

the *Escapist*

FROM '94 TO INFINITY:
BEFORE HALO

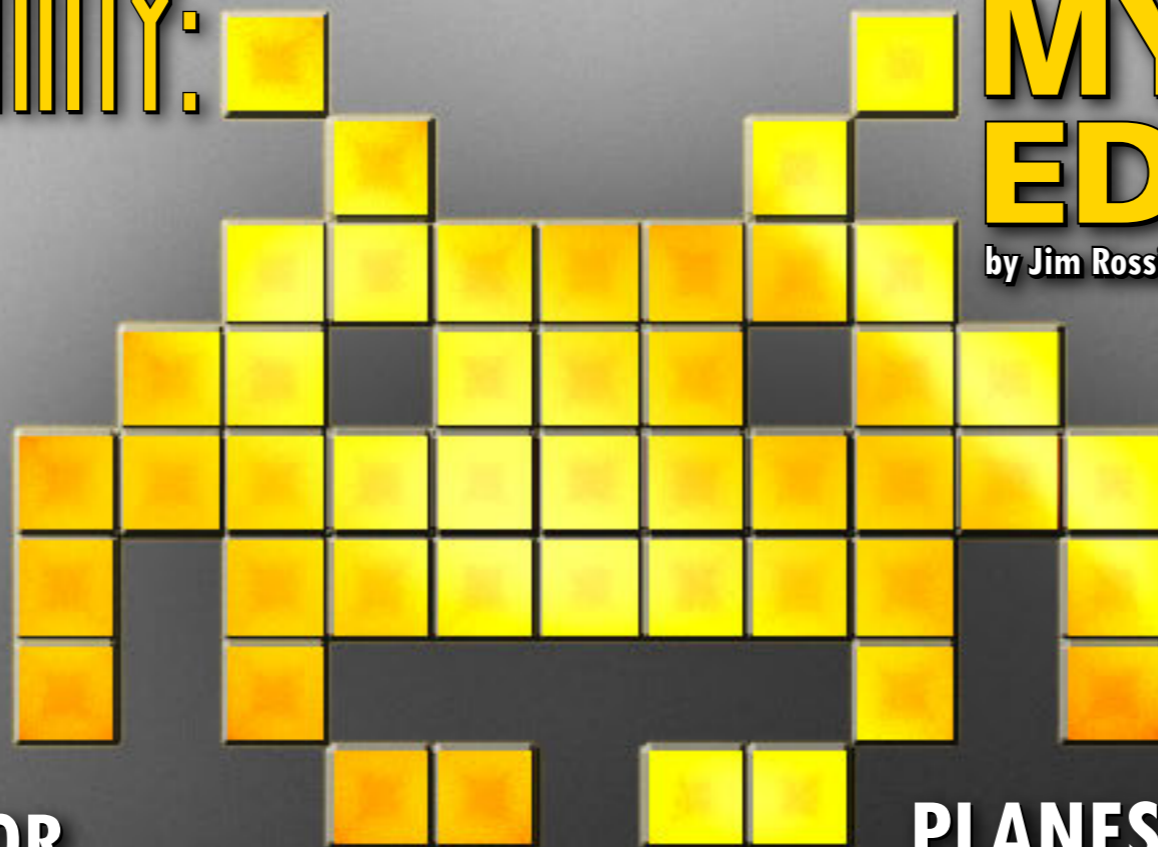
by Pat Miller

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by Julianne Greer

Wrecking Crew came with my original Nintendo Entertainment System. Most buyers got *Super Mario Brothers*, but mine came with everyone's favorite brothers wearing their construction worker hats, making their way through puzzles of demolition, avoiding monsters called Gotcha Wrenches and hiding from Spike, the Foreman. I took on the role of Mario, climbing this ladder, banging that door with the hammer, waiting for the purple Gotcha to follow me, then smashing the pillar at the exact moment to trap him under an orange barrel.

Sounds extremely simple, dull even, when compared to the sensory extravaganza of today's video game world. But it provided endless hours of entertainment for me, enough that when the catchy, repetitive tune came through the television, even my dog groaned and moseyed out of the room in what might qualify as a doggie-huff. Even now, I can clearly recall the music, which certainly

did not extend beyond the span of one octave, and cannot keep the smile from my face.

What is it about that first game that captures one's imagination? Sure, *Wrecking Crew* was not the first game I had ever played – I participated in my share of *Pong* tournaments and *Pac-Man* could make even me like yellow. Something about the simplicity of hammering away at a concrete wall, satisfying crunching noise and all, until it crumbled was captivating enough to park itself in my memory and prompt me to mention *Wrecking Crew* in nearly every discussion on classic games.

Speaking of discussion on classic games – we have an entire issue of that for you this week. Pat Miller debuts in *The Escapist* this week with an interesting read about Bungie's original masterpiece, and foundation for future work, *Marathon*. Allen Varney returns with an

insight into the world of interactive fiction. Jim Rossignol discusses the importance of the past in the future of gaming. Please enjoy these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor: I have really been enjoying my weekly reads of *The Escapist*. And, more often than not, feelings of anger, sadness, resigned apathy and a healthy bit of righteous fury accompany those reads as well. That is not a bad thing, however, as they all stem from well written articles by talented and insightful writers who challenge me to think in new directions and look at the industry as it is, instead of how I wish it were. Even when I remain opposed to their arguments, I have a better foundation on which to stand than before my opinions were challenged.

What primarily prompted me to write to you was Max Steele's exceptional article "It's All Real to Me." My high appraisal is not garnered due to the arguments in the article matching many of my own opinions, which too often becomes the criteria people use in judging editorial writing. Instead, it made me think about the issues under examination from a fresh and thought-provoking perspective.

Indeed, I frequently rant to friends, much to their chagrin, I'm sure, about the influence of marketing on various forms of art, particularly games and movies. Usually, after somehow fitting in a caustic barrage against consoles, I end up leveling my wrath on the mass consumer, start muttering about the state of humanity, and give up in a resigned huff. Mr. Steele's enlightening article, however, gave me some food for thought, fuel for the fire, and added a little to my usually dwindling hope for the future of gaming.

If there are smart folks out there in the industry reading the words of the smart folks at your magazine, even this grizzled old gamer is willing to be patient and look forward to what the future may bring, ranting all the while, of course.

-Greg Gursky

To the editor: Excellent content and great read. But badly presented. Please have the font size enjoyable to read or the site code flexible to scale.

-jt

To the editor: I continue to enjoy watching the growth of The Escapist, both in size and in reach. However, I was disappointed by the short "News Bit" regarding gaming violence in Issue #5. For such a contentious and current topic, an entire issue could be dedicated to this discussion alone, instead of adding a datapoint of questionable relevance.

First, Asheron's Call 2 is extremely tame by the standards of violence in video games. While it includes combat as a central feature, a much better example of obsession-inducing immersive violence would be Guild Wars, World of Warcraft Battlegrounds, or, even more so, games from outside the genre, be they Real-time Strategy or First-person Shooter.

Second, research to date hints that violent behavior can be linked to much more invested time than two hours per day. Fourteen hours a week is considered almost "casual" by gaming standards, an amount of time leaving much more left over to fair grounding in the "reality" of employment, families, etc.

Third, no mention is made of local conditions, cultural background, nor the decades of attempts to qualify and

quantify the effect any media consumed in dedicated chunks may have on the behaviors of their more hardcore participants. To date, all causal relationships appear to be anecdotal, attempts to link the latest hot button issues within the constraints of sound-byte delivery – a constraint you are not bound by.

As a result, I felt this bit did a disservice to the debate, adding a reference point which would not stand up to any serious scrutiny. A better handling of the subject would involve a conscientious overview of the history of media and violence, perhaps culminating in an objective summary from representatives of both sides of the debate.

-Darniaq

To the editor: Nice website, but you seriously need to do something about your layout. It's a real pain to read. Granted it looks nice and flashy but I'd rather have good content (which you already have) in a nice, simple, readable format (see <http://www.slashdot.org>)

-Pratik Patel

To the editor: The Escapist is just what I've been wanting — I've always preferred the look of magazines to the look of Web pages, but dislike the physical clutter they produce. Your site's a soup that eats like a meal, as it were — the ease of access offered by the Internet with the design sensibility of a print magazine. I salute you. And I'll be back for more.

-JH

To the editor: I love The Escapist - great articles, good formatting and wonderful insight. I have a suggestion/request - repost/reprint the web page in a mobile format friendly manner. Call it, www.escapistmagazine.com/mobile. I've tried to read the escapist on my Treo, and it's more than a little bit difficult.

-Tawnya Carr

To the editor: Great design, great articles. Arresting and engaging. Thanks.

-d

FROM '94 TO INFINITY: BEFORE HALO

by Pat Miller

Imagine, if you will, a first-person shooter game. Imagine it set in a science fiction world where humanity is on the verge of extinction from mysterious alien forces; imagine that it is beautifully rendered in the level design and complemented by a compelling storyline, and imagine that it is loaded with exotic alien weaponry that you can unleash on your friends and enemies in adversarial and cooperative multiplayer games alike. Not too hard to picture, right? Now - and here's the tricky part - imagine this game as having been released **eleven years ago**.

Is that a bit more difficult to envision? It shouldn't be, because you, as the kind of classy, educated gamer - you know, the kind who reads magazines that are distributed exclusively in PDF format - that you are, should have already played Bungie's *Marathon* trilogy back during the formative years of the FPS. Right now, Bungie's *Halo 2* is a phenomenon that has won critical acclaim, sold over \$125 million in its first day of sales, and perhaps most significantly, drawn in the Average Joe to the wonderful world of online multiplayer gaming via Xbox Live. Anyone who wishes to understand this success would do well to investigate its roots in *Marathon* on the Macintosh.



Marathon's game design has left its mark, not only in *Halo*, but also in the genre as a whole. While the rest of the industry was collectively soiling themselves over *Doom's* gritty texture maps and the **totally awesome BFG 9000**, the Bungie folks were quietly pioneering FPS development with things like secondary fire modes, objective-based missions instead of red keys and blue doors, plots that aren't mind-numbingly boring, and so on. The fact that *Marathon's* gameplay remains fresh and modern even now stands as a

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testament to its pioneering game design (or a depressing indicator of the video game industry's stagnation, if your cup is half empty).

But beyond all this lies a very strong sense of character; the levels range from the dark, claustrophobic corridors of the colony ship *Marathon* to wide open, colorful alien landscapes, and the weapons have their own quirky personalities with names like the TOZT-7 Napalm Unit, the WSTE-M5 Combat

Shotgun, and the trusty old SPNKR rocket launcher (which lives on in *Halo*). The multiplayer action, with game modes like King of the Hill and Kill the Guy with the Ball instead of just boring old deathmatch, was the LAN party staple for Mac gamers well into the *Quake III Arena* era. And the plot, which put you in the shoes of a cybernetically enhanced Security Officer, left you at the mercy of a somewhat psychotic AI in a war between human and alien, and narrated everything to you by way of strategically placed computer terminals; *Marathon's*

storyline has a sublime perfection in its progress from straightforward alien-killing in *Marathon* and *Marathon 2* to a disturbing, disorienting tale of alternate realities, dreams, time travel, and godhood in *Marathon Infinity*, and establishes a narrative style that is faintly echoed in the plot twists of *Halo*. Yes, perhaps some bizarre sector of the gaming elite frown upon the populist *Halo 2* during their secret *Katamari*-and-caviar parties, but neither they nor anyone else can deny that the series'

...few modding groups will find themselves so inspired as to port the signature *Marathon* multiplayer gameplay to another game engine, a la the *Marathon: Rampancy* mod for *Unreal Tournament*.

simple elegance is a product of years and years of toiling in relative obscurity.

But where *Halo 2* brought the modern first-person shooter into the hands of the Everyman, *Marathon* inspired the exact opposite reaction. *Marathon* was Mac-only, and rather than opening doors for a new class of average gamers, *Marathon* instead drew in the few and the proud: namely, those who not only **owned** a Macintosh back in 1994, but **played games** on it. And so computer-illiterate creative types and the aging-hippie system administrators and the children of yuppie parents and all the other predecessors of today's mocha-frappuccino-and-PowerBook kids banded together out of love for perhaps the only Mac game that was their own - and in doing so, created one of the most tightly knit and zealously productive gaming communities ever.

The *Marathon* community has its roots in Usenet forums, befitting its age, and it

began as any gaming community would. There was something about *Marathon* - about making flawless one-shot kills with the rocket launcher across the Thunderdome, maybe about those last few seconds of a game of King of the Hill - that forged a common bond across the computer networks of the world. People would swap war stories and game replays, puzzle over the plotline, run their lunchtime tournaments on unsuspecting office networks, make a few new maps - such is the life of any gaming clique. But where, say, the serious *Doom II* players would remain happily with a few shared pursuits, the *Marathon* players pursued all of this with a ferocious dedication that would warm the hearts of any game developer.

One particularly poignant example: the current obsession with speed runs and technical proficiency, popularized by the classic "Quake Done Quick" films, could very well include *Marathon's* "Vidmaster" films in its hereditary tree. Not content

to merely play games better, the *Marathon* elite, inspired by Bungie's official Vidmaster Challenge, gave rise to a long-standing tradition of masochism by worshipping at the altar of the Vidmaster; that is, the players who would record their feats of mastery by not only beating levels as quickly and skillfully as they can, but also by adding a certain amount of cocky flair to them by killing all moving things (friends and enemies alike), using grenades for locomotive purposes, not using any weapons but the fists, and above all, never retreating - all, of course, on the hardest difficulty setting possible.

The community was composed of more than just dedicated players; while people will forever sing the praises of the *Half-Life* modification community for

Marathon's story uses computer terminal gibberish, numerology, Shakespeare, the Bible, ancient mythology, and complex mathematics, all within the context of its own rich backstory...

achievements like *Day of Defeat* and *Counter-Strike*, the *Marathon* modders are no less significant. *Marathon* has its share of well-done total conversions, as any decent modding group would; and indeed, many of the fan-made adventures are no less compelling and haunting than the actual series canon itself, thanks in part to the inclusion of Bungie's own mapmaking tools with *Infinity*. But once again, the fans' devotion carried them far above and beyond the call of duty; few modding groups will find themselves so inspired as to port the signature *Marathon* multiplayer gameplay to another game engine, a la the *Marathon: Rampancy* mod for *Unreal Tournament*. Even fewer modding groups will ever be able to coordinate the resources and manpower necessary to port all of the *Marathon* trilogy in its entirety to run on any modern computer - Macintosh or PC - in high-resolution graphics and support for true Internet play, neither of which were supported by Bungie's original product. Yes, that's right; currently, the entire *Marathon* trilogy is available for free download, and it's playable on your home computer with Aleph One, a labor of love produced by *Marathon's* faithful.

Perhaps the most impressive display of Marathon dedication resides in the group of people surrounding the *Marathon's* Story web site. Maintained by webmaster Hamish Sinclair, the site catalogs each terminal screen of plot exposition present in the *Marathon* trilogy, plus years of communal discussion and investigation. This plot discussion is no teenage "ZOMG AERIS IS ALIVE" fluff; *Marathon's* story uses computer terminal gibberish, numerology, Shakespeare, the Bible, ancient mythology, and complex mathematics, all within the context of its own rich backstory, and so it takes people literate in each subject to decipher each message. Many games might have a secret message, a developer's room, maybe a hidden level or two; not so many games will present the raw hexadecimal code of a secret level file in the game's own narrative text, and not so many communities have the raw ingenuity and talent necessary to spot it. For years, people tore apart and analyzed everything they could - the hex code of the data files, hidden messages in the manuals, even the bar codes on the game boxes - and found clues and easter eggs that helped them piece the story together bit-by-bit. To the fans, Bungie had made a literary



Marathon and Halo: Bungie's Connected Universe

by Nova Barlow

Bungie's storytelling introductions to upcoming games have become classic, with the most recent example being the Haunted Apiary alternate reality game (2004, funded by Microsoft, developed by 4orty2wo Entertainment, and approved by Bungie), also known as "ilovebees" (ILB).

Introduced in a movie trailer, "ilovebees.com" appeared to be a simple site about beekeeping that had been hacked. Players quickly determined that the site, and the messages that appeared on it, were connected to *Halo 2*. Story wise, the activation of a mysterious artifact in 2552 caused a military ship's A.I. to split into multiple personalities. One of these personalities traveled through space and time to land on a web server in the year 2004.

After landing, the A.I.'s mission to repair herself involved players worldwide, who answered payphones and searched websites to gain clues and, together, put these puzzle pieces together. This game culminated in a live event spread across four cities (San Francisco, New York, Chicago and Austin) - a chance to play *Halo 2* before the official release on November 9th.

One of the many links between *Marathon* and *Halo* is a common term called "rampancy," used in both series to signify when a computer A.I. goes "insane." Rampancy occurs when a computer A.I.'s self-awareness is enhanced to the point when it learns and develops greater mental abilities. In *Marathon*, all three A.I.s of the UESC Marathon become rampant. To announce *Halo*, the "Cortana Letters" featured a *Halo* character that talked about her reality. The A.I. in ILB - the "Operator" or "Melissa" (the name, incidentally, comes from the Greek bee nymph who nursed Zeus) - demonstrated the effects of rampancy in a "smart" A.I., after she continued to function after her theoretical lifespan of seven years. Regardless of the fact Bungie has not considered the ILB material to be Bungie/*Halo* canon to date (yet approved the ILB material), this recurring theme has proven to be solid enough to forge a connection between these games for hardcore fan and casual observer alike.

the Escapist

masterpiece, and they were determined to appreciate it, *Quake* and *Unreal* be damned.

And Bungie paid attention. One particularly notable anecdote from the *Marathon's* Story website details the mystery of the Lost Network Packets; at the site's inception, a few inconsistencies in the given dates and times of certain events arose that made the *Marathon* plot a little bit confusing. Rather than retroactively writing over the troublesome dates in the sequel, Bungie sent out a little tidbit side-story email to Sinclair entitled the "Lost Network Packets" that managed to rectify the dates - the date switching was intentional on the part of one of the story's AIs, said the protagonist of the Packets, as part of a defensive attempt to confuse alien hackers. Another tidbit came at the very beginning of *Halo's* development, where mysterious emails originating from Bungie office computers with cryptic writing styles made their way to the site by way of someone named Cortana (who would later be known as the *Halo* AI character). It wasn't enough for Bungie to create *Marathon*; they did their damndest to

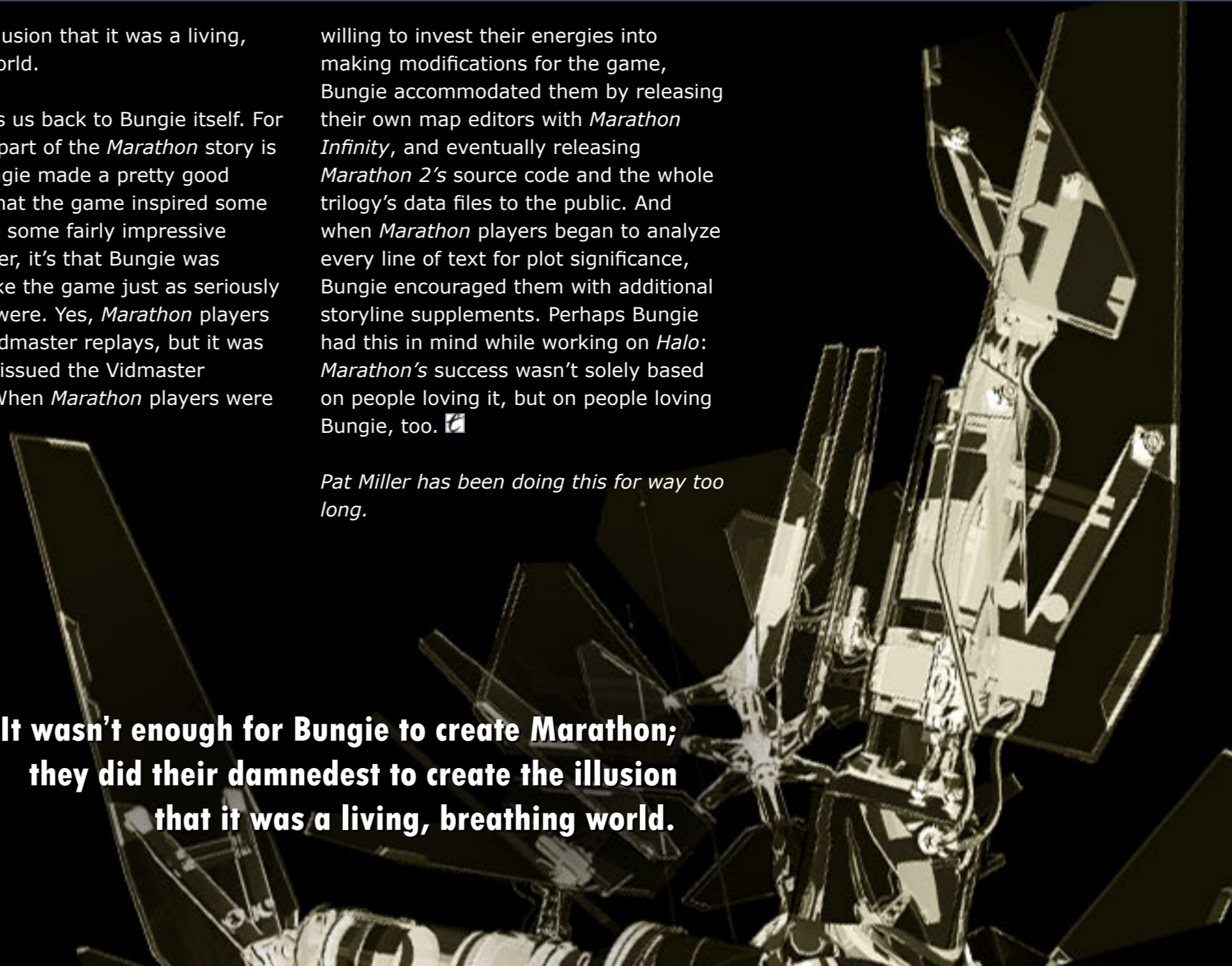
create the illusion that it was a living, breathing world.

Which brings us back to Bungie itself. For the notable part of the *Marathon* story is not that Bungie made a pretty good game, nor that the game inspired some people to do some fairly impressive things. Rather, it's that Bungie was willing to take the game just as seriously as the fans were. Yes, *Marathon* players made the Vidmaster replays, but it was Bungie who issued the Vidmaster Challenge. When *Marathon* players were

willing to invest their energies into making modifications for the game, Bungie accommodated them by releasing their own map editors with *Marathon Infinity*, and eventually releasing *Marathon 2's* source code and the whole trilogy's data files to the public. And when *Marathon* players began to analyze every line of text for plot significance, Bungie encouraged them with additional storyline supplements. Perhaps Bungie had this in mind while working on *Halo: Marathon's* success wasn't solely based on people loving it, but on people loving Bungie, too. 📌

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long.

**It wasn't enough for Bungie to create *Marathon*;
they did their damndest to create the illusion
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MY EDUCATION

by Jim Rossignol

Ever since my dreamy childhood spent being raised by *Pong* machines in pixel-land, I've been consuming electronic entertainment. These days, I figure an educated games journalist is a better games journalist, and what better education than playing anything and everything, all day, every day for decades at a stretch? It's a dirty job, but hey...

Yet not all games carry equal weight. Some, like that influential lecturer or inspiring teacher, have had a disproportionate effect on the whole. There are a few games that stand out as bright psychic landmarks in my personal history, the high-water marks of my education. While there are too many to mention in an article as brief as this, there are three in particular which I want to talk about, because they have direct relevance to the opinions I have about games today. If you're a developer whose game I am reviewing, then it is these rudiments, these embryonic versions of our modern gaming archetypes, that I will, however unconsciously, end up comparing your game against.

Each of these games taught me something. Significantly, they taught me that looking forward is more important than looking back. Sure, I'm going to talk about how great and important these old games were, but what I want you to take from it is that old games have something to teach us about where the future may lie. I am not one of those navel-gazing retro-heads who pines for lost pleasures of yore. No, I pine for the future I was promised by the past. Here's why.

First: *Midwinter* on the Atari ST. The 16-bit spy game blew apart my sense of what games could be and, at the same time, imbued me with a startling sense of where they might be going. *Midwinter* seemed to contain a fragment of future

games, something that I recognized for the first time as a youth. Sure, *Elite* had been a stunning vision of open-ended play in previous years, but suddenly, right here, was a palpable **world** I could **explore**. I got hold of vehicles, interacted with people. I was inside something recognizable. It was my first taste of a kind of game in which the act of moving, through travel and exploration, was central to the experience. It pointed to magical possibilities of creating worlds I might escape to. Before then games had been *Defender*, *Smash TV*, *Gauntlet*, *Tempest*. Now they were something else.

Midwinter had taught me that one of the futures for games would be about freedom. That future wouldn't just make toys for us to play with. Instead it would deliver something more akin to **places** for us to visit, as well as challenges in those places for us to overcome. My personal love of games would grow because of the way these places

captured my imagination. I went on to identify in my own mind the descendents of *Midwinter* – not the direct genealogies of what inspired who, but the games from which I personally can extrude this special kind of experience. *Hardwar* and *Operation Flashpoint*, *Outcast* and *System Shock* all act as imperfect examples of what I've been looking for since *Midwinter*. Most recently, possibilities seem to be opening up again with appearance of *GTA3*, the MMOGs and, I hope and pray, with the forthcoming Chernobyl wasteland game and spiritual inheritor of the *Midwinter* mantle, *Stalker*. None of these games have quite managed to create the future that they all promised. But we're getting there.

Going back and playing *Midwinter*, I realized that it's tough, if not impossible, to take these significant games out of time. This is especially true of my second game. In the annals of gaming history *Hired Guns* is little more than a footnote,

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COOPERATIVE, SHARED EXPERIENCE...**

but to me it represents the moment in which the future of multiplayer gaming became a cooperative, shared experience, rather than a head-on competitive exercise. It was the game that taught me that playing with somebody didn't mean having to batter them into unconsciousness on the speedball court, but could instead mean working with them to complete a grand quest and explore an intricate challenge. *Hired Guns* was a lost game that no one (other than my best friend circa 1993) seems to have played. It was a four-players-on-one-screen *Dungeon Master* clone with pseudo-3D single-frame-per-click movement. That alone marks it out as a developmental oddity that now seems impossibly crude, and it has little or no importance in any grand history of gaming that might one day be written.

Yet few games approach its level of achievement. *Hired Guns* created a unique world that never felt the need to explain itself and kicked genre conventions in the face with a throbbing robo-boot. It had teeth-jarring machine gun blasts, magic killer monks, serpents, sharks, deployable automated sentry cannons, personal teleports, ED-209 clones and apropos of nothing, thirty-foot bone monsters. All this weird was wrapped up in a gloom-clad future world that was both spooky and intriguing. It embraced peculiarity in a way that games fear to do today. But its greatest achievement was to place me and my best friend **together** in a game world. We played our way across the epic map over the course of three weeks. We overcame puzzles through joint thinking, and fought pitched battles together.

How many first-person perspective games now combine RPG elements, while dodging genre clichés and still remember to include a cooperative play mode? Okay, now subtract from that number those games that won't last you two weeks and ... I think you understand me. Few games bother to deliver us a cooperative experience, but when they do it is a remarkable pleasure. I was bleary-eyed with joy when I realized I could play *Halo* cooperatively on my Xbox. Any game that has this potential, and fails to do something about it, is

failing the possible future that *Hired Guns* made me wish for.

My third game is one whose vision has been utterly failed. Despite its perfect encapsulation of what real time strategy might become, no one has followed its example. Perhaps that's thanks to it being more recent. Perhaps not. *Ground Control* gave me hope for the point and click wargames, with its minimalist design, stealth systems, artillery spotters, dropship tactics and a genuinely intriguing story.



I had never been particularly impressed by the visions of the future suggested by strategy games, but *Ground Control* introduced a visual elegance and a tactical realism that was unprecedented. It used the 3D terrain for more than just pretty screenshots. It rejected what had gone before, delivering us from any kind of resource management or tank-rushing silliness to a game where technological escalation demanding new uses for old units were the methodology. (And the artillery ... Holy God. A gun carriage the size of an apartment block: has anything been quite as beautiful ever since?)

But it was the side of the 3D real-time strategy wars that seemed to lose. The future it described – one where the lie of the landscape and the scripting of events would, as in action games, define the scope of the tactics – has only been echoed ever so distantly by the *Total War* series. For the most part, RTS games have taken on a pallid and over-familiar hue. While there are obvious highlights (*Warcraft 3*, *Dawn of War*, *Homeworld*) none of them took up the gauntlet thrown down by *Ground Control*. Nothing tried to improve upon

the idea and reject resource management and based building. No one had thought to take it further. No one had taken the future that I, and presumably its developers, had seen in *Ground Control* and tried to make something from it. Even its sequel, years on, lacked the stripped-down simplicity of the original and its quietly brilliant expansion pack.

GAMES HAVE TO GO FORWARD. THEY HAVE TO BELIEVE IN THE FUTURE...

When I came to review that sequel, there were some grumbings from my editor that I couldn't leave the past alone and just "review the sequel on its own merits." But how could I? The sequel had created what looked like a

dead end. It brought resources back in, and overdid everything with layer upon layer of overwrought design. The elegance was gone. Even worse, the future I had been promised was gone.

Games have to go forward. They have to **believe** in the future, and they cannot do so as a groundless generation X, divorced and alienated from the achievements of their parents. The past is littered with suggested futures, some still possible, others abandoned. Some really were dead ends and others still inspire us today. But whatever clues that past may hold, I don't believe that we can go forward without them. 🗨

Jim Rossignol is a writer and editor based in the South West of England. He writes about videogames, fiction and science.

> READ GAME

Heirs of Infocom, fans of interactive fiction still choose their own adventures

by Allen Varney

> GO WEST

Living Room

You are in the living room. There is a door to the east, a wooden door with strange gothic lettering to the west, which appears to be nailed shut, and a large oriental rug in the center of the room.

There is a trophy case here. A battery-powered brass lantern is on the trophy case. Above the trophy case hangs an elvish sword of great antiquity.

Remember *Zork*, the text-based adventure game from Infocom and one of the best-selling computer games of the disco era? If you're older than about 38, words and phrases like "frotz," "xyzzzy," "maze of twisty passages all alike," and "eaten by a grue" trigger sharp remembrance, like Marcel Proust eating a madeleine. You'll instantly reminisce about text games like Infocom's *Deadline*, *Suspended*, *Infidel*, *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*, and a zillion Scott Adams titles from Adventure International. You'll grit your teeth recalling the hours it took to put the Babel fish in your ear in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. If you're a male secure in your masculinity, you may even join the manly men who say the death of Floyd the robot in *Planetfall* was the only time a computer game ever made them cry.

hissing kills
flytraps

If you're under 38, you're now saying, "Huh?" Text games (or, as some called them, "interactive fiction") were once **the** most popular electronic games. Yet they vanished overnight from store shelves, driven into darkness by the IBM PC's EGA and VGA graphics adapters.

But in obscure reaches of the field, text games survive to this day. Indeed, despite (or because of) no sales, they're currently enjoying an artistic Silver Age. Just as traditional craftspeople even today use time-honored techniques to hand-tool birchbark canoes and embroider lace doilies and program the Commodore 64, devoted hobbyists still play and design text games.

"Results 1 - 10 of about 340,000 for 'interactive fiction.'"

- Google

Interactive fiction (IF) fans maintain huge websites like the IF Archive and its loyal companion, Baf's Guide. There's XYZZY News (named for a magic word in Zork) and Interactive Fiction Ratings ("1141 of 2584 titles have been rated; 738 titles have multiple ratings; 351 users have entered 6374 opinions"). Fans hang out on a chat MUD, Liza Daly's ifMUD, which draws a small but friendly multinational tribe around the clock. They write scholarly books like *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*, a 2004 treatise by Nick Montfort published by the MIT Press. The quarterly newsletter of the Society for the Promotion of Adventure Games (SPAG) has reached issue #41. There's even a non-worksafe AIF ("Adult Interactive Fiction") community.

Two Usenet newsgroups, rec.arts.int-fiction and rec.games.int-fiction, have bubbled along respectably for many years. Some recent topics:

- Writing under PalmOS
- Interactive Fiction ROMS for the Gameboy Advance
- Best font to use while playing text games

hissing kills
flytraps

XYZZY

- TADS3: Using a self-made transitive verb without an object causes error
- How to describe plainness in an attractive way?

On the interactive fiction newsgroups, users debate Z-machines. A Z-machine is a program that interprets and runs Infocom game data files, which were written in a cross-platform "Z-code" to run on 26 different platforms. For years IF fans dissected the Z-code format like Champollion cracking the Rosetta Stone. Now the fans know Z-code backward and forward and have implemented their own extensions to the standard. There are Z-machines for just about every operating system, from Windows XP and Mac OS X to PDAs down to ancient boxes even a NetBSD team wouldn't touch. (Check out this list - At last, a use for your old Atari ST!)

But having already played Infocom's three dozen titles, and maybe a few from other text game publishers of the time like Level 9, Topologica, and Adventure International, what were devoted IF fans to do? As the graphics-heavy titles dominating the market took over the professional sector of electronic gaming, inevitably some enthusiasts began writing their own games.

You come around a corner, away from the noise of the opening. There is only one exhibit. She stands in the spotlight, with her back to you: a sweep of pale hair on paler skin, a column of emerald silk that ends in a pool at her feet. She might be the model in a perfume ad; the trophy wife at a formal gathering; one of the guests at this very opening, standing on an empty pedestal in some ironic act of artistic deconstruction - You hesitate, about to turn away. Her hand balls into a fist. "They told me you were coming."

- Emily Short, Galatea (2000)

The annual Interactive Fiction Competition is now in its eleventh year. This, the best known of many IF contests, draws three to five dozen entries annually - 30 to 60

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complete text games, each playable in two hours or less. (Or anyway, they're only rated on how much the judges can complete in two hours.)

These games cover a stunning variety of subjects: genre adventures in the Infocom tradition, historical tales, mind-bending dream worlds – one recent entry, Aidan Doyle's *Bolivia by Night*, is basically a tour of Bolivia. There's even a text version of a first-person shooter, Jason Bergman's *IF Quake*:

A Grunt is on patrol here, armed with a shotgun and looking rather surly. As you enter the room, he looks up and turns in your direction.
The Rottweiler sniffs you immediately and runs in your direction.
You can also see a Medkit here.

> ATTACK GRUNT WITH SHOTGUN

You hit the Grunt, taking off 12 from his health.

The Grunt's shotgun nicks your leg, hitting you for five points. It won't kill you, but you'd really rather it not happen again.

Interactive fiction fans range widely, and some of them write well. Chris Klimas' *Blue Chairs*, which swept the major Xyzzy Awards for 2004, leads the player through a stylish, symbolic second-person hallucination/dream full of sad recollections:

Beatrice's Room

The first time you saw this room, you were laughing. It was Christmas, after dinner, and you were flush with the wine her parents insisted you drink - maybe because you seemed so nervous - and there you saw them: all those paper cranes hanging from the ceiling. She made them, one by one, to remember things worth remembering. Her sixteenth birthday. When she

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THE CHIGGER
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stopped taking ballet classes. You caught her reaching for a piece of origami paper on her bureau that night. She thought you had fallen asleep.

(Klimas has posted a *Blue Chairs* walkthrough. Playing any IF walkthrough makes you part actor, part stenographer, part observer. It's like watching a really good *Dance Dance Revolution* player: entertaining, but the experience is completely different from actual play.)

For newcomers, one good introduction to IF is Andrew "Zarf" Plotkin's fantasy game *Dreamhold*, an amnesiac's exploration of a wizard's high house. It has a tutorial mode that helps the newbie along with hints and encouragement.

Porch

This is the weathered front porch of the house. A closed screen door leads westward into the house. You can leave the porch to the east.

Mr. Martin is standing in the doorway.

There is a particularly yummy bone here.

> BARK

"What! Timmy's fallen down and broken his leg! Where?"

> BARK

"In the old Johnson barn! Let's go!"

- a joke contest example from the Winter 1986 Infocom newsletter, "The New Zork Times"

These interactive fiction games range so widely because their cost of entry is so low. Using free special-purpose compilers like Inform, TADS, or the more recent Hugo,

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UM91, 50, 15, 121
UM28, 250, 45, 178

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any IF enthusiast can make a complete computer game in days instead of years, alone instead of on a huge team, with minimal programming knowledge. No, there's no money in it - but then again, if there were, the games would probably look a lot more alike, slick mass-market clones.

Well, there is a **little** money in text games. Though fans of text games now number barely in the thousands, if not hundreds, the form still finds markets. As steaming atolls, newly formed from the ocean depths, soon grow green with moss and lichens, so are some new gadgets instantly colonized by text adventurers, gaming's hardy pioneers. A few early mobile phone games were text, and now you can buy text games for your iPod. (You read the text on the display and make choices even while you listen to your songs.)

But some IF fans seek a higher destiny. They foster ongoing discussion of whether and how text games qualify as a genuine art form, a branch of literature. Stephen Granite, who runs the popular IF site The Brass Lantern, has argued IF fans must become "literate gamers":

"I think that IF can be more than entertainment. It is an art form, and at its best it does what all good art does: It sheds light on the human condition. But for IF to be art, IF must have its cadre of literate critics and creators. [...] One problem which plagued science fiction criticism for the longest time was that works of SF were compared only to other works of SF. Little attempt was made to connect SF to the larger realm of fiction. We can fall prey to the same mistakes when critiquing IF. It's not enough to say that a game was good 'for an adventure game.' We need to be willing to subject works of IF to the harsher standards of literature in general."

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MUD HEALS
THE CHIGGER
BITES!

Beware the
grue

Granade's writings show the devotion of not only a literate gamer, but a hardcore fan - the uncompromising commitment you'd encounter in a crafter of birchbark canoes, lace doilies, or Commodore code. "As you grow in experience, it becomes harder and harder to just 'enjoy a game,'" he writes. "Bad games seem ten times worse than they are; reasonably good games become disappointments. The reward, though, is a heightened enjoyment of IF when it works. You'll be playing a game, going through the motions, when you'll hit a scene which works. All the drudgery of playing IF, all the time you've spent suddenly becomes unimportant. For a brief moment a glow will surround you, and you'll marvel at the craftsmanship and artistry of the author."

This glow, however brief, shows little sign of dying.

A brilliant flash of green light seems less unusual when followed by the appearance of tentacled aliens, as is the case with the current flash of green light. The tentacles wrap roughly around you as you faint.

After an unknown amount of time ... Well, let's cut the crap. 7.3 hours later, you wake. Your head feels as if it's been run over by several locomotives, or at least one very large locomotive, and your clothes are now unrecognizable ...

- Steve Meretzky, *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*



Allen Varney is a freelance writer and game designer based in Austin, Texas. His published work includes six books, three board games, and nearly two dozen role-playing game supplements.

"I think that IF can be more than entertainment. It is an art form, and at its best it does what all good art does: It sheds light on the human condition."

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PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

by Chris Dahlen

Planescape: Torment was doomed to be a cult classic. Combine the unique and often disturbing setting, the cabal of antiheroes that follow you through the game, the fan favorite voice talent - like Dan "Homer Simpson" Castellaneta - and a story that some gamers called "intellectual" and others dismissed as "brainy" and "dull," and you've got a product that was sure to ward off casual players, yet convert others into lifelong devotees. *Planescape's* ideas on character development and storytelling are still bold and exciting - and today's mainstream hack-and-slash adventures could still take lessons from it.


The strangest, and one of the least successful RPGs from Black Isle (the company that brought you the *Icewind Dale* series), *Planescape: Torment*, which was released in 1999, took a risk by using the alternate *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign of *Planescape*, a not-really-fantasy, not-really-futuristic world that's mostly defined as unstable and bizarre. Strange and unruly dimensions intersect at the city of Sigil, where most of the game takes place, and your character, portentously called The Nameless One, wakes up in a mortuary with amnesia, a battered shell of a body that cannot die, and just one friend: a flying, talking skull. And the game gets stranger from there.



the Escapist

People remember *Planescape* most fondly for its characters. The NPCs that join your party - including a reformed succubus, a psychopath engulfed in flames and a girl with a Scottish accent and a rat's tail (who was voiced by pop star Sheena Easton and was, well, wicked hot) - are not only exotic, but their motives and back stories make

them feel three-dimensional. But the most complicated character is the one that you control. *Planescape* neatly balances a rich protagonist with an emergent narrative: Although you wake up as a blank slate and you can roleplay any way you choose, you're just the latest in a series of personalities that have controlled this beaten-up body.



**People remember
Planescape most
fondly for its
characters.**

The Nameless One has also been wild and savage, cold and calculating, and an obnoxious do-gooder - and you have to deal with the fallout. (It's true that LucasArts' *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* pulled a similar trick, but the reveal was far more straightforward.)

Most RPGs don't respond to your behavior in any serious way, except maybe to give you either a "good" or "evil" ending after you beat the game; while the *Dungeons and Dragons* rules use an alignment grid that extends from good to evil, and from lawful to chaotic, most dungeon crawls just tack it on as another attribute. But in *Planescape*, alignment informs every part of the world you're in. Instead of your usual fighters' or thieves' guilds, the factions include the Anarchists, the Godsmen, and a pack of people who roam like wild dogs. Everything, from your gnarled body to the changing city streets to all of the planes around you, shifts and disrupts based on nothing but principles; one city physically drops from its original plane to a more nightmarish one after its people become chaotic. The same conflicts that rack the Nameless One also torment the people you meet, the neighborhoods you walk through, and

the world around you all the way up to the endless "Blood War" between law and chaos that rages at the edge of the game's world. Ideas become real, and the conflicts in your head are reflected on gigantic battlefields; like your character, the entirety of the world is in turmoil.

You could go so far as to call *Planescape* a work of art; it's a truly interactive story that would only work in this medium, and with this setting. You spend more time exploring ideas than game maps, and you experience a character, making his actions and suffering your own. And crucially, *Planescape* never settles for simple answers or gives up its secrets. Fans are still arguing over the themes and the ending, like movie buffs arguing over, say, *Donnie Darko*. And even the players who "beat" it keep coming back to the question at the heart of the game: "What can change the nature of a man?"



Chris Dahlen is a freelance writer for Pitchforkmedia.com, the Boston Phoenix, Signal to Noise, Paste, and The Wire (New Hampshire). His website is Save The Robot (<http://savetherobot.com>).

NEWS BITS

Microsoft Meets Exent; First Step toward the Death of Retail?

Microsoft has partnered with Exent Technologies in order to digitally distribute Microsoft games. A dominant company such as Microsoft experimenting with digital distribution might be the first baby step toward the obsolescence of retail sales, where publishing overhead drives up the cost of games.

Infinium Reorganizes, Names Bacchus as CEO

X-Box pioneer Kevin Bacchus has joined Infinium labs, developers of the controversial Phantom gaming console, as the company's CEO. Bacchus has a long history with Microsoft, developing for the DirectX framework before working with third party developers on the Xbox console. Seeing Bacchus move to Infinium, after Microsoft worked with the company at this past Consumer Electronics Show, leads one to believe Bacchus

shares Infinium's vision of the digital distribution profit model.

Amazon.fr Prices Revolution at €299

The French contingent of Amazon.com has priced the Nintendo Revolution at €299, with a release date of June 15, 2006. The monetary conversion would put the price tag at \$365, or near the Xbox 360's deluxe model. However, one might speculate the price of the Revolution may in fact be \$299, both to compete with Microsoft's lower price point, and to match Nintendo's recent history of underselling competitors.

Casual Friday

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