THE MISSING PIECE

Something is missing.

As I type, I am sitting in an anonymous rented hall in New York City, listening to panel after panel of people in suits talk about gaming. Lawyers, marketers, technologists, game developers, investors. Advertising and gaming, licensing and gaming, business models and gaming, mobile technology and gaming. You get the picture.

The voices drone on. But something is missing. Something that makes me want to rush the stage, grab the lapels of their dark pressed suits, and shake them until the coins spill out of their pockets.

Something is missing. Something just isn't there.

You already know that gaming is an important form of culture. If you didn't, you wouldn't be reading this magazine. The question is, what's next? Computer and video games are at a crossroads. They are making lots of money; they are driving dozens of new technologies; they are gaining a growing global audience. But something, I tell you, *something* is missing.

It has been said before, but is cannot be said enough. Games stink. Digital gaming today represents an embarrassment of cowardly imitation, an avalanche of adolescent male power fantasies, a risk-adverse business of look-alike clones, a procession of unsophisticated cultural ideologies masquerading as innocent fun. And even the little online shareware titles are just watered-down wannabees of what the big boys are doing.

Don't get me wrong. I like games. No, I love games. I play games. Shit, I *make* games for a living. There is nothing wrong with indulgent, escapist fantasies. But something is definitely missing. I don't know exactly what it is, but I know it isn't there. There has got to be more to games than ten kinds of high-powered killing and cute Japanese characters jumping on the heads of cute Japanese monsters. There has got to be something beyond cheesy sci-fi games that desperately imitate bad film and licensed sports games that desperately imitate bad television.

What gaming needs are margins, borderlands, *mestiza* habitats. Let's start with new ways of funding, developing, and distributing games. And new languages for discussing, arguing and theorizing games – the more uselessly esoteric the better. What else? Gaming needs more points of contact with the global ecosystem of pop culture, transfer stations where the universe outside gaming can invade, colonize, and transform our tired industry. Enough with braindead genreware and military fantasies. Enough with high-tech shovelware sporting bleeding edge particle systems. I want deadpan gaming manifestos, games oozing with kitsch irony, self-imploding game happenings, anarchic game hoaxes, epic games with more than a scrap of literary intelligence, games about sex and art. I want game punk rock. Is that too much to ask?

What's missing? A hell of a lot. How do we get there? I'm not sure.

But maybe, just maybe, the secret is in the games themselves. Look past the glittering pixels and barking soundtracks of the latest console releases. Look down deep past fingers twitching on button triggers. At the heart of every game is play. From the athletic balletics of Quake and Tennis to the intellectual gymnastics of Starcraft and Go, play is the key. Play, the uncertain outcome. Play, the dance of interaction. Play, emergence personified. The play that *plays you* as you play with it. The play that transforms. There is something about play, that staggeringly ancient and eternally youthful impulse, which contains the seeds of gaming's metamorphosis. Somehow, play is the model for changing games as a whole. I don't know why, but I am certain of it.

But how? That's the big question. How do we take play out of the games and into the culture of gaming? How do we harness the spirit of play to unmake what gaming has wrought? How do we channel play like a demon spirit, become truly *possessed* by play, spew our devil vomit onto the priesthood of the game industry?

I wish I knew.

Something is still missing. But maybe not for too long.
Now excuse me. I've got some lapels to rattle.

Eric Zimmerman
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