PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Over the last few months a number of the events have rocked the Epson community; some good, some bad. Seldom satisfied with what I read in many of the user group newsletters, and dismayed at most of the news coverage found elsewhere, here is my personal perspective on several of the events important to Epson users that have occurred over the last year or so.

Major news stories include the introduction of the QX-16 computer, Epson's Interact '85 conference, the release of Valdocs 2, the parting of ways between Epson and Rising Star, the introduction of the Equity computer series and finally, the demise of the QX-10 and Titan Technology's MS-DOS expansion board for the QX-10.

In our Spring 1985 issue, we ran a review on one of the QX-16 prototypes that was available to us. Overall, the computer is not an improvement over the QX-10, but does have the ability to run some MS-DOS software. Execution of CP/M-based programs is considerably slower than on the QX-10 due to the hardware memory refresh scheme used. (It ties up the memory about 12 percent of the time, slowing program execution by that amount.)

We were also disappointed that the computer is only about "30 percent" compatible with the IBM product line, meaning that if your software isn't configured especially for the QX-16, there is a good chance it won't display or operate correctly. We noted these and other problems at the time of the review, thinking that they would be corrected before the system went into production. To make the story short, the QX-16 is not selling very well due to a combination of high price and poor dealer support and performance.

Epson's Interact '85 conference was enthusiastically attended. Overall reviews were mixed, due mostly to the wild variations in the speaker presentation quality ... to be expected in an undertaking of this scale. Given the complete sellout and user interest, we hope Epson will try it again.

One of the main attractions of Interact was the first release of Valdocs 2. As luck would have it, the disk duplicators made corrupted copies of about half the disks issued at Interact '85. Further, despite what RSI's Chris Rutkowski claimed was "the most tested software ever produced," the release was full of fatal, data-destroying bugs. And so is the current "fixed" release of Valdocs 2, if we are to believe reports coming into Epson World.

Shortly after Interact, and after three years of effort and $10 million of funding, Epson terminated its contractual relationships with RSI, and later in the summer of 1985 ceased production of the QX-10.

RSI's response to the problem is an interesting story. In a nutshell, this is what happened. At the time Epson cut the apron strings, RSI's main external revenue was from sales of RSIBASIC, ValDraw, ValPaint and the TPM-II and Valdocs technical manuals. The RSI staff was soon cut from over 100 down to about 85, and an intensive effort was made to find "new product."

Much of the "new product" was in the form of system utilities and other software left over from the demise of TDL, a company active in the late 1970's that spawned CDL and eventually RSI. Valdocs 2 was renamed Valdocs 2+, and an intensive direct sales campaign was initiated. It was clear from the start that the Epson QX-10 and QX-16 community (which numbers somewhere 35,000 and 50,000 depending on whom you believe) could not alone support a company the size of RSI.

This spring, Atari's new 520 ST computer became news and RSI's Gale Carr extracted an agreement from Atari that basically said it was OK to develop software for the 520, and that maybe Atari would help distribute it later. She is reported to have been pleased to deal with a person as "straightforward and honest" as Jack Tramiel. According to press announcements, the first software for this computer was to have been delivered in September of 1985, but nothing ever did come of the project. RSI recently announced it has terminated its agreement with Atari.

As Valdocs 2+ became more operable over the summer of '85, it was apparent that the QX-10 computer system was stretched to capacity and that promised performance could not be delivered. RSI arranged a special deal with Semi-disk to provide (in the $700 range) a semiconductor-based disk drive that eliminates much of the well-known disk grinding performed by Valdocs software.

More recently, RSI has also announced another option board being developed for the QX-10 to speed Valdocs performance. Dubbed "V-MAX," it provides a Hitachi CPU that should also speed up Valdocs. No price or availability has yet been announced, but a good guess might be something in the $250 range.

About mid-summer of last year, Epson announced the Equity series of MS-DOS personal computers, recognizing that the CP/M market is now gradually starting to fade. Delivery of these systems began in the early fall.

About the same time, RSI, becoming desperate for revenue, developed a new "innovative" marketing plan. For a fixed price, untested versions of Valdocs 2+

Text continues on page 41

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RSI president Gale Carr is counting on the latest releases of Valdocs to take some pressure off the company.

VAL?

The completion of Valdocs remains backstage as the crowd grows ever restless.

By Roger Strukhoff

It's hard to get more than two people to agree on anything, but in the sub-culture of Valdocs, all adhere to two opinions: 1. Valdocs is great, 2. Valdocs is late.

Rising Star Industries, unleashed by Epson in 1985, announced Valdocs+ last fall, and has been proclaiming its diligence in completing the Valdocs project ever since. Epson QX owners, having shown incredible patience, are starting to doubt RSI's ability to get the job done. One influential group, the National Epson QX-10 Users Group, headed by Richard Shoemaker, has gone so far as to announce a boycott of RSI.

BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

Surely, if the QX owner feels like Job right now, then Valdocs developer Chris Rutkowski, new RSI president Gale Carr and the remaining staff at RSI must feel like so many Noahs ... without the ark.

Rutkowski has passionately defended his product and his company, recently dropping a lengthy message on the EpsonLine special interest group, which is accessible through CompuServe. Major excerpts of Rutkowski's February message accompany this story.

In this message, Rutkowski revealed several facts germane to RSI's future.

One, RSI and Atari are no longer working together on a major implementation for the new Atari 520ST. Rutkowski said this project was prohibitively expensive. He asserted that RSI is continuing a relationship with Atari, however.

More important, Rutkowski acknowledged that RSI is truly a "user-supported company" now. That is, there are no venture capitalists in the background, no funding by corporate partners to develop products, no public stockholders keeping things afloat. RSI's fate depends solely on acceptance of Valdocs.

As such, Rutkowski repeated his company's fall 1985 offer of offering Valdocs+ for $349, with free upgrades until ValDone.

And what of the latest Val developments? At press time, Valdocs 2.03 and Valdocs+ III had not been released, but RSI president Gale Carr said they would be "at any moment."

V2.03 will be the final update to Valdocs 2. Rutkowski said its editor and spreadsheet have been rebuilt out of V+'s "innards," with many features restored that were lost in the transition from Version 1. For example, in 2.03's editor, there is a calculator, page breaks and line spacing on screen, and a linear file store and retrieve option. Its spreadsheet allows empty cells to be calculated as s "0" or "NA," features absolute/partial formula adjustment, and has a compressed file storage option.

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In addition, V2.03 will include the sam DEFKEY, SCHEDULER, COPYDISK and other system modules as are used in Valdocs+.

Rutkowski stresses the upgrade path to V+III modules for V2.03 users. All Valdocs+ plus modules can be added to Valdocs 2.03 as needed.

V=III

A new module in V+III is CPL, or Console Programming Language. Essentially, the module "watches" the user's moves; those moves can be edited later. CPL will automatically load definitions with any program,

Other modules include: a word processor with spell checker, a spreadsheet with business graphics, an automatic checkwriter, a telecommunications package, a graphics design and presentation group, Valpaint, display and printout utilities, and an electronic cardfile. Rutkowski also stresses that Valdocs 2.03 is not needed to use Valdocs+ Version III.

The number to call at Rising Star, located in Torrance, California, is (213) 373-9111. ●

Public statement by Chris Rutkowski.

The following are excerpts from a message Chris Rutkowski in February.

PROPHETS AND PROFITS

Have you ever heard of a self-fulfilling prophecy? It works like this: predict something in such a way that the fact of your prediction causes the event.

No matter how you cut it, both Rising Star and QX-10 users are involved in a self-fulfilling situation.

For example, take a close-knit user community (like QX-10/16 owners), then take a company which depends on that user base for 100 percent of its income (like RSI). Now, prophesize the death of that company. How are the majority of the users going to react to your prediction?

Any sensible person would adopt a "wait and see" attitude, right? "Why should I buy from a company that may not be there tomorrow? I'll wait and see what happens." Catch is, if those people don't buy, the company *will* die. The prophecy fulfills itself.

Rising Star has *zero* income from any source other than the QX-10/16 user base. Similarly, QX owners have no other source of advanced software. We need each other.

If the rumors about the imminent demise of RSI scare you into "wait and see," we both lose. Rumor-mongers represent the only real threat to the eventual delivery of ValDone.

Decidedly, V+ purchasers have a right to know if they are going to get what they paid for. The answer is yes. V+3 is so close to release that virtually nothing could prevent its completion.

It contains yet another round of *big* improvements: the Dictionary, Calculator, Data Conversion, Slideshow, and many features and details elsewhere. It puts us well past 95 percent of the way to ValDone.

I might add that our current round of layoffs should have little or no impact on either V+3 or ValDone.

The "Atari Project" as some knew of it (in the technical rather than the

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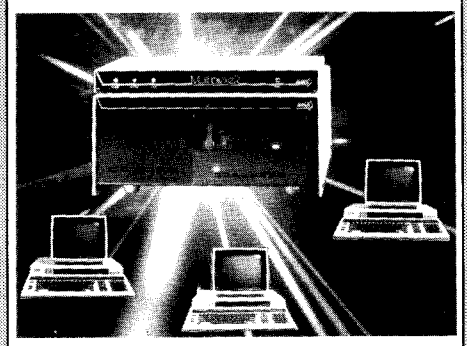

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market/user sense), was really cancelled months ago. That project called for a complete re-write from the ground up of everything. It was going to cost millions for modest improvements. That specific effort has been back-burnered. Meanwhile, we are putting several other Atari products into "main stream" distribution channels. These are *not* "Valdocs for the Atari."

Regardless, the porting of modules to non-QX computers is still very much a part of our plans. Other than that, our plans are proprietary. Details will be revealed when products are announced — not before. I can say that the migration path is *from* the QX-10 *to* other machines. Technically we have struck paydirt, as evidenced by V+1, 2, and 3. I'm just glad we had the luxury of developing Valdocs on such a sweet machine.

As most of you know, until only one year ago we were purely a research and development company. Our *only* job description was to create Valdocs. Putting sales, marketing and service in place has been a difficult undertaking. Much of the difficulty stemmed from the fact that a lot of people got very cultish about RSI. Someone even took a couple of articles I published in Byte magazine describing the HASCI keyboard, and retitled them: "The Valdocs Philosophy."

Well, now we're financed by sales rather than corporate funding. A lot of old faces, whose qualifications were more enthusiasm and willingness than skill and professionalism, are gone. The transition has not always been painless, as the rumor-millers testify. But both the goal and the results have been improved delivery, service and quality for our users.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

In response to a few user letters, I looked over the pricing. You stop the rumors, get out your checkbook, and buy Valdocs+. You do that and I'll authorize all who call in, within the next 30 days, to receive the the V+ package as it was originally promoted, for $349.00. Nothing more, nothing less. This includes all the V+ software modules and manuals, including Valdraw and Valpaint. It does not include a mouse or any other hardware. It includes updates when ValDone is released. So let's get this show on the road; you forget the rumors and buy the software that supports your investment and I'll get you that software at the original price. It is a bargain by any measure.

To those who say it ought to be free: I almost agree with you. Fact is, that's impossible. Rising Star has employees who must be paid. Someone has to foot the bill. As I said in The Rising Star a couple of issues ago: in the absence of Epson as our mutual benefactor, it is customary for the receiver of the services or goods to bear the expense. (At the same time, I asked for suggestions on how we might get around this. Needless to say, no suggestions were offered.)

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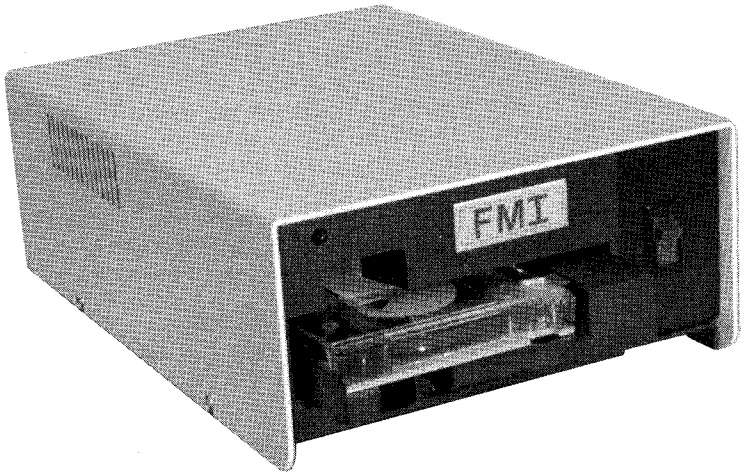

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continued from page 7

(including "preliminary documentation") was sold with the promise that all future revisions would be sent free of charge.

This marketing "strategy" is probably all that has held RSI together so far. It allowed RSI to make further cuts in the testing and quality control staff, and at the same time, customers who get "the latest" version of the software generally consider it a good deal since they will never have to spend another penny on Valdocs 2+ software. They have become what amounts to a RSI's software testing facility.

Despite aggressive marketing, RSI has had to further cut costs. A second round of layoffs took place near the end of October and included the entire documentation staff.

Near the end of 1985, Titan Technologies announced a blow to future users of MS-DOS on the QX-10 by terminating further production of the MS-DOS expansion board. Once current supplies of this board have been exhausted, the QX-10 cannot be upgraded to run MS-DOS software.

Contrary to the upbeat reports flowing out of RSI, it would appear that the Valdocs experiment is nearing a conclusion — one that users dedicated to the system will not like. RSI's marketing strategy was the only one that would let it stay in business long enough to get an operable version of Valdocs 2 on the market. But since all upgrades are free, once this market levels off or becomes saturated there will be no more revenue to fund further development.

Our next issue will examine more closely the MS-DOS option for QX-10 owners and the Epson Equity systems targeted to the MS-DOS market. There is an entirely new world to be discovered in MS-DOS, one which the Epson community has thus far largely ignored.

And quite frankly it is an exciting world with software systems as easy and fun to use as Valdocs, plus a whole lot more. There are hundreds of companies beating their brains out to make better mousetraps for the user. And it is a world that all Epson owners should be aware of.

Epson World will support both the QX-10/16 and Equity camps. If you are apprehensive about the future of your computer, consider this: your system and software, except for repairable mechanical failure, will perform as well twenty years from now as it does today. Unless you change the rules ("It must run faster!" or "It must do something new!"), your system as it stands today does not need further "support" unless the computer itself breaks or you erase all your system software.

But for all the new systems available today, and I've tried a good many, I still come back to my trusty QX-10. Nobody, but nobody, comes close to the QX-10 keyboard, screen and system reliability. The QX-10 is the best damn computer ever made. — Jim Hansen

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