GlobeTrotter: A Dialogue on DEMOing

Patrick Lichty talks to Weston Hilton

What is *Globetrotter*? It is a demo cartridge for, curiously enough, an Atari 2600; it was created by Weston Hilton and publicized on the Stella Maillist. Stella, which is the code name for the original Atari 2600 prototype, is one of the most lively lists for those interested in programming Atari 2600 consoles. There are individuals who are interested in learning 2600 game design; artists like Paul Slocum who are using the consoles for sound design and performance; and 6502 hackers who are obsessed with the intricacies of 'illegal opcodes' on specific platforms. The world of the 2600 is far from dormant, as is the entire world of retro gaming.

Weston Hilton's *Globetrotter* was produced by Packrat Video Games and is a single demo cartridge that also has a 'passport' that can be signed by those whom Trotter 'visits.' The appeal of the global nature of DEMO distribution is reflected in *Trotter*, as Hilton's vision of the project is to see it make full circuits around the world by sending it to Atari 2600 afficionados all over the globe. Part DEMO, part conceptual art project (although I do not imagine that Hilton intended it to be from the beginning), *Globetrotter* accesses part of the memory of the digital culture and mixes it with contemporary retro gaming sensibilities. The following is an excerpt from a conversation I had with Weston Hilton in March, 2004. *-Patrick Lichty*

PL: What was your conception of *Globetrotter*, and how did the project develop?

Weston Hilton: I originally envisioned *Globetrotter* as a complete game to be played on the Atari 2600. When I learned about the PhillyClassic 4 retro gaming convention through AtariAge.com, and how many people were expected to attend, I thought this would be a great springboard for getting people to sign up to help the cart travel from place to place, continent to continent. I was able to put together just a demo of Globetrotter in time for the traveling-cart concept to be presented at the show, thanks to Atariage.com, who were also showing other works-in-progress at their vending tables. That demo (with a few small changes) is what you see on the cart today.

I let the project rest for a while when AtariAge became very busy with other classic gaming projects after the show, and I thought that interest in the idea from the gaming community had passed. The idea was given new life when a similar concept was discussed in the AtariAge forums, so I talked with Packrat Video Games about helping me sponsor the cart's journey, and Jarett (Musevox Multimedia) agreed to co-sponsor with me.

PL: What were your influences in conceiving the project?

Weston Hilton: My interest in Atari led me, in early 2003, to search the Net for info on my collection that had remained dormant for a few years. To my pleasant surprise, the classic gaming community was still alive and well, and new programs were being created and shared. I was most impressed by Andrew Davie's work, which translated the "Dancing Baby" that was made popular on shows like Ally McBeal into a working demo for the 2600 emulators.

The positive response to his work and others, plus my youngest brother's plan to serve an LDS mission in Leeds, England, prompted me to put together something he could take with him, then mail home to me, thus traveling a great distance: from England to Utah, USA. The next logical step was to have the program (in cart form) continue traveling from place to place, much like other trinkets or letters have been sent from person to person, creating a connection between people separated by great distances. To my knowledge, no Atari-related item had been passed along over long distances in this manner.

So, the idea's focus morphed from a mass-produced finished project into celebrating the journey of a unique item logging many miles and hours in circulation, touring the globe. By not having a specific travel plan, the project has already begun to take on a life of its own, hopefully creating unity between those who otherwise may not associate with each other. This also gives Trotter an interesting story to tell, because of the contributions of many people.

PL: So far, where has *Globetrotter* been (Besides the Intelligent Agent editorial offices?)

Weston Hilton: *Globetrotter* officially started his journey on November 15, 2003. As of this writing (March, 2004), *Trotter* has had 11 hosts, has stopped in 8 states, about 15 cities, and been traveling for 3 1/2 months. Some of the stops included: Los Angeles, Hollywood, Las Vegas, New Orleans, Louisville, and Boston. It is on his agenda, but Trotter has yet to travel outside the U.S.

PL: For how long will you send *Globetrotter* on his travels? Does he have an end point?

Weston Hilton: I would like to see *Trotter* make it at least once completely around the world. This would likely be in a consistently eastward course, crossing the Atlantic Ocean and circling around to enter the continental U.S. again from the Pacific. This is constantly subject to change, depending on who is available to host when *Trotter* is nearby, and where they live.

When *Trotter* started, the trip was planned to go for 1 year before his return to the start point, here in Orem, Utah. We decided that this should remain flexible, depending on the amount of interest from those who are fans of classic gaming. A year may not be long enough to accommodate everybody who wants to participate.

PL: Do you feel *Globetrotter* was/is successful?

Weston Hilton: The response thus far has been very positive, especially here in the U.S., with a few new hosts signing on to help every week. We have had a smaller response from those outside the States, but expect this involvement to increase once Trotter makes it overseas and others see that *Trotter* is heading in their direction. We refer to his travels as the "*Globetrotter* World Tour," because we hope that *Trotter* will be well received as he tours from one country or state to another. The key is that we want this 'event' to remain flexible in order to allow for small deviations from the overall journey's path around the globe, but organized enough so that the goal of circling the globe is not forgotten. Though not impossible, we don't anticipate *Trotter* returning to a specific state or country once he's left there. This will help move *Trotter* along toward his return home. The exception to this is that *Globetrotter* is traveling post haste to Philadelphia in time for PhillyClassic 5, so he will likely backtrack some of the states he rushed through.

PL: Do you consider *Globetrotter* a conceptual art project, more of a social experiment, or otherwise?

Weston Hilton: As I hinted at in the previous answer, I would say that *Globetrotter* fits the idea of a social experiment. So far, the interaction with hosts has been positive, and they have enjoyed participating in Trotter's journey. But I would also venture to say that the 'concept' of the ongoing

Globetrotter journey is more appealing than the DEMO program by itself. In this case, the DEMO is only one piece of the overall project.

It has also been a lot of fun to see *Trotter* slowly progress on his journey over time. The URL for the documentation of the journey is http://www.packratvg.com/trotter.htm

PL: How do you think *Globetrotter* fits into the general landscape of computer DEMO programs? Are you a fan of the DEMO genre? If so, who are some of your favorites? (Personally, I was a big fan of Future Crew.)

Weston Hilton: I don't have any favorites. The various forms of multimedia out there have always fascinated me. I would be honored if the Globetrotter project is still remembered a few years from now. I haven't really added anything to the advancement of the DEMO scene, but I hope others will be inspired to make their own ideas become a reality.

PL: Any further reflections on *Globetrotter*, and do you plan to do any future projects of this sort?

Weston Hilton: I would like to see *Globetrotter* as a complete game someday. This depends on time, my progress at learning more about programming for the 2600, and my interest level. I have some other game ideas I'd like to develop first. I'm always coming up with a bizarre twist on old ideas, so I won't rule out the possibility of a future contribution to the DEMO scene. :-)

For more info, see: www.packratvg.com/trotter

GLOBETROTTER POSTCART™ #7

Host: Milo S. Fisher(Patrick Lichty)
From: Baton Rouge, LA, USA
Received: 12/05/03   Sent: 12/18/03