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ZX Spectrum scene status

by Elfh of Inward & Cpu

More than two years have passed since I last spoke about this topic in the magazine 'Pain'. These kinds of articles are rare, simply because not much is happening on this platform these days. If you look at the list of Spectrum productions released in the last 2-3 years, then you'll notice 3-5 groups, making demos and intros and releasing them at the same parties each year. Nevertheless, if we compare 2006 and 2007, then it is easy to notice that more interesting works were made this year. Recalling last years Chaos Constructions, I only feel despondency, because at the main event of last year in Russia, there were only three productions made by two groups released. And I took part in creating two of them. Now, try to imagine my feelings after the democompo: disappointment and bad mood chased me for a long time, until I visited Breakpoint 2007 and got cured completely.

Now it is time to speak about highlights of the "speccy" scene, coming from my subjective point of view.

I'll start with last year's Scene.org Awards, where our demo 'I am the seed' was presented in the two nominations 'Best Demo on an Oldschool Platform' and 'Best Effects'. It didn't win, but the fact, that more European people paid attention to the speccy demos released in Russia, made a lot of people happy. As I mentioned above, this year we made a trip to Breakpoint with our demo 'Your song is quiet' and got a lot of unforgettable moments. For me this all seems like a part of our integration into the world-wide demoscene, because Russia is still disconnected from it a bit.

Your song is quiet by Inward and CPU

Continuing on this topic I'd like to also joyfully mention that a young team named 'Ate Bit', formed in 2004, won the 'Most Original Concept' award this time. They really brought their own style, upholding old-school traditions even today.

Old skool intro maker / Ate Bit

Icabod / Raww Arse has been holding the speccy demoparty Raww orgy since 2005. What is really astonishing here is that he can attract people to the party whose works I never thought would be released anywhere. For example, Pissedbob from the very old speccy demo crew Technium 220 scored first place in the 256b intro competition, having done something for the first time after a 10-years-hiatus. Also, a new team from Russia, Debris, revealed itself for the first time at Raww orgy 2007, too.



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In the middle of this year Skrju, who blew the demoscene away with their works in 2002 - 2005, started to make demos again after a break for 1 and a half years, when the fate of the group remained unknown. Sq, their coder, recently moved to Rybinsk -- a small Russian town with a population of 300,000 people -- where the majority of CyberPunks Unity lives, including me. Their first work in this year was called 'Almost here' and featured views of my hometown. It was released at Forever 8 demoparty and got the 1st place.

Almost here / skrju

Not long time ago, in Nizhniy Novgorod the party DiHalt was held, which is one of two demoscene events held in Russia each year. I think that 100 - 150 attendees is a very small quantity of people for the major European demoparties, but in Russia, the scene is having a hard time now. That's why it was very good for us. Besides that, holding Chaos Constructions which had the status of being the biggest demoscene event in Russia for the last 3 years, was uncertain, because organizers are in lack of money. The situation with CC became clear only after DiHalt, when organizers announced that it would be held, but on a smaller scale, than last year. Speaking of DiHalt I must say, that party made me happy, because of good new demos from 4D+Triebkraft, CPU and Skrju. In particular, I was impressed by the work of 4D+TBK, who came up with a new style and won the compo.

Ugly kid, magic star by TBK+4D

Spectrum Hardware

As a lot of you already know, the ZX-Spectrum was spread in Russia because of radio amateurs, who hacked original machines and started to produce homebrew clones using cheap Russian parts. Nowadays, people craving for spectrum compatible hardware developments are still omnipresent. If you visit <http://zx.pk.ru> -- a Russian speccy forum -- you will find 3 - 4 currently discussed threads about new clones in the 'Hardware' topic. Some of those machines have extended graphics or sound features and some don't go further than the standard speccy 48. I've seen a few foreign sites with such developments too, and one thing that I am not sure of, is: does anyone else except developers use those machines? It is like the demoscene, but dealing only with hardware, where everyone is doing what he likes. So, I think a hardware exhibition at Chaos Constructions 2007 would be cool, if all those people bring their machines. Like in 2006, when we were shown a streaming video with sound, using ATM Turbo 2+ IDE Cd-rom.

Another one day / CPU

One of the few Russian groups who really promote their spectrum-related hardware is Nedo pc (<http://www.nedopc.org>). They started by producing one of the most enhanced clones of the past century -- the ATM Turbo 2+ (7mhz / 1Mb / IDE / Covox / new screen resolutions) -- originally designed by the company Microart in the late nineties. Then they produced the Turbo-AY card which included 2 AY chips (6 channels instead of 3) and could be installed into any speccy in place of a standard AY. This card was originally designed by Himik ZxZ in 2000 or so, but was not spread very much. Nedo pc improved the scheme and gave some cards as prizes



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at demoparties, so a lot of people now own this device. They have also made cheap and good pal-coders, so connecting a speccy to a standard TV has become much easier now. And finally, they presented the Turbo-FM board this year, which includes 6 channels of AY sound and 6 FM channels. Editors for this device exist only for Windows at this moment. The first compo for this sound card was held at DiHalt this year.

Turbo-FM card

In spite of all those hardware developments, the Pentagon remains the standard speccy demoscene machine since the first Russian demoparties. Nearly all demos still work with 128kb ram, 3.5 mhz and AY/YM sound chip. Thanks to the Moscow hardware developer with the deterrent nickname King of Evil it became possible to buy new boards of this machine, built with Altera chip. The main differences to the original is a 1mb onboard memory, done with simm, 7mhz turbo mode and 4bit per dot color mode with the possibility to turn it all off. The board costs ~100 and could easily be installed into the ATX case. This board also has ZX-Bus slots to connect new devices, such as IDE controllers or SD card readers, which are still in development.

Pentagon 1024sl v2

The construction of new sound devices has pushed musicians to be more creative, of course. And here comes the new Ubiktune netlabel created by C-jeff with Newart and oriented toward releasing speccy music in various formats. It started in 2006 with the 'konami' album by C-jeff. In 2007 they continued with the release of an album by Karbofos written with the Turbo-AY card. I look into the future of Ubiktune with hope, because it might speed up the progress of modern speccy musicians. I don't like current situation with only two composers (nq/skrju and simon/cpu) writing music for all Russian speccy demos (except for some rarely seen stuff by me). I'm not saying that they are composing bad songs, I just think that seeing new names here would be great.

Now a few words about speccy games released in Russia. The center of the speccy gamedev community is the group Perspective, which releases a printed mag about the speccy named 'Abzatz'. They also distribute some games from Russian authors and carry out annual 'Your game' contests with a prize fund of about ~200. Games taking part in this contest are sold commercially (~6 for the disk with all the entries). Usually 3 - 5 are released on there. I will not speak about the quality, because I am simply not very interested and didn't even see the entries from last year's participants. I should say that game development stands out a bit out from the demoscene here, in spite of the fact that people are not gaining big financial profit with this.

This article wouldn't reflect the full current situation if I did not mention the most important problems, at least the way I see them. First comes the language barrier, which prevents Russians from integrating with the world-wide demoscene on a full scale. Yes, it is true: a lot of people here neither speak nor understand the English language. Some time ago CPU tried to improve the situation a bit, releasing the bilingual spectrum mag 'Adventurer'. It is hard to say whether it gave us some positive results or not, but at least we tried. The second problem is that there is no single mag devoted to the speccy demoscene now, not even in the Russian language. Some mags are released from time to time, but they are not covering all aspects of the demoscene. Guys from the Symbols group,



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who were silent for about two years, promise to continue releasing their 'Genz' mag this summer, but without any English language articles, I think. Another obnoxious thing is that the Russian scene on various platforms is not united. We still have some kind of cold war between PC, Amiga and the Spectrum. Single groups communicate, of course, but when you are at the party, you can feel the division.

InSilver / skrju

Forecasting the development of the demoscene on the Spectrum in the nearest future, I can say something regarding the appearance of productions which will use the enhanced possibilities of modern clones. It is still in an early exploration stage and only few people are working on this. For example, not a long time ago Alone Coder released a demo where he illustrated a hardware scroller in hi-res colour mode on ATM-Turbo 2+. This feature was undocumented in manuals and no emulators are able to work with this properly. He also released 'Ball Game', a game for 16 colours per dot mode on Pentagon 1024sl v2.2 and ATM Turbo2+. As far as I know, it is available for MSX now. I also hope to see a return of some oldskool people to the scene, who left it in the late '90s. Now a lot of them have a more stable social life and some old names are already being seen in forums. With modern development tools like SjAsm, Vortex Tracker and good emulators it has become possible to work more comfortably everywhere using PC's. Of course, watching demos and listening to music on a real machine always brings more joy to everyone though.