DEREK SMART CLOSES DOWN THE UNIVERSE

One of PC gaming's most notorious indie developers retires the decade-old *Battlecruiser* franchise

Mention the name Derek Smart to almost anyone in the PC gaming world—consumers and industry types alike—and you'll likely elicit a reaction. Envy, bemusement, and open antagonism all are valid responses to one of the most combative characters on the indie PC gaming scene.

Smart's *Battlecruiser* and *Universal Combat* space-flight sims are niche games built for a specific audience—namely, people who think and game like Derek Smart. Though the series has earned mixed reviews (and a variety of publishers) over the past decade, Smart recently decided to retire the franchise following the soon-to-be-released compilation entitled *Universal Combat Collector's Edition.* Our curiosity piqued, we asked Derek some questions about his past accomplishments and future plans.

by ANDY MAHOOD

■ A shot from *Universal Combat Collector's Edition.*

PCG: Just about any description you read about Derek Smart, online or in print, brings up adjectives like "controversial" and "maverick" (and, to a lesser degree, "bombastic" and "arrogant"). What's your take on these characterizations?

DS: Well, "bombastic" is a new one. As for being an arrogant controversial maverick is concerned...well, they're probably right. It's always good to have a little amount of arrogance, I think. I didn't go looking for controversy; it just kinda landed on me due to my efforts to follow my dreams and my not allowing idiots on the Net to put me under siege. As for being a maverick, almost every freethinking innovator and/or pioneer is a maverick of sorts. So I guess I'm in good company.

PCG: What can gamers expect to see in *UCCE* that they haven't seen before?

DS: Quite a bit, actually. Those who have all the games in the series will see several improvements in graphics, audio, and AI. For those who missed a game or two in the series—or who never tried it—they get one massive game they'll be playing until their grandchildren get married. For the others, they get an all-in-one classic, because, quite frankly, games like this aren't going to be made again.

PCG: You've taken two former publishers (Take Two and Dreamcatcher) to court. Is this just business as usual or is there something specific about the way you want to see your games marketed/distributed that fueled these conflicts?

DS: What publishers do, by taking your product and either (a) not paying for it or (b) cooking the books, is not only theft, but also fraudulent. Being independently wealthy means that at the drop of a hat, I can take legal action against a publisher if they starting messing with my livelihood. If all devs had the resources—or guts—to take legal action against publishers, there'd be more of it. For me, since I've never, ever needed a publisher to sell my games, I couldn't care less who it is I'm going after. You cheat, you pay. It's simple, really. Companies sue each other all the time; the only reason my legal actions make the news is because of who I am.

PCG: Your games tend to deliver unapologetic sandbox experiences set against a massive universe that players must often navigate and decipher on their own. Have you ever considered a more conventional approach, or is this what your fan base demands?

DS: That was the original goal from the start, and since I primarily only develop games that I would want to play, I have no incentive to go with the flow. There are lots of space games that have come and gone. Meanwhile, eight games later, my otherwise unapologetically niche games go on, and the install base gets larger with each release. I found that somewhere out there, a select group of gamers shared my vision and my style.

PCG: Will you stay with PC gaming or do you anticipate a shift to console games?

DS: I go where my ideas take me. Since we've been heavily involved with digital distribution, I have all but scuttled plans for a retail Xbox 360 title in favor of Xbox Live Arcade. As a patently unapologetic Microsoft loyalist, going from the PC to that console is just the natural progression of things. Especially now that they actually have a console that can power my ideas. If I wanted to develop some trickled-down rubbish and throw it up there, I'd have done it by now. When you're an indie, you aren't afforded those luxuries. So, in my case, I have been taking my time and working with the XBLA crew to come up with a title that is not only worthy of the platform, but which will also appeal to its subscribers. ●