

The Reviewer

Halibron was much more than a gaming company. As a subsidiary of the tech giant BluGull, they had access to cutting edge technology as well as ongoing research in virtually every field of scientific endeavor. When they announced the development of their new Metabron gaming environment, everyone took notice. The company was famous for the tight security of its development team, but when over 5,000 beta testers were invited to try the system rumors began flying. Some claimed the system utilized secret military methods of mind control. Others said the system brought medical advances in man/machine interfacing into the gaming world. A few said the tagline for this new environment was “If you can imagine it, it’s there.” I personally thought Halibron was allowing these rumors to escape, and perhaps authoring a few of its own to create a demand for their soon-to-be-released product. I said as much in my blog, which happens to be the most widely read review of gaming systems. I don’t know if Halibron asked me to do the first public review of their product because of that or in spite of it, but I jumped at the opportunity. The product was in full production and the release was just two weeks away when a courier personally delivered my system.

Physically, it was the epitome of simplicity. A sleek, silver gaming box which connected to the BOD (BluNet of Devices) and a headband about as wide as my finger. The “quick start” guide was equally simple. It said to put on the headband and touch the on/off button over your right temple. I did, and I was immediately floating in space, surrounded by the most beautiful stars and galaxies imaginable, with the familiar “Halibron” logo in front of me. If I stood up and started to walk the stars faded to a ghostly image and my vision of the room returned so I could see where I was going, but when I stopped I was back in the Halibron universe. Once the thrill of this new universe subsided I thought “Now what?” As soon as the thought entered my head I was aware of the options available to me. I could play a game, I could meet with other users in a social networking “party,” I could go sightseeing anywhere in the world, or I could experience concerts, movies, documentaries, etc. as a “live” participant – surrounded by the action. This was not a menu of options that I read, these were options I just instinctively knew existed.

Since I make my living reviewing games, my first choice was to play a game. I knew there wouldn’t be unlimited options, as Halibron had only recently opened the system to third party game developers, but the list of games which Halibron’s in-house developers had created was pretty impressive. I selected a World War 1 flying game (I’m old school) and I was instantly in a Sopwith Camel, flying over the Western Front. I could feel the cold blast of air on my face, hear the roar of the rotary engine, and smell the burned castor oil that lubricated it. I seemed to be able to fly the plane by instinct, although it felt awkward. I assumed that was because I was a novice, and that I’d get better with practice. I saw a Fokker triplane beneath me and I dove to attack. Just as I was about to fire he zoomed up to the left and disappeared. I looked behind me and he was on my tail, flames blazing from his machine guns. I felt the plane shake as bullets struck it, then three sharp thuds in my back, and everything faded to black. The words “Try again?” floated in front of me. It was the most intense gaming experience of my life. Never mind the fact that I’d been shot down within seconds. I had to try it again.

I lost all track of time as I explored the games in the Metabron environment. I spent several days immersed in the games, grabbing an occasional soda or frozen burrito between games when the hunger

pangs became unbearable, and pausing to sleep when I could no longer keep my eyes open. Knowing I had to write a review I forced myself to spend some time exploring other options. They were equally impressive. Sightseeing was just like being there. Movies, documentaries, and other media took on a whole new atmosphere when you were immersed in them. Trust me. You've never truly been to a 1960's rock concert until you can experience it from all perspectives – from the Hippies smoking pot and making love on the fringes to standing on stage with the performers.

To me, the social media experience was the least impressive, but I've never really been fond of social media anyway. It was kind of fun to see the wild avatars some people adopted, but I wasn't able to have meaningful conversations with anyone. Maybe it was because the participants were limited to beta testers, as no one else had access to the environment, but the people seemed to be one-dimensional. Even with a limited number of participants there were multiple groups, or "parties," as Halibron called them. Each group seemed to focus on a single issue. Everything they talked about either reinforced their own view or denounced people with different views. I felt uncomfortable, like I was in the middle of an angry mob and things were about to get ugly.

Three days before the product release I reluctantly set my headband aside and began to organize my thoughts. I had promised Halibron I would post my review the day before the product was released. I was very impressed with the product and wanted to give it the best review possible, but I didn't know how to describe the environment to people who had never experienced it. I was less than half-way through my first draft when hunger and frustration forced me to set it aside. I had been living on whatever I could find in my refrigerator for several days, so I went out for lunch. It was well past the normal lunchtime, so there were only a handful of people in my favorite bar. The waitress had just brought me a cheesesteak with fries when a young man approached my booth.

"Mr. Robertson?" he asked.

My photo is posted on my blog, so I was used to being recognized by gamers. My mouth was filled with food so I simply nodded to him.

"Excuse me for interrupting your lunch," he said as he slipped into the seat across the table from me, "but I wanted to speak to you in private. I was told you often ate here. Rumor is you're going to review the new Halibron system."

"I don't discuss my reviews before they're published," I said coldly. You'd be surprised at how many people try to influence a review. Usually it's a gamer who is an enthusiastic supporter of a new game. Sometimes it's an investor who wants inside information on what my review will say.

"I don't want you to discuss it," the young man said, "but you need to know about some issues with the system. I was a beta tester, and I knew some of the other testers. Two of them have died, and four were fired because they stopped going to work."

"Surely you don't blame the Halibron system?" I asked.

"I do indeed," he replied. "And my friends are just the tip of the iceberg. Halibron brags about how they have over 5,000 beta testers? They started with 5,427. Now they have 5,284. Here's a list of the 143 testers who are no longer in the program."

He handed me a list of names. "I've put a star beside the names that I can confirm are dead," he said. "The rest seem to have just vanished from the Earth."

I quickly scanned the list. There were at least two dozen stars.

"How could a game kill people?" I asked suspiciously.

"They're too intense," he answered. "Not the Halibron games themselves, of course. They could be held liable for that. But they've created an environment where anyone can create an intense, personal experience. The system hasn't even been released yet, and already there are dozens of applications on the black market. Lots of porn, of course, but that's not the problem. There are combat games that feature death and dismemberment. Want to know what it feels like to be a gladiator in the Coliseum? There's a game for that. There's also a horror genre. There are a lot of sick people in the gaming world."

"But if it's too intense you can just turn off the game," I argued.

"You can if you think of it," he replied. "The experience is so realistic, it's easy to forget it's a game. And you can't always turn it off. I played a fantasy game where a wizard cast a spell on me that kept me from moving my arms. It didn't matter whether or not I could really move them. I *thought* I couldn't move them, and that kept me from turning off the game."

I thought about this. I had only turned my headband off between games. The thought of turning it off never even occurred to me while I was in the middle of a game.

"Ever fall asleep while you were wearing your headband?" he asked.

I admitted I hadn't.

"It's quite an experience," he said. "The first time was by accident, but I enjoyed it so much I did it several times. You know how they say 'If you can imagine it, it's there?' That's definitely true when you're dreaming. It makes the dreams much more real. Normally when you dream, part of your brain knows it's just a dream. With the headband on, though, you can see it, you can touch it . . . it is real! I relived several happy memories from my childhood. My parents were alive again. I talked to old friends I hadn't seen in years. Then one night I had a nightmare." He shuddered at the memory. "Believe me, you don't want a nightmare to be real."

I looked at the list again. "What happened to the testers who didn't die?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. They don't answer calls, messages, or emails. They stopped showing up at the beta tester forums. I went to the homes of a few who live nearby, but nobody answered the door. The lawns needed mowing, there were packages and notices on the doorsteps, but it was like nobody lived there anymore. I think maybe they were like my friends who lost their jobs because of the system. You know how some people get addicted to drugs, or alcohol, or gambling? I think if the real world is disappointing, people can get addicted to a dream world. Especially if the dream world has all this sights, sounds, and experiences of the real world. Why deliver pizzas when you can be the most powerful wizard in the world? Why worry about unemployment when you can be a warrior princess?"

"Where'd you get this list?" I asked.

He shifted uncomfortably. "I have a friend who's good at guessing passwords."

I decided it would be pointless to press that issue, so I changed subjects. "Have you told Halibron about this?"

"I tried," he said. "That's why I said I *was* a beta tester. They kicked me out of the program and took back my system as soon as I broached the subject. Actually, before I went to Halibron I mentioned the problem during one of the beta testers' forums. It was a virtual forum, of course, on the system. When I pointed out that some of the testers weren't there and mentioned the possibility of gaming addiction, things got ugly in a hurry. I told you about outside developers writing games for the system? They can also create plug-ins for existing games. I was pelted with rocks, and people were coming at me with bicycle chains when I switched off my headband. It was terrifying. I was surprised I didn't have bruises, it seemed so real. When people are hiding behind avatars and screen names they do things they'd never do in person."

I stared at the list for a moment. "How can I get in touch with you?" I asked.

"Sorry," he said, getting up from the table. "I know better than to take on Halibron. You're so famous they wouldn't dare go after you, but they'd crush me in a heartbeat. I've given you the facts, and I trust you'll do whatever is necessary to make certain this system is never released." He walked out of the bar.

Back at my house, I spot checked some of the names on the list. I was able to find obituaries for several of the starred names, but most gave no cause of death. One listed "undiagnosed heart condition" and one simply said "died in her sleep." I could find very little on the other names. Several had blogs or social media pages, but there were no updates since the week Halibron began beta testing. Finally I decided to call the product development manager at Halibron who had arranged for me to review the system and given me a pre-release model.

"What's up, Kendall?" he asked when his smiling face filled my screen. "You got that review written yet?"

“Not quite,” I answered. “I’ve started, but I’m calling to check on a nasty rumor. Have you heard of any unusual deaths among your beta testers?”

The smile disappeared from his face immediately. “There’s nothing unusual about it,” he said. “Sadly, two of our beta testers died during the test. One had a congenital heart condition which he failed to disclose during our pre-test screening, and the other had severe diabetes. Also not disclosed. Doctors said the first tester could have died at any time, and the second died because they stopped taking their insulin. There’s no evidence that either was using our system when they died. It’s very unfortunate, and I feel sorry for their families, but statistically it’s not surprising that there are a few deaths among such a large testing group.”

“OK. The rumor I heard involved more than two deaths,” I said.

“Then the rumor is absolutely untrue,” he declared.

My spot checking had confirmed at least ten deaths, but I only had my informant’s word that those people were beta testers. He could have made up the list. I couldn’t prove anything without looking at Halibron’s list of beta testers, and I suspected I couldn’t get that list without a court order.

“I also heard that several people stopped showing up at user forums and did not respond to phone calls or messages. Supposedly they got so addicted to the games that they stopped going to work or doing anything except playing games.”

He chuckled. “I wish our games were that popular. We always have a few people drop out of beta tests. Sometimes it’s for personal reasons, but usually it’s because they’ve sold the beta product and are intentionally avoiding us. We’ve stopped even investigating such cases because it’s hopeless. The products are long gone, and the testers are never able to pay for them.”

It was obvious this call was not going to resolve my concerns about the Halibron system so I brought it to a close as quickly and politely as I could. Halibron’s answers directly contradicted the information I had gotten from my anonymous source. On the other hand, they also made me realize I had no way to verify the information I’d gotten from that source. If he was lying, Halibron’s statements were direct, honest, and forthright answers to my questions. If he was telling the truth, Halibron’s statements were outright lies.

I worked long into the night writing and rewriting my review. Sometimes I resolved to stick to the provable facts and I wrote a glowing review of the new system. Sometimes I decided to go with my gut, which told me the kid was more believable than the Halibron executive. Then I wrote a dire warning about the new system. Sometimes I tried to write a balanced review, praising the performance but warning that it should not be used by people suffering from medical conditions or gaming addiction. I wasn’t happy with any of these approaches. I finally decided to sleep on it, and make a fresh start in the morning.

The next morning my computer wouldn't boot. My phone was dead, too. I had to get that review written, so I decided to buy a new computer. I grabbed my wallet and tried to go to the store, but my door wouldn't open. My digital lock was supposed to automatically open the door when my phone approached it, but my phone was dead. There was a manual override lever on the inside of the door, but it didn't work either. Maybe something was wrong with the digital lock and it was jamming the mechanism. In any event, I couldn't open the door.

Like many homeowners, I had fortified my doors and windows when the government decriminalized home robberies where less than \$10,000 was taken. The bars and locks on my windows were controlled by the same digital system that locked the door. I was trapped in my house. I began to feel a little paranoid when I realized my door lock was made by a subsidiary of Halibron's parent company BluGull. My phone and my computer were made by other BluGull subsidiaries. They were all interconnected through the BOD.

I spent most of the day trying to find some way out of my house. Because I lived in a hurricane zone, the walls were made of reinforced concrete. The nearest thing I had to a digging tool was a teaspoon, which made no impression at all upon the walls. My nail file was equally ineffective against the bars on the windows.

That night I spent several hours sitting in front of the window with a flashlight, flashing "SOS" between the bars. Cars drove by, people walked by on an evening stroll, and once a police car cruised by, but nobody noticed. Doesn't anyone know Morse Code anymore? I mean, I don't remember any other letters, but I do know the code for "SOS."

I was trapped in my house for two days. On the third morning the house was freezing when I woke up. I wrapped myself in a blanket and checked the thermostat. There was a message displayed on the screen:

Updated User Agreement

In exchange for using BluGull devices I agree not to publish, speak, or otherwise disseminate any information which could reflect negatively on BluGull or any of its subsidiaries, including Halibron. I understand that a violation of this agreement will result in the public disclosure of files which will lead to my financial ruin and long term incarceration.

There was no option to not accept the agreement. After considering the situation I realized there really weren't any other options. I had no idea what files they would release if I violated the agreement, but I had no doubt that any organization that could shut down all my devices and lock me in my house for three days could create whatever "evidence" they wanted. I suspected that all traces of the user

agreement would disappear from the thermostat once I accepted it. I couldn't even take a picture of it because my phone wouldn't work. I touched "Accept" and the screen returned to its normal temperature and weather display. I heard the furnace kick on and felt warm air coming from the diffusers. My phone trembled excitedly with three days' worth of unanswered calls and messages. One was from the product manager at Halibron, who thanked me for my review. I looked at my blog. Somehow I was not surprised to see that a glowing review had been posted the day before the new product was released. The review included all the positive things I'd written in various drafts a few days ago, along with some additional information that justified a "two thumbs up" rating. There were no negative comments, and no warnings.

It's been two weeks since the product release. Sales of the Halibron system are through the roof. The economy has tanked, as millions of people worldwide are choosing to stay home and play games instead of going to work. Emergency rooms are flooded with cardiac cases, deaths due to unknown medical conditions have skyrocketed, and the Halibron social media environment has grown so chaotic that police are having to send their avatars in to quell riots. On the plus side, though, after many hours of practice I can now shoot down that Fokker triplane.