Games - Jim Munroe

Is it Possible to Have Too Much Fun?

Is it possible to have a pleasure circuit overload?

"Girls are to be kept away from those activities of civilization that over-stimulate the imagination and the senses, such as fashionable novels, paintings, music, balls, theaters… as this can lead to uterine epilepsy, sapphic tastes, and nymphomania."

While this is Victorian-era advice, it's reflective of how certain people deal with something that's new and sexy: hysteria. It's the same people who are now blaming video games, today's over-stimulant of choice, for everything from obesity to mass murder. Even those of us who aren't concerned parents or members of the religious community have a tendency to look at video games as a waste of time when compared, say, to reading a novel.

As someone who makes his living from writing novels, let me tell you that this is sanctimonious horseshit.

There's no shortage of time-wasting novels, and plenty of brilliant videogames, and the dismissal of a medium in its infancy says volumes about the guilt we have about playing and pleasure. This snobbery prevents this hugely popular entertainment industry (a $13.5-billion annual gross revenue in the States alone places it ahead of Hollywood) from getting the critical focus it needs to grow. Despite the numbers proving that it fills a social need, there's next to no serious cultural discourse about it.

I'm not just talking about critical reviews or in-depth profiles, I'm talking about people chit-chatting at parties. While it's acceptable to discuss the cinematography in a movie you've just seen, try bringing up the inventive and creepy camera angles in Resident Evil Zero (Capcom). While you can recommend a page-turner to a total stranger without raising eyebrows, try recommending the brilliant Grim Fandango (LucasArts). Rueful grins and shaking heads are all you'll get.

Why? Well, like porn, there's something naked about the fantasy-fulfillment most video games offer—you can drive that big rig, shoot that terrorist and hit that ball in a way you never could in real life—that seems basically juvenile. Like science fiction, comics and other gutter genres, playing video games is something kids do.

And more often than not, people have had some unsatisfying experience with one kind of game and dismissed them as a whole. That's like dismissing the world of film based on watching an action flick. Because

there is very little discussion about games, there's no vocabulary to describe how the experience was unsatisfying, and consequently find a type of game you might like better. While you might come away from a boring movie and say that the pace was too slow or that the acting was wooden, when most people quit playing games they don't tend to say that the cut scenes were too talky or the interface was cluttered.

The medium as a whole has a much more inbred feedback loop than those that continually strengthen and stimulate the legit media. Hardcore gamers, the most vocal feedbackers game designers have, are often more impressed by more realistically rendered lava than cohesive storylines or intriguing characters.

So it becomes a vicious circle: designers aren't given much incentive to raise the bar except technologically, and consequently the potential next-generation designers don't find much to inspire them to pursue a career in videogame-making. Without the "I wanna make a game/movie/album like 'X,'" it's hard to keep the spark alive in any medium.

But plenty have pushed the medium in interesting directions. Because they don't really know where it will go, it can be both exciting and frightening. While wandering freely around the aptly named Liberty City of Grand Theft Auto III (Rockstar Games), I was struck by how the most accessible and realistically detailed virtual city thus far created was not made by an urban planning thinktank or architectural company, but as a byproduct of a first-person shooter. And since the odds are that we'll be spending more and more time in virtual environments in the coming decades (email's the thin end of the wedge), what will it mean for us to have had our first experiences be psychopathic killing sprees? As fun as those sprees are, they're only one fantasy among many that could be played out.

Compelling games and the questions they pose are what I'm going to focus on for this column. From the weeks solid I spent as a teenager unravelling text-adventure games to the hours I spent finishing Grand Theft Auto III last night, I've been engaged and excited by games - sometimes from afar, as there was a 10-year drought in between when I filled the void with art and politics. This mix gives me a sympathetic but critical eye on the medium, makes me a participant-observer if you will, and I aim to temper my enthusiasm with analysis of both the game itself and its place in our society.

Video Games: The Timewasting Junk That's Changing Our Culture.

When Reality Bleeds

Two ravers are discussing how ridiculous it is that videogames are blamed for inciting killing sprees. "Yeah," one says to the other. "We grew up playing Pac-Man, and it's not like we're running around in the dark, popping pills, and listening to repetitive electronic music."

This internet joke is funny on one level, but vaguely unsettling on another. Have we been affected by videogames in ways we're not even aware of? Obviously our culture has been affected by videogames, but do games have a lasting subliminal impact on an individual's intellectual and emotional self?

Of course they do.

In a post on gamegirladvance.com, "Play=Life in GTA3," the author describes how much playing Grand Theft Auto 3 (Rockstar Games, 2001) has affected the risks she takes while driving. The scores of "me too!" comments after the article is testament to how common the feeling is.

I was walking down the street and I noticed a store was selling silver jewellery. It occurred to me that I needed silver, but I couldn't remember for what. Ah yes, to close the interdimensional rift. I had been playing Evil Dead: Fistful of Boomstick (THQ, 2003), and I'd learned that I needed to find silver to close the vortices to stop the hordes of zombies. If it had been a magic crystal, I probably wouldn't have put it in the same memory slot — but as it was, "silver" was beside bus tickets, bread and orange juice in my mental shopping list.

Horrified yet?

A lot of gamers downplay the moments when their virtual worlds bleed into their reality. They realize it makes them sound Columbine. And even if they love games, they're often a little freaked out by their own brains. That's a shame, because if they looked at it closely they'd realize that there's lots of things that are just as affecting.

When people talk about how affecting a movie is, they mean it as a compliment. "It changed the way I look at baseball," says a sap leaving Field of Dreams. Fight Club was very good to boxing gyms. For a long time, I had the opinion that if a movie affected me it was ipso facto a good movie. Then I saw Bad Lieutenant.

On my way home after the movie, which features Harvey Keitel as a seedy police officer, I looked around at my fellow subway passengers with different eyes. Everyone seemed fallen, suspect, nauseating. Certainly the movie affected me powerfully, and I'm not going to argue

whether that made it better art (that's another discussion). I just know that I didn't like it.

I had a similar experience when I was playing Hitman: Codename 47 (Eidos Interactive, 2000). You awake without memory, in a hospital. A disembodied voice trains you in the way of the knife and gun, and dispatches you to assassinate a variety of targets.

As a tall, bald westerner, you perhaps aren't the best choice to silently murder the heads of two rival triad gangs, but that's your mission. You garrotte the limo driver when he takes a piss in an alley and dress in his uniform to accomplish this. Your mission also states that you have to make it look like they killed each other — and that's only the beginning of the disembodied voice's plan. After a few levels of being his tool, I felt too greasy to go on.

While these "realistic" depictions of corrupt and venal killers are a justifiable reaction against the squeaky-clean action hero who always kills with moral backing, the question remains: how much grit can you stomach in your media diet? Continuing that metaphor, what appetite you have for a certain type of media is also reflective of you, not just of the medium that's taking the heat.

But movies are passive and games are active, you say, there's a big difference.

We're used to the pitfalls of passive entertainment while interactivity still seems deadly and exotic. Everyone who isn't addicted to television craves movies, and so there's a consensus that staring at something for hours on end is normal. I think this difference between active and passive entertainment is like the difference between talking and listening: just doing one all the time gives you a skewed view of the world. It's also important to note that the excitement around first-person shooters doesn't come from nowhere—it owes a lot to the fact that you get to "be" the action hero from movies, a medium that's nurtured the fascination with gunplay and power for so long that it goes nearly unnoticed nowadays.

The designer of Pac-Man(Midway, 1980), when he wasn't secretly plotting the invention of the rave subculture, had pretty lofty ambitions when it came to the future of video games. In the wake of its popularity, Toru Iwatani was asked what he wanted to do next. He said that he'd like to make a game that makes people cry. When a videogame does affect mass culture in this subtle way, it will be a profound moment. One that will mirror the undocumented moment when, for the first time, sniffles were heard in the darkness of a movie theatre.

My Wicked Moves, Quantified

I love to dance. This always seems to come as a surprise to people, me with my big gangly 6'3" frame and all, but I quickly qualify: "Oh, I'm not good at dancing—I just love to dance."

It all started at a grade seven school mixer in 1985.

Our classroom, once the lights were flicked and a discoball was plugged in, was transformed. I was surrounded by the few friends I had at the time in a dark room, without even a beer to pose with as we leaned against the desks that had been moved against the wall.

Chris Beharry, a Guyanese kid who'd introduced me to this music his American cousins were listening to the year before—"It's called rap music"—was bopping his head. And eventually, his legs and arms followed suit.

I have no idea why I thought I could do the same, not being a particularly confident kid, but I did. I remember the exhilaration, not from the freedom of the movement itself (that came later) but rather the fact that no one was laughing at me. Despite my rather shaky popularity, the moves I was busting were not singled out for ridicule. After a while I took a break, wandered over to the snack table and enjoyed a potato chip, calmly surveying my boogying classmates from the heights of my new social standing.

Since that triumphant moment, whenever I find myself in a club or at a wedding or anywhere else where the normal rules are suspended in favour of dancing to cheesy breakbeat anthems or hip-hop, I'm usually shaking what I got. Once, very drunk in a club on a cruiseboat headed for Helsinki, I vowed to dance in every big city of the world—and I was only partially joking. So the idea of a videogame named Dance Dance Revolution may seem ludicrous to some, but it doesn't to me.

DDR, as it's known to its legions of fans, is a series of games from Konami that use a footpad in the place of a joystick. On the screen are a cascade of arrows (up, down, right, left) that scroll to the top in quick succession. When they get to a specific spot, the player foots the corresponding arrow and gets points based on how accurate their timing was. A quantification of rhythm, if not grace. It's all done, of course, to a fabulous dance favourite booming out of the most sophisticated piece of electronics on the game unit: the speakers.

The series has been around since 1998, and I'd seen the game in action plenty of times in Asia and in the Asian malls around Toronto. A quick spin on the internet will introduce you to fansites like ddrfreak.com that

document the DDR competitions held in North American cities. But on a recent trip to a friend's Georgian Bay cottage I happened upon a beach-front arcade and was delighted to see that the revolution had spread as far as Tiny, Ontario.

It was time for me to stop denying myself. Slipping in a loonie (the new millennium's quarter), I chose "It's Raining Men" and got down to it. It took me a few seconds to figure out when I was supposed to foot the pad, so I got a "Miss!" and even a "Boo!" or two before I found my feet. But pretty soon I was nailing the arrows with the right rhythm, and even managed to do a right-left combo arrow—a leg-splitter—without missing a beat.

It was almost as fun to watch my friends dance. In between offering helpful hints, I chatted up the teenaged girls who were waiting their turn. "So what song do you like to play?" They mumbled something, and I said "Eh?" like the grandpa I was. "Blow My Whistle," one of them repeated emotionlessly, staring ahead at the screen. They had on matching white jackets festooned with a logo I believe I've seen in Vice magazine.

When the two teenaged girls took the stage—which they could, since there were two footpads side by side—we shamelessly looked on. They indeed chose the song they had said, except that its full name (wisely truncated) was "Blow My Whistle, Bitch." Their synchronized dancing would have been more impressive except for the multitudes of "Miss!" and "Boos!" the screen gave them. We floated away, trying not to show the girls how disappointed we were in them, when another young lady took the stage.

She wasn't as pretty or as stylishly dressed as the other two, but you could tell by the way she whipped through the menus that she was a pro. While her song played, she hit all the arrows and then some, and the arrows were flying a mite bit faster than they had been with us. Between levels she adjusted her hoodie and gave the audience a whatchulookinat kind of glare. Then she went back to dancing, staring at the screen, her feet flying and self-conscious not in the slightest.

Sure, the other girls had the money and the boys. But at the end of the day, who had the fuckin' high score?

Mission: Look at Neat Stuff

Ninjalicious is the founder of Infiltration, a zine documenting his urban exploration hobby in hilarious and diagram-enhanced travelogues. He's recently been playing Thief II (Eidos, 2000), a videogame with a focus on stealth, and I asked him about how the first-person sneaker measured up to his real-life experience.

What made you start playing it?

I thought it would be cool to see if it could be used as practice, or at least to check out if it was realistic. I wouldn't go as far as to say it can be used as practice, but it's pretty realistic.

Yeah, a lot of the game is about listening—you can hear people's footfalls in the game. How close is that experience to what you do?

Obviously it lacks some subtlety—in real life, if you concentrate on your footfalls you won't make any noise on any surface, but in the game it's impossible to walk across a metal catwalk silently. But the game does teach you to favour grass and carpet over tile and wood. Some of the other sounds they've chosen to ignore are kind of weird. It doesn't make any noise to open and close a door—it makes a sound, but the guard doesn't "hear" it.

What else would you like to see?

More dead ends. In real life there are lots. I guess it's kind of frustrating in a videogame, but…

I've noticed that. Everything's there for a reason. When I come across a flippable switch in any game, I flip it.

See, in real life I would never pull a switch like that. It'd be trouble. I like to be careful. I get a kick out of being really careful. They've put a lot of time into this game but I'd admire them if they were willing to have a few useless things, a few dead ends.

Videogames never try to teach you how to know when to give up. While everything is there for a purpose, what I noticed with one of the levels was that I was able to achieve the objective without going through a third of the rooms.

To me that's admirable, because they know that some people are going to push right through it. I did do everything on that level, just for the sake of seeing everything.

Shouldn't they force you to get to know every level well?

No! The game is best when you're in unfamiliar territory. The best game of Thief II I had was my first—exploring the building without realizing that I was able to do anything other than sneak and hide, and not

having any clue what the various threats were. As you play the game you realize, oh, the AI is not that smart—the guards just walk back and forth in a pattern.

The artificial intelligence is patchy.

Yeah. One of the major innovations that Ms Pac-Man (Midway, 1981) made over Pac-Man (Midway, 1980) was that the ghosts stopped simply predictably chasing your character and threw in some random stuff as well. There needs to be more of that with these guards.

Given the choice, a human opponent is more satisfying?

Yeah. The game and real life are similar in that you're trying to figure out a puzzle and people are pieces in that puzzle, but in Thief II I would say the most interesting pieces are architectural or mechanical while in real life the most interesting pieces are people.

Puzzle? Give me a real-life example.

Well, like getting in the pool in the Crown Plaza Hotel. The door was locked, and it was a glass door, and there was always an attendant at the desk. You couldn't wait at the door, because they'd see you waiting there. What you had to do was go down the hallway, wait until you heard the elevator ding, then you'd have to walk down the hallway, getting your pace just right so you'd arrive at the same time as the person who had a key. You had to make small talk with the person as you went through so it looked like you were buddies.

That is such a videogame moment.

I was well aware of that at the time. I was like, 'Oh yeah, this is better than Impossible Mission or Elevator Action.'

I noticed that the infiltration.org site used to have an Elevator Action theme—how much of your hobby comes from videogames?

About half. Half comes from 2600, the magazine about hacking, and half comes from videogame cheat books. Playing the game was fun, but reading the cheat books was really fun. I wanted to write cheat books for exploring real places.

Final comments?

I get a real kick out of there not only being rooftops to explore, but drains and boiler rooms. But if it was up to me, the only goal would be to take pictures of these things and leave.

The Name Game

While I wait in the lobby of one of the largest game studios in the world, I watch someone go through to the inner sanctum. The shiny barrier, with transparent doors that whir apart at the wave of a card-pass, looks familiar—I think I've seen the devices being used as turnstiles in a Tokyo subway.

Most places of work are satisfied with a locked door, but someone at Ubisoft Montreal decided they needed something with a little more panache. Something that made the employees feel important and impressed visitors. And something that said, "No, you won't just be waltzing in here and stealing our secrets."

I half-wonder if I'm being tested.

After all, the company's breakthrough title was Splinter Cell, a military stealth game in which you circumvent much more challenging security than this. And last year's Beyond Good and Evil has you sneaking around taking photos of sensitive information in order to topple a corrupt government.

But before I become convinced that the office is a set piece in some kind of real-life metagame upon which my life depends, Tali arrives. She welcomes me, swipes me through the subway turnstile, and shows me around. I'd just asked to have a look at the place while I was in town, maybe chat with some of the people who made the games. Most of the rooms are cubicle-style, open-concept kind of areas filled with a bunch of average-looking guys. What they have on their screens is different depending on whether they are play-testing, modelling, animating or producing the games, but their slumped posture and dispirited mouse-clicking are pretty much office-worker-standard for a Friday afternoon.

We continue on another floor, and Tali's commentary pauses as we pass another clump of cubicles. Then she says, "Can't tell you what's going on there." I naturally cast my eyes over this forbidden zone, but nothing stands out as notably different. I'm amused by it on the one hand—damn, and me without my lapel-pin spy camera!—and also slightly irritated.

A lot of the game world is top secret and hush-hush. Non-disclosure agreements are flying all over the place. Everyone from play-testers to journalists is asked to sign them, and you can almost understand in those cases. But when you make someone keep quiet about what they do for most of their waking hours, are you asking too much? And ethics aside,

when so many great ideas happen through casual conversation in off-hours, is this even an effective way to run a creative business?

As we wait for the elevator, I ask Tali about the secrecy that pervades the videogame industry. "I mean, you don't see it in the movies as much… "

She thinks about it. "Well, they rely a lot on pre-publicity… " she says. "Plus, if they have Tom Cruise acting in their movie, it's not like you can steal that in the same way you can steal an idea for a game."

The "marquee name" power that certain actors and directors have in film is not that common in videogames. Brands and game titles have always had the limelight (Atari, Pac-Man, etc.) and not the creators behind them. This is despite long-term pressure for the humans behind the games to get some credit. Arnie Katz wrote in the June, 1983 Electronic Games magazine, "All designers of electronic games are just as much creative artists as painters and novelists… . Why shouldn't the creator of such a work of art be entitled to put his or her name on it to reap the praise and brickbats of gaming consumers?"

As a result of this, the Intellivision and Atari 2600 cartridges of Masters of the Universe: The Power of He-Man had the design teams credited on the packaging. But even He-Man could only push it so far — today, though credits rolling at the end of a game are common, games haven't made the big step towards the marquee name. I bring this up with Tali, and she points to a promotional cutout picture of XIII, a game done in a graphic novel style with voice acting by David Duchovny and Adam West.

I admit that having the voice of Batman encourage me along was one of my favourite parts of XIII, but it's different when the names attached to the game have star power in other media. Once game makers promote the designers and the art directors, audiences will start picking up games based on those things… and the industry will have its own marquee names native to the form.

Sure, it'll spawn a few enfants terribles. It's not like a superstar designer won't make games just as crappy as a game company on its own, but being able to raise funds for a game based on, say, having a prominent art director attached, will mean more diversity in how games can be made.

You can steal bits and pieces of a project, but a good game is more than the sum of its parts. The secrecy and paranoia belies an adolescent lack of confidence in this, a lack of trust that your audience won't know a rip-off from the genuine quality article. All these electromagnetic doors,

arcane contracts and press leaks—they're good cloak-and-dagger fun and all, but it's time to grow up.

How to Spoil a Game

You wake up in a centuries-old asylum. Your face is in bandages and your memory is in tatters, only coming back to you in black and white cinematic flashes. As you walk around and talk to people, you solve puzzles and unearth the mystery of your identity, travelling to different places that may only exist in your mind.

Sanitarium (DreamForge, 1998) is a puzzle-based adventure game for the PC, and playing the game caused me to stumble across another mystery from my own past: why does taking hints when I'm stuck in a game ruin it for me?

The appeal of games like Sanitarium is not in their realism. Sanitarium's got what's known as a semi-isometric, top-down view, which will be a familiar one for players of The Sims. When you make your character go into a room, the top dissolves with a ghostly sound and reveals what's inside, reminiscent of a dollhouse. The miniature characters are slightly blurred and unreal, which suits the creepy tone. When you encounter mutated children, their varied characters come through in their voices (tremulous, nasty) rather that the glimpse you're given of their twisted faces.

The way that environments are small—as opposed to the sprawling, free-form settings of a lot of 3-D shooters—is actually preferable in a puzzle game like this. When you have a half-dozen rooms rather than a hundred, you'll more easily find the stick on the ground that you need to poke the pig so it runs and gets rid of the dog, which allows you to get through the garden to the gazebo…

That's not a real solution to anything, by the way, but that's the kind of sequential list of things you do to progress in Sanitarium. When you come across something, you know you'll be using it later—again, not realistic, but the interlocking tasks are fun to set in motion. Like the Rube Goldbergian contraptions that start by pushing over a domino that turns on a fan that blows up a balloon, there's a satisfaction in getting it right.

But there's an equal frustration in getting it wrong. In chapter two of Sanitarium, I got stuck. I knew what I needed to do but I couldn't find the thing I needed to do it with. So I spent a few hours pixel-picking—revisiting everywhere I could, scrolling my mouse over everything that looked like it might be takeable. I knew the environment pretty well because earlier, the kids in the game had played a game of hide-and-seek with me, so I had to find them—a great little interlude where you have to

watch carefully for the motion of someone peeking out of their hiding spot.

But this game of hide-and-seek was less fun, and I started to worry that the game might be buggy. So I searched the internet, found that there were no relevant bugs—and also found some hints. And I should have known better, but I looked.

When I was 15 and stumped by The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (Infocom, 1984), we didn't have the internet, so I bought the official InvisiClues hint book. I took but one hint but to this day I've never really felt like I finished that game myself. It's a great game but my experience of it is somehow tainted by never really knowing if I could have completed it without help. Since that time, I've never taken hints. I've let games sit, come back to them months, or sometimes years, later, and give them another try—and more often than not, I figure it out eventually.

When I wrote my own text adventure, Punk Points, I didn't include any hints, nor do I give any to people who ask. It's not to be mean, it's just because I've learned the correlation between challenge and satisfaction. When I write books, I'm more concerned about making things clearer—starting subtle, and moving towards obviousness if I need to—but with a game I'm OK with a smaller, more intense audience.

With Sanitarium, I had decided that as a reviewer I should take a hint—I didn't want to recommend a game that was buggy or impossible, did I?—and I thought that I might have changed in the 15 years since I took my last hint. I don't take games as seriously now as I did then, when I might have had a passionate opinion about whether hints were cheating and took unironic pride in completing a game.

But the thing that I was stuck on wasn't a bug, or impossible, and instead was something I would have figured out in time. And now… I find that my enthusiasm for the game has dissipated. It feels like watching a movie with a twist ending that I know about beforehand. Good though it is, I doubt I'll go back to play it.

You'd think I would have gotten the hint the first time.

The Scientist-Hero Returns

I was a little nervous as I waited for Half-Life 2 (Vivendi, 2004) to start. The original Half-Life (Sierra, 1998) is one of the reasons this column exists—the game brought atmosphere and intelligence to the first-person shooter without skimping on the visceral kickassocity, and brought me back to videogames after a decade of neglect.

The sequel had been talked up in the gaming community for years, and even being over a year late hadn't destroyed the enthusiasm. (Though coming out at the same time as Halo 2 [Microsoft, 2004] did destroy the chance of mainstream press attention—the much less interesting game on Microsoft's Xbox console was backed by much more marketing money.) We remembered being Gordon Freeman, the scientist in the hazmat suit—a hero in glasses, for Christ's sake—having to shoot himself out of the Black Mesa lab turned horrific by an inter-dimensional snafu. We were willing to wait.

The loading screen is a good sign. A hazy blur of colour and shapes, evocative and mysterious, eventually sharpens into a street scene with the title and menu options overlaid. It's either twilight or pre-dawn, with cobblestones and architecture hinting at a European setting. There's a clicking of heels and a soldier in a face mask comes into the shot, doing his rounds. Then a flying sentry whirrs by, its steady bleeping not quite breaking the ominous silence.

That's just the menu screen. I choose Play New Game, a good deal of my nervousness having dissipated. The game begins aboard a train just pulling into City 17. I don't really know why I'm here, and I walk around the grandly decrepit train station listening as the video screens broadcast a welcome by a bearded man speaking calmly about "relocations" and "our benefactors." A man hunched at a lunch table throws a bag on the ground in disgust, and I approach him for information.

When I stand beside him, he looks at me. I'm a little surprised—I'm used to feeling like a pair of disembodied eyes in videogames, a point-of-view rather than a person. Gordon doesn't really speak, so the interaction with people isn't really a gameplay element—but it is effectively used to tell the story.

And there is a good story in Half-Life 2. Marc Laidlaw, who also wrote the predecessor, was a science-fiction novelist (Kalifornia, The Orchid Eater) before he started working with Valve. Both games have SF plots that, while not stunningly original, are told with subtlety and attention

to detail. More importantly, they're adapted to the medium. I still remember playing the beginning of Half-Life, where I was told by a senior scientist to push a cart into the centre of the chamber. When I did this, I hit something and a disaster ensued—and I remember thinking, "Shit, I should have saved the game, now I'll have to start over"—but there's no way to avoid it. It was a brilliant method to make the player complicit in the "things-go-horribly awry" stock science-fiction plot. Far more engaging than just explaining in a cut scene that an interdimensional rift caused yadda yadda yadda.

And while there are parts in the game where the story is advanced, they're not the conventional sit-and-watch cut scenes. I could, for instance, run around the lab opening things while my fellow scientist explains the importance of the teleportation device to the underground resistance. The facial expressions and body language are remarkable and the dialogue is also a cut above. As he upgrades my swamp boat with a gun turret that came from the same model of 'copter that is chasing me, my comrade says "I like a little irony in my firefights."

I use the swamp boat to get to the outskirts of City 17, loath though I am to leave a city where I once glimpsed a giant H.G. Wellsian robot stalking by on towering insectile legs. But the detail lavished on the urban centre, even down to the style of graffiti and stencilled posters, is also extended to the outreaches of the city. You get a sense of the scale of the city as you speed down rivers that curve forever, flanked by electrical towers, bleak apartment buildings and factories.

My appreciation of the game will have to continue in in the second half of this article. I'm not the fastest game player, I know that for a fact: I recently ran across an announcement that David "Marshmallow" Gibbons had posted proof that he was able to finish Half-Life 2 in two hours, 57 minutes. "Speed demos," as they're called, are done for many games and are backed up by video proof… the Super Mario 3 one made waves last year.

As for me, I don't want to rush. I'm planning to savour the experience, spend some more time in beautifully crafted dystopias like City 17. Half-Life 2 ends with a monologue by the mysterious G-Man, who's appeared through the entire game with his distinctive briefcase—ducking into a doorway, walking along a platform in the distance—always one step ahead of you. He looks fairly human, but the way his voice sounds like it's been spliced together (and the way he seems to be able to stroll between dimensions and stop time) suggest something more unworldly. The ending monologue intimates that he's not above selling your

services to the highest bidder, but it was the phrase "illusion of free will" that caught my ear.

As a novelist, I strive for verisimilitude: the appearance of reality. I try to give a sense of place, a person's life, a situation, not by giving exhaustive descriptive detail but by giving just enough detail to evoke a feeling of realism. The videogame has to do this with the visuals and the narrative, but faces an additional challenge: giving people the illusion of free will.

People sometimes criticize the Half-Life series for being "on a rail"—more or less like a funhouse ride on which you're shuttled through constructed scenarios. Having tight control like this is a trade-off for a nuanced and complex narrative. In opposition to this, games in the Grand Theft Auto series offer scenarios, rather than stories, and are often referred to as "sandbox games." While both limit the player's free will, they employ different strategies of evoking the illusion of maintaining it.

Half-Life 2 does this through a steady diet of marvels, a lot of them based on how smart the objects are. If, in a moment of panic, you grab a nearby paint can and throw it at a zombie, the zombie will be covered in paint. If you grab a circular saw and throw it, the zombie will be sliced in two (and if you go to look, you will see the saw half-embedded in the wall behind). Shoot someone with a crossbow and they will hang literally pinned to the wall. Physics are used a lot in puzzles—if you weigh down one end of a see-saw with the concrete debris lying around, you can get up to the second level. At another part, the buoyancy of plastic barrels in water comes into play.

But the shock of recognition (my god, it's rolling down the hill like a real tire would!) that is a big part of the appeal of physics is only one possible use of these complex mathematical algorithms. Unlike the physics in our world, gameworld physics aren't natural laws—they're as changeable as the visual environments. And Half-Life 2 takes admirable advantage of this, drawing on its futuristic setting to introduce the gravity gun.

With the gravity gun—a.k.a. the zero-point energy field manipulator—you can suck objects into the field, have them hover in front of you, and then fire them away at great force. The gravity gun is quite a unique weapon—even the alien weapons of some games simply exchange energy bolts for bullets and don't really have their own character. With the gravity gun you can pick up filing cabinets and shoot them at oncoming soldiers. Need something below on the cavern floor infested with vicious

head crabs? Reverse its gravity and watch it come to you. Out of grenades? Hurl a barrel of gasoline at an ant-lion and watch it explode on impact, then watch the animal thrash around in flames until it finally collapses.

Speaking of ant-lions, when you're on the coastline, these buggers appear from under the sand and attack you relentlessly. But once you kill one of their mothers, you're able to harvest the pheromone sacks. Now they're under your control, and you can call them from the sands and direct them to harass your enemies.

You find a less successful variant on the pheromone-sack weapon when you're fighting in the city, and word of your heroic actions has spread to the point that the resistance humans you meet all want to fight with you. You can direct them into battle like the ant-lions, and they'll run off to get killed. But unlike the ant-lions I remorselessly sent into battle and watched from a distance, I felt like I had to lead the charge for my human squad. I didn't really need their help, where elsewhere in the game (the gun turret scene in "Entanglement"), I was stuck for hours. They died very quietly and everything, but mostly they just got in the way (constantly saying stuff like, "Excuse me, Dr. Freeman," "Let me get out of your way, Dr. Freeman") as I plowed through the bombed-out buildings of City 17.

Dr. Freeman is better as a loner, not a soldier. This becomes apparent as you drive across the beached coastline about halfway through the game, which has a melancholy feel of a post-apocalyptic road trip. A soldier busts out of an outpost and you gun him down before he can do the same to you. You go into the little tin shack he came out of to scavenge supplies. But there're no medkits or ammo, just the soldier's belongings and the old mattress he slept on.

Rolling Pleasure

In a brief flashback to the hip Queen Street West I remember from the ’80s, I chanced upon a cult-hit videogame there. I was killing time and wandered into Microplay and asked the counter guy if any interesting games had come down the pike lately. “Yeah,” he said, “There’s this Japanese game…” He passed me a PlayStation 2 game with a curiously static image on the cover: a cow standing in a field next to a gigantic ball of… stuff. I made a mental note of the name: Katamari Damacy (Namco, 2004).

“You roll that ball around,” he explained. “And if you roll up enough stuff it gets put up into the sky and becomes a star.” I suppose I looked baffled, because he shrugged and said, “I haven’t played it yet, but people really love it.”

When I eventually got the game, I found out why. It’s a refreshingly simple and fun arcade-style game. With its amazing soundtrack and psychedelic rainbow visuals it captivates shroom-head adults and sugar-high kids alike. You begin the game a few millimetres tall, rolling around a ball on a desk and picking up thumbtacks and ants, until your ball is big enough to pick up bigger objects. If you keep on rollin’, eventually you’re picking up cars and cows and even people. The apt title of the sequel, scheduled for release in Japan this spring, is Everyone Loves Katamari.

Keita Takahashi knew what he was doing when he designed the game. Takahashi, at the Game Developers’ Conference held in San Francisco this past March, talked about how he intended for it to be loved, that he wanted to create something “enjoyable and funny.” That’s not to say that he didn’t have deeper thoughts than that: he followed it up by pointing out that the flipside to violent games inspiring violence is that pleasurable games can inspire pleasure. This was well received by an audience of game developers who can hardly ignore that videogames are our culture’s latest bogeyman, simultaneously regarded as a waste of time and all-powerful influence.

Takahashi’s talk was the highlight of the GDC for me. I caught a glimpse of him the night before accepting awards for game design and innovation in art-school slacker clothes, and I had worried that the talk would be a lot of him shrugging and being charming. (That’s not so awful, just not worth getting up for at 9am.) But he was a very generous and candid speaker, bringing up ideas like love and punk alongside

practical ways the industry can improve, all while doodling the Prince and the King on his desktop.

Translated via headphones from the Japanese, he showed us some of the work he did while going to school for sculpture. Among them were a coffee table that transformed into a flying robot and a goat-shaped flowerpot, which went a long way to explaining the whimsy and spatial use in Katamari Damacy. That he had an arts background made a lot of sense to me too, because the kitschy-cool-crazy-Japanese feel of the game seemed too self-aware to be solely the product of a game company.

And while Namco did release the game, the objects in it were built by students in a computer graphics design class assigned it as a project. That explained the specificity of the objects—there's a learner's permit, for instance. It also pointed at another possibility for game development beyond the game company model. Takahashi himself is an interesting manifestation of the game auteur that is becoming more and more linked to innovation and breakthrough games: unlike many of his auteur predecessors, who are compared to movie directors, he's drawing from other artistic wells.

Takahashi also showed the original prototype for the game, which was almost identical to the final game. In getting his vision through the game company system intact, Takahashi admitted that he had to "proactively ignore" pressure to make the game (which famously only uses the two analogue sticks of the PS2's multitude of buttons) more complex. In the Q&A there was a question about whether changing the name from the Japanese (pronounced "katamari dama-she," by the way, and roughly translating as "clump soul") was ever considered for the Western market. Takahashi said no.

Not that Takahashi is unconcerned with how the game is marketed. In his talk, he addressed the fact that in Japan, where gaming is often thought by Westerners to be more acceptable, there's still a stigma. "Gamers are the ones who buy games," he said. To combat this, he suggested that manuals could be created for games that were as well designed and intriguing as books in bookstores. People who would be too intimidated to pick up a controller for a demo in a game store might flip through a book.

While this could easily be dismissed as a packaging gimmick to bring in more money, it's actually idealism. Takahashi is applying the same intentions to promotion and marketing that he's applied to making the game: reaching out to non-gamers and bringing them pleasure. It's a

kind of advocacy that has faith in the transformative power of gaming, rather than insisting that gaming be taken seriously.

Makes me wonder if Takahashi very roughly translates to "he who offers the stick-of-joy."

Rethinking Brain Eating

If he feels vindicated, he doesn't show it. As Marc Laidlaw waits for his co-workers to finish a talk, we sit down at a table in San Francisco's cavernous Moscone Center and talk about Half-Life 2 (Valve, 2004).

Its 1998 predecessor is legendary for pushing the form both narratively (bringing atmosphere and intelligence to the first-person shooter) and technologically (the Half-Life engine having been used for the online phenomenon Counterstrike). As if living up to that wasn't enough, the sequel took six years to make and was plagued by delays and a code leak of a beta version of the game. But I meet up with Marc the day after the first-person shooter game has swept the Game Developers Choice Awards: it won Best Game, Technology, Character Design and Writing.

As indicated by the last two awards, Laidlaw's background as a novelist (he got into games through writing Wired articles about the game company that made Doom) has given him a skill for character development rarely seen in the industry. He explains how he approaches the dramatic scenes in the game: "In the same way we set about designing an ambush with some monsters, we're going to design a scene where we want a specific emotional impact. For instance, the scene where you first get to Eli's lab, we wanted you to feel like you were watching a family dynamic with this daughter-and-stepmother kind of energy going on," Laidlaw says.

Perhaps because he's confident about his writing, he's learned the difficult art of what not to say. "I'm not a big fan of too much dialogue; it needs to be just enough. But we tend to overwrite and record a lot of extra stuff that we don't use, and then it's kind of like scaffolding. Because as soon as you have communicated enough to the animators, they're able to express a lot of it non-verbally and we can cut the scene down further and just communicate more visually. And it's a visual medium."

That was something I'd forgotten when I asked the publishers of Half-Life 2: Raising the Bar (Prima Games, 2004) to send me a review copy. For some reason, I'd expected a non-fiction account of the making of the game, but what arrived was a lavish coffee-table book featuring examples of the visually stunning work of the game accompanied by 100--word descriptions. What comes across in the book, which quotes dozens of people, is how much collaboration shaped the process.

Laidlaw explains that this was the case even with the dialogue, which could have been solely the domain of the writer. "We basically created radio plays, and we'd get a bunch of extra stuff: 'Let's try this line.

You're doing this line really close up; now you're 20 feet away; you're angry; you're scared.' We'll take that stuff back to the lab, and these are our pieces for building the scene. And then in the process of that, we'll usually find little weird bits and pieces in the outtakes and the alternates that will inspire one of the animators."

And Laidlaw says it helped that there were a couple of pairs of ears cocked for inspiration. "Like in Eli's lab, when he's kind of teasing you and Alyx, and he goes 'Awwwwyyyyiii!' Well, that's just the sound [voice actor] Robert [Guillaume] made. When Bill Fletcher and I were going through the audio stuff, we just heard this sound, and we were like, 'Oh, we gotta use that sound.' Bill instantly saw something to do with it, and so he took it away and fed it into the scene. It wasn't supposed to be there, but as soon as we heard it, it had to be there. It was just such an interesting sound."

Laidlaw says trusting what he finds interesting is key to working with a genre many consider hackneyed. "A lot of science-fiction stuff works in games because it hasn't been done before in a game, although it's been done to death in every other medium. In the first game it was the cliché of the trans-dimensional teleporter; this one has the cliché of the Orwellian future. We're always on the lookout for the science-fiction clichés… They're good because everybody recognizes them and you don't have to explain them before you turn them on their head."

Laidlaw's co-worker Ted Backman echoes this reconstructionist sentiment in Half-Life 2: Raising the Bar. When designing the soldiers of the future, he decided they wouldn't need the shoulder pads every other videogame had them wearing: "I don't know if they think soldiers will be tackling people," he quips. Similarly, when designing monsters, he rethought the genre standbys: the Stalker "was a kind of nullified amputated human the Combine turned into a slave labourer … that presented a moral dilemma every time you had to deal with it. It is more horrific to have to deal with an insane hostage than something that just wants to eat your brains."

Pirates of the Pacific

This past winter, Bruce and I took the trip out to Pacific Mall to get his PlayStation 2 modded. He was excited that he'd soon be able to play the pirated games he'd downloaded off the net, and I was excited about the amazing dim sum we'd be eating after. It was a pain getting to Kennedy and Steeles on transit in the snow, but had we waited till the spring Bruce would have been shit out of luck. The pirates have all now set sail.

Pacific Mall was as shiny and fabulous as I remembered, a piece of Hong Kong transplanted successfully into suburban Markham. We traipsed around to the various game stores, and Bruce would ask them questions about options and prices. They'd sometimes have price lists posted with different mod chips, preloaded packages and a catalogue of the bootleg games they had to offer.

After the third or fourth place offered the exact same price—$130 for the mod chip installation with three games, $110 with no games—Bruce started to grumble about honour among thieves. So he picked one that said they could do it in an hour, entrusting the two teenagers with the binder-sized console. The incongruity of the sleek tech coming out of his paint-flecked satchel gave it a spy-thriller feel.

I mentioned this as we sat down to lunch at Graceful Vegetarian Restaurant. "I think that's one of the reasons I like pirated games," Bruce said. "It's just more fun. Finding ways to get them rather than just going into a Wal-Mart—it becomes a game in itself. Unlike movies or music, videogames have always been digital—pirating games has been part of gaming culture from the beginning." He flipped over the menu. "Kind of expensive."

I assured him that once he tried the food his starving artist would be grateful. I called him on the fact that he was spending over a hundred bucks on a consumer purchase to avoid making consumer purchases.

"That's true," he said, "but once I saw the games available via bit torrent I decided it'd be worth it. I wouldn't have actually bought a PS2 at all if I couldn't get it modded—retail games are out of my budget. I'm not going to quit painting and get a crap job so I can buy a new game every month."

We ordered, checking off a bunch of tasties, and I asked him what the mod chip actually does. "Most games are just DVDs, right? So you should be able to just copy them like you do CDs. But they've got these unreproducable bad blocks on the original that DVD copying software corrects, then when you put the copy in the PS2 console, it looks for

these bad blocks, and when it can't find them it refuses to play. The mod chip bypasses this bad-block-checking step."

Our food arrived and we ignored bad blocks in favour of good bok choy and a number of other amazing dishes that had Bruce converted and sated by the end of the meal. "Good value," he decided.

We returned to the store, where one of the young guys was hunched over another console, the guts open and tools applied. The other one showed us Bruce's console, plugged it into a couple of ready plugs and fired it up. The TV in the corner showed the familiar PlayStation logo boot-up screen with a small addendum in a corner reading "Infinity." A game booted up and Bruce nodded his approval, pulling out some cash. As he unplugged it, the guy explained that you wanted to keep the cover open while you played, to avoid overheating: the unit wasn't made to support another chip.

"Cool," Bruce said to me as we left. "It reminds me of a customized hot rod, with the engine exposed." He patted his bag happily. "That was easy. I sort of expected more cloak-and-dagger stuff."

As it turned out, the stores at Pacific Mall could have used a little more discretion. A few months after our trip, I got a press release: "The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) and the Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC) joined today in applauding the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's (RCMP) recent actions against numerous retail outlets offering pirate and counterfeit entertainment software for sale at Pacific Mall in Markham, Ontario."

The release originated from Highroad, a PR company that represents Microsoft and often sends me information about Xbox titles, so I took them up on their offer to chat with Danielle LaBossiere, executive director of ESAC.

ESAC is a trade organization made up of most of the game companies that, according to Danielle, serves civil warnings—"kind of like cease-and-desist letters"—to people violating copyright law and then "work[s] very closely to keep [the RCMP] abreast [of these violations]." Then, in the case of the "fairly successful raid on Pacific Mall," they (and other trade organization representatives from the movie and music industries) go with the RCMP to identify the bootlegged games. In the case of the Pacific Mall's Fun Desk, a retailer that had already had a warning, they were shut down in early May. No arrests were made.

Danielle was a political staffer before she was hired in October, a one-person operation supported by various "researchers" and a US parent organization in Washington. "Piracy's a huge problem in Canada … it

discourages innovation." Danielle was particularly outraged that the manufacture of mod chips is not actually illegal in Canada, just the use of them to circumvent copy protection.

Out of curiosity, I called Fun Desk a little more than a week later to see if they were open. They were, so I asked them if they sold PlayStation 2 games.

"Yes," he said, adding hastily: "But only originals."

I expect it'll be a while before I get any vegetarian dim sum again.