Excerpts from The SIG*ATARI conference with ATARI'S Chris CRAWFORD

The document itself begins on the next page.

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Comments:

SYSOP*NameOfPerson means that this person is a System Operator, BBS System Administrator, Forum administrator, moderator, etc.

This is a very lively conversation between users on one side and specialists working for Atari on the other. Some of the comments are quite critical, but they surely reflect the mindset of the first customers, who were very knowledgeable about the subject and wealthy enough to equip themselves with Atari computers and peripherals.

Many sentences end with 'GA'. A quick internet search tells me that this stands for 'Go Ahead', indicating that they have finished speaking and inviting others to speak in turn.

Obvious spelling mistakes and typos have been corrected.
Additions by Laurent Delsarte are indicated by [and].

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Excerpts from The SIG*ATARI conference with ATARI'S Chris CRAWFORD

Date: 1983-02-07 [7 February 1983]
Time: 21:00 to 00:00 (midnight) Eastern Standard Time (UTC−5)
[Time zone of New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington, D.C.]

Compiled/edited by: SYSOP*Greg Leslie [Greg LESLIE]

(**SYSOP*Arlan Levitan**) Why do I have the feeling no one sees this?

(**Chris**) Who's got the first question?

(**SYSOP*Michael Reichmann**) Can anyone read anyone, or is the system kaput?

(**Chris**) The system is very sluggish.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Due to CIS problems, the next half hour is very fragmented and, to avoid confusion, I've deleted all but the (apparently) complete question/answer combinations. Maybe someone else can fill in the gaps. I take no responsibility for misquoting someone, since I don't think ANYone was getting EVERYthing.

I also edited out some random, non-pertinent comments, along with Arlan Levitan's expert crowd handling.

(**Tom Goltz**) Can you give us any [..] the Atari 1200XL motherboard is completely "potted", that is, sealed in plastic, making modifications and even repairs impossible?

(**Chris**) I haven't taken an Atari 1200XL apart, but what you describe seems most unlikely.

(**SYSOP*Greg Leslie**) Chris – are you working with Ted Hoff (formerly of Intel)?

(**Chris**) Alan Kay emphasizes 'R', Ted Hoff emphasizes 'D' (in 'R&D') ... I'm 'R'.

(**Greg**) Chris – what's his primary focus now?

(**Chris**) Greg: Alan's or Ted's focus?

(**Greg**) Ted's.

(**Chris**) Greg: Sorry, Ted just started and I don't yet know where he will take things…

(**SYSOP*Michael Reichmann**) Joe Miller (Chris)...call Ron Luks,

(**VOICE**): Ron's 800 is kaput!

(**PAUL ELLISON**) Chris, where do you get the ideas for your games that are on the market?

(**Chris**) I try to design games that express an interesting fantasy. I'll try any fantasy that seems interesting and hasn't been done before.

(**SYSOP*Steve Ahlstrom**) Chris, in what direction do you think Atari is headed in with both software and hardware?

(**SYSOP*Arlan Levitan**) Bulletin from imperial leader Ron Luks!!!!!! Ron requests that we all exit the SIG and go to the CO section on the telecommunications SIG

(**Chris**) We'll be right there. See you soon.

(**SYSOP*Arlan Levitan**) We are switching to another conference area that is less busy.

(**Tom Goltz**) Going to Telecomm Now.

(**SYSOP*Arlan Levitan**) Selection 12 On PCS-50

EDITOR'S NOTE: At this point I exited the CO area and began a 20-minute trek over to TELECOMM SIG. All I saw for this period of time was:

Files busy, code 0-29...
Files busy, code 0-36...
Files busy, code 0-53...

Finally...

Welcome to channel 30, Greg Leslie

(**Channel**) Users tuned in

(**30**) 6#

(**Brad Konia**) Why Atari consistently brings out low quality products, such as Telelink (a total joke! There are far better products in public domain), the new printer which is supposed to replace the Atari 825 (Okidata cheapie), and the Atari 830 acoustic modem, which is totally out of date. I realize that Atari is bringing out a direct connect modem, but feature-wise, that modem is a far cry from something like a Hayes smart modem, which I currently own (I sold my Atari 830). Go Ahead

(**Chris**) (Brad, it would help if you focus the question into something specific.) You seem to have listed a few products that you were unhappy about, but I didn't get a specific question. Try me again. OK?

(**Arlan Levitan**) Well it only took 20 minutes to get here

(**Steve Ahlstrom**) It only took me 30!!!

(**Dan Moore**) Steve: You should have hung up and recalled!!!

(**Steve Ahlstrom**) I did!!! 3 times

(**Brad Konia**) Can we get on with the conference?

(**Marge Robbins**) Before or after I blow up CIS

(**Brad Konia**) I was asking Chris, why Atari consistently brings out low quality products, such as Telelink, Atari 830 cheapie Okidata printer, and 810 disk drive (with very low storage) instead of higher quality products. Everyone knows that Telelink is a public domain terminal program.

(**Greg Leslie**) It is?

(**Tom Goltz**) Huh?

(**Brad Konia**) Chris, I just want to know why Atari brings out junk like Telelink, Okidata printer, Atari 830 modem, etc.

(**Chris**) Atari is a consumer-oriented company, and as such, difficult... Trade-offs have to be made. The trade-offs that are right for a hobbyist may not be best for "Mom and Pop". In my view, "quality" is a subjective term.

(**Greg Leslie**) Chris – what is happening to CAMELOT?

(**Chris**) I'm still working on CAMELOT. This is a 48K, disk-swapping assembly language program. So far, we have more than 18 man-months in it. It's a gigantic game. I don't know if it'll work, but we're giving it a hell of a shot!

(**Tom Goltz**) Chris, a couple questions ago you mentioned that there are certain trade-offs for the "Mom & pop" user. I am assuming that one of these trade-offs is price, and especially regarding the 810, which was originally priced at $800. At the same time, other companies were selling disk units with approx. 128k, for about $600 for the first drive. Currently, today, for $500, 500k is now available for $500. I hardly see the 810 as a necessary price trade-off. Yet why did Atari choose 88k, at a fairly slow speed?

(**Chris**) The 810 was chosen 3.5 years ago. Factors to consider now include compatibility, reliability, and ease of use. Hindsight wisdom is easy.

(**Steve Ahlstrom**) Even though Atari is a consumer-oriented company, is there any hope for old timers – had my machine 3 years now – that Atari will support us? I find that I need something more powerful than an Atari 800. I will buy another computer, and prefer it to be Atari, but there is currently nothing made for us who need more. Will there be?

(**Bob Geayer**) An Atari 1600[1], please

(**Brad Konia**) Don't talk about the Atari 1200XL either!

(**Chris**) Steve: We've got several new designs in the works (we almost always do) ... All of the new designs are very exciting...

(**Arlan Levitan**) Including the 16-bit super animation unit...

(**Chris**) ... Whether they see the light of day is a marketing issue... Don't hold your breath. For now, add a RAMDISK, or Corvus, or whatever.

(**Tom Goltz**) That simply isn't enough for most of us!

(**Steve Ahlstrom**) IBM PC here I come

(**Arlan Levitan**) No swearing here Steve

(**Tom Goltz**) Steve - I agree, all but the price!

(**Chris**) (Steve, it'll be worth the wait!)

(**Marge Robbins**) Can DOS II goof? Recently I downloaded a program that ran for me, but a copy I took to my dealer did strange things. He said the pm gr. Were messed up. Go Ahead

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[1] Atari 800/IBM PC compatible computer – never released
(project Shakti/25601; later: 1600; would become a joint venture with Toshiba)

(**Chris**) I've used DOS II for nearly 3 years with no problems (attributable to DOS II), it could be a media (diskette) or drive problem.

(**Brad Paulsen**) Okay, Chris... I'm a very enthusiastic Atari 800 owner who, as a professional programmer, working daily with various operating systems, is especially impressed with the Atari O/S. (Just wanted you to hear a positive word). I'd like to know how you got into game design, and, in particular, how you became associated with Atari? (and I probably will have a follow-up) Go Ahead

(**Chris**) Thanks for kind words! (I need them about now). I started war-gaming in 1965. I started designing war-games in 1972. Seeking a way to get better war games, I turned to computers. First did FORTRAN war games on mainframes, then got a KIM 1 in 1977, taught myself machine language, and started doing wargames on the KIM. Then, in 1978, I went to a PET and did 2 wargames in it. Those games got me the job at Atari. "The rest is history."

(**Arlan Levitan**) I understand the employment agency wasn't interested at first Chris.

(**Brad Paulsen**) Chris >> Speaking of the Atari O/S... (what a transition, huh?) ...

(**Arlan Levitan**) Very smooth

(**Brad Paulsen**) I have found it to be extremely well thought-out and powerful, but with that power comes an awesome complexity. Do you have any encouraging stories about how you fumbled around with the Atari O/S while you were first learning the machine (and I don't want to hear that you took to it like a duck to water – you may be responsible for a suicide in

(**Chris**) I agree the OS is intimidating; I learned the hardware long before I tackled the OS. Part of the problem is the manual, ...

(**Tom Goltz**) <what manual?>

(**Brad Konia**) Yeah, what manual?

(**Steve Hall**) Part of the problem?

(**Chris**) Which subordinates clarity to precision. Don't let it scare you away!...

(**Dan Moore**) Atari took lessons from DEC!

(**Steve Hall**) Most of the problem.

(**Chris**) The chapters in "De Re Atari" go a long way towards clarifying the operation of the OS. If you read those and go thru the examples, you'll eventually get "on top" of it.

(**Brad Paulsen**) Thank you, Chris for the words of encouragement. I feel I have a good grip on the O/S now, but it took me almost a YEAR! Go Ahead

(**Bob Geayer**) Chris three (?) years ago Doug Neubauer wrote a state-of-the-art program that still stands... Is he still active at Atari?

(**Chris**) Bob: Doug left, then came back, then left again. I don't know where he is now.

(**Bob Geayer**) Ok, thanx... I understand he was credited with the 2600 version (!!!).

(**Steve Hall**) Chris: I am beta testing efront [Eastern Front 1941] now. Expert level needs work. See my notes... What is status of your book and "Camelot"? Go Ahead

(**Chris**) The book awaits approval from the "highest levels". This is supposedly forthcoming. CAMELOT will be done in 8 weeks, but NOT available until (and if (and when)) it is approved.

(**Arlan Levitan**) Chris is the fact that taking absolutely no action in the hardest level (pro solar) of Energy Czar eventually wins the game intended as a political statement or was it a program bug. If so, how did it slip by?

(**Chris**) The Energy Czar simulation is only reliable out to 100 years. You are talking about 160 years into the simulation...

(**Arlan Levitan**) Oh my dwindling resources!

(**Chris**) I tried very hard to make both Energy Czar and SCRAM free of political bias. This is difficult to do with an intrinsically politicized topic.

(**Dan Moore**) Chris: the OS is great, but it does not leave MEMTOP alone when you do a warm start, I wish Atari would change that. I also wonder if Atari intends to release a new DOS to handle the coming higher capacity drives? Go Ahead

(**Chris**) The Atari 1200XL corrects the MEMTOP problem, can't comment on unreleased products.

(**Arlan Levitan**) I can...

(**Dan Moore**) Thank you for the Atari 1200XL at least!

(**Tom Goltz**) Sputter.

(**Dan Moore**) The OS not the machine!!!

(**Tom Goltz**) (Dan - oh)

(**Brad Konia**) Chris: I feel that it is up to you as an insider at Atari to push these exciting "new designs" through marketing. What we (most of us anyway) want is a 16 (bit assumed – ed.) With CP/M and Atari 400/800 compatibility,128k, etc... Also, have you seen the sprite Graphics on the SpectraVideo computer??? 32 players, Atari Graphics seem outdated. Go Ahead.

(**Steve Ahlstrom**) Agreed !!!! or at least MS-DOS

(**Arlan Levitan**) Oh really?

(**Chris**) Brad: I went to Corporate Research to escape from marketing (!!) I can expend my energies on politics (trying to get other people to do the job well) or simply doing my own job well. I chose the latter.

(**Tom Goltz**) Chris, When the Atari 800 is taken apart, I noticed that there is an "edge" connection at the back of the PC board which holds the RAM slots. Are there any plans at Atari to use this connection for expansion of the Atari, or for connection of disk drives and other devices to the Atari 800? Go Ahead.

(**Steve Ahlstrom**) All the lines are there, Tom, just no buffering – use it!

(**Chris**) Tom: Perhaps you didn't notice Atari has released a new computer?

(**Tom Goltz**) (I have never seen an Atari 1200XL)

(**Chris**) That is the best indication of Atari's intentions re. [regarding] the connector.

(**Arlan Levitan**) The connector you speak of is used for testing on the assembly line.

(**Tom Goltz**) It does have potential for expansion of the system. <sigh>

(**James Diaz**) This may be a touchy subject, but do you feel that all innovation... (present company excluded) has gone out of Atari since Warner Communication?

(**Chris**) Absolutely not!!! We did have a period when things went slowly, but the arrival of Alan Kay has been a real boost to the research element of this company. Of course, substantial innovation such as Alan brings to the company will not be perceptible to the consumer for some time to come – all good ideas need time for development.

(**Arlan Levitan**) Watch for BIGTALK in the future.

(**Brad Konia**) Any truth to the rumor that Atari has sealed off the memory slots, and right cartridge slot on the new Atari 800's to save money?

(**Chris**) I can't talk about new product developments before release date.

(**Brad Konia**) I'm talking about the Atari 800's currently being shipped.

(**Chris**) The units being shipped now are not sealed.

(**Steve Ahlstrom**) IF the Atari 1200XL fairs as poorly as all the reviewers think it will, will Atari continue to produce strictly game machines and machines for 1st time users?

(**Chris**) Clarify: do you mean will Atari discontinue home computers, or game machines?
(**Steve Ahlstrom**) No, I mean will Atari re-evaluate their position and market a more powerful computer

(**Chris**) Atari is always working on more powerful equipment. Whether that equipment reaches the marketplace is another matter. I can't discuss decisions that have not yet been made.

(**Steve Ahlstrom**) Thank you, guess we'll have to blast marketing then!

(**Tom Goltz**) (Perhaps Atari marketing needs a little shaking up!)

(**Dan Moore**) Chris, what all will the 'new' OS in the Atari 1200XL add besides the new graphics modes? Go Ahead

(**Chris**) Lots of things, most of them minor embellishments and corrections. Because there are so many of these, I can't go into them all here. The documents exist now and will be released soon after the Atari 1200XL.

(**James Diaz**) What is the major con [disadvantage] is the software piracy market still as rampant in the industry enough to discourage software development even with amazing Atari sales?

(**Chris**) Piracy hurts the profit picture for all software developers. This discourages more ambitious products and tends to encourage products that are safer bets or are less vulnerable to piracy. I can assure you that the existence of piracy is a factor taken into account in almost all software product planning.

(**James Diaz**) Not to be a pig but what about advanced Visicalc (Atari)

(**Arlan Levitan**) Out soon $200.

(**Dan Moore**) When will Atari use the extra memory in the Atari 1200XL if ever? Go Ahead

(**Chris**) I've got to go offline in 15 minutes folks.

(**Arlan Levitan**) I know you hate to leave Chris ... but, ok.

(**Chris**) Dan: That's something I can't comment on.

(**Dan Moore**) Thank you for coming to the mugging.

(**John Levin**) Chris, unfortunately, I chose tonight to demonstrate CIS to my users' group. The group question was: How do you obtain four lines of text in graphics modes greater than 2?

(**Chris**) Do you mean the "text window" at the bottom?

(**John Levin**) I think so... everybody went home
(**Chris**) Just enter "GRAPHICS x" where x is the mode number.

(**Don Brown**) Since the Atari 5200 console seems to be an Atari 400 without a keyboard does this mean that games produced for it will show up for the Atari 400/800/1200XL line?

(**Chris**) Since this is easy to do, it's a good bet that you'll see more.

(**John Levin**) Sorry, Chris, your answer is correct, but the question...

(**Don Brown**) Will Pole Position be one of them?

(**Chris**) Can't discuss specific new products.

(**John Levin**) I must have mucked up the question

(**Arlan Levitan**) Let it slide?

(**John Levin**) Thank you for eastern front, Chris. Go Ahead, all

(**Brad Paulsen**) (Note: we are now 17,471+ bytes into this conference, since switching)

(**Arlan Levitan**) Enough of the pat company lines ... Do you miss teaching and what are the most frustrating non-programming aspects of your job? Do you find "stardom" hard to take?

(**Chris**) Yes, I really miss those crazy seminars. Frustration? Lots... I'm a lousy manager, and I frustrate the people working for me, and myself in the process. Stardom? Love it, it strokes my enormous ego!

(**Tom Goltz**) Chris, is there any OS support for a text window in the additional graphics modes that the GTIA offers over the CTIA?

(**John Levin**) That's the question!

(**Tom Goltz**) (John, thought so)

(**Chris**) I thought the OS already supported it. Does your OS not?

(**Tom Goltz**) The GR. commands that put you in those additional modes doesn't seem to allow a text window in the New GTIA modes. (I have REV. A ROM)

(**Arlan Levitan**) [9,] 10, 11, etc.

(**Dan Moore**) You need a DLI and a modified Display List. Try the old COMPUTE!s, someone published the routine.

(**Chris**) The new OS does provide additional graphics features (in the Atari 1200XL). All: Thanks for an interesting evening! I've got to go.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Here followed several minutes of thanks, best wishes and applause...