

PAINKILLER DEATHSTREAK

Adventures in video games.

BY NICHOLSON BAKER

I'd never held a video-game controller until last fall. Which is a pretty sad admission, as if I'd said in 1966 that I'd never watched "Bonanza" or heard a song by the Rolling Stones. My sixteen-year-old son and his friends—his male friends, that is, all of them polite, funny, good-hearted kids—play video games just about every day. They don't watch much TV; they don't have time. Most of the games they play are on the Xbox 360 console—not the Wii or the PlayStation 3—and most involve killing and dying. The big one for the first half of last year was *Nazi Zombies*, a mini-game included with the best-selling *Call of Duty: World at War*. In it, you and your friends, linked by audio headsets, hide out in a ruined building, and yellow-eyed zombies in Nazi uniforms lurch toward you mumbling and waving their arms and trying to eat your head. You have to shoot them or stab them or set them on fire, and they never stop coming. If they swarm you, you call out, "Dude, they're on me!" and a friend struggles over to save you. If you're near death, you call out, "Dude, revive me!" and a friend jabs you with a revivifying hypodermic. There's a lot of wild laughing.

I still haven't played *Nazi Zombies*. But since last fall I've been buying some of the biggest new game releases and trying them out. I say "trying" because the first thing I learned is that video games—especially the vivid, violent ones—are ridiculously hard to play. They're humbling. They break you down. They kill you over and over. Eventually, you learn how to crouch and crawl through grass and hide behind boxes. You fight your way to a special doorway and you move up to the next level. Suddenly, you feel smart and euphoric. You reload, with a reassuring metallic click, and keep on going.

To begin, you must master the controller. On the Xbox 360 controller,

which looks like a catamaran, there are seventeen possible points of contact. There's the left trigger and the right trigger, the left bumper and the right bumper, two mushroom-shaped joysticks, a circular four-way pad, two small white buttons, each with triangles molded into them, and a silver dome in the middle that glows green when you press it. Then, there are the very important colored buttons: the blue X, the green A, the red B, and the yellow Y. On the slightly smaller Sony PlayStation 3's controller, the buttons are similar, except that in place of the colored letters you've got the green triangle, the pink square, the red O, and the blue X. (The PlayStation 3's blue X button is in a different place than the Xbox 360's blue X button—madness.) In order to run, crouch, aim, fire, pause, leap, speak, stab, grab, kick, dismember, unlock, crawl, climb, parry, roll, or resuscitate a fallen comrade, you must press or nudge or wobble these various buttons, singly or in combination, performing tiny feats of exactitude that are different for each game. It's a little like playing "Blue Rondo à la Turk" on the clarinet, then switching to the tenor sax, then the oboe, then back to the clarinet.

The second thing I learned about video games is that they are long. So, so long. Playing one game is not like watching one ninety-minute movie; it's like watching one whole season of a TV show—and watching it in a state of staring, jaw-clenched concentration. If you're good, it might take you fifteen hours to play through a typical game. If you're not good, like me, and you do a fair amount of bumping into walls and jumping in place when you're under attack, it will take more than twice that.

On the other hand, the games can be beautiful. The "maps" or "levels"—that is, the three-dimensional physical spaces in

which your character moves and acts—are sometimes wonders of explorable specificity. You'll see an edge-shined, light-bloomed, magic-hour gilded glow on a row of half-wrecked buildings and you'll want to stop for a few minutes just to take it in. But be careful—that's when you can get shot by a sniper. Stay frosty.

The first game I bought was *Halo 3: ODST*, developed by Bungie and published by Microsoft Game Studios last September. It's not one of the really beautiful games, but it's instructive. *Halo* was Microsoft's first hit on the Xbox, in 2001, and this is the latest offering in the long-running series. It's set in 2552, during a space war. ODST stands for Orbital Drop Shock Troopers—people who say things like "You know the music, time to dance," and then drop down through the atmosphere into battle. I plummeted into the city of New Mombasa, Africa, which looked like a dim, cast-concrete parking garage but with grand staircases. An alliance of bad creatures called the Covenant had killed billions of people, and this drop might be an opportunity to save humankind.

Mostly I glided up and down ramps and stairs shooting at enemies, listening to chilly electronica. I played the game in "easy" mode, as opposed to "normal," "heroic," or "legendary"—the menu option reads "Laugh as helpless victims flee in terror from their inevitable slaughter"—but it didn't seem all that easy to me. Short-statured, stocky aliens called Grunts popped up frequently, and with hostile intent—they had munchkin voices and cackled nastily and they said things like "Die, heretic!" I had to kill many of these. Other alien enemies, called Brutes, said, "I will split your bones." They sounded as if they had ripped up their vocal cords by popping steroids. I used several different weapons to kill them, including the

The first thing you learn playing video games is how hard they are; the second thing is how many hours they take to play.

cluded an optional zero-gravity mode, in which mercenaries, when shot, flip up ragdollingly in the air and drift there. After one battle, there were two riot shields and six bulletproof-vested dead people peacefully hanging like barrage balloons in the air in front of a temple.

After *Uncharted 2* came the biggest release of the year—*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, developed by Infinity Ward and published by Activision on November 10th. My son and his friends went to a local GameStop at midnight to get their reserved copies; they played it all night and then fell asleep in school assembly. *Modern Warfare 2* sold fast—it reportedly made more money in its first twenty-four hours than “*Titanic*” or “*Avatar*” did. Millions of people play it every day. In less than a year, it has become the second-best-selling video game of all time, after *Wii Play*.

Here’s what it’s about. It’s about killing, and it’s about dying. Also, it’s about collecting firearms. And it’s modern warfare, which means it’s set in places like Afghanistan. As in *Halo*, you are a gun who moves—in fact, you are many guns, because with a touch of your Y button you can switch from one gun to another. But this game has a much crisper, brighter look than the murky *Halo*, and the graphics engine is better, and the telescopic rifle scopes, their lenses pale blue and curvingly reflective, are a delight to peer through. “Yesterday’s enemies are today’s recruits,” says the narrator, General Shepherd, who is full of little bits of wisdom like that, until he slides over to the dark side.

The first thing you have to do is learn how to aim and shoot, and to do that you run through a training course in Afghanistan with pop-up wooden targets. Some targets depict enemies—they have angry frowns and wear turbans and look like Khomeini—and some depict civilians: boys in blue-striped polo shirts, little girls in dresses, and a plump man in a button-down shirt. The training course keeps track of how many civilians you’ve killed and how many frowning Khomeinis, while a corporal shouts at you to hurry up: “Go, go, go!”

You do so well as Private Allen, shooting Arabs in Kabul, that you are enlisted to help out the C.I.A., which is up to nothing good in Russia. Then, as part of something called Task Force 141, you

begin dying in earnest. I don’t know how many times I was killed as I tried to work toward the northeast section of a runway in order to plant a bomb. (This was at a military base in Kazakhstan.) I wandered tensely through cold quonset huts. Each time, a jeep would park, and there was a sudden surge of Russian voices and men would aim at me and shoot me. I was shooting them, too. My name during this phase of the game was Roach. “Roach, search the northeast part of the runway for the fuelling station!” my commander, Soap MacTavish, said repeatedly, in his Scottish burr. When I got someone in the head, MacTavish would say, “Nicely done,” or “Good kill.” When I shot badly, he would say, “That was sloppy.” I always felt better when MacTavish was telling me what to do.

When you’re hit in *Modern Warfare 2*, the bullets make a *zing* and then a *flump*. Your field of view jolts and gets alarmingly blood-dropletted around the edges. You begin to gasp. The sound goes hollow, as if you’re listening through a long tube, the controller vibrates, and you know that you have only a moment of life left. As your head hits the ground, the screen’s image turns suddenly diagonal and fuzzes out. There’s a swooshing in your ears, followed by a brief whistling-teakettle sound. The last thing you hear is MacTavish shouting, once again, from far away, “Roach, search the northeast corner of the runway!”

Then, at the blood-blurred moment of death, you are rewarded with a literary quotation. These come from Einstein, Voltaire, Zora Neale Hurston, Edward R. Murrow, Churchill, Machiavelli, Dick Cheney—all sorts of apropos people—and they are confusingly contradictory. Some quotes are cynical, some pacifist, some earnestly pro-war. Cheney says, “It is easy to take liberty for granted when you have never had it taken from you.” Gandhi says, “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” These neat word packets, displayed just as you’ve been shot or blown up by a grenade, mock the notion that there is any body of aphoristic wisdom that can be applied to a fatal firefight. You’re lying in the snow, dead. Words of wisdom mean nothing now.

But, of course, you’re not really dead. Almost immediately, you respawn. You’re given another chance. You’re given many, many chances, because *Modern Warfare 2* is just about the dyingest game out there.

It isn’t, in my reading, a glorification of modern warfare. You play for three hours and you think, This? This chaotic chattering absurdity and panic and wasted ardor is what we mean by “troop surge”? It is an unjingoistic, perhaps completely cynical amusement. The C.I.A., covertly making everything worse, gets mixed up in an airport atrocity in Russia, which prompts Russia to attack a residential neighborhood in northeastern Virginia, not far from the Pentagon and C.I.A. headquarters (both in flames), with paratroopers and helicopter gunships. “Ramirez,” a sergeant shouts, voice-acted by Keith David, “take your team and secure the Burger Town!” Also: “Be advised multiple enemy mobiles have been sighted near the taco joint, over!”

I’d been playing alone, but the “single-player campaign,” with its improbable story, is not what *Modern Warfare 2* is really about. Most people want to go online and shoot at other real people, not at software soldiers controlled by artificial intelligence. “Single player is like taking a Spanish class,” my son explained. “Multiplayer is like going to Spain.” In multiplayer, you choose a locale—for instance, the submarine base—and a style of competition. There’s Team Deathmatch, Capture the Flag, Domination, and others. And then you run around shooting and setting claymore mines where other players won’t see them when they walk into a room. If you kill three people without dying, you can get a U.A.V.—a Predator drone. A kill streak of nine gives you a Stealth Bomber air strike. If you kill twenty-five people in a row, you can get a tactical nuclear weapon, and the game is over. You get frequent bonuses and awards—new weapons, new ammunition, new scopes, new camouflage, new proficiencies. “It’s like they’ve got you on a drip feed of sugar,” my son said. “The only way you get the next little drip is by playing a little more.”

In multiplayer you kill and die so often that a single statistic becomes extremely important to you: your kill-to-death ratio. As you get better—reviewing your deaths on “killcam” instant replay to see who got you—your kill-to-death ratio goes to one and then to more than one. One of my son’s friends, a good student, has a kill-to-death ratio of 1.65. In two hundred and nineteen hours of game-playing, he has killed 32,884 times

and died 19,956 times. My son, who believes that wars serve no purpose, has played for ninety-six hours, and he has a kill-to-death of 1.17; it was 1.4 when he was playing every day. Mine is 0.08.

In order to give me a taste of multi-player madness, as I practiced my shooting and my sprinting skills, my son set us up by ourselves in a location called Rust—a place in Afghanistan where there is an old oil installation. Sitting side by side and watching our characters on the split screen, we spawned out in Rust, and he began running circles around me. I could hear his feet going *pad pad pad pad* in the sand, and then the sound changed and became hollow as he ran onto a pipe. I would look around, trying to find him—and then I'd see that he was a few feet away, pointing his gun at my head. His character was an American soldier, I noticed. My character, which I saw when I looked at his split-screen image, was some bad jihadist with Arabic writing on my head scarf.

We were very considerate of each other in the beginning. My son could have shot me many times, but he didn't. "Go ahead!" I said. "No, Dad," he said, "I'm not going to shoot you." He followed me around, waiting for me to take some shots. We carried on this peculiar chivalry for fifteen minutes, sometimes using riot shields, whose glass cracks realistically under repeated fire. Finally I wounded him, and he stabbed me, and we relaxed and began shooting and sniping and running and laughing, just as he did with his friends via inter-couchal headsets. We switched to another map, Afghan, which has as its centerpiece a C-130 transport plane that has crashed somewhere in the mountains of Afghanistan. There were thick-budded poppies growing in the sun, with PVC irrigation pipes over them. Again I heard my son's sprinting footsteps—he had a multiplayer perk that allowed him to run forever without tiring. He knew a way to get up on the fuse-lage—I could hear him running down the metallic skin—and onto the tail, and from there up onto a high cliff. I'd spray bullets in a semicircle, and then there would be a single quick sniper shot and I'd be dead. Then he'd apologize. "Sorry, Dad, I didn't mean to kill, only to maim." I died often enough that I received a temporary health boost called a "painkiller deathstreak." By the end, I'd improved—so he said—and I'd machine-gunned him

WINTER IN THE SUMMER HOUSE

Home is a place we never notice
Needing much repair, and coming back
Year after year, the separated man
Filled the cracks in the hardwood floors with his own dust.

The house no longer creaked, or he no longer heard it;
The walls were painted but not covered;
Tiles of flint lay crossward on the lawn;
The trees were a silent siege; the heat went on.

As if he were custodian, he kept his tools
In pegboard tracings; sawdust neatly piled
Along the jagged band; a vise in waiting,
Capable of holding till the glue was dry.

The same old Dodge still lurched from neutral
Into gear; old leaves hissed in the vents;
Backing out was the only gamble,
And by now he knew this road so well.

Deadpan breakfasts, cakes with molasses—
All that remained from his little version
Of the triangle trade, with its casks of whiskey,
And captives in the hold who salted the Atlantic.

As if to prove he wasn't still at sea,
He put dramatic lights up in the branches
And all the same old people in their places,
Triumphantly discarding in an evening game of hearts.

If only he had made a little room for her,
Or made a play; if, in between the deals,
He'd made a modest bid; a run in suits;
Or cast away a hopeful flush to keep the pair.

—Robert N. Watson

a few times. We went off to dinner full of weird camaraderie.

Altogether, it took me an astounding twenty-four hours to get through the single-player version of *Modern Warfare 2*—three times longer than the average player takes. But I made a lot of notes, and that stretched the time out some. What fascinated me most were those moments in the midst of a fierce firefight when you were given a chance to find some "intel"—on the second floor of a house on the Russian border, say, where Makarov, the paleo-Soviet terrorist, was rumored to be hiding out. During these tranced lulls, I found, you could wander at your leisure from room to room while your squadron-mates

stood around waiting for you to act. As they waited, they cracked their necks from side to side and scratched themselves, as idle men seem always to do under the guidance of artificial intelligence.

I found many interesting things while exploring this house, not wanting, particularly, to get back into the action and be killed again. Some Russians lay in pools of blood in the upstairs hall. In the master bedroom were books on a bookshelf, including "The Jungle Book," a law treatise, and what appeared to be a biography of the Dutch painter Gerard van Honthorst. I'd seen these same books back in northern Virginia, during a break in the frantic action there, before the bloodbath at

Burger Town. In the bathroom there were sections of illegible newspaper and a Teddy bear fixed to the wall with a knife through its nose. I went into a smaller bedroom.

In it were seven or eight sleeping bags, unrolled, empty, and a lot of rollaway suitcases. Also a pinup of a clothed woman wielding a machine gun. There was something touching about this tableau of sleeping bags, since I knew that the soldiers who had slept there were now dead. If I got down on my stomach, I could crawl right through the sleeping bags, which was an interesting experience—seeing the underside of the texture. I could even crawl through a dead body, and I did once—for everything in a video game is just a contortedly triangulated, infinitely thin quilt of surface. What, I wondered, was in the suitcases?

The only way I knew how to look inside a random object was to shoot it. So I shot at a suitcase. A dingy striped shirt flew out. I shot at another suitcase: another dingy shirt. These rang a bell: I'd seen them hanging from a clothesline in the Brazilian favela, the setting for an earlier battle. In the master bedroom, I shot at some cardboard boxes. Bags of potato chips and beef jerky popped out, and little cherry pies. Down in the kitchen, I noticed an old crate of potatoes—also bags of flour and basmati rice. These staples, too, I'd seen in the favela.

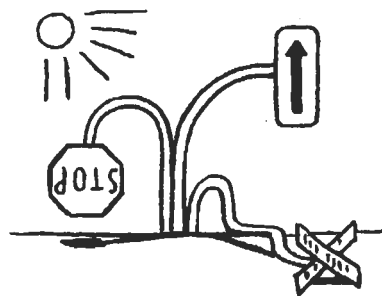
I began to think a lot about the hard-working set dressers for this game, who cleverly reused the same props in different ways in different countries. What moral were they offering—that people were basically the same everywhere? That most of life was getting up in the morning, putting on your clothes, and eating basmati rice? That war, even for the soldier, was the aberration? Or were they just being thrifty, or playful?

Modern Warfare 2, at that moment, felt truer, realer than almost all war movies—although it owes much to them, of course, especially “Black Hawk Down.” In fact, when I watched “The Hurt Locker” I sensed the rifle-scopic influence of the entire Call of Duty series—as in the long, still standoff in the desert with the tiny figure at the window. Cinematographers and movie directors think more like snipers now because of the Xbox. I went downstairs in the Russian house to resume the battle. When I was shot and died, I

was offered a quotation from Confucius: “Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.”

Next on my master list, appearing on November 17th, was the ultra-stealthy, silver-hooded Assassin's Creed II, set in Renaissance Florence and Venice. (This list, by the way, I'd made with my son's help. He reads the video-game Web sites and listens every week to the charmingly garrulous Giant Bombcast, which is like “Car Talk” but with four vastly knowledgeable gamers.) In Assassin's Creed II, you are Ezio, a man with many missions. You deliver letters and hurry around cities with a loping stride, climbing up the façades of palazzos and churches when the mood moves you. You leap from rooftop to rooftop, and sometimes you leap in the wrong direction and fall, and if you fall too far you die, whereupon the screen goes red and then white, crisscrossed with many schematic lines, and it says “DESYNCHRONIZED”—because in the game's frame story you're not really in Renaissance Italy; you're really a twenty-first-century man (again voice-acted by Nolan North) reclining in a comfortable virtual-reality machine with an orange cushion.

Sometimes you have to assassinate someone—that's your creed, after all—which you can do with hidden wrist knives or poison blades or swords or even an early gun, and sometimes you just have to beat someone up. One of your first tasks, in fact, is to find a lout who is cheating on your sister. You call him a lurid pig, and when you beat him up you make money. You can hire thieves, you can loot dead bodies, you can steal florins from pedestrians (although they will fuss if you do), and you can buy Renaissance paintings from a small art stand. You can even hire a group of murmuringly flirty courtesans who wear low-cut pastel gowns and coo provocatively, and if you suddenly decide to parkour around on the roof once



again they will wait for you down below.

The game, made by Ubisoft Montreal, has moments of loveliness, as when you reach a lookout high up over Venice and allow your gaze to sweep across the sfumatoed city. The colors are brown stone, weathered brick, the occasional red flapping banner, and pale Mediterranean blue. The wind sounds just the way wind should sound. Not much that's noble or witty or soul-stirring happens in these lovingly recreated cities. If you hang in there for many hours, you get to fly Leonardo da Vinci's bat-winged glider by night. But mostly it's death, death, death—and fist-fights, and the accumulation of wealth by acts of thuggery. You leap down on the Borgia Pope in the middle of Mass and punch him out. You're forever pressing the pink square to stab. (Or, on the Xbox, the blue X.) “There's a lot of face and neck stabbing, if you like to stab dudes in the face and neck,” Ryan Davis explained on the Giant Bombcast. “There's one really good move where you will stab a dude five or six times super quickly, shank style, like, *uh uh uh uh uh*, just jabbing—and that's oddly satisfying.” The most fun I had was jumping off a building into a pile of hay. My son showed me how to rock-climb to the top of the Tower of San Marco, keeping a lookout for the slightly darker brick where the handholds were. That was a pleasure.

To avoid competing with Modern Warfare 2, many game publishers took cover and postponed their launches, so after Assassin's Creed II there wasn't much going on till late in January. Out of curiosity, I played the demo for Bayonetta, a Japanese game in which a woman dressed in her own hair kickboxes her way through battles with fearsome creatures. She wears hip eyeglasses and looks like Tina Fey. When she goes wild with a kick combination, her hair suddenly swooshes out and forms itself into a swirling lethal force that helps her defeat her enemy. I also fought zombies with a fry-pan and a crowbar in Left 4 Dead 2. A zombie called the Spitter doused me with corrosive stomach acid that emerged in a flume from her enormous toothy mouth. That was the only game that gave me a bad dream: in it, I crouched in a jet engine with my family, hiding out from evil people on the runway, wishing I had a fry-pan.

Meanwhile, my son and his friends

were laboriously working their way up the multiplayer ladder of *Modern Warfare 2*. The goal is to reach the top rank, level 70, in which you unlock an AK-47. At that point, you start again at level 1, but with a fancy star icon next to your name to signal that you've gone "Prestige." My son quit playing the game at that point—many of his friends have continued.

Then came BioWare's gigantic opus, *Mass Effect 2*, released on January 26, 2010. Commander Shepard (no relation to *Modern Warfare's* General Shepherd) is in control of a gracefully elongated spaceship, the *Normandy*, which has bunk beds, fishtanks, and a wisecracking mess officer who also cleans the bathrooms. "This ain't no luxury liner," he says. "I catch what falls through the cracks, heh-heh." Young ensigns flirt outrageously with Shepard as they give him messages, and Miranda, a brunette with "extensive genetic modification" (i.e., breast implants), accompanies you sometimes on your travels. You visit a strip club where a blue alien dances for you and a bartender tries to poison you. You avert a plague by using some big fans to spread an antidote around.

Mass Effect 2 is the most novelistic of the games I played. It's an elaborately catalogued scatterment of worlds in which you slingshot yourself around using mass-effect generators that make you go at light speed. You meet many colorful humanoid, with whom you converse by choosing bits of dialogue with your control stick. It sounds awkward, but it works. After one battle, Shepard encounters a young Krogan standing in a corner. The Krogan, a hulking monster with a huge reptilian neck, was born in a tank the week before. "You are different," the Krogan says. "You don't smell like this world. Seven night cycles and I have felt only the need to kill. But you—something makes me speak."

"How can you speak if you're only a week old?" Commander Shepard asks, providing you prompt this query with your control stick.

"There was a scratching sound in my head, and it became the voice," the Krogan replies. "It taught things I would need—walking, talking, hitting, shooting." Walking, talking, hitting, shooting—that just about sums it up. Video games aim to find and nurture the tank-born Krogan in all of us.

I played for a while, visiting planets and

shooting incendiary bullets at waves of venomous antagonists. Then I stopped. It's two DVD disks. It's really enormous. In order to do all the missions and side missions of *Mass Effect 2*, you can easily spend fifty hours or more, especially if you like trying all the dialogue options, as I do. I craved more sunshine pouring in through the helmet visors, more leaf shadow, more wind, more air—maybe some little Kro-gans riding on bicycles. Finally, I gave up. I was dying too much, and when you die the music goes *bom-bom-bom-bom-bom-bom-bom*, while terrible red and black retinal veins grow in from the edges of the screen.

By then, it was the end of February, and time to play the most self-consciously artistic game on the list: *Heavy Rain*, by Quantic Dream, a studio in Paris that got development funding from Sony. Sony kindly sent me an early copy, in a faux battered shoebox. When I lifted the lid, an audio clip of a woman's voice asked, "Are you prepared to suffer to save your son?" David Cage, Quantic Dream's founder, calls the game an interactive drama. In one interview, in the *Independent*, Cage said that he feels close to Orson Welles, advancing an art form. And in fact he's right.

For the first half hour, the game is a stunner. "It's flipping genius, Dad!" my son called out as he began playing. The faces have complicated eyes and eyelids, and you, a sad-faced father with a strong resemblance to David Duchovny, do pleasant things with your kids and your wife. Then comes grief: one of your sons dies in front of your eyes. Whereupon you enter the gloomy *Heavy Rain* universe, switching among several characters, one of whom may possibly be a serial murderer who likes paper folding. You are a woman with amazingly good posture and an impassive face who high-steps around her apartment in her underwear. You are a private detective with a big stomach and a big heart. You are an F.B.I. agent with virtual-reality sunglasses. It's always raining, and the music is lush, and everyone's face is sad and empty, until you can't stand the pop of droplets anymore and you're slogging around in the runoff at the side of the street, wondering whether the clouds will ever part. No, they never will.

Is it a good game? It has realistic eye-blinks and moments of ecstatic mundanity, as when you use the controller to put a

frozen pizza in a microwave for your TV-watching son (who is soon to be kidnapped) and then dump it onto a plate. It's forward-looking, too, in the way it uses the control buttons: at moments of high tension, you have to hold down several at once, like Lon Chaney playing a Bach arpeggio, till you've accomplished a difficult action—fought off an attacker, say, or chopped off one of your own fingers. But the plot and the conversational tropes will be familiar—too familiar—to crime-drama watchers. It's an homage to "NYPD Blue" episodes and the movie "Se7en": cops who squabble in Brooklyn accents, some serial killing, some split personality, some amnesia, more lush music—nothing that has any reality in any conceivable life lived anywhere on planet Earth. The endings vary based on what you do—the script is more than two thousand pages long—but my son and I both arrived independently at similar endings, in which the character that we liked the most turned out to be the Origami Killer. Which made us unhappy and made no sense dramatically. In my version of the story, my second son died, too. I suffered, to be sure, but I didn't manage to save him.

Heavy Rain feels like a clinical depression served up in a shoebox. Possibly that's what David Cage intended it to be—and more than a million copies have sold, so it's a successful depression.

The next game on my list was another eagerly sought-after PlayStation 3 showpiece: *God of War III*, a single-player game set on and under Mt. Olympus. I got about eight hours into it, during which time I cut off the Chimera's tail, ripped off Helios' head, and stabbed somebody in the eye with his own horn. I hooked into the flesh of middle-aged naked bird-women who flew around as Harpies. I injured a horse and saw its intestines pour out. I cut off Hades' chest muscle and watched it jump around on the floor like a toad; I had to destroy the muscle before the huge Hell god could grab it and slap it back into place. I took hold of the Cyclops' eye like a beach ball and pulled on it till the optic nerve dangled.

Why did I do this? Because I was the muscleman Kratos, a Spartan-born hero who wears a lot of eye makeup and wanders the mythosphere with a spoiled scowl on his face. Kratos is on a rampage, bent on revenge, because one of the gods tricked him into killing his family. He has

a flaming bow and arrow, some claws he won from Hades, a long blue sword, and two big blades, and every time he whirls around—and he whirls a lot, because that's how he fights—he's slashing at something. If he slashes well, the words "Brutal Kill!" come onscreen. Once, he runs into a toga-wearing civilian on a window ledge of Olympus. "Curse the gods and their war," the civilian says, quite sensibly, weeping. "My home—everything I own—destroyed!" Kratos knocks the civilian's head against the wall and tosses him down the mountain.

This game isn't satire. It's a slasher movie over which you have control. It uses the Greek stories to trick you, or your parents (few families abide by the rating system), into tolerating a level of participatory gore that would be otherwise impossible in a mass-market entertainment. You think it must be O.K. to make your hero, Kratos, slowly tear off someone's head by whanging away on the O button because the someone is a Greek god and everyone knows that Greek myths are dark, brutal, and Oedipal. It's all in the name of classical culture, isn't it? No—it's a trick.

Even so, *God of War III* has visual astonishments in almost every scene. You walk around on Gai's gigantic rocky body. You see her giant stony breast. You climb into her chest cavity and see her stony heart beating. You cut her wrist so that she falls away. The game, to a surprising degree, is about hacking away at half-naked women, or naked half-women. Whenever you see female breasts, you have a pretty good idea that the breasted person is going to die horribly, and soon. *God of War III* is a confused confection, and the brilliant, smiley, jokey designers who made it should hang their claws in shame for so misdirecting their obvious talents.

The last big game I played was a Western called *Red Dead Redemption*, made by Rockstar, the people who created *Grand Theft Auto*. I bought it on its release day, May 19, 2010. You are John Marston, a polite whoreson cowboy with virtuous instincts who has done bad things in the past. John is handy with a lasso and he has dirty hair, as does everyone in the game. He collects medicinal herbs like feverfew, he keeps cows from panicking in a storm and running off a cliff, he shoots and skins skunks, wolves, bears, raccoons, vultures, and coyotes—"Ugh, what were



"Is it horny in here, or is it just me?"

you eating?" he mutters to the dead coyote as blood splatters on the screen—and he travels the dry borderlands of Texas and Mexico helping or hurting innocent people: your choice. When he loots a bounty hunter's corpse, he says, "This ain't nice, I know." A kind woman named Bonnie tries to draw him out, but he's not chatty. "You are being deliberately obscure as a substitute for having a personality," Bonnie says, as she and John canter around her ranch on horseback.

You kill and you die in *Red Dead Redemption*, of course—with "dead eye" aiming, you can queue up several shots in slow motion, while on horseback—and when you die the word "DEAD" appears on the screen in fat red cracked letters. But after an exhausting day of shooting and skinning and looting and dying comes the real greatness of this game: you stand outside, off the trail, near Hanging Rock, utterly alone, in the cool, insect-chirping enormity of the scrublands, feeling remorse for your many crimes, with a gigantic predawn moon silvering the cacti and a bounty of several hundred dollars on your head. A map says there's treasure to be found nearby, and that will happen in time, but the best treasure of all is early sunrise. *Red Dead Redemption* has some of the finest dawns and dusks in all of moving pictures. Albert Bierstadt couldn't

make morning light look this good. When you do eventually wander back into town, a prostitute pipes up, "I can't stand to see a man walking around town with such a dry pecker. Can I help?"

So those were the games I tried. They showed me many sights I'm glad I've seen, and some I wish I hadn't seen. I liked *Uncharted 2* best, but *Red Dead Redemption* had the prettiest clouds and hootiest owls, and the taciturn *Modern Warfare 2* had the deepest moral snowdrifts. My son has been trying out *Crackdown 2*, where you leap around a city shooting mutant freaks and collecting energy from green orbs. But he's playing less now; he's waiting for September's release of *Halo: Reach*, which will let players construct intricately ramped battle structures that hang out over rocky coastlines. I think it's time for me to take a break. No war, no gods, no bounties, no kill chains, no vengeance. No convoys in Afghanistan. Just end it. Maybe I'll try a game like *Flower*, for the PlayStation 3, which is a sort of motocross game for wind and petals. Or even go outside, with my pants legs tucked into my socks so that the midsummer ticks don't crawl up my legs. I miss grass. ♦

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Nicholson Baker talks about video games.