September 2, 1982

To Alan Kay, Chris Jeffers

From Bob Stein

Subject: Bank Street Project in Science and Math Education

I met this week with Sam Gibbon. Formerly the producer
of Sesame Street and executive producer of the Electric
Company, Sam is currently the director of the Bank Street
Project in Science and Math Education (as well as a
member of the board of the Atari Institute). As winners
of a highly competed-for contract with the Office of
Education, Sam's group is exploring the use of new
technologies in science and math education. With their
2.65 million dollar grant they are producing 26 15-minute
episodes of an adventure story about 2 scientists and
a group of teenagers on a whale research expedition.
(See attached brochure.) The story will stand on its own
as a drama, however a wide range of additional materials
including microcomputer software and videodiscs will be
created to be used in parallel with the tv programs.
Some of the software, especially that aimed at younger
children is logo based. Because of the story line
which involves both whales and a sea voyage, there are
numerous interesting paths of inquiry that can be explored -
biological adaptation and survival, the food chain and
the interdependence of species; navigation and the underlying
principles of physics, mathematics and astronomy.

Sam would like to find additional funding for the project.
He is looking for approximately $500-750,000. A small
part of this would go toward improving the production and
dramatic value of the TV programs, but most is aimed at
expanding the scope of the software and videodisc materials.
For example, when they are done Sam expects to have a
tremendously valuable collection of whale footage and is
very interested in producing an "encyclopedic" videodisc
on whales. He wants to try to construct a browsable
domain with a number of entry points and variable pathways.

This project presents a number of interesting possibilities
in terms of the Atari/EB venture:

1. If one company were to provide all the $ needed, not only
would its name be associated prominently with the TV series
(to be aired on PBS probably, although there is still a
small chance of ABC), but could be the publisher and
distributor of the software and videodiscs.

2. Since they already have $2.65 million of govt. money
Atari/EB can buy into the project very cheaply.

3. They have a creative group in place and up to speed

4. I think Sam would be amenable and receptive to Atari input and collaboration, such that the projects research function and product development could coincide as much as possible with our own plans.

I know Van Doren would be very interested in pursuing this possiblity. He and I went to visit Bank Street in February and spent an hour or so playing with a navigation simulation they were developing. It needed work but was a lot of fun and showed considerable promise. Van Doren was quite impressed and has referred to it often as an example of software heading in the right direction.

I suggest we look at the whole project carefully and assess its overall value to us. (The pilot of the TV show will be ready for viewing later this month.) Perhaps Brenda L. could take this on. Cynthia S. might want to look at the quality and nature of the LOGO work they are doing. If we like what we see we probably want to bring in the advertising folks etc. since our support of the project would amount to sponsorship of the TV program. Presumably part of the Atari $ could come out of the advertising budget.