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HELLO my name is CLIFF

“HEY, AREN'T YOU THAT GUY THAT PEOPLE MAKE FUN OF ON THE INTERNET?”

When you peel away the jealousy, **Gears of War** creator **CLIFF BLESZINSKI** isn't the jerk gamers seem to want him to be. But who does he think he is?



Cliff Bleszinski has it pretty good. He drives an exotic car. He has a cute girlfriend. He has a 17-year history of making hit games for Epic, including *Unreal Tournament* and *Gears of War*. Gamers everywhere know his name — or at least his nickname, *CliffyB*, which is arguably easier to spell.

And yet, based on internet posts about him, “egomaniacal douchebag” seems easier still. Poke around and you’ll see gamers compare Bleszinski to everyone from a couch-hopping Tom Cruise to action director Michael Bay to... Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi. Usually, though, it’s the “all sizzle, no substance” tag that follows him around. One gaming website called Bleszinski “the gaming industry’s version of Paris Hilton, minus the sex tapes.” “He’s not a game developer,” sniffed another commenter. “He’s a model.”

Ouch. What did the inventor of the chainsaw bayonet do to deserve this?

In an industry unfairly plagued by anti-social stereotypes, Cliff is one of the few developers who seems to enjoy the spotlight. Now 34 years old, Bleszinski is a little less outrageous than his younger self, but no less excited about building gameworlds — both established and forthcoming. It’s clear from our face-to-face discussion that he’s cooking up something brand-new to follow *Gears of War*, but until then, he’s very happy playing with his *Delta Squad* action figures. “I don’t think *Gears* is anywhere near burned-out,” he says. “It’s not like we’re on *Gears 12*.”

But even as his MySpace page smolders with “an ongoing flame war between people who love *Gears*, people who hate *Gears*, people who like me, [and] people who think I should be shot,” Cliff was willing to sit down with us and talk about the state of *Gears*, the weird price of nerd fame, and the internet’s obsession with his douchebaggery. continued on pg. 54 ►

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IF TOMORROW SOMEONE CAME TO EPIC AND FORCED ME TO DO THE GAME FOR THE NEW MUMMY MOVIE, I WOULD GO OUT BACK AND PUT A SHOTGUN IN MY MOUTH.

OXM: All said and done, how happy are you with Gears of War 2?

CLIFF BLESZINSKI: I remain extraordinarily proud of the work that I do as well as the gifted team I work with. But that said, nothing's perfect and hindsight is 20/20. Matchmaking was very flawed out of the box; the game did ship with exploits, and it's an unfortunate reality when you make a product that is played by millions of players on day one. That said, Horde was a resounding success, and this really seems to be the era of co-op really and truly emerging as its own thing, much like versus did years ago in the Quake and Doom era. But we'll continue with DLC and keep that long tail as long as possible.

I think we did a far better job with the story this time around — I think Josh Ortega is a fantastic writer, the game had a tighter story, made a lot more sense, had some nice twists and turns, a little bit darker. That said, of course, it's not Shakespeare; it's still a popcorn blockbuster. People love to beat up on us about story for some reason, and they focus on the buff characters and the chainsaws, and they fail to see any of the nuance in the game. But the reactions to the Maria resolution were interesting — if you go to YouTube right now and look up that spoiler scene, there are 780 comments on there and two-thirds are people saying things like "this made me cry," "this is the saddest moment I've ever seen in a videogame," "oh my god that was horrible." Sometimes you've gotta trust your gut and make the kind of game you want to play and believe in yourself.

OXM: They say that artists should follow their instincts and create to make themselves happy. But you're a commercial artist: when you're working on something, it's being created for the audience to buy it, so you have to consider their needs, too. Which dominates?

CB: It's a multifaceted formula. We have 125 people at Epic. Those guys have kids; we have to keep the medical plans going and keep gas in their new cars! We do take good care of our employees. But that said, I don't want to be the indie-game guy. Games like Shadow of the Colossus are amazing, but it's not in my blood. I'm all about the fun and the explosions and the entertaining moments. If people want to say that the content I work on is very Michael Bay-ish, I'm perfectly okay with that. I'm not going to make the videogame equivalent of Adaptation or The Reader.

OXM: But you're still creating for yourself?

CB: There's a balance. There are certain game ideas that I would like to do that are extremely personal to me in regards

to my past and my upbringing and what I find interesting and exciting and scary. But at the same time, Epic... we make blockbusters. So you have to find where that threshold is.

OXM: You hint at these ideas that you have not explored. What are the game ideas that have gotten away while you've been focusing on Gears?

CB: Well, this is getting a bit much, but there was a rumor about me doing a survival-horror game. I have absolutely no idea how that hit.

OXM: Somebody wanted you to make a survival-horror game. CB: I know! And that genre is very near and dear to me. I love the first three Silent Hill games. The other ones didn't happen; it's like Highlander sequels. I'm sorry, I know that's dickish. I'm a huge fan of Condemned: I think it's one of the most underrated and poorly marketed franchises. I thoroughly enjoy Resident Evil 5; yes, people have their crits, but they should f*** off because it's a stellar game. Fatal Frame — Jesus, I had to stop playing Fatal Frame 2 because it scared me too much. Maybe I'm just a big p*ssy. But that genre is near and dear to me and somewhere down the line I would love to get around to doing something like that. But it's a tough sell when you start making something psychological, single-player-oriented, and very nuance-based.

And that [would] be a challenge, because in case you haven't noticed, at Epic, we're not always that good at nuance. We tend to paint with large brushstrokes. So no, I'm not making a horror game next. Gears is very much near and dear to me.

OXM: Do you feel shackled by the franchise at this point?

CB: No. There's been only two Gears games, man. There's still plenty of opportunities for things you can do in a cover-based shooter and there's still a lot of stories to tell in the Gears universe. I'm not burned-out on that at all. But there are tradeoffs. With an established IP, you're not saying "Are we going to do cover?" and "Who is this Cole Train guy?" It's all there — the writer writes and it's a known entity. But with a new IP, it's raw and wide-open — you don't



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know and you're playing in the sandbox and feeling out. "Is this feature going to work? Is this fun? Who's this character, how does this fit into our fiction? How does this all come together?" It's like solving a giant puzzle in your head, and it's great.

Whenever I talk to people in the business, I ask them what they're working on, and when they say they're working on a new IP, I tell them, "Good for you!" Because I swear to god, if tomorrow someone came to Epic and forced me to do a licensed IP — "you have to make the new videogame for the new Mummy movie" — I would go out back and put a shotgun in my mouth. Original IPs are the best-selling and the strongest titles in the industry because they generally don't have to adhere to rules or limitations. You can say "Can we do a flamethrower? That will fit into the fiction." It's the wild, wild West in the business right now. It's like the comic-book industry back in the day.

OXM: Is *Gears* now the game that sells itself?

CB: Well, you can dial back a bit on the goofy shenanigans. It's good to have spokespeople like Rod and myself to remind people what we make and how we support it, but it's probably not quite as necessary that I burst onto a stage with a chainsaw or I dress in a silly fashion. I just want to show up places looking like an adult, semi-fashionable and well-spoken and somewhat mature. [laughs]

OXM: You've been praised as being really good at "getting it" when it comes to game design — you can see a game and instantly tweak it in your mind, and say "this needs to be shaved here and buffed there."

CB: Rod likes to call me a holistic designer, and I think that means that he called me a hippie bastard. But it's a feel thing; it's a nudge thing. I don't always know what the 15th step is to get "fun"; I can see two steps in front of me. Same with levels and pacing. It's not just putting my own ideas in the game; it's harvesting the ideas of everybody I work with. Having the respect of co-workers and being able to say, "You know, a rocket launcher with a sanding belt on it is really lame and you shouldn't have suggested that." And same thing with them — when I'm like, "I wanna do this gun that does this," and they go, "Uh...no, dude."

OXM: Since what you do is so subtle, it's hard for people on the outside to see what you do. Are you afraid that all people see is your flashy image?

CB: That's the problem — the perception. By taking on the responsibility of being the face of the company, there's an assumption that I'm not there every day, banging away on design documents and meeting after meeting and playtests and things like that. There's a weird element when you put yourself out there — just because you're visible, people hate you. Back in the day when I was a kid and looking forward to getting into the business, I remember feeling that when I saw Tommy Tallarico's print ad for his first album of videogame music. He had torn jeans on, and I'm looking at that thinking: "What a douchebag! This guy's gotta be a real tool." And for some reason, there's

that attitude when you're a gamer — "Oh, I hate you!" But whatever, it's fine. There's that photo of me with the red shirt on, holding the Lancer chainsaw? That was originally going to be for that Rolling Stone issue [Issue 1,075, where Cliff was named one of the "100 Agents of Change" — Ed.]. We took that picture like a year ago. And people said, "Cliffy needs to stop doing photoshoots and be more focused on the games!" It's like, dude — that was me grabbing Aaron Smith at work and going outside for five minutes and taking two f**king photos. What did you think, it was like four hours of makeup and stylists and hookers and blow all day long? If I'm not there working with the guys, I start going crazy. The criticism is what it is; you can't put yourself out there and not expect a little bit of flack.

OXM: Are you a douchebag?

CB: I'm a giant douchebag.

OXM: Seriously — you drive a flashy car, you use styling products... a lot of gamers don't comb their hair, let alone style it, and they don't drive a fast car. So they look at you and go, "Oh, what a douchebag." Do you really think you're a douchebag?

CB: I think I'm okay. My whole goal is to look like someone who is loud and out there. And then what I'm hoping is that people will say, "Have you met that guy?" And hopefully people will go, "Yeah, he's actually a nice guy."

OXM: Well, very few people get to meet you and say, "Hey, Cliff's cool."

CB: My goal any time I'm at a signing or if someone comes up to me, is to shake their hand and look them in the eye and say, "Thank you so much." I mean, this is the reason I have a job. You need to be thankful and appreciative of your customers, as much as they call you a fag on the internet. Because they're still talking, man. I'd rather have that attention than not have anybody talking at all, because it means you're relevant. continued on pg. 58 ►►



■ ■ YOU NEED TO BE THANKFUL AND APPRECIATIVE OF YOUR CUSTOMERS AS MUCH AS THEY CALL YOU A FAG ON THE INTERNET. ■ ■



ERROR: You can nitpick *Gears* all you like; to Cliff, it just means you care enough to look closely. "And you're not a cool IP unless you have a story bible that's three inches thick, right?"

PUBLICITY: Wanna meet Cliff? Look outside. "Coming off so many years of sitting in front of a computer, I want to be out there and meet people and experience the world a bit more."

HELLO my name is CLIFF

“ I MAYBE GET A LITTLE NERVOUS DOING THE E3 PRESS BRIEFINGS, BUT I GET FIVE TIMES MORE NERVOUS TALKING TO THE TEAM HERE IN MEETINGS. ”



was because I started hitting the gym a little bit more, but they gave this perception that I was some kind of hulking mass that got into fights in the hallways, some legend growing out of control — f**king hilarious.

OXM: But you don't have a Twitter account, and you've stopped blogging — the last game you blogged about was *BioShock*. It was interesting to read how you would break down other games that you were playing.

CB: I would rather save that opportunity for an interview with the press. We talk about accessibility, but if you put yourself out there too much, it ceases to be special. I don't need to know that [God of War creator] David Jaffe wants to nail Sarah Palin — and I don't mean that as a slam at Dave. But I'm going to buy God of War 3; they had me at hello. I wanna know more about what you're working on now.

OXM: Funny you mention David Jaffe. When the whole “don't call me CliffyB anymore” thing was reported, Dave said he would use the name if you no longer wanted it. Are you okay with him taking over the moniker?

CB: Maybe it's one of those things with someone becoming the new superhero, where the identity is handed down. Like when there's a new Robin. And he can deal with all the comments on the internet for a little while! [laughs]

Honestly, that was just a media experiment to me. It was Stephen Totilo [former editor/blogger at *multiplayerblog.mtv.com*] who started it — I had an IM conversation with him and said, “I'm thinking of abandoning that.” And he broke it on MTV Multiplayer, and it got picked up everywhere, and then it turned into “Who does he think he is?” Dude, the fact that you're getting upset just means you're playing along with my joke here. You can call me whatever you like as long as you play the game.

OXM: Well, that begs the question: Who do you think you are? Everybody thinks they know you from your videos and interviews and games. How do you see yourself?

CB: I'm just a big kid. But I'm also the adult with an interesting career and an interesting life that I was hoping I could be when I first saw *Space Invaders* when I was 6. ●

touch with things. Fourteen-year-old guys who I started working with in the mod community are now successful developers at BioWare. I think it's a karma thing: you get what you give.

OXM: Do you ever have any stalkers, people who try to track you down in real life?

CB: No, everybody's cool in public. I've gotten crazy-ass voice mail. Once you hear that voice of someone saying “You suck smoke grenades! You're gay! Aaaaah!” you go, “Oh my god, this is some serious sh*t. I should set this as my ringtone.”

This is going to sound weird, but the thing I can't get used to is the little gamer fame. In public, you get recognized every once in a while. It's cool, it's not like you can't go to the supermarket or anything, but at gaming conferences it's non-stop. At Comic-Con, people come up and want to get a photo, and you put your arm around them...and they're shaking. That's the weird one; it's surreal. You're like: “Dude! Calm down.” And you realize you're in a position to make this person comfortable and to be absolutely as nice as possible. Because if this person likes your work, they're going to remember this forever and tell all their friends about it. But if you're a dick, that's going to travel everywhere.

OXM: Does your theater background contribute to your ability to “be yourself on purpose” like that — to perform when you're in public?

CB: Absolutely. I was such a huge theater geek and I don't mind putting myself up in front of people. The funny thing is, I maybe get a little nervous doing the E3 press briefings, but I get five times more nervous talking to the team here in meetings. Because when push comes to shove, the opinion I care the most about with my professional career is the people I work with here. You can directly translate that to nerves.

OXM: Can we talk about “Fake CliffyB” on Twitter? Two comedians were posting as you, making jokes about your badassery. I fell for it at first; I thought you were goofing on your own image.

CB: That's where the whole thing got really dangerous. With internet journalism and gaming, that kind of stuff overshadowed the actual promotion of what *Gears 2* was about. I can't really speak to any of the legal shenanigans, but personally, outside of anything at Epic, I was a fan of it and laughed my ass off. It was extraordinarily well-written. The joke

OXM: You've said in the past that you want to make game design look cool — to not be the old stereotype of some sweaty nerd coding in his parents' basement. But now we have game developers as the “new rock stars,” and more than anybody, you've helped cultivate that. But it seems like we're trading one stereotype for another. Is it fair to trade the nerd for the rock star?

CB: I think it's an accessible rock star. Going to GDC in particular, I'm hanging out on the show floor, going to the Independent Games Festival, getting demos from guys. And you don't see that a lot in other entertainment; you can't go to a conference and say: “Hey, what's up, Peter Jackson? Check out my short film on the show floor!” Or go to a music conference and see U2 hanging out right there next to this garage band. I've had friends who work in Los Angeles tell me: “You're too accessible. You need layers and people.” But I don't really care: it's a manageable thing. I think if you get too unapproachable, it's easy to get out of

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COMIX: “Honestly, given a choice between a graphic novel and an actual book, I'll usually take a graphic novel,” admits Cliff. He's currently re-reading *Transmetropolitan*.

GRINDING ON: *Gears* is Cliff's baby, but it could outlive him. “If I got hit by a bus tomorrow, I'm sure that Epic could do a very good job of making another *Gears* game,” he says.