



Roomers

by The Bandito

From emulations to exclamations The Amiga (and the world) continues.

[These statements and projections presented in "Roomers" are rumors in the purest sense. The bits of information are gathered by a third-party source from whispers inside the industry. At press time, these rumors remain unconfirmed and are printed for entertainment value only. Accordingly, the staff and associates of Amazing Computing cannot be held responsible for the reports made in this column.]

Emulation, The Sincerest Form Of Flattery

One of the more colorful Amiga companies is Utilities Unlimited, best known for their Macintosh emulation board for the Amiga. Like other Amiga developers, they've been looking for other markets to attack. Their initial target (apparently) is a 486 emulator for the Macintosh. What's that, you say? Where's the long-promised 486 emulator for the Amiga? Jim Drew says that the Amiga version of the 486 emulator will be done first, indeed, that it *has* to be done first for technical reasons. Cynics among you may be wondering where the Amiga version is; it being long overdue. Well, you're not the only cynics around.

UII has been getting some rather skeptical press about their 486 emulation for the Mac, especially as regards price, performance, and delivery. UII's claims that their emulator can exceed equivalent Intel clock speeds on a 68040 has drawn cries of "Impossible!" But now the scuttlebutt is that Apple is very interested in buying the technology, if indeed

it really works as advertised, though this may delay entry of the product into the market. Maybe Apple should be keeping an eye on the Amiga market to see when the emulator might actually come out. In any event, UII has been awfully quiet lately. We'll just have to see what comes out...

Put The Pedal To The Metal?

The 68060 accelerators for the Amiga are on the way, according to the scuttlebutt drifting around the Amiga community. Unfortunately, plans for the accelerators have slowed to a crawl with the declining fortunes of Amiga hardware developers. But it may be too late for the best marketplace, which is the professional video production market. Most of them are switching to other platforms. This is causing the potential market for accelerators to dry up, too. Why bother to get an accelerator if you're going to be buying a whole new computer? It's indeed a grim situation. The prolonged delay in finding a new company to produce Amigas is exacting a heavy toll.

Game Machine Wars Continue, Minus Commodore

While Commodore is (temporarily or permanently) out of the action, the market for game machines isn't standing still. Lots of new platforms are heading for the market, and the game magazines are going crazy over them. Unfortu-

nately, the CD32 is getting missed in almost all of the "survey" articles that cover new CD-ROM platforms. Even though the platform has hardware specs that are at least competitive, the lack of product right now and the uncertain future is enough to keep it out of most magazines. The window for a CD32 re-introduction is closing down rapidly; the hype over new machines would make it very difficult for an "old" machine to get a fair hearing.

Speaking of new machines, those determined folks at 3DO aren't giving up in the face of new hardware competition and lackluster initial sales. 3DO is making a serious bid to catch up with the new generation of video game hardware. They've announced an upgrade for current 3DO machines to a PowerPC chip that will absolutely blow away the CPU power of any other game system that's been announced. Now if they can add RAM, they'll really have something.

The other kicker for 3DO might well be the 3DO card for PCs being developed by Creative Labs, if the price is low enough. It'll have to be under \$200 to really make it, though. And then where would you put this PowerPC upgrade? Lots of unanswered questions here, folks. But we'll be seeing this 3DO card by Christmas, according to the reports, so we'll have a chance to judge for ourselves. (Now doesn't this remind you of the Amiga-on-a-card concept the Bandito suggested a couple of years ago?)

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The Sony PSX is the "Amiga" for 1995, according to some developers in the know. What does that mean? Well, everybody talks about how cool the hardware is, but nobody is sure that the machine will be successful in the marketplace. Sure, Sony is a vast consumer electronics giant with billions of dollars in annual sales. Then again, so is Philips, and look how well they did with CD-I. Eight years and over \$1 billion later, they've never managed to crack the market. You can't say they didn't try. For all of Sony's vaunted power, they have shown their weaknesses before. Particularly in consumer software; their Sony ImageSoft division has done OK, but it's never had any hit products. Still, the PSX (previously called the PlayStation) is a nice piece of hardware. If Sony can hang around for the two years or so it'll take before developers get the hang of the hardware, they might have something. If they can lower the price down from the stratospheric \$500 tag that's been bandied about.

With all of these hardware rumors circulating, entertainment software is once again in turmoil; the killer platform is yet to be anointed. Major contenders are PC CD-ROM, 3DO, Sega Saturn, Nintendo Ultra 64, and Sony PSX. The hardware is converging enough so that you can almost make one title for all of them (the Nintendo is the only one lacking a CD-ROM, so it's the real odd ball of the group).

Oh, yes, there is the Jaguar, but that's become "Jaguar Who?" as you might have known if you'd followed the Bandito's columns. The mythical Jaguar CD-ROM player has stayed mythical, and the lack of software development has caused the Jaguar to keep a low profile. 3DO has a good shot, now that they've done some mid-course corrections and have a more reasonable price tag.

Nintendo will probably do OK in the short term, but fall behind in the long term as they will find it much, much harder than they think to line up software developers. Without a CD-ROM drive, they'll be cut off from the mainstream of development and several types of games will be functionally impossible on the machine. With the other machines, the key is getting software that takes advantage of the unique hardware features offered by each platform. Which

always takes a couple of years, despite the wishful thinking of the hardware manufacturers. With that in mind, 3DO is the best positioned to have the killer software for Christmas 1995.

Commodore Sets Sale

While the arguments continue over who will get the rights to the Amiga, Commodore is liquidating the remains of its North American headquarters. What's left is mostly junk: old furniture, a couple of moth-eaten mainframe computers, bits and pieces. The 600,000 square foot facility is inhabited only by memories, and dusty ones at that. But it still costs \$8,000 a day for the utilities, and Commodore needs to clean the place out so that their lease (which runs to 1999) can be canceled.

So just about the last vestiges of an American Amiga operation are gone. A few employees linger in Norristown, but they may not last long. While both of the remaining bidders have expressed interest in using American facilities for R&D or manufacturing, there may not be much left to use. At this point, most of the Commodore engineers (if not all) have been hired elsewhere. Manufacturing facilities are generally cheaper in other countries. You can bet that financial considerations are going to be very important to the new Amiga company, so overseas facilities look very likely.

A Deal Delayed Is No Deal At All

While Amiga fans continued to watch the drama, noses pressed against the windows of the smoke-filled rooms, little action could be seen. Unless you count the pronouncements every couple of weeks that a deal was almost done, just another week now. These guys have been at it long enough to hammer out a national health care plan, haven't they? What's the hold up?

What does all this maneuvering and posturing mean? Let's cut through the self-serving fertilizer and get to the real substance. The basic fact: despite lots of words expended, no deal has been finalized yet. Let's hear what some of the people involved have been saying in public.

According to the best info the Bandito can glean, Bahamian liquidator Franklyn Wilson has been meeting with both David Pleasance (the head of Commodore UK) and Alex Amor (head

of CEI), the two finalists in the bidding. Both companies plan to resume manufacturing Amigas, though exactly how they see the potential markets developing is different. Clearly the Euro market is for game machines, while the American market is more interested in A4000's for professional use. CEI plans to manufacture in Philadelphia as well as in Europe; Commodore UK would make the machines in Scotland.

It's pretty clear now that Amigas couldn't become available until sometime in the spring of 1995, even if everything went swimmingly from this point forward.

For a while there, the Commodore UK bid looked like it was a shoo-in. But things went awry after it was determined that the Philippine plant had been seized for back debts, and that no parts would be coming from that location any time soon. The plan Commodore UK submitted to the liquidator was based on the condition that all the Amigas and parts in the Philippines would be available immediately after the purchase of Commodore. However, due to unpaid bills, the Philippine government and other creditors have seized the whole building, and they're going to guard it until they can find a way to squeeze money out of it. Which means they aren't letting anyone have the products.

The general reason given for the delays is the complex nature of Commodore's structure, with interlocking international companies and subsidiaries entwined like mating octopi. No doubt it gave the revenue agents from all those countries fits trying to decipher it.

The whole process is complicated even more by the specter of US courts, which may still intervene in the whole bankruptcy process -- which of course would merely serve to mess things up royally. But it may happen if the courts feel that they have a compelling interest (read: might make lots of money) in the proceedings.

What happened to the other bidders? They've dropped by the wayside, mostly because their interest was tepid and they were only interested in bits and pieces. Samsung only wanted the chip set, as did Hewlett-Packard. By the way, HP just signed a deal with LSI Logic to use their chips in set-top boxes, so it looks like HP's interest in Amiga chips has completely disappeared.

All this maneuvering continues to erode the Amiga-based business community. The latest casualty is CBM Canada, which is closing their doors because they don't have anything more to sell. They hung on as long as they could, but with no new products coming in, the end was inevitable. There's no way they can hang on until next year when Amiga products may make it back onto the market.

Reading The Obits

Meanwhile, in the media Commodore is being given brief obituaries, if any. At least some of the gaming magazines have noticed, and sadly waved good-bye. *MacWeek* (the Macintosh industry newsweekly) had a nice obit, mentioning the Amiga's pioneering role. Columnists have begun referring to the Amiga in the past tense, and are finally awarding it some recognition for the many technologies it started off. The net result of all this media attention, though, is to make things very, very difficult for any company hoping to revive Amiga sales.

Amiga Futures?

According to Commodore UK, there are seventeen Commodore engineers currently residing in Norristown, and the plan is (if Commodore UK ends up with the company) that staff will be expanded to sixty people. About fifteen people will be supporting existing products and deriving new products from the present architecture. The remainder will be working on a new RISC-based Amiga.

Since Commodore UK is the likely inheritor of the Amiga, it's worth examining the plans they've mentioned for the future of the Amiga. First of all, they've said that the AAA project is certainly dead, though the reason is a bit strange -- Pleasance says the hardware is almost complete (stretching the truth a bit) but that software would take 18 months to complete. Yes, but isn't this going to be true for any new chip set? And what about the time it will take to port an operating system to a whole new RISC CPU; would that take any less time than supporting some graphics chips?

Anyway, the plan is to go gung-ho developing a new RISC-based Amiga, probably using the HP PA-RISC chip (though that would be subject to what sort of deal they can cut with the RISC chip makers). They'd throw in a DSP, and some off-the-shelf SVGA chip set

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with some blitter capability. Software? Well, they're not mentioning that, but it's obvious that you'll need a whole new operating system. They could (fairly quickly) adopt Windows NewTek to such a box. But porting AmigaDOS to this new machine would take years, by

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which time no one would care very much. An emulation mode would take nearly as long. So what's the point here? To play off of the Amiga name? Seems rather strange, given the general ignorance of the Amiga in the marketplace. Maybe they're hoping to get Amiga owners to buy this new machine. But if you can't run any of your Amiga software, what's the point?

Commodore UK does plan extensive support for developers, include free loaner machines for development work. Though it's going to be awfully hard to convince developers to work on Amiga projects unless they see the prospects for some sales.

More cleverly, Commodore UK plans to aggressively pursue sublicensing with third-party developers who are not in competition, like NewTek and Scala. Of course, they're interested in making money off of the Amiga in any fashion possible, which is eminently sensible (unlike previous Commodore management).

Commodore UK expected to have products around the middle to end of

November, but that's now impossible because of the parts situation. It looks more like March to the Bandito, if everything goes right. They do plan to have the CD drive for the A1200 and the expansion box for the CD32, and then within a few months of that release some new products using existing technology.

Commodore UK also plans to create an Amiga card for the PC. Or, at least, license that off to some other manufacturer. The Bandito thought this was a nifty idea a few years ago, but it seems less positive now. How many people want to run Amiga software on their PC? Wouldn't this just hurt Amiga sales? It seems more like a hastily tossed-out idea rather than a well-thought-out strategy.

Amigas More Expensive Than Ever

In a rather strange turn of events, Amigas are selling for high prices these days as anxious professional users rush to protect their investments. They want to know they have backup machines, or they need more machines to expand their business. And they're paying a premium for Amigas, especially for ones that can handle a Video Toaster. Of course, Amiga 4000s are the most sought after, but Amiga 2000s and 3000s are also in demand. And if you happen to be a lucky possessor of the very rare A4000T... well, name your price.

Commodore Is Dead. Long Live The Amiga!

It's for us to stop dreaming about the Amiga's future and realize that the glory days are most probably over. The Amiga is no longer a technology that's advancing into the future, despite the wishful press releases from CEI and Commodore UK talking about future RISC Amigas. The reality is that any such new computers wouldn't really be Amigas any more, with all new hardware and all new software. You might be able to run some current Amiga software in an emulation mode, but that's not really a new Amiga, is it?

Those Amigas now in service may be the last Amigas that we will see. But they have many fine hours of computing left to them. And the Amiga has left an indelible mark on the history of computing.

While Commodore had some of the worst management the computer industry has known, the Amiga stands as a shining example of excellent hardware

design. Its capabilities foreshadowed the directions of the entire computer industry: thousands of colors, multiple simultaneous screen resolutions, multitasking, high quality sound, fast animation, video capability, and more. It was the beauty and elegance of the hardware that sold the Amiga to so many millions of people. The Amiga sold despite Commodore's neglect, despite their bumbling and almost criminal marketing programs. Developers wrote brilliantly for this amazing piece of hardware, creating software that even amazed the creators of the hardware. The Amiga heralded the change that's even now transforming the television industry, with inexpensive CGI and video editing making for a whole new type of television program.

Amiga game software also changed the face of entertainment software. Electronic Arts launched themselves headlong into 16 bit entertainment software with their Amiga software line, which helped propel them into the \$500 million dollar giant they are today. Cinemaware's *Defender of the Crown* showed people what computer entertainment could look like; real pictures, not blocky collections of pixels. For a while, the Amiga was the entertainment software machine to have.

Well, enough of the eulogy, already. The Amiga isn't dead, not as long as one Amiga is still in use somewhere. Commodore has died the death they deserved; stupidity is its own reward sometimes. Now we are hopeful that a new company can arise from the ashes and carry the banner of the Amiga forward into the future. That may or may not happen; only time will tell. It may be, sad to say, that another Amiga will never roll off an assembly line. But the Amiga will live as long someone, somewhere uses one and appreciates it. And that, my friends, will be happening for many years to come.

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