

Developers are tasked with accurately scheduling their projects, but no matter how accurate they are, Murphy's law always enters the picture.

The Court Martial Candidates

THE PRESS. If this war were regulated, some members of the press would be on trial for treason — if you assume that they are on the side of the game player. The publishers need the press to get the word out on their games. The press need the publishers' ad dollars, as well as the game players' subscriptions. Most game players factor what they read into their buying decisions. Gaming magazines with years of experience and reader loyalty find themselves in the combat zone, trying to cater to both the publishers and the game players. Playing both sides against the middle is common practice for some press types. Certain members of the media will trash a bad game that everyone knows is bad, and hope that the next time they give a high rating to a truly bad game (from a publisher without purchases) that no-one will notice. Take a wild guess at what happens when a magazine assigns a sports game columnist to review a flight sim — an inaccurate review. With the number of game release blunders, grossly inaccurate reviews and previews, and hype without substance on the rise, game players have a hard time figuring out who to trust. What happens when a game is hyped for years based on countless reviews of previews, beta versions, and so on, and then game bombs because (a) it was plain bad or (b) it was released incomplete? The game player will find someone to blame, and will often forget that the press is at fault for generating inaccurate hype in the first place.

THE RETAILER. It isn't surprising that several publishers are either going out of business or peddling shovelware in order to make up for losses in big budget games. The retailing tactics amount to something short of outright extortion. It is becoming more and more difficult to put games on the shelves, especially for small publishers and independent developers who want to self-publish. There was a time when retailers made their money on gaming software from profit margins. Nowadays, they rely on big budget

publisher-funded marketing campaigns. Therefore, fewer games make it to the shelves. Those that do make it don't last very long because the retailer expects price reductions in order to move them and make way for the next best thing. If the retailer paid low cost for non-returnable inventory, this means that the retailer is stuck with the inventory and has to shovel it. When disgruntled game players return dud games, you would expect that action to ultimately affect the retailer-publisher relationship, right? And that if the retailer didn't sell duds, that publishers would cease producing them. Wrong. As long as publishers continue to pay retailers to put bad games on the shelves, this cycle will continue. The retailers must be thinking that if the publishers are going to peddle duds on their shelves, they may as well pay for the forthcoming downtime that those returns are going to cause.

Casualties of War

THE GAME PLAYER. Meet the warrior clan: the casual gamer, the hobbyist, and the anti-social misfit. With the exception of the third caste, who only use game-release mishaps as an excuse to behave badly online, this clan just wants to play games right out of the box. When a game player has to search the Internet for a patch that makes a new game playable, you know somebody is going to take the flak for it. What is a game player to do when a favorite publisher releases a game incomplete? The game player can start a war or threaten a boycott, but this practice has been going on for years and incomplete games are still the number one complaint among game players. The solution is not as easy as buying another game. If the game player is locked into a genre, for example, a flight jock who has never played QUAKE, then it compounds the problem. Publisher brand recognition is not what it used to be, but the damage is already done. In a choice between RED BARON II and FLYING CORPS GOLD, how many flight jocks relied on the Sierra name brand and ignored a better alternative in FLYING CORPS GOLD? Or games go only halfway. UNREAL is an awesome single-player game, but it has dismal Internet play. So, we all continue play-

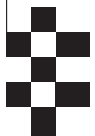
ing our favorite QUAKE II mods online. There isn't too much flak about UNREAL because we have the QUAKE alternative.

Let me give an example from personal experience. When my game, Battlecruiser 3000AD, was released incomplete by my publishers in 1996, there were no alternatives in that genre. So, the fallout was catastrophic and it's still going on to this day. There aren't that many choices, and when eagerly awaited titles don't live up to the hype or are released in a dismal fashion, it alienates the game players and places the developers under siege.

Developers, Publishers, Retailers, Press, and Game Players FIGHT!!

The Quality Assurance guys are seasoned vets who are paid to play games and break them. Period. However, there is always the possibility that a game will ship with known or unknown bugs. This is one reason why patches appear online before ten people have bought the game. A time comes when a decision has to be made. Publishers assume they don't have much choice when development schedules slip and there are millions of dollars at stake. Most often, they will ship the game incomplete, recoup some of their money, and hope that the game is good enough for game players to hang on to while the development team continues to work feverishly in order to fix the bugs and complete the game.

The advancements in technology which create the hardware and software cocktails prevalent in today's systems ensure that somewhere out there, a bug is waiting to surface. This, in itself, is quite different from shipping a game with known bugs that should've been fixed prior to release. I predict that in the coming months, especially with the ULTIMA ONLINE lawsuit, we will start to see game disclaimers the size of legal documents. Epic has already started the trend with their inbox notice acknowledging that there may be unforeseen problems in the boxed version of UNREAL. This is a step in the right direction, but one which I feel will be misused by some publishers as yet another loophole to shovel duds. One thing is certain, the war will continue to rage on. ■





It's Ready When it Ships

There's a war going on out there. It's a fragfest that involves: (a) publishers shipping games before they're ready, (b) developers taking flak for games released incomplete,

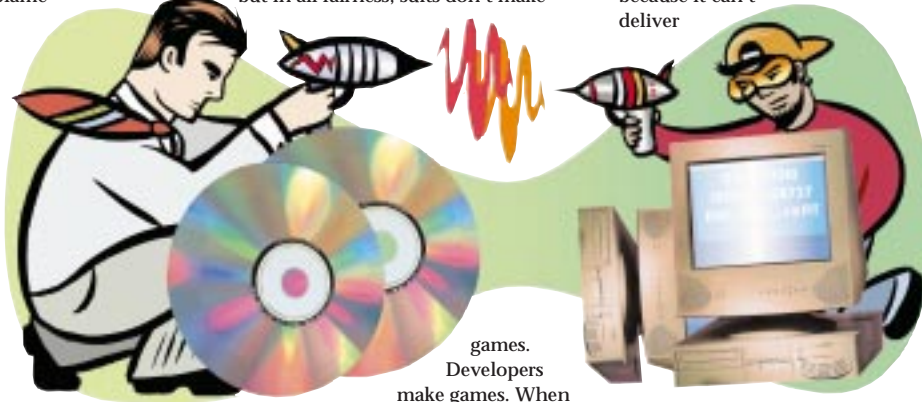
(c) retailers putting these duds on the shelves, (d) some members of the press giving inaccurate reviews and fueling the hype of games they know are released incomplete, and (e) game players who purchase said duds and then attempt to blame someone.

If the current trend of low-cost titles as well as high-end ones finding their way into bargain bins within weeks of shipping is any indication, one can assume that the monetary clout of game players will win, and that this practice of shipping incomplete games will cease. Right? Wrong. It's going to take a lot more than flame wars, lawsuits, and foul language to resolve this problem. So, what the heck is going on out there? Below, is my take on the situation.

The Usual Suspects

THE PUBLISHER. Your typical outfit is run by suits who ignore the fact that releasing a game incomplete is just plain fraudulent. Whether it's an innovative title or the next great shovelware, the game players are the last factors consid-

ered in a bean-counting exercise that peers at the bottom-line sales figures. No matter how long a game is in development, there will come a time when it will go in a box, even if it's not ready. Publishers are blamed for this mishap, but in all fairness, suits don't make



games. Developers make games. When a development team schedules a game to be completed in 18 months and takes large advances from publishers, what recourse does the publisher have, when 24 months and a bloated budget later, the game is still not ready? Where can a publisher draw the line between shipping an incomplete product and recouping at least a portion of its investment? In an industry where the release date of a title makes a world of difference, most games are subject to the Christmas Syndrome.

THE DEVELOPER. A producer from the publisher is usually tasked with ensuring that the publisher's interests are protected and that the team and game are

on track. No respectable development team plans to ship an incomplete game. There are a variety of situations that cause this problem as a result of games slipping and going over budget. It's a problem that is prevalent, and one which is not as easy to resolve as one would think. In-house developers have milestones and a regular paycheck. If they slip, heads roll, and the suits say "Ship it." All the developer can do at that point is ask, "When?" An outside team that is paid on milestones will find itself in a bind if a game slips because it can't deliver

that critical version in order to collect pay for that milestone. At the end of the day, what will the publisher do when they've invested millions of dollars in a title, and its schedule slips? Give the team more time and money? Fire the team? Cancel the project? Most times, the team is either given more time or the game ships incomplete. In some cases, team members leave under suspicious circumstances only to resurface elsewhere and repeat the same mistakes. When a game slips, the developer loses leverage with the publisher, and unless there's a bargaining chip tucked away somewhere, the game is going to ship if the publisher says so.

Derek Smart is the Designer/Lead Developer of BATTLECRUISER 3000AD, one of the most disastrous publisher-induced game-release-mishaps since OUTPOST. Outgunned, outnumbered, and unabashed, Smart is behind enemy lines doing what he does for fun: making industry deadbeats and anti-social misfits, very, very mad. You can flame him at dsmart@3000ad.com.