This Gaming Life
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And now for a brief digression to a dreary evening in Bath, England. . . .

On celebrating someone’s birthday on a freezing winter night, we adjourned our drinking to a town apartment. The place was Spartan, apart from its gaming apparatus. There was a long sofa, a large TV, and a stack of game consoles from different eras. Atop this pile there was a Nintendo Wii, complete with two wireless motion-sensitive controllers and a copy of *Wii Sports*. An evening that had already been fairly exuberant was suddenly dominated by the yelling of two 20-something women who were wildly punching the air as their supercute Mii avatars duked it out on-screen in a game of virtual boxing. The scene was bizarre but uplifting. We jeered and cheered for the flailing ladies, cracking open fresh tins of booze as we did so.

One of the people next to me on the sofa, a writer of many years’ experience, said: “That, right there, is why Nintendo are the most important thing ever to happen to gaming.” And I thought he was dead right. Yes, what else
could matter outside a small group of friends enjoying themselves so completely? How could anything but this sudden joy in technological novelty really be important about games? How could the future of games be anything other than this kind of entertainment, on this kind of evening?

Much of what is currently written about gaming relies on just that kind of assumption: namely, that the significant future of gaming is in what happens with home consoles, in front of the family TV. I touched on this assumption in my essay about Seoul and the PC gamers of East Asia, when I pointed out how strange it seemed that their gaming culture was based around the desktop PC. Here in the West, we can’t help but assume that the most important and vital aspects of gaming are going to be found in the boxes we plug into our television sets. We all have evenings of gaming like that one I had last winter, and we are all struck by the convenience and power of these pluggable entertainment gadgets. Naturally we’re inclined to believe that they will be the dominant, most relevant, most important gaming platforms for the future. It is assumed that their availability and accessibility will be the defining feature of the future of gaming and that their polished games are what everyone really wants to play. It is also assumed that the most interesting events in video gaming are going to be derived from big-budget, best-selling supergames, the likes of which find their home on the PlayStation or the Xbox. For the purposes of most gaming discussion, this assumption seems reasonable enough, but over the last couple of years, I’ve begun to think that there are some problems with it. I’ve hinted at quite a few of these problems already in the present writing, but perhaps it’s time to dig up a few more.

There are reasons to think that the future of gaming and of the behavior of gamers could be more various and less controlled than we might expect from the “home console”
model. It might not be big companies that ultimately decide where gaming goes or how it gets there. These issues were encapsulated for me in my meeting back in London with Paul Wedgwood (described in “The Big Smoke”). At the end of our session, the goateed developer said: “The future of media isn’t TV, it’s YouTube. The same sort of thing seems to be true of consoles and PCs. Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo control what you see on their screens, like broadcast television, but the PC is unconstrained. That, I think, is a very important difference.” Later, listening to those words played back on my dictating machine, I realized that my interviewee was a living example of the importance of gaming and of why the difference between consoles and PCs was important. Wedgwood was a gamer who had gone pro but who needed a certain culture and certain environment to allow him to do so. And he was working with the YouTube of gaming, having entered his profession via amateur modding.

The modification of games is supported by commercial companies to differing degrees, with many of them releasing tool kits that allow direct modification of game parameters, with access to level-building tools and other custom-built applications. Wedgwood took full use of these tools, even taking the initiative and getting in touch with the developers directly before the *Quake III* tools had been officially released. Wedgwood’s team was allowed to test the tool kit, and in doing so, they seized a head start for their modification. As the project ripened, Wedgwood began to do huge amounts of promotion and marketing for his game, e-mailing news sites and promoting their work to the gaming teams across Europe. Splash Damage’s mod *Q3F* was going to be one of *Quake III*’s most important add-ons, and Wedgwood made sure that everyone knew about it. Once the mod had been released, Wedgwood persuaded gaming
community administrators to run tournaments for the game, many of which were to be populated by the small army of $Q3F$ disciples who had signed up to test the mod in its earliest beta stages.

The $Q3F$ mod was a hit and, combined with Wedgwood's amiable nature, gained the attention of the original game designers, id Software. In mid-2000 the $Q3F$ team were invited to visit QuakeCon, the *Quake* and *Doom* fans’ official annual gathering, held in Dallas, Texas. At the convention, the team hosted their modification for their fellow gamers to play. “We manned a table and networked like crazy,” said Wedgwood. “We talked to every mod developer, members of id, every hardware vendor, and just did as much as we could to promote the mod.” It was the turning point for the group: the small team (then just five people) realized that they wanted to be full-time developers, not just volunteering fans. During one of the QuakeCon dinners, they pitched an idea to id’s Graeme Devine (the man behind the adventure classic *7th Guest*), who told them to get back to basics and stop aiming at the sky. “He thought I was insane,” said Wedgwood. “Although we had a mod, it was a straight port. We knew that we had to demonstrate a better grasp of art and technology.” The team set about replacing all content derived from *Quake III* in their latest iteration of the $Q3F$ mod. The new project would have a new user interface, new maps, new logos, a new soundtrack, new audio, and a complete overhaul of all incidental art materials. “In truth the community hated us,” concedes Wedgwood. “We were taking this pure game that they loved, and I guess it seemed like we were just dressing it up as a portfolio piece—and there would be some truth to that idea. But we were still proud of it: we had new special effects, new models, new skyboxes. We thought we were doing something for the community.” When the team returned to QuakeCon the
next year, everything changed. “We had something really really polished to present,” Wedgwood recalled. “And at this point we were introduced to [id Software co-owner] Kevin Cloud and to Jonathan Moses of Activision, who was the producer on Return to Castle Wolfenstein.”

Wedgwood’s company, to be called Splash Damage after the properties of area-of-effect weapons in his favorite games, were soon going to be making commercial games. They designed the multiplayer levels of id Software’s Doom 3, and they designed a multiplayer game based on Return to Castle Wolfenstein, which was eventually released freely over the Internet. As I write this, they are putting the finishing touches to a full-on commercial project, Enemy Territory: Quake Wars, an impressively ambitious futuristic combat game that will eventually spawn its own wave of new mods.

It was only through the possibilities opened up by modding that Wedgwood’s team had been able to create this niche for themselves. Furthermore, the modding culture that has arisen around PC games has supplied the company with much of the human talent necessary to make commercial games. These were gamers who not only had enjoyed playing games but had also realized that there were ways in which these games could be improved or altered. Their compulsive reimagining of games had created something palpable. They had made new games from old, recycling and augmenting. Browsing through modding archives is like visiting a library of rewritten classics. It’s as if someone were able to edit Shakespeare with pulp fiction tropes or rewrite Conrad to beef up the metaphors. There are mods that turn traditional point-and-shoot gun games into John Woo–inspired acrobatic gun juggling; others turn gung ho combat games into hide-and-seek. There are thirty breeds of zombie movie games and also the adventures of a
sentient marble. One of the most exquisite mods I’ve ever had the pleasure of playing (at 4 a.m. while the sun was rising) was *Air Buccaneers*. Based on the hyperbolic sci-fi shooter *Unreal Tournament*, *Air Buccaneers* is a game of archaic steampunk airships, each one floating over a smoky gothic landscape. Players pilot the balloons and duel precariously with muzzle-loaded bombardards and wildly inaccurate blunderbusses. It is a strange and beautiful experience, unlike anything else I have ever played.

This, in some way, is my answer to Chris Suellentrop’s claims about how games impinge on our imagination. These gamers, the modders, aren’t following given rules: they’re making new ones. Mods do not answer to commercial pressures or to the ideas that game developers are supposed to have accepted. Creating a mod is a project for the inspired and the truly committed, affording imaginative possibilities that cannot be found elsewhere.

**HEADHUNTING**

Mods have influenced some unique games and some unique gamers. They spawned one of the most popular online games of all time, in the form of *Counter-Strike*. That game went on to define the European and American professional gaming scene, from 2002 up to the present day. Mods have also allowed many gamers to indulge their esoteric interests and their desire for expression in gaming media. One such person is the British programmer and artist Tom Betts, who has used modding to create some unusual art projects. These include a psychedelic video installation based on live modification of *Quake III* servers during play and a manic, color-filled shoot-'em-up poetically dubbed *Endless Fire*. For Betts, the modding scene represents a kind of unlegislated terrain in which he could play with
bold ideas: “I realized that consoles were missing out on this vibrant element of interactivity. I could argue that consoles patronized the audience by reducing their input options and denying them access to any code or creative interface. However, this was more a case of streamlining interaction to encourage immediacy and broaden the potential audience. Its only recently that consoles have begun to reach back toward the practice of user-generated content and modification. This is perhaps not totally altruistic as console developers were seeing the benefits that modification brought to the PC game market. The mod scene serves as a mechanism to extend product life span, build communities—as well as providing a ground for free beta testing and potential headhunting.”

Betts’s experimental approach drew inspiration from both the games themselves and the excitement of remodeling something that had already been meticulously crafted. His approach echoes major trends in modern culture, in which sampling, cut-ups, and remixing have become essential artistic tools. Like Wedgwood’s, Betts’s creativity relied on the small-scale productivity that was made possible by modding culture. Without these tools, his wish to change and manipulate games would have been frustrated: “Unlike other mediums, it is difficult to translate your creative vision into a game format. The entry barriers to amateur gaming production are daunting and, when considering console platforms, almost impossible. The PC modding scene allows players to become developers without too much hassle, and in many cases, the tools the ‘official’ developers use themselves aren’t much different. The situation becomes blurred, especially where mods provide such a high level of quality as to rival their parent software. The PC has always been a more open platform than consoles, where it’s hard to comment on or alter titles without re-
sorting to machinima techniques or advanced hardware hacks.”

Betts, like many other people undertaking these small-scale, no-budget gaming projects, was thrilled by the freedoms they afforded him: “As a programmer I often code my own projects, but modding often appeals to me as a more interventionist ‘punk’ approach. I wanted to make artwork about games and gaming culture, so actually using the same tools and software as that culture seemed a more direct route to comment upon it. I also feel that modification allows me a route to provide alternative readings of a game and suggest other forms gaming could take. FPS games [first-person shooters, such as Doom and Half-Life] have always seemed on the verge of orgiastic screen-smearing chaos, so that is how I approached most of my mods. At the same time, I wanted the experience to be dislocated from the usual gaming environment, to draw attention to the surrounding culture of games and the issues they raise. Modding can also hold a kind of glamour due to its proximity to hacking and piracy; the idea of mangling all the menus in a game (especially the copyright screen) appealed to me. Gamers would recognize my mods from the original game and be unsettled by the direction and style of alteration, whereas nongamers were astounded when they realized the culture and software behind the work.”

Where Betts enjoyed chaotic artistic freedom, other mods end up being simply continuations of projects that were started by commercial companies. Games like Vampire: Bloodlines or Giants: Citizen Kabuto were so ambitious and so enchanting that gamers fell in love with them and ended up working on them even after the respective commercial companies moved on to other things. The fans continued where normal development had ceased: fixing bugs, installing new features, and so on. One of the most im-
pressive instances of the continuation of these "abandoned" games involves a racing game called *Grand Prix Legends*. Notoriously realistic and unforgiving, this ancient racer has long been forgotten by commercial concerns. The hard-core racing gamers who love it, however, continue to tweak and improve the ancient masterpiece to this day. The game has been enhanced in every conceivable manner over the intervening years, including a full graphical overhaul to bring it up to date with contemporary visual standards. These gamers aren't interested in the commercial cycle of new games; instead, their concern is to keep the past alive and to keep their favorite games evolving.

Wedgwood's point about consoles being analogous to broadcast media, with the major publishing companies being able to control exactly what it is that we see on our screens, was born of this kind of homegrown culture. The big console companies get to decide what games are allowed on their machines and, therefore, who makes them. They decide who can change their games and when they are to be discarded entirely. The PC, on the other hand, (so far) refuses any such guidelines. (This mildly contentious statement might end up being an untruth, because Microsoft exerts so much influence through its Windows operating system—the only viable platform for PC gaming—and that influence is increasing.)

Moreover, the Internet has given PC users relative freedom to distribute whatever gamers can make, with only occasional lawsuits to interrupt those projects that worry the copyright watchers. Crucially, broadcast systems tend to aim for one thing: the best seller, or the ratings topper. This commercial demand has warped the games market in the direction of huge budgets and mass production, a trend that has swamped the possibilities for low-scale or independent production. While independent filmmaking is still vi-
able, independent game making has become increasingly difficult to pull off.

Digital distribution could alter this decline. Downloading games online cuts out the retailer and the publisher: gamers can buy games directly from their creators, just as they can download mods for free. Even console games developers are getting in on new ways of distributing games: Xbox Live Arcade provides an opportunity for the smaller, less popular, and potentially highly innovative independent titles to find a market. Of course, it is still controlled to some extent, and there is still the possibility that the console manufacturers will get to say what moves through their networks. In fact, increasingly Byzantine security controls on more recent iterations of Microsoft’s operating system threaten the efficiency of independent production on the PC, too. We gamers just have to hope that the channels remain open and free.

Ultimately, though, it’s the unconstrained production possibilities of the PC—as much a tool and development platform as it is a gaming machine—that has allowed modding to come as far as it has done. And, again, the Internet is the great enabler. The online culture of modding means that teams like Wedgwood’s Splash Damage can form from people who live in a dozen different countries, in different time zones, and who can still work on the same project, to the same end. Not all modders will enter the commercial arena: and that’s a good thing for gamers. For the most part, modding has been about communal gaming and personal entertainment—things done for the love of games, rather than for the love of cash. Recalling the joys of his modding days, Wedgwood told me about “development parties” he would hold at his home during those early years. His team would fly in from all across Europe for a long weekend of eating pizza and building their game. Back
then, they were doing it for the fans and for themselves. The PC, Wedgwood was keen to emphasize, is still a fertile ground for such activities: gamers can be playing a game one day and rebuilding it the next.

**SUPERHERO OUTFITS**

It’s a month before my Reykjavik trip (described in “The Special Relationship”), and I’m in the grim northern town of Huddersfield. The view across the Yorkshire valleys is wondrous—green hills, a setting sun throwing the city below into the shade. Huddersfield itself is tired and partially abandoned. The houses are built of gray and black stone, and some have the windows boarded up. The expanding value surge led by the London property boom has not reached this far into the provinces.

I’m sitting at a kitchen table in one of those terraced Victorian houses, thinking about how the tradition of creativity in gaming goes back decades. Above all, I’m thinking about how small groups of gamers collaborate on building scenarios for pen-and-paper role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. I’ve joined a group of gamers who have been playing the same *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign for over a decade. The chronicle of their exploits, kept by a wry military intelligence officer from Cheltenham, has reached a quarter of a million words. Each week, they collaborate to create a story of high adventure, filled with absurd humor and ludicrously misfiring plans. Ideas are generated spontaneously in conversation, and the consequences are hilariously outlandish: heroic characters turned to mud, a fountain of kidnapped dwarves ejected from a collapsing pocket dimension, the god of travel getting lost. . . . It’s their story, and no one else will ever be able to live it.

The *D&D* group is a fine example of how the promise of
creativity and of goofing off with friends makes gaming a long-term commitment—something we can sign up to and feel rewarded by for year upon year. The nondigital gaming community has long been diverse and prolific. There have long been rich, complex communities based around the “play-by-mail” games that were so popular in the 1980s and early 1990s. Then there are the war gamers and the board gamers who put everything into the creation of their miniature model worlds: the incredible precision of painted Warhammer armies and the authentic scenery of Napoleonic conflicts on a tabletop—sometimes taking years to create. All these impulses have found their way into computerized gaming. What these guys do on the weekends when they can meet has, in effect, been facilitated and mass-produced by the Internet. We can all get involved in gaming—hands-on, communal, and rewarding—and we don’t even have to be in the same room. Games like Neverwinter Nights have allowed gamers to create D&D scenarios for anyone in the world, while the game versions of Warhammer games allow meticulous painting of banners and armies that can then be distributed directly across the Net for online battles.

The digital gaming world has a long and healthy prehistory of user creativity. Before the likes of World of Warcraft furnished online worlds with lavish graphic content, there were online games called MUDs, or “multiuser dungeons.” These were text-based adventure games where Net users were able to fight monsters, talk, trade, and go on quests, all within a text-driven (generally natural language) system. MUDs were multiplayer and based entirely on what could be written into the text interface. These “worlds” were extremely flexible and allowed gamers to rebuild their content with relative ease. Like the sandbox games of today, MUDs relied on gamers to define many of their own goals and to
create content. Many of these age-old text worlds are still running today, thanks to the way they directly involved the gamers in their workings and encouraged creativity.

Contemporary electronic games offer a wide array of options for personalization and content bending, and this goes a long way toward explaining their continuing popularity. *World of Warcraft*, for example, the most commercial of the online role-playing games, leaves plenty of scope for enterprising gamers to modify the game’s interface, and this latitude has in turn altered and refined how the game is played. The large-scale invasions of monster-filled dungeons often depend on these third-party tweaks to the original format to be pulled off successfully. These modifications change how the information that is available to the player presents itself—with timers, notifications, and interface tweaks making the game a different experience from the vanilla game. This is how we played *Quake III* in years past: we’d tear up original configuration files to create ugly but hyperfunctional interfaces, with graphic detail removed and unnecessary prettiness expunged for the sake of efficiency. Although such alterations to the user interface may seem trivial to observers, they are crucial to hard-core players—the tiniest changes in invisible game variables were immensely important to my *Quake*-playing colleagues, especially when we were competing for league points and credibility. Like the tweaks made to racing cars, the changes made to the aspects of the game that governed frame rate and smoothness of play would decide between victory and death. The fact that Blizzard, the company behind *World of Warcraft*, didn’t prohibit such modification in their game interface turned out to be to their advantage, as well as handy for hard-core gamers. Features of popular modifications have turned up in the basic interface—fea-
tures that the designers hadn’t thought of or hadn’t been sure whether they wanted to implement.

Games don’t have to be closed off, finished, or abandoned. Nor do they have to be fixed and unchanged. Learning to play might be about learning the rules of a game, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t aspire to change them. Of course, many of the best games are solo, solitary experiences that have been tightly scripted and carefully crafted by large teams of highly paid designers, and these cannot be modified easily. These big commercial games will also undoubtedly figure prominently in the future of games, but I nevertheless anticipate gamers finding increasingly diverse uses for messier, less product-oriented projects. The rigid masterworks that are fabricated like Hollywood films in the great production studios should only be seen as one possible way of gaming.

We will learn to value bizarre modifications and independent experiments far more than we do today: these projects are, in their own small way, the vanguard or avant-garde; and the ideas they generate may well point corporate, risk-averse projects in new directions. Just recently, a teleportation game called Narbacular Drop made this transition from weird private project to commercial behemoth. This clever, Escher-like game, which was freely downloadable and the result of a university project, went on to inspire the game Portal, a polished and humorous commercial release from Valve Software, one of the most successful games companies in the world. The evolution of Portal is exciting because it demonstrates how small-scale independent thinking can reinvigorate commercial game design, delivering to jaded consumers the unprecedented experience of a first-person puzzle game riddled with black humor.
But there is also more than design innovation at stake here. Games that use open-ended approaches like that of *EVE Online* can be seen as incubators for personal creativity. More than a puzzle, a blaze of action, or an intricate adventure, they offer a set of building blocks—conceptual Lego kits. Finding a project for yourself within a game world could be much like finding out what you want to do in life generally: experimentation, exploration, coping with both social and physical situations. Games are providing gamers with a lexicon in which many different kinds of creativity are possible. Gamers might want to rework an old classic or fix the bugs in a favorite game. Or, like Smart and Wiinholt, they might want to influence the direction of a virtual world in which tens of thousands of other people participate. Gamers may wish to set up a backpack manufacturing trade in *World of Warcraft* or run an online sports team. The options are open and getting more diverse all the time.

Of all the gaming platforms, the PC enables this broad approach to gaming the best, while the broadcast nature of consoles has so far found little place for these methods. In this way, the future possibilities for PC games can be seen as just another aspect of the way the Internet is now being used. Like MySpace (which provides a particular framework for music sharing and socializing), DeviantArt (which supplies a forum for showing off artwork), or even Wikipedia (in which users author and edit encyclopedia entries), games can harness our creativity by providing a medium with which gamers can develop their own esoteric projects. Games provide tools, frameworks, and inspiration. *EVE* inspired the ISS project that was devised and executed by Smart and Wiinholt (which I discussed in “The Special Relationship”). Meanwhile, on a far smaller scale, the superhero game *City of Heroes* provides gamers with the possibility for designing superhero outfits and secret lairs. Of
course, these games also offer gamers limited room to maneuver, because, as in the case of a wiki (a system enabling collaborative writing on certain themes) or a MySpace page, they’re designed for quite specific uses. MySpace is about being a music fan and sharing a few photos, *EVE* is about galactic conflict, and so on. These games are designed to give us goals, quests, and aspirations within a certain context. We play them because we’re gamers, and our attraction to space war or goblin bashing means that we are gamers long before exposure to the medium inspires us to become modders, emergence-minded tech experts, or anything else that might develop from the act of simply playing games. Our need to be distracted, to avoid boredom, is simply the starting point. But it’s a fine starting point that should not be dismissed lightly.

I would like to see a genuine divergence between the games that rely on big studios and multimillion-dollar production and the games that rely on the innate creativity of gamers. This might end up creating quite different kinds of gamers, too: those who want to sit down and be overwhelmed by *Final Fantasy’s* sweeping emotions and operatic drama and those who want to be able to tinker and mess around in their own private corners of the universe. Luis von Ahn is right about gaming having led to many “wasted cycles” of human computing (as I discuss in “Propagandists”), but perhaps the most appropriate application for the energies of gamers is in improving and expanding the games themselves. If designers can encourage gamers to collaborate with them through play, thus sparing us the hard work that modding entails, then everyone wins. We get to create content while goofing off with our friends and, at the same time, can enable gaming companies to realize even more ambitious projects.

One game that is already making moves in this direction
is Will Wright's *Spore* (aka *Sim Everything*). The game provides players with tools with which to build their own creature, a creature that has the potential to be completely unique. Thanks to the complexity of the procedural animal editor and the mass of options provided by Wright's team, no two *Spore* life-forms need be the same, and this has some pretty profound consequences for the game world. The player evolves a rudimentary creature through various stages of sophistication (from microbe, to animal, to sentient civilization) into what is ultimately a spacefaring culture, traveling from one star system to the next across a vast galaxy: yet the player's experience of doing so will depend largely on the morphology of his or her creature. The player has, in part, designed his or her own experience.

Once *Spore* players begin to explore that galaxy, they encounter other races and discover other planets. Wright's team will not have to design the creatures that inhabit these other planets, because the players will do it for them. As gamers develop their own creatures, their designs are uploaded to the Net and used to populate the universes of other gamers. It's not a multiplayer game as such, but it does make it possible for what someone does in one single-player game on their home computer to have a direct (and entertaining) effect on what happens on another computer on the far side of the world. It's this kind of insight into how the creativity of gamers can be harnessed that will change how building games for gamers should be understood.

Wright came to understand this principle by looking at how his previous game *The Sims* had inspired people to design household objects. *The Sims* is one of the best-selling games of all time. Only a fraction of the gamers who bought it had to produce in-game items for there to be a wealth of extra free content. All they needed were the tools to make
their designs possible in the game world. The easier it becomes for gamers to produce in-game content—indeed, if creation of content is the game—then the more of it there will be to furnish game worlds like that of *The Sims*. This approach reduces costs for game developers, because they don’t have to pay studios filled with artists. It benefits gamers, too: they are engaging with their medium creatively and productively in order to make something happen. Like Smart and Wiinholt, they will be, at least in some small way, creators themselves.

**THE PLAGUE**

An interpollination of gaming ideas is taking place across our culture. Thanks to the way that gamers continually rattle around in the space provided for them, emergent situations and user-generated materials are arising in unexpected places and causing unexpected fallout. The fresh perspectives provided by harnessing the productivity of gamers have invited developers to take new paths in the development of future games. In a 2006 edition of *Receiver* magazine, David J. Edery, worldwide games portfolio planner for Xbox Live Arcade and a research affiliate of the MIT Comparative Media Studies program, described the whole phenomenon as follows: “In *Grand Theft Auto*, you can spray graffiti on the walls of the virtual cityscape. What if players were enabled to customize their graffiti in great detail? The game could automatically upload player-generated graffiti to a server, where it would be randomly downloaded by other game instances in controlled quantities. The cityscape would quickly fill up with legitimate graffiti, which would contribute to a much more authentic gameplay experience overall. And perhaps players could be enabled to somehow vote on other players’ graffiti, or add to it, or
overwrite it?” Suddenly the possibilities open up—the cities of Grand Theft Auto become the canvas of gaming artists across the world. They’re not playing in the same game, like gamers do in Second Life or EVE Online, but nevertheless they’re affecting each other’s experiences. Games of all kinds can be transformed by the activity of gamers, if appropriate tools can be provided. We don’t have to be as profoundly committed as Paul Wedgwood and his team to produce something useful or interesting—our contributions to change and content creation could be minute, but they would nevertheless count for something.

Sony’s Game Developers Conference speech in 2007 focused on a game called Little Big Planet, which builds a traditional platform game (think Mario or Sonic) around the concept of allowing gamers ideas to construct the platform environments for themselves. Little Big Planet’s cute avatars jump into multiplayer games to build the game levels before playing them. These are activities that can be shared across the Internet or simply played at home with friends. It’s enormously appealing both as a game and as a creative ideal for gamers generally. Little Big Planet presents games as malleable, communicable objects, built for gamers to customize and distort as they see fit. Things like this and like the bizarre sandbox modification of Half-Life 2 called Garry’s Mod are becoming facilitators of our imagination, ready to be bounced into someone else’s gaming like a conceptual mind bomb: “Look at what I made.” The future of games, say the big companies, is in new and accessible versions of the sandbox games: the places where gamers use games as sculptural, expressive media.

This kind of application is not limited to play. Games are also creating useful nongaming applications by virtue of their unusual approach to sharing and processing various types of information. The massively popular photo-sharing
system Flickr, for example, was built using the tools developed for a failed massively multiplayer game known as *Game Neverending*. Although the game itself—a lighthearted exercise in collaborative object creation and media sharing—never made it past the beta stage, it ended up birthing one of the most important sites on the contemporary Internet. Flickr’s image gallery architecture owes its existence to the gaming ambitions of its parent company—the aptly named Ludicorp—whose tools and technology concepts are used everyday in something that is definitely not a game. As the money spent on gaming increases and the things that games intended to achieve expand, so this kind of secondary application will become increasingly common.

On an even wider scale, games are leaking from one format to another. One example of this is the evolution of the *Second Life* user-made game *Tringo*. It was invented so that people would have something to play within *Second Life* and a reason to spend time and virtual cash within the user-made world. But *Tringo* soon became so popular among the inhabitants of *Second Life* that it was noticed outside the world and licensed for development as a commercial game on the Game Boy Advance. As well as being reworked and launched in the commercial format, it was polished up and then relaunched within *Second Life*, in an effort to generate even more virtual capital (capital that could then be exchanged for real U.S. dollars on the LindeX, *Second Life*’s exchange system for changing virtual to real money). *Tringo* had become a leaky object: moving between physical and virtual realities seamlessly. It was a virtual entity that had become a physical product, while still making money within a virtual world.

Other, more serious phenomena have emerged from idle play, and many of them could one day have applications beyond gaming. One of the most widely discussed examples is
the *World of Warcraft* plague. This accidental virtual contagion was caused by an in-game curse called “the Corrupted Blood plague.” The Corrupted Blood plague was transferred from one game character to the next and then back again, a bit like a real disease, causing massive problems for gamers as it swept through populated areas. The game’s designers had intended the plague to be a temporary feature in one of the game’s dungeons, but people left the area before the infection had cleared up, and so the curse spread through the game, much like a real-world epidemic.

The plague was devastating and, like real such outbreaks, was caused by the speedy, unwitting travel of gamers around their world. It was so virulent that even quarantine didn’t help—servers had to be rebooted and the game code rewritten to finally curb disaster. Computers are, of course, often used to model the spread of disease, but such simulations only take into account routine behavior. What was exciting to epidemiologists about the *World of Warcraft* plague was that it was driven by the activities of thousands of real people and therefore provided a much more complex model than those generally used on epidemic-modeling programs. The random behavior and odd breaks in routine that a computer simulation is unable to predict or map emerged spontaneously from the plague-ridden gamers, meaning that they could potentially have provided a useful tool for modeling the spread of disease. This brings us back once again to von Ahn’s concept of human computing, where games are about harnessing gamers and putting them to use without their even knowing. Even without having to build a new game, the models of *World of Warcraft* could potentially be of use to science as a plague-mapping tool. It might even be possible to introduce symptom-free diseases to a game and then use real people’s be-
behavior to model its spread, without their ever knowing. This, in turn, could be used to model many of the problems faced by epidemiologists in the real world, such as people with innate immunity and others who are silent carriers, not knowing that they harbor the disease. Nina Fefferman of Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston plans to do exactly that, although, at the time of this writing, she has been unable to get any games companies to perform such experiments on their customers.

Perhaps needless to say, Fefferman’s ideas have not avoided vocal criticism—the World of Warcraft outbreak was in a virtual world, in which there is no death, and such a situation is hardly comparable to a real one. Nevertheless, the mechanical fact of it, that the gaming model could, even in theory, be used to map structures of information applicable to many different scenarios, suggests thrilling possibilities for what gamers might be able to achieve, given some lateral thinking. The games of the future might have more than one application at a given time, and many of those applications might well be invisible to the people playing them.

THE METHOD

Back on Earth, at the EVE Fanfest, such metagaming applications seemed far away. Free beer tokens, smiling lab technicians from Copenhagen, polite conversation about respective socioeconomic backgrounds—it could have been the party stage of any conference in the world. Nevertheless, the kind of life and excitement that surrounds the Fanfest in Reykjavik suggests that this generation of gamers has just begun to find itself. The gamers in Reykjavik were heading out into this strange new world of emergent plans and game-driven socialization without a second thought.
They were its willing passengers, each of them paying for a ride on this journey of exploration. Gamers across the world have all bought into that in some way: games are paying for a unique kind of hi-tech progress, experimentation that would otherwise be unjustified and unimaginable.

This festival was partly a social event and partly another aspect of the collaboration that EVE has engendered. The massively social nature of online games makes them particularly suitable as a basis for this kind of out-of-game socializing. Gamers are able to talk over the Net and get to know each other without meeting, long before they brave an event like this. Gatherings like the EVE Fanfest are taking place because of the interaction of players within the game. Without this connection or conduit, thousands of friendships might never have come to be. It seems understandable, perhaps even obvious, that games would generate their own internal modes of playfulness (such as rearranging furniture in a game of Thievery), but the idea that they now have wider social effects remains provocative. These trends could have unique consequences: there are now millions of people interacting and socializing in online game worlds, and many of them will choose to take their relationships further—to meet at events like the Fanfest and in countless other contexts. Stories of people having met and married through online games are by now too common to mention.

Some of the people who meet outside games, like Wedgwood or like Smart and Wiinholt, see gaming as an opportunity to do something more than obtaining high scores or besting lap times. They see games as ways of networking, of making new allies and fresh work contacts. These gamers are people who are engaging with gaming productively and dragging others along with them. (World of Warcraft has repeatedly been called the new golf within the technology in-
dustry, because young executives are now just as likely to be able to hang out with the bosses in the Dwarven city of Ironforge as they are on the real-world golf course.)

Other gamers, meanwhile, are engaging with games in ways that have been seen as satirical, progressive, and even criminal. On the sidelines of the EVE Fanfest lurked one of its most notorious players, Istvaan Shogaatsu. Known to the community only by his in-game nickname, Shogaatsu has become a legendary figure. He seemed to be playing the role of legend in person, too: looking like an incidental character in The Matrix, he strutted across the hotel carpets in a futuristic costume and sunglasses, ultrahip piercings protruding from his handsome face. There was pointing and muttering at his presence. The EVE gamers knew him by reputation.

Shogaatsu’s Guiding Hand Social Club is a bona fide secret organization within EVE Online and the polar opposite of the ISS project. Shogaatsu was the mastermind and key perpetrator behind the infiltration and massive betrayal of a major EVE Online corporation. It was one of the most inspiring pieces of play ever seen in a game, but also one of the cruelest and most devastating. Revealed with a flourish on the EVE Online forums, the attack by the Guiding Hand Social Club on the wealthy Ubiqua Seraph Corporation was a masterstroke of patience and cunning.

Initially, the Guiding Hand, who had previously set themselves up as committed assassins, had been hired to kill the CEO of Ubiqua Seraph and were to be paid handsomely for the task. Their method, though, was not the crude and difficult matter of waging war and killing the mark by martial means alone. Instead, the Guiding Hand infiltrated Ubiqua Seraph to the highest level, taking 12 months to ingratiate themselves with the corporation and gain access to its extensive resources. Like the 1930s FBI infiltrators who or-
ganized the Communist Party meetings in which suspected conspirators were to be arrested, the Guiding Hand’s own influence on the CEO of Ubiqua Seraph arranged the time and place of her doom. Not only did they schedule the trap, but the executioner was to be a fellow colleague, a director of her own corporation, and just another member of the Guiding Hand.

When the time was right, the Guiding Hand ambushed their quarry in space, claimed the bounty, and pillaged the corporate coffers. A bounty that had originally seemed like a large sum was but a fraction of what the Guiding Hand plot would actually claim in this takedown. The mark lost her near-priceless battleship, one of a number of limited edition objects that the developers dropped into the game. She also saw the assets of her corporation, which she and her corp mates had worked for 18 months to accrue, ransacked by Guiding Hand infiltrators. The Guiding Hand members who devastated Ubiqua Seraph took some 30 billion ISK (interstellar kredits) in game money and assets, an amount that, if taken at contemporary eBay exchange rates for EVE’s virtual currency to real cash, came in at a staggering $16,500. Ubiqua Seraph was far from destroyed, but it’s impossible to gauge the psychological impact of such a brutal strike on the players behind Ubiqua Seraph itself. Could they ever trust other online gamers again? All of which begs the question: are such devastating events really smart play or just acts of outright cruelty?

This wasn’t just a devious bit of gamer backstabbing; it was a genuine betrayal of personal trust and kinship. And it also reveals the extent to which our online identities have new and unforeseen vulnerabilities. The excuse “Oh but it’s only a game” doesn’t quite cut it when you consider that the legitimate members of Ubiqua Seraph had poured years of their lives into building this virtual entity. It was some-
thing they had invested countless hours into building, and the Guiding Hand actions represent a staggering act of virtual theft. Nevertheless, the action destroyed the corporation legitimately and within the parameters of the game. EVE's creators quietly applauded Shogaatsu's cunning malevolence: this was emergent behavior as valid and exciting as anything that could be engineered by designers like Smart and Wiinholt. Shogaatsu had influenced a game world, stunning its population with his audacity. Whatever the ethics, Shogaatsu's work attracted many more like-minded gamers to come and see what they could achieve in the same game. This was a gamer playing the bad guy, and we could all see that he did it brilliantly.

GRIEF CAUSED

There were other players at the Fanfest whose reputation preceded them as well. Among the most playful of these were members of the GoonSwarm, a vast in-game alliance affiliated with the online collective Something Awful. Something Awful, whose comedy-oriented review-driven Web site boasts one of the Internet's most active discussion forums, has a presence across a wide number of online games. Like many other groups who are not affiliated with a particular game, their ability to roam across many different game worlds provides them with an easy way into games communities. The 90,000 registered forum users can pretty much depend on an instant Goon fraternity in almost whatever game they're interested in. Thanks to a history of gaming exploits and the general scatologically angled humor of Something Awful, the Goons have a reputation as being a disruptive influence in many games. Their philosophy seems to be simply that people should not take anything on the Internet seriously.
In the case of *EVE Online*, the Goons started out as a mass of inexperienced players marauding around the galaxy, overwhelming their enemies by sheer force of numbers, and often dying horribly as a result of their lack of skill or experience. As the organization has grown and consolidated its assets, it has developed into one of the most significant in-game factions, though the mad verve still remains. The Goons have been derided and mocked by many groups within *EVE*, thanks to allegations of dubious tactics, but the truth is that they’ve largely acted within the spirit of the game. As ludicrous as their swarms of beginner ships might have been, they’re a force to be reckoned with these days, and despite their characterization of *EVE* as “something awful,” they work hard to maintain a lively, welcoming empire.

The Goons’ most significant contribution to the *EVE* universe was a result of one of the most bitterly contested subjects in the history of the game. One enterprising gamer had discovered elements of “corruption” within CCP and publicized this fact ruthlessly and relentlessly both inside the game forums and on his own well-trafficked blog. He alleged that one of the developers had been using his administrative powers to help out the players that the developer associated with in the game world. The alliance he had helped out was the powerful and constant adversary of the Goons. This led to a continuing campaign, in which the Goons publicized more alleged corruption, including what they regarded as an active infiltration by a member of the development staff into their in-game corporations. The subject was, perhaps not unsurprisingly, an extremely contentious one for CCP. The developers denied most charges of corruption and pledged to set right the actions of their one errant staff member. Of course, being a private corporation governing a public “world,” there was no reason to
believe them, as the Goons were pleased to point out. Finally, just as this writing went to press, CCP made a bold move and another step toward a mature phase of collaborative multiplayer entertainment: they pledged to allow player elections that would create an “oversight committee” of player ombudsmen. These neutral representatives of the community would be allowed total access to the workings of the company and the governance of the game and, as such, would ensure that there was no culture of corruption within CCP itself. CCP CEO Hilmar Petursson told the *New York Times*: “Perception is reality, and if a substantial part of our community feels like we are biased, whether it is true or not, it is true to them. *EVE Online* is not a computer game. It is an emerging nation, and we have to address it like a nation being accused of corruption.” The elections should have taken place by the time you read these words. More rhetoric? Perhaps, but even the Goons had to admit that this was a brave experiment.

Meanwhile, the Something Awful crowd has been rather more destructive in *Second Life*, where the scripting and building systems have allowed them to perform all kinds of outrageous actions. Known as W-Hats in their *Second Life* incarnation, the Goons have satirized events such as the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the assassination attempt on the last pope and have indulged in numerous other troublemaking activities. Of course, outrageousness in *Second Life* is nothing unusual, but it’s the skill that many of the W-Hats have displayed that really astonishes: these are talented individuals who regularly use their remarkable talents for purely malevolent purposes. The W-Hats have engaged in numerous destructive attacks across *Second Life*, including many that have been categorized as criminal by their victims. Showers of pornographic imagery, “lag bombs” that slow a game server down to the
point of uselessness—these are acts analogous to terrorism. The perpetrators of these actions are pursuing a kind of virtual anarchism, where maddening chaos is caused just because. Many of the W-Hats seem to take pride in the grief caused, and their victims have often cried out for criminal remonstration. Something Awful does not sanction any of these actions, of course, and goes out of its way to point out that people should not break the terms of service supplied by game worlds. Nevertheless, the bad seeds remain, because that's where their philosophy was rooted. These people, like those who were attracted to the ISS project, have found a tribe within a tribe—they have connected with like-minded allies. First they found gaming, then specific games, then an ethos within that game.

These anarchists, like the ISS and others, are pushing boundaries. They are living examples of why gaming doesn't force us—any more than does any other medium—to learn to obey rules. If anything, it simply gives us new rules to break, new things to subvert, and new constructs to tear down. There's always someone who wants to smash it up, always someone who will push things to the breaking point, just because it is human to do so.

All these activities seem to have ramifications for our real lives as well as our gaming ones. The U.S. State Department has been looking at how to tax game earnings since they learned that people could make money through virtual business. How long before they start legislating to protect citizens from online assault? If these actions really are criminal, as both gaming terms of service and the reactions of the victims of such attacks seem to imply, then doesn't this online anarchism have real, legal implications?

These questions raise further, fundamental questions about the future of personhood. What parts of our lives actually constitute our personal identity? Is it just the things
you do, day to day, in your everyday life, or does our identity extend into game worlds? The knee-jerk reaction is that games provide us with alternate identities, masks that have no value. Perhaps that was once true, but it doesn’t seem to be anymore. We’re not acting or pretending: I am my spaceship, or my superhero, or my robo-suited explorer. If I have invested time and money in these extensions of my everyday life, then I deserve respect and protection.

Ideas such as these are provoking a great deal of thought among observers of digital culture. Julian Dibbell wrote two prescient books, *My Tiny Life* and *Play Money*, about the meaning, economics, and values of online life. Dibbell makes a powerful case for the contemporary social and political importance of virtual interactions, as well as summing up something about their weird, hybrid nature as both games and monetary systems: “Games attract us with their very lack of consequence,” Dibbell wrote in *Wired* magazine, “whereas economies confront us with the least trivial pursuit of all, the pursuit of happiness.”

**THE TRIBES**

We wander into Reykjavik to take a break from the festival. Braving freezing squalls, we set out to find a famed fish bar, the Seafood Cellar. I had told my companion that this was the place to eat, and so we were determined to check it out. The beautiful six-foot girl on the front desk shakes her head: no booking, no food. She says she’s sorry, but it doesn’t seem like an apology; it seems like a dismissal. Ruefully we step back out onto the street and wander past a couple of pizza parlors. It’s too cold to browse, but we didn’t travel this far north to end up eating Italian. Eventually we find a bar that serves rather more traditional Scandinavian food—steamed haddock and some kind of potato salad.
It’s good. Even better thanks to the music: The Smiths, the Pixies, Patti Smith, and some Elvis Costello. A young man wearing a black T-shirt and an apron delivers the food to our table. I glimpse a single metallic *Space Invader* hanging from his key ring. I want to point it out to him and offer some gaming solidarity—to say, “Brother!” But I don’t. Too inane. Too far removed from my tribe. Maybe he just liked the design. I concentrate on the fish.

The talk at our table is, inevitably, about gaming. Being the more ludo-literate member of our duo, I reel off some recommendations: *Fahrenheit* (aka *Indigo Prophecy* in the United States) is, I explain, a masterpiece of modern video game storytelling. It breaks conventions, uses the medium to surprise us, and creates a worthwhile fiction. This, I suggest, is where the seemingly redundant concept of the “interactive movie” has ended up. My companion makes a note of the name, intending to buy a copy when he returns home to the United States. Then he asks, “Do you think you’ve played *EVE* this long because of the game or because of the people?”

Tough question. We’re all familiar with the way pop culture brings dispersed communities together: we watch an episode of *Heroes* and then talk about it in the office the next day. Our knowledge of this TV show or that pop record gives us a common culture to work with. But *EVE*-like online games create something else: a cooperative project. We fight battles together; we explore the unknown together; we share jokes that are only possible within that particular game. We all have knowledge about certain games, but rather than chatting about lone experiences (as we might do when reporting on our adventures on the latest *Zelda* game), we are able to discuss group plans and group ambitions that are possible within online games. The group I play with has made this very easy. Everyone is on the same
page, and we’ve adopted a recruitment policy of “one jump removed,” meaning that anyone joining the group must know one of us from outside—whether from another online game or from everyday life. I quit playing *EVE Online* several times before I helped to assemble this group of online friends. If they hadn’t made the long-term projects we have undertaken possible, *EVE* might have been just another discarded experience—a curiosity I picked up for a while but eventually discovered to be useless.

Initially, online gaming groups formed out of teams or role-playing groups (such as MUD groups). But now, it seems that they are becoming more like actual communities or tribes. Like entertainment-seeking nomads, they can move from one game to the next. If the future of games ends up being focused on user-generated works, then we will probably join projects because we like gaming with particular people we have met elsewhere. We might like the look of what they are making or how they are influencing the game world they play in, but it’ll be the gamers themselves that reinforce our commitment or define how our gaming is experienced. It’s happening already: the anarchic attitudes that the Something Awful affiliates have brought with their gaming exploits are just one example of how gamers are bringing real-world predispositions to gaming worlds. If my current *EVE* tribe moves to another game, I will follow because I will expect to find a similar climate of cooperation and quiet success and because I know they would only move on if the opportunities afforded by the new space are similar or better.

As elsewhere in the world of gaming, many tribes were in evidence at the *EVE* Fanfest. Subtle distinctions between what different people want from this game ended up defining who they had drinks with and what they talked about. As much as gamers can be expected to generate content
and build game worlds, I suspect what they’re really building in the bars of Seoul and the Hotel bars of Reykjavik are new social networks that will last way beyond the life spans of the games that currently preoccupy them.

It’s telling that I recognize names from the fast-paced gung ho death-match era of *Quake III* among the most aggressive pirates and the most destruction-oriented of the *EVE* players. The manufacturers and the traders of *EVE*, meanwhile, were often architects in *Star Wars Galaxies* or obsessive *Tycoon* enthusiasts whose simulated cities were so rich in perfectly balanced futurist cityscapes as to be unimaginable by the casual player. Meanwhile, other gamers—especially those for whom mainstream games are never weird enough—seem to turn up in all kinds of unusual places, exploring the underbelly of gaming that the crowd has ignored. They lose themselves in one-man online worlds like the bizarre *A Tractor*, obsess over obscenely difficult fighting games like *Godhand*, or construct intricate military scenarios for *Operation Flashpoint*. These are people who value games as part of the sum of human experiences—as things that could not have existed before and may not exist again. They’re dissatisfied with what is presented to us as the acceptable, desirable mainstream and are looking for the new and the weird. Their attitudes are not the attitudes of most gamers: they are the kind of neophiles who are interested in games because games are the newest medium they can find. Nevertheless, it’s never quite new enough.