GETTING IT TAPED

Virgin Games is a subsidiary of the highly successful independent record company, Virgin Records. The connections between promoting popular music and computer programs are significant: software 'pop charts' are becoming as important as the Top Forty.

When the market for home computer software was an unknown quantity, back in the early 1970s, it afforded many opportunities for youthful entrepreneurs to cash in on the demand for cassette software. Anyone who could write amusing games programs in BASIC could get hold of a high-speed cassette-to-cassette audio dubbing machine and sell mail-order through the small ads.

Today, things are not so simple. No matter how good a programmer you are, you must possess originality and creativity in order to make the grade. Different software houses originate their product in different ways. Imagine Software for instance, (see page 79) has many in-house-programmers coding their bosses' creative ideas.

Nick Alexander, the 28-year-old managing director of Virgin Games, says: 'Often the better the programmer, the fewer the ideas they have. To be a good programmer you need to be very logical, very methodical, very diligent, and those tend not to be the qualities of the creative individual'. For this reason, he has chosen to restrict Virgin's in-house programmers to a minimum. The plan is to provide a technical and creative service to correct the deficiencies in the many programs that they receive every week from young hopefuls. Capable programmers are helped in developing ideas; and the creative people get help with coding.

The rewards of being published by Virgin may appear less than those from other companies. A game that Virgin publishes earns an advance of between £1,000 and £3,000 for the author against 7.5 per cent royalties on the net price. Contrast this with the 25 per cent royalties that many other software publishers claim to offer. But Alexander argues that because nearly a quarter of the net revenue of any game is ploughed back into promoting it, sales (and the author's eventual reward) are subsequently much greater.

Promoting products is, of course, an activity that Virgin knows a lot about. Virgin's name was established through its successful ventures in the music business and the techniques that 31-year-old Virgin boss Richard Branson learned in that field have been applied to its software offshoot. Games writers are promoted as stars in their own right — cassette inlays not only credit the author by name, but also feature a picture and thumbnail biography. Virgin Games, which started in February 1983 by advertising for games in the home computer magazines, received 500 initial submissions. Now it has 46 titles for eight home computers on its list. Its best sales are for the Spectrum, with the BBC Micro in second place and the Commodore 64 not far behind.

Virgin's hottest new writer is Martin Wheeler, who is 15 and has just written two new games for the Spectrum, 'Dr Franky and the Monsters' and 'Sorcerers'. Wheeler has assembled the programs in machine code, and developed some impressive graphics for them. Alexander sees a similarity between the home computing scene of today and the music business of a decade ago and believes that computing is on the way to displacing music as the favoured leisure activity of the young.
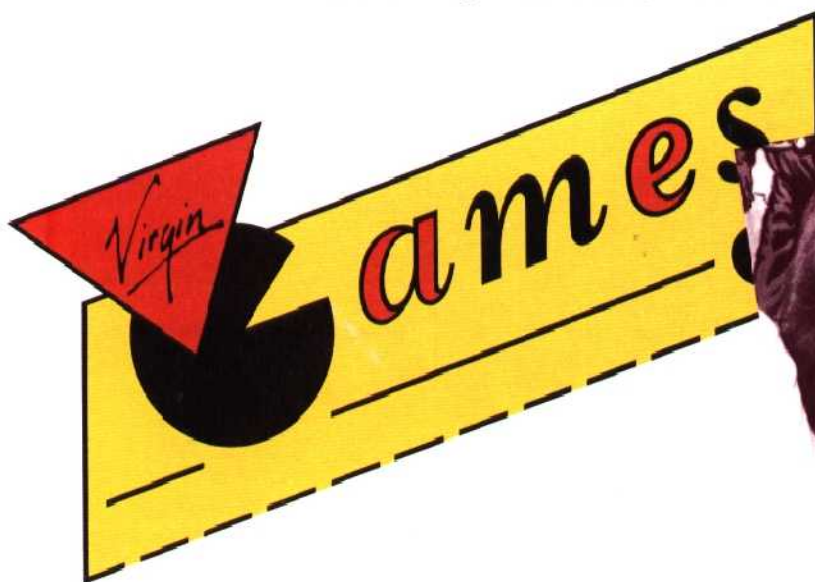
Nick Alexander

Richard Branson