SPLASHDOWN

It’s July 2007, and Southern England is being gradually submerged in the heaviest rains for 60 years. Intercity trains to and from the West Country, where I live, are forced to roll slowly through shallow lakes of water (a scene reminiscent of a drab, burned-out version of the end of the animated film *Spirited Away*). Half the London Underground is closed due to flooding, and I must take a circuitous, oversubscribed subway route to reach my destination, Victoria Station. The familiar central London travel hub is awash with water from the leaking roof. Hundreds of people stand about forlornly staring at the departure boards. Most trains out of the station have been canceled.

I’m going to be late for my meeting with an old *Quake* acquaintance, Paul “Locki” Wedgwood, who has long been a key member of the British and European *Quake III* community. As a key organizational gamer, he was responsible for rallying my team to exhibition matches, and although we did not meet until many years later, we corresponded regularly around these events. Very occasionally, we even played in the same games.
“Locki” was a regular name on the *Quake* chat channels, and he managed to drum up plenty of support for the game and its variants on U.K. game services. The success of my team and dozens of others depended on people like Wedgwood running the community—delivering news, organizing competitions, and making sure servers stayed online. Their dedication meant the games were free and well maintained.

These days, however, Wedgwood’s interest in the *Quake* community is altogether more serious: he’s making the games that these online communities will play. Wedgwood is now the owner of Splash Damage, which is working with id Software and Activision to make *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*. (By the time you read this, *Quake Wars* will have been played by tens of thousands of gamers across the world. At the time I was traveling through London, however, almost no one had played the game, and it was a largely unknown quantity—just another work in progress.) This sequel to both *Quake* and *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*’s free *Enemy Territory* expansion will be one of the major games of 2007. It’s a first-person online shooter, like *Quake III*, in which gamers take up the roles of human defenders and alien invaders on a lavish futuristic battlefield. Given its pedigree, I’m boyishly excited about being able to play it for the first time. The flood-driven delays and the slowly trundling train I finally catch from Victoria combine in a nexus of frustration and make me want to scream. I regret not bringing a thicker book with me to read.

When I finally step into Splash Damage’s offices (over the pallet bridge across voluminous puddles), Wedgwood doesn’t seem to notice my tardiness. He’s all smiles. With glasses, goatee, black Splash Damage T-shirt, and a collection of sci-fi figurines around the windows of the demo room, he fulfills plenty of familiar gamer traits. But there’s something else detectable in him: a glint in the eye, a
strong sense of just how focused and dedicated he has become. He’s a man who understands his mission. Video games have changed Wedgwood, and he knows it. More than that, he embraces it. Like so many other people I meet in London, Wedgwood is someone for whom games have become the currency of his life.

Wedgwood has been prodigiously successful, not only in creating a major game but in getting into a position of corporately funded creativity by virtue of his own passion for gaming. It’s fair to say that he’s one of London’s most accomplished gamers. *Quake Wars* may have been a massive project involving dozens of people and millions of dollars, but it was Wedgwood’s baby. He’s plugged into every aspect of it, and his face lights up with a mixture of pride, delight, and obsession as he demonstrates the game to me. He talks at speed, leaping from one subject to the next with alarming energy. He talks as one gamer does to another, with only the most minor inflections of marketingspeak creeping into his monologue. He stops and apologizes for talking in what he calls “salespeak,” explaining that he has trained himself to trot off accolades and financial factoids so that he can sell the game to distributors and retail reps. Getting the message across to the nongamers, especially these money men, has become a full-time job. I confirm that I understand, and we continue.

There must be hundreds of men like Wedgwood across Greater London—men for whom gaming has become the great escape. They’ve all come to games out of a desire for leisure-time distractions, but some, like Wedgwood and his colleagues, take it much further. In fact, on reflection, Wedgwood has probably taken his gaming further than any of the gamers I’ve met in the past decade. He has been utterly faithful to his obsession, and it has been faithful to him. He started off, like me, by finding a *Quake* team in the
late 1990s—one of the European “clans” of Team Fortress and Quake players—and playing routinely. His competitive nature shone through as the team began to win on a routine basis. Wedgwood led from the front, as he has continued to do throughout his career in games. As he played more and more, he began to forge strong links with the people who made up the online community. More important, he had time to sink into writing news and running game Web sites. “I got a job as a contract IT guy in a bank in the City,” he explained in an interview we’d done a few months earlier. “Because it had trading floors, I wasn’t allowed to touch the network between nine and five. So my job was to sit at my desk and not touch anything. Instead of actually doing anything, I spent most of 1998 updating the Team Fortress news desk.” Suddenly he had a second job, and rather than dwelling on the lonely existence of a server administrator, he began to connect with a young, energetic community.

As Wedgwood became increasingly integrated in the gaming community, he began to get involved with the now-defunct gaming community service Barrysworld. At the same time, however, his work began to suffer. Like me, he’d found something more important. He soon lost his job at the bank and then another working for a government tech department. After months of chatting and gaming with the folks who ran the Barrysworld service, Wedgwood discovered that its chairman lived just a few blocks away in the same part of London. The two men arranged to meet for a drink, and soon Wedgwood was filling the role of infrastructure manager for the gaming service. “It was a big pay cut,” Wedgwood explained. “But by then I knew I had to be in the games industry.”

After a month of the familiar routine of commissioning servers and dealing with the technical issues of Internet
gaming, Wedgwood found himself commentating on *Quake* matches that were to be televised on Now TV, a cable channel that was selling content into the Asian market. All the action took place during unsociable hours—weekends, evenings, and so on. “So during the week,” he explained, “I got more and more involved in mod work.” *Mod work*, or *modding*, is the process of taking an existing game and modifying it to create free variants. It’s a kind of nonprofit amateur game design. It was to be the foundation of what Wedgwood and his allies would do with the commercial *Quake Wars* project. “*Team Fortress* had been the main thing for us, but we were all looking forward to *Quake III*. I joined up with a mod team called *Q3F*, based on *Fortress*, and I soon became project leader for this *Quake III* mod.”

This was the crucial turning point for Wedgwood. By taking up modification, Wedgwood had set out not to make a game from scratch but, instead, to build something based on a work undertaken by a professional team. By standing on the shoulders of giants and repurposing what had gone before, Wedgwood could create something new and viable. In this case, it was a modification of *Quake III*, but Wedgwood could have chosen any number of commercial games. What was most significant about modding projects like this, however, was that it demonstrated that games were entering a new era and taking gamers with them. Wedgwood was working with a team that was based across Europe and getting help from game designers in Dallas in a project that would be the foundation for a new career in game development. His story was fascinating to me because it seemed to exemplify what so much coverage of the gaming press missed out on: how games were influencing the lives of the people who played them. It was becoming clear from my visits to London that they were influencing many, many people.
Wedgwood’s London was becoming another node in an international, globalized gaming culture. He and his team are representative of this latest phase of British gaming—one that is heavily influenced by American and Japanese game design but has also hooked itself up to an evolving, networked culture. The entire Splash Damage team were inspired by and connected via the Internet, and the game development—the modification—that they immersed themselves in was very different from the amateur games environment that had previously existed in the United Kingdom. Fifteen or twenty years earlier, homes across Britain were nurturing a generation of game designers whose experiences with games were rather unlike those of Wedgwood’s team. This was once a nation of “bedroom programmers,” a phenomenon of one- or two-man game design teams, facilitated by the simplicity of the 8-bit (and then 16-bit) home computers that proliferated at the end of the 1980s. The British games industry thrived in those years thanks to the sheer number of home computers and the creativity they engendered. While the rest of the world was falling into the thrall of Atari, Nintendo, and then Sega, Britain’s gaming language was being written in machine code on ZX Spectrums and Commodore Amigas. Game design was rampant, weird, and wonderful. The country produced both defining video games and a generation of gamers whose experience of making their own games was at odds with the way games are made today—in multimillion-dollar media studios across the world. Many Britons see that era of early home computing as a golden age of gaming. It was a time in which anyone could get involved in the process of making games. Copying a few lines out of a manual or learning a crude programming language was all it took to start making games. Almost everyone had access to the tools—home computing was cheap and ubiquitous;
creativity was unbounded. Many of the principles of games as they are seen today were conceived and delivered in that neolithic era of computerized play.

The home-programming culture has now largely been lost, thanks to the increasing complexity and commercialization of gaming. There’s a pocket of personal creativity here and there (the British company Introversion springs to mind), but to create games now means raising large budgets and employing dozens of professionals, exactly as Wedgwood does in his South London studio. But Wedgwood’s project also demonstrates that there is still hope for individuals wanting to find their way in. Thanks to the tools and the technological scaffolding provided by modding, the bedroom programmers do still have a way of making something unique—even if it means working with others across the Net. In Wedgwood’s era, creativity is once again being facilitated by cheap computers and simple tools, but these are tools provided by the commercial games industry and distributed electronically.

Modifying games has become both the new amateur art form that could drive the creation of games onward and upward and the training grounds for potential commercial game creators. It’s not the only way of making amateur games—and the programming of one person can still achieve a great deal—but it is a new way, one that has had major ramifications for many of the gamers I have encountered. It makes the creation of games accessible to all—not just the gilded elite.

Where once Britain was a nation of solitary programmers, it is now a node in an international network of cut-and-paste video game creation—a place where gamers can get a leg up from the efforts of the professionals and create professional-looking games via a series of shortcuts. Modding games, I will later argue, is one of the ways in which
gaming will begin to change gamers’ lives all over again. We’ll come back to Wedgwood and his companions later, as I discuss just how gamers have been inspired to change the medium in which they live and play.

LIVING INSTANCES

Let’s now leave me goggle-eyed in front of that first session of *Quake Wars* and roll back a few years to the time that followed my stint as a financial journalist (and consequently my most excruciating encounters with boredom). Back then I thought of London as a city of toil, depression, and long journeys spent jostling with exhausted commuters. I moved away to a cheerily provincial tourist trap of a town in the West Country of England, where I sit writing these words today. I was glad to see the back of the big city, and several times I turned down job offers that would have meant returning there. But soon my idea of London began to change. As my new career developed, I began to journey to London and greet the people I met there with a new perspective. The people I now traveled to London to see (people like Wedgwood) were illustrative of how and why my life had gone down the route it had. London became the place I went to in order to talk to interesting gamers—gamers who talk about *SingStar, Tekken, or Project: Ico* with wide eyes or razor-sharp sarcasm; gamers who are jet-lagged and still pumping with adrenaline from a weeklong gaming competition in Korea; gamers who are bitter about the loss of their “golden age” or thrilled by unforeseen developments. These knowledgeable, energetic people, who have things to say and insights to share, replaced the financiers and clerks of my previous life. These gamers were living instances of how games had changed people’s lives
and how games had changed my life. Their enthusiasm was infectious, galvanizing.

My travels had begun to reveal that almost all writing and reporting concerned with gaming overlooked what the experience of gaming had meant to the gamers themselves. There was some talk about the intellectual or cognitive experience, but how games slotted into different lives and how they changed perceptions and agendas was being ignored. Most writing about games was about “the product” or about some particular phenomenon—virtual economies, violence in games, marriage via *EverQuest*. But there was more to it than that: I wanted to talk about what the gamers themselves were doing, to describe about what they were like and how the experience of gaming manifested itself in their different lives. How does that Saturday afternoon spent smashing cars in *Crackdown* fit into the life of a dedicated father and accountant? How are schoolchildren’s personal politics influenced by educational games? How have South Korean youngsters turned avoiding boredom into a profession? The need to talk about these things was what made the present writing possible.

Take, for example, a man called Jonathan Smith. I encounter Smith on an irregular basis, each time bumping into him at a different stage in his career in games—here in an Internet café in central London, there at the Olympia convention center—each time with a different game-related theme. Smith had, I learned, once worked on the same magazine that had saved me from unemployment. Long before my time, he had moved on to write a book, to work on video games, to get a job with Lego, and eventually to found his own company. In 2006 I was sent on an assignment to see this new company and talk to its creative director.

I arrived at Smith’s far-periphery-of-London headquar-
ters (on the outskirts of the conurbation somewhere near the Chilterns) on a mild summer afternoon. We had arranged the details of the meeting a couple of months previously in a hired barroom packed with bloggers and folk from the games industry—unshaven men who stood around drinking beer and trying not to talk about games—and so the venue for this latest meeting couldn’t have been more different. Set in a large, modestly maintained garden, the large Victorian house was unlike any other development office I had visited. It was a whole world of domesticity and languid porch-dwelling cats away from the sequence of downtown studios on office blocks I had reported on across the world. Smith’s office was situated in a small building on the grounds of the main house. He led the way down a gravel driveway of what was a very English home. It was the nerve center of development for the sequel to 2005’s most successful British video game, *Lego Star Wars*, which sold three and a half million copies its first year. “Of course, there are still offices where the work happens,” Smith explained as we entered the kitchen-office area to make a cup of tea and a sandwich. “Traveller’s Tales [the main studio] have about a hundred people in Manchester.” In that cottage just outside Burnham (a suburban appendix to the concrete jungles of Slough), Smith and the company director, Tom Stone, along with their lead producers and the Q & A team (secreted upstairs in the cottage bedrooms), were working toward making the perfect sequel to the previous year’s success.

Smith sat down in a large, well-upholstered armchair to tell me about the relationship he had created between several different game companies. His own small production unit had to work with the larger development studio (Traveller’s Tales) as well as Lego, the publishers at Activision, and the *Star Wars* franchise controllers at LucasArts. “It’s
a relationship of love,” Smith laughed. “Everyone has input onto what the game should be, so it’s never a forced marriage.” Smith is one of a small cadre of gamer-developers who seem to have exact control over their passion for gaming. The results of this focused energy have meant that the people who work around Smith display enormous trust in his abilities to create a worthwhile game. One of his team confided in me that he was amazed by Smith’s insight and long-term enthusiasm for the medium. They were traits I had seen many times in people who were gamers long before they were industry professionals.

The fact that both Activision and LucasArts (two games industry monoliths) were now so interested in the Lego Star Wars concept seemed like a reflection of Smith’s honed gaming instincts. People had been uncertain about the idea of fusing Star Wars with Lego, but that kind of doubt hadn’t been an issue for Smith. His time working at Lego had been revelatory, and he articulated some of that effect on him. He talked about being “immersed in toys” and explained that the attitude Lego had toward their “play materials” (the plastic kits) had gone a long way toward expanding his own understanding of what it is to play. For someone who had been around gaming for decades, it seemed like a period of refreshment and enlightenment. “Play has many meanings and its own semantics. Lego was about nothing less than fun,” said Smith. “And that’s not mere corporate gobbledygook. To be immersed in that and tasked with finding out what games Lego could make was liberating. We meshed that with our own commercial awareness, so it wasn’t just R & D. It was about making something that kids would love to play with.” But, more important, Smith was, for the first time, really set on making something that everyone could enjoy.

“We knew we had what it took to express Lego interac-
tively,” said Smith, although the expression of plastic toy in sci-fi video game was clearly never a straightforward problem. “There was a big challenge in making the minifigure into a video game character. Animating them makes a video game character, but it has to be done in a way that makes them a video game and not a simulation.” Watching Smith steer Princess Leia’s chunky legs around the screen suggested that there was as much inspiration as perspiration in making that happen. This idea of his game not being a simulation was important to Smith. Lego Star Wars was about playing, not about building. It was not an attempt to simulate Lego itself. “It’s not a ‘CAD’ experience,” said Smith, when I ask him why there’s no “real” building in Lego Star Wars but, rather, a series of puzzles in which pieces assemble themselves. “It’s not a simulation of the plastic Lego experience—it’s the imaginative exercise. It’s exploration. Lego translates differently into the video game space. It’s not about building, because that becomes frustrating. Of course, you can mix things up in the game world, but not in the same way as the real world.”

This was where Smith’s philosophy as a gamer became apparent: “We are delivering imagination and not simulation.” You can see these aspects of Smith’s attitude emerging within the game: there’s a constant two-player dynamic, where someone can drop in and join the first player at any moment—someone like a busy parent. Smith says, quite seriously, that he thinks the Lego games are “for the child in all of us.” It’s clear that his project is motivated not by a desire to make video games for money but by a motivation to make video games for his own family. Smith is the father of three, and the experience of parenthood seems to have defined and completed his understanding of games. “We focus on the reactions of children,” he says. “Specifically my two boys.” For Smith, making video games for a younger audi-
ence is clearly a personal matter. The ultimate judge and jury of his life’s work will be his own children, and that means that games development is more than just a job.

Smith’s joy was evident as he sat next to me, showing me what he had made. It was gaming that had allowed him to create something unique and given him a mission. And his purpose wasn’t some mysterious tier of administration or paperwork that would be alien and abstract from the lives of his children; instead, it was right here in front of us. We picked it up and we played.

THE LABEL

The journalist Will Self once remarked that he would probably identify himself as a Londoner before identifying himself as a man, so important was the effect of the city on his psyche. In a similar way, I would probably identify myself as a gamer more than a writer, a human being, or a European citizen. The same is true for many other gamers: their job and ethnicity are subordinate to the fact of how their leisure time is spent. The classification “gamer” has become a badge of honor and, occasionally, a badge of shame. The label has (at least in the West) taken on a peculiar potency that doesn’t quite seem parallel with “cinemaphile” or “art lover.” Perhaps it’s because gamers have been to some degree vilified and mocked that they have felt a need to grasp onto and highlight their identity. They have appropriated the term for their own uses.

The blogger Alice Taylor has mused on this subject a number of times in her endless trawl through the most obscure corners of gaming culture. “If everyone’s a gamer, or even a majority, then ‘gamer’ will lose its tribal status,” she told me. “It’s currently a subculture, an identity statement. It will just become another ordinary ‘doing’ label: viewer,
watcher, listener, gamer.” Taylor’s blog is largely motivated by her love of picking up on the gamer label: she blogs fashion and furniture, phones and furry toys, each item emblazoned with or inspired by the iconography and language of gaming. Gamers like Taylor are endlessly absorbed in the active process of bonding themselves with these symbols, the icons of their enjoyment. The tattoos stained into the skin of a number of my friends testify to the visceral reality of their commitment to these gaming identities.

Of course, the gamer label only identifies an indefinite aspect of a person. We don’t all play the same games or even place the same value in games. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a difference between those people for whom games are little more than a distraction and those for whom games are of defining importance. Gamers have been changed in some of the ways I have already listed here but also in many other ways besides. It’s possible that the gamer label to some degree matches up with the industry’s internal identification of “hard-core” and “casual” gamers. This distinction has proven to be something of a myth but has nevertheless been used by developers and publishers to distinguish between the kinds of people who will simply dabble in the odd game of Solitaire or freeware Mah-jongg and those who commit vast amounts of time and money to habitual gaming. The latter people, to my mind, are the true gamers.

The habitual, hard-core gamers are people who have discovered something essential in gaming. What these people get from video games cannot be found elsewhere, and it is difficult to determine precisely what that thing is (although I suspect it has something to do with their personal projects of staying entertained). The range of possible gaming experiences is so vast that any survey will rapidly be overwhelmed or lose its way: gaming is no longer readily de-
scribed or bracketed. The local status of a Japanese arcade hero hammering his way through epically difficult fighting games on a single credit seems worlds apart from the solitary hours I spent locked into the epic ultradetailed private fantasy world of the *Elder Scrolls* game *Oblivion*. What my retro-loving friend gets from the ancient classics of *Yar's Revenge* and *Breakout* seems to have little connection with the drunken evenings of *Guitar Hero* we enjoy elsewhere. The experiences that video games provide, the services they offer, cover a vast spectrum of possibility. We use *Tetris* on our mobile phone to make a train journey pass quickly, we turn a *Final Fantasy* game into “duvet terrain” when we’re feeling tired and emotional. For hard-core gamers, video games have done more than distract or entertain us. They’re vital experiences in which we’ve uncovered something useful, something vital in our lives.

One of these hard-core gamers, an adopted Londoner, is Leo Tan. He is a man whom I first met with his face illuminated by the screen of a handheld Nintendo. Does he think of himself primarily as a gamer? “Yes, completely,” he says, “but I wouldn’t say it has ever been a revelation at any point; I didn’t wake up one day and think, ‘Holy shit, I’m a gamer!’ I suppose I’m just as likely to identify myself as Scottish, if it makes someone more comfortable.”

Given Tan’s personal history, it seems strange that he should worry about whether the gamer label would make people feel uncomfortable. He’s right, though: the unfamiliar often does make people nervous. Tan knows all about that. He grew up on the Pennyburn, a council estate on the outskirts of Kilwinning, a small town in the west of Scotland. It was a place where “the schools have bars on the windows and huge fences to keep the children in, and all the mental kids carry Stanley blades.”

Tan’s memories of that time are grim. “Growing up there
was not much fun for me, who felt like the only Chinese kid within a thousand miles. Loads of fighting and being beaten up by huge Scots, a general fear of being out on the streets.” For him, as for thousands of other children, games allowed a route for escape, a tunnel out of a place where there was no option to belong. It was the perfect alternative to ugly reality and to looming boredom: “Gaming was my escape when going out on the streets was no longer valid. Life at home was hell thanks to an alcoholic mum and an abusive step dad. My life consisted of getting out of the house whenever they were at home or staying in my room playing games whenever they were out at the pub. Much of my time out of the house was spent at a friend’s playing games. Whenever I look back on my childhood, I can mostly remember just the games. Nostalgia for some people is remembering fields and playing soldiers in the trees; for me, it’s *Roland on the Ropes* on the Amstrad CPC 464 and *Captive* on the Atari ST. Those worlds and my time in them provide the basis for all of my reminiscing.” Tan is not alone in these memories.

When he grew up, Tan did something that probably doesn’t come naturally to all kids who have spent most of their youth savoring computer games: he became a hairdresser. But even with this new career of haircuts and expensive shampoo, the computerized pastimes were not forgotten; Tan still bought and played everything he could. More important, though, he continued to find friends who had the same interests, people with the same ideas about games. He found much of this companionship on Internet game forums, such as the one hosted by the infamous British video game magazine *Edge*: “I was on it at least a few hours a day, which seems like a tremendous waste of time in hindsight. Or at least it would if it hadn’t have got me my job. On the forum, I met [London-based public rela-
tions executive] Simon Byron, my current boss. I was getting bored with hairdressing, so after ten years of talking to hot girls about their sex lives, I asked Simon Byron for a job. Literally, I said, ‘Can I have a job?’ and he said, ‘Yes.’ That was it, really. I didn’t really have a job interview or anything. I joined the games industry solely on my forum posting. Simon thought I could write and that I knew about games, and that was enough.”

Echoing the sentiments I’ve heard from dozens of other gamers over the years, Tan recalled how he suddenly felt at home in a job where he got to talk about and work on the things he loved: “I’ve spent a lifetime feeling separated from everything and everyone around me. Things that I’ve cared about have not, by and large, been the things that other people around me care about. I have made some incredible friends growing up who also love games, but by and large we were not part of the ‘community,’ for lack of a better term.” The video games that gave the young Tan something to escape into had ended up giving a focus to his adult life, just as it had done for me, Smith, Wedgwood, and countless other Londoners. Tan, however, had gone one better than any of us.

When working on the marketing for the rhythm-action masterpiece Guitar Hero, Tan and his colleagues arranged a publicity stunt at Donnington rock festival, the United Kingdom’s largest heavy metal event: they would play Guitar Hero on stage in the opening hours of the concert. In a life that had been framed by gaming, this seemed like the ultimate achievement, a ludicrous, triumphant epiphany of video gaming.

Tan swells with pride at the mere mention of the event: “We opened for Guns ’N’ Roses,” he boasts. “Technically speaking, we opened for everyone. Gibson gave us their stage, so we just plugged in and went for it. We were really
scared. We had no idea what the crowd would do when they saw our plastic guitars. We thought the worst that can happen would be bottles of piss thrown at us or maybe the crowd rushing the stage and smashing our faces in, so when we opened, my hands were shaking and I missed easy notes. Our tent quickly filled, as we were the only music anywhere, and they loved it. I think most of the crowd knew the game. They were cheering for songs during the options screen, and we had kids up on stage playing. Most of them were nailing the final tier songs on *Expert*; some played behind their head. It was incredible. It was the exact opposite of our worst fears. And playing *Guitar Hero* on stage is a completely different experience to playing at home. At home, you might feel like a guitar god; but on stage, people are screaming, and when you come off, they swamp to the sides to try to talk to you. It’s exhilarating in a way that I’ll never experience elsewhere. And it was a game. *And everyone knew it was a game.*” Somehow, impossibly, Tan had been there when gaming turned into rock and roll. How’s that for entertainment?