FOSTERING AN IMAGE

Melbourne House is a company that is best known for its adventure software, including games such as The Hobbit and Mugsy, which attract attention for their high standard of graphics and well-crafted plots. But the company also produces books, and its publications are invaluable aids to home computer programmers.

Melbourne House was founded in 1977 by an Australian, Fred Milgrom. The launch of the Sinclair ZX80 alerted Milgrom to the potential rewards of publishing books on home computing, and in 1980 Melbourne House produced *30 Programs for the ZX80*. The success of this led to a series of books devoted to the Sinclair machine, and the company released its first software package — Space Invaders, again for the ZX80.

The following year saw the appearance of the ZX81. Demand for ZX80 books and cassettes plummeted, and it was only US sales that saved the company from disaster. The lesson was learned and Melbourne House realised the merits of diversification. As new machines came onto the market, the company provided users with books and software, sales of which were aided by the poor quality of the user guides supplied with some home computers.

The immediate success of the Sinclair Spectrum enabled Melbourne House to produce games software that exploited the machine's high resolution colour graphics and sound. The arcade game Penetrator sold well, but the company's biggest coup was the release of The Hobbit, a graphic adventure based on the Tolkien novel of the same name, which won the Golden Joystick award for best strategy game of the year. The game cassette was marketed in a package that also contained a copy of Tolkien's book; this was a condition set by executors of the author's estate

and resulted in The Hobbit being sold at a price three times as high as most Spectrum software then available. Despite the cost, sales were extremely good and The Hobbit is now available on other home machines, including the BBC Micro and Oric/Atmos.

The in-house programmers are based in Melbourne, Australia. Each team of four concentrates on one aspect of a game. This means that more time is spent in game development, but the policy has brought high sales and customer loyalty. The company hopes to capitalise on this loyalty in a drive to sell more books. Paula Byrne, the company's publicity manager, points out: 'When people go to buy a book they don't know what they want, and so they will probably end up buying something that is not suitable, which discourages them from buying other books.' Melbourne House hopes to combat this confusion by marking their books as suitable for Beginner, Intermediate or Advanced readers and by packaging books and software in the same style, so that the public identifies quality books with quality software. To this end, the company includes a registration card with each of its products, on which customers are invited to give an opinion of the quality of their purchase.

The company's latest game, Mugsy, is claimed to be the 'world's first interactive computer comic strip' and allows the player to take control of a mob of hoodlums in the Chicago of the 1920s. The graphics are highly detailed and beautifully designed, although the game itself is hardly complex. Melbourne House is also working on a Hobbit-style adventure called Sherlock Holmes, which will be released in late 1984. This is reputed to be as innovative as The Hobbit was at the time of its launch and has taken 15 months to develop. Little has been divulged of the game's contents, although it is said to require a good knowledge of Victorian transport!
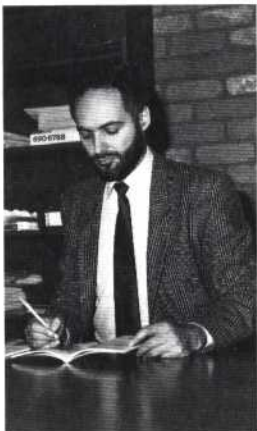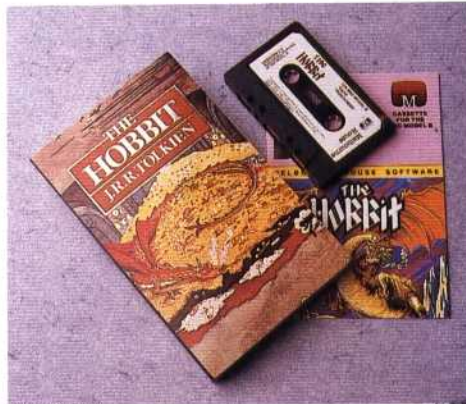

Alfred Milgrom, Co-Director and Publisher, Melbourne House

Philip Mitchell, author of The Hobbit game and Sherlock Holmes

Book Of The Game
In addition to creating a fun and exciting game in The Hobbit, Melbourne House also includes a copy of JRR Tolkein's masterpiece in the package, a brilliant marketing ploy

IAN McKINNELL

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