SIMPLY THE BEST

INTERVIEWS WITH VIDEO GAME DESIGNERS, COMPOSERS AND SCOFFLAWS

MAT BRADLEY-TSCHIRGI

MOON BOOKS PUBLISHING

PRAISE FOR SIMPLY THE BEST

INTERVIEWS WITH VIDEO GAME DESIGNERS, COMPOSERS AND SCOFFLAWS

"Video games have mutated from the jangly, jagged chaos of arcades to a fully immersive HD art form. In this collection of interviews with game artists, designers and composers, Mat Bradley -Tschirgi explores both gaming's past and, more importantly, its future."

FLINT DILLE, WRITER/GAME DESIGNER

"Simply The Best offers a brilliant peek under the hood of game design with insights from a thoughtfully chosen lineup of interviewees from across the industry (and across the decades). It's the rare example of a book with something to offer to aspiring game developers, game scholars, and everyday fans alike."

PROFESSOR JESS MORRISSETTE, PH.D, CREATOR, THE VIDEO GAME SODA MACHINE PROJECT

"I'm proud to say I've known Mat Bradley-Tschirgi for decades, and not once has he disappointed me with any of his vast array of writings. In his latest project, Mat has delivered an impressive collection of in-depth interviews with a wide variety of game industry professionals. The information you'll find in them is not only useful for those aspiring to careers in game development or game studies, but also entertaining and even profound for anyone who has wondered about why people make and play games. What's particularly impressive here is the scope of this project and the variety of subjects. For fellow writers and scholars, Steven Kent and Nick Montfort's interviews will no doubt be well-thumbed, but I dare anyone who wouldn't welcome a stop-and-chat with the gloriously eccentric Fat Man or Howard Scott Warshaw. Mat's favorite genre, the adventure game, is well represented here by the legendary Al Lowe and John Mandel. There are great musicians, designers, producers, and publishers here ready to share their insights with us via the Bradley-Tschirgi conduit."

PROFESSOR MATT BARTON, PH.D.,
AUTHOR, DUNGEONS AND
DESKTOPS: THE HISTORY OF
COMPUTER ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

"Over several decades, video games have become a fascinating intersection of arts and sciences, driving the evolution of our technology while thrilling players with both cerebral challenges and emotional experiences. Capturing the story of this maturing industry has become a labor of real historical value, and Mat Bradley-Tschirgi has joined the pantheon of greats who have undertaken this important work. If you're an aspiring creator, a lifelong gamer, or you just have untoward questions about Leisure Suit Larry, Mat just delivered the goods."

TODD MITCHELL, PODCASTER,
CODEWRITEPLAY

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FOREWORD

Almost 20 years ago, Mat and I started eBoredom after deciding to expand the scope of our previous movie-centric website Xtreme Movie Watchers. After a few years of making dumb jokes about crappy movies, we started wanting to also write about video games and, in my case, dumb comic books.

While I was busy finding new ways to obsess over old Captain America comics and harassing a guy with my name that published awful poetry online, Mat decided to ruin it all with some actual journalism. At the time it seemed like a whim, but suddenly Mat was emailing me interviews with people I was completely unfamiliar with. Even as my contributions to eBoredom tapered off, Mat continued to churn out interviews.

"Anybody can write a synopsis, but very few people actually understand the significance of the

world of technology," said video game journalist Brad King in his interview with Mat. He was not specifically referring to my own writing when he stated that, but it did apply. King wrote a regular column for Wired that covered various video game genres and their fan bases. He was just one of the many legitimately respected voices in video game commentary that Mat scored interviews with.

Mat was able to coerce Al Lowe, famed creator of the original video game incel Leisure Suit Larry, into an interview. And Mat had the restraint to only ask one question about Larry Laffer's junk. I would have had way more questions for Lowe than Mat, but not a single one of mine were appropriate.

Mat could have half-assed it and just interviewed game creators, but he had the wherewithal to consider the variety of work that exists within the medium.. Among others, Mat talked to Yoshitaka Amano about his artwork, which has been featured prominently in the Final Fantasy series. He also talked to Jeremy Soule who composed the music for several RPGs.

I have always been impressed with the expanse of Mat's knowledge geek shit, which is hard not to appreciate in these interviews. I can confidently hold my own when debating the Nintendo Entertainment System, but Mat is out here chiming in on old school text adventure games, table top role playing games or the guy that wrote 8-bit symphonies for entire genres of games.

At the time, I had little choice but to make fun of

Mat for interviewing game developers and midi composers. And yet, his interviews elevated eBoredom far beyond what I ever considered. I was hung up on Nintendo game reviews that were 15 years too late, comic book reviews that were 20 years too late and movie reviews that should not have ever happened. Meanwhile, Mat had the audacity to produce content that was honestly out of place in our little crap corner of the Internet.

It is nice to see all these years later, his interviews have a more appropriate home in this book than on a free, sub-domained website that I had to delete to avoid prospective writing employers from searching for my name online. If a short hairy fellow like him can write a book, perhaps there's hope for the rest of us.

-Zack

Zack Huffman is a journalist who has written for Vice, the Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism and an assortment of local Boston newspapers. He was also co-founder of eBoredom and once set up an entire game of Monopoly on top of Mat when he fell asleep.

INTRODUCTION

Back when I was wrapping up my BFA in Game Design & Interactivity from the Savannah College of Art & Design, I decided to start conducting interviews for the indie pop culture site E-Boredom founded by my friend Zack Huffman and me. What started as a lark grew into over two dozen interviews with such video game luminaries as Yoshitaka Amano (Final Fantasy), Feargus Urquhart (Fallout 2), and Al Lowe (Leisure Suit Larry). The film director interview books from the early 2000s going through their works one movie at a time were a big inspiration for these interviews in the first place (Lynch on Lynch, Scorsese on Scorsese, Gilliam on Gilliam, etc.).

These interviews were conducted from 2004-2005. It was a lot easier to pitch artists to do interviews back then because there was less competition and less social media. This era of video game history was on

the cusp of a major transition. Standard definition full-frame televisions would give way to high definition widescreen TVs. Pricey home theater systems were replaced with compact sound bars that could simulate discrete surround sound at a fraction of the space and cost. A far superior video game experience for the average home consumer was just around the corner. It was the end of one era, and the beginning of the next.

I have revised the original text for clarity as well as implementing a heap of grammar and spelling fixes. Interviews are presented in alphabetical order by last name of the interview subject; in cases where they do not have a last name, I go by the first letter of their first name. All of the interviews were conducted via email or AOL Instant Messenger except for Inon Zur, which was conducted via phone.

It has been an absolute pleasure polishing up these interviews for your current enjoyment. To paraphrase the late Douglas Adams, "share and enjoy."

Mat Bradley-Tschirgi
December 2019

ERNEST ADAMS

Ernest Adams' book Break Into the Game Industry is full of advice for various career paths, including what college courses to take for different fields. It's a unique resource for aspiring computer artists or game designers wishing to enter the industry.

Adams also leads workshops around the world on game mechanics and game design. He also consults for various companies, assisting them in the design phases. In this interview, we discussed the lack of games marketed to females to the touchy issue of abandonware.

E-BOREDOM: What is the most immersive game you've played?

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ERNEST ADAMS: I've recently come to the conclusion that there are three types of immersion (and maybe more): tactical, strategic, and narrative.

Tactical immersion is the second-by-second experience of play, and is deepest in really fast action games. Being immersed tactically is what people call being in the zone or in the groove in action games. The most immersive tactical game I've played was Tetris, which can't be beaten for simple elegance of design; it is the purest action game I know of, and I consider it to be a work of art. Another name for the zone that I've seen used is the Tetris Trance. Second to it would be Interstate '76, which I thought was a blast... An action game that even I could play!

Strategic immersion is the player's involvement in working out a path to victory. I'm not terribly good at turn-based strategy games like chess because I don't have that facility to look ahead for several moves. I think the most strategically immersed I've ever been was while playing the BASIC game Super Star Trek, an unlicensed text-only Star Trek simulator popular in the 70s and 80s. I played it a lot in college and got really good at it. In terms of modern games, it would have to be Dungeon Keeper which always had something interesting going on. I also really enjoyed an odd little game called Strange Adventures in Infinite Space by Digital Eel.

Narrative immersion is getting involved with the storyline, and for that, it's imperative that you have

good characters and narration. Without a doubt, the most narratively immersed I've ever been was playing Planescape: Torment. However, I also have to add that I was once quite startled playing the original text Adventure (Colossal Cave) very late at night by myself when suddenly it printed on the screen, "You hear footsteps in the darkness behind you." I must have been really into it, because this seriously creeped me out. I started typing really fast trying to run away from them!

E-BOREDOM: What was the first computer game you played where you felt an emotional attachment to one of the characters?

ERNEST ADAMS: I've been playing computer games since 1970, so you're asking me to go a long way back! The earliest adventure games didn't give the avatar any character to speak of, so they don't really count. People always talk about Floyd the robot in Planetfall, but I have to admit that I've never played it. I guess the earliest character that I can remember thinking of as emotionally appealing was Bobbin Threadbare from LucasArts' graphic adventure Loom. Bobbin was brave, loyal, resourceful, and witty without being a smart-aleck. In addition to being visually gorgeous for its time, the game was suffused with a wistful sadness

as he searched in vain for his mother. You can't beat a musical score written by Tchaikovsky to set an emotional tone.

More recently, I developed a sort of fatherly affection for April Ryan, the naïve young protagonist in The Longest Journey. April is about half my age, so I can't really think of her as my avatar. That was an unexpected feeling, to realize that my relationship to her was not one of identification, nor even friendship, but paternal protectiveness.

By far the most interesting and engaging characters I've ever experienced in a computer game were in Planescape: Torment. Annah demonstrated such loyalty to my avatar, that I played that game with a specific goal of keeping her friendship regardless of what else it cost. At the same time, some of the other characters in my party were extremely weird and often downright dangerous. Like most brilliantly innovative games, Planescape didn't get nearly the recognition it deserved.

E-BOREDOM: On your site, you mention that "the writing in most computer games is terrible." What is the worst example of writing you have encountered in a computer game?

ERNEST ADAMS: The worst writing I have ever

encountered in any game, bar none, was in Resident Evil. And the acting was even worse than the writing. It was so bad, in fact, that I had to quit after the second or third room... I simply couldn't stand to listen to it any longer! By that time, I hated the protagonists so much I was rooting for the monsters.

E-BOREDOM: You often argue that more games should be made for the female market. Why is this demographic being ignored and what sort of games do you think would appeal more to women?

ERNEST ADAMS: The person who should really answer this question is Sheri Graner-Ray, lead game designer at Sony Online Entertainment and the author of Gender-Inclusive Game Design. However, I'll give you my top-line thoughts anyway. The demographic is being ignored because of market inertia. Publisher marketing departments don't know how to market to women. They don't want to take the trouble to learn because the vast majority of game developers are male. Developers have always had a bad habit of making games for themselves, and so long as they continue to do that, their customers will necessarily resemble them: young adult males. This will improve if we can begin to attract more women into development. The purchasing ratio for The Sims was report-

edly 50-50 male and female; to no one's surprise, the ratio on the development team was 50-50 as well.

As for making games that appeal to women, it is NOT true that we need to make a line of "pink" games. That was tried during the abortive "games-for-girls" effort in the late 1990s. For the most part, the results were embarrassingly bad: poor value for the money when they weren't actively insulting to girls' intelligence. Rather, what we need to do is make slight adjustments to existing genres. Research shows that women don't like to be thrown in at the deep end; they prefer to know what is expected of them before they begin a task. This means decent instructions and tutorials, not the learn-by-dying approach that is so common in games today. It also means avatars who aren't boy teen masturbation fantasies. When a game's avatar is a sexpot in a chainmail bikini, it screams "Not for women!" to anyone who sees it. We don't have to abandon female heroines (both women AND men like playing them), just make them reasonably realistic.

On the whole, women like decent storylines and game mechanics that reward intelligence. They find brute-force and trial-and-error approaches a boring waste of time, and they aren't motivated by the prospect of getting their initials on the brag board. Make games for smart people, and you'll attract more women.

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E-BOREDOM: What are some good examples of video games where violence isn't necessary to complete the game and how is gameplay different with a non-violent objective?

ERNEST ADAMS: First, I think it's worth distinguishing between "violence" and "conflict." Chess has conflict, but you wouldn't really call taking an opponent's piece "violent." Of course, in Battle Chess a gratuitous element of violence is overlaid in order to add visual interest to the game, but serious chess players would consider Battle Chess to be a joke. I don't think wargames played with cardboard counters are "violent" either. So, it's perfectly possible to have a game about a violent subject which doesn't actually pander to the juvenile player's desire for blood and guts.

However, there are many, many games in which violence plays no role at all. All the sports games except for boxing and wrestling are effectively non-violent. Driving and many flying games are non-violent. Construction and management simulators of various sorts (Sim City, Capitalism, Roller Coaster Tycoon) are all non-violent. Puzzle games like The Incredible Machine, and many adventure games are non-violent. Most MMORPGs can be played in a non-violent fashion, although they reward violence more highly than other kinds of behavior. Even Sonic

the Hedgehog was non-violent since you were actually breaking open robots to release your friends trapped inside.

In fact, I would say that the majority of gameplay types do not have a violent objective; it just so happens that the violent games get the most press, the biggest ads, and the most complaints in Congress. It tends to induce a little less adrenaline, perhaps, since we're programmed to respond viscerally to blood and gore. It can still be exciting, though. Ask any player who's at 4th and 2 in the Super Bowl, four points down and one second left on the clock.

Games without conflict are intrinsically different from those that include conflict, whether violent or not. They offer different challenges: exploration, economic management, maintaining social relationships, puzzle-solving, and races against time. Then there's the elements of construction in games like Theme Park and self-expression in RPGs, both of which are often overlooked as a part of the way we entertain people. I've heard of people spending hours tuning and tweaking their character before they even start into an RPG. This is part of the reason that dying in an RPG or MMORPG is so painful! You've invested time, energy, and, above all, creativity in your avatar. If you're going to get killed all the time, you might as well play with a generic character so it doesn't hurt so much.

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E-BOREDOM: It's been three years since you wrote the Dogma 2001 Vow, a call for game designers to make games in which "innovative gameplay is not merely a desirable attribute, but a moral imperative." Have you seen any games that have tried to follow your guidelines and have ended up a fun game?

ERNEST ADAMS: Not a one. Unlike DOGME 95, the Danish film movement on which Dogma 2001 was based, I wasn't actually trying to create a movement. I didn't expect anyone to build a Dogma 2001 game commercially. My real intent was to stimulate debate, and in that, at least, it was a resounding success. I still believe it's perfectly possible to make a fun Dogma 2001 game, though.

When I give my game design workshops, I require the participants to design games that have never been made commercially. They're not Dogma games, but they are necessarily innovative. I've seen some wonderful ideas come out of those experiences. I told one group to do a game about the French Resistance during WWII. I figured that they would design the usual sort of blow-up-the-railroad-lines kind of FPS like James Bond during the war. Instead, they created a game about bribing and blackmailing German officers, and running a ring of spies to collect data for the Allies. It was fascinating. Of course, it couldn't be a Dogma game because Dogma prohibits both spies and Nazis!

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E-BOREDOM: Several of the older PC games are unavailable for sale, not giving gamers a chance to play classic examples of games in different genres. The abandonware movement online offers people a chance to download these older games online with an obvious questionable legal issue attached to it. What are your views on abandonware?

ERNEST ADAMS: This is a tough one, and my heart and my head give different answers. My head says that pirating intellectual property, no matter how old, is wrong if it's still in copyright. Think about it with books: suppose the Harry Potter series went out of print and J.K. Rowling didn't write another one for 10 years or so. Would I be entitled to start printing the old Harry Potter books and distributing them for free without giving Rowling any money? Of course not. Why should games be any different?

My heart, on the other hand, says that if you don't maintain your moral obligations to a work you've created, you lose the right to say what happens to it. If there's a demand for a work of art and you don't meet it, in fact, you refuse to distribute it and you actively prevent its distribution by others... Then you're committing a cultural crime. It's one thing to demand payment (that's fair), but it's another thing to remove it from circulation altogether. Suppose the heirs of

Picasso got together and demanded that one of his paintings must never, ever be seen again: they refused to authorize its reproduction and they demanded that all unauthorized versions be destroyed? Owners or not, that deprives the world of part of its cultural heritage, and it shouldn't be allowed.

I guess the bottom line is that I'm sympathetic to the abandonware movement as long as it isn't creating new games using someone else's characters and settings, and as long as they aren't actively pirating current or recent products. I think they ought to establish a clear line of demarcation to indicate what they consider abandoned: for example, if the product has been out of print for 15 years and the publisher has not published anything using the same intellectual property since then; or if the original publisher has been out of business for 5 years and no subsequent owner can be found. I realize it's still technically illegal, but by setting up a clear rule and sticking to it, they're more likely to stay out of trouble.

E-BOREDOM: Out of all the entry level jobs in the game industry, which ones would you recommend to aspiring game designers or writers?

ERNEST ADAMS: Assistant producer or level designer if a company is willing to hire entry-level people in those positions (some do); otherwise, testing,

quality assurance, or any intership going. Get the job first -- any job -- to establish some credentials, then work towards the one you really want. It's a mistake to hold out for the "perfect job," because if it never comes along, you'll never get into the game industry at all.

People get into game design in all sorts of strange ways. Some come from programming, like me; some come from art; I think you could get in from localization or marketing. The real trick is to demonstrate, by whatever means you can, that you have the aptitude for the job; then get someone's attention.

E-BOREDOM: Out of all the game designing and consulting work you have done, have some genres of games been more rewarding to design for than others?

ERNEST ADAMS: I'm fondest of adventure games, computer RPGs, god games, and strategy games. After that, construction and management sims. You'll see a pattern here: none of them require any physical dexterity. Since early childhood, I've been one of the most uncoordinated people I know. I'm barely able to make it past the first level in most action games.

Apart from the dexterity issue, the reason I find those genres the most rewarding to design for is simply that they offer the greatest opportunity for creating interesting characters, environments, and stories. I consider Starcraft to be a landmark in strategy game

design for its characters and storyline. When Sarah Kerrigan disappeared, I really wanted to know what had happened to her. Because of their complexity, those genres also have the most room for innovation in game mechanics. I like the challenge of designing and balancing new kinds of units; again, Starcraft excelled in this area.

The most rewarding design work I ever did was for a new game for Bullfrog Productions called Genesis: The Hand of God. It was supposed to be a successor to the Populous series. Unfortunately, it got cancelled when Electronic Arts killed most of their PC game projects in early 2000.

E-BOREDOM: What current projects are you working on?

ERNEST ADAMS: I'm doing some design consulting for THQ on a project that I can't talk about.; I've also got a job designing a game for Trapeze Media in Canada working with the film director David Cronenberg. Those are the big ones.

Apart from that, I'm doing a huge amount of teaching. In the first half of this year alone, I've been to Ireland (twice), Denmark, Germany (twice), Sweden (twice), Egypt, Singapore, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States in addition to the occasional gig in England, which is where I live. With all the new

college game design degrees starting up, and all the communities looking to game development as a boost to the local economy, there's a huge demand for professional designers to come and teach what they know. Teaching about game design is almost as much fun as doing it, and a lot less work!

AGD IINTERACTIVE

Out of all the fan-made sequels of adventure games that are out there, none are better than the ones by AGD Interactive, formerly known as Tierra Entertainment. So far, they've made VGA remakes of King's Quest I and King's Quest II; both featured voice acting with the latter even included an original song with vocals!

Created with the Adventure Game Studio, their games are worth checking out. I recently chatted with AGD # 2, one of the two developers that do the majority of the work for their games. In this interview, we covered challenges in remaking classic games, information on their upcoming remake of Quest for Glory 2, and the process of picking the right voice actors their games.

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E-BOREDOM: In the late 1980s, Sierra On-line produced remakes of their classic adventure games, starting with the original Kings's Quest. Given the choice of the original KQ and the EGA remake, which do you prefer and why?

AGD INTERACTIVE: Personally, I prefer Sierra's EGA remake over the AGI version. I know that the remake was considered a commercial failure and that a lot of people strongly disagreed with the overhaul at the time, but this was the first version of KQ1 that I experienced. For that reason, it has more sentimental value to me.

That's not to say that I disliked the AGI version, though. In general, I just found the SCI parser games to have better gameplay design; they accepted more words and phrases, and were a little less painful on the eyes too!

E-BOREDOM: Fans tend to be very vocal about their favorite KQ games... Which ones do you enjoy?

AGD INTERACTIVE: This is a difficult question for me because I played them all out of order! I think I played KQ1 first, followed by KQ4, KQ5, KQ2, KQ6, KQ3, KQ7, and KQ8! I'm not sure which is my absolute favourite, but KQ4 really stands out in my

memory as being a very enjoyable experience. I regret to say that I resorted to using a walkthrough for KQ6 the first time I played it,:op-[so that ruined much of the experience for me. Still, KQ6 was a very good game too.

My least favourite (considering the time of release) would have to be KQ7. Something I didn't like much about the KQ games was the "experimental" nature of each successive game... By using the KQ series to "push the envelope," I believe Sierra also made some big mistakes. The constantly changing style was quite bothersome to me (KQ7 jumping from realistic to cartoon style graphics). I actually didn't mind KQ8, but I didn't consider it a continuation of the KQ plot.

E-BOREDOM: Remaking such classic adventure games must have been a massive task. How did you keep so organized during the design process?

AGD INTERACTIVE: We try to keep the team as small, organized, and motivated at all times. Making sure that everyone has a clear set of goals and knows what needs to be done. But having goals is only half of the milestone. The other half comes from having team members who are good at what they do, and who have a natural inclination to work hard. Progress is only as fast as the slowest member on a team, so having

talented and close-knit team members is probably the key to success.

E-BOREDOM: One of your projects, Royal Quest 1: Retrieving Lost #@!$, was cancelled. What was the reason for the cancellation and how far were you along in the development process?

AGD INTERACTIVE: The game was going to be based loosely on KQ1. It would have used all the same background screens and most of the same characters -- only with a lot of extra animations and a few new backgrounds too. The game would have been a dark parody of the original KQ1. It was roughly 3/4 complete.

It was a difficult decision, but we cancelled Royal Quest because it was leading in the opposite direction from our main goal. We wanted to reintroduce people to classic adventure gaming and the older Sierra games in particular, the ones which pretty much started the genre. RQ would have likely caused more damage than good.

E-BOREDOM: Both of your KQ remakes have optional voice-over packs available for download. What was the casting process like?

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AGD INTERACTIVE: Most of KQ1VGA's voices were done online by people who were interested in auditioning for a part. In the end, we also ended up using a few friends to perform some voices as well. For KQ2VGA, much more effort went into the casting process. It was done entirely online and we went through voice acting groups on the Internet to find the most suitable people for each part.

E-BOREDOM: Your next project was a remake of KQ II VGA that was more ambitious because it featured new puzzles and dialogue! What aspects were lacking in the original KQ II that prompted the remake?

AGD INTERACTIVE: The original KQ2 was basically just the shell of a game. It was essentially just the original version of KQ1 again with new graphics. Almost everything else remained untouched. It is said that the creators used KQ2 as a "testing ground" to hone their skills with the AGI engine.

Consequently, KQ2 was a game that could have been improved in several main areas. Our intention with the KQ2VGA remake was to make KQ2 a unique experience that stood apart from KQ1 on its own merits, and also to draw some more focus to what most people consider the weakest game plotwise in the KQ series.

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E-BOREDOM: KQ2VGA also features When I Saw You, an original song with lyrics. How did the idea come about to incorporate a love ballad into the game?

AGD INTERACTIVE: From the beginning of the project, our plot writer Daniel Stacey had always envisioned a love ballad playing at the end of the game. He had even written lyrics for it which he gave to us with his initial screenplay! The song lyrics were then shown to our musician, Tom Lewandowski, and went through many months of further musical and lyrical refinement.

Daniel and Tom collaborated on the song until they found just the right 'feel' for it. At this point, a singer was approached to record the words. The song went through even more refinements and tweaks with the vocals in place until it sounded like the perfect ballad for the game and we were all happy with it.

E-BOREDOM: The Quest for Glory games managed to introduce some RPG aspects into the graphic adventure game genre while keeping things fresh. What QFG game balances the combat and puzzles the best?

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AGD INTERACTIVE: I think all of the QFG games did a pretty good job in this aspect. QFG5 was probably the easiest game to raise your stats in, so it provided a bit less of a challenge. I'd say that QFG1 and QFG2 were probably the best at integrating the RPG elements due to the mostly varied puzzles which allowed you to slowly build up your skills over time in different areas. This prevented the stat-raising process from becoming too much of a repetitive click-a-thon!

E-BOREDOM: Your current project is QFG2 VGA. What is the status on it and why did you choose the second QFG game for a remake?

AGD INTERACTIVE: The remake is coming along extremely well. It's impossible to tell how far along it is at this stage, but most of the major events have been scripted and 90% of the artwork is complete. QFG2 is a very complex game, though. The alpha and beta testing phases are expected to take quite a while to get, through. We chose QFG2 because it is simply one of the best Sierra games that never got the remake that it deserved. In fact, we started on the remake way back before we even started making KQ1VGA. QFG2 is the only QFG game that does not have a VGA point and click version, so we wanted to bring it up to par.

YOSHITAKA AMANO

Squaresoft has used famed artist Yoshitaka Amano for concept illustrations in their long running Final Fantasy series. His watercolor illustrations are far from the normal anime style of Japanese drawing; they have a wonderful free-flowing sense of motion through them, conveying emotion in a way that simple pixelated graphics of the time could not. Amano is also known for creating paintings for the series of Vampire Hunter D novels which spawned two anime movies: Vampire Hunter D and Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust.

In this intriguing interview, Amano reveals his method of drawing, differences between working with traditional 2-D and CG 3-D art, and an early artist who inspired him. You can visit his website Amano's World to sample generous samples of his art, order his latest art books, and learn about his current projects.

Thanks go to Yoshio for translating my questions into Japanese.

E-BOREDOM: What was the first piece of art that emotionally moved you?

YOSHITAKA AMANO: A picture book of Peter Max I saw when I was quite young. Some images were animation-like and some were plain visual-design-like. I was really impressed by their simple appearance which conveyed multi-layer of different styles and messages.

E-BOREDOM: Were you ever frustrated doing concept illustrations for the earlier Final Fantasy games knowing the graphical limitations of the Famicom & Super Famicom?

YOSHITAKA AMANO: My design work and the actual game graphics design goes side by side simultaneously... The same as the way it was done when I was working for the animation company. I knew the limitations imposed by the media and have gotten used to it. For me, my design is done when I finish the drawing, so I don't feel frustrated by the end result when it appeared through its final medium.

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E-BOREDOM: Do you have a favorite Vampire Hunter D novel that you illustrated?

YOSHITAKA AMANO: Since the settings are different every time, it's hard for me to choose a particular one. For me, it's like being asked which of my children I like most. The one that has the strongest impression on me is the very first one. Not because of the works I did for it, but because it was the first one and everything was so fresh.

E-BOREDOM: Did your approach for drawing mechas for the Front Mission series differ from your approach for drawing characters and locations for the Final Fantasy series?

YOSHITAKA AMANO: I've been drawing mechas since the days I was working on animations. I like mechas, especially the ones with somewhat biological features. When I was working on G-Force and Kashan, the design team had mecha specialists. My job was to design the characters, so I didn't really press it.

My approach to the design doesn't really differ according to whether it's a character, a landscape, or a

mechanism. First, I have to build up a concrete image of the world those characters or mechanisms inhabit until I feel as if I can actually touch things there, then the rest follows more or less naturally. Well, not always, but more or less!

E-BOREDOM: How did you start collaborating with Neil Gaiman?

YOSHITAKA AMANO: I was asked to make a poster for Sandman's 10th year anniversary. Neil liked it a lot and that led us into the collaboration.

E-BOREDOM: Which of your various projects have meant the most to you?

YOSHITAKA AMANO: For illustrations, I'd say Vampire Hunter D. For the games, Final Fantasy VI. For animation, Angel's Egg.

E-BOREDOM: Do you find it easier to express emotions with drawings in 2-D or 3-D?

YOSHITAKA AMANO: When I'm imagining the

design in my mind, it's always naturally 3-D. CG is a tool to visually realize that image. The most important thing for me is that image itself. I can't say either one (2-D or 3-D) is better suited to express my intentions or emotions.

It also depends on the ability of the graphic designer or the animator. A good 2-D work can convey more of the original intention than a bad 3-D work. That said, I'd agree that 3-D has a great potential.

E-BOREDOM: What current projects are you working on?

YOSHITAKA AMANO: I'm currently working on a new game that will hit the market next year. It's in a category I haven't worked on in the past. The original comic book will be released at the same time. Please look forward to it. We'll post the information on my website, www.amanosworld.com (English), and www.amanosworld.jp (Japanese).

BO BENNIKE

The role of a sound designer is one that is rarely appreciated in the gaming industry. A sound designer works to create sound effects that mesh with a game's musical score to make a cohesive aural hole. Bo Bennike of Radius 360 works on both sound design and music composing for games. Recently, worked on Van Helsing and The Hobbit.

In this interview, Bennike describes the challenge of converting the sound from an XBox game to a PlayStation 2 game, his dream game genre to do sound work on, and how he got his start with music remixing. Thanks go to Bennike for taking some time to do the interview for us.

E-BOREDOM: What was the first video game you played?

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BO BENNIKE: The first game I played was Pong on the Atari 2600 in the late 1970s.

E-BOREDOM: Can you remember the first time a movie's sound design was memorable to you?

BO BENNIKE: The first Star Wars was pretty awesome, but the best was The Exorcist. The score and sound design are so scary and really make the music.

E-BOREDOM: Why did you start out as a DJ?

BO BENNIKE: I always loved R & B and couldn't find it in regular music stores where I grew up. So I found a DJ store and was instantly hooked. I invested in a Fostex 8 track recorder and 2 SL1200MKII's and a TC Electronic Broadcast mixer, and just started playing around.

I was inspired by A lot of the Hip Hop stuff coming out of new York and got into scratching. I still wanted a melodic or sometimes a rhythm track that I had to create from scratch, and a hybrid of turntable and synth based remix evolved.

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E-BOREDOM: What's the difference between remixing and composing?

BO BENNIKE: The big difference is that with a remix someone else has already done the composing for you. I just elaborate on that, or maybe take it in a different direction. Composing is like starting from scratch and building it all the way to a finished idea or song.

E-BOREDOM: Is it a challenge optimizing a sound mix for multiple consoles?

BO BENNIKE: Well, the Xbox simply blows away PS2 when it comes to audio. For Van Helsing, everything had to be dummied down for PS2 as is always the case. Xbox has discrete 5.1, while the PS2 only has what I call "fake Surround" (Dolby Pro Logic II). That means there is no discrete 5.1, just a pseudo surround image.

We take the Xbox 5.1 mix and make Dolby encoded stereo PLII files, which the PS2 uses. The current tool we use is Surcode, which works very well.

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E-BOREDOM: When you worked on Battlestar Galactica, how much of the original sound effects from the classic show did you use?

BO BENNIKE: Yes, we used a lot of the original sound design as a base. Battlestar Galactica had signature sounds for all the spaceships, but we just enhanced them with a little more cutting sound. The original sound design was for TV and in Stereo, ours are in 5.1 surround and greatly enhanced because of today's improvement in home theater systems.

Sound design today is very sophisticated. I'm not sure how they did the original show, but we used huge libraries on very advanced workstations which weren't available back then.

E-BOREDOM: Is there a kind of game you'd love to do sound design work for?

BO BENNIKE: Yeah, I have yet to work on a really creepy game. Van Helsing was more monster oriented, and I love to do slimy scary sounds. LOL!

E-BOREDOM: What current projects are you working on?

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BO BENNIKE: All I can say is that it's the biggest sound design effort put into a game to date. It will be publicly announced in Mid December 2005.

ERIC CHAHI

Eric Chahi is one of those game designers that doesn't have the name recognition he deserves. In 1991, he designed Out of This World (released outside of the United States as Another World), a 2-D platform game that used polygonal graphics to create a psuedo 3-D feel with effective cinematic cut scenes. Though the game is a bit short, if not hard to control at times, the storytelling is wonderful. Cutscenes are presented with almost no dialogue, yet the simple story rings true. Originally released for the PC and Amiga, it was later ported to the SNES Sega CD. Three years later, Chahi released a sequel titled Heart of the Alien for Sega CD.

Chahi reveals his thoughts on the controversial ending to Heart of the Alien and cinematic influences on Out of this World.

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E-BOREDOM: Remember the first video game you played?

ERIC CHAHI: It was Space War, a two player game where ships battle around a gravity star on a screen capable of displaying vector graphics. The second generation of arcade games (Tempest, Defender, BattleZone, Pac-Man, Xevious, etc.) is what inspired me to create games.

E-BOREDOM: How did you get your start in the gaming industry?

ERIC CHAHI: While I was attending high school in 1983, our Math teacher was responsible for a little Computer Club. She taught us some introductory lessons of the BASIC programming language on the ZX81. That was my first step in programming. At the same time, I realized how computers could be a useful tool to create games with.

During the summer, I got my first computer when I was 16. It was an Oric. I decided immediately to create a game, actually two, written in BASIC. One was a clone of the arcade game Carnival, and the other one involved a frog eating insects. After finishing both games, I contacted importer of the Oric computer and

asked them to publish my games. They agreed, but only paid me with some small pieces of computer hardware. While it wasn't a large payment from working all summer to make a game, psychologically it was most rewarding.

Next, I learned Assembly. For the next two years, I continued to program games by myself... It was an obsession. Each game was published for the French market, and I received actual money this time! In 1987, I decided to make my living from game creation so I dropped out of school.

In 1988, the Amiga 500 changed the landscape of computer gaming by allowing games to have colorful graphics. My interest in illustration pushed me to become a graphic artist, leaving programming by the wayside. For a year, I worked for a small game company creating backgrounds and animations on Amiga.

In 1989, Paul Cuisset at Delphine was searching a freelance graphic artist for his new project Future Wars. My portfolio didn't please him at first, since my past creation on the Amiga was based on retouched scanned images. For the next 3 weeks, I worked like a crazy man to improve my portfolio. Finally, Paul was convinced to work with me. After wrapping up Future Wars, I started to study programming again and began to create Out of this World.

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E-BOREDOM: Did any films inspire the cinematic style of Out of This World?

ERIC CHAHI: The movie that influenced me the most was clearly Star Wars. However, I would say that science fiction books and fantasy art inspired me more than movies. Curiously, comics were a big influence because sequential art is closely related to storyboards.

E-BOREDOM:OUT of This World features Buddy, a great character who is an alien who befriends the protagonist of the game. Did any other aliens from other media influence your sympathetic alien portrayal?

ERIC CHAHI: The first aliens I met lived on a blue planet named "Earth". But other than that, the first imaginary extra-terrestrial I encountered was The Thing From Another World. John Carpenter later made a remake of it.

E-BOREDOM: What led you to create the graphics for Out of This World with polygons instead of sprites?

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ERIC CHAHI: The polygon idea came from playing the Dragon's Lair port for the Amiga, which was showing incredible big animation on the screen thanks to Randy Linden. That game's graphics weren't polygons, but were compressed bitmaps directly read from the disk. This was revolutionary for the time.

I thought it could be done with polygons since the animation was flat. I wrote a vectorial code and programmed some speed tests. The idea was to use polygons not only for movie like animation but also for gameplay sequences. Think of the sprites as an assemblage of vector shapes. This proved to be a major advantage because you had big sprites that were scalable which took up less disk space than traditional sprites.

E-BOREDOM: When designing Out of This World, how challenging was it to prevent levels from being too easy or too hard?

ERIC CHAHI: It is really a trap because the creators know the game so well they progressively adjust skill level and rules so that it remains enjoyable for them. This creates a problem by making the game too difficult for beginners. It is important to proceed to some test with external people just to watch them play to know where and why they got stuck. To adjust the

difficulty level, it is necessary to stand back and take a fresh look at the game.

Globally, I think that the most important quality for a game designer is to be able to have an outersider's look on their creation, to have the illusion of the first time playing the game constantly throughout the design process. They need to be able to feel it from inside and outside at the same time. It is valuable for any aspect of creation.

E-BOREDOM: Did you originally have a sequel in mind when creating Out of This World?

ERIC CHAHI: Not at all. This sequel was decided from the pressure of Interplay. I never had the initiative to do a sequel. So instead of a real sequel, I thought it would be much more interesting to replay the game from the alien's point of view.

E-BOREDOM: Heart of the Alien has a very controversial ending. Was the ending always intended to be so bittersweet?

ERIC CHAHI: Well, I prefer the ending of the first game. I wanted it to be uncertain regarding the hero destiny: is he alive or not? Heart of the Alien lifted the

veil too much. Personally, I'm not happy with the sequel. Hopefully, this has been released only on Sega CD.

E-BOREDOM:WHAT ARE you working on now?

ERIC CHAHI: Actually, I'm collecting and sorting ideas in order to create a new game. I really miss designing games.

THE FAT MAN

In this interview, video game composer George "The Fat Man" Sanger recalls why the Roland MT-32 was such a great sound card for its time, what music he worked on that sounded really screwed up in the final game due to an audio programming error, and his personal favorite computer game score he's worked on.

E-BOREDOM: What is the first video game that you played that had memorable music?

THE FAT MAN: Donkey Kong was memorable. They used the first four notes of the Dragnet theme, followed by some bashing sounds and the bass line from Teddy Bear. What's not memorable about that? I

still remember Space Invaders' memorable accelerating bassline... Pong's two beeps were memorable.

So we ask ourselves, is "memorable" a good thing?

E-BOREDOM: Remember any early attempts at composing music?

THE FAT MAN: My first composition was the Japanese Guitar and North Korean Amplifier Blues. I wrote it at age 14 shortly after I got my first guitar and amp. Maybe I wrote Nose Job Rock 'n' Roll before that, I'm not sure.

I tried composing more complex music in college because I was trying to get a Music degree. I sure wasn't a virtuosic enough player to be able to graduate with anything but a Composition major.

E-BOREDOM: Got a favorite instrument?

THE FAT MAN: Guitar. It's easy to get massively effective noises, and you get laid. Drums are hard to pack so you can't leave the gig with anybody on a moments' notice. Remember that when you pick out your instrument. It's all about the sex.

The unspoken agreement between musician and listener is that they will communicate using the body

from the eyes down. Anything that comes from the eyes up represents a violation of that agreement.

E-BOREDOM: Run into any challenges on your first score for Thin Ice for the Intellivision?

THE FAT MAN: Heh heh. While composing, the only thing in my mind was "Ice Skating Penguins." Summer, Winter, Ice Skating Penguins still require the same music, don't you think?

Per the sound chip, the quality of the tones were never a problem for me. I was happy to know that my melodies would be output on some pitched sound, and any sound would do as long as the melody was effective. I knew I was limited to two notes at a time, and that's that. But jeez, any Bach two-part invention faces the same issue, and Bach never specified that his music be played by a good violin or a bad violin or even tuned sheep.

E-BOREDOM: Ever had a bad experience working on music for a game?

THE FAT MAN: Death Knights of Krynn. The audio programmer was so sure that he knew everything about music that he followed his "specials star" and did

not compare his final implementation of the music to the MIDI version I had given him. Nor did he seek feedback or a sanity check from me or Dave Govett.

The result was literally squeaks and farts. Notes that were written lower than his programming anticipated were wrapped around and re-interpreted as high notes. It was nuts. It was also the first and only game that had "music by the fat man" in the opening splash screen.

E-BOREDOM: Roland's MT-32 sound card was quite good back in the early 1990's... What made it so coveted among both fans of gaming audio and video game composers?

THE FAT MAN: Oh, the sound of the MT-32 is fantastic. It wouldn't be a decent sound card for MIDI any more because it was created before General MIDI was. General MIDI (what most users today think of MIDI) has specific patch change numbers that call up specific instruments. Playing back a General MIDI file on an MT-32 would bring up the wrong instruments. Playing a game that is set up to play MT-32 files would be great, but there aren't that many of them.

At the time it was released, the MT-32 was put into the musical instrument market as an incredibly inexpensive synth capable of making several different

instrumental tones at once. I had bought one to aid with my music production business just for that reason, not because of any hope that it would one day be used as a sound card.

It was a delightful surprise to me that Loom and Wing Commander targeted the MT-32 as an incredibly expensive sound card for computers. As an analog synthesizer, its sound stands alongside any other synth. Add to that the capability to play small samples at the start of an analog noise, and you have a very beautiful sound. Mixed into a band's sound (which it hardly ever was), it's awesome. One must admit that to use an MT-32 to imitate an entire orchestra kind of overburdens it.

If a musician wished to create his own tones, he had to jump through some severe hoops. Marc Schaefgen and Neno did that for Strike Commander to great effect. Team Fat's "Professor" K. Weston Phelan and I created a set of custom tones for the MT-32 to emulate General MIDI.

The problem was always twofold: First, at the game's initialization, a big system-exclusive message has to be sent to the MT-32 via MIDI. System-exclusive messages require handshaking, and therefore the sounds only load up if MIDI is connected both to and from the sound card. Secondly, hardly anybody had an MT-32, so nobody much really gave a damn. This is E-Boredom, so I know that you do care, Dear Reader, and that is why I tear open my soul to share with you

the terrifying visage of my tangled depths and what-not.

E-BOREDOM: Got a favorite score for a game that you worked on?

THE FAT MAN: Ummm, maybe Putt Putt Saves the Zoo. It was so fun to do, and the collaboration between the members of Team Fat was at a peak. Team Fat got to write the rhymes for the Rhyming Monkeys, and we also got to be those voice talents. Also, it was the first game to feature an in-game music video: Welcome to the Zoo.

TOM HALL

In this interview, Tom Hall reveals his original concept for Doom, what game got him hooked on gaming in the first place, and ways he could have improved Rise of the Triad. You can visit The Tom Hall Press for a complete listing of games he has worked on.

E-BOREDOM: What was the first computer game you played?

TOM HALL: Well, I played a game called Monster on a teletype terminal in my high school and part of the original Colossal Cave. But on the Apple][we got on June 9th, 1980, I believe the first game I played off cassette tape was probably Penny Arcade.

The first game I purchased was Scott Adams' Adventure 0: Adventure Sampler. It's a bit embarrassing, but it took me three days to finish it because it was learning a whole new type of gaming. I had the baggie it was in and no instructions... That was it! So, I grew to learn what commands to type in, what kind of puzzles it was presenting, and what I was supposed to do. I LOVED it. I got all of his text adventures. I was hooked.

Once, I met him at the Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago, and I was shaking as I talked to him. Years later, I had my first shaking fan, a little kid who loved Commander Keen. I gave him an autograph and drew a little Keen for him.

E-BOREDOM: Ultima was an inspiration for one of your early games, The Silver Cow. What set Ultima apart from other CRPGs at the time?

TOM HALL: It was the first game that really made a interesting self-contained world that you could explore. You were a hero free to wander around it and solve its puzzles. I liked Dragon's Eye and Morloc's Tower and such before it, but this series really let you develop a character or party and had the depth to have a real adventure in.

I have a soft place in my heart for Ultima 3. Ultima 2 I never finished it because I went to the guy

in San Francisco who ups your strength. Since I went past 255 strength points and the data was stored in a byte, the stat rolled over. After fighting the last boss Minax forever, I couldn't figure out why she wasn't dying... Then I went and saw my strength was 01.

E-BOREDOM: How did the level-design process for Commander Keen go?

TOM HALL: We designed levels with TED5, the Tile EDitor. There was a background and foreground plane of tiles. If the flag was set on the foreground one, it would be drawn in front of you. Another flag made it solid. Another meant "exit." Some levels were planned out, some were freestyle. A lot of stuff was dictated by the graphics I requested, and Adrian's awesome art.

E-BOREDOM: With Catacomb 3D, why was the decision made to make it a FPS? Did the 3D perspective make level design more difficult?

TOM HALL: Catacomb 3D was the first first-person texture-mapped fast-action game, really. We first tried it with Hovertank One, which was fun, and Catacomb 3D was the first one with texture-mapping. We always wanted to make a real 3D game. After cutting our

teeth on Hovertank One, Paul Neurath at Looking Glass gave us the idea to try texture-mapping.

As for making levels, it was easy because we used the same editor! TED5 was used for 38 games before retiring! We used it for Wolfenstein 3D too. Romero wrote it, and it was an awesome app that saw us from the Super Mario Demo all the way to Wolfy. It was really cool.

E-BOREDOM: You felt that Doom was "too minimalistic in player reward." If id Software had done Doom according to your original design document, how would it have been different?

TOM HALL: It would have had minor story components at the start, at the end, and a reason for what you are doing. Also, some minor environment hazards to liven up the gameplay. At the end of each level, you'd have had a small bit o' story to pull you along, give you a reason for going along.

Basically, what they are doing in in Doom 3. :)

E-BOREDOM: What were you trying to do with Rise of the Triad that made it different from other FPS games at the time?

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TOM HALL: I was trying to innovate beyond the means of the technology. It did have the highest number of players in a deathmatch at the time (11), the first Capture the Flag multiplayer mode, the first instance of Rocket Jumping (required at the end to solve the game), several multiplayer modes, the first player-above-player fighting, two-weapon fighting (making you choose what to fight with), and other innovations. However, the tech at the time was dodgy and we pushed way too far.I should have just thrown out all the art once it wasn't "Wolfenstein 3D 2" anymore.

E-BOREDOM: Chrono Trigger was an inspiration for Anachronox. What makes console RPGS different from CRPGs and what aspects of Chrono Trigger did you try and bring into your game?

TOM HALL: Console RPGs tend to feature epic, sweeping stories, a variety of experiences in gameplay, list-interface combat, lots of equipment shopping, and less of a stats and treasure focus than CRPGs. Chrono Trigger had multiple paths through and different characters. There were cool moments like the party sitting around the campfire talking about regret, and the trial for all the bad things you did previously in the game. Just genius. All the endings and time-traveling puzzles were cool too!

In Anachronox, I wanted to bring over the epic adventure, the variety of experience, the multiple pathways through, and the nice little sense of humor.

E-BOREDOM: What current projects are you working on?

TOM HALL: At Midway, I'm Creative Director of External Projects. I'm working on Area 51, Narc, and a few upcoming games. I'm excited about them all!

STEVE INCE

Steve Ince was the Producer for all three Broken Sword games, and even did some writing and puzzle design for the third game which was released last year for the PC and X-Box. The first game in the series was also recently converted to the GBA. In this interview, we covered such topics as the differences between writing for comics and for games, and the challenges of working in 3-D for the third game.

E-BOREDOM: Out of all 3 Broken Sword games, which one was your favourite?

STEVE INCE: The Sleeping Dragon without a doubt. Not necessarily because it was a better game than the other two, but that it was so enjoyable to work on from

a writing point of view. Trying to push our ideas to new levels taught us so much about interactive storytelling.

E-BOREDOM: The first two Broken Sword games were released at a time when graphic adventures were very popular. What was it about them that made them stand apart from other popular adventure games at the time?

STEVE INCE: Attention to detail in all aspects. We had rich, well-coloured backgrounds that were consistent in style and quality and thousands of animation files that fit the background style perfectly. The story was strong with its roots in historical fact and driven by empathic characters. The interface was something which gave it a feel of its own, too. It was a truly complete package.

E-BOREDOM: When working on Shadows of the Templars, you started as a concept artist but shifted to the role of a Producer early on in the project. What was the most challenging thing about switching over?

STEVE INCE: Learning how to schedule projects. Project management is an important aspect of devel-

opment, but one that's amongst the hardest. My hat goes off to specialised project managers.

E-BOREDOM: With The Sleeping Dragon, you made the move from 2D to 3D. What do 3D graphics offer in terms of gameplay that is different from a standard 2D graphic adventure game?

STEVE INCE: We were able to develop the cinematic use of cameras and character animation that would have been extremely difficult and costly with 2D or pre-rendered backgrounds. It also meant we could explore using the environment in a much fuller way.

E-BOREDOM: How was did the 3-D environment change the puzzle design for the game?

STEVE INCE: You have more opportunities to create environment-based gameplay without the need for incredible amounts of specific animation. All the old approaches are still available so you actually end up with more freedom.

E-BOREDOM: How did casting the voice-overs work for The Sleeping Dragon?

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STEVE INCE: We brought in an award-winning radio director and an outsourcing agency to find the actors and cast them. It was the best set of actors we'd used to date and they really delivered the goods for us. They were a pleasure to work with. Rolf Saxon (George) was brilliant throughout, too.

E-BOREDOM: Another game you worked on was The Road to El Dorado, based on the animated feature film by Dreamworks. How was it working for them?

STEVE INCE: Dreamworks were incredibly supportive and helped us with lots of original artwork and concept work that we used as reference when creating the art resources. We knew that we wanted to use the main story from the film as the basis for our story and it was simply a case of developing the puzzles and gameplay to interpret that story.

E-BOREDOM: You also write several comic strips online. How is writing for a 3-panel comic different from writing for a computer game?

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STEVE INCE: A three or four panel strip is always about the idea of the gag. If you're lucky you can also fit in some character development, but this is very secondary. With a game, particularly an adventure, you have to develop the characters, the adversaries and the story in a way that builds throughout the game in an exciting way. The story must always complement the gameplay; the two should drive one another at all times.

E-BOREDOM: What current projects are you working on?

STEVE INCE: I can't mention specifics, but I'm working on developing my own original ideas, a project that's in the concept stage, a dialogue editing project, original concepts for other developers, and a potential book deal. I also have a regular column, Developing Thoughts, on Randomville.

BEN ISAAC

While there are several live-action fan films on the Internet devoted to Star Trek and the like, it's rather rare to see a live-action video-game fan film. Ben Isaac's trailer for his Castlevania fan film Prelude to War manages to have decent production value while conveying the sense of dread so commonly found in Konami's legendary Castlevania series.

Ben Isaac reveals what makes Castlevania music suitable for heavy-metal remixes, some of his favorite vampires from the silver screen, and fun production stories from his Prelude to War trailer.

E-BOREDOM: Have any favorite portrayals of vampires from movies?

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BEN ISAAC: Great question! Nomak in Blade 2 was fantastic in his primal force and power, and the Elder Vampire in Underworld was very successful in portraying the history and strength of an ancient and supernatural race.

As far as my favorite goes, it would have to be Lestat in Interview with a Vampire. His character really captured the realities of live as a vampire while not being too sympathetic. Vampires are killers after all, and the predatory nature of them was well conceived in the film.

E-BOREDOM: Can you remember which was the first Castlevania game you played?

BEN ISAAC: The first Castlevania game that I played was the original Castlevania for the NES. I was lucky enough to recieve both Castlevania and Contra for Christmas in 1987, and I must say, that was one of the better holiday hauls of my life. ;) I spent most of my Christmas vacation playing Castlevania, and was immediately mesmerized by the incredible challenge, fantastic gameplay, atmosphere, and brilliant music.

E-BOREDOM: Were you satisfied with the portrayal of Simon Belmont in the cartoon, Captain N: The Game Master?

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BEN ISAAC: No, I was not. That show was great in a nostalgic fun sense, but if you look at it seriously, Simon looked like a complete fool. The terrible, goofy character design sucked all the dignity and strength out of the great Vampire Hunter.

E-BOREDOM: Did the Castlevania series take a hit when it moved from 2-D to 3-D?

BEN ISAAC: I believe it is in fact a non-issue. Good gameplay, and a spirit and atmosphere that draw you into a game are really the main qualities that count, not what dimension something is in. I do understand for some that the difference is hard to accept, but for me I love Castlevania SO much, that I have found deep enjoyment and inspiration in every Castlevania game to date. Lament of Innocence was brilliant, if a little repetitive, and the N64 games were VASTLY underrated.

E-BOREDOM: Have any favorite Castlevania tunes?

BEN ISAAC: Absolutely! Vampire Killer, Bloody Tears and the Daylight Theme in Castlevania 2:

Simon's Quest floored me at the time. Richter's Theme from Symphony of the Night blew my head apart when I heard it. At the time, it was for me the very personification of the the spirit of Castlevania. The driving heroic power in the melodies, the darkness, the retro guitar stylings, and the still to this day gorgeous graphics combined to create the ultimate Castlevania moment for me.

Other notables would be Olrox's Theme and the Long Library piece from Symphony of the Night. The Castle Center theme, Tower of Execution theme, and Opening Titles from Castlevania 64 were also great.

E-BOREDOM: What makes the music so suited for heavy-metal arrangements?

BEN ISAAC: You only need to look at the past games in the series to see that Castlevania lends itself VERY well to instrumental rock/metal music. The soaring guitar lines and doom-laden riffs fit perfectly with the action-packed and restless nature of the games. Some of the best cuts from the games have been rock pieces, such as Richter's Theme. Prelude to War has an original score in the vein of Castlevania's gothic personality with some new and epic power injected into the aural aesthetic.

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E-BOREDOM: What inspired Prelude to War?

BEN ISAAC: It all began with my firm belief that Castlevania, if done right as a film, could be on the level of Lord of the Rings or any other epic fantasy adventure. So in the perhaps naive hope that Konami might get to see my film, and see that there is an interest in a cinematic adaptation, I set out to make one. I also wanted to give something to the fans that we had been missing... A live-action visualization of Castlevania.

E-BOREDOM: Did you run into any problems during the shoot?

BEN ISAAC: During the flame whip sequence, it was very dangerous and really hit and miss in terms of a fiery performance that was satisfactory on cue. Add in a freezing rain storm in the middle of the night in winter while you're shooting, extremely volatile gasoline, and you've got a recipe for a huge headache! But it was worth it in the end...

E-BOREDOM: What is the current status of the film?

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BEN ISAAC: The distribution of the film is currently up in the air. Konami is actually in possession of the film as we speak, and will be deciding if it is something they want to support. When they come to a decision, I will go from there. Legally speaking, we are in a temporary deadlock in getting the film out on a mass level at this time.

E-BOREDOM: Working on any other projects in the meantime?

BEN ISAAC: I am currently composing part of the soundtrack for a Castlevania project that in fairness to the creator I cannot elaborate on as of yet. I am also finishing an epic script treatment for a Castlevania feature film that I hope to get made some day.

STEVEN KENT

If you've ever wondered how video games have changed so quickly in just a few decades, you should read The Ultimate History of Video Games by Steven Kent. A thick tome consisting of hundreds of interviews with professionals in the gaming industry, it's great for reference material as well as being a wonderful read all by itself. Kent has also written for MSNBC and GameSpy.

E-BOREDOM: When did you first have the idea to do a book on the history of video games?

STEVEN KENT: I first decided to do the book in 1994. I was pretty new in the industry and had no idea of the magnitude of the project. Frankly, I had no

idea about the work that others had done, most namely Lenny Herman's Phoenix the Fall and Rise of Videogames.

E-BOREDOM: The Ultimate History of Video Games ends with the PS2, GameCube, and X-Box console war on the horizon. Now that it is fairly late in lifespan for those systems, what do you think of the outcomes?

STEVEN KENT: I was pretty spot on in my predictions about Microsoft and Sony, that was predictable. I don't think anybody could have predicted the shifts in the market that have so hamstrung Nintendo in the console business.

I would like to go on the record stating that I adore this generation of games. I thought the Super NES/Genesis generation was undistinguished. I was completely disappointed by the PlayStation/N64 generation, but I have been thrilled with much of what I have seen this time out. I think most gaming connoisseurs will disagree with me about that, by the way.

E-BOREDOM: What will be some important factors for Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo for the upcoming next-generation consoles?

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STEVEN KENT: Everybody had better be to the party on time. Heaven help the CEO who shows up too late or too early because it will be the kiss of death. Nintendo says that the industry lacks innovation and I believe them. That said, when consumers go to a story and see one console that has life-like graphics and another with primitive graphics, they are going to buy the more powerful machine. Can you blame them?

The more interesting battle to me is PSP vs DS. I think they may both fail. If PSP comes out with a $50 price tag, or even a $250 price tag, I think it will join the ranks of 3DO, Pippin, and Virtual Boy. As to DS, Nintendo has not explained why anybody would want a second screen. If there is a good reason, DS will be a hit. But that seems like a pretty big "if" at the moment.

E-BOREDOM: With Game Design curricula becoming more popular in colleges, how should video game history be worked into classes?

STEVEN KENT: I would very much like to teach a class on the evolution of video games. I have discussed this idea with DigiPen, which is located fairly near my home. I think there was some interest among the students, but it sounds as if some of the teachers were not interested in the idea.

Anyway, I think that a class in game evolution should include a discussion of the strengths and limita-

tions of each generation of hardware followed by a look at the most innovative and the best-selling games of that generation. There should be discussion about the games that defined each generation. I would likely discuss the personalities of the designers and how their personalities were manifest in their work.

E-BOREDOM: What are your views on emulation?

STEVEN KENT: That is a very tough question. I assume you are asking about the ethics of emulations such as MAME. I do not have a hard and fast answer. Piracy is a problem for the industry. If we are talking about mod chips and free versions of current games, I think that hurts everybody in the end. Companies such as EA invest thousands of dollars into games because of the profits they make from their best sellers. If you take the incentive out of making games by distributing them illegally, then EA will no longer make games. Then who will make the games? Certainly not the folks who sell the mod chips.

If we are talking about MAME, on the other hand, I am less resolved. When I interviewed Dave Theurer, he told me about how Atari ripped him off on Tempest. The arcade designers were supposed to get a new and more fair bonus plan, Atari delayed the plan until after Tempest because they recognized that the game was going to be big. Dave Theurer estimated

that he lost $1 million because of that little trick. I suppose two wrongs don't make a right... But, hey, if MAME isn't hurting Theurer, maybe there is an ironic justice in it.

E-BOREDOM: IN JAPAN, THE RECENT "FAMICOM-MINI" reissues of classic Famicom games for the GBA has proven extremely popular. Do you think this could be a result of older games concentrating on gameplay over graphics?

STEVEN KENT: Good question. I think gaming would be benefited if we would all agree to look at gameplay over graphics, but I don't think the mass market would do that. I think the success of Famicom-Mini is an anomaly... A very smart play on nostalgia for what I consider to be the great system of all-time. I do not think Famicom-Mini would do as well in the United States (here is would need to be called "NES-Mini"), as I think our market is more interested in fully three-dimensional worlds, cutting-edge graphics, etc.

E-BOREDOM: How do you feel about the recent cable G4 Channel, devoted to video games and the video game lifestyle?

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STEVEN KENT: I openly admit surprise at well G4 has done. More than one year ago, I met the CEO and he asked me what I thought. I told him, "You have a tough row to hoe. You need to convince gamers that watching a show about games is more fun than playing them." That kind of translated into, "I don't mean to offend you, but you don't stand a chance."

Now, one year later, his channel has proven me wrong. Oh well, I am also well known for telling Nintendo that Pokemon would never catch on in the United States. "It's too Japanese" was my precise phrase. I was dumb enough to say this in a crowded event at E3! Crow may never taste good, but it sure has a familiar taste.

Years ago, there were television shows that explained how to find Easter eggs and beat bosses and such. I do not know if G4 offers this. I don't have Comcast cable. I have been involved in a couple of ICONs documentaries, and I have been impressed with what I have seen.

E-BOREDOM: What books do you have in the works?

STEVEN KENT: I have a book on the making of Doom 3 coming out at the same time as the game. The book is largely pictorial with approximately 50,000 words in text including an interview with John

Carmack and most of the other major players. I have a sci-fi novel with a good publisher. The deal is NOT inked, but looks positive. They asked me to make changes in the story, which I have done. So, my fingers are crossed. Beyond that, I have been approached about doing a book on the business side of the games industry.

BRAD KING

First-Person Shooter games and Role-Playing games couldn't be more different from each other. Although both have flourishing online communities, one focuses on intense action with precise controls while the other focuses more on storytelling and stat-building. In Brad King and John Borland's book Dungeons & Dreamers, they manage to cover both of these online communities while charting the history of the Ultima series and the rise of the FPS genre.

In this interview with Brad King, we cover the appeal of older games a certain story about Richard Garriot's mother that didn't make it into the book. You can visit the book's official site for information about the book and links to various online articles Brad King and John Borland have written.

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E-BOREDOM: What is it about older games that make fans want to remake them for a newer audience?

BRAD KING: Old games have a certain nostalgic appeal. Intellivision games are now available on handheld devices. Early PlayStation games are on smartphones. MAME resurrects arcade games for the PC and custom home arcade boxes. I'm glad this is happening because so much of the early days of the game world is being lost.

E-BOREDOM: How has the FPS community grown from a few random Doom WAD creators to the current group of fans capable of making retail quality products, such as Counterstrike?

BRAD KING: The biggest change has come from the rapid advances in technology both for broadband and wireless networks. The experience is so much better these days. Lag times have dropped, hardware like Alienware is specifically designed for gamers. People can take their laptops with them anywhere at anytime. It it easier to play games than ever.

E-BOREDOM:THE SINGLE-PLAYER

EXPERIENCE in FPS games is still often lacking. What could designers do to improve in this area?

BRAD KING: Well, the dream of artificial intelligence would certainly solve that issue, but frankly I'm not holding my breath for that. Computer software always boils down to a simple set of rules that govern action. Right now, there is no way to replicate human behavior. Anyone who has played a game for any length of time knows that it's pretty easy to figure out patterns in the avatar behavior.

E-BOREDOM: Was there any material in the book that couldn't make it in?

BRAD KING: The one story that didn't get in the book was about Richard Garriot's mother. She took some of the money she made from helping her son launch his first company and built a kids' playscape in her hometown. And yet, she didn't just build it. She had architects design the project, and then asked the residents of the town to put it together with the help of builders. Thousands of people came out. It was, in a very real sense, a real-life RPG.

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E-BOREDOM: How does the wide availability of the Internet affect online journalism?

BRAD KING: The funny thing about the Internet is that now everyone believes they can be a journalist, but that's just not the case. Having the ability to publish doesn't automatically make you a journalist. Becoming a journalist means following a set of ethical standards, following a set of reporting standards, and following in the steps of the trade of those who went before.

E-BOREDOM: What sort of topics do you cover in your Online Journalism class?

BRAD KING: It's difficult to describe my class. It's taught in the journalism school at the University of Texas, although this year its moving to Southwestern University. It's hardly a traditional journalism class.

Blogs are used for two reasons: to teach people how to write concise ledes and nutgrafs, which are the cornerstone of any story, and introduces them to simple HTML programming and shows them what it takes to follow a beat. They must choose one topic to follow, find the main information sources for that beat, and write short pieces each day. Many of them have never been exposed to blogs or beat reporting.

At the most basic level, blogs are really just an indexing of information, whether it be information on scholarly research or information about what is going on in your life.

E-BOREDOM: Most reviews online consist of lots of synopsis and little substance on actual criticism of the game itself. What can game reviewers do to improve their writing?

BRAD KING: Well, learn the history of technology. Study the people who built the Internet. Read up on the history of Dungeons and Dragons. Tell the stories of the people who play the games. Anybody can write a synopsis, but very few people actually understand the significance of the world of technology.

FRANK KLEPACKI

Frank Klepacki has composed music for all of the Command & Conquer games up through Red Alert 2: Yuri's Revenge. Earlier in his career, he worked on music for The Legend of Kyrandia trilogy and Dune 2.

E-BOREDOM: What was the first piece of instrumental music you listened to that blew you away?

FRANK KLEPACKI: The opening theme to Star Wars. It was epic and told me right away before I even saw one frame of the film that it was going to be something extraordinary! It is as uplifting for me now as it was in 1977! I've been a die hard ever since.

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E-BOREDOM: What was the first video game that you played?

FRANK KLEPACKI: First game I played? Thats a tough one. I think I just went into an arcade for the first time one day and played a few of them. I remember Pac Man, Donkey Kong, Space Invaders, and Asteroids being the first ones I played.

I love all the classic 1980s games. They were simple and fun. Newer games have gotten away from that. The complex ones are impressive, but sometimes nothing beats sitting down for 5 minutes to play Ms. Pac Man. I also most certainly wore the hell out of my Atari 2600 when those ports came out!

E-BOREDOM: In school, did you ever play any instruments for a band class or on your own?

FRANK KLEPACKI: I played in the orchestra, jazz, and pop bands in school. In the orchestra class, I learned how each part worked within a piece having it drilled in my head every time they went over their separate parts. That has always stuck with me. I also played in original bands all the time.

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E-BOREDOM: What was the first piece you composed and what did you compose it on?

FRANK KLEPACKI: The first piece I ever wrote was done on my friends 4-track cassette recorder where I played acoustic guitar, electric guitar, and keyboard, and added sound effects. I think it was called Rainy Day. It was enough to impress the head of audio at Westwood to give me a try. The rest is history. What inspired me to compose was my lack of being able to tell other musicians what my ideas were. I was a professional drummer since I was 11. By the time I was in high school, I was jamming with different bands and always had a thing for distorted guitar rock. I grew frustrated not being able to get my ideas across so I finally learned how to play myself. Keyboards was another outlet for me to play with different sounds and I started mixing the two together.

I got my Tandy 1000ex as my first computer. I learned how to program music in basic with 3 notes at a time. That was when the idea of computer music hit me, and I pursued it. If anything, learning about Westwood was inspiring. The audio director Paul Mudra was inspiring to me too. He believed in me and gave me a chance to prove myself. This pushed me harder to do well and learn as much as I could.

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E-BOREDOM: You have composed music for a few different D&D video games: Dragonstrike for the NES, Warriors of the Eternal Sun for the Genesis, and Eye of the Beholder 2 for the PC. What was it like composing music based on Dungeons and Dragons given the constraint of the NES & Genesis sound and the PC sound cards of the time?

FRANK KLEPACKI: Well, it certainly was very limiting. The NES for example could only play back 4 music notes at one time, and the Genesis and PC could only play 6 notes at one time on the early sound cards. It was quite a trick to write a good song given the technology restraints! I just did the best I could with what I had to work with.

I did enjoy Eye of the Beholder 2 very much. I was way into the game itself and the story. Westwood was really pushing the envelope at the time. I remember making the music so it surprised the player a lot, like only coming on when there were story cues or events that happened. A lot of the game was silent, so this method proved very effective in drawing you into the world.

E-BOREDOM: When you did music for The Lion King for the SNES, was it limiting working with existing music from the movie?

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FRANK KLEPACKI: Actually, that was the easy part. The hard part once again was the technology. I mean, how do you take Hans Zimmer's beautiful music and throw it into 11k worth of samples and with only 8 notes to hear at a time? I wrang the SNES dry of its capabilities. Westwood recieved a letter from Zimmer's company saying they were impressed and enjoyed how I integrated the score.

E-BOREDOM: Each game in the Kyrandia series had a different tone to it: The Legend of Kyrandia had a sort of traditional fantasy tone, The Legend of Kyranida: Hand of Fate had a very sarcastic tone to match Zanthia's personality, and The Legend of Kyrandia: Malcolm's Revenge had a msichievous tone to match Malcolm's personality. Did the music for each game revolve around the protagonist's characters in any way or was it based more on the various locations?

FRANK KLEPACKI: A bit of both. The main themes were made to accent the time period of the game and the main character you played. There were also themes for all the different locations that added spice to the game and reflected the characters you interacted with there too. Kyrandia was a fun, quirky series to work on.

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E-BOREDOM: Given its military/science-fiction setting, the variety of musical styles in the Command and Conquer series is surprising. Was there a reason why you had so many different genres of music throughout the series?

FRANK KLEPACKI: I was part of the birth of C&C from the start. When music was first discussed, they wanted variety. They wanted to push the boundaries and make this a really hip and ultra cool game. It was also the second game that Westwood did with streaming audio instead of MIDI. I took this pile of influences and busted out a ton of music from industrial, to hip-hop, heavy metal, orchestral, and techno.

No one knew the game would be as big of a hit as it was. I was certainly surprised that there was demand for a separate soundtrack. The music hit a chord with fans all over the globe, and they have come to expect it. The soundtracks are out of print now, which is a shame. I get fan mail every other day asking where soundtracks can be purchased. I tell everyone check eBay... That's about it!

E-BOREDOM: C&C: Sole Survivor was an obscure game in the C&C series, but it had some of your favorite music in it. What was it about the music in that game that made it so special?

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FRANK KLEPACKI: Even though the game was less desirable, I did some remixes of my favorite Red Alert tunes at the time. They came out so good to me that I wished they would have been in RA that way in the first place. I later included them in Red Alert: Retaliation on the PlayStation.

E-BOREDOM: Why you didn't do the music for Command and Conquer Generals?

FRANK KLEPACKI: I get this question on a weekly basis. LOL! I simply wasn't asked to score it. I offered to, and did a demo for them, but in the en, it was through a fansite that I learned they selected someone else. I do hope to do future C&C; related music if they continue the series. If not, the fans can still plug in my expansion music!

I am putting out my own CDs on my website that will continue music in my C&C style. The first CD I released is called Morphscape.

E-BOREDOM: Dune 2000 was a remake of the classic Dune 2: The Building of a Dynasty for the PC. How was it to do different music for a newer version of a pioneer game for the RTS genre?

FRANK KLEPACKI: Well the music wasn't really

that different... I used most of the same themes from the original Dune 2. The remake allowed me to make those scores sound just like they were meant to in my mind. Those are the definitive versions of the score. I couldn't be happier with them. I felt that I was able to capture the heart of my original works and the feel of the David Lynch film all in one.

E-BOREDOM: With the advent of computer software, composing music has often changed from writing out notes on a musical scale to using samples and remixing them. Do you think using samples results in better music than having music performed by a live orchestra?

FRANK KLEPACKI: No, but it all comes down to budget. There are fairly convincing orchestra samples out there that can achieve the desired result, but nothing can beat a live one. It just costs a ton of money.

E-BOREDOM: Was there any game you have played where you wished you could have composed the music for?

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FRANK KLEPACKI: The Unreal Tournament series and Star Wars: Rogue Leader & Star Wars: Rebel Strike.

E-BOREDOM: Any other video game composers whose music who admire?

FRANK KLEPACKI: I really like Alexander Brandon's music in Deux Ex and the original Unreal Tournament. Richard Jaques' music in Headhunter was also great. That music has character and was memorable to me. There is so much out there right now that sounds alike and even the impressive orchestrations are all blending together. You still need a great melody and arrangement for the experience to capture to player. Otherwise it's just background.

E-BOREDOM: In Japan, video game soundtracks have long been popular both as CDs and as orchestral performances. Do you think the situation with video game soundtracks has gotten any better in the US?

FRANK KLEPACKI: A bit. The same sort of thing is slowly catching on here, but we still have a ways to go.

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E-BOREDOM: What do you think of the various fan remixes of video game music available online?

FRANK KLEPACKI: I think it's great. It's a starting point into music for a lot of them, and if they can develop as songwriters because of it, that's great. Just so everyone knows, slapping loops together doesn't make you a composer... It makes you an "Arranger". Hehe...

E-BOREDOM: Out of all the games you have composed music for, which has been your favorite? Which game that you have composed music for has been the most fun to play?

FRANK KLEPACKI: My favorites have been the C&C series, Dune 2000, Blade Runner, and Pirates: The Legend of Black Kat. The most fun to play? The original C&C, C&C: Tiberian Sun, and Eye of the Beholder 2.

E-BOREDOM: What projects are you working on?

FRANK KLEPACKI: I have music currently playing

in the Ultimate Fighting Championship TV events, a song featured in the film The Gristle on HBO right now, and a top game project I'm not permitted to speak of at this time.

CHRIS KOHLER

Journalist Chris Kohler has written Power-Up! How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life, an upcoming book which interviews several Japanese game designers while taking a look at why Japanese games are appealing in a different way than American games. You can visit Kobun Heat to read Kohler's articles.

Kohler reveals how he got in start in game journalism, reveals differences between Japanese game design and American game design, and how the elegant simplicity of the classic controllers affected gameplay.

E-BOREDOM: Can you remember the first videogame that you played?

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CHRIS KOHLER: Whoa. That's a tough one. Well, my parents liked to play their Atari 2600 way back in the day, and I definitely remember them having Superman. So, I'd say they probably shoved the joystick controller into my tiny hands at one point and made me move Clark Kent around. Since I was like two years old, I probably thought it was great.

E-BOREDOM: What video game magazines did you enjoy as you grew up?

CHRIS KOHLER: I started reading Nintendo Power back around 1988, so I was around eight years old. For a long time Nintendo Power WAS the magazine, and you didn't question it. A couple years later, this new magazine called Electronic Gaming Monthly was just starting to show up in the grocery store. The writing was certainly different in the EGM of old. Unlike Nintendo Power, they didn't bother to spellcheck. They were industry outsiders, actually reporting scoops. Even at ten years old, I could tell the difference.

E-BOREDOM: How did you start writing game reviews?

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CHRIS KOHLER: I'd done a video game fanzine - that's kind of like a website, except it was printed out on this thing we used back in the day called "paper" - that I'd Xerox and send out to other game fans. Electronic Games reviewed it and printed my address, that's how I got the word out. That was in 1993.

By 1996, I was writing for a magazine called Game On! USA, which was a short-lived gaming-only version of Animerica. When that folded, I moved on to Animerica.

E-BOREDOM: How did the more simple controllers on classic console systems make games different to play than the games of today?

CHRIS KOHLER: They certainly made them more accessible to a wider range of people. There's too many damn buttons these days, to the point that my parents don't play games anymore. They like stuff that's easy to understand, but that doesn't mean "simple" by any means. Some designers today need to take a look back at what worked years ago.

E-BOREDOM: What makes the gameplay in Japanese games unique?

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CHRIS KOHLER: We in the Western world generally have a taboo about images, or to be more specific, storytelling through images, the combination of image and words. Paintings are okay, words are okay, but put them together and people think you're weird because you're reading a comic book. After a certain age, your books aren't supposed to have pictures in them anymore. In Japan - and Japan has one of the highest literacy rates in the world - there's no such taboo. People read comics their whole life.

And so growing up in this place where a storytelling medium that mixes image and word is commonplace, is indeed a national pastime, it was inevitable that Japanese designers would see the medium of the video game as another way to tell a story using this graphical style that they'd developed for so many years. They just had a different view of it, and different sorts of people - very artistic people - were drawn to the medium.

E-BOREDOM: What about game design can Japanese developers learn from American developers?

CHRIS KOHLER: If Japanese game creators tend to be better at design, Western developers tend to be better at the programming aspect of the games. Great graphics engines, choking lots of power out of the hardware, that kind of stuff (Read Chapter 6 of Power-

Up for more!). Of course, I don't know how much Japan can "learn" this, since it comes out of the fact that kids in the US tend to be hobbyist programmers before they get a job designing games, and when you grow up programming, that's how you become a whiz at it.

Many game designers in Japan don't start screwing around with computer programming until the first year of college, and even then it's a very rigid, by-the-book type of learning.

E-BOREDOM: Has there been successful collaborations between American and Japanese designers?

CHRIS KOHLER: Some of my favorite Western games this "generation" have actually been crossover projects like Metroid Prime and Eternal Darkness. That's where the quality really is because now instead of trying to look at Japan from the outside, they're actually working with guys who have been at Nintendo for decades.

E-BOREDOM: How do Japanese and American game design processes differ?

CHRIS KOHLER: Americans plan everything out

with a design document that illustrates every little aspect of the game, many Japanese designs start out by building an interface, building the core of the game, and then just adding onto that, letting the world flow on its own.

That's how Shigeru Miyamoto and his team started with Mario 64 - the first thing they did was build a little demo with Mario running around, and only when that demo was fun on its own, had a fun control scheme and everything, did they start really fleshing out the game design. Which process works better? I know what I think.

ALEXANDER LEON

One genre of Flash cartoon that has been thriving on Newgrounds is that of the sprite cartoon. Loosely speaking, they use the original sprites from classic video games in often a comedic nature. Alexander Leon's Super Mario Bros. Flash series features classic Mario sprites in a tale that's both hilarious and touching. You can visit Mario Central to watch the first four episodes of this ongoing series.

Leon reveals some tips on how to make better sprite cartoons, his thoughts on the Super Mario Bros. live-action movie, and how well music works to convey emotion.

E-BOREDOM: Do you have a favorite Mario Bros. character?

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ALEXANDER LEON: I love Toad, and I hate that he was never put in as a character in Super Smash Brothers or portrayed by a real life actor in the 1990 cartoon.

E-BOREDOM: Did you enjoy the Super Mario Bros. cartoon?

ALEXANDER LEON: I wouldn't have been a normal kid if I didn't. I loved that show. I even have some VHS tapes of it from long ago. The best were the live action segments with the actors. Luigi was the best... I'd give him the Academy Award.

E-BOREDOM: What did you think of the Super Mario Bros. live-action movie?

ALEXANDER LEON: I thought it was a sick and twisted joke. It has no real connection with Super Mario Bros. at all. I really can't understand exactly what the director was going for. He had to realize how screwed up the version he was making was. If he seriously thought that it would be a successful venture that would appeal to fans of the games, then I pity him.

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E-BOREDOM: Was your Mario Bros. Flash series planned out before you start animating it?

ALEXANDER LEON: Not at all... I started making the first episode as a "funimation" involving Mario. Initially, I made the first scene with him running with some words saying that he's thinking about his life. From there, I was going to make a funimation dedicated to all the games involving Mario throughout the years.

As I worked on it, I decided that I would just make a serious Flash movie about Mario. I wanted it to be overly dramatic and thus make it funny, consisting of only two parts. What happened is that it proved to be a very intricate project that lasted a few weeks, so I decided to make a larger story stemming from what I started with.

Now the first scene in 'part I' with him running I sort of regret... However, I am keeping it all true to itself so the first scene of Part I will be in the final scenes of Part V. I still consider it all as a semi-joke but it can be interpreted as a drama as well. I don't think I would have been able to make it funny like I initially intended since my mind always seemed to lean towards making it serious/sad/dramatic.

E-BOREDOM: Your music choices seemed pretty deliberate, though...

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ALEXANDER LEON: The music was unbelievably important. Working on the first movie I knew that every movement of the camera and characters had to go with the music. If the music was slow, the scene would be slow. If the music was fast, the scene would be fast.

I always built the movie around the music, meaning that I imported the song and then modeled the movie around it. Music was the skeleton of the production. For each episode, I had a specific song that I listened to over and over again before I began importing it in flash.

Part I was Luigi's death theme, Part II was The Requiem Remix, Part III was the Pyramid song, and Part IV was the Toad March theme. I had to make sure my subconscious picked up the emotional nuances of the songs so that I could visually convey them to emphasize the story.

E-BOREDOM: Do you have a favorite out of all the parts you've made so far?

ALEXANDER LEON: I personally like the Toads marching in Part IV. The music I think goes perfect with it, but that may just be me talking. I love the Toads and seeing all of them marching together with

that music after spending hours making sure each single sprite was moving correctly.

I know that Part II has become the personal favorite for a lot of people. I admit that it is probably the most exciting chapter. I owe that all to the music and, of course, the Toads. Just wait till Part V!

E-BOREDOM: What other Flash shorts do you have planned for the future?

ALEXANDER LEON: After Mario Part V, I will be doing some shorts based on the book I, Robot. I didn't think the movie did the book any justice, so I will keep my little shorts true to the book. It will be challenging, but I think the end result will be greatly appreciated. Look forward to that.

Some people have asked me to make other sprite series for their old NES games and I've considered it. We'll just have to see what happens... I really don't like making a movie because every one wants it. I like to make a movie that I alone would like to see. Sounds self-centered, but I think what I like is what a lot of other people like.

AL LOWE

Al Lowe is best known as the creator of Sierra Online's classic Leisure Suit Larry series of adventure games. He was also the co-creator of Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist. He composed music for most of the early Sierra Online games, including the catchy Leisure Suit Larry titular ditty.

E-BOREDOM: The Leisure Suit Larry series had jazzy music. What was the first piece of jazz you listened to and what made it so memorable?

AL LOWE: There was never one first piece. I grew up listening to jazz. My parents were into Dixieland and Blues, so I developed from there. The first recording that made a big impression on me, though, is easy:

"Take Five" by the Dave Brubeck Quarter. It was in 5/4 time. I watched kids at my junior high school dance to it and thought, "I can do that!" (by that I mean "Play," not "Dance." I never could dance!)

E-BOREDOM: What were some instruments you played?

AL LOWE: I started on piano at age 5, took lessons off and on until age 12, then took up the saxophone. Why? Because my parents had one lying in the basement left over from my older brother! In college, I learned to play most every instrument in order to teach instrumental music. Sax is still my favorite.

E-BOREDOM: You composed the music for a lot of earlier Sierra On-line games... How was composing music for the PC Speaker different than composing music for sound cards? Was it more rewarding hearing music come from a sound card than from a PC Speaker?

AL LOWE: Are you kidding? Kazoos are more rewarding than a PC tweaker! <grin> Those early games had to pause the game play in order to make a sound. It was very difficult to get both things to work at once. That's why there was so little sound and music. In order to play an A-440, we literally had to feed the

speaker a +5 volt signal, wait 1/880 of a second, then feed the speaker a -5 volt signal, wait another 1/880 of a second, etc! It obviously took much longer to write and, of course, sounded like crap.

E-BOREDOM: It must have been rewarding to hear the music through a Roland MT-32 for those later games with the MIDI music...

AL LOWE: Oh, yes. I remember the first time I got to play with an MT-32. I was in heaven! We never wanted people to hear our games any other way.

E-BOREDOM: How was it getting to hear a live band perform the music for Larry 7?

AL LOWE: It was only one of the best days of my life. We recorded in Chick Corea's Mad Hatter Studios in Hollywood and had the place for a full day. What a sweet room! And we got to use Chick's personal Steinway piano, which is about as good as it gets. I remember there was a huge Bosendorfer concert grand sitting in a corner gathering dust! THAT'S how good their piano was!

We had such great musicians that we cut the entire soundtrack in about 6 hours, 2 of which were

setup and 1 was lunch! All we had to do was tell them exactly what we wanted and they'd nail it the first time. In fact, while we recorded a safety take, much of the music you hear in that game is first tries.

E-BOREDOM: In playing all the Larry games, there has been one question I've had: Is Larry cut or uncut?

AL LOWE: Gosh, I don't know. I never looked! (Now let's talk about your reasons for asking! <grin>)

E-BOREDOM: Recently, you posted the game design documents for a lot of your later Sierra On-line games... I was wondering if the older games were planned out as much in advance?

AL LOWE: They were thoroughly planned. However, only 1 or 2 people were working on them, so we didn't need to write everything down. We also used an interactive development system that allowed us to create scenes, actions, and animations on the fly. So many of the funniest ideas came about because we were goofing around.

E-BOREDOM: Over time, the Larry games had three

different interfaces: the text-based parser, the icon-driven interface, and the simplified "1-click" cursor. Which of these three interfaces do you think was the most fun to you when you played adventure games and which was the most rewarding to design for?

AL LOWE: I used to think typing was fun until I watched enough people play who didn't know what we expected them to type. They were often frustrated. On the other hand, the icon-driven cursor gave you enough options to keep things interesting without learning all the responses we did NOT program!

I personally feel that LSL7 was the best game I did. I liked the overall balance of being able to type if you wanted to hear some more dumb responses, or not needing to type if you didn't. As an aside, one reason that LSL5 was so much easier than the other games was because it was the first game that didn't require typing. I made the puzzles a little more difficult than the first 3 games, but it was much faster to solve. Why? Because point and click removed all the frustrating wrong answers and you just solved puzzles.

E-BOREDOM: In the mid 1990's, CD-ROMs became popular. LSL 6 was the first game in the series to feature voice-acting. How difficult was it to cast the actor who was the voice of Leisuire Suit Larry?

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AL LOWE: It was sheer hell! I had a voice casting agency go through many people first, then they brought in at least 25 actors to read for the part in front of me. Each was taped and I took the tapes home to study later. I agonized a long time before finally choosing Jan Rabson, whom I think was brilliant. He was a ball to work with. Many times his improvised lines were funnier than mine, so we'd work them into the game!

E-BOREDOM: What made you narrow it down to Jan Rabson?

AL LOWE: Jan had a wonderful way of putting just enough "whine" into Larry's voice to make him sound hopeless, but not enough that you'd grow sick of it by the end of the game. Plus, he had a wonderfully wide range of emotions and is completely uninhibited. I wish I could hire him again!

E-BOREDOM: If Freddy Pharkas had to give you a prescription for something, what would it be?

AL LOWE: Gout. Actually, nothing, I hope. I've seen that guy mix chemicals!

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E-BOREDOM: With Freddy Pharkas, you wrote material with Josh Mandel. How did the collaboration work?

AL LOWE: I think it worked quite well. While I had designed most everything before we started, he added tons of additional dialogue, and also fleshed out design problems that I had glossed over or forgotten entirely. We had no problems because we followed one simple rule: whoever came up with the funnier line won!

E-BOREDOM: What is the toughest puzzle you've run across in an adventure game?

AL LOWE: There are too many to list and I'd hate to offend any of my designer friends by omitting his (or her!) stinking-est! Anytime you say"Ah!" when you learn the answer to a puzzle, it might have been hard, but it was fair. But when you say "HUH?" you know the author just didn't try hard enough. I think most of those "difficult" puzzles are really the designer's failure to predict what gamers would think. Therefore, he didn't include clues to help them see the answer.

E-BOREDOM: Sierra Online remade the first games in a lot of their series (KQ, SQ, etc) in the early 1990's.

How was it to revisit the first Larry game for the update remake?

AL LOWE: It was fun. I was able to add many new jokes, but I missed those wacky responses that came about when you typed in something unexpected. I just wish we had been able to add the voices to ALL the old games. That makes such a difference!

E-BOREDOM: What is your view on the fan games and fan sequels being made with Adventure Game Studio and other game development programs?

AL LOWE: It's a wonderful way for gamers to learn just how damned difficult it is to make a really good game! :-) I'd love to see them succeed, but I'd rather see them let the old games go and do something original of their own creation. Why use characters, settings, and situations that fit Roberta, Scott & Mark, or me? Better to be true to yourself, I think.

E-BOREDOM: Larry has met lots of gorgeous women over the years and has also had lots of glorious deaths. What is your favorite "Larry babe" and your favorite "Larry death"?

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AL LOWE: My favorite Larry babe has to be Captain Thygh. Don Munsil and I were laughing about her creation just last week. We were brainstorming trying to come up with some reason why she would run a contest like the "Thygh's Man Trophy" when it finally hit me: she doesn't need a reason! It's Leisure Suit Larry! That's just the way she is. That was an amazingly liberating moment to know that we could make those characters do almost anything if we remained true to their overall "Larryness."

My favorite death is the one that wasn't: walking around the cliffs to get to the airport in Larry 2. Back then, we almost always had a cliff walking scene somewhere. I often died trying to do them myself. Finally, I asked Bil Skirvin, the art director on many of those games, why we couldn't just have him "almost" fall. That was enough. Bil jumped right in and made a hilarious "stretching Larry rubberman" and solved the problem of cliff death once and for all. In the later games, I took out death altogether: there was no way to die at all. You know, I never received one complaint!

JOSH MANDEL

Among all the writers Sierra-Online had for their graphic adventures, Josh Mandel is an unsung hero: Josh Mandel. He not only assisted Al Lowe on the hilarious Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist, but he also wrote for Heart of China and even non-Sierra titles like Jagged Alliance 2. While his game designing days are behind him, he reprised his role as the voice of King Graham for AGD Interactive's VGA remakes of the first two games in the King's Quest series.

Mandel reveals his thoughts on how Sierra's VGA remakes affected the integrity of the original games, notes how game design is different for educational games, and provides a peek into the writing process of Sierra On-line during its golden years.

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E-BOREDOM: Did playing your first graphic adventure affect the way you approached text adventures?

JOSH MANDEL: The first graphic adventure I played was either The Black Cauldron or one of the early Polarware adventures such as The Crimson Crown or Transylvania. I had a Leading Edge CGA system, so going back and forth between text adventures and graphic adventures was easy.

At the time, Infocom text adventures had so much more robust parsers and were better written than most of the graphic adventure. At the time, the text adventures easily held their own for overall entertainment. It was sort of the difference between reading a good novel and reading a bad coloring book.

E-BOREDOM: Since you acted in several games, which character was the most fun to perform as and which was the most bizarre?

JOSH MANDEL: Ouch. Difficult to say. Each role had definite rewards. I loved being the Pawn Shop guy in Jones in the Fast Lane because he had real attitude. I loved being the Monolith Burger Manager in SQ4 because, hey, it was Space Quest. I loved being King Graham because it was the company's most prestigious series.

King Graham was the most bizarre. I'd had a lot of theater training at Carnegie-Mellon and the American Conservatory Theater and a lot of onstage experience. But when doing King Graham, he was envisioned as very two-dimensional. I was directed, "Graham is never tired, never frightened, never defeated. He is ALWAYS buff." So while I had lines and situations that strongly suggested various moods and emotions, I was always reined in: "Be buff, be strong, be confident, no matter what." That was odd. But hey, I got to work with Cedric, and how many people can say that?

E-BOREDOM: When writing various manuals for the Leisure Suit Larry games, how were you able to keep them interesting?

JOSH MANDEL: When I wrote a manual, I tried never to let it take itself seriously. And so I never get bored writing them. I'd play with the legal stuff to the extent that I could get away with, I'd play with the characters and the plot and whatever else the manual needed to communicate. Al and I had an "anything goes" attitude toward the manuals, as did most of Sierra.

The only place where flippancy is inappropriate is when you're trying to write the clearest, simplest possible instructions about basic functions. Those

were so standardized from manual to manual that it wasn't necessary to write new ones very often.

E-BOREDOM: Did you run into problems localizing Zeliard from Japanese into English?

JOSH MANDEL: When I started at Sierra On-line, the assignments that greeted me at the door were Zeliard and the EGA SCI remake of King's Quest 1. The King's Quest 1 remake had been slow going due in part to Roberta's attentions being mostly on KQ5.

The toughest aspect of Zeliard was learning the Producer's role on an import game; being a Producer was new to me period, but working on a game that I could not understand was even more intimidating. I had no experience in dealing with Japanese business customs.

E-BOREDOM: Speaking of the SCI remakes, which one did you feel was the most effective and which one was the least effective?

JOSH MANDEL: The Larry 1 remake brought the greatest sense of style to the original material. Bill Davis gave it that jaunty look, and I thought it ended up being a very good fit for the material, for two is –

and this is happily overthinking it -- but with that askew style, there wasn't a single right angle to be found. Wasn't that Larry's problem all along – he never had the right angle?

Not that the other remakes weren't big stylistic improvements; the SQ1 remake had a great '50s scifi look and a lot of clever stuff hidden in the periphery of the text and graphics, as there often was in Sierra's adventures.

I'm not sure what the least effective remake was, but I think I missed the parser most in the Quest for Glory remake. Searching for the witticisms that Corey and Lori hid in the original game, the ones you could find with creative use of the parser, was one of my favorite aspects.

E-BOREDOM: How was puzzle design different on Heart of China, considering it took more of an "interactive movie" approach to the genre?

JOSH MANDEL: I did a lot of dialogue but just a few puzzles on HoC. I really liked Jeff's approach to adventure games, which was new in the industry at the time and now more closely resembles today's adventures than the old Sierra games do. The only problem was that the puzzles tended to be very easy and straightforward... A problem that all the Sierra designers had to grapple with themselves.

That was the first problem addressing designers when losing the parser and condensing a world of potential verbs and interesting responses into the all-purpose "use ___ on ___." I really didn't want to interfere with Jeff's design. I wanted to introduce the aspect of clicking inventory items on other inventory items which allowed for more complex puzzles and more experimentation for the player.

E-BOREDOM: Did you have a lot of input into the second Laura Bow game, The Dagger of Amon Ra?

JOSH MANDEL: I had expected to be intimidated by the experience. Until the suits started taking over in the mid-90s, there was very little pretension. I was originally going to do Laura Bow 2, as I think Roberta had good feelings about my work on the KQ1 remake. I wrote two or three very brief story outlines for Laura Bow 2, a page or two each. Roberta chose the one she liked, which was the Dagger of Amon Ra scenario.

Bruce Balfour joined Sierra about then, and he was clearly far more qualified to write a murder mystery game. He took a sketchy one-page scenario and turned it into an excellent game. Roberta wasn't involved on a day-to-day basis, but occasionally did thorough reviews of the material and made mostly minor changes... A credit to Bruce's ability to meld his own style with Roberta's.

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E-BOREDOM: Did Blazing Saddles influence Freddy Pharkas at all?

JOSH MANDEL: I had only seen parts of Blazing Saddles, so it wasn't a big problem for me. Of course, I avoided watching it as soon as I knew I'd be working on Freddy. That was a habit picked up from my stand-up comedy days when I would often avoid watching other comics for fear that I'd subconsciously steal something.

Al and I both knew that comparisons to Blazing Saddles were inevitable, but we weren't worried. There are thousands of Westerns and so many clichés and conventions that they can't all be parodied in one movie.

MARK MINASI

Mark Minasi's excellent hint book Secrets of the Wing Commander Universe. The only book in English that features tips for the first two Wing Commander games and all four expansions packs, it also features a style of writing where it feels more like a friend talking to you about how he played his way through the game and less dry than the usual hint guide. Minasi is also the author of Mastering Windows Servers 2003 and The Software Conspiracy: Why Software Companies Put Out Faulty Products, How They Can Hurt You, and What You Can Do About It.

Minasi's glee for the classic Wing Commander games was infectious as he regaled me with stories of failed missions, suicidal wingmen, and problems he ran into when publishing Secrets of the Wing Commander Universe. Be sure to check out his site MR&D to learn about his upcoming lectures,

discover info on his various books, purchase his Audio CD seminars, and sign up for his free Tech Newsletter.

E-BOREDOM: What was the first video game you played?

MARK MINASI: Hmm... I think pretty much the same as a lot of old-timers: Pong. Probably saw Pong on some system, must have been at Sears. I had heard about Space War at MIT, and that's what I really wanted to play.

E-BOREDOM: What sort of computer games did you enjoy?

MARK MINASI: Text adventure games absorbed me when I was younger. When they added graphics to those games, they lost something. Until the graphics get so good that I forget I am looking at a screen, what's the point? Are we so illiterate that we can't read a description? Sometimes, I would be working really hard on a puzzle, solve it, and then get a chill from reading the descriptions.

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E-BOREDOM: What made the original Wing Commander so fun to play?

MARK MINASI: With Wing Commander, it eases you in really easily. The card that came with the game led you into the first mission. You had to pretty much blow things up, it was really fun. The missions got harder at a reasonable rate, that's what got me hooked.

The beauty of the original game is that it's not a mindless shoot-em-up. You have a particular mission that's not too hard to beat... The X-Wing games were so complicated I couldn't even make it past the training missions. You had to balance the power between managing shields, weapons, and engines... I just want to blow shit up!

I can't tell you how many games I have on my shelf where I've played them, got too frustrated, and said, "Fuck it, I'm not loading this again."

I was so utterly amazed with the original game. There are few things in life I truly get addicted to, but for a while I would work until 7:00 PM, grab a beer, and wang away at some scenario I couldn't get past. There were so many missions. You could have a couple little victories each week. It was delightful!

E-BOREDOM: Did you have a favorite wingman to fly with in the games?

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MARK MINASI: They were all annoying, particularly in the first WC. In the first one, if you lost them they died. In the final battle where you are taking out that Death Star, I think the number of wingmen you had alive affected your score. I spent more time protecting my wingmen than flying the actual mission.

I mean, look at Knight. What a complete idiot. Actually running through the 3 mission set with him still being alive was a miracle.

You know, it's most fun to fly the missions by yourself. As I recall, there is a mission where you are flying a medium-level ship against 12 Jalthi. They way the mission works, all you're supposed to do is get close enough to see this secret weapon. You don't have to destroy the ships, just need to get back to the base alive. If you could actually knock out all the Jalthi, that was even more fun.

E-BOREDOM: Got any more unique ways to tackle missions?

MARK MINASI: Just for fun, I would replay the first mission from the original game. My goal was to kill every ship by gently ramming them. There are 5-6 Dralthi and a few Salthi, and it's a real challenge to gently take out the ships this way without blowing up. Of course, the Colonel chews your ass out for damaging your ship, but it's worth it.

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E-BOREDOM: Your book only covers the first two WC games and their expansion packs. Ever play the later games in the series, which relied on Full-Motion Video cutscenes?

MARK MINASI: WC 3 was fun, but at the time getting that thing to run... I had four different systems. Half of them would lock up midway through the video sequences. Remember, it was a state of the art game at the time.

I liked that the plots got more intricate. I don't know what they were thinking with WC 4. I felt like Chris Roberts was squeezing the last bit of juice out of that thing.

E-BOREDOM: How was the experience of writing Secrets of the Wing Commander Universe?

MARK MINASI:I HAD ALREADY BEEN successful with writing Networking and PC books for Sybex. Since some of their game books were becoming popular, they asked me to do a Wing Commander book.

Game books are supposed to be 120 pages long. I turned in this 500-600 page book, and they said "Oh

my God... What are you doing?" Keep it mind it covers 8 games if you count the expansions. It was a book that was not a commercial success, but everyone who has talked to me about it loves it!

For a game book to be a success, it has to come out the same day as the game. If it's gonna do that, you need the info from the game publisher. From now and probably forever, the publisher gets what the author should get for royalty. If I handed you $2,000 and told you to write a book, you are not going to have a staff of 3. It probably cost me $50,000 to get the WC book together. I had to pay an artists, a guy to play through the games to pick up all the little details... It was a labor of love. You're never going to see that colossal of a conceit in game publishing ever again.

E-BOREDOM: What are you working on now?

MARK MINASI: I'm about to do a book on Windows Security. At least, I hope to. I am going to start revising my Server 2003 book.

NICK MONTFORT

One of the earliest genre of computers games was the text adventure, a type of games with no graphics at all. The Player had to type in various commands to explore different rooms, solve puzzles, and interact with objects. Nick Montfort found playing these games so interesting that he started to write his own text adventures. Recently, he wrote Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction, a book covering the history of the text adventure genre with an academic tone not usually seen in video-game history books.

E-BOREDOM: What was the first text adventure game you played?

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NICK MONTFORT: It was Zork I, if that experience counts as playing. We got it for the family's Epson QX-10 which ran CP/M. It came on an 8" floppy, which I still have; the salesman copied the files to a 5.25" disk so that we could use it. After a few days of fruitlessly typing "EAST" and "REMOVE BOARDS" over and over again not knowing how to leave the first location, I ordered the hint book and pretty much followed it through the whole game. A friend and I finished Zork II without Invisiclues assistance not too long afterwards, though.

E-BOREDOM: Out of the several text adventure games released in the 1980's, arguably the best of them came from Infocom. Which Infocom games were your favorites and what made them stand apart from other text adventures?

NICK MONTFORT: A Mind Forever Voyaging was a favorite of mine, and not just as a "literary" person looking back on things. Providing a rich world, dividing the interaction into different stages, and creating a dystopia that offered a political comment impressed me when I first played AMFV. It still does. I would guess that Infocom was distinguished by having many good IF authors, a culture that fostered creativity, and good software development practices.

They also kept expanding into new genres and trying new things.

E-BOREDOM: Pretend you have a few minutes to convince a young console videogame player to playing a text adventure. What would you say to her?

NICK MONTFORT: First off, I should mention that I'm not opposed to anyone, young or old, firing up their Playstation 2, if that's what they want to do... Even though I'm a Dreamcast owner!

I suppose might say this: Interactive fiction offers terrifyingly complex and challenging worlds, games that are as detailed and fun as Jet Grind Radio or Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, but are way more subversive. Imagine if you read great books all the time but never went to see a movie in your life. No matter how much you like books, you'd be missing out on a lot. Playing video games but never having tried to play interactive fiction means you miss out, too.

Reading and typing words as you play a computer game may sound strange, but sitting in a dark room and looking at a lit-up screen is actually weird, too, if you've never done it. Take a few hours and give it a try. See what you're missing.

E-BOREDOM: How is the gameplay of a text adven-

ture game a different experience from a graphic adventure game like King's Quest?

NICK MONTFORT: On the simplest level, one involves typing a command and the other involves moving and clicking a mouse. Just as typing is a poor way to point to something, mousing around is a poor way to indicate a complex action or express a complex thought unless they come from a small menu of such things. So you might spend more time searching for "hot spots" when you play a graphical game, which can be enjoyable but is a different sort of activity. In text-based IF, if you missed something, it's probably because you didn't comprehend what you're reading, not because you actually overlooked a certain word. Better yet, it might be because you didn't understand the whole system or workings of the strange world that you're in, and you need to think more deeply about those.

Also, the interface in text-based IF is, at least at a basic level, symmetrical. You get text from the computer, and you give it text in reply. This provided some inspiration for the puzzles in Ad Verbum.

E-BOREDOM: What are some of the best fan-made text adventures that you have played?

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NICK MONTFORT: Really, the IF that I know of today isn't an imitation of earlier work by a group of fans, and it doesn't generally appropriate and play with established characters the way fan fiction does. Some truly excellent, original IF is being written these days by accomplished programmers and authors.

Interactive fiction companies had a decade in which they could have produced something as compelling and innovative as Dan Shiovitz's Bad Machine, from 1998, but they didn't. Emily Short's Galatea and Savoir-Faire are other examples that push beyond what was done in the 1980s, as is Adam Cadre's Varicella. There are also plenty of shorter, less involved pieces that are of high quality but never would have been made in the 1980s because the games providing 20 to 30 hours of playing time was the only format thought to be marketable.

E-BOREDOM: Winchester's Nightmare was the first IF game you made. What was it that inspired you to make your own game in the first place?

NICK MONTFORT: I had wanted to create a piece of interactive fiction for many years. When I first began to think about Winchester's Nightmare, and think about the United States and the strangeness of industry and life in this country, it just seemed that what I was thinking about was a world expressed

through text on a computer. Just as I probably wouldn't confuse an idea for a poem with an idea for a novel, I wouldn't have thought to create something else besides IF that dealt with these themes and issues.

E-BOREDOM: You won the 2000 XYZZY Award for Best Puzzles for your next game Ad Verbum. What makes a good puzzle for a text adventure game?

NICK MONTFORT: There's no one puzzle that is good for all games. A puzzle has to suit the game, the overall world of it, just like a particular room or sentence has to. You can really tell when there are out-of-place puzzles in a game that have been cribbed out of logic books, even if the puzzles themselves are clever. It would be like putting some random paragraph from a good novel into IF. It wouldn't fit, and it wouldn't sound right.

E-BOREDOM: You also translated Olvido Mortal from Spanish into English under the title Dead Reckoning. How did you find out about the game in the first place?

NICK MONTFORT: There was a controversy in 2001 because an earlier translation of Olvido Mortal

had been entered in the IF Competition and was disqualified since it wasn't an original work. I played the translation and the original. Olvido Mortal seemed innovative and well-written... Not perfect, but something that English-speaking IF authors and players really should be able to play.

I was disappointed on a few levels. The existing translation didn't express the literate nature of the original. The game being disqualified built an unfair wall between the English-language IF community and the already isolated IF communities in other languages. I thought I could work against that to some extent by translating IF from Spanish. Akbarr, the author of Olvido Mortal, was the first person to contact me when I offered to translate something. I agreed to do a new translation of his game.

E-BOREDOM: How was translating a Spanish game into English different from translating Spanish prose into English?

NICK MONTFORT: It's certainly more involved in some ways. It wasn't just a matter of replacing words here and there, because the program had to be converted for English input as well as output.

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E-BOREDOM: Was it difficult to convince the MIT press to publish Twisty Little Passages?

NICK MONTFORT: MIT Press has been building a very strong list of titles in new media. What really matters is whether or not people in their core readership and market are interested in the book. It took many years, but apparently students and faculty at universities are now becoming interested in IF and in similar topics.

E-BOREDOM: What is it about game studies that makes it worthy of scholarly criticism compared to a more traditional field such as literature?

NICK MONTFORT: There does seem to be lots of interest at universities. I think the worthiness of anything as a topic has to do with how much influence this topic has on our lives and how lasting that influence will be. Putting aside the issue of whether popular culture is distasteful, no one wants to preside at the opening of the Department of Beanie Baby Studies.

By now, video games have been around for more than 40 years. IF has been around for about 30 years. It seems clear that computers will remain part of our

lives and people will continue to do creative things with them.

E-BOREDOM: Aside from writing IF and new media articles, you also write poetry. Is there a connection between IF and poetry?

NICK MONTFORT: I certainly think so. Pretty much the whole second chapter of my book is about this. Now, I don't think poetry and IF are the same in all ways. Poetry is breath shaped by the human body into memorable words. A work of interactive fiction is a computer program that simulates a world and provides a textual exchange. I do think there are many ways the practice of poetry that can inform the creation of IF. The literary riddle, itself a form of poetry, helps to explain some of the connections.

E-BOREDOM: What books or work of interactive media are you currently working on?

NICK MONTFORT: Right now, I'm in the early stages of what may end up being a boring and unpopular book, one that will take me at least two more years. It's about a computer science topic. I haven't figured out what the title will be, but the subtitle is

going to be "Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy."

There are some things of mine that are a bit more exciting that should be coming out first, though. One is a project I'm working on with Emily Short and Dan Shiovitz, Mystery House Taken Over, coming in early 2005. Another is a long work of interactive fiction that I hope to release in November 2005 at the end of the IF Competition.

Hopefully, I'll have some articles coming out before too long, including an academic article about the Atari VCS game Combat and a review of Bad Machine. I'm also co-writing a novel called Implementation with Scott Rettberg; we'll be finished by the end of the year with that. It's being published on stickers which people attach to various places around the world.

MUSTIN

Mustin, Producer of OneUp Studios, has produced five albums featuring work from the best video game remixers on the Internet. Their most recent album The Very Best of SEGA features remixes of music from games in the Sonic the Hedgehog and Streets of Rage series. You can visit OneUp Studios to download select tracks from their albums, read bios of the different remixers, and participate in their thriving forum community.

Mustin gives us a peek behind the complicated processing of getting the rights to legally release a video game remix on a CD, muses on why most video game remixes are techno, and delves into the different musical styles of various video game music composers.

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E-BOREDOM: When was the first time you listened to video game music that moved you?

MUSTIN: I'm not sure, but I think I got choked up at the Final Fantasy IV ending. Probably the Final Fantasy VI ending too. But for the record, let's just say the whole "Opera" scene in Final Fantasy VI. I think that blew a lot of people away.

E-BOREDOM: Why do most video game remixes end up as techno?

MUSTIN: That's a great question. But I think it has to do with how easy it is to make "cheap" techno. Anyone can get on a file sharing program and download Fruity-Loops, the most popular remixing program. And it has some great presets for electronica: drum sounds, drum loops, synth sounds, etc. Pretty easy to work with and great sounding results.

On the other hand, sitting down and writing for orchestra is a different story all together. You can listen to techno all of the time and get a good feel for how it works, thus resulting in some nice remixes... But, it would take you a lifetime, if ever, to sound like BT.

Writing for orchestra has limitations and some common practices that one should really know and understand. A big problem with orchestral mixes is

realism. And orchestral samples can costs thousands upon thousands of dollars. So therein lies several problems. And with jazz, it's too hard to emulate really great solo brass for jazz with electronics... I don't care what anyone says. Yes, there are some excellent samples (there we go with the thousands of dollars again), but it just makes more sense to record a real soloist. Most people who are doing this are content with making electronica remixes and branching out from there occasionally.

Personally, I enjoy making all types of music: techno, two-step, R&B, rock, jazz, soul, funk, ambient... I love all types of music, and that's another thing that helps. A lot of people doing this don't like all types of music, and that's why you don't hear as much, I think.

E-BOREDOM: How is video game music different from film music?

MUSTIN: Well, for a lot of games not so much anymore. Some games sound just like movies. I think the biggest difference is the type of medium. Movies are one way, that's it. It's the same two hours each time you watch it. Now with the advanced technology, we're seeing some really cool things happening in DVD like alternate music tracks and the like, but for the most part things aren't changing much.

As for games, a great deal of audio is environmental. The first time I noticed this was Super Mario 64. In the water level "Dire Dire Docks", Mario would swim around to a very pleasing piece of music with an electronic piano playing chords and melody. But if Mario swam down really far or in different areas, strings would come into the mix. And if Mario were to step out of the water onto land, a nice 16-beat drum pattern would be thrown in the mix. It's a really cool idea that has evolved to be so much more. So many games are using this technology and really making innovative use of it.

SSX Tricky has music that remixes itself in real time, which is really well done. Every time you play the game (or games like this), it's going to be different. And that's a hard task for game composers to work with. They've gotta think about what's going to happen here, and what's going to happen here if a monster just popped up.

E-BOREDOM: The 16-bit consoles just had MIDI music, right?

MUSTIN: Actually, the SNES and Genesis didn't deal in MIDI. The SNES played back samples and the Genesis was an FM Synth. As far as the music, composers had to make music that told the story. Scores today are more movie like, meaning that they

blend in the background and amplify the experience with subtlety.

Back then, Soyo Oka was working her tail off trying to write a piece of music that was beautiful to listen to over and over again while you build a city in Sim City. So there's a certain charm missing from today's music, but today's music has it's own charm now that there are more possibilities. They are two very different eras.

E-BOREDOM: Do you think video game soundtracks are gaining in popularity in the US?

MUSTIN: I think there's something going on where people are starting to recognize the importance of music in video games. More and more licensed music is used nowadays. Good Charlotte credits their big break to their appearance in a video game soundtrack. Once a record company for game music is established with substantial distribution, then we'll start seeing more and more scores pop up in the "soundtracks/shows" sections of Barnes & Nobles and Best Buy. That will be nice!

E-BOREDOM: Squaredance was your first album, right?

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MUSTIN: No. Project Majestic Mix - A Tribute to Nobuo Uematsu was the first album I worked on and co-produced. I got a good start on Squaredance by working with people I had established relationships with on Project Majestic Mix. Jan van Valburg, Haroon Piracha (FFMusic Dj), Dale North, and others had all appeared on the first album, and I wanted them to work on the second one.

Later, I thought of some remixers from Over-Clocked ReMix that I really liked and asked them to work on the project: djpretzel, AE, po!, and more. Stephen Kennedy put me in charge of Squaredance and told me to get it going and let him know when it was done. Well, in just a few months time, the musicians had churned out a whole album. Everyone worked really hard!

NESKIMOS

Although there are a lot of remixes of video-game music online, there are not many NES Tribute bands that play covers of NES songs. One of the best video game tribute bands around is The Neskimos. They have released two albums so far and are nearing completion on a third.

E-BOREDOM:WHAT WAS the first NES game you played that had memorable music?

NESKIMOS: Super Mario Bros. was the first, because it came with the system... And every game after that because even if the music wasn't all that catchy to begin with, after playing a game for hours upon hours

upon hours that music gets in your head and WILL NOT GET OUT.

E-BOREDOM: What are some of the hardest Nintendo games you've played?

NESKIMOS: Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Bionic Commando. Ghosts N Goblins (or was it Ghouls N Ghosts? [Ghouls N Ghosts was the Genesis sequel to Ghosts N Goblins]). Contra, if you hadn't learned the code yet. Tetris was just too boring for me to play. I'm like the only person in the world who had this problem, evidently.

E-BOREDOM: Did any of you subscribe to Nintendo Power when you were younger?

NESKIMOS: I'm still finding issues of Nintendo Power in my various boxes and books from years ago. I can still remember the excitement of getting a new one and reading Howard and Nester, a comic that was in each issue of Nintendo Power. I remember the Howard and Nester where the Ninja Turtles were in it and they were drawn in this really weird way, like their eyes were solid blue or something. Freaky!

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E-BOREDOM: Music from the Mega Man games for the NES (especially Mega Man 2) are covered and remixed quite often by fans. What is it about Mega Man music that makes it so beloved by the fan community?

NESKIMOS: Well, there are certain bands (Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, etc.) that everyone seems to agree are great bands. Mega Man 2 is just one of those games that everyone agrees had really great songs. In fact, the reason I wanted to form the band in the first place was because I was sitting in my room many years ago and started picking out Bubble Man on my guitar. I realized that I remembered that song so well that I was able to figure it out from memory alonewithout even having to consult the NSFs or ROMs.

Over a decade is a long time to go without hearing something as complex as a Nintendo song and then be able to remember it that well. Mega Man 2 is one of those special games that you absolutely cannot forget. I think it also helps too that the Mega Man games were conceived as "music-themed". Remember that in Japan, Mega Man is known as ROCK Man. And he certainly does.

E-BOREDOM: What inspired the Neskimos to get together?

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NESKIMOS: Belmont and I sat down and decided we needed a name. I knew that I wanted NES to be in the name somewhere, just like all those stupid ska bands always had the word "ska" in their names. I wish I could remember some of the other candidate names we were kicking around, but I can't. At one point we had a dictionary out. We decided 'NESkimos' was stupid but not too stupid, which was perfect for us.

E-BOREDOM: Out of all the songs you've recorded so far, which one was the hardest to play?

NESKIMOS: Mario was a complete monster. We must have leveled up or something because the actual complexity of the music really hasn't bothered us since. Bionic Commando, which took me a few tries to get recorded. F-Zero: Big Blue was quite hard. I didn't even bother trying to play that one. We just called up our good friend the Shredder to guest star on that song. Problem solved!

E-BOREDOM: You have 2 albums: Battle and Bloodshed. What are some of your favorite tracks?

NESKIMOS: I'm most excited about our Bionic Commando series, which started on Bloodshed but

continues on our new album Berserker (Bionic Commando Movement II is now available on our Soundclick.com page!). It's our most ambitious project ever. We are trying to fit every song from that game into a giant 30-minute long epic. I'm also quite proud of Bloody Bossanova just because it's so fun to listen to.

When we play live, there are certain songs that are the most fun to play: Contra: Base and Boss, Zelda, Kirby, and, more recently, Star Wars: Cantina of Fear. Mario is always funy because of the crowd appreciation.

E-BOREDOM: You sometimes do requests of songs... Are there any requests that were too bizarre to do?

NESKIMOS: On our message board we have an entire forum devoted to requests. We pretty much have had every song from every game ever made requested. We just can't do all of them, although we'd like to. There was a guy who requested Legend of Kage so many times that we actually started working on a version of it but never got around to finishing it. Maybe someday!

E-BOREDOM: You've recently moved a lot of your songs over to SoundClick. How has SoundClick worked as a resource to display your songs?

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NESKIMOS: Soundclick is GREAT. They give us unlimited storage space, which MP3.com did not unless you paid them. They only downside to Soundlick is that we can't deep-link to the MP3s, and the max file size is 10 meg. We had to slice Bionic COmmando Movement II into two pieces.Maybe we'll start paying them soon and those problems will go away.

Perhaps enough people will buy our CDs so that we can do that. That's right! CDs will go on sale sometime this summer. The wait will soon be over.

E-BOREDOM: Have you ever played any gigs at bars or parties?

NESKIMOS: We play shows all the time; in fact we'll be playing a show at DigiPen school in Redmond, WA in early September. Hopefully be opening up for 1970s super group Foreigner later that month (we're pretty stoked about that!). The funny thing is, most people have no idea what we're doing up there until we play Mario or Zelda. Then they're putty in our hands. EVERYONE recognizes those songs.

One time, a 50-year-old bar skank who was sitting at the bar drinking shots of Jack all night, looking miserable, actually got up, stood next to the stage, and

starting booty dancing when we played Mario. It might have been the most flattering response we've ever had.

E-BOREDOM: What do the Neskimos offer that make it different from other Nintendo-cover bands (The Minibosses, Game Over, etc.)?

NESKIMOS: Well, the main difference with us is that we never considered ourselves to be constrained by the original songs; we like to re-interpret stuff in completely new ways, whether it be by exploring differing genres (we made Snake Man into a surf rock song for our new album) or adding new parts (Kirby: Grape Garden). Sometimes we slow it down, sometimes we rock it out, you just never know.

I heard Konami's Dracula Battle CD way before I'd ever heard of the Minibosses or any other VG band out there, and they did it up right on that disc. The songs had the same nostalgia trip, but also took you for a ride above and beyond your memories. That's what we're about!

E-BOREDOM: Newer games are often lacking in gameplay compared to older games. What was it about the older console games (NES, SNES, Genesis) that made them more fun to play than the current ones?

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NESKIMOS: Well, it takes a lot of time to code the models, art, etc. in newer games. Games are made or broken by their good looks nowadays. However, there is the honest question we need to ask ourselves: were the old school games really that great, or did we just like them because we were 10 years old then? Try to imagine a game like Final Fantasy 7 or Metal Gear Solid on the Nintendo or even Super Nintendo. I think there's a lot more truth to that theory than we'd like to believe.

E-BOREDOM: Any plans for what is coming up on your third album, Berserker?

NESKIMOS: We've got several songs already up on Soundclick. Come on and check 'em out, everyone! We've got more Bionic Commando, some Mega Man 3, Double Dragon 2, Metroid, Ninja Gaiden - fun times all around!

SCOT NOEL

In this interview, we discuss the troubles of directing voice actors for computer games, the challenges of converting AD&D rules to a CRPG, and the surprising similarity between web design and game design.

E-BOREDOM: How were your first introduced to RPGs?

SCOT NOEL: Advanced Dungeons & Dragons was my introduction to role-playing in the traditional sense. I remember playing AD&D even before I understood the rules, but that didn't seem to matter as much as taking on a dragon with a +2 sword. Other than AD&D, my

primary gaming experiences growing up were strategic and tactical board games, such Axis & Allies and the many wonderful games produced by Avalon Hill.

At DreamForge Intertainment, Inc., we would often play the pen and paper or board games associated with our next project in order to gain a better understanding of the intended play value. For years, we had a great after-hours AD&D group going at DreamForge. I played a Ranger famous for missing the intended mark with his arrows due to having more bravado than tracking skill, and who once spit on a demonic altar of sorts just to see what would happen (don't ask!).

E-BOREDOM: The CRPGs you worked on all had gameplay from a first-person perspective. How is playing a CRPG different from playing a tabletop RPG?

SCOT NOEL: That's a good question! I'll go for the obvious first: cool technology that does all the work of setting up the game and knows all the rules. To me, they are simply different venues somewhat like movies and books.

Playing RPGs live with a group of friends is a social experience, like going to the movies (I never go alone). You share pizza, beer, catch up on what's

happening in real life, and have arguments about the rules.

Playing a PC game is more like reading a book, a private experience where you can be alone with your imagination. Network and Internet play bring a touch of the social back, but not in the same way; you are simply outsmarting a live opponent on the other side of the screen rather than a well-crafted AI.

E-BOREDOM: How did you get started with SSI? Were they pretty strict on converting the rules from the original tabletop AD&D to their various computer games?

SCOT NOEL: I got into gaming as a writer first. In 1990, I was one of the winners of L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future. Some of my more recent short stories can be found in the anthologies The Book of All Flesh and The Book of More Flesh, both published by Eden Studios.

My first assignments were to write rule books, stories to include in the rule books, and game character dialog. SSI was strict about keeping the stat conversions faithful to AD&D; however, occasionally rules and statistics had to be modified to make the game work as a computer game. Much in the way movies and books are simply not the same medium, PC games occasionally need to tweak time-honored rules so that

the intended play value of the rule comes across. Otherwise, you would get a blind conversion of statistics that on a PC might do nothing more than annoy the user.

E-BOREDOM: You worked on two games using AD&D's Ravenloft setting, a darker, more horror-oriented campaign setting. Was their any censorship on the violence included in these games from SSI?

SCOT NOEL: There were often limits as to how much violence we could show. It was never as simple as pointing a finger at a defined group of censors and thinking of them as the bad guys. The designer and design team often had a great deal to say about how well violence and its appropriate depiction would fit into a given game. The Ravenloft titles especially were about horror. Horror is related to, but not the same, as violence. For Ravenloft: The Stone Prophet, we especially pursued an involving plot and ended up emphasizing story over combat.

Sometimes, we made decisions on the depiction of violence based on our own internal discussions. The publisher or license holder could make a decision based on routine design and progress reviews. An economic or cultural factor might kick in, such as how overseas sales in Germany or Australia would be affected if red blood or a certain violent act were

shown. We were ghoulish kids at heart who wanted to slice, dice, and blow things up.

E-BOREDOM: How much of an influence did R.A. Salvatore's Forgotten Realms novels have on Menzoberranzan?

SCOT NOEL: We read everything we could about Drizzt Do'Urden and the drow elves of the Underdark. I can only hope it showed. I still have a little figurine I made of Drizzt's black panther companion, Guenhwyvar which I kept at my side throughout production. We made every effort to develop plot, characters, and situations more extensive than any offered by similar games of the time; some of the reviews reflected this. PC Gamer said that, at times, Menzoberranzan was better than Eye of the Beholder.

So, was R.A. Salvatore an influence? I'd say we lived in his world for a time.

E-BOREDOM: With Dungeon Hack having so many randomized dungeons, how did the design process work?

SCOT NOEL: As the title implies, Dungeon Hack was meant to be pure hack 'n slash fun. Players

romped through ever changing dungeons in search of mindless entertainment. It is completely configurable; over four billion different dungeon combinations were possible! This was done through the alteration of monster and trap frequency, wall design, etc. At that point in time, we were really limited in colors. The artists made different sets for walls and floors (Walls A, B, and C, Floors 1, 2, and 3, etc.) designed so that you could mix and match them.

Programming made the randomization happen. New levels were generated out of matchable pieces and varying limited color palettes to create a constantly new look. Gameplay was a matter of testing good intuition against actual play-testing. There is little to no story here, but it should keep you entertained for a few thousand years if you get into the "zone".

GEORGE OLDZIEV

In this interview, George Oldziey describes the experience of working in different established game franchises, collaborating with Robert Rodriguez on his film scores, and the difference of composing music for FMV sequences and gameplay. You can visit his website to listen to samples of his latest work, read his biography, and learn about all the different games and films he has composed music for in the past.

E-BOREDOM: Does music in movies serve a different purpose than music in games?

GEORGE OLDZIEY: I think it serves the same purpose but in different ways. I've always felt that the main function of music in movies and games is to

provide an emotional element that helps tell the story. It shouldn't necessarily be emotional, but in combination with all the other elements it should help provide something intangible that visuals, dialogue and sound cannot do by themselves.

I know that sounds a little cryptic, but whenever I compose for film or games I always go by how I feel when listening to the music with all the other elements combined. It's usually not an intellectual process... It's an emotional one.

E-BOREDOM: The first instrument you learned to play was accordion, but later you decided to switch over to trumpet. Why the switch?

GEORGE OLDZIEY: I didn't really appreciate the sound of the accordion when I was 7 years old. I was very good at it, but not that inspired by it. I took to the sound of the trumpet as soon as I blew into one for the first time (I was about 9). Having studied the accordion did help me in the fact that I already knew how to read rather complicated musical figures when I first took up trumpet. It also gave me rudimentary keyboard skills which was the foundation for my taking up piano later in life.

E-BOREDOM: Did studying the improvisational

aspects of jazz help you with learning music composition?

GEORGE OLDZIEY: I firmly believe that the part of your brain that one uses for musical improvisation is the same for musical composition. In many ways, it's the same process. I tell my students that the composer has the advantage over the improviser in the fact that you can edit your ideas before you commit to them. However, the creative process is very similar.

I'm not sure if studying jazz improvisation helped with classical composition per se, but it definitely helps to establish the mindset where you encourage the flow of new ideas. It also helps me to come up with ideas quickly, like when I'm under a strict deadline.

E-BOREDOM: Before starting work for Origin Systems, did you have any preconceived notions of what video game music sounded like?

GEORGE OLDZIEY: No, not really. As a matter of fact, I was completely computer illiterate until I got the job at Origin. Not sure if I should be telling you that :). Thus, my "gaming" experience was pretty much limited to watching others play them. Composing music for Origin (or any other games for that matter) had less to do with composing good game music as it

was composing good music period within the limitations of the technology.

Those limitations in a way were very inspiring, because a) they provided a framework in which to work, which is very helpful when trying to compose, and b) made it more challenging, and thus much more fun.

E-BOREDOM: Before starting work on composing music for Wing Commander III, did you listen to any of the music from the previous Wing Commander games?

GEORGE OLDZIEY: The only music from prior WC games that I listened to was the few select themes that the producer Chris Roberts wanted me to quote or emulate in Wing Commander 3. You may remember that there is a reference to the old WC 1 theme in a fanfare before the opening credits music for WC3. Also, there was some music from the old games that was used for "running to your ship" that Chris wanted to emulate. Other than that, I was pretty much on my own. I'd have to say that the great Star Wars and Star Trek scores that were out at the time were inspirational for Chris and me as well.

E-BOREDOM: Wing Commander IV is a much

darker game than its predecessors... How did you work on the score to reflect this?

GEORGE OLDZIEY: Chris Roberts likes scores that are on the darker side in general. It was pretty obvious from studying early demos of the game and early cuts of the movies that this was going to be a dark story, so naturally the inspiration for the musical timbres came from that. Since I come from a Polish family, I think I was born with one of those dark Polish musical souls to begin with.

Outside of the obvious choices of orchestrations which emphasize darker timbres, such as low strings, winds and various percussion effects, and the use of harmonies such as minor chords and dissonant clusters, it's difficult to put a finger on it. I was just trying to paint the musical picture that came into my head when reading the script or watching the film. BTW, this was my favorite Wing Commander game, at least in terms of how the music and all the other elements came together.

E-BOREDOM: Wing Commander: Prophecy featured a new nemesis, an organic alien race bent on destruction. Was it challenging composing music to represent this new alien race that wasn't present in the previous two games?

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GEORGE OLDZIEY: The big difference compositionally between Prophecy and the others is in the use of assigning musical elements to characters, moods, or situations. WC 3 and 4, much like Star Wars, was very thematic. In other words, each main character as well as certain locations and psychological conditions had its own theme. In Prophecy, I instead assigned various harmonies and orchestration combinations (choices of instruments) to reflect the same ideas. For instance, whenever you see the aliens in Prophecy, you would hear the same (or very similar) dissonant chord with certain instruments as opposed to a melody that you could immediately say, "Oh, that's what's his name's theme."

One reason for doing this was the new producer's wish to try to have Prophecy look and sound different that the others. At first, I resisted because I wanted more continuity and connection to the music from my previous work. Ultimately, I accepted it as another challenge, which in hindsight turned out pretty well. There are moments like in the scene when Blair reflects on his life after being interrogated by the aliens where I snuck in themes from the other games.

MANDI PAUGH

Mandi Paugh runs The Mega Man Homepage and is known online as the MegaMaster. Aside from writing various fan-fiction novels based on various characters and situations from the video games, she also is an artist in the video game industry and was one of the first graduates from the Digipen Institute of Technology.

Thanks go to Mandi Paugh for agreeing to do the interview. It was conducted via e-mail and she was very prompt in her responses. Her Mega Man Homepage site has lots of reviews, walkthroughs, and fan fiction to feed your Blue Bomber craving.

E-BOREDOM: What was the first Mega Man game you played?

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MANDI PAUGH: The first one I ever played was Mega Man 2 (NES). At the time, I really knew nothing of Mega Man. I just found the play control to be quite good, and the game was a lot of fun. At the time, I was very bad at fighting the bosses. A friend of mine would fight all of the bosses for me after I navigated through the stage to reach them. It worked out pretty well, and together the two of us beat the game that day. I know I saw the final boss then because I thought of him as "this weird alien" at the time, but I don't really remember noticing the ending.

It was later on when I'd bought an NES of my own that I played through MM2 a second time on my own... and this time the ending really hit home for me. After that, I was hooked.

E-BOREDOM: In May, Capcom is coming out with compilations of classic Mega Man games for the Game Boy Advance, PS2, & GameCube. Which is your favorite out of the classic NES Mega Man games (1-8) and which is your favorite out of the classic Game Boy Mega Man games (1-5)?

MANDI PAUGH: Mega Man 3 is my favorite of the classics. Great play control, Rush Jet is actually useful, and it breaks the template of 8 stages and 2 fortresses that later games began following to a fault. For the Game Boy games, it's really a toss-up between Mega

Man IV and Mega Man V. Both of those are really very good.

E-BOREDOM: When the SNES came out, Capcom started a new story in the Mega Man saga with the Mega Man X series. Do you think the new art style and storyline of the Mega Man X games are better than the classic Mega Man games?

MANDI PAUGH: The art style of Mega Man X1 was much better in most respects than Mega Man 7, which was made at around the same time. The art has been up and down since then, but overall the X series artwork usually succeeds in being superior.

On the other hand, the storyline has begun to suffer. The story for the first X game wasn't that bad, but the more X series games they make, the more they butcher the plot and characters. I definitely prefer the original series plotline.

E-BOREDOM: What is your favorite game in the Mega Man X series (1-7)?

MANDI PAUGH: That's a tough call. I enjoy aspects of certain X games, but don't really have an overall favorite. Probably, I would have to say Mega

Man X1. It's overall a very high-quality game, even though it lacks some of the nifty features from later X games. On the other hand, while I enjoyed the duck and the flying Falcon armor and Zero's sabre and other unique moves in later X games, it seems that the X games get more irritating to play with each successive title. It's hard to nominate any of them as a favorite even though I've liked parts of them.

E-BOREDOM: What is the worst Mega Man game that you've played?

MANDI PAUGH: That's also a tough call. Contenders would be most anything not made by Capcom. The Rockman & Forte game for the Wonderswan, for example, or the Game Gear game, or the original PC games (the two that weren't ports).

If we were to limit it to Capcom, I guess I'd have to say Mega Man X6... Shocker, I know! The game really is more irritating than fun, even though it does have some positive features. Another possibility would be Mega Man II for the Game Boy... It wasn't a bad game, but it wasn't one of Capcom's better efforts either.

E-BOREDOM: You have written a lot of Mega Man fan fiction novels over the years... What was the first

Mega Man novel you wrote and what is your favorite Mega Man novel you've written?

MANDI PAUGH: My first Mega Man book was actually the Mega Man 3 novelization. That one is really a basis for much of what takes place in later books. I was very interested in the plot for Mega Man 3 even before I'd played it. I loved the ending to Mega Man 2, but there was already a novelization written for it. I felt at the time that Mega Man 3 had a story that I needed to tell. Looking back on it, I'm not very happy with the writing style of the book. Hey, it was done a long time ago.

My favorite changes as I write more books. Seriously. I tend to like my more recent works more than the older ones.

E-BOREDOM: Mega Man has been in quite a few animated shows! He was a character in Captain N: The Game Master, starred in the American Mega Man cartoon series, and now is a series on the Mega Man NT Warrior based on the GBA games. Which of these is your favorite portrayal of Mega Man and why?

MANDI PAUGH: None of them. Heh. Overall, the EXE shows are probably the best cartoons out of the group (at least they are the most accurate to the

games), but that isn't the same Mega Man. Then again, I guess you really can't call the Mega Shows Mega Man or the Captain N shows Mega Man the "same" Mega Man either.

E-BOREDOM: Which is your favorite and least favorite Mega Man boss? Which boss had the most useful weapon and the least useful weapon?

MANDI PAUGH: I don't really have a favorite boss, although if Bass counts, he would probably be on top of the list because he's so much fun to write. Least favorite would be anything that is too unfair or unforgiving, which includes most of the final bosses in most of the games... For Robot Masters, that would probably be Burner Man.

My favorite weapon could probably be said to be the Thunder Beam. It's big, it's powerful, and it has a really nifty animation in Mega Man 1 where it originated. If I ever need Mega Man to be in a lot of trouble ,the first Robot Master I tend to grab from the bin is Elec Man and his trusty Thunder Beam. Being hit by a triangle of ice just somehow doesn't seem as deadly as being fried to a crisp.

Least useful weapon... Well, there are several that are very useless, but I would probably have to give this one to the Sentsuizan (Zero's swan dive in Mega Man X6). They should have named that one

"Suicide" because that's what it is more often than not.

E-BOREDOM: What makes Bass such a fun character to write?

MANDI PAUGH: He's so off-the-wall. I mean, here's a guy who's obsessed with only one thing, and that's taking down Mega Man... Thereby proving he's the strongest robot in the world. He says and does the funniest things. Now mind you, just because I find him to be amusing doesn't mean he's comic relief. He's a serious character who can be a real threat to Mega Man, which for me just adds to the fun.

E-BOREDOM: You went to DigiPen to study game design and programming for college and worked on several group game projects. Which of these was the most fun to work on and which was the most frustrating?

MANDI PAUGH: Oh, I enjoyed most everything we did. Our Zelda clone was our most popular, I think, although we never got further with it than a single level. The Balloon game was much more complete. Probably the most time-consuming for me was our

SNES game, because we were trying to squeeze every last bit of space out of the tile RAM, and that meant doing all sorts of crazy things with the tiles like using the skeleton's elbow joint for his knee!

E-BOREDOM: Are there any other video game or computer game series that you have played that you have enjoyed as much as the Mega Man series?

MANDI PAUGH: I could fill pages with this answer. Sonic (first four Genesis games; I didn't enjoy most of the rest), Zelda, Mario (bits and pieces here and there), WarCraft/StarCraft, King's Quest, etc...

E-BOREDOM: You mentioned one of the series you have enjoyed playing is the King's Quest series... Which game in the series did you enjoy the most and what was your favorite puzzle that you had to solve?

MANDI PAUGH: My favorite I'd probably have to say King's Quest IV because that was the first one that I'd played. I later went back and played the first three with a friend, and enjoyed those as well. V and VI weren't bad either, but I never did play VII. My computer couldn't handle it at the time, and later I never got around to it.

I'm not sure I have a favorite puzzle since I enjoyed just exploring and finding stuff. One of the more amusing ones would have to be crumbling the cookie into the porridge to turn the wizard into a cat. You'd think a wizard would have caught onto that, heh. The cat turns up again in V, which is a nice continuity.

Quest For Glory was a lot of fun too, though I got in so late on the series that I only played the remake rather than the original. Very early on, I figured out how to make a fighter/mage/thief character in that game... Who says you can't have it all?

JEREMY SOULE

Jeremy Soule started composing video game music for The Secret of Evermore on the SNES. He later moved onto such acclaimed titles as Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, Icewind Dale, and Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance.

E-BOREDOM: What was the first video game that really impressed you?

JEREMY SOULE: I really enjoyed this game called Solaris on the 2600 because it squeezed so much capability out of the machine at a time when everyone had pretty much abandoned Atari. I feel that we always have to push the envelope in terms of technology and learning. There's no perfect way to achieve perfection.

It takes a lot of hard work to get noticed in our business. I just try to enjoy each composition as I create it. I think the same is true for other game developers.

The best games were fun for their teams to make. I think Mr. Miyamoto has fun doing what he does. I can't imagine where games would be without him. The Legend of Zelda really blew me away. I also remember my first experiences with Squaresoft. However, as a young adult, I loved Total Annihilation... I'll even admit I shut off the music. Chris Taylor made one of the greatest RTS titles of all time. I was happy to be a part of the team. I will say that the orchestra had fun performing the score. You can hear that in the recordings!

E-BOREDOM: What was the first video game you played with decent music?

JEREMY SOULE: I would have to say that Final Fantasy was great. Nobuo Uematsu is one of the greatest composers in games today. The stuff from Capcom and Konami really stood out in the early days was well. Anyone remember Bionic Commando?

E-BOREDOM: Do you have a favorite instrument to play?

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JEREMY SOULE: By far, my favorite instrument is the piano. I don't care if it is a $500 piano or a $100,000 piano. I always enjoy playing whenever I have the chance.

E-BOREDOM: One of the first games you composed music for was Squaresoft's Secret of Evermore. What was it like composing music for the SNES?

JEREMY SOULE: It was a great learning experience. I was a 19-year-old kid when I composed that score. Little did I know that that score would haunt me for 10 years! HAHA! I will say that the greatest difficulty in working with the SNES was the archaic tools. I didn't have the Sony system like my counterparts in Japan. I worked with a cranky third party toolset. The problems I had there were compounded by the fact that I had limited experience as a game composer at that time.

I was grateful to have my start at such a prestigious company, though. I guess Squaresoft saw something in my talent even at that early stage of my composing life.

E-BOREDOM: What about video game music makes it different to compose for than film music?

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JEREMY SOULE: I think video game music is a real challenge in that there's often interactive music technology that has to be creatively addressed. Film tends to be more linear and more predictable from a compositional standpoint. If you know in advance that a piece has to branch five different ways at any moment, it means that you have more complexity to manage. For the most part, a film will require great storytelling ability but it doesn't require the composer to think in the same ways.

E-BOREDOM: Is composing done early or late in the production process?

JEREMY SOULE: Games are rarely anywhere near finished when I begin composition. I usually have to rely on my experience to get the music into proper form when the development process finally does come together. It is always rewarding to work with great people though. So many of the people I work with have as much of an understanding of the process as I do. I work with some of the best developers in the world. I'm very lucky.

E-BOREDOM: With computers becoming more and more important in music composition, I was

wondering if you composed music on the computer or if you write out music by hand?

JEREMY SOULE: Unless one has the track record of John Williams, computers are absolutely critical in the process of making music. I read an interview by a young composer that recently took over a film from a composer about twice his age. The surprising thing to me was that neither composer uses MIDI. Without MIDI, you can't create sophisticated synth mockups. Synth mockups empower directors.

Directors who have started to work with game composers are finding out just how great it is to not have wait for a studio recording date to hear a scene. Game composers have used MIDI for years, so I think our industry is just spoiled. It is amazing that computers are not the brass standard in other media.

E-BOREDOM: For video games, how do sound engineers work with the music composers so the sound effects and the music score work well together?

JEREMY SOULE: I'm often paired up with Frank Bry, one of the best sound designers in the business. He knows what I'm going to do before I do it, and the same is true for me. We're a great team. I will also say

that Alistair Hirst is right up there. He has a real sense of space and timing and he's a composer as well which helps. Nick Laviers, my music supervisor on Harry Potter, always provides the most detail of anyone I work with. He has a universal picture for the entire franchise so I rely on him to provide me with the right footing for each composition. Somehow, the best audio in games always can be linked to a great audio director.

E-BOREDOM: In Japan, video game music is so popular that it gets performed by live orchestras for concerts as well as concept albums. Why do you think video game music is not as popular in the US?

JEREMY SOULE: Game music is very popular here in the US! There are just some hang-ups with the "gate keepers" concerning certain live venues and record labels. I think we will see progress in terms of getting the music of games in to more accessible venues and formats. There's nothing like great music. I think the composers of video games are working every bit as hard as their film and television counterparts. I couldn't be happier with the direction of the industry. Everywhere you turn, you now here of an orchestra being used for a game score.

I know that I had arrived as a composer when two thousand people heard my music close the first half of a sell-out concert intended to honor the LA Master

Chorale (LAMC) and Frank Gehry, the designer of the Disney Concert Hall. It was during this time that I spoke with Maestro Grant Gershon about Nobuo Uematsu. Exactly 11 months later, Grant's choir the LAMC ultimately performed along with the LA Philharmonic in a smash-hit concert of Nobuo Uematsu's Final Fantasy music this past May. I guess it's just a matter of time before game music reaches the notoriety here in the US that it enjoys in Japan.

E-BOREDOM: How do you feel about the many video-game remixes of music that fans do online? If someone wanted to learn how to compose music, what path would you recommend?

JEREMY SOULE: I fully endorse music experimentation in the form of remixes. It's a great way to learn the craft. I would say that private studies with a piano teacher and eventually a composition teacher is a good way to go. I always recommend that people study the composers they love and stick with it.

E-BOREDOM: Are there any film composers or video-game composers that have influenced your work?

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JEREMY SOULE: Honestly, I tend to like mainstream composers just as much as the next person. Why not? These guys have the magic. Nobuo Uematsu, John Williams, and Danny Elfman are among my personal favorites. I also love the composition and technical skills of Hans Zimmer.

I would have to say that my friend Bill Brown is doing some exceptional work. Michael Giacchino is also fantastic! He's been called the John Williams of the games business. Not a bad distinction even though he'd rib me for saying it.

E-BOREDOM: What has been the most challenging or fun game you have had to compose for?

JEREMY SOULE: I can't say that there's been a game that hasn't been challenging. Every game has required special care. I always try to do the best with what I have. I can say that many, many composers learn that music isn't always fun to compose. However, I feel that my passion carries me during those tough days. Meanwhile, it's hard just to keep up with things like email when you know you have to produce 35,000 notes by the end of the week. Composing is a very demanding job, but I feel like I have one of the best jobs in the world.

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E-BOREDOM: What kind of music do you listen to?

JEREMY SOULE: I listen to all kinds of music. I write a lot of orchestral music but I listen to everything from Tool to Fluke or even vintage underground bands like Skinny Puppy. However, I'm always open to the "next big thing". You have to be. Yes, I can tell you more than you want to know about the music production behind Britney Spears or Justin Timberlake. I know the settings, the timings and the arranging. I also can tell you things about how Sean Murphy (a renowned engineer) approaches a John Williams mix. I've worked for clients as diverse as MTV and LucasArts. They both have demanding high standards, but they also require that one has a feel for their musical world.

E-BOREDOM: What games are you composing music for now?

JEREMY SOULE: I just finished music for the video game Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. I have a number of projects in progress, but confidentiality is keeping me mum. However, our schedule is just as busy as last year. We're hoping to take a break at some point. Don't know when that will be though.

TREY STOKES

While most Star Wars fan films end up being endless series of lightsaber battles, a select few end up being hilarious jabs at the Star Wars universe. One of these is Pink Five, the award-winning short film by Trey Stokes. Looking at the assault on the Death Star from Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope from the point of view of a Valley Girl pilot, it manages to be funny while displaying a mastery of special effects. Of course, not everyone has the professional film-making experience of Stokes, who worked on special effects for Starship Troopers and The Abyss. You can visit The Truly Dangerous Company to download Pink Five, read his bio, and purchase T-Shirts.

Stokers reveals similarities between puppetry and animating CG characters, the inspiration for Pink Five, and his thoughts on some of his favorite Star Wars fan films.

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E-BOREDOM: What introduced you to puppetry?

TREY STOKES: That early exposure to the Muppets was certainly a key moment, it got me interested in doing puppetry. I did do some bunraku-style work on stage in my theatre days... It's a very interesting style to work in.

There's this unspoken agreement with the audience: "I'm right here on stage and you can see me working this puppet, but we'll just pretend you can't, OK?" That sort of "contract" with the audience can work in films and video, too - if you can get the audience to accept the show on its own terms, that really helps.

E-BOREDOM: How is working on puppetry similar to animating CG characters?

TREY STOKES: Well, in the end it's about the character and getting the performance. Puppets are limited. They just do a few specific things and you have to work within those limitations to bring life to the character. In their way, CG characters are limited as well. You have to find the little details that make them seem alive.

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E-BOREDOM: Are puppets easier to work with than actors?

TREY STOKES: I suppose puppets are harder just by their nature. It takes a lot of time to deal with the technical concerns: hiding the puppeteer, figuring out how to do some simple action like walking or picking up a prop, and so on. Actors generally come to the set ready to walk and pick up things all by themselves... At least, most of them do.

E-BOREDOM: Which was the first Star Wars movie you saw?

TREY STOKES: Star Wars. I guess nowadays we're supposed to to call it A New Hope or Episode Four, but it was just called Star Wars back then. That's what I still call it. It was a turning point in my life, that movie. It made me decide that I wanted to work in the movie business. For a high school kid in Maryland, this was a pretty farfetched concept.

E-BOREDOM: Got a favorite from what's been released of the Prequel Trilogy?

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TREY STOKES: I enjoyed Attack of the Clones much more than Phantom Menace, though that's not saying a lot. I've only seen Phantom Menace once. Shows you how much I liked that one, I guess.

E-BOREDOM: When you went to USC to study filmmaking, which classes were the most useful to you?

TREY STOKES: In retrospect, the most useful classes were the ones where we just sat and watched movies and analyzed them. That knowledge of film history, the styles and genres and so on. I still use that info to this day. By contrast, in the technical classes I generally learned just enough to squeak by then pretty much forgot everything as soon as the class was over.

E-BOREDOM: Can you remember the first Star Wars fan film you watched?

TREY STOKES: I saw Troops when I was working on, of all things, Starship Troopers at Tippett Studio. Phil Tippett worked for ILM before he started his own company: he animated the Tauntauns, Imperial Walk-

ers, and so on. At Tippett, people would bring in funny videos and we'd watch them before dailies. Sometimes, they'd be little in-house videos sent over from ILM. At first, I just assumed Troops was one of those.

I didn't realize it had become possible to do effects like that without the resources of a big FX company.Years later when I ended up making Pink Five, it was a bit of an homage to Troops in that P5 was another story you "didn't get to see" from the original film.

E-BOREDOM: What were the influences behind Pink Five?

TREY STOKES: Pink Five was just an idea I came up with when I had access to a blue screen and a fighter uniform. I wasn't thinking "I'll make a fan film" because I wasn't aware of the term. It was more like "Hmmm, what can I do in a cockpit?" Being such a Star Wars fan, the Battle of Yavin was an obvious choice.

The Valley Girl part came from thinking that Luke Skywalker is such a Valley Dude in that first movie. He seems like he just stepped off Van Nuys Blvd. that I wondered where the Star Wars Valley Girls were. They had to be there somewhere. I knew

Amy could do a great job with that sort of character, so there you go.

E-BOREDOM: Were the special effects the hardest thing about making Pink Five?

TREY STOKES: Directing the shoot was the easy part. There are only three angles in the piece, and Amy and I knocked it out in about three hours. It was the post-production that was hard. Pink Five was really just something I did as a test, I wasn't ever going to show it to anyone.

I wanted to practice keying and compositing and so on... All that took a long time since I was learning as I went. Fitting all the sound effects in there without stepping on the monologue and trying to tell the rest of the story outside those little windows, that was tricky. It definitely couldn't have been made without all the nifty digital tools we have now. Thank you, Adobe.

E-BOREDOM: Did winning the George Lucas Selects award from the 2003 Star Wars Fan Film Festival inspire you to work on the sequel?

TREY STOKES: Actually, it was the opposite. The award pretty much killed the idea of a sequel for a

while. I was already thinking about sequels, and had a rough idea of what I would do if I ever made them. But then we won the Grand Prize, and so we were thinking, "Well, we made this goofy little film in a couple of weeks and won this great prize. We can't possibly top that, so let's not try, it'll just ruin it."

We were prepared to sit this year out, and then I got an email from one of the contest organizers at Lucasfilm saying "So, you're submitting something again this year, right? Right? It'd be great if you would." And so, literally at the last minute, we decided to do it.

E-BOREDOM: Did you have a different goal when making Pink Five Strikes Back?

TREY STOKES: I just wanted to open it up more - certainly we might have gotten away with five more minutes of Amy in a chair, but that wouldn't have been very interesting. Easier, perhaps, but not as interesting. I wanted to tell a more elaborate story. Actually, I had to since Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back has the main characters spread all over the galaxy.

Fitting Stacey into such a sprawling story meant we had to do a longer, more complex piece. There wasn't just a self-contained section like the Death Star battle from the first one. So the sequel has fewer jokes

per minute than the original, but it's more of an actual movie instead of a comedy sketch.

E-BOREDOM: Got any favorite Star Wars Fan Films?

TREY STOKES: Troops is the funniest. George Lucas in Love is the best made in terms of filmmaking skill, and a lot of them have great visual effects. It's not out yet, but the scope of Revelations looks incredible.

E-BOREDOM: Do you ever wish that "fan-fiction films" could be allowed in the Star Wars Fan Film Festival?

TREY STOKES: Well, it's just the intricacies of the copyright laws at work there. Lucasfilm has a lot of well-paid lawyers figuring out what they should or shouldn't allow, and they have their reasons for doing it that way. I think it's great that Lucas supports fan films at all when a lot of other content creators don't. And while they don't give prizes to "serious" fan films, they don't suppress them either. They're being kinder than other corporate entities have been.

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E-BOREDOM: Are you working on Return of Pink Five now?

TREY STOKES: We were sort of hoping people would hate Pink Five Strikes Back so we wouldn't have to make a third one. But then we went and won Audience Choice with it, so there went that plan. Geeze, talk about pressure.

In the meantime, we're still working on our other short films. Pink Five Strikes Back was big enough that we realized we were probably ready to make a jump to a feature-length project, so we're working on some ideas for that.

BILL TROTTER

In this interview, PC Gamer Desktop General columnist Bill Trotter reveals one of the worst war games he has ever played, his most satisfying war gaming experience, and the challenges of writing fiction and nonfiction books. You can visit his official website to learn about the various books he has written, discover information about vintage classical music records, and unearth random personal tidbits.

E-BOREDOM: Can you remember the first tabletop war game and the first computer war game you played?

BILL TROTTER: Like most of my friends in elemen-

tary school, I had a "toy soldier" collection. by combining our personal shoe boxes of Dinky Toys and plastic dime-store infantrymen ("100 Figures for $2.99! Realistic Poses! Includes one spring-loaded cannon and plastic ammunition!"), we could field a diverse and colorful "multi-national" brigade of 500-odd grunts and 50 armored vehicles and cannon.

I was fortunate enough to live in big rambling house in one of the better residential sections of Charlotte, North Carolina. My grandfather, who really WAS a colonel and after whom I early-on acquired the nickname "The Little Colonel" which eventually morphed into the "Colonel Trotter" moniker in PC Gamer, had built us a sandbox that to our eyes seemed huge. Allowing for nostalgia-creep, I guess it was really about fifteen feet on each side. This made for a damn fine battlefield. We often constructed elaborate trench lines, bunkers (discarded popsicle sticks were the construction material of choice), bridges, barricades, airfields, and revetments for the artillery.

So I guess "tabletop" games, in the broadest sense of the word, were a regular and much loved part of my childhood. Just about the time we all hit adolescence and began aging out of the toy soldiers, I conned my folks into giving me one of those fantastic carbide-gas "Big Bang" cannon. You can still buy them, but the prices are grotesque. Mom and Dad paid about $12 for my howitzer along with enough bags of chemical ammunition to re-fight the first day of Verdun; nowa-

days, the same piece of ironmongery will set you back almost $200!

Most of the toy soldier collection ended up being incinerated in summer-night holocausts. We quickly discovered that if you soaked a pine cone in charcoal lighter and fired it out of a double-charged Big Bang, it made one hell of a tracer round... The carbide gas ignition was just hot enough to touch off the lighter fluid. We would spend the afternoon entrenching our targets (digging in Dixie cups full of gasoline to simulate ammo dumps) and then spend a gleeful hour or two bombarding the sandbox with incendiary pine cones. Dangerous? You're dang skippy it was! If our parents had caught on to what we were actually doing, they would have been quite properly appalled. Man, it was great fun to lob a flaming cone into one of those "enemy fuel dumps"!

The innocent days of "playing soldier" gave way to the confusions and delights of adolescence and the toy soldier collections. Or at least, what was left of them after our bombardments that lay forgotten in the attics. Not until my 16th year did I take up a real tabletop wargame: Avalon-Hill's Gettysburg. My experiences thereafter were similar to those of most middle-aged wargamers: collected all the A-H classics, subscribed to Strategy and Tactics magazine, and I tried my hand at designing custom games usually using the map boards from boxed commercial games and hundreds of hand-cut unit counters.

I stared in awe at "monster games" like War in the East, which I purchased but never actually played to conclusion one single time. My first wife, like so many Spousal Units, resented the time I spent with my war-gaming beer swilling pals. Sometimes she "forgot" to close the study door, just so the cat could sneak in and wipe out a Russian Front game that had taken days to set up. Trust me, nothing destroys a Panzer division more cruelly than kitty-saliva!

After Mrs. Trotter Version 1.0 and I parted company, I survived many a sodden self-pitying horny weekend by playing solitaire versions of old tabletop favorites. I did not play my first computer wargame until I was hired as a reviewer by PC Entertainment (the original incarnation of what became PC Gamer) in the autumn of 1987. You have to be of a certain advanced age, I guess, to remember the thrill of discovery that came when you first glimpsed the potential of electronic gaming. No more cardboard counters! No more cumbersome pads to record hits and damage! No more arguments over die-rolls and CRT results! No more need to lock the door against marauding pussy cats!

As it happened, two of the first games I was assigned to review happened to be two of the all-time classics: Empire and Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Those two titles just sucked me in, giving me my first experience of true "Game-Lock": an alternate state of consciousness with which I would become all-

too-familiar. Empire and later Empire Deluxe stayed on my hard drive for about 12 years. If I had the time, I'd download the new Windows-compatible version and would be playing it still. I'm still pissed off at Koei for abandoning the PC platform totally!

E-BOREDOM: Which kind of war game do you prefer: turn-based or RTS?

BILL TROTTER: Turn-based, no question. I like to contemplate my strategy without artificial time-constraints, and I generally prefer solitaire play against a good AI to on-line play against human opponents. Partly, I'm just a private anti-social bookworm who doesn't tolerate easily the sort of assholes one runs into from time to time in real-time online games.

I like to play at times of my own choosing. Indeed, I have so little disposable free time to start with that it's difficult to stay current with any of the massive multi-player epics, even if I've found a congenial group to play with. I despised the whole "click-fest" phase of real-time gaming and still do! Fortunately, that style of game design has pretty much vanished. It has been replaced by adjustable speeds of real-time or nice combinations of real-time and leisurely contemplation like in Combat Mission.

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E-BOREDOM: Out of all the Desktop General columns you wrote for PC Gamer, can you think of one you liked the most and one you liked the least?

BILL TROTTER: The one I liked the least was the one in which my glib analysis of the cause of the American defeat on Corregidor was slapped down harshly by a 78-year-old Marine who had actually fought there, stood next to his commanding officer, and wept when the American flag was hauled down and the white one raised. He also survived four-and-a-half years of hell in a Japanese POW camp. That taught me that sometimes saying "it's only a game" just doesn't cut it. The only honorable thing to do, I felt, was to reprint his letter verbatim, offer my apologies, and ask all my readers to join me in remembering and honoring the men who sacrificed their youth and health so that smart-ass game reviewers would have the freedom to spout off in print.

On the positive side, I am most proud of the columns in which I gave exposure to worthy struggling independent developers who didn't have enough marketing money to buy an ad in a high school year book. If I discovered someone like that who was doing good creative work, I gave them worldwide exposure. Sometimes, I think, I helped some really fine game developers become successful. I honestly believed that was a part of my responsibilities. I still do.

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E-BOREDOM: What's the worst game you had to review?

BILL TROTTER: Jesus, there's so much competition! Of the games I've reviewed in the last three years, however, Korea: The Forgotten Conflict stands out as a virtual paradigm of abysmal dreck. It's one of the few games I can honestly say I "hated". I was forced to spend quite a few hours with this Czech-designed farrago and I resented every goddamn minute of it. Every time I booted up the game, I felt the same enthusiasm and anticipation I normally associate with root canal appointments. Interface, manual, mission design: all were crapulous beyond endurance. As for the team of "elite" warriors you're in charge of... Well, let's see... There's the commander, a man's man named Ranger Ben Goodlover (I swear I'm not making that up!) who's described as being "tall and respectful" (whatever that means). He's such a terrific marksman that he can "kill enemies within a second", which is pretty much what firearms are designed to DO, isn't it, whether the guy pulling the trigger is a genius or a cretin.

You also get a female "elite warrior" (despite the fact that there were NO women in combat in Korea and, as far as I know, there still aren't any in the Special Forces) whose nick-name is "Honey Bear". Her in-game dialogue consists mainly of sophomoric prick-

teasing innuendoes except when she's called upon to do her duties as the team medic, in which case she giggles, simpers, and shouts "Whoopee!" when one of her comrades takes a hit. It's as if her day would not be complete without the chance to treat a few sucking chest wounds!

There's also the Token Negro who shucks-and-jives his way through a mission with snappy come-backs like "Ah be dere in a New-Yawk minute, suh!" ("Mmm, dat sho am good waddy-melon, boss-man! Yowsir, yowsir!"). Not to be left undone, there's a Token Oriental named Kato (I'll bet those Czech designers thought that one was a real thigh-slapper), and an American Indian named "Night Hawk", who is described thusly in the manual: "many of his comrades avoid his company, maybe because of his habits." No further information is given. Dear God, make it stop!

You may be sure I observed Night Hawk very closely to learn exactly what those "habits" might be. However, I never caught him nibbling his boogers or sniffing the armpits of dead Koreans.

Not only were the game characters risible when not downright offensive, but the interface was impenetrable and the level of difficulty egregiously impossible (lose one team mate and it's "Mission Failed"). Aside from the scenery, the whole steaming pile of offal had nothing whatever to do with the actual Korean War.

Sometimes a reviewer is delighted to receive a game so unashamedly crass and worthless (Celebrity Mud-Wrestling or Swamp Buggy Fever!) that you can

abandon any pretense at objectivity and just take all the cheap shots you want. However, it took me about 30 hours to discover how abominable Korea: The Forgotten Conflict truly was and it infuriated me to waste that much time on it!

FEARGUS URQUHART

While most CRPGs offer a fantasy setting, both Fallout games offered something different: a post-apocalyptic setting that had brilliant flashes of dark humor throughout. Feargus Urquhart was a designer for the second game in the series and produced such classics as Baldur's Gate, Icewind Dale, and Neverwinter Nights. Urquhart now works at Obsidian Entertainment and is working on Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords.

In this interview, Urquhart recalls some of his favorite CRPGs from the 1980s, points out the challenges in ensuring that Icewind Dale offered a different enough playing experience from Baldur's Gate, and reveals gameplay differences between console RPGs and CRPGs.

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E-BOREDOM: Can you remember the first tabletop RPG and the first CRPG you played?

FEARGUS URQUHART: The first table top RPG that I played was Basic D&D in 7th grade (1982 or 1983). By 1984 or so, I was then playing AD&D (1st Edition). The first CRPG that I played was Temple of Apshai by Epyx, I think. It was quite a while ago and some of those really early games blend into one another.

I generally found CRPGs and PnP RPGs to be immersive in different ways. I could lose hours to a pen and paper RPG because of the way you could just be hanging round with your friends and puzzle-solving... I wasn't as into the whole playing of a certain role, but more of the idea that it was my friends and I doing something together in another world. CRPGs could also take me away for days at a time. It seems that I played Ultima IV, The Bard's Tale and Wizard's Crown for so many hours after school that I don't really know what else I did.

E-BOREDOM: How is the gameplay for RPGs on consoles different than when you play on a computer?

FEARGUS URQUHART: I think it depends on what

you are looking for in a game. Some people find fast action more immersive, while others find a more tactical approach to gameplay to be their thing. So, I think the answer is that it really depends on the game: its execution and the gameplayer himself as to whether a game is more immersive than another.

As for gameplay, I'll go with the easy answer here in that in console RPGs you generally control the character directly. On a PC, you often click the mouse and the character goes where you click. It seems minor in some ways, but it changes a lot of how you design the game and what expectations people have.

An example here is that in direct control, players expect more that when they press the Attack button that they will swing or fire their weapon right away and if there is an enemy in front of them or in their line of fire then they will hit them. With non-direct control, there is more an expectation that the character will move to where they can attack the enemy, either running up to them or moving to where they have a shot and that when the attack occurs and when it is successful is dependent more on the game system, i.e. rolling of dice. Now those distinctions are not so true with KOTOR and KOTOR 2. Maybe this is why both console and PC players loved it.

E-BOREDOM: What was the inspiration for Interplay developing The Bard's Tale Construction Set, one of the first RPG editors available?

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FEARGUS URQUHART: If I remember right, I think the idea came form the Adventure Construction Set and a feeling of why don't we do that with one of the dungeon view RPGs. I think it was a great idea, but possibly a little bit before it's time. There were a number of people that were swapping scenarios on BBSs, but the community was never that large.

E-BOREDOM: Out of the CRPGs included in The Ultimate RPG Archives, which were your favorites? How different was the gameplay in older CRPGs?

FEARGUS URQUHART: Wow, that's an easy and hard question all at once. So many of my favorite RPGs were in that box that it's hard to pick just one of them, so I won't. I would have to say that I put the most time into Bard's Tale I, Wasteland, Ultima Underworld I and Wizardry VII (Wizardry Gold). Each of those are my favorites for different reasons, so I'm not going to pick between them.

As for the difference in gameplay, I think a lot of it has to do with the evolution of players. The game needs to be easy to play. Many of those old games required you to map your own areas and track a lot of information yourself! Pretty much every modern

CRPG does all the mapping and saving information for you.

I think one of the major areas where they differ, and I'm not sure if this is for the best, is that much of the newer RPGs are much more directed like adventure games while past CRPGs allowed more roaming around. I hesitate to say that recent RPGs are linear while older RPGs are non-linear. I suppose I would say that the older RPGs seem to have a more complete world or sandbox that the player played around in, while many more recent RPGs just provide shards of the world.

E-BOREDOM: How much of an influence was Wasteland on Fallout?

FEARGUS URQUHART: Well, I think Brian Fargo always wanted to do another post-apocalyptic RPG, but EA owned the rights and Interplay was no longer a developer. Plus, doing games in that genre attracts most game developers. It gives you the feeling of the old west but a lot more lethal. It creates a lot more tension in that there are things that are a hell of a lot more dangerous than you out there and you have to respect the wasteland.

As for how much of direct influence, the guys thought about it, but moreso they wanted to make their own game in that world. Plus, they came up with

a future 1950s twist that really brought the look and feel of the world together.

E-BOREDOM: What was done to ensure that Baldur's Gate was different from other CRPGs at the time?

FEARGUS URQUHART: I think the ideas for the game at the beginning is what made it feel different in the end. Direct X was a huge new thing. The programmers at Bioware felt they could create these huge scrolling maps that were no longer tiled. Doing that made every pixel unique and created a world that felt much more real. Using the Forgotten Realms setting allowed the designers to focus more on the gameplay and story of the game since the history and descriptions were already created for them. All of this probably helped them make a game that was more immersive.

E-BOREDOM: How tricky was it to differentiate the Icewind Dale series from the Baldur's Gate series?

FEARGUS URQUHART: That was probably one of the scariest things we did on that project. We really didn't want people to feel they were just

playing BG again but in the snow. In the end, I think we were able to differentiate it quite a bit, but we had to think about it at every turn. We changed a lot of things in the game just so the feel different than BG.

However, I think the premise itself gave the game a very different feeling. Having the player create their whole party at the start of the game without their being a key figure started the game on a completely different footing. Plus, we focused a lot more on combat and items, so that players felt their characters were constantly growing.

E-BOREDOM: Did the unique setting for Planescape: Torment offer some freedom for the designers?

FEARGUS URQUHART: The biggest freedom was that the Planescape game setting was built upon the premise that thoughts could effect reality. This allowed the designers to explore a lot of ideas that were based on thoughts and emotions. It also helped that everyone felt that the world of Planescape was a more of an adult world. Things that might have been frowned upon in the Forgotten Realms was allowed to be in Planescape.

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E-BOREDOM: Was it hard for Bioware to make the switch from designing games in 2D to 3D?

FEARGUS URQUHART: I think the design of 3D games is fairly similar, however the changes in the creation of the artwork seemed to have ramifications through out the projects. We, while at Black Isle, found that on our own 3D projects like TORN and FR6/BG3 and now on KOTOR2 that creating 3D artwork takes longer and is much more exacting. Having said that, I do think it took the designers a while to become at home in a 3D editor vs. the 2D editors.

However, most of the 3D RPGs that have been created are still fairly 2D. This is because the ground is often on a single plane - there are few if any instances where things can walk over other things, like an freeway overpass. There have been RPGs that have done this like Morrowind. I would expect that the learning curve for those designers was higher than the designers who have worked on most of the Bioware, Black Isle and Obsidian games.

E-BOREDOM: What led Black Isle and Bioware to select such great composers for their RPGs?

FEARGUS URQUHART: I would have to say that

the drive for all of the Black Isle and Bioware products that were published by Interplay to have great composers was due to in part to Charles Deenen, Interplay's Audio Director. He pounded into me and most of the other producers at Interplay while we were coming up in the ranks how important sound effects and music were. Since he created an atmosphere where it was acceptable to be picky about audio, we were able to spend more time, do some experimentation on the audio, and also get the audio budgets we needed to really make the games great. I think this was all initially reinforced by the success of Fallout and how many people complimented the score.

E-BOREDOM: With your current work on KOTOR2, I was wondering what advantages does a sci-fi setting for a RPG offer over a fantasy setting?

FEARGUS URQUHART: Blasters and Droids! :) Sci-Fi games can feel big because you can send the player to entirely different planets instead of just another part of the same world. You can have a bunch of different races that the player can interact with and for some reason everyone understand everyone else even though they aren't speaking the same language... Incidentally, this really adds to the atmosphere.

Plus you can have cities with ships flying around is

no problem, the atmospheric sound of droids in the background, light saber duels, the jump to light speed, etc.. As it turns out, there are some things that you can do in sci-fi that are much harder to do fantasy, because you have to explain them to people. Most people know what a jump to light speed is, but when you say you are teleporting someone, they look at you strangely.

MATT VANCIL

It's so refreshing to see Matt Vancil's The Gamers, a short film that accurately captures the goofy camaraderie of a group of Dungeons & Dragons gamers while lampooning the fantasy genre in general. Now available on DVD with a decent collection of special features, it's worth checking out if you're a fantasy fan.

Although he's currently at work on a feature-length sequel entitled The Gamers: Second Edition, Vancil was kind enough to give us an interview covering his initial D&D experiences, troubles he faced while shooting a certain scene for The Gamers, and his inspiration for writing The Gamers in the first place.

E-BOREDOM: Remember anything about the first time you played D&D?

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MATT VANCIL: The first time I played straight D&D was in college. I've been roleplaying since middle school, and have always been up on the rules for D&D. The thing was, until college I never had a gaming group that could afford to set time aside for gaming, so we grabbed it in chunks whenever we could: at lunch, after school waiting for the bus, and between classes.

Those five- to ten-minute sessions didn't really allow for much setup (books, dice, extensive notes), so I developed a diceless and pageless gaming system that allowed for rapid interaction. I have yet to really let go of that. As one of my gaming buddies says, I would game without rules or dice if I could get away with it.

E-BOREDOM: Ever try being a Dungeon Master?

MATT VANCIL: I actually prefer to play as the DM. I also prefer running my own campaigns in my own system. I have run campaigns for over two years with a phenomenal cast of rotating characters who help sculpt the world into a living breathing reality. In some sessions, the character interaction was so natural and so deep that we never rolled dice, never got into combat, and yet had groundbreaking sessions as far as story development went.

I hate power gamers and I don't allow power gaming in my campaigns. It's one of the bonuses of being the writer of the rules. That and maintaining the right to change to rules on a whim to better the story.

E-BOREDOM: What makes tabletop RPGs different from MMORPGs?

MATT VANCIL: Well, there's human interaction for one. Honestly, the two don't compare. I think MMORPGs are more for people who like power gaming: it's something they can win, they don't have to interact more than they want to, and there's almost no oversight or repercussions for character choices. If your idea of fun is making as broken a character as you can and instituting the bulldozer effect, fine... Go ahead and have fun online, but don't sit across from my table. I prefer roleplaying games that demand actual roleplaying. I'm a little touchy on the subject, if you haven't gathered. :)

E-BOREDOM: What made the D&D movie so crappy?

MATT VANCIL: I try not to think of the D&D;movie. It was truly terrible. Before I saw it, I remember

thinking that there would be two ways the movie would be any good: if the film was shot as an epic fantasy, or if the characters were rather geeky so as to imply they were being played by gamers.

The film took itself way too seriously, was extremely overacted, missed all of what made Dungeons & Dragons so much fun, and really did a disservice to the gaming community. I mean, come on, with thirty years of campaign settings that crap about the dragons was really the best they could come up with?

E-BOREDOM: Did you have a favorite D&D setting that wasn't in the traditional swords and sorcery style?

MATT VANCIL: I really enjoyed Spelljammer from AD&D. Too many groups have tried to combine fantasy and sci-fi, and rarely, if ever, does the combination work. When they do, you get really marvelous worlds. Spelljammer, Shadowrun, Final Fantasy games, and Stephen King's Dark Tower series are the best science/fantasy combos I can readily think of.

I thought the science of the cosmos was especially well done as it borrowed from the cosmology of antiquity. The spacefaring ships were just incredibly awesome. I've always loved airships (Final Fantasy III was still my fave of that series). Additionally, the setting linked together all of D&D's other myriad

worlds. I have always had a problem with, say, bringing a character into a campaign from a different world. How did he get there? Why is he hanging around? Well, he hopped in a Spelljammer that crashed. There's an explanation that worked! I really wish they'd bring that setting back. It'd kick way more ass with the 3.5 ruleset.

E-BOREDOM: What inspired you to write The Gamers?

MATT VANCIL: One major inspiration for The Gamers came from an Inquest Gamer magazine several years ago back when Rick Swan was still with the mag. The editors did a special where they took photographs of themselves sitting around a gaming table next to photos of themselves in costume in the game world. They superimposed cartoon word bubbles over their mouths. It was rather funny, and I got to thinking that the idea could easily be expanded into film.

In writing the characters for The Gamers, I specifically avoided giving the gamers names outside of their characters. I wanted the focus to be on the fantasy. As for basing characters on real-world people, there is one actor who really isn't acting during an argument with the GM.

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E-BOREDOM: Did Dead Gentlemen Productions work on any other projects before The Gamers?

MATT VANCIL: The Gamers was actually the third Dead Gentlemen film. Our first, Demon Hunters, was a horror-comedy in the vein of the Evil Dead films. We shot it on campus my junior year. The only guy who had any idea what he was doing was Ben Dobyns, the director.

The film met with such success at the university that we shot the sequel, Dead Camper Lake, during our spring break the following year. We didn't break ground on "The Gamers" until "Dead Camper Lake" was in editing... where it's been for about three years. It finally comes out on August 19 on DVD!

E-BOREDOM: Were any scenes problematic to shoot?

MATT VANCIL: The hardest scene for me was the campfire scene because we had so little light. We had our lighting designer placing lanterns across the setting and bouncing flashlight light off of a white-board to try and lend more light to the set. We had a production assistant whose sole job was to drop paper logs onto the fire to get the flames to pick up before each shot.

In addition to the dark and the cold, my cameraman had to leave early. I had to shoot the scene myself, and I'm not the best with a camera. Anyway, despite all the hangups, we got the scene shot. It looks halfways decent, so I'm happy.

E-BOREDOM: Got a favorite special feature from The Gamers DVD?

MATT VANCIL: I really enjoyed the making of featurette since it was a chance for me to see footage that I wasn't as familiar with. It's a real kick to see the behind the scenes stuff, especially the stuff that was so obscure that I forgot about it. It also shows just how much fun we had on the project.

Another feature I really, really like is the Go Exploring feature. Basically, Ben hid a ton of easter eggs in the map under the Go Exploring feature. There is one easter egg that no one has been able to find without putting the DVD in his computer and hacking the code. The reason? Emily Olson, our beautiful demure princess, said something so horrible that we had to put it on the DVD. She said the only was she'd allow it on is if her parents could never find it. So, it's hidden well. It's almost impossible to find. Good luck.

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E-BOREDOM: How is The Gamers: Second Edition coming along?

MATT VANCIL: The Gamers: Second Edition is the sequel to The Gamers. We begin filming in January. It will be a feature-length film that expands on the Gamers universe without losing its roots. The best place to find out about the production is at the G2E website.

JEFF VOGEL

Jeff Vogel's Spiderweb Software has been releasing independently developed CRPGs for years. Demos of his games, which cover such varying topics as Ancient Rome and genetic mutation, are available at his website.

In this interview, Vogel reveals his inspirations behind a few of the games he has designed while remembering classic CRPGs.

E-BOREDOM: What made Wizardry and Ultima stand apart from other CRPGs at the time?

JEFF VOGEL: Well, Phantasie and Wizard's Crown were good titles, but Wizardry and Ultima had the

combination of ingenuity and good, solid design that makes a winner.

E-BOREDOM: Have CRPGs gotten better over time?

JEFF VOGEL: I think CRPGs now are fantastic. I would play Baldur's Gate or Knights of the Old Republic over Ultima IV any day. Don't get me wrong... When it was new, Ultima IV was amazing, but I wouldn't play it now. The best RPGs now are deeper, bigger, and prettier.

E-BOREDOM: Do any kind of CRPGs not appeal to you?

JEFF VOGEL: I would not dare say. I don't like saying naughty things about my peers. However, pure hack and slash games that don't have Diablo in the title don't stay on my hard drive for very long. It takes a really special alchemy to make that work.

E-BOREDOM: What were you trying to accomplish with the original Exile Trilogy?

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JEFF VOGEL: I wanted to take all the best elements of my favorite CRPGs and synthesize them into one huge exciting title. I wanted something BIG and absorbing, but my skills weren't really up to the task until Exile 3.

E-BOREDOM: Releasing Blade of Exile with a Scenario Editor was certainly an inspired idea...

JEFF VOGEL: The idea seemed really exciting. It's a huge amount of work making a system like that, but I really wanted to see what other people could do while stretching my own skills.

E-BOREDOM: Was there an inspiration behind the Romans VS. Celts concept for Nethergate?

JEFF VOGEL: I could have done the same story with a fantasy setting, but I think placing it in real history made it more compelling somehow. The ability to copy Roman and Celtic culture saved me from having to design something on my own.

E-BOREDOM: I've noticed there has been an increasing focus on story in your games...

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JEFF VOGEL: I've been doing this a long time. I do whatever it takes to keep my own interest up. In the last few years, really involved stories with lots of opportunities for role-playing have interested me more than anything else.

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW

Howard Scott Warshaw got his start with a decent Atari 2600 shoot-em-up, Yar's Revenge, and later worked on two games that were based off of blockbusters: E.T. and Raiders of the Lost Ark. Recently, he completed Once Upon Atari, a fascinating documentary about Atari back in the early 1980s.

Howard Scott Warshaw reveals what changes he would make to E.T. if he got the chance to do it over again, his views on abandonware, and gameplay differences between games of the Atari age and games of today. Be sure to visit the Once Upon Atari homepage to purchase a DVD of the great Atari documentary of the same name and read recent articles Warshaw wrote for EGM and GamePro.

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E-BOREDOM: What was the first video game you played?

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: Space Invaders. I saw it in a Blimpie's in New Orleans and as soon as I did I knew this was going to be HUGE!

E-BOREDOM: How were games for the Atari 2600 different than the games of today?

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: Older games are more focused on simple yet involving play and seeing how far you can go. Modern games are more about a simple journey which has a definite conclusion. You play through the game and you are done. Now games don't really have that "how high is up" component. They do have an immersive journey aspect that older games don't. It's a different approach to the gaming experience.

E-BOREDOM: Your first game was Yar's Revenge, a shoot-em-up, a popular genre at the time. What did you to do try and make it more involved than other games?

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HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: I wanted Yar's to be the coolest and most innovative game when it came out. I wanted fast frenetic game play and some more advanced user controls and bigger visual payoffs and *much* more elaborate sound. I hope I achieved that.

E-BOREDOM: The next two games you worked on were based on Steven Spielberg movies. Did Spielberg have any input into the games?

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: He definitely discussed the designs with me but didn't really get too involved during the development. He was pretty busy himself :)

E-BOREDOM: Raiders of the Lost Ark is one of those movies with so many memorable moments. Which of them did you try to preserve for the game?

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: I wanted to have the adventure aspect, the mystery aspect and replayability. I also wanted it to be the biggest adventure on the machine. Raider's has more *unique* game play screens than any other 2600 title, I think.

There are games with more screens, but I don't think the play is as variable from screen to screen. The

replayability comes from randomizing where the final objective is each time so the map room becomes essential. I wanted to keep the action, the searching, and a big action combo necessary for the grand finish.

E-BOREDOM: If you could remake E.T., what would you change about it?

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: I think the idea of the gameplay was good. In E.T., you need to evade some humans trying to capture you while you collect pieces you can use to build a phone. Then, you need to arrange a landing away from human eyes. I think those are all the components you really need, and of course you need an "Elliott to the rescue" mechanic.

What could vary significantly is environment, which is the key to the experience. I would vastly improve the play space to highlight the other components of game play. I believe that would round out and make a much more compelling game.

E-BOREDOM: Can you think of the worst video game based off a movie ever made?

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: Charlie's Angels, no question!

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E-BOREDOM: What are your thoughts on abandonware, an online movement to preserve classic games. Is it a great way for players to replay old favorites and learn about video game history or should companies release more "classic compilations" in the first place?

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: I think that what this shows is a genuine demand amongst the classic gamers. I think companies should recognize this and pursue this market. The practice is questionable but it is a clear message that people *want* these games, so why not make them available for sale?

E-BOREDOM: What interview subject for Once Upon Atari gave the most surprising responses?

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: George Kiss was surprising in how honest he was about his interactions with management. That is very tricky stuff for him to cover on camera. There were many wacky responses, but these are wacky people so I don't consider that surprising. :)

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E-BOREDOM: Any chance of producing another video game documentary in the future?

HOWARD SCOTT WARSHAW: I'm currently doing some promotional videos for non-profit groups about services and initiatives aimed at improving developmental opportunities for children under age five. It is very rewarding, but you never know when another video game piece is coming up. The draw and the allure of covering classic gaming is always where my heart lies.

AARON WILLIAMS

In this interview, Aaron Williams discusses his thoughts on the Dungeons & Dragons film, benefits of having a comic available both online and in print, and which Nodwick character is most beloved by his fans.

E-BOREDOM: What can you remember about your first experience with D&D?

AARON WILLIAMS: My first D&D experience was a LONG time ago, I'm afraid. I was given the D&D basic set by my parents. The box has long since disintegrated, but I still have the blue-covered book and a copy of Keep on the Borderlands on my bookshelf. The staples have almost rusted away, the tape on the

spine is yellow, and I think the dice are actually falling apart (what did they make them from back then?).

I got to play with a friend of mine named Jason. My first real gamer quandary was winding up in the bottom of a 30 foot pit, and realizing that you needed more than a sword to make it in a dungeon. I've never forgotten to buy rope since. Holy water, on the other hand...

E-BOREDOM: Ever run into any memorable scenarios during a game?

AARON WILLIAMS: In college, I guess the one that made me realize there was more to RPGs than just hack-and-slash was when our thief announced he wanted to go on a midnight burglary run in the town where we were recuperating. The other players started to object, and then said he had to give us a share of whatever he got. The DM told them they failed to detect him leaving, except for me. I was playing as a wizard, and I'd gotten lucky when he tried to sneak past my room.

Rather than turning him in, I joined him using a few spells I had left over from the day before to assist his purloining tasks. It was pretty eye-opening for a kid who had pretty much barreled his way through D&D for years.

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E-BOREDOM: What was your take on the Dungeons & Dragons film?

AARON WILLIAMS: The D&D movie was an interesting experience. I had to go see it because my editor had asked me to make fun of it in a Nodwick strip for Dragon Magazine. I laughed at its unintentionally funny acting, its Quake II generated castles, and lame attempts to insert D&D jargon into the dialogue ("I thought you wizards were all intelligent!").

I believe it was Kaja Foglio who summed it up the best. She said the movie was an accurate portrayal of what your 11-year-old kid brother's campaign was like. I think a better time would be had watching the old cartoon. Many of us fans were pulling for a full-length 80's cartoon-based feature rather than what we got, but there's always Lord of the Rings to help dull the pain (grin).

E-BOREDOM: What comics have you enjoyed reading?

AARON WILLIAMS: I love the rich world that Neil Gaiman creates for Sandman, as well as the fact that you barely notice it takes place in the DC Universe. I hope I can give the same sense of a larger place outside of my principal characters. Invincible has a great and

believable father-son relationship that I admire, and Powers grounds the reader in the "real life" of cops while adding the "fantastic" of superheroes. Powers also was a bit groundbreaking in that it became a huge hit without the realistic art that Image titles were known for, which is a help for me.

I also read JLA just to get a feel for what the "team" books are doing. I'm amazed how many issues it takes for them to tell a story. I don't think my fans would let me get away with doing five minutes of dialogue with a fight every month. :) Girl Genius by Phil & Kaja Foglio has gorgeous art, a fantastic story, and is genuinely funny!

E-BOREDOM: Were any of the classic comics in Dragon an inspiration for Nodwick?

AARON WILLIAMS: Oh, yes... My favorite strips in Dragon were What's New? by Phil Foglio and Wormy by Dave Trampier. I especially tried to model my early style on Phil's work, but at that stage in my developing art attempts that was like saying the Yugo was trying to model its cars on Cadillac. I think I've found my own distinctive techniques, but you can still see traces of Foglio here and there. I especially learned how to do expressive faces from Phil.

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E-BOREDOM: What was the inspiration for the various characters in Nodwick?

AARON WILLIAMS: It's based on archetypes I've played with. Artax is the guy who's more interested in details but who still likes the occasional large horde of cash. Yeagar is the A-type personality who wants to run in and kill stuff and is often surprised when this leads to disaster.

Piffany is the gamer-gal who has that a sunny disposition no cloud can dim. I think she's the one people relate to mostly because I've noticed that with many women in role-playing groups there's a deep love of fantasy worlds that men have yet to achieve as a group. Men are from Helm's Deep, Women are from Valdemar.

E-BOREDOM: Where was Nodwick first published?

AARON WILLIAMS: It started for Dragon. I had done a multi-page series for two years called Floyd. When the editors decided that series strips were becoming a problem for new readers, they asked if I could do something simpler. I looked around and discovered that no one had really tackled the "hench-man" character in fantasy. That, plus a love for the

Dilbert strip and my own experiences working in a cubicle, led to the creation of Nodwick.

E-BOREDOM: What supplies do you use when drawing a strip of Nodwick?

AARON WILLIAMS: For all of my strips, I start with a #2 pencil on bristol board, then I ink with a variety of pens (I've used Rapidiograph, Micron, dip-pen, Sharpie, etc.). After erasing the pencil lines, I scan it in, clean up the page using Photoshop, add text with Freehand, and then back to Photoshop for coloring.

E-BOREDOM: How has the look of the Nodwick characters changed over the years?

AARON WILLIAMS: The characters have gotten a bit more defined. Nodwick's nose is larger, Piffany's glasses are bigger, Artax's moustaches are longer, etc. Since Nodwick runs as a comic book, readers are treated to a much deeper world and broader stories. They're still funny, but I think they have deeper themes and plots than those only reading the website strips have seen.

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E-BOREDOM: What about Full Frontal Nerdity sets it apart from Nodwick?

AARON WILLIAMS: At first, FFN was a d20-oriented gamer strip made for a d20 gaming site. The site decided to take a pass on the strip, but I already had about ten of them at that point. I put them up on the web. The fans loved it, and I discovered that it allowed me to make gamer-specific jokes (i.e. about WizKids "Sportsclix") as well as be a bit more... mean?

I game with some friends that have no qualms about letting everyone know what they think sucks and what they like... That kind of brutal honesty can often be very funny. In a way, it's the closest thing I've got to a "gamer log," although many jokes are just about topics of interest to geeks that I want to address.

E-BOREDOM: What are some advantages you've found to having a comic both online and in print?

AARON WILLIAMS: I've discovered that the web and print can work in tandem. Promotion on the web has led to greater sales of comics, and the comic book has brought readers to my website. In the future, we're going to see more integration of media output rather than dominance by one form. Think of it as the Blair Witchization of entertainment. To get the whole pack-

age, you gotta go rent the movie, read the comics, and devour the website.

E-BOREDOM: What are your current projects?

AARON WILLIAMS: Right now, I'm in super-hero mode as I get out the 7th and 8th issues of my other comic book ps238. I'm also doing a page for the back of the City of Heroes comic book starring updated versions of the Nodwick crew as superheroes. At the moment, our henchman's descendant is a series of unfortunate costumed crusaders called simply "Junior Hero XXX" where X represents numbers. These numbers represent which Junior Hero is "at bat" this week, as in "Junior Hero 023, try not to get crushed by thrown buildings like 012 did."

WOLF

One of the classic CRPGs of yore was Interplay's The Bard's Tale. Spawning two sequels and a campaign editor, it let players control a party of six characters into a city where things were not as they seemed. Saddened at the lack of a true sequel to the series, Shifting Suns, an independent gaming company, was formed to create a game in the tradition of The Bard's Tale: Devil's Whiskey. With wonderful graphics and music matched with retro gameplay, it offers a sense of the gaming past with a touch of the gaming present.

Wolf is one of the co-writers of Devil's Whiskey. He reveals the what made the original Bard's Tale so great to begin with, examples of humor he added to liven up the script, and his brief experience using the Bard's Tale Construction Set. Be sure to check out Shifting Suns Studios to learn about their current

projects and download the demo of The Devil's Whiskey.

E-BOREDOM: When did you first play The Bard's Tale?

WOLF: I think it was 1987 after my motorcycle accident. I just bought my first computer and some friends told me about Bard's Tale. Prior to that, all I ever played was arcade games...at the arcade! The first game was my favorite. Bard's Tale 2 added a few things, but the original is still my first choice to replay.

E-BOREDOM: Ever try making a dungeon with The Bard's Tale Construction Set?

WOLF: Yes. Tried and failed. Too much was going on in my life at the time to give it the time and attention required to really accomplish anything with the Bard's Tale Constructor's Set.

E-BOREDOM: The Bard's Tale must have had a lot to do with Devil's Whiskey...

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WOLF: Well, Bard's Tale was certainly an inspiration. I remember suggesting we (before SSS incorporated) set up a network that would allow people to share the games they created with the Bard's Tale Constructor's Set, then one of us (I like to think it was me, but us old folks have bad memories) suggested just doing our own game from scratch. Well, that let the Genie out of the bottle and here we are!

E-BOREDOM: Did any of your artists for the game blow you away?

WOLF: For me it was Rob Thomas' work. He just kept getting better as time went by! When we started looking for more artists, we wanted people whose style was similar to his.

E-BOREDOM: What contributions did you make to the writing of Devil's Whiskey?

WOLF: Hmmm...that could be legally dangerous to answer! My contributions tended towards adding humor here and there (among other things). "Run like a bunny" in the battle options was my idea, for instance.

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E-BOREDOM: What current projects are Shifting Suns Studios working on?

WOLF: Nothing carved in stone yet, but there is discussion about Dark Resurrection, the game we originally planned on doing but put on hold for Devil Whiskey.

XORLAK

Several gamers try their hand at making their own game, yet only a few actually get their game completed. One of the few fan-made games completed using the notoriously buggy RPG Toolkit is Dark Age, created by Xorlak. After completing the original Dark Age, he developed a sequel. He's currently working on a remake of the first game in the series entitled Dark Age EX.

E-BOREDOM: What game first got you into RPGs?

XORLAK: Heh, believe it or not, Super Mario RPG! Having no idea what an RPG was at the time. I thought it was an interesting, addictive twist to game playing. After that, I dove into the SNES Final

Fantasies (Final Fantasy II [FF IV JPN] & Final Fantasy III [FF VI JPN]).

My favorite is certainly Final Fantasy 3 for the SNES with Final Fantasy 2 not far behind. While not bad games in their own right, the 3D games just don't get it for me.

E-BOREDOM: What was the inspiration for the original Dark Age game? Did you have the story planned out in advance?

XORLAK: Having just discovered I could now create games of my favorite type, I naturally wanted to emulate what I had already played, the SNES Final Fantasies in particular.

As far as planning, I'll admit Dark Age wasn't very well planned. That was sort of the effect of suddenly realizing I could do something I always wanted to do that I hadn't been able to before. I didn't feel like mapping things out; I just wanted to dive right in. I think a lot of people experience this when first discovering a game maker program for the first time. About halfway through, I started to get a bit more organized.

E-BOREDOM: RPG Toolkit is a buggy program at times, to say the least. Were there any real memorable bugs you ran into while making the game?

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XORLAK: Yeah, that old default battle system caused plenty of interesting things to happen... After-battle story sequences would repeat. Players could perform the enemies' special attacks. Some bugs could be hacked around with some obtuse programming, but some you just had to live with.

E-BOREDOM: Dark Age includes original graphics that you drew. Did you have a lot of drawing experience before starting the artwork?

XORLAK: Not very much via the computer, as I'm sure anyone can tell by looking at the first enemies in Dark Age. Working on these games has provided me with a huge amount of experience through the years, though. You can see a progression of improvements in the pixel art from the first enemies of Dark Age to the last boss of Dark Age 2, which I'm actually quite proud of.

E-BOREDOM: Lots of the music from Dark Age is from various Final Fantasy games. How important was it to find the right MIDIs to use?

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XORLAK: Music is a pretty important part of an RPG since it sets the mood. The Final Fantasy themes were an obvious choice since I was most familiar with them, and the games cover a wide spectrum of moods. Many of the MIDIs I found didn't quite fit up to the standard of the original music, or didn't fit my game exactly. I actually modified a few of them for Dark Age.

E-BOREDOM: Both Dark Age games have mini-games, a staple in several RPGs. What is it about mini-games that make them fun?

XORLAK: Mini-games are a clever trick to get you to play the game longer. No matter how fun the main game is, you're going to want to take a break sometime. Why not do it without leaving the game at all? Mini-games provide a change of pace and variety that's vital to keeping the player interested.

E-BOREDOM:WHY DID you decide to jump into doing a sequel right after making Dark Age?

XORLAK: Well, Dark Age was somewhat rushed and unplanned. After the game was complete, the initial excitement of finally being able to make my own game subsided. I was able to think about my next project

with a cool head. In this way, Dark Age 2 came out much more organized than the first. The many bugs stemming from the use of RPG Toolkit's default systems in Dark Age inspired my to write my own battle system and menus.

E-BOREDOM: Dark Age 2 features an original musical score by Seth Martin and Dave "Rueben" Smith. How was it collaborating with them?

XORLAK: They were both great. Rueben, especially, knows how to handle huge demands and impending deadlines very well. Dark Age 2's soundtrack gives it a truly original feel.

E-BOREDOM: Out of the over 100 RPGs in the Design Stage over at Toolkit Zone, only 5 % of them are in the Finished Game stage. What makes it so hard for people to finish the RPGs that they've started?

XORLAK: I think a lot of kids think they're going to enter the professional video game industry and burn themselves out trying to make the perfect game. I just regard this as a fun hobby and don't have any intention of doing this as a career. That leaves me open to

pursue this interest whenever I want for as long as I want.

E-BOREDOM: Your upcoming project is Dark Age EX, a remake of the original game. What prompted you to start work on a remake?

XORLAK: Well, I don't really feel like diving into the next big production just yet. Because of it's default systems, Dark Age pales in comparison to its sequel. I thought it would be fun to give it a sort of face lift. I'm also adding a few other things along the way.

INON ZUR

Few game composers have made their mark as quickly as Inon Zur. He started off doing music for a variety of Star Trek computer games (Star Trek: New Worlds, Star Trek: Klingon Academy), some of which had musical scores that were arguably better than the games themselves. He also had a hand in the well regarded Advanced Dungeons and Dragons RPGs Icewind Dale 2 and Baldur's Gate 2. More recently, he has done music for Men of Valor.

Inon Zur discusses the spark that inspired him to get into music composing in the first place, the differences between composing for a fantasy game and a more realistic contemporary war game, and his thoughts on music education. Thanks go to Zur for taking some time out of his busy schedule for an interview and to Greg O'Connor-Read for setting up the interview. Stop by his website to hear samples of

music from the various games he's worked on and learn news about his newest projects.

E-BOREDOM: What was the first video game you played?

INON ZUR: I was like big on video games when I was 12-14. I remember growing up in Israel, sneaking away from school... Basically, playing all these very, very early games. Especially Pac-Man, what a wonderful game!

E-BOREDOM: When did you know you wanted to be a composer?

INON ZUR: Overall, I always loved music and listened to classical music when I was very young. When I grew older, I listened to other kinds of music so I can draw parallels from Prokofiev to the Beatles to John Williams.

I have a few heroes in every genre of music, but my first real trigger of music to picture was when I was 16. E.T. first came to Israel and I was tuned into the music that John Williams did. I remember thinking about the movie and the music, "Wow, this is really

great! The synchronization of picture, music, and drama."

E-BOREDOM: Why did you leave the Musical Academy of Tel Aviv to go study at UCLA?

INON ZUR: I left Tel Aviv because I felt like I was looking for something else. They did music as art. By the time I was looking at it more as a craft... A place to work and put in your talents in a way that will tell something to people.

One thing that they forget at Tel Aviv is that music more than everything is a language, that people are communicating with each other. When you write something, if the audience can't relate to what you write, it might be great and artistic but it's not going to say anything to anybody.

E-BOREDOM: Your earlier games were set in the Star Trek universe. Was having such a popular license constricting?

INON ZUR: No, in fact I felt very free. I was familiar with the music by Jerry Goldsmith and the others, but I did my take on it. I used my own technique and personal tastes to make it the way I wanted it to be. Of

course, there were times when I threw in a few musical references to classic Star Trek musical pieces.

E-BOREDOM: How is it different working on music for a more realistic game like Men of Valor compared to a fantasty title like Icewind Dale II?

INON ZUR: Each title poses a different challenge. Some create an atmosphere for a different world. Trying to convey "realistic" reality is as hard because when you create something for a fantasy, you almost can do anything you want and people will buy it because they aren't familiar with it. With realistic games, many people have been there and done that, so with the music you want to convey the experiences they did really did experience.

E-BOREDOM: Is there a big difference composing for cinematic sequences for games and composing for gameplay sequences?

INON ZUR: It is the difference between writing linear and nonlinear. This is basically the difference between the two techniques. Writing to picture, the music is locked accompanying the picture. Writing for gameplay, it needs to capture certain moods. However,

it is not locked to picture so it doesn't tell you what to do every second. Each technique has its difficulties and rewards.

E-BOREDOM: How do you keep costs down when producing music?

INON ZUR: I would say that I'm no cheaper or more expensive than my peers. Each composer does the work his own way. I do know that I was able to produce quality and amount of music that overall was in a cost-effective way. This is because I have worked with people I have worked with for a long time, and they know a system that is fast and cost-effective.

E-BOREDOM: Have a favorite score that you have worked on?

INON ZUR: Heh, this is always the hardest question. It's like asking, which of your sons and daughters do you like most? Think of it that way.

Of course, there are some games are less of a challenge to work on, but every game I work on as the most important thing that I ever did, no matter what the budget or company. If I am deciding to take money to

compose music for a title, it is because the outcome is something I care for.

E-BOREDOM: What current projects are you working on?

INON ZUR: I am not allowed to say right now. The most recent project I finished was working on music for the cinematics of Prince of Persia: The Warrior Within.

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You can learn more on his website, www.matwbt.-com, follow him on Twitter @MatWBT, and listen to his podcast at www.sequelcast2.com.

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