

THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

JEFF MINTER'S OCCASIONAL NEWSLETTER

OR

WHY WE HAVEN'T PUBLISHED ANY MORE SHAREWARE LATELY---

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HAPPENINGS:

It's been a very long time since I last wrote one of these, longer still since last time I wrote one on this here Mac. This is the same Mac I wrote the first NOTBs on years ago, now retired from active service at Llama HQ (replaced by a sleek new Centris) and living here with me in West Wales. This display used to seem so high-res but now it seems rather sad in comparison to my usual 1280x1024 mono (on the TT) or 1024x768 256-colour (on my PC). Nonetheless I do love this little Mac, and it's a testament to the quality of Apple's design that it is still a very usable system for wordprocessing now, even with only 1MB and no HD. The keyboard's still excellent, the mouse is built like a tank and just feels much more solid than the average ST or PC mouse.

The last time I wrote any kind of newsletter was when I released the demo version of Hardcore and asked for comments on the game design. Hardcore should have been finished ages ago, but there has been rather a large interrupt in the form of Atari Corp., who have been keeping me busy writing things on their two new beasts, Falcon and Jaguar. Llamazap on the Falcon should be released any time now, it's in pre-production now and they had final code off me ages ago. The Jaguar project is well advanced - more on this later.

Falcon Fooborolity

A year and a bit ago now, I was invited to Atari UK to look at something new. That something was a couple of machines that at first I thought were just STs, but a bit darker than usual, with their lids off and Richard hanging over the innards with a soldering iron. These turned out to be the first Falcons, on their way out to a show in Germany. Atari wondered whether I'd be interested in doing a game on one of these new beasts, and that sounded like a rather spiffy idea to me.

So, for the past year I have been deeply busy doing a game for Atari on the actually rather excellent new machine called the Falcon. The new game is called Llamazap and incorporates gameplay elements from Attack of the Mutant Camels, Llamatron, Sheep In Space, Metagalactic Llamas Battle at the Edge of Time, Gridrunner, Abductor, and Subgame 1 out of Iridis Alpha.. not to mention Scramble, Robotron, R-Type, Defender and Asteroids. The main format is a horizontally-scrolling shoot-em-up, bi-directionally scrolling like in Defender. The play area is approximately 30 screens long and 2 screens high - the display also scrolls vertically as you move your ship up and down. The game format is based on the Attack of the Mutant Camels theme - that is you have certain large targets on each level to eliminate before you can progress to the next. Of course these large targets don't just sit there waiting for you to dish it out; they spawn projectiles and myriads of menacing meemies bent on kicking your butt from here to Upper Goat Lane, Norwich. On many levels the nasty alien vermin also take time to abduct dolphins, neurally rewire cows into cybernetic killing machines, transform innocent and fluffy sheep into half-spaceships, half ovine kamikazes, and manifest in the form of giant DMs to stomp on innocent goats. You, as the hard llama out of Llamatron, get to leap into your choice of three traditionally horribly beweaponed spaceships and fly off to invade their space and show them who's really boss. This is the first game where I've actually had a real graphic artist, musician and DSP programmers working with me, so it looks and sounds quite a bit better than my games usually do. Peachy 256-colour graphics throughout, including the largest camel sprite ever to be seen in any video game, anywhere, in the entire Universe, on level 13. Wicked DSP sonics in a variety of styles from rock to rave. There are 25 levels in all; there are five themed zones with four main levels each, and a Transition Level separating each zone. The transition levels require the furry hero to leave his craft and battle the aliens directly; this provided me with a nice opportunity to reacquaint the player with such old friends as Llamatron, Metagalactic Llamas Battle at the Edge of Time and Gridrunner. All done with the usual dose of Yakly strangeness and continual references to excellent beasts.

The game's been finished for a while now, although it took longer than I expected to get it past Atari's extremely rigorous game testers, who would come up with stuff like: 'If I play the game for 1000 hours, then, on Level 14 I rescue a llama while I'm wearing my purple tank-top, and it's a Tuesday and John Skrush just ran out of Camels, and I go up the screen reciting the Lord's Prayer backwards, press all three FIRE buttons and shout "Ning! Ning! Ning!" at the top of my voice, then the score appears three pixels to the right of where it should actually be. Sometimes.' Anyway, it's done now, and Atari are printing the manuals and making the keypad overlays an' stuff and it should be out Real Soon Now. Honest.

Genealogy of a Jaguar

I've been destined for Jaguar for a long time, or that's how it seems to me at least. Long-time readers of Llamasoft newsletters will understand why, but for anyone who doesn't know, I'll give the history of the Jaguar console.

Way back in 1987, I was invited to Konix to see the prototype of a revolutionary new game console, to be called the Multisystem. At that time, the Multisystem was an exciting design, with an 8086 CPU supported by a fast blitter and a 256-colour byte-mapped display. There was also a DSP for audio. One of the most intriguing aspects of the Konix was the design of the console itself: it was shaped like the controller of an aircraft or spaceship, and cried out for some good 3D flying/driving games. In due course I got a development system and it was agreed that I'd do an advanced version of Attack of the Mutant Camels on the system. This was about 70% completed when Konix ran out of cash and the whole project failed. This was a shame, as I'd been working for months and didn't get paid, and the concept and hardware was good and might have held back the Japanese tide in Europe; Sega and Nintendo weren't as well established back then.

Oh well, I hated bloody 8086 code anyway.

Then, in 1991, Atari UK approached me to do some work on a new console. Somewhere along the way Flare mutated into Flare II (imaginative name change, guys) and created a new beast, this time called Panther. I submitted a game design to Atari and while they pondered spent a few weeks getting to know Panther. This time the CPU was a good ol' 68000 and in no time I had screens of scrolling backdrops and herds of bouncing antelopes leaping gracefully across them (well what else d'you expect from me?). The system had a powerful sprite engine, able to generate hundreds of hardware sprites in a selection of pixel depths, and do naughty things to them. Unfortunately just as I was starting to have fun Atari decided to pull the plug on the Panther, muttering something indistinct about a more advanced console being developed and pissing me off as yet again I had a perfectly good console snatched out from underneath me in mid-game.

So I settled back down to doing some more Shareware, and then the Falcon came along and soon I was busy with Llamazap. Occasionally I'd go to a devcon and hear something mentioned about a mysterious Thing called Jaguar - evidently the 'more advanced console' promised at the demise of Panther. I asked Richard Miller, Atari's VP of R&D and trouble from way back, whether the Jaguar (which may or may not exist, I added, as it was still Top Secret at that time) would be fast. He just laughed and said that speed wouldn't be a problem.

Guess what? He was absolutely right...

Now I can't tell you a lot about Jaguar, I had to sign NDAs about NDAs before I could even get near the beast, but I can give you my general impressions of what it's like. Atari invited me to Sunnyvale for a few weeks to write some demos for Jaguar at the start of the year, and while I was there I had an excellent time, met some most excellent dudes, hung out with Richard for the first time for years, and got bruises on my jaw from where it kept hitting the floor as I got more familiar with Jaguar.

I arrived at Sunnyvale as a complete novice on Jaguar. I'd seen it at a devcon a couple of weeks earlier and read the manual, but the first time I sat down to code one was my first day at Sunnyvale. It was love at first byte. I was expecting quite a steep learning curve - the Jag's an advanced beast, a long way from yer humble ST, full of multiprocessor RISC tech and more copro's than you could shake a knobly stick at - but within two or three days I was up and away. It's just so nice to code. Everything does just what you'd like and is set up exactly how you'd like it to be. As for the speed, well, if coding your standard ST is like riding a pushbike, coding Jaguar is like being strapped to a cruise missile. It kicks. It burns. You try and slow it down and the little sucker just keeps right on going. It does extremely, deeply naughty things to bitmaps of all sizes. It never runs out of colours. One cannot foam at the mouth or rant dementedly enough about this hardware. We are talking full-on, all out, X-rated technolust here.

Some of you may be thinking you've seen this all before; the Yak rants and raves about some new console and then it goes down and is never heard of, and besides, who are Atari anyway in these days of Sega and Nintendo?

Well, yeah, but the failure of the Konix was because they were too ambitious - I believe the Konix would have done well if it had actually been released in 1988 as planned. As for Panther, although I was annoyed at the time, in the light of Jaguar it makes sense - why waste time, money and effort breaking into a difficult market only to supersede your own hardware a year later? Far better to push on with Jag and gather resources for launching it, I reckon.

Sega and Nintendo are powerful opponents for Atari, it's true. However, Atari have the big advantage of being the first player in the 32/64-bit game. Sega and Nintendo are committed to their current systems for at least a couple more years (Sega have a 32-bit system, "Saturn", in development, but are unlikely to release it until their own Mega CD Megadrive bolt-on has had a decent innings, and despite Nintendo's much-publicised link-up with Silicon Graphics, they're only promising hardware in the arcades in 1994 and no home console until late 1995). There is also the new 3DO console soon to be released, and it certainly does look quite nice, but the launch price anticipated - around \$600 - is pretty high for a game console. They are in danger of Archimedesing themselves - that is, producing something

that everyone agrees is really jolly nice but which is just that bit too expensive to actually buy. Atari's projected launch price of \$200 is at least on the same planet as Sega and Nintendo's current offerings, and the hardware is every bit as powerful as 3DO's (if not more so). Admittedly it doesn't have a CD, but if you really want one you'll be able to bolt one on and it'll still be piles cheaper than 3DO.

A Storm In Cyberspace

You are no doubt all aware that I do love my Williams games, especially Defender and Robotron. Well, first the bad news: my Jaguar game is not based on any of the classic Williams arcade games. However, there is one non-Williams game which is just as good - and which has never been convincingly converted to any other format. It's a game which I used to play most nights with the lights off and fast, loud music playing; a game which has one of the most fiendish addictive hooks I've ever encountered. Steve Woz, founder of Apple Corp., used to have one in his games room alongside his Defender machine (and at the time he lived on a ranch with a herd of 40 llamas - such excellent taste).

The game to which I refer, if you hadn't guessed already, is Tempest. For those not ancient enough to remember this excellent game, I shall explain. Tempest was an extremely fast-paced 3D shoot-'em-up implemented on Atari's colour vector graphics arcade system. Graphically Tempest is absolutely unique - pure Techno (and after 6 million identical versions of R-Type rampant on all formats for the last million years, I guarantee you'll be refreshed). Imagine a neon web suspended in virtual space, extending down into the screen. You are a small yellow kind of claw-shaped thingie and you can move around on the top of the web. You fire rapid-fire shots, which look like tiny flowers, down the channels of the Web. Your enemies appear as tiny dots off the bottom of the Web; they land on it and swarm up it towards you. Should they reach the top before you zap them, they walk along the top edge until they find you, whereupon they grab you and carry you off to their lair at the bottom of the Web, where they presumably do a lot of nasty stuff to you because you never come back out again. They also find plenty of time to fire at you and even electrify sections of Web to fry you at a distance. Each Web is a different geometric shape; some are connected allowing you to walk a full circuit around the top edge; some are open, meaning that it is possible to get trapped in a corner. Should you zap all the meanies in a level, you zoom rapidly down through the Web and then soar off through space in a tidy little hyperspace sequence, until eventually you arrive at the next Web and alight on its top edge, whereupon the assault begins anew.

There have been efforts to transfer the Tempest idea to other formats but they have largely been unsuccessful. There was a game called Web Warp on the Vectrex, which had nice Web graphics but lacked the pace and gameplay of proper Tempest. There was Axis Assassin on the old 8-bit Atari, which tried to look more like Tempest but which failed to captivate, due to a slow update rate and pixels the size of Lego bricks to represent objects which should be formed of straight, clean vectors. There was a version done years ago on the ST by Atari UK; like the Robotron version also perpetrated by them at the same time, it's best to draw a discreet veil over this... thing. Suffice to say that if Dave Theurer (the very excellent designer of both Tempest and Missile Command) were dead he'd doubtless be spinning in his grave.

Anyway, Tempest has finally made the transition, got a bit prettier on the way, and is now alive and well and living in West Wales. A new generation of fingers hover over the Superzapper button awaiting the choicest moment to unleash total destruction. A new generation of buttocks clench at the sound of Pulsars pulsing.

Of course I'm not just going to convert Tempest to the Jag raw and leave it at that. Jaguar's so powerful most of the hardware would still be asleep in bed if all it had to do was run basic Tempest. No, there's plenty of new stuff, even on the basic game. (Like Def II on the ST, Tempest will come with the option to play the original Tempest game, in vector or enhanced modes, or play Tempest 2000, with graphical and gameplay enhancements). A variety of new enemies and weapons are available, there's some particle system effects you just have to see to believe, and you can have a Droid like in Llamatron while you learn to play. There will be some extended warp sequences with bonus games in them, and a whole bunch of other new powerups and stuff. I did think about having a solid Web but decided against it, as the neon web is so characteristic of Tempest; if you rendered it solid it would look like a bit of drainpipe. Neon stays, even if it does do a few things the original Web never did.

Basically, if you like (a) really fast shoot-em-ups, (b) the particle system effects in Trip-A-Tron, and (c) drop dead graphic effects, better start saving up for your Jaguar now...

Other Thangs

I've mentioned before that I'm no longer alone in the lightsynth project; myself, the very excellent Dr. Ian Bennet out of Inmos, Master of the Splines and Keeper of the Vertex Normals, and the quite unnaturally talented hardware designer Dave Japp out of Division, makers of righteous VR hardware, have all teamed up to form a company called the Virtual Light Co., (and, I might add, called the Virtual Light Co for over a year before a certain William Gibson published his latest book Virtual Light, excellent!) with the avowed intention of using naughty hardware to produce an absolutely spanking light synthesiser.

The Virtual Light project is proceeding steadily. VLC's Transputer-based system has been doing the rounds of clubs and raves, and in the last year we have worked at gigs with The Shamen, Primal Scream, The Orb and even a couple of dates on Prince's UK tour. I can't really mention what we're trying to do at the moment, as we're still discussing our plans with certain people; but if things go well, there will be a sequel to Trip-A-Tron created by the Virtual Light Co. which you just wouldn't believe...

With all this stuff happening there isn't really a lot of time for me to do any Shareware at the moment. I haven't gone off the idea, and I expect that if things get a bit quieter at some future time I'll do some more stuff, maybe on the Falcon this time (a 4-player Falcon version of Llamatron would be quite a laugh, I think) but I can't promise any new material for a little while. The PC version of Revenge of the Mutant Camels is about half done, but the guy doing the conversion is at Uni at the moment and naturally his studies have to take priority. He's working on it whenever he gets the chance, so hopefully in a few months we'll be able to release it.

I'm Off Then

Right, that's it, you've had your lot, you know what we're doing.. I certainly know what I'm doing: I'm off down the pub, come back, play some Tempest, go to Gatwick, get into a metal tube, be temporarily suspended 35000 feet above the surface of the Earth drinking gin and tonics, land on a bit of land surrounded by wetness, and spend two lovely weeks reclining on the granular interface between sea and land, offering up seldom-seen parts of the Yakly surface area to the gentle caress of hard radiation from a thermonuclear reaction eight odd light-minutes off. Methinks there will be plenty of donkeys and every chance that they'll do parascending. Excellent.

I'll leave you with a couple of little lists; remember if you haven't got a Falcon yet buy one now, and if you value your sanity start saving for your Jag straightaway, because you'll go completely insane if you see Tempest 2000 and realise that you can't play it until your fingers bleed. Not that I'm biased towards Atari or anything, me, oh no siree.

Yak's Top Moments of Recent History

- Getting demo mode 16 on the Jaguar to work and realising what you could do with it
- Spending an hour in VR on a state-of-the-art system, in Studio A at Paisley Park, listening to The Orb on a 10K studio monitor system
- When I was learning Jaguar and I'd written this warp effect that was intended to be strictly non-real-time, and Leonard said to put it in a realtime loop and see what happened
- When the first Flippers emerged from the Web and behaved exactly like real Flippers: Tempest lives again!
- Going flying with Richard in Sunnyvale, and being in exactly the same position I've been in on various flight simulators, flying over the Golden Gate Bridge, but actually there in a real Cessna
- Graphics Demo Mode 20
- Any one of those times when you're on the top of the Web, the Flippers are marching towards you, there's a Fuseball on the top rail right next door and you're out of Superzapper - and the last enemy reaches the top edge and you zoom out of there, excellent! hahahaha!

Yak's Top Blasters

Tempest 2000 (Jaguar) Not that I'm biased or bigheaded or anything, oh no, definitely not, it's not like me
 Jungle Strike (Sega Megadrive) Dubiously gung-ho theme, but top gameplay
 Pop'n'Twin Bee (SNES) Seriously wiggled-out graphics
 Pinball Dreams/Fantasies (Amiga) Classic pinball with good maths
 Lemmings 2 (You name it) Ski-ing lemmings. Excellent!
 Starfox (SNES) Super FX ain't no Jaguar, but it'll do for now
 Street Fighter II (SNES) Don't get me wrong, I hate beat-em-ups, EXCEPT when I'm a large green beastie with a wicked head-bite

Take care, catch ya on the Flipside...

AND NOW.. A FEW WORDS from our Sales Manager-

• AS YOU MAY KNOW- Jeff's mum has negotiated a deal with UK Atari which allows us to sell copies of Jeff's PHOTON STORM and DEFENDER II, which were marketed under Atari's ARC software label. Copies are available from us at £5 and £6 each respectively. (Atari RRP was £20!).

We think the games are excellent, especially DEF II which was a labour of love for the Yak who was and is a devoted DEFENDER/ STARGATE fan. The disk contains authorised faithful copies of both those games, plus Jeff's own creation, DEFENDER II.

PHOTON STORM is a LookoutheretheycometheAlienScum! game which will keep you twitching with anxiety and should sharpen your reflexes. The graphics may not be state-of-the-art but the gameplay is tremendous. Not many of us survive beyond the 6th level; the inter-wave Hyperspace Tunnel sorts the men (sorry) adults from the children... or vice versa probably.

Neither of these games was energetically marketed by ARC and we are delighted to have the chance to offer them at this price. They are suitable for the ATARI ST and the AMIGA 500 (not 500+) series machines.

ALSO, LLAMASOFT'S range of SHAREWARE titles now includes-

• LLAMATRON

-100 levels of mad, hectic and humorous action. Dangerously addictive- can change your lifestyle, destroy your joystick and improve your peace of mind. 520k and 1040k versions. Recently judged the best game ever produced on the PD/Shareware circuit.

For Atari ST/STE and Falcon, Amiga (including A600 and 500+):

Registration fee: £5

For PC & compatibles:

Registration fee: £10

• REVENGE OF THE MUTANT CAMELS

REVENGE was a big hit when first published back in 1984 (on the CBM 64) and we feel that the time has come for a new public to enjoy it in its fresh 16-bit form. And of course this is no straight conversion-it has been greatly enhanced, without losing its essential playability. For Atari ST/STE and Falcon, Amiga (including A600 and 500+) and soon for the PC.

Registration fee: £5

• TRIP-A-TRON

Jeff's famous light synthesiser the subject of many enthusiastic reviews, is now available as shareware, for the Atari ST and the Amiga computers (not the A600, which has too small a keyboard). This unique interactive graphics program is a wonderful accompaniment to any type of music- and a great creative tool.

"...ALLOWS THE USER TO PLAY WITH LIGHT AS A MUSICIAN WOULD PLAY WITH SOUND."

TRIP-A-TRON includes its own programming language, KML, but comes ready to use with graphics effects pre-programmed to individual keys. It also includes a 135-page manual and, while stocks last, a handsome three-ring binder.

For Atari ST/STE (not Falcon) and Amiga (including 500+)

Registration fee: £10
(UK: add £1 p & p)

• COLOURSPACE

Also a LIGHT SYNTHESISER, Colourspace enables users to create flowing, iridescent graphic effects on screen, and if they wish, harmonise them to their favourite music. It is best played in a darkened room with the music volume well up.. The results can be truly spectacular.

Comes with a manual to help you to explore the potential of this original program, AND a cool and spiffy sleeve for the disk.

Registration fee: £5

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Your Registration fees can get you a free copy of Andes Attack or SuperGridrunner (ST or Amiga), or an upgraded version of the shareware game, plus a Llamasoft poster (while stocks last). Just ask...
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AND, BY GOLLY....

• **HARD CORE** A sample disk of Jeff's latest shareware game is available on request. It includes an opportunity to comment on and possibly influence the final form of HARD CORE.

For Atari ST/STE and Falcon only.

Disk, post and packing: 75p

• THE MERAK VIDEO-

A Space Journey of fifty minutes- TRIP A TRON graphics matched to ADRIAN WAGNER's music: £10

PLEASE NOTE!

When ordering, don't forget to tell us which machine you have.

Non-UK Buyers: Credit card orders are easier for us to handle.

Please include £2 (Europe) and £3 (elsewhere) to cover postage and packing N B: £2= \$3 or 5 DM etc.