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## When Art Imitates Videogames, You Have 'Red vs. Blue'

**Mr. Burns Makes Little Movies  
Internet Fans Clamor For;  
Shades of Samuel Beckett**

By **KEVIN J. DELANEY**

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It was past 9 p.m. in Buda, Texas, one recent Thursday, and Mike Burns was in his spare bedroom watching two buddies get set to play a shoot'em-up videogame. The two men waited, thumbs poised on their game controllers.

"Ready!" Mr. Burns commanded, "Action! Go!" As videogame playing goes, the performance was pathetic. On a computer screen, a pair of futuristic soldiers lurched into odd movements. One swiveled at the waist. The other bobbed his head. Mr. Burns eventually stopped the play to give some instructions. "Action!" he said again.

The 31-year-old Mr. Burns was directing a movie, Episode 27 of "Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles," and fans around the world were eagerly awaiting it.



**Mike Burns**

Every week, Mr. Burns gathers Geoff Fink, 28, and Jason Saldaña, 25, and some other friends to play a videogame called Halo. They edit the on-screen images into roughly five-minute videos that have plots, recurring characters and original soundtracks. Like puppeteers, each man controls a computer-generated character on the screen. They also provide the voices along with friends in other cities, who send in their audio tracks over the Internet. The group distributes the series online and on DVDs. Now on its 29th episode, the low-budget production has attracted a cult following and shows signs of crossing over to a broader audience.

There are now about 650,000 episode downloads per week from the computer servers Mr. Burns and his friends oversee.

Downloads from other sites probably push the total viewers closer to a million.

GameStop, the videogame retail chain, sells Red vs. Blue DVDs around the country. A showing of a number of episodes at Lincoln Center in January was sold out.

Mr. Burns's story line centers around nine intergalactic soldiers stuck in a nondescript landscape where the red and blue teams are supposed to fight each other. True gamers would try to gun down opponents and swipe the other team's flag in the Blood Gulch section of the Halo videogame. In Mr. Burns's version, the soldiers are bungling types puzzled about why they are there in the first place. Continuing gags

involve a Spanish-speaking robot nobody understands and a tank the characters don't know how to drive. Mr. Burns describes the content as "bureaucracy humor" and compares the form to early film serials such as "Tarzan" and "The Lone Ranger."

The writing and novel production techniques have earned praise. And some say the sophomoric jokes bespeak something more profound. "The literary analog is absurdist drama," says Graham Leggat, director of communications at the Lincoln Center film society and a videogame critic. "It's truly as sophisticated as Samuel Beckett."

Red vs. Blue is part of an emerging genre. MTV Networks' Spike TV cable channel has broadcast videogame-generated videos. Rapper Chuck D's "Rebel vs. Thug" music video was created with help from Quake II videogame software. Low-budget videogame-generated films, sometimes called "Machinima" (short for machine cinema) have their own awards festivals. There's an Academy of Machinima Arts & Sciences in Brooklyn.

Red vs. Blue has played a big part in leading Machinima toward mainstream culture. Mr. Burns, a gamer since childhood, came up with the idea in 2002 and began distributing the series weekly last April.

Several nights a week, he and friends can be found in his home in this thinly developed area south of Austin best known for The Salt Lick Bar-B-Que restaurant. The bedroom he uses is equipped with several thousand dollars in computer gear and three Microsoft Xbox game machines. The players work from scripts they've written, with characters' lines, stage directions and all.



***Caboose and Sarge, characters in 'Red vs. Blue'***

They record audio tracks in a bedroom closet, working around the Burns family laundry schedule because their microphone picks up noise from the washing machine. Then, they get down to acting out the scripts in the videogame, controlling Caboose, Tucker and other on-screen characters.

"Caboose, right there, Tucker, right there," Mr. Burns said during the recent production session of Episode 27, firing virtual bullets into the videogame landscape to show Mr. Fink and Mr. Saldaña where to position their characters. The two soldiers they are playing are involved in a scheme to get the Spanish-speaking robot, Lopez, to repair damage to himself and their jeep. That's complicated by the fact that the ghost of another soldier has possessed Lopez's body. High jinks ensue.

Mr. Burns, sitting barefoot before two computer screens, played the audio track for the scene. Messrs. Fink and Saldaña used game controllers to move the soldiers' helmeted heads up and down to make it appear that they are talking. They try to move in sync with the recorded dialogue, which is mostly gibes and simple jokes. "I thought maybe I was dreaming, so I punched you in the face to make sure," says Tucker in one scene. "Tucker, when you think you're dreaming, you don't punch someone else, you ask someone else to pinch you," replies Church, his victim.

The game-playing and video editing for the five-minute episode took more than seven hours, stretching well into the night. Mishaps were frequent, as when a character accidentally fired his turbocharged weapon in the middle of a scene. Mr. Burns's 2-year-old son, Jack, toddled into the room a few times. The group broke briefly to eat take-out pasta and discuss fan mail from viewers.

The following day, they made the video available to the several thousand people who pay \$10 or more annually to get early access. Two days later, anyone could download a version with lower-quality video free of charge.

Mr. Burns won't say how much money his series has brought in, but he says the venture is profitable despite about \$150,000 in annual computer-hosting costs. And he's spreading the franchise. Microsoft Corp., which owns the company that created

the Halo game, commissioned Mr. Burns to produce an episode to run during a big software-developer conference; the clip recounts a fictionalized falling-out between Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer and one of the game's soldiers. Microsoft and Mr. Burns agreed last year that he can distribute his films without running afoul of copyright issues. Spike TV commissioned a short piece from Mr. Burns's team last year, which it ran on its Web site. The rock group Barenaked Ladies asked for Red vs. Blue videos to show at concerts.

Despite spending 40 hours a week on the series, Mr. Burns still works his day job as chief operating officer of teleNetwork Inc., a 250-person technology-services company. Mr. Fink, a heavily-tattooed army veteran, manages a call-center team at the same company. Mr. Saldaña is an unemployed guitarist. Their composer, a Frenchman named Nico Audy-Rowland, sends soundtracks for each episode over the Internet from his home in Cambridge, Mass.

Mr. Burns has just hired the first official staffer for Red vs. Blue, Matt Hillum, a Hollywood visual-effects supervisor. But he says he's wary of expanding too much or getting too commercial. "You kind of hate to mess with what's working," he says.

And, for all the popularity of their game-playing videos, the Red vs. Blue creators still aren't very good at the game. At a promotional event in New York in January, they played Halo against five fans before a small crowd of bystanders.

The Red vs. Blue team was trounced, Mr. Burns says: "One of the kids finally said, 'Man, you guys really stink.' "

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