

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

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1 1998 Columns

1.1 Online Gaming: Why Won't They Come?

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In his regular Gamasutra column, analyst Paul Palumbo recently crafted a must-read article titled [Online vs. Retail Game Title Economics](#). As a 12-year executive in both the online and computer game industries, co-founder of Interplay's Online Gaming division and a founder of Engage Games Online, I tell you it is the best review of the current online games business situation I have read. Every business development person in the industry should read that article.

In the article, Mr. Palumbo wrote the following:

"Nevertheless, it's still a question of volume for online games as well. 3DO's experience with

Meridian 59 revealed that while there is a dedicated group of online gamers, their numbers are small. Meridian 59 averaged about 10,000 players per month. That was enough to cover ongoing production and maintenance, but not enough to reach full development payback.

Both retail and online markets have their problems: Retail has too many products chasing too little retail shelf space. Online titles are chasing too few initiated users and investors have yet to warm up to the concept."

This is the one point in Mr. Palumbo's article that screams for more detail. It's not a matter of the online gaming market being too small. By my most conservative estimate, there are at least 2.5 million hard-core gamers with access to the Internet and online services today. OK, that isn't the mega-millions everyone wants, but it is potentially \$300 million annually in subscription fees at the current standard of \$9.95 a month. That's not chicken feed, and the market is growing in the double-digits every year.

However, for-pay online game sites today still have real trouble scaring up more than 10,000 subscribers. The largest, Ultima Online (www.ea.origin.com), claims some 50,000 +, although that will certainly go down now that players actually have to pay for the service. Even non-pay sites such as the well-publicized and distributed Mplayer (www.mplayer.com) claim only 200,000 subscribers. Microsoft issued a press release on 2/18/98 claiming 1.1 million registered users for The Zone (www.zone.com) and 6,500 simultaneous users at peak hours. More interesting statistics for them to release, I think, would be the number of unique users per month (I'm a registered Zone subscriber, but I rarely drop in more than once every couple of months) and the number of paid subscriptions to their one premium game, Fighter Ace.

Which begs the question: We're building it, why aren't the gamers coming to play?

I tell you this up front: The \$9.95 standard pay-for-play fee is only an incidental reason. It is not the main reason people avoid online gaming sites. If it were, freebie service Mplayer would have far more than just 200,000 subscribers and the free section of The Zone would be looking at eight digit subscriber numbers. Gamers have shown in the past that they will pay fees as high as \$6 an hour for access to some games. Remember The Zone numbers in the paragraph above? Prior to December 1, 1996, AOL's Games Channel used to have similar simultaneous player numbers every night. And they charged \$2.95 an hour. So what is the reason the players aren't flocking?

It really all boils down to one thing:

Retail game publishers and most online game sites don't know diddly about online game management or customer service.

Players are looking for a safe place to play, one with a level playing field. If companies such as 3DO and Origin had done some basic market research before embarking on their online journey, they would have discovered one over-riding fact about online games: 90% of the work begins after initial development is finished and the game is deployed. Managing a multiplayer game correctly after the launch is the key to customer satisfaction and continued growth.

And boy! are they learning the hard way. Players expect added value for added costs, and that means proper game management. That doesn't mean just adding new features and game scenarios on a regular basis, which is something game companies know how to do. Far more important - and something very few developers or publishers understand - is having humans on hand to:

- A) Train the new players, and;
- B) Listen to and resolve problems as fast as possible.

The operative word above is 'resolve.' That implies the sysop is empowered to take action, and has the tools and authority to do so.

The Important Role of the SysOp

How many times have you seen it? A new player pops into being in an online game, fumbles around for a while, then leaves in frustration, never to return? In some games, players just hanging out are generally happy to help, but that's no guarantee of hands-on assistance to the new user.

That first five minutes of play is a critical time for an online game; the customer will make up his or her mind in that time whether or not to spend money on playing. If there is a sysop present to get new players started, the chances are good that they'll decide to play long term, and pay for the privilege. Or, in the words of online games expert Bridgette Patrovsky, "The first five minutes customers are in your game, they're interviewing you. If you don't make a good first impression, you're unlikely to get the 'job.'"

This is no secret; we've known this for over a decade. If you drop into *Gemstone III* (www.simutronics.com) or *Legends of Kesmai* (www.gamestorm.com), you have a very good chance of finding a sysop or game master available to help you. And I'm talking meaningful help here, not just a company stooge to tell you how to call customer service. Done correctly, it works like a charm; the new player gets started fast and has a good experience his first time out, and the company gets a new customer.

So why are 9 out of 10 online games not doing this? Look at who does this, and who doesn't. Online game developers such as Kesmai, Simutronics and Mythic Entertainment, who have been developing multiplayer games since before the over-hype of the industry, do this without thinking twice. Dilettantes like 3DO and Origin are fumbling around, trying to figure out what it means.

What Does It Mean?

There are always problems. This is a fact of life in online games. If it isn't a database bug destroying player characters or a bank bug ruining the economy and giving some players an unfair advantage, it's a personal conflict between two or more players or teams that erupts into a firestorm and disrupts play for everyone. Every online game is going to see these problems; how

they are dealt with, and whether they are dealt with in a timely manner, will separate the winners from the losers. Remember: 90% of the work for an online game comes after it is released.

Sysops are the caretakers and loremasters of the system. Or, put another way, they are the police, teachers, writers, construction and repair workers, entertainers, storytellers and, most of all, salespersons, of the system. Sysops online can answer questions and give information; if a player notices something going wrong with the game operation, or comes across a situation that cannot be otherwise dealt with in the context of role-playing, then any sysop on duty can be contacted immediately for assistance. When not addressing such issues, sysops are expected to keep the game fresh, exciting and new for the players and, when necessary, act as arbiters in player disputes.

But, first and foremost, the sysops are in the game for the players. As such they have - or should have - an enormous amount of responsibility.

So here's the secret. Here's how an online game developer or publisher can guarantee success for their product:

The single most important tool for that timely, effective customer service online is the trained, empowered, supported sysop.

Sysops are an online game's front line for customer service and retention. If sysops have some power and discretion, they can resolve problems on the fly and keep word of mouth about your product high. These problems can be something as simple as replacing a piece of game equipment a player lost due to a server crash or lag death, or as complex as acting as an adjudicator and bringing both sides in a personal conflict together to work it out. If the sysop has the tools to do these things, the authority to do them on his own discretion in a timely manner, and the training to help him make those decisions correctly, your customer base will get what it needs and be very happy, indeed.

Historically, word of mouth has accounted for over 90% of online game subscribers. A well-trained, motivated, empowered sysop crew won't just retain users and reduce churn by solving problems; the good word of mouth generated by their actions will actually draw in more customers, as players encourage their friends to join them.

The growth curve of multiplayer games supports this. Below are two charts, based on my direct knowledge of the growth and income rates of over fifteen online games, dating as far back as the initial years for such perennials as *Air Warrior*, *Neverwinter Nights* and *Gemstone III*. The first shows growth rates over the first year of a game's online life for properly managed games and the second for improperly managed games:

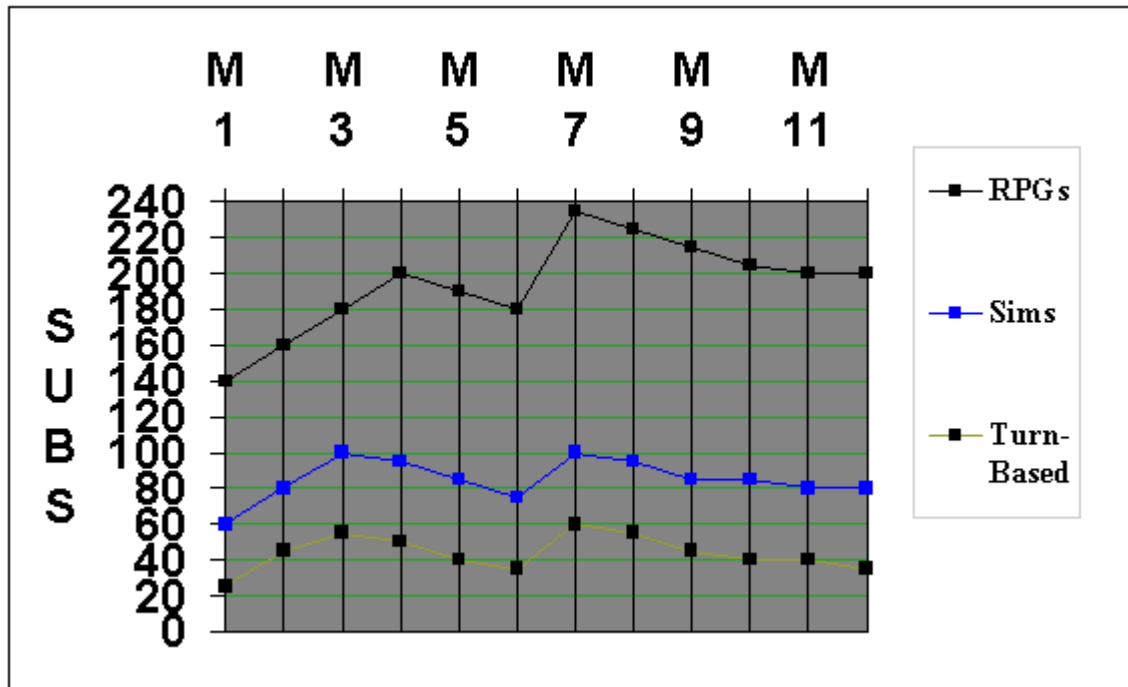


Figure 1: The SUBS numbers are a generalized rate to show proportions. For example, RPGs online generally do over twice the business of simulators. In a properly managed game, the initial subscription or monthly play growth curve spikes at about 4 months, then slowly churns off some users. By month 7, the effects of good word of mouth cause another subscription spike, and the churn rate reduces and finally plateaus to a predictable subscription rate.

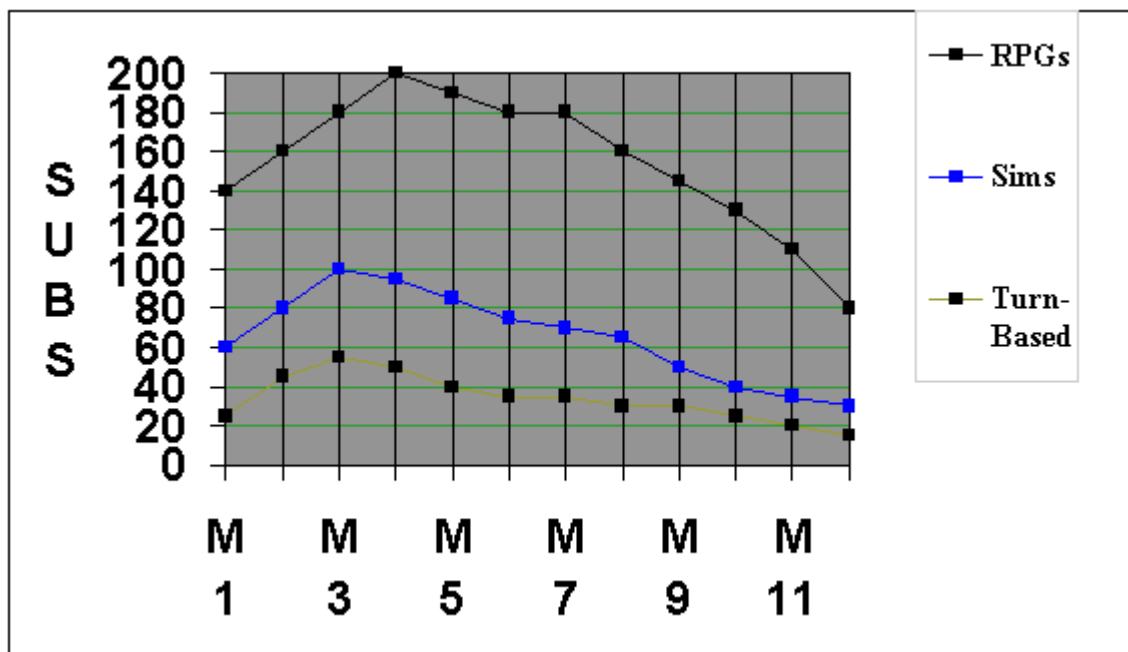


Figure 2: In improperly managed or unmanaged online games, the product will still experience the 'first flush' effect on launch, as users come to check it out. However, the effects of having no timely authority to

ameliorate the effects of bugs and inter-player conflicts begins to take it s toll by Month 4. Left unresolved, the curve continues to descend to well below income levels that will sustain the effort.

If you accept the charts as valid, it makes perfect sense to give your sysops the right administration tools, train them and give them the authority to help the players solve problems on the spot. The experience of games that have done this, including the popular *Gemstone III* by Simutronics and all of Kesmai's games, has been happy, satisfied customers and constant growth, meaning more income.

However, the role of the sysop is almost always lightly regarded by management, rarely supported by the Development team with tools and generally not empowered to effect change within the game or resolve difficulties. Without that support and power, all a sysop can really do is stand around and look stupid, which can make or break you when the manure hits the fan, as 3DO found out in *Meridian 59* and Origin is now discovering in *Ultima Online*.

In *M59*'s case, the 'Guardians' have never had any power; why they were even in the game is a mystery, unless it's so 3DO can say, "Hey, we have sysops!" The only power they have to solve problems is to encourage players to call Customer Service who, of course, also had no power to solve problems. Being so unempowered, when problems erupt, as when the male members of one Guild decided to drive a female player out of the game by holding a virtual gang rape in the public square, nothing was done by either the Guardians or CS. Heck, a Guardian stood in the square and watched the whole thing. The female player canceled her account, as did her seven friends, and they moved en mass to another game. This is not an unusual occurrence in this industry

Ultima Online is experiencing similar problems, for similar reasons. One of the biggest single complaints is the uselessness of the game masters. *UO* has hope, however; Rich Vogel, who used to be on the *Meridian 59* team and lobbied unsuccessfully for more Guardian powers there, is now in charge of *UO* for Origin. If they listen to him, he can fix what's wrong in *UO*.

Conclusion

In summary, any company delving into online games would be wise to do three things:

1. Recruit and train a whole corps of sysops, with an emphasis on solving problems for players;
2. Build the correct administrative tools to allow the sysops to do that job. At a minimum, they need to be able to add and remove game items from players, alter game stats and characteristics on the fly, lock out troublesome or unreasonable users and check account status on anyone;
3. Make sure your sysops and customers understand they have the authority and responsibility to deal with these issues.

If you do these things, they will come. If you don't, you'll lose your customers to those companies that will do them.

1.2 March to May, 1998

1.2.1 Ultima Online

It saddens me to see reporters writing about how "new," what a "grand experiment" [*Ultima Online*](#) is, how no one has ever done a game like this before. The hyperbole tossed at this one product has been incredible.

I shouldn't be surprised; most of the so-called journalists covering online games have exactly zero experience in the industry and still confuse CD-ROM Hybrids like *Quake* and *Command and Conquer* with online games. Even those who write with confidence, as if they knew what they were talking about, are pretty much pumping smoke like crazy. Developers of other massively multiplayer games (MMGs) must cringe to read the stories generated by these people. Its rather how an actor must feel, reading a flaming review of his/her performance by a reviewer who never acted, yet feels qualified to render an 'expert' opinion.

Of course, EA/Origin has a vested interest in promoting that view and works diligently to do it. In a letter dated April 15, by [Electronics Arts](#) senior vice president and general counsel Ruth A. Kennedy to George Schultz, the attorney for the plaintiffs in the suit against *UO*, is the line, "Ultima Online is a revolutionary product. The sheer size and complexity of the game alone is unmatched in the industry."

This is, of course, pure hogwash. The only thing "revolutionary" about *UO* as a massively multiplayer game is the amount of money and people thrown at the art and the graphic interface. Most everything else about the game - the size of the world, the features, the persistent world, most of the character classes, et al - can either be found in role-playing MMGs that have been around for years, or was tried and discarded years ago. Heck, the first true commercial MMGs went online some fourteen years ago and just about everything you can think of to try in such a game *has* been tried. In fact, ask any experienced MMG developer what matters more: size of the world or quality of the world? Sheer size has been tried, and it didn't work as well as making certain that the quality of the gaming experience for each player was good. You do need a certain amount of physical game space for players to move around in, but that isn't as important as making sure there is something fun and interesting to *do*.

The EA letter goes on to state, "This [suit] can only reduce the amount of efforts that will be spent on producing the games that the putative class members see in the future. Indeed, your proposed 'class action' will serve only to divert tens of thousands of dollars and a huge amount of company time to legal fees and litigation matters - time which could be better spent providing further maintenance and enhancements to the game."

Any merits of the suit aside, computer game publishers have gotten away with murder for years. This is an industry where it is the practice to ship product with known bugs and patch them later on. You can't even change publishers for better quality, because everyone does it. It is more important, apparently, to get the product on the shelf to keep the cash flow stable; we'll just fix those pesky bug things later. For all of EA/Origins' protestations, it can be said with relative

certainty that they made the game available and shipped the retail package to the shelf with the knowledge that bugs existed. They *always* exist; its generally accepted practice among publishers to ship with bugs. The only questions are how serious were they and were/are they fixable?

For them to now protest that they shouldn't be held accountable is, well... interesting. Look, I have no doubt Origin tried like heck to fix everything they could before the ship date. Unfortunately, errors and design flaws in MMGs have a far more immediate and lasting impact on the player, and tend to be more widely publicized. My question is, was there a company mandate to ship the product, regardless of the state of bug fixes, to catch as much of the Christmas '97 sales season as possible? (And don't you just love the veiled threat that legal action just might/maybe/perhaps cause them to cut back on support and maintenance of the game?) Origin's greatest success with *UO* has been to convince the general gaming press that something new and innovative has been done, instead of just another reinvention of the wheel. Of course, PR is one thing and execution is another. *UO*'s technical and customer service problems are well-known; no need to beat that dead horse here, except to say: If you're going to reinvent the wheel, the least you can do is make sure the darn thing will roll before you start selling it.

This applies to every game publisher trying to leverage company expertise in computer games into the online games arena. If Origin, 3DO, Microsoft, et al, wish to succeed in this industry, all they have to do is gain a sense - some scope, if you will - of the history of MMGs, understand that its a completely different market than standard computer games and that you have to do some things differently. Nearly every problem *UO* and 3DO's *Meridian 59* have experienced were also experienced by the pioneer games of the industry. Gold bugs, server crashes erasing characters, latency causing character deaths, players finding ways to duplicate items... these have all been seen in years past in similar games, such as *Islands of Kesmai*, *Dragon's Gate*, *Gemstone III* and *Kingdom of Drakkar*. They are common problems with common fixes. If the people in charge at Origin and 3DO had done some basic research, such as talking to or even hiring (and listening to!) people with real-world experience in designing, developing and managing MMGs, many of the well-publicized problems could have been avoided.

The first moral of this story is: Expertise in one industry does not automatically translate into success in another industry.

The second moral is: An online game isn't just a product, it is also a *service*.

1.2.2 Publisher Focus: Interplay

'Tis the season when computer game publishers tally the quarterly count. The after-Christmas sales numbers are pretty important, as they are still the largest single chunk of sales for publishers (30 to 60% of annual sales, depending on who you listen to). The top ten games of the year can seemingly break that trend with impunity but, for most games, the Christmas season is *it*, make-it-or-break-it time. By the end of March and running into April, most companies have received their cut of the take from the distributors for the final December sales, minus returns

and remainders, and have a pretty good idea of where they stand as they prepare to end their fiscal years.

Interplay Productions (www.interplay.com) probably had a darn fine season. Class AAA games *Star Fleet Academy* and *Fallout* did well, *Carmegeddon* continues to sell, *Redneck Rampage* remains a niche favorite with the "If I wanted to think, I wouldn't be playing *this* game!" crowd, *M.A.X.* did OK in it's category, and Interplay still leads the pack in making an extra buck off games by bundling titles with OEM vendors, such as Creative's SoundBlaster and CD-ROM drives. Scheduled for 1998 is *Freespace*, the latest in the *Descent* series, *To Die By The Sword*, a 3D sword-fighting game that looks very interesting, and an intriguing game I expect to be nominated for a Software Publisher's Association Codie Award, *Of Light and Darkness*. That one is being produced by one of Interplay's three ace Producers, Brian Christian (the other two being Jacob "Rusty" Buchert, the 'make it happen' genius behind *Descent* and *Star Fleet Academy* and Vince DeNardo, whose works include *Conquest of the New World* and *Castles II*. It used be four, but Tim Cain of *Fallout* left the company).

This may have been the season when Interplay broke upwards out of the middle of the Top Ten pack, in perception if not also in the financials. To be sure, it has been a few years late in coming due to massive delays in key projects, but some of the resulting games are incredible. *Fallout*, for example, has been named RPG of the Year by just about every authority in the Known Universe. And despite complaints from purists about *Wing Commander*-like flight models, *Star Fleet Academy*, based on the original Star Trek universe, is a tour d' force; the backstory by Dan Greenberg, et al (*Al Qadim*, *Star Control 3*) really kicks butt and programmer Jon Price's 3D engine is revolutionary.

Although I still have a soft spot in my heart for Interplay two years after leaving, the company isn't perfect. They are lagging in computer RPGs and Sports products, in spite of concentrated efforts to be a leader in those categories. CRPGs, in fact, is a category they helped create with *Wasteland* and the ground-breaking *Bard's Tale* series. Lately, only the incredible *Fallout*, largely produced, designed and engineered by superstar coder Tim Cain, removes some of the tarnish. Otherwise, the company's inhouse RPG development efforts are, well, mediocre. *Stonekeep* was marred by years of missed release dates and ended up short in the game-play department. The 4-going-on-5 year old *AD&D* license continues to languish in the DragonPlay division, with only a few so-so inhouse products such as *Dragon Dice* shipped to date (although *Baldur's Gate* by independent developer Bioware shows real promise for *that* company's future) and internal development projects continue to miss release date after release date. The VR Sports division is in a little better shape, although with projects developed for the division by independant development houses taking the lead.

Truly, Interplay's strength the last four years has been its ability to spot interesting new development houses and bring them along. This is where the bulk of their new product has come from. Gremlin has provided several products, including a couple nifty sports titles and a real-time strategy game; Parallax brought in the *Descent* series; the afore-mentioned Bioware provided *Baldur's Gate* and *Shattered Steel*; Triptych checks in with the very intriguing *Die By The Sword*. As long as Interplay can continue to spot and sign outside talent such as these, the company is in pretty good shape.

There have been rumors for the last 24 months that Interplay's founder and CEO, Brian Fargo, wants to take the company public with an IPO. Indeed, when I worked there, I was asked by investors two or three times a year when Brian would announce an IPO; everyone wanted a piece of it. Speculators will have to wait no more; such a move was recently announced by the company, with the intent to raise over \$70 million. Some of the money will be used to retire debt (over \$28 million, not including executive bonuses and other payments) and the rest, according to a press release by Interplay, will go mostly towards research and development.

There's no guarantee the offering will raise what Interplay wants, and computer game publisher stock prices in the past have had a distressing tendency to tank within a year or two after the IPO, as publishers run by game fanatics found out what it was like to live and die by quarterly earnings statements. The "Street" is quite unforgiving of companies that don't live up to expectations and few game publishers do, at the start. This is probably due to the nature of the industry, which is dependant on the ongoing creativity and ingenuity of the developers, the fact that missed release dates are the standard, not the exception, the fickle nature of the customers (who would have expected the original Warcraft to be such a hit at the height of Doom's popularity?) and the hit-driven nature of the industry, in which the top 10 or 15 games out of hundreds make the big bucks. There is definitely a learning curve in moving from private company to publicly-owned corporation.

There may be a different experience for Interplay, as they aren't totally dependant on shelf sales for income. The Interplay OEM, Inc. division, for example, is the industry leader in bundling games with hardware, and not just for Interplay; they bundle over 300 titles for the likes of LucasArts, Microprose, Virgin and Westwood and in the past has 'owned' as much as 45% of that market. Interplay also makes a dandy extra buck licensing properties in other media, such as cartoon shows and movies. These efforts to diversify the income stream stabilize the volatile nature of computer game publishing and may make the offering more attractive to investors.

Besides having three or four of the top Producers in the industry, Interplay also has a unique set of talents on Executive Row which investors should take a hard look at. I have great respect for CEO and founder Brian Fargo as an aggressive strategist/businessman, but, contrary to the cult of personality press releases you might read, no one man comes up with all the ideas or executes them. Some of the management team, who receive little or no press, have been instrumental in making Interplay the success it is today. Vice President of Business Development Phil Adam, VP of Sales Kim Motika, Executive VP and respected industry fixture Dick Lehrberg, COO Chuck Camps... Investors want to know who will do the work in the trenches and they check these things out; they will not find the above executives wanting.

Interplay rests on that thin edge between "big game publisher" and "BIG game publisher." The IPO may be a catalyst for movement; the question is, will that movement be up or down? Early indications say "Up," but it will be very interesting to see what happens with Interplay this rest of this year.

1.2.3 The 1998 Modem Mutant Awards

The time was, lo! these many years ago, that I would issue my annual awards to the online games industry each spring. It all started at [GENie](#) in 1990 as the Modem Mutant Awards, specifically for GENie sysops and developers. Later, the awards branched out to the industry as a whole, when I went independent in 1992. The awards themselves were meant to be amusing and instructive, and generally served that purpose.

(For pure entertainment, however, The Modem Mutant Awards never challenged the hysterically funny Academy of Game Science Awards, given annually to the board, computer and 'paper and pencil' game industry at the Origin game convention. The AGS awards include the highly coveted Wesson Handshake Award for oiliest person in the industry and the Refrigerator Magnet Award for the computer game most deserving of having its floppy disks pinned to a Norge with a magnet. Interestingly, they are nominated and awarded by people who look similar to, but are not, game industry professionals, led by someone who looks an awful lot like best-selling author and Game Hall of Fame inductee [Mike Stackpole](#).)

I laid off the gig a few years back due to a conflict of interest: I was an executive at an online games aggregator, so it would have been unseemly to judge my competitors too publicly. To mark the first anniversary of this column, I decided to once again go the ego-boo route and recreate my own awards for multiplayer games, good and less than good. While the awards will probably have all the impact of a feather on a rhinoceros (much like all those meaningless Best Of... Web site awards that keep popping up), at least I have the advantage of an understanding of the industry and the developers, and can explain the reasoning behind each award.

The intent of the new **Modem Maven** awards is to recognize excellence by developers, not the publishers, per se. While developers do receive some key technical and monetary assistance from publishers and aggregators, the thought and execution behind the games begins and ends with the people doing the design and coding. The intent of the **Modem Mutant** awards is not to slam anyone, but to be instructive to the industry as whole.

So without further ado: **The Modem Maven Awards**

Best Massively Multiplayer Game: Role-Playing

[*Darkness Falls*](#) by [Mythic Entertainment](#)

In an industry that is beginning to feature more graphics than actual game play, *Darkness Falls* is basically a text game with a simple graphic interface layered on top. In this case, simpler is better.

No, *Darkness Falls* doesn't have a CD full of graphics, like *Ultima Online*, or bunches of 3D death effects, like *Quake II*. What makes this game a winner is a dark, absorbing persistent world that isn't totally overshadowed by the graphics or mechanics of playing. The players can concentrate on the game play and interaction between each other, instead of messing with the interface or watching pretty pictures. It has all the features one would expect of a good RPG. In other words, this is a game with a *design*, not a piece of software hoping that a game will somehow mysteriously attach itself.

Honorable Mention

[Gemstone III](#) by [Simutronics Corp.](#)

Gemstone III was a very close second in this category. The venerable game has been around in one form or another since 1987 and has developed a unique following of loyal players in that time. While a graphic interface is available for the game, the true power of this product comes from the flexible text interface and the seemingly unlimited imagination of its players.

Best Massively Multiplayer Game: 1st Person Simulation

[Warbirds](#) by [I-Magic Online](#)

Warbirds began life a few years back when several *Air Warrior* players from the old GENie online service decided they wanted to do a flight combat simulation *their* way. They formed Interactive Creations, Inc. (ICI) and partnered with Domark to develop the ill-fated *Confirmed Kill*. Breaking away from Domark, they completed the game as *Warbirds*. They were bought out by Interactive Magic a couple years back and became part of I-Magic Online.

While similar in concept and game play to other online flight simulators, *Warbirds* has its own unique flavor and style, and a flight model that is every bit as good as any on the market. Recent improvements in the game, in beta testing now, will result in a new version being released soon (it may already be out). One of the strengths of *Warbirds* is that the developers really seem to listen to the players and incorporate their suggestions into the game, where feasible. Thus, the game tends to evolve and improve over time, one of the tests of a true MMG.

Honorable Mention

[Rolemaster: Magestorm](#) by [Mythic Entertainment](#)

This one gets an honorable mention, in part, for exactly the opposite reason this same company won in the role-playing category: The graphics are absolutely incredible. *Magestorm* is a fantasy shooter that features no hand-to-hand combat; all fighting is done by magic spells. Players select to build a character in one of three disciplines, each with it's own advantages and disadvantages, then side up in three teams for a free-for-all, with 40 to 60 players to an arena. The purpose of the fight is to destroy the Shrines of the other two sides; along the way, wading pools that increase the magical power of a side can be turned by standing in them long enough. The more pools turned to your side, the quicker your side's ability to cast spells regenerates. Naturally, a lot of combat takes place around these pools.

The interface is beautiful and intuitive, the offensive and defensive spell effects incredible without detracting from or slowing game play and the pace fast and furious without being overwhelming. The game is also flexible enough to allow for some interesting strategy and tactics, as teammates form 'hit squads' by abilities and rush to turn pools, blast Shrines or hunt down the opposition and prevent them from doing the same.

This is a far more satisfying experience than *Quake* or *Duke Nuke 'm 3D*, although the game does begin to wear a bit thin after a while. If Mythic would add more persistent world aspects to the

game, this one would be in the running for both **Best Massively Multiplayer Game: 1st Person Simulation** and **Best Massively Multiplayer Game: Role-Playing**.

Best Retail CD-ROM Hybrid

This is a very tough category, simply because so many computer games now have the ability simulate 2 to 8 player LAN play online in some fashion, and because they are generally stuck in two categories, Real-Time Strategy and 3D Action 'Shooters.' There are only so many ways to present each of those styles, so companies spend a lot of time imitating each other. This makes it difficult to choose from among the pack, and also means that most Hybrids don't last very long, as the next slough of them is always in the publishing queue.

Rather than pick one overall winner, I'm going to mention three currently available Hybrids, simply because each is just darn fun to play, which is the real test of a Hybrid. I don't think you can go wrong purchasing and playing online the following:

Age Of Empires by Ensemble Studios

Command and Conquer by Westwood Studios

Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II by LucasArts

Best Classic Game

[Chess](#) by [Yahoo! Games](#)

This is a Java version of classic chess (meaning anyone can play with no plug-in required), incorporating the U.S. Chess Federation ranking system into a very intuitive, easy-to-use interface. You can watch others play, set up ranked or unranked games or join in on a table someone else has started. It's also easy to invite someone to play, using the paging feature that Yahoo! has provided.

Overall, a darn good job technically, and it s a lot of fun to sit around and kibitz with others while playing or watching. If you like Chess, either ranked or just to play and learn, this is the place to be; there always seem to be between 350 and 600 players in the game.

Best Game In Beta Test

[ULTRACORPS](#) by [VR-1](#)

Strategy games have always been a favorite of mine, especially those set in a science fiction universe. The crew at VR-1 have come up with a doozy. *ULTRACORPS* has all the elements of a good turn-based game, including being fairly easy to learn to use and fairly difficult to master. As stated in a VR-1 press release, "UltraCorps is a browser-based online game that pits thousands of players against each other in a battle for domination of the universe. Users do not need to download or install any software to play. During each turn (or cycle), players choose from a number of actions to perform, such as developing new technologies and weapons, dispatching fleets to conquer and colonize other planets, and turning their resources into the materials needed to expand and defend their growing empires. At the end of each 24-hour cycle, the UltraCorps server calculates the outcome of each player's actions and displays the results on the player's computer." That's pretty dry text, but it gives you an idea of the game.

One of the more impressive features of this game is the development team; they *listen* to the testers and have no fear of incorporating ideas and comments from them. That's pretty unusual in this industry, where ego and the Not Invented Here! syndrome rules. The game is currently in final testing on [Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone](#). If Zone executives don't get stupid and price it out of the reach of the average consumer - it will be a Zone premium product and even I would have a hard time justifying paying the Zone's daily or monthly flat rates for the game-, ULTRACORPS might end up being the sleeper multiplayer game of the year.

Best Online Games Information Web Site

[The Multiplayer Online Games Directory](#)

Dave Frankson, Producer

If you want to find out what multiplayer games are available for play on the Net, in development or in various stages of Alpha and Beta testing, this is the site to see. MPOG lists everything from the various 2-8 player CD ROM Hybrids from the publishers to all the independent "garage inventor" efforts that will probably never see the light of day, all carefully listed in various categories such as Action, Simulation and even Virtual Worlds. The site also recently added IRC style Chat and message boards, and an "Editorial" section in which issues such as Player Killing in MMGs is discussed by player/writers.

Not as slick as professional news sites such as GameSpot or Next Generation (typos are everywhere and the grammar in the editorials is worse than mine), it has a charm all its own and is as close to a comprehensive list of 2 player+ games as you'll find on the Web. And you won't find this a site loaded down with rewritten press releases disguised as "news." The information here is, first and foremost, written by online game players for online game players.

Lifetime Achievement

Bill Loudon

Without Bill Loudon, it is unlikely that the multiplayer online games market would have taken off when it did. Through his auspices as an executive at CompuServe in the early 1980s and later as Co-Founder and General Manager of GENie for some seven years, most of the pioneers got their start, including Kesmai, Simutronics and Mythic Entertainment. I worked for Bill as Games Product Manager at GENie, and the leeway he gave me to find and fund online games made all the difference. Games that he gave me the OK to put on GENie in 1989, 1990 and 1991 still exist, including Harpoon, Dragon's Gate, Gemstone III (a major upgrade from GS II, including using the rules set from ICE's RoleMaster series), NTN's Trivia and QB1 football game, and Multiplayer BattleTech. He approved Air Warrior, the groundbreaking graphic MMG, to go on GENie in 1986.

By giving the pioneers a break and letting them experiment, Bill helped push the development of MMGs and all online games far faster than would otherwise have been the case. All in all, there are few people who have had as much of an impact on the industry as Bill Loudon. Salute'.

The Hole In The Wire Award

[Meridian 59](#) by [The 3DO Company](#)

This one could be *so good*, it has such *potential*... if it were just managed correctly. *Meridian 59* has a great little interface, an interesting world and they do try to refresh the game regularly. They really *do* try.

But the volunteer and in-house employee Sysops - called Guides and Guardians, respectively - and the phone customer service representatives are so ill-trained and managed, so lacking in common sense, its no wonder the game is stuck at somewhere between about 10,000 and 15,000 subscribers (by my personal estimate). There is absolutely no reason *Meridian 59* shouldn't have 50,000 or more subscribers, except for the lack of good customer care. The rest are churning out through the holes in the wire and going elsewhere... where, to 3DO's credit, things are as bad or worse, for the most part.

There has been recent improvement, and more players are satisfied with the Guides and Guardians, but this one still has a long way to go.

1.3 An Open Letter To Hasbro Interactive

August 10, 1998

Originally Published on Gamasutra

http://www.gamasutra.com/newswire/industry_analysis/19980828/hasbro.htm

To: ""Tom Dusenberry, President, [Hasbro Interactive](#)

From: Jessica Mulligan, Arrogant Columnist, [Biting The Hand](#)

RE: About Those Avalon Hill Games

Dear Tom,

It s been a couple of years since we last spoke. I m sure you remember; you were just forming Hasbro Interactive and I was in charge of content for [Engage Games Online](#). Those were the days, eh? Heady, exciting it seemed we were all poised to make a zillion bucks on Internet gaming. What a change two years brings.

But you haven t been sitting still, have you, Tom? Just recently, you bought [The Avalon Hill Game Company](#) from the Dotts. That was one smart move, Tom. I know, because we tried to buy them when I was at [Interplay](#)/Engage. Interestingly, if they had accepted our offer back then, they almost certainly would have made more money than the paltry \$6 million you paid. And I do note that quite a few of the games we told AH we planned to develop into computer and online titles went into production soon after negotiations broke off but, that s water under the bridge.

What an interesting time this is for us both, then. I m off on my own as a consultant in online

games- being paid good money to be ignored more often than not - and Hasbro Interactive is still trying to figure out why Spades on the [Internet Gaming Zone](#) gets a couple thousand simultaneous players at 10am PDT and *Risk* gets ten. Of course, your business model is to make money by selling units at retail, which you seem to be doing. That s cool, because not very many other companies are. Still, it must rankle a bit to see powerhouse brand names such as *Scrabble* and *Battleship* take a virtual back seat online to Checkers and Cribbage. And it does translate into profit, too; imagine how many more units of *Risk* sold at retail those 2,000 simultaneous users would represent. A bunch, I bet.

The future is bright, though. The 250+ in and out of print boardgames owned by the Avalon Hill imprint represent one of the truly great, untapped resources in the world of computer and online gaming. This has been the case for at least fifteen years. You got a terrific bargain at a mere \$6 million for this horridly undervalued product line.

Why this situation has been allowed to exist is linked with the business priorities of the former owners, Monarch Avalon. That s a letter all by itself; for now, I m going to ignore all that and just dig into how you can make a wheelbarrow full of money with these treasures if Hasbro is willing.

And Hasbro may not be willing. According to press reports, you ve have been seeking a presence in larger discount stores by attempting to snap up smaller computer game shops. With your powerhouse brand names, such as *Risk*, *Scrabble* and *Monopoly*, you may just be seeking to use AH as a market entry point without developing the AH titles.

And that would be sad, because there are several great Avalon Hill titles, any one of which could return to you the \$6 million you paid for Avalon Hill, not to mention the development costs of the games themselves. So at the risk of seeming like a know-it-all, here s how:

A. What: Mo Players, Mo Players, Mo Players!

Some of Avalon Hill s games would allow Hasbro Interactive to gain a new audience: the intermediate to hard-core gamers. This is the beauty of some of these classic designs; anyone can learn them pretty easily and more than one level of player experience can derive enjoyment from them.

Now, I know you specialize in mass-market games, Tom. Those games are easy to learn and appeal to a broad demographic. There s probably a faction within your own group that looked at the AH product line and said, "What the heck? Who the hell do we sell *Panzerblitz* to?"

Believe me, some AH titles are simple. *Diplomacy* and *Feudal* are no more difficult to learn than *Monopoly*. The difference between the popularity of *Monopoly* and *Feudal* has been the marketing power of the owner and consumer trust in the brand name. Avalon Hill is known mainly for its complex war simulations; what mass-market gamer is going to buy a game from them?

But Hasbro or Parker Brothers (which you also own); now these brands are trusted for their

compelling, yet easy to learn and play games. Every one of us knows that we can buy any game from either brand and the whole family can play. This is your secret weapon, and one which can revitalize some of AH's titles.

B. How: It Takes Two, Baby.

First, we're not going to make the mistake that other publishers have made with retail titles. We're not going to just tack on a feeble IPX emulator so two to eight players can experience the dubious joys of Internet latency together. And we're not going to ignore the fact that doing it that way leaves the interface wide open for any precocious 12 year old to hack the code, build a cheat application and distribute it all over the world. We're not going to ignore the fact that, for all intents and purposes, we're developing for two different platforms here.

No, we're going to do this *right*; we're going to simultaneously develop both the retail and online versions of the titles, taking advantage of the unique technology available to each platform.

What this means is that we need two development teams that share code, along with two designs and two budgets. The retail team needs to share the interface and object code with the online team; they'll modify this code to send and receive data from Internet-capable servers. The online team also needs to develop the database and executables that run on these servers, accept the data from the interface and make use of it. Keeping data on servers makes it much harder to cheat and designing a separate online version allows you to take advantage of the hardware and software standards on the Net.

As you can see, this pretty much means developing two different, yet complimentary, products. Thankfully, you don't need to double your development team personnel or expenses. For the online team, you'll need: One designer experienced in online/multiplayer games; one senior Windows person; one or two backend server people fluent in NT and/or UNIX, TCP/IP and at least one of them (or a third person) also good in SQL or Oracle; one part time artist. That's it; everything else, the online team gets from the retail unit team; art, sound, interface, you name it.

Caution: We want both these versions to be available to the public at the same time, so we need to make sure that both teams are in place at the get-go. This way, they can share ideas, designs and code.

Caution #2: Let's not go overboard with FMV and other bells and whistles. I mean, the stuff you tacked onto *Battleship*, et al, was well done but useless to the game play. It just slowed things down and all we wanted to do was turn it *off* so we could get on with the game, already. With all the games listed below, about the most you want to do is maybe have a famous personality narrate some sections on strategy, tactics or history. For example, may you could have Colin Powell or George Bush discuss diplomacy and strategy for *Diplomacy*, or Shelby Foote help put together some interesting files for *The Civil War*.

C. Who: Rounding Up The Unusual Suspects

While there are at least fifteen Avalon Hill games that could be extremely profitable computer/online titles, below are the ones I would develop, where I you. I picked them because they appeal to the beginner, or have something for both the beginner and intermediate player. All these games also had large audiences in the past for the board game version.

My remarks concentrate on the online version of each game, because any competent designer can take the board game design and modify it for the computer. At least, I think they *should* be able to; you never know in this industry.

[Diplomacy](#): The quintessential game of conflict and inter-player negotiation. This game has been around for decades; most of us in the industry cut our gaming teeth on it. It — and its companion game of power politics, [Machiavelli](#) - is still used in schools to teach students about strategy, power negotiation, brinkmanship and the efficacy of the timely back-stab.

Its best played by six people, although seven can participate. The rules are fairly simple and easy-to-learn; there are some nifty variants and optional rules to program for later add-on pack sales. And it's turn-based; everyone enters their turn and the backend code resolves the moves. No darn latency to screw things up.

Diplomacy is still one of the most popular play-by-email games around. Just do a quick search on the Net; I found over one hundred sites devoted to the game in just 10 minutes. If you provide all those people a nice interface to use, you'll be selling some units, I think.

And if you are willing to hire a couple people to head out into the colleges and high schools, I'll bet there is a market there, too, especially for *Machiavelli*; they used both games in various classes at my university. And can you imagine linking six classes from six different high schools via the Net for a game of *Diplomacy*?

[Freedom In The Galaxy](#): Currently out of print but with a computer game in development. This is one of the most fun games I've ever played. Designed originally at Jim Dunnigan's SPI nearly two decades ago, Howard Barasch and John Butterfield came up with a truly unique (for its time) game system. Combining hero and villain character cards with item and vehicle cards, teams of the good guy Rebels are sent on a variety of intelligence and provocateur missions throughout a 30 solar system empire, in an attempt to cause rebellions on planets and topple the evil emperor. One person generally played the Empire position, although there were several bad guy character cards. Although designed as a 2-6 player boardgame, there are a couple dozen character cards; theoretically, that many could play.

This one can appeal to all levels of gamer, because it's so darn well designed. In 1990, I taught most of the 40 employees at GENIE to play this game in one lunch hour. The most complex game most of them had ever played was *Monopoly*.

This is also a turn-based game and is tailor-made for play-by-email and server games. Check out VR1's [UltraCorps](#) on the Internet Gaming Zone for one method of bringing this type of game to the masses.

I know there is a computer version in development and slated for release later this year. You'll

need to take a hard look at this one; AH's past efforts in the computer game field have been disappointing, to say the least. Don't be afraid to go back to the drawing board on this one; better a delay than another panned AH product.

Victory Games The Civil War: Another two player game, representing the ebb and flow of the American Civil War from a grand strategic prospective. What made this game so compelling were the Leader counters. Most of the Generals and Admirals of the war were represented, rated by skill and ability to move and motivate troops. If you want to get a feel for why it took the North four years to win, just play this game once. And the Leader counters represent an opportunity for thirty or more players to participate in an online version.

This is probably more an intermediate-level game, just because of the subject matter. A good implementation of the computer version could easily bring this game within reach of beginners, however. There is also an opportunity here in the educational market, if you're willing to go to the effort. Any college student who can't learn to play this game needs to be transferred back to high school. And the military would probably love this game, too

Feudal: Think of this as medieval chess for 2 to 6 players. The game comes with four plastic game boards and 84 miniature game pieces representing mounted knights, foot soldiers, archers, sergeants and castles. The object is to assault and capture all the other castles on the boards. A very easy to learn and play game.

As a turn-based game, variants could easily be designed for simultaneous play and turn-based email play. This one really appeals to the kids, too, because of those miniatures. The archers really look cool.

Kingmaker: Two to 6 player game of England's War of the Roses in the 16th Century. Each player represents one of the many noble factions fighting for control of Parliament and the countryside. Game cards represent all of the major and most of the minor nobles of the realms. There are also cards representing official offices and titles, such as Chancellor, Earl of Salisbury and Warden of the Northern Marches, ships, mercenaries, et al.

A deck of Event Cards brings in the random element of plagues, Storms at Sea which keep ships in port, calls for office and title holders to return to their possessions to put down rebellions or attacks, you name it. All in all, an incredible achievement that has sold many copies over the years. The annual tournament draws several hundred players. A mediocre computer game was done several years back; a new version could stand to be developed.

With all the cards representing noblemen and mercenaries, there's an opportunity for twenty or more people to play on online version. It would be pretty easy to program variants for 2 to 30 players, and with all the optional and advanced rules available, there are at least two add-on packs here.

Starship Troopers: Based on the classic Heinlein science fiction novel of Humans versus the Communistic, hive-brain Arachnids, and the game does more justice to the book than director Paul Verhoeven recently did with his sophomoric abortion of a movie. Each Terran Mobile

Trooper in the squad is represented by an individual counter, with the Bugs represented by a series of Worker, Warrior and Royalty counters. The Skinnies are also represented. Dig down into the Hive's burrows and try to capture a Queen, or try to draw them to the surface and pop them there.

An easy-to-learn game for 2 to 6 players that presents a great opportunity for both a 3D, first person action game and an isometric, MechCommander-style game.° Heck, if done correctly, the 3D shooter version could be as big as *Quake*.° No kidding.

D. When: Gonna Party Like It's 1999

With the possible exception of *Freedom In The Galaxy*, there is no reason why each of the above games couldn't hit the market sometime in 1999. The major portions of the designs are already done; it is all a matter of how fast your coders are. With *Freedom*, the art alone might push the release into the 1st quarter of 2000. It really depends on how much can be salvaged from the current development of that game.

E. Why: Mo Money, Mo Money, Mo Money!

Three ways to make money with each of these titles:

1. There is absolutely no reason why each of the games discussed here shouldn't sell at *least* 200,000 units, especially if Hasbro's marketing department works its magic on the titles. I suspect *Diplomacy*, *Feudal* and *Freedom In The Galaxy* could sell 500,000 units, if your marketing people are as good as they appear to be. The possible exception is *The Civil War*, and that's mainly because the content is viewed as history. I'm not sure what to do about that; ask your marketing gurus;
2. Each of the titles lends itself to two or more add-on packs. The Colonial variant of *Diplomacy* alone should sell 100,000 units;
3. Depending on which online gaming site you partner with, the online versions will bring in advertising and/or subscription fees. How much they bring in depends on how much attention is paid to them. For example, you generally get more players of the Hasbro games on [mPlayer](#) than Internet Gaming Zone, because the mPlayer people go out of their way to hold tournaments, training sessions and special games. Don't ignore this part; you might consider hiring a remote staff to attend to your games online. And heck, this might be the perfect opportunity for you to set up your own site to host your own games. You have the brand name trust and the cash to do it, that's for sure.

Well, Tom, there's more, but this letter is getting long (I do like to talk, don't I?) and you are no doubt busy as a beaver in dam building season trying to integrate Avalon Hill and [Microprose](#) into the Hasbro Interactive family. I hope you'll forgive my presumptuousness in writing this; it is done with love for Avalon Hill's games and in the hope that you'll take it in the spirit intended. After all, I'm a gamer; I want you to succeed by building incredible games that I'll play for years.

However, I suspect anyone who has been playing Avalon Hill games for the last twenty or thirty years - or who works in the industry and cut their teeth on Avalon hill and SPI - would have loved to write you and make many of the same points.

Good luck, and continued success with your company. Overall, your team is doing a pretty darn good job in their market, and now they have some really interesting new properties to play with.

Best Regards,

Jessica Mulligan

1.4 Hasbro To Buy Microprose

August 14, 1998

In the August 2nd Short Takes column, I wrote:

"The rumor is, of course, that Microprose is just moments away from announcing its purchase by <insert some game company s name here>. The list of suspects mentioned to me is now at six. The rumor can mean anything. It might mean that someone talked to them about a buyout. It might mean several companies have done so. Or it might just be one of those damn chain rumors that get started out of thin air and propagate themselves seemingly by magic. Who knows?"

Well, the rumors were certainly true.° Hasbro announced on August 11 that it would offer \$6 a share for all outstanding stock.° That adds up to a buying price of about \$70 million dollars for a company that lost \$30 million last year on revenues of \$60 million.° The deal is to be finalized next month and the Microprose operations integrated into the Hasbro Interactive division.° This is a tender offer, so everything depends on Hasbro being able to acquire at least 50.1% of Microprose stock at the \$6 price.

My main question is, though: Why?° Why is Hasbro buying Microprose?° According to the press release on the event:

"This acquisition is an incredible opportunity to combine the complementary talents of Hasbro Interactive and MicroProse," said Alan G. Hassenfeld, Chairman and CEO of Hasbro, Inc. "MicroProse brings us great people, especially in research and development, and a strong international operation, which is very important to us as we continue to aggressively pursue the international marketplace." "The acquisition of MicroProse will significantly enhance Hasbro Interactive in three key strategic growth areas: brands and content, R&D assets, and European distribution," noted Tom Dusenberry, President of Hasbro Interactive, Inc. "We will now compete in virtually all major PC game categories. We also look forward to expanding many of MicroProse's games to multiple hardware platforms."

As Counselor Troi might say, "Captain, I sense something is wrong."

Hasbro is known for it's easy to learn and play, no-brain-strain games, such as Monopoly.° Microprose, on the other hand, made its reputation by developing some of the most complicated computer games in the industry, including the Falcon flight simulator series.° Even the games Microprose produced for the middle tier of gaming enthusiasts, such as Civilization, the Star Trek: Next Generation series license and X-Com, won't appeal to Hasbro's core market.° The two markets have little or no intermingling; one is made up of hard-core to regular computer gamers and the other made up of Everybody Else In The Known Universe.° Heck, GameSpot reported that a Hasbro manager is reputed to have said that anything that takes longer than an hour to play is not a game.° Can any of us imagine playing Civilization, computer gaming's answer to the question "How can I use up the rest of this incarnation?, for less than an hour?"

And as far as R&D (read "Inhouse development of games") goes: °C'mon!° Let's not be silly, please.° Microprose's R&D department is notorious for not being able to get a product out the door, or have we all forgotten Falcon 4.0 already?° Rather, the old Spectrum Holobyte R&D crew can't seem to get games out; the Microprose crew, acquired by Spectrum several years ago, can at least ship a product within an order of magnitude of an announced date.° Most of Microprose's hit games in the past few years came from the Microprose shop, not the old Spectrum Holobyte side of the show.

While I've said before that probably all Microprose needs is a few managers to come in and kick some butts around to jump-start a "Can do!" attitude, this doesn't happen overnight; it takes a couple years to see the effects.° Now, does Hasbro have the kind of experience in this part of the industry to make that happen?° I suspect not; there is a big difference between developing Risk! and X-Com or Falcon. ° One requires pretty standard programming talent; the others require innovative coders, designers, artists and sound techs to amputate themselves on the bleeding edge of technology.° The two development styles talk completely different languages and I just don't see the Microprose R&D teams viewing their new lords and masters with any kind of honest respect, at least at the outset.° The Hasbro dev teams will be treated with the same kind of tired, semi-amused tolerance with which battle-scarred veterans treat newbie GIs after their first firefight.° I can just see the Battleship and Falcon development teams talking at lunch:

Battleship Team Member (enthusiastically, with many hand gestures):° See, when Player One gets a hit on an enemy ship, this really cool cut scene of an aircraft attack plays and the computer screams, "You sunk my battleship!"° I mean, we must be keeping track of at least three whole objects at one time!° It's really cool!

Falcon 4.0 Team Member (To the rest of his team):° Do you think Electronic Arts is hiring?

"Culture clash" is a mild way of putting it.° I suppose they could keep the management and development team leaders intact, but isn't that how Microprose got into this mess?° The only real alternative I see is partially cleaning house and bringing in new team managers from other 'high tech' computer game companies.

No, the real prize here for Hasbro is that distribution network.° Microprose does pretty well in European sales and, of course, they are in all the major stores here in the US.° The company's

products have a proven track record of sales, which is what chain buyers at CompUSA and B. Dalton Software look for, so Hasbro's shelf reach just took a big leap. All in all, this is a weird marriage of talents.° If Hasbro is seeking to branch out into a more hard core computer gaming market, they bought the right company.° Tom Dusenberry, Hasbro Interactive's President, has been quoted as saying he plans to keep the Microprose R&D team intact.° The question is, can they manage their new charge?

1.5 September 1998

1.5.1 Reaction To The Hasbro Articles

I've received more email concerning my recent two articles about Hasbro Interactive than any other articles I've written in the past year. I seem to have especially struck a cord with the Open Letter regarding the newly acquired Avalon Hill games. As you might guess, quite a few developers felt compelled to comment. Below are some selected comments, with the sender's names omitted for privacy:

"I agree wholeheartedly with your recent open letter to the Hasbro president about the former Avalon Hill products. Diplomacy is a game that just *cries out* for a good multiplayer online treatment. I was introduced to it when we played it in a high school international relations class many years ago, an amazingly addictive game and one that makes hardly any sense as a single player computer game, like the old DOS version of about a decade ago."

"Excellent thoughts here. Unfortunately the pessimist in me suspects it will fall on deaf ears. What would have been more exciting is someone like Firaxis snatching them up. I'd rather wait for a game a year if they were likely to be true treatments of the game instead of fancy, flashy, fluffy, flung together versions."

"I hope they take some of your suggestions to heart. Oh, you left off one of my personal favorites that I always thought would make an excellent on-line port: Titan."

"Read your column on the gamasutra.com website, and as a wargamer who cut his teeth on AH games back in the 70s I hope Mr. Dusenberry follows your advice, or even 10% of it. It'd be a damn shame to see all those titles (especially the former Victory Games and SPI titles) buried in a vault someplace when the technology is out there to easily refit them for play-by-email or interactive play."

"Great read Jessica, I agree with a lot of your comments and it will be fascinating to see what happens here..."

"I'd respond publically on Gamasutra but there seems no way to do so. In terms of complexity, Diplomacy != Monopoly. Diplomacy may be a simple *wargame*, but it is far more complicated than Monopoly for anyone in the mass market:
- turns are simultaneous, rather than round-robin like every other family board game out there."

- there are no dice. Families use dice.
- the rules for military maneuver, although small for a wargame, are complex compared to the expectations of a mass market. You really expect families to sift through the simultaneous resolution of attack, support, and convoy orders?
- there's a complete lack of structure regarding what you're supposed to do in a turn. Families are used to being told to do A, then B, then C. Usually with a path leading around the board or a card to tell them what to do.

RISK is the proper family wargame, comparable in complexity to Monopoly.
Axis & Allies is the proper next step from RISK. It incorporates all principles of family games from childhood, and yet provides the bridge to real wargames. In fact, it is a sufficiently complex game in and of itself that I still play it."

"I'm hoping the best...but expecting the worst. Your article was terrific (Gamasutra) and if someone offered the advice you gave...I'd go for it. In fact I had been thinking of the AH games a lot in the last three years. I've been in this industry too long to be a cheerleader. I'm afraid that they (Hasbro) will read it and do exactly the opposite out of pride and machismo."

All of which tells me that Hasbro may have bought an even richer gold mine than I had thought. At least in the developer community, there is a lot of interest in the Avalon Hill titles. How Game Software Companies "Innovate" With all the talk these days about the need to preserve innovation at software companies, I thought the story below might be amusing. (OK, Microsoft is doing most of the talking as part of the anti-trust suit against it, for all that they innovate by buying or licensing the soul of smaller companies that still know the meaning of the word.) I consider the story illustrative of the bloated bureaucratic process that takes the place of honest thinking in today's computer and online games industry.

I've been exchanging email lately with a long-time industry friend, who is currently an executive at a well-known game publisher. Our exchange has been about the possible participation of the company in a new type of Internet product, one that almost certainly would dramatically raise the number of subscribers to the company's Web site. He/she agrees that participation would probably be a good thing for the company. However, as to whether the company will participate, this quote (used with permission):

"To be honest I doubt it, in that they move so slowly here. I can almost guarantee that the following will happen:

1. We tell Senior Management of the opportunity.
2. Nothing happens.
3. The concept goes live with companies that are hip to the idea.
4. Senior Management decides this is something we should do.
5. I point out they were sent the literature 6 months ago.
6. They ask for another copy.
7. One year after the concept goes live, we get involved."

I did, indeed, laugh out loud when I read the e-mail. The laughter was tinged with a touch of depression, because the above "innovation process" is so familiar to so many of us. Believe it or

not, my friends, this is how most computer and online game publishers operate. Heck, it may be how most corporations in general work. It certainly applies to every corporation I've ever worked for. While they all talk about how one needs to stay ahead of the curve in today's market, only a very few of them practice what they preach. These are the Blizzards of the industry, who come up with something interesting and then move to get it on the market fast.

At that point, all the other publishers and developers will rush to create a "me, too" product and get it on the shelves before the idea is old and stale. This is a kind of retroactive innovation. OK, when I was a kid, we called it "copycatting." If it happened during a test, we called it "cheating." To be kind, we'll just christen it the Method of Retroactive Innovation (MORI). It's at this point that the established publishers of games move in and buy these real innovators, or lock them up with long-term exclusive contracts.

This has caused me to do some thinking on how the food chain works in our industry. As I looked at the games being published these days, it occurred to me that small shops, in general, develop the more popular games that are, in turn, published by established houses that used to be small shops.

This isn't any great revelation, to be sure. Anyone who has kept an eye on the industry for the past three years has probably noticed the trend. However, while it is not unusual for large publishers to work with smaller developers, I do think the evolution of companies in the industry has slipped into a dangerous pattern:

Start as a small shop and turn out one or two really cool products that sell well. Get Big or Sorta Big on those one or two cool products. Lock in shelf space with the distributors and retailers (You may or may not know that the larger and/or more popular publishers have actually been known to buy space on the shelves. The next time you see 20 copies of a truly awful game on the shelf at a retail chain software store, think about how it got there). Buy or lock up to long-term exclusives the truly innovative smaller developers by waving mediocre cash in front of the noses of unsophisticated — and hungry — techies acting as CEOs or Presidents. Make sure the company logo is larger and has better placement on the box than the smaller company that actually developed the game. Become Really Big while burying the smaller developers under your brand name. Hire lots of people. Institute the MORI. Stagnate.

I think the record of large companies going out of business or being bought for a song bears out the observations. Look at the recent list of formerly small, innovative companies that got big, then stagnated and are being acquired for relatively small money: Broderbund, Microprose, Mindscape, Virgin/Westwood. That's all just within the last year, three of them within the last three months. There are also constant rumors that Eidos will acquire Crystal Dynamics soon and Hasbro also just bought Avalon Hill, more noted for their board games than the company's pathetic efforts to produce computer games. The list of game companies that have gone out of business or had layoffs is of similar size.

What does all this mean? Frankly, I'm not really sure. I suspect it means that trying to enforce a Harvard-style MBA business process on an industry that requires developers to be somewhat loony to retain the creative juices just doesn't work. Lord knows, the biggest fights between

departments at computer game publishers seem to occur between the creative wonks in R&D and the finance beancounters and marketing pukes. One side is trying to stay ahead of the pack by being creative and innovative, which doesn't lend itself to budgets or deadlines. The other side wants to tell the wonks the project's exact completion date, because the ads have already been placed, retail shelf space purchased and the end caps bought. They also question every decision that requires money to be spent, such as why one would pay an actor such as Michael York or Leonard Nimoy multiple tens of thousands of dollars to speak some words when the kids down in QA would do it for free.

The questioning of each and every penny spent is not a joke, by the way. I once had a Vice President and Chief Operating Officer (COO) question my requisition for a \$300 hard drive. I explained via email that the drive on one of my artist's machines had died and it needed to be replaced. The COO replied by asking if there wasn't a drive I could borrow from some other machine. I replied that all my team's hard drives were in use and asked if he were suggesting that I steal one from another team? He replied no, but instructed me to search the company (then over 400 employees) for a hard drive not in use before he would approve the purchase of a new one. I replied in heated frustration that at the salary the company was paying me, our three day exchange of email plus one day of asking around for an unused hard drive, plus four days of the artist being unable to work on a project within two weeks of being mastered, had already cost the company over \$1,000. If he'd just bought the damn drive when I first asked, we'd have saved the company hundreds of dollars and if he would pull his head out of his butt, he'd see that.

That was the first time I was hauled into the CEO's office, but not the last. Ask around; you can hear similar horror stories from every producer in the industry.

Maybe it is the industry's lot for innovation to take a back seat to bean counting, at least at the Big Corp level. It's sure starting to look that way. Thank god for the Blizzards of the world; at least innovation won't die off. I think.

1.5.2 The Marching Morons

One Reason Why Online Gaming Is In Sad Shape

As we all know, online gaming hasn't taken off the way we all thought it would. I mean, we all know this is a compelling, exciting industry, and every year companies like Jupiter Communications put out their annual screeds that tell us how it is going to be a gazillion dollar business Real Soon Now. Why, it's going to be a billion-dollar business by 2001! Honest! And why is online gaming such a wasteland, Jessica, when just three years ago we all expected to be rich as Croesus because of it? I'm glad you asked, my friend. There are several reasons why, but certainly one of the most poignant has to be the way the disgustingly low class of today's online gamer drives away the people who might actually spend some cash to play. (As a side note, why would anyone buy the annual Jupiter Online Gaming report any more, when they've been so consistently wrong in their projections? Not that they are alone, of course, as everyone has been, shall we say, a tad enthusiastic in their online gaming revenue projections. Of course, you have to count every conceivable online connection to reach the numbers they do in the reports, including totaling up sales of retail computer games that also feature some kind of

online connection. Naturally, that makes up the bulk of those huge numbers that we're going to start seeing you guessed it, Real Soon Now.

(Sorry, but retail computer games with online modules (henceforth called Hybrids) are a completely different market. If you are going to add those numbers in, you need to divide by at least 10, because consumers are buying them for the home play, not the exceedingly tawdry, tired, added-on-at-the-last minute "Internet" play that goes into most of these games. There are exceptions, such as Quake II, but in general, probably less than 10% of the buyers spend any significant time playing Hybrids online. When you pull those revenues out of the calculations, what's left won't buy a ploughman's lunch. And at over \$1,000 a pop for the average expert report, that makes for some awfully expensive scratch paper.)

Let me give you an example of what I mean by "low class." Drop into any of the free online gaming sites, such as mPlayer or Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone. Just entering a chat lobby at one of these sites garners you a significant chance of viewing some variation of the following exchange:

Player One: Shut up, you pussy faggot!
Player Two: Eat sh**, dumba**!
Player One: F*** you, faggot!
Player Two: No, f*** you!
Player One: No f*** you, sh**-eating faggot-dork-loser!

And so on. Granted, you could sit in a lobby for half an hour and not see such. Or you could hit several lobbies and see it in every one. I see it happen often enough to grate on the nerves. I also happen to be a male-to-female transsexual, so use of the word faggot especially grates, not to mention the other Anglo-Saxonisms.

As one might guess, the players most often resorting to this kind of infantile name-calling are not very far out of diapers themselves, the 12 year old to 16 year old demographic. They hang out on mPlayer and IGZ because, of course, those services are free. They'd probably rather hang out where the really cool games are, such as Kesmai's GameStorm or Simutronics Playnet, but that takes a credit card and who wants Mom and Dad to know just exactly what they are doing with that educational Internet thingamabob, anyway?

In a way, I lay this type of behavior at mPlayer's door. You get what you pay for, and they were the first to panic at the lack of paying subscribers and turn their service free. And, as naturally as toast falls to the carpet peanut butter side down, in rushed the unsocialized young kids who can't afford to pay and, apparently, aren't getting any home training in manners or courtesy. Not to say that some supposed adults don't do this, too, but the preponderance of my experience with it has been from kids.

The attitude is a bit more mature on IGZ, probably because of Age of Empires and other adult-oriented titles. You won't find many kids playing spades, cribbage or Fighter Ace. Those games require some learning and an attention span exceeding three minutes, and the people who play them demand a certain modicum of courtesy. They are also good at the games and tend to go out

of their way to trounce unruly kids, which has a tendency to drive those worthies back to the mindless shooters and other action titles.

Before they go, however, these miscreants do their damage and drive away some of the otherwise desirable players. In other words, adults with jobs who can afford to pay for games and who might just click-through on an advertisement and buy a product; their time is valuable and they won't stick where someone is ruining the neighborhood.

It doesn't take too many instances of rude behavior to cause an exodus from a service, especially a free one. The free services could probably stem some of the flow by monitoring the rooms and clamping down on the worst offenders, but you almost never see that happen. Some services, such as GameStorm, have an icon you can click to summon a sysop or game operator; this is a mighty fine idea that works. The player doesn't have to go out of his way to track someone down and request help; the help comes to him, which is a great convenience. On the paying services, these icons actually get used; even at \$9.95 a month, consumers are less likely to put up with such BS.

Again, you get what you pay for. If the consumers are willing to pay for the development of quality online games, we could see a Renaissance in the industry. If many or most of the consumers aren't willing to pay for such development, then we're likely to be stuck with two kinds of gaming services. Patronizing one type will be those willing to pay for quality games and a safe haven from the rude little monsters of the world. Patronizing the other will be all those unwilling or unable to pay for online games and willing to settle for second best. The digital country clubs and the cyber-slums, if you will.

And if you don't agree with me, you're just a great big dork-loser. So nyah!

1.5.3 Pressing The Flesh, The Interactive Way

September 30, 1998

In times past, the phrase *pressing the flesh* was an insider's code used by politicians and celebrities. It meant getting out and shaking hands with the *hoi polloi*, letting them know they were just plain folks.

In today's computer game industry, the phrase has taken on a whole new meaning. With the advent of characters such as Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*, developers are letting all those fourteen year-old, hormone-ridden boys that they, too, are just like them.

Here's a radical position: *Tomb Raider* would have sold just as well if Lara had a normal bust line, instead of one that looked like a tourism advertisement for visiting the Rocky Mountains. The game was compelling, easy to learn and use and just plain fun. There was no need to stick an air pump under her blouse and make her a young boy's wet dream.

Why, then, you ask, was it done?

The common wisdom given out by game company execs is that sex sells, and sells especially well to horny teenagers. The reason most publishers don't try to build games to attract women, they will tell you, is that they don't sell. The buyers are overwhelming young males. And young males like action and big tits.

This is just so much crapola. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy that virges on circular reasoning. Since they start from a premise that women don't buy games in significant numbers, they won't build games aimed at women. Of course, that means women will continue to not buy games, which fact the publishers will then continue to use as a justification for not doing the research necessary to build games specifically for women.

The simple reason characters like Lara Croft are given huge bustlines is that the developers are not far from being horny teenagers themselves. You may find the following difficult to believe, but most anyone who has worked in the industry will tell you the same: The working atmosphere at most of today's (overwhelming male) game publishing and development shops makes typical locker room talk sound positively PC.

Oh, sure, every company has the standard no sexual harassment policies and guidelines in place. Everyone is required to behave on the job as if sex doesn't exist. But when the girls aren't around, look out. The guys just want to have a little harmless fun, of course. If that involves infantile antics and stereotypical views of women and sex, hey, so what? Boys will be boys, right? Who gets hurt?

The industry as a whole does, in my opinion. Take *Tomb Raider*, for example. The talk about it has almost nothing to do with the game play or technology, both of which are excellent. No, the burning topic of conversation regarding *Tomb Raider* is trying to guess which big-breasted Hollywood bimbo will play Lara Croft in the movie.

As long as we keep fostering an attitude that it's OK to foist these ridiculous stereotypes on the game-buying public with the insipid, circular argument that this is what the audience will buy, we continue to foster the locker room attitude among the young kids who build the games.

And it's not limited to the early 20s crowd. This kind of attitude starts at the top, with the senior executives. It then dribbles down into the ranks. Don't believe me? Here are some juicy examples; only the names have been left out to protect the guilty:

- A high executive from a company now owned by EA used to be notorious for treating comrades at conferences to, uh, clubs that feature bare female anatomy. I was with a dinner group led by this illustrious person at a CDGC annual meeting when he literally took over one of these clubs and treated a German journalist to the birthday present of a lap dance, while the young Aryan was tied, semi-naked, to a chair. Cost for the evening's entertainment: A reputed \$8,000. The unconfirmed word is that EA pulled the plug on these Boy's Nights Out after purchasing the company. Not for the moral issue, of course, but because of the expense;

- As related to me 2nd hand, at the last E3 a producer from GT Interactive treated the boys from id Software to one or more evenings at one of Atlanta's finer titty bars, The Gold Club. He then expensed the \$10,000+ cost back to the company. To GT's credit, it is rumored the producer was reamed for the expense and he resigned soon thereafter. Of course, he immediately formed his own company, funded by GT;
- While on a road trip with two other senior executives a few years ago (before I made it known I was a male to female transsexual), I was treated to an evening of lap dancing at a Chicago establishment. No, I didn't indulge, which made the other two look at me strangely. On arriving home the next day, as we were debarking the plane, I said loudly, OK, guys, act horny, in case the wives are out there. The angry panic and Shhhhhhhh's were amusing, to say the least. (And yes, I borrowed the line from Jim Bouton's great work, *Ball Four*. It was too good not to use in the situation).
- Some years back, I complained to the CEO of the company I worked for that my new boss had a tendency to make offensive gay and bisexual jokes. He'd speak in lilting tones and make stereotypical hand gestures as he was delivering some moronic one-liner. The CEO later told me he brought the (senior executive!) man in and told him to can it. And he did. When I was around.

Six months later at a convention, 5 months after I had publicly made the gender transition, I was approaching our company's private booth section, where this person was speaking to every male senior executive of the company, including the CEO. I caught the tail end of his speech, in that lilting, fake-gay tone he affected: Being bisexual means you double your chances for a date on Saturday night. While these gentlemen were laughing uproariously at this witty sally, I left the booth immediately. Not to mention the company, soon thereafter. And let me just say that E3 is a *great* place to look for a new job.

You can hear similar stories from anyone in the industry. Sure, most of them have been added to in the telling, like the original message in a game of Telephone. The point is, is that this is an accepted activity. When executives and producers, most of whom are also geeks or ex-geeks, return to the office from a conference, having been treated to one of these outings, and regale everyone with story, the first comment heard is universally, Hey, I want to go next time! It is a badge of honor to be invited on one of these outings; if you aren't invited, you aren't in. For goodness sake, the head of a major California game publisher and his buddies regularly hit the strip bars. To them, it's a claim to fame.

Is it any wonder the attitude bleeds over into the rank and file, and then the games?

Now, I just *know* someone is going to point out that it was yours truly who hired a male stripper to dance for birthday girl Bridgette Patrousky in the bar of the Omni Hotel at the Atlanta E3 in 1997. Before anyone gets all excited and starts tossing around the word hypocrite, there is a difference: What I did was done in humor, not in prurience. And that is exactly how the audience and Bridgette herself took it. No one seriously believed that Bridgette or anyone else present was meant to be sexually aroused by the stunt. Yes, the dancer was well muscled. Yes,

his moves were suggestive. And yes, the whole event was an exaggeration on a theme, *as it was meant to be*.

This is a far cry from taking a group of poorly socialized computer game nerds to a nudie bar so they can shove \$5 dollar bills into a dancer s panties, in the hopes that something might rub off. The whole *purpose* of that type of event is to become sexually aroused. Not once do I ever recall someone telling the tale of a trip to such a place and saying something like, Yes, she was really quite beautiful, in an artsy, Brechtian way. I really wanted to talk to her afterwards and get her opinions on Ionescu s works. No, tales of such trips are usually told using language that would make a demon blush.

As long as this kind of event is accepted practice in this industry, especially when it is encouraged by management, we ll continue to have sadly prurient values such as huge breast lines and sexy sirens in our computer games.

The sad part is, the industry is capable of better.

1.6 October 30, 1998

1.6.1 General Notes for the Holidays

Well, it s been about a month since my last column. I intended to post one every couple of weeks, but I ve been pretty busy with clients. So goes the best of intentions. *Biting The Hand* has become something of a double-edged sword; I love writing it, but the reaction to the column has been to bring even more consulting gigs my way, which leaves me with less time to write. There are some in the industry that would argue that this is a good thing. No doubt it is a conspiracy to keep me quiet by keeping me well fed and housed.

They should be so lucky. Like a bad penny, I just keep coming back. I may not come back as often these days, but it s tough to get rid of an old, scrappin broad like me completely.

1.6.2 Interplay Falls On Hard Times

I was going to write a whole column on this, but I m going to wait a while and see how the situation settles out.

For those who haven t heard, [Interplay](#) this week reported a shockingly dismal 3rd Quarter and warned that 4th Quarter results were going to be less than lovely, too. They also announced some products were going to miss the Christmas selling season, most notably Earthworm Jim 3 and Messiah. As a result, the stock has been bouncing all over the place, but is generally lower. Like, below \$2, compared to a high of \$8 _ just a few weeks ago.

And just to add to the festivities, they laid off a reported 10% of the company, which amounts to about 50 employees. The recently announced Tribal Dreams adventure game division was axed entirely and some inside reports say that the PR and Marketing departments have been gutted.

Interplay isn't the only game publisher to fall on hard times, and I'll report on them next time around.

For more information on this, see the posts on the [GameBytes Forums](#) in the [Game News](#) section.

1.6.3 Tis The Season

The Christmas Selling Season“ is upon us. For computer game publishers, this is *it* . Somewhere between 40 and 65% of all game software (depending on whom you listen to) is sold in the period between October 1 and December 24. This short period can make or break a publisher's year. Naturally, that means two things are going to happen.

First, it means layoffs at computer game companies. For some strange reason, the holiday season is also the season of choice for publishers and major developers to reduce staffing. No doubt this is so the 4th quarter financial results will look good and the executives can continue to justify their salaries. Which, in many cases, are bloated. Not to say that some executives don't earn their salaries and bonuses (Phil Adam at Interplay comes to mind) but, by and large, executives can make serious misjudgments and not be held accountable for them. Rarely are executives let go during the Layoff Season, ho ho ho. However, as development teams finish products and get them into the retail channels, quite a few of those people are going to be escorted unceremoniously to the door, along with some of the marketing and PR support staff that back them up.

This season is shaping up to be a very bad one for a lot of workers in the industry. Already, Interplay, Radical and [Segasoft](#) have had major layoffs and the season is barely begun. [Virgin Interactive](#) saw quite a few folks being shown the door after [Electronic Arts](#) bought the company a few weeks back. [Microprose](#) and Avalon Hill have also seen some departures, mostly due to consolidation on being acquired by [Hasbro](#). And with parent corporation Cendant in such bad straits (the stock is down from about \$29 to about \$12), there is a chance we may see layoffs at [Sierra](#) and maybe even [Blizzard](#) before the year is out.

I can think of nothing more depressing than to get a pink slip during the holidays. This has got to be one of the cruelest jokes that companies play on their employees. For God's sake, if the executives aren't smart enough — and compassionate enough — to plan finances well enough to let their people keep their jobs until the end of January, they need to lay themselves off. Or be shot. Either one works for me.

(The cruelest layoff story I've ever heard deals with Sierra. I wasn't there, but I've heard substantially this same story now from six different people who do claim to have been there.

(It seems that a certain well-known Sierra senior executive used to dress up as Santa Claus at the annual company Christmas Party and hand out the bonus checks. One year, shortly after the infamous Cartridge Crash in the mid-1980s, this performance was recreated yet again. Only this time, Sierra had decided to lay off a significant portion of the company. And how did the layees find out? You guessed it. There was a pink slip in their little envelope from Santa instead of a bonus check. As you might also guess, there were plenty of tears and outrage from both those laid off and the survivors.

(I believe this story, mainly because I've known two of the tellers for over ten years each and they are not known to lie. Knowing by reputation the senior executive involved, I can also see where he would think this was appropriate. One can only hope that one day, the Ghost of Christmas Past will visit him and put coal in his stocking. Or a scorpion.)

The second thing that happens during this time is, paradoxically, that almost all effort at every publisher is focused on finishing and shipping product. In fact, they are so focused on shipping, they are spending less time actually testing and playing their own games to see if they are, indeed, actually playable.

This results in two common mistakes that many games in the industry seem plagued by:

Error #1: Replayability is not determined by how many times you force the player to replay the same mission.

When those in the trade talk about Replayability, we generally mean designing and implementing a game so fun and intriguing, the player is compelled to start the game over from scratch and play it again. In practice, because so few game and scenario designers in the industry know what they are doing, what we actually get is what I call the Impossible Mission Syndrome. This is the process of designing so tough a section of the game, scenario or mission, you virtually guarantee the player will fail and be forced to replay.

The IMS most often takes the form of tossing in up to ten thousand enemies to kill, which is a sure sign of a level or mission designer who secretly desires to work as a tax auditor for the Internal Revenue Service. It's also cheap, unprofessional and just plain lazy.

Even games I *really* love to play, such as Origin's latest in the Wing Commander series, Secret Ops, suffer from one or two Impossible Missions. Other gross offenders - among the many - are Microprose's MechCommander, Quake II and Descent I.

Several missions in MechCommander are so tough to beat, in fact, it makes you wonder if anybody bothered to check the work of the designer. At some companies, the Quality Assurance department does the checking, but the testers are mostly young, inexperienced people trying to break into the industry. When they do complain about an IMS experience in a game, they are generally intimidated into backing down and signing off on the game by older and wiser heads. After all, they want to work on games, not be stuck in the QA department for the rest of their professional lives. It is rare to find one that will stick to his/her guns and carry an objection about an IMS problem all the way to the end.

(A welcome exception to this was Interplay's Jeremy Barnes, who was QA Director for a time while I was at the company. He had absolutely no problem going toe-to-toe with anyone in the company over QA issues, including the CEO. IMS design problems especially irritated him; he expected and demanded better from supposedly professional game designers. Thanks to Barnes, the overall quality of Interplay's products rose during my time there.)

Error #2: Added Value does not mean fixing known, serious bugs after the product has shipped.

This one so infuriates me, I could write several columns about it. It should be patently obvious by now to every game buyer in the Galaxy that computer game publishers live by the motto, I don't need it good, I need it Tuesday! Sure, the publishers all speak solemnly about the need for quality and the sanctity of the game experience. The way they talk to the press and at conventions, you'd think they were the high priests of a new religion devoted to pristine product. Privately, they are pushing the developers to just get the damn code in the door, so they can move it out again and on to the shelves.

The emphasis is in getting product on the shelves. And if a few (dozen) bugs need to be left unfixed to make sure the cash flow isn't interrupted unduly, well that's just part of the process. Heck, we can always make a patch and post it on the Internet, right? Besides, the execs that make these decisions don't have the answer the phones down in tech support or respond to the flames on the Internet.

And cynically, the company PR machine cranks into high gear and focuses on the added value of the needed patches. Typically, this takes the form of one or two new game maps, or something else as easily done. At all costs, substantive discussion of serious bug fixes is avoided. One would think that no game is ever shipped with a serious bug, when in fact most of them are.

This season is shaping up to be no different than any other of the recent past. Heck, I've already book-marked several publisher Web sites so I can more easily download the patches to the games I plan to buy this year.

I wish I didn't have to. My Favorites folder is already packed. But it is not like I have a choice, is it? At least, not if I want to play those games.

1.7 December 7, 1998

1.7.1 The 1998 Round-Up

Well, 1998 draws to a close and an interesting — and terrifying — year it has been for the computer and online game industries. Below are some of the trends and events that helped define

the year and, yes, I find it particularly appropriate to write some pieces of this column on Pearl Harbor Day.

Less Is More: id Software makes Quake customers believe that getting less product (Quake Arena instead of Quake III) is actually a better thing for them. This either shows that id has mastered the ancient but forgotten technique of mass mind control, or that Quake fans have all the powers of discrimination and common sense of the average Pet Rock. More Is Less: The consolidation and shaking out of industry publishers and development houses continues, with the big news being the absorption of Microprose and Avalon Hill by Hasbro, Inc. Other victims of the current industry-wide shake-out include Crystal Dynamics, Radical, GameTek and Cendant, which sold the Sierra/Blizzard game divisions to a French company.

Hey, Kid, Wanna Be A Star?: The Small Developer Syndrome - where small teams of programmers and artists leave the parent company to form their own group - continues and accelerates. A few of the "Name" developers starting their own companies this year include Tim Cain (Interplay/Fallout), Mike McShaffry (Origin/Ultima), The Big Eight (Ion Storm/Daikatana), Doug Whatley (Various/Lots) and Ray Gresko (LucasArts/Dark Forces II).

Mine Is Bigger Than Yours!: The Stupid Numbers War, wherein online game aggregators tout the number of their registered free accounts, continued, but with mPath's mPlayer and Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone as the primary players. Both will talk endlessly about how many registered accounts they have and how many total monthly play minutes their site experience. Curiously, neither seem willing to discuss the numbers that really matter, such as how many duplicate registrations they have (i.e.: individual subscribers with two or more free registrations), or how many of those free accounts are actually active (i.e.: logged on at least once in the previous week or month).

It's Just Like Warcraft II, Except : Once again, the industry will post record sales numbers and, once again, 70% of that money will go to 10 or 15 of the hundreds of games to hit the retail shelves. This does not bode well for either the publishers or developers and is a major cause of the industry's consolidation. It also proves out the paraphrase of Sturgeon's Law: 90% of everything is crap. That's one reason why the 10 or 15 games that aren't crap make all that money. You don't suppose that's because everyone is imitating each other instead of doing original work, do you? Nah, can't be.

Coyote Ugly: History repeated itself in the form of ugly Initial Public Offerings by computer game publishers. Both Interplay and Interactive Magic issued IPOs, both of which promptly tanked and remain far below their initial issue price. If they can hang on, they have the examples of EA and Activision to hope for; both had ugly IPOs years ago and both are now doing quite well.

The Year's Most Interesting Test: Origin offers Wing Commander: Secret Ops for free as a series of weekly mission downloads on the Net. The game is huge (over 100 Megs on the initial download) and full-featured, being a series of add-ons for WC: Prophecy. Depending on the success of that test, this kind of thing may become the business model of games in the future. It

also has the advantage of extending the life of a game engine. The question is, do you charge for the initial download or charge for the weekly mission packs?

Late, But Unlamented: DWANGO finally packs it in. An interesting idea in 1994, CEO Robert Huntley proved expert at gaining press attention and ticking off just about every publisher on the face of the earth, but lousy at gaining customers in a rapidly changing market, in spite of a presence on Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone. DWANGO's few customers will no doubt be sad to see the service die; however, I suspect more than one publishing industry executive cheered out loud.

VaporWare of the Year: Falcon 4.0 still hasn't shipped, although it was announced today (12/7/98) that the game had gone gold and would ship to retailers within the week. Considering that the game started development in 1994, shipped a demo eighteen months ago and was supposed to hit the shelves last December, I'll believe it when I see it. My two sources at Microprose tell me the game is nowhere near ready but is being shipped anyway, to save face for some senior executives. Gee, like that never happens in the computer game biz.

Meanwhile, Back At The Old Same Place : The leading online game magazines, namely GameSpot, Next Generation Online, Gamecenter and OGR, continue to compete against each other by posting news that is 90% composed of press releases from company marketing departments, slightly rewritten and condensed to make it appear that the "press" had actually done some original research. Generally, they post the same news within 24 hours of each other. They also review all the same games, in mostly the same reporting format, and it's real tough to find one they don't just love. Not only is this deceptive journalism, it's boring. Don't these people have contacts at game companies? Can't they afford to pick up the damn telephone and get some real news, instead of just reprinting marketing department fluff? Oh, yeah, sorry; that takes initiative and common sense.

Not Your Father's News Style: BitchX's Gaming Insider is a refreshing change from the sickening butt kissing of the traditional online news media. If you want some real inside poop on computer games, check out the site. Company employees regularly dish her the inside dirt. Sometimes they even leave their real names, which is gutsy as hell, if not too smart.

We Hardly Knew Ye: Dani Bunten Berry, creator of the best computer game in history, M.U.L.E., passed away this summer. In our young industry, she was the first true superstar, preceding even Richard Garriott and Chris Crawford. An original thinker and all-around great person who tried her damndest to make the industry better, she will be missed, not the least because the industry has so few original thinkers today.

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