

*'A paean to well-earned hangovers, seventeen-hour international flights and the kindness of taxi drivers.'*

Andrew P. Street,  
TIME OUT

*Business  
— it's a trip.*



**FLASHBACKS  
FROM THE  
FLOW ZONE  
TOM CRAGO**

# FLASHBACKS FROM THE FLOW ZONE

TOM CRAGO



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# 1

## M1

Carlo had a copy of some video-game magazine resting on his lap serving as a de facto table, and with one hand was pulling the tobacco out of a cigarette while rubbing a bud of weed between thumb and forefinger in order to reduce it to an appropriate consistency, leaving his other hand to remove and attach the three rolling papers required to construct the spliff, after, of course, he had pulled away a small, rectangular section of the magazine for roaching purposes a little later on. That he was on the phone and messing about with the stereo throughout this procedure was neither here nor there, and neither, as I would discover, was the fact that we were doing seventy miles per hour on the M1 from Liverpool to London in a manual transmission car with Carlo himself behind the wheel. Might a one-paper joint have been sufficient under the circumstances? It was not my place to ask.

Despite my being seated directly beside him, and otherwise completely unoccupied, there was no suggestion that I should assist in this process in any way. It was understood but unsaid that my spliff-rolling skills at that point were not of the requisite standard to make any kind of contribution, even given the less-than-optimal surrounds. And to describe the driver's seat of a 1997 Ford Puma

travelling at that kind of speed down one of the United Kingdom's prime arterial roads as 'less than optimal' isn't to imply that it was far from typical. To the contrary, this particular brand of challenge, if it could even be called that, was the very thing that kept smokers like Carlo convinced that whatever this terrific drug was doing to their long-term health, it was in no way affecting their motor skills or dexterity.

I couldn't name a single feature or landmark on the M1, despite having spent more than twenty hours there and always as a passenger. The California section of the 101 Highway? I could illustrate you a coffee-table book. Same goes for the Autostrada that runs from Northern Italy south to Rome. The M1, though, remains cloudy, in every possible sense of that word. No doubt it's a lesser stretch of road, even on its best day, but to lose it to memory altogether seems unkind. If there's a next time, I'll make a point of taking in a little more than the contents of Carlo's three-paper marvel.

This was my first year working in the video-game industry, and a couple of small projects notwithstanding, we were really only working with Sony. They had asked us to develop two titles, both ostensibly about car racing and both under the supervision of their once celebrated, now shuttered Liverpool studio. While the Liverpool guys oversaw production, much of the rest of the process was managed out of Sony's European headquarters in London.

And so from Liverpool to London we sped, one trip of many, stoned, recovering from the legendary Creamfields music festival held that weekend, and needing to put the pieces back together with sufficient precision so that we might contribute to a marketing presentation the following morning. Me and Carlo up front; Jonas, Aiden and Fraser in the back, waiting patiently for Carlo to choose the music, get off the phone and finish rolling that spliff.

For whatever reason I had expected Jonas Dietrich to be bald, stocky, middle-aged and black. What I found, in the arrivals hall at Adelaide's domestic airport earlier that same year, was a young, slim, six-foot-five German chewing furiously on a piece of gum and ready to kill in cold blood for a cigarette. It was immediately clear to

me that he had not slept for some time. I was momentarily thrown. I had worn a shirt with buttons for the occasion, and had even arranged opera tickets that evening, figuring this might constitute a suitable form of after-dinner entertainment for our important, erudite guest.

I had a lot to learn about the way things worked in the video-game business, and despite it being blindingly obvious from the first moment that Jonas was a fellow traveller, I maintained the charade for most of the day, lest this be a kind of trap or test, or maybe because I had in my own mind a sense of how a professional should act in these circumstances and felt obliged to stick to the script. It was a long day, although far longer for Jonas. We put in eight hours at the office, did dinner and the opera, and then, in my only lowered-guard moment, smoked a joint back at his hotel room, before he passed out asleep on his bed.

A month or so later we would meet up again in Los Angeles, where he would give me his perspective on the meeting. It was, he said, one of the strangest days of his working life. He had spent the Sunday at the Formula One Grand Prix in Melbourne, where he had taken in the race and generally availed himself of the hospitality on offer. His studio was working on the official Formula One video game, and so that hospitality was generous and liquid.

At something of a loose end come the completion of the race, Jonas had set about making his way on foot back to his hotel. He was shortly thereafter drawn into conversation by a group of young locals, who happily informed him that later that night Melbourne would host a party featuring arguably the best line-up of DJs ever assembled in Australia. They had a spare ticket and would he like to join them? Yes, he would like to join them. And join them he did, from that piece of kerb, to a bar, to the party, back to their place, briefly to his hotel at 7 am to collect his bag, and then to the airport to fly to Adelaide for his 9 am rendezvous with me.

He had run into a few difficulties clearing security at Melbourne airport. The exchange went like this:

Security Officer: Bit of a big night, mate?

Jonas: Yes.

Security Officer: Are you carrying any drugs?

Jonas: No.

Security Officer: In the last twenty-four hours, which of the following substances have you consumed: ecstasy, marijuana, LSD, cocaine, methamphetamine.

Jonas: Yes.

Security Officer: No, you need to tell me which ones you've had.

Jonas: All of them.

He told me he knew he wasn't carrying anything, and that insofar as an extensive, rubber-gloved search and a swab test seemed by that stage inevitable, he felt he might as well just tell the guy the truth. As it turned out, the officer seemed to appreciate his candour and let him pass through without further examination.

Despite the weekend's many and varied escapades, the weirdest component for Jonas by some margin was the trip to the opera. It was there, at Adelaide's Festival Theatre, on no sleep and on the back of a thirty-hour bender, that the fear began finally to take hold. I had told him about my plans for the night during a break in conversation earlier that morning. He had assumed that 'opera' was code for strip club, and had clung to this presumption throughout the day. A beacon of normality in an otherwise ragingly surreal sea, and sustenance amid the gruelling work agenda we had arranged. I can only speculate as to the sickening magnitude of the blow he surely must have sustained when, upon arriving at the theatre, it became clear that he was, in fact, in for a night of actual opera.

Back on the M1, Carlo had finally selected a CD and it was not Verdi's *Aida*. Pretty much all of the partying we were doing at that time was fashioned around electronic music, specifically progressive house, which despite having a popular following was by no means the most common sound on the dance floor. Those guys were into it, Carlo and Aiden were constantly playing it, and so I became immersed without question. I continue to listen to it even now at the expense of anything else electronic, and this often plays

on my mind. What if they'd been techno or trance fiends? What if they were into folk? I guess I would have climbed aboard that train instead, but there was definitely something about that sound that left a mark.

More than once I planned work trips to Liverpool just so that I could attend Creamfields, an event held to this day in a paddock just out of town and always boasting a formidable line-up of DJs across multiple stages. Our friend, Kiwi Derek, stripped down to his underwear in front of one of those stages, a performance that only gently nudges the top-ten list of weird and heedless things in which I've participated directly during that festival. It used to be that you could walk there from Jonas's house, and always you would return, whatever the hour, to find the party continuing, albeit on a more intimate scale.

Sometime early in the piece we built a business trip around attending a weekend-long electronic-music festival held in Prestatyn, Wales, at a kind of family camping ground with dormitory-like accommodation and a bunch of community halls and galleries that served for those couple of days as dance floors. It poured rain the entire time and not a great many people turned up, but the Sony crew arranged tickets and for a weekend of unbridled excess it remains without equal. Whatever thin remnants of the business facade that may have persisted were torn down forever in a sweating, muddy tangle that would have seemed fantastical even if it hadn't taken place at a holiday camp in Northern Wales.

From Prestatyn it was back to London and an eventful evening of mutual hallucination in a hotel bed with Jonas. How could we be having the same visions at the same time? Surely there's no possible scientific explanation for that. Better roll another spliff. Jonas's father is a priest, and although we had the necessary provisions that night, it was always pleasing to see him pull a page from a hotel-room bible for rolling purposes when no alternative was available. As we grew accustomed to saying: Jesus wept.

For the British, of course, rolling a joint is like preparing a meal. There is a ritual element which is forceful and endearing,

and I think that's one of the things that got me interested in trying weed in the first place. How could you refuse something rendered with that amount of care? Probably, some from that extended circle smoked a little too much, and around the edges you occasionally met someone who had strayed too far into the psychedelic abyss or developed too soft a spot for the hard stuff. That's never a pleasant thing to see, but as a group we checked in on one another.

Like the time I saved Fraser's life in central London. In a way it was my karmic duty, having been afforded similar salvation myself in Washington DC not long before, and unquestionably Fraser had helped me out more than once when booze or chemicals were getting the better of me. The thing was we'd all had exactly the same mushrooms that night, in identical quantities, and yet Fraser was the only one who flipped out. And, most dangerously of all, he considered himself to be in full control of his faculties and behaving entirely normally.

We had been at a club, maybe Pacha, and were feeling somewhat enhanced when Fraser's behaviour started to change. It wasn't like he was delirious or seeing things, he just moved into a different reality, not a million miles from actual reality but different enough to have consequences. We rescued him from a fight he seemed intent on brewing with a couple of strangers and took the decision to get him out of there and back to Derek's flat. It was on that walk home that Fraser took a step into oncoming traffic that surely would have proved fatal had I not been standing there to grab him by the shoulder and wrench him back to the kerb. He didn't walk in front of that car deliberately; it may just have been that in the universe he was occupying at that moment, no harm could come to him on London's roads.

Right, so drugs very often aren't awesome and if Fraser had been killed or injured that night the whole song would unavoidably have a different chorus. That's the way it goes. Yet another moment along the way where little things matter and you hope that the sum of what you are at that second is sufficient to enable you to do the right thing.

I had been in London that day for meetings with another video-game publisher, at a time when things were going pretty well for us. On one level, it was all business, all of it tied inexorably to work. Meetings and deals, schedules and expense accounts. Did I expense the mushrooms? No. But I certainly would have claimed the cab ride out to Camden to get them.

Sitting, smoking, careering down the M1 with the weekend's soundtrack stirring us from Carlo's stereo, it went acknowledged but unspoken that we had landed flush in the epicentre of an uncommonly privileged period. The video-game industry was rich, especially the PlayStation brand, budgets were liberal, and no one asked too many questions as long as the games were selling well. A certain kind of recklessness was pretty much expected. At a music festival a few years earlier, Sony themselves had distributed post-cards mapped with rectangular, grid-like perforations. The very clear implication was that attendees should pull off a piece to use as a roach for whatever they were smoking.

A lot of what I think I know about the United Kingdom, a lot of what I continue to feel about the place, was informed by those guys during a golden era that was all too short. And that initial group, the four men in that car, constituted a lavish spread of the nations exemplified in my childhood imaginings. One English, one Irish, one Scot and one German. More or less the lineage of my grandparents.

I was green, overeager and quite a lot younger, but they graciously brought me into their collective. It's true they had no choice but to work with me, although they absolutely could have endeavoured to draw a line between business and pleasure. No such mark was made and it was as a result a manic, jumbled, marvellous time.

By the end of my inaugural year in the video-game industry, and putting other international travel to one side, I had met up with Jonas Dietrich in London, Liverpool, Las Vegas, New York and Prestatyn, in addition to our efforts in Adelaide and Los Angeles. The LA trip, to attend my first video-game trade show, was only

my third time overseas. Yet I was already beginning to appreciate the power of those random, happily opportune encounters. That chance meeting in Melbourne between Jonas and a group of like-minded locals is one I would channel, in some form or another, many times and in many different cities.

It's a kind of flow, to appropriate a term from the jargon-spewing fount of game-design theory. People who are good at making video games create experiences that leave the player energised, focused and utterly immersed. You lose track of time, abandon external pressures and give yourself over to the decisions you need to make and the obstacles you need to overcome so that you might remain in that zone and accomplish your goal. You are fulfilled by the project, and that sense of immersion, of flow, is what ultimately distinguishes great games from those that don't quite deliver.

And really every game is a journey. In a meta-sense, as players, we know we need to rescue the princess or defeat the enemy, but it's the moments along the way, the little quests and diversions, that give vitality to the experience; you are present in a place.

Same goes on the road, and that first year in the industry was flow and journeying personified. As an introduction to the wide world and to the vast possibilities of marrying business with pleasure, it left exactly nothing to be desired. It was intoxicating. And while those months were seminal, in truth my travel love affair had its origins some years prior. It would begin, as it almost never does, in Adelaide, South Australia.