



# HAYWIRE MAGAZINE

ISSUE 1 • JOURNALISM

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Doing it once is luck, twice skill. Our inaugural issue was primarily an experiment, a test for our team of relative strangers to see if we could create something of this scope. We did, and I think it turned out pretty amazing. With this first 'real' issue we're addressing a different problem: We now know we can do it, but what is it that we want to do?

Though Haywire may be an entirely negligible force, we are technically a videogame magazine and our contributors, by the same stretch of creative license, journalists. We have stumbled into the field, now I invited our team to pause and consider what it means. What kind of magazine are we going to be? What style do we strive for, what ideals do we aspire to? What conventions do we need to adhere to, which should we reject? Given the chance, as we now have, what would we change?

It may seem a little early to partake in such navel gazing, but I think it's important to set a course, not just for our own sake, but also to let you know who we are, what we do, how we do it, why we do it the way we do it and why we might be the right magazine for you. For those of you with no interest in theoretical musings, we have plenty of other content too.

Given the things said in this issue, I think it's important to remind you that we love games journalism. It's the quality work of the many talented writers in this field that inspires our amateur efforts, but sometimes you learn more by examining bad examples: the articles we hate, the perspectives we disagree with, the methods we despise. The industry is far from perfect, and we'd like to do a little bit to improve it.

We love games journalism, but we also love games. We're writing about the most exciting and diverse medium of all, a burgeoning aspect of contemporary art and culture. They deserve our passion, our dedication, our absolute best. Bland, poorly informed or lazy writing will never do.

Cheers,  
Johannes Köller  
Editor-in-Chief

**HW**





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# An End, Once and for All

The ending of *Mass Effect 3* saw journalists fighting their own community. Andrew Huntly on where the debate went wrong.

On March 13th, a week after the release of *Mass Effect 3*, IGN's Playstation editor Colin Moriarty posted an opinion video about the game's controversial ending. But instead of discussing the acclaimed sci-fi series' finale, it focused on the community reaction, attacking those who were left disappointed or hurt by *Mass Effect's* closing chapters. Delivering pointed barbs, Moriarty spoke of "entitled" fans, "stupid online petitions" and the arrogance of those who wanted to rewrite BioWare's fiction. With 11,832 dislikes compared to 1,646 likes on

YouTube (as of writing), that video has become something of a metaphor, the pure and absolute representation of the Us vs. Them mentality formed around a piece of disappointing fiction. Those with lecterns and megaphones against the bellow of the crowd. One voice shouted at the internet and eleven thousand shouted back.

The line between journalists and regular gamers has always been thick and noticeable. For years, the urban legends of back alley deals in which outlets sell scores for cash - or, more realistically, advertising space - has been a constant

and occasionally funny thorn in gamers' sides. An uncomfortable thorn that, regardless of validity, demonstrates a significant lack of trust within the food chain. The friction between those who play games for fun and those who play games for a living is something that has always existed, particularly in big and secretive outlets like *IGN*. The ambivalent reactions to the final moments of *Mass Effect 3* accelerated the trituration between the paid and the paying, resulting in an explosion of divisive opinions and distrust.

*Penny Arcade* quickly backed up Moriarty's opinion. In a fairly anemic article, Mike Krahulik claimed "The book has been written and you can change the way you read it but

don't pretend you're the author." Even if less overt than *IGN*'s attack, the feature was still directed at the fanbase, despite vague attempts at defending the ending itself. With statements like "Were the other options similar to mine? I don't know. I didn't pick them" it was clear Krahulik wasn't interested in examining content or sharing his thoughts on why the ending was a success, rather why he felt the fans were being unrealistic and unreasonable. Not a harmful or unnecessary opinion, but it skimmed an

actual discussion on the quality of the experience in favor of lambasting the community.

As games are becoming more and more of a medium for genuine storytelling, BioWare themselves being a notable force in this movement, it was always likely that the idea of the auteur theory was going to surface in one form or another. In this case, journalists and publications decried changing the ending as an affront to art, frequently citing it as similar to changing a novel. *Kotaku*'s Owen Good expressed that "[...] the development of a creative work cannot be democratized and its revision to appease a vocal minority would surrender the creative freedom people claim to value" and Bob

Was the ending of a substantial, justifiable quality? Did it have merit?

Chipman of *The Game Overthinker* said "You don't have creative rights to something that someone else made just because you like it a whole lot." Whether or not you agree with their points on artistic democratization, the issue remained: Was the ending of a substantial, justifiable quality? Did it have merit?

It was as though journalists were ashamed of the community reaction, fearing that demanding a change or even questioning the ending would



Journalistic efforts to margin  
and whiny left little room

A dramatic space scene featuring a bright sun on the left, a planet's horizon line, and a meteor streaking across the dark sky. The text is overlaid in white at the bottom.

nalize the protest as entitled  
for genuine discussion...

strip the game and all of gaming of its art status. As a relatively immature medium, videogames crave acceptance. It's unclear what such acceptance even entails, but to be seen as an insightful medium alongside books and movies is certainly desirable and journalists are hoping to push games towards this lofty goal. At this impasse, they were hesitant to discuss the ending itself because they were afraid of setting the wrong precedent. But with gaming in such a relatively unrefined state, what would a precedent really mean?

Within the gaming community, discussion and debate of the ending spread like wildfire. Extensive YouTube videos like *Tasteful, Understated Nerdrage* became staples for the anti-ending argument. A charity drive for Child's Play was set up to show the desire for the game's conclusion to be rectified, raising over \$80,000. The fan response was astronomical and only grew in the months after *Mass Effect 3*'s release, with threads all over the BioWare forums and other gaming sites dissecting the ending and its issues. The division between fans and journalists started to look more like a rift.

With a few exceptions such as *GameFront* and *Forbes*, the journalistic response had been focused on the community backlash. Journalistic efforts to marginalize the protest as entitled and whiny left little room for genuine discussion, dismissing the community rather than confronting it. For an industry that so often tries to be inclusive, lowering barriers between developers, journalists and the audience at home, such an undertone of seething acerbity between camps was noxious.

People started defending games as art, even though nobody questioned their status to begin with.

Eventually, after two months of shouting matches, BioWare released DLC expanding on the original endings. Whether received as a great improvement or too little, too late, the community reaction was minute

in comparison to previous outrage. Those who predicted the death of artistic vision within game development did not find those fears realized, while those who felt the ending had no artistic merit to begin with were either satisfied or had long ago stopped caring. There were small blots of discussion to be found, but nothing that capitalized on the event as much as before. People moved on.

Gaming has always struggled

with the definition of art, just as art has always struggled with definition. What makes a game art? Are all games art? Are some games more artful than others? Despite the firm grip on popular consciousness gaming has achieved, being classified as just 'entertainment' is something anyone with investment in the industry fears, and *Mass Effect* provided the perfect arena to fight these fears. People started defending games as art, even though nobody questioned their status to begin with. The response from journalists showed how obsessed they are with making sure their favorite medium is recognized as an art form, and the easiest way to defend art is to call it infallible and visionary.

Yet the most damaging thing for any medium is limitation. To tell it what it can and can't do is as creatively harmful as any fan petition, if not more so. Rather than discussing *Mass Effect 3's* ending based on its merits, game journalists took to saying that regardless of quality it should not be altered or otherwise its merit would be warped. But when journalists called out fans, they misinterpreted their desire for change. It was never about wanting something different, tailored to suit independent tastes and desires. It was about wanting something better. It was about wanting something BioWare and gamers could be proud of. Ignoring the *Mass Effect 3* ending and claiming it's

an untamperable artistic statement is the easy way out. What makes gaming better is discussion and change, analysis and deconstruction. Using feedback to produce something greater and more assertive next time. When BioWare co-founder Ray Muzyka took to the developers official blog to reassure fans he said "I'm proud of the team, but we can and must always strive to do better."

If you believe games are art, then you believe they should be open for discussion and criticism. Regardless of your thoughts on the ending or entitlement, accepting games as a valid medium for artistic expression requires dedication to artistic growth. Our medium needs effort, purpose and drive, a desire to see games become something that can stand beside films and novels rather than look up to them. You don't encourage this development by sanctioning art. You encourage it by questioning it.

**HW**

*Intermission...*

# Why “Haywire”?

Titles have never been my strong suit, so having to come up with a name for a whole publication made me slightly uneasy. A good name should roll off the tongue, it needs to be short, descriptive and unique. For once I had run into a problem that could not be solved by making an obscure reference, as our predecessor *The Guardian Force* had chosen to do, because I didn't want this to be entangled in somebody else's legal properties.

When “Haywire” popped up in my head after a myriad of terrible ideas, I knew that I had found our name. It's packed with a few negative connotations - a quick Google search confirmed that we'd mostly be fighting counselling programs and rehab facilities to be ranked there - but it captures the kind of wild, unrestrained, erratic quality that defines our content and our crazy mode of operations. Plus the word 'wire' implies technology. Admittedly by that same logic we might as well be covering agriculture, but still.

*Haywire Magazine.* There may be better names out there, but this one's ours.

**HW**



# Pardon my French

Francisco Dominguez helps us decode Ubisoft's corporate doublespeak.

Back in September, *Rock Paper Shotgun's* John Walker interviewed Ubisoft representatives on the company's decision to abandon their notoriously restrictive DRM policy. The site presented the piece as the result of several years' worth of petitioning, and yet it achieved very little. Ubisoft confirmed that their reviled 'always-on' DRM had been abandoned all the way back in June last year, but admitted very little past that, refusing to explain the motivation behind that decision, or to even evaluate the success of the practice. Abandoning their current approach to DRM strongly suggests failure, but Ubisoft preferred to speak of improvements and customer feedback, while shrugging off previous critical statements about the efficiency of its system as unfortunate comments.

The next day, John Walker posted a follow-up piece speculating on Ubisoft's reasoning. He claimed that while "many interpreted the responses from Stephanie Perotti and Michael Burk to be unsatisfactory, a lot of sites calling it 'corporate speak'", dissatisfied readers had missed "the nuance of what happened." Citing Radio 4 interviews and the hard hitting politics show *Newsnight*, he claimed the act of evading a question can be as valuable as an answer. Unfortunately, an aggressive line of questioning is less informative in text, where words are stripped of verbal delivery and the speaker's visual reaction to the interrogation hidden. Perhaps his intention matched that of his comparisons, but his results differed.

John Walker is a fine, conscientious writer, who, along with the other

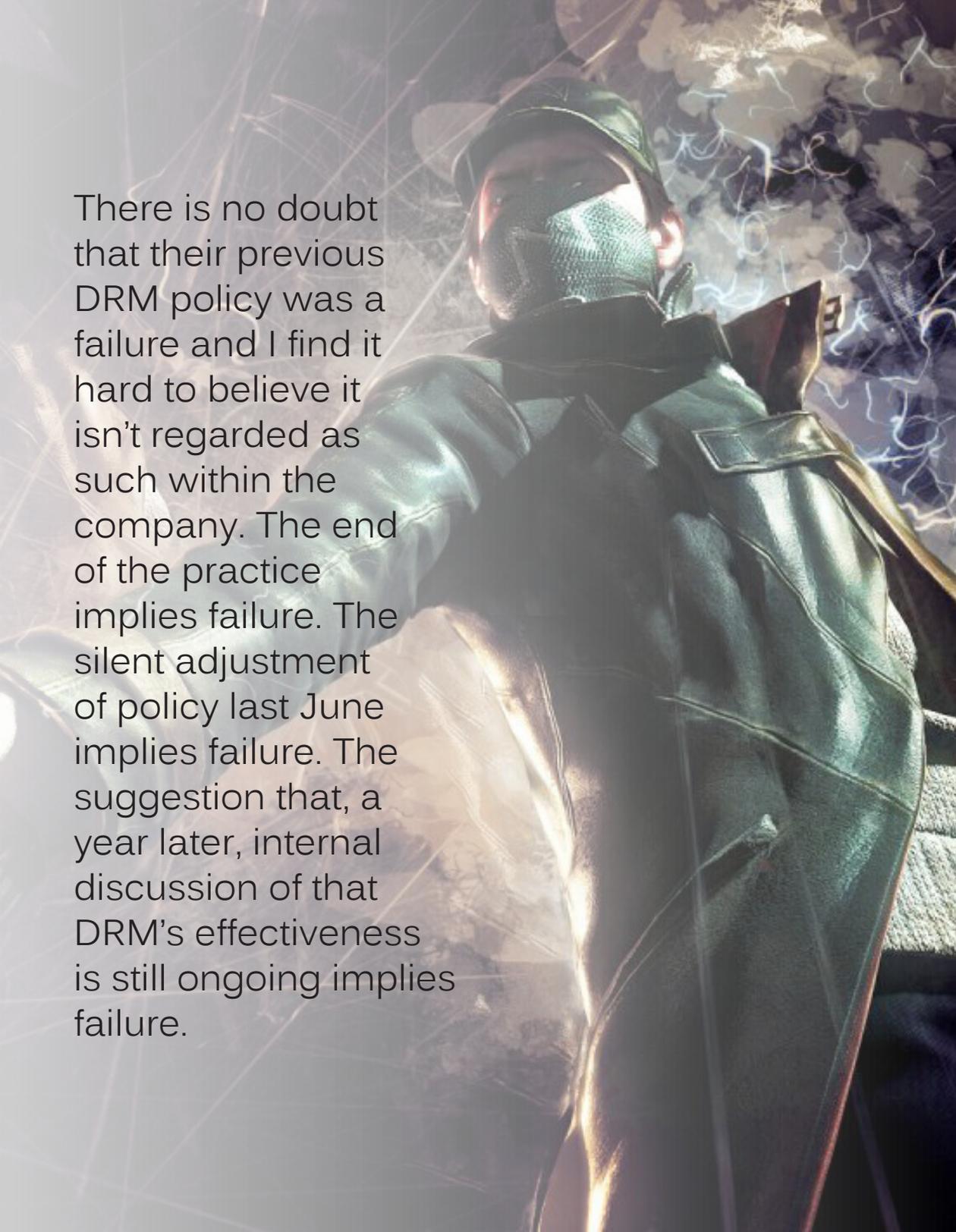
writers at the site he co-owns, has long fought overzealous DRM with insight and deserved mockery. Few outlets would defend the deficiencies of their interview subject, especially when that subject has revelled in blaming its target audience for the perceived decline of the PC market. I appreciate that he was at least aware of his interview subjects' frustrating stubbornness, and brave enough to address it.

However, defending Ubisoft suggests the attitude they showed throughout the interview is defensible. I don't think it is. Regretfully, I can't help feeling that by publishing their opaque interview answers about an event that occurred unannounced over a year ago as if it was some kind of breakthrough, then going on to justify them, *Rock Paper Shotgun* became partly complicit in Ubisoft's practised consumer hostility. If an interview requires a follow-up piece to extrapolate on the answers given - not even to elaborate, but to speculatively answer the questions asked in the interview itself - the interview was a failure. A failure on the interviewee's side perhaps, but the interview's worth remains negligible.

The follow-up concludes that Ubisoft's evasive answers to pointed questions are justifiable because it avoids identifying internal culpability. But doesn't that just imply the duplicity extends towards shareholders as well

as customers? As *Rock Paper Shotgun* have pointed out in the past, subjecting customers to constant verification checks and other forms of digital surveillance, which pirates evade with ease, causes exactly the opposite of the DRM's intended effect of impeding illegal software users. There is no doubt that their previous DRM policy was a failure and I find it hard to believe it isn't regarded as such within the company. The end of the practice implies failure. The silent adjustment of policy last June implies failure. The suggestion that, a year later, internal discussion of that DRM's effectiveness is still ongoing implies failure. Ignoring the elephant in the room can work for a while, but eventually someone has to grab a shovel and clean up the mess.

Farcical repetition of the same sentiments can be disastrous to your image. Just ask Ed Miliband. For the benefit of those of you who unfortunately neither live in the UK nor follow Charlie Brooker, in 2011 a perplexingly surreal interview with the Labour Party leader was leaked, in which he answered a series of questions on recent public sector strikes with identical statements. Perhaps he would change the word order, or stress a different part of the sentence, but the continuously recycled statement barely deviated from original. Not an evasive refusal to comment, but a refusal to comment in any terms other



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than those of a prepared script.

Apparently this practice is common, the footage resulting from the peculiar process can be edited for the most convenient news soundbite. But here it was employed to supply propaganda disguised as the product of frank dialogue. Ridiculous, but permitted by a media who accept this behavior. Most people were surprised when frustrated reporter Damon Green broke ranks and leaked the video. I don't expect he will be invited to interview Labour party members again.

To avoid similar reprisal, *Rock Paper Shotgun* can't outright ridicule their interview subjects, nor should they. But should they defend, nevermind publish, the comically rote answers of an interviewee firmly clinging to the company line? Good relations with publishers must be preserved for the outlet's future, even if this necessity has inhibited the games press' ability to genuinely interrogate publishers and developers for some time now. Walker astutely acknowledged that now Ubisoft have at last announced some intent

to give PC gamers what they want, hostility would be counterproductive.

But I can't help feeling that this is a ceasefire, not lasting peace. A previous gesture Ubisoft extended towards PC gamers was the DRM-free *Prince of Persia* release, which was stifled by breathtaking arrogance. Ubisoft made no commitment to change, but instead chose to insult their customers' moral integrity. On their own forums. Announcing their intentions to release it without DRM for the first time, a Ubisoft representative felt inclined to say: "A lot of people complain that DRM is what forces people to pirate games but as POP PC has no DRM we'll see how truthful people actually are. Not very, I imagine."

A company that would honestly say such a thing of their own devoted fans has a lot to make up for. For years Ubisoft saw the constant surveillance of customers as their right, as if circumstances and technological mishaps conspire to turn paying customers into thieves the moment they pass beyond the verification server's sight. This partial public turnaround so

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long after the actual policy change does little to engender trust.

And consumer trust is important. It may not be reciprocated by the company, no matter how fond and cuddly they appear, but a sense of respect is the bare minimum required to cement purchase habits. Nintendo understand this. After the 3DS's early price cut, Iwata tried to salvage the trust of early adopters with an effusive apology and an offer of 20 games from the eShop. Early adopters lost money due to their faith in the company, so compensation with monetary value was necessary. Nintendo may have more cause than Ubisoft to behave this way, given their substantial recent losses, but the Japanese company's 'family' image makes me feel it was a decision in keeping with the company culture. Many still felt betrayed, but contrition, coming from the highest echelons of the company, was apparent.

Ubisoft can't trade on this illusion as much as Nintendo, few could. But even if they won't compensate for past crimes, at the very least they will have to admit them. Instead, by refusing to explain the reasoning behind the DRM decision or

to publicly evaluate the success or failure of the scheme, they keep the option to return to the policy whenever they choose. No commitment has been made that can't easily be redacted. The scheme was never declared to be abandoned as a concession to consumer rights, only quietly sidelined after repeated fractious attempts to impose it. They had a chance to come clean about their mistakes, and these have been mistakes, but their absolute refusal to discuss

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their failures suggests their contemptuous arrogance and latent hostility to the platform hasn't been entirely eradicated yet.

This is only a first step, and *Rock Paper Shotgun* recognised it as such. It's great that they have taken it, but Ubisoft are a long way from being redeemed and only honest, frank dialogue with its customers will help build that trust. If we knew where they were coming from, we'd have a better idea of where they are going. As it is, despite the constant reassurance that feedback is acknowledged, the customer may go ignored, or worse, maligned, again.

# Cinemanania

Who let freedom become the exception? Ethan Woods fights for more player agency.



*“We will never reach our true potential, and we’ll never be anything more than the bastard step-child of Hollywood, until we embrace what makes us unique.”*

» Warren Spector

As I’m sure you’ve noticed while wolfing down this month’s utterly delectable edition of *Haywire Magazine*, this issue concerns the current state of mainstream games journalism and the role of journalists within the industry. If countless hours of *Skyrim* have taught me anything however, it’s that you can’t hunt down a dragon without having your balls boiled by psychotic fire mages, who represent developers in this

increasingly strained metaphor. And how do they threaten the land of Old Skyrim? By perpetuating the perception that in-game freedom is a luxury. But before we slay the scaly, winged beast sitting arrogantly atop his craggy perch, I confess we’ll first have to deal with the cretinous bears, bandits and bloody fire mages adorning the mountain path. Still, think of it as less of an arduous slog, more a fantastical stroll. Or just skip to the end. Lazy buggers.

Much of this perception’s circulation is owed to developers’ increasingly reverent attitude towards Hollywood, which journalists do little to dissuade. It’s not difficult to see why this attitude exists, nor is it an entirely faulted

position. While gaming's mainstream acceptance is certainly on the up, the idea that everyone's a gamer just because your mother plays *Angry Birds* can feel contrived. It's nice that more people come to accept videogames as a perfectly natural form of entertainment, but there's still a long way to go before we are fully accepted as a medium of artistic expression.

Naturally, that's a little depressing. It's hard to date their inception precisely, but by all accounts videogames are now about 50 years old. Half a century. In the same timespan cinema had its *Citizen Kane* and reached widespread popularity, acceptance and understanding. That a person working in game development would find this aspirational, even enviable, is perfectly understandable. Similarly, it's easy to speculate on how a games journalist might despair at the perceived insignificance of their job, when critics of an outwardly similar medium, like Roger Ebert, are publicly revered for their critique. What's important is that these developers and journalists don't confuse reaching the same level of respect as films with being like films.

What we frequently encounter in games produced by those struggling with

the difference are the supposed virtues of 'cinematic' gaming, resulting in a bizarre instance of cognitive dissonance: interactive entertainment aspiring to be like non-interactive entertainment to be a better piece of interactive entertainment. This ridiculous effort is characterized in-game by a plethora of unnecessary infringements on player agency: scripting.

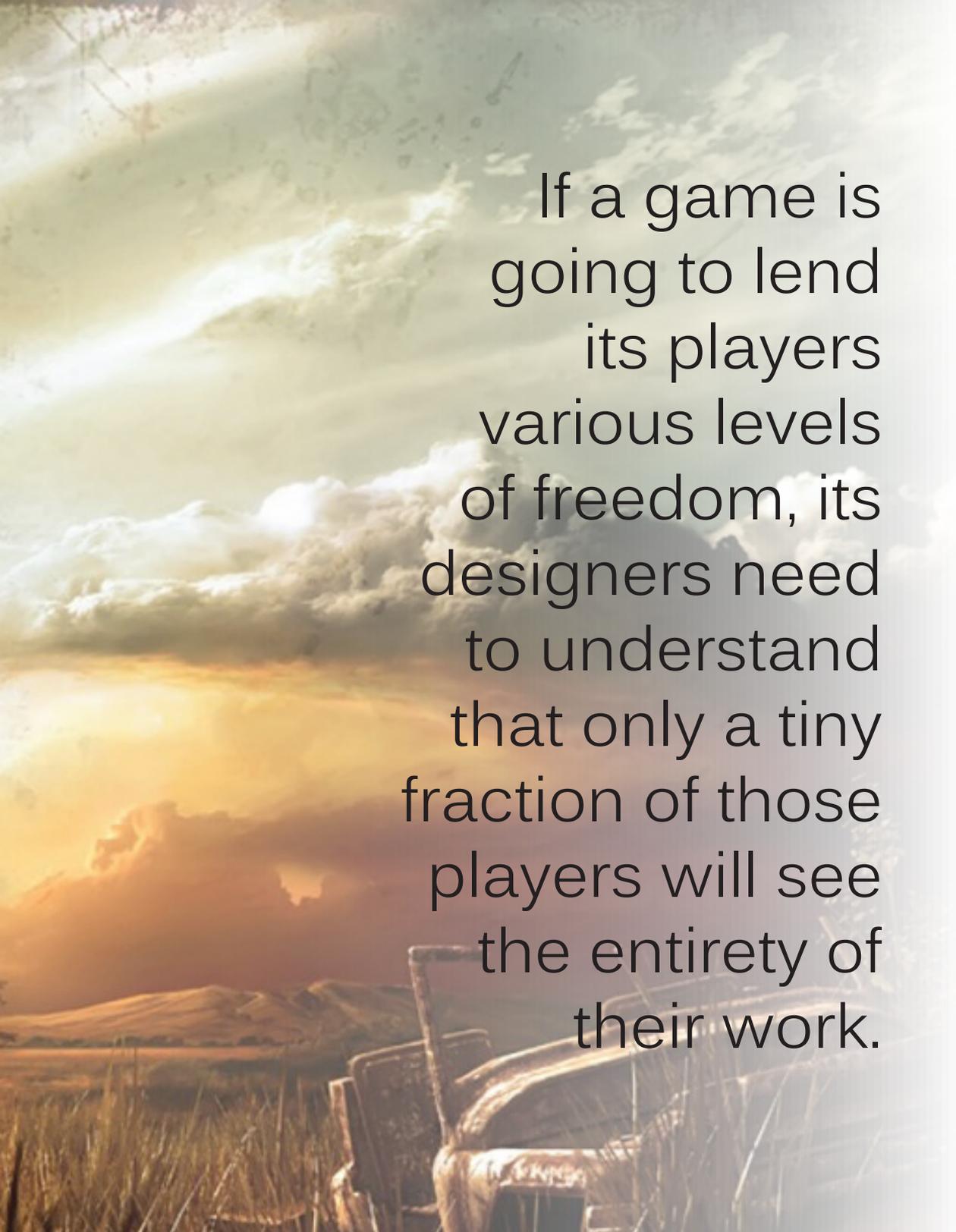
At some point between *Half-Life's* popularization of modern scripting and now, something dreadful happened. What was once a deft pair of hands that sparked off events and controlled their trajectory has since become an excuse to demote players to the role of 'Tag-Along Terry', no will or initiative of their own, locked into a

maniacal grip to ensure entire sequences look as cool as possible. Trust a pesky player to not stand on the exact mark they're arbitrarily supposed to, eh?

So great was this degeneration come the arrival of *Modern Warfare 3* that *Rock Paper Shotgun's* John Walker declared it a "clumsy un-game," "ensuring you never, ever feel like you're really playing." Admittedly, it wasn't one of his more popular reviews with the wider internet. Still, the collective groan at the mention of how *Call of*

Trust a pesky player to not stand on the exact mark they're arbitrarily supposed to, eh?



A dramatic sunset over a field with a wooden structure in the foreground. The sky is filled with large, billowing clouds, and the sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow. The foreground shows a wooden structure, possibly a fence or a small building, partially obscured by tall grasses. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

If a game is going to lend its players various levels of freedom, its designers need to understand that only a tiny fraction of those players will see the entirety of their work.

*Duty* is crap and people are stupid for liking it is almost palpable. Its ridiculous bombast has already been covered by a great many people. Meanwhile, more subtle instances of this worrying trend have been allowed to slip by.

Set on the fictional Lingshan Islands, the first *Crysis* was known for being a bit of a show-off. At the centre of the game's main island, there sits a large mountain dominating the sky for much of the first and second act, until the the entire bloody thing starts to fall apart. It's a commanding and organic sight, a visual antidote to the dreaded C-word, the craftsmanship of a designer who understands that the player's initiative should be retained. The vista was not forced on you, the mountain simply crumbles like a muffin in the background while you leap and punch your way through vast, wide-open levels. Of course it was still scripted, but it seemed natural. Presentation is key here. And yeah, it was a really big

fucking mountain.

Then along came *Crysis 2*, and *Half-Life 2*'s svelte, sensual hands were replaced with clenched fists, looking for a fight. Once the game's first 'Press F to look' appears, the thin, naturalistic veil encompassing *Crysis*' Crumbly-Muff Mountain was torn to shreds. *Crysis 2*'s scripted background events are no more artificial than those of its predecessor, but it makes the mistake of reminding us. Now we're being told something is happening, told to look at it. Whether you ignore these cues or play along meekly, you allow *Crysis 2* to control your gaze. If a game is going to lend its players various levels of freedom, its designers need to understand that only a tiny fraction of those players will see the entirety of their work. And that's perfectly fine.

The general critical consensus on *Crysis 2* is that it's smaller, less open and more controlling than the first, but that's A-okay since it's still more open

What's important is that these developers are reaching the same level of respect

than most games. Given how easily tropes from successful titles can spread across the entire industry, critics should perhaps be more careful about giving their tacit consent. Developers may be the ones devising these ludicrous attempts at streamlining, but it's journalists who have the power to slap them on the wrist when they go too far. To ask that they're more adamant in their lashing of these basic deficiencies to make sure a game's negatives aren't carried into the rest of the medium unhindered would seem a fair demand.

Of course, these are minor infractions. Awkward on-screen cues, the tendency to slow down the player during radio chatter or background events, they all speak to a lack of trust, but should they be singled out among bigger achievements and faults? In the grand complexity, magnificence and wonder of so many titles, is it really worth devoting time to three little words and a letter? Maybe, maybe not.

Still, the prevalence of these tropes is worrying. Linear, restricting games are now celebrated as our most impressive accomplishment, while games that rely entirely on player agency are seen as blissful exceptions by journalists and players alike. It's why *EVE Online* is frequently forgotten when people bemoan the staleness of the MMO space, why *Deus Ex* held the peak of immersive simulations for over a decade and why *Minecraft* continues to amaze. As entertaining as the beaten horse *Call of Duty* can be, it's those open-ended games that show the true potential of our medium, that editorials everywhere should be showering with praise. If we continue to neglect true interactivity, gaming will never shed the perception that we are nothing but Hollywood's bastard child - no matter how much *Angry Birds* your Mum plays while sexting your Dad.

**HW**

Developers and journalists don't confuse  
being like films with being like films.

*Intermission...*

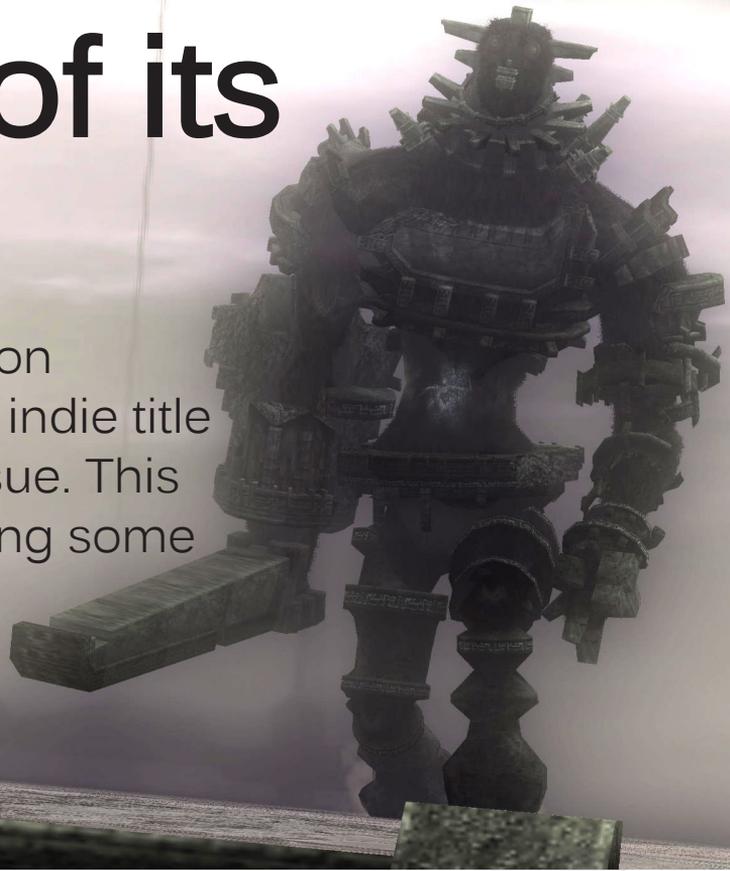
# So you Want to be a Games Journalist?

Freelance videogame journalist Nathan Meunier has recently managed to kickstart a written guide for people looking to break into the field. The idea of a comprehensive introduction is appealing, but if you're willing to spend some time researching, you'll find that there's an endless supply of writing advice readily available online, and for free. Here are some basic pointers by Aaron McKenna, Mathew Kumar, John Walker, Kieron Gillen and Tim Edwards.

And of course you need to practice, practice, practice. Perhaps you'd like to write for a burgeoning new videogame publication? **HW**

# Sum of its Parts

Zachary Bricton reviews a new indie title for us every issue. This time he's sharing some thoughts on the craft.



A game isn't really a game, I've come to learn.

Its cutscenes are considered 'cinematics', its dialogue dubbed a 'narrative', its world composed of 'graphics', its music merely a 'soundtrack' and its methods of interactivity simply 'mechanics'. Each game an ocean for critics to reel elements from, and in their outstretched arm grasp what they believe is an argument.

It's convenient, fun even, to break down complex forms of human expression into comparable components. It makes discussion

accessible, ordered, quantifiable and professional. I can rank things now. These graphics are better than those, this script is better than others, and which has the better character, you ask? Let's simply pull each from their game's respective universe and cross-reference our findings.

Pay no mind to how they flounder and suffocate, games and their various facets are, after all, just organized sets of code. Software with unbendable rules. It only makes sense that their analysis be so mathematical. A *Final Fantasy* game is so cleanly sectioned into battle

screens, cutscenes and scrollable menus, how can anyone avoid the temptation of isolating them? Of sorting them into pieces, stringing each up to dry to examine and compare more closely?

That's what I've been doing, anyway. Snatching individual elements from games and pretending they can be measured independently. And as they lie there, dead on the deck, I debate them. Here is a paragraph about the story, now the combat and next a slew of flattering adjectives regarding the visuals and sound. Finally, the conclusion comes as a neat aggregate, a counting of points and some cliched dismissal along the lines of 'overall, the battle system makes up for the visual shortcomings.'

But are games really played like this? Part by part, piece by piece? At what moment during actual play, truly, do players itemize their experiences so perfectly? When exactly does someone

split the act of gutting the jugular of a city patrol in *Assassin's Creed* into graphics and gameplay? How does anyone's mind make that distinction? Not only that, but who then has the gall to proclaim which element plays the bigger role?

This is lunacy. Grossly reductionist and uninteresting, and yet frustratingly unavoidable. The structure is so scientific, so rudimentary that I could pump out its format in my sleep. And readers are beginning to notice. The routine, the patterns, the trends, the absolute tunnel vision. Game discussion is so formulaic that its ceased to be relatable. It is so detailed that it has somehow become vague.

Even as games become more complex and continue to blur their designs into less classifiable aspects, the process remains stubbornly vapid. How do critics compensate for games like

At what moment during actual play, truly, do p

*Half Life 2, Shadow of the Colossus or Journey?* Well, these games simply have an additional quality, something called ‘atmosphere’, tacked to the scorecard.

I’m frustrated by this, bored by it, unable to identify with the opinions it presents, sometimes even my own. Because when I’m actually gaming, it feels more like I’m swimming through an interconnected ecosystem of ideas and layered design. I’m interacting with a universe, being conditioned to its rules and how they affect one another. But when I surface to write, I’m there with everyone else, jotting down notes while looking at dead fish. Sorting my memories into a detailed taxonomy of topical paragraphs and neat arguments.

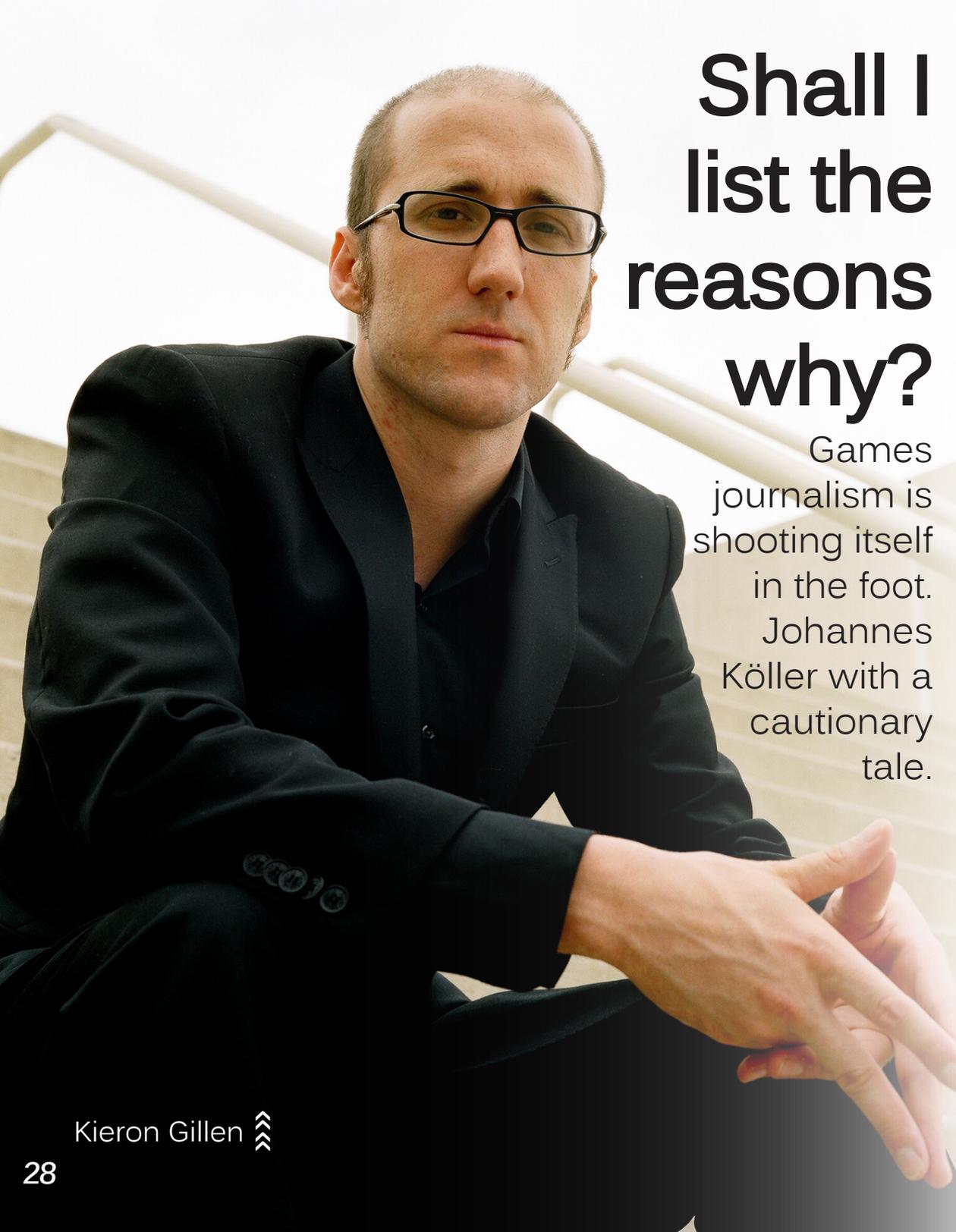
The gaming experience is being lost in translation. Cherry picking and holding games under a microscope is what modern games journalism excels at, and truthfully that’s something I can

get behind and learn from. But it needs to keep perspective. An understanding that a game’s devices - its code, algorithms, triggers, and pixels - are only truly alive when our imagination sets them to motion. Is that so embarrassing to admit?

While taking these objects out of context allows for more precise inspection, their actual functions are lost to readers. Here are its gills, yes, but why are they important? Well, throw it back in the water and see. See how the game doesn’t stop when it meets a cutscene, it simply continues. They are linked, they depend on each other, a stream of ideas put in place by very human teams of creators. So let the damn things swim. They may be harder to write about and observe, but isn’t that what makes them worth reading about in the first place?

**HW**

players itemize their experiences so perfectly?

A man with short hair and glasses, wearing a black suit jacket over a black shirt, is sitting on a set of stairs. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. His hands are clasped together in his lap. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting with a white railing.

# Shall I list the reasons why?

Games  
journalism is  
shooting itself  
in the foot.  
Johannes  
Köller with a  
cautionary  
tale.

In 2004, Kieron Gillen published his infamous *New Games Journalism Manifesto*, a call for critics to free themselves of rigid review patterns in favor of more varied, personalized critique. Gillen asked writers to see their work as “travel journalism from Imaginary Places”, a mission that should provide entertaining reports and stories even to those with no interest in the subject matter. At the time, I was in my early teens and had only just started to consume games journalism on a regular basis by following a certain German print magazine. It was my only source, infallible in its singularity, and could hardly have been further from Gillen’s vision.

In spirit of Teutonic thoroughness, German reviewers tend to examine games the way you would a car, by disassembling it and checking each individual cog. How does the experience system work? Are the factions balanced? How many guns and upgrades does it have? The result is no holistic assessment so much as a technical analysis, a breakdown of features. Imagine my surprise encountering Anglo-American critics who managed to catch the essence of a game in the same amount of space usually dedicated to extraneous details.

It was amazing to see how a different culture had managed to afford the subject far more enthralling

efforts, and again I was captivated by the discovery. Over time, however, I noticed that even if English-speaking outlets paid more attention to brevity and wit, many of the basic issues of the German crusade for thoroughness were still there: entire paragraphs devoted to minutia, the focus on mechanics over their effects, the widespread view that games are merely a commercial product, not one of art and culture.

Perhaps you’re wondering why I speak of the strange customs of a foreign land. Even if its flaws can be traced to the industry as a whole, why should you care about the state of German games journalism? Because it is not only archaic, formulaic and obsessed with details, it’s also in trouble, and call me crazy but I think the trend is indicative of international outlets. In the period from 2004 until now, the biggest local videogame publications lost over half their readership. Sure, print is receding on the whole, but not at this rate. As the Audit Bureau of Circulations records, specialist periodicals on the whole only shrunk by about 20 percent in the same period, even those in fields that attract a similarly tech-savvy readership.

Admittedly, all these gaming publications saw a significant increase in web traffic during the same period, somewhere in the ballpark of 300 percent, but the same can be said for virtually any magazine with presence

of mind to provide decent web content. And keep in mind that videogame websites tend to generate more traffic through community forums than through editorial content. The ever brilliant Christian Schmidt was among the first games journalists to speak out on this worrying trend in an article for *Spiegel Online*. As he rightly notes, the less than overwhelming growth in online traffic doesn't make up for the steady loss of readers.

Even as their audience continues to grow, these publications have managed to lose readers. As games are moving from the fringes of society to its center, videogame magazines are strangely on their way out. Nevermind that they haven't figured out how to reach the audiences of mobile games, handheld games, iOS games or browsergames, they're actually losing their current audience. How? How can an industry face recession in a growing market?

When faced with the terrifying prospect of change, games journalism wrongly identified hardcore enthusiasts as their main audience and embarked on the arduous quest of meeting their

As games are moving from the fringes of society to its center, videogame magazines are strangely on their way out.

inconsistent demands. But obsessive fans had just found another way to communicate through our very favorite mode of publication, the internet. The democratization of reviewing through a vote of majority on the likes of Amazon has caused much grief even for critics in far more established media like film, but few shared the demented plan game critics had: to compete. Rather than to try and differentiate themselves from the smelly hordes of novice writers through professionalism, they tried to beat them at their own game.

Now reviews had to be more thorough than detailed guides, because god forbid you neglect to mention something fans of the game care about. Now reviewers had to demonstrate a certain level of skill, because god forbid you were found uncovered as a poor player. Once readers noticed how desperately magazines were trying to cater to their tastes, they started to grow entitled. You might dismiss the outrage over unpopular review scores or the righteous indignation when a critic admits to not having finished the game as mere idiocy, but it's also the result of a journalism too damn scared to be mean to its own audience. This stifling fear

has started to get in the way of frank dialogue, as publications tread lightly rather than calling our community out on its bullshit.

At the same time, the need to claim intimacy by showing that they are gamers just like us has not exactly done wonders for the literacy of critics. Many reviewers really do hold no qualifications past a background in geek culture, and this can keep them from appreciating the full cultural and literary significance of more ambitious games. Few outlets can claim to have addressed, not just mentioned, the themes of Transhumanism in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* or Objectivism in *Bioshock*. That a game like *Spec Ops: The Line* can achieve its lofty narrative goals of morality and cognitive dissonance only to lose marks for its defunct multiplayer is downright shameful.

These are exciting times to cover games. More people than ever before are inclined to listen to us instead of dismissing our contributions as the scriblings of lunatics obsessed with a children's pastime. It will not do to forever mock these late arrivals and to ignore entire platforms over misguided elitism. It will not do to only serve a tiny fraction of our audience with reviews that can only be deciphered by the initiated.

When they defend their outdated practices, games journalists frequently

try to make us sympathize with their plight, the fact that nobody reads reviews in this age of Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes. It's certainly true that the internet has seen a shift to shorter, visual formats, but to suggest that people have simply stopped consuming written content is an easy way to rationalize your own faults without really addressing them. People haven't stopped reading. Our content is just not good enough.

There is so much more to critique than the rough assessment of quality you'll find in score averages or user reviews and we shouldn't be content to be just another voice in that chorus. We should strive to be opinion leaders. Industry watchdogs. Experts in gaming culture, and contemporary culture as a whole. We should be chasing the truth buried in corporate speak, hunting down the unlikely stories taking place in this industry and documenting the deeply personal interactions one can have with this medium.

Our field has plenty of reviewers. What it could use are more critics, more writers and more journalists.

**HW**

*Intermission...*

# The Seven Deadly Sins of Gaming

Tasked with 671 grains of diplomacy, the Noble Sniper covets his hold on the ground. A lone soldier, he sits watching the world through a circular window, his entire ego squeezed into a single red dot, the slender marker that lets him grant death to whoever should stray into his field of view. A short twitch, perhaps a reverent nod, and he returns to his post.

Despite the best efforts of the map maker, there will always be a point where the line of sight is far, the health plentiful and the protection near-absolute. Here he reigns supreme, delivering divine judgement upon every intruder. A master at decimating the enemy team in offense and in defense, a paragon. None control the ground such as he, each pixel of grass studied so that the lightest change will reveal those who would hide from him.

Yet, he may be a jealous god, a Snipergangr. This greedy fiend will consume all of his team's resources to fuel his own crusade. He will sit upon health and ammo, snatching it from the mouths of the dying, while hurling abuse at those who dare come close. Once the red mist descends, a Snipergangr sees no friends, only those that would deny him perfection. If you fall, it was your fault. If you succeed, you must have cheated.

The difference between the Noble Sniper and the Snipergangr should be understood by all that wish to avoid Gaming Hell, and it follows seven simple rules.

- 1 · *You are the enabler - You are there to enable the objective, your body count is never the objective.*
- 2 · *A bodyshot is a warning.*
- 3 · *Luck happens. Luck happens more to the skilled.*
- 4 · *Watch someone's back and they will watch yours.*
- 5 · *Always expect a spy.*
- 6 · *It's not a missed shot, it's suppression.*
- 7 · *A game is when you can lose. Games help you learn.*

The 7th Circle of Gaming Hell is reserved for all Snipergangr. Across a pixel-perfect brown landscape, the campers sit, invisible to each other. Forever watching for that single red ray that gives away the enemy's position. Waiting for that split second when they can claim their opponent's skull, before their own laser sight is traced back, and their head taken. Then its another eternity waiting for respawn, editing kill montages that will never upload to YouTube.

# Off the Grid: *Snapshot*

Not One for the Album



By Zachary Bricton

A bashful robot holds a camera that stores up to three images, each magically containing the physical contents of his pictures. Capturing objects through this fantastical flash photography, he uses them to platform across a plethora of 2D environmental puzzles. It's a novel concept, a sort of cut-and-paste leapfrog, and holds mischievous potential.

But *Snapshot* can't afford to be overly ambitious. Understandably, the camera's capabilities are limited, so game-breaking strategies like moving the finish line to your feet are out of the question. To keep the number of possible solutions under control, the

game is very clear about what objects can and can't be manipulated. In effect, *Snapshot's* puzzles are practically solved for you.

Its prototypical challenge is asking you to create your own platform, a basic task staged in various iterations throughout the game. Sometimes it will be a crate, sometimes you'll pan the level to find an elephant, and use it to the same effect. Or capture portions of a cloud and paste them over a lethal pit of spikes. The gimmicks change but lead to the same mental gymnastics.

Complexities arise with the introduction of momentum and

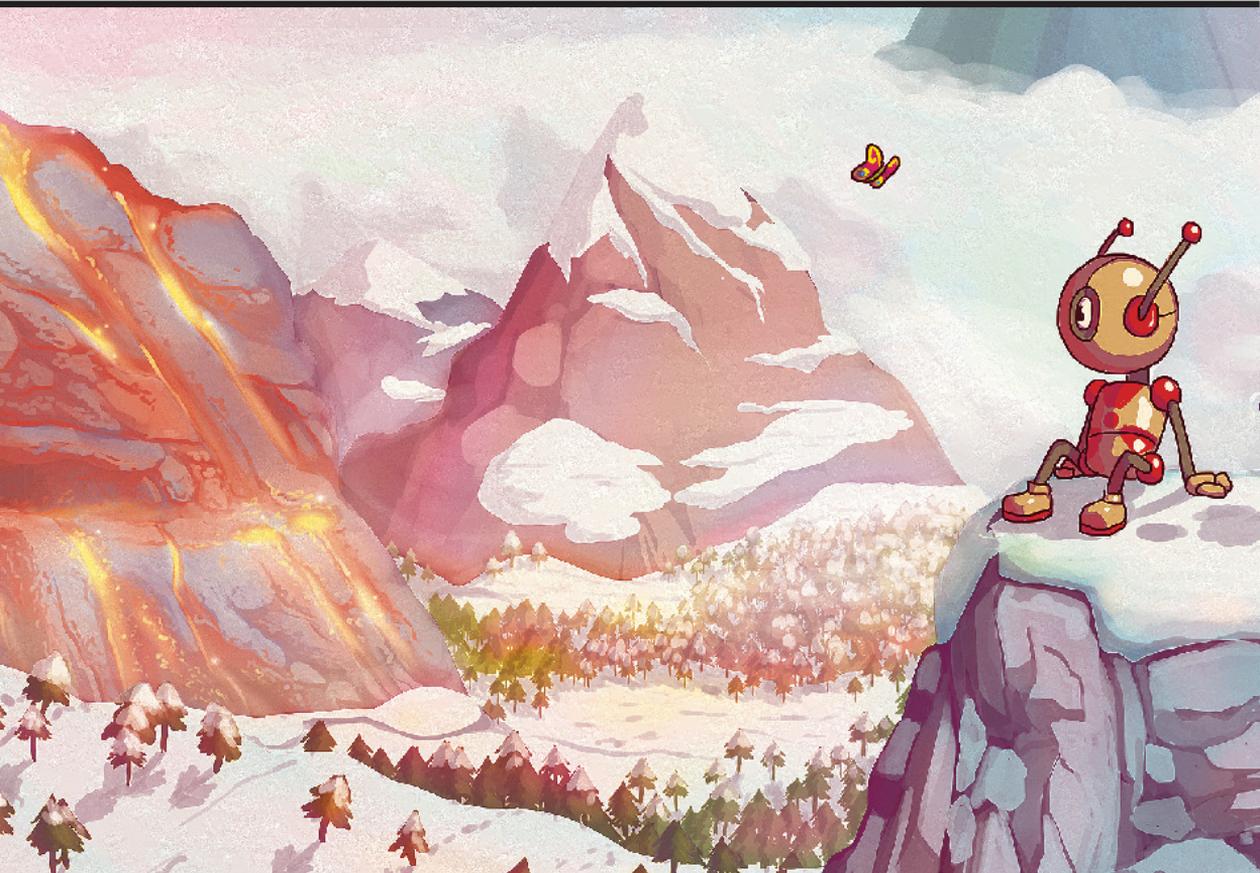
physics, such as snapping photos of fiery ammunition leaving cannons, or capturing jet streams of wind. Pasting these forces elsewhere can push a crate you need out of a no-photo zone, for example. Once the crate is pushed out, it's a hop, skip and a jump, and puzzle solved.

That is, if you want it to be. Tiny collectible stars and artifacts lay strewn about each environment, and gathering these items at high speeds will yield higher scores. But it's a process that hardly demands wit, only mastery over unwieldy controls during situations of high accuracy platforming.

Any mistake sends you back to the beginning of the level, and such irritation lays bare the real absurdity of *Snapshot*. Where crossing the finish would be a mere victory over juvenile logic, acing the level is triumph over clumsy design. The former isn't worth the time, the latter not the effort.

But it's a photogenic game, and the crunching snap of a point and shoot camera is such a gratifying sound of machinery. It's fun. Not so much when you discover you had the lens cap on the entire time, and that's ultimately how *Snapshot* feels. Pointless.

**HW**



# The Mechanical Void: Bullet Heaven

A Look at the Properties of Digital  
Projectiles.

By Joshua Ens

The FPS genre has come a long way since being popularized by *Wolfenstein 3D* 20 years ago. We've jumped from fighting awkward rectangular hitboxes on a single, horizontal axis to bullets flying wildly through true three-dimensional space in the likes of *Borderlands 2*, *Max Payne 3* and the *Modern Warfare* series. There's more to this evolution than a mere increase in on-screen shooting, though, these three franchises in particular employ a mechanic other games would be wise to borrow: bullet impact.

Like all moving objects, bullets carry momentum, and this force is applied to their target on impact, a fact games still tend to ignore. Enemies dropping on the spot instead of being

carried backwards by your high-caliber rounds can ruin immersion for anyone with an understanding of how real guns work, but what's more by ignoring the physical reality of rifles games miss out on potential tactical depth.

*Borderlands 2*, for instance, employs a very basic model of bullet impact. Most parts of your enemies are still strangely resistant to gunfire, but each has a certain weak spot where your fire not only does double damage, but will also stagger your opponent and break off pieces of their armor. It's a singular, binary application of bullet impact, you either hit the spot or don't, but it adds a gratifying reward for accuracy and is vital to defeat late-game enemies.

The *Modern Warfare* series and



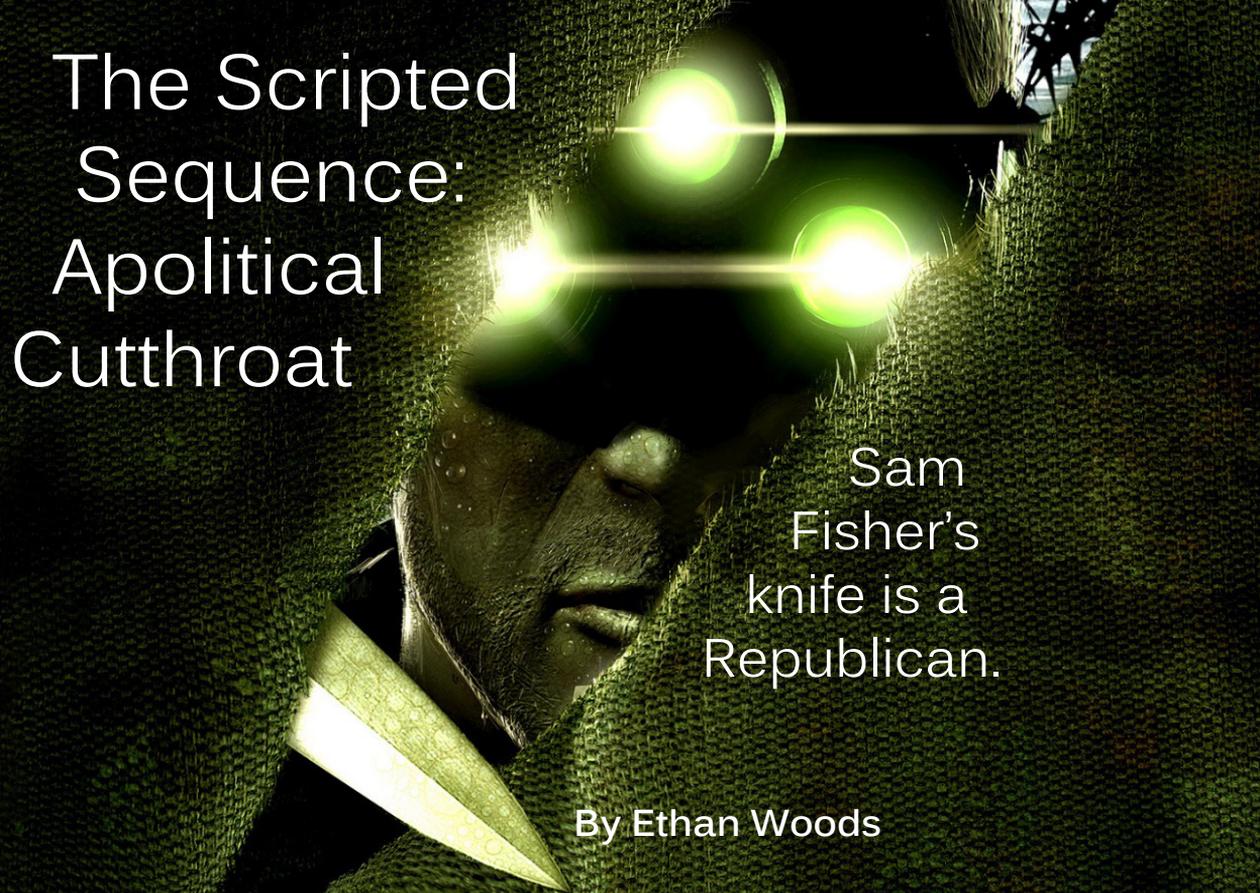
*Max Payne 3*, on the other hand, use a more realistic version of bullet impact, in which the entire model of your foe is subject to this force. One might aim at their legs to trip them or shoot their arm to sway their aim. Since the player is more vulnerable in these games himself, the goal in using this system is not to maximize damage, but to quickly disable enemies.

Using projectiles as more than a mere damage source is an interesting new trend for a genre many would call stagnant, and we have only seen part of what this system could achieve. Games like *Max Payne 3* and *Borderlands 2* are a decent first step, but consider the immersive potential of more detailed destruction, the simulation of ricochet

and adequate animations for NPCs being hit by high-calibre rounds with impressive stopping force. Consider games featuring kinetic shields that block impact, but not damage, and armor that works the other way around.

A pistol is different from a shotgun, rifle or rocket-launcher, and they should feel different. The way a projectile acts in-game is more than an aesthetic choice, it can determine strategy and pace. Clever use of bullet impact systems can even help players turn the tables in those frantic firefights. By taking a closer look at how games simulate projectiles now, we can keep moving the genre forward. We have 20 years of evolution behind us, but we can always go further.

**HW**



# The Scripted Sequence: Apolitical Cutthroat

Sam  
Fisher's  
knife is a  
Republican.

By Ethan Woods

Behold, dear reader: before you sits a man enlightened. It used to be that the idea of storytelling through game mechanics would leave a bemused twinkle in my eyes. The concept seemed so wasteful, a surefire way to break entire stories down into metaphors ranking somewhere between 'Infuriating' and 'completely bloody cryptic'. Even I, a connoisseur of storytelling and a savant of abstract metaphors, would not wish for such an all-encompassing transformation. Of course, children are idiots by nature, and by law I was but a child back then,

so what can you expect? But no more. My opinion has since been cornered, captured and christened 'appreciative'. Appreciative of how mechanics might allow us to impart a teeny-tiny piece of ourselves into a character or plot.

Morality is a peculiar thing, don't you think? Stranger still is how we verbalize it with idioms based in financial logic. If someone does you a favour you 'owe them' and if they do you a wrong then you might want to 'pay them back'. In more relevant terms, we can use this to highlight the United

States' lean to the Right against that of its international chums. In October 2011, Gallup polled Americans on the subject with the question: Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder? It concluded that "almost three-quarters of Republicans and independents who lean Republican" were in approval, but only "46% of Democrats and independents who lean Democratic" felt the same way. At the time of writing, 33 of America's states permit the use of the death penalty, though only half of these are considered to actively use it. The sentiment behind the death penalty and its justification by those who lean to the Right is simple: kill someone and your own life is fair-game. An imbalance on a balance-sheet.

And it's with that international disconnect that we come to *Splinter Cell*. Based on the works of author Tom Clancy, an American conservative and product of the Cold War, the series has been a mainstay of triple A gaming since its inception. Unlike *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six*, which were first brought to life by Clancy's own studio, Red Storm Entertainment (long-since Ubisoft Red Storm), *Splinter Cell* itself has always been developed by Ubisoft. Ubisoft being a studio in Canada, and Canada being death-penalty-free since 1976. Its third and best installment, *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*, was helmed by Clint Hocking, perhaps

more widely known for *Far Cry 2*. Himself a Canadian, Hocking describes himself as "probably more left-leaning [...] than the 'average' Canadian" who, as he concedes, already have "fairly left-leaning political opinions and moral convictions [relative to Americans]". Still, despite *Chaos Theory's* awkward existence as a property inspired by the works of a conservative American writer and designed by a liberal Canadian, it manages to avert schizophrenia and even uses the ideological dissonance to its advantage.

Sam Fisher himself is an enigma wrapped in a contradiction, sealed in a kinky black wetsuit and hidden behind a voice that'd make Morgan Freeman weak at the knees. Outwardly a cynical military-man perpetually on the edge of a too-old-for-this-shit breakdown, he is in fact a character who has averted crucifixion-by-stereotype. How? Several reasons, voice actor Michael Ironside being not the least of which. But most importantly, from the first *Splinter Cell* to *Double Agent*, we've had to mine incidental dialogue for clues about the man inside the big rubber condom. Rare is the occasion that Sam appears in a cutscene. We instead learn about him as we play, both through his banter with his team members over the radio and through enemy interrogations. While the latter is akin to the mechanical-storytelling I

was rabbiting on about at the beginning, it's Sam's shiny new combat knife which is the real champion.

Significantly insignificant, the knife lets us imprint ourselves onto Sam. Our understanding of his character is built from hints, subtle intricacies: his sense of humour, the relationship with his colleagues and his daughter, the absence of a wife. As players it's left to us to extrapolate any ideological bearings he might have. Our standards for how to progress through a mission may prove reflective of our own attitudes and personalities, but it's the panicked reactions to crouching Sam face-first into another man's crotch most accurately define both him and ourselves.

To stab or not to stab. Sam's 'Fifth Freedom' allows him to kill without repercussion, so knife use is tied to no rules, except your own. Even civilians can be killed without fear of mission failure, although this does result in a chastising from Sam's CO Lambert. The choice, the moral justification for our actions, remains almost entirely our own. If your first instinct is to stab, then you imbue Sam with the same financial-logic which is favoured by more Right-leaning people and nations.

If not, then like me you are a total hippy. Congratulations. But what really matters is not what choice we make, but that we have the liberty to choose.

Assuch, *Chaos Theory* acknowledges and accepts both responses. The refusal to enshrine them within Sam reflects the moralistic dissonance between nations and even countrymen, between those inspiring, creating and playing the game. Neither reaction is given moral superiority, with any mechanical superiority (like kills reducing your stealth-rating) being divined from a practical realm of logic. Not only does Sam's knife come to nullify any ideological friction, but it allows us as players to actively impart him with our own culture;

What really matters is not what choice we make, but that we have the liberty to choose.

our own life experiences and attitudes in a way that, seven years later, remains all too rarely seen within gaming. The series' latest efforts may have been an attempt to make him more recognisably human, but it'll forever be Sam's knife that helped make him the character he is to me.

**HW**

# The Other Screen: Through that Lens

A Look into the Horrific  
and Frequently  
Disappointing History  
of Faux-Gonzo  
Filmmaking.

By Andrew Huntly

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It's fair to say *The Blair Witch Project* is a true postmodern horror classic. Released in 1999, its story of three amateur filmmakers strutting off deep into the woods to try and film a documentary about the fabled and titular Blair Witch has become one of the most enduring and acclaimed stories in horror. Its trademark technique of a film within a film was a massive critical and commercial success, starting a trend of 'found footage' movies: completely fictionalized films made and marketed under the pretense of being rediscovered reels. The ease and low costs of producing such films made them a haven for independent directors and writers. But with the ease of using

the tool, came the propensity to abuse it.

To understand the potential of point-of-view photography and how quickly it came to be a crutch for low budget horror filmmakers and, later, larger studios, we need to go all the way back to 1980. It was more than three decades ago that Italian exploitation director Ruggero Deodato unleashed upon an unsuspecting world the reviled and revered *Cannibal Holocaust*. *Cannibal Holocaust* presented itself as the last reel of a crew of documentarians who trekked to the Amazon to film indigenous cannibals. The crew resorted to inhumane and savage violence to film their documentary, poking the

flesh eating beehive with an aggressive stick. They finally meet their just deserts in a finale so gruesomely accomplished Deodato was brought before Italian courts under the accusation he had actually murdered his cast.

While the idea of faux-gonzo storytelling can be traced back to the mid 60s and *Blowup*, *Cannibal Holocaust* took the idea to a whole new level. It used the dynamic of a film within a film to create a horror movie with satirical and highly disturbing bite, masking bleak commentary on the savagery of modern media under the guise of a cannibal exploitation movie. Deodato conceived the film after watching Italian news coverage of the terrorist group the Red Brigades, finding himself disgusted by the lack of journalistic integrity on display. The found footage photography communicated the film's repugnance towards slanted journalism, with the documentary footage giving us a clear image of filmmakers so desperate for their shot they will callously degrade to savagery in search of it. It's a distressing and affecting film, frequently counted as one of the most disturbing films ever made, and not without merit. The Italian

Deodato was brought before Italian courts under the accusation he had actually murdered his cast.

exploitation roots resulted in several animals being killed on film while being prepared for meals for the cast, but even without the live animal deaths, it's a brutal and deeply uncomfortable film that comes with a caution sign as much as it does a recommendation.

There was a tiny scattering of more found footage films released between *Cannibal Holocaust* and *The Blair Witch Project*, but Belgium's *Man Bites Dog* was the only real highlight. Following a film crew documenting the exploits of a serial killer, it reaffirmed the found footage technique as a tool for commentary and satire. Both *Man Bites Dog* and *Cannibal Holocaust* highlight how shockingly quickly a team of filmmakers

can turn from observers to participants, dedicated to achieving their vision in any grisly manner possible. It was another attack on journalism and the corrupting influence of media, this time with a far more satirical, even comical streak. However, the underlying nihilism and extreme violence kept the films far outside the realm of mainstream attention.

When *The Blair Witch Project* was released, its success proved that POV

filmmaking was an effective method of communicating horror and distress even while keeping affairs almost bloodless. It lacked the wit and bite of *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Man Bites Dog*, replacing it with more defined emotional terror. However, what truly sold the film was the marketing tapping directly into the found footage aspect. The film wasn't directly promoted as real footage, but neither was such a thing denied. With rough looking film stock, deliberately clumsy editing and a cast of convincing no-name actors, the idea of *The Blair Witch Project* being a particularly exploited last will and testament was easy to embrace. It was a pop-culture icon almost as soon as it hit theatres. It wasn't the first of its genre, but *The Blair Witch Project* used the technique in an accessible way without losing the meta foundation that made *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Man Bites Dog* so fiercely intelligent.

Low-budget horror filmmakers saw *The Blair Witch Project* as an opportunity. The relatively low expense of producing such films and an inherent leniency towards mistakes made it a breeding ground for those whose films

might be too ambitious to shoot outside of a studio system. Unfortunately, the result was in an influx of poorly constructed and shallow films that didn't truly understand the technique. The *August Underground* trilogy was perhaps the worst offender, a collection of cheap and reprehensible faux-snuff films that relished in nothing but deranged and immature splatter. The best was Spanish flick *[REC]*, a striking

cocktail of paranoia and intensity, trapping a reporter and her cameraman in an apartment building as the residents succumb to a viral outbreak one by one.

Aside from *[REC]* and the experimental post-9/11 monster movie *Cloverfield*, found

footage movies hadn't ventured into any new or interesting territory. The ability to craft an entire film that tore down the planned, scripted and choreographed cinematic was ripe with potential and yet it was almost exclusively used for low rent horror. It was a great storytelling ground, sandwiched between cinema verite and more broad cinematic methods, and the popularity of the technique meant it

Both *Man Bites Dog* and *Cannibal Holocaust* highlight how shockingly quickly a team of filmmakers can turn from observers to participants.

was quickly becoming a subgenre itself. All it needed was another creative push.

A decade after *The Blair Witch Project* hit theatres, found footage movies received a formative shot in the arm with *Paranormal Activity*. Audiences had started to grow disenfranchised with the harshly termed ‘torture-porn’ subgenre, mainstream horror films focusing on explicit violence and gore, and the incredibly low-budget and gore-free *Paranormal Activity* turned into a huge and critically acclaimed hit. Despite being set in a single home, it had the same horrific edge as *The Blair Witch Project*: the idea that what you are watching on screen might be a real document, a real event. At heart, it was a story of an ordinary young couple experiencing something supernaturally destructive in their very own home. The domestic, suburban quality gave proceedings a feeling of cognitive dissonance, which was only strengthened by the carefully executed POV photography.

Movie studios paid close attention to *Paranormal Activity*. Its two sequels were more careful than the dismal *Blair Witch 2*, and retained the suburban

environment and the found footage style. They were both commercially successful, but the lesson studios seemed to have taken from the original was not domesticated claustrophobia, but that people like found footage and the supernatural. The feeling of an authentic lost record was bled out. The sequels, with bigger budgets and more tricks and gimmicks, became conventional pieces of storytelling shot from a crippling self-aware perspective. More and more

The result was in an influx of poorly constructed and shallow films that didn't truly understand the technique.

films were pumped out of the Hollywood system with POV photography and found footage tropes strapped onto them, with little effort made to deploy the technique with finesse and intelligence, thus proving that the biggest film production houses in

the world are as capable of languishing in misunderstanding as the lone filmmakers with a single camera and some few hundred dollars.

Between the release of *Cannibal Holocaust* in 1980 and *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999, less than 10 notable films were made using the found footage technique. Between 1999 and today, there are over 60, almost half of those following *Paranormal Activity*.



⌘ Daniel Myrick, co-director  
⌘ of *The Blair Witch Project*

While the artistic merit of films solely dedicated to providing slasher thrills is debatable, and that of films depicting gruesomely excessive torture even more so, POV photography and the concept of films within films are a tool, a way of enhancing a story and its themes. There have been enough examples in the past thirty years to prove its viability, particularly when it comes to talking about the medium itself. With the slew of dry, wasteful films of the past few years, it's becoming a technique used less and less for its thematic weight and more because of the depressingly short-sighted assumption that it makes money. The two notable films that took it beyond the horror genre, the teen superhero movie *Chronicle* and post-Superbad comedy *Project X*, lost much in translation with their gimmicky, half-baked use of the POV style. *Chronicle* in particular had a ludicrous finale, stretched and snapped to incredulity by the insistence of keeping the film somewhere it didn't

belong.

A good found footage movie keeps the audience within our reality. It presents our world, captured on screen as we know it, without clean edits, without perfectly established camera angles and without a meticulously chosen score. It shows us a world we can believe in, and makes us watch, through that lens, as it twists that world into something shocking and profoundly different. A poor found footage movie distracts us with its otiosity and grinds its gimmick into the ground. It results in a complete breakdown of communication. The fourth entry in the *Paranormal Activity* series will be fresh in theatres by the time this article is posted, and perhaps it will bring back that sense of authenticity. Likely, it will not. If found footage filmmaking and POV photography continue as they are, they will die on a film more exploitative than *Cannibal Holocaust* could ever be.

**HW**

**Write for us!**



**Contact us at  
[haywiremagazine@gmail.com](mailto:haywiremagazine@gmail.com)**



# Who we are...

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## Editor-in-Chief

➤ Johannes Köller is an occasional amateur critic and student of two languages at the University of Vienna.

## Layout & Design

➤ Andrew Walt is a lapsed amateur journalist and prospective graduate student of classical drama at the University of Toronto.

## Editorial Assistant

➤ Taylor Hidalgo is an American person, an English student and a devout lover of words in the twilight hours of the night.

## Contributors

➤ Andrew Huntly is a British musician and film student currently gearing up for entering NaNoWriMo.

➤ Francisco Dominguez recently completed his degree in English Literature, which he uses to swat flies in Brighton between erratic fits of job-hunting and writing.

➤ Ethan Woods is a dashing handsome, thoroughly amateur writer and student of English and American Literature at the University of London.

➤ Zachary Britson is a hopeless gaming romantic studying computer sciences and Japanese at Northern Illinois University.

➤ Mike Grace from Great Britain is an aficionado of fine writing, fine games and “Fine, I’ll do it tomorrow.”

➤ Joshua Ens, hailing from Alberta, Canada, is a welder by trade and drunkard by choice.

# What we do...

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