

CONSTELLATION Games

a SPACE OPERA SOAP OPERA

LEONARD RICHARDSON

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For Sumana, again, and all the time.

Part One: Hardware

Chapter I:

Terrain Deformation

Blog post, May 31

What the hell is up with the moon? I am riveted to the news, which is quite the productivity killer because **EVERYTHING HAPPENS SO SLOWLY**. I have CNN on right now because they have the best satellite footage, and I swear there was just a five-minute discussion about whether or not something is a dust cloud. Yes, it's a dust cloud! Some fucker is chopping up the moon! You're going to have a certain amount of dust in that circumstance!

But compared to how long you have to wait to see something happen, that five-minute argument goes by as quickly as the time after you hit the snooze button. So, starting now, I'm not watching any video that's not sped up 100x. Okay, CNN, you're gone.

A 24-hour news channel with some balls would crash their rented satellite into the "center of activity," the spot in lunar orbit where all the moon chunks are going. But satellites probably don't work that way. So we get shots of the lunar dust cloud because all the satellites were built to map the moon. The moon's not the story! Stop playing peekaboo. Get some close-ups. Do it for science!

I will post a review later tonight. I have twenty critical bugs to fix in this fucking pony game.

Blog post, June 1

Finally done with work. Fans of cute ponies will squeal with glee to learn that [Pôneis Brillhantes 5](#) has met its death-march deadline and will soon be landing in North America as "Smarty Pets: Pony Stable Extra." Thanks to

yours truly, the Smarty Pets series continues to have the best pony physics of any handheld series. You haven't lived until you've used the styluses on the DS Twin to braid a pony's hair! (Ironically, that was around the point where I stopped living.)

I have to immediately pivot to a tech demo for the upcoming all-hands meeting in São Paulo, so let's do a game review now, while it won't raise questions about my time cards.

GAME REVIEWS OF DOOOOM 2.0 PRESENTS

Caveman Chaos (2002)

A game by Narix

Reviewed by Ariel Blum

Publisher: Narix (Europe), New Time Entertainments (USA)

Platforms: Windows 2001

ESRB rating: T for cartoon violence and teleological suspension of the ethical

As always, I've been thinking, "How can I tie in current events to a review of an old video game that no one will read?" Because I am all about your satisfaction. There are a number of games where you mine the moon or some other planet, and it's a fun concept that's hard to screw up, but it's also hard to make a mining game that really stands out.

And then there's Caveman Chaos, the game your grandmother gives you because she knows you're into computers and it was in the \$10 bin at the office supply store. The biggest-scale, most terrifying "god game" of all time.

In a typical god-game like City, in Darkness (my personal favorite) you've got a contextual palette of tools for keeping your charges happy: tools for regrading the ground, putting up a school, and so on. In Caveman Chaos, you communicate with your primitive isometric-view tribes the same way G-d does in real life—by pummeling the shit out of things!

Need to move a river? Flood it! Mammoths moving out of hunting range? Bring in the ice sheets! Need to clear some space for the new fire pits? You can't spell "fire pit" without "fire"! Your cave-dudes running out of stone chips for spears? Create obsidian the natural way, by sending a fucking active volcano right through the crust of the earth!

In other sim games, when you get bored with doing things correctly, there's a menu of catastrophes you can inflict on your simulated population—hur-

ricane, dirty bomb, Godzilla attack, Prohibition. In Caveman Chaos, catastrophes are pretty much the only tools at your disposal. The Narix devs surveyed what had come before and said, "You know that 'extra' mechanic that's thrown in just for fun? Let's make that the CORE OF THE GAME."

Natural disasters are an unconventional technique for winning your population's affection. In fact, they terrify the poor bastards. But that's the genius of this game. Catastrophes bring in the resources you need to advance in the game, but they also kill people and leave the survivors cursing your name. Oh, cruel fate!

Would you believe it gets worse? After a few ice ages and lightning strikes, your cavemen develop religion, as a sort of defense mechanism. A caveman wakes up one day hearing voices—those voices are *you*. He's promoted to shaman, and he forms the rest of your control set.

Tell your shaman where you're going to put a volcano, and he'll declare that area taboo, like a Neanderthal zoning board. This is implemented in-game with an area selection interface and it's a useful way to herd your cavemen around the map. Only now you'd better *put* a volcano there, or your shaman will lose credibility and soon enough end up on the wrong side of a spear.

Shamans have a stat called "soulpower" (this game was originally in German). I'm sure soulpower was intended to be some generic fantasy-game thing like mana or magic points, but when I was a kid I interpreted it as literally the strength of the soul: the degree to which a shaman can listen to the voices in his head without going batshit insane. Push a shaman too hard (and you'll need to push them hard to get anywhere in this game) and he'll snap, start his own religion, and send your caveman tribe into a schism of inappropriate zoning and poorly-built fire pits.

So, a game that pretty explicitly plays up the "god" in "god game," in which your primary means of conversation with your worshippers are natural disasters and psychological torture. I wonder why this game ended up in the \$10 bargain bin in America? City, in Darkness cleaned this idea up for the family by adopting a more familiar good-versus-evil theme, and honestly, City, in Darkness is the one that I still play. But for sheer loincloth-pissing terror, for the feeling of looking up at the moon and seeing someone cutting chunks out for some unknown purpose, it's gotta be Caveman Chaos.

Blog post, June 2

It's a space station. Someone's building a g-ddamned space station out of moon rocks.

The news is now a parade of denials. Politicians are very concerned and plan to investigate the issue Right Now. NASA scientists have no clue and would like to get back to work. Crazy former NASA scientists know a lot about lunar pyramids, but sadly, not much about lunar space stations. Air Force asshats with perpetual frowns are declining comment on nonexistent black ops projects. A few hours of this and I may be going on air myself to deny everything. And then they'll do the weather report.

Knock it off, guys. We all know who it is. Too bad they're not giving interviews.

Blog post, June 5

Where were you? I was asleep. Jenny sent me five links to the same video and then called me.

"Yeah, you woke me up, okay? Mission accomplished. I can't see the link. The server's down."

"You have a TV!" said Jenny. "Use the TV. The aliens made us a video."

I ran downstairs to the living room, unplugged a bunch of consoles, and tried to remember how to receive a broadcast signal. "Tell me what's happening," I said, "in the video."

"It's a contact mission," said Jenny. "They came through a wormhole. There's about twenty kinds of aliens and they want us to join them."

I fumbled through the television menus. I changed the input source and my TV picked up the signal.

When I was in high school, the space shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated over my head while my dad was driving me to school. We heard about it on the radio, and I cried and cried. A few weeks later, when they decommissioned the other shuttles, I didn't cry because I didn't watch the video, but I knew I would have. Crying isn't sadness; it happens because an emotion is too big for your body. Emotions about space have always been too big for me.

I'm no expert at having emotions, but this is as big as they come. I'm still watching this video and it's still like watching *Columbia* touch down in Florida and the crew come out waving and smiling, and behind them the crew of *Challenger* waving and smiling in their 1980s blue suits. And the crews from Apollo 1 and Soyuz 11, and finally Laika the dog waving a little Soviet flag in her mouth. There's nothing to compare it to. It's the object of all future comparisons.

"Are you still there?" said Jenny.

My television showed a small hairy creature standing in front of a screen, manipulating symbols with twitches of the tentacles around its mouth.

"That thing..." I said, "that *person* is playing a video game."

"That may not be true," said Jenny.

"It's game-*like*," I said.

"I don't know where in the video you are."

"The thing that looks like a Dragon's Dice cerebrophage," I said. "With the tentacles on the face. It's gesturing at a computer in a very game-like way."

"Jeeezus, you've known about the aliens for three minutes and you're back to talking about video games."

"They have computers," I said. "They'll have games. I'm going to find out what game that cerebrophage is playing and I'm going to review it on my blog."

Jenny is understandably skeptical. But it's going to happen, readers. This is my quest.

Holy shit.

Chapter 2:

Corner Pieces

Real life, June 6

“Hey, Jenny,” I said. Jenny waved at the video chat window and made a kind of “mehhh” noise that might have been “hey.”

“You’re still up.”

“I am up. This idiot’s final act before leaving for the weekend was to tell me to redo the entire website.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t see no naked chick in your bed,” said Jenny. “Wait, lemme full-screen it. Nope, still nothing.”

“Jenny. I... this was the worst date of my life.”

“Was there an explosion?” said Jenny. “Did you push her to an emotional crisis and she threw up on you?”

“Third worst,” I conceded. “I brought up the Constellation.”

“Like, just makin’ conversation, or...”

“I may have mentioned that I’ve been waiting for the space aliens to arrive since I was six.”

Instead of facepalming, Jenny asked: “What happened when you were six?”

“*Triple Point* happened.”

“Didn’t the aliens in that movie want to steal Earth’s water?”

“Yes, but they looked very cool.”

“I begin to see the problem.”

“It seemed like... she had these hot nerdy glasses. Did I mention that? Like your glasses. I thought it’d be okay to discuss the Constellation.”

Jenny took off her glasses and peered at them. “They’re hipster glasses,” she said. “You don’t need a fuckin’ nerd permit to wear ‘em.”

“It was a false-flag operation. She just looks at me through those glasses, like, you’re one of *those* people.”

I reloaded my profile page on the dating site. No rating, no comment. This was a standoff. My date wouldn’t rate me until I’d rated her. It was

cold-blooded blackmail. Or maybe she had gone to sleep.

“Did you find out what *she* was interested in?” said Jenny.

“Oh, yes, that was my second mistake,” I said. “She complained a lot about her job. Apparently bicycle couriers don’t get much respect.”

“Okay, and then the mistake...”

“I commiserated. I told her that I know how she feels, because I make pony games for ten-year-old girls. And the instant I say ‘pony games,’ she sees me with a little pervert moustache, cruising the middle school in a banged-up white van. And the date’s over.”

Jenny rubbed her eyes. “Ariel, let me introduce you to the wonderful world of stretching the truth. Suppose I need to get laid, I may pretend to be a famous artist. Usually Erica Fujii. Or Andy Warhol, if I think I can get away with it.”

“Hey, you know what?” I said. “Maybe ten-year-old girls should develop their own damn pony games! And then old guys like me would be pushed out of the industry altogether!”

“Listen, I am giving you a walkthrough for your next date. You work for Reflex Games. You make super-violent games for frat boys, and every time one of those bastards goes gold, you shed a single sensitive tear and collect a fat royalty check.”

I clicked over to the bicycle courier’s profile. I noticed that her bio said she was a bicycle *mechanic*.

I laughed a cynical, world-weary laugh—some kind of laugh, anyway. “Reflex devs don’t get royalties,” I said.

“This one does,” said Jenny, “and he spends them showing the ladies a good time. And if by some freak accident his date finds out he doesn’t work for Reflex anymore, that he writes pony games and has been waiting for the Constellation for twenty years, he goes home and smokes some weed and falls asleep like a normal person. Instead of calling up his friend Andy Warhol who is busy redesigning a website.”

“I smoked all my weed during the pony death march.”

“Plan B is tequila,” said Jenny.

“Tequila, okay.”

Blog post, June 10

Hey, you know what’s bullshit? Pretty much everything about this contact mission. It’s been over a week and I haven’t talked to one extraterrestrial.

I signed up for an appointment with the Constellation Library, and got an appointment for time zero plus one month. That’s not one month from now—it’s one after the government gets off its ass and builds a Library

building in Austin! So, creepy hive-mind Wikipedia is out.

Real life, June 10

A couple hours after I posted that, social network notifications lit up my screen with flashing lights like a white trash neighborhood in mid-December. This was my big break, I thought. I just needed to act fast. I needed an internal combustion engine.

ABlum: bai
the constellation is sending down small spacecraft
RIGHT NOW
they want people to come up to the space station
like the astronauts did
you need to pick up me+jenny so we can hit the landing
site
i reiterate: RIGHT NOW

KThxBai: hey bro.
that would be awesome, except i'm at work.
where i work.
so i can pay for the car i use to drive you around.
can we do it at 5:30?

ABlum: at 5:30 i will be walking on the fucking moon
and the line to the austin shuttle will be a million people
long

ABlum: jenny
the constellation is sending down small spacecraft
RIGHT NOW
they want people to come up to the space station

OMJennyG: Hi

ABlum: like those scientists did
we need to ride over to the landing site (~15 mi)
i reiterate: RIGHT NOW
bai can't make it because of some "work" thing

OMJennyG OK sounds good

ABlum: i'll bring leftovers
who knows what kind of food they have up there

OMJennyG: I have leftover cue from Eddie's bday party

We joined a pack of other cyclists at the onramp. Five miles out, a thick stream of cars started passing us up, plus the occasional overhead helicopter. Eight miles out, we passed those same cars, now stalled in a traffic jam, honking their horns. Twelve miles out, we encountered a select group of assholes who'd decided to take their cars over the fence into the bike lane and spread the traffic jam there.

"We may not get to the moon today," said Jenny.

Some of the bicyclists turned around; others walked their bikes through the traffic jam. We walked ours over another wrecked fence, through the mud and onto the grass, and ate lunch on top of a hill.

"It's only a couple miles away," I said. "Maybe we can at least see the ships land."

"Who's that?" asked Jenny, and pointed. It was an old hippie with a walking stick, heading through the meadow *away* from the landing site, back towards Austin.

"Oh, geez," I said.

"Don't be picky," said Jenny. "Maybe he saw something. Watch my bike." She got up and ran off to flag the hippie down.

The hippie was about seventy, real wiry and muscular, naval tattoos up and down his arms. Classic local color. The first thing he said to me was: "Ya know, that used to be a living thing."

I looked up from my spare rib. "Uh, yeah," I said, "it's barbecue."

"There's coleslaw and potato salad," Jenny told him. "Corn on the cob." Hippie allowed as how he would eat some coleslaw, and crouched on the grass.

"What's it like over there?" asked Jenny.

"Just what you'd think," said the hippie. "National Guard, spooks, NASA, Homeland Security, all fallin' into each other's assholes." Another helicopter flew overhead.

"So they're not even letting us in," said Jenny.

"They're not *guarding* it," said the hippie, "except by accident, by sheer numbers. They're arguing over jurisdiction. Bunch of lions fighting over a zebra carcass." He nodded at the sticky beef rib in my hands. "No offense."

"Don't bring NASA into your wildlife analogies," I said. "NASA's the good guys."

"NASA has always been a civilian fig leaf for the militarization of space."

“Dude!” I said, “Nobody eats my coleslaw and disses NASA.” I always thought when the police blotter said a fight started over a “philosophical dispute,” it was a euphemism, but maybe not.

“My coleslaw,” said Jenny.

The hippie gave Jenny a look like: whoa, that was the last straw for *that* guy! “I was part of a civilian weapons inspection team in the Nineties,” he said. “You want to get in there? Go home, come back with a suit in a dry cleaning bag. Change when you get there, come out from behind one of the towncars, act like you belong there.”

“Sounds like a good way to get shot,” said Jenny.

“Well, go on and live a little,” said the hippie. “I probably won’t live to see it, but you kids are going to see the end of the human race.”

“Why are you so cynical?” I said. “This isn’t an alien invasion. They’re friendly. You think they’re pretending to be nice so they can eat us?”

“Intentions don’t matter,” said the hippie. “Read your history. Any time there’s a first contact, the contactees end up dead.”

The cars stopped honking and some car doors opened. “Here comes a ship,” said Jenny.

The hippie turned and we watched the bullet-shaped shuttle drop whining out of the sky. A thing designed by people from other planets and made from pieces of our moon: superstructured glass and cerametal. The shuttle flared and landed silently behind a rise.

“Why’d you go to the landing site?” I asked the hippie. “You must have been the first one there. You want to get wiped out first?”

The hippie kicked back the leftover vinegar like a shot. “I’m curious,” he said. “We’re all curious. That’s what gets us killed.” He stood up. “Thanks for the coleslaw. Better get back.” He picked up his stick and headed towards Austin.

“Man,” I said when the hippie was out of earshot, “I thought hippies were supposed to be all optimistic and shit.”

We ate our cold barbecue. The cars resumed honking and trying to turn around. Before too long, the shuttle took off again, rising like the chorus of a song, empty.

Private text chat, June 11

Smoke-ccsspm-6be8 Hello, Ariel. I am a submind of Smoke, Ring City’s general-purpose cognition engine. My cognitive address is Smoke-Cursive-Cytoplasm-Snakebite-Singsong-Polychromatic-Musteline. In a recent email, you asked to be matched with a

member of the contact expedition. I'm evaluating your application.
Please answer questions with YES or NO. Do you understand?

ABlum: NO

Smoke-ccsspm-6be8: My supermind tells me you're being sarcastic, so I'll continue.
Sometimes two humans have the same name. I think I know which Ariel Blum you are, but tell me if I'm wrong.

I think you're the human partially or wholly responsible for the following works of art:

- "Recoil"
- "Pôneis Brilhantes 4: Problemas com Pôneis"
- "Me and Sonic at the Amusement Park"

Is this right?

ABlum: man, i wrote that sonic fanfic in junior high school

Smoke-ccsspm-6be8: Please answer YES or NO.

ABlum: YEEEEEEES

YES

[Smoke-ccsspm6be8 is now offline.]

ABlum: wtf

Smoke-ccssp-65290: Hello, Ariel.
My cognitive address is Smoke-Cursive-Cytoplasm-Snakebite-Singsong-Polychromatic.
One of my subminds recommended that I talk to you.
Please answer in English prose. Do not use idioms.

ABlum: where did the other guy go?

Smoke-ccssp-65290: I don't know who you're referring to.

My Musteline submind is busy identifying other people. My supermind is waiting to speak with you, pending the resolution of some concerns regarding your treatment of fictional characters. Shall we begin?

ABlum: hey, some of my best friends are fictional characters.
most of them, actually

Smoke-ccssp-65290: What was your role in the creation of "Recoil"?

ABlum: uh
i mostly worked on the enemy ai
so if you think about it, i was actually on the side of the fictional characters for that one

Smoke-ccssp-65290: In "Me and Sonic at the Amusement Park", why did you connect a fictional person to an electrical generator, in violation of Article 6 of your planet's Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

ABlum: i don't remember that
but probably because i was in fucking junior high
and i didn't know how electricity works

[Smoke-ccssp-65290 is now offline.]

Smoke-ccss-b85b07: Hello, Ariel. My cognitive address is Smoke-Cursive-Cytoplasm-Snakebite-Singsong. One of my subminds recommended that I talk to you. Please answer in English prose. You may use idioms.

ABlum: hi, smoke-cursive-cytoplasm-snakebite-singsong

Smoke-ccss-b85b07: Tell me about a time when you did something evil.

ABlum: oh gee
well
sometimes i work too hard
is that evil?

Smoke-ccssb85b07: Sarcasm ignored.

ABlum: ok um
when i started college, my brother raph pressured me to join the ut austin chapter of his fraternity and i joined, only to discover that fraternities are the stupidest forms of social organization ever invented so, live and learn
but
at the end of the fall semester, one of my frat brothers offered to pay me to write his final history paper and i did it
but i didn't want to get caught, so i read his earlier papers and put a lot of work into imitating his shitty writing which made the paper a d+ at best
so he failed the class
and i wouldn't give the money back
so they made up an honor code violation and kicked me out of the frat
and at the time i remember thinking "this has worked out surprisingly well"
so, i don't know what you consider "evil"
but i'm sure you can find it somewhere in there

[Smoke-ccss-b85b07 is now offline.]

ABlum: well bye

Smoke-ccssp-65290: Smoke-Cursive-Cytoplasm-Snakebite-Singsong-Polychromatic here again. What would it take to get you to kill someone?

ABlum: fuck's sake
i'm not killing anyone

Smoke-ccssp-65290: Good.

[Smoke-ccssp-65290 is now offline.]

Smoke-ccs-762d: Well, if it isn't Mr. Sarcasm.

ABlum: YES

Smoke-ccs-762d: Don't quit your day job.
I'm Smoke-Cursive-Cytoplasm-Snakebite.
Let's get down to business. In your initial email, you said that you want to write reviews of electronic games from the Constellation.

ABlum: yeah

Smoke-ccs-762d: Before I connect you with one of our anthropologists, I'd like to see you write a review of a human game.

ABlum: there are like 50 reviews on my blog

Smoke-ccs-762d: I've read your blog.
To eliminate confounding variables, I'll need you to review a game that no one else has ever reviewed.

ABlum: have you seen the Internet? that's a pretty tall order
why don't you have me write some more sonic fanfic?

Smoke-ccs-762d: I'm confident you can rise to your occasion.
I'll be watching your blog, Ariel.

[Smoke-ccs-762d is now offline.]

ABlum: hello?
guess that's it

Blog post, June 13**GAME REVIEWS OF WARMED-OVER RESENTMENT 2.0 PRESENTS**

Quexx (2012)

A game by Reflex Games

Reviewed by Ariel Blum

Publisher: unknown (in-universe), Reflex Games (real life)

Platforms: Primary Fire Control Mainframe (in-universe), Xbox Forever/PS4 (real life)

ESRB rating: M for getting headshot while playing

Most people who go through Temple Sphere's story mode will come out thinking that Quexx is a fictional game-within-a-game like frungy, Imperial Marzai, or Pinochle With Guns: frequently mentioned within the game but having no official rules. These people are dead wrong.

Quexx is an action puzzle game that, as you'll overhear if you play Temple Sphere, is sweeping the Tool of Justice space fleet and causing huge productivity loss. The Tool warrior caste is twiddling switches back and forth to release colored bubbles, instead of twiddling the switches that kill humans with lasers. This goes a long way towards explaining why they rarely notice you sneaking around their spaceships.

Snoop on enemy transmissions with your spacesuit radio. Along with useful information about whatever mission you're on, you'll hear Tool command-castes bitching about how much time the warrior caste is wasting on Quexx, and warrior-castes swapping strategies.

That's as deep as most people go. Even pro game reviewers are being paid to review Temple Sphere, not Quexx. But I'm not being paid, and my future as a reviewer of Constellation games depends on reviewing a game that's never before been reviewed *as a game*. So I'll tell you that within Temple Sphere's infiltration path, you can play Quexx from any vacant Tool of Justice workstation. It's called "Multidimensional Fluid Simulation" to hide it from the officers. There's even a boss screen inside the game, showing fake battle telemetry. That's a boss screen for a game played on a simulated computer inside another game running on a real computer.

The game itself is a clever variant on the combo-matching mechanic that has been hijacking humans' pleasure centers for twenty-five years now. Bubbles line up behind gates. You open and shut the gates, guiding the bubbles into a reaction chamber where they interact in pleasing or horrible

ways. There's no opponent, but since one switch controls up to three gates, you'll find yourself taking punishment for almost every bonus you receive.

The big problem with Quexx is that there's nothing alien about the game. It would be perfectly at home as a ninety-nine-cent downloadable on Hit-Brick. Now that there are real extraterrestrials living in lunar orbit, it's time to hold fictional ETs to a higher standard. It seems strange that intelligent birds in a religious caste-based dictatorship would develop the same games as a human sitting in a cubicle in Austin or San Mateo.

When I first heard about Quexx, I admit I took it as a personal affront. I thought it was my former coworkers' way of mocking me for leaving Reflex for the world of short-term consulting contracts and femme-y "casual" games. It may seem silly to suspect Reflex of putting so much manpower into an Easter egg just to mock a former employee, but if you'd worked with these guys, there's not much you'd put past them.

And then Give 'Em Hell III came out, with the French kids and all their street games, and I mellowed a little—Reflex devs love screwing each other over, but they also love running jokes. Games-within-games are just their latest joke.

And while it may not fit perfectly with the Temple Sphere backstory, Quexx is a real game, not a parody. It's polished and playable, and the strategies you hear from the Tool transmissions are actually good strategies. (Pro tip: clear out the Tool ship before starting to Quexx, or you'll get a laser bolt through the head before you even finish the tutorial.) It's almost like the game-within-a-game is an outlet for the Reflex devs' creativity as they crank out a game with identical mechanics every sixteen months.

(Confidential to Smoke: all your civilization's games could get this same gushing treatment! Or, if your games are terrible, I can also do funny-angry reviews, which humans really go for.)