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RICHARD HANSON INTERVIEW FOR IMAGINE PUBLISHING

PH = Paul Harrison

RH = Richard Hanson

PH: Superior Software began life in 1982. How would you describe the game market back then,

RH: In 1982 the software games market was very exciting and innovative – there were so many new game ideas and great enthusiasm around.

PH: What in particular made you believe that you could succeed in that market?

RH: There were four main contributory factors:

* I graduated with a B.Sc. degree in computational science, and the university courses provided me with very useful knowledge about coding, graphics, artificial intelligence, operation research, and various other related subjects.

* I had written a number of games and utilities that were sold by a software publisher called Program Power, which later became Micro Power. So I already had some direct experience of the computer software marketplace, and it was a rapidly growing industry at that time.

* I had also built up some knowledge about marketing and general business management.

* I felt sure that it would be an enjoyable, interesting enterprise – and I think that's often an important factor for success. It really helps to enjoy the work!

PH: Superior Software had an interesting beginning involving £100 and a newspaper advertisement. Can you recount the story of the very early days of Superior Software?

RH: My first business partner was John Dyson, also a university graduate who had written some computer games. In autumn 1982, John and I coded Superior's first four games ready for publication: I wrote three of those games, and John wrote the other one.

We set up Superior Software with just £100 – John and I each put £50 into the business, and this was the most that we would lose if the business had not taken off. To promote our software, we initially placed a small black-and-white advertisement in one of the early home computer magazines – I think our first ad was in a magazine called Computing Today, which was published by Argus Specialist Publications.

We were delighted by the response we received to our first advertisement: the level of sales covered the cost of the advertising several times over. So we placed more advertisements, gradually increasing the size and taking more prominent positions in the magazines. We also started to invite other software developers to send us software for evaluation and possible marketing by us.

PH: Many critics have commented on how quickly Superior Software's games improved, with games in 84 and 85 being significantly better than those of 82 and 83. What happened over that time frame that enabled you to so quickly improve the quality of your games?

RH: This was largely due to teamwork – both in terms of business management and software development. We built up our total range of skills partly via the new contacts that we made. In chronological order Superior's personnel on the management side included Steve Botterill, Chris Payne and Steven Hanson.

There have been many key personnel in terms of software development including: Tim Tyler (for Repton 1 and 2), Peter Johnson (for several early games), Martin Edmondson and Nicholas Chamberlain (for Ravenskull and Codename Droid), Chris Roberts (for Stryker's Run), Kevin Edwards (for Crazee Rider and Galaforce), Matthew Atkinson (for Tempest and Repton 3), Peter Scott (for some very skilful conversions), and David Braben (for Zarch soon after the launch of Acorn's Archimedes computer). In later years David Bratton, Darren Izzard and Ian Rees have done some marvellous work for Superior Interactive.

PH: Hunchback has been cited as the first game to give Superior Software a real breakthrough, selling 26000 copies. What do you think it was about Hunchback that made it so successful, and how big an effect did that success have on the company?

RH: It's an engrossing game: at first it can seem quite tricky, but after practice and perseverance most players find it becomes much easier to progress through the various levels of the game. The game was quite popular in its original arcade form, and Superior's BBC Micro version was well coded and implemented.

I'm not sure how many sales it achieved in total, but it was certainly a helpful stepping stone for Superior at the time. Of the early games, Overdrive – coded by Peter Johnson – was even more important as a major sales success.

PH: Repton was another real breakthrough moment. How did you get in touch with Tim Tyler and what were your initial thoughts on the game?

RH: Tim Tyler was already known to Superior as he had previously contacted us with some earlier games. He decided to write Repton and then sent it to us for consideration: we were very pleased indeed to receive this software – it was clearly a beautifully designed, stimulating game. We knew it was destined to do well, and the Repton series of games (Repton 1, Repton 2, Repton 3, Repton Infinity, and extra level sets for Repton 3) is Superior's biggest success in both overall sales and rewarding customer compliments.

PH: One of the most impressive technical feats of Superior was Exile and its ahead-of-the-curve graphics. How were you able to pull such detailed graphics out of the severely limited BBC Micro?

RH: Exile was written by two very skilful coders, Peter Irvin and Jeremy Smith. They were already quite experienced with the stylish Starship Command and Thrust games. I wasn't personally very closely involved in this game's development; Peter and Jeremy deserve the principal credits for the production of this classic game, especially for the clever algorithmic techniques they employed.

PH: At times you attempted to move games away from Acorn marketplace. How difficult was that process? Were there complications? And, how happy were you with your venture into other systems?

RH: Our main interest and expertise was the Acorn software markets. We published several titles for other computers, such as the Commodore 64, Sinclair Spectrum and Commodore Amiga. This was generally a reasonably straightforward process, and we were happy to branch out to these other markets occasionally, but we kept coming back to the Acorn computers – at that time they were the computers that we really enjoyed and knew the best.