

MG Interview: Eric Young

by Karen Kaye

IMG: Eric, let me first ask you to explain to our readers what it is exactly that you do for a company like Atomic?

Young: My first and foremost duty is to pick the battle that we do a game on. I try to pick battles that have high mobility and/or lots of interesting features or twists with the possibility of being fun to play, having good play balance and several good scenarios. The titles should also have good name recognition like Stalingrad or The Battle of the Bulge.

Then I research the title for order of battle, (the units in the game) the game map, weather data, supply data, new features that are required, draw the unit counters and the map prototype, and translate this data into spreadsheets that the programmers use to make the game. I also write copy for a lot of the printed material in the game.

I usually have most of this done before any programming on a title begins.

IMG: Sounds like you are the major force behind implementing many of the new features of the product.

Young: All of the people who worked on Crusader have major input on the final product. Keith, Jeff Wessevich, Doug Walker, Larry Merkel, and myself are the BIG five but we listen to all of our in house playtesters (Bob Mayor, Bob Arning, and Andy Veres) and they have contributed greatly to the design. We also read all the email we get and consider all suggestions from all users of all Atomic products.

IMG: How did you get started in this line of work? Has history always been a hobby that sort of just turned into employment?

Young: I have always been a history buff and a board wargamer. I have 128 hours of college credit in history, geography, cartography, German language, and political science but never could find a excuse to take the bowling so I never graduated. This training has served me well in my work with Atomic Games.

I got my start by recommendation from my good friend Ed Rains. He was the game

designer behind V4V Utah Beach. We had worked on many unpublished game designs dating back to the 70s and when my previous publisher decided to publish more titles than Ed was comfortable doing they came to me. We had worked on a board game version of V4V Velikiye Luki so I helped with it and started work on V4V Market Garden.

IMG: I think Ed Rains is currently working on a modern combat simulation called Tac Ops. Have you in the past or are you currently collaborating with Ed on a project?

Young: Ed Rains and I are very good friends (we have known each other since 1975), we worked together on the V4V games but our paths have split. He is working on a game series called ETO and (as far as I know) has nothing to do with Tac Ops beyond helping Major Holdridge in getting it published. We still use each other as sounding boards for game design issues.

IMG: When you conduct your research, do you leave no stone unturned? Tell us an interesting anecdote about how you came across something important in an unexpected place.

Young: I do my research as completely as possible. I have two large private libraries to work in as well as my own and I also tap the National Archives and am working on connections with the National Archives of Germany.

The other day I was sitting in a bar having a drink when the bartender turned to A&E on television. The subject of the documentary was Erwin Rommel. After a short exchange over who would hold the remote control, the rest of the bar and myself were educated in Rommel's life story. It contained much of the biographical information on both Rommel and Gott that is in Operation Crusader. Although we had already put this info into the game it was interesting to see it on TV.

IMG: I was told that you have a 2000 volume personal library. How long did this take to amass, and what three books would you save first from a fire?

Young: 2000 volumes is an exaggeration, but I do own more books than the average person reads in a lifetime. I have collected books on military topics for as long as I can remember. In case of fire I would try to save Victory in the West: Volumes I & II by L. F. Ellis and Das Heer 1933-1945 by Mueller-Hillebrand, they are hard to find. If it were not for a house fire in 1985 I might have closer to 2000 volumes.

IMG: I just had a chance to take a look at an advanced beta of Operation Crusader, the new game that Atomic is about to release. I am very impressed. Tell me what aspects of the game you are particularly fond of? I am also curious, if time and money was abundant, what would you like to have seen differently in the release version of the game?

Young: The new combat and supply systems coupled with the open desert setting of Operation Crusader make it the best of all my work. I am very fond of Doug Walker and Larry Merkel's new strategic artificial intelligence program, it will hurt you if you're not careful. Operation Crusader is also the cleanest program Atomic Games has ever released with a big thanks going to Jeff (no time for fun) Wessevich. The interface has undergone many improvements also, foremost of which is Keith Zabalaoui's tool bar.

We took a lot of time in putting Operation Crusader together and, although we are broke, I am very pleased with the product.

IMG: Since some will invariably infer that Operation Crusader, the first in the World at War

series, is nothing more than son of V for Victory. How this feel about this assertion?

Young: Thankfully Operation Crusader and the World at War have only a mask of similarity. It is true they are genetically linked but so are men and orangutans.

IMG: Operation Crusader will feature Overrun attacks. Why did you wait to implement this in Crusader? Was it something that you wanted to do for some time, or will it likely remain a permanent feature of the World at War series?

Young: Overruns were suggested by an editor of a game magazine. We would have done overruns in the V4V system but the games I worked on didn't NEED it so it was always on the back burner. We decided we would like to have it and that we had time to do it so it made it into Crusader. It will be a permanent feature of The World at War.

IMG: Are you an avid boardgamer? Do you attend any conventions? More importantly what do you do when you want to get away from work?

Young: I play a lot of boardgames, mostly World in Flames and Squad Leader, and am always looking for new games to play.

I try to go to the Winter Consumer Electronics Show and Origins every year.

"Getting away from work" usually means I am camping, floating, shooting, or going to "music parties."

IMG: OK, help out those of us who are not so hip. What is a "music party"?

Young: A music party is when you get together with your attorney and the two best looking blonds in the world, then camp in the best camping spot in the world with the best battery powered sound system you can find, stay up all night listening to everything from Peter Gabriel to frog calls, get really blasted, and forget all about any trouble you ever had with any publisher in the past.

IMG: What is your non-work relationship with Keith Zabalaoui and the rest of Atomic? Can you tell us any embarrassing stories about Keith that he himself would not necessarily divulge?

Young: My non-work relationship with Keith Zabalaoui is very good, you could say we are one big happy (very close) family. I really couldn't say anything bad about anyone I work with and I am very sincere.

IMG: It does sound like your sincere about your coworkers. Who is it exactly that we are talking about when we say Atomic and what do they all contribute?

Young: Atomic Games Inc. is a group of twelve programmers and myself who work very hard to get the best computer wargames possible to as many people as possible.

IMG: What are you currently working on, and what tantalizing secrets can you give away at this time?

Young: Our schedule is very open at Atomic, Stalingrad is the next game with the Battle of the Bulge coming in late 1994. After that I hope to be working on a Civil War game. A new

more strategic level game system with more historical (than has been applied in the past) detail is a dream I would like to see done.

IMG: Thanks for taking the time out with us. I look forward to hearing about your "exploits" in the future. Be kind to Elvis.