

TOPPING THE CHARTS

The teenage programmer who makes thousands of pounds from writing games programs captures the imagination of many computer owners. In this article we follow up two of these success stories and see how a fortune can be made from an original programming idea.

In the summer of 1984 Gremlin Graphics launched a new computer game called Wanted: Monty Mole. The game is expected to be a bestseller. If so, then the programmer, Peter Harrap, stands to earn several thousand pounds. Yet Harrap is just 19 and Wanted: Monty Mole was his first commercial game.

Peter Harrap belongs to a small group of 'whizz kid' programmers, usually in their 'teens, who can earn considerable sums of money if they come up with a top-ten game. One 14-year-old made nearly £4,000 from writing games software for the BBC Micro. Another programmer, aged 17, was given a Lotus Esprit sports car by the software company he worked for.

Like most games programmers Harrap is self-taught. The first computer he owned was a Sinclair ZX81 and after seeing the small amount of software that was then available, he decided to have a go at writing his own games programs. To do this he had to learn Z80 machine code as BASIC is far too slow for arcade games. Harrap soon switched his attentions to the Sinclair Spectrum and concentrated on trying to improve one game that particularly interested him, Quicksilva's Ant Attack (see page 6). Harrap broke into the machine code and altered the 'landscape' featured in the program. His modified version was rejected by Quicksilva, but a local computer enthusiast, Ian Stewart, who was looking for new talent for his small software company was impressed by the tape Harrap sent him. Harrap's game infringed the copyright on the original Ant Attack so Stewart's company, Gremlin Graphics, did not accept it. However, the company needed a high-powered Spectrum programmer so they took on Harrap immediately.

Every software company looks for an interesting and unusual theme in a game that it hopes will push it up to number one in the software charts. Gremlin Graphics conceived the idea of Wanted: Monty Mole in the hope that its topical theme of the miners' strike would capture the public's imagination. The idea was put into practice by Harrap, who wrote a program for it to run on the Sinclair Spectrum.

The game took Harrap four months to



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program. He began by writing a sprite generator routine to enable the various graphics shapes to be designed quickly, he then drew the coal mine and finally he programmed in the rules of play that determine the characters' movements.

The game received nationwide television coverage because of its topicality, and was soon a bestselling hit. The media reports did not ignore the irony that Harrap's father, who worked at the local colliery, was himself on strike, nor the fact that Gremlin Graphics had pledged to donate five pence for every cassette sold to the Miners' Welfare Fund.

Gremlin Graphics pays Harrap a *royalty*, or a percentage of each cassette sold. These royalty deals vary from company to company. Most companies will pay royalties on a sliding scale: five per cent for the first 3,000 copies sold, for example, and then seven per cent for the next 10,000. The percentage will be calculated either on the nett price, which is the price the software company receives from the distributor, or on the gross price, which is the price paid by the public.

Most companies will also pay its programmers an *advance*. This is paid against royalties, in other words it will be subtracted from the first royalties paid. Many companies, however, will not pay their programmers a royalty and will opt instead for a single up-front payment. Programmers should be wary of such deals as they can result in lost revenue if sales are high.

On a royalty deal, the programmer will retain copyright to the game. This means that if there is any dispute the programmer is the one who sues,

Retail Detail

Point of sale presentation is perhaps the most important of all user interfaces: here, the effects of advertising, reviews, packaging, merchandising and product appeal combine in influencing the customer's choice. Availability is obviously crucial to sales, so getting the product distributed through multiple outlets such as Boots and W H Smith is a primary goal of all software publishers

Making It

Thousands of home micro owners are trying to write software packages: some of them actually succeed, find a publisher and make some money. Our imaginary game may overstate the element of change in the process, but a lottery it surely is...