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CTW

13-6-88 BRITAIN'S TOP COMPUTER TRADE WEEKLY ISSUE 190

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MacByte dips out

Software duplicator MacByte has gone bust owing £350,000 in a messy and confusing liquidation.

Reasons for the bust have still not become clear despite a recent creditors meeting. The fact that the company reported an annual gross profit of £205,966 on a £700,000 turnover last January makes the liquidation even more baffling. MacByte was losing £100,000 a month in the early part of this year.

It is understood that the firm was chiefly involved in business software duplication. It also distributed duplication equipment in the UK via a licence agreement with Mountain Computer in California and had close contacts in the USSR.

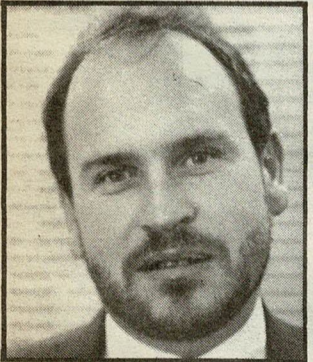
Director Michael McMahon is currently in Germany with his subsidiary MacByte GmbH which is apparently still solvent. That firm owes the UK branch some £25,000. McMahon has previously exhibited hardware in the USSR against UK Customs rulings - an action which resulted in investigations by Customs officials.

Creditors were "none the wiser" by the end of their meeting as to the reasons for the sharp losses. Apparently "extensive interrogation" of McMahon took place there, with "no satisfactory explanation".

Continued on page two

INSIDE:

A TOKEN EFFORT?



Microdealer's boss Lee Ginty recently announced a tokens-based software promotional deal. CTW talks to some optimistic dealers 10

TUNNELLING CHANNELS

French software house Loricel claims that its "global approach" will make it one of the very few European publishers to succeed in the UK. CTW listens in 12

BUCKING TRENDS

David Lester weighs up the chances of budget 16-bit games 14

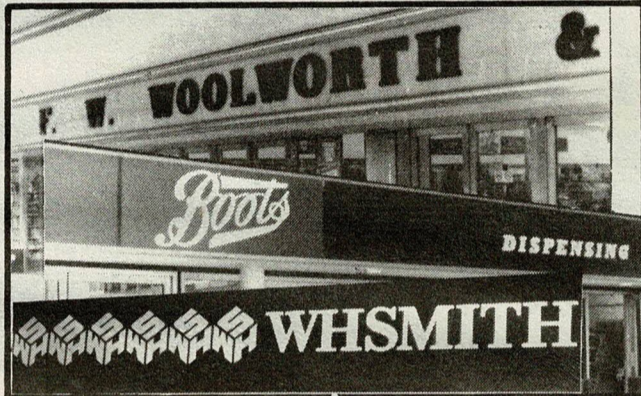
CHARTS, 17/LETTERS 18

Chains link up in new games ruling

Unprecedented agreement on leisure software publishing has been arrived at by the three leading multiple chains.

Following complaints from all sides of the industry about the difficulties of displaying unusual sized boxes, standards for four main areas have been adopted by WH Smiths, Boots and Woolworths. Between them, the stores sell upwards of 40 per cent of all leisure software in the UK.

It is understood that the fourth leading multiple, John Menzies, is also in agreement with the guidelines. Due to its traditionally subterranean low profile, though, it is not willing to go public



The multiples hope that software houses will comply with the suggestions, if they don't do so already. The intention is to stick rigidly by the recommendations from September 1st.

At this stage, it is not yet clear what will happen if one of the leading software houses

persists in proffering bastard sizes. The statement from the three firms said that exceptions can be made, though these are evidently to be discouraged.

The statement in full:

●Budget

(i) All budget software must be packaged wherever possi-

ble in a single cassette clear audio case.

(ii) Deviations will be considered for selection only in the event that the product has multiple cassettes or extensive instructions which cannot conveniently fit inside a single audio box. If the product deviates it must follow the guidelines as per 8-bit software.

Acceptable pack - Single audio clear box

●8-bit software (cassette)

(i) No software will be stocked in a size larger than a standard A5 box.

(ii) Individual titles must be packaged in a clear double audio box. Deviations will only be considered for selection if the product requires more than two cassettes or if

Continued on page two

Epson shifts upwards

Epson is lining up faster versions of its entire PC range for later this month, with prices rising between £100-£200.

The move will follow swiftly the 10 per cent hike on all Epson's printers which comes into effect this week due to the European Commission's recent 33.4 per cent levy on imported Japanese dot matrix models.

Epson itself is preferring not to give exact details on the

PC increases and two new models until their official announcement just prior to the PC User Show on June 28-30th.

"Epson product is conspicuously underpriced at the moment and many competitors have been shifting their prices up of late," commented UK corporate communications manager Edward Hugins to CTW.

Epson's erstwhile entry level machine the PCE with one 20Mb hard drive will go up £100 to £1,299 (ex VAT).

There will, however, be a new starting system for £799: a PCE with single floppy drive and no video adaptor.

A single floppy version of the PC AXII AT clone is also lined up, costing £1,299. The current version will increase by £200 to £1,699. The PC AX40 and 80 will also see an increase of £200 to £2,199 and £2,495 respectively.

The hikes are being attributed to substantial performance improvements rather than any need to counteract rising D-Ram chip prices or

the like. Each machine is expected to run 75 per cent faster as a result of the enhancements.

The printer price increases range from a miserly £4 on the bottom end LX800 and top end ink jet and laser printers, to £84 on the previously £745 EX1000. The nine pin LX800 now retails at £279 and the entry level 24 pin model, the LQ500, has gone up £14 to £399.

Epson said it was determined not to transfer the full

Continued on page two

EMAP on 16-bit trail

EMAP will be launching its first new leisure computer magazine in nearly seven years next September, backed by a quartet of former Newsfield writers.

The new title is provisionally called *The One*, and will cover the burgeoning 16-bit entertainment scene. Un-

veiled at the PC Show, the initial print run will be 50,000 with a cover price of £1.50.

Erstwhile *Zzap* editor Gary

Penn will edit *The One* and former Newsfield colleagues Graeme Kidd, Julian Rignall and Steve Jarrett will be amongst the regular contributors. "Software houses are prepared to spend more time and money in making 16-bit software special, so they deserve special support such as detailed two or three page reviews," Penn offered.

One hiccup for EMAP has been the name. The initial far stronger title *16-Blitz* appears to have been nixed after the possible threat of legal action from the publishers of youth culture magazine *Blitz*.

EMAP is claiming that *The One* has an advantage in its size, which will be larger than A4. The aim here is both to allow it to stand out on the shelves amongst the plethora of A4 size glossy computer magazines, and to enable

more flexibility in page design. Given all the pages published to date in computer magazines, layouts in general are becoming repetitious.

A dummy issue is due to be shown to potential advertisers this week. The launch is being backed by a claimed £150,000 adspend.

In effect, EMAP will be up against both *Ace* from Future Publishing and Newsfield's *The Games Machine*, though they also cover the 8-bit sector. It will also be fighting for market share against the rackful of ST and Amiga specific magazines launched in recent months.

●EMAP's last leisure market computer magazine launch was back in November 1981. Since then, it has purchased both *Sinclair* and *Commodore User*.



EMAP's DUMMY RUN: A spread from *The One*, due in September

UK cloners brush off Dell deal

IBM's continuing hunt for backdated royalties took a further step last week, but the smaller UK cloners are still unworried.

Opus and Spectrum both reacted nonchalantly to the news that the major US cloner Dell has signed a licence agreement with IBM to pay royalties on sales of both past, present and future compatibles.



DELL: IBM deal

This is the first deal to be made since IBM made clear its intention to seek retroactive payments on claimed patent infringements. It is demanding one per cent of total sales to be paid back by the end of the year.

"We're not worried about the threats but we are holding

Continued on page two

Amstrad dishes it out

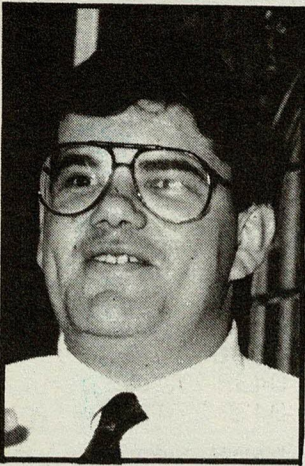
Amstrad will become one of the prime movers in the embryonic satellite TV market next year with the launch of a £199 dish and receiver.

The firm is currently "tooling up" for the production of up to 100,000 units per month. Deliveries are expected to begin in the first quarter of 1989 with assembly taking place in a high unemployment area in the UK.

The 60 centimetre dish and receiver will be branded Amstrad Fidelity. Currently such products are selling for around £1,000, plus up to £200 for aerial erection. Amstrad's offering will be VAT inclusive and installable for as little as £40.

Amstrad chairman Alan Sugar characteristically argued that "a lot of nonsense" has been talked about the satellite TV market so far. He hopes that his cheap package can clear up any confusion and ignite the market's potential.

Borland profits leap



KAHN: Profits up to \$7m

Borland last week posted year-end pre-tax profits of \$7.17 million, a figure broadly in line with most City analysts' predictions.

This 52 per cent increase was supplemented by a 162 per cent rise in sales and royalty income from \$29.2 million to \$76.5 million.

The results were helped enormously by the firm's good performance in the last quarter ending March 31st.

Pre-tax profits for this period totalled \$2.1 million compared to just \$250,000 the previous quarter. Sales and royalty income rose from \$21.7 million to \$29.2 million.

It was Borland's comparatively poor performance in the third quarter that led to the revision of year-end predictions. Both Barclays de Zoete Wedd and Schroder Securities were at one stage forecasting a \$13 million profit.

The fourth quarter benefited from the successful introduction during the pre-

ceding period of products such as *Quattro* without experiencing high marketing costs. In all, six new products were launched in the 1987/88 fiscal year.

Whilst announcing the results, Borland also finally unveiled the English version of its *Sprint* word-processor which will retail at £195. The OS/2 version of relational database *Paradox* was also launched, carrying a rather higher price tag of £549.95.

On the results, Borland chairman Philippe Kahn offered: "As demonstrated by our recent product announcements Borland continues its product development programmes and looks forward to a successful future."

Chains

Continued from front page

instructions are too extensive to conveniently fit inside a double audio box.

(iii) Deviations will be packaged either in an A5 size box (cardboard or plastic) in which case the artwork must be landscape or a softbox, or 152mm x 182mm (cardboard or plastic) in which case the artwork must be portrait.

The preferred option from above for any product not in double audio cases is the softbox size and the meeting strongly recommends that publishers move toward this size of packaging as soon as possible.

●8-bit software (disk)

All 3" or 5.25" disks suitable for the Amstrad CPC, Spectrum +3 or Commodore 64 machines must be packaged where possible in a clear crystal compact disk size case or the same size box as the cassette.

Acceptable packs: double audio clear plastic box, softbox (portrait artwork) and A5 box (landscape artwork)

●16-bit software

It is very strongly recommended that as soon as possible all 16 bit product, whether imported or manufactured in the UK will be packaged in:

- i) Crystal compact case
- ii) Softbox (cardboard or plastic)
- iii) A5 box (cardboard or plastic) as 8 bit.

It was recognised that this was an area of rapid growth and therefore packaging should be standardised as soon as possible.

Epson

Continued from front page

33.4 per cent levy imposed by the EC on to its consumers. "We're absorbing the increase as much as we can. It's going to hurt us but still less than the majority of our competitors. Because of the volume of our business and inherent profit we're in a better position to ride the levy," said Huggins.

Epson has six months further lobbying to do until a law is passed to make the levy stand for five years. A pessimistic Huggins noted that the initial ruling is "unlikely to be repealed".

"We're going to have to bear the pain. But the long term effect on reduced bottom line profit will ultimately cause us to rethink our investment plans in the UK," he warned.

MacByte

Continued from front page

tion forthcoming". The creditors succeeded in removing the directors' choice of a 'friendly liquidator' in favour of joint liquidators from London accountancies Robson Rhodes and Touche Ross. Eric Stonham from Touche Ross told CTW: "They lost their sales staff and they were going to lose the Mountain account, but we have yet to scrutinise this fully.

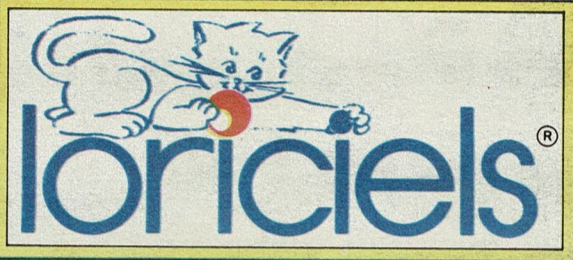
"It's a relatively complicated matter made worse by the fact that the landlord of the firm's premises changed the locks in May. The directors wanted to go into liquidation at the end of April but couldn't get the resolution from the shareholders."

The Hayes based firm was set up three years ago. Major creditors include Xidex (£56,035); Mountain Computer (£74,413) as well as Eden Plastics, Memorex, Burroughs Machines, MBS and Tetra.

Dell deal brush off

Continued from front page talks with some of our suppliers about it," offered Steve Cole at Spectrum, which produces the SBC range.

This reaction was echoed by Opus' sales and marketing director Martin Breffit: "It's something we'll be discussing, perhaps, later this year," he told CTW.



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*CTW 1987-1988 Dealer Survey

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Trouble looms for C64 mags

Commodore magazine publisher Antony Jacobson has sounded a warning of impending trouble for the sector's 8-bit titles.

Fresh from the Commodore Show - replete with its A500 and C64 price cut announcements - he argued that *Zzap*, *Commodore User*, *Your Commodore* and his own title *Commodore Computing International* will be squeezed hard from early next year.

"With *CCI*, we've just had our fourth best month ever, but I can't believe it won't go down after Christmas. All the Commodore mags will suffer, and I believe that that'll be around 25 per cent all round.

"We're already seeing thinner *Zzaps* and *Commodore Users* because their ad base is being eroded both by the budget publishers and the growth of 16-bit. They haven't really got a serious ad base to fall back on. *Your Commodore*, as everyone can see, is doing very badly, but they have got more of the serious utilities-type advertisers.

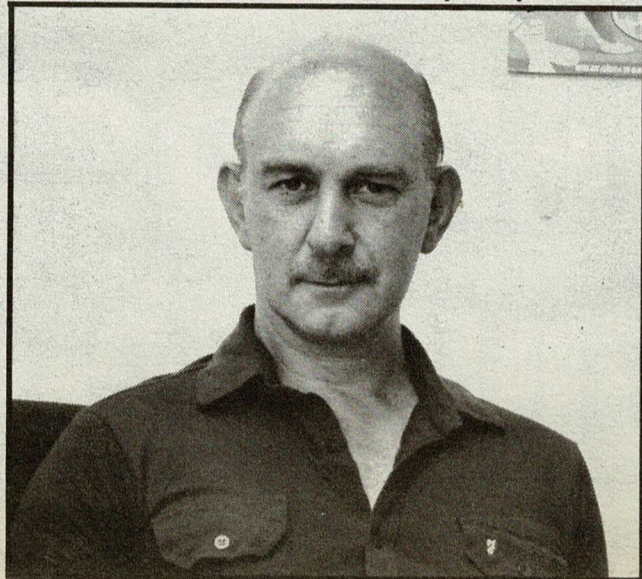
"I think there'll be a dramatic change next year, and we'll probably end up with just one games and one serious title," Jacobson claimed.

Supporting his argument, he said that Commodore's price cut on the 64 takes it closer to the toy market and makes it even less likely that many publishers will be able to continue producing full price 64 titles. Additionally, the Amiga chop means that even more 64 - and other - owners will be making the transition to 16-bit this year.

"It's all speculation, of course, and I'm saying this at a time when we're doing well. Our distributors Comac have been amazed to discover that since we split *Amiga User* from *CCI* back in January, our sales of *CCI* have shown a

month-on-month increase. That's because of the resentment that some 8-bit owners have to 16-bit material appearing in their magazine. But I still expect it to go down next year."

CCI - one of the handful of computer titles that doesn't file for an official ABC figure - is claimed to be selling 41,000. *SDome* 26-28,000 of these are in the UK. And Jacobson is making the bold pitch that *Amiga User* with a 44,000 print run is the world's biggest selling Amiga title "except for one issue of *Amiga World* in Germany, which is a bi-monthly in any case".



JACOBSON: Commodore Cassandra

Database doubts Atari show plan

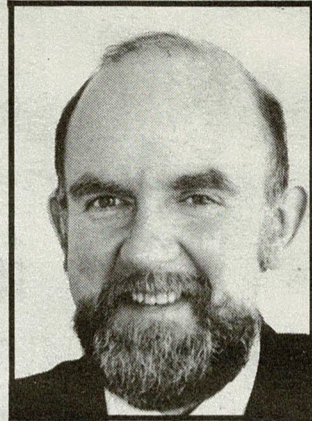
Database Exhibitions has derided prospects of Atari organising its own consumer show (CTW June 6th).

Atari floated the possibility of its own event after the apparent success of a trade exhibition at the Cafe Royal. Database runs the consumer orientated *Atari User Show* twice a year.

"We'd be very surprised if they decided to get into showbiz," offered spokesman Mike Cowley. "I would think that they're too busy selling product to bother with a specialist market in its own right.

We're doing a sufficiently good job directly and indirectly.

"We had a visit from Bob



GOWLEY: Showbiz

Gleadow (Atari UK's boss) to the last show and he liked it so much he brought his kids the next day."

Atari's recent trade forum attracted 100 dealers and 60 software developers. Atari is known to be looking at vertically integrating its activities and the possibility of that including shows is not being denied.

Cowley said that the trade forum was "a completely different ball game" from any consumer event adding "I'd be very surprised if anything is on the cards..." The next *Atari User Show* has been pencilled in for November 25th to 27th.

CBM splits PR

Barrington Harvey PR - formerly Headlines - has been appointed by Commodore to represent its leisure activities.

This is the first hardware account for the Finsbury based firm. It has previously always been involved in leisure software companies such as *MicroProse*, *Domark*, *CRL* and *Grand Slam*.

CBM's current PR firm *Burgess Daring* will still be handling the business side of the company - a function to

which it is more suited.

Barrington Harvey's eponymous boss Simon Harvey explained to *CTW*: "It's a real opportunity for us because it's our first hardware account. *Burgess Daring* and I will be working together closely and we have some good things planned."

On the decision to change the name of the company from *Headlines* he offered: "Headlines has been around for some time and the name is associated with the past. This fits in with my aspirations and plans."

For Commodore, market-

ing manager *Dean Barrett* said that the appointment had been made because of Harvey's "success in the leisure area". Harvey was formerly deputy editor of *CTW*.



HARVEY: CBM move

16-bit Software

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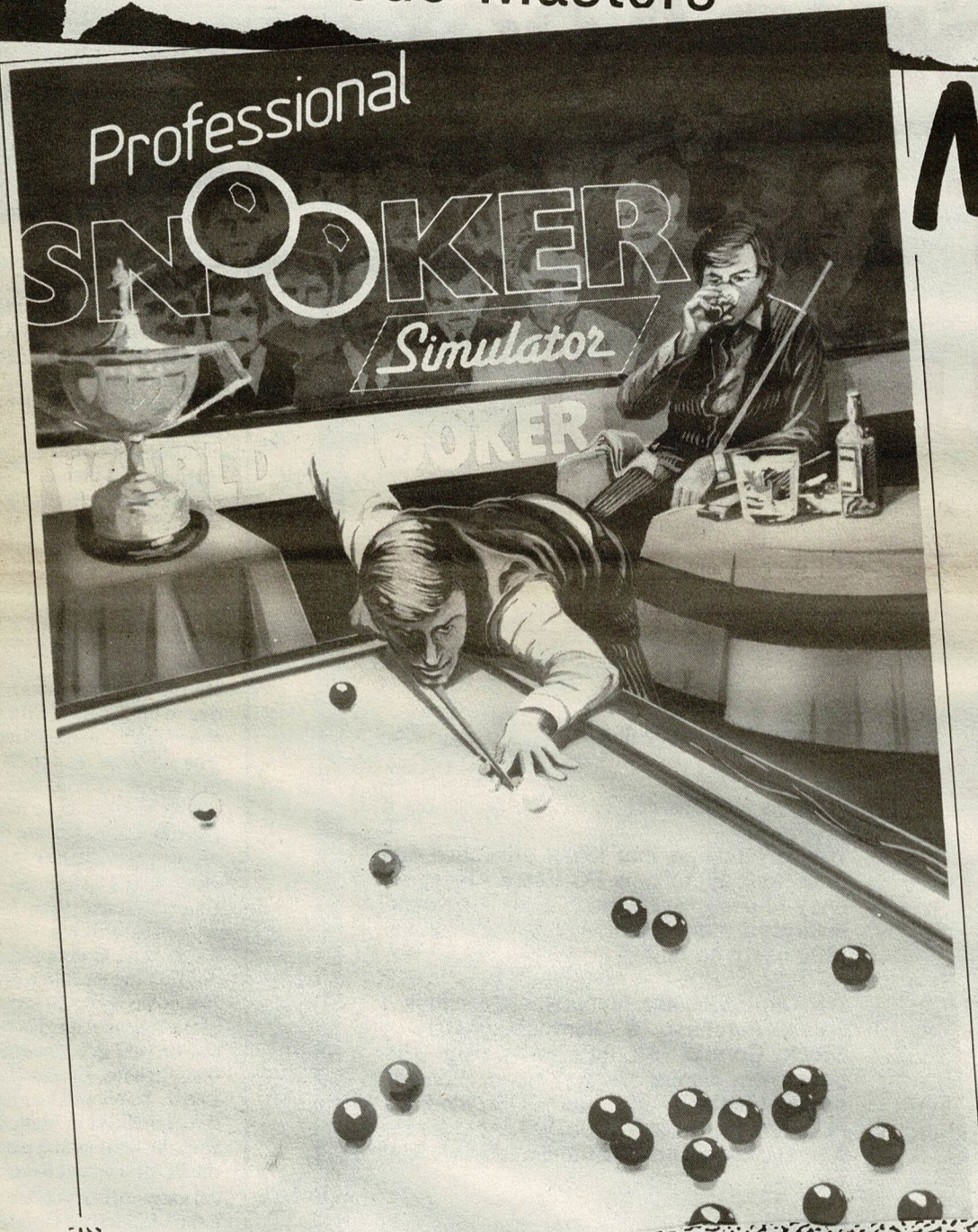
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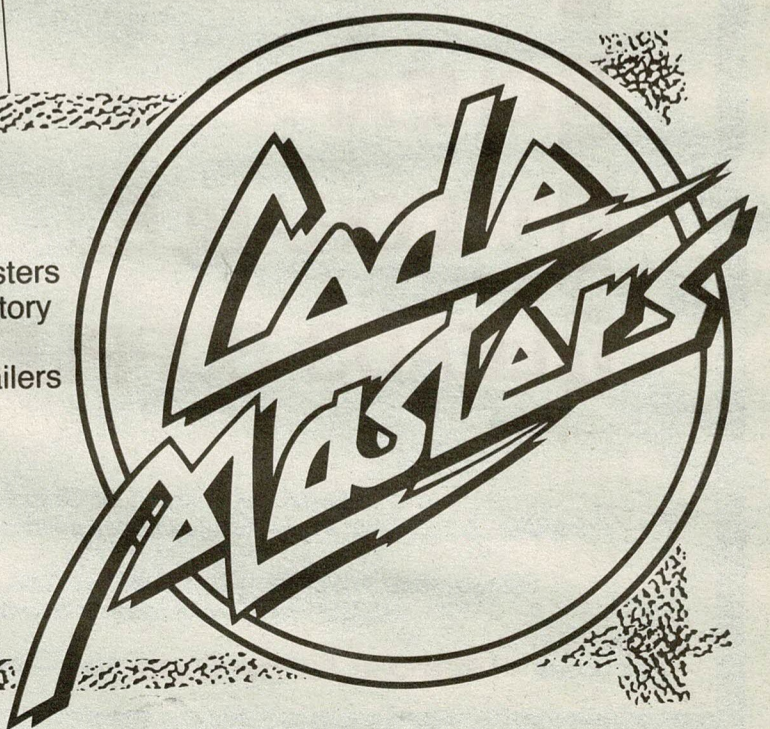
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SNIPPETS



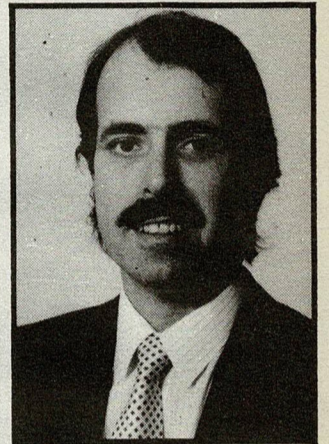
RUSSELL: Ruffled

Page Three model Corinne Russell made an appearance at Shekhana in Tottenham Court Road the other weekend to promote Martech's *Vixen*. Shekhana won the privilege after a raffle - based on volumes taken - was drawn by Electronic Arts. Eire based distributor Interface claims that budget sales have increased by 30 per cent in the last six months. Boss John Lenihan told CTW that full price games are "dying a death" in Southern Ireland. It's being suggested

that budget accounts for 80 per cent of Eire's games market. . . . The third AmiEXPO is due to be held on July 21st in Chicago. . . . There is a whisper that Anco's boss Anil Gupta is less than pleased with Newsfield for printing the final screenshot of *Strip Poker II* in *The Games Machine*. Gupta apparently views this as being offensive to those readers who wouldn't necessarily want to buy the game. Gupta though is preferring to keep his

customary low profile on the matter. . . . Industry media stars no. 468: Ocean's software development manager Gary Bracey last week made an appearance on kids Saturday morning TV show *Get Fresh*. He was announcing the winner of a competition involving devising a scenario for a computer game. . . . Mindscape has tied up the rights to George Lucas's \$40 million movie *Willow*. Unfortunately the film looks to be heading for a flop after

the US's critics mauled it. One said the magic adventure was "déjà voodoo". Apparently Activision turned down the licence mainly because of the disaster of Lucas's last project *Howard The Duck* which the firm had gained the rights to. . . . Roving games journalist Ciaran Brennan has been appointed deputy editor of Dennis's *Your Sinclair*. Brennan was formerly editor of *Zzap* and has recently been a sub-editor on *Video Trade Weekly*. . . .



REAVLEY: Into DDL
Dealers are being offered a mail order catalogue for computer supplies by DDL. The dealers will then be passing the brochure onto customers thus avoiding any investment in stock. DDL previously engaged in this last autumn and claims that the catalogue "is the most comprehensive from any supplier". Meantime, the distributor has appointed David Reavley as sales director. He moves over from parent company MBS where he has spent the past two years. . . .

On the 26th October IBM is due to hold its seven day show/conference/seminars at The Business Design Centre in London. It is not known at this stage whether or not Database is organising the event as was the case last year. Newsfield's Computer Games Championship kicks off this Saturday at Edinburgh. Commodore has donated the machines and Konix has given 60 joysticks to the tournament. Heats will also be held in Gloucester, Birmingham, London and Leeds. Semis will be held in the capital and in Manchester with the final taking place at the PC Show next September. An extraordinary series of events has forced Comley Computers to change the name of its new package for employment agencies, *Regalia*. During the launch speech aboard the Regalia boat on the Thames the firm's managing director Bob McCalden was issued with an injunction from a competitor using the same name. 200 guests witnessed the proceedings grind to a temporary halt. The name of the product has swiftly been changed to *Micromatch*. McCalden said later: "Despite the interruption a good time was had by all - even the bailiff." The latter apparently said that it was the best injunction he had ever served. According to Gallup the Atari ST's value market share has reached 20 per cent - ahead of the C64 (18.5 per cent). This is the highest share the machine has gained yet. . . .

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What's more, your company's profile can also be greatly enhanced. Your standing with dealers as a professional, concerned operation inevitably benefits from this sort of regular contact and support.

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BULLET

STAMPS OF APPROVAL?

Microdealer has latched on to petrol stations' marketing tactic of giving away tokens. In a first ever end-user promotion games it supplies will be specially stickered. Every £5 purchase then receives a token redeemable against sundry computer goodies. This, along with a new plan to sell T-shirts, is being pitched as a much needed tonic for retailers worrying about the dreaded summer drop. **STUART DINSEY** gets their reactions . . .



If there's one thing that dealers have always agreed on it's distributors' marked reluctance to provide sufficient end-user sales support.

It seems that no matter how good a firm's turnaround speed is, how enticing its discounts are or how pleasant its telesaes department attempts to be this is never quite enough.

Historically dealers have wanted proof that a distributor can put as much effort into helping the shop sell the game as it does in making sure the shop places the order. That means more posters, stickers, window displays, demos - in fact anything that might make a title shift once it's on the shelves.

A distributor's argument has always been that the POS material must come from the software houses in the first place and if it doesn't exist it doesn't exist. Also with their small margins many would argue that they simply haven't got time to be dishing out freebies, and that the job should be done by the publishers themselves.

This discrepancy between what a dealer wants and the service a distributor thinks it should provide has led to the formation of firms like USD and Active and the arrival of record marketer Bullet. The combination of these firms' success, an appetite for larger market share and the onset of the tough summer period has at least spurred one distributor, Microdealer International, into action.

It has come up with two bright ideas, ideas which will actually take a distributor out to the public for the first time without cutting out retailers.

The first - and most important - initiative is a token promotion along the lines of those run by petrol stations. All Microdealer's stock will be specially stickered and the retailers will be supplied with a roll of tokens. The consumer receives a token for every £5 worth of purchase. Those tokens are then redeemable against sundry computer products such as joysticks, mouse mats and free games. The final details are still to be announced as are the more dangleable products on offer.

If nothing else, Microdealer is making an effort to stimulate retailers' business and all dealers contacted praised the firm for its efforts. Some, however, were more aggressive than others when explaining why such a move is good news. Most hadn't even heard of it.

"It's about time the distributors got off their backsides and did something," responded Tricia Steadman of

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Screen shots from Amstrad version.

Bits and Bytes in Liverpool.

"They should be out there promoting product rather than leaving it to us or saying software houses won't do this or that."

Kids are all right

She in part defended Microdealer's erstwhile lack of on the road support, though, offering that a distributor shouldn't just be sending out glad handers because everybody else is these days.

"I know Microdealer are going to put reps on the road. But you can only put them out if they're actually doing something like this promotion. Otherwise retailers will just say 'not today thank you'. There's got to be clear marketing tactics behind it."

Following Microdealer's announcement of the token scheme one would imagine that a number of distributors are kicking themselves for letting a rival gain first blood. Even some of the retailers contacted revealed that they had been toying with a similar style promotion for the summer themselves.

"I think the kids'll go for it. I talked to them before about giving away a budget game every time they'd bought a total of twenty," commented John Barker of Hagar's Electronics in Sheerness. One dealer had even run a promotion in which a free budget game was offered with every full-price purchase.

It is clear after just a small amount of research that retailers are all for such schemes in principle but, as ever, they are wary of complications. Several mentioned the problems arising from stocking product which hasn't come solely from the Microdealer warehouse. They were worried about having to explain to a customer one week that the more games they buy the more tokens they build up, only to say "this one doesn't count" the next.

Barker was particularly concerned about the complications, especially considering he majors on budget product and does little business with Microdealer. Thus, his store could end up having just a handful of titles with the special stickers. This would not necessarily be perceived by the kids as a dynamic new promotion.

Microdealer will obviously hope that the kids will latch on to the promotion as a result of advertising in the Newsfield and EMAP monthlies. Retailers might then have to order more product than usual from Microdealer simply due to end-user demand.

Steadman agreed that the promo will give Microdealer "an advantage" when it comes to ordering but all are playing it cool at this point. Karen Sutherland, owner of Atari World in Manchester commented resolutely: "I order what I need and what I know will sell. I order according to my customers and not according to what seems a good deal."

Microdealer might even be optimistic enough to hope that some retailers might take up an exclusive deal. These are rare, mainly because people like to shop around for the best bargains and a distribu-

tor will usually be out of stock of something or other most of the time.

Vic Purnell of Computability in Ebbw Vale has got an exclusive deal - with R&R. He backed Microdealer's move as a good idea it will have a fight on its hands to bring him into the fold. "I've made a commitment to get the deals that I get. If R&R can't supply then I might go to someone else."

His ideal world would see R&R following up with its own version of the token system. For other dealers who buy from, say, three or four distributors this could be a nightmare. Imagine if motorists got different petrol tokens

depending on which pump they used?

Getting shirty

Like most retailers, Purnell was pleased with Microdealer for trying something new. He was particularly enamoured with the fact that the £5 purchase rule gives 8-bit full-price and 16-bit buyers a better deal. For instance, someone buying just one ST game might gain five tokens whilst a budget collector has to make three purchases for a single token.

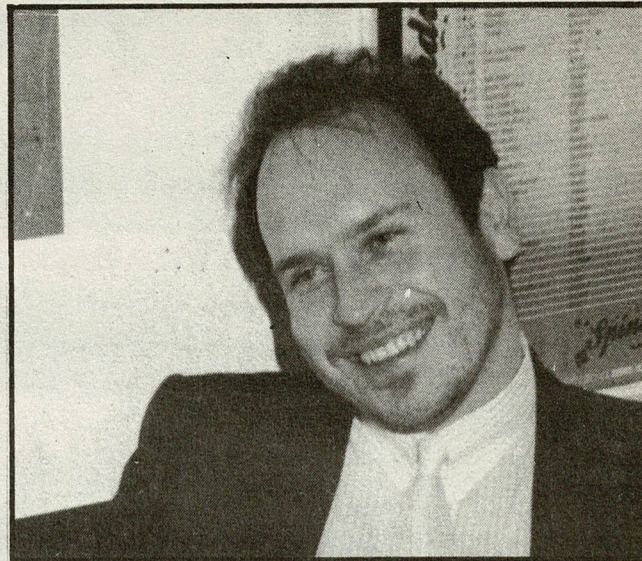
"I'm all for selling the higher priced games. We can all sell the budget stuff but it's

getting harder to sell anything else," said Purnell.

The question of course for the shops is whether such a promotion actually increases business. Barker offered that there wouldn't ultimately be any more software sold, but that those who stocked the stickered games might steal sales from shops not taking part.

"The only thing I can compare it to is Green Shield stamps. My experience is not so much that people buy things to get the stamps but that they buy it from a particular place because they do the stamps. People aren't stupid," said Barker.

Continued on page 19



GINTY: Masterminding Microdealer's token effort

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CROSS CHANNEL ATTITUDES

French software veteran Loriciel has been up and running here since the beginning of the year. With a little help from Elite via a sales and distribution deal the firm hopes to break into a market which has traditionally been too busy stretching its arms out across the Atlantic to bother with Europeans wanting in. COLIN CAMPBELL listens in to the plans afoot . . .

Like salmon fighting their way upstream European software houses have been faced by the torrent of US and UK pro-

duct pouring onto the continent. Those planning to set up in the UK have traditionally needed the flesh of big money to carry them over.

Apart from the odd hit, none has made much of a splash.

All, though, have recognised the need to be conservative in their picking and

choosing of product suitable for the UK market. The French in particular have been quick to note that those games which are hailed as technical and creative achievements etc in France will simply confuse and bore Brits.

And so the theories of how to cross the Channel are being dragged out again. This time it's Loriciel with all the promises - an independent software publisher with a substantial distribution network in France. The firm was set

up in the halcyon days of software growth and has prospered since with various sorties into other projects such as business software.

Of course the Gallic link is being furiously played down. Loriciel is stressing that its products here are international. Its games are not French titles being marketed in the UK. They are simply titles.

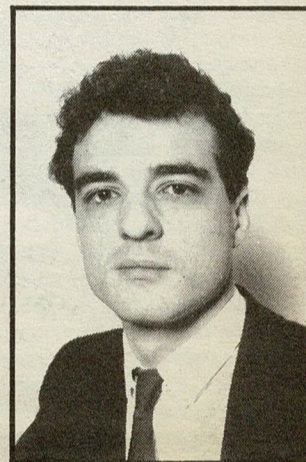
Also, it has been acknowledged that the UK market is best left for the British to understand. Thus, Loriciel has not set up as a completely

independent entity. It has forged links with an already established company - Elite.

Of the options available it was deemed inappropriate to licence out product to a UK publisher. That would have left the firm with little control over an operation which is clearly being regarded as vital in the company's growth.

A straightforward set up and hit 'em policy was also rejected because of the sheer struggle of coming to terms with a foreign and trenchant market alone. The cost of such an operation will surely have played its part in that decision.

So Loriciel has placed its own product manager, Nikki Penny, in the Elite camp to oversee games and generally to keep a close eye on developments here. The games themselves go through Elite's distribution pattern which is a hell of a lot easier than tunnelling new channels into the market.



WEILL: Global market syndrome

Previously, Loriciel has licensed out some of its games to Activision. The impact was an instant anticlimax and it's an episode which Loriciel is adamant is history, not part of future plans and therefore not worthy of discussion.

After this is established Penny is more than ready to explain product policy here and now. "As far as product is concerned it is up to us to decide whether to release it. Loriciel Ltd (Loriciel UK) will take the game, evaluate it and go to Elite. Then we'll discuss it and take a careful look at it. If we feel it is good for the UK market then we'll adapt it and release it. It's not a *carte blanche* across all our products."

Ski's the limit

Whilst Loriciel has been here since January it has thus far concentrated on the formats from whence it came: CPC, PC and some ST. The company is now writing for the C64 and Spectrum - machines which are not generally regarded as being of any importance in France.

Loriciel's president directeur general Laurant Weill holds the view that both markets are indeed poles apart in their specialised tastes but that there is a vast middle ground that can be exploited. Its new title *Eddie Edwards: Super Ski* holds a strong licence name which at least for the moment holds international appeal.

The game itself has been received favourably by the

Continued on page 19

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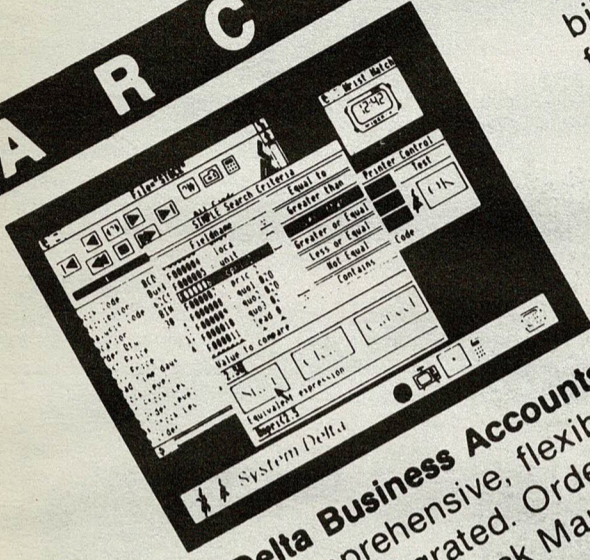
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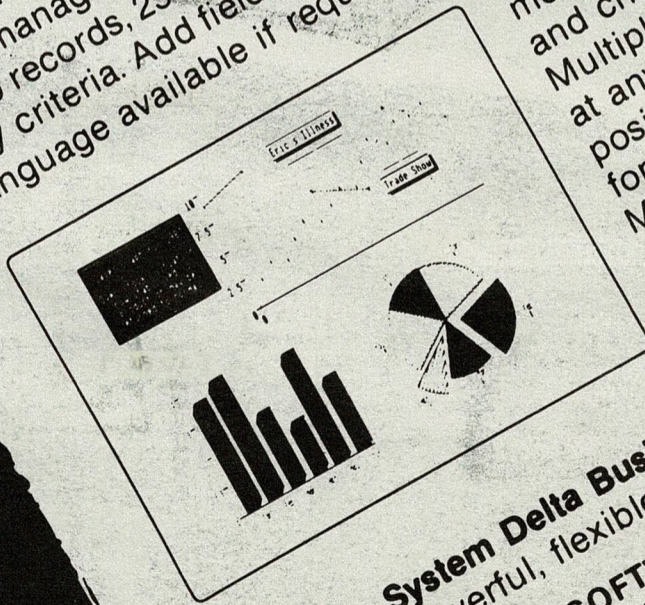
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INFLATIONARY BUDGET

Budget games of the 16-bit variety have had a rough ride from those who would much rather that they didn't take off. And who can blame them? The market is growing and people are prepared to pay full price. Those who have tried their hand at 16-bit budget have often dropped it or at least upped the pricepoints. DAVID LESTER analyses the situation as it stands...

Six months is a long time in software, or so someone famous might well have said. Before Christmas, as I reported in an article in *Popular Computing Weekly*, most of the major budget software houses were on the verge of launching their own 16-bit brands, with games to sell at £9.95. Since then, some games have appeared, some have not; and of those that have, only some have kept to the £9.95 price they were initially intended for. And CTW has only recently run a headline to the effect that budget ST software is a non-starter.

So why is this? Are the software publishers beginning to think that budget software for the Atari ST won't make any money, or that there aren't enough STs around yet? If that were the case, I could understand it, but it isn't. Unfortunately, it seems as if the software industry has returned to its attitudes of three years ago.

When budget software was

first launched in 1984, it was slated by all and sundry who weren't in on it, as being bad for the future of the games industry, bad for programmers, etc etc. But when budget survived its first six months reasonably successfully, the criticisms changed, to slugging off the quality of budget software. And the biggest sellers of software (people like Smiths or Boots) didn't want to know about budget games, because there wasn't enough money in it for them.

That, of course, has all changed now. People have not had any option but to accept the huge success of firms like Mastertronic and Code Masters, and the trend seems to be veering still further towards selling games at two or three quid.

Most publishers have stopped complaining about the poor quality of budget games, and are getting in on the act themselves, while the major multiples have been enjoying the truth about how much money they can make from

the cheap games for some years.

Given all of which, as 16-bit software begins to take off, it seems eminently sensible for firms to start budget ranges on 16-bit. Which is precisely what most budget labels thought just before Christmas — but now, only some are strongly along that route.

And why? Because the retailers, and some software houses, are bemoaning the low quality of ST software, and alleging that the market is not yet ready for it. This at a time when most consumer mags are full of letters from readers who can't afford current 16-bit prices!

Multiple turn off

Probably the most notable publisher to change its mind is Code Masters. It was literally on the verge of launching its first 16-bit title, *BMX Simulator*, at a stated price point of £9.99, when the idea was suddenly dropped.

Bruce Everiss explains the U-turn: "The problem was

that budget software on the ST had a terrible reputation; people thought it was a load of rubbish. And the multiples wouldn't stock it, they said that their margins were too low. If the multiples won't take it, then there is no point in going at the price." Sounds familiar, doesn't it? (1984 revisited.)

Other firms have had mixed reactions and decisions. Anco has been particularly active at the £9.95 price point for some time, especially with Amiga software. But boss and industry veteran Anil Gupta, echoes Everiss. "The multiples just won't touch it, which means that sales are much lower than they need to be. They've been very disappointing."

However, although his firm will be cutting down on its new releases, it has by no means given up on the price point. Anco still believes it is right, but must wait for others to believe that, too. Mean-

while some of its new releases are appearing at Code Masters' chosen point, £15.

The tale continues through many of the non-big-four-budget houses. Pirate has upped its price point on 16-bit to a mid-range £14.95 and will not be putting out any ten pound ST product until "at least the middle of next year" according to boss Henry Kitchen. Bug Byte has also shelved its 16-bit budget range with its one and only title remaining *toute seule* for the medium term.

Newly relaunched PowerHouse relates similar stories, while newcomers such as Zepelin will not be putting out 16-bit product for a good few months yet.

But there are exceptions, and they're major exceptions at that. The two big boys which forced budget's success in the early days on 8-bit, Firebird and Mastertronic, have been putting out titles at £9.95 since last year, and

plan to continue doing so. While sales have not been as high as they might have been, both firms claim to have been quite satisfied with sales so far.

Players recently launched *Joe Blade*, its phenomenal success on 8-bit, at £9.95, which has sold well on the ST. Prism, too, sports a huge catalogue of titles for varying budget prices on 16-bit machines, mainly re-releases. Diamond Games is a third medium-sized budget label to be sticking to its guns on pricing — although having to fight retailers to do it.

Most publishers are now convinced that there is room for a 16-bit budget price point; the problem simply comes in determining where that is to be. (Sounds just like the 8-bit market again, doesn't it?) The labels themselves seemed keen to go out at just under a tenner, the sticking point being the multiples.



Amidst the 16-bit hits, few are budget

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Rachel Davies at Mastertronic supports their policy: "Ten pounds is the only budget price-point which is perceived as a budget level for 16-bit; and market perception is all important for budget sales. £14.95 is in between budget and full price, and doesn't catch the impulse buyer in the same way."

Quids in

One has to recognise that there are a number of differences between 8 and 16 bit markets. Until recently, most 16-bit product has been selling for upwards of twenty pounds — and in some cases, considerably upwards of that, especially for more serious software.

Partly because of that, and partly by nature of the pre-autumn '87 price differential on hardware between 8 and 16-bit, the ST and Amiga had a much older ownership profile. And the key to budget's success has been the impulse purchase of something by, or for, young kiddies — impulse because of the throwaway price of a couple of quid, which was a pretty cheap afternoon's entertainment for a few children, at the very worst.

But ten pounds is different. You don't just throw away tenners all over the place (at least, you don't on the rates you get for writing computer articles!). Furthermore, 16-bit owners expect something a little bit special from their software. After all, had they wanted just a cheapo game for a couple of hours' entertainment, they would have saved a few bob and gone and bought a Spectrum or Commodore instead. So the 16-bit owners will be considerably more discerning about what games they buy. At least, they will be until the nature of the 16-bit software buyer veers away from twenty-year-olds and older.

And that seems to be the crux of the matter: the nature of the ST and Amiga games buyer today.

From the success some of the more simple licence conversions ported up from 8-bit have had, it would seem as if the ST owning population, in particular, is changing. Ocean and US Gold are both poised, about to overwhelm the 16-bit market with vast quantities of new titles. This can only increase the appeal of the computers to the younger buyer (even if it puts other, more discerning buyers off!). This can only be good for the would-be budgeteers on 16-bit.

The whole matter is complicated still further by a much more blurred range of prices. Full price firms charge anything between £14.95 and £24.95 for an ST or Amiga title, and more for very exceptional titles. However, the budget firms put off the £9.95 price-point are also charging £14.95, inviting questions as to which are budget products, and which are not.

Some might argue that it is of only academic interest as to how each firm is perceived by the market place, but I think the distinction has more significance than that.

Expectation is all

If you think that you are buying a budget product, your expectations are considerably different from those you would have if you were paying several pounds more a

game. Which is really just another way of saying that, despite the loud cries to the contrary from several budget producers, there really are differences in quality between the budget / full price divide.

For some games, the differential might only be perceived, for example by better packaging, the inclusion of a novella or other goodies, or by the game having a licence tagged onto it for good measure. But nonetheless, it does exist. So there can only be a degree of confusion when you can buy a "full price" game for the same amount of money as you are paying for a "budget" game.

Clearly, given that choice,

most rational consumers (if such beings really do exist in the computing industry — which I have often paused to wonder, but that is certainly another story. . .) would automatically opt for the higher perceived value item, or the "full price" product. This is especially important when you consider that highly regarded publishers like Palace and Elite have charged just £14.95 for their ST and Amiga games and that several others are following suit.

Yet another problem that the ten pounds price point has caused for 16-bit games is that more than a few firms have used it as an outlet for sub-standard games. They get a

lousy game developed which would undoubtedly tarnish their reputation if they tried to charge their normal price for it, so they get some cash back by terming it a budget release.

This is not what "real" budget is at all. The serious budget publishers actually selling at £9.95 are producing upgraded, 16-bit versions of their budget ranges, by and large, with the occasional addition of completely new titles.

All of which fits in with what is going on in the full price arena, and makes a lot of sense. One of the main factors behind budget software purchases is thought to be the

image of the publisher, which is why branding is so important: teenagers will actively search out a Code Masters / Firebird / Rack-It release because of who publishes it, rather than because of its inherent qualities (at least, to some extent).

Hence one would not expect budget-priced one-off releases from the full-price houses to do well, as there is no brand reputation to stir up demand.

Back to CTNs

As so often, it is a chicken egg situation: it is only by increasing the volume of "proper" budget games at

£9.95 that the problems will be overcome, as with 8-bit years ago.

And yet the multiples are apparently not prepared to make that step and stock such product yet, which means that the software houses *en masses* are delaying releasing games at that price point. You only have to begin to consider the snowball effects which this might have on hardware sales, before you realise how short-sighted it all is.

And, yet again, it seems to be down to Mastertronic, and Firebird, and their excellent CTN networks, to carve out respectability for what will surely be a very buoyant sector within eighteen months.

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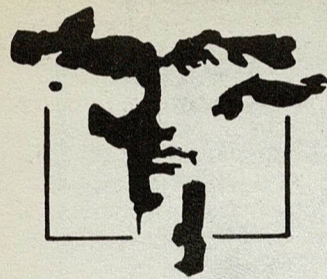
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ATTITUDE

Continued from page 12

press and there's little doubt that it'll perform credibly here. But there are "intellectual" games which the French market holds in high esteem but which are seen here as rather impenetrable.

Whilst there have been attempts to market them here they have come to little. As a rule youngsters simply won't buy a game with a French flavour as opposed to something with say, a North American taste. *Captain Blood* is but an exception.

"The French market has its own way of thinking as does

the British market. But there aren't good French products and good British products - there are just good products," explained Weill.

"It's not true that the UK doesn't like French product. But if you want to launch an intellectual game then it just won't fit in. All French product is not the same."

It's an obvious point which is often overlooked. Games which sell well in France include the likes of *Out Run*. If their taste is broadly similar to Britain's then there is no reason for no crossover. To view the French market on the basis of the strange and esoteric is being seen as unfair. Weill's view is that it's

not just the British and Americans who can wheel out good sports simulations and shoot 'em ups.

"Everywhere in the world the software houses know what is a good product which will work everywhere. To make a product which works everywhere doesn't mean that it has to be without spirit. Now we make games with the UK and US in mind. Before we might have only had the French market in mind."

Eddie Edwards is drafted in to prove the point. "Just look at it. It's a good game and it'll do well. People in the UK are sufficiently open-minded to recognize a good product. It's all so global now that the old

images are fading."

Out to launch

Loriel claims to have long held the policy which is thankfully becoming more fashionable now - that of limiting releases to the few games worthy of launch and likely both to sell and further the company's image. Weill believes that in France there has been a "polarisation" between good games and bad games with those average titles rapidly diminishing.

"Two years ago people thought that we were crazy to publish products with the long term in mind. The UK market is the most advanced in Europe but on this one

point it is different." Nevertheless, various UK software houses have been taking that view for some time with EA and MicroProse traditionally keeping release schedules at a minimum.

A major difference in both markets appears to be the nonchalance with which French publishers view coin-ops. Whilst their British counterparts are forever scrambling for this coin-op licence or that French publishers couldn't really give two hoots.

Not surprisingly that's because of the lack of coin-ops in France. Whilst here there is an arcade presence everywhere, they are limited to the

cities and holiday resorts in France.

"Coin-ops don't mean much to us," said Weill. "OK, so *Out Run* sold well in France but that wasn't because of the coin-op link. It would have done well with a different name."

"In the UK people want security and brand names and that's normal. It's a difficult market and you need a year to be fully recognised. September will be the real launch for us because it's taken us since the beginning of the year to understand that market. We are prepared to do whatever is necessary and we'll be one of the top UK publishers within six or seven months."

STAMPS OF APPROVAL?

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Microdealer's second new initiative involves the buying up of software houses' logos for exclusive use on T-shirts. Packs of 60 or so will be sold to retailers for around £200. These can then be sold on as merchandise or used as freebies.

Very few retailers, it seems, are likely to set up racks of Ocean and Activision T-shirts in their stores. Steadman at Bits and Bytes immediately raised the point of dealing with enquiries about colours running, shrinking and wrong sizes. "We're a computer specialist not a glorified clothes shop. We don't just stick anything in the corner and hope it sells."

John Anderson of Long Eaton Software Centre predicted that he would probably give a T-shirt to anyone buying three games at a time. "If the price is reasonable they sound like a good thing. You couldn't give one away with a single game unless it was for the ST or something."

Work ethics

Bits and Bytes is possibly the most promotion led retailer in the UK currently with activities ranging from large mailshots to free Easter eggs. It's small wonder then that it was the most in favour of Microdealer's efforts. Its message of "more of the same please" to other distributors generally sums up what retailers have wanted for a long time.

But as Steadman pointed out, for promotions to work fully and an outlet to succeed fully shop owners can't just sit back and let everyone else do the consumer coaxing. Microdealer's decision to take up a tried and tested marketing technique is a step in the right direction and it should only be a small taste of things to come.

"No retailer should sit back and say 'I'm all for an easy life'. Just as the distributors have started reacting with new marketing approaches so it is time for retailers to do the same," explained Steadman.

Sure, Microdealer's promotion will take some explaining and could even cause some complications regarding other distributors' stock, but the message is clear. If retailers can make this one work then they could be in for a bonanza of end-user sales aids as all the other distributors catch on.

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