



Are Sims Dead? A Roundtable Discussion, Part Two

Feature by [Tom "Wklink" Cofield](#)

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This seems to be a common thread on the newsgroup and we seem to love to discuss the apparent downfall of the simulation industry. Depending on who you talk to, simulations are either dead, dying, or seriously wounded. Who gave the industry the wound is up for debate. Some people claim it was the industry that wounded itself; others claim it was the players who brought down this particular line of games.

Those of us in the 'gaming press' love to act as pundits on this particular subject. We analyze, discuss, and in general drive most people sick with our thoughts. Although we know quite a bit about the industry, most of us have little at stake when it comes to this genre failing. Therefore our opinions, while valid, may not always reflect what may or may not be going on within the industry.

Late at night, while trying to get to sleep, I came up with this idea. Why not ask those in the know...the developers, the producers, the designers of some of our favorite games...to give their opinions on the state of the simulation genre and what they think the future holds for our hobby? Thanks to help from Dan Crenshaw, James Leasure and John Sponauer, this little project of mine has blossomed into what you see below.

I have gathered some of the best minds in the simulation entertainment industry and will let them say what the future of that industry is. This is in their own words; the only editing is grammatical when absolutely needed, and nothing is left out. Like what they say or hate it, these guys' opinions should hold some weight. We do this because it is a fun hobby, but this is their life.

I have broken this up into two installments. [Questions One and Two](#) were on Tuesday....Three, Four, and Five are today. To be honest, I never expected the level of depth to which our panelists have gone. All of the respondents' answers are shown next to the same question. This will hopefully aid the reader in comparing answers to the same question, and keep the article from getting too long (although most of you will agree that it is plenty long as it is). Most of the replies are taken directly from email with the respondents, however some of the text is based on phone interviews.

And now, our panelists. We asked each for a bio.

Alexander Delaney, 34, is the brains behind the new tank simulation **Steel Beasts**, which should be coming out at the time of this article. Alex has worked on this simulation for the last four years. He has a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering and, prior to working on Steel Beasts, worked as a digital design engineer. He currently resides in Sunnyvale, California.

Recognized as a 'Gaming God' by PC Gamer Magazine, **Andy Hollis** is well known in the flight sim community. He is known as a pioneer in the field of combat flight sims and has been an integral part of teams producing flight sims since 1983. Andy was a founding member of MicroProse software, where he created his first successful multi-player combat flight sim - **MiG Alley Ace**. Andy was key to the development of some of the greatest games MicroProse has ever made, games like **Gunship**, **F19 Stealth Fighter**, and **F15 Strike Eagle II and III**. He later joined Electronic Arts as founder of Jane's Combat Simulations, leading teams that created acclaimed hits like the **Longbow** series and **F-15**. He has over 14 successful games to his credit.

Jay Littman comes to iEntertainment Network with several years of experience in the computer game industry. Having been a Producer for Kesmai Studios, Alliance Interactive Software, and a Expert Software, Jay has been involved in the conception and production of a number of those games where the successful player strives to kill more or less everything that is wearing the wrong color hat. (Strategy and technology make this less barbaric than it might sound.) Jay has produced twenty-seven products and has developed and launched into production **Harpoon Online** and **Air Warrior Macintosh**. Jay's current projects include **WarBirds**, **Dawn of Aces**, **Fighter Ops**, **Raider Wars**, and **Shock Force**. All games are online massively multiplayer simulations for Windows and the Macintosh environment. He has been a member of the Computer Game Developers Association since 1993. Jay is a charter member of the International Game Developers Network and the Academy of Interactive

Art and Sciences. Jay earned a BA in business administration with a concentration in management information systems from Florida International University in Miami, Florida. Other interests for Jay include art, music, sailing, SCUBA diving, and fishing. (This means that he would be interested in these things if he weren't always busy blowing stuff up on the computer.)



Oleg Maddox, 40, attended the Moscow Aviation Institute and worked 11 years as the lead engineer for one of the largest Russian military research institutes. In 1992, he founded Maddox Games. His company has produced more than 40 games and multimedia products for MS-DOS, Windows and Pen Pad (Palm) platforms. His first flight sim was 'Stormfighter,' which he described as, "A fantastic scenario and fantastic planes. Arcade flight model using some part of real physics law. It was simple but had a high playability and there was even a very easy to use mission editor included." Oleg's second sim is the much anticipated (at least by me -ed) **IL-2 Sturmovik**.

Carl C. Norman, is currently the Director of Product Development managing the Novato Studio of the Entertainment Division for Mattel Interactive. Mr. Norman joined the Company in September of 1994. He has 10 years experience in the entertainment software industry as a Designer, Customer Support Manager, Studio Director, Operations Manager, Producer, Executive Producer, and Director of Product Development. He has been Executive Producer or Producer on such titles as **Flanker 2.0, Panzer Commander, Luftwaffe Commander, Imperialism, Su-27 Flanker, Great Naval Battles, Steel Panthers II, Silent Hunter I & II, Destroyer Command, Allied General, Thunderscape, V for Victory, Harpoon I, Harpoon II, & Harpoon 4, and the Harpoon Designers Series**. Prior to working in the software industry, Mr. Norman worked as a Project Manager in the defense industry on training devices and simulations. He has also worked as an independent contractor selling investment and insurance programs. Mr. Norman has served on active duty and in the Reserves as an officer in the United States Marine Corps, where he held a variety of both tactical and administrative positions. His last rank was Captain. He is an instrument-rated private pilot and has a Bachelor of Science from Purdue University and a Master of Business Administration from National University. His interests include gaming, computer technology, military aviation, reading, history, Baseball, skiing, and travel.



Teut Weidemann, 35, claims the only products he has ever shipped early were his three kids. A professional in the industry since 1987, Teut has been writing his own games since 1981. Teut's colorful career includes being a programmer, artist, producer, consultant, director, and designer with international companies and even Nobel Prize winners. He finally decided to form his own company, and with a business partner, formed Wings Simulations. His first simulation was **Panzer Elite**, which is well known to the virtual tankers that frequent our site.

Steve Wickes, 29, of Empire Interactive, has been involved with simulations such as **MiG Alley, Flying Corps Gold**, and **Enemy Engaged: Comanche vs. Hokum**. He is a California native and has a dual major in History and Anthropology. He has worked in the software industry for more than ten years. He has been involved in Production, Product/Project Management, Technical Lead, Support Manager and has been in the gaming industry for five years. Steve is responsible for all products in North America for Empire Interactive, with a primary focus on Simulation and Historical Strategy.

SimHQ: All of our panelists here have some thing in common; they put out high quality games that work well right out of the box with minimal patching. Some games have been doomed right from the beginning due to unplayable bugs right out of the box. Do you think the publish now, patch later trend with some games is an overblown phenomena or is it a problem that needs to be corrected?

[Alexander Delaney, eSim]

I'm not sure if this is a trend, and I have a hard time believing that companies would want to do it either. It doesn't make good business sense to release a buggy product and patch it later. I understand how such things happen, though. If the sales and marketing department has an ad campaign all set up to run at a certain time, with interview, reviews, etc..., it can be just as detrimental to SALES if the release is delayed.

My guess is that as companies (especially big companies) get more experienced in project management, they won't need to patch their product that often. Of course, this is another area where you can see why big companies would want to keep their games simple. The more complex the game, the more risk there is for delays, and sims surely are some of the most complex games out there.

Please keep in mind, though, that need for patches, at least in the case of sims, is driven in large part by consumers. Customers are constantly asking for more features, and developers really want to please them. Adding new features near the end of a project is a good way to introduce new bugs. However, if these new features are added later, the upgrade might still be thought of as a patch, when it really is a product upgrade. If the features are never added, people complain about the lack of features and support. It's a tough industry!

[Andy Hollis, Electronic Arts]

I believe that this must be corrected for PC product or consumers will continue to go elsewhere for their software entertainment (i.e. consoles). Hardcore folks will put up with it, but others will not. Just as a fanatic will suffer through owning a classic car that

he knows may not start every time, most people will prefer a car that always starts. On-line community support should not be about fixes, it should be about adding scope and variety to an already compelling play experience.

[Jay Littman, iEN]

It's the plague of CD ROM games. Here is the problem. Once you burn a CD you have 20 thousand copies of it. If you find a fatal bug, well... that is bad. Not everyone who buys a CD game goes to a website to download a patch either, and sending out patches can get very expensive. Just developing a game is expensive enough, then you add on the expense of Beta Testing. Not all companies do that. The online arena is much easier. If you find a bug in the software there is a patch created pretty quick. I like the way we work with our Beta Testing teams. Online we have Community Managers and Trainers who we use for our closed Beta. After we feel the update is stable we then open Beta arena, which is open to the community. If we feel we need additional testing of a new feature then we may have a free day to stress test the game. Once we think that it is ready, then we go to a forced download.

[Oleg Maddox, Maddox Games]

This is a problem ... In many cases it is a real problem.

1. The problem of deadline time of the title release Title wasn't tested for bugs enough or hasn't all declared features. Publisher thinks that Christmas is most important and releases the title with serious bugs ... Publisher thinks that it is possible to fix some bugs by patches and begin to sell the game that is not ready for the market. The result sometimes is awful. Many players try to return the box to the retail store, because they are even unable to start the game.
2. I think that the patches should cover non-serious 'bugs' For example, to fix one or two glitches the game suffers from with some hardware. If it was declared as working with such hardware – it is an error. But it isn't an error if Publisher or Developer never declared it as a working feature. In this case this "error" should be fixed by an add-on, but not by a bug patch :). There are different terms for such things.
3. Publisher and developer must release the title, which has been tested a lot. Sometimes, due to unplayable bugs the early release means death for a good title ... In case of a bug-free but late release, the profit losses would be minimal or losses would be insignificant. But I agree with marketing guys – the time of the year for the release is a very important factor.
4. Another important factor – Mutual understanding between publisher and developer. In our case I would like to say only warm words towards Blue Byte, our chosen publisher of IL-2 Sturmovik.
5. Add-ons (not bug-fix patches) should increase features of a game. If the game is planned with upcoming add-ons, everything should be ready for such add-ons with the release of the title itself. Do you remember why the first Quake had such a long life?

[Carl Norman, Mattel Interactive]

I do not believe it is overblown. It is reality. Software development is both art and science. Trying to put the software development cycle into a quarterly dividend dependent corporate schedule is a constant source of pain and suffering. If I could accurately forecast code final dates on entertainment software development titles, I'd be a rich man. There are so many variables with software development that it is always a tough call when it comes to making your dates. I've seen this in just about every project I have ever witnessed (and not just mine, or the projects of the companies I've worked with in the past ten years). There is tremendous pressure to ship that product NOW! It's a business. One of the most difficult moments in a Producer's life is the decision to authorize the Gold Master. This moment arrives just after the sleepless weekend spent doing the triage of the remaining bugs. Every Producer knows that there are still problems and bugs remaining on that Gold Master. Hopefully, most of the really nasty showstoppers have been eliminated. The plans for the first patch are reviewed that very next day. There are no perfect products in software.

[Teut Weidemann, Wings Simulations]

Well, we had a good share of bugs ourselves, and our online play still doesn't work. The problem of patching is manyfold and is mostly influenced by costs. If you have a very good QA and squish all bugs you need time, both a well run QA and the time costs serious money. If you spend half of that time you of course don't find all of the bugs. And another simple matter: 50.000 players with their configurations simply find more bugs than 20 testers in a couple of weeks. We did a public beta to test on as many systems as possible and still we had trouble out of the box. The major problems we had were the copy protection, the sound system we used and some DirectX features, which weren't properly supported by many 3D-card drivers. The basic problem is the PC. You cant even start to compare the PC quality assurance with console ones as the hardware on consoles never changes, something which would be heaven on earth for PC games if that ever happens. So in my opinion it needs to be corrected as close as possible as money and time allows. Good project management and a good QA department do wonders to PC products. My hats off to you QA guys, they do a hell of a job and mostly go by unnoticed.

[Steve Wickes, Empire Interactive]

Every publisher has released a product that in one way or another needed an update. Some view this as an intentional slight that publishers inflict on consumers. Obviously this is not true. I'll speak strictly on simulation software, although we know that 90% of PC and Mac titles released need an update. Simulation software is unlike nearly every other gaming genre. Simulations are just that...simulators. Developers spend innumerable hours defining their product, researching, tweaking and finally deciding what they will and will not include in the final product. Something sim fans often forget is that these flight sims are

games. Nothing more. Military simulations are available to those who can afford to spend the money, but many of the pilots I've spoken with point out that simulators aren't fun. What computer game software publishers are attempting to do is simply create a fun, as realistic as possible game. Flight sims are games, not a war simulator. The more realistic the sim is, the more appeal it has to flight sim enthusiasts. But these products are still far from realistic, heck we can't even look over our shoulders yet. We can only do so much.

For sims the need for an update is almost mandatory. The simulation community is filled with ultra sharp (and not so sharp) individuals that value these products tremendously. At the same time these same individuals will criticize a known issue. If something is incorrect, and Mr. _____ who's actually flown the aircraft highlights the point to a development team, then it makes sense to correct the error. Sometimes we find issues with hardware. Hardware issues are tough to tackle these days, as each of my developers state the same simple words...new technology is fabulous, but at the same time can directly impede the development cycle. Bottom line; with the ever changing video arena, developers are constantly being forced to re-address their 3D engine. A significant number of updates are released to better support some new, changing technology. Developer's stage milestones for their products for a reason, changing and advancing technologies are fine, but significantly effect a products life right out of the box...thus the need for technology updates. Simulations have some of the most detailed and advanced engines, physics models, network code, and playability models of all games released. As a result of this level of detail, developers may find that something bugged and with a specific configuration it simply fails. It's rather difficult to tackle each configuration these days, so more and more publishers find themselves outsourcing game testing. Testing operations for a classic puzzle game is simple...give the game to a number of kids and let them play. Simulation software is a bit more complicated than that. An external test must occur with the right people. A formal testing house must be used to formally evaluate the product to ensure high quality. Standard testing houses need not apply, as they simply are not staffed to adequately address the detail found in a sim. Of course costs increase with specialized testing houses as well.

SimHQ: You can't help but read at least once a week on the newsgroups, 'sims are a dying breed.' There are quite a few coming out in the next six months, with probably more that I don't know about on the drawing board. What do you see as the future of simulations. What untapped technology (an example would be 3D acceleration five years ago) do you see as the next great step in simming?

[Steve Wickes, Empire Interactive]

Simulations are in trouble, no question. Only two formal publishers plan to release sims beyond 2000. Of these two groups, one is recognized for their continued commitment to the genre, while the other is, well...staged to rule the world! Larger publishers could continue to produce sims, but would not turn a high profit, sell more than 100k units, or attract many new buyers. For now simulation developers need find a means of appeasing the enthusiast, but at the same time make it simple enough for anyone. Frankly, simulations are not that difficult. Perfect examples of this are online 1st person shooters. A new gamer to this genre would be quickly dispersed of. Try playing Quake 3 for the first time, and not getting blasted every 30 seconds. How fun is that? After 3 hours, is the gamer any more adept at taking out his opponents? Not likely, and after 10 hours? Perhaps. Now take the simulation title. If any individual spent 3 hours on a flight sim he'd surely be able to enjoy it and complete 40% of the game. After 10 hours he'll only get better. Are sims boring? Are the manuals ominous? Initially simulations are daunting, but frankly most things in life are daunting the first few hours...then you become more comfortable, things become more second nature, and finally things begin to make sense.

This applies to nearly every aspect in life. Again, simulation software is sliding downhill without a stopping point in sight. What we can see is that game genres are constantly shifting; with new genres emerging, and old resurfacing. Simulation software is not gone forever, but to speculate on its reemergence is difficult. New technologies have had little effect on keeping sims alive. We have great 3D acceleration, superb positional sound, realistic controllers, and yet sims continue to struggle with sales and low price points. Retail is a very competitive arena for gaming software and will only become more so with the emergence of new consoles. What I'd like to see as a readily available sim technology (these currently exist...but can cost 20+k!) would be a helmet with a high resolution visor that will allow users to check their six. This level of immersion would surely attract the hardcore audience, but who else would it attract? The next technological step for flight simulation software is not going to be found at retail...it will be in the hangars and training beds of tomorrow's pilots.

[Teut Weidemann, Wings Simulations]

Well, I dare to make a prediction: The next or the following year we'll see a simulation which will sell very well simply because its a good game and no other sim is being released. And you know what happens next? Publisher will jump on the wagon and release a bunch of new ones the following year trying to sell as well and fail again. This industry never learns, not since I joined anyway. The retreat of the large publishers isn't as bad as the community thinks. It's a chance for smaller publishers to grab the opportunity and release some good sims with healthy sales. And this process already started as some sims are grabbed by smaller publishers which do not have the large overhead costs tied to projects. I don't see technology having this large impact anymore as it did the last 10 years. If you run in 32 bit, 1024x768, on a GeForce2, how different looks a 1280x1024, 32bit on a GeForce10? Not much, at least not as different as the jump was from CGA to EGA, to VGA, to SVGA, to 3D and finally to 3D Highres...

[Carl Norman, Mattel Interactive]

I believe that simulations are in a cycle similar to what role-playing games have gone through the past few years. Five years ago RPGs were dead. Now they have a new life online. With respect to combat simulations, at present we are in the bottom of the curve. If you look at some of the top selling products in the early and mid 1990's you'll note that many of them are combat simulations. For simulations to cycle back there are going to have to be some changes. Firstly, simulations are going to have to be sold for a price that will justify the expense of development and publishing these types of products. Next, the means of selling these specialty titles is going to have to be changed. The Internet appears to be the best means. Of course the Internet is also the likely destination of what many of us in the combat simulations community have desired for many years: "The Electronic Battlefield." This is a major undertaking and will require big support from an interested community. Sadly, with all the arguing, trolling, and name-calling on the various forums and newsgroups, the community is a bit divided. The potential exists to make this concept happen but the business model and distribution scheme still need to be worked out.

[Oleg Maddox, Maddox Games]

I don't think that the flight sim market is a dying breed. I think this genre will transform by the following main ways:

- Improving common quality.
- Improvement of the simulation reality. Better to say - the feeling of the reality of surroundings.
- Improving AI of units, which will allow us to make more complex and realistic scenarios.
- Increasing complexity of the environment simulation.
- Increasing of the flight sim community in general. The Internet is a great thing!

On the subject of hardware, the main thing for the next few years is the increasing speed of the hardware. Each 1.5-1.8 years the speed of processors increases at least twice ... So the more powerful processors are, the more powerful 3D cards are, and the more complicated features you will find in software. See above 'main ways'

[Jay Littman, iEN]

When you hear someone complaining about how the simulation market is dying, I think they are really wanting some kind of change. Sims will always be a niche market. The mass market will always be made up of arcade style games. Online game development is never completed and you're always adding and improving feature. The community expected it and this is what keeps the simulation fresh for years and keeps your paying customers coming back. This allows us to take advantage of new technology that might come by. As for the Tech future, I see broadband becoming increasingly more common. Another thing I see is high-end 3D cards, like the GeForce cards, becoming increasingly cheaper. Remember five years ago when having a sound card was a big option? Now every computer made ships with one. I see top of the line 3D cards being the same way. The increased speeds of CPUs, increases in hard disk space and the next generation of 3D cards has allowed for some really cool stuff to happen.

One of the nice things about a game like Warbirds is that it is always a new game. If you add a new plane or a new feature then it becomes a new game. People will develop new strategies for the new feature that changes the game completely.

[Andy Hollis, Electronic Arts]

I agree that it will take some new significant technological advance to make sims more widely appealing, but I can't say what it is. For years, it was all about more and more realistic looking scenery. That's the thing that got broader markets excited about sims. Now, photo-realism is commonplace and shows up in all kinds of games, not just the obvious usage (simulation).

[Alexander Delaney, eSim]

3D graphics will keep getting better and better, and I suspect that network play will become very important. It seems clear that the world is getting connected to the Internet at a fast rate, and it's only a matter of time before everyone has broadband Internet access in their home. Latency will always be an issue, but the increased bandwidth will surely make for some interesting times for sims -- and other games, for that matter.

SimHQ: Final question, then I'll let you all get back to work. The lines between genres seem to cross more and more these days as the technology improves. An example would be a game like Rogue Spear, which crosses several genres from first person shooter, to simulation, to even a tactical level wargame if you think about it completely. What genres will simulations cross with? How do you think this will effect your work?

[Alexander Delaney, eSim]

Well, you've mentioned two good ones already. It's conceivable that sims could cross over to almost any genre, given the right idea for a game. In fact, if sims want to capture a larger market share, it's probably necessary for them to do so. Perhaps we'll all be dabbling in areas outside of sims down the road. I wish I had a better answer for this one, but I don't.

[Andy Hollis, Electronic Arts]

I believe the future of combat flight simulation will be in a cross-genre form. The purest sense is just too limited in scope and

war is just not fashionable right now. Moving in more futuristic or hypothetical subject matter directions, combined with non-traditional gaming mechanisms, will add new play value.

[Jay Littman, iEN]

Well, Warbirds is a flight sim, getting people into the cockpit as quickly as possible is what is most important to me. We may add something later on but what we concentrate on is our flight sim. The most important thing to keep in mind is the entertainment of the game. If a game designer tries to fit too much into a game it is like the LA Freeway, a lot going on but you aren't going anywhere. At least for us, the simulation aspect is the most important thing we concentrate on.

[Oleg Maddox, Maddox Games]

This is a question for a good separate interview. (I might hold him to that -ed.) Here I will answer only in general. Yes, such games will transform into a separate genre. I think that genre is already forming. On the other hand, the flight sim genre will hold its ground: the quality of all sims will be increased. Plus sometimes resource management will be added. But this resource management feature will never cover other features of the sim, because a flight sim is always a flight sim and players will like to fly, experiencing more and more realism of the common environment :).

[Carl Norman, Mattel Interactive]

I'd like to see more strategy built into combat simulations. I'd like the mission planning and coordination with cooperative players to be greatly enhanced in combat simulations. I'd also like to see a variety of roles available for a multi-player session available to the players. For instance, one player is in the front seat flying the aircraft while another player is in the backseat playing the Weapons Officer (I know that Longbow 2 did this very well). Another example would be one player working as the AWACS controlling air assets and assigning targets and giving vectors to other players. I'd love to see a third-person perspective product like Harpoon link to a first-person simulation like Flanker. The potential exists to bring much more "gaming" and cooperative play to simulations.

[Teut Weidemann, Wings Simulations]

Well, we just are developing a cross genre game ourselves, so yes, it will happen more frequently. I guess we do this as the fixed genres become more or less occupied with franchise titles and we try to create one of ourselves. Also the gamers want more content, so I guess putting more than one game into a game is one way supporting this. I guess all games covering any military vehicle or weapon will have sim content as the customer is used to more and more realistic behavior of those military items in their games.

[Steve Wickes, Empire Interactive]

Frankly I don't feel flight sims will, or should, crossover with other genres. It is my opinion that when they do they ultimately fail. A gamer buys a flight simulation to experience flight, to take place in an ongoing campaign, to experience history, to escape the ongoing daily exercises of work or school, to experience what it was like for his father or uncle, grandfather. A flight sim enthusiast buys the game to have fun. This element of fun is something that is gradually getting lost in all games these days. One of the most fun, keep you coming back for more games ever to release, was Asteroids. Simple concept, simple engine, simple sound, and yet...the monotone audio from asteroids is recognizable by nearly every gamer on the planet. Simple fun games are becoming a thing of the past. Are sims dying because we have too many easy, simple "fun" games? Surely not, we could use 20 fun games to make up for the 100 boring titles released over the last year.

Many feel that by creating a strategy element that sims will attract a larger fan base. I disagree with this concept. If gamers are interested in a strategy title then purchase a strategy title, not a blend. Chances are this blended game will not do anything right, poor strategic elements, meager simulation elements, moderate depth. We've seen this plenty over the last three years. Some simulations now include a mode that allows for detailed planning of a campaign. This, in my opinion is not a blend of genres, but in fact an advancement of the campaign interface found in many of sims. Allowing the user complete control over any and all aspects of an air campaign is perfect for creating a further level of detail and immersion in the game. To some the commander role will overkill and is unnecessary complicated. I'd rather see development teams give users the choice, rather than choosing for them. Sometimes game engines, models, and budgets factor in, which can quickly kill these types of additions to simulations. Simulations may fewer shelf spaces available, but with the passionate community that already exists I'm more than sure we've not seen the end of our favorite pastime...having fun, and taking to the air.

Agree? Disagree? Talk about it on the [SimHQ.com Message Boards](#)