

Was it so very long ago before I knew the dragon? That was in 1975, when I first encountered the concept of a computer game. That was a new concept to me. For me, the computer had always been a tool for scientific calculation. Now, the notion of using it to play, well, that was a fascinating and utterly unconventional concept to me. And so I decided to begin to acquaint myself with this technology.

I had no dream as yet. For me, the dragon still slept. But I wanted to learn. So set to work. I started programming a mainframe computer. That was technologically eons ago. FORTRAN, punched cards, JCL, IBM mainframes.. But in the life of one man, it's not so very long ago.

In 1976, I got my first computer game running, a strategy war game on a hex grid. And at the same time, I decided that I was going to get a microcomputer. I wanted to own my own machine. I wanted to understand this technology.

So I set to work, teaching myself everything I could about TTL and power supplies, LM309K voltage regulators, and 7476 JK flip-flops, and the difference between a tantalum and an electrolytic capacitor, and which end of the soldering iron gets hot.

And then in January of 1977, I got my first computer: a Kim-1 single-board microcomputer with a 6502 processor, 1K of RAM, and I was set. And you know, within one month, I had got that thing hooked up and running. I had learned a code in 6502 machine code, and I had written a game and gotten it working in 1K of RAM, a little strategy war game on a hex grid.

And then I, like all microcomputer hobbyists, I started expanding my system and expanding my game. And then, in 1978, I bought my first appliance computer, a Commodore PET with 8K of RAM.

In the same year, I sold my first commercial computer game. That was in 1978, 15 years ago. It's been a long time.

In 1979, I joined Atari, did a game on the Video Computer System. Then I went to work on the Atari 800, because this was the premier graphics and sound machine of the industry. The 800 was so far ahead of everything else, it was the machine to learn on.

And I knew nothing about graphics and sound, so I hurled myself into the machine, absorbing everything I could, learning all about graphics and sound. Some of you may find it ironic to learn that for a time there, I was known as the graphics wizard of Atari.

And indeed, there was a period of time there where my game, Eastern Front, was the most graphically advanced product on the marketplace. Because that was a phase I needed to go through. I needed to understand graphics at a deep level. I needed to feel that I had a good grip on it.

And so all through this period, from 1975 to 1981, for six years, I was apprenticing myself to this technology. I was turning it over and over in my hands. I was getting the feel of it in my fingertips.

And for six years, I had no dream at all. All I did was learn.

By 1981, I felt that I understood the technology. I felt that I knew what this medium was about. But I had no dream. I couldn't see the dragon. But by 1981, I could hear him thrashing about in the forest. I knew he was out there somewhere. I knew he was big, whatever he was. And I wanted to find him.

And then, in one of those fortuitous circumstances that is so perfectly timed that we can only ascribe its occurrence to the workings of fate, then Alan Kay came into my life. Alan had been hired at Atari to form a corporate research group. And first thing he did when he got to Atari was he asked around to see if there were any angry young Turks who were possibly in danger of leaving the company. And every finger pointed at me.

"Okay, I'll take your job, Alan." So I went to work in corporate research. And then Alan very carefully set about planning his division and starting to interview and hire other people. But it was three months before he hired anyone else. Which means that for three months, I had Alan Kay all to myself. This is the computer scientist's equivalent of being marooned on a desert island with Marilyn Monroe.

Alan and I talked about all kinds of things. And I learned so much from him. You know, some of you may have noticed over the years that I tend to have a fairly generous assessment of my own talents.

You don't have to laugh that loud.

And a correspondingly ungenerous assessment of other people's talents. Let me tell you this. Alan Kay is so much smarter than I am, I feel stupid when I'm talking to him. I mean, most other people, when they think, they go in little tiny steps. A, B, C, D, E, F, G.

Alan doesn't work that way. He goes in big leaps. A, J, M, R, Q. Boy, if you want to keep up with Alan when he's talking, you've got to run along behind him filling in the blanks. B, C, D, E, F, G, A, J, M, R, Q.

And it's hard. You have to work to keep up with this guy. I used to walk out of meetings with him saying, "Alan, I can't take it anymore. I've got to go back to my office and stare at the wall for a while."

So I learned a tremendous amount from Alan. But you know, the tricky thing is, most of what I learned were the blanks that I filled in. And it's impossible to say whether the blanks that I filled in were blanks that he intended for me to fill in, or blanks that just came from my own experience. I'll never know. But perhaps that's the mark of a truly great teacher.

And one of the things that I learned from Alan was how to dream well. You know, before I met Alan, I dreamed like most other people. Most people dream in a very shoddy fashion, very lazy dreaming.

Good dreaming is hard work. It takes energy and talent and experience, but mostly work. And one way to understand dreams is to think of them as existing between two extremes, fantasy and planning.

Fantasy is the free indulgence of human desire, unconstrained by the crass limitations of reality. Whereas planning exists entirely in the world of reality. When we plan, we have a narrow objective that we've already boiled our desires down to a specific objective, and then we create a sequence of steps that will achieve that objective, and it all lives and breathes the air of reality in it.

Dreaming exists in the netherworld between easy fantasy and plodding planning. Dreaming is an odd mixture, an integration of fantasy and planning.

To dream well, we must weave together the warp of fantasy with the woof of reality to create a fabric that is strong. And that fabric, if we do it well, is a good dream.

A dream, a fantasy, spreads its wings and soars off into the cosmos where a plan plods along, earthbound. But a dream, a dream takes a running leap and jumps up as high as it can to catch a handhold by which it can hoist itself up.

And that, that's hard because there are lots of people who can fantasize, and there are lots of people who can dot I's and cross T's, but people who can do both well at the same time, people who can keep their eyes on the stars even as they walk without tripping across broken ground. Such people are very rare, and it takes work.

Another way of viewing dreaming is to think in terms of alternate realities. There is, of course, reality, the real reality. But when we fantasize, we create an imaginary, a desired universe. But we don't care about whether the universe works, whether it's possible. Only when we dream do we create a universe that is actually possible.

A dream universe is a desirable universe that is possible. And that means that we have to work out the ramifications of our fantasies. We have to figure out the consequences and how everything fits together.

Oh sure, I can fantasize about Sally Sexbomb. I can fantasize about what it would be like to go to bed with Sally Sexbomb. But if I'm going to dream about Sally Sexbomb, well then I'm going to have to think about where we're going to live, and maybe whether we're going to have children, and who's going to do the dishes. That's part of a dream, too.

So, under Alan's goading, I set to work to dream about computer games. You know, most people, when they dream, they draw a sketch of the dragon. But they do it in pencil, and all they do is sketch out the barest outlines of the dragon.

Under Alan's goading, I had to fill in every detail. I had to see every scale, every eyelash. I had to know what was inside the dragon, where the kidneys were, how big the lungs were, and what the skeletal structure was. So it took me a year and a half just to hammer together my basic dream.

I worked, as part of this, as an exercise, I wrote a book, *The Art of Computer Game Design*. And that was really an exercise to help me dream more clearly. By 1983, I had my dream. I could see the dragon clearly in my mind's eye.

Let me tell you about my dream. I dreamed of the day when computer games would be a viable medium of artistic expression. An art form.

I dreamed of computer games encompassing the broad range of human experience and emotion. Computer games about tragedy, or self-sacrifice. Games about duty and honor, patriotism. Satirical games about politics, or games about human folly. Games about man's relationship to God, or to nature. Games about the passionate love between a boy and a girl, or the serene and mature love between husband and wife of decades. Games about family relationships, or death, mortality. A boy becoming a man, or a man realizing he is no longer young. Games about a man facing truth at high noon on a dusty main street. Or a boy and his dog, or a prostitute with a heart of gold.

All of these things and more were part of this dream. But, by themselves, they amounted to nothing. Because all of these things have already been done by other art forms. There's no advantage, no purchase, nothing superior about this dream. It's just an old rehash. All we are doing with the computer, if all we do is just reinvent the wheel with poor grade materials, well, we don't have a dream worth pursuing.

But there was a second part to this dream that catapulted it into the stratosphere. The second part is what made this dream important and worthy. And that is interactivity.

Let me explain to you why interactivity is so overwhelmingly important. Let me talk about the human brain. You know, our minds are not passive receptacles, they are active agents. It's not as if we have a button on the side of our head, and they come along and push the button, and the top of our head flips open, and then they take a pitcher full of knowledge and pour it into our skull. And then they close the top of our head and shake well and say, "Congratulations, you're educated now."

It doesn't work that way. How does a little boy learn about butterflies? Does he read a big, thick book about butterflies? No, he catches one and tears its wings off. "Oh, look, what's the green stuff coming out of his body? I wonder what it tastes like." That's how they learn.

And this isn't some gross characteristic of little boys only. The only difference between us and them is we've learned to hide that. This is fundamental to our nature. It's wired into our brains. And if you really want to understand that concept, sometime you ought to watch a couple of kittens at play.

Here are these two kittens here. And what do they do? Well, one of them sees a little bug, and so he decides to follow that bug all through the house. The second kitten, well, he sees the first kitten, and he gets an idea. And what does he do? Well, he gets down low, and he folds his ears down flat so he will be harder to see. And then he creeps forward stealthily until he gets close enough. And then he gets ready, and then he pounces on the kitten. Ha-ha! And he kicky-kicky-kicks, and he clawy-clawy-claws, and he bitey-bitey-bites. And the two kittens roll around on the floor, and we all laugh. We say kittens are having fun. Kittens do nothing but play all day long. Kittens don't have a care in the world. And we would be wrong.

Because, you see, those kittens are not goofing off. They're engaged in some very serious business. And to understand the nature of this business, you need merely ask yourself the question, "What is the job description of an adult cat?" Well, here's the adult cat standing in the house, just keeping an eye on things, when all of a sudden he sees a mouse. And what does he do? Well, he gets down low, and he folds his ears down flat so he will be harder to see. And then he creeps forward stealthily until he gets close enough. And then he gets ready, and then he pounces on the mouse. Ha-ha! And he kicky-kicky-kicks, and he clawy-clawy-claws, and he bitey-bitey-bites. And that's how adult cats earn their living. So you can see -- except at my house.

So you can see, these kittens are not wasting their time in idle entertainment. They're engaged in job training. This is serious business for them. You don't see a bunch of kittens lined up in nice, neat rows with some old geezer of a cat standing at a chalkboard drawing anatomical diagrams of mice with approach angles and attack vectors. They don't do it that way.

All the higher mammals learn by playing, by doing, by interacting. And indeed, the higher the mammal, the more of its life it spends in play to prepare itself for adulthood. So you can see, this active role of the mind is fundamental to the way we think. It's wired into our brains.

However, we humans have come up with an improvement upon this method, and it's called language. Language is a means of allowing one person to learn from many people. It expands the intellectual reach of your universe.

For example, suppose after this lecture, I go down to the lunchroom, and I eat the orange hamburger. And it makes me sick. And I come back to you and say, "Hey, don't eat the orange hamburger. It's going to make you sick." Well, that way, you've learned something without ever having to get sick. And that's good. And in fact, most of the things that you know, most of the facts in your mind, are things that you learned from other people. So language is a way of allowing one person to learn from many different people.

But you know, we've also learned to turn that concept around, to use language as a way of allowing one person to teach many people. This is the concept of mass media. And in fact, by mass media, I don't mean just radio and television. Mass media goes back 100,000 years to a circle of people sitting around a fire with one guy telling a story. This lecture is mass media. Look, right now, I'm teaching 200 people. Think about how tremendously efficient that is. That's really an enormous improvement in the efficiency of a single conversation. However, we've learned over the years that there's a responsibility associated with this. That is, if I'm going to give you guys this lecture, and take up all of your time, it is incumbent upon me to do a good job. I better prepare this lecture carefully. I better outline it, plan it, and rehearse it over and over until I have a lecture that is worthy of all of your time.



So there's a real responsibility here. And in fact, over the years, we have also learned that if you run with that responsibility, and do a really good job, why, lots and lots of people will want to hear about your communication.

For example, suppose this lecture was a really fantastic lecture. Suppose I prepared it, and I had special effects and spaceships shooting across behind me, and all sorts of fabulous things going on, and this lecture was just so great, so wonderful, that after it was over, you all went running out into the hall saying, "Hallelujah! Brother Crawford has shown me the way!" And everybody wanted to buy Chris Crawford Lecture videotapes, and everybody wanted to buy Chris Crawford Lecture audiotapes, Chris Crawford Lecture t-shirts, coffee mugs, keychains, yes!

But, uh, I'm not that good. I think we'll have to scratch the t-shirts and coffee mugs. The principle remains the same.

And in fact, this is the genesis of art, because art really is just a way of communicating ideas. For example, consider Michelangelo's statue, the Pietà, showing Mother Mary holding the crucified body of her son. This tells you something about the nature of motherly love. And Michelangelo invested so much talent into that statue, so much energy and so much time, that the result conveys to you, the audience, its message of motherly love with tremendous power. It is compelling. It is clear. It is powerful. And because of these things, it is so great that we call it beautiful.

That is how art comes about. However, we have also learned over the years that the responsibility works both ways. This is a two-way street. I mean, you don't get off scot-free. You have a responsibility, too. Your responsibility is not to mess up my beautiful speech. I mean, if I went to all the trouble to prepare this damn thing, you better not disrupt it. So don't get up and move around. Don't, uh, rustle your papers and drop them on the floor. Don't stomp your feet. Don't crack your knuckles. Don't belch. Don't fart. Don't do nothing. Just sit there, quietly, passively.

Wait.

Didn't I just say, uh, I think it was about here somewhere. Didn't I say something about the human mind being an active agent, not a passive receptacle? What gives? I mean, here we have the march of civilization. Every day, in every way, getting better and better. And the grand culmination of this glorious march is the creation of art, which puts you, the audience, in a passive role, which we have just shown to be fundamentally in conflict with the basic structure of the human mind. What gives?

Well, maybe I can, uh, illuminate the nature of this contradiction a little with an imaginary alternative. Suppose, suppose I were to, to, uh, give the, instead of giving this lecture, suppose I were to take each of you one at a time. You know, we'd start with you, David, and you and I would go off to a little room together, and we would have a conversation instead of a lecture, an interactive conversation instead of an expository lecture. And so I would start saying something about my dream, and then you might ask a question, and then I'd answer your question, and then you might have another question, I'd answer that, and you'd start to argue with me, and I'd argue back, and we'd go back and forth and back and forth, and we would interact, and that would be a lot different, wouldn't it? Because, because you'd be a lot more active. You wouldn't be sitting there on your fat butt. You'd be, you'd be doing something. The juices would be flowing, the wheels would be turning, your mind would be going a mile a minute. You'd learn a lot more, wouldn't you?

Yeah, and, and from my point of view, I would convey my message a lot more effectively, wouldn't I? But the problem is, there are 200 of you, and there's only one of me. And if I were to use that method, I'd be here forever. So the lecture method is a lot more efficient than the conversation method. And that is the basic problem we face. The interactive conversation is effective, but the expository lecture is efficient. That's the trade-off we make.

And over the centuries, we humans have learned that the gains in efficiency outweigh the losses in effectiveness. And therefore, we choose expository methods. But the sacrifice remains real. We haven't ever solved that problem. It's been with us since the beginning of history. Every single artist has faced it. Every communicator, every teacher, every novelist, every sculptor, every singer, every musician, every painter, every novelist, every single artist through all of human history has been forced to sacrifice effectiveness for efficiency.

Until now. Because now we have a technology that changes everything. With the computer, I can take my ideas that I want to communicate, I can express them in the form of an algorithm. And then I can take that algorithm, and I can write it up as program code. And then I can put that program code onto a floppy disk. And then we can mass produce that floppy disk. We can make millions of copies of it, spread it all over the world, so that millions of people can play my game. They can interact with my ideas. And because they are interacting, I achieve effectiveness. And because we are mass producing the disks, I achieve efficiency. That, that is the revolutionary nature of the computer. It allows us to automate interactivity, to achieve both effectiveness and efficiency. And that was the most important part of my dream.

And so, in 1983, I set about the long task of realizing that dream. Now of course, any truly worthy dream cannot be realized in a year or two or five. A truly good dream needs a lifetime to realize. But that didn't stop me from at least identifying the fundamental problems that had to be solved. And the very first problem that required my treatment, the very, the biggest problem we face here, is the lack of people in our games. Have you ever noticed, computer games, all of our games are about things, not people. We shoot things. We chase things. Things shoot us. Things chase us. We manipulate things, maneuver things, allocate things, manage things, but it's always things, things, things. There are never any people in any of our games.

Oh, sure, I've seen the pitiful excuses for characters in our games and their fakes. They are Potemkin villages. The characters in our games are like a cardboard box with a picture of a face pasted onto the front, but nothing inside. There's no heart and soul in them. All they have are a couple of buttons on front. You push one button and he says, "I am your friend now." And you push the other button and he says, "I am your enemy now." The characters we have in our games have as much to do with real characters as an inflatable doll has to do with sex.

That may be good enough for most people. That's not good enough for me.

If we want real characters in our games, there are three fundamental technological hurdles that we must jump. First, the technology of human facial expression. We've got to be able to show people's faces emoting. We've got to show our characters laughing and smiling and crying, looking frightened and skeptical and suspicious and greedy and lustful and romantic. We've got to have a library of a hundred different facial expressions, each of which can be put onto the face of any member of our cast.

You can't do that yet, can you? I can. I have.

The second thing we need is artificial personality, the algorithms of human behavior. We need equations that show how people feel, how they behave, how they react to different situations. And we need this on a gigantic scale. We need to be able to handle hundreds upon hundreds of different behaviors with thousands of different equations. You can't do that yet, can you?

I have.

And lastly, we need a language of emotional expression. We need to allow our players to interact with the characters in an emotionally significant fashion. It's not good enough to be able to stab them or shoot them or take

something away from them or give something to them or talk to them about where the princess is. That's not good enough. We've got to be able to talk about feelings and emotionally significant events. You can't do that yet, can you?

Yes, I have.

And I don't say these things to boast. I say them to point out how long I've been working on it and how long the path in front of you is. I've been working on this stuff for ten years. You've got a lot of catch-up to do. My very first interpersonal relationships game, *Gossip*, was published in 1983. It had human facial expressions, artificial personality, and a language of emotional expression. It was primitive, but you know, this industry still hasn't published anything as good as *Gossip*. That's pretty sad.

Well, I continued to advance my work on it on a very opportunistic basis, trying different approaches, successes and failures. It was a very herky-jerky development path I followed. In 1987, I published a game called *Trust and Betrayal*, *Legacy of Siboot*. And that one was a commercial failure. At the time, I blamed it on my own failings. I thought, well, you know, I'm still learning this stuff. I was way out on a limb. I thought that the fault was all mine.

What I didn't understand was that I was really up against some fundamental forces at work in the industry, forces that I didn't understand at all. But in 1990, something else happened that served as the kick in the side of the head that woke me up. And that was the reaction to my game *Balance of the Planet*. When I set out to do *Balance of the Planet*, I wanted to do a game about environmental policy. But I wanted to do a game that had some honesty in it, some integrity. I didn't want to do dolphins dancing across the screen. I didn't want to do Zork dressed up in Greenpeace clothing. I wanted a game that honestly addressed environmental policy issues. And that was a pretty tough problem. But I was very proud of the approach that I came up with.

The solution I came up with was a pretty good one. It really did address those issues. And in fact, Balance of the Planet remains the best way to learn about environmental policy trade-offs. It's better than any book or television show or videotape. If you really want to understand it, that's the best way.

And so, boy was I proud of that product. And so I was really stunned when the industry rejected it pretty widely. Distributors, retailers, customers, press, game designers too, pretty much rejected this game. They turned thumbs down. No good. Perhaps I think the overall reaction of the industry was best summarized in a review of the game written by some fellow at Computer Gaming World. Let me just read it to you.

He said, regarding Balance of the Planet, "It is the closest thing to art to be sold as computer entertainment. But it's just not fun. Therefore, if the game is not fun, it simply wouldn't be right to endorse it."

A more explicit rejection of my dream cannot be imagined." Here they are saying, "Yes, it's art, but it's not fun. Therefore, pfft." Now, I'm sorry, Mr. Shakespeare. Your play, Macbeth. Boy, it kept me up with nightmares for three nights. But gosh, well, it's just not fun. I mean, can't we get a few belly laughs in there? Maybe we can have Macbeth tell a few mother-in-law jokes to his wife.

Yeah, and you, Mr. Beethoven. Your Ninth Symphony. It makes my heart soar in awe at the majesty of the cosmos. But you know, it's just not fun. I mean, we need something we can dance to. We need some cute, catchy little tunes we can snap our fingers to.

What can I do? At first, I fought this. I just couldn't believe it. I was furious. I fought back. But then I realized that this was not really attributable to the obtuseness of individuals. No, no. This was a fundamental force. This was the marketplace at work.

Let me explain to you what was going on and what is still going on in our industry. Think in terms of a scale of difficulty, with simple games at the bottom and hard games at the top. But the scale applies to people as well, with inexperienced people at the bottom and very expert game players at the top.

Now, any given game falls somewhere on this scale. But it doesn't fall at a single point. It actually has a window. There's the lower level of difficulty and the upper level of difficulty. And when you first start playing a game, you normally start off below the lower level. And what happens? You get skunked. The game clobbers you and you lose.

But no problem. You come back and try again and you learn. You get better. So you start climbing the ladder. And as you climb the ladder, pretty soon you climb above the lower level of difficulty and you climb into the fun zone. Where the game is challenging and interesting and fun. But you keep playing and so you keep learning. You keep climbing the ladder. And as you do, the day comes when you climb above the upper level. And now the game is too easy to beat. It's boring. You don't play it anymore. You put it aside.

And then what do you do? Well, you buy another game. But this game is going to be a little more difficult than the previous one. It's going to be higher up on the scale. And so you'll climb up through that game and put it aside and buy another game. And another. And another. And you're going to just climb right up that ladder, improving your expertise.

And the result is something I call games literacy. And it really depends on the genre. For example, I'm really literate when it comes to flight simulators. I've played a lot of these. And so when I got Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe, I took that thing, plugged it in, fired it up, and within five minutes I was shooting down P-51s.

But when it comes to graphic adventures, every year or two I get the latest graphic adventure. I plug it in, fire it up, and within five minutes, I'm bashing my head against a brick wall, stumped and frustrated. I mean, I'm so bad at this, I had to call up Brian Moriarty and get hints for Loom.

But we all have different literacies. And so if you think about the population of people out there, it's divided into three groups. At the very bottom of the scale are the millions of personal computer owners who are not literate. They don't play games very often, so they're way down at the bottom. Then there's a very small group of people climbing the ladder at any given time. And then at the top of the ladder there are the aficionados, the experts, the people who play the games a lot. There are a few hundred thousand of these people.

Now, simple question. If you're a developer, or a publisher, or a distributor, or a retailer, which of these three groups do you want to sell to? And the only possible answer is group number three, the aficionados.

Why? Because they're so easy to sell to. They're connected. They read all the magazines. They're on the electronic networks. They all have a big circle of friends. They're always talking about the latest, greatest games. They hang around the stores all the time. And they spend money. These people buy games a lot. And so they're easy to sell to.

I mean, the best proof of how easy they are, look at the success of Wolfenstein 3D. Here's a game with zero formal marketing, and everybody's talking about it. How did they find out about it? The network, the connections. Everybody here in this group knows about Wolfenstein 3D. That's the proof of just how powerful this group really is.

By contrast, how do you sell to the people at the bottom end of the scale? How can you even tell them that your game exists? Advertise on nightly news? These people don't read any of the regular magazines. They don't log on to CompuServe every 35 minutes. These people, the way they buy



games, they wander into the computer store once a year to get a new ribbon for their dot matrix printer. They get lost in the store, and they bumble into the games section. And they say, "Oh gosh, computer games, that's right. I haven't played a game in two years. Maybe I ought to buy one. Let's see. Oh look, here's a pretty box. Harpoon. Oh, that sounds good. I think I'll buy it. I'll bet it's about whales."

How do you sell to these people? And these people here, these are the ones to sell to because they tell you what they want. Designing for the bottom crowd, it's hit or miss. You spend a half a million dollars on a game, you put it out there. If they don't like it, they won't even tell you they don't like it. They just won't buy it.

But these people, boy, try to stop them from telling you. They'll send you letters. They'll fill out the feedback form, send you email. They'll call you up in the middle of the night to tell you what's wrong with your game and how to make it better. These people, boy, it's easy to figure out what they want.

And what do they want? They want more depth. Yeah, they've invested a lot of money and a lot of time climbing that ladder. And they don't want to throw away that investment. They don't want to start all over on a new ladder. They want to keep climbing the ladder. They want to go higher and higher. They want more depth in their games.

And think about how that compares to my dream. Because I want to encompass the broad range of human experience and emotion. What I want is breadth. And what the customers want is depth.

I am at cross-purposes with my audience. And there's only one conclusion I can draw. I have to leave. I don't fit in here anymore. Now, I realize that's kind of strange. But, you know, many years ago, I left the crowded cities of the eastern seaboard and crossed the Appalachian Mountains and came upon the virgin forests of Kentucky. And there I built myself a cabin and I

hunted the dragon. I wasn't very good back then. I only bumped into him at night by chance. And my encounters with him were brief and desperate. I'd wave my sword frantically and hear his claws hissing through the air. And then he would be gone. But I was learning. And it was fun.

More people came. The hardy pioneers, they built cabins near mine. And pretty soon we had a lot of cabins. Pretty soon we had a village there with lots of houses. And then more people came until now. Now we have a town with stores and people being busy and streets and property lines and lawyers.

And this place has gotten too damn civilized for me. I mean, I just don't fit in. So I hoist my backpack onto my shoulders. I walk down the main street one last time. I wave goodbye to a few old friends, but most of the faces I see belong to strangers. They look askance at me and turn to their neighbor and say, "Who is that scruffy old tramp anyway? I'm glad he's leaving town. We don't need his kind in our town."

At the edge of town, I turn and look back one last time. It's a good town. I'm proud of the role I played in its creation. But out there to the west, beyond the Mississippi, beyond the Great Plains await the Rocky Mountains. There are no people there. Just rocks, trees, clear blue sky, and the dragon. He is there, too, waiting for me.

I can hear you saying, "Chris, this is crazy. I mean, you don't want to leave all this behind. You've got too much invested here. This is insanity." And you know, you're right. This is crazy.

But let me tell you about another crazy old fool. Let me tell you about a guy by the name of Don Quixote de la Mancha. You know, insanity is an inability to come to terms with reality. Don Quixote was definitely insane because he couldn't come to terms. There was a reason. The reality in which Don Quixote lived was a sordid and ugly reality. The people were scrabbling for survival. Don Quixote didn't want that. He wanted to live in

a world where there was truth and human dignity. And yes, love. And try as he might, he couldn't accommodate that to the real world. Other people were able to compromise enough to reach an accommodation. But Don Quixote, for him, the gap was too great. He couldn't bridge it.

And so instead of giving up on it, he imposed his reality onto the real world. Where other people saw a filthy country hostel, he saw a castle. Where other people saw a flock of sheep, he saw a mighty army. Where other people saw a windmill, he saw a dragon.

Yes, Don Quixote was a crazy old fool. But you know, he was more honest about his dreams than most people. And for that, I honor him.

And so, the time has come for me to make my commitment. I have committed myself. I have dedicated myself to the pursuit of the dragon. And having made that commitment, having decided that once and for all, now, all of a sudden, I can see him. There he is, right in front of me, as clear as day.

I never thought that I would see you this clearly. I always saw you with brief glimpses in the dark. But now, now, you're so much bigger than I'd ever imagined. I'm not so sure I like this. I mean, yes, you're glorious and beautiful, but you're ugly, too. Your breath reeks of death.

No, I never had any childish fantasies of conquering you. That thinking is for children. You are beyond that. Indeed, I can see, stretched around your feet, the bodies of my predecessors. And all you have to show for it is a few nicks and scratches.

But do you have to laugh at me that way? Am I so pitiful that you can sneer in my face like that? Yes, yes, you frighten me. You hurt me! I felt your claws ripping through my soul! But I'm going to die someday. And before I can do that, I've got to face you eyeball to eyeball. I've got to look you right in the eye and see what's inside.

But I'm not good enough to do that yet. I'm not experienced enough. So I'm going to have to start learning today, here, now. Come, dragon, I will fight you. Sancho Panza, my sword!

For truth!

For beauty!

For art!

Charge!