Meet Mr. Moon

A prodigy at an unknown age, Mr. Moon says he'll make Noho famous

By Kitty Axelson

It was less than two years ago that a man named Mr. Moon ("Yep, that's right. My first name is Mr. and my last name is Moon") was totally computer illiterate. But now, Mr. Moon is sitting on top of a computer software business that's booming, with a 30 percent monthly growth rate since its beginnings last January, and sales in "the upper ranges." Mr. Moon creates, manufactures and markets original computer games—cassette and disk drive—and, Moon says, his company is already recognized as a leader in third-party software. "Third party software," in case you're computer illiterate, means that Moon works independently of business tie-ins with computer manufacturing firms; first-party software are creations of programmers employed by the computer companies and second-party games are made by programmers under contract.

"Here, I'll give you an objective," says Moon. "We're going to have Moonbeam Software in any—and every—store that sells software for this computer [the Texas Instruments 99/4(A)]. It's going to be a household word. Look, in 1981, Texas Instruments sold 30,000 of these; in 1982 it sold 550,000. This year, they're looking at probably two million out there, and we're going to be in every one of those homes."

Moon was once a funky, middle-aged, bearded, long-haired hippie-type purveyor of used stereo equipment. He still has the long beard, which is graying, the long hair, which is tied in a classic, green elastic, and the beer belly profile; he wears a brilliant yellow sun visor and grungy old clothes. He doesn't tuck in his shirt for visitors. And the sign outside his store still reads "Hi Fi Exchange"; customers continually float in to off their old stereoware, and are surprised to find the production facilities for Moonbeam Software, already on-line with orders of over 500 pieces at a time, and its capacities all set for a $5 to $6 million a year business. (Moon also sells computers to go with the games.)

Moon is the kind of guy, in fact, who serves as an ample reminder that all you need to succeed—in the pioneering world of computer software, at least—is a touch of genius, a flare for the dramatic and a good business head.

"A little less than two years ago," recalls Moon as he swills his coffee and swivels in his frayed executive chair, "a friend told me to get a computer for my stereo business' record-keeping. This computer, the T199/4(A)—it's about $99 now, but it was $400 then—was advertised in *The New York Times*, and I mail-ordered it straight from 42nd Street, New York. I taught myself how to use it from the books that came along with it. That took me about two months. And then somewhere along the line, I purchased some computer games. They were third-party games—and I was grossly disappointed. I said, 'Shit, I could do better than this!' "

Death Drones sprang from Moon's bitter disappointment with the lack of luster in what's generally available for computer games. In *Death Drones*, "Your city is under attack by relentless Alien Drones! They are unmanned satellites from the far reaches of the galaxy coming to destroy your world! Can you protect your nuclear reactor or will your city be reduced to rubble by the devastating nuclear explosions?" The pace is incredibly fast, the graphics dynamic, the levels challenging all the way through. His games, he says, are "real joystick breakers."

Programming such a thriller wasn't easy at first, though. Moon ran into dead-ends because he didn't know enough about programming to satisfy his personal requirements for fast action sequences and striking graphics. Despite the lingering paint on his old pants, Moon is a perfectionist as well as a creative whiz. Then he discovered extended BASIC, a more complex version of the basic BASIC computer language; an extended memory capacity opened up for him and his future co-conspirators. As soon as he'd gained fluency in the new language, Moon whipped up a thriller called *Moonbeam Express*.

Flushed with the glory of the game and excitement of the creating spirit, Moon quested for other TI-99/4(A) users. An ad in the classifieds brought only one result—but that was enough. Future partner

Tolsky photo

Joe Macciarulo was also frothing with excitement at his new-found abilities to program computer games and, like Moon, he seriously lamented the dearth of available high-quality, fast-paced games.

The two immediately formed a mutual admiration partnership, playing each other's games ad infinitum, and soon after, they entered into phase two, a business partnership. Macciarulo's *Garbage Belly* ("help Garbage Belly eat up the ripe garbage in a field of garbage pails, but don't let him eat any raw garbage or he'll die"), and Moon's *Death Drones* and *Moonbeam Express* were the beginnings; in rapid sequence, the two devised four more games and went into production and marketing.

With a highspeed duplicator to make the cassettes, heavy-weight boxes produced in nearby Chicopee, Mass., a backroom shrink-wrapper, and a brother-in-law in Providence, RI as the designer for bold advertisements and packaging graphics, the company is now going after the mass market. At present, they are negotiating with rack-jobbers (like the bread companies, rack-jobbers charge a store only for what the store actually sells, and take the leftovers back at no charge) for Sears, Roebuck and Co. and other retailers across the country.

"We're in a unique position now," says Moon with an expansive smile. "We have the best third-party gaming software for the TI's and the best packaging. Most of the other third-party games, see, come in plastic baggies. So who wants to buy something for $30 or $40 that comes in a little plastic bag?" Moonbeam also does it for less; their games sell for $14.95 to $19.95, compared to about $39.99 suggested retail price for most other TI games, Moon says.

What does it take to write a good game? "You have to have imagination, creativity, and a good working knowledge of the manipulation of the language of the computer. And a good game concept of what people will actually enjoy. They like shoot 'em up games—men more so than women," advises Mr. Moon, who preferred to absent himself from further discussions of that apparent preference. Other than that, just about anyone can write a real joystick breaker.

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