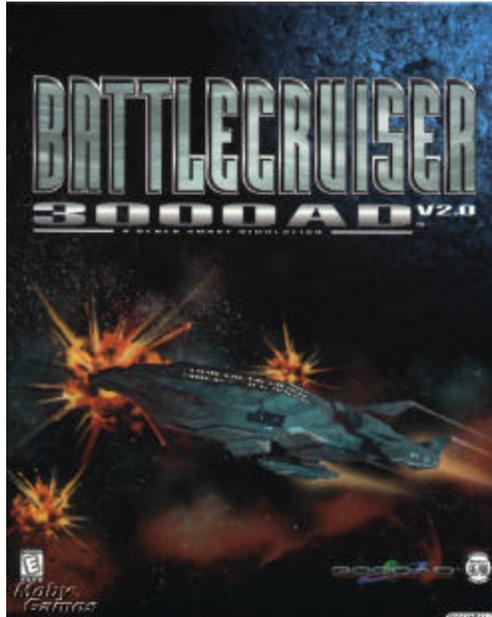


Case History: Battlecruiser: When Good Intentions Go Bad

Nicholas Fang – nfang@cs.stanford.edu - SUID 4495024



Introduction

Although there are many online discussion groups and communities on computer games that have sprung up as the Internet grows, veterans of the Internet know that the Usenet Newsgroups on computer games¹ are the most venerable. Over time, these newsgroups have developed a following of the most experienced, most vocal followers who get into heated debates over any issues that may come up in the computer gaming world. Among all of these issues over the years, perhaps none have caused more controversy than *Battlecruiser 3000 AD*, its sequels in the Battlecruiser line, and its chief developer, the vocal and cocky Derek Smart.

This is unsurprising, though, because in all respects, from design and development to testing and publishing, *Battlecruiser 3000 AD* has had one of the most twisted roads of any game ever created. Much of this is spurred on by Smart, who seems to attract and even relish controversy, both about his game and himself personally. Some consider him one of the most despicable villains on the newsgroups, some consider him one of the most wrongly vilified, and some are unsure what to think of him, but almost everyone would agree that he is probably the best known, most divisive personality ever to participate in an online gaming community.

All of this controversy is the result of a fundamental disparity between Smart's vision and dedication, which are immense, and his failure to make good game design and execution

¹ comp.sys.ibm.pc.games.*

decisions and his inability to execute realistic plans. This case history explores this disparity, the ongoing story of the *Battlecruiser* series (beginning with the original game, from conception through its tumultuous production to its troubled publication), as well as its controversial developer and the future of the series.

The Beginning - Inspiration

For a game whose first release was in 1996, whose latest versions were released between 1998 and 1999, was still being patched in 2000, and whose sequel is currently hot in the news, it might be surprising to find that the story of *Battlecruiser* actually began all the way back in 1988. The development cycle was so long, in fact, that the game was at the forefront of any discussion of vaporware, games with announcements of grand visions and promises but no working code to be seen.

It was during the end of that first year when Derek Smart played a game called *Jetfighter*, and while playing that game and subsequent ones, decided that he was interested in trying game development. In his own words, it was then when, “<he> knew that <he> wanted to write a game, not just any game, but THE GAME.”²

“THE GAME”, as he envisioned it, was a space and flight simulation that can only be described as ridiculously expansive. Its goal was to place the player in a dynamic universe and give them full control of an spacecraft, over systems such as “personnel control, engineering repairs, tactical command, cargo manipulation, communications, navigation, power allocation, etc...”³ It also allowed for attacks on other spacecraft, space stations, and planetary targets, organize invasions, handle diplomacy, technology, gather intelligence, and almost any other feature you can think of from any game in the space combat genre. In short, it promised an experience much like one might expect if they were running the Starship Enterprise in Star Trek, all in a living universe. The goal really was to try and do anything and everything.

Much of this design can be traced back to his original inspirations – his experiences with various games at that time and his personal background. *Jetfighter* provided the original impetus, giving him the original idea for a flight simulation. This was further reinforced by his experience with other games, of which he found the flight simulations from Microprose to be most compelling. This interested him originally in creating a detailed and accurate simulation of flight. This was transformed into a space simulation because of his, “a scientific and space research background.”⁴ The design began bouncing back and forth between different ideas from the genres of flight simulation, space simulation, role playing, and others prompted by his own interests in many types of games. Eventually, the design settled in a way that would be indicative of Smart’s philosophy on design throughout the project; rather than choosing any one of these fields and focusing, the game just included them all; everything from every genre.

² Smart, LoonyGames Guest Editorial

³ Battlecruiser 3000 AD v2.0 Product Info

⁴ Smart, LoonyGames Guest Editorial

Initial Development and Failed Deals

With this vision in mind, development began its tortuous path. Much of the first seven years of the development process will forever be a mystery to all but Derek Smart himself, but there are some things that are public knowledge through a combination of online posts, claims, and his own accounts of the development.

Right from the beginning, Smart set his sights high. Though this was before his Usenet days, he posted actively on AOL and CompuServe with continual claims of the greatness of his design and the game that was to be. Throughout his own personal account of the history of the game, he refers to his game as, “THE GAME,” in all capital letters, and it was clear that this is how he saw it. Every other game that came out (and there were a good number over the extended period of development of *Battlecruiser*) was not quite as good for one reason or another, or going to be eclipsed by *Battlecruiser* and its enormous load of features. He’d assert that those who would just wait for it to come out would be blown away, and that these other games that came out would be irrelevant.

Among the throngs of protractors and detractors of Derek Smart, very few would debate that his original vision would be great if it could be all be put together well and released as a working game. Nobody really argue that he was and is very ambitious and sets his sights high. Very few would even argue that he is dedicated to his vision and really puts forth a phenomenal amount of effort on his projects.

Where people start to differ in opinion is on is execution, and it is here that his lofty dreams and inability to cut features works to his detriment. For every advantage that he claimed that *Battlecruiser* had over all of the other games coming out over this time, they all had one trump card to play; they were finished. They had all been through a standard development cycle, been released, and were playable. *Battlecruiser*, on the other hand, was so much hype from Smart and was on the road to being king of vaporware. Many argued that Smart had spent so much time hyping this grand vision and posting this hype online that he had lost sight of the fact that none of it would come to pass if he didn’t start accelerating his development.

As time went on and more and more competing games were released, Smart fell into the trap that so many vaporware games do; *Battlecruiser* was sinking under the weight of increasing expectations. Not only was the original vision extremely expansive, but each new game that came out that improved on one aspect of gaming or another raised the bar on gaming a little bit. As Smart continued to claim that *Battlecruiser* would be superior, *Battlecruiser’s* development requirements got higher and higher; graphics became dated before they were even done and sound was obsolete before it was shown to the public. The need to keep up with current standards frequently happens to games way behind schedule and was exacerbated in this case by Smart’s grandiose assertions. His intent and his desire were clearly there. Even Bill Huffman, known to be one of his greatest detractors, admits that, “You have to hand it to Mr. Smart, he is persistent and determined...” The problem, many would argue, was the ability to deliver. Huffman continues, “...It’s just too bad that such fine attributes have been wasted producing such a sad example of gaming. I think it might point

out a major Mr. Smart weakness, a lack of objectivity that leads to lots of other problems including an inability to execute to expectations that he has set.”⁵

With such a grand vision and a project not heading anywhere, one might have thought it would be a good time to consider bringing in other people to help with development. In fact, Smart did consider this and he, “created a demo and posted it on the popular on-line services with a message for anyone interested to contact <him>.”⁶ Even so, he ended up deciding to continue developing himself; only Smart himself will know whether the people who contacted him would have been helpful to the project and if their skills matched what was necessary, but it seems clear that tackling such an ambitious project by himself could not have helped with the delays.

Even so, development continued and, thinking ahead to the day when the game would finally be completed, Smart began searching for publishing deals and the funding associated with them. Here, too, a difficult path awaited *Battlecruiser 3000 AD*. Dean Gordon perhaps said it best; beginning in 1991 Smart and the game, “<went> through publishers like they were Flinstone-chewable morphine.”⁷

The first few years were full of chaos and many, many false starts. Smart himself reveals:

In 1991, I contacted one publisher who had just terminated an agreement with another source of game products and who was excited about publishing my game it never panned out In early 1992, negotiations with another publisher never went beyond the non-disclosure agreement stage <then I contacted *Microprose*, and> I received a (*sic*) encouraging ding letter from an associate producer that stated a potential conflict between my project and a pending *Microprose* project. Undeterred, the search for a publisher willing to release the project continued with contacts with yet another major player, but that deal, again, never went beyond the non-disclosure agreement stage.⁸

Things were not going well in the early years. Even front-page exposure in magazines, successful at drumming up even more interest and expectations among the gaming community, wasn’t enough to get the publishers interested. Publishers would approach Smart and even go so far as to sign deals, only to back out when they felt that the game would not be a success.

After this initial phase of failed starts, though, some lengthier deals came about. *Mission Studios*, a new publishing house, decided to take on *Battlecruiser* as its first product. The same problems surfaced; the game continued to be delayed as Smart was still unable to focus his vision into a product that could be shipped. This continued for a full three years. “For three years I was chasing technology. Great games came and went and *Battlecruiser: 3000 AD* was still in development. Review followed review, still no game in sight,”⁹ admits Smart; the same lack of execution that had plagued the early development was starting to influence his ability to find a publisher. True enough, eventually *Mission Studios* ran into financial limitations and could wait no longer. *Battlecruiser* was set loose again.

⁵ Huffman, *History*

⁶ Smart, *LoonyGames Guest Editorial*

⁷ Gordon, *Battlecruiser Named Desire*

⁸ Smart, *LoonyGames Guest Editorial*

⁹ Smart, *LoonyGames Guest Editorial*

A few more failed publishing deals later, Smart entered the deal that would finally see the game released, and its legacy cemented in time.

Take 2 and the Release Disaster

It was then that *Take 2 Interactive* decided to publish the game and in order to ensure a return on investment, they began to set deadlines for release. At the same time, tired of failed deals with publishers caused by the (by now extreme) delays, Smart was ready to settle down and get the game finished. Things seemed to be coming into place for the game finally to get out the door.

Take 2's original suggested goal to Smart was Christmas in 1995; not surprisingly, this date came and went and still no game. *Take 2* redoubled their efforts. "On May 15th, 1996, *Take 2* and Smart announced a September release date for the perennial vaporware,"¹⁰ reports Gordon. Smart calls this a date that was coerced from him under pressure, not one which he naturally would have set, and one vastly premature. History would prove him to be right.

Battlecruiser 3000 AD was released on October 11, 1996, which we now know to be the low point in the entire series. Although that date was far later than the original release date and the project was already far over its allotted budget from *Take 2*, it was way too early for the game to be successful. To Smart and all of those who had waited for this game for so many years, this release could not be described as anything but a complete failure, almost unplayable and assaulted by reviewers and gamers everywhere in every way possible. T. Liam McDonald stated, "It will go down in legend as the most bug-ridden, unstable, unplayable pieces of software ever released."¹¹ Of the manual, it was said that, "I could feed my dog Scrabble tiles and he could crap a better manual."¹² In all respects, the game was received as poorly as any game in history.

It was obvious to everyone that the game was far too early, and it seems inconceivable that *Take 2* wouldn't have known that. By Smart's account, he knew that *Battlecruiser* wasn't ready, but *Take 2* forced him into it and caused this disaster to occur.

Though *Take 2's* official position may never be known, widespread speculation is pretty consistent and from a publisher's point of view, makes sense. *Battlecruiser* and Smart already had a history of delays and inability to execute. Regardless of his intention to finally get something out, the missing of the first release date was a wake-up call that some pressure needed to be exerted. They laid down an ultimatum; deliver a game or get cancelled, and as Smart said, he was unwilling to face another failed publishing deal, so he was thus "forced" to release the game.

Smart wanted more time to complete the game and *Take 2* denied his requests; this had all happened before. There were always more features and greater things to work on, but never any working product to release, and they could see that things might be headed down the

¹⁰ Gordon, *Battlecruiser Named Desire*

¹¹ McDonald, *Gamespot Review*

¹² *Little Battlecruiser That Could*

same road that caused the last few publishing deals to fail. Rather than deal with this, they decided that ready or not, the game needed to be put on a strict timeline and released. It doesn't seem likely that *Take 2* was unaware that it wasn't ready for shipping. Instead, they knew and simply didn't care. They needed this project to be over with, one way or another, or face a perpetual blemish on their budget and scheduling. In a sense, this was a similar choice to the ones that other publishing companies had given him; he was taking too much time and either had to finish the game or have his game cancelled; the ultimatum angered Smart, who said that the game should be given as much time as it needed to get finished and he left the development effort for a period. Rather than cancel the deal, the game was released, and it was a mess.

In this state, the game was released, and the flames, the blame, and the slow repair process began.

The Aftermath: Fallout, Patches, Flames, and Usenet

Whose fault was it? From the perspective of the gamers, there's blame to go around. *Take 2* was clearly negligent in releasing a product that was so obviously unfinished and so terribly buggy. Even though they were within their rights to issue the "release or cancel" ultimatum, clearly cancellation was the responsible choice, rather than cause many people who'd been waiting for the game for years to essentially pay for the chance to beta (or even alpha, depending on who you ask) test an incomplete product. If they were so determined to release the game to the shelves, they certainly should have made sure that it at least worked, even if it wasn't perfect or as enjoyable as they would have liked.

On the other hand, Smart would have you believe that the fault is all *Take 2*'s, that he is free from all blame, when the truth was that he was just as much at fault. Looking from *Take 2*'s perspective, they were dealing with a title that, while it looked promising, looked that way because Smart was known for excessively hyping and exaggerating his game. This hype had to influence their beliefs of what the status was and when the game ought to be ready, and it's hard to believe this isn't the effect that Smart desired.

Vision and promise aside, the game was very late and far over budget, and in analyzing its status, they couldn't help but notice Smart's history over the last several years; promising more and more and hyping more and more without having anything to show for it. True to form, rather than recognizing the reality of the situation, that *Take 2* had a business and budget to worry about and couldn't hang on forever, Smart wanted complete control over the project, an endless budget, and as much time as he felt he needed to get things done; he expected *Take 2* to do everything he needed from a publisher for his game without fulfilling what they needed in return. "If it were up to me, I'd be doing this for another decade if that's what it took,"¹³ he said, and *Take 2* was probably justified in fearing that this might be exactly what happened. From their perspective, Smart was uncooperative; he wanted everything and offered nothing. Furthermore, the two had an agreement they had agreed to, and release was part of that agreement, so the notion that this was entirely forced by *Take 2* seems a little ridiculous.

¹³ Gordon, *Battlecruiser Named Desire*

Though *Take 2* has kept quiet, Smart has been on the warpath over what happened and in trying to place the blame square on his publisher; if his claims are true (which *Take 2* often denies), then he has some valid points. Even so, his rants are really all that will ever be known, as *Take 2* hasn't responded with their own story, and his rants clearly come from his perspective, the perspective of a developer who feels like he was screwed out of his vision and had his game and name dragged through the mud. Smart doesn't seem particularly understanding of the other side of things. In short, it will be difficult ever to get the full story without some bias involved, but most bystanders agree that they both are at fault.

By this point, in 1996, Derek Smart had also become a very avid Usenet poster, and *Battlecruiser 3000 AD* quickly leapt into the forefront of all of the discussion, argument, and controversy on the computer game newsgroups. His detractors and proponents engaged in massive flame wars, spurred on by Smart himself, which still persist today. Everyone who is familiar with those newsgroups knows that Smart's Usenet presence is not only like his own personality, very boastful of his game designs, visions, and his own abilities, but goes one step beyond by also being extremely inflammatory. Examples of his disrespectfulness ranged from his profuse swearing to his forging of disparaging messages against himself to discredit someone else.

His excitable nature even inspired a game among Usenet posters; *Battlecruiser: The Online Game*. It didn't really have anything to do with the computer game. Instead, this referred to the following, as explained by Dean Gordon:

The Rules of The Online Game are simple: post a derogatory remark about BC3K or Derek and wait for the bait to be taken. After Derek goes ballistic, follow that up with an even more derogatory comment to see just how far Derek would, in his own words, "dig his own grave"¹⁴

He spent and spends inordinate amounts of time defending his game, his vision, his name, and everything else related to him. Much of this has nothing to do with the games themselves. One famous fiasco, for example, was over Smart's claims of receiving a Ph.D. When some disbelieved his actually having a Ph.D., years of flame wars ensued including threats from Smart to sue those claiming he was a fraud for defamation.¹⁵ Eventually it came out that he in fact was lying, but the important thing here is that this really doesn't have much to do with *Battlecruiser*. All it does is drum up more controversy and waste more of Smart's time and effort. His inability to divorce himself from criticisms and have anyone see him as anything but perfect detract from his development efforts as much as his need to have his design and vision be absolutely perfect.

So in a sense, the cycle began again. Smart was getting himself into the same kinds of trouble that he did online way back in the beginning, spending too much time on the newsgroups being inflammatory and boastful of how much his new games or updated versions of *Battlecruiser* stand above the competition, but now with the addition of personal and otherwise unrelated flame wars sucking him in.

¹⁴ Gordon, *Battlecruiser Named Desire*

¹⁵ Huffman, *Ph.D. Fraud*

This all makes him out to be very bad at what he does, but at the same time as this, it's clear to most people involved that he is as dedicated, if not more dedicated, to his game than any other developer is to a game they are creating. One positive result of his involvement in the groups was to figure out what was worth enhancing and what needed fixing and for three years after the release, he continued to churn out patches and enhancements for people who had the game, ending up finally with a very usable product (which many, including Smart himself, would argue ought to have been what shipped in the first place). Some say he did this just to cover for his own earlier failures and to clear his name, while others believe he really cares about his customers. Either way, his dedication is apparent, and fortunately, at least with respect to the original game, the execution has finally caught up and he's been able to practice some of what he preaches. Still, there are still remnants of the old patterns, and this manifests itself in the future of the series.

The Future of Battlecruiser

The future of the series is packed. The *Battlecruiser* web site lists two large projects; one is an online massive multiplayer version of the game called *Galactic Command Online*, where many players all reside in the same living universe. The other is the full-blown sequel to the original game, *Battlecruiser Millennium*, with new implementations of many components and the requisite ambitious design.

What will happen with this? It's hard to say; Smart has a history of not coming through on his grand visions, and his active status in the newsgroups dealing with all kinds of topics that do nothing but waste his time mean that there is even more keeping him from delivering. At the same time, the constant revisions and fixes to the original release over the course of three years shows that he is capable of producing results if he can motivate himself.

Either way, it is likely that this story is not over yet.

Lessons and Conclusions

From a design perspective, what's the lesson of *Battlecruiser 3000 AD*? As the common saying goes, you can't let the perfect get in the way of the good. Dedication and a great idea go a long way, but that isn't sufficient. If you let your vision blind you to the practical needs of cutting down designs and focusing on getting a playable product finished, the game will never get finished.

Reading through interviews and postmortems from successful developers on successful projects, both game-related and not, show one important lesson that they've all learned. As much as developers often complain about management, it's important that there is someone in charge, with a good idea of the whole project so they can set realistic goals and force these goals to be met. Those goals need to be set and then stuck to; you cannot constantly be trying to incorporate the next best thing as it comes along or you will get caught in an infinite loop of being delayed and then having to do something even newer. There comes a time in any project where the priorities and focus have to settle on a final version of the product; features need to be cut and ideas sacrificed, but the vision of a game doesn't do any

good if that game never makes it out the door. And, while it's important to be accessible to users and listen to feedback, there are limits there as well; you can't let yourself be dictated by those users.

Ultimately, *Battlecruiser 3000 AD* fell victim to a too zealous, too proud, too visionary developer who never learned the pragmatic need to settle down, set a mark, and stick to it. There are the beginnings of some good signs for the future of the series, though, and if Smart has learned these lessons, his passion and desire may be enough to overcome the bad name and bad will the series currently has. If not, we may merely be between chapters in an ongoing saga of failed dreams. The future of *Battlecruiser* is in his hands. Either way, the rest of the industry would do well to pay close attention and learn the lessons that Derek Smart unwittingly has to offer.

Credits

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