

Book Review:

Andrew Hewson: hints & tips for videogame pioneers

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Hints & Tips for Videogame Pioneers by Andrew Hewson

My dad never really understood my childhood obsession with video games. Every afternoon, after school, I'd hook up my Spectrum+ to a portable black-and-white television set in the living room, and sit patiently as the pulse-width modulated tones describing the data blocks on tape crawled into memory. Every evening, I would drag out my screen time for as long as I possibly could, forever running the gauntlet of fortune, and hitting the power switch and dashing up the stairs only when my parents' insistent demand that I get to bed reached that tell-tale critical point.

It wasn't that my dad didn't understand or appreciate 'geekery' and the obsessive devotion that comes with it – he was, after all, a steam train buff, who could wax lyrical about the intricacies of expansion strokes until the King Arthur class locomotives came home – it was just that microcomputers had very little to offer him. Very little, that is, until Hewson Consultants, one of the most innovative of the early 8-bit publishers, released *Southern Belle*, the world's first 3D steam-train simulator, in 1985. Thanks to Hewson's innovative approach to gaming in what was a buccaneering era of technical innovation and design, my dad and I were able to forge a strong bond between the two things that we each loved most.

And so it was with a sense of nostalgia coupled with a deep professional interest that I delved into *Hints & Tips for Videogame Pioneers*, Andrew Hewson's new retrospective on a fascinating and, at times, fraught career in gaming.

The book, whose title is a nod towards the ZX80 programming guide that launched his game publishing career in the early 1980s, is the result of a successful Kickstarter campaign masterminded by Hewson's son Robert, who was born in 1981, just as the UK games industry exploded into existence, and who has followed in his father's footsteps to become a successful game developer in his own right. That use of Kickstarter, of harnessing the social media phenomenon of crowdsourcing to convert the esteem in which industry figures like Hewson are still held into advance orders for the book, seems like a very fitting way to celebrate an industry that similarly grew up around a community of enthusiasts and depended on its patronage.

No sooner have we skimmed the very personal perspective that is presented in the foreword and introduction, than Hewson outlines a powerful statement about the relationship between technology and creativity that goes well beyond the relatively uncontentious observation that the former often drives the latter to argue that it is only the immediate aftermath of the launch of a new technology that sees true creative practice emerge: once the technology matures and is understood, once its possibilities have been explored and its territories mapped out, the applications of that technology can only ever be derivative, and what follows is a process of refinement, repetition and commoditisation. It is an opinion that Hewson acknowledges is open to challenge, and yet I suspect it is one that has formed through a career spent on the front lines of the video games industry itself. Certainly, the idea serves as a fine precis for the book, and it is a theme that emerges

repeatedly as it charts the transition of both Hewson's companies, and the industry that they served from hobbyist sideline to fully-fledged multinational commercial enterprise.

What follows is a fascinating perspective on the serendipitous combination of family circumstance – by his own admission he is one of a long line of familial nerds – and technological progress that saw Hewson swept up and carried off by the whirlwind of the home computer revolution only to emerge running his own company and publishing video games. Of course, serendipity is just one aspect of the story, and in one telling excerpt, Hewson hints at the effort involved in treading the ragged pathway to success from the opportunities that fortune presents: “Success, if it arrives at all, only arrives following commitment and hard work and when it arrives it demands further commitment and further hard work. In some ways a lack of success is easier, provided only that you can bear the thought of giving up.”

Hewson presents a story that is delivered in an evocative, though quite matter-of-fact way, with a descriptive level of detail that not only adds a richness and depth to the significant events that take place, but which provides context and an insight into the prevailing sense of national optimism that gripped the UK in the 1980s. Interspersed with the – largely chronological – structure of the narrative is some commentary from some of the gaming luminaries whose careers Hewson helped to launch: Steve Turner, Jeroen Tel, and, of course, Mike Male, who created the ‘first-person chuff-‘em-up’ that had opened my father’s eyes to the appeal of the home computer.

As the book progresses, the warm and affectionate tone becomes more sombre, and is tinged with a sense of melancholy as Hewson describes the personal burden of responsibility that he felt as his own companies and others struggled and ultimately folded during the difficult periods of transition that ushered in first the 16-bit platforms, and then the consoles, whose closed development platforms effectively shut off the small-scale innovation that had been a feature of the first generation microcomputers and early gaming industry. Invoking Kipling, Hewson notes that he “had met with Triumph but had never known that it was an Impostor and [...] had no inner resource with which to deal with it.”

With the exception of a couple of phrases which land a little heavily and disrupt the flow of the text – the allusion to Andrew Braybrook standing on the shoulders of giants felt uncomfortably hyperbolic, for example – the book reads as an authentic and honest account of an accidental career in video games. For those of us who spent a significant portion of our formative years piloting our Mantas back and forward across vast Dreadnoughts, and indeed for those fathers who brought the Evening Star safely into Bournemouth Station on time, *Hints & Tips for Videogame Pioneers* is a compelling read, and a fine companion piece to the feature documentary, *From Bedrooms to Billions*.

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