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     Interviewer:   Andrew Kerr (kerrjnr)
SC-3000 Celebrity:   Michael Howard
     Notable Work:   The House
                     Help!
                     More Than 50 Programs For The SEGA SC-3000!!
                     Teach Yourself BASIC Games Programming
   Interview Date:   3rd - 5th June 2008
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AK> You're definitely a celebrity in New Zealand SC-3000 circles but, for our international readers, could you start by giving us a little background on your involvement with the SEGA SC-3000 and why you got a SEGA SC-3000 instead of one of the other, more popular computers of the time such as a Commodore, Spectrum or Apple?

MH> I was at Auckland Uni in Auckland, New Zealand, and had always been interested in computers. My dad saw an ad in the paper for SEGA programmers, and suggested I apply for the job. Heck, why not?! So he and I wrote a synopsis of my background and I went for an interview at Grandstand, the SEGA distributors in Newmarket, Auckland. I spoke mainly with Grandstand's Phil Kenyon. Phil showed me a list of programs that needed writing, and one was a simple typing practice tool. I got the job doing programming work and tech support for the SEGA SC-3000. I walked out of the interview with an SC-3000 and a very rough tech document under my arm. That night I started playing around with sprites and sound!

AK> Did you own any computers prior and what have you owned since?

MH> Oh yeah – mainly a ZX-81! I learned Z80 assembly language on that thing, and I think that's what helped Kenyon decide to hire me.

AK> What additional SEGA hardware did you own?

MH> I had both joystick types and I had the SEGA monitor. That's about it!

AK> What impressed you most about the SC-3000?

MH> It was very easy to program, especially in Z80 assembly.

AK> What do you think was the SC-3000's biggest limitation?

MH> Software – that was the #1 issue by far. We were up against the likes of Atari and Commodore who had a huge software base.

AK> What were the outstanding cartridges/cassettes/discs available for the SC-3000 and what made them great?

MH> I never played any of the cartridge games. It's not because I didn't like any of them, it's mainly because I had no time and I knew that if I started a game I would not put it down.

AK> From memory, were there any particular games that inspired you to write your own games either for the SC-3000 or any other platform?

MH> I loved numerous games on the ZX Spectrum. For all of its weaknesses, it was a stunning success because so much software was written for it. if there's only one thing that can be learned from this, it's that software makes a platform. If you don't have the software, no matter how good the hardware is, you're sunk. My favorite games are probably Elite (the ZX Spectrum version was OK, but the Amstrad version rocked, as did the PC version) and Knightlore (anything from Ultimate [now Rare], in fact!) on the Speccy.

AK> What was your programming background at the time and how did you adjust to programming for the SC-3000?

MH> I was totally self taught, I just picked up a couple of books, read a bunch of magazines and learned by doing. I'm a big fan of learning this way: pick something you want to do, and write it. My favorite piece of code at the time was a game of Defender I wrote in Z80 assembly language on the ZX-81. A 1K ZX-81 :-)

AK> What was the most memorable piece of work you produced for the SC-3000 and why?

MH> To this day I still love "The House" – it was quirky and bit silly, but it made good use of assembly where needed, especially in the area of sound and sprites. It took me over a week to build the opening screen!

AK> How did the opportunity to produce the book "More Than 50 Programs..." present itself?

MH> The idea for the book was mine. The Kenyon's (Paul and Steve, and to a lesser extent Les) liked the idea of the book, mainly because I had already written a whole bunch of code to show off the SC-3000. So the book was pretty much no-brainer. The cover for the book was another example of wackiness: you'll notice a Purple People Eater on the front, that's a shout out to "The House" and the cat was modeled on my cat named Merlin.

AK> What was your approach to developing a game back then and, on average, how long did the whole process take?

MH> I had no process other than a few scratched notes, which often ran to a dozen pages, with design ideas and just random thoughts. I always had a pen and paper by my bed, just in case I had an idea in the middle of the night. Funnily enough, I still have a pen and paper at the side of the bed!

AK> Did you ever collaborate with anyone to develop a SC-3000 game and either way, what was the reason behind that?

MH> I was always very much of a loner – in fact I don't think many of the developers knew any of the other developers in NZ at the time. That was fine by me. I'm still a bit of a loner at times when it comes to writing stuff. But with that said, all the software and books I have written while at Microsoft have been with others. How things change!

AK> How did you go about testing the games you developed?

MH> Testing was pretty simple. I would give the programs to other people to play with. So it was more than just bug hunting, people also gave me tons of usability and playability feedback.

AK> Who managed the duplication and marketing once you'd completed development?

MH> Duplication and marketing was solely by Grandstand, there was literally a high-speed cassette duping machine out the back! And most marketing was done through the SEGA magazine.

AK> What were the biggest challenges getting a game out to the market?

MH> There really were none. Grandstand was *IT* and they were *the* SEGA people, so everyone came to Grandstand indirectly to buy their hardware and software.

AK> Was there ever the possibility of you marketing your software outside of New Zealand?

MH> I really don't know – I know at one point there was talk of cross-pollinating software to and from Australia (John Sands) but I don't think it ever took off, which is a real shame.

AK> Were there any eagerly anticipated games you were aware of that, due to the decline in local support for the SC-3000, never made it to market?

MH> I started on my dream game called "Gravmur's Gambit," it was a role-playing game that required a hard disk to run because it would load data off the disk as the game played. I had the map all drawn up, the sprites developed and basic game play done. The opening screen was done too. But to be honest the game was never completed because of two things; first, the world moved along and second I really needed to spend more time at Auckland Uni!

AK> What was the biggest contribution to the SC-3000's decline?

MH> To be honest, I don't know. I was (and still am) a geek, so that kind of stuff never really interested me that much at the time. But with that said there was a definite shift within Grandstand once the Amstrad line of computers came out. Not so much the CPC-464, but the CPC-6128 was a killer machine. You could feel the change within Grandstand when one morning I went into work, and Les Kenyon came in with a parcel under his arm: it was a CPC-464 and a game of Sorcery from Virgin Games. He loaded it up and everyone was amazed at the game play. I think that really sounded the end of the SC-3000.

AK> In your opinion, did piracy affect the SC-3000 like it did the other popular 8-bit platforms?

MH> I don't think so – there was clearly some, but the base of users was never really there to create "game swapping clubs" or anything like that.

AK> What did you do after the SEGA Market dried up? Did you move on to programming for other platforms? Which ones?

MH> Wow how things changed. I think I owe a lot to the SC-3000, my time at Grandstand taught me a great deal about customers, providing tech support, delivering software, doing trade shows and generally being in business. Grandstand was a very small company, led by the Kenyon's and by Bill Fenton. Fenton was in the toy market, so the collaboration of Grandstand and Fenton was a pretty good retail fit and I learned a lot from that. I stayed with Grandstand when the company took on the Amstrad line as I was of course very happy that the CPC and PCW range used a Z80! I wrote the Amstrad demo that ran in all the stores

in NZ. It was fun to write. From there Grandstand moved to take on the Amstrad brand name but still at the same location in Newmarket, SEGA was now basically a memory. After a couple of years Brandt Corp. took over the Amstrad computer line because Brandt did the Amstrad audio line so it made sense to consolidate to just one distributor. So I moved to Brandt mainly doing tech support for the Amstrad PCs. Amstrad starting bundling Microsoft Word and Microsoft Windows, so I started cutting my Microsoft teeth at Brandt. Then things changed again, and Brimaur (named after the owners, Brian and Maureen Eardly-Wilmott) who were the Microsoft distributors in NZ hired me, again to work on tech support, mainly for Windows and the C compiler. Finally, Microsoft moved directly into NZ, and Brimaur became one of three Microsoft distributors in NZ. I was told that I could not go to Microsoft, so I resigned from Brimaur and took up a job at Microsoft NZ. At MS NZ I moved from tech support to consulting, and then after a few years I moved to the US to work at Microsoft Corp in Redmond, where I work exclusively on software security. And funnily enough, I have co-authored a number of books on the subject!

AK> Are you still in touch with anyone you met directly through your association with the SC-3000?

MH> I have talked to Phil Kenyon on email a few times, he's living in New Jersey now, his story is pretty colorful too (pun intended).

AK> Is there any substance to the rumour that Microsoft has a SC3000.NET library in the works? ☺

MH> Of course, we have an army of developers working on it right now!

AK> Good news! ☺ **Thank you for your time Michael.**