

## arts } culture in context

## The bout between Michelangelo and Nintendo was a fight to the finish

To paraphrase the old cliché about horses and water, you can lead people to culture, but you can't make them take it in.

Or can you? Maybe the answer depends on the horse and the water, the people and the culture.

This is one of the lessons I gleaned from my summer vacation: After years of conversation, months of planning and Pyrrhic dicker-ing with Northwest Airlines on frequent-flier tickets, we took the kids to Italy to meet up with some European friends, to eat endless pizza Margherita and to attempt to feed our youngsters some of the world's greatest art.

We'll take lots of memories away from those two weeks, but a couple of them serve especially well for this column, and both happen to deal with my 11-year-old son, who, like his 6-year-old sister, soldiered through the idiosyncrasies of their overseas travel with more aplomb than I could have anticipated or dared hope for.

For everyone's sanity, we decided to alternate days by the pool with days of culture, which landed us in Florence one Wednesday morning to visit the Accademia dell'Arte del Disegno, home of Michelangelo's "David." We tried to do it the right way, getting to the museum early to avoid the crowds and renting the



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and tried to explain how this magnificent work of art was created from a piece of marble that two other sculptors had rejected.

"Uh-huh," he mumbled. I tried aesthetics next, pointing out to him that the proportions of the stature aren't quite right: David's hands and head are larger than they should be because Michelangelo expected the statue to be displayed up high and that, viewed from below, the proportions would look correct.

He glanced up momentarily, feigning interest. "Ohhh," he said, before returning to "Age of Empires."

Finally, I tried to tell him how Michelangelo's successful completion of the sculpture made him something of a rock star in Renaissance Italy and how the Florentines showered him with honors and the city fathers voted to build him a house and a studio.

"Cool," he offered monosyllabically. I let it go, hoping that something of the experience, if not the statue itself, would sink in. And maybe it did: The following week, we visited the Vatican Museums, the Roman Catholic Church's vast treasure trove of art from two millennia.

The capstone of the tour is the Sistine Chapel, which offers another of Michelangelo's masterpieces, the breathtaking ceiling frescoes of bibli-

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and snapping photos, despite the shushing of guides and the pre-recorded, multilingual admonitions about proper behavior. Here, a guy sipped his iced tea; there, college girls posed for cheesecake photos near the altar.

It was a nightmare, but I tried to make the best of it by trying to point out one of the features of the Last Judgment our guide had told us about: how Michelangelo had depicted one of his naysayers — nude, in hell, with a serpent biting his genitals.

I bent down to him as he surveyed the ceiling. "Nicky," I began.

He wheeled on me, eyes ablaze. "Dad! Shhhh!" he hissed, before returning his eyes to the ceiling. Amid the cacophony and the disrespect, the power of the place and the images had helped him create a cone of concentration and reverence and innate respect for the art; one that neither I nor anyone else should violate.

I allowed him his good, long, uninterrupted drink and counted the trip a success.

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## tech } tech test drive

## These rippers and earbuds will have you rocking your iPod or MP3 player

Several local consumer-tech companies want to rock your world, in the musical sense.

Got gobs of music CDs you want converted to iPod-friendly digital files? Plymouth-based Primera Technology now rents out a CD-ripping "robot" that automates this thankless chore but at a stiff price.

This is a do-it-yourself alternative to such services as Golden Valley-based Ripshark, which take your CDs and digitize them for you.

Once your music is loaded on your iPod, you want it to sound good. Oakdale-based Hearing Components sells foam audio-enhancing ear inserts that fit onto regular earbuds from Apple and other makers.

This is an alternative to custom-molded hard-plastic earpieces (from Eden Prairie-based Starkey Laboratories and others), which are comfortable but problematic in certain ways.

## WHAT A RIP

Primera's just-announced ripper-rental program intrigued me because I know how much work is involved in creating digital equivalents of physical CDs. It's no fun to feed discs into your computer one by one and baby-sit this process for hours on end.

Primera promises to make this process effortless and



Julio Ojeda-Zapata

mostly delivers.

Its equipment is a customized version of its Bravo disc ripper, duplicator and printer; the rental incarnation comes with feature-limited software that will rip only CDs and has no duplicating or printing options. The PTRip software is Windows-only; Macintosh users can't rent this robot.

Using the ripper is a breeze. Load discs into a device bin, 20 at a time, and fire up PTRip along with Apple's iTunes jukebox software (or, if you prefer, Windows Media Player). Click "Import to iTunes" or "Import to Media Player" in PTRip, and you're off!

I sat back while my loaned ripper did all the work. A robotic arm picked up a platter and dropped it into a drive tray. Once that drive extracted music from the disc and added the files to an archive on my PC, the arm picked up the disc again and dropped it into another bin.

This happened dozens of times with nary a glitch. Since my sample discs were mostly from well-known music acts, there were few problems accessing relevant band infor-

mation via an online database.

I did get a single cryptic "printer cartridge needs to be aligned" error message; it turns out Primera had erroneously included a printer cartridge with my ripper, and I had dutifully installed it. But others receiving the robot won't get a cartridge and therefore will not see this issue.

Primera charges \$299 for a one-week rental, which is steep or a steal, depending on how many CDs you need ripped. This is a good option for those with extensive CD collections. If you have fewer than 300 discs or don't want to bother with a week of Primera ripping in 20-disc increments, try Ripshark with its standard 99-cents-per-platter ripping fee.

Shipping is free because Ripshark sends "RipKit" with pre-paid postage. Your CDs are insured at \$10 each. You get your digital files on archival DVDs at no extra cost (you have to buy your own DVDs for archiving if using the Primera ripper). And those files are properly tagged with song, album and artist info.

## FOAM ROCKS

Like many iPod users, I've come to hate the generic white earbuds Apple packages with its players. The buds won't stay in my ears and sound awful. Both problems are easy to fix.

I have previously written about hard-plastic add-ons for Apple's earbuds. Those pieces fit only one user's ear canals, meaning they're incredibly comfortable, and they dramatically enhance the quality of sound coming from iPod buds.

You can be fitted for the plastic add-ons at audiology clinics, and the pieces get made elsewhere — often at Starkey Laboratories, which is also known for its hearing aids. You get to pick your earpiece colors or color patterns.

But in testing those custom-molded earpieces, I've discovered a few problems.

They aren't very good in windy places because they don't form a tight seal in the ear canal — wind noise will sometimes drown out your iPod tunes. And their soft-plastic cups meant to grip Apple's earbuds have a tendency to stretch over time, which means the buds will keep falling out. This is annoying.

So, I recently took a closer look at Hearing Components' foam tips, which are available in versions for earbuds from a wide variety of makers. If you use regular Apple earbuds, for instance, the foam tips go onto hard-plastic cups that fit over the buds. With most other earbuds, the foam tips go on directly (no cups).

This "Comply" foam, which originated in 3M laboratories, is remarkable. It squishes easily for insertion into the ear, yet pops back again and again. It is stiff while outside the ear, but becomes ultrasoft when exposed to ear-canal heat. And, unlike the hard-plastic

**Primera Technology rents out a robotic CD ripper that makes short work of big disc-digitizing jobs.**



## MORE INFO

- **Primera's Bravo rentals**  
[primera.com/bravorental.html](http://primera.com/bravorental.html)
- **Ripshark**  
[ripshark.com](http://ripshark.com)
- **Comply foam products**  
[complyfoam.com](http://complyfoam.com)
- **Starkey music gear**  
[xrl.us/starkeymusic](http://xrl.us/starkeymusic)

**Hearing Components offers Comply foam eartips for use with Apple earbuds and other brands.**



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