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Tim Victor

Not too long ago, personal computers were the province of fanatical hackers and pioneering hobbyists. Hard to use and not very capable, those primitive computers were nonetheless a means of expression for early enthusiasts. They offered a way to test newly developed skills, and a medium though which creative work could be appreciated by the rest of the computing community.

Thanks in part to the ingenuity and hard work of those pioneers, using a computer today doesn't require as such dedication as it once did. But for a group of programmers and artists around the world, programming a PC is solely a medium for personal expression.

Their creative statements are *Demo programs* — mini-movies of animation, graphics, and music that demonstrate the potential of the PC. Everything moves in a Demo. Three-dimensional objects twist and turn, becoming reflective, then translucent, then mutating into other shapes. A simple grid of dots becomes a waving flag, a spinning cube, even a 3-D landscape. Text twists and spirals before exploding like a skyrocket. A soundtrack underlies these visuals, with throbbing rhythms and soaring melodies all made from sampled sounds.

Unlike the promotional versions of commercial computer programs, which are also called "demos," these Demos exist purely for their own sake. They're released to the world as free software, and exist solely to promote the skills of their creators.

Without a doubt, the best-known PC Demo is "Unreal," released in the summer of 1992 by Finland's Future Crew. (All the screens in this story are taken from "Unreal.") Thanks to the brilliant sights and sounds of this Demo and its follow-up, "Panic," the nine young men who make up Future Crew have become nearly synonymous with the term Demos.

PC Demos are also influencing the world of commercial software. Mark Rein, vice-president of marketing for Epic Megagames, describes the Demo scene as "our secret weapon." Epic has worked with Demo authors to create several programs, collaborating with Future Crew on *Ken's Labyrinth*, and with Thomas Pytel (A.K.A. "Tran" of Renaissance, a U.S. demo group) on the new title *Zone 66*. Other upcoming Epic releases include *Jazz Jackrabbit*, whose developers include one of the founders of Dutch Demo group Ultraforce; and *Epic Pinball*, a shareware game based on a "Proof of Concept" Demo by Future Crew. Microleague will also offer a retail version of *Epic Pinball* under the name *Silverball* (covered in detail in our feature story on PC pinball games elsewhere in this issue).

It's a Social Thing

The PC Demo scene was born about four years ago, when Future Crew and Dutch Demo groups Ultraforce and Witan started working with PCs. Groups were already making Demos for the Commodore 64 and the Amiga, but PCs were considered too expensive, with limited music and graphics capabilities. PC prices were dropping, though, and new 386 CPUs, inexpensive VGA cards, and Sound Blaster sound systems started to shift the balance in favor of the PC. Without an Amiga's special graphics and animation circuitry, some effects are trickier to code on a PC, but that's the kind of challenge that drives Demo writers — the chance to do something that seems impossible.

This year, several top Amiga groups have released their first PC demos: "Optic Nerve" from Silents, "Delusion" from Sonic, and Majic 12's "Wish."

Like the military test pilots in the book *The Right Stuff*, Demo makers are constantly trying to push the envelope. But instead of flying planes, they live to take a PC to the limits of its performance. For the most part these Demo jocks are young and talented, primarily high school and college students. Most live in northern Europe, with Scandinavian countries well-represented. Asked about the predominance of European groups, Dan Wright (AKA "Pallbearer," of international demo group Toxic Zombies) explains in economic terms. "Good American programmers get hired. But in some parts of Europe, you don't have the same opportunities. Anyway, it seems like most Americans don't like the idea of working for free."

Epic's Mark Rein has another theory. "It's because European television is so bad," he says, half-jokingly. "There isn't much to watch, so kids turn to other means of entertaining themselves. Their educational system is very good, so a lot of them know how to program."

When asked why they do it, Demo makers sometimes cite technical challenges, the opportunity to hone their skills, or the possibility that it could lead to a computer-related career. But inevitably, they measure their accomplishments by the recognition they've earned from other Demo makers. Says Dan Wright, "When you code these Demos, you gain a lot of respect from the other people."

In Scandinavia, Demo parties and competitions add a social dimension to the hobby. The past year has seen several large Demo competitions, drawing hundreds or even thousands of fans. Among the more important shows were The Computer Crossroads, held last May in

TOMORROW'S GAMES TODAY:

THE UNDERGROUND DEMO SCENE

Goteburg, Sweden; and Assembly '93 in Kerava, Finland, last July. At Assembly '93, Future Crew unveiled "Second Reality", while Amiga supergroup Silents showed "Optic Nerve," their first PC Demo. German Demo groups Xography and Dust also drew attention with the premieres of "Elements" and "Dust," respectively. Groups are currently preparing for The Party '93, a competition to be held in Denmark this December.

To Find Out More...

As a showplace for the talents of some of the world's brightest young programmers, Demos offer an early look at the sights and sounds of tomorrow's PC games. There are several ways to find out more about the PC Demo scene and to get copies of some demos. Entire Demo programs can be downloaded from bulletin board systems, and most Demos will include a list of additional bulletin boards to check. If you have Internet access, you can reach Demo archive sites at **ftp.uwp.edu**, **wasp.eng.ufl.edu**, or **ftp.sun.ac.za**, logging in via **ftp** as "anonymous." Demos are currently available in the directory **/pub/msdos/demos/demos**, though the archive was being reorganized at press time. On Usenet, discussions about Demos take place in **comp.sys.ibm.pc.demos** — one of the best places to find out about new Demo releases, and to exchange messages with Demo makers around the world.

An Interview With Future Crew

The nine talented young men who make up Future Crew, all between the ages of 18 and 21 and all from Finland, are recognized as the premiere PC Demo group. They are: Samuli Syvahuoko ("GORE": PR), Sami Tammilehto ("Psi": coding), Mika Tuomi ("Trug": coding), Arto Vuori ("Wildfire": coding), Jonne Valtonen ("Purple Motion": music), Peter Hajba ("Skaven": music, graphics), Mikko Iho ("Pixel": graphics), Aki Maatta ("Marvel": graphics), and Jussi Laakkonen ("Abyss": BBS).

We were able to arrange an interview with GORE via electronic mail, and to get some of his thoughts about the PC Demo scene and Future Crew's role in it.

Special thanks go to Jarkko Heinonenk, for providing the e-mail connection.

Who started the group, and how long has it existed? How much longer do you expect to be doing this?

Psi started the group in 1988, so our group has existed for about 5 years now. At that time FC was working on the Commodore 64. The next year, we moved to the PC.

How much longer will we be around? Well, as long as we find this thing to be fun enough. So far we can't see the end! As the oldest PC Demo group, we think of our roles in the Demo scene as our lives. This is not just a hobby. This is *much* more.

Which of your Demos are you most proud of?

Of course, the latest Demo is always the best! But since "Unreal" was the one that made us famous, I'd have to say that we were particularly pleased with it at the time of it's release. We can't really say we're so proud of it anymore since we have "Panic" and now "Second Reality." By the time this magazine comes out, our latest Demo should be out, too. But "Unreal" is still the most precious. From a technical point of view, though, "Second Reality" would be the thing we're most proud of.

Who comes up with the ideas for your projects?

Everything comes from our own creativity. The new Demo effects are usually invented by our coders, since they know what is possible with the hardware. Sometimes the other members also come up with new ideas, but these ideas usually end up being impossible to convert into reality. The graphics and music are also usually invented by their makers. But when we design a Demo script, we do it together at Future Crew meetings. Then we can all have a chance to know about everyone's ideas, and we try to vote for the best ideas in order to create a good script.

Do you get to see many Amiga or C-64 Demos?

We like to watch Amiga and C-64 Demos very much and usually get a chance to do so at our meetings. Since one of our goals is to make PC Demos as good as the Amiga Demos, we have to check the status of that scene from time to time. When we see a very nice effect, one we haven't seen on the PC yet, we try to convert it to the PC hardware. Not only convert, but also to enhance and improve it. And when we come up with totally new ideas, we check to see if anyone has done them on the Amiga yet. If someone has, we have to start thinking about another Demo effect until we find a unique one. A very good example was Trug's landscape routine in "Unreal," and most of the routines in "Second Reality."

What's the biggest challenge facing PC demo writers?

You always have to find new ways of doing things faster — inventing new Demo effects, and so on. That can be very challenging for the coders. And of course, there's always an artistic challenge involved. The musicians and graphic artists have to make even better stuff than what they did last time, so they are constantly developing. You always have to improve upon your last Demo somehow, and that's beginning to grow out of hand (just see "Second Reality"). I don't know how long we can keep up this speed of releasing Demos and still constantly improve their quality, but you can be sure we'll do our best!