

Special Front-Line COMDEX Edition

Point of ORIGIN

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Fear and Loathing at COMDEX

by Galen Svanas

LAS VEGAS, Nevada - Greetings from Sin City (absolutely no relation to the Maxis title) and COMDEX, the hardware industry's bi-annual love-in. Actually, COMDEX is more of an orgy of purchasing, posturing and presentations.

Let me try to give you some idea of the scope of this event. First of all, it's huge, almost twice as large as CES. About 145,000 are expected to attend. The show is spread out over seven locations around town: the Las Vegas Convention Center, the Sands Expo Center, and several of the biggest hotels. In reality, it's too big for its own good. There is really no way to get around to all of the sites. My unsolicited and unheeded advice is that the whole thing should be moved to the desert and a giant extension cord run from Hoover Dam.

ORIGIN is showing as part of the Media Vision booth in the "Multimedia Pavilion" at Bally's Hotel. Media Vision makes the Pro Audio Spectrum 16 sound card, which we've been running with our demos (after some 11th-hour configuring). Media Vision also bundles the Underworld/Wing 2 CD with its Fusion CD 16 Multimedia Upgrade Kit.

"...the whole thing should be moved to the desert and a giant extension cord run from Hoover Dam."

As you'd expect, this kind of crowd means a lot of foot traffic. We brought thirteen boxes of brochures, flyers, press kits and demos and they were



This is the entrance to the fabulous Mirage - not where the ORIGIN crew is staying.

completely gone by Tuesday afternoon, just the second day of the show. It's been press-intensive, too. We've talked with all kinds of magazines and business publications that we'd never see at CES. We've done some television interviews and I understand we (yours truly, The Point Man, himself) showed up on CNN.

The Strike Commander demo continues to draw big crowds, as it has for the last year and a half. (Thanks go out to Zach for changing the end of the demo to say, "The assault begins real soon."). With a couple of very rare exceptions, only the cinematic sequence is running. ORIGIN FX seems to be an up-and coming winner. Buyers and journalists who've seen it say they think it will be a good seller. That means a lot when you consider the fact that other screen savers (such as Star Trek) are being debuted at this show as well. If

anticipation means anything, Underworld 2's a sure hit. Apparently, its first crop of players is just now finishing the game and waiting for the sequel. We've shown it (the beta version) to a select few and they're more than excited. We're also seeing a lot of interest in Serpent Isle, although an overriding concern is the speed performance of the U7 engine.

We are, in effect, a force of two. Karl Kabler and I (Galen Svanas) were the only two non-Dell employees on the flight here. Dell's hitting the concrete with 175 people. Marten Davies, the planned third member of our search-and-destroy team, came down with the flu that's going around Austin. He did manage to fly out Tuesday afternoon, but had a sinking spell and jetted back to Austin Wednesday afternoon. MIS Mavericks Steve Morris and Kathy Lambdin are in

(Continued on next page...)

Vegas, but on an information-gathering mission. We're all staying just a stone's throw from Bally's at the fabulous and opulent Town Hall Hotel, or, as it's become affectionately known by us, the "Town Hole," a place where you have to leave a \$10 deposit before they'll even turn the phone on in your room. But that's another story (another article, heck, even another whole issue of Point of ORIGIN).

On the business side, Karl says he's "75% sure" that he'll be able to work out a major ongoing bundle deal with Insight hard drives (remember that old joke?) He's also close to inking a deal with a Canadian distributor which represents 28 stores. On top of it all, we've generated a stack of sales/press leads about 4 inches high.

Taking a look at the bigger picture: the big battle of the databases has begun. Microsoft has used COMDEX to announce its new database called Access. Access will ship at a suggested retail price of \$99, well below that of other business databases. Microsoft also plans to have a Windows version of FoxPro available by Christmas. Mega-gazillionaire Bill Gates threw a champagne fete for 1,000 people at Caesar's Palace to honor the occasion (I read about it).

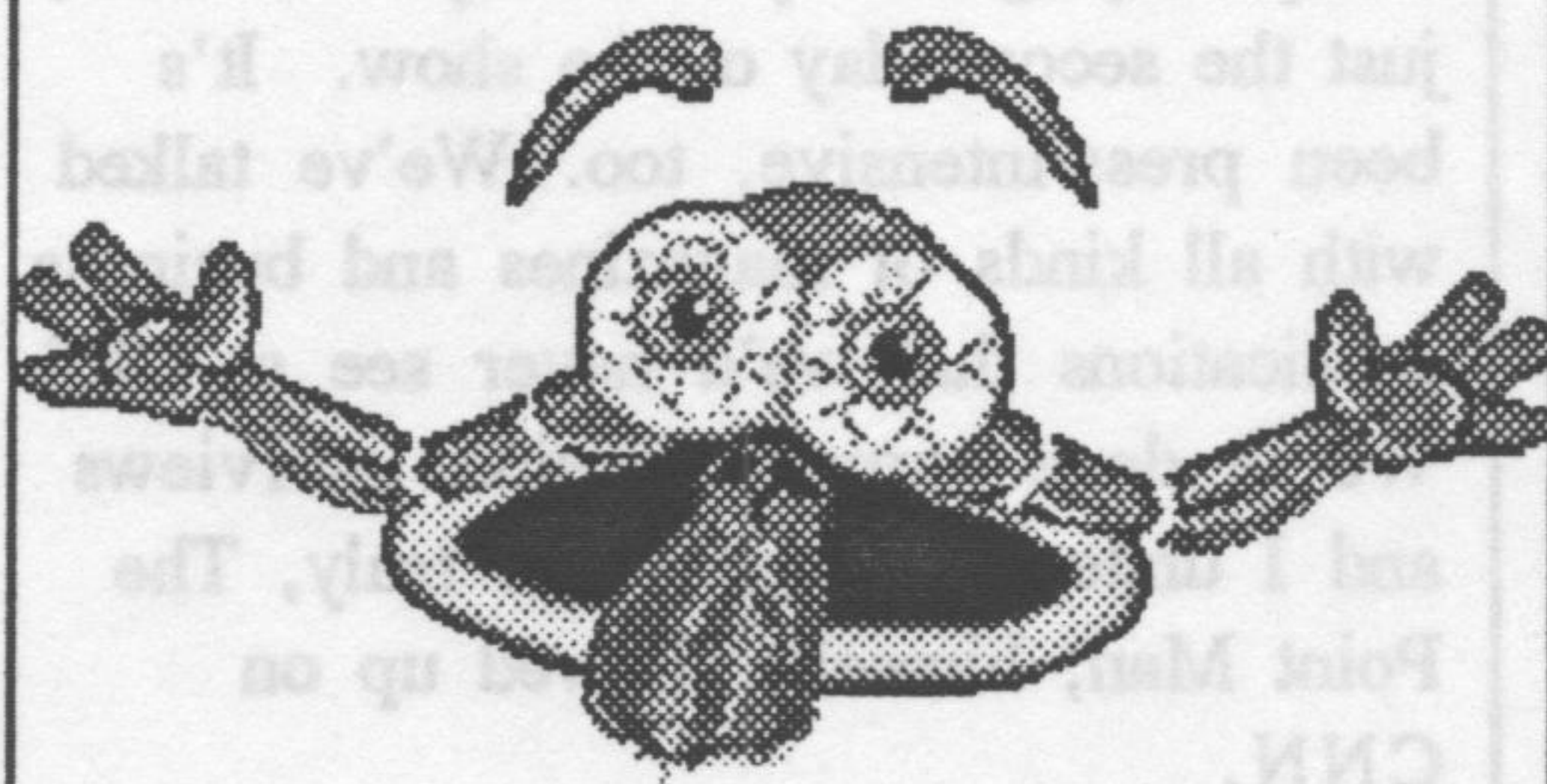
All of this doesn't play well at all with Borland, former king of the databases. Borland still controls about 65% of the market, but delays in the Windows versions of its dBase and Paradox products have flung open the Windows of opportunity for the competition. Borland stockholders aren't too thrilled, either. Borland traded at \$86 a share in January. It's trading in the \$30's now. So what does Borland do to counter this new threat? Well, Borland Chairman Philippe Kahn is personally buzzing the show every day in a biplane, yanking a banner that reads, "Borland Flies High." Go figure.

That's really not the worst of what goes on here in the name of advertising. Taxis are topped with ads for business applications. A Corel Draw hot-air balloon hangs aimlessly over the Con-



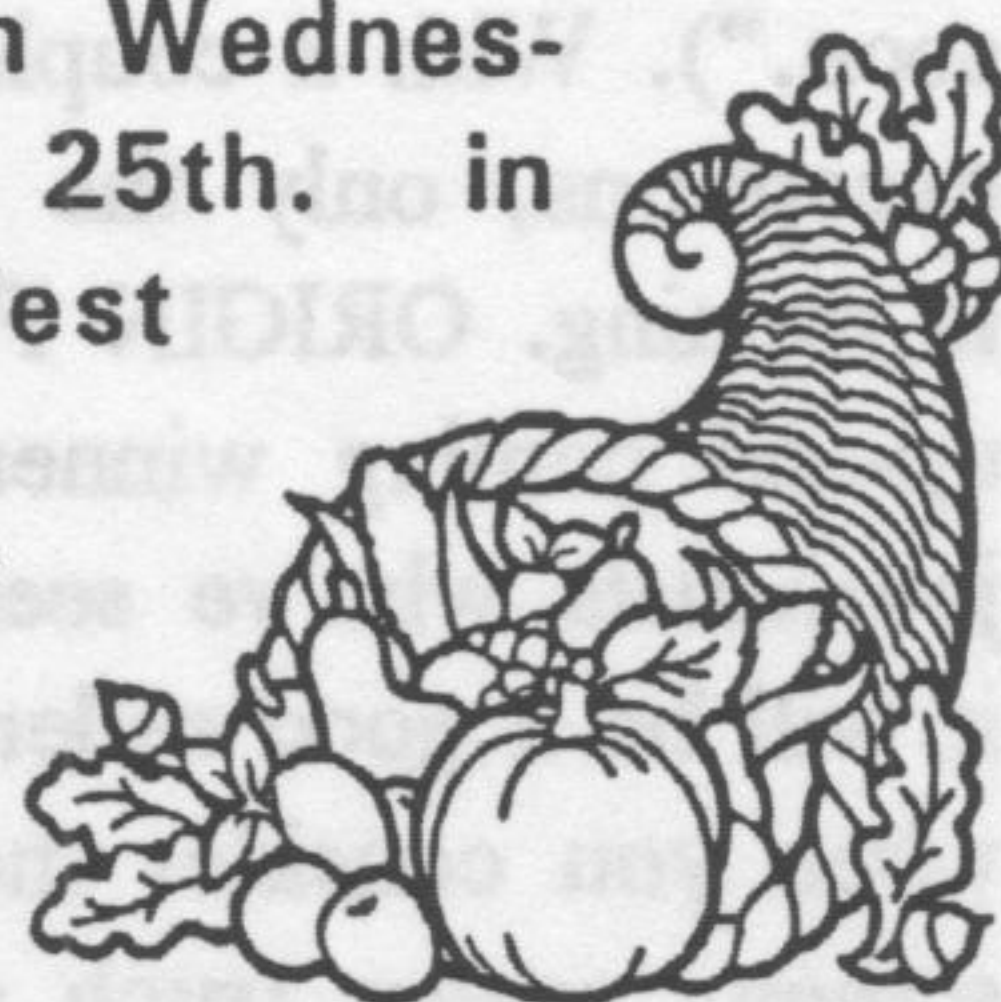
Moonlighting...

This is Upgrade Man - proof that making a few extra bucks in Vegas can be a cinch with the right cape.



Turkey Gobbler'...

Don't forget the 2nd annual EC Thanksgiving potluck feast. This will be held on Wednesday, November 25th, in the ORIGIN West Atrium. See Carolyn Cutler for more details.



Happy Thanksgiving!!!

vention Center. Even more ads are projected onto sides of hotels. And the air waves are crammed with messages like, "Come see the very latest in form capacitors." You can practically hear the stampede in the street. I do have to give credit to one campaign, though. It features Mr. Magoo saying, "Even I can see the advantage of a Samtron monitor."

Business reigns supreme at COMDEX and the hot items right now are full video in Windows and voice-recognition technology. Several vendors are touting compressed video as the answer to all the multimedia presentation questions. What I've seen so far doesn't quite back that up. Frame rates are still excruciatingly slow. But importing video from another source - television, VCR or laser disc - is much more impressive.

The voice-recognition companies are making leaps-and-bounds advances. A couple of presentations made it clear just how easy it is to set up programs like WordPerfect with voice-recognition technology and custom commands. No longer do you have to speak as though you're in a foreign country ("OPEN... THE... FILE... NEW ...BUSINESS"). In fact, you can speak in a normal voice with regular inflection. Obviously, the possibilities related to gaming are intriguing.

While we're on the subject, entertainment software publishers are once again noticeably absent from the festivities. The only other gaming company we've run across is MicroProse, which isn't hard because they are on the other side of the Media Vision booth. MP is showing Strike Eagle 3. Very impressive. I also got the latest scoop on 7th Guest from a person with Virgin Games who stopped by to see Strike. She said it's looking like it won't ship until January or February at the earliest. Guess they missed that Halloween deadline.

We'll have a final wrap-up on COMDEX when Point of ORIGIN moves back to its home base in Austin next issue. Until then, Viva Las Vegas!