

# *Biting the Hand:* **A Compilation of the Columns to Date**

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## **1 The 1997 Columns**

*Biting the Hand was intended to be a monthly or quarterly digest, to give me plenty of time to write thoughtfully and completely.*

*As it turned out, I had something to say about the insanity of the industry most every week (well, every day, actually, but I was trying not to overload myself or the audience). What developed was the posting of a major column or two each week, with subsequent updates tacked on weeks or months later, as needed. I also started adding brief articles of 200 to 300 words called Short Takes about four days per week; they were commentary based on daily game industry news of note.*

*This led to a pretty disorganized Web site, which I continually tried to shape up and make easier and faster to access the information I posted. In the middle of the 1997 volume of columns, Bridgette Patrovsky closed down the experimental GamerGals Web site and opened Gamebytes, which she used to test new Web technology as it appeared on the scene. We transferred the columns over and, in the process, cleaned up and formalized both the format and the frequency of postings to every three days.*

*Many columns had two or more updates, sometimes months apart. Instead of listing the updates to the 1997 columns separately in chronological order of posting, which would have been confusing as all get-out for a book format, I have consolidated each update at the end of the relevant column.*

## ***1.1 Issue 1: April 1997***

Why name a column Biting The Hand, as in "biting the hand that feeds you?" Why write such a column at all?

I'm a cantankerous sort; if I see something that needs correcting, is in the process of being covered up or being allowed to die from neglect, I speak up. Interestingly, doing that has a way of creating trouble for me. In the words of John Taylor, President of Kesmai/Aries Corporation, who was an uninvolved observer to such an incident on [GEnie](#) a few years back, "Mulligan, you told that 'truth stuff' again; why are you surprised you're in trouble?"

Insiders aren't writing much about the *real* problems of the Internet/Online games industry and, if we're going to solve those problems in a timely, sane manner, they need to be discussed openly. Ask anyone who knows me; I've no fear of doing *that*. I always seem to be dunking myself in hot water with the naive notion that company executives want to hear the unvarnished version of what's happening. You'd think experience would teach me to keep my head down. As the old Croat proverb says, "Tell the truth, then depart quickly."

So, no doubt, some will consider the frank talk in these writings as biting the hand of the industry that has fed me for the past eleven years. It has been my sheer luck and privilege to be on the forefront of new developments in online and computer gaming and help make them happen, starting at [GEnie](#) in 1986, then [AOL](#), then [GEnie](#) again, [Interplay](#), [Engage Games Online](#)... Now I'm an independent consultant, giving game and entertainment companies advice on how to make a profit in the business, and being paid pretty well for the honor of having my advice ignored nine times out of ten. There is a *lot* more I can talk about these days, now that I don't have to worry about being fired for my impertinence. Of course, the phone may stop ringing and contracts may stop coming...

But I love this industry; after playing my first online game in 1986 (*Stellar Warrior* from [Kesmai](#), for the trivia minded in the audience), I dumped a moderately successful acting career overnight and never looked back. I want the whole industry to thrive and grow, so we all have more compelling, interesting, just plain cool online games to play. It's worth the risk of losing a few contracts to help make that happen.

And it won't all be bad. I'll talk about the good things, too. For example:

### **1.1.1 ACTIVISION??? WHO DA THUNK IT?**

Not too many years back, [Activision](#) was bankrupt, on the skids and the joke of the industry. Business was so bad, they were offering to pay off debtors with office equipment. Then Bobby Kotick bought the company and things actually got worse for a while. It seemed like Bobby was intent on making every mistake in the book and most of us, me included, wrote them off as soon to be just another appetizer in the shark-infested waters of computer gaming.

Boy, were we wrong! Bobby learned about the industry, patiently fixed what was broken with his company and hired some key people to help build Activision back into a legitimate company. In the last year alone, they have:

- Announced 112% growth in revenue from last year, from \$17.5 million to \$31.3 million;
- Cut a deal with mega-star Bruce Willis to star in Apocalypse, the first Hollywood personality of that magnitude to star in a CD-ROM game;
- Acquired a long term, exclusive license to Target Games' popular Heavy Gear RPG to replace the Mechwarrior series;
- Acquired an equity interest in Titanic, the small Texas company developing Netstorm, one of the most truly innovative online games I've seen in years;
- Taken their first steps toward making the Internet and online games a viable market for the company with Mech-Net and deals with several Internet game aggregators.

The turn-around is astounding. In a year when almost every other computer game company laid off employees and scaled back operations, Activision sprinted forward. They have to be considered the Computer Game Company Of The Year.

And remember I said Bobby Kotick hired some key people? One of them was Mitch Lasky, brought in last year to be Vice President of Activision's business development activities. Mitch has been a fixture in Hollywood for years, quietly cutting interesting deals for studios. He's also one those people who 'get it' about online games, and there are darn few such people in our industry. I suspect Mitch is responsible for some of these deals and, if so, Activision got a great deal when they hired him, no matter what he's paid. Call Mitch Lasky the MVP of Company of the Year. And kudos to Bobby Kotick for proving all of us cynics wrong and making us eat crow.

Pass the salt, Bobby; this tastes horrible!

### **1.1.2 AMERICA ONLINE: WILL YOU BE PAYING MORE FOR GAMES?**

Unless you've been living in a cave, you know about AOL's switch from hourly fees to flat rate monthly pricing of \$19.95. You also know that it has been an utter disaster, creating a brand new, temporary market for class actions suits. Some days, it really pays to be a lawyer.

AOL claims they are as surprised as everyone else at the problems, that even their most aggressive projections on usage spikes didn't predict the current mess. Something about those protestations just doesn't wash with me and I'm sure you picked up on it, too. The plain fact of the matter is, if anyone should have known, *it was AOL*.

Consider: These are some of the most experienced online professionals in the world, having been in business since 1985. They have working for them, in senior management positions, professionals formerly with other online services that experimented with flat rates (GEnie and Prodigy). And they have the public example of the extreme subscriber usage patterns of the larger flat rate Internet Service Providers, such as Netcom and Concentric.

All of that example and experience specifically points out that, under a flat rate plan, you need to be able to simultaneously host, *at minimum*, five percent of your total subscriber base. Ten percent capability would not be too much, but anything less than 5% is guaranteed to be an access nightmare, punctuated by the lonely buzz of a busy signal. This isn't news; this is gospel, known to anyone who has worked in the industry longer than a year or two.

Even under the old hourly charge plan, I would still get the occasional busy signal trying to call AOL's access numbers in Los Angeles. I always reported it; all online services encourage such reports and it's the best mechanism any online service has for knowing where to add modems. Such reports should have been their first clue.

To paraphrase The X-Files: The truth was out there. Anyone able to do simple addition and division could have figured it out, which is why I'm having trouble swallowing AOL's "golly gee, what a surprise!" statements.

And it's going to be a while before AOL licks the problem. By the time they finish the heavily-publicized \$350 million upgrade plan to 350,000 modems, sometime later this year, they still won't have enough access nodes to service 5% of *today's* subscriber base. Users coming in over TCP/IP connections at work and school will pick up some of the slack, but it is still going to be bad in the larger markets for some time to come. Unless AOL pulls a rabbit out of the hat - and if anyone can, its CEO Steve Case, who is arguably the brightest person in the online industry and compares favorably with the CEO of any company in any industry - AOL subscribers may be hearing the lonely cry of the busy signal for several years.

There is another point to all this flat rate nonsense most people seem to have missed: How is AOL going to pay developers for products? Specifically, how are online game developers going to recoup the costs of developing those games?

Online games are expensive to develop and host. They didn't used to be, but, just as happened in the computer game industry, customers demanded more art, more sound and more bells and whistles, so the average development team has risen from two guys in a dusty garage to six or ten people in a nice, clean office building. The cost of development has risen accordingly; whereas \$40,000 could buy you the likes of a Harpoon Online in 1991, it wouldn't even buy you

Multiplayer Tic-Tac-Toe today. The average development cost seems to be about \$300,000 for an OK game and \$700,000 to \$1 million for a high-end, online-only hit.

That doesn't count the cost of hardware to host the game, nor people to watch the hardware 24 hours a day and fix problems as they develop, as they always do. Those costs can add another few hundred thousand a year on top of development costs, especially for very popular games.

(There is a very vocal faction of gamers on the Internet that complains they shouldn't have to pay any fee at all for such games. After all, they say, aren't the MUDs - Multi-User Dungeons or Dimensions - free?

(These people always seem to ignore the fact that, although the college students who program the MUDs donate their time for the pure love of it, someone has to pay for the equipment the games run on and the telephone lines to access that equipment. Generally, that someone is the student's university. If the Free MUDders could do simple arithmetic, they'd find that a very popular free MUD can cost the host university as much as \$10,000 a month.

(University administrators *can* do math, however, which is why very popular free MUDs have to find new homes every three or four months.) ([www.mudconnector.com](http://www.mudconnector.com) has 100's of these free muds listed. The list is often out of date as sites move frequently or close without warning.)

When online services billed customers by the hour, game developers received a cut of that action. Online gamers are notorious for ignoring the billing clock; if they like an online game, cost is immaterial to them. On AOL alone, a hit game of the likes of *Gemstone III* by Simutronics, *Air Warrior* by Kesmai/Aries and *Dragon's Gate* by Interworld Productions, could bring in millions of dollars of royalty revenue each year. In fact, AOL spent most of 1995 and 1996 courting big name computer game companies and the better online game developers, singing just that siren song of the millions to be made under the hourly charge plan.

And boy, did they bite! By some accounts, AOL signed up over fifty online games in 1996. Just the thought of having access to six million-plus customers (December, 1997: Now almost 10 million) had them salivating. Kesmai/Aries, developers of the popular *Air Warrior* and *Multiplayer BattleTech* games, recently announced topping one million billable hours for one month on AOL; [Simutronics](http://www.simutronics.com) immediately played Dueling Press Releases, announcing 1.4 million billable hours that same month (and isn't that turning into an amusing rivalry? Kesmai has long enjoyed a deserved reputation for excellence in online games and Simutronics has always felt they don't get the attention they deserve for their good works. They get downright surly about it sometimes. After this latest round, it wouldn't surprise me to see them challenge Kesmai to a Tag Team wrestling match at the local Armory. Have your tights pressed, guys.)

Imagine everyone's surprise when, after spending millions of dollars preparing games for AOL, that company announced the flat rate. Say what?

Understand: Game developers don't get a cut of the monthly fee. All their income projections were heavily based on that hourly fee. Now, they must be wondering how they are going to make back all that money they've spent, or even keep their companies alive during the transition.

That has to be scaring the bejazzuz out of the developers. Its interesting to note, however, that AOL is starting to spread the word that "premium pricing" will "likely" be instituted for some AOL products. The rumor is that premium pricing will be \$1.95 an hour. No one is saying what products will fall under such pricing.

But you figure it out: An online game requires more equipment and personnel to run than most any other type of online product. Under a flat rate pricing scheme, these products change from being profit centers to money-losers for the online service. If any type of product were a candidate for "premium" pricing, it s online games.

So start saving your pennies; you ll probably be needing them, if you plan on playing games on AOL.

**UPDATE: June, 1997.**

AOL Games did, indeed, announce premium pricing for games at the E3 computer gaming convention in Atlanta, to the tune of \$1.99 an hour. That s a lot of pennies. I ll go out on a limb here and predict that, when premium pricing goes into effect in July, usage of AOL Games will drop through the floor to less than 20% of the current levels.

AOL also announced that the eternally unprofitable ImagiNation Network will change names to WorldPlay and will become the prime connection for the Games Channel. Where this leaves Kesmai, Engage and Simutronics is unknown; however, as [WorldPlay](#) is a competitor to those worthies, I wouldn t be surprised to see at least one lawsuit.

**UPDATE: October, 1997.**

In a situation like this, I hate when I m right.

Not only did use of games on AOL drop through the floor, it didn t stop until it was within sight of the First Ring of Hades. Play hours are currently between 3% and 7% of the previous totals. The switch to flat rates, then re-switching back to hourly rates, has basically killed Engage (of which I was a founder and still have a soft spot for) and my as-yet unconfirmed guesstimate on the drop of Kesmai s AOL royalty revenues is from approximately \$6 million a year to less than \$400,000. Simutronics has left AOL altogether to run a flat-rate site on the Web and claims over 20,000 subscriptions already, which wouldn t surprise me greatly; *GemStone III* ([www.simutronics.com](#)) had a pretty large following on AOL. Still, a Web site has to bring in around 100,000 subscriptions a month to allow for growth and new product development; if Simutronics can t achieve that, they ll just be another small shop making OK money on the Net.

And the first lawsuit is already in: Kesmai has sued AOL for \$1 billion dollars, claiming everything from breach of contract to abusing a de facto monopoly position with anti-competitive practices, ie: predatory pricing and requiring them to be serviced by WorldPlay, a competitor that, incidentally, is wholly owned by AOL. The suit also seeks to stop the announced acquisition of [CompuServe](#) by AOL.

As Kesmai's parent is the incredibly wealthy News Corporation, this suit must be of some concern to AOL. Mr. Murdoch's empire has access to as many, if not more, lawyers than AOL. I see three possibilities here:

- AOL settles with Kesmai out of court for cash and prizes, meaning Kesmai gets a few million dollars and equal billing with WorldPlay;
- The suit goes to trial and AOL loses. This would be a disastrous result for them, and not just because the money damages are liable to be high; it would provide judicial notice of a de facto AOL monopoly status. This would require them to live under a more stringent set of rules and make them fair game for lots of other lawsuits. And they haven't made many friends in the industry lately; their good will factor is kind of low right now. Like, almost non-existent with computer and online game developers;
- The suit goes to trial and AOL wins. In which case, we probably won't see very many compelling persistent worlds on AOL for a while, as WorldPlay's leadership seems to lean toward the gin and bridge crowd. It would also probably be the demise of Kesmai, and several smaller developers, too.

If I had to make a choice today, I'd say Possibility 1, out of court settlement, is the most likely result; it really depends on how ticked off Kesmai is. All other considerations aside, I'm not sure AOL wants to chance losing in court, but it really depends on the strength of Kesmai's case and we won't know that until more information is filed with the court. We won't have to wait long for a resolution to the suit; it was filed in Virginia, a state famous for the Rocket Docket, which requires suits to be resolved within one year of the filing date.

I predict that 1998 is going to be a very interesting year for Kesmai and AOL Games. I wonder if Lawrence Schick, AOL Games' top dog, has an ulcer yet?

### **1.1.3 LATENCY: NO LONGER AN ISSUE**

Why is latency no longer an issue, you ask? It's now a non-issue in the same way that our \$5 trillion national debt became a non-issue in the last election; no one can do anything about it, so they just stopped talking about it.

For the uninformed, latency is the time it takes for a bit of data to travel from the user's modem to a host computer, and for the response from the host to make the return trip. For home modem users, there are no average latency rates on the Internet; it can be anything from 120 milliseconds (slightly more than 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a second) to several seconds. And it's not very predictable; it can be 120 ms on one pass and 2 seconds on the next.

Latency rates are important to Internet gamers, especially for those who love 3D actions games such as *Quake* and *Duke Nuke em*. The higher the latency, the worse the game play. For an action game, 200 ms is pushing the envelope of good play; 500 ms (1/2 a second) makes it impossible to really enjoy playing.

It used to be standard practice for Internet gaming companies to lure investors and customers with claims that their service would reliably have latency rates of 150 milliseconds or less. This elicited much derisive laughter from industry insiders, who knew that achieving reliable rates of even 500 ms would be noteworthy and hitting 250 ms reliably would be a major miracle, on par with electing an honest politician.

That didn't deter the likes of [TEN](#)° and [MPath](#), however, who showed more optimism than common sense in making those claims. I know the founders at both companies and there was no hanky-panky in those claims, by the way. They understood the reason that latencies of one second or more were standard on the Internet; most traffic is routed through multiple computers, as many as ten or more computers and routers per data trip. They honestly believed they could trim the latency way down, mostly by cutting deals to have preferred access with an Internet service provider.

Sadly, that turns out not to be the case. Let's all pull out a Number 2 pencil and do some more simple arithmetic:

The average modem or router adds between 30 ms and 80 ms of latency on each incoming and outgoing packet of data;

For a home modem user to send a bit of data to a remote computer and receive a response requires a minimum of four modem or router passes (From Joe User's modem to Host Modem/Router, then from Host Modem/Router back to Joe User);

That adds up to a *minimum* latency of 120 ms and a maximum of 320 ms, just on the best possible data route through modems and routers.

Even the average of those two figures, 220 ms, is pretty steep and would make playing Duke Nukem or Quake a shaky experience, at best. I'm not going to even try to estimate the latency added by the host computer; suffice it to say, there are so many ways to configure host computers, it would take the aforesaid miracle to cut the average latency below 250 ms, even in a closed loop such as TEN and MPath can offer customers.

And that experience has borne out the predictions of the nay-sayers. There are times when play in the action games on TEN and MPath is outstanding; most of the time, however, it isn't unusual to feel like you're watching a slide-show.

Thankfully, this is a problem that will be solved, in time. How much time? In following the dictates of Gresham's Law (ie: a prophet should never be too specific, lest she fail to leave enough room to weasel out later), I wouldn't count on the problem being solved in any less than five years and no more than fifteen. Not only does a lot more bandwidth have to be laid, in the form of fiber optic cable, we need a heck of a lot more DS3 switches built and installed, especially in California. Almost 80% of all Internet traffic originates, ends or passes through the California nodes. They had two DS3 switches in California, last time I looked; they need at least six, and preferably something more like ten.



TEN and MPath are kind of stuck with it for now, although each is moving to acquire games that are less low-latency dependent. In the meantime, some companies, such as [Kesmai](#), [ICI](#) (now I-Magic Online) and [Interworld Productions](#) (now Mythic Entertainment), continue to develop games correctly from the outset, by designing online/Internet products *around* the latency problem. Games such as *Air Warrior II*, *Multiplayer Battletech*, *Rolemaster: Magestorm*, *Warbirds* and *Descent II* are very tolerant of latency and tend to deliver a much more satisfying game experience than PC games with a quick LAN or TCP/IP fix tossed in. While TEN and MPath seem to get all the press, Kesmai, Interworld and I-Magic are companies to watch.

#### **1.1.4 PORTAL UPDATE: December, 1997**

TEN has announced it would entertain a buy-out offer, while loudly proclaiming it is quite satisfied with its results to date. Yeah, right; if they're so happy with the results, why do they want to sell? The plain fact is TEN has tossed something like \$30 million, by some estimates, into building a system stuck at about 30,000 paying users. They'd have spent less money and be in the same boat if they'd just sent \$500 checks to 30,000 people chosen at random.

Depending on the price, I don't see very many potential buyers. Only [CUC](#), [Sega](#), [Microsoft](#) and AOL have that kind of cash right now, and they've all got their own plans. [GT Interactive](#) might be a candidate, but they just pulled out of the merger with [Microprose](#) over concerns on profitability; can you imagine the damage to GT's stock price if they announced the acquisition of a money-sink like TEN?

The most common sense answer here is for TEN to merge with one or more other game services. [Engage Games Online](#) and Kesmai would be ideal; merging all three entities under Kesmai's News Corporation umbrella would create a major force in online gaming, for a variety of reasons:

Kesmai and TEN have the proven technical expertise to construct and manage an online service and online games;

All three have one or more exclusive, compelling products. Engage brings *Warcraft II*, *Descent* and the rest of Interplay's products, plus two nifty original titles, *Magestorm* and *Splatterball*, from independent developer Interworld Productions; Kesmai is a developer of some original, popular online titles, such as *Air Warrior*, *Harpoon* and *Multiplayer BattleTech*, as well as developing some Fox and Discovery titles, such as *Aliens Online*; TEN has a nifty exclusive for *AD&D: Dark Sun* from SSI and a bunch of hybrid CD-ROM titles. Taken as a whole, the 50+ products of all three services combined would offer a wide variety of games for all markets;

All three have good Network Operating Centers (NOCs) with plenty of incoming bandwidth. This would allow them to distribute the load between sites on both coasts and cut back on the worst of the latency problems. Use of all three NOCs would also expand the number of simultaneous users the new service could handle.

It ll never happen, of course. The problem of how to value the investment equity of each of the three, and who gets how much equity in the new entity, is probably not solvable; the branding arguments alone would probably kill the deal. Think about it: TEN is leveraged many different ways to many different investors and they d all be clamoring for some ROI, Engage has at least two investors and Kesmai has News Corp., the 800 pound gorilla, as a parent. Trying to get all these people to agree on the shape of the negotiating table is probably impossible, much less anything substantive, like surviving and making back some of the investment. And I don t even want to talk about the egos involved.

But it s the Christmas season, a time of miracles, so let s play a little game and imagine that senior management and the Boards of all three were able to set aside conventional business wisdom (which got them into this fix in the first place) and realize that:

A lot of money has been spent and is lost, period, and;

Maybe a merger could actually rescue the situation and increase the chances of an eventual ROI.

Under those conditions, they d all be smart to:

Pool all available contracts, money and personnel resources into one entity;

Each take an equal 1/3 equity share of the new entity;

Either let the powerful News Corporation lead with the Gamestorm brand, with Engage and TEN as niche sub-brands, or create a new *uber*Brand and make all three sub-brands to it, each sub-brand to service one or more niches;

Use TEN s front end software as the service access software;

Then, spend a couple months consolidating the various staffs. This would no doubt mean some layoffs as job duplication was eliminated. Total employee count among the three is around 110; the new entity would need maybe 80 to start, with heavy emphasis on running the NOCs, porting products to the platform and marketing. The infighting among senior executives to save their own necks would be amusing, to say the least; the battle would make Iwo Jima look like a high school girl s field hockey match.

Whatever the end results, as long as Gordon Walton is General Manager of the service and John Taylor is in charge of overall product development, the new company would survive and, I believe, thrive. Both are with Kesmai and they are two of the top five people in the industry. I m not sure who I d keep from TEN; everyone there does OK at what they do, but no superstars leap to mind. Maybe Greg Harper, to reprise his role in Business Development. At Engage, you would definitely want to keep techno-guru and designer Scott Hartsman, who *is* a superstar and will probably be one of the online game industry s first mega-stars. Beyond those folks, it probably doesn t matter much.

I wonder if it makes sense to them? It makes sense to me. It certainly makes more sense than going out of business.

## ***1.2 Issue 2: April-June, 1997***

I'm rather enjoying the reaction and comments to my first column, which range from "I didn't know that!" to "You'll never eat lunch in this town again, bitch!" In some later column, after I receive permission from the writers, I'll print some of the more interesting letters. They are revealing about the industry, to say the least.

I was going to discuss designing online/Internet-only games this time around, but there is just too much happening in the industry that needs to be discussed; I'll save that for next time. In keeping with the tone of the last column, let's start out with something good:

### **1.2.1 SSI: The Little Company That Could**

One of the true success stories of the computer games industry is Strategic Simulations, Inc., known by all simply as [SSI](#). They've been around for a long time; I bought my first SSI game, *Carrier Force*, in 1984. They went through some hard times a couple years back, almost folded, but managed to survive by being bought by Mindscape. Now they're better than ever, thanks to the unique creative talents of people like founder Joel Billings, Chuck Kroegel, Dan Cermak, Debbie Minardi and Bret Berry.

Although most gamers know them as the company that made [TSR](#)'s Advanced Dungeons and Dragons role-playing worlds into best-selling computer games, they started out as a wargame shop. They quickly developed a reputation as *the* computer wargame shop, were challenged briefly by [Microprose](#) in the early and mid-80s and won (Microprose decided to move on to simulations), then hit hard times with everyone else during the mid-80s doldrums. What saved them then was the TSR deal. I can remember the raised eyebrows when it was announced. I mean, *really*; role-playing games by *SSI*? What's the industry coming to? What's next, *Falcon: The Interactive Adventure*?

Let me be more specific: It was SSI's *execution* of the TSR RPGs that saved them. One thing the crew at SSI has always understood: It's the game experience that keeps 'em coming back for more. While roundly criticized for always being one or two steps behind the latest PC technology, the games sold and sold and sold. Why? Because they were great gaming experiences. Even the funky old Gold Box series; they may not have been pretty, but there was plenty of action, adventure and mind puzzles, just the sort of features role-players want. Contrast that with today's offerings, which emphasize twiddling with the interface over having a grand time, and it's easy to see why the games made millions.

Since becoming part of the [Mindscape](#) family in 1994, they have emerged once more as the premier computer wargame company. In an industry where it's a truism that wargames can't sell more than 30,000 units, *Panzer General* set a new standard. SSI doesn't talk about total sales,

but one of my friends there told me sales for the game were well over 50,000, *Panzer General II* is on track to beat those figures easily and that the *Steel Panthers* series was beating those marks. Now, no one talks about the limited wargame market for PCs; everyone is too busy trying to snag a piece of the action.

Personally, I've played all those games, plus *Age Of Rifles* and *Star General*; I can see why the numbers bar is being raised. These games are fun, simple to learn and play and almost infinitely flexible. And that's today's lesson: Truisms aren't, necessarily. If you concentrate on what makes a game compelling to the player, you can beat the marks.

SSI is also one of the few companies to make online gaming pay off handsomely. I first met the crew face-to-face while an Associate Producer at AOL back in 1988 - yes, AOL existed before they started the helicopter drops of floppy disks in the 90s. By writing a 24 page white paper on the game industry and the popularity of RPGs, Scott Gries and I managed to convince AOL management that we needed to have a massively multiplayer RPG online and that it should be an AD&D world. Negotiations with TSR and SSI began and viola! *Neverwinter Nights* was born.

AOL didn't pay much for the game; if I remember correctly, less than \$50,000 in advances were paid. That means SSI had to take a chance, because it probably cost them twice that to re-develop the Gold Box series for online play. It was a good risk; I can't reveal recent official figures, due to a non-disclosure agreement, but I was told by a reliable source with whom I'm not non-disclosed that the game grossed over \$5 million dollars in 1994. And use of the game was up in 1995 and 1996. Not bad for a game that is eight years old.

There's one other thing I want to say about SSI, before we move on. This is the nicest, most honorable crew in the industry. I say this after knowing most of them professionally for nearly 10 years. You'll never hear that SSI cheated anyone, bad-mouthed anyone or acted in anything other than an ethical, moral manner toward a developer, employee or professional associate. If you think this is the usual state of affairs in the computer games/online industry, you haven't been in it very long.

Which is probably why developers that worked with SSI ten years ago are still working with them, even though they could certainly get more money elsewhere. Another lesson for the industry: You don't have to be a shark or a bastard-on-wheels to achieve success. Just ask the gang at SSI.

## **1.2.2 CompuServe: The Big Company That Couldn't**

Oh, my, where to start? Poor [CompuServe](#)! Their stock value has slid from nearly \$30 to under \$10 a share in a less than a year, respected CEO Bob Massey has become a casualty and left, the quarterly losses keep mounting, morale is at an all-time low and they've shut down their family-oriented service, WOW! And now, they are on the auction block; CIS is seeking a buyer and rumors are flying that AOL is in talks to be that buyer. I've been receiving resumes from current CIS employees via email for weeks.

When I first entered the online industry in 1985, CompuServe (CIS) was the 800 pound gorilla. After all, they had almost 250,000 subscribers, compared to The Source's 30,000. AOL's Commodore 64 service QuantumLink and GENie had barely launched, and Delphi, The Well, Byte and People-Link were hardly blips on the screen. There were *maybe* 500,000 people worldwide who used commercial online services. They also had some very cool games, most notably *Islands of Kesmai*, *Mega Wars III* and *British Legends* (a subset of Richard Bartles' and Roy Trubshaw's [MUD II](#), the original online game).

CIS started out as a business service, linking companies and their employees to databases and information. Somewhere along the line, someone at CIS realized that all that hardware and software wasn't being used in the evening or weekend hours. Since nature abhors a vacuum and CFOs abhor letting one penny go by without leaving their fingerprint on it, it was decided to offer a consumer service during those hours and rake in some extra cash. For all you millions who don't realize it, this is where chat, massive software libraries and message forums came into vogue. Others had done it before, and sometimes better, but CIS made it all a popular phenomenon.

The cost to the user was enormous; over \$12 an hour. CIS made money hand over fist. Before being spun off by H&R Block and going public, it was not unusual for them to record revenues of well over \$250 million a year. So why is the company ready to join the likes of The Source and People-Link in the Dead Online Service Pile?

The simple answer is: They forgot where they came from.

As a member of the large H&R Block corporation, CIS didn't have to stand alone. Profits, losses and expenditures were part of a larger corporate picture. They didn't have to act like a real business until they were spun off and *had* to stand alone.

The bad habits that the company learned while operating as excess capacity of a larger corporate entity stuck with them and those habits have nearly killed them. While there has been recent improvement, the effects are lasting:

**Arrogance:** Until recently, CIS was the single most arrogant online service in the entire world, and in the running for Most Arrogant Company In The Known Universe. The attitude of the executives and staff was, "Hey, we're *CompuServe!* Sure, maybe AOL has more members *now*, but just wait. We're a *real* online service; the market will come around."

Due to that arrogance, content providers, potential content providers and customers (for Heaven's sake!) were treated like citizens of an occupied nation. I know content providers for CIS who, experiencing technical problems with their content, would call to get the problem rectified and be told it would take three weeks to fix. When it would be pointed out that three weeks was unacceptable, they were told, literally, "Tough. You're not a high enough priority." Customers were treated much the same. Horror stories about CIS customer service have abounded for years; no need to repeat the gory details here.

This type of attitude is not conducive to good business relations. When they were the only game in town, they got away with it. When GENie and AOL came along and actually treated content providers and customers like human beings, people started jumping ship. CIS pretty much ignored it. "Hey, let the losers go. We re *CompuServe!* They ll be back."

**Centralized Control:** CIS s management structure makes Stalinist Russia look like a libertarian paradise. No one below the rank of Vice President is allowed to make a decision of any consequence. Not even which products will go live on the service, after the contracts are signed. Since 1989, I ve had business dealings with every person below the rank of VP and supposedly in charge of games at CIS. Each of them have cut some fantastic content deals for games in the past. One of those deals was for *Falcon* from Spectrum Holobyte. According to then-CIS game manager Robin Nichols at the 1990 Computer Game Developer s Conference, the CIS games group played multiplayer *Falcon* every day at lunch in an internal Beta test. When I heard this, my blood ran cold; I was GENie s Games Product Manager at the time and I knew the incredibly popular *Falcon* had an excellent chance of taking market share away from *Air Warrior*, our premium game product.

I needn t have worried. In the span from 1988 until recently, only one new game, the incredibly poorly executed *Sniper!*, was made available on CIS. This, while the likes of *Gemstone III*, *Rebel Space*, *Air Warrior* and *Dragon s Gate* were going live on newcomers GENie, Prodigy and AOL. Why, you ask? CIS s senior management had:

**Skewed Priorities:** What the customers would pay for was far less important than the likes and dislikes of senior management. If a VP didn t have a personal interest in a product line or specific piece of content, it had small chance of ever seeing the light of day.

*Falcon* is a good example. The game would have made millions for CIS but, as the VP in charge couldn t have cared less about games, other products received the resources to actually go live to the customers. Real compelling stuff, like the Bee Keeper s Forum. This is not a joke. All 200+ professional beekeepers in the US got their exclusive-to-CompuServe forum, but the hundreds of thousands of gamers who bought *Falcon* had to eat cake. In the online world, this is the equivalent of Campbell s deciding not to ship Cream of Mushroom in favor of Road Apple Bisque. This syndrome goes hand in hand with the truly fatal flaw at CIS:

**Market Ignorance:** Weird as it sounds, CIS didn t have a clue about the changing nature of the market. In fact, they believed that they *made* the market. For years they didn t have to worry about it, because they didn t answer to shareholders or have to run the company like a real business. Their own prejudices, likes and dislikes were what mattered.

When they did start to get a clue, they jumped the wrong way. Still believing they were in a position to make the market, not just serve it, they began development on the late and completely unlamented *Worlds of Wonder!* WOW! s guiding principle was simple; it was to be a flat rate, graphically oriented service aimed at families with children. This service would compete head-on with AOL and others for the family/kids market.

On the face of it, not a bad idea; in execution, it was horrible. In a misguided attempt to differentiate the service, the restrictions on content were mind-boggling. Someone in management decided that, as this was to be a family service, no violent content could be allowed, especially *Quake* and similar ilk. OK, still not bad; if you're trying to set up a safe haven for parents who want to protect kids from extreme violence, that decision makes sense.

Until taken to the extreme: Chess, for example, was determined to be too violent for WOW! I was told this to my face by a CIS employee who, I am sure, would wish to remain anonymous and employed. Using that criteria, every game ever invented was too violent for WOW! No Rock-Paper-Scissors, no Tic-Tac-Toe. No, compelling content for WOW!, my friends, was *Good Housekeeping* and *Sunset* magazine and the like.

Extremism rarely works. I can admire an effort to make a safe haven, but there has to be a sense of proportion. Small wonder that WOW!'s unofficial motto was immediately branded by insiders as: "WOW! No sex, no violence and no customers." As it turned out, it should have been the official company motto; they managed to acquire less than 50,000 customers.

If the company has learned its lessons, there is still time to salvage it and succeed. After all, they claim to have 5 million customers worldwide; that's a heck of a subscriber base. And there is some reason to hope; CIS has recently signed deals with Kesmai and Engage Games Online to bring more cool games to service. If they all ever see the light of day, at least CIS will be in a position to compete.

All the above factors taken together, by the way, is the main reason you don't see a lot of industry professionals publicly lamenting CIS's imminent demise. They were so nasty on the way up, people are jostling to be first in line to kick them on their way down. I could sell raffle tickets, I tell ya. After all, they're *CompuServe*!

#### ***UPDATE: December, 1997***

AOL is, indeed, going to pick up CompuServe, in a complicated three-way deal in which UUnet's parent will buy all of CIS and the CIS network operations, then pass the consumer side of CIS and \$175 million in cash for AOL's ANS network.

This should add some 200,000+ modems to AOL's current 350,000 dial-in lines, while relieving them of the burden of owning and maintaining the dial-in hardware. Out of all of this, AOL is the big winner and the consumer is the biggest loser. There will now be less competition to AOL, and competition is always a good thing. It looks like we're going to end up with only two online services of note, AOL and MSN.

Why do I not like this picture?

### **1.2.3 And Speaking Of Arrogance**

#### **The Computer Game Developer's Conference**

My first attendance at the Computer Game Developer s Conference (CGDC) was in 1989, at Con #3. It was the first not held in Chris Crawford s living room and a whopping 100 some-odd designers, producers and wannabes attended; I was one of three from the online industry. It was a heady atmosphere, with a completely free exchange of information and advice among professionals. The speakers and roundtable leaders all had good track records in the industry and the talk was frank, sometimes brutal and intended to improve the quality of computer games at all companies.

It just kept getting better. Every attempt was made to follow Crawford s original dictum to keep the price under \$250. I spoke or served on panels at CGDC for the next five years and more and more people showed up to listen. Everyone was jazzed about doing online content. Along about 1994, the Con exploded, rising from about 600 attendees to over 2,000 in one year. We were all in Nirvana.

Unfortunately, in 1994 the [CGDC](#) also became politicized. Chris Crawford founded the CGDC as an organization dedicated to serving the little guys in the industry. As more and more people attended and more money accumulated each year in the CGDC bank account, some board members got greedy and forgot they agreed to serve without compensation. They started paying themselves. Pretty well, too: I was told by an insider they voted themselves \$12,000 each after the 1994 CGDC, over Crawford s vehement objections. Not bad for a couple months work. Then came the scandalous episode in which the Board waited for Crawford to leave town on business, called a special and highly unusual Board meeting and kicked him out of the organization he created. They also stripped him of his stock. While a settlement was eventually reached and Chris, always the gentleman, departed with grace and honor, the incident left a bad taste in the mouths of many in the industry. The arrogance of the Board members was nettling, to say the least, and we all started to wonder what kind of monster had been created.

Then came the sellout to Miller-Freeman.

I m not going to delve into that whole sorry mess here. Simply, the Board allowed themselves to be paid good money to sell off the CGDC to become a moneymaking enterprise. It didn t help that the Board members and Miller-Freeman agreed to a non-disclosure clause in the contract that allowed/required the Board to not discuss what they were paid for the shares. The whole thing was one of the most shameful episodes in our young industry. Before we could even pull the knives out of our backs, the price of attending the Con had risen almost 300%, to over \$600. It has now risen from about \$250 for everything to \$1,195 for everything (unless you pay at the door, then it s \$1,495).

One of the reasons given for the dramatic price rise in attendance fees was to allow Miller-Freeman (and I don t even know if I m spelling it right; I couldn t find their name anywhere on the CGDC Web site) to expand the quality and quantity of the seminars, roundtables and panels.

This last weekend, I hit the CGDC Web site to peruse the schedule of classes and roundtables to be offered this year (and whose brilliant idea was it to rename the seminars to classes and the



presenters to instructors? ). After less than ten minutes, I ran screaming from my computer, brains slowly oozing from one ear. I could go on for pages, but will limit myself to this: The titles of the classes and roundtables look good. They are certainly intended to cover subjects of import and interest to the community. But they are being taught, by and large, by people with no business giving advice to anyone on these subjects. People with no experience in designing, developing, producing or managing computer and/or online games are teaching classes in you guessed it, designing, developing, producing or managing computer and/or online games. My immediate thought, directly after reading the descriptions and bios of the instructors of the first five classes that might be of interest to me, was "Who did these instructors pay off?"

Believe me, *someone* needs to be checking this out. Somehow, the wannabes have managed to create an alternate universe where they are to instruct the people who actually made this industry. In the case of online games, I've been designing, developing, producing or managing them for twelve years. People I *know* have never been involved in an online game, in any capacity, are instructors in online game-specific classes. For the privilege of standing in line, probably not being able to get a seat - last year, attendees quickly learned that to get in to a seminar, you had to start lining up 45 minutes ahead of time; quality, it would seem, doesn't include scheduling a large enough space - for this, I get to listen to instructors with no real-world experience in the subject they are "teaching?" For this, I'm expected to shell out over \$1,000?

There is a Board of Advisors to the CGDC. The members of the BoA are, on the whole, people with enough experience in the industry to weed out the fakers from the makers. I know several of the Board and one of them told me that these were the *best* of the speaking proposals they received. They received the usual spate of self-serving, "please give us free advertising" type proposals, which is only to be expected, and actually accepted one or two of them. One of the proposals was for a class in Spiritual Programming. No, really; I'm not making this up. I suppose we'd all gather around a Ouiji board and contact dead programmers. Or, if this is the best that the CGDC can attract in the way of speakers, wait a couple years and the industry will be able to speak with the dead programmers directly.

That Board person was a tad despondent about the whole thing.

Last November, as the deadline for proposals to speak at CGDC was nearing, I seriously considered proposing a seminar. I've spoken at the CGDC several times over the years and I usually enjoy it. However, I was up to my ears in contracts, last year's DevCon was a farce of over-crowding and April already looked to be booked up and I wasn't sure I'd even be able to attend, so I passed it up. Now, I'm glad I passed. This is going to sound harsh, cruel and arrogant, but I would be *embarrassed* to be associated with most of the CGDC's online speakers this year. Not people like Dani Berry and Eric Goldberg; they generally know what they are talking about and, more importantly, are honest enough to tell you when they don't know something.

But I promised to shoot straight in this column so, at the risk of offending lots of well-meaning and probably very nice people: The CGDC speaker line-up for the 1997 Con sucks on ice. If this

is the best we can do, at the premier computer game developer s convention, we re sunk as an industry.

Quality in Miller-Freeman s universe, it would seem, streams from quantity, a sort of "Have lots of tracks; it doesn t matter who is speaking because everyone s there to schmooze, anyway" theory of conventions. Of course, this ignores the old Garbage In, Garbage Out adage. I pity the poor fools who actually attend some of these classes. Their Garbage In quotients will be full to overflowing. If we can t count on quality speakers, why are we all spending the exorbitant sums Miller-Freeman demands for this conference? Maybe it s time for a little competition to the CGDC; at the very least, that would make them sit up and take notice.

When it comes to the CGDC, the only thing you can count on is the last two lines of promotion text on their main Web page at [www.cdgc.com](http://www.cdgc.com). They were talking about attendance, but the text is oh, so appropriate. Those two lines are:

"Registration fees go up with each passing minute."

and

"And the CGDC will sell out!"

### ***UPDATE: December, 1997***

At the [MPG 97](#) conference in San Francisco last September, where I hosted a seminar and sat on a panel concerning the future of online games, a very nice person associated with the CGDC approached me during a break and asked if I wanted to speak at the 1998 conference in Long Beach, CA. To be perfectly fair, I asked her if she d read this column. She hadn t, so I directed her to the URL and told her that, after reading this, if she still wanted me to speak, I d be happy to oblige.

For some strange reason, I haven t heard from her. Go figure.

## ***1.3 Issue 3***

### **1.3.1 December, 1997**

The computer and online gaming industries have taken a beating this past eighteen months. Several of the smaller companies have gone out of business, several large corporations, such as GTE, closed down their game divisions, GameTek just declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy, GT Interactive canceled its planned merger with Spectrum Holobyte/Microprose after watching it s value plunge on the announcement. It has all been very depressing to watch.

On the bright side of things, such a shaking out was inevitable and the good news is that it came earlier than expected. Most of the weak sisters are gone, although we can expect more consolidation, and the industry is set for an upturn. There are going to be fewer games

competing for limited shelf space, which means most games will have longer than three weeks to gain an audience. As many innovative games are developed by small companies with limited budgets, this is a good thing. The way the competition for shelf space is (some 5,000 products annually competing for 300 spaces), if *Myst* were debuted today, it probably wouldn't stay on the shelves long enough to gain a following.

Personally, I think this Christmas selling season will be somewhat moribund, but the 1998 season should be pretty good and 1999's will probably be a true record setter. Any developer or publisher that can hang on through the 1998 selling season will probably do OK.

### **1.3.2 The Seidman Forums**

If you haven't been reading the exchange of information in Robert Seidman's Online Insider Talk forum on [WellEngaged](#), you most definitely should wander over and take a peak. A couple hundred of the online industry's best and brightest have been invited by Bob to participate as message posters, and the information and ideas being floated are incredible, humorous and jam-packed with value.

Whether you're in online games or work for the online/Internet division of your company in any capacity, it's definitely worth your time and trouble. The discussions regarding building online communities and the emerging business models on the Net are fascinating, to say the least, and both Halsey Minor's [Snap! Online](#) and Scott Kurnit's [The Mining Company](#) have taken polite beatings at the hands of the online experts.

Nothing is sacred here, so if you want to see some no-BS, hand's down opinionating on the future of the Internet and Online Services, slide on over to Seidman's place.

### **1.3.3 Quake II: So What?**

And over on said Insider Talk, one of the Seagate Web Development staff accused me of being an idealist. I found this rather humorous, mostly because I *am* an idealist, but the post she referred to was completely practical and just chock-full of depressing, realistic advice. The subject was online business models and I was being a pure realist about the need for companies to make money on the Net, and my belief that consumers would pay for the right added value. I am overly idealistic about one segment of the industry, though, and that's quality in games. To whit: I think we, as an industry, should and need to aspire to more than blood and guts. Rather than impel players to munch each other in fake combat, I believe we should compel them to something grander.

Fat chance. Look, I know the industry has to make money to survive, but we're definitely hurting if the most waited-for game of the year is yet another mindless shooter. It looked like there was hope for a while; more gamers were into strategy gaming, which at least requires some planning and rewards intelligence, much like Chess. However, the game making all the news this Christmas season is a sophomoric shooter which rewards not intelligence and creativity, but

bad attitude and an ability to twitch faster than your opponent. Oh, yes: It also has Net connection ability, so you can take your bad attitude world-wide.

Yes, I'm talking about [Quake II](#). Yes, I'm apostate and will probably be burned at the stake for my heresy. Reserve your front row seat early.

Business reality no doubt dictates at least some of this. I suppose it was inevitable that, as PCs became ubiquitous, the game software would devolve into larger niches that appealed to the lowest common denominator, all the better to sell more units. That's Quake, at its base concept: The PC equivalent of the television console action game. id Software's *Wolfenstein* and *Doom* started it all, and *Quake* and *Quake II* continue it. It's homogenized, simple gameplay, Rock, Paper, Scissors at it's finest; shotgun beats axe, nailgun beats shotgun. Nobody does this better than id. Many try, and 3D Realms' *Duke Nukem* and Interplay/Parallax's *Descent* come close, but id is still #1 on the Hit Parade.

For all the ballyhoo, however, - At least six separate articles in one week on [Gamecenter.com](#) alone; can you say "Desperate for advertising space?"-, there isn't anything startlingly new or innovative in QII. The most apparent change in the game is the object movement model, which now takes into account the speed and trajectory of the object when accelerating or decelerating. We've seen this model before, however; it is a pure-D ripoff from *Marathon* by Bungie. Pardon me; to apply the dictum of Microsoft's Steve Ballmer, they took Bungie's good idea and made it their great idea.

The real appeal of QII, as with it's predecessor, is the multiplayer aspect. There is something quite compelling in watching a head pop off a body and slam into the ground, knowing you've just fragged the human on the other end of the line. And the new object model will make the game seem to run more efficiently over the Internet by hiding lags as players slip and slide over the terrain. QII will no doubt sell as well or better than Quake I, and the multiplayer experience will be better. We'll have blood-soaked copper from here to Tibet in just a few days. In truth, QII is more a cash cow than innovative game, in much the same manner as was [Blizzard's Warcraft II](#) (and notice how I'm making friends all over the industry?).

But...but...I mean, can't we do *better* than this? While the kids of the universe run around on the Internet, blowing each others' heads off in full-color glory, where is the true innovation? Where's the thought behind the game play, thought that goes farther than just "Will this make it easier/cooler/gorier to destroy another player." Maybe I'm just jaded. Maybe *real* game and story designers, such as Dan Greenberg of *Star Control III*, *Al Qadim*, *Earth Explorer* and *Star Fleet Academy* fame, are too few and far between to make a lasting impact on the industry.

By the way, this is not yet another "Violence in games is bad, because it teaches our kids to be murdering bastards!" bitch and moan session. Violence is a part of the human animal, just as much as are the capacities to be kind, generous or know beauty. Trying to hide it, to pretend it doesn't exist, is just so much bushwa. It is most often paraded about at election times, when Congresspeople who haven't accomplished anything more than wasting our money need an emotional trigger to cadge votes. There will always be people who resort to violence because

actually thinking and relating to people hurts too much, and trying to teach kids to be pacifists isn't doing them any favors when they inevitably run up against one of these morons.

Maybe my idealism for compelling games that require more thought beyond pulling a trigger is too impractical; computer game companies have to make a profit to survive, after all, and if what the public wants is mindless idiocy, that's what they'll develop. But I can't help but think we can and must do better than QII and it's ilk, if we're to grow and thrive as an industry.

There is no doubt that I'm in the minority here. As far as the rest of the Known Universe is concerned, QII is the greatest creation since bedroom ceiling mirrors. And I can't really say I'm surprised: QII is easy to install, easy to learn and tough to master, three of the keys for a popular game. Those are three of the four factors that made video gaming a household enterprise, the fourth being cheap, easy to install hardware.

If we're lucky, maybe the PC side of the business will continue to imitate the console side and we'll have a return of the 1984 Cartridge Crash, which resulted in many companies going out of business, but also a return to quality over quantity in game design. The period 1985 to 1994 saw some of the most innovative, intriguing games in our history, games like *The Bard's Tale*, *Battle Chess*, *Battlehawks 1942*, the *Ultima* series, *Tetris*, *Harpoon*, et al. The Darwinian nature of the 1984 crash stripped the chaff from the industry and left us with quality people turning out quality products.

In the last three years, however, we've spent our time refining technology and capitalizing on brand names, not innovation and game design. The business model now is, "I don't need it good, I need it Tuesday!" This is *exactly* what happened to the cartridge market in 1984; so much crap got pushed onto the shelves, the consumers finally threw up their hands in disgust and stopped buying.

We're seeing some of that now. With hundreds of PC games being shipped annually, the top ten rack up 70-80% of the total retail sales. And is it any coincidence that, over the past eighteen months, all but two or three computer game publishers have either had layoffs or gone out of business altogether?

Will 1998 be the year of The Great PC Games Crash?

#### **1.3.4 Martin Cirulis: Columnist Of The Year**

Martin Cirulis is a columnist for Computer Gaming World. He writes the end piece to each issue, entitled "[What's The Deal?](#)", in which he gets to harp on whatever pet peeve of the moment strikes him. Before I begin extolling his virtues, let me just say this about "What's The Deal?": I usually hate it. No, hate is too strong a word; generally I find it not really worth my while. Maybe I just miss Johnny Wilson's Rumor Bag, which I loved and which the column replaced. Or maybe I'm just jealous, because he gets paid for a gig we'd all like to have.

Whatever. Usually, I read the first two paragraphs and move on. Not the October issue, however. Mr. Cirulis' column that month had my eyes riveted to the page and made me proud to be in the industry. That one column gains him my nomination for Game Columnist Of The Year.

What was the subject of this column, you ask? An insipid little number called *Postal*.

In case you haven't heard of it, *Postal* is an action/shooter in which the main character goes psychotic and begins a killing rampage. It is modeled on real-life incidents we've all seen on the news. In the words of Vince Desi, the head of Running With Scissors, "We made a game that we'd like to play ourselves, a game where you don't shoot at aliens or look for some dragon's balls."

(Interestingly, Running With Scissors is a wholly owned subsidiary of a going-nowhere company that specializes in edutainment. They formerly did some work for Jim Henson's Muppets enterprise. What did they call it, I wonder? Kermit Date-Rapes Miss Piggy?)

Naturally, this all received plenty of media notice, as was the intention. More disturbing to me, however, was that online game news sites, such as Next Generation, actually, seriously reviewed it, as if it were more than just a cynical marketing ploy. To read those sites, you'd think there was nothing out of the ordinary here, just a bloodier than usual game.

Such silly gutlessness was not the choice of Mr. Cirulis. Out of the entire game press, only he and his bosses at CGW took such a public stand. Rather than quail behind loud exclamations of "1<sup>st</sup> Amendment! Their right to be tasteless!", he called them the mindless, cynical bastards they are; he stood up and was counted. Examine some choice clips from his column:

"Another company is scared that their game is going to make about as much of a splash as a turd thrown into the Atlantic, so they decide some controversy will take the place of talent... and the mainstream press falls for it hook, line, and sinker."

"It has all the spontaneity and creativity of walking into a school yard and picking out the kid who's just small enough for you to safely push down in the mud, just so all your friends think you are tough."

"And for every attack on their blindly repugnant behavior, their defense will be the cliché, "Hey Man, you're just being Politically Correct! We're just saying what we think is funny. We're rebels, man!" What utter and complete CRAP!"

"Gee, why doesn't the Scissors bunch come out with Genocide: The Home Game, Kickboxing the Blind or Custer's Rapin' Rampage? (Those of us with long arcade memories might wince over that last one.) You want to know why? Because the groups who suffered similar tragedies are too big and powerful to be laughed at, and Scissors would have its little ass kicked all over the place."

"Are other creatively bankrupt goons going to try this routine every time they feel the need to make a media splash? Without a doubt. Are a thousand-odd unfortunate people going to feel like they have been kicked hard in the gut by these cretins? Sadly, yes."

Worms without a conscience like the Running With Scissors crowd will come and go in this industry, and we'll see more tasteless, heartless, cruel *Postals*. Columns such as Martin Cirulis' happen only occasionally, mores the pity; would that all of the game press was willing to stand up and be counted.

Mr. Cirulis, in the words of Jean-Luc Picard:

"Nicely done."

###