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Rage Quit

Robert Marcuson
Syracuse University

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ROBERT MARCUSON

Call me addict. Call me computer game junkie. I'm not talking about those fast-action games, shooters spattering pixelated blood. Those are just dumb. I have in mind slower and more thoughtful games requiring planning and strategic thinking, where you might actually pause and think before the next move. You don't need fast-action to be an addict. Board games and real people are more fun than computers, but nowadays, computers seem to be how it's done. To incite rage, a computer may be best. Maybe because it's so hard to talk back to a computer.

My addiction began long before computers. Mr. Mead brought a stack of mimeographed papers to his fifth grade class and a supply of those little kid scissors. Alternating dark and light squares were printed on each mimeo sheet, and 32 circles about the size of nickels were printed with symbols for rooks and pawns and all the rest. Mr. Mead drew

diagrams on the blackboard, and we kids cut out the paper boards and little circles. Then Mr. Mead used his last period class to show us all how to play chess.

Novices are stymied just setting up the game, all those different pieces, moving differently, each set up on their different squares. Like the black queen on the black square stands opposite the white queen on the white square. But after one period a day for five days, we would have it down, as Mr. Mead told us.

I didn't finish my game at school that day, but after school I walked with my friend to his house. They say strong memories are created by strong emotions. I don't remember my friend's name now or much about him—it was so long ago—except seeing him sitting across the table from me in his mother's kitchen. The sun is bright through the windows behind him. It's my move. Still, my

first day of chess, I didn't know the queens were set up incorrectly. But the center pawns were already captured and gone. I saw my queen sitting exactly opposite his king across the board, so I captured it. This is how I won my first chess game.

A few years later, my favorite was an Avalon Hill game called *Tactics II*. The game board was shared by two warring countries, each with their half-dozen cities. Dozens of cardboard squares comprised the Red and Blue armies, infantry, armor, even nukes moved over roads, rivers, mountains, woods, and beaches. Army engineers built bridges across rivers. Mountain infantry specialized in rugged terrain. Dice produced weather. Paratroopers never flew in snow, and heavy rains slowed you down. And you had to be careful with the nukes. They only fired once.

It's my mother's kitchen table this time. Middle school, maybe early high school. My cousin Doug moved first as it was my game, and I was more experienced. We skirmished cautiously, neither wanting to commit. Reserves marched up from the rear. Mountain divisions deployed to guard the rugged passes. Early skirmish victory might be easy, but early victors might be slaughtered during the next turn, the retaliation.

My cousin can be forgiven. The nuke rule had never been used before, and his two-year age deficiency was no advantage. Poor Doug probably had never heard of a first strike. He was not watching how I maneuvered my limited-range nukes, and when he finished his next move doing nothing to defend, I struck. All my tactical nukes moved their maximum distance and launched. All at once, Doug lost six of his seven nukes, including his ICBM missile and clusters of

infantry and armor that he had failed to disperse. Doug was demoralized. But it was not a game like chess that encourages resignation once the situation was hopeless. We played it out. Doug's remaining tactical nuke took out an infantry division. It was all he could reach as my armor was tucked safely in the rear. A move or two later, my armor rolled into his capital. I don't recall that Doug and I ever played *Tactics II* again.

With later friends and college students, I played *Risk*. We expanded the rules to allow more time for bargaining strategies to play out. Strategies mostly in the form of, "You attack Sue in Quebec and Greenland. I will attack her from Alberta, and then we divide up North America!" Or, "I agree to let you have Ukraine, and even all of Europe if you want it. You just let me have those little purple countries down around Micronesia and Australia." Anybody who thought Ukraine was a good place to own property really hadn't played much. My strategy was usually the same: Hole up in easily defended Australia until enough power was accumulated and sufficient mistakes made, then pow! Blitzkrieg! Come to think of it, that's what happened to poor cousin Doug.

A rage event did occur one day during *Risk*. Not me. RB jumped up clenched fist. I forget now why he wanted to punch me. Probably because I invaded Asia. You learn a lot about people playing *Risk*—who is trustworthy, who is not; who is engaged, and who is just going through the motions. Categories get named like the Irrational Man (IM). It must be coincidence that the IM who I have in mind was studying pre-law, and I once caught him making up facts in a living-room debate. An IM might start the game

by stating, “Whoever attacks me first, I vow to spend all my energies attacking only him for the rest of the game.” This type of deterrence does not work. One cannot play with this giver of ultimatums. So everybody just gangs up while he is still weak and eliminates him. Then we get on with the game. Another category was named by my eventual wife Deale when she called David F. my Attack Puppy. She claimed my Attack Puppy would do anything I asked. This is not true. I only offered David fair and reasonable deals. But next game, Deale and her girlfriends made a

guage. Smedley was Colorado College’s very first computer and my access was as a student employee. Every Friday, I watched the payroll lady. Before Smedley, she typed checks in her office. Now she sat at the computer room’s best printer watching each check being printed, verifying Smedley made no mistakes. Even words like “word processing” were so new that they made little sense. You mean like food processing? When I turned in a dot matrix printout to a professor, she got mad at me. I hastily explained that Smedley had not actually written the paper for me.

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secret alliance to wipe me out, else I would just hole up in Australia until I won. Well, maybe, but I was still hurt. Once, playing backgammon, she threw a dice cup at me.

It’s not smarts that makes a winner at games. More important is strong desire to win. Any game worth playing is a system of rules and potentials. You must care enough to figure out the system, or else be one of those people who claims he or she never liked games.

Primitive computer gaming came along for me about 1973. Smedley was a brand-new HP mainframe about five feet tall, two to three feet deep, maybe eight feet long counting the memory storage unit, six disks stacked like large cake platters, 25 megabytes all together. There was even a panel of toggle switches for programming machine lan-

Early computer history is all very interesting, I know, but my important point is that Smedley came equipped with *Star Trek* elements. A grid of Xs and Os represented Klingon and Federation starships. Fire phasors and photon torpedoes, type new starship coordinates on the keyboard, and all results were calculated and printed out on the cathode ray tube screen one qwerty character at a time. Sounds pretty dull now, but this was my introduction to Basic programming code. I learned to tweak the program for more shield and phasor energy, and lots more photon torpedoes. There was also the *Lunar Lander* game which always crashed until I figured out how to give myself more fuel.

Star Trek and *Lunar Lander* were not like the board games I loved. The difference is not so much style or even whether actual people

play. The difference is that computers never get tired nor do they get bored. Computers never go home for dinner nor do they get drunk.

For example: *Railroad Tycoon*, a newer technology on 3 1/2 inch floppy disks, is a game that has no opponent, no Internet, nor does it have much of a standard for winning or losing. Make-believe money bought the trains, tracks, stations and factories. The trains crawled around the screen between stations, and factories doing their own thing, pretty much ignoring me as I was off building even more trains, tracks, stations, and factories.

One day, Deale went away for a weekend conference and left me home alone. The computer was already booting up as she backed out the driveway early one Friday morning. I played *Railroad Tycoon* all that day Friday into the night and into Saturday. I stopped occasionally, I guess. I must have, to snack on whatever was in the house. I went to bed late Saturday night like a normal man, but I was up early Sunday morning still building trains, tracks, stations, and factories when Deale returned home Sunday evening. True story. No exaggeration. I lost 5 pounds.

A few weeks, months later, I grabbed pliers and tore the metal end from *Railroad Tycoon's* disc cassette. I did not know the term yet, but I was experiencing Rage Quit. A flash of sanity joins whatever vexation the game is provoking that instant—hence the rage. That sane moment is your opportunity to destroy the game. Tapering-off compromises don't work. So cold turkey, like cigarettes.

Years earlier when I had rage quit *Empire: Wargame of the Century*, I failed to destroy the

discs. I thought throwing away the manual was good enough. The manual was needed to log on. The computer prompted with a page number and a second number each time I wanted to play. I'd find that page and return the required word. Three tries and you're out. There was a long dawdle time waiting for the game to reload. So when I decided to play the game again—and of course I did—there was much guessing for that code word. Some guesses were easy, words like “the,” “and,” “army,” as well as rarer ones such as “battleship,” “attack,” and the like. I kept a notebook to track the pages from one to however many. I recorded each bad guess until I hit the right one. No sense repeating myself. I might need an hour at first to log on, if at all. But over weeks and months, dawdle time shortened. Eventually, I'd collected enough passwords to start play with only one or two reboots, sometimes none at all.

I rage quit *Empire* a second time—properly—and even gave my obsolete *Tandy 1000* away. But better games were available. *Beyond Railroad Tycoon* came *Civilization III* for my Macintosh. *Civilization III* would have been another all-nighter weekend if Deale had ever left me home alone again. I won't bore you with the details of this game for which I still pine. When the moment came, my rage quit was final. I hit the eject button and just as quickly snapped the disk in two. At \$60 a pop, I wasn't going to buy another game anytime soon. By the time I did start looking for it, a new generation of computers and games had come along and I couldn't find it.

Internet computer games are the most insidious, chatting with other players online, running quests and adventures. Online

people are not imaginary. On the other side of the keyboard are real people you've built relationships with. And now there is Skype and virtual reality. I have never gone that far and don't even want to think about it.

I won't name the game. Much more addictive games exist, but I don't want to be responsible for anybody accidentally getting hooked. Or worse, see how really dumb it is. The game chatroom is where I learned the term "rage quit." Somebody would write, "So-and-So rage quit and gave all his stuff away." One cannot destroy the Internet, and email doesn't allow you to irrevocably forget the password. So giving all your stuff away is rage quitting. My rage quit began when I tuned in to the last few minutes of an NPR call-in show about computer-game addiction. Had I caught the show earlier, I might have called in myself. I knew more than any of those guys. I was playing my game and listening to the radio, and saying to myself, "Yeah, I know that, and I already know that, too." The last straw fell when the radio guy said to write down the time spent on the game each session and add it up. Well, I didn't have to do that. Sitting at the keyboard, I already knew. Instantly, I began destroying the city I had spent too close to four years building, every day a few minutes here, a few hours there, never a day missed. I clicked and destroyed random buildings at first, then went for the expensive ones, level six swordsmiths and bow makers and steel mills. Then I announced my rage quit by in-game email, and did anybody want anything? And I did give some stuff away, but it was taking too long because I had so much stuff, so I logged off.

I'm 27 days clean as I write this. I know

because I just logged on to check. I also checked some stats and saw that in April, I was 7th in the United States player-against-player (PvP) efficiency category, 115th in the world. I have no idea how many people play this game, but the U.S. has two servers, Germany a dozen or more. As I was wandering around destroying stuff anew, I noticed Lukeys had kicked me out of the guild. I'm a little annoyed at that. Lukeys once abandoned the game for nearly a year and nobody kicked him out. He's still on my friends list, and I noticed he is still only level 54. He wasn't logged on and neither was Bigdaddybucks. I destroyed more buildings, especially storehouses with all their stuff, but the stuff just went into star menu. I destroyed my very expensive marble pit. But much of the stuff still exists among the rubble, and the deeds are still all there. I could rebuild. It would take a long time. The gold towers still produce 112 gold coins per day as long as the wheat holds out. So I destroyed my expensive improved silos. I almost destroyed my water castle. The water castle represents my 7th and 155th rankings. My finger hovered over the delete button, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. That's not a good omen. So I should be grateful to Lukeys for kicking me out of the guild.

So what am I going to do with this surge of time suddenly entering my life? The long term is still out there, but for now I notice the lawn is shorter, the tomatoes are taller, and baby maple trees and poison ivy no longer grow in the gutters. Oh yeah, and I've written this essay.

—September 2016