

LLAMASOFT

Llamasoft is a company that is built around the talents of one man — Jeff Minter. Minter has achieved star status in the software world with his quirky, humorous games for Commodore and Atari machines. Here we look at his career to date, and examine his obsession with camels, llamas, sheep and other animals.

Most software houses are started in 'cottage industry' fashion, with one or two programmers working from home. As they become more successful, other programmers are hired and the very factors that led to success become submerged in the rush to produce new software: the 'house style' disappears and one company's output becomes much like any other's. But Llamasoft is different. *Revenge of the Mutant Camels* and *Sheep In Space* could not have come from any other company.

Llamasoft's distinctive style must be attributed to one man. Jeff Minter is still only 22 years old but has, over the past few years, become one of the stars of the software world. It is his obsession with camels, llamas and other furry beasts that has shaped Llamasoft's image, and his favourite adjective — 'awesome!' — is used regularly in Llamasoft advertising. Minter's fame — or notoriety — is such that he is lampooned in a rival company's software: one of the hazards in *Software Projects*' *Manic Miner* is described as 'Attack of the Mutant Telephones'.

Minter began writing games in 1981 after leaving the University of East Anglia, where he studied maths and physics. Despite coming top of his set in the computer part of his course, he failed the maths papers and was forced to leave.

His first venture into the commercial software market came when he wrote a version of *Defender* for the Vic-20 and founded Llamasoft in 1982 to market the product. *Traxx* and *Gridrunner* soon followed, and success was assured. *Gridrunner*, in particular, sold well, both in Britain and in the USA. Minter's mother Hazel, who helps to run Llamasoft, claims: 'Gridrunner was the top seller in America for ages and ages. That was the one that really made Jeff's name'.

Minter now writes games for the Vic-20, Commodore 64 and Atari computers, but is not interested in producing games for the Spectrum, which he considers an 'awful machine'. Conversions of Llamasoft games have therefore been undertaken by *Salamander Software* and *Quicksilver*, which produce the Spectrum versions under licence. Llamasoft will shortly hire an assistant to convert games, thereby allowing Minter to concentrate on writing new software. But Minter will remain totally in control of the programming. He explains: 'I'm just interested in getting a good game. They're all my ideas, and so there's no reason to take on other people'.

The company is very much a family concern. Llamasoft became a limited company in April 1984, and its directors are Minter himself, his father Patrick, and his mother Hazel. The company is run from the family home in Tadley, Hampshire. Patrick Minter helps his son with the programming, while Hazel handles the administration. Llamasoft also employs two assistants, two accountants and an artist.

Minter has now produced 21 games for Llamasoft; many of these contain a recurring theme, usually camel-oriented. Minter says he is 'deeply into camels', and the first game to feature these beasts was written in 1982 for the Atari. This was *Attack of the Mutant Camels*, and it was later followed by *Revenge of the Mutant Camels*.

Llamasoft has now signed a contract with CBS to market Minter's games in the UK (with the exception of the *Quicksilver* and *Salamander* conversions). Distribution in the United States is handled by *Human Engineering Software*.

Demand is high for Llamasoft games: a new product will have a first run of 10,000 cassettes, and this run is then repeated a number of times, depending on sales.

Minter does not foresee any major changes in the way the company is run. He claims that the business side does not interest him, and he plans to carry on as before, developing his obsession with furry animals and writing 'awesome' new games.

TONY LODGE



COURTESY OF YOUR 64 AND VIC-20

Revenge Of The Mutant Camels

Llamasoft's surrealist-obsessive style is graphically illustrated in this shot from *Revenge Of The Mutant Camels* — follow-up to the successful *Attack Of The Mutant Camels*