



## Out There with the "Away Team" Into the Mindset of the Media Generation

The first generation of kids who grew up with video games are looking for new toys now—they're older, wiser, and primed for ever-more-sophisticated entertainment experiences. These twenty-somethings want realism, action, strategy and a visceral rush—and they're willing and able to pay for state-of-the-art technology if it delivers the goods: immersive, absorbing interactivity.

Watching its legions of gamers grow into adulthood, Sega knew that video gaming had to take a revolutionary leap forward to keep today's savvy and demanding consumers coming back for more. To give the maximum voltage to this kind of gamer—and anyone of any age who hungers for over-the-top entertainment value—Sega has created the Sega Saturn, the ultimate gaming system. Sega Saturn provides a one-of-a-kind platform that delivers never-before-experienced, immersive gameplay.

But creating a breakthrough hardware system has been only part of the equation. "After all, a game system is just an expensive paperweight without the right kind of games," says Steve Payne, Sega's vice president of product development. "It's the game *software* that makes the system."

With this in mind, Sega has chartered a focused, high-energy team—the Away Team—to produce and market hot game titles for the Sega Saturn.

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Sega of America  
255 Shoreline Drive  
Redwood City  
California 94065  
[www.segaoa.com](http://www.segaoa.com)

### **A Vision From the Inside Out**

In the tradition of a company that knows how to manage talent, Sega's management astutely realized that the creative vision behind Sega Saturn's titles had to come from the inside out: from a young, plugged-in team that knows the difference between Beavis and Butthead and can regale you with a detailed history of grunge rock, Star Trek and/or Quentin Tarantino's meteoric rise to fame.

And vision is what it requires. Because Sega Saturn is a breakthrough product that makes possible immersive experiences that haven't been imagined before, Sega knew that its executives couldn't mandate a top-down directive that spelled out what Sega Saturn titles should look and play like. One of the dilemmas they discovered was that there's no way to survey the market to find out what it would take to exceed customers' expectations.

"People can't tell you what they want in a system that creates an entirely new kind of experience—they just base their ideas on what they've already seen or done," says Payne.

"But Sega Saturn isn't about something already known."

The vision, then, fell to the Away Team, which knows and *is* the market.

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### Been There, Done That

The entire Away Team, which ranges in age from 27 to 32, knows all about the "target" customer for Sega Saturn—a technosavvy creature of the '90s who's been there, done that: was raised on MTV, takes videogames as a given and isn't impressed with entertainment innovations that offer anything less than state-of-the-art production values and a truly riveting edge. How does the team know this consumer so well? In a nutshell, it has met the customer—and it is them. They're all members of a media-stoked short-attention-span generation that's looking for ultrarealism in entertainment experiences.

"We're all totally into the mindset," says Steve Apour, a producer who has been with the team since it was formed in late 1993. Apour cites as examples the team's rabid discussions about films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Natural Born Killers*, and its history of getting together for marathon nights of taped *Seinfeld* or *Melrose Place* episodes, fueled by mass quantities of pizza and Red Hook beer.

"We're all movie and music addicts," says Apour. "It's just in our blood."

"The people who are watching MTV and going to concerts and reading *Rolling Stone* and *Details* are going to be the ones who can get into the heads of this new kind of consumer," says Sarah Richmond, a member of the marketing side of the team, whose office is decorated with Calvin Klein ads, an X-Files poster and other images of pop culture. "And that's us."

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Richmond says she lobbied hard to be on the Sega Saturn team because she saw it as a product that could make an impact in the industry and on the culture at large—which is exactly the attitude embodied by the team as a whole. The Away Team sees itself as a product of the culture, *and also a vehicle for perpetuating it.*

"We've grown up as part of the media generation," says Eric Rawlins, an assistant producer who joined the Away Team in early 1994, and whose record/CD collection is the subject of much admiration among the group. "Now we're *everting* it—turning it inside-out to produce an experience that will influence the culture in return."

### **Not Your Usual Cross-Functional Team**

So what makes this team so special? Wouldn't just about anyone developing games for any of the competing next-generation systems be just as plugged into the Generation X culture? Maybe yes, maybe no. Either way, that's only part of the story. To be sure, it's essential to start with a common set of assumptions about what's ultracool -- but then what? How does a creative collection of individuals with a gonzo sense of fun work together as a team?

"They're all young, but they have incredible maturity," says Payne, who is the official manager of the development side of the Away Team. ("Official" because the team requires virtually no management, says Payne—who gives the team *carte blanche* to make many of its own decisions.)



"None of them think of themselves as *artistes*, which is what you see so often in video game companies. They're all self-starters, but they also completely respect each other's abilities."

The Away Team is no ordinary corporate committee that's entrenched in playing politics, pointing fingers and trolling for a post-launch bonus. Instead, it's an opinionated collection of individuals who share an uncanny degree of cooperation. The team consists of a core of seven people—four from product development and three from marketing -- surrounded by a supporting cast of another dozen or so.

The team actually got its start in late 1993 as the "Tiger Team," originally formed to develop a set of first-wave titles for Sega Saturn. Over time some of the other original Tiger Team members moved on to other gigs, and new people joined the group. But even with the personnel changes, upper management saw that the team had a rapport and energy worth preserving past the initial wave of launch titles, and decided to keep the group intact.

Still, a name change was definitely in order, to account for the new direction of the team. In typical fashion, this was left up to the team—which rechristened itself (after an e-mail ballot) the Away Team (as in Star Trek, where the "away team" is transported down to investigate uncharted terrain).

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### **An Amazing Degree of Trust**

Amazingly, the product development and marketing halves of the Away Team actually *trust* each other and share information without reserve (which is hardly the case in most companies, to put it politely).

"So many times you'll see product development and marketing in adversarial positions, blaming each other when dates slip or things go wrong," says Richmond, who's run into this a time or two as a marketing person at other companies -- where marketing tends to think that producers take projects too seriously and can't meet deadlines, and the producers think marketing doesn't know or love games. "But that's not our experience," she says. "There's an easy flow of communication back and forth."

The rapport between marketing and product development started early on, when Tim Dunley, director of marketing for Sega Saturn, came onto the team and quickly established himself as something other than the average marketing "suit." Dunley had recently joined Sega from Microsoft, where he pioneered Microsoft's interactive television project and thus had a certain amount of instant credibility. But more than anything, he made an immediate impression by asking the producers' opinions about what kinds of things marketing should be demonstrating at an upcoming trade show--not the usual approach for a marketing guy venturing over into product-development land.

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"Tim's extremely cool," says Apour. "From the first Tiger Team meeting he showed up for, the chemistry felt good -- he was supportive and shared our same vision for the future. Not only did Tim contribute some fantastic, creative product-related ideas from the outset, but -- surprisingly to us -- he was interested in hearing *our* ideas about the magic he was creating in marketing!"

From there, a natural sense of trust continued to evolve--to a point where the Away Team producers now consult their marketing colleagues to an unheard-of degree during the game-development process. Usually, producers are fiercely protective of the titles they have under development. They fear to let marketing take a peek too early in the process--when the game is still rough and unrefined--because there's a danger that marketing won't be able to see the game's potential. This then brings on unwanted (some would say bogus) suggestions--or worse, the cancellation of a game project before it has a fair chance to show its stuff. Breaking with this close-to-the-vest tradition, though, the Away Team producers show even nascent versions to the marketing side--because they know their marketing partners are savvy enough to offer intelligent feedback, even at the earliest stages.

"Ninety percent of what happens on this team is chemistry," says Dunley. "The other ten percent is ability."

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### The Only System to Have

The undeniable chemistry is underscored by a collective Away Team belief about Sega Saturn, which is simply that the Sega Saturn is *the* next-generation system to have.

"It's an honor and a privilege to be working on Sega Saturn," says Dante Anderson, an inveterate gamer who recently joined the team as an assistant producer. Anderson, who left a programming job to come to work for Sega as a tester ("I couldn't believe they'd actually pay me for playing games") became a video game junkie by playing games late into the night with his semi-employed rock star roommates.

There are varying degrees of game fanaticism on the Away Team, and for a tough customer like Anderson, the Sega Saturn is the ultimate home gaming system. "Anyone who's a gamer—even someone who's an arcade addict—is going to say this is great," he says. "It's just so much more capable than anything anyone's ever seen."

But, he says, it's not just because Sega Saturn technology paves the way for immersive, "out there" special effects. As a producer, he's also discovered that the sophistication of the system lets him be more creative about surprising and challenging the player, giving the game more convolutions and depth. This all adds up to a game that a player is eager to come back to, time after time. "The whole idea in producing the best games," he says, "is that *the more you play a game, the more you want to play it.*"

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### **The Power of a New Medium**

The technology also uncorks the producers' creative potential in other ways. "Getting to produce titles for the Sega Saturn lets me play film and music producer because the technology makes so much more possible," says Apour with characteristic enthusiasm. For instance, Apour is working with a completely new breed of music and graphic artists that know how to exploit the Sega Saturn as a medium that lets game programmers draw the player right *inside* the game experience with super-realistic visual, audio and kinesthetic effects.

And then there's video. Apour and Rawlins produced a 22-minute video sequence for Ghen War, one of Apour's launch titles—an unprecedented amount of full-motion video for a video game. A similar depth of video content will accompany FreeRunner, a cyberpunk, "mature audiences" three-dimensional adventure game that will be among the "second wave" of titles.

"Sega Saturn games are spectacular," says Max Taylor, the producer for FreeRunner and an engineer who ran his own video game software start-up in the U.K. Despite his credentials, though, Taylor doesn't consider himself a big-time game fanatic.

"I'm not really a gamer," he says. "But that gives me a certain advantage because I have a fresh perspective. I'm not influenced by all the assumptions that gamers make about what video games should do. My goal is to just create games that I'd be interested in playing, and Sega Saturn is the best system I can imagine to make that happen."

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### **Letting a Good Thing Ride**

In the earliest days (when it was still the Tiger Team), the Sega corporate powers-that-be didn't spend all their waking hours thinking about the upcoming Sega Saturn. Instead, they assigned a fresh, lively, appropriately twenty-something team to the project, and then turned their focus back to then-current product issues. Meanwhile, the Tiger Team dove into planning, brainstorming, and bonding—moving ahead big-time, thanks to its unusually cooperative spirit and get-things-done approach. By the time Sega was ready to make Sega Saturn its main focus, the Away Team was far down the path with several significant milestones, such as creating a logo and packaging, and refining the hardware and peripheral designs.

Fortunately, the executives knew a good thing when they saw it—recognizing that the Away Team had created a momentum all its own and had made remarkable progress with relatively few people and resources. So, letting a good thing ride, they bestowed upon the team much of the same autonomy it enjoyed before it landed in the corporate spotlight. This executive-level respect means that certain things go a little more smoothly.

For instance, to get executive buy-off on product packaging, Dunley and Richmond presented their recommendations to the executive staff, which basically said "nice work, ship it." Dunley and Richmond looked at each other a bit incredulously, having seen other packaging sign-off situations in their careers where minutiae like the captions on photos were scrutinized with compulsive fussiness.

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"It ended up being more of an FYI than a for-your-approval process," says Dunley, still a little amazed at the fact.

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### Believing in the Future

Still, Sega is a many-faceted company with many products, and the top brass needs to balance the needs of the many against the few. Translation: The Sega Saturn team doesn't necessarily get everything it asks for in terms of resources and dollars.

But Dunley has a ready response to this. Just as the game titles developed by the Away Team will determine Sega Saturn's success, he says, so will the Sega Saturn determine Sega's future as a company. Even though Sega dominates the 16-bit video game market, competition for the next-generation market promises to be fierce, and Sega can't take its current position for granted.

"Sega will live or die by Sega Saturn," proclaims Dunley, whose job it is to continually instill executives with the mantra that Sega Saturn is *the* most important project in the company, and get their sign off on the marketing resources he needs to make it all happen.

"The execs have lots of products to think about, but I have only one," Dunley explains. "Still, if they do right by Sega Saturn, they'll do right by them all because Sega Saturn represents the future. So I'm a crusader. We're all crusaders on the Away Team. We believe in what we're doing."

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*Editor's Note: Photographs of the Away Team are available upon request. Please contact Kelly Smith at Manning, Selvage & Lee 818/509-1840.*