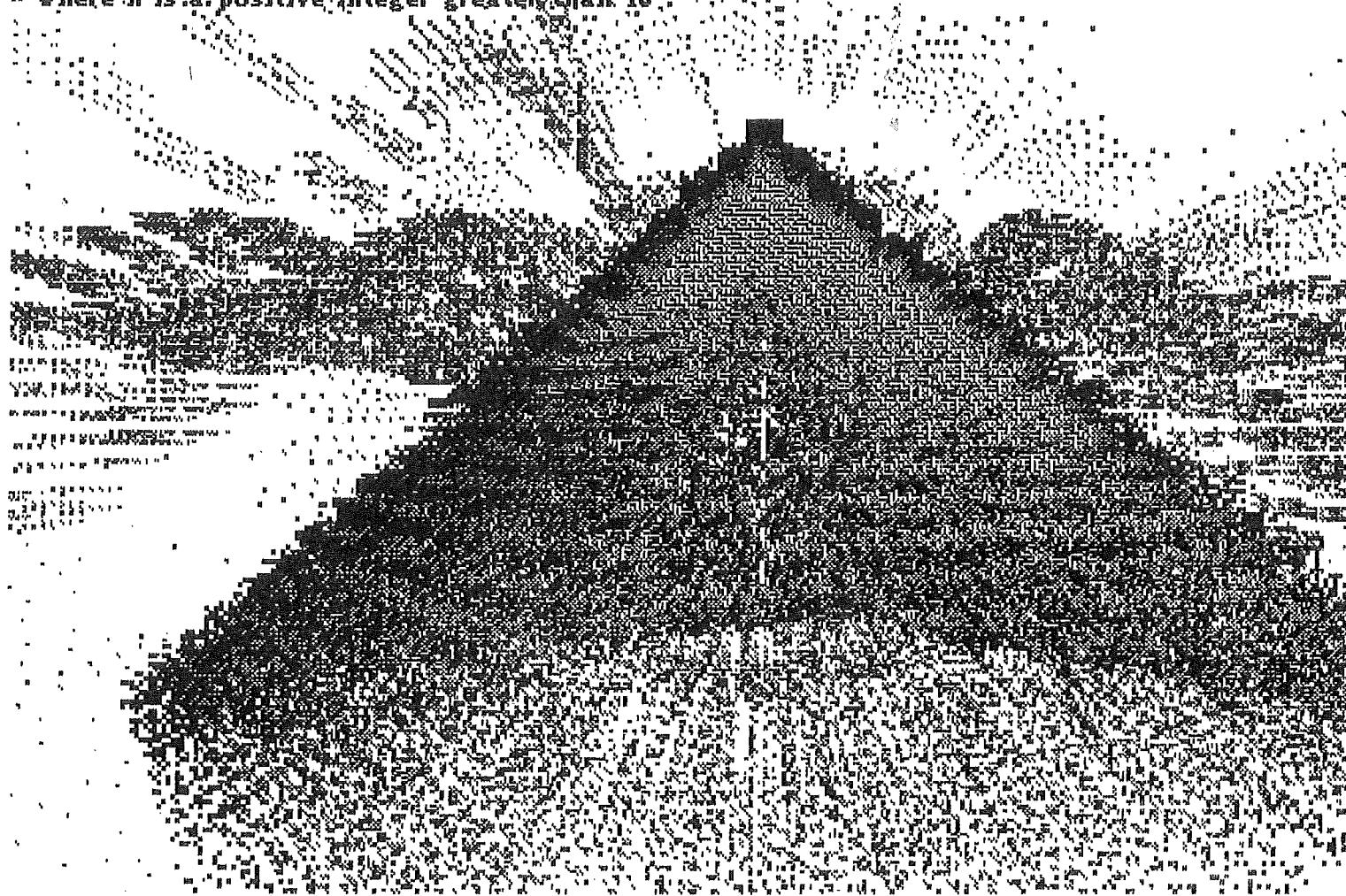


The Nature of the Beast

The uniquely zarjaz LLAMASOFT Newsletter: Issue n^o*

* where n is a positive integer greater than 10



From a 32-frame KML animation 'Rotating Pyramid with Sine Waves and Sun'

In This Enlightening Instalment:

MUTANT CAMELS on the *KONIX*

TRIP-A-TRON on the *AMIGA*

ATOMIC TADPOLES vs. SAVAGE MUTANT WEIRDOES
from BASINGSTOKE

best of PC-ENGINE and MEGADRIVE

scarcely coherent gibber about ATARI *LYNX*

why you must buy a *KONIX*

-- and all the usual weird stuff....

Stardate: 11/10/89 3:17 am. Music status: Pink Floyd 'More'. Tea status:
CRITICAL - activating kettle sequence. Fag status: nominal. Sheep status:
unconscious. Cat status: dormant. Higher Yakfunctions online. Standing by for
hyperdrive...

1: Greetings from Woolly Welsh Wales

YAK greets that subset of sentient beings who still take an interest in Beastly things enough to receive this newsletter. Welcome to another splendidly irregular issue of 'The Nature of the Beast', the only company newsletter which could be described as 'weird, kind of furry, crunchy in the middle, soft on the outside, maybe with a slight tang of Curly Wurly, or at least the first derivative of the taste of Curly Wurly', and still the only company newsletter to talk about life, the Universe and everything instead of trying to make out that our company is the best thing since sliced silicon, our games are the best in the known Universe, and go out and buy them now and don't even *Kark* at anyone else's and that'll be twenty quid please mush.

Of course, we will inform you about our latest stuff, that's only natural, but rest assured YAK will endeavour to tell you about it in a relaxed and zarjaz way.

Since the last newsletter I've been fairly busy, creating another ST blaster (Gridrunner) and getting to grips with the zarjaz new Konix console (of which more later). Work is now well underway on the first Konix title 'Mutant Camels 89' (of which more later), and there's yet another ST blaster happening too, provisionally entitled (get this) 'Atomic Tadpoles vs. Savage Mutant Weirdoes from Basingstoke' (of which more [you guessed it] later).

First off, though, since I might as well go in chronological order, it's the kind of thing everyone will feel comfortable with, after all we do tend to perceive Time in a linear, contiguous, non-segmented kind of way - (unless you're a scriptwriter for 'Neighbours') - I shall tell you about

Gridrunner (or to be precise, SuperGridrunner I suppose)

Those of you with long memories, long hair, flares, flowing white beards, huge collections of Pink Floyd albums, a driving license, the collected works of Douglas Adams, a cup of tea, Peruvian jumpers, and fond memories of past blasters, who used to own Vic-20s, may well remember one of Llamasoft's first games, Gridrunner (written in autumn 1982, at the same time as 'Blade Runner' was on release in the West End - it was a poster for the film I saw whilst waiting for the Tube which gave me the idea for the name). Gridrunner has been described as 'the original fast blast', and set the style for my later 'lazer frenzy' style of gameplay. After the completion of 'Andes Attack' I decided it wouldn't be a grotnig idea to implement the ol' blaster on the ST, as the basic design is a natch for mouse control and besides, it'd be fun to bring the game up to 16-bit date with hordes of sprites and plazma-pumpin' lazer weapon systems. So shortly after Christmas I began work on the game, even unto the extent of trucking a 1040 and my trusty SH204 out to France so I could work and ski (not at the same time, I won't be able to do that until I get the laptop ST with the built-in hard disk drive).

In France I did most of the work on the game, and completed it shortly after my return to England, despite dropping my hard disk on the tarmac at Geneva airport.

The game in its ST incarnation features 64 levels of mayhem. The basic Gridrunner ship has been given a shiny new weapon, a neat metallic nosecone reminiscent of the Force in R-Type. Unlike the Force, the nosecone doesn't function as a shield. Instead, it is used to augment the firepower of your ship. The nosecone can be detached and placed anywhere on the screen, where it will sit and quite happily pump out widebeams for you without further intervention. Alternatively, it can be recalled to your ship where it attaches with a satisfying 'plink' and enables the ship to fire quadruple widebeams. The most useful application of the nosecone is for shot amplification. This is achieved by firing a shot into a detached nosecone. Each shot entering the device emerges as three separate shots, the angles of which can be adjusted to fire straight ahead or behind, to left and right, or on upper or lower diagonals. Effectively, using the shot-augmentation mode of the nosecone enables you to cover your ship from attack from just about

any direction.

This is just as well, because unlike Gridrunner on the Vic-20, in which attacks were limited to snakes from the top of the screen, Super Gridrunner features hordes of enemies which can attack from any quarter. Of course, the snakes are still there, but now there are several different species of snakes, plus many discrete enemies ranging from giant enraged plasma spheres through enormous bad-tempered indestructible guinea-pigs (yes, Rory's back) to rapid-fire mutant armoured homing-pizzas. You'll need all the firepower you can get to deal with these hordes of video villains. The most devious feature of the Gridrunner design, the infamous XY-Zappers, haven't been forgotten, either: in Super Gridrunner persistent Rail Guns trundle round all four borders of the play area taking potshots at your unfortunate ship, which is usually cowering in the face of a withering psychedelic onslaught anyway and just doesn't need to be hassled by Rail Guns right now.

Luckily, there are factors which count in your favour: periodically a shot enemy will release a tiny yak which, if collected, will give you extra-powerful shots capable of withering multiple nasties in a single blast. A shield icon will, if caught, give you about thirty seconds of glorious invincibility allowing you to wreak bloody revenge upon your tormentors. Some snakes, when shot, release herds of itsy-bitsy llamas which, if collected, yield a nice pulsating Williams-style 500 points (and which, if shot, squeal in a pathetic manner and make you feel really guilty). Occasionally, a tiny white goat will skip across the screen, and if you collect it you'll cop an extra life. You can exchange extra lives for a Smart Bomb and some invincibility, too.

Through the 64 levels you'll encounter some familiar old enemies as well as savage multitudes of new ones, and if you're into shoot-em-ups and weirdness and just wicked gameplay, this should be just your cup of substances. C+VG described it as 'Centipede meets Psychedelia' and rated it 86%, so I guess it can't be bad. There's a 40-entry Williamsque hi-score table maintained on disk, and the game maintains a record of your progress, allowing you to enter the game at any point up to the level you were killed on, so there's no boring having to flog your way up from level 1 every time you play.

Unfortunately, due to distribution hassles, Super Gridrunner is quite rare in shops (see the section on Distribution Hassles to find out why) so elsewhere in this issue we'll provide details of price, a zarjaz offer if you buy Andes Attack at the same time, and where to send your lolly to do the mail-order bit.

2: The Konix Konsole

Just before I started work on Gridrunner, I was invited to Konix HQ down in Ebbw Vale to view what was, at that time, their rumoured new console. I won't go on at great length about the console now, as it's been well covered in most games mags by now, but suffice to say that I was impressed by the graphics and sound hardware, and also by the startling, innovative design of the console. Far from being just another black box you plug a joystick into, the Konix actually looks like it should be used for flying a spaceship.

Attracted by the weird design, the 256-colour graphics mode (could anyone resist a 256-colour graphics mode?), the blitter and the possibility of great sonix via a digital signal processor, I decided that writing some games for the Konix would be a Good Thing, despite having to learn scummy 8086 assembler and buy a PC to run PDS on. Consequently, in May I took delivery of the large black box containing the prototype Konix board and hooked it up to my shiny new 12MHz 80286 VGA PC and set about learning the system.

Learning 8086 wasn't that bad, except that all the instructions are back to front compared to their 68000 equivalents (in 68000 you would say 'move d0, llama' to move the contents of register d0 to memory location 'llama', in 8086 the nearest equivalent instruction is 'mov llama,ax') and that there's a

lot of piddling around to be done with 64K segments, I much prefer the 68000's contiguous address space. Despite the CPU not being a 68K, programming on the Konix is still good fun as you're assisted by a wickedly fast blitter and a sound chip capable of doing just about anything you want (I managed to get 14-channel stereo sound out of it without too much hassle, and it'll also double as a fast RISC processor for crunching numbers if you want).

By now, I'm about two-thirds of the way through programming 'Mutant Camels '89', a considerable re-design of good old AMC. The fundamental idea of the game is the same - prevent the camels from reaching your base at one end of a horizontally-scrolling play area - but the gameplay has been extended in a number of directions. There's more of a mission - you collect shards of shattered camels and carry them back to base, where eventually they're turned into a Neutronium Bomb which you use to destroy the enemy base and complete the level, and the camels aren't alone - they've got air and ground support from all manner of weird psychedelic aliens all out to splatter your pixels. To aid you, you've ten devastating weapons systems allowing up to 16 bullets onscreen simultaneously. Some of the higher-powered systems enable you to fill the screen with enormous bullets against which no meanie stands a Spectrum's chance in Hell, and the very best weapon, Smart Lasers, you don't even have to aim.

All this mayhem takes place to the accompaniment of eye-searing psychedelically-coloured visuals (sort of 'I've-got-a-256-colours-mode-and-I'm-going-to-damn-well-make-sure-everybody-knows-it kind of stuff), with a sun which rises and sets and a raster horizon which lightens and darkens accordingly. The game music is fast, in stereo, loud and algorithmically-generated to change according to what's happening in the gameplay, and the sonics are satisfyingly blasty. The graphics should be much better than the usual Yakly stuff, too, since they're being provided by my mate Wulf, who's an artist, whereas I'm not.

The finished game will span five or six major levels each with a different theme (at the moment I've got Pyramids and Stonehenge, but there'll be others like Volcanic, City and Strange). There's a 44-entry high-score table which will be saved to disk, and three Pause modes, and some zarjaz demo screens with an exceedingly groovy variety of purple-and-black colourflows behind them. There's powerups and big explosions and loadsabullets and just plenty of blasting, and we hope to have the game out sometime in November, hopefully by which time the Konix will be on sale and people buying it in droves. The Konix hardware itself provides more potential for fast, colourful, innovative games than even the best Japanese offerings - PC-Engine and Sega MegaDrive. Software is planned to be at around £15, too, comparing very favourably with current 16-bit and console prices. If the console does well, I plan a steady stream of releases - games and maybe something weirder - although I shan't be abandoning the ST altogether; how could I now I've got such a zarjaz library of ST sprite, rasta and sound drivers?

The Konix also has some amazing add-ons to turn it into the ultimate game system outside of the arcades, not least of which is the Power Chair, bringing hydraulic-style gameplay within the reach of the slightly rich game freak. If you're into something more than just the latest coin-op conversions and you just want the hottest game hardware around, get yer mitts on a Konix Konsole. And you'll be able to play Yak games...

3: Current Developments

I'm currently waiting for the final release of the Konix development hardware (which contains a true 8086 instead of the 8088 in the prototype and which should cop a 3x speed increase, yes please I'll have some of that) which will allow me to finish off MC89. While I've been waiting I've been tinkering about on the ST to keep my 68000 from going rusty, and I've come up with a game called 'Atomic Tadpoles vs. Savage Mutant Weirdoes' from

Basingstoke" (henceforth referred to as Atomic Tadpoles for the sake of less typing). I started the design process by first thinking of the most weird game title I could, and then going and playing an awful lot of Stargate to soak up Williams inspiration. (The game could have been called anything; the gameplay doesn't demand that the central character be a tadpole, it could have been a spaceship, a beastie, a pair of red size 10 socks, Anneka Rice's front six teeth, or a dozen paperclips all stuck together. It could have been called anything, Obliterator, Star Destroyer, Zap-Till-U-Drop, Die Mutant Scumbag Alien Slime Vermin, Invasion of the Galactic Haddock from the Slime Pools of Outer Fishfinger, just anything. Since when have game titles actually meant anything anyway?)

Not surprisingly as I'd played so much Stargate, the basic game idea is based around the same theme as Stargate. Don't worry, though, that I'm just going to do another horizontally-scrolling blaster along Andes-Attack lines. The theme of the game is similar to Stargate in that it's a rescue mission, but instead of humanoids on a planet you're protecting Galactic Frog Spawn from the clutches of the evil nasties, and it's floating around in space. The game scrolls in 32 directions, according to the direction of travel (swimming?) and features a unique new control method allowing you to move and aim independently in any direction. You have a square scanner which automatically switches resolution as you play, scanning a large area if the enemies are far away, but switching to close-up as the enemies come within threat-range. The enemies include familiar types like Pods, Swarmers and Baiters, and also new types like Firebombers and Deathstars (which take several shots to kill and which release a power-up capsule when shot) and doubtless I'll put in some totally weird ones too. As is usual with my games, speed, fragmentary explosions, psychedelic stroboscopics, and bad-ass gameplay are the main priorities.

No promises yet as to when Tadpoles will be released, as I naturally have to give highest priority to my Konix work at the moment, but it shouldn't take me too long after MC89 is finished.

Amiga TRIP-A-TRON: Real Soon Now

Due to popular demand, we have decided to have Trip-A-Tron converted to the Amiga. At the time of writing this, the conversion coding is all but finished; I'm testing the program at the moment and there's just a few bugs left to zap and some slight alterations to the manual before it's released, but it will be finished ready for the Commodore show. The program itself is virtually identical to the ST version (it runs a tiny bit slower than on the ST, but not enough to make much difference). Colours can now be selected from the 4096-colour range of the Amiga palette, although the main display remains 16-colour (to keep the speed up and to save memory). The program will run on any Amiga from the A500 up, although, like the ST version, videosequencer functions require one megabyte or more of memory.

4: Other Stuff

During the last few months I've been expanding my PC-Engine collection, and I've had access to all the latest major consoles, including the Sega Megadrive, the Atari Lynx and (of course) the Konix. Since anyone who's even remotely interested in videogames is bound to purchase at least one console sometime in the next year (you'd have to be brain-dead or to have had your FIRE button finger amputated not to want some of the console action).

First off, then, here's a brief summary of what I consider to be the best PC-Engine releases since last time I wrote:

Fantasy Zone: Classic psychedelic weird blast. Everyone should have it.
Twin Tiger: Vertically-scrolling chopper blast reminiscent of "Sidewinder" but much better. Wicked firepower and great playability.

Space Harrier: Fast, psychedelic (again), smooth and difficult 3-D blaster

perfect for playing when you're in the Right Frame of Mind.

Dragon Spirit: Clifford the Listerine Dragon flies up eight vertically-scrolling levels mutating as he goes and dealing death to deadly dinosaurs, flaming phoenixes, and assorted flying vegetables. A demanding and zarjaz blast.

Hyperdyne Side Arms: Power-up and kick some serious ass over a multiplicity of levels with some very tasty graphix. Great weapons, fast'n'violent gameplay. You get to collect tiny cows, too.

Dungeon Explorer: Classy Gauntlet-style dungeons game, which is not only wickedly addictive, it also plays Pink Floyd's 'One Of These Days' on level 5.

P-47: Horizontally-scrolling WWII blaster with loads of enemies and some very nice rasta horizons. Pretty difficult at first but worth the effort.

Unfortunately, the assumption that any game on the PC-Engine must be good because with hardware that capable it would require a huge amount of effort to make a game look bad, no longer holds true. Two games in particular you should avoid like the plague. One is a racing game called *F-1 Pilot*, which actually manages to do some serious raster glitching and is guilty of jerkiness to an almost Spectrum-esque degree, has the playability of a dead haddock, and costs more than most PC-Engine games. The other game is called '*Deep Blue*' and at first looks quite tasty; the background graphics are unusual and fairly zarj. However, once you start playing you're soon disillusioned. Your fish moves too slowly, the enemies attack in relentlessly dull attack patterns, and due to some dysfunction of the game designer's mind the 'power-up' weapons are much less effective than the standard issue shooter. In this day and age and on such ultra-groovous hardware there is no excuse for a game which only lets you have one bullet on the screen at once. Eschew '*Deep Blue*'.

Upcoming rival to the PC-Engine is the new(ish) Sega Megadrive. The potential of the Megadrive is greater than that of the PC-Engine (better sound and graphics and (drool) a 68000 driving it) but at the moment software releases are a little thin on the ground and not up to Engine standards in gameplay; this is set to improve dramatically, as the system is launched in the UK and Sega convert all their hottest titles. Highlights of my current collection are:

Space Harrier II: Great graphics, speedy gameplay, gameplay just a tad too easy though and only twelve levels. Nonetheless, worth having just because it's fun and shows off the Megadrive well.

Altered Beast: Is good because it has (a) goats in; (b) some very pretty pictures; (c) some wicked sonix; (d) OK playability. It does have a few bugs though, the collision detection ain't perfect, and occasionally it crashes. Good fun especially with two players.

Thunder Force II: The best Megadrive blaster to date. Eight levels of action alternating between 8-way overhead view and Nemesis-style side view, a multiplicity of death-dealing powerups, and sonix you want to listen to.

Alex Kidd: Big-Ears is back, if you liked the 8-bit Sega version you'll love this one with full-screen 50Hz parallax scrolling and all those cute Japanese cartoon graphics. And it's got a *cave* in.

The latest trend in consoles is the hand-held, with two major contenders, the Nintendo Game Boy (which I have) and the Atari Lynx (which I have not, but which I have used, and for which I am smitten with deep, throbbing techno-lust). I'll start with the Game Boy. When I first got this machine I figured it was the best thing since sliced silicon, but since then I've seen the Lynx... Nonetheless, the Game Boy is well made (mine came on holiday with me and survived being left out in 120-degree temperatures, impact by tennis ball, sand up the FIRE buttons and even the bizarre incident during which the Super Mario cartridge got dropped into a pint of John Smiths bitter, although it still sometimes comes up with 'Nintend-blip' at initial power-up and requires a quick blow up the cartridge port to restore ordered function).

The screen is a black-and-sort-of-yellow LCD matrix, fairly easy to read if you have the right light, with a bit of afterblur but not enough to be a serious

basale. The best game is Super Mario Land, sort of a stripped-down version of the classic SMB with a couple of shoot-'em-ups thrown in, and playable in the way that only SMB can be. There's a good Tennis on the system, and the old Activision puzzle game Shanghai, and the excellent Tetris, with others to follow. The Game Boy has the advantages of being cheap (at least in Japan) at around £80, with the games £12-£15, and fairly light on the batteries.

However, the Game Boy faces stiff opposition in the shape of the awesome Atari handheld console, the Lynx. Doubtless you've read all about the console in the games press recently, but all that stuff can't adequately prepare you for the experience of paws-on experience. I was on the Atari stand at the PC show and had a few opportunities to have the odd thrash on the system. My first impression was that the system was slightly larger than I expected, but not uncomfortably so. It's a bit longer than a VHS videotape, dumbbell-shaped, maybe a pound in weight. You grab the ends of the dumbbell and the screen faces you in the middle, unless you're playing Gauntlet III, which is oriented with the vertical along the screen's long axis.

The screen itself is clear, colourful and readable; although it's small you never feel that you have to squint at it to make out detail. The screen is backlit, which eats batteries but ensures that you can always see the display clearly. The initial pleasure at encountering such a clear and colourful display is replaced by delight and disbelief when you actually begin to play a game and see what the graphics chips can do. The much-vaunted hardware sprite scaling is immediately apparent (it's hardware sprite scaling which creates much of the visual effects in Sega coin-ops like Afterburner and Space Harrier). It really is just like holding an arcade machine in your hands.

Objects zoom into and out of the screen smoothly and without a trace of flicker, entire walls grow larger as you move towards them, and just generally lots of groovy stuff happens which would be nigh-on impossible to do on an ST or Amiga but which the console handles easily in hardware. Sounds are surprisingly meaty for a handheld. The games I have played so far include 'Blue Lightning', an Afterburner-style jetfighter game, fast, furious and mindless; 'Gates of Zendonon', horizontally-scrolling blaster with smart graphix and plenty of blasting; 'California Games', with a zarjaz surfing sequence which is fun to play and obviously written by a Zippy freak; when you come off it says 'Are you having fun yet?'; Gauntlet III, a new re-working of the classic dungeon game in which as well as the overhead view of the maze you get a tiny 3-D view of the monsters arriving to bash you in; and a puzzle game called 'Chip Challenge' in which you wander about in a maze collecting chips to plug into chip sockets. 'Impossible Mission' is supposed to be out too but I haven't seen it yet.

Considering that these are the first efforts on the system, the quality of all the games is first-rate. All are fast, colourful, smooth and playable, and this bodes well for the future releases, which are likely to get even better as programmers get to grips with the system. With a rumoured price of somewhere around maybe possibly perhaps a hundred pounds, you'd have to be one Smart Bomb short of a full rack not to buy one. Any red-blooded zapfiend worth his pixels is going to want one of these machines in addition to any TV-based consoles he might already own. Atari must be delighted, because in releasing the Lynx they have administered a sharp poke in the eye to Nintendo, whose Game Boy has been well and truly eclipsed. This must be particularly satisfying for Atari, who had their previous dominance of the US home game market well and truly Smart Bombed by the 8-bit Nintendo and who have doubtless been itching for revenge ever since. Atari have the perfect product, because (a) it's technologically sexy - to see one is to want one; (b) it's cheap; and (c) it doesn't compete with Nintendo's massive US installed user-base of Nintendo TV consoles. The Lynx is something you need to have as well as any TV console, and as a bonus it can be sold in any country without having to worry about varying TV standards.

Its only competition, the Game Boy, is smaller and cheaper, but the Lynx outguns the Game Boy by several orders of magnitude and is well worth the extra few quid it costs to buy (if you were offered a ZX81 for £80 and an ST for £100, which would you buy?). Atari can't fail with the Lynx. They must

be sniggering all the way to the banking-emporium.

Another good thing about the Lynx is that it doesn't conflict with my enthusiasm for the Konix, which I consider to be the most capable, original, interesting and globally zarjaz TV-based console around (or nearly around as I write this). (Brief pause at this point in typing to appreciate a Dave Gilmour guitar solo which just shouldn't be typed through). Whereas something like the PC-Engine is specifically zarjaz in respect of its supreme capability to accurately reproduce scrollly arcade games controlled by an 8-way joystick, the Konix is globally zarjaz in that it possesses unparalleled colour-handling, blazing speed, and a great variety of game control possibilities, allowing not only accurate arcade conversions but also the possibility of original games designed around the unique capabilities of the system. Konix are encouraging third-party developers to use the system, which will make for a good variety of titles catering to different tastes, and they're going to quality-check each game before it's released, which should hopefully ensure that no naff games are sold. Software will be diskette-based and priced at around £15, making building up a library of games considerably cheaper than on a ROM-based console. And you can always expand the system and get the Power Chair for the ultimate home game experience.

I like the Konix a lot because it is an original design. Even the PC-Engine is just an improved version of the original Atari VCS games-machine: a box you plug an 8-way joystick into to play sprite-based, scrollly games. The Konix gives you the same capability if you want it, but also allows you to go beyond the limited control options offered by the old 8-way switch joystick and explore designs using flight controllers, foot pedals and all sorts of groovy stuff like that. The Konix also uses a fast bitmap display, rather than sprites, which is a little harder to program than a sprite system but which allows for a much greater variety of effects onscreen (you'll never see a PC-Engine drawing any vectors or polygons. And the classic Williams arcade machines were all fast-bitmap systems).

To conclude this section, here's a summary of the machines which a well-equipped blaster ought to be forking over the dosh for in the immediate future:

1: The *Konix*. It's fast, colourful, original, Welsh, reasonably-priced and awesomely-powerful, and of course I've got an ulterior motive, you can play Mutant Camels on it.

2: The *Lynx*. Now there is no reason ever to stop playing videogames. You can play in the bog, on the beach, in the car (as long as you're not driving), just anywhere. And the system's got infinite pose value for freaking people out on trains and in "planes.

3: The *PC-Engine*. Now becoming generally available over here, and still nice to have as a dedicated machine for running standard-format arcade-conversions. Get one if you have any dosh left over after the Konix and the Lynx..

Apart from having an exceedingly groovy time on consoles just recently, what else have I been doing? Well, there was going to see Pink Floyd five times this summer, once in Paris and four times in London. I believe I raged extensively about Floyd's amazing show last time I wrote a newsletter so I won't repeat myself; refer back to the last issue and read the description there, it's as true today as it was then. The only disappointment was the London venue, that new place in the Docklands. The hall itself was OK, but what was really irritating was the overly strict enforcement of an all-seated rule. It is necessary to be able to get up and groove at a Floyd gig without some twat hassling you to sit down on pain of ejection. There was a no-smoking rule too, but asking a concertful of Floyd fans not to smoke is like asking them not to breathe: forget it. Everybody smoked.

I've also been on holiday with the usual mob, to a zarjaz Greek island where we had a villa actually located on the beach and where there was much swimming, sunbathing, reading, playing of the Game Boy, and activities of a generally groovy nature, and no coding. There was a massive boombox, someone else's guitar, lots of friendly people, cheap booze, cheap food and cheap Camels, about 40 CDs, a portable CD player which worked as long as you rested something heavy on the lid, enough lilos to go round, an arcade just up the road, one really amazing electrical storm, plenty of solar activity, and generally we all agreed that it had been the best beach holiday yet. We plan to return again to the same place next year, and next time I'll take a Lynx and all the games. Then, I won't even have to walk up the road to the arcade...

Then there was the PC show just last week, and this year we were guests of Atari, who kindly provided us with a large Mitsubishi monitor for the purposes of displaying Trip-A-Tron, which looked most groovy thereupon. We were situated in the Games Arcade section of the Atari stand, which meant I could sneak off from time to time and have a quick blast. Most of the time I sat there quite happily demonstrating just how zarjaz 9.5 Megabytesworth of STs can look when they are all running Trip-A-Tron through my video mixer. Konix were there demonstrating the Multisystem, and whenever I went over there was always someone playing my Mutant Camels, which was encouraging to see (if anyone thought that the Konix demos lacked smoothness or were in any way slow, remember that the demos at the show were running on the old 8088-based systems, which (a) only have an 8-bit address bus, and (b) are shut down during screen lines. Production Konixes will have the full 16-bit 8086 CPU, which will remain active during screen lines, so all the games will run a lot smoother and faster).

Most Interesting Object of the show was, for me, the Atari Lynx handheld, which must have been the rarest object too, as there were only two of them in the country, both at the show. Atari very sensibly displayed the machine in a sealed display cabinet, as the machine is so zarjaz it has an almost infinite Nickability Quotient. Of course there were many other, possibly more Interesting Objects around such as the Atari Transputer Workstation, which is Very Interesting Indeed, but which unfortunately falls squarely in the category of 'far too expensive to even think of thinking about'. At least I'll be able to afford the Lynx.

While I was at the show I met a couple of guys from Elmtech, the dudes who make the zarj Parsec Graphics System for the ST. They gave me a lot of information about their system which has definitely convinced me that if and when I get to do the next ST-based lightsynth, it will use one of these graphics boards for display. Basically, the Parsec system is based around a TMS34010 graphics chip, which is really just an amazingly-fast (50 MHz) full 32-bit CPU with assembler-level instructions to handle pixels, lines and bitmaps insanely quickly. For example, Trip-A-Tron relies intensely on pixel-plot operations for its effects. To plot a pixel on an ST screen requires you to call a subroutine of maybe twenty or thirty lines of code which has to clip the pixel to visible screen boundaries, look up bit-patterns and masks, get the data on the screen, mask out a hole, and finally drop the new pixel into screen RAM. This plot routine is called constantly throughout Trip-A-Tron and is one of the main speed 'bottlenecks' in the system. Now the Parsec can plot a pixel with a single assembler instruction, so plotting a Parsec pixel would take approximately 1/20 of the code that an ST pixel would, and that's disregarding the subroutine call; now remember that the TMS chip clocks at 50MHz as opposed to the ST's 8MHz, and you can see that plotting pixels on the Parsec would be of the order of $20 \times (50/8) = 125$ times faster than on the ST. (of course it isn't quite that simple, you have to take into account competition for the bus in each system, instruction timings and stuff, but I just wanted to give you a rough idea). When you consider that the Parsec handles lines and bitmaps insanely quickly too, that it can change the palette on every scan line with no CPU overhead, that it has 16 million colours, hardware clipping, and hardware scrolling, plus numerous other features too amazing to mention here, you can see why it's the natural

choice for the next generation of the lightsynth. I don't know yet how I'm going to get the time and the hardware to do it, but when I do it'll be based around the Parsec system...

Elsewhere at the show all the usual things were happening, US Gold and Ocean had huge stands full of coin-op arcade machines, doubtless all in various stages of conversion; I don't think I set foot within their domain once in the whole show, except perhaps once I might have walked across the US Gold stand on the way back from the bog. Atari and Commodore vied with each other showing off just how useful/groovy/musical/serious their respective machines were, and they were joined in force this year by Acorn desperately trying to persuade everyone that the Archimedes, and in particular the A3000, was a Good Thing (which it is, but it's also an Expensive Thing, and the ST is a Cheap Thing, so I'll stick with that for the moment). I met a great variety of people at the show, games players, Trip-A-Tron users, people who liked my stuff and who had played everything since Gridrunner on the Vic-20, people who hated my stuff and who stood behind me making loud comments about how crap it all was in the hope that I'd get annoyed, people who wanted Trip-A-Tron on the Amiga, on the Archimedes, even on the PC, people desperate for an ST version of Sheep in Space or an Amiga version of Iridis Alpha, the first female Iridis player I've yet encountered, a middle-aged chap who enjoys Trip-A-Tron with James Last music, representatives of hacking crews and demo crews, Swedish guys, Japanese guys, Mad Norwegians, weirdoes, freaks, MenInSuits, men from the planet Parsec, strays from the business side of the exhibition who wandered in by accident and were transfixed by the weird Trip-graphics.....

After five days of the PC show I was very glad to be able to return to my nice peaceful Welsh abode and do nothing except make tea, listen to the peaceful sounds of the river, and the sheep bleating for more digestive biscuits, and have the odd game of something on the PC-Engine. I really enjoy computer exhibitions, but five days doing constant Trip-A-Tron in a crowded, noisy environment and talking to all those people leaves you in a weird state of bead, knackered and in need of a few days off just to recover.

5: Distribution Hassles

We have had a lot of trouble recently, in trying to get our stuff effectively distributed. The major software distributors would much rather buy games from companies who can afford to spend tens of thousands in promotional hype than from a small independent company which can only afford two or three adverts at the time of a product's launch. This leads to the paradoxical situation we currently find ourselves in, where our products receive universally favourable reviews and people want to buy the games, but are unable to buy them from major software outlets. Because we can't afford to place constant advertising over a period of months after a game's release, people are unaware that they can buy the games by direct mail-order from us; eventually they give up trying to get the game, either not bothering at all or worse still, going to a pirate. Thus I find myself in the frustrating position of having games which people like, the reviewers like, but which never get into the marketplace. My last game got a rating of 86% in C&VG, elsewhere reviews ranging from very good to rave, and yet we've sold hardly any. We tried doing everyone a favour by selling software for the ST at half the established price, which I figured was too much to ask for the majority of game software. What we found was that the distributors, even buying at a discount of 50% or more, felt that they wouldn't make enough money out of the deal; they'd rather sell £20 games and make more profit. I reckon it's just sick that I could have sold more games if I'd asked £20 each instead of £10. The market is becoming increasingly geared to the large companies churning out arcade conversions and film licenses, while the smaller companies are forced to either cease to exist or to be absorbed by one of the majors, which can often amount to the same thing. This is a shame, because it is often the smaller, less commercially-oriented companies who come up with the more unusual, innovative and therefore interesting products. Larger companies tend to follow safe, well-established trends - like arcade

conversions and film licenses - which are guaranteed to make money. More unusual projects which might not have maximum impact with the average games-buyer are never considered; too risky. A large company could never have originated something like the lightsynth.

Gradually the smaller companies either drop out or are absorbed and lose their identity; the games market becomes increasingly stagnant and boring. The large software companies of today have no identity. Formerly, if you bought a game from a particular company you had a pretty good idea of what kind of game it would be, what style of gameplay and graphics it would have.

If you liked a particular style of game, you bought from that company confident that future releases would be to your taste. Thus people bought games from Llamasoft and Task Set and TC's old company Wizard and suchlike, and knew what they were getting would be to their liking. None of that exists any more. Large companies like US Gold and Ocean have no identity - there's no such thing as an 'Ocean-style' game, it's just another license deal, could have been released by anybody. There are still a few small companies managing to retain some kind of identity - Novagen for example, at least their Paul Woakes releases, but since he only releases a (without exception brilliant, it must be said) game every two years or so, it isn't much relief in a market dominated by nicely-presented, well-programmed, but ultimately boring licenses and conversions.

I hope and believe that this can't go on forever. I think that the rise of cheap, powerful game consoles may well help things along. If you want arcade conversions and film licenses, a good game console like the PC-Engine or the Sega Megadrive will deliver arcade-quality versions of all popular arcade games - some Megadrive conversions are indistinguishable from the originals. As more people have access to such consoles, demand for arcade conversions on computers will slacken. You'll get people who have a console for arcade games and a computer for original games and creative software - so you might have a Megadrive for Out-Run and Space Harrier, and an ST for Virus, Sentinel and Gridrunner and an art package and maybe a music package (and of course as you have good taste you'd have Trip-A-Tron, a complete set of Floyd CDs and a good hi-fi). There will be no market for an arcade conversion on a computer, because people can buy a version for their £100 console which knocks seven shades of silicon out of any ST or Amiga version. People will still play games on their computers, but they'll be the more unusual games like Virus or Sentinel and of course good adventure games, the sort of not-quite-mainstream-but-still-well-interesting stuff which is currently getting forced out. There will be an end to such hassles as license ennui and yet-another-progressive-vertical-scroller-syndrome, peace and tranquility will be restored to this sector of the Galaxy, the good guys will win and ride off into the sunset on Mutant Camels, and the sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned.

Until this zarjazosity transpires, remember that if you can't find our stuff in the shops you can always order it direct from Llamasoft at the usual address (see the small print at the end).

6: Assorted Weirdness

YAK can thoroughly recommend the following books, albums and experiences: Pink Floyd 'Delicate Sound of Thunder' double-live CD (featuring the Best Guitar Solo in the Known Universe, but unfortunately not the live version of 'Welcome To The Machine'); Peter Gabriel 'Passion' (the soundtrack to 'Last Temptation of Christ' and an extremely zarjaz album, the sort of thing to sit down to with four channels of lightsynth on at four in the morning and wish you had bigger speakers and an awesome amplifier so you could get that bass a bit more apocalyptic); the Mandelbrot set; anything by William Gibson; getting your own copies of 'Blade Runner' and '2010'; 256-colour graphics demos on the Konix; 'Underwater Sunlight' by Tangerine Dream and 'Connections' by Vangelis; Andes Attack and Gridrunner together at only £15; level 23 in Stargate; Psygnosis' Beast on the Amiga (if you want the best graphics and sound yet on the Amiga, a zarjaz Roger Dean t-shirt,

a character which looks suspiciously like good ol' Cippy, and you don't mind gameplay which is almost impossibly difficult); that new album by Tanita Tikaram (she's not a savage mutant weirdo even though she comes from Basingstoke); Irn Bru (it's the drink least unlike Inca Kola in the UK, if you close your eyes and think of llamas it could almost be...); responding to the 'throw yourself off end of jetty' interrupt whilst on holiday (the interrupt still occurs during realtime but the vector contains a null pointer, which can be disconcerting at first); TMS34010; the Atari STacey with a GCR Mac-emulator cartridge; anything furry; a Swansea band called 'Medium Green'; seeing the Atari Lynx do hardware sprite scaling for the first time; seeing the Atari Lynx do anything, anytime (except run out of batteries); a villa on the beach; Plutos; another cup of tea; the gloating feeling you get watching soap operas when Mrs Mangel gets her come-uppance or Nick Cotton gets kicked out of Albert Square again; curries; DPaint2 running on VGA; mist in the valley on a moonlit night on the way back from the pub; VIZ; the forgotten art of video game design; the idea that one of the more innovative adventure-writing outfits, say Scrolls or L9, might develop text-based entertainment software beyond its current fundamentally sequential, goal-oriented nature (start off by mixing hypertext, Douglas Adams, and Hacter, perhaps [a textsynth?]); Smart Bombing four pods; Pink Floyd; Iterated Function Systems; Ozric Tentacles; 'one for the ditch'; Zippy the Pinhead; direct neural input; damp sheep; PDS failing to crash; getting the raving Munchies and having a fridge full of goodies; getting the raving Munchies and setting off on an expedition to the nearest 24-hour petrol station to get some (but only applies in cities; here in Wales nearest 24-hour place is thirtyfive miles away); Cerebus the Aardvark and Flory the Savage Guinea Pig; going running with your Walkman on; Quantox on the Amiga (if you can handle the idea of buying software originated by an amateur tap-dancer); that first glug of a lovely pint of bitter when you haven't been down the pub for ages and you could really do with a pint; that feeling you have when something zarjaz you've long anticipated is going to happen (like when you're sitting in a stadium fairly near the front with a good view of the circular screen and you know that shortly Pink Floyd will emerge and play for you); getting a coding-urge at half three in the morning; communication; the camel animation in MC89; 'Eon' and 'Blood Music', both by Greg Bear; doubles at Plutos; trashing three savage Hunters and a disgusting Mutant in a single pass at Virus; crashing out at seven in the morning after a particularly good party; a large wallet originally designed to accommodate business cards but which now contains twenty-four PC Engine games; Atari eight-bit Star Raiders; going back to a decent monitor after having to put up with RF-modulated 80-columns for three weeks; having someone else make the tea; that strange headspace you get into when you haven't been to bed after an all-night coding session; those cheap cordless 'phones you can get, which allow the actions of communication and tea-making to proceed concurrently; the Parsec awesome Mandelbrot-eating beastie; Stargate and Guns'n'Roses in total darkness at apocalyptic volume; Trip-A-Tron and 'Echoes', also in total darkness; sine waves; phase shifts; Azimuth Co-ordinators; Curly Wurly dipped in tea; Dime bars; Lion bars; Blitz bars and a can of Coke; getting the raving Munchies whilst writing a newsletter; the dancing cows on the Anchor butter commercial; 'Stark', in fact Ben Elton in general; the Illuminati series by Shea and Wilson; the knowledge of just what you could do with the starfield generator on the aforementioned Parsec beastie; the Konix Konsole; the latest Lou Reed album; Red Kings; 'L.A. Woman'; autonomous self-repairing lawnmowing von Neumann machines (sheep); Laser Zone; the Hyperspace button; 'The Winner's Guide to Video Games', by Craig Kubey, now hopelessly outdated but still the best writing on the subject - the section on Defender is a classic); Devpac II; Atomic Tadpoles; hard disk drives; kettles which switch themselves off; Kempston joysticks; Fantasy Zone; Rolos, Galaxy, CCEs and black Wine Gums, Jelly Babies, Fruit Pastilles or whatever - to name but a few. That's all for now - see you in Cyberspace..

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