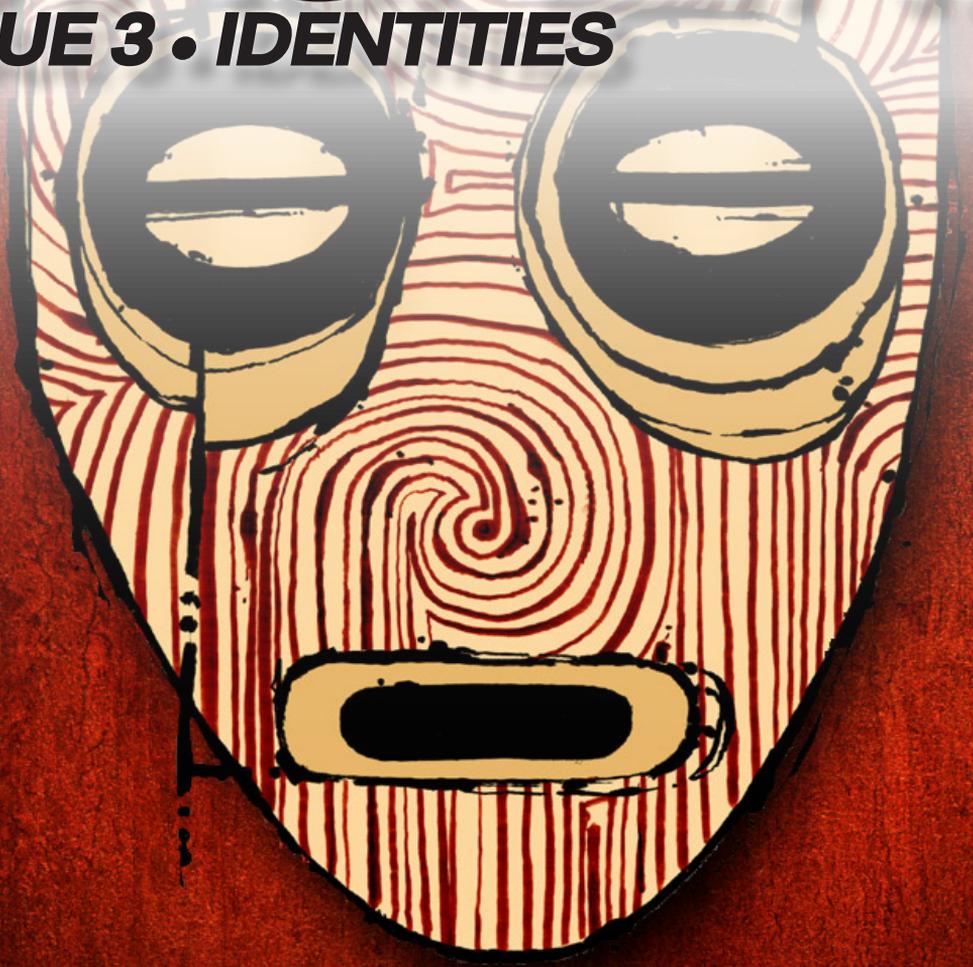


# **HAYWIRE MAGAZINE**

**ISSUE 3 • IDENTITIES**



I am a gamer. The term has something of a bad reputation in the kind of highbrow videogame writing we aim for. Many would like to see it fall out of general use, arguing that a specific term for people who play videogames reinforces social stigma. After all, we don't place these kind of labels on people for watching TV or reading books. It's just one of many perfectly normal activities they happen to enjoy.

There are also few events dedicated to competitive reading or movie watching. It seems to me a better comparison is the field of writing. Wordsmiths, too, are labelled with a term that at first glance only describes a perfectly mundane activity. Yet not everybody who writes is a writer, and not everybody who plays games might see themselves as a gamer. In either case the term is reserved not for those who write or play, but for those who do so regularly, passionately and define themselves via this love for words or games.

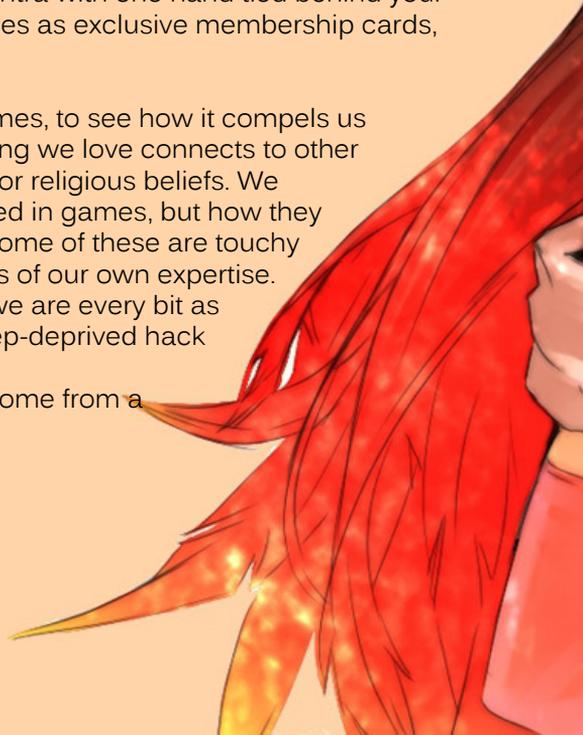
Many people enjoy these things without active devotion, which is perfectly fine, but for some they are more than just distractions. They are part of their lives, part of their identities. In relation to other media we differentiate avid readers, lovers of literature, audiophiles or cinephiles. If videogame enthusiasts (ludophiles?) want to show their love for the medium with a similar voluntary badge, I don't see why they shouldn't. And, well, gamer is a term that's already in common parlance.

Things only get muddy when we deny others this expression of self and try to hold them to some arbitrary standards. You're not a writer until you've published a book. You're not a writer until you've published a successful book. You're not a gamer until you've beaten *Dark Souls*. You're not a gamer until you've beaten *Super Meat Boy*. You're not a gamer until you've beaten *Contra* with one hand tied behind your back. Such rites of passage misinterpret the titles as exclusive membership cards, when really, they are declarations of love.

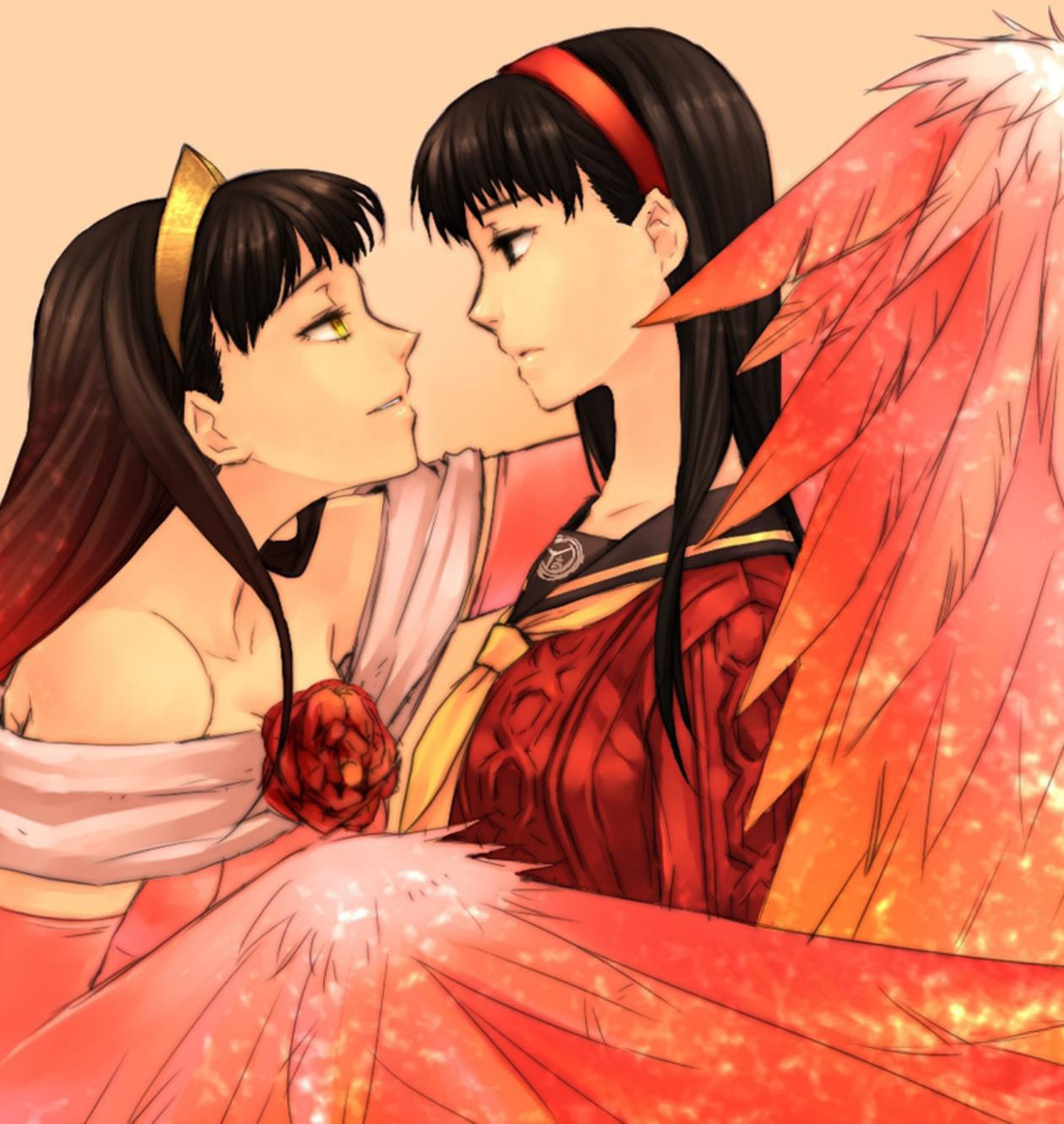
We dedicated this issue to that love for games, to see how it compels us and affects us, but past that, to see how the thing we love connects to other parts of our identity: gender, sexuality, political or religious beliefs. We explore not only how such matters are portrayed in games, but how they affect the interactions within our community. Some of these are touchy subjects and they have driven us to the borders of our own expertise. I have devoted countless hours to make sure we are every bit as respectful as we should, but I am only one sleep-deprived hack of an editor, and I doubt the results are perfect.

Bear with us on this one. Don't forget, we come from a place of love.

Cheers,  
Johannes Köller  
Editor-in-Chief



Yukiko Amagi encounters  
her shadow self in  
Persona 4



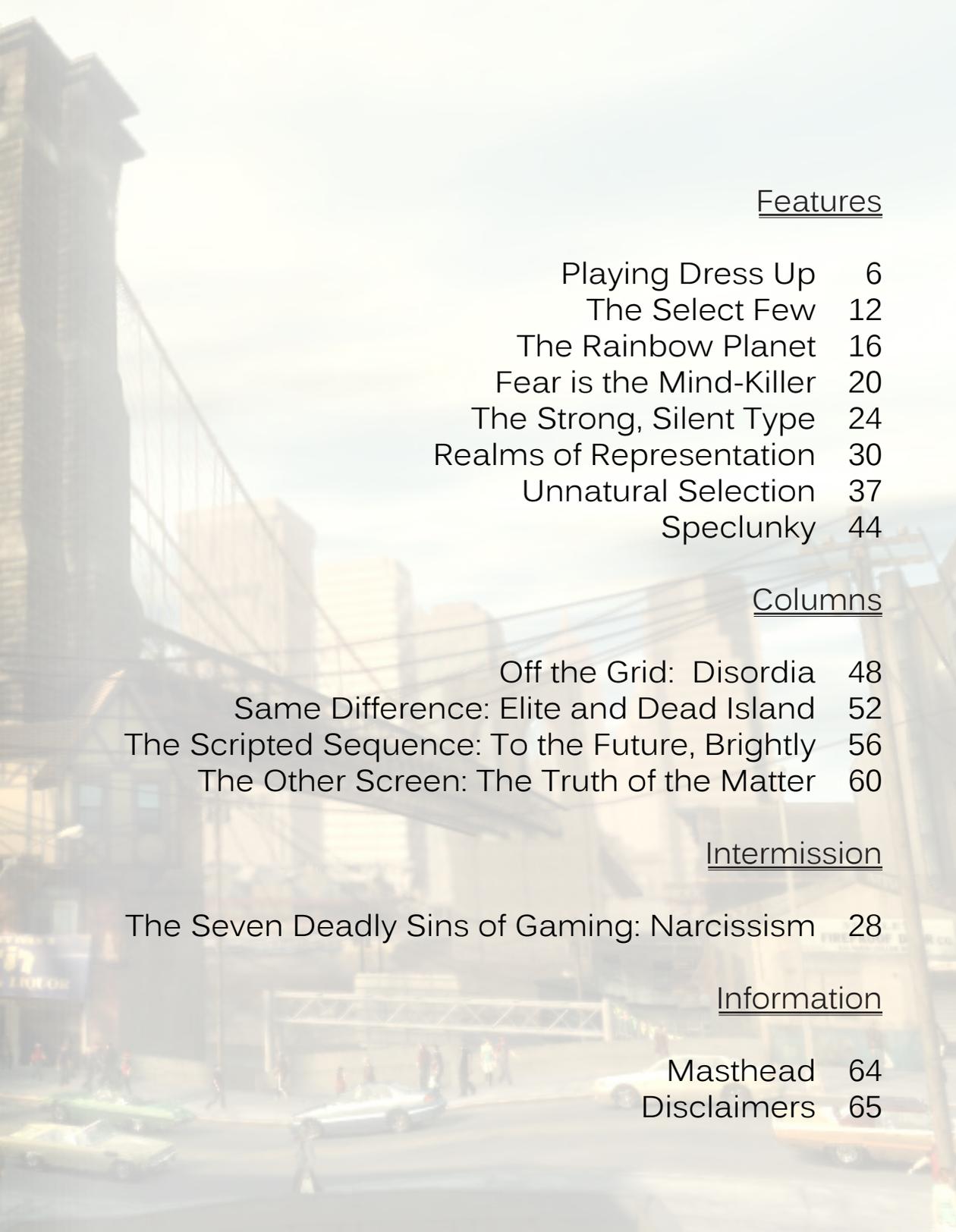
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# Playing Dress Up

Zachary Bricton shares his personal gaming quirk.

ENTER ACCEPT ESC BACK F1 RANDOMIZE

Give me half decent customization options and I'll easily sit at a character creation screen for over an hour. Twenty minutes on the jawline alone. Even if it's just a list of defaults I'll match every hairstyle with every kind of eyebrow available, with every mouth, with every shape and color of blush offered. It's a silly process of chin stroking where I interrogate myself over tedious details.

Bangs? No. How about blonde hair with darker eyebrows for contrast? And the default earrings look nice, so let's wear that hair up. Bring the nose forward a bit more, no, that's too much. Raise the cheekbones, a little eye shadow, perfect. And once I hit 'Create' the loading screen will fade to black, its reflection revealing a grown man. What am I doing here?

That I'm essentially playing with digital dolls makes me a little self-conscious, toy soldiers and Lego were really more my thing as a kid. But when it came to gaming I quickly developed this habit of playing the opposite sex at any opportunity. It went from the character creation screens of MMOs to those of more personal, choice-driven stories. I'd start playing favorites in games with party systems, always sure to bring the heroines of the adventure along. Within fighting games, too, even on a somewhat competitive level, I'd find myself only playing the girls of the roster, whether they were functionally ideal for me or not. If you ever looked at DLC offering nothing but cute costumes and wondered who'd buy such a thing, that would be me.

I'm not sure how this preference came to be, and by now it's developed into a clear bias. People are talking a lot about this new *Devil May Cry* reboot, for example, and let me just say that I would have thrown money at Capcom if they had made a female Dante. Thrown. Instead, I'm just waiting for the price to drop. Ramblings of a

fanboy's personal wish list aside, I can't help but wonder how weird this passion might sound. Perhaps it's a preference I should be comfortable with by now, yet after all these years there's the same air of insecurity about me at that computer screen. As if somebody's watching over my shoulder, mocking me as I make the final touch-ups to a woman's face.

Certainly the habit of not only designing her appearance but then also assuming her role has deeper implications, else where would this tinge of guilt and insecurity come from? Nor am I the only one who gets defensive over this practice. Ask any guy why he prefers the female option and he's likely to deflect the question with a noncommittal shrug. At best you'll hear how he'd rather stare at a woman's behind for hundreds of hours instead of a man's. The shallow justification neglects that the eye candy in question is our own avatar, and we do much more than stare at her form. Through her we interact with the world and she represents us within it. In relation to the game, we are her. But to think too deeply about a man's choice to play as a

lady is frequently seen as an attack on his masculinity.

In my early days of *World of Warcraft* I actually played as a male Orc warrior (seems nobody finds the desire to be big, green and nasty unusual), but as soon as the expansion hit I tossed that hulking monster aside like an outdated action figure, exchanging him for a female Blood Elf. It wasn't even a question; in fact, it would have been dishonest for me not to play as one. The ensuing awkward confrontations with friends and online acquaintances would be unavoidable, but I'd cope with it, laugh it off, and they'd adapt. Gender crossplay is nothing new, after all, and to be comfortable as myself in an MMO is worth any level of discomfort brought from others. It was a beautifully designed character and I wanted to play as one. Simple as that.

Of course, it wasn't all that simple, nor is it an entirely aesthetic decision. It's true there isn't much else going on at the creation screen beyond an effort to create an ideal beauty and if the models offered don't align with my personal taste for the feminine form, I find myself rolling males instead. Still,

the act of playing these characters means engaging on much more than a visual level. Sex appeal does seem to factor into this, and the need to play as not just any woman, but an attractive woman, invites Freudian analysis of the underlying desires: Men creating idealized virtual partners or expressing feminine identities.

Perhaps this holds true for some. I'm not one to dismiss the possibility, nor am I here to speak for all men.

In relation to the game, we are her. But to think too deeply about a man's choice to play as a lady is frequently seen as an attack on his masculinity.

Personally I find that hypersexualization of female character designs degrade the experience. Games such as *TERA Online* feature beautiful women, indeed, but why do their armor options range from lingerie to chainmail bikinis, and why can they

only cast spells with a generous gyration of the hips? I can't take such a world seriously, nor would I be able to take myself or my heroine seriously while partaking in it. I admire my characters, male or female, and to see them made into commodities instead of people is insulting on a personal level. In a way, my experience gender swapping has made me more aware of the issues of sexism apparent in our industry.

The Blood Elf character from  
World of Warcraft



But how deep does this personal connection to our avatars - the idea that I am her and she is me - really go? I can't help but disagree with the notion that anyone actually believes they are playing from a completely first person perspective, nor, conversely, that gaming is strictly a matter of third person observing. It has to be something in between. We are the puppeteers, but at the same time our puppets are much more than simple objects and their strings attached to much more than our fingers. For me, having a female ambassador represent me in a fantasy world just pulls the right strings, ones that I'm never able to pull in real life. They are a solution to my identity crisis, and though many see videogames as mere escapism, it is in that fiction that I look for a clearer picture of myself.

Behind that reasoning I think that, yes, it's partly a desire to be emasculated. I say this as a fairly boring heterosexual male who uses the term 'bro' far too liberally for his age, but also as a guy who's dealt with his share of social anxiety and pressure. As an introvert,

I often try to blend in with the crowd, however uncomfortable or unnatural that may feel. I'm open with a small circle of friends, but outside of that I'll try to misdirect attention to myself. To go against the grain of society's expectation is the hook that gaming offers for me. Entering a world as a woman, escaping your own sex and the roles assigned to it, and then to overcome them all at the same time is something

We are the puppeteers, but at the same time our puppets are much more than simple objects and their strings attached to much more than our fingers.

I find fascinating. Especially in an industry that continues to churn out clones of the same male heroes, as if every man likens himself to that outdated ideal.

Instead I look to my Blood Elf paladin and see power hidden behind beauty, strength in the form of grace, a petite woman, but one adorned in plate armor and carrying as many hit points as any man. She is compelling. A sort of underdog complex brings me to half-agree with the controversial comments of Ron Rosenberg, executive producer of the upcoming *Tomb Raider* reboot. He admitted that when a female character (in this case, the new Lara Croft) faces adversity, "you start to root

for her in a way that you might not root for a male character.” I can relate to that. But what had people riled up and me shaking my head was his earlier labeling of the player as Lara’s “helper”. The implication that I’m a guardian of virtual women, it’s never how I interpreted that relationship. Far from it, it’s their own courage that I find inspiring.

And so when people question why I play as a girl, I think the real source of embarrassment comes from just how personal the answer is for me. All the characters I’ve created and brought to

life, all the heroes and heroines, tragic and dashing, all these avatars, at one time or another, existed as extensions of myself, and in them my aspirations, insecurities and curiosities. Why a girl? Well, then why a boy? Why a dwarf? Why an ogre? It’s like asking “What makes you you?” I make these choices to express the sides of me that aren’t. Right now, after all this talk of gender, that might well be heavy lifting and a cold beer. But soon enough, it might be worrying about my makeup and styling.

**HW**



Lara Croft as she appears  
in the upcoming  
 *Tomb Raider* reboot

# The Select Few

Gamers want to speak on behalf of their medium, but what do they have to say? Johannes Köller on their current dialogue.



Last semester I had the tremendous opportunity of attending a course on videogames as part of an introduction to the study of media. It was an interesting chance to see how academia approaches our favorite digital distractions, but what was even more interesting was its audience. Since this is only one of several options that fill this peculiar

hole in our curriculum and it came with a convenient evening timeslot, it had attracted the enthusiastic and the uninitiated in almost equal measure.

The obvious next step would have been to bond with the fellow gamers over our shared passion, yet I quickly found myself preferring the comments and contributions of inexperienced

colleagues. They might have lacked our years of training, but approached the field with refreshingly open minds compared to the hardened veterans, who occupied themselves bickering over various ideological approaches.

We had not come to learn, because to hear us tell it, we already knew everything there was to know about games. To some they were profound metaphors, divinely cerebral arenas or social experiences to others, and each group laughed heartily at each other's alien concepts. Games, of course, can be all these things and many more, but that doesn't stop gamers - if I might use the term for now - from bashing heads in trying to define things. In our enthusiasm we like to see ourselves as the advocates and apostles of our favorite medium, but what apart from incessant infighting have we really ever achieved? Gamers, we are the worst.

Consider the recent brouhaha over whether or not Ed Key and David Kanaga's walkie feelie *Proteus* can truly be considered a game. I personally find the question of whether or not something constitutes a game rather inane - well, is it something you play? The specific rules and mechanics that

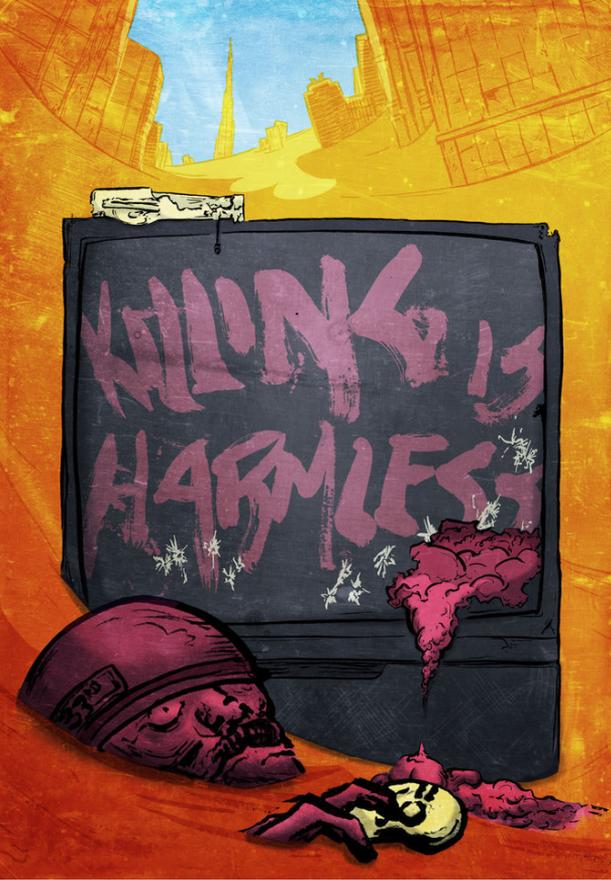
govern this interaction are interesting from a theoretical perspective, but few people ask the question because they want to discuss game design. We ask it because atypical specimen like *Proteus* conflict with our own views on what a game can be and we want a neat label to tell us just what it is. Only why is it so important that your own judgement be made universal? Some consider *Proteus* a game and others don't. That's fine.

The tendency to extrapolate universal rules from our own subjective experience collides with our supposed desire to see games as a medium and art form equal to movies or books. When Brendan Keogh decided to devote a full 50,000 words to *Spec Ops: The Line* with *Killing*

## Why is it so important that your own judgement be made universal?

*is Harmless*, many gamers dismissed the book outright because to them no game was worthy of such detailed analysis. Yet that is exactly what we do with art, we interpret and analyze it at great length. Others dismissed it because to them this specific game was not worthy of detailed analysis. Yet personal taste is not a determining factor in the interpretation of art.

The issue here is not that the discourse surrounding games is less than academic, but that it is frequently anti-



*Killing is Harmless*, Brendan Keogh's 50,000 word treatise on *Spec Ops: The Line* ¶

intellectual. You don't have to like or follow this kind of writing, but to deny it the right to even exist is ridiculous. You don't have to find *Spec Ops: The Line* as moving as some (myself included) did, but that doesn't mean said others are wrong or shouldn't be talking about their experience. As banal as the observation might be, it bears repeating that art, if that is the status we want to claim for games, is subjective. It means different things to different people, and none of these perspectives are wrong. It can be a scary thought to see your

own opinion as just one among many of equal worth, but to fight this insecurity by looking for 'definite' answers is to silence the most exhilarating discussion we could be having, the exchange between those with the most radically different perspectives and approaches.

Of course, such an exchange would require people of widely disparate opinions both accepting and entertaining contrary viewpoints. Perhaps it is an audacious thing to ask of a community that has grown so used to shouting matches and comforting anonymity, but I never subscribed to the idea that discussion on the internet will always be different and weird because that's just the way the internet is. It might well be that our community is uniquely entangled in wired communication, but is that not all the more reason to learn how to use it responsibly?

More importantly, it's not like cancerous arguments are something only trolls and lunatics engage in. They certainly do, and extensively so, but the practice is something we are all a little guilty of sometimes. I know I am. Recently some very clever games writers were, too. It began when Jonas Kyratzes responded to Mattie Brice's *Would You Kindly* with a piece titled *Would You Kindly Not*, superficially a poorly conceived response to her points about satire and power relations in videogames. But past disagreeing with

her perspective, Kyratzes went on to talk about her confessional mode of writing, thus rekindling a discussion started by Electron Dance's *The Ethics of Selling Children*.

A very specific subset of high-brow games criticism was suddenly set ablaze with controversy as the debate moved away from Brice's original argument to her preferred style, questioning not how effective it was or how well she employed it, but whether she and anybody else should be allowed to use confessional writing at all. Some rushed to her defense, others agreed with the attack. Her silence on the matter being held against her, Brice finally weighed in, venting her rightful frustration over how quickly the discussion with her had turned into an argument about her. Even now I am continuing that argument and subjecting her to its purpose.

Mattie Brice is a tremendous writer. I value her work immensely, and precisely because her perspective is so different from my own. I cannot begin to imagine what it must be like to live her life, but she has a gift for relaying the experience, alien as it might be to

myself, in clear and simple terms. I say this partly because I am in writerly love with her, but also to show what impact personal, confessional writing can have. It's not a style suited to all approaches or audiences, but I see no fundamental issues with it either.

The connecting thread of all these debates and discussions is the desire for simple, definite answers. Is it a game? Is this worth writing about? Is this the right way to write? There is no simple,

The issue here is not that the discourse surrounding games is less than academic, but that it is frequently anti-intellectual.

universal answer to these. *Proteus* is simultaneously a game and not a game, *Spec Ops: The Line* at once boring and interesting, and confessional writing both brilliant and silly. Even this claim is at once true and false, such is the quantum perspective of subjectivity.

There are many, many divergent opinions out there and to argue over them is great sport. But we don't need to prove which of them is conclusively best. They can co-exist peacefully.

**HW**

# The Rainbow Planet

With *The Old Republic*, Bioware fails to meet the standards it set for itself.

Andrew Huntly reporting from Makeb.

You would be hard pressed to find a more LGBT friendly developer than BioWare. Since *Jade Empire* and the presence of the bisexual characters Silk Fox and Sky, the Canadian studio has frequently attempted to reach homosexual audiences by providing suitable romantic conquests. There are other games that have included homosexual characters in their cast, but few can claim to have tackled the subject as directly and thoughtfully as BioWare.

Which makes it hard for me to question them. Personally, I have no doubt that the scribes at BioWare have their hearts in the right place. The

decision to include such (needlessly) controversial characters and romantic choices is one the studio has, for the most part, managed to downplay. The inclusion of Liara in the first *Mass Effect* was never handled with anything more than a handwave. While the game's lore attempted to cover her sexuality with talk of the singular and thus neutral gender of her species, her defined feminine appearance makes it impossible to ignore that she, and any female Commander Shepard that romances her, is not a character of the exclusively heterosexual persuasion.

The problem I have with BioWare is not the inclusion of homosexuality

in their games, far from it, but rather how the topic is included. In their 2009 throwback to RPG classics, *Dragon Age: Origins*, the team included two bisexual characters, one female and one male, out of a possible romanceable four. A very decent and fair split. Sprint over to the 2011 sequel and we again find four romanceable characters, except now they all appear to be bisexual. Or, to be more accurate, are open to courting by either a male or female protagonist. On the surface it seems like even greater forward thinking, a far more diverse and open pool in which players of all orientations can feel free to pick the virtual partner they wish. It even fits in with the medieval fantasy nature of the series.

There was, however, a sacrifice to be made in character consistency. One romance option was the mage Anders and depending on whether your character is male or female, his sexuality changes completely. Play a female and he's as straight as an arrow, with no desire for anyone with a Y chromosome. But play through the game as a male and he becomes the complete opposite, even having a male character implied to be his lover. This facet is never

once suggested if your playthrough is spearheaded by a female protagonist.

It's an awkward thing. BioWare wanted inclusivity, but to do so in such a brash, brazen and almost tactless fashion sours the intent. It was no longer about characterization and what it meant for that character to be gay. Instead, the portrayal of homosexuality was completely removed from the characters themselves. It's so very unfortunate to use such a word, but the way the subject was handled was

BioWare wanted inclusivity, but to do so in such a brash, brazen and almost tactless fashion sours the intent.

pandering, catering only to the audience and never to the story or the characters. Homosexuality was reduced to an appeasement policy.

But then, BioWare got it right. *Mass Effect 3* had some of the finest

examples of gay characters in gaming. Liara remained, but accompanying her were two new characters, Cortez and Traynor. Cortez was an exclusively homosexual option for male Shepard, while Traynor was an exclusive option for female Shepards. Their sexuality was wonderfully underplayed. The only times they spoke explicitly of their sexuality was when Cortez mentioned his late husband and Traynor spoke of her affection for EDI's feminine voice.

It was a subtlety the broad sweep of *Dragon Age 2* failed to match, and turned Cortez and Traynor into actual romantic options. They weren't just "the gay option," but fully developed characters in their own right, who just happened to be homosexual. They were people, with lives and dreams and thoughts, not thrown onto Shepard's ship to play to his or her inquisitive sexual side. To have characters that were exclusively gay and yet so unburdened by it was refreshing and far more progressive than the sweet-hearted but wrong-headed desire to cater to everyone.

More recently, details on the long awaited inclusion of homosexual characters in BioWare's MMO *Star Wars: The Old*

*Republic* were finally announced. Both gay fans and avid roleplayers have been asking for this since the inception of the game, and it's only now that the plans have come to fruition. Unfortunately for all involved, they're something of a dud. Homosexual interactions will be limited to one new planet, Makeb, itself part of the *Rise of the Hutt Cartel* expansion and thus locked behind a paywall.

Makeb is not exclusively dedicated

to LGBT content (it is, in fact, the only planet in the new expansion) and it would be inaccurate to call it "the gay planet," as others have. But for a part of the game that players have long asked for and BioWare long vowed to include to be added this late and with a price tag attached is bound to sting. BioWare cites as the reason for this unsatisfactory solution the complexity of retrofitting the entire game with altered dialogue and voice acting. The decision is presumably connected to

To entangle equality in cold business decisions paints the company as mercenary.

the game's recent transition to the free-to-play business model: It has not proven as profitable as they hoped and tinkering with old content is unlikely to make returns. But to entangle equality in cold

business decisions paints the company as mercenary.

Such a lazy compromise pleases no one. The righteous indignation of bigoted homophobes does not depend on the amount of homosexuality you include, as the previous outrage over optional gay relationships shows. BioWare has weathered this kind of hate before and I respect their willingness to expose themselves to such 'controversy'. But by restricting same-sex interaction

to one planet, they have upset those campaigning for virtual equality as well.

I don't believe BioWare acted out of malice or even disinterest, but whatever good intentions they might have had were undone by a lack of ambition. *The Old Republic* fails by assuming that providing homosexual interactions was enough, regardless of context. *Dragon Age 2* failed to represent homosexuality because it was too broad and malleable. *Mass Effect 3* still stands above both,

proudly open-minded in an intelligent and meaningful way. It acknowledged that sexuality is just a part of a person. A tiny part, really. There are so many facets and sides mixed into human beings, desires that are more complex than a lust for one sex or the other. A person is so much more than their sexual orientation. Such a thing stands true for both characters, and for players.

**HW**

Mass Effect 3's  
Commander  
Shepard embraces his partner



# Fear Is the Mind-Killer

Gamers are fighting demons of their own creation, and it needs to stop. Johannes Köller asking for a little courage.

ShrineNI is a Youtube user like any other, with a small share of instructional videos for *World of Warcraft* and a perfectly negligible following. Two months ago, however, he earned a bit of notoriety when *Kotaku's* Patricia Hernandez questioned his suggested course of action. And what might that be? "A few of the places you might find girl gamers hiding are in capital cities and PvE servers, in order to avoid dying. But I can assure you, if you follow this guide you're gonna have these attention whores logging off in no time."

You see, Shrine is a man with a mission, fighting the good fight to keep his game free from the corrupting

influence of women. Their crime? Their gender, and having the nerve to openly show it on the internet. Having his idiotically sexist quest exposed caused a bit of backlash, but what good soldier would abandon their duty in the face of adversity? Shrine, of course, knew just how to respond to *Kotaku's* article: "Just because of that article I'm going to devote every waking second of my life to making girl gamer lives difficult. You haven't seen the last of me:"

Between the fake nerd girl craze and killer nuns in bondage gear, the Anita Sarkeesians and the Jennifer Heplers, Shrine's somewhat successful attempts to rally his fellow men to harass female

gamers are sadly just one of many, many examples of the rampant sexism that haunts our medium, and far from the most important. But his crusade is interesting to consider because it so clearly betrays the emotion at the heart of these misguided struggles: Fear.

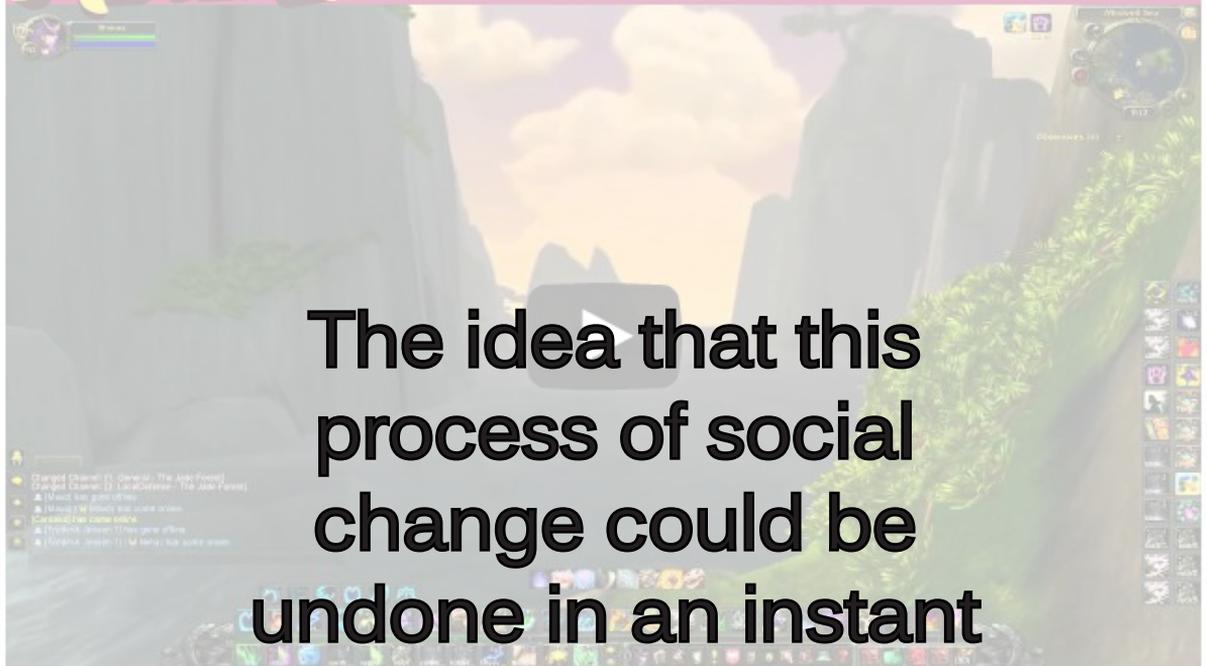
Shrine and his ilk would want you to think that they are driven by anger, mad with a righteous fury, but that is only partly true. They are mad alright, but anger is the effect, not the cause. After all, what exactly drives him to hunt down female gamers? "It just goes to show that you don't need quality gameplay or a good quality stream to get viewers on Twitch, just as long as you have a vagina." Trying to rationalize their success in the competition for views, he assumes that anybody watching these women's streams must have fallen victim to female mind control. As we all know men are basically powerless against feminine wiles and obviously anybody more successful than him must be cheating somehow. So he must destroy that which he cannot understand, because it scares him.

Fear is an undeniably powerful motivation, but it's also irrational. It drives you towards rash decisions based more on crude instincts than conscious thought. It poisons any attempt of reasonable discussion. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate to suffering. We all know this, and yet

so many gamers succumb to the dark side, stooping to the most shameful and disgusting behavior imaginable. Shrine's kindergarten antics of pulling pigtaails and kicking shins are almost harmless compared to the kind of bullying our community is capable of when it unites against a common foe.

I am talking, of course, about Anita Sarkeesian. Yes, her. Again. I can hear you groan, but let's not forget the sheer amount of hate and abuse she faced for daring to suggest a critical examination of gender roles in videogames. Personal abuse, doctored images, hacking attempts, revolting Flash games, anything to silence her before she might force us to entertain uncomfortable thoughts. This violent outrage needs to be seen for what it was: Hordes of grown men terrified, scared shitless by the prospect of a woman sharing her perspective on Youtube.

Why? Because she hit a nerve. Because a considerable fraction of our community is still afraid that if we don't pay attention, people might take our precious videogames away from us. This particular fear is rooted in our past of being seen as weirdos obsessed with children's toys, an unfortunate image that has been slowly changing as our medium reaches widespread acceptance, for instance in the shape of the decision by the Supreme Court of the United States to protect it as part of free speech



The idea that this process of social change could be undone in an instant is bizarre, the idea that it could be undone by a single woman nothing short of ridiculous.

## SEXISM

Faith In Humanity Slowly Depleting: This Jerk And His Supporters Find Joy In Harassing Women Gamers

91,001 1,592 1.2k

Patricia Hernandez

New year, new cretins who hate women

who dare to like video games. Here are a couple of videos by [YouTube user ShrineNI](#) where he tells people how to go about finding and harassing women gamers, particularly those who stream on services like TwitchTV and play *World of Warcraft*. His main gripe seems to be that they are attractive and are 'using' that against men who are too stupid to resist falling for them and then donating to them (his reasoning, not mine.)

Juicy tidbits from the description of the video above:

22

They're a 4/10 in the real world, but a 9/10 in the gaming world.

alongside books and films.

The idea that this process of social change could be undone in an instant is bizarre, the idea that it could be undone by a single woman nothing short of ridiculous. We cannot let this fear govern our actions, if nothing else then for the fact that this kind of behavior certainly isn't helping our cause. Trying to hide the problematic sides of our medium rather than owning up to them only makes us look guilty. One woman wants to explore whether games might be sexist and our community jumps to attention to prove that they damn sure are.

Things have slowed down since the end of Sarkeesian's Kickstarter campaign, but gamers remain doubtful. People have gone on to question her credentials, wondering whether she's a real gamer or a real academic - next you'll tell me you're not even convinced she's a real person.

On the other end of the spectrum, she is being reproached for having yet

to revolutionize our discourse of gender and gaming. I resent that. I resent that because, while masquerading as valid concerns, these arguments are intended to cut the discussion short, to discredit Sarkeesian without having to hear her out. How about we discuss her arguments based on content, based on merit?

Because we can. We can let her present her views, negative or not, and nothing's going to happen. It might be a scary prospect, but that's the other thing about fear: It's all in your head. Insignificant heights turn into deadly drops, small animals into unimaginable terrors and creaking doors into lurking murderers. Nothing is ever as dangerous and terrifying as your mind paints it, so don't let terror govern your life. Be not afraid.

Shrine, if you ever read this, I want you to know something: It's alright. Nobody's out to get you, nobody wants to hurt you. Shhhh, it's okay.

**HW**

# The Strong, Silent Type

What makes a man?  
Tosy Mahapatra pokes the  
miserable pile  
of secrets.



There's a lot to be said of the unrealistic portrayal of women in videogames, but the representation of men isn't much better. The fact tends to be appropriated by those who seek to excuse or downplay the sexism in our community by pointing out that, hey, men have it just as bad as women. No, we really don't. We aren't singled out and harassed over our gender, for instance, even if some would try to convince you of deeply rooted conspiracies of misandry. All this nonsense aside, the fact remains: the notion of masculinity in our medium is just as bizarre, sexualized and worrying as its feminine counterpart.

Our male characters are based

on outdated notions of masculinity centered around such concepts as physical superiority, patriotic fervor and valor, combined with the apparently defining male emotions of rage and angst, or a combination of both. Between Nathan Drake, Captain Price and Cole McGrath, the 30 year-old white male with a chip on his shoulder is today's standard protagonist and the archetype has been around for a while. Some argue that these characters are tailored to their audiences, that the majority of gamers are white men in their twenties.

Whether this assumption is still true or has ever been true at all, the

argument doesn't hold up. If we cannot be trusted to relate to somebody of a different race or gender, if the experience on screen needs to mirror our own life, how could we relate to something as fantastical as Nathan Drake's struggles at all? Yet we clearly can. Only must his characterization be as unrealistic as his adventures? Our medium uses larger than life narratives for escapism, but do the one-dimensional motivations of a character defined by their gender add to that, or are they missing an opportunity to ground the fantastical in the real and believable?

Consider the defining damsel in distress of our medium, Princess Peach. She is helpless, never showing any aggression towards her captors, and Mario just needs to save her. But it is never clear why that is the case. Is he driven by a chivalrous duty owed to his girlfriend, or a patriotic duty to his sovereign? Is he defending her honor? Is he in love with her? Does he just enjoy beating up Bowser? Instead of exploring Mario's motivations, it's assumed that

being a man and Peach being in need of help is sufficient justification to risk his life. Some 27 years worth of videogames have expanded on the idea since the first *Super Mario Bros.*, to the point where *Super Princess Peach* reversed the gender roles. Nonetheless, the original formula of hero and princess still defines most relationships in our medium.

Worse, this role distribution has turned sexuality in videogames into a field for male characters to express their dominance and woo women with their physical forms. From Kratos to Geralt, sex is shown as a reward for being powerful, while *GTA* protagonists can buy as many women as they please with their financial might. This representation of heterosexuality

If gamers were more accustomed to seeing female or gay characters showing dominance and saving the world, would they still be so quick to throw around gendered or homophobic insults on Xbox Live?

might feed into the worrying behavior of our community. If gamers were more accustomed to seeing female or gay characters showing dominance and saving the world, would they still be so quick to throw around gendered or homophobic insults on Xbox Live?

The issue here is not that our male protagonists follow certain ideals of

chivalry and valor, but that they do so without explanation or exploration, masking their decision to hold to these specific standards as a natural male quality rather than showing it for what it really is, a choice. What games present as natural clashes with our experience in the real world: We know that masculinity is about more than being physically strong and refusing to talk about your feelings, and we know that men aren't exclusively defined by masculine traits. Real people aren't defined by their gender, it's merely a part of them.

With all that in mind, can developers ever create more believable protagonists? They can, and they have been doing so for years. Many modern RPGs sidestep the issue by allowing players to model

their own character, and create their own identity. Beyond that, *Psychonauts'* Raz or *Phoenix Wright's* titular hero show how relatable characters can be when they are capable of expressing a full spectrum of emotions. *Persona 4* is remarkable not just for the unusual gender identities of its teenage cast, but for the way they respond to these issues.

The traditional videogame tales of princesses and worlds in danger will not go away any time soon, but we could at least admit that the desire to save both is no inherently male feature. If we go beyond the notions of masculinity presented by gun-toting stoics to ask why they follow this specific ideal, they gain depth without having to change on the surface.

**HW**

*Persona 4's Kanji Tatsumi frequently muses on what it means to be a man while wrestling with his own sexual identity*



*Intermission...*

# The Seven Deadly Sins of Gaming: Narcissism by Proxy

What's that? You have a whole folder dedicated to pictures of your character? Not just pictures, but fan-fiction based on your exploits? And how you saved the lives of the Heroes of the Realm?

No, seriously, please show me everything about your character, his armor, his weapon of choice and the contents of his backpack. In excruciating detail, too. Tell me about how, as a baby, he survived the attack on his village that killed everything, including his parents, who, coincidentally, are named after yours.

I'm sorry. His parents didn't die immediately, how silly of me to forget. They lived for three days while he stood vigil over them, their only wish to impart the knowledge of your battle cry. A battle cry that I notice you have hot-keyed onto your attack button so that it sounds every time you go into combat, a feat that would surely collapse a normal larynx simply from the fifteen separate syllables. That you utter with every swing of your two Dwarven battle-axes. That were made by the finest Dwarven battle-axe makers in the kingdom and that you happened to find hidden in that chest just behind the Zombie Lord, on your seventeenth try.

What were their names again? Wesson and Smith? What a shocking coincidence. I mean the odds of two Dwarves, who bear names based on the exploits of their fathers, being named after a United States gun manufacturer are astronomical. Especially when you consider that one of them is called Colt, and the other Derringer.

But I digress, tell me more about your Dwarf: What is his favourite food? Misty Picnic Baskets?

Surely that's quite difficult to carry around? No? Well, then who makes the baskets? He does?

Now this is interesting, where would a Barbarian Dwarf, orphaned at an early age, on a dark and stormy night, under a full moon, whose name happens to be Gumli Ashenshield, ever learn about basket weaving?

Oh, you've left. How sad! That was starting to be interesting.

## *The Seven Rules of Narcissism by Proxy*

- 1 · Interruption gives you the initiative.*
- 2 · Creatures from another realm have an innate understanding of 21st Century Earth. This is typified in everything they say or do.*
- 3 · Orc or Blue characters don't have stereotypes. Brown, Elven or Female do.*
- 4 · Originality means you never get noticed. Always plagiarize.*
- 5 · Certain phrases are hilarious and never get old. Ever.*
- 6 · Reasons are explained elsewhere. True fans have been here since beta.*
- 7 · Noticed is more important than useful.*
- 8 · Never accept limits.*

The Fifth Circle of Gaming Hell, The Endless Mirrors, reaches out between the Marshes and the Canyons. Each tiny character is surrounded by multi-faceted mirrors that show them in the greatest possible light, a paragon of utter perfection. Except one. One facet shows the player, dressed as a clown, trying to make every other character look at them. And the only way to look at other people is through that singular facet.

**HW**



# Realms of Representation

Johannes Köller talked to Regina McMenemy about academia, feminism and gaming.

If you're interested in the connections of gender and gaming, chances are you've already run into the works of Dr. Regina McMenemy, podcastress deluxe. Together with her co-host Rhonda Oglesby she discusses issues of roleplaying, identity and geek culture every week over on *Game on Girl*. Today she's joining us for a chat about the project, her research and plans for the future.

**Regina McMenemy:** Thanks for inviting me.

**Haywire:** Anytime. Now, unlike most podcasts out there, you base your

discussions not only on a passion for games but also a PhD thesis studying MMOs and their players. Could you introduce us to your research?

**RM:** For my dissertation research, I conducted interviews with 30 female gamers, mostly MMO players, but the basic requirement was that they had played a game with avatar creation options. I asked them what types of characters they played and what kinds of choices they made when selecting an avatar: hair color, skin color, race, class, etc. I wanted to look at a lot of the general assumptions around women

gamers, most of which turned out to be entirely wrong.

One big assumption was that female gamers play healers because they want to take care of the group, but every female healer I talked to said they preferred the role because it took more skill than just doing damage or even tanking. For them healing means staying on top of your game. The only person who said she liked to take care of the group did, in fact, play a tank. This was an idea I hadn't seen expressed in gaming research before and really challenged the stereotype of the female gamer.

The podcast allows me to continue doing interviews and talking to gamers about what they love about gaming. I developed three gamer types through my data analysis - self, role and mastery players - and we use those types regularly on the show to talk about how people approach or engage in gaming. It's been a blast to see the types take on a life of their own through the podcast. I wanted a large audience for my research and the podcast has allowed me to reach a lot more people, and a much more diverse audience than a traditional academic publication might have done.

*HW:* Are you planning to continue your research based on that response?

*RM:* Essentially, yes. We started the podcast interviews with the questions I used in the dissertation study and have

been adapting them since then. We've added in a few, including some new thoughts and ideas that came out of the interviews themselves. It's become a living thing in a way.

*HW:* Will you be expanding on the theoretical framework and quantitative study of your initial paper then? You certainly have access to more data now.

*RM:* Well the theoretical framework is expanding. We consider how the gamer types interact with different game mechanics and trends. For example, we're looking at the idea of permadeath and the gamer types now. It's an interesting idea and I've been curious to see how the different types react to actual loss in game. I'm not sure I would have considered this avenue of research or been able to gather reactions so quickly if I had been writing an academic publication now.

I am talking with an academic publisher about turning the dissertation and the new work from the podcast into a book. I just haven't had a lot of time to write between my teaching schedule and the podcast. Hoping to take some time to focus on writing over the summer.

*HW:* I was curious if the podcast had become your sole mode of publication. While it certainly opens up the discussion for a wider audience, I can't help but wonder how the internet's tenet of much noise and little signal

affects the idea of peer review.

**RM:** I haven't really decided what direction I want to take in terms of publication, but I've made some strong career decisions that take me away from needing to publish in a peer reviewed format. I don't want a tenure track professorship. At all. It was the path I thought I would head down when I started my doctoral program but I realized early on that the things I care about aren't really valued by the tenure process. I'd rather have a mosaic career, where I work on contract, and pursue my own writing and publishing goals. I'm not thrilled about the lack of security, especially since I never know how much money I'll have coming in semester to semester, but that is a risk I'm willing to take to have the academic freedom I have right now.

I loved working on my dissertation but there are always compromises you have to make in that process, to please your committee or the grad school. I don't have to compromise this way and I feel excited about what we're producing and thrilled to see where it's going to take me. It's different and alternative, for sure, but it's also full of heart and

soul, something I find the academy sadly lacks.

**HW:** Working with the internet certainly is different, and the gaming community specifically has a tendency to snap at the kind of gender-related questions you are asking. Any negative experiences in that regard?

**RM:** Not as of yet. Most of the feedback I've gotten on the podcast, both from the general gaming community and my academic one, has been positive. Although the focus for the dissertation

There is something to be said for the ovaries to the wall brand of feminism. My approach is a little sneakier, I think.

was on female gamers, the ideas about identity apply quite easily to both genders. One of the most exciting things for me about the podcast was being able to interview male gamers and see that the same theme

emerge from their interviews as well. I've never wanted *Game on Girl* to exclude male gamers, that is one reason why our first live interviews for the show were guys. Gender stereotypes impact all gamers and talking about those issues is an important part of what I want to do with the podcast and my research.

**HW:** What do you make of the violent backlash to other projects, like Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women* idea?



Image courtesy [www.feministfrequency.com/about](http://www.feministfrequency.com/about)

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◀◀◀ In June 2012, Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* Kickstarter campaign became an unexpected success, with funding \$150,000 in excess of its modest \$6,000 request. A viciously misogynistic backlash soon followed, casting more light than ever before on the malignant attitudes and ideas of certain web and gaming communities.

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**RM:** Such an unfortunate display of digital misogyny. I'm sure you're familiar with Penny Arcade's *Internet Fuck Wad Theory*. This seems a prime example of that concept set on fire. I am not quite sure what it is about Sarkeesian's work that has sparked such a strong reaction. I can't help but think it's because she got so much support for it so quickly. I think there can be a lot of resentment toward successful women, especially when they are looking at issues in media that many people would rather ignore, like a topic that will probably reveal a fair amount of sexism in the portrayal of female characters in game.

I admire Sarkeesian. She is totally out there with her feminist viewpoints and stands up to the harassment. It can't be easy. It's not even easy to face sexism in smaller doses. A friend recently shared a story with me about how she was

congratulated at work with an "atta boy" comment. So completely inappropriate. She works in a male dominated field and knows that if she says something about the inherent sexism in that comment she will be labeled as difficult to work with and it might hurt future promotions. This isn't anything near the level of sexism that Sarkeesian faces but it is the kind of thing many women face on a daily basis. The internet tends to magnify everything, good and bad, and that is something all of us producing content need to keep in mind.

**HW:** How should we deal with that fact, though? It seems that the people who need your perspective the most are always the least willing to hear it.

**RM:** There is something to be said for the ovaries to the wall brand of feminism. My approach is a little sneakier, I think. I like to lead by

example. It was early in my teaching career when I realized how true the old adage of you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink really is. I can talk to my students for days about how writing is important and how they need to expand their point of view. But that doesn't have the same kind of impact as posing a question to them and letting them grapple with it and then opening it up to the entire class for discussion.

I often use downloading music illegally in my first year composition classes as a discussion point. Since that course often serves a younger population, most of them have downloaded some (or all) of their music without paying for it. They don't consider what that means. It's easy. It's free. When I stand in front of them and say I pay for every piece of music I own, they first look at me like I'm crazy, but through the discussions they often start to see the issue differently. I try not to preach. I just state how and why it is important to me to acknowledge the work done by those artists. It's a perspective they haven't considered. Do they stop illegally downloading music? I doubt it but if it makes them pause and consider what they are doing, I consider that a win.

I like to treat the issues around gender the same way. One of the really important ways to do that I think is to acknowledge that sexism works both

ways. Men are subjected to ideal forms of masculinity and that can be very limiting to personal identity as well. Because much of western culture leans towards patriarchy, that form of sexism doesn't have the same impact it might have on women, but it still exists. That is one way, I think, we might go about approaching those crazy, loud outliers. Acknowledging that they might be facing the same kind of issues in their own lives.

**HW:** Before we go too far into how to fix society, could you tell us about the growth of *Game on Girl?* You've recently been taking on new contributors and publishing more written content. How much control do you exercise over the site?

**RM:** One of the main reasons I wanted to start a podcast based on my dissertation research was to continue to engage the community that I started through the interviews. I started the podcast on my own, not really sure where I wanted to go with it, but feeling like it was the start of something big. When I started looking for a co-host I had a few people in mind that had followed the project from the beginning. Rhonda was one of those people. She jumped on board and it's become one of the best collaborations I've ever experienced in my life. We balance each other perfectly.

As the podcast grew, more people were getting in touch with me about

their own thoughts about the topics we were covering. In many cases they were people we had already interviewed and had a great time with on the show. So I started thinking about all the many ways I could continue to collaborate with more people on these topics. Recruiting writers for the site seemed the next logical step.

I put my mind to work and came up with a short list of writers I knew that might be interested in contributing. They've all been guests on the show and have long-standing interests in gender and game culture. Most of the time they have complete control over the topics they want to write about, only sometimes we discuss ideas or topics in recent news that we should probably cover. I let them know from the beginning that I don't want *Game on Girl* to be a news site. I don't want summaries or straight news stories. I want it to be a place of reflection for them as writers and gamers and individuals. I'm pleased with the stories that they are producing

and the engagement we're seeing on the site. They're provocative and engaging people and that shows in their writing.

**HW:** Do you have a particular direction in mind for the future? Representations of geek culture, gender issues inside and outside of gaming, more general writing?

**RM:** We've already ventured past the main topic I started with - female gamers and identity - and into pop culture and broader web culture analysis. These were both topics that came up quite a bit during the interviews and ran as a secondary theme through the dissertation. A lot of the definitions of "How do you define a gamer?" included engaging in geek and game culture, either online in forums or at cons or other geek gatherings.

This year, Rhonda and I are taking the podcast on the road together. We're doing our first panel at PAX East in March and we'll be live podcasting and hosting panels at DragonCon as well. So I guess the next big thing for *Game*

I haven't really decided what direction I want to take in terms of publication, but I've made some strong career decisions that take me away from needing to publish in a peer reviewed format. I don't want a tenure track professorship.

on *Girl* is to get even more involved in the game community.

As a side note, this will also be the first time Rhonda and I meet in person. It's really exciting because we've become great friends over the last year and now we get to spend some time gaming, hanging out and promoting the podcast. I am constantly amazed at the way we can connect with and build friendships and community through gaming and similar intersects. It's so unbelievably powerful.

**HW:** Let's say you get one magical email and whoever you ask will agree to be on the podcast. Who do you get?

**RM:** Can it be a small gathering of people? Okay. I would ask Felicia Day, runner-up being Wil Wheaton. I

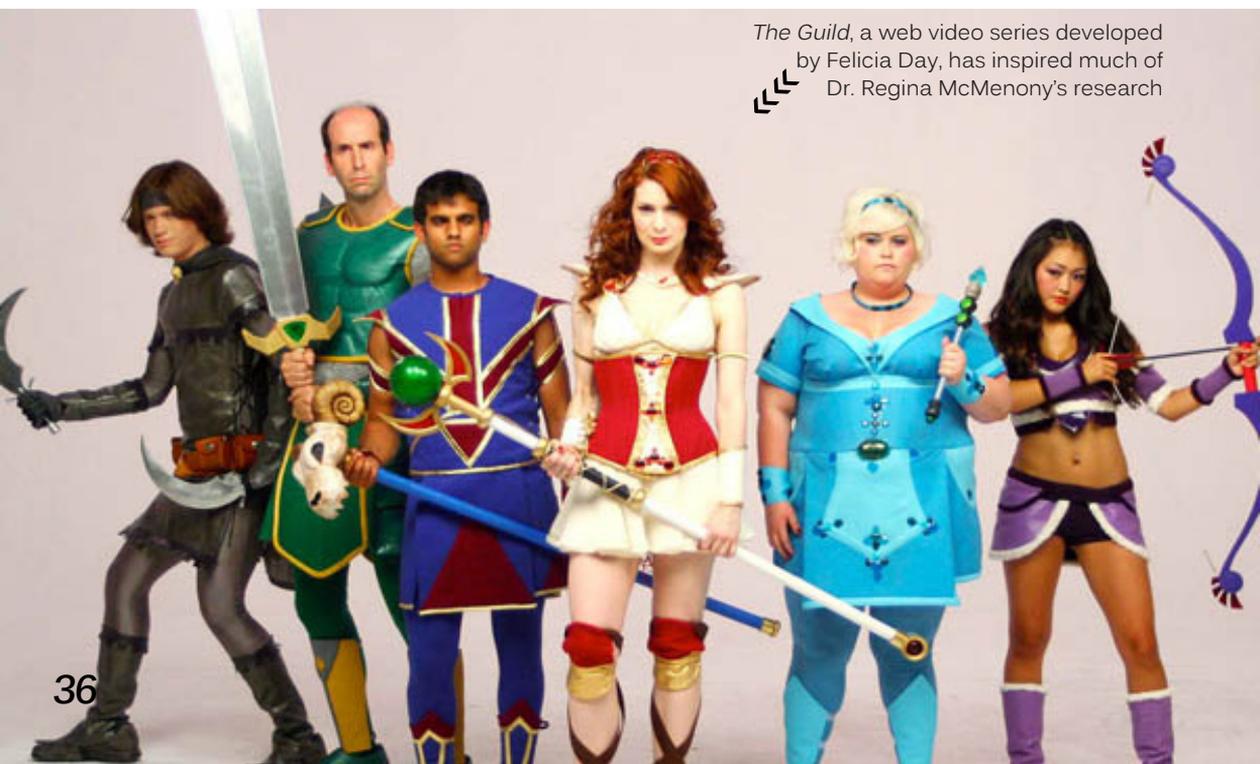
really admire Day. Her commitment to *The Guild* and now to *Geek and Sundry* is part of what inspired me to launch the podcast. Sometimes you have to take your future into your own hands and seeing how successful she's been with her projects really got me thinking about what I could do myself.

It doesn't hurt that she's a gamer, or that *The Guild* inspired so much of my research, or that she's a great conversationalist with a huge geeky following. It's a pipe dream but I'm firmly of the mind it never hurts to dream.

**HW:** Well, Felicia, if you ever read this, be sure to drop her a line. Thanks for joining us Regina, it was a pleasure.

**HW**

*The Guild*, a web video series developed by Felicia Day, has inspired much of Dr. Regina McMemony's research





# Unnatural Selection

Francisco Dominguez attended BAFTA's *Tomb Raider* preview in London for us.

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A swanky West End theater, just down the road from Piccadilly Circus, was an unlikely host for a *Tomb Raider* preview. Despite its substantial commitment to the field, gaming is still the odd one out among interests of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, hosts of the event. The culture divide felt obvious as I passed through a softly lit bar full of smartly dressed people seated on plush upholstery. One more stairway took me to an area where too many people crowded around too few screens. Game demos. Posters. Teenagers in hoodies. That's more like it.

Funnelled into the auditorium, we

took our inordinately comfortable seats to hear studio head Noah Hughes and creative director Darrell Gallagher share the story of how Crystal Dynamics found the "*Tomb Raider* DNA". It began with *Guardian of Light's* success. Seen as proof that a fresh approach to *Tomb Raider* could work, a planned sequel switched to the invigorating prospect of a reboot. That brief sense of liberty, however, quickly faded once the breadth of obligations to the brand and to the fans became clear. Even with a clean slate, Crystal Dynamics felt a duty to retain the essence of the franchise they inherited six years ago.

So, how do you locate the core of a 17 year old series? An intensive internal debate within Crystal Dynamics endeavored to find out. Gallagher insisted that he maintained editorial control of the studio's decisions, and that the game was all the better for it: "Group feedback is great, but consensus can spin you in all sorts of directions."

The aim was to forge a strong emotional affiliation between the player and Lara and a gruelling game experience was Crystal Dynamics' means to achieve that goal. Operating from the belief that "the stories that we remember aren't the ones that are easy," a set of harrowing true stories circulated among the staff to illustrate the desired "emotional weight". Examples included the Andes Flight Disaster, a plane crash that had survivors resort to cannibalism, and Aron Ralston, a mountaineer who cut off his own arm to free himself from the boulder it was trapped under.

Now that they had picked an emotional tone, gameplay could be designed to support it. Crystal Dynamics' "Survival-Action" style was

devised as a combination of the "three pillars" of traditional *Tomb Raider* gameplay: traversal, combat and puzzles. All were tweaked to complement the new approach. Traversal became treacherous, paths changing as Lara uses them. Combat is now intended to be desperate and overwhelming. And puzzles use physics simulations, not fiddly block pushing, indicative of Lara's resourcefulness.

A high level plot treatment, art samples, game scenario overviews and lots of other information were compiled into a terrifyingly vast spreadsheet.

Mixing three broad game styles hardly ensures a textured emotional experience. Recognizing this, Crystal Dynamics brought in the artist's constant friend, Microsoft Excel, to aid the careful structure and sequencing of game scenarios for heightened effect.

No, really. A high level plot treatment, art samples, game scenario overviews and lots of other information were compiled into a terrifyingly vast spreadsheet. Mood is defined by a color key. Scarily extensive categorization like this provides the framework to many other powerful game experiences, but seeing it laid out like that was an impressive, if oddly clinical, sight.

And what of Lara, the target of this calculated chain of perilous situations? In a Q&A later that evening, writer Rhianna Pratchett described her early reluctance to write the character. Once a keen fan, her enthusiasm gradually turned to apathy as Lara's design calcified into "a pair of boobs with a pair of pistols." But the re-imagined Lara's early concept art displayed unexpected potential. Today, the imagery of a bow feels stale.

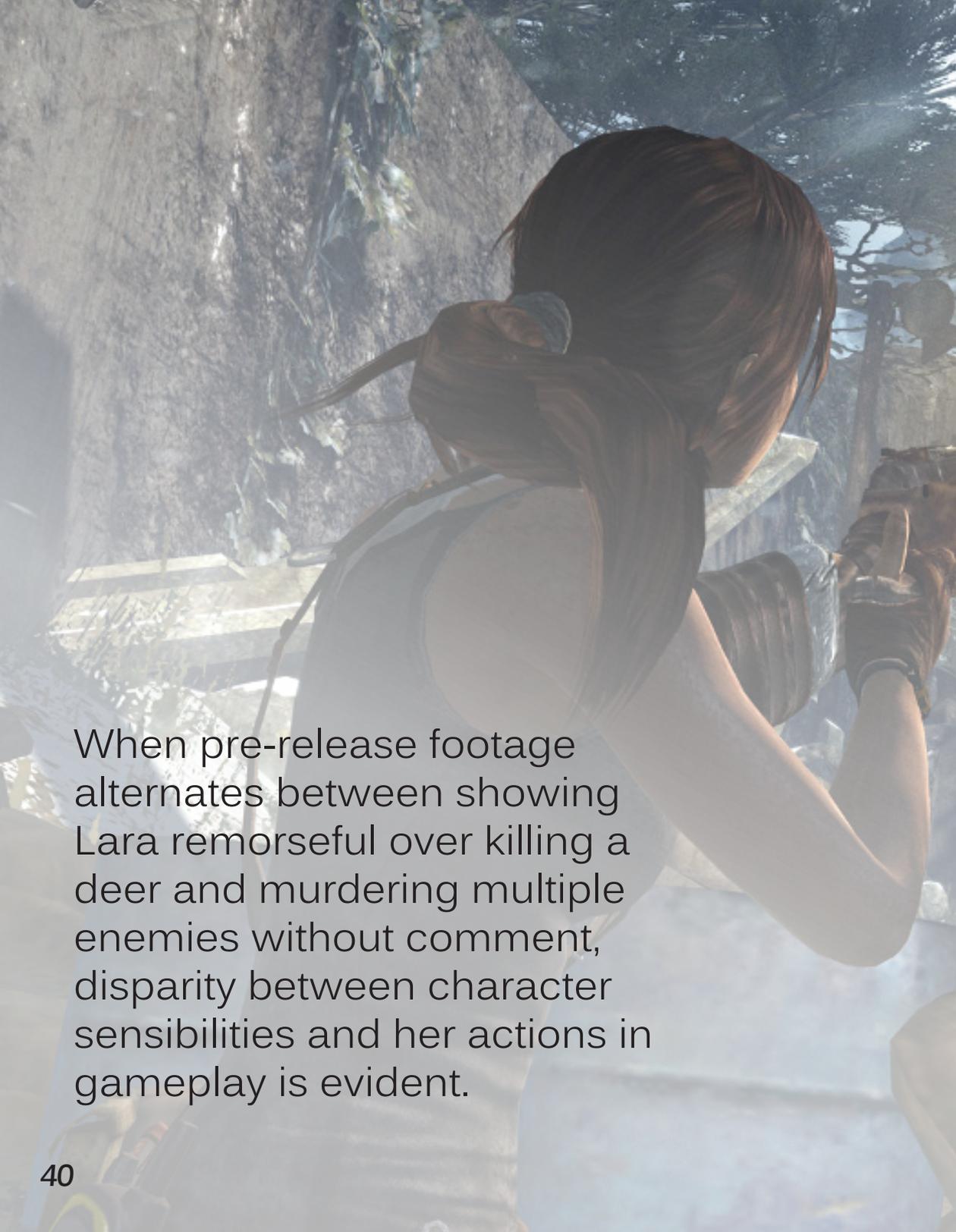
*The Hunger Games* has become a phenomenon, and *Crysis 3* launched with the same weaponry. But before other franchises co-opted the bow, it introduced vivid, new suggestions of primal capability and self-sufficiency for Lara, which was enough to persuade Pratchett, the studio's writer of choice, to get onboard. Even if her suspicions that "they were just looking for someone British and geeky with father issues" might have been true.

The writer behind the heroines of *Mirror's Edge* and *Heavenly Sword* wanted to refit Lara to her new environments by making her more relatable. So pre-existing relationships

with other characters were introduced, and her financial independence was established to avoid her seeming like "some kind of trust fund babe". The mandate to tell a "heroic, not a superheroic" story has caused problems, Lara's constant, audible discomfort in particular receiving prominent attention. While Powerpoint slides can't capture intentions, if Lara evolves as the developers claim she will, the game could deliver an intriguingly sophisticated character arc. As always, it all comes down to execution. If they aren't obscured by misjudged decisions, Lara's personal doubts as her world view collapses could be fascinating drama.

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"a pair of boobs with  
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Talk of "experiential game design" principles and design-integrated storytelling ambitions couldn't hide the compromises writers frequently have to take in games. Pratchett happily admitted to have built the plot from someone else's early synopsis and created characters to connect with game systems taking form before she came in. Even as a vigilant critic of studios that hurriedly recruit "narrative paramedics"

A screenshot from a video game showing Lara Croft from behind. She has long brown hair tied in a ponytail and is wearing a dark tank top and a backpack. She is holding a rifle with both hands, aiming it towards the right. The background is a lush, sun-dappled jungle with trees and foliage. The lighting is bright, creating a hazy atmosphere.

When pre-release footage alternates between showing Lara remorseful over killing a deer and murdering multiple enemies without comment, disparity between character sensibilities and her actions in gameplay is evident.



at a late stage, better prepared studios still throw practical inconveniences in her way. A common maxim that character is best expressed by action is inverted in her view of games writing: “With games you’ve already got the action, so you’ve got to work backwards to find the character”. In many ways, different storytelling rules apply.

That ludonarrative dissonance, game storytelling’s unique demon, came up was no surprise. When pre-release footage alternates between showing Lara remorseful over killing a deer and murdering multiple enemies without comment, disparity between character sensibilities and her actions in gameplay is evident. The designers responded with a jarringly conservative answer, concluding that it simply didn’t matter, it’s an acceptable part of the genre, and

it’s up to the player to suspend their disbelief.

Pratchett leapt in to explain that Lara’s first kill does influence her, suppressed guilt striking at intervals, but the difference in attitude between disciplines remained striking. Pinning inconsistent characters to genre expectations felt particularly inexcusable. Earlier, they had cited the *James Bond* and *Batman* reboots as inspiration for their own efforts. Lacking their monumental creative daring isn’t a slight, but the lack of will to match their disregard for genre limitations is sad.

Tougher questions followed, and once again the answers weren’t always satisfactory. Multiplayer was explained as a long-time ambition, viable now after *Guardian of Light*



provided a technological model. The most challenging question of the night suggested some fans have seen one change too many to a beloved series. A brave “disenfranchised *Tomb Raider* fan” presented a lengthy list of complaints, citing seemingly borrowed game features as evidence of generic design that removed the “cerebrality” of previous games. The deeply felt grievances were only partially rebutted by the developers, who rejected any similarities to contemporary games as coincidental. Fully engaging with such a wide attack on their game before its release was a commendable response to an impossible situation; they tried, but the issues remained unresolved before the audience Q&A moved on.

At this point, the final game will be the only valid answer to every

contentious decision made by Lara Croft’s new custodians. Intense criticism feels premature. The huge complexity of the task made the many compromises feel like acceptable inevitabilities of the medium: challenges to be overcome, not creative impediments. Even if every accusation of derivative design is accurate, if they contribute towards the emotional power they claim, producing the Lara they aimed to create, perhaps that single accomplishment will be worthwhile.

**HW**

*In the interests of full journalistic disclosure: canapes were served after the event. Francisco Dominguez did not partake, rushing off in search of the toilet.*



Delicious canapes. Norwegian Smoked Salmon with Cream Cheese canapes. BAFTA canapes. Not that Francisco would know.

# Speclunky

Francisco Dominguez went looking for *The Cave's* hidden treasures, but found only its secret shame.



*Monkey Island? Day of the Tentacle?* Ron Gilbert's new game *The Cave* predates them both by premise. The result of 25 years of slow mental gestation, this set of seven unlikely (well, one likely) explorers pursuing their greatest desires within a talking cavern was an idea that came to the former Lucasarts maestro long before Guybrush Threepwood.

This game could have been special. It has an intriguing setup in making most levels dioramas unique to the characters selected by the player, and there's genuine originality within these levels when they act, almost, as gradually

developed dramas revealing the sinister motives our silent protagonists don't want to talk about. Unfortunately *The Cave* serves as a sad example of a weakly executed premise prone to sabotaging individually excellent parts.

We know Double Fine can write. As always, the only complaint with their extravagantly humorous dialogue is that there isn't enough of it. Every sentence is laced with witty self-awareness of its own tropes and affectations, to the point where avid Let's Players may feel uncomfortably redundant. For once the desire for more sharp dialogue



really is a genuine complaint, though, as the main cast remains silent, leaving the gregarious cave itself to become the central character. Except he only infrequently barges in. This restraint far too often turns *The Cave* into an eerily subdued experience.

We know Double Fine can create bold, visually distinctive worlds and characters on a whim. The blend of styles featured in this game are all capably refitted in characteristically bold fashion. Hidden in *The Cave*'s depths are a surprisingly broad range of settings, including an Egyptian pyramid's bright, lethal interior, a moody Victorian home and a metallic nuclear silo. Plain, unremarkable rock faces may predominate, but variations in detail prevent the monotony that samey backgrounds could create. And when, on occasion, the mystical cave's confines expand to reveal vast, vivid backgrounds, these yawning vistas impress without overwhelming the crafty details dotted around the closer surroundings.

And of course we know Double Fine, with Ron Gilbert at the helm, can create intelligent, intelligible puzzles. All of them convey their specific

demands well enough, and whenever I failed to notice something, it was my failure to observe, not the game's failure to communicate.

Clarity may be a curse here, when no puzzles have that stunning, revelatory twist past Lucasarts puzzles seemed to specialize in. The promising multi-character puzzles especially tend to degenerate into pedantic exercises in lever pulling and crate pushing.

So, what's the issue that dismantles everything good in this game? It's the platforming. Specifically, the kind of shoddy platforming forced on an adventure game. Few straight lines will be found in *The Cave*. Instead, paths constantly bisect, elevating, descending and

In design and controls, *The Cave* seems to invite the unwelcome spectre of tedium we depend on games to banish.

looping to form an intermittently contiguous cluster of routes. To reach any puzzle you must first jump, climb, swim and fall along various convoluted, erratically interconnected routes. You may often sight locations the width of a wall away while following one branching path, when the actual path leading to it is in another direction entirely. Once the area has been scoped, and the scenery admired, the unintuitive map layout becomes an irritant.

It's a joy to watch your characters in motion, every step made with deceptively smooth fluidity, but clumsy controls ensure any sense of grace remains firmly illusory. Even if the game never demands extreme precision, unresponsive movement robs the platforming of any of its fundamental satisfaction, quickly turning it into a chore. As the necessary ritual between every novel setting and hilarious set piece, this lousy, misconceived platforming is utterly inexcusable, especially when across the industry, less experienced studios routinely master something as pivotal as 2D platformer controls.

The multicharacter system, too, only erratically fulfils its promise. While the impact your party composition has on the structure of the game is interesting, beyond a broad influence over the sequence in which levels appear, the idea rarely expands available puzzle solutions in the way it could. Most scenarios that exploit multiple characters are obvious, dull affairs of levers, switches, pressure plates and crates. Lots and lots of crates. Occasionally, a multicharacter solution will imaginatively take advantage of a character's unique ability; more frequently, they'll be matters of interchangeable character placement, easily identified but tiresome to execute. Sometimes, a specific character in your group can use their ability to bypass a

puzzle entirely, but these opportunities are rare - and worse, uninteresting - methods to circumvent puzzles in a single convenient step.

In design and controls *The Cave* seems to invite the unwelcome specter of tedium we depend on games to banish. With three characters available at almost all times, the absence of tools available to manage them does nothing but multiply the tedium by three. Often, once a character passes an invisible threshold, the rest are instantly transported to the new location. But sometimes not. And with no indirect commands to move characters simultaneously, no option is available except to manually move each character, one at a time, to the required position.

A unique premise is useless when potentially interesting parts only surface between unwelcome platforming jaunts. Playing *The Cave* feels nearer to fishing than it does to spelunking, passages of uneventful quiet interrupted by brief moments of excitement. A minor lapse in Double Fine's high standards of comedic ability still results in a funny game, but failing to meet even their own inconsistent standards for gameplay renders this barely functional. Perhaps a more traditional adventure game would have worked better. I hear they're working on one, too.

**Write for us!**



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# Off the Grid: Disordia

Zachary Bricton greases  
the rusty machinery of  
*Primordia*

By Zachary Bricton

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When booting up *Primordia* for the first time I couldn't help but awkwardly fondle my own face to make sure my glasses were on, just to confirm that, yes, it is the game that's blurry. The pixelated palette of brown and dusty

orange takes some getting used to, but the hazy smear actually does the setting good justice, complementing a post human world of machinery and grease.

What may catch you more off guard is just how human that world really is.

The two robot protagonists of this point and click adventure, the engineering droid Horatio and his pieced-together companion Crispin, seem as capable as any person in expressing the full emotional spectrum of the English language.

They call a piece of wreckage their home, located in a desert turned junkyard where Horatio scours for tools. To build is his *raison d'être*, passed down to him by the now extinct Man, the original and 'perfect' builders of the world. Man made Horatio to be resourceful, and Horatio made his buddy Crispin to be, well, obnoxious.

But as you scan each environment for objects, clues and information, Crispin's sarcastic chiding of your decisions does lighten the frustration of the trial and error process. Paired with Horatio's matter-of-fact tone of inner monologue, *Primordia* guides the player to answers and away from dead-ends, while successfully characterizing the two machines. Hover the cursor over a pile of junk and Horatio will soberly deny any practical use of it, while Crispin

may shoot back "Gee, boss, maybe if you built me some arms!" should you ask him to perform a task outside his limits.

The problem solving still manages to be annoyingly roundabout, requiring a lot of backtracking to see which objects interact with each other. From using a blowtorch to cut a long piece of cable, to placing a bomb in a puddle of grease to create a sticky explosive, uncanny

solutions can leave you resorting to random guesswork, and later feeling a bit betrayed. Doubly so if you happened to fail to spot something hidden in the out-of-focus visuals.

M a t c h i n g objects in the desert gives way to various logic problems once you reach the

corrupted city of Metropolis. You'll barter, argue and confront crazy robot townies like one that seems programmed to riddle at you in hilarious rhymes. A stoic droid from the boonies, it's easy to sympathize with Horatio in this harrowing dilemma, but it loses its touch as his humble quest uncovers a more grand conspiracy. The puzzles leading to this reveal resort to asinine

A stoic droid from the boonies, it's easy to sympathize with Horatio in this harrowing dilemma, but loses its touch as his humble quest uncovers a more grand conspiracy.





trickery with numbers and text and to NPCs with overwhelming amounts of droning, robotic dialogue stuffed with all the answers to the city's mysteries.

Instead of giving you the other half of Metropol to explore, *Primordia* hastily rushes towards an ending that decides the fate of a city you hardly understand. It's desire to be an epic adventure is too sudden and ambitious, leaving its personable character dynamics and somber scenery in the dust for quick, shallow access to drama. If this software could talk to its creators like Crispin does to Horatio, I imagine it would take on a very similar tone. Endearing, but ungrateful.

**HW**

A character from the game Dead Island is shown from behind, looking over a tropical island. The character is wearing a dark jacket with a skull emblem on the back and holding a chainsaw. The island below is lush with palm trees, has a beach, and a small town with thatched-roof buildings. In the distance, there are mountains and a body of water.

# Same Difference: *Elite* & *Dead Island*

Mike Grace examines two remarkably similar games

*Elite* is a wire-frame gestalt of 70s sci-fi and the *Traveller* role-playing game, a space-trading odyssey that gave you a paralyzing fear of rotating climbing frames.

*Dead Island*, on the other hand, is an open-world zombie bash-em-up that dumps you in the middle of paradise before turning it into an inescapable hell. Sort of like every date I've ever been on.

Does that prove they are different games? No. What proves things is facts.

## **Both games follow the same pattern**

*Elite*: Leave station, move around,

shoot ships, collect cargo, travel to different stations, upgrade, repeat.

*Dead Island*: Leave station, move around, punch zombies, collect cargo, travel to different stations, upgrade, repeat.

## **Both games have simple and illogical exploits**

In *Dead Island* zombies drown – despite not needing to breathe – so leading them into water gets you easy XP.

*Elite* had a small spot on the screen where the laser would automatically hit. Mark this pixel, move the enemy ship

into that pixel and you can tear into it like a drowning zombie. I used red felt tip.

### **They were created at similar speeds.**

David Braben and Ian Bell created *Elite* in two years, packed away into 14 kilobytes (This magazine stands at almost 8 Megabytes). That makes the programming speed 7 kB per year.

Techland, the team behind *Dead Island*, took a lot longer: *The Island of the Living Dead*, its original title, started up around 2005 and released in September 2011. However, this beast takes up 3.9 GB.

At first it might look like Techland is working far faster at 650 MB per year, but then you look at the credit sequence for *Dead Island* and it's nearly 10 minutes of names. Maybe a hundred names there? Divide that up and you're getting awfully close to 7 kB per year, exactly what *Elite* managed.

### **The related media aren't.**

*Elite* famously came with the brilliant novella *The Dark Wheel* by Robert Holdstock. It told of young Alex Ryder and his search for the killer of his father. The last word his father says is "Raxxla" - not the name of a sled this time, but of a ghost world, a legend.

*Dead Island* famously sold itself on

the brilliant film of a young daughter turning into a zombie and attacking her father before being thrown through a window. And it was a cool film, even if it promoted killing kids.

Small problem though: Neither of these existed.

*The Dark Wheel* and *Raxxla* were searched for, this being before the internet someone went through all 4096 planets looking for this phantom. Nada. Zip. Zilch. The Generation ships were a lie as well, even if you did have an Archimedes, like my swotty mate.

*Dead Island* didn't even touch on the idea of emotional bonds to zombies, never mind having your daughter attack you. The family shown in the trailer is hidden away somewhere, but I never bothered finding them.

### **Both had shocking re-releases.**

*Elite: Dangerous* launched on Kickstarter asking for £1,250,000, one of the highest goals ever set there. It managed it, and even pushed further to 1.6 million.

*Dead Island: Riptide* wasn't Kickstarted, but it did have a dismembered female corpse diorama. No, really. They thought it'd be a good idea to appeal to the Ero Guro among us.

### **Both had top-of-the-range DRM**

### **that wasn't quite up to the job.**

*Dead Island's* initial release on Steam was not perfect. First the wrong version was released, the next version had bugs galore and the final one had to be online constantly due to a bug interfacing with Steam itself.

*Elite* had a forgery-proof postcard that you could send in if you reached the rank of Elite. The problem being that the only way to find that point was to write down the code it gave you. A code that was soon passed around the earlier bulletin boards. Not by me, I add.

### **Both were dogged by controversy.**

*Elite* had two 'official' sequels: *Frontier: Elite II* and *Frontier: First Encounters*. Both were riddled with bugs (another link?) and started up a three year lawsuit with Gametek.

*Dead Island* was banned in Germany for excessive violence, as well as having

to deal with the hanged zombie in the title.

Were these created controversies? No one knows, but they were there.

### **Both included swearing.**

In the processing of planets through procedural generation, *Elite* produced a planet called "Arse". Braben and Bell quickly deleted that entire galaxy.

Techland, however, forgot to remove the title "Feminist Whore" as a description of Purna before release, and had to apologize later.

But they both had swear words in them. Unlike *IK+* or all the other games I've tried to enter swear words into. And that's not all, now for the fact blast – hold onto your joysticks guys.

**Multiple platforms, novelizations, real time damage, levelling enemies, missiles, ramming, weapon recharge bars, Island = I land? - both games**

**had them!**

What does the other side have? That they had different publishers? Different languages? Different computers? That all means nothing. Mario was originally named “Jump Man,” does that make him Pac-Man’s brother? Of course not. That’s Luigi, and he never had the surname “Man,” did he?

**CONCLUSION:**

***Elite and Dead Island are the same game!***

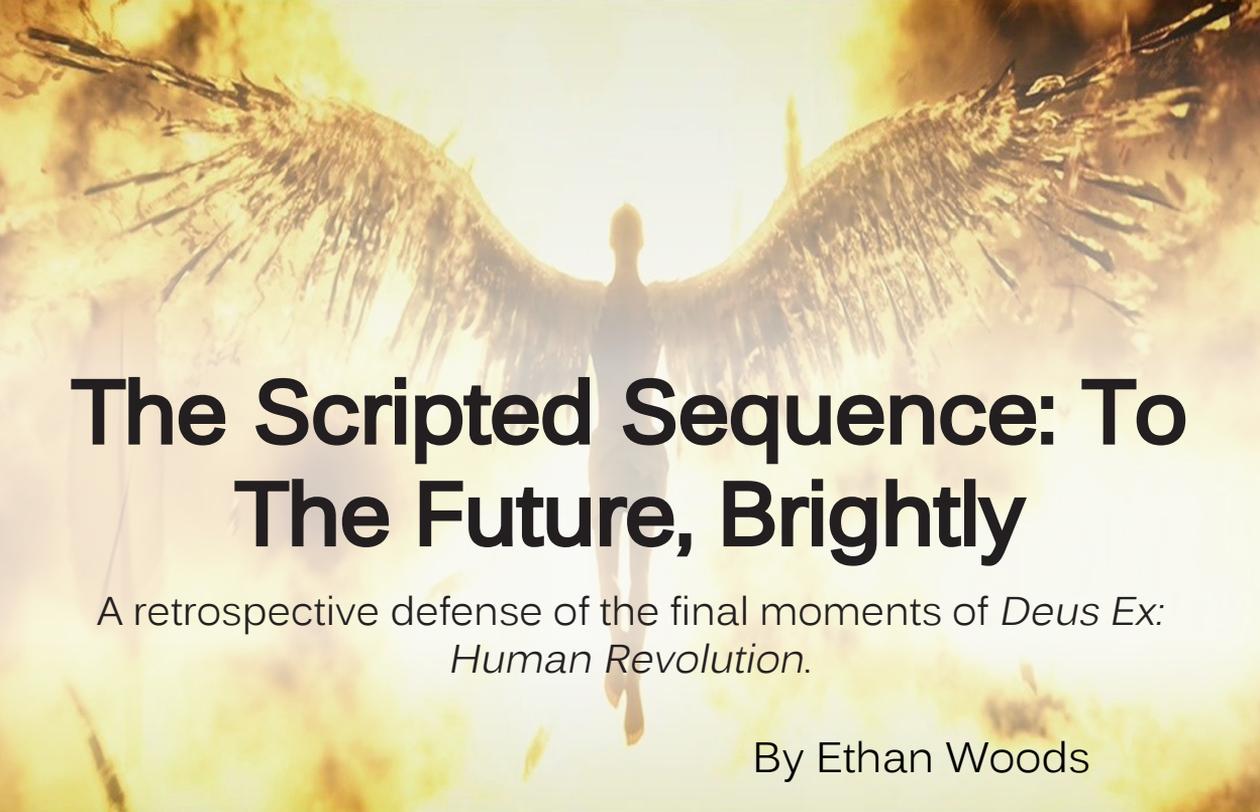
You may want to argue this, but you know in your heart that you’re wrong, and I’m right.

Any geek on the internet starts giving you trouble talking to you about two games?

You come back to me and I’ll make sure they know the facts.

I’m outta here. Peace.

**HW**



# The Scripted Sequence: To The Future, Brightly

A retrospective defense of the final moments of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*.

By Ethan Woods

For all the allusions in *Human Revolution* to Adam Jensen as Icarus incarnate, their descents into the depths of the ocean couldn't be more different. Where Icarus crashed blindly, Adam's dive is a considered, lingering affair - and not just because he ends up penetrating the heart of Panchaea on the future's equivalent of a stairlift.

Indeed, *Human Revolution* encourages players to take their time and talk things over, to have one final hearing with Adam's ideological cohorts and competitors. In truth, these

conversations command a finality that far exceeds that of the game's ultimate boss fight, owed to the intense scrutiny of a single issue for its 30 hours of fist-chiseling goodness. It's a debate, and it demands introspection far more than it does emotional engagement, or selfless decision-making colored by pretensions of honor. It asks us 'What do you think?' not 'What will you do?'

What many perceived as a failure of *Human Revolution* to incorporate choice and consequence into its ending is actually the result of a strict adherence

to having its narrative format emulate a debate. Hell, there's even a chance to abstain from making any real decision, although it does end with some rather watery lungs. Still, as any good maths debater will attest, it's important for a person to keep an open mind until each avenue of discussion has been exhausted, and the debate brought to a close. For *Human Revolution* to corner us into an ending before its final moments, it would have had to break its own rules.

'Oh, but come on! If we're not going to have an ending influenced by our prior decisions, don't we at least deserve a proper epilogue of sorts? What about Adam and Frank's newfound bromance? What of Megan's return?' All good points, Kevin. When

a developer sits down to write their masterpiece, the problem they face is that, as human beings with all their thoughts and morals and ethics, it can be difficult to write conversations and events which can be influenced by the player without imbuing their work with a degree of personal commentary.

This isn't a wholly undesirable occurrence. For instance, what would *Specs Ops: The Line* be without its self-referential commentary on modern military shooters? But in other instances, as it is with *Human Revolution*, developer commentary is baggage, a side-effect of the writing process that must be kept at bay. Any attempt at an epilogue of

consequences is then itself baggage, a weight around the player's neck that distracts from the narrative's purpose: to ask them what they believe. The truth is that *Human Revolution's* ending is, despite appearances, a hypothetical.

As for our secondary characters, their rather in c o n s p i c u o u s abandonment is a case of the external narrative reflecting

character development. What begins as an emotionally charged tale fueled by tragedy transforms into a philosophical and ethical inquiry. Adam's role as a go-between who courts the bigwigs and the dumpster divers ultimately disconnects him from humanity altogether. He and the narrative shed human ties together,

What many perceived as a failure of *Human Revolution* to incorporate choice and consequence into its ending is actually the result of a strict adherence to having its narrative format emulate a debate.

as the philosophical questions of ‘What is right?’ and ‘What is human?’ become more pronounced. Whether he is now more than human or less, we can at least be certain that he has changed. If we’re to take his name biblically, then Adam really is the first man of a new age. And that’s a lonely place to be.

Finally, the inherent tentativeness of *Human Revolution*’s ending poses one final, daunting question: does Adam’s decision even matter? After all, we already know the fate of the world post-Jensen, because we played it pre-Jensen. In this it’s important to remember that *Human Revolution* is a game about potential. Sarif’s potential to take the augmentation industry by storm. Panchea’s potential to rid the Earth of climate change. Adam’s potential to change the world with the push of a button. But potential is no guarantee. Eliza may make predictions about the consequences of Adam’s choice, but if *Human Revolution* demonstrates anything, it’s the fallibility and elasticity of human behavior. Again however,

this is simply an example of a narrative remaining true to itself: asking players to reach an internal decision that says something about themselves. In suggesting that Adam’s decision might not even matter to the outside world in the slightest, it gives such an opinion an internal value by asking us anyway.

So yes, *Human Revolution*’s ending may have lacked the dazzling polish of Adam’s shiny new limbs. It may have featured the fourth of four boss fights too many and one of those annoying End-o-Tron 3000s that have you push a button for an ending. But it also saw a thematic seed flower into something both utterly compelling and debate-worthy. Past choices may not direct the ending in a mechanical sense, but in having a range of smaller decisions and outcomes throughout, it creates a wealth of experiences from which to draw a final opinion. What it lacks in presentation, it makes up for in functionality, as the narrative and thematic threads flourish side-by-side. And that’s an ending worth toasting.

**HW**

Adam Jensen, the  
reluctant trans-human  
protagonist of  
*Deus Ex: Human Revolution*





# The Other Screen: The Truth of The Matter

*Zero Dark Thirty* neither condones nor condemns. It simply tells.

By Andrew Huntly

I want to open this, the black sheep among columns, by talking about something we rarely touch upon in this magazine: videogames. The looming colossus of the videogame industry for the time being is the modern military shooter, a subgenre of the FPS that has players fighting in warzones developers and publishers love to label as ‘authentic’ and ‘realistic’. Most level-headed gamers see these for the buzzwords

they are, hollow, vacuous phrases thrown around to make a game sound more exciting than it really is. Unless it happens to be developed by Bohemia Interactive, in which case shine on, you crazy diamonds.

I bring this up only because the gall of these words, particularly authenticity, seems a lot more troubling after viewing *Zero Dark Thirty*. I understand that mixing the established world of

film academia with the still burgeoning game academia is frowned upon, but in this case I think it's a valid cocktail. The power of *Zero Dark Thirty*, which chronicles the ten year hunt for Osama Bin Laden, is very much authentic.

To the Infinity Wards of the world, authenticity means little more than the detailed modelling of real life guns, vehicles and locations. They pour over authenticity in the most glossy, shiny way possible, with little regard to grounding their narratives in real world politics or even real world conflicts. *Zero Dark Thirty* opens with something more brutal and harrowing, a set-piece of true authentic might. A prisoner is being interrogated in a small, dank room. He refuses to answer questions. He's pushed to the floor, before his captors produce a jug and, in unflinching detail, proceed to waterboard him.

But rather than shady, evil men garbed in black and maliciously masking their faces, this is all carried out by a small gang of Americans. Members of the CIA no less, at a black site where they bring Pakistani detainees and attempt to rip information out of them,

through whatever means necessary. The opening fifteen minutes of *Zero Dark Thirty* show the prisoner waterboarded, having his genitals exposed to the only female staff member and dragged around the room on a dog collar before finally being stuffed in a small box.

The torture committed by the US in the War on Terror is something that's rarely been discussed in film since horrific images leaked around 2003 and 2004, showing the immense

cruelty inflicted on prisoners held in Abu Ghraib prison by the US. The frankness and explicitness that *Zero Dark Thirty* brings to its torture scenes is impressive in an appropriately warped, uncomfortable

The frankness and explicitness that *Zero Dark Thirty* brings to its torture scenes is impressive in an appropriately warped, uncomfortable way.

way. Director Kathryn Bigelow places her camera in the room as though it's a member of an audience. She brings you into this situation, sits you down and asks you nothing more than to expose yourself to this world. To not include these scenes would be intellectually dishonest, and they're handled with as quiet a lens as necessary.

The crucial cog in Bigelow's quest for neutral authenticity is Jessica

Chastain's performance as Maya. An amalgamation of several real people, Maya is a CIA operative who slowly becomes obsessed with hunting down the infamous terrorist mastermind. As the film sprawls itself out into a lengthy, but appropriate, three hours, the rapid slur of countries, names and events could easily be overwhelming. With Maya, Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal have given the audience eyes and ears into this decade-long manhunt. She's an active and powerful character in her own right, given fire and depth by Chastain, while always making sure the audience is ensnared in the drama at all times.

And yet, drama is such an inappropriate word for *Zero Dark Thirty*. Drama sounds calculated and scripted. No matter how well you dress it, drama

will always sound like a construction. So what is truly remarkable about the film is how little it relies on manipulation to engage its audience. It's a frank, brutal depiction of a war on terror that had people making incredibly smart choices and fucking up beyond belief. Where heroism would normally be found in a more flag waving film, *Zero Dark Thirty* turns it into a mix of cruel necessity. The half-hour climax showing the assault on Bin Laden's safehouse isn't handled with emotional tenderness or explosive satisfaction. The US SEALs sweep through the building, ensuring the dead are dead by firing more rounds into the bodies in front of frightened children. The film doesn't play it as a gratifying final battle. This is simply what happened. This is simply what they had to do.



As Maya finally comes face to face with the body of the man she's hunted for over ten years, it's impossible to get a read on the film. There's no sense of satisfaction, but neither is there any mournfulness. For so long Maya may as well have been trying to kill the devil himself, but wrapped in a flimsy body bag, there doesn't seem to be much to the monster. The audience is never even given a nice, cathartic close-up of the dead man's face. Bigelow doesn't fill her frame with images telling the audience what to think, and how to feel. She simply, over the course of 160 minutes, captures as real and base a description of events as she can, before walking away and leaving the audience to choose how they process what they've seen. That is honesty and that is authenticity, and it is immensely powerful.

Only a few will know just how accurate *Zero Dark Thirty* is, though most reports claim it to be as true to life as it could possibly get. Whether certain discussions were had and how they went is not an important factor to consider, because it's the way *Zero Dark Thirty* deals with the humanity within its story that's the most genuine. The crunching might of the modern war machine means nothing if you all have to represent is the aesthetic. It's about that real, tangible emotion lurking underneath. The emotion that slowly seeps through the cracks of war to engulf you. The emotional crux of humanity, the unknowing and the unfathomable. What's right? What's wrong? It's all just a state of mind.

**HW**



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# What we do...

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