May 2020

Projects in a Time of Isolation

Hello everyone, and welcome to what passes for an apocalypse these days. We shall be following health guidelines this month, which means we won't be having a traditional meeting this month. Instead, our President (the group one, not the orange-tinted one) is setting up a virtual AmiTech meeting on Discord, to take place at the usual time. You will need to set up your own Discord account (at https://discordapp.com for most current web browsers, or as an app on your smartphone or tablet), then send an email to Prez Mike Barclay for an invite to the AmiTech chat. Hopefully we can shake out the issues quickly enough, and potentially, once this terrible time has passed, and we can hold meetings in person again, we can use Discord to allow absent or distant members to participate as well in some form. Time will tell.

Last month I teased a story, one ultimately less interesting than the hype. In February, back in the beforetime, I lost my trusty tablet (Samsung Galaxy Tab S3), in more ways than one. The tablet had gone missing, misplaced actually, Looking for it, I discovered that a heavy object had been dropped on it, cracking the screen apparently hitting with enough force to bend the casing a bit. The tablet still worked, at least sort of, but the broken screen didn't any more. After a short cursing tirade, I pondered my next move—to repair or replace the tablet. In the meantime, I notified the people who support my artistic work through Patreon that some works would be delayed, the stuff that I was using the tablet to do obviously. In my first bit of good fortune, I was able to get the busted tablet's screen working BARELY enough (turns out the touch screen no longer worked, but the pen input still did.) to hook it up to my laptop and back up every file I possibly could to a portable terabyte hard drive. I also ordered a charging cable so I could bring my first tablet (Samsung Galaxy Note 10.1), the broken one's predecessor, online again after years. I managed to do so, but the old thing was from around 2013-2014, which in tablet terms might as well have been from World War II, not unlike being used to working with a decked-out Amiga 4000 with a 68060 CPU, then dropping back to a stock A500. Its software still worked, albeit slowly, and most of it refused to update to current versions, as said versions no longer supported that hardware. Still, it helped out when I needed it, I just couldn't expect a decent game or YouTube video out of it anymore.

At least I was clever enough to use the opportunity to back up all files on the old tablet just as I did on the other one. While this was going on, I received a most pleasant surprise. A few of my patrons asked me what I needed to replace my broken tablet, offering to donate. I was thrown back by this—I certainly was not asking for money—all I did was state that the tablet was broken, and that it would cause delays, and I have never been the type to ask for handouts or set up a GoFundMe page in any but the most dire emergencies. But the offers came regardless, and after some back-and forth, I would receive enough funds to pay for a brand new tablet (the Samsung Galaxy S6, the best pro-grade Android tablet available at the time, much like my previous tablet was in its time, as well as the one before that) and aside from some annoyances at changes in technology, software, and interfaces seemingly just for the sake of change, it is the best possible outcome to what was originally a big mess.

This all has made me acutely aware of how fortunate I am to have people around me will to help in such a profound way. I'm doing my best not to take such good fortune for granted, much like how my current work isn't strongly affected by this pandemic we're living through, as I work from home already, although I can assume the longer this situation keeps up, more and more people will be less willing or able to kick in a few bucks for the luxury of comics of cartoon skunks.

While I have the money, I've worked to give back to those who need help of their own, such as charities working to COVID-related aid.

This time in barely-changed-for-me isolation has given me the opportunity to work on a thing or two I might not have otherwise, even though I wanted to. I have been, less-than-successfully up to this point, been trying to build a custom Amiga Kickstart ROM 3.9 file for use in Raspberry Pi emulation. At the previous meeting held at the Prez's place, I found the ROMs I built using the Romsplit and Remus utilities didn't work at all. Going back to the drawing board, I re-read the tutorials and tried again, Seeming with more success, as I achieved a boot screen on one emulator. But I

have yet to fully test it out in its intended place.

My other Amiga project is the construction of the CD-32, 'Kickass Edition.' One part was getting my NTSC CD-32 re-capped by Chris, which has been done, and is waiting to be picked up at a time when the land is not ravaged by plague. In the meantime, I have a PAL CD-32, which I may send in for re-capping at a later time.

Second, I have upgraded my TerribleFire TF328 Ram + IDE board to a new TF330, which brings a 50 Mhz 68030 CPU into the mix. (I think I can manage with that, as opposed to going for a 68060 or Vampire CPU.) Initial testing looks very good, using the "Run the intro to 'Frontier: Elite II' and see how smooth it looks" benchmark.

Finally, I found a good way to attach it to a modern LCD TV/monitor. Those who have been paying attention have probably noticed I've messed with various scan converters and adapters, with varying amounts of success, but never a complete success, until now it seems. I was able to score a RetroTINK 2X SCART from http://www.retrotink.com (about $100 with shipping and all, but much cheaper than many comparable devices). RetroTINK sells scan doublers/converters designed for using game consoles and other devices on modern screens with a minimum of fuss and adjustment. In this case, I connect the Amiga to the device with an Amiga-toSCART cable, which can be found on Ebay or through shops like AmigaKit, and from the device to your screen via HDMI. Both the HDMI and SCART cables carry RGB signals and sound, so the resulting picture is

sharp. It's worth noting that the output is not full 1080P or 720P, but 480P, or 576P for a PAL signal, so you might want to check what your TV or monitor will accept. I was pleased that my LCD TV handled it fine, including the progressive PAL signal. The main benefit to this minimal conversion is a low latency, meaning the RetroTINK device adds almost no lag to the picture at all, which is good if you want to play games. (If there's any lag, blame the monitor instead.) I would strongly recommend the RetroTINK 2X device for anyone wanting to hook an Amiga to a modern LCD monitor, at least for the NTSC or PAL screen modes. I wouldn't advise feeding other resolutions or scan rates through it, so this is best for older systems and ones you intend to use primarily for gaming, but in that capacity, it excels.

Good luck to all of you out there. Stay strong, safe, and healthy where possible, and hopefully we can connect for a virtual AmiTech meeting. I'll see you there.

…Eric Schwartz
From The AmiTech Gazette,
Dayton, Ohio, April 2020

A Pleasant Surprise From China

A few months ago I ordered a $20 cell-phone car mount (the kind that latches onto the air vent) on Amazon by a Chinese company called Vicseed. It's actually pretty nice, fits well, and is very sturdy. A note in the box encouraged me to

"register" my purchase so I did. That was the end of it, I thought.

Out of the blue I received an email from an individual at Vicseed (using a Gmail address) telling me that I was a "VIP Member" (yeah, right!) And they would send me a "mystery gift" if only I would supply my mailing address. Of course I smelled a total scam and no way was I going to release personal info to this hacker. I noticed he used the unique email address I supplied only to Vicseed, so this fact and an unhealthy curiosity to play the game led me to reply with my mailing address.

Ten days later I received a package from China Post containing their deluxe cell-phone mount with wireless charging. I looked it up on Amazon and it sells for $50! It's a lovely piece of tech, with motorized, robotic phone-grabber arms, fits my Pixel 3 perfectly, and charges while in the mount. Swwweeettt!

I am reminded of the time I left a 3-star review of a Chinese 12V-USB charger dohicky and the company sent a free replacement out of the blue. Oh wait, correction, they sent FOUR of them!!!

I'm guessing these suppliers are desparate to establish their brand names on Amazon, especially in Western markets and are going out of their way to build good will. I'm selfishly willing to go along with their temporary largesse for now.

…Kevin Hisel
From the Status Register,
Champaign-Urbana, Illinois,
April 2020

May Meeting — Canceled

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