



the people vs. DEREK

As the Battlecruiser saga reaches its end, is its developer the most hated man in gaming? Or is he the most misunderstood? You say you've never even heard of this game, or the stories about its creator? Read on....

BY JULIAN MURDOCH

Pull up a chair and listen to a tall tale. Once upon a time, we used to care about who made our games. We'd read about these people. We'd write about them. They'd actually show up and talk to us. They'd tell us about their games. We could even tell them what we liked and what we didn't like, and they sometimes listened. We're talking honest-to-God conversation.

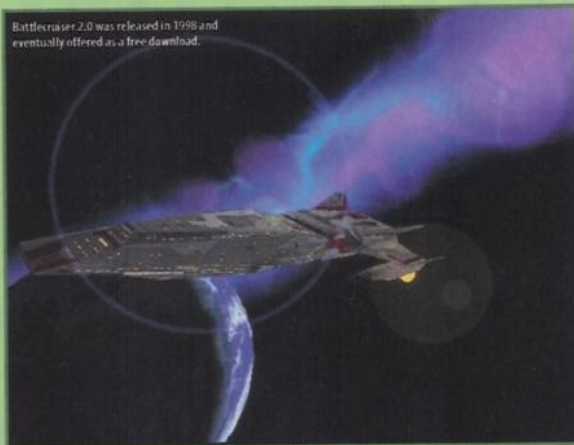
The most infamous and outspoken of this species was one Derek Smart, Ph.D. His exploits are legend, and it is our sacred trust to pass the legend down from generation to generation.



SMART

the people vs. derek smart

Battlecruiser 2.0 was released in 1998 and eventually offered as a free download.



In 1992, Derek Smart has an idea for a game. Or "THE GAME," as he's fond of calling it. THE GAME is *Battlecruiser 3000AD*, a sweeping space opera that puts the gamer in the command chair of an enormous, well, *Battlecruiser*. But unlike the *Wing Commander* series of the same era, this is to be no "hop in and shoot" arcade experience. This is going to be a *simulator*. "When I set out to develop this suite of games, I knew exactly what it is I wanted," Smart says. "I wanted a game that would stimulate my mind. A game that I wanted to play."

So Smart starts coding. He has no idea how to make a game, he just does it. He spends the next four years both developing *Battlecruiser* and telling the world about it (gracing the cover of this fine magazine along the way).

THE GAME finally emerges in 1996, and that's when the Legend really starts. Smart has signed a deal with Take 2 Interactive. They have their minds set on a Christmas release, but Smart refuses: The game is nowhere near ready, has yet to emerge from beta, and is undocumented. Take 2 insists. So Smart walks off the stage, signs away the rights, takes his marbles and goes home. Take 2 sticks a CD of what they have in a box and drops it into the market. It's essentially unplayable. All that promise disappears overnight.

The world blames Smart. They heap bile

on him. Magazine editors and 13-year-olds with dial-up connections post their opinions on the Net. Most people—most rational people—would just move on.

Not Derek Smart. "That kind of attack is what strengthened my resolve," he says, looking back.



"someone brings a grenade to a firefight, i'll be the guy hoisting the nukes."
derek smart

That resolve leads him to sue Take 2, regain his rights to what will become a long-running franchise, and continue pursuing his dream. He patches. He releases manuals. He carries the torch.

"All that time, I was confident that there were others out there who shared my vision," he says. So he keeps at it.

At the same time, the Derek Smart flame wars become one of the most highly documented sports on the Internet. Smart, naked and unclothed, playing nobody but himself, enters into heated battles with mostly anonymous detractors. Bizarre accu-

sations and urban legends about Smart's online and offline behavior are updated daily. He beat up a Coke machine. He called the police on stalkers. He had the phone company tracing phone calls. He faked his Ph.D. He forged e-mails to make himself look like the victim.

At the peak of the crapstorm—in the middle years between that first release and the 2001 release of the sequel, *Battlecruiser Millennium*—the real game has nothing to do with space combat, graphics, and AI. For most of the world, the game is baiting Derek Smart.

"I've been playing the Derek game for over three years now, and it... never... gets... boring," posts one of Derek's most frequent anonymous adversaries, known as "shammers."

"It's like Pro Wrestling, a soap opera for white trash. Our game is a soap opera for computer game geeks. Wonderful stuff!"



In 2003 the *Battlecruiser* series was rebranded as *Universal Combat*.

Smart fights back. Daily. And he doesn't couch his opinions in politically correct PR dialogue.

"I can get down there in the dirt and belt it out with the best of them," he says. Smart loves a good fight, and he's good at it. "Someone brings a grenade to a firefight, I'll be the guy hoisting the nukes."

And the nukes fly. Even the most skeptical and unbelieving Internet philosophers give him credit for one thing: he's good at this.

"Smart never descends to incoherence in his public discourse. In this respect, he is far better than most Internet trolls," admits Phillip Scuderi, a journalist who's covered the Smart chronicles from the beginning. "But coherence is no sure sign of sanity; clarity no counterpoint to depravity."

Over time, his reputation as an online defender of his games and unabashed pistol-whipper of his enemies overshadows the games themselves. But Smart's dedication to his dream game and to his small but ferociously loyal band of followers never wanes. When he finally patches up and polishes *Battlecruiser* to his satisfaction, he does the unthinkable—he gives it away as a free download. He follows this with *Battlecruiser 2.0* in 1998, which he also ends up giving away to the fanbase. Next, he goes into a three-year period of near-constant development, lasting until the franchise re-sets with *Battlecruiser Millennium* in 2001 and the *Universal Combat* series that follows.

Throughout this period, Smart's sorties

into online forums remain animated and controversial. Whenever the discussion on a gamer site turns in his direction, he appears. (This leads to yet another urban legend: Utter his name thrice and he shall appear!) And his appearance often leads to the derailment of entire communities. He admits that, when a conversation piques his interest, "I post, and walk away in most cases leaving nothing but scorched Earth behind."

Shawn Andrich saw the Smart-bomb land at several game community sites he's managed over the years, most recently at GamersWithJobs.com. He couldn't stand it. Fearing a descent into madness, he banned Smart most recently after only a handful of posts.

"I've banned him from two different sites now," says Andrich. "If I ban him from a third site, I think I get a tote bag."

The Derek Smart story is about games, despite all the controversy. "Some people tend to forget one very, very important thing about me," he explains. "I am a gamer." And that's what's driven him to work, rework, re-

fine, and expand a single vision for 14 years.

But a Derek Smart game is not for the faint of heart. Every game in the *Battlecruiser* mythos is a complex flight simulator, tactical strategy game, and resource management challenge all rolled up in a dense interface. When you fire up *Universal Combat* (the *Collector's Edition* is the latest version), there's little question you are playing his game. When you open up the manual—because you ain't learning this one by feel—he's right there in your face:

"In this tutorial, unless otherwise stated, 'click' implies that you left-click using mouse button one. Yeah, it's the one on the left. Ingenious, isn't it? If you're not certain which button I'm talking about, stare at the mouse for a bit."

That's right. He's talking to you. You wanna play? You're playing on his terms. Unless you're a fan—a big fan—and you've got the patience of a mule and really, really want to play them, you're going to get frustrated pretty quick. This difficulty level, the unapproachability of his games, isn't a function of sadism; Smart wants the game to be complex.

"They're not—and never have been—for the typical gamer."

And he's going to keep making them that way, even as he moves away from the PC and on to his new projects, an original series of space games for the Xbox 360 called *Galactic Command*. He heads into this brave new world completely unafraid.

"What makes a man is not just his ability to stand strong but also his ability to get up when he falls," he says. And even then, the world will not see the last of Smart. Love him or hate him, Derek Smart will not go quietly into that good night. He'll keep making the games he loves.

"I turn 44 this year, and my guess is I'll probably be doing this until they turn the lights out and wheel my sorry ass out." ■

get your head in the game

If you're looking to take the *Battlecruiser* plunge for the first time, or want to reunite with your old *Universal Combat* friend, there's only one place you can look. Smart has signed an exclusive deal with Turner's GameTap service to distribute *Universal Combat Collector's Edition*. He joins other niche independent games such as *Sam and Max* and the latest *Myst* game, *Uru*.

But that's the end of the line. Smart's taking his dream to a different audience. Watch out, Xbox 360, here he comes.