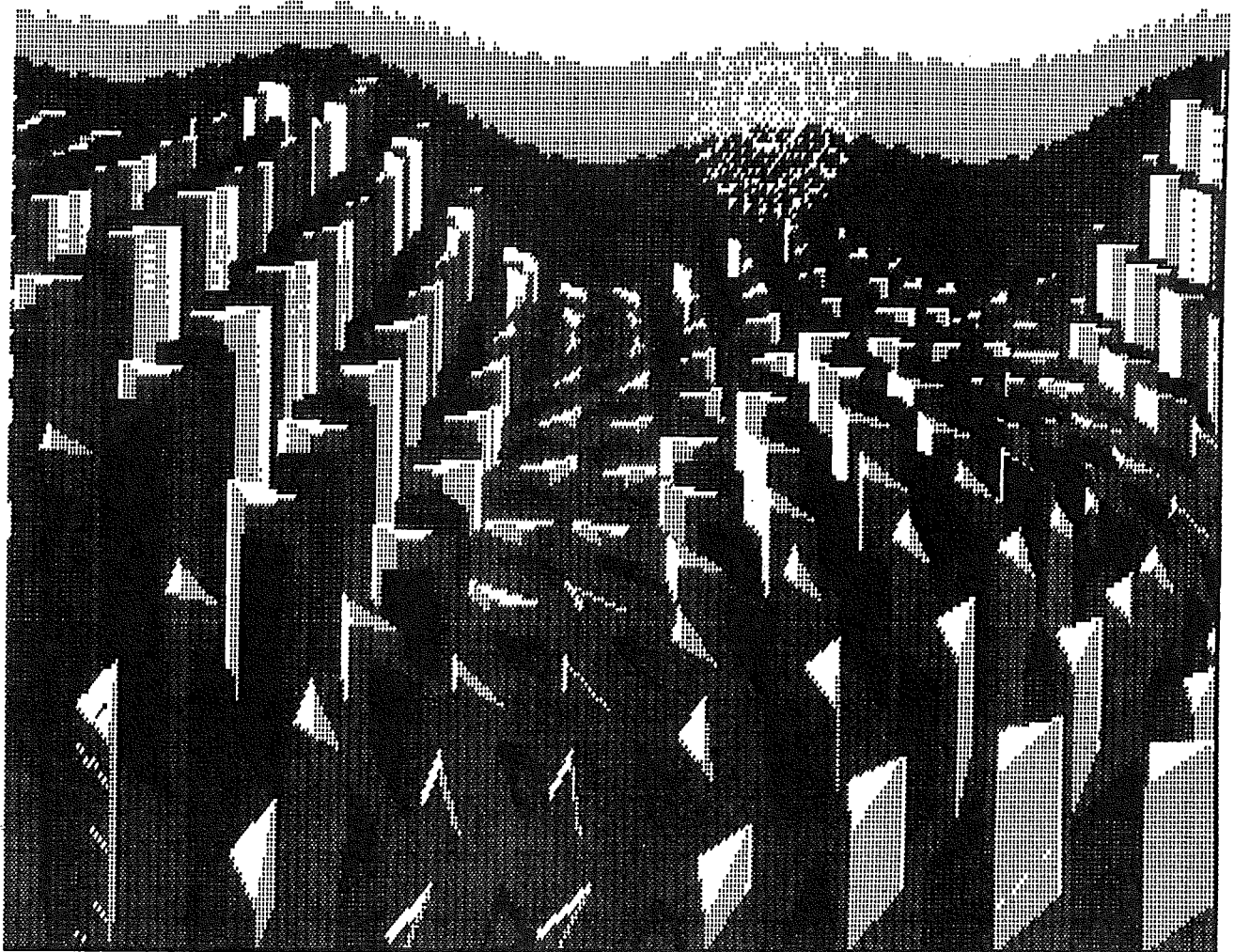


The Nature of the Beast:

The Legendary LLAMASOFT newsletter



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1: Not Bust, Just Busy.....

Doubtless many of you have been wondering just why you haven't had an issue of NOTB for such a long time. Maybe you figured we'd gone bust, ceased trading, or just got too bone idle to inform anyone of what we're up to anymore. Not so.

You see, normally I would produce a newsletter around the time I completed a project, in order to let everyone know about when/where it would be available and what it was all about. This time it's really no different; it's just that the project has taken a great deal of time to complete!

The project in question is the new ST lightsynth, TRIP-A-TRON. This took a little over a year to write, but has, I feel, been well worth it. If you liked Colourspace on the ST (or even if you have only had experience of Psychedelia on the Commodore!) then your eyeballs will be out on stalks when you see what the new system can do.

ST Colourspace was fine for its time - but do you remember the ropey user-interface? (WHAT user-interface I hear experienced users bleat....) No text at all in the whole program, no disk directories, loading and saving files by arcane strings of key commands like Undo-M-A and nonsense like that, and adjusting system parameters using a series of weedy little bar graphs, unlabelled and incomprehensible....

Well, now there's Trip-A-Tron. You get edit screens for all the functions, all point-and-click stuff; a nice fat file selector for hassle-free disk I/O; even a programming language which allows you to customize the layout of your ST keyboard. The lightsynth functions themselves have been massively extended; you still have the 'basic' Colourspace pattern generation stuff, but to augment that you have a number of new modes, such as Expandors (slower and more 'drifty' than raw Colourspace) and Line (creates patterns formed of lines, rather than pixels). Existing Colourspace effects, like Starfields, have been completely re-designed; Starfields are now treated as true 3-D, and can be moved in the x-, y- and z-planes and even assigned an angular velocity to allow spectacular vortex effects. Colour selection is greatly enhanced and simplified - you can have up to four rotation ranges per palette; within each range you can attach oscillators to the red, green and blue components of the colours to get constantly-changing dynamic colourflows. Smooth transitions from one colour to another can be generated by just choosing the endpoint colours and using 'Calc Flow' to fill in the in-between shades.

Then we get on to the seriously new stuff. If you have 1 Megabyte of RAM or more, you can start to use the video effects tools, which allow you to manipulate single frames, or entire animation sequences, in a variety of ways; resizing, rotation and translation in 3-D, pixellisation, mapping onto surfaces, filtering and suchlike. Animations generated in this way can be played back at up to 50 frames a second via KML (the programming language). KML itself contains a number of graphics commands.

Thus, it can be used to create mathematical graphics and animations.

The cover pic was generated in this fashion, and is part of an animation sequence used in the MERAK video. Then you get all sorts of groovy stuff like the built-in sequencer, and the SillyScope (a truly wazzo device which allows you to use waveforms to generate the sort of effects associated with laser shows).

Anyway, that's why it's been a while since the last newsletter. All these edit screens and 3-D translations and programming languages and stuff take quite a bit of time to program in assembler. By the time I'd finished I felt like I'd just written 10 games! Even the flippin' manual took me two weeks to write (and that's twice as long as it took to write 'Gridrunner' on the Vic-20). But the good news is that it's finished, it even works, and it's on sale NOW for the imposing price of £34.95, which I know might sound a little hefty, but it isn't really considering that (a) there is a HUGE amount of 'code in the program, (b) the manual is the size of a small novel and comes in a Yupmaster Filofaxoid ring-binder thingy and actually looks quite flash and (c) if you already have Colourspace on the ST, you can trade it in with us and get the new stuff for a tenner off.

Oh yeah, don't worry when I say the manual is the size of a small novel: it is, but you don't have to read it all at once. Trip-A-Tron is designed to be operated on a variety of different levels; you can work it just like Colourspace, just moving the mouse and pressing the odd button, while you get used to it; if you want more control, then you can use the manual and start to learn about pattern editing, starfields, and ultimately KML. Using KML gives you deep control over every aspect of the lightsynth's function. KML itself is a vastly simplified programming language, with minimal syntax and no complicated program structures (unless you believe that review by Chris Jenkins, where he moans about not understanding the conditional structures in KML, but if he can't understand a simple IF/ELSE/ENDIF structure then what's he doing writing for a computer magazine?)...

If you're interested, check out the Trip-A-Tron reviews, there have been several in the ST mags just recently, and see what the reviewers say (ignoring aforementioned Chris Jenkins comment). There was something else about him.... oh yeah. Well. You lot reading NOTB know my style by now, yeah? Sheep and llamas everywhere, highly individualistic, you dig? Well, as a result of this, I decided when doing Trip-A-Tron that I didn't want it to look like a utility (boring, Gem, four-colour, business-like etc.) so a lot of the Edit screens are very colourful, often have sheep and llamas on them, and the text often gets pretty strange as well, you know me. Nonetheless, all the screens are easy to use, certainly a lot easier than Colourspace ever was, and I've had no complaints from anyone, except our Mr. Jenkins. So, if you should come across his review, where he says that 'the edit screens are without exception badly designed with nothing so obvious as a Quit box to click on' or somesuch twaddle, ignore it, and remember that the World is unfortunately full of the sort of people who think that computers should be totally straight, boring and businesslike, utilities should be Spartan and standardised in structure, and God forbid that the programmer should allow any personal touches to show through. You can then appreciate how lucky we are to be the sort of people who think that computers should be for having a groovy time, utilities should look zarjaz, and who don't get uppity at the prospect of leaving an Edit screen by clicking on a Naff Off button rather than a Quit one.

Anyway, enough about Trip-A-Tron, and onto a related subject....

2: MERAK

What's a Merak, I hear you bleating... well, it's the name of a star, and also the name of the latest album by Adrian Wagner, and also the name of a video. You see, me and Adrian decided a couple of years ago to collaborate on a complete audiovisual composition, him on synths and me on the lightsynth. During the intervening time he composed the album 'Merak' and I created Trip-A-Tron, and then used Trip-A-Tron in conjunction with some zarjaz hardware (10 Meg'sworth of STs running through a seriously cool five-channel video mixer) to create a 50-minute-odd graphics sequence to accompany the music. The resultant audio-visual 'album' is now available on video with hi-fi sound, and all at the respectable price of £12.95, so now you can experience 'ultimate' Trip-A-Tron *and* some amazing music together without even having an ST. We did a performance of the album at the Ars Electronica festival in London earlier this September, where it went down very well (and thanks to everyone who came along to give us some moral support, much appreciated, sorry I didn't hang around much to chat afterwards, but we got offstage and I found to my horror that the **bar** was closed, most uncivilised, so we split to hit a pub).

We're hoping to maybe do some more shows later in the year, so if you hear of us doing anything come along and have a look. Even if you can't, or we don't, or something, you can, should you want to, obtain the video, not that I want to come across with any heavy advertising-type self-congratulatory blurb like you get in *most* corporate newsletters (you ever seen the US Glod newsletter? If you have you know what I mean) so I'm just gently making you aware of the video's existence, and the fact that it's £12.95, and that you can order it from us, so buy it NOW, give us your money, loadsamoney, so I can employ loadsaprogrammers, and churn out arcade licenses across all th' popular formats and carve out a *software empire* and take out HUGE stands at computer shows and just put up a bunch of monitors displaying all the stuff that's not quite available yet and maybe get in some arcade games, those games that my programmers haven't even started converting yet but which will attract the kids to th' stand, and I'll get a haircut and a suit and sit inside my huge stand making deals and never, God forbid, go outside and meet anyone who actually plays th' damn games...

Or maybe not. If you feel inclined, buy th' video, and I'll use the money for a few 25-kilo bags of Rough Sheep Mix for Ewes and Lambs and a new box of disks or if I get seriously lucky, another hard disk drive, and Adrian'll buy yet another amazing synthesiser or six, and the next video'll be even better than this one...

The video's good quality visually, because we went to do the recording in a video studio in Cardiff, where they had this amazing machine we used to expand the ST's screen to fill the whole TV picture (th' starfields zip right off the edge of the TV, no border, most groovy). Come to the Atari show, we'll run it there for all to see.

3: What YAK is Doing Next

I'm sure that those who know me will be totally surprised to find out that my next project is, in fact, a zap game. I've been getting together some fast sprite routines and some totally wicked raster control routines on my ST, and I've decided that, to get myself back into a blasting frame of mind I'm going to convert my very first Vic-20 game onto the ST. (Most companies go for the *most recent arcade license*. YAK goes for *converting an old VIC 20 title*. Well you know I'm weird...)

Those of you with long memories will instantly know the game of which I speak. I shall be making a few *alterations* to the appearance of the game to suit the target machine, so don't be too *disappointed* if the game doesn't appear exactly identical to the original version.

We will have at the very least an advanced, playable demo at the Atari Show at the end of November, and the way it's going at the moment (great guns) maybe even a finished game. Today I was programming in the collision-detect routines, always a significant point in a game's genesis (as opposed to the programmer's Genesis, that's different and on the CD at the moment) because with the detecol stuff installed you can fire at things and they will blow up! So this afternoon I toiled for long minutes, intently hunched over the keyboard, skilfully building up nested webs of logic, expectantly assembling up, booting up the program, lining up on a particularly nasty-looking alien and unleashing white-hot laser hostility in his general direction, and the laser didn't go through the alien like all the other times, oh no, this time, the laser hits the alien and at last you see.... two bombs, a garbled Menu bar with the helpful legend 'DesiFeViepOio' in garbled colours, and a dead Busy Bee. Whilst this was not the spectacular alien demise I had been expecting (central 32x32 explosion animation, three-phase, suspiciously similar to the explosions in PC Engine 'R-Type', plus smoothly-expanding 16-sprite 'burst' explosion behind, expanding by about 120 pixels in all directions) it did represent progress. It's just that every time you hit something with your laser the system bombs. I'll have to remove that before I release, it may well affect playability....

Seriously though, I did eventually find the cause of said crash and achieve the groovy and really quite psychedelic alien death as previously described, and I've been happily zapping away all afternoon, not strictly fair mind you, since the aliens haven't got any collision detect on *you* yet let alone any bullets, but things are looking Very Promising. Look for release at the end of the year. Once this game's finished, I expect I'll do another game or six; it's been too long since I sat down to write a bunch of good honest zap games. So be warned - the Atari ST is to be the silicon battleground for a whole new generation of struggles against those dastardly Zzyaxians, so all you old Gridrunners and Matrix pilots and Mutant Camels and Sheep In Space and Gilbies and Laser Zone Gunners better start weight-training for your Fire button fingers and get some TCP for the blisters you're gonna get on your Smart Bomb thumbs. From the Vic-20, to the '64, and now the Atari ST - YAK is back in the blastin' business!!

Prepare to die, Player One.....

While I'm on the subject of my games, I must apologise to everyone about what happened to Revenge II. I wanted, on what was probably to be my last Commodore game, to release RII as a budget game, nice to end with a good game done cheap I thought, so I gave it to Mastertronic... Unfortunately, the game suffered from what I have come to realise is always a problem if you release a game through a 'Big Company', namely it became Just Another Product and got largely lost somewhere in the depths of their release schedule. Not a **single** advert was placed for the game, and the game was hardly reviewed in its '64 incarnation, the only review I saw was in ZZAP! and that was because I had visited the ZZAP! offices and demo'd the game in person. As for the conversions to other systems - I haven't seen the Spectrum one although I believe it does exist, and the Atari ST one - well, I'm sorry if anyone bought it expecting to find a Yak game, because they will have been sorely disappointed. I expected, perhaps naively, that as they were converting my game, I would be consulted at various stages of the conversion, shown the prototype and allowed to offer advice and guidance to the conversion programmers. A fair assumption, yeah?

Not so. I found out about the ST conversion when I went into a shop in Basingstoke and *bought* a copy. Not a glimpse of the game did Mastertronic vouchsafe me prior to this. No opportunity to point out that the colours on the Wave Select screen were, to say the least, diabolical, especially considering how easy it is to get pleasing colours on a 512-colour system; no chance to comment that the scrolling was fine but that the sprite motion was too jerky and the sprites still looked like Commodore 64 ones, which is absurd on a machine where you can have 16-colour hi-rez sprites. To add insult to injury the conversion programmers quite gratuitously hacked my attack waves about, inserting completely non-Yak ones, having the aliens hatch out of dumb-looking *eggshells* f'Ghod's sake, and removing all the waves with sheep in (I didn't find a single sheep in the conversion)... and to add impudence to insult and injury, the programmers (about five of them, all for one Commodore game??) added a dedication, they dedicated *my* game, or what was left of it, to two people I didn't even know, never mind want to dedicate my game to!

For these reasons, I've come to the conclusion that the only outfit capable of correctly handling Yak games is Llamasoft, and it is to us you must look for all future releases. We won't install dodgy turbos which knacker the bonus level and release 5000 copies of a game thus bugged; we won't neglect to print all the game instructions 'because they won't fit on the card'; we won't hang on to a game for months after it's finished waiting for the Right Release Date; we won't do naff 16-bit conversions which are crummy versions of a good 8-bit game; in short, it'll be blazin', and no messin'. Yak games will be lovingly hand-rolled by a dedicated games freak and made available as soon as they are finished, not spat out from faceless empires on release dates calculated with military precision to maximize the Porche-purchasing potential of some bunch of fat cats who probably couldn't get an extra ship and Smart Bomb on Stargate even if you added all their scores together and really aren't too worried about the *playability* of a game so long as it looks pretty, so long as it *sells through*...

How on earth did it come to **this???**

4: The PC Engine

Way back in 1983, a bunch of Americans set out to design the ultimate home games console. They worked for a company called Amiga, and they aimed to produce a 68000-based games console to be sold for about \$300. This project was conceived at a time when the games console market was booming – but shortly after the bottom was knocked out of that particular market – home computers zapped games consoles, seemingly for good. And so, the Amiga project mutated, almost becoming an IBM PC-Jr compatible, but emerging eventually as Commodore's 68000-based beastie, definitely intended for more than just zapping.

However, in Japan the games console never died at all, and the Nintendo games system attained such supremacy that virtually every Japanese family had one, and a single popular game could sell a million copies in a day. The Nintendo became big business in the US, and has recently been introduced here (but without much success, due at least in part to the amazing reluctance of Nintendo to release any decent games for the machine, despite a huge library of games already available in Japan). The Nintendo, although a nice machine, still wasn't sufficiently in advance of, say, the C64 or the 8-bit Ataris to really impress.

Now, out of Japan has come the most extraordinary machine, a system which fully realises the Amiga-designers' concept of a home system capable of delivering arcade-quality entertainment, and all at a ridiculous, give-away price. That system is the PC-Engine by NEC, and doubtless you will have seen references to it in the computer games mags. I have been fortunate enough to own a PC-Engine for the last few months, during which my Sega and Nintendo systems have scarcely seen the light of day, so I'll give you an owner's eye viewpoint of the system and the high points of my PC-Engine games collection.

First impressions of the PC-Engine are confusing, to say the least. We are used to STs and Amigas, powerful machines and quite large, too, what with keyboards as long as surfboards and built-in disk drives and all. Powerful machines ought to be big. So when you get the PC Engine, you'll be amazed to find that it is tiny, about the size of a CD case in area and about as thick as the sort of piece of toast you need those special wide-maw toasters, or better still a grill, to do at 4.30 in the morning after Night Network when you've got the munchies. Into this tiny case plugs a single Nintendo-style joypad, 9V DC, and an NTSC TV. Oh yeah, and a game cartridge. The games come on credit-cards' with a single edge-connector at one end; the cards slot into a recess on the top of the machine. These little cards are quite amazing; you can't buy a bunch of CDs and Fat Freddy's Cat comics at the Virgin Megastore with them, but I reckon they must hold *at least* a Megabyte of game code and graphics and are virtually indestructible. Mind you, the real surprise comes when you turn the wee beastie on...

Games on the PC-Engine are, quite simply, the best you've ever seen. Graphics are generally of the huge, highly-coloured, intricately-detailed and fast-moving variety.

Scrolling is effortless, raster glitches unheard-of, gameplay finely-tuned and addictive. None of the games would be out of place in an arcade at 20p a shot. The system is orders of magnitude ahead of Nintendo, and put most ST and Amiga arcade conversions to shame. The six-channel sound chip, although not as good as the Amiga's sound output, is better than the old '64 SID, and the six channels allow both tunes and FX to run concurrently in one game.

I've amassed a few PC Engine games by now, here's some details of my favourites:

1: R-Type. A near-perfect conversion of the arcade game, including all those loathsome-looking aliens and motherships, and demonstrating the power of the PC-Engine in terms of sheer volume of moving objects. Gameplay is identical to the arcade machine. If you get good on PC-Engine R-Type and encounter the game in the arcades, you will be equally good at the coin-op. The major difference between arcade and PC-Engine R-Type is that the arcade game tends to slow down when there's a lot happening onscreen, but the PC-Engine version does not. The eight levels of arcade R-Type are too big to be contained on a single card, so the game is divided into two cards, R-Type I and II. Completion of R-Type I gives the player a Mission Code which, entered into R-Type II, allows you to enter the remaining four levels with your score, ships and weaponry from R-Type I. Definitely a must for heavy-metal zap freaks.

2: Victory Run. What they really mean, of course, is Out Run, and this is the best home driving game, bar none; fast action across road and desert, superb road and hill effects, parallax-scrolling horizons, huge sprites, spectacular crashes. The graphics are very colourful, especially the zarjaz sky colours and transitions from day to night, and the driving action is demanding and compulsive. The satisfaction gained the first time you complete all 8 stages is well worth the effort involved in getting there.

3: Galaga '88: Remember Galaxians, Galaga, Zalaga, Galgas and all those other 'poor-little-spaceship-under-attack-by-mutated-houseflies' games? This Namco PC-Engine release is the latest in the series, and features numerous species of loathsome insects, psychedelic explosions, tasty space backdrops, even vertically-scrolling sections. And the mythical Triple-Ship, rumoured but never found in Galaga, is a reality in Galaga '88, and is capable of dishing out some serious lethality. Bonus rounds are now called Galactic Dancing, and come complete with weird dance-music soundtracks. Loadsasprites, loadsablasting, loadsafun.

4: Chan and Chan: VERY strange re-working of Wonder Boy theme featuring what appears to be a Japanese comedy show host who has to leap, kick and fart (pull down on joystick, character squats and grits his teeth) his way through a variety of obstacles. A totally bizarre game full of totally OTT lavatorial humour, but beautifully put together and very playable. Makes you realise just how weird the Japanese games market is.

5: The Legendary Axe: This game is basically *Rastan Saga* except the hero wields an axe instead of a sword. The game is easy to get into - you'll be hewing the legs off giant spiders within five minutes of starting - but gets progressively a lot harder. There are six levels, and I'm currently stuck at some purple blobby jellyfish things at the end of Level Three which I can't seem to kill even with a three-times-power-upped axe. The graphics are superb throughout your violent journey, which takes you through forests, down canyons with lava pools, swinging over rivers on vines, up and down waterfalls, leaping around suspiciously-Andean-looking mountain ranges and suspiciously-Inca-looking temples and fortresses. You are beset along the way by bears, spiders, bats, condors, rock-golems, purple blobby jellyfish things (curses!), salamanders, fireball-spitting giant frogs, and a variety of homicidal axe-wielding maniacs with varying degrees of accuracy and armour. The main graphic looks a bit like my mate Hendy would if he had ginger hair and wore a loincloth. Fun, frustrating and horribly addictive.

6: Alien Crush. A brilliant two-screen Pinball game, with extraordinary H.R.Giger-type slimy alien graphics. You shoot the ball out from what looks a lot like a length of intestine, and you're into a table with such edifying targets as the Tentacles, the Pulsating Brain, and the Monster's Mouth. Bumpers on the lower table get progressively more diseased with each ball bounce until they eventually hatch out into these loathsome *roaches* which scuttle up the table and can be popped for extra bonus. An excellent game which conveys some of the feel of a real Pinball table whilst extending the gameplay and concept by including features impossible to implement on any Terrestrial non-organic pintable.

I could go on, but I'd run out of space. Highlights of the coming months will include PC-Engine versions of *Space Harrier* and *Fantasy Zone*, and a Gauntlet clone. Extra hardware, in the form of a 550-Megabyte CD-Rom drive and a flat-screen, colour LCD display allowing you to play the PC-Engine anywhere, ought to be out before Christmas.

The most amazing thing about the PC-Engine is the price: the machine and a copy of R-Type I together will set you back just £70 in Japan at the moment. Games are about £20-£25 each, comparing favourably with 16-bit games here in the UK in pricing, and far surpassing them in graphics and gameplay. Unfortunately, there are no immediate plans to release the Engine anywhere outside of Japan at the moment, which is crazy, because if it were released here tomorrow Sega and Nintendo could just forget it; even Atari and Commodore would have sales dented by the device. If you are tempted to order one straight out of Japan, remember that it puts out Japanese NTSC format video, and you need a multi-standard TV to display it's output. Meanwhile, we'll just have to hope that somebody, somewhere, is negotiating to bring over a UK version (how about it Amstrad?) because the PC-Engine is too good to remain in Japan: it's the most impressive piece of videogame hardware I've ever seen. Seeing hardware like this makes me faintly uneasy about what would happen if the Japanese had a serious crack at the home computer market instead of faffing around with all that naff MSX stuff.....

5: Pink Floyd

With the unfortunately acrimonious departure of Roger Waters from the Greatest Rock Group the World has ever seen, it was with a certain amount of apprehension that I awaited the release of the new Pink Floyd album and subsequent concerts. Could the Masters retain their awesome integrity in the absence of the mind which had dominated the group for years? The answer, luckily, has to be a definite 'hey *yeah*, man, like, for *sure*, okay?'. The new album, whilst not perhaps lyrically as strong as the works of the Lord our Rog, is easily sustained by the divine axemanship of Dave Gilmour and deserves to be rightfully acclaimed as 'the zarjaz new Floyd alb'. The only difficulty lies in attempting to decide which is better, Waters' *Radio KAOS* or the Floyd's *Momentary Lapse of Reason*, but the whole idea of trying to compare the albums is pointless anyway; it depends entirely upon your state of mind at the time of comparison. Both albums are excellent; if you don't yet possess both albums, get thee to an Our Price *straight away* and remedy the situation.

Accompanied by assorted deranged Pink Floyd freaks, I went to all three UK concerts, two in Wembley and one in Manchester (we were the ones with the rubber chicken on the first night at Wembley and in Manchester). Upon going to the concerts, any lingering doubts concerning the Waters-less band configuration vanished. Pink Floyd put on a show of, well, typically Floydian scale: the huge round screen, Floyd-droids, pyrotechnics, animations, and more lasers than the SDI ensured that a truly neuron-sizzling time was had by all. The musicians played superbly, the sound system was severely cool (just like standing in front of a very, very loud and awesomely expensive hi-fi system) and in a show lasting almost three hours the Floyd went through such classics as *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*, *Signs of Life*, *Learning to Fly*, *Dogs of War*, *One Slip*, and then ripping on into *One Of These Days*, *Us and Them*, *Great Gig in the Sky*, *Another Brick part 2*, *Money*, *Time*, *Welcome To The Machine* (totally awesome animation, they should release a video), *On The Run*, *Comfortably Numb* (Dave Gilmour playing some serious guitar whilst a lightshow approaching the proportions of a small nova occurs behind him), all accompanied by flying pigs, crashing beds, and other such Floydian fooberolity. If you didn't go, shame on you, and don't *ever* fail to go to either a Floyd or Waters gig ever again or I'll personally come over and make you eat the entire collected albums of Floyd, Waters and Gilmour, on CD, without so much as a nice cup of tea to wash them down with. You have been warned...

Shame though it is that the Lord our Rog has parted company with the Holy Trinity of Gilmour, Mason and Wright, we can at least derive a certain amount of comfort from the fact that now we get twice as many albums released, what with Floyd releases and Waters' solo albs. It's almost as if, in splitting, Floyd were not weakened but in fact duplicated, becoming two independant Pink Floyds, one continuing the Waters style and the other following a different but equally zarjaz course. I await future developments with interest. It would be nice one day to see the re-united Floyd playing a few gigs (can I do the lightshow please?)

6: Other Stuff...

Various changes in the Yakly lifestyle have occurred since the last newsletter; I now live in relative rural isolation in a small cottage in Mid-West Wales, alone with my slightly-neurotic Siamese cat Denis, and two pet ewes, Molly and Flossie, who eat my garden (if I hadn't obtained them they wouldn't be the ones doing any eating, lamb chops don't graze much). Beer is cheap here and the scenery is zarjaz, and the only neighbours I have to worry about are a bunch of cows who occasionally occupy an adjacent field. Mind you there are certain drawbacks - S4C, the lack of 24-hour service stations and Chinese restaurants, and a paucity of CD shops - but this is more than made up for by the positive aspects. Should I wish to stay up programming until 4am whilst listening to Pink Floyd at apocalyptic volumes, and subsequently leap out of bed at the crack of noon, I won't annoy anyone by so doing. This makes for an environment extremely conducive to getting some good coding done.

My current system for programming is an Atari Mega4 attached to a 20-meg hard disk drive, and I run the Devpac II assembler, a fine tool including a reasonable Gem-based editor and producing healthy assembly speeds off the hard disk, and at £50 it's cheap enough for those of us who want a decent programming environment without having a megalithic mother company to shell out the dosh for a PDS system. Devpac II features improvements over the previous Devpac assembler including faster assemble times, a quicker editor and some extra directives such as the useful INCBIN for including files containing raw bitmap data at assembly time. The Mega4 is an extremely nice machine, reliable and with an excellent keyboard, much better than the ones on 520s and 1040s, and best of all 'bytes free' figures which read like telephone numbers, international-direct-dialling ones at that. Saves all that tedious worrying-about-lack-of-symbol-table-memory hassle. It has a slot for a blitter chip, but when Atari sent me one down some months ago I put it in but it failed to work, so I'm thinking of having it made into an earring. I guess I'll have to wait for the rumoured Super ST to come out....

Current non-PC-Engine games getting a good airing include the excellent Virus, a game which every self-respecting ST and Amiga owner needs to possess. Although the basic game idea - you fly over a planet zapping ships which are polluting the surface with red Virus - is Defender-esque in its simplicity, the implementation is stunning. The planet surface is rendered as a solid 3-D landscape, over which you fly your spaceship, which looks remarkably like a naff-BBC-sitcom-stereotype-Northerner's flat cap. The control system is elegant, using the mouse; difficult to pick up at first, but once mastered flexible enough to give you total control as you scream around popping Virus ships and engaging in intricate 3-D dogfights with all manner of alien creeps. Zapping the aliens is particularly satisfying as a fat bonus score floats through the air while the sundered polygons of the deceased alien craft tumble earthwards (or planetwards I should say, I don't think it's Earth). Virus combines elements of *Defender* and *Thrust* to create an awesomely-addictive game which is technically amazing, satisfyingly difficult and a joy to play. My only gripe is that for some reason the Smart Bombs which were a feature of the Archimedes

original, have been omitted from the ST version, which is a shame, because come level 4 they'd come in most useful. The heatseekers are OK, but liable to get shot in the heat of a battle with three Fighters, two disgusting Mutants and numerous Pests. At least they don't zap you, unlike the heatseekers in Whirligig which have an annoying tendency to seek the ship's exhaust with resultant disruption of said ship.

Also severely good is Starglider II, featuring some wicked solid 3-D graphics and a gameplay stretching over a whole solar system. Trucking thru the planets descending to wreak havoc on the Egron defences is a fine way to spend a Sunday afternoon. The sound effects, especially on the Amiga version, are both atmospheric and informative. The game offers the superb interplanetary graphics first promised - and not yet delivered - by the Novagen game 'Damocles', whilst the planetary action is a mixture of typically Starglidery zap-the-Egrons stuff allied to a certain amount of Mercenary-type mapping and carting objects about. When you die in interplanetary space you get a 360 degree pan around your disintegrating spaceship with the sun and planets lined up in the background. Real 2001 stuff. It's amazing how a bunch of shaded disks on a computer screen can look so impressive. Beautiful.

We apologise to anyone who may have come to the PCW show and been disappointed we weren't there, but we'd just shelled out plenty dosh producing Trip-A-Tron and the PCW show is pretty expensive, and besides the character of the show has changed now and the whole thing takes place in the shadow of the Empires. So we're waiting until the Atari show at the end of November; we'll be there with the big screen, the new video, Trip-A-Tron, and hopefully the first airing of the new ST game too. Come along and help yourselves to a few Smart Bombs. We'll be giving away extra ships with every 10,000 points, too.

If Trip-A-Tron does well for us, we'll be considering an Amiga conversion, but at the moment we're making no promises. That aside, it'll be ST all the way. The new game will be, as I have promised, the first of many. I'll see you at the Atari show if you get down there. Until then:

- 1) listen to more Pink Floyd;
- 2) get some more memory for the ST;
- 3) if you haven't got an ST yet, get one!
- 4) buy the video, Trip-A-Tron, and the new game;
- 5) be kind to furry animals and listen to Talking Heads.

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