

TEXAS TALES

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This month, my news is not neatly arranged under one single topic. Rumors and products of several kinds have been most interesting, and I want to tell you about several of them.

VERSION 1.3

Rumors concerning a 1.3 revision of the Amiga software have been circulating since early last summer. When version 1.2 was under development, it was relatively easy for anyone to get a copy, and almost everyone tried a number of alpha and beta versions. We knew what was being done. There were problems with that, however. Some programmers began to write their software based on those prerelease versions, and when the final version came out, the software did not work. This time, the Commodore people have been terribly tight fisted and close mouthed about their work. Questions about the release date have usually elicited a response similar to "When it is fully tested and known to be correct."

During the past few weeks we have begun to receive messages from them that give some firm information. We had been told that version 1.3 would be released some time during the spring. I feel that the positive information coming out may indicate that release time is drawing near.

The major points of improvement promised include a greatly improved printer device, a faster file system, better handling of both hard disks and floppies, an AUX: device, and builtin pipes. Now, pipes are not a familiar feature to me. The Usenet folks speak of them constantly, and apparently find it difficult to get along without them. As I understand it, a pipe allows you to use the output of one program as input for another. There are some "fixes" written by various Amiga programmers that give this capability, but version 1.3 is said to have this ability built in to the system properly.

We are told that version 1.3 will include both a KickStart and a Workbench disk for owners of the Amiga1000; A500 and A2000 owners will receive a Workbench disk. The ROMs built into those machines are said to have "hooks" through which new code can be loaded from the Workbench and still work with the ROMbased system.

Improvement in diskhandling and other filing system capabilities have been a truly major thrust for Version 1.3. One Usenet writer (a beta tester) said that the new system may make disk accesses as much as three times as fast. A Commodore programmer wrote that with a hard disk and the FFS (fast file system), he can read 600K bytes/sec. from a 100 Mb SCSI drive.

Many bugs have been fixed, too. For example, have you had problems with the file requester that says "Volume xxx has a read/write error"? You can keep hitting "Cancel" repeatedly, but nothing happens. If you remove the disk you get the more urgent requester that says "You MUST replace volume xxx in drive n!!!". So you jiggle disks back and forth until you grow weary and reset the machine, losing all of your work. This problem is caused by a threesecond timeout problem in AmigaDOS. The disk has been altered, and the DOS is trying to write the corrected bitmap back to the disk. If it encounters a bad block while writing the bitmap, you encounter these requesters. I have no immediate answer to the problem, but Commodore has promised that it is fixed in the new file system.

My personal favorite in the promises is that we will have improved printer support. I have never been able to use the excellent software I have (such as Pagesetter and DPaint) because I did not have one of the printers supported by the Workbench disk. I could find drivers that would let me use a few of the features of my STARSG10, but for most things, it simply will not perform well when used with the Amiga. The WordPerfect Corporation has been trying for months to create a satisfactory driver for this printer, and has not been able to do so. The promise of a new printer driver easier to use, faster, and capable of supporting more printers is most welcome.

The first real leak of 1.3 material that has come my way has been some of those new printer drivers, along with the new printer device that makes them work. These are on one of the disks I am mailing to you this week (February 25). Nothing there for any of the STAR printers, I'm sad to say, but there are drivers for EpsonQ and EpsonX, among others. I have tried to make sure that it is OK for us to be distributing these drivers. They are included in several of the most recent software products offered for sale, such as the SHAKESPEARE DeskTop Publishing program. I downloaded them from a bulletin board that is known to be quite scrupulous. To the best of my knowledge, they have been released and we may use them freely.

DEVELOPERS' CONFERENCE

Commodore has announced a conference for Amiga developers, to be held in Washington, D. C. April 28 through May 1. Items to be discussed include versions 1.3 and 1.4 of the operating system; slots for the A2000; peripherals for the A500; new Commodore products; various specialized topics such as IFF, sound and audio, working with the special chips, and discussions of libraries such as the Janus library and the math library. This conference will be at L'Enfant Hotel, just a few blocks from the Smithsonian Institute and other tourist attractions.

FORGOTTEN PATHS?

A number of people here have recently mentioned having the same small problem. On certain occasions, they have found that with particular disks inserted in the drive (any drive), the Amiga would forget all known paths. Upon removing that diskette, the paths are remembered again. One user thought he might have acquired a new virus, so he ran Install on his disk. No change. He formatted a new disk and copied the files over the problem disappeared. Then he did Diskcopy on the original, and the problem remained on both the original and the exact copy.

The problem seems to be that the Amiga cannot accept disks that have the same names as those of the directories or devices that are coded into the system software. For instance, one of my friends had named his compiler disk "C". His machine became forgetful each time he used that disk. The Amiga recognizes "c" as the name of the directory that holds the AmigaDOS commands. When a disk named "C" was inserted, that disk became the C: directory as the Amiga saw it, and it could not find the DOS commands there. One of the developers suggested that there are a variety of these names. He suggested that you might want to try naming a disk something like "Libs" or "Devs" or "DF1" just for 'fun', of course.

HARD DISKS FOR THE AMIGA1000

Those of us who have elected not to move up to the Amiga2000 have really been feeling left out recently. Of course, some of us remember a time when having a tape drive was a bit of a status symbol. In my own case, I began computing with an advanced system an 8032 with 8050 drive. But at school we began using PETs and tape drives that same year. We were considered quite progressive at that time, because none of the neighboring schools

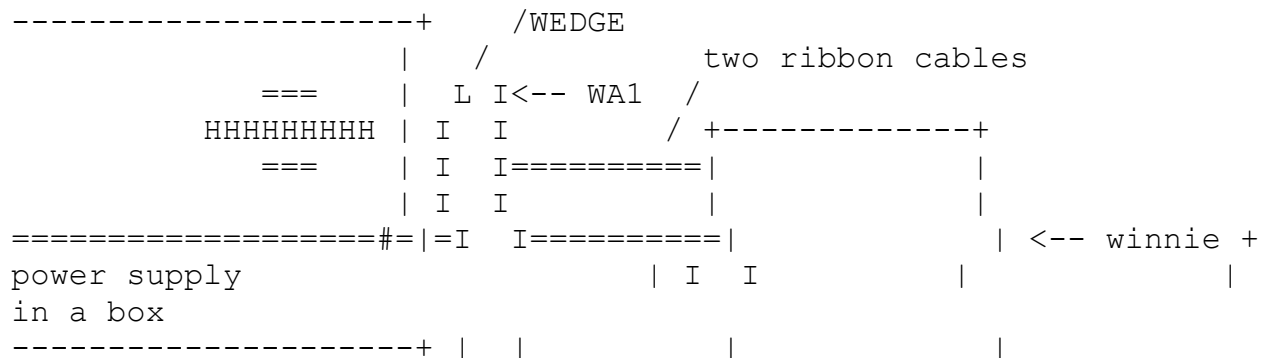
had computers at all. Recently, however, hard disks have become the status symbol in these parts. Now really who ever thought a Commodore user would come to consider a hard disk to be a necessity! Perhaps the same dreamer who would have dared suggest we would ever need 2.5M of memory?

Well, with the coming of the A2000 and its ability to handle the relatively inexpensive hard disks made for the Big Blue computer, a hard disk has suddenly become a major topic of conversation. In the 2000, it is simple to install one. For the 500 and 1000, it is expensive and difficult.

Two products have been released in the States recently that will make it easier for us to add these items, though I do not have either myself. Here is some information about them, mostly taken from Usenet.

The WEDGE is a two piece interface that connects to the BUS connector on an A1000 or A500. The first piece is a vertical board about 6" long and 2.5" high, with the BUS connector approximately in the middle. The second piece is a backplane that sits horizontally under the first board and has two female connectors. The first connector holds the wedge and the second holds the controller card, such as the Western Digital WX1 or the DTC5150. These two cards are tested and recommended. The WEDGE allows you to connect up to two 142 Megabyte IBM style hard drives.

Here is a physical description from Bill Henning:



but it is a kit which the purchaser must put together. Several of the technical types have written about this product and seem quite pleased with it. This card allows the IBM controllers and drives to work with the Amiga. As with the WEDGE, these controllers and drives may be purchased separately from the PALAMAX card kit. The PALAMAX works with the RLL controllers, allowing for more useful space on the disk. This card is said to have a reading rate of about 200Kb/s and a write rate of about 80Kb/s. The cost of the kit and materials (not including the drive itself), runs to approximately \$250.

With the arrival of these relatively inexpensive ways to attach hard disks to the A1000 and A500 computers, probably more of us will find them a necessity soon.