

ST on the Net

by Stuart Williams

A whole new area for ST users has now opened up on Prestel. Stuart Williams gives a view from the inside.

For the Atari ST user interested in communications, there hadn't been much of interest in the UK other than hobbyist bulletin boards and expensive electronic mail. Until, that is, a new area opened on Micronet, the huge computer hobbyist database on Prestel. That new area, '16/32', named, like the ST itself, after the structure of the 68000 microprocessor, now provides an incentive for ST owners to pay their subscriptions, take up their modems and log on to discover what they're missing!

16/32 is a Micronet Contributors area, run and edited by users, for users. The brains behind the creation of the feature belong to Steve Kelly, one-time programmer for Psion (of Sinclair fame), writer of ST Karate for Eidersoft.

Steve first decided to take up the pen (or the key) on behalf of Atari ST users of Micronet in early 1986 when he began to try his hand at writing and, in an attempt to get more out of Prestel, he booked a series of frames in the Gallery, a section where Micronet will lease up to twenty-six frames to subscribers for a small quarterly fee.

With the help and contributions of other ST 'Netters', Steve was able to provide interesting articles, tips and news, albeit in a rather confined space. Gradually, the original '16/32' became so popular that Steve contacted the Micronet editorial team at Herbal Hill, London, with a view to starting up a regularly up-dated ST magazine on a more profes-

sional basis. Steve appealed to ST users via his Gallery pages for support for the implementation of the new database, and the response from the 'Netters' was overwhelming!

Around this time, Micronet had undertaken an updated survey of the computers used by subscribers, since it was obvious that many had changed their micros since the days when those who logged on were mainly Acorn and Sinclair owners. It seems likely that the results of



this poll were taken into account, as shortly thereafter the provisional go-ahead was given to begin the organisation of the new 16/32.

During several weeks of negotiation with the Net and, in particular, with Features Editor, now also News Editor, Ian (love me, love my Beeb) Burley, Steve collected together a band of volunteer editors who would be taking on different sections of the vastly enlarged maga-

zine as their own responsibility. Eric Matthews and Paul Nevitt, who had been in on 16/32 from the beginning, were joined almost immediately by Nick Elliott and myself.

I had been about to take pages in the Gallery myself in support of Steve's original 16/32, when I was invited to contribute to the new area. This seemed an ideal opportunity to help create an electronic magazine for real users of the ST. As it turned out, Paul and Eric were unable to take an active part due to other commitments, which left Steve in overall charge, and Nick and myself as co-editors.

During an initial period of setting up and gradually getting the feel of Prestel editing, we came up against a rather more serious problem than we had anticipated. Strange as it may seem with machines of the power of the ST to hand, there simply wasn't communications software available with the capability to edit Prestel pages off-line! All the current communications software had either a very simple, limited editor, designed for brief messages only, or had no Prestel graphics editing at all. This meant that two of us had to use BBC Micro and Spectrum to edit our pages off-line and then upload them, and, for a while at least, Steve found it necessary to edit on-line - an expensive process and one which would have made things impossibly expensive for me since I live near Birmingham, and Duke, the Prestel edit-

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MNET Contributors (C) 88091641a 8P
POST Public Domain
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STu's Selection Update 31/5/87
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I have a real goodie for you this week,
especially for the Chess fans!
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Krabat by Ulf-E Schmidt is a German
chess game (surprise, surprise!)
controlled by the mouse under GEN.
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The graphics are excellent, using the
traditional flat board preferred by
MORE
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7 PDST
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9 Main Menu
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MNET Contributors (C) 88091641b 8P
PDST Public Domain Review
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Many serious chess fans to the prettier
3D displays common in most commercial
offerings; the central screen area is
the board, on the right are the control
buttons to select level etc, and on the
left the level indicator, Move timer
and various other indicators I could
not read because they're in German!
(Must nip down to the library for a
German dictionary!)
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Piece movement is by clicking and
dragging with the mouse, and is very
simple and fast. The graphics (for the
mono monitor only) are neatly drawn,
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MORE #
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MNET Contributors (c) 80091643b 0f

Guide to the Public Domain

Public Domain software has been given up by it's author for free use by any person who wishes to do so; you can take as many copies of such a program as you like, and give them away to your friends!

This does not mean that Public Domain software is not copyright - this is normally retained by the author who will usually specify that the program is not to be sold for commercial gain but that it is permissible to offer a reasonably priced copying service for others.

MNET Contributors (c) 80091643a 0p

PD5T Guide to the Public Domain

Prices for Atari ST software have not been what you might call 'cheap' until the advent of the new brand of lower price games which have recently appeared on the market; not surprising, then, that Public Domain and Shareware programs have become very popular as a cheap (or indeed alternative to commercial) offerings.

Many of you may well ask 'what do the terms Public Domain and Shareware mean?' and there is a crucial difference between the two.

MORE !!

7 PD5T

9 Main Menu

ing computer, is in London - fortunately for him, Steve lives in London.

Eventually, Steve, an experienced programmer, was able to write a desk accessory which enabled him to upload full frames, albeit in a roundabout way, using Fastcom software, which does not normally have this facility. The method employed is far from perfect and I'm sure Steve would love an alternative. I would like to take this opportunity to appeal to any software house preparing communications software for the Atari ST to include a decent full-page off-line Prestel graphics editor in any future releases - we would be deeply grateful!

By the end of April, then, after much discussion of what was to be the final make-up of 16/32, the first skeleton framework was going up from page 800916 on Micronet. Within a fortnight, the flesh was appearing on the bare bones, and 16/32 as we know it began to take shape. Working within a limit of a hundred frames, we gradually added our title page, then a Welcome page to introduce new readers to us. Steve Kelly took on the News and Letters areas and created a new feature, 'Bits', where all sorts of strange things appear. Basically, the bits in here wouldn't fit anywhere else in 16/32!

Nick Elliott masterminded 16/32's Features area, where guest writers can see their names up in lights together with series run by the regular editors, such as Steve's current series on the 'C' language. Bill Welsh, one of our contacts in Bonnie Scotland, recently sent us a feature on the use of Midi synthesisers with the ST which appeared here. Nick also took on our Reviews section and many interesting articles on software and hardware have been penned by him and volunteers, including a recent review of the Twillstar independent 1 megabyte disk drive.

By now, you're probably wondering how I fit into all this. For my sins, I edit

16/32's Public Domain feature area, 'P.D.S.T', where I present a guide to software in the Public Domain, and Shareware, much of which is superb, including weekly reviews of the best 'PD' programs available for the ST, and a monthly guide to PD Libraries, many of which advertise in this magazine. In addition, I write the weekly Comms feature in, would you believe it, the features area!

Here I've discussed various aspects of communications with the ST, including bulletin boards in the UK and abroad, and recently presented a Bulletin Board Users Code of Practice. Currently 16/32 is running a beginner's guide to communications, as many non-technical subscribers to Micronet have expressed an interest in the 'nitty gritty' of the technical details of the hardware and software they use, or are about to purchase, to log on to Prestel and other services - as many ST owners on the net have transferred from other micro's, and are unsure of the requirements of communicating with their ST, such information has been in great demand.

Gradually then, things have taken shape and 16/32 has started to take on a regular routine of weekly updates (and sometimes, if a news story breaks or a significant press release or product reaches us, a daily editorial). Contributors to our letters pages, of which there have been many (keep them coming in) have kept up a lively battery of comments and questions, which have been limited, until recently, as they have had to write via our personal mailboxes on the system - 16/32 now has a pre-addressed mailbox frame, so things should gradually hot up in the post bag.

Software houses and dealers have begun to take notice of the new electronic magazine, and submissions of the latest software products and books have enabled us to fill 16/32's reviews area with the latest goodies for the ST'er

- up and coming reviews of software from Computer Concepts, Soft Bits, Robtek, Hisoft, Silica Shop and other manufacturers are already in the pipeline to go on-line.

Routes leading to the area are appearing in strategic places around Micronet, and our updates are a regular feature of the Micronet What's New page. According to the many readers who contact us, a large number of ST users have now taken to making 16/32 their first stop after logging on - which encourages us to put our best into the content.

We hope to expand in the not-too-distant future as, with the price cuts announced by Atari recently, the popularity of the ST looks set to soar - a fact graphically illustrated on Microchat, one of Micronet's CB-style 'Chatlines' - where hardly a day goes by without a new ST user appearing, having sold his or her BBC Micro outfit, or Amstrad outfit, or Commodore outfit, in order to take a leap into computing's future with the ST! One of the first things to be expanded will undoubtedly be 16/32's Letters pages - there can be no doubt that the name of the game on Micronet is communication - and 16/32 is no exception.

Behind the scenes, Steve, Nick and myself are fighting a weekly battle against line noise and cranky software to put the pages up every Sunday - though we may swear at our gear, the show must go on! One thing makes it worthwhile, the feedback from the readers (or should that be viewers?) of 16/32. We've had nothing but help and constructive comments so far, and that counts for a lot, especially when you're crying into your beer after receiving your latest 'phone bill!

Perhaps the best comment so far comes from Martyn Moore, Manager of Silica Shop - it seems they're now able to sell modems to ST owners on the strength of the presence of 16/32 on Micronet - praise indeed!