

In-depth Analysis

We've got new men at the helm - but what course are they likely to steer?

The latest buyout broke all the traditions of an Amiga buyout - it was not preceded by a financial collapse, it took a lot less than the year previous buyouts took, and it did not happen in April. It is to be hoped that Amino will avoid repeating all the other traditional mistakes. Certainly the interest that Bill McEwen and Fleecy Moss have in the existing Amiga community will make things quite different. We can expect more than lip service to be paid to retaining the wealth

that PPC was a dead end. It was even more of a shock to the dealers who had large stocks of them to sell. None of which would have been so bad if it wasn't for the fact that nothing came of the announcement anyway - apart from permanent damage to the Amiga PPC market.

The new Amiga, on the other hand, has made it quite clear that they are aware of the sensitivity of things they may say, and do not want to cause this kind of trouble again. Thus we are not likely to get any specific product announcements until those products are ready to ship. Which



"...we are not likely to get any specific product announcements until those products are ready...."

of talent still remaining in the Amiga market. We can also expect a greater degree of sensitivity to the wants and needs of the rest of the Amiga market.

One of the biggest problems with Amiga under Gateway was that they had a dangerous tendency to make poorly considered announcements. The classic example of this has to be the debacle of the MMC announcement at World of Amiga '98. The BlizzardPPC had just become available, and it was a shock to many prospective buyers that Amiga basically told them

is good, but also very frustrating - we'd all love to know what is going on.

Beneath the veil

Fortunately there are plenty of pointers to give us some guidance. While the details of the plan may be unknown, there are two knowns; Tao group and the new Amiga executive team.

We know that Bill McEwen and Fleecy Moss want to pursue a vision of "invisible and universal" computing. What this means can be easily understood if you read the article on Digital Convergence in issue 4 of Amiga Active.

Basically, this means that the Amiga system becomes a scaleable OS that will work on all sorts of digital devices, relying heavily on networking throughout the home or office and beyond, via the Internet and broadband services. Amino have already discussed the notion of "Amigatizing" digital convergence systems.

More specifically, we can guess that a fair amount of inspiration

which is highly appropriate to the vertical Information Appliance market, and could provide the basis of an extremely sophisticated user environment for a desktop system.

Aqua (not the band)

Amino talked about a user interface system they called Aqua. Although little has been publically said, the obvious implication of the above is that the nature of the user interface does not matter. If Aqua follows this to its logical conclusion, it could provide a system that binds interface objects to their own interrogation method, and could allow totally different types of interface to interrogate the system differently. You might, for instance, want to browse images on your computer by having a window showing a virtual drawer which has all your image files in it, each illustrated by a thumbnail icon. At the same time you might have a Opus style file lister which shows virtual directories organised into drawers for each application program, containing all files used by that application even if the file is also used by other programs elsewhere. Why not get a bit more extreme and say that these windows are opening on a 3D

One consequence of a system like this is that the system ceases to have an inherent structure. Objects in the system can be interrogated in any number of ways according to how you want to interface with them. Current computer user interfaces are basically evolved disk operating systems, locked into a way of operating by the file structure. This approach allows the structure to be modelled any way you chose,

Below and bottom right: Trickstyle, written with Criterion's Renderware.



graphic of a wall inside a VR world representing the contents of your computer as a room in a virtual house modelling all the devices in your home network, in a city modelling the Internet...?

We know that Amiga are using Elate for the foundation of the new Amiga system. We don't know exactly what that means yet, but there are interesting possibilities and conclusions that can be drawn from the partnership. For a brief technical grounding in Elate, turn to page 18.

Tao group is an interesting company. Set up 8 years ago by Francis Charig and Chris Hinsley, a game coder who worked on Everyone's a Wally and Pyjamarama for the Spectrum and Onslaught and Frostbyte for the Amiga and Atari ST, they describe themselves as an "Intellectual Capital and Software" company. They have been working on their vision of an OS for the upcoming digital age since long before most companies had considered the notion. They have some strong patents in some key technology areas and a suite of software they are just beginning to get into the OEM market.

So far there isn't much to see. LSI's set-top box technology using

Elate has been demonstrated (Java performance has been a particular selling point), but that's pretty much it. However there appears to be interesting things afoot. Along with the Amiga announcement, several other press releases from Tao Group were made at the CES show. One of these covered the intent toolkit, which is a Java based multimedia interfacing system. Motorola, who have been a principle investor in the company, are launching a "smart phone", the P1088, which will use intent.

Two other press releases are particularly provocative. Tao Group, along with QNX Software Systems Ltd. and a dozen other companies, has joined the HAVi (Home Audio Video interoperability) group, which may well be an essential part of keeping in the DC sector. Secondly, Tao group announced a new investor: Sony. There is no indication of what Sony are after or how much they have invested, but Sony are serious about Digital Convergence, so it will be interesting to see where that link will go.

RenderEverywhere?

Another very interesting partnership for Tao is with Criterion. While intent offers the core interface technology, there is a further level to it, offering an integrated 3D graphics subsystem with a full-scale gaming API (Application Programmer's Interface) in it. Tao have worked with Criterion studios, another UK software house, to develop their Renderware system for Elate. This is a sophisticated gaming development environment with built in 3D engine and world management system, which accepts plug-in modules to support other gaming features such as AI, speech recognition and more. Renderware is a multi-platform system designed to make porting from one system to another easy. Dreamcast launch title Trickstyle was made using Renderware, and was cross-compiled to the Playstation 2 in a week by a single programmer.

Yes, that's right - I said Playstation 2. Renderware is going to be part of the development middleware system for the Playstation 2. If the next

generation Amiga uses the same gaming system used in many Playstation 2 games, we can expect Hyperion to be porting games faster than they can announce them!

A final thought, and a stab at explaining this mysterious "Amigatizing" business. Building everything on top of Elate makes the whole thing portable, and not only as a stand-alone OS. With a full set of interface, multimedia and gaming APIs and a Virtual Processor code all running in a hardware neutral, binary compatible mode, Elate in its hosted mode would allow the entire API to sit along side the host's API. In other words, if you write a program to these APIs, you can run it not only on a wide variety of hardware running the Elate/Amiga OS, but also on anything running another OS, such as a Mac or a PC, or a Nintendo. It's just a guess, but they have all the pieces; Amiga could become a universal, cross platform, binary compatible, system scaleable API.

Argh! Microsoft are going to go spare!

Andrew Korn A



"Tao group announced a new investor: Sony."

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was first published in issue 5,
of Amiga Active magazine.*

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Amiga Active magazine is produced by Pinprint Publishing Ltd. in Bournemouth, England and distributed worldwide via the newsstands and on subscription. Individual issues and subscriptions can be purchased online via our web site.

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