, a group of us went out to a piano bar to celebrate. This is one of those dueling piano places with two pianos and pianists on stage who take requests from the crowd. This is supported by a bar, so a couple hours after being there, the crowd is a lively bunch, drinking, hooting and laughing.

But then, the pianists, smart performers they are, saw the wheels of the fun coaster were well-oiled and brought out the big guns: the interpretive dance sing-along. Did you know that there's a whole dance that goes along with "Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog"? There is, and all the boys and girls got up, sang terribly and pantomimed wildly to the pianists' playing and singing.

I was engaged.

The directors of these two instances were employing a twist of the adage "I do, I understand." Games are unique as far as entertainment in that they are by their very nature interactive, and employ that old bit of wisdom. Where it's innovative and quirky and engaging for more traditional modes of entertainment to use audience involvement, games do this as a cornerstone of the genre.

So, games sometimes have to go a step further to rise above the crowd in grabbing the attention and minds of players. And in this issue of *The Escapist*, "Reach Out and Touch Someone," we discuss some of the games that have, some of the people that do and ways we

are building that interaction for the future of games. Enjoy!

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor: Don't you guys ever get bored with hammering the same topics over and over and over? Jesus, I can't count the number of articles I've read in *The Escapist* about sex in gaming. Enough shit already. Stop always trying to do the "controversial" stories and start covering some of the cool stuff that's actually happening in the industry.

-Dragoniz3r

Editor's reply: I'm going to assume you're talking about the article by frequent *The Escapist* contributor, Lara Crigger entitled "Resident Evil's Second Sex," although as far as articles about sex go, this one was pretty tame. In fact, the word "sex" as used in the

article's title (and in the article itself) refers to gender, not intercourse, and the article actually does address the over-sexing of games, and why we as a culture seem to be preoccupied with such things. I think you might find a lot to love there, judging from the nature of your letter.

In the defense of *The Escapist* though, it's been quite some time since we've published an article about sex. We publish roughly 250 articles a year, and so far this year approximately none of them have been about sex. In fact, in looking through our archives to find out what may have possibly triggered this objection, I had to go all the way back to Issue 64 from last year to find an article in our archives discussing sex. That one, a piece by me covering the growing teledildonics industry was pretty racy, I admit, but that was eight months (and about 150 articles) ago.

We did touch on the subject of being a woman gamer in Issue 92, but aside from a brief mention of raising a family and/or having children, that issue had very little "sexy" content (and even that was a stretch). We also covered the love story of a couple who met in an online

game in Issue 88, but I assure you the kissyface described in that article was very PG. There was also a great article by Erin Hoffman (AKA EA Spouse) about the difficulty of being a woman in a man's industry in Issue 70 from November, but again, as far as objectionably sexy content goes, that one was a bit of a let down.

If what you're really objecting to are articles in our magazine discussing gender differences and presenting the viewpoint of women gamers and game designers, I'm afraid we'll have to continue to disappoint you.

What interests us here at The Escapist is how games and media intersect with our lives, and sex, in all respects, is a fairly important aspect of life. But aside from that, the simple fact is that most games and game developers are men, and how they interact (or don't) with the other half of the human population is pretty interesting. In order for more women to find something valuable in games, more women should be making games, and for women to get interested in making games in the first place, they should probably be playing them. It's kind of a catch-22 situation and this industry isn't

alone in perpetuating that. Sexism is alive and well in this country (and the world) and, to be honest, letters like yours aren't helping.

- Russ Pitts, Associate Editor

In response to "Resident Evil's Second Sex" from The Escapist Forum:

I think that "feminist ideal" needs rethinking a bit. You discuss earlier in the article the "if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em" trap. But this whole business of having to constantly be strong and competent sounds a bit like more of the same. Not that strength or competence are inherently male, but rather the stereotypically male idea that it's never OK to show fear or to fail at anything. Is this a case of feminists taking on the worst of male culture and embracing it as their own?

In the context of video game design I see this quite a lot. Games are often designed in a way that punishes the player (not their character, the actual player) for failures. I think the whole mindset underlying that could do with being called into question.

- Dom Camus

Author's Reply: I don't think any school of feminism advocates that women must always be strong and competent, because that's impossible, whether you're a man or a woman. Instead, strength, freedom, competence; these are the ideals toward which we should always strive. We should always try to be the best we can be.

But you're right: By adopting that ideal, women do risk developing those same fears of failure and of showing weakness that men stereotypically struggle with. But rather than seeing that as something wrong with those ideals, I think it's a problem with how we understand fear and failure. Naturally, nobody idealizes failure, but perhaps the proper response is to instead understand its role in forming all those qualities we DO admire; that without failure, strength, freedom, competence, etc are meaningless.

Some games do in fact punish the player for failure, and I think that's a mark of poor game design rather than sociological bias. Thankfully, that style of game/player interaction seems to be going out of fashion these days.

- Lara Crigger

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To the editor: Shannon Drake hits the spot on "Vision Doesn't Sell Copies - The Short Life of Clover Studios". Indie developers rely on fresh ideas to pump out games like Chronic Logic's "Gish" and make a living.

However, big name developers focus on revenues from the mainstream players. And Capcom is no exception.

I believe that the business model is to blame. To sell a million copies (as some games do today) we have to sacrifice many aspects so that games will be enjoyable by the average Joe. Otherwise, the PS2 would never sell 100 million units. With those sales figures in mind and development costs rising fast, it is no wonder what happened to Clover Studio.

- Paulo V. W. Radtke

In response to "Vision Doesn't Sell Copies" from The Escapist Forum: I'm getting kind of tired of hearing this kind of "oh well what can you do" hopeless self-defeating nonsense when something like Clover's demise comes up, especially from the more sophisticated (I assume) developers, press and gamers that read The Escapist. If even the people who dug

Okami wrote it off the moment it was released as "too different/interesting to be successful", how are publishers and non-gamers supposed to change their attitudes?

I'm dead serious about this. Conservatism and fear are self-perpetuating, and the truth is that the mass market(s) are far more interested in "out there", new or interesting stuff than we give them credit for. The change has to start with us. It's understandable to become discouraged when something you think is cool fails in the marketplace, but that's no excuse to go into a permanent cynical sulk of nerdly elitism and doom the next Psychonauts the instant it appears. We need to be the ones fighting for it.

- chmmr





A MURDERER HAS YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS

by Susan Arendt

It was late, and I was tired. The police had requested help making sense of certain computer files they had been sent by a suspected serial killer; they felt my unique talents and skills might see answers, where they merely saw chaos. My eyes were gritty with the need for rest, and my head was throbbing with the effort of it all. I decided to take a break from my labors, hoping that, refreshed, I might better see my way through the apparently random collection of numbers and images that were contained on the CD the police had supplied. I began to rise from my seat at the computer, then as I do whenever I leave the desk, I checked my email for any important messages. My inbox was populated by the usual assortment of spam, forwards from my mom, ads from Amazon and something completely unexpected: a message from the killer I was hunting, telling me the next knock on the door I heard would be his.

There was no killer, of course, not a real one, anyway. The email was just *Evidence: The Last Ritual's* way of messing with my head, of rattling my cage as I sat in my oh-so-comfy

computer chair. On a deeper and more logical level, I knew that — after all, I had to enter my email address before I could even start the game — and yet they were not logical thoughts I was thinking, as I read the taunting missive again. It wasn't logic that sank like lead into the pit of my stomach, and it wasn't logic that forced me to turn my head and hold my breath as I regarded my front door, awaiting any potential knock. It was unreasonable, undeniable fear. All from an email just a few lines long.

Breaking down the fourth wall to unsettle the player is not a new concept, of course. *Metal Gear Solid's* Psycho Mantis freaked us out by making our controllers shake, and *Eternal Darkness* messed with our heads so often we needed therapy when we were finished. However, as creeped out as we may have been, it was an easy condition to cure; all we had to do to restore that fourth wall — and our perceived safety — was to turn off our consoles and walk away. The game world and the real world may have bumped up against each other, but they were still two very separate and distinct things. To get better at reaching

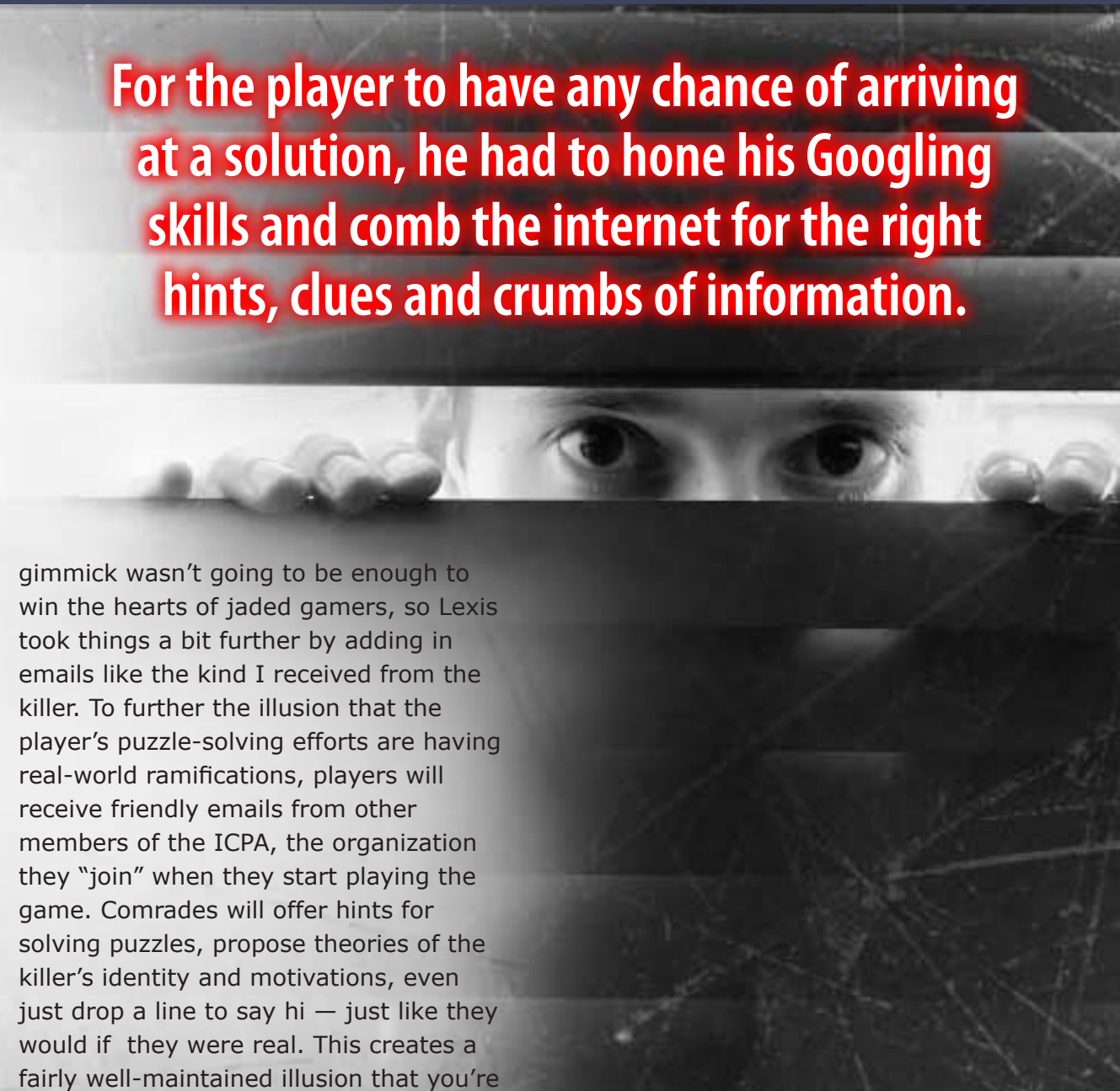
out and grabbing us, or, more often than not, tapping us on the shoulder when we least expected it, games needed a little help, and our dependence on technology was just the thing.

Our increasing acceptance and dependence on communication technology has accidentally fooled us into thinking we're more removed from the outside world than we really are. Checking email has become as regular a routine as brushing our teeth or having our morning coffee, a simple fact of life that's become so commonplace we hardly realize we're doing it anymore. As we focus more on what communication technology can do for us, how much easier it can make our lives, we tend to forget the door swings both ways, and that anything that lets us look out can let others look in. We may be safe at home, but so long as our cell phones are turned on and our ISPs are working, we're still connected to the outside. It's rather a lot like spotting someone picking his nose as he drives to work — mentally, he is In His Car, isolated from the rest of the world, completely forgetting that we can see him just fine through the glass.

Evidence recognizes this mental lapse and uses it to its advantage, building on a game structure that developer Lexis Numerique first tried in *MISSING: Since January*. *MISSING* used various webpages to plant information vital to solving its puzzles, so for the player to have any chance of arriving at a solution, he had to hone his Googling skills and comb the internet for the right hints, clues and crumbs of information. It was a brilliant idea; after all, if you want to know something, what do you do? You look it up on the internet. Blending this everyday activity into the gameplay went far toward making players feel as though they really were helping to unravel the mystery of two missing journalists and a serial killer, but it was ultimately a flawed mechanic. Once the game had been released for a few weeks, virtually any search players ran turned up so many walkthroughs and cheats that the emotional effect was lost. That's the problem with the real world: It's devilishly difficult to control.

Evidence solved that problem by integrating an in-game search engine that weeds out such unwanted "help," but simply improving upon *Missing's*

For the player to have any chance of arriving at a solution, he had to hone his Googling skills and comb the internet for the right hints, clues and crumbs of information.



gimmick wasn't going to be enough to win the hearts of jaded gamers, so Lexis took things a bit further by adding in emails like the kind I received from the killer. To further the illusion that the player's puzzle-solving efforts are having real-world ramifications, players will receive friendly emails from other members of the ICPA, the organization they "join" when they start playing the game. Comrades will offer hints for solving puzzles, propose theories of the killer's identity and motivations, even just drop a line to say hi — just like they would if they were real. This creates a fairly well-maintained illusion that you're

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not just playing a game in a vacuum, but rather working with a team toward a goal. The emails arrive at random intervals, with some puzzles sparking a flurry of incoming messages, while others meet with complete silence, thus giving them an organic feel despite the

We want to be scared, sure ... but not really.

fact they're being automatically generated as you progress through pre-determined markers in the game levels. More importantly, by extending the gameplay into an area of activity we don't normally associate with gaming, *Evidence* tricks us into forgetting, even if only for a few seconds, that we're not communicating with living, breathing people.

By invading our personal space, the game becomes more than just an amusing diversion or a way to pass the time before dinner, it becomes an experience. Creating an emotional connection with the player is something classic adventure games, the genre into which *Evidence* technically fits, have had a hard time doing, because their core gameplay elements force the players into an emotional disconnect. The puzzles in adventure games tend to be fairly esoteric and exotic; when trying to determine the right heroic couplet to recite in order to open a locked vault, the only real emotions you're likely to feel are frustration if you can't figure it out and elation if you can. Those feelings don't have anything to do with the actual story, however - they have to do with

personal victory and therefore create little connection between the player and the plot of the game. The puzzles in *Evidence* are no less obtuse, but its blurring of the line between real world and game world takes the game out of the player's head and makes it feel very genuine and real.

Breaking down the fourth wall can be a tricky way to tell a story, however, as developers have to maintain that delicate balance between being a welcome invader of privacy and an uninvited guest. Players provide email addresses and cell phone numbers with a certain unspoken expectation of respect and consideration. We'll happily accept mysterious text messages or even a chilling email or two, just don't ring us in the middle of the night. We want to be scared, sure ... but not **really**.

As our lives becomes more and more tech-heavy, it will be interesting to see what other ways savvy developers find to sneak their games into our lives. Perhaps the most popular download on iTunes one day will have a hidden message from a game's secret agent

character, or we'll find the solutions to puzzles have been downloaded onto the hard drives of our TiVos.

All of this trickery isn't just about telling a better story, though; it's also about simple self-preservation. As our gaming palates become ever more fussy, our snobbery increases exponentially to the point that any game not boasting the most accurate physics or glorious graphics is frequently dismissed as not being worth our while. For a small game like *Evidence* to register on our gaming radars, it has to bring something else to the table, something special that would make us look twice at its satisfying, but somewhat antiquated, puzzle-solving gameplay. Maybe *Evidence* can't compete with *Oblivion's* graphics or *GRAW's* multiplayer, but what it can do, just maybe, is make you forget you're playing a game long enough for you to get up and lock your front door. You know, just in case. [COMMENTS](#)

When Susan Arendt isn't writing the news at Wired's Game|Life or feeding her Achievement Points addiction, she's training her cat to play Beatmania.

LEGO

games

More ways to stack bricks than you can easily imagine

by Allen Varney



Since 1958, The LEGO Group has sold over 300 billion plastic toy building bricks, an average of 52 bricks for every person in the world. Did your 52 LEGOs get lost in the mail? Then you're missing a lot of games.

LEGO bricks tower high in geek culture, as shown by the extensive LEGO Wikipedia portal. In addition to esoterica like *The Brick Testament* (a retelling of Bible stories using LEGO mini-figures, or "minifigs"), the LEGO Bandit and an introduction to brickfilm, the portal offers a decent list of LEGO-related games.

Sure, you've seen the *LEGO Star Wars computer games* – at The Escapist Daily, no less – but they're only the tip of a huge thermoplastic iceberg. Many LEGO games use real building blocks and minifigs as tabletop miniatures. Some games are robotic contests and trials employing the *LEGO Mindstorms* sets beloved of young engineers everywhere. And LEGO is now joining a growing field of blocky online games.

Learning the range of LEGO game activities, even the most jaded gamer may say, with strong emotion, "Huh!"

A family-owned company founded in 1934 in Billund, Denmark, The LEGO Group is the world's sixth-largest toymaker, with 2005 revenue of US\$1.1 billion. The company has just weathered a dire financial crisis and, thanks to its *Star Wars* license and *Bionicle* toy line, is regaining profitability – at the cost of 1,200 jobs, factory closures and sale of a 70 percent stake in its four LEGOland theme parks. The company retains its LEGO retail stores, where you can buy bricks in bulk, like raisins. LEGO also founded the world's largest maker of architectural signs, Modulex.

LEGO makes 15 billion blocks annually of 20 different materials in 55 colors. Bricks are manufactured to tolerances of two micrometers; LEGO bricks made in the 1950s still interlock with bricks made yesterday. There have been over 2,000 different products. The LEGO Group 2005 annual report described the brand as "a synonym for creative building experiences and roleplaying, which makes learning fun, as children learn through play."

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LEGO stands out among toy companies for its close relationship with its fan base. Fans helped create the new *LEGO Hobby Train* set, and the company intends to rely heavily on user-based design going forward.

The LEGO community gathers online at the LEGO Users Group fan site, LUGNET, and collector site Peeron. At Brickshelf and MOCpages, you can upload photos of your own LEGO creations for others to rate. ("Am I study or not?")

The tabletop LEGO games listed on LUGNET's gaming page are all, conceptually, tactical miniatures games. The rules explain how to assign differing abilities to LEGO creations (usually minifigs), move them across varying terrain, attack other figures at range or hand-to-hand, inflict damage and (inevitably) destroy stuff in a shower of bricks.

LEGO Wars launched the form in 1991. Today there's *BrickQuest* (fantasy), *Starship* (space opera) and *Mechaton* (giant robots). *Evil Stevie's Pirate Game* is by Steve Jackson - yes, **that** Steve

Jackson, owner of Steve Jackson Games and designer of *GURPS*, *Munchkin*, *Illuminati* and others. His pirate game covers battles between minifig-laden ships (including rules for being eaten by sharks) and adds live-action roleplaying. At conventions, Jackson runs his pirate game for up to 20 players at once, all down on their knees pushing big plastic ships across the hotel carpet and shouting "boom!"

A standout LEGO tabletop effort is Mike Rayhawk's *BrikWars*, a voluminous recasting of all imaginable miniatures activity in LEGOLian terms. The 2005 Tenth Anniversary *BrikWar* rules are online; the 2001 version is a 135-page .PDF.

Unlike industrial-strength miniatures games such as Games Workshop's *Warhammer* series, LEGO tabletop games, one and all, play pretty loose. They charm you with humor and frivolity. *BrikWars* begins with copious etiquette advice for the Enlightened BrikWarrior: "Be a cunning and challenging adversary, but when your opponent blows your prize creation into its component bits, share in his excitement and the sheer glory of destruction. Play as if you were drunk (many players will not need to

fake this); when faced with difficult decisions, ask yourself what Homer Simpson would do."

One technically inventive LEGO miniatures design is Alban Nanty's *BOW* (Bricks-Only Wargame). Though slight in detail and clearly inspired by *BrikWars*, *BOW* uses LEGOs not only as figures and scenery, but also as dice and character sheets. To determine an action's success, you throw 2x2 LEGO squares; the ones that land on their side count as successes. Measure distances with a ruler made of bricks. Record your

minifig's abilities on a six-by-eight-stud baseplate divided into regions for movement, attack and hit points; on each area, place a color-coded brick with a number of studs represent the ability score. *BOW* is interesting for its complete LEGO grammar, a proof of powerful flexibility.

But if you want **true** LEGO power, you're talking electronics and software.



We think of LEGO blocks as simple, elemental toys, but the company has always embraced high tech – first in its precision engineering, then by adding motors, gears and, later, microprocessors.

LEGO released its *Technic Computer Control* in 1986, in consultation with MIT's Media Lab; in 1998 came the first *Mindstorms* robotics kit. LEGO and other organizations have sponsored many regional *Mindstorms* sporting games, such as Botball and RoboCup Junior. Founded by inventor Dean Kamen, a

non-profit called FIRST – “For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology” – stages robotics competitions for high-school students, and has a dedicated LEGO League. Inspired by FIRST, *Wired* editor Chris Anderson has proposed an aerial robotics league and, with his son, is building a cheap Unassisted Aerial Vehicle (UAV) using a LEGO autopilot.

The booming field of pure-software LEGO design starts with Ldraw.org, which defines an open CAD standard. Many

open-source Ldraw-compliant programs model, render and export LEGO software creations. The LEGO Group offers a similar, proprietary client, *LEGO Digital Designer*, that uses LEGO Exchange Format (.LXF). You can download user-created models into the client, modify them and then order that exact custom set of real blocks directly from LEGO.

As for computer and videogames – well, there's a cute *Super Mario Bros.* brickfilm, but that's not what you had in mind. Wikipedia's list of LEGO computer and video games has 30 entries, including the first LEGO computer game, 1997's *LEGO Island*, and straightforward branding exercises like *LEGO Chess*.

Chief on that list are the best-selling *LEGO Star Wars* games by TT Games Publishing, formerly the Traveller's Tales studio. In a February 2007 GameSpot interview, TT Games Creative Director Jonathan Smith credited managing director Tom Stone with the original concept: “It seems obvious now, but back then we would go into meetings and say ‘LEGO Star Wars,’ and people would just shake their heads [in confusion]. But it was a brilliant idea,

and we didn't screw it up. Which is harder than you'd think.”

Dan McAuliffe, producer of the GameBoy port of *LSW2*, commented in an About.com interview, “The most important element to the overall feel was an unwavering attention to scale. All LEGO objects and set pieces were built in 3-D using rendered LEGO pieces. This allowed all of the game objects and characters to remain as though they were constructed from the original toy sets.”

The LEGO-*Star Wars* connection has produced other wonders. The largest LEGO kit ever released is the Imperial Star Destroyer – 37 inches long, 3,104 pieces. The alliance goes both ways: The most recent DVD re-re-re-release of the movie saga includes a LEGO animation featurette narrated by Mark Hamill.

Next up from TT Games, in 2008, is *LEGO Batman*.

In March 2007, The LEGO Group licensed online game studio NetDevil to create a LEGO-based massively multiplayer online

“Back then we would go into meetings and say ‘LEGO Star Wars,’ and people would just shake their heads.”



game (MMOG). A Killer Betties interview with NetDevil's Scott Brown and Ryan Seabury reveals little about the new game, but it's early yet.

The placeholder LEGO MMOG website emphasizes building and creativity, heretofore notorious weaknesses of MMOGs. The idea raises bold hopes of players importing their own models into the game, in .LXF or Ldraw format, and gaining status based on, perhaps, community judgments of their studliness. Cross your fingers; NetDevil's previous MMOG, *Auto Assault* (published by NCsoft), bombed within weeks of launch.

The desire for online LEGO has produced a couple of low-end, somewhat dorky precursors: *Blockland* ("that game where you build stuff"), now mostly dormant; and *Roblox*, which emphasizes multiplayer games based on deathmatch and other shooter models. The *Roblox* coders are working hard and seem to know what they want, so more power to them; still, in playing up PvP carnage, *Roblox* shows a regrettable shortage of imagination. As all these games amply demonstrate, LEGO is about imagination.

To an extent, LEGO has always mirrored society. In the 1950s, the blocks were identical and interchangeable; in the '70s, you could buy mechanized kits to repurpose those blocks for many functions. Starting in the '90s, you could buy customized sets; now, there are online LEGO networks. We can imagine more innovation ahead, such as smart, networked, globally aware LEGOs with radio-frequency identification (RFID) tracking tags.

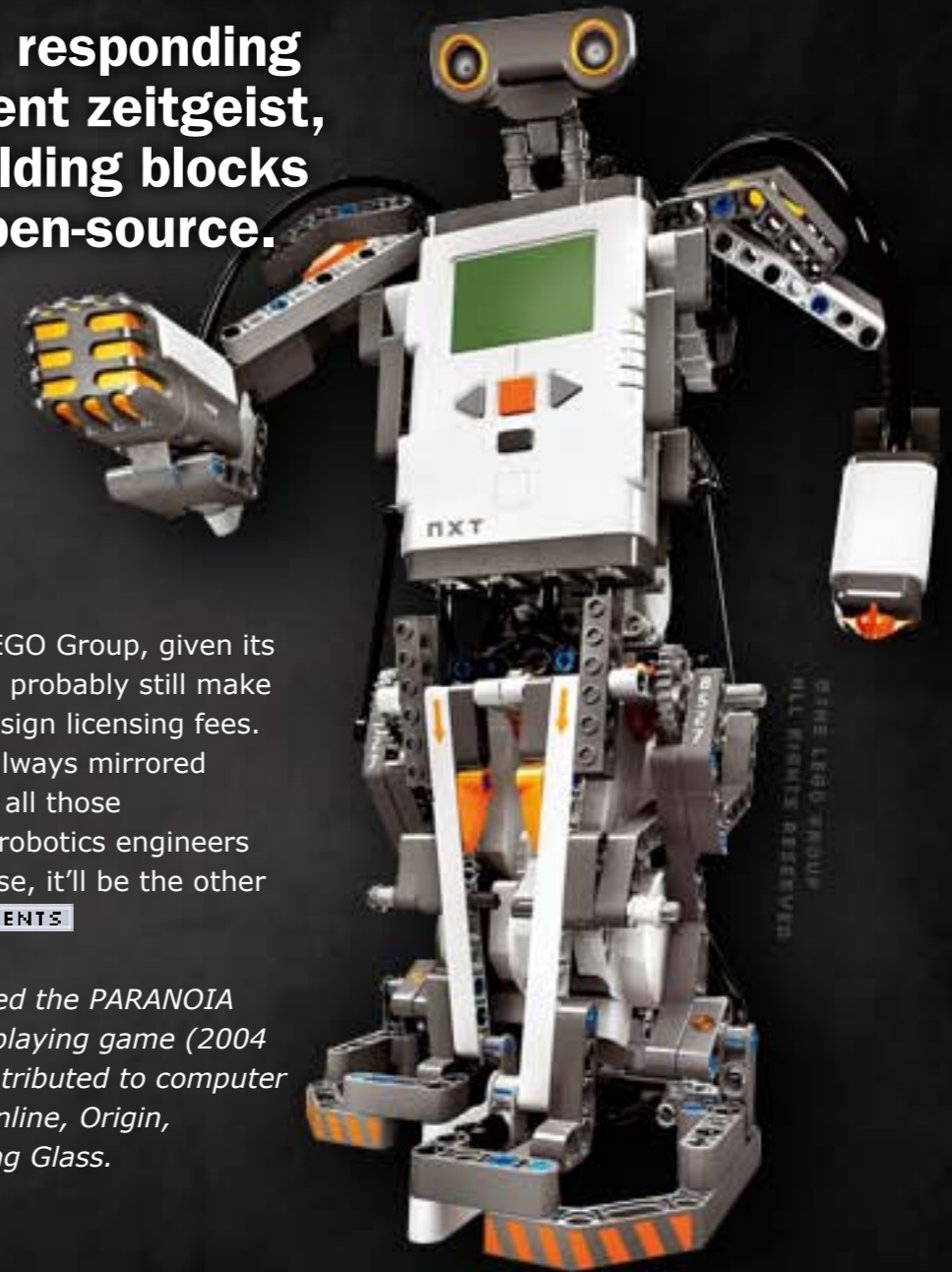
And how long until we get collectible LEGO games a la *HeroClix*? Designing a good clicky-base miniatures army feels (metaphorically) like assembling a model - that is, putting together a little machine with lots of complementary, interlocking parts.

Inevitably, responding to the current zeitgeist, plastic building blocks will go open-source. The field of 3-D printers - "fabs" - is barreling along. In 10 years, maybe less, you'll have one on your desk, using Ldraw-based software to spit out LEGO-like knockoffs of your own design - thousands of them, for no more than the cost of the plastic.

Inevitably, responding to the current zeitgeist, plastic building blocks will go open-source.

Yet somehow The LEGO Group, given its high-tech savvy, will probably still make a fortune in brick-design licensing fees. Because LEGO has always mirrored society. Maybe once all those *Mindstorms*-trained robotics engineers grow up and get loose, it'll be the other way around. [COMMENTS](#)

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





MARIO READS Minds

by Shannon Drake

San Francisco startup Emotiv Systems emerged from the shadows at GDC 2007 with a rather startling announcement: They're working on a way to read your mind, and they're close to release. Big, brassy announcements with nothing behind them are the bread and butter of the gaming industry, the better to be shoved back in a company's face when things don't work out, but Emotiv seems to be a cut above the usual design-doc-and-a-prayer windbags.

For one thing, the pedigree of the Emotiv team is impressive, made up of bright stars of business and award-winning scientists, engineers and executives. The company's founders include: Allan Snyder, a noted neuroscientist and Marconi Prize winner, as well as a pioneer in the field of fiber optics; Tan Le, a rising young technology star and entrepreneur from Australia; Nam Do, a partner of Le's and a gifted student and manager; Neil Weste, one of the leaders in chip design; and Steve Sapiro, a heavy hitter from Intel with a passel of companies under his belt. Sitting on the Board of Directors are two more notable names: John Murray, a heavy hitter in Australia's financial scene, and Ed Fries, formerly one of the head honchos in Microsoft's game division and the reason you've heard of the Xbox.

Finally, Randy Breen is a game industry veteran with a pedigree to die for — 14 years as a producer and executive producer at EA and four and a half years as a Vice President and Head of Development at LucasArts — who now serves as the Chief Product Officer for Emotiv Systems. Breen's job focuses on "extending the research into new areas and figuring out how to productize that

research, both from a hardware and software standpoint, and to evangelize it, so that developers understand how to use it. Basically, [to] get SDKs in their hands early." While they've been primarily working with developers, they plan to get a device out to consumers "sometime next year."

According to Breen, the company is three years old. "Two of the founders [Le and Do] were acquainted with a fellow named Allan Snyder ... and a fellow named Neil Weste," he says. "The four of them got together and talked about the potential for creating a device that could tap into unconscious thoughts and use those as a new form of interface for computers, and that lead to about a year and a half of research." The fledgling company recruited Breen for his game industry experience, as the founders felt gaming was a logical fit for the research. Their work produced a headset that recognizes brainwaves and patterns and the Emotiv Development Kit, which lets developers integrate the information from the headset into the games they make, detecting thoughts, emotions and other kinds of brain activity.

"We've announced the release of a software development kit," he says. "The kit is really a subset of what we think will come to market for consumer applications. It gives a sense of direction, and the idea is for us to get that equipment and our software into developer hands early, so that they can start to build applications that utilize these things." Emotiv currently offers three software suites, "the Affectiv Suite, which is emotional detection, the Expressiv Suite, [which] is facial expression, and the Cognitiv Suite, [which] is conscious decision." Using the Expressiv Suite as his example, he says, "The idea is to be able to express yourself naturally rather than using emotes." So rather than typing /smile or /wink, "you might just smile and wink, and be able to translate your physical actions into actions that your character online, or your in-game character can [use to] communicate with another, non-player character." The Affectiv Suite detects emotions. "We released excitement as the first example of that. The idea is that we can detect a range of emotional behavior, from an excited state to a calm state, so that those can be used to trigger events in a game, like control of an audio score, or [translating]

your actions onto your character, so that not only does your character respond through your facial expressions, but it might respond through its animation, using your feelings.

"Calming could be used to provide health rather than picking up power-ups or waiting on timers, potentially," Breen continues. "You could play out the fantasy by having to get out of the line of fire and relax somehow." On the other hand, feelings of excitement "could be used on the other end of the spectrum to enable the character, so if the fantasy of the character was to become empowered by becoming excited, then, again, you're feeling the character's role rather than simply forming mechanical actions in the game. And we also think that the emotional detections have the potential to be used to enable dynamic difficulty in a game. So, for instance, being able to make adjustments to suit the player's ability or their feelings, rather than predefined specifications for what difficulty should be."

Excitement may be where they've started, but by the time they bring their offerings to market, they hope to offer the ability for games to "get a sense of

what the player needs. You need to adjust the game to suit the players. And we think that that's really important, because the range of player ability right now is so broad that the games have difficulty really tailoring [themselves] to suit that range of ability." Emotiv's suites offer game developers the ability get "a sense of ... how the players are responding to the content. We think that's a really powerful tool to provide the best possible experience." He makes a comparison with film editing, where "a director has a very fine control of tempo by carefully editing the scene. They'll basically get the audience to an apex and before they deliver new material, they want to make sure that the scene provides time for the observer to relax and settle before they provide the next big bang." Games don't currently have this luxury, he says, and Emotiv "provides a method for game developers to sense whether the player is at the emotional level they want them to be [at] and then [they are] able to adjust the content accordingly."

Their third offering is the Cognitiv Suite, which allows the game to detect conscious decisions from the player's brainwaves and interpret them into in-

“we can detect a range of EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR, from an excited state to a calm state, so that those can be used to TRIGGER EVENTS in a game”



game actions. "You can visualize an action and see that action translated into movement on screen," Breen says. They've already got some basic movements in, such as lifting, pushing, pulling, dropping and rotating an object, "and those actions can be translated to anything onscreen, really, that you might use them for."

The science may be complex, but the interaction is simple: "You think about pushing the object, and the device allows detection for that event, and then you're able to perform that action [in game]." Currently, they're up to being able to detect three distinct actions

simultaneously, which he says is "just the beginning. It's not clear where the limits are, but we intend to continue and expand both the number of things that you can do, [both] the number of things that you can do simultaneously, as well as the list of things you can do discretely."

Developers hoping to work with the system and utilize Emotiv's development kits "will find it extremely easy to work with," he says. "The detections themselves have been done, so the information that's passed through the API is fairly standard and easily integrated into menuing and functions that they would expect. It's not going to look very different than other types of interfaces, other than the fact that it's detecting these discrete things that they didn't otherwise have access to. From a functional standpoint, it'd be very simple." No mind reading required.

As for players who will — hopefully — be encountering Emotiv's hardware and software packages, Breen is aware of the "gimmick" status of the similarly innovative Wii controller in the minds of some of his audience. However, he doesn't think they'll run into the same resistance, he says. "The nature of what we're doing is providing a method ... for players to become more immersed in the material that they're already interested in. When you think about the trends, there's a long-term trend toward realism and toward more complete experience in the game world. When you think about your expressions and your feelings being part of the scene, this is really providing an avenue for that relationship."

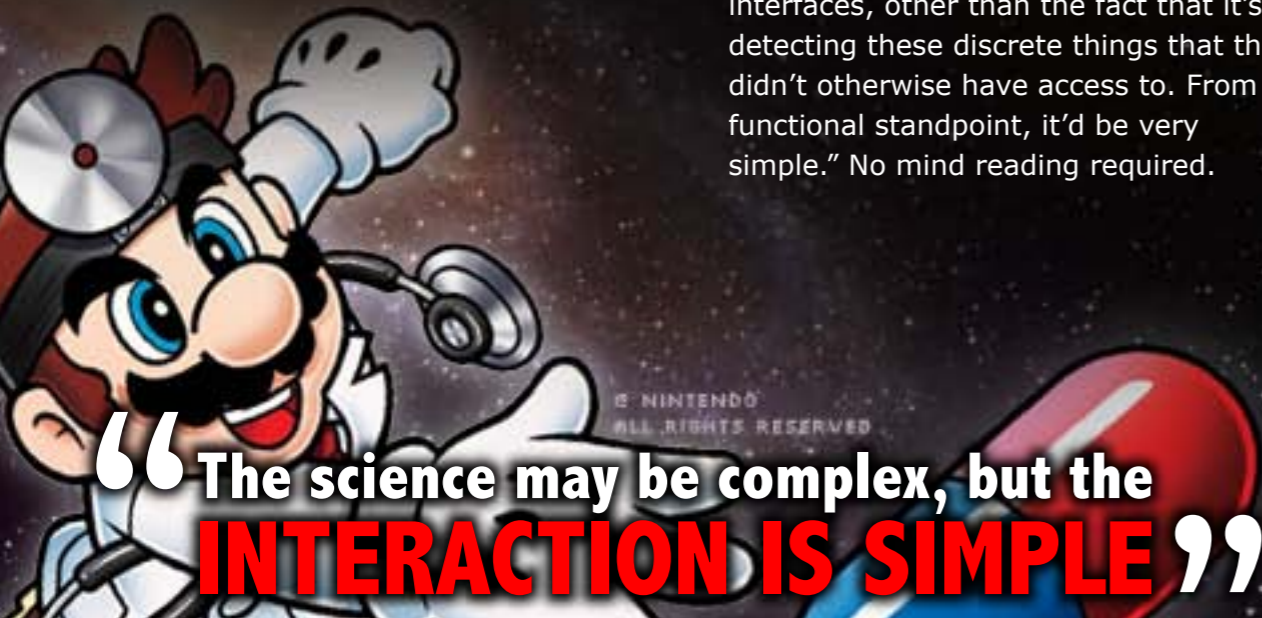
Instead of typing slash commands or emoticons, "now you're just smiling. And when you're excited, your character demonstrates excitement by just changing his body language, or the music changes. It's just a reinforcement that that's how you feel, increasing tension the way films do. Or, in the case of the cognitive actions where you're imagining pushing an object with your mind, you're really mimicking the things characters are doing in the game. Whether that's magic or telekinesis, it's

fantasy fulfillment." He thinks taking out the middle man and taking out, say, button presses, "which are not very good representations of the actions they represent," would make for a "much more fulfilling experience."

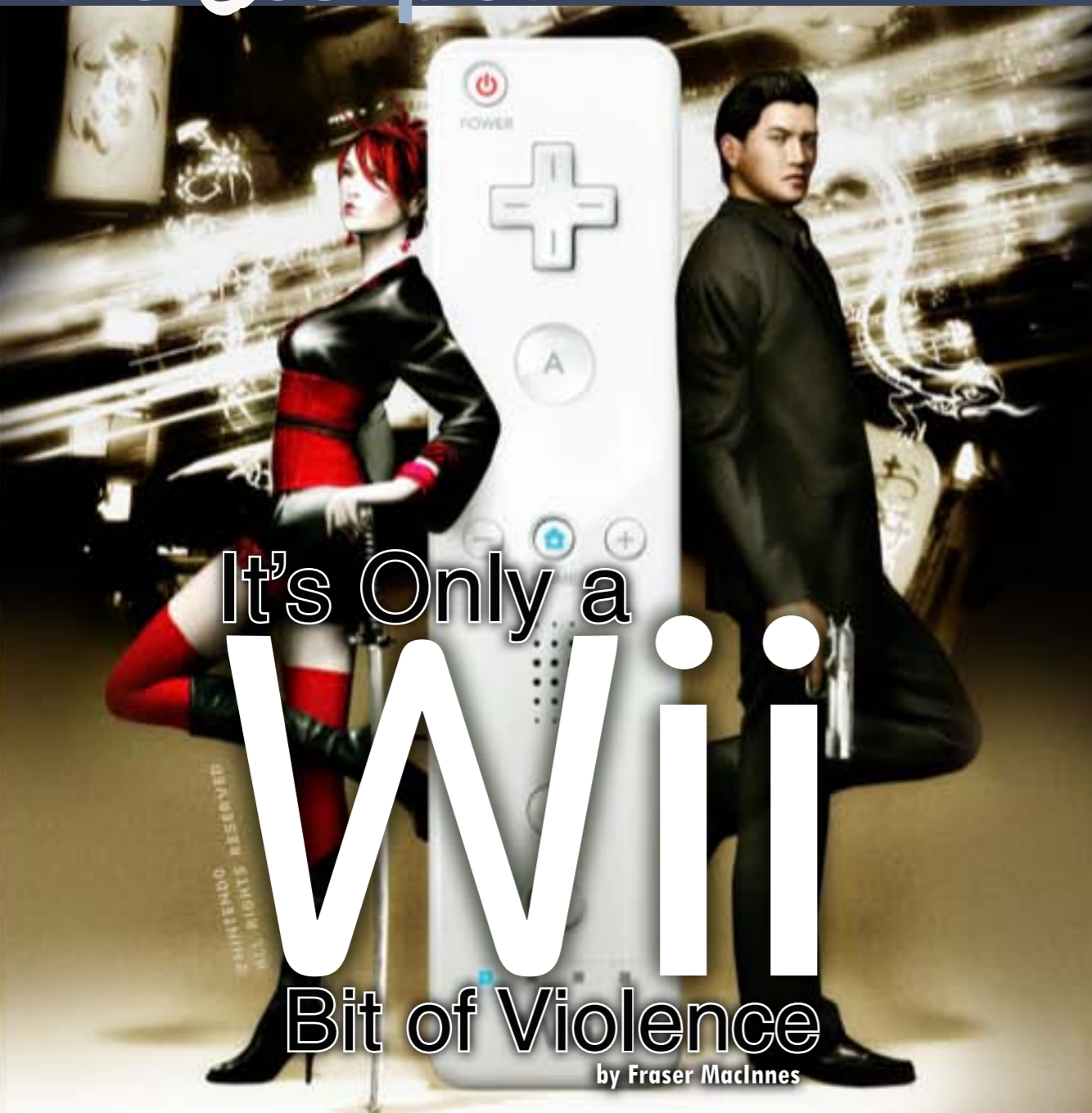
However, Emotiv isn't seeking to change things completely, he says. "I imagine that the device is a supplement to the joystick. It's not trying to replace it. The conscious actions, the nature of them is not as immediate as the joystick control, but it provides a level of satisfaction that's different. ... It's a different type of experience." And one that may completely change the way we play.

[COMMENTS](#)

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



“The science may be complex, but the **INTERACTION IS SIMPLE**”



It's Only a Wii Bit of Violence by Fraser MacInnes

Much has been made of how the Wii is a family console with a squeaky clean image. But does its interface method add yet another layer of gray on an already muggy moral stage?

Nintendo has always played the family card, their mascot resplendent in cheerful toyland shades presenting a clearly defined set of moral boundaries. For parents concerned about the vapid zombie-like expressions fixed on their 10-year-old's face as he plays with an alien-looking device, the physicality of the Wii's inviting collection of interfaces and the apparent playfulness they inspire is convincing.

The Wii is one of the few genuine master strokes of hardware design in gaming's short history. Even during the most exciting moments of a tense game of multiplayer *Halo 2* or a particularly fraught police chase in *Grand Theft Auto*, the majority of gamers tend to sit with a glazed expression, inert and apparently oblivious to the world around them. The Wii provokes a different response; players are animated and acutely aware of their immediate surroundings. For the first time, a gaming console resembles a toy in the traditional sense.

There is, however, an interesting contradiction in the Wii's design philosophy. The Wii is the under the TV gaming experience that has been built with attracting grey and girl gamers as a primary consideration. In light of such an obvious bid to entice new demographics, Nintendo's decision to name the Wii's primary interface, the Nunchuck, after a weapon seems slightly out of step. And yet, as the Wii hurtles headlong toward its six-month birthday, the Nunchuck's nomenclature is beginning to seem less coincidental.

Nintendo's new, inclusive gaming ethos has already succeeded in bringing quality casual games to new players. Similarly, Nintendo has sated the rabid appetites of more seasoned gamers. But to be a true everyman's gaming experience and snare those moderate gamers who spent the last generation endlessly playing *GTA* on the PS2, the Wii is going to have to be the first Nintendo console to fully embrace gaming's so called dark side.

And it seems as though this is exactly what Nintendo intends to do. Nintendo's second wave of Wii titles include the likes of *Scarface*, *No More Heroes* and *Manhunt 2*, all games with violence and

gore as central themes. Not only that, but Nintendo has been vocal about their desire to persuade Rockstar to bring the *GTA* series to the Wii in some form.

But given the added level of immersion the Wii's controllers afford, does this imminent union of hardware and content present a new gaming conundrum?

A case in point is *Red Steel*, a Wii launch title and one of the first gamer's games to put the Nunchuck and remote through their paces. There is typically an element of detachment in console first-person shooter games; the actions performed on a control pad are linked tenuously to the onscreen action. Playing a first person-shooter on the Wii removes this dissociation; you have an onscreen twin, and the tool you have in the game is figuratively in your hand. In spite of *Red Steel's* lack of gore, the removal of those psychological boundaries enforces a sense of realism even light gun games don't provide.

There are other titles where this sense of mirrored action is even more acute. The butts, swings and shoves involved in roughing up enemies in the *The Godfather: Blackhand Edition* are a far

cry from the actions required to control the boxing game in *Wii Sports*. The trailer for *The Godfather* clearly illustrates that the game's control method requires the player to make specifically violent gesticulations.

Replace a gun with a hammer or a sword, and the actions the player must use to control the onscreen action are even more tangibly violent in nature. Suddenly, the Wii's propensity to make players more animated takes on a much more sinister connotation.

Of course, it would be foolish to deem this emergent play dynamic universally bad. If a stable, well-rounded individual wants to step into the shoes of a gangster and pummel a virtual shop keeper by waving his fists around, surely he should be entitled to do so. The problem comes in rating this sort of content; will ratings boards such as PEGI, the ESRB and the BBFC soon have to factor the physical actions players perform into the classification process for Wii games?

At present, it seems as though this has not yet been considered by any of the game classification bodies. Submissions

to the ESRB are voluntary, as they are for the BBFC, whereas the European PEGI system (excluding Germany, where the slightly more strict USK body controls game classification) is a self-regulated process. Developers have most often built relationships of mutual good will with classification bodies; misleading them by omitting content in submissions can have serious consequences, especially in light of gaming's current media status as the source of all societies' ills.

The ESRB, however, doesn't involve any actual play time on the part of the raters, as games are submitted for classification in the form of taped sections that contain certain kinds of content. According to the ESRB, raters are from a wide range of backgrounds, races and ages, have no ties to the gaming industry and are comprised largely of retired school principals, parents and professionals. In other words, individuals who might not necessarily know about the Wii's interface method.

Then there is the issue of how the players choose to play. For many of the games in *Wii Sports*, some of the wilder



The Wii's propensity to make players more animated takes on a much more sinister connotation.

movements can be just as easily performed with understated wrist flicks; it is a matter of how immersed the player chooses to be. One of the reasons political figures damn and vilify violent games more so than they do violent films is because they argue the player is allowed to direct the violence themselves. With the Wii, not only can the player direct the violence, they can act it out, too.

The way in which a game is played may not always be a consideration in violent Wii titles. There are several Wii games that contain depictions of violence and yet do not require violent mimicking with the remote or Nunchuck in order to control them. The forthcoming Wii remake of *Resident Evil 4* shares *The Godfather's* third-person shooting action, which is controlled in a similar way. There is, however, no evidence thus far that *Resident Evil 4* will require the player to perform violent actions for melee moves. Similarly, *Mortal Kombat Armageddon's* control scheme makes full use of the Wii's motion sensing capabilities, but only a few of the control actions mimic the onscreen violence directly.

Is this a lack of imagination, or a conscious decision to omit violent mimicry? More importantly, should graphically violent games with conventional control schemes be rated more leniently than games that are less graphically violent but offer a more tangible connection to the violence via the control method?

Games are the media's favorite witch, and the game industry needs to be absolutely above reproach, if it is to have any hope of rebuffing the spurious claims of the fanatical and vocal few. The Wii has enjoyed positive press so far, owing in large part to the undeniable personality and playfulness embodied by its unique interface. But the mainstream media is a fickle animal, and it will only take one game to instigate a backlash with lasting repercussions throughout the industry. The ratings bodies will have to move quickly, otherwise pundits will soon be bleating about how teens are learning how to beat up and shoot their schoolmates with their Wii. And the last thing they need is more ammunition.

[COMMENTS](#)

Fraser MacInnes is a freelance game journalist for pocketgamer.co.uk. He is a Scotsman but currently lives in Munich, Germany, where he loves the weather but hates the queuing etiquette. His website is frasermacinneshitsandblogs.googlepages.com.



There are several Wii games that contain depictions of violence and yet do not require violent mimicking with the remote or Nunchuck in order to control them.

Go ahead: MAKE MY PLAY

by N. Evan Van Zelfden

Sometimes, the best games are the ones you make yourself.

At the turn of the last century, options for play were decidedly simple. Sliding down cellar doors, hollering down rain barrels and climbing apple trees were at the height of popularity.

But the world progressed and technology along with it. By the mid-century mark, gameplay could be found, personified in fact, by that new wonder of the Atomic Age: injection-molded plastic. That feat of engineering was closely followed by the perfection of transistors; resistors; magnets and electronics of all shapes and sizes; circuits; boards; buttons; knobs; and poles, culminating in the coin-operated videogame arcade machine.

Arcade machines were fun, of course, but the games were hard-wired into circuits. You couldn't change them, even if you wanted. From soldering iron to dev kit, the console games that followed would be rigid and require special equipment to make; those rules were set.

Personal computers changed that. With disk space and operating systems, games could now be programmed as

executables. The number of original games programmed for the Apple II exploded. You could make a game yourself. You could play someone else's game - you could even change existing games. Now, technology was letting people take fun into their own hands.

Enter the Frogger

South by Southwest Interactive is the yearly conference for technorati and the Net Set held in Austin, Texas. Speakers sit on panels discussing the latest issues in technology, gaming and communication, all in an atmosphere of good barbeque and good beer.

There's even one story - **now a legend** - of what happened on the night of March 14, 2006. After the closing conference party, a small group of journalists and techies met in Peter Ludlow's *Second Life* Herald hospitality suite, at the Driskill Hotel. There was still a bottle of tequila, and other work to be done that night.

As the party started, Philip Torrone and Limor Fried entered, carrying a bag of supplies. They made for the kitchen. One of those robot vacuum cleaners, a Roomba, appeared. Fried, an R&D fellow

from Eyebeam, began to cut a green T-shirt into strips.

Torrone, a senior editor at *Make* magazine, explained to a reporter from C|Net News that he'd rewired the robot's remote control, and by using Bluetooth was able to drive the Roomba with his laptop.

Word spread through the suite. The reporter began to take photographs, and the Roomba took shape. As foam cups were taped in place and green fabric fitted, the Roomba *Frogger* rolled across the floor.

The historic downtown hotel happens to overlook Austin's Sixth Street, and the *Second Life* Herald suite happened to have the third floor balcony. Looking down upon the street gave an identical perspective to that classic of the arcades, *Frogger*.

The anticipation turned into debate about how long poor *Frogger* would last in live traffic, how soon before the police would arrive and how good a player it takes to beat the real-life game.

By 2:00 in the morning, the robot was ready. The Roomba went back and forth

across the street. On the 10th trip across four lanes of traffic, *Frogger* got crushed by a white SUV. After they picked up the debris, everyone laughed and remarked on the world's first coin-op-inspired vacuum cleaner game.

The next morning C|net's News.com ran the story, which went on to become one of the outlet's most-read stories of the year. "Once you get a taste of Roomba *Frogger*," noted Ludlow, "you can't get enough."

Covering Emergence

That C|net News reporter was Daniel Terdiman, who is no stranger to covering games and technology. What first attracted him to games, he says, was emergence. "I just loved the things that people were doing with games that were never expected by the publishers."

Terdiman first encountered Torrone two years ago, when he was writing a *Wired* News piece about four sky-divers jumping from a plane just to attempt a game of multiplayer *Mario* on the Nintendo DS while free-falling at 120 mph (it worked).

Terdiman has written about Torrone from time to time. "He's the biggest tinkerer

I've ever met. Let's put it that way." Most games are about imagination, inside a box. Even the likes of *Spore* and *Katamari*, a designer creates a system, and players later look into a machine to interface with that system. But many of Torrone's projects seem to take that same imagination and engineering, throw away the box and play in real social situations. "He basically says, 'I don't like the box I'm given - I'm creating a new box.'"

Terdiman sees more social and hands-on gaming in the future, too. Last autumn he took part in a game created by Jane McGonigal of *ilovebees* fame and Ian Bogost of Georgia Tech. The game of benevolent assassination, titled *Cruel 2 B Kind*, transformed New York's Broadway between 48th and 58th Streets, into a battleground of combatants with compliments.

Teams of players would try to "kill" other teams, by yelling kind phrases at "enemies." What made it dynamic, notes Terdiman, is you don't know who is a player and who isn't. Yelling "You look great!" at a group of strangers who end up not be involved in your game ... "the look on their faces is priceless."

// The anticipation turned into debate about how long poor

**FROGGER
WOULD LAST IN
LIVE TRAFFIC**

//



Seize the Play

Torrone and Fried have moved on to other electronic entertainments. At this year's South by Southwest they discussed subversive, yet playful technology during their keynote. One

device turns off televisions. Another, the Wave Bubble, disrupts cell-phone signals within a five-foot radius and fits inside a cigarette pack.

Manufacturing and selling cell phone jamming devices might be less than legal in the United States, and that's at the heart of what the pair refers to as open-source, do-it-yourself hardware hacks. They document and publish new techniques online in full detail.

"It starts conversations," explains Torrone. "You're not malicious; you don't want to hurt people." So his quarterly magazine, *Make*, strives to illustrate projects that make the most of home technology, celebrating "your right to tweak, hack and bend any technology to your own will."

Torrone describes his goal as helping to change things for the better by showcasing, writing and celebrating the things people make. "I'm not certain how to solve all the world's problems, but I'm sure it will involve everyone learning how to build (more) things." Evidently, the more technology available, the more you can play with it.

Make My Play

At this very moment, Torrone is focusing all his attentions on the second annual bay-area Maker Faire, a two-day, family-friendly event – it features an Electric Giraffe – that celebrates "arts, crafts, engineering, science projects and the Do-It-Yourself mindset." Terdiman, who expects to report on the event, says it has similar energy to the Burning Man festival, of which Terdiman is a 10-year veteran. Beside the more ephemeral crossover between the two events, Terdiman refers to "actual projects that were created for Burning Man that are on display at Maker Faire."

In the end, it's about taking fun into your own hands and making it work. Torrone once wore a shirt made of computer fans to Burning Man. People would ask him if it really worked. "Why would I make a shirt out of computer fans if it didn't work?" [COMMENTS](#)

N. Evan Van Zelfden expects great things for the future of games. Games are the greatest art form to date, he asserts. This is why he plays games, writes about them, and continues to work in the industry of games.

// In the end, it's about TAKING FUN INTO YOUR OWN HANDS and making it work. //

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