

Wing Commander II: a Tale of a Trailer

“Chris owned a white Porsche 944. In the summer, it was becoming clear to us in the studio how strong a game Wing Commander was, though that hadn't translated into preorders yet. At a party—maybe Richard's yearly birthday party on the 4th—everyone was loosened up by a few beers. Chris promised Marten [Davis, head of Marketing] something, I think a dinner at one of Austin's fanciest restaurants, if Marten could sell 50,000 copies of Wing Commander. Marten jokingly said, 'Done! Now what will you give me if I sell 250,000?' In the same spirit Chris replied 'Marten, if you sell a quarter million copies of Wing Commander, I'll give you my Porsche.' Well, Wing Commander did sell that many units. Everyone knew the 'bet' was a joke, and Marten certainly did very well in bonuses that year regardless. At the company Christmas party, however, Chris came out on stage and grandly presented Marten with a brand new white Porsche 944... remote-controlled toy car. ;)”

Siobhan Beeman

“In 1991, with no new mainline Ultima game appearing and with the Worlds of Ultima spin-offs having flopped, the Wing Commander product line alone accounted for an astonishing 90 percent of Origin's total revenue.”

Jimmy Maher, *The Digital Antiquarian*, Wing Commander II

Chris Roberts' extraordinary blitting engine, built to rotate and scale sprites, had potential well beyond *Wing Commander*. Defined by John Miles as “15KLOC of x86 assembly, all hand-written by Chris Roberts, just an insane feat of mental endurance,” the technology had everyone at Origin wondering what they could do with it. The first answer was the FX Engine, which allowed the animated introduction to *Savage Empire* made from Daniel Bourbonnais' artwork.

But more could have been done.

“Since disk space was so precious,” Manda explains, “‘spot animations’ were the norm anyways. Animating was done by creating alternate versions of little patches of the main picture.”

Roberts' code, combined with Miles' libraries, solved two of the biggest problems that programmers and graphic designers had been struggling with up to that moment: it was efficient both in terms of computational power and the memory it required on disk to store the data needed for the animations. In addition to the side-scrolling *Savage Empire* intro, the code could do more, leading to the realization of genuine animated sequences. Genuine in that they would not be like the intermission screens of *Wing Commander* in which the background was static excepting a few details to give the illusion of action.

Siobhan Beeman, former programmer and designer for *Wing Commander*, recalls, “One of the key innovations of *WC1* was Chris' high-performance sprite blitting code. This was what made the pseudo-3D space combat work, but it was the same code that also ran the animated cutscenes. These scenes were the part of the game reviewers noted most, and we knew we had hit technology on our hands. We wanted to reuse this tech[...].”

Before CD-ROMs solved the space problem and before PCs gained enough computing power with new CPUs and dedicated video cards, Roberts' blitting engine was Origin's secret weapon for a

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handful of seasons. For the moment, the company found itself with a tool that provided great opportunities. It was just a matter of leveraging them properly.

Many folks at Origin were confident *Wing Commander* would be a success. The programmers who worked on it thought so as did the director of marketing and, by this time, so did Chris Roberts himself. Indicators up to this point were both positive and encouraging. Those in the public audience who had tried the game were enthusiastic and pre-orders reached a figure that, until then, had been exclusive to games in the *Ultima* series.

The first month after launch was greeted with enthusiasm at Origin but the next few months were met with nigh disbelief. OSI had so-far been synonymous with role-playing games, with quality products that were appreciated but never wildly popular in the sense that they were games well aimed at a limited audience. *Wing Commander* was a game that appealed to everyone: from science fiction fans to action game fans, from simulator players to casual gamers. The notion that everyone wanted *Wing Commander* was evident from the sales statistics: in just one month, it was selling like the best *Ultima*.

At this point, Roberts wondered if he could further capitalize on the game's success by offering additional missions in the form of a paid expansion. The idea wasn't entirely novel. Roberts recounted that he came up with it when thinking about *Dungeons and Dragons* modules, but in truth, this strategy was as old as the video games industry itself. *Temple of Apshai* by Automated Simulations proposed this model several years earlier. Since then, the video games market made great strides and became a \$24 billion-plus industry (at 2020 adjusted value).

The expansion disk experiment was thus undertaken with a certain cautious optimism. The first expansion contained missions there were not connected via a branching story like the base game and some vehicles that had been designed during the development of *Wing Commander*, but, for reasons of time and budget, had not found their way to publication. Initially it was sold only by direct mail order but the amount of orders, however, pushed the company to a quick change of course. They started selling boxed versions directly via large and small distributors and began a second expansion.

Wing Commander's success marked a rapid transformation for the company. Roberts, who was up to that point a contract freelancer, was promoted to Director of New Technologies. He was given the green light on two projects at the same time. The first was the immediate sequel to *Wing Commander* while the second was an even more ambitious game intended to create a new intellectual property for Origin to work alongside the *Ultima* and *Wing Commander* brands: *Strike Commander*.

This was no small choice. Despite *Wing Commander's* success, the company's resources were stretched to the limit and the staff, pushed nearly to the breaking point, had been divided to carry out an unprecedented number of projects concurrently. Many of these projects were quite ambitious, including *Ultima VII*, *Savage Empire*, *Strike Commander*, and *Wing Commander II*. Soon would come *Martian Dreams* and *Runes of Virtue* in addition to the fact that the company was supporting the external development of *Ultima Underworld*.

Roberts had big plans for *Strike Commander*. *Wing Commander II* reused the previous chapter's engine, albeit suitably modified and improved. However, Roberts wanted to create a new graphics engine from scratch for the newer *Strike Commander*, assuming he could then reuse it for the future

third chapter of the *Wing Commander* series. From the beginning, Roberts devoted himself more to his new project than to *Wing Commander II*, whose direction was entrusted to Siobhan Beeman. Beeman, at the time, was fully committed to *Savage Empire* in the simultaneous roles of director, programmer, and world builder. The development of the first of *Ultima VI*'s two spin-offs happened rather quickly as Origin's priorities had changed radically and the shortage of personnel, in the face of increasingly numerous and ambitious projects, had taken a high toll on staff.

"It was the first of my stretches of serious crunch time at Origin," Beeman recalls. "So I don't remember much of anything from that time. I was working 90 hour weeks, washing NoDoz (caffeine tablets) down with cans of Coke, curling up beneath my desk at 4:00 a.m. when I just couldn't continue. Probably just as well, because there's no way I'd have been safe on the roads to drive home."

It was the first glimpse at what would become an unfortunate norm at Origin: devastating crunch time needed to release a game in the perfect launch window.

When *Savage Empire* was ready for release, Beeman finally returned home and "slept for two weeks." In the meantime, Origin's organizational machinery had been set in motion. Beeman, having regained the energy to return to work, was called into the office to become the director of *Wing Commander II*.

At that stage, however, there wasn't much to do as there was a lack of available staff as they were all on other projects. Thus Siobhan found herself almost completely alone, helped only by a new recruit from Origin, Ellen Beeman, known at the time as Ellen Guon.

"I joined Origin Systems Inc. in 1990," Ellen describes, "just as the team was finishing up *Wing Commander 1*. I was encouraged to apply by my good friend Jeff 'Johann' Johannigman, who was working there at that time. I was initially hired as a writer, based on my television and fiction writing experience, but after about six weeks and working on *Wing Commander: Secret Missions*, I was promoted to a project director."

Jeff Johannigman continues, "I also take full responsibility for introducing [Siobhan] and Ellen. I had known Ellen for several years, and recruited her to move to Austin to work for Origin. So, even though their lives have now diverged, I am glad that [Siobhan] and Ellen shared the years they did."

At this stage of development, in addition to Siobhan and Ellen, there was Chris Roberts, who was involved primarily with the plot.

"The first step was to set the overall plot," Beeman explains, "a one-page spec describing the general course of the campaign. That spec set the opening premise: an attack from previously-unimagined stealth fighters makes it look like Bluehair let a strike wing slip past his position, causing his disgrace and ouster from the service."

The similarity of the stealth fighters to the fearsome Klingons of *Star Trek* with their cloaking devices is quite obvious. Beeman, after all, was a science fiction buff.

Ellen remembers, "*Star Trek* definitely figured in as well for the Kilrathi stealth fighters, and other story elements."

Yet, the choice to center a plot around this new technology falling into the hands of the established enemy, the Kilrathi, had another, more subtle, explanation. Siobhan explains:

"In terms of technology, the *WC1* graphics engine had a feature we hadn't taken advantage of, the ability to ramp the brightness of a sprite up to white or down to black. We didn't have alpha

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blending or transparency, but against the backdrop of space, a fully-black-out ship sprite looked like it was cloaked. Furthermore, since the background color of space in *Wing Commander* is dark blue (pretty sure it was R0G0B3), a pure-black sprite actually stands out just slightly, making it extremely difficult but not completely impossible to see. This was clearly something worth exploring as a new game mechanic. Stealth fighter technology was bleeding-edge in the late '80s—the stuff of credible rumors but shrouded in secrecy and conjecture. That, plus the fact that I was a hard-core Trekkie, made for a short leap to giving the Kilrathi stealth fighters.”

Having decided to use an untapped element of Roberts' graphics engine as a key plot point, an intriguing story was now required to tie the various fights together and integrate it into the game.

“Chris, Stephen, and I knew we wanted to do a more dramatic, intense storyline.” Ellen explains, “*Star Wars* was a big influence, and the Hero's Journey style of storytelling. We knew we would have room for a lot of subplots, but also one big story arc.”

Already in its first draft, the design document was closely influenced by the potential of Robert's graphics engine. By this time, Siobhan had exploited the technology completely, leveraging not only the 3D combat and the kluge of stealth fighters, but, above all, enhancing one of the aspects that had most impressed the public: the narrative side of the game, which was shown to the players via the cutscenes.

In truth, the previous chapter had only a sketchy storyline. Much of the energy spent by the designers and writers was used to create the narrative branching tree which allowed the player to influence the plot and which battles were fought via their performance. Much of this effort went to waste, however, as many players, faced with a battle that ended badly, preferred to reload and try again than to explore the narrative consequences of a defeat.

The goal of creating a more complex and ambitious story with a central narrative role was mutually exclusive, for reasons of time and budget, with the branching approach of the first episode. Even before the green light was given, coupled with an incredibly short deadline of nine months, it was clear that in order to have a more structured plot, sacrifices had to be made.

While the basic plot points, such as the scene after the court martial and Spirit's death, were decided almost from the beginning, many other things were still to be defined. Unfortunately, the team's experience creating other games wasn't all that helpful in making some of the more complex decisions. In particular, when the three agreed that the second chapter would begin with the degradation of the protagonist, the choice was made in order to provide players (likely veterans of the previous episode) an adequate stimulus to face the challenge of the game. Again, Siobhan Beeman:

“As for why Bluehair had to be court-martialed, that was [a] game necessity. We felt like Bluehair's progression in the first *WC*, his climb up the leaderboard and the table of ranks, was an important emotional hook for a lot of players. These days we have a lot of ludological theory to explain what's appealing about that kind of progression and what sort of players are motivated by it. Back then we had absolutely none of that intellectual framework, and were just stumbling around in the dark! But we knew everyone loves the movie *Rocky*, a comeback and redemption story. So the quickest and easiest way to enable a new rise-through-the-ranks story was to first knock Bluehair back down.”

In working out key elements of the story, the three decided to involve the players. Not wanting to directly poll the fan, however, Ellen allowed herself time to figure out what the players' opinions were about the first chapter and expectations for the sequel. She explains, "I spent a lot of time incognito on player forums[...]I was going into other forums, I believe some personal BBS's hosted by fans, and I think also in CompuServe. I wanted to hear what the players were saying to each other, not to the company, so I don't think I ever actually used an Origin BBS. The Angel storyline was the major one that I came up with based on that research, but there were other observations, such as which of the characters the players liked and trusted."

It was at that very moment that the developers realized that players had filled the spaces in *Wing Commander's* plot with their own desires, even going so far as to imagine a love story that never actually existed.

"I learned that a lot of players thought of Angel as a romantic interest character," Ellen continues, "and even thought she had been flirting with the player in *WC1!* (She wasn't...I carefully went through all that scripted code to be sure.) But we decided to introduce that, and the concept of a traitor for the villain."

While the initial development document was being drafted, Siobhan allowed herself time to reflect on the world of *Wing Commander*. Being passionate about science fiction, she jumped at the chance to add details and expand a world that was perhaps about to become as important as *Ultima*. Siobhan recalls:

"I think the initial idea for FTL travel in *WC*—'jump lanes' between fixed points in star systems—was Jeff George's invention. Once again this was game design driving story decisions: Having a fixed point in space as an objective, whether to surround and claim or make a desperate run to reach, opened up a world of mission design possibilities. A big challenge in space games is putting any kind of 'terrain' onto the battlefield to make maneuver and speed more interesting and important. Without some sort of fixed point, the faster ship will pretty much always have an insurmountable advantage. What I brought to the *Wing Commander* universe was a long history as a fan of 'hard SF,' and a background as a physics and astronomy major in college. I wrote up some background material for *WC2* that explained the plausible pseudoscience behind *WC1's* jump lanes. This took the form of a vignette story of an elderly university professor giving a folksy introductory lecture about the jump drive. The professor describes jump lanes as 'God's tramlines' or subway lines, and says 'If these are God's tramlines, then He must really like black holes, because those are always surrounded by stations.' There was a lot of other stuff about the topography of jump lanes visualized by lowering a stretched bedsheet into a swimming pool...I was really happy with the writing of that bit, but sadly I can't find it anymore. Anyway, the bottom line was that jump lanes were defined in unpredictable and poorly understood ways by gravity, making black holes strategically critical. This bit of backstory became the centerpiece of the plot to *WC2*, the fight for control of the Enigma Sector, a black hole with associated jump-point cluster creating a 'back door' to reach Earth."

Having achieved a certain degree of consistency, and filling in many of the gaps left by the previous chapter, Siobhan felt satisfied and went back to what was, after all, her strong point and main role: programming. Between sales of the base, expansions, and critical and public acclaim, *Wing Commander's* success was a triumph for the company. It was necessary to strike while the iron

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was hot and the right occasion to announce the sequel could only be the winter CES in Las Vegas, the most important event in the electronic entertainment industry.

“The announcement needed to be something eye-catching to show that we weren’t just recycling the engine, but were going to push technology forward,” Siobhan explains.

It was at this very moment that a synergistic series of wonderful circumstances, great skills, and good timing came into action and changed the course of events. As had happened before, technology was about to take a quantum leap, though the immediate and long-term consequences were not easy to predict. The first of such events was when Origin had chosen to switch from 8-bit platforms to the IBM PC at the most propitious time. The second time was with *Wing Commander*, a game that required hardware that only serendipitously became available to consumers during the game’s development.

This time, the important technological leap forward was the SoundBlaster. Siobhan explains:

“The dominant PC sound card at the time was the AdLib. The AdLib was designed to be a music synthesizer card, a fact that proved to be a critical (but forgivable) design failure. The AdLib consisted of trivial support and interface circuitry surrounding a third-party chip, the Yamaha YM3812, that did all the real work. Since the AdLib was aimed at studio musicians, it didn’t bother to enable the YM3812’s PCM (‘digital voice’ feature). After all, the only reason Yamaha had even put that feature into the YM3812 was for telephony applications like answering machines. Ignoring the feature saved AdLib some support circuitry and some testing costs, so it made good financial sense.”

As had happened with the Mockingbird sound card, the add-on card for the Apple II that Ken Arnold had ably exploited for the *Ultima III* soundtrack, AdLib’s sound card, although designed and manufactured for musicians, was instead used primarily by the most demanding gamers. Siobhan continues:

“PC game audio without add-on cards was terrible pulse-modulated speaker beeps. But the only alternative was thousand-dollar Roland synthesizers. Game developers supported those, because they made for flashy demos, but very few but the hardest of the hard core of gamers had them. But, since the developers created the audio assets anyway (both for the Roland market and for other computer platforms which unlike the IBM PC had built-in audio), adding sound support for other cards to games was a small expense. So when the AdLib reached the market, developers started supporting it, at which point gamers snapped it up—suddenly they could get a reasonable facsimile of Roland audio for 1/10th the price! And that kicked off a virtuous circle, as gamer purchases created a market that developers filled with games, and the existence of games created an appetite for sound cards that AdLib filled. So, AdLib suddenly found themselves selling thousands of times more product than they’d expected, but selling it to a completely unanticipated market.”

Shortly before the winter CES, Chris Roberts handed Siobhan a new sound card. To the surprise of the programmer, it was not an AdLib. Rather, it was a new brand, recently on the market which was donated in the form of development kits to the major video game companies. It was, of course, SoundBlaster. Beeman recalls:

“They had a similar product to the AdLib, using a different chip, the Philips SAA1099. This was similar to the Yamaha part but far inferior (though also cheaper, which is why Creative used it). It wasn’t enough cheaper to meaningfully compete on price, so the Creative Music System lost decisively to the AdLib. Creative swiftly pivoted and released a new card, the SoundBlaster, that

incorporated the Yamaha part so that it was instantly feature-competitive with the AdLib. Unlike AdLib, though, Creative went ahead and enabled the PCM features. This was a marketing gimmick: they labeled this capability ‘digital signal processing’ (which it wasn’t), the hot audiophile technology that was enabling things like DAT tapes, ‘digitally mastered’ recordings and compact discs. The SoundBlaster was slightly more expensive than the AdLib, since it had more parts (so as not to alienate their existing market, Creative actually included their old CMS card entirely on the SoundBlaster card, so the SoundBlaster was essentially two entire sound cards in one). So the SoundBlaster couldn’t really compete on price, and while it was technologically superior, that superiority wasn’t relevant to gamers.”

The main difference between AdLib and SoundBlaster, however, was at the management level. SoundBlaster’s marketing people had realized that the market was made up of avid gamers, ready to spend a lot of money to avoid playing with the annoying beeps of the PC speaker. This was the market that SoundBlaster wanted to target, and to do so, it had sent hundreds of development kits for free.

One of these arrived in the hands of Chris Roberts, who gave it to his director.

“[He] said ‘see what you can do with this—apparently it’s got digital voice, which might be neat,’” Siobhan recalls.

Realizing the potential of this new tool, the programmer set to work immediately to insert the necessary functions to make the card work in the animated sequences of the FX Engine. It was not an easy job: there were no tools of any kind and the animation and synchronization work was entirely hard-coded into the game’s programming.

“I rounded up random people in the building when I was working, usually after 11:00 p.m., to record the cinematics’ script—Marten Davies of the Porsche story was Admiral Sir Geoffrey Tolwyn; Ken Demarest, one of the key programmers on *WC1*, was Bluehair; Philip Brogden, a designer and tester on *Ultima* games, was Prince Thrakath; Martin Galway, our audio lead (and the nephew of famed Irish flautist James Galway) was the guard who announces the Prince’s arrival; and I pitched my gravelly sleep-deprived voice as absurdly low as possible to play the Emperor,” Beeman recalls.

The recording was done with a cheap microphone and none of the participants, despite their enthusiasm, were really qualified for that assignment.

“The results[...]in terms of voice acting are astonishingly terrible and embarrassing,” remembers Siobhan with a smile.

However, no one at CES expected anything like this.

“It set CES abuzz,” Beeman explains, “preorders soared.”

The balance of the company changed again. As preorders increased and other projects reached advanced stages of completion or went to press, the resources needed to develop *Wing Commander II* were diverted to the offices where, at least initially, only Siobhan, Ellen, and Chris had worked.

Even then it wasn’t enough.

“As *WC2* moved from preproduction to full production,” Siobhan explains, “Origin went on a hiring spree. The existing staff were by that point fully allocated to all the other projects just starting up (*Martian Dreams*, *Strike Commander*, *Ultima 7*), so *WC2*’s needs were met by new hires.”

Graphic designers like Chris Douglas and Denis Loubet, programmers like Bill Baldwin, musicians for the soundtrack like Martin Galway and George “The Fat Man” Sanger, sound engineers to create

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the sound effects like Marc Schaeffgen, and the entire QA department were brought in to develop and test the game.

Although *Wing Commander II* was ultimately a sort of *Wing Commander* “on steroids” and had inherited a good deal of its engine from its predecessor, Siobhan’s team ended up being larger than the one that had finished the first chapter the previous year. It benefited from having more sound engineers and musicians, more software engineers and artists, more writers, and generally more highly skilled professionals. Aside from the acting for what would later be released as the “Speech Pack” every detail was taken care of by the most appropriate and competent professional to get the job done right.

The *Wing Commander II* team was not satisfied, however, to simply improve on what they already had. Despite the limited timeline, there was also the intention to add features and expand the gameplay. Siobhan explains:

“We knew we wanted to add gunnery positions to the game, a la the famous scenes from *Star Wars IV*. What was necessary was an in-fiction rationale for why those positions would exist. Modern jet fighters after all don’t have turret gunners, because that weight is far better spent on additional speed and maneuverability. So we created bombers, a ship type that would be forced to fly slowly in a straight line and thus needed gunners if it was to have any defense at all. To give bombers an excuse to exist, we introduced torpedoes, a weapon that would be devastating against capital ships but required a period of slow, straight flight to ‘lock on’ and fire. This was of course another example of basing *Wing Commander* combat on World War II fighter combat, in this case torpedo bombers like USN Avengers and IJN Kates. I’d say that *Star Wars* and “WWII air combat” were the two cornerstones of *Wing Commander*, but *Star Wars* itself was also based on WWII dogfights, so really that’s what all of this comes back to.”

Not everything went right, however. In particular, although the introduction of bombers was well received, not all players actually found it fun—or appropriate—to leave the driving of the vehicle to pilot the turret, thus becoming an easy target.

“The introduction of new mechanics like bombers,” Beeman explains, “meant that we needed new AI routines to fly them, to fire the guns when the player was flying one, and to make enemies conduct strafing attack runs in an appropriately showy and cinematic manner when the player was operating a turret. I do remember a good chunk of time going into that and everything else related to bombers. Ultimately I don’t think bombers paid off enough to have been worth the investment, unfortunately, but our hearts were in the right place.”

The AI of the first chapter had been taken care of by Ken Demarest while Siobhan had been in charge of writing the tables that governed the “cinematic” behavior of the Kilrathi fighters. This too was taken further in the second episode. Siobhan again:

“I think there was a desire among almost everybody at Origin to make the AI ‘better,’ which is to say ‘more capable of evaluating the situation and choosing a tactically sound maneuver.’ However, I know that such an effort would have been fruitless—not only did we not have the spare CPU cycles nor the expertise to make ‘smart’ AI, a ‘smart’ system wouldn’t even be desirable. We knew exactly how to make an unbeatable AI: pick a point about five ship lengths behind the player, and fly to that spot as directly and single-mindedly as possible. This AI existed for testing purposes, but was too boring to use in the game, even for a ‘hard’ boss fight. That’s the smartest AI possible, and doesn’t

take complicated algorithms at all. Any effort to create a 'smart' AI would either be flawed, or would succeed and arrive at that same unbeatable AI through a more time-consuming and expensive coding path. The role of the AI in computer games is to make the player feel accomplished, and I think the *WC1* AI did that very well. AI programming should focus on making the AI do interesting things that look smart, to make the player feel smart. So I'd like to believe that people generally said 'let's improve the AI,' and I at the time said 'nah, that's not how this works' and we spent our efforts making the AI look flashier and more fun."

There were also cuts to the plot.

"I know we discarded a lot of ideas," Ellen explains, "even with that much storytelling time, you always have to cut stuff. But I can't remember at this point any specific ideas that didn't make it into the final storyline. But one interesting thing from that...almost all the art created to support story and game elements that were cut from *WC2* made it into the *Special Operations* game, though modified to fit that format. We basically never threw away any art if we could help it."

Nevertheless, time was running out. Management anticipated that the game would be ready in time for Christmas 1991. Originally scheduled for a June '91 release, *Wing Commander* was released two months late, confirming Origin's tendency to miss deadlines though still managing to do better than other titles by virtue of being on store shelves for the entire holiday season.

Wing Commander's sales, even if in strong decline, were still consistent and so it happened that the two games passed the baton: in August '91, almost a year after its launch, *Wing Commander* was still in the sixth position, down one point from the previous month. The following month, *Wing Commander II* immediately entered the fifth place of the SPA Top-20 ranking for MS-DOS published by *Computer Gaming World*.

Sales were also strong for the Speech Pack, the expansion that added digitized speech to space combat and some animated sequences.

"*Wing Commander 2*," Siobhan recalls, "became the first AAA game to feature digital voice. That single game, leveraging the impact of that initial demo I created late at night during that winter, was the cornerstone of all of Creative Labs' future success. Within a week of *WC2* shipping later that year, SoundBlasters were out of stock everywhere in the country, and the company could barely keep up with backorders."

The base game, as had happened for the first chapter of the series, was soon followed by two other expansions, all of which were rewarded with excellent sales. Many years later, the publication of expansions with additional missions and, in particular, the *Speech Pack*, was partly criticized. The researcher and writer Jimmy Maher, in one of his articles dedicated to *Wing Commander*, expressed himself in this way towards the company: "Origin thus continued to monetize *Wing Commander* like crazy to pay for their latest *Ultima*. In a cash grab that feels almost unbelievably blatant today, they shipped a separate 'Speech Accessory Pack' simultaneously with the core game." Maher's harsh judgment about the add-on policy requires some further clarification.

"Here's the truth of those products," Siobhan explains, "they did not exist to milk money out of consumers, they existed to get stores to pay us for games that we had already manufactured and shipped."

The problem first arose when Origin broke commercial ties with EA and signed a distribution contract with Broderbund, and then decided to go it alone.

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“But they found out the hard way,” Dr. Cat explains, “retailers won’t pay you for the games you shipped them until you force them to. They would lie and say the check is in the mail or whatever. Until finally they call YOU and say ‘Your new *Wing Commander* game sounds good, send us 5,000 copies for our stores’ and you say ‘Not until you pay us for the copies of *Ultima VI* we shipped you’ and then surprisingly you have a check fed-exed to you that arrives the next day.”

With small retailers, the situation was even worse. Beeman explains:

“A store would order, say, 10 copies of *WC2* under ‘net-90’ payment terms, meaning they had 90 days to pay us. This was standard industry practice (probably still is to be honest) and amounted to giving the stores interest-free loans to fund their inventory. No big deal; we’d already spent the money to write the code and duplicate the disks, and it was if anything cheaper to have the product sit on the store’s shelves than in our warehouse. The catch came when the 90 days were up, at which point a lot of stores (not all, but more than you would imagine) would just...not pay us. Super unethical, but what are you gonna do, right? It’s not like they had a credit rating for us to ruin, and it certainly wasn’t worth suing them for \$250. And besides, fair’s fair, they were doing the exact same thing to the big publishers like EA. Just the cost of doing business.”

Large companies like EA, however, had a much bigger catalog and numerous titles coming out each month. They had the bargaining power to demand what they were owed without going to court.

“When a store had a balance in arrears with EA,” Beeman explains, “EA would—quite reasonably—simply refuse to ship new product. The end customers wound up being the muscle to get the stores to pay what they owed, because a store that didn’t honor its terms would not have the *next* game, and people would take their business down the street.”

For Origin, the situation was not as good. In 1989, it had released six titles, but the following year only three: *Bad Blood*, *Ultima VI*, and *Wing Commander* (since *Savage Empire* would not arrive until later).

“We had the biggest hit games of the year,” Siobhan explains, “*and we couldn’t get paid for them.* We needed new products to ship to get paid for the old products, and we needed them fast.”

It was the same reason the two spin-offs of *Ultima VI*, the *Worlds of Ultima* games, were conceived. There was not only the goal to maximize profits and exploit an engine that had cost a fortune, but also, presumably, to further attract a part of the public already fond of *Ultima* and Origin. But first *Savage Empire* and then *Martian Dreams* were not as successful as initially hoped and therefore did not fulfill their main task: to provide Origin with interesting titles to push distribution to pay on time and keep reordering.

“We needed product,” Beeman again explains, “that would be demanded by a reasonable percentage of the main games’ customers, could be shipped quickly and frequently, and didn’t delay the main dev teams from getting the next big games out the door. Thus, the *Speech Packs* and *Secret Mission* disks.”

Wing Commander II was even more successful than its predecessor, propelling Origin to the top of the PC gaming market and accelerating both the company and industry’s transformation. It was also the sound card killer app, leaving an indelible mark on video game history.

“Here's the moral of this story for technologists,” Beeman concludes, “don't picture the market for your product, picture the potential market. AdLib and Creative both designed products for the music market, and AdLib did it better. But Creative pivoted and re-imagined AdLib's own product, adding features for which a market did not exist. Those features called a market into existence. Given the technology, game developers used it, creating demand.”

This text is an extract from “Through the Moongate — The story of Richard Garriott, Origin Systems Inc. and Ultima: Part II from Wing Commander and Ultima VII to Portalarium” . Its translation in English and its publishing were possible thanks to Kickstarter backers who funded them.

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