

MARC LAIDLAW

## TOTAL CONVERSION

For those of you who have wondered about the recent absence of Marc Laidlaw's fiction from our pages, here at last is the answer. Two or three years ago, the prolific Mr. Laidlaw moved to Seattle and turned his talents to creating computer games. (In fact, if you look closely in the bestseller Half-Life, you'll spot a copy of Marc's novel The 37th Mandala in Freeman's locker.)

Our loss is their gain. But if this new story is any indication, Marc's current line of work is not all fun and games...

ON HIS WAY HOME FROM CompUSA with the latest overdrive processor and another 128 megs of RAM chips in the tiny trunk of his Alfa Romeo, Barton Needles cruised slowly past the high school and gazed through the chainlink fence at his so-called peers. It was a scene that should have set him tingling with nostalgia, like something out of a PG-13 teen romance movie: sociable kids taking lunch in the quadrangle, running laps on the track, throwing themselves at football dummies, laughing and shouting. But as the bell rang, calling the students back to classes, Barton mouthed the word "Losers," and stepped on the gas.

At home, he slung his backpack under the computer desk and nudged the mouse to kill the screensaver, which played continuous looped demos of his personal online Gorefest victories. A dozen e-mails sprang onto the screen, all received since that morning. He icily scrolled and deleted with one hand while gnawing at a tortilla smeared with peanut butter and jelly -- he needed fuel before getting to work under the hood.

There were three messages from GoreX: more optimistic notes-on business plans and the revised royalty offer for the Skullpulper total conversion. Total bullshit was more like it. He would never work for them again, despite the latest personal pleading e-mail from Tom Ratchip, GoreX's owner: "Bart, I am asking you as a friend and as your biggest fan to please reconsider your unreasonable position."

It took him about five seconds to type in, one-fingered, "TTML, AW" and sent the message. Talk To My Lawyer, Ass. Wipe. In other words, his dad.

Ironically, Ratchip had forwarded a handful of semiliterate messages from delirious garnerers, praising Skullpulper in what passed for gushing flattery. "wOOpee! Man thass kewl!" "Barton Needles is GOD!" "wtf is Needles doin workin on TCs? IMHO he shud have have his own fkn company -- and proolly will!"

My sentiments exactly, Barton thought; and how odd of Tom to send that one along. He "proolly" thought it was magnanimous of him.

He deleted the fan transmissions as fast as he could scan them, holding back only on the last message, caught by its surprisingly formal structure -- not to

mention the absence of spelling errors.

With stunning architecture, fantastic textures, terrifying new monsters and brilliant new skins for existing monsters, everything about Skullpulper is an improvement on the original game. This is the best Total Conversion we have seen of any game. Given that it is a TC of Gorefest, the reigning blockbuster, this means that Skullpulper is now the best 3D game in the world. Period.

Barton leaned a bit closer to the screen, cramming the last of the tortilla into his mouth. Was this an advance review? -- something from an upcoming issue of PC Garner, maybe?

Then he saw that it hadn't been forwarded from GoreX after all. The return address read simply: "[n01@noware.org](mailto:n01@noware.org)." Mildly weird. Orgs were generally, what, nonprofit groups, religious institutions, stuff like that? The thought of a Skullpulper fan heading up an organized religion was amusing. Like getting fanmail from the Pope.

He continued scrolling through the letter, but the praise of Skullpulper was confined to one paragraph. The next one was far more intriguing: Because of your obvious brilliance, Mr. Needles, we are writing to inquire as to your team's availability for another total conversion project.

My team, he thought. That would be me, myself and I.

We have acquired from a third party developer the code to what we consider an extraordinary game. The original program has never been released, and due to legal complications cannot be published or otherwise distributed in its current form. While the source code may not be altered in any manner, we believe that would make your task all the easier. You need not concern yourself with programming or behavior issues, but merely convert the outward appearance of existing game elements. We believe you could accomplish this quite rapidly, and we are prepared to pay extremely well for your services. If you would kindly respond to this e-mail with a simple affirmation (and the appropriate information regarding your financial institution), we will be delighted to demonstrate our intentions by immediate electronic deposit of a one-third advance into any account you specify. Once you have verified the availability of the funds and consented to this project, we will forward everything you need to commence the conversion. You may use your own utilities if you prefer; but we will provide all textures, skins, and entity models for conversion. You may work independently and at your own speed (keeping in mind that time is of the essence), transferring files to us only when you are pleased with them. We will compile the files and, of course, take full responsibility for the ultimate conversion.

Barton was sitting down by the time he'd read this far. Could this be real money? The GoreX boys were a bunch of cheapshit assholes. The artists and programmers were okay, but a bunch of suits had taken over the company since he'd first agreed to do the conversion, and they had done nothing but try to

chisel him down and cheat him out of a profit from the moment they'd realized they had a wildfire hit on their hands -- something that might give the original game, Gorefest, a mn for its money.

If these Noware people were serious, he was prepared to put together something that would blow away even Skullpulper. It would be supremely satisfying to snatch the ground out from GoreX.

He'd have to top himself, work harder than he had on Skullpulper, and of course it all depended on the raw materials he had to work with. He couldn't imagine how some nonprofit organization had come up with decent code -- let alone code competitive with what was already on the market -- but they seemed serious. No harm in seeing how serious.

Barton composed a one-letter reply -- "Y" -- and regretted having to mar its perfect symmetry by appending his clunky account information.

At 4:17 he sent the message. At 4:26, when he walked back into his room, gouging a cold spoon into a pint of espresso ice cream, a reply was waiting in the mailbox: "Electronic deposit complete."

Was this for real? No organization worked that fast. There were committees, accountants, people who filled out the requests and submitted them to others who had authority, and on and on.

He connected to his bank. Checking deposits. There was something new, today's date, timeclocked at 4:22 p.m.

At first the amount itself didn't register. Until he saw the dollar sign in front of it, he thought it was his account number. It had almost that many digits.

"Well, the money's clear, but I can't get a lead on these Noware people," his father announced the next evening over dinner.

"Keep trying," Barton instructed. "I'll start work on the TC. Put that money somewhere nice and warm where it can breed. I won't touch it yet. I'll be too busy. This is the last sit-down dinner I'll be eating with you two for a while."

"What about school?" his mother asked. "Have you given any thought to going back?"

"Did you see the size of that deposit?" his father asked. "At this point, for what Barton wants to do, school has become irrelevant."

"This conversation has become irrelevant," Barton said, pushing away from the table.

He went to his room and organized his desk to the tune of explosions and screams from Gorefest battles. He meant to replace the screensaver with a Skullpulper deathmatch, but so far he hadn't done much online battling in his own game. The TC had only been available for a week; he'd been busy.

He decided that before beginning on the Noware project, he would treat himself to one last Skullpulper battle -- one that would leave his name ringing in the ears of the Pulper community. It was time to liquefy a few skulls.

He pulled on his Intraspexion 3D goggles and connected to GoreWorld, the network of servers dedicated to endless Gorefest and Skullpulper online wars. It took about a second to find a battle in progress; he mouse-clicked on a maelstrom icon and was sucked right in.

"Lord Needles enters fray," said a little voice in the headset, barely audible above the screams of his first victim. He was in the best of his own deathmatch levels, "The Killing Floor" -- three stories of metal ramps and catwalks with adjoining corridors that wove in and out of each other. The Killing Floor was a Mobius strip, a hollow hypercube; you could walk through a gate at one end of a room and find yourself coming in at the far side of the same room. There were ten players already in the map, and as soon as news spread that Lord Needles had jumped in, the number of players joining from other sites began to soar. It topped at thirty-six -- the max limit for this level -- and by then things were getting crowded.

Lord Needles cleared the mob as fast as it respawned.

From his first victim -- a startled blur of neon colors with a human face, quickly transformed into beautifully rendered chunks of flying meat -- he had liberated a stomp-gun and an ammo pack. As orange streaks of firebolts began to seek him on his ledge, he spied a lift just rising past. He leapt aboard, riding the platform two levels up, clearing catwalks of upright figures and strewing the room with a rain of bloody meat.

Within seconds he had the high-ground. A Tesla-cannon floated in midair, just out of reach, but for Lord Needles it was money in the bank. A normal jump would fall short, and leave you plunging to the Killing Floor below, which rippled periodically with gnashing spikes as the walls closed in and caught anyone not fortunate enough to have rocket-jumped onto a ledge. Lord Needles turned his back to the gun, slid until his heels were at the edge of empty air, then fired the stomper at the nearest wall. The recoil blew him backward, all the way across the gap; in midflight, with a clang, he snagged the Tesla, then came down smack on a suit of glowing armor that snapped into place around him. He held his fire until the level was full again, crawling with garners hoping for a shot at him. They'd all go to bed happy tonight, bragging of how they'd actually been reduced to ground-round by Lord Needles himself.

The world is good, he thought. This one, anyway.

"Who's building your levels?" he queried n01. "If you want an exciting, comprehensive package, full of traps and murderous surprises, I'm a skilled mapper as well. I can do more than just straight conversion."

"We understand that you are an excellent level designer," n01 replied via e-mail. "However, the world is already complete in every respect. It merely needs total conversion, element by element. Please restrict yourself to that task."

Oh well. Maybe they'd come around. He'd never seen a game yet that couldn't stand to be improved -- unless it was one of his own.

Barton saw no reason not to use the same procedures he'd used when converting Gorefest into Skullpulper. You built a world up from the basics. Code was more basic than textures, but he didn't have access to that. So he'd start with textures, then do models (and the sounds that went with them), and finally (best for last) invent a new armament.

"The number of textures in the game is immense," a message from n01 had informed him. "However, if you will kindly assemble the elements of a new visual language, we have utilities to employ your textures as the basis for an almost infinite variation of new patterns."

So they took shortcuts, but that was kewl. So did he. Even his rush-jobs still had the definitive Needles look. With the money he was making, he could have afforded to hire a few artists, but he prided himself on being a renaissance kid. This was to be his vision, start to finish.

He began with a tile, 64 by 64 pixels square, blown up to fill his screen. One pixel at a time, he began to shade and sketch and manipulate until he had an interesting texture. He used his much-hacked version of Mickey's MasterPainter, a Disney painting program he'd been using for all his art projects since he was six years old. Sometimes he started with a blank tile; more often he worked from an existing image -- such as a photograph or a modified tile from Skullpulper. He designed brown panels striated with darker lines, punctuated with knotholes like long, torn, gaping faces. He made tiles of grainy gray and speckled brown, poking up from matted green, to serve as rocky ground and sparse vegetation. He created panels set with gruesome demonic faces, leering ranged gargoyles. Mushroom-hued alien textures. Metal meshwork smeared with what looked like old, rotten blood. Tessellated grids clotted with hair and tissue. He made everything a designer would want in a world.

After days of unbroken work, Barton began to see his custom textures everywhere.

This always happened in the middle of a project. When he lay down to snatch a few hours of sleep, colored tiles replicated themselves on the undersides of his eyelids, wallpapering the interior of his brain with riveted blue panels, ocher brickwork, coppery asphalt. When he woke and wandered upstairs for more of the sugary espresso fuel he craved, the walls seemed to crawl with patterns he had designed. The biggest difference between the visual content of his dreams and his waking hours was the lack of a monitor framing his dreams. And sometimes he

dreamed the monitor as well.

It was more than a week before he had a complete set of textures he was happy with -- the makings of a new world. He gathered the files into a single pack, zipped it up, and e-mailed it to Noware. That was at 3:14 a.m. on a Saturday.

Just before noon of the same day, when he finally rolled out of bed, there was a message from n01 waiting in his mailbox. He expected, at worst, a mere confirmation: Textures received. At best, the usual raves. What greeted him was both unexpected and unwelcome.

Excellent work, Mr. Needles (may we call you Lord?)! Many of these are everything we had hoped for, and should serve to fill in every aspect of our game. However, we note that overall there is a certain grim, even cruel, quality to the work. We discern little of lightness here, little of humor or human kindness

"Human kindness?" he said with a sleepy snarl. "What is this shit?"

We are therefore returning certain textures which we consider inappropriate for this conversion, and request that you kindly recast them with a somewhat more benign demeanor. It is our intention that this game be significantly less grueling and gruesome than the usual fare. We believe our conversion will find a ready niche in a world already saturated with bloodlust and senseless violence.

Attached to this message was a file comprised of every tile that was even slightly macabre or sinister: the demon faces, the gory floors, the gears clogged with flesh.

In Barton's first flush of disgust and indignation, he started a letter like those he had fired at GoreX toward the end of the Skullpulper conversion, letting his venom shape and seethe through every bitter sentence. But gradually he found himself reconsidering such a rash response. If Noware had stated their intentions at the outset, he could have told them to flick off before agreeing to their terms. But now...the money. Yes, the money, already beginning to bubble yeastily and rise like wonderful dough, inflating....

In the end, he deleted the letter.

Why had they picked him for the TC? They knew his work -- they'd praised it. Had they sought him out with the ulterior intention of subverting his natural style? He still suspected they were some sort of quasi-religious outfit. Maybe it was Barton himself they wished to convert.

Well, they couldn't touch him. He would do what they asked, but in the end he would have his way. In the end it would be Lord Needles's world.

He treated the revision work with economical disdain, devising a program to switch the goriest tones of clotted blood with soothing pinks, soft blues,

subdued nursery-room yellows. The multitude of fierce icons were more difficult to alter, but he devised a fractal filter that softened and blurred the masks of evil, then re-sharpened them into whimsical forms. Wicked spikes and jagged fangs softened into curls and spirals like multicolored rotelle pasta. The grimly leering slits of demon-serpent eyes became cheerful crescent moons mounted on the fuzzy cheeks of smiling-snouted orange teddy bears.

Barton reserved the serpent smirks for himself. And carefully laid the groundwork for his subversive masterpiece.

The batch of revised textures, fired back at Noware approximately 12 hours after their rejection, met with no further objection: "Textures received. More than acceptable. Please commence entity conversion based on the attached model files."

This terse message was accompanied by an immense collection of .mdl files. Once he began to examine the files, he was disappointed to find how utterly unimaginative they were.

No monsters. No aliens. No marine sergeants frothing bloody foam.

Instead, he found people, all sizes and shapes and colors, all ages, but all utterly ordinary. The fact that they were naked was the strangest thing about them. Game models were usually decked in flamboyant colors, military garb, savage armor. So the nakedness of these was odd...but ultimately boring.

His first task, therefore, was to make the models interesting again. That should be no problem. There were enough similarities in the basic human forms that one good all-purpose program would be able to remake the entire tedious population on a global basis.

On a whim, and for consistency's sake, he went back to the image of the stupid cuddly teddy bear he had concocted for his tiles. Having settled on a basic teddy bear model, he went through the human model files, altering all of them in one sweep, creating a motley army of awkward, patchy teddy bears. He spent the next day tweaking them individually, keeping limbs aligned and furry snouts smiling.

The next group of models was harder to comprehend: batches of limbs, unattached to any creature; horns and fur and scales. There were machine parts, things that looked like the hoods of generic midsized cars, lampstand bases, twigs and fronds. He no longer had any idea what he was altering. He followed his own sense of style, hoping to make all these oddments look as if they shared some common source; he teased the limbs into long strings and let them snap back into floppy curls. He turned gentle arcs into spadelike parabolas. He had never worked in the dark like this before, guided only by a sense of rightness; but after a time he found it addictive. He enjoyed the alterations for their own sake, without a thought to their purpose or ultimate use, or to what sort of game this all added up to. Days passed; and, more importantly, nights, when he hardly stirred from his seat. But while he reveled in the work, his plans for

revenge were far from forgotten.

All the grimness, all the cruelty, that was such an essential element of everything he'd done before the Noware TC, he carefully set aside for a private project. It was to be a secret entity, something made all the more hideous by contrast to the warm and whimsical creatures which surrounded it.

Barton distilled his conception of evil into a hybrid bearing the worst features of every monster he had ever wrought or dreamed of. A Demon Lord. In scale, it was several hundred times the size of the human figures; it was gray and black and dripping with blood; its maw a festering pocket of abscessed fangs and sucking lamprey tongues. Its body was a slimy mass of chancres from which razor-hooked tendrils uncurled, and it moved on a carpet of insect legs that could adhere to any surface. It was covered with eyes and armor, and was all but unstoppable. He decided to include one and only one--weapon in the artillery pack which, if cleverly used, might kill it.

The hardest thing was finding the right sound for the beast. He experimented for days until hitting upon a satisfactory noise, achieved by feeding glass and bone and masses of sinewy fat into the kitchen sink garbage disposal and recording the gurgling, grinding sound with a microphone taped to the plumbing down where the razors whirled. By raising this to an almost intolerably high pitch, he captured what sounded like a scream of demonic triumph.

The Demon Lord would be Barton Needles's signature. Anyone who played the game would recognize his handiwork as soon as the monster devoured them.

But naturally he could not simply e-mail the Demon Lord to [n01@noware.org](mailto:n01@noware.org) and expect accolades. He could imagine their shock and horror, and then their polite rejection. Well, he would not give them a chance to reject it before letting them know what he thought of their namby-pamby vision of a peaceful world. First, there would be a good long reign of carnage.

Noware had unknowingly delivered the means of its undoing into his hands. The original collection of models had been accompanied by a large DLL file -- a dynamic link library containing a number of animation and other routines shared by many of the models. Changes to the models necessitated changes to the animation functions; and Noware had entrusted him with this rudimentary programming task.

He compressed his Demon Lord data and hid the unlabeled array among others in the DLL. He then found an ordinary animation function, one that would be called fairly frequently during runtime, and made one minor alteration: at random intervals the normally useful function would return a pointer not to an ordinary animation function, but to the Demon Lord array. The game would then decompress, load, and let loose the monster.

If Noware eventually did locate the monster array and tried to remove it, all model animations would fail. Meanwhile, it was self-triggering, and would



spawn

at random but frequent intervals. Over time, if the creatures were not killed, there would be hordes of them all through the game. By then, of course, the hard-core gamers would have risen to the challenge and mastered the tricks of the arsenal.

On the other hand, no hard-core gamer of Barton's experience would spend more than two minutes in this particular world anyway. With all its soft edges and pastel colors, it would repel them instantly. It was just as well he was working anonymously. A world like this would be death to his reputation...except for the Demon Lord aspect.

He would do things differently next time. Not that there need be a next time. Once he'd been paid in full for the Noware TC, he would have the capital he needed to start his own company, with a few hand-picked employees. He'd rent an office on the cheap end of Water Street, and a renaissance of coolness would surely crystallize around his arrival. He'd buy a new car...something fast and flashy and astronomically expensive. Yes, it was time to think along those lines.

He packed up the model files and shipped them off to Noware. The money was almost his. Nothing remained now but to create or convert an arsenal of weapons, an immensely enjoyable task after so much tiptoeing around. It was hard to imagine how even the grubs at Noware could expect him to make chainguns and rocket launchers seem sweet and innocent. Ultimately, a weapon was a weapon, even if it shot marshmallows and had a fuzzy pink handgrip.

Acknowledgment arrived no more than forty-five minutes after he'd sent off the models.

Dear Lord Needles:

Thank you for delivery of your model pack. The models appear more than satisfactory -- certainly there is nothing in the least offensive or inappropriate here; further minor modifications can be attended to by our staff if necessary. We have deposited the balance of your payment in the account you previously specified. We thank you for your participation in our TC, and look forward to working with you in the future should any similar project ever arise.

Barton's surprise was enormous. He typed a hasty response: "I don't understand.

I'm still waiting to convert the weapons pack. If you gave that work to someone else I'll be really p.o.'d -- and you don't want to p. me o.!"

His fingers slammed and skittered on the keyboard. He smashed the Send button and waited in a fury for n01's reply.

It came almost instantly:

All weapons code has been expunged from source. No weapons in our TC. This is to

be a peaceful game as we have previously stated. Thank you again for your participation. All elements are in place, and we have received final approval to embark on Total Conversion immediately. We trust you will be pleased with results.

Barton couldn't force himself to stay at the screen another moment. He got up snarling and stormed out of his room.

It seemed to be morning -- what hour exactly, or what day, he felt unsure. His mother wavered in the kitchen doorway until she saw his face; then she retreated to the safety of her pots and pans. He rushed out of the house, past his neglected Alfa Romeo. He didn't trust himself to drive right now; he would kill someone -- maybe even himself. Well, he wasn't stupid or rash, and he wasn't about to take chances like that. He felt as if he hadn't been out of the house, or used his legs, or felt the sunlight in weeks. He was not far wrong.

Usually -- in a deathmatch for instance -- rage and thoughts of revenge sharpened his mind, providing a clear black background to his thoughts, allowing him to stalk and slay his enemies with deadly precision. Today, for some reason, murk accompanied the anger. The sky was blue, the streets looked fresh and bright, as if a storm had swept them and moved on; but his mood clouded everything. He kept surfacing to find that he'd walked another few blocks. He soon found himself downtown, entering the town square. Trees threw their shadows over him. Up ahead, preschoolers clambered on a climbing structure. A dog chased a Frisbee.

Good, he told himself, calmed by the exercise. You're getting a grip.

It was better to plan his next move, and put Noware behind him. He had their money now, that was all that really mattered. With money he could do anything: start his own company, take all the time he needed to make a game that was pure Barton Needles, pure and unadulterated evil. Yes, his next game would be everything the Noware conversion was not.

In that moment of anticipatory calm, he realized he had made himself dizzy by rushing out so quickly after weeks of concentrated mental effort. Dizzy and sick. That explained why the world seemed to be tipping -- and why he saw his textures everywhere he looked, as if they were pouring out of his eyes again. Maybe it also explained why the pine trees were suddenly wrapped in blue and scarlet fleurs-de-lis with ornate tessellations; and why the thin, beaded trickles of sap shimmered with a weird fluorescent orange glow.

He headed toward a park bench to sit down, but it was changing, growing narrower at the ends, beginning to sag and spiral into limp dangling curls like the tendrils of a creeping plant. He crouched in the grass and put his head between his knees, eyes shut, hoping his textures would stop crawling over everything he saw.

He would get help next time. He wouldn't try to do it all himself. It was too much for one kid to make over an entire world. He kept his eyes closed until he saw only sparkling darkness, devoid of the self-created patterns he'd been staring at for weeks.

When he opened his eyes, he gazed straight down at the grass and earth underfoot.

The grass was red. The earth beneath the blades was purple, faintly shot through with lime. Things were crawling in the soil -- things like soft enormous pink ants with floppy legs.

Barton shot uptight -- too fast, for it made him even dizzier. As the world spun, he saw it had been completely remade with his textures. He couldn't stop seeing them no matter where he looked. The buildings at the far edge of the square were all colors but the proper ones; they were shaped like enormous saggy mushrooms, puddling on the soft cushions of streets that were not so much paved as upholstered.

Barton turned and ran toward home, hoping he could find his way now that he'd lost his senses.

Near the edge of the square, something darted to and fro, dragging a leash across grass that stubbornly refused to revert from red. If he squinted his eyes it was still mostly a dog, but the sound it made was not at all canine. Where had he heard it before? It shot between his legs, snagging him in the dragging leash. Somewhere in the distance he could hear its owner piping on a weird shrill dog whistle. Hopelessly tangled, Barton fell. As the dog circled toward his face, he braced for a licking.

Then he remembered where he had heard the creature's call. Like the textures, it was something he'd carried in his head that had somehow spilled out into the world. It was glass and bone and metal and meat, all grinding together in a bottomless bubbling throat.

The cries, with all their overtones of impending total victory, grew louder as the Demon Lord overshadowed the square, then dimmed to a muted slurping as the first of many lamprey tongues found his face.

Next time they'll want weapons, Barton thought indignantly. Lots of weapons!

His final conscious act was the unhappy one of seeking his reflection in a million rheumy eyes, but failing. There were no Lord Needles or even Bartons anywhere.

All he saw were a million orange teddy bears, screaming.