Epic MegaGames

Welcome to the Epic MegaGames team! I've put this newsletter together to brief you on the projects we are working on and the goals we are trying to achieve. The shareware market is a *great* place to be right now -- the quality of what's available is improving dramatically and the market is growing at an amazing pace.

I just talked to the president of Software Excitement recently and learned that their next catalog will reach 1.2 million people! That's a lot of potential customers, and you can rest assured that every product from Epic MegaGames will be in that catalog -- and hundreds of other catalogs.

Over the next six months, Epic MegaGames will be releasing a line of state-of-the art games that will open up vast opportunities in the market: the Epic MegaGames BBS network will soon go online, which will spread our name and our games across the country; a group of international distributors is ready and waiting for our next generation of releases; and key contacts in the industry are clued in and waiting for the big debut.

As the Epic MegaGames authors, artists, musicians, game designers and promoters, we are all faced with a big responsibility -- we need to create the next generation of computers games that the world is waiting for.

Just how successful can a shareware game become? Just look at the games from Apogee, our top competitor. Commander Keen and Duke Nukem are #1 and #2 on the shareware top 10, and each game brings in over $30,000 in orders every month.

As you may have guessed, beating Apogee is a top priority here at Epic MegaGames. We are all capable of reaching the goal, and we can succeed by creating high-tech, high-quality products that people want to play.

Game design takes a lot of work, but it's a fun job and the satisfaction of creating a finished product then seeing it appear in the top 10 is the holy grail of shareware. As we work to achieve our goals, remember that we are a *team* and together we can compete with the best. Look out world, here comes the Epic MegaGames team!

-Tim Sweeney, founder of Epic MegaGames

For Team Members Only!

About my newsletter:

A few months ago it was easy to stay in touch with everybody on the team. But we've grown so much that I've been getting behind. This newsletter is the solution!

If you'd like to contribute an article or just share some information with everyone, please do. This means you, Chip Hageman, Allen Pilgrim, and our other visionaries!

Epic MegaGames has three big goals for 1992, and meeting them will assure us success in the future. Here they are:

The Goals:

1. Three top ten games in 1992. I know our team members have the talent and energy to make games that truly live up to the title: "MegaGames".

On the top 10 in 1991: Hugo's House of Horrors (Gray Design Associates), Commander Keen, Duke Nukem, and Crystal Caves (Apogee.)

2. Make a good name for Epic MegaGames and our team members!

Games with the Epic MegaGames logo will be known as high-quality, bug free, and very *playable*. When people hear about a new release, they will listen because quality comes to mind.

The key to success is promoting our *authors* more than just our name. Customers need to associate a product with a person. We have unity and strength as a team, and individuality and character as members. Both are very important.

3. Make **Customer Satisfaction** our first and foremost priority.

This means giving customers a great price on a great high-quality game, and responding to their needs and wants. You'll be hearing a lot more about this in the future as we begin to establish our product line. If we make this our number one goal, the other goals will be possible.

Game design teams:

Just like the million-dollar game publishers, we work in teams. A team could include a producer, programmers, artists, musicians, and game designers.

In this business, our teams can be spread all over the country (actually, world). Thanks to fast modems and slow mail, we can create games without wearing business suits and fighting traffic twice a day.

The majority of Epic MegaGames members are working a job or getting an education at the same time. I think we'll have a number of full-timers by 1993, once the next generation of games debut and the royalties start flowing.

The Marketing Machine:

All of our releases go into about 400 shareware catalogs, which reach about 5 million people. We also upload them on the 100 top BBSs which sysops call to get their software. In March, the Epic MegaGames release point BBSs will go into action promoting our games. We'll have about 20 to start with, and I think we can grow this into 200-500 by 1993 with some advertising in the right BBS magazines.

A group of foreign distributors is also backing us up. In fact, we're working on a deal to form Epic MegaGames U.K. for our overseas customers. Add that to the list: CDV-Software (Germany and France), Manaccom (Australia), and Distant Markets (Canada.) We've had offers from firms in five other countries also. Our products will probably be retail in the really far-out places where shareware isn't well established.

Interestingly, most of the distributors do not require translated versions. Enough people speak English that it's not necessary (almost all computer software is English-only.)

Letters:

I'm printing these to give you some insight into the workings of the shareware world. Every little bit of knowledge helps.

The following is an excerpt of a letter from Scott Miller, the founder of Apogee. It's about creating a successful shareware game. Read this, learn it, live it:

"Tim, making money with a shareware game is tough because of one simple reason: You need a good game. I've got one, you've got one, hence we have the hard part done. Most other programmers in shareware don't have a good game.

"Part two, which we both do quite well, is marketing. And having a good game opens up a lot of doors that help with your marketing efforts.

"Part three is distribution, which gets the game in the hands of potential customers.

"Part four is professionalism which leads to customer loyalty and follow-up orders--which is why our customer mailings work so darn well. Our customers believe them when we tell them we've got a hot new game, and they know from past experience, we deliver.

"All of those parts need to be in place, or you have a weak link, and the whole chain breaks. Most shareware authors have one or two weak links. Are we special? Yes, in that neither of us has a weak link."

Well said! The next one is from Robert Cook, a successful commercial author. We had a nice discussion about the direction that shareware and retail software are headed in:

"The shareware market now holds the greatest promise for the advancement of game design. The big publishers are now churning out monstrosities like Strike Commander that are more approximating movies. This is where the money is for them. They are paying more attention to cosmetics, music, and "story" rather than cutting-edge ideas in game design. Shareware is a freer environment where people can dream up original ideas.

"I anticipate there is going to be another shakeout in the commercial game industry soon. People will stop buying games that turn their computers into a $4000 VCR, and one of those big-budget games will flop. Those of you in the shareware sidelines can jump in and begin creating what you've done all along."

Welcome a new member of the Epic MegaGames team:

UltraForce Development

If you've seen their amazing 3-D animated Vector Demo, you already know who they are. For newcomers, they are a team of eight brilliant graphics wizards from Holland:

Remco de Berk	Michel Hooymans
Joshua Munnik	Bram Graveland
Eric Oostendorp	Eric Soonius
Wido Riezeobs	Arjan Brussee

You'll see the graphics and sound wizardry of UltraForce in four releases from Epic MegaGames: Klatris, Bart's Law, Turrikan, and Super Sprint. They are a group dedicated to out-performing Sierra and Origin, so stay tuned...

Shadow Productions

Just as UltraForce was stealing the show, along comes Shadow Productions, headed by Dave Cooper. Their graphics techniques are out of this world!

Their most interesting demo displayed 80 colors on the screen in 16-color graphics mode. Their crackpot programming techniques involve changing the color palette on every line of the screen. Now they are working on getting 4096 colors on the screen in 256-color mode.

Even more amazing, the demo also included some extremely fast animation, smooth scrolling, and 3-D perspective graphics at the same time.

Technology Department

The Epic MegaGames Strategy

The state-of-the-art is always advancing, so we need to stay on top of it. That means learning the ins and outs of the latest graphics, sound, and game design technology.

Rumors

I'm always snooping around trying to find out what our competitors are working on. Soon from Apogee, you can expect:

1. An 80386-only arcade game that uses Wing Commander-style "texture mapped" graphics. The idea is this: Build a 3D object out of flat surfaces, then draw artwork on each surface. The result is fast 3-D animation with stunning realism. (Fortunately, UltraForce has surface-animated graphics that are extremely fast. An Epic MegaGames team may start a Wing-Commander style project soon, licensing that technology from UltraForce.)

2. A Duke Nukem-style game with 3-plane scrolling graphics. Nukem had 2-plane graphics (a non-moving background and a moving foreground.) The next step is adding an intermediate plane that scrolls at half-speed, similar to the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo.

3. Full-screen sprites. Imaging battling a monster that takes up the whole screen -- yikes! That is a technology we need to work on. In fact, Shadow Productions is mastering that technique right now with ultra-fast giant sprites.

Ideas to think about

There are some other nice game techniques that not even the commercial publishers have explored. Here are some hints:

VGA Palette Mapping: A nice feature of 256-color mode is the ability to change the color palette. No games take advantage of this yet. By changing the palette in realtime, you can generate startling full-screen effects with little overhead.

Cycle mapping: One technique, used by many VGA demos, involves cycling the color set through a pattern of hues to generate the appearance of motion. For example, an expanding sphere or a rotating ball. With 256 colors, imagine the incredible effects you can get with 8 sets of 16-color rotations.

Gradient mapping: The idea here is to pick 32 basic colors (5 bits) and use the other 3 bits to store 3-D information straight onto the screen. (Picture 8 gradients: Flat and 6 directional orientations, plus 1 left over.) Then torches can flicker and lightening can flash across the screen and the shading looks incredible. We have a great opportunity to develop and pioneer this technique.

Digital sound: Most games now have boring Adlib-compatible sound tracks with 11 channels of FM music. But the instruments sound very tinny and monotonous. We're implementing a 4-voice digital music system that uses digitized sounds (good instruments and drums, plus high-quality voice and sound effects.) This is based on the MOD file format for the Sound Blaster. We'll be the first to have full digital soundtracks playing in the background as action takes place. Stay tuned!

Keep on the lookout: Whenever you run into a talented programmer, artist, musician, or shareware author, mention the Epic MegaGames team. I've found that many people are very eager and would love the opportunity to get involved in a game project. You never know, a little bit of recruiting might bring in the next superstar game designer.

Our long-term strategy: Staff

Right now we're getting by without having an office or staff in place. Ken Mocabee at Advanced Support Group is staffing the toll-free ordering line right now (he takes orders for us and a few other start-ups.) That's working great for the time being, since our only products on the market are ZZT and Super ZZT.

Our next step is to set up a bona fide office, with a full-time staffer to handle all ordering and tech support (and I wouldn't mind a little help with the marketing...)

I hope to phase this in around April, once we have two big products backing us up (*Jill of the Jungle* and *KiloBlaster*). We need about 25 orders per day to set up the office. Between shareware and mail marketing, we can reach that goal without much difficulty.

...Anybody looking for a job in Maryland?

Epic MegaGames Projects:

Jill of the Jungle (Tim Sweeney, John Pallett-Plowright, Dan Froelich): Our first 256-color VGA game debuts on March 1.

KiloBlaster (Allen Pilgrim) is a VGA shoot-em-up arcade game in the style of Galaxian with lots of variety. The digitized backgrounds look excellent (Allen is using many of the Voyager pictures of the planets, plus some raytraced scenes by Samuel Goldstein.)

Klatris, Bart's Law, and Turrikan will be the first releases from UltraForce Development, a group of eight of the leading graphics and sound programmers based in Holland. If you've seen their Vector Demo, you'll agree that their technology is far ahead of the state-of-the-art here.

Drum Blaster and **Drum Traker** (not games) by Larry Tipton are our first two entries in the sound and music category. Drum Traker is an easy-to-use system for designing drum and musical sequences for the Sound Blaster. This music and sound technology will soon migrate to our game projects, including a great digital sound system by Tomi Engdahl of Finland.

Animac, by Craig Pell, is the largest shareware game ever -- with over 600 rooms to fly your infiltrator spaceship through. Once Craig finishes this 4-color game, his extraordinary design talents will be focused on a VGA game that breaks all previous standards!

James Hague's debut release is an innovative combination of tank warfare ala Scorched Earth and the high-speed scrolling action and warped geometry of Sonic the Hedgehog (a hit game for the Sega Genesis.)

Shadow Productions' first shareware release, led by Dave Cooper, combines scrolling arcade action, 3-dimensional scrolling flight, and the best computer game soundtrack ever.

Todd Daggert, an experienced FRP game designer, is masterminding our largest project ever, a major fantasy role-playing/action adventure in the style of Ultima and Hack. Action takes place in a gigantic 3-D world. It's about time that somebody designed a game with Dungeons & Dragons-style character building!

Homework Assignment

Finally, when was the last time you went out scouting for new ideas and useful information? Here are three things you *need* to do:

1. Walk into a local computer store and look at every game on their shelves! Think about the packaging, game style, technology, and marketing. What sets the successful games apart?

2. Pick up a copy of *Shareware Magazine* and read it cover-to-cover!

3. Call up your local BBS and see what the latest technology and trends are. Also look at all of the shareware games out there -- and see why 95% of them are not at all successful.

The Roster

Allen Pilgrim	Programmer (KiloBlaster, Super ZZT)
Todd Daggert	Programmer (FRP/Action style)
Larry Tipton	Programmer (Drum Blaster, Drum Traker), Sound Effects Expert
Shadow Productions	Game Development (Dave, Cooper etc.)
UltraForce	Game Development (Eric Oostendorp, Arjan Brussee, etc.)
Craig Pell	Programmer (Animac)
James Hague	Programmer & Game Designer
Tomi Engdahl	Sound Programmer
Joe Hitchens	Game Designer
John Pallett-Plowright	Artist (Jill of the Jungle, etc.)
Adam Rixey	Artist (Jill of the Jungle, etc.)
Alison Colman	Artist
Samuel Goldstein	Artist (Raytracing, Digitizing, Special effects)
Dan Froelich	Musician (Jill of the Jungle, etc.)
Dave Earnsberger	Musician
Andrew Saucci	BBS Distribution
Bill Dickson (SSI)	BBS Distribution
Chip Hageman	Official BBS: Misty Mountain (NJ): 1-609-985-3215
Tim Sweeney	Programming, Game Design, Marketing, Coordinating this whole thing.

Epic MegaGames

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