

The Station that plays:

I've been reading stories about the mayhem and chaos that has occurred outside many "big box" stores, all over the country, in response to the recent release of Sony's Play Station Three. Apparently it's so compelling a product that folks will do just about anything to get one. And when they can't get one their frustration is taken out on the store, it's employees, people in line and even light poles in the parking lot. Some poor soul in California, out of his mind with desire for a PS3, ran into a parking lot pole and seriously injured himself.

Here's what I'm wondering. What if Houston, MN magically found itself in the distribution channel for this wonder toy? What if our local, hypothetical electronics emporium had the goods on release day 2006?

I'm trying to imagine myself in a line of devoted fans outside the Root River City Best Mart at midnight, in the cold, waiting for a chance to buy Sony's latest Play Station creation. We can barely contain our excitement knowing that the new platform will totally, totally outperform the previous Play Station. We can't wait to load our favorite games. Titles like "Harvest Havoc", "Blaze Orange Orgy" and "Canned Hunt Carnivores" are waiting for our carpally tunneled tendons to commence firing.

The problem is that our Best Mart has been allotted only 5 Play Stations and there are 75 people in line for those 5 items. No one in line knows there are only 5 to be had and we all think that just by lining up we will get the Play Station of our dreams. Powder keg.

OK, so there are 75 freezing, excited, sleep deprived, testosterone filled gamers standing on the sidewalk when the lights go on in the Mart and the manager comes to the double glass door to open up for the rush. His eyes are as wide as pies on a cooling rack when he sees how many of us there are as compared to how many games he has behind the counter. "Oh man", he thinks. "This is a sticky one". "It's like being out of jerky the day before the opening of deer season."

Nothing for him to do but relock the doors and hang the "Back in Five Minutes" sign in the window, turn out the lights and do some serious, albeit quick, thinking.

Option One: Keep the lights off and leave by the back door. I'll be half way to Rushford before they know I'm gone.

Option Two: A good manager stays with his store. I'll hunker down in the dark with my thermos. Sooner or later they'll go home.

Option Three: I'll get on the PA system and make an announcement. Something like, "Pay no attention to the man behind the counter. Go home and come back tomorrow. The great and powerful Oz"....nah.

Option Four: I'll just go out there and tell them the truth. "I've got only five Play Stations to sell but I'll do my best to get more in. In the meantime take these discount coupons and thanks for shopping at Best Mart." Then duck.

With his thinking done and armed only with the peace that comes from the right decision the manager turns on the lights, unlocks the door and walks resolutely out into the crowd. He widens his stance and prepares to make his announcement. He can't help thinking...

"I should have called my wife to say goodbye and remind her to get the snow blower tuned up."

Then what do you think happens? Nothing. No one rushes the manager, no one shouts obscenities (although some muttering was heard), no one pulls a weapon and no one throws a brick through the window. What does happen is this. From the back of the crowd Zeb B. who is the largest, most intimidating figure out here, steps out of line and walks toward the manager. He gets right up to the poor guy, spits his plug in a styrofoam cup and says, "Can we get rain checks?"

I'll tell you what. Never was a storekeeper so relieved. Never was a man so thankful to be situated right here, among the fair and patient folks of Houston. Never was I so proud to be a neighbor to such a sidewalk full of reasonable citizens. Folks who know that sometimes you make do with what you've got. Folks who are thankful to be here as opposed to say...California.

I just can't see one of us running into a lamppost. Not even to play "Harvest Havoc".