Atari Research

Kristina
ROM: Jim Dunion, Bob Hon
C : Alan, Chris Jeffers, ???
E : Club Med Project Report

    This memorandum covers events that occurred after our first trip to
unta Cana. For more information about the first trip and our
ecommendations, refer to memos from B. Hon dated May 25 th and Jun 3 rd.
uffice it to say that the purpose of our first trip was to lay the cabling
or the network and evaluate the situation for potential technical problems.
le found a situation that was so haphazard that at times it was ludicrous. In
n attempt to alert management to the potentially disasterous situation we
ncountered, Bob wrote two memos about the trip down.

    The chain of events that is the heart of this memo in fact started in
he midst of writing those two memos. After returning from Punta Cana late on
he 24 th of May (without our luggage), we learned we had a meeting bright
nd early the next morning with Linda Gordon, Pattie Sheehan and Pierre
chemla. True to form, they were late in arriving for the meeting. We asked
attie to call is when they got there.

    Bob had prepared a memo that summarized our experiences and feelings,
hich were somewhat bitter. Nevertheless, we were quite determined to make
ure that Linda and Pierre (who is a high level executive of Club Med, real
igh level, like #2 or 3), knew about the problems we felt were present. In
ur opinion there were several major and numerous minor problems that needed
o be addressed for the project to have a chance of success. It seemed to us
hat no one was handling the myriad of technical & organizational details,
nvolved in this venture.

    From the start the meeting was quite strained. Bob, acting as our
pokesman, began by explaining that our intent was in no way to be critical
f individuals or to cause problems for anyone. We were merely reporting our
xperiences, offering our perceptions and even suggesting some alternatives.
le ran into a stone wall.

    Pierre became defensive almost at once and began debating specific
oints heatedly. Linda, for the most part, supported Pierre. A tendency was
stablished right there to look at each problem that arose as a crime for
hich some culprit must be found and punished. During this meeting the
xchanges became quite heated several times, but stopped short of directly
nflammatory remarks. We came away feeling that they had completely
isconstrued our intentions with the memo and that they were still not aware
f the problems facing the project. After the morning meeting Bob spent an
dditional hour and a half going over specific points with Linda and Pierre.

    For several days after that meeting we stopped by Special Projects to
heck on various things and see if any progress was being made on solving the
roblems we had pointed out. After it became obvious that almost nothing
certainly nothing that had any significant cost to it) would be done, we
ecided to concentrate solely on our portion of the project.

    Bob was working on the data base handler for the Corvus Disk Drive and

he communications protocols. This involved quite a bit of assembly language
ode for the Atari 800 and some modifications to the firmware handlers for
he 850 interface module. These modifications were carried out with some
ssistance from the old Home Computer Division.

Jim was handling the remote station programs to implement an iconic
ulletin board. Part of this involved a set of 76 pictorial symbols depicting
he activities of Club Med Punta Cana. Carol Boemer worked with us in drawing
ip these symbols. We then used the digitizer developed by Gary Phipps of
itari Research Engineering to convert these to a form compatabile with the
)00.

During the two weeks between trips software development work proceeded
'airly well, if somewhat slowly at times. Original plans called for a trip
)ack down on the 5 th of June, then was switched to the 6 th. By this time,
)owever, we suspected (correctly, as it turns out) that our development time
:ould be much more productive here than there. We opted thus to delay our
)rrival until the 7 th. This move precipitated yet another brouhaha and we
'eceived a good taste of flak for not going down on the 6 th with the
'emainder of the troupe (Linda G., and 6 or so from the L.A. lab). The big
)roblem we were told, was that Club Med charges us $500.00 for an extra trip
;o pick us up. This involves sending one Spanish speaking driver with a small
'an on a three-hour trip to the Santa Domingo airport. So we ended up going
)n Tuesday the 7th anyway- Bob, Patty and Jim.

The trip down was uneventful, except for the close call in having to
)ave the limo driver turn around half way to the airport and race back to
)ick up Jim's passport. No problem. We arrived in Santa Domingo and cleared
:ustoms with no problems. My, what a surprise we had outside, though. In
;harp contrast to our first visit, there were two smiling G.O.s (Gentle
)rganizers, Club Med's quaint term for slave labor in paradise) and the
:rusty van driver. We really didn't expect to see the elusive Olivier, but it
)as nice to see his trusty assistant again. Met us at the airport this time
;he did, not in the parking lot.

We quickly beat a path through the local urchin fauna hanging about and
;equestered ourselves in the van. It may have been raining, it's hard to
'emember. No sooner were we in the van than Michel whipped out the ice chest
ind stated,
"We have sandwiches, pop, and of course, cerveza! Et Voila!"

So we happily munched roast mystery meat on white bread and sucked at El
'residente all the way through the scenic majesty that is the Dominican
{epublic.

Three hours later after we had dodged our last dead burro and had our
;eeth jammed one last time, we rolled to a stop by the welcome area at Club
1ed Punta Cana. Imagine our surprise at the smiling, laughing gala welcome
;hat awaited us. Young, pretty, smiling, gleaming G.O.s-even an Atarian or
;wo- "Hands Up, Get your Hands Up, Give me your heart, gimme gimme your
)eart..."

Even at our rooms the surprises continued as we found bowls of dying
ruit, a container of mineral water, a Punta Cana tee shirt and a hand
ritten how-do-you-do note. Not Bad.

Well, so much for the good news. Within minutes of our arrival our angst
egan gathering itself together in the form of a crowd outside our rooms.

After the obligatory hugs and kisses Linda announced that there was a
eeting bright and early the next morning for the whole "ATARI" team. Bob
entioned that he thought it was nice that she was having a meeting, but to
ot be surprised if we weren't there, as we intended to jump in and get right
o work. A cold, steely look came over her, but before she could reply, a new
ave of wellwishers rolled in. She was quoted later as having said that from
hat moment she thought we were trying to sabotage the whole project.

After the obligatory hugs and kisses we went looking for Flavia, the
ssistant Chef de Village at P.C. When we left two weeks earlier we had
iven her the key to the computer rooms containing our equipment.

She's at the Disco, we were told. Of course. So off we went.

Sure enough, she was there.

"But I don't have the key," she said; "Aladin is in charge of all that
ow." Aladin is the French G.O. who is in charge of the computer G.O. team,
round 6-8 G.O.s - some Atari, Some Club Med. This sounded like bad news.

So we headed back towards the rooms and ran smack into Aladin and
ntoine, his assistant. Why do you want the key, he asked. So we can go to
ork, we answered. But there's no equipment there, he replied. Why is that,
e asked. Because I wanted to use the equipment down in the Palapa, he
nswered. You'll have to move the equipment back to the room, we stated. No,
 think the equipment will stay where it is, he responded. The equipment will
e moved into that room tonight, was our last emphatic comment. We headed to
ur rooms for showers and beads (oh hey, forgot to mention that they had a
ree bag of beads waiting for us in our rooms. Bless their little hearts.
aturally, it was the $10.00 bag, not the $20.00).

Back down to the disco for a burger and an egg for 3 orange beads, the
est deal on the island. Who do we run into but L.G. who demands to see us
utside. As the ocean breeze whips her dress and hair about she tears into us
ike so much rancid meat. How dare we march in and take over. Undermine her
uthority. Stab her in the back. Sabotage her project. Alienate the entire
rench computer crew whom we are already badgering. Her people had worked
ard all day and they were trying to enjoy the evening and here we were
rying to cause trouble. How dare we? Already 10 people have come up to me
nd complained about your behavior. Which 10 was that Linda? No answer.

On and on it went. It was throughly unprofessional and immature for you
o write that memo, she told us, and furthermore after carefully, very, very
arefully considering the problems we pointed out, it was her opinion that
hey were either no problem at all, or they themselves had already started

orking towards a solution. The situation is well in hand, we were told. No roblem, we said, still we're going to move the equipment tonight and go to ork.

And we did. Several G.O.s pitched in to help us move and set the evelopment computers up. In the process of doing this we discover our only rinter has undergone the strange transformation that is known as French ngineering. Seems they broke off the tension lever. Just broke it off omehow. So Aladin had jerry-rigged a contraption with wire that held the ead in the proper printing position. Until you have to change the ribbon, or aper. Then unfortunately you have to unwire the whole thing and start over. ood enough. At least it's working.

After that we split up, Jim for some rack time before the Big meeting, nd Bob to the computer room to bring up the disk software.

Oh, one other thing. We found out that Pierre had done exactly what we ad asked him not to do, and had called Paris and hollered and screamed, then alled Punta Cana and hollered and screamed. Then Paris called Punta Cana and ollered and screamed. Most of this hollering and screaming was directed at erard, who is the chef de Village at Punta Cana. He promptly called in lavia and hollered and screamed at her, and together they went searching for nyone we had even vaguely mentioned and hollered and screamed at them.

That's what we faced our first dawn in Punta Cana, an alienated G.O. taff, an especially alienated computer G.O. team, an obviously hostile Linda ordon, screwed up equipment, mosquitos, lizards and crabs.

The next morning the meeting started late, oddly enough, as Linda was ate arriving. Once again this irratated us quite a bit, as Jim had dragged imself out of bed, and Bob was still up from the night before. Mostly it was "rah us" kind of meeting. It's Wednesday, here's our plan for the rest of he week till Saturday, the day the official Atari-Club Med projects starts. he press should arrive Friday we were told. The Press? Yes, for the major ress conference. Surprise!

After taking stock of the situation, here's what we found,
- Both Pierre and Gerard out of the village
- Almost none of the computer equipment through customs
- Equipment, especially kiosks, heavily damaged
- Lost interface boxes for the LA lab project
- Little or no discernable progress on the problems we pointed out
- A ticking clock
- A long way to go on our own stuff.
o we got to it.

Over the next few days, we lived in the computer room. Virtually 24 ours a day one of us was in the room, leaving only when absolutely necessary or meals or to grab a few hours sleep. We even took to sleeping in shifts o make sure we could be awakened and not oversleep.

Meanwhile back at the ranch, things were heating up. Several pallets of

quipment showed up and were quickly unpacked. A quick look was all it took
o confirm our worst suspicions about shipping damage to the kiosk stations.
ot one came through unscathed, and several had to have entire plexiglass
anels replaced. The roof in the Palapa still leaked (this is where the
omputer classes would be held). Work started on setting up the Scuba shack,
uilding awnings, unpacking and setting up and testing the equipment, setting
p the Palapa and Mini-club. Course it's kinda tough to test out much of the
omputer stuff with no monitors for the computers. But they're coming, no
roblem.

Back up in the corner utility room next to room 507 on the 3 rd floor,
he working conditions were Dante-esque. In spite of unbelievable heat during
he days, they were still turning off the air conditioning during the day.
nd night. And once again the electricity was doing whatever it does when
achines work and then don't work, then work then don't work... If it wasn't
or the crabs to spit on, things would have really been tough.

Back at the ranch the tension level had been jacked up a few notches
hen Gerard and Pierre showed up. The order of the day, rather explicitly
iven to the G.O.s, was don't fuck up. Every problem that came along we
layed the Who's Fault Is It game, till everyone was on edge and nervous.

Things started heating us for us personally when Pierre stopped by to
ee how things were going. The tension present at the meeting in Sunnyvale
as immediately reestablished. "When will the electronic bulletin board be
eady?", he demanded.

We are working on the final stages of the separate parts, we replied, by
he next day or so we should be ready to integrate our software.

"But all I'm interested in is seeing the final bulletin board", he said,
when will that be ready"? Already tremors indicating loss of control were
pparent in Pierre's voice.

"As soon as possible", we answered, "possibily Saturday". They stormed
ut and the tension level crept upward.

All around the village, the computer work was going fitfully forward.
gain, as we predicted, enormous problems were generated in getting all the
quipment running, the kiosks setup, electricity and air conditioning setup,
.. By this time, most of the staff had had a run-in or two with Pierre or
inda and was becoming very wary of them, walking lightly as if on egg
hells. Indeed, at one point during the week Linda even fired and the next
orning rehired Bob Kahn from the project. One of the American computer G.O.s
as also fired (by Pierre) and then rehired after massive public outcry. All
n all, not a happy place, and even then some of the problems we had pointed
ut were absolutely no closer to a solution. By this time the standard toast
round the bar was "Boondoggle HQ!". We kept trudging on. As the weekend
pproached, the situation was thus:
- The software for the bulletin board was nearing completion, awaiting
ainly integration.
- The equipment in the Palapa was in place and being checked out.

Already numerous problems had developed with the equipment.
- A good deal of equipment had still not arrived, or was damaged.
- The kiosks were being repaired by the facilities crew at Punta Cana.
- A couple of half-assed awning shelters for the kiosks had
  been built.
- The atmosphere was so thick in the village that you could cut it
  with a knife. Tempers were on edge.
- The relationship between ourselves and Linda and Pierre was
  almost one of open hostility. This was usually exhibited
  in exchanges between Bob and Pierre. Indeed, Pierre seemed intent on
  making it a personal matter between himself and Bob.
- The press was due in on Sunday.
- And still there was hardly any gentle members at the village.

     All during Saturday, work proceeded well. There were a few words here
nd there, but all in all things were moving along. So well in fact that we
ecided to celebrate at least one night in Punta Cana. On the previous trip
e learned of a Dominican restaurant just outside the village gate (which
minously is padlocked and guarded by an armed uniformed guard). Four of us
ecided to head over and check the place out Saturday night.

     Appearances certainly can be deceiving, at least in this case. The
estaurant was the back porch of a local villager's house. Except the porch
ad been converted to an open air restaurant, about 4 tables worth. In a word
he dinner was delicious. Succulent lobster, excellent soup, good chicken,
tc. Afterwards we went by the Club bar and had a few hundred drinks, then
ent walking by the beach. Finally we headed down to the disco for another
urger and egg. Little did we know fate was also walking on the trail in the
uise of Pierre and Linda.

     "Is the bulletin board ready?" he demanded as we passed.

     "Damn right, just like the shelters and everything else," we retorted
nd kept on walking. Later we were to learn that this episode pushed some
ever in Pierre. Apparently he and Linda huddled together discussing the
ituation on into the night.

     Sunday arrived with little fanfare as we began integrating the software.
ater in the day there was yet another showdown in the computer room with
inda and Pierre demanding to know when the software would be ready. Next
inda began asking about our timetable for having the G.O.s create screen
mages for the bulletin board. Once again we explained that we were providing
 mechanism for village staff to use in implementing their own ideas. The
revious day we had provided them with a portion of the system that is a
raphics tool that allows users to create screen images for the system. We
ad even held a training session explaining to the G.O.s how to use the tool.

     So now Linda was ranting and raving and demanded that Bob Kahn tell his
taff to stay up all night making screen images so that we couldn't say they
eld up things any. At this point she seemed to be operating well beyond her
imit of rationality. Finally we were able to clear them out (are you getting
he feeling that all they ever did was impede work ?) and get back to work on

he integration.

Amazingly enough the integration went unbelievably smoothly. After one
isfire, the two parts of the system came to together like a zipper closing,
zzzziiiiiippppppppp!! Naturally we felt great. We set out then to test a
emote kiosk, the first real test of the system.

We hurried down to the Disco/Snorkeling shack to try out the kiosk
here. As we're firing up the program the village chief cook wanders up and
eers over our shoulders.

"You're witnessing history," we told him, as the first image was sent
ut from the system in Gerard's office. As we were whooping and hollering
bout, the hostess happened to snap a picture of us. Wish we could find that
icture.

We still had one major test to run, two remote stations having
imultaneous access. Bob set course for the sailing shack and while I angled
 shot over to the tennis court. Absolutely no problem. Feeling absolutely
reat we met back at the pool to discuss mop-up operations as Bob was
cheduled to leave the next day. Then we ran into Pattie.

"They want to talk to you in the Palapa," she said.

On the way to the Palapa, Bob mentioned that the kiosk that was supposed
o be near the hostess was gone, so that he had not been able to check it
ut. Seeing as this was on our minds, we asked about it soon after walking in
he door.

"It doesn't matter," Linda said.

"What?" we asked.

Pierre suddenly stood and dramatically shouted, "As of this minute I
ancel the Bulletin Board project."

He paced a while then turned and pointed at Bob and said, "You, I cannot
eep pace with your brillance. Years ago I was a doctorate in engineering and
 did what you now do. But I cannot understand your brillance. Perhaps we
ill meet back in Sunnyvale with Ray to discuss what went wrong, eh?"

"As you wish," we replied, "No problem," and headed back up to the rooms.

What to do? We sat around asking ourselves. We decided to act pretty
uch as if nothing had happened. Jim kept working on some of the graphics and
ob prepared instructions for booting the system, etc. Bob also packed all
he tools away and prepared to leave. Early the next morning a taxi arrived
nd he did just that, left thinking that the project had been cancelled.
bout this time Jim said to hell with it and went to lay down for a while.

Within a couple of hours, Pattie Sheehan was up at the rooms with the
essage that Jim had been summoned. After a typical communication foul-up

bout where and when to meet, five of us sat down to talk: Jim, Linda, ierre, Pattie and Guy somebody, the Atari head of sales in France. Pierre egan the discussion by asking when the bulletion board software would be eady.

Jim replied that he was confused in light of the fact that Pierre had anceled the project the night before. Pierre then began a long rambling talk bout how sometimes we have to consider things like canceling the project, nd that he was sorry we misunderstood his meaning before, etc., etc.

After a brief explosion and retort by Jim, Pierre asked again when the oftware could be ready. When Jim explained that the software was working the ight before there was a moment of stunned silence. However, Pierre recovered icely, drew up his rather immense bulk and roared,

"We go to see this bulletin board, NOW !!!".

We marched up to the computer room, nary a word being spoken as Jim ried gamely not to laugh out loud. The demonstration went smoothly, and fter several more moments of babbling, the definitive time for the press onference was set for 3:00 Tuesday, the next day.

Yet another all night vigil was launched. While Jim was working on olishing the bulletin board software, Bob Kahn and several of the computer .O.s worked on creating graphic frames. Work proceeded smoothly all through he night and into Tuesday.

The first hint of trouble came when Todor Fay (one the L.A. labs people) :ame into the computer room and said that Linda asked him to check whether or iot the line to the Mini-Club was functional. Jim explained how to check it iut and how to operate the frame creaction/update program. Off he went, and iothing more was heard for several hours.

Finally, about three hours before the press conference, Todor wandered iack in and said, "Now don't get excited." Which meant of course that the 'oof was about to cave in.

"The line to the Mini-Club definitely doesn't work, so I went down to :he sailing shack to make sure I was doing things properly", he said. "It iidn't work there either", he continued, "and that's not the worst of it. The 'ress had asked to be able to take pictures of the kiosks, so Antoine had ioved the one at the snorkeling shack out for them to see. Unfortunately, he 'ucked up all the interface connections in doing so. And lost the wires .nside the box. And got scared, locked the kiosk and didn't tell anyone. And .ost the key."

A while later, something approaching sanity had returned to Jim and he iegan racing around the village, diskettes in hand trying to find out what las wrong. After attempting to reboot the system several times, swapping all iystem diskettes, checking all cable, etc., Jim was in a state of absolute ianic. Since Bob had done the programming for the network handler, he was the ine knowledgeable about that part of the system. The only thing left to do

as to swap the entire central disk system. Working furiously, Jim and Todor xchanged the two systems in Gerard's office and the computer room. With a ook of abject desperation, Jim rebooted the network software again. BINGO!

The final hour before the press conference was spent in a state of renzy, loading graphic frames into the system, checking out each remote ite, and repairing the station down at the snorkeling shack. At last, it was ime for the press conference.

Against all odds at this point, the press conference went wonderfully. very aspect of the system worked well, the graphics quite impressed the ress crew. At one point the audience even burst out into applause. This uphoria carried over after the overall conference into several interviews ith the press. By and large, the articles they wrote about the project eemed quite positive. This positive press was a welcome respite from the ontinual barrage of bad news we have been having to read.

There were a couple of other functions we wanted to have running on the ulletin board. After we returned from Punta Cana, we sent down updates for a ouple of weeks, but it seemed as if interest in the project died after the ress conference. We also lost interest.

Later we did hear several pieces of information about the project. lithin three days after we left, a sudden storm left every kiosk standing in later. The network was shut down. Around the village equipment was dropping ike flies. Diaster, right?

As it turns out, no. The team down there seems to have pulled themselves ,ogether, gotten enough equipment to run to take care of the activities they iere running, and were using the bulletin board on a daily basis. Recent 'isitors down have said it was quite an enjoyable experience.

In summary, what can we say about the Atari Club Med project? The)verall project was (indeed, still is) a good idea. Introducing people to :omputers in a non-threatening environment is a powerful idea that Atari should pursue vigorously. Unfortunately, this project also pointed up some of ,he problems inherent in joint projects. The management, particularly the ,echnical management, was shoddy. The differing goals of research and public 'elations came sharply into focus in this project, with PR priorities always jinning. This merely reemphasizes the need for good communication on projects .ike this. There is a fundamental difference of opinion in what makes a juccessful project. Our hope was to have a positive effect on how ion-technical people perceived computers. Management's apparent hope was to iave good PR generated for Atari. Unfortunately this was the priority 'egardless of effect on the public (at Punta Cana) or on the employees iorking on the project. We believe that this is symptomatic of an inwillingness (for whatever reason) to invest in a solid foundation at the ixpense of immediate gratification.

Finally there is the question of styles of management. In this instance, :he overall style of management was one of confrontation. When problems arose, the solution was often to severely chastise the offending party,

ather than to eliminate the problem. It is our feeling that this style of anagement is wrong, unproductive and humiliating to the workers involved. We aution members of the research group to be wary of this experience before igning up for future joint projects.