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Runaro, Axel, Sat 25 Aug 2007

Interview with kb

by Runaro and Axel of Brainstorm

Becoming kb

Tammo Hinrichs began his life in the small town of mid-1970s Oldenburg, Germany. The only child of an average middle class family, he was poised to become a perfectly ordinary and socially integrated human being. But that didn't happen.

Already at age 3 or 4, he began to show an affinity for all things technical, and musical. A fateful day came in 1982, at age 6, when his father took him to visit a co-worker. This man was the stereotypical computer geek, in his mid-30s, complete with beard and large glasses, who always had the latest gear. Here, Tammo was shown a brand-spanking-new Commodore 64 home computer. To an impressionable 6-year-old, this was a magical device. What's more, it had a manual where you could read how to program it to do whatever you wanted. Tammo's fate was sealed. Within his soul, KB had begun to fester.

He got a photocopy of the manual to take home, and he began teaching himself BASIC by writing programs on paper. "I still have some of those sheets lying around and I'd love to type down those programs into an actual computer if I were only able to figure out those infamous inverted control characters", says KB, twenty-five years later, now a game developer for a German software house.

A good part of the next four or five years were spent at the computer department of a local electronics store with the other "cool" kids. They were those kids whom all the staff knew by name. Their addresses and telephone numbers were also kept on file, just in case. His parents would regularly call the store to inform of important things like the fact that dinner was ready. At dinner, he would nag his parents for a computer. Eventually they got fed up and bought him a C64 of his very own.

Around the same time, Tammo switched schools. "The timing was perfect because I was fed up with basic school, and humanity in general. Yeah, even back then." School was not an easy ride for him, socially. "You might imagine what happens to that one kid who's a bit too intelligent and a bit too sensitive for the rest of the class, which mainly consisted of idiots or bullies, or both."

So there it was a new school and finally a computer. Tammo was on his way to becoming a nerd on his way to becoming kb. He started acting stranger and stranger, and surprisingly, this was socially integrating. By halfway isolating himself from the rest of the children around him, he would make them accept him more, and he managed to get real, actual friends. And because he had his own computer, he didn't hang out with the kids in the computer store anymore.



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16-bit Letdowns and 32-bit Compromises

This was around the time when 16-bit computers were just coming on the market. Kb's initial feelings for these new computers was one of aloofness: "I never minded the Amiga or the Atari ST too much back then." To him, these were mostly machines for playing games. Watching Amiga demos, he would think about how to get those effects to the C64. Kb admits: "I loved the Amiga for gaming with friends and watching demos." But he thought that most Amiga music in the late 80s and early 90s was dominated by "mindless technoid concatenation of ripped samples". In his eyes (ears, rather), they were no match at all for the melodic and harmonic greatness that was SID music. The one exception was Chris H ülsbeck, "after he got used to the Amiga".

"The Atari ST, on the other hand, was way too obscure, impersonal and workstation-like for my taste," says Kb. "That keyboard felt really awkward and gave the machine the feeling of being slow. Of course the MIDI capabilities were a dream, but I didn't have much musical equipment back then and what I had was easily handled by my C64 with an external MIDI interface and, if I remember correctly, Steinberg's 'Pro 16' sequencing software. In summary, the C64 was enough for my general computing and programming needs, except for gaming."

A radical change came when Kb went to X'95 in Holland. This was a party not only for the C64, but also for the new, evolving PC scene. Kb had seen a few PC demos already, mostly at one computer game store owned by "a total Future Crew fanboy." Kb remembers saying about Second Reality: "Hah! You can do that on a C64." Little did he know that he would one day do just that. "The demos weren't that convincing thus far, and the PC was in my mind still purely an office machine with a few strange games and a very measly choice of sound cards." This completely changed when he saw Complex's "Dope" and listened to the Gravis Ultrasound card in its full glory. "That wasn't mindless sample mixing anymore. That was," Kb hesitates, "almost real music. And you weren't able to count the channels anymore, while listening." Kb thought a PC was an ugly grey box making a constant awful noise, but if that was the price he had to pay for being able to play with a GUS, then an ugly grey box it was. Later, his father's home office 386 was suddenly and mysteriously equipped with a GUS and FastTracker II.

As for other 32-bit computers, Kb had high hopes for the Acorn Archimedes. Although really great in many ways, he didn't feel that it lived up to the hype. More importantly, he was the only one who had an Acorn in his circle of friends. "Still, I made a few demos on it. I also coded a 6502 macro assembler to use it as cross development system for the C64, with a parallel data cable between the machines, and even limited Edit and Continue debugging," says Kb. The Acorn also took over his everyday computing tasks, like word processing. "There comes a point in life when you realize that GeoWrite isn't actually that great, and waiting 20 long dreadful minutes for a single fake-letter-quality page to come out of that old nine-dot printer certainly isn't."

The Year of Goth and Gravis

This was a fateful year for Kb, at age 18. Not only was he first introduced to the GUS, but also to the goth culture. In the spring of 1995, he was with a girl who literally dragged him into to a goth club one night in Oldenburg. He had no idea what to expect. Kb reminisces: "There I stood in my blue jeans, with the green pullover and the white t-shirt under it that stuck out in one or two places, a haircut that screamed 'nerd!', acne, and the obligatory Fielmann glasses. I didn't want to know who had the worst 'WTF' expressions



on their faces me or all those goths staring at me like I was some geek at a goth party."

But after that initial shock wore off, as well as the second, more pleasant shock at all those gorgeous goth girls, Kb realized that this place, this scene, was something he could really relate with. "My affection for the normal parts of human society had been pretty much been done away with for years anyway, and suddenly I saw those people who basically were thinking almost like I. They were separating themselves from the sheep and wolves out there just like I was, only that they had found a vastly more aesthetically pleasing and effective way of expressing this than I did by hanging in front of a C64 screen all day and night. That was the second moment that I got hooked and this time it wasn't electronic devices but actual humans that I was suddenly able to relate to." One week later, Kb decided to wear black jeans, a black T-shirt, put away the glasses, and go there again.

From then on, he became progressively more "goth". "My parents started worrying what strange cult I've now gotten into because of that girl I kept hanging out with," says Kb, "but it was never a problem to sit down with them and talk through things. They eventually started accepting it, especially when they realized that I still went to school every day, didn't start doing all drugs at once, and still had enough time to spend lonely in front of a flickering cathode ray tube."

Driven to Create

Kb has become many things to many people in the demoscene. Musician, coder, party organizer, "that weird guy from Farbrausch with the makeup", and overall scene celebrity. But his real passions are coding and making music. "Both making music, as well as making computers do what I want them to, are real passions of mine," says Kb. "I never thought about abandoning one of the two completely. My daily life is spent hacking in C++ for video game consoles, so being able to creatively use the right half of my brain composing or singing is mostly what keeps me balanced and alive. But on the other hand, if you really look at it, music and code go really well together. Both deal with the abstract and both are built on strong mathematical foundations. It's really interesting to see that almost every part of sound and music can be described by rather simple mathematical formulas, and it's a whole lot of fun to employ these formulas from the code side to get some music out of nothing. Now, if only it were possible to find a few formulas that automatically compose good songs. That's the one thing you still need lots of genuine human emotion-driven creativity for."

According to Kb, recognition for that creativity is what really drives a scener. Both for respect from an artistic angle and for simple popularity's sake. For himself, he says that his motivation is definitely recognition from an artistic or technical perspective: "I want people to watch or listen to what I've done, and yes, of course I crave feedback. Honest feedback that is; when people say 'I like it because...' or 'I don't like it because...'. !Party or Pouet rankings are good for bragging rights, but really are nothing compared to seeing that people actually like what you've done."

Kb goes on: "Making demos, or producing any other kind of art for that matter, is only worth something if it gets seen. You always want to make a point, express something, say things, even if the whole message revolves around your being the new temporary holder of a sine dots record. Of course there are those people who produce demos for the sake of producing, and maybe even place their creations on some website, but the whole point of a creative community like the demoscene is getting those productions out to your peers and getting feedback from them." Even looking outside the scene, Kb says: "A place like DeviantArt or even YouTube



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wouldn't be as successful without other people being able to comment on whatever you've uploaded, and in a sense those sites fulfill the desire for recognition."

"That desire for recognition is cultivated even more by the fact that the root of the demoscene culture is in competing against each other. We're not only creating and sharing, but all the time we're taking part in a perpetual artistic dick-size contest. Winning a demo compo, or at least getting really close to the `big guys`, is one of the main motivations for many newer groups to participate, or even start doing proper, finished productions at all."

"The interesting thing is that competing only starts to get less and less important when you've already had the taste of the thin air at the lonely top. You're on that stage or designated spot on the floor during the prize giving, everyone is frantically throwing their hands together because of your demo, it feels great once, but the most important thing is what happens afterwards: You put that drive to beat your favourite elite demogroups to rest. Your ego is sufficiently charged, and you're finally free to do the production you want to do next."

Great Expectations

"Of course, at this point half of the scene is suddenly expecting you to do better and better and fulfill their personal tastes more and more." Kb tries to drop the subject, but we insist that he explain what he means. He continues: "It would be cool if anyone was able to sustain an upwards slope as far as the quality of artistic output is concerned, but this is rather unlikely. There are up and downs in life, and the scene's history has shown that everyone has his time but that time will eventually end. And as soon as the zenith is crossed you're basically thrown in front of the lions and vultures to tear you apart."

"This of course takes only one dimension into account. There's another cluster of dimensions, one that you won't be able to navigate even if, seen objectively, you keep hammering out works that are better and better until you finally stop, die, or both: Taste. That one milestone, once-every-five-years production will be the point everyone's measuring you against for the rest of time or at least until your next hit production and the problem is: Everyone likes different aspects of it. You can't go into any direction without leaving some people behind who liked exactly what you don't do anymore. But you can't sit still doing the same stuff over and over because there are always people who appreciated your original work because of its originality or a certain innocence, which is lost as soon as you release Part Two."

"There are only two ways out. Either stop, leave the scene and start raising bunnies or something, or do the obvious: Don't care about that cage of expectations that people try to erect around you. It's interesting that, for example Conspiracy, as well as Farbrausch, released something that could be described as fairly crappy exactly one year after our first big hits, `Project Genesis` and `the .product`, respectively. Exactly when everyone was so anxious to see another great release of these great groups. In both cases some people were outraged at how we were able to disappoint them so much and trample on their feelings, but in both cases the big plan worked out: We were able to give all those expectations the big Kewlers logo, freeing us once again to concentrate on what we wanted to do next."



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So, what does someone like Kb like to do next? What drives him in the scene after all these years, after milestones like Candytron? Kb explains: "Hey, it's a hobby, it's fun creating demos. Actually that's most of it technology advances, and in my job as game developer I'm constantly stumbling over stuff I would like to try out, but that I couldn't ever do at work. And what a nice coincidence: I have that bunch of people which I can do stuff with and an even bigger bunch of people to show that stuff to. I can travel through the lands every few weeks and meet creative and cool people from all over Europe. Some of them I can even call friends. Honestly, why should I give that up just because there's probably not that much more mind-shattering to come from my side?"

Personae and Popularity

To some people, Kb's celebrity antics may come off as conceited. But to him, it's all just a fun role-playing game. "As Marilyn Manson worded it in his biography, there comes that point when you recognize that the more you're behaving like a rock star, the more people treat you like one. And seeing that this worked out in the scene was fun."

Things have changed in more recent years, though, says Kb: "Be it that I've actually grown up or simply become too old, be it that as far as fame or social status is concerned, we did almost everything you can do in this scene, but nowadays that beloved rock star image isn't of any real importance anymore. Don't get me wrong, it's still fun to show off." Kb cracks a smile at this. "In the end, simply enjoying myself and the presence of other cool people is my main motivation to go to demo parties these days. I don't exactly need to co-organize Breakpoint either, but it's just so much fun, and the feeling that your work for the scene paid off and you helped making quite a bunch of people a bit happier is probably the most important aspect that makes me exhaust myself again and again every year."

"Still, many people approach me like I'm who-knows-who, and depending on my mood I either try to relax the situation or, if I'm too playful, fall back into the role they see me in. But as long as people are disillusioned in the end, when they actually get to know me and find out that I'm only a human being, even occasionally a nice one, everything is OK in the end." Kb smiles: "But don't tell anyone." [Don't worry, kb, your secret is safe with us - ed.]

The Human Factor

For Breakpoint 2006, Farbrausch and Vacuum surprised everyone with the invitation, titled "FR-049: Of Spirits Taken". People were expecting the usual parade of 3D effects, but instead they got an emotionally charged 2D animation sequence. If you haven't seen it, go watch it now. Demos like this are rare, but Kb thinks that this kind of emotional payload is what makes a demo great. He explains: "Demos are essentially abstract works of art, and as such they're really dependant on the individual viewer's perception and interpretation. Look at many productions' Pouet comments. The emotional response to one and the same production varies greatly in intensity and type."

"Those demos which have a clearly discernible emotional content or impact all employ the same cheap trick, which is at the same time artistically liberating and constraining: They have something human in them. People, at least for the most part, don't react emotionally to lifeless items, but they do to other people. That's the crux of the whole question. To achieve a kind of emotional consistency, you



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have got to have humans in it. In the case of `Of Spirits Taken`, it's pretty obvious. We show people and we put them into an emotional context. Directing, or doing the soundtrack, in a way that it underlines and amplifies this context, was easy. It was already all there in the images Floetus had drawn. Wayfinder and I just had to be a little empathic and flesh it out."

But Kb says that the Breakpoint invitation is an extreme example. "This human factor can be anything. For the most part, even a well embedded vocal track in the musical score does the trick. Think Deities, think Ocean Machine, think 303, even think 1995 a simple yet strangely uplifting robot voice is enough to make everyone love this otherwise rather pointless collection of cube effects like mad. Or think all those overlays in demos that show people. Fairlight's recent intros wouldn't have had such an impact if it weren't for the character design. Candytron and The Popular Demo had vocals and characters, and as such had an unfair `hit bonus` from the very start."

"But yeah, most demos don't use this, and as such either fall flat on the emotional side of things, or are widely open to the associations they evoke in the individual viewers. Or they go the opposite route and show things that normally are connected to people, but in a kind of dehumanized way." After a bit of thought, Kb says that this can sometimes work, kind of. "Kasparov and Debris are examples of that; structures that are inherently human-built, and therefore could easily tell a story for themselves, are taken and bereft of all that's living, resulting in an emptiness, a kind of negative field that's also possible to convey to the audience." Judging from the popularity of those demos, a lot of people like that kind of emptiness.

The Party Organ-Grinder

As mentioned before, in addition to being a coder, musician and all-round rock star, Kb is also a party organizer. This is where Kb pays back all the fun he's had at other parties. And it's also where he can express his "affection for expensive gadgetry" and show off his huge loudspeakers. "The two weeks around BP are perhaps the most exhausting weeks every year, but clearly also the most gratifying," says Kb. When asked what he would do differently, he says: "Apart from all the bitching coming from various sides, we always get told that Breakpoint is pretty much perfect as it is. It's actually quite hard to think of something that's really missing from today's demo parties. I think as far as the organizing itself is concerned, most teams do a really good job within their budget and capabilities, and try to do everything to make their party as good as possible."

"But when I think about it, there's definitely some stuff that would be worth trying out." Kb thinks that the scene ought to branch out more, by "trying to connect the scene to the rest of the world somehow". "We're really old enough, and lots of stuff that's released in the scene doesn't need to be hidden from makers and consumers of so-called real art. So how about not showing demos on the big screen between the compos, but selected animations and shorts from film festivals instead? How about connecting to local art events, sharing more, extending the notion of the last-night-only `compolurker ticket` we had at BP? The Evoke organizers are already trying to do some of that stuff, but sadly only within their own limited circle of acquaintances as it seems."

"The downside is that I wouldn't want to sacrifice any of the `geek culture` aspects of a demoparty. Namely, all the booze, sitting around talking about the weirdest stuff, shouting in-jokes into the general direction of the compo screen, celebrating the non-birthday of a guy who hasn't attended a single party for years, and all that stuff that would make real art types leave screaming. This is



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probably something that's hard to combine."

So, what would be Kb's ideal demoparty? It would, he says, be exactly like Breakpoint, but without Kb having to do any of the work, so he could actually talk to people and start boozing at a decent hour. "And watching compos on a fucking huge screen and PA, right in the middle of a fucking great audience, with a joint in one hand and a bottle of Salmiakki in the other. And chilling at the fire until the morning hours. I really have not had that for quite a while now. I think 'The Party' 2001 was the last time," he concludes.

So, Kb has thrown down the gauntlet. If you think you're up to the task, it's your turn to throw a kick-ass party.