

Probing into Probe

Jerry Muir tells the story of a company that escaped from Alcatraz to play games in Rome



PROBE is something of a paradox. The company currently has 72 people working on various products, and yet it's still a two-man organisation. It brings programmers and projects together, but it's not an agency. And apart from a few titles in the early days, Probe has never published anything, but its name is probably as well known as the labels on which it appears.

Another paradox: Despite all the accolades, this is the first time that Fergus McGovern, one of the two directors, has been interviewed. Perhaps this will help clear up the mystery of what Probe is, and how it works. But first I get a tour of the offices, two floors of bright, modern rooms in an award-winning block in Croydon, South London.

There are work benches with computers around the walls and a coin-op machine stands endlessly cycling through a demo of 1943. But where is everyone? Apart from one solitary figure cracking away at code it's rather like the Marie Celeste. And yet Fergus tells me that they are just about to move into new premises 100 yards away because they are running out of space. I really do feel that it is time to get down to business, and start talking.

Roots

Unlike many people in the software industry, Fergus didn't come from a programming background. In fact, his first brush with micros was as a 16-year-old on a summer job with distributors P&P Micros.

"I was their third ever employee and watched a small company turn into a very large, limited company. They were distributors for Apple, and they are now a dealer for IBM and Apple - they are huge. They gave me the use of a £5,000 IBM

system and an Apple II system on a toy basis, doing anything and everything".

Soon after that Fergus won a scholarship in accountancy, though he still retained close involvement with P&P. It was while he was training that he had the idea of launching a games label, and along with his partner, Vakis Paraskeva, he formed Probe.

"Nowadays I'm technically minded, but back then I was more into marketing", he recalls. "It was more of a hobby. I didn't just go to work in the morning - I controlled my own destiny.

"We started off as publishers, distributing and marketing, doing the whole job".

The first release - Alcatraz, a budget title - was treated as an experiment. Its sales highlighted what Fergus and Vakis believed to be the next area for exploitation, Commodore's C16 and Plus 4. Defence 16, a Defender clone, followed and they were delighted when Smiths agreed to stock it - they had only sold to independent outlets before.

Developments

However it became obvious that the C16 was not going to be a huge success. Probe looked to the Amstrad.

"Virgin had just put out Sorcery, and we did Devils Crown. It was particularly well received by *Amstrad Computer User*, with a double page photo map". He smiles proudly. "It was even taken up by Harrods".

Sure enough, there is a cover with a Harrods price sticker in his cuttings book.

At this stage everything from packaging to marketing was still done by Fergus and Vakis, and it was turning into a 24 hours a day job. But it had its rewards: Devil's Crown sold in very large quantities, particularly in Europe. Probe's next licence brought in TV madman Russ Abbot for *The Adventures of Basilton Bond*. They even tried another C16 game, *Dirty Den*, though despite the teasing *EastEnders* connotations of the title, it wasn't actually a tie-in.

Fergus was in a position that every businessman dreams of. "Cash flow was good, all monies were generated ourselves. We were making enough profits for the purchase of our next licence and were being approached by programmers looking for work. But we weren't able to fund original games as we didn't have a sales team, just the two directors".

So they took the momentous decision to

become a software development house, concentrating their efforts on programming rather than marketing. Long discussions with the bosses of publishing companies followed and eventually Fergus and Vakis felt they could safely free Probe from the day to day duties of getting products into the shops.

"We approached software houses and explained how we wanted to operate, what services we could give them - and they put their faith into co-operation with Probe".

Probe also took this opportunity to license Devil's Crown, and the rest of their back catalogue, on to budget labels or Computer Hits compilations, giving a new, profitable lease of life to titles which had already sold well at full price.

Conversions

Pretty soon the transformation was complete and Probe was getting a good name for its coin-op conversions. For these they drew upon the wealth of British programming talent that preferred not to tie itself to one company.

"We found that if you treated someone well and paid well you'd be offering a financial and company package that nobody else could offer. We were able to attract more programmers, then keep them when they arrived. We soon had programmers who could do conversions to a high standard".

The results of this method of working are impressive. They include games such as *Xevious*, *Metrocross*, *Slapfight*, *Arkanoid*, *Solomon's Key* and many more for virtually every major company including Ocean, US Gold, Activision, Mirrorsoft, Psygnosis, Epyx plus budget leaders Mastertronic and Firebird.

Fergus smiles as he recalls: "We'd transformed into coin-op specialist and the nice thing about it was that we were being offered so many games we were able to pick and choose for programmers to get products that would show them in the highest esteem.

"We tried to forge good working practices and relationships with the companies".

This meant that not only could they depend on Probe, but they could also use the company name to market products.

"We have prestige London-based offices and, subject to software house approval, journalists can come in and see a game in development. We're not just doing conversions but provide a complete service to the software house and give programmers a chance to do work they might not find for themselves".

Rewards

But where, I wondered, are all these programmers?

"They used to work in-house, but the way we structured ourselves we weren't able to get the best out of them on a nine-to-five basis. So we set up little internal development houses within Probe. We'd structure any programmers who wanted to cooperate into groups with self-contained offices of their own, and even living conditions".

They were still controlled by the Probe man-

agement though, overcoming the danger of programmers' ego trips?

"If you have two programmers, an artist and a musician living together in one house, you can control them more efficiently than if they are in their own back bedrooms. Now our offices are large enough to cope with them, so that when they get to the end of a project they can work under supervision".

Probe now rents four-bedroom houses around the country, and will even buy them if they'll be needed for a while. They can then offer the programmers a complete package.

"They know that the rent is paid", says Fergus, "and that the heating won't get turned off, so they can concentrate on the work in hand".

The advantage of this method of working is brought home when Fergus remembers the experience of developing Outrun, just one of the 150 formats developed last year.

"It was our worst game in terms of the amount of energy and resources expended and the time it took personally. It actually changed the course of how we wrote games. I was taking three or four plane trips a day to control development. One day I flew all over England to get it out on time".

But all that hard work had its rewards.

"The ST version is probably the best game we've written. It is going to live up to what people want. It is going to do well money-wise and it is

going to lead into a good game for the 16-bit market".

Originals

All this talk of the coming generation of computers makes me ask Fergus what he considers the future to be for the Amstrad CPC market? He believes: "It will be dominated by companies that know the machine back to front and are able to have good ideas and produce innovative games: the companies that are willing to invest in the livelihood of Amstrad computers".

Which leads neatly on to Probe's next product. Having proved themselves in coin-ops, they are now working on originals as well. While most must remain secret owing to confidentiality agreements, there is one project that Fergus can talk about because it is being developed internally.

"It is probably one of the best games that will ever hit an Amstrad. We are doing it without a commission. I wondered: 'What if I gave programmers unlimited time, unlimited money, and put them together to produce the best possible game. What sort of game would we get?'"

Fergus firmly believes that this game will dominate the Amstrad market for a long time.

"We will storyboard it", he says. "We'll put our

money where our mouth is and develop half the game before we show it. Then we'll select the publisher that we think the product is right for, the one who can do the best job for us".

He's loath to say much more.

"It's graphically stunning, addictive, has perfect gameplay, and it is not one but five games. Each load is a game in itself, each individual section is different but complements the previous one, so you will feel you are playing a continuation".

If it does live up to its early promise - and there is every indication that it will - it will be because Fergus and Vakis have carefully observed the market and taken an innovative approach. They've provided a buffer between the commercial demands of publishers and the idiosyncracies of programmers to produce the best software in the most efficient fashion.

The project - and it could be one of the most important projects in CPC history - has been provisionally named The Roman Games.

Eventually Fergus takes me up to another room and loads a disc into a 6128. What I see is... well, it is everything he promised and more, but that's all I can say because he swore me to secrecy.



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