



THE EDITOR'S GODZILLA

-by Lenard R. Roach

COMMVEX 2018: A PERSONAL FAILURE

Nothing in 2018 thus far has hurt me more than missing the CommVEx this year. I believe it necessary, though, after being so braggadocio about getting to be there and having to eat those words, to explain in as much detail as possible, why I failed to attend, and believe me, it's nothing more than a series of unfortunate "stupid" that brought all this around.

Let's start with the main thing: The budget wasn't there. I burned through my 2017 tax return that I was going to use for all my CommVEx expenses. I had some necessary car and house repairs that showed up before Robert even announced a third of the CommVEx roster. I tried like a fool to say that heaven itself was going to replenish the funds, but The Almighty is a lot smarter than I to back up my outrageous boasting. Still, I was determined to make it to Vegas for CommVEx 2018, so I went and did stupid again and got an installment loan off the Internet. I found a lender based in Chicago that was willing to give me the money at a "paltry" 300% APR. I didn't care at that moment, so I signed the digital contract and they put the money into my account.

Next reason why I missed CommVEx 2018: Transportation issues. As most of you know, I was all braggadocio on taking the Amtrak from Kansas City to the show, but the closest I could get to Vegas by train was the little town of Needles, California, which was still 65 minutes from Vegas. We would have to either rent a car or Uber it from Needles to Vegas. With the train tickets at \$535 for two people round trip plus \$142 one way by Uber to Vegas, and my loan was only \$1100, the budget was 3/4 gone, and I haven't even worked in hotel and food, but I still was determined to press on.

Next: Unexpected household disasters. On Memorial Day weekend 2018, the power mast that held the power cable coming from the electric company's wooden power pole was hit by a big falling branch from one of my backyard shade trees. The power mast was ripped from the roof and toppled to the ground. The good news about this was that my son was home to immediately shut off the power at the main breaker so the house wouldn't burn down but the bad news was that we had to find an electrician to come out on a three day weekend. When the city power company came out to inspect the damage, the official took pity on us and gave us an insider name and phone number of a trusted electrician. The electrician was out the next day, repaired the damage, and only charged us \$480. The next best price was \$1200. We got off mega easy, but we had to stay in a hotel thanks to my needing power for my CPAP machine and it was going to be 80 degrees and humid overnight. Gabe flipped the bill for everything, even for evening pizza for four men, but I needed to pay him back so there was more money gone from the "in the red" CommVEx budget.

Here's one: The weather. If anyone has followed the Kansas City area weather over the summer, we have faced the most evil summer when it comes to heat and humidity since 1934. Our heat began in middle April almost the day after a 32

degree day complete with light snow and ice. This heat stayed with Kansas City for 3 1/2 months with only very widespread days where temperatures dropping below 90. Naturally, the electric power companies were giving thanks and offering sacrifices to the god of greenbacks as they raked in monumental profits from the weather, as well as the fresh water ministers. At my convenience store where I work, we were averaging nine cases of 15, 28 oz. bottles each of electrolyte replenishing drinks during the whole escapade. We also went through approximately 200 cases of 16.9 oz. water containing 24 bottles each at the same time. My particular domicile had electric bills of \$400 or more a month for four consecutive months. Yup, even more out of the travel budget to cover the extra expense.

Okay, now it was time to recoup some losses if I could. I notified my co-traveler that I was canceling the train tickets and we were going by ground vehicle. He was a bit whiny, but with his wife being in the hospital twice since planning for the trip began, he understood that this might be a win/win situation, since the train was a direct line. If we got notified that something happened during the trip, we would be stuck on the train until our destination, then having to find transportation back to Kansas City to be with her. My son was courteous enough to donate his Nissan Frontier to us for the journey, which was nice. My co-traveler started whining that we would have to stop at least twice for hotel while I insisted on driving through like I've always done. Since, so far, I've paid for everything, he knew he'd better shut up if he wanted to go.

I canceled my tickets for Amtrak, to which Amtrak obliged, but not without hitting me with a \$128 cancellation fee. Cute. That cut the ticket refund to about \$382, and I waited for the money to hit my account...

It never came and it wasn't going to.

Apparently, I bought the Saver Package from Amtrak, which does not allow for refunds, but instead offers the rider a voucher good for a future ride on the train up to one year from the date of initial cancellation. After a heated debate with customer service at Amtrak, the only loophole was to fax a copy of a doctor's excuse stating that I can't ride the train. So, I need a doctor's note to excuse me from class? This was insane! But my son Gabe actually read the return policy on the Amtrak website and the electronic deal I bought was airtight. So again, I'm out even more money on my planned trip to CommVEx and I haven't even left the Kansas City metropolitan area. All I got was a train voucher that I probably will never use.

I haven't touched lodging yet: A second co-traveler, who was going to fly out to Vegas and meet us at CommVEx said he had a contact at one of the high class hotel chains in Vegas and could get hotel at a serious discount, so I left lodging to him. That was May. By mid July I had not received word about the rooms, so I emailed my friend and asked him what was the hold up? He responded that his hotel contact just lost her mom and he didn't want to impose anything at that time. Knowing CommVEx was close around the corner, hopped online and got us a room in North Las Vegas for \$100/night. When I told the first co-traveler about the accommodations, he started whining about traffic the six miles to Vegas from North Las Vegas everyday, then finding parking in Vegas as well as parking prices. He wanted me to cancel the room, pick up three rooms close to the CommVEx hotel, and pay more. This would mean losing more money on fees and spending more of a budget that was well past over stretched.

Have I mentioned yet that I'm starting to get pretty perturbed?

Now let's move on to getting the time off from my three jobs...

The delivery service I work for part time doesn't care neither hide nor hair if I take time off. This company caters to the retired or those who just want extra money. Company hours are 6 am to 6 pm Monday through Friday. You can log in to go to work anytime between those hours. Their work philosophy is simple: You work, you get paid; you don't work, you don't get paid. It's up to you.

Moving on to the convenience store that I work in the mornings: I put in around May for the time off to go to CommVEx. The HMFIC of the store approved it, with the only stipulation being that I step in as "acting manager in charge" while he attended vacation of his own in the middle weeks of July. I consented for I reasoned, "Hey, going through crap for two weeks to get to go to CommVEx? Fair trade." On his first day gone all chaos broke loose like the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the dust didn't settle until he walked back in as commander thus relinquishing my commission. However, my part of the "bargain" (and I put that word in quotes for a reason) was fulfilled, and he was more than ready to hold up his end ...

Until "stupid" showed it's silly face.

One of our clerks who generally worked the evening to close shift had a mental meltdown on an unsuspecting customer right in front of the boss. We have had problems with this particular clerk in the past, but it was usually small stuff like offending comments or excessive breaks, but he never did something as crazy as this. The commander-in-chief took his off register and made him take a week off with pay to think things out. Of course, this was going to cause the schedule to be rearranged, and, my vacation for Vegas was canceled.

Let's add insult to injury: As I checked the computer at my evening job to see if my vacation request (again, put in over May) to see if it was accepted by the higher ups at the auto parts store I

worked in the evenings. To the right of the screen in a small box was written in bold letters: DENIED. Beside that was the name of the district manager. Hmm. Since I was already screwed out of going to CommVEx by the convenience store, this was no longer a problem, but I would still like to know why. I caught up with my immediate supervisor of my department and posed the question to him. He looked at me with sorrow, knowing perfectly well I had Vegas in my travel plans. He tried to explain to me that one of his assistant's wife was expecting a baby soon and the baby wasn't due until the week after CommVEx, but his wife experienced a serious drop in blood pressure, so they rushed her to the hospital, where the doctors decided that the best course of action was to induce labor and get the baby out as soon as possible. Since the supervisor was already severely short on help, and this was an unexpected emergency, he asked upper eschalons to deny my vacation request at the last minute.

"I hope you understand," he said softly to me.

Listen, y'all, it's rare at this age of mine to be asked to pull my matching cape and boots out of the mothballs and play hero. The crazy clerk at the convenience store? Yeah, that's just flat out dumb, but this? To fill in while someone else had to deal with a highly possible life and death crisis? It would be totally insensitive of me to throw a five year old style tantrum because *I* couldn't get to go to CommVEx 2018 because of this. Out of all the stuff I wrote down in this article explaining why I couldn't make CommVEx this year became moot and inconsequential when this was laid before me. Baby and mom are doing fine as at the moment I penned this piece and Dad got to stay home while CommVEx was going on to help his wife and care for his newborn daughter.

So, after all of the above listed events occurred and unfolded, I decided that The Great Almighty

Omnipotent Stomper of the heavens was trying to tell me something like, "Your fat, flatulent, flabby fanny is staying home this year instead of going to CommVEx." I fought His Holiness as hard as any mortal could, but no dice. I canceled my rooms, texted my co-travelers that the trip was off, and emailed Robert and Dick that I couldn't make it. Both our club officers took my declining to come well, but with disappointment, especially after Robert told people on the CommVEx website I would be there. My error, guys. I'm sorry.

Next issue (November/December) I will be explaining what weird things happened to me almost to the minute when I hit SEND on all the texts and emails I sent excusing myself from the show. It totally freaked me out.

But before I put this article to bed for the July/August issue of "The Interface," allow me please to add an epilogue to it by relating one more incident that was just so out there that I have to file it under "stupid" because something like this just shouldn't have happened. This episode also contributed to my failure to attend the 2018 CommVEx...

Sometime in July, not too long after Independence Day, I was driving the auto parts hub van doing the southeast Kansas/southwest Missouri route. I was chugging southbound on US 169 when all the traffic ahead of me a ways slowed down to 50 mph no more than five or so miles south of Garnett, Kansas. We all (about 9 of us or so) stayed a constant 50 mph in a 65 mph zone for about ten minutes, occasionally getting to 60 as, one by one, the slower than the speed of evolution vehicle ahead of us was passed by us southbound drivers. Before long I was behind The Odd Couple in their foreign made sedan waiting for my opportunity to pass and get back to highway speed. After all, when you're in the delivery business, it's all about getting there on time and in one piece with freight intact.

It wasn't too long of The Odd Couple's teasing and taunting of the accelerator to provoke me to lose my logic temporarily and opt for a lemming's attitude. Like the others before me, I signaled to go left and began to move into the northbound lane of this two lane highway ... and I was heading straight towards a small white coupe coming north in his lane.

"\$4!£" I muttered, but it was too late to merge back into my proper lane. I was committed. I hugged the sedan as close as I dared while the coupe took to the paved shoulder and went on by. I hit the accelerator hard and quickly got back into my lane. Thanks to the coupe driver's quick thinking, a serious accident was avoided and everyone was safe.

But not everybody behind in the southbound lane agreed with me, especially the red and blue strobe lights that were now flashing in my mirrors. Since I was sure that I haven't driven the work van into a discotheque, then the other logical alternative must be that, during our trek southbound, we acquired the glorious presence of one of the many Deputy Sheriffs of Anderson County, Kansas. He saw the whole thing from his vantage point in line. I pulled off onto the right shoulder, with the deputy behind me, and all the remaining cars, including The Odd Couple in the sedan, cruised right on by.

I got out my driver's license and rolled down my window as the well groomed young man in the brown uniform strolled up to the window.

"Evening, sir," he said. "Do you know why I pulled you over?"

I sighed and looked straight at him. "Because I did stupid," I answered.

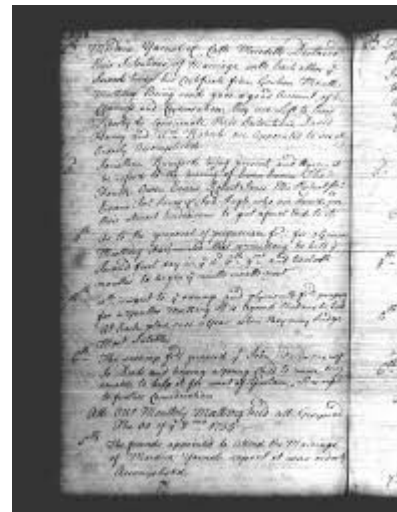
He smiled. "Well, sir, I wouldn't call it that on my own, but you did force a person off onto the shoulder while you were making an illegal pass."

"I'll take my ticket with a smile and a 'Thank you,' officer," I said.

He took my license. "I'll be right back after I run a background check."

In summary, I was given a \$183 ticket for the infraction which had to be paid by August 14th. This meant that, once I got back from CommVEx, I would have just enough time to triple S, grab a couple of hours of sleep, wake up bright eyed and bushy tailed, drive two hours south from Kansas City to the Anderson County Courthouse located in the little burg of Garnett that is no bigger than a thumbtack mark on the state map (even though the city of Garnett is the county seat where the courthouse is), and stand before a judge with a stack of 183 dead presidents in hand after just coming back from Vegas and CommVEx. Sorry, friend reader, with a travel budget that was blown not once, but twice, and I never went more than 150 miles out of the Kansas City Metro Area, it wasn't going to work.

I can only hope that, after all the aforementioned, I will have a grandiose time at the upcoming 2019 CommVEx.



MONTHLY MEETING REPORTS

-by Robert Bernardo & Dick Estel

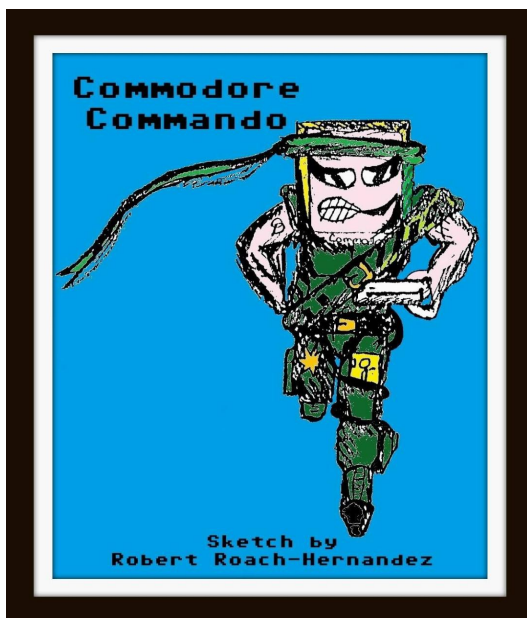
September 2018

Cooler pre-fall weather brought out a good crowd, including a couple of members who have not attended in quite a while. On hand for September were Robert Bernardo, Roger Van Pelt, Dave Smith, Randy Stoller, Mike Fard, and Dick Estel.

Having recently paid his dues, Dick has been a member for 30 consecutive years. Dave countered by displaying a membership card from 1993, although he left the club for a long period, re-joining in 2017.

Robert will be going to Oregon for a Quarterflash concert and will take equipment to Ray Carlsen for repair. In other travels he will attend the AmiWest Show in Sacramento October 11-14, and then will have a table at the Mini-Maker Faire in downtown Los Angeles December 1. With hardware from at least one other person, his table will be titled, "Classic LA Computers" (CLAC).

Robert reported on CommVEx, which had a decent attendance but did not produce enough



revenue to pay for the room cost. A lower rate is available next year, and a member of TOGA, the Amiga group in San Jose, will sell some of the equipment Robert has in storage to pay down the deficit. Plans for CommVEx 2019 remain undecided at this point.

Next month will be the club's annual "picnic," which is now an indoor lunch at a different restaurant. Lunch is paid for by the club, and there will be no official demonstrations or business. The location will be the Elbow Room in Fig Garden Village.

After lunch we watched a video Robert shot at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, featuring four Commodore engineers in a panel discussion. Participants were Bil Herd, Leonard Tramiel, Hedley Davis, and Ron Nicholson. The event followed the showing of the film, The Commodore Story.

Moving to our software demonstration, Roger had been working with the German C64 Giga-CAD program we first looked at in July. He and Robert used Google to translate the manual, and using the SuperCPU, Roger showed us how a drawing can be rotated in various directions for a 3-D view from many different angles. Roger's work with this program will continue.

Using the SuperCPU with the 3D Construction Kit game, A Chance in Hell. Robert and Roger played with v1.1 of the game which author Steven Flanagan had just sent over. Version 1.1 was now further bug-fixed and enhanced for the SuperCPU. Steven also had sent the 3D Kit Game, the original demo game which came with 3DCK but which he had enhanced for the SCPU. Robert and Roger briefly looked at that game.

Robert fired up the Amiga CD32 and ran the very colorful and realistic program, Pinball Dreams, and several members tried their hand at it. Balky

controllers prevented anyone from beating the high score.

Ending the meeting, the members played the new VIC-20 games, Spikes, Defense Shield, Alien Invasion, and Cavern Explorer.

RELATED LINKS:

The Commodore Story premiere night at the Computer History Museum -

<https://youtu.be/ta2rL6brXmI>

Ray Carlsen Electronics -

<http://personalpages.tds.net/~rcarlsen/>

Downtown LA Mini Maker Faire -

<http://dtla.makerfaire.com>

Amiga CD32 -

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amiga_CD32

AmiWest - <http://www.amiwest.net>

Giga-CAD - <https://csdb.dk/release/?id=93742>

October 2018

Back in the day, the Fresno Commodore User Group had an outdoor picnic at the home of one of our members. As our membership declined, we came in from the outdoors and turned this annual event into a restaurant lunch.

However, it's NOT a regular meeting, because:

1. No official business is discussed.
2. There are no hardware or software demonstrations, and no Commodore computers.
3. Families are invited.
4. The club pays for lunch.
5. We go to a different restaurant from the one at which we regularly meet.

This year Robert Bernardo, Dick Estel, Roger Van Pelt, Dave Smith, and Mike Fard gathered at the Fig Garden Village restaurant, The Elbow Room, that has been in business in various locations since 1955.

We had a fun discussion of various topics, naturally including computers. Sticking with the theme of ancient technology, Dick reported that he had connected his 1970s Tandberg reel-to-reel recorder to his stereo system, with mixed results. His tapes went back as much as 50 years, and the ancient splices were not holding up well. The machine also produced an intermittent high frequency signal in one channel, which interfered with attempts to copy the music to the PC.

Roger spoke briefly about his continuing work with the German Giga-CAD program that we've been experimenting with since July. Robert warned Roger to be ready to give a video demo for the next CommVEx.

Following another tradition, Robert brought gift grab bags for all attendees. There was an extra one which we presented to our waitress.

Throughout the years, these events have always brought good food and good company, and we hope to enjoy another one in 2019.

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Paul Allen Passes Away

For the last 2 years, the Pacific Commodore Expo NW has been at the Seattle, Washington Living Computers: Museum + Labs, a venue established by Paul Allen who was the co-founder of

Microsoft. On Oct. 15, 2018, Paul Allen passed away. I never met Paul Allen, but my friend and LCM + L official Stephen Jones had. Stephen told me that Paul had stories to tell about Commodore! Perhaps that is one of the reasons he let our show be based at his museum. Rest in peace, Mr. Allen.



A HISTORY OF THE AMIGA

Part 11

Between an Escam and a Gateway

The Amiga didn't go away with Commodore, but its future was uncertain.

By guest contributor Jeremy Reimer

(In previous Interface newsletters, the History of the Amiga computer was published up to part 10, that part recounting the end of Commodore Business Machines. However, that was not the end of the Amiga. It lives on... as these next parts will relate.)

Commodore International declared itself insolvent on April 29, 1994 under Chapter 7 of US bankruptcy law. Ordinarily, this would have been followed immediately by an auction of all the company's assets. However, Commodore's Byzantine organizational structure—designed to serve as a tax shelter for financier Irving Gould—made this process far more lengthy and complicated than it should have been. During this time, Commodore UK, Ltd. continued to operate. It had been the strongest of all the

subsidiary companies, and it always had a positive cash flow. As the other subsidiaries went under, Commodore UK purchased all of their remaining inventory and continued to sell Amigas to British customers.

The head of Commodore UK, David Pleasance, hatched a plan to purchase the mother company's assets at auction. His idea was to raise enough money not only to buy Commodore International but to fund the new company as an ongoing concern, including the continuation of research and development projects. The business plan was to continue to sell Amiga 1200 and 4000 computers and CD32 consoles while slowly transitioning to next-generation hardware based on Dave Haynie's Hombre RISC architecture.

Pleasance raised about \$15 million from local investors, which was enough to win the auction. For the rest of the money, he arranged a deal with a curious partner: New Star Electronics, based out of China.

New Star got its start by selling unlicensed clones of the Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis consoles—the clones not only played the same games, but they looked identical to their legitimate counterparts. Under pressure from the Chinese government, New Star had decided to change its business model, and it was looking for game companies willing to license their devices. David Pleasance arranged a deal worth \$25 million for New Star to produce and sell Amigas for the Asian market.

Other companies were also vying for Commodore International's assets. Dell Computer put in a \$15 million bid—but it was late. The bankruptcy judge refused to wait for Dell to do its due diligence. Six months had already passed, and the only remaining contender in the race was a European PC manufacturer named Escom, which put in a bid of \$14 million. Originally Escom wanted to bid only on the Commodore brand, but

the company raised its stake to all the Commodore assets after other bidders complained.

With only thirty-six hours to go before the end of the auction, New Star told Commodore UK that it was backing out of the deal. Without enough money to guarantee the continuation of the business, David Pleasance withdrew his bid. All of a sudden, Escom was the new owner of Commodore and the Amiga.

Enter Escom

Escom was founded in 1991 in Germany by Manfred Schmitt. Early on, the company sold Commodore 64 computers, but it quickly branched out into its own line of IBM PC clones. From 1992 to 1994, sales rose from 180,000 to 410,000 units, making Escom the biggest PC distributor in Germany.

Schmitt's company had been saved in its infancy when he was able to secure a large purchase of Commodore 64s for the Christmas 1991 season. He did so by making a personal phone call to Commodore's global logistics director, a man named Petro Tyschtschenko. During the bankruptcy negotiations, Schmitt called Petro again to get help with the process. After Escom won the auction for Commodore's assets, Schmitt split the company into two subsidiaries: Commodore BV in Holland (which became the holder of the Commodore trademark) and Amiga Technologies, whose name was self-explanatory. Schmitt rewarded Petro with a new job as the director of Amiga Technologies.

At first, this wasn't much of a job. Escom had only been interested in the Commodore name, and putting all the Amiga assets together in a single division seemed like a prelude to selling them off. However, Escom was soon buried under a deluge of mail and phone calls from Amiga owners and fans, pleading with the company to keep their

beloved computer alive.

Petro was keen on keeping the flame going, as he had been a fan of the Amiga back in his Commodore days. However, the task wasn't going to be easy. In the wake of Commodore's demise, factories around the world had been sold, and parts suppliers moved on. Just restarting production of Amiga 1200s and Amiga 4000s required building a brand new factory in Scotland, which wasn't able to deliver machines until October 1995. By then, it was a year and a half since Commodore had declared bankruptcy.

Still, Amiga Technologies soldiered on. The subsidiary company revealed a new Amiga logo and released a hardware and software bundle called the Amiga Magic Pack. This was an Amiga 1200, sold for £400 in a single box, along with two games, the Deluxe Paint AGA painting software, the Wordsworth 2 word processor, and Print Manager. A £500 bundle was released that added a hard drive and more productivity software. These Magic Packs were reasonably good deals, albeit saddled with aging computer hardware. Sales were poor in England but a little better in Germany, where Escom had greater marketing presence.

In Asia, Amiga Technologies licensed its hardware, not to New Star as everybody had expected, but to another Chinese company called Regent Electronics Corporation. With the help of ex-Commodore engineers, Regent designed and built a set-top box called the Wonder TV A6000, which was eventually released to a small set of Shanghai residents in 1997.

Petro was insistent that Amiga Technologies should operate as a viable business without asking for additional financial help from Escom. However, this meant that there was little money available for research and development. Eventually, he did find the funds to develop a prototype of the first new Amiga hardware since

Commodore's demise—it was code-named the Walker.

The Walker was a modest iteration on the Amiga 1200. It bumped the CPU from a 68020 to a 68030 running at 40Mhz, kept the 1200's AGA graphics chipset, and added an integrated CD-ROM drive. The whole kit and caboodle was stuffed into a small form-factor tower case that looked either like Doctor Who's robot companion K9 or Darth Vader's helmet, depending on which side of the pond you lived on.

The Walker would have been a fantastic and competitive machine if it had been released in 1991; it was going to be woefully outdated in 1996. In the end it didn't matter, because the product never made it to production. Escom had inherited what would become known as the "Commodore curse," and the company itself careened toward bankruptcy.

Escom had expanded too quickly in two years. The company had opened retail stores all over Europe, hoping for a huge increase in PC sales. Sales of PCs were in fact growing rapidly at the time, but the gains were mostly taken by small "white box" assemblers with lower overhead and lower prices.

Manfred Schmitt's company had also backed the wrong horse at exactly the wrong time. On the eve of Windows 95's release, Escom signed a deal with IBM to sell computers bundled with the ailing OS/2 operating system.

Escom declared bankruptcy in June 1996. As with Commodore UK, one of their subsidiaries (Escom Netherlands) kept operating and tried to buy out the mother company. That group went bankrupt themselves a year later. Escom became just another PC company on a huge rubbish pile of failed PC companies. Today, no one even remembers it—except, of course, for Amiga fans.

Limbo again

The beleaguered Amiga once again found itself between two companies. In the Escom bankruptcy sale, no fewer than 11 firms made bids on the assets. Quikpak, an American manufacturer and reseller, got out to an early lead before running into money issues. VIScorp, a startup company that had hired some ex-Commodore engineers, wanted to get the Amiga technology to put it into set-top boxes. They hired Carl Sassenrath, father of AmigaOS, who said: “I don’t plan on killing the Amiga. In fact, if they ask me to take over system development, you’ll see one killer Amiga!” Unfortunately, the company’s plans came to a screeching halt as they, too, ran out of cash.

While the dreary saga of bankruptcy negotiations trundled on, a group of former Commodore employees decided to take matters into their own hands. John Smith (previously a sales manager at Commodore UK), Dr. Peter Kittel (a director of software at Commodore), and Dave Haynie (a legendary Commodore engineer) joined forces to found PIOS, a startup that would build the next generation of Amiga hardware that could also run other operating systems.

This was the same time that Apple was transitioning from the 68k series of CPUs to the PowerPC, and the latter was getting a lot of great press in technical circles. Some Amiga accessory companies, like the German-based Phase5, had started shipping PowerPC accelerator boards for classic Amigas. These could speed up specific software routines in applications that supported them, even if the operating system itself was still stuck running on the 68k chip.

Apple had also opened up licensing for MacOS for the first time in its history, allowing legal Macintosh clones to exist. The PIOS ONE was planned as a computer that could run almost anything: either a PowerPC flavor of Linux, a

licensed copy of MacOS, a copy of the brand-new operating system BeOS (from a company run by ex-Apple manager Jean-Louis Gasse, who billed his operating system as the second coming of the Amiga and even had vanity license plates that read “AMIGA96”), or an “Amiga-like” PowerPC operating system that PIOS hoped to develop, called pOS.

The possibility of a computer that could run any operating system was a nerd’s wet dream, but the dream died a few years later. Apple withdrew its licensing program, BeOS transitioned to x86, and pOS failed to appear. PIOS had also hoped to win the Escom auction, but like many others, the company was outbid.

The eventual winner was another PC clone company founded by Ted Waitt, the son of four generations of cattlemen. Founded in 1985, it had risen to five billion in sales by 1996, selling PCs in cow-painted boxes by mail order, in showrooms, and later online. This was Gateway 2000.

The Gateway Era

Gateway 2000 had experienced phenomenal growth over the last few years, and it was now considered one of the giants in the PC world. As a giant, the company came under the radar of the wounded but still mighty IBM. IBM, angry about the PC clone industry it had unwittingly brought into existence, was starting to push its massive legal weight around.

While PC clones were still legal, IBM had a portfolio of patents that it was brandishing as a stick, trying to extract licensing revenues from any cloner company wealthy enough to be worth its time. Larger companies like HP could respond with their own patent portfolio and negotiate a “Mutual Assured Destruction” cross-licensing agreement, but the young Gateway had few if any patents to speak of. It was at this point that Jim

Collas, senior VP of product development for Gateway 2000, was put in charge of patent acquisition.

Collas was a technical manager with a degree in electrical engineering and computer science from UCLA. When he was still at school, he had run across the Amiga (still in prototype form) while working for a startup game developer, and he'd been impressed by the technology. After graduating, Collas started a PC design company that was acquired by Gateway in 1992.

So when the opportunity arose, he jumped at the chance to acquire the Amiga assets. Working with the resilient Petro Tyschtschenko, he arranged a winning bid of \$14 million for Amiga Technologies and all Commodore patents (the Commodore brand was sold separately, ending up with a Dutch PC company called Tulip). The deal closed in early 1997.

Collas' bosses, of course, were only interested in the extensive patent portfolio, which included patents on a type of dropdown menu and the two-button mouse. But he saw a little further. In an interview with Ars, Collas said that "the combination of the Amiga brand, the available technology at the time, and the passion of the Amiga industry made me feel like there was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for making significant change in the industry and the world."

By 1998, he was losing confidence in Gateway's upper management and their vision for the company. He correctly realized that PCs were becoming a commodity item, and profit margins were going to keep shrinking over time. Without any differentiating technology, Gateway would eventually get squeezed out by smaller firms that could sell identical PCs for less money. Cow-painted boxes could only get you so far.

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When the purchase from Escom was concluded, Collas became the head of Gateway's Amiga Technologies subsidiary. He kept Petro on as a consultant and quickly assembled a new team of engineers, designers, managers, and marketers, as if he was building a brand new company. He hired former Commodore Director of Operating Systems Software Dr. Allan Havemose to head up engineering, Joe Torre (no, not that one) to lead the hardware division, Fleecy Moss to handle developer relations, and Bill McEwen as a sort of marketing and software evangelist (think Guy Kawasaki).

While Collas was assembling his team, Gateway received a torrent of letters from Amiga owners and fans who were desperate to know what the company was going to do with the technology. These letters helped Collas convince his bosses that he was on the right track.

The technology world in 1998 was experiencing tumultuous change. The rise of the Internet in everyday life changed the way people looked at computers. Laptops, once a niche market, were rising in popularity, and the first usable generation of Wi-Fi was about to become ratified as a standard.

It was this environment that shaped Jim Collas' vision. He saw a new line of computers that would span everything from tablets to workstations, all running the same software. He even imagined a standardized method for users to purchase this software digitally. These new Amiga computers could be workstations, game consoles, set-top-boxes, or Internet terminals, or all of them at the same time.

Bringing this vision to life would require a drastic shift away from the traditional Amiga hardware

and software architecture. The first thing it would need was a new operating system kernel: something that was fast and lightweight enough to run on the minimal hardware of a tablet but strong enough to also run graphically intensive applications. Collas found what he was looking for with QNX's Neutrino, a real-time operating system that famously could run an entire 32-bit preemptively multitasking OS with a graphical user interface and a Web browser, all from a single 1.44MB 3.5-inch floppy disk.

But the kernel was not enough to deliver the complete vision. Dr. Havemose drew up plans for what he called the Amiga Operating Environment (OE)—a software layer on top of the kernel that would handle the graphical interface and provide a standardized development platform. Programmers would write to the OE layer, using a high-level language like Java, and their applications could run on any Amiga OE compatible hardware. When Dr. Havemose told Collas about his ideas, Collas thought that "he was either the most brilliant software architect I had ever met, or he was delusional and fooling me." Collas brought in some experienced software architects to look at the plan, and they concluded that the plan was indeed brilliant.

The Amiga Operating Environment was another piece of the puzzle. There was also a plan for an online store, much like today's Apple App Store or Google Play Store, where consumers could buy new Amiga OE applications directly through the Internet.

The first hardware to be prototyped was called the Amiga MCC, which stood for Multimedia Convergence Computer. It was designed to work either as a set-top box and gaming console connected to the television or as a standalone computer with a traditional monitor. The MCC tablet would be the second piece of hardware to be delivered later.

None of this new hardware or software would be directly compatible with the classic Amiga architecture. This concerned some Amiga fans, particularly the ones running companies like Phase5 and Haage & Partner that were selling PowerPC accelerator cards to extend the life of existing Amigas. In fact, the announcement of the Amiga MCC and OE shocked these companies so much that they immediately settled their differences (both companies had been developing incompatible standards for PPC accelerator cards) and agreed to work together to continue developing classic Amiga hardware and software.

Collas, for his part, felt that "the Amiga brand was about revolutionary change in computing." He saw the new MCC devices as being in the spirit of the original Amiga, rather than a direct descendent. The hardware was to be cutting edge, even going so far as to use liquid cooling to overclock industry standard graphics cards.

It was at this point that Fleecy Moss was fired by Gateway for unknown reasons. He immediately announced to the world that he was joining forces with Dave Haynie to develop his own idea of the next-generation Amiga platform, called KOSH (for Kommunity Oriented Software and Hardware). Aside from a number of fanciful blog posts, this never ended up amounting to anything.

As 1998 rolled into 1999 and Gateway (the company dropped the "2000" from its name around this time) continued to work toward its Amiga OE vision, Haage & Partner released AmigaOS 3.5, an official update for classic Amigas. This fixed some bugs from Commodore's final 3.1 release and added some bundled software. The traditional Amiga market was dwindling by this time, but there were still enough people using the old hardware to warrant development.

Then came an announcement that caused an uproar in the Amiga community; some even saw

it as a betrayal. Jim Collas' team revealed that it was switching the OS kernel for Amiga OE from QNX to Linux. He met with Linus Torvalds to discuss his plan, and Linus really liked Collas' ideas. There were even plans for Linus to attend Amiga shows and meet key Amiga community figures.

In retrospect, this was probably the correct choice. Linux, then and now, supported a much more diverse array of hardware and was already gaining significant momentum in the tech industry. But Amiga fans didn't see it that way at the time. They saw Linux as bloated, clunky, and slow, the exact opposite of their beloved Amiga. QNX Neutrino was seen as fast, small, and elegant, and the community had rallied behind it. In fact, QNX itself was surprised and taken aback by the sudden shift in plans.

In response, QNX immediately announced a partnership with Phase5 to develop a QNX Neutrino operating system for Amigas with Phase5 PowerPC accelerator cards, as well as a planned new QNX-based Amiga computer called the AMIRAGE K2. The use of the word "Rage" and all capital letters was seen as a deliberate statement of defiance against Gateway itself, although Phase 5 jokingly said it was pronounced "A-MIRAGE." Unbeknownst to the Amiga community and fans, however, there were much bigger and more troubling conflicts on the horizon.

Jim Collas' ambitious plans for Amiga Technologies was running, as he had predicted, head on into interference from Gateway's conservative upper management. At the center of the controversy was Gateway's new CEO, Jeffrey Weitzen.

Weitzen had come from AT&T and was skeptical of Collas' Amiga vision. Collas felt that he had to fight his own CEO for control of the subsidiary, as Weitzen could potentially torpedo the plan.

Collas worked out a scheme with his own CFO where Amiga Technologies would purchase enough shares from its parent company to get 51-percent ownership and operational autonomy. He hoped that Gateway would not want to shut down the division at that point because it would end up taking a massive write-down for the quarter. Collas was on good terms with Gateway's founder, Ted Waitt, and thought that this would provide him with at least some political protection.

Weitzen, however, played the political game better. He got that CFO to reveal these plans to him, then waited until Ted Waitt was on vacation before calling Jim Collas into his office.

Weitzen told him to sit down. He said that he was planning to sell the Amiga division and that Collas' plans would not be realized. Collas knew that he had lost, so he next sold his Gateway shares and left the company. Ironically, a few quarters later, the stock crashed from \$35 to under \$10, and Weitzen was forced out as CEO. But by then it was too late. Collas' grand vision—the MCC, the Amiga OE, the computers and tablets, the online application store—all vanished into the ether.

Gateway carried through with its plans to sell the Amiga division, but this time there weren't as many takers. Mostly this was due to the fact that Gateway still wanted to retain all of Commodore's old patents, which was the primary reason it had been interested in buying the Amiga in the first place.

The diehard fans in the Amiga community were hanging on, but hope was dwindling. Outside of the PowerPC acceleration boards, there had been no new Amiga computer hardware since the Amiga 1200 and 4000 were released back in 1992. Amiga software companies were struggling as well. Amiga magazines were getting thinner, and some were going out of business completely.

Newtek, the maker of the Video Toaster, had already moved its hardware and software to the Windows platform.

An Amiga 4000 equipped with a dedicated video card and an accelerator board featuring both a 68060 main CPU and 604e PowerPC accelerator chip, running native Amiga software, was still competitive speed-wise with contemporary Windows 98 and Macintosh computers. However, this wasn't a computer you could easily buy—it had to be crafted together from old and new parts, and there was no guarantee that the operating system would ever be updated to be fully PowerPC native. It was also expensive, as the volumes for these add-on boards were low.

At the same time, the idea of a brand-new, revolutionary Amiga architecture as promised by Gateway was now just as far away as it had ever been. Petro Tyschtschenko had offered to buy the division himself, but he could not find enough money to do so. He was asked by Gateway to find a new buyer. Who would pick up the torch and carry on with this dream?

The people who decided to do that were ex-Gateway employees who had been bitten by the Amiga bug during their brief time with the company. Bill McEwen (the technology evangelist) and Fleecy Moss (the former developer relations manager) joined forces and created a startup they called Amino Development. Together they raised \$5 million from venture capitalists.

How did a couple of mid-level Gateway employees manage to get this kind of money? It wasn't difficult. This was late 1999, and the Internet "Dotcom" bubble was heating up. Investors were happy to throw money at anything remotely computer or Internet-related, and Amino Development promised to be both of those things.

Amino Development took its \$5 million and

purchased all the non-patent portions of Amiga Technologies from Gateway. It then immediately changed the name of the company to Amiga Technologies, Inc.

The deal was closed at the final hour on the last day of December 1999. The old millennium was coming to an end. There was a feeling in the air, something that Federal Reserve Chairman Allan Greenspan had called "irrational exuberance." It was a feeling that anything was possible.

For the first time since a group of dreamers led by Jay Miner had banded together in 1982 to create something amazing, Amiga was an independent company again. The little computer that could had survived a rocky stewardship under Commodore, Escom, and then Gateway, but now it was on its own.

The future was wide open. Surely the next millennium would usher in something even more amazing. With Internet and computer companies' stock prices soaring, it seemed like the sky was the limit, even for the Amiga.

What could go wrong?

(to be continued)

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Dues are \$12 for 12 months. New members receive a "New Member Disk" containing a number of useful Commodore 8-bit utilities. Members receive a subscription to The Interface newsletter, access to the public domain disk library, technical assistance, and reduced prices on selected software/hardware.

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