

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

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1 Year 1999 Columns

A note on column numbering: Due to the sporadic nature of BTH up to this point and the arcane method I had of adding and updating columns and comments, we started renumbering the columns on Happy Puppy from Volume Eight, Issue 1.

1.1 *Welcome To My World; Now Bite Me*

Volume Eight, Issue 1 February 1, 1999

Welcome to a whole new volume of *Biting The Hand*, the column that answers the question, "How do you kill a successful career with just a few well-chosen words?"

As you may have guessed from the title, this is my attempt to provide an irreverent, pointed and sometimes vitriolic look at the online and computer game industries. This marks a new beginning of sorts; beginning with this issue, the column now appears exclusively on Attitude Network's Happy Puppy Web site. Sure, the pay sucks and I have to keep to weekly deadlines now, something that is anathema to the creative spirit (Translation: writers are lazy and editors have no choice but to impose deadlines. Writers who wish to eat on a regular basis honor those deadlines, bitch though they must about them).

But the people at HP and Attitude are great and share my need not to be afraid to call a spade a spade, and to ask the tough questions about an industry we all love. Those new to this column, especially the legions of Happy Puppy members, may wonder just exactly where I'm coming from and why I feel qualified to jump all over the industry like a pit bull on raw steak. Let me quote from the introduction of the first BTH, written nearly two years ago:

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

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

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

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

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

And that's just what I've done for the last two years. No doubt I've lost some work because of my writings; no doubt, I've gained some, too. You can check out the BTH archives for yourself and form your own opinion on how I've been doing by *clicking here*.

And in the meantime, its time to start the New Year out with a bang:

Nasty, Inconvenient Questions

First, some impressive-looking statistics:

In December, Origin Systems announced that of the approximate 250,000 Ultima Online retail units sold, 100,000 online gamers were paying them \$9.95 a month to play the game. They also noted that over 20,000 simultaneous users play during peak hours, that over half the subscriber base plays every day and that subscribers average about 20 hours a week in the game. For those as math-challenged as I normally am, that's about \$1 million a month in revenue to OSI's coffers. This is over and above the retail unit revenues, which could be in the neighborhood of \$7,500,000 if OSI wholesaled the unit at \$30 a pop. This certainly makes UO among the top

three of all-time moneymakers of online-only games, and practically guarantees it the top spot sometime before mid-1999. All in all, pretty darn good, right?

Now, let's ask **Nasty, Inconvenient Question #1:**

Why does this game have only 100,000 users?

This is not an idle question. Think about it: The brand name of Ultima is the single most recognized and revered name in computer role-playing. The home play, retail versions of the game have sold millions of units over the last twelve years or so and its fiercely loyal base of fans certainly numbers in the hundreds of thousands, if not over a million. The Ultima brand name is so golden, an OSI marketeer once told me, that they could ship horse crap in an Ultima box and the fans would immediately start asking for *Ultima: Road Apples II*. Ultima is one of maybe four or five of the top-level entertainment brands that can have this effect on the online market, along with Star Wars, Star Trek and maybe a couple of the TV soap operas or a brand name casino such as Caesar's or Harrah's. If ever there was a focused, pre-qualified market for an online game, it is the fan base of the Ultima series.

And yet, six out of every ten purchasers voted with their feet and abandoned UO. Only 40% of the 250,000 people who purchased the online game found it interesting enough to stick around and play.

To the casual observer, this may seem like I'm splitting hairs. After all, having the most successful online game in history with 100,000 subscribers and a cool million dollars a month is nothing to sneer at. I certainly can't think of any other single online game that is bringing in that much money right now.

But think about it: Of a loyal, almost captive fan base, only four out of ten actually stick around to play UO. This is akin to six out of every ten people who make a down payment on a top-of-the-line Mercedes deciding later to take the car back and stop making the monthly payments. And its not like the consumers didn't know the game was online only and had no solo play features; it is unlikely very many of units of the game were purchased mistakenly. In fact, its safe to assume at *least* 90% of the purchasers, if not close to 100%, bought it with the intent to play the online game.

Which brings us to **Nasty, Inconvenient Questions #2 and #3:**

Why did 150,000 of 250,000 buyers leave UO?

If retaining only 40% of a loyal market is the best that a powerhouse brand such as Ultima can do, what chance do the unknown and kinda-sorta-known online games have?

In fact, the answers to these two questions may be the single two most important pieces of information an online-only game provider can have about this business. In next week's issue, I will answer both of them. The answers may surprise you.

1.2 Nasty, Inconvenient Questions, Part Deux

**Volume Eight, Issue 2
February 8, 1999**

In *last week's column*, in which I callously threw water on the mainstream press's lovefest with Origin Systems' *Ultima Online*, the following questions were left unanswered:

Nasty, Inconvenient Question #2: *Why did 150,000 of 250,000 buyers leave UO?*

Nasty, Inconvenient Question #3: *If retaining only 40% of a loyal market is the best that a powerhouse brand such as Ultima can do, what chance do unknown and kinda-sorta-known online games have?*

Before I begin, let me note one thing. This is not a "Bash UO" festival. I actually like the folks at Origin, I have friends who work there and I'm glad to see they are doing well. What this is all about is to blow past the shallow analysis that seems to permeate the gaming industry and really look at what we've got here. UO is used only because they are the darlings of the press right now. Make no mistake, there are some things the game does correctly, too.

The answer to NIQ #2 is pretty easy. Remember that the normal experience of game publishers is that 90% of the work is finished when the game is on the shelf. Thereafter, they issue patches to fix bugs as they are discovered and help out the occasional customer who might be having problems installing or running the game. I suspect that OSI realizes the answer now, but is having trouble deciding what to do about it. Unfortunately for them, the answer to Question #2:

With online games, 90% of the work begins *after* initial development is finished. You have to follow through with good online customer service and manage the game correctly to provide a fair, level playing field for all your subscribers. In other words: Managing a multiplayer game correctly after the launch is the key to customer satisfaction, subscriber retention and continued growth.

Yes, online game players are demanding; when a bug or crash causes a character or item loss, they will scream bloody murder until the situation is made right. Yes, they will find every hole in your code and exploit it to gain an unfair advantage over the other players, and you will spend many hours tracking down these holes and plugging them. Yes, this all is man-hour intensive and can be expensive in time and money to do correctly.

However, just like swinging a baseball bat, you have to follow through correctly to get a good hit. If you don't do it correctly, you're liable to pop up or hit yourself on the head on the back swing or something equally as stupid. For online games, this translates into otherwise loyal players saying "Adios!" and taking a powder.

I submit UO as Exhibit A. Talk about unfulfilled potential! The problem noted in the paragraph above is *exactly* what has happened to the game. Remember all the bugs and the horrid latency on the servers when the game first came out? Remember how tough (read: damn near

impossible) it was and still is to get the attention of a customer service rep online? Things haven't changed much. While the game features more depth than perhaps any other current online game, in some ways UO is the *worst*. Bugs continue to randomly - on a daily basis - strip players of hours of the tedious, mind-numbing character building required to build a character that can survive, and the infamous player killers continue to rule many servers, driving customers to other shards or even out of the game. Servers crash on a regular basis, costing players a minimum of the last hour's play each crash, and OSI's server and bandwidth hosting partner continues to lead the Known Universe in latency and dropped data packets.

One might think this would be cause enough to make sure enough humans were staffed to deal with the inevitable problems. However, OSI has come up with a not-unique solution to the eternal problem of man-hour sucking customer service for online games: They just don't provide it. At least, not much, and certainly not in a timely manner.

The recent house upgrade and bug fix is a good example of how UO's "customer service" works. The "fix" cost one of my friends a large sailing ship and everything aboard it, items including horses, armor, etc., valued at 'way over 30,000 in UO game 'gold'. The game did this simply by removing my friend from the ship while she was sailing in it, moving her to the shoreline in the space of a second, while presenting over and over again the message, "You have been ejected from this house." Imagine it; everything you have worked for two months, suddenly and precipitously stripped away by a bug.

One would think this would be something OSI would jump on and fix. And they did fix it eventually. Three days later.

Three days may not seem like much to you, but it pretty well prevented my friend from playing effectively for that time; much of her equipment and resources were on that boat. My friend followed OSI's complaint procedure to the letter, but multiple pages to get the attention of a counselor in the game elicited precisely zero response in two days. At the same time, she filed an email bug report; it took two days for OSI to respond. Their response was that the ship was floating around somewhere and to page for a counselor. Quite aside from the total lack of response to previous pages, the UO Terms of Service explicitly state that counselors can't and won't handle missing items; they don't even have it on the menu choices when you page for help. And one of the peculiarities of UO is that ships and houses 'decay' over time; if you don't play, they disappear from the game. Ships have a tendency to decay and disappear after three days if you don't board them.

So now, she placed a phone call to OSI's customer service representatives. After about thirty minutes of waiting on hold, the CS rep gives her the same answer as was delivered in email. When my friend pointed out that online personnel weren't allowed to handle these problems, she was advised to lie to get a response.

So she did, although she didn't like having to lie (and being told to do so) just to get the problem fixed. For her, though, the only other choice was to just give up on UO, something that was becoming more desirable in her mind as she waited 42 minutes for a counselor to arrive. At

which point he fixed the problem in less than two minutes and a customer decided to give the game one more chance.

Of course, two weeks later, the exact same problem occurred. However, instead of fixing the problem, my friend was told she was now branded in the database as a "trouble maker" and if she continued to complain, she would be banned from the game. When she noted that she wouldn't have to complain and ask for a fix if OSI would just fix the sailing ship bug, she was told not to be an "impudent mortal."

Not only is this kind of treatment of the customer the height of arrogant stupidity, it is piss-poor customer service and guaranteed to drive customers away. Yeah, yeah, I know; the UO Terms of Service explicitly state everyone plays at his/her own risk. Legally, OSI probably needed do nothing to fix my friend's problem. And OSI is very quick to state that all they are providing is an environment and that it is up to the players to determine how much fun it will be.

However, it may seem simplistic, but the above and the many variations of it over the past 14 months, is the one of the main reasons most of those 150,000 dumped UO. How do I know this? How can I make this incredibly arrogant statement without even blushing? Have I taken a survey? Have I spoken to each of those 150,000 to ask them why they left?

No, and no. I don't need to; I've been a witness as these mistakes were made many times in many online games over the past twelve years. Every mistake made in UO has been made before in other online games; OSI either failed to learn those lessons, or decided not to spend the resources necessary to correct them, and history is just repeating itself. In the process, they have cheated themselves out of a large chunk of that \$1.5 million a month represented by the 150,000 players who bailed (\$18 million a year!). There is absolutely no reason, given good player relations and support, that UO shouldn't have 200,000 monthly subscribers today.

The fact that they don't, that only about 40% of all those pre-qualified customers stuck around to play the game, should be a source of worry and concern to OSI. Not only are they leaving nearly \$20 million a year on the table, they only have one more brand franchise capable of being turned into an online hit, *Wing Commander*. And there's lots of competition coming down the pike from the likes of Sony Online Entertainment and the ubiquitously inevitable Microsoft. These companies have the resources and knowledge to be able to turn any online game into a brand franchise. To grow larger than UO and/or *Wing Commander*, all they have to do is provide better follow-through.

But, of course, that assumes OSI isn't blinded by their current limited success and really does care about retaining more customers. I'm sure it does; the people at OSI aren't stupid and let's give credit where it is due for both creating a monster hit and leaping with both feet into what is, for them, a whole new type of product.

I suspect, however, that online product support and customer service is going to be the differentiating factor from now on. Anyone, and I do mean *anyone*, can develop an interesting online game. It is retaining the subscriber that is the hard part. The difference between having a successful online game that attracts and keeps most of the interested subscribers, and having a

marginal game that might actually turn a profit for years to come, is going to be how well the company responds to the player.

It is not the publishers with access to the huge brand names that have the advantage here. It is the companies that have been doing it successfully for years; I'm talking about the Kesmais, Mythic Games and the Simutronics' here.

A lesson for the publishers to learn, indeed. But will they?

1.3 Pressing the Flesh II: The Interactive Sequel

Volume Eight, Issue 3

February 16, 1999

Last September, I wrote an article for GameBytes entitled "Pressing the Flesh, the Interactive Way." In it was the following:

"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 Politically Correct.

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?"

So it was no surprise to me to see the following news blip appear on [FGN Online](#) on February 2:

3DO In Sex Rap

Industry: According to The San Francisco Independent, a sexual harassment suit has been filed against a 3DO manager. According to the women that instigated the suit, Kate Robinson and Holly Magno, the manager inquired as to breast size and harassed the women into going on dates. Robinson and Magno complained internally, but the plaintiffs claim that no action was taken by the company. 3DO was unavailable for comment at the time of going to press.

OK, there was one thing surprising about the story: that 3DO was the company accused. As far as I know, 3DO's management doesn't hang out in strip bars and use trips to same as rewards for horny, unsocialized developers, as do other well-known companies. I would have expected any one of several other computer game publishers to be the first hauled into court.

I'm sure that 3DO will not be the last company to be so honored. There is a sad truth to this whole thing: This incident, whether or not true or proven in court, will *not* be used as consciousness-raising event elsewhere. In the young, ego-ridden, sex-obsessed, hormone charged

atmosphere that passes for "working conditions" at many computer game publishers and developers, they know how to play this game. In public, it will be pointed to as a freak occurrence, not representative of the industry as a whole. Underground, the word will hit the grapevine to lay low for a while to let things cool off. I know; been there, done that, got the bra.

In a few days or weeks, the situation will go right back to being what it was before. The boys will continue to posture and make crude jokes when the girls aren't around and the locker room atmosphere will continue to build up until someone steps over the line. Then we'll go through this whole sordid mess again. It is a scenario that happens at many companies in many industries; it is especially virulent in computer gaming, with its very young, socially unsophisticated work force, led by younger than average senior management crews.

How can we collectively clean up the industry? What should we do about it? Nothing.

Do absolutely nothing. On the industrial scope, it just isn't worth worrying about anymore because this type of stupidity isn't going to stop, not in the computer game industry. It is too much a part of the culture. It starts right at the top with the senior executives, who serve as examples to be emulated by their charges. There is only one solution, and it is the one provided by law on a case-by-case basis.

You see, not only is the industry infested with young, ego-ridden, sex-obsessed, hormone charged kids, at the management level they are *money-hungry*, young, ego-ridden, sex-obsessed, hormone charged kids. So the solution is to hit them where they will *really* feel the pain: In their wallets.

Maybe if they don't have the weight of all that money in their back pocket dragging blood from the brains to below the waist, they'll start thinking about the kind of corporate culture they are promoting.

Tribal Warfare

When it comes to CD Hybrid games, i.e. retail games with an Internet component, I'm usually pretty hard on the industry. OK, I bitch and moan endlessly about it. I mean, how many times do we have to go over this before someone gets the idea? Mostly, the Internet TCP/IP component of so-called "Internet enabled" games is slapped on at the last minute and works about as well as last minute work generally does. Which is to say, not well at all. Having suffered through the incredibly bad multi-user implementations on *MechCommander* and *Axis and Allies*, I was pretty much ready to give up on the Hybrid portion of the industry as a lost cause.

So it was a pleasure to discover *Starsiege: Tribes* from Dynamix (<http://www.sierra.com/dynamix/tribes/>). Not only does it break out of the usual CD-ROM game mode of only 2 to 8 players by allowing up to 32 players per session, the game is made specifically for multiplayer use. There is almost no solo play involved, other than a few training scenarios; the guts of the game is playing it on the 'Net.

And this it does better than just about any other first person game out there. The multiplayer code is stable and well done. Unlike the mass of Hybrid FPS games, which run like a slide show at 250 milliseconds of lag on the Internet, *Tribes* plays quite well at between 200 ms and 250 ms lag times. If you have a high-speed connection such as a cable modem, ADSL or access to a T-1 leased line, *Tribes* plays quite smoothly, almost seamlessly, in fact.

Dynamix has also avoided the pitfalls of such shooters as *Quake* and *Unreal* by designing cooperative play into the framework of the game. Teams that operate as individual members on a mindless, deathmatch rampage tend to get the crap blasted out of them. Those that take a little time to plan some strategy and then cooperate during play tend to excel.

If you are in to multiplayer sessions on the Internet, *Tribes* is a game definitely worth checking out. This game actually makes me feel a bit more optimistic about the industry; it shows that we are capable of learning to adapt to changing technology and game styles.

I'd almost given up hope that could and would happen. Kudos to the team at Dynamix!

1.4 More Bugs: A Casualty of the Xmas Rush?

Volume Eight, Issue 4

February 23, 1999

Nothing makes me want to commit homicide more than finding a serious bug in a game I just paid \$50 for, especially a bug that could not possibly have slipped past the testers. I wish such bugs were a rare occurrence but, as we all know, it is the rule today, not the exception. And the closer it gets to the Christmas selling season, the worse are the bugs that "slip" past the testers.

Back in October's *Biting the Hand* column (<http://www.happypuppy.com/columns/bth/archive>), I noted the following about computer game publishers and the Christmas selling season:

"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?"

So imagine my total lack of surprise at seeing the following excerpt on GameSpot News on December 29th:

"Bungie Software today took the dramatic step of recalling the entire first production run of its just-released *Myth II: Soulblighter* (<http://www.bungie.com/mythii/>). Some of those CDs had made it to retailers and into gamers hands.

"Bungie's Doug Zartman alerted the industry and gaming public to a potential problem if gamers use the Uninstaller. Zartman said that "in certain unusual cases, using the Uninstaller can cause problems. If a user chooses an installation directory other than the default directory, they should NOT use the Uninstaller but should manually drag the *Myth II* folder into the Recycle bin and delete it.""

The Uninstaller bug in question would do more than "cause problems," as so eloquently put by Mr. Zartman. It could erase the entire root drive of the computer. For those unfamiliar with the term "root drive," that's where your operating system resides. As in, your C: drive. You know, where a lot of your stuff is installed, such as games, word processors and the like.

This would certainly tend to "cause problems" for a computer. This is like saying that shagging a bullet with your forehead could "cause problems" to your memory processes. I guess, technically, Mr. Zartman was being truthful in his statement, and I can hardly fault him for trying to put the best face on what could have been the PR Nightmare of the Year in computer gaming. As of today, I can't find mention of anyone who claims to have experienced the root drive erasure, so it looks like Bungie dodged that particular bullet.

And one has to applaud Bungie's drastic step of recalling the entire shipment of the game. It was the right thing to do and Bungie is going to have to eat that expense. I do have to wonder, however, how such a bug got past the testing crew, and just how the bug was later discovered.

The bug *Myth II* experienced is an extreme case, to be sure. Most of the bugs we're seeing in the Class of '98 Christmas ship are of the lesser sort, such as Looking Glass's *Thief* crashing when trying to use the bow, if software acceleration is being used instead of hardware acceleration. While this type of bug won't reformat your hard drive, it is frustrating enough to the average run of players. We're seeing more and more of this as the publisher's sacrifice quality and testing just to get the game on the shelf. ("Dammit, I don't need it *good*, I need it Tuesday!").

The stress on engineers, artists and testers is particularly high during what the industry calls the "Christmas Rush." The Rush starts about the first week of July. This is when executives start putting massive pressure on project teams to finish up, no matter what shape the game is in, for the Christmas selling season. Now, as far as executives are concerned, the Selling Season starts about October 1. It takes about two weeks for a "gold" disc (the finished product, supposedly) to be mastered, duplicated, put into boxes, shipped to distributors and then to retailers, to finally end up on the retail shelf. So even if a game is only half finished in July, the development team is expected to polish it off and ship it in two and a half months, even if they have to work two months of sixteen-hour days.

Considering the number of games that ship from late November to late December, we can see how well *that* works. With the development team frantically turning out version after version, each of which needs to go through the "Quality Assurance" process by the testing group, it is no wonder that thousands of bugs crop up. It is impossible to keep up with the load. Based on my experience, I'd bet good money that the average computer game ships with at least 50 known bugs. Some ship with a heck of a lot more; the arm-twisting on testing teams to sign off on games that still have nasty bugs in the code increases the closer it gets to December 1st. Even if they won't sign off, games have been known to go out the door without a QA signature.

Sometimes, entire bug-infested sections of games are yanked just before mastering the product. My spies tell me this is what happened with a current Top Three game that is selling like hotcakes. If you purchased a certain such Top Three game and it seemed a tad short on play to

you, you may have been correct. I am confidentially told by company insiders that the last 1/3 of the game was yanked out just before the ship, due to several hundred bugs that couldn't be quashed in time to get the game on the shelf for Christmas. So instead of delaying the ship, the publisher just tore out the whole section and shipped it anyway. (NOTE: If I can get a second source confirmation on this, I'll print the names of both the game and the publisher here. Until such confirmation, however, it would be unfair to print them.)

Now, if this rumor is true, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, I think it was a good thing that the publisher removed the infested section of the game, saving us buyers the trouble of pointing out a truckload of bugs they already knew about and wasting everyone's time in the process. And the game must still play well for most people; it has been on the Top Ten sales list for the past few weeks.

Interestingly, an "expansion pack" for the game has already been announced, scheduled to be shipped just a couple months from now. That's mighty fast work. A suspicious mind might be tempted to make a connection between the rumored excised section and the coming "expansion pack." Of course, none of us would ever suspect a computer game company of stripping out a large chunk of a game due to bugs, then charging us more money for it later on as an expansion pack. A *suspicious* mind would, but that's not any of us, I'm sure.

The point of all this: The indentured servitude of the publishers to the Christmas selling season is not good. It is a major reason there are more bugs in more games than ever before. One would think an industry with so many smart people in it could at least schedule enough development time for a game to allow adequate bug hunting before shipping the product. Why the industry should be learning the lesson at this late date is beyond me, but there it is. Or perhaps the answer is much simpler:

They already know the lesson, but it takes a back seat to generating income by getting product on the shelf.

Something Nice, For a Change

If you've been using computers and modems for any length of time, you know who Jerry Pournelle is and what Chaos Manor (<http://www.jerryypournelle.com>) stands for. For those who don't know of him, Dr. Pournelle is an author and columnist, well known for his popular column on technology and software, which ran in Byte magazine for years. He also pens pretty compelling science fiction novels and collaborates on others with Larry Niven, S.M. Sterling and other authors (Niven and Pournelle's *A Mote in God's Eye* is acknowledged as *the* classic first contact novel).

In 1990 and 1991, I was the product manager for Dr. Pournelle's forum on GENIE and I consider that period something of an Enlightenment for me. Jerry and his readers, perhaps the most intelligent and educated audience in the world, discussed everything under the sun, and those discussions opened up new worlds of reading and thought for me, personally, and for thousands of other visitors to The Jerry Pournelle RoundTable. Here is a measure of the success of that forum. Almost every one of the emails I received about it began with a line to the effect of

"Damn it, why won't he change his mind when I write my arguments?" and ended with a line to the effect of "Don't you *dare* ever cancel this RoundTable!"

Last year, Byte bit the dust, disappointed hundreds of thousands of readers who have come to depend on the Good Doctor's view to help make purchasing decisions regarding new software and hardware (including games). Thanks to the Web, however, you can still read Dr. Pournelle's views on technology, politics and more. He maintains a site at:

<http://www.jerrypournelle.com>

I consider this site a "must read." One may not always agree with Dr. Pournelle's views, but he is always informative and thought provoking. And he still has the most intelligent readers on the Web, as evidenced by reader mail. I try to hit this Web site just before sitting down to work. It really gets my creative juices flowing.

1.5 In the Biz

Volume Eight, Issue 5

Wednesday, March 3, 1999

One of the questions I am frequently asked is, "How can *I* get a job at a computer game company?" My reply is usually,

"Why the hell would you want to?"

This has the immediate effect of causing the inquirer to recoil in horror, hands held high to ward off the godless heretic (Well, its either that or the fact that I'm 6'4" and have been known to intimidate bear-wrasslin' lumberjacks with a casual look). For some reason, those who aren't in the computer games industry can't imagine why anyone wouldn't *want* to be in it or, for that matter, why *they* shouldn't be in it.

There's no particular reason why not, I guess. Aside from such minutia as the 60 to 70 hour workweek that becomes 80 to 90 hours during the Christmas Rush, that is. And being expected to sleep in the office so you can get more work time in, if it looks like you might miss the already unreasonably short and completely arbitrary deadlines set by "older and wiser heads." And the below software industry pay scale. And the squalid, cramped working conditions. And lack of benefits and perquisites enjoyed by similar workers in other segments of the software industry. And being treated not as a person, but as a profit center to enrich stock-holding, six-figure salaried executives. And being laid off two weeks before Christmas with no notice after your game ships to retail. And having no social life because you are working 60 to 70 hours a week. And, and, and

Other than these little things, there is absolutely no reason not to find a job developing computer games.

There is also absolutely no reason not to suck on the lit end of road flare, either. All it takes to endure either activity is passion: One the one hand, a passion for games and gaming and, on the other hand, a passion for unbridled pain and agony. Now that I think of it, the two are more similar than I first considered.

Passion is where it begins. If you don't have a passion for playing games and burning need to create them, your chances of getting hired to make them are quite low. It is the first thing Producers and Executive Producers look for during an interview. While I have never sucked on a lit road flare, I do know the kind of passion it takes to put up with the sweatshop-like atmosphere that passes for working conditions at most game developers and publishers. And there are plenty like me out there; the supply seems endless. For the first week or so, the enthusiasm fairly flies off these brand-new, never-worked-on-a-game-before, entry-level programmers, QA testers and telephone technical support employees. This is it, the Holy Grail! Of course, once the reality of the situation hits them, that attitude disappears faster than a sailor's promise when the anchor rises.

"Wannabes" have all the passion in the world. The other side of that coin is that most wannabes won't do what it takes to be part of the game development community. Passion is not enough; you have to have the tools of the trade, too. All most people see is the final product. They look at that and say to themselves, "Heck, I can do *that*." What they don't see is what it took to acquire the tools necessary to be there in the first place. Such as the four long years of college, taking every math course available and learning every programming language in the book. Or learning to draw 3D models with a mouse. Or learning how to use Microsoft Project and spending three months listing every one of the tens of thousands of individual tasks it will take to develop a new game from beginning to end. Or, or, or

It is these unglamorous tasks that actually make a computer game come alive, and it is just these sorts of tasks that most people don't want to do. I don't know how many times some enthusiastic kid has stopped me after a seminar and told me he wants to be a "computer game designer." There seems to be this impression out there that a designer doesn't need to know programming, 3D modeling, the Direct X package, mathematics or any of that icky stuff. Apparently, a designer is one who just sits around and thinks up cool games, which other people then program. That's not so hard; golly, just *anyone* can do that! My buddies and I do *that* all the time!

So it is with a touch of sadness that I inform them that most of the respected game designers I've met and worked with are among the best educated, most widely read and natively bright people I know. Rarely does someone walk into a game developer off the street and become a game designer. Most of them know their way around some C code, and all of them are at least passing familiar with the concepts. The best ones, people like Dan Greenberg and Greg Costikyan, started out designing "paper and pencil" role-playing and strategy board games. And these people also share one other trait; the simple joy of *learning*, for its own sake.

In other words, it is a lot of work, a staggering amount of work, work that requires a very bright and learned person to do correctly. The more you know about programming, graphics, 3D modeling, literature, history, mythology, psychology, et al, the better you can do the job.

As you might imagine, the fanatics that buttonhole me in person rarely take this seriously. Like the die-hard fans of the X-Files TV show, they *want* to believe, to believe in the purity and sanctity of computer games and their own, personal place in the Temple of Game Goodness. They think I'm intentionally exaggerating the work out of all proportion to weed out the weak sisters or to prevent new competition from springing up. One person actually accused me of recognizing his innate brilliance for game design and trying to quash his career before it began, so that he wouldn't be competition to me in my declining years.

This is much the same syndrome experienced by actors accosted by would-be Thespians. I know, because acting is another career I once pursued. The same type of starry-eyed wannabes would grab me by the arm after a show and demand to know how they, too, could be in show biz. After all, how hard can it be to just stand there and talk?

I would try to explain to them everything it took to be a working actor. It involves a *lot*. Want to know what its like being an actor just starting out? I was once required to learn following skills during one short, nine week Summer Stock season:

- Juggle a simple cascade;
- Play two tunes on the guitar;
- Fight with both broadsword and the fencing saber;
- Dance an Irish jig;
- Use a bow well enough to fire four arrows in less than a minute *and* hit a target thirty feet away on the stage in full view of the audience;
- 1950s swing dancing (akin to the jitterbug) for three full dance numbers;
- Sing a madrigal;
- Speak clearly in four foreign dialects, and;
- Play a deaf character and use American Sign Language well enough to fool any hearing-impaired person in the audience.

All this, while simultaneously rehearsing and memorizing lines for five plays and the lines and songs for a musical, plus acting as stage crew for three other shows. Nine plays in nine weeks; I had to hire someone to do my laundry. If I could have hired someone to sleep for me, I would have.

Now, want to know what it is like being a development team member on a computer game? Take the above and double it. Now stab yourself through the hand with a ballpoint pen. That should give you the idea of it.

If it is so all-fired painful and consuming, you ask, why are *you* still doing it?

What, and give up show biz?

1.6 Jack and The Beancounter

Volume Eight, Issue 6
Wednesday, March 10, 1999

Jack and The Beancounter **A Fable For The Computer Age**

Once upon a time, there was a young developer named Jack.

Jack produced 3D action shooters. Being a pious young developer, Jack naturally worshipped the great god Creativity. That deity smiled on Jack for his piousness, bestowing on him the rare attributes of Great Design, Elegant Code and Fast Programming. Jack's games were fun and delivered on time to the consumer, and everyone agreed that his shooters were the best.

Jack's games were so good, in fact, they moved off the retail shelves like free cheese at a government handout. The company he worked for became very big and wealthy, with many employees. The company executives, most of whom hadn't the talent to be developers and resented Jack because of it, became very rich, while Jack continued to slave away on his beloved games for mere wages. Oh, and the occasional free pizza and can of Jolt.

Jack was an unassuming young man, however, who liked games and loved the idea that many people would play *his* games. He thought that was very cool. He was happy making games people enjoyed playing. So because he loved games and the people who played them so much, he continued to work for far less than the senior executives, who didn't really contribute much to the games, although they told the world they did.

And lo! the world believed them, because the executives controlled the mighty demon Press Release, an evil being that could seduce ignorant, lazy journalists into believing *anything*. The journalists constantly reprinted verbatim what Press Release said of the executives, and Jack, who did the real thinking, lived on unknown and unsung.

After a while, the demon could even make the executives believe they were great, though they knew better. Like most executives, they weren't evil, just stupid, greedy and full of themselves. Much like politicians, in fact, but that's another story.

The executives began to believe they were great men and women of unsurpassed business ability, responsible for the company's rise to power in the industry. They began to send email to Jack, telling him that several hundred new features must be in his game. They awarded themselves stock options and large salaries and bonuses. They spoke at conventions and seminars, telling their associates from other companies how they made the company a powerhouse. They gave interviews to journalists, attributing to themselves the mystic skills of Power of Distribution, Excellent Negotiator and Great Sense Of Where The Market Is Going. They were flying high in hog heaven and looked forward to retiring as respected — and incredibly rich — members of the industry.

That's when the megagod Reality showed up.

As everyone except executives know, Reality is a capricious but easily seen god. That's why he normally picks on executives; they've been blinded by their own light and are easy targets.

Reality gazed on the market and saw that it was bad. He mused to himself, Well, if everyone likes Jack s games, they ll like even more of them. So, with a sly grin and a sense of the absurd, he went about inspiring the company s competitors to flatter by imitation. Soon, there were dozens of games on the retail shelves that were just like Jack s games. Development of other types of games slowed to a near-halt. Sales at Jack s company began to fall off. A lot. Like, by nearly 50%. Ouch.

The executives became worried, but not too much. After all, the demon Press Release was still under their control and journalists were still lazy and ignorant. No one had to know just how bad things were. In the meantime, the executives prayed to the deity Great Deal in hopes for a windfall and read the front page of the Wall Street Journal.

But Great Deal took an extended vacation that season and sales continued to fall. Yet the executives still weren t too worried, because Jack would save them with his next game, due Real Soon Now for the Christmas selling season. Jack would save the company yet one more time, then the executives would sell their options and get the hell out before things fell apart.

When September rolled around, however, there was no new game from Jack. Hey, it s taking longer than I thought, shrugged Jack.

But we bought the shelf space! cried the executives. We already shipped the end caps and bought the advertising for the Christmas selling season! We issued preliminary numbers for the 4th quarter! Our stockholders will sue the crap out of us!

Hey, Creativity doesn t work on a deadline and you ordered me to put hundreds of new features in the game, said Jack calmly. You can have it in January. Maybe February. April, for sure. Guaranteed, no later than June. Or July. You can never be sure.

That s when the interesting god Panic showed up.

It struck the hearts of the executives with major fear, and they cowered behind their desks, saying, All is lost and, if something isn t done, everyone will see us for what we really are! We have to sell the company to Microsoft at an inflated, outrageous price!

But Microsoft, which was already a deity in its own mind, had it s own problems with the occasional god Justice and couldn t be bothered right then. So the executives approached everyone they could think of, but no one wanted to buy the company. We ll wait for the fire sale, they all said, showing their teeth and laughing.

Panic whispered in the ears of the executives again, saying, Only that most fearsome demigod, Beancounter, can save you now! And so the executives prayed to Beancounter, who showed up immediately on a plane from Cambridge, Mass. Riding in coach, of course, having refused to pay \$4 for a headset to watch the in-flight movie, which starred his wife.

Beancounter immediately took control of the company from the Panicked executives, saying to them, Worry not. Your jobs and perqs are safe, because you prayed sincerely to me. Everyone

else around here is in for a surprise, however. And so Beancounter drew his sword and began slashing.

The first thing to go was free Jolt and pizza for the developers. This was followed quickly by a new set of policies and procedures designed to make it impossible to buy anything more expensive than a postage stamp, and then only after weeks of delay and dozens of forms to be filled out. Then, faster than you can say Low margins on SKUs, Beancounter sliced up Human Resources, Finance and Marketing. When he was done, half the company had been fired and the rest were scared to death. The vital god Morale was nowhere to be found. The executives breathed a sigh of relief and continued reading the Wall Street Journal.

Then Beancounter set his sights on Development.

After nosing around the department for several days, Beancounter slid into Jack's office one morning, plastered an evil smile on his face and said, I'm afraid we're going to have to let go a few of your people.

That's not very realistic, said Jack, not looking up from his monitor, if you want this game finished sometime this incarnation.

I don't have to be realistic, said Beancounter gleefully. I'm an MBA. Reality has nothing to do with my job description.

It ought to, replied Jack, still coding merrily away. These people create the games that pay your salary.

I am perfectly aware of that, smiled Beancounter. That's why we have to fire half of them. It makes perfect sense, if you look at it from my point of view.

Jack turned to look at Beancounter. If you fire even one of my people, he said grimly, you'll really, really not like what happens.

Nevertheless, replied Beancounter triumphantly, half of them are fired. You pick them, and then tell them before lunch. And don't forget to inform HR before the end of the day, he chortled, returning to his corner office.

When Beancounter arrived at the office the next day, he found the executives all huddled in office, quaking in terror. What's wrong this time? he asked impatiently.

Jack resigned! they cried in unison. And he took his team with him!

But, but, but spluttered Beancounter, where can they go? The job market around here sucks!

Our competitors gave them millions in funding to set up a new company and develop a Jack Game for them! they wailed. All is lost!

You re right, said Beancounter. Prepare to worship Bankruptcy and Receivership. And he immediately called up his old college roommate and got a job at AT&T at a higher salary for less responsibility.

The Moral: In the Game Business, if you worship the wrong gods, you re going to get Jacked around.

1.7 Color me boneheaded

Volume 8, Issue 7
March 16, 1999

In my biweekly Online Games Insider email newsletter a few weeks back, I wrote about the demise of Purple Moon, a computer game developer formed specifically to produce games that appealed to young girls. My thesis was, generally, that Purple Moon couldn't compete with the likes of Mattel, whose Barbie fluff pieces command over 64 percent of the girl's software market, and that that was a damn shame.

The replies to this bit were quick, sharp and mainly pointed out that I was over-generalizing or ignoring the true reasons for that demise. In other words, I was politely being called a bonehead. Well, it wasn't the first time and won't be the last, I'm sure. The points were so well made, however, I thought I would share some of them. Below is the original article; below that are two of the better responses.

Purple Moon Shuts Down

I'm going to wax philosophical for a bit. Another noble effort to design software for girls that has more meaning than deciding who is prettier or more fashionable went under this past week. As someone who believes more morally responsible titles need to be produced, I think that stinks. As a free market advocate, I think the market has spoken, whether I like it or not.

Citing recent market and retail consolidation, games-for-girls developer Purple Moon closed its doors and laid off about 40 employees last week, after beginning operations only two and a half years ago. The company was the brainchild of *Computers as Theatre* author Brenda Laurel, based on research she and others, including the late Dani Bunten Berry, conducted for Paul Allen's [Interval Research Corporation](#).

That research focused on the gender differences and playing patterns of children ages 8 to 12. According to Interval, "The profile of contemporary American girls that emerged through these studies differed markedly from conventional wisdom and more recent stereotypes. Purple Moon's mission is to build upon these insights to publish a portfolio of branded products in several media, focused on the contemporary interests and needs of young girls." The resulting product line, headlined by a young lady named Rockett Movado and the moral and ethical dilemmas she faced growing up, never seemed to catch on with the target market. The company

brought in only about \$4.7 million last year, while spending millions on TV and print advertising.

According to PC Data, that gave them only about 5.7% of the girl's software market. In hindsight, Interval should probably have spent more time researching how to break into a market that is controlled as tightly and viciously as are the New York City docks by organized crime. Mattel owns 64.5% of the girl's software market, soon to be 86.1%, after Mattel finishes absorbing The Learning Company, headlined by the Barbie line of fluff pieces (<http://www.barbie.com>). While there is nothing wrong with playing with dolls, such software titles as *Barbie Nail Designer*, *Barbie Jewelry Designer* and *Barbie Cool Looks Fashion Designer* are hardly groundbreakers. They are intended to do one thing; sell more dolls and the "refill" packs for the software titles. The worst moral dilemma faced by a child playing with the *Fashion Designer* software is the possible gaff of dressing Barbie in white after Labor Day. Oh, the embarrassment!

The *Rockett* series went a bit deeper than that, focusing on such issues as how peer pressure affects friendships and sometimes forces hard choices. The whole line was truly a noble effort and should be applauded. Like most noble efforts, unfortunately, it was mugged by a bigger brand name with more money to spend. The Barbie brand name, teamed with the incredible marketing resources and dollars of Mattel, pretty much seals the fate of anyone else trying to enter the market through traditional retail channels. Purple Moon recognized this and attempted to bypass those channels for venues such as bookstores, Wal Marts, Price Clubs and toy stores. Unfortunately for them, these are not yet mature software channels and sales were punky, to say the least. Nice try, but no dice.

Being a free market advocate, I'm in something of a moral dilemma myself. The Barbie titles show once again that well-known brand names can and do control markets. There is nothing wrong with this, per se, as long as no unlawful anti-competitive actions are taken by the brand name. However, software that entertains but also teaches is something I consider an important issue; I'm probably one of the few in this industry in that camp. It is extremely unlikely, however, that "thinking" titles can challenge the brand names without either the expenditure of tens of millions of dollars over a period of many years, or government intervention.

There aren't many companies willing to spend \$100 million plus to own market share in a niche market. But I can hardly advocate regulatory pressure on Mattel and the retailers to produce more meaningful titles for young girls, however much the lingering social engineer in me might be tempted to do so. That way is a slippery slope to "meaningful" intervention that none of us want to go down. The cure would be worse than the disease.

It really comes down to parental choice and supervision, as it always does in these cases. If America's parents would rather their kids play with software that demonstrates the difference between a sweetheart and princess neckline instead of the difference between standing up for what you believe or giving in to peer pressure, there isn't a lot that can be done about it. Not without violating a slough of Constitutional rights, anyway, and none of us would advocate that. I think we're stuck with the situation until someone decides to spend a lot of money, over quite a few years, to gain some meaningful market share and let parents know they *have* a choice. If the

Rockett titles had been allowed to sit side-by-side on the shelf with the Barbie titles, I suspect there would be fewer anatomically incorrect dolls wearing empire waist gowns today and more young ladies who know the difference between form and substance. I despair that we're stuck with a market that favors the former over the latter. Such is the free market and we shouldn't change it. Purple Moon's demise probably means that quality titles for young girls are still some years away, if they ever get here.

And that *really* stinks.

From Doug Whatley, founder and head honcho over at developer Breakaway Games:

You are way off base on Purple Moon! As someone who supported them and even tried to develop for them, I certainly am disappointed at their failure. However, it once again proves, to me, that focus groups and scholarly research can't identify good creative products. These focus groups always gravitate toward what they are used to or what they think they should like.

Unique creative product will always lose at a focus group, since I think that only creative, innovative people can identify a good product at first glance. Until the sales numbers prove the game is fun, most people won't believe those developers are trying to create something new or different.

Second, nobody really wants morally deep entertainment. I love studying history. I love a deep book. I like being morally challenged. I enjoy those because I like learning. But, they aren't entertainment. Moreover, until children have the real world experience that induces them to want to learn, they won't love learning just for learning's sake. Barbie succeeds because that is what little girls want and enjoy. *Rockett* failed because that is what "high minded" adults want little girls to want. That isn't disparaging of little girls; it just says they are little girls and not "high minded" adults. Give them the chance to be children. They have plenty of time as adults to deal with big moral issues.

For the same reason that philosophers can't get on the NY Times best-seller list, you won't find anything but fun games at the top of the PC Data charts. I happen to think that is a good thing or else we would all live boring lives.

From Greg Costikyan, the lead designer on [Fantasy War](#) at Crossover for Sony:

Bosh. These games sucked.

Consider *Rockett's New School*; it's basically a graphic adventure. Okay so far, nothing wrong with that. Your objective: to Make Friends. Okay, this is making me nauseous already; yes, girl gamers tend to be more sensitive to players' emotions than stinky boys, and "play to be friendly" more than "play to impress," but to take this result of research and say "therefore, we do a game in which the literal objective is to make friends" is a *reductio ad absurdum*.

But nonetheless; fine, we need to make friends. It is at least a clear objective, a *sine qua non* of any good game. How do we make friends? We wander about and have conversations. How do we have conversations? Well, at each decision point in the conversational tree, we have three

available conversational gambits. The gambits always wind up being a choice between "be a jerk," "be sunny" and "be a wimp." This is brain dead; better conversational engines have existed since, oh, *Zork*, say.

Okay. Never mind. So which is the better choice? What considerations go into making a choice? How do I navigate my way through these decisions in order to achieve my goal? The answer: *it doesn't matter!* You can choose to behave like a bitch at every decision point, or behave like a mouse, or mix up your responses, and the eventual outcome is the same every time--you make friends and have a successful first day at school. I watched my daughter go through just about every possible branch of the tree, and become increasingly frustrated--and convinced, as I was--that the game sucked, because *none of it mattered*. No amount of feminist rabble-rousing, no amount of cheering the development of games for girls by girl developers, instead of stinky boy games developed by stinky boys, could hide the fact that Purple Moon's product sucked.

And no amount of vaunted "research into play styles" can improve games that are poorly designed *ab ovo*.

Poor Purple Moon just couldn't compete with Barbie? Balderdash; I've never seen a developer get as much favorable press as Purple Moon. They had their shot, and they blew it. No tragedy here.

1.8 Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life

Volume 8, Issue 8

Tuesday, March 23, 1999

People often ask me why game publishers keep retreading two concepts, the real-time strategy (RTS) game and the 1st person, 3D action game (Shooter). The implication here is that gamers are getting bored with these two genres and want something new and fresh.

Somehow, I thought the answer was a tad obvious; it goes to greed and laziness.

Then again, those of us who work with this stuff, day in and day out, have a tendency to be amazed that everyone doesn't understand what we do. It is a symbiotic relationship; if that is what the gamer will buy, that is what we will make. However, money does play another part in this; as we'll discuss below, RTS and Shooters are pretty easy to develop compared to RPGs or adventure games. So there is something of self-fulfilling prophecy in all this; sure you'll buy a good Shooter, but you'll buy a good RPG, too. Only, it takes more money and time to develop an RPG, so more Shooters and RTS games get to the shelves.

Both the Shooter and the RTS have been around for about five years now and we have so many clones of the original *Warcraft* and *Doom* on the shelves, it sometimes seems as if they are the only types of games developed these days. In the final analysis, they are all pretty much the same game. What is *Half Life*, after all, except *Doom* on steroids? What is *Age of Empires*, if not *Warcraft* without the elves and dragons?

So, if they are so undifferentiated, why *do* publishers keep developing them?

Publishers know you will buy them.

We all figure there are about 4 million hard-core gamers out there. These are the people most likely to buy one or two games a month, 12 to 14 games a *year*, so these are the customers that publishers and developers cater to. The Hard Core gamers like Shooters and RTS games and they are fairly easy to produce, so that's what gets developed.

In reality, most developers would rather be working on the Great American Game, much as writers thirty years ago wanted to write the Great American Novel. The realities of the business don't allow for that, so they work on the next boring 1st Person, 3D action game and dream of having the cash to do their dream project. That's why small groups of developers have a tendency to break away from parent companies at the first sign of success; to work on the games they *want* to work on.

Once you've done one RTS or Shooter, it is a hell of a lot easier to do the next one.

Change some of the art, add a few weapons and voila! You have the next game in the series. You didn't really think the developers went back to the drawing board and did Shooter 2, 3 and 4 from scratch, did you? The only thing about Shooters and RTS games that should amaze any of us is that so much money is wasted developing the sequels. Considering what we actually get in terms of features and new game play, probably half the money spent on developing them represents valuable dead presidents tossed down a rat hole. A very deep and dark rat hole.

They are a lot easier to develop than a game with an actual storyline and game play.

Let's be realistic: Shooters are just the PC's answer to console games and RTS is a cool fad that developed legs. They are both easy to learn and play and, for the most part, don't put a whole lot of strain on the gray matter.

Games such as *Star Control* or *Betrayal at Krondor*, on the other hand, are far more compelling experiences. They are also a lot tougher to design and more expensive to develop. Basically, it requires real talent to design an adventure game, and real talent is a commodity in short supply in the game industry.

Not to say developing a game such as *Warcraft*, for example, doesn't take some talent; at the risk of offending friends in the industry, it just doesn't take as much talent as a good RPG or adventure game. For all that *Warcraft* kicked off the RTS craze, it shouldn't escape us that the RPG version of it was quashed in its infancy.

Publishers know you will buy them.

Did I mention that publishers know you will buy pretty much any piece of junk they send to the retail shelf, as long as it is labeled a Shooter or RTS? Look at the list of Top Twenty sellers from

PC Data any month (www.pcddata.com). It is dominated by Mass Market trailer trash, Shooters and RTS games. Sure, the occasional RPG or adventure game slips in, but only because they so few RPGs and adventures get developed. When someone actually bothers to spend the time and money to develop one, it pretty much automatically hits the list for a while.

This means that, in one sense, publishers are just following the money. You pay for Shooters and RTS, that's what yer gonna get, pard.

What it all comes down to, then, is this:

Right now, there is no incentive for publishers or developers to innovate and come up with something new; you buy everything they slap on the shelves in enough quantity to pay the bills. Why should they take a chance on innovation when they don't have to?

If you really are looking for something new and fresh and are bored with Shooters and RTS games, *stop buying them*. Buy something else, like an RPG or adventure game. If you can convince enough people to do this, then the industry will have to come up with something to replace them.

Seems simple enough to me.

1.9 The Conference Formerly Known as the Computer Game Developer's Conference

Volume 8, Issue 9

Tuesday, March 30, 1999

The Conference Formerly Known as the Computer Game Developer's Conference (now renamed just the GDC, for some unexplained reason) took place last week in San Jose, CA. This was the 13th such iteration of Chris Crawford's brainchild. It was a quiet, almost boring conference this year; very little that was new or interesting turned up.

This issue, I'll just give some general impressions, while they are still fresh in my head. Later on, I'll write about specifics, including a great one-hour discussion I had with a couple people working on Origin's *Ultima Online* (<http://www.owo.com>). I wouldn't have expected that they would spend so much time with me, as critical of the game as I have occasionally been in the past. Well, I would have expected such attention, with the addition of heated irons and a rack. But they were very forthcoming about upcoming changes to the game; they got me excited. Not to mention convincing me that the *UO* crew knows what they are about. It should be a revealing article.

Meanwhile, some impressions:

The hit of the show for the attendees was overwhelmingly the online-only role-playing game *EverQuest* (<http://www.station.sony.com/everquest/>). Developed by Verant Interactive and published by Sony Online Entertainment, the 1st Person, 3D graphics-based MUD was launched

at the show on Tuesday, March 16. Developers and press wanting a demo of the game constantly crowded the tiny Sony Online booth, which was run by Sony's Producer Bridgette Patrovsky and was voted Best Small Booth of the Show in a landslide by those same attendees. I suspect if Sony had sprung for booth space larger than an airplane restroom, they would have taken Best Large Booth; interest in *EverQuest* was that strong.

As a subscription based offering, the game is a raging success already (albeit with some highly publicized player access problems). Using a business model similar to Origin's *Ultima Online*, in which the player buys the game at retail and pays a flat rate monthly fee for access, some 17,000 people bought the retail unit and subscribed to the game *on the first day*. Mid-day on Thursday, I overheard a Sony Online senior executive tell a colleague at the Miller Freeman booth that about 25,000 had subscribed and Sony expected 30,000 by the end of that day.

Not bad at all; if they keep up this rate of subscriptions, they might match and even beat *Ultima Online*'s 1997 launch rate of 80,000 in the first couple months. Rich Vogel, *UO*'s Producer, stood at the Sony booth and cheered them on. "I hope they grow the industry," he said, grinning. "That would be good for all of us." Mr. Vogel is a class act, indeed.

Two months ago, I would have expected *EverQuest* to rack in maybe 20,000 subscriptions the first six months. Now it looks like they will beat that estimate by a factor of at least three or four. Sony and Verant have a bona fide hit on their hands. This success also bodes well for Turbine Entertainment's *Asheron's Call* (<http://www.turbinegames.com/>), an extremely similar online-only game to be launched on Microsoft's The Zone later this year. The only real question is whether *Asheron's Call* and *EQ* will cannibalize limited market share from each other or if each will develop a strong audience in its own right.

1st Person/3D shooters are still a hot genre, so it was no surprise that tools to generate and manipulate 3D models and worlds were all the rage on the Exposition show floor. You couldn't move ten feet without some booth bimbo stepping in your path and shoving literature about "the most powerful 3D tools!" in your face. Nothing particularly new in the way of such tools presented itself; there were just more companies hawking them.

It did appear that, on an evolutionary basis, there was quite a bit of refinement. Intel's multi-resolution mesh technology (MRM) received quite a bit of attention. It is designed to scale the level of detail of a model to the amount of processing power available. In other words, artists using MRM won't have to create several variants of differing resolution for each model, as is now the case. A single high-res model can be built, and MRM will then tailor that model on the fly to suit the user's current processing power. See <http://developer.intel.com/ial/3Dsoftware/mrm.htm> for more information.

If MRM works as advertised this could drastically cut development times and graphics costs for 3D games. The cynic in me keeps whispering that now it will be even easier to get another *Quake* clone to market, further saturating an already crowded market niche. On the other hand, having more time available might also encourage developers to look more closely at design and game play. Hey, it could happen.

In terms of retail games, the hit of the show was Valve's 3D shooter, *Half-Life* (<http://www.sierrastudios.com/games/half-life/>). The game walked away with a handful of awards. While I consider *Half-Life* just another Quake clone on steroids, it's a *good* clone on steroids. It has all the features and technology you would expect, is fun to play, and has a couple nice surprises built in. It even has something of a well-designed story, which is a nice change for a genre that should be renamed CarnageWare.

My favorite feature was being able to really *use* enplaced objects. For example, I was able to sidle up behind a .50 caliber machine-gun emplacement and use it to blow away a carload of nasties. *Very* nice.

Another nice feature was the great tutorial. This is the best I've ever seen in a shooter; even someone unfamiliar with shooters could run the tutorial and have a good idea of how to work within the game. Nicely done, Valve.

Overall, attendance was obviously down from last year. Miller Freeman said in a press release at the start of the show that they expected 7,000 attendees; that was wildly optimistic, in my opinion and in the opinion of everyone I asked. Hardly a scientific survey, but the general impression was that there were *maybe* 3,500 attendees, if you included all the booth workers. That estimate seemed about right on Wednesday, the second day of the show, when I did a quick estimate by walking the Expo show floor, counted heads in the hall and stuck my head into the seminar and lecture sessions.

If the attendance was truly down that far, the cost of attending the conference was the one of the main culprits. At \$675 to \$1100 a head, with another \$800-plus for travel and lodging (every hotel near the San Jose Convention Center raised its rates from an average \$79 a night to \$179 a night, just to soak the convention attendees), companies are sending fewer employees to the show. Back before Miller Freeman bought the show, the price was \$250 a head, which most developers could pay for out of pocket. There were always a couple people wandering the halls without a show badge, but it was no big deal.

This year, many people chose to forego the purchase of a show badge; they just wandered the halls and hotel lobbies, talking to people they knew; this phenomenon was pointed out to me by more than one person. More developers chose to do this than in any one year that I can remember, and I've been attending the CGDC since 1989, when it moved out of Chris Crawford's living room and into a hotel in Santa Clara.

Another reason for lower attendance would be the ongoing controversy of cost versus value of the GDC. Every single person I asked felt they received less for their money this year than last year, which cost the same price. The reasons were pretty subjective, of course. They ranged from the inevitable knocks on bad food ("I paid \$1,100 for a boxed lunch?") to seminars and lectures run by people better at making proposals to the GDC than making games ("That guy never finished a project in his life; what's he doing telling *me* how to make games?").

Miller Freeman would be well advised to spend some time thinking about how to improve the quality of the seminars, and maybe dropping the price a tad.

I asked 63 people in an informal poll what one thing they would change about the GDC. The two top vote-getters were lowering the price to the point that an individual (as opposed to a company) could pay for it, and either screening the speakers more carefully or reducing the number of seminar and lecture spots in favor of quality, not quantity.

Amusingly, more than one person mentioned the Miller Freeman/Nihilistic Software (<http://www.nihilistic.com/>) 'We're sending everyone in the company to the GDC; shouldn't you?' promotion campaign. The funniest reply came from a person who looked around at the huge posters featuring employees from Nihilistic that were plastered on every column in the convention hall and said, "We *must* find a way to separate Nihilistic's nose from the GDC Board's lower anatomy."

The ten or twelve of us standing around cracked up. What makes this even more amusing is that the person's badge noted he was from Activision. Nihilistic's only development project so far is the vampire game *Redemption*, to be published by you guessed it, Activision.

Most of the attendees I spoke to were merely exasperated by the untried Nihilistic's shameless image management. Not that *they* wouldn't do it, too, given half a chance; publicity is what you make of it. We all found it curious that a company without a single game to its credit was chosen for the promo, however.

1.10 This fragged corpse brought to you by

**Volume 8, Issue 10
Tuesday, April 6, 1999**

Advertising? In *computer games*? Oh, say it ain't so, Joe!

Unfortunately, it is so. Last month, Salon Magazine journalist Janelle Brown (janelle@salonmagazine.com) was the first to break the story about attempts by Conducent (<http://www.conducent.com/>) and other companies to create technology that would allow publishers to insert advertising in games (<http://www.salonmagazine.com/21st/feature/1999/03/22feature.html>). The advertising might take several forms, including interstitial commercials of varying length and "clickable" objects like Coke cans that would route the player to the Coca-Cola web site, for example.

I don't know about you, but I play games to ditch this sordid reality and get away from it all for a few minutes. Nothing quite takes the mind off the stresses of the day like planning a strategy to backstab an ally in *Starcraft*, or booting up *Half-Life* or *Quake* and blasting a few alien nasties. Just about the last thing I want to have happen at those times is something that jerks me out of the game and slaps me in the face with that same reality. I get downright surly about it; if the phone rings, someone knocks on the door or even if the neighbor kids start being loud and unruly while I'm fragging something, I get very annoyed. Anything that detracts from the game gets

slammed immediately with Mercutio's Curse ("A pox 'a *both* your houses!") and banished to the Seventh Circle of Hell.

Publishers *like* this attitude in a customer. They spend a lot of time talking about how "immersive" their games are and how such immersion improves the gaming experience and helps build customer loyalty. Now they want to consider pulling us out of that immersion by selling ad space in the games? That makes about as much sense as well, it doesn't make sense at all. I don't care if it's product placement, interstitial commercials or even ads thrown into free download demos; it just plain isn't right.

This is a development I anticipate with all the excitement of receiving a colonic. Like we aren't bombarded by enough ads in our daily lives already; you can't walk twenty feet these days without having one shoved in your face. For God's sake, in Los Angeles they even put ads on individual pieces of fruit in the grocery store. They are *everywhere*; any bare surface is fair game for the marketers. Every morning when I wake up and head for the bathroom, I half-expect to see that some hireling has sneaked into the house during the night and painted an ad on my forehead for Viagra, Preparation H or some other product equally irrelevant to my life.

It is one thing to provide a free service and support it with ads, such as television or this web site; it is quite another to charge for the product *and* insert ads. Of course, publishers never let the right thing get in the way of squeezing out an extra penny here and there. If they can make an extra few thousand dollars by inserting ads in games without having to improve the quality, they'll do it. They'll worry about how it affects the next end of quarter financial statement, not how it effects their credibility with the customer.

Not that the publishers have a whole lot of credibility right now with many of us, anyway. They must be smoking crack if they think they can get away with this while they *knowingly* ship bug-ridden product to the retail shelf. This itself is a scandal to the jaybirds. In any other industry, knowingly shipping defective product would be cause for civil and criminal lawsuits and massive fines. Just ask the Ford Motor Company; they gave Ralph Nader his start by knowingly shipping defective cars.

Of course, a fatal software bug isn't of the same magnitude as killing someone, but why software companies are allowed to get away with it is beyond me. The worst offender is Microsoft, which regularly imposes on their monopoly to make paying customers beta test products. However, game companies aren't far behind; when the first patch to fix a fatal error for a game is available for download within a day of the package hitting the shelf, you know there is a decaying rodent fouling the chilly Scandinavian air.

There is one circumstance in which I *might* be tempted to buy a game that included advertising: If there were a hefty price discount included. Such as, if I had the choice between buying the game without ads for \$40, or with ads for \$9.95; that would be a no-brainer. And this only if the ads don't intrude upon the game itself. I wouldn't want to have the game interrupted in mid-stride by a catchy little jingle extolling the cancer preventative virtues of Metamucil (<http://www.metamucil.com/>), for example. Unfortunately, I suspect any price discounts we might see will be something on the order of a drop from \$40 to maybe \$30 and the ads will be

whatever the company can sell for placement. There's a better than even chance we'll see no price drop at all at the start; they'll test the waters to see if ads have a significant negative impact on sales. If there isn't watch out.

In this tawdry, ad-ridden, over-marketed society of ours, the computer games we play are one of the last bastions from the onslaught of devious Madison Avenue pitchmen who exhibit all the social conscience of a West Indies slave trader. If publishers succumb to the siren temptations of advertising dollars, I can guarantee you this: I won't be buying those games. And I won't be alone.

Will I?

1.11 Oh, No! I Forgot to Have Children!

**Volume 8, Issue 11
Tuesday, April 13, 1999**

Is discrimination based on calendar days on the planet, regardless of the talent or knowledge of the individual, rearing its ugly head in the computer game industry?

OK, I'm going to climb up on my high horse now (as if I ever climb down from it). Lately, I was accused of being, well *old*. Too old, apparently, to understand games any more.

Funny, I don't *feel* old, so this came as something of a shock to me. Sure, I forgot to have children somewhere in there, but 43 years hasn't been "old" since Henry II accidentally on purpose had Thomas a' Beckett killed for being more a troublesome priest and less a drinking buddy. For the younger crowd out there, let me just say: No matter how old in years you get, you never stop feeling younger, mentally. Really. I certainly don't feel different mentally than I did on leaving the Army at age 21. I visited my 87-year-old grandmother about 6 months before she passed away and she told me the same thing; she didn't really feel different mentally than she did at 19.

One of my friends has a great poster. It shows a caricature of the stereotypical '50s woman, all big hair and super-long eyelashes, flouncy dress with an apron, a kitchen in the background. Her face is filled with shock and horror. The caption reads, "Oh, no! I forgot to have children!" Its one of those classic "Say *what?*" moments; "What do you mean, I'm too old to have kids???" Or in my case, "What do you mean, I'm too old to understand games???"

Is today's over-30 crowd out of step with contemporary gaming? It is beginning to seem, more and more, that this is the perception of the up-and-coming gaming cognoscenti: if you aren't under 30 years old, how can you possibly understand modern games? In the perception that passes for reality in this business, it is becoming chic to look on the young as cool, hip and "with it," and on the 30- to 40-somethings that actually built this industry from the ground up as old, stodgy and out of the loop. Gee, you don't suppose that's because a lot of young people eager to make their bones in games are climbing the ladder, do you? Good grief, we now have people at

some major publishers who have never been involved in the actual hands-on making of a game, *in charge* of deciding what games will be developed. I'm all for guiding youth and talent with experience and knowledge, but this is backwards, in my opinion.

There seems to be some confusion in the industry between the processes of deciding what titles to develop and just how to develop them. It is one thing to decide to make a title that appeals to the younger crowd; it is quite another to confuse the issue by deciding that Young Title = Young Developers.

And the crowd does seem to be getting younger every year. Cost has a lot to do with this; less experienced people get paid less. In this Orwellian view of game development that seems to be picking up speed in the industry, we are now supposed to believe that Youth Equals Experience and Age Equals Irrelevancy. I'm sure such folks as Sid Meier, Bing Gordon, Chuck Kroegel, Dan Cermak, Bill Volk, Richard Garriott, Chris Crawford, Bill Stealey, Gilman Louie and Brian Fargo will all be interested to learn that they are now too old to take part in creating interesting games. I sure hope they have retirement funds set up.

Sarcasm aside, there is at least two major problems with confusing youth with experience, knowledge and skills: Lack of quality and lack of innovation.

You may not agree, but it seems to me that the younger the development crowd has become, we've seen less true innovation and a worsening of quality in games. I guess part of it depends on your definitions of innovation and quality. I consider the original *Doom* an innovation, but the string of follow-on 1st person shooters as incremental refinements to the genre. Sure, some them refine a lot of features in one package and do it darn well (*Half-Life* comes to mind), but that isn't innovation. And no one can convince me that there are less serious bugs in shipped product today than five years ago.

Viewed from that certain perspective, maybe I *am* too old for this industry. I'm just too darn set in my old ways to lower my standards to today's increasingly skewed vision of "quality," and so middle-aged that I insist on quality before parting with a buck. And I'm certainly old enough (read "experienced enough") to care to hold up to the light the practices that are making computer and online games as boring and filled with schlock as television.

(Now I have this picture in my head of some publisher executive standing on the rampart of a palace dressed as Marie Antoinette, with the peasants below screaming and shaking copies of *Trespasser*. The exec placidly holds up an aged copy of *Civilization* and states regally, "Let them eat Sega.")

To be perfectly blunt: Someone with little - or no- game development work under his/her belt has no idea of how this industry really operates, what it takes to make a game or how business practices truly affect the products we see on the shelf. You don't have to agree with me on what those standards, quality or practices are, or even if they exist. Diversity of opinion, after all, can make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. But none of that matters if you can't make an informed opinion; *why* and *how* games get into the hands of the consumer is as important as *what* games. And only experience can really drive home what you need to know.

Now that I've carped on the age issue, I'll finish up by throwing a curve at my own analysis and say: this is arguing the wrong point. In the final analysis, it isn't age that matters, but experience, knowledge and skill. I'm more than willing to listen to the opinions of a 22 year old lead coder with a couple great games under his/her belt, just as I tend to tune out a 40 year old marketing person when they try to tell me what makes a great game. And the reverse is also true; the opinions of a Chris Crawford are far more important to me than those of some young buck who did some pick-up work on a hit game.

What makes me *feel* old is feeling the need to explain all this.

1.12 Catching Up On Email

Volume One, Issue 12

Tuesday, April 20, 1999

The quality of email responses to this column is, frankly, refreshing. I've received some interesting ones lately, and I thought it might be fun to the readers to see some of it. I've copied bits and pieces below, with my comments appended afterwards.

I'm 'way behind on answering all that email, by the way, due to business travel and consulting work. If you've written me in the last two weeks and haven't received a reply yet, you will.

Regarding Issue 11, "Oh, No! I Forgot to Have Children!"

Take it as a compliment that I didn't have a clue you were over 30 until you admitted it in your latest article. Which I guess proves both your points: like most people, I stereotype computer game experts as young; and you have enough knowledge in the field to "fake as a young person", or in other words, to prove that the older generations can understand the ways of games as well as the younger.

Thanks. That's pretty much what I was getting at, and it's nice to see the point got across.

From a college student studying Math and Computer Science:

I guess this is pretty irrelevant but I am 21 one years old. Hopefully you don't think that all of aren't still in that teenage "I know everything" stage, for I wholeheartedly agree with you. I have noticed that the quality of games in recent years have been, on average, of a lower quality. It seems now days that the latest game requires the latest hardware. And this seems, in most cases, always at the cost of depth of the game, whether it be coding bugs or lack of a coherent story (that always gets me).

Too true. Somehow, we seem to have established a standard for games based on technology, not story, playability or just how plain fun it is.

There never should be a time where someone stops doing what they love to do just because it's not in the "In" thing to do. I'm from Kentucky and I'm actually appalled at the state of the Michael Carneal situation. If you hadn't heard of it (yeah right) the victims of the Paducah High School shootings have filed a law suit against all the most popular gaming companies, stating that they wish to "Hurt the entertainment industry." Your article on "being too old" is actually a proud statement of what parents are not understanding. It's terribly unfortunate that you don't have kids, because in my eyes adults such as yourself who have not shrugged off the joys of your youth are the best equipped to deal with a younger age who is growing more and more distant from their parental role models.

Agreed on the Carneal situation, although this threatens to take us into the "violence in games is bad/good/indifferent" debate. The suit in Kentucky reminds me of the people in the '70s and '80s who blamed TSR's *Dungeons and Dragons* for making young people flip out and kill themselves or others. I'm sure it made a great defense item for the suspects and it certainly gave some religious organizations (the same ones which believe in a world-wide Satanic conspiracy to abuse children) great grist for the contribution mill. Blaming video and PC games for multiple shootings sure must make the parents feel relieved.

It also ignores the issue of personal responsibility. Young Carneal obviously had far more problems than just access to some violent video games. Maybe I'll write a column about this again soon; it deserves some treatment.

I totally agree with you about your column: Oh, No! I Forgot To Have Children. I am only 16 and I agree with your opinion. Just because you or I or anyone gets older physically, it doesn't mean anything. Maturity comes from experience, so does intelligence. A little 5 year old couldn't just make games and keep a game corporation afloat.... Some people think too far into the future that it gets right down annoying, People saying kids are the future. Without adults to guide us we are no kind of future.

Regarding Issue 10, "This fragged corpse brought to you by ":

"I so enjoy reading your articles. It gives me a break from the boring work here in my college's computer lab.

One quick note on the last article. (Since I am a big Romeo and Juliet fan) Mercutio's cure was a plague on both your houses, not a pox. It's ok and I'll even forgive you this time."

He's right, and I should have known this, too. After all, I've performed in Romeo and Juliet three times. Maybe age isn't a drawback in games, but it sure hits the memory core at the oddest times.

"Incidentally, I was just thinking about how cool it would be to have a fully-detailed McDonald's (complete with Playland) set up as a Quake map. Think Ronald would go for it?

I got yer Shamrock Shake RIGHT HERE!!!"

If Ronald McDonald has a sense of humor, he'll go for it. After all, McDonald's fare is the quintessential computer food, after chips and Jolt cola. He might want the taunts toned down a bit, although I'd love to see his face the first time he saw the phrase "Ronald McDonald rides Jessica's rocket."

From a Senior Producer in the industry:

"Interesting column this week (yes, yes, they are all interesting <g> but as I'm involved in product placement within games, it caught my attention).

Some thoughts:

I believe we will see a lot more product placement in future games but it will be tied into promotions. Game companies are searching for further ways to expose the potential marketplace to their products and working out co-promotion opportunities with major brands will allow them to do that. I don't see clicking on a coke can and going to a coke website but I do see racing by a gas station which is a Shell gas station (or similar).

We've started experimenting with some tie-ins with <large corporation> and the reason is promotional. Having our product feature in a grocery store promotion would be worth significant sales and also hit one of <large corporation's> core markets.

These product placements don't have to be crass and, in fact, if folks take the time to think them through, they can add to a product. No, seriously. Take Mythic's online *Godzilla* game. Can you imagine one of those little Taco Bell dogs that you could click on, on a street corner, and it saying, "I've got to get a bigger box." Now that would be funny product placement.

We are, I suspect, with the financial demands that a great Playstation 2 title will require, going to have a situation where paid ad placement will be used to keep the price of titles down to the current levels rather than see them climb. The budgets involved are going to be huge and an awful lot of software isn't making its production cost back these days.

For all that we love the business, the financial models are starting to get a little scary."

I've known the above writer for a long time, and I agree with a lot of what he says. Especially the part about scary financial models; the current consolidation of the industry shows pretty well that there is room for only so many mediocre games.

And done intelligently, product placements *could* add something to the game. I just don't know that I trust very many designers to do it intelligently. Also, we have to worry about "sponsors" gaining the kind of control they have over television content. It was the corporate mentality of "Don't offend *anyone*" that made TV a wasteland. No, ad placements in a game aren't the same as sponsoring an entire TV series, but corporate sponsorship of a game series is the next logical step in this chain.

Let me just say: If it comes down to paying for a good game or receiving a corporate-sponsored game for free, I'll buy the game, thanks.

That wraps it up for now. Thanks to all the people who sent in comments; it was invariably intelligent and well thought out, even the ones that disagreed with me on one or more points. Keep it coming!

1.13 GOD SUED!

**Volume Eight, Issue 13
Tuesday, April 27, 1999**

"Free will is the root of all evil!" says writer.
April 27, 1999 4pm EST

In response to a lawsuit filed by the parents of three victims of the 1997 Paducah, Kentucky school shootings, Jessica Mulligan, a commentary writer on computer and video games, filed suit against God in Federal District Court today. She charged that Deity with responsibility in the deaths resulting from Michael Carneal's shooting spree. The suit alleges that "God, a.k.a. the Creator, a.k.a. the Supreme Being, a.k.a. 'The Man,' through the use of individual free will in the creation of human beings, is directly responsible for the shootings."

The suit seeks to require God "to remove the concept known as 'free will,' whereby one individual may perform an act or acts that another individual might or might not chose to perform" from the capabilities of humanity and "make all individuals on the celestial body known as Earth, a.k.a. Terra, a.k.a. 'the Planet,' exactly the same emotionally and mentally in all ways and manner." The suit also seeks damages in the amount of one trillion dollars US.

Named as co-defendants were 25 of the world's largest religious organizations, including Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Protestantism, Episcopalian, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Wicca, Satanism and the ancient Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Assyrian, Hittite and Sumerian pantheons. The suit also names the US Internal Revenue Service, not generally considered a religious organization by any group except Satanists.

"The lawsuit filed by the victim's parents against computer game and movie producers and a couple porn sites (<http://gamecenter.com/News/Item/0,3,0-2666,00.html>) doesn't go far enough," declared Mulligan at a press conference today to announce the suit. "It is the act of grieving parents trying to make sense out of a totally senseless act.

"However," she continued, "suing 25 media and computer game companies can only result in the case either being thrown out of court, or the parents - and their lawyers - receiving a huge monetary award. It begs the question of the moment. Simply stating that movies and computer games brainwashed and then trained Carneal into becoming a seasoned, effective killer ducks the *real* problem."

The real problem, according to Mulligan, is not that such games and movies are available, but that God allowed humans free will to commit their own acts. "If God had made us all mindless, identical clones," she said, "Carneal would never have been tempted to play a game, watch a movie or pick up a gun. Without free will, this horrific tragedy would never have happened. It's God's fault and if He won't take the blame squarely on His shoulders, we need to place it there."

One reporter asked Ms. Mulligan if she thought the Carneal lawsuit had merit. "Absolutely not," she stated. "This is just like the cartoon violence controversy of the 1960s. God caused the creation of the Roadrunner cartoons, for example, which tempted me as a child to want to trick coyotes into running off of cliffs. I didn't do it," she pointed out quickly, "but what if I had? How many coyotes barely escaped a brush with death or serious injury at my hand, due to God's flagrant and negligent use of free will? The potential is terrifying."

The 25 religious organizations were named as co-defendants, Mulligan said, because "they are God's representatives on Earth. They tend His houses, counsel His followers, see to his financial well being and look after His plants and pets while He's elsewhere. It's a big Universe," she added, "God might be anywhere at the moment and unable to attend the trial *in corpus*."

When asked if the fact that these were also some of the wealthiest organizations on the planet affected her decision to name them in the suit, Ms. Mulligan replied sternly, "It affected my decision no more than that of the lawyers in the Carneal suit to name 25 of the wealthiest media and computer game companies as co-defendants."

"The important issue," she continued, "is that God is responsible. How many other intelligent species throughout the Universe has He subjected to this cruel joke of free will? If we can prevent this type of behavior in the future by hurting Him monetarily, then we should." Asked how the one trillion dollar damage figure was arrived at, Mulligan shrugged. "He *makes* the money. We figured one trillion dollars would cause even Him to sit up and take notice. And, we wanted a figure roughly comparable to Bill Gates' annual interest income from Windows sales."

Legal experts are unsure of Ms. Mulligan's chances in court, and none were willing to go on the record with comment. "You've got to be kidding, right?" said one senior attorney for a large New York law firm, who spoke under the condition of anonymity. "This is a lose-lose situation for an attorney. It's like defending a baby killer; you can't win. Give me the Carneal suit any day. At least you have the chance of getting rich with that one."

Repeated calls to Heaven for comment on the suit went unanswered by press time.

1.14 Paying for the Wrong Sins and Other Odd Thoughts

**Volume Eight, Issue 14
Tuesday, May 11, 1999**

- Talk about your violence. No sooner had I completed my last column about the lawsuit against game and media companies for violence, *God Sued!*, before I was in an emergency room with a surgeon standing over me, toying with a scalpel and demanding access to my gall bladder. It's gotta make you wonder

Thankfully, my personal down payment on sin is merely being forced to pack up the skin-revealing bikinis for the summer and take on a low-fat diet. As for computer game and media publishers, it looks like the punishment for their sins - a lack of true creativity - may be higher. A bevy of political and ideological forces are arrayed to blame them for everything from the Littleton shootings to lower SAT scores. They are this election year's target of opportunity in the Save Our Kids, No Matter What The Constitution Says contest.

I personally find nothing more venal than a politician or ideologue who will tell parents what they want to hear, knowing that the Supreme Court will rule them down. However, the media and computer game publishers are easy targets. We can expect to see politicians jumping on the bandwagon, using the odious "No excess is too extreme to protect our kids" arguments that got the CDA and CDA II passed. We can only hope the courts will strike down any knee-jerk laws that curtail the 1st Amendment, as they did with the CDAs.

And in the final analysis, the industry has only itself to blame in this. I'm not the only insider who has been taking them to task about quality over the past few years. Publishers and developers having been going out of their way to make games bloodier, because sales on the best-selling FPS and RTS games are up to record levels and that's easier and less time-consuming than improving the backstory.

They left themselves easy targets for just this sort of guilt by association. By comparison, *Wasteland* (<http://www.ggc.u-net.com/w6.htm>), developed by Interplay and published by Electronic Arts over thirteen years ago, had as much potential for violence. It also had some incredible story and design elements, along with moral and ethical choices that took the player on a personal exploration, not just a gaming experience.

To be brief, the point I'm making is that we've somehow slid from an attitude of "This is a great game!" to "See the pretty pictures!" I don't think the industry is the better for it.

- *Asheron's Call*, developed by Turbine Entertainment (<http://www.turbinegames.com/>) to be Microsoft's entry into the massively-multiplayer RPG genre, is now in beta test. It is slated for a release before Christmas of this year. Considering the success of *Everquest* (<http://www.everquest.com>), the extremely similar 1st Person 3D game from Verant/Sony which is currently posting simultaneous player numbers on a par with *Ultima Online*, one has to wonder. Is the market for such games large enough to support two similar entries, or will *Asheron's Call* and *Everquest* spend their time stealing customers from each other?

This isn't an idle consideration. With the budget for a good massively multiplayer online game now running between \$2 million and \$8 million, there is a lot at stake in this contest. A flop will be costly, indeed. Stay tuned; this is going to be an interesting one to watch.

- The Electronic Entertainment Expo (<http://www.e3expo.com/home.html>), a.k.a. E3 and the computer game industry's contribution to the return of the senseless orgy, begins this week at the Los Angeles Convention Center. If past E3s are any indication, publishers will be showing a bunch of games that all look alike and that won't be shipped for months or years or, in some cases, ever.

In between, they will be throwing lavish parties, trying to steal employees from each other so they can actually complete development on the projects they announce and sneaking out to the nudie bars every night for some quick titillation (pun intended). In other words, the conference is fairly useless except to let us geeks act out and let off steam. In that, it accomplishes the goal admirably.

Wouldn't miss it for the world.

- I've been wondering lately what the next breakout game genre is going to be. It's been five years since we saw the last of these, in the form of the 1st Person Shooter and Real-Time Strategy genres, and I think we're due.

But for the life of me, I can't see what that genre might be, unless online gaming finally comes into its own. Any ideas out there?

Next time out, I'll tell you the better rumors that float around E3 this year. There are always some doozeys, and I expect this year to be no different.

1.15 No Modem Mutants Here, Pal

Volume Eight, Issue 15
Tuesday, May 18, 1999

Every spring for the past ten years, I've handed out the coveted Modem Mutant Awards to honor - and shame - the best and the worst in online gaming. They are just my little contribution to making friends wherever I go. Well, ok, I admit it; the "worst of" awards are coveted like a root canal by Dr. Kevorkian, but what's a little disagreement among friends, right?

I had a lot of fun with last year's awards (<http://www.happypuppy.com/columns/bth/archive/>, look at Volume 4). Unfortunately, this year I think I'm going to give the awards route a pass. There just wasn't much of note happening in multiplayer online games this past year.

The annual rite started when I was the Games manager at GENie. GENie was then just about the only online service that had multiplayer gaming as a major focus, thanks to visionary and co-founder, Bill Loudon, now a VP at Looksmart.com (<http://www.looksmart.com/>). No service had as many multiplayer online games, not by a long shot. By the time I left in 1992, there were over a dozen online games and they accounted for almost 25% of GENie's total revenues. The line-up included games that are still with us ten years later, including *Air Warrior* (<http://www.gamestorm.com/actionandstrategy/airwarrior3/>), *Dragon's Gate*

(<http://www.mythicgames.com/gamesdragons.html>), *Federation II* (<http://www.on-line.co.uk/ib/fed.html>), *The Hundred Years War* by James Dunnigan and Al Nofi (<http://www.hyw.com/>) and *Gemstone III* (http://www.play.net/simUNET_public/gS3/gS3home.asp). Naturally, most all of the awards went to GENIE products in those early years.

(GENIE is so stupidly managed these days by new owner IDT that you can't get a preview of the services, sign up an account or even read their copyright notice at <http://www.genie.com/> without already having an account and password. No wonder the grand old company died under IDT's leadership; they're morons.)

So here it is spring again and I don't know what to do. I really can't find many online multiplayer games to give awards to, good, bad or indifferent. 1998 was the first year I can remember that online gaming actually didn't really do, well, *anything*. Heck, I'm tempted just to give a large raspberry to the industry in general for their feeble efforts in 1998 and let it go at that.

The only two new multiplayer games of note, in fact, were *Starsiege: Tribes* (<http://www.sierra.com/dynamix/tribes>), mostly because a game publisher finally shipped an online product that was latency tolerant and had great, interesting game play, and *EverQuest* (<http://www.station.sony.com/everquest/>), simply because it was the first 3D, 1st person massively multiplayer game to hit the market in a big way. I'm not counting all the "me, too" FTS and FPS games shipped by the computer game industry, by the way. Most of them are still so bad or imitative, I can't bear to play more than a few hours. Generally, just enough to know that such-and-such a game is almost exactly like so-and-so's game.

This is a far cry from years past, when I had as many as two-dozen new online games to praise or pillory. The industry is in bad shape this year, my friends.

Which is paradoxical, since everyone and his cousin seems to be developing a massively multiplayer game. Next year or the year after might show a great field for the awards circuit. Just look at a few of the potential big hitters scheduled for the next two years or so:

Sierra: After the total bomb-ola that was *The Realm*, Sierra decides to stay in the industry with online games based on Tolkien's *Middle Earth* and the *Babylon 5* TV show. Both are great licenses and should attract some players if Sierra learns something about managing online games in the meantime. They've never really twigged onto the fact that online games are a service, too, as well as being products.

Interplay: Developer Bioware of *Baldur's Gate* fame is rumored to be working with Interplay's AD&D: *Forgotten Realms* license on the next generation of the old AOL multiplayer game, *NeverWinter Nights*. It should be noted that Interplay also funded development of two current popular online games, *Rolemaster: Magestorm* and *Splatterball* by Mythic Entertainment. With an AD&D license to attract players, *NWN II* should bring in some serious subscription cash.

Origin: The worst kept secrets in the industry are the development of *Ultima Online II* and a massively multiplayer game based on the *Wing Commander* universe. Both games should be mega-hits, based on brand loyalty alone. Combine that with what Origin has learned through the *UO* experience about developing and managing online games, and we could see a couple of real groundbreakers here.

Electronic Arts: The Maxis division of EA has been trying to hire an Executive Producer for *Sim City Online* for the past eight months or so, with scant results. This could be a very cool game, indeed, depending on the final design and supposing they can actually ever decide to hire someone to lead the effort.

Microsoft: Two online games of note coming here, the fantasy RPG *Asheron's Call* by Turbine Entertainment and the space adventure game *Freelancer* by Chris Roberts' Digital Anvil. The big question is whether Microsoft and its development partners truly understand how to manage the service side of online gaming. My experiences with player relations on The Zone (<http://www.zone.com>) have been mixed, to say the least.

It's enough to cause ulcers, because I've been waiting for some 14 years for this market to take off. I thought we were near Nirvana in 1994-1995, but then all the newbies in the industry - who are, unfortunately, also the people with lots of money - decided they'd rather waste money by learning it all over again, instead of learning from past development efforts.

Of course, they didn't set out to waste money; they figured they knew it all from developing computer games. That attitude alone set the Cause back five years. We're just now seeing the results of that expensive education, in the form of some interesting online games.

So, what is a columnist to do, but put the awards on the back burner, keep her fingers crossed and wait until next year? I *hate* it when that happens.

1.16 Massively Multiplayer Games We'd Like To See

**Volume Eight, Issue 16
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Let's have some fun.

While pretty much any game can be turned into some kind of multiplayer product, massively multiplayer games - those that allow hundreds or thousands of simultaneous players to interact in the same universe - are particularly compelling. People play them - and pay for them - for years at a crack. There are quite a few people who have played the same character in Simutronics' *Gemstone III* (<http://www.simutronics.com>) since 1990, for example. I personally know of several players of Richard Bartle's *MUD II* who have played the same character for at least a decade, some as long 15 years.

That kind of loyalty is to be sought after. It seems to me there are some opportunities out there still for unique massively multiplayer games that would attract large and loyal audiences. Some

are game worlds; others are book or TV/movie worlds. Why some of them haven't been produced yet is unknown; it isn't like others and I haven't broached most of these ideas more than once.

But let's try one more time; maybe we can break a logjam and start something unusual and cool. We'll ignore games or universes we know for sure are in development or planned for development and concentrate on some blue-sky stuff. Just off the top of my head, here are six potential blockbusters:

Baldur's Gate Online (<http://www.interplay.com/bgate/>): Take one outstanding interface. Add a floating chat window with the ability to assign private team channels. Move critical player and combat data off the front end and on to a UNIX server to forestall hacking. Train 10 or 12 people on the tools to add quests and new lands on a regular basis. Toss in about 25 paid supervisors and 400 volunteers to handle bug reports and complaints. Mix well and serve. Sounds like a recipe for greatness to me.

Star Wars (<http://www.starwars.com/>): Combine two interfaces: A 2/3s raked isometric interface a la' Diablo for walking about, land-based real-time combat, trading, chat, etc., with a space travel/combat simulator for that X-Wing adrenaline rush. Allow players to join either the Rebels or the Empire. Weight the game so the Empire has the advantage in resources and heavy ships, but give the Rebels have the advantage in individual ship combat, small party commando missions and the ability to train over time as Jedi knights. An entirely skill-based RPG system would probably work best here. Sit back and watch the fun - and the subscriptions- mount.

Star Trek (<http://www.startrek.com/>): Oh, where to start? I've actually designed such an online game three times now. The original idea that eventually became Interplay Online Services and then Engage Games Online was founded on the idea of starting with a *Star Trek* online game. Unfortunately, Paramount could never make up its mind to say yes or no. By the time they did so, Viacom had bought them and the deal collapsed. Suffice it say, one could build anything from an Academy simulator to a full-fledged RPG to a bridge crew-based ship simulator, and players would flock to be a part of this universe. A combined skill and experience based character system would probably work best here, to help determine when a player gets promoted in Star Fleet rank.

Wasteland (<http://www.ggc.u-net.com/w6.htm>): Although Interplay developed the original game over a decade ago, Electronic Arts owns the rights to this title, one of the best and most popular computer games ever developed. Certainly, it was the most popular after-the-holocaust computer game ever. This one would best be served by skill-based character system, using an isometric interface a la' *Ultima Online*, creating a huge land to explore and have some mild competition between widely separated settlements to locate and use resources and before-the Fall technology. Plenty of opportunity over time to toss in mutated creatures and twisted societies bent on the destruction of Mankind.

Imperial Trader

(<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0671741926/qid=927132028/sr=1-21/002-4252521-7960266>): To be set in Jerry Pournelle's best-selling Empire of Man universe, of which

The Mote in God's Eye, *King David's Spaceship* and the Falkenberg's Mercenary Legion novels are a part (although the latter are set in an earlier era). Dr. Pournelle and I discussed the possibility of developing this game nearly ten years ago, when I was in charge of games at GENIE. The player would start as a low-level trader in the Imperial Trader's Association with one merchant ship, trying to work up to Master Trader and control of a fleet of ships. Cargoes would include items such as food, weapons, luxury items and, most especially, information. Information that one trades and information that one seeks to keep from the competition and the Imperial Navy, which doesn't particularly like Traders. This one would also allow space combat - or secret alliance - with the Outie rebels and the occasional "quest" for 1st Empire technology, which is greater than currently available technology. I'd anticipate a skill-based system, a combined 1st person and isometric interface and promotion by Trader rank and Imperial title (Baron, Duke, et al).

Stargate SG-1 (<http://www.stargate-sg1.com/home/index.html>): To be based on the movie and cable TV series starring Richard Anderson. This one is tailor-made for small party exploration, combat and "questing." With a near infinite number of worlds to explore, four person parties can be sent to worlds to accomplish various missions (recon, bring back alien technology, recruit allies, what have you), thereby gaining skill experience and promotion points towards being a team leader. Score it by team and individuals. With the proper implementation of the backstory and mission parameters (the G'holds want to destroy or conquer Earth), more than one team can be sent simultaneously on the same mission and scored separately and how they do as a meta-team. A 3D, 1st Person interface would do best here. Make it skill-based and vary the skills needed on any particular mission, to encourage team members to build several different skills.

OK, I've had my turn; what game, TV show or movie universe would you like to see turned into a massively multiplayer game? Drop me a line at bth@happypuppy.com and let me know. If you don't mind me printing your email in this column, let me know that, too.

1.17 Games We Might (Shudder) See

Volume Eight, Issue 17
Tuesday, June 8, 1999

Recently in column 16, we explored some game universes that would make pretty neat online games. Naturally, it makes far too much sense for the folks with development money to take that advice and actually produce those titles.

In fact, you'd be amazed at some of the truly idiotic games proposed to publishers and developers that actually make it past the reading stage and have a design document funded, before saner heads prevail and burn the damn things before they breed. I once saw a proposal for a combination of the Ouija Board and FPS actually get past the first screening and make it to an executive producer for approval. No, I'm not making that up, more's the pity. Thank god, the EP had enough sense to actually kill the darn thing.

In that spirit, and considering what passes for wisdom among decision-makers these days and the consolidation of the industry over the past several years, we're far more likely to games such as these:

Half-Warrior: A combination of Half-Life and Mechwarrior, the player is forced to hop around a 3D, 1st Person world in a Mech with only one leg, firing weapons that operate at half power, at targets that you can only half-see. Brought to you by Half-Wit Games; we're always half right!

Baldur's Nail Designer: In the eternal quest to create a mass-market RPG, Bioware, Interplay and Mattel team up to bring us the definitive fashion fantasy game. As Morona, a Chaotic/Neutral Human beauty salon owner, you are charged with exploring the dangerous realm of The Garment District in search of the mystical and powerful +5 Acrylic Nail in Christian Dior Indian Red. It won't be easy; everyone knows the District is the dwelling place of the hideous Anorexians, wielders of the powerful Back-Biting and Cat-Fighting spells. Find the Nail and fight your way back through the Anorexians in time to give it to Heather Locklear in time for the Emmys, or all is lost!

Quaketriz: Beware! The vile and cunning Dropping Boxes are out to get you, sliding down from the ceiling in a series of seemingly infinite combinations in this tour d' force combination of Quake and Tetris. Dodge left, dodge right, find and use incredible weapons such as BFG (Box Frying Gun) 3000 to blow them apart in a blood-soaked spray of cardboard and staples. Will the Boxes block your way to freedom? Not for the faint of heart!

Command and Conquer: Day of the Deer: Somehow, they stole a starship and escaped from Deer Hunter to colonize their own world. Now, you must pull it from their grasp in a desperate battle of Man vs. Antelope. Cringe at the appearance of the Ram Mark IV, whose 20-foot antlers can pierce the heaviest armor. Beware the genetically engineered Doe Aerospace Fighter, with it's #2 dive bombing capability and heat-seeking Antler Missiles. Your units must take the planet before the Deer allies, the cunning and lethal Rabbits, arrive!

The Game of Half-Life: Hasbro and Valve team up to bring you this exciting FPS version of the beloved children's game. Spin the wheel and run your heavily armed character down Life's track. Spin a six and land on Produce a Music Video; Spend \$100,000 or Shoot Up the Studio and Kill All the Technicians. Spin a three and land on Find Buried Treasure; Collect \$80,000 or Blow Up Treasure Site and Kill All Nearby Natives. You and the kids will have hours of blood-soaked fun learning all about Life and the proper use of heavy weapons.

Microsoft Monopoly: From Hasbro and Microsoft, the people who brought you the game and the real-life thing! Move about the board, ruthlessly crushing your competition by incorporating the features of their products into your monopoly Operating System. Offer to buy another company, only to look at their software code, pick the brains of the talent, then kill the deal and build the product inhouse. Cleverly insert false messages into your OS so it appears that competitor's products are malfunctioning, when they really aren't. Can't innovate yourself? Buy the companies that are with the huge cash reserves generated by your monopoly. But watch out! If you land on Federal District Court, the Department of Justice might force you to break up the company and do business in a fair and equitable manner.

You Don't Know Jack about Jedi Knight: Answer the trivia question correctly and receive a light saber or access to the Millennium Falcon. Answer incorrectly and Imperial Stormtroopers burn your village and torture your family. Hours of fun and rape n' pillage action in this combination Trivia/FPS game from Berkeley and LucasArts.

Meat Puppet Scrabble: Move about the isometric tiles, shooting up the alphabet before your opponents can construct words from the English language. Shoot from a bonus square and receive a Double or Triple Gore Score! Brought to you by Hasbro and Playmates Interactive.

Rainbow Six: The Cribbage Gambit: Fifteen for two, fifteen for four, trips for ten look out, terrorists behind the crib hand! Loads of exploding heads and board-pegging fun in this FPS action card game from Tom Clancy's Red Storm Entertainment.

OK, I've done my part (and I need to wash my hands now, anyway). Time for you to take over. What ludicrous games would *you* like to see?

1.18 Unsung Heroes

**Volume Eight, Issue 18
Tuesday, June 15, 1999**

A couple weeks ago, Microsoft and VR-1 (<http://www.vr1.com>) shut down *UltraCorps*, a massively multiplayer turn-based space strategy game on the Zone (http://zone.msn.com/msn_home.asp), after spending millions of development and maintenance dollars on the game. VR-1 is one of the new crop of well-funded but inexperienced online game developers. They and the ubiquitous Microsoft made quite a few mistakes during the "learning process" that was *UltraCorps*. To read their press releases, however, you'd think they invented the genre.

Nothing irritates me more than a Johnny-come-lately acting like they invented the genre.

In the world of online games, unfortunately, VR-1 isn't alone; there is a lot of that going on. The current crop of supposed "online gurus" would have you believe they just kinda/sorta sprung up out of nowhere from whole cloth, impelled by their own genius to re-create computer gaming. Like a baseball player giving "humble interview #21" to a sportswriter, they shyly shuffle their feet, stare at the ground and grudgingly admit that, well, yes, they *are* geniuses and no one did anything like *Game X* before they came along. But they are just glad to be here in the Bigs and hope to keep contributing to the team's success, yada, yada yada.

Bushwa. For those who don't recognize that term, it's a polite way of saying Bu**\$#^%. I learned that in the Army twenty-five years ago; your tax dollars at work.

When it comes to online games - whether you define that term to mean commercial computer games with Internet modules attached, true multiplayer, server-based games or both - the

groundwork for every game you play today was laid down over 15 years ago by others. Starting in the early 1980s, when most people still thought the word "modem" referred to some kind of exotic Asian appetizer, some visionary folks were breaking the trail. They set design and coding standards that stand today's designers and programmers in good stead. They had little money - the world's first 3D, 1st person online game, *Air Warrior*, released on GENie by Kesmai in 1987, was developed for *zero* advance money - and absolutely no respect from the computer game industry as a whole.

What they did have was *passion* for online multiplayer games. At a time when the monetary rewards were slim, this true love is what kept the industry alive and growing. This is certainly different from today, when ego and cash seem to drive the industry at the cost of quality and good design. Like most pioneers, they lived with the trade-off, shagging arrows from irate natives in exchange for freedom. In this case, creative freedom, which let 'em do the tough grunt work and show these newbies how it is done.

So, as these Johnnie-Come-Latelies aren't likely to acknowledge the debt they owe some unique individuals who toiled in poverty so the newbies could have an easier time of it, I shall. Naturally, the list below is not complete, but it's a good start.

Mark Baldwin (<http://mark.baldwin.net/contents.htm>) and Bob Rakosky

Two classic games stand out here, *Empire* (1987-88) and *The Perfect General* (1991). *Empire* was one of the first, if not *the* first, game to have an option for playing games via email. *The Perfect General* was one of the first commercial computer games to allow modem-to-modem gaming. Both are accomplishments to be proud of.

Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw (<http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/>)

In 1978, these two kicked off the multiplayer gaming revolution with the original MultiUser Dungeon, or MUD (sometimes referred to in historical documents as MultiUser Adventures or MUAs). It was the seminal event in multiplayer online gaming.

The game was developed at the University of Essex in Colchester, England, as an experiment in shared memory techniques. From there it just kind of took off as a commercial project and still exists today as *MUD II* (<http://www.mud2.com/>). Every MUD out there owes a huge debt to this project, not the least because someone decided to illegally release the source code to the Internet in the 1980s. This was the main cause of the explosion of MUDs, MOOs, MUCKs, you name it, on university mainframes around the world. In that sense, Bartle and Trubshaw have to be considered the "Fathers of modern multiplayer gaming."

Dani Buntten Berry (<http://www.mpath.com/dani/>)

Oh, where to start? Dani's classic *M.U.L.E.*, published in 1983 by Electronic Arts, redefined excellence in multiplayer gaming. If you ask around at any gathering of computer game professionals, most of them will cite *M.U.L.E.* as one of their favorite games of all time.

She broke new ground again in 1988 with *Modem Wars* which, as far as I know, is the first true head-to-head strategic computer game allowing remote connections between two players (Spectrum Holobyte's original *Falcon* for the Mac was probably the first modem-to-modem game, but several of these came out in a short period of time during 1987-1988, so it is hard to be sure).

Before she passed away last year, what Dani did was set a standard for excellence of design and player interface for multiplayer gaming that is rarely met even today. Her contribution cannot be over-emphasized. Rest in peace, Dani; I sure miss you.

Mark Jacobs (<http://www.mythicgames.com/>)

This may be hard to believe, but Mark gave up a lucrative career as a lawyer in 1984 to follow the muse of online gaming. This is today's equivalent of giving up the job of CEO of Microsoft to work in tech support at a small local ISP. Remember, in 1984 there were probably less than 500,000 modems in private hands in the whole US; not a large market to draw from.

Using the old QNX version of UNIX to program two multiplayer games, *Aradath*, an RPG, and *Galaxy II*, a real-time space conquest game, he set up his own little online service in the dining room of his house in Virginia. This was one of the very first services to feature a flat monthly fee instead of hourly billing. He started with something like four incoming phone lines, but quickly had to expand as the subscriptions rolled in.

Mark's major contributions to multiplayer gaming were to push design and interface elements to try new things, and to listen to the players and modify the game accordingly. No one was really doing that before; the attitude among designers was more like "This is my game and if you don't like it, screw you." Afterwards, everyone had to at least pretend they cared to follow suit and keep up.

John Taylor (<http://intelligamer.com/features/qa/kesmai.html>) and Kelton Flinn (<http://www.cstone.net/~kelton/>)

If Bartle and Trubshaw are the Fathers of modern online gaming, John and Kelton are the family heirs. Their brainchild, Kesmai Corporation, founded in 1983, is the oldest and still among the best of the commercial massively multiplayer game developers. They actually showed that you could make a little money with online games while having a good time and breaking ground. When you look at the record, they were the first to develop virtually every type, style and genre of massively multiplayer game. What more needs to be said?

Bill Loudon (now a VP at LookSmart, <http://www.looksmart.com/>)

Bill wasn't a programmer, nor an artist or designer. What Bill was, was a visionary. He recognized in the early 1980s that online, multiplayer gaming was a gas and that it would someday be *big*. He also loved to play. From 1982 through about 1997, as an executive first at CompuServe and then at NVN, GENie and Delphi, he gave some of the names on this list their start by making some (damn little) money and network resources available to them. These

include John Taylor and Kelton Flinn of Kesmai fame, Mark Jacobs of Mythic Entertainment and David Whatley and Simutronics of *Gemstone II* and *III*. Oh, and me, too.

There is no doubt that without Bill's foresight and commitment to online games, we wouldn't be anywhere near as far along on the technology and design of massively multiplayer games as we are today. The truest tribute to Bill: At least seven games that he funded or gave resources to, going back to 1984, still exist and are making money today on the Internet, AOL or both. The man knows talent when he sees it!

Cathryn Mataga and Megan Quattrocci (<http://www.junglevision.com/company.html>)

Let's see now. They did the hard core design and programming guts work for the groundbreaking and incredible popular RPG *AD&D: NeverWinter Nights* massively multiplayer game on AOL in 1989, the same for *AD&D: Dark Sun* on TEN, plus work with several other online games on TEN and Mplayer. A heck of a record. Indeed.

This makes JungleVision, their company, one of the oldest online game developers around. And yet, who knows of them outside of a small circle of developers? Well, you do now, <grin>.

1.19 Bandwidth Shall Not Save You

**Volume Eight, Issue 20
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Bandwidth. It's a clarion call, a wizard's chant to create the spell of No-Lag. All we need is more of that super-big, mystical stuff, "They" say, and all will be well.

More bandwidth, "They" say, translates to more speed for data. You know the line, big pipes, no waiting, an end to the nefarious Lag monster. Imagine: 50 to 80 millisecond latency rates for everyone! We could play all those Internet action games and flight simulators and the frame rate might actually match the data transmission rate.

And cable modems and DSL lines, those Deity-blessed saviors known collectively as "broadband," will give us that access, "They" say. Why, as soon as everyone is on a cable modem or DSL line, we'll all experience these low ping times, and playing a session of *Quake III* or *Ultima Online* will be a lagless exercise worldwide. Broadband, the so-called experts trumpet, shall save us all.

Right. Uh-huh. You betcha. And these jeans I'm wearing don't make my butt look big.

Understand something up front: What you hear about broadband these days is marketing fluff, and about as honest as marketing fluff ever is. That is to say, riddled with misdirection, incomplete information and lies by omission. All the marketers want you to see is the perfect case; the reality of the situation can wait until after you've plunked your money down on the table.

What "They" want you to see and believe is that broadband in the form of cable and DSL will remarkably improve your Net performance. What "They" don't want you to see is that bandwidth is only one part of the puzzle and that all parts have to be fixed for broadband to have any lasting effect on lag.

If you believe I'm saying that certain cable companies, cable access providers and content providers - the ubiquitous "They" - are fudging the truth about the efficacy of broadband access for their own purposes, score yourself a 10. Let's have a little reality check:

1. Lack of bandwidth alone is not the cause of lag.

Yes, lack of adequate bandwidth is a major cause of latency. The US Department of Commerce estimated last year that the amount of data sent out over the Internet doubles every 100 days. Compare that to the amount of fiber and copper that is laid on an annual basis and you find that only about 12.5% of the needed bandwidth is being laid every year.

However, that is not the whole story. Other major contributors to latency include obsolete routers, obsolete and badly configured servers, badly programmed databases and applications on those servers and the existence of certain critical data routing choke-points on the Internet, such as at the Metropolitan Area Ethernets (MAEs).

What this means, my friends, is that you cannot control lag at the end user's home. It doesn't help just to open the broadband spigot into the home; in fact, without fixing the other parts that create lag, that hurts more than helps. All those additional bits and bytes are going to be crowding the lines at those obsolete routers, badly configured servers and data choke-points and just make the problem even worse in the short run. By that, I mean over the next three to five years, overall lag for the majority of Net users is actually going to get *worse*, not better.

If you think lag during multiplayer games is bad now, just wait two years.

2. Massively multiplayer games can and will take advantage of broadband to reduce lag.

Maybe, but unlikely. We're not talking about a one-time shot of 20k of data from a Web page, which can then be cached and redisplayed. MMGs (and Retail Hybrids such as *Tribes* and *Quake III*) are dynamic; the information needed, such as player locations or the effects of combat or magic, changes quickly.

It can be bad enough trying to shoot out data for a twitch game such as *Quake*. With MMGs such as *EverQuest* and *Air Warrior*, significant lag can be -and usually is - caused by the backend server programming. Look at it this way: If 1,000 simultaneous users are sending in commands to the server, and those commands each effect anywhere from 1 to 50 other players, the amount of data that has to be correlated and sent back out is tremendous. At the risk of making some enemies, most programmers in the MMG arena haven't been doing it very long and they can be sloppy about how much data needs to be transferred in these situations.

In other words, this is a technical design issue, not a broadband access issue. Just opening up the pipe is useless if the programming on the game server - or the PC client - sucks. Which is pretty much the situation today in most MMGs; a lot more data than is necessary is being transferred, in most cases. This may be one of the easier problems to solve, although it won't help that much if Net lag is still bad.

Which it will be for some time to come. Read on.

3. Cable modems can deliver speeds of up to 100 times standard telephone modems.

Well, yes, they can. Occasionally. On a perfect day, in a perfect situation, if you are the only person on the line. If you wave a dead chicken over the cable modem and chant the correct mojo invocation. And if other factors don't intervene (see 1 above).

Sarcasm aside, a cable modem is a pretty good deal right now. This will not last. Unlike DSL, in which you lease a certain portion of bandwidth that only you have access to, cable modem users share the bandwidth. The usual configuration is 500 users to a neighborhood "head end" sharing something like 10 megabytes of bandwidth. Now, if only you and a couple other people are using that bandwidth, which is the case today at most head ends, you can get pretty darn good performance on downloads. I know; I've been using a cable modem for a year and I love it for pure downloads, especially late at night. I can grab a 30 meg file in 5 to 8 minutes.

But imagine the situation two or three years from now, when all 500 slots on your head end are filled, with all those people downloading huge movie files and MP3s and 30 megabyte game demos. Ten megabytes divided by 500 equals 20,000, according to my calculator. That's about 20k in tech-speak. When that happens, you'll long for the days when you had 56k worth of bandwidth all to yourself.

This is a shell game with rapidly diminishing returns. The cable providers know this and they hope you are not smart enough to realize it. This is one of the reasons they are so resistant to opening the lines to other ISPs, such as AOL or Mindspring. If all those millions of users clog the cable lines too soon, their best marketing fluff blows away like a dandelion on the wind. This is also why they are placing governors on their systems already, so they can limit how much bandwidth you actually use, and quietly altering their user agreements to note that they can limit your bandwidth use at any time, for any reason.

4. DSL is a good alternative to cable modem access.

Well, it would be, if the stupidly greedy telephone companies would drop the price today. Right now, it costs about \$40 a month for a DSL line that provides about 360k bandwidth into the home and about 128k uploading from the home to the Net. This is not that great a deal. Even though you don't have to share that bandwidth with 500 other subscribers, it's only about six times as much download power as you get from a 56k modem and you still have to deal with the traffic jams elsewhere on the Net.

However, 2 or 3 (or 5, whenever) years from now, when the cable lines are clogged like an 80-year old saturated fat eater's arteries, this could be a *great* deal. If the stupidly greedy telephone companies don't raise the price after a few hundred thousand users subscribe to it, which is exactly what they did with ISDN broadband lines. And which is exactly why ISDN hasn't grown into the millions of users the phone companies predicted five years ago. Duh.

So before you plop down \$40 or more a month for broadband access in the expectation of superior gaming, understand this:

Broadband shall not save you. Not for a long while, anyway, and not until a lot of routers and servers are replaced with newer equipment, pressure is relieved at the choke-points of the Net and more programmers learn how to code games for more economical transfer of data. Yes, you probably will see a performance increase, but it will not be the Nirvana-like experience promised and it will get worse over time, as more people subscribe to broadband outlets.

If you still want to subscribe after understanding all that fire away!

Organizational Note: I get a *lot* of mail, far more than I can answer in a timely manner. This is a double-edged sword for a columnist; I want to answer each one immediately but, if I did that, I'd never get anything else done. And my laundry is already starting to stack up

So, if you have sent me email and haven't received an answer yet, please accept my apologies. I'm working through it as fast as I can. -Jessica

1.20 History s Revenge

Volume Eight, Issue 21
Tuesday, June 29, 1999

"History is a vast early warning system."
-Norman Cousins

Those who fail to learn the lessons of history *are* doomed to repeat them.

For example, take the spurious assumption from five or six years ago that many consumers were willing to pay to play Internet sessions of 2-8 player retail games such as *Quake* and *Duke Nuke 'm*. Plenty of evidence existed that this was not so, including the failure of those types of games on the commercial online services. Yet hope springs eternal, especially when you can convince investment houses to give you money.

We've already seen what happened with the original game aggregators that bought into that mess. DWANGO, TEN, Engage and MPlayer collectively, they have tossed something like \$100 to \$120 million down a rat hole. They spent all that money to set up services that charged anywhere from \$19.95 per month to \$2.00 per hour for play, only to end up providing mostly

free gaming online. This is a profit model? Looks like the old "We'll lose a penny on each transaction, but make it up in volume" argument to me.

History didn't wait around very long to take its revenge. DWANGO is out of business in the US, Engage might as well be, and TEN has shifted gears to the Spades and Pinochle crowd. Mplayer is the only one of the group that continues to look like it has a future of any kind. Its parent, Mpath, was able to collect back a big chunk of the \$50 million-plus it spent by issuing an initial public offering of stock earlier this year, which ran up to over \$50 per share early. The stock has since slid back to a price of about \$23; still not bad. However, Mpath doesn't push Mplayer; rather, most of the money they've made comes from licensing their technology. Investors see them as a technology play, not as a game aggregator. Reading Mpath's SEC filings, you get the feeling they wish Mplayer would just die, already. As in, "We're sorry we ever associated ourselves with games. Forgive us! That's not what we're about, really!"

At least Mpath survives and has potential for growth; the rest of those guys are on the rocks, figuratively if not actually. It is hard to compete on price when the market standard is zero. True, free gaming services such as Blizzard's battle.net (www.battle.net) and Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone (www.zone.com) put pressure on the others to lower the price and provide at least some access for free. However, the free services didn't cause a price war; they were reactions to the lack of market success by the for-pay aggregators. They also had the advantage of having deeper pockets than the VC-funded startups and, in most cases, of being divisions of large publishers with access to the publisher's Internet-enabled product.

The mainstream computer game industry is learning the lesson that "more is better" and is starting to come around. Note such recent retail releases as Dynamix's *Starsiege: Tribes* (<http://www.sierra.com/dynamix/tribes/>). This is strictly an Internet game, is completely designed and optimized to take advantage of limited-use server game technology (not to be confused with true client/server games such as Kesmai's *Air Warrior*). More importantly, the game breaks the 2-8 player barrier, allowing up to 32 players in an arena. It is also carefully designed to emphasize and reward cooperative behavior among team members, while still allowing Quake-style "deathmatch" behavior.

The next lesson the publishers have to learn is that "Persistence sells." Players like to grow personas over years, and will pay to do it. That concept is best served by a client/server technology model, which can be an expensive proposition to set up and maintain. It is also in direct conflict with the publishers' business model, the need to sell retail units; they'd rather develop one new *Tribes*-style game per year than have to support a server farm and sell monthly subscriptions. Not only do most of them just not "get" online gaming's unique attraction and player base, it scares the crapola out of them. Seriously, the only customer contact the publishers really want is your product registration card. Actually having to answer to you on an ongoing basis is not something they look forward to. And boy! do you guys call them to account when something goes wrong!

For the next few years, we are probably going to see the publishers mostly continue to chase retail space with non-persistent Internet-only games. Which is a shame, because it continues to lock them into the hit-driven retail market. We'll see a flood of retail-only games, the top ten or

fifteen of which will make money and the rest tossed into the remainder bins, just as happens now. Sure, a few high profile online games will hit the datastream over the next three years, but they will continue to be the exception, not the rule. The big money will continue to be lavished on retail shelf units with only limited Internet multiplayer connectivity.

This is being penny-wise and pound-foolish. Why? Because in the meantime, those few publishers with the foresight to start building their online customer base *now* are snapping up large chunks of a limited market. By spending what they need to spend now, and learning what they need to learn, those few publishers presenting online-only games will continue to quietly build an extremely loyal, paying audience for massively multiplayer, persistent world content. And online gamers are nothing if not loyal.

Yes, there is more money overall in the retail side today, but what about five years from now? In the long run, you can make more money with persistent world games, *if* you can retain your audience. The customers are willing to play the same game for years at a stretch, if you give them what they want and need. And over a one year period, one subscriber at today's standard \$9.95 a month is worth three or four buyers of a single retail game.

Now *that* sounds like a profit model to me. I wonder what history will have to say about it, five years from now?

1.21 Odd Bits and Pieces

Volume Eight, Issue 22
Date Posted July 8, 1999

It has been something of a slow year for computer games. Overall, nothing much of any interest to the average "gamer in the street" has happened. Other than the brief excitement of the press and a few campaigning politicians tying the Littleton, Colorado, shootings to violence in games (the Hyde Amendment was shot down in flames a few weeks ago, thank God), it's just been plain boring.

My favorite slice of the aforementioned violence mess was the politicians who branded FPS games "murder simulators" to gain their 30 seconds of press time. While we all know America's federal legislators have an unlimited amount of unmitigated gall, this is a new low in their lexicon. I don't know why I should be surprised they'd say anything to get reelected. I hereby brand these rank opportunists "legislator simulators" and demand that Congress enforce the same truth-in-advertising laws for them that they are demanding for video games and entertainment media in general.

Yeah, right; that'll happen. Sure.

Lack of real news; eyah! This is a situation to cause panic in a columnist. If the publishers and developers aren't out there in the field making public, boneheaded mistakes, I have to really dig

in to think of something to write about. I mean, come on, you guys, *work* with me here. The reading public has demands, after all.

Of course, this is the summer season, which is always slow for computer and online gaming. That's because everyone is gearing up for the Christmas selling season. There is lots of coding and artwork being done right now in the hopes that games in development will actually ship during the period of October through December. Along about the first or second week of November, it will become clear that a good portion of those games won't ship on time. That's when they start stripping features out of the game just to get in on the shelf and protect the company cash flow.

In one sense, there is some news in my personal life that will have some small effect on my writings here. If you haven't heard already, I took a job with Origin Systems, Inc. Yep, that's right, OSI, the folks who publish *Ultima Online*, the massively multiplayer game that I've taken to task more than once here and elsewhere. My own personal task at OSI will be to reorganize the volunteer programs, institute new ones and generally bring my experience to bear to help UO's customer service become a world-class operation.

Don't think I've missed the delicious irony of the situation. It's one thing to be separated from the situation while making pertinent, if pithy, comments; it is quite another to be told, basically, to put up or shut up. So now I am ensconced in Austin, Texas, Live Music Capital of the World, working with my crew to figure out how to make it a reality. Hey, how the heck did *that* happen? I was seduced, I tell you. Gordon Walton, VP online services, and Jack Heistand, formerly CEO of TEN and now the head of OSI, sang me a siren song of support and glory and hope. They raised me to the mountaintop and tempted me with visions of incredible game service, intelligently and compassionately managed. They painted a glorious picture of what *could* be, if only we worked together.

And I was a weak vessel. I saw their visions and I was tempted. I wavered. I contemplated and ruminated, I anguished over it night and day....

Okay, okay; I lie like a cheap rug. I went for it like a taxi-dancer getting a marriage proposal from the Aga Khan. I caved like it was sale time at Christian Dior and they were dangling a platinum card before my eyes. I put up the same amount of resistance that a gold-digger does in accepting a diamond necklace, i.e., none to speak of.

Come on; how often does a professional get a chance to work with the largest online game community in the known galaxy? Or to work with some of computer gaming's top-tier designers and innovators, people of the likes of Richard Garriott, Raph Koster and Rich Vogel? Or skilled online veterans such as Gordon and Jack?

What this means to my ramblings here, however, is more complex. There is the little matter of objectivity to consider. Don't get me wrong; I'm perfectly capable of being bluntly objective, no matter whom I work for. However, readers should be reminded, from time to time, just whom I work for, so they can form their own opinions about my objectiveness. It's only fair.

Worry not; I'll continue taking the industry at large to task. There is a very thick skin covering this body of mine and I do seem to enjoy having that thickness tested.

Maybe it will be an interesting year after all....

1.22 Persistently Silly

Volume Eight, Issue 23

July 14, 1999

I really hate moving.

Not being in a new place, mind you, which is something I've always enjoyed, but the physical process of packing up the household and actually moving it to a new home. Moving companies, like politicians, will tell you anything you want to hear, except the truth. Oh, they'll give you a window of about when your possessions will arrive; try getting them to live up to it. On my last major move, it took the moving company 23 days to deliver my goods. This does not make for a pleasant period of anticipation.

The other thing moving does is completely interrupt a writer's work flow. I have six columns in various stages of completion but, unfortunately, I also have a deadline tomorrow (as I write this) and no way I can complete any of the six in time and also have them read semi-coherently. So this week, you get a some of my odd thoughts and snippets of supposed wisdom. During periods of stress, as in moving and starting a new job, these things tend to float through my brain in weird patterns, so I might as well make use of them.

There seems to be a misapprehension in the industry about what constitutes "persistence" in an online game. This one is a column all by itself. I will say this; keeping track of kill/death ratios in a ratings ladder for retail hybrids such as *Tribes* or *Unreal* is *not* persistence. If it were, people would be paying subscription money to still play Doom.

I was standing in line at a software store the other day to buy *MechWarrior III*. The two young lads in front of me began ragging to each other about lag on the internet, how it makes playing a game like *MechWarrior* tough and, amazingly, how it must be Activision's fault for not programming the latency out of the game. I'm not making this up.

I'm afraid I lost it a little and proceeded to lecture these two buffoons on the causes of latency. To repeat for those who still haven't caught on: it is not the fault of the game publishers (including Activision) that lag/latency exists on the internet. The internet was never made to serve real-time games. It is a distributed network environment, not a closed loop such as a company LAN, and as such it takes time for data to travel from here to there and back again. See my Biting the Hand column [number 20](#) for details.

Everyone in the industry is all atwitter about the online gaming possibilities of the Dreamcast and PSX2. Sega is actually going to build a network to support the Dreamcast. Why? Catapult and Sega's own Saturn NetLink were miserable failures. Don't the executives at Sony and Sega

understand that the compelling nature of two- to four-player console games is that all the players are *right there*, yelling and screaming at each other? Sure, internet-capable games might sell more for the consoles, but do these people have any idea how expensive it is to build and maintain a network operations site to support the games?

I guess not and therefore predict disaster. I have a very good record when it comes to predicting disaster, mainly because I get a lot of help from silly senior executives.

Several months ago at the GDC, a fairly senior producer from a Washington State-based software company approached me with a "completely new idea!" for an online game. Whenever I hear those three words from someone who has never worked on an online game, I want to run for the hills and hide in a cave.

I should have followed my instincts in this case. This person's "completely new idea"? It was "like, you know, a medieval fantasy game, but with psychic powers instead of magic!" This is rather akin to proposing to film a new version of the movie *The Wiz*, only using white actors instead of African-Americans. Not only have psi powers been used in online games, but what is the difference, really, between that and magic? To the player, practically none. As long as there is some unexplainable yet powerful phenomena that can be harnessed, they don't care. I really wish this industry would learn the difference between "derivative" and "completely new." A friend and I were recently talking and each trying to pick our favorite solo computer games of all time. This is a tough decision, because there have been so many since 1984, when I first began playing them.

Picking my all-time top six is easy: LucasArts/Larry Holland's *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*, Microprose/Sid Meier's *Civilization II*, Chris Crawford's *Balance of Power*, EA/Dani Berry's *M.U.L.E.*, SSI/Gary Grigsby's *War in the South Pacific* and Dynamix's original *Red Baron*. Trying to choose one out of those six as my number one favorite is just plain impossible.

I am interested in what you consider your one or two favorites of all time, though. Drop me a line at bth@happypuppy.com and let me know. (My friend's all-time favorite to date? Id's original *Doom*.)

1.23 Oh, No, Not Convergence Again!

Volume Eight, Issue 24

Thursday, July 22, 1999

Here we go again.

About six years ago, in the Internet Stone Age of 1993, the buzzword of the month in Hollywood was "convergence." This meant the supposed cohesive interlinking of digital information from personal computers, PDAs, television, pagers, the Internet, home alarm systems, intranets, extranets, the telephone (both POTS and cellular), satellite communications, game consoles and,

presumably, Aunt Mamie's Epilady and the kitchen sink. Et al, ad infinitum, to include anything with any kind of silicon chip in it.

The purpose of all this digital witchery (as the telephone, PC and online service companies told regulators) was to be the delivery of new forms of entertainment and information. How was this to work, you ask? Imagine:

Watching *The X-Files* and getting turned on by Gillian Anderson? Not a problem, my friend. Simply have the CPU chip in your TV access an Internet search engine and find doctored pictures of her naked. Then print them out on your ink jet, while emailing them to your buddy down the street with your voice comments attached, and posting them on a Web site, complete with a voting booth to let fans pick America's favorite Gill doctored pic. Oh, and send her a fan email at the same time and telling her where to find them.

Or, let's take online gaming. You're trolling along in your favorite RPG, keeping contact with a twelve person hunting party by voice via a microphone attached to the PC monitor. You get a sudden idea and have the PC privately dial the telephone number of one of the party members. He isn't answering, so his pager is automatically sent your phone number. When that isn't answered, a banner with your number scrolls across his TV screen. Turns out he's watching a soccer match in Australia while playing, so he calls you back and together the two of you plot to backstab the party and steal the treasure you've just found. You order the PC to send a map with the location of your secret hiding place to your cohort in crime's TV set and printer, so he can observe it while continuing to play. All the while, you are entering game moves and commands via your touch-sensitive monitor screen and speaking to other party members by switching the microphone on and off.

Enhanced gaming, easy access to all forms of information retrieval and dissemination, a convergence of content and technology to overwhelm and delight the mind, body and soul. All cheerfully and digitally delivered to you by the same people who brought you *Three's Company*, invasive Windows cookies and busy signals on Mother's Day. Ah, quite the utopian vision, indeed.

Of course, to make it happen, the regulators were told, we need a few changes in the law. Not much, you understand, just loosen up those competition barriers a bit, give us some tax breaks and let us raise the consumer rates *just* a tad. Do that for us, and we'll be happy to spend tens of billions of dollars (literally) laying new fiber optic cable and wiring in America.

No sweat, said the regulators as they made those changes. At which point, the obvious happened. As soon as the dust settled on the tax breaks and rate increases, the industry reversed course. They quietly announced that instead of laying over \$16 billion worth of fiber optic wire per year to wire out America within 10 years, the actual amount would be about \$1 to \$2 billion and it would take more like 25 to 30 years. If you sense a disparity in the numbers versus time, it is only because certain companies inflated costs when asking for tax breaks and rate increases.

So here we go again, six years later, with the process all over again. Once again, conferences are held to tell the hoi polloi just how convergence is going to happen, if only the mega-corps would

be left in peace to do it. Once again, we're being told that with just a few minor changes in the law and a few tax breaks, why, convergence is just around the corner! It isn't, of course, unless you consider 10 to 15 years "just around the corner."

So, they'll all bleat and jockey for position until they get some interesting new laws and fee increases that will cost us more now for "something" later. Only this time, the stakes are bigger. Much bigger. All those phone companies, cable operators and online services have gone through some convergence of their own and now there are tens of millions online, not just a few. There are literally hundreds of billions of dollars in future profits at stake.

To that end, several regional Bells have merged, creating mini-AT&Ts. AT&T itself now owns one cable company and is waiting for approval to own a second. Other cable companies are slowly building out broadband Internet access on their local networks, one city at a time. AOL, which gave up its own dial-in network when it went flat rate in 1996 and is probably wishing it had bought a cable company instead, now wants Congress to make those folks give them access to the cable networks (Yeah, that's the American way; let someone spend a few billions developing and deploying a new technology, then get the Feds to give it to you. I'm all for open access, but sheesh!). Convergence online, it seems, requires convergence of companies - and profits - first.

In the end, what the heck does this have to do with all of us who love online gaming, you ask? The weird thing about all this is no one has proven that any of us want all this crap. These guys are just assuming we do, pretty much the same way they all assumed everyone would jump at the chance to get movies on demand over cable. After spending \$100 million building that technology, imagine their surprise when they tested it in several markets in 1994 and 1995 and, even when offered for free, the average household watched less than one movie per month.

We all just want well-designed, nifty games to play. That doesn't require a TV set with a CPU chip, it just requires good designers and developers. The same goes for TV shows, good Web sites, you name it. So my question is:

Why is all this money being spent on new technologies for TV/PC/kitchen sink convergence, when they really have no idea whether we'll buy it, need it or even want it?

1.24 Two Mind-Bending Emails

Volume Eight, Issue 25
July 28, 1999

As you can imagine, I tend to get some email. Most of it is of the Hey! variety, as in "Hey! You're a moron!" or "Hey! You'll never eat lunch in this town again, (w)itch!" And even the occasional "Hey! Good column!"

But every once in a while, just about the time I start to think I'm something special and unique, an email will land in my box that is so well thought out, so cogent and well considered, that it

makes me stop and think. To me, that is the highest compliment I could pay to any email: it made me stop and *think*.

In the past couple weeks, I have been blessed by two of these humbling emails. With the permission of the writers, I print them here, with my own short comments following,

From Eric Lulie (tiki@tomatoweb.com), regarding column 24, **Oh, no, not convergence again!**:

You know, I think the answer to your last question, "Why is all this money being spent on new technologies for TV/PC/kitchen sink convergence, when they really have no idea whether we'll buy it, need it or even want it?", would have to be: it takes much longer to do something really creative or innovative, than it does to do something derivative or to do something that incrementally approves on something that was done before. (You could probably apply this same logic to things that are well-crafted and designed, too; it takes much longer to do that than to do something that is of the same quality as everything else, or that is incrementally better, quality-wise, than the competitors.)

Look at the world of science for a wonderful example: you do have a handful of highly publicized researchers, working on coming up with the next big thing, theory-wise; however, the vast majority of all scientific research is actually incremental -- it builds on knowledge that has come before, and usually improves the existing understanding of the way something works, rather than providing a totally new way of looking at things (could you imagine what college would be like if that were true for all the classes you took: each new class totally changed everything you had learned in the class before :-)).

Something completely different: the auto industry. Very infrequently do you get a total redesign of a car (e.g., the first year that the Ford F-150 or the Dodge Ram or the 90's Mustang came out); typically, the new year brings incremental changes in an existing design. (Even with new cars, you don't really see anything that is groundbreakingly different; a prime example would be most 'new' sport utility vehicles -- for all intents and purposes, these usually come across as a truck with four doors and a cover for the truck bed :-)).

In terms of computer games, look at the trends we tend to see: one successful game (first person shooter, real-time strategy game) is released, then the market responds by releasing a flood of largely derivative clones (some of which are superior to the game which started the flood; however, they usually don't represent that much of a change from the original). A successful single game becomes the beginning of a series of games, each of which is incrementally better than its predecessor (Hardball, Heroes of Might and Magic, Alone in the Dark, the Journeyman Project, Need for Speed, etc.). Even much hyped 'true' successors to a game turn out to be incremental improvements of the game that appeared before (e.g., Alpha Centauri seems to be a moderately improved version of Civilization II, and even then more in terms of the control you have over your civilization, rather than substantial improvements in gameplay).

I don't think you're going to see the outpouring of creativity or quality that was present in computer games between the mid-80's and early 90's; even then, if you do see elements of either of those two qualities, it will tend to be from a technical, programming standpoint rather than a creativity or quality of design. Surprising, though: it would seem that nowadays, computer games use more creative programming (to do the new, whiz-bang effects) and less quality programming (to make sure the program doesn't require a never-ending series of patches) -- off the top of my head, I can think of very few games that worked as advertised, without at least one patch of some kind.

I'd guess that my answer to "Why is all this money being spent on new technologies for TV/PC/kitchen sink convergence, when they really have no idea whether we'll buy it, need it or even want it?" is "It's far easier for us (the companies) to work on things that we know how to do than it is for us to work on things that you (the consumers) want or ask for."

Eric Lulie

Mr. Lulie has hit the nail on the head on two very important points. The first is that creating something new is not a scheduled event and, when somebody does it, everyone else rushes in to copy it. In the process, incremental improvements are made to the "new thing" as a natural part of the process. In our industry, we saw it happen with id Software's Doom, arguable the first *true* 1st person action game for the PC, and with Blizzard's Warcraft, perhaps the first true real-time strategy game for the PC. Each spawned a raft-load of imitations, some of which included interesting but incremental improvements (Half-Life, Delta Force, Descent, for example). We are seeing the process happen now with the Linux open source operating system.

The other important point he made is that, curmudgeons like me aside, people and companies work on what they know because, well, they know it. Let's face it; if any of us knew how to build the next "new thing" on demand, we'd be *doing* it. I mean, you can get up in the morning, stretch and say, "Think I'll totally revolutionize the industry today," but 99.999999999 times out of 100, it ain't going to happen. And as industries mature and find a willfully paying audience, it becomes harder for that to happen; there is less incentive to rock the boat and maybe kill the goose while it lays golden eggs.

That doesn't mean I won't keep nipping at the industry with my filed canines for not at least *trying*.

From Aaron Contreras (acontrer@vfs.com), with general commentary:

Sellout! Sellout!

Sorry, had to get it out of my system. (*One sentence clipped. -JMM*) At any rate, good luck making Ultima Online (or whatever madness they are planning) a quality roleplaying environment. Or just a bunch of really cool effects. Either are, IMHO, the only way to go.

I've been gaming online for...well, lots of years now. Mostly doing the text-based thing. Started out on MUD's, graduated to Gemstone, graduated to Legends of Future Past (so ahead of it's time, and such a shame it was mis-managed), graduated to Inferno, graduated to MUSH'es, got a life. Common story. Semi-infrequent trysts with Ultima Online (when it first started) and Everquest aside, I've pretty much been doing the text-based online thing for a whole decade.

It has become somewhat obvious to me that the gaming public, as a whole, is a bunch of idiotic geeks with poor social skills. This is somewhat sad, as it makes quality roleplaying (be it dramatic, flowery, action oriented, whatever...simply *playing a role*) in any sort of game quite hard to find. Throw in graphics, or two thousand players (though hopefully this will change in time), or a poorly designed list of stuff to do, or the slightest imbalances in gameplay...and you have a crap game. The only solution is to up the wow factor...as Everquest demonstrated perfectly. Sure, nobody was IC (*note: in character. JMM*), nobody gave a damn about anything but power, personal advancement and seeing/killing/wearing new stuff, but it all looked and sounded so damn pretty even us crusty types stuck around for a while. Obviously, the lack of a storyline of any sort eventually drove us away...but I think my 80 dollars or so was well spent. A well trained and motivated volunteer staff (is this what you're looking to do for OSI?) might have even been able to make a few of the servers playable for a year or more.

Until then, I will be happily playing and running adventures in the (*Web address deleted. -JMM*), trying to give my 40-50 regular players something meaningful in the way of a story. Not quite as awe-inspiring as a nice Everquest sunset while you are in the mountains, but it fulfills a greater need in me.

The point? Uhm - you're probably the most vocal, educated, experienced voice in the media (That I am aware of) talking about online gaming. The wow factor is all well and good, but let's not focus entirely on the (let's be frank) clumsy efforts of large gaming companies. There is art out there to be found and praised.

Now - my two favorite games of all time, in no particular order!

- 1) Ultima IV - Questioned my morality and helped spark a passion for ethics...when I was 10 or so.
- 2) Civilization (Either One) - probably the best game ever made in any format.

Yeah, no big surprises.

Congratulations if you actually read this poorly written jibber-gabber, I'm just now drinking my early afternoon coffee.

Lots of interesting sub-points in this letter, but the truly important one is that there is art in online games, but it is mainly found right now in the less-populated, home-grown efforts. Right now but as larger publishers jump into this arena and make their own mistakes (and learn from them), this will eventually become moot.

Now, what should that remind us of? Remember Mr. Lulie's letter above and my commentary that there is no incentive to kill the golden egg-laying goose? If that's true, and it surely is, where do the revolutions begin?

In two places, for the most part:

- In home-grown efforts such as Mr. Contreras', where the incentive to try something new and maybe spark a revolution begins with pure love of the art and the process, and a need to change the world;
- In well-funded efforts where a company puts a group of deep thinkers together, dumps a bunch of money on them and then basically leaves them alone to just *do* it. Two examples we should all be aware of: the old Bell Laboratories (now Lucent) and the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). Without the research conducted by these two groups, you wouldn't be reading this article. There wouldn't be a Web, or a graphic user interface or Ethernet technology. (And the next time someone starts railing to you online about big, soulless corporations, maybe you could remind them of this. There are minimum two facets to every story.)

Definitely, food for thought.

1.25 The Count Is In, and More Reader Mail

**Volume Eight, Issue 26
August 5, 1999**

I've been a bad girl.

I have quite a bit of *BTH* mail sitting in my box, and I'm just now getting around to it. My objective has always been to print selections from it every five or six columns; what with moving twice already this year, I just haven't had the opportunity. So I'm going to take this opportunity to run some more of it, even though I printed some last column, too.

Back in issue number 23, I invited readers of this column to send me their picks for their favorite games of all time. The response to that call was all over the field, but a few games were clearly in front.

In first place was Sid Meier's *Civilization* series. *Civ I* or *Civ II* was mentioned in about half the emails I received. What I found interesting about this is that a turn-based game beat out all the real-time strategy games on the market. This just shows that well-designed game can keep one interested for a loooooong time. In fact, I'm a day late getting this column to the editor because I fired up *Civ II* to check a couple things and got hooked all over again.

The close runner-up was id Software's original *Doom*, a game I consider the first true "shooter." This was no surprise, as the game had as much impact on the industry as any product ever has.

Some excerpts from a few of the "pick" emails:

From Brad Andrews, who I know from the old GEnie days. Brad is one of the "good guys" and had a hand in some computer games himself, including *Arkanoid* for the Mac (if I remember correctly):

I might change the games if I thought more, but I really think *Civ II* and *RR Tycoon* (the original) would probably be my favorites.

I think you would have to factor in how enjoyable it was at the time, not just how it compares to today, though both could hold up very well. In some ways *Civ I* might deserve the spot more, as it was completely new and exciting. I didn't spend as much time with *Civ II*, but then my gaming time has decreased significantly over the years.

From Jason Robert Bogh:

You're right, it IS tough to choose your favorite solo computer game of all time, but I think I have it narrowed down to a couple. Well, there's *King's Quest 6*, *Wizardry 1: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord*, *Mean Streets*, and *Castle of the Winds*. It's funny, because I just had a conversation with about 7 of my closest friends about our favorite video games. This conversation led to video games in general, and the future of video games. I must admit that I've always loved computer games more than console games, although I feel 8-bit Nintendo had the best games (gameplay-wise) ever. I thoroughly enjoy reading your columns. Keep up the good work.

From UnaBraumer:

You mentioned in your Biting the Hand column, Volume Eight, Issue 23 that you would be interested in our all time favorite game(s). I have to say that Final Fantasy VII is my all time favorite. I have yet to play a game that affected me as much as that one did. I actually got emotionally entangled in it. The next one down would be Half-Life, because of it's atmosphere. And then right behind that X-Wing Alliance, because I... well, I have no idea why I like the X-Wing series as much as I do. Before Half-Life came along, Doom (I and II) would have been on there too. Half-Life was the first game in quite a while to have as much of an atmosphere as doom.

To close, an interesting email about one of the early columns. I received this in early July, while I was in the process of moving to Austin:

From Abe Flores:

Okay this is a late response, I'll admit, but I just read (Volume Eight, Issue 8: March 25, 1999) about the glut of FPS & RTS games on the market. You made very valid points and I do agree with you up to a point.

While laziness and greed are certainly a big factor in why the gaming market looks the way it does, you overlook, perhaps, the fact that most computer gamers are largely getting out of their games exactly what they want. For most, the computer game is a diversion and occasionally a frustration releaser, you get to blow stuff up. I mean I'm an old paper & pen RPG gamer and I understand precisely what you are saying about what is possible in a good RPG. The thing is for me, at least, the charm of an RPG is the group of people you've gathered, the snacks, stale pizza, joking and all the stuff that goes on around the game as well as the role playing within the game. You make an emotional investment in these people and play as often off their non-verbal cues as much as your character's demands.

I've not found this dynamic possible even within the world of computer gaming. Now I'll admit I've not yet played the high end online multiplayer RPGs yet, and I am seeing advances recently that may change that, but the future notwithstanding if I'm looking for multiplayer RPG or even RPGs of quality it's back to the books for me. For computer gaming I look for something I can slip in and out of without a lot of investment, I look for something I can play either for hours at a time or step away from for weeks and not have to struggle too much to get back into. It's kinda like Magic: The Gathering, quick, sloppy and shallow, in other words gamer-Crack, but it'll do until I can convince my paper and pen pals to come up to SF.

I must also add two quick points, for good measure if for no other reason. I'm what they call a film snob, and everything you've said about gaming I've been known to say about film and movies, but it also has taught me one thing about media and technology. When a technology first appears and is successful, two things happen right away. First everybody copies it like mad, yes this is lazy and greedy, no argument.

What happens second is more important. Everybody starts using it for the most basic, simple and wowie factor possible. Computer Gaming has just exited this phase. Right now the tools have been developed, the language has been formed and it is time for the industry to evolve.

Before now that evolution would have been nearly impossible. Thief, which in my mind feels very much like an RPG, wouldn't have been possible before Quake really, and the new D&D titles from Black Isle could only evolve after the largely disappointing Interplay RPG titles and the MUDs of the early 90s.

Anyway, that's at least how I see it. The only obstacle that will really remain is whether I'm willing to make that emotional commitment to an online community I've never met and gotten to know before the game.

Mr. Flores makes some good points, especially about the naturally chaotic and dynamic nature of humans gaming together and the social aspect of that. Certainly, it is much easier to achieve this social aspect when you're gathered around a table in someone's dining room. When the technology reaches a point where we can simulate that adequately, massively multiplayer games will go through another evolutionary leap.

What technology is needed for this to happen inside a massively multiplayer game? At minimum, I would think we'd need:

1. Good voice communications;
2. good visual communications, either actual streamed video from the home or excellent 3D animations that can represent the player in ways impossible today;
3. a way to eliminate or greatly curtail latency on the Internet, so we can stream all that seamlessly;
4. voice command, hands-off-the-keyboard game and communications input.

How long will it be before we have those tools available to us? No telling, although I'm betting on at least five years for everything except #3. That I'm expecting to take at least ten years, and maybe fifteen and maybe never.

1.26 Talk About Dreaming

Volume Eight, Issue 27
August 12, 1999

What game company would plan to ship a game hardware product with online capability, but have no online games available for it? Sounds stupid, right? No company with an ounce of sanity would do that, right?

Wrong. That is *exactly* what Sega is planning to do with the Dreamcast game console.

For those who haven't been following the news, Dreamcast is Sega's answer to the Playstation, a next-generation 128 bit gaming console that will ship with an installed modem. According to the media hype, this is supposed to be the Next Big Thing for Internet gaming, available in stores on September 9, 1999 which is, coincidentally, the first horror date in the Y2K calendar, as 9999

is the "please shut down and don't work anymore" code in a lot of older processors. Sega may learn to regret having chosen that marketing date for it's catchy ring. If a bunch of computers go down on that day, the term "my computer went Sega" may be added to the technical lexicon.

But I digress. Last week, Sega finally got around to announcing that AT&T's WorldNet would be the network connection for the Dreamcast Network. There was plenty of press play on the item, with wild estimates that WorldNet could double or triple it's current user base of 1.2 million (where it has been stuck for a couple years) via Dreamcast subscribers. In the same announcement, would-be online games mega-corp Sega announced there would be no online games for Dreamcast until next year.

My initial reaction was, "How utterly silly." This is roughly equivalent to trying to sell a boat with an improved engine to the inhabitants of the Gobi desert.

My second reaction was, "So what?"

In my not-so-humble opinion, this is all sizzle and no steak, a chimera designed to sell boxes to parents with kids who want to play console games. Why do I think this? Consider:

- If people really wanted to access the Internet from a box sitting on top of the television, why has it taken WebTV two years and hundreds of millions of Microsoft's monopoly money to garner only one million buyers/subscribers? In the same period, something like 40 million PCs were sold and about 50 million people subscribed to an Internet ISP. Why the disparity? Someone needs to give a definitive answer to that question, before we go spending all this money on hardware no one wants or needs. Here's a hint: When was the last time you played an online game sitting 12 feet from your monitor, with the keyboard in your lap?
- There is this concept known as "added value." We used to use the same technique when I worked for online services. All our surveys and focus groups showed education forums and chats ranking near the top of reasons to sign up for an online service and playing online games ranked dead last. When we checked the usage logs, however, education areas provided less than one percent of the total usage of the service and online games were about 25%. We immediately began publicizing the education uses of online services, subscriptions soared and education products continued to be ignored. Online game usage, however, was very good.

See what I'm driving at? It's hard to justify buying something to play games, but education now that's a winner! That's *added value*. It is a high *perceived* value, whether it actually gets used or not. In this case, it would work like this: "Yes, honey, that *is* a \$200 game console in the shopping cart. Why? Look, right here on the box, it says our kids can use it on the Internet to do homework. Wouldn't that be useful? I know the air conditioning in your car needs repairing, sweetheart, but just imagine how smart little Joe and Jane will be! Uh, no, darling, I don't know how all those games got in the cart. Quite puzzling."

- To effectively play the average "run, dodge, jump and shoot" console game, you need a latency rate of about 60 milliseconds or less. That is less than 1/10 of a second lag time. When was the last time you consistently got 1/10 of second lag time over the Internet? When was the last time you consistently got a two-second lag rate over the Internet? For the vast majority of dial-up users, never, that's when. Surely, Sega realizes this. Surely, they've done their homework. Surely, they learned a lesson from their own disastrous Saturn Net-Link from a couple years back. Surely, I'm spitting into the wind.

And what makes anyone think developers will actually try to design around the lag, which is the only hope for a decent game experience this way? Or that kids will enjoy playing console games that are a *lot* slower than they are now because of designing for the lag? Or that Dreamcast will succeed with 2 to 4 player games over a modem when damn near everyone else has failed to make money off them? Or, or or

Sure, I know Turbine has signed on to develop a massively multiplayer game for Dreamcast. I wish them all the luck in the world. I can barely read the chat screen in most online games when my face is 18 inches from the screen; good luck having a fun play experience ten or twelve feet away, or even six. Trying playing an MMG balancing one of those tiny keyboards in your lap. No, thanks.

So what am I actually saying here? I'm saying that no one with an ounce of common sense really cares about online games via a game console. The modem in Dreamcast is a perceived value, pure and simple, with no true real world use for gamers. Dreamcast will be bought for one reason: it is backward compatible with previous Sega platforms. That means all the games you bought from Sega before will work on Dreamcast, and probably better.

As for online gaming with it: Why do you think it is shipping with not one online-capable game ready for it?

1.27 Snippets and Rumors

Volume Eight, Issue 28
Thursday, August 19, 1999

It is a rare moment that I don't have a lot to say about computer and online games. I have no doubt my friends and colleagues treasure these rare quiet moments. But it sure makes it pure-D heckaciousness to meet a deadline.

So I decided to do what every self-respecting writer does when she lacks subject matter: write fewer words and print rumors. (I'll bet you thought I was going to say, "Make it up." This isn't the National Enquirer, I just write that way.)

I suppose I could just take a gratuitous shot at someone; it isn't like there aren't plenty of handy targets. Well, less than there used to be, for sure. Between Hasbro and the French (who can't seem to win a shooting war but do know how to buy a company on the rocks), there just aren't a

lot of companies left to buy. Lately, the industry grapevine is all a'twitter with rumors of a bidding war between Mattel and Hasbro to see who gets to pick over the decaying body of GT Interactive. A couple lousy quarters for Barbie sales and see what happens? I mean toy companies buying computer game companies? Have they no shame? And did you notice that they didn't bother until toy sales started to drop a bit?

Of course, Sega has bigger problems. In case you haven't heard, they ditched Dreamcast head Bernie Stolar barely one month before the launch of that next generation gaming console, appointing in his place - surprise! - a native Japanese well-known to the head office. This is akin to a publisher dumping Tom Clancy as writer at the last chapter of his latest best-seller and having Dr. Seuss finish up. Rumors abound about Bernie's no-BS style of management ticking off the head office in Tokyo. If that is true another one bites the dust. We need more Stolar's telling it like it is.

And Interactive Magic: What's up with that? They sell their CD-ROM game business to UbiSoft, change their name to iEntertainment Network and decide to go all the way to online-only fare, then de-emphasize online games such as *Warbirds* and *Kingdom of Drakkar*, the stock price sinks lower than dolphin doo-doo and CEO Wild Bill Stealey bails. Then *this* week, they appoint Jim Hettinger as CEO. Hettinger sold his small, self-funded company, MPG-Net, to Interactive Magic last year. No offense to Jim, a man I've known for going on nine years and a person I genuinely like, but IM's stock started tanking right after that purchase by IM. Good luck, Jim; you're going to need it, especially if the NASDAQ delists your new ship from the exchange today or tomorrow, as seems possible.

The press release said Stealey's move had been planned since Spring, but it was news to the rest of us. If one were a suspicious sort, one might smell the odor of deceased rodent in the sultry summer air. The word "putsch" has been bandied about in some low circles. All is not horrid for Wild Bill, however; the company stills pays for him to fly his privately owned airplane. Not bad, at all. If they're still looking for a replacement, I'm not nearly that high maintenance; all I want is a company-sponsored shopping spree at Saks when I leave. Make a note.

I just realized something; I haven't heard an official peep out of America Online's Game Channel for over a year. Not since the federal anti-trust lawsuit between those worthies and Kesmai Corporation was settled last July, in fact. No new product announcements, no rousing speeches at conferences by Lawrence Schick; did they all just disappear? This is not like them at all; up until the lawsuit was filed in late 1997, you couldn't swing a dead cat without hitting a press release about CyberPark or Extreme Games or *something*. I better call and make sure a meteor didn't hit Dulles, Virginia while I was busy elsewhere.

In the Online Games Insider newsletter lately, I've been writing about my experiences with ADSL, the local telephone company's answer to the cable modem. The upshot: The more expensive ADSL option of 1.5 meg dedicated bandwidth is quite useful for online gaming. I'm a so-so Quake and Tribes player, but my kill ratio went up dramatically when I started using the high-bandwidth ADSL; less lag overall, most times I play. Until the boneheads at the phone companies figure out a better and faster installation method and lower the price for the higher

bandwidth option, however, you shouldn't expect to see it surpass cable access subscription numbers soon.

Just a reminder: The Christmas Selling Season is about to start. Beginning in September, the flood of games to retail will increase and, with it, the extreme hyperbole with which Marketing Departments describe those products. Be prepared to see games as boring as 3D Tic-Tac-Toe described in such glowing terms as "revolutionary," "mind-blowing," "next generation technology," "you've never seen Tic-Tac-Toe like this!" "Washes your car and the windows on your house," "your bread will rise faster," "The chicks will really dig you!" and other such nonsense.

In fact, that gives me an inspiration for the next column

1.28 The World's (Coolest/Most Exciting/Eagerly Awaited) (Column/Article/Rant)

**Volume Eight, Issue 29
Thursday, August 26, 1999**

Ah, Christmas: the season of giving. And in that spirit, the Marketing wonks at our favorite game publishers will be giving unto us, yea, verily! They will be slinging us verbal hash in Biblical amounts, complete with purple prose and hyperbole. You should all recognize them by now; I use them enough in this column.

You see, along with the change in seasons comes The Christmas Crunch, that period from September through December when somewhere between 35% and 60% of all computer and video games are sold. The disparity results from who does the counting and how, primarily in the difference between "sell in," which means the number of units bought by retailers to put on shelves, and "sell through," which when the publisher actually gets credit for the sale. There is also generally a 90-day lapse in payment, as retailers wait to see how many copies of a game are returned and so they don't pay the publishers for returned copies. Thus, one might "sell in" 100,000 units, but "sell through" only 80,000, and then experience 40,000 returns.

There is vicious competition for shelf space during La Crunch. About three times more games are published during this period than can actually physically fit on the shelves. If the game doesn't make its bones in the first seven to ten days, the retailers aren't sentimental about it; off it comes. And hence, Marketing Departments are charged with doing whatever it takes to make sure the game *does* fly off the shelf.

This is a tough time for the Marketing weasels. After all, each one of them has anywhere from 5 to 15 different SKUs to push. It is a battlefield out there, and sometimes they end up fighting with themselves as they push two similar products. It's all rather amusing to watch them tensely flip through Roget's Thesaurus, while the fear sweat beads the forehead, attempting to pick a word or phrase that the competition hasn't already used a zillion times.

One weapon they use in these Hyperbole Wars is the press release. Rather than explain just how, allow me to demonstrate my commitment to public service by constructing a brief template for all budding marketing weasels to use during the upcoming Crunch. Of course, I simply must throw in my own little twists here and there; call them real-world definitions of the hype, if you will.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Digital Online Productions Interactive Games is (pleased/excited/thrilled/scared like hell) to announce the release of (*Masher/Maimer/Baby Killer/Culture Destroyer/Psychotic Teenager/<Insert Name Here> III*), which is (the most highly anticipated/the exciting new/the most innovative ever/a complete rehash) entry into (real time strategy/First Person action/classic favorites/the Universe and everything in it/we have no idea what it is) games. (Anticipation/Expectation/Eagerness/The Feeding Frenzy) for The Game has (raised/elevated/hoisted/hurled upwards) in recent days as retailers have (doubled/tripled/quadrupled/promised deviant sex for more) pre-orders of it.

The Game puts players (in the captain's seat/in command of massive forces/behind the biggest fricking 3D-rendered gun ever) for (action-packed mayhem/thrilling game play/heart-pounding game play/non-stop action/monotonous replays due to the inability of the designers to look up the word "creativity" in the dictionary).

"The Game delivers (a powerful new gaming experience/multiplayer mayhem/stomach-churning action that will cause epileptic seizures) to young and old alike," crowed Yermi Mealticket, CEO of DOPI Games. "With it's(killer effects/stunning graphics/multi-player capabilities/features we copied from successful games), The Game is (as intense/fun/thrilling/insane/as stupid enough to sell) as it gets."

Players (blast their way through 100 million increasingly difficult levels/carefully build resources and units/click on pretty pictures/are forced to quickly manipulate the keyboard and mouse and thus miss the game's shortcomings) designed especially for (novice players/experienced players/the 12 to 17 year old girl/for 14 year old boys who love gore, even though the game is rated Mature Audiences Only/grandmothers with a schizoid bent).

"The Game will provide (hours of fun/years of entertainment/more non-recyclable trash in garbage heaps everywhere)," said Sil E. Geek executive producer of The Game for developer Nostril Blow Interactive. "This CD-ROM game is destined to become (the most loved and played game ever/the new technological milestone by which all computer games will be

judged/filler for remainder bins in retail stores worldwide/used as a coaster by your Aunt when she comes to visit)."

The Game is now available at retailers everywhere, at a suggested retail price of (\$89.43/\$69.19/\$49.99/\$19.95/feel free to trade in our last bomb for credit).

DOPI Games is a leading developer, publisher and distributor of interactive entertainment software for all markets on all planets anywhere, in all space/time continuums for all types of sentient beings. DOPI currently balances its development efforts by publishing for personal computers, video game consoles, main frame computers, the Swiss Army Knife, toasters, microwave ovens, the Infiniti Q45, Revlon Hair Curling Irons and HEPA filters. More comprehensive information on DOPI Games is available at <http://www.dopi.com>.

1.29 The Real Online Game Markets

**Volume Eight, Issue 30
Thursday, September 2, 1999**

After some fourteen years of experience and proselytizing, including hammering home the data annually at the Computer Game Developer's Conference and other speaking engagements, I figured everyone in the industry must know by now how the online game market was composed. That is, who the customers are, what they want to play and who is actually willing to pay money for online games. This isn't rocket science, after all, and the historical data is very clear about it.

Well, dress me up in a monkey suit and make me dance next to an organ grinder; the word still isn't out. Let's try to rectify that yet one more time.

First, a caveat: The following categories of gamers online do not include those folks who indulge in online gambling for cash, such as patronizing the "offshore" Internet casinos in the Cook Islands, or online sports fantasy leagues, such as Rotisserie Baseball. They are complete markets unto themselves. In the future, I may do a BTH just on them, for they have some interesting characteristics you won't find in "traditional" online games.

That "traditional" online gaming market is actually three separate and distinct niche markets, with only a little crossover between them. Yes, these are gross simplifications and kinda muddy; I know that. Give me a break; this is a commentary, not a college thesis.

The "Classic Games" or "Mass Gamer" Market

Represented in this market are those games familiar to just about everyone, such as Chess, Poker, Hangman, Spades, Hasbro's Risk and Scrabble, Backgammon and Hearts. While we might not be experts in these games, most of us at least know the basic mechanics of play.

These games have become commodities, offered for free play on aggregator and portal sites such as Yahoo!, Internet Gaming Zone and the like.

The Mass Market gamer is unlikely to move "up" into the other categories. In truth, he/she isn't really a "gamer," as we think of the term in the industry. This person is looking for easy entertainment and the companionship of other humans more than a game experience, in most cases. The familiar, Classic game is just a vehicle to find those other humans to chat with.

It is hard to make any money from this class; their pricing point is "free or less." Current game sites and portals are using these games as loss leaders, trying to attract enough people to charge decent advertising rates for page views.

The "Retail Hybrid" or "Casual Gamer" Market

Think "Quake II" and "Age of Empires." These are the 27 million or so people that buy anywhere from one to three computer games a year, on average. They not only play the games solo at home, but also connect to the Internet and hit the match-making sites to play against two to eight other humans. Real time strategy games and 1st person 3D shooters dominate this category.

The Retail Hybrid concept has also become a commodity; while the player has to buy the retail unit, the games themselves are offered for free multi-user play at many sites.

The Casual Gamer is also a prime candidate for moving in the Hard Core gaming segment. Many Casual Gamers have tried or will try one or more online-only games. They may even play an online-only game, albeit irregularly.

The "Online-Only" and/or "Hard Core Gamer" Market

Exemplified by games such as EverQuest, Ultima Online, Air Warrior III, Gemstone III and Warbirds. The key differentiators of this category are:

- a. The games usually feature a persistent world, in that the player creates a character, persona or handle that identifies him/her in the game and which can be grown and altered over a period of time. In Ultima Online, this is represented by a character whose skills and possessions grow with playing time. In Air Warrior, it is represented by the kill/death ratio.
- b. The games are intensely social. After a while, the game itself becomes almost irrelevant; what matters is that the player's friends are there.

These four million or so people buy 12-15 games a year and regularly play one or more online games. Heck, let's admit it; they will play any game available. You'll find them playing Hybrids at IGZ or mPlayer, you'll find them in the persistent worlds; if you put up multiplayer Tic-Tac-Toe, they'd try it. Online games are the prime source of entertainment for the Hard Core player.

As noted above, there is little movement between the groups. Think of it as a pyramid, with the Mass Gamer at the base and the Hard Core gamer at the pinnacle. There is less room to move

upward in the pyramid's structure. About 70% of the population, in fact, sit at the base in the Mass Gamer category. Another 15% to 20% rests in the Casual Gamer slots and the rest are the Hard Core gamers.

Traditionally, that 10% to 15% at the top of the pyramid has represented 80% of the revenue. God bless 'em, the Hard Core gamer will spend whatever it takes in time, money and dedication to enjoy an online game. For the past fifteen years, they have provided the income that supported development of new online games.

Why is it important to understand this? Simply put: Survival. Or, at least, it is important to the survival of the Hard Core segment of the industry. Now that the business model has changed from hourly fees to flat monthly rates, the industry is at critical cusp. No longer can a mere 2,000 players financially support a single game, as was the case just three years ago. We no longer need just a few quality users with high disposal incomes to flourish; we need hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of players willing to spend \$9.95 a month on one or more of our games. In a flat rate world, this is a recipe for slowly going broke, as Prodigy found out in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

And, boy! are the players demanding. With advent of the Retail Hybrids, players now expect that online-only games have the same production values. This has drastically raised the bar on development. Even up to mid-1996, two or three people could create and sell an online-only game and make a pretty decent living at it. Now, with the need to have graphics and sound that approaches the quality of a retail SKU, its pretty tough to develop a commercial online-only game with less than a dozen to fifteen people and for less than \$750,000.

Without at least 100,000 paying customers, there is little room in the margin for a developer/publisher to create new games. You can see the results of the business model change three years ago. At that time, almost 100 online-only games were in serious development. You'd be hard put to find twenty such games in development today.

By "serious," I mean a development team with the proper resources. You can find probably still find hundreds of online-only games in various stages of development, but most of them are shoestring efforts with little or no resources or support. Mentions of them on the Net come and go all the time.

So what does all this mean for the online gamer, you ask?

Good question, and I will attempt to answer it next week.

1.30 The Real Online Game Markets, Part II

**Volume One, Issue 31
Thursday, September 9, 1999**

Tap, tap. All right, folks, settle down. Let's get started, shall we? We have a lot to cover today.

If you haven't read last week's homework assignment, The Real Online Game Markets, please do so now. We'll wait for you to catch up.

Finished? Okey dokey, let move on to this week's question, which is:

"So what does all this mean for the online gamer?"

The short answer is it depends. It depends on several factors but, mostly, it depends on what type of online gamer you are. We are going to see plenty of games put into development in all three of the broad markets I described in the last column (Mass Market, Casual and Hard Core). The computer and online games industries are nothing if not optimistic and prolific; last time I checked, there were at least 40 online games in development, not counting Retail Hybrids.

Most of them will never see the light of day, of course, and most of those that do come to market won't have the legs to stick around very long. I base this statement on history. As little as three years ago, when I was still a consultant, the executive briefing I gave to companies began with a slide that listed every publisher, developer and online distributor that had even one online game in development or deployed, and the total number of online games in development as an industry. In September, 1996, the total was 132.

Yes, that number is correct. Allow me to put that in modern terms we can all understand (especially a greedy wench like me): One Hundred and Thirty Two and No Cents.

As it turned out, the "No Cents" should have read "No Sense." There is no telling how many millions of dollars the 41 companies on my list tossed down the proverbial rat hole on games that could not possible succeed. Certainly, most of those 132 games never made it to market or even beyond the paper design stage. And at what cost? Let's say 90 of them haven't or never will make it to market; the number is probably more like 110, but let's be conservative. If the average amount of money spent on failed efforts was even \$100,000 - and that number is surely higher by a factor of at least two-, that's \$9 million right there. Nine million dead presidents, gone for nothing.

Waste not, want not. As I look over the chart today, fifteen of those 41 companies no longer exist and seven or eight others have pretty much exited the industry. That total doesn't include companies such as TEN, which last week took a look at their hard core gaming fare, said "We have seen the enemy, and they is us!" and went to all Mass Market games and changed the corporate name to pogo.com. (And if you don't understand the mangled reference, ask your parents. Or grandparents. My god, I *am* getting old!)

Nine million dollars. For \$9 million today, I can produce for you a minimum of two absolutely kick-butt persistent world online games that will bring in a minimum of \$9 million a year *each* or several years. That includes my bloated salary, outrageous perqs and golden parachute that will allow me to retire to Tahiti with Pedro the Cabana Boy.

It is definitely a great time to be a consumer. Expect to a lot more money tossed down rat holes, as companies rush to try to seal up the various markets by throwing as many games as possible online. These games will come and go from the market fairly quickly, but you'll get a chance to try a lot of them in a short period of time.

The Mass Market, typified by familiar games such as poker, backgammon and spades, has the toughest row to hoe. These games are commodities; sites give access to them for free as loss leaders to draw in a crowd. This works admirably if you are a Sony and own licenses such as *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune*. It works less admirably if you are a TEN - excuse me, Pogo - or even a Microsoft and are competing with the same old ho-hum spades, chess, et al.

Sure, they make back some of the costs of hosting the games through banner advertising, but not near enough to make their margins. Everyone and his grandmother is going to be trying to find a Mass Market product that breaks out of commodity status and can be charged for in some way, shape or form. After spending three years training the market to expect these games for free, good luck.

The Retail Hybrids will stay with us for a few years, at least. Selling units at retail is the only way most publishers know how to make money. They still haven't figured out how to make a lot of money on the Internet portions of their games, although one could make the argument that Blizzard and Sierra have made a start with battle.net and won.net, respectively. They are still money sinks, but at least they help promote brand loyalty.

The main argument for these dollar sucks is that the companies make up the costs in additional game unit sales. Of course, they can't really tell us how many extra sales they make, although they estimate it at 10% to 15%. This seems to me like a number pulled out of thin air, to justify the costs.

Truth to tell, Internet connectivity in retail games is now also commodity. Since id tossed it in for free in Quake, everyone else has to follow suit. And because it is a free feature and almost completely unsupported after launch, it is generally poorly implemented and tacked on at the last minute. There are some excellent renditions - Tribes comes to mind - but they are the exception, not the rule. But if you play computer games and like the 2 to 16 player gig, you needn't worry about that segment of the market disappearing soon.

Persistent worlds and designed-for-online games are faring somewhat better. With the example of *Ultima Online* (www.owo.com) and *EverQuest* (www.everquest.com), which together presently represent something like \$24 million annually in subscriber fees alone, more companies are taking a serious look at entering this arena.

A few examples: Sierra still swears it is developing Tolkien's *Middle Earth*; Turbine's *Asheron's Call* is slated to finally go live on The Zone this fall; Bioware is working a limited-play version of *AD&D: NeverWinter Nights* (And why not name it *NWN II*? Why not a single nod to the original on AOL? Why are they ignoring references to one of the most financially successful online games to date?) and; Digital Anvil is working on a couple games for The Zone, too, including the space combat game *Freelancer*.

What it all means is that companies would love to tap into the games annuity market, and that means doing persistent worlds and doing them correctly. Unfortunately, most people don't know how, so expect a lot of trial and error as publishers continue to ignore the lessons of the past and make the same old mistakes over and over again.

So to wrap all this up neatly and answer today's question:

For the next three or four years, game consumers from beginners to hard core enthusiasts are going to have an ever-increasing number of online games to try. There will be a plethora of entries in all markets, with quite a number of failed efforts and a few gems that will be around for years. In the process, much *dinero* will be thrown to the winds on products better left in the mind of the progenitor.

The main effort will to be find a way to make the Mass Market actually pay for playing, even though the biggest hit right now and for the next 4 or 5 years is in persistent worlds. Those games are, however, too difficult to support and manage for most companies to want to stay in that market. And Hybrids are too attached to the hit-driven nature of the retail market for most of them to stick around for more than a couple years, and most companies can't figure out how to make money with them beyond the initial sale, anyway.

This may all seem like simple common sense to you and me. To paraphrase the author, however; "Why is it called 'common sense' when it is so uncommon?"

Good question. If there are no more questions, class is dismissed.

1.31 The Marching Morons, Part Deux

**Volume Eight, Issue 32
Thursday, September 16, 1999**

I'm worried. When did it become OK for online gamers to be foul-mouthed, dishonest, racist homophobes?

I must have missed the announcement making such behavior acceptable. Yet there obviously was one, because I can hardly cruise the message boards today without finding messages of the likes of these:

(WARNING: The following material contains references of scatological, racist and homophobic nature. Some of it is quite raunchy. You have been warned. They are also generally ungrammatical, with quite bad spelling, and thus sometimes tough to understand. That should tell you something about the education level of the various writers.

(And yes, I use bad grammar here occasionally, too. The difference is, I do it intentionally. Why do I suspect these people don't?)

As for pestering GMs with macroer reporting (and, btw, you're a total homo if you do this) *(A player complaining about other players reporting cheating and exploits);*

This is f***ing gay! *(In reference to the inability to use a debit card to pay for an online game);*

It has always been gay that way. *(Discussing an odd bug in a game utility designed specifically to allow players to cheat);*

Japs and their Blue Healing/Stonewallers *(Topic title in a message board dedicated to cheating in online games);*

(Previous Poster), Your gay. Your Probably a Spy for (a game company). If we wanna get banned Umm F*** to us. But I really feel like getting banned. On one of my multiple accounts. This site is dedicated to letting us know bugs and s***. But you have to be a queer and Not tell us. WHO cares They will fix it anyway let us have our fun.

Your a crazy mother f***er everyone hates you. *(Posted on a board dedicated to finding ways to cheat and exploit bugs in online games, after one of the moderators had a fit of conscience and refused to post a particular bug.)*

2) People know who "(a poster)" is.. hes El Wannabe Jew.. *(In reference to the same guy being lambasted in the example above. People start getting nasty when you won't tell them how to cheat.)*

You, sir, are gay. Duping is not hacking. Only a mindless twit with no knowledge of what hacking is would say that. *(Castigating a poster who approved of the banning of players using duplication bugs to cheat. Apparently, it is OK to use a bug and ruin the game for everyone, just so long as you don't "hack.")*

I could go on for pages. I mean that literally; I found the above examples in less than fifteen minutes on three message boards, including the time it took to discard several that were so obscene that re-posting them here would create a paragraph of nothing but asterisks. Yes, there was much, much more where this all came from. Sadly.

One year ago today, I wrote a column about this phenomenon. That column was titled *The Marching Morons* and focused primarily on the rudeness, homophobia and profanity as it pertained then to the free online gaming services, such as Mplayer and The Zone. What saddens and disheartens me is that some of those willing to pay to play online games also exhibit this behavior. If it were just one or two jerks, I could chalk it up to the statistical probability that there will be one or two jerks in any group of 1,000 or more. A small fraction of one percent I can live with, but the message posters above represent thousands of online gamers. How many? I just don't know. 2% of the total? 5%? 10%? There is no way to know for sure.

Maybe they are just a vocal minority, statistically insignificant and ticked off because of it. Heck, anyone using such language or expressing such views in public would be slapped down hard and thoroughly humiliated by anyone nearby. You'd think they'd be embarrassed to do it, even under the cover of anonymity. What if their true identity were revealed? What would Mom think?

Far from being embarrassed, however, they revel in it, spewing out their hatred and abuse as if they were earning merit badges in Lucifer's Junior Demon Scouts. You and I - and they! - know that using such language or exhibiting such behavior in real life would get them shunned. So what makes it OK to do it online?

We've always known the anonymous nature of online communications freed up a certain percentage of people to act out. We expect it. What I didn't expect however, was to find that what appears to be a significant portion of the online gaming universe seems to feel it is OK to lie, cheat, be rude, slam gays, be racist and use language that would make a chief petty officer blush.

So, I worry. I worry that so many "people" (and I use the term loosely) feel this is acceptable behavior, anonymous or not. I worry that so many people are apparently homophobic bigots online when we've come so far in real life. It makes me wonder if a significant portion of us stopped baiting gays and "Japs" publicly just to keep from being sued or publicly humiliated, not because *not* doing it is the right thing to do.

And somehow, I just know this column is going to have little or no effect on them. Far from it; they'll take it as a badge of honor. After all, these people think nothing of being foul-mouthed, dishonest, racist homophobes on a daily basis. What's a little criticism from a transsexual columnist who'd like to think most people *aren't* foul-mouthed, dishonest, racist homophobes?

I guess I'm just gay that way.

1.32 The Future: Shooting the Moon

Volume Eight, Issue 33

Monday, September 23, 1999

The Muse dropped in on me the other day.

You know the feeling, I'm sure. You'll be sitting there, doing what you're supposed to be doing when, all of a sudden, what you're doing sparks something and you just have to take a break and think about it.

What The Muse decided to make me ponder was the future of online games. More specifically, what technology or advances would make them easier to play? The answers I came up with were mixed, to say the least, because we have some very real technology problems to solve before we can make online gaming hugely easier. So I decided to try to look ahead and see what

technology changes we might need in the next 5 to 15 years to have a great online gaming experience.

To me, the pinnacle of online gaming technology in the near future would be a complete or near hands-free environment. I'd love to be able to reliably issue voice commands to a game, while also chatting with other players and going to the keyboard only as an option, not a requirement. This would be much like how the characters on *Star Trek* interface with their computers.

Imagine being able to play *Ultima Online* or *Everquest* without ever touching the keyboard, but by simply saying out loud what you want your character to do. This is a heady thought, fraught with interesting possibilities. To get to that point, we have a few major hurdles to overcome.

The first major hurdle may be the toughest one to solve: the Internet itself. Come on, let's face this problem and spit it in the eye like the daredevils we are: the Internet was never designed to be online game friendly. It is a distributed network, in which data packets (such as email or a command you issue to a game) can bounce along a somewhat convoluted path to arrive at their destination. This can take some time. Depending on where you are in relation to your eventual destination on the Net, it can take little time to several seconds.

As a government project, ARPAnet, (now the Internet we all know and sometimes love) was never meant to be a real-time distribution network; it was just a research project designed to see to it that email would eventually get through to various government agencies after The Bomb was dropped.

That alone brings up weird visions:

FROM: collections@irs.gov
TO: jtaxpayer@shelter45.stlouis.mo.org
RE: Tax Forms for 2010 AD

Dear Mr. John Taxpayer,

We haven't received your taxes for calendar year 2010. We realize the destruction of St. Louis might have caused your Form 1040A to be delayed. If you are alive, please resubmit your taxes to us immediately.

Also, please be advised that the Radiation Sickness Deduction may not exceed 25% of your total medical expenses, unless you die from it. In that case, you may also claim the Funeral Expense Deduction of 20% of your funeral costs, including the cost of protective lead clothing for your mourners, if any. To claim these credits, please fill out and attach Schedule Z to your Form 1040A, along with the receipts from your funeral.

Regards,
Internal Revenue Service

My sick sense of humor aside, the Internet wasn't made for low ping times and instant gratification. I mean, after the Big One, who cares if it takes 30 or 40 seconds for an email to go from Point A to Point B? For online games, however, this can be death, both for the game and the player's character. This is the Demon Lag, also known as latency, and it is built into the system by its very nature.

We can eliminate a lot of lag by laying more bandwidth and upgrading the software and hardware that actually runs the Net. Unfortunately, the problem isn't going to go away; we can't seem to lay bandwidth fast enough to keep up with the demand. According to the US Department of Commerce in its *The Emerging Digital Economy* report issued last year (<http://www.doc.gov/>), the amount of data going out over the Internet doubles every 100 days. Unfortunately, new bandwidth isn't keeping up, not by a long shot. I've seen various estimates of the amount of the bandwidth being laid to meet that demand and none of them exceed 15% of the needed amount. This means the problem of latency is just going to get worse for a while.

And we won't go into detail on aging servers, such choke points on the Information Dirt Access Road as MAE East and MAE West, or badly configured routers everywhere. Suffice it to say that, in my opinion, it is going to take at least another 5 years, and perhaps as long as another 15 (if ever), to bring Internet technology and bandwidth up to snuff for online gaming, especially "twitchy" retail hybrids such as *Quake 3* and *Unreal*.

The second major hurdle we have to overcome is home computer technology, both the hardware and software. I mean, well they suck. Big time. It may be a bit easier to use than it was five years ago, but it is still persnickety, failure-prone, bug-ridden, needlessly complicated and utterly dependent on the keyboard. It doesn't help that the industry has this shotgun marriage thing going with the Windows operating system and Intel processors, which seem to operate on the premise that slower and more of it is the way to go.

This is another problem that may be solved in time; in the meanwhile, we are going to be spending a lot of money upgrading our computers and software to latest complicated, buggy versions. A suspicious person might see a connection.

The third hurdle is voice recognition technology. To get more hands-free in the near future, we need to be able to talk to our home computers to issue commands and speak with the other players. Applications such as *Roger Wilco* (<http://resounding.com/>) and various VOX applications for sound cards are starting to bring voice communication between players to reality. They still have a long way to go, however, and that still leaves the problem of voice commands for playing.

I have no doubt we'll get there; these are mostly engineering problems, after all. Once engineers know a problem can be solved by their talents, they have this habit of working with it until it is.

However, I'm starting to wonder just how long it will really take. Nothing in technology ever happens as fast as the experts say they will. For example, 30 years ago, experts almost universally agreed that by the year 2000, there would be a computer in every home. With 3 _ months to go to 2000, we're less than half-way there.

Darn it, I want it *now*.

1.33 So This Is Broadband?

**Volume Eight, Issue 34
Monday, October 4, 1999**

Broadband could be an important advance for online gaming. Let me restate: if they ever get the persnickety details figured out, broadband *will* be an important advance for online gaming.

There are significant gameplay advantages in having near-instant response times in most games. Using cable or ADSL, you may still have to log in several times to find a clean, speedy connection (not as easy as it sounds) but, when you get one, the experience is incredible. When I started playing *Quake II* via a cable modem connection last year, my frag ratio went through the roof. In *Air Warrior 3D* on Gamestorm, the play became virtually seamless--no more jerkiness on the screen as my packets attempted to update in a timely fashion.

This quality of data transmission has been viciously driven home to me lately, during my move to Austin. I had been suffering along with a 56k modem connection for a couple weeks, waiting for ADSL to be installed. After using a cable modem for the last year, it was painful to be stuck at 56k, to say the least. All of which reminded me once again of an important point. If the industry can make enough bandwidth available to keep broadband access a nice experience (not the same as making broadband connections available, see BTH #20, Bandwidth Will Not Save You at <http://www.happypuppy.com/columns/bth/archive/>), it will revolutionize what we can provide in massively multiplayer games.

Of course, there are other problems. Not the least of them is just getting ADSL or a cable modem installed. Since there is a raging battle right now among analysts on which is better, ADSL or cable modems, I decided to try an ADSL line in Austin. Both are available at this apartment's location and I've used cable modems for over a year in both Phoenix and Los Angeles with mixed results. Time to see if there was a real difference in the services.

Right off the bat, one of the main differences was in the bone-headed modus operandi of the local Regional Bell Operating Company (RBOC), Southwestern Bell. When I had cable modem service installed in Los Angeles, MediaOne set it up at the same time they came out to activate the cable TV service. The whole process took a total wait time of four days from calling to schedule the service until I was up and running. Installation of both cable TV and modem service took two hours. Compare that with Time-Warner here in Austin, which wanted to make two trips using separate crews. What do these people think, that we can take time off work whenever we want, just to suit *them*?

As of last August 1st, I still didn't have ADSL service, after moving into the apartment on July 12. This didn't surprise me overly. Just to get a voice line activated, I had to call Southwestern Bell over 150 times over a period of 14 days. Each time, I had to wend my way through the

touch-tone menu by touching the numeral 1 five times to be transferred to the "activate new service" section. At that point, I would be transferred to a new operator queue and invariably receive a busy signal, at which point I would be told they couldn't take my call right now and I would have to "try again later." Click. ("Your Honor, I've never been to SW Bell's headquarters. No, sir, I don't know where that shotgun came from.")

As a last resort, I tried calling several other local phone service providers in the area. Each of them gave me the same story; until SW Bell activated the line, I couldn't switch services. And they all tried to get my name and service address. No, thanks; I don't want my service slammed, or switched without my consent, which is a huge problem in the industry right now.

After two weeks of this frustration, I emailed a complaint letter to all five commissioners of the FCC and the Texas equivalent of the Public Utilities Commission. I was going to email it to Southwestern Bell, too, but there was no email address posted on their website. There was a form for sending web email to them, the category choices for which did not include service complaints. I chose a category at random, copied my complaint letter in and sent it off.

That was on Saturday, July 10. The only reply was from the chairman of the FCC, Mr. William Kennard. His office replied on Monday, July 12, the next business day, mind you, letting me know they were forwarding it to the consumer complaint division. I was pretty impressed by that. I figured the complaint division would lose the email and never respond--and I haven't been disappointed in that--but it was impressive to me that Mr. Kennard's office responded promptly. Good job; this is what the government is supposed to do when dealing with regulated monopolies.

By camping on the phone for two more days, I finally did get through to SW Bell and have my phone service established. I then inquired about ADSL, as the line has to be active for them to check on availability. A tech sends out a check signal and records the distance of the line to the nearest ADSL repeater to see if your line is within the service radius. It takes all of one minute or so to do this.

Except with SW Bell. The process for figuring out whether my apartment was in ADSL service range took four days. Four days. When I inquired in Phoenix last year, they did the signal check while I waited on the phone.

As it turns out, the apartment is within 15,000 feet of an ADSL repeater, so it can be installed. So I call back *again*--a different 800 number from before; I was answered immediately--and spend another 20 minutes on the phone with the operator, placing the order. She tells me they will call back in three or four days with an installation date.

To recap: so far, as of last August 1st, I'd been waiting two weeks for my ADSL line to be installed. I ordered premium service, which is 384k uploads and 1.5 meg on downloads. Supposedly it will happen on August 5th, although I have to call back for a time; the message on my phone just mentioned the day, not a time window. The very polite service operator on the phone went out of her way to mention that, even when they come out to install the line, if the

service can't provide the minimum transfer rates after an on-site check, they won't complete the installation.

To schedule a technician to come out to my apartment to install ADSL, it takes an exchange of minimum five phone calls between me and SW Bell over a period of seven working days, with a subsequent waiting period of another seven days. Even then, there is no guarantee that the ADSL service will meet minimum standards when they do try to install, so this could all be for naught.

So I'm stuck with the possibility of taking more time off work for this and maybe not getting ADSL after all. And the price for jumping through an RBOC's silly hoops? Over \$250 installation and \$199.00 a month. Cable modem access here is about \$40 a month. Of course, I ordered a top-line ADSL option; you can lease 128k upload and 384k download ADSL access from SW Bell for about \$40 a month. That's about 1/25th of a cable modem's average local transfer rates for the same price.

But our carnival ride is not over, ladies and gentlemen. Oh, no! This ride is just beginning. Next week, the continuing saga of Jessica in ADSL-Land, our heroine discovers that the phone companies have a loooooong way to go to compete successfully with the cable modem market.

1.34 So This is Broadband? Part II

**Volume Eight, Issue 35
Thursday, October 14, 1999**

Last week, we learned two important things about ADSL broadband lines. We learned that:

- A) The technology is in the middle of a vicious fight with cable modem technology for the hearts and minds of American consumers;
- B) While neither the RBOCs or cable companies have reputations as wonderful customer service organizations, getting Southwest Bell to come to my apartment and install a technology for which they will bill me \$199 a month is like trying to pull your own teeth with a Garden Weasel.

To recap from last week's column:

It takes Southwest bell 16 days and a complaint to the FCC just to answer their own customer service phones and activate a voice line. To schedule a technician to come out to my apartment to install ADSL, it takes a minimum exchange of five phone calls between me and SW Bell over a period of seven working days, with a subsequent waiting period of another seven days. Even then, there is no guarantee that the ADSL service will meet minimum standards when they *do* try to install, so this could all be for naught.

Thursday, August 5th comes around. After another call to SW Bell at 8am and waiting on line for over 30 minutes, I now have a time window for the appearance of the ADSL install technician. According to the operator, my time window is from now until 5pm.

Excuse me? I have to take an entire day off work just to wait for the install person? And you just *know* if I have to wait around, he won't show up until 4:55pm. That's how these things work, you know. It's a conspiracy to drive you into becoming a tower sniper, so the Feds have another excuse to pass another useless gun law during an election year. Or something.

After being passed to a supervisor, it is grudgingly agreed that yes, SW Bell is a telephone company and yes, they do have operating telephones there at Monopoly HQ and yes, I can go to work and they will use this miracle technology to call me when the technician is on the way. Oh, happy day.

So I drive to work, sit down, turn on the computer and the phone rings. Guess who?

So I drive home, escort the technician into my home and am told this will take about 40 minutes. Hurrah! At last! I will be ready to up my frag count on the backs of those poor 28.8k, high-ping victims on the Internet in just a few minutes.

One and a half hours later, I'm starting to wonder if I was Jack the Ripper in a previous incarnation and if this is my punishment. The technician has removed the cover plate from every phone jack in the house, there are little bits of colored wire scattered everywhere and he is on his cell phone to a co-worker trying to get a clue as to why he can't get an ADSL signal from the main phone jack to the one in my home office space. He was able to do so 90 minutes ago; as of 70 minutes ago, he could not and still cannot. He sounds quite frustrated as he speaks with his co-worker.

He is a nice young man; he keeps apologizing for the inconvenience and I keep being extremely gracious about it, even though I am seething inside at the whole bloody situation. I am this gracious because he is also a very cute young man and isn't wearing a wedding ring. Ok, so I have other interests besides online gaming; sue me.

However, it is approaching 10:30am and I am scheduled for an 11am meeting back at the office. I'd call and let them know, but my phone isn't working and the technician is still on cell phone to his buddy, trying to figure out where things went so wrong. Finally, at ten minutes to 11, he hangs up, looks at the main jack again and scratches his head. I borrow the technician's cell phone and let my boss know I'm going to be late to the meeting.

As I hang up and pass the phone back to the young man, I can see a light bulb going on over his head; he has a notion. Like the Roadrunner vanishing in a cloud of dust with a Meep! Meep!, he whirls and disappears out the door, to return with a cable puller. He dives back to the main phone jack, buries the cable puller inside and down the wall and pulls up a great wad of colored wire. He examines it for a minute and then practically cries out in joy. He has found the problem. What is it? When he first examined the wires at the main jack, accidentally broke the wire that ran into my home office. Our seventy minutes or so of frustration is over.

From that point on, the installation went smoothly. Five minutes to repair the wire, another 20 to hook the ADSL modem up to my computer and reconfigure the computer's network settings. It worked like a charm first try.

And to SW Bell's credit, it is still working like a charm. As a gaming technology, ignoring the price, I can confidently recommend it. In two months, the network has gone down only once, and that was for a scheduled hardware upgrade. My online gaming on the Net is back to a quality I like and overall, I'm quite happy with ADSL. Pound for pound, ADSL is every bit as good as a cable modem for online gaming. My file download times aren't as fast as a cable modem's, but I notice very little difference between them in ping times for gaming, for the most part.

I'm still a bit in shock over everything I've had to go through just to get to this point, however. In the long run, it is a better technology; you own the bandwidth, not share it with 500 to 1000 other cable users. When the cable systems fill up, latency is going to go through the roof for cable modem users. If my installation experience is at all typical, however - five times the hassle to pay five times as much compared to cable modem access-, it is difficult to believe ADSL will ever compete successfully with cable.

And no doubt, SW Bell and the other RBOCs are probably wondering why its ADSL service isn't taking off faster.

1.35 Happy 30th Birthday, Online Games

**Volume Eight, Issue 36
Thursday, October 21, 1999**

For some strange reason, there is this impression in the general public that online gaming began sometime in 1994 or 1995 with *Doom* and *Warcraft*.

This irks me somewhat, but none of us should be surprised at this kind of myopia. For most members of the general public, the online world didn't exist until the Internet started to explode in 1993 and online games didn't exist until publishers started adding Internet connectivity to computer games in 1994-95. The press hasn't been much help, mainly because most of the press is ignorant about online games history. As far as they are concerned, online gaming just coincidentally happened when their advertisers started producing Internet-capable games.

However, the world of online gaming started about 1969. Yes, that's the 1969 that happened 30 years ago. I thought it fitting, in this 30th anniversary year of the industry, to post a timeline with some of the major events in online gaming, just to give us all a sense of scope about the industry.

By the way: This is *not* meant to be the definitive milestone marker, just something of a draft road map of some major events. If you see an error, know of a major milestone that I missed or one that you believe should be a part of the timeline, drop me a line at bth@happypuppy.com.

This one will be in two parts, because there is a lot to cover. In this edition, we'll cruise up through 1989.

Circa 1969

Rick Blomme writes a two-player version of MIT's famous *Spacewar* for the PLATO service. PLATO was one of the first time-sharing systems dedicated to experimenting with new ways to use computers for education. Originally built in the late 1960's at the University of Illinois/Urbana, it blossomed into a system that, by about 1972, could host about 1,000 simultaneous users.

1970-1977

Several more games appear on the PLATO service. Multiplayer games that appeared on PLATO include a version of Star Trek, a Dungeons and Dragons-style game named *Avatar* which later became the genesis of the first *Wizardry!* PC game and a flight simulator named *Airfight*.

1979

Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle (<http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/home.htm>) head up development of the first working *Multi-User Dungeon (MUD)* on the DEC-10 at the Essex University, Colchester, UK.

1979-1980

Various versions of the Essex *MUD* are released on the university's mainframe. In 1980, what is now considered the "classic" *MUD* is installed and runs for nine years. Eventually, the popularity of the game with hackers and non-hackers alike causes computer resources to be eaten at a tremendous rate and the university restricts playing time to the evening hours.

Circa 1982-83

Although the *MUD* code is copyrighted, Bartle is pretty liberal about sharing it with other colleges and universities for education purposes. Someone at one of those institutions starts passing around the source code to friends. By the end of 1983, hundreds of illegal copies have been distributed around the world, starting the free access *MUD* craze at universities and, eventually, on the Internet.

1982

Kesmai Corporation (<http://www.gamestorm.com/company/>) is formed by John Taylor and Dr. Kelton Flinn and receives its first contract, to develop an ASCII text role-playing game for CompuServe. The game would later launch as *Islands of Kesmai*.

Bill Loudon, in charge of games at CompuServe, buys an ASCII space combat simulator called *DECwars* on DEC mainframe computer tape for \$50.00. He hands it off to Kesmai and it eventually launches as *MegaWars I*.

1983

Kesmai launches *MegaWars I* on CompuServe. Finally closed down in circa 1998, it was the longest-running for-pay online game in history. That honor now resides with the current incarnation of the Trubshaw/Bartle *MUD*, MUD II (<http://www.mud2.com/>).

1984

The first commercial version of *MUD* is released on Compunet in England.

Islands of Kesmai is released on CompuServe. The game will run for approximately thirteen years and will eventually spawn a graphics-based version, *Legends of Kesmai*, which is available today on AOL and Gamestorm. The price to play in 1984: About \$12 an hour.

Mark Jacobs forms the company that will eventually become AUSI and then Mythic Entertainment (<http://www.mythicgames.com/>). He sets up a server system in his house and installs 8 phone lines to run his text-based role-playing game *Aradath*. Cost to play: \$40 a month. This may be the first instance of a professionally run, flat-rate online gaming service.

1985

Bill Loudon convinces General Electric's Information Services division to fund a commercial, ASCII-based service similar to CompuServe, using the evening hours excess capacity on GEIS's mainframe computers. Named GENie by Bill's wife (GE Network for Information Exchange), it premieres in October to much hoopla. It is the first serious competition to CompuServe; price in the evening hours is \$6 an hour for both 1200 and 300bps. This is half of CompuServe's price for 1200bps access.

In November, Quantum Computer Services (later to rename itself America Online) quietly launches QuantumLink, a graphics-based online service exclusively for Commodore 64/128 users. The price is \$9.95 a month, plus about \$5 an hour. QuantumLink's graphic interface is a watershed in online services but, because the C-64/128 is already on the wane, no one seems to pay much attention. This will turn out to be a huge mistake on the part of competitors.

The Golden Age of the online services begins.

1986

Kesmai rewrites *MegaWars I*, files off the serial numbers and launches it on GENie as *Stellar Warrior*. It is GENie's first multiplayer online game; it is not the last.

Jessica Mulligan, working as a volunteer librarian in the Apple II RoundTable on GENie, finds *Stellar Warrior*. After her account is turned off by GENie three times for playing too much, she snags a contract to write a combined Chat-based/Email-based space strategy game. *The Rim Worlds War* launches at mid-year; it is the first Play-By-Email (PBEM) game on a commercial online service.

Kesmai begins pre-alpha testing of *Air Warrior*, a WWII combat flight simulator and the first true graphics-based Massively Multiplayer Game, on GENie. The Macintosh version is demonstrated on multiple terminals at the GENie booth at the West Coast Computer Faire in early 1986 in San Francisco. The 20,000 attendees are wowed.

QuantumLink begins testing *Rabbit Jack's Casino*, the second graphics-based online game in the commercial online services industry. In conjunction with LucasFilms, development on *Habitat* begins (<http://www.communities.com/company/papers/lessons.html>).

Steve Case from Quantum Computer Services begins camping out in Cupertino, CA, trying to get John Sculley to allow Apple Computers, Inc. to support a graphics-based online service for Apple II computers. After over 200 days of persistent nagging, Sculley finally agrees.

1987

Air Warrior is released on GENie early in the year.

Rabbit Jack's Casino is released on QuantumLink.

Kesmai's file scraping worked so well for *Stellar Warrior*, they strip the serial numbers from *MegaWars III* and launch it as *Stellar Emperor* on GENie.

After working with the private BBS-based role-playing and gaming service Spectre, David Whately sells his idea for a text-based online game to GENie. *Gemstone* goes into alpha testing late in the year and what will become Simutronics Corporation is born (http://www.play.net/simunet_public/default.asp).

A stripped-down version of *MUD* launches on CompuServe as *British Legends*.

Quantum Computer Services hires Kent Fillmore, President of International Apple Core, Inc., to start recruiting sysops for its upcoming Apple II only service, AppleLink-Personal Edition. He recruits and contracts with Jessica Mulligan to manage the Apple II Games Forum.

1988

The original *Gemstone* role-playing game is launched on GENie as *Gemstone II*. Over the next two years, this text-based game will surpass *Air Warrior* as the most popular game on GENie.

Quantum Computer Services launches AppleLink: Personal Edition for Apple II computers at the May AppleFest Convention in Boston. It also turns down both of AUSI's games, *Aradath* and *Galaxy II*, for its online services, saying it doesn't want to get into text-based games. Eight years later, it will reverse this decision and sign on both *Gemstone III* and *Dragon's Gate*, the commercial version of *Aradath*, after realizing they left millions of dollars on the table for GENie and CompuServe to snap up.

Jessica Mulligan, now a Quantum Computer Services employee, writes a white paper on the gaming industry and recommends that Quantum license the Advanced Dungeons and Dragons game from TSR, Inc. It does so, and *AD&D: NeverWinter Nights* is born, based on SSI's Gold Box series of AD&D games. Once launched, *NeverWinter Nights* will run continuously for several years, even though the technology of the graphics interface is hopelessly outdated. In its last year of existence as a for-pay game, 1996, it will rake in an estimated \$5 million dollars.

Next Week: The industry takes off.

1.36 Happy 30th Birthday, Online Games, Part II

Volume Eight, Issue 37

Thursday, October 28, 1999

Welcome to part two of the timeline, a 30th birthday tribute to online games. If you haven't read part one of this time-line of online games, you can do so by [*clicking here*](#).

This was intended to be a two-parter, but I'm expanding it out to three parts, simply because there is so much to cover. In this section, we'll cover the time period from 1989 to 1993, just before the recent explosion of online gaming. And to reiterate from Part I:

This is *not* meant to be the definitive milestone marker, just something of a draft road map of some major events. If you see an error, know of a major milestone that I missed or one that you believe should be a part of the timeline, drop me a line at bth@happypuppy.com.

1989

Bill Loudon hires Jessica Mulligan as GENie's first dedicated Games Product Manager and gives her virtual carte blanche to sign up more online games.

GENie signs AUSI's *Galaxy II*, a real-time space strategy game. On launch, it immediately becomes the third most popular game on GENie, behind *Air Warrior* and *Gemstone*.

GENie licenses the venerable *Diplomacy* board game from Avalon Hill and contracts with AUSI's Mark Jacobs and UNIX/Open Source guru Eric Raymond to develop an online game, based on Raymond's existing UNIX version of the game.

GENie launches *A-Maze-ing*, a Macintosh based 3D maze combat game similar to the Amiga-based computer game *MidiMaze*. This is the first online 3D "shooter," it won't be the last.

Quantum Computer Services more or less de-emphasizes online games after launching development of *NeverWinter Nights*, even though they have several in development, including a helicopter flight simulator from Sierra, a version of *Hangman* from Broderbund and a working version of the wildly popular board game *Cosmic Encounter*. Only *Hangman* sees the light of day.

1990

GENie signs AUSI to develop a text-based role-playing game. It will eventually become *Dragon's Gate*, which is still available today on AOL.

GENie signs Activision and Kesmai Corporation to develop an online version of the *MechWarrior* 3D 1st person computer game.

Diplomacy Online launches on GENie.

GENie signs with strategy game legend Jim Dunnigan to develop *The Hundred Years' War* for the service. Dunnigan delivers the definitive turn-based online strategy game, allowing up to 300 players to relive the medieval war as French, English and other European noble families in campaigns that can last for over 400 real-time days.

GENie begins negotiating with Origin Systems to develop an online version of *Ultima*, to be called *Multima*, and introduces them to Kesmai as the prospective developer.

GENie signs with Clem Chambers and Alan Lenton to bring the British-based space trading and adventure game *Federation II* to the service. It launches late in the year and rapidly becomes quite popular.

CompuServe signs with Spectrum Holobyte to develop an online version of the *Falcon F-16* flight simulator. It will remain in development for years, including working versions shown in 1991 and 1992, but will never be released to the public. CompuServe offers no explanation.

GENie signs with Simutronics, John Weaver of RS Cards and Scott Hartsman (now a VP at Engage) to convert the *Gemstone III* code into a persona-based Chat system, a sort of role-playing game with no rules. Named *ImagiNation*, it launches into beta later that year. GE's lawyers forget to trademark the name, an omission that will come back to haunt them.

GENie begins an experiment called Basic Services, in which about 25% of all products on the service, including message boards and Chat, are offered for a flat monthly rate of \$8.95. It is so successful that, on the first day of flat rate service, so many people attempt to log in simultaneously at the 6pm start time that the entire GENie service crashes. It is a precursor to what will happen to AOL when it changes to a flat rate service in December, 1996. History repeats itself. Again.

1991

Dragon's Gate launches on GENie in February and rapidly moves into the top three game spot on the service, alternating on a monthly basis with number two *Air Warrior*.

Testing the waters with the competition, Origin Systems begins negotiating with Quantum/AOL to develop the *Ultima* online game. Origin closes negotiations with GENie and begins negotiating an agreement with Quantum. The deal eventually falls through and the *Multima* project goes on the back burner for several years.

Ken Williams, CEO of Sierra Online, announces the upcoming The Sierra Network, designed to be a private online gaming dial-in service to feature Sierra products.

Founder Bill Loudon leaves GENie after seven years as General Manager. This is the beginning of the end for GENie.

1992

MPG-Net, a privately owned company funded by wealthy online games enthusiast Jim Hettinger (now CEO of iEN), launches a new dial-in gaming service with *The Kingdom of Drakkar*, a top-down view graphic role-playing game. It rapidly becomes popular, signing up more than 3,000 players who pay between \$3 and \$5 an hour for access.

GENie launches *CyberStrike* from Simutronics. It is Simutronics' first foray into graphics-based games, going head-to-head in competition with *Multiplayer BattleTech* from Kesmai.

Quantum Computer Services integrates its Macintosh, Apple II and PC services into one service, renames that service America Online, renames the company America Online, Inc. and goes public.

The Sierra Network, Sierra Online's foray into online gaming, launches with a flat rate subscription model of \$14.95 per month. The only content is a series of such wildly exciting 2 to 4 player games as *Nine Man's Morris*. Subscriptions are few and far between. Over the next two years, TSN will try many pricing schemes until its pricing structure is more complicated than a Rube Goldberg device, and will rename itself the ImagiNation Network (INN) when it realizes GE forgot to trademark the name.

The Golden Age of the proprietary, closed loop online services such as CompuServe and AOL is already ending. Although there will continue to be good growth for two to three more years, a project originally funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency is about to change the way everyone in the world communicates and exchanges information. This change does not include room for proprietary online services.

The Golden Age only lasted about six years.

STATE OF THE ONLINE WORLD: Setting the stage for 1993

At the end of 1992, there are an estimated 3-10 million homes that actively use modems to subscribe to online services. The range is so wide because no one has really been keeping an accurate count. The top five services, in order of publicized subscriber numbers, are Prodigy, CompuServe, America Online, GENie and Delphi.

On university mainframe computers around the world, students are constructing MUDs and inviting other students to log in and have some fun. By the end of 1992, there will be over 50 MUDs available on the old DARPA-Net, a distributed network mainly used by academics and government research agencies.

Computer game publishers are experimenting with multiplayer products. There are several instances of 2 player, modem-to-modem games, including *Empire*, *Perfect General*, *Falcon*, *Command HQ* and *Fire Fight*. Now, they are adding LAN/IPX code on top of TCP/IP protocols to games in an attempt to move up to four and even eight players.

Commercially, there are about fourteen to sixteen for-pay multiplayer games available on the online services, with another eight or nine in development. The total gross income of all of them together amounts to between \$10 and \$15 million annually. There are also a wide range of Trivia and word jumble games available, including NTN Trivia on GENie and variously home-grown word and trivia games run in Chat sections by interested subscribers.

1993 will change everything.

NEXT WEEK: It's 1993; do you know where your wallet is?

1.37 Happy 30th Birthday, Online Games, Part III

Volume Eight, Issue 38

Thursday, November 4, 1999

Before we begin with part III, three comments:

1. An Addition: Troy Dawson wrote in and reminded me that the venerable *Empire* appeared on mainframes in the mid-to-late 1970s. His quote from a USEnet post:

Peter S. Langston did indeed write the original code based on a board game they'd been playing at Reed College. He started writing the original version of *Empire* in about 1972, and it was playable not long after. I personally played *Empire* at the Rand Corporation (now RAND) in the mid-1970s; certainly by 1978, but probably earlier.

However, the earliest historical note I could find mentioned only Walter Bright's 1978 DEC-10 version, which was the one modified Mark Baldwin for the PC and released in 1988 as "Empire: Wargame of the Century" by the now-defunct Interstel. It is perfectly believable, however, that Langston wrote an earlier version and that Bright was the first to copyright a version and the name. Anyone with info concerning this, please drop me a line.

2. BBS and DOOR Games: Reader Andrew McConachie wrote in to ask why these games weren't included in this timeline. Good question. The brief answer is, limited space in the column and because I haven't finished my research on them. Most of these games fell off the face of the earth between 1993 and 1996. They also probably deserve a column all by themselves.
3. You'll note I only run the timeline through the end of 1997, with the release of *Ultima Online*. I intend to finish out 1998 and 1999 sometime in February or March, after we see the results from *Asheron's Call on the Zone*.

Now, on with the show:

1993: The Year of Incubation

DARPA-Net is now increasingly known to the public as the Internet. It has become open to commercial enterprises, even though the great majority of the users are still government employees, contractors, university students, instructors and researchers. Small local companies, many of which used to provide one to 16 line BBSes, are now becoming Internet Service Providers, as well. By the end of 1993, there may be as many as 4 million Internet users; no one is really keeping a count at this point, because few people really care. The press starts to pick up on the phenomena and starts to talk up the Internet.

The World Wide Web, an innovation by Tim Berners-Lee of CERN, is still a text-based toy for students and interested researchers. However, some university students, including some unknown geek named Marc Andressen, are trying to change all that with a graphic interface named MOSAIC.

The online services are still pretty much unaware of the Internet as a commercial opportunity. Their subscribers can't access the Internet via the service and the overall subscriber numbers are still pretty small - maybe 6 million or so active subscribers. By the end of the year, with Internet use beginning to skyrocket, they will all start paying very close attention.

In mid-1993, Prodigy goes from flat rate to hourly charges of about \$3 an hour, causing a huge customer backlash. Smelling blood, AOL and then GENie lower their rates to \$3, too and the price war begins. As usual, CompuServe chooses to ignore the price war. This is the first in a line of major errors that will end up with them being owned by AOL in four years.

In the computer game industry, the trend is in modem and LAN connectivity to allow two players to compete against each other. Isolated instances occasionally allow 4 player to participate. More and more games are shipped to retail with modem code built in.

For the most part, 1993 is a pretty dull year for massively multiplayer games on the online services. Simutronics formally released *CyberStrike* on Genie, *Red Baron* and *Shadow of Yserbius*, and RPG, picked up steam on INN and MPG-Net started to add some small games to complement their RPG, *Drakkar*. The price drop to an average \$3 an hour *did* do wonders for use of games on GENie and AOL; usage of most games rose to between 1.5 and 2 times what it was before.

With all the above taken together as a whole, however, 1993 was the watershed year for multiplayer gaming. The groundwork and infrastructure was laid for explosion to come. And, man, did it come!

1994

The singular ground-breaking title this year is *Doom* from id Software. Other great titles were released this year (including *Warcraft* by Blizzard, which will slowly build the real-time strategy niche into a large one, too) and the actual publication date of *Doom* was December 10, 1993, but who cares? This is the game that put first-person shooters on the map and virtually created a brand new section of the computer games industry. Most appealing was the addition of LAN

code to allow 4 players to connect and happily frag each other. Both *Doom* and *Doom II* are showered with just about every game and technical achievement award in existence.

Late in the year, the guys at id will start hearing a new refrain: "Please add TCP/IP so we can play this across the Internet!" After *Doom II* is released in October, they begin to oblige. They also start pondering an interesting thought: What if we built Internet connectivity in our next game?

Jim Clark, who made Silicon Graphics a billion dollar company, has recruited Andressen and pals to form Netscape and make the MOSAIC code into something more useful for viewing the World Wide Web. The first version of Netscape Navigator is released late in the year and is an immediate smash success. The web is now somewhat useful for even relatively unsophisticated computer users.

Traditional media companies are starting to get the idea that online gaming is going to be big someday. Rupert Murdoch's News Corp buys ace multiplayer game developer Kesmai Corporation for an unknown price. AT&T buys INN from Sierra Online for an estimated \$50 million.

1995

By this time, AOL, CompuServe and Prodigy all offer some Internet content to their subscribers. This consists mostly of access to USEnet newsgroups, gopher and, oh yeah, something called the World Wide Web. Main result: AOL's unsophisticated customers head out onto the newsgroups and get soundly slaughtered for violating every posting protocol on the Internet.

Id begins openly testing *Quake*, an improved version of *Doom* with some Internet server and play capability built in. It's like giving heroin to an addict; gamers want more, and id gives it to them. This open testing process proves to be a PR bonanza; this isn't building buzz, it's building demand for a product into a homicidal frenzy.

Everyone and his grandmother seems to be developing an FPS or RTS game. Clones of *Doom* and *Warcraft* are being published on nearly a monthly basis. *Descent* and *Command and Conquer* build large audiences of their own.

By some estimates, over 300 text-based MUDs are now available on the Internet, almost all of them free of charge.

Gemstone III goes live on AOL late in the year and immediately builds a following. It is soon followed by several Kesmai games, including perennial favorite *Air Warrior*.

Hasbro and Westwood release a Internet-capable version of *Monopoly*. Four years later, it is still a top 20 seller.

1996

Quake is formally released and the boys from id have changed the world again. In almost no time at all, *Quake* servers start appearing all over the world. On some nights, over 80,000 people will be fragging each other in 10,000+ simultaneous game sessions.

After getting a taste, players want more. *Lots* more. By the end of the year, about 20 titles will have Internet connectivity in some form or another. Three years later, at the end of 1999, Microsoft's Gaming Zone alone will offer 118 Internet-playable titles.

At the Electronic Entertainment Exposition in May, Origin Systems demonstrates an early pre-Alpha test version of a little game called *Ultima Online*. It excites some modest interest.

AOL buys INN from AT&T for about 20% of what AT&T paid Sierra Online for it a couple years previously, proving once again that AT&T couldn't market immortality if it had an exclusive.

In December, AOL switches from an hourly charge to a flat rate of \$19.95 a month, which proves to be so popular it gives new meaning to the phrase, "Can't get there from here." The pricing also includes access to the massively multiplayer games on the service; players rejoice as AOL's margin fall through the floor.

1997

Origin releases *Ultima Online* for play across the Internet. Despite massive problems with bugs and lag, the game has over 50,000 paying customers within three months. The game proves there is a large audience of gamers waiting for MMRPGs.

The Modern Era of Online Gaming begins.

Post-Mortem: Providing inspiration to the masses

*I'm continually surprised by what subjects spark interest in the community. I would have expected the column titled *God Sued!* to have sparked a larger reaction.*

But no: these three columns was probably the most reprinted and hyperlinked of all the BTHs. They were passed around several game-related mailing lists, posted whole on fan and game news sites, linked to by several dozen sites, reposted on USEnet newsgroups and segments were quoted all over the place, including other media such as print magazines. Not a month goes by that I don't receive an email request or two to reprint the series. Of all the money Happy Puppy paid me for nearly 100 columns, these three got the most PR bang.

Eventually, the series inspired online game designer Raph Koster to create a more complete and updated list, which can be found on his Web site at <http://www.legendmud.org/raph/gaming/>. Look under menu item Essays, then scroll down to find Online Game Timeline.

1.38 General Stuff

Volume Eight, Issue 39 November 8, 1999

One of these days, I'm going to have to catch up on my email. I have something like 40 about the column on my Southwest Bell/ADSL experience that still have to be replied to, and another 50 or so pertaining to the Online Games history timeline. To all of you who wrote; I'm working on it, honest.

In the meantime, some general and mostly unrelated thoughts that have been running through my head lately:

Want to know how tough it is to develop a massively multiplayer RPG?

By my last count, at least 18 legitimate, original development efforts were scheduled to go live to the playing public in 1999 (as compared to about 50 total MMRPGs in development that have announced various 1999 premiere dates and most of which consist of 2 or 3 people trying to get a prototype together in hopes of finding funding).

How many of them have actually made it out so far this year? Four: *EverQuest* (<http://www.everquest.com>), *Asheron's Call* (<http://www.zone.com/asheronscall/>), *Spellbinder: The Nexus* (<http://www.centropolis.com/games/Spellbinder.asp>) and *Rubies of Eventide* (<http://www.eventide.net/>), although that last kinda stretches the point a bit. And note that all four missed at least one release date. Two of those four games missed several release dates and are *years* late.

I'm not beating up on them (well, not much); it just goes to show that there is a lot more to programming both a client and a stable server than meets the eye. Lots of enthusiastic development teams and publishers jump into the steaming cauldron; very few jump out again unburned.

The Mobius Strip of Online Business Models

We've come full circle. In these waning days of 1999, the predominant business model for profitable online companies (as personified by America Online) is to charge a flat monthly rate, then to try to make profit margins on advertising, sponsorships and transaction fees from selling merchandise. This is an enormous change from just three years ago, when the predominant model was to bill the consumer \$9.95 a month and five cents per minute/\$3 per hour.

And here's where I get to say "I told you so." In 1987/88, the former business model was *exactly* the one introduced by Prodigy and which damn near every online "expert" in the industry said would never work. Charge the consumer *and* show advertising? They'll never stand for it! At the time, there were maybe 500,000 home modem users. I said to my then-employer that Prodigy was 'way ahead of it's time and that the model was workable, but only when we had a potential customer base of at least 100 million people using modems. Say, in fifteen to twenty

years or so. They laughed at me and told me to get real. I left the company soon thereafter (for unrelated reasons).

I missed the mark by three to seven years, but the industry grew a heck of a lot faster than any of us dreamed it would, thanks to the early commercialization of the Internet. So you ask, "What's the next step, Jessica?" As I gaze into my crystal ball, I see: An incremental step to charging no fee for most services, and charging flat fees for selected services, such as multiplayer games. The margins will still be made with advertising, sponsorships and transaction fees on e-commerce. When will this happen? It could happen at any time, but I don't see it becoming predominant for at least two or three years and probably more like five to seven years.

Oh, my employer in 1988? America Online.

Innovating Product Slippage

As I write this, the judge in the Microsoft anti-trust trial has released his findings of fact. Not surprisingly, he found that although Microsoft has contributed greatly to the growth of the industry, it also has a monopoly on PC operating systems and has used that monopoly to stifle innovation and competition. Gee, there's a shocker.

If you ask computer and online game developers whether Microsoft's monopoly is a good or bad thing, you'll get mixed results. On the one hand, some think it is good that we really only have to develop for one standard to make money, that standard being Windows and DirectX. On the other hand, some believe that that one standard changes so often that it contributes greatly to adding to the development time (read "release date slippage"), cost and post-ship redevelopment and bug fixes.

For example, in the last two years I've been involved in at least three projects that slipped between one and three months because a newly released version of DirectX caused epileptic fits in the game code. No doubt many examples of this can be found throughout the industry.

Needless to say, developers tend to view upcoming releases of DirectX with a curious mixture of anticipation and outright fear. Rather like waiting as a child for my disciplinarian grandmother to visit. She always brought home-baked chocolate chip cookies and a sense of punishment that would have done credit to Torquemada. Even worse, the older I got, the more the rules changed; by age 10, it was tough to keep up. I loved that old gal, but she sure made my childhood interesting in the sense of the Chinese proverb.

When I think about it, I'm sure she reincarnated as DirectX version 6.x.

1.39 Ramblin' On

**Volume Eight, Issue 40
November 15, 1999**

Another year is coming to a close and, for the industry, it's pretty much same-old, same-old time.

We're in the heart of the Christmas Rush. Everyone is crunching overtime to get games on the retail shelves to grab as many sales as they can before the lucrative Christmas buying frenzy ends. In pursuit of this worthy but hasty goal, some bugs will slip through the QA process. More will be left intentionally unfixed, with intent to patch later; them shelves won't wait, ya know and isn't patching what the Internet was built for?

Considering the amount of code needed to build a game, the ever-changing "standards" in Windows and DirectX and the disparity of various hardware manufacturing standards, it's probably impossible to achieve bug-free status in any piece of software these days. Well, it probably is possible, but only if you don't mind waiting five years or so for a game to come out. By which time, of course, the game will be obsolete technologically and/or won't address any current market need. And what fun is that?

Of course, considering that at least 90% of the games that hit the shelves are totally lame, complete losers, are rip-offs that clone someone else's success by barely filing off the serial numbers or all of the above, maybe a five year development cycle isn't such a bad idea. Or some sort of industry-wide Quality Control Commission that nails the losers before they can smell up the retail shelves.

Naw, that last is a bad idea. The government would want to get involved. I have problems with a game's fate being decided by the same government that can't even send a man to the Moon thirty years after they first did so and which seriously debates controlling the content of games, TV and movies under the cynically political argument of "saving our children." Most of these guys don't even use computers; I'm supposed to trust them to rank content in a game?

Hey, I'm not unreasonable. I'm willing to make a deal with them: If the Feds will put a colony of at least 50 people on the Moon and send a manned probe to Mars, I will personally see to it that no player of first-person shooters gets a job with the Post Office.

Seeing droves of the same-old, same-old hit the shelves for the fifth Christmas in a row, I wonder again when online gaming will truly explode. Sure, we have several million people playing various types and styles of online games now, ranging from 2-16 player retail hybrids to massively multiplayer RPGs and flight sims. Estimates of the online gamer population range from 4 million to 7 million. That's not bad at all, compared with the one or two million estimated just three or four years ago. In massively multiplayer games alone, we've pretty much doubled the audience this year alone, thanks to *EverQuest's* success, the recent introduction of *Asheron's Call* and the continued growth of *Ultima Online*.

Based on my experience, the 4 to 7 million player estimates strike me as being at least in the ballpark, if not in the infield. But when will we have, say, 20 million players? Or 40 million? Right now, we're a growing industry, but no one would call us "large" and we need to go beyond that to become huge. As a huge industry, there will be truckloads full of money available for new development. This is a quality I admire.

The first mark we have to hit, however, is 10 million *confirmed* players/buyers, with at least one subscription game or game service (probably a massively multiplayer game) maintaining no less than 300,000 monthly subscribers. In other and more general terms, we pretty much need to double the current online gaming numbers. The way things are going, this could actually happen before the end of the year 2000.

Once we hit those first marks, the folks that control the checkbooks in this industry - not to mention moneybags in other industries, including the "vulture capitalists" - will start to see the major profit potential and those checkbooks will fly open. They'll break fingers writing checks at lightspeed. We'll see more adequately funded projects than we ever thought possible or feasible.

The joker in the pack is the phrase "confirmed players/buyers." Someone needs to come up with a method for truly counting online gamers. What we get right now is educated guesstimates, based on counting simultaneous players on servers and trying to make sense of the wildly inflated subscription numbers given out by the game portals. To make sense to the money folks, we need to be a lot closer than just in the ballpark; we need to be on third base and taking a long lead towards home. Once someone does that to everyone's satisfaction, I think we're set to blow out of the gates.

That said, the coming year could still be very interesting for us all, indeed. This has been said so many times that it is becoming a cliché, but we really do stand on the threshold of seeing online gaming take off. The year 2000 could end up being more than just the last year of the Twentieth Century; it could be the year online gaming finally comes of age.

Even as jaded as I am after being in the industry for 14 years, that thought actually gives me tingles.

1.40 *Breaking Tradition*

Volume One, Issue 41
Thursday, November 25, 1999

I suck at multiplayer *Quake*. Not just a little bit; I define the phrase "really bad" when it comes to playing that game online.

Normally, I don't spend much time playing FPS games online. There are a couple of reasons for this, not the least of which is that I royally suck at most of them. Even with a cable modem or ADSL line and low-ping access to a server, I'm generally frag bait in *Quake II* or *III* and similar "twitch well or die" simulations.

Sure, I've had my moments, but they are few and far enough between that playing such games online don't hold my interest long. I mean, come on; who is going to spend a lot of time courting continual failure? This is the industry of instant gratification, after all. With zero-sum games, ya

got it or don't. We can't all be Dennis Fong; some of us can't even get close. About the only thing we targets *can* do is deal with it and move on to some other game.

This is not to say that such games aren't good in their own right; I just want something more.

So it comes as something as a surprise to me that I'm spending quite a bit of time playing NovaLogic's latest FPS, *Delta Force 2* (<http://www.novalogic.com/>). This major update to the original game is modern world, squad-based, Special Forces combat using a variety of personal weapons, from long-range sniper rifles down to the extremely personal silenced pistol and knife. The scenarios can be played in a number of outdoor locales from around the world and has the typical range of game sessions, from search and destroy to capture the flag. On the LAN, 16 players can participate effectively and up to 50 can play in one session on the NovaWorld game servers, according to the company (although I've never seen more than about 25 in any session I've played).

What really attracts me to the game, however, is that it breaks the tradition of FPS gaming by rewarding patience, cunning, and teamwork, not the mundane ability to speed about in dark corridors and twitch the keyboard faster than your neighbor. It reminds me of playing war with the neighbors as a kid, sneaking about through every backyard on the block, hiding in bushes or behind fences to take someone by surprise by leaping up and blazing away with whatever cap gun or squirt gun was the flavor of the month.

For that matter, it's the closest thing to playing real-world Paintball (<http://www.paintball-online.com/default1.asp>) you can get from a retail game, with a better variety of playing fields and weapons. Crawling around in the grass to get the perfect angle on a long shot is preferable to running around in the open with the strafe key locked down. Sneaking up close to a building to pop an opponent with a silenced pistol or toss a grenade in the window has much more satisfying results for me than dodging about with guns blazing. I hesitate to say this is the thinking person's FPS, but forethought and a penchant for strategy is more readily rewarded in *DF2* than dashing out in the open with the trigger held down.

I still suck. The joke among my playing group is that I'm "consistently unchallenged for last place" in the death match scenarios. But there is still satisfaction to be derived from watching a plan come to fruition. For example, setting up a hand-held video camera and claymore mine in a building, then herding an unsuspecting victim into the building with long-range fire and setting off the claymore. Even if that's the only kill I get in a session, it tickles me; I love it when a plan comes together <insert maniacal laughter here>.

My twisted psychological needs aside, the point I'm making here is that FPS games don't need to be run-and-gun extravaganzas to be fun. Slowing down the action and adding an element of personal or team strategy and tactics can actually enhance the excitement. You don't need a constant flow of adrenaline to make these games fun. It's not the game itself that is fun, for that matter, but the *people*. The game is just a handy excuse to interact with other humans.

For example, in one recent *DF2* Capture the Flag session, my team placed me with a sniper rifle on a hill overlooking the other team's HQ, with instructions to stop anyone from running one of

our flags back for a score. With two minutes to go, three of our flags were stuck in the open within easy running distance of their base (dropped by players I had stopped earlier), they were two flags down in score, six members of the opposing team were gathered behind a building nearby preparing to make a play for the flags and I had only 4 rounds left for my rifle. None of my teammates were within easy supporting distance. If I couldn't hold them for at least one minute while one or two of the team came up to help me, we were going to lose.

At that moment of realization, with the game in the balance and my teammates shouting to hang on, help was on the way, I realized that I was so excited that my hands were, literally, shaking. At that singular moment, winning or losing was irrelevant; not letting down the team was paramount. I was in the process of having one of the best times I'd ever had in a non-persistent online game. I'll remember that session for the rest of my life, even though my team lost at the last second.

And that is what this is supposed to be all about, no?

1.41 *I Fear, I Fear!*

Volume Eight, Issue 42
Thursday, December 2, 1999

I Fear, I Fear!

Is it election time *again*?

Two Democratic U.S. senators, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Herb Kohl of Wisconsin, along with a self-styled anti-violence-in-the media lobbying group, the National Institute on Media and the Family (<http://www.mediaandthefamily.org/home.html>), have released yet another report on the supposed dangers of violence in games. Oh, joy.

The report says pretty much what you would expect such a narrowly focused, politically inspired, special-interest chop piece to say, especially less than a year before a national election. We can always count on politicians to jump on the "No excess is too great to save the precious bodily fluids of our children" bandwagon at vote-cadging time. This report is no different.

(Of course, the Institute's website goes to great pains to note that they don't believe in censorship, oh, no! This is just an education effort backed up by two of the most powerful politicians in the country. In fact, Lieberman held a press conference in Washington which was attended by Doug Lowenstein, the president of the Interactive Digital Software Association, and in which Lowenstein described the steps the IDSA is taking in response to Congressional pressure concerning game violence.

(But this isn't censorship. Really.)

More accurately, this is less about the report than the Institute's "report card" rating of some 78 games (as well as other ratings for movies and TV shows) for kids ages 3 to 17, assigning grades to each game. The rating criteria were interesting. Here's how it was described on the Media and the Family website:

"KidScore" is the innovative rating system that looks at the content of media products in terms of : violence, fear, harmful or illegal behaviors, nudity, sex, language, age appropriateness."

Well, I certainly couldn't pass *that* up; time to check up on a couple of last year's most popular (read "best-selling") games. I won't run the full rating for the games; you can check that for yourself at <http://www.mediafamily.org/kids.html> :

Age of Empires II: Age of Kings

Players build and manage a civilization in a historically accurate setting.

Due to some violence and some illegal/harmful behavior this game is not recommended for young children and caution should be used if viewed by older children.

While the "some violence" part is pretty easy to locate (hey, it's a colonization and conquest game), try as I might, I'm having some trouble understanding the "illegal/harmful behavior" part. More on this later.

Starcraft

Manage space colony armies in battle. Collect resources, build buildings, train soldiers and place them in battle.

Due to the extreme level of violence, illegal/harmful behavior, vulgar language and the ability to cause fear, this game is not recommended for children of any age.

Now I'm a little confused. There is no more or less violence in Starcraft than Age II. And just what in this game has the "ability to cause fear?" The only thing I feared when playing was that some other player would find and crush me before I had my defenses built up.

Half Life

First person science fiction adventure.

Due to extremely violent content and excessive portrayals of illegal/harmful acts which may cause fear in the viewer this game is not recommended for children of any age.

I think my thoughts on this one should be obvious.

Superman

Superman must find and rescue his friends in a virtual reality world.

Due to some violence and illegal/harmful behavior which may cause fear this game is not recommended for young children and caution should be used if viewed by older children.

I tossed this one in for leavening. According to the Institute, children aged 3 to 12 probably shouldn't play this game. I mean, come on: is there any more law-abiding, do-gooding hero than Kal El of Krypton? Why *wouldn't* we want kids aged 3 to 12 to learn from Superman's morals and ethics? If there is any illegal or harmful behavior in this game, Supes is there to *stop* it.

Do you see the problems that I do with these ratings? Nowhere on the site could I find a definition of what "harmful or illegal behavior" was, or just how the ability to cause "fear" was gauged, nor just what defined "age appropriateness." In other words, once again we have well-meaning people using extremely subjective criteria to announce a supposedly objective result.

Under the criteria used, pretty much any book, movie, TV show or game with more content than *Barbie's Magic Hair Styler* can be branded as psychologically ill-suited for kids ages 3 to 17. For example:

The Wizard of Oz

Dorothy rides a tornado, kills two witches, bullies the Wizard into giving her a joy ride in a balloon and does battle with some fierce flying monkeys.

Due to some violence and some illegal/harmful behavior, this movie is not recommended for young children and caution should be used if viewed by older children.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas

A green monster and his little dog descend on a village, break into houses and public buildings and steal everything in sight, endangering the residents with starvation and a lack of Christmas cheer.

Due to extreme violence and its portrayal, illegal and harmful behavior and the ability to cause fear, this TV special is not recommended for children and caution should be used if viewed by teenagers.

The Mets vs. The Yankees

Two baseball teams take turns beating on a small, defenseless ball until, overwhelmed by emotion, they riot and beat on each other.

Due to some violence and some illegal/harmful behavior, this game is not recommended for young children and caution should be used if played by older children.

The Book of Revelation

John is shown visions of the end of the world as we know it, including large battles and Death on a pale horse slaying everything in sight, until God condemns most of humanity to everlasting torment in Hell.

Due to extremely violent content and excessive portrayals of illegal/harmful acts which may cause fear in the viewer, this religious tract is not recommended for children of any age.

The point to all this sarcasm? Just this:

You can't just rate a book, movie, game or TV show on the individual acts within. It matters just as much *why* something was done and the consequences of the act, as the plain fact that it *was* done. If you don't consider those acts within the context of the story/plot/game/whatever, they mean *nothing*.

At the end of the movie *Old Yeller*, for example, the boy shoots his dog, certainly a terrifying act guaranteed to cause fear in many children. But *why* did he do it? To save his friend and companion from hideous suffering, an act of extreme sacrifice and bravery. Yet the Institute and its political pimps would rate only the act, not the reasons or intention behind it, nor the result of it.

And, I would think, it is *exactly* these reasons and intentions, and the consequences thereof, we want our children to experience. Sure, applying the *why* criteria to acts within computer games might result in some that you wouldn't want your kids playing, with or without your supervision; at least that would be an *honest* evaluation.

And anytime you want your children to experience acts of violence, fear, harmful or illegal behaviors, nudity, sex, and bad language, just have them watch C-Span for a day. Now *that's* scary.

Post Mortem: A little less fear, thank you

As we now know, Lieberman was chosen the summer after this column was published by Al Gore as his running mate in the tawdry mess that ended up being the year 2000 Presidential elections. We now have a Vice President of the US who has clearly shown he does not believe attempts at censorship by intimidation is OK with him. For which I thank God fervently.

For all I know, Lieberman is a good man who loves his kids and country. His attempts to end-run the 1st Amendment by using his office as a Senator to intimidate media venues into changing content to suit his ideals, however, damn near made me a one-issue voter. The man is highly educated, a graduate of both Yale College and Yale Law School; I can't believe he doesn't know the difference between the depiction or description of a violent or sexual act and understanding such a depiction in context. He also must surely understand that the Supreme Court would never stand for laws that attempt to circumvent the 1st Amendment, hence the Senatorial cajoling. That makes his efforts to use his office to browbeat media (using the hideously cynical for the kids rallying cry) a ploy for re-election votes, pure and simple, something that scares me even more than someone who is sincere about the issue. Unfortunately, such emotional rallying cries in the face of everyone else's rights often work with voters with big hearts and soft heads.

I also found it tiresomely typical that he and Gore both used the September 2000 FTC report on violence and marketing to cadge over \$10 million in campaign donations at fund-raisers in Hollywood less than two weeks later, after which the whole violence and media issue dropped off the Democratic Party radar faster than an airliner with four dead engines.

I am frequently asked about this issue and whether I believe it will come to a head in the next Congress. My reply is that I believe it will, as long as certain Senators and Representatives believe there is at least one more campaign contribution dime to be squeezed from Hollywood media moguls. At that point, the issue will disappear into voluntary standards until the politicians need reelection money again.

Yes, that is a jaded and cynical outlook; it is also based on recent US political history, which never fails in its unending search for campaign funds.

1.42 Invisibility Comes With A Price

**Volume Eight, Issue 43
Thursday, December 9, 1999**

I've spent some time lately thinking about anonymity and the Internet (and no, my head didn't disintegrate from the unaccustomed load. Well, not yet, anyway.).

Used responsibly by the individual, anonymity is one of the great things about the 'Net, in my opinion. One can surf the 'Net comfortably and, for the most part, with no one knowing where you've been peeking. Or issue a scathing, uncut opinion from the complete privacy of the home. In these times of the general disenfranchisement of the individual, what other venue offers such qualities in such abundance?

However, my latest thinking on anonymity and the Internet is this:

We're in the process of losing it.

You see, there are always those who, unfettered by the real world, face-to-face consideration that being a complete jerk in public might earn one a punch in the snoot, are willing to go off the deep end and consistently use that anonymity irresponsibly.

What brought all this somber cogitating about was an issue brought to our *Ultima Online* (www.uo.com) public by the people I work for, Origin Systems, Inc.. Lately, our game servers have been coming under regular and sophisticated denial of service attacks. A DoS attack can take many forms, but the desired result is the same; to shut down everyone's access to the servers. The unknown entities hitting our servers were doing so with varying degrees of success. This is anonymity with a real vengeance.

DoS attacks aren't new; they've been around for years. What makes them so effective is that the Internet, from its earliest conception back in the 1960s, was built on the primary assumption that

everyone on it would behave responsibly. When there were only a few thousand academics and government researchers using it, this was generally the case.

Nowadays, with tens of millions of people using the 'Net, I suppose we shouldn't be too surprised that a few of them get a kick from exploiting the fact that the Internet was built on the assumption that people are, for the most, reasonable beings. After all, it is easier to destroy another person's work than actually create something yourself.

Quite aside from the fact that some folks have so little to look forward to in their daily lives that they must deprive 130,000-plus other people of the ability to play a game - a *game*, for heaven's sake! -, their actions and the other abuses of anonymity of people like them are having unintended consequences. Every time something like this happens, there are folks who smile grimly and add it to their count of irresponsible and damaging acts performed on the Internet, along with the various viruses issued, pedophiles convincing kids in chat rooms to meet them in real life, credit card scams, et al.

These people then contentedly walk the totals up to Capitol Hill, where they use the list as evidence in their continuing campaign to have laws written requiring keyholes in encryption and digital signatures/positive identification for anything that happens on the Internet.

If anything is anathema to the general culture of the Internet, loss of digital anonymity is it. Sure, there are times I give that up; when making a purchase off a Web site, for instance. But those instances are voluntary on my part; it isn't like an online vendor can reach into my purse and *make* me buy something. However, there are forces at work that want to make it impossible for me and you take any action on the Web without it being recorded and stored elsewhere, lest some functionary wish to check out our habits and actions.

No, this is not some grand conspiracy to enslave us all; it is the natural behavior one would expect of government, law enforcement and corporations. They want to know who you are, all the better to sell to you, check up on you, tax you and, if necessary, put the cuffs on you. It's just part of who and what they are, as natural for them as skinny-dipping is for a fish.

I don't know very many people who, confronted with the proposition of losing Internet anonymity completely, would say it is a good thing and should be done. That's why the forces above are having something of a tough time pushing through the laws and regulations they want, at least in America.

But there's that Law of Unintended Consequences again. People who create and load viruses to the Internet, who scam other people on fake e-commerce sites, or pull off just plain malicious stunts such as DoS attacks, are falling right into the hands of those who want to limit or destroy that anonymity. Every time they do something like this, they make the argument that there should be no anonymity. When childish crackers hack and deface a government Web site or cause some commercial Web site loss and force them to call in security consultants, they are saying clearly, "You can't stop us. You don't even know who we are! Nyah, nyah!"

To which the reply is, "We don't know who you are yet. Maybe we'll never know who you are; we'll just make it impossible for anyone else to ever do this again without us know who *they* are."

All one has to do is read the newspapers to know that this is exactly what is happening right now. For every Bubbleboy virus attack, there is a sponsor for a digital signature bill. Each time a NASA or CIA Web site is popped, some member of Congress issues a press release about the need for the ability to positively identify every person on the 'Net. Each DoS attack on a commercial site has the potential of creating another supporter for all this.

I cannot *believe* I am facing the all-too-real prospect of not even being able to play a quick *Tribes* or *Quake* session without supplying positive identification first.

1.43 Gadzooks!

**Volume Eight, Issue 44
Thursday, December 16, 1999**

Gadzooks!

"My Lords, my Ladies, Gentlefolk all, good evening and welcome thee to Medieval Network News, the official news agency of Her Majesty, the Queen. Verily, these are the headlines on this 13th of December in the Year of Our Lord, 1599:

"Chirgeons in York claim new studies show the efficacy of leeches in curing dropsy and the ague, and in relieving swelling of the buboes caused by The Great Plague;

"Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the First, issued a stern rebuke to Spain today, warning that Spanish warships harassing English fishing vessels in the Channel risk "the same treatment Our Brave Navy doled out to the Armada over ten years ago." Attempts to reach the Spanish Embassy in London for a reply were in vain;

"In the wake of last month's Canturbury Day School Tragedy, in which a dozen young people died, The Association of Her Royal Majesty's Sheriffs today issued a call for the outlawing of swords longer than 24 inches and the banning of crossbows from private possession.

"And in the latest on The Canterbury Tragedy, investigators say newly discovered diaries prove that the two schoolboys planned their bloody attack on classmates for over a year. According to the London Times, the diaries are purported to also show that each had a fascination with the theater, especially the works of Mssr. William Shakespeare of the famous troupe, The Lord Chamberlain's Men.

"Bishop Weirdly of Sloply Dun, the Royal Leech, stated today that the discovery of several of the works of Mssr. Shakespeare in the homes of the two crossbow-yielding youths proves conclusively that easy access to the live theater is destroying the minds of the Kingdom's youth.

"Indeed, are not the works of Mssr. Shakespeare extremely violent, emotional and prone to the use of weapons to resolve situations?" the Bishop was quoted as saying. "So-called theatrical works such as *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* are nothing more than depictions of murderous rampages and are destroying the very moral fiber of this great Kingdom."

"In other news, 29 traitors were beheaded today in the Tower of London. The traitors were convicted of attempting to assassinate Her Majesty and overthrow the monarchy. Each had also been found in the possession of the works of Shakespeare and blades longer than 24 inches "

"Hello to the Milky Way galaxy and good incarnation to you all! This is the BeamSpace News Network, serving all planets in the Confederation of Man. Here are the galactic headlines on this 13th day of December, 2599:

"Genetic manipulators on the planet York confirmed today that recent studies show the venerable Earth leech, long ignored by the medical community, has certain palliative effects in the treatment of blood diseases;

"Wiley Charmer, Secretary General of the United Planets, today issued a stern rebuke to the Empire of Chitin, warning that Chitin starships harassing UP colonization vessels in the Crucis sector risk "the same treatment we doled out to their fleet over ten years ago." Attempts to reach the Chitin Embassy in Geneva for a reply were in vain;

"The Proxima Centauri Times is reporting today that the Virtual Reality Network diaries of the two teens who rampaged through the halls of a high school on Tau Ceti, killing 14 students with plasma rifles and home-made vibra-bombs, were devotees of extremely violent VR games, including the ultra-realistic *Quake 204*. A spokesman for Electronic Nintendo id Arts declined to comment;

"The Intergalactic Association of Police Commissioners today applauded the action of the UP Secretariat in voting unanimously to ban private possession of all weapons and virtual reality games in the wake of the Tau Ceti Tragedy. The ban includes kitchen knives, rolling pins, carpenter's hammers and the highly popular direct-connect VR game, *Quake 204*. "In these enlightened times, there is no reason for the private citizen to have possession of any weapon, nor to train themselves to kill on these murder simulators," read the statement;

"Twenty-nine rebels were executed in Geneva on Old Earth today. The rebels were convicted of attempted of attempting to assassinate the Secretary General and to overthrow the United Planets. They were also found to be in possession of deadly carpenter's hammers and violent VR games "

"Good day, Gentlebeings. This is the Chitin Empire Approved News Agency, reporting on this 13th of December, 2999, also being the 399th year of enlightened rule by our Supreme Masters, the Chitin. In today's headlines:

"Chitin veterinarians on York 329 have determined that, all other medical procedures being outlawed for the 'human animals,' leeches are now the only approved treatment for human cancer;"

"The Chitin Supreme Emperor today issued a stern rebuke to the Yaya Hegemony, warning that Yaya bio-ships harassing peaceful Chitin battlecruisers in the Crucis sector risk "the same treatment we doled out to the humans after they unilaterally disarmed 399 years ago." Attempts to reach the Yaya Embassy in Geneva for a reply were in vain;

"In the wake of last week's Wolf 359 Tragedy, in which two Chitin teenagers went on a rampage in their school and killed 14 classmates with demolecularizers and home-made fusion bombs after viewing the heroic documentary, "Conquest of the Humans," the Supreme Emperor has issued an order outlawing entertainment of any kind.

"The Emperor also went on to note that "any Human finding this order amusing will be summarily executed "

1.44 It's The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Volume Eight, Issue 45

Thursday, December 23, 1999

I love the holidays.

Mostly, I love them because it signals the end to the merciless hype of the game industry's Christmas Rush. By the time New Year's Day rolls around, my brains are leaking out one ear from the relentless PR pounding I've taken. To hear the marketing geeks tell it, every single game released this year is groundbreaking, exciting, signals a new wave of PC gaming and/or all three.

The holidays also signal the end of yet another year and, for me, a chance to reflect on the changes the year hath wrought. In these days of Internet time, which seems to operate like dog years (one day of real time being the equivalent of seven days of Internet time), when things move, they move *fast*. Keeping up can be quite a chore.

This will be my last column of the year, and a most interesting one it has been, indeed. Heck, the whole online gaming landscape has morphed greatly in just twelve short months. Some noteworthy milestones and random thoughts from the year that was:

- The debuts of *EverQuest* (<http://www.station.sony.com/everquest/>) and *Asheron's Call* (<http://www.zone.com/asheronscall/>) showed that the market for persistent worlds is, indeed, quite large. Just how large, no one really knows yet. However, persistent worlds tend to be more "sticky" than most online fare, so we've probably just scratched the surface;
- The failure and closing in May of VR-1's (<http://www.vr1.com/>) *Ultracorps* on Microsoft's Zone (<http://www.zone.com/>) also showed pretty dramatically that for-pay strategy games

are quite a bit less sticky than persistent worlds. Despite the bugs and flawed design that allowed a few players to dominate the game, they might have made a minor go of it if the Zone had supported the game adequately with sysop and game master support. But they didn't and the game died.

This is the first instance of a major online game effort dying coming out of the gate; it won't be the last;

- Call 911. A few dead, dying or seriously ill online game companies and portals:
- **TEN**, which is now www.pogo.com, with a new mission to be yet another mass market gaming portal;
- **MPG-Net** of *Drakkar* fame, which was bought by Interactive Magic to be part of Imagic Online, which is now iEN (<http://www.iencentral.com/>) and we're taking bets on what the name will be next month;
- **Engage Games Online** (<http://www.gamesonline.com/>), the spin-off from Interplay which still exists but just kinda faded away into obscurity;
- **Mplayer.com**, which is still around but is more or less being ignored in favor of the parent company's Hearme.com voice chat site (<http://www.hearme.com/>);
- **DWANGO** (<http://www.dwango.com/>) Dead in America, alive and in Cheynes-Stokes breathing in Japan.
- By far, the single most important online games-related event of 1999 was Electronic Arts (<http://www.ea.com>) (the parent corporation of my employer, Origin Systems) cutting a major deal with AOL (<http://www.aol.com>) to be a primary provider of content to the AOL Games Channel. At the same time, EA bought the venerable online games ground-breaker Kesmai Corporation (<http://www.gamestorm.com/>) (*Air Warrior*, *Multiplayer BattleTech*) and online sports game developer PlayNation (http://www.playnation.com/ie_ne.html).

This agreement with AOL places EA and it's studios in the pole position to offer online games to AOL's 20 million subscribers. As AOL consistently ranks among the top three visited domains on the Web, and it's members are variously reported to be responsible for between 30% and 50% of all online access time from the home, this is not to be sneered at. It is a major competitive advantage.

The deal instantly makes EA *the* primary player in the for-pay market. Microsoft may have more money to spend and Sony may own key mass-market licenses such as *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune*, but EA now has the better distribution. With this deal, no major player can get a game in front of more qualified eyeballs faster than EA.

- Most interesting new computer game: *Planescape: Torment* (<http://www.planescape-torment.com/>), a fantasy RPG set in the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons universe. This one is apparently built on the engine that Bioware (<http://www.bioware.com/>) used to develop another AD&D title, the highly successful *Baldur's Gate*. From what I've seen so far, this game rocks the house down. If you're into CRPGs, this is definitely worth a look.

- Sega shipped the Dreamcast set-top game console (<http://www.sega.com/homepage/>) with its built-in modem and, for the life of me, I can't decide whether this is really news or not. The Dreamcast Network, in conjunction with AT&T, has been announced, but is still AWOL as far as games are concerned.

Does anyone really want to play games on the Internet via a console hooked to a TV? Considering the failures of such ventures as WebTV, Catapult/X-Link, Interactive TV and Sega's own Saturn network, no one has even proved very many people want to surf the Net that way, much less play games. I guess the best that can be said is that the jury is still out, but that we're unlikely to get a mistrial. Either this market is going to be a raging success or miserable failure; I don't see any middle ground.

There won't be a column next week, as even hand-biting she-dogs like me need to take a little time off to fully savor life's little ironies. The next column will be January 7, 2000; see you then!

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