

SPACE

NEWSLETTER for April 2008



President's Corner by Michael Current April 2008

It was a fine meeting and a fine auction last month, a really nice get-together all around. Let's keep it up!

Don't think I have too much to say right now. Still putting lots of time into my research/obsession into Atari history, currently working with SEC filings and using various web sites as backups to construct a list of EVERY release by Atari Games Corp, and integrating this into my "History of Atari Divisions Initially Retained by Warner" web page. Now formulating ideas for presenting this stuff differently. Probably a separate page for "A history of Atari Games Corp / Midway Games West" (including Atari Operations and Tengen), and eventually a separate page for "A History of Atari Inc / Atari Games Inc / Atari Holdings Inc." And also eventually a separate page for "A History of Tramel Technology / Atari Corp / JTS Corp". I find so much misinformation out there (think Wikipedia), it really seems like putting out substantive facts based on primary sources is contributing something useful to the world.

Do check out the Landon Dyer blog posting "The Atari ST (part 1)" here in this issue of our SPACE Newsletter. Fascinating stuff!

See you again soon!

Thanks, keep using that Atari, and come to your next SPACE meeting, Friday April 11, 2008.



Treasurer's Report by Greg Leitner For March 2007

Now that's more like it!! I don't know if it was the beautiful weather or the SPACE Auction. All I know is that we had seven members present for the March 2008 SPACE meeting

and you can't do much better than that. Good to see our President, Michael Current, again. He made the long trip despite the high gas prices, and he contributed some auction items that brought in some of the highest bids for the evening.

In all we took in \$111.00 thanks to the auction and the great Dom that Glen prepared. Any member who didn't get the February and March Dom should try to get one next month. You will be glad you did.

Not much happening in the computing world last month so I guess I will just give you the SPACE financial status for the month.

Beginning balance as of March 1, 2008: 743.56

Receipts for the month:

Dom sales	36.00
Mbshp renewal	15.00
Auction sales	60.00

Total receipts 111.00

No expenses for the month

Ending balance as of March 31, 2008: 854.56

With room rental paid through 2007 we probably won't see another room rental billing until the end of this year. That gives us an opportunity to achieve the \$1,000 mark again. We haven't seen that for over a year. We need to catch up on the web-site billing but Nolan hasn't been around for a few months so he hasn't been paid since last year.

Anyway, we are looking very healthy for this year and to keep it that way, please renew those memberships and buy the Dom each month. It's the least we can all do for the hard work that Glen puts into making the Doms.

Hope you had a great Easter and I will see you all next month for the April 2008 SPACE meeting. Let's have another turnout like March!

**Secretary's Report
By Steven Peck
For March 2007**

We had quite a good turnout for a change this time, partly because there was an auction this month. The auction went well and mostly everything was sold at the March meeting. I hope that we can continue to have these auctions because I know that the old Atari stuff is getting rarer and rarer.

I am eager to see this Coldfire computer when it comes out. Lance was saying it's getting pretty close to being done. Again, I would like to see it in action.

If only the Golden Age of Video Gaming was back again. I remember going to the arcades when I was 9 years old and blowing my money on Crystal Castles. I think I made the bowling alley near my house very wealthy with my patronage. It's too bad those days are gone. Back then, games were games. They were challenging, addictive, and for everybody. Nowadays, you're lucky finding games below T for Teen rating. They're just not family games anymore. It's sad.

I go to the State Fair every year, and the arcade games cost a dollar to play now. A dollar! Plus, it's not worth a dollar to play! At least in the 80s you can get by with just quarters and save your money that way.

Well, enough of my ranting and raving. This concludes my report.



**BBS Corner
By Nolan Friedland
For April 2007**

If anyone has any comments, suggestions, ideas, or submissions for the BBS Corner column or the SPACE BBS web site, you may email them to me, Nolan Friedland, at the address shown on the back of this newsletter under the "CLUB OFFICIALS" section.

From: Michael Current [michael@mcurrent.name]
Sent: Saturday, March 29, 2008 10:19 AM
Subject: Rainbow for Atari Falcon Is Now Freeware

From Norbyte,
<http://www.rainbowpainter.com/about/rainbow2multimedia.html>

Rainbow for Atari Falcon Is Now Freeware

Way back in the 1990s, long before the latest version of Rainbow Painter, we developed a program for the Atari Falcon called Rainbow II Multimedia.

Rainbow II Multimedia

Our Atari Falcon exclusive program Rainbow II Multimedia was used for creating pixel-based drawings/paintings, retouched photos, animated sprites, sound effects and slideshows.

It was first published in December 1993, as Rainbow.

A much improved version called Rainbow II Multimedia was released in May 1995 and received an ST Format Gold 96% rating.

More info can be found here
<<http://www.rainbowpainter.com/about/history.html>>.

Freeware

The good news is that our old program Rainbow II Multimedia for Atari Falcon is now freeware!

The bad news is that you need an Atari Falcon to run it, unless you can find an emulator (which may or may not exist)...

Rainbow and Rainbow II Multimedia are Copyright 1993-1996.

Compatibility

You need an Atari Falcon computer with at least 4Mb memory.

The program works with both RGB/TV and VGA.

Download Link

Click here
<<http://www.rainbowpainter.com/about/hs/RAINBOW2.ZIP>> to download the zipped archive (1MB).

This archive consists of the last release of Rainbow II Multimedia.

We have not changed anything from it's original release, so please note that any contact information etc that you may find within the program is invalid.

Also, we'd appreciate if you would link to this web page instead of directly to the file.

Original Release Date

Version 2.1 was released on the 4th of March 1996 (the release date of version 2.00: 4 May 1995).

From: Michael Current [michael@mcurrent.name]
Sent: Saturday, March 29, 2008 10:35 AM
Subject: GFA-BASIC Compiler v3.6 r15 released

GFA-BASIC Compiler v3.6 r15 released

Mar 29, 2008 - 10:21 AM :: lp

Small update to the GFA-BASIC Compiler:

- Reverted the '\$F%' and '\$X' modification, fixed the code which skips spaces. The command '\$ F%' is now valid per the manual (extra white spaces).

http://gfa.atari-users.net/ftp/download.php?fn=gfa_comp.zip

From: Michael Current [michael@mcurent.name]
Sent: Saturday, March 29, 2008 10:34 AM
Subject: New version of CrippleMiNT

New version of CrippleMiNT

Mar 27, 2008 - 04:55 AM :: lp
M.A. Kehr announced on usenet:

Hi,

There's a new CrippleMiNT version available on my website. Now it's possible to configure a network card. But to do so, read the README file.

Bye
maanke

<http://atari.st-katharina-apotheke.de>

From: Michael Current [michael@mcurent.name]
Sent: Saturday, March 29, 2008 10:32 AM
Subject: The Atari ST (part 1)

The Atari ST (part 1)

Blob post by Landon Dyer, March 12th, 2008
<http://www.dadhacker.com/blog/?p=995>

One friday afternoon in July, 1984 the rumor floated through the halls: Jack Tramiel had bought Atari, and we were all going to be killed.

Or laid-off. Or something. My office-mate had worked at Commodore a few years earlier (where Jack had been CEO) and said "If this is true, I'm quitting. I'm not working for Jack again; he's a monster." I didn't know anything about Jack, but this wasn't a good sign.

On Monday the rumor turned out to be true. Like all important happenings at Atari — layoffs, major management shake-ups, bad financial news and so on — we found out through the San Jose Mercury News rather than an official internal announcement. The paper said that Jack Tramiel had bought Atari from Warner Communications, and he and his people were on the way to San Jose to take the company apart and kill us. Or lay us off. Or something. The Merc didn't exactly say that Jack was a monster, but that he had a hard, no-nonsense management style. This wasn't a good sign.

I remember spending a crazy couple of days trying to concentrate on my current project; I sure didn't feel like doing much (I was working on a computerized Trivial Pursuit game, something we'd code-named "Trivial Compute," and was learning a lot about data compression algorithms, but my heart just wasn't in it). The hallways were buzzing with rumors of entire buildings-full of people who had been nuked.

It took a little while for them to get to us. On Wednesday two of Jack's "lieutenants" arrived at our building (we consumer games folks had been co-located with the coin-op division to save money). Someone had phoned ahead and said that the Tramiels were coming over and that news spread like wildfire. When they showed up, someone said, "I see them! They're walking in the front door!" I dialed-up the building's intercom system and announced:

"Imperial storm troopers have entered the base!
Imperial storm troopers have — Urk!"

then hung up abruptly. (Later, one of the two said that the timing couldn't have been more perfect; my announcement happened as they had begun marching down the main hallway on the way to meet with the people they were going to lay off...).

There were interviews. Fast interviews that might better be described as grillings. We each had about five minutes to talk with Leonard Tramiel (Jack's son) and John Feagans (a long-time Commodore employee, and someone that the Tramiels trusted). They asked questions like: Do you have any experience writing operating systems? I told them that I'd read Lion's notes on Unix, and about my CS coursework at Maryland and the tools work that I liked to do. Did I want to work on a new computer? Sure, that sounded kind of exciting. I might have mentioned Soul of a New Machine and stuff about compilers. My memory of this is rather vague; I recall having a private conversation with the two of them, but others have said that we were interviewed in groups of five or six. It might have been both.

A couple hours later we were told to meet in a common area. There were about sixty of us. "Do you want the news individually, or all at once?" We took a vote, and most of us (veterans of many, many layoffs) just wanted to get things over with quickly. Leonard read two lists of names. Those on the longer list, about two thirds of the people there, were the ones getting a package. Those on the shorter list would be working for the Tramiels, at least for a while. My name was on the shorter list.

It was unclear if it would be better to be laid-off or to work for these people; they were tight-lipped and nearly complete ciphers. Who were the lucky ones? There was no way to tell. I helped my now-ex-cow-orkers pack their offices and load boxes into their cars. Out of the cluster of six programmers and an artist, people who I'd worked with and survived layoffs with for years, I was the only one left.

There was a lot of stuff left behind, and a bunch of VAXes that I could mess around with nearly all by myself. It wasn't all that much fun.

All of us programmers got VP desks.

The Tramiels had bought a lot of stuff — by contract they could have anything they wanted of the Warner Atari's assets — and we needed to set up our offices in the new building that

engineering was being consolidated in. We were moving from the coin-op building (since Jack hadn't purchased the coin-op business, the doors to that part of the building, now a separate company, had been locked) to a building in Sunnyvale that had belonged to Corporate Research. Most of the people in Research had been let go; Lisp Machines and Vaxes were humming away without anyone to use them. Jack wasn't interested in academics.

It turned out that we could have nearly anything from the old Atari that we wanted, since it didn't cost anything extra. While the Tramiels were selling the more expensive items (like the Vaxes and Symbolics Lisp Machines that the researchers had been using), more mundane stuff could be had for the asking. You could have just about anything you wanted, and as long as Jack didn't have to write a check for it (and was something that he couldn't sell to make quick cash), he didn't care.

Anything?

"Well," said somebody, "There's this warehouse full of stuff in Santa Clara..."

So we went over there. Remember the last scene in the movie Raiders of the Lost Ark where they wheel the boxed-up Ark into a gigantic warehouse with acres of huge boxes and whatnot? This was like that, but for real. This warehouse (and others like it) was where the office equipment from all of the now-empty Atari buildings had gone; maybe fifty or sixty buildings' worth.

I think that Jim Eisenstein, one of our graphics guys, started it. "I'll take that one, there," he said to one of the warehouse workers. Jim pointed at a really nice, large desk. "Okay," said the fellow with the forklift, and he got it down. No argument. Pretty soon we had all chosen really nice, large desks (and some nice chairs) and tagged them for delivery. The guys running the forklifts didn't care.

Dave Getreu and I shared an office for over a year (he was the guy whose version of Centipede I had bettered, but he was pretty decent about that). Our two desks barely fit, but it seemed worth it; a symbolic finger in the eye of the old, crappy Warner-Atari management. I don't know who had used my desk before me, but it was sure nicer than anything I'd had, and my guess was that for every dollar that my efforts had earned the company that the former owner had blown at least two bucks down the toilet in bad deals and clueless management.

Rule of thumb: If your company has more VPs than it does bathrooms, you're in trouble.

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The Tramiels had bought Atari with a plan to make a little money immediately by quickly selling off assets, and more intermediate-term money by making minor updates to the existing Atari product lines (the 400/800/1200 series of 8-bit computers), but the biggest effort was going to be a completely new line of cheap computers. There were some other products in various stages of development (the Atari 7800, whose major engineering work had actually been done

outside Atari, at a small company named General Computer, a new sound chip code-named Amy, and some others) that the Tramiels kept lightly staffed.

The new computer was going to be based on a 16-bit or 32-bit processor. The Tramiels were initially pretty closed-mouthed about things; they had brought some folks from Commodore with them, and I got the impression that they didn't trust us that much, and in addition there was a legal fight going on with Commodore over trade secrets. During the next month or two the design of the new system solidified. It was going to be based on a 32-bit processor, have a 16-bit bus (thus ST, for "Sixteen, Thirty-two"), have 256K of RAM and 128K of ROM. It was going to have a mouse and a graphical interface of some kind. At first the National 32000 series processor was a serious possibility, but in the end the Motorola 68000 won out. [In retrospect this was a good choice; National chips looked great on paper and had a nice, clean instruction set, like itty bitty Vaxes, but in reality they were very buggy and quite slow].

There were a number of candidates for the ST operating system. Leonard Tramiel gave us some GEOS documents to evaluate, as well as some specs on something called Crystal (from Digital Research Inc), and there were one or two other contenders. Frankly, none of the choices seemed all that great. Ultimately the Tramiels signed a contract with DRI to port CP/M-68K and the still-being-developed GEM user interface to our still-being-developed hardware.

The schedule for the ST was very aggressive; we were starting in August, more or less, and working systems needed to be ready for the Consumer Electronics Show in January. With lead-time for the custom chips measured in many weeks (I don't remember exactly, perhaps 6 to 8), this didn't leave much time for development. So while the hardware guys were spending 20 hour days frantically designing chips and wire-wrapping prototypes, the software guys were spending a lot of time at the beach.

No, really. The software team temporarily relocated to Monterey, 70 miles south of Silly Valley and on the California coast, which was where Digital Research was located. Initially we stayed in hotel rooms a short walk from the DRI campus, but after a few weeks Atari rented some houses for us in Carmel, just a few blocks from the world-class beaches there. I used to leave work around 5, watch the sunset over the ocean (because it would have been a shame to waste those), then go back and work really late.

Our first meeting with the folks from DRI did not go very well. One of their engineers tried to give us a chalkboard introduction to C (which I'd been using for five or six years at that point), and his "this is a for loop, this is a struct" talk didn't go over very well (you can't effectively teach a language in an hour like this anyway). Another engineer attempted a tutorial on assembly language (to video game programmers, ha). This attitude colored the whole Atari-DRI engineering relationship; in addition to the project's incredibly short schedule, which put everyone under a lot of pressure, there was an uneasy division of turf: DRI got to call the shots

on their code and architecture, while Atari had to make it work. Things didn't always go smoothly; when we found bugs or design problems, egos sometimes got in the way and there was an occasional temper flare-up.

Stress: A number of us learned how to juggle. One of the DRI people had a nervous tick in the form of a "quacking" sound, and this spread through the group (a year later some of us were still doing it a little). The word "fine" became a pejorative: "Don't worry, everthing will work out just fine." How are you feeling? Fine, okay?

Getting access to working hardware was a problem. There was a wire-wrap prototype of the hardware in Sunnyvale, but it was flaky as hell and certainly not transportable. You could run something, have it crash, then wiggle a board slightly and have the code work just fine. There were attempts to get the software engineers hardware earlier, but they were always unreliable (e.g., big, expensive machine-wire-wrapped boards that almost worked, but that turned out to be just too dodgy to trust).

Wire-wrap: Imagine a board, say two feet by three feet, crammed with chips. On the flip side of the board are thousands of half-inch metal pins. Now, the pins have to be wired-up to each other in order for the chips to talk, and the way you do this is to wrap a fine wire tightly around a one pin, run the wire up and about, then wrap it around the other pin and cut the wire. Hilarity ensues. There are thousands of wires to keep track of, and only so many colors of wire available. Little bits of wire will flake off, get buried and short out contacts. Wires will work themselves loose. Wires carrying signals at high speed will interfere with each other and cause ghost signals. Wires will break internally and invisibly, become unwrapped, mysteriously stop conducting electricity (sometimes), and this is all behavior that doesn't include the simple boneheaded mistake of somebody mis-wiring two pins out of those thousands because they were short on sleep.

The nasty thing about wire-wrap prototypes was, if your code didn't work, you could just shake the boards (there were three or four of them you could do this to), and if everything settled down right your code might actually run. Or bomb in a different, exciting way. Software progress was slow. There were attempts to get us more stable prototypes, but they never really worked that well.

Sometime in December we started getting chips from the fabs and the real hardware began to come to life. We booted the ST for the first time (it was exhilarating to see the floppy disk spin and seek under OS control — this is something that you take for utterly for granted until you have to make it work yourself).

The original budget of 128K of ROM was blown pretty early on, and we targeted 192K. Initially this was so that the machine could incorporate a built-in BASIC interpreter. Up until this point it was virtually unthinkable that you could ship a consumer computer without BASIC in ROM (the Apple II, the Commodore line, and all of the Atari computers had built-in BASIC).

DRI had a version of BASIC available, and one of our engineers (someone the Tramiels knew) was hired and given the task of porting it. I don't remember precisely what went wrong, but it just didn't happen. It's possible that the DRI BASIC wasn't very good, or was too full of platform-specific garbage to easily port, and it's also possible that the engineer given the job just wasn't up to it. Regardless, we started to realize that just the operating system alone was going to use up the entire 192K (and in fact, blew past it and had to be pared down during a 2-3 week crunching period just before we shipped the ROMs), and BASIC simply would not fit.

The other thing that was clear was that the software was going to be late; the ROM version wasn't going to make it in time for CES. We had disk-based versions of the OS (called TOS, for "The Operating System" — catchy) booting, and that's what we showed. The hardware guys doubled the amount of RAM in the system so the OS could live in RAM with room left over for applications.

Jack didn't pay for all of the engineers to fly to Las Vegas, but he was willing to put us up in a hotel and get us CES badges if we arranged our own transportation, so a few of us did a road-trip. The show was fun; there was a lot of excitement and speculation about Atari's new products. What people didn't know is that there were only about five working ST systems in existence, and they kept dying on the show floor (possibly due to heat problems, bad connections, or barely-working custom chips going south) and had to be resurrected from time to time in a back room where techs were hidden away with soldering irons, a limited number of spare chips, and a liberal supply of invective.

We'd shown the ST to the public. Now we had to make it work.

From: Michael Current [michael@mcurrent.name]
Sent: Saturday, March 29, 2008 10:33 AM
Subject: KeyEdit 1.0 for FreeMiNT released

KeyEdit 1.0 for FreeMiNT released
Mar 26, 2008 - 05:34 PM :: lp

Jo Even Skarstein announced on usenet:

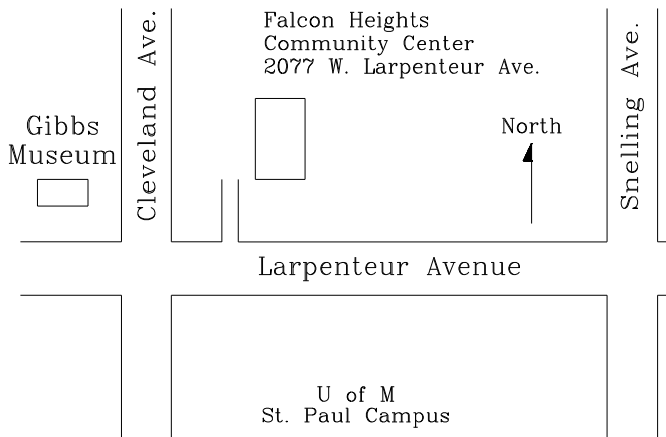
I've just released a small GEM utility for editing keyboard layouts for FreeMiNT. It allows you to easily edit the keytable.tbl keyboard files used by FreeMiNT >= 1.16. ARAnyM-users in particular might find this tool useful due to the amount of different PC keyboards.

It's available on <http://atari.nvg.org/download.html>

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Saint Paul Atari Computer Enthusiasts (SPACE) meets on the second Friday of each month at 7:30 PM in the Falcon Heights Community Center at 2077 West Larpenteur Ave. Doors open at 7:00 PM.



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<http://Space.atari.org>

Articles for Publication must be received by the Newsletter Editor two weeks prior to the Club's next Scheduled meeting.

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Supporting:

ATARI 8-Bit Computers

ATARI ST Computers
