

New York Times

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January 31, 1996

Movies and Games: Marriage Shows Signs of Success

**CYBER
TIMES
EXTRA**

By ASHLEY DUNN

Chris Roberts created one of the classics of British gaming a decade ago with just a little pocket change for floppy disks and a lot of spare time. His creation was called Stryker's Run, a side-scrolling, shoot 'em up that topped the British gaming darts for months, selling what was then the astronomical amount of 40,000 copies.

Today, all the money Mr. Roberts made on Stryker's Run wouldn't pay for the coffee tab on his latest offering to the gaming world, a \$10 million extravaganza set to be released Feb. 9 called Wing Commander IV.

The game is one of the most anxiously awaited in the short history of computing and by far the most expensive ever made, featuring four and a half hours of video with the actors Mark Hamill, John Rhys-Davies, Malcolm McDowell and Jason Bernard.

Is it a movie with a game or a game with a movie?

Mr. Roberts, now an executive producer with Origin Systems, said whatever the name is for it, he is already planning an even grander production to follow Wing Commander IV -- a \$30 million project to make the next Wing Commander both a movie and a game at the same time.

"For my type of game, this will be the model for the future," he said. "At \$30 million, there's no way to justify that with a game alone."

While Hollywood is buzzing over how computers are changing the nature of movies with computer-generated blockbusters like Toy Story and Forrest Gump, for game players all the talk is about Hollywood's invasion of the once obscure and geekish culture of computer gaming.

In the past year, games such as Origin Systems' Wing Commander series, LucasArts' Rebel Assault II and Trilobyte's 11th Hour have heralded the rise of Hollywood writers, directors and stars into the top ranks of game production.

The newcomers have brought storytelling and acting skills that game producers hope will break games out of their niche market for computer buffs and propel them into a mass market whose standard of entertainment is television and movies.

"We are striving for the visual fluidity of television and movies," Mr. Roberts said. "We're designing for the masses now. You're looking a market that's not of a couple hundred thousand, but millions."



Just to recoup the costs of Wing Commander IV, Mr. Roberts said that Origin would have to sell nearly 400,000 copies of the \$60, six-CD game. But even then he was unconcerned since the previous Wing Commander, which sold over 500,000 copies. "With a half million, we'll make \$20 million" he said.

Lee Sheldon, a longtime television writer and the producer of Sanctuary Woods' Riddle of Master Lu, said the transformation of gaming is a phenomenon that is long overdue.

Mr. Sheldon has been an avid game player since he got an Atari 2600 nearly 15 years ago. In the early days, he said, just interacting with a computer, which was such a different experience from the passive entertainment of television, was entertainment in itself

"At first computer games were played by the same people who wrote them." he said. "They wrote what they wanted to play. Up until recently, 50,000 copies was a megahit. People didn't need to ask more of games."

Mr. Sheldon remembered how in 1989 he posted a message in a Compuserve gaming forum complaining about the stupidity of computer games and their lack of emotional sophistication.

"It was stagnation." he said. "The same people were doing the same games over and over again. I mean. when I got to Space Quest 5, I started to go, 'Whoa!' "

He was flamed by gamers who branded him an idiot. But one year ago, he posted the same criticism. This time he got five job offers from game companies.

The Riddle of Master Lu, an adventure game based on the Ripley's Believe It or Not! cartoons, is his first computer game, and he concedes its emotional range is limited as well. But he is proud of small touches: the use of close-up video to show the fear and anxiety of Ripley as he confronts death in the opening scene and dialogue that tries to create a greater sense of character and drama.

"The people in this game aren't just there to shoot." he said. "I'm hoping that by the end of the game, people will want to sequel not just because of the puzzles

but to see what is going to happen to Ripley next."

The cost of creating these video realities is enormous by game standards. The scenes in Wing Commander cost \$8 million because of the use of real movie sets and actors like Hamill.

But in an industry that Larry Marcus, a recreational software analyst for Alex. Brown & Sons in San Francisco, estimates sold about \$2 billion of game and recreational software worldwide last year, the costs are a small concern. Recreational software now accounts for a third of all consumer software purchases, and Marcus said the industry is expected to grow 35 percent a year for the next three years.

For some gamers like Thomas Hong of New York City, the story has become as big a selling point as the game.

Mr. Hong said it was in the second Wing Commander that he realized how engrossing a good story could be. One character, Spirit, commits suicide by ramming her ship into an enemy space station after discovering her fiancé is being held as a captive on board.

Mr. Hong said that when Spirit died, he found himself staring at his computer screen in disbelief.

"I never had that experience before with a game," he said. "It made me stop and think. On the one hand it's just a game. On the other hand, she sure was a good wing man."

The movie scenes are often much more spectacular than the games and hence have become more popular.

Doug Marien, a game player from St. Paul, found himself so engrossed in the story of Rebel Assault II that he eventually found playing the game sections an annoyance.

"I play now to see the cut scenes," he said. "Once you get good, you just want to get done with the mission so you can see the movie."

Game designers, of course, are overjoyed that players are willing to spend \$30 to \$70 for a game as opposed to \$15 for a videotape.

But the question is will they continue to do so once the novelty of movies in games begins to wear off.

The market is already beginning to flood with games packed with ever more video and grander story lines. Sierra Online now holds the record with a mammoth seven-CD adventure game called Phantasmagoria that it released last year.

But for all the money lavished on these new productions, complaints have already begun to rise that too little of it has been poured into the one thing that make games fun, -- good game play.

Phantasmagoria, for example, even with its excellent graphics and story, often ends up as a tedious exercise in mindless clicking around the screen. Wing Commander has been roundly criticized even by its most ardent fans for its repetitious missions. And Rebel Assault II, considered one of the best of the new generation of games, has missions that annoyingly prevent the player from moving around to keep the story on track.

The problem is that movies and games are not as natural a marriage as it sounds.

To begin with, the two worlds exist on different levels of technology. Games that used to look fine when everything was done in computer-generated graphics begin to look crude when put next full video sequences.

In the Riddle of Master Lu, the video resolution of characters is actually reduced so they better match the SVGA scenery.

Even the perspectives of television and games are different. Television is done from a third-person perspective, while action games are largely done from a first-person perspective, resulting in a jarring transition from video scenes to actual game play that feels like watching "Gone With the Wind" and "Beavis and Butt-head" at the same time.

Sheldon said a bigger problem was the cultural differences between Hollywood and Silicon Valley.

"Hollywood is thinking, 'How can we make this movie into a game?' "Sheldon said. "Programmers are thinking, 'How can we make this game into a movie?' There's a lot of arrogance on both sides: movie people thinking they can do games and gaming people who think they can do movies."

Ultimately, he said, the two mediums of mass communications, computers and video. are destined to mix.

"It's like a salad with oil-and-vinegar dressing," Sheldon said. "They're never going to mix entirely, but eventually it's going to taste pretty good."

Other Places of Interest [Origin Systems Inc.](#), publisher of Wing Commander IV. [alt.games.wing-commander](#) Usenet newsgroup. [Sanctuary Woods](#), publisher of The Riddle of Master Lu. [Sierra Online](#), publisher of Phantasmagoria.