Portrait of the Gamer as Enemy

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Picture the typical computer game enthusiast. He's a white male in his twenties, well educated, and spends a lot of time every week playing games. He subscribes to *Computer Gaming World*, possibly *Questbusters* or some other specialist periodical. He is an opinion leader, guiding his friends in their purchase decisions. He spends a lot of time on national networks such as GEnie or Prodigy discussing the latest games. Most important, he spends a lot of money every year on games.

Now picture a cross-hairs centered on his head. Paint an evil moustache on his face, and an ugly leer on his lips. Picture him as The Enemy.

This picture doesn't seem right, does it? The games aficionado is our bread-and-butter customer, the mainstay of our business. He loves games and loves to talk about games. He's our kinda guy, the last person in the world you would want to think of as The Enemy.

But there's a problem. You see, Joe Enthusiast is an activist. He makes sure that his opinions are known by the publishers. His voice carries a lot of weight because he speaks up. To use the polarized nomenclature of an earlier time, Joe is part of the Vocal Minority, as opposed to the Silent Majority who don't send in their warranty cards or write letters or post messages on the nets.

"Why is this a problem?" you wonder. What could be more fair than to listen to the people who care enough to speak up? The problem here is that what may be fair to some people may be unhealthy for the industry. By listening to these people, we who create games could end up killing the industry. To explain how this could happen, I need to give some background.

Anatomy of a Customer Base

Let's think of our customers in statistical terms. We know a lot about the average player, but the market is composed of people who fall above and below the average. There have been lots of market analyses, and their results show lots of scatter, but, roughly speaking, our average player has gotten about four years older in

the last eight years. This means that we're losing people as they age. The typical player enters the audience at a younger-than-average age, stays in for a few years, and then gets out.

Assuming that our goal is to have the largest possible base of players, our problem is two-fold: 1) to get more people to enter the marketplace; and 2) to get them to stay in longer.

Getting Them In

This involves more than merely getting computer owners to try one game. Our problem is to get them to try several games, to get them to really dip their toes in the water. We face two obstacles here.

First is the general bias against games as an adult form of entertainment. "Games are for kids. Playing games is childish." Our best strategy here is to differentiate computer games from video games. If we can establish a public perception that computer games are to video games as movies are to cartoons, we can whittle away at that long-held bias. But that's another editorial....

The second obstacle is the likelihood that the novice player will get burned by purchasing a game that is completely beyond his ken. The most dangerous games here are the sequels, games based on earlier games in a long line that goes far back into the past. Examples include the Ultima series of games, almost anything from Sierra, the SSI war games, or any game whose title ends with a Roman numeral.

Because these companies listen to their customers (or rather, the ones who talk), they refine their game systems with each new release. But—and this is the key point—the refinements reflect the tastes of the aficionados, the people who spend a lot of time with the games. These people want more depth, more complexity, more trickiness. And so the games get hairier with each new edition.

Guess what happens to the poor slob of a beginner who buys one of these games? The game stomps him in the first five minutes and makes him feel like a fool. This person is not going to become an avid gamer. Thus, these games poison the well of new players. This is not what we as an industry want.

And let's dispense with the marketing bull that these games are accessible to the beginner even as they are challenging to the enthusiast. That's ad copy, not honest analysis.

The magazines contribute to the problem. Beginners don't buy magazines like *Computer Gaming World* or *Questbusters*; aficionados do. These magazines therefore quite properly reflect the tastes of the aficionados, bringing further pressure to bear on developers to make the games more suitable for aficionados—and less suitable for beginners.

Case in Point: LOOM

Let's look at this problem from the other direction. Let's consider *Loom*, a game that was clearly designed for the beginner. I was appalled at the reception to *Loom* among the aficionados. Many of

these people hated *Loom*. "Too *!&#ing simple" was the oft-repeated complaint. True, *Loom* is not a game for aficionados. It is a game for beginners. It will bring new customers into our audience. It will prepare people for bigger, more complex games such as those from Sierra or the *Ultima* series. But the aficionados worked hard to kill this game, and I suspect that its sales suffered as a result. That's bad for our industry.

A related process took place with my own game *Balance of the Planet*, but that's a can of worms of a different color....

Keeping Them In

Our second broad problem is to keep players interested once they've been hooked. This is the major argument in support of catering to the aficionados, but I think that it is misplaced. The key question here is, do the aficionados make up the majority of the gaming audience?

I don't know, and I don't think that anybody knows. It's almost impossible to tell the difference between the player who hopefully buys a dozen games, trying to find one that strikes his fancy, and the player who avidly buys a dozen games, loving every one. When the only one who's talking is the aficionado, it's all too easy to congratulate ourselves that we've done a great job. When the former buyer gives up and abandons the market, we shrug our shoulders and ignore the implicit message.

It can be argued that the success of the games that cater to the aficionados is the best proof that we are doing something right. That's true—but it's also true that the slow aging of the gaming population strongly suggests that we are losing a lot of our audience. Maybe we are doing something right; could we be doing righter if we weren't losing so many players?

It Can Happen Here

We have a sobering precedent to consider. Back in the 1970's a company called SPI rejuvenated the flagging board war game industry and sparked a boom in the business. For five years, SPI rode high with a series of impressive designs. One of SPI's secret weapons was its feedback survey. The principals at SPI paid close attention to those survey cards, and as a result, the SPI games grew progressively bigger, more complex, and more obscure. Introductory level games grew rare, and game rules manuals became longer and longer. Unsurprisingly, SPI began a long downhill slide, finally collapsing in 1981. The board war games industry didn't die, but it never regained the luster of its heyday in the mid-70s. There were many reasons for the decline, of course, but catering to the aficionados was one of them.

There is no law that says that our industry must continue. If we abuse our customers by catering to the needs of a subset, they could just walk away from us.

What Should We Do?

First, we should recognize that the aficionados are a vocal minority. An important one, but a minority nonetheless. We need to apply a "skepticism discount" to the comments we read on the nets or in the magazines. They don't represent the majority.

Second, we need to make a greater effort to gather the opinions of the Silent Majority of customers, the people who don't volunteer their opinions. We have to go to them because they won't come to us.

And finally, we should label our games with honest representations of our target market. Labels such as "Perfect for Beginners!" and "Deep, Complex Game Play!" would help us serve both the beginner and the aficionado.