

GAME

BOY



Called the Steven Spielberg of the computer gaming industry, Hunt Valley designer Sid Meier walks softly but creates big hits.

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Sid Meier seems content these days. Of course, with the self-effacing Meier, it can be hard to tell. Here's the creator of the mega-hit computer game *Civilization*, a guy who has achieved brand-name status by titillating mankind's lust for world domination. Yet in person, Meier is so low-key you can nearly forget he's there.

On this afternoon, Meier is hanging with the brass of his Hunt Valley company, Firaxis Games. The three men sit in CEO Jeff Briggs's office, taking a break from post-production cleanup of their latest opus, *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*. While Briggs and Firaxis vice president Brian Reynolds look like urban hipsters with their goatees, the 45-year-old Meier is as carefully combed and clean-shaven as a preacher.

Discussing how the area has become a mecca for computer-game developers, CEO Briggs refers to Hunt Valley as "the Silicon Valley of the East."

Actually, cracks Meier in a thin, playful voice, "We like to think of Silicon Valley as Hunt Valley West."

This is not the glum Meier I remember. Three years ago, when I first met him, Meier was toiling away at MicroProse, another Hunt Valley concern. Though already famous—in certain circles—as the author of *Civilization*, he seemed disheartened, just a cog in the works, a designer dutifully trotted out of his ground-floor office when the press came calling. From Meier's stature at MicroProse, you'd never guess that he was one of the company's founders.

Now, in his top-floor office at Firaxis, I ask him about the change. Why so buoyant, Sid?

"There's more oxygen up here," Meier jokes, motioning at the view from his window. Like a player in one of his own strategy games, Meier can look out over land he has conquered—in that he's looking at other computer-game companies, each aching for a Meier-sized hit.

There's an irony at play, though. Meier's games are all about the nuances

of growing and maintaining nations, industries, armies, and, most recently, planets. But in his business life, Meier seems to have decided that bigger is not always better. Market domination may be nice, but for Sid Meier, it's not the name of the game.

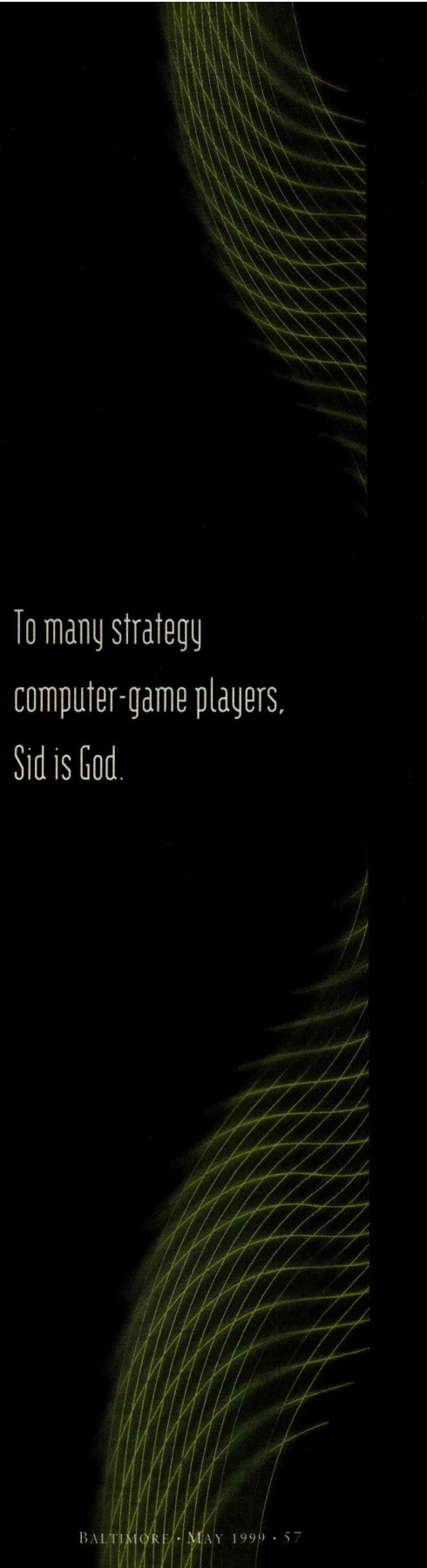
UNLESS YOU PLAY A LOT OF COMPUTER games, you've probably never heard of Sid Meier. But mention the name to the people whose purchases fund the \$5.5-billion-a-year electronic gaming industry and, chances are, you'll get fawning responses.

"To me and many other strategy gamers, Sid is God," gushes long-time fan Rod Ramsey, a 31-year-old Atlanta banking software programmer who often discusses the designer's games on Internet newsgroups like *comp.sys.ibm.pc.games*.

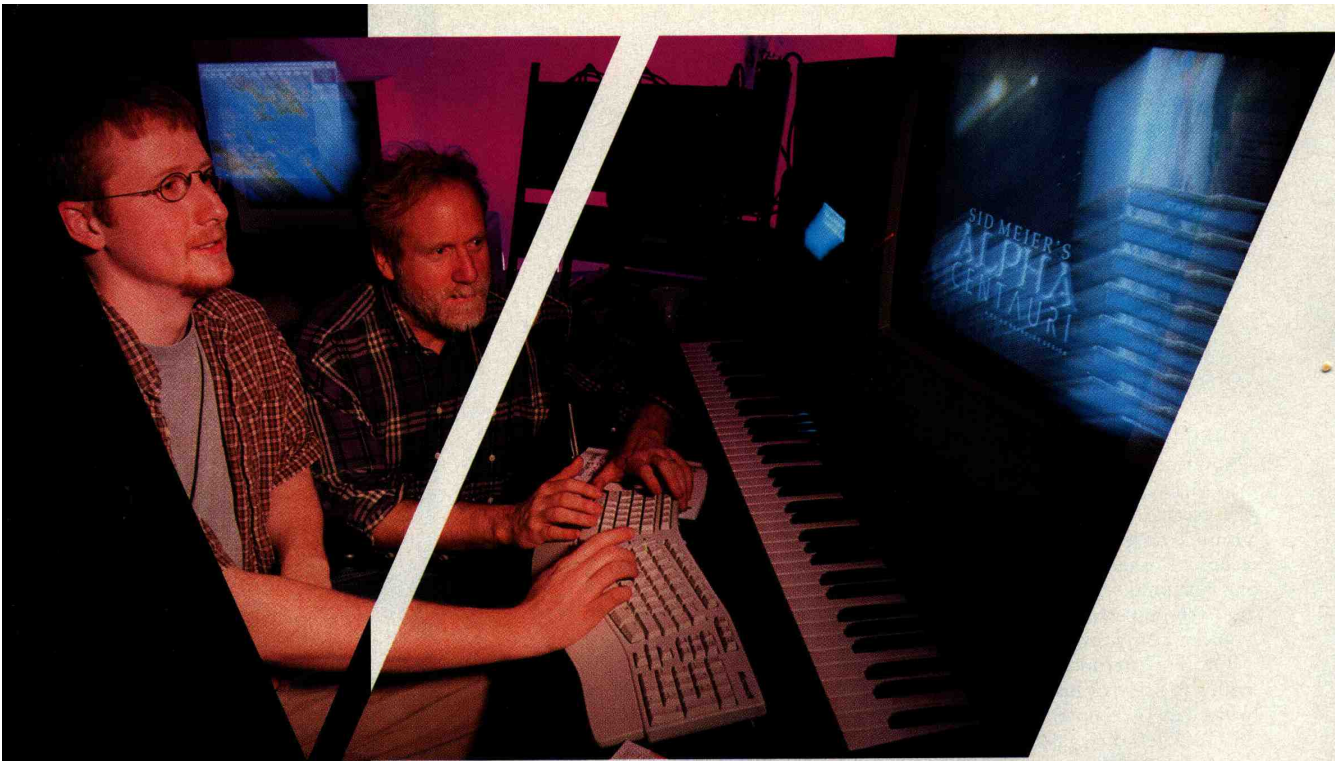
"Sid Meier is the closest the computer gaming industry has to a Steven Spielberg," agrees Terry Coleman, the reviews editor for *Computer Gaming World* magazine.

Play *Civilization* once and you'll see why. The game can be tremendously addicting. You start from scratch at the dawn of human civilization, with the goal of ruling the world. Before long, you're battling Mongol hordes to grab as much of their fertile land as possible, while Babylonian soldiers are landing on both of your coasts. Suddenly, the citizens in one of your towns start to riot. Their morale is low. They don't want to build catapults anymore. They want to build a temple! A temple! Can you believe it? How many Babylonians can you fend off with a temple? Computer games like *Duke Nukem* let you blow things to pieces, but *Civilization* lets you taste the same thirst for power that drove Julius Caesar.

Though the world-building game *SimCity* came earlier, it was Meier's ingenious and intricate 1991 game that experts considered revolutionary. In fact, it's hard to overstate the influence *Civilization* had on the insular computer gaming industry. In February, when the



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This month, Sid Meier
will become the
second-ever inductee
into the Academy
of Interactive
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Hall of Fame.

respected gaming magazine *Next Generation* listed the 50 greatest games of all time, *Civilization* was ranked number four, behind only *Tetris*, the *Mario* series, and Nintendo's *Zelda* series. Not only did *Civilization* revive game genres thought to be dead—those based on history or strategy—but it demonstrated the potential complexity of the medium, offering players a seemingly endless variety of challenges and situations. With *Civilization*, it was as if the computer took on a life of its own.

On May 13, Meier's peers will recognize that impact: The Hunt Valley resident will be inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame. Meier is the second Hall of Fame inductee, following only Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto, who sent Donkey Kong and the Mario Brothers scrambling across the world's collective consciousness.

The genesis of this success is Meier's unusual intellect, colleagues say. "Of all the people I've ever met, I've never known someone I'd suspect would have a higher IQ than Sid," says Brian Reynolds, vice president of software development at Firaxis.

"Sid is an original thinker," concurs Firaxis CEO Briggs, who has worked closely with Meier for the past decade. "Sid is able to take the most off-the-wall topic and make it bloom into a fun

Freelancer Joab Jackson writes the "Cyberpunk" column for City Paper. He is a former research director of Baltimore.

At Hunt Valley's Firaxis Games, Jason Coleman and David Evans develop computer games.

game." Briggs cites Meier's 1990 Micro-Prose game *Railroad Tycoon*. "I remember when that was first proposed, the management was like 'What? A game about railroads?' But it worked," he recalls. "The same thing happened with *Civilization*. Most of the people there thought a game about a history of the world wouldn't work: 'It's a strategy game. You can't sell those.'"

THE LEGEND OF HOW SID MEIER GOT into the computer gaming business goes something like this: Back in the early 1980s, the Detroit native came to Baltimore for a job programming cash register networks at General Instrument Corporation's Hunt Valley office. There, he met former Air Force fighter pilot "Wild" Bill Stealey, who did business development with the company. Stealey was always regaling Meier with stories about his days as a pilot. Yet during a trip to Las Vegas, Meier easily outscored Stealey on a flight simulator arcade game. Stealey was flabbergasted. He was the pilot, after all. How did Meier do it? Simple: During Stealey's turn at the machine, Meier had trained his Cal Ripken bullet-blue eyes on the screen, noting the game's every move. By the time his own turn came, Meier could easily predict when and where the next enemy



Sid Meier, bottom left, with colleagues, from left: Tim Train, Greg Foertsch, Dave Inscore, Jason Coleman, Chris Pine, Jeff Morris, Jeff Briggs, David Evans, Susan Meier, and Michael Bazzell.

planes would appear. He told Stealey he could program a far better game.

So, with \$1,500 in start-up cash, the two formed MicroProse in Meier's basement. It was a small-scale operation at first, with Xeroxed manuals and disks stuffed into baggies by volunteered family members. Stealey adeptly handled the business end, while Meier set off on a game-by-game mission to push back the limitations he had sensed in that Las Vegas arcade.

Yet as MicroProse grew, catching the late-'80s wave of desktop computer buyers, Meier himself didn't play the company's own boardroom power game. Instead, he bunkered down in the trenches of creative development as Stealey built up the sales and marketing forces. By 1990, MicroProse was reaping \$25 million a year in profits, though its increased infrastructure took a toll on profits as the recession of the early 1990s hit. Eventually, the company was sold to the larger, California-based game company Spectrum HoloByte, now owned by Hasbro Interactive. Stealey himself bailed from the company altogether, and Meier had further retreated, working under the title "consultant."

"At that point, they were trying to manage it from the West Coast," recalls

Briggs, who joined MicroProse in 1988 and eventually became its director of product development. "It was hard for Spectrum HoloByte to keep track of what was going on."

Briggs, a game designer in his own right, left MicroProse in May 1996 to form his own company, Firaxis. Brian Reynolds followed in June and Meier in July, though Briggs says that wasn't necessarily part of his business plan: "I had no idea if these two guys would make the jump."

While most companies start out small by necessity, Briggs sees staying small as a distinct advantage for Firaxis. "I think in the gaming industry, when you're making computer games, you have a lot of artistic, creative people all trying to work on the same thing at the same time. If you're a big corporation and you have lots of layers, it just slows the process down," Briggs says.

Meier prefers working in the smaller pond of Firaxis because, he says, "I have more confidence in the people here. I know exactly what they're capable of, so I can just tell our sound guy what I need and not stop by every day and listen to what he's doing to make sure he's on the right track."

Firaxis has only one marketing person and no sales department to feed. It simply licenses the games it produces to distribution companies, which specialize in such muscle. This allows Firaxis to release the kind of games the designers want to do. This is important: Most game industry analysts agree that Meier is one of the last game designers to write games solely

On one legendary trip to Las Vegas, Meier easily outscored a fighter pilot on a flight-simulator arcade game. How did he do it?

because he himself would want to play them. Games these days tend to be brought into existence by focus groups and market studies, *Computer Gaming World's* Coleman points out. And most gaming companies equate big budgets with good games—an equation that holds little sway with computer gamers themselves.

In 1997, Firaxis released the lavishly packaged *Sid Meier's Gettysburg!* Though a bit of an oddity by computer gaming industry standards—it was based on the three-day Civil War battle—it sold well enough for the distributor gaming heavy-weight Electronic Arts to extend a publishing agreement for two additional titles. And although the newest game, *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*, has only just been released, it looks like it may sell very well. Set in the 22nd century, the game tackles the social and economic complexities of colonizing a new planet. Sound familiar? "There is little doubt in my mind that if Sid Meier was still with MicroProse, the name of this game would have been *Civilization III: Alpha Centauri*," wrote Jason MacIsaac for the Gamesmania website.

One anomaly, though: *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* was conceived and largely designed not by Meier, but by 31-year-old Firaxis veep Reynolds, the only one of the company's three founders who sports the burgeoning rotundity so common among hardcore computer users. Reynolds has a good feel for creating Meier-like games. "I would say that Sid taught me everything I know," Reynolds says. He and Meier trade off as lead designers at Firaxis. While Meier was in charge of getting *Sid Meier's Gettysburg!* out the door, Reynolds created and put together a prototype of *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*. Now that it has been released, its namesake is busy at work ramping up the next creation. In fact, based on Firaxis's short history, it's almost as if Meier is leaving Reynolds the work of creating name-brand blockbusters like *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*, freeing Meier for other quirky, more experimental projects.

TO GO BY HIS SUCCESSES, YOU MIGHT picture Meier as one of those hacker types stuck in front of a keyboard churning out code for entire days at a time, with a growing pile of candy wrappers and empty Jolt cans beside him. But despite his ability to make magic with the C and C++ programming languages, Meier enjoys a family life. In his time off, the program designer plays computer games with his 8-year-old son, Ryan—*Diablo* and *StarCraft* are the latest favorites.

Divorced from Ryan's mother, Meier met his second wife, Susan, through his sister. The two sing in the choir at Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cockeysville, for which Meier composes music.


The two dated for about three years and were married this past October. In keeping with their musical interest, the entire bridal party was dressed in baroque costume. (Meier is a big Bach fan.) A string quartet played baroque music during the ceremony and reception, and all the guests joined in a rendition of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus."

THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS OFFICE AT Firaxis—the one with the most floor space and the most breathtaking panoramic view (of Oregon Ridge Park)—is enjoyed not by Meier but by Reynolds. If the company personnel made a game of occupying their work environment, Reynolds most certainly would have racked up more points than his mentor.

But if there were such a game, one senses Meier wouldn't be very interested in playing it. Nor does he seem to feel pressured by his previous success—to do another *Civilization*, rock the foundations of the industry, and put Firaxis on Easy Street. "If *Civilization* turns out to be the best game I've ever done, that's fine with me," Meier says. "I'm not in the mode where every game has to be bigger, better, fill up two disks . . . three disks . . . five disks!" he says, perhaps taking a jab at the *Riven*, the somewhat overwrought five-CD follow-up to the megaseller *Myst*. "It's not what motivates me. I'm glad I had one *Civilization*. That's more than most people."

What does motivate Meier is far simpler. "A few years back, I came to the realization that all the types of game topics I found interesting were things that as a kid I went through a phase with," he says. "I went through a Civil War phase. I had to read all the books on the Civil War. Or railroads—I went through a time when I had to learn about railroads." In other words, the depth of detail that computer gamers so admire in Meier's work is just an outgrowth of his own boyish obsessions.

When Meier returns to these topics years later, though, he finds in himself new levels of appreciation, which is also incorporated in his games. "As a kid, you just kind of accept everything 'Oh yeah, railroads are cool,'" Meier explains. "Then as an adult you ask 'Well, how do they not crash into each other?' or 'How did they pay for all those trains?' I try to combine fun the kids have with the topic with the depth an adult would bring to it."

Meier won't talk about what his next game will be, though I did spy a stack of books on music theory and Bach in his office. "There is no end to topics," he says. "I still have five or six games I always wanted to do that I haven't gotten around to yet, so I haven't lost any enthusiasm. I can't imagine doing something that would be more fun." 

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