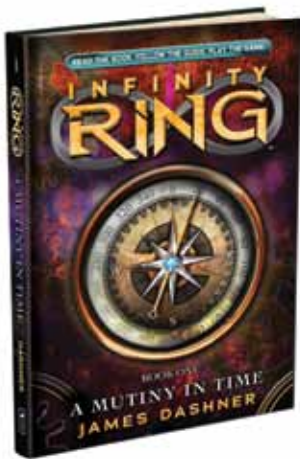# Books Meet Videogames

A Conversation about *Infinity Ring*

Infinity Ring **is a new book series by Scholastic. This series will follow three kids as they travel through time to correct historical moments that have been altered by a centuries-long secret war.** *Infinity Ring* **is one of a few stories being told through books and interconnected online games with immersive open-world environments.**

To find out more about this merging of traditional and new media, we spoke with Scholastic's Gavin Brown, who oversees *Infinity Ring's* **online and mobile gaming, and Nick Eliopulos, the editor for the series.**

How do you want people to think of *Infinity Ring*? Is it a book series with a videogame component or a videogame series with accompanying books?

GAVIN: We present it as a book and online game series in which each platform is equal and stands on its own. The story weaves seamlessly from the books to the game and back to the books.

NICK: *Infinity Ring* is a cool time-travel adventure story that happens to be told through different media, in satisfying installments that all add up to one big adventure.

How did this idea come about?

NICK: A small group of editors batted around the initial idea at the core of the story: What if history had been manipulated so that key events had gone wrong? And what if a few kids had the ability to travel back in time to fix those Great Breaks in history? We didn't go much deeper than that before talking to James Dashner, a tremendous writer with a real knack for speculative fiction (and who happens to be a bit of a history geek). James took that nugget of an idea and ran with it, developing an extensive outline, including a list of potential Great Breaks. As soon as we had a sense of the scope of the story, and saw how the Breaks allowed pretty naturally for an episodic structure, we looped in Gavin and his team to see if they agreed this story would benefit from the larger canvas that multi-platform allows.

GAVIN: The editorial team came to us with this idea, and we constructed a game around it. As soon as I read the description I knew that it had to be a classic adventure game, similar to the old Sierra and LucasArts games that I played as a kid. This series is all about history and the story, and required building a completely new game engine to allow us to build all seven episodes in a little more than two years.

What resources did the authors and game designers use to make sure that the details were historically accurate?

GAVIN: Historical accuracy is a major goal for our multi-platform team. This was a major challenge because a game can include a huge number of details that won't fit into a book. For 1792 Paris, we wrestled with questions like *What sort of curbs did the streets have?* and *What exactly does an 18th century glass cutter look like?* We made trips to New York's architectural and art libraries in order to produce a section of the city that's both accurate and full of life. And then immediately we had to move on to Washington D.C. in 1812.

NICK: The authors have been able to rely on more traditional means of research, for the reasons Gavin outlines. But they absolutely want kids to come away with a genuine sense of these settings and historical figures. James Dashner portrays Columbus as a bit of smug, unlikeable character because historical accounts paint him that way. In the second book, author Carrie Ryan was careful to describe a Danish Viking ship rather than a Norwegian one. It was an important distinction that I wouldn't have picked up on before we started our research.

Each book also comes with a "Hystorian's Guide," which is a strategy guide to a game episode. Since those are so visual (even including historically accurate maps), they've required a crazy amount of

research. For our Revolutionary Paris guide, we ended up buying centuries-old French currency from eBay so that we could include an image of the real deal.

Although authors have unlimited options of how to tell their stories, game designers are limited by processing power, production time and budgets. How were these limitations addressed?

GAVIN: Everything designed in the *Infinity Ring* game had to be built with the limitations of the device in mind. For example, there can only be a limited number of characters on screen at any time, which means there can't be any crowd scenes. We're fortunate that most devices nowadays can handle great 3D graphics, but we're constantly adjusting to keep the level of detail and file size low enough that loading screens and downloads won't take too long. Creating great looking visuals is hard enough—doing so within limitations of polygon count and texture size is an art form with its own rules and secrets.

We have a toolset for building the plot that is very effective, but it requires that everything fit into a certain framework. We have a great team here at

sue. The authors have been able to run wild with their own stories.

But while plotting the overall arc we did run up against the differences between what works in a book and what works in a game. Many of those dif-

Gavin Brown; *Associate Director, Scholastic;* **New York, NY;** & Nick Eliopulos; *Editor, Infinity Ring Series;* **Brookfield, IL**

CHARACTER   ITEMS   MAP   JOURNAL   PHOTO   OPTIONS   X

Sera

- Loves Quantum Physics.
- Fixed the Infinity Ring
- Is Dak's best friend.

SELECT

Dak   Sera   Riq

Three main characters: Dak, Sera, and Riq are the three children who travel through time, fixing history.

ferences are obvious in hindsight, but weren't necessarily obvious to me in the early stages. For example, the subplots running through the story—where one character is keeping an important secret from the others, for instance—fit much more naturally into the books. The game episodes by their nature are driven by dialogue and action and don't slow down for introspection.

You often hear writers advised: "Show, don't tell." Writing a game is the ultimate expression of this.

Scholastic also published *The 39 Clues* book series which also had an Internet game component. How did the lessons learned from the production of *The 39 Clues* inform the development of *Infinity Ring?*

GAVIN: *The 39 Clues* was a huge learning experience for us. We had to learn from the ground up how to design a book and game simultaneously. It requires frequent communication, constant learning, and collaboration with a team that understands both worlds. Additionally, fans on *The 39 Clues* message boards have been a tremendous advantage in helping us understand how they think and what they want. *Infinity Ring* was all-new technology, but the expertise built up from *The 39 Clues* was crucial in ensuring a smooth launch.

Scholastic that is up for the challenge of working within the limitations of technology to create a story that's engaging, exciting, and at times sidesplittingly funny.

So has an author ever suggested a storyline that was rejected because it would have been too difficult to include in the game?

NICK: Fortunately the episodes really do stand on their own well enough that we haven't had this is-

NICK: Scholastic broke new ground with *The 39 Clues,* the first multi-platform series in children's book publishing. This popular series now has more than 15 million copies in print worldwide and more than two million registered users in the online game. Those are just amazing figures. We've had great success in the multi-platform space and we've learned a lot since we published *The 39 Clues* series in 2008. The best professional advice I ever received was from an editor of *The 39 Clues.* She told me: *Look, nobody is an expert yet when it comes to multi-platform publishing. So have fun—don't be afraid to share crazy ideas. It's a new frontier, a level playing field, where you know as much as anybody else in the room.*

But we have definitely benefited from the experience of the *Clues* pioneers. And I'm consistently in awe of the work they've done. That story gets bigger and bigger, without losing any of the excitement or momentum it has had since launching years ago. They've built a wonderful mythology that books alone simply wouldn't be able to contain.

A recent study conducted by Bowker Market Research found that 55 percent of Young Adult books are purchased by adults, and 78 percent of these adults are buying these YA books for themselves. Do you feel that this aging demographic will influence how Scholastic produces books?

NICK: I love that adults enjoy so many of the books we publish. I think it's a great indication that children's publishing is where you're seeing a lot of innovation. And Scholastic in particular is very interested in continuing to innovate. There's a big emphasis here on creativity and on making reading fun—for kids in particular. But if adults pick up on that message, that's all the better.

We'll continue to go where the kids are. That increasingly means multi-platform. And while I don't see adult interest influencing the work that we do, I think that the work we do will continue to interest adults.

Some say that e-books and other electronic media are pushing printed text toward extinction. Do think video games or e-books will ever cause the printed word to disappear?

NICK: Absolutely not. What we're seeing now is that e-books and electronic publishing are broadening our audience instead of replacing it. The reading public has more options now—in an age where consumers want options. There will always be a place for printed books. Now there's a place for electronic books, too. Put them together and you're reaching more readers than printed books alone ever would.

As for video games, the trap people fall into is thinking of it as a zero-sum game, as if every kid with an interest in games is a lost reader. I don't believe that's true. Personally, I'm a big reader. I love to read. But sometimes I'd rather play a game or watch a movie. As a consumer, I like to vary the media through which I enjoy stories in my leisure time. I don't believe I'm unusual in that.

With more story franchises being told across multiple media, how do you two think storytelling might change in the 21st century?

GAVIN: Storytelling will be in all sorts of new places and across multiple new media, but the basics of it will never change. One of the great things about Scholastic is that writing and storytelling are always a priority. There will always be an audience for great stories.

NICK: It's such an incredibly exciting time to be a storyteller. Or to work in an industry committed to building bridges between a storyteller and an audience. It feels as if the horizons are expanding. Skillsets are diversifying. Innovation and creativity are being rewarded.

But Gavin's got it right. The fundamentals remain the same. And there will always be an audience for gifted storytellers, whatever the medium.

Finally, what can fans look forward to from *Infinity Ring* and Scholastic in the near future?

NICK: Book 2 in the series, *Divide and Conquer,* came out in November. It hinges on an epic medieval siege. Its author, Carrie Ryan, is best known for her intense horror-adventure series, *The Forest of Hands and Teeth.* There are no zombies in *Divide and Conquer,* but she does create some truly terrifying Vikings. Books 3, 4, and 5 are all scheduled to come out in 2013.

GAVIN: For Episode 2 of the *Infinity Ring* game, we're going to save the American First Lady from British redcoats in the War of 1812. We'll then head to Japan to learn the Bushido Code and help a famous Samurai survive Ninja assassins in Episode 3. Beyond that—we're always looking one step ahead to the next big thing. But for the moment our focus is on delivering an Episode of *Infinity Ring* that lives up to the epic story that we have tell.

NICK: And when wondering what comes next, kids should keep an eye out for hints within the story, too. There's a reason that our otherwise historically accurate recreation of Paris in the online game includes a Viking statue right outside Notre Dame. ❋

1792 Revolutionary France is the setting for the first video game installment of *Infinity Ring.* This episode is called, "The King of Diamonds."