Greetings Escapists,

While this certainly isn’t the first editor’s note I’ve ever written (it’s true!), this is my first since rejoining Team Humidor after a year-long leave of absence, and my very first since taking over as Editor-in-Chief of The Escapist. As a remarkable coincidence, this issue also marks the fourth anniversary of The Escapist’s birth and the culmination of one of the most exciting years of its existence.

This year, we accepted our second Webby Award for “Best Games-Related Website,” launched our first-ever webcomic, Stolen Pixels, brought to life another smash-hit video series, Unskippable, brought to life another smash-hit video series, Unskippable, and hosted the most successful community event ever, our Second Annual March Mayhem Developers Showdown, among many, many other notable accomplishments - all of which has made us extremely hopeful for the future and excited about the milestones yet to come.

A few weeks ago, however, we bid farewell to our founding Editor-in-Chief, Julianne Greer, the woman who hired me and with whom over the past few years I have shared many long days, medicinal glasses of scotch and celebratory cigars. I simply can’t imagine what this site would be like today if it wasn’t for her vision and guidance, and, on the eve of whatever the future may bring on this, our fourth birthday celebration, I can think of no finer words to say to her than “thank you.”

When I first applied to join The Escapist team over three years ago, I did so quite honestly because it was the only place I wanted to work. I left behind a successful and profitable career in theater because I just flat-out wanted to write about videogames, and the only place I could imagine doing so was at the very young web magazine called The Escapist.

During the two years I served as an editor for The Escapist, I had the privilege of working with hundreds of top-caliber writers, watching the site grow and evolve into a first-rate videogame community and media powerhouse and helping launch a slew of successful content lines, including the most popular videogame review series in the world, Zero Punctuation.

That evolution in and of itself launched me into the next phase of my career at The Escapist: creating and overseeing an entirely new department, Team Hollywood, where, for the past 13 months, the video editors and I have not only been creating our own video series, but in conjunction with our excellent partners, producing some of the finest, most entertaining web videos around.

And now we have come full circle. As I step back into the fray on the editorial side at The Escapist, it is with no small amount of irony I am able to present our issue covering “The Evolution of Gaming.” Three years can be an eternity, it seems. It can take one man from part-time videogame writer to Editor-in-Chief of the finest videogame website on the planet. It can take a website from a small, relatively unknown webzine to a first-tier media powerhouse. And in terms of gaming, it can see the evolution of the next-gen gaming platforms into the “now-gen.”

I’ve said for years that there has never been a better time to be a gamer, and every year it becomes more and more true. The vast array of gaming options available to casual and hardcore gamer alike are simply staggering. Gaming has become truly mainstream, to the point where it’s possible for two people to both consider themselves “gamers” without ever having played the same games. For someone who grew up during the very infancy of the medium, this turn of events is both startling and awe inspiring.

In this auspicious issue of The Escapist, I’m pleased to present articles from some of our favorite writers. Colin Rowsell weighs in on a medium that, when mixed with our own, could very well change the face of gaming: romance novels; Rob Zacny explores the transition from user manuals to in-game tutorials; Leigh Alexander returns to share the surprising secret fantasies of some of the game industry’s most well-known personalities; and I am pleased to make my own return to the pages of The Escapist with a wake-up call for the hardcore.

In all, we hope this anniversary issue will be one you’ll enjoy for years to come, and to help you do so - and to thank you all for sharing our journey for the past four years - we’re offering it as a one-time commemorative PDF download. Enjoy!
The average personal player story from Spelunky usually sounds roughly the same to any other one. There are a dozen or so procedural scenarios that constantly change combined with a tight platforming design to make the combination of choices possible manageable. The only emergent game I’ve ever seen actually produce a surprisingly deep personal story was Dwarf Fortress. The thing is...who the f*** understands how to play that game? I don’t mean any offense to the proud gamers who can, but I struggled with it for hours and hear the same from most people.

Linearity may be a shortcut, but the implications of having it or abandoning it go way beyond just giving the player options.

-L.B. Jeffries

In response to “A Delicate Balance” from The Escapist Forum: I must say ... that I don’t really know what to make of this article.

I’ve always considered ‘indie’ games to be games developed without reliance on a financial backer who distorts and controls the creative process in order to maximise profit. Companies that I think of when I think ‘indie’ are guys like Introversion (Darwinia, Defcon), and Bit-Blot (Aquaria), and ThatGameCompany (fl0w, Flower). There are also plenty of individuals out there who make indie games, of course, but none spring immediately to mind except the maker of Dwarf Fortress, Tarn Adams, and the maker of Battleships Forever, Sean ‘th15’ Chan.

This is, at least, what I associate with the label ‘indie’. But I’ve not really seen any pushes from bigger companies to try and mass-market the ‘indie’ genre. To try and make big studios make ‘indie’ style games. So... while I kinda enjoyed the read, I’m not really sure what the point Chris was trying to make was. Am I supposed to have a raised awareness of indie game companies? Feel wariness towards the (apparently looming) commercialisation of ‘indie’?

I suppose at the very least, I’ve reflected on what ‘indie’ means to me. So I guess the article’s done its’ job? *shrug*

-Fenixius

In response to “A Delicate Balance” from The Escapist Forum: As I said in the Editor’s Note section, the sheer lack of boundaries and the ability to be as creative as you want is what I love so much about the Indie scene.

I would think of it as a shame for the indie scene in gaming to disappear into obscurity, as it kind of has with music and (partially with) the film industry, as it is one of the few parts of the entertainment business that haven’t started to put emphasis on the business side of the balance rather than the entertainment side. Instead of just doing what everyone else is doing because what everyone else is doing sells and makes money, these people are trying to be original and don’t care about profit margins and sales.

However, I can see the idea behind what Carlos Bordeu is saying as well, about “Indie should still be indie, whether or not it is mainstream.” I can see where he’s coming from there, but that’s just not indie in my opinion. “Indie” is an abbreviation of “Independant”, and I just don’t think it’s standing up to its original meaning and objectives if it is part of a mainstream company. If an indie company and a mainstream company were to make the same game, the mainstream one...
wouldn’t be indie in my eyes. It would be “original”, but not “indie”.

All in all, I don’t think indie itself matters as a genre after reading that article. What matters, is what it stands for: Creativity, original ideas, clever designs that we wouldn’t expect as a player. These are all things that the major game developers could bring into their designs if they merely believed they would sell, but as it is they’re playing it better safe than sorry and as a result just stick to the same ideas that sell lots.

Any company could do what indie ones are trying to do, it just happens to be that the indie ones are the only ones doing it, thus indie gets thought of as a genre for any game that is original and creative.

-Zombie_Fish

In response to “The Death of a Manifesto” from The Escapist Forum: I hadn’t even heard of Manifesto until its closure was announced recently. Based on this article, I missed nothing more than an ideal.

Looking at the state of the games industry today, I agree with Costikyan to an extent; large scale titles all follow the same tried and true formula for success and any originality whatsoever is often considered an “innovation”. As with any innovation, there are risks that must be run in order to get the concepts and ideas to work. These risks can be succinctly defined as a chance that the game will be terrible (id est: sell poorly) due to a new, but bad feature.

AAA titles require so much monetary investment that risks are rare; in order for a game to get decent returns, developers resort to pushing out endless sequels because they know that this development strategy guarantees a return. Indie games are small scale and small budget, allowing more risks due to a lessened necessity of generating a return. It is because of this that indie games represent what the industry should be about: creating new and engaging gaming experiences, as opposed to the graphically intensive, but ultimately lacklustre titles that most large mainstream developers and publishers are producing.

I must confess that I have played few indie games and enjoyed even fewer. That said, the ones that I enjoyed were much more engaging than most mainstream games I play. As with any medium of art or entertainment, for every piece that is great and awe-inspiring, we must endure about a hundred that are average at best.

It is sad that a game, such as a sequel to The Shivah, cannot get any distribution due to the presence of complex themes like religion, despite not including any objectionable or derogatory material. It reflects very poorly on the industry as a whole; it demonstrates the fact that the medium cannot evolve or grow into something more than mindless entertainment.

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Revisit the crude progenitor of one of gaming’s global mega-franchises, and you’re left with feelings of nostalgia, fondness ... and bewilderment, too.

The elaborate production values, prolific marketing campaigns and blockbuster status of today’s Street Fighter and Final Fantasy bear little resemblance to the winking-pixel simplicity of their earliest forebears. It’s enough to make you wonder: How did we, as a generation of gamers, fall in love with characters who existed only in eight bits? How did we perceive such richness in an era where the idea of “narrative” seemed absurd? And how did we become immersed for life when game design was so simplistic, often brutally difficult and frequently counterintuitive?

Today’s generation of ’80s babies are fortunate to have shared a childhood with gaming — we grew up with them, and they with us. It’s a strange inversion, in a way: Now that we’re older, wiser and perhaps a bit more jaded, games have risen to the occasion, offering compelling characters, fleshed-out environments and engrossing stories to transport us to another world. But when gaming was at its most primitive, our imaginations were at their most active. And imagine we did; the characters of favorite Nintendo and Sega titles formed the substance of our playground games, the landscapes of our neighborhoods could be easily transmuted into vivid game worlds and we could be heroes alongside our friends. Had games been richer, more sophisticated and more complete in our youth, maybe there wouldn’t have been so much space for us to fill in with our wishes and our dreams; had characters and stories been more defined, there may not have been room for us to define them ourselves.

Childhood games were often canny precursors to real products; in fact, Jeremy LaMont and his friends were playing Super Smash Bros. before it even existed. “We would choose teams of videogame characters, from the most iconic hero to the lowliest Goomba, and pit them against one
How did we, as a generation of gamers, fall in love with characters who existed only in eight bits?

Belmont had whipped the fire flower away from Mario before he got it, touché. Luckily, Pidgey was there with a magic carpet to fly Mario to safety while the team regrouped.

Plenty of other players found room to expand on the slate of characters in games like *Mega Man,* including a young Anthony Neal, who made a hobby of inventing his own bosses. “I would draw them up, to the best my 7- or 8-year-old hands could muster, on sheets of notebook paper, along with their various powers and, of course, their weaknesses,” he writes. His derivations – “Sword Man” and “Gun Man,” among others – were not especially original, but one of the bosses he imagined is actually featured in *Mega Man 9: Tornado Man.* “Obviously I had no input or influence on *MM9*’s villain whatsoever,” says Neal. But the dichotomy between the result and his original vision stands out nonetheless: “Green is a horrible color for him, and he was a piece of cake to defeat,” he gripes.

While games provided plenty of fodder for boyish power fantasies, they could inspire devotion as well. RPGamer.com editorialist Sam “Nyx” Marchello shared a veritable *Lunar* obsession with a fellow female pal growing up, poring through the game’s strategy guide as if it were a piece of illustrated literature rather than a manual, and eventually extrapolating her own comics revolving around the adventures of their “boyfriends,” characters Kyle and Nash, with whom they’d elected to be in love. Nyx recalled their *Lunar* days with a fond pang at her friend’s wedding - where her playmate had at last decided to forego Kyle in favor of a real husband.

Of course, not all gamer memories are about idyllic creativity or love. Given that most of the games with which we grew up revolved around fighting, it’s unsurprising that so many kids recall having gotten hurt. Austin Walker, US/Canada editor at OneLastContinue, recalls having jump ropes confiscated from him because he and his friends were using them as whips in their games of *Castlevania’s* Belmonts-versus-Draculas. Likewise, Asael Barcena’s parents must have worried endlessly over their son’s *Mortal Kombat* fandom – he remembers slinging his dog’s leash at his brother while shouting “Get over here!” Scorpion-style, whenever he felt the urge.

It only takes one lapse in judgment for pretend violence to become all too real, as Dominic Sileo found out. He and his friends used to envisage themselves as *Street Fighter* heroes whenever they played in the public pool, turning acrobatic flips underwater or splashing to simulate Blanka’s electricity. “However, one day my cousin decided he wanted to Spinning Pile-Drive me,” Sileo recalls. “I foolishly obliged. That was not the smartest of decisions. Being upside down, spinning and having your head smacked into the ground of a concrete floor (even in a pool) is never really the greatest of ideas. We got
kicked out of the pool for the rest of the day on that one.”

This pretend-combat continues to influence many gamers even into adulthood. Growing up play-fighting *Mortal Kombat* on the playground’s balance beam (so that losers could “fall into The Pit,” of course), Michael Rousseau later pursued the discipline of martial arts – where his videogame memories are an occasional liability. “I thought for the longest time that the best way to finish a fight is with an uppercut,” he reflects. “Even with my martial arts training, I still find myself wanting to forgo simple, safe and proven self-defense techniques in lieu of a flashy uppercut. It’s a tough habit to break.”

It didn’t take a fighting game to bring out the morbid side in some kids – Michael Grove remembers being inspired by *Oregon Trail*. “As the precocious little second grader I was, I’d assemble a party of students and drive them across the country on a Muppet Babies-grade ‘journey of the imagination’ using a piece of playground equipment as a wagon,” he says. “If memory serves, I’d kill off one or two kids every time. For the sake of emotional impact.”

It’s tough to break the abstraction and simplicity that made it so delightful to expand, to explore and to flesh things out in our young minds, we’ve still got games that leave room for imagination. Some of our most successful, popular and beloved titles immerse players using what’s unsaid rather than what’s apparent – think *Portal* or *Shadow of the Colossus*, constantly begging the player to imagine what happened in their worlds, the silent whys and whens.

There’s an entirely new generation of players being drawn into a medium that’s become much more accessible and diverse. The relationship between videogames and childhood creative play will be different for our children than it was for us, but it will certainly remain. As we continue to enjoy videogames as adults, our experiences with the evolving medium will always be inextricably connected to the creative play of our formative years. New games, whether they’re direct successors to our old best friends or simply influenced by them, will continue to amaze us with their advances – and they’ll also remind us how much we’ve grown up.

**ALTHOUGH THEY’RE ALL GROWN UP, GAMES STILL HAVE THE POWER TO SET US DREAMING.**

Leigh Alexander is News Director at Gamasutra, author of the Sexy Videogameland weblog, and writes about games and gamers wherever they’ll let her.
radically it’s shocking to those of us, the hardcore gamers, who at one point in time believed games would forever be considered our secret passion, unknown and unknowable to anyone not in the club.

And yet, in the early days of The Escapist, that was our mission: to try to explain the secrets of The Secret. In fact, my very first article for The Escapist, written a few months before I became an editor, was an attempt to explain the disorientation of having grown up in a time when nuclear annihilation at the hands of the Russians seemed a near-certainty, and that only by exploring videogame simulations of the end of the world was I able to find some peace. It was a fairly rambling piece, and I’m not sure how well it actually accomplished The Mission, but I had to try.

I write this article - my first for The Escapist in over a year – with a troubled mind. Much has changed in the year since I last wrote about videogames, still more has changed in the more than five years since I first wrote about videogames and an infinite amount of change has swept the gaming landscape since I first picked up a controller almost 30 years ago. The games themselves – and the experience of playing them - have changed so
In those days it was fairly common for an article in *The Escapist* to drag on for more than 3,000 words, and the website layout you enjoy today wasn’t even a glint in anyone’s eye. The new site bears little resemblance to the original, and the weekly magazine, while still very much alive, is surrounded by content the likes of which we couldn’t have imagined in 2005. Now, four years after the founding of *The Escapist* and slightly more than three years after I was hired, I’m not just any editor, I’m the Editor-in-Chief, and our readership has grown by more than 600 percent.

Change, it seems, is everywhere. Yet it seems one thing hasn’t changed at all, and it’s perhaps the one thing that really should: After 30 years of videogame evolution, hardcore gamers are still a bunch of reclusive dicks.

Videogames have always been more than just another medium to the hardcore crowd. It’s always been a core tenet of the hardcore gamer creed that videogames are our medium. At the risk of sounding trite, for those of us who grew up with more brains than brawn, videogames were an escape. Perhaps the ultimate escape.

Sure, you could lose yourself in a book or occupy your mind with the mindless entertainment of cinema, but videogames have always been about more than either while combining the best effects of both. Videogames since day one have been immersive. And we, who discovered them first, have always believed that immersion was a sacred rite that we alone could experience.

This was partly a result of the difficulty of explaining the pastime to others. Try putting into words the concept of immersion for someone who has never experienced it. There really is no way short of placing the controller in their hand. Videogames allow you to flex the muscles of your imagination while tickling the little spot just to the side of your fantasies and giving your cortex a little something to chew on. The best of them are stories wrapped in puzzles with a side of hero porn. Explain that to your mom.

Two decades ago, the conversation never even took place. The idea of games being anything more than a juvenile waste of time was so completely foreign to ... well, just about everyone, that for the longest time trying to justify our passion seemed painful and destined for inevitable failure. Nowadays, grandmothers play Nintendo games, the Wii makes semi-regular appearances on *The Today Show* and soccer moms have *Bejeweled* on their iPhones. The passion for gaming is now multifaceted, and we no longer have to try to explain.

There are still full-bore, immersive game experiences the likes of which you and I take to in our darkest hours, when all we need is a darkened room and a digital friend who makes us feel strong. But videogames have recently become much, much more than that. They’re everywhere, and everyone is playing them.

This should be good news. There should be dancing in the streets on this, our Day of Jubilee. Our time has come, has it not? We had a dream, at one point in time, and now, it seems, that dream has become real. So why are most gamers so damned annoyed by this?

The changes to the industry – and the games - aren’t that unusual or unexpected. Change happens. Change is inevitable. And in most cases, change is good. In this case, it’s a change we’ve been waiting for, arguing for, begging would come to pass. People finally understand why videogames are fun and worthwhile. Isn’t that what we’ve always wanted? Isn’t that finally enough...
to get the monkey of shame and cynicism off our backs?

So what if a few parasitic sluts are making a living out of your favorite hobby? It’s not as if the rest of our societies were not already infested through and through by loathsome leeches: If porn stars can be elected to parliament (see Italy) why shouldn’t a crack whore be able to make money blowing jour no-lol-lists and spewing nonsense about vidyageams? You want democracy? - there you have it: Suck it up. That’s democracy in action, baby - “Democracy” from Greek δήμος “the people” + -κρατία “power, rule” - the rule of the people, the mass, the mob, the rabble - and that’s what the rabble wants: porn stars in parliament and blond crack whores everywhere else. ... So yes, “cultural legitimacy” for your little hobby does not come when you think it does, it comes far sooner - it comes when vacuous sluts can make a living out of babbling incoherently about it. So if “cultural legitimacy” is what you wanted you should be celebrating - because you’ve already got it.

Judging from the above rant, the title of which should be unfit for printing in any form, it would seem not. The attitude of being “in the club” has so permeated the hardcore audience that, even now, in the dawn of gaming’s greatest era, the time in which the joy to be had playing videogames is no longer a dirty secret - no longer a secret at all, in fact - some are finding it hard to celebrate. Or perhaps it’s something deeper, more insidious.

After all, wasn’t this the plan? Haven’t we all along espoused the kind of near-universal acceptance of videogaming that we’re now seeing right before our very eyes? Haven’t we always dreamed of the day when we could share the experience with, well, everyone? We may have, but, as they say, no plan survives first contact with the enemy. And in this case, it would seem the enemy is us.

The Escapist has spent a good, solid four years delving as deeply into the finer points of the videogame industry as our talents and resources would allow. The result, I’m proud to say, has been the creation of a back catalogue of magazine-quality feature articles addressing the creation of games and their impact on society at large in a way no one has before, all wrapped up in a high-art layout and served with a side of near-masochistic attention to detail. But we’ve all known the magazine has more potential than to be a breeding ground for pseudo-intellectual wankery about “the meaning of games.”

Two years ago, we began to address that, scaling back the pretense and opening our eyes to what you, the readers, have shown us is the evolving world of videogaming; a world in which it’s OK to be hardcore, it’s OK to spend hours on end in the dark playing games; a world in which no one really gives a shit anymore that there are people who like fake people more than actual people. My friends, this has been the trippiest part of the long, strange ride: the realization that while we’ve been preaching to the choir, the heretics have been lining up for baptism.

What we realized in the past two years or so was that, while we of the Old Guard were pacing around in the echo chamber of our own circular arguments, debating with ourselves over how to convince the populace at large that games are important, dammit, the populace at
large was figuring it out for themselves – and beating us to the punch.

When we finally clambered out from our cave, what we discovered was something wonderful, awe-inspiring and totally unexpected: Videogames – and videogamers – had become normal. And this is the part that’s truly terrifying to the hardcore; the realization that the videogames, our secret, shared hobby, have moved on without us. That the mainstream doesn’t need us to tell them how important videogames are, because they’re too busy finding that out for themselves.

Don’t believe me? Watch a beautiful, blonde television personality review Wii Fit on none other than NBC’s Today Show and draw your own conclusions.

There are two possible courses of action one can take in this situation. One can either put on blinders, walk around with one’s hands clamped over one’s ears shouting “LALALALA!” and refusing to acknowledge the world has become a more complicated place. Or, more constructively, one can embrace the change and move forward with the understanding that, although this Brave New World of mainstream gaming may not have been entirely of our own making, it is a world in which we can nevertheless find a place for ourselves as leaders, mentors and guides. All we have to do is deign to share.

And so, dear readers, that is what we at The Escapist have decided to do – something we’ve been doing all along, in fact. The Escapist was founded on the principle that we should share our passion; that we should strive to define the era of videogaming and impart our love for the medium to those who may not yet understand. We have done so with aplomb. Now, we’ve opened our hearts to that ever-expanding community of you who do understand, and instead of preaching, instead of leading with the hammer, we’re guiding you with a gentle hand to where you may not yet have known to go – and allowing you to point us to where you want to be led.

We have, in effect, performed the most excruciatingly difficult trick in the media business: We’ve swallowed our pride. We may be the editors of one of the world’s best videogame websites, but without you, the community, the readers, the gamers, we’re nothing at all.

Russ Pitts is Editor-in-Chief of The Escapist.
We need more romance novelists making games.

I recently picked up *To Tempt a Scotsman* by Victoria Dahl, an up-and-coming U.S. romance writer. It has kilts. It has duels. It has a lot of women seducing men and men grabbing women. It has a Happily Ever After ending, apparently a key component of the romance formula. The whole thing is immensely silly, which shouldn’t obscure the fact that a) Ms. Dahl is a superb writer, and b) Romance novels account for over 50 percent of paperback fiction sales in North America.

You read that right: over 50 percent. Romance quietly outsells nearly everything else in the Western book biz. People laugh at romance novels and the people who read them – not unlike the sneers many still direct at videogames and gamers. But along with the raw sales, consider the business model: Leading publisher Harlequin releases more than 120 titles per month, going for addictive quantity as a selling point. Many romance readers buy several books a week. Authors have rabid followings and hook fans with episodic series. Romance publishers are also leading the charge into e-books, adapting faster and more successfully than mainstream companies.

So you have high output with frequent, addictive variations on the same theme. You have episodic content. You have buyer lock-in. You have nimble adaptation to changing technology. Sound like the wet-dream fantasies of any industry we know? And to sweeten the deal, most romance readers are women. If videogame publishers want to extend their reach beyond the standard 18- to 34-year-old male demographic, they might want to form development teams with fewer gamers and more romance novelists.
Actually, they (sort of) already have—in Japan. Developers there have long injected strong romance elements into RPGs (Grandia), simulations (Harvest Moon), anime-related games and titles like those of the Angelique series. Many of these go well beyond the norms of “relationship stuff” in most Western games, and as with Japanese manga, their willingness to incorporate a diversity of genres attracts a wider audience to the medium.

The Japanese refusal to say that anything can’t be in a videogame should be an example to Western developers. Mixing up the creative gene pool only helps gaming’s evolution: Trying Weird Shit™ can be a great antidote to the waves of derivative titles that choke store shelves every sales season. The problem is that evolution’s a cast-iron bitch to deal with in terms of risk management. Bringing in outside catalysts for change is great for an industry too used to navel-gazing, but the price for innovation can be high. New steps forward are often gained through expense and failure.

Take the Nintendo DS. With its emphasis on new types of gameplay and control mechanisms that appeal to a broader audience than the usual hardcore gamer demographic, it’s a poster child for fruitful experimentation. The DS has everything from cooking, surgery, detective stories, library management and sailing to breath-based interaction and, yes, romance. People who wouldn’t otherwise touch videogames love their DSs. But the DS’s diverse game library was born from an awful lot of trying and failing. I remember meeting with a Nintendo sales rep a few years ago to play some first-generation DS titles. They were unusual. They were interesting. Nine out of ten were god-awful. It’s easy to forget that, like the Wii, the DS was a huge, unwieldy risk at a time when the evolution of gaming meant little more than better sports games and shooters.

The DS is proof that it’s still possible to find the next evolutionary leap in games—something totally unexpected, from far left field, that will bring whole new audiences to gaming and make vast amounts of money.

So who will be the next to step up?

Imagine, for instance, a serious effort to bring romance novels into Western videogames on a AAA scale. It wouldn’t be easy: Romance novels have highly-developed creative formulae that celebrate passion and commitment. Spreadsheet-based monster slaying and laser rifles wouldn’t exactly cut it. Nor would cobbling together a team of traditional developers and romance authors—the many failures of cross-media gaming mash-ups show that throwing creative processes together and demanding instant results is foolish. So, dropping Victoria Dahl into a development team would likely result in a very bad videogame. The next attempt wouldn’t be much better. But over time, if the conditions were right, something new would emerge that could never have been created by either side alone. Gaming would take a step forward, reach a vast new audience of avid romance fans and make money hand over fist.

The Western games industry already has successful studios accustomed to bringing in outside influences. It’s no coincidence that Bethesda Softworks was founded by someone with a background that combined virtual reality work and broadcast news production. Or that BioShock, one of the most thematically unique AAA titles in recent memory, was helmed by a former screenwriter and playwright who didn’t
play games growing up. Even designers steeped in the traditions of the industry can successfully forge into new territory, as evidenced by Peter Molyneux’s *Fable 2*, where marriage is a key component of the gameplay. Bioware has also been extremely successful in taking Japanese-style relationship elements into their own RPGs. But such experiments are still the exception. Far more typical are those studios too dominated by the industry norm: young men with comp. sci or design degrees, raised on similar games and other media, who create solid but repetitive titles with mild variations on the Same Old Thing. These creative monocultures produce faster results and quicker profits, but in the long haul, they could be fatal.

So, how can the industry avoid this kind of creative stagnation? I believe part of the answer lies in focusing on creative diversity in its own right. We need the equivalent of open-skies tech research funding to help foster new creative cultures. Studios should try to attract waves of people from backgrounds other than videogame development, the weirder the better. Romance novelists would only be the start: I’m talking educators, aerospace engineers, urban designers, public policy experts, you name it. Throw in some Broadway producers,Take a gamble on a forestry ranger, Go right off the grid to the still-untapped implementation skills and new creative possibilities would start to reinforce each other rather than clash. Then and only then would the real money start flowing.

This is essentially the same process that fueled the DS’s expansion and keeps Bioware’s RPGs so interesting, just on a grander scale. The problem, of course, is that patience and tolerance for failure are two of the toughest things for the industry to stomach right now. It’s hard to imagine a publisher releasing three boundary-pushing AAA games to an unenthusiastic public and allowing the developer to make a fourth. Smaller developers don’t have the resources for a long-term push towards creative diversity, and the major outfits famous for their factory approach likely wouldn’t dare to embrace a project that would take years to pay dividends. Why go weird when there’s plenty of money still to be made inside the box?

Because real evolution is all about taking weird steps into the unknown. Especially in tough times, staying narrowly focused on what already works is a soft form of suicide. “Safe” industries from newspapers to scientific publishing to major-label music are feeling the effects of this as we speak – why would videogame publishers want to join them? There are thousands of creative mother lodes out there waiting to be mined. Those 100 million DS units with their strange-ass game library are the result of a relatively short leap of faith on Nintendo’s part; think of the rewards that lie further afield if only someone will take on the risk of finding them.

I’ve got my kilt and Scottish accent all ready - I await the first romance novelist delivery with glee. A deeper, more diverse creative gene pool for videogames would be a fantastic thing to see. I, for one, am ready to Try Weird Shit™.

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gamers the mechanics of their games, the less patience gamers have for instruction. This race between diminishing attention spans and less intrusive training has been a major force in gaming’s ongoing evolution, influencing which genres have flourished and which have foundered.

In gaming’s infancy, every game came with a printed manual regardless of whether or not it helped players learn to play. The *Super Mario Bros.* manual contained a comprehensive section about enemies, explaining in detail the role of the Goomba in Bowser’s army, as opposed to that of the Koopa Troopa or Paratroopa. It was less a manual than a field guide to the Mushroom Kingdom – after all, it doesn’t take an exhaustive knowledge of Koopa taxonomy to know to jump on their shells.

At the other end of the spectrum were games like *Falcon 3.0*, which came with a gruesome flight manual that dwarfed the average college textbook. Learning to play a sim of that caliber involved serious study, and the manual was designed for someone willing to pour hundreds of hours into the hobby.

When I was a tutor in college, my biggest challenge was dealing with students who thought my job was to make learning effortless and fun. They were often incensed that I could only help them if they were already willing to work hard. Over and over they’d ask in a tone reserved for bad wait-staff at a restaurant, “Hey, isn’t it your job to make sure I learn this?” Fortunately, a poor grade on a quiz or assignment was usually enough to remind them that learning was ultimately their responsibility, not mine.

Game designers, on the other hand, have no such luxury: They must constantly strive to make the learning process in games as fun and painless to players as possible. And paradoxically, the better they have gotten at teaching
Although they are polar opposites in terms of complexity, *Mario Bros.* and *Falcon 3.0* reveal similar assumptions about gamers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Their manuals were meant for an audience who demanded thorough documentation, whether the game was a 2-D platformer or a model of one the most advanced aircraft in the world.

As time went on, it became clear most gamers neither needed nor wanted that level of detail. Publishers learned they could easily cut costs by reducing or eliminating documentation; in fact, by confining detailed gameplay information to official strategy guides, they could increase revenue. More significantly, however, developers began to understand that manuals were rarely the best teachers. Most control schemes and gameplay concepts are easier to grasp once they have been shown to players rather than simply told.

In-game tutorials provided players exactly this kind of hands-on instruction. They allowed players to learn new game mechanics in a failure-free environment that prepared them for the tasks ahead. And while they weren’t always the most memorable part of their respective games, they were perhaps the most enduring. Most long-time PC gamers remember the tram ride into Black Mesa at the start of *Half-Life*, but my first experience with the game was playing through the training level where the game’s relatively new mouse-and-keyboard controls finally clicked for me.

But while tutorials have helped developers quickly and efficiently teach players the basics of their games, they have also decreased gamers’ tolerance for in-depth instruction. These days, if a game has something to teach players before they can dive in, it had best be brief. A few easy missions at the start of a game or a 10-minute tutorial level might be palatable, but a series of training missions or a lengthy “Getting Started” section in a manual is pushing its luck. The unfortunate result is that it has become risky for games to contain complex controls or mechanics that can’t be explained in a few minutes.

Starting in the last few years, tutorial sequences have been supplanted by tutorial games, where players derive much of the fun from the gradual introduction and application of game mechanics. Perhaps the best example of this trend is Valve Software’s *Portal*, which spends approximately half the game introducing players to the mechanics and strategies they must employ during the game’s post-Victory Incandescence finale. The “new mechanic -> application -> reward” formula that *Portal* uses is so immensely satisfying that players feel like they are picking apart brain teasers when they are actually following a rather thick trail of bread crumbs left by the designers.

PopCap has taken a similar approach with *Peggle* and *Plants vs. Zombies*. Each game gives players a steady drip-feed of new tools and challenges. The main game in a PopCap production - more like the first hit, really - is an extended tutorial that prepares players for other, more difficult game types. In *Peggle*, the adventure ends shortly after players unlock all the game’s available characters; from there, they have the option to tackle *Peggle*’s various challenge modes. Likewise, *Plants vs. Zombies* guides players through a very easy campaign that introduces new plants, zombies and maps at a slow, steady rate. Only after players complete the campaign do new, more difficult modes become available.

Even Creative Assembly borrowed a page from this book in *Empire: Total War*, where the game’s “Road to Independence” campaign functions as its tutorial. It starts players with the basics of unit control, then, over the course of several hours, works them up to managing a large nation and major armies. Despite its utilitarian
purpose, the “Road to Independence” campaign was well received by players and critics alike, and many Total War veterans spent their first days of Empire in its tutorial mode.

From these examples, it’s reasonable to conclude that most gamers find learning far more entertaining than executing. Games that focus on execution risk frustrating players, because understanding a game mechanic isn’t always enough. Players must be skilled at applying it, and skill takes time and patience. By contrast, learning is far easier, and the joy of discovery and the satisfaction of finally “getting it” are hard to resist.

This problem can either make for a dead-end or a way forward to a more interesting and diverse marketplace. While hardcore gamers of every stripe are quick to decry the stupefaction of videogames in the name of mass-market appeal, the truth is most niche genres are marginal because they have done an abysmal job of finding interesting ways to teach new players.

Even 15 years ago, Greg Costikyan singled out wargames as a quintessential example of bad tutorial design. In his article “I Have No Words and I Must Design,” he writes:

“I’ve had more than one conversation with a computer game designer in which he tells me about all the fascinating things his game simulates — while I sit there saying, “Really? What do you know. I didn’t realize that.” Say you’ve got a computer wargame in which weather affects movement and defense. If you don’t tell the player that weather has an effect, what good is it? It won’t affect the player’s behavior: it won’t affect his decisions.

Unfortunately, this approach has become a fixture of the niche-genre landscape, which helps explain why such games have limited appeal. Players need to understand the rules of a game if they are to enjoy themselves. The alternative is a “black box” gaming experience, where players press buttons and stuff happens, but only the program and its designers actually understand the relationship between inputs and outputs. This is what Sid Meier warned against when he said the computer should never have more fun than the player. Elegant and sophisticated game systems are worthless unless people can appreciate them.

Simulations and sports games are similarly opaque. If you already understand both automotive engineering and professional racing, SimBin’s GTR Evolution might make sense, but for most people it will be incomprehensible and frustrating. In GTR Evolution, players spend numberless hours adjusting and testing settings on their cars, but neither the game nor its manual attempts to explain how those settings affect the vehicles’ handling.

Even games we consider closer to the mainstream, like EA Sports titles, fall into the trap of designing for an audience that already knows how to play while leaving other users out. How many people, even among football fans, are able to utilize even half of the options that the Madden series puts at their disposal?

We’re at a point where games can not only make learning fun, but they can disguise it so effectively that the game itself becomes an extended lesson. If more developers learn to break down complex mechanics into series of simple tasks while giving players a sense of progression, they could bring new audiences to niche genres without feeling compelled to dumb them down. After all, there’s nothing wrong with developers teaching to the test when they’re the ones who get the grade.

The Truth is Most Niche Genres Are Marginal Because They Have Done An Abysmal Job Of Finding Interesting Ways To Teach New Players.

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It’s no secret the popularity of The Escapist exploded with the arrival of a certain Englishman with a sweet hat. While we could certainly make the case that without the excellent foundation of quality we’d built with the rest of the content on The Escapist or our innovative web design features, the site as a whole would not have evolved into the massively popular juggernaut that it is today, no one can deny the popularity of Zero Punctuation in and of itself. And for that, we have Ben “Yahtzee” Croshaw to thank.

Yahtzee is a unique talent. I’ve been his editor at The Escapist for almost two years, during which I’ve gotten to know him fairly well, considering we live 14 time zones apart. He’s one of those rare individuals who can shine at pretty much whatever he puts his mind to doing, and these days he’s doing a lot. Aside from Zero Punctuation, Yahtzee is shooting television pilots, working on writing projects, developing videogames and, of course, enjoying the lifestyle of an internet celebrity playboy. Or something. But he’s still best known for the snarky, insightful videogame review series that introduced him to the world and helped usher The Escapist into a whole new era of internet media dominance.

To help make The Escapist’s fourth birthday even more special, I asked Yahtzee to answer a few questions that would appear only in the commemorative PDF version of this week’s issue. In the interview, Yahtzee talks about what it’s like working with The Escapist, how fame has changed his life, why gamers like dick jokes and what happened to that girl he broke up with, prompting him to start making videos on YouTube.

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Russ Pitts: The Escapist is four years old this week. Thoughts on that?

Yahtzee: Four, eh? Well, that certainly is a number. Falling between three and five, if I’m not mistaken. Also, if you add it to another four, you get eight, which is also a number.
RP: Zero Punctuation will air its 100th episode on August 5th. Did you ever suspect there was such an insatiable appetite for intelligent, multi-layered videogame commentary peppered with occasional dick jokes?

YZ: I knew that there were plenty of game reviews in the world, and I’d read enough British newspapers to know that the media is never unbiased and trustworthy. And I knew that there were things like Penny Arcade where people could go for more honest, personal commentary on gaming. I assumed that niche was filled. I could never have anticipated everything that’s grown up around ZP by now. As for the dick jokes, I guess people can just never get enough. Like Pringles.

RP: You’ve stated in previous interviews that you were motivated to create the videos that became Zero Punctuation out of the boredom following a breakup. Can you tell us what happened to the girl you broke up with? Is she pulling her hair out these days, ruing having ditched the "Man Who Would be Yahtzee"?

YZ: I’d been with her for quite a few years in a state of relationship stagnation where neither party was particularly interested in the other anymore, but routine was too deeply established to break off. We were both just kind of ... there, I guess. I eventually realized I had to get out or I’d go insane. We haven’t spoken in a while. She’s sent a couple of texts but I’ve got no idea what to say. “Hey, life’s much better since I left you, thanks a bunch?”

Anyway, I’m single now and perfectly happy. I don’t seem to have any desire to enter another relationship, and that feels quite liberating. You’re never alone when you’re totally self-absorbed.

RP: From day one, you’ve enjoyed a fairly positive relationship with the developers’ whose games you eviscerate on ZP. Why do you think that is? Are they just gluttons for punishment?

YZ: I think what it is is that I’ve got no beef with any individual developers (mostly), but I hate the process so many mainstream games go through that leaves them smothered and homogenized. And that’s something I think a lot of developers agree with. More than once I’ve spoken to the developers of a game I’ve ZPed and they’ve said “What you said was exactly what we said to our publishers, but they wouldn’t give us any more time ...” So my relationship with developers is cordial. As for my relationship with publishers, probably best not to look into that.

RP: How are your own game development efforts going these days?

YZ: ZP and other projects are taking up a lot of my time, so I haven’t been as devoted to it as I have been in the past. I do have a couple of freeware games in the works that I work on in a hobby capacity, but it’s even odds whether they get finished. That’s always how I’ve worked – keep a lot of projects on the go and let yourself realize over time which ones you’re actually interested in seeing through. It’s like hedging your bets.

I’d love to develop games professionally. Critics and professionals have traditionally had a close relationship. That’s a long-term thing, though, and right now some interesting avenues are opening up that are well worth exploring for a while. The good thing about being a writer is that virtually every creative medium needs one at some point, so you’re free to spread your wings a bit.

RP: Tell us a bit about your television work. I understand your fame has transcended the internet in Australia.

YZ: Hee hee. Not just yet. The Game Damage pilot that was released online last year is bearing fruit, and we’re working on developing something for a TV network here with further advancement into online stuff pending. And trust me: We’re ten million billion times less rough around the edges than we were when we made the first pilot. We’ve been writing and rehearsing constantly since then, and the difference is thick enough to beat whales to death.
It’s been almost two years since you started making Zero Punctuation videos and signed on with The Escapist. Since this is The Escapist’s birthday and all, I imagine fans of the site would like to know a little more about how your relationship with the website works. What can you say about that?

I really think I lucked out with The Escapist. When I first started doing ZP on YouTube, I was a simple young English boy who was completely bewildered by the mere thought of actually being paid money for this folderol. I was naïve and could very easily have been exploited by some evil corporate jerks, but The Escapist snapped me up first. And they’ve always treated me well. I get extremely fair cuts of traffic and merchandising income, and I feel I’ve gained actual friends rather than mere publishers.

And of course the editorial freedom is very nice. A story I like to tell is when I first started with The Escapist and I asked [you] if [you] wanted me to cut down on the swearing and risqué gags. [You] replied with just one word: “No.” So ever since then I’ve diligently censored myself as little as possible, no matter how many whiny bitches bleed out their cunts.

You've made some snide comments about videogame fans in general and your own fans in particular. How do you really feel about the fans, and why?

I seem to have gathered a reputation for being a jerk in real life, because frankly fans make me uncomfortable. Complete strangers come up and talk to me like they've known me their whole lives, and for that reason I can seem a bit standoffish. Some of them seem so awestruck. They're just knob gags, guys. You imagine things that would be funny if a knob was put in them, and then you write it down. It's not like I'm revolutionizing global culture.

No, the whole “fan” thing confuses me. I like things. Maybe you like the same things as me. That's cool. But I like a lot of things and it's almost certain I'll find other things some day that are even better than the things I currently like, so getting attached is just weird. I've seen guys who get ZP tattoos. It would be instructive to wait and see how they feel about that 20 years down the line.

One thing most audience members don’t fully appreciate is exactly how difficult it is to stay motivated to keep playing a new game every week. How do you stay positive about that part of the job?

Yes, that’s always the trouble when something you love becomes your job. That’s exactly what it becomes: a job. Sometimes I’ll put off starting a new game for days, procrastinating with internet videos and work. That’s one thing I miss about my poverty days: constantly replaying a small handful of titles and learning their every slightest nuance inside out.

Every now and again, though, I find I have enough time to replay something, and often I’ll find myself with a weird urge to play an old review game I might even have completely trashed. Alone in the Dark, for example. It was so broken it could barely limp, but there was so much potential there it makes me want to cry. It’s nice to take time out to revise your internal game database now and then.

If you could start over with ZP, what would you do differently?

Like a slightly brighter shade of yellow? I dunno. It’s a difficult question. So far nothing but good has come out of ZP - I’m not sure I’d want to meddle with causality. I guess my biggest regret so far is picking up the Wii version of The Force Unleashed rather than the PS3 one. Christ that was stupid. But hey, there's still time.
Travis, thanks so much for sharing your time with us today.

First off, who are some of your influences as a writer?

Wasn't Münchhausen a madman liar and a fraud?

In the past you've claimed that you're the victim of sexual discrimination. Care to explain?

If I was a woman I would have been able to fall back on prostitution to pay my student loans.

Do you have any advice for newer publications like The Escapist magazine?

Okay, now we can't resist asking about your pants.

WELL, WHEN I GRADUATED FROM COLLEGE I REALIZED MY DUAL MAJOR IN COMMUNICATIONS AND ALCOHOLISM COULDN'T GET ME A DECENT JOB.

But because I'm a man, I had to resort to game reviews.

Yeah, this was a terrible day to wear this shirt.

It's really degrading.

Actually, we're an online publication.

Shamus Young is a programmer and writer by trade, videogame nitpicker by inclination. If you have the patience for more of his ramblings, they can be found at ShamusYoung.com.
The Escapist was founded to encourage a new way of writing about videogames, which we could not have done without the support of the community of writers that have long been our biggest fan base. Throughout the years, the voices of our contributors have defined the very soul of the magazine, and the magazine has been the foundation upon which all else was built. On this, our fourth birthday, we would like to thank the following contributors, without whom, none of our successes would have been possible. — Ed.

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