

Biting the Hand: A Compilation of the Columns to Date

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1 Year 2000 Columns

1.1 *Random Thoughts*

**Volume Nine, Issue 1
January 6, 2000**

I'll see your host and raise you a Cisco router : I was reading an interview online a couple weeks ago, in which the designer of an upcoming persistent-world, massively multiplayer game claimed that, literally, hundreds of thousands of players would be able to exist simultaneously in their game world.

After quelling a sudden urge to giggle hysterically, I begged the question: So what?

Now that may sound strange, coming as it does from someone who currently makes her living at persistent-world MMGs. The plain fact of the matter is, however, that anyone can string together enough hardware to host multiple tens of thousands of players; all it takes is the money to buy the hardware and some technical know-how to string it all together. Of course, there is still the matter of how *well* you string it all together and then configure your server-side software to handle it, but that's another story. The up-shot is, the information and experience to put together such a host site is readily available. And if you find that you don't have enough hardware to host your audience, it's pretty easy to slap some more into the daisy chain.

A more salient question would have been: "Technically, how are you going to approach the problem of Internet lag in your game?" There is no real answer to that question, mainly because it can't be solved today through technical means. Data such as game commands sent and received over the Internet acts like a Jim Bouton knuckleball on a windy day (<http://www.velocitynyc.com/ballfour/bio.htm>); once it leaves the hand of the pitcher, it moves with unpredictable speed along an only moderately predictable course. It does not matter if you have absolutely zero latency at both the home PC and the game host site; all it takes is for the data to hop through one bad router along the way and your lag rate is well and truly screwed. Since most data has to move through at least nine or ten hops between a home PC and a host site, the chances of encountering one bad router are pretty good. And we haven't even mentioned what happens when a major data transfer chokepoint such as a MAE-East goes kaplooeey

This kind of unpredictability is why Bouton's knuckleball was able to strike out the likes of Pete Rose and why any MMG dependent on even moderate response times for an enjoyable game

session can be a crap shoot. I'd have been far more impressed if the designer had simply said, "Who cares how many we can host? Let's talk about the game design, which attempts to take into account the unpredictable nature of Internet communications and smooth it out."

Riddle me this : The one question most asked of me is, "What will be the next great persistent world online game?" And my answer is always the same: "After *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and/or *Middle Earth*, your guess is as good as mine."

That is not to say that there aren't other great worlds to license or interesting games waiting to be created from whole cloth. It merely means that there are very few worlds that can stand on their own merit and popularity despite the crushing affects of so-so designers, mediocre programmers and publishing executives who can't or won't understand the service side of this business.

Developing and maintaining a persistent world is a complex, time-consuming, money-sucking, knowledge-intensive endeavor. If it was easy to do, we'd have 1,000 of them to choose from, instead of a couple dozen or so. All the pieces have to come together more or less in concert and pretty much stay together for extended periods. Otherwise, what you have done is wasted a few million dollars to no good effect.

So what I'm really saying is, anyone who puts all the pieces together and maintains them well can have the next great persistent world online game. This is rather like saying that anyone can compete with America Online or Microsoft given two or three billion dollars and some technical know-how.

Overheard in a crowded software store on Christmas Eve (I'm not making this up):

Middle-aged Customer: "What is this *Asheron's Call* game like? Will my 12 year old niece like it?"

Young Sales Clerk: "Think of it as *Sim City* with swords, monsters and people who want to kill you."

Middle-aged Customer: "Is that a Yes or a No, young man?"

Young Sales Clerk: "That would be a No, ma'am."

Seen posted on a Web bulletin board (I'm not making this up, either):

"Hi! I just got this computer for Christmas. Can someone tell me how to get on the Internet with it?"

More from the same crowded software store on Christmas Eve (I couldn't possibly make this up):

Middle-aged Customer (examining a Pokeman display): Who *are* all these ugly creatures?

Young Sales Clerk (without looking up from his cash register): Gamers, ma'am.

1.2 Budget Madness: Beginning the Year with a Rant.

**Volume Nine, Issue 2
January 13, 2000**

Nothing.

Yes, we're at that time of the calendar year when 'nothing' is the major product in the industry. This can be rather boring for all concerned. After all, most of the product for the year has shipped, with a few notable exceptions that have slipped to (supposedly) the first quarter of this new year. Everything else is at various stages of development and most of it won't be shipped until the Fall. Game publishers really have nothing to do right now except recover from the Christmas Rush, while their loyal minions rush to issue patches to fix the known bugs they shipped with the games.

This will all change in the next two or three weeks. Activity in executive offices at the publishers will slowly increase from Alcoholic Coma While Recovering From Rush to the industry standard of Fever Pitch Worse Than A French Poodle On Crack, though you and I out here in the field won't see any visible evidence of the change. What is the cause of all this renewed activity? Two words, my friends:

Budget Madness.

Yes, it is the time of year when many, if not most, publishers decide how much money to spend where and on what. This really has less to do with the calendar year than with that mystic Druidic tradition, the fiscal year. The difference between the calendar year and a fiscal year is fairly simple: the calendar year runs for 12 months from January through December and a fiscal year runs for 12 months starting from some other month. Which month a fiscal year starts in is generally decided either by the nature of the market or in some purely arbitrary or self-serving manner. For example, the Federal government runs on a fiscal year that starts in October. This is not driven by any rational motive, but a purely political one; is it a coincidence that the Federal budget process is scheduled to end just before November, when elections for Congress are held? Nothing like being able to crow to the constituents about all that pork you've shoved into the budget the month before.

In the case of many game publishers, the fiscal year starts in April. Why? It has to do with how publishers get paid from the retailers and distributors. In the normal course of the business, there is a 90 day delay on payment to publishers for units sold at retail. The reason is simple: the distributors don't want to pay publishers for copies of a game returned for a refund or exchange. And there are always returns and exchanges, even on a Top Ten game.

Now, combine that with the Christmas Rush, wherein a great proportion of the games purchased during the calendar year are bought by consumers. For the most part, the Christmas Rush ends

on December 31. By that date, kids have opened their gifts, discovered that Grandma gave them *Really Fun Interactive ABCs*, when what they really wanted was something with just plain *BBB* (Blood, Bullets, Breasts), and have run down to the software store to exchange it for some game with more fun and fewer socially redeeming values.

Now, as most publishers are publicly traded, shareholders want an accurate picture of how the company *really* did financially during the year, so they know whether or not to dump the stock. Since distributors hold money for 90 days, publishers hold off announcing results and closing the books on the year until they know how much is actually going to be banked. Sure, they are going to have a pretty good idea by no later than mid-December; that's why executives traditionally lay off workers late in the year, as Hasbro Interactive (<http://www.hasbrointeractive.com/>) did last year. Anything to make the annual bottom line look good and keep the stock strong; after all, in addition to bloated salaries and obscene perks, most executives also have a nice big lump of the company stock.

And that's also where Budget Madness comes in. You see, most game companies don't come close to achieving the financial results they projected the year before. This is cause for some consternation; without some bright, positive outlook for the future, the stock might tank and what would happen to the perks? So the executives spend a couple months rewriting history and/or explaining why "unforeseen and unforeseeable forces" blew their previous projections out of the water, and constructing a new budget that will fund development of exciting, groundbreaking new games that will, of course, fix everything.

What they actually do, of course, is look at the sales figures from PC Data (<http://www.pcddata.com/>) to see which of the competitor's games actually sold well during Christmas. They then announce in the annual report that, golly-gosh, we had already figured out that 3D, FPS versions of classic games were going to come on strong, so we started a "black" project last year to develop a 3D, FPS version of Tic-Tac-Toe that is remarkably similar to the one that sold 200,000 units last Christmas. What a coincidence!

Anyway, you get the idea. Budget Madness will last until mid-March. After that, you'll see a slough of press releases that all read very much the same and will seem very *deja-vu* familiar to you. Regardless of the actual facts, they will announce:

strong Christmas sales ("We expected to sell 10,000 of Game X and we sold 15,000. We sold 50% over projections!");

reasons for continued optimism in the coming year ("It isn't our fault all our games tanked, no one could have foreseen how the market reacted to all those clones and, besides, we are ");

funding of a whole new boat-load of games that will be ground-breaking, exciting, create whole new paradigms and take the world by storm <"Since we're having trouble designing our own products, we plan on imitating every damn game that sold more than 100,000 units last year.">.

In other words, pretty much the same crapola we hear every year at this time. And what has been the result in years past?

Does the word "consolidation" mean anything to you?

1.3 Fabian, Harvard, and You

Volume Nine, Issue 3
January 27, 2000

One of my colleagues (i.e., another one of those professional game geeks) remarked to me the other day, "You sure are hard on marketing types and Harvard MBAs. I mean, like a pit bull is hard on an arm or leg."

Well, yes, I am; it's one of my little failings, I suppose. As regular readers of this column have learned, I occasionally take it to extremes in the firm belief that exaggeration is good for the soul and can reveal hidden truths. Or it's just amusing, which occasionally can be the more instructive of the three effects.

That cynicism toward the concepts of bean-counting and spin-meistering did not originate out of thin air. Let me demonstrate through two examples listed in the title of this column, Fabian and Harvard:

Fabian Forte was one of those 1950s teen rock idols, an incredibly good-looking kid with a mediocre voice who was as much made from whole cloth as any heartthrob of the era. He made his splash at a time when the mass media was really just coming into its own, and marketers were beginning to realize the intriguing money-making possibilities of hyping form over substance across radio, TV, records, and personal appearances. The attitude among promoters and marketers was (and in most cases, still is) that anyone and anything of sufficiently good looks and sex appeal could be sold to the public, regardless of talent or utility.

There are two versions of how Mr. Forte made it, the Official Version and the Marketing Legend:

The Official Version is that he was just discovered while hanging out in Philadelphia, by two promoter/marketers who instantly recognized his obvious talent. As [Fabian's official website](#) tells it:

Born on February 6, 1943, FABIAN FORTE was actually discovered at the age of 14 sitting on his front steps in Philadelphia. Soon, thousands were to throng to his concerts. Capitalizing on his good looks and ability to excite an audience, FABIAN reached dizzying heights of success.

The way [Marketing Legend](#) tells it:

Frankie Avalon's success led Bob Marucci and Peter DeAngelis to scour the South Philadelphia neighborhoods in search of talent. Avalon suggested they visit the Forte family, and they discovered Fabian sitting on the front porch. Legend has it he was crying over his

father's health and the plight of his family. Marucci approached him and asked him if he ever thought of being a rock and roll star.

Marucci and DeAngelis gave Fabian a complete makeover. They dressed him in V-neck sweaters to accentuate his facial features. They piled his hair high in a pompadour. On occasions, they covered his acne with pancake makeup. After his first recording session, he was enrolled with a vocal coach in hope that he could develop a passable singing voice.

Now, which version do you find more believable? Uh-huh. Another triumph of form over substance. This is not to say that Mr. Forte is a bad person; in fact, he is well known within the entertainment community for his charitable works. It does not change the fact that his success was a marketing maneuver, however.

How does this relate to form over substance and online games? Let me put it this way: In my 14 some-odd years in the industries, I have had contact with dozens of marketing types. It has been my experience that the overwhelming majority of them do not play computer or online games--not even the ones they are responsible for marketing to the public.

So if they have no solid idea of the substance of a game, what do you think they end up marketing? Uh-huh. They market the form and patch it later in an attempt to teach it to sing.

Harvard is famous for its Masters of Business Administration graduate program. For the most part, only the best and brightest are admitted to the school. As the [Dean's Message](#) puts it:

Our students, who are among the brightest, most principled, and most accomplished young people in the world, define much of what is special about our MBA Program. We are looking for people who have a devotion to the highest standards of integrity, respect for others, and personal responsibility; who possess an appetite for hard work; and who understand that leading is a privilege.

It also doesn't hurt to be extremely well connected and/or to come from old money, but that's just my jealousy talking. However, you still have to make the academic grade to get in. Once in, the course work is not easy, and not everyone graduates; not even blue blood and green money can buy you an MBA diploma from Harvard. You have to earn it.

So here we have these incredibly bright, well educated, and reputedly highly principled young men and women being released on an unsuspecting new world--online games. In the last six years alone, I've worked closely with three of them. You would think all that education and large number of individually firing synapses would practically guarantee success. You would be wrong. All three of the projects I have been involved in with these folks were heavily influenced or in some way controlled by them, and all three went down the tubes faster than Drano down clean pipes. Why?

Think "beans." Why beans? Simply, all three Harvard MBAs I have worked with insisted on treating online games as these tangible, physical things, like plumbing fixtures or thumb tacks--or beans. Success in selling beans is simple: count how many beans you made, shipped and sold, subtract your expenses, and voila! You either made money or you didn't. And in the world of

industrial-age bean making and selling businesses, having an MBA on your side to keep a handle on the expenses can mean the difference between profit and loss.

However, apparently someone at Harvard (and other MBA programs) forgot to tell the academic staff that, in the information age, an online game isn't just a widget you sell, it is also a service you maintain. In online games, especially, you are selling both substantive technology and providing the service to help keep the subscriber's perception of the product alive. The MBAs tended toward familiar concepts, such as economies of scale and margin points at retail; they never seemed to make the connection of tying both form and substance together.

See where I'm going with this? In the technology world, you can and should attend to and market the substance, as that is what differentiates you from the pack. In the entertainment world, it helps to market the form because, in many cases, that's all you have to work with.

In the online games world, though, you need to attend to and market *both*. The players are living and breathing the form they have created for others to see, but are dependent on your technology working properly to make that happen.

This can be a pretty lofty concept to grasp. Heck, I sometimes have trouble wrapping my head around it myself, and I'm writing a whole column about it. Is it any wonder that those without direct experience with the concept have trouble with it?

I think not.

1.4 CPIS: The Deadly Disease

Volume Nine, Issue 4
February 2, 2000

FADE IN.

Impeding Tragedy music to background. Picture slowly fades in to reveal an apparently healthy Man striding confidently down a sidewalk. The scene is obviously the business district of a large urban area. The Man is dressed in an expensive business suit and is carrying a briefcase and a copy of the Wall Street Journal. He smiles broadly as he walks into an office complex and walks through a door with Great Always Games/Multimedia Entertainment stenciled in gold script on clear glass. Still smiling broadly, Man walks past a stunning beautiful receptionist to a very large corner office.

NARRATOR (deep, dark tones with a subtext of unseen torment): The disease can strike at any time. It can appear in a seemingly normal game company executive without warning. No one, not man or woman, young or old, rich or poor, is immune to it.

Cut to interior of office. By the expensive furniture, art, magnificent view and huge mahogany desk, we know Man is very important. He sits at desk, turns on the computer and begins to work.

MAN: The day that GAG/ME promoted me to Vice President of Development was the proudest day of my life. I never thought *it* could happen to me. Sure, I've seen *it* happen to others in the online game industry, especially after they get promoted to the executive ranks. But I just never dreamed *it* could happen to me.

Cut to **DEVELOPER**, longish hair, leaning back in his chair in a dark office with anime' posters plastered on the walls.

DEVELOPER: Bill was one of the greats until they promoted him. I mean, come on, man! He knows what it's like down here in the trenches. But the first thing he did was cut two of my artists, a junior engineer and the free Jolt cola. "Over budget," he says. "The margin is starting to look thin," he says. Then he tells me, "We need your game four months early to catch the Christmas Rush." Bah!

Cut to **WOMAN EXECUTIVE**. She tries to speak calmly, but there is a current of fear in her voice. She is edgy and she constantly glances left and right while speaking.

WOMAN: I've known Bill for years, since his first day here at GAG/ME. I mean, he seemed so normal. I had no idea, none of us had any idea, that he had *it*. The first time I entered his office during one of his attacks, I was so scared!

CUT TO: Bill the Man's office, viewed from doorway. The blinds have been drawn and it is very dark and hard to see clearly. He is standing in the corner, with his trousers in a pile at his feet. While we can't see it clearly, he appears to be extremely bent over at the waist. His head is nowhere in sight.

WOMAN: OK, so *Half-Life* was eating our lunch; but how do you cram violent 3D action into a *Tetris* clone meant for the Soccer Mom market? "It'll give it a backstory," he said. I mean, was this my future? Would this happen to me, too? I've only been a VP for two years! Ohmygawd, I have a big head and a small behind! (Breaks into uncontrolled weeping)

Cut to **MALE TELETHON HOST**, previously a star on a #1 rated TV show, but now a has-been and a joke in the industry. Think "love child of Erik Estrada and Suzanne Somers."

HOST: *It* is the online game industry's number one disease among executives. Little is known about it; it can and does strike without warning, hitting previously sane decision-makers and making the lives of everyone around them a living hell.

What is "*It*?" Doctors have named it Cranial Posterior Insertion Syndrome, or CPIS. You may know it by the street slang, "Head Up The Butt."

BILL: When I was just a simple developer producing great online games, I didn't think CPIS was a factor in my life. Sure, we all laughed about how our bosses must have it. Who among us hasn't joked that "this VP" or "that CEO" must have his head up his butt to make such a stupid decision? How was I to know that CPIS is an epidemic in the executive ranks? How was I to know that my promotion carried with it this terrible disease?

HOST: While no one really knows the cause of CPIS, and it can seemingly strike any executive at random, there *are* some risk factors and warning signs:

People with experience in traditional story-telling media, such as television and movies, who move into executive positions in the online games industry. Listen for such well-known warning phrases as "convergence," "backstory," "story-telling" and "How do we make the players do what *we* intended them to do?"

Game players educated in standard Industrial Age business models at universities and who subsequently take executive positions at online game companies. Ivy League MBA graduates, most notably Harvard MBAs, are especially at risk of contracting CPIS;

Computer and video game executives who decide to enter the online games industry. Listen carefully for him or her to say the warning phrases, "I have X number of years in this industry; I know what I'm doing," and "Online games is just another platform, and we know how to port games to other platforms."

What can *you* do to help end CPIS? Probably nothing; if medical science can't extract these people's heads, your chances of success are about equal to that of Hillary offering Bill a good cigar.

But we have to *try*.

Picture of **TOTE BOARD**. The top-line Goal reads \$30,000,000.00. Underneath, the Pledged Amount reads \$0.00.

HOST: Give now, and give *generously*. Your donation will help fund research into this insidious disease, in the hope that we may someday find a cure. It will buy desperately needed head-extractors for online game executives everywhere. And it will fund badly-needed counseling for the spouses and employees of CPIS-stricken executives.

BILL (Voice extremely muffled and hard to understand by the effects of CPIS): Won't you give, just a little? Won't you help me live a normal life again? Aaaccckkk Quake clone, Quake clone, backstory, MBA, MBA, it's just another platfoooooorrrrrrrmmmmmmmm

FADE TO BLACK.

1.5 *Panem et Circenses*

Volume Nine, Issue 5
February 10, 2000

A belated welcome to the new year.

Notice I did not say "Welcome to the new millennium." I don't care how many pinheads in the TV, print and web press say otherwise, the 21st century did not start on January 1. The year 2000 is the last year of the 20th century, and no amount of ignorant talking heads cheerfully greeting a new millennium can change the fact. Maybe I'm just being pedantic, but come on! Facts is facts. What do we do next, change *pi* to 3.0 so the form-over-substance people can get it right?

Not that we should expect anything different from those wonderfully cynical folks who elevated the OJ Simpson trial, Princess Diana's death and the Bill and Monica cigar story to be the sensations of the century. Apparently, there was no other news of worth this century. A huge national debt that creates over \$200 billion in annual interest payments alone? The incredible success of the Human Genome Project in identifying genes that cause crippling diseases? The administration's constant and thinly disguised attempts to shove a national ID card down your throat (as in "Your papers, please") in the form of a "health security card"? The fact that the nation's violent crime statistics are down for the eighth straight year? And I could swear I heard something about a world war or two.

No, apparently none of that is newsworthy compared to gloves that don't fit, accidents on French roads caused by human stupidity or non-obvious uses for a Cubano Robusto. Bread and circuses, indeed (http://www.cyberfair.org/citrag/roma/doc/civil/ecv_026.htm)!

As long as we're on the subject of feeding and entertaining the masses: in the May 11 column (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth0814a.html>), I wrote:

Asheron's Call (<http://www.zone.com/asheronscall/>), developed by Turbine Entertainment 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.station.sony.com/everquest/>), the extremely similar first-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?

Asheron's Call has been on sale for about two months now. As of today, the answer seems to be that the market *can* support at least two 3D, first person, massively multiplayer RPGs without a lot of poaching. *EverQuest* now has somewhere between 150,000 and 180,000 paying subscribers and seems to post about 30,000 to 35,000 players at peak. The debut of *Asheron's Call* doesn't seem to have affected those numbers much, if at all. Turbine's offering, although growing somewhat slowly compared to other MMRPGs, is posting simultaneous player numbers

around the 9,000 mark at peak. I have no idea of the actual numbers of paying subscribers for *AC*, but if we use the standard persistent world marker of 20% of subscribers playing at peak times, this would put the subscriber numbers in the 35,000 to 45,000 range.

While not exceptional, these are fair to middlin' numbers for the game at this stage in its life cycle. The real test for Turbine and Microsoft in the next six months is whether they can sustain growth. The current generally accepted sign of "exceptional," as set first by *Ultima Online* and then by *EverQuest*, is 100,000 or more paying subscribers. If *Asheron's Call* can hit and maintain that mark, they have a true hit on their hands, by anyone's standards.

The good news in this for developers and publishers, though, is that the market for persistent worlds does, indeed, seem to be growing with no end in sight. This should cause more development money to be tossed at persistent world games by major publishers. I don't know about you, but I tend to think of "more money" as a good thing. Not for the money's sake, but because risking it signals commitment and intent. The larger the sum risked, the greater the commitment and intent. This is a one of those vicious circles I can live with.

Of course, a good share of that money will be wasted on silly designs and misguided development efforts. Hey, you pays yer money and you takes yer chances.

Unexplainable weirdness: An old friend and I, both ex-Interplay employees, were looking at that company's product line (<http://www.interplay.com/>) the other day, and we both agreed; what company wouldn't want to have it? The *Descent* series, some good to excellent *Star Trek* games, *Messiah*, *Giants*, the utterly excellent AD&D games *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment*; what's not to like?

Something neither of us can figure out, apparently. Overall sales continue to be weak and the company's stock price is still mired below \$4 a share at the time of this writing, although it has been moving up rather smartly of late from \$2.

Go figure; this is one of the industry's tough-to-explain bits of weirdness. Of course, investors haven't liked computer game stocks in general since they were burned heavily by them a few years ago, and that probably explains some of it.

Danger, Will Robinson! I installed intrusion detection software on my computer over the Christmas holiday, and the results were pretty frightening. In the first 24 hours, there were four attempts to either take over my computer with Back Orifice or drop some other trojan or virus on my hard drive. This caused major panic in my heart; if I had this many attempts in *one day*, is my computer already "owned" by some punk script kiddie?

Therein followed a long distance telephone call to impose on my best friend, Bridgette, also known as She Who Know This Stuff Backwards and Forwards, four hours of virus checks using three different on- and off-line programs to make sure my machine wasn't already compromised, downloading intrusion detection software, installing it and then doing online port scans to make sure my computer was safe while connected to the internet. And then doing it all over again,

because now I'm feeling really paranoid and violated and I'm not sure if I'm being paranoid enough.

There is an article or two in this, and I intend to write it/them very soon. If you don't have much of an idea of what I'm talking about, just this:

Be afraid. Be *very* afraid.

1.6 Catching Up

Volume Nine, Issue 6
February 17, 2000

Time to tie up some loose ends. I don't know about you, but I tend to get behind on things during the end-of-year holiday season. Heck, I still have mail from back in August to answer yet.

Back in Issue 38, Happy Birthday, Online Games Part III, posted on November 4 (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol8%2D38.html>), I wrote:

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.

On January 6th of this year, I heard from Mr. Bright, himself, clearing up the record:

Hi, I'm Walter Bright. I saw your article, and you were wondering about the origins of Empire on the PDP-10.

It had nothing to do with Peter Langston's game. I'd never heard of his game until the 1980's, and I've still never played it to assess how similar it is or not to the Empire I created.

Mine was originally developed in BASIC, which was a total failure due to the inadequacies of BASIC. I then learned FORTRAN, and the PDP-10 version was written in FORTRAN and worked well. In the 80's, I rewrote it in PDP-11 assembly code, and sold exactly 2 copies.

Later, I ported it to C, and sold the rights to Interstel. Interstel hired Mark Baldwin to make a GUI (*Graphic User Interface*. -JMM) for it, which was then sold as *Interstel Empire*.

Thanks for clearing up the record, Walter! One of these days, I'm really going to have to take the time to do full research, then rewrite the timeline to make it more complete. Later this year, maybe. Right now, I'm so busy that I've put my life in a blind trust.

'Way back in August, reader Jonathan Vermette sent in this interesting email:

Oh how I miss the days when the internet was not a culture trend!! How I long for the days when most people on the internet actually knew what they were doing!! I might sound a little rough on the internet but I'm seeing a decline in it.

You mentioned in Vol.8 isu.27 about the Dreamcast having a modem but with no actual modem games. This reassures my belief that the internet today is being exploited by companies to make a quick buck on "cultural ignorance."

People today not familiar with the internet see the internet as something they "have to have cause everybody else does". This opened the "cybernetic floodgate" that has the internet the topic of almost every media outlet. It has allowed companies to create what I believe is an almost useless market. You can now send e-mail on a new telephone for a mere 200 bucks. Now let me ask you this, do you need to send e-mail over your phone? More than likely you already have a computer which can send e-mail for a lot less. You just aren't sure how.

What people need is not the ability to get online through your microwave but an understanding of how to use what they already have. If you make a little effort you'll see past the trendy glitz and glamour and really make use of the internet. Of course the companies don't want it this way. They want the extra money burning a hole in your pocket.

I agree, Jonathan. The internet was commercialized far too soon, long before it was ready either technologically or culturally. Now the "dot com's" are rushing about trying to make sure they can soak us all for extra bucks, still unsure why Net content doesn't draw the audience of TV or radio or pay off like same. Gee, do you think that's because we're an active, participatory medium, and radio and TV are passive, observatory mediums? All them smart fellers and gals couldn't possibly have misjudged us poor, ignorant mass market-type folk, could they? I mean, them bein' so smart and all.

Yes, Jonathan, we're both heretics and the E-Commerce Hit Team will be tracking us both down shortly. My advice: Don't stand near any windows. I don't.

Someone asked me the other day about online games and the AOL buy-out of Time Warner, which was so wonderfully positioned in the media as a "merger." The deal is a "merger" much the same way a shotgun wedding is; one party has no choice, if he wishes to survive.

Anyway, the question put to me was, what will this do for or to online gaming? My answer was, Nothing. Not at least for five or six years, anyway. AOL TW will be far more concerned with

mainstream entertainment, and not many online games are mainstream. Once they get around to consolidating into the entertainment monolith they desire to be, they may do something inhouse about online games, but I doubt it.

This is why AOL cut an agreement with Electronic Arts for that company to basically control the AOL Games Channel. To AOL, the online games niche is just a distraction right now. For EA, however, this is the opportunity of a corporate lifetime: access to over 20 million pairs of eyeballs in one fell swoop. We'll see what they make of it. (Just for disclosure's sake, remember that I am employed by Origin Systems, which is owned by EA. That doesn't mean EA didn't do a smart thing here.)

COMING SOON: The Convention Formerly Known as the Computer Game Developer's Conference comes in March this year. This is the computer and video game industry's answer to a Roman orgy and the participants attend in that spirit. I'm scheduled to be there and, and usual, I don't really expect to see anything new or exciting in gaming.

However, I fully expect to see new levels of drunken excess, as maladjusted young computer geeks take over every strip bar in Santa Clara County. It is a show not to be missed.

1.7 The conference formally known as CGDC

Volume Nine, Issue 7
February 25, 2000

As I write this, the whole industry is in stasis, preparing to unleash the media hype onslaught that is the [Game Developer's Conference](#). As you read this, thousands of people are gathered in San Jose, CA, saying the same old things at the same old seminars and lectures, and in the process, issuing press releases at a mad rate. The press releases will make about as much sense as they always do, which is to say, "Not much."

As has been the case since the board of the CGDC sold out to Miller Freeman, very few people will learn anything new at the conference. However, that is not the purpose here, regardless of Miller Freeman's intent. No, individuals and companies pay the \$750 to \$1,500 danegeld for two reasons: (a) finding and recruiting/stealing talent from other companies, and (b) getting together with friends and taking over every strip bar in Silicon Valley. Indeed, the GDC is the computer game industry's answer to the [Roman Saturnalia](#), only with more exuberance and less common sense...and clothes.

Naturally, if people are coming for the fun and recruiting, they don't have time to mess with something as mundane as actually *speaking*. This orgiastic attitude has resulted in the GDC lecture, seminar, and roundtable speakers list becoming a breeding ground for, uh, hmm--how can I put this delicately? Let's just say that if you raise your hand fast enough, your chances of getting to speak are pretty good.

If you *are* attending in hopes of learning something worthwhile, some excellent speakers, knowledgeable about online and/or computer games, do manage to slip in. As always, it is not the title of the engagement that makes a difference; it is the person imparting the information. Below is a list of events that should provide good information to anyone in the audience, whether they are actually looking for it or not. I base my evaluation on knowing the person(s) and their work over a period of years.

You can also view basic biographies of the speakers on the [GDC web site](#). I warn you that the Speakers' page loads pretty slowly, so be patient.

Friday, March 10, 2000

What Does it Take to Make a Successful Persistent Online World?

Intermediate 2:30 PM-3:30 PM Raphael Koster, Rich Vogel-Lecture

Raph and Rich were two of the prime movers on the original *Ultima Online*, Raph as the designer and Rich as the producer. There's a whole lot of knowledge here; feast.

Thursday, March 9, 2000

Community Design for Large-Scale Gaming Worlds

Intermediate 10:00 AM-6:00 PM Jonathan Baron, Amy Jo Kim, Raphael Koster, Brad McQuaid, Toby Ragiani, Mike Sellers, Amy Bruckman

This all-day seminar is just chock full of experience and academia. If you are interested in this critical section of online games and can spare the entire day, this is the place to be.

Friday, March 10, 2000

Heat into Light: Community Generating Conflict in Online Multiplayer Games

Intermediate 9:00 AM-10:00 AM Jonathan Baron-Lecture

Jonathan has been in the industry for a decade, and he thoroughly understands the players, good design, and the flexible, dynamic nature of the gameplay. You will learn more in one hour with Jonathan than you would in ten hours with 99 percent of the rest of the "online games gurus" put together. And he's entertaining, to boot.

Friday, March 10, 2000 Schedules that Mean Something

Intermediate 9:00 AM-10:00 AM Don Daglow--Lecture

Don has been in the industry for something like 20 years, and he's a truly nice guy. It really doesn't matter what he speaks about; he has extensive knowledge of most facets of the industry. Drop by and get his business card, if nothing else.

Saturday, March 11, 2000 Online Play Patterns

Intermediate 9:00 AM-10:00 AM Gordon Walton--Lecture

Gordon has also been in the industry for 20-plus years, and he thoroughly understands online games. He also has a no-BS style of delivery that makes even the most arcane subject understandable. Well worth the time.

The Freelance Life: The Business Side of Being a Freelancer Beginner Ellen Beeman--Roundtable

Ellen is a game designer and author of note. I consider her greatest achievement to be the backstory behind *Wing Commander II*; it is still one of my favorite games, some ten years after being published. She has also been one of the more successful freelancers in the industry. This is a unique opportunity to get advice from one of the real pros.

So, though most of the list of seminars, etc., at the GDC are avoidable (unless you need the sack time after being up late the night before), the above list is most definitely recommended. The speakers will get your brain moving, and you're likely to learn something new and useful, whether you intend to or not.

And if learning is not on your schedule, you can still hit the strip clubs. Won't Mom be proud?

1.8 Are You Paranoid Enough?

Volume Nine, Issue 8
February 24, 2000

One of my best friends, Bridgette Patrovsky, called me over the holidays and asked if I'd installed intrusion detection software on my PC yet. If you don't have much of an idea of what I'm talking about, just this:

Be afraid. Be *very* afraid.

Some people are "general specialists." They know damn near everything about one specialty, as well as a heck of a lot about the general field from which the specialty springs. They also absorb new information quickly and are just generally bright and well-read. You'll find one or two of these people at every large corporation in every industry. The term Renaissance Man (or Woman) also applies.

Bridgette is one of those exceedingly rare people I call a "special generalist." She knows damn near everything about several specialties, a whole darn lot about the general field of Internet/computer technology and more than most people about technology, communications, operating systems, online services, system architecture, marketing, game design and production, *and* how they all fit together. She also reads, absorbs and understands material faster than anyone I've ever known. In other words, when she talks, I listen.

What provoked the original phone call? Bridgette happened to notice one day that the data transfer lights on her cable modem were going nuts. As she wasn't doing anything on the Internet at the time, she found this curious. Being also a cautious person, she immediately pulled the plug on the modem and started up a virus scan and port check.

Sure enough, someone from an ISP in another state had been scanning the ports on her computer to see if Back Orifice was on her hard drive. So she then spent some time making sure her computer was clean. As part of that, Bri researched the current state of the "hacking" art. What

she found decided her to upgrade the sophistication level of the detection software on her PC immediately. She then did the right thing and emailed the ISP with the information. Then she called me with The Question.

My answer: Well, no. I mean, I have all the right virus cleansing software installed and I run all the right checks regularly to make sure my iron isn't compromised. And I don't open emails with file attachments from people I don't know and trust. That's enough, right? Silly me. As I found out, if you connect to the Internet, this isn't *nearly* enough protection.

You see, hackers aren't the main problem. Not to say that a sophisticated, experienced hacker isn't a problem, but there are millions of computers connected to the Net and only so many real hackers to go around. Real hacking takes a lot of knowledge, patience and experience and with so few real hackers, they can pay only so much attention to your particular PC. And they wouldn't find it that interesting, anyway; they are looking for real challenges, not access to your steamy romantic emails to John659723@myISP.com.

No, the real problem right now are the Script Kiddies. If a hacker is the sophisticated Assassin of the wired world, a Script Kiddie is the Drive-By Shooter. The Kiddies are relatively unsophisticated hacker posers who have come into possession of a software script. For the most part, these scripts just scan for open ports on computers logged into the internet to see if someone else has already deposited some sort of foreign program, such as Back Orifice. Some of the scripts actually deposit Back Orifice or some other insidious nasty code on your machine, making it possible for the Script Kiddie to then look at your files, download them, watch what you do with your PC in real time or even take control of your machine away from you.

Done in this manner, it is unlikely that standard virus checking software will actually detect the intrusion through the port and the implantation of the virus. And it doesn't take any skill to speak of; anyone with access to one of dozens of scripts can do it easily. All it takes is for one person to make such a nefarious script available on a Web site and then invite his friends in to download it. Or he can email it to them, with instruction on how to use it. One script left running can scan tens of thousands of computers logged on to the internet in a just a couple of hours. And once they do drop a nasty on your hard drive, they let all the other Script Kiddies in their group know. Now you have a whole group of anti-social vandals peeking at your private business. Talk about your virtual rape.

Script Kiddies are reviled by actual hackers for giving the community a bad name, but they must outnumber the hackers by a factor of 1000 to 1. On Bri's advice, I installed the Black Ice Defender (<http://advice.networkice.com/Products/BlackICE/blackice%20defender.htm>) intrusion detection software on my computer over the Christmas holiday, and the results were pretty frightening. In the first 24 hours, there were four attempts to either take over my computer with Back Orifice or drop some other trojan or virus on my hard drive. This caused major panic in my heart; if I had this many attempts in *one day*, is my computer already "owned" by some anti-social punk?

Therein followed a long distance telephone call to Bridgette, four hours of virus checks using three different on- and off-line programs to make sure my machine wasn't already compromised,

downloading an active virus scanner (<http://www.mcafee.com/centers/clinic/>), installing it and then doing more online port scans to make sure my computer was at least relatively safe while connected to the internet. And then doing it all over again, because now I'm feeling really paranoid and violated and I'm not sure if I'm being paranoid enough. This kind of paranoia is natural when you are getting hit with TCP, UDP, SOCKS and NetBus port scans and probes daily.

The first moral of this story is: You have to take responsibility for the security of your own PC.

The second moral of this story is: The ISPs know this is happening and, for the most part, aren't doing a damn thing about it.

More about that next week.

1.9 Are You Paranoid Enough? Part II

Volume Nine, Issue 9
March 2, 2000

Last column, I closed with:

The first moral of this story is: You have to take responsibility for the security of your own PC.

The second moral of this story is: The ISPs know this is happening and, for the most part, aren't doing a damn thing about it.

The first moral was amply demonstrated the week of February 7, when Denial of Service attacks were launched on several of the highest profiles internet sites, including Yahoo! and CNN. The attacks were so vicious that they clogged the entire internet and slowed it down to a crawl for almost 24 hours. The DoS attacks therefore affected *all* of us, not just four or five high-profile sites.

What does personal responsibility for security of your own PC have to do with DoS attacks on major internet sites? Just this: The attacks were, in part, launched from PCs infected with trojan horse and zombie programs. Hackers and Script Kiddies use these compromised machines to hide their own location during DoS attacks.

They place such programs on your machine in a number of ways. With game players, the most common method is to first gain your trust over time and become your "friend." They help you out in online games, they share tactics and strategies. They make you part of their "in group," one of the elite.

Then one day, they offer to send you the "cheat program" that will make you a King/Queen of Online Quake, just like them. Or it might be a document detailing the "winning" strategies; you

get the idea. They then send you a file attachment via email or ICQ. When you open the attachment, Back Orifice or some other nasty code is dropped on your hard drive. Note that this is the same sort of tactic used by con men; gain the trust of the mark, appeal to his greed, then abuse that greed. By the time the mark figures out they've been duped, be elsewhere.

If the sender is careful about when and how he uses you, you'll never know your computer has been taken over and you'll never know what nefarious purpose they are using your computer for, until some authority figure comes knocking on your door *unless* you do regular checks for such things.

So, if you haven't done a thorough check of your machine lately, you might actually be part of the problem. There are several programs and methods available for "cleaning" your machine. Personally, I use McAfee's online Clinic and Active Scan, found at http://www.mcafee.com/centers/clinic/clinic_fees.asp?offer=0&cid=1290. If want to check this out, they offer a 14 day free trail. I also have BlackIce Defender (<http://www.networkice.com/>) installed to warn me when someone is trying to attack or scan my machine. However, even a cursory keyword search will deliver up several alternatives for you to examine.

The second moral is trickier. To date, I have sent out fifteen emails to ISPs or web sites, telling them that an attack or scan on my computer was launched from their site. I was very careful not be accusatory, as the probability is that the sites themselves weren't responsible; hackers into their site were. I just wanted to inform them that someone was using their machines and bandwidth for possibly unlawful purposes.

To date, I have two responses. One was an auto-response from a major Regional Bell Operating Company which gave me a trouble ticket number. Calls to the RBOC to get the status of the ticket have yielded pretty much zilch info. One phone tech did tell me that the standard response would be to shut down the offending account. No FBI? No calls to local police authority? Nope, sorry; we just solve the problem and go on.

This is pretty much the same response from everyone, I've learned. The ISP or web site affected doesn't report the intrusion so it can be followed up on; they just quietly close that one hole and hope like hell the press doesn't get wind of it.

Now consider this: The DoS attacks mentioned above came from hundreds, if not thousands, of individual PCs, corporate internet servers, university internet servers, small business sites and ISP network centers. Theoretically, *one* person can launch a DoS attack from all these places, if he has access to the iron on the site. Typically, however, it takes a gang of 10 or 15, with access to many sites and PCs, to accomplish.

The important thing to note, though, is that thousands or tens of thousands of sites, servers and PCs are already compromised. Most of them probably have no idea of it or, if they do, are just trying to close the holes and make it all go away. No attempt to report it, no attempt to find and prosecute the offender(s); just "please daddy, make the nightmare go away!"

What that means for all of us in the long run, gamer and non-gamer alike, is more government control and regulation of the internet. Is it a coincidence that all these high-profile shenanigans occurred just days after President Clinton announced over \$200 million to be spent helping secure the internet from this sort of thing?

No, I'm not implying a government conspiracy here. What I am saying is that stupid jerks decided to tweak Clinton's nose and rub his face in it, without considering the consequences to us all. And the corporate internet servers, university internet servers, small business sites and ISP network centers who won't report this activity as it happens are falling into the unintended trap set by these morons. If we aren't careful, we're going to wake up one day and find that every single bit and byte of data transmitted over the internet in this country is running through government-controlled servers and routers on its way to some other eventual destination.

And that means that the 99.9% of us using the internet for legitimate purposes will have no privacy, period. That's a commodity tough enough to find these days; why make it tougher?

It may already be too late. Hope springs eternal, though, so do your part to forestall this and secure your PC. Even if you think you've already done so, please be paranoid enough and do it again. And to the people launching these attacks, I can only send this plea:

For god's sake, will you stop giving the government an excuse to completely control the damn internet, already?

1.10 The Column Calliope

1.10.1 X-ing Out the Competition?

Sometimes, working with Happy Puppy was maddeningly frustrating.

Take this column, for example. I actually wrote about 1/3 of it in March on the day of Gates address to the GDC, as part of another column duly submitted a couple days later. My editor, Charles Gray, rejected the whole column, something he almost never did. He wanted me to split the three items in the columns into their own issues. In fact, he told me he didn't want me to do any more multi-segment pieces, but to focus the column on one issue per week.

This one issue bit disturbed me; it was a radical change to my style and a total change from the breezy manner in which I generally wrote. The man paid for the column, though, so I rewrote it, turning it out the same day and resubmitting this expanded version to be printed as Issue 10, the week after the GDC. I figured I'd talk with him about the whole one issue thing later on.

Why the rush? At the time, absolutely no one in the press had picked up on the import of the X-Box's Ethernet port as Microsoft's stealth attempt to get an interactive TV set-top box in homes. Everyone believed MS's repeated assertions that this was a game box only, and would be used exclusively as a game console and nothing else.

I knew this for the absolute BS that it was and figured everyone else did, too. After all, MS had been talking about unbundling their software and offering it on the Internet for rent for months, and they owned a huge chunk of a cable company; the X-Box seemed like an obvious piece of that puzzle. Search as I might, however, I saw nothing in the press about it. As the publication date for the column approached, I started rubbing my hands in glee; it looked like I was going to beat out not only the gaming press with the story, but the mainstream press, too.

March 16 came and went no column. No answers to my emails, and no publication the next day, either. OK, this happened occasionally, that they would slip the column by a few days.

In fact, they didn't print one of my weekly columns for a month and totally ignored this one. In the meantime, I submitted a column every week on deadline, just as before. Finally, I got the word; my editor was moved upstairs and a new one was to take over. On his way out the door, my old editor informed me that my column just didn't have the old spark and he was cutting me back to a twice a month publication run. Oh and, by the way, here's your new editor, treat him nice, OK?

I was furious. Here the man had flippantly changed my style and format of writing to match his perceptions of what the column should be, then had the gall to tell me that it no longer had the same old spark and he was cutting the publication dates because of it (in the process, cutting back the income I made from the column by 50%, at a time when their stock price was going down the toilet. Coincidence? I think not.). If we had lived in the same city, I'd have been in his office within the hour and the scene would not have been pleasant.

In the process, this column was never published and the opportunity was lost. By mid-April, the mainstream press started speculating openly that MS would use the X-Box for purposes other than a game console. By Fall 2000, MS started announcing versions of the company's other software for the X-Box, such as MS Money. Yes, this is just the application every console gamer has been waiting for, isn't it?

In other words, I had a one-month scoop on this and Happy Puppy tossed it down a rat hole. I'm still angry about it: writers can become temporarily famous for being first to print on this kind of issue. And even temporarily famous usually means gobs of quotes in the mainstream media and being mistaken for an expert, which brings more writing opportunities. Which also means more cash, and if you think that isn't important to a writer, you've never known one well.

So the column is presented here for the first time.

Volume Nine, Issue 10
March 16, 2000

In the only real news of import from the GDC last month, Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates unveiled the X-Box gaming console to a figuratively breathless crowd at the Game Developer's conference. It was discovered that the X-Box is, surprise! a stripped down PC that will run versions of the Windows NT kernel and DirectX. Lots of people are commenting on the X-Box; Happy Puppy's Ray Padilla wrote an excellent article about the console's specifications and

potential. I recommend you read it (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/editorials/xbox-ed-1.html>).

Microsoft is going all out to avoid calling the X-Box a PC, preferring to label it a game console. However, this console's "brain" is a specially made Intel Pentium III, it runs on a version of the Windows OS and has a hard drive. If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck and spits pork like a duck, it's a stripped-down PC. A powerful one, there is no doubt; the integrated Intel/Nvidia CPU and graphics chip is going to be very fast, three times as fast as anything out there, according to Gates. It's still a PC, dammit.

However, it also will be a stripped-down PC with an Ethernet port. Ahhhh, now we start to see into Microsoft's Nefarious Plan". When the X-Box ships in late 2001, it will ship pretty much cable-modem and DSL ready. Plain and simple, this is MS's attempt to get the Windows OS into the living room of the 50% of homes that don't own a PC, but probably *do* subscribe to cable. And that coaxial cable can be split to provide both TV and Internet service, markets that Microsoft has invested heavily in.

That makes the X-Box part of MS's plan to diversify into every possible device it can tailor the Windows code to match. Not only does the company get a foot in the door on the hardware side of the \$7 billion digital entertainment industry, it infiltrates and positions itself to take advantage of the broadband home entertainment market. And did I mention that the company already owns significant chunks of cable TV companies and backbone access providers?

Not surprisingly, MS is also going to great lengths to tell anyone who will listen that X-Box is not a veiled attempt to get a Microsoft-owned set-top box in homes. It's a game console, pure and simple, they say. In market crowded with three other game consoles, however, what makes the Lads in Redmond think they can succeed with a fourth?

Beyond the fact that many PC developers will have little problem retooling to develop for it, the X-Box has two huge advantages to smooth it's entry into the gaming market:

Microsoft can pour literally billions of dollars into marketing it, buying shelf space to promote the box prominently at retail and buttressing the price so it is an inexpensive buy.

Don't think that marketing and placement makes that much of a difference? Well, do you remember the BetaMax? If you're one of our younger readers, you probably don't. See that VHS machine sitting near your TV, the machine that plays the video tapes? Would you believe me if I told that there once was a better video tape player system, one that was so high quality, it made your VHS tape quality look like old bat doo-doo?

Well, that's what the BetaMax was. Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the VHS and BetaMax formats slugged it out to own the video tape player format market. BetaMax was better in every qualitative way imaginable, yet it is as dead as honest politics in America. Why did it lose if it was so darn good? For the same reason actors and pretty-boys keep getting elected president; the VHS guys threw around more marketing dollars and kept lowering the price. Bye-bye, BetaMax.

As a result, you expect to see a price war in the game console market next year, as Sony, et al, scramble to keep pace.

Publishers and developers literally despise Sony, Nintendo and Sega for past abuses in gouging licensing fees and royalties. They want X-Box to succeed, as punishment and maybe in hopes of getting charged lower fees.

You probably have little idea how much those guys charge developers and publishers for the privilege of spending millions to make a console game; it just isn't something the industry talks about. Want to know why your video games cost so much? For one console game I produced about six years ago, I was told by my boss that the fee we paid the console maker was some \$20 per unit. This did not include our development costs, the \$5 per unit cost of goods to print the box and manual and duplicate the disc or marketing costs.

I am told that the console makers are much more reasonable these days. No matter; I still need a breath mint when I think of what we had to do to publish that one console game. You can bet there are a lot of executives and developers who feel the way I do.

Even with these advantages, MS is going to need some help on the software side. They have pretty much zip experience with video console games and when it comes to consoles, software sells the hardware. As the X-Box tools will be familiar to most PC developers, they'll no doubt port some games over. Microsoft does have enough money to buy a nice big piece of some company that *does* have experience in that arena, however. A company that might otherwise be exiting the industry in three or four years, whether they want to or not. Like, say, a Sega or a Nintendo

Now, wouldn't *that* be interesting?

1.10.2 The Golden Age: DOA?

This is the column that Happy Puppy published as Issue 10. I wrote it the day I heard that Richard had left Origin Systems, Inc., the company he and his brother founded in 1983 and for which I had worked until earlier that same month. His leave-taking invoked a bittersweet melancholy, as I had and have enormous respect for Richard's achievements and intellect, both of which are huge.

Volume Nine, Issue 10 April 6, 2000

Did the Golden Age of Computer Gaming end last Thursday?

In case you missed it, on March 30, 2000, Richard Garriott, the infamous Lord British and creator of the *Ultima* series, left Origin Systems, Inc., the company he founded with his brother

over seventeen years ago in his parent's garage. From such humble beginnings, the *Ultima* series became one of the first million-unit sellers in the industry and eventually spawned nine versions.

This is all the more impressive when you stop to remember that, at the time, there weren't a huge number of personal computers in US homes. It's hard to estimate numbers today (few people bothered keeping records of this sort of thing early on), but there may have been all of 3 million homes with personal computers in 1983, the year of OSI's founding. Even as late as 1990, the year PCs really started to sell, there may have been fewer than 10 million PCs in US homes - compare that with 40 or 50 million homes with computers today, just a decade later. For any computer game series to become a million-seller before 1990 was an incredible achievement.

You would also be hard-pressed to find a series of games that had as much impact on computer role-playing as did Garriott's opus maximus. While the rest of us were fumbling around, building hack-fests and oohing and ahhhhing over our neat use of assembly language to create funky-colored orcs and dragons, Mr. Garriott was building a living, breathing world. His Britannia had everything we had in our games, plus character, danger and - amazingly- a sense of ethics. His use of *The Virtues* bound us to his world; they gave us a goal and reason to exist beyond killing everything in sight. No one had ever done that before; very few have done it since.

Garriott was one of the very last of the original visionaries left in the industry. In these days when most games hail cutting edge graphics and music soundtracks by popular bands as "immersive experiences," even the older *Ultimas* continue to kick butt and take names. Why? Simple: the design. Every version of *Ultima* had an interesting, absorbing design. Even without death-of-a-thousand-cuts graphics and a gangsta' rap soundtrack, they sucked you in and *owned* you. They made you think and ponder your actions. *Ultima* pointed out to the player the critical difference between *what* you do and *why* you do it. This is compelling stuff and tends to make a game timeless. Ask around; people still boot up *Ultima III* and *IV* and go to town, over a decade after their release.

And *that's* why I say the Golden Age of computer gaming is finally dead. As long as visionaries such as Garriott were around, there was always hope that we'd get through this era of the BSU games (as in Blow Stuff Up). Sure, we're slowly making the transition to the massively multiplayer online game, where the players set the tone and the ethics, but there is still room for solo games that guide the player to a revelation or two. The lack of design talent in the FPS and RTS genres, today's top sellers, make it tough to do that. They have become PC-based console games, pretty much. We're lucky to get one true RPG a year now.

Or maybe I'm just being morose. After all, how many designers like Richard Garriott are there? Could it be that we were just lucky he was around at the start? Am I just romanticizing; was the Golden Age a fluke of history?

Now *that's* a depressing thought.

A Quick Note

You'll notice that the disclaimer that normally follows this column, about me being the Director of External Relations at Origin Systems, is missing. There's a simple explanation for that; I'm no longer with OSI. I packed my bags, left Austin on February 28 and moved to San Diego to work with a start-up company.

No, I didn't know anything about last Thursday's lay-offs before I left; the timing was pure coincidence. Leaving that great group of people behind was one of the toughest decisions I've ever made. I'm proud to have been a part of it, and I miss the crew terribly. 'Nuff said about that.

On the other hand, being with a start-up is terribly exciting, too, especially when it is being formed by one of your best friends. Bridgette Patrovsky, whom I've mentioned in other columns, I consider to be one of the smartest people around and certainly one of the best in the online games industry. She's one of those rare talents that the heavyweights go to when they need advice or to have their chestnuts pulled out of a fire. She's formed and made a success of several companies in the ten years that I've known her; I can't tell you what it means to me to be able to be a part of her latest creation.

Sure, it's a start-up and that has great risks attached; that's part of the bargain. There are no guarantees, people, in business or life. But how often do you get to work with a person who is one of our best friends *and* one of the most respected people in your chosen field? Not often, I tell you.

Life continues to be interesting, indeed.

1.11 EULAquest: Part One

Volume Nine, Issue 11
April 20, 2000

It seems like only yesterday that I was opining that we all had to be more paranoid about securing our online gaming PCs from trespass by crackers and script kiddies and other such unsavory, anti-social elements. How was I know that online game developers would include themselves as part of the unsavory elements?

On April 4, Verant Interactive, the Sony subsidiary company that developed and runs the MMRPG *EverQuest* (<http://www.station.sony.com/everquest/>), made a few changes to their EULA (End User Licensing Agreement). EULAs are used to get you to agree ahead of time to all sorts of interesting conditions for use of a software product. For example, even though you pay good money for a game or a Microsoft product or pretty much any other piece of commercial software, you don't own it. If you bother to read the EULA, you'll note you are purchasing a license to use the product. Even though it resides on your computer, the company that created it still owns it. Theoretically, they could rescind your license and demand the product back.

(That invokes weird visions of black-garbed Microsoft EULA Police showing up at my house brandishing MP-5s and grenade launchers, breaking down the door and assaulting my home computer to retrieve my MS Office license and software. Or maybe I've just been playing too much *Half-Life: Opposing Force*.)

Most EULAs are so long and filled with weasel-worded LawyerSpeak that even another attorney would have trouble understanding them, much less those of us who speak a language other people can understand. For this reason, most of us just click on the **AGREE** button on the damn things and continue playing. This habit makes it easy to slip in all kinds of terms and conditions you or I would never otherwise agree to. Happens all the time, my friend.

However, Verant CEO John Smedley took the time and trouble to actually inform EQ players, in plain English, of the text and reason for some of the EULA changes. For this, he is to be commended; he tried to be upfront about it. Of course, considering the firestorm that erupted, he's probably wondering why he bothered.

Now, I play most massively multiplayer games enough to at least keep up on features changes. As I'm only a casual EverQuest player, I probably would have missed the announcement, had not the notice from Mr. Smedley been posted on several news and rant sites. The minute I read about the two most controversial changes, I knew Verant was in for a public relations hellride.

The two *EverQuest* EULA changes of note:

"You may not sell or auction any EverQuest characters, items, coin or copyrighted material."

The ability to sell hard-to-get items or buffed-out characters from MMRPGs on eBay and other auction sites has created quite a little cottage industry. Believe it or not, some people actually make a good living doing it. This has a tendency to tick off game designers. You're supposed to earn your character, darn it; they never intended for you or me to be able to buy a 50th level Goat Strangler and bypass throttling the 150,000 quadrupeds required to reach that exalted level. To the designers, that just isn't the way it should be done. That's not the way they designed the game. It's it's damn it, it's just *not right*.

It isn't like this is a new thing. To my certain knowledge - because I was there - players were selling characters and game items between themselves for cold, hard real-world cash back in the mid-1980s in games such as *Gemstone III* and *Dragon's Gate* on GENIE. If any one of the new breed of MMRPG developers had bothered to do any research, they'd have known this would happen. The only thing different today is the scope; there are a lot more players, so you see more selling.

What the designers are really saying, of course, is "That is not how *I* want you to do it!" This is also a continual problem with the developers of today's MMRPGs. They just can't seem to learn that one critical lesson from the seminal online games of the 1980s and early 1990s: once the game is in the hands of the paying subscriber, it's *their* world, *not* yours. They are going to do things with the world's features and gameplay elements you never expected or anticipated. If you try to change the game to get them to stop and go back to playing the way you want them to

play, you're going to tick off customers and lose some of them. If you're a real cheesehead about how you go about it, you could lose quite a few customers.

This is not to say bugs, cheats and exploits shouldn't be fixed. It *is* to say you better think very carefully before you nerf something that is going to negate a couple dozen or more hours of legitimate play time. We're all getting pretty tired of having developers nerf a character class or feature because we're not using it to role-play or game in the way they intended when they designed the feature.

The change in the EULA was not made to appease the designers at Verant, however. The clause is almost totally unenforceable before the fact. No, there is a more practical purpose to the change. You see, the eBay route has also prompted enterprising young capitalists to create scams designed to separate fools from their money or game passwords. As you might guess when dealing with the anonymous nature of the Internet, the scammers outnumber the honest auction users by a wide margin. As you might also guess, these scams cause quite a few telephone calls and emails to Verant's customer service department.

Until a customer gets ripped off and calls customer service to complain, it is unlikely that the lads and lasses at Verant would ever know. But when the offended party does call, the new EULA clause gives Verant a plausible reason to get such callers off the telephones quickly. It gives the player support folks the ability to say to these people, "Read the EULA lately? Now please hang up so I can help someone else."

So that was change number one. Then there was this little gem:

"You hereby grant us permission to download Game-related files to you. You also grant us permission to access, extract and upload (i) Game-related data as part of the patching process and (ii) data relating to any program that we, in our reasonable discretion, determine interferes with the proper operation of EverQuest."

Read (ii) very carefully. If you believe such a clause would give Verant permission to look at the programs on your computer and decide, unilaterally, that you might be hacking and thus shut down your account, you are correct.

Whoa, circle the wagons, men; we're in Injun Country now. I mean, come on; you're asking me to give some game geek permission to snoop my computer? Heck, *I'm* a game geek, and I wouldn't give someone like me permission to snoop my computer.

If you've a notion that (ii) caused a veritable guano tidal wave of protest, you would be correct again. This whole mess brought up several privacy issues near and dear to the heart of the gamer.

And therein lies next week's column.

1.12 EULAquest: Part Two

Volume Nine, Issue 13
May 4, 2000

Time to continue our saga about the quest for good online gaming *and* a sane End User Licensing Agreement, begun *over here* (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth-vol9-11.html>). At the end of that column, I wrote:

Then there was this little gem (in Verant's April 4 update of the EULA for *Everquest* -JMM):

"You hereby grant us permission to download Game-related files to you. You also grant us permission to access, extract and upload (i) Game-related data as part of the patching process and (ii) data relating to any program that we, in our reasonable discretion, determine interferes with the proper operation of EverQuest."

Read (ii) very carefully. If you believe such a clause would give Verant permission to look at the programs on your computer and decide, unilaterally, that you might be hacking and thus shut down your account, you are correct.

Before going forward, let's give credit where it is due: A couple days after this brouhaha began, Verant CEO John Smedley issued a letter to the gaming community in which he retracted the change, saying, "We have decided that it's the wrong thing to do." Of course, that doesn't tell us why anyone at Verant thought it was a good idea in the first place. It is heartening, however, to see someone in the industry willing to stand up when they screw up and take the thrown rotten fruit and veggies in the face. Falling on one's sword is never easy or pleasant. I know; I've made my share of public online screw ups.

Still, it is shocking to me that someone there thought it was OK to try to pull this off. They may believe that such information from my PC will never be abused, but you'll never convince *me* of that. Nor will you convince a majority of gamers or just plain Internet users. Just the fact that Verant thought this would be an OK move shows me that there is room for considerable variation of what constitutes "reasonable discretion." Your "reasonable discretion" is my violation of privacy.

To most of us, our computers and the information on them are intensely personal. We might be convinced to share if, say, our personal immortality were on the line or Mom's life were in danger, but we'd still rather not. It would be like sharing your toothbrush the morning after a one-night stand. Hell, I'd rather share my toothbrush with a pyorrhea victim than let some stranger check out the contents of my hard drives. Trying to force permission to do so down my (or any online gamer's) throat by modifying the EULA is just going to tick me off. It smacks of arrogance.

How could they not understand this? I keep coming back to the Everquest slogan: "You're in our world now!" I've always considered that somewhat laughable, because once you release a

persistent world, it is no longer your game. Oh, you can pretend; you can create all sorts of non-coded rules and try to enforce them by fiat. History has shown that rule by fiat is pretty tough to enforce consistently; each customer service rep defines them differently, with the result that you just end up annoying your customers beyond belief.

Yes, I can understand where the guys at Verant were coming from. The object of this interesting little change was to force Everquest players to grant Verant permission to snoop their computers for hacking and sniffing applications, such as the infamous ShowEQ. I know this comes as a shock to most of you (as Jim Bouton of *Ball Four fame* (<http://www.velocitynyc.com/ballfour/>) might say, Yeah, riiiiight.), but some players actually try to cheat at online games. A few of the more precocious even write programs that modify the player client - the application that sits on your hard drive and allows you to play - to do this. If you played *Diablo* on battlenet during the early days after the initial release, you know exactly what I m talking about.

There is a phrase used quite a bit in the online game development industry: The client is in the hands of the enemy. I first heard it used in 1989 by a Kesmai Corporation employee, after a cheat hack of the *Air Warrior* player client appeared on GENie. The phrase is not exactly a secret among developers, either; we ve all heard it multiple times at conventions or seen it used in email or developer message groups. Before the popularity of Internet auction sites, cheat hacks such as this were done purely for the twisted need to win at all costs or because the lamers using the hacks were, well, lame and got tired of getting their heads handed to them by other players. These folks were containable for the most part, because there were only a few of them and game populations were small compared to today.

Now that use of the Internet has exploded and Web services such as eBay exist, however, there is a whole new incentive to cheat. One can make a tidy sum auctioning off items or characters in an online game. Some buffed-out characters with lots of loot have sold for \$3,000 and more on eBay. One company started by a couple of enterprising young capitalists claims to be making \$400,000 a year selling Ultima Online characters and items. This is not chump change.

The enemy phrase was not meant as an insult to players, but as a warning to front end client developers: Once you distribute the front end client, the enemy has access to it, not just the good guys. It says: If you leave important, modifiable information in the client, the modification of which would give an individual an advantage over other players, it *will* be modified. It is a clarion call to make sure you don t leave important information on the client, to protect the integrity of the game for the 99.9% of your players who will never attempt to hack you.

It s a tad bit worse in these Internet days, as it is pretty easy to acquire software that sniffs the data packets going in and out of the modem. All it takes is one pretty decent code mechanic to sniff the packets, decrypt them if necessary and write an application to use that information in some way and voila ! you have interesting little applications like ShowEQ or UO Extreme.

It is nearly impossible to protect packets from this kind of analysis and use by clever minds. EQ does a pretty good job of making sure information can t be modified on the server side; ShowEQ is basically used to find out exactly where the monsters are and what nifty loot and treasure they are carrying. That can still be a pretty hefty advantage, especially if your side business is

harvesting loot and selling it on eBay. This tends to cause loot camping at monster spawn sites by auctioneering businesspersons, which in turn denies some legitimate players full access to the game. It s no wonder Verant felt a tad frustrated by the whole thing.

Enough. You get the idea. The point of the rambling paragraphs above:

We know the client is in the hands of the enemy. We know that it is impossible to stop sniffing and analysis of the packets, although we can make it difficult. We know there is a small minority of player-hackers that will take advantage, if at all possible. I know that you know. You know that I know. We know that they know that we know. We re a very knowledgeable industry. (Public kudos to the first person to write me with the origin of that rephrased quote.)

Knowing all this, why aren t we designing massively multiplayer games accordingly, instead of trying to trample on the sacred privacy of our player s PCs after the fact to cover up our own thumb-fingered mistakes?

That was not meant as a dig specifically at Verant, by the way; they are only repeating the past mistakes everyone else in this industry has made, including myself, a time or two.

Time to learn differently, I think. I think 30 years of making the same mistakes is enough, don t you?

1.13 E3 Impressions Oh, and some stuff on games, too

Volume Nine, Issue 13
May 18, 2000

Between May 10 and May 13, you only had to spend three minutes inside any hall at the Electronic Entertainment Exposition (E3) in the Los Angeles Convention Center to make four things abundantly clear:

1. There were significantly fewer attendees than in previous years;
2. The supposed restrictions against noise that makes the brain leak out one ear were not being rigorously enforced by E3 organizer IDSA (<http://www.idsa.com/>), and;
3. There were more gorgeous, big-breasted, long-legged, overly made-up Booth Babes per square foot than in any previous year, and;
4. Watching the male attendees create drool puddles around the Booth Babes, is it any wonder that these otherwise nice ladies are also referred to as cretin bait?

I m still at a loss to explain the purpose of E3. I mean, who are we trying to impress or influence? The retailers and distributors? They ve already placed their orders for Christmas; most did so in February and March. The press? These guys already know everything there is to

know about every game in development, or at least think they do. Which pretty much leaves: Each other? Heck, I guess it must be that.

In which case, we didn't do a very good job, because the most overheard comment of the show was, Gee, there isn't anything exciting or new here, is there? The same old, same old was shown, 2,400 separate games that all looked pretty much the same as last year, played pretty much the same and will sell pretty much the same (which is to say, not much). Maybe that's why attendance looked down; other people must be trying to figure out the why of it, too, and coming up with the same answers.

There *were* present a couple interesting products, however, just not necessarily the ones you might think. I'll run through some of them quickly, without a lot of detail; we'll get more in depth later on, as they get closer to actual release.

While some of the press were raving about various Dreamcast games, the demo for *Metal Gear Solid 2*, a PlayStation 2 game in development at Konami (http://www.konami.com/main/home_frame.html), stole the console show. The demo looked fantastic and created long lines every hour as it started up fresh. If the game fulfills its promise, this may be the first PSX2 game to really take advantage of the box's capabilities. It's a sure bet to create sweat beads on the foreheads of Sega Dreamcast executives.

For massively multiplayer games, the pre-show buzz was all about the Gathering of Developers signing up to publish Wolfpack Studios' upcoming MMRPG, *Shadowbane* (<http://www.shadowbane.com/alchemy.html>). Everyone wanted to get in to see the *Shadowbane* demo, especially since they recently announced that testing and release was being pushed back from this year to sometime next year. **Note:** I didn't get a chance to see the demo or talk to the developers myself. I had to settle for speaking to a dozen press and development folks that had seen it.

Apparently, for many the buzz didn't live up to the reality. The general consensus among the press and developers that I spoke to was mixed, at best; no one I spoke to saw *SB* as being a legitimate threat to *Ultima Online* or *EverQuest*. Interestingly, however, every single one of those people remarked to the effect, Those guys are *really* arrogant, aren't they? Which really makes me wish I had been able to talk to them and form my own opinion.

GoD's thunder was stolen by the 3D, 1st person MMRPG *Anarchy Online*, from Norwegian publisher Funcom (<http://www.anarchy-online.com>). Not only was everyone wowed by the flexibility and utility of the interface and thought and implementation behind the game system design, the Funcom people were just genuinely nice folks. You've never met more enthusiastic online gamers, either. They are very much concerned that people play *and* enjoy the game, for the game's sake, and listened to opinions and took notes. If they can get the service side of the business right, *Anarchy* should do very well. The service side is not an easy task, by any stretch of the imagination, and more than one online game has failed from lack of experience concerning it. Still, this is one to watch closely.

Blizzard: You gotta hand it to these guys: even when they lose, they win. Blizzard was showing their wares at parent company Havas booth (<http://www.havas.com/en/>). We were all pretty much underwhelmed by *Diablo II*, which shouldn't be surprising, because even the Second Coming couldn't live up to the expectations created by the hype surrounding that game. It could take out your trash, paint your house and get you a date for Saturday night (no mean feat for some of the developers present) and still not live up to expectations.

On the other hand, that mild disappointment was tempered by *Warcraft III* (<http://www.blizzard.com/war3/>), which looked and played very well, indeed. I'm thinking *Warcraft III* is going to be a must buy for many and another Warcraft game is preparing to most likely sell over 500,000 units.

Havas had another winner at their booth: Troika Games' adventure piece, *Arcanum* (<http://sierrastudios.com/games/arcanum/>). The game is being designed and developed by the creative geniuses behind Interplay Productions' *Fallout*, most notably Tim Cain, Leonard Boyarsky and Jason Anderson. You are going to like playing this one, I guarantee it. It has been described as Jules Verne meets J.R.R. Tolkien and will have both solo and multiplayer options. And for the dungeon masters among us, a map and dungeon editor is to ship with the game, which is scheduled for a Fall, 2000 release.

And my alma mater, Origin Systems, was showing private demos of the Game Formerly Known As Ultima Online 2 (<http://www.uo2.com/main.html>). The *Ultima Worlds Online: Origin 3D* interface and its capabilities impressed many, including some people who were pretty sure the game would be blasphemous, at best. The jury is still out, but it looks like the game is going to give *EverQuest* and *Asheron's Call* a good run for the money.

And with E3 over and the mega-woofers assault on my person stopped, I am now going to try to shove my brains back into my ear, in hopes that they will find their way home. Makes you wonder just what the cleaning crew in LA found on the floor on Saturday night.

1.14 Sounding Off

Volume Nine, Issue 14
June 15, 2000

This whole column is a bitch session. It's a *long* bitch session. You've been warned.

I have this pet peeve. It involves bad voice-overs in computer games. My peeve is that I'm tired of hearing them. The bad acting, that is, and I can't seem to find many good performances in games lately.

For those unfamiliar with the term, a voice-over is a recording of an actor reading a script, with the subsequent recording then plugged into the game at the appropriate place. It's like listening to a play, movie or TV show, but without seeing the actors move on stage. We hear a lot of them these days, as more 3D modeled characters come into use. Video of actual people is expensive

and uses a lot of disc space; animated characters don't draw a check and use less disc space than video.

We've been using actor voice-over performances in our games for a while now, and they generally suck. It is a concept that should add value to the gaming experience, but doesn't. Rather than adding to a game, the voice-overs are so badly read, so completely misunderstood and misinterpreted by the actors, that they end up making parodies of themselves. The sentences uttered are usually out of context with the current situation in the game, with the wrong emphasis placed on the wrong words. You know what I mean: A line that should be read simply as "Oh my god, a *battle cruiser*!" is mangled to come out stilted and *quelle dramatique*, such as "Oh my **god**! A BAT-el CREW-zur!" It reminds me of a group of friends watching a grade B sci-fi flick and imitating **Mystery Science Theater 3000** (<http://www.scifi.com/mst3000>).

In addition to grade-school Christmas Pageant acting quality, we are forced to suffer the mind-numbing stupidity of the repeated stock phrase. This is a voice file that is used so often throughout the game that one is utterly sick of hearing it by game's end. Nothing kills the suspension of disbelief in a game more than hearing the exact same voice file over and over and over again. For example, I recently finished **Starlancer** (<http://www.digitalanvil.com/projects/starlancer/digitalanvil.html>); now the phrase "He's on your six!!!!" will not leave my head. I'm not surprised, as that one voice file is used every time an enemy ship gets behind you. Like, at least 20 times in each of the 24 scenarios. That's 480 uses, not counting at least 10 scenario replays due to mission failure. What, Digital Anvil couldn't record seven or eight other one- to two-second "The enemy is behind us!" phrases?

Come on; how many times have you've been playing a game, reached a tense, critical point and had it ruined by an actor with all the talent of a peanut? Or heard the same phrases over and over again until you want to climb up a tower with a lunch box, a rifle and a telescopic sight? Far from adding to the game, which is what a voice-over is *supposed* to do, they nearly always subtract from the experience. Whenever possible, we turn the suckers off, just to keep from being bothered.

Why are voice-overs in games so crappy and repetitive? Glad you asked, my friend. There are three good reasons for this sad state of affairs:

- Believe it or not, professional voice-over artists do not generally perform game voice-over work.

This is not because they refuse to do such work, but because developers and publishers are penny-wise and pound-foolish. Instead of hiring professionals to record the lines, they pull employees from QA, Tech Support and other departments and have *them* read the lines. And instead of hiring a professional voice director, the sound engineer or Producer directs the performance. The acting quality sounds amateurish because the lines are being read and directed by amateur actors and directors.

This is an incredible situation. Imagine X-Files producer Chris Carter sticking his head out the studio door every week and yelling, "Who wants to be on TV with Gillian Anderson?"

Ok, you there, in the red coat, you had your hand up first. Memorize these lines; you'll be working with her in ten minutes. And you, in the Capri pants and bad hair-do you get to direct the scene. Report to the camera crew.

Doesn't make a whole lot of sense, does it? In fact, no sane producer would think of doing it, except maybe once as a stunt. So why is it done that way for computer games? Simply, because employees do it for free, whereas the average voice actor for the Screen Actors Guild earns \$600 a session.

Six hundred dollars a day may sound like a lot, until you consider what you get with non-professionals doing the work. And when you total the cost of day actors for the average computer game, it's chump change. Consider: When I was the producer of record for the CD-ROM version of *Star Trek: Judgment Rites* for Interplay, recording 25+ day actors (not including the original series cast) to perform over 70 character voices cost us less than \$30,000, including studio rental, a professional voice director and our employee time to prepare the scripts and monitor the taping. This was not a large fraction of the overall budget.

Not only did we have a lot of fun, it was worth spending the money. Our voice director was Michael McConnohie, whose voice you'd recognize from countless TV cartoons, films and books-on-tape. He brought in professionals of the caliber of **Anthony De Longis** (<http://www.delongis.com/index.html>). The voice acting and directing in that game was superb and won us more professional compliments than the game play.

- Game publishers do not understand what Hollywood talent needs to be able to perform well.

Another example from *ST:JR*: For a previous Star Trek game the original cast had recorded, the game's Producer had printed the script lines in alphabetical order, starting with sentences that began with the letter 'a'. The cast had no way to establish context for any of the lines, or even to know which of the eight scenarios any of the lines belonged to. And because of that, the lines in that first game had come out sounding like disjointed nonsense. Sound familiar? The original cast also didn't much want to do the second game, because of the bush-league manner in which the company had handled the first game.

Director Michael McConnohie and I solved that problem by arranging the lines in spoken order by scenario and, as *ST:JR* was an adventure game, we included the text of the two to four different responses to each line. Now, the actors could read all that and understand very well what they were saying and what the results of each line might be.

Simple, no? Well, if you're a professional actor or director, yes. Of which sound engineers, designers and/or Producers at game companies are not, 99% of the time. They often pretend they are, though, with the shoddy results we've come to expect.

We also took the time to educate the actors on adventure game design. When the *ST* cast walked in the studio for the first time, this was just another linear storyline to them, progressing from point A to point B. No one had ever explained to them the adventure game

concept that point A might lead to point B, C or D, depending on the player's choice, and continue branching and looping from there. Or as William Shatner put it when he understood, So this is like three versions of the same movie, with three different endings!

To solve this education problem, we wrote briefing documents and included them with the scripts, explaining the concept and how player choices could result in two or three different results. We also ran a short adventure game boot camp at the recording studio, going over the documents and answering questions. The actors loved it; it allowed them to do a better job and it showed in their performances.

Again, simple, no? Apparently no, because few developers or publishers take the time to do even that much actor education.

(By the way, everything you've heard about the way the original cast tries to crack each other up is true. When we told Leonard Nimoy what Shatner had said about the game being like three movies, he grinned and asked, So, did he ask for three times the fee? When we related this to Shatner at his second taping a few weeks later, he laughed so hard we had to stop work for ten minutes.)

- Voice-over files in games are repetitive because sound files take up a lot of space on a CD ROM and there is only so much space available.

OK, this one comes close to being a legitimate excuse. Indeed, the voice files can be quite large and disc space is at a premium these days, especially with all the bits and bytes eaten by 3D models and objects. If the budget calls for only one or two CDs and that space is being used up by 3D engine stuff, voice files almost always get cut first.

Now, a sensible person might think, Heck, CDs are cheap to duplicate. Why not just toss in another one, if that's what it takes to increase quality and immersiveness and have less repetition of lines?

Yes, that is what a sensible person might think. Apparently, penny-wise and pound-foolish is an easier concept to grasp; an extra disc would cost, *gasp!*, *real money*. Got those margins to watch, you know.

Ah, but how much real money? Based on my experience, the cost of adding an extra disc couldn't possibly be more than \$2 per unit and would probably be a lot less for any duplication run of 40,000 or more, maybe as low as \$1 per unit. This cost could easily be added to the price of the game without player complaint, especially if it means a more interesting game experience. Heck, the first game to advertise One full CD of actor voices, so you don't hear the same lines so often! will probably sell an extra 20,000 units on that alone.

So that's my pet peeve, why it happens and what we could do to fix it. You may be asking yourself, If it's so easy, why don't developers and publishers *do* it?

That question could cause me to go off on another four-page rant, but I've probably expended all of my editor's patience already. To try to answer the question simply:

Because. Because they don't know any better. Because they think they are doing a good job. Because they don't know how to weigh the risk of the minimal additional cost versus the potential additional sales. Because they are loath to risk even one profit margin point unless some number-cruncher can prove to them they'll get back three or four. Because they have your money before we know whether the game or voice-overs are crap.

And most of all: Because they don't have to. Not when people like you and me keep creating double-digit sales growth numbers by buying more games every year.

1.15 I sing the misericorde

Volume Nine, Issue 15
July 6, 2000

"The note of misery." If you're wondering what the heck "misericorde" means, that's it. It is a French name, given in medieval times to the [ice pick-like dagger](#) carried by foot soldiers. The misericorde had a singular purpose: to deliver a killing blow to the brain of an unhorsed knight.

I learned about the misericorde--and its singular, grisly use--during stage combat training 22 years ago. I had forgotten all about it until the recent merger news. You know the merger I mean: Vivendi, the French company that owns Havas Interactive (which in turn owns Sierra and Blizzard), has announced buyout/merger discussions with Seagram's, which owns Universal Pictures, Universal Interactive (*Crash Bandicoot*) and the world's largest music studio, Polygram NV. The proposed \$30 billion deal would create a mega-media corporation the likes of AOL Time Warner.

Reading that news brought back the memory of the misericorde. French game companies have been slowly slipping them under the armor and into the exposed gray matter of American computer/video game companies for two years. Now this. I haven't decided whether this is a good or bad trend yet. After all, we let the Japanese take over home electronics such as TVs and VCRs, and I haven't noticed anyone complaining about it lately.

It *is* a signal--if you read it correctly. To me, it is a signal that the arrogant mismanagement of U.S. computer and video game companies is finally coming home to roost, and that the French "invasion" is now officially in the break-out-of-the-beachhead stage.

The beachhead was firmly established last year after the French bided patiently as U.S. game companies, not generally known for intelligent decision making at the executive level, exhausted themselves in the War of Consolidation. After the American companies battered each other on the marketplace battlefield, spent their scanty resources acquiring each other, and were giddy from the blood loss, the French moved in with their misericordes. Titus Interactive exercised

options that bought control of Interplay (*Baldur's Gate, Fallout, Descent*), which had previously eaten parts of Virgin Interactive (*Evolva*). Infogrames then snapped up the faltering GT Interactive, which had previously acquired a bunch of smaller studios, such as Legends (*Wheel of Time*), SingleTrac, Accolade (*Jack Nicklaus Golf, Deadlock I and II*), Humongous (*Blue's Clues, Pajama Sam*) and Cavedog (*Total Annihilation*).

Once the Vivendi/Seagram "merger" is approved, about the only major American-owned computer/video game publishers left will be Electronic Arts, Mattel, and Hasbro Interactive. And Mattel has already stated that its interactive division, the Learning Company (which includes Broderbund, Mindscape, and SSI), is for sale; Infogrames has expressed an interest.

Then there comes the breakout. This opens up a fascinating line of speculation. Consider: the French companies have financed their acquisitions through bonds and the French stock market. They've had remarkable success at this, pulling in various chunks of cash in the multiple nine figures *each*. They've raised billions in this manner, and whether you're counting francs or U.S. dollars, that's a lot of dead French presidents (or emperors or whomever; I really don't know who the French put on their money).

So they've shown they have an established method and means of raising cash--lots of cash--for major acquisitions. Considering this, could U.S. holdouts EA, Mattel, and Hasbro Interactive now be in the French crosshairs? Buying any of those would be expensive as all get-out; EA alone has a market capitalization of around \$4 billion, and Mattel wants \$3.2 billion for TLC. This is not chicken feed; it would almost certainly take a minimum bid of \$8 billion in cash and prizes just to be considered a serious suitor for EA, for example, and there is no guarantee that the shareholders would approve. Nor can very many companies dip into the petty cash drawer and come up with \$3.2 billion.

Somehow, I don't think any of that would be very intimidating to companies that can construct \$30 billion buyouts with the help of the enthusiastic French investment community. With the way American tech stocks are getting hammered right now--only EA among game companies continues to hold a strong price--either Infogrames or Vivendi could probably muster up the support to make a strong offer. Or here's an interesting thought: Infogrames and Titus could decide to merge, pool resources, and then go after bigger game.

It might be tough right now; Infogrames is suffering from the weak tech stock market too, but that is normal during a platform transition year. Tech stocks, and especially game stocks, have a tendency to dip in the summer, anyway. Given the cyclical nature of the market and that the Christmas rush is only four months away, we can reasonably expect everyone to bounce back, at least a bit, pretty quickly.

Which leads to the final two questions:

Is it just a matter of time before they start learning conversational French in Redwood Shores, CA, Cambridge, MA, or Beverly, MA, and;

Will the first word they learn be "misericorde?"

1.16 I m A Volunteer; Where s My Check?

Volume Nine, Issue 16
July 13, 2000

There is a class-action lawsuit in progress that could kill, literally, a bunch of online games, not to mention some online services and other popular Internet gathering places.

When it comes to lawsuits and the average American, there are usually three kinds of litigation: the seeking of justice; opportunistic greed, and; pure, simple revenge. The latter two types generally try to masquerade as a seeking of justice, because none of us like to see the courts clogged up by the greedy or vengeful.

The lawsuit I m referring to falls into the revenge category, in my opinion. For those of you who have forgotten, America Online is being sued. OK, this isn t exactly a rare occurrence. In fact, it happens often — two class actions have been filed against them since I started writing this column. I m not making that up. It happens so often, in fact, the online service ought to just save everyone some time and add an icon to their Welcome screen captioned Want to sue us? Click here!

For the purposes of this column, however, a couple former AOL volunteers filed the particular suit I refer to over a year ago. It is HALLISEY and WILLIAMS versus AMERICA ONLINE, INC. and AMERICA ONLINE COMMUNITIES, INC., Docket #: 99 Civ. 3785 in UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK. Anyone interested can read the original complaint at <http://www.observers.net/complaint.htm>. Observers.net is a Web site maintained by Ms. Kelly Hallisey, one of the named plaintiffs.

The general thrust of the complaint? The two plaintiffs were volunteer Community Leaders for AOL and accuse the online service of treating them like employees but not paying them. They want back wages and reparations, not just for themselves, but for all the other volunteers, too. They claim to have spent years and thousands of hours as volunteers, filling out time sheets and working a schedule. There are also sundry claims of wrongful dismissal from volunteer positions, being treated disrespectfully, etc.

My first question to the plaintiffs has to be: What part of the word volunteer didn t you understand?

I m normally for the underdog in these situations, so one might reasonably assume I would sympathize with the volunteers here. The good Lord knows that when it comes to misunderstanding just what an online community is, or misunderstanding the volunteers and contract sysops who lead and guide the communities, AOL is unchallenged for first place. I speak from experience, because I started my career in this industry as an online volunteer and was one of the original crew of 14 people brought in by Kent Fillmore in 1987 to run the Forums

on AOL, then called *AppleLink: Personal Edition*. Some of the stories I could tell you of the blindness and disrespect of the executives in those days, you would literally not believe.

However, I *don't* sympathize with the volunteers here. For once, and somewhat to my amazement, I sympathize with AOL. I don't think the plaintiffs have a case and I don't believe, in my layman's imperfect understanding of the law — but also in my extreme understanding of what it means to be a volunteer for an online service or game — that AOL has violated the spirit or intent of the **Fair Labor Standards Act** (<http://www.opm.gov/flsa/overview.htm>). And I also believe that this lawsuit has hidden dangers for online games and the industry, collectively.

(In the interest of full disclosure, it should be noted that I was an employee at AOL for a year in 1988 and 1989 and that I still have friends who work there. That doesn't color my judgment here. It didn't stop me from serving as an expert witness against them in 1998, for example, in an anti-trust case where I believed they were in the wrong.)

Services such as AOL, Prodigy, CompuServe and massively multiplayer games have had volunteers since Day One. These are the natural leaders with passion for the subject matter and the community who step forward and say, Hey, I want to help the other people here. I get a kick out of it. I don't need money; the tickle my ego gets from helping people will do just fine. In the early days, online services and online games didn't go chasing volunteers; they chased *us*. The reason was simple: We billed by the hour and we all provided volunteers with a free account. In these days of flat rate service, that doesn't mean much anymore, but we still don't have to chase them; there are always people in the wings who want to jump onboard. It is one of the things that make the online world a unique and interesting place to be.

In one sense, the volunteers *do* demand one form of compensation: Respect. And that's where I believe the AOL lawsuit comes in. Hallisey, Williams, et al seemed more than willing to go along with the schedules, the reports and timesheets, as long as they felt they were getting some respect from the AOL managers in charge of the communities. This state of affairs carried on for months and years, by the admission of the plaintiffs. What changed? How did the situation suddenly become an intolerable violation of lawful labor practices?

In the case of Hallisey and Williams, both of whom claim to have volunteered up to 40 hours per week for years, the status of the program apparently changed when they were fired from it. Now, all of a sudden, AOL's volunteer practices were heinously evil, born in Hell and birthed by demon-spawn. What, it took them years to realize this?

I doubt it. I think what it comes down to is simple revenge. Revenge for not being treated with what they consider the proper amount of respect. Revenge for being dismissed from the program they loved and helped build, and for being separated from the community in which they have invested so much ego. I think **Ms. Hallisey said it best herself** (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A33855-2000Jul1.html>):

Hallisey now heads the AOL watchdog site [Observers.net](http://www.observers.net) and has made it her mission to collect stories that she says show AOL is arrogant and insensitive.

"Getting filthy rich off volunteers' work would be okay, if they treated people decently," said Hallisey, a 36-year-old single mom. "But they don't."

Unfortunately, this sordid and petty attempt to drive home the dagger could have unintended and wide-ranging consequences for the industry as a whole. If AOL loses this suit, one affect is that Hallisey, Williams and any other former AOL Community Leader they've convinced to join the suit stand to make a lot of money, as much as \$20 million if all former AOL volunteers join in, according to Hallisey's lawyer.

Another, more lasting affect: Many current services — including some of the Internet's most popular games — will feature far less service to customers. Services such as AOL *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online* will not organize, train or provide any special tools for volunteers, for fear of being branded those folks' employer.

This also means that only the cash-heavy top layer of successful online/Internet companies will be able to afford to provide adequate customer service. Most people aren't aware of it, but just paying minimum wage is not the total cost of a company hiring someone. There is an additional 25% to 35% load tacked on for such costs as Federal, State and local taxes, Workman's Compensation, buying PCs and hardware, leasing additional bandwidth, licensing software, buying chairs for them to sit in and desk to hold the PCs, health and vacation benefits, the building floor space to put the desks and chairs, telephone lines, telephones, etc., etc., etc, ad nauseum. And just try hiring competent people for \$5.15 an hour these days. Even AOL's phone support centers, situated in some of the lower cost of living cities in the US, pay a starting wage of \$7 an hour.

Companies such as AOL and Microsoft might be able to swing it, at some level; they have huge cash reserves and massive cash flow that could be used like a blunt instrument on the problem. They could probably at least ameliorate the situation a bit. For all the success of the Verants, Origin Systems and Turbines in online games, however, it is chicken feed compared to an AOL or Microsoft. If they were forced to pay the volunteers they support with training and tools, they just wouldn't support them; they can't afford to and stay in business.

The hardcore wags on the fan rant sites will no doubt snigger and sneer and make pithy comments about "What customer service?" They have a point; current online and in-game customer service efforts are rarely up to professional standards. Game publishers are still learning - and continually relearning — those lessons. And most of the hardcore ranters think the volunteers ought to be axed or brought on salary, anyway, regardless of the math of it (see above).

If you think the wait for and the quality of help is bad in games now, however, just wait and see what it's like when volunteers aren't supported at *all*. Players of massively multiplayer games log among the most — if not *the* most — time among online users, averaging over 20 hours per week in the popular games. It is not surprising that waits are long or even that some of the thousands of volunteers make mistakes or use tools to help their buddies. What *is* noteworthy is that so few complaints and help requests are lodged in games that can and do rack up player usage of over a *billion* minutes per month from 20,000 to 50,000 peak simultaneous players.

What it sums up to, then, is that this revenge lawsuit has the potential to change the very nature of the way we do things online, and in a manner that won't be good for the customer or the industry. All because a couple of volunteer community leaders didn't get treated with the respect they thought they deserved. They may be right; AOL employees may have treated them like dirt. That doesn't make for a class action suit, in my book.

I'm offended by the lawsuit on a more personal level. Some things just can't be bought. The sense of moral responsibility exhibited by volunteerism, whether done for moral reasons or to appease one's own ego, is one of those non-purchasable things. It is part of what makes the connected universe more than just a commercial or informational exercise. Back in the day we used say to each other, If you're doing this for the perks, you're doing it for the wrong reason; leave. The definition of volunteer says it all:

vol·un·teer (vɒl-ən-tīr')

n. *Abbr.* *vol.*

A person who performs or offers to perform a service of his or her own free will.

From: Dictionary.com (<http://www.dictionary.com/cgi-bin/dict.pl?term=volunteer>)

Which brings us full circle back to my original question to Hallisey, Williams, et al: If you thought they were turning it into a job, why didn't you say, Hey, you need to pay me for this or I'm leaving the program?

Just what part of volunteer didn't you understand?

1.17 Gamers Are Hard To Console

Volume Nine, Issue 17
July 27, 2000

OK, where are the 12 million?

Back in 1996 and 1997, all the usual suspects that issue those wonderfully glowing — and hideously expensive — industry analysis reports about the future growth of the gaming industry made an odd prediction:

By 2000, they said, 12 million people would be using gaming consoles to connect to the Internet and online services to play games.

Of course, that didn't happen; it *may* happen in the future and that's what this column is all about. A little background is in order first.

One reason the report sellers predicted so many online console gamers is that they believed the likes of Sony, Sega and Nintendo when they said they'd be shipping next generation consoles with modems real soon now. Sega had already shipped the separate **Saturn NetLink modem and online service** (<http://corporate.planetweb.com/products/consumer/platforms/sega.html>) for

the abortive Saturn console, to a rousing So what? from the overwhelming majority of Saturn owners. One reality of the 1990s was that console consumers weren't willing to spend another \$100 or so for a modem, after spending \$200 or \$300 for the main console.

Another reality is that, at the time, neither Nintendo or Sony was serious about shipping a modem-enabled console to compete with NetLink. They were merely engaging in Preemptive Vaporware, a time-honored tradition in the high-tech industry. PV occurs when a company wants to appear competitive and on the cutting edge, while also A) preventing other developers from starting a competing project, and/or B) preventing consumers from purchasing a competitor's product, instead waiting for the PV product to arrive.

To engage in PV, you have to have at least a medium strong industry position. For example, if you are well-known as a market leader in cool flight simulators, and Company A announces they are developing a new sim called *Jet Mangler* to compete with your flight sims, then you might issue a PV press release stating that your next generation sim will come out about the same time as *Jet Mangler*. Consumers with limited discretionary income will be encouraged to give *Jet Mangler* a miss and wait for your game. Of course, your sim may not even be on the drawing board yet and probably isn't scheduled to ship for two years, but that's the whole point, eh?

To add to the analyst's confusion, NetLink was shipped in a time of console transition. Sony was preparing to ship the Playstation and Nintendo was going to ship the N64. The transition years of 1995-1997 were also notable for the incredible hype that surrounded the Internet and the potential of online gaming. Suddenly, if your products didn't talk to the Internet, you were passe and headed for the Game Graveyard; it was Internet or Bust and no one likes to bust. For game console executives who understood nothing about the Internet or online gaming (which was 99% of them), there was only one solution; issue thinly veiled hints about Internet connectivity to any reporter or analyst in earshot. From there, it was quite easy for the reporters and analysts to project tens of millions of Internet-able game consoles sold by year 2000, and to assume that 30% or 40% of them would use the consoles for gaming online.

So that was the Preemptive Vaporware reality of yesterday. What about the upcoming reality? There are two critical issues to confront here. The first critical issue is: How many people will actually buy and use game consoles for Internet gaming?

Not having learned their lessons from the mid-90s, the predictions from the analysts on this just keep getting wilder. For example, Datamonitor predicted last November that 45 million console gamers would be playing games via the Internet by 2004, compared to 28 million PC online gamers. They also estimated a total of 165 million consoles sold worldwide by 2003, but fail to make clear whether that number is all boxes sold in years past or just the next generation consoles. Other estimates are of a similar vein. My take on this: These guys are smoking crack. And damned pure crack, at that.

Just take a brief look at the state of the market today, in which one company has shipped an Internet-capable console and three companies are preparing to do so:

- Although Sega claims about five million Dreamcast consoles have sold worldwide, with two million sold in the US, there are currently a grand total of zero Internet-enabled games for it; a few are planned for ship next year. I'm still boggled over the lack of insight that allowed an Internet-capable console to be shipped with not one single Internet-playable game ready. If they'd had even five such games ready to go, they'd have made everyone's job at Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo a living nightmare. Talk about missing the beat;
- Sony, which currently owns 60% of the market with the PS1, plans to ship the Playstation 2 at the end of October, but no one *really* believes that any Internet-capable games will actually ship with it. It could easily happen that way, but the smart money is betting on 2001. They will probably continue to dominate the market;
- Microsoft plans to ship the X-Box late next year, but considering their groundbreaking efforts in PV for software, one has to wonder. There will be no modem, but there will be a broadband connection device built in. If they ship with a few Internet-capable games who knows?
- As for Nintendo's Dolphin your guess is as good as mine. Nintendo has a powerful brand name and they may actually ship the Dolphin by this time next year, but my gut feeling is the best they can possibly hope for is to continue sucking hind tit behind the PS2. They could easily end up 4th in a four horse race and nothing hurts sales like being unchallenged for last place.

So we really won't start seeing any Internet console games until early-to-mid 2001 or any major sales of Internet game boxes until late 2001. Yet we are to believe that 45 million people in the US and Europe will be using those consoles for multiplayer Internet gaming 2 _ years later?

I have no doubt there will be tens of millions of game consoles sold by 2004. Whether there will be 165 million sold is moot; I have no doubt that at least 50 million will be sold, so the predictions have the potential to come true. However, just having consoles available is not the only key. The second critical issue is; will the Internet gaming experience be good enough to promote console game play? In other words, is the current and planned Internet technology mature enough to make console gaming a good enough experience that people will actually *do* it?

I highly doubt it. We'll discuss why in the next column.

1.18 Online Console-ation

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July 27, 2000

Last week, we had a homey little chat about the possibilities of console gaming using the Internet and online services. For those who haven't read last week's column, you'll want to **take a quick**

gander (*Editor: insert URL to Gamers Are Hard To Console column at bolded text*) before continuing here. Go ahead, we'll wait for you.

OK, on with the show. At the close of last week's column I wrote:

The second critical issue is; will the Internet gaming experience be good enough to promote console game play? In other words, is the current and planned Internet technology mature enough to make console gaming a good enough experience that people will actually *do* it?

I highly doubt it.

The current and future state of both the backend Internet technology and Internet game design and multiplayer console game peculiarities is key here. Let's look at some of the critical issues here:

(NOTE: For purposes of this article, I am assuming that most online gaming for consoles is going to be a pay-for-play proposition, in some form other, such as paying for the overall net connection service. Considering recent actions and comments from console company execs, such as Square announcing that *Final Fantasy XI Online* will cost 1500 yen (\$15 US) a month when launched, this is probably going to be the case for most online console gaming. Offering free online play is a totally separate market; it may sell some extra SKUs, but you have to be really good developer to get away with it. To date, only Blizzard has had noteworthy success at it in the PC market.

We're also not going to get into mass-market classic games, such as poker, bingo, etc. or worry about services such as cheats, hints, reviews and the like. Again, a totally different market; we're talking *gaming* in this column.)

Reaction Times and Latency: From issuing a command on the controller to seeing the reaction on the screen, console gamers are used to experiencing consistent split-second reaction times. By split-second, we're talking on the close order of 60 milliseconds. Loosely translated, that comes out to less than 1/10th of a second. Or, in layman's terms, really damned fast. That's why they are called twitch games.

Which makes the Internet a bad bet for online versions of twitch games, what with the Internet being as split-second and consistent as your average Presidential candidate. Estimates of average Internet latency — the time it takes the average piece of data to go from point A to point B - vary from 125 milliseconds to over 500 milliseconds. Even worse, the latency is not consistent. It is not unusual to have a data packet stall for several seconds during a trip, giving rise to the Web's cynical nickname, the World Wide Wait. Can you imagine trying to duel another human in the average boxing or martial arts arena game and having to wait a second or so for a punch or kick to update on the screen?

(Say, that gives me a game idea ***The Six Million Dollar Man*** (<http://www.scifi.com/bionics/sixmill.html>) *Combat Arena!* The marketing will be easy: Heart-pounding, flesh-ripping combat so fast, it'll look slow! I already have the sequel planned: ***The***

Bionic Woman (<http://www.scifi.com/bionics/bionicw.html>): PMS (Permanently Motion-Slowed Warrior.)

OK, so the Internet sucks now, but how about in the future? I mean, all those pundits and experts are telling us that broadband will solve these critical issues for us Real Soon Now. Suffice it say that, without going into a thousand- word rant that questions their sanity, they are wrong. Latency rates and inconsistency are getting worse, no matter how backbone providers fudge the figures to show improvements. Broadband makes the problem worse, not better; ever more data continues to flow over increasingly clogged lines. We just can't lay fiber fast enough, only about 12.5% of what we need each year just to stay even. It's going to be this way for a long time, maybe 15 years or more.

What does it all mean? With inconsistent latency being a critical issue, publishers are going to have a hard time charging for online console games designed for split second reactions. Which means they'll probably end up giving away online play for free for most games, just as all Mpath, Pogo, and TEN and the Zone had to for the PC twitch games.

Design and Controllers: Console controllers rather mandate that these games be designed with 2 to 4 player games in mind. The biggest hits in the online world right now are the 8-32 player Retail Hybrids such as *Quake III*, *Tribes* and *Unreal Tournament* and the massively multiplayer, persistent world games, such as *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*. The 2 to 4 player games - and most 8-32 player games, for that matter - just don't draw a long-term audience.

This would seem to argue that you'd *want* to give away the 2-4 player online gaming for free as a loss leader in hopes of selling some extra units, unless you can offer some other bennies and perks that make paying a monthly fee worthwhile. The only bennie worth anything to an online gamer is some persistence of the character, like racking up permanent win-loss scores and gaining power and attributes thereby.

That's where the game design comes in and why most online console games are going to fail hideously, especially in the first two or three years online console gaming. Not only are the console developers going to have to try to design with the Internet's less-than-wonderful latency in mind, something they've never had to do before and is completely antithetical to their industry, they can no longer write game design documents using a template that starts with the line This is a twitch combat/sports/fantasy battle/arena duel/whatever style of game (please pick only one) that will appeal to the male teen market. I rather suspect that the only change to that template at some companies will be to delete the word twitch, which pretty much guarantees some spectacular, expensive failures.

Remember, too, that video games and online games aren't just different platforms; they are also different markets with different needs. Online gamers expect a whole lot more for their money and are quite vocal when they feel they aren't getting it. Actually developing the game is only part of the puzzle; most of the work happens after the game is shipped. We've talked about the whole not just a product, but also a service thing before. Why do I believe it will be ignored here as it most often is in the PC online market?

What this all really boils down to, then, is that unless the console publishers understand upfront that this takes more than just porting video console games to an online platform, they are in for a rough ride and we're going to see some online console games that would appeal only to the Devil's ugly sister.

On the other hand, if the publishers do realize it upfront, then they'll save themselves tens of millions of dollars and we'll see some really interesting online console games in the next year or two.

Oh, yeah, *that* will happen.

1.19 Raising the stakes

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I could be wrong, but I think the PC game industry changed completely three weeks ago. On July 17, Blizzard announced that *Diablo II* sold 1 million copies in just two short weeks. Reorders of over 600,000 units were also announced. Just to round out the eye-popping numbers, *Diablo II* was the first PC game to have an initial publish of 2 million copies, and is Blizzard's fourth-straight game to sell a million or more copies.

Stop and think about those numbers for a moment. These are the kinds of numbers we would normally expect from a PlayStation or Nintendo game. Video consoles make up a large chunk of the electronic gaming market, with sales more than double that of PC games: \$4.2 billion to \$1.9 billion in 1999, according to the [Interactive Digital Software Association](#).

I continue to find those uneven sales numbers a bit odd, considering that the number of U.S. homes with video consoles is about the same as the number of U.S. homes with PCs (around 50 million), and that the costs per game for each platform are in the same ballpark. On a worldwide basis, the number of installed machines is significantly in favor of the home PC over consoles: some 150-200 million PCs (depending on who's counting) to 100 million consoles. On the face of it, PC games should logically be selling as many or more units as the consoles.

The difference, of course, is the technology nature of the two platforms. PC game developers have to contend with ever-changing Microsoft OS, DirectX, and third-party video card display standards, as well as their own propensity to code for the bleeding-edge PC (coders speak for "feature creep"). Video game console technology, however, stays relatively stable for three to four years at a crack; having a stable platform makes it easy to crank out games faster. So, because of the changing nature of the technology, PC game sales have matured at a slower rate. That may all be changing. It was only three years ago that sales of 500,000 copies of a PC game over its lifetime was considered a milestone worth noting in the press. Not very many PC-based games hit that mark; those that did generally took years to reach it. *SimCity* and *Myst* are good examples of those "evergreen" product types.

Now, however, sales of 500,000 units in 18 months is considered a merely adequate success rate for a product, and 1 million has become the magic number. Companies will resort to all kinds of chicanery to puff up sales numbers to reach the mark, and this led to a very tidy arrangement with a starving game press eager to sell advertising space. Counting add-on package sales as part of overall game sales became a popular method for padding sales figures. For example, if a game sells 500,000 copies, and the two or three add-ons sell another 500,000 copies, then a company will announce that game X has sold 1 million units worldwide--all lovingly reported in detail, sometimes next to an ad for the game.

Not exactly cricket, but what the heck? It isn't likely anyone was screaming about it. But can you imagine the consternation that reigns in publisher marketing departments since July 17? Everything was going so *well*; now here comes those SOBs at Blizzard with their *%&*%\$@ *Diablo II* sales of *1 million* in a *week*, for crying out loud. No add-ons, no padding...just a pure, simple statement that Blizzard made a *guanoload* of money in one week by selling more copies of one game than the top five games combined normally average in three months. What were those guys at Blizzard thinking? I imagine the phrase "Hate you!" is being bandied about.

Do you see why I think the PC games industry was changed three weeks ago? Not only has the bar on hit status been raised way high, but the method for counting hit sales has been changed. Of the thousands of games shipped to retail each year, only ten or 15 achieve hit status, and most of those reach the level of 500,000 to 1 million sales of all products associated with the game's name. With the coming of *Diablo II*, that will no longer be enough. From now on, if you don't have at *least* 500,000 sales in the first week or two, the industry is just going to shrug and move on. If a PC game doesn't hit 1 million sales in the three or four months...ho hum.

Get ready for every overly hyped game in the pipeline to have its sales compared to DII. To me, the really funny/scary aspect of this is that I wasn't that impressed with the game at E3 last May. It really just looked like more of the same with a new coat of paint. Another game impressed me much more, both technologically and in terms of gameplay, and I would have bet money at the time that it would outsell DII.

What game was that? *Warcraft III*, also developed by Blizzard, and also guaranteed to be a 1-million seller, whether in one week or a couple months. Wouldn't you just love to be in Blizzard's shoes right now?

I can hear the primal screams from the other marketing departments already.

1.20 Sensitive Teeth

Volume Nine, Issue 20
August 10, 2000

Well, to judge from my email, it appears I struck a nerve or two with the July 14 column **I m a Volunteer; Where s My Check?** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D16.html>).

Some agreed with my opinion that the lawsuit was born of revenge and some disagreed. Some of them took polite umbrage with some of the possible outcomes I proposed, were AOL to lose the lawsuit. And a couple of them were from a principal in the lawsuit itself and one of the moderators of Observers.net.

Never let it be said I m unfair. Even though this is an opinion column and there is no obligation to print the opinions of others, I m going to quote two of the better written of those dissenting emails, without comment.

A couple of them were quite good. Reader **Nigel Tzeng** an especially cogent and well-written response that deserves airing. The meat of it was:

For-profit companies have been misusing volunteers as an unpaid resource. Companies like AOL should be paying forum moderators since that is part of the package they are offering. Companies like Sony/Verant should realize that a service industry requires more than lip service for customer support.

Second, current volunteers that get "cut" because of the lawsuit can volunteer on messageboards that they create on EZBoards, run their own fan or hobby website, or just contribute on Usenet.

Net loss to the net using public? Zero. In fact there is a positive impact in general because these volunteers aren't locked into a closed network like AOL but benefit everyone.

Net loss to volunteers? None...they either get paid or gain editorial control over their own forums.

Net loss to AOL customers? Moderate, they face increased cost for reduced services (i.e. fewer forums). But AOL can be considered a premium service over your neighborhood ISP that simply provides a pipe to the internet. There's no impact on availability of service in general since they can make their own choices based on their own perception of value.

Net loss to AOL? Moderate, because while they can pass the cost on to the consumer, they will be less competitive against the non-content providing ISP. This doesn't exactly hurt the industry at large that we remove the advantage that simply because AOL/MS have mass, they can attract unpaid volunteers where the mom and pop ISPs can't do so for their own content.

Impact to small companies? Limited. Without the mass of the major competitors, they aren't getting a lot of volunteers anyway. Odds are, this isn't a major part of their offering so they can either drop it or staff it minimally themselves. This is a function of numbers and interest. If you have a large population from which to draw volunteers, you're likely to be

making large revenue (or have a broken business model).

So the bottom line is that the big boys finally have to pay the hordes of volunteers that they use and abuse. That really doesn't hurt my feelings regardless of the motivations of the plaintiffs.

Nigel Tzeng

Online games industry veteran **Scott Hartsman** (scotthartsman@pacbell.net) (Scepter, Gemstone I, II and III, former VP of Engage and CEO of Worldshock) also had a well-thought out and amusing take on the situation:

Because I'm on a masochistic/insomnia kick, I spent some time with the complaint (<http://www.observers.net/complaint.htm>) and the law (<http://uscode.house.gov/DOWNLOAD/29C8.DOC>).

A few things jumped out at me:

- 1) You nailed it.° This whole thing stinks of, "I wanted to volunteer.° I volunteered.° It was fun.° Then AOL started being jerks.° So instead of walking away, I sued."° I'm addicted.° I can't leave.° Make them change.
- 2) Speaking as a guy who started out as a volunteer, I really wanted to feel sympathy for the displaced CLs. They do the trenchwork. It's a labor of love.° However, if love comes to an end, most people don't build websites around their bad breakups.° Volunteering for an uncaring monolith is not an ideal solution for those who are looking to feel appreciated.
- 3) The complaint calls what the volunteers do "content" and, further, "critical" to "much of" AOL's revenue.° Bullpucky.° Take down all the forums, leave EMail, IMs, unmoderated chat, and shopping.° AOL would do just fine.° Would there be revenue loss?° Absolutely.° "Critical?"° I don't think so.
- 4) Interesting legal trick, trying to isolate the communities (AOLC, inc) from the service (AOL, inc) as a separate corporation.° I don't see how the two can be separated, since one provides a service exclusively to the other. But then, I'm not a lawyer.
- 5) The law is very hard to read.
- 6) The law doesn't do much for defining what a 'Volunteer' legally is, except in regards to 'for public agencies' and for (get this) ' non profit food banks who receive groceries as compensation.'

The prediction: Online services of the future will all pair up with online food banks.° The volunteers are given free CL accounts on the online service as their compensation for providing customer service for said food banks. If they happen to host forums and chats and stuff on the online service, that's not your problem.

Curiously, the food banks will provide mainly mountain dew, coffee, and doritos. The benefits of free groceries then become obvious.

On the other hand: A couple of the good people at Observers.net (you know, the Web site run by one of the ex-volunteers suing AOL) decided to drop me love notes. For some strange reason, they didn't agree with me. Interestingly, their replies hardly covered the issues discussed in the column at all. I suspect part of this results from an inability to distinguish between an opinion column and a news article.

First, there was this from a moderator of Observers.net:

I suppose Jessica Mulligan could've missed the point of the class action suit against AOL by a wider margin, but not by much. If she'd taken a few minutes to do some research, perhaps she could've written a more balanced report.

The suit isn't about revenge. The parties fully understand the meaning of the word "volunteer." What Mulligan didn't bother to report is that AOL was using volunteers to do the same work as that of paid employees. There is an ongoing investigation of AOL's use of volunteers by the Department of Labor, so whether labor laws were violated remains to be seen. The onus to understand and comply with labor laws wasn't on the volunteers, but on AOL. When the DOL investigation is complete, those questions will be answered.

Many of the parties to the lawsuit did leave the volunteer program of their own free will. Some were released involuntarily. Any of the issues beyond the use of volunteers to perform the same duties as paid employees are more or less fringe issues. They aren't the main focus of the suit.

Next time, do some homework first, huh?

And my reply was:

Thanks for the note. We'll just have to agree to disagree on this one.

I read pretty much everything on Observers during the research for the column, as well as having followed the suit pretty closely since it was filed, and nothing has convinced me this was anything but an opportunistic 'sour grapes' action. The suit ALLEGES that AOL used volunteers for the same work as paid employees; that remains to be proven and I covered those allegations in the column. Those allegations may be the main focus of the suit proper; they were not, in my opinion, the reason it was filed. I happen to think the allegations are bogus. Ms. Hallissey's remark of "Getting filthy rich off volunteers' work would be okay, if they treated people decently," said Hallissey, a 36-year-old single mom. "But they don't." really says it all, doesn't it?

I could be wrong about the allegations; the court could certainly find otherwise. Stranger things have happened in the American jurisprudence system. That still would not change my

opinion on the motivations behind it, and opinion is what a column (versus an article) is all about.

And in my informed opinion, this suit is revenge, pure and simple.

Considering your affiliation, I'm not surprised we don't agree on the issue. That's OK; diversity of opinion is a good thing.

Regards,

Jessica Mulligan

My email box was also graced with a missive from one of the two original plaintiffs, Ms. Kelly Hallissey herself:

Well Id like to say I read your article in depth but after skimming it I saw that it didn't really require that =)

Perhaps the next time you do an "in depth" look at an issue you try talking to the parties directly involved :D

Have a GREAT Day :D

Kelly Hallissey, who took up the torch against AOL long before they "fired" her, btw, HOW do you fire a volunteer? :D

One certainly hopes Ms. Hallissey s attorney has a better attitude towards reading and understanding text that doesn't unflaggingly agree with her assertions. A certain amount of righteous indignation is to be expected when motives are questioned, I suppose. My reply:

Ms. Hallisey,

Thanks for taking the time to drop me note. I rather was expecting you to write after (a moderator) from Observers dropped me a line earlier. And as I replied to him, I really don't expect you to agree with my opinion, :D.

As I also wrote to (the moderator), there is a big difference between a straight newspaper article and an opinion column, which is, well, opinion. Had I been commissioned to write a news article, I would have certainly have contacted you, as well as AOL.

Finally, as for being 'fired,' use whatever word or phrase suits you to describe the concept of involuntary removal. Fired, being let go, removed from the program... it all means the same thing. Whether the 'removee' is a volunteer or employee is irrelevant to that concept.

I had a MARVELOUS day and thank you for the kind wishes. Here's hoping yours was just as good.

Regards,

Jessica Mulligan

And speaking of motives, and just to end the column with the proper amount of irony, let me leave you with this little tidbit from the other principal in the lawsuit, Brian Williams, as reported in the October, 1999 issue of Wired magazine (<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.10/volunteers.html>):

The volunteers who remained and who were recruited after the rate change were not after money. For them, community is more than a "sticky app." They want things online they can't get in real life: respect, power, a place where they belong, friends, you name it. They receive tools and access that regular members don't have - they can creep around in hidden areas, hang out in special lounges, and script content in RAINMAN, AOL's proprietary language.

"It was a power trip. I admit it," says Brian Williams, a plaintiff in Greenberg's suit. "We were empowered. You could Gag people and give the Boot command."

1.21 Free, and Worth It

Volume Nine, Issue 21
August 17, 2000

How does it feel to be a product?

You are, you know. Television, cable and radio executives regularly sell you.

For example, you receive network television shows for free (other than those pesky cable bills, if you don't use an antenna) and, in return, network TV executives bundle you up with the other viewers and extract valuta from the likes of Proctor and Gamble and Kimberly-Clark for the right to hawk their wares. They don't care about you as an individual; what they care about is how many pairs of eyeballs watch the ads. In other words, you are a commodity, valuable only to broadcast executives as a product to be sold.

Quite aside from that fact that radio stations, TV networks and cable companies pay next to nothing to use our public airwaves, while banking billions every year, do you feel well served? Is television the uplifting media you hoped it would be? Does it rankle you to know that, because you pay no per-show fee for television, the content is stale, tired, moronic, sophomoric and aimed at 18 to 34 year olds with a third grade reading comprehension? Does it irritate you that of the 100+ television shows rated every week, maybe three or four are worth watching? Do you ever wonder how *good* TV shows could be if the millions who watch the average series paid \$1 each per showing?

Now, does it make you utterly *%^&ed off that the Napster/Scour/File-sharing program flavor of the month crowd is working hard to guarantee that you will also be a product on the Web, sold to advertisers in exchange for free crap? If it doesn't, it should.

In case I haven't mentioned it to you before, those who use Napster and like ilk to download professional music that they don't already own are non-violent criminals of the first water, namely thieves and cheats. Sure, they try to cloak themselves in righteousness and talk about how they are trying to make things better for you and me. By stealing the work of music artists (I'm just sampling before I decide to buy. Really!), they say, they are striking a blow against those greedy music corporations. And soon movie artists and game publishers will know this joy, as pirating those products via file-sharing programs is the great new frontier of the Web.

Maybe I'm just stupid, but just how stealing from the artists makes things better for us all, which is the end result of file-sharing programs, is beyond me. The whole basic argument here is the hoary old slogan, Information wants to be free. According to the Napster-ites, intellectual property such as music, art, movies, books and games should be free, that it cries out to be free and would be, if not for greedy middlemen.

Bull; only the unlawful distribution of copyrighted material to non-purchasers is at issue here. This isn't the civil rights movement, nor are artists begging people to download their work without paying for it, so they can go broke and have to get a job laying bricks. Judge Marilyn Patel was right to rule against Napster. This isn't a David vs. Goliath fight of good-hearted techies against corporate greed. It's theft, pure and simple, regardless of how often the cynical bastards at **Napster** (<http://www.napster.com/index.html>) say the future of person-to-person file sharing is in question. While I have no doubt that those greedy middlemen at the record studios are taking too large a cut, that is something for the artists and the music studios to work out.

So, what if the folks at Napster, by some wild stretch of the imagination, win in court? What will happen then?

Get ready for even more dreck (which is another way of saying garbage, in case you didn't know). I hate to disillusion anyone, but professionals don't write and perform music or act or direct or produce — or make games, for that matter - solely for the inspiration. They expect to be paid for it; it's how the professionals put bread on the table. In today's media universe, they get paid in one of two ways: a) when enough of you watch a show to allow the networks to charge advertisers lots of money, or b) when you pay for it, such as buying a record, a ticket to a movie or a game.

We've seen what happens when we get entertainment for free; 99% of TV is such absolute dreck that it can't even make it into syndication. This, at a time when the 100+ cable channels are dying for new content; it should be a scandal to the jaybirds. Over 100 programs are rated each week; how many of them will you ever watch twice? How many of them are *worth* watching twice?

On the other hand, when we pay for entertainment out of our own pockets, we get pretty much what we want and the quality is higher, relatively speaking. Some faceless Nielsen rater isn't

making our choices for us, we're voting with our own hard-earned dollars. The artist gets paid depending on the sales; popular artists succeed, less-than-popular artists fail and find something else to do. Music and movies are a good example of this.

(I hear another tired, old argument coming up. Yes, I know the studios don't sign and promote as many new acts and artists as they could, especially in the highly subjective alternative genres. One of the reasons most of the alternative bands can't get a contract with a studio is, simply, they suck. They suck as musicians and they suck as songwriters. That's a very subjective statement and art is relative to the person partaking of it, of course. Relatively speaking, then, many of us think most alternative bands suck. If we didn't, more of them would have record contracts, because studio executives *are* greedy middlemen and they aren't going to leave good money lying around for others to pick up.)

Now, imagine if you could snag all that music, all those movies and all those games for free, which is what Napster, Gnutella, et al are promoting. What happens to the quality of entertainment when artists can no longer make a living from their art?

That's right; even the best of them stop producing art and become bricklayers, dental assistants and music teachers and start collecting weekly paychecks. As with what happened with TV, the overall quality of the product slides downhill. And all the while, those of you who won't and don't pay for quality art will bitch and moan about it.

And don't give me any crap about how you'll send money to artists whose music, games or movies you enjoyed after downloading the whole thing for free. If enough of you really *would* do that, shareware would have driven the software publishers out of business years ago.

So what does that leave? Just the advertising model currently in use, oh, frabjous day. The studios with money will pay the artists, be they actors, game developers or musicians, then broadcast the content over the Web. If enough of you agree to be a commodity and click through on the ads, the content will survive. And because few studios are in to taking risks on content that have an ounce of controversy, real value or smack of intelligence greater than the average pre-teen, we'll get the same sort of regurgitative, sophomoric, moronic, predigested bat guano pap that now passes for entertainment on television.

You get what you pay for. If you get it for free, eventually most of what will be available is what is worth giving away.

And you'll only have yourselves to blame.

1.22 Doomed To Fail?

The Doomed to Fail? series was planned as seven or eight columns covering the most hyped massively multiplayer online games planned for release in 2001 or 2002. I made it to the fourth column in the series before deciding to hang it up and let it rest for a few months. I'm not sure I ever will take it up again.

Why? The hoorah from fans over the second column in the series about Shadowbane rather soured me on the whole thing. Talk about single-issue voters; the vile-imbued email that filled my box after that column was enough to make anyone throw up their hands in despair. It wasn't that they disagreed with my assessment, but the total lack of grace or education in the emails that saddened me. If it were in my power, I'd track down every English teacher that the people who flamed me ever studied under, from Kindergarten to high school, and fire their sorry butts. If they were retired, I'd rehire them and then fire them.

And of course, the dudes at Wolfpack, developers of Shadowbane, were right there with their idiot fans, pouring gas on the coals and in general using the situation to stir up even more hype for a game that not one of their fans has had a chance to play. More about this later on; I wrote a whole column about it.

It is tough being a writer when a significant portion of the audience doesn't seem to understand simply constructed English sentences or how to write them, the difference between a question and a statement, nor the difference between an opinion column and a news article.

Volume Nine, Issue 22

August 24, 2000

Most subscription-based massively multiplayer online games are doomed out the gate, predestined to be failures that attract little in the way of audience. I'm sure most of you are shocked to hear such a pronouncement out of the eternally optimistic me.

Of course, as with **experiencing time** (<http://members.tripod.com/~johndoan/jd2.htm>), the concept of failure can be relative to the observer. Take **VR-1's *Fighter Ace*** (<http://www.vr1.com/sneak/fightrace/index.html>), for example. Even mondo exposure on Microsoft's Zone for the past couple years hasn't produced what you'd call a wildly popular product. At the best of times, you'd be lucky to see a few hundred simultaneous players partaking of the WWII air combat there, even at peak play hours.

Compare this to around 14,000 players at peak for *Asheron's Call* on that same Zone, or some 30,000 to 50,000 (depending on who you believe) for Verant's *Everquest* over on the The Station. By such a comparison, *Fighter Ace* is punky, a stone cold loser financially; it seems unlikely that the game has made back anywhere near whatever royalty advances Microsoft paid to VR-1, or whatever development funds and resources VR-1 devoted to the game.

On the other hand, *Fighter Ace* was a winner for VR-1, in the sense that they got some cash to develop technology they'll use in other online games. If there was a technology sharing arrangement in the deal, Microsoft might also get some of that code, which would help alleviate the financial failure of the game.

See what I mean about failure being relative? There's generally a silver lining for *someone* in any bad situation. Thus, while *Fighter Ace* certainly hasn't developed an audience and is a failure for the online gaming industry as a whole, development of the game probably provided

some tools that may be used in other VR-1 games and, in that sense, is a success of sorts for the company. Me, I'm a player and an evangelist for online games. In the sense that it didn't develop an audience and push forward online gaming as a whole, that makes *Fighter Ace* is a failure to me.

So, Jessica, what about the upcoming crop of subscription-based online games, you ask? Ah, you seek *opinion*. You came to the right place, my friend; I have a fresh batch right here, free for the asking and worth double the cost. In the next column, we'll discuss some specific games and their chances according to Le Jessica The Mystic. For this column, let's just set three ground rules for discussing what could make a subscription-based MMOG a financial success or failure, in today's terms of reaching the current magic number of 100,000 or more monthly subscribers.

Your game is pretty much irrelevant.

If you think people are playing your MMOG for the *game*, you get an F on your term paper.

Your game, per se, is almost an afterthought to the players. At best, some part of it is a hook to get them in the door, be it the genre, style, interface, game system, whatever. Some people are more attracted to science fiction, some like medieval fantasy role-playing, some will only play a 3D 1st person interface, etc..

These are just the teasers, not the *raison d'être*. No, the reason people are *really* there is other people. This has always been the main attraction of MMOGs. No amount of cool game design elements or whiz-bang graphics will allow your MMOG to succeed in the long run if players can't find other players they want to hang out with on a consistent basis. It is the shared experience that is primary to them. MMOGs that don't provide plenty of reason to go out and have a shared experience will eventually fade away.

Your Development Team folks are *not* the most important members of the organization.

I mention this because development folks are generally the ruling authority at MMOG companies. And this is a huge mistake. Yes, they are important; they're coding the damn game, aren't they? In terms of what they implement and how they implement it, they are crucially important.

However, at the risk of ticking off some friends in the industry: Anyone can make a MMOG. Technically, it isn't all that hard and there are plenty of code and design examples to peruse to help out. Heck, today's most popular MMOG is pretty much a copy of a popular style of MUD with great eye candy thrown on top.

But what happens when the game is launched? If the Dev Team isn't the most important group, who is? Some questions, the answers to which should make it all clear: How do you solve player problems? For that matter, *who* solves player problems? Do those people have the proper tools and training and the authority to use them? What actually represents a problem and who

sets policy for dealing with them when they are recognized? Who decides what gets changed and what gets fixed, and in what order? Who relays that information to the players?

These are critical questions for any live MMOG and the answer to all of them is Customer Service. Whether you call it that or Player Relations, Customer Relations, whatever, these are people in the trenches with the players on a daily basis. They understand the needs of the players (or should) better than the Dev Team ever could, because those needs change on a damn near daily basis.

Your Development Team should not be in charge of the Live game.

Once the game is launched, Customer Service/Player Relations are the people that should be dictating fixes and changes to the Dev Team, or at the very least controlling the process. Unfortunately, it usually works out to be the reverse; the head of the Dev team ends up being in charge of the live game.

This is a mistake; most Dev Teams should be gagged, muzzled and forbidden direct contact with the players on the pain of a horrifying death to loved ones and idols. Dev Teams are less concerned with the actual player game experience, than with players experiencing the game in the way *the Team* intended them to. After two to three years of development, they have a ton of emotional baggage concerning their baby and tend to get downright hostile when someone plays it in a way the Team did not intend. This leads to the nerfing —the willy-nilly changing of the design to stop unintended play patterns- and similar reactionary silliness we see in some of today's current MMOGs.

Such cowboy programming has caused more PR problems and player anger than any other single factor. To torture General Von Moltke's famous quote about war, no game design survives contact with the enemy. Players are inventive and curious; they will examine your game from all sides and play it in ways you never anticipated or imagined would be possible. To then punish them for finding new and interesting things about your game is unforgivable. I'm not talking about exploiting bugs to duplicate items or using cracks in the design to cause grief for other players; I'm talking about finding new strategies and tactics to get ahead. This is art, and should be rewarded as such.

The people making the decisions about these things shouldn't have a vested emotional interest; it makes it near impossible for them to be able to stand back and make rational decisions based on a combination of what is good for the players right now and what is good for the long-term health of the game.

That's enough for this column. Next week bring on the losers!

(And the winners, of course. If any.)

Post Mortem: No, actually, Doomed to Succeed

This was just the set up column, to give readers some basis for understanding the judgments made in later columns in the series. There was an interesting and unanticipated reaction to it, however. The column was published in late August of 2000. Within eight weeks, I had been notified by no fewer than seventeen people employed by online game publishers or developers that they were using the column as part of inhouse presentations to executives or were copying it whole to email around the office, in an attempt to inform executives on the real story behind online games. All seventeen were middle management or lower on the totem pole.

This seems to be a common refrain at corporations involved in online gaming. The troops in the trenches understand quite well what needs to be done to make an online game a success. The people above them, however, seem not to have a clue. This may explain why so many online games start development and why so few actually see the light of day.

1.23 Doomed To Fail? Episode II

Volume Nine, Issue 23
August 31, 2000

in which our gallant reporter, at perilous risk to life and limb, attempts to ferret out information vital to the existence of the Free World

Okay, okay; so that s a load of hooey. No one is ever going to accuse massively multiplayer games of being critical to the existence of Truth, Justice and the American Way. Well, not anyone playing with a full deck, anyway.

If you haven t read last week s column or need a refresher, take a quick moment and **read it here** (archive address to BTH 9-22 new).

So, in my completely subjective opinion, which of the upcoming crop of massively-multiplayer online games will lose and who will win? In this column and one or two that follow, I ll take a look at some of the front-runners and rate their chances, based on my own Criteria d MMOG“, as related in last week s column.

This week:

Shadowbane (<http://www.shadowbane.com>)

Developer: Wolfpack Studios

Publisher: **Gathering of Developers** (<http://www.godgames.com/>)

When Wolfpack set out last year to drum up word-of-mouth advertising for this project and help land a publisher thereby, their motto was I don t play games to bake bread, I play to crush. This in keeping with Wolfpack s hiring policy, as detailed in several interviews with the founders and executives, that they are wolves and they only hire wolves. Which, presumably makes the rest of us are their sheep (which conjures up some really horrifying visions of them running around the office wearing wolves head masks and the receptionist dressed as Bo-Peep and carrying a shepard s crook).

The campaign was remarkably successful with the intended Player-versus-Player crowd and it's bastard sub-niche, the grief players (you know, the guys who play to crush and trash talk people who can't reach through the phone wire and punch them in the nose). Wolfpack even hired an Internet Relations Manager from one of the fan sites and courted the Slime King of MMOGs, Dr. Twister, as someone representative of their desired customer base. No one in the community has even seen a live test or demo this game yet, but hundreds of players sing its praises based on FAQs and statements from Wolfpack.

It worked; they finally landed a publisher. However, since the publishing agreement with GoD, showing a non-live demo at E3 in May and slipping the beta schedule by quite a few months, however, there hasn't been much real news about the game. There are the occasional new screenshots and discussion of planned features (and if they can implement even 50% of the proposed features and the interface plays as good as the screenshots look, it'll be a technical tour de force, if nothing else), but that's about it. Oh, except that one of the main designers, Brian Balsraph Urbanek, left the company a few weeks ago under somewhat mysterious and sudden circumstances. Considering that he at times publicly contradicted the statements of his bosses that *Shadowbane* would be about PvP, faction wars and crushing, maybe this isn't such a mysterious parting of the ways. Losing a main designer at this stage is not a happy thing, in the best of times.

And clearly, crushing others is the make-or-break concept for this game. Mind you, there is nothing wrong with PvP or faction wars; some people enjoy it. However, PvP servers tend to be the least populated in any game, mainly because most players don't want to be subjected to non-consensual PvP. This is contrasted by the fact that many PvPers and all grief players don't want a fair fight, they want victims. When you separate them from the non-PvP community and put them in an environment where the intended victims have an equal chance, they tend to quickly lose interest. And *Shadowbane* seems tailor-made to attract this type of player.

Also, there hasn't been much public discussion of who will manage the live operations of the game, how many game masters and phone reps they'll have on staff or just who will be in charge of setting problem resolution policy, the developers or player relations, Wolfpack or GoD. Considering the likely player base, this is going to be a critical area for the game.

At this point, acknowledging that the game is months away from Beta and serious load and features testing, I'd have to rate *Shadowbane*:

Chances of being a Big Money Maker: Probably a Loser here. The game appeals to one of the smallest and hardest to please niches of MMOGs, a group of people that tend to drive other players away from the game and has the highest player-to-support cost ratio in the industry.

Cool Game Tools: Possibly a Winner, but we'll have to wait for public Beta and see how the interface actually handles to change that tone of definitely, probably or Loser. If they pull off the interface we see in the screenshots, Wolfpack might develop a cottage industry in licensing the tool set to other developers, and that's a Great Big Win in anybody's book.

Chances of being a customer service nightmare: Probable. Unless GoD or Wolfpack hires someone with MMOG player relations experience and puts that person in charge of live operations, I suspect the conflict won't stop at the game level, but will bleed over into public forums.

Next Week:

Anarchy Online (<http://www.anarchy-online.com/>)

Developer: Funcom (<http://www.funcom.com/corporate/about/index.html>)

Publisher: Funcom

Nice interface, nice press comments on the design and backstory, terrifically nice developers what's not to like? We'll see if there are any skeletons in this closet in next column.

1.24 Doomed To Fail? Episode III

Volume Nine, Issue 24

September 7, 2000

Anarchy Online (<http://www.anarchy-online.com/>)

Developer: Funcom (<http://www.funcom.com/corporate/about/index.html>)

Publisher: Funcom

Interface: 3D, 1st or 3rd Person

Tentative Release Date: Sometime before the end of 2000

This game seems to have all the technical and design elements going for it; a pre-planned four year storyline based in an original sci-fi universe, a very nice 3D interface that includes many hot-key emotes preprogrammed, articulated body-parts that can move separately from each other, very nice character, object and terrain art, several different quest systems to keep the player from dying of camping boredom, including player designed and generated ones it all seems to be there in a nice, integrated package. You can hit the *Anarchy Online* link above and check all that out for yourself, and I encourage you to do so.

That is not why I am so high on this game, however. There are a couple of massively multiplayer online games in development that are as technically competent as this game and technology alone does not feed the MMOG cat, anyway. No, there is another reason I'm waiting impatiently for *Anarchy Online*.

Meet any person on Funcom's *AO* development team and one thing strikes you almost immediately; they are all, part and parcel, truly nice people. This is unusual enough (believe me). Not only that, they love talking about *AO* to any and all comers; they are so enthused about this game, they want everyone to know everything about it. For example, at E3 last May, while waiting for a chance to have the game demo-ed, I watched in amazement as one of the developers gave a full demo and answered every question asked by a designer from one of *AO*'s competitors.

The competing designer could hardly believe it, either; the modus operandi in this industry is to pretend your game's particulars are, you know, *really important* and should be protected more fiercely than the **Manhattan Project** (<http://www.tidepool.com/bdaley/essays/manproj.htm>). It's a stupid attitude because, by and by, we're all going to see everything that isn't code or server transparent — the invisible code being hidden from casual view and all. Once any supposedly new feature is tested in public, anyone who wants to copy it from the game, will. I suspect this secretiveness is done on a standard basis for two reasons: to feed developers' egos — We're doing, you know, *really important* stuff here that we can't really talk about yet. — and to preserve the fact that most designs are horridly incomplete when coding begins and have a tendency to change a lot during Alpha and Beta tests as weaknesses are revealed.

The folks from AO exhibit little if any of that insecure attitude. But the lads and ladies from Funcom just don't talk; they also listen, to the customers, other developers, an intrigued janitor sweeping up near the booth, you name it. They want you to look at what they are doing and then tell them what they are doing wrong, what could be done better or just plain what might be cool to add or subtract from the game. Rather than be insecure about what they are doing, they cheerfully acknowledge upfront that they don't have all the answers and are more than willing to listen to others.

More than anything else, it is this open, Let's have some fun *together* attitude that makes me believe that AO has a shot at being a winner. It's just plain unusual to find the attitude so prevalent in one team. Sure, they talk the talk and, from what I saw of the game at E3, they certainly walk the technology walk; check out their site for the movies, FAQs and screenshots and you'll see they seem to have a good handle on it.

But anyone can do that. Actually committing to customer service and then listening to the customer is a horse of a different color. Every damn online game in production or development pays mucho lip service to it. So what is the measure of the AO team's commitment to a good player experience? It is this:

The former project leader and designer, Tor Andre Wigmostad, actually volunteered to change jobs and be in charge of customer service, because it needed to be done right and he wanted to make sure it was.

Now, that doesn't mean he really knows what CS is all about and that he won't bollux it up completely — or, conversely, that he might do it all right the first time and become a CS Diety - but you gotta love that attitude. The man is willing to be held publicly accountable for the game's customer experience, as an individual and an agent of the company. Incredible; what does he think he is in, a service industry or something?

Take all this together in one package — good technology, interesting design and great attitude about the customers and customer service — and you've got yourself a game ripe to be a gold-plated Winner.

The Take:

Chances of being a Big Money Maker: Probably a Winner here. The game is a bit niche product, but the interface looks to be very accessible to any experience level of gamer from beginner to advanced, and the focus of the game design seems to be Add nothing that isn't fun or useful for the player. If they can follow-through on their customer service commitment, they could easily garner 200,000 subscribers in the first year of live operations.

Cool Game Tools: Clearly a Winner, as long as they don't screw up the interface from feature creep or drop the various quest systems, especially the player generated quests. These alone should keep the game from becoming the hack n slash boredom generators that other MMOGs have a tendency to slide into.

Chances of being a customer service nightmare: Depends. The Funcom people are nice, but you really don't understand how frustrating it can be to manage one of these games until the exploiters and grief players show up and start driving away customers. This is the company's first online game; they are about to learn that lesson under fire. How they deal with the jerks will be an indicator of the long-term survivability of the game in a competitive market.

Next Week:

Atriarch (<http://www.atriarch.com/>)

Developer: World Fusion

Publisher: ???

Another 3D RPG, and one of an increasing number of grassroots, dark horse entries in the market. Who are these people, what do they want and what chances does yet another RPG have in this market?

1.25 We Interrupt Our Program

Volume Nine, Issue 25

September 14, 2000

This column was supposed to be another in the continuing series of analyses I've been doing on upcoming massively multiplayer games. However, the issue of violence and games has arisen again and, being the little ranter that I am, I just had to comment. Next week will feature the column about Atriarch.

This week, and as I **predicted last year after the Littleton school shootings**, (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth0814a.html>), violence in games has become an election issue.

As President Clinton requested in June, 1999 after Congress badgered him into it, the Federal Trade Commission has issued a report on entertainment media marketing practices. No surprise, the pressured agency found that entertainment media markets violent adult content to people

aged 17 years and under. Also no surprise, Presidential candidate Al Gore immediately jumped on the issue with a press release calling for tougher regulation of the movie, music and the video and computer games industries, if they don't follow tougher voluntary standards within six months.

(And don't be too amazed about Gore being completely prepared to issue a press release on this matter, ambushing opponent Bush. Being Clinton's VP, Gore no doubt got a review copy of the FTC report before publication. This is known as fair campaigning. Right.)

(And don't think the above paragraph means I'm voting for Bush. Our choices in this Presidential election — if by choice you mean having two Beltway insiders rammed down our throats by the party machines and a modest selection of niche issue candidates that will collectively capture less than 5% of the popular vote— are execrable, in my opinion. I plan to write-in a more viable candidate. Like Daffy Duck or **Zippy the Pinhead** (<http://www.zippythepinhead.com/>). You know, someone with more common sense and less greed than two career politicians.)

On first read, the report immediately strikes me as somewhat flawed. It mentions games, movies and music marketed in venues popular with the under-17 crowd. Some are obviously no-nos, such as *GamePro* and *Seventeen* magazine. I mean, *GamePro* and *Seventeen* are pretty much aimed at the under-to-17 crowd, so any mature product marketed there makes the industry look bad, indeed (although I couldn't find mention in the report or its appendices of what mature products were marketed in either; if you find them in the report, drop me a line with the page number).

Some of the examples used, however, were just plain silly. What are these examples? For example, TV shows such as *South Park*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*. I can't find anywhere in the report that mentions these shows are also popular with the *over-17* crowd, which makes them a prime target for marketing mature games and products. What, you're not supposed to market a game to your audience if even one under-17 kid might happen to view the material?

I could go on for pages. This whole thing is all grandstanding; even Gore doesn't believe it, as evidenced by his voluntary standards comments. According to the Mitchell Report on MSNBC, he's taken \$13 million in entertainment industry campaign donations while telling the executives not to worry, this whole FTC report thing was Clinton's idea, not his. You know: Wink, wink, nudge, nudge; don't worry about it if *I* m elected. Besides, it is easier to make this an issue versus dealing with something of substance. Like, why certain US politicians accepted campaign donations from mainland Chinese front companies, then supported trade concessions for China while it closes its markets to US imports and blatantly steals our technology and violates copyrights. Little stuff like that.

In fact, all those "We must save our children from the horrors of entertainment!" politicians need to explain something to me:

According to no less authority than the FBI's Unified Crime Reports, listed at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr.htm>, crime in general and violent crime in specific has dropped every year since 1991. The archived reports only go back to 1995, but that report notes that the decline that year was the 4th straight. Since 1994, the number of violent crimes per 100,000 people has dropped from 713.6 to about 526 (a loose estimate based on the preliminary 1999 figures); it dropped 7% last year alone. And, as has been the trend this entire century, people under the age of 25 made up the most arrested group in 1998, the last year for complete figures, accounting for 44% of violent crime arrests. In fact, the 1998 report notes that the total number of juvenile violent crime arrests fell 8% (no 1999 crime by age range figures have been released yet).

So, violent crime by those under 25, who account for 44% of all violent crime arrests and whom we've supposedly been training for the past eight years to be violent offenders via the entertainment media, has instead gone down dramatically during that time. Juvenile (under 18) violent crime is also dropping. At time, mind you, that sales of movies, music and especially computer and video games, which is now an industry bigger than Hollywood, have risen dramatically and reach far more young people than they did in 1991. And not to mention that personal gun ownership is at an all-time high in the US, but the murder rate is also down eight straight years. How embarrassing for Rosie O'Donnell and all the other gun-confiscation nuts!

So, all you politicians screaming for reform, if games, movies and music are a causative factor in violent behavior, why is violent crime in the under-25 age group declining?

Could it be that (horrors!) this *isn't* a problem? Could it be that (shock!) this is a non-issue made up to get free airtime during a close campaign?

I expect nothing less — or more - from politicians, especially in a national election year. And just to show how hypocritical this whole issue is, let me leave you with this final CYA (Cover Your A**) thought from the FTC report:

Scholars and observers have generally agreed that exposure to violence in entertainment media alone does not cause a child to commit a violent act and that it is not the sole, or even necessarily the most important, factor contributing to youth aggression, antisocial attitudes and violence.

FROM: Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children, Page 6
Report of the Federal Trade Commission, September 2000
<http://www.ftc.gov/reports/violence/vioreport.pdf>

1.26 Doomed to Fail? Part IV

Volume Nine, Issue 26
September 28, 2000

OK, this one was supposed to be about World Fusion's **Atriarch** (<http://www.atriarch.com/news/news.html>). However, turns out that they are right up the road from me and, because they are so nearby, I've arranged to speak with them before writing that

column. Next week's installment will be the *Atriarch* article. Honest. Really. No kidding. Unless something changes. You never know in this business.

So this week, we'll cover:

Ultima Worlds Online: Origin (<http://www.uo2.com/main.html>)

Developer: **Origin Systems, Inc.** (<http://www.origin.ea.com/>)

Publisher: **EA.com** (<http://www.ea.com/>)

Genre: Generally Fantasy

Type: 3D (3rd or 1st Person)

Release: Summer, 2001

Disclaimer: For those who have forgotten or never really cared in the first place, let me nip a possible conflict of interest in the bud and note that I used to work for OSI, having left the company earlier this year on amicable terms to pursue other interests in San Diego.

While slightly branded with the popular Ultima moniker and set in an altered Britannia, OSI takes great pains to note that *Ultima Worlds Online: Origin (UWO:O)* is not a sequel to *Ultima Online* (<http://www.uo.com/>), the popular persistent world launched three years ago this month. Indeed, *UWO:O* is a different genre and style altogether, with the interface being 3D, a la *EverQuest* and *Asheron's Call*, and the universe a conglomeration of world genres that might be best described as Fantasy Monster Medieval Sci-Punk, mixing limited high technology with the standard fantasy elements. For example, some characters run around in kinetic and pneumatic armor, while others use none at all. There are creatures in rolling machines and elevators powered by propellers. The atmosphere created by all this is weirdly compelling and different.

Character advancement will be largely skill-based, centered on skill trees; players will gain new capabilities as they advance up one of the trees. There are experience levels, but they are handled much the same way as in *Asheron's Call*, used mainly as a marker for skill points. The non-consensual PvP/PK issue is handled by creating exclusively PvP and non-PvP zones within the game. For more information on the game itself, see the screenshots and FAQ at the *UWO:O* web site link above.

Aside from a different genre of game universe, what is going to set this game apart is the incredible player interface. First and least, it is visually top notch, with the terrain, character and objects graphic art as rich and detailed as any persistent world out there. This is something players have come to expect from 3D games and *UWO:O* does not fail in the task.

More importantly, character and NPC/creature body movements via the interface are smooth and a joy to watch. The interface allows some body parts to move separately and simultaneously and hundreds of original motion-captured body movements and combination of movements have been included. These not only include some really cool combat move combinations, but plenty of the non-combat grin, fart and tap dance emotes that we all use in such games.

There is no way to adequately explain just how well done this is; I recommend you download the 21.7 megabyte preview video from <http://www.uo2.com/downloads.html>. It's at the bottom of the page and is well worth the download time.

All in all, the game is certainly going to push the technology forward and give the player more control over his/her image and direct physical actions in the game, especially if the climb the skill tree, get more moves feature works as advertised. Industry insiders who viewed the demo at E3 last May were certainly impressed by the potential and possibilities.

There is one big down-check on this game: players will not be able to own housing or ride animals at launch. This I consider a huge mistake. Although OSI swears these will be added later, similar claims have been made by other 3D games with no result. Granted, adding those two features to a 3D perspective game is tougher than with the isometric view of an *Ultima Online*; I'd have delayed the launch and worked out the problems. Of course, it's not my money being spent on development, either. One should be prepared for the possibility that these features will not be added any time soon, if at all.

The Take:

Chances of being a Big Money Maker: A Winner here, I believe. Not only is the game an installment in the popular Ultima universe (albeit loosely so), giving the players more control over their persona's physical actions and destiny via skill trees is a smart move. I expect this game to hit 100,000 subscribers quickly and continue to grow for several years.

Cool Game Tools: Potentially a huge Winner, depending on just how deep and rich the preprogrammed combat moves and emotes are, and whether the player will be able to program his/her own emotes and combat moves.

Chances of being a customer service nightmare: 50/50. OSI seems determined to learn from and correct the mistakes made with *UO*'s launch three years ago. How well they learn the lessons we won't know until *UWO:O* launches in Summer, 2001.

My three favorite lines from the *UWO:O* FAQ (<http://www.uo2.com/faq.html>):

So I won't be able to kill the largest monster in the game on my own?

If we've done our job correctly, he will crush you like a grape.

Blackthorn wasn't evil in Ultima Online! How could you make him evil in Origin!?!

Who says he's evil? Perhaps he is merely misunderstood.

Will other animals (i.e. dragons) use motion capture?

No. Dragons are notoriously hard to find in real life, and even harder to attach the little sensors to.

1.27 The President of Your Fan Club Called

Volume Nine, Issue 27
October 6, 2000

Two notes before I get started:

I pushed the *Atriarch* opinion back another week. The more I read about this game, and the more I exchange email with Serafina, the more intrigued I become. Plus, it was a busy week, and I haven't been able to visit with the developers yet, even though they are only about 90 minutes up the road.

I received an email from Ashen Temper, the internet-relations manager at Wolfpack Studios. Ashen is a pretty nice guy, by the way, and certainly has had his hands full lately, organizing and preparing for the first limited beta test of *Shadowbane*. He'd received some email about the following line from my [Shadowbane column](#):

"Wolfpack even hired an internet-relations manager from one of the fan sites and courted the slime king of MMOGs, Dr. Twister, as someone representative of Wolfpack's desired customer base."

°Apparently, someone took that to mean the fan site he'd worked at was Dr. T's, and Ashen was concerned there'd be confusion among some of the readership. To clarify: Ashen worked with the *Shadowbane* Vault and Stratics before being hired by Wolfpack, *not* with Dr. Twister. Which brings us full circle to this week's topic. Ashen Temper's email was not the only one I received about the *Shadowbane* column, oh no. My mailbox overflows with love and approbation. I was also the topic d'jour on various *Shadowbane* fan sites, where my effigy was roasted to a fine, crunchy texture.

The upshot of the great majority of emails and posts? Apparently, I have sinned. Apparently, I do not properly worship at the altar of *Shadowbane*. Apparently, I do goats.

In other words, I didn't join in with an unabashed "This game is going to rock and be a mega-hit!" and some took that personally. From the tone of the majority of the posts and emails, you'd think I said those people's religion ought to be banned. As often happens online, a significant portion of them devolved into name calling. My favorites so far (misspellings, missed punctuation, and weird grammar left intact):

"It's people like you who need to be deported to Cuba."

(Translation: "You're a communist bitch. Go back to commie land, where you came from." Demonization of this sort is common among people who otherwise would be reduced to saying, "Hate you! Nyah!" I hate when people do that. It's people like these who need to be deported Iraq.)

"If she lived in Austria I know (which) party she would belong to."

(Translation: "You're a Nazi, fascist bitch. Go to Austria and hang out with the other Nazis.")

Now I'm confused. The fascist and communists literally hate each other. They fought a war in Europe in which they killed a cumulative 30 million people. It's kinda tough to be both, although I'm bemused at the thought of a transsexual Nazi. The Nazis really liked people like me, not to mention gays, Gypsies, and Jews. They courted us. Ruthlessly. They "invited" us over to their place for cookies and Zyklon B.)

"Some chick named Jessica (Blows Goats) Mulligan..."
(Everyone needs a hobby. The goats should be so lucky.)

"Look, I don't think she is an idiot--she is a biased idiot."
(Someone who also wrote me a very calm, collected email--pointing out why she thought I was wrong--posted this message. She is also continually counseling the others on the boards not to spam my mail with insults, because PvPers already have a bad-enough reputation. Too late, but nice try.)

"They are making a game catered to us because WP are players "like us"... You wouldn't understand this because you obviously can't cut it in PVP, part of which you are female."
(The above remark was written by the self-styled "father" of a PvP guild, one which has among its posted ideology tenets the "manipulation and conning with the result of endless amounts of wealth," more commonly known to the rest of us as "lying and cheating," and "innovative methods in which to increase your stat & skill abilities at an accelerated rate," which is often a wink and a nod toward "exploiting bugs and loopholes." I ought to send his link to the female PvPer above.)

Before I go any further, let me correct some misconceptions harbored by a few of these folks:

- (A) I do not dislike the people at Wolfpack. I met a couple of them briefly at E3, and they were nice people--very enthusiastic and motivated.
- (B) I do not think *Shadowbane* is crap. How could I? *I haven't played the game yet*. Neither have 99 percent of the people dropping me love notes, for the simple reason that it doesn't yet exist in a form available to the public.
- (C) The column wasn't a review of the game, nor even a preview. Each column in the "Doomed to fail?" series is a question: what do I think of a game's chances of succeeding, given what I know about the market vis a vis the game's design and intent at this stage? Anyone who read the [first column in the series](#) would understand that, I think.
- (D) Some people seem to think the column was intended to brush all PvPers with the kewl-dude or grief-player brush. That's reading too much into too few words. The point I tried to make (and apparently failed at) is that the griefers cause serious effects to the game, the customers, and the customer-service reps. With *Shadowbane* being so heavily slanted toward personal human-to-human conflict on all scales, this is bound to attract them, with the concomitant follow-on effects.

According to these correspondents, I also apparently just plain do not understand *Shadowbane*. Of course, 99 percent of the people posting and writing me email don't understand *Shadowbane*. How could they? None of us have played the game; all but a very few of us are going by what Wolfpack *says* will be in the game.

Considering that, I suppose it should come as no surprise that we interpret the data differently to reach different conclusions. The only difference is that I acknowledged in my column that it is early in the process, and serious testing has yet to be done. Part of the problem seems to stem from differing interpretations of the terms "player versus player," "player killer," and "grief player," and their effects on an online multiplayer game. Even among the *Shadowbane* devotees posting on the boards, the definition of just what constitutes PvP versus PKing versus being a grief player seems to vary from poster to poster. For further reference, here's my take:

PvPers enjoy combat against others humans, because gray matter can provide an opponent that a silicon chip never could. While they don't care if it is consensual or non-consensual, for the most part, they would prefer consensual play in the form of duels, and faction-versus-faction or guild-versus-guild conflict--something that gives greater meaning to the slaughter. It is not uncommon for a true PvP devotee to wax a victim and then guard the body so the victim can come back and retrieve the lost inventory.

PKers are looking for victims, pure and simple. If the game allows non-consensual PvP, PKers don't care who they kill so long as the victim can't fight back effectively. They are schoolyard bullies; if you turn out to be too good at fighting, they will go find someone else to steal lunch money from.

Grief players could care less about the niceties of PK, PvP, or the game; they are there to cause other people grief, hence the name. If they are successful enough and get banned from the game, they just move on to the next one and repeat the process. Their objectives are varied; the result--pissed-off customers--is not.

There is also a tendency to pass off the grief players as a small number of players unworthy of consideration in the larger scheme of things. While I agree that the overall number of grief players is small, their effect on the landscape is *not* small. The 80-20 rule applies, although maybe we should modify that here as the grief-player 80-1 rule: 80 percent of your problems will be caused by one percent of the player base. Problems take man-hours and staff to resolve. The more grief players, the more man-hours wasted. If your game attracts more grief players, you'll waste more time resolving the problems they create.

Worse, these people are affecting your customer base before you are aware of them. They drive customers to other games and even out of online gaming altogether. For all that, PvPers sneer at what they call the "Care Bear lands." It is no mistake that the largest population in an MMOG to date, *EverQuest*, separates PvPers from other players, and that the overwhelming majority of game servers are non-PvP. Nor is it a fluke that *Ultima Online* saw a second major growth spurt after launching its Care Bear lands.

PvPers will argue that this is because PvP is an afterthought in most games, and has not been correctly integrated into a game from the ground up. This is not exactly true, as anyone who played MMOGs "back in the day" knows full well. However, the argument has some merit, especially when it comes to faction and/or guild warfare. *Shadowbane* certainly plans to have full-featured guild warfare, apparently both strategic and tactical; whether that will be enough to ameliorate the effects of grief players remains to be seen.

While [Sturgeon's Law](#) applied to most of the comments directed at me, the most reasoned public response, [What's the Frequency, Kenneth?](#) was written by Vosx Temper, site manager of the fan site *Shadowbane* Vault. I urge you to read it, if only to get a different slant on the game. He has a tendency to misinterpret what I wrote, sometimes grossly so, and he sets up easily knocked-down straw men based on those misinterpretations. But he does make a few good points worth considering.

And now, if you'll excuse me, I have some goats to tend to. Adieu.

Post Mortem: More goat-blowing

The emails and message board postings quoted above were far from the nastiest directed at me. They were also the ones that exhibited at least some ability to write clearly. Yeah, that scares me, too. It was dismaying enough to see that a significant portion of the community can't seem express themselves without using profanities and trash-talk; most of them can't seem to write a complete sentence, use punctuation or have the faintest idea of proper grammar. Sure, I'm no great shakes at grammar myself, but at least I try. The insults and profanity I can live with; the lack of education depresses me.

After the column was published, the Internet Relations Manager for Wolfpack, who bills himself as Ashen Temper, intervened to send an apology for, as he termed it, all the blows goats emails. He passed such emails off as the product of a few bad apples and Shadowbane Fanatics.

I laughed out loud when I read the email. You reap what you sow, and Wolfpack has gone out of its way to create such Fanatics to garner free publicity. And did he think I wasn't reading his posts on the Shadowbane message boards, agreeing with the profane criticisms and encouraging them to write the publisher, Happy Puppy and me? He read the posts; when he urged such emails, did he think they were going to write clear, well-reasoned dissertations, free of scatological terms and personal insult? To try to distance himself and Wolfpack with a private apology, while continuing to play to the crowd on the message boards, was amusing, to say the least. This is indicative of many online game developers and the software development industry in general; they don't just assume they're smarter than the average bear, they tend to assume that most of the other bears are morons.

Of course, considering the quality of communication from the vocal faction of the customer base, they can hardly be blamed for so believing.

1.28 Mommy, She Talked Dirty!

Volume Nine, Issue 28
October 12, 2000

This is a story of how *not* to handle your customers. It's going to be a long one.

First, Phase One: What the Customers Saw.

In EverQuest, there used to be a player named Mystere. This player's character was of the race known as Dark Elves, a particularly vicious form of Elf that publisher Verant clearly modeled on the Drow Elves of Dungeons and Dragons fame. We know they are a violent, nasty race by virtue of this official Verant profile of a Dark Elf (http://everquest.station.sony.com/hht/h_profile_zatozia.shtml), written by Verant and posted by them on the official EverQuest Web site.

Yes, according to Verant, Dark Elves are dark, indeed.

Mystere was quite a creative role-player, so creative, in fact, that he wrote fan fiction short stories. Being a role-player, and playing a race of Elves known for their propensity to toy with their victims, the stories were dark, full of physical torture and ugly deeds. As Verant himself writes and posts such things, we shouldn't find such stories unusual or not in keeping with the intended tenor of the game.

Mystere posted these stories publicly on independent fan sites — not on Sony's official EQ site — for the edification of friends and other EQ players. The boards were known for racy fanfic and carried a mature content warning. The stories were well received; Mystere has no little talent for fiction. About three months or so ago, he posted one such story on a fan site message board. The story was definitely not for young audiences; it was dark, disturbing and included a graphic description of a slave master attempting to have his way with an Elf of 14 seasons. Hoo, boy, guaranteed to cause a major outcry, eh?

Well, no. There the story stood for three months, just another apparently forgotten chapter in fan fiction.

On October 4, someone brought Mystere's story to the attention of Verant. By 3pm, the Mystere account had been permanently blocked from EverQuest. This was done without prior notice to Mystere; we don't know if Verant attempted to contact him before the banning and couldn't, or just reacted. This will be important later in the moral to our little tale.

Puzzled, Mystere picked up the phone and called Verant Customer Service. After that conversation, the player then posted the following:

I called CS and was eventually passed on to George Scotto, the directory (sic) of Customer Service for EverQuest. I was told that the story I had written had been passed on to them. I was told that the story was sickening and disturbing in the extreme. I was told that some

council of some sort had made the decision to ban me, and said decision is immutable (George is the last in the line for appeals). The post had "many" customers up in arms and they don't need "players like (me)".

Not much I can do to argue that. I tried, was told they didn't want to hear it, the decision was not negotiable.

As anyone might predict, the action of banning Mystere for the perception of a sickening and disturbing post, especially on a message board not owned or operated by the company, as well as being told we don't need customers like you, caused a storm of protest against Verant on various fan sites. Everyone agreed that **Sony's Terms of Service** (<http://www.station.sony.com/services/tos.jhtml>) allowed the company to ban anyone for any or no reason, but come on! Do you read the profiles on your own site? And no one believed that many customers were up in arms over a story that had been available for three months; as it turns out, it was one parent who sent it to several organizations, but more on that later.

At this point, I was torn between helpless laughter and utter disgust. When it comes to relations with its players, Verant has a track record of shooting itself in the foot; see **EULAQuest Part One** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D11.html>) and **Part Two** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D12.html>) as examples. Okay, so they were new to the industry and were making newbie mistakes; it happens. To be fair, pretty much every one of the other MMOG developers have made similar mistakes, with similar results.

However, the excuse of inexperience no longer holds water. Earlier this year, the company opened an Austin, Texas office and hired away a slough of people from Origin Systems. Among them were designer Raph Koster and producer Rich Vogel; both have years of experience in dealing with online gamers. Either of them could have prevented Verant from looking like a bunch of stupid wankers in this case, if anyone had bothered to ask them and then followed their advice. In fact, last April Raph started a thought experiment on the MUD Developers mailing list called **A Declaration of the Rights of Avatars** (<http://www.kanga.nu/archives/MUD-Dev-L/2000Q2/msg00281.php>). If anyone at Verant HQ had bothered to read and understand this, they would at least have been sensitive to how players view a MMOG and their place within it.

The events leading up to this point, where what the public understands is that Verant's CS manager and some mysterious internal council have made a value call on fanfic and banned a player because of it, are bad enough. They then began the justification game. First, they had the company Internet Relations Manager, Gordon Wrinn, post this statement:

Like all other account issues, this is a matter between us and the owner of the account. It's not something that we're going to discuss or justify publicly.

We make determinations based on information at hand regarding who is or is not having a positive affect on EverQuest's community. If we determine that one person's actions make EverQuest a game that other people do not want to play based upon those actions, we will exercise our right to refuse service to the extent necessary to provide a reasonable and

enjoyable gaming environment.

This is the extent to which we'll address this specific issue. If people have general questions not related to the specific issues in this case, I'll be happy to field them tomorrow. This issue is however closed.

Players remained unconvinced and the negative postings continued unabated. The mood of the players was **best summed up by these lines from Lum the Mad** (<http://www.lumthepad.net/news/970718644,57681,.shtml>), taken from an editorial posted on his site the day of the banning:

Regardless, and again, if the side of the story we're hearing is the truth, Verant banned someone for roleplaying incorrectly. You know, dark elves aren't REALLY evil. They group with high elves and halflings all the time. Everything is happy and perky and most importantly child-safe in Norrath. There is no evil whatsoever. Ignore the mutilated bodies of dwarves strewn liberally around Feerot. While you're at it, ignore the fact that while dark elven males default to a fully dressed outfit, dark elven women default to wearing a skimpy bikini. And ignore the fact that these stories were posted to a third-party web site that had no affiliation with Verant whatsoever.

I'm at a loss for any further comment. I don't think Verant has ever done anything quite this stupid. And I'm including Abashi (Author s Note: Abashi is the handle of Gordon Wrinn, who has been at the center of previous Verant customer service gaffs.) in that. Verant banned someone for posting in-character on EQ Vault. I couldn't make this up. No one would believe me. Hell, I don't believe it. Surely there is a rational explanation somewhere. Maybe someone broke into Verant's San Diego office and turned them all into Borg.

YOU ARE IN OUR WORLD NOW. COMPLY.

At this point, the whole incident was threatening to escalate from just another scandal that would blow over in a couple days to one of major media newsworthy proportions. So, just to confuse the issue a little more, Sony Online s General Counsel, Andrew Zaffron, issued the following statement the day after the banning, October 5:

I want to thank everyone for their fervent opinions on this matter.

We aspire neither to be censors nor the guardians of the Internet; we desire to be the developers of a great game which fosters a vibrant and dynamic community. Fortunately, the body of intellectual property law that has developed over the past 225 years -- the laws governing the use of copyrighted material, derivative works, trademarks and trade dress -- gives us the exclusive right to permit or disallow the outside use of our intellectual property so that we can properly manage our business and nurture the EverQuest brand.

Among other things, the story author used our intellectual property -- without license -- to create what the law calls a "derivative work." The law gives the copyright owner the exclusive right to create and distribute derivative works, so that the copyright owner can control the

manner in which its property is being used. If this story were about Luke Skywalker or Mickey Mouse, you'd certainly expect Lucas or Disney (respectively) to resort to their legal rights to protect their valuable property and good name; this is nothing different.

This is not about the first amendment -- this is about infringement of our intellectual property rights in a patently offensive manner that tarnishes the Sony, Verant and EverQuest brands. It almost goes without saying that we cannot tolerate our intellectual property being used in a story depicting the violent and explicit rape of a child.

Andrew S. Zaffron
General Counsel, Sony Online Entertainment

As one might well imagine, this one didn't do much to stem the tide of negative opinion. The lawyer's statement didn't convince anyone. What the EQ public saw at this point, as was made clear in various message boards, is that Verant recognized they'd screwed the pooch and, rather than back-track and try to make things right, they decided they needed a better justification.

At this juncture, Verant should have done one of two things: 1) Shut up, rode out the storm and promised themselves never to make the mistake of handling things this badly again, or, 2) apologized publicly, reinstated the player and gone on with life.

As of October 8, they hadn't done either. We now enter Phase Two of our little morality play and the situation is about to become even more interesting.

Next Week: Phase Two: What Verant Saw.

1.29 Mommy, She Talked Dirty! Part II

Volume Nine, Issue 29
October 19, 2000

If you haven't read Part One, you can do so **here** (insert Part One URL).

As strange as it might seem, this tale does have a happy ending of sorts. We've seen how the players reacted to this point and what they thought about the whole Mystere banning episode. So, what might have been happening behind the scenes at EverQuest's owner, Verant Interactive?

Having been in their position, I can tell you that this is truly like being between a rock and a hard place. The rock is one or more anti-porn groups, not known for being reasonable in their treatment of anyone who fits their guidelines of a child pornographer. The hard place is a very vocal group of customers - you know, those people who pay the bills — not known for being reasonable to anything that smacks of stripping them of rights. Both sides have points in their favor; pleasing both sides, in this specific situation, is going to be tough.

And, in an election year where politicians are using the bludgeon of potentially suing or regulating companies with sex and violence in products to extract campaign donations from entertainment companies, one has to navigate the waters very carefully. Unfortunately, as many of their predecessors did in years past when in the same sort of bind, Verant initially blew it. Then they had to play catch-up.

After issuing at least two contradictory standings on the banning of Mystere for posting the fiction (You re disgusting and we don t want players like you. and You violated our copyrights.), Verant s Internet Relations Manager, Gordon Wrinn (Abashi), noted that they would not discuss the particulars in public, as is company policy. Over the weekend of October 6-8, Verant head honcho John Smedley proceeded to do exactly that:

I've seen the outcry regarding the banning of Mystere. While we typically do not discuss this, I would like to elaborate on several things surrounding this in order to address legitimate concerns raised by our playerbase.

It is very important for everyone concerned to understand that EverQuest's reputation is a very important thing. In this day and age, video games are subjected to an ENORMOUS amount of scrutiny by watchdog groups and the federal and state governments.

In this case, a parent complained to a lot of anti-child porn watchdog sites and several mainstream media outlets regarding the extremely graphic detail of the story and the fact that it apparently contained violence directed at a child.

For us, this poses an extremely serious problem. EverQuest has a reputation as being a family oriented game. Yes it has a mature rating, and yes it does contain violence. That in and of itself gives pause to many people out there (especially parents). But, you would be amazed at how many parents play this game with their kids mostly because we do control the language and they feel like EQ is a family friendly environment despite the dark overtones of some of the stories and quests.

You may say "a person has the right to say whatever they want"... and of course that's true. But, when that action is linked to a company's Intellectual Property (which is just a fancy way of saying people associate it with EQ) it becomes our business because it threatens our business by making us a huge target for all the folks out there that think we all are all a bunch of violent video game players. This just gives them fuel for the fire.

For us, this story represented a serious problem because it used EverQuest as a backdrop. It's already been pointed out by our General Counsel in more legal terms, but the simple fact is that it's easy for folks to point at that story, point at EQ and link the two.

Whether or not any of us likes that or not isn't really the question. The fact is that EverQuest is the very heart of our business and we have to take that very seriously.

Now - Will we be policing the Internet looking for these kinds of stories?

No. We won't. In fact, none of us was even aware of this until it was brought to our attention. That doesn't mean if someone crosses the line again and it's pointed out we won't do the same thing.

The big question is - where's the line? And what right do we have to draw it outside the game?

The answer is complicated and extremely subjective, so I'll just have to be honest and say we'll know it when it's over the line. We're going to discuss it in the upcoming few weeks and see if we can make it more clear, but I can't honestly say if we'll get anywhere because none of us wants to stop people from writing awesome fan-fiction about EQ.

But we aren't going to be looking at every fan site and becoming the Thought Police. We have neither the time, nor the inclination to do that. However we need to protect EverQuest's good image as best we can.

Did we handle this as well as we could have?

No - We didn't. And for that, I apologize.

In the future, we're going to handle this in a different way.

Regards,

John Smedley
President and CEO
Verant Interactive, Inc.

Mystere also posted that he'd had a nice conversation with Mr. Smedley, received a personal apology for Verant's handling of the situation, was satisfied and wouldn't be returning to *EverQuest*. No official word was offered on whether this was a personal choice or the ruling of Verant, but the flavor of the post smacked of personal choice.

Now, what Mr. Smedley posted made far more sense to the players than the corporate shuck n jive act performed by his employees the previous few days. Player reaction to Smedley's post was quite favorable, overall, especially the apology and promise not to make the same mistake again.

The incident also highlighted several nasty facts that make good lessons for publishers and developers entering this industry:

- Verant's first reaction was typical of developers inexperienced in MMOG service and being pressured with a potentially public scandal: Punish the player. There was no dialogue with Mystere, no apparent attempt to make contact or perform an adequate investigation, not even a "Hey, we're getting hounded by the anti-porn people about this, would you do us a favor and take it down?" to either Mystere or fan site EQVault, where the story was posted.

And the place to start was with EQ Vault; in fact, this was where the unnamed parent and watchdog groups should have started. By the time they complained to Verant, a reasonable first step for the company would have been to first request the EQ Vault to remove the post. And I do mean *request*, politely and with a full explanation of why. Then, they should have also contacted the player, told them about the request and why it was made. If EQVault had refused to remove the post, the poster would have been asked — politely! — to contact EQVault and request the post be removed. This is the dignity and communication part of our moral.

If the above process has the desired affect, the post is removed and you bring the player/writer on your side. If all that reasonableness and politeness fails, *then* you bring out the heavy artillery. As it is, Verant merely contributed to a reputation for being ham-fisted when it comes to dealing with the player base;

- Now, because Smedley s statement kinda-sorta contradicts previous statements by George Scotto, the EQ Director of Customer Service and Gordon Wrinn, the Internet Relations Manager, the whole organization look like either big, fat liars or a disorganized group of bumblers. This is not the first time that Smedley has had to become the public point man in a Verant PR crisis. While one should laud his willingness to be reasonable, take it on the chin and do the right thing, one also has to ask: If the top guy has to keep intervening, what does that say about the company s customer service philosophy or the company policies the employees labor under? It smacks of a lack of honesty and communication in policy and that s the last impression you want to leave with anyone;
- Verant has set itself up with an even bigger problem; because they unnecessarily fired the Tomahawk missile of intellectual copyrights so early and so vocally in the fray, they have set an expectation with the public that they must do so in similar circumstances. This makes them just the Internet cops they say they don t want to be, no matter what they say. Mr. Smedley even hints Verant may issue some sort of fanfic guidelines.

This would be a mistake. If the company does issue fanfic guidelines and acts on them, Verant risks making themselves legally responsible for fanfic, regardless of where it is posted. If some private party finds offensive even one story passed by Verant s internal checkers and the company is subsequently sued well, you know.

The morals of our story are this: Honesty, dignity and communication. If you deal with your players using all three values, all the time, you ll have customers for life. Leave out even one, or even have the appearance of leaving one out, and you are just asking for trouble. You could be the nicest folks in the world, with true compassion and concern for your customers, and still come across as ogres.

In this incident, had Verant not panicked and punished, then compounded the problem by backing and filling with seemingly inconsistent statement, but instead thought a bit before reacting, Smedley wouldn t have had to intervene yet again. With a little finesse, communication and compassion for the player, this whole thing could have been handled quietly

and to everyone's satisfaction, or at least to a point where everyone was equally dissatisfied, but understood the situation and the need to remove the post.

In that sense, Verant lost a perfect opportunity to gain some much-needed good will with the vocal portion of their customer base. As it stands, it will just be remembered as a screw-up.

I think the lessons for the industry, especially for those preparing to launch products in the next six months to a year, are pretty obvious.

CORRECTION: And now to demonstrate the proper procedure for falling on one's sword.

In the column **Doomed To Failure?**

(<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D22.html>) was this line:

Compare this to around 14,000 players at peak for *Asheron's Call* on that same Zone, or some 30,000 to 50,000 (depending on who you believe) for Verant's *EverQuest* over on The Station.

It was pointed out by Gordon Wrinn over at Verant that the depending on who you believe crack makes it look like Verant is engaging in subterfuge or deceit on the matter of subscriber numbers. He's right; it was an ill-written line that implies sliminess where none exists. I apologize to Gordon and the whole crew at Verant.

You can check EQ's current simultaneous player numbers by going to the main Sony Station page at <http://www.station.sony.com/> and scrolling down the page. It's one the left.

1.30 Checking Back

Volume Nine, Issue 30
November 2, 2000

Back in the February 5 column, **Panem et Circenses**

(<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D5.html>), I wrote:

Asheron's Call has been on sale for about three months now. As of today, the answer seems to be that the market can support at least two 3D massively multiplayer RPGs without a lot of poaching. *EverQuest* now has somewhere between 150,000 and 180,000 paying subscribers, and it seems to post about 30,000 to 35,000 players at peak. The debut of *Asheron's Call* doesn't seem to have affected those numbers much, if at all. Turbine's offering, although growing somewhat slowly compared to other MMRPGs, is posting simultaneous player numbers around the 12,500 mark at peak. I have no idea of the actual numbers of paying subscribers for AC, but if we use Verant's sales numbers versus simultaneous users as a marker, that would be about 30% of subscribers playing at peak times. This would put the total subscriber numbers in the 35,000 to 45,000 range.

While not exceptional, these are fair to middlin' numbers for the game at this stage in its life cycle. The real test for Turbine and Microsoft in the next six months is whether they can sustain growth. The current generally accepted sign of "exceptional," as set first by *Ultima Online* and then by *EverQuest*, is 100,000 or more paying subscribers at the end of the first year of operations. If *Asheron's Call* can hit and maintain that mark, they have a true hit on their hands by anyone's standards.

So, we're coming up on the one-year anniversary of the *Asheron's Call* launch; what's the status? Microsoft and Turbine haven't released detailed numbers on *AC*'s monthly subscribers and an email inquiry I sent to Turbine's PR department on October 14 has gone unanswered. The best inside numbers I could get from my sources say the game had 80,000 subscribers as of about September 2000. The simultaneous player numbers seem to roughly bear that out; I've personally seen about 17,000 during peak play hours, and others tell me they've seen about the same or slightly more.

So, *AC* may or may not have 100,000 subscribers; if not, the game would seem to be within spitting range. The game certainly hasn't taken off in the way *Ultima Online* or *EverQuest* did, each which had well over 100,000 subscribers at the end of its first year, but would still have to be called a success. Any MMOG bringing in around \$9.6 million a year in subscriber fees is nothing to be ashamed of.

I also wrote at the time:

The good news in this for developers and publishers, though, is that the market for persistent worlds does indeed seem to be growing with no end in sight. This should cause more development money to be tossed at persistent-world games by major publishers. I don't know about you, but I tend to think of "more money" as a good thing--not for the money's sake, but because risking it signals commitment and intent. The larger the sum risked, the greater the commitment and intent. This is a one of those vicious circles I can live with.

Amen. Since February, I know of at least six major MMOGs going into the design or development and three others that were rescued from termination; the potential for using MMOGs in collecting dead presidents is just too good not to risk some capital. It would seem that the market for PC-based massively multiplayer games is in a steady growth phase.

Of course, we haven't seen our first high-profile failure yet, and it is uncertain how the money people will react to that. The recent full-scale decimation in the ranks of content-providing entertainment dot-coms on the Web, including high profile sites DEN and POP.com, a content site backed by both Steve Spielberg and Ron Howard, gives us a disturbing indication. The indication is that such a high-profile failure of a MMOG might cause panic and retreat by content providers and the money people alike.

I can imagine how it might happen. Take a mass-market license, such as Star Wars or Star Trek. Each of them has an MMOG being built for it. A MMOG built on either is pretty well

guaranteed to attract a larger crowd of non-gamers or casual gamers than the current offerings, which are geared toward the Hard Core gamer niche.

The mass-market consumer just doesn't have the time or energy to deal with much of the BS inflicted by publishers on Hard Core subscribers. Hard Cores may be vocally abusive about it, but they'll put up with a lot of crap for the privilege of paying \$10 a month. Not so the average Joe. For example, I can't imagine any of my relatives who are also Star Trek fans *not* dumping a game if they logged in and found that several hours worth of game play has been erased by a developer nerf. To the Hard Core, this is just business as usual, worthy of a little name-calling, at most.

So, should either the Star Trek or Star Wars persistent universe blow these types of Hard Core chunks, you can expect to see something you wouldn't find in *Ultima Online* or *EverQuest*: a mass exodus. And if that *should* happen, then you can expect many MMOG projects in development to be shut down faster than an anti-prostitution protester at a game convention.

Thus, the message from the rest of the industry to Activision, holders of the Star Trek online license, and Verant, producing the Star Wars online game, might well be:

Don't screw up.

1.31 3D OR NOT 3D?

Volume Nine, Issue 31
October 26, 2000

One of the Web sites I read daily is **The Rantings of Lum the Mad** (<http://www.lumthemad.net/>). The site began about 1 1/2 years ago as a rant-fest concerning the *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest* communities and instantly became hated by those of us actually trying to make the games worth playing. No one likes having their dirty laundry washed in public, even if it is done with a wry humor and sharp, sometimes hilarious, sarcasm. We all read and laughed and hated.

From then to now, Lum has transformed the site into one of the more thoughtful, analytical vehicles devoted to MMOGs, without losing his unique attitude or twisted sense of humor. He also brought onboard several other writers and moderators who share his talent for humor, love of MMOGs and ability to write. Each of them has written and posted columns and articles of worth. One of those writers goes by the handle of arcadian del sol (arcadian@digiphobia.com). On October 16, he posted a column regarding **3D versus isometric view games** (<http://www.lumthemad.net/news/971715179,11778..shtml>) that impressed me.

The subject of game interfaces is one much debated within the online game industry, as each of the two main styles, 3D 1st/3rd person and isometric god view, have nasty limitations in what you can allow the player to do. For example, one reason you aren't able to own a house in 3D games such as *EverQuest* or *Asheron's Call*: Houses are dynamic objects, not hard-coded into

the database. Hard-coded objects load at the start or when you enter a new zone; each time you pass by a dynamic object in an online game, the server has to load it for you, creating a bit of lag. No one has figured out how to keep the lag from loading thousands of player-placed dynamic 3D houses from grinding everyone to a screeching halt.

Limitations such as this plague development teams, as they try to balance eye candy with player functionality and ownership. Ownership of large container objects such as houses and ships are one reason players choose Ultima Online's isometric interface over 3D hack n slash games. Another is that some people just plain don't like 3D interfaces.

Arcadian's column is from the player's viewpoint and he touched on and these other interesting thoughts, among which were:

Players are passionate about online games. The players who aren't don't stick with them for longer than 3 months. Currently, the field is limited to three games, and the communities have their reasons for selecting one over the other. My reason for sticking with *UO* has been the interface. *EQ* and *AC* look like an origami puppet show on crack, and *UO* has a familiar, comfortable, isometric display I prefer to this day. Yes, it's three years old - crucify me. I also prefer a three-year old port to one bottled two days ago. I guess I'm crazy that way.

Landscape is the least of my concerns however. I'm more concerned at the widening gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged players. How many of you are using the "tiny UO" setting in order to get a display that is three tiles wider? I am. Why? Because when you are not the red PK gank-whore, you are already at a disadvantage. You don't need more of them, such as being visible to an opponent who is not visible to you. The sacrifice is that *UO* runs a teensy bit slower now, but you do what you must in order to maintain a somewhat level playing field. Nobody is arguing that a new 3D client will be superior - and naturally those who use it will gain yet another advantage.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not say that of the screenshots I have seen, the new online product from OSI does look prettier than the current assembly of 3D titles. But then again, the fruit fly larva is prettier than any other maggot in the animal kingdom. That doesn't mean I want one as a pet. *EverQuest* and *Asheron's Call* will always be there to love me. Like harlots in a bordello, all I need is a twenty-dollar bill and I can buy me some love. But I haven't been to see them yet. I have a nice *UO* to come home to every night. She might not dance and sing and strut like *EQ* and *AC*, and she might not be the red lipstick and mascara type, but she's got what I need, and she's the one I took home with me.

As Arcadian's viewpoint shows, these are some of the critical issues which developers are going to have to weigh and make decisions on. As the MMOG market grows and competition becomes fierce, it is not too general to state that they can and sometimes will be make-or-break decisions concerning a game's success. The lackluster success of *Asheron's Call* compared to *EverQuest* shows what having the first mover advantage in an interface can mean. If some other team jumps in with major improvements, that type of ephemeral success can also come back to bite you. One has to wonder, for instance, what would happen if someone marketed a game similar to *EQ*, but with house ownership, before Verant gets around to retro-coding into *EQ*.

In a narrow sense, this means we'll be seeing incremental improvements in the near future. What does it mean in the broader sense? Today's popular games, all of which began development over three years ago, had the advantage of being first movers into the market by actually developing the games professionally, with professional-sized budgets and resources. That advantage is now gone: that's why it's called *first mover advantage*.

You'd be amazed at the number of publishers and development shops that don't realize that the first mover advantage is gone. Online game design meetings have a tendency to start with, OK, we're going to do EQ/UO/AC/Insert Existing Game Name Here, except it will be science fiction instead of medieval fantasy. Needless to say, most of these games are slated for the trash heap.

So I suspect the broader sense means that we'll have a battle royale for the next five years or so, at which time the consumers will have spoken their piece about interface preferences. Companies that wish to succeed in this industry will then start their design meetings by stating,

OK, we're going to develop a 3D 1st person game, so we know that A, B, F and Q must be in the game or players will ignore us. Now, how do we add all that and still differentiate *our* game, not just copy everyone else?

1.32 Not Another Christmas Rush?

Volume Nine, Issue 32
November 9, 2000

I find myself waxing a tad serious this week.

It's the middle of the **Christmas Rush again** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol8%2D40.html>) and hundreds, if not thousands, of PC and console games are hitting the shelves. A year ago, I wrote the following about the game industry's annual Rite d Rush:

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?

And:

Of course, considering that at least 90 percent 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.

To see if anything has changed, I've been examining the current game releases on the various platforms, with an eye toward possible conclusions to be drawn about the state of today's industry. And, while stuffing my abused gray matter back into the ear canal it attempted to ooze from, I have, indeed, come to one over-riding conclusion, to wit:

If computer and video game designers were charged with Originality While Working, most of the charges would be dropped due to lack of evidence.

Want to know what I'm talking about? Check out a recent list of **top sellers at Gamerankings.com** (<http://www.gamerankings.com/itemrankings/salesdata.asp>) and what do you find? Most of the titles are sequels built on existing engines, add-on packs for last year's games, this year's version of perennial sports games, licensed products thrown on top of other game engines and ports of games to other platforms. On each of the top ten sales lists for each gaming platform, you'd be lucky to find *one* truly original title.

Someone or several someones will no doubt attempt to smack me with the Salmon of Discipline profusely about the head and shoulders, all the while crying, "But Jess! Most of these games are really fun! To which I reply well, yes. You are correct; some of the games, maybe even most of them, are quite fun to play. I'm having a great time with a couple of them, myself."

So what? That has nothing to do with the issue of originality. The current game industry offerings remind me greatly of the movie industry from the 1930s through the 1950s. While occasionally movies of great originality were made (*Citizen Kane*, *Casablanca* and *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* come immediately to mind), most of the many thousands of pictures shown during that period were formulaic, very cheaply produced toss-aways. Think serial Westerns and mobster flicks. 99% of them weren't intended to be originals or masterpieces; they were intended to briefly entertain an audience, make a few bucks and then go the hell away and make room for other, similar fare.

Computer and video console games have settled into much that same pattern. There's no doubt we're being entertained; the industry ships plenty of titles every year, and seems to bring in more valuta each year than the previous year. For the most part, we seem to be happy with the selection, much as moviegoers were generally happy with the cowboys and Indians oater of the week fifty years ago. The comparison even holds a bit when you compare game designers to the screenwriters of the age, who were hired more for their ability to turn out a script in a week than to write compellingly and with originality.

What I'm wondering is, will we see the Renaissance in originality and creativity that moviemaking has seen during the period of approximately the mid-1960s to the present? That renewal has featured experiments, sometimes wild and outré ones, with subject matter, technology and technique. As society went through extreme and sometimes vicious changes, so did the nature of how and why movies were made. Sure, there were and still are plenty of toss-aways, but we're also seeing some really interesting uses of new technology, sometimes combined with wildly new technique and broader subject matter.

As a result, movies are far more expensive to make these days, so we're seeing the Renaissance slack off as studios reinstitute formulas as a way of fading their own bets. We get action films, love stories, the annual summer teen romances and the occasional noble content that also entertains well, such as *Schindler's List* or *Erin Brockovich*. The cycle is turning.

Computer/video games would seem to be sitting just at that first crux point, or perhaps just over the line into initial experimentation. While we are in the first phase of the formula doldrums, the pieces for change appear to be there: the technology is evolving rapidly and being adopted by the industry, the subject matter is beginning to change with the new popularity of massively multiplayer games, and both of those are causing some changes to the techniques we use to design and development them.

The only question left is: Will we actually have a Renaissance?

1.33 Hot Game Developers: Two Years Later

Volume Nine, Issue 33
November 16, 2000

Some quick notes before we get started on the latest rant:

A look at **Atriarch from World Fusion** (<http://www.worldfusion.com/news/news.html>): No, I haven't forgotten this one. I simply was swept up in the Chinese fire drill that is Christmas Rush and have been trying to clear the decks, so I can get up to Orange County and check them out. With any luck, things will calm down in a couple-three weeks and I can schedule some time with Serafina and crew.

In coming months, other games on my look-at list in the question-asking *Doomed to Fail?* series include **Mythic's Dark Age of Camelot** (<http://www.mythicgames.com/>), The Stars Wars RPG by Verant/Austin (<http://www.verant.com/>) - assuming that John Smedley and Gordon Wrinn continue to resist the temptation to send a hit team armed with Fiery Avengers to skin me alive - and **Horizons by Artifact Entertainment** (<http://www.artifact-entertainment.com/horizons/horizons.htm>), assuming they do, indeed, continue to survive on short rations.

Now, on with the column:

Want to know how quickly this industry changes?

Back in January, 1999, when I was still writing and editing the Online Game Insider bi-weekly newsletter, I laid out my list of hot online game developers. Discussing "hot" or good developers is much like crossing a minefield; it seems real easy, until you're suddenly missing a foot. All you have to do is not list someone who thinks they ought to be listed and, voila! people start calling you Stumpy.

Then there is the question of how you define hot. Do you gauge "hot" by monetary success, critical review success, code and design implementation or player satisfaction or some combination of all of them? No matter what criteria or combination of criteria is used, there is always going to be someone you miss that probably *should* have been mentioned.

I thought it might be interesting to look at those eight companies again, almost two years later. There *have* been some changes. In the interest of space and time, I'm going to split this into two columns, each covering four companies on the list. Then I'll take my chances on being called Stumpy in hand and update the hot list for the year 2000.

Crossover Technologies

Location: New York, NY
URL: <http://www.crossover.com/home.html>
Style: Massively Multiplayer, Other
Latest Projects: Fantasy Wars (Station.sony.com)

01/1999 Comments: I like Crossover for one reason; they have constantly taken major risks and tried to push the edge of online gaming out of the role-playing and simulator box and in new directions.

This hasn't always been a financial success. Games such as *President 96* (<http://www.crossover.com/pres96.html>) and *Reinventing America* (<http://www.crossover.com/reus.html>) pushed the edge a bit, but were not what one would call financial windfalls. What they did do, however, was to move online gaming out of the traditional box and involve tens of thousands of people, many not in the hard core computer gaming category, into a new type of gaming experience. In that regard, the games were raging successes.

It not only takes guts to try this type of game, it takes real chutzpah to sell the concept to profit-minded companies such as AOL and CNN. The industry as whole is going to benefit from what Crossover is doing, if just in showing us all that there is a different way to think about online gaming.

11/2000 Comments: In March, 1999, I had a conversation with Robert Gehorsam, VP of Content for Sony Online, at Sony's booth at the GDC. They were showing Crossover's *Fantasy War* (as well as launching *EverQuest*) and Robert asked me how well I thought it would do. When I told him it was a noble experiment that would be a huge bust financially and that he ought to offer it for free as a loss leader, he literally turned white.

Well, *Fantasy War* on Sony's Station *was* a huge bust and has been removed from the play list. And it was a noble experiment that had to be done, in that it showed that the Internet gaming market is not yet ready to charge per-session/game subscriptions for slow, turn-based games.

In the meantime, Crossover is spinning off as **Unplugged Games** (<http://www.ungames.com/>) and is attempting to reinvent itself as a developer of wireless games. With Crossover leaders Eric Goldberg, Greg Costikyan and Len Quom involved, we can be certain that the experimentation into interesting new games will continue.

Kesmai Studios

Location: Charlottesville, VA
URL: <http://www.gamestorm.com/company/>
Style: Massively Multiplayer Games, Other
Latest Projects: Jet Warrior, Jack Nicklaus Online Golf Tour

01/1999 Comments: In a very real sense, Kesmai created the for-pay online games industry. The company was the first true client/server online game developer, starting in 1982, and its design and technological innovations have been emulated by most client/server games that followed. The company has constantly pushed the server technology edge, seeking always to make its games a bit better, more enjoyable experience for the player.

Everyone in the industry today owes a debt to Kesmai for breaking the original ground and continuing to wield the shovel. They were and are pioneers, and have the arrows to prove it.

11/2000 Comments: Well, Electronic Arts agreed with me. They acquired Kesmai from News Corporation a year ago and have been integrating the company's experience and personnel into the EA.com effort. I'm sad to see the Kesmai brand get swallowed up in the EA franchise hopper; some things ought to be retained just out of respect for history and risk-taking.

[Interactive Magic](#)

Location: Research Triangle, NC
URL: <http://www.imagiconline.com/home.shtml>
Style: Massively Multiplayer Games, Retail Hybrids
Latest Projects: Dawn of Aces (Imagic Online), Raider Wars (AOL)

01/1999 Comments: I-Magic understands what makes a good massively multiplayer game; they have certainly observed and learned the hard lessons of the industry. *Warbirds* and *Planetary Raiders* are fun and are improving all the time. Moreover, the company isn't afraid to branch from its roots as a WWII flight sim provider and build solid games in other genres, including space combat and casino games. "Hot" because they push the envelope just a tiny bit with each new version and product and aren't afraid to take some chances here and there.

11/2000 Comments: Talk about changes. First founder Wild Bill Stealey started buying up every gaming site he could get his hands on, including MPG-Net, which owned The Kingdom of Drakkar. The company then went through hard times, before things changed to miserable times. Things got worse from there.

Now the company is called iEntertainment (<http://www.iencentral.com/>) and has shifted focus from MMOGs to the same old, same old as every other gaming portal out there. Will Bill is gone, most of the MPG-Net crew is gone and the stock price is sitting at around a dollar, down from a 52-week high of \$6 and change.

I'd have to say they no longer belong on the Hot List.

[Mythic Entertainment](#)

Location: Fairfax, VA
URL: <http://www.mythicgames.com/>
Style: Massively Multiplayer Games
Latest Projects: DarkStorm: Well of Souls, Aliens Online

01/1999 Comments: I like this company for the same reasons I like Kesmai. They came later, 1984, but have also pushed the backend technology and design of online games.

11/2000 Comments: Mythic keeps trucking along as an independent. They recently formed a partnership with Abandon Entertainment that brought in some cash, and the company's games are now being premiered on The Mothership (<http://www.mothership.com/main/default.asp>), a sci-fi and gaming site that is partnered with film-maker Centropolis (Independence Day, Godzilla, Stargate). The company is also in serious negotiations to license a TV series based on its latest game in development, *Dark Age of Camelot*.

I'd say, not bad.

Next Week: Verant, Turbine, Uproar and VR-1.

1.34 Hot Game Developers: Part Two

Volume Nine, Issue 34
November 23, 2000

Last week (insert link to BTH 9-33a here), we began a revisit to my January 1999 list of hot online game developers, to see what changes had been made in the nearly two years since the list was first published.

This week, we finish up with the last four on the list.

[Verant](#) (formerly Redeye, 989 Studios before that, who knows about tomorrow?)

Location: San Diego, CA
URL: http://www.989studios.com/index_studios.html
Style: Massively Multiplayer Games
Latest Projects: EverQuest (Station.sony.com)

01/1999 Comments: It may seem premature to add Verant to the list; the company's first game is still in beta test, after all. What I have seen of the game so far, however, tells me that they have a chance to really push the envelope with this product. Certainly, the front-end client is the most beautiful I have ever seen. The game play may or may not be revolutionary; much depends on how the development team manages the "Let's add all this neat stuff!" syndrome that seems to infect every massively multiplayer game (and most computer games) during beta test.

So let's call this a provisional listing for now, and revisit it in a few months.

11/2000 Comments: Well, I think we can take these guys off the provisional list. *EverQuest* has become the best-selling persistent world in the industry with almost 300,000 monthly subscribers.

Verant was also smart enough to begin working on expansion packs for the game immediately. Two have already been released and the third is on the way soon. This was a smart move, indeed; averaging a new retail expansion unit every six months keeps the income flowing and the hard-core customers happy.

So, technologically and expansion pack-wise, the company is red hot. They came into the market at just the right time, with just the right product; kudos to them for that.

However, I'm starting to get a tad annoyed with Verant's habit of claiming every new development project as a first ever, as if they were inventing the industry as they go along. Yes, they are doing some good work, but the company is a Johnny-Come-Lately to the industry; everything they are doing has been done before. Only *EverQuest*, as the first true 3D POV persistent world on the market, has any kind of claim to a first. Otherwise, the game isn't particularly revolutionary; any former DIKU MUD player will have no trouble recognizing that extremely major influence on *EQ*'s design.

Nor, as far as I can tell, are any of the other Verant games in development firsts. Technologically, they look nice, but all of them, with the possible exception of *Star Wars Online*, are clones of previous games, some shamelessly so. The announced feature set for *Sovereign* (<http://www.station.sony.com/sovereign/>), for example, borrows more than a little bit from the old mainframe game, *Empire* (http://www.decus.org/libcatalog/description_html/v00012.html) and from the failed Activision/Titanic Entertainment persistent world, *netWar* (<http://www.netwar.com/>). And the recently announced *PlanetSide* (<http://www.station.sony.com/planetside/>), billed by Verant as the first massively multi-player first-person shooter to date, simply isn't, not by five years. That honor goes to **Mythic Entertainment** (<http://www.mythicgames.com>) for *Splatterball* and *Rolemaster-Magestorm*.

My advice to them would be: Your actual accomplishments to date are impressive enough, OK? Stop trying to outdo Al Gore.

[Turbine Entertainment](#)

Location: Westwood, MA
URL: <http://www.turbinegames.com/>
Style: Massively Multiplayer Games
Latest Projects: Asheron's Call, Dreamcast game (Sega)

01/1999 Comments: *Asheron's Call* is not what I would normally consider a "hot" game. One reason they are on the list: For having the guts to sell Sega on a massively multiplayer game for

the Dreamcast console. I am not sanguine about the chances of multiplayer games for the console market; no one has yet proved that anyone wants to play multiplayer games via the TV. Current consoles lack the ease of player-to-player communications capability of PCs, and that communication is a major reason people play these games.

But someone has to take the chance, at the risk of failing miserably and not making back the advance payments, and Turbine is to be applauded for being the pioneer. Now pardon me while I hide behind this here boulder; arrows hurt like hell.

11/2000 Comments: The arrows seem to have found their mark. The Dreamcast MMOG seems to have quietly crawled into a corner and died. Turbine has released zero news about it since this list was first published, and when I asked an inside source at Sega-Net recently when they expected to launch the game, he laughed so hard that he dropped the phone.

Asheron's Call (<http://www.zone.com/asheroncall/>) is doing OK for Turbine, for all that they are running last in a three horse race with *EQ* and *Ultima Online*. And while the company doesn't have any news about upcoming games posted on its Web site, they are hiring people to work on other, unnamed games.

All in all, I doubt they will make the year 2000 Hot list, but who knows about 2001 and beyond?

[Uproar](#)

Location: New York, NY
URL: <http://www.uproar.com/>
Style: Game Shows
Latest Projects: Trivia Blitz, CBS Sportsline Team Trivia

01/1999 Comments: Hot not because they are breaking any new ground in technology or design, but because they are pretty much the only company presently trying to create games that can appeal to everyone in the household and having some success at doing it. These games are really *fun*. If you're in the mood to take a break from chasing orcs or shooting down enemy fighters, these beer-and-pretzel offerings are just the ticket.

11/2000 Comments: It's been a wild ride for Uproar. They went public this year, and the stock has slid from \$35 to hover around \$2.50. Losses continue to amount, including some \$11.9 million in the last quarter alone and they predict the losses to continue through most of fiscal 2001. Like everyone else in the industry, they are hanging on and praying for an upswing.

In the meantime, they have acquired several companies, including [iwin.com](http://www.iwin.com) and [ibetcha.com](http://www.ibetcha.com), increased distribution worldwide and ad impressions are near 2 billion per month. If they can hang on through the ugliness that is the entertainment portion of the stock market, they should do fine. They have a lot more competition now than two years ago, but they also have a huge lead on them.

[VR-1](#)

Location: Boulder, CO
URL: <http://www.vr1.com/>
Style: Massively Multiplayer Games
Latest Projects: Fighter Ace, Ultracorps (IGZ), S.A.R.A.C. Project (AOL)

01/1999 Comments: Hot for two reasons:

They are trying a concept that could end up being revolutionary: Taking some of the hard core elements out of hard core massively multiplayer games, to try to broaden the audience a bit;

They actually listen to the customers and make improvements and design changes based on those comments. They then carry on these improvements as design requirements in games in development, rather than reinventing the wheel with every new game.

11/2000 Comments: Hoo-ee; talk about going from hot to not. One would have to list VR-1's online games as failures. *Ultracorps* did so badly on the Zone that it was closed down last year. *Fighter Ace* continues to live there, but as one of the least-played games in the industry. *Nomads of Klanth* went live late last year on AOL renamed as *Fantasy Tank Battles*, to extremely mixed results; it isn't on the play list of new Games Channel controller EA.com.

Most of the other MMOGs are still in terminal development or have been dropped altogether, and the company changed its name to Circadence and is trying to license the game tools as an e-business solution. Only Hasbro seems to have taken the bait, and they have troubles of their own.

Yeah, I think we can drop this one from the list.

Coming Soon: The Year 2000 Hot List.

1.35 Cassandra Speaks

Volume Nine, Issue 35
November 30, 2000

And I get to say, I told you so. Not that I'll be listened to; I'm getting used to being ignored by the guys that hold the checkbooks.

I'm speaking, of course, of the companies outside the computer/video game industry who started buying publishers back in the mid-1990s, figuring that would be an easy way to get in to a market worth more than Hollywood.

All those chickens of stupidity are coming home to roost. Hasbro is the latest casualty. The toy company leads the pack in announcing the winners in the annual I'm suck at managing, so you're laid off during the Holidays sweepstakes. It announced last month that, company-wide,

500 to 550 people can soon look forward to having a lot more spare time than they planned on. No telling how many of those will be from the Interactive division, but as Hasbro Interactive continues to be the largest money-loser for the corporation, you can guess where the cost cutting is going to be the most vicious.

If you'll remember, Hasbro was also the lay-off leader last year, announcing in December 2,200 lay-offs company wide, which included closing two of the old Microprose development studios and rapping a third. Now, to top it all off, the rumor mill is all a-twitter with the news that Hasbro is trying to sell off the Interactive division. All Hasbro will say about it is that they are exploring strategic alternatives. This is CorpSpeak that translates as Will you for God's sake take this mismanaged dog out and shoot it, already?

I'm not surprised by the losses or lay-offs. Back in August 1998, when Hasbro had announced the purchase of Spectrum Holobyte/Microprose, I wrote a column questioning the wisdom of the move. The potential culture clash between the mass-market behemoth and the hard-core computer simulation game company just seemed too large to rectify.

Here are some snippets of what I had to say at the time (You can read the **full column here** <insert URL>):

Hasbro is known for it's easy to learn and play, no-brain-strain games, such as *Monopoly*.° Microprose, on the other hand, made its reputation by developing some of the most complicated computer games in the industry, including the *Falcon* flight simulator series. The two markets have little or no intermingling.

Heck, GameSpot reported that a Hasbro manager is reputed to have said that anything that takes longer than an hour to play is not a game.° Can any of us imagine playing *Civilization*, computer gaming's answer to the question "How can I use up the rest of this incarnation?" for less than an hour?

Now, does Hasbro have the kind of experience in this part of the industry to make that happen?° I suspect not; there is a big difference between developing *Risk!* and *X-Com* or *Falcon*. The two development styles talk completely different languages and I just don't see the Microprose R&D teams viewing their new lords and masters with any kind of honest respect, at least at the outset.

I can just see the *Battleship* and *Falcon* development teams talking at lunch:

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

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

All in all, this is a weird marriage of talents.° If Hasbro is seeking to branch out into a more hard core computer gaming market, they bought the right company.° Tom Dusenberry, Hasbro Interactive's President, has been quoted as saying he plans to keep the Microprose R&D team intact.

The question is, can they manage their new charge?

The answer to that last question was obviously a resounding No. Even if Hasbro picked up Spectrum just for the company's wide distribution network, the continual losses from the software development side negated any possible advantage of the acquisition. The culture gap was just too large.

The acquisition occurred at a time when companies with no experience in PC or console games wanted to capitalize on the exploding growth of the industry. They figured all they had to do was buy one of the players. It was a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the industry, one that has turned into a megabucks boo-boo for Hasbro. Like, a \$200 million US down the rathole boo-boo.

Hasbro wasn't the only company to make that mistake. Cendant and Mattel, among others, also bought into the folly and ended up losing hundreds of millions each. In the end, each had to take it on the chin and get rid of **the Albatross** (<http://www.sangfroid.com/rime/>) at fire sale prices.

So, Cassandra, what will happen now? Probably the same thing that happened when Cendant decided to sell Sierra/Blizzard/et al to Havas Interactive and Mattel sold The Learning Company/SSI/et al to Gores Technology: now that the value of the property has been lowered remarkably, some computer game company with experience will swoop in, acquire rights and make out like a bandit.

Ah, who will be next, who will be next?

1.35.1 Hasbro To Buy Microprose

August 14, 1998

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

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

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

is a tender offer, so everything depends on Hasbro being able to acquire at least 50.1% of Microprose stock at the \$6 price.

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

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

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

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

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

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

tired, semi-amused tolerance with which battle-scarred veterans treat newbie GIs after their first firefight.° I can just see the Battleship and Falcon development teams talking at lunch:

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

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

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

No, the real prize here for Hasbro is that distribution network.° Microprose does pretty well in European sales and, of course, they are in all the major stores here in the US.° The company's products have a proven track record of sales, which is what chain buyers at CompUSA and B. Dalton Software look for, so Hasbro's shelf reach just took a big leap.

All in all, this is a weird marriage of talents.° If Hasbro is seeking to branch out into a more hard core computer gaming market, they bought the right company.° Tom Dusenberry, Hasbro Interactive's President, has been quoted as saying he plans to keep the Microprose R&D team intact.° The question is, can they manage their new charge?

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1.36 Get Rid of Game Ratings

Volume Nine, Issue 36
December 7, 2000

Its time to just get rid of video and computer game ratings.

When even the Federal Trade Commission says there is no direct link between depicted violence and real world violent acts by kids, why are wasting the time and money it takes to rate them? I'll tell you why: because politicians and demagogues such as Joe Lieberman have invested their careers heavily in the concept of saving our kids from depicted violence.

And Joe Lieberman and the Forces of Darkness that wish to subvert the Constitution to protect our kids! are already winning. Why worry about the media filing lawsuits based on the 1st Amendment to get elected officials off their backs, when the pols are becoming expert at censorship by intimidation?

Lieberman, his political cronies and their willing shock troops are masters at subtly changing the subject. For years, the man who might end up being Vice-President (at the time of this writing in

November, the election is still undecided) decried depictions of violence in the media, waving study after flawed study that purported to show that media violence begets real world violence. As Lieberman himself said in a **press conference in December 1998** (<http://www.senate.gov/member/ct/lieberman/general/r120198a.html>), The fact is we have compiled a strong record, starting with our hearings, to show that repeated exposure to these games can be harmful and should be cause for concern.

December 1998 seems to have been a watershed for Lieberman; it was also the first time he started changing the subject away from violence begets violence to Hey, these guys may be marketing mature games to kids! This is known as covering your bets, something most politicians at the Federal level are very good at. Lieberman is a Past Master; while pounding on publishers for supposedly contributing to a youth violence epidemic, he covers his bets with statements like We are not seeking censorship but better citizenship and This is an honest admission that we don't have all the answers to explain why so many kids are turning into killers. (From the press release announcing the Omnibus juvenile justice bill on May 20, 1999) Lieberman goes to great lengths to state how he is not in favor of censorship, while calling for just such legislation in the absence of self-enforced censorship by the entertainment media.

Lieberman and other politicians, such as Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas, have been playing the censorship through intimidation game since about 1992. They and others threatened the computer/video game industry with government sanctions and forced the adoption of a game rating system, and lowered the hammer on Hollywood to make theirs more stringent. The 1st Amendment never came into play legally, because Hollywood and Silicon Valley grudgingly caved, rather than pay for legal proceedings.

Meanwhile, more and more scientists and censorship groups began to question and reject as flawed the surveys by anti-media violence advocacy groups and even agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and (the good lord help us) Senator Orrin Hatch's Senate Committee on the Judiciary. It was noted that some of these reports were endorsed without being read by the likes of the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Assn., and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. It was also noted that study after study refuted the basic premise by noting there was no link to violence in media causing youth violence.

This is where the marketing to violence to kids air cover came in very handy for those with an agenda. After the April 20, 1999 Columbine High School murders in Colorado, it was widely reported that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the perpetrators, played *Doom*, that well-known murder simulator and corruptor of youth. That was all Lieberman and President Clinton needed. Within days Lieberman was calling for a study and, within two months, Clinton ordered the FTC to investigate and report on youth violence and violence in media and marketing practices.

And while the report did, indeed, decry such marketing practices when issued in September — almost the whole damned thing was about marketing practices - imagine the surprise in D.C. when the pols read advance copies of the report and found that it flatly stated, on the first two

pages, that there is no proof that depicted violence in any way causes youth violence. Don't worry; it didn't slow them down one bit. Who cares if media violence doesn't really make kids violent? Why, depicted violence obviously *reinforces* violent behavior they learn elsewhere. And those entertainment bastards are marketing mature games to the under-aged! Censor! By the way, we have this Presidential campaign in progress and money is kind of tight

Do you see the vicious circle here? Based on flawed and rejected studies that proved a link between media violence and real world violence by kids, Lieberman and his Congressional cronies intimidated game publishers into creating a voluntary rating system to protect kids from it. One would think that when even the FTC reports that media violence doesn't cause real world violent acts by kids, the matter of ratings would be dropped. But no, that would make too much sense and remove a perfectly good vehicle for extracting campaign contributions from Hollywood. Instead, let us just say, with absolutely no peer-reviewed proof, that there is a *correlation* and pound the game makers even harder for daring to market their mature games in venues where kids might see the ads, too.

This is getting absolutely insane. There is only one way to get these people to stop the censorship by intimidation:

Let the power of the 1st Amendment come into play. Drop the rating system and make politicians and their single agenda followers who want censorship file federal lawsuits to squelch violence in media. You and I know it will go to the highest court in the land.

And if they think Duke Nukem is tough, just wait until they face The Supremes.

1.37 OK, Would You Pay More If

Volume Nine, Issue 37
December 14, 2000

First, I'd like to introduce a guest collaborator for this series of columns: Myschyf, she of the quick wit and ready opinion. Mys is a contributor to several game-related sites, including Lum the Mad.

Now: Let's go out on a limb and speculate wildly that the next two columns are going to raise a few hackles. Why? Because we going to propose raising the cost to play massively multiplayer, persistent world games online, that's why.

(The authors wait until the last rotten veggie bounces off their heads.)

All right, now that we have that out of our systems, let's lay some foundation:

- The games we're talking about here are those that make up the MMOG market, such as *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *Asheron's Call* and the new crop in development, represented by *Anarchy Online* and *Shadowbane*, et al. This does not include such games as Poker, Trivia,

Backgammon, etc. In other words, we're talking about persistent worlds that charge a fee for access to the game;

- This column does not cover such Retail Hybrids as *Diablo II* or *Unreal Tournament*. Those games represent a different market with a different cost structure and business model. It may be worthwhile to discuss that market at some point — say, when *NeverWinter Nights* is ready to ship — but not today;
- We aren't going to directly discuss the potential videogame console online market, although it is much on people's minds today. However, most of what we'll be discussing will apply to those services, as well;
- We're operating on the assumptions that A) MMOG's already don't have enough effective in-house customer support by at least half; B) one of the main reasons for that lack is that not enough revenue is generated to allow it and still make even a minimal profit; C) the current lawsuits by former volunteers against AOL and Origin Systems, whether the companies are absolved or not, are going to have a chilling effect on the current industry standards of support of such volunteers; D) because of those silly lawsuits, MMOGs will have to hire people to deal with the minor support issues volunteers now perform; E) to be able to hire all those people and make up for the current understaffing problem an MMOG will have to generate much more revenue to allow that expenditure and still make even a minimal profit.

That said, we'll use this column to lay out some pricing history and how price affects player behavior. Next week we'll cover what your \$10 pays for today and why you should pay more.

Pricing History and the Effects on Player Behavior

Commercial MMOGs, i.e. charging money for persistent, massively multiplayer games, have really only been around for about 17 years. In that time, however, the pricing concept has gone through some major changes.

Start in 1983, the year *MegaWars I* debuted on CompuServe. At the time, there were maybe 150,000 people using online services, mainly CiS and The Source. That is not a large customer base to draw from.

The early for-pay MMOGs first debuted on CompuServe, GENie and America Online between 1983 and 1993 at hourly rates, billed to the closest minute. Quite high hourly rates; on CiS, for example, access to the network cost between \$6 for 300bps access and \$12.80 per hour for 1200bps. Toward the end of that period, access slowly dropped to \$5 per hour for 300-2400bps, and higher fees for 9600bps. The reason for the high cost was simple; there were few computers in homes, most access was by businesses and online services were expensive to set up and maintain. Take the example of Prodigy. Sears and IBM spent something like \$500 million US over 2 or 3 years building-out that online service in the mid- and late 1980s.

Yet some people, the early adopters, were willing to pay the hourly freight. Today, analysts and the press are amazed that players average 20 hours of game time per week in *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*. Yet this has been the standard for Hard Core players, the top ten percent of players in terms of playing time, since the beginning. For players of *Islands of Kesmai*, *Gemstone II* and *III*, *Dragon s Gate*, *Air Warrior* and the original *NeverWinter Nights*, credit card bills of \$500 per month were not at all unusual. The average monthly bill between 1989 and 1992 for gamers on GENie, the then-premier online service for online gaming, was \$156 US, or about 31 hours per month. The real difference between now and then is that more of the Hard Core group can now afford the games.

By 1993, there were about 3.5 million home PC owners using the online services, 2 million of them on flat rate service Prodigy. We all wondered how long Prodigy could hold out with flat rate pricing; due to telecommunications and hardware costs at the time, it cost minimum 50 cents per hour/per user just to keep an online service operating. Flat rate users on Prodigy and in GENie s Basic Services tended to spend over 100 hours per month online. Heck, they d leave their computers connected to the service while they went out to dinner and a movie. It became obvious that when you said All you can eat flat rates, the subscribers took you at your word. It also became obvious there was no way to make a profit on flat rates unless you charged in the neighborhood of \$70 per month, which just wasn t possible in 1993.

Prodigy then announced they were dropping the \$14 per month flat rate and instituting hourly fees. AOL started a price war by dropping the access rate to \$3 per hour and was soon followed by GENie. Somewhere between a quarter and half of Prodigy s customer base defected to AOL and GENie. And use of MMOGs on the latter two services more than doubled. This was the first real-world proof that you could drastically slash hourly access prices and make more money doing it.

Then came the watershed year of 1996 and AOL s transition to flat rate access at \$19.99 per month. There was still no way to make a profit at that low rate. In retrospect, this was obviously a tactic by AOL to drive its main competitors, CompuServe and Prodigy, and a bunch of the small ISPs out of the field.

The change also had the effect of allowing a whole lot more people try MMOGs. And with everyone able to access the games, not just fairly well to do computer owners, the whole nature of community began to change.

Player Behavior vs. Cost

Along with lower costs came a change in the player behavior. When the fee for playing was six to twelve dollars an hour, characters could cost thousands of dollars to build. As many of the older games had avenues for permanent character death, no amount of blustering (read trash talking) was worth risking a character built over four or five years and on which \$4,000, \$5,000 or even \$36,000 - as with one exceptional case on GENie - had been spent.

Those that could afford a character like this were usually older, employed men who played primarily on weekends and in the evenings after work. Given the hourly charge, macroing

overnight simply wasn't an option for most people. If one was going to pay, one wanted to be actually playing the game.

It is no wonder, then, that player base tended to be smaller, that players formed more tightly knit guilds, took their characters more seriously and were more polite. Indeed, the services at the time demanded it. Using scatological language on AOL could get you banned from the service — and therefore from the game. If one had played for four months and had corresponding \$500 per month bills, risking that character for the privilege of swearing was rather silly, as was arguing with a GM over a name or whether or not a certain action constituted harassment.

Being impolite could also cause one to lose a character to another player. In *IoK*, during the PK (called LK — Lawful Killing) wars, not only did you give up half of your experience to the person that killed you — at one point your corpse could be deposited in a trash can and disposed of forever. In *NWN*, the death match arena was the final resting place of those that wished to put their money where their mouth was. If one was killed there, one resurrected inside a room that was impossible to get out short of re-rolling the character, a painfully boring process that could take many hours.

The upshot of all this were general community standards in the games and a policing by the players themselves. New players were informed of the unwritten rules and were expected to be personally accountable for their actions. Players that didn't follow the unwritten rules were quickly ostracized by the rest of the community and found themselves either without others to play with or constantly under attack — or both.

As prices dropped, player behavior became more unrestricted. Macroing overnight turned into an international pastime for those who played online games. Consequences for misbehaving — whether for exploiting bugs in the game code or just being generally rude and impolite — were trivial and easy to recover from. Get banned? Make another character and macro it up.

The player base also grew to unprecedented levels. True anonymity, at times a difficult thing to achieve in the older games, became easily accomplished in these new, larger games. No longer could the community be counted on to police itself. As the player base became larger and more unruly, community standards fell by the wayside and the task of policing the players fell to the game companies. Which, in turn, meant increased customer support staff and increased customer support costs.

The game companies, most notably OSI, as they were the first to have a game with these massive numbers, were at first caught unawares. The customer support nightmare that this large player base would present was not planned for. The games were and, to some extent still are, rife with account fraud, grief players (those that play solely to cause grief to other players), bug exploiters and other players that present increased customer service difficulties. Today, while the companies largely have a handle on it, the small monthly fee, in comparison to the large fees of yesteryear, is barely enough to allow the game companies to have a large enough customer service staff to support all this.

This vicious equation — lower costs plus easier anonymity equals less player accountability and higher customer service costs - is the reason so many of us find the customer service so sadly lacking.

Next Week:

What your \$10 pays for today and why you should pay more.

1.38 OK, Would You Pay More, Part II

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December 21, 2000

If you haven't read **column number 37**, take a minute and do so. Go ahead, we'll wait for you.

What Your \$10 Pays for Now

One of the most often heard refrains from irate customers is, Spend some more of those millions on more customer service and in-game development, you bastards! The plain fact of the matter is, most of the money you pay already goes to this.

First, there is the matter of how much money these games actually bring in.

There is a mistaken belief among the customer base that you can just multiply the number of subscribers by \$10 and voila! you now know how money a MMOG brings in each month. In reality, a MMOG is fortunate if it can consistently, successfully bill 90% of the subscribers monthly. There are several reasons for this:

Just because a credit card is valid and has enough unused credit left on it, does not mean that Visa, Mastercard or whomever will actually approve charges to it. In any one month, as much as 5% of attempted charges fail for reasons such as data transmission errors, database errors at the credit agency, the card owner changed addresses but failed to change it in the game's billing database, etc.;

Credit and debit cards expire. Most cards are issued for two or three-year periods, after which they are automatically turned off and have to be renewed. Even if you assume three-year periods for all cards, when you have a user base as large as *EverQuest* or *Ultima Online*, this amounts to thousands of expiring cards and denied charges each month. The percentage on this can be as high as 10% in a month, though it more often tends to be in the 5% range;

Then there is outright fraud, the use of someone else's credit card to start an account. This is an extremely variable number, but you can't go wrong if you estimate 1% or 2% of the total subscriber base.

When you add all that up, a MMOG publisher is lucky to see 90% of the potential billables on a monthly basis.

Expenses

Of the generally 90% that is actually billed and paid, what is that money spent on? Most people don't understand just how expensive these things are to develop, launch and manage.

This may surprise many players, but anywhere from 40% to 60% is spent just on keeping the game up and running. This means hardware, software, host sites, bandwidth - which is generally a variable cost that rises as your data transmission totals rise, not the flat rate that many seem to believe it is -, network operators to watch it 24 hours a day, people to man the phones and read and respond to emails, a crew of in-game CS representatives to handle problems and bugs, the community relations people, a live development team to fix problems and add features and lands to the game - it all adds up fast. In a recent **Wall Street Journal** article (<http://www.msnbc.com/news/487613.asp>), Kelly Flock of SOE noted that *EverQuest* use 100 employees to do this at costs of \$1.5 million per month. This would be slightly over 50% of the approximately \$2.7 million monthly the game probably brings in.

After those expenses, there is then overhead and other development projects to add in, the two of which can easily eat up another 30% of your \$10. This covers such subjects as rent on office space for all these folks, computers, desks and chairs for all of them, office software, bandwidth for all those PCs, a LAN to tie them all together, people to maintain the LAN, payroll and expenses for other development teams creating new MMOGs for you to play, a QA department to test software, Human Resources people to make sure everyone in the company is paid and to track benefits, executive salaries, state and Federal payroll and unemployment taxes, pencils, paperclips, stationary, tablets, power strips, heating costs in the winter and air conditioning costs in the summer, replacing the carpet where someone spilled a pot of coffee, coffee, tea, hot chocolate, water coolers, copiers, fax machines, CD burners, white boards, conference room tables and chairs, telephones, telephone charges - the list goes on.

At this point, we've spent between 70% and 90% of the money you've paid, leaving us with somewhere between 10% and 30% of the take. Where does that last bit go? Most of it goes to the parent corporation as contribution margin, which is then used to help pay overhead expenses there. State and Federal governments tax anything left over from that. What is left over from that exercise is amusingly referred to as profit. If you're very, very lucky, that is 20%, and shareholders are pretty damn insistent that the number be as high as possible.

Of course, the more popular the game, the more discretionary budget money is left over at the end of the day. However, to reach levels where you could actually fund large customer service staffs (say, over 200 paid employees) and still pay all the other expenses and have some profit left over, we need to basically double the best subscription record to date. That would be about 600,000 subscribers.

That will happen some day, but not for a year or two at the least and only for a select few MMOGs built on mass-market universes, such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. Most successful MMOGs will continue to sit in the 100,000 to 300,000 range.

So Pay More, You Cheap SOBs

The fix to all this? Both of the authors agree that a price hike in subscriptions has the potential to fix this, though they differ in means and methods:

Jessica's Answer: The simplest solution is to raise the monthly fee for everyone and apply most of the difference strictly to maintenance of the game. Customers want simple pricing solutions, and this is the simplest available.

The fee need not even be that large. For example, boosting the average monthly MMOG fee by \$2, from \$9.95 a month to \$11.95 per month, would add enough money to the bottom line for any of the top three MMOGs to add between 50 and 200 customer service personnel.

The biggest problem with this is that customers rarely enjoy price increases, whatever the reason. For that matter, most MMOG customers really don't care if the game makes a penny of profit and many seem to feel that 100% of the proceeds should be applied back into the game or that profits should somehow be limited to some (small) percentage. These budding socialists would no doubt object loudly to even a 25-cent per month increase.

So, there is no doubt you would be taking a chance by announcing and instituting a price increase. Even a \$2 price increase is going to lose you some customers; as long as that loss is 20% or less of the subscriber base, however, it evens out.

For this solution to work, then, the publisher would have to make the following promises to the player base and visibly follow-through on them:

The price increase would be announced 90 days in advance, with regular warnings during that 90 days;

The hike would be specifically used to increase the customer service presence assigned to the game;

As high a percentage of the increase as possible would be so assigned, minus any government mandated taxes and fees.

Mysch's Answers:

A more complex solution would be to base cost on bandwidth. That is to say that, the more you play, the more you pay. This is not as simple as what Jessica proposed, but easier to understand than the PVP/stat loss/faction system in UO — and many of the more dedicated players seem to do well with that. I would still raise the base fee of all players — this has to happen and probably will happen regardless of whether a bandwidth-usage-tier system is introduced. However, there are many advantages (and quite a few disadvantages) to making the monthly fee tiered:

- Casual players will not be hit by high increases in fees.

- Those that have great amounts of time to play will pay for the advantage that time-in-game gives them, thereby evening out the success-in-game = those-with-the-most-time-to-play equation.
- Game companies can actually charge the most to those that use the service the most. Since it can be argued that these people tax the system more than those that play only casually, it stands to reason they should pay more.

While this might lose customers, this may not necessarily be a bad thing. Those that play the most present the largest customer service problems and expenses to the game company. These are the players that gain the most, expect the most, and usually either present social problems or, conversely, run quests and events for other players and expect game company support for their events.

I haven't done a study, but it would be interesting to see if game companies actually gained money from losing some of these people, as they saw their customer service needs drop. Indeed, one solution to many of the problems MMOGs face today may be to realize a drop in their player-base numbers, while still continuing to pull in the same amount of revenue they receive today. This would solve more problems than just the customer-service scenario. I can't help but wonder at what point the size of the player-base begins to equal diminishing returns and I don't know that this is something any game company to date has explored.

There are other ways, however, that game companies can generate revenue for their games, over and above just a monthly account. I've often wondered why, if players can make money on eBay selling high-level characters, the game companies have not taken advantage of the fact that players will pay through the nose for high-level characters and that's left. After all, the game company is in the best position to sell these characters and to undercut those selling them on eBay at the same time. Now, that has to be a sweet-smelling proposition for any game company, especially those that have dealt with the havoc that the transferring of accounts has wrought in the MMOG world.

I know that as a long-time gamer, I am quite tired of building characters. I work for a living and make a decent salary. I would definitely shell out some cash to purchase a pre-built character. I have a feeling I'm not alone in this. As more and more of us desire to maintain our presence in one or more virtual worlds, while at the same time continuing to enjoy a happy and active life outside the gaming world, game companies will be pressed into delivering solutions in order to keep their customers. Already designers are being pressed into designing for the casual gamer. Selling pre-built characters and offering tiered pricing systems is one way to make the game not only attractive to the casual gamer, but competitive as well. No longer would the casual gamer be forced to compete using hours and days as a weapon.

Of course, there are those that will feel that money is not a valid weapon for a gamer to wield. I like to look at it, rather, as a balancing factor. Some people have time — some people have money. Rarely does a person have both. This allows everyone to compete on an even playing field. Except for those who have neither. But for those people, a tiered system would still work well for they would only pay the lowest price. The only people I can see a tiered system being a

huge disadvantage to are families. Under a tiered —system plan, families — those with multiple people playing one account — will suffer. However, a combination of some of the above would work as well for families. Or even, perhaps, a type of family-service plan. (I know, hard to verify, easy to abuse).

Summation

It comes down to an old saw: You get what you pay for. The authors feel that, in the case of MMOGs, customer service is one area where throwing money at the problem can actually have positive results. The problem is, where does that money come from?

If you are happy with the customer service you currently receive at about \$10 per month, then there is no problem to be solved. If you feel improvements are necessary, however, you have to decide if you willing to shell out an extra few dollars a year to help pay for them.

We d be interesting in knowing your opinion (we re pretty darn sure you have one). Send email to bth@happypuppy.com and let us know what you think.

1.39 The End of The Year: The 2001 Hot List

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December 28, 2000

As promised a few columns back, here are my choices for the Hot list for 2001. I thought it appropriate in this, the last column of the year and the Millennium (Coincidence? I think not!), to list my opinions on the hot online games and hot developers. At the very least, this will give you a good reason to vent into my email as we prepare for 2001.

First, I should define how I m using the term hot in the context of these lists. When I talk about specific games, hot means a big financial success or an upcoming online game that is likely to be one. When I write about hot developers, I look at experience and technical know-how and the likelihood that those will be used to push the envelope, at least a little bit.

Hot Games in 2001

UWO: Origin (<http://www.uo2.com/main.html>)

The coming 3D POV world of Ultima (or *Ultima: Third Dawn*, or whatever it really ends up being named), with its fantastic use of motion-captured body moves, is sure to be a winner and push the technology envelope a bit. It ll probably even be fun to play; all those motion-captured movements can really give some fluidity to characters and NPCs.

Anarchy Online (<http://www.anarchy-online.com/>)

Groovy-looking game, nice interface, very weird and different world: a nice combination. The developers at Funcom also have a pretty damn good attitude about customer service and player

relations. If they can survive their first real-world experience with providing support to the incredibly demanding MMOG audience, this game is definitely going to be a hit, I believe.

Star Wars Online (No Web site yet)

Unquestionably, the Star Wars name is enough to guarantee this one financial success. It's one of those licenses that we all dream of controlling. That SWO will make megabucks is not in doubt.

If Verant HQ gives their Austin crew room to breathe, we also have a good chance of seeing an excellent game, as well. Some of the best people from Origin Systems moved there, and that means some of the best and most experienced people in the industry. I have high hopes (and expectations!) for this one.

NeverWinter Nights (<http://www.bioware.com/nwn/index.html>)

The player-controlled server and story/content concept is bound to be hot. I have no doubt that developer **Bioware** (<http://www.bioware.com/index.shtml>) and its publisher, Interplay, are going to sell a lot of retail units. This one could easily be a one million-unit seller, even though the persistence of the servers is limited.

I also have no doubt that players will learn again the lesson of why shareware games rarely build a large audience; designers and storytellers of professional quality don't grow on trees. Expect to see a lot of hoopla from the press around the launch of this product, then, two to three months later, a whole bunch of articles about the low quality of content player-run servers and speculation on whether the concept was a good idea to begin with.

Hot Developers in 2001

Origin Systems, Inc. (<http://www.origin.ea.com>)

This is the only studio at EA.com developing cutting edge MMOG, with the possible exception of EA-Virginia, the old Kesmai studio. I'm putting them on the list, even though competition is fierce as hell and they've lost quite a few of their experienced developers to Verant/Austin for *Star Wars Online* and Hasbro/Austin for the secret AD&D online game project. *UWO: O/Third Dawn* alone will keep them there for 2001; 2002 might be more problematic.

Verant/Austin (http://www.verant.com/press_releases.html#12)

Raph Koster, Rich Vogel and a rogues gallery of ex-OSI employees brought some much-needed design and management experience to the Verant organization. Some of OSI's best people jumped ship; that alone would put Verant/Austin on the hot list. Applying that talent and experience to *Star Wars Online* just adds to the story.

Sleepers: Hot List Maybes

Below are some games and/or companies that, as of today, appear to have at least a 50-50 shot at making the Hot List for 2002.

Funcom (<http://www.funcom.com/>)

Yes, I listed *AO* as a hot game. So why isn't Funcom a Hot Developer? Simply, one game does not a hot MMOG developer make. They have two other MMOGs in development; when we get a look at those, we'll have a better idea on the Hot status for this company.

Atriarch from World Fusion (<http://www.worldfusion.com/news/news.html>)

Good people and good leadership are a fundamental building block for any company, and World Fusion seems to have both. As Atriarch approaches Beta test, we'll have a much better idea of whether Serafina and crew will be on the 2002 list.

Dark Age of Camelot from Mythic Entertainment (<http://www.mythicgames.com>)

Good press, lots of MMOG experience and a pretty good world concept. I almost put Mythic on this year's Hot list, but decided to wait until we can see if *Camelot* will be able to compete with *AO*, *EverQuest* and *UO: Third Dawn*. The market has changed quite a bit since the game went into the design stage, and with I.C.E.'s recent demise, Mythic has to redesign the game to pull out the *Rolemaster* paper game elements.

Unplugged Games (<http://www.ungames.com/>)

Wireless games are the hot issue right now, and Unplugged is getting in on the ground floor. Whether this will be enough to push the company onto the Hot list for 2002 is anyone's guess at this point. They are definitely the right people in the right market at the right time, however.

JumpGate from Net Devil (<http://www.netdevil.com/main.html>)

This *Privateer*-style game is likely to be the first on the market, even though EA studio Westwood is working on a similar title. I think there is a market for one of these games, but just one. If Net Devil really can hit the market at least four or five months before EA, they have an even chance of capturing significant subscriber loyalty. Should that be the case, they have a shot at making next year's list.

Not Hot

Some commercial games are just better left undone. Here are a few of my choices:

Allegiance (<http://www.zone.com/allegiance/start.asp>) from Microsoft Zone

This space action game can't even beat out *Bridge* for simultaneous players. It looks to be a mini-maxers heaven, in which the best are always the best and the rest are just targets. And, as a combat-oriented game, you can pretty much guess what happens in the list of the 9,168 ranked players (as of 11/17/00): Once you get out of the Expert ranks, participation begins to fall. Once you're out of the top 1500 or so, you see a lot of Novice ranks with low scores. That indicates players who can't compete with experienced hunters, get killed a lot and leave. Multiple deaths are not fun; no one likes to be a Designated Target.

How many times do I have to say it? Repeat after me *again*: Commercial kill-fests don't rake in monthly subscriptions; they don't make much money. Persistent worlds with several avenues for character advancement make much money.

Chron-X (<http://www.station.sony.com/chronx/index.jhtml>) by Genetic Anomalies

A turn-based strategy game based on card trading. When first sold by Genetic Anomalies to the Station a couple years ago, this was supposed to be an online competitor to *Magic: The Gathering*. Yeah, right. Repeat after me: Turn-based for-pay online games don't sell. To see proof of this, one need only check the Rankings. In the All Players Ranking selection, there are all of 141 people listed.

The company learned something from its Station experience, however. Genetic is also the developer for Activision's *Star Trek: ConQuest* online card game (<http://www.conquestonline.com/community/home.html>), which was announced in March and went live in June. This turn-based game also has a section for Rankings which has not been implemented. One wonders

The only wonder here is that *Chron-X* hasn't disappeared from The Station, as did the turn-based *Fantasy War*, which had similar dismal financial results.

Infantry (<http://www.station.sony.com/infantry/>) by Harmless Games

Why in God's name did Sony pick up this game for The Station? Did they learn nothing from the financial failures of *Fantasy War* and *Chron-X*? Repeat after me: Session-based, zero-sum games are not as commercially viable as open-ended persistent worlds.

For a couple months earlier in 2000, I played *Infantry* for about 70 hours. I came to the conclusion in the second hour that this dog wouldn't hunt. The only reason I put in the other hours was out of respect for Rod Humble and crew, who developed the old *Subspace* game while at Virgin. That game at least had a few redeeming features, not the least of which was that it was free. Had Virgin attempted to charge a fee for *Subspace*, it would have been a financial disaster; as a free game, however, it was a fun diversion.

When the game went into open beta on The Station in mid-November, I decided to try it again and see if Harmless made the drastic changes necessary to make *Infantry* a viable for-pay game.

Nope.

Heaven knows, I tried to find one or two redeeming features in *Infantry*, I really did. All I found was another game that totally misunderstands the nature of the commercial side of the online games biz. Should Sony be so foolish as to attempt to charge a fee for this game, and right now it looks like it will be a premium game, it will almost certainly be another financial failure for Sony Online Entertainment.

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