



THERE IS A TIDE . . .

There should be something for everyone in this month's piece (huh, as if there isn't usually). Simulation stimulation is provided with a look at Sid Meier's *Silent Service*, which puts you in command of a WWII sub. For the traditionalists, we finally have *Tigers in the Snow* by SSI and *Two Jims* by PSS. I also get my come-uppance for not having appreciated some of the finer details of Datasoft's *Alternate Reality* in an interview with Sam Poole, president of Datasoft.

It's strange to think that as disk drives are becoming more popular and in-depth strategy games continue to gain acceptance in markets on both sides of the Atlantic, wargaming shows signs of losing out to the popularity of role playing games, just as it did in the conventional market some years ago. Personally, I don't think the rift will be as great as it was the last time it happened. The conventional market

had more complications. Board games were not often very good and traditional miniatures were rising in price dramatically. By comparison, role playing was relatively cheap. A handful of miniatures sufficed for most games as opposed to an entire army. Rules were cheaply produced and role playing was more of a social hobby, there being five or six players to the average game rather than a two player wargame.

It's hard to tell where the balance will lie in the computer hobby. Popularity of both areas will probably ebb and flow for a while. Both types of game tend to be designed for solo play and both are as cheap (or expensive, depending on your point of view) to produce. Crossover between the different types of game is also breaking down any definable differences. *Silent Service* for instance, could be classed as a simulation, or a wargame, or a role player. In these respects, the strategy gaming market is in a flexible state at the moment. Considering the growth of importance in this market, manufacturers would do well to ensure an open minded attitude to game design continues to provide varied products and reduces the chances of the stagnation that has marred other types of computer games.

When our Sean Masterson reviewed *Alternate Reality* he came away feeling unhappy about the game. Datasoft read the review and felt the same way about Sean — after all, it has been a smash hit over in the States. Thus an interview was arranged so that the people on the other side of the pond could give us

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF alternate REALITY.

...AND MORE

SEAN MASTERSON takes the transatlantic phone line to talk to **SAM POOLE**, President of **DATASOFT**, and **KATHI TREMBLAY**, Datasoft's Marketing Projects Manager.



rendering so that people who join the club will be able to examine it and see where the various shops and taverns are and where things like *The Palace* and *The Arena* are generally located within the city. It doesn't tell them how to get into them but it does provide a general feel for it.

'It's one of the top products in the states. After one month of sales, it appeared in the top ten of Billboard's Software Chart.'

I asked about how something this complex actually came about and the answer must mean that this is one of the contenders for Longest Time Spent In Development.

'It was started about three and a half years ago by Paradise Programming, based in Hawaii. The people there originally started working on the Atari and the game was only intended for release on the Atari, so a lot of the features gave us a difficult time to translate onto the Commodore. We acquired the rights to finish, manufacture and release the game. But it took us an extra year and a half to actually translate the literally hundreds of thousands of lines of code into the other versions of AR. The individual responsible for the original game is Phil Price. And he is designing *The Dungeon*.'

I asked about Phil Price and whether he was a role player or a programmer, first and foremost. 'No, he is a programmer but he has a great deal of knowledge and depth of understanding about that whole Fantasy Role Playing backdrop.'

Actually, in *The Dungeon* itself we have developed the spec-

from the major distributors and retail outlets. It's one of the top products in the states. After one month of sales, it appeared in the top ten of Billboard's Software Chart (the major chart in the US). The consumer response has been even greater. We've had literally thousands of letters congratulating us from people who have tremendously enjoyed the game and in fact because of the response we've had, we're going to form the AR User Group. We are inviting people to send in comments and tips they have after playing the game, the kinds of responses they've had with different characters, what kinds of actions they've taken to enhance their characters.

'It will be open to players in the UK as well. We are going to distribute our product through US Gold, and they are in the process now of forming an AR club. We'll offer special advantages to people that join the club. We'll send them material including a map — not a detailed outline of the city, but an honest

First off I spoke to Sam Poole, and asked him to update me a bit on *Alternate Reality* — *The City*, the first product in the series.

'*Alternate Reality* will actually be comprised of seven different adventures, the first of which is *The City*, a role playing fantasy adventure. Part two, *The Dungeon* will follow in the second part of this year. Then there'll be *The Arena*, then *The Palace* so there'll be a number of different adventures all being role playing fantasies.

'You'll be able to take the character you developed in *The City* and hopefully use it in the rest of the adventures where you will eventually make your way back to Earth and seek revenge on those people who abducted you. It's a different kind of role play-

ing fantasy to *D&D*. AR really goes a step further in a kind of moralistic way. It encourages you to play the game as a very good individual. When you make decisions, they have an impact on how you play the game so that, if you're faced with individual characters you meet in the streets, you'll often have the choice of whether you want to try to avoid them, greet them or attack them and those kinds of decisions and how you react to them have an impact on the rest of the game. It's a very, very evolved game.'

As the game has been out for some time over in the States, I asked Sam, how it had been received so far.

'It's had an excellent response

"THERE'S NO ALTERNATIVE TO ME!"

"SAYS 400...!"



STRATEGY



ific objectives. It will be an underground scenario below the city and you will have to go through four different levels and hopefully, when you get to the end of the fourth level, you will be able to take actions to allow you to go on to the next scenario, *The Arena*.

'You will be able to play each as a stand alone game but it will be best to develop a character in the first part of the game and take him onto further adventures. However, you would be able to start a character in say, *The Dungeon* and take him back to the city and go on from there. In that respect the game is open ended.'

With *Alternate Reality* being such a massive project, taking such a long time to develop, did this mean future games would be based on the AR system?

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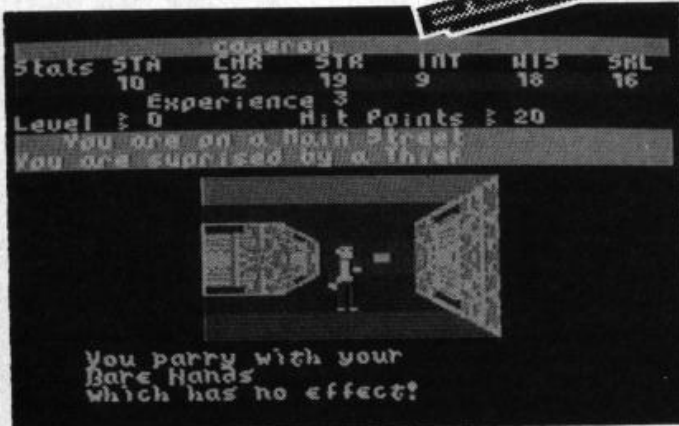
'Obviously as we're designing and developing the series, we've learned a great deal about random character generation, and logic and statistics. As a result, we are now looking to use some of those same types of features in a follow up program based on *Bruce Lee*, which has been a major seller in Europe. Called *Bruce Lee — Enter the Dragon*, it will be a full role-playing adventure and have strong hi-res graphics and animation sequences but taking advantage of some of the techniques we've developed in AR. Combining the best of both.'

So how would these future games be packaged? Did Datasoft intend for all of them to be two disk game packs?

'Well one of the things I noticed about your review is because of the tremendous amount of programming involved, certainly the most we've seen, probably in the UK as well, there's this necessity for a lot of disk swapping. The programmers are working at changing some of the techniques so that hopefully we'll be able to cut down on some of the disk swapping that's necessary now.'

Leaving that rather cryptically answered point aside, I took the opportunity of asking about the attitudes of the American gamers, who are more used to such 'Mega-games'.

'Yeah, we've had, er people who have commented here in the US about the disk swapping as well, but the vast majority of them, I would say 95%, have made the point that the extent



and depth to which they can build their characters and the kinds of experiences they can have outweigh the disadvantages of the disk swapping.'

Fair enough. What other machines were being considered for new versions of the game and how would Datasoft take advantage of the new range of sixteen bit computers like the Amiga and the ST?

'We have developed it for the Atari, Commodore and the Apple. We are actually enhancing *The City* on the IBM, the Macintosh, the ST and Amiga. Not only because of the graphics and the sound capabilities of these machines but also because of the additional memory, we are going to be able to have a lot of other features that we

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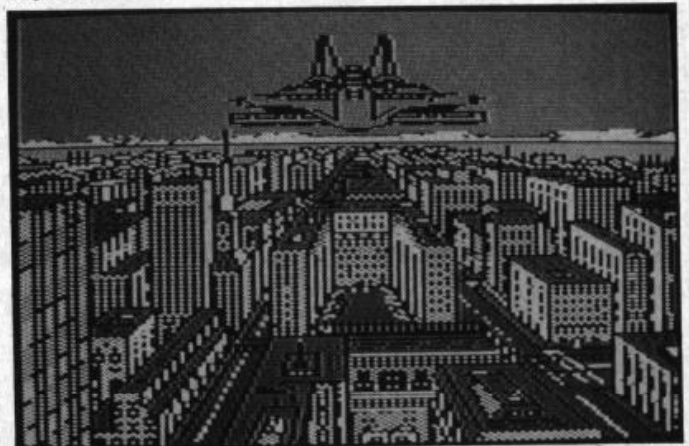
couldn't put into *The City*.'

If AR is a mega-game, it certainly takes a mega approach. The opening even has series of credits done in the style of a major feature film. Did Mr Poole see this as a sign of the future of game presentation?

'Because it is an entertainment product, we're finding more and more that you have to appeal to all of the senses of an individual and that encompasses graphics, the use of keyboard and joystick and so on. You have the opportunity to do music, so you're appealing to a lot of different senses. And one of the things which we actually borrowed from movies was the credit lines to get the people more involved in the atmosphere of the product itself.'

'And there are a lot of clues just from that scenario. Now, you don't know what to look for, but as you go through the later scenarios, you will see that there are a lot more clues in the

opening sequence than you might realise.'



To tell me more about what AR actually contained, Kathi Tremblay came on the line to dispense wisdom and knowledge of encyclopaedic depth. But what exactly did her job entail?

'We do a lot of playtesting and I supervise testing and I write the instructions for the game and review submissions that people send in.'

How much did her job involve interaction with the writers? Could she go to them with suggestions for inclusions for the games?

'I do, I interact a lot with the programmers. And when people have written in, we try to incorporate their suggestions where possible.'

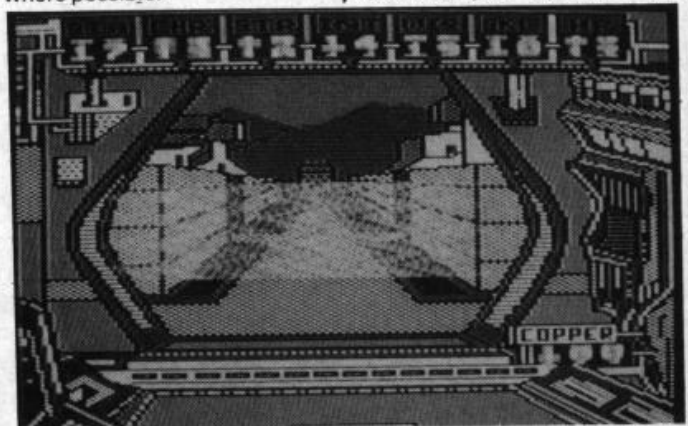
'Anyway, there are fifteen shops, scattered all over the city and there are seven inns which are really very crucial to find because after a time, you need to know where they all are. If you

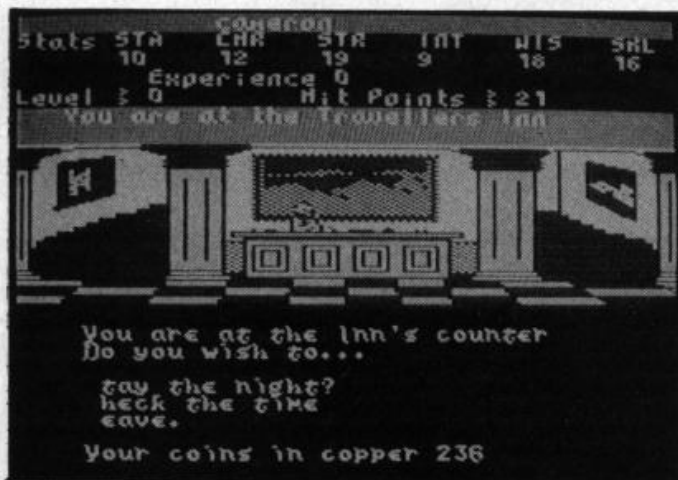
'If, when you go into the taverns, you buy a round for the house, it makes everybody very friendly towards you.'

don't have any food or water packets, going into the taverns can save you. If you have lost all your money and you go into a tavern and sit around for a while, you'll be taken care of. Also, if,

when you go into the taverns, you buy a round for the house, that's a very good thing because it makes everybody very friendly towards you. It helps develop the character in the game. On the other hand, if you drink too much, you get drunk and this can have an effect on the character in the game. So if you think about it, you can do too much of a good thing.

There are two healers who aren't very far apart, but they are hard to find. They involve a lot of travelling around and searching for secret doors and such. They are very important because occasionally, you will have a battle and they will be needed to deal with your injuries. There





are twelve guilds and of course they can provide magic or cursed weapons. There are four smithies (where you can purchase various items and haggle), various shops which have everything at a fixed price and then there are ten other areas which, for the most part are areas used interactively.

Was Kathi selected for the job because she was a role player?

'Er no I am not. I had never played anything — any role playing game before I began testing AR. I've since become hooked.'

So what did hooked mean in terms of time spent playtesting?

'A lot. Generally hours and hours each day. The game took several weeks to playtest. And weeks can stretch out into months. I playtest other games as well; *Zorro* for instance. In fact, almost all the games we've released so far. We have four people who are working on playtesting as well.'

'We feel it's important to get as much testing on the games as we can and get other people's point of view. The more people we have working on them, the more chance we have of catching errors before the game is released. Well, in any game there's always something you would have liked to have done

better so, we've looked at all the versions for the different machines so far, and I think we have caught everything. Quality control is very important to us.'

When Sam Poole came back on the line, I asked him about a couple of rumoured Datasoft releases; *Pole Position II* and *Elevator Action*.

'*Pole Position II*: we're in discussion at the moment with Namco to release this game. It's 45-50% complete and if all goes well in our discussions with Namco, it will be released in the

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second half of this year. But we're still in negotiations and we have to conclude those first. As far as *Elevator Action*, the licensor, Tito — we originally had the licence but they pulled that back, so it will probably

never be released.

How did this, and the state of the markets in the US and UK affect Datasoft's attitude to doing arcade games?

'One of the things that has happened over the past year, and is progressing at a very fast pace, is the markets are coming very close to each other. We're now working with Ocean software, where we have developed several new arcade style products based on games by Konami. The first of these is *Yie Ar Kung Fu* and the second, of course, is *Hypersports* and we're working on a third called *Russian Attack*. We've developed a working relationship with Ocean where we will secure the source code for these products and we release them in the United States. We have similar relationships with a number of companies in Australia, the UK and Canada, so we're seeing a lot of product going back and forth across the Atlantic and that's one of the things we're going to see more of.'

'We're also talking with a number of other British companies about products they have developed in the UK for marketing and distribution here in the States because we have a very solid marketing and distribution organisation and I know a number of British companies that have attempted to release products over here, but I think that most people would probably agree that a company already established over here would do better in these terms. In fact one of the products we have a tentative agreement to release over here is *Novagen's Mercenary*.

'We already have a strong arrangement with Namco for three of their new arcade products and we'll be developing those as well. So we're not at all moving away from the arcade style products but we are expanding in different kinds of products in the entertainment fields. Not only arcades but RPGs, graphic/text adventures — we have what I would call a new style product, family entertainment, where instead of just having one or two persons play, have the whole family.'

'Probably in the second part of this year we will have *221b Baker St*, based on Sherlock Holmes (taken from the board game of the same name by Gibsons). It's a great game and we have made the software version better than the board game. You will actually have an animated character walking through the streets of London and you will be able to go into pubs or theatres and pick up clues. But we will actually involve the animations with the clues and in the text, and up to four people can play the game. You know, it will be a very different type of product to be introduced in the US or anywhere else. We will

have a follow up in the form of an additional data disk and there will be new locations, new clues and cases (in the first game there are thirty), new graphics and thirty more cases. So when people play it, if they get bored of the same graphics and locations or if they have played all of the scenarios, the disk will allow them to extend the original game.'

'We are also working on cross-word and Scrabble based games, strategy as well. We will try to take advantage of the board games to obtain a very new style of play. As a matter of fact, the follow up to *221b Baker St*, which is being put out by the same company, has already created interest because the company have seen some of the original screens and schematics and they want us to develop the follow up game on the computer as well. So we're looking at new products around the boardgame scenario. And this allows not only adults but children to play, which is an interesting concept because I think most games are aimed at a specific age group and we want the whole family to be involved, even if there are adult and children's versions. We want everybody to become interested.'

With time getting short and the threat of a dry throat developing, I asked Mr Poole if there was anything he would like to say to conclude the interview.

'I think that we can perhaps comment on, regarding AR, is that one of the drawbacks is the constant disk swapping caused by the massive amount of code in the program. The complexity, say in interaction between the seventy odd characters and so on... all of these things are taken into consideration and the mathematical intricacies cause these problems. But, I think that once people start to play it and begin to develop their characters, it won't be as significant a factor. In the US that's exactly what has happened. People are so enthralled that they are prepared to put up with this.'

With that, we agreed to call it a day. I expressed my hope that Mr Poole would feel any possible imbalance created by my review would have now been redressed. He must have thought so because he promised that the future bi-monthly newsletters would be sent along with news of any further developments in the saga of the *Alternate Reality* series. Now, could it be that he had begun to convert me as well? I would have to consider my answer and its consequences over a long, cool pint down at The Bull.

I would like to thank Mike Dixon of Datasoft UK and Tim Chaney of US Gold for helping to arrange this interview.

Sean Masterson