

THE CLASSIC ADVENTURER



FANTASIA DIAMOND

KIM TOPLEY TAKES US ON A QUEST TO HUNT FOR THE FABLED JEWEL

SLAINE

BERSERKER JAS AUSTIN BRINGS THE 2000AD BARBARIAN TO LIFE WITH THE REFLEX SYSTEM

ILLUSTRATING ADVENTURES

INCENTIVE FOUNDER IAN ANDREW ON THE LEGACY OF SEAN ELLIS' GRAPHIC ADVENTURE CREATOR

QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN EGGCUP

HARVEY LODDER IS RUN OVER BY A SINCLAIR C5 AND FINDS SMART EGGS AREN'T ALWAYS GOLDEN

THE DIGITAL ANTIQUARIAN

THE AUTHORITY ON ADVENTURES REVEALS HIS DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

THE CLASSIC ADVENTURER

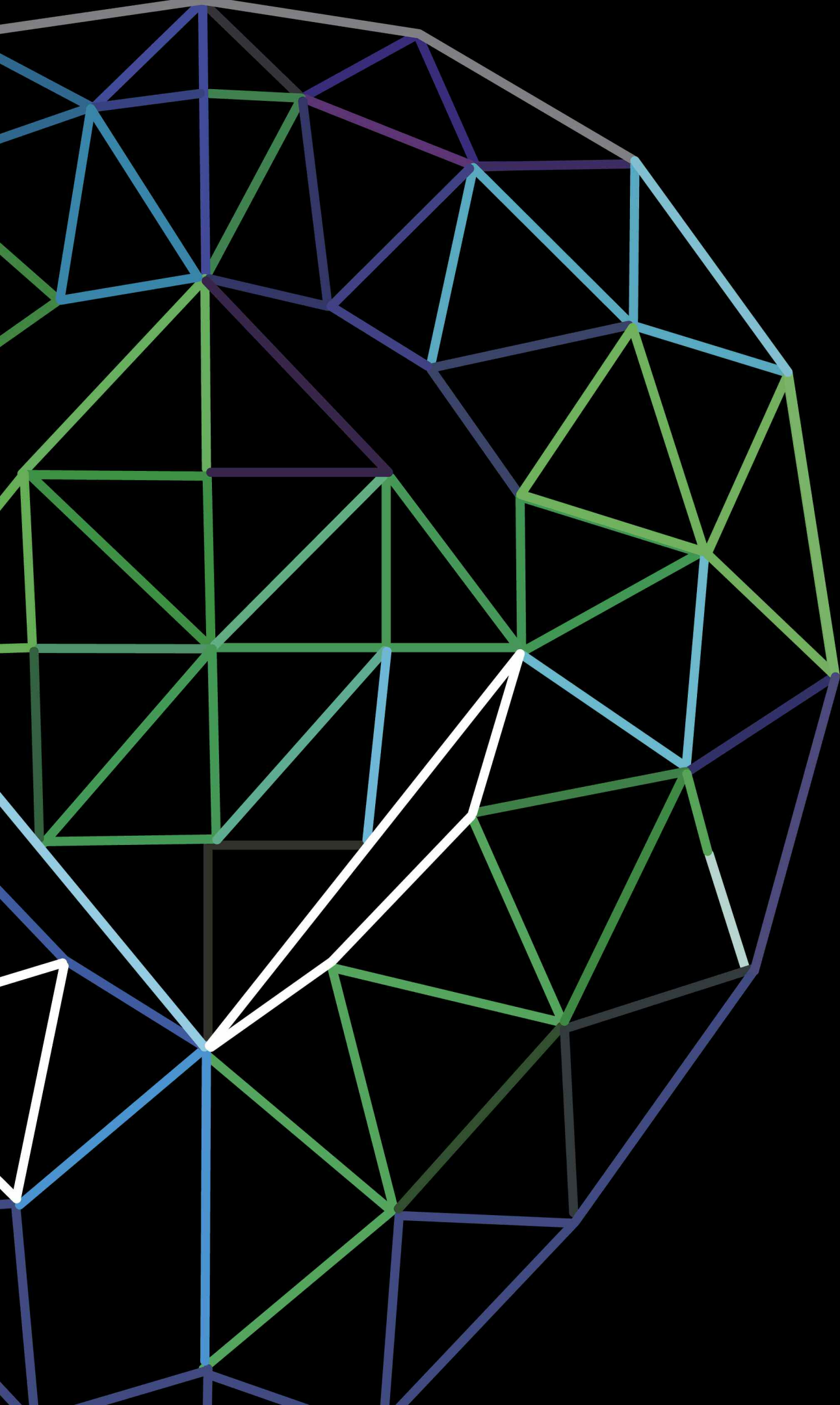
I owned an Acorn Electron as a kid. It wasn't the greatest games machine in the playground, but it did have the best game of all-time, Braben and Bell's *Elite*, and one of the best adventure games of all time, Trevor Hall's *Twin Kingdom Valley*.

For a boy with a fertile imagination, and an obsession with the Fighting Fantasy books, *Twin Kingdom Valley* immersed me into a fantasy world of babbling brooks, forests, orcs, dwarves, trolls, goblins, dragons, kings and treasure!

I played as many adventures as I could, but It wasn't until I owned a ZX Spectrum and bought Fergus McNeill's *The Big Sleaze* that I encountered the same captivation with another game. A friend and I spent many weekends hunched over the keyboard, notepad and pen in hand, determined that Sam Spillade would find the missing Maltese Bullfinch.

I'm therefore delighted that both Fergus and Trevor feature in this celebration of classic adventure games, along with many other adventures and authors that transported legions of other kids to far flung corners of their own imagination.

Mark James Hardisty, 2021



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Author: Jarad A. Sorensen
Release Date: 1989
RRP: \$30.00 (Hardback) \$20.00 (PDF)
Website: <http://www.memento-mori.com/>

PARSELY

Jarad A. Sorensen is considered one of the founding fathers of indie roleplaying. In 2003, inspired by the text adventures of the 1980s, he created *Action Castle*, the first in a series of party game dubbed Parsely,

Jarad "Arkanoid" Sorensen attended elementary school in Western Massachusetts, USA. One of Jared's teachers, Mr Lipinski had a keen interest in technology and was instrumental in bringing some of the first Apple computers into the classroom.

[JA] He was a real weirdo. He taught 6th grade science and English. I remember blowing up balloons using acid and magnesium, reading *The Westing Game* and the *Prydain Chronicles* and watching 50's B movies like *Amazing Colossal Man* - where the task was then to write a newspaper story about the events in the movie.

Mr Lipinski inspired the children to share his passion for computers by forming a games club. Attendees of the club were treated to a wide range of games, including many Infocom adventures – something close to Mr Lipinski's heart since he was a friend of several of its employees, including *Planetfall* and *Sorcerer* designer Steve Meretzky.

[JA] Besides the Infocom games we also played *Swashbuckler*, *Temple of Apshai*, *Rocky's Boots* and *Sneakers*. I'm sure there were others but that was a long time ago! I remember as I was leaving the school he was getting into Macs - I just missed playing *Wizardry* there, but I made up for it later.

Using his contacts, Mr Lipinski arranged for his pupils to visit the Infocom headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was a pioneering visit that would leave an indelible impression in the minds of many of the kids, and was a life-changing moment for Jared.

[JA] Infocom was a building filled with microcomputers and bearded Massachusetts Institute of Technology grads. The guys signed a poster for me and I wore my homemade Floyd the Robot [a NPC character that appears in *Planetfall*] t-shirt - which I still own! I remember one of the guys was working on *Infidel* at the time.

After the visit, Mr Lipinski offered Jared a golden opportunity – he asked him to test a new game that Infocom were about to release. That game ended up being *Seastalker*.

[JA] The game was done so it was basically a beta-tester position, though I didn't know that term at the time. [...] We just played as an end-user would and gave them feedback. Nothing new was added or

Your greatest challenge
lies ahead—and downward.

ACTION CASTLE

The original Family game explores the levels of Action Castle, braves
its dangers and claims the crown.

LEVEL: **ADVANCED**
DURATION: 1-2 HOURS
AGE: 10+

The next step
downward to danger.

ACTION CASTLE II

Return to Action Castle

Now you have passed under the legs of Action Castle and returned.
Now, a simple soldier with dreams of honor and glory sets out on a
quest to destroy.

LEVEL: **INTERMEDIATE**
DURATION: 1-2 HOURS
AGE: 10+

It all
comes down to this.

ACTION CASTLE III

Beneath Action Castle

Now you have passed under the legs of Action Castle and returned.
Now, a simple soldier with dreams of honor and glory sets out on a
quest to destroy.

LEVEL: **EXPERIENCED**
DURATION: 1-2 HOURS
AGE: 10+

DAKERTOWN BEATDOWN

It's 1982, and Detective Jack Stone and his partner Jerry Strong must
take down a crime boss and his crew. Can you?

LEVEL: **ADVANCED**
DURATION: 1-2 HOURS
AGE: 10+

FLAMING GOAT!

A young cowboy's routine is interrupted by a wild man.
Can you find him in the big city?

LEVEL: **INTERMEDIATE**
DURATION: 1-2 HOURS
AGE: 10+

JUNGLE ADVENTURE!

After surviving a crash landing in the jungle, a daring adventurer
must find the hidden treasure.

LEVEL: **EXPERIENCED**
DURATION: 1-2 HOURS
AGE: 10+

WANTED

SIX-GUN SHOWDOWN

The legend of the six-gun show is a
series of events and challenges. Can you
survive the show and become a legend?

LEVEL: **EXPERIENCED**
DURATION: 1-2 HOURS
AGE: 10+

BLACKBOARD JUNGLE

Can you find your homework and avoid detention, or are you doomed to
a lifetime of studying at the wall?

LEVEL: **INTERMEDIATE**
DURATION: 1-2 HOURS
AGE: 10+

PINKIE TOWN

It's Halloween. The only town that has children can still the world
of Halloween. Can you make it back home with a big haul
of candy?

LEVEL: **EXPERIENCED**
DURATION: 1-2 HOURS
AGE: 10+

[Previous] Parsely's cover design, a homage to the days of text adventuring on a Commodore 64. [Opposite] Manning L. Krull's clever artwork accompanied each Parsely title.

deleted but a logic puzzle might have been tinkered with to give better clues or something. [Infocom] games were like nothing else I'd seen! And they were smart - they challenged you to rise to meet them.

After school Jared embarked on a career in games design, developing role-playing games and boardgames as well as videogames with several computer game companies. He started out at San Francisco based startup called PF Magic in 1997 and was a tester for virtual pet games *Dogz II* and *Catz II*.

[JA] After that I contributed art, design, writing, and animation work for *Petz 3* and *Babyz*. Later on I was on the QA team at Atari and left to work on an Egyptian-themed city building game called *Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile* by Tilted Mill. I also worked in QA there but was eventually tasked with scenario design and writing. After that game shipped, I went to Turbine where I worked on *Dungeons and Dragons Online* and *Lord of the Rings Online*.

In 2003, Jared visited a friend's house where they cobbled together a Home-Con – a downsized residential tribute to the larger pop-culture fan-based events held in exhibition halls and arenas across the world. He and his friends crammed an entire weekend full of Role-Playing Games and Dungeons and Dragons scenarios between light-hearted sessions of the popular party deception game *Are You a Werewolf?* During the creative weekend, Jared had the idea for what would become his first Parsely text-adventure game.

[JA] [...] In the lull that followed such a riveting experience, I had a brainstorm, scribbled down some notes, mostly just boxes connected by lines. and said, "Hey, I have an idea...You are in a cottage. There is a fishing pole here..." and we played it and they LOVED it. When they finally finished, they asked for another, so I wrote *Jungle Adventure* on the spot. That took a lot longer and wasn't quite as good because it was so complicated. I eventually figured it out.

Jared's first game became *Action Castle*, based loosely on his recollection of playing Infocom's *Zork*. Traditional RPG or D&D games required a Dungeon Master – someone that controlled all aspects of the game, and who was highly creative, weaving the narrative and guidance for each player. In *Action Castle*, to follow the spirit of text adventuring, that person became "The Parser".

[JA] One player "plays" the computer, a position I call the Parser, and the other players are players, taking their turn "typing at the keyboard" and giving commands for the Parser to interpret. [...] It's really a performance, not a game. The "game" part is played by the Parser, the "players" are just the chaotic random factors like human dice. You never know what they're going to say. I call it Nerd Karaoke.

Action Castle and *Jungle Adventure* existed purely in Jared's head and he'd run the games from memory for players at various events. In 2009 he decided to commit the games to paper, and publish them in packaging reminiscent of early Scott Adams adventures in the US. They were written as laminated pamphlets, with all the required components packed together in a small ziploc bag. Each game came with its own unique cover art, produced and created by Jared's close friend and long-term collaborator Manning L. Krull.

[JA] They were incredibly expensive to make, despite the DIY quality. I would run the game for free at conventions all the time. [...] Space was an issue—fitting everything on a double-sided sheet of 11"x17" paper. Also figuring out all the little details took a long time, like how to present the information—colours, italics, boldface - to help the Parser quickly figure out what to do.

Each new game that Jared created could take up to three months to write, a period of time split between the creation of a basic narrative and a series of brainstorming and playtesting sessions with a group of trusted friends.

[JA] [With] whoever I could rope into playing through my dumb ideas. Some games are super-fast to create, others are painfully slow. I have a handful I still can't figure out how to finish. I did *Kringle Krisis* in just a few months—but that's mostly due to Rebekie Bennington's [a California based designer and storyboard artist working for several studios including Starburns Industries and Nickelodeon] super-fast, super-awesome map and my friend Drozdal's clever layout which he originally designed for the book.

As the narratives developed, new features were added to each game, mainly through Jared playing around with different styles of Parsing.

[JA] I thought it would be funny to act like a dumb and sarcastic computer and torture my friends. I was right! From there it was just a question of what to add that the previous game didn't have. *Jungle Adventure* had side quests, *Spooky Manor* introduced multiple endings, *Space Station* had 3D movement. You can play a few of the games more than once to get alternate endings or the rare perfect score, but yeah—they're not really intended to be replayed, only re-Parsed. Like I said, the real game is for the Parser.

In July 2017 the idea was taken to Kickstarter, with a campaign to fund a 300-page hardcover book containing every Parsely narrative text-adventure game that Jared had designed to that point. By that time, *Spooky Manor*, two sequels to *Action Castle*, *Pumpkin Town*, *Z-Ward*, *Dangertown Beatdown* and *Six-Gun Showdown* had been added to his portfolio.

[JA] Kickstarting is just "how it's done." I did a Kickstarter for the *Z-Ward* pamphlet which led to stretch goals of *Z-Ward-X* and *Six-Gun Showdown*. [...] I dislike the Kickstarter platform and hope I don't have to use it in the future. [...] There were changes. *Space Station* went through the biggest change from a gameplay standpoint as there was a very hard puzzle that was counter-intuitive. I fixed it. That was an interesting game because it was directly inspired by *Planetfall* and I got to run it at the Boston Museum of Science's planetarium—the staff created a whole bunch of graphics and we played it in the dark with the dome lit up with the space station room graphics. There was even sound and explosions! *Z-Ward* also went through some changes, mostly to connect the more advanced supplement to the main game while still having it remain optional as a "hard difficulty mode."

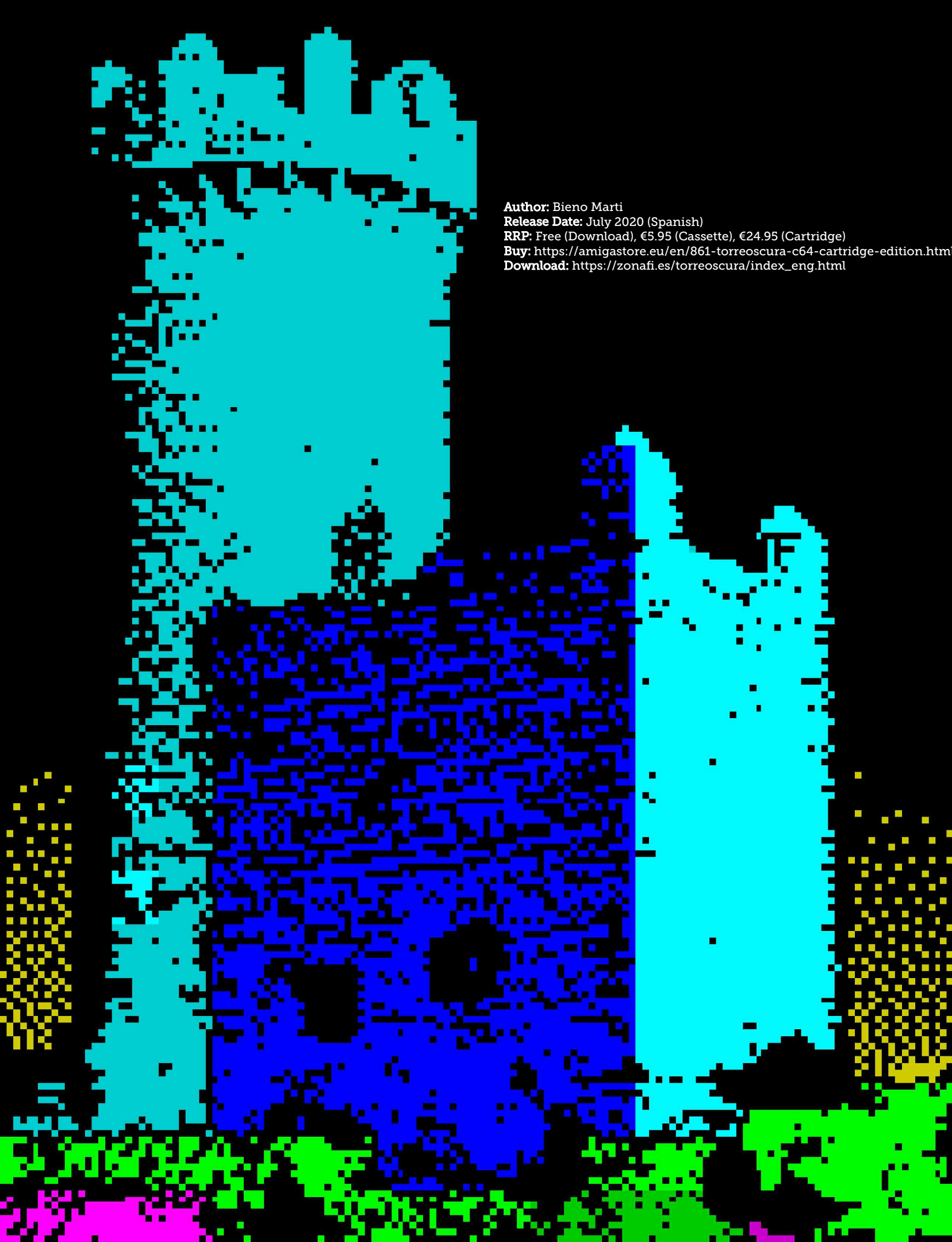
Parsely the book was successfully Kickstarted, with Jared's idea reaching its funding goal with contributions from a respectable 1210 backers. It may have attracted a wider audience and more backers, but the project was launched to the US-specific market. Previous projects had resulted in Jared making a loss on shipping due to complications and ever-changing international delivery rates.

Despite finding the whole crowd-funding mechanism clunky and offering little protection or help for creators, he did achieve the "project we love" status from Kickstarter that demonstrated credibility for his vision. The dislike for the funding mechanism shone through in some of the pledges though, with a favourite reward seeing the author "begrudgingly" signing a backed copy.

[JA] Signing books is such a chore. This time I took a page from Marc Maron and signed bookplates - stickers that I designed to look like 3.5" diskettes. So at least I didn't need to wrangle hundreds of books, just hundreds of stickers.

Jared has no plans for any further Parsely adventures, but has made the book available to purchase from his website in hardback or digital format. Calls for the series to be turned into bona-fide text adventures have also been rejected, but he does see the advantage of allowing the role of The Parser to be turned into an app as a digital assistant.

[JA] I never had plans for a computer to be the Parser although many, many people have asked for permission to script their own text-adventure games using *Action Castle* as the source. I thought it may be cool one day to load it into an iPhone app so people could run the game from their phone rather than a book, but aside from inventory control and a few other bells and whistles, the hyperlinked PDF I sell works almost as well.



Author: Bieno Marti

Release Date: July 2020 (Spanish)

RRP: Free (Download), €5.95 (Cassette), €24.95 (Cartridge)

Buy: <https://amigastore.eu/en/861-torreoscura-c64-cartridge-edition.html>

Download: https://zonafi.es/torreoscura/index_eng.html

TORREOSCURA

Thanks to efforts by the Spanish community, a translation of Bieno Marti's acclaimed spooky thriller *Torreoscura* is now available to English-speaking adventurers.

Torreoscura, or *The Dark Tower* is a text-adventure written by Bieno Marti using Gilsoft's *The Quill*. Originally released in the author's native Spanish, an English translation was published in August 2021 for a range of machines including the ZX Spectrum, Oric, MSX and Commodore 64.

Torreoscura begins with a nicely drawn and coloured loading screen together with a page or so of introductory text that sets the scene for the challenge ahead: The protagonist is looking forward to spending time away on a well-earned vacation, and though the destination isn't given, it's described as a little town that is "exotic and mysterious", far from the madding crowd and ideal for escaping the stresses of the city. Once there, our player's friend, Marc, who had offered to show us around the town doesn't turn up at the arranged meeting point. Undeterred, the protagonist heads onwards, presuming that Marc will know where they are staying. The place of residence, it turns out, is a hostel, just on the other side of the main town square. On arrival the player heads inside, only to instantly feel a sense of foreboding.

After the introduction, the narrative unfolds and we are drawn into an atmospheric and spooky thriller. The town seems to be mostly deserted, apart from the hostel's receptionist who gives the player a cryptic warning about the heavy fog that seems to lie over the buildings and accompanying streets. She then hands the player a letter from Marc who needs to meet on the other side of a gate at the edge of town.

It's then a case of exploring the town, following the clues, examining the cats and collecting treasures and jewels hidden amongst the small number of locations. The puzzles aren't difficult, so even the most inexperienced adventure player will soon find themselves completing part one and eventually ending up in front of *Torreoscura*.

The Quill was used to create the C64, Amstrad CPC and Oric versions. The other releases are powered by the DAAD engine; it's similarity to the earlier Gilsoft tool enabled the adventure text and logic to be ported fairly easily.

The DAAD versions benefit from an increased number of characters per line, presenting the text in a neat, more compressed format, akin to other DAAD-enabled releases from Stefan Vogt, and reminiscent of commercial titles such as *Mordon's Quest* and the later Level 9 games.


On the ZX Spectrum version *The Classic Adventurer* played, the neatly-drawn illustrations were rendered in black and white, quite in keeping with the game's scary theme, with almost all locations having their own graphics. The occasional splash of colour here and there in the text helps highlight important pieces of information such as the time of day. The ZX Spectrum 128K version even features music, although this AY soundtrack does become a little grating after a while.

The game doesn't really stretch the power of the DAAD's parser, with most of the puzzles solved using simple verb and noun commands, as you'd expect from a game originally created with *The Quill*. Interaction with the town's inhabitants is done via the TALK command, a simple and effective solution which removes the complexities and confusion of SAY TO commands.

There are minimal grammatical errors, and what translation issues remain are quickly forgotten and forgiven as you're pulled along by the rip-roaring narrative. There seems to be a very strong hobbyist community still active in Spain, so those of us with a GCSE D in Spanish are thankful for any efforts to bring these games to an English-speaking audience - we wish there were more.

Torreoscura is highly recommended, and another wonderful example of the fine work from the adventuring community that continues to thrive in Spain.





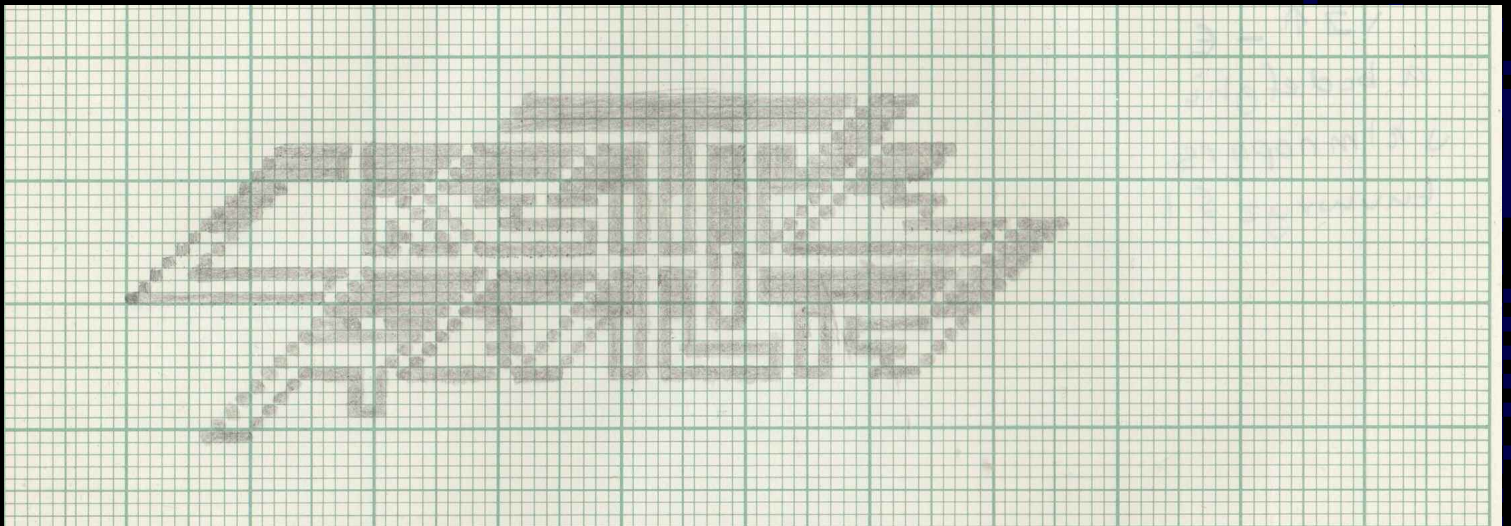
Format: ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC, Commodore 64
Publisher: Martech Games Limited
Developer: Creative Reality
RRP: £8.99 / £9.99
Release Date: November 1987

SLÁINE

Creative Reality went berserk bringing Pat Mills' 2000AD barbarian to life in a comic book graphic adventure for Martech. **Jas Austin** walks the Land of the Young with The Classic Adventurer and looks back at the origins of the revolutionary *Reflex System*.

Jas Austin always had a soft spot for text adventures. Through his teenage years he devoured a catalogue of classic British titles such as Level 9's *Snowball*, *Return to Eden* and *Colossal Adventure*, as well as Melbourne House's genre-defining *The Hobbit*. Though he admired the plucky Anglo-adventures, it was really the epics from US giant Infocom that sparked his creative imagination.

[Jas Austin] like most people I started on the likes of *Zork*, then gravitated towards their more left-field games like *Suspended*, *Planetfall*, *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*, and the Douglas Adams penned *Bureaucracy*. Some of their games still cross my mind all these years later - *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, where you played as a sentient AI, and used security, and environmental systems to manipulate people, and my all-time favourite *Infidel*, where the end of the game had you getting trapped in the tomb and dying. Downbeat endings like this were unheard of back then. Not



[Above] The original graph paper sketch for the Creative Reality logo.

forgetting all the cool physical “feelies” That came with the games, like letters, maps, and even scratch and sniff cards. Fun fact: since 1995 my keyring is the *Wishbringer* stone from the aforementioned game.

His break into the videogame industry came during a memorable Easter holiday in the early 1980s. The 17-year-old Jas was attending a local computer club where like-minded kids and adults got together, set up their own machines and played and shared their games and enthusiasm for the technology.

Two of the stars of the club, who visited every now and again, were maverick game designers Mel Croucher and Christian Penfold, founders of one of the first of Britain’s dedicated software houses – the anarchistic Automata.

[JA] That year they decided to hold a competition to make an Easter themed game or piece of software. I put together *Bunny* [a rabbit-running collect-em-up written in BASIC] on the Spectrum. Mel and Christian liked it and offered to publish it, and obviously I jumped at the chance. I got paid a massive £25 and I was over the moon. Looking back, it was clearly a ruse on their part to find some games to profit off. Although looking at *Bunny*, I’m not sure who were the winners!

The scent of a royalty cheque sowed the seed in the teenage Austin’s mind that games could earn him a bob or two and perhaps eventually end up becoming an actual career. A sobering appointment with his school careers adviser soon dampened his enthusiasm, as according to the councillor the only way into a future working with computers was to apply for a job with US multi-national technology company IBM.

[JA] I guess I showed him!

Bunny, however, did turn out to be the big break, and the experience of working with Automata and particularly Mel Croucher left a lasting impression. Mel and Christian were beginning to build a cult following and Croucher in particular developed into one of the most unique developers of the era who stuck two fingers up to the emerging conventions of the industry. “Mel Croucher is without doubt one of the most important voices and artists who has worked in videogames” said Llaura NicAodh, as part of the BAFTA New Talent event in 2016, “with an independent spirit, a mercurial mix of guts and humour, Mel Croucher [is an] inspiring figure.”

[JA] Yes, for sure. Even at my early age, it was clear to me Mel and the rest of Automata were creating ground-breaking games. Mel still is, and I believe he doesn’t get the credit he deserves for the way he shaped early game development. I learnt a lot from him, his left-field approach is something I still aspire to, and hold in high regard.

Along with ground-breaking games such as *Deus Ex Machina* and *ID*, Automata were an early publisher of text adventures, many of which featured their long-nosed company mascot PiMan. Games included the innovative and wonderfully titled *My Name is Uncle Groucho ... You Win a Fat Cigar*, *Here Be Tygers*, *Royal Adventures of a Common Frog*, *Xtroth* and *PiMania*.

[JA] I was a huge fan [of *PiMania*], despite being terrible at playing it. I had to ask [Mel] for help to even progress at the start when you had to type in the symbol PI, back in the day before you could just google the solution. I loved the idea of the Sundial as a physical prize. I also played and enjoyed *Uncle Groucho*, Automata’s other twist on a classic text adventure.

Jas continued to write games in his spare time whilst studying in sixth form and working part-time in a local shop. He’d developed an original game called *The Colour Scape* and touted it around various publishers, without luck, looking for someone interested in taking it to market.

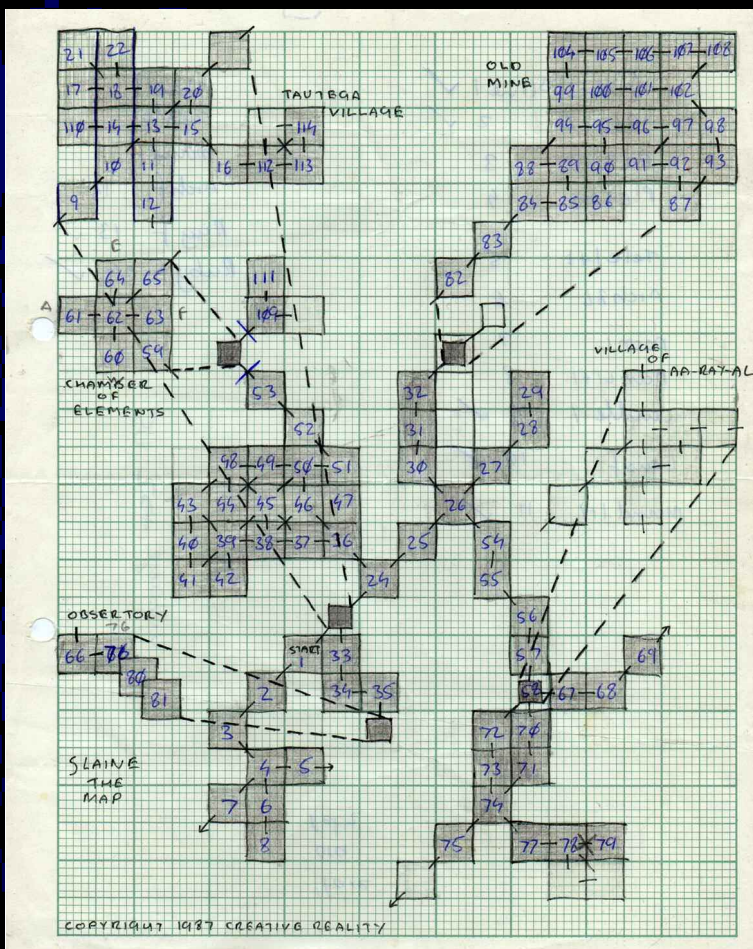
[JA] By chance I bumped into a friend of mine, David Wainwright, who had a development team called Catalyst Coders. He asked to take a look at *The Colour Scape*, and on seeing it decided it was way too bizarre to pursue. But he was after people for other projects, so I joined Catalyst and started work on *Tarzan*.

Catalyst was a work-for-hire studio, whose primary contracts involved porting arcade licences such as *Gyroscope* for Melbourne House and *Jail Break* for Konami. They started a relationship with David Martin’s Martech Software, porting *Geoff Capes Strongman Challenge*, and the infamous *Samantha Fox Strip Poker* to various platforms. On behalf of Martech, Jas worked on the Edgar Rice Burroughs tie-in *Tarzan*, and the mechanoid shoot-em-up *W.A.R.*

[JA] After Catalyst ended, Martech approached Dave Dew, Neil Dodwell, and myself from Catalyst to work with them as an external dev team. We were all mates, so got on pretty well, and felt we were a well-rounded team. There were the core members; David Dew on art, Neil Dodwell and myself on programming, plus we all had a hand in design. Then there was Mike Archer who would help us out sometimes with the code for Commodore 64 conversions. [Working with Martech] seemed like a solid move so we took the offer.

The relationship with Martech focused the minds of the young developers. They began to realise that if they wanted to make headway and be taken seriously in the industry then they had to become more professional. The former Catalyst developers left their hobbyist roots behind when Jas and his colleagues stopped working from home and moved into an office.

[JA] We had a small office in Southsea Portsmouth, that Dave, Neil,



TEXT LIST			
COMPRESSED WORDS			
123	VILLAGE	157 smithy	158 air
124	YOU ARE ON A	159 demon	173 & the
125	WHICH	159 red	179 and
126	AND	160 black	175 it's open.
127	YOU STAND	161 whole	171 & its closed.
128	THIS IS A	162 & down	177 & large wooden
129	TO THE NORTH	163 pile	chaot 97
130	CAN BE SEEN	164 & cracked	179 drink
131	PATH	165 skeleton	180 & gold pieces
132	NORTH	166 bookman	181 . & .255
133	SOUTH EAST	167 & converse	182 name
134	SOUTH	168 & cloudy	183 earth
135	EAST	169 & closed	184 water
136	WEST	170 & open	185 appears; & .255
137	NORTH WEST	171 lady	186 that
138	THE	172 drum	187 & scrap & itings
139	MOUNTAINS	173	188 ATTACK
140	YOU	210 & JUST	189 SEEN
141	YOU ARE AT	211 CAN	190 says
142	YOU CAN		191 & gold
143	TO THE		192 leather pouch
144	GRAVE YARD		193 dragon
145	THIS		194 half dead
146	YOU	S	195 ape
147	the	S	196 SEE
148	VILLAGE	P → drunk P	197 FROM
149	BARBAR	P → warrior	198 DIRECTION
150	PUNCH		199 MAGIC
151	KICK		200 AS
152	WOLVES	P 209 WIL	205 ROAR
153	THE ENEMY		201 AD
154	SLAINE	S	202 DAD
			207 what
			203 & of
			208 IL
			204 A battle

[Above Left] The original map design for *Slaine*. [Above Right] Text compression was key to maximising a game's available memory.

and I worked from. We didn't have firm rules about working hours, as long as the work got done it was cool. Personally, after working from home it was good to get back into more of a social environment, where it was easier to chat through ideas with the guys.

Their new attitude to work was accompanied by a new identity: They called themselves Creative Reality, a name whose origin has been lost in time and space, and in the haze of many smoke filled boozers.

[JA] Good question and difficult to remember exactly. Most of our brainstorming sessions were done down the pub, so guess it was after a few pints. One thing I do remember though was, we used to joke about it being an acronym for the full name 'Creative Reality and Programming.'

It was reported in early 1987 that Martech had snapped up the rights to Pat Mills and Kevin O'Neil's comic strip 2000AD, and of the first games created under the Creative Reality banner was the hugely successful platformer, *Nemesis The Warlock*. *Nemesis* was the third 8-bit game to be based upon the comic characters, after Piranha's arcade adventure *Rogue Trooper*, and Melbourne House's distinctly average run-and-gunner *Judge Dredd*.

Nemesis eventually hit the shelves to huge acclaim in the summer of the same year. With such praise it was inevitable that Martech would want to exploit its costly licence to its fullest potential and release more games based upon other characters. The Creative Reality team, with the vast catalogue of 2000AD characters to choose from, pushed for the next videogame tie-in to feature the Celtic barbarian *Slaine*.

[JA] [*Nemesis*] had reviewed and sold quite well, it seemed a natural progression to tackle another 2000AD title. Although it was us that planted the seed for *Nemesis*, as it were, we were all fans of the comic, and mentioned to Dave Martin that it would be something cool to pursue.

Nemesis and *Slaine* were two favourites of Jas, and he was delighted when Dave Martin agreed to contract Creative to create a game based upon the character. It was especially surprising given that at the time *Slaine* wasn't considered one of the better-known strips in the 2000AD canon. But, given that *Judge Dredd* had already been done, he was perhaps one of the best known characters without a videogame connection.

[JA] As game development times were much shorter back then, the story would have come together pretty quick, and was a team effort, with myself taking the lead. Pat Mills didn't really have any input into the story. I was lucky enough to speak to him over the phone a couple of times, where I ran what I had by him, he was happy to let us run with it. We did use his brilliant comics as a basis, so it was hard to go wrong.

Once the groundwork of a narrative had been laid, it was then down to working through the mechanics, and to decide which genre would fit best. *Dredd* had been a run-and-gunner, *Rogue Trooper* an isometric arcade adventure, and *Nemesis* a platformer – so were all these ideas prototyped or considered for the barbarian?

[JA] No, we didn't prototype any other ideas, we decided on the graphical text adventure early on. We were keen to not do another platformer like *Nemesis*, and my love of older text adventures certainly had an influence on me. [Martech didn't have] any objection to our odd choice of game. Luckily they trusted us as developers, and were excited with our direction.

Creative Reality met with Martech over the next few months, to demonstrate their progress and for Dave Martin to ensure that milestones in development were being met in line with the publisher's release date.

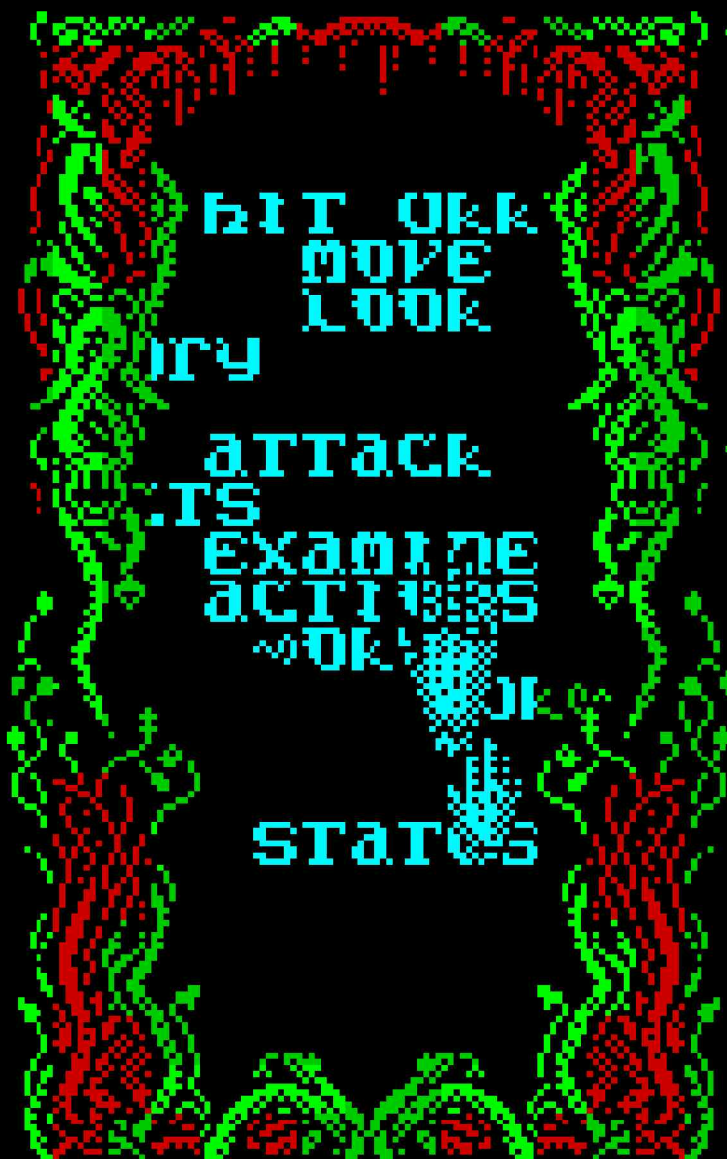
[JA] We would also post tapes to them - remember this was before the

internet. Back then if we wanted to get a tape to them quickly you'd pop down the local train station, and it was put on a train, then somebody their end would pick it up from their station. Imagine doing that now eh?

As development started in earnest, Dave Dew took responsibility for the art production, and Jas concentrated on implementing the design onto the Spectrum. By now the development environment had moved from unreliable Sinclair Microdrive systems to something called PSD - a hardware interface that connected a Spectrum to an old form of PC computer, running a custom editor and assembler.

[JA] The code was assembled and squirted through the interface to run on the Spectrum. The whole process took seconds - an absolute joy compared to previously where it could take half an hour or so for a single build.

Along with the narrative and genre, Jas and team brainstormed what would become *Sláine's* raison d'être - its unique approach to entering commands into their text adventure engine. Traditionally, text adventures required the input of verb and noun, by the player using



the keyboard to type each command into the game. For *Sláine* the development team used the characteristics of their protagonist to great effect and invented the *Reflex System* - a precursor to a point-and-click interface where commands appeared in the playing area at random and required the player to move around a gory, severed hand of a cursor to quickly click on the instruction they wanted.

The "thoughts" window took up the majority of the left-hand side of the screen display, encased in a gloriously detailed gothic border. The right-hand side accommodated a description of the current location, small representations of objects and another window containing comic-book style graphics, depicting the location, responses to commands and any action that took place. The graphics across all versions were neatly drawn, using high-resolution modes to good effect, with plenty of neat dithering on detailed character portraits.

The Reflex System, Jas told C&V magazine was invented because the team got upset if "adventure" was mentioned in relation to the engine. Creative Reality, he said, "wanted to create a completely new system, something removed from both adventure and arcade."

The instructions included with the game made it clear: "Move the image of Sláine's hand within the bounds of his imagination. The words represent the thoughts in his mind. Influence his actions by pointing at them. Although *Reflex* may seem confusing at first, controlling Sláine using the system will soon become second nature. For greater understanding, read on...."

[JA] I did think of the game beneath the hood as a text adventure, with traditional text entry commands GO NORTH, TAKE AXE, etc. The *Reflex* pointer command selection is ultimately just a different way of entering the commands. One thing I've always thought [is that] it would work much better now with mouse input. [...] As well as trying to build something a little different, the constantly moving text was supposed to represent the fevered chaotic mind of a Berserker.

Reflex became an acquired taste. Some players adored it, whilst others abhorred the random, and sometimes haywire nature of attempting to enter the correct command, especially during the game's fight sequences. It did add to the flavour of the game, which for Jas was a constant battle between balancing the need to make *Sláine* adhere to the conventions of text adventuring, whilst making the game true to its comic strip roots.

[JA] In reality we had total freedom, as I was already a fan, I'd read all the comics, plus done some of my own research into Celtic mythology. So I just made sure I kept within those boundaries. [...] Except for my chats with Pat Mills, I never had any contact with anybody at 2000AD.

Add into that, the difficulties that all Spectrum developers had - wrestling a quart of vocab, puzzles, locations and notably, detailed graphics into the pint-pot memory.

[JA] No artwork problems for me, that was all on Dave's back! Programming wise, it was the same issues I always seem to have on the Spectrum - fitting the whole damn game in memory. Normally keeping framerate high is also tricky, but luckily that was not a concern here. [...] I'd like to think that I did have a decent amount of content and puzzles. But I'd say most of the heavy lifting of making it comic like, was Dave's art. I just tried to stay true to the comic book style, dialogue, and characters. [...] I did make the early decision to have the command selection limited to the left portion of the screen, which meant I could have a much smaller off-screen buffer so there was no flicker on the moving words and hands. So that saved a whole bunch of memory.

As the game progresses, *Sláine* and his side-kick Ukko find themselves in perilous circumstances when coming into contact with the game's cast of nefarious characters. In the ensuing fights, the *Reflex System* implemented a combat mechanism played over a series of rounds, where the player can defend, attack and or use the berserk powers of Sláine to unleash a melee attack.

[JA] The combat was all based on a series of internal random dice rolls for attack and defence. While I can't remember exactly how it worked, it was based on old paper RPG games like D&D, but far simpler. Looking back this is something in the game that could have been improve. [It] would have been more exciting to visually show the dice rolls.

The story revolved around a legend of terror in the village of Tautega, a place in Lyonesse, a land in the grip of evil. Its people had suffered a terrible fate. The Drune, a cultist who worshipped the dark gods, had used his terrible magic to lay waste to the area and slaughter anyone he came across. In the battle that ensued the people managed to slay the Drune, but not before he had cursed the land and its people and also imprisoned his daughter, Reya in Small Sky's Tower. Sláine learns of the story on his travels, and he and Ukko decide to seek out the tower and release the maiden.

Sláine took around three months or so, from start to finish. It was extensively previewed as *Sláine The King* in the gaming press, its



artwork lending itself perfectly to be featured in the glossy magazines of the time. The working title in the magazines was never something that was applied to the game by Martech, but was probably derived from a series of storylines that was running in the 2000AD comics at the time. Computer and Videogames Magazine made the game its cover star in issue 72, and previewed it extensively with a feature accompanied by spectacular illustrations commissioned from original Sláine artist Glenn Fabry. With the Spectrum development leading the way, it was the Sinclair version that hit the shelves on 24th September 1987, with the Amstrad and Commodore 64 versions following a little time later.

[JA] Neil [Dodwell] worked on the Amstrad in tandem with myself. Once the Spectrum was finished, Michael Archer was let loose on the C64 one, which did prove to be a little problematic. In the end both Michael and myself were pulled into a small hotel in sunny Eastbourne, right opposite the Martech offices to finish the game... so that proved to be a "fun" few weeks.

Even though both ports had been given enough dedicated time by the developers to be more than direct interpretations of the Spectrum versions, neither the Amstrad nor the Commodore versions took advantage of the extra RAM or graphical capabilities of either machine. However, both used a neat high-resolution graphics mode, and added some additional flourishes of the colour palette here and

there. The Commodore 64 version included an atmospheric soundtrack by one of the leading computer musicians of the era.

[JA] Much that I've always been a Spectrum kid I reluctantly concede the C64 with its SID chip always had far better music than the Speccy. It also helped that we were lucky enough to have the mighty David Whittaker compose the music.

The press reception was mixed. The Spectrum and Amstrad versions received better reviews, with Crash awarding the game a respectable 70%, saying it was one of the best adventures on the market and praised the *Reflex System* that made the game "more interesting than the usual type-it-in style of text adventure". ACE magazine lauded the effort to mix the comic book and text adventure genres and compared the ambition to Melbourne House's *Redhawk* [see Issue 05]. Sinclair User said *Sláine* was an "innovative and interesting pseudo-adventure", with Your Sinclair heaping most praise awarding it a Mega-Game accolade and a highly commendable 9/10. On the C64 however, kind words were harder to come by where ZZap!64 awarded a below-average 45% saying the game was "an interesting concept that unfortunately [failed] to convey any drama or action."

In the round, the critics had a parochial obsession with the *Reflex System*, and this preoccupied their reviews. Crash commented that *Reflex* fell "between two stools [making] a simple task, like going north or picking up an object difficult and overcomplicated." Steve Jarratt in ZZap!64 said the system "was extremely wearisome" with Paul Glancey, though praising its "innovative thinking" concluded it was "incredibly frustrating when you're about to select a command and it suddenly zips off screen". The Games Machine finally commented that "the *Reflex System* smacks of gimmickry and is decidedly detrimental to gameplay." Ultimately, that negativity affected sales and meant the end for the *Reflex System*.

[JA] While we weren't privy to any sales data, it was clear from the mixed reviews and the charts of the time that it didn't sell well. As this was very pre-internet. We didn't really get any feedback from actual players who bought the game. [...] Although it was pretty clear to us after *Sláine* that *Reflex* wasn't a goer, so we didn't pursue it. Giving the system a name was more of a pre-emptive strike just in case we did more games. Plus giving your engine a name was a cool thing to do back then.

The negativity around *Sláine* impacted the future of the team. Their next game, *The Fury*, failed to impress the sales charts. In a desperate attempt to restore their integrity as developers, Creative Reality developed their final game under a pseudonym. Jas told Classic Replay "Our previous game for Martech hadn't done particularly well commercially. So for *Rex*, we decided to re-invent ourselves with fake names and a new company called The Light. We even invented a back story that we were all ex-IBM employees and wrote the game in a matter of weeks. Of course, all a complete pack of lies."

[JA] That is absolutely true. We rocked up for a meeting with Martech, and we had a feeling that we were going to get a talking to, or worse, the elbow. We had with us a very early demo of *Rex*, we called *The Peeps Game*, which was just a bunch of stick men jumping around a screen, with the main character blasting the crap out of them. Dave Martin was impressed, and we got a stay of execution. Because of this we hatched the cunning plan to release *Rex* under a new name to distance ourselves from the previous games.

Jas has remained in the games industry ever since and has worked at several companies on a variety of projects including the remake of Chris Sawyer's iconic *Transport Tycoon*. He's now a senior developer with Funfair, a hyper-modern company working on implementing blockchain technologies across the gaming ecosystem. To whet many retro and classic gamer's appetites, in February 2017, he announced he had revived *Rex* and had begun development of a new version aimed at the crowdfunded Spectrum Next machine.

[JA] *Rex Next* is going well. Even though I've never stopped making games, it's been fun getting back to my roots. I'd forgotten how much I enjoy coding in assembly. I'm also getting stuck into the art side, so that's been a massive learning curve. Most of the code side is done, and I'm deep into making levels now. I only wish I had more

KIM TOPLEY

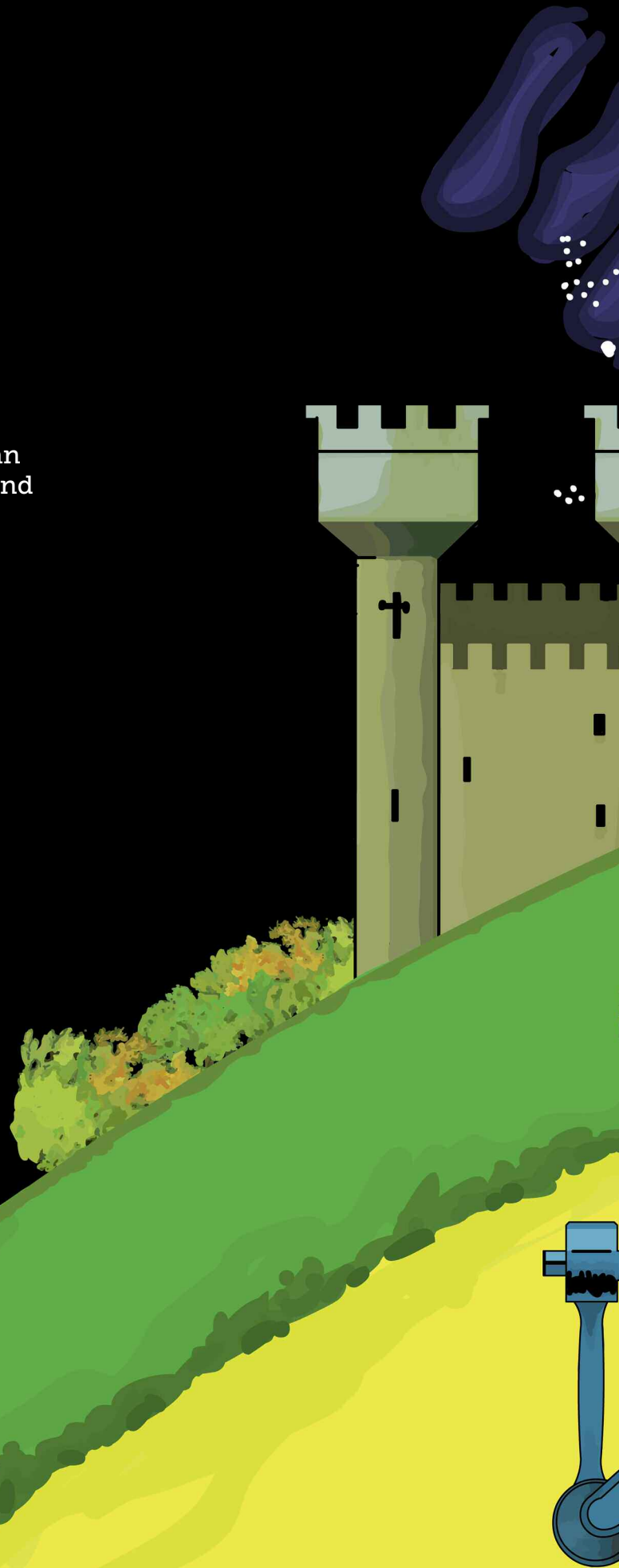
Hewson Consultants may be best remembered for arcade blockbusters *Uridium* and *Dragontorc*, but it delved into the world of text adventuring when the company was in its infancy. Kim Topley was the man responsible for Hewson's classic adventure *Quest*, and the much-loved *Fantasia Diamond*.

After his school installed an IBM 1130 mainframe computer and begin teaching Computer Science, Kim Topley became an avid student of the subject and was often in the lab, teaching himself skills far beyond what the curriculum offered.

[Kim Topley] We used a language called CESIL and then BASIC. I taught myself the IBM 1130 machine language and used it to write an assembler for CESIL, which was more complete than the one the school had, so they switched over to using mine instead. I subsequently taught myself Fortran on the same machine.

After school, Kim pursued a career in computing and programming. He landed a job at British hardware manufacturer International Computers Limited, better known simply as ICL. By that time, Sinclair had released the ZX81 upon which Kim taught himself Z80 assembler. When the improved ZX Spectrum arrived, its additional memory, colour and sound capabilities meant that games programming was more attractive, and Kim began to piece together several programs for his own amusement.

[KT] I had a sideways scrolling shoot-'em-up game with a spacecraft flying horizontally through a cave system, dodging missiles fired from above and below, picking up fuel from silos and bombing enemy bases. I also wrote a kind of a strategy-based game set in





space where the display was a little like the view screen on the Starship Enterprise, complete with parallax view of the stars as you sped through them. The universe was randomly generated with stars, star bases and enemy spacecraft. I sent that game to a company that was advertising for games to publish in one of the national magazines at that time. They signed a contract to distribute it, but I heard nothing more from them. That left a sour taste in my mouth. I also wrote an interpreter for the Forth programming language.

Kim's interest in text adventures started well before his employment with ICL and shoot-em-up efforts with the Spectrum. Whilst studying Maths at Trinity College in Cambridge he was a keen chess player and his peers introduced him to the world of Dungeons and Dragons. Aged 25 he stumbled on an installation of *Adventure* on the mainframe and played it to death, compiling his own versions. He started writing his own game, drawing heavily on the inspirations provided by his role-playing experiences.

[KT] I went to my local bookshop to get a book about role playing games so that I had the basic ideas straight in my head, then branched off on my own from there. It was intentionally a combination of D&D and my experience of *Colossal Caves*.

The game map was initially sketched out on scraps of paper. Into the rooms, monsters were added, with their manifestations, attributes and characteristics drawn from the books he had purchased. He implemented a basic parser whose first functions contained the ability to navigate between locations.

[KT] Once I had something basically working, I started playing it and adjusted it from there to make it more playable or add something new that came to me as I was play testing.

For speed, the engine was coded from the ground up, completely in assembly language, with Kim hand-writing pages and pages of instructions and functions in pen, compiling the code and running the program through his head. It was standard practise for him, given that the capability to test and debug programs on the machines themselves were still in its infancy. He used his own assembler to compile and build the code into a testable game, and kept the source on a rack of cassettes, given that Sinclair's Microdrive system that he was originally using proved to be unreliable.

Next, the basic parser was fleshed out into something more complex. Only *The Hobbit* in 1983 had attempted to break the standard verb/noun construct, but Kim aimed for something a little more sophisticated, and wanted to include a more expansive vocabulary.

[KT] The sentence structure is more-or-less VERB THING PREPOSITION THING, where THING is ADJECTIVE* NOUN. All the words are in a table, together with their part of speech. The parser converts the text into something that contains all the parts of the sentence, with zeroes for parts that were left out. Once everything is in that form, the code jumped to the right code based on the verb, and that code looked in standard places for the parts of the command it could handle.

As development progressed, Kim decided to add a feature that wasn't common at the time but would come to define the releases of adventures from that point onwards – the inclusion of graphics. He incorporated a very basic illustration system, that was slow and limited but implemented enough features to draw some pleasing location graphics.

[KT] It was a simple engine that allowed me to encode the graphics in a very compact form, which was important given the memory restrictions. I think the basic drawing operations were available in the Spectrum ROM, but I had to implement other things, like fill myself. All the graphics were drawn on graph paper first, then I hand encoded them as data for the game. Initially, I was debugging the graphics engine and my ability to correctly encode what I had sketched out, but eventually I was able to go from no sketch to a completed and working picture in less than an hour.

Using the Spectrum's built-in ROM functions for the graphics engine meant that the illustrations were painfully slow to render. After all,

the ROM code wasn't optimised for speed, rather for simplicity and ease of use for someone calling them via BASIC.

[KT] It was quite slow, but that was the trade-off – either that, or use a lot of memory with a bitmap. There just wasn't enough memory for pre-drawn graphics.

The game started to take shape after a month or so of toiling away evenings and weekends to get the work done. Kim's focus was on balancing the needs of the puzzle logic, text for locations and vocabulary over the need of implementing complex or optimised graphics routines.

[KT] That was a constant struggle. The game data was very compact. Each word appeared only once as text. When you see something like "You are in a long, dark hall", that's encoded as 1 or 2 bytes for each word, where those bytes are an index into the game's dictionary. The "You are in" is not stored with the text because it can be constructed separately. The puzzles are just in-line code that work with the game's data structures. After the user types a command and it's been actioned, there is a phase that I called "room actions" that figures out how to respond. In specific rooms, this had code to special things.

Keeping true to its D&D roots, Kim allowed the player a choice of 5 protagonists - the persona to adopt when playing the game - a Wizard, Cleric, Rogue, Fighter or Simpleton. He also incorporated everything that a classic adventure should contain – a brass lamp, a maze, and a *Colossal Cave* inspired treasure, as well as some of the other infuriating features of traditional text adventures - instants deaths, a tricky-to-manage energy level and lots of getting lost in forests and dark caves.

[KT] Yes, I did keep some of the things I had learned from *Colossal Cave*, as well as elements that I invented. It's not an adventure if it doesn't have a maze of twisty tunnels, or something equivalent.

With the game now virtually finished, his next job was to find a company willing to bring the game to market. Kim had developed a love for newly formed ZX Spectrum publisher Hewson Consultants, whose reputation had been growing throughout 1982 and 1983 fueled by the sales of founder Andrew Hewson's range of Sinclair programming books. Hewson entered the software market with two games for the expanded Sinclair ZX-81 - Mike Male's *Pilot* and John Hardman's *Puckman*. They seemed a perfect stable for the new adventure.

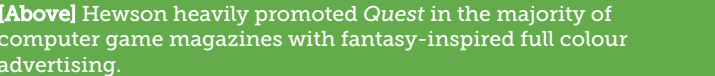
[KT] I was a fan of Mike Male's flying games and I bought and played all of them. *Nightflite* [Mike's follow-up to *Pilot*] was a classic at the time, but I also liked the strategy behind *Heathrow ATC*. Hewson seemed to be a reputable company, so [...] I contacted them, expecting either to get a "no thank you," but hoping to get a contract that would actually lead to something, unlike the first one I had signed with another company for my space game. I was pleasantly surprised when Hewson agreed to go ahead.

[Andrew Hewson] [We received] probably a dozen [submissions] a day at the peak. We played the games that were sent to us and most were quite rudimentary and so the initial sift was straightforward. [...] [Kim's adventure] was one of the few which we found to be enjoyable and absorbing. [...] I liked it immediately. It was easy and enjoyable to play.

With the game almost complete, but requiring a little polish around the edges, Kim sent it away to Hewson so they could get the game ready for release. He was living in Manchester at the time, which was some way from Hewson's base in Oxfordshire, so they organised the logistics behind the release of the game by using the traditional methods of communication available in the 1980s – telephone and postal mail.

[KT] I used snail mail to send them cassettes with the latest version of the game. [...] As I recall, the only change they asked for was a new loading screen, for which they had professional artwork prepared and then I wrote the code to realise it.

The unnamed game was titled *Quest*, or *Quest Adventure* by Hewson



[KT] It was a thrill to walk into Boots or WHSmith and see my game there and in the magazines. Really, though, at that time I was already working on [the next game] so I didn't have much time to think about *Quest* too much.

[KT] Well, I didn't want to make it too easy, and I wanted it to be possible to play the game more than once and have a different experience, but I probably took it too far. As for the inability to restart the game, that was because memory was too tight – there was no room to keep a clean copy of the game data in memory.

many full-page colour adverts across the gaming press, from *Crash to Your Computer*. "An enthralling adventure with graphics" boasted the tagline, exulting that *Quest* was set in an "inhospitable world inhabited by gruesome creatures."

[KT] Hewson did an exceptional job with advertising and marketing. It was nice to get royalty cheques too, but I don't remember exact sales figures. It was nothing like the return on investment for the arcade style games, of course, but I never expected it to be. Given that people bought it, I regard Quest as a success.

What was delightful about Hewson at the time, was the company's drive to publicise and promote its creative programmers. Other software houses such as Gremlin Graphics and Imagine Software gave credits to their game's authors on the inlays, but Hewson went one better: Promoting Kim as the creative force behind *Quest* on the game's slick advertisements – begging the question – did it result in sacks and sacks of fan mail for the adventure author?

[KT] I think that was more true of Steve Turner and Andrew Braybrook and, of course, Mike Male. I didn't really expect any of that and I was happy to be a backroom person, writing games in the shadows. I did get an honourable mention by name a few times; I think. I was more than happy being fairly anonymous.

[AH] It seemed obvious to me that consumers would want to know about the people who created our games. It gave us something to talk about and helped our customers to know what they were buying.

For months after it went on sale, adventure columns and tip sections were inundated with request for hints and solutions to puzzles to the adventure. Requests became so frequent that enquirers got the nickname *Questers*, and Hewson were pushed to create a hints sheet that could be sent out to befuddled players.

[KT] I remember Andrew or Gordon telling me how they would get calls from people asking for hints when they got stuck and there was one place in the game where you have to open a door. Nobody could figure out how to do it, but I had given Hewson a cheat sheet with the solutions to all the puzzles. Apparently, this was the one they got most calls about and they all got to know the answer – OPEN SOUTH. It should have been OPEN SOUTH DOOR, but that didn't fit the parse rules. I really should have added a workaround for that. It was a little unfair. That's probably my least favourite element of the game.

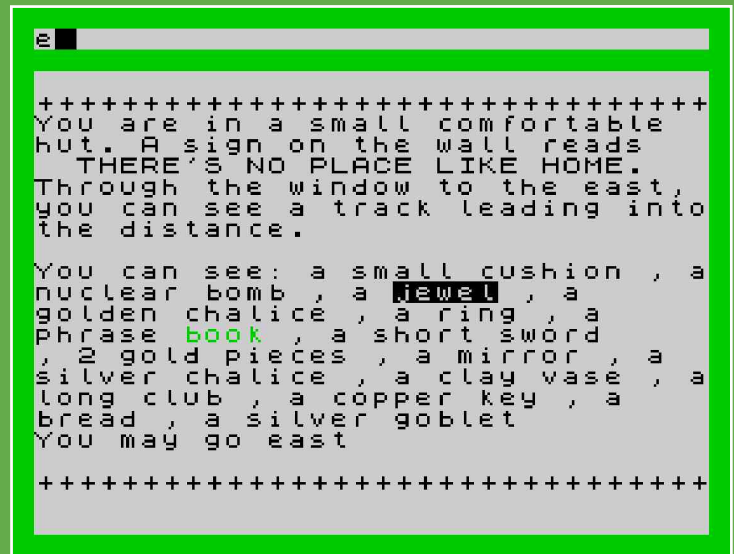
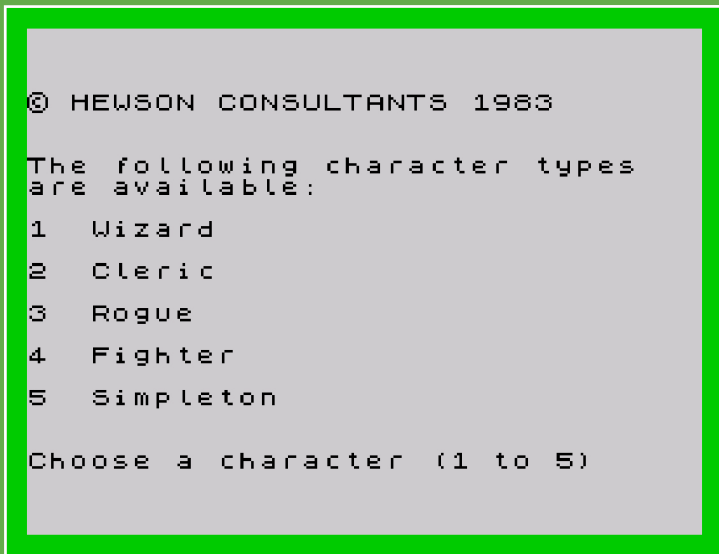
Quest was a starting point for Kim. As he had explained, by the time he was completing coding for the game he started immediately on his next adventure. He had the ambition to produce something bigger and better, with a much improved parser and more intelligent non-playable characters that could be interacted with in more depth. Hewson were open to a second game, and inspired by *The Hobbit*, Kim got to work in his spare time on *Fantasia Diamond*.

[KT] *Fantasia Diamond* was heavily influenced by *The Hobbit*. I admired what they had done with that game, and I shamelessly borrowed some elements of it. I am a great fan of Monty Python, which probably explains why some of the characters and props seem unusual for an adventure game. I didn't think of *Fantasia* as being at all medieval, but instead being set in more modern times.

The game moved away from its blatant Dungeons and Dragons, mechanics, and Kim improved the parser addend action tables for non-playable characters to be able to act independently. Gone were the attributes (at least on the surface) and focus on combat, and in was a more humorous approach to the narrative.

There was a significant improvement to the vocabulary, in direct response to the issues that players had with the first game that led to the numerous calls for a hint sheet. The more flexible parser could understand adjectives, and this was used, perhaps overly throughout the game, to manipulate different sized and colour objects, such as small or coloured doors, or rusty keys. The word count was increased substantially to 300, pushing the boundaries of what could be squeezed into the Spectrum's 48K memory.

[KT] This was possible because I made the text and graphics very



[Above-Left] Kim's love of Dungeons & Dragons is demonstrated with Quest's character selection start page. [Above-Right] Further into the adventure the player encounters a familiar setting and a vast array of objects.

compact, as I described earlier. The memory limitation was always a prime consideration. There would have been many more scenes with graphics if I had more memory. The ability to restart a game was an unfortunate casualty of the shortage of memory, because there wasn't space for a second copy of the game's dynamic data, and things moved around during gameplay, so there wasn't any automatic reset that I could do.

There was a need to shape the story and evolve the technology in line with the current trends of emerging adventures from other software houses. *Fantasia's* locations felt a world apart from its predecessor's homage to the classic adventuring of *Colossal Cave*, and veered towards the fantastic worlds of Level 9's *Red Moon*, *Worm in Paradise* and *Return to Eden*.

The titular diamond, a family heirloom and the world's largest jewel has been stolen, with the thief absconding to a heavily defended fortress, across a river that lay in a faraway land. Boris, a master spy of some description is sent to recover the gem, but he himself is entrapped by the malevolent Guardian leaving the task of rescuing him and the *Fantasia* Diamond to you.

The player is flung into a fantasy world where gnomes, elves and pixies rub shoulders with toy robots, and technology is married to a fairytale landscape of caves, forests and castles.

The narrative wasn't the only thing to break from the norm. Kim also bucked the trend by continuing to develop his own text adventure engine, rather than experimenting and using *The Quill* – Gilsoft's revolutionary utility that came to market in 1983 – a product that started to gain traction both in the amateur and professional development world.

[KT] No, I would never do that. For me, the whole point of the exercise was writing the code—the fact that something that could be sold came out of the process was just secondary. I don't even remember being aware of any adventure-writing tools at the time, but if I had been, my attitude probably would have been that using such a thing would be akin to using BASIC – necessary for some people who didn't want to or didn't have the time to learn Z80 assembler, but an unnecessary restriction for me.

Like *The Hobbit* and *Twin Kingdom Valley*, the creatures in *Fantasia Diamond* that you encountered would help and hinder and were friendly and evil – stealing objects without warning, or dropping items, or attacking you or other foes and generally making a nuisance of themselves. Once you reached the castle, you'd find The Guardian patrolling the rooms, whilst the other characters wandered freely around the world having minds of their own.

[KT] I constructed the code so that this would be easy. The code that executes when you, as the player, type a command, is the same as the code that executes when NPCs take their turn. Essentially, I choose a verb for the NPC, in a pseudo-random way, although there are biases for some characters that make some verbs more likely than others. For example, the robot is programmed to follow the player whenever they are in adjacent rooms, which is why it seems to stay with the player at all times. Having decided what to do, for example, TAKE, the code notices that it doesn't know what to take, so it looks around for something to take. If it finds something, the action is performed. If not, another verb might be chosen, or the character might just do nothing, the decision again being random. Sometimes it's more complex—for example, if the verb GIVE is chosen, the code has to choose something to give and another character to give it to.

The Toy Robot is one of *Fantasia* Diamonds more memorable and loveable characters and featured prominently on the marketing artwork that accompanied the game. It was the equivalent of The Hobbit's Thorin, though it was less annoying, and in many cases more helpful. In fact, as with Thorin, the Robot at one point in *Fantasia* is the keystone character in one of the later puzzles.

[KT] Yes, *The Hobbit* was the inspiration for this. In *Fantasia Diamond*, I made a lot of use of the ability to make NPCs active participants in the game – you can't finish it without making use of that. In some places, I think I went a little over the top with that. For example, the puzzle that involves the orchestra near the end of the game is really a lot harder than it should have been, as a result of the NPCs' slightly random behaviour. Still, though, some people managed to solve it.

The screen layout was something else that was redesigned, and Kim improved greatly on the screen display. *Quest's* clumsy interface was modernised and replaced with better split-screen layout. The drawing routines all received further optimisation and a much needed speed boost in the new version of the code.

[KT] The split screen made it easier to see what was going on and easier to repeat commands, an essential feature when NPCs don't immediately follow instructions. The only other adventure game I played was *The Hobbit*, but I don't think this particular feature was inspired by that game.

Quest's hint system was improved and expanded. Typing HINT would give the player some idea of how to progress, or very occasionally one of the NPC characters would provide clues or instruction on how to proceed. It was a nice helping hand for the layman player and part of *Fantasia's* better balancing of puzzle difficulty.

[KT] This is one area where I learned from experience and from the support calls that Hewson was getting from *Quest*—I wanted to make it easier for players to help themselves before they called Hewson, but without making the game too easy, so the clues were usually not quite straightforward. I also gave Hewson a complete solution to the game, to ease their burden.

Whether following the solution, or through their own wit, once the player reached the end of *Fantasia* they were confronted with a rather less than extravagant ending. It wasn't something particular to adventures. The limitations of 8-bit machines, restricted to 32K or 48K meant that something, somewhere had to give, and developers tended to sacrifice any plans for lavish endings in order to squeeze in more content elsewhere.

[KT] I really wasn't a fan of flashy endings, so I was never going to invest precious RAM space to make one. I felt that the reward for an adventurer was getting to the end of the game, and they did not need an irrelevant special effect.

The Spectrum version was released in May 1984. With Hewson keen to capitalise on the expanding home micro market, and the popularity of the first game, they asked Kim to port the game to the available computers of the time. The Amstrad port [with different inlay artwork] appeared in September 1984, and a non-graphics version for the BBC Micro and Acorn Electron a month later.

[KT] I bought the hardware, read the manuals and made the necessary changes. For the Amstrad port, this was relatively straightforward because it had a Z80 CPU, but the Electron took much more time because I had to get up to speed with the 6502 and write everything from scratch. The game data, of course, was completely portable, so I already had the complete game setup ready—I just needed to write the code to make the game come to life.

The Electron code was easily converted to run on the BBC Micro. Kim couldn't afford to buy another computer just so he could create a port for it, so he had to rely to Acorn's comprehensive manuals to help him through the conversion process. With the code ready to run on a BBC, Hewson helped verify and test the game on real hardware before releasing it.

The Amstrad port disappointingly failed to make use of the additional 16K of RAM, or graphical capabilities that was available on Alan Sugar's machine. As with many ports of Spectrum games to the Amstrad, it would have been nice to see more detailed graphics, additional locations, puzzles or an expansion of the very basic sound

and graphical effects that accompanied key events in the game – such as been taken prisoner.

[KT] I think this was just timescale—the shelf life of a game can be quite short and Hewson wanted to make as much use as possible of the good reviews for the Spectrum version. Adding content was also more than I was prepared to do at the time—I was getting ready to move on to something new.

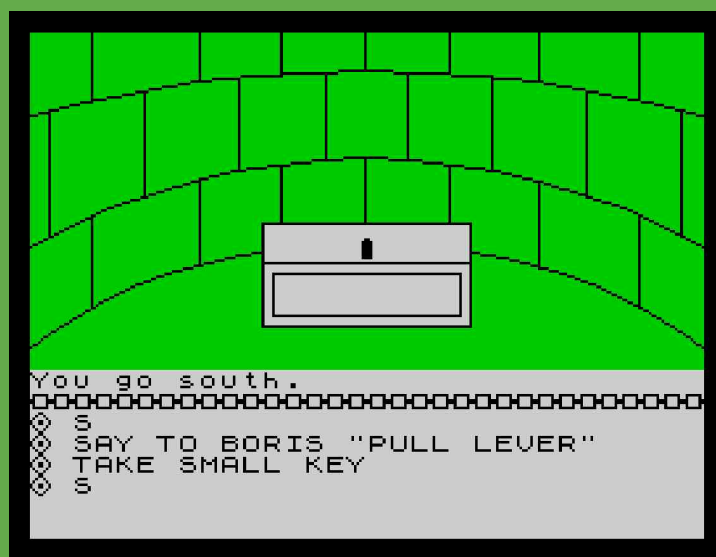
Strangely, out of those initial two formats, it's the Spectrum version that remains harder to acquire today. The Acorn port is exceptionally hard to obtain, but even rarer is the lesser-known Enterprise version that arrived in 1985. The Enterprise was a British home computer, that endured a troubled launch by Elan Computers in 1983. Development of its custom chips plagued production, and significant numbers only started to arise a year and a half later. *Fantasia Diamond* was chosen as a prestigious launch title for the machine, alongside other titles from huge companies such as Ocean and US Gold.

[KT] Yes, I did that port too. I remember Andrew and I visiting the company that made that machine. They gave me a prototype of the hardware and some internals documentation that allowed me to figure out how to use the keyboard and drive the screen. I took it home and got to work. Since I already had a working set up on the Spectrum, I actually wrote the code there, compiled it and wrote the binary out to a cassette tape using the SAVE code in the Spectrum ROM. On the Enterprise side, I copied the Spectrum ROM code and modified it a little to make it more reliable and because the CPU speed was different, so that I could plug my cassette player into the Enterprise and actually use the modified ROM code to read the Spectrum-encoded tapes into the Enterprise. That little trick saved a lot of time! Once I was done, I had to pass the machine on to Mike Male, who was porting his flight games, along with my tape-reading code so that he could do the same thing. I remember him coming to my home one weekend to pick it up and having a chat about what I'd learned about the new machine. I have no idea what happened to Enterprise or what the sales of any of Hewson's games for it were like.

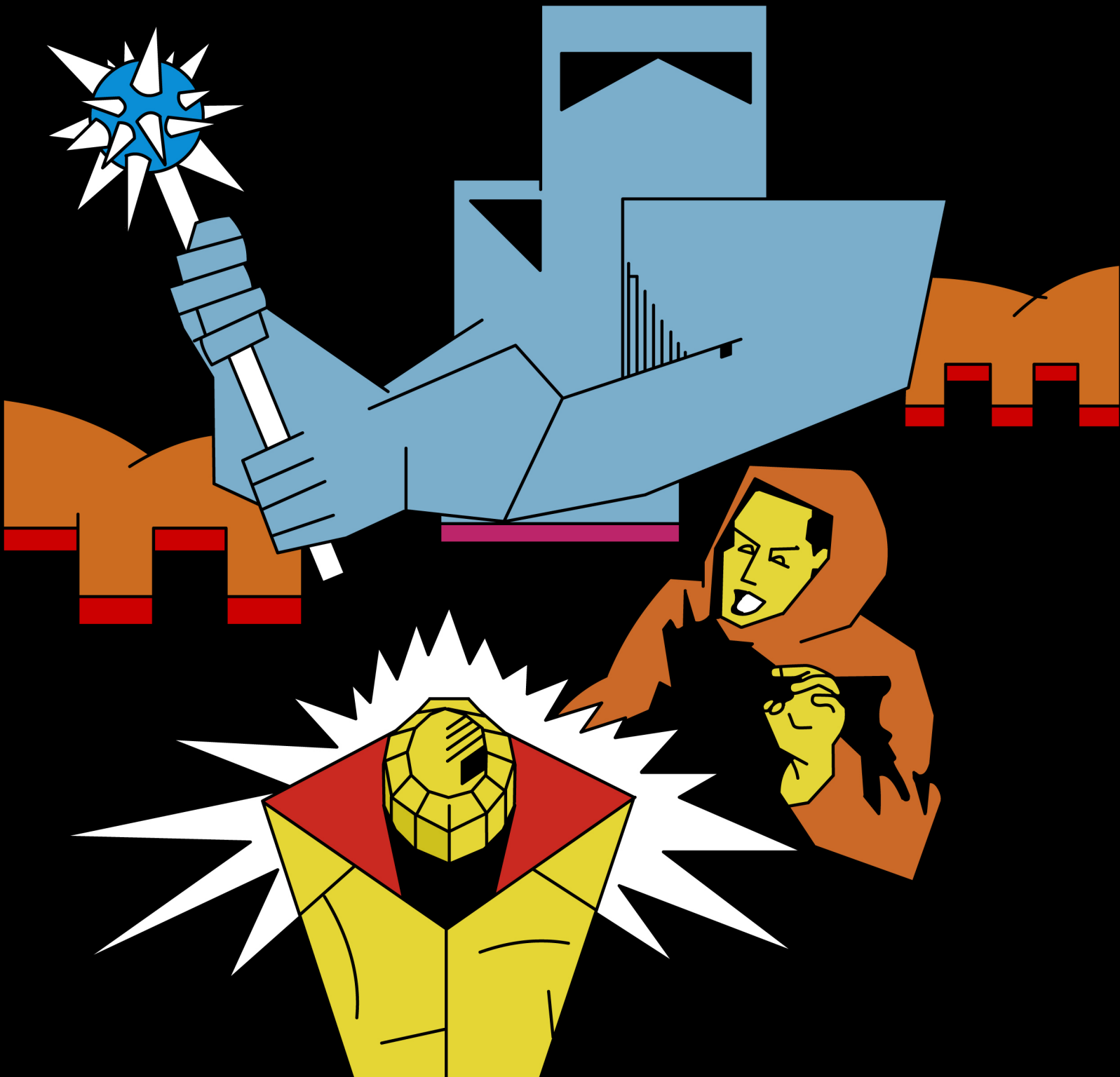
One notable machine that was missing from the list of platforms *Fantasia Diamond* was ported to was the Commodore 64. Frank Gasking's well-referenced Games That Weren't site states that the C64 port was never completed because Kim didn't own a Commodore machine. This seems reasonable, as the BBC port was only done because Kim could access an Acorn Electron, but in the case of the C64, Hewson even went as far as to advertise that the product would be available for the machine.



[Above] Kim's Spectrum loading screen interpretation of the *Fantasia Diamond* illustration artwork.



[Above] *Diamond* improved greatly on *Quest*'s user interface and graphical speed and capabilities.



[KT] I think the advertisement was a copy-paste error. I remember seeing it and thinking somebody at Hewson had made a mistake! GTW is correct—I did not own a C64 and I was sceptical that it would be worth spending yet more time porting an adventure to C64. That was probably a mistake, but at the time I didn't want to invest any more time and money to do another port. [...] I don't think Hewson ever asked for a C64 conversion. I think by then they were being so successful with other games, they didn't need to make any revenue from smaller demand things like adventures. For me, it was a hobby but for them, it was a business and they had to spend their own money and hope to get it back, with a profit. I visited Hewson HQ in Abingdon a few times and the first time, Andrew showed me the tape replication machine he had invested in, so that they could produce the physical games in-house. He mentioned that it was very expensive and a big gamble for him. I have a lot of respect for

Andrew and Gordon Hewson—they took a risk and were rewarded for it, at least for a while. I tried to always do my best when they asked if I could do another port, since I felt that I owed it to them as a way of repaying the bravery they showed getting started in what was a risky business, at the time. If they had asked me for a C64 port, I would very likely have done it, for that reason, but I wasn't going to volunteer it.

When it was released, *Fantasia* was very well received and reviewed. The effort that Kim put into enhancing his text adventure engine paid off. Derek Brewster in *Crash* said it was "a superb graphic adventure with a very intelligent and friendly vocabulary" and was "highly recommended".

[KT] It was definitely nice to see that particular review!

[Opposite] Abstract artwork for the rare Enterprise computer version of *Fantasia Diamond*.

Your Spectrum also gave the game glowing praise, though were less generous when awarding its actual review score. "It's fun to play, and the theme is thoroughly exciting" they began. "[The] good use of the Spectrum's capabilities is made even better by a very good idea. One of Hewson's best" they ended.

Even with glowing reviews, and the accolade of a Crash Smash, which usually guaranteed excellent sales, *Fantasia* it seemed, failed to shine in the sales charts. Its marketing was less energetic than *Quest*, with the game struggling to share the same press-agentry in the Hewson catalogue when placed alongside other titles such as *Avalon* and *Dragontorc*. These arcade behemoths were the ones that Hewson decided should receive full-page, full-colour promotion this time around.

[KT] I think Hewson did the right thing for their business – *Avalon* and the other similar games were always going to give a better return. I was happy to be associated with that success. [...] At the time, I made enough money to put down the deposit on a house. It was all a bonus, since my aim had simply been to write an interesting game.

In July 1984, Crash reported that *Fantasia* had been entered into a French game competition, the International Adventure Game Grand Prize or Grand Prix Internationale du Logiciel d'Adventure. It ended up being awarded the Best Scenario [Le Prix due Meilleur Scenarior] and Hewson were invited to collect the award in Paris.

[KT] I don't know how *Fantasia Diamond* was entered or what the prize was.

[AH] It was probably put forward by our French distributors.

[KT] I got a call from Hewson one day telling me about it and they wanted me to go to Paris to accept the award, but I didn't want to – it was at very short notice - I think it was the next day and I was very busy at work.

Taking advantage of their continental fame and fortune, Hewson hastily converted the game into French. Years later a recovered Dutch version also appeared on the World of Spectrum and Classic Adventures Solution Archive websites.

[KT] I did all of the ports—I was the only person with the source code and I had no plan to give it to anybody else because I would have had to spend time explaining how it worked, how to build it and so on, and I felt that was time wasted, for me. The French and Dutch versions didn't take very long. I had some French from school and, over a weekend, I taught myself enough Dutch to get the job done from a Teach Yourself Dutch book. The sentence structure in the game is very basic, so only a small subset of the language is required. The Dutch version was verified by a native speaker once I'd finished it. Like the French version, it probably has some language inaccuracies, but it was apparently good enough.

In 1986 Kim relinquished the royalty rights for *Quest* and *Fantasia* back to Hewson. By that time the royalty cheques were becoming too small to pay for his accountant to make the appropriate returns on his taxes. *Fantasia* appeared on several compilation cassettes, including Sinclair's *Games Compendium* and Beau Jolly's hugely popular *10 Computer Hits* series.

He continued to work on his game engine for a while, further enhancing the intelligence of the NPCs in the logic, expanding the capabilities of the parser and coding improvements to the ability to manipulate containers.

[KT] I added the ability for characters to be inside containers, for example. This had some interesting consequences. For example, you could climb into a chest and still see around, but not be able to reach things in the room around you until you climb out. If an NPC picked up the box, you would know about it and, if the NPC carried it around, you would go with it. [...] There were also parser

HEWSON'S EGYPTIAN ADVENTURE

In January 1986 Crash Magazine previewed a graphic adventure in development from Hewson called *Sphinx*. From the hazy screenshots and descriptions of 'literary induction' it seemed that *Sphinx* could have potentially been designed to be similar to Legend's *Valhalla* or Firebird's *Runestone*. After six months, with market forces purveying, *Sphinx*'s narrative had crossed the ocean to South America and morphed into the 3D isometric adventure *Pyracurse*.

enhancements. As an example, if there were two keys, say a small key and a large key and you said "GET KEY", you would get a prompt saying "WHICH KEY?" You could respond "SMALL" or "LARGE". Also you could instead say "GET SMALL", then on the next line just say "LARGE" and the game would carry over the verb from the previous command.

He used the engine and developed a game based upon the characters from Alice in Wonderland, but never whole-heartedly pursued getting the title published because of copyright reasons. There also wasn't an appetite at Hewson to publish more text adventures, with their arcade titles selling so well.

[KT] I also wrote a platform game on the Amstrad CPC464, which I did show to Hewson. Gordon and I went back and forth on it a few times, but in the end, Hewson decided not to publish it. They had enough games of better quality being offered to them at that point and I was neither surprised nor disappointed when they turned it down. It was fun to write and I had fun playing it myself. I also wrote a game that had the same forced perspective view as *Knight Lore*, with similar traits—a puzzle in each scene, with movable objects, etc. That was just for me, though. There was never a plan to try to publish it.

Kim retained a good working relationship with Hewson, although he decided not to pursue creating more games for the publisher. Andrew Hewson commented in his Hints and Tips for Videogame Pioneers book that "Kim was uncomplicated and clever" and that "he had set himself the task of writing a text adventure for the Spectrum and delivered on it, effortless it seemed to me."

[KT] I had a very good working relationship with both Andrew and his brother Gordon. They were always helpful and enthusiastic. I got invited to their offices in Abingdon a few times, which was fun.

He was offered a lead programmer role with the company, but decided that his future lie elsewhere, and ended up staying with ICL in his programming role.

[KT] I stopped writing games because I got married and, as a result, I had less spare time. [...] I couldn't commit to being able to satisfy the requirements of game publication. Also the industry was changing and it was becoming more difficult for a single person working from home to reach the standard expected by a more mature customer base, especially as far as graphics are concerned. [...] Before that, Hewson did offer me a position on the in-house development team that they were trying to start up at the time. I think I was supposed to lead the team, but I was concerned about how long the bubble would last for small software publishers, so I decided to stay with ICL.

THE GRAPHIC ADVENTURE CREATOR

Incentive's *The Graphic Adventure Creator* pioneered integrated graphic adventure development when it was launched in 1985. The Classic Adventurer, with the help of **Ian Andrew**, looks back at the development of Sean Ellis' ground-breaking tool and the legacy that it leaves.

Sean Ellis' first exposure to computers was with a pair of faulty Science of Cambridge MK14s at school. Sean showed interest in the micros and his teacher allowed to take them home. He spent many hours tinkering with various components before finally managing to bring one of the machines back to life. He desperately wanted a machine of his own, so saved and saved and finally managed to buy his first home computer – a Sinclair ZX81 – returning the MK14s to school.

Computers appealed to his logical maths and science-oriented brain, and he joined the school's fledgling computer club at the age of 14. He started to program in BASIC, and then expanded his abilities to include machine code. His knowledge of the intricacies of machine code and machine language developed to such an extent that he was able to create programs by directly entering the hex values of commands into the ZX81's memory using a hex editor. Ellis would embrace this style of coding for the rest of his 8 and 16-bit career, designing his algorithms on paper, memorising the hex values of assembler language mnemonics dispensing with the need of an assembler/editor.

After a Computer Science O-Level and successful Science and Maths A-Levels, Sean enrolled at Reading University where he read Cybernetics (a forerunner of modern Artificial Intelligence courses) and Computer Science. In 1984, during his first year at university, Sean picked up a copy of the ZX81 Pocket Book by Trevor Toms [See **Special Edition issue**] and was inspired to develop his own adventure authoring system on his Amstrad CPC464. Using Trevor's adventure writing kit as the framework [coincidentally derived from Ken Reed's *Adventure II* article in Practical Computing from 1980] he evolved his own prototype system called ADVAL – the ADventure Algorithmic



Format: ZX Spectrum, CPC, C64, BBC/Electron
Publisher: Incentive Software
Developer: Sean Ellis & Ian Andrew
RRP: £22.95
Release Date: October 1984



Language. He incorporated more advanced features into its concept, including locations, objects, counters, flags and the foundations of a flexible logic programming language that could manipulate the adventure world via a series of conditions.

ADVAL consisted of three separate utility programs, a format that became standard in later systems such as the Infinite Imagination's *DAAD* and the *CP/M* version of Gilsoft's *Professional Adventure Writing System*. *ADVAL* had an editor, compiler, and runtime interpreter - all complex and functional but written in excruciatingly slow BASIC. Sean told John Aycock, an Associate Professor in Computer Science at the University of Calgary in a rare interview in August 2016 that the original implementation of *ADVAL* "as you can imagine, [...] wasn't very friendly. Converting it to machine code allowed it to be a lot faster and compact."

Sean continued to develop *ADVAL* but didn't really have any plans to release the system into the public domain as a retail product. What changed the trajectory of *ADVAL*, and Sean's life, was a serendipitous visit from Incentive Software and its founder, Ian Andrew, to the university: Sean recalled in *Retro Gamer* magazine. "Just before Christmas 1984 I was attending the Reading University Computer Club and they had an evening with these guys from a local software company. I met Ian [Andrew] and told him about an adventure game system I had been playing around with on the Amstrad. Full credit to him as it wasn't in the best state, yet he was able to see through this and visualise the potential."

Like Ellis, Ian's own interest in computers started with a ZX81 that he'd purchased via a mail order advertisement in the *Daily Mail*. He coded the puzzle/strategy title *Mined-Out* [published by QuickSilva in 1983] and used the royalties to enter the burgeoning games software market by founding his own publishing company - Incentive Software. Keen to build Incentive's catalogue of games, visiting the university made sound business sense to the new entrepreneur.

[Ian] We wanted to talk about what we were doing and thought also we may meet new programmers. [...] Sean was in the audience and told us he was writing an adventure creator. We were interested in any opportunities and were actually pleasantly surprised that Sean had written so much on his own.

Seeing the huge potential, Andrew asked Sean to spend a few more weeks developing the tool and invited him to demo his progress at the Incentive offices on London Street in Reading. Unfortunately, the day the visit didn't quite go to plan: Ellis got lost and ended up wandering the snowy streets of the town, before giving up and heading home. Luckily for him (and the future adventuring community) Andrews was sympathetic to the teenager's plight and after a frantic telephone call and apology he agreed for him to return on the next day. This time, armed with a roughly drawn map, Sean arrived on time, safe and sound.

Ian Andrew and Incentive liked what they saw, and their enthusiasm drove *ADVAL* through a series of iterations, from the initial version *ADVAL1*, through to a final, more rounded, and capable tool in *ADVAL3*. Ellis took a year to work through the iterations with Andrew, splitting his time between his studies and coding when camping at the Incentive offices - which also doubled as Ian's home.

[Ian] [My home was a] 5 story terraced [house] on London Street. [It had a] basement, shop and office; living room, kitchen [and] three bedrooms. I also kitted it out with pinball machines, one arm bandits, videos games and a juke box. [It was] great for parties [and] It cost £80 per week for the whole place!

JAH BRENDAN BUG

Magazine mailbags filled with rumours of a mystical GAC bug that displayed the message "Jah Brendan" in the top-left corner of the screen. Several users reported that the utility would crash after the message, wiping their adventure database.

London Street became a very informal company headquarters. Apart from Ian, Incentive had two other full-time members of staff; shop manager Darryl Still and resident technician Dave Baines. "There's a very informal atmosphere in the shop", Ian told *Crash Magazine*, "and it has been a definite advantage having a shopfront. Programmers tend to wander in and hang around drinking coffee [...] which means that the place is a melting pot of ideas." When he was there, Sean stayed in one of the spare bedrooms, in the company of the *Tempest* arcade machine and several hundred stacked copies of Incentive's soon-to-be-released arcade blaster, *Moon Cresta*. Hunched over his Amstrad, Ellis continued to defy logic and coded by directly entering machine code values using his extraordinary talent and memory. Recalling his programming superpower on his website he wrote "By this point in the project, I was no longer thinking in terms of instruction mnemonics - I could read the hex code directly. This was not a healthy state to be in, especially as others would have to look at my code later."

It really was an incredible exercise in computational thinking and programming capability from Sean. Besides doing the heavy-lifting of converting source code mnemonics into machine code, an assembler offered early features of an Integrated Development Environment, allowing the easy manipulation of label names and variables - huge time saving features for any developer. Without one, any changes to code were messy, meaning that every explicitly numbered reference would have to be recalculated and re-entered. "Doing this in hex was in hindsight a complete and utter bastard," Sean later admitted on his website.

ADVAL was smattered with the strategic use of NOPS [No Operation instructions] that patched the code by removing existing bytes and overwriting them with commands literally did nothing. This meant that Sean's manually calculated jumps and offsets remained. It was long-winded and inefficient but avoided the need for an expensive recalculation of the code. Sean recounted on his website, "In assembler you can mess around with the size of subroutines. I couldn't. If I wanted to extend a routine I had two choices - either move it to the end of the code or tack a jump onto the end and put the rest of the routine at the end of the code." The reconfiguring and refactoring of code wasted precious time that could have been used to address bugs [several notorious bugs crept into the final version] and enhance *ADVAL*'s features. "The extra time would have allowed me to do things like implement a proper flood fill command and optimise the dictionary used for descriptive text," he regretfully recounted.

Whilst Sean split his time between studying at university and programming for Incentive, Ian Andrew kept in touch; helping direct development in his role as producer. Andrew's feedback on the user interface and the utility's overall usability helped focus and speed up the production of the tool. Sean would later credit Ian as 'the most influential person on the design of the GAC'.

As 1984 unfolded, commercial adventure games were starting to appear with graphics in greater numbers. Veronika Meglar and Philip Mitchell's *The Hobbit* [see [Issue 01](#)] had set the benchmark, and further games such as Mitchell's *Sherlock* [see [Issue 08](#)], Trevor Halls *Twin Kingdom Valley* [see [Issue 01](#)], David M Banner's *Heroes of Karn* and *Jewels of Babylon* were setting the standard. Consumers specifically now expected games with illustrations and Ian saw the business potential of adding a graphics editor and refactoring the *ADVAL* adventure language from a FORTH-based construct into something akin to BASIC - logical, and more accessible for the home market.

[Ian] I was aware that the market already had an adventure creator, *The Quill*. I thought that in order to make an impact [our tool] needed to have graphics. Sean's program was text only at the beginning. Also, I [thought] *The Quill* was not very user friendly, so having something simpler to use would make it better all-round.

With Ian's additions, the newly named *Graphic Adventure Creator* [or GAC] was the first adventure tool onto the market offering a fully integrated suite of utilities. It combined a neat graphics editor and advanced text features with its sophisticated parser capable of breaking the straitjacket of verb/noun input, an implementation of

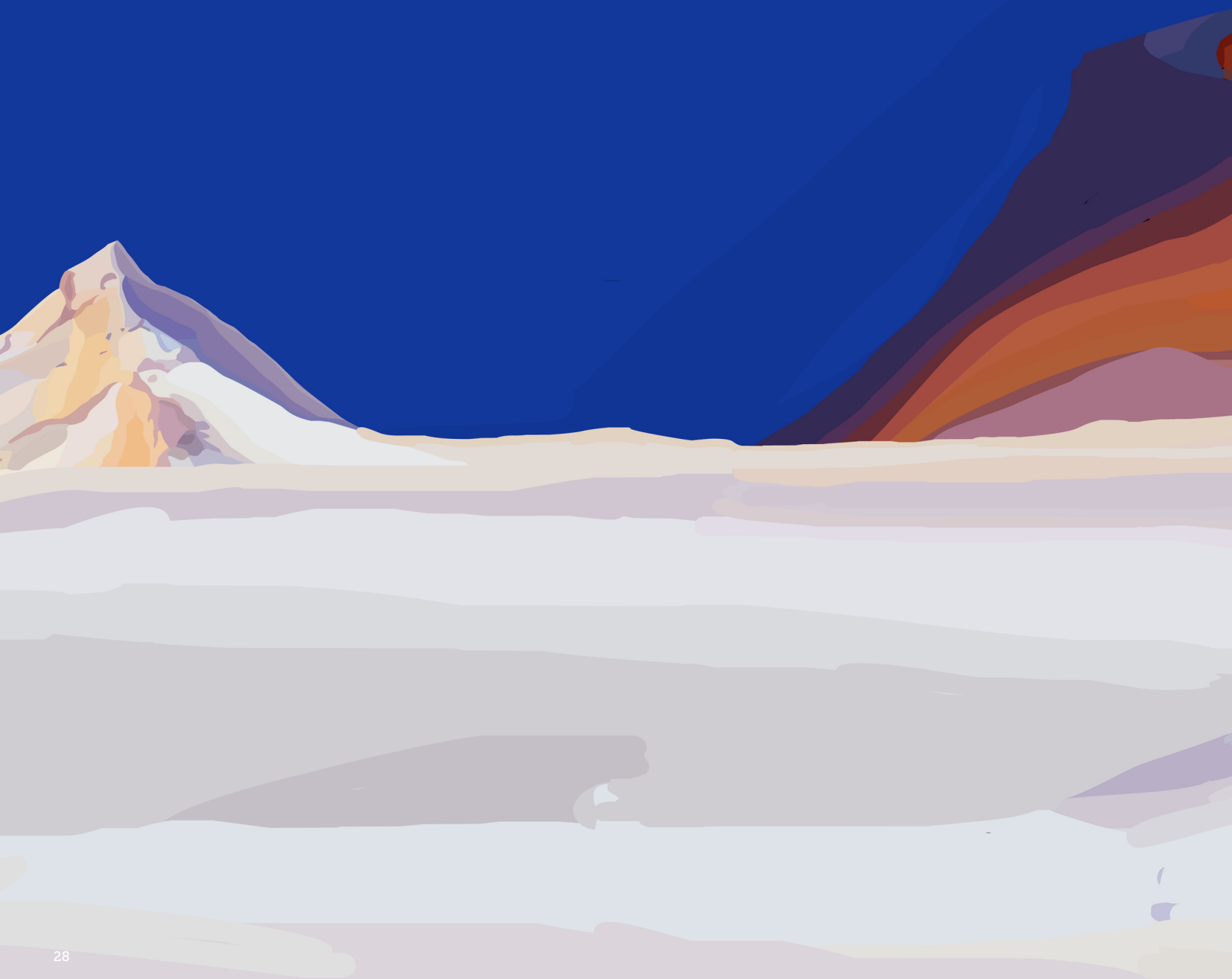
but would also be "one of the most successful programs of its type ever". Finally, they commented that "Gilsoft had better watch out!" Adventure guru Tony Bridge received one of the first review copies for Popular Computing Weekly, and extensively covered the Amstrad version in his Adventure Corner in December 1985. He was suitably impressed, starting with the user-friendly manual stating that "GAC made the whole process [of adventure writing] very easy to get started." Bridge also thought that GAC's drawing utility was "a delight to use" and it was "reason enough to buy an Amstrad." The legendary adventure journalist Keith Campbell in Computer and Video Games in January 1986, thought GAC vied to become the market leader noting that "perhaps the most striking feature of this utility is the graphics option, which is a joy to use" and that it was "easy to learn and use [and] put it way ahead of *The Quill*."

Quickly producing the ports was now the key to unlocking the commercial success of the product. It had to receive versions for the more popular 8-bit micros of the time, the Commodore 64 and more importantly the ZX Spectrum – undoubtedly the largest market for hobbyist and amateur adventure developers. Brendan Kelly handled the port to the Spectrum, whilst Dave Kirby ported GAC to the BBC Micro. The BBC and Acorn Electron also received a text-only version

under the guise of *The Adventure Creator* which was programmed by Cornucopia Software. Finally, the C64 version was ported by Malcom Hellon [otherwise known as The Kid]. An Atari version, reported in the pages of Computer and Videogames Magazine in September 1986 would never materialise.

With Sean's extensive use of directly entering hex instructions and the lack of commented source code, porting was a long and laborious job, taking up to a year for the new versions to arrive. Ellis provided Incentive with pages and pages of hex dumps, translated into assembler instructions using an export utility that he custom coded. "I was still in the mindset that spending £40 on a disassembler was a waste of money," he commented, "when I could write one myself in a week. OK, two. Maybe three, if you don't mind the IX and IY instructions being a bit wrong." He then had to post-process the scanned sheets, manually labelling jump statements, providing meaningful names to routines and functions, and adding helpful comments that he thought the porting author might appreciate. The whole process took another month on top of the initial development of his own decompiling tool.

When the C64 version was reviewed in ZZap!64 Sean Matterson felt



GAC deserved its coveted Gold Medal Award. On the Spectrum it reviewed just as strongly, with Crash magazine granting its illustrious Crash Smash honour. Crash proclaimed that GAC was "the most powerful adventure creator on the Spectrum ever" and noted its integrated environment which gave writers the edge over *The Quill*: "GAC's advantage lies in the fact that an entire adventure may be created without the need for loading up different programs or buying add-ons to the basic package" they said. Sinclair User in July 1986 said GAC was "a very impressive and sophisticated adventure generator", that was "not cheap but worth every penny". Finally, ZX Computing had an extensive review in August 1986 noting that "*The Quill* [...] now has a serious competitor", and that GAC was "the most exciting utility for some considerable time [and] a superb additional to the game writer's armoury [that could] prove unbeatable."

Of course, strong reviews weren't the sole metric in gauging the success of a game writing utility. Once it got into adventure hobbyist and writer's hands, it had to be used to produce titles of sufficient quantity, and importantly quality to make an impact. Again, it seemed that Ian Andrew was ahead in his thinking, and he had several ideas aimed at quickly getting games onto the market that were developed using the tool. Firstly, the best way of exhibiting the

power of the utility was to write a game that would be included with the package. It was one of the best ways of proving what GAC could do, providing would-be authors with a game they could decompile and take apart to understand how they could use some of the inbuilt programming logic to design their own puzzles.

The demonstration adventure included with GAC was called *The King's Ransom* written by Sean himself. Though it was a short adventure [just 7 locations], it contained especially detailed and lush illustrations, one of which – a bankside view of a stream with an ornate bridge crossing was one of the more popular images used in reviews and previews because it showcased the potential capabilities of the drawing tools.

[Ian] It helped validate the power of the tool. We hoped the adventures would be more prolific and successful than they actually turned out to be.

To encourage homegrown adventures, Incentive waived any expectation on royalty payments for adventures that were released commercially and written using GAC. Its adverts proclaimed, "no copyright problems" and that authors were "totally free to market



REVAMPING RANSOM



In 2021 indie developer Sunteam released a Spectrum Next conversion of GAC's companion adventure *King's Ransom*. Sunteam's *Ransom* was created as part of a demonstration tutorial on how to write adventures for the Next using Chris Ainsley's fine *Adventuron* system.

<https://sunteam.itch.io/kings-ransom>

adventures through ANY company without payment or royalties whatsoever."

[Ian] We wanted to remove as many barriers as possible for people to buy and use it.

In March 1986, the first homegrown adventures started to be sent into the gaming press. Tony Bridge in *Popular Computing Weekly* had expected a raft of adventures produced with GAC in the same vein as they had with *The Quill* on the ZX Spectrum - "a *Quill*-like torrent" he predicted.

The first GAC-*d* adventure to be submitted, predictably, was an Amstrad adventure sent to Tony by Linda Wright called *Sharpe's Deeds*. Linda had sent the game into Bridge asking for his advice on finding a suitable publisher for the game. Wright also addressed some of the minor criticisms that had been levelled at GAC in magazine reviews and reader's letters by providing programming workouts, but she did question Incentive's own advertising blurb: "My main criticism of GAC," she began, "arises from not being able to use as many locations with graphics as they claim."

Wright's game would eventually be published by Incentive via their *Double Gold* label - two games on a single cassette that retailed for £7.95. *Sharpe's Deeds* was included alongside *The Black Fountain* - also written by Wright. A further *Double Gold* release, containing *Nova* and *Haunted House* written by Jem Wyer and Jason Twigg respectively was also published. *Nova* was a sci-fi thriller set on a wrecked space-station whereas *Haunted House* was a run-of-the-mill ghost story with a meagre 30 locations and 15 objects to use.

Double Gold was the second in-house label that followed Incentive's own *Medallion* range. Their third GAC-only label rumoured to be called *Automata*, featured in *ACE Magazine* in November 1987 was subsequently dropped without publishing a single title. *Medallion* was launched as a mechanism for Incentive to publish games that were sent to them for consideration. GAC's advertising blurb was updated to include the chance for homegrown authors to "£ MAKE MONEY £". If you had an "atmospheric, original, humorous and imaginative" adventure written with GAC then you were encouraged

to send it in to earn the chance of publication.

To bolster the *Medallion* range, Ian arranged a competition for more homegrown games via the popular Home Computer Club [HCC] - a division of the Book Club Associates whose managing editor was Peter Sleeman. The Home Computer Club offered its members serious discounts on software, including introductory offers to purchase games for as little as 49p. Those discounts attracted a large membership, but once you'd joined, you had to commit to buying further software at the expected retail price. The Club sent home a leaflet of offers every month, and if you didn't make your own buying choice then the HCC's choice of game would be charged to you and dispatched. The club also ran a "featured" product, and if publishers were lucky to be the club's own choice or the featured product then it guaranteed sales in the thousands of units. Copies of GAC sold through the club were bundled with Ian's competition leaflet offering a top prize of £500 and a publishing deal for the best adventure games sent in for evaluation.

One avid adventure author who took advantage of the generous HCC offer was 17-year-old Darren Shacklady. Up to that point, Darren had been creating games for his college friends to play using *The Quill*. As a member of HCC however, he decided to buy the much-reduced GAC and give it a shot. "I could hardly wait for GAC to arrive by mail," he told Graeme Mason of *Retro Gamer* magazine, "and I eagerly devoured the manual and example adventure". Seeing GAC's graphical limitations after playing *King's Ransom*, Darren took inspiration from Bo Jangeborg's *Fairlight* [published by Edge in 1985] and created his own simple, but effective way of display isometric location graphics by using GAC's ability to merge and reuse basic designs. The resultant game, *Karyssia: Queen of Diamonds*, was reviewed by Your Sinclair who thought it was "one of the best GAC games we've seen" and scored the game 8 out of 10 thanks to its "stylish" graphics and "sophisticated" features. Derek Brewster reviewed the game in *Crash* and awarded *Karyssia* an impressive 87% - just missing out on the magazine's top Smash award. Brewster summed up the game as "a fine adventure with many admirable features", praising the pretty graphics but did note the use of sudden deaths to ensnare the player. "In order to close off one direction, I used a trap, which in retrospect was very bad manners to spring on unsuspecting players," recalls Darren apologetically.

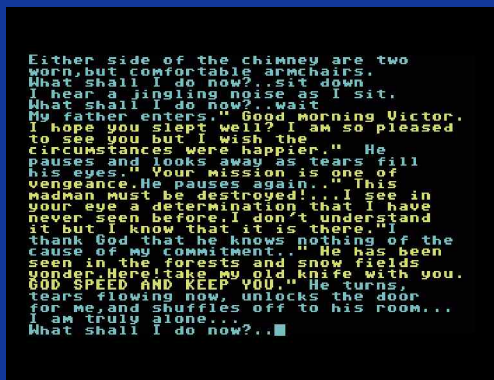
For a game with such critical praise *Karyssia* wasn't as successful as it should have been. It arrived late in the shelf life of 8-bit adventures and struggled to get a distributor, and because of this, according to Mason, its sole sales channel was through the HCC. Graeme concluded in his interview that it was "almost certain that Incentive made a loss on *Karyssia*, a huge shame considering its quality." In 1990, it reached a wider audience as the full game was split into its respective parts and given away across three issues of *Crash* magazine. Darren told Mason that he hoped Incentive recouped some of their £500 advance royalty payment from its re-issue.

Incentive did find more success with its *Medallion Gold Medal Range* when it launched in January of 1987. Ian Andrew told *Retro Gamer* magazine that after encouraging non-programmers to create games it was "important for us to publish some of these games to show publicly that it could be used to make decent adventures." The first game commercially to hit the shelves under the label was *The Legend of Apache Gold*, written by Peter Torrance, author of *Firebird* adventures *Subsunk* and *Seabase Delta* [both penned with *The Quill*]. *Apache Gold* told the story of a wild western gold prospector in his fight against native American powers. It arrived at Incentive in a very finalised state and was quick to market.

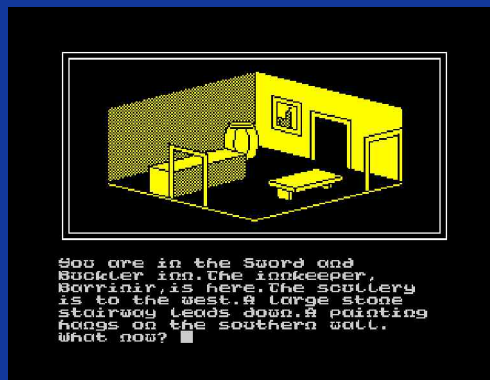
One game that attracted a more drawn-out development was *Winter Wonderland*. Written by Simon Lipscomb and Tim Walsha, it should have been the first commercial GAC game from Incentive but was delayed due to complications producing its artwork. Simon and Tim had visited the Incentive offices to discuss adventures with Sean and Ian and demoed them their adventure system written using BASIC. Though not impressed with the engine, Ian was impressed with the duo's enthusiasm and handed them several mock-up graphics that had been created for publicity purposes using GAC's illustration tool. The images, ranging from a spaceship, Sphinx and cave system with a flickering torch (complete with a giant pair of smelly feet on the

GREAT GAC GAMES

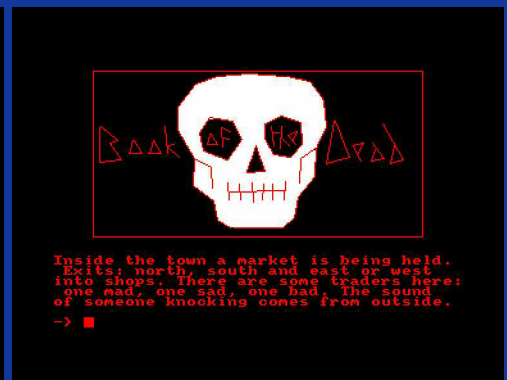
With a catalogue of well over 300 published adventures, **Classic Adventurer** wades through the *Graphic Adventure Creator's* softography to pick of the best of the bunch.



[Frankenstein, CRL] The second in the trilogy of horror adventure games from maestro Rod Pike. You play Dr. Frankenstein trying to hunt down and apprehend his abominable creation in this hugely atmospheric adventure.



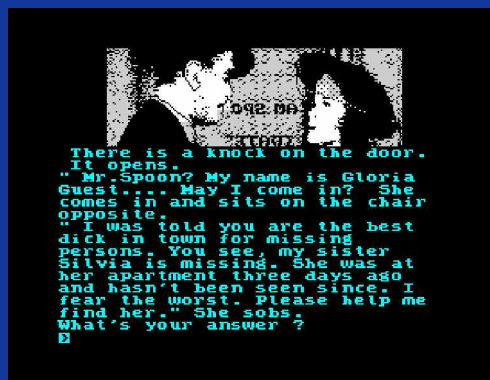
[Karyssia: Queen of Diamonds, Incentive Software] Robert Shacklady's three-part adventure featuring smart isometric graphics, a basic magic and combat system and a quest to kill the game's namesake queen.



[The Book of the Dead, CRL] The Essential Myth proved GAC could deliver a solid adventure with this game based upon ancient Egypt and a book full of magic believed to protect the deceased.



[Matt Lucas, Players] A Classic Adventurer budget favourite, Alex Williams' *Matt Lucas* captures the very essence of a certain 80s US TV cop show. Williams would go onto write the equally brilliant *The Boyd Files* released by Zenobi Software.



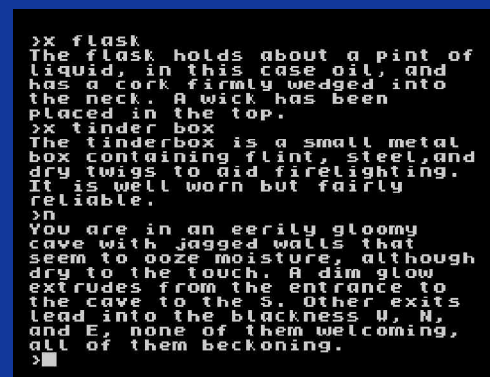
[Play It Again, Sam, Mastertronic] A Spectrum exclusive featuring some neat digitised graphics, *Play It Again, Sam* is set firmly in the film noir of 1930s detective land. You play Sam Spoon, a Private Investigator who is broke, and has to do anything to pay the bills.



[Spytrek, Americana] Peter Torrance on great form in this spy thriller that casts you as an ace secret agent, contracted to recover a lost set of secret plans. Beginning the game laying in a coffin, *Spytrek* is an original adventure with neat puzzles and good graphics.



[Winter Wonderland, Incentive Software] Simon Lipscomb and Tim Walsha's flagship Gold Medallion adventure tells of a crashed Cessna aircraft in the mountains of the Himalayas. The protagonist has to negotiate perilous locations and dangerous animals on their way to locate an archeologist friend and the remnants of a long-lost civilisation.



[The Tales of Mathematica, Zenobi] One of the few GAC-d games that was released by the late John Wilson on his Zenobi label. *Mathematica* is a two-part adventure where you have to find the four objects of power that will restore peace and tranquility to the land. As well as a good narrative, *Mathematica* also allowed the player the novel option of choosing gender.



[Football Frenzy, Alternative Software] Okay, so the quality of Charles A Sharp's adventures could be somewhat questionable, but there's no doubting the Sheffield-based author's prolific ability to churn out games and create adventures from challenging, diverse and obscure subjects such as football, cricket, athletics, werewolves and sci-fi epics!

end of hairy legs blocking the exit) had been used to send to magazines to accompany GAC preview articles.

Ian challenged Simon and Tim to create a game based around some of the images but unfortunately the demonstrations illustrations were so complex, using a substantial amount of line/plot and fill routines that there was little usable memory left for any game once they had been implemented.

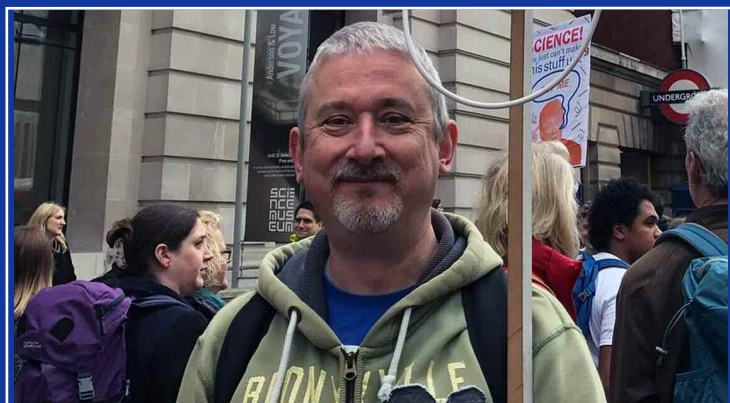
[Ian] Really? I thought with the text compression, good graphics were possible along with a good adventure!

Undeterred, Simon and Tim started to use GAC to program an adventure they'd previously planned for their BASIC framework. Sean looked over the game, liked it and the duo evolved the narrative into *Winter Wonderland*. Ellis told John Aycok, "I remember *Winter Wonderland* as the outstanding title, [with] a good use of graphics, a decent plot and some nice puzzles." *Wonderland* received good reviews, especially on the Amstrad, Spectrum and BBC Micro – but failed to impress the reviewers on ZZap!64 where the Commodore version fell short of the mark with a disappointing 59%.

After *Winter Wonderland*, Lipscombe and Walsha, along with Richard McCormack were contracted to convert one of Incentive's previous adventure releases, *Mountains of Ket* from the ZX Spectrum to GAC. The unique dungeons and dragons style fighting system posed them some problems and they "had to encode the combat system making weird use of rooms and variables" they told CASA in February of 2006. The eventual port was a remarkable feat, with the impressive compression capabilities of GAC shrinking the Spectrum's original database from 38K down to a paltry 15K.

Simon and Tim's relationship with Incentive ended after fleshing-out a design for an adventure for Ian based upon Frank Oliver's *Axe: Tale of Carthelion* book. They somehow managed to program GAC to allow for multiple playable characters but the logic consumed too much of the available RAM and left little room for an actual game. "The idea was to have something a la *Lords of Midnight* or, indeed, *Lord of the Rings*, where one character follows the mass warfare path and the other is involved in a 'get rid of the ring' type of quest" Simon told CASA. He explained that "it would have to be multi-part to make it worthwhile [and] we just didn't have the time anymore." Both gave up writing games after that, instead pursuing careers elsewhere after sitting their A-Levels.

The *Ket* Trilogy [*Mountains of Ket*, *Temple of Vran* and *The Final Mission*] provided to be so popular that they were also released on the BBC and Electron [by Graham Thorpe and Richard McCormack], though it remains unclear whether these were ports of the Spectrum version onto the Acorn platforms using the text-only *Adventure Creator* or custom written code. John Martin was responsible for the rare Dragon 32 version [probably ported by hand since no version of the *Adventure Creator* was released on the machine]. Retro Gamer made it one of their top ten games on the Dragon 32 stating that the machine "wasn't the best platform for text adventures." But *Ket* on the Dragon was faithful to the Spectrum releases and offered the player a



[Above] GAC's author Sean Ellis, pictured here from The Skeptic website, was also a highly active political campaigner.

well-written and challenging adventure. Retro Gamer thought it was a quality release, especially with the inlay adorned with "some typically heroic Oli Frey artwork."

Indie adventure author and author of *Twilight Inventory*, Gareth Pitchford remembers the GAC Medallion games: "*Winter Wonderland*, *Apache Gold*, and several of the other Incentive GACed games got later releases on Crash magazine coverpages in the latter years of the Spectrum, and probably on ZZap!64 for C64 too, which is where I discovered most of them. *Apache Gold* is quite fun [but] perhaps not the most politically correct game. If I recall, near the start you escape from a "wigwam" by wearing a sheet to dress as a ghost and scare the "Indians" guarding you."

Throughout 1986 and into 1987, Incentive continued to push GAC with a strong marketing campaign and supported the tool with several bold claims about its abilities. Events took a bizarre turn in November 1986 when the Austin Brothers at Level 9 felt strongly enough about Incentive's boasts and clever marketing that they released their own press statement to counter the claims that GAC could author adventures that would rival the size and sophistication of those created with their own famous A-Code. From the advertisements and marketing undertaken by Incentive the company made no direct comparisons, but Crash magazine in issue 32 might have muddled the waters by saying "the interpreter is the real gem in GAC [...] If you have ever wanted to create Level 9 style adventures but have been held back by the limitations of *The Quill* or lack of programming ability, then this where GAC can solve your problems". They further made comparisons with Level 9 by suggesting that "after a while, you might come out with something like *The Price of Magic*," suggesting that Level 9 should make A-Code available to the public. "[GAC] can be bought to give pleasure and help to would-be adventure writers; [Level 9's] own system can't." Gareth Pitchford reflects on the commotion that The Gremlin in Sinclair User called "petulance in pixeland."

[Gareth] I think, given the date. It'd only been a niche Amstrad product for a year up until then. Level 9 might have been getting worried that the market was going to be flooded with graphically impressive games - games with better graphics than their own which, as far as I recall, weren't that highly regarded in the graphical department at the time.

GAC programming clinics started to appear in several magazines: "Back to GAC" was a regular comprehensive programming column in Your Sinclair with Mike Gerard and several features appeared in Amstrad Action, hosted by Stuart Whyte as his alter ego The Balrog. To boost this blossoming development community, Incentive published the GAC Adventure Writer's Handbook complete with errata corrections for the original GAC manual, and instruction on how to design and write adventures using counters, diagnostics, and advanced commands. The handbook offered 48 pages of tips for a paltry £1.25 – and included contributions from adventure authors Simon Lipscomb, Tim Walsha, Pat Winstanley, John Gwinnell and Lesley Anderson.

[Ian] The handbook supported the product and helped users create better and more games.

Off the back of the clinics, tips and additional manuals, tools penned by third-party authors began to appear. Kelsoft, who specialised in add-on utilities for systems such as *The Quill* and PAWS, released the *GAC Reclaimer* that promised to increase the amount of memory available to adventures by analysing and optimising word tables. The Essential Myth, who had got to grips with GAC by writing the *Book of the Dead* for CRL [published in April 1987] released a utility called GACPAC. It was initially only available via mail-order [but later given away on the front of Your Sinclair in Feb 1992] and provided several routines, one of which compressed the GAC database and optimised the original code into new datafiles - it even had a spell-checking routine. Myth claimed it would speed up GAC response times by a blistering 500% by reorganising the verb, adverb and noun tables. One of the more useful features of GACPAC however was its ability to customise the default character set and amend the loading screen – something that allowed homegrown adventures the chance to differentiate their creations from standard games. A follow-up, The



GAC PLUS

FOR THE COMMODORE 64

After considerable public pressure, Incentive Software have rewritten and released the classic Graphic Adventure Creator (GAC) now to allow "stand alone" Disc Accessed Adventures to be written.

GAC Adventures can now be of an incredible size, limited only by the number of Discs.

Graphic Adventures created on GAC+ can also be published without further permission or payment to Incentive!

The new "Disc Access" GAC+ is released 10th April 1989 at £29.95 on Disc complete with Manual.

Existing GAC owners can upgrade their GAC by returning the original tape or disc only with £10.00.

Available from EXCLUSIVE distributor: Mandy Rodriguez
24 Maes Y Cwm
Llandudno
Gwynedd LL30 1JE
(0492) 77305

Commodore 64 Disc RPP £29.95
Upgrade £10.00
Release 10th April 1989

incentive
SOFTWARE LTD

Zephyr One, Calleva Park, Aldermaston, Berkshire, RG7 4QW. Tel: 07356 77288. [Fax: 07356 6940]
Registered Company No: 1725468 Registered Office: 64 St Marys Butts, Reading, VAT No: 352812850

commented Hester, "arcade games take preference over adventure utilities."

Released with virtually no marketing or press at all, *GAC+* was finally available to purchase in April 1989. It retailed for an eyewatering £29.95 – probably one of the most expensive pieces of software ever released on 8-bit computers – and to everyone's surprise was solely available on disk for the Commodore 64. The Amstrad version was missing in action, and Incentive quietly dropped their plans for any further versions. The delay in publishing *GAC+* left the door ajar for Gilsoft and their *Professional Adventure Writer* to capture more of the market. *PAWS* supported cassette, disk and microdrive, and by using clever overlays and paging routines it was able to unlock the additional memory in 128K machines. Hester was pretty scathing when finally reviewing *GAC+*: "Where's the music editor for a start? [...] There's no improvements made to the graphics section at all. [...] It appears *GAC+* is not the deluxe *GAC* I was looking forward to, in fact [...] it's just *GAC* with the ability to link separate parts to bigger adventures. That's it."

In the end very few adventures used *GAC+* or the abilities of *PAWS* to build adventures for the more expansive 128K machines. Incentive's claim that adventures could be of an "incredible size, limited only by the number of discs" had become irrelevant. Creative adventure writers such as Fergus McNeil were already circumventing the limitations of *The Quill* and cassette capacities with multi-part games long before *PAWS* and *GAC+* arrived. Chris Hester's evaluation of *GAC+* in *Adventure Coder* was incisive, as on closer inspection of the source disk the program revealed itself to be no more than the original *GAC* modified for the US – a version that had been coded a year before that allowed multi-part games to be read from disk. *GAC+* was more *GAC USA*, repackaged for exclusive distribution through Atlas Adventure Software and *Adventure Probe* magazine in the UK.

With the sidelining of a true *GAC+*, and Incentive's smash hit *FreeScape* system wowing the gaming public and critics alike, Ian recognised that 8-bit adventures had come to the end of their commercial shelf-life. He did however see some value in continuing to support adventurers and gave *Medallion* games and *GAC* away for free. Lucky readers of *Your Sinclair*, *Amstrad Action* and *Commodore Format* all received a freebie on the cover of magazines in 1992.

But, as with being first to market with a full integrated suite of tools, Sean Ellis gave *GAC* authors a head start with the first publicly adventure authoring utility for the new 16-bit machines. The *Atari ST Adventure Creator* or *STAC* was released in the second half of 1988 and contained a myriad of features from advanced parsing, synonym recognition and music, through to a font designer and the ability to create adventures of unlimited sizes. "STAC was much less constrained and had a better parser, conditions and graphics" Ellis told Aycock. *ST User* proclaimed it a "superb accomplishment" and the "adventure product of the year."

Unfortunately, the adventure market in 1988 was well past its peak. Even games created with *STAC* looked dated as Level 9 and Magnetic Scrolls continuing to produce titles that were considerably out-of-reach for hobbyist authors. The sophistication and fidelity of adventures now required a team of artists, narrative writers and programmers to constantly evolve their graphic text adventure technology. A handful of adventures penned with *STAC* appeared, and the planned Amiga version, the *Amiga Adventurer Creator* [or *AMAC*] was canned before any development was started.

After *STAC*, Ian invited Sean to help port the *FreeScape* system over to the Atari ST and Amiga and they used the engine as the basis for the *3D Construction Kit*. Sean, Chris Andrew [Ian's brother and inventor of *FreeScape*] and Paul Gregory worked on the next iteration, the super 3D system they christened *SuperScape*. Incentive changed direction and delved into the world of 3D and early Virtual Reality renaming itself Dimension International and then *SuperScape*.

So, what of Sean Ellis and *GAC*'s legacy? Judged upon the quality and quantity of games that were created using it, *GAC* falls somewhat short of its Gilsoft rivals. From the huge number of copies available on retro and internet auction sites to purchase today it seems its

[Above] Incentive's underwhelming announcement of *GAC+* to the Commodore adventuring community.

Essential *GAC* Notes booklet, promised to Mike Gerrard [who saw a pre-production copy] didn't materialise.

Ellis told John Aycock, "[*GACPAC*] was developed by people reverse-engineering the code with no help from me or anyone at Incentive. They managed to repack the data, including dictionary and make larger adventures than we had thought possible."

Expanded adventures, however, was something that Sean had considered before the release of *GACPAC*. In 1987 Incentive announced a disk-drive supporting version of *GAC*, named *GAC+* or *GAC Plus* that offered the ability to author superior sized adventures over their cassette counterparts. *GAC+* seemed to promise a modified interpreter that was able to load data straight from disk, rather than use the available working RAM of the computer – much the same as Infocom were able to in the US. *GAC+* teased adventures of up to 150K in size, with the potential to support a greater number of graphics and the complexity and sophistication of *Deadline*, *Trinity* and other games from the Massachusetts powerhouse. As with its cassette-based predecessor, *GAC+* was scheduled as an Amstrad-exclusive for the 664 and 6128 machines, but endless delays had critics questioning if it ever would be released. Chris Hester in the first issue of his *Adventure Coder* fanzine speculated that the arrival of Incentive's ground-breaking 3D technology *FreeScape* [premiered in the game *Driller* at the PCW Show in 1987] had stalled the development of *GAC+*. "It would appear that [Incentive] came across the idea for their *FreeScape* 3D graphics routine and that took over"

SEAN'S SOURCE

Sean's personal website where he documented his political activities and programming memories is still active:

<https://moteprime.org/>

His collection of GAC notes and scanned source images can be downloaded from:

<https://moteprime.org/images/GAC/>

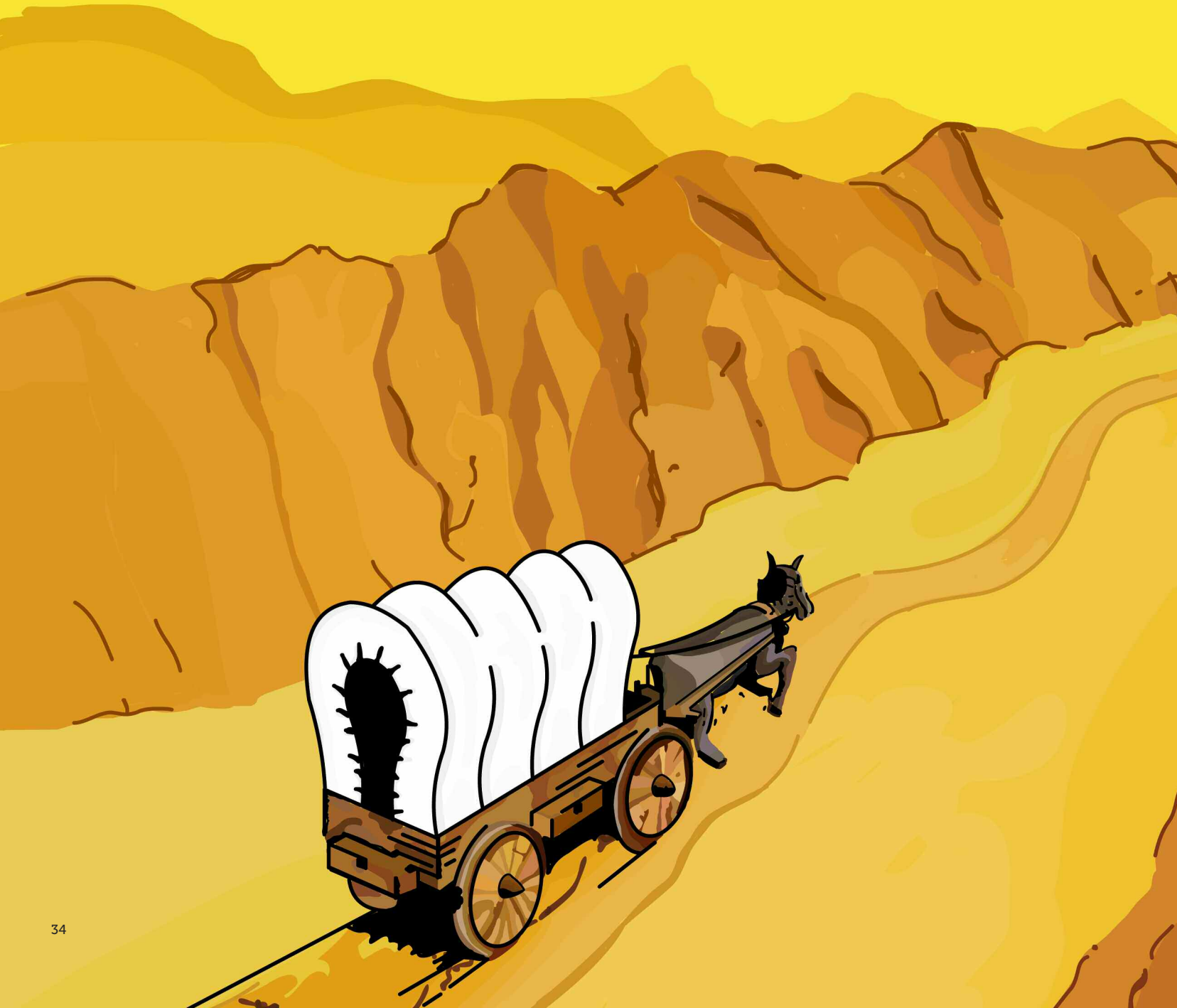
John Aycock's interview with Sean, conducted via email in August 2016 is available to read from the University of Calgary's cultural library:

<https://prism.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/51523>

sales figures were as impressive as Incentive's marketing blurb made out. PCW and Amtix Magazine reported in October 1987 that "GAC Takes A Million" claiming Incentive had announced sales had accounted to be over £1m. Ellis told Aycock that he thought they "ended up shipping about 100,000 copies overall".

[Ian] Yes, absolutely [true]. the biggest buyers were Book Club Associates [the Home Computer Club], that had a "game" of the month which guaranteed good sales. We won that spot, and it was a huge sales success.

It certainly was perennially popular, especially on the Amstrad where it continued to feature heavily in the charts throughout 1986 and 1987, outshining *The Quill*. ZZap! Called 1986 "the year of GAC!" It was loved by the critics, picking up a Crash Smash, ZZap! Gold Medal and was awarded "Utility of the Year" by Personal Computing Weekly. Why this didn't translate into commercially available games is not clear. The reputable World of Spectrum website lists 117 games authored with GAC and CASA has 323 games created with Ellis' tool. The number surprised Sean, who remarked in his interview with



Aycock that he didn't think that many had been published and that GAC was mainly being used as a hobbyist tool, something for fun rather than one to realistically make commercial level software. Apart from the Medallion games [which remain highly sought by collectors], quality commercial GAC products were few and far between. Charles A Sharp, aka The Dreaming Djinn released no-less than 11 adventures, but the games were of mixed quality. Rod Pike's critically acclaimed *Frankenstein* remains the standout title that showcased GAC's capabilities when paired with an author who spent time and effort on developing a plot and puzzles rather than focusing solely on the graphics [its rumoured CRL added the sound and illustrations after Rod submitted a text-only adventure]. ZZap!64 said that *Frankenstein* was "well thought out, beautifully atmospheric and a pleasure to play. Rod shows the way for all potential and existing adventure authors who [...] use [GAC]."

GAC was also responsible for inspiring many modern authors into pursuing a career in videogames. BAFTA winning writer-director and game designer Sam Barlow, who created *Immortality* and the groundbreaking narrative-driven *Her Story*, recalled that he "used to

noodle around with game making as a youngster back on my Amstrad CPC [using the] *Graphic Adventure Creator*."

STAC remains the only British commercial, professional text adventure tool published for a 16-bit machine. Several public domain tools were developed later [GRAC on the Amiga for example], and Colin Jordon created the *SAM Adventure System* [see Issue 06] for the ZX Spectrum successor, the Sam Coupé. After PAWS, Tim Gilberts founded Infinite Imaginations and was contracted to develop *SWAN* and *DAAD* for third-party software houses Aventuras AD and Abstract Concepts. Both utilities were never released to the public during the commercial life of 16-bit machines and have only recently been released as part of Andrés Samudio, Tim Gilberts and Stefan Vogt's heritage and preservation project.

Tragically Sean sadly passed away in November 2020 after a brief illness. He remained as a developer with SuperScape until 2006 when he moved to British semiconductor and software design company ARM to be part of their GPU architecture team.





THE QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN EGGCUP

The Quest For the Golden Eggcup was a rip-roaring, satirical and humorous adventure written by Harvey Lodder. Originally released under his own Network Adventure Games label, *Eggcup* was re-released by Mastertronic having undertaken a mysterious redevelopment by Nigel Brooks' notorious Smart Egg Software.

Harvey Lodder's first computer was the ZX Spectrum that he received as a Christmas present along with three games – *Ant Attack*, *Gangsters* and *Atic Atac*. Alongside the fantastic worlds created in his home micro, he adored exploring the fantasy worlds created by Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson in their *Fighting Fantasy* series of gamebooks and immersed himself in the imaginative storytelling of Gary Gygax and David Arneson's role-playing phenomenon *Dungeons and Dragons*.

[Harvey Lodder] Once in class a teacher came to lessons with *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* and we did a walkthrough of that. The teacher would read from the book and as a class we had to make a

Format: ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64
Publisher: Network Adventure Games & Mastertronic
Developer: Harvey Lodder & Smart Egg Software
Release Date: May 1988



decision on what we were going to do next. [We] were split into two groups [and] whoever “won” the debate went with the choice of group A or B. This was the beginning of getting gripped by adventure games.

Bizarrely, it wasn’t Dungeons or Dragons, or Fighting Fantasy that influenced Harvey’s first choice of adventure purchase: Instead, it was the appeal of US sci-fi television series *The Six Million Dollar man* that swayed Harvey’s decision to buy *Espionage Island* or *Adventure D*, written by videogame legend Charles Cecil for Artic Computing.

[HL] In my mind, the cover reminded me of [Steve Austin].

He found the syntax and parser difficult, but the schoolboy persevered and his love affair with the genre blossomed. Harvey bought and borrowed as many games as he could get his hands on. He developed a flair and patience for adventures, and was able to progress in most titles, often completing complex games such as Melbourne House’s *The Hobbit* and Level 9’s *Snowball*. He even developed a talent for arcade games, completing tough titles such as Mikro-Gen’s *Pyjamarama* and Craig Communications’ unique and innovative *System 15000*. He wrote into the popular magazine adventure columns and letters pages offering solutions to unstick fellow readers and players. He called himself the “Illustrious Harvey” in his communications.

[HL] Hah! I actually would say that was a word I had learnt and back then figured it looked good. It came from a magazine comment on the old way that we used to help each other using ancient technology. For the young people of today [...] these were stamped addressed envelopes [and] the technology involved people using pens to paper and posting and waiting for days on end hoping the postal service works!

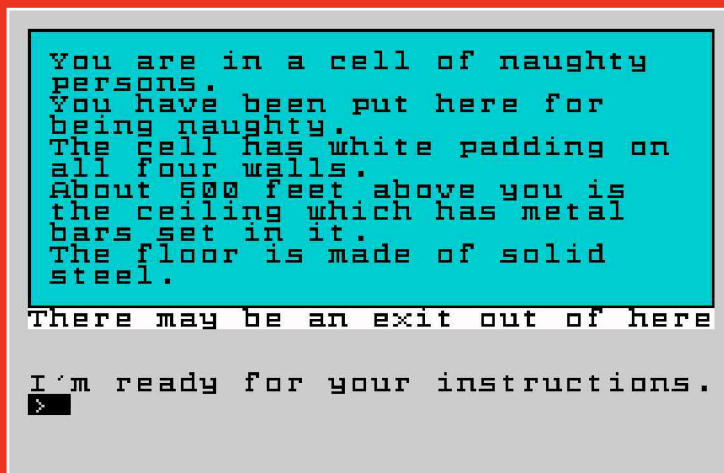
Lodder started to design his own adventures, and took inspiration from Mel Croucher’s anarchic Automata label, and in particular their Pi-Man character. Harvey used *The Quill*, a utility that he’d longed to own for a lengthy period – often visiting high street retailer WHSmith just to pick up the packaging and read the manual that the sales staff had left in the plastic. Once he’d saved up enough money, he pieced together a game called *Pi-Week* – where the player was quested to find how many days were in the self-titled period of time.

[HL] It would have been one of the headline games for a *Cassette 50* compilation [a rather naff and often ridiculed compilation of terrible games from Cascade] offering nothing of value, nothing of fun. I’ll tell the truth here, I just had to load it up to check the storyline on the opening blurb to see what the hell it was about and reading now it still makes no sense to me!

“I was always very pleased to see it many years later on a retro site for second-hand games going for about £50.”

Now in the final year of school, 16-year-old Harvey began to brainstorm his follow-up to *Pi-Week*, and began to sketch out ideas for a new adventure with two school friends, Paul Cook and Jon O’Brien. He pulled on his expanding adventuring influences and penned a humorous intro about being knocked down dead by a speeding Sinclair C5, regaining consciousness in God’s temple and making a deal with the Lord to find his stolen eggcup in return for reincarnation.

[HL] If I recall it was the very week after I’d spent the same lesson copying down the code sheet from *Jet Set Willy*. It was a boring lesson and as a kid, was just brainstorming what I could do. [...] The opening intro was written, and it just evolved from there. There was no planning, no master plan or anything like that. It was simply enjoying the game. I truly loved adventure games, and the era that I liked was *Delta 4* type games and I hoped that I could write



[Top] The loading screen from *Pi Week: The Quest*. [Bottom] Curse words could get you into trouble in both of Harvey Lodder’s games.

something that would be just as fun. It was a challenge as you were always going to be in the shadow of the people that had been a success, but it was a cool little project.

The Quest for the Golden Eggcup pulled on the ridiculing narratives of Fergus McNeil and Roger Taylor and positioned itself into the satirical alongside luminaries such as *Delta 4* and *St. Brides*. It didn’t take itself too seriously, was firmly tongue-in-cheek and poked fun at other adventures – particularly those from Melbourne House.

Gareth Pitchford in his March 2021 interview with Harvey recalled that *Eggcup* picked on *Sherlock* [see [Issue 08](#)] and the range of bugs that afflicted the game engine developed by Veronika Meglar and Philip Mitchell. Pitchford recalled that *Eggcup* “parodied *The Hobbit*’s assorted troupe of wandering characters who generally got in the way” and *Sherlock*’s “dead detective that you could pick up and put in your pocket.” Given the complexities of these contemporary games, and the difficulties of their puzzling, *Eggcup* positioned itself at the other end of the frustration spectrum: Harvey’s game was certainly geared more towards a novice player.

[HL] You could probably argue that this was my fault due to inability to use some features of *The Quill* and looking back with retrospect, the lack of planning that it really was made on the fly as we went along. [...] It was never the intention to be a beginner’s adventure, but in fairness there was no big plan or picture and creating it was about having fun along the way.

Eggcup took around two months to complete. It was an attractive game, neatly presented and very well written, given how young its author and co-collaborators were. Paul and Jon were given contribution credits on the well laid-out introduction screen, with Paul providing creative ideas and Jon using his superior English to

correct Harvey's grammar and spelling errors. Harvey made use of *The Quill's* customisation capabilities and designed the screen layout to use a smart white box to show the game's location, a clear list of exits and used spot coloured text here and there to ensure the player was signposted to useful objects or specific puzzle clues.

[HL] Credit for the style and format of *Eggcup* is down to *The Quill* - nice boxes around all text - or at least nice back then. My regret looking back then is I was wasting at least two lines of text per location in having the format like that - but that was the eighties, and we knew no different.

Though the game was beginner-friendly, it contained a clever learning curve, and as the quest progressed got slightly more complex - including a neat puzzle involving a series of useless objects. Along with the non-playable characters, one of the more memorable features of *Eggcup*, and one fondly remembered by the adventuring community was the game's lack of tolerance to swearing. If you entered certain boorish phrases, you'd find yourself locked away as punishment in a Goblin's dungeon. Lodder told Gareth Pitchford "Yeah it had to have a reference to *The Hobbit*, I hated that bloody dungeon when I first encountered it."

Without funds, and lacking the knowledge and confidence to engage with a mainstream publisher, Harvey decided to create his own independent software label called Network Adventure Games. He hand-crafted simple bright yellow inlays for his homegrown cassette copies which seemed to feature another copyright infringing instance of Automata's Pi-Man.

[HL] Nope. That was inspired by a chad and drawn for me by my mother. My drawing skills were of a spider that had recently had a run in with a cat and lost a few legs and like a spider who could not walk straight - nor could I draw straight. I think she figured that unless she did it for me, I'd run out of paper!

The mum-drawn copies were sent to all the current magazines that promoted adventures, and whether it was the good luck charm of her drawings or something else, a full-page feature entitled "The goose that laid the golden *Eggcup*" appeared in Tony Bridge's celebrated adventure corner in *Personal Computer Weekly* magazine.

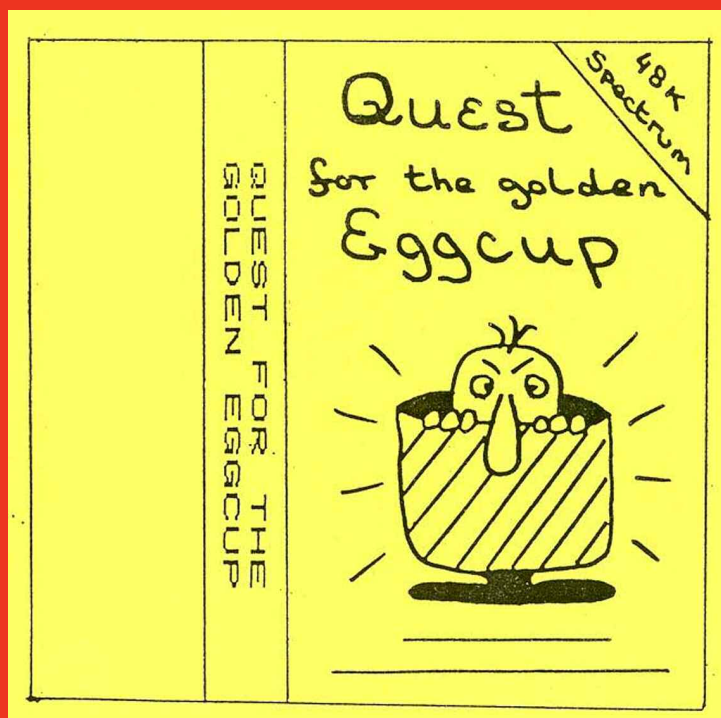
[HL] I only found out about it when I went into the shop then and they showed it to me. I had to then rush out and by that magazine. [...] I sold about thirty or so [copies] of the game. I was always very pleased to see it many years later on a retro site for second-hand games going for about £50.

Tony Bridge's column brought the game a lot of attention - some beneficial, and some less so. Selling 30 copies was a positive for Harvey, but the spotlight on him also initiated a relationship with another software publisher that he now looks back on with some regret. Nigel Brooks of Smart Egg Software had seen the glowing review and contacted the teenager with a business proposition. Brooks had already written the highly regarded *Serf's Tale* [originally sent to Mike Gerrard under the moniker Adventure Software] for *Players*, and the C&VG Hit, *Rigel's Revenge* for *Bulldog*.

[HL] He wanted to have a copy of the game with a look to publishing it as I believe he had just done *Rigel's Revenge* and they had their version of *Colossal Adventure* [*Serf's Tale*] as well.

Though Harvey is unsure exactly of the agreement that the two made, Brooks took it upon himself to remaster several of the elements of *Eggcup*, retaining a huge chunk of the original storyline but changing the odd puzzle here and there crediting himself in the final game as "co-designer". To accommodate some of the other features, many of the humorous responses that Harvey had coded into the original game were dropped.

[HL] [...] There was never any permission to make the changes - but equally I did not challenge it either that I recall. I was more interested in it being commercial released if possible and the dreams it may have brought. [...] Your readers will be the best judge of that with a compare of both games.



[Above] Sean's scribbled notes from the development of the precursor to GAC, his *Adventure Algorithmic Language*. [L-R] An

Whilst *Eggcup* was being updated, Harvey would receive infrequent cassettes from Smart Egg, sent to him in the post. Nigel would change the code and then send these iterative releases for Lodder to playtest. Unfortunately, it was a very much a one-sided relationship, and there was no mechanism for critiquing the new versions or providing any feedback or questions on development - each tape would just arrive at Harvey's house every now and again.

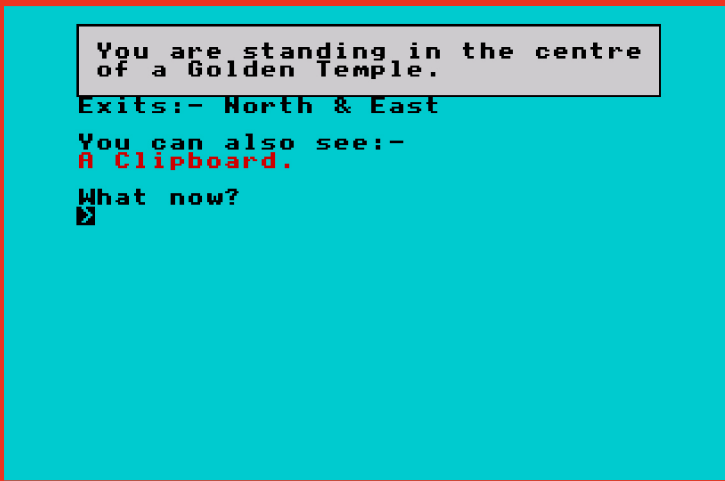
Apart from the added puzzles, it was the graphical and overall presentation of the revamped *Eggcup* that was most impressive. A new introductory illustration was added, along with a contemporary font, several clever screen transitions, and the implementation of instant, bitmap-style graphics - akin to those seen in other games from Interceptor Software and Adventure International (UK). To achieve the effects, and add the ability to co-publish the game for the Amstrad, Spectrum and C64 at the same time, Smart Egg used a modified version of *The Quill*. Reviewers and adventure developers had already played *Rigel's Revenge* and wondered how the various special effects had been implemented in a seemingly *Quilled* game. *Rigels Revenge*, *Serf's Tale* and *Eggcup* kept the highly recognisable text layout and parsing of *The Quill* but added many of the shiny presentation barbells that now graced Harvey's remade game. Smart Egg's called their modified utility *The Ballpoint*.

[HL] I only got *The Ballpoint* because I had tried to build a better relationship with them. [...] I wanted to play *Federation* and in order

EASTER EGGCUPS

The Quest for the Golden Eggcup contained a myriad of humorous responses, videogame related jokes and "Easter Eggs". *Eggcup* generally poked fun at Melbourne House's *The Hobbit* and *Sherlock* recreating some of their more memorable non-playable characters, dead body investigative scenes, and even allowing the player to pick up the deerstalkered detective and use him to complete one of the game's latter puzzles.

As an additional surprise, author Harvey Lodder even makes an appearance in one location.



[Above] The opening location in Harvey Lodder's original *Quest For The Golden Eggcup* adventure. Though basic in its *Quilled* implementation, the original screen layout and clever use of colour showed a thoughtful and competent approach to design.



[Above] The first location in the Smart Egg Software remastered version of *Quest For The Golden Eggcup*. The effective illustrations, stylish font and more verbose approach to describing objects and exits gave the game a more polished feel.



[Above] Graphic artist Simon Dunstan was contracted to utilise the bitmap-style engine that was a feature of *The Ballpoint* modification to *The Quill*. Dunstan employed a series of simple textures and segments of images to create more complex illustrations.



[Above] In a nod to Melbourne House's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings: Game One*, our protagonist is constantly hampered by several familiar non-playable characters, including Dandalf the Wizard and Thoron the Dwarf.



[Above] As in the original *Adventure*, you are provided a storage location for your assembled treasure horde. In a clever puzzle twist, once you return all of the collectable objects to the room, a surprise awaits. Notice the tongue-in-cheek reference to *Sherlock*.



[Above] In the end sequence to the game, you climb a fairy-tale beanstalk to the Temple of Doom [not that one!] and have to present a series of valuable eggs in order to salvage the missing Golden Eggcup for God

to do that, I somehow ended up converting it for them with *The Ballpoint*. [...] It felt very *The Quill* like, but it was much harder to use. It had no decent menu, nothing, and everything was written down on a piece of paper [...] The game code was entered completely by hand – everything was manually typed and transferred over. If you could use *The Quill*, you could use *The Ballpoint*.

With the version of *The Ballpoint* that Harvey was given, he was only able to access the text and adventure conditional logic of the game. The custom parser and new graphics engine that Smart Egg had used for their other games was missing. There's no doubt that the graphical engine modification for *The Ballpoint* was special, and allowed high-speed, complex and detailed bitmap graphics replacing *The Quill* and *Illustrator*'s slow basic plot, line and fill. Lodder could only assume that this was their best kept secret and something that Nigel Brooks held under lock and key. To produce the graphics for *Eggcup*, Smart Egg hired RamJam Corporation artist Simon Dunstan.

[HL] My one regret was never meeting Simon, he and I never crossed paths, but he was able to create lovely graphics. If I had an option to be involved with the graphics that Simon had done, I would have changed nothing. [...] [The graphics] were a huge positive change to [Eggcup]. This was about the time that games were starting to have the graphics included and eventually even Level 9 started to add graphics.

Dunstan's methodology was simple yet effective. He used an array of basic textures, from simple borders and leaf designs, to brick and stonework that when combined could create a wide range of illustrations from a small number of building blocks. From start to finish, the reworking took after four months. Afterwards, Brooks approached several budget houses, and agreed a deal with powerhouse label Mastertronic to publish the game, after discussions with British Telecom for their Firebird label. Mastertronic released the game on their new quirky label called floppy. They published the Commodore 64 version on its own but included both the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad versions together on a single cassette or double-sided disk with the Speccy version on one side of the media and the CPC version on the other.

[HL] I had no control of that and to be honest, and didn't really like that. I think looking back, text adventures were a risk when so many kids loved arcade games and Mastertronic did not have that many text adventures in its portfolio. It was probably a business decision.

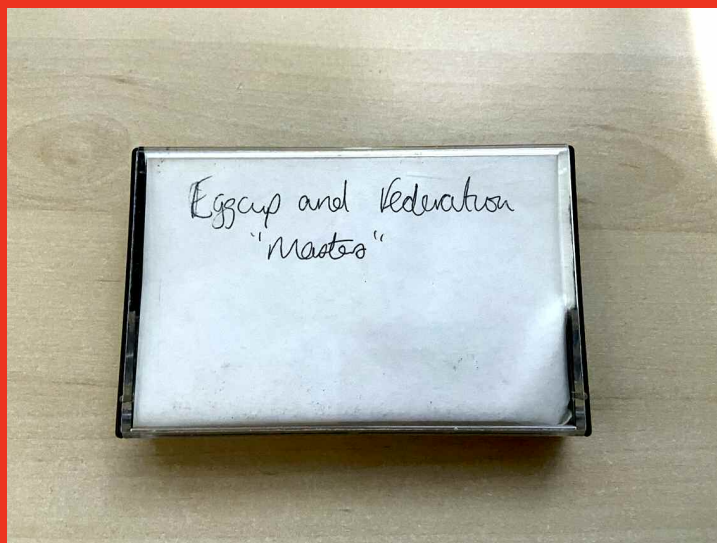
Harvey's intuition was probably correct. The Amstrad market was probably the smallest of the three main home micros, so bundling it with the ZX Spectrum version made financial and business sense in terms of smaller and cheaper production runs, but it also made it cheaper for the retailer too. Mastertronic bundled several of its titles in floppy format on both its £1.99 and £2.99 Mastertronic Added Dimension range. Being marketed with such a reputable budget publisher, with a large reach was a positive for the game.

[HL] Yes, that was wonderful. I was so pleased to buy it from Toys R Us, seeing it hang there with all the other games [and] to see it in the games section in HMV as well. [Mastertronic] were a great bunch of guys and I must say after *Eggcup* release [...] I got to visit them in the town where I lived. They had a couple of houses they had brought next to each other. One housed live in game designers and the other housed them. I had the chance to do some game testing for them – which sounded more fun than what it was!

On its second release in July of 1988, *Eggcup* was well received by the adventuring community. Almost everyone was in agreement in their praise for the game, but was noticeable was the overt credit given to Brooks and Smart Egg for its creation. Tony Bridge in his original adventure column, had said that *Eggcup* was one of the best comedic adventures he'd played.

[HL] It was really hopeful, and I felt I had achieved something. That being said, it was equally wonderful to have great reviews by Mike Gerrard from *Your Sinclair* and Tony Bridge from *PCW*.

Keith Campbell or The Faringdon Fiend [depending on whether you believed the urban myth that it was Campbell's alter-ego] rated the



[Above Top] A cassette containing one of the master copies of *Eggcup* and *Federation* sent to Harvey by Nigel Brooks from Smart Egg Software. [Above Bottom] The copy of Smart Egg's *The Ballpoint* adventure writing utility that was used to build the aforementioned CRL published *Federation*.

game as a firm 10 out of 10 or value, saying *Eggcup* was a "zany romp" that was a "professionally produced, totally irreverent and comic adventure." Samara in the *Crash Magazine Adventure Trail* awarded the game a dizzying score of 88%, recognised it as a "game of high calibre" and praised Mastertronic continuing to support the genre by saying "as long as [budget houses] keep releasing products as slick and innovative [...] there's hope for adventurers yet." The *Games Machine*, putting *Eggcup* up against the slick and impressive graphics of *Magnetic Scrolls' Corruption* on the same page, crowned *Eggcup*'s glory, saying the game "should not be missed."

[HL] It's a strange emotion where seeing something gave a proud response because you could physically see it and reading reviews gave a wonderful response as there were grown adults that had appreciated the work that had been done.

In the finale of the game, after you have given the titular eggcup back to God – which isn't much of a spoiler – the game's closing scenes promised a sequel, *Eggcup II – The Egg of the Phoenix* which would be "available shortly". *Phoenix* seems to have been designed as a true sequel to the game, escaping the temple at the top of the beanstalk and chasing another mythical egg that would have gone into the recovered golden eggcup. Though Harvey had purchased a copy of Gilsoft's next generation adventure tool *The Professional*

SMART EGGS OR HUMPTY DUMPTIES?

In March 1988, just before the release of *Quest for the Golden Eggcup*, Smart Egg Software formed a publishing partnership with budget software titan Mastertronic. They called the label PowerPlay, and planned to release a raft of titles split between arcade games and adventure games throughout the coming year.

Nigel Brooks boasted about the sales of *Rigel's Revenge* to ACE magazine when they questioned the viability of adventure games in 1988, saying that the game had "sold as well as any of their other titles."

Not convinced by the argument, ACE entitled the news, "Smart Eggs or Humpty Dumpties" - and they were right, as no games were ever released under the new brand.

Adventure Writing System at a Microfair, he never used it for the follow-up, so we are left to wonder what would have been given the extra capabilities of the utility.

[HL] The temple was done. It was basically holed up with cement and the beanstalk top was not there and you could potter about there. That was all. [...] The idea I had was there was going to be another way out and it was via a Tardis that could be explained by being in the temple as a new object and there was something else that was missing this time, not show what the McGuffin was going to be this time - or I can't remember.

As mentioned, one of the unexpected benefits of the relationship with Smart Egg was being granted access to their advanced *Quill*-based adventure engine, *The Ballpoint*. Access wasn't gifted because Brooks was keen to share his technology, more he wanted to exploit the agreement he'd made with Harvey. Brooks had just acquired the rights to another *Quilled* adventure and wanted the teenager to do the donkeywork in converting the game across to his new system.

[HL] This was a method that I could get my hands on *The Ballpoint* and the only way as well. They were not too keen on sharing their toys on reflection. I was never paid for this.

The game in question was Mike White's science-fiction escapade *Quann Tulla* [see **Issue 03**], released on his own 8th Day label in 1985. White had his own issues dealing with Smart Egg, including a very familiar confusion over how they ended up being able to modify and publish his game without consent.

[Mike White] I rather stupidly signed a contract with Smart Egg software that gave game rights away, for what I thought was for a limited time and for, dear God, a royalty only basis.

Harvey told Gareth Pitchford that "The whole game was ported by hand - it took a long time to do - but it did give me access to *The Ballpoint* - which I hated!" Smart Egg then did the rest, adding more polish and contracted Dunsten again to provide several eye-catching illustrations for the game. *Tulla* became *Federation*, perhaps to hide its origins so it could be published as an original title by Clem Chambers' CRL in 1988.

Adventure author and researcher Pitchford had long wondered about *Ballpoint*, and the engine utilised by Smart Egg to produce their games. He teamed up with Phillip Richmond and Gilsoft's Tim Gilberts in 2018 in an effort to finally uncover the rumours about the system, and whether the "created using a modified version of *The Quill*" attribution was true. Early references for *The Ballpoint* having a developer called Adventure Software were originally discounted by

Pitchford, but these proved to be true given Mike Gerrard's reference to the original submission of *Serf's Tale* being under that brand, before the game was picked up by Players.

The result of Gareth's interview with Lodder was a loft search and the uncovering of the original *Pi-Week* adventure, as well as a cassette containing the version of *The Ballpoint* that Harvey received. On loading the cassette, it's media still sound after several decades, the Spectrum version displayed a minimalist menu, and functions that matched *The Quill* revision C. Tim Gilberts examined the code and found that huge chunks of *Quill*'s original programming remained intact, but was possibly disassembled and reassembled, since there were a lot of NOP instructions - usually present when code is moved and patched using the tools of the day.

Harvey's personal and professional relationship with Smart never recovered and seemed sour from the start. At the beginning of the relationship a meeting was arranged in Brighton and when Harvey finally arrived at the agreed rendezvous, after a walk of several miles he found they were nowhere to be seen.

[HL] So there I was stuck in Brighton wondering why they were not there. I went back to the station and tried calling - no answer from the number. [I] walked back to the address, still not there and returned to that station. I repeatedly dialled a lot and again no answer.

Said Hassen [credited as one of the developers of *The Ballpoint*] made several apologetic phone calls after that, and Harvey returned several weeks later, only to be greeted by an unprepared Nigel Brooks and more excuses when questioned about the lack of payment for *Eggcup*.

[HL] I think we went for a pie to a local shop and I just went home. [I] should have taken my game then and just left. They claimed sales were really low and never made any money, something along those lines. [...] But if the sales were as low as they said that was not my problem and they still should have paid.

The experience ended any desire to do any further development at the time for Harvey, and his experience of being ripped off meant he pursued other career avenues from then on. He started work on a port of *Eggcup* in 1994 using the Infocom interpreter *Inform* and has been expanding and enhancing the original game up until the present day.

[HL] It then became a reworking into something much bigger as the *Inform* platform and my increased abilities allowed me to expand on what I could do with *The Quill*. This has been built over a wide spanning *Inform* set of releases, it went from Z5 code to Z8 and more recently using *Inform 7*.

Given the recent interest in *Eggcup* and the 8/16-bit text adventure scene, Harvey has revitalised his own enthusiasm for his remake project and hopes to finish it - either with *Inform*, or PAWS, a copy of which still eludes him after his original purchase all those years ago.



DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

SS Eggcup captain **Harvey Lodder** is stranded when his ship runs aground on our inhabited adventure island. Which five games will he need for company?

The Hobbit 128K – Spectrum 128K

What a wonderful remake! I once did a speed-run of this before speed-runs were invented back in the day and completed the game in under eleven minutes with no cheat sheets or anything. This is a great game and a perfect classic that you could get lost in.

Velnor's Lair – Spectrum 48K

For some reason, this always used to remind me of the Warlock of Firetop Mountain. I loved this game and in an ironic twist of fate, the way I ended up owning it was by swapping it for a copy of Warlock of Firetop Mountain!

Cutthroats – Commodore 64 Disk

What a brilliant adventure and great time I had with this. I think this is one of Infocom's underrated games but the atmosphere just pulled me into wanting to progress. I found this to be a fairly unique game in the setting as well, it was not your usual dragons and stuff – if you're looking for a unique game – don't read spoilers and give this one a go.

Snowball – Spectrum 48K

This was a game that boasted thousands of locations and literally got you lost in space. Playing this, I completed it far quicker than what Level 9 ever claimed you could and in many cases by accident in terms of solving puzzles. There was some great puzzles here and good fortune got me through this game. I was a fan at this stage of sci-fi and this one really hit the mark of being alone in this game. I say text only, as this was one of the few games that I considered graphics ruined.

Zork – Commodore 64 Disk

The great underground empire. *Colossal Cave* had been done to death for me at this stage and to get this game which was a classic and be able to explore a brilliant setting that again had puzzles that challenged, was worth its weight in gold. The text was very minimal in parts considering what later games were but it was enough to bring you back to the game time and time again. Every soul that loves adventure games should experience this one.





JIMMY MAHER

As The Digital Antiquarian, Jimmy Maher is renowned for his impeccably researched articles on the history of computer entertainment and digital culture, and is a leading authority on text adventure games from both sides of the pond.

When and how did the idea for The Digital Antiquarian begin?

[Jimmy Maher] I had just finished writing a book about the Amiga for the MIT Press, had recently moved to Denmark to be with my wife, and was kind of at loose ends as to what to do next. I started doing some contract programming whilst also considering whether to pursue a PhD; I ultimately decided against it. I knew that I wanted to keep my hand in at writing, so I started the blog. Eventually, my online writing started to pay well enough that I could drop most of my other work.

Who did you think was your target audience?

[JM] No one in particular, I'm afraid. It all started very organically. All of my readers have found me rather than me doing anything to "target" anyone whatsoever. I simply write about what interests me to

the best of my ability. I'm gratified that so many people find me interesting to read.

Your first articles were published online in March 2011, when you wrote about *The Oregon Trail*, *Hunt the Wumpus* and *Adventure*. These games seemed to drag you down into the adventure rabbit hole - what was the draw to writing about this particular genre?

[JM] I just got personally interested in the back-story of *The Oregon Trail*, this game that was played by a couple of generations of American schoolchildren, myself among them. I found the "treasure hunt" aspect of looking for the oldest possible version rather addictive. I get to do less of that sort of thing nowadays because there are fewer obscurities from the 1990s to dig up. Luckily, the era has other compensations...

You created your first social media account on Twitter in 2013, did the ignite further interest in your writings?

[JM] Geez, I don't know. Maybe? I did it just because some people asked me if I could announce new articles there. That, and occasionally replying to direct queries, is still the only thing I really use Twitter for. I'm afraid I've done absolutely none of the things people tell you to do to be successful on the Internet.

You have written about a wide range of games and genres, but you were one of the few people, especially at the time, to write about text adventures - why focus there?

[JM] Again, strictly personal passion. The first game I ever got for my new Commodore 64 in 1984 was *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. I'm a very literary sort of guy, so the genre has always been a natural fit for me.

What particular aspect of an adventure would pique your interest, and make you choose a game to be a topic of an article?

[JM] There are a number of criteria that can cause any given adventure to make the cut. Historical importance in the sense of a game that sold a lot of copies and/or was extremely influential is of course one of them. But there are also more personal factors. I'm always interested in games that have something to say about the world or that try something new, and of course simply in really, really good examples of the craft of game design. I made a decision early on to write about every game from Infocom and Magnetic Scrolls because of those companies' combination of innovation, influence, and quality.

How long does each article take to research and write?

[JM] I publish one article per week, alternating between the Digital and Analogue Antiquarian, so that's the base timescale. Generally, Monday is a research and planning day (a nice way to ease into the week!), Tuesday through Thursday are writing days (my goal is to write 2000 words per day), and Friday is editing and reading-aloud day. On Saturday or Sunday, the article will get a second reading aloud (I have a very patient wife), then it gets set aside for at least a week or two before I pull it out again, read it aloud one more time, and publish it. The quality of my prose is really, really important to me - I like to think of myself as a writer who happens to write about games some of the time rather than a games enthusiast who writes about his interest - so I really put a lot of time and energy into that aspect of my work. I could easily imagine a life without games; I couldn't imagine a life without writing.

Through your vast research you attribute the growth in home adventuring to Scott Adams and his adventure "engine" being freely available in the public realm. Just how influential was Scott?

[JM] Massively so. Making an adventure engine instead of just a bespoke game was truly a stroke of genius; that's still the way people make text adventure today. His actual games are obviously primitive, but the best of them still have a certain charm as well as historical interest. Oddly, his earlier games generally hold up better than his later ones. I'd recommend that everyone play *Pirate*

Adventure and *The Count*.

You first crossed the pond and covered British gaming in 2012 with an article about the British videogame industry in general, and then you played Charles Cecil's *Planet of Death*. Unfortunately it seems you weren't impressed?

[JM] No, I suppose not. If the homespun nature of those early text adventures was a big part of their charm, the complete lack of quality control was the flip side of the double-edged sword (to thoroughly mix my metaphors).

Amongst observers you're uniquely placed to offer an insight of the differences between the US and European or British market (you've even written about Japanese adventures) for text adventures - how do you think the two markets differed? What were their strengths and weaknesses?

[JM] The big difference was the presence of disk drives in the United States. By the time they became commonplace in Britain, the text-adventure market was already on the downward slope. Disk drives allowed companies like Infocom to create bigger, more sophisticated worlds with a professional sheen that their European counterparts couldn't hope to equal. Magnetic Scrolls came closest late in the day, but never quite equalled Infocom's standards of design.

Technology aside how do you think the two compared in their creativity?

[JM] The British market was obviously a more hobbyist-driven one; everyone was working with vastly fewer resources than the likes of Infocom had at their disposal. Level 9's compression technology was phenomenal and they had some great design instincts; they were probably the gold standard in British adventures prior to the arrival of Magnetic Scrolls. But they never did enough testing and polishing, and their games were the worse for it. It was the process for making fair, playable games, complete with lots of play-testing at every stage, that really set Infocom apart.

Though the hobbyist or indie market in the US seemed to flourish in the late 70s and very early 80s around Scott's adventure engine - the US didn't have as vibrant a homegrown community as Europe. Do you think the lack of adventure writing tools such as *The Quill*, *The Professional Adventure Writer* and *The Graphic Adventure Writer* stateside was one of the reasons you didn't see the same creativity?

[JM] Hmm... good question. Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, the American market was consistently three to five years ahead of Europe in terms of technology. For a significant portion of those who wrote and played text adventures, they were just a stopgap solution until they could make games with graphics. I would guess that these folks simply moved on earlier in the United States.

I think you are correct. The bar was set too high by Infocom, and amateur authors could not match what the professionals were capable of.

[JM] This could be. There's a natural appeal to being able to produce "professional" quality work, whatever that means in your particular cultural context. Certainly there was great flowering of text adventures, in North America and Europe, when TADS and Inform came along, allowing anyone to who was sufficiently dedicated to make games every bit as advanced as those of Infocom.

Do you think that Infocom and the maturing of the market was a reason that British adventures didn't do well in the US? We imported many games of all genres from the US [Scott Adams adventures being one huge success] but very few went the other way?

[JM] There were perhaps more than you're aware of. *The Pawn* and *Guild of Thieves* were very popular in the United States, as was *The*

BOUNTIFUL BLOGGER



Jimmy Maher's quest to create a comprehensive history of computer gaming can be found on his Digital Antiquarian website and as well as more in-depth articles for Patreon supporters.

<https://www.filfre.net>
<https://www.patreon.com/DigitalAntiquarian>

until something better came along. Very few people brought home a shiny new Amiga or Atari ST and got excited about loading up an all-text game on it. Games have traditionally been a novelty-driven medium; it's not shocking that Magnetic Scrolls, the last text-adventure maker to really make a splash, had very nice illustrations in their games.

Why do you think then, that those companies such as Legend, Magnetic Scrolls, Level 9, who were highly innovative couldn't transition the text adventure genre on 16-bits through onto PC in the early 90s?

[JM] Mice and multimedia were the wave of the future. People just weren't that interested in reading lots of text anymore, much less typing lots of text. Legend, of course, was able to move much of the text-adventure aesthetic to a point-and-click-driven interface.

There seems to be a renaissance at the moment in the genre, both with pure text or graphic adventures and the immergence of modern interactive fiction. Does the genre still interest you?

[JM] The interactive-fiction community has been going along pretty steadily for more than two and a half decades now, which is vastly longer than the commercial heyday of text adventures. I hope it continues for many decades to come. I am still interested in the genre, but I'm afraid I struggle to find time to play many of the modern games. There are just too many on the syllabus, as it were, and I have a lot of other commitments that can sometimes make it hard to find time for the games I'm *supposed* to be playing.

Do you think there's an adventuring future? Has your Patreon helped you engage with the wider text adventure community?

[JM] I don't see any big commercial revival for text adventures on the horizon, but I think they will continue to be made by amateur enthusiasts at least until our generation passes away. After that, we'll have to see. If that's the end, they've had a pretty good run; no creative form lasts forever. The text-adventure community was my first base of support, and I still have plenty of folks from that community as patrons. That said, my supporters are a pretty diverse group these days. I don't do most of the typical Patreon things. I just keep my head down and write. Luckily, most of my patrons say that's what they'd like me to do. They're really, really wonderful in that sense and many others.

Do you plan on continuing to track down adventures, or do you think you have covered the genre? What does the future hold for The Digital Antiquarian?

[JM] I'm actually very excited about continuing to cover the IF Renaissance of the mid-1990s. A ridiculous number of really good games were released in 1995 alone. In fact, in terms of number of worthwhile games released, 1995 is literally the best year I've yet encountered in my little journey through history. So, although text adventures have become a less dominant part of The Digital Antiquarian, what with so many other topics screaming for coverage, they will always have a place there.

Hobbit. But the culture of gaming in general was very bifurcated in those days. By the time that began to change, with companies like Firebird and Electronic Arts establishing trans-national operations, the text adventure was past its heyday.

One revelation you uncovered when writing and researching *The Hobbit* was the lack of acknowledgement for Veronika Meglar's contribution in the game's development credits. It was a rare case where you returned to your earlier work to correct the omission - have there been any others?

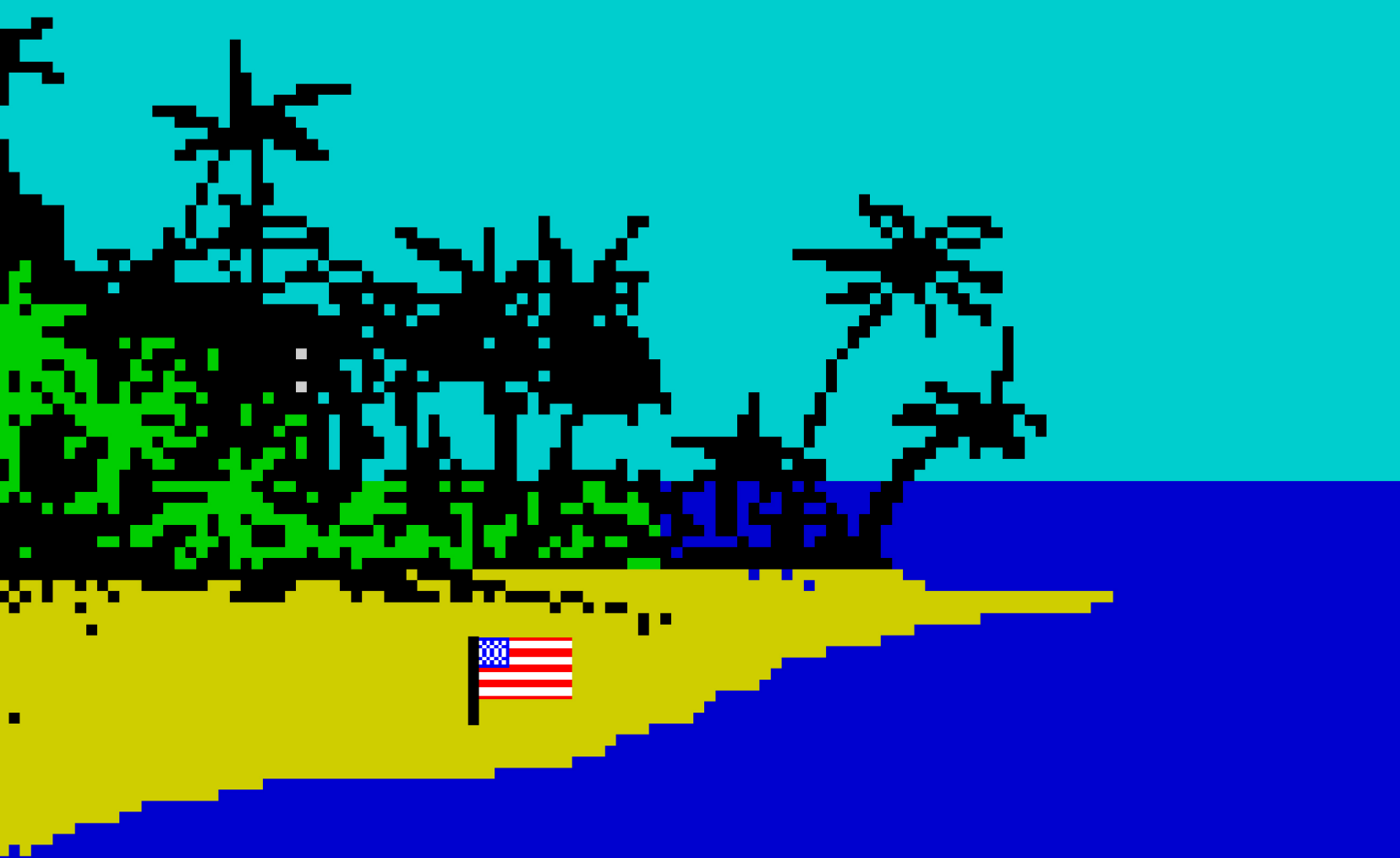
[JM] I can't think of anything off-hand. I certainly learn a lot in the writing of just about every article, but shocking... no, nothing off-hand. Mostly it's a case of people turning up in response to an article to offer more information - information that I wish I had had before writing. Veronika Meglar was an extreme case of that, and of course the information she could offer contradicted much of the conventional narrative. Thankfully, that turned out to be a fairly unique situation, at least in the context of text adventures. I recently went through a similar thing with the game *Lode Runner*.

What has been your most popular post on adventures?

[JM] No idea whatsoever. There was a time very early on when I paid attention to such things ("People are actually reading what I write!"), but I quickly decided that life's too short to count clicks. The reviews of Infocom games do tend to generate a fairly regular stream of new comments even years later, but that's not really a huge surprise.

Why do you think that the text adventure genre came to an end?

[JM] As I said, for a lot of people text adventures were just a stopgap



DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Transatlantic liner captain **Jimmy Maher** is the castaway, all alone with a single power socket and a clutch of text adventures for company.

I'm not sure how much mileage one would get out of text adventures in this situation – my first instinct would be to ask if I could swap games for all the Beatles albums and the complete works of Shakespeare -- but here's some Infocom favourites...

Trinity – as close as Infocom ever got to true interactive literature.

Plundered Hearts – just a rollicking good time; don't let the romance label put you off.

Spellbreaker – maybe Infocom's best, tightest puzzle design ever.

Leather Goddesses of Phobos – if the above is not *Spellbreaker*, it's this game.

Enchanter – just a delightful, playful experience; it's so much fun casting random spells on everything to see what happens.



And from British shores ...

Jigsaw by Graham Nelson - a fascinating journey through history combined with some superb puzzles.

Muldoon Legacy by Jon Ingold - another wonderfully tantalizing puzzlefest, even bigger than *Jigsaw*.

Gnome Ranger by Level 9 - its multi-character approach to problem-solving still makes it unique.

Wonderland by Magnetic Scrolls - a really fun environment, and the rare example of a literary adaptation that really works .

Christminster by Gareth Rees - a quirky game set in an English university that is clearly based on Oxford and/or Cambridge, with very witty writing and some memorable characters.





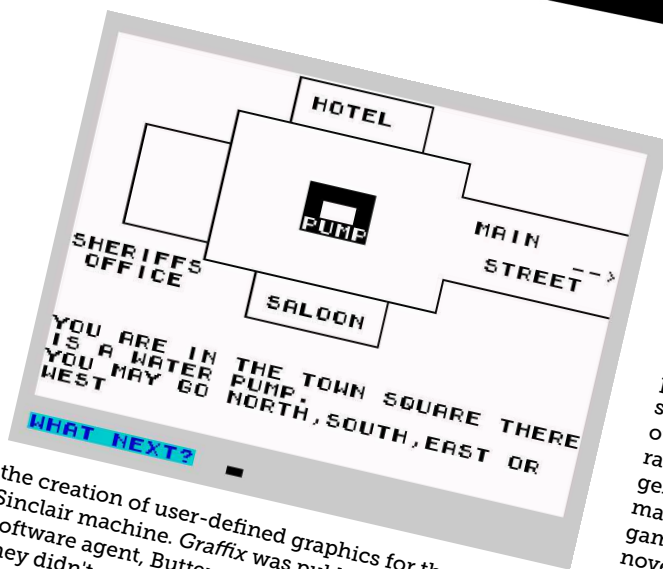
GHOST TOWN

Bedroom programming powered the British videogame industry, especially in the world of text adventuring where the genre was an accessible starting point for many young wannabe programmers. John Pickford was one of these eager teenagers, and coded *Ghost Town* for Virgin Games in 1983.

Teenager John Pickford was drawn into programming when he was gifted a brand-new ZX81 computer for Christmas in 1981. He was able to expand his programming knowledge and experiment with games when the more sophisticated ZX Spectrum arrived on Christmas morning a year later in 1982.

One of John's first efforts was *Graffix*, a utility that aided

Format: ZX Spectrum
Developer: John Pickford
Publisher: Virgin Games
RRP: £5.95
Release Date: August 2018
Website: www.zee-3.com



the creation of user-defined graphics for the new Sinclair machine. *Grafix* was published by small software agent, Buttercraft, but to John's knowledge they didn't sell a single copy. Despite that, having his program appear in a press advert was enough to spur John into continuing to code. He turned his blossoming talents to adventures, and created *Ghost Town*, a BASIC text adventure set in an abandoned Californian town, left to the ravages of the desert after the end of the Gold Rush days. The protagonist hears a tale about an old abandoned mine, once owned by a certain character called Old Jake Clampett that rumour says still contains a stash of hidden gold. On arriving, our adventurer finds a map to the town and sets about trying to uncover the missing horde.

John sent the game to Virgin Games, a new face on the block of publishing after the record label announced in March 1983 that it was investing £1m "to get into the software business." Though John's adventure looked somewhat rudimentary against it's emerging contemporaries, Virgin agreed to back it, paying £500 in an effort to replicate what other startup labels were doing in a drive to build a launch catalogue of games.

Ghost Town was released in November of 1983, with Virgin opting for a striking purple and blue striped branding for its range of cassette inlays. Also included in the blurb and instructions was a small biography and photograph of John, part of Virgin's drive to showcase it's programming talent.

The photo would come back to haunt the teenager, as Virgin arranged for an interview to be featured in 2000AD magazine [since John was a huge fan]. He appeared in the Mighty Micro segment of the magazine alongside Virgin Games Managing Director Nick Alexander who said that he "liked the theme and setting" of *Ghost Town*, adding that it had "all the elements a good -adventure game should have, and some interesting graphics."

John recalled the interview on his website many years later. "I was a big fan of 2000AD," he said, "so it was a bit of a thrill getting a phone call from the editor - in his then human guise of Richard Burton, not The Mighty Tharg himself - asking me questions about the game. I always hated the photo they used, which was

also on the cassette inlay of the game."

Ghost Town showed the restrictions of BASIC, being a limited game with limited graphics, and having the game described as a "graphic adventure" may have been pushing the definition, but John did implement a decent-ish vocab and a surprisingly speedy parser - which was impressive given the speed of Sinclair's built-in programming language. Even so, reviews were kind - probably because the sophistication of adventures was still in their infancy in Britain. Although *The Hobbit* and other titles such as *Twin Kingdom Valley* were starting to raise the expectations of players and critics alike, the general standard of software still being submitted to magazines and published was of mixed quality. Having a game programmed entirely in machine code was still a novel selling point.

Micro Adventurer praised *Ghost Town* for its attractive presentation, saying overall it was "not a bad game, but certainly nothing special." Crash's main criticism was the game's similarity to Phipp's Associates *Greedy Gultch* [see **Special Edition**], awarding it a disappointing 43% but noting that while the graphics were sparse the game was 'well written and the response times are very good'. Keith Campbell, the much respected adventurer columnist for *Computer & Videogames Magazine* was less than enthusiastic. He compared the game to Scott Adam's namesake adventure, stating that the Virgin author was "Definitely not Scott!" He went onto criticise the quality of *Ghost Town*, and called John himself a "teenybopper", finally questioning Virgin's credibility in releasing such a game.

Campbell's review prompted an irate response from Peter Ranson, brother of Paul Ranson who had started to collaborate on games with John. He sent a letter that was published in Issue 44 of C&VG saying that the iconic columnist had disrespected John, saying he should be more encouraging to teenage programmers. Keith was pretty scathing in his reply, saying the least Pickford could have done was to make sure the game was free from spelling errors.

Ultimately the criticism of that first adventure was probably fair as John has openly admitted that he thought *Ghost Town* wasn't a very good game. He went onto write *Ziggarut*, another text adventure for Software Supersavers, the budget label of Software Projects. The Spectrum and the Amstrad versions were both programmed in BASIC by John and his school friend Paul Ranson, who designed and wrote the games while both still at school in the sixth form. John's younger brother, Ste drew a comic strip as an introduction to the game. *Guy Mannly*, the follow-up text adventure to *Ziggarut* was abandoned when John and Paul both started their commercial career developing video games at Binary Design in Manchester.

The Pickford's are still well loved, and remembered for a long list of classic 8-bit titles including *Zub*, *Feud*, *Glider* and *Rider* and *Amaurote*. John and Ste are now regarded as veteran game designers and continue to ply their trade as Zee-3 - an independent publisher of videogames and comics.



- **John Pickford** is sixteen years of age, lives in Stockport, Cheshire and is currently studying for 'A levels' in Maths and Physics.
- **He received** his first computer (a 2 x 81) for Christmas 1981 and replaced this the following year with a Spectrum on which he began writing games. Frustrated by his lack of success with arcade games, he turned his hand to adventures which he found more enjoyable and decided to write one of his own.
- **John's main** hobby is computer programming. However, he also enjoys reading, trying to solve other adventure games and going to the cinema, particularly to watch science fiction and comedy films.
- **John lists** his dislikes as including television sport, washing dishes and younger brothers who hog his computer and constantly beat his scores at arcade games!

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A non-exhaustive list of references and other useful information:

Books, Magazines and Fanzines

Retro Gamer Magazine, Future Publishing
Twilight Inventory, Gareth Pitchford
Spectrum of Adventure, Thomas A. Christie, Extremis Publishing
Adventure Coder, Chris Hestler
Micro Adventurer, Sunshine Publications

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GET LAMP, Jason Scott
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Websites and Blogs

Mobygames
Spectrum Computing
Lemon64
Internet Archive
The Classic Adventures Solution Archive
Stardot Forums
Games That Weren't

Research Papers

There and Back Again: A Case History of Writing The Hobbit, Veronika Megler

Artwork

Ghost Town
Virgin Games

Sláine
Martech Games

The Quest for the Golden Eggcup
Mastertronic

The Graphic Adventure Creator
Incentive Software

Parsely
Courtesy Jared A. Sorensen

The Classic Adventurer

Written and designed by Mark James Hardisty

About the author

Mark James Hardisty is from Sheffield. His weekly pilgrimage to Just Micro as a child left him with an indelible love for Gremlin Graphics.

You can find Mark at [@hardistymark](https://twitter.com/hardistymark), where he tweets about games, getting kids coding, The Cannonball Run, and his favourite game - *Elite* on the Acorn Electron.

This work is dedicated to:

My wonderful family – my mum Val, my beautiful wife Helen, and daughters Amelia Rose and Kitty Mae.

Fergus McNeill, a genius, and one of the kindest and humblest people I have had the pleasure of meeting. Thank you for *The Big Sleaze*.



