The 10 strangest things in video games
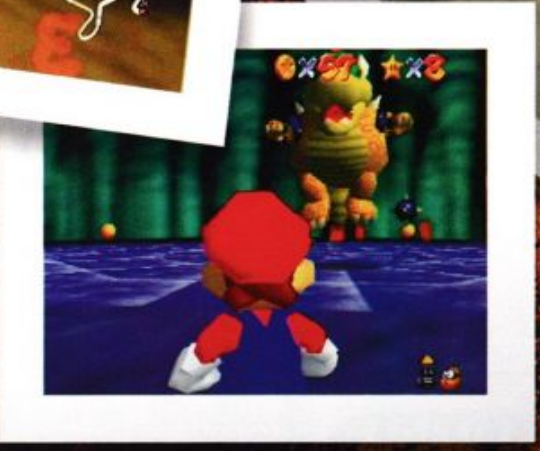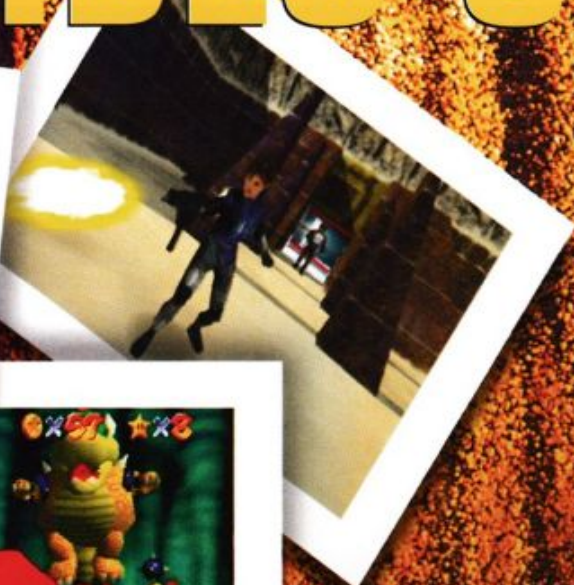
THE 10 STRAN
IN VIDEO GAM

Games are great but they do funny things sometimes...

GEST THINGS
ES

by James Price

Games are fun. But have you noticed how *strange* they can be at times? How they brazenly disregard real-life wisdom and common sense, favouring their own, oft-twisted interpretation of universal laws? You haven't, you say?

Oh but you *have*. You have. Here are ten prime 'weird things' that only occur in games. They're mystifying, funny and irritating in equal measure, and there's often no *true* explanation for their presence. They're just there. Like Everest. Except smaller and less snowy.

Of course, if you know another strange aspect of gaming that you feel should be mocked or explained, feel free to write in and tell us. But, as far as we're concerned, the following are the ten best (or, sometimes, worst). For example, have you ever noticed...

The 'small blow' finish

1

Explain? You're playing a fighting game. Your opponent, a 20-foot robot or, perhaps, Beelzebub himself, has a tiny iota of energy left. Do you topple him with a huge power-up punch? Or some outlandish projectile attack, to an accompaniment of flashing lights and visual extravagances? No. You use a simple 'weak' kick. It hits your opponent's foot. And that's it. Lights out. They fall, exhausted. You win. An ignoble defeat for your opponent, a strangely unsatisfied feeling for you, the player...

But they're out of energy. So that's fair, yes? No! Why should a low-powered punch fell an assailant the size of a Canadian Redwood? As weird things go, this is a heavy albatross for the beat-'em-up to carry. Let's imagine James and Tim having a fight about, say, jam. Let's say that James favours strawberry, Tim raspberry. They're both down to the final dregs of their, ahem, energy bars. Will a tiny, feeble punch to the midriff, leg or head see either fall? No! And no again! Because they *love* jam, hence the scrap! And, with every fighting game you care to mention having a story behind it, why should *MK4*'s Sub Zero, for instance, fall over after having his foot tapped by Sonia? He's a Thunder God! Sheesh...

Good thing or bad thing? Just an inherent flaw. Energy bars are a necessary evil, but their limitations mean that 'finishing' punches are often insipid, sneaky efforts. Perhaps *Mortal Kombat*-style 'fatalities' should be available once a fighter's energy drops beyond a certain point, or something. Why not send in your own suggestions to Dream On?
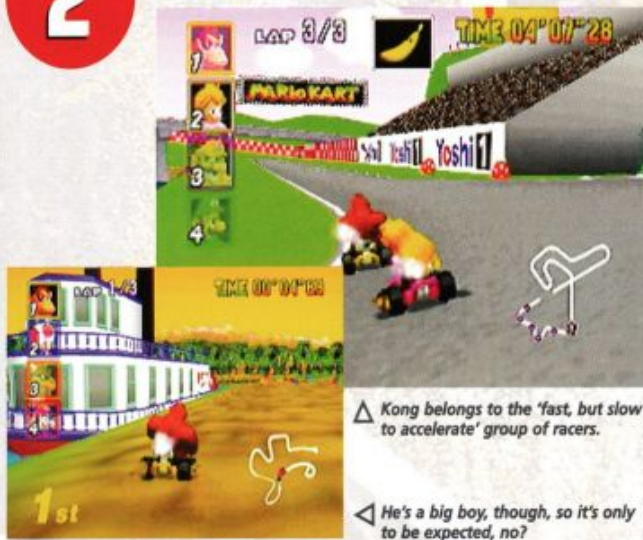
△ A little tap's all that's needed in any Mortal Kombat.

▷ Al Rashid's in trouble. A light slap around the face'll finish him.

GO! GO! ▷
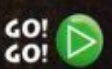
Small cars, big cars, slow cars, fast cars

2

Explain? Well, it's a feature of almost every driving game ever released. Go to the 'select car' screen, and you have, essentially, a choice between a fast car that steers like a cow, and a small car that reaches speeds comparable to that of stuffed monkey nailed to a table. Fast cars move forward well but don't turn, the slow cars operate in precisely the opposite manner. And the 'average' car's offered as a newcomer-friendly compromise? Don't make us laugh...

Surely it has to be like that? Not really, if you think about it. With a racing game in the arcades, it's different. Programmers of such coin-guzzling monsters have to assume that its players will be gaming virgins or mindless simpletons, just to make their game as accessible (therefore lucrative) as possible. So the fast/no steering, slow/good steering, average/average simplification is acceptable. Console games, however, should offer a mite more. In accrediting players with a higher level of intelligence and sophistication, developers of 'domestic' racing games would wriggle their way onto far more Christmas lists. They could offer players, as a reward for successful play, cars that are fast *and* handle well, with the challenge provided by skilful AI opponents and creative track design. Is that expecting too much? We think not...

Good thing or bad thing? Just an 'old' thing. This has been a videogaming 'cliche' for a looooong time...

△ *Kong belongs to the 'fast, but slow to accelerate' group of racers.*

◁ *He's a big boy, though, so it's only to be expected, no?*

The disappearing corpse

3

Explain? The corpse is – hooray! – an integral aspect of many video games. Marking the transition of an on-screen homicidal monster or Uzi-toting guard to *fois gras* for fungi, the 'dead' body speaks volumes. Specifically: 'You've got him. Stop shooting now. No, NOW! Look, this isn't *Mortal Kombat*, you know. He's dead! Get the other one!' If you do hang around for a moment, though, the body disappears. Why?

Why does this happen? Well, it's simple. Every console or computer has a limit on the amount of stuff it can have on screen at any given juncture. Just because something is judged in game terms to be 'dead', it doesn't necessarily mean that moving the prone figure in question takes any less processing time.

Is this a good thing or a bad thing? There's a school of thought that suggests that having vanquished foes remain where they are would, indeed, be A Good Thing™. After all, when playing *GoldenEye*, *Quake 64* or any other polygon first-person blaster, it's easy to get lost, yep? Well, corpses could act as 'bread crumbs' – remember the fairy tale? – for the player, offering a clear indication that you've already passed through that area. Certain sections of *Shadows of the Empire* have corpses that remain where you left 'em, but it's hard to say that it improves play in any tangible sense.

△ *Go on, give it a quick dice before it has the chance to disappear. Ker-ching!*

The winning pose

4

Explain? Amidst the hype, many missed one of *Street Fighter 2*'s most sinister contributions to gaming: it popularised the 'winning pose'. Since then, almost every fighting game has fighters that forsake modesty in victory for an elated animation sequence and, usually, a feeble soundbite. Worse, even, is the fact that the latter is occasionally context-sensitive. An American footballer-style fighter would cry 'Touchdown!', while for a generic Ninja-type, an inane 'oriental' scream of some description will suffice.

What's so bad about that? Well, nothing. But, assuming those reading this are from the UK and Europe, surely you must acknowledge the 'American' nature of such displays? If you've scored a goal in a cup final, a victory dance is understandable. If the girl (or boy) of your dreams has consented to a night out, that's good reason, too. But beating someone to a bloody, polygon pulp and *then* having a bit of a celebratory jig? Hmmm.

But that, in itself, is not the problem. If the after-victory dance is present, *the player should be able to choose their own*. There should be at least three, including 'unimpressed', 'mocking' and 'I salute you, my honourable friend.' Not too much to ask, no?

Good thing or a bad thing? Oh, hell. We're just being picky...

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5 The sequel improves upon its predecessors

Explain? Well, you know. The software industry used to be obsessed by licensed games, from film tie-ins to character endorsements. And, by and large, they still are. They have, however, realised the potency of a recognised 'brand'. Want an example? How about Mario, and his games? Or *ISS*? Or Lara Croft? Or *Quake*? We could go one.

Film sequels are, so the accepted wisdom suggests, invariably weaker than the first instalment. Many gaming franchises, by contrast, improve upon their predecessors.

△ Turok 2 *is very definitely better than Turok. Unlike* Speed 2 *and* Speed*, say.*

But isn't that a technology issue? Well, kind of. No-one can dispute that *Mario 64* benefits from N64 hardware and wouldn't, say, work or be possible on an NES – unlike *Mario World*. Obviously. And there's no doubt that, within their lifespans, every gaming format ever known has seen developers become more canny with passing years. Who would have thought that Rare could create a game like *Donkey Kong Country* on the SNES when Nintendo's 16-bit machine was first released? Or Argonaut with *Starfox*? For an N64-specific example, look no further than *Perfect Dark*. *GoldenEye*, for now, reigns supreme as a triumph of artful accomplishment – it's by far the best first-person shoot-'em-up on any format. But will its pseudo-sequel be better? If you're prepared to bet 'no', give us a call. We'd be delighted to take your money...

Is this a good thing or bad thing? Good thing. God, yes. And *Perfect Dark*? Our knees go weak at the very mention...

7 The lens flare

Explain? You must know this one. You're driving over the brow of a hill in almost any racing game you care to mention, and a series of co-ordinated, coloured and largely circular lights appear, trace out a brief pattern, and disappear. This is a 'lens flare'. We'd relate just why and when they occur in real life, if we weren't so damn *bored* of seeing them in games...

But why? Aren't they realistic? Yes, yes, yes. They're very pretty. And yep, very realistic, we're sure. But it seems you can't turn a corner without a game engine blinding you with lens flare trickery, these days. Perhaps we're exaggerating. Maybe it's a piece of eye candy programmers find too sweet to ignore. We should *appreciate* such enthusiastic effort. But, quite frankly, the lens flare is *boring*.

Looks lovely, but does it actually happen to your eyes? ▽
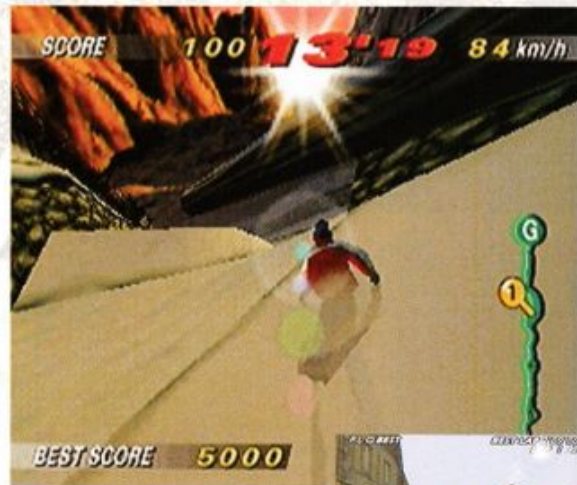
△ *Just programmers showing off really, isn't it.*

Achieved in a subtle manner, we're prepared to accept their presence. But when a coder gets over-enthusiastic and decides they should in any way shape or form obscure the player's view of the track ahead in a racing game, we lose all interest.

A good thing or bad thing, then? Neither. Just an over-used 'trick'. And yet another argument for why many games programmers should get out more. LOOK AT THE SUN! DOES IT DO THAT TO *YOUR* EYES? Thought not...

6 A raised arm wards off all blows

Explain? Okay. Picture the scene. You've got half a ton of man-mountain powering up a blow that should be measured in megatons, not pounds. He winds back his fist, throws it with all his might... and a slight female figure shrugs it off with a casual wave of a slight, paper-thin arm.
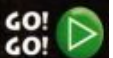
Sound familiar? A feature of almost every fighting game ever created, the 'block' move continues to defy physics, biology and just about every science you care to mention.

Now you come to mention it, that does seem strange... Doesn't it, though? Like it or not, it's a feature of fighting games that would be hard to replace. However, beat-'em-ups are, slowly but surely, adopting the 'counter' move. Rather than absorbing a ferocious punch or kick with limb aloft, fighters execute judo-style 'grabs', foiling their opponent with grace, poise and, amazingly, a modicum of realism. Thankfully, this is 'realism' with training wheels – we're sure you share our desire to avoid seeing the blood and snot of real-life brawls on the N64 *just yet*, thanksverymuch... *(Speak for yourself – Martin)*

△ *Leon hits out with full force. Leon 2 takes it on the forearm without a grumble.*

◁ *Abdul hides behind his fists. Wusser.*

Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Neither. Just a fact of life. Counter moves are good. We applaud their innovative nature. But in the fantasy environments that games provide, why *shouldn't* a schoolgirl swat aside a sumo wrestler's fist with a delicately-poised limb? Exactly. But, ahem, don't try this one in any bars, playgrounds or gun clubs you happen to visit...

GO! GO! ▷

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8

Mario's tiny, look. But he can still swing ol' Bowser here.

Size doesn't matter

Explain? It's a familiar concept, explored by virtually every entertainment medium you care to mention. Basically, it's the old David and Goliath ideal; that is, the little individual can overcome the behemoth. Thus, a tiny spaceship can defeat an enormous battleship in a shoot-'em-up, Mario can pick Bowser up by the tail and throw him around, and small (yet fast) beat-'em-up characters can rival their enormous and all-powerful (yet slow) counterparts. Of course, anyone who has ever stepped into a playground as a dribbly-nosed infant or teen will tell you, life doesn't *quite* work that way. When you encounter, at age ten, a schoolmate from the same year who *shaves*, you run. You aim to be still accelerating by the time you passes the five hundred metre mark, quite frankly...

But isn't beating bigger foes the fun thing about games? Exactly. It's great. Life is, at times, hard. TV, books and games offer an opportunity to experience events that rarely occur in real life – like the big 'bad' guy getting his much-deserved comeuppance. But games, specifically, offer that little bit more – you can turn on your N64 and administer the kicking yourself. The therapeutic benefits are obvious and, what's more, it's *fun*, too...

Good thing or bad thing? Need you ask?

9

Golf games, in any way, shape or form, 'simulate'

Explain? Now here *is* a mystery. Although the N64 lacks a 'decent' golf game, the whole idea is intrinsically flawed. The success of any given match is dictated, after all, by a player clicking a button two or three times in order to set a power bar at the 'correct' level(s). What relation does that bear to the techniques required to succeed in the real-life sport? None, of course. On the PC, developers are experimenting with golf games that use a mouse to 'simulate' a swing – although, it must be said, with little genuine success so far. The N64, alas, has no such rodent-like peripheral. How, then, can *Waialae Country Club* take itself seriously?

△ Golf: a game for men of a certain age.

But golf games can be entertaining. I played one once and... Yep. We know. There are many people who enjoy golf games, and we're not arguing that they're entirely without merit. It's just that, let's face it, the 'golf' aspect of such titles is restricted to on-screen representations of courses, ball movement, and little more. Of course, the same could be argued of any sports game. You could say that *ISS '98* isn't an accurate simulation of football. But you'd be talking through your behind. Sure, when playing you're not wearing boots and huffing and puffing around a field but, tactically, you're participating in a more-than-adequate representation. In building coherent passing moves with a view to creating goal-scoring opportunities, you genuinely feel 'involved'. *Waialae's* simple power metre – like that of all the other golfers – appears shockingly shallow by comparison. And rightly so.

Good thing or bad thing? Well, *Waialae's* obviously a bad thing. And golf games are unsophisticated, as games go. So how's about creating one that utilises the N64's analogue stick? Possible, surely? *The Glory of St Andrews* tried and failed, but surely a developer with talent could manage something.

10

Games become more difficult the further you get

Explain? Games, as the above heading states, become increasingly difficult with each successive level, track or location. Many developers, however, lose sight of the *real* issue. Essentially, games should *entertain*. Not frustrate. Or infuriate. There's a huge creative gulf between 'an entertaining challenge' and 'tediously difficult'. *You* know that. *We* know that. So why can't lots of developers grasp it?

Can you offer any examples? Well, Take *Mario 64*. It's a hellishly tricky game in places, but it's *fair*. Its goals are, in short, perfectly achievable. But look at the contrast between *Mario Kart* and *GT 64*. Play the former on its most difficult track with every conceivable handicap against you, and it's tricky, to say the least. But with *GT 64*? Ha! Enjoyable? No. Ridiculously draconian and mindlessly unfair? Why, yes. A perfect example of how to offer a challenge is, embarrassingly, another mention of *GoldenEye*. Play it on Agent level, and it's a relatively harsh taskmaster. On 007 Agent, it's an unforgiving swine. But *that's half the fun*. It's a fallacy that games should, by default, be near-impossible to play once you're over 50% or so through them. If anything, they should offer *more* at that point, by way of reward. And, preachy sermon over, we bid you Amen.

Good thing or bad thing? Obviously good if you get it right. Obviously, hair-tearingly, screamingly bad if you don't. How about a bit of playtesting, you developer types, eh?
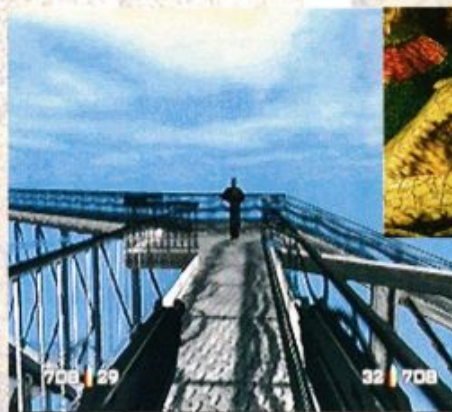
△ Click Clock Wood is the hardest thing in Banjo-Kazooie.

◁ The Cradle level in GoldenEye's certainly no pushover either.

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