COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

SPACE INVADERS

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Wing Commander look like Asteroids

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Star Wars Galaxies
Independence War II
Bridge Commander**

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space in Westwood's
EARTH AND BEYOND

"Attack me.
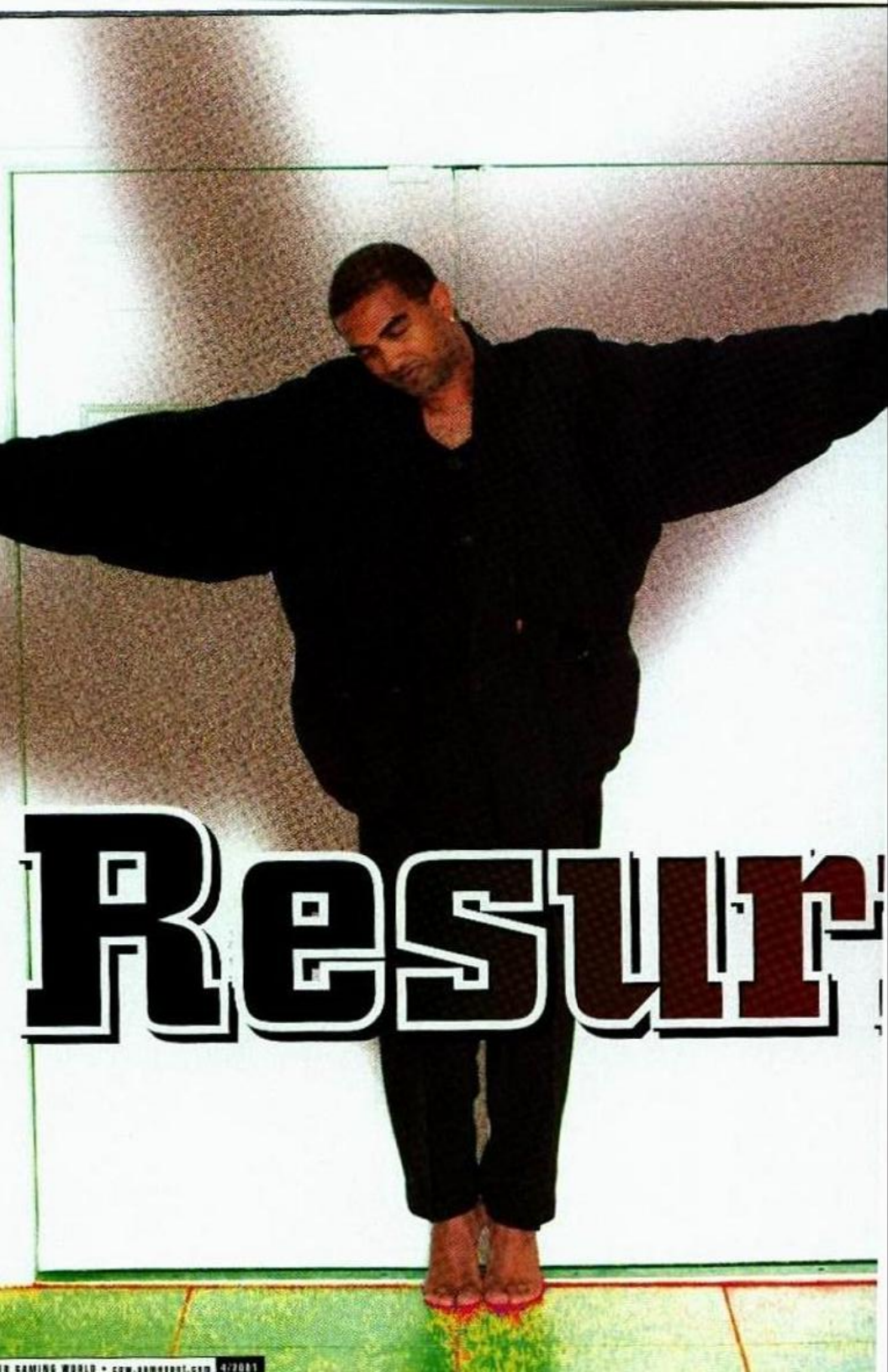I can deal with it!" —Derek Smart on Derek Smart

Black & White
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The Quake III Movie
Behind the scenes of *Sidrial*

Resurrection

"Do you know how hard it is to turn the other cheek?"

Derek Smart is looking straight at me. He's getting fired up.

"If you're not on the receiving end, you don't know what it's like. I can make one simple post, about a screen-shot or something, and these idiots will start a flame war for weeks. I don't f***ing get it."

I didn't f***ing get it either, frankly. Which is why I now find myself sitting in a bagel shop in Sunrise, Florida, face to face with one of gaming's most legendary and bizarre figures. Like someone gawking at a car accident, I had needed to meet this guy.

And sitting in this restaurant, listening to his story, I realize that I am getting a lot more than I bargained for.

Long before John Romero and DAIKATANA came along, Derek Smart was *the* gaming biz whipping boy. To this day, his name is one that inspires derision, mockery, and sometimes outright hatred in his detractors, and his game—an ambitious, independent space sim called BATTLECRUISER 3000AD—remains one of the most notorious projects in the history of computer gaming.

It would take a Stephen King-sized novel to do justice to the fiasco surrounding Derek Smart and his game, so here's the CliffsNotes version: BATTLECRUISER 3000AD was in development for about seven years (starting in 1989), went through three publishers, accrued major hype (including a *CGW* cover in 1994), only to be shipped, inexcusably, by Take Two in 1996 in an unplayable, buggy beta form, without a manual.

But if all we had was a lousy game on our hands, there would be no story here, or at least, not one we haven't heard a million times before. The real story is the man himself—Derek Smart, whose notoriety, like Dennis Rodman (to whom some people liken him) or Howard Stern (to whom he likens himself), comes not from *what* he does but from who he is and what he says.

Smart boasted of BATTLECRUISER's greatness for years and thus (like Romero) set himself up for excoriation and ridicule following the game's disastrous release. But where most developers might have vanished from the scene—or taken their lumps in silence—Smart did what public figures rarely do: He fought back. Viciously. Proud, stubborn, and fiercely driven, Smart refused to be the fall guy, and he publicly battled anyone and every-one—Take Two, the press, and gamers themselves—who tried to lay the blame on him. And that's when his real trouble started.

What started out as the dream of a lone, unknown programmer mushroomed into the longest, most savage, and most ridiculous flame war this industry has ever seen, with Smart as much at fault as anyone else. Even now, *five years* after BATTLECRUISER's release, the game is not completely dead. Type Derek Smart's name into an

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The second coming of Derek Smart is near.

The most notorious man in gaming sits down to discuss his life, his game, and his mission. By Jeff Green

Internet search engine, and you'll see strands of it all over. There are websites dedicated to ridiculing him, and guys who follow him around mercilessly, pouncing on every post he makes. Any thread that Derek Smart appears in, regardless of the original topic, devolves into a Derek Smart flame war.

And through it all, there's Smart himself. Still combative, still pissing people off. Why does he bother? And isn't he ever going to learn to just *shut up*?

Lox, Bagels, and a Side of Rage

Derek Smart can't stop talking. His bagel and lox will sit on his plate, uneaten, while I fill two 60-minute tapes with his words.

"Nowadays you go online and it's not people talking about the game [BATTLECRUISER] or how to make it better. You go online and it's all 'Derek Smart's an a**hole.' It's just *so disturbing*. I mean, sometimes I go on there and read something and I just get *depressed*. I mean, who are these people? There's all these guys who actually punch my name into a search engine to find out where Dsmart is posting, and go on there and totally rip me. You can walk down the street, and if someone is harassing you, you can call the cops. Online it's a totally different story."

The exasperation shows on his face. He's not speaking loudly, but he is speaking forcefully.

"I got a god complex that took over"

DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE, PART 1 One of the more notorious ads for BATTLECRUISER 3000AD, circa 1995.

"My concern is for the newbies who go online and just ask a question about my game, and they get ripped. Okay, fine, attack *me*. That's cool. I can deal with it. I've been beat up, tossed around for so many years. I'm immune to it now. Yeah, I get pissed every now and then and go over the top, but I can take it. I'm used to it."

Smart pauses to eat. I gently question whether he *can* take it. I suggest that this attitude might be what has kept his persecutors gleefully in pursuit of him all these years: They know they can get to him.

"Someone calls me an a**hole, and then when I respond, they say 'Oh, look! He called me an a**hole back!' Well, gee, duh, what do you expect? I'm not a 'take it' kind of guy. But I know my limits. I know how far I can go."

A Simple Plan

London, 1988. A 25-year-old computer consultant and self-taught programmer is getting obsessed with computer games. He's playing games like ELITE, ECHELON, and the STARFLIGHT series, and he starts thinking maybe he can create a game himself. He doesn't know his limits yet. He doesn't know how far he can go.

He puts together some ideas for what he calls "THE GAME"—the ultimate combination of simulation, role-playing, strategic combat, and more. Never mind that he has no game design or industry experience, he believes he can do this. He works on his ideas in his spare time, learning from books, and puts together a demo to show to members of the gaming community. The result: In May 1992, BATTLECRUISER 3000AD lands on the cover of *Computer Games Strategy Plus* magazine.

"It all went downhill from there," Smart says now. "All of a sudden I had to live up to the hype. I got a god complex that took over. Suddenly I was 'Derek Smart, the game developer.' But I was nothing, nothing, nothing close to a game developer at that time."

Smart keeps plugging away and in late 1993, he lands the first of a series of ill-fated publishing deals with 360 Pacific. The arrangement falls apart when the development drags and Smart becomes increasingly resistant to compromise. "People were saying to me, why don't you strip it down and make it more of an action game? Why don't you make it more like WING COMMANDER? But I was not in a hurry to release *a game*. This was my game. It was my world, and I was building it."

It *was* his world—until September 1996, when Smart signs a

EAT IT Derek Smart drives a Mercedes 500SL convertible, whether you like him or not.

deal that will change his life forever. The previous year, Take Two Interactive agreed to publish the game. Now they have had it. They force his hand. In April, Smart, who had always worked independently from his home in Florida, is forced to drive up to Take Two's office in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and work with a team of guys he doesn't know so the game can ship by Christmas. Come August, they're not even close. ("Jeff, it wasn't even beta yet," he sighs.)

But Take Two is fed up. They believe Smart will never finish the game. They tell him the game is shipping in October, finished or not, for a Christmas release. He's horrified and furious, and his frustration boils over. A huge argument ensues. Online legend has Derek attacking a Coke machine at this point, which he denies to this day (and an email from a former Take Two employee backs him up on this point).

Smart wants out. He will not be a party to the early release of his game. So on September 27, he makes the most painful decision of his life: He signs a mutual release giving Take Two the rights to the game, and then he gets in his car and drives back to Florida, defeated. And Take Two ends the nightmare by releasing BATTLECRUISER 3000AD in all of its pathetic, unfinished, undocumented glory.

For the next four years, Derek Smart—boastful, outspoken braggart, would-be designer of "THE GAME"—is roasted alive on the Internet and in the gaming press. But he doesn't do the one thing that everyone expects—he doesn't go away. Facing an avalanche of derision, he stands by his project. Without Take Two's consent, he starts patching the game. He settles with Take Two to get back the rights to BATTLECRUISER 3000AD, gives the whole game away for free over the Internet, and in 1998 rereleases the 2.0 version as a budget title through Interplay and two other publishers. And slowly, incredibly, he salvages the game's name. But his own name stays mired in mud.

Paradise Found

We leave the bagel shop, and Smart takes me on a mini-tour of his adopted home, Sunrise, Florida. It is a quiet, peaceful, open area comprised mostly of high-tech business parks and gated communities, built on former swampland on the outskirts of Fort Lauderdale.

Derek Smart, now age 38 years old, lives in a new home in one of these gated communities with his fiancé and his baby daughter. The house is not huge, but it's picture-perfect on the outside, and immaculate and tastefully decorated on the inside.

His home office, an open area right off his kitchen, resembles something out of one of his beloved space sims with its massive deck of electronic gear from which he

DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE, PART 2 Even that venerable old rag *CGW* fell prey to the hype, putting BATTLECRUISER on the cover in May 1994.

"I'm the guy who just won't die"

operates every aspect of his business, 3000AD, Inc. Smart sits down at his computer and shows me the infrastructure he's set up with servers, FTP sites, Web cams, and ICQ to keep in daily contact with the team working on his new game, BATTLECRUISER MILLENNIUM. (Yeah, that's right. There's a *new* game. And a massive-multiplayer one after that. See page 64 for details.)

In the first two minutes that we are seated, he fields a phone call from his support programmer, Peter Rushworth, in England, and then chats over ICQ with his tools programmer, Andrei Proskurine, in Moscow. Everyone on the team is employed on a work-for-hire basis. They live all over the world. They've never been in the same room together. And none of them has ever worked in the gaming industry.

"I love it," Smart says, "because I'm in control. I have a group of people I trust with my game. It's all about trust. Nothing else. I could go out and get an office space, hire from the tech businesses and universities around me, but I want to remain in a situation that I'm in control of. These are all guys who like me, who know what it is to want to do something because you want to do it, because you love doing it—not because you want to make money. They're not doing it for fame and fortune. They've all got regular jobs."

At this very moment, Derek Smart is happy. He's in his element. He is insulated. He is in his home, his office, working with friends he trusts. The nightmare of BATTLECRUISER 3000AD and those who won't let him forget it are far away.

Or are they?

"I have a confession to make," he says. "Sometimes when I get online, and it's quiet, and I see something that attracts my attention, I'll post just to piss these guys off. That's why I do it." He laughs. "Because I'm in a good mood that day, I go in there and I start trouble."

But why Derek, why? Why bait the guys who have tormented you so relentlessly?

"Because at the end of the day, they can attack me all they want, but I know who I am. I'm focused on my family and my game. And I'm doing the game that *I want to do*. I'll never falter. That's just not ever gonna happen. Beat me up, that's cool—but as long as I have breath, I'm gonna try to get to the finish line. I'm the guy who just won't die."

Survivor

I'm on the airplane heading back to California, and I'm thinking about everything I've heard. I take out a sheet of paper and start making a list of adjectives. Smart. Witty. Stubborn. Angry. Tenacious. Loyal. Thoughtful. Obsessive. Proud.

So go ahead—flame the guy. Try to piss him off. You'll probably succeed. But he's still here. He's got his family, his friends, his games, his fanbase, and above all, a frighteningly strong fighting spirit.

I'm the guy who just won't die.

You wanna take on Derek Smart? Go ahead. Make his day. He's waiting for you. CGW