The Nature of the Beast*******

September 1991

Shareware Project Update

FIRST, I Have to state categorically that based on our experience, Shareware works. It is a viable alternative to the commercial way of selling software.....

.....The details, for those who are interested, are as follows. So far we have had some 800 registrations, mostly from the ST release. The Amiga version is in PD libraries now and we're just starting to get a few Amiga registrations. The Ami version gets the cover disk treatment next month.

So we've already made about 4K out of the ST version and we're still getting about five registrations a day. If we assume that Amiga owners are going to be at least as honest as ST owners, at the end of the day we could stand to have made going on for ten grand out of Llamatron. While this isn't as much as you might make from a big time commercial blockbuster, it's still quite a reasonable wedge, definitely more than you'd make selling a "commercial" budget game.

I'm delighted, as are all at Llamasoft. I must admit that when I originally proposed releasing Shareware it took quite a bit of persuading to convince the others that it was a good idea, but now we're convinced. Special thanxx to everyone who has registered with us. It's been especially great that so many people have taken the trouble not just to register but also to write us long letters telling us what they thought about the game, about Shareware, and offering constructive criticism. We can't possibly reply individually to all those people who asked us questions but we've tried to help as many people as possible. All feedback about the game is being considered and will be borne in mind while I'm writing 'REVENGE OF THE MUTANT CAMELS" - no leftover text to obscure the graphics, ability to turn hardcore strobe effects off etc. etc.

It's a really nice way to make some money when everyone pays over their fiver with a smile on their face and no-one feels disappointed. Thanks, too, to those people who have sent in disks, tapes of music and other stuff for me. It's great to get feedback from the people who actually play the game. Beats hell out of dealing with some software house and being just another product. And although only one per cent of the people who actually got Llamatron have registered, it's nice to know that for once a game of mine has got out there and that a lot of people are playing it. If only it were ten per cent - I'd never write any commercial games again!

Hopefully, we've helped to give a bit more credibility to the idea of Shareware. What we need now is for more programmers to join in and make more quality stuff for the Shareware circuit. The more stuff there is in Shareware, and the better the quality, the more chance there is that little Darren might think twice before forking over the dosh for the latest load of unimaginative twaddle which some (but by no means all) of the large software empires foist on the public.

Of course getting cover-disk distribution has been a big help and some people have suggested that we had an unfair advantage over shareware distributed via the PD libraries. My response to those people is: we didn't ask ST FORMAT to distribute the game. All we did was send out the shareware to the PD libraries. They in turn sent it to ST FORMAT as a sample of their latest new stuff, and FORMAT asked if they could put it on the disk. The same thing could have happened to any good piece of shareware. There's always loads of PD on these cover disks: if they like mine they're welcome to take it! It's just part of the Shareware idea: good Shareware distributes itself. If people like it they want to spread it for you.

Currently under way here in Woolly Welsh Wales are two projects. The first is an ST version of 'REVENGE OF THE MUTANT CAMELS'; expect this before the end

of the year. It features a laser-spitting dromedary, an ancipital, loads of weird waves, powerups, Warps, some more mad samples, the option of simultaneous two-player mode and a computer-assisted mode like the Droid in Llamatron. It's going to be Shareware. There will be an Amiga version but it'll be a bit later than the ST release, as I'm going to replace the scroll with a hardware-scroll and add some raster horizons.

The other project, which I have great difficulty in tearing myself away from, is a next-generation lightsynth on a Transputer-based platform. Details when appropriate, suffice to say I am having a distinctly wonderful time; you have to love any system where you have sufficient speed to run dense 256-colour 3D starfield effects in weird symmetry modes like order-17 rotational with X and Y mirroring, and the Mandelbrot sets you can generate on this thing make my brain hurt, especially when you start using some of the new lightsynth's effects on them!

Of course Panther is now dead, and I'm waiting to get my mitts on Jaguar. Third time lucky? I'm determined to do some console work one way or another, and if Jaguar is everything Atari are hinting then, in terms of hardware, it's going to nuke the Megadrive and Famicom into a glowing radioactive pile of melted silicon. Take the brain of a workstation, bolt it onto some kickin' graphix hardware and you've got one awesome games engine. Let's hope Atari can also deliver the goods in the software department. Rule No.1 of consoles is: SOFTWARE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN HARDWARE. Look at how the Lynx - a technically brilliant system with an utterly optimum graphics chip - is struggling in the face of SEGA's Game Gear onslaught. SEGA released as many games in the first month as Lynx has had over its entire lifespan. We need a lot of new Lynx software right now. The Lynx is technically streets ahead of the Game Gear, which is basically just a handheld 8-bit SEGA console, but it could get buried in a tidal wave of cute Japanese software. This is infinitely galling to me, 'coz I love the Lynx dearly.

What Atari must do is have at least ten, (twenty would be better) absolutely dynamic games ready at launch time. These games should do all the things Famicom and Megadrive can't do. Famicom's hardware rotate/scaling chip only seems to be usable on a single playfield - not individual sprites; its CPU is very slow and as soon as too many objects get onscreen the system begins to slow down. Megadrive has a faster CPU, but no scaling or rotation. So we need games which push Jaguar's CPU and hardware to the limits. Rather than get companies to do Amiga ports to Jaguar they should get them to design new versions FOR the Jaguar. By all means get hold of prestigious titles from the likes of Psygnosis but let's have the ultimate version of Lemmings and a version of Beast which makes the Amiga version look like a ZX81 program by comparison.

They also have an excellent chance to score against the Japanese in their strongest subject - software. It is true that the Japanese write excellent, polished, playable software - but have you noticed that it's all the same game? You scroll through a level, bosh the meanies, collect the goodies and powerups, then you get to the Boss, kill him, then it's level 2, scroll along.....(repeat about 8 times, get to a Super-Boss, beat him, you've won!). This is all well and good, but although it's easy and quite fun to play, ultimately such games are boring. You don't really get good at games like these; you just learn patterns. You could train an industrial robot to play Super Mario Brothers or R-Type right to the end.

Atari already have the rights to a lot of excellent game designs. Some of them are old, but in all cases the underlying designs are much more advanced and interesting to play than the standard Japanese formula. A competent game designer could use today's graphics, sound and hardware capabilities, extend the design if necessary adding complexity and depth, and produce games so utterly blinding that standard Japanese formulaic stuff would look very flat by comparison. Jaguar would then be perceived to be orders of magnitude better than the competition for hardware AND awesomeness of software.

Here are a few of the titles Atari have already published on console or for which the rights must be available for a song:

STAR RAIDERS. Utterly brilliant Atari 400/800 3D space game. If Atari have any doubts that an improved Star Raiders would be popular, let them look to the PC world, where a game called Wing Commander by Origin Systems is currently taking over the US. The game is basically improved Star Raiders with breathtaking graphics - enemy ships being scaled and rotated in the dogfights, mega explosions, going on missions in a large and hostile Galaxy - it's all there. The game is brilliant - I've played it - but to play it you need a 386 PC with VGA graphics and a hard drive. Even on such a PC the game is nowhere near 50Hz smoothness. A Star Raiders-upgrade like this on Jaguar would be awesome. The graphics hardware and that awesome CPU could render this game in 50Hz realtime no sweat. Add amazing sound and plenty of ROM space for lots of graphics and missions, and you'd have a game which would dwarf the likes of Super Mario with its sheer epic scope and which, as an added benefit, have every PC owner in the US slavering to buy a Jaguar to play the ultimate Wing Commander-style game on - not to mention all those Atari 8-bit Star Commanders already out there. Should be bundled with the system when you buy it - or even built in!

RESCUE ON FRACTALUS: Originally developed for the 7800 console, finally emerged as a 400/800 game. Lucasfilm managed to create a world of solid 3D fractal mountains through which you could fly in realtime. Imagine what they could do with a CPU a hundred times as powerful and awesome graphics assist. The basic game formula begs to have more complexity added, with larger mappable terrains and different missions. I can imagine Jaguar owners bragging to Nintendo nerds: "So you thought that ground rotation in Pilot Wings was good? Check THIS out, dude....."

DEFENDER/ROBOTRON: Both these Williams titles could be developed into outstanding shoot-'em-up games. Given the best graphics you can buy, more variety and complexity and special attention to playability they'll make conventional Japanese scrollie-blasters look very uninspiring.

TEMPEST: Weird but wonderful early Atari arcade game. I can think of how you might use the basic design of this game to create an utterly brilliant and unusual 3D shoot-'em-up in a Cyberspace-style setting. Tempest is a strange and wildly frantic 3D shoot-'em-up designed by Dave Theurer, the game designer responsible for another early Atari classic, Missile Command. Tempest is played on a neon web suspended in space; running along the top edge, you fire down into the web at the meanies which swarm up to get you. Originally a vector game, this basic design could be updated using the latest raster technology to create a 3D shoot-'em-up far more weird, ferocious and addictive than Space Harrier or AFterburner ever were.

Atari also need at least one awesome flight simulator, one awesome driving game (possibly Race Driving, the Hard Driving sequel), STUN Runner (a futuristic driving game which would, if implemented well, be a lot better than Famicom's futuristic driving game F-Zero) and Lemmings. Sure, let them hedge their bets with a few arcade conversions, but let them pick the best ones and the most complex - the sort of stuff which would be hard for a Sega or Nintendo to do well.

So Atari have the ideal opportunity to reclaim their homeland from the invading Japanese. Nintendo and Sega have made their moves; Atari know that their hardware is way better than both of the Japanese offerings. Ultimately, however, it is the quality of the software available which will decide the matter. In this respect Atari shouldn't set out just to emulate the Japanese. They should go all out to bury them.

Well, that's about all for the moment.
Watch out for REVENGE when it becomes available and keep on taking the tablets.
I'll leave you to reflect on a few gentle lines I wrote to my beloved only the other night:

```
[] INT tbb [star FROM 32 FOR 64]:
SEQ
   tbb[tp.s<<1]:=x2
   tbb[(tp.s<<1)+1]:=y2
   IF
      (in.x.range(x2)) AND (in.y.range(y2))
         sympixel(screens[draw.screen],x2,y2,col.s,rsym.s,phase,
            sx.s,sy.s,mirx,miry)
      TRUE
         SKIP
```

Enchanting, huh?

-- Y a K 14/8/91