

## software

**Jim Gasperini**  
*Hidden Agenda*

**Jaime Levy**  
*Cyber Rag*

A couple of computer software items have crossed my desk in the past few months that I felt warranted bringing to people's attention. One because it represented a sophisticated attempt to take computer games beyond the level of simulated war and succeeds in being both interesting and educational without being boring. The second is interesting primarily as a model for emulation. Both, to my mind, represent a slightly higher consciousness about the world.

**HIDDEN AGENDA**

*The palace began to burn. Clouds of acrid smoke forced me into the open. There was a burst of machine gun fire and something went wrong with my legs...suddenly, I was viewing the room from three inches above the floor. A figure stepped out of the smoky gloom, tinged with red as everything seemed to be, wearing an expression both wary and triumphant. It was Gloria Jimenez Fleming.*

Thus ended my brief tenure as president of Chimerica, the mythic Central American country in Jim Gasperini's computer game *Hidden Agenda*. I use term "game" lightly here, since even if I had avoided the coup d'etat and completed my term in office, there would have been no verdict declaring me a winner or a loser. I would have only completed, albeit a bit more successfully, the experience of trying to rebuild a country decimated by 40 years of corrupt dictatorial leadership.

The premise of *Hidden Agenda* is simple, the dictator has been overthrown and you, as appointee of a fragile three-party coalition, become the leader of a country rife with poverty, corruption, a factionalized army, death squads, outside intervention and more. Your job is to restore order and begin the healing process that will turn Chimerica into a healthy country again.

In a realistic departure from typical geopolitical games, your role is not to lead armies or police squads, or even to travel from region to region and deal with problems. You sit behind a desk in the president's office, meet with your advisors and the representatives of your various constituencies—bankers, coffee growers, ambassadors,

campesinos, etc.—and make decisions. If you want some feedback you have a file of progress reports covering various economic and social conditions and newspapers representing a spectrum of political opinion, including the foreign press. By deciding who to meet with, you control the issues that are dealt with. It's all deceptively simple.

But just like the real world, dealing with a problem doesn't necessarily solve it, and ignoring it doesn't make it go away. Ignore the food crisis and peasants take to the streets, let the economy slip and foreign lenders withdraw your credit, ignore the military and you can get in deep trouble. You may choose to put the death squad leaders in prison, but that doesn't keep a renegade military commander from granting them amnesty. You soon find yourself with only so many hours in the day and problems galore.

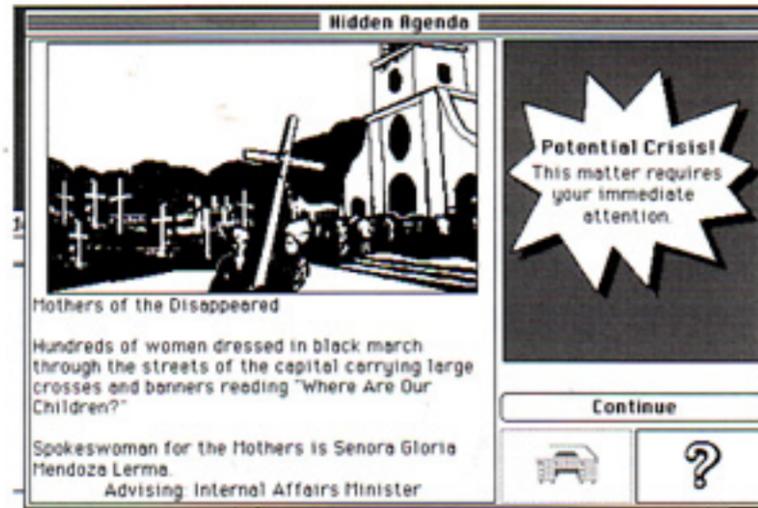
If *Hidden Agenda* creator Gasperini has a hidden agenda of his own here, it's to illustrate the complexity of the problems facing newly liberated countries. If you approach the game with an ideological bias you'll quickly discover that there are powerful forces on both sides of any issue and the efforts you must make to reconcile these forces can lead you far astray of your noble intentions.

The *coup de grace* of *Hidden Agenda* comes at the end. There are no scores. Instead, you are presented with an extensive "Verdict of History." The verdict is described as an "encyclopedia excerpt written nearly a century after your term in office" that details your performance as president. *Hidden Agenda* leaves it up to you to decide whether or not you did well. It's a payoff that's much richer than a simple "winner" or "loser" ending.

*Hidden Agenda*, by Jim Gasperini; systems design by Gasperini, Greg Guerin and Ron Martinez; programming by Martinez and William Herdle; graphics by Angela Green; distributed by Springboard Software Inc. Available in both IBM and MacIntosh versions for \$59.95 from Springboard Software, call 1-800-445-4780 ext. 2000.

**CYBER RAG**

This review constitutes my Earth Day rant. Plain and simple, *Cyber Rag* is a magazine



on a floppy disk. Put the disk in your computer (in this case a MacIntosh) and you get an animated intro followed by an interactive table of contents offering a choice of computer graphics, stories or games. Selecting one will bring you to a submenu specific to each category.

In *Cyber Rag* #1 (Winter 1990), editor Jaime Levy has gone to a lot of trouble to make the package appealing—sound effects, animated graphics and flashy menus—without really giving us anything memorable inside. The four graphics will probably be of interest only to others who create similar things. The three games consist of a *National Enquirer*-level quiz on Steve Jobs (who cares), a short morality play on drinking and driving and "Noriega Tag," a cutesy little "try to catch Noriega in Panama" trifle. Of the three articles, "What is a disk magazine?," "Punching Pay Phones," and a "Hacker Manifesto," the latter two are reprints.

So why do I like it? Because, as Levy accurately points out in his essay on disk magazines, you don't have to cut down any trees to do it. As harsh as I've just been on *Cyber Rag*, I get much more useless stuff in the mail on paper, representing not just trees but the chemicals and fumes associated with the printing process.

As a publisher myself, I wish enough people owned computers to make electronic publishing viable. The ecological implications of having just the *L.A.* or *N.Y. Times* delivered electronically instead of on paper are overwhelming.

So to Jaime Levy I say, "Good idea, now let's get serious." And to everyone else I point out that the technology is already out there. When you're ready to read electronically, publishers will start publishing electronically. So yes, recycle and save a tree, but in the long run, buy a computer and start saving the forests.

*Cyber Rag*, edited by Jaime Levy, 622 E. 11th St., Apt. 7, NYC, NY 10009.

—Steven Durland