

Biting the Hand:

A Compilation of the Columns to Date

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Table of Contents

| | | |
|----------|---|-----------|
| 1 | THE 1997 COLUMNS | 6 |
| 1.1 | ISSUE 1: APRIL 1997..... | 6 |
| 1.1.1 | <i>ACTIVISION??? WHO DA THUNK IT?</i> | 7 |
| 1.1.2 | <i>AMERICA ONLINE: WILL YOU BE PAYING MORE FOR GAMES?</i> | 8 |
| 1.1.3 | <i>LATENCY: NO LONGER AN ISSUE</i> | 12 |
| 1.1.4 | <i>PORTAL UPDATE: December, 1997</i> | 13 |
| 1.2 | ISSUE 2: APRIL-JUNE, 1997 | 15 |
| 1.2.1 | <i>SSI: The Little Company That Could</i> | 15 |
| 1.2.2 | <i>CompuServe: The Big Company That Couldn't</i> | 17 |
| 1.2.3 | <i>And Speaking Of Arrogance</i> | 20 |
| 1.3 | ISSUE 3 | 23 |
| 1.3.1 | <i>December, 1997</i> | 23 |
| 1.3.2 | <i>The Seidman Forums</i> | 23 |
| 1.3.3 | <i>Quake II: So What?</i> | 24 |
| 1.3.4 | <i>Martin Cirulis: Columnist Of The Year</i> | 26 |
| 2 | 1998 COLUMNS | 28 |
| 2.1 | ONLINE GAMING: WHY WON'T THEY COME? | 28 |
| 2.2 | MARCH TO MAY, 1998 | 33 |
| 2.2.1 | <i>Ultima Online</i> | 33 |
| 2.2.2 | <i>Publisher Focus: Interplay</i> | 35 |
| 2.2.3 | <i>The 1998 Modem Mutant Awards</i> | 37 |
| 2.3 | AN OPEN LETTER TO HASBRO INTERACTIVE | 41 |
| 2.4 | HASBRO TO BUY MICROPROSE | 47 |
| 2.5 | SEPTEMBER 1998 | 49 |
| 2.5.1 | <i>Reaction To The Hasbro Articles</i> | 49 |
| 2.5.2 | <i>The Marching Morons</i> | 53 |
| 2.5.3 | <i>Pressing The Flesh, The Interactive Way</i> | 55 |
| 2.6 | OCTOBER 30, 1998..... | 57 |
| 2.6.1 | <i>General Notes for the Holidays</i> | 57 |
| 2.6.2 | <i>Interplay Falls On Hard Times</i> | 58 |
| 2.6.3 | <i>Tis The Season</i> | 58 |
| 2.7 | DECEMBER 7, 1998 | 61 |
| 2.7.1 | <i>The 1998 Round-Up</i> | 61 |
| 3 | YEAR 1999 COLUMNS | 64 |
| 3.1 | WELCOME TO MY WORLD; NOW BITE ME..... | 64 |
| 3.2 | NASTY, INCONVENIENT QUESTIONS, PART DEUX..... | 66 |
| 3.3 | PRESSING THE FLESH II: THE INTERACTIVE SEQUEL..... | 70 |
| 3.4 | MORE BUGS: A CASUALTY OF THE XMAS RUSH?..... | 72 |
| 3.5 | IN THE BIZ..... | 75 |
| 3.6 | JACK AND THE BEANCOUNTER..... | 77 |
| 3.7 | COLOR ME BONEHEADED | 81 |
| 3.8 | AH, SWEET MYSTERY OF LIFE | 84 |

| | | |
|----------|---|------------|
| 3.9 | THE CONFERENCE FORMERLY KNOWN AS THE COMPUTER GAME DEVELOPER'S CONFERENCE | 86 |
| 3.10 | THIS FRAGGED CORPSE BROUGHT TO YOU BY | 89 |
| 3.11 | OH, NO! I FORGOT TO HAVE CHILDREN!..... | 91 |
| 3.12 | CATCHING UP ON EMAIL | 93 |
| 3.13 | GOD SUED! | 96 |
| 3.14 | PAYING FOR THE WRONG SINS AND OTHER ODD THOUGHTS | 97 |
| 3.15 | NO MODEM MUTANTS HERE, PAL | 99 |
| 3.16 | MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER GAMES WE'DLIKE TO SEE | 101 |
| 3.17 | GAMES WE MIGHT (SHUDDER) SEE | 103 |
| 3.18 | UNSUNG HEROES..... | 105 |
| 3.19 | BANDWIDTH SHALL NOT SAVE YOU | 108 |
| 3.20 | HISTORY'S REVENGE..... | 111 |
| 3.21 | ODD BITS AND PIECES | 113 |
| 3.22 | PERSISTENTLY SILLY | 114 |
| 3.23 | OH, NO, NOT CONVERGENCE AGAIN! | 116 |
| 3.24 | TWO MIND-BENDING EMAILS | 118 |
| 3.25 | THE COUNT IS IN, AND MORE READER MAIL..... | 121 |
| 3.26 | TALK ABOUT DREAMING | 124 |
| 3.27 | SNIPPETS AND RUMORS | 126 |
| 3.28 | THE WORLD'S (COOLEST/MOST EXCITING/EAGERLY AWAITED) (COLUMN/ARTICLE/RANT)..... | 128 |
| 3.29 | THE <u>REAL</u> ONLINE GAME MARKETS..... | 130 |
| 3.30 | THE REAL ONLINE GAME MARKETS, PART II | 132 |
| 3.31 | THE MARCHING MORONS, PART DEUX | 135 |
| 3.32 | THE FUTURE: SHOOTING THE MOON | 137 |
| 3.33 | SO THIS IS BROADBAND?..... | 139 |
| 3.34 | SO THIS IS BROADBAND? PART II..... | 142 |
| 3.35 | HAPPY 30 TH BIRTHDAY, ONLINE GAMES..... | 144 |
| 3.36 | HAPPY 30 TH BIRTHDAY, ONLINE GAMES, PART II | 147 |
| 3.37 | HAPPY 30 TH BIRTHDAY, ONLINE GAMES, PART III..... | 151 |
| 3.38 | GENERAL STUFF | 154 |
| 3.39 | RAMBLIN' ON | 156 |
| 3.40 | BREAKING TRADITION | 158 |
| 3.41 | I FEAR, I FEAR!..... | 160 |
| 3.42 | INVISIBILITY COMES WITH A PRICE | 164 |
| 3.43 | GADZOOKS! | 166 |
| 3.44 | IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR | 168 |
| 4 | YEAR 2000 COLUMNS | 171 |
| 4.1 | RANDOM THOUGHTS | 171 |
| 4.2 | BUDGET MADNESS: BEGINNING THE YEAR WITH A RANT..... | 172 |
| 4.3 | FABIAN, HARVARD, AND YOU | 174 |
| 4.4 | CPIS: THE DEADLY DISEASE..... | 177 |
| 4.5 | PANEM ET CIRCENSES..... | 179 |
| 4.6 | CATCHING UP | 181 |
| 4.7 | THE CONFERENCE FORMALLY KNOWN AS CGDC | 184 |

| | | |
|----------|---|------------|
| 4.8 | ARE YOU PARANOID ENOUGH? | 186 |
| 4.9 | ARE YOU PARANOID ENOUGH? PART II | 188 |
| 4.10 | THE COLUMN CALLIOPE | 190 |
| 4.10.1 | <i>X-ing Out the Competition?</i> | 190 |
| 4.10.2 | <i>The Golden Age: DOA?</i> | 193 |
| 4.11 | EULAQUEST: PART ONE | 195 |
| 4.12 | EULAQUEST: PART TWO | 197 |
| 4.13 | E3 IMPRESSIONS O H, AND SOME STUFF ON GAMES, TOO | 200 |
| 4.14 | SOUNDING OFF..... | 202 |
| 4.15 | I SING THE MISERICORDE..... | 206 |
| 4.16 | I M A VOLUNTEER; WHERE S MY CHECK? | 208 |
| 4.17 | GAMERS ARE HARD TO CONSOLE | 211 |
| 4.18 | ONLINE CONSOLE-ATION | 213 |
| 4.19 | RAISING THE STAKES | 216 |
| 4.20 | SENSITIVE TEETH | 217 |
| 4.21 | FREE, AND WORTH IT | 222 |
| 4.22 | DOOMED TO FAIL? | 224 |
| 4.23 | DOOMED TO FAIL? EPISODE II..... | 228 |
| 4.24 | DOOMED TO FAIL? EPISODE III..... | 230 |
| 4.25 | WE INTERRUPT OUR PROGRAM | 232 |
| 4.26 | DOOMED TO FAIL? PART IV..... | 234 |
| 4.27 | THE PRESIDENT OF YOUR FAN CLUB CALLED | 237 |
| 4.28 | MOMMY, SHE TALKED DIRTY! | 241 |
| 4.29 | MOMMY, SHE TALKED DIRTY! PART II..... | 244 |
| 4.30 | CHECKING BACK | 248 |
| 4.31 | 3D OR NOT 3D? | 250 |
| 4.32 | NOT ANOTHER CHRISTMAS RUSH?..... | 252 |
| 4.33 | HOT GAME DEVELOPERS: TWO YEARS LATER..... | 254 |
| 4.34 | HOT GAME DEVELOPERS: PART TWO..... | 257 |
| 4.35 | CASSANDRA SPEAKS..... | 260 |
| 4.35.1 | <i>Hasbro To Buy Microprose</i> | 262 |
| 4.36 | GET RID OF GAME RATINGS..... | 264 |
| 4.37 | OK, WOULD YOU PAY MORE IF | 266 |
| 4.38 | OK, WOULD YOU PAY MORE, PART II..... | 270 |
| 4.39 | THE END OF THE YEAR: THE 2001 H OT LIST | 274 |
| 5 | YEAR 2001 COLUMNS | 278 |
| 5.1 | BROADBAND IS NOT YOUR SAVIOR VOLUME TEN, ISSUE 1 JANUARY 4, 2001 | 278 |
| 5.2 | NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN VOLUME TEN, ISSUE TWO JANUARY 11, 2001 | 281 |
| 5.3 | IT S LIKE INSTANT KARMA, BUT WITH A TIME DELAY | 283 |
| 5.4 | THE TOP TEN THINGS TO SAY TO INSURE NOT GETTING HIRED IN THE INDUSTRY | 285 |
| 5.5 | THREE THINGS TO UNDERSTAND ABOUT ONLINE GAMING..... | 287 |
| 5.6 | WHEN GAMERS ATTACK! | 289 |
| 5.7 | SINGING THE BANDWIDTH BLUES..... | 291 |
| 5.8 | BOY-TOY IS AS BOY-TOY DOES | 295 |
| 5.9 | THE MARKET ISN T IN KANSAS ANYMORE | 296 |
| 5.10 | R APE BY ANY OTHER NAME..... | 298 |

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 5.11 | TOLD YA | 301 |
| 5.12 | REARRANGING THE DECK CHAIRS | 303 |
| 5.13 | THIS IS THE END THIS IS THE END, MY FRIEND..... | 307 |

1 The 1997 Columns

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

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

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

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

1.1 Issue 1: April 1997

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.1.1 ACTIVISION??? WHO DA THUNK IT?

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

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

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

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

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

Pass the salt, Bobby; this tastes horrible!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Online games are expensive to develop and host. They didn't used to be, but, just as happened in the computer game industry, customers demanded more art, more sound and more bells and whistles, so the average development team has risen from two guys in a dusty garage to six or ten people in a nice, clean office building. The cost of development has risen accordingly; whereas \$40,000 could buy you the likes of a Harpoon Online in 1991, it wouldn't even buy you Multiplayer Tic-Tac-Toe today. The average development cost seems to be about \$300,000 for an OK game and \$700,000 to \$1 million for a high-end, online-only hit.

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

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

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

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

When online services billed customers by the hour, game developers received a cut of that action. Online gamers are notorious for ignoring the billing clock; if they like an online game, cost is immaterial to them. On AOL alone, a hit game of the likes of *Gemstone III* by

Simutronics, *Air Warrior* by Kesmai/Aries and *Dragon s Gate* by Interworld Productions, could bring in millions of dollars of royalty revenue each year. In fact, AOL spent most of 1995 and 1996 courting big name computer game companies and the better online game developers, singing just that siren song of the millions to be made under the hourly charge plan.

And boy, did they bite! By some accounts, AOL signed up over fifty online games in 1996. Just the thought of having access to six million-plus customers (December, 1997: Now almost 10 million) had em salivating. Kesmai/Aries, developers of the popular *Air Warrior* and *Multiplayer BattleTech* games, recently announced topping one million billable hours for one month on AOL; [Simutronics](#) immediately played Dueling Press Releases, announcing 1.4 million billable hours that same month (and isn t *that* turning into an amusing rivalry? Kesmai has long enjoyed a deserved reputation for excellence in online games and Simutronics has always felt they don t get the attention they deserve for their good works. They get downright surly about it sometimes. After this latest round, it wouldn t surprise me to see them challenge Kesmai to a Tag Team wrestling match at the local Armory. Have your tights pressed, guys.).

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

Understand: Game developers don t get a cut of the monthly fee. All their income projections were heavily based on that hourly fee. Now, they must be wondering how they are going to make back all that money they ve spent, or even keep their companies alive during the transition. That has to be scaring the bejazz out of the developers. Its interesting to note, however, that AOL is starting to spread the word that "premium pricing" will "likely" be instituted for some AOL products. The rumor is that premium pricing will be \$1.95 an hour. No one is saying what products will fall under such pricing.

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

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

UPDATE: June, 1997.

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

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

UPDATE: October, 1997.

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

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

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

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

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

If I had to make a choice today, I d say Possibility 1, out of court settlement, is the most likely result; it really depends on how ticked off Kesmai is. All other considerations aside, I m not sure AOL wants to chance losing in court, but it really depends on the strength of Kesmai s case and we won t know that until more information is filed with the court. We won t have to wait long

for a resolution to the suit; it was filed in Virginia, a state famous for the Rocket Docket, which requires suits to be resolved within one year of the filing date.

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

1.1.3 LATENCY: NO LONGER AN ISSUE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For a home modem user to send a bit of data to a remote computer and receive a response

requires a minimum of four modem or router passes (From Joe User s modem to Host Modem/Router, then from Host Modem/Router back to Joe User);

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

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

And that experience has born out the predictions of the nay-sayers. There are times when play in the action games on TEN and MPath is outstanding; most of the time, however, it isn t unusual to feel like you re watching a slide-show.

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

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

1.1.4 PORTAL UPDATE: December, 1997

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

Depending on the price, I don t see very many potential buyers. Only [CUC](#), [Sega](#), [Microsoft](#) and AOL have that kind of cash right now, and they ve all got their own plans. [GT Interactive](#) might be a candidate, but they just pulled out of the merger with [Microprose](#) over concerns on

profitability; can you imagine the damage to GT's stock price if they announced the acquisition of a money-sink like TEN?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Under those conditions, they'd all be smart to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2 Issue 2: April-June, 1997

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

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

1.2.1 SSI: The Little Company That Could

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

the unique creative talents of people like founder Joel Billings, Chuck Kroegal, Dan Cermak, Debbie Minardi and Bret Berry.

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

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

Since becoming part of the [Mindscape](#) family in 1994, they have emerged once more as the premier computer wargame company. In an industry where it's a truism that wargames can't sell more than 30,000 units, *Panzer General* set a new standard. SSI doesn't talk about total sales, but one of my friends there told me sales for the game were well over 50,000, *Panzer General II* is on track to beat those figures easily and that the *Steel Panthers* series was beating those marks. Now, no one talks about the limited wargame market for PCs; everyone is too busy trying to snag a piece of the action.

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

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

AOL didn't pay much for the game; if I remember correctly, less than \$50,000 in advances were paid. That means SSI had to take a chance, because it probably cost them twice that to re-develop the Gold Box series for online play. It was a good risk; I can't reveal recent official figures, due to a non-disclosure agreement, but I was told by a reliable source with whom I'm

not non-disclosed that the game grossed over \$5 million dollars in 1994. And use of the game was up in 1995 and 1996. Not bad for a game that is eight years old.

There s one other thing I want to say about SSI, before we move on. This is the nicest, most honorable crew in the industry. I say this after knowing most of them professionally for nearly 10 years. You ll never hear that SSI cheated anyone, bad-mouthed anyone or acted in anything other than an ethical, moral manner toward a developer, employee or professional associate. If you think this is the usual state of affairs in the computer games/online industry, you haven t been in it very long.

Which is probably why developers that worked with SSI ten years ago are still working with them, even though they could certainly get more money elsewhere. Another lesson for the industry: You don t have to be a shark or a bastard-on-wheels to achieve success. Just ask the gang at SSI.

1.2.2 CompuServe: The Big Company That Couldn t

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

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

CIS started out as a business service, linking companies and their employees to databases and information. Somewhere along the line, someone at CIS realized that all that hardware and software wasn t being used in the evening or weekend hours. Since nature abhors a vacuum and CFOs abhor letting one penny go by without leaving their fingerprint on it, it was decided to offer a consumer service during those hours and rake in some extra cash. For all you millions who don t realize it, this is where chat, massive software libraries and message forums came into vogue. Others had done it before, and sometimes better, but CIS made it all a popular phenomenon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I needn't have worried. In the span from 1988 until recently, only one new game, the incredibly poorly executed *Sniper!*, was made available on CIS. This, while the likes of *Gemstone III*, *Rebel Space*, *Air Warrior* and *Dragon's Gate* were going live on newcomers GENie, Prodigy and AOL. Why, you ask? CIS's senior management had:

Skewed Priorities: What the customers would pay for was far less important than the likes and dislikes of senior management. If a VP didn't have a personal interest in a product line or specific piece of content, it had small chance of ever seeing the light of day.

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

Market Ignorance: Weird as it sounds, CIS didn't have a clue about the changing nature of the market. In fact, they believed that they *made* the market. For years they didn't have to worry about it, because they didn't answer to shareholders or have to run the company like a real business. Their own prejudices, likes and dislikes were what mattered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

UPDATE: December, 1997

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

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

Why do I not like this picture?

1.2.3 And Speaking Of Arrogance

The Computer Game Developer's Conference

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

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

Unfortunately, in 1994 the [CGDC](#) also became politicized. Chris Crawford founded the CGDC as an organization dedicated to serving the "little guys" in the industry. As more and more people attended and more money accumulated each year in the CGDC bank account, some board members got greedy and forgot they agreed to serve without compensation. They started paying themselves. Pretty well, too: I was told by an insider they voted themselves \$12,000 each after the 1994 CGDC, over Crawford's vehement objections. Not bad for a couple months work. Then came the scandalous episode in which the Board waited for Crawford to leave town on business, called a special and highly unusual Board meeting and kicked him out of the organization he created. They also stripped him of his stock. While a settlement was eventually

reached and Chris, always the gentleman, departed with grace and honor, the incident left a bad taste in the mouths of many in the industry. The arrogance of the Board members was nettling, to say the least, and we all started to wonder what kind of monster had been created.

Then came the sellout to Miller-Freeman.

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

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

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

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

There is a Board of Advisors to the CGDC. The members of the BoA are, on the whole, people with enough experience in the industry to weed out the fakers from the makers. I know several of the Board and one of them told me that these were the *best* of the speaking proposals they

received. They received the usual spate of self-serving, "please give us free advertising" type proposals, which is only to be expected, and actually accepted one or two of them. One of the proposals was for a class in Spiritual Programming. No, really; I'm not making this up. I suppose we'd all gather around a Ouiji board and contact dead programmers. Or, if this is the best that the CGDC can attract in the way of speakers, wait a couple years and the industry will be able to speak with the dead programmers directly.

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

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

But I promised to shoot straight in this column so, at the risk of offending lots of well-meaning and probably very nice people: The CGDC speaker line-up for the 1997 Con sucks on ice. If this is the best we can do, at the premier computer game developer's convention, we're sunk as an industry.

Quality in Miller-Freeman's universe, it would seem, streams from quantity, a sort of "Have lots of tracks; it doesn't matter who is speaking because everyone's there to schmooze, anyway" theory of conventions. Of course, this ignores the old Garbage In, Garbage Out adage. I pity the poor fools who actually attend some of these classes. Their Garbage In quotients will be full to overflowing. If we can't count on quality speakers, why are we all spending the exorbitant sums Miller-Freeman demands for this conference? Maybe it's time for a little competition to the CGDC; at the very least, that would make them sit up and take notice.

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

"Registration fees go up with each passing minute."

and

"And the CGDC will sell out!"

UPDATE: December, 1997

At the [MPG 97](#) conference in San Francisco last September, where I hosted a seminar and sat on a panel concerning the future of online games, a very nice person associated with the CGDC

approached me during a break and asked if I wanted to speak at the 1998 conference in Long Beach, CA. To be perfectly fair, I asked her if she'd read this column. She hadn't, so I directed her to the URL and told her that, after reading this, if she still wanted me to speak, I'd be happy to oblige.

For some strange reason, I haven't heard from her. Go figure.

1.3 Issue 3

1.3.1 December, 1997

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

On the bright side of things, such a shaking out was inevitable and the good news is that it came earlier than expected. Most of the weak sisters are gone, although we can expect more consolidation, and the industry is set for an upturn. There are going to be fewer games competing for limited shelf space, which means most games will have longer than three weeks to gain an audience. As many innovative games are developed by small companies with limited budgets, this is a good thing. The way the competition for shelf space is (some 5,000 products annually competing for 300 spaces), if Myst were debuted today, it probably wouldn't stay on the shelves long enough to gain a following.

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

1.3.2 The Seidman Forums

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

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

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

1.3.3 Quake II: So What?

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

Fat chance. Look, I know the industry has to make money to survive, but we're definitely hurting if the most waited-for game of the year is yet another mindless shooter. It looked like there was hope for a while; more gamers were into strategy gaming, which at least requires some planning and rewards intelligence, much like Chess. However, the game making all the news this Christmas season is a sophomoric shooter which rewards not intelligence and creativity, but bad attitude and an ability to twitch faster than your opponent. Oh, yes: It also has Net connection ability, so you can take your bad attitude world-wide.

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

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

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

The real appeal of QII, as with it's predecessor, is the multiplayer aspect. There is something quite compelling in watching a head pop off a body and slam into the ground, knowing you've

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

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

By the way, this is not yet another "Violence in games is bad, because it teaches our kids to be murdering bastards!" bitch and moan session. Violence is a part of the human animal, just as much as are the capacities to be kind, generous or know beauty. Trying to hide it, to pretend it doesn't exist, is just so much bushwa. It is most often paraded about at election times, when Congresspeople who haven't accomplished anything more than wasting our money need an emotional trigger to cadge votes. There will always be people who resort to violence because actually thinking and relating to people hurts too much, and trying to teach kids to be pacifists isn't doing them any favors when they inevitably run up against one of these morons.

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

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

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

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

got pushed onto the shelves, the consumers finally threw up their hands in disgust and stopped buying.

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

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

1.3.4 Martin Cirulis: Columnist Of The Year

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nicely done."

2 1998 Columns

2.1 *Online Gaming: Why Won't They Come?*

Originally published on Gamasutra, February 27, 1998

Republished on Gamebytes, April 1998

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

In the article, Mr. Palumbo wrote the following:

"Nevertheless, it's still a question of volume for online games as well. 3DO's experience with Meridian 59 revealed that while there is a dedicated group of online gamers, their numbers are small. Meridian 59 averaged about 10,000 players per month. That was enough to cover ongoing production and maintenance, but not enough to reach full development payback.

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

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

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

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

I tell you this up front: The \$9.95 standard pay-for-play fee is only an incidental reason. It is not

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

It really all boils down to one thing:

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

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

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

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

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

The Important Role of the SysOp

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

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

This is no secret; we've known this for over a decade. If you drop into *Gemstone III*

(www.simutronics.com) or *Legends of Kesmai* (www.gamestorm.com), you have a very good chance of finding a sysop or game master available to help you. And I'm talking meaningful help here, not just a company stooge to tell you how to call customer service. Done correctly, it works like a charm; the new player gets started fast and has a good experience his first time out, and the company gets a new customer.

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

What Does It Mean?

There are always problems. This is a fact of life in online games. If it isn't a database bug destroying player characters or a bank bug ruining the economy and giving some players an unfair advantage, it's a personal conflict between two or more players or teams that erupts into a firestorm and disrupts play for everyone. Every online game is going to see these problems; how they are dealt with, and whether they are dealt with in a timely manner, will separate the winners from the losers. Remember: 90% of the work for an online game comes after it is released.

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

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

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

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

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

and the training to help him make those decisions correctly, your customer base will get what it needs and be very happy, indeed.

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

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

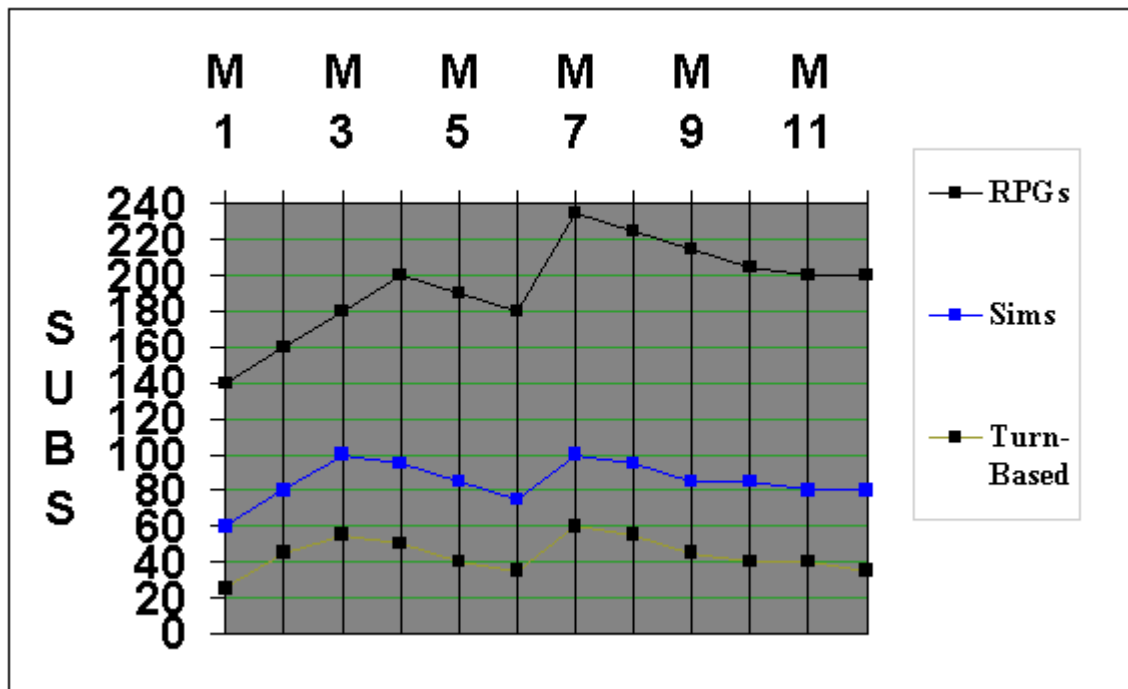


Figure 1: The SUBS numbers are a generalized rate to show proportions. For example, RPGs online generally do over twice the business of simulators. In a properly managed game, the initial subscription or monthly play growth curve spikes at about 4 months, then slowly churns off some users. By month 7,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

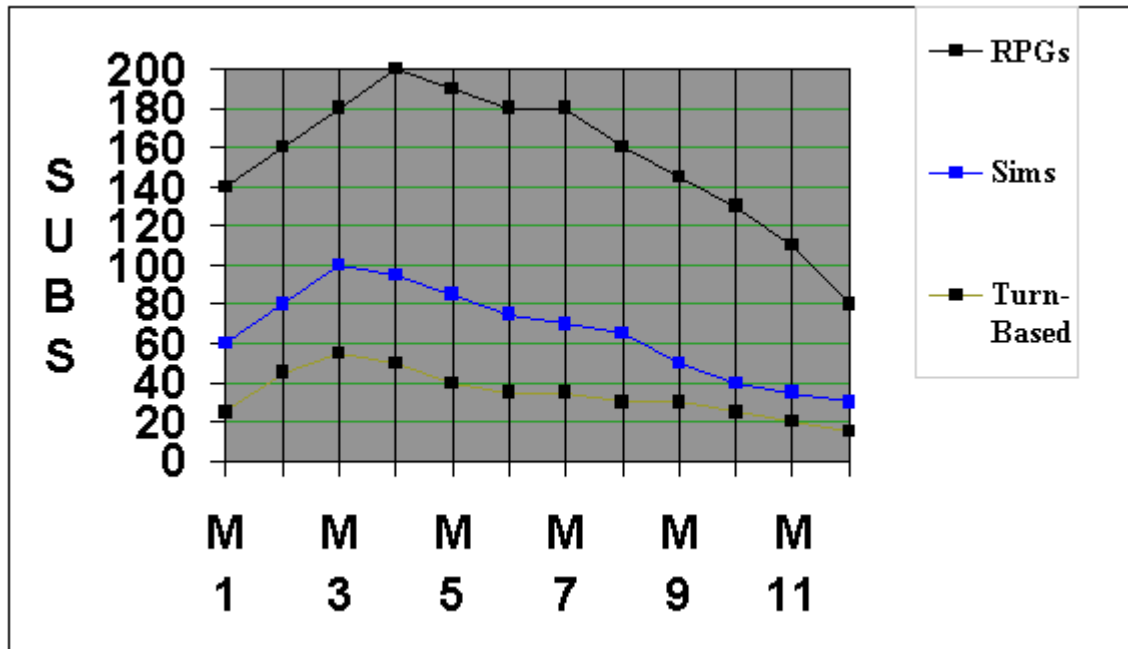


Figure 2: In improperly managed or unmanaged online games, the product will still experience the 'first flush' effect on launch, as users come to check it out. However, the effects of having no timely authority to ameliorate the effects of bugs and inter-player conflicts begins to take it s toll by Month 4. Left unresolved, the curve continues to descend to well below income levels that will sustain the effort.

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

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

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

Ultima Online is experiencing similar problems, for similar reasons. One of the biggest single complaints is the uselessness of the game masters. *UO* has hope, however; Rich Vogel, who used

to be on the *Meridian 59* team and lobbied unsuccessfully for more Guardian powers there, is now in charge of *UO* for Origin. If they listen to him, he can fix what's wrong in *UO*.

Conclusion

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

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

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

2.2 *March to May, 1998*

2.2.1 Ultima Online

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

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

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

This is, of course, pure hogwash. The only thing "revolutionary" about *UO* as a massively multiplayer game is the amount of money and people thrown at the art and the graphic interface. Most everything else about the game - the size of the world, the features, the persistent world,

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

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

Any merits of the suit aside, computer game publishers have gotten away with murder for years. This is an industry where it is the practice to ship product with known bugs and patch them later on. You can't even change publishers for better quality, because everyone does it. It is more important, apparently, to get the product on the shelf to keep the cash flow stable; we'll just fix those pesky bug things later. For all of EA/Origins' protestations, it can be said with relative certainty that they made the game available and shipped the retail package to the shelf with the knowledge that bugs existed. They *always* exist; its generally accepted practice among publishers to ship with bugs. The only questions are how serious were they and were/are they fixable?

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

This applies to every game publisher trying to leverage company expertise in computer games into the online games arena. If Origin, 3DO, Microsoft, et al, wish to succeed in this industry, all they have to do is gain a sense - some scope, if you will - of the history of MMGs, understand that its a completely different market than standard computer games and that you have to do some things differently. Nearly every problem *UO* and 3DO's *Meridian 59* have experienced were also experienced by the pioneer games of the industry. Gold bugs, server crashes erasing characters, latency causing character deaths, players finding ways to duplicate items... these have all been seen in years past in similar games, such as *Islands of Kesmai*, *Dragon's Gate*,

Gemstone III and *Kingdom of Drakkar*. They are common problems with common fixes. If the people in charge at Origin and 3DO had done some basic research, such as talking to or even hiring (and listening to!) people with real-world experience in designing, developing and managing MMGs, many of the well-publicized problems could have been avoided.

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

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

2.2.2 Publisher Focus: Interplay

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

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

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

Although I still have a soft spot in my heart for Interplay two years after leaving, the company isn't perfect. They are lagging in computer RPGs and Sports products, in spite of concentrated

efforts to be a leader in those categories. CRPGs, in fact, is a category they helped create with *Wasteland* and the ground-breaking *Bard's Tale* series. Lately, only the incredible *Fallout*, largely produced, designed and engineered by superstar coder Tim Cain, removes some of the tarnish. Otherwise, the company's inhouse RPG development efforts are, well, mediocre. *Stonekeep* was marred by years of missed release dates and ended up short in the game-play department. The 4-going-on-5 year old *AD&D* license continues to languish in the DragonPlay division, with only a few so-so inhouse products such as *Dragon Dice* shipped to date (although *Baldur's Gate* by independent developer Bioware shows real promise for *that* company's future) and internal development projects continue to miss release date after release date. The VR Sports division is in a little better shape, although with projects developed for the division by independent development houses taking the lead.

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

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

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

There may be a different experience for Interplay, as they aren't totally dependant on shelf sales for income. The Interplay OEM, Inc. division, for example, is the industry leader in bundling games with hardware, and not just for Interplay; they bundle over 300 titles for the likes of LucasArts, Microprose, Virgin and Westwood and in the past has 'owned' as much as 45% of that market. Interplay also makes a dandy extra buck licensing properties in other media, such as

cartoon shows and movies. These efforts to diversify the income stream stabilize the volatile nature of computer game publishing and may make the offering more attractive to investors.

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

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

2.2.3 The 1998 Modem Mutant Awards

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

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

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

The intent of the new **Modem Maven** awards is to recognize excellence by developers, not the publishers, per se. While developers do receive some key technical and monetary assistance from

publishers and aggregators, the thought and execution behind the games begins and ends with the people doing the design and coding. The intent of the **Modem Mutant** awards is not to slam anyone, but to be instructive to the industry as whole.

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

Best Massively Multiplayer Game: Role-Playing

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

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

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

Honorable Mention

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

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

Best Massively Multiplayer Game: 1st Person Simulation

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

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

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

Honorable Mention

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

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

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

This is a far more satisfying experience than *Quake* or *Duke Nuke 'm 3D*, although the game does begin to wear a bit thin after a while. If Mythic would add more persistent world aspects to the game, this one would be in the running for both **Best Massively Multiplayer Game: 1st Person Simulation** and **Best Massively Multiplayer Game: Role-Playing**.

Best Retail CD-ROM Hybrid

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

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

Age Of Empires by Ensemble Studios

Command and Conquer by Westwood Studios

Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II by LucasArts

Best Classic Game

Chess by [Yahoo! Games](#)

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

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

Best Game In Beta Test

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

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

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

Best Online Games Information Web Site

[The Multiplayer Online Games Directory](#)

Dave Frankson, Producer

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

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

Lifetime Achievement

Bill Louden

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

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

The Hole In The Wire Award

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

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

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

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

2.3 *An Open Letter To Hasbro Interactive*

August 10, 1998

Originally Published on Gamasutra

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

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

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

RE: About Those Avalon Hill Games

Dear Tom,

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

But you haven't been sitting still, have you, Tom? Just recently, you bought [The Avalon Hill Game Company](#) from the Dotts. That was one smart move, Tom. I know, because we tried to buy them when I was at [Interplay/Engage](#). Interestingly, if they had accepted our offer back then, they almost certainly would have made more money than the paltry \$6 million you paid. And I do note that quite a few of the games we told AH we planned to develop into computer and online titles went into production soon after negotiations broke off - but, that's water under the bridge.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Hasbro or Parker Brothers (which you also own); now these brands are trusted for their compelling, yet easy to learn and play games. Every one of us knows that we can buy any game from either brand and the whole family can play. This is your secret weapon, and one which can revitalize some of AH's titles.

B. How: It Takes Two, Baby.

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

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

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

As you can see, this pretty much means developing two different, yet complimentary, products. Thankfully, you don't need to double your development team personnel or expenses. For the online team, you'll need: One designer experienced in online/multiplayer games; one senior

Windows person; one or two backend server people fluent in NT and/or UNIX, TCP/IP and at least one of them (or a third person) also good in SQL or Oracle; one part time artist. That s it; everything else, the online team gets from the retail unit team; art, sound, interface, you name it.

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

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

C. Who: Rounding Up The Unusual Suspects

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

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

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

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

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

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

[Freedom In The Galaxy](#): Currently out of print but with a computer game in development. This

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

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

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

I know there is a computer version in development and slated for release later this year. You'll need to take a hard look at this one; AH's past efforts in the computer game field have been disappointing, to say the least. Don't be afraid to go back to the drawing board on this one; better a delay than another panned AH product.

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

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

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

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

Kingmaker: Two to 6 player game of England's War of the Roses in the 16th Century. Each player represents one of the many noble factions fighting for control of Parliament and the

countryside. Game cards represent all of the major and most of the minor nobles of the realms. There are also cards representing official offices and titles, such as Chancellor, Earl of Salisbury and Warden of the Northern Marches, ships, mercenaries, et al.

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

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

[Starship Troopers](#): Based on the classic Heinlein science fiction novel of Humans versus the Communistic, hive-brain Arachnids, and the game does more justice to the book than director Paul Verhoeven recently did with his sophomoric abortion of a movie. Each Terran Mobile Trooper in the squad is represented by an individual counter, with the Bugs represented by a series of Worker, Warrior and Royalty counters. The Skinnies are also represented. Dig down into the Hive s burrows and try to capture a Queen, or try to draw them to the surface and pop them there.

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

D. When: Gonna Party Like It s 1999

With the possible exception of *Freedom In The Galaxy*, there is no reason why each of the above games couldn t hit the market sometime in 1999. The major portions of the designs are already done; it is all a matter of how fast your coders are. With *Freedom*, the art alone might push the release into the 1st quarter of 2000. It really depends on how much can be salvaged from the current development of that game.

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

Three ways to make money with each of these titles:

1. There is absolutely no reason why each of the games discussed here shouldn t sell at *least* 200,000 units, especially if Hasbro s marketing department works it magic on the titles. I suspect *Diplomacy*, *Feudal* and *Freedom In The Galaxy* could sell 500,000 units, if your marketing people are as good as they appear to be. The possible exception is *The Civil War*, and that s mainly because the content is viewed as history. I m not sure what to do about that; ask your marketing gurus;
2. Each of the titles lends its self to two or more add-on packs. The Colonial variant of

Diplomacy alone should sell 100,000 units;

3. Depending on which online gaming site you partner with, the online versions will bring in advertising and/or subscription fees. How much they bring in depends on how much attention is paid to them. For example, you generally get more players of the Hasbro games on [mPlayer](#) than Internet Gaming Zone, because the mPlayer people go out of their way to hold tournaments, training sessions and special games. Don't ignore this part; you might consider hiring a remote staff to attend to your games online. And heck, this might be the perfect opportunity for you to set up your own site to host your own games. You have the brand name trust and the cash to do it, that's for sure.

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

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

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

Best Regards,

Jessica Mulligan

2.4 Hasbro To Buy Microprose

August 14, 1998

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

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

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

Microprose stock at the \$6 price.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.5 September 1998

2.5.1 Reaction To The Hasbro Articles

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'd respond publically on Gamasutra but there seems no way to do so. In terms of complexity, Diplomacy != Monopoly. Diplomacy may be a simple *wargame*, but it is far more complicated than Monopoly for anyone in the mass market:

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

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

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

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

I've been exchanging email lately with a long-time industry friend, who is currently an executive at a well-known game publisher. Our exchange has been about the possible participation of the company in a new type of Internet product, one that almost certainly would dramatically raise the

number of subscribers to the company's Web site. He/she agrees that participation would probably be a good thing for the company. However, as to whether the company will participate, this quote (used with permission):

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

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

I did, indeed, laugh out loud when I read the e-mail. The laughter was tinged with a touch of depression, because the above "innovation process" is so familiar to so many of us. Believe it or not, my friends, this is how most computer and online game publishers operate. Heck, it may be how most corporations in general work. It certainly applies to every corporation I've ever worked for. While they all talk about how one needs to stay ahead of the curve in today's market, only a very few of them practice what they preach. These are the Blizzards of the industry, who come up with something interesting and then move to get it on the market fast.

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

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

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

Start as a small shop and turn out one or two really cool products that sell well. Get Big or Sorta Big on those one or two cool products. Lock in shelf space with the distributors and retailers (You may or may not know that the larger and/or more popular publishers have actually been known to buy space on the shelves. The next time you see 20 copies of a truly awful game on the shelf at a retail chain software store, think about how it got there). Buy or lock up to long-term exclusives the truly innovative smaller developers by waving mediocre cash in front of the noses

of unsophisticated — and hungry - techies acting as CEOs or Presidents. Make sure the company logo is larger and has better placement on the box than the smaller company that actually developed the game. Become Really Big while burying the smaller developers under your brand name. Hire lots of people. Institute the MORI. Stagnate.

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

What does all this mean? Frankly, I m not really sure. I suspect it means that trying to enforce a Harvard-style MBA business process on an industry that requires developers to be somewhat loony to retain the creative juices just doesn t work. Lord knows, the biggest fights between departments at computer game publishers seem to occur between the creative wonks in R&D and the finance beancounters and marketing pukes. One side is trying to stay ahead of the pack by being creative and innovative, which doesn t lend itself to budgets or deadlines. The other side wants to tell the wonks the project s exact completion date, because the ads have already been placed, retail shelf space purchased and the end caps bought. They also question every decision that requires money to be spent, such as why one would pay an actor such as Michael York or Leonard Nimoy multiple tens of thousands of dollars to speak some words when the kids down in QA would do it for free.

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

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

Maybe it is the industry s lot for innovation to take a back seat to bean counting, at least at the Big Corp level. It s sure starting to look that way. Thank god for the Blizzards of the world; at least innovation won t die off. I think.

2.5.2 The Marching Morons

One Reason Why Online Gaming Is In Sad Shape

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

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

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

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

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

As one might guess, the players most often resorting to this kind of infantile name-calling are not very far out of diapers themselves, the 12 year old to 16 year old demographic. They hang out

on mPlayer and IGZ because, of course, those services are free. They'd probably rather hang out where the really cool games are, such as Kesmai's GameStorm or Simutronics Playnet, but that takes a credit card and who wants Mom and Dad to know just exactly what they are doing with that educational Internet thingamabob, anyway?

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.5.3 Pressing The Flesh, The Interactive Way

September 30, 1998

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

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

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

Why, then, you ask, was it done?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- A high executive from a company now owned by EA used to be notorious for treating comrades at conferences to, uh, clubs that feature bare female anatomy. I was with a dinner group led by this illustrious person at a CDGC annual meeting when he literally took over one of these clubs and treated a German journalist to the birthday present of a lap dance, while the young Aryan was tied, semi-naked, to a chair. Cost for the evening's entertainment: A reputed \$8,000. The unconfirmed word is that EA pulled the plug on these Boy's Nights Out after purchasing the company. Not for the moral issue, of course, but because of the expense;
- As related to me 2nd hand, at the last E3 a producer from GT Interactive treated the boys from Mid Software to one or more evenings at one of Atlanta's finer titty bars, The Gold Club. He then expensed the \$10,000+ cost back to the company. To GT's credit, it is rumored the producer was reamed for the expense and he resigned soon thereafter. Of course, he immediately formed his own company, funded by GT;
- While on a road trip with two other senior executives a few years ago (before I made it known I was a male to female transsexual), I was treated to an evening of lap dancing at a Chicago establishment. No, I didn't indulge, which made the other two look at me strangely. On arriving home the next day, as we were debarking the plane, I said loudly, OK, guys, act horny, in case the wives are out there. The angry panic and Shhhhhhhh!s were amusing, to say the least. (And yes, I borrowed the line from Jim Bouton's great work, *Ball Four*. It was too good not to use in the situation).
- Some years back, I complained to the CEO of the company I worked for that my new boss had a tendency to make offensive gay and bisexual jokes. He'd speak in lilting tones and make stereotypical hand gestures as he was delivering some moronic one-liner. The CEO later told me he brought the (senior executive!) man in and told him to can it. And he did. When I was around.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.6 October 30, 1998

2.6.1 General Notes for the Holidays

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

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

2.6.2 Interplay Falls On Hard Times

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

For those who haven't heard, [Interplay](#) this week reported a shockingly dismal 3rd Quarter and warned that 4th Quarter results were going to be less than lovely, too. They also announced some products were going to miss the Christmas selling season, most notably Earthworm Jim 3 and Messiah. As a result, the stock has been bouncing all over the place, but is generally lower. Like, below \$2, compared to a high of \$8 _ just a few weeks ago.

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

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

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

2.6.3 'Tis The Season

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.7 December 7, 1998

2.7.1 The 1998 Round-Up

Well, 1998 draws to a close and an interesting — and terrifying — year it has been for the computer and online game industries. Below are some of the trends and events that helped define the year and, yes, I find it particularly appropriate to write some pieces of this column on Pearl Harbor Day.

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

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

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

It's Just Like Warcraft II, Except : Once again, the industry will post record sales numbers and, once again, 70% of that money will go to 10 or 15 of the hundreds of games to hit the retail shelves. This does not bode well for either the publishers or developers and is a major cause of

the industry's consolidation. It also proves out the paraphrase of Sturgeon's Law: 90% of everything is crap. That's one reason why the 10 or 15 games that aren't crap make all that money. You don't suppose that's because everyone is imitating each other instead of doing original work, do you? Nah, can't be.

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

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

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

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

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

Not Your Father's News Style: BitchX's Gaming Insider is a refreshing change from the sickening butt kissing of the traditional online news media. If you want some real inside poop

on computer games, check out the site. Company employees regularly dish her the inside dirt. Sometimes they even leave their real names, which is gutsy as hell, if not too smart.

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

3 Year 1999 Columns

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

3.1 *Welcome To My World; Now Bite Me*

Volume Eight, Issue 1 February 1, 1999

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nasty, Inconvenient Questions

First, some impressive-looking statistics:

In December, Origin Systems announced that of the approximate 250,000 Ultima Online retail units sold, 100,000 online gamers were paying them \$9.95 a month to play the game. They also noted that over 20,000 simultaneous users play during peak hours, that over half the subscriber base plays every day and that subscribers average about 20 hours a week in the game. For those as math-challenged as I normally am, that's about \$1 million a month in revenue to OSI's coffers. This is over and above the retail unit revenues, which could be in the neighborhood of \$7,500,000 if OSI wholesaled the unit at \$30 a pop. This certainly makes UO among the top three of all-time moneymakers of online-only games, and practically guarantees it the top spot sometime before mid-1999. All in all, pretty darn good, right?

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

Why does this game have only 100,000 users?

This is not an idle question. Think about it: The brand name of Ultima is the single most recognized and revered name in computer role-playing. The home play, retail versions of the game have sold millions of units over the last twelve years or so and its fiercely loyal base of fans certainly numbers in the hundreds of thousands, if not over a million. The Ultima brand name is so golden, an OSI marketeer once told me, that they could ship horse crap in an Ultima

box and the fans would immediately start asking for *Ultima: Road Apples II*. Ultima is one of maybe four or five of the top-level entertainment brands that can have this effect on the online market, along with Star Wars, Star Trek and maybe a couple of the TV soap operas or a brand name casino such as Caesar's or Harrah's. If ever there was a focused, pre-qualified market for an online game, it is the fan base of the Ultima series.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2 Nasty, Inconvenient Questions, Part Deux

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I submit UO as Exhibit A. Talk about unfulfilled potential! The problem noted in the paragraph above is *exactly* what has happened to the game. Remember all the bugs and the horrid latency on the servers when the game first came out? Remember how tough (read: damn near impossible) it was and still is to get the attention of a customer service rep online? Things haven't changed much. While the game features more depth than perhaps any other current online game, in some ways UO is the *worst*. Bugs continue to randomly - on a daily basis - strip players of hours of the tedious, mind-numbing character building required to build a character that can survive, and the infamous player killers continue to rule many servers, driving customers to other shards or even out of the game. Servers crash on a regular basis, costing players a minimum of the last hour's play each crash, and OSI's server and bandwidth hosting partner continues to lead the Known Universe in latency and dropped data packets.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I suspect, however, that online product support and customer service is going to be the differentiating factor from now on. Anyone, and I do mean *anyone*, can develop an interesting online game. It is retaining the subscriber that is the hard part. The difference between having a successful online game that attracts and keeps most of the interested subscribers, and having a marginal game that might actually turn a profit for years to come, is going to be how well the company responds to the player.

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

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

3.3 Pressing the Flesh II: The Interactive Sequel

Volume Eight, Issue 3

February 16, 1999

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

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

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

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

3DO In Sex Rap

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

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

I'm sure that 3DO will not be the last company to be so honored. There is a sad truth to this whole thing: This incident, whether or not true or proven in court, will *not* be used as consciousness-raising event elsewhere. In the young, ego-ridden, sex-obsessed, hormone charged atmosphere that passes for "working conditions" at many computer game publishers and developers, they know how to play this game. In public, it will be pointed to as a freak occurrence, not representative of the industry as a whole. Underground, the word will hit the grapevine to lay low for a while to let things cool off. I know; been there, done that, got the bra.

In a few days or weeks, the situation will go right back to being what it was before. The boys will continue to posture and make crude jokes when the girls aren't around and the locker room atmosphere will continue to build up until someone steps over the line. Then we'll go through this whole sordid mess again. It is a scenario that happens at many companies in many

industries; it is especially virulent in computer gaming, with its very young, socially unsophisticated work force, led by younger than average senior management crews.

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

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

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

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

Tribal Warfare

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

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

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

Dynamix has also avoided the pitfalls of such shooters as *Quake* and *Unreal* by designing cooperative play into the framework of the game. Teams that operate as individual members on

a mindless, deathmatch rampage tend to get the crap blasted out of them. Those that take a little time to plan some strategy and then cooperate during play tend to excel.

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

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

3.4 More Bugs: A Casualty of the Xmas Rush?

Volume Eight, Issue 4

February 23, 1999

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

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

"The emphasis is in getting product on the shelves. And if a few (dozen) bugs need to be left unfixed to make sure the cash flow isn't interrupted unduly, well that's just part of the process. Heck, we can always make a patch and post it on the Internet, right?"

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

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

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

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

This would certainly tend to "cause problems" for a computer. This is like saying that shagging a bullet with your forehead could "cause problems" to your memory processes. I guess,

technically, Mr. Zartman was being truthful in his statement, and I can hardly fault him for trying to put the best face on what could have been the PR Nightmare of the Year in computer gaming. As of today, I can't find mention of anyone who claims to have experienced the root drive erasure, so it looks like Bungie dodged that particular bullet.

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

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

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

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

Sometimes, entire bug-infested sections of games are yanked just before mastering the product. My spies tell me this is what happened with a current Top Three game that is selling like hotcakes. If you purchased a certain such Top Three game and it seemed a tad short on play to you, you may have been correct. I am confidentially told by company insiders that the last 1/3 of the game was yanked out just before the ship, due to several hundred bugs that couldn't be quashed in time to get the game on the shelf for Christmas. So instead of delaying the ship, the publisher just tore out the whole section and shipped it anyway. (NOTE: If I can get a second source confirmation on this, I'll print the names of both the game and the publisher here. Until such confirmation, however, it would be unfair to print them.).

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

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

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

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

Something Nice, For a Change

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

In 1990 and 1991, I was the product manager for Dr. Pournelle's forum on GENIE and I consider that period something of an Enlightenment for me. Jerry and his readers, perhaps the most intelligent and educated audience in the world, discussed everything under the sun, and those discussions opened up new worlds of reading and thought for me, personally, and for thousands of other visitors to The Jerry Pournelle RoundTable. Here is a measure of the success of that forum. Almost every one of the emails I received about it began with a line to the effect of "Damn it, why won't he change his mind when I write my arguments?" and ended with a line to the effect of "Don't you *dare* ever cancel this RoundTable!"

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

<http://www.jerrypournelle.com>

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

3.5 In the Biz

Volume Eight, Issue 5

Wednesday, March 3, 1999

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

"Why the hell would you want to?"

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

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

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

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

Passion is where it begins. If you don't have a passion for playing games and burning need to create them, your chances of getting hired to make them are quite low. It is the first thing Producers and Executive Producers look for during an interview. While I have never sucked on

a lit road flare, I do know the kind of passion it takes to put up with the sweatshop-like atmosphere that passes for working conditions at most game developers and publishers. And there are plenty like me out there; the supply seems endless. For the first week or so, the enthusiasm fairly flies off these brand-new, never-worked-on-a-game-before, entry-level programmers, QA testers and telephone technical support employees. This is it, the Holy Grail! Of course, once the reality of the situation hits them, that attitude disappears faster than a sailor's promise when the anchor rises.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What, and give up show biz?

3.6 Jack and The Beancounter

Volume Eight, Issue 6
Wednesday, March 10, 1999

Jack and The Beancounter A Fable For The Computer Age

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

Jack produced 3D action shooters. Being a pious young developer, Jack naturally worshipped the great god Creativity. That deity smiled on Jack for his piousness, bestowing on him the rare

attributes of Great Design, Elegant Code and Fast Programming. Jack's games were fun and delivered on time to the consumer, and everyone agreed that his shooters were the best.

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

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

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

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

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

That's when the megagod Reality showed up.

As everyone except executives know, Reality is a capricious but easily seen god. That's why he normally picks on executives; they've been blinded by their own light and are easy targets. Reality gazed on the market and saw that it was bad. He mused to himself, Well, if everyone likes Jack's games, they'll like even more of them. So, with a sly grin and a sense of the absurd, he went about inspiring the company's competitors to flatter by imitation. Soon, there were dozens of games on the retail shelves that were just like Jack's games. Development of other types of games slowed to a near-halt. Sales at Jack's company began to fall off. A lot. Like, by nearly 50%. Ouch.

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

But Great Deal took an extended vacation that season and sales continued to fall. Yet the executives still weren't too worried, because Jack would save them with his next game, due Real Soon Now for the Christmas selling season. Jack would save the company yet one more time, then the executives would sell their options and get the hell out before things fell apart.

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

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

Hey, Creativity doesn't work on a deadline and you ordered me to put hundreds of new features in the game, said Jack calmly. You can have it in January. Maybe February. April, for sure. Guaranteed, no later than June. Or July. You can never be sure.

That's when the interesting god Panic showed up.

It struck the hearts of the executives with major fear, and they cowered behind their desks, saying, All is lost and, if something isn't done, everyone will see us for what we really are! We have to sell the company to Microsoft at an inflated, outrageous price!

But Microsoft, which was already a deity in its own mind, had its own problems with the occasional god Justice and couldn't be bothered right then. So the executives approached everyone they could think of, but no one wanted to buy the company. We'll wait for the fire sale, they all said, showing their teeth and laughing.

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

Beancounter immediately took control of the company from the Panicked executives, saying to them, Worry not. Your jobs and perks are safe, because you prayed sincerely to me. Everyone else around here is in for a surprise, however. And so Beancounter drew his sword and began slashing.

The first thing to go was free Jolt and pizza for the developers. This was followed quickly by a new set of policies and procedures designed to make it impossible to buy anything more expensive than a postage stamp, and then only after weeks of delay and dozens of forms to be filled out. Then, faster than you can say Low margins on SKUs, Beancounter sliced up

Human Resources, Finance and Marketing. When he was done, half the company had been fired and the rest were scared to death. The vital god Morale was nowhere to be found. The executives breathed a sigh of relief and continued reading the Wall Street Journal.

Then Beancounter set his sights on Development.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You're right, said Beancounter. Prepare to worship Bankruptcy and Receivership. And he immediately called up his old college roommate and got a job at AT&T at a higher salary for less responsibility.

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

3.7 Color me boneheaded

Volume 8, Issue 7
March 16, 1999

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

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

Purple Moon Shuts Down

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

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

That research focused on the gender differences and playing patterns of children ages 8 to 12. According to Interval, "The profile of contemporary American girls that emerged through these studies differed markedly from conventional wisdom and more recent stereotypes. Purple Moon's mission is to build upon these insights to publish a portfolio of branded products in several media, focused on the contemporary interests and needs of young girls." The resulting product line, headlined by a young lady named Rockett Movado and the moral and ethical dilemmas she faced growing up, never seemed to catch on with the target market. The company brought in only about \$4.7 million last year, while spending millions on TV and print advertising.

According to PC Data, that gave them only about 5.7% of the girl's software market. In hindsight, Interval should probably have spent more time researching how to break into a market that is controlled as tightly and viciously as are the New York City docks by organized crime. Mattel owns 64.5% of the girl's software market, soon to be 86.1%, after Mattel finishes absorbing The Learning Company, headlined by the Barbie line of fluff pieces

(<http://www.barbie.com>). While there is nothing wrong with playing with dolls, such software titles as *Barbie Nail Designer*, *Barbie Jewelry Designer* and *Barbie Cool Looks Fashion Designer* are hardly groundbreakers. They are intended to do one thing; sell more dolls and the "refill" packs for the software titles. The worst moral dilemma faced by a child playing with the *Fashion Designer* software is the possible gaff of dressing Barbie in white after Labor Day. Oh, the embarrassment!

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

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

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

It really comes down to parental choice and supervision, as it always does in these cases. If America's parents would rather their kids play with software that demonstrates the difference between a sweetheart and princess neckline instead of the difference between standing up for what you believe or giving in to peer pressure, there isn't a lot that can be done about it. Not without violating a slough of Constitutional rights, anyway, and none of us would advocate that. I think we're stuck with the situation until someone decides to spend a lot of money, over quite a few years, to gain some meaningful market share and let parents know they *have* a choice. If the *Rockett* titles had been allowed to sit side-by-side on the shelf with the Barbie titles, I suspect there would be fewer anatomically incorrect dolls wearing empire waist gowns today and more young ladies who know the difference between form and substance. I despair that we're stuck with a market that favors the former over the latter. Such is the free market and we shouldn't change it. Purple Moon's demise probably means that quality titles for young girls are still some years away, if they ever get here.

And that *really* stinks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bosh. These games sucked.

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

But nonetheless; fine, we need to make friends. It is at least a clear objective, a *sine qua non* of any good game. How do we make friends? We wander about and have conversations. How do we have conversations? Well, at each decision point in the conversational tree, we have three available conversational gambits. The gambits always wind up being a choice between "be a jerk," "be sunny" and "be a wimp." This is brain dead; better conversational engines have existed since, oh, *Zork*, say.

Okay. Never mind. So which is the better choice? What considerations go into making a choice? How do I navigate my way through these decisions in order to achieve my goal? The answer: *it doesn't matter!* You can choose to behave like a bitch at every decision point, or behave like a mouse, or mix up your responses, and the eventual outcome is the same every

time--you make friends and have a successful first day at school. I watched my daughter go through just about every possible branch of the tree, and become increasingly frustrated--and convinced, as I was--that the game sucked, because *none of it mattered*. No amount of feminist rabble-rousing, no amount of cheering the development of games for girls by girl developers, instead of stinky boy games developed by stinky boys, could hide the fact that Purple Moon's product sucked.

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

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

3.8 Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life

Volume 8, Issue 8

Tuesday, March 23, 1999

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

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

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

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

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

Publishers know you will buy them.

We all figure there are about 4 million hard-core gamers out there. These are the people most likely to buy one or two games a month, 12 to 14 games a *year*, so these are the customers that

publishers and developers cater to. The Hard Core gamers like Shooters and RTS games and they are fairly easy to produce, so that's what gets developed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Publishers know you will buy them.

Did I mention that publishers know you will buy pretty much any piece of junk they send to the retail shelf, as long as it is labeled a Shooter or RTS? Look at the list of Top Twenty sellers from PC Data any month (www.pcd.com). It is dominated by Mass Market trailer trash, Shooters and RTS games. Sure, the occasional RPG or adventure game slips in, but only because they so few RPGs and adventures get developed. When someone actually bothers to spend the time and money to develop one, it pretty much automatically hits the list for a while.

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

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

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

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

Seems simple enough to me.

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

Volume 8, Issue 9

Tuesday, March 30, 1999

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

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

Meanwhile, some impressions:

The hit of the show for the attendees was overwhelmingly the online-only role-playing game *EverQuest* (<http://www.station.sony.com/everquest/>). Developed by Verant Interactive and published by Sony Online Entertainment, the 1st Person, 3D graphics-based MUD was launched at the show on Tuesday, March 16. Developers and press wanting a demo of the game constantly crowded the tiny Sony Online booth, which was run by Sony's Producer Bridgette Patrovsky and was voted Best Small Booth of the Show in a landslide by those same attendees. I suspect if Sony had sprung for booth space larger than an airplane restroom, they would have taken Best Large Booth; interest in *EverQuest* was that strong.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.10 This fraggged corpse brought to you by

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

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

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

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

Publishers *like* this attitude in a customer. They spend a lot of time talking about how "immersive" their games are and how such immersion improves the gaming experience and helps build customer loyalty. Now they want to consider pulling us out of that immersion by selling ad space in the games? That makes about as much sense as well, it doesn't make sense at all. I

don't care if it's product placement, interstitial commercials or even ads thrown into free download demos; it just plain isn't right.

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

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

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

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

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

In this tawdry, ad-ridden, over-marketed society of ours, the computer games we play are one of the last bastions from the onslaught of devious Madison Avenue pitchmen who exhibit all the social conscience of a West Indies slave trader. If publishers succumb to the siren temptations of

advertising dollars, I can guarantee you this: I won't be buying those games. And I won't be alone.

Will I?

3.11 Oh, No! I Forgot to Have Children!

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

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

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

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

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

Is today's over-30 crowd out of step with contemporary gaming? It is beginning to seem, more and more, that this is the perception of the up-and-coming gaming cognoscenti: if you aren't under 30 years old, how can you possibly understand modern games? In the perception that passes for reality in this business, it is becoming chic to look on the young as cool, hip and "with it," and on the 30- to 40-somethings that actually built this industry from the ground up as old, stodgy and out of the loop. Gee, you don't suppose that's because a lot of young people eager to make their bones in games are climbing the ladder, do you? Good grief, we now have people at some major publishers who have never been involved in the actual hands-on making of a game, *in charge* of deciding what games will be developed. I'm all for guiding youth and talent with experience and knowledge, but this is backwards, in my opinion.

There seems to be some confusion in the industry between the processes of deciding what titles to develop and just how to develop them. It is one thing to decide to make a title that appeals to

the younger crowd; it is quite another to confuse the issue by deciding that Young Title = Young Developers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

opinions of a Chris Crawford are far more important to me than those of some young buck who did some pick-up work on a hit game.

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

3.12 Catching Up On Email

**Volume One, Issue 12
Tuesday, April 20, 1999**

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

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

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

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

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

From a college student studying Math and Computer Science:

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

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

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

the joys of your youth are the best equipped to deal with a younger age who is growing more and more distant from their parental role models.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I got yer Shamrock Shake RIGHT HERE!!!"

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

From a Senior Producer in the industry:

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

Some thoughts:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.13 GOD SUED!

Volume Eight, Issue 13
Tuesday, April 27, 1999

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One reporter asked Ms. Mulligan if she thought the Carneal lawsuit had merit. "Absolutely not," she stated. "This is just like the cartoon violence controversy of the 1960s. God caused the

creation of the Roadrunner cartoons, for example, which tempted me as a child to want to trick coyotes into running off of cliffs. I didn't do it," she pointed out quickly, "but what if I had? How many coyotes barely escaped a brush with death or serious injury at my hand, due to God's flagrant and negligent use of free will? The potential is terrifying."

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

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

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

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

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

3.14 Paying for the Wrong Sins and Other Odd Thoughts

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

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

Thankfully, my personal down payment on sin is merely being forced to pack up the skin-revealing bikinis for the summer and take on a low-fat diet. As for computer game and media publishers, it looks like the punishment for their sins - a lack of true creativity - may be higher. A bevy of political and ideological forces are arrayed to blame them for

everything from the Littleton shootings to lower SAT scores. They are this election year's target of opportunity in the Save Our Kids, No Matter What The Constitution Says contest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In between, they will be throwing lavish parties, trying to steal employees from each other so they can actually complete development on the projects they announce and sneaking out to the nudie bars every night for some quick titillation (pun intended). In other words, the

conference is fairly useless except to let us geeks act out and let off steam. In that, it accomplishes the goal admirably.

Wouldn't miss it for the world.

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

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

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

3.15 No Modem Mutants Here, Pal

Volume Eight, Issue 15
Tuesday, May 18, 1999

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

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

The annual rite started when I was the Games manager at GENie. GENie was then just about the only online service that had multiplayer gaming as a major focus, thanks to visionary and co-founder, Bill Loudon, now a VP at Looksmart.com (<http://www.looksmart.com/>). No service had as many multiplayer online games, not by a long shot. By the time I left in 1992, there were over a dozen online games and they accounted for almost 25% of GENie's total revenues. The line-up included games that are still with us ten years later, including *Air Warrior* (<http://www.gamestorm.com/actionandstrategy/airwarrior3/>), *Dragon's Gate* (<http://www.mythicgames.com/gamesdragons.html>), *Federation II* (<http://www.online.co.uk/ib/fed.html>), *The Hundred Years War* by James Dunnigan and Al Nofi (<http://www.hyw.com/>) and *Gemstone III* (http://www.play.net/simunet_public/g3/g3home.asp). Naturally, most all of the awards went to GENie products in those early years.

(GENie is so stupidly managed these days by new owner IDT that you can't get a preview of the services, sign up an account or even read their copyright notice at <http://www.genie.com/> without

already having an account and password. No wonder the grand old company died under IDT's leadership; they're morons.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Electronic Arts: The Maxis division of EA has been trying to hire an Executive Producer for *Sim City Online* for the past eight months or so, with scant results. This could be a very cool

game, indeed, depending on the final design and supposing they can actually ever decide to hire someone to lead the effort.

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

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

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

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

3.16 Massively Multiplayer Games We'd Like To See

**Volume Eight, Issue 16
Tuesday, May 25, 1999**

Let's have some fun.

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

That kind of loyalty is to be sought after. It seems to me there are some opportunities out there still for unique massively multiplayer games that would attract large and loyal audiences. Some are game worlds; others are book or TV/movie worlds. Why some of them haven't been produced yet is unknown; it isn't like others and I haven't broached most of these ideas more than once.

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

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

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

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

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

Imperial Trader

(<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0671741926/qid=927132028/sr=1-21/002-4252521-7960266>): To be set in Jerry Pournelle's best-selling Empire of Man universe, of which *The Mote in God's Eye*, *King David's Spaceship* and the Falkenberg's Mercenary Legion novels are a part (although the latter are set in an earlier era). Dr. Pournelle and I discussed the possibility of developing this game nearly ten years ago, when I was in charge of games at GENie. The player would start as a low-level trader in the Imperial Trader's Association with one merchant ship, trying to work up to Master Trader and control of a fleet of ships. Cargoes would include items such as food, weapons, luxury items and, most especially, information. Information that one trades and information that one seeks to keep from the competition and the Imperial Navy, which doesn't particularly like Traders. This one would also allow space combat

- or secret alliance - with the Outie rebels and the occasional "quest" for 1st Empire technology, which is greater than currently available technology. I'd anticipate a skill-based system, a combined 1st person and isometric interface and promotion by Trader rank and Imperial title (Baron, Duke, et al).

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

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

3.17 Games We Might (Shudder) See

**Volume Eight, Issue 17
Tuesday, June 8, 1999**

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

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

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

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

Baldur's Nail Designer: In the eternal quest to create a mass-market RPG, Bioware, Interplay and Mattel team up to bring us the definitive fashion fantasy game. As Morona, a

Chaotic/Neutral Human beauty salon owner, you are charged with exploring the dangerous realm of The Garment District in search of the mystical and powerful +5 Acrylic Nail in Christian Dior Indian Red. It won't be easy; everyone knows the District is the dwelling place of the hideous Anorexians, wielders of the powerful Back-Biting and Cat-Fighting spells. Find the Nail and fight your way back through the Anorexians in time to give it to Heather Locklear in time for the Emmys, or all is lost!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.18 Unsung Heroes

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

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

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

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

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

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

What they did have was *passion* for online multiplayer games. At a time when the monetary rewards were slim, this true love is what kept the industry alive and growing. This is certainly

different from today, when ego and cash seem to drive the industry at the cost of quality and good design. Like most pioneers, they lived with the trade-off, shagging arrows from irate natives in exchange for freedom. In this case, creative freedom, which let 'em do the tough grunt work and show these newbies how it is done.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bill wasn't a programmer, nor an artist or designer. What Bill was, was a visionary. He recognized in the early 1980s that online, multiplayer gaming was a gas and that it would someday be *big*. He also loved to play. From 1982 through about 1997, as an executive first at CompuServe and then at NVN, GENie and Delphi, he gave some of the names on this list their start by making some (damn little) money and network resources available to them. These include John Taylor and Kelton Flinn of Kesmai fame, Mark Jacobs of Mythic Entertainment and David Whatley and Simutronics of *Gemstone II* and *III*. Oh, and me, too.

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

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

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

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

3.19 Bandwidth Shall Not Save You

Volume Eight, Issue 20
Tuesday, June 29, 1999

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.20 History's Revenge

**Volume Eight, Issue 21
Tuesday, June 29, 1999**

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

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

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

We've already seen what happened with the original game aggregators that bought into that mess. DWANGO, TEN, Engage and MPlayer collectively, they have tossed something like \$100 to \$120 million down a rat hole. They spent all that money to set up services that charged anywhere from \$19.95 per month to \$2.00 per hour for play, only to end up providing mostly free gaming online. This is a profit model? Looks like the old "We'll lose a penny on each transaction, but make it up in volume" argument to me.

History didn't wait around very long to take its revenge. DWANGO is out of business in the US, Engage might as well be, and TEN has shifted gears to the Spades and Pinochle crowd. Mplayer is the only one of the group that continues to look like it has a future of any kind. Its parent, Mpath, was able to collect back a big chunk of the \$50 million-plus it spent by issuing an initial public offering of stock earlier this year, which ran up to over \$50 per share early. The stock has since slid back to a price of about \$23; still not bad. However, Mpath doesn't push Mplayer; rather, most of the money they've made comes from licensing their technology. Investors see

them as a technology play, not as a game aggregator. Reading Mpath's SEC filings, you get the feeling they wish Mplayer would just die, already. As in, "We're sorry we ever associated ourselves with games. Forgive us! That's not what we're about, really!"

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

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

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

For the next few years, we are probably going to see the publishers mostly continue to chase retail space with non-persistent Internet-only games. Which is a shame, because it continues to lock them into the hit-driven retail market. We'll see a flood of retail-only games, the top ten or fifteen of which will make money and the rest tossed into the remainder bins, just as happens now. Sure, a few high profile online games will hit the datastream over the next three years, but they will continue to be the exception, not the rule. The big money will continue to be lavished on retail shelf units with only limited Internet multiplayer connectivity.

This is being penny-wise and pound-foolish. Why? Because in the meantime, those few publishers with the foresight to start building their online customer base *now* are snapping up large chunks of a limited market. By spending what they need to spend now, and learning what they need to learn, those few publishers presenting online-only games will continue to quietly

build an extremely loyal, paying audience for massively multiplayer, persistent world content. And online gamers are nothing if not loyal.

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

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

3.21 Odd Bits and Pieces

Volume Eight, Issue 22
Date Posted July 8, 1999

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

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

Yeah, right; that'll happen. Sure.

Lack of real news; eyah! This is a situation to cause panic in a columnist. If the publishers and developers aren't out there in the field making public, boneheaded mistakes, I have to really dig in to think of something to write about. I mean, come on, you guys, *work* with me here. The reading public has demands, after all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What this means to my ramblings here, however, is more complex. There is the little matter of objectivity to consider. Don't get me wrong; I'm perfectly capable of being bluntly objective, no matter whom I work for. However, readers should be reminded, from time to time, just whom I work for, so they can form their own opinions about my objectiveness. It's only fair. Worry not; I'll continue taking the industry at large to task. There is a very thick skin covering this body of mine and I do seem to enjoy having that thickness tested.

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

3.22 Persistently Silly

Volume Eight, Issue 23

July 14, 1999

I really hate moving.

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

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

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

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

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

Everyone in the industry is all atwitter about the online gaming possibilities of the Dreamcast and PSX2. Sega is actually going to build a network to support the Dreamcast. Why? Catapult and Sega's own Saturn NetLink were miserable failures. Don't the executives at Sony and Sega understand that the compelling nature of two- to four-player console games is that all the players are *right there*, yelling and screaming at each other? Sure, internet-capable games might sell more for the consoles, but do these people have any idea how expensive it is to build and maintain a network operations site to support the games?

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

Several months ago at the GDC, a fairly senior producer from a Washington State-based software company approached me with a "completely new idea!" for an online game. Whenever

I hear those three words from someone who has never worked on an online game, I want to run for the hills and hide in a cave.

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

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

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

3.23 Oh, No, Not Convergence Again!

Volume Eight, Issue 24

Thursday, July 22, 1999

Here we go again.

About six years ago, in the Internet Stone Age of 1993, the buzzword of the month in Hollywood was "convergence." This meant the supposed cohesive interlinking of digital information from personal computers, PDAs, television, pagers, the Internet, home alarm systems, intranets, extranets, the telephone (both POTS and cellular), satellite communications, game consoles and, presumably, Aunt Mamie's Epilady and the kitchen sink. Et al, ad infinitum, to include anything with any kind of silicon chip in it.

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

Watching *The X-Files* and getting turned on by Gillian Anderson? Not a problem, my friend. Simply have the CPU chip in your TV access an Internet search engine and find doctored pictures of her naked. Then print them out on your ink jet, while emailing them to your buddy down the street with your voice comments attached, and posting them on a Web site, complete

with a voting booth to let fans pick America's favorite Gill doctored pic. Oh, and send her a fan email at the same time and telling her where to find them.

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

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

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

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

So here we go again, six years later, with the process all over again. Once again, conferences are held to tell the hoi polloi just how convergence is going to happen, if only the mega-corps would be left in peace to do it. Once again, we're being told that with just a few minor changes in the law and a few tax breaks, why, convergence is just around the corner! It isn't, of course, unless you consider 10 to 15 years "just around the corner."

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

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

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

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

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

3.24 Two Mind-Bending Emails

Volume Eight, Issue 25

July 28, 1999

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

But every once in a while, just about the time I start to think I'm something special and unique, an email will land in my box that is so well thought out, so cogent and well considered, that it makes me stop and think. To me, that is the highest compliment I could pay to any email: it made me stop and *think*.

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

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

You know, I think the answer to your last question, "Why is all this money being spent on new technologies for TV/PC/kitchen sink convergence, when they really have no idea whether we'll buy it, need it or even want it?", would have to be: it takes much longer to do something really creative or innovative, than it does to do something

derivative or to do something that incrementally improves on something that was done before. (You could probably apply this same logic to things that are well-crafted and designed, too; it takes much longer to do that than to do something that is of the same quality as everything else, or that is incrementally better, quality-wise, than the competitors.)

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

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

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

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

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

Eric Lulie

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

The other important point he made is that, curmudgeons like me aside, people and companies work on what they know because, well, they know it. Let's face it; if any of us knew how to build the next "new thing" on demand, we'd be *doing* it. I mean, you can get up in the morning, stretch and say, "Think I'll totally revolutionize the industry today," but 99.99999999 times out of 100, it ain't going to happen. And as industries mature and find a willfully paying audience, it becomes harder for that to happen; there is less incentive to rock the boat and maybe kill the goose while it lays golden eggs.

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

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

Sellout! Sellout!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yeah, no big surprises.

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

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

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

In two places, for the most part:

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

Definitely, food for thought.

3.25 The Count Is In, and More Reader Mail

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

I've been a bad girl.

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

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

In first place was Sid Meier's *Civilization* series. *Civ I* or *Civ II* was mentioned in about half the emails I received. What I found interesting about this is that a turn-based game beat out all the

real-time strategy games on the market. This just shows that well-designed game can keep one interested for a loooooong time. In fact, I'm a day late getting this column to the editor because I fired up *Civ II* to check a couple things and got hooked all over again.

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

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

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

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

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

From Jason Robert Bogh:

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

From UnaBraumer:

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

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

From Abe Flores:

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

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

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

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

What happens second is more important. Everybody starts using it for the most basic, simple and wowie factor possible. Computer Gaming has just exited this phase. Right now the tools have been developed, the language has been formed and it is time for the industry to evolve. Before now that evolution would have been nearly impossible. Thief, which in my mind feels very much like an RPG, wouldn't have been possible before Quake really, and the new D&D titles from Black Isle could only evolve after the largely disappointing Interplay RPG titles and the MUDs of the early 90s.

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

Mr. Flores makes some good points, especially about the naturally chaotic and dynamic nature of humans gaming together and the social aspect of that. Certainly, it is much easier to achieve this social aspect when you're gathered around a table in someone's dining room. When the

technology reaches a point where we can simulate that adequately, massively multiplayer games will go through another evolutionary leap.

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

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

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

3.26 Talk About Dreaming

Volume Eight, Issue 27
August 12, 1999

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

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

For those who haven't been following the news, Dreamcast is Sega's answer to the Playstation, a next-generation 128 bit gaming console that will ship with an installed modem. According to the media hype, this is supposed to be the Next Big Thing for Internet gaming, available in stores on September 9, 1999 which is, coincidentally, the first horror date in the Y2K calendar, as 9999 is the "please shut down and don't work anymore" code in a lot of older processors. Sega may learn to regret having chosen that marketing date for it's catchy ring. If a bunch of computers go down on that day, the term "my computer went Sega" may be added to the technical lexicon.

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

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

My second reaction was, "So what?"

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

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

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

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

And what makes anyone think developers will actually try to design around the lag, which is the only hope for a decent game experience this way? Or that kids will enjoy playing console games that are a *lot* slower than they are now because of designing for the lag? Or

that Dreamcast will succeed with 2 to 4 player games over a modem when damn near everyone else has failed to make money off them? Or, or or

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

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

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

3.27 Snippets and Rumors

Volume Eight, Issue 28
Thursday, August 19, 1999

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

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

I suppose I could just take a gratuitous shot at someone; it isn't like there aren't plenty of handy targets. Well, less than there used to be, for sure. Between Hasbro and the French (who can't seem to win a shooting war but do know how to buy a company on the rocks), there just aren't a lot of companies left to buy. Lately, the industry grapevine is all a'twitter with rumors of a bidding war between Mattel and Hasbro to see who gets to pick over the decaying body of GT Interactive. A couple lousy quarters for Barbie sales and see what happens? I mean toy companies buying computer game companies? Have they no shame? And did you notice that they didn't bother until toy sales started to drop a bit?

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

off the head office in Tokyo. If that is true another one bites the dust. We need more Stolar's telling it like it is.

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

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

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

In the Online Games Insider newsletter lately, I've been writing about my experiences with ADSL, the local telephone company's answer to the cable modem. The upshot: The more expensive ADSL option of 1.5 meg dedicated bandwidth is quite useful for online gaming. I'm a so-so Quake and Tribes player, but my kill ratio went up dramatically when I started using the high-bandwidth ADSL; less lag overall, most times I play. Until the boneheads at the phone companies figure out a better and faster installation method and lower the price for the higher bandwidth option, however, you shouldn't expect to see it surpass cable access subscription numbers soon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

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

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

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

"The Game will provide (hours of fun/years of entertainment/more non-recyclable trash in garbage heaps everywhere)," said Sil E. Geek executive producer of The Game for developer Nostril Blow Interactive. "This CD-ROM game is destined to become (the most loved and played game ever/the new technological milestone by which all computer games will be judged/filler for remainder bins in retail stores worldwide/used as a coaster by your Aunt when she comes to visit)."

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

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

3.29 *The Real Online Game Markets*

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

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

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

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

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

The "Classic Games" or "Mass Gamer" Market

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

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

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

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

The "Retail Hybrid" or "Casual Gamer" Market

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As noted above, there is little movement between the groups. Think of it as a pyramid, with the Mass Gamer at the base and the Hard Core gamer at the pinnacle. There is less room to move upward in the pyramid's structure. About 70% of the population, in fact, sit at the base in the Mass Gamer category. Another 15% to 20% rests in the Casual Gamer slots and the rest are the Hard Core gamers.

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

Why is it important to understand this? Simply put: Survival. Or, at least, it is important to the survival of the Hard Core segment of the industry. Now that the business model has changed from hourly fees to flat monthly rates, the industry is at critical cusp. No longer can a mere

2,000 players financially support a single game, as was the case just three years ago. We no longer need just a few quality users with high disposal incomes to flourish; we need hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of players willing to spend \$9.95 a month on one or more of our games. In a flat rate world, this is a recipe for slowly going broke, as Prodigy found out in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

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

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

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

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

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

3.30 The Real Online Game Markets, Part II

Volume One, Issue 31
Thursday, September 9, 1999

Tap, tap. All right, folks, settle down. Let's get started, shall we? We have a lot to cover today.

If you haven't read last week's homework assignment, The Real Online Game Markets, please do so now. We'll wait for you to catch up.

Finished? Okey dokey, let move on to this week's question, which is:

"So what does all this mean for the online gamer?"

The short answer is it depends. It depends on several factors but, mostly, it depends on what type of online gamer you are. We are going to see plenty of games put into development in all three of the broad markets I described in the last column (Mass Market, Casual and Hard Core).

The computer and online games industries are nothing if not optimistic and prolific; last time I checked, there were at least 40 online games in development, not counting Retail Hybrids.

Most of them will never see the light of day, of course, and most of those that do come to market won't have the legs to stick around very long. I base this statement on history. As little as three years ago, when I was still a consultant, the executive briefing I gave to companies began with a slide that listed every publisher, developer and online distributor that had even one online game in development or deployed, and the total number of online games in development as an industry. In September, 1996, the total was 132.

Yes, that number is correct. Allow me to put that in modern terms we can all understand (especially a greedy wench like me): One Hundred and Thirty Two and No Cents.

As it turned out, the "No Cents" should have read "No Sense." There is no telling how many millions of dollars the 41 companies on my list tossed down the proverbial rat hole on games that could not possibly succeed. Certainly, most of those 132 games never made it to market or even beyond the paper design stage. And at what cost? Let's say 90 of them haven't or never will make it to market; the number is probably more like 110, but let's be conservative. If the average amount of money spent on failed efforts was even \$100,000 - and that number is surely higher by a factor of at least two-, that's \$9 million right there. Nine million dead presidents, gone for nothing.

Waste not, want not. As I look over the chart today, fifteen of those 41 companies no longer exist and seven or eight others have pretty much exited the industry. That total doesn't include companies such as TEN, which last week took a look at their hard core gaming fare, said "We have seen the enemy, and they is us!" and went to all Mass Market games and changed the corporate name to pogo.com. (And if you don't understand the mangled reference, ask your parents. Or grandparents. My god, I *am* getting old!)

Nine million dollars. For \$9 million today, I can produce for you a minimum of two absolutely kick-butt persistent world online games that will bring in a minimum of \$9 million a year *each* or several years. That includes my bloated salary, outrageous perqs and golden parachute that will allow me to retire to Tahiti with Pedro the Cabana Boy.

It is definitely a great time to be a consumer. Expect to a lot more money tossed down rat holes, as companies rush to try to seal up the various markets by throwing as many games as possible online. These games will come and go from the market fairly quickly, but you'll get a chance to try a lot of them in a short period of time.

The Mass Market, typified by familiar games such as poker, backgammon and spades, has the toughest row to hoe. These games are commodities; sites give access to them for free as loss leaders to draw in a crowd. This works admirably if you are a Sony and own licenses such as *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune*. It works less admirably if you are a TEN - excuse me, Pogo - or even a Microsoft and are competing with the same old ho-hum spades, chess, et al.

Sure, they make back some of the costs of hosting the games through banner advertising, but not near enough to make their margins. Everyone and his grandmother is going to be trying to find a Mass Market product that breaks out of commodity status and can be charged for in some way, shape or form. After spending three years training the market to expect these games for free, good luck.

The Retail Hybrids will stay with us for a few years, at least. Selling units at retail is the only way most publishers know how to make money. They still haven't figured out how to make a lot of money on the Internet portions of their games, although one could make the argument that Blizzard and Sierra have made a start with battle.net and won.net, respectively. They are still money sinks, but at least they help promote brand loyalty.

The main argument for these dollar sucks is that the companies make up the costs in additional game unit sales. Of course, they can't really tell us how many extra sales they make, although they estimate it at 10% to 15%. This seems to me like a number pulled out of thin air, to justify the costs.

Truth to tell, Internet connectivity in retail games is now also commodity. Since id tossed it in for free in Quake, everyone else has to follow suit. And because it is a free feature and almost completely unsupported after launch, it is generally poorly implemented and tacked on at the last minute. There are some excellent renditions - Tribes comes to mind - but they are the exception, not the rule. But if you play computer games and like the 2 to 16 player gig, you needn't worry about that segment of the market disappearing soon.

Persistent worlds and designed-for-online games are faring somewhat better. With the example of *Ultima Online* (www.owo.com) and *EverQuest* (www.everquest.com), which together presently represent something like \$24 million annually in subscriber fees alone, more companies are taking a serious look at entering this arena.

A few examples: Sierra still swears it is developing Tolkien's *Middle Earth*; Turbine's *Asheron's Call* is slated to finally go live on The Zone this fall; Bioware is working a limited-play version of *AD&D: NeverWinter Nights* (And why not name it *NWN II*? Why not a single nod to the original on AOL? Why are they ignoring references to one of the most financially successful online games to date?) and; Digital Anvil is working on a couple games for The Zone, too, including the space combat game *Freelancer*.

What it all means is that companies would love to tap into the games annuity market, and that means doing persistent worlds and doing them correctly. Unfortunately, most people don't know how, so expect a lot of trial and error as publishers continue to ignore the lessons of the past and make the same old mistakes over and over again.

So to wrap all this up neatly and answer today's question:

For the next three or four years, game consumers from beginners to hard core enthusiasts are going to have an ever-increasing number of online games to try. There will be a plethora of entries in all markets, with quite a number of failed efforts and a few gems that will be around

for years. In the process, much *dinero* will be thrown to the winds on products better left in the mind of the progenitor.

The main effort will be to find a way to make the Mass Market actually pay for playing, even though the biggest hit right now and for the next 4 or 5 years is in persistent worlds. Those games are, however, too difficult to support and manage for most companies to want to stay in that market. And Hybrids are too attached to the hit-driven nature of the retail market for most of them to stick around for more than a couple years, and most companies can't figure out how to make money with them beyond the initial sale, anyway.

This may all seem like simple common sense to you and me. To paraphrase the author, however; "Why is it called 'common sense' when it is so uncommon?"

Good question. If there are no more questions, class is dismissed.

3.31 The Marching Morons, Part Deux

Volume Eight, Issue 32
Thursday, September 16, 1999

I'm worried. When did it become OK for online gamers to be foul-mouthed, dishonest, racist homophobes?

I must have missed the announcement making such behavior acceptable. Yet there obviously was one, because I can hardly cruise the message boards today without finding messages of the likes of these:

(WARNING: The following material contains references of scatological, racist and homophobic nature. Some of it is quite raunchy. You have been warned. They are also generally ungrammatical, with quite bad spelling, and thus sometimes tough to understand. That should tell you something about the education level of the various writers.

(And yes, I use bad grammar here occasionally, too. The difference is, I do it intentionally. Why do I suspect these people don't?)

As for pestering GMs with macroer reporting (and, btw, you're a total homo if you do this) *(A player complaining about other players reporting cheating and exploits);*

This is f***ing gay! *(In reference to the inability to use a debit card to pay for an online game);*

It has always been gay that way. *(Discussing an odd bug in a game utility designed specifically to allow players to cheat);*

Japs and their Blue Healing/Stonewallers (*Topic title in a message board dedicated to cheating in online games*);

(Previous Poster), Your gay. Your Probably a Spy for (a game company). If we wanna get banned Umm F*** to us. But I really feel like getting banned. On one of my multiple accounts. This site is dedicated to letting us know bugs and s***. But you have to be a queer and Not tell us. WHO cares They will fix it anyway let us have our fun.

Your a crazy mother f***er everyone hates you. (*Posted on a board dedicated to finding ways to cheat and exploit bugs in online games, after one of the moderators had a fit of conscience and refused to post a particular bug.*)

2) People know who "(a poster)" is.. hes El Wannabe Jew.. (*In reference to the same guy being lambasted in the example above. People start getting nasty when you won t tell them how to cheat.*)

You, sir, are gay. Duping is not hacking. Only a mindless twit with no knowledge of what hacking is would say that. (*Castigating a poster who approved of the banning of players using duplication bugs to cheat. Apparently, it is OK to use a bug and ruin the game for everyone, just so long as you don't "hack."*)

I could go on for pages. I mean that literally; I found the above examples in less than fifteen minutes on three message boards, including the time it took to discard several that were so obscene that re-posting them here would create a paragraph of nothing but asterisks. Yes, there was much, much more where this all came from. Sadly.

One year ago today, I wrote a column about this phenomenon. That column was titled *The Marching Morons* and focused primarily on the rudeness, homophobia and profanity as it pertained then to the free online gaming services, such as Mplayer and The Zone. What saddens and disheartens me is that some of those willing to pay to play online games also exhibit this behavior. If it were just one or two jerks, I could chalk it up to the statistical probability that there will be one or two jerks in any group of 1,000 or more. A small fraction of one percent I can live with, but the message posters above represent thousands of online gamers. How many? I just don't know. 2% of the total? 5%? 10%? There is no way to know for sure.

Maybe they are just a vocal minority, statistically insignificant and ticked off because of it. Heck, anyone using such language or expressing such views in public would be slapped down hard and thoroughly humiliated by anyone nearby. You'd think they'd be embarrassed to do it, even under the cover of anonymity. What if their true identity were revealed? What would Mom think?

Far from being embarrassed, however, they revel in it, spewing out their hatred and abuse as if they were earning merit badges in Lucifer's Junior Demon Scouts. You and I - and they! - know that using such language or exhibiting such behavior in real life would get them shunned. So what makes it OK to do it online?

We've always known the anonymous nature of online communications freed up a certain percentage of people to act out. We expect it. What I didn't expect however, was to find that what appears to be a significant portion of the online gaming universe seems to feel it is OK to lie, cheat, be rude, slam gays, be racist and use language that would make a chief petty officer blush.

So, I worry. I worry that so many "people" (and I use the term loosely) feel this is acceptable behavior, anonymous or not. I worry that so many people are apparently homophobic bigots online when we've come so far in real life. It makes me wonder if a significant portion of us stopped baiting gays and "Japs" publicly just to keep from being sued or publicly humiliated, not because *not* doing it is the right thing to do.

And somehow, I just know this column is going to have little or no effect on them. Far from it; they'll take it as a badge of honor. After all, these people think nothing of being foul-mouthed, dishonest, racist homophobes on a daily basis. What's a little criticism from a transsexual columnist who'd like to think most people *aren't* foul-mouthed, dishonest, racist homophobes?

I guess I'm just gay that way.

3.32 The Future: Shooting the Moon

Volume Eight, Issue 33

Monday, September 23, 1999

The Muse dropped in on me the other day.

You know the feeling, I'm sure. You'll be sitting there, doing what you're supposed to be doing when, all of a sudden, what you're doing sparks something and you just have to take a break and think about it.

What The Muse decided to make me ponder was the future of online games. More specifically, what technology or advances would make them easier to play? The answers I came up with were mixed, to say the least, because we have some very real technology problems to solve before we can make online gaming hugely easier. So I decided to try to look ahead and see what technology changes we might need in the next 5 to 15 years to have a great online gaming experience.

To me, the pinnacle of online gaming technology in the near future would be a complete or near hands-free environment. I'd love to be able to reliably issue voice commands to a game, while also chatting with other players and going to the keyboard only as an option, not a requirement. This would be much like how the characters on *Star Trek* interface with their computers.

Imagine being able to play *Ultima Online* or *Everquest* without ever touching the keyboard, but by simply saying out loud what you want your character to do. This is a heady thought, fraught with interesting possibilities. To get to that point, we have a few major hurdles to overcome.

The first major hurdle may be the toughest one to solve: the Internet itself. Come on, let's face this problem and spit it in the eye like the daredevils we are: the Internet was never designed to be online game friendly. It is a distributed network, in which data packets (such as email or a command you issue to a game) can bounce along a somewhat convoluted path to arrive at their destination. This can take some time. Depending on where you are in relation to your eventual destination on the Net, it can take little time to several seconds.

As a government project, ARPAnet, (now the Internet we all know and sometimes love) was never meant to be a real-time distribution network; it was just a research project designed to see to it that email would eventually get through to various government agencies after The Bomb was dropped.

That alone brings up weird visions:

FROM: collections@irs.gov
TO: jtaxpayer@shelter45.stlouis.mo.org
RE: Tax Forms for 2010 AD

Dear Mr. John Taxpayer,

We haven't received your taxes for calendar year 2010. We realize the destruction of St. Louis might have caused your Form 1040A to be delayed. If you are alive, please resubmit your taxes to us immediately.

Also, please be advised that the Radiation Sickness Deduction may not exceed 25% of your total medical expenses, unless you die from it. In that case, you may also claim the Funeral Expense Deduction of 20% of your funeral costs, including the cost of protective lead clothing for your mourners, if any. To claim these credits, please fill out and attach Schedule Z to your Form 1040A, along with the receipts from your funeral.

Regards,
Internal Revenue Service

My sick sense of humor aside, the Internet wasn't made for low ping times and instant gratification. I mean, after the Big One, who cares if it takes 30 or 40 seconds for an email to go from Point A to Point B? For online games, however, this can be death, both for the game and the player's character. This is the Demon Lag, also known as latency, and it is built into the system by its very nature.

We can eliminate a lot of lag by laying more bandwidth and upgrading the software and hardware that actually runs the Net. Unfortunately, the problem isn't going to go away; we can't seem to lay bandwidth fast enough to keep up with the demand. According to the US Department of Commerce in its *The Emerging Digital Economy* report issued last year (<http://www.doc.gov/>), the amount of data going out over the Internet doubles every 100 days. Unfortunately, new bandwidth isn't keeping up, not by a long shot. I've seen various estimates of

the amount of the bandwidth being laid to meet that demand and none of them exceed 15% of the needed amount. This means the problem of latency is just going to get worse for a while.

And we won't go into detail on aging servers, such choke points on the Information Dirt Access Road as MAE East and MAE West, or badly configured routers everywhere. Suffice it to say that, in my opinion, it is going to take at least another 5 years, and perhaps as long as another 15 (if ever), to bring Internet technology and bandwidth up to snuff for online gaming, especially "twitchy" retail hybrids such as *Quake 3* and *Unreal*.

The second major hurdle we have to overcome is home computer technology, both the hardware and software. I mean, well they suck. Big time. It may be a bit easier to use than it was five years ago, but it is still persnickety, failure-prone, bug-ridden, needlessly complicated and utterly dependent on the keyboard. It doesn't help that the industry has this shotgun marriage thing going with the Windows operating system and Intel processors, which seem to operate on the premise that slower and more of it is the way to go.

This is another problem that may be solved in time; in the meanwhile, we are going to be spending a lot of money upgrading our computers and software to latest complicated, buggy versions. A suspicious person might see a connection.

The third hurdle is voice recognition technology. To get more hands-free in the near future, we need to be able to talk to our home computers to issue commands and speak with the other players. Applications such as *Roger Wilco* (<http://resounding.com/>) and various VOX applications for sound cards are starting to bring voice communication between players to reality. They still have a long way to go, however, and that still leaves the problem of voice commands for playing.

I have no doubt we'll get there; these are mostly engineering problems, after all. Once engineers know a problem can be solved by their talents, they have this habit of working with it until it is.

However, I'm starting to wonder just how long it will really take. Nothing in technology ever happens as fast as the experts say they will. For example, 30 years ago, experts almost universally agreed that by the year 2000, there would be a computer in every home. With 3 _ months to go to 2000, we're less than half-way there.

Darn it, I want it *now*.

3.33 So This Is Broadband?

**Volume Eight, Issue 34
Monday, October 4, 1999**

Broadband could be an important advance for online gaming. Let me restate: if they ever get the persnickety details figured out, broadband *will* be an important advance for online gaming.

There are significant gameplay advantages in having near-instant response times in most games. Using cable or ADSL, you may still have to log in several times to find a clean, speedy connection (not as easy as it sounds) but, when you get one, the experience is incredible. When I started playing *Quake II* via a cable modem connection last year, my frag ratio went through the roof. In *Air Warrior 3D* on Gamestorm, the play became virtually seamless--no more jerkiness on the screen as my packets attempted to update in a timely fashion.

This quality of data transmission has been viciously driven home to me lately, during my move to Austin. I had been suffering along with a 56k modem connection for a couple weeks, waiting for ADSL to be installed. After using a cable modem for the last year, it was painful to be stuck at 56k, to say the least. All of which reminded me once again of an important point. If the industry can make enough bandwidth available to keep broadband access a nice experience (not the same as making broadband connections available, see BTH #20, Bandwidth Will Not Save You at <http://www.happypuppy.com/columns/bth/archive/>), it will revolutionize what we can provide in massively multiplayer games.

Of course, there are other problems. Not the least of them is just getting ADSL or a cable modem installed. Since there is a raging battle right now among analysts on which is better, ADSL or cable modems, I decided to try an ADSL line in Austin. Both are available at this apartment's location and I've used cable modems for over a year in both Phoenix and Los Angeles with mixed results. Time to see if there was a real difference in the services.

Right off the bat, one of the main differences was in the bone-headed modus operandi of the local Regional Bell Operating Company (RBOC), Southwestern Bell. When I had cable modem service installed in Los Angeles, MediaOne set it up at the same time they came out to activate the cable TV service. The whole process took a total wait time of four days from calling to schedule the service until I was up and running. Installation of both cable TV and modem service took two hours. Compare that with Time-Warner here in Austin, which wanted to make two trips using separate crews. What do these people think, that we can take time off work whenever we want, just to suit *them*?

As of last August 1st, I still didn't have ADSL service, after moving into the apartment on July 12. This didn't surprise me overly. Just to get a voice line activated, I had to call Southwestern Bell over 150 times over a period of 14 days. Each time, I had to wend my way through the touch-tone menu by touching the numeral 1 five times to be transferred to the "activate new service" section. At that point, I would be transferred to a new operator queue and invariably receive a busy signal, at which point I would be told they couldn't take my call right now and I would have to "try again later." Click. ("Your Honor, I've never been to SW Bell's headquarters. No, sir, I don't know where that shotgun came from.")

As a last resort, I tried calling several other local phone service providers in the area. Each of them gave me the same story; until SW Bell activated the line, I couldn't switch services. And they all tried to get my name and service address. No, thanks; I don't want my service slammed, or switched without my consent, which is a huge problem in the industry right now.

After two weeks of this frustration, I emailed a complaint letter to all five commissioners of the FCC and the Texas equivalent of the Public Utilities Commission. I was going to email it to Southwestern Bell, too, but there was no email address posted on their website. There was a form for sending web email to them, the category choices for which did not include service complaints. I chose a category at random, copied my complaint letter in and sent it off.

That was on Saturday, July 10. The only reply was from the chairman of the FCC, Mr. William Kennard. His office replied on Monday, July 12, the next business day, mind you, letting me know they were forwarding it to the consumer complaint division. I was pretty impressed by that. I figured the complaint division would lose the email and never respond--and I haven't been disappointed in that--but it was impressive to me that Mr. Kennard's office responded promptly. Good job; this is what the government is supposed to do when dealing with regulated monopolies.

By camping on the phone for two more days, I finally did get through to SW Bell and have my phone service established. I then inquired about ADSL, as the line has to be active for them to check on availability. A tech sends out a check signal and records the distance of the line to the nearest ADSL repeater to see if your line is within the service radius. It takes all of one minute or so to do this.

Except with SW Bell. The process for figuring out whether my apartment was in ADSL service range took four days. Four days. When I inquired in Phoenix last year, they did the signal check while I waited on the phone.

As it turns out, the apartment is within 15,000 feet of an ADSL repeater, so it can be installed. So I call back *again*--a different 800 number from before; I was answered immediately--and spend another 20 minutes on the phone with the operator, placing the order. She tells me they will call back in three or four days with an installation date.

To recap: so far, as of last August 1st, I'd been waiting two weeks for my ADSL line to be installed. I ordered premium service, which is 384k uploads and 1.5 meg on downloads. Supposedly it will happen on August 5th, although I have to call back for a time; the message on my phone just mentioned the day, not a time window. The very polite service operator on the phone went out of her way to mention that, even when they come out to install the line, if the service can't provide the minimum transfer rates after an on-site check, they won't complete the installation.

To schedule a technician to come out to my apartment to install ADSL, it takes an exchange of minimum five phone calls between me and SW Bell over a period of seven working days, with a subsequent waiting period of another seven days. Even then, there is no guarantee that the ADSL service will meet minimum standards when they do try to install, so this could all be for naught.

So I'm stuck with the possibility of taking more time off work for this and maybe not getting ADSL after all. And the price for jumping through an RBOC's silly hoops? Over \$250 installation and \$199.00 a month. Cable modem access here is about \$40 a month. Of course, I

ordered a top-line ADSL option; you can lease 128k upload and 384k download ADSL access from SW Bell for about \$40 a month. That's about 1/25th of a cable modem's average local transfer rates for the same price.

But our carnival ride is not over, ladies and gentlemen. Oh, no! This ride is just beginning. Next week, the continuing saga of Jessica in ADSL-Land, our heroine discovers that the phone companies have a loooooong way to go to compete successfully with the cable modem market.

3.34 So This is Broadband? Part II

Volume Eight, Issue 35
Thursday, October 14, 1999

Last week, we learned two important things about ADSL broadband lines. We learned that:

- A) The technology is in the middle of a vicious fight with cable modem technology for the hearts and minds of American consumers;
- B) While neither the RBOCs or cable companies have reputations as wonderful customer service organizations, getting Southwest Bell to come to my apartment and install a technology for which they will bill me \$199 a month is like trying to pull your own teeth with a Garden Weasel.

To recap from last week's column:

It takes Southwest bell 16 days and a complaint to the FCC just to answer their own customer service phones and activate a voice line. To schedule a technician to come out to my apartment to install ADSL, it takes a minimum exchange of five phone calls between me and SW Bell over a period of seven working days, with a subsequent waiting period of another seven days. Even then, there is no guarantee that the ADSL service will meet minimum standards when they *do* try to install, so this could all be for naught.

Thursday, August 5th comes around. After another call to SW Bell at 8am and waiting on line for over 30 minutes, I now have a time window for the appearance of the ADSL install technician. According to the operator, my time window is from now until 5pm.

Excuse me? I have to take an entire day off work just to wait for the install person? And you just *know* if I have to wait around, he won't show up until 4:55pm. That's how these things work, you know. It's a conspiracy to drive you into becoming a tower sniper, so the Feds have another excuse to pass another useless gun law during an election year. Or something.

After being passed to a supervisor, it is grudgingly agreed that yes, SW Bell is a telephone company and yes, they do have operating telephones there at Monopoly HQ and yes, I can go to work and they will use this miracle technology to call me when the technician is on the way. Oh, happy day.

So I drive to work, sit down, turn on the computer and the phone rings. Guess who?

So I drive home, escort the technician into my home and am told this will take about 40 minutes. Hurrah! At last! I will be ready to up my frag count on the backs of those poor 28.8k, high-ping victims on the Internet in just a few minutes.

One and a half hours later, I'm starting to wonder if I was Jack the Ripper in a previous incarnation and if this is my punishment. The technician has removed the cover plate from every phone jack in the house, there are little bits of colored wire scattered everywhere and he is on his cell phone to a co-worker trying to get a clue as to why he can't get an ADSL signal from the main phone jack to the one in my home office space. He was able to do so 90 minutes ago; as of 70 minutes ago, he could not and still cannot. He sounds quite frustrated as he speaks with his co-worker.

He is a nice young man; he keeps apologizing for the inconvenience and I keep being extremely gracious about it, even though I am seething inside at the whole bloody situation. I am this gracious because he is also a very cute young man and isn't wearing a wedding ring. Ok, so I have other interests besides online gaming; sue me.

However, it is approaching 10:30am and I am scheduled for an 11am meeting back at the office. I'd call and let them know, but my phone isn't working and the technician is still on cell phone to his buddy, trying to figure out where things went so wrong. Finally, at ten minutes to 11, he hangs up, looks at the main jack again and scratches his head. I borrow the technician's cell phone and let my boss know I'm going to be late to the meeting.

As I hang up and pass the phone back to the young man, I can see a light bulb going on over his head; he has a notion. Like the Roadrunner vanishing in a cloud of dust with a Meep! Meep!, he whirls and disappears out the door, to return with a cable puller. He dives back to the main phone jack, buries the cable puller inside and down the wall and pulls up a great wad of colored wire. He examines it for a minute and then practically cries out in joy. He has found the problem. What is it? When he first examined the wires at the main jack, accidentally broke the wire that ran into my home office. Our seventy minutes or so of frustration is over.

From that point on, the installation went smoothly. Five minutes to repair the wire, another 20 to hook the ADSL modem up to my computer and reconfigure the computer's network settings. It worked like a charm first try.

And to SW Bell's credit, it is still working like a charm. As a gaming technology, ignoring the price, I can confidently recommend it. In two months, the network has gone down only once, and that was for a scheduled hardware upgrade. My online gaming on the Net is back to a quality I like and overall, I'm quite happy with ADSL. Pound for pound, ADSL is every bit as good as a cable modem for online gaming. My file download times aren't as fast as a cable modem's, but I notice very little difference between them in ping times for gaming, for the most part.

I'm still a bit in shock over everything I've had to go through just to get to this point, however. In the long run, it is a better technology; you own the bandwidth, not share it with 500 to 1000 other cable users. When the cable systems fill up, latency is going to go through the roof for cable modem users. If my installation experience is at all typical, however - five times the hassle to pay five times as much compared to cable modem access-, it is difficult to believe ADSL will ever compete successfully with cable.

And no doubt, SW Bell and the other RBOCs are probably wondering why its ADSL service isn't taking off faster.

3.35 Happy 30th Birthday, Online Games

Volume Eight, Issue 36
Thursday, October 21, 1999

For some strange reason, there is this impression in the general public that online gaming began sometime in 1994 or 1995 with *Doom* and *Warcraft*.

This irks me somewhat, but none of us should be surprised at this kind of myopia. For most members of the general public, the online world didn't exist until the Internet started to explode in 1993 and online games didn't exist until publishers started adding Internet connectivity to computer games in 1994-95. The press hasn't been much help, mainly because most of the press is ignorant about online games history. As far as they are concerned, online gaming just coincidentally happened when their advertisers started producing Internet-capable games.

However, the world of online gaming started about 1969. Yes, that's the 1969 that happened 30 years ago. I thought it fitting, in this 30th anniversary year of the industry, to post a timeline with some of the major events in online gaming, just to give us all a sense of scope about the industry.

By the way: This is *not* meant to be the definitive milestone marker, just something of a draft road map of some major events. If you see an error, know of a major milestone that I missed or one that you believe should be a part of the timeline, drop me a line at bth@happypuppy.com.

This one will be in two parts, because there is a lot to cover. In this edition, we'll cruise up through 1989.

Circa 1969

Rick Blomme writes a two-player version of MIT's famous *Spacewar* for the PLATO service. PLATO was one of the first time-sharing systems dedicated to experimenting with new ways to use computers for education. Originally built in the late 1960's at the University of Illinois/Urbana, it blossomed into a system that, by about 1972, could host about 1,000 simultaneous users.

1970-1977

Several more games appear on the PLATO service. Multiplayer games that appeared on PLATO include a version of Star Trek, a Dungeons and Dragons-style game named *Avatar*

which later became the genesis of the first *Wizardry!* PC game and a flight simulator named *Airfight*.

1979

Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle (<http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/home.htm>) head up development of the first working *Multi-User Dungeon (MUD)* on the DEC-10 at the Essex University, Colchester, UK.

1979-1980

Various versions of the Essex *MUD* are released on the university's mainframe. In 1980, what is now considered the "classic" *MUD* is installed and runs for nine years. Eventually, the popularity of the game with hackers and non-hackers alike causes computer resources to be eaten at a tremendous rate and the university restricts playing time to the evening hours.

Circa 1982-83

Although the *MUD* code is copyrighted, Bartle is pretty liberal about sharing it with other colleges and universities for education purposes. Someone at one of those institutions starts passing around the source code to friends. By the end of 1983, hundreds of illegal copies have been distributed around the world, starting the free access *MUD* craze at universities and, eventually, on the Internet.

1982

Kesmai Corporation (<http://www.gamestorm.com/company/>) is formed by John Taylor and Dr. Kelton Flinn and receives its first contract, to develop an ASCII text role-playing game for CompuServe. The game would later launch as *Islands of Kesmai*.

Bill Loudon, in charge of games at CompuServe, buys an ASCII space combat simulator called *DECwars* on DEC mainframe computer tape for \$50.00. He hands it off to Kesmai and it eventually launches as *MegaWars I*.

1983

Kesmai launches *MegaWars I* on CompuServe. Finally closed down in circa 1998, it was the longest-running for-pay online game in history. That honor now resides with the current incarnation of the Trubshaw/Bartle *MUD*, MUD II (<http://www.mud2.com/>).

1984

The first commercial version of *MUD* is released on Compunet in England.

Islands of Kesmai is released on CompuServe. The game will run for approximately thirteen years and will eventually spawn a graphics-based version, *Legends of Kesmai*, which is available today on AOL and Gamestorm. The price to play in 1984: About \$12 an hour.

Mark Jacobs forms the company that will eventually become AUSI and then Mythic Entertainment (<http://www.mythicgames.com/>). He sets up a server system in his house and installs 8 phone lines to run his text-based role-playing game *Aradath*. Cost to play: \$40 a month. This may be the first instance of a professionally run, flat-rate online gaming service.

1985

Bill Loudon convinces General Electric's Information Services division to fund a commercial, ASCII-based service similar to CompuServe, using the evening hours excess capacity on GEIS's mainframe computers. Named GENie by Bill's wife (GE Network for Information Exchange), it premieres in October to much hoopla. It is the first serious competition to CompuServe; price in the evening hours is \$6 an hour for both 1200 and 300bps. This is half of CompuServe's price for 1200bps access.

In November, Quantum Computer Services (later to rename itself America Online) quietly launches QuantumLink, a graphics-based online service exclusively for Commodore 64/128 users. The price is \$9.95 a month, plus about \$5 an hour. QuantumLink's graphic interface is a watershed in online services but, because the C-64/128 is already on the wane, no one seems to pay much attention. This will turn out to be a huge mistake on the part of competitors.

The Golden Age of the online services begins.

1986

Kesmai rewrites *MegaWars I*, files off the serial numbers and launches it on GENie as *Stellar Warrior*. It is GENie's first multiplayer online game; it is not the last.

Jessica Mulligan, working as a volunteer librarian in the Apple II RoundTable on GENie, finds *Stellar Warrior*. After her account is turned off by GENie three times for playing too much, she snags a contract to write a combined Chat-based/Email-based space strategy game. *The Rim Worlds War* launches at mid-year; it is the first Play-By-Email (PBEM) game on a commercial online service.

Kesmai begins pre-alpha testing of *Air Warrior*, a WWII combat flight simulator and the first true graphics-based Massively Multiplayer Game, on GENie. The Macintosh version is demonstrated on multiple terminals at the GENie booth at the West Coast Computer Faire in early 1986 in San Francisco. The 20,000 attendees are wowed.

QuantumLink begins testing *Rabbit Jack's Casino*, the second graphics-based online game in the commercial online services industry. In conjunction with LucasFilms, development on *Habitat* begins (<http://www.communities.com/company/papers/lessons.html>).

Steve Case from Quantum Computer Services begins camping out in Cupertino, CA, trying to get John Sculley to allow Apple Computers, Inc. to support a graphics-based online service for Apple II computers. After over 200 days of persistent nagging, Sculley finally agrees.

1987

Air Warrior is released on GENie early in the year.

Rabbit Jack's Casino is released on QuantumLink.

Kesmai's file scraping worked so well for *Stellar Warrior*, they strip the serial numbers from *MegaWars III* and launch it as *Stellar Emperor* on GENie.

After working with the private BBS-based role-playing and gaming service Spectre, David Whately sells his idea for a text-based online game to GENie. *Gemstone* goes into alpha testing late in the year and what will become Simutronics Corporation is born (http://www.play.net/simunet_public/default.asp).

A stripped-down version of *MUD* launches on CompuServe as *British Legends*.

Quantum Computer Services hires Kent Fillmore, President of International Apple Core, Inc., to start recruiting sysops for its upcoming Apple II only service, AppleLink-Personal Edition. He recruits and contracts with Jessica Mulligan to manage the Apple II Games Forum.

1988

The original *Gemstone* role-playing game is launched on GENie as *Gemstone II*. Over the next two years, this text-based game will surpass *Air Warrior* as the most popular game on GENie.

Quantum Computer Services launches AppleLink: Personal Edition for Apple II computers at the May AppleFest Convention in Boston. It also turns down both of AUSI's games, *Aradath* and *Galaxy II*, for its online services, saying it doesn't want to get into text-based games. Eight years later, it will reverse this decision and sign on both *Gemstone III* and *Dragon's Gate*, the commercial version of *Aradath*, after realizing they left millions of dollars on the table for GENie and CompuServe to snap up.

Jessica Mulligan, now a Quantum Computer Services employee, writes a white paper on the gaming industry and recommends that Quantum license the Advanced Dungeons and Dragons game from TSR, Inc. It does so, and *AD&D: NeverWinter Nights* is born, based on SSI's Gold Box series of AD&D games. Once launched, *NeverWinter Nights* will run continuously for several years, even though the technology of the graphics interface is hopelessly outdated. In its last year of existence as a for-pay game, 1996, it will rake in an estimated \$5 million dollars.

Next Week: The industry takes off.

3.36 Happy 30th Birthday, Online Games, Part II

Volume Eight, Issue 37

Thursday, October 28, 1999

Welcome to part two of the timeline, a 30th birthday tribute to online games. If you haven't read part one of this time-line of online games, you can do so by [clicking here](#).

This was intended to be a two-parter, but I'm expanding it out to three parts, simply because there is so much to cover. In this section, we'll cover the time period from 1989 to 1993, just before the recent explosion of online gaming. And to reiterate from Part I:

This is *not* meant to be the definitive milestone marker, just something of a draft road map of some major events. If you see an error, know of a major milestone that I missed or one that you believe should be a part of the timeline, drop me a line at bth@happypuppy.com.

1989

Bill Loudon hires Jessica Mulligan as GENie's first dedicated Games Product Manager and gives her virtual carte blanche to sign up more online games.

GENie signs AUSI's *Galaxy II*, a real-time space strategy game. On launch, it immediately becomes the third most popular game on GENie, behind *Air Warrior* and *Gemstone*.

GENie licenses the venerable *Diplomacy* board game from Avalon Hill and contracts with AUSI's Mark Jacobs and UNIX/Open Source guru Eric Raymond to develop an online game, based on Raymond's existing UNIX version of the game.

GENie launches *A-Maze-ing*, a Macintosh based 3D maze combat game similar to the Amiga-based computer game *MidiMaze*. This is the first online 3D "shooter," it won't be the last.

Quantum Computer Services more or less de-emphasizes online games after launching development of *NeverWinter Nights*, even though they have several in development, including a helicopter flight simulator from Sierra, a version of *Hangman* from Broderbund and a working version of the wildly popular board game *Cosmic Encounter*. Only *Hangman* sees the light of day.

1990

GENie signs AUSI to develop a text-based role-playing game. It will eventually become *Dragon's Gate*, which is still available today on AOL.

GENie signs Activision and Kesmai Corporation to develop an online version of the *MechWarrior 3D* 1st person computer game.

Diplomacy Online launches on GENie.

GENie signs with strategy game legend Jim Dunnigan to develop *The Hundred Years' War* for the service. Dunnigan delivers the definitive turn-based online strategy game, allowing up to 300 players to relive the medieval war as French, English and other European noble families in campaigns that can last for over 400 real-time days.

GENie begins negotiating with Origin Systems to develop an online version of *Ultima*, to be called *Multima*, and introduces them to Kesmai as the prospective developer.

GENie signs with Clem Chambers and Alan Lenton to bring the British-based space trading and adventure game *Federation II* to the service. It launches late in the year and rapidly becomes quite popular.

CompuServe signs with Spectrum Holobyte to develop an online version of the *Falcon F-16* flight simulator. It will remain in development for years, including working versions shown in 1991 and 1992, but will never be released to the public. CompuServe offers no explanation.

GENie signs with Simutronics, John Weaver of RS Cards and Scott Hartsman (now a VP at Engage) to convert the *Gemstone III* code into a persona-based Chat system, a sort of role-playing game with no rules. Named *ImagiNation*, it launches into beta later that year. GE's lawyers forget to trademark the name, an omission that will come back to haunt them.

GENie begins an experiment called Basic Services, in which about 25% of all products on the service, including message boards and Chat, are offered for a flat monthly rate of \$8.95. It is so successful that, on the first day of flat rate service, so many people attempt to log in simultaneously at the 6pm start time that the entire GENie service crashes. It is a precursor to what will happen to AOL when it changes to a flat rate service in December, 1996. History repeats itself. Again.

1991

Dragon's Gate launches on GENie in February and rapidly moves into the top three game spot on the service, alternating on a monthly basis with number two *Air Warrior*.

Testing the waters with the competition, Origin Systems begins negotiating with Quantum/AOL to develop the *Ultima* online game. Origin closes negotiations with GENie and begins negotiating an agreement with Quantum. The deal eventually falls through and the *Multima* project goes on the back burner for several years.

Ken Williams, CEO of Sierra Online, announces the upcoming The Sierra Network, designed to be a private online gaming dial-in service to feature Sierra products.

Founder Bill Loudon leaves GENie after seven years as General Manager. This is the beginning of the end for GENie.

1992

MPG-Net, a privately owned company funded by wealthy online games enthusiast Jim Hettinger (now CEO of iEN), launches a new dial-in gaming service with *The Kingdom of Drakkar*, a top-down view graphic role-playing game. It rapidly becomes popular, signing up more than 3,000 players who pay between \$3 and \$5 an hour for access.

GENie launches *CyberStrike* from Simutronics. It is Simutronics' first foray into graphics-based games, going head-to-head in competition with *Multiplayer BattleTech* from Kesmai.

Quantum Computer Services integrates its Macintosh, Apple II and PC services into one service, renames that service America Online, renames the company America Online, Inc. and goes public.

The Sierra Network, Sierra Online's foray into online gaming, launches with a flat rate subscription model of \$14.95 per month. The only content is a series of such wildly exciting 2 to 4 player games as *Nine Man's Morris*. Subscriptions are few and far between. Over the next two years, TSN will try many pricing schemes until its pricing structure is more complicated than a Rube Goldberg device, and will rename itself the ImagiNation Network (INN) when it realizes GE forgot to trademark the name.

The Golden Age of the proprietary, closed loop online services such as CompuServe and AOL is already ending. Although there will continue to be good growth for two to three more years, a project originally funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency is about to change the way everyone in the world communicates and exchanges information. This change does not include room for proprietary online services.

The Golden Age only lasted about six years.

STATE OF THE ONLINE WORLD:
Setting the stage for 1993

At the end of 1992, there are an estimated 3-10 million homes that actively use modems to subscribe to online services. The range is so wide because no one has really been keeping an accurate count. The top five services, in order of publicized subscriber numbers, are Prodigy, CompuServe, America Online, GENie and Delphi.

On university mainframe computers around the world, students are constructing MUDs and inviting other students to log in and have some fun. By the end of 1992, there will be over 50 MUDs available on the old DARPA-Net, a distributed network mainly used by academics and government research agencies.

Computer game publishers are experimenting with multiplayer products. There are several instances of 2 player, modem-to-modem games, including *Empire*, *Perfect General*, *Falcon*, *Command HQ* and *Fire Fight*. Now, they are adding LAN/IPX code on top of TCP/IP protocols to games in an attempt to move up to four and even eight players.

Commercially, there are about fourteen to sixteen for-pay multiplayer games available on the online services, with another eight or nine in development. The total gross income of all of them together amounts to between \$10 and \$15 million annually. There are also a wide range of Trivia and word jumble games available, including NTN Trivia on GENie and variously home-grown word and trivia games run in Chat sections by interested subscribers.

1993 will change everything.

NEXT WEEK: It's 1993; do you know where your wallet is?

3.37 Happy 30th Birthday, Online Games, Part III

Volume Eight, Issue 38

Thursday, November 4, 1999

Before we begin with part III, three comments:

1. An Addition: Troy Dawson wrote in and reminded me that the venerable *Empire* appeared on mainframes in the mid-to-late 1970s. His quote from a USEnet post:

Peter S. Langston did indeed write the original code based on a board game they'd been playing at Reed College. He started writing the original version of *Empire* in about 1972, and it was playable not long after. I personally played *Empire* at the Rand Corporation (now RAND) in the mid-1970s; certainly by 1978, but probably earlier.

However, the earliest historical note I could find mentioned only Walter Bright's 1978 DEC-10 version, which was the one modified Mark Baldwin for the PC and released in 1988 as "Empire: Wargame of the Century" by the now-defunct Interstel. It is perfectly believable, however, that Langston wrote an earlier version and that Bright was the first to copyright a version and the name. Anyone with info concerning this, please drop me a line.

2. BBS and DOOR Games: Reader Andrew McConachie wrote in to ask why these games weren't included in this timeline. Good question. The brief answer is, limited space in the column and because I haven't finished my research on them. Most of these games fell off the face of the earth between 1993 and 1996. They also probably deserve a column all by themselves.
3. You'll note I only run the timeline through the end of 1997, with the release of *Ultima Online*. I intend to finish out 1998 and 1999 sometime in February or March, after we see the results from *Asheron's Call on the Zone*.

Now, on with the show:

1993: The Year of Incubation

DARPA-Net is now increasingly known to the public as the Internet. It has become open to commercial enterprises, even though the great majority of the users are still government employees, contractors, university students, instructors and researchers. Small local companies, many of which used to provide one to 16 line BBSes, are now becoming Internet Service Providers, as well. By the end of 1993, there may be as many as 4 million Internet users; no one is really keeping a count at this point, because few people really care. The press starts to pick up on the phenomena and starts to talk up the Internet.

The World Wide Web, an innovation by Tim Berners-Lee of CERN, is still a text-based toy for students and interested researchers. However, some university students, including some unknown geek named Marc Andressen, are trying to change all that with a graphic interface named MOSAIC.

The online services are still pretty much unaware of the Internet as a commercial opportunity. Their subscribers can't access the Internet via the service and the overall subscriber numbers are still pretty small - maybe 6 million or so active subscribers. By the end of the year, with Internet use beginning to skyrocket, they will all start paying very close attention.

In mid-1993, Prodigy goes from flat rate to hourly charges of about \$3 an hour, causing a huge customer backlash. Smelling blood, AOL and then GENie lower their rates to \$3, too and the price war begins. As usual, CompuServe chooses to ignore the price war. This is the first in a line of major errors that will end up with them being owned by AOL in four years.

In the computer game industry, the trend is in modem and LAN connectivity to allow two players to compete against each other. Isolated instances occasionally allow 4 player to participate. More and more games are shipped to retail with modem code built in.

For the most part, 1993 is a pretty dull year for massively multiplayer games on the online services. Simutronics formally released *CyberStrike* on Genie, *Red Baron* and *Shadow of Yserbius*, and RPG, picked up steam on INN and MPG-Net started to add some small games to complement their RPG, *Drakkar*. The price drop to an average \$3 an hour *did* do wonders for use of games on GENie and AOL; usage of most games rose to between 1.5 and 2 times what it was before.

With all the above taken together as a whole, however, 1993 was the watershed year for multiplayer gaming. The groundwork and infrastructure was laid for explosion to come. And, man, did it come!

1994

The singular ground-breaking title this year is *Doom* from id Software. Other great titles were released this year (including *Warcraft* by Blizzard, which will slowly build the real-time strategy niche into a large one, too) and the actual publication date of *Doom* was December 10, 1993, but who cares? This is the game that put first-person shooters on the map and virtually created a brand new section of the computer games industry. Most appealing was the addition of LAN code to allow 4 players to connect and happily frag each other. Both *Doom* and *Doom II* are showered with just about every game and technical achievement award in existence.

Late in the year, the guys at id will start hearing a new refrain: "Please add TCP/IP so we can play this across the Internet!" After *Doom II* is released in October, they begin to oblige. They also start pondering an interesting thought: What if we built Internet connectivity in our next game?

Jim Clark, who made Silicon Graphics a billion dollar company, has recruited Andressen and pals to form Netscape and make the MOSAIC code into something more useful for viewing the World Wide Web. The first version of Netscape Navigator is released late in the year and is an immediate smash success. The web is now somewhat useful for even relatively unsophisticated computer users.

Traditional media companies are starting to get the idea that online gaming is going to be big someday. Rupert Murdoch's News Corp buys ace multiplayer game developer Kesmai Corporation for an unknown price. AT&T buys INN from Sierra Online for an estimated \$50 million.

1995

By this time, AOL, CompuServe and Prodigy all offer some Internet content to their subscribers. This consists mostly of access to USEnet newsgroups, gopher and, oh yeah, something called the World Wide Web. Main result: AOL's unsophisticated customers head out onto the newsgroups and get soundly slaughtered for violating every posting protocol on the Internet.

Id begins openly testing *Quake*, an improved version of *Doom* with some Internet server and play capability built in. It's like giving heroin to an addict; gamers want more, and id gives it to them. This open testing process proves to be a PR bonanza; this isn't building buzz, it's building demand for a product into a homicidal frenzy.

Everyone and his grandmother seems to be developing an FPS or RTS game. Clones of *Doom* and *Warcraft* are being published on nearly a monthly basis. *Descent* and *Command and Conquer* build large audiences of their own.

By some estimates, over 300 text-based MUDs are now available on the Internet, almost all of them free of charge.

Gemstone III goes live on AOL late in the year and immediately builds a following. It is soon followed by several Kesmai games, including perennial favorite *Air Warrior*.

Hasbro and Westwood release a Internet-capable version of *Monopoly*. Four years later, it is still a top 20 seller.

1996

Quake is formally released and the boys from id have changed the world again. In almost no time at all, Quake servers start appearing all over the world. On some nights, over 80,000 people will be fragging each other in 10,000+ simultaneous game sessions.

After getting a taste, players want more. *Lots* more. By the end of the year, about 20 titles will have Internet connectivity in some form or another. Three years later, at the end of 1999, Microsoft's Gaming Zone alone will offer 118 Internet-playable titles.

At the Electronic Entertainment Exposition in May, Origin Systems demonstrates an early pre-Alpha test version of a little game called *Ultima Online*. It excites some modest interest.

AOL buys INN from AT&T for about 20% of what AT&T paid Sierra Online for it a couple years previously, proving once again that AT&T couldn't market immortality if it had an exclusive.

In December, AOL switches from an hourly to charge to a flat rate of \$19.95 a month, which proves to be so popular it gives new meaning to the phrase, "Can't get there from here." The pricing also includes access to the massively multiplayer games on the service; players rejoice as AOL's margin fall through the floor.

1997

Origin releases *Ultima Online* for play across the Internet. Despite massive problems with bugs and lag, the game has over 50,000 paying customers within three months. The game proves there is a large audience of gamers waiting for MMRPGs.

The Modern Era of Online Gaming begins.

Post-Mortem: Providing inspiration to the masses

I m continually surprised by what subjects spark interest in the community. I would have expected the column titled God Sued! to have sparked a larger reaction.

But no: these three columns was probably the most reprinted and hyperlinked of all the BTHs. They were passed around several game-related mailing lists, posted whole on fan and game news sites, linked to by several dozen sites, reposted on USEnet newsgroups and segments were quoted all over the place, including other media such as print magazines. Not a month goes by that I don t receive an email request or two to reprint the series. Of all the money Happy Puppy paid me for nearly 100 columns, these three got the most PR bang.

Eventually, the series inspired online game designer Raph Koster to create a more complete and updated list, which can be found on his Web site at <http://www.legendmud.org/raph/gaming/>. Look under menu item Essays, then scroll down to find Online Game Timeline.

3.38 General Stuff

Volume Eight, Issue 39 November 8, 1999

One of these days, I'm going to have to catch up on my email. I have something like 40 about the column on my Southwest Bell/ADSL experience that still have to be replied to, and another 50 or so pertaining to the Online Games history timeline. To all of you who wrote; I'm working on it, honest.

In the meantime, some general and mostly unrelated thoughts that have been running through my head lately:

Want to know how tough it is to develop a massively multiplayer RPG?

By my last count, at least 18 legitimate, original development efforts were scheduled to go live to the playing public in 1999 (as compared to about 50 total MMRPGs in development that have announced various 1999 premiere dates and most of which consist of 2 or 3 people trying to get a prototype together in hopes of finding funding).

How many of them have actually made it out so far this year? Four: *EverQuest* (<http://www.everquest.com>), *Asheron's Call* (<http://www.zone.com/asheronscall/>), *Spellbinder: The Nexus* (<http://www.centropolis.com/games/Spellbinder.asp>) and *Rubies of Eventide* (<http://www.eventide.net/>), although that last kinda stretches the point a bit. And note that all four missed at least one release date. Two of those four games missed several release dates and are *years* late.

I'm not beating up on them (well, not much); it just goes to show that there is a lot more to programming both a client and a stable server than meets the eye. Lots of enthusiastic development teams and publishers jump into the steaming cauldron; very few jump out again unburned.

The Mobius Strip of Online Business Models

We've come full circle. In these waning days of 1999, the predominant business model for profitable online companies (as personified by America Online) is to charge a flat monthly rate, then to try to make profit margins on advertising, sponsorships and transaction fees from selling merchandise. This is an enormous change from just three years ago, when the predominant model was to bill the consumer \$9.95 a month and five cents per minute/\$3 per hour.

And here's where I get to say "I told you so." In 1987/88, the former business model was *exactly* the one introduced by Prodigy and which damn near every online "expert" in the industry said would never work. Charge the consumer *and* show advertising? They'll never stand for it! At the time, there were maybe 500,000 home modem users. I said to my then-employer that Prodigy was 'way ahead of it's time and that the model was workable, but only when we had a potential customer base of at least 100 million people using modems. Say, in fifteen to twenty years or so. They laughed at me and told me to get real. I left the company soon thereafter (for unrelated reasons).

I missed the mark by three to seven years, but the industry grew a heck of a lot faster than any of us dreamed it would, thanks to the early commercialization of the Internet. So you ask, "What's the next step, Jessica?" As I gaze into my crystal ball, I see: An incremental step to charging no fee for most services, and charging flat fees for selected services, such as multiplayer games. The margins will still be made with advertising, sponsorships and transaction fees on e-commerce. When will this happen? It could happen at any time, but I don't see it becoming predominant for at least two or three years and probably more like five to seven years.

Oh, my employer in 1988? America Online.

Innovating Product Slippage

As I write this, the judge in the Microsoft anti-trust trial has released his findings of fact. Not surprisingly, he found that although Microsoft has contributed greatly to the growth of the industry, it also has a monopoly on PC operating systems and has used that monopoly to stifle innovation and competition. Gee, there's a shocker.

If you ask computer and online game developers whether Microsoft's monopoly is a good or bad thing, you'll get mixed results. On the one hand, some think it is good that we really only have to develop for one standard to make money, that standard being Windows and DirectX. On the other hand, some believe that that one standard changes so often that it contributes greatly to adding to the development time (read "release date slippage"), cost and post-ship redevelopment and bug fixes.

For example, in the last two years I've been involved in at least three projects that slipped between one and three months because a newly released version of DirectX caused epileptic fits in the game code. No doubt many examples of this can be found throughout the industry.

Needless to say, developers tend to view upcoming releases of DirectX with a curious mixture of anticipation and outright fear. Rather like waiting as a child for my disciplinarian grandmother to visit. She always brought home-baked chocolate chip cookies and a sense of punishment that would have done credit to Torquemada. Even worse, the older I got, the more the rules changed; by age 10, it was tough to keep up. I loved that old gal, but she sure made my childhood interesting in the sense of the Chinese proverb.

When I think about it, I'm sure she reincarnated as DirectX version 6.x.

3.39 Ramblin' On

**Volume Eight, Issue 40
November 15, 1999**

Another year is coming to a close and, for the industry, it's pretty much same-old, same-old time.

We're in the heart of the Christmas Rush. Everyone is crunching overtime to get games on the retail shelves to grab as many sales as they can before the lucrative Christmas buying frenzy ends. In pursuit of this worthy but hasty goal, some bugs will slip through the QA process. More will be left intentionally unfixed, with intent to patch later; them shelves won't wait, ya know and isn't patching what the Internet was built for?

Considering the amount of code needed to build a game, the ever-changing "standards" in Windows and DirectX and the disparity of various hardware manufacturing standards, it's probably impossible to achieve bug-free status in any piece of software these days. Well, it probably is possible, but only if you don't mind waiting five years or so for a game to come out.

By which time, of course, the game will be obsolete technologically and/or won't address any current market need. And what fun is that?

Of course, considering that at least 90% of the games that hit the shelves are totally lame, complete losers, are rip-offs that clone someone else's success by barely filing off the serial numbers or all of the above, maybe a five year development cycle isn't such a bad idea. Or some sort of industry-wide Quality Control Commission that nails the losers before they can smell up the retail shelves.

Naw, that last is a bad idea. The government would want to get involved. I have problems with a game's fate being decided by the same government that can't even send a man to the Moon thirty years after they first did so and which seriously debates controlling the content of games, TV and movies under the cynically political argument of "saving our children." Most of these guys don't even use computers; I'm supposed to trust them to rank content in a game?

Hey, I'm not unreasonable. I'm willing to make a deal with them: If the Feds will put a colony of at least 50 people on the Moon and send a manned probe to Mars, I will personally see to it that no player of first-person shooters gets a job with the Post Office.

Seeing droves of the same-old, same-old hit the shelves for the fifth Christmas in a row, I wonder again when online gaming will truly explode. Sure, we have several million people playing various types and styles of online games now, ranging from 2-16 player retail hybrids to massively multiplayer RPGs and flight sims. Estimates of the online gamer population range from 4 million to 7 million. That's not bad at all, compared with the one or two million estimated just three or four years ago. In massively multiplayer games alone, we've pretty much doubled the audience this year alone, thanks to *EverQuest's* success, the recent introduction of *Asheron's Call* and the continued growth of *Ultima Online*.

Based on my experience, the 4 to 7 million player estimates strike me as being at least in the ballpark, if not in the infield. But when will we have, say, 20 million players? Or 40 million? Right now, we're a growing industry, but no one would call us "large" and we need to go beyond that to become huge. As a huge industry, there will be truckloads full of money available for new development. This is a quality I admire.

The first mark we have to hit, however, is 10 million *confirmed* players/buyers, with at least one subscription game or game service (probably a massively multiplayer game) maintaining no less than 300,000 monthly subscribers. In other and more general terms, we pretty much need to double the current online gaming numbers. The way things are going, this could actually happen before the end of the year 2000.

Once we hit those first marks, the folks that control the checkbooks in this industry - not to mention moneybags in other industries, including the "vulture capitalists" - will start to see the major profit potential and those checkbooks will fly open. They'll break fingers writing checks at lightspeed. We'll see more adequately funded projects than we ever thought possible or feasible.

The joker in the pack is the phrase "confirmed players/buyers." Someone needs to come up with a method for truly counting online gamers. What we get right now is educated guesstimates, based on counting simultaneous players on servers and trying to make sense of the wildly inflated subscription numbers given out by the game portals. To make sense to the money folks, we need to be a lot closer than just in the ballpark; we need to be on third base and taking a long lead towards home. Once someone does that to everyone's satisfaction, I think we're set to blow out of the gates.

That said, the coming year could still be very interesting for us all, indeed. This has been said so many times that it is becoming a cliché, but we really do stand on the threshold of seeing online gaming take off. The year 2000 could end up being more than just the last year of the Twentieth Century; it could be the year online gaming finally comes of age.

Even as jaded as I am after being in the industry for 14 years, that thought actually gives me tingles.

3.40 *Breaking Tradition*

Volume One, Issue 41
Thursday, November 25, 1999

I suck at multiplayer *Quake*. Not just a little bit; I define the phrase "really bad" when it comes to playing that game online.

Normally, I don't spend much time playing FPS games online. There are a couple of reasons for this, not the least of which is that I royally suck at most of them. Even with a cable modem or ADSL line and low-ping access to a server, I'm generally frag bait in *Quake II* or *III* and similar "twitch well or die" simulations.

Sure, I've had my moments, but they are few and far enough between that playing such games online don't hold my interest long. I mean, come on; who is going to spend a lot of time courting continual failure? This is the industry of instant gratification, after all. With zero-sum games, ya got it or don't. We can't all be Dennis Fong; some of us can't even get close. About the only thing we targets *can* do is deal with it and move on to some other game.

This is not to say that such games aren't good in their own right; I just want something more.

So it comes as something as a surprise to me that I'm spending quite a bit of time playing NovaLogic's latest FPS, *Delta Force 2* (<http://www.novalogic.com/>). This major update to the original game is modern world, squad-based, Special Forces combat using a variety of personal weapons, from long-range sniper rifles down to the extremely personal silenced pistol and knife. The scenarios can be played in a number of outdoor locales from around the world and has the typical range of game sessions, from search and destroy to capture the flag. On the LAN, 16 players can participate effectively and up to 50 can play in one session on the NovaWorld game

servers, according to the company (although I've never seen more than about 25 in any session I've played).

What really attracts me to the game, however, is that it breaks the tradition of FPS gaming by rewarding patience, cunning, and teamwork, not the mundane ability to speed about in dark corridors and twitch the keyboard faster than your neighbor. It reminds me of playing war with the neighbors as a kid, sneaking about through every backyard on the block, hiding in bushes or behind fences to take someone by surprise by leaping up and blazing away with whatever cap gun or squirt gun was the flavor of the month.

For that matter, it's the closest thing to playing real-world Paintball (<http://www.paintball-online.com/default1.asp>) you can get from a retail game, with a better variety of playing fields and weapons. Crawling around in the grass to get the perfect angle on a long shot is preferable to running around in the open with the strafe key locked down. Sneaking up close to a building to pop an opponent with a silenced pistol or toss a grenade in the window has much more satisfying results for me than dodging about with guns blazing. I hesitate to say this is the thinking person's FPS, but forethought and a penchant for strategy is more readily rewarded in *DF2* than dashing out in the open with the trigger held down.

I still suck. The joke among my playing group is that I'm "consistently unchallenged for last place" in the death match scenarios. But there is still satisfaction to be derived from watching a plan come to fruition. For example, setting up a hand-held video camera and claymore mine in a building, then herding an unsuspecting victim into the building with long-range fire and setting off the claymore. Even if that's the only kill I get in a session, it tickles me; I love it when a plan comes together <insert maniacal laughter here>.

My twisted psychological needs aside, the point I'm making here is that FPS games don't need to be run-and-gun extravaganzas to be fun. Slowing down the action and adding an element of personal or team strategy and tactics can actually enhance the excitement. You don't need a constant flow of adrenaline to make these games fun. It's not the game itself that is fun, for that matter, but the *people*. The game is just a handy excuse to interact with other humans.

For example, in one recent *DF2* Capture the Flag session, my team placed me with a sniper rifle on a hill overlooking the other team's HQ, with instructions to stop anyone from running one of our flags back for a score. With two minutes to go, three of our flags were stuck in the open within easy running distance of their base (dropped by players I had stopped earlier), they were two flags down in score, six members of the opposing team were gathered behind a building nearby preparing to make a play for the flags and I had only 4 rounds left for my rifle. None of my teammates were within easy supporting distance. If I couldn't hold them for at least one minute while one or two of the team came up to help me, we were going to lose.

At that moment of realization, with the game in the balance and my teammates shouting to hang on, help was on the way, I realized that I was so excited that my hands were, literally, shaking. At that singular moment, winning or losing was irrelevant; not letting down the team was paramount. I was in the process of having one of the best times I'd ever had in a non-persistent

online game. I'll remember that session for the rest of my life, even though my team lost at the last second.

And that is what this is supposed to be all about, no?

3.41 *I Fear, I Fear!*

**Volume Eight, Issue 42
Thursday, December 2, 1999**

I Fear, I Fear!

Is it election time *again*?

Two Democratic U.S. senators, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Herb Kohl of Wisconsin, along with a self-styled anti-violence-in-the media lobbying group, the National Institute on Media and the Family (<http://www.mediaandthefamily.org/home.html>), have released yet another report on the supposed dangers of violence in games. Oh, joy.

The report says pretty much what you would expect such a narrowly focused, politically inspired, special-interest chop piece to say, especially less than a year before a national election. We can always count on politicians to jump on the "No excess is too great to save the precious bodily fluids of our children" bandwagon at vote-cadging time. This report is no different.

(Of course, the Institute's website goes to great pains to note that they don't believe in censorship, oh, no! This is just an education effort backed up by two of the most powerful politicians in the country. In fact, Lieberman held a press conference in Washington which was attended by Doug Lowenstein, the president of the Interactive Digital Software Association, and in which Lowenstein described the steps the IDSA is taking in response to Congressional pressure concerning game violence.

(But this isn't censorship. Really.)

More accurately, this is less about the report than the Institute's "report card" rating of some 78 games (as well as other ratings for movies and TV shows) for kids ages 3 to 17, assigning grades to each game. The rating criteria were interesting. Here's how it was described on the Media and the Family website:

"KidScore" is the innovative rating system that looks at the content of media products in terms of: violence, fear, harmful or illegal behaviors, nudity, sex, language, age appropriateness."

Well, I certainly couldn't pass *that* up; time to check up on a couple of last year's most popular (read "best-selling") games. I won't run the full rating for the games; you can check that for yourself at <http://www.mediafamily.org/kids.html> :

Age of Empires II: Age of Kings

Players build and manage a civilization in a historically accurate setting.

Due to some violence and some illegal/harmful behavior this game is not recommended for young children and caution should be used if viewed by older children.

While the "some violence" part is pretty easy to locate (hey, it's a colonization and conquest game), try as I might, I'm having some trouble understanding the "illegal/harmful behavior" part. More on this later.

Starcraft

Manage space colony armies in battle. Collect resources, build buildings, train soldiers and place them in battle.

Due to the extreme level of violence, illegal/harmful behavior, vulgar language and the ability to cause fear, this game is not recommended for children of any age.

Now I'm a little confused. There is no more or less violence in Starcraft than Age II. And just what in this game has the "ability to cause fear?" The only thing I feared when playing was that some other player would find and crush me before I had my defenses built up.

Half Life

First person science fiction adventure.

Due to extremely violent content and excessive portrayals of illegal/harmful acts which may cause fear in the viewer this game is not recommended for children of any age.

I think my thoughts on this one should be obvious.

Superman

Superman must find and rescue his friends in a virtual reality world.

Due to some violence and illegal/harmful behavior which may cause fear this game is not recommended for young children and caution should be used if viewed by older children.

I tossed this one in for leavening. According to the Institute, children aged 3 to 12 probably shouldn't play this game. I mean, come on: is there any more law-abiding, do-gooding hero than Kal El of Krypton? Why *wouldn't* we want kids aged 3 to 12 to learn from Superman's morals and ethics? If there is any illegal or harmful behavior in this game, Supes is there to *stop* it.

Do you see the problems that I do with these ratings? Nowhere on the site could I find a definition of what "harmful or illegal behavior" was, or just how the ability to cause "fear" was gauged, nor just what defined "age appropriateness." In other words, once again we have well-meaning people using extremely subjective criteria to announce a supposedly objective result.

Under the criteria used, pretty much any book, movie, TV show or game with more content than *Barbie's Magic Hair Styler* can be branded as psychologically ill-suited for kids ages 3 to 17. For example:

The Wizard of Oz

Dorothy rides a tornado, kills two witches, bullies the Wizard into giving her a joy ride in a balloon and does battle with some fierce flying monkeys.

Due to some violence and some illegal/harmful behavior, this movie is not recommended for young children and caution should be used if viewed by older children.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas

A green monster and his little dog descend on a village, break into houses and public buildings and steal everything in sight, endangering the residents with starvation and a lack of Christmas cheer.

Due to extreme violence and its portrayal, illegal and harmful behavior and the ability to cause fear, this TV special is not recommended for children and caution should be used if viewed by teenagers.

The Mets vs. The Yankees

Two baseball teams take turns beating on a small, defenseless ball until, overwhelmed by emotion, they riot and beat on each other.

Due to some violence and some illegal/harmful behavior, this game is not recommended for young children and caution should be used if played by older children.

The Book of Revelation

John is shown visions of the end of the world as we know it, including large battles and Death on a pale horse slaying everything in sight, until God condemns most of humanity to everlasting torment in Hell.

Due to extremely violent content and excessive portrayals of illegal/harmful acts which may cause fear in the viewer, this religious tract is not recommended for children of any age.

The point to all this sarcasm? Just this:

You can't just rate a book, movie, game or TV show on the individual acts within. It matters just as much *why* something was done and the consequences of the act, as the plain fact that it *was* done. If you don't consider those acts within the context of the story/plot/game/whatever, they mean *nothing*.

At the end of the movie *Old Yeller*, for example, the boy shoots his dog, certainly a terrifying act guaranteed to cause fear in many children. But *why* did he do it? To save his friend and companion from hideous suffering, an act of extreme sacrifice and bravery. Yet the Institute and its political pimps would rate only the act, not the reasons or intention behind it, nor the result of it.

And, I would think, it is *exactly* these reasons and intentions, and the consequences thereof, we want our children to experience. Sure, applying the *why* criteria to acts within computer games might result in some that you wouldn't want your kids playing, with or without your supervision; at least that would be an *honest* evaluation.

And anytime you want your children to experience acts of violence, fear, harmful or illegal behaviors, nudity, sex, and bad language, just have them watch C-Span for a day. Now *that's* scary.

Post Mortem: A little less fear, thank you

As we now know, Lieberman was chosen the summer after this column was published by Al Gore as his running mate in the tawdry mess that ended up being the year 2000 Presidential elections. We now have a Vice President of the US who has clearly shown he does not believe attempts at censorship by intimidation is OK with him. For which I thank God fervently.

For all I know, Lieberman is a good man who loves his kids and country. His attempts to end-run the 1st Amendment by using his office as a Senator to intimidate media venues into changing content to suit his ideals, however, damn near made me a one-issue voter. The man is highly educated, a graduate of both Yale College and Yale Law School; I can't believe he doesn't know the difference between the depiction or description of a violent or sexual act and understanding such a depiction in context. He also must surely understand that the Supreme Court would never stand for laws that attempt to circumvent the 1st Amendment, hence the Senatorial cajoling. That makes his efforts to use his office to browbeat media (using the hideously cynical for the kids rallying cry) a ploy for re-election votes, pure and simple, something that scares me even more than someone who is sincere about the issue. Unfortunately, such emotional rallying cries in the face of everyone else's rights often work with voters with big hearts and soft heads.

I also found it tiresomely typical that he and Gore both used the September 2000 FTC report on violence and marketing to cadge over \$10 million in campaign donations at fund-raisers in Hollywood less than two weeks later, after which the whole violence and media issue dropped off the Democratic Party radar faster than an airliner with four dead engines.

I am frequently asked about this issue and whether I believe it will come to a head in the next Congress. My reply is that I believe it will, as long as certain Senators and Representatives believe there is at least one more campaign contribution dime to be squeezed from Hollywood media moguls. At that point, the issue will disappear into voluntary standards until the politicians need reelection money again.

Yes, that is a jaded and cynical outlook; it is also based on recent US political history, which never fails in its unending search for campaign funds.

3.42 Invisibility Comes With A Price

Volume Eight, Issue 43

Thursday, December 9, 1999

I've spent some time lately thinking about anonymity and the Internet (and no, my head didn't disintegrate from the unaccustomed load. Well, not yet, anyway.).

Used responsibly by the individual, anonymity is one of the great things about the 'Net, in my opinion. One can surf the 'Net comfortably and, for the most part, with no one knowing where you've been peeking. Or issue a scathing, uncut opinion from the complete privacy of the home. In these times of the general disenfranchisement of the individual, what other venue offers such qualities in such abundance?

However, my latest thinking on anonymity and the Internet is this:

We're in the process of losing it.

You see, there are always those who, unfettered by the real world, face-to-face consideration that being a complete jerk in public might earn one a punch in the snoot, are willing to go off the deep end and consistently use that anonymity irresponsibly.

What brought all this somber cogitating about was an issue brought to our *Ultima Online* (www.uo.com) public by the people I work for, Origin Systems, Inc.. Lately, our game servers have been coming under regular and sophisticated denial of service attacks. A DoS attack can take many forms, but the desired result is the same; to shut down everyone's access to the servers. The unknown entities hitting our servers were doing so with varying degrees of success. This is anonymity with a real vengeance.

DoS attacks aren't new; they've been around for years. What makes them so effective is that the Internet, from its earliest conception back in the 1960s, was built on the primary assumption that everyone on it would behave responsibly. When there were only a few thousand academics and government researchers using it, this was generally the case.

Nowadays, with tens of millions of people using the 'Net, I suppose we shouldn't be too surprised that a few of them get a kick from exploiting the fact that the Internet was built on the assumption that people are, for the most, reasonable beings. After all, it is easier to destroy another person's work than actually create something yourself.

Quite aside from the fact that some folks have so little to look forward to in their daily lives that they must deprive 130,000-plus other people of the ability to play a game - a *game*, for heaven's sake! -, their actions and the other abuses of anonymity of people like them are having

unintended consequences. Every time something like this happens, there are folks who smile grimly and add it to their count of irresponsible and damaging acts performed on the Internet, along with the various viruses issued, pedophiles convincing kids in chat rooms to meet them in real life, credit card scams, et al.

These people then contentedly walk the totals up to Capitol Hill, where they use the list as evidence in their continuing campaign to have laws written requiring keyholes in encryption and digital signatures/positive identification for anything that happens on the Internet.

If anything is anathema to the general culture of the Internet, loss of digital anonymity is it. Sure, there are times I give that up; when making a purchase off a Web site, for instance. But those instances are voluntary on my part; it isn't like an online vendor can reach into my purse and *make* me buy something. However, there are forces at work that want to make it impossible for me and you take any action on the Web without it being recorded and stored elsewhere, lest some functionary wish to check out our habits and actions.

No, this is not some grand conspiracy to enslave us all; it is the natural behavior one would expect of government, law enforcement and corporations. They want to know who you are, all the better to sell to you, check up on you, tax you and, if necessary, put the cuffs on you. It's just part of who and what they are, as natural for them as skinny-dipping is for a fish.

I don't know very many people who, confronted with the proposition of losing Internet anonymity completely, would say it is a good thing and should be done. That's why the forces above are having something of a tough time pushing through the laws and regulations they want, at least in America.

But there's that Law of Unintended Consequences again. People who create and load viruses to the Internet, who scam other people on fake e-commerce sites, or pull off just plain malicious stunts such as DoS attacks, are falling right into the hands of those who want to limit or destroy that anonymity. Every time they do something like this, they make the argument that there should be no anonymity. When childish crackers hack and deface a government Web site or cause some commercial Web site loss and force them to call in security consultants, they are saying clearly, "You can't stop us. You don't even know who we are! Nyah, nyah!"

To which the reply is, "We don't know who you are yet. Maybe we'll never know who you are; we'll just make it impossible for anyone else to ever do this again without us know who *they* are."

All one has to do is read the newspapers to know that this is exactly what is happening right now. For every Bubbleboy virus attack, there is a sponsor for a digital signature bill. Each time a NASA or CIA Web site is popped, some member of Congress issues a press release about the need for the ability to positively identify every person on the 'Net. Each DoS attack on a commercial site has the potential of creating another supporter for all this.

I cannot *believe* I am facing the all-too-real prospect of not even being able to play a quick *Tribes* or *Quake* session without supplying positive identification first.

3.43 Gadzooks!

**Volume Eight, Issue 44
Thursday, December 16, 1999**

Gadzooks!

"My Lords, my Ladies, Gentlefolk all, good evening and welcome thee to Medieval Network News, the official news agency of Her Majesty, the Queen. Verily, these are the headlines on this 13th of December in the Year of Our Lord, 1599:

"Chirgeons in York claim new studies show the efficacy of leeches in curing dropsy and the ague, and in relieving swelling of the buboes caused by The Great Plague;

"Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the First, issued a stern rebuke to Spain today, warning that Spanish warships harassing English fishing vessels in the Channel risk "the same treatment Our Brave Navy doled out to the Armada over ten years ago." Attempts to reach the Spanish Embassy in London for a reply were in vain;

"In the wake of last month's Canturbury Day School Tragedy, in which a dozen young people died, The Association of Her Royal Majesty's Sheriffs today issued a call for the outlawing of swords longer than 24 inches and the banning of crossbows from private possession.

"And in the latest on The Canterbury Tragedy, investigators say newly discovered diaries prove that the two schoolboys planned their bloody attack on classmates for over a year. According to the London Times, the diaries are purported to also show that each had a fascination with the theater, especially the works of Mssr. William Shakespeare of the famous troupe, The Lord Chamberlain's Men.

"Bishop Weirdly of Sloply Dun, the Royal Leech, stated today that the discovery of several of the works of Mssr. Shakespeare in the homes of the two crossbow-yielding youths proves conclusively that easy access to the live theater is destroying the minds of the Kingdom's youth. "Indeed, are not the works of Mssr. Shakespeare extremely violent, emotional and prone to the use of weapons to resolve situations?" the Bishop was quoted as saying. "So-called theatrical works such as *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet* are nothing more than depictions of murderous rampages and are destroying the very moral fiber of this great Kingdom.""

"In other news, 29 traitors were beheaded today in the Tower of London. The traitors were convicted of attempting to assassinate Her Majesty and overthrow the monarchy. Each had also been found in the possession of the works of Shakespeare and blades longer than 24 inches "

"Hello to the Milky Way galaxy and good incarnation to you all! This is the BeamSpace News Network, serving all planets in the Confederation of Man. Here are the galactic headlines on this 13th day of December, 2599:

"Genetic manipulators on the planet York confirmed today that recent studies show the venerable Earth leech, long ignored by the medical community, has certain palliative effects in the treatment of blood diseases;

"Wiley Charmer, Secretary General of the United Planets, today issued a stern rebuke to the Empire of Chitin, warning that Chitin starships harassing UP colonization vessels in the Crucis sector risk "the same treatment we doled out to their fleet over ten years ago." Attempts to reach the Chitin Embassy in Geneva for a reply were in vain;

"The Proxima Centauri Times is reporting today that the Virtual Reality Network diaries of the two teens who rampaged through the halls of a high school on Tau Ceti, killing 14 students with plasma rifles and home-made vibra-bombs, were devotees of extremely violent VR games, including the ultra-realistic *Quake 204*. A spokesman for Electronic Nintendo id Arts declined to comment;

"The Intergalactic Association of Police Commissioners today applauded the action of the UP Secretariat in voting unanimously to ban private possession of all weapons and virtual reality games in the wake of the Tau Ceti Tragedy. The ban includes kitchen knives, rolling pins, carpenter's hammers and the highly popular direct-connect VR game, *Quake 204*. "In these enlightened times, there is no reason for the private citizen to have possession of any weapon, nor to train themselves to kill on these murder simulators," read the statement;

"Twenty-nine rebels were executed in Geneva on Old Earth today. The rebels were convicted of attempted of attempting to assassinate the Secretary General and to overthrow the United Planets. They were also found to be in possession of deadly carpenter's hammers and violent VR games "

"Good day, Gentlebeings. This is the Chitin Empire Approved News Agency, reporting on this 13th of December, 2999, also being the 399th year of enlightened rule by our Supreme Masters, the Chitin. In today's headlines:

"Chitin veterinarians on York 329 have determined that, all other medical procedures being outlawed for the 'human animals,' leeches are now the only approved treatment for human cancer;"

"The Chitin Supreme Emperor today issued a stern rebuke to the Yaya Hegemony, warning that Yaya bio-ships harassing peaceful Chitin battlecruisers in the Crucis sector risk "the same treatment we doled out to the humans after they unilaterally disarmed 399 years ago." Attempts to reach the Yaya Embassy in Geneva for a reply were in vain;

"In the wake of last week's Wolf 359 Tragedy, in which two Chitin teenagers went on a rampage in their school and killed 14 classmates with demolecularizers and home-made fusion bombs after viewing the heroic documentary, "Conquest of the Humans," the Supreme Emperor has issued an order outlawing entertainment of any kind.

"The Emperor also went on to note that "any Human finding this order amusing will be summarily executed "

3.44 It's The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

Volume Eight, Issue 45

Thursday, December 23, 1999

I love the holidays.

Mostly, I love them because it signals the end to the merciless hype of the game industry's Christmas Rush. By the time New Year's Day rolls around, my brains are leaking out one ear from the relentless PR pounding I've taken. To hear the marketing geeks tell it, every single game released this year is groundbreaking, exciting, signals a new wave of PC gaming and/or all three.

The holidays also signal the end of yet another year and, for me, a chance to reflect on the changes the year hath wrought. In these days of Internet time, which seems to operate like dog years (one day of real time being the equivalent of seven days of Internet time), when things move, they move *fast*. Keeping up can be quite a chore.

This will be my last column of the year, and a most interesting one it has been, indeed. Heck, the whole online gaming landscape has morphed greatly in just twelve short months. Some noteworthy milestones and random thoughts from the year that was:

- The debuts of *EverQuest* (<http://www.station.sony.com/everquest/>) and *Asheron's Call* (<http://www.zone.com/asheronscall/>) showed that the market for persistent worlds is, indeed, quite large. Just how large, no one really knows yet. However, persistent worlds tend to be more "sticky" than most online fare, so we've probably just scratched the surface;
- The failure and closing in May of VR-1's (<http://www.vr1.com/>) *Ultracorps* on Microsoft's Zone (<http://www.zone.com/>) also showed pretty dramatically that for-pay strategy games are quite a bit less sticky than persistent worlds. Despite the bugs and flawed design that allowed a few players to dominate the game, they might have made a minor go of it if the Zone had supported the game adequately with sysop and game master support. But they didn't and the game died.

This is the first instance of a major online game effort dying coming out of the gate; it won't be the last;

- Call 911. A few dead, dying or seriously ill online game companies and portals:
- **TEN**, which is now www.pogo.com, with a new mission to be yet another mass market gaming portal;

- **MPG-Net** of *Drakkar* fame, which was bought by Interactive Magic to be part of Imagic Online, which is now iEN (<http://www.iencentral.com/>) and we're taking bets on what the name will be next month;
 - **Engage Games Online** (<http://www.gamesonline.com/>), the spin-off from Interplay which still exists but just kinda faded away into obscurity;
 - **Mplayer.com**, which is still around but is more or less being ignored in favor of the parent company's Hearme.com voice chat site (<http://www.hearme.com/>);
 - **DWANGO** (<http://www.dwango.com/>) Dead in America, alive and in Cheynes-Stokes breathing in Japan.
-
- By far, the single most important online games-related event of 1999 was Electronic Arts (<http://www.ea.com>) (the parent corporation of my employer, Origin Systems) cutting a major deal with AOL (<http://www.aol.com>) to be a primary provider of content to the AOL Games Channel. At the same time, EA bought the venerable online games ground-breaker Kesmai Corporation (<http://www.gamestorm.com/>) (*Air Warrior*, *Multiplayer BattleTech*) and online sports game developer PlayNation (http://www.playnation.com/ie_ne.html).

This agreement with AOL places EA and its studios in the pole position to offer online games to AOL's 20 million subscribers. As AOL consistently ranks among the top three visited domains on the Web, and its members are variously reported to be responsible for between 30% and 50% of all online access time from the home, this is not to be sneered at. It is a major competitive advantage.

The deal instantly makes EA *the* primary player in the for-pay market. Microsoft may have more money to spend and Sony may own key mass-market licenses such as *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune*, but EA now has the better distribution. With this deal, no major player can get a game in front of more qualified eyeballs faster than EA.

- Most interesting new computer game: *Planescape: Torment* (<http://www.planescape-torment.com/>), a fantasy RPG set in the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons universe. This one is apparently built on the engine that Bioware (<http://www.bioware.com/>) used to develop another AD&D title, the highly successful *Baldur's Gate*. From what I've seen so far, this game rocks the house down. If you're into CRPGs, this is definitely worth a look.
- Sega shipped the Dreamcast set-top game console (<http://www.sega.com/homepage/>) with its built-in modem and, for the life of me, I can't decide whether this is really news or not. The Dreamcast Network, in conjunction with AT&T, has been announced, but is still AWOL as far as games are concerned.

Does anyone really want to play games on the Internet via a console hooked to a TV? Considering the failures of such ventures as WebTV, Catapult/X-Link, Interactive TV and Sega's own Saturn network, no one has even proved very many people want to surf the Net that way, much less play games. I guess the best that can be said is that the jury is still out, but that we're unlikely to get a mistrial. Either this market is going to be a raging success or miserable failure; I don't see any middle ground.

There won't be a column next week, as even hand-biting she-dogs like me need to take a little time off to fully savor life's little ironies. The next column will be January 7, 2000; see you then!

4 Year 2000 Columns

4.1 *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.

4.2 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?

4.3 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.

4.4 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? Aaacckkk Quake clone, Quake clone, backstory, MBA, MBA, it's just another platfoooooorrrrrmmmmmm

FADE TO BLACK.

4.5 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 pay yer money and you take 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.

4.6 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.

4.7 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?

4.8 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.

4.9 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 profile 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 it's 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?

4.10 The Column Calliope

4.10.1 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?

4.10.2 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.

4.11 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.

4.12 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?

4.13 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.

4.14 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.

4.15 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?"

4.16 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 perqs, 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?

4.17 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.

4.18 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.

4.19 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.

4.20 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 unflinchingly 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."

4.21 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.

4.22 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.

4.23 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.

4.24 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?

4.25 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>

4.26 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.

4.27 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.

4.28 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.lumthemad.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.

4.29 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.

4.30 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.

4.31 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?

4.32 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?

4.33 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.

4.34 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.

4.35 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?

4.35.1 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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4.36 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.

4.37 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.

4.38 OK, Would You Pay More, Part II

Volume Nine, Issue 38
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.

4.39 The End of The Year: The 2001 Hot List

Volume Nine, Issue 39
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.

5 Year 2001 Columns

5.1 Broadband is not your savior

Volume ten, issue 1

January 4, 2001

I don't know how many times in the past three months I've heard some variation of the following: "Yes, well, we're concentrating on broadband delivery for our online games; with all that bandwidth, that's where the real action will be."

In a word: wrong. (Now you see why I haven't been named Diplomat of the Year by the GDC or AIAS.)

I don't know why I find it surprising that game company executives don't understand the online world or that they have an ugly misconception or two about it; when I do side work as a consultant for companies, I spend a lot of my time trying to fix these mistaken impressions at the top level. The misconceptions about broadband beget silly statements, such as the one above, and belie a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the internet, bandwidth, and game design. Unfortunately, these misconceptions are growing to epidemic proportions in the minds of publishers and developers, and it's only going to cause some red faces down the line. Here are the three major boo-boos I most often hear:

Misconception #1: Broadband speeds will let us send more data faster, and this will be good for everyone.

Unfortunately, more data transmitted also equals more lag on the internet. To use a fractured and somewhat overworked analogy, the pipes that carry data are like a superhighway, and each data packet to and from both servers and users is a car on that highway. The more cars on the highway, the slower traffic moves. The end result is a traffic jam.

And, as with a highway, even if more lanes (fiber cables) are added, they fill up quickly, especially in large urban areas. Data packets traveling across the country must slow down to go through these choke points. As traffic grows, so does the number of choke points. We can't seem to build enough lanes to handle the traffic growth.

In other words, the more data each individual can send and receive, the worse our slow-traffic problem becomes. Already, we're only laying about 1/8 of the fiber needed to handle today's growth of data transmission, when 90 percent plus of U.S. home internet users are stuck at 56k; what happens when 50 percent or more have broadband connections? At some point, we are going to experience nationwide and worldwide traffic jams on a daily basis.

Misconception #2: Our customers want the so-called rich media allowed by broadband speeds. This will let us stream huge media movies, 3D graphics, and sound files that will wow the unwashed masses.

Wonderful. Not only will we clog the lines by having more people downloading and uploading more data packets, we're going to exacerbate the problem by increasing the size of files and streamed data loads. This is rather like an amusement park operator noticing that the park is sold out and filled to capacity, and instead of closing the doors to those waiting in line, he cuts ticket prices in half.

In actuality, what is more likely to happen is widespread dissatisfaction with such media as the internet begins to grind to a stop with all that downloading going on.

Misconception #3: If you think broadband is fast now, just wait ten years!

This is the worst broadband misconception of all. What is called broadband speed today is not likely to be the broadband speed of tomorrow.

When considering broadband data-transmission rates, most people seem to have bought into past marketing efforts of the telephone companies and cable providers, namely that DSL or cable modem access will allow you to download 50MB movies and the like in mere seconds. While this is theoretically possible, it is not what usually happens (see misconception #1, above). Such claims are based on a best-case scenario in which everything from the destination server to the home computer, including the distributed nature of the internet, works to 100-percent perfection. Oh, yeah, right. That happens all the time when I access the internet! I never run into a broken or badly programmed router or hop through a host site with bad lag due to insufficient bandwidth or get ground to a halt by a downed server.

That claim was also most often used before cable providers started putting bandwidth governors on subscribers and before DSL traffic started overloading central trunk lines. I find it absolutely amazing that there are still less than 4 million cable broadband subscribers in the U.S., but they eat so much bandwidth that governors must be used to slow them down. Instead of the rapid-fire data transmission promised, cable subscribers in several markets are now limited to transmission rates lower than 400kbps on downloads, and in some cases, 128kbps on uploads. In other words, nothing close to the transmission speeds required for downloading a 50MB file in seconds. What kind of punky cable internet transmission rates will we see in ten years, when we have 40, 50, or 60 million cable modem subscribers? We may end up longing for the days of the 56k modem.

As for DSL, sure, you can hit those transmission rates...if you're willing to pay \$200 plus per month for the bandwidth. The most common DSL subscription is far lower (at around \$40 a month for that same 128k upload), and lower than the 400kbps download option that cable providers have mandated for their \$40-a-month subscribers in high-use areas. And even with only about a million DSL subscribers nationwide, local trunks are being overwhelmed with transmitted data, causing problems for data and voice calls alike.

You ought to see the long faces in boardrooms when I deflate these misconceptions; broadband is the current Holy Grail, and nobody likes having their myths shattered. What I try to emphasize to decision makers are these points:

Broadband is not some miracle technology that will soon free you from retailers and distributors. Yes, some day we will have enough bandwidth available to allow easy transmission of entire CD-ROM games, but you and I will have retired long before that day arrives. For the next five years, concentrate on CD delivery of engines, with graphic and code updates via the internet. You do not exist in a vacuum. By the very nature of the internet, you are dependent on every other server, router, and bandwidth connection thereof. Some will be better than your setup, some will be worse. There will be more and more traffic jams. You can't control that, and neither can broadband access, which is actually going to make things worse in the short term. If you think that waiting for ubiquitous broadband access is the answer to your problems, you are fooling yourself and endangering your company.

It is far more important to design games and websites that decrease the amount of data transmitted, not increase it. This simplifies the process all around, and reduces the chances of server-based lag, and you will achieve better customer satisfaction and word of mouth because of it.

Being the eternal optimist, I have no doubt I am a voice in the wilderness again.

Two corrections from last week: In last week's column, the [2001 Hot List](#), there were two factual mistakes:

Ultima Worlds Online: Ultima is not UO: Third Dawn. UO: Third Dawn is to be a major upgrade to Ultima Online, and UWO:O is an entirely new game.

The Sony Online Entertainment MMOG in development, *Star Wars*, does have a website at <http://www.station.sony.com/starwars/>.

No excuses: I screwed up here. How did this happen, you ask? Simple: in preparation for a vacation during the holiday season, I wrote and submitted the column in November, several weeks before the column's scheduled publication date. At that time, the *Star Wars* website hadn't been launched, and it wasn't clear whether *Third Dawn* was going to be used for UO or UWO:O. (Well, it wasn't clear to me; others didn't have the same problem.)

The lesson here is not to write a column too early in a medium where information changes quickly, and then blow off on vacation. Talk about getting bit!

5.2 *Nothing new under the sun*
Volume ten, issue two
January 11, 2001

I keep harking back to this one point: when it comes to massively multiplayer games, there is nothing new under the sun.

Take real-world suicide for online reasons, for example. A couple months ago, there was a big hoorah over the supposed [suicide](#) of an *EverQuest* guide who was removed from her post. While the fans rushed to start elevating poor, disturbed Sheyla to sainthood, news organs and some fan sites noted (for once) that the "suicide" was unconfirmed, and not to jump to conclusions. Of course, the suicide turned out to be an elaborate hoax, as did the whole "reality" surrounding the supposed real-world life of the players involved. The 19-year-old Sheyla turned out to be a young man who, apparently, was attempting to embarrass his young wife, who had recently split from him.

And none of this surprised me at all. I knew when the suicide story first broke on the fan sites that there was a 99.99 percent chance it was a hoax.

I can hear someone in the back of the room now: "Oh, yeah, sure! Jessica has 20/20 hindsight, just like the rest of us." Not so, not so, to my everlasting headache. How did I know this was almost certainly a hoax? Easy: in my career over the past 15 years in this industry, I've seen the "untimely death scenario" played out many times, in many online games and online services, with many clever variations. In each case I have been attendant to since 1986, with only one exception*, the whole purpose of the exercise was basic and simple: to focus the attention of the online community on the perpetrator. For some, it is just simply part of the game within the game. The Sheyla case is a particularly pernicious form in that the most common pattern of "announce and be talked out of it" was not followed. Still, I've seen this one a few times over the years, too, so I wasn't particularly surprised at the outcome.

Why do people do this online? Sometimes it is for the attention, such as the occasional disturbed player who announces to all and sundry that he or she is about to commit suicide and has come to bid all a farewell. I call this the "good-bye, cruel world!" scenario. Using it has the effect of causing other players spending hours talking down the perp from his intention. Over the few days afterward, the now-redeemed player is showered with attention from a widening base of other players, compassionate people seeking to show this poor, unloved schmuck that he is, indeed, a loved schmuck.

Never mind that most of them not only don't know the person in real life; a good percentage never even knew the player's character. The perpetrators of "good-bye, cruel world!" understand that most people are good-hearted and open-armed, and use that fact to elicit a little online love. Most of the perpetrators probably are disturbed and lonely, just not enough to do something so drastic as take their own lives. What I find so despicable about this scenario is that it is almost impossible to determine in a chat room or MMOG if someone really means to do it. I mean, you can't read their body language or listen to their tone of voice; you have to take the perp at his or her word. I have no doubt there is the rare case when someone is actually looking for a good

reason not to kill him or herself; the point is, you'll never know if its real or just some jerk pulling your chain, will you?

Other times, players have a sneakier motive for pulling such a hoax, as was apparently the case in the Sheyla incident. I call this the "ignore the man behind the curtain!" ploy. While the perpetrator is waving a red flag in front of the eyes of the community, something sneaky is going on behind the scenes. Sometimes it's for monetary gain ("We've set up a suicide-prevention memorial fund in Departed Player's name; please contribute and help wipe out suicide in our lifetimes!"), sometimes it is an attempt to cause other players to feel the wrath of the community ("Departed Player wouldn't have done this if XYZ Guild weren't such heartless brutes. Shun them! No, *kill* them!").

Sometimes, it is just that the perp has been telling so many divergent lies about the "real life" of the now-dead "person," it is impossible to keep all the lies straight. The only way to get out of it and still remain a part of the community is to wax the character and start over with a clean slate as a new character. And there is no reason not to go out in a blaze of glory, right? If you watch closely what other players relate about the dead player in the days following the "event," you can usually tell who the perp is. He or she is the one who starts off a discussion with something to the effect of "I sure miss Departed Player; he was a such a great person!" Then he or she sits back and loudly agrees as everyone extols all the wonderful virtues of the dearly departed.

These cynical observations aside, this is a phenomenon that has been with us since Day One of online gaming, and probably won't go away. As long as there is easy anonymity available over the wires, we'll be seeing online suicides occasionally played out in the press and on fan sites. And since most of us have reservations about removing anonymity from the online world, the cycle will continue.

Ironically, it is just something we're going to have to live with.

*Earlier, I mentioned there was one case I knew of in the last 15 years that wasn't a hoax. I can't really pin it as an online suicide, because it happened on the telephone, not online.

In 1993, while I was working at a small online service start-up in Texas, a young woman called customer service one day to complain that her account had been turned off. We had recently gone from flat rates to hourly charges, and she had racked up hundreds of dollars in charges in a MMOG she had been playing for a while. When we attempted to bill her, her credit card was refused, so the system automatically closed her down.

As the young customer-service rep tried to explain this to the woman, she became more and more shrill, screaming at the rep that she had to get online, she had to be with her friends, they needed her. Then, suddenly, she stopped screaming and calmly told the rep not to worry about it. After a short pause, the rep heard a loud report, then a clunk as the phone fell to the floor. When the police arrived at her house, they found she had indeed blown her head off while clutching the phone.

As tragic as this was--and you can only imagine how the customer-service rep felt; hell, it chills my blood to this day to recall the anguished pallor of that person's face--as tragic as the whole mess was, note this about the incident:

The woman never threatened suicide to the rep, never gave the rep time to realize that the situation had changed or an opportunity to talk her out of it. She made sure someone would know what she had done and just plain did it. No matter how many veiled cries for help in the days previous, this is how it happens when pain exceeds the resources for coping with that pain, and this is how most true suicides go about it; make certain someone will know, then go and do the deed.

And that's why I was morally certain from the start that the Sheyla suicide was a hoax. "She" made no provisions that anyone online would know that she was gone. For someone so tied to and dependent on the *EverQuest* community, this was a virtual impossibility (pun unintentional).

5.3 It s Like Instant Karma, But With A Time Delay

Volume 10, Issue 3
January 18, 2001

Here we go again. Some things never change.

We take you now to Yester-Year (**NOTE to Eds: please keep these caps and hyphenation**), when personal computers were the stuff of science fiction and gamers were forced to play RPGs with the primitive tools of pencil, graph paper and human gray matter. Yes, all the way back to the 1980s, the Stone Age of role-playing games, when men were Warriors, women were Clerics and no one thought that was a particularly sexist arrangement.

What was the biggest problem players faced then? Was it the difficult job of finding a good group of people to game with? Was it understanding the complicated and ever-changing rules to *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Gamma World* or *Paranoia* well enough to play effectively? Was it finding enough time to actually do some serious gaming and still perform such mundane functions as working, eating and sleeping?

No, my friends, it was none of those things. The greatest danger was a hideous one, indeed, one to make even the staunchest Barbarian pale in fear. Of what do I speak? Observe, gentle reader:

Bud the Warrior: Uh, yeah, OK, I say we should go down the tunnel to the right. Gang?

Slimly the Thief: Yeah, sure, looks good. My infravision doesn't see anything nasty waiting for us.

Shannala the Cleric: Verily, then, it is a good choice.

Bondago the Magic User: Let's do it. Ready Magic Missile spell!

Bud the Warrior: Uh, yeah, OK, we take the tunnel to the right and carefully walk twenty feet down it.

Morono the DungeonMaster: Large, nasty arrows fly at you from all directions from hidden and undetectable traps in the walls, floor and ceiling, piercing every part of your bodies and killing everyone in the party instantly. You re all DEAD!
Hahahahahahahahhaaaaaaa!

Sound familiar? I m sure it does, because the greatest danger for gamers in that technologically-challenged era and yea! verily, even unto today, was getting stuck with a DM who mistook the You Will All Die Horribly In My Impossible Mission Again Syndrome for actual talent, such as Good Scenario Design. And it seemed to happen just about every damned time, didn t it? I swear, 9 out of 10 DMs in the live RPG games I played in just plain sucked rocks. I m sure you have similar horror stories.

You might ask, Jessica! Why this little time trip just to note the inability of 9 out of 10 DMs, than and now, to construct and manage a balanced, interesting quest? We *know* all that. To which I reply with just two words:

Neverwinter Nights.

Yes, I m throwing a bucket of cold water on the concept of the absolute coolness of player-generated content for online games. The debate on this subject has been an off-and-on thing since at least 1989, when proponents for both sides argued it vociferously on various Game Roundtables on the old GEnie online service. The issue has recently gained new life with the anticipation of **Bioware s *NeverWinter Nights*** (http://www.bioware.com/nwn/NWN_faq.html), or *NwN* in GamerSpeak (Eds: keep caps, please), which will allow a player to set up a free server, design game sessions like Dungeon Masters of old and offer multiplayer sessions for a small group of people. Bioware is aiming to allow anyone to run a server on their home PC to allow from eight to as many 64 people on a player-run server, though you ll need the bandwidth of a cable or DSL modem connection for that last number.

Naturally, some players are licking their chops and rubbing their hands just thinking of that kind of control: Design a quest and guide people through it? Be my very own Dungeon Master? Hoo, boy; I can hardly wait! The discussions on various fan forum message boards are all about how *NwN* will transform online gaming and put companies such as Sony Online and EA.com out of business quicker n you can say Hidden traps kill all!

D j vu. Remember when free gaming online with Retail Hybrids such as *Quake* and *Unreal* was going to kill MMOGs? The players and the press were full of those pronouncements. That was three years ago and MMOGs have six times as many paying subscribers today as they did then. The reason? Simple: Persistent Worlds appeal to a different sort of gamer than do Retail Hybrids. The doom-sayers confused technology and playing style with the actual market realities.

And so it is with the pronouncements about *NwN*. Just what makes anyone think that having some new-fangled technology available will suddenly transform crappy DMs into good ones? This is confusing the tools with the creative process. New tools might make it easier to construct an interesting scenario, but they confer no sudden ability for creativity, subtlety or genius. At the risk of offending thousands of players who also consider themselves good DMs, I've said it before and I say it again:

Sturgeon's Law, that 90% of everything is crap, applies to DMs as much as anyone or anything else. There is a reason that so many entertainment projects fail; creative talent is limited. If such genius were so readily available, every entertainment project would be a major. Do you see that happening in any entertainment field?

What does this mean, then? It means that instant karma is about to happen again. *NwN* will hit the shelves, many will buy it and run their own free servers with cool adventures available, most of those cool adventures will absolutely suck and the predictions that MMOGs will suffer will be proved wrong yet again.

And for those who disagree and think that *NwN* and similar technology is capable of killing MMOGs, here's a little reminder:

Large, nasty arrows fly at you from all directions from hidden and undetectable traps in the walls, floor and ceiling, piercing every part of your bodies and killing everyone in the party instantly. You're all DEAD! Hahahahahahahahhaaaaaaa!

5.4 The Top Ten Things to Say To Insure Not Getting Hired in the Industry

Volume 10, Issue 4
January 25, 2001

Everyone wants to work for a game company and make computer or video games. Why in God's name that is true for anyone who really **knows anything about the business** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth0805a.html>) is beyond me. OK, I do know; it is either the passion to create or because the thought of making games for a living just sounds too cool (and too easy; how tough can it be to make a game?. Right. Har de har har).

So it is inevitable that, whenever an entry-level development position opens up at a developer or publisher, dozens or even hundreds of resumes flow in, resulting in the need for many job interviews. We who are responsible for hiring new people dread these moments. Why? Because we know that we're going to interview multiple applicants and almost all of them are going to be completely inappropriate for the position at hand.

And I do mean completely; nothing like sorting through forty resumes and realizing that not one is right for the job, but that you'll interview at least three of them anyway, because you've been ordered to fill the position by yesterday at the latest. So you interview, and the statements that can come out of the mouths of these babes in the woods can often be hysterical, but are

always dead giveaways that the industry is attracting the same crowd that wanted to be a part of the French Revolution, after the fighting was over and guillotining had begun.

If you want to know what I'm talking about, just take a gander at the Top Ten list below. To enhance your enjoyment of them, know this:

Each and every one of these statements, near as I can remember the wording, was spoken by an actual job candidate at an interview.

With no further ado, The Top Ten Statements To Insure Not Getting Hired in the Industry:

Number 10: I've played some of your games. I've also been a dungeon master for ten years and I'm probably one of the top ten DMs in the world. You guys really need me.

A 22 year-old floor clerk from CompUSA with no game design experience, applying for an entry-level design position.

Number 9: I've never played your game, but I have a degree in screenwriting from UCLA.

A Hollywood script doctor applying for that same design position.

Number 8: It's just dots of light on a screen; you can't take that *too* seriously, right?

The former producer of a failed TV sitcom, showing why his TV show failed while trying to break into PC games through an entry-level producer position.

Number 7: Well, *technically*, no, I've never actually programmed in C++ at work. But I've read the book and I play around with it at home all the time.

A Visual Basic programmer from a credit union IT department, applying for a software engineer position for which the job description clearly stated a minimum of two years or more of C++ experience, and whose resume claimed three years of such experience.

Number 6: I should tell you up front that I'm a pacifist and won't work on code that has to do with guns or killing things.

An independent 3D engine programmer, applying for a position on a development team for the sequel of a world famous, best-selling first-person shooter.

Number 5: Passionate? You bet I'm passionate; just ask my wife. Hey, is that a job requirement?

A somewhat confused applicant, when asked if he was passionate about what he did. He was quickly assured that being passionate toward other team members was not a requirement, although a willingness to kiss ass was always appreciated.

Number 4: Money, what else? If you aren't doing it for money, you're a moron.

An applicant, when asked why he wanted to work in the games industry; he may have a point, but he sure made it at the wrong time and place.

Number 3: Of course, I'm qualified! You know, I'm a very good friend of the owner and I don't think he'd like your attitude.

An applicant with no programming experience interviewing for a programming position, just as the company owner entered the conference room. To which the owner, who never met the man before the interview, replied, "I'll see that he hears about it instantly."

Number 2: I told the recruiter during the phone call that I wasn't qualified for this, but she said it was good money for both of us and if I would just play one of your games, it would be obvious I was just as qualified as any designer here.

A would-be designer, interviewing with a Lead Designer to work on the sequel to a Top Ten seller.

And the **Number 1** thing to say to insure not getting hired in the industry is:

I know my salary requirements are high, but so are you guys if you think <the company's previous massively multiplayer online game> was good.

A 19 year old, second-year college student to a Producer, a VP and a Lead Engineer, asking for \$150,000 a year to work as an entry-level tools programmer on a MMOG development project.

5.5 Three Things to Understand About Online Gaming

Volume 10, Issue 5
February 1, 2001

All human knowledge, **author Robert Heinlein** (<http://home.t-online.de/home/herbsev/rah.htm>) wrote in *Expanded Universe*, is based on history, language and mathematics.

I believe that to be true; it seems pretty self-evident to me, in fact. Each of the three plays a key role in the accumulation, creation and/or transference of knowledge. It is a three-legged stool, in which each field of knowledge plays the role of a leg on that stool. Take away any one leg and the stool falls over and becomes far less useful.

I also believe the thought behind Heinlein's assertion can be made to work for MMOGs. And we do need some help.

1. **HISTORY:** One needs to understand where MMOGs have been and come from to understand where to go in the future.

The point Heinlein tried to make here is that if you don't understand the scope of history and how something came to be that way over time, you are less likely to be able to make a truly informed decision and/or design an effective plan of action.

So it is with MMOGs. It is important to understand how the industry and art got where it is today, else how are we going to avoid the mistakes of the past? I mention this because there seems to be something of a trend among today's very successful developers to consider their works seminal, or the 1st generation.

Bushwa. I don't care how many times Game God Brad McQuaid tries to make it so by saying it to an unthinking, parroting (and parrot-brained) game press; *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online*, et al, are not 1st generation massively multiplayer games. They aren't even 2nd generation.

No, my friends, we are currently in the 3rd generation of MMOGs. The 1st Generation began about 1969 and was typified by the PLATO network games and the original Bartle/Trubshaw MUD in 1978/79. At the time, massively multiplayer was a bit of a misnomer, especially compared to today's large player bases, but several games made the cut, thus creating the seminal generation of MMOGs.

The 2nd generation was the expansion of those concepts into fully massively multiplayer offerings during the period of about 1984 and to about 1997, with some experimentation in client front-end graphics and vertical market niche games tossed for leavening.

If you wonder why this information is important, consider this: If McQuaid and company had researched and truly understood the history of MMOGs, would they have made so many bush-league mistakes in customer relations with their first product? I think not.

2. LANGUAGES: While we have a kinda-sorta working pidgin patois for MMOGs, we have not yet hit on a language that is easily understood.

Heinlein was talking about human, spoken languages, and how we communicate and exchange knowledge with each other across culture and spoken-word barriers. For example, if you can speak, read and/or think in German, you can better discern the nuances and subtleties of a work written in German or better understand what a German speaker is really saying.

The industry today is much like a group of separate nations, each speaking its own tongue. This causes some confusion, even among the experienced professionals in the industry. We can't even agree on the terms we use for the various online games. Some call them MMOGs, some split out the vertical markets in MMRPGs and MMRTS, some use the term Persistent World or Persistent State World, etc. Trust me; it is even worse when it comes to discussing game and systems design or customer service issues.

In other words, we just don't have a common language that defines what the heck we are talking about in terms we can all understand. Until we do have one, we're going to be

floundering around a bit. Maybe it is time for the industry to come together at a conference and define the language we'll be using five years from now.

3. **MATHEMATICS:** We're actually doing much better here. Heinlein was referring to measurable results and using the common language of mathematics as a tool for research and expansion of knowledge. It is a given around the world that, if you can't measure the results, it isn't science.

While programming is still a black art in many ways, it is based on measurable results in mathematics. So while we may be using various different programming, operating systems and graphics tools, you still have to be well-grounded in math to achieve accurate, measurable results in an MMOG.

What we don't have yet is MMOG's Einstein, Planck or Hawking, someone to be really artistic and take us to whole new levels. We haven't yet had the advantage of a quantum theory or relativity theory, something that really shakes up the whole world. It may be necessary to have entirely new programming tools or a new operating system on the back-end to make that happen.

Taken all together, this 3rd generation of online games is certainly expanding the horizon in terms of building the player base and creating knowledge in how to handle, technically, many thousands of users in a persistent game environment. It is an extremely evolutionary generation, a building-blocks generation, and a necessary one.

I can't help but wonder how different — and exciting! - the 4th generation is going to be when it gets here, in five or six years

5.6 When Gamers Attack!

Volume 10, Issue 6

PUBLICATION DATE: February 8, 2001

Security is in the news again and, like one of those strange, voyeuristic reality TV programs, what happens *to* the internet is becoming more interesting than what happens *on* it.

The reason the news is full of security talk is mainly because of **Denial of Service attacks** (http://www.cert.org/tech_tips/denial_of_service.html) and other cracker activities against some high profile Web sites. Again. Such events may not affect you personally each time they occur, but they should be of concern to you. The plain fact of the matter is, Internet technology has some nasty weaknesses and people of low moral character have no problem trying to exploit them. It happens in games as much as anywhere else and it's likely to get worse before it gets better.

The biggest news was about the biggest tech company around, the 800 ton gorilla that is Microsoft. You know, the ubiquitous software giant that owns your computer, whether you like it or not? Seems they've had trouble with both DoS attacks and employees suffering the Oops,

did I press *that* button? Syndrome lately. A couple weeks ago, when Microsoft was hit by hackers and employee mistakes and had their Web complex driven from the Net for a time (like, the better part of four days), they issued a statement picked up by the press (http://news.cnet.com/news/0-1003-201-4615691-0.html?tag=mn_hd), part of which was:

"Unfortunately, as we have learned over the last few days, we did not apply sufficient self-defense techniques to our use of some third-party products at the front-end of parts of our core network infrastructure," the statement continued, without naming the products.

I love how MS plays the CYA game like a real pro (no, not the chat idiom for See ya! but the business jargon for protecting one's backside) and blames unnamed third-party products. As if MS products never have security holes, oh no! Yet, CYA is pretty standard corporate activity when something bad happens; blame anyone but yourself. Next, I expect someone to hire Saturday Night Live's **Mr. Subliminal** <<http://snltranscripts.jt.org/scripts/86asubliminal.phtml>> as the corporate spokesperson. I can see it now:

Reporter: What is the company's response to allegations that that security holes still exist in the company's products?

Mr. Subliminal: While we may have had some small problems in the past —*Forget*— we have taken all reasonable measures to insure security — *Forget*— since then. Did you have a —*Bathroom*— follow-up question?

Reporter: I thought so, but I can't seem to remember it. And I really have to go

Snide cheap shots aside, if you are more than an occasional online gamer, you know attacks and hacks are not limited to the likes of Microsoft, but happen to online games and game sites, too. Attacks are common because it is fairly easy for a disgruntled gamer to get together with a couple of his friends and, by using an easily available Script Kiddie DoS script, flood a company's routers and bring an online game to its knees. And some gamers seem to view being disgruntled as a life style.

When gamers attack, however, it is more likely to be to gain an advantage. Every online game has its weaknesses and some people with no self-esteem or self-respect just can't resist exploiting them. It could be a poorly programmed Retail Hybrid front end client that allows hack programs to make the cheater invincible, such as happened to the original *Diablo* on battle.net. This is annoying as hell for those of us who try to build characters online the old fashioned way, i.e. fairly. I don't mind if someone else has no self-respect; that's their problem. I do care when that lack of moral fiber manifests itself as the need to cheat to look superior, thereby destroying the joy of gaming for the rest of us. Frankly, these people are scum and I have to wonder what the hell the parents were doing for years instead of rearing their child.

With MMOGs, it can be a weakness in a backend database that allows a DoS attack to crash a server. This is most often used to try to create a time warp between the saved character on the server and the possessions currently on the character, in the hope that the time warp will duplicate the items in questions in both the bank vault and in the character's inventory. The fact

that a few hundred other players might be affected is immaterial. In the worst case scenario, causing this to happen to a sufficiently large site can have **ripple effects across the whole Internet** (<http://wired.lycos.com/news/business/0,1367,34234,00.html>), in much the same way losing a MAE center can.

This tactic has worked entirely too well in the past, well enough that companies like Sony, Microsoft and EA have become way too familiar with the standard FBI procedures for such incidents. On the bright side, it is also a wake-up call to make security against such attacks a priority. They probably aren't entirely preventable, but at least the extremely small percentage of people willing to risk jail time to do this can be thwarted a bit.

What does that mean for you and me? Take that extremely small percentage noted above. It is probably far less than 1%, probably less than 1/10th of a percent. So let's assume, for the sake of argument, that the 1/10th of one percent is a true figure. I note that less than 8% of the world's population currently has Internet access. What happens in ten, twenty or thirty years, when six billion people have access?

What happens is that 600,000 barbarians will be standing at the gates, ready to try the latest gambit. And if that doesn't scare you, try this:

The more this happens, the more governments will use it for justification to track your every move on the Net. Security and safety, you know. If these attacks continue, there will come a day in the not-too-distant future when you will have no freedom to move untracked on the Internet.

I don't know about you, but I find that *really* scary.

5.7 Singing the Bandwidth Blues

Volume 10, Issue 7

PUBLICATION DATE: February 15, 2001

This one is going to be very long-winded and somewhat rambling (like you're surprised). One reason is that I chose to assume that some people reading this particular column need some background on the whole bandwidth issue. Another is that the refrain needs to be sung occasionally to cut through the silly hype about the future of the internet.

Bandwidth is a beautiful thing. Rather, having enough of it is. With enough bandwidth (or so the legend goes), latency would disappear and we could play all those Internet action games and flight simulators and have the frame rate actually match the data transmission rate. If they could do that, the gaming experience would jump by an order of magnitude on the "fun" index.

It's not that simple, of course; there are several contributing factors to Net's latency. No one questions, however, that having T-1 capacity bandwidth for each individual home user would allow us to greatly enhance the online game experience.

This is a serious issue to online game players, because we are notorious suckers. In our quest to eke out the very last bit of performance to improve the gaming experience (i.e. trying to get an unfair advantage over the next geek), we seek to suck every erg of performance from the PC and every bit of speed out of the Net. We'll overclock our computers, buy the latest video accelerator card, swap out motherboards so we can use the faster SDRAMs instead of DRAMs and add video and PC memory until the desktop sags.

And because speed is a necessary component to playing many games on the Net, we'll also buy the fastest modem available. Decreasing the lag time between issuing a command to a game server and receiving a response is of paramount importance to us. Games such as *Quake III Arena* are very intolerant of lag; almost as intolerant as online gamers, in fact. Speed is a misnomer, of course; we're actually referring to a modem's bandwidth transmission capacity.

That is probably more than most current modem users ever wanted to know about that particular piece of equipment. For all intents and purposes, speed is what they see or don't see on the Internet, and the difference between do see and don't see is all they really care about.

(This does not take into account that game designers rarely design online games with latency and bandwidth restrictions in mind. See **Greg Costikyan's excellent article** <<http://www.crossover.com/fantwar/screed.html>> for more discussion about this.)

If our online play experiences too much latency, we'll buy even faster modems and switch ISPs until we have the best possible connection to the Internet. I've lost count of the number of modems I've bought and \$20 account set-up fees I've paid to ISPs in the last few years. In the last three years alone, the count is at three modems and nine accounts.

In short, we hard core gamers have more money than common sense.

Of course, that propensity to spend money like water doesn't help us with the bandwidth issue. We have no control over how much copper or fiber is available to us once the data leaves our modems, nor how clogged the bandwidth pipes are when we try to access various servers and sites to play games.

The press and the casual Net user have a tendency to think of bandwidth as the sole cause of latency on the Internet. Unfortunately, latency has several causes besides lack of adequate bandwidth, including badly configured and obsolescent servers, outdated routers, the individual's modem (which adds anywhere from 30 to 120 milliseconds) and 'choke points' at certain sites on the Net, such as the Metropolitan Area Ethernets (MAEs).

However, it IS true that there isn't enough bandwidth to go around these days and that lack is a major contributor to the slowness of the Internet. Remember, the Internet is a decentralized network; each individual site and provider is responsible for leasing and maintaining his own bit of bandwidth. For most providers, that means one or more leased T-1 telephone connections, each of which has a maximum bandwidth capacity of about twenty-four 56k or forty-eight 28.8k connections.

If more people try to use that bandwidth, the performance is degraded. Imagine a tunnel ten feet wide; two people can run side by side down the tunnel and reach the end at pretty much the same time. Now imagine 100 people trying to enter the tunnel simultaneously; most of those people are going to reach the end of the tunnel far behind the two leaders. The only two solutions are to convince fewer people to use the tunnel or expand the tunnel's width. Of course, if you expand the width to handle those 100 runners, pretty soon the word will get out and 1,000 of them will try to squeeze into a space designed for 100.

Traffic jams such as these are daily occurrences on the internet, as sites receive hundreds or thousands of near-simultaneous "hits." When this happens, the bandwidth available at the site is split among all those users, as the servers and routers try desperately to keep up with the commands and requests from all those users. An individual may have a cable modem or DSL connection, but a Web or Internet site he/she is trying to communicate with may be so overloaded that it is responding at 2400 bps. And this can occur at anywhere in the connection of hops between the player's home (called The Last Mile in the industry, denoting wiring from the nearest bandwidth head-end to the home) and the game site. The more hops, the more likelihood for latency.

In 1986, when I shoehorned my way into this business, use of the available bandwidth wasn't an issue. There were probably less than 700,000 home modem owners in the US, the Internet was virtually unknown outside of academic circles, bandwidth was everywhere and it didn't seem like we could ever use it all. Until 1992, a modem upgrade from 1200 BPS to 2400 BPS, and from 2400 to 9600, showed dramatic results in download rates.

What a difference those nine years have made. In 1992, there were maybe 10 million people using modems worldwide, almost all of them in the US, with over 95% of bandwidth use happening on online services and local BBSs. Today, the number of people accessing the Internet and online services is almost certainly over 350 million (Nua, Ltd. estimates the number at over 400 million), with most of the bandwidth being used to access the World Wide Web. This includes America Online, whose 26 million subscribers worldwide account for about 35% of all access to the WWW, according to Media Metrix.

What has this done to bandwidth availability? Well, is the term World Wide Wait familiar? In that short nine year period, we not only filled up all the available bandwidth pipes, we can't lay enough new copper, fiber and coaxial cable to keep up with the demand. While several culprits contribute to latency, the main malefactor is us; we are using more bandwidth than is being laid.

It's not going to get better as soon as we want. According to the US Commerce Department in an April 1998 report, traffic on the Internet is doubling every 100 days. Think about that: About every three months, we are trying to jam twice the amount of data down the same pipes. An Insight study late last year predicts that data packet demands are going to rise from about 6 billion to day to over 30 *trillion* within two years.

Now, compare this with an annualized bandwidth growth of 50%, as calculated by Nielsen's Law, created by noted Web usability expert Dr. Jakob Nielsen. The math does not look good:

Every 100 days, we are adding only 12.5% of the bandwidth needed to handle traffic growth. What that all means for us gamers is: Things are going to get worse for a while, not better.

Someday, this may all even out. At some point, the curves between computer power, Net access speeds and bandwidth growth will intersect. Dr. Nielsen expects computer power and bandwidth to intersect in 2003, with average Web speeds 57 times faster than in 1998 and the high-end user having capacity equal to a T-1 telephone leased line and the low-end user having ISDN capacities.

That estimate is a bit enthusiastic for my tastes. If the past fifteen years have shown me anything, it's that nothing to do with relief from technology bottlenecks happens as fast as anyone thinks it will. For example, in 1978, everyone thought there would be a personal computer in every home in the US by the year 2000. At the end of 2000, the count stands at about 50% of US homes.

My educated guess is that it is unlikely we'll see any real, substantive relief from the Bandwidth Blues before the year 2008. And that relief will occur only if the telephone companies and cable companies not only continue to lay lots of new fiber, but actually carry through with their teases to accelerate the installation amounts and rates. If they don't lay a whole bunch of new fiber and cable, it doesn't really matter what the capacity is at the home user end. Without enough bandwidth at both The Last Mile and cross-country in general, data is still going to hit traffic jams out in the Great Internet Cloud.

In fact, a build up of capacity on the Last Mile without a general build up of bandwidth capacity in backbones and Web sites in general would be a disaster. Imagine lots of huge pipes trying to feed data into medium or small-sized pipes. I shudder just to think of it.

What does all this mean for online games? Bandwidth is one of the main limiting factors for our industry to provide an online gaming experience with the speed, performance and compelling nature of the best solo computer games. With enough bandwidth available, we could actually get creative in interesting ways. I'm beginning to suspect that online gaming, and especially persistent world gaming, won't really take off until we can provide a TV or movie quality experience. Imagine:

- Being able to add new, multi-megabyte sections to an online game on the fly as a player approaches an entry point to the scenario, done completely transparent to the player;
- Allowing players to tie into team chat channels with both real-time, 32 frames per second or more video with accompanying audio, leaving the hands free to issue game commands instead of typing chat messages;
- Having human-run game actors communicate clues or lead quests by the same video/audio link. Talk about making the game experience more like TV or the movies: Imagine an actor showing up in the 'flesh' to lead a spontaneous one hour adventure for five or six *Ultima Online* or *EverQuest* players.

These are just three possibilities; I'm sure you can think of more. Someday, we will no doubt reach this plateau where bandwidth, computer power, server and router efficiency and access speeds will meet.

It can't happen soon enough for me but, as I stated above, it isn't likely to happen for a long while.

5.8 Boy-Toy is as Boy-Toy Does

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To paraphrase that great philosopher, **Yosemite Sam**
(http://www.nonstick.com/sounds/Yosemite_Sam.html):

Men are *so* stupid.

For years, analysts and executives at PC and video game companies, a subsection of the business species that is overwhelmingly male, tried to figure out how to get more women to buy more games for themselves. Their usual customer base is something near the 12 to 35 year old male and they'd like a wider selection of customers, thank you, because that means more money in their pockets.

Nothing wrong with wanting to make more money off the female market, but they never had any success figuring out how to make it happen intentionally. As dictated by the Law of the General Perversity of the Universe, it happened anyway. Indeed, a 1999 IDSA study claimed that 43% of the market for PC games was female, with 35% of the market being women who played video console games. More recent studies have indicated that slightly over 50% of online gamers are women.

OK, so now more women are playing games. That still leaves the males who overwhelmingly dominate Executive Row in this industry, some of whom have been leading us for 15 years and more, with a perplexing question: why? They look at the figures and see that women play a wide assortment of online fare, such as card games and trivia games and a darn good share of the MMOG subscription market. Then they scratch their heads and say to each other, Do *you* know why? Should we make more card games? At that point, they just look at each other, shrug and head for the nearest strip club, where they slip dollar bills in the dancers' thong panties and, in between treating each other to lap dances, continue the discussion about how to figure out why women play games.

Well, wonder no more, m lads; the answer is simple. If you can stop playing Motor Boat for a moment and pull your face from between that lap dancer's breasts, I'll tell you:

We play the same games you do, for pretty much the same reasons you do. The only difference between then and now is that more of us have access to computers and consoles these days.

Get the picture? We're individuals, just like you guys, and that means we have individual preferences. Quit lumping women into one large box, as if all women had the same tastes and there was some magical formula or equation that can be tapped to make us buy games. You don't make those kind of assumptions with the male population, do you? Heck, no; you do all sorts of studies and focus groups and figure out what minute male demographic subsections of the 12 to 35 year old group want in a game.

And what they want is, surprise! just what you young bucks want: Big tits, big guns or both. Hate to tell ya, but just as not every male player is akin to John Romero, we're not all like Stevie Case (as much as you'd like us all to get our breasts pumped up until our chins have a perpetual bruise). Like the population at large, we fall into different categories and like different things.

This is not a new thing, guys. It has always been this way. Forget the tired old argument that we grew up playing with Barbie and you grew up with G.I. Joe and that means we are soft and gentle and you are hard and aggressive; it means nothing in the long run. Come on; do you still play dolls? I sure don't. And if you think G.I. Joe was tough, you should see Barbie in a cat-fight; Joe wouldn't last two seconds.

It goes even deeper. When we were growing up, we watched the same TV shows and movies and read the same books you did. And I tell you truly: just like you, we secretly wanted to command a starship like Jim Kirk and Jean-Luc Picard, be secret government agents like James West, float down the Mississippi on a raft like Huck and Tom or save lives on the operating table like Dr. Kildare. Forget that they were all men; the *idea* of the adventure and being able to do something we couldn't do in real life was what mattered.

So, is it any wonder that when you build hard-core gamer products with little adventure and such lovely teenage male wet-dream features as dancing strippers or buffed-out babes with Himalayan breasts, that we avoid them in favor of something with at least a little substance? And it doesn't come down to those tired old clichés about women wanting social games and men wanting bang-bang games. Note that as more publishers branch out into products that feature some adventure and/or originality, sales spike for both males and females. Like with *Diablo II*, *Half-Life* and *The Sims*, million-plus sellers all.

Or look at the online games, of which the best solo games bear a striking resemblance in one form or another and which are populated by 50% females. The women run around with swords and shields in *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*, too, just like the men. Why? Gee, you don't suppose it's because there are more opportunities for making up an interesting adventure or intrigue, do you? Probably just coincidence, right?

Yeah, right. You can go back to playing Motor Boat now.

5.9 The Market Isn't in Kansas Anymore

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PUBLICATION DATE: March 1, 2001

Verant Interactive (<http://www.verant.com/>) gets a lot of press for being the largest of the MMOGs with over 300,000 subscribers and 70,000+ simultaneous players for *EverQuest* (<http://www.station.sony.com/everquest/>). That certainly represents one of the most successful online games of all time and is nothing to sneer at.

However, would it surprise you to know that US-based *EverQuest*'s subscriber base is many times smaller than the world's largest? And that the MMOG with the world's largest subscriber and player base was developed and is hosted in South Korea, of all places?

Yeah, me, too; go figure. *Lineage: the Blood Pledge* (<http://www.lineagethebloodpledge.com/pr/>) is a medieval RPG developed by South Korean ISP NCSoft and is to be hosted in the US by their subsidiary, NC Interactive. As of January, 2001, *Lineage* claimed some 10 million registrations, peak usage of between 110,000 and 140,000 simultaneous players, 33% of the South Korean market and revenues of \$4 to \$5 million US per month. That figure would be wildly impressive if expressed in the South Korean Won, which trades at about 1,238 Won to one US Dollar.

I'm pretty clued in to the industry, but this one took me by complete surprise. I had real trouble swallowing those figures, even though I was aware that the Asian market for MMOGs, and RPGs in particular, is fairly large and growing. For example, *Ultima Online* locates nearly half of its shard server clusters in Asia, including several in South Korea. I was so skeptical of the *Lineage* numbers, in fact, that I started asking around to my friends in the industry, some of whom make trips to South Korea and Japan a couple times a year. What I learned from my friends is that the figures NCSoft released for *Lineage* are accurate and that these numbers are causing a land rush among Asian companies to get a game up on the Net.

For a parochial gal who has seen that American MMOG players will spend anyone into the ground in search for entertainment, this is weird beyond belief. The weirdness doesn't stop there; something I find utterly fascinating, probably because it is so different from the US MMOG culture that I am used to, is how *Lineage* players in South Korea access the game. They don't log in from home, as players in the US and Europe tend to do. No, the overwhelming majority of *Lineage* players log in from Internet cafés.

Think about that for a moment. Over 100,000 simultaneous players at peak hours, and most of them are logging in from a cyber-café. Who over here knew that South Korea had that many online game players in the first place, much less that many Internet cafés and chairs near computers? Heck, I'm not sure there are even 100,000 seats in Internet cafés in the US. Just to add to the discomfort, *Lineage* defies the current "3D 1st person or die" mantra; it's 10 million subscribers play on an isometric interface similar to that of *Ultima Online*.

As the title of this column implied, all of this shows that we aren't in Kansas anymore; the nature of the market is changing. Up to now, it has all been "the US this" and "The US that." Americans have a lot of disposable income and tend to spend it (savings account levels on a nationwide basis are at an all-time low), and also tend to be among the early adopters for new technologies. More Americans per capita can afford a home computer than pretty much any

nation in the world, not to mention \$10 to \$20 a month for Internet access. This makes it relatively easy to offer a game online aimed at US customers, with a reasonable expectation of some level of success. Thus, the press follows.

In Asia, outside of Japan, the impression is that things aren't in such good shape. Income levels are lower, hence disposable income is generally lower, and cutting edge technology in the home is less pervasive. The South Koreans, at least, have found a way around these limitations. If they don't own computers at home, provide a home for the computers. Bingo; we sneer at your mere 300,000 users, silly Americans!

It has certainly created a larger market for MMOGs than in the US. Predictably, conglomerates such as the \$40 billion behemoth SK are creating online game divisions and trying to cash in, and more of the smaller ISPs and telecom firms are joining in. Just a few days ago, Japanese telecom firm Pacific Century CyberWorks Ltd announced their entry into online games with a \$48 million cash and stock deal with U.S. company Circadence, in which PCCW would take over Circadence's somewhat moribund VR-1 developer unit (<http://www.vr1.com/>) to produce games for the Asian market.

Nothing strange about any of that; when a market is revealed, someone will try to exploit it. To have somehow, up to this time, missed these developments, which have important ramifications for the industry as a whole, is somewhat stunning. To paraphrase Jack Nicholson's character in the movie *A Few Good Men*, Don't I feel like the <expletives deleted>.

It also means that US developers, which until now have led the MMOG revolution, had better learn something about the differences in play between the US market and the Asian market, or their games are going to be relegated to the status of small backwater, good for a couple bucks when we get around to it.

And here I was just getting around to **learning conversational French**, (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D15.html>), after Infogrames acquired Hasbro Interactive.

5.10 Rape By Any Other Name

Volume 10, Issue 10

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The online game equivalent to forcible rape is a hot debate topic again.

Yes, it is PK/PD time again. On message boards and in email lists that focus on this sort of thing, there has been quite a lot of debate the past two weeks on Player Killing (PK) and Perma-Death (PD) in massively multiplayer games. Since MMOGs started making money, this has been a perennial subject on player message forums and pro design and developer lists, with plenty of verbal slap-downs and posts that begin with such left-handed politeness as "With all due respect, you're \$*&^ing nuts." Whenever it crops up, it is quite intense for a period of time, as the partisans for and against PK and PD grapple vocally with the ASCII equivalent of rusty

knives, chains and two-by-fours with a railroad spike through one end. Then it dies down again, as the participants retreat to their strongholds to heal up from the battle and prepare to charge in again.

This is not a topic that is likely to ever go away. If you've followed the discussions on these topics in the past, you know the current debate has been lively, to say the least. What brought about this latest iteration was an **article written for UK magazine Edge Online** (http://www.edge-online.co.uk/news_main.asp?news_id=3416) by pioneering online game designer/developer Dr. Richard Bartle, co-creator of the original MUD that started this whole online-only game industry in the first place. In it, Dr. Bartle proposes that games without PD cannot provide a sense of achievement in the long term, because they eventually max out their characters, get bored and leave. He compares it to a race in which the players are attached to a long bungee cord; the last few steps can be tough to make, but you eventually get there. Once you do, what then? He also brings up an old argument, that PK and PD add conflict to a game, and that conflict is a necessary part of any drama. Or, in his words, A game without loss is no game.

Before I go on, let me state that I've known Richard for about nine years, having been first introduced to him through Bridgette Patrovsky, who brought *MUD II* to the States when she was President of the Access 24 online service. The man is truly a pioneer and, for all that the Johnny-Come-Latelies like to send arrows his way (you can usually pick the true pioneers out of the crowd by counting the arrows sticking out their body), he is still one of the masters.

And shoot arrows they do, because it's easier to hit a target willing to stand on an outcropping and risk them. I find it ironic that many of the professionals taking exception with Dr. Bartle's views do it only in the safe confines of closed mailing lists, not on public boards where they, too, might have to dodge multiple castings of the Oaken Shaft of Piercing (+5). Whether you consider him right or wrong, The Good Doctor has never been shy about his views on PD and PK, and they have influenced (and continue to influence) a number of designers. Including a couple of those responsible for the first iteration of *Ultima Online*, which in the early days tended to resemble a newbie decimation factory more than a game.

Beyond all that, we should also remember that it is people like Bartle that have pushed the envelope and made these games possible at all. We don't have to agree, but it certainly pays to listen when they are attempting to push the envelope again.

And I do tend to disagree with Richard on the pure *need* for PD and PK when it comes to commercial games, i.e. for-pay MMOGs; a sufficiently robust design can handle conflict without them. The needs of commercial games that must support hundreds of thousands of subscribers, each of whom feels that their \$10 a month should give them a significant voice in the game and most of whom don't rank themselves as player killers, are far different than those of free MUDs aimed at a limited number of players. In a free MUD, you can get away with anything, because the objectives of the implementers are learning the ropes and trying to create art; in the final analysis, they don't really care if they have 100 players or 10,000.

In a for-pay game, the objectives have to be entertainment and *making money* (**editor: keep italics, please, and remove this notice**). You can sometimes create art and have it be entertaining, but not often, and a whole lot less often in a medium that is participatory, not just sitting in a chair and watching. And you can bet the people who shell out \$8 to \$12 million for development of a commercial MMOG damn well want a chance at getting their money back. Nonconsensual violence doesn't fit that bill. Just as people tend to avoid crime-ridden sections of a city, they tend to avoid crime-ridden online games, too.

You can still work PD and PK into a game, as long as it is consensual. To me, this debate all boils down to one point for commercial MMOGs, which Bartle edged around in his article with mentions of badlands where PK and PD could take place:

If it isn't consensual, it's rape.

In other words, if it isn't the player's choice to place the character's life and possessions in harm's way, he has no real control of the situation and when you're paying money, you want some control. Nothing like leaving the confines of a town and getting ganked multiple times by one or more players waiting to do just that. Most people don't find that entertaining, as *UO* showed; it is no coincidence that the retention level of that game stalled until changes were made to slow down the efficacy of PKs, nor that there was a leap in retention after they were implemented.

All the other issues pertaining to keeping the player entertained — achievement, growth of character, badlands with more challenge and reward, what have you — are design issues. If your MMOG has interesting beginning and middle games, but nothing for the high-level character, of course they will eventually leave, whether PK/PD is there or not.

So, really, it comes down to a lack of interesting design elements throughout the game for all levels of players, not some visceral need for PK and PD. Conflict doesn't have to be life-threatening to be interesting, nor does loss have to be loss of life, limb and/or property. Conflict has to have a greater meaning or it is just useless, tiresome slaughter. In other words, just plain PK and PD, in and of themselves, lack the ability to create meaningful context.

What do I mean? Well, were the bad guys in *North by Northwest* chasing and trying to kill Cary Grant just to sell his clothes on eBay? Of course not; he knew something about them, they wanted that knowledge to die with him and *he didn't know what it was he knew*. That made for suspense as he continually looked over shoulder to see if the bad guys were coming. Nor did Humphrey Bogart kill to acquire the travel papers in *Casablanca*, or try to auction them off to the highest bidder; when the time came, as the vultures began to close in and the temptation to use them for his personal gain was strong, he gave them away to promote a higher good.

That is context; it gives actions a meaning beyond I rOxXoR U, d00d! What would give more excitement to a game session, dodging PKs just because they exist, or dodging them because you have volunteered to deliver food to a starving village down the road? One conflict is chosen for you, without your consent; the other you have chosen because it gives meaningful context to

your action. One is dangerous as hell and entertaining; the other is dangerous as hell and a pain in the butt.

Which one sounds more fun to you?

5.11 Told Ya

Volume 10, Issue 11

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This is both a kind of "I told you so" and yet another lesson in the dangers of ignoring history. You'll see why later in the column, and it won't be for the reason you think.

If you'll harken back six months (yes, I know, that's more like three years in Internet time), you'll remember that I wrote an opinion about the market chances of Wolfpack's **upcoming MMOG, *Shadowbane*** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D23.html>). You'll also remember that some rabid *Shadowbane* fans — you know, all those people who have never played the game because it doesn't exist, but like it anyway — filled my mailbox so overflowing with **love letters and approbation** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D27.html>).

It now is starting to appear that those loyal fans that have never played the game they most love may remain just that, something of a *Romeo and Cyberet* unrequited love story. As we go forward, please bear in mind that this falls into the realm of speculation, for reasons that will soon become apparent.

In mid-February, arcadian del sol of Lum The Mad first broke the rumor (<http://www.lumthepad.net/news/1744.php>) that **Take 2 Interactive** (<http://www.take2games.com/public/frameaset.jhtml>), an equity owner in Gathering of Developers Games and publisher of record for *Shadowbane*, was dropping it from the list. Naturally, this caused a bit of a twitter among all those fans, many of whom, interestingly, assumed that the first reports were true, even before Wolfpack had an opportunity to respond. This was either an excellent example of the fickle nature of online gamers, or these fans, which had regular contact with Wolfpack on message boards, had some reason to accept the rumor at face value.

This kind of thing happens all the time in this industry, so normally I would just wait for some further news. This attitude of doomed acceptance among the fan base got me interested, however, so I started nosing around for confirmation. The normally vocal Wolfpack was strangely silent about the rumor, and who could blame them? Rumor is as rumor does and all that. However, no comment, after many months of going out of their way to be as vocal as possible about what was going on, only lent credence to the rumor in the minds of the fans. So I began checking various other info sites, but none had any further information. It began to look like just another one of those things that seems to spring full-born out of nowhere, only to die soon thereafter.

Then, in the normal course of business interaction with colleagues, four people with reason to be in the know on this issue confirmed that they, too, had heard the rumor, and all from different sources. One of these informants is someone I've known for over a decade and I trust this person's word explicitly.

OK, so now, out of the blue, I have second-hand, hearsay confirmation of the rumor from four sources. Lots of rumors based on second-hand information get printed in newspapers every day (Remember the initial stories about Watergate, or Drudge's break about Lewinsky?), but that isn't the same as having it confirmed first-hand, i.e. from Wolfpack, GoD or Take 2. So I dropped a line to J. Todd Coleman and Sean Dahlberg, Wolfpack's VP of Sales and Marketing and the Internet Relations Manager respectively, and asked them. I also dropped a line to GoD Games PR contacts, as listed on their Web site.

Wolfpack's Coleman responded pretty quickly with "Once again, it isn't our policy to comment on rumors." If any significant changes in our publishing arrangements arise then we'll make a public announcement to that effect. OK, fair enough, although it did smell a bit like he was setting things up for an announcement later. GoD's PR people didn't even bother to respond with that much.

At this point, I decided to just let the matter sit; it was pretty obvious I wasn't going to get anything approaching a first-hand confirmation and I was just a tad uncomfortable going with what I had. It was tempting to go with it anyway, but I wanted at least a hard fact or two to back it up.

On March 13, those facts arrived. Lum posted **new information about the issue** (<http://www.lumthemad.net/news/1805.php>), noting that retailers were being asked by Take 2 to delist the game and stop taking pre-orders. This is a pretty good indicator that one of two things has happened:

- 1) The product was pulled from pre-order because the ship-to-retail date had slipped past the Christmas selling season, or;
- 2) The product was delisted, i.e. no longer to be published.

Much speculation about the future of *Shadowbane* ensued (<http://wire2k.phpwebhosting.com/wwwthreads/showflat.php?Cat=&Board=comments&Number=5757&page=0&view=collapsed&sb=5&part=>) and, as of the date of this writing (March 17), still no definitive word has come from Take 2, GoD or Wolfpack. At this point, either 1) or 2) is as likely as the other. One has to wonder, though: if 1), slippage, is the reason, why the information embargo? Curious, indeed.

And this is where the "I told you so" history lesson comes in. No, it has nothing to do with my *Shadowbane* column from last year and everything to do with my constant refrain that the people entering the online games industry refuse to learn a damn thing from it's history until it bites them on the butt.

At a conference in San Francisco in September 1997, I sat on a panel about the future of online games with, among others, GoD head-honcho Mike Wilson, at that time not yet a Todd Porter coup d'etat victim at start-up Ion Storm. At the time of the conference, Wilson was fresh off his major success for id Software, the innovative marketing of *Quake* products that created huge sales numbers. He was getting plenty of personal press and, not unusually for the computer game industry's version of the nouveau riche, was a bit full of himself. Granted, he had some reason to be so.

One question asked of the panelists was who would succeed or fail in online games in the next five years. My opinion was that the big publishers of retail and console games wouldn't be the initial winners. They'd try and fail, as online games and especially MMOGs were outside their core competencies. So, because online games were both a product and a service, the people and companies that then had experience in both developing them and then running them after launch would be the sure winners, in some form or another. At that point, Wilson leaned toward a microphone and said, The winners will be companies like ours, who know how to develop top games.

Being ever the shy wallflower, I immediately replied, You don't know what you're talking about. Companies like yours will try and fail; then you'll hire the people with experience to fix your mistakes. That garnered me a half-grin and a shake of the head from Wilson. It was the first and last time we've interacted on the issue.

So here we are, three and a half years later, and we all know what happened. After entering the market and getting smacked around by their own inexperience, especially on the service side, the big publishers like EA, Sierra and Sony wised up. They are currently preparing for the future by acquiring the experienced online game developers or picking them clean of experienced employees. History repeats itself again, and it is getting boring to watch.

Meanwhile, Wilson and GoD are either on the verge of aborting their first real attempt into the commercial online game market space, or learning the lesson that making successful Retail Hybrids like *Quake* means nothing when it comes to developing and servicing games for the commercial online market. Either way, all I can do is give a half-grin, shake my head and say:

Told ya.

5.12 Rearranging the Deck Chairs

Volume 10, Issue 12

PUBLICATION DATE: April 5, 2001

If you follow the industry at all, by now you've aware of what former employees are calling the Black Wednesday Massacre. On March 21, Electronic Arts, apparently bleeding money from the EA.com online games operation and having recently acquired 150 new employees via the pogo.com buy-out, slashed around 200 jobs, including 85 at *Ultima Online* developer Origin Systems and some 40 at the former Kesmai Corporation offices in Virginia. That 200 number is the official figure; insiders say the damage was greater and that more carnage is to come.

In the process, EA also shuttered one of the most highly anticipated MMOGs in the industry, *Ultima Worlds Online: Origin*, also known as The Game formerly known as UO2. Last year I picked UWO:O as a **sure bet to be a winner** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D39.html>). Silly me; I should have added, If it is released. And let me cover some bets right now by saying that *Anarchy Online*, another game I picked as a probable winner and currently in testing, seems to have some design flaws in the architecture and game systems that may limit its popularity (CYA Alert! CYA Alert!).

Just to round out the insanity, as I write this column, Infogrames is in the process of releasing the entire Hasbro Interactive Dungeons and Dragons Online MMOG Team in Austin, some 22+ people. The Austin online game community has thus suffered the loss of about 107 jobs in one short week, going from the MMOG Mecca to a wasteland of lost developers. Ouch.

Quite aside from the folly of releasing a couple hundred experienced online developers from your online effort and back into the marketplace, one has to wonder where EA, Infogrames and, indeed, the entire industry, is heading. On the verge of the true Internet online gaming revolution, we seem to be bucking for the Mass Market and pulling back from the one model that actually makes money, the massively-multiplayer subscription games. I can understand why; it is scary for a publisher to contemplate spending \$10 to \$12 million to launch an MMOG in an industry used to spending maybe \$4 million to ship a solo home game to the retail shelf (not to mention all the projects that have \$1 to \$2 million spent on them and which never ship). It would scare me, too.

However, when you consider the upside to these games, that even a moderately successful one such as *Ultima Online* can gross well over \$20 million a year and contribute \$8 to \$10 million to the bottom line, year after year after year development of one or two seems like a no-brainer to me. And if you garner a hit such as *EverQuest*, with 360,000 monthly, loyal subscribers, hoo boy! The annual meeting is in the Caribbean, kids!

But, no; the Holy Grail is the Mass Market consumer. Unfortunately, you aren't going to Caribbean on the backs of the Mass Market consumers, simply because there is no business model. The banner ad market is in a shambles and Mass Market consumers won't pay for content. Maybe someday they will, but no one knows when, how or why. Naturally, this is a signal to the industry to avoid money-making MMOGs and develop money-losing Mass Market online games. Eh?

Concerning MMOGs, I tell the industry now what stock analysts are telling jittery investors:

The time to buy is *now*; it's never going to be cheaper to get in.

For those waiting for broadband to kick off the Mass Market spending spree, as if that transport technology were some sort of business model, I urge the industry to consider some key facts concerning online gaming over the next five to ten years:

KEY FACT #1: This is a marathon, not a sprint.

Of the world's population of about 6 billion, only about 400 million are Internet-connected. Over 5 billion people: That's a boat-load of potential gamers who haven't even connected up yet. It seems likely that at least another billion of them will connect up in the next five years. That's over triple the users we have now, and should represent at least a doubling of annual online gaming subscription revenues.

What that means is the people who get in now, create loyal customers and internal knowledge bases about how online game development is done, have a better chance to be the big winners later on down the line. That also means having the will to compete over the long term and a willingness to spend some money.

If you don't, then the few companies that are spending now, such as EA and Sony/Verant, win by default.

KEY FACT #2: We aren't building the games people want to play online.

From experience, we know that about 10% of any connected population is potentially willing to pay for some kind of game-related content; the trick has always been to figure out what that content is and provide it.

We've had OK, but not overwhelming, success at doing that. According to industry, some 4 to 6 million consumers world-wide buy most of the console and PC games sold; they are the same people most likely to pay subscription fees for online games. Inside, we call these folk the Hard Core. Of the Hard Core group, we've only managed to get about 680,000, or a little over 10%, to pay for MMP online games regularly, although something closer to 1.4 million, slightly over 20%, have actually tried them on for size.

This should tell us that A) we aren't building the online games that even most of the Hard Core group wants to play, and, B) we certainly aren't building games that attract the next 20% of the market, the Moderate player, who is the consumer most willing to move up into the Hard Core and spend more money online.

In other words: Anyone with two active brain cells, an ability to learn from the mistakes of others and some development money is in a position to make a killer MMOG.

Of course, everyone seems to be waiting for broadband, so they can build products more likely movies and TV that will appeal to the sainted Mass Market. The problem with that is:

KEY FACT #3: There won't be a mass market for online gaming until it is far easier to connect and play.

In case anyone didn't notice, the market for PCs is down. Way down. Like, lower than whale snot down. Looking at a chart of PC manufacturer stock prices is like looking at a portrait of a

man jumping off a cliff. The question is, why? After all, we haven't near reached the saturation point for PCs, even in the US.

My opinion on this is two-fold:

1. **PC hardware and the Windows OS are still just too clunky, bug-ridden and difficult for most people to use.** Replacing a video card or hard drive may be easy to you and me, but to most people it's a hassle. And software instability: Nothing irritates me more than having Windows crash on me, then having to stare at Scan Disk for several minutes, all the while reading Microsoft's cynical message about how I should always shut the computer down properly to avoid having to read the message again.

The plain fact is, our hardware and software is still too weird and unstable for over half the households in the US, much less the rest of the world. Those of us dedicated to building and/or playing games, we are quite willing to learn what we need to know. Other people look at the situation and say, I don't have the time or inclination to be that pissed off, thanks.

2. **PCs and software still cost too much.** \$500 to \$1,000 for a decent PC is still too much to spend for most people. Beyond that, consumers are not stupid and understand that PC makers, peripheral makers and software developers keep playing the Upgrade Shell Game on us. You know the drill; if you'll just spend a few hundred dollars to get the latest video card, OS, motherboard or completely new system, all the problems we created for you previously will be fixed. Honest. Really. No kidding, this time we got it figured out.

Until the equipment and software needed to get online and play is simpler, more reliable and cheaper, growth in the Mass Market sector will be slower than everyone would like. And there is no telling when this transformation is likely to happen.

It may be that relatively low cost next generation video consoles, such as the PS2 and the Xbox, are the first step. The problem with set-tops and game consoles for online play is that they lack the means to effectively connect individuals with each other. A huge chunk of online game play is about socializing with friends, guild/teammates or whoever happens to be in the immediate area of the game. Without a keyboard, that's kind of tough. When voice over data technology is shipped with the boxes, the problem is solved, but that is going to take years.

So what do we end up with out of all this? A Mass Market that won't arrive for about five years and which will probably show up without a business model. On the other hand, we already have a money-producing market for subscription-based MMOGs that is still wide open. It is a choice between definitely losing money now on the hope of making more later, or risking money now in a market niche that is proven to produce revenue.

The choice seems pretty simple to me; why doesn't it look that way to the publishers?

5.13 This is the end this is the end, my friend.

Volume 10, Issue 13

PUBLICATION DATE: April 19, 2001

This is a tough BTH to write. After over two years as part of the Happy Puppy pack, this will be the last column for this site.

They've been two pretty damn good years. Ninety-six columns worth of ideas, opinions, responses to reader email and the occasional dogfight with various and sundry special interest groups yeah, it's been fine. I've thoroughly enjoyed myself and I'm sad to see it end.

The reason for it is no secret. The Globe, parent company of Happy Puppy, has been hit as hard as everyone else by the crash of the banner advertising market. However, unlike some large game news sites, which have parents with deep pockets to keep them going, The Globe stands alone, a cyber-version of Horatio at the bridge, if you will. The company has held things together better than most over these last six months, preserving 200 jobs while others folded the tent completely and laid off hundreds.

But even the good guys sometimes have to bow to the inevitable. They've recently had to lay off some of the staff and tighten the belt, which is a whole lot better than just shutting down. This is not a happy time to be a content site; at a time when mere survival is counted as a victory, they survive.

But not so this column, unfortunately. Part of the belt-tightening means a certain freelance column must go. And truth to tell, I can't say I disagree; when you're trying to ensure the company's survival long-term, you do what you must and cut costs where you have to. When you're laying off your friends, it's kind of hard to justify paying people like me to continue writing.

I haven't decided if the column will reappear elsewhere. As some readers are aware, BTH has been around since April 1997, first on the old GamerGals site, then on Gamebytes in mid-1998 and then Happy Puppy since February 1999. I wasn't paid to write the column until Happy Puppy picked it up; it began as most volunteer efforts do, a labor of love. Well, that and the sick, twisted need to see my own opinions in print somewhere.

So it may be that I'll decide to move the column to a new site; once you're addicted to the written word, it's tough to give it up. Meanwhile, as I croon an old Doors tune on the way out the virtual door, I feel compelled to make a few predictions and general comments about online games:

- You will be paying for content.

The glory days of the Internet land grab and tons of free stuff is over. The banner ad market might come back, but not for years, if ever. In the meantime, if you want decent content from all but the two or three biggest corps with the deepest pockets, the only way content sites are going

to be able to afford to give it to you is A) if they can get companies to pay for it, or B) if *you* pay for it. And lord knows you guys are cheap bastards.

In other words, folks, the free ride is over. Start deciding what you will and won't pay for and be prepared to vote with your pocketbook. And as they say in politics, Vote early and often.

If you don't, you'll end up with Microsoft, Sony/Verant and Electronic Arts determining what online games you will and won't be offered. And you'll bitch to high heaven about, but only have yourself to blame.

- "They were extremely arrogant, considering how little they knew about the digital world."

That quote from Jim Choate of SF Gate referred to those who worked at the late and unlamented NBCi, but it could apply to the front office at just about every game publisher now attempting to produce online games. As a group, I've never met more people who knew less about their business, or were less willing to listen.

The arrogance doesn't slow them down one bit. One reason there isn't a lot of compelling content on the Web right now is that the people running these companies haven't a clue who the customer really is and what he'll pay for. They all aim for the legendary Mass Market, even though there is no business model there yet and probably won't be for years. On the other hand, the one model that actually works and makes money, subscription gaming, is treated like a pariah. Cause, you know, it takes real development money to make one of those things. This is just another case of pennywise and pound-foolish.

What that quote really means is: You can expect some high profile failures, both in games and game companies. And the people who will pay the price are the ones who always do, not the executives making the decisions, but the people in the trenches trying to make it work.

- Game publishers are waiting for broadband to revolutionize online games by being able to shove more data down the pipe. This is a HUGE mistake.

The senior executives at game publishers talk about how broadband will allow richer content, more options in what to download to then player, a cooler overall experience, yadda yadda yadda. Broadband isn't being treated like a data transport mechanism, but as a business model. You know, make the Internet more like TVs and movies.

That's all just so much useless buzz-meistering. It reminds me of 1994, when everyone thought banner advertising was *it* and rushed to make it a reality. I remember pointing out to an investor in 1996 that over 95% of banner advertising wasn't bought, but was bartered between sites with no actual dead presidents changing hands; eventually, real money would have to be spent or the house of cards would have to crash. He gave me a look that clearly said, Shut up, you fool, someone might hear you!

It took a while, but the house did come down. Now we're seeing the same kind of hype machine con game with broadband. What you don't hear them talking about is that over 94% of the world (including the US) has no access to broadband options and won't for a long time, that broadband companies are going out of business (especially DSL providers), that the more people that get broadband in the home, the worse the Internet reacts to it because of all those additional data packets being transmitted and that most of the problems with online entertainment today can be solved by simply designing products around the Internet's known limitations.

Apparently, that makes too much sense. Or rather, it makes a certain perverted kind of sense. When it comes to stocks, people buy on rumor and sell on results. Thus, stock options are worth more to executives in the short term if they can create the buzz, then sell before the results can affect the price. In case you didn't notice, a lot of people with nice stock options made money by selling out before the crash hit. Not the average employee, of course; s/he's probably looking for a job right about now.

Another thing you don't hear these people talking about is the simple fact that the Internet is not TV and there is no reason to think that anyone willing to buy content wants it to be. Certainly gamers don't; gaming is participatory, watching TV is passive observation. Gamers want to participate, not watch. It's that simple.

So instead of treating broadband like a business model that will automatically confer riches upon the unworthy but clever businessperson, the winners in broadband gaming will be those who use it to increase the options for participation, not observation. If you want an example or two of participation versus observation, just look at the fanatically loyal communities that spring up around MM/PW games that *aren't even available yet*.

Sounds simple enough, right? It probably makes too much sense.

- Massively multiplayer, persistent worlds will continue to be the money-maker in online games for at least four years.

The largest sites around can still make money with banner ads, but everyone else is going to have to have compelling subscription content to survive. Right now, the best kind of subscription content is that which offers persona growth, ownership of items, houses, etc. over a period of time, and offers multiple means for participating with others. That means a persistent world of some kind.

You can take it from there.

- Wireless gaming is going to be big six or seven years from now.

Wireless is the other big buzz-a-roo market today, with many entrants to the field, but it is nowhere near ready for prime time. Heck, the developers and device makers can't even agree on standards. Expect plenty of short-term failures and good long-term growth.

In fact, I expect that eventually wireless gaming will be at least an order of magnitude more profitable than PC online gaming (and consoles, when they take off). Before that happens, wireless devices have to accomplish at least two things: some interface and coding standards, and bigger and more capable display screens and input methods.

Once it does happen, wireless will be massive. PC online gaming won't go away and will, in fact, continue to grow, but wireless will be King someday. However, I expect that someday to be at least six years from now. That's about how long it will take the manufacturers to get the better devices on the market and for enough of them to be purchased to make a difference.

- *Shadowbane* will survive.

Shadowbane was a self-funded effort at the start. Losing Take Two as a publisher is a set-back for them, not a killer. As long as they are within a year of launching, I expect them to go live in some way, shape or form.

How well the game will do, subscription-wise well, **my opinion on that** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D23.html>) is well-known. Which is no doubt why the fanatically loyal, haven't-yet-played *Shadowbane* fanbase (I'm not a *Shadowbane* character, but I play one on the Web) would love to nail me to a board and parade me through town as an example to others. They keep confusing market analysis and opinion with she hates us, she does!

So let me **set the record straight again** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D27.html>): I don't hate *Shadowbane* and I don't hate Wolfpack. In fact, I rather admire their will to succeed and I wish they would, if only to grow the industry. I just happen to think they've chosen the hardest, rudest, least forgiving, problem-filled niche in MMOGs to make a run at and therefore the chances of *Shadowbane* being a runaway hit aren't good.

And Wolfpack may love their fanatics now for the way they help create buzz about the game, but just wait. The first time Wolfpack doesn't come through, for any reason, they can expect the vocal ferrets among the base to toss them some **love notes of their very own** (<http://www.happypuppy.com/features/bth/bth%2Dvol9%2D27.html>).

I've stated before in public and I do so again; if I'm wrong and the game *is* a hit (meaning at least 100,000 confirmed, *paying* subscribers), I'll eat crow publicly. If I don't resurrect BTH somewhere else, no doubt Wolfpack will give me space on their Web site to abase myself on the Altar of Flagellation, as I munch unseasoned fowl.

- A final loose end:

I never did get around to looking at *Atriarch* by WorldFusion (<http://www.atrarch.com/news/news.html>); there was just too much time spent on the road between last October and today and I was never able to free up the time to go to their offices, as I had planned. I wish I had taken the time, because I certainly like the way head honcha Serafina

talks about the industry, the players and the *Atriarch* game design. Without having seen the game or played it in its current state, I can only say; the right attitude is there.

And so we re done, for now. At some point, Happy Puppy will want me to quit sucking their server resources through the bth@happypuppy.com address, so if you need to reach me, do so at jessica@mm3d.com.

Don t be strangers now, y hear?

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