



# the Escapist

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

My Dad took my Grandpa to see *Saving Private Ryan* when it first came out in the theater. Then they bought *Band of Brothers* and watched it together. I remember listening to them talking about each of these afterward. "The scene, landing on the beaches in [*Saving Private*] *Ryan*, it's what it really sounds like," said my Grandpa. Dad agreed, "Yeah, the bullets, the whizzing, it was very real sounding." Similarly, *Band of Brothers* received praises for its understanding of the camaraderie between fellow soldiers from both of them.

Both my Dad and Grandpa served in the U.S. military; my father was stationed in the Philippines during the Vietnam War and my Grandpa was in the army in Europe during World War II. They both saw battle. They both experienced the camaraderie between soldiers. And they both seemed to want to see and experience these things again in movies and television series.

How odd, I thought, that they should want to relive these moments –

moments that were no doubt terrifying, despite all their intense military training. But they aren't the only ones. My friends and their family members who've been in the military during wartime also seem to want, even need, to re-experience war through entertainment.

In recent years, the field of games has produced a number of war games to add to the mix. Indeed, several of my younger veteran friends find these games just as compelling as some of the movies released to the masses. And so I pondered whether my own Dad and Grandpa might find in games that something that seems to draw them into the other forms of entertainment. I decided to interview them for this issue on war games.

I had never really talked with either of them extensively about their time in the service; neither one is much of a talker. My Dad actually continued this trend, only admitting that he did see battle and that he'll never forget the sounds. My Grandpa, however, was feeling talkative.

John C. Peeler was a Sergeant in the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of the U.S. Army, deployed in the European Theater of

World War II. The Century Division landed in Marseilles, France in October of 1944 and moved north, toward Alsace, for their part in the Ardennes Offensive. The 100<sup>th</sup> experienced "Success in Battle," as was their motto, holding the strategic Saverne Pass against the 17<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer-Grenadiers, the "Götz von Berlichingen" Division, in mid-January, the height of winter. This is their very impressive record on paper.

But what made the most impression on me was my Grandpa's description first-hand experiences. Sure, the historical

notes of the heaviest snows in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in January 1945 are meaningful, but the description of the bitter cold brought it home. The reputation of the powerful German Panzers made a dent, but Grandpa's stories of the sound of the trees splintering above him from artillery blasts made it real. It was these tree splinters that caused many of the casualties to their division – people he knew, friends and comrades.

And it was these stories that really brought home to me that you can only get part of the story from a history book. But more than that, I began to get an inkling of why vets may want to experience war again through entertainment. It's a healing thing to experience terrifying, difficult events again in a controlled environment. It's a way to reconnect with them, feel the emotion again, and then put them safely away again.

I recently experienced this desire to reconnect with and re-experience events. My Grandpa died two weeks ago, today. In those grasping days afterward, where one reaches into the treasure chest of memories, as if to make sure they're all still there and weren't lost



along with your loved one, I remembered these conversations about WWII. In some bizarre leap brought on by sadness, I felt a desire to watch *Saving Private Ryan*, to watch *Band of Brothers* or to play *Call of Duty*.

It doesn't seem to make much sense on the surface, but it was a need similar to my Grandpa's to connect with memories of war. It was different for me in that it was a need to connect with my Grandpa. I have to wonder how many games, movies and TV series' were created so that we could not only connect with memories of combat, but also for the civilians among the population to connect with loved ones lost in war or who told stories about war before passing.



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**To the Editor:** RE: "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Xbox"

Haven't I heard this before? Gaming is undeniably expanding, but a wholesale cultural shift anytime soon (and through convergence devices — a notoriously disappointing format) is rosy speculation. Hollywood's pop cultural hegemony is still unchallenged, despite those nice numbers comparing game and box-office gross (as if those mattered post-DVD). And it's not gaming but its digital sibling, the Internet, that's promising — and is largely delivering — the next leap forward in media consumption.

Add to this our ongoing cultural fragmentation, and even the idea of a "forefront of the nation's entertainment pulse" looks ludicrous. Pop culture is becoming increasingly balkanized, and has been since we realized that nothing could **ever** be as big as the Beatles again. That's why *Nevermind* was astonishing; it succeeded despite this. Fifteen years of Internet-abetted

fragmentation later, and any type of success on the scale *Nevermind*, let alone a gaming *Nevermind*, looks unlikely.

**Weebot**

**To The Editor:** In his article in last week's Extra ("How I learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Xbox"), Joe Blancato depicts a very rosy future for gamers, and he is not the first. However, I believe that while all gamers have hoped for this to be the future all their lives, it is not going to work out the way we would all like, simply because the main driving force behind the gaming industry is not innovation or imagination anymore, but glitz. The gaming industry exploded with the Playstation because not only was it cheap, but my goodness, it's three-dimensional! Who cares that the early PS games were all garbage? They looked so cool!

Unfortunately, this is the tendency of all American media. Movies used to be about stories, heck they would even have actual themes, but for the most part those movies fell by the wayside in favor of special effects. Sure there's a backlash starting now, but only some

twenty years later. The popular writers are Steven King and Tom Clancy, who write for entertainment, not to challenge. This is what's happening to games right now, and the saddest part is that gaming has yet to hit its true stride. I personally feel that games have the potential to be considered art, not just for their stories or graphics, but for their very mechanics.

But right now there is no room for that. And Mr. Blancato may be correct, maybe in ten years gamers will be the new athletes. Call me a Costikyan-ian, but if things do not change between then and now, I will want no part in it. The games of the future will be style over substance to an even greater degree, and the gaming superstars of tomorrow will be no different than the popstars of today.

**Jason Begy**

**To the Editor:** I don't understand the latest issue at all. Joe Blancato's article seemed to be trying to describe how a gamer subculture might survive the stresses of corporate co-optation, but instead comes out sounding at times like some Xbox marketing hack ghostwriter



trying to entice us to buy into the look and attitude of the next new thing. (Black leather and Mario T-Shirts? How punk! 13-year-old girls? Sexay!) Seriously, the article did more to disprove the existence of any 'gamer subculture' at all, but if it did it was selling it out to the lowest bidder anyways as a limp package of absurd imagery, shiny devices and mario-nostalgia.

There are no 'indie' gamers because there is no indie game scene. There is no cohesive, collective, acknowledged network of independent developers, reviewers to serve the diasporic masses of gamers who want it. Truly, *The Escapist* magazine is a step in this direction, but there must be a division between the corporate giants and the indie collectives, and that division (in a subculture) is marked by a healthy skepticism for the merits of corporate organization and its effects on the medium. Which means declaring unconditional love for something like the Xbox, (the Martini glass was a great touch) is not acceptable. You can't be an indie-rock band and love clear-channel, that's not how indie works. Indie means independent means of distribution and

production. It means you don't need a big company to have lots of fans, and many of these fans you know personally.

I'll admit I really love the new Nintendo commercials, and as a gamer, I get jokes that my girlfriend does not. Does this make me a niche demographic? Yes. Does it make it a subculture? No. Can we build a subculture anyways? Yes. But we have to resist giving in to marketing and economics-derived explanations of 'what a game is' or 'what gamers want' and instead think about what it is we want,



and how we are going to do it. Our history is **largely unwritten**! You hear me, Blancato? Stop all this doctor doom shit.

Perhaps I'm just perpetuating the gamer stereotype of the incessantly critical video-game snot, but I'm not critical because I'm a gamer. I'm critical because it is important to be when you care about something, as I do about games and their future.

*Escapist*, y'all have the power to spell the future of indie games, if you want. Or you can lament the end before it comes. Whatev. I don't care. I'm indie, I don't give a fuck.

Keep up the killer mag.

**eben**

**To the Editor:** Funny your columnist should mention *Neverwinter Nights* in an article about the use of games (or not) in the classroom: one development team in the UK has thought just that, and has created a version of *NN* to teach Key Skills qualifications in Application of Number and Communication...

**Adam J Hepton**

**To the Editor:** *The Escapist* rocks! And I finally have good reason to mail you about my own stuff!

I enjoyed Jon Woods' article in issue 21, and just had to ask you to send him a link to [www.KidsProgrammingLanguage.com](http://www.KidsProgrammingLanguage.com). KPL is still new - v 1 released in August - but it's very hot. Hot enough that **volunteers** have translated it into Russian, Chinese, Greek, French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, Polish, Romanian, Czech, Swedish and Catalan - so far. :) From our KPL site:

KPL stands for **Kid's Programming Language**. KPL makes it easy for kids to learn computer programming. KPL makes it fun, too, by making it especially easy to program computer games, with cool graphics and sound. KPL is not just for games, though - it can be used for teaching many different subjects. Its emphasis on games is based on the belief that learning is best when learning is fun.

**Jon Schwartz**

## Les Grognards

'Gameboxes' let them email moves, but wargamers remain joyously low-tech

by Allen Varney

By cruel fate you are the only board wargamer in Kankakee, Illinois. No, make that **bored** wargamer. You've set up all three poster-sized maps of *Terrible Swift Sword* and laboriously moved its 2,000 cardboard counters -- by yourself -- scrupulously following all 32 pages of rules -- to explore alternate outcomes of the Battle of Gettysburg. It took you a month of weekends to complete the 50+-hour, 149-turn campaign game; the South won. Sure would have been nice to have an actual opponent playing Grant -- or Napoleon in *Wellington's Victory* - or the Germans in *Bulge*, *Battle of the Bulge* , *Battle for the Ardennes* , *Ardennes Offensive* or *Wacht am Rhein*.

And now you, alone, Kankakee-kept, are staring dismally at your setup of *Europa*. It's, not to use the word lightly, awe-inspiring. It is the monster of monster games, the mega-monster that drove publisher Game Designers Workshop to its knees, a mad and grandiose attempt to simulate the **entire** European Theatre of World War II at (oh man! oh man!) DIVISION LEVEL. What with 11 linked games, **32** maps and connecting mapsheets, upwards of 11,000 tiny little counters in towering stacks, and assorted charts and schedules, you couldn't fit all of *Europa* in your two-car garage, so North Africa currently fills your living room. You have braced to devote 18 months of weekends to this more-than-simulation, this paper-and-cardboard lifestyle. You sit braced ... and waiting...

Is no one else in Kankakee willing? Can you not find someone to drop even four hours on a piddling little game of *Third Reich*?

For most historical board wargamers, the answer really is, "No, you're all alone." These graying hobbyists, who once numbered in the tens or hundreds of thousands, have dwindled to a total world population probably under five digits, and at best a few per city. But now, thanks to specialty software engines like *Cyberboard*, the *VASSAL Game Engine* and *Aide de Camp* , simulation fans can replicate their favorite games

as electronic modules and play by e-mail or in real time with opponents worldwide, free.

These electronic “gameboxes” are simple scans of the paper maps and cardboard counters. Gamebox modules don’t incorporate program code or artificial intelligence; they don’t automate setup or enforce rules. Players must do that themselves.

And wargamers wouldn’t have it any other way.

## Truth Above All

Historical wargaming isn’t just about the “game,” but about simulation. A wargame can show you more about military history in two hours than a textbook can tell in a hundred pages. Whereas the book may make you yawn, the simulation grips. Players judge wargames as much by historicity as by “fun.” Is a given Bulge game fun to play, but it neglects to dramatize the importance of German supply lines? Pfft! Does that Civil War game trivialize the influence of each side’s generals? Then it’s a mere “beer and pretzels” diversion.

A computer version might automate such effects into invisibility. Wargamers don’t want automation, or at least not much. Wargamers seek understanding. Automation muddies the learning.

Traditionally, too, wargamers have been strongly categorical thinkers, or (to put it less charitably) rules lawyers. Even the simplest wargame has rules of harrowing complexity compared to, say, *Risk* or *Stratego*. These men - yes, they’re all males - enjoy mastering voluminous rules and exploiting their superior understanding to triumph over poorly schooled opponents. In an MMOG, such people haunt forums and whine about nerfing in the latest patch. Board wargamers, channeling their mania to the cause of good, design variants and expansion sets.

Most of these old guys - “grogards,” they call themselves, after the nickname for Napoleon’s veteran troops - are holdovers from the Golden Age of

Wargaming, the late 1960s and '70s. Ah, the giants in the earth back then! Avalon Hill stolidly produced one or two lavish games a year: *Afrika Korps*, *D-Day*, *Stalingrad*, *PanzerBlitz* and *PanzerLeader*, and many more, including the bestselling king of them all, John Hill’s 1977 *Squad Leader*.

And Simulations Publications, Inc., better known as SPI, published hundreds of games, ranging all over the map in subject matter and quality, but always rich in unbridled ambition. Producing dozens of games a year, including a complete game in each bimonthly issue of the remarkable *Strategy & Tactics* magazine, SPI simulated nearly every major military engagement from the Bronze Age to Vietnam, with side visits to the 1968 Chicago Riots, the Reformation, guerrilla war in Yugoslavia, Canadian separatist politics, speculative visions of a Sino-Soviet war and World War III, and American football. SPI’s *Terrible Swift Sword*, *War in the East*



A wargame can show you more about military history in two hours than a textbook can tell in a hundred pages.



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and many others continued GDW's *Europa* idea of "monster" wargames, multi-map, multi-thousand-counter, hugely complex simulations that take weeks or months to play.

Some highlights, lowlights and sidelights of the copious SPI line:

- \* In *Russian Civil War*, you can sometimes score victory points by firing on your own troops.
- \* *The Fall of Rome*, a solitaire simulation of the entire late Roman Empire, was notorious for errata longer than the original rules.
- \* The designer's notes for *Balaclava*, one of SPI's Crimean War games, consisted entirely of Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade."
- \* *Grunt*, a 1971 game of Vietnam published while the war was still going, included rules for torturing prisoners.
- \* *Outreach*, a 1976 science-fiction game, is the largest-scale game ever published. Its single map covered two thirds of the Milky Way Galaxy; each hexagon measured 1,000 light years. A big part of the game involved opposing units in the

same space trying to find each other.

- \* *Campaign for North Africa*, a monster game presented as a "HIMS" (Heuristic Intensive Manual Simulation), replicated the World War II desert theatre at such length (an estimated 1,200 hours for the full game), with such exhaustive attention - skill ratings for individual pilots, and Italian regiments' water requirements for pasta - that ten playtest teams bombed out before publication. When the game shipped, no one had played it through. To this day, it may never have been played to a conclusion.

In the 1970s many wargame publishers sallied forth onto the field of hobbyists. Some did well. Top titles could sell thousands of copies, if not the tens or hundreds of thousands Avalon Hill (AH) and SPI enjoyed. The whole field fizzed with vitality.

Today, if you're a wargamer - in Kankakee or anywhere - you're probably the only one in town.

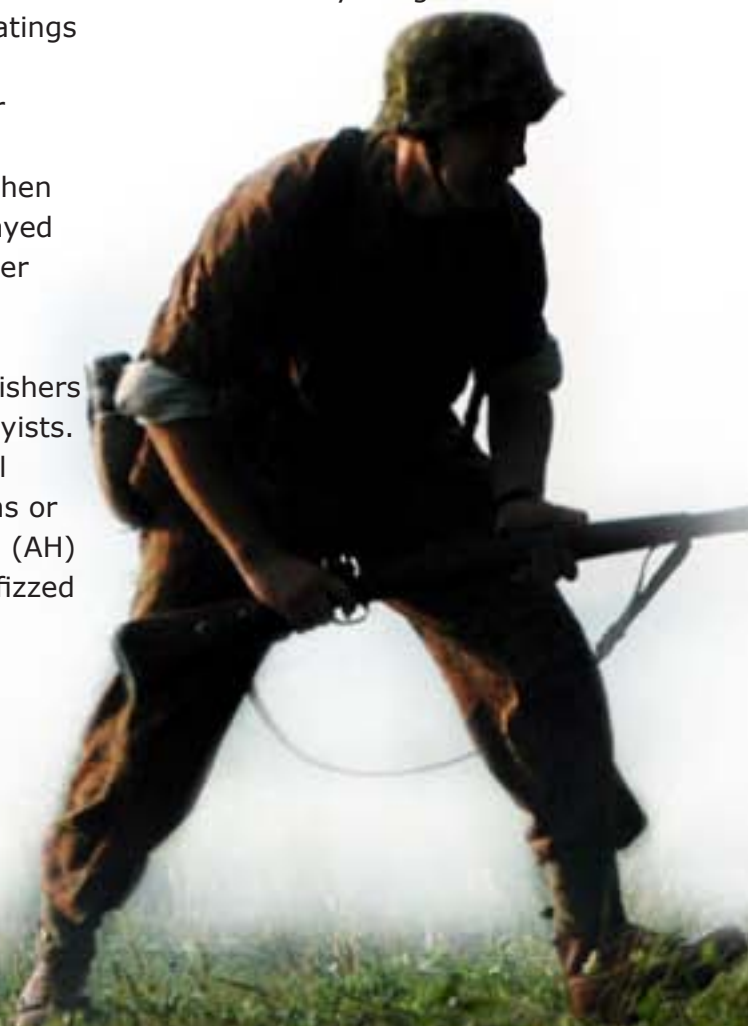
## Decline and Fall

Future Smithsonian curators will someday display board wargames from the 1960s and '70s alongside astrolabes and orreries. Each represents a tremendously imaginative and intricate

solution, realized through herculean labor, to a problem that later technology rendered trivial.

For example, David Isby's wargame *Air War* is played on an entirely blank poster-sized hexagonal grid. Each player may control as little as one single cardboard counter, representing one modern jet fighter. The rules to manipulate these two counters on this blank hexmap comprise 28 pages of tiny print plus 39 charts and tables. Cardboard markers on a separate display track each plane's throttle, acceleration, turning, altitude and attitude, plus weapons use; there are individual data sheets for each plane and each type of missile. A later *Update Kit* adds 16 pages of rules and a 72-page chart booklet. A three-minute *Air War* engagement requires six hours to play, nevermind the labor of mastering rules of fabulous complexity, all so players in 1979 could achieve the same effect today's *X-Plane* player can see by launching the game and pushing forward lightly on a joystick.

In 1982, after many years of mismanagement, SPI went bankrupt and





was seized and destroyed by TSR, makers of *Dungeons & Dragons*. GDW shut down in 1996. In 1998, Hasbro bought the Avalon Hill name and game line and let most of its classic titles fall dormant. The company licensed AH's popular *Advanced Squad Leader* to Multi-Man Publishing, a hobby operation funded by Boston Red Sox pitcher and longtime grognard Curt Schilling. Over the decades, other wargame publishers have vanished and revived and vanished again like aging garage bands. Greg Costikyan, who was an SPI developer while still in high school, says, "Wargaming is not quite extinct, no; but all that remains are the reflex twitches of a still-warm corpse."

He's probably right. But you'd never guess it from the Web.

## Just Hanging On(line)

Isolated hobbyists inevitably converge online. Wargamers hang out on BoardGameGeek, the Consimworld forums, WarOnline.net, The Gamers Network and elsewhere. They maintain reference sites like Web-Grognards.com. *Strategy & Tactics* magazine is still

around at its fifth publisher - it's up to issue #228! - and there's another game-in-every-issue magazine, *Against the Odds*. Each August, a thousand hardened grognards journey to Lancaster, Pennsylvania for the Boardgame Players Association's grandly misnamed World Boardgaming Championships.

Some wired wargamers create modules. They scan a game's maps and counters as JPEGs or .PNG files, and then import them into a game engine. They laboriously create charts, organize the counters in folders, and give individual pieces custom right-click menus. Then they upload the module, or "gamebox," to fan sites. If any force anywhere in the world can recruit new players to the senescent wargame scene, it is these fan-created modules.

To play a game, both (or all) players need the same game engine and the same module. The engine uses the module to render the map and pieces for that game. Players drag and drop counters onscreen. The engine may either record each turn's moves in a small file to e-mail to the opponent, or may permit direct online play, with

communication via chat or VoIP. The engine rolls dice, checks line-of-sight and handles administrative minutiae, but otherwise doesn't validate moves or automate anything. Even with a module, you still need the original board game, or at least the rulebook.

Active communities have gathered around three engines:

\* Rodney Kinney created a set of Java libraries, *VASL (Virtual Advanced Squad Leader)*, to play *ASL* online. Now

generalized as the VASSAL Engine, the free open-source program supports many board and card games. The cross-platform VASSAL is the only engine that supports direct play over a live connection; it can also record moves for e-mailing or later replay. Ten developers maintain VASSAL on SourceForge. The VASSAL Engine Yahoo group draws 150-200 posts a month. There's a large selection of modules, though many are works in progress; as you might expect, the *ASL* modules work best.




\* Dale Larson's freeware *Cyberboard*, for Windows only, supports only e-mail play, not live, direct connections. Cyberboard has the largest selection of free gameboxes, available on fan sites like Limey Yank Games and Yankee Air Pirates.

\* *Aide de Camp II* by HPS Sims is the only commercial engine here (US\$49.95, Windows only). *ADC* supports over 350 games, including approved commercial modules not legally available elsewhere. Nick Bell's site Die Hauptkampflinie (German, "main combat line") has many *ADC* modules.

Some publishers have persuaded fan sites to take down modules based on their games. This is certainly understandable; every wargame publisher is already in a precarious position without having to worry about piracy. Understandable - but wise? You'd think they'd try anything, everything, to publicize their games. If they give away the gamebox, wouldn't their hardcopy sales go up? Low-profile bands distribute their music free online and make money

selling T-shirts at concerts; why not a similar business model for wargames? There's so little money on the table anyway, it seems worthwhile to experiment.

It would take a miracle to pull the wargame community back from imminent oblivion. But you know, military history is full of unlikely last-ditch victories. Wargamers should try for one of their own. 

*Allen Varney is a writer and game designer based in Austin, Texas. This essay derives from his Guest of Honor speech at the Consternation gaming convention (Cambridge, UK), August 13, 2005.*





## Apocalypse Not

by Shawn Williams

**December 20th, 1989 – Fort Clayton, Panama – 01:30 hours**

The balloon has gone up – quite noisily. For the past half hour, we’ve been listening to explosions from Panama City as the bombing runs began on Noriega’s headquarters. My fellow Military Policemen and I are standing around, waiting to get our orders to move out. We know we’ll be securing the POW camp – we had spent the past week building it as a “training exercise” – but we don’t know when. We’ve taken shelter at the front of the barracks because a few Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) snipers have somehow gotten into the dense jungle behind us and have been taking potshots at us for the past hour. To pass the time, we’re saluting each other and yelling, “Sniper Check!” Some of my peers have begun writing on the camo coverings of their helmets – “Born To Kill” seems to be the motto de jour (thanks, Kubrick). As desperate as we seem to turn this into another Vietnam, it instead has the surreal absurdity of a Monty Python sketch. At any moment, I expect an officer in full drag to show up and begin dancing.

A few minutes later, we are told that some of the infantry guys are now in the jungle and have killed two snipers and are chasing a third. We all groan, because now we’re going to have to fall in and roll out instead of enjoying the fireworks coming from the bombing in the city.

One of my buddies turns to me to say something, but I never hear it. At that moment, a mortar round lands several barracks down from us. I’d like to think it was the force of the explosion that knocks us over, but the truth is, we all shriek like children and fall on our faces.

Someone near me begins screaming.





# the Escapist

## An Outsider's Opinion?

I'm not, nor will I ever be, someone you're liable to confuse with Rambo. What I experienced during the Invasion of Panama was the tiniest slice of Hell. I could count on one hand the number of times I came under direct fire. I'm not a battle-scarred veteran, not a hardened soldier – I wouldn't even qualify as a dependable Boy Scout. But I do know what it's like to be in a firefight. With all respect to the superb Call of Duty and Medal of Honor series, no graphics card will ever be powerful enough to truly simulate the experience.

It is misleading and poor practice for anti-gaming activists – who usually have neither experience with actual combat nor the games they're accusing of being "combat simulators" – to make any comparison between what it's like to push some buttons and "kill" some pixels versus what it's like to hold a real firearm and shoot at another person. Even the most realistic of games, arcade games with plastic light guns cast from real weapons, fall woefully short of an actual firearm – there's no kick, the weapons are far too light, the act of reloading is done automatically and you'll never experience a weapon jam.

That and the fact that getting shot doesn't really hurt....

The loudest critics of games tend to be those who have never really played them – at least, not with an open mind. Their research into games usually consists of quoting the most violent scenes in the game that they themselves have only heard about and never actually experienced first-hand. Taken out of context and with selected description, it's quite easy to horrify people. If I described how one game allowed me to cut into someone's torso and carve out one of their organs, you'd think I was talking about something produced by Rockstar instead of Atlus' Trauma Center: Under the Knife.

It's not that criticizing games for their violent content is a problem to me; I'm more than willing to agree that there are games that should be kept out of the hands of children – just so long as you're not infringing on **my** right to play those games. The problem I have with most gaming critics is that they're all too willing to throw up comparisons of the games with actual combat. Perhaps their intent is to demonstrate how horrific experiences in the games can be, but to

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me – and a number of veterans – what they’re instead saying to us is that the sum of our experiences can be reduced to Dolby Digital Sound and the latest Unreal Engine.

## **Mechanics vs. Motivation**

There are a number of games where the mechanics of aiming a weapon are extremely accurate. Even if you ignore the crosshairs, a lot of games give you the concept of “lining up your sights” and what a “good” target is supposed to look like. But is that enough to teach someone to kill?

According to Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, a retired Army Ranger and West Point psychology professor, yes. Grossman goes on at great length in a number of his writings about Michael Carneal. Carneal is the 14-year-old boy that committed the Paducah, Kentucky, school shootings in 1997 that left three students dead and another five wounded. He opened fire on a group of students in a prayer circle, hitting four of them in the head, one in the neck, and three in the upper torso. Grossman points out the incredible amount of skill this demonstrates; skill that this 14-year

old could only have learned by playing videogames.

“I trained a battalion of Green Berets, the Texas Rangers, the California Highway Patrol, the Australian Federal Police, and numerous other elite military and law enforcement organizations, and when I told them of Michael Carneal’s achievement they were simply amazed [...] His superhuman accuracy, combined with the fact that he “stood still,” firing two-handed, not wavering far to the left or far to the right in his shooting “field,” and firing only one shot at each target, are all behaviors that are completely unnatural to either trained or “native” shooters, behaviors that could only have been learned in a video game.”  
(Grossman, Dave. “Statement Of Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman Before The New York State Legislature.” Oct 1999. *Free Radical*. 01 Nov. 2005.)

Carneal’s accuracy was amazing, there is no doubt about that. And perhaps he did learn such accuracy in the arcade (although having spent many more years in arcades than Carneal and yet not qualifying my first time with my rifle in boot camp, I’d be willing to debate the value of “arcade learning” in real-world



shooting any day). But focusing on the mechanics of shooting taught by videogames ignores the much more important subject that should be the focus of any inquiry into violence: Where did the subject learn the **motivation** to commit such acts?

The mechanics of aiming – especially for pistols – is not particularly difficult. And I hate to break it to Grossman, but “headshots” aren’t an invention of videogames. Carneal’s motivation for that horrific killing spree should be the focus of Grossman’s papers, not the fact that someone might learn to shoot from a videogame. The fact that Carneal targeted students in a “prayer circle” – one of them his ex-girlfriend – has more to do with that case than how much time Carneal spent in an arcade.

Grossman himself focuses on how unbelievable Carneal’s marksmanship is. Are we to believe that anyone playing an arcade game is automatically better qualified with a weapon than highly-trained “Green Berets, the Texas Rangers, the California Highway Patrol, the Australian Federal Police and numerous other elite military and law enforcement organizations?” The things that a videogame teaches about combat – at least a **good** game – focus on using cover and concealment, working as a unit, carefully clearing out a building without exposing yourself to enemy fire – things that involve thinking and problem-solving. Being a superb shot in a game does not translate into being a sniper in the real world. During my enlistment, after the initial nervousness of boot camp, I qualified at all my units as an expert with the M16, .45 and 9mm pistols, and M60 machine gun. Yet in

most videogames, I’m lucky to get one “headshot” per several hundred shots.

## Old Soldiers WASD

When I decided I was going to write this piece, I sat down with my father-in-law and talked about it. He’s a Vietnam veteran, and he and I often talk about our respective experiences. His experiences are vastly deeper and more frightening than my own. During one night on guard duty, his position was overrun by Viet Cong. He called in an air strike on his own location and survived only through a bizarre stroke of Fate.

I showed him some different games to get his opinion on the authenticity of combat in games versus reality. When he tried to play them, the first thing we agreed was that playing first-person shooter games with a joystick sucks – “thumbs are too twitchy to aim with.” We

talked about some of the game scenes and how some critics claim games are **too** authentic, and how games teach kids to kill. While we played Medal Of Honor: Allied Assault, I told him how some people say games are too much like **real** combat.

“Really?” He looked down at his joystick, then up at me. “You know, when I was young, they said it was Rock and Roll corrupting us. Probably the same people doing the bitching, too. But this ... this **game**, teaching someone what combat’s like?” He laughed.

“Might as well give them Pac Man.” 

*Shawn “Kwip” Williams is the founder of N3, where he toils away documenting his adventures as the worst MMOG and pen-and-paper RPG player in recorded history.*



“MIGHT AS WELL  
GIVE THEM *PAC MAN*.”



## KUMA\WAR: FRONTLINES OF A NEW MEDIUM

by Mark Wallace

In July 2003, television screens around the world were filled with images of the dead bodies of Uday and Qusay Hussein, sons of the Iraqi dictator, who had been killed by coalition forces in a raid in Mosul. American troops in Iraq had not been able to take the tyrants-in-waiting alive. But in the first mission from a small company in New York called Kuma Reality Games, gamers got the chance to do better. Just seven months after the brothers' deaths, computer screens across America were filled with similar images: a pixelated Uday and Qusay holed up in an Iraqi villa as a squad of American soldiers – commanded by players who had downloaded the game for free – made their way past sniper fire to capture the wanted men.

Kuma's follow-up missions took on similar moments from the conflict in the Middle East. *Operation Anaconda* re-created part of an assault on Taliban and Al Qaeda forces in the Shah-i-Kot mountains of Afghanistan. In another mission, Kuma put the player in command of soldiers of the 4th "Iron Horse" Infantry Division, who was seeking to put down a sophisticated insurgent operation whose ultimate goal was to knock over a bank in Samarra.

As the company got under steam, the lag between real events and their polygonated onscreen re-creations narrowed. When insurgents raided a police station in Fallujah in mid-February 2004, it took Kuma only two months to put players in the shoes of the inexperienced and poorly armed Iraqi officers who had struggled to fight off the assault.

Still churning out missions, Kuma wants to let players fight wars as they happen. "We're a different kind of videogame company," said Kuma CEO Keith Halper. "We have an extraordinarily fast development environment. [Four months] is really conservative for us, but it's impossible for other videogame companies." And if the company has its way, such fleet-footed production capabilities could change the face of not just gaming, but of television and other media as well.

# the escapist

*Kuma\War*, as the company's basic game is known, is a game that aspires to the state of a cable news broadcast. Indeed, its missions come complete with historical information, links to actual news stories about the real-world events on which each mission is based, and news-like presentations mixing television and game footage with commentary from former military men who've signed on to be part of the project (as well as weirdly enthusiastic narration from *Kuma*'s own "news" anchors). New missions are released on a schedule that mimics cable news cycles. At this point, Halper says, most *Kuma* missions take around three weeks to produce, and some have been produced in as little as three days.

*Kuma* stays fast on its feet, in part, by keeping only a small production staff in-house and farming out short-term work to outside production houses. Because the company's development cycle is so short, Halper says it gives them time to experiment with more new ideas than companies with longer development cycles.

In part, *Kuma* can turn missions around so fast because much of their level

design is done for them by the U.S. Army. With few exceptions, all of their missions are re-creations of historical events - including episodes like the Iran hostage rescue mission of 1980, or John Kerry's controversial gunboat mission of 1969. Where they are not re-creations of real-life events, *Kuma* has taken on the task of creating true-to-life fictional scenarios, like the raid on an Iranian nuclear facility that was one of its latest missions. Because so many of the game's 61 (and counting) missions take place in Iraq, many of the art assets from earlier missions can be quickly tweaked, reused and reconfigured to form new ones.

Of course, many of the details of real events are lost in translation to the pixilated world. *Kuma* is not so much a simulation of war as it is a dramatization of it, just as Walter Cronkite's 1950s television series "You Are There" re-created the stories of people like Joan of Arc and Galileo; you could never know, just from watching that first broadcast cosplay, what it was like to be burned at the stake, but you at least got to swallow the historical events sweetened by the sugar coating of television. *Kuma*

provides a similar kind of sideshow: The game moves people who might not otherwise be interested to look at current events, while the ongoing conflicts of the world provide *Kuma* with a steady stream of new material.

Certainly, few would consider the accounts of war described by a videogame to be as informative as an in-depth news broadcast. But what's interesting about *Kuma\War* is not that it translates a live shooting war into a first-person shooter game, but the fact that it does so in as near as possible to real time.

One of the emerging trends in gaming this year has been the imminent appearance of so-called "episodic" games, Ritual's *SiN Episodes* being the flagship entrant to the still-gestating field. Taking off from Ritual's 1998 FPS *SiN* (which suffered in the shadow of *Half-Life*, released the same year), *SiN Episodes* will present progressive installments, each featuring three to six





hours of gameplay, that will describe an ongoing story much like chapters of a book.

The prospect of such an involved, ongoing shooter fiction has many gamers drooling over their Logitechs. But if you ask me, "episodic" is the wrong word to describe *SiN*'s venture (as cool as it does sound). At three-plus hours a pop, *SiN*'s episodes will be more like sequels in a long-running movie franchise than like

episodes of a weekly television series. Which is exactly where *Kuma* comes in.

Halper's brainstorm is to position *Kuma* for a tie-up with a weekly network television show like *24* or *Alias*. Imagine it: Every Tuesday night, Jack Bauer dodges terrorists and femmes fatale on Fox. As soon as the credits roll, you download the *Kuma* episode that re-creates the show and see if you can go him one better. Or maybe it's Thursday nights with *Alias*, only you get the game episode on Wednesday and play through the back-story leading up to Sydney's latest assignment. Who knows, maybe it's *Desperate Housewives* that'll have you marveling over brilliant squad AI, as you navigate Mary Alice, Susan, Lynette, Bree and Edie through the streets of suburbia to host the perfect Sunday

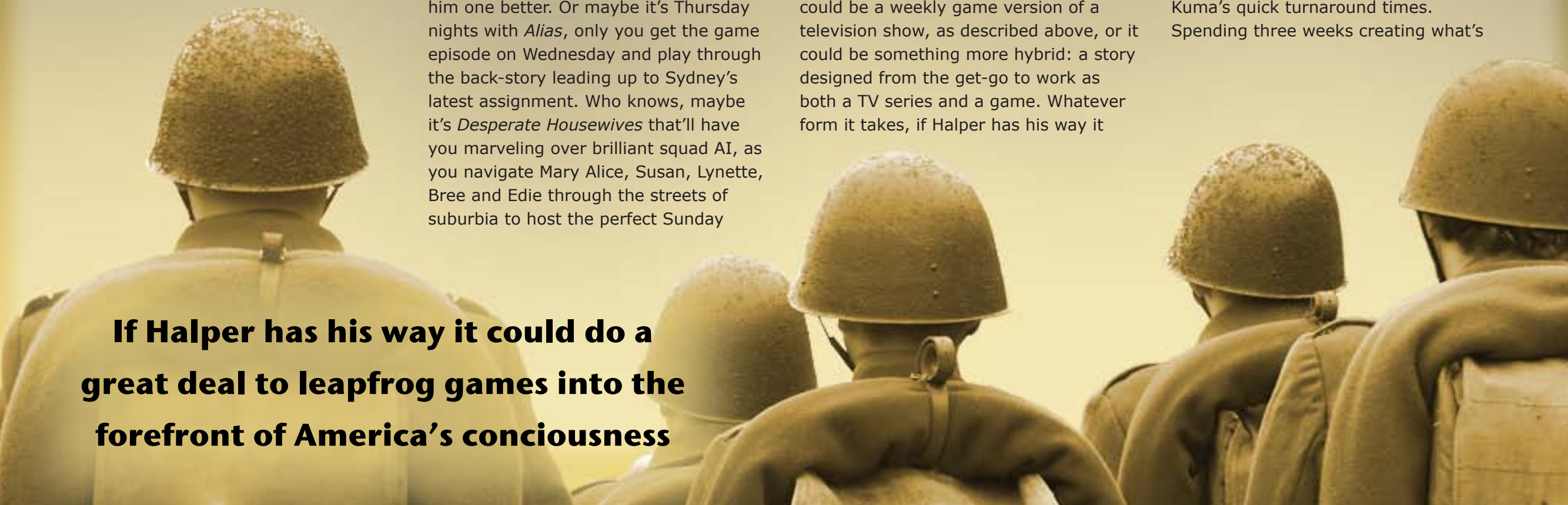
brunch or bed the poolboy before Daddy gets home. The possibilities are endless!

And on *Kuma*'s production schedule, it could actually happen. The company recently signed with Hollywood firm United Talent Agency to shop the idea to networks, and according to Halper, the response has been very positive. When I spoke to Halper, he was hoping to have a product coming to your PC by January. It could be a weekly game version of a television show, as described above, or it could be something more hybrid: a story designed from the get-go to work as both a TV series and a game. Whatever form it takes, if Halper has his way it

could do a great deal to leapfrog games into the forefront of America's consciousness in a way they have not quite achieved so far.

Of course, it will help if both the show and the game are triple-A, engaging products. Unfortunately, that's where *Kuma\War* falls flat, at least so far. As shooters go, it's not quite doing its job. And the problem is not necessarily *Kuma*'s quick turnaround times. Spending three weeks creating what's

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essentially a small level might actually be enough time to get some complexity and balance into the thing. While they're not overly complex, many of *Kuma's* missions seem like they work just fine. It's hard to tell, though, since the current version of Kuma's proprietary game engine is fairly flawed.

I just went back and played the Samarra bank heist mission to make sure I wasn't overstating things here. I'm not. Actually, I had high hopes for the heist mission this time. My entire four-man squad wasn't wasted in the first five minutes, as has occasionally happened in other missions, as one man stands stock-still facing **away from the enemy who's shooting at him**. Unlike in *Desperate Housewives*, squad AI in *Kuma\War* is so stupid as to make you want to frag your own men (which isn't


actually possible). Your squadmates barely register your existence, even when they're supposed to be following you into the fray. Once we climbed in our M1A1 tank, we had better luck shelling the black-clad Fedayeen - some of whom didn't seem very alarmed; they just stood there, too. When one finally did manage to disable our Abrams, we were tossed from the vehicle - only to get stuck within the model's polygons, comically unable to escape the confines of *Kuma\War's* broken physics.

*Battlefield 2* this ain't. In fact, it's not even *America's Army*, though Kuma claims a similar level of realism, wrung from consultants recently retired from various branches of the armed forces. But an Abrams tank that can't drive over a car - that can't even drive over a small rock, for cryin' out loud - is just not a

realistic game feature. Nor is the completely non-interactive environment and the kind of collision detection that has NPCs occasionally wading thigh-deep through the landscape.

Nevertheless, I love *Kuma\War*. Even in the state it's in now, it has a chance to help make not just gaming history, but media and entertainment history as well. Whether it's Kuma or someone else, the idea is just too good not to happen, and it's going to happen soon. The crossover between games and movies is already deep (though we've yet to see a game and movie that are designed from the outset as two facets of the same product). With online game delivery, Xbox Live and Turner Broadcasting's new GameTap service, the medium of

television and the medium of games are poised to go through some kind of significant convergence. A concept like Kuma's could easily turn out to be a big part of the future of both forms of entertainment. And one of the best things about it is that it could do a great deal to help finally drag gaming right into the center of the mainstream spotlight.

As the soldiers in *Kuma\War* all too rarely say: Hoo-wah! 

*Mark Wallace can be found on the web at [Walkering.com](http://Walkering.com). His book with Peter Ludlow, *Only A Game: Online Worlds and the Virtual Journalist Who Knew Too Much*, will be published by O'Reilly in 2006.*



## The Contrarian: Why We Fight

by John Tynes

Starting with the original *Castle Wolfenstein* game on the Apple II, I have personally shot, stabbed, driven over, detonated or otherwise killed thousands of Nazi soldiers. I have slain at least hundreds of Japanese and Italian soldiers. And through incompetence, negligence, callousness or bad luck, I have doubtlessly caused the deaths of at least dozens of American troops through friendly fire. All of this slaughter occurred between about 1939 and 1945.

More recently, I've shot and killed countless Arab "enemy combatants" and outright terrorists, gunned down North Korean soldiers in their missile bunkers, executed rogue intelligence operatives from my own government, and even fought alongside John Kerry. I've felt the *Call of Duty*, received the *Medal of Honor*, fought with my *Brothers in Arms*, done my *Ghost Recon*, been over the *Rainbow Six*, joined *Operation Flashpoint*, escaped from a *Splinter Cell*, and have both *Commanded* and *Conquered*. If you made a charnel pit of all my varied dead, from the flickering pixel-men of that long-ago castle to the latest normal-mapped shrapnel victims, it might blot out the sun. Such is the magnitude of my carnage.





# the escapist

All of this is to say: me too. The following indictment of our crimes does not exclude the present prosecutor, who is both accuser and among the accused.

I believe the seemingly endless popularity of these particular games, in which players take the role of soldiers, spies and other enforcers of government policy, can be attributed to the inherent appeal of a particular ideology. The practical implementation of this ideology can include myriad bureaucratic and cultural details but whose fundamental appeal to the human animal comes down to the notion that might makes right.

I'm talking about fascism.

Put simply, fascism is a political system that advances the worth of the state above any other consideration. Your life, your freedom, your work, your family, your property, your expression all serve the state at its whim and can be used or discarded as the state wishes. This is why fascism is inextricably linked with violence: When the individual and the fascist state come in conflict, violence is how the state achieves its aims. Where the democracy relies on representational government and capitalism values the

market and the rule of law, fascism is ultimately rooted in the belief that those in charge know what's right and have the authority to manifest their will by force.

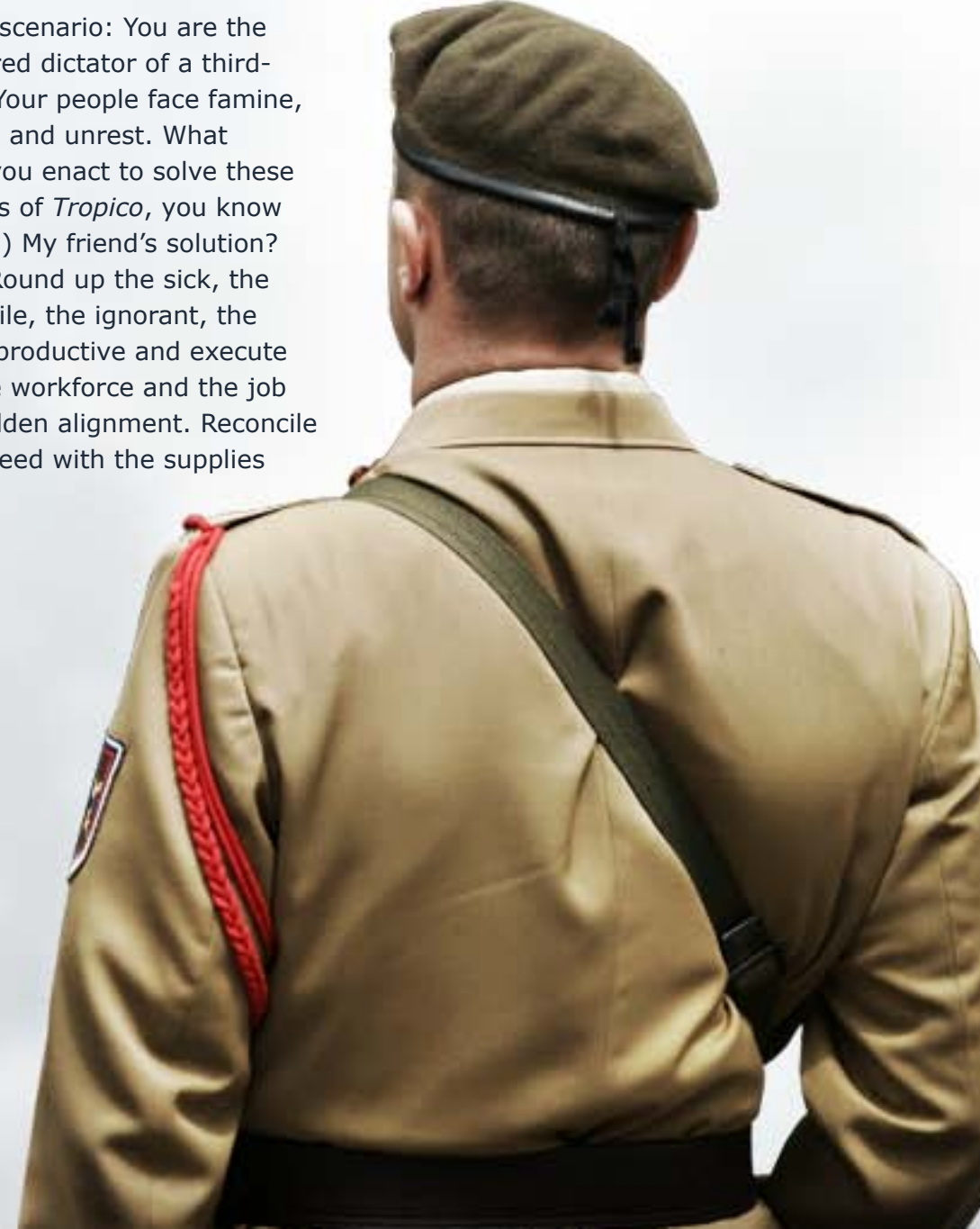
And it feels really, really good.

The gun settles all arguments. The boot silences criticism. The tank crushes protest. When the world is quiet and you are the only one standing, your opinion is the correct one because there is no alternative. You are right, because there is no competition to prove you wrong.

How many times have you looked at a situation in the news, whether a political dispute or a terrorist attack, and thought, "If they'd just make me dictator for a day, just one day, I'd straighten this mess out." I'm sure you would. You're a good person. Your ideas have merit. If you could just cut through all that debate and get something done for a change, people would understand why you had to raise your voice. Sometimes somebody has to shout a little, push a bit, jab with the sharp elbow, just to make the other fellow see sense.

A friend of mine studied political science at Yale. In one class, the professor

posted a game scenario: You are the newly empowered dictator of a third-world country. Your people face famine, plague, poverty and unrest. What policies would you enact to solve these problems? (Fans of *Tropico*, you know how this works.) My friend's solution? Death camps. Round up the sick, the lame, the infertile, the ignorant, the useless, the unproductive and execute them. Bring the workforce and the job market into sudden alignment. Reconcile the mouths to feed with the supplies of food.







**When we play these kinds of games, we are in every case taking the place of the hypothetical politicians who have failed us.**



The rest of the class was horrified. Their reports contained economic incentives, requests for aid, plans for a staged restoration of democracy, summits to bring the eggheads together, earnest ideas by the wagonload. By comparison, my friend's solution was ghastly.

The professor was overjoyed. Finally, a student saw the point of the exercise: making comprehensible what looks incomprehensible when viewed through the media, understanding how Papa Doc and Pol Pot and all their ilk come to power and why they make the decisions they do.

My friend figured it out. He played the scenario and won. He saved the *Kobayashi Maru*. It should come as no surprise that he was a hardcore gamer.

When we play these kinds of games, when we step into the role of the soldier, the spy, the conspirator, the operative, we are in every case taking the place of the hypothetical politicians who have failed us. If politicians did their jobs better, Sam Fisher would be out of work. Rainbow Six would run a gas station. Soldiers would stay home. But these games begin at the point where politics

has failed, where the will of the state to survive can only be expressed through violence.

At this point, it's up to us. We are exceptional in every way: moral, compassionate, clear-headed, deadly. People face the world with the tools they hold in their hands, and in these games those tools are weapons. The joystick only lets us interact with people by killing them. The game only lets us solve problems with violence.

EA's *Medal of Honor* encouraged us to find out: What would I have done at Pearl Harbor? The answer is gratifying: I would have been smarter, tougher and better than the 2,403 soldiers who lost their lives that day because I lived and I killed approximately a metric shit-ton of Japanese airmen in the process. I'm the hero! Keep this up and I'll program a combo into my turbo controller and take down Tojo in a cage match.

I used to joke: How can they call it the History Channel when they never have shows on the history of cheese? But that's the deal. The popular conception of history is military history. Washington at Yorktown, the flag-raisers at Iwo Jima.


Every second show on that channel is something like *History's Hitlery Mysteries*. Hardcore gamers don't buy games where the goal is to compromise. They buy games where the goal is to save the world - by force.

I believe humans have a deep longing for authority, to possess it or to obey it. It is tempered by our empathy, our ability to view another's situation and project it onto ourselves. But our games know nothing of empathy. We optimize our play to reach the solution in the most direct way possible. When you watch a video of someone completing the entirety of *Half-Life* in 45 minutes, you have to think: That guy could make the trains run on time. There is no pause for conversation or exploration. There is merely the fanatical implementation of an optimal result.

A final solution.

Somebody has to save the world. And that means somebody has to rule it. We gamers have had the training. We've learned the mindset. We know the score. We are efficient, deadly, methodical. If only we were in charge - then, oh then, we could show the world how much we

care about it. We could wrap our arms around all that suffering and whisper of our speed runs, our fervent smashing of crates, the countless times we've saved them all already. And if any of them talked back or questioned our wisdom we could show them exactly what we've learned.

Press the button. 

*John Tynes has been a game designer and writer for fifteen years, and is a columnist for the Stranger, X360 UK, and The Escapist. His most recent book is Wiser Children, a collection of his film criticism.*

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## NEWS BITS

### Xbox 360 Launches in Europe

With only 300,000 systems shipped to the continent, Microsoft has been accused of “[failing] to provide enough consoles ahead of Christmas.” That hasn’t stopped the console from gathering the same amount of attention it received stateside only two weeks ago. More interesting will be how well the console is received in Japan, which we should find out this week.

Also notable for independant gaming fans, 1987’s Crystal Quest joins other independent titles on the Xbox Live Arcade, with an update from original developer Patrick Buckland (now at Stainless Games). Hopefully we’ll see these non-retail releases happen with increasing frequency.

### In-game Advertising Works, Increasing

According to a new study by Nielsen Entertainment, integrated advertising in games can “make players feel more positive about a product,” as long as the ads were relevant to the game. The survey was conducted as a joint effort between Nielsen and Activision, and also notes that “ads done in a way the player interprets as inappropriate can also annoy.”

Even without strict studies, in-game advertising was still big business. Midway, who just hired their first director of in-game advertising, revealed that they “take as little as \$20,000 for a limited placement on up to close to \$1 million.” EA also plans to increase the number of titles with in-game advertising this year, up to 13 from 11.

# Casual Friday

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