The Golden Age Arcade Historian

A blog dedicted to the history of arcade video games from the bronze and golden ages (1971-1984).

Thursday, November 20, 2014

Softape History - Part I (plus a review of Atari: Game Over)

A few weeks back, I posted an all-too-brief history of Programma International – one of the earliest and largest *Apple II* software publishers. Today I cover an even earlier company that is in some ways even more interesting – Softape. Once again, this post will be more of a very brief sketch rather than a proper history and will surely not come close to doing the company justice and I hope that others will take up the mantle and flesh out more of the details of this sadly unappreciated company.

The above image, and many others, were taken from http://www.artscipub.com/history/, which also includes more information on Softape

Setting the Stage

Softape was founded in late 1977, a key year in personal computer history. According to a number of histories, the personal computer industry was still in its infancy at the beginning of 1977. While this is arguably true, I would actually argue that it would be more accurate to say that it was in its teenage years. Contrary to popular belief, personal computers did not start with the *Apple II*, at least not if we define "personal computer" as a computer marketed for personal (rather than corporate or institutional) use. While they are largely forgotten today, there were many personal computers (or microcomputers as many called them at the time) that appeared prior to mid-1977. The June, 1977 issue of *Byte* for instance, featured ads for the *Apple II,* the *IMSAI 8080*, the *Sol 20* (Processor Technology of Berkeley), the *Poly 88* (Polymorphic Systems, Santa Barbara), the *Altair 8800b* and *680b* (MITS, Albuquerque), the *Z-2* (Cromemco, Mountain View), the *SWTPC 6800* (Southwest Technical Products, San Antonio), the *OSI Challenge* (Ohio Scientific Instruments, Hiram OH), the *Equinox 100* (Parasitic Engineering, Albany), the *Compucolor 8001* (Compucolor Corp, Norcross GA), the *FD-8* (Midwest Scientific Instruments, Olathe KS), the *Xitan Alpha-1* (Technical Design Labs, Princeton), and machines by Denver's *digital group*, as well as reviews of the *KIM 1* and the *Noval 760* (the latter produced by a division of Gremlin Industries – yes THAT Gremlin - and co-designed by one of the designers of **Blockade** and other arcade games). And personal computers didn't start with the Apple I either, or even the Altair 8800 (though the Altari could be credited with launching the revolution). A handful of other kits, projects, and machines appeared earlier, such as the *Mark-8* and the *Scelbi 8H.* Some trace personal computers all the way back to the *ECHO IV* in 1967, or even earlier)

personal computers all the way back to the *ECHO IV* in 1967, or even earlier).

Sadly, these machines have been largely ignored in most computer histories. Two exceptions are Paul Frieberger and Michael Swaine's *Fire in the Valley: The Making of the Personal Computer* and *Stan Veit's History of the Personal Computer*. While both are outstanding, I found that the former left me wanting, really only serving to whet my appetite for more information on these early machines. By far, the best source of info I've found about these seminal companies and machines is Stan Veit's wonderful book. It certainly isn't the best-written book on personal computer history (though neither is it poorly written), but it may well be my favorite. Aside from the fact that these machines were mostly hobbyist kits, one reason they have been forgotten is that they didn't last. In 1977, however, three PCs appeared that did: the *Apple II* (introduced in April and first sold in June), the *TRS-80* (released in August), and the *Commodore PET* (released in October). Unlike most (though not all) early PCs, these machines were (relatively at least) user friendly and sold well. It was in this milieu that Softape appeared on the scene.

The History of Softape

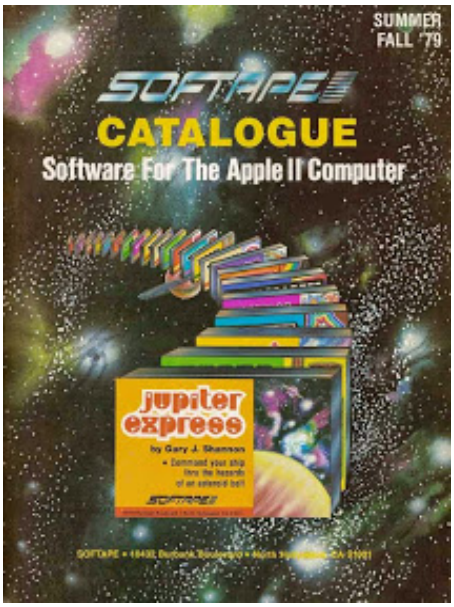
Why are all these people smiling? It's because the gentleman on the left, Gary Koffler, is giving them a fantastic demonstration of Appletalker and Apple-Lis'ner. He was playing a game of tic-tac-toe with the Apple (on a large-screen TV) using the voice synthesizer and voice recognition packages developed by Bob Bishop and Bill Depew. Impressive! If you've got an Apple . . . then send off for their catalog, by all means. Softape, 10756 Vanowen, No. Hollywood, CA 91605.

Softape was the brainchild of three people: William V. Smith, Bill DePew, and Gary Koffler, all of whom had attended John Burroughs High School in Burbank (though none of them realized this fact when they first met). Smith graduated from high school in 1974 and earned an AA degree from Los Angeles Valley College in 1977 (an interesting aside that has nothing to do with computers or computer games - Smith's grandmother was Beatrice Roberts, a model, dancer, Miss America finalist, actress [she played Queen Azura in a 1938 *Flash Gordon* serial], wife of Robert Ripley [of *Believe It or Not* fame], and mistress to producer Louis B. Mayer [the second M in MGM]). More relevant to our purposes was Smith's first encounter with computers, which came in 1976 or 1977 when he saw an article in *Popular Science* detailing how to build an S-100 bus computer (the hardware bus used in the *Altair* 8800 and other early PCs). After taking a computer class at Los Angeles Valley College in 1977, Smith and his best friend, Dave Mosher, built the computer, with the help of the owner of *The Byte Shop* in Pasadena[1] and parts cobbled together from various computer manufacturers. Realizing that other people had invested similar time and effort (not to mention money) in computers of their own and needed a way to protect them, Smith and Mosher formed a company called International Computer Accessories that sold clear Plexiglas computer covers nationwide for machines like the Imsai and Byt-8 (a personal computer created and sold by *Byte Shop* founder Paul Terrell). Meanwhile, Mosher had taken another job selling fish and fish supplies to aquariums and pet stores. While selling his products, Mosher met another aquarium-supply salesman named Gary Koffler, who also collected and traded *Apple II* software on cassette. After Dave told Smith about Koffler, the two met and formed an instant connection inspired by their shared love of computers. They quickly wrote a program called *Rollin' On the River* that Koffler began trading with his many computer contacts, one of whom another *Apple II* enthusiast named Bill DePew. DePew had graduated from John Burroughs High in 1972 before briefly attending UCLA. He also had an uncanny ability to learn new things quickly. The three met at DePew's house in Burbank and decided to start a company to make products for the *Apple II*, something few companies were doing for the still relatively new computer. The three initially planned to offer both software (programs Koffler had collected plus others written by DePew) and hardware (like a thermostat they found that connected to the *Apple II*'s game port). Calling their company Softech, and funded by profits from Smith's Plexiglas cover business as well as a vending route he owned, they rented a 900-square-foot building on Vanowen Street in North Hollywood for $195 a month and went into business, with Smith handling the marketing, accounting, and office management, Koffler heading up sales, and DePew developing the software (Debbie Jorman was the office assistant).

Softech's first product was something called the Software Exchange (later the Softape Software Exchange), which Softape's winter 1978 catalog described as follows:

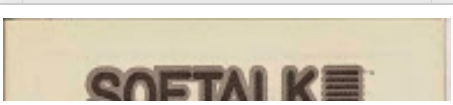
> The largest problem in personal computing today is the lack of organization and distribution of software. Much software exists, but it is not readily obtainable, Softape is committed to filling this void. Since you had the insight to join the microcomputer revolution, we have no doubt that you will recognize the value of this opportunity. The Softape Software Exchange was created to interface the microcomputer *owner* and the microcomputer *programmer*. Through the exchange every kind of program will be available quickly and inexpensively. Programmers, both novice and professional, can have their software distributed nationally. If the software is "top notch" and of sufficient interest, Softape will contact you about royalties. No program will be distributed until the author has given his permission, and a mutually beneficial agreement has been agreed upon.

After paying a $20 membership fee, customers could order software "modules" on cassette for $2 each. The first title, *Module 1*, included three games: *Advanced Dragon Maze* (a lo-res maze game by Gary Shannon), *Digital Derby* (a lo-res horse racing game), and *Saucer War* (a two-player space combat game). William Smith describes *Module 1* as "the first program available nationwide for the Apple II". While I am not sure this is true, it was likely among the first. The group mailed a copy of the program to every *Apple II* retail store they knew of, a task that was made easier by Apple, who had kindly provided them with pre-printed labels, along with its dealer and warranty lists (they bought one of the first 5 MB hard drives from Corvus Systems to store them). At one point, Softech even paid to fly Steve Wozniak down to Burbank to attend a club meeting, after which he retired to Smith's house to watch *Battlestar Gallactica*.



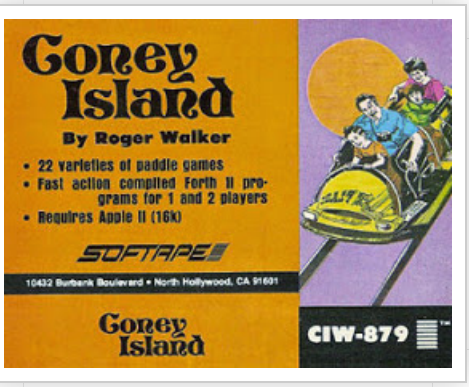
Just as they got started, however, a company from San Diego contacted them and told them that they were already using the name Softech so the group changed the name to Softape, which had nothing to do with a downy gorilla, but rather referred to the fact that they made

software on cassette tape (the standard method of distributing software at the time). In an effort to save money, the fledgling company cut corners whenever it could. Rather than buying an expensive tape duplicator, Bill DePew created an audio bridge that allowed them to make multiple copies of a tape at once. (in later years, Softape partnered with GRT Corporation, a large music tape and record manufacturer with more extensive duplication facilities). Instead of advertising in national magazines like *Byte, Creative Computing*, or the *Apple II* magazines that were just beginning to appear on the scene, Softape marketed its product directly via a newsletter they created called *Softalk*.



The *Softape Software Exchange* grew to include at least eight modules with utility and productivity software in addition to games. Eventually, however, Softape found that some programs like DePew's blackjack game *Apple 21* and Bob Bishop's *Music Kaleidoscope* merited release as stand-alone products, which they sold for $9.95. While these may seem like "bargain basement" prices compared to those of Apple programs of the early '80s, it was actually fairly standard pricing for the cassette-based programs of the time, which rarely sold for more than $15-20 (with the exception of business software). In its relatively brief life, Softape released at least 75 programs for the *Apple II* (and possibly many more). Among them were graphics programs (*Etch a Sketch*), music programs (*Appleodion*), utilities (*Dump/Restore*), educational programs (*Typing Tutor*) a Forth interpreter (*Forth][*) and over 50 games. It also produced a handful of titles for other systems like the *TRS 80*. Among the more interesting (or at least interesting sounding) games were *Baseball Fever* (a full color baseball simulation), *Coney Island* (featuring 22 different ball-and-paddle games), *Journey* (a little-known text adventure that may not have been released), and

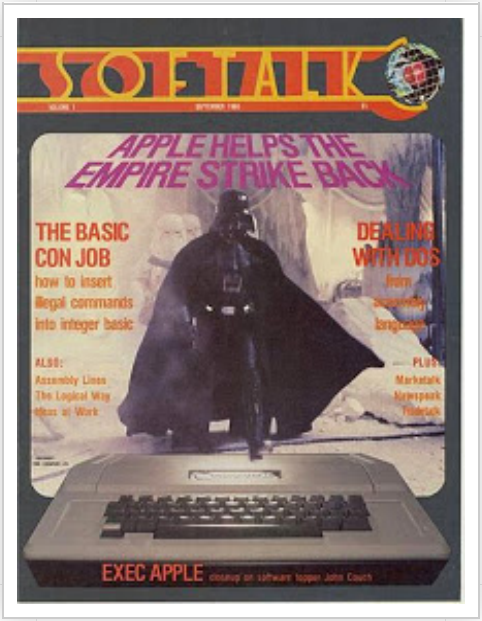
Microgammon. I'm not sure what their most popular games were, since they mostly came out before *Softalk's* bestseller lists and other lists, but my guesses would be *Microgammon, Photar*, *Planetoids*, *Star Mines*, *Apple 21,* and *Best of Bishop* (which combined *Rocket Pilot, Space Maze, Star Wars, Saucer Invasion, Apple-Vision*, and *Dynamic Bouncer*).



Its most groundbreaking program may have been *Apple-Talker/Apple Listener,* perhaps the earliest speech synthesis/voice recognition program for the *Apple II*. Softape used the technology in programs like *Tic-Tac-Talker* (a talking version of tic-tac-toe with voice control). The company's most ambitious effort was probably *Magic Window*, a full-function word processor created by Gary Shannon and Bill DePew and released in 1982 under the Artsci/Softape label. Its most unusual feature was that the onscreen cursor actually stayed still while the virtual "paper" moved (like an old school typewriter). The program was voted #1 Word Processor of 1981 (according to Softalk) and came with an optional spell checker (*Magic Words*) and a mail merge program (*Magic Mailer*).

In addition to the software, the company also made hardware, like the Bright Pen (a light pen input device that they also used in games like *Bright Pen Craps),* Reset Guard (which prevented *Apple II* users from inadvertently hitting the machine's reset key), and the Axiom-820 printer. One of the company's greatest legacies was not a program, but a magazine. After three issues, the *Softalk* newsletter was converted into a full-scale color magazine (and, IMO, one of the best *Apple II* magazines on the market) in July, 1980 under the direction of William Smith, Bill DePew, and Margo Tommervic. In 1979, Tommervic, then a freelance textbook editor, won $15,000 on the gameshow *Password*. She and her husband Al, an editor at *Variety*, decided to use the money to purchase a TRS-80 microcomputer. After a rude Radio Shack salesperson chided Al for smoking his pipe in the store, however, the two left and bought an Apple instead. Margot became an instant computer addict and gamer. While visiting Rainbow Computing (an early computer retailer) she saw an ad for a new adventure game called *Mystery House* from On-Line Systems, offering a prize for the first person to finish it. When the game went on sale that Friday, Margot was there to purchase a copy and by noon the next day she had solved it. Around this time, Tommervic visited Softape (whose offices were a short distance from where she lived) to buy a copy of *Magic Window*. Within a few days, she and Smith agreed to start a new company to publish *Softalk* as a full-scale glossy magazine with Tommervic (who had used the rest of her *Password* winnings to help finance the venture) as Editor, Smith as Advertising Manager, and Bill DePew as Technical Editor. Published from September, 1980 until August, 1984, *Softalk* grew to over 400 pages at its peak and included how-to articles, industry news, product reviews, fiction, and monthly games and

contests (one asked readers to count the number of turkeys hidden throughout the issue, another asked readers to guess the identity of Lord British, based on clues provided in each issue). For the video game historian (or at least this video game historian), two features stand out. One was the monthly bestseller lists for software in various categories, based on actual retailer sales figures. The other was the monthly “Exec” column, which featured an in-depth history/profile of a single company.



Overall, Softape/Artsci sold over 100,000 cassettes and 200,000 disks and had annual sales of over $3 million. Unfortunately it never made the transition to the IBM PC (it did try its hand at a few programs for the Macintosh, but it never really panned out), and disappeared along with the *Apple II* itself (in addition, many of its programmers were hired away by Apple). Eventually, the three partners had a falling out (involving, in part, a woman). DePew and Smith renamed the company Artsci while Koffler went to work for DataMost (whose founder Dave Gordon was an early friend and customer). Bill Depew died on August 2, 2011 in Burbank. In our

The Artsci crew in 1983

Bonus - Automated Dress Pattern, 1978

This is only tangentially related to Softape. The image below is from the September, 1978 issue of *Interface Age*. It is for an *Apple II* dress pattern program written by William V. Smith and Paul Essick. The pattern was available from McCall's Dress Pattern Company and could be printed on

a 132 column printer.
The interesting thing to me, however, is the medium. The program was distributed on "floppy ROM". I can't imagine that anybody reading this wouldn't know what a record is (even people born after they were supplanted by CDs and mp3s generally know what they are). But if you weren't around during the record era, you may not remember these things. They were "records" printed on flexible plastic that were often distributed as promotional items in magazines or other media (there were even cardboard records that could be cut out of the back of cereal boxes). Even less known is that they were used to distribute computer software, though only rarely. In a way, this isn't surprising. The data from the record was read in through the cassette input port, but the port could be used with any audio source (the data is the same no matter what source it comes from). Anyway, I thought it was an interesting sidelight of computer history.

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[1] According to Smith, this was none other than yoga master, Guru Prem Singh Khalsa

Review - Atari: Game Over

Many of you probably know this, but today marked the release of *Atari: Game Over,* a documentary about the infamous E.T. cartridge burial in Alamogordo, New Mexico. This thing has been the subject of much discussion in the last several months. I just finished watching it and thought I'd post a few comments. (NOTE there are some "spoilers" below, though if you've paid any attention to this story, they really don't spoil anything as there isn't really anything to spoil)

I have to admit, that I was actually dreading seeing this thing. From what I had seen I knew what I was expecting and it wasn't good. What I was expecting was that they would dig up the site and find a number of different cartridges and other items, including some E.T. cartridges. Actually, I basically already knew that was what they'd find, since I'd read as much elsewhere and was already convinced that that was what was buried there.

What I feared is that they would then say that the "myth" had been proven true after all and that all those people who said it wasn't true would now have to eat crow (followed by online attacks on the E.T. deniers as a bunch of buffoons or accusations that they "refused to believe" the obvious evidence and continued to cling to their unfalsifiable myth claims)