HE 'AINT HEAVY - THE APEX INTERVIEW

Who are APEX anyway?

Take two brothers, give them a computer each, shove them in an attic/office for 8 hours per day, treat them to a nightclub each week and trips to arcades now and again, and what do you have? Well, you'll probably end up with possibly the most bright and imaginative C64 programming team in a long time. John and Steve Rowlands, more affectionately known as APEX COMPUTER PRODUCTIONS, have been producing C64 software for a little over 4 years now. They already have two superlative releases under their belts, namely the neat flick-screen game CYBERDYNE WARRIOR (released on the 4th Dimension Compilation), and the tremendous shoot 'em up RETROGRADE (from Thalamus). Both of these titles have received critical acclaim. And now their current project (Creatures) looks set to follow suit.

They started out as many programmers do; writing demo upon useless demo. It was their father who spotted the potential in the lads, and prompted them to answer an advert in the paper. The man responsible for that advert was a certain Delvin Sorrell, working on a project for Firebird. To cut a long cliche short, John wrote a sound FX player and Steve provided the graphics for one of Delvin's games; SCORPIUS. They've never looked back since.

John (the older of the two) tackles the rigours of programming, having spent a torturous two years at college studying Computers (what else). He uses an Amstrad PC (originally bought for college work) for the coding, and then the assembled code is downloaded to the C64 via a Programmer's Development System (PDS). Why? Well, the PC can compile even the most complex code in a matter of seconds (compared to minutes on the C64), and it is also much easier to write the code as the assembler itself is very sophisticated and user-friendly. He also uses a popular utility known as the POWER CARTRIDGE as well as occasionally 'borrowing' his brother's ACTION REPLY cartridge.

So what about Steve? You could say that Steve is a multi-talented guy; he's responsible for all the graphics, level layouts, attack waves, etc, not to mention piece upon piece of funky music and dozens of sound FX. Steve too went to college, but chose to study Architecture - Lord knows why. On the graphics side he uses the ever popular VIDCOM (for loading screens and the like), Firebird's GRAPHIC EDITOR (for backgrounds, animated characters, and sprites), plus a whole host of custom-made editors and design systems. He usually sketches his ideas out on paper first (check out the sketches shown on these pages), and transfers them to the screen via cling-film (honestly!). The music is composed using a brilliant music editor (which again was custom-made by John). Unlike other packages, the music is 'coded' using numerous special commands. The flexibility of this system allows different chunks of music to be looped and manipulated in any desired fashion. For example, a four line drum pattern could be repeated endlessly while a main theme continues alongside it. So good is the editor that many of the tunes created rarely take over 3K (which is not a lot).

As for sound FX, they are created with APEX's latest acquisition; a custom made sound FX editor, which was programmed by Robin Ellis of TRANSMISSION
SOFTWARE. Robin joined forces with APEX some time ago (having known John from their school days), and made his debut with the BBC version of CYBERDYNE WARRIOR. Unfortunately, due to a stubborn software company which I shouldn't name, the game never saw the light of day. Pity. After that he and John spent an intense 8 months programming RETROGRADE, for which Robin wrote the weapon routines, the fabulous end sequence, as well as the ghastly task of mastering the disk version. After the game was completed, Robin parted company with APEX (on good terms I hasten to add) for the more lucrative sport of business systems.

Anyway, Steve simply saves the data from these graphics and music packages, and hands the disk to John who uploads them into the system and brings the game to life. It's really as simple as that! Of course, John often has to scrap some of Steve's work due to memory restrictions (well, that's his excuse anyway), but they usually plan out carefully the game structure so that the aesthetics and the coding gel together perfectly.

Mummy, where do Creatures come from?

After RETROGRADE was completed, the lads took a well earned break from the programming scene, during which they rustled up several ideas for their next project. Many of these were later coded into short demos. They included: GENESIS (a two player shoot 'em up based on a vast parallax play area), a WARDNER type platform game, a SPACE WARS clone with counties bolt-on weapons, plus a technically excellent parallax scrolling routine (which was sadly never developed into a game). All of these ideas fell by the wayside.

So why did they pursue CREATURES? Well, after RETROGRADE the lads were sick to death of bullets, firepower, aliens, and exploding planets. The CREATURES theme offered the most scope for expansion; they could include more ideas, bring in a 'cutey' atmosphere, and also their previous idea of 'torture screens' would fit in just perfectly. Torture screens? Yes, the idea of a chum being tortured (which you have to rescue) seemed to be a great idea for a game, and so it was swiftly incorporated into the project.

So, where do the lads get their ideas from? There was only one way for me to find out, and I was quickly zoomed down to Southend-on-Sea. Aha! Arcades in abundance! If you've ever played MR. WARDNER you'll quickly realise that CREATURES owes a great deal to it; fast, cute platform action - fun to play and totally engrossing. Other favourites of theirs include SPACE HARRIER, SMASH TV, and AIRBUSTERS. As for the torture screens, ideas came flooding in from friends (they were literally swamped), and they also paid close attention to scenes from ROAD RUNNER and PENELPO PITSTOP (which both feature cunning torture devices and traps). Steve was also 'inspired' by the myriad of wierd blobs 'n' things from the TV favourite TRAPDOOR (check out the rope puller on the torture screen!).

On the music side, Steve draws a lot of influence from house music, indeed that's all the lads ever listen to! If you're a keen nightclubber (like the APEX team) then you're bound to recognise some of the tunes from CREATURES (Chad Jackson, Snap, etc). Occasionally Steve will produce something totally original, but he prefers to 'borrow' bits from popular tunes.
Technically speaking

The game has been under development for about 8 months now, and is scheduled for release 'soon' under the THALAMUS label. Why is it taking so long? The actual scrolling levels were programmed long ago, with each level now only requiring graphics and attack waves to be added. The problem lies in the torture screens - each one is totally different, and thus have to be written from scratch (taking anything up to 4 weeks to finish). The shop section also had to be written from scratch, and so too will the spectacular end sequence (APEX never do anything by halves - except buying drinks!). The title screen will hopefully feature loads of little 'fuzzy-wuzzys' dropping down the screen, along with a bouncing high score table.

So far John has written 3 special editors; one to map out the levels, one for the design of the witch in the shop, and a very sophisticated one to map the aliens on to the levels. This isn't bad considering 8 or so were written for RETROGRADE! Currently there are three levels (though a fourth may be squeezed in...just), and the game should contain: 15 pieces of music (out of the hundreds Steve has composed), 10 character sets (84 per level, each level is up to 30 screens long), 30-40 sound FX, and a staggering 1000 sprite images. Needless to say, it's going to be a multiload game.

Don't believe the hype

Creatures, in case you hadn't already guessed, stands for: Clyde Radcliffe Exterminates All. The Unfriendly, Repulsive, Earth-Kidden Slime. The story goes something like this... Clyde is a fun-loving fuzzy wuzzy who lives in a quaint little village on an obscure island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. One day he leaves the village to go out and pick berries, but when he returns hours later his chums have vanished! He spots a trail of footprints, belonging to the deadly demons who also live on the island. Being a brave (or stupid) kind of chap, he sets out to rescue his villagers. And that's about it.

On each level, Clyde will battle his way through a horizontally scrolling section, meeting a large demon at the end of it. After this, he will automatically enter a witches hut where extra weapons can be purchased (such as the droopy, super droopy, curvy wurly, and thermo bombs). During the scrolling sections, 'magic potion creatures' must be collected, and these allow you to purchase items in the witches hut (the shop). He then traverses another scrolling section, with yet another obstacle at the end. It's into the shop once more (where Clyde can also purchase hints on how to do the torture screen) and then on to the torture screen itself. If he manages to save his chum, he will be rewarded with more magic potion creatures as a bonus. Then, it's on to the next level! Clyde can react with the environment too; in water he gains a diving helmet, at the waterfall he rides on lilly pads, and he may possibly ski down the mountains.

CREATURES should be released in late September, with a price tag of £9.99 (Cassette) or £14.99 (Disk), and look out for the 'bugs' at the computer show! The game is a sure fire winner, and will soon be available on all other formats. This one's gonna be big!!!