

Commodore: What If?

It doesn't happen every month, but every so once in a while there is some new(ish) information out there in the Amiga-and-related world to report. First off is a recent article on a patent dispute claimed to have killed Commodore and Amiga.

<https://plus.google.com/110412141990454266397/posts/dbipY1GJoGv>

In case you don't feel like the gymnastic typing the link requires, the article is linked from Amiga.org, but I'll also give you the gist. Basically Commodore was betting all on its CD-32 game console, hoping it would be enough of a cash cow to keep the company going, but shortly before the console's release in the USA, there was an injunction regarding a patent held by the Cadtrack company on the "XOR cursor" (regarding cursors and pointers that are drawn and erased by creating an "XOR" operation to reverse the colors of the background over which the cursor appears), where the judge ruled in favor of Cadtrack. Commodore had to pay up 10 million that it didn't have after spending all to build a bunch of CD-32 machines, so the sale of the console was barred in the USA. Some made it into the country by bypassing the

regular sales channels, but the intended sales push was cut off, tons of stock sat at the factories, and the lost revenue left Commodore unable to pay their bills, forcing them to declare bankruptcy.

The implication of the article is that Commodore might still be rolling today if not for this particular misstep. I'm a little skeptical of the whole deal myself. First off, I was under the impression that the Amiga chipset used a hardware sprite for its mouse cursor, to which the patent wouldn't necessarily apply. There are others that might fall under the patent, such as cursors appearing in other software (or text cursors, or other on-screen markers), though exactly what is or isn't considered is unknown to me, or if Commodore was held



responsible for the actions of a third party software maker. It does make for a good example of the problem with patents, especially when applied to intangible things

such as concepts. The idea of XOR applied to graphics and cursors has been around about as long as cursors and graphics have existed. The patent holders almost certainly didn't invent the concept, but they were the first to successfully patent it and start beating other companies over the head with it for licensing gain. Commodore and the CD-32 were just unlucky enough to get caught in the net, and unable to successfully dispute the case.

I and others have occasionally played the "What if Commodore hadn't died out?" game, and this article adds a new hypothetical wrinkle, that of "What if there were no impediments to the CD-32's US release?" The CD-32 managed to be reasonably successful in Europe, where release was not blocked and the Amiga name carried greater weight. The situation was not identical in the US, so I have my doubts if Commodore would have been saved even if it could sell CD-32s wherever it wanted. To give an example, hardly any of the new game consoles available around that "half-generational" period, such as the CD-1, 3D0, and Atari Jaguar, were particularly successful as gamers seemed content to wait a year or two for Sony's first Playstation to come out instead. It seems unlikely Commodore's CD-32 would be any different, though it did have an advantage of a large library of "shovelware" Amiga games and

programmers already familiar with the hardware. Perhaps the CD-32 didn't need to be a giant success, and just needed to sell enough units to keep Commodore's doors open long enough for the next system or the next production run. It seems like Commodore was limping through much of the 1990s, so perhaps the sales may just have been prolonging the inevitable, with Commodore hypothetically declaring bankruptcy in 1996 or '97 instead of '94.

Then again, they were developing the "Hombre" RISC chipset at the time, which by many accounts may have been geared more toward gaming than desktop systems. Perhaps Commodore could have wormed its way into the home video game market with the CD-32, then later an Hombre-based console. It seems unlikely on the surface, but considering it's a market that started with Atari, Mattel, Coleco, and Magnavox, and currently runs with Sony, Nintendo, and Microsoft, a name like "Commodore" in the lineup doesn't seem quite so out of place now. The video game market is often a harsher competition than the home computer market, so I don't know how long Commodore would be able to hold on to it. I'd wager that, had Commodore not died out, we'd see a very different product

line as they chase after consumer bases. Much like how Apple is more about i-devices and music sales than Macintosh computers nowadays, the hypothetical Commodore of today could easily be about game consoles, or media players, or operating system software for smartphones with



nary a thought to desktop or laptop or palmtop computers. Amigas and Amiga-like systems available today are so familiar thanks in no small part to years of stagnation.

Whether that's a nostalgic comfort or not for Amiga fans is up for debate.

While I've dwelled on the first subject a bit much, there is other news in Amiga circles. Hyperion has been pushing along with its "AmigaONE" line of systems. Available now (and/or soon) is the AmigaONE 500, a complete system based on the SAM460 board, the AmigaONE X1000, a system with impressive hardware and an equally impressive (in the bad way) asking price, and finally an announced Amiga OS-running netbook, supposed to sell for somewhere between 300 to 500 dollars. I've been on the MorphOS side (AKA blue trolls) for some years now, but an inexpensive-enough netbook might sway me to try out OS4. It can run alongside the Mac G4 laptop running MorphOS I'd like to get, as well as my Pegasos and old-but-managing Amiga 4000. In any case, the future of the Amiga family looks to be an interesting one, even if it probably looks nothing like whatever the future of Commodore from some alternate time-line turned out to be.

...by Eric Schwartz
from the AmiTech Gazette,
November 2011

January Calendar

No Meetings in January

January 28 — Newsletter Deadline — 8:00 AM

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