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Playing Mogul

By JONATHAN DEE

No appointment with Bruno Bonnell ever begins on time, and here's why. Our first meeting takes place just after Bonnell, the French C.E.O. of Atari, has returned from a 15-city, cross-country "road show" designed to rally skeptical investors behind a new issue of Atari stock. The company founded in 1972 (and bankrupt in 1998) was scooped up by Bonnell three years ago as part of an acquisition binge. There was a great deal at stake for him -- and for the company that once was to video games what Ford was to cars -- and so the first question posed to him is, simply, How did it go?

"Before I go into your question," he replies, "can I just go back a little?" And I think, Fine, he wants to contextualize his answer with a quick overview of Atari's checkered history -- or perhaps of the booming video-game industry as a whole -- but no. He means to go back to the age of the caveman.

"At that time," Bonnell says, "they had two ways of entertainment. One was the chief of the tribe telling about the hunting of the day -- how big the tiger's teeth were, how brave this guy was when he went to hit the mammoth with the stick or whatever. And that was to impress the crowd. The fun, the thrills, were coming from this impression that you got from outside. Then they moved into painting on the cave walls, then writing stories, then the stories started moving, like cinema, and the cinema went to television. Still the same system. The media of impression."

Born 45 years ago in Algeria, Bonnell now divides his time between New York and France. He speaks an excellent but heavily accented English. Transcription cannot do justice to his idiosyncratic pronunciation of a word like "gratuitous," or "ethical," or "Xbox."

"The second way of entertainment they had was to take two sticks, beat them together and dance around the fire," he continues. "And here the thrill was not about being impressed but about expressing yourself. That moves into the invention of musical instruments, getting different emotions from different styles of music, growing the music experience into opera or whatever. And that really leads into the video game. Playing with a joystick is basically the same move as playing a piano; the thrill is not what you get from outside, but what you express from inside. Whether it's a piano or a chessboard or a joystick, that's your technology, and you express yourself through it.

"Very often, people talk about the video-game business from a pure financial point of view. Numbers, percentages, market share, all those subjects -- we don't care. And the mass market, they don't care either. What they want is to see if, at the end of the day, this form of entertainment is going to be a part of their life or not. The answer is yes. Big time."

As he gets rolling, Bonnell twists around in his seat, as if barely able to contain his energy. Compact, round-shouldered, with a clean-shaven head and tiny wire-rim glasses, he resembles a human bullet.

"The golden age of movies is gone. That's it. It's a fact. What they do today to survive is they multiply the special effects to catch up with what the kids want, because they've seen it in the incredible universes of these video games. It used to be, 'Well, let's make a movie and then make a video game version as a licensed product.' The next step to this will be the collaboration between the stories, between the complexity of their stories and the personal expression of the video game. This product doesn't exist yet, but it will. Think about this kind of game, where you'll be in a kind of Star Wars environment, you'll have X thousand people playing together at the same time; you could just spend your day watching the screen and waiting for the stories to happen, or else you can decide to enter the game and take your own little path, all in real time. Or let's say you see a movie and your character is in the jungle, there's a snake there, you see the snake but he hasn't seen it, he's smoking a cigarette, talking to his girlfriend. You're like: 'The snake! The snake!' And the character on the screen says: 'A snake? Where?' But if you choose not to say anything, then he just goes on doing what he's doing. The movie people don't anticipate this revolution. They better watch their back. We're right there. Big time.

"Wake up! Something is happening there! I was trying to convince my boy to learn Chinese. You know what his answer was? 'Why do I care about learning Chinese? By the time I master Chinese, we'll have computer phones where you'll be able to talk in French or English and it will be translated into Chinese in real time.' And he is right! I am wrong! I mean, who cares about speaking in Chinese, because we'll be able to communicate like in 'Star Trek.' We'll have automatic translation, and we'll be able to talk. And you know the wonder of this? This is all video games. This is why it's so interesting. And we haven't even touched the depth of all the education that you can derive from there. But just in terms of fun, that's where we're going. So all this is a big loop to get back to your question."

Question? Oh, right: the road show. Turns out it was a big success; Atari recapitalized to the tune of $200 million, wiped out all its toxic long-term debt practically overnight and lives to fight for market share another day. It's difficult to imagine even those roomfuls of analysts and number-crunchers not bending at least a little bit beneath the charismatic intensity of Bonnell's vision. ("You can't send him out there with a script," says Nancy Bushkin, director of corporate communications for Atari, "because that's just not Bruno.") As with anyone who sees the future, you might start out listening with a little smile on your face, but in the end it's awfully hard not to pay attention.
Has there ever been a cultural sea change as stealthy as the one represented by the rise of interactive entertainment? To anyone who came of age after, say, the introduction of the first Sony Playstation in 1995, video gaming is every bit as central to the pop-entertainment universe as movies or music, while to anyone older than that, it seems like one of those strange customs indigenous to the country of the young, in which the revenge fantasies of lonely teenage geeks are harmless siphoned off in some vaguely Dungeons-and-Dragons-like fantasy setting. No one would think of denying that video games are big, but few grown-ups outside the business have an understanding of just how big they've become.

Globally, the industry earned $28 billion in 2002, and in the United States, it's growing at around 20 percent a year. According to Fortune magazine, Americans will spend more time playing video games this year -- about 75 hours on average -- than watching rented videos and DVD's. A nationwide survey found that the percentage of last year's college students who had ever played video games was 100. Two games from the industry leader Electronic Arts, Madden NFL Football and FIFA Soccer, have each earned in excess of a billion dollars. (This year's Madden edition made more than $200 million alone.) For new and established musicians alike, games are the new radio; landing a spot on a video-game soundtrack is arguably more prestigious than landing a similar spot in a movie, a function not just of sales figures but also of the fact that the average Madden NFL 2004 buyer, for instance, will spend 100 hours in front of the game. Each statistic is more mind-boggling than the last, and together they certainly pose a challenge to conventional wisdom about which of these media is the tail and which is the dog.

For the completely uninitiated, a primer: There are games made to be installed and played on your personal computer, and then there are games that require a separate machine, or "platform." The best known and most widely used platform is Sony's Playstation 2, and Sony has sold about 60 million units worldwide. In 2001, Microsoft, seeing which way the wind was blowing, introduced its own game platform, known as Xbox. Because it contains its own hard drive (thus cutting down on a game's "loading" time, and also making it more easily adaptable to online play), it's considered the superior machine -- at least until Playstation 3 debuts, probably in 2005 or 2006, to be followed thereafter by Xbox 2. Sony is also poised to introduce a portable version, the PSP ("the interactive Walkman," Bonnell calls it), to compete with Nintendo's ubiquitous GameBoy hand-held system and Nokia's new, hacker-bedeveled N-Gage.

Then there is the holy grail of gaming, the target at which the arrow of technology is squarely aimed: competition online, in real time, against friends or total strangers in remote locations. Known by the unwieldy abbreviation M.M.O.R.P.G. ("massively multiplier online role-playing game"), this experience is available but has yet to catch fire; Xbox Live suffers from a dearth of game offerings, and even EA's phenomenal Sims franchise has sold poorly in its online version. Bonnell is more cautious than most about committing too many resources to this future too early; you can have the fanciest software in the world, he says, but until broadband access has really saturated the market, information will travel back and forth too slowly to make the customer's massively multiplayer experience satisfying enough to pay for. Still, the most popular current M.M.O.R.P.G., Lineage, has four million subscribers worldwide, primarily in South Korea, where the game is an outright phenomenon. In the long term, the revenue potential of online role-playing games is generally viewed as bottomless.

It's a gold rush, in which the very prosperity of the landscape is what makes it treacherous to inhabit; and so, over the past five years, Bonnell's unapologetic, Amazon.com-like survival strategy has been to get huge quickly and at virtually any cost. "It's been a turbulent few years for Atari," says Edward Williams, an interactive-entertainment analyst with the investment firm Harris Nesbitt Gerard. "But the critical piece for them was to introduce a portable version, the PSP ("the interactive Walkman," Bonnell calls it), to compete with Nintendo's ubiquitous GameBoy hand-held system and Nokia's new, hacker-bedeveled N-Gage.

Bonnell naturally agrees. "If you look at the structure of our business today," he says, "you have Electronic Arts running the pack, like 20 percent market share, and then you have a pack of five companies -- Activision, Atari, Take-Two, THQ, Konami -- which are all fighting in the range of 5 to 7 percent market share. At the end of the day, you'll end up with probably four to five players each controlling something between 15 and 20 percent market share, and probably a significant number of smaller players around. To be there, to be in this league, is critical. Because I believe that the big will be bigger and then the small will be smaller. And mechanically, if you're not in the right league -- it's like winning the Tour de France, right? You have to be in the first pack to have a chance. If you are too far behind, you can't really come back."

Bonnell subsequently adds, "It's a credo he reiterated earlier this fall at a yearly New York gathering known as the Playtime Conference, in which various new-media entities mount a series of sober pep rallies in front of an audience of institutional investors. As always, he spoke off the cuff, with a minimum of PowerPoint-ish bells and whistles, and in the end he charmed the room.

"We like the stock," whispered an analyst sitting next to me in the Grand Hyatt ballroom. "It's a great story. We just started coverage yesterday."

A half-hour earlier, in the standing-room-only ballroom next door, the chief financial officer of the mighty Electronic Arts offered his own vision of the future; globalization was its major theme. The atmosphere was like a war room; the numbers may not have been news to this audience, but they command respect just the same, and as the C.F.O. spoke in his quiet, even voice, the hush in the room was awesome. Bar graphs flashed across the video screen -- Return on Invested Capital, Profit Growth Rate -- and the surprising thing was not how EA dominated its competition in all these categories, but who, at this point, they consider their "competition" to be. Those little, squat bars next to EA's great big towers weren't representing Atari, Sega or Take-Two. Instead they symbolized Walt Disney, Time Warner and Viacom. That's the new playground that the self-styled 'Yankees of the industry' are sizing up. "We're not trying to win a championship," EA worldwide Studios president Don Mattrick tells me later. "We're trying to build a dynasty."

Anyone who thinks that just getting into the video-game business is a license to print money need only consider the history of Atari, and of how Bonnell came to own the name. An electrical engineer named Nolan Bushnell founded Atari (a Japanese word that approximates the chess term "check") in 1972, in Santa Clara, Calif., with two partners. Bushnell's initial investment was $250. The company's first full-time employee was a 17-year-old receptionist who used to baby-sit for Bushnell's kids, and its second was a young engineer named Al Alcorn, who, later that same year, invented what would become the primordial mother of video games, Pong. (One of Alcorn's own subsequent hires was a scruffy teenage dropout
named Steve Jobs.) Four years later, Bushnell sold Atari to Warner Communications for $28 million. Two years after that, he was forced out of the company.

Despite its early leadership not just in the field of games but also in home computers themselves, Atari was, over the next two decades, mismanaged right into the ground. It was sold off in 1984, and again in 1996, until finally the Atari Corporation became the property of Hasbro Interactive after its parent company at the time, a disk-drive manufacturer called JTS, filed for bankruptcy.

Meanwhile, back in France around 1983, Bonnell and a high-school classmate wrote a primitive but seminal video game called Autoroute, in which a player guides a frog across a busy highway (similar to another popular game called Frogger). He parlayed that success into a gaming company called Infogrames, which over the next 15 years mushroomed into Europe's largest electronic-games publisher. As it grew, so, too, did Bonnell's ambitions for it as a global force; the biggest market, though, was still across the ocean in the U.S. So Infogrames began buying up American gaming concerns, including, in 2000, Hasbro Interactive -- primarily, it seems, because owning HI meant owning the rights to the Atari name. With that, Bonnell's company had an American pedigree. He went right on buying up game studios throughout the U.S. and bringing them under the new Atari umbrella. Has it worked? Infogrames still has some vultures circling it -- less than a year ago it laid off 280 of its 460 employees in France -- but Atari's market share has risen by 77 percent since 2001.

Unquestionably, Atari's boldest and most controversial venture under Bonnell was Enter the Matrix, the video-game version of the three-volume sci-fi juggernaut directed by the brothers Larry and Andy Wachowski. Released in 2003 on the same day as the second movie in the trilogy, the game worked off a 244-page script written by the Wachowskis themselves, and included scenes shot on the movie's sets and with the movie's actors, but exclusive to the game. It came closer than any game ever has to realizing Bonnell's own vision of the equivalent interplay of a story you passively watch and a story you choose to enter; it was also one of the best-selling games of the year. The controversy has to do with what Bonnell reportedly worked off a 244-page script written by the Wachowskis themselves, and included scenes shot on the movie's sets and with the movie's actors, but exclusive to the game. It came closer than any game ever has to realizing Bonnell's own vision of the equivalent interplay of a story you passively watch and a story you choose to enter; it was also one of the best-selling games of the year. The controversy has to do with what Bonnell reportedly paid for it. Not only were other game publishers shocked by his agreement with the Wachowskis (considered so shamefully generous that it was posted on the Smoking Gun Web site), but in his single-minded pursuit of the game, Bonnell spent some $50 million to buy the entire studio, Shiny Entertainment, that already held the Matrix license.

To top it all off, Enter the Matrix received generally poor reviews from hard-core gamers. Still, Williams says that "in general it probably helped them. It gave them a higher-profile property. It remains to be seen how beneficial it was economically. The acquisition of the studio was more than just the one game, so you have to see how that pans out over time."

Mattrick offers a more interesting, if less sanguine, prediction for Atari's immediate future. "Bruno is definitely provocative, incredibly passionate, an adventurer at heart," he says. "The biggest challenge he's facing is that there's only one Bruno inside that company."

When Atari acquires a new company, it generally tries to keep the talent happy by not forcing anyone to relocate. So a significant part of Bonnell's schedule consists of traveling to these offices and development studios -- in Dallas, Seattle, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Newcastle, in northern England -- to get updates and offer input. The largest studio, employing about 120 people, is in Beverly, a suburb of Boston; the office building itself, deep in the woods off Route 128, came as part of the Hasbro Interactive acquisition. Bonnell visits there every six weeks or so.

When I arrive at the Beverly office (Bonnell has been in Boston for a few days already, holed up with his son, who is preparing to take the SAT), the first thing I see is a kind of vindication of Bonnell's scrupulous hyping of the reborn Atari brand: the sign at the end of the driveway, with its distinctive retro logo, has been stolen. The office is as unprepossessing inside as out: on each of its three floors, offices run around the perimeter, enclosing a warren of small, low-walled cubicles festooned with personal photos and company advertising. The days when scruffy dropouts could show up and be hired are long gone.

At a conference table shaped like a giant staple, framed by windows looking out into a wall of past-peak foliage, Bonnell receives a daylong parade of game designers and marketing executives. The designers themselves conform only vestigially to the computer-age stereotype of the socially unskilled, Cheetos-eating genius, although they are all male, and at least one of them (who demonstrates, on a giant video screen, his in-progress game about global warfare) looks young enough to trigger a child-labor investigation. But theirs is no longer some marginalized culture of renegades. Some of the industry's best-known, name-above-the-title game designers (like Sid Meier, creator of the classic Civilization series) get a movie star's reception at trade shows and conventions. Perhaps their status as the technocultural advance guard is more widely acknowledged now, or perhaps it's just the fact that this is the one day every six weeks when they have to shine themselves up and impress the C.E.O.; but in a roomful of corporate honchos, the code writers don't stick out the way they used to. Still, when a bug appears in another in-progress game (a character walks past his airplane's control panel and his legs disappear), the glazed, deep-focus expression on the young designer's unlined face clearly says that he can't wait to get away from all of us and figure out where the error is.

Meanwhile, the mostly female marketing executives talk about how to further saturate the preschool market (a sample PowerPoint exhortation: "Emphasize: PC Games Are Good for Your Kids") and how to promote a new title called Kya: Dark Lineage, considered ground-breaking in that it is a fighting game primarily for girls.

A game like Kya takes about three years to develop and involves the participation of up to 40 people at any one time (including quality-assurance employees, whose job is to play out a game's every conceivable permutation, in the search for bugs in the program). The great dialectic of game development is between the profit-potential inherent in creating an entirely new property and the guaranteed audience that comes with licensing an established movie, TV show, comic book, etc. That license comes at a intimidating cost -- in the case of a "Harry Potter" or a "Lord of the Rings," upwards of $20 million -- and indeed, overdependence on expensive licenses is one of the most common industry knocks against Atari. Even apart from that expense, a high-quality console game now costs about as much to produce as a low-budget movie, in the general neighborhood of $10
million. A game's designer generally gets a flat-rate payment for a game proposal, followed by royalties, not unlike the book business. As production values continue to rise, an ever-larger percentage of a game's component elements -- music, voice-overs, etc. -- are now outsourced to specialist companies.

Kya typifies Atari's professed goal to be the brand not just for the hard-core gamer but for the whole family, to offer something for everyone, which leads naturally to the question, who really plays all these games? The answer begins with an understanding of the various genres into which the games themselves are informally divided. "Fighters" and "shooters" are pretty much self-explanatory, as are sports or driving games. Then there are "real-time strategy" games, many of which are still about fighting, but only in the way, say, a board game like Risk is about war. But the most unusual term I heard tossed around at Atari was the designation "God game," a game about the building and controlling of a particular environment. Atari's own best-selling God-game franchise, called RollerCoaster Tycoon, involves the design of amusement parks; the fillip is that, when you choose to open your park, actual cyber-patrons start showing up, paying admission, riding the rides. The extent to which everything has been thought of is dizzying: faulty construction or inattention to maintenance can result in the occasional roller-coaster accident, for example, in which fatalities are sometimes involved, but one of your options in that case involves the construction of a memorial garden honoring the dead. As John Hurlbut, a senior vice president at Atari, points out, a game like this, involving the simulation of architectural models via computer, is pretty hard to distinguish from what many architects actually do for a living.

The biggest God-game franchise by far is EA's phenomenal series of Sims games, in which simulated people live Detailed cyberlives; they get jobs, watch TV, go on dates and, if you forget to send them to the bathroom every once in a while, they wet themselves. Endlessly spun off (with hundreds of new titles issued for Playstation 2 alone in a given year, the competition for shelf space is so fierce that games are often rebranded with new add-ons or special features just as a way of keeping them "new" enough to stay on display), the Sims, like God games in general, has a relatively huge female audience, even though (or perhaps because), as one Atari executive told me, "hard-core gamers laugh at it." They can laugh all they want -- the Sims franchise is closing in on the $1 billion mark, and its primary demographic is teenage girls.

As for the "fighters" and the "shooters," an Xbox joy pad may have 13 different buttons, but its basic point-and-click technology still lends itself most readily to aiming at things and hitting them; it therefore seems undeniable that video games, compared to other forms of entertainment, are disproportionately concerned with violence. (Revenge is the back story element in a great many games, if only to frame the violence in a justifiable context.) Atari's family-friendliness notwithstanding, this is one of the cultural flashpoints for the video-game industry -- the perceived dangers of marketing strategies intended to get kids to play games. The gore and moral lascitude of games like Doom or Grand Theft Auto (or G.T.A., for those intimately involved) have given rise to a parental panic reminiscent of the early days of rock 'n' roll. (The California State Assembly has just introduced a bill that would make it illegal for minors to buy the most violent games; according to the bill's author, Assemblyman Leland Yee, "This is all about saving our kids.") Bonnell reacts to these indictments of his business with a mixture of sympathy and impatience.

"It's as if you just read the music industry through the hard-rock guys," he says. "And you say it's all about bad words, crazy music and that's it. And someone says, What about Mozart? What about Elvis Presley? Oh, we don't know. No image. It's not an easy sell. So we don't talk about it. I think the mass-market perception of video games, for the most part, is 'Wow, those games are too violent, look at Doom, look at G.T.A. 3.' But that represents only about 10 percent of the market. Out of the 60 million Playstation 2's out there today, no game on the planet has sold more than six million. If the video-game business was really just about G.T.A., or just about Doom, if that was really representing what people want to play, why would it be only 10 percent of the install base? That's the whole thing -- people express themselves in what they choose to play." At the same time, though, he might approve a game that others would find offensive if he felt it had artistic merit; and in this he joins a growing chorus, principally of academics, who say it's time to start taking the video game a lot more seriously, not as a sociological phenomenon but as an art form in its own right. A European group called the Digital Games Research Association recently organized a conference at which a call was issued for the gaming equivalent of Cahiers du Cinema, the French journal responsible for the first serious analyses of Westerns and murder mysteries and other forms of what was previously considered a kind of junk entertainment.

Unfortunately, says Bonnell, even to many of his colleagues in the industry, "we're still toy makers. We have no roots in terms of, could I call it, the theory of our business. Like you have movie schools, where you go to the school of cinema and they teach you about the message, the background, the basics. But this industry will have its Spielbergs. That's why I hate talking about 'video games' to define our business. I talk about 'interactive entertainment' most of the time. Because the video game reduces it to its simplest form. And you forget that it's much bigger, that you can have different kinds of experience. Look at it as art."

All right. "The whole intricate question of method," the British critic Percy Lubbock wrote in his landmark 1921 study "The Craft of Fiction," "I take to be governed by the point of view. This seems like a pretty fruitful place to start in the case of video games as well. While some games have a "first-person mode" in which the screen really does represent the field of vision of the game's main character, the narrative norm in games, in literary terms, is more like a "close third person": you are not the character taking action; you are standing behind that person, looking over his or her shoulder. The exception to this is found in the God games, in which there is no central figure to stand behind; there, one's divine, controlling presence is, as Flaubert said, "present everywhere and visible nowhere." Many, if not most, games offer multiple choices in terms of point of view as well; Atari's Terminator 3, for instance, lets you fight either for or against (or as) Arnold Schwarzenegger in the battle for humanity's future.

The visual quality of the average game is very much a question of the expectations you bring to it. Do the human beings walking the streets of Vice City in Grand Theft Auto look or move just like real (which is to say, filmed) people? Not really. It's about as realistic as your average Pixar animated movie, which is to say, technically quite impressive but still a cinch to distinguish from real life. "We miss the tears in the eyes, the touch of the skin," Bonnell says. "We're still rough in the body language. But that's all possible." Indeed, it's so much better now than it was 10 years ago (and there's so much research-and-development money available for it), that the day when computer-animated human beings will be impossible to tell from filmed ones seems bound to come sooner rather than later. Never bet against technology.
Short of that, though, to what extent is interactive entertainment an unprecedented exercise in simulating the real? Much of the panic surrounding the more violent games has to do with that simulation -- with the idea that the adrenaline rush you might derive from video violence would become too hard to distinguish from the pleasure you might take in it in real life. But if there's anything disturbing about the relationship between video games and actual homicide, it's not that the games have become too realistic; it's that killing, particularly the warlike variety, has become far too much like a video game. Conflict Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad is most convincingly warlike in the sense of uncertainty bordering on panic it engenders -- the possibility of accidentally firing on your own troops, or the experience of walking into a building that may or may not be empty -- but still, the game's essential fidelity is not to war but to war movies. A player's "objectives," far from the geopolitical or even the just plain violent, are mostly about rescuing buddies in peril. (The four characters whose perspectives a player can adopt are named Bradley, Foley, Connors and Jones, war-picture names if ever there were any.) If the U.S. Army's Web site offers its own "shooter" for download, and if our armed forces have been using game technology as a training aid for years, who are the disaffected ones in that equation?

The revolutionary aspects of interactive entertainment have less to do with realism than with storytelling. A game like Max Payne or Enter the Matrix or Grand Theft Auto may depend heavily upon simulated violence, but the object of the game is to make the story tell itself. Piling up or losing points (or dollars or blood) is relevant to the gaming experience only in that it allows you to keep the story going, to find out, if you want, what happens in the end. Atari's Kya game is about the teenage heroine rescuing her brother from aliens and returning to Brooklyn; the game's designers estimate that it will take an expert-level player 15 to 20 hours to complete all the tasks required in order to get to the end of the story. Plot is the reward. Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, which takes place in a fictional Florida city in the 1980's, is certainly about the thrills of taboo violation -- and is depressingly ridden with the kind of adolescent sensibility that counts on big laughs from, say, naming a female character Candy Suxx -- but it is "completed" only after you have lived through more than 50 "main story missions" involving more than a dozen subsidiary characters. (The G.T.A. franchise is currently the target of at least one lawsuit asserting copycat behavior on the part of teens; its creators, Rockstar Games, refused to be interviewed for this article.) Activision's True Crime: Streets of L.A., a typical cop-outside-the-law story that takes place in precisely recreated Los Angeles neighborhoods, has six different outcomes, and even with all the killing going on, it's hard not to notice that your "mission" is actually a narrative one.

As with rock 'n' roll, violence on television, sex in the movies or any number of other sorts of cultural panic, the controversy about video games tends to center on concern for the emotional development of children. It would be easy to point out that, unlike movies or music or almost any other form of popular entertainment -- or drugs, for that matter -- games are virtually impossible to consume anywhere outside someone's home. It's always tempting to ask why 17-year-olds who are allowed to watch, say, the remake of "Scarface" should be protected against a violent game like Doom on the grounds that the latter is somehow too realistic. But the fact is that parents who are unsettled by video games -- who have let this phenomenon into their homes without necessarily understanding what it is -- are onto something.

John Hurlbut of Atari tells the story of his teenage daughter playing RollerCoaster Tycoon, one of the least violent games imaginable. In the course of the game it's possible to zoom in on any one amusement-park patron. "There was this one guy," he says, "who just had this scowl on his face. It really bothered her. She built new rides, she opened up concession stands, she lowered all her prices and she kept checking in with this one guy, but he just kept frowning. So finally, she clicked on him, picked him up, dragged him over to the river and dropped him in. 'Daddy, I tried everything,' she said. 'But I just couldn't make him happy.'"

Interactive storytelling is storytelling with the element of moral instruction taken out of it. Actions have consequences -- even in G.T.A., if you steal a car and the cops catch you, you have to go to jail, and in True Crime: Streets of L.A., the excessive shooting of bystanders causes a rise in the "civil unrest meter" -- but the consequences are inside the game itself; they have no application outside it. Even the docile Sims can be punished by their God at any time for no better reason than he or she feels like it. Everything is permitted. Whether this is good or bad depends on how didactically you think mass-market popular entertainment should be in the first place, and who gets to choose the lessons it teaches.

The fascinating thing about Bruno Bonnell -- a man of the future in every other respect -- is that this is the one point on which he remains proudly reactionary. He is unwilling to concede that a game cannot be a form of "personal expression" if the game's creators dictate that there are some places, morally speaking, where one is not allowed to go.

At the end of our long day inside the conference room in Beverly, something extraordinary happens. Game developers have come to inform Bonnell of a coup: a major hip-hop artist, a game aficionado himself, has agreed not only to lend his name to a new game but also to create, lend his voice to, star in (digitally speaking) and provide the original soundtrack for it. (Atari insisted that the star not be identified.) The developers present Bonnell with the rough storyline (on which the rapper collaborated) as well as some preliminary storyboarding. In the fierce competition for shelf space and for the consumer's attention, this is as close as you get to a sure thing: a game with a massive, built-in audience, and not just through a licensing claim that movies are violent, too, and books are violent, too, and so that's an excuse to cross any limits. I think this sometimes looks a bit ridiculous to some of our competition. But that's O.K. I love to be ridiculous when I can sleep at night."

There is a moment -- just before they all snap out of it and agree with their boss that the game is unacceptable and must at a minimum be sent back to the drawing board -- when the Atari executives all have the same blank expression on their faces, as if they can't believe what they've just heard. Lesson? Ethics? It's a game! In this setting, where virtually anything you think of can be and will be invented before you know it, where the money drives development so fast that no one quite understands the revolution they're fomenting, there's something noble about this kind of hubristic conservatism, as Bonnell insists that, as long as he's still calling the shots, he's damned if the industry he helped sow 20 years ago is going to reap the
With my own moral equilibrium in mind -- as well as my age, my middling technological aptitude and my apparently suspect ability to distinguish between the virtual and the real -- I sit down in my living room to play (if that's even the right word anymore) Max Payne, another popular, violent title from Rockstar. It's a story-based shooter, and Max's story -- set in a nighttime, comic-book-livid New York City -- is a sad and vengeful one: Max was formerly a by-the-book cop, but the agony he suffered when his wife and baby were murdered by junkies has pushed him into vigilante territory. The man of law who, when the quest for justice becomes personal, steps outside the law's boundaries: anyone who's ever seen a John Wayne or a Clint Eastwood movie already knows the drill.

The game begins with a noninteractive prologue in which Max sets up his own story in world-weary voice-over, and the quality of this is so discouragingly awful ("The sun went down with practiced bravado. Twilight crawled across the sky, laden with foreboding") that I start to disengage before the experience is even under way. But when Max opens the front door of his house and then stops -- and it dawns on me that he won't walk in and discover the corpses of his wife and child unless I direct him where to go and what to look at -- well, that's when I start to feel as if there's something new under the sun.

I can't temper Max's grief, but I can control his movements; thus he shoots dead the three junkies still concealed upstairs in his home, aided by my quick reflexes and by the fact that I have set the game on "easy" mode. When Max is the only one left standing, another voice-over transports me to the next scene, three years later, in a deserted subway station. Max, now deep undercover, has been called there to meet his boss, but when he arrives, he finds instead a transit cop lying dead on the men's-room floor. Voices are heard descending the stairs. I walk Max back out to the platform, and that's where the trouble begins. The game offers a "Matrix"-like function that will slow time to the point where Max can actually dodge flying bullets, but I haven't mastered it yet; he's hit once in the chest, then again, and then, in a pool of cartoon blood, Max dies.

I don't feel as if it's happened to me, but I do feel strangely sheepish for having allowed it to happen to Max. He comes to life again, of course, but at a cost: the story backs up to the beginning of what my incompetence has turned into Max's death scene, and I have to start over and try to shepherd him to the next stage in his own revenge quest without getting him killed.

Max is not me; but is he a character? Do I ever feel the sort of emotional affinity for him I might feel for a grief-demented father in a movie or a book? He's more of a narrative puzzle piece, an archetype, a situation; if I walked into the middle of a movie and saw a chase scene, I could feel something simple and immediate for both hunter and prey without having any idea who they are, and that's how I feel about Max. The whole scenario strikes me (especially after he dies a few more times) as silly and ponderous and overly bloodthirsty, and yet there's something there -- a curious tension between control and no-control -- that seems worth feeling solely on the grounds that, over a lifetime of novels and plays and movies and songs and paintings, I've never felt it before. The form is miles ahead of the content, and as long as the gold rush is on, it'll probably stay that way. But, as in the first days of television or radio or the movies, the form is the whole thrill, and it's more than thrill enough.

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