THE CLASSIC ADVENTURER

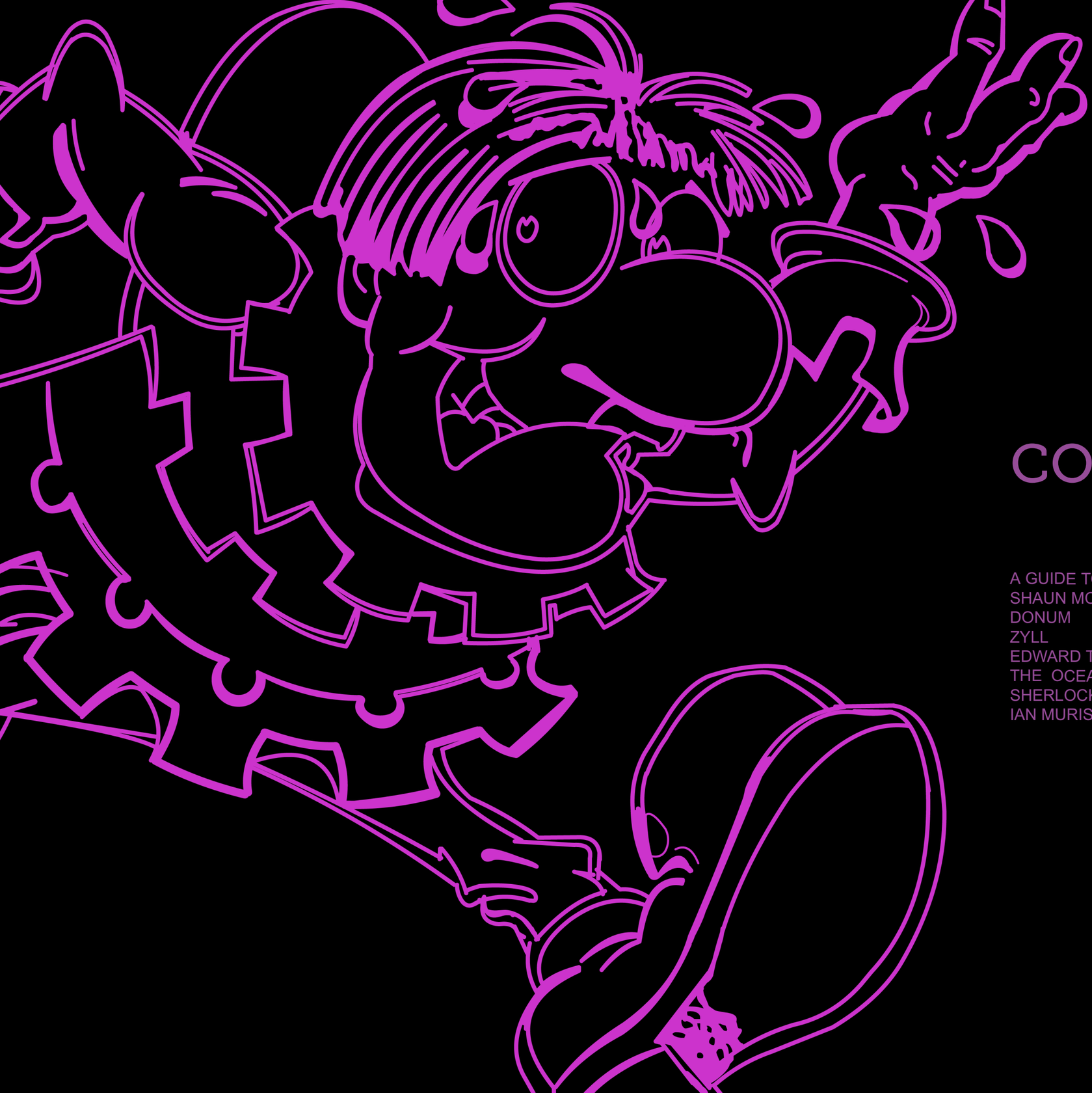
I owned an Acorn Electron as a kid. It wasn't the greatest games machine in the playground, but it did have the best game of all-time, Braben and Bell's *Elite*, and one of the best adventure games of all time, Trevor Hall's *Twin Kingdom Valley*.

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, 2023



CONTENTS

A GUIDE TO ZX SPECTRUM ADVENTURE GAMES 1982 - 1985

Shaun McClure is a name that should be well-known to **The Classic Adventurer** readers. Responsible for an abundance of text adventure illustrations, Shaun is also a keen 8-bit historian, and has written several books including this one - a look back at the text adventure genre on the ZX Spectrum.

A Guide To ZX Spectrum Adventure Games 1982-1985 is an exhaustive breakdown of 190 or so adventure games published on Sir Clive Sinclair's humble Spectrum. Not wanting to stick with the usual high profile releases of the period, McClure has gone to extraordinary lengths to poke around in the deep, dank recesses of the adventure mire and has featured virtually every release from the era.

There's a lot in the huge tome for adventure fans to enjoy and get stuck into. The book is over 640 pages, featuring reviews, screenshots and interviews with some of the biggest author and adventure influencers around at the time. Just some of the names to spotlight are Don Woods, Veronika Megler, Mel Croucher, Charles Cecil, Scott Adams, Tim Gilberts, Trevor Hall, Terry Greer, Tony Barber, Pete Austin and Roy Carnell. Phew!

Shaun's lighthearted interview style shines through, and his jovial appraisal of each of the games are easy to read and are short enough to allow the book to be a great coffee-table filler. You can pick it up, flick through some of the imagery and dip in and out of a game review quickly and easily. Shaun, however, isn't shy of telling it like it is - and several games, usually those coded in BASIC come in for a playful grilling.

The book is highly recommended, and kudos to Shaun for securing a foreword from adventure legend Mike Gerrard. This really gives the book some gravitas, alongside the stunning incidental illustrations throughout from artist Robin Grenville-Evans.

Author: Shaun McClure
Publisher: Amazon
RRP: £19.99
Buy it from: Amazon
Website: https://www.amazon.co.uk

SHAUN MCCLURE

Shaun McClure's text adventure credentials are impeccable: He has created artwork for Zenobi Software, Tartan Software, Eight Day and The Essential Myth, as well as collaborating on *Excalibur*, *Alien Research Centre* and *Hit* with friend Ian Smith.

Where did the idea come from for the book?

There were lots of books about playing games, and nostalgia stories, but there were no in-depth books covering proper reviews, that covered everything, even down to the obscure, mostly forgotten ones. [...] I felt that there was a need for specialist books about the Adventure genre written in a similar vein, which I think are very interesting.

How long did it take to write?

About 2 years, on and off. [It was] definitely a labour of love. I would actually write the first drafts at work in my lunch breaks, working from my notes from playing the games, and then email them back home to tidy up and add the screenshots and so on.

Which interview did you enjoy the most?

All of them! It's nice to hear about the creation of games. How they planned them and how the games evolved. Mel Croucher invented the first games software company, and all of his background was very interesting, and people such as Scott Adams had some good things to talk about too. Pete Austin is an adventure god, and he was especially candid. Veronika Megler stands out as getting a female perspective though.

Which was the most difficult interview to obtain?

All of them had their challenges, as they have their own lives to lead and are often a bit bored of interviews. Pete Austin was quite difficult

> "...if the game was ridiculously hard, and I was stuck in the first location, I felt it funnier to just chat about my failed attempts before I either died or just gave up and went to the pub in real life."

to get hold of for this very reason. I had to badger him a bit.

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Was there an interview that you really wanted to get, but wasn't able?

I wanted to get a lot more women interviews, just for balance and I didn't manage it. I wanted to get as much variety into the interviews as I could. You can only do what you can do though. Anita Sinclair is an obvious one, as well as Linda Wright of Marlin Games, who is seriously underrated.

Did you discover any hidden gems that you hadn't played before?

The vast majority of the games in the book were new to me. I wasn't actually a big player of adventure games back in the day, because I found them a bit too difficult. If you read the reviews this incompetence can still be seen, but I think it also reflects the 'typical' player too, and what their own experiences would be like.

Which games do you think have stood the best test of time?

You'll have to read the book to find out! Typically, they are the ones that have a flowing narrative and are well presented though. The Level 9 games are still very playable.

How long did you spend playing each title?

I made sure that every game was given a proper chance. So, what I would do is, play each one from the beginning for around 3 hours. This gave me a good first impression, and a decent crack at getting as far as I can. [...] Sometimes, if the game was ridiculously hard, and I was stuck in the first location, I felt it funnier to just chat about my failed attempts at the game before I either died in the game or just gave up and went to the pub in real life.

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Has the self-publishing route been successful?

Sort of! I've made my money back, but if you factor in the time I've spent on them, then not really. But then it's a hobby and not a job, isn't it?

You also didn't really rate the games traditionally, but gave your own personal preferences on titles – was this a purposeful way of bringing that personality to the reviews?

Well, I did consider giving the games a percentage rating, but it's more accurate to just read the review to figure out what I think about it. I give a summary at the end anyway.

Being a fellow pixel pusher, which adventures have your favourite graphics, and why?

Generally speaking, I never saw the point of filled vector art. [..] I think the only time it's looked good was on *The Hobbit*. Bitmap art or nothing. *Witch's Caldron* and some of the Adventure International games stand out in this respect. Terry Greer's art was also superb. I also had my moments!

Tell me more about the artwork featured in the book – you commissioned this from Robin Grenville-Evans? How many individual pieces of art are there?

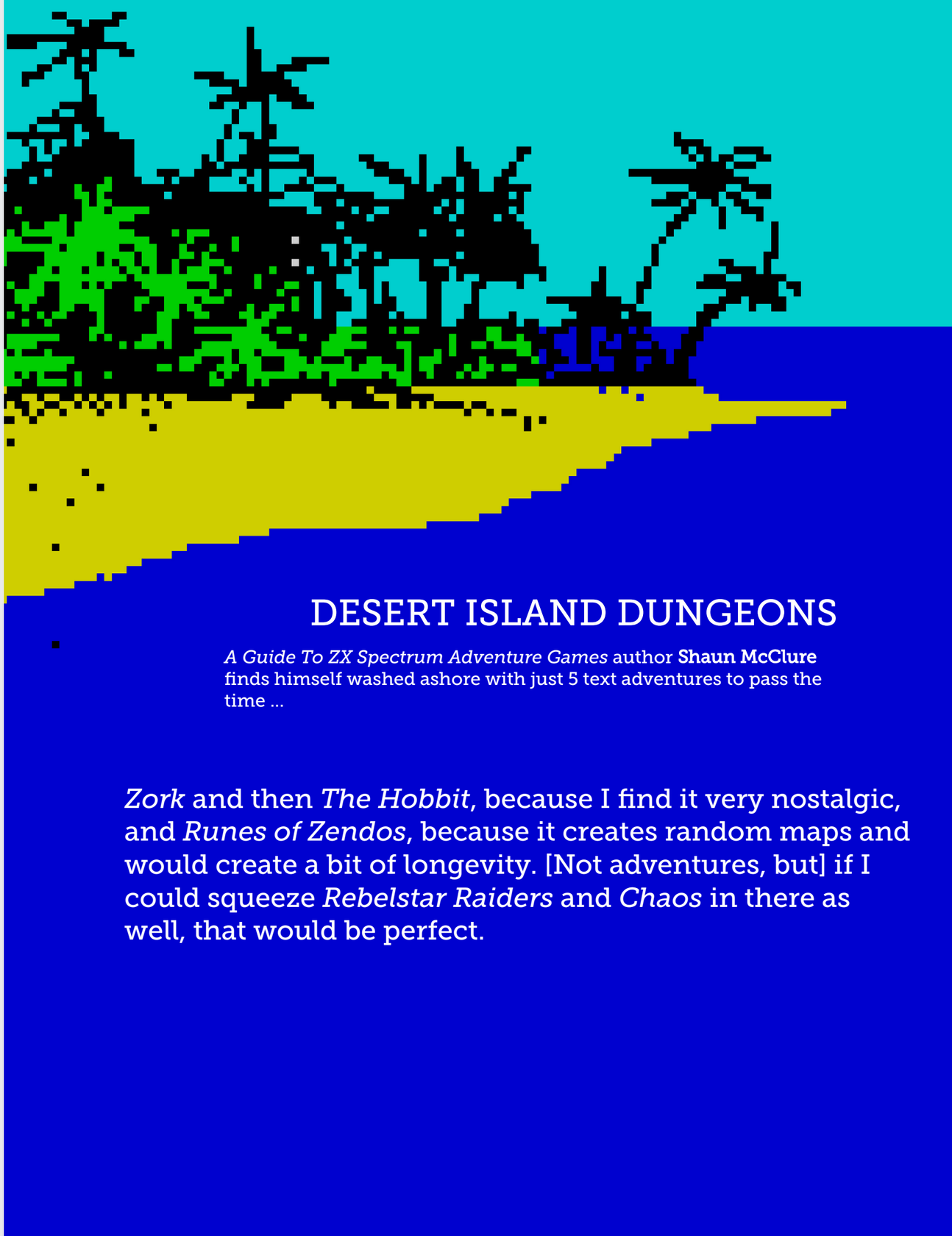
There's the cover, the contents page illustration, and a page showing the year of that section of the book. It's little things like that, that add to the presentation. [...] Robin is a great artist. He would usually send me a quick sketch first before going on to completion, and I can't remember ever having to say that he was heading in the wrong direction.

What has been the response from the 8-bit text adventure and retro community so far?

They were very helpful. [...] Gareth Pitchford especially came in handy as he is a walking encyclopaedia on adventure games.

Any plans for further additions to the series, covering other periods or platforms?

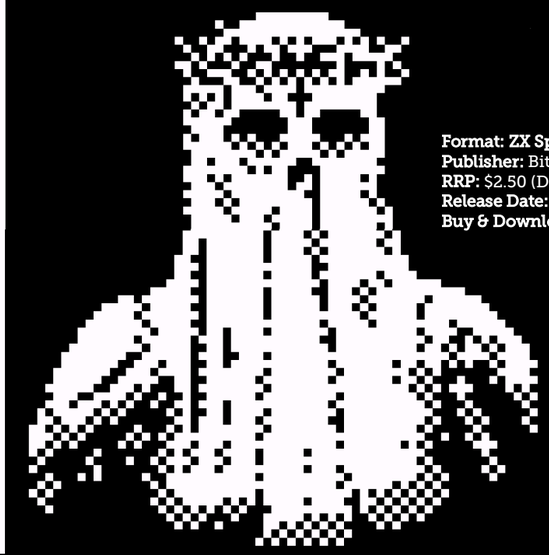
There is a follow up book that's almost completed. I just need to add around 40 games to the final chapter.



DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

A Guide To ZX Spectrum Adventure Games author **Shaun McClure** finds himself washed ashore with just 5 text adventures to pass the time ...

Zork and then *The Hobbit*, because I find it very nostalgic, and *Runes of Zendos*, because it creates random maps and would create a bit of longevity. [Not adventures, but] if I could squeeze *Rebelstar Raiders* and *Chaos* in there as well, that would be perfect.



Format: ZX Spectrum 128K
Publisher: BitFans
RRP: $2.50 (Digital Version)
Release Date: November 2022
Buy & Download: https://bitfans.itch.io/donum

DONUM

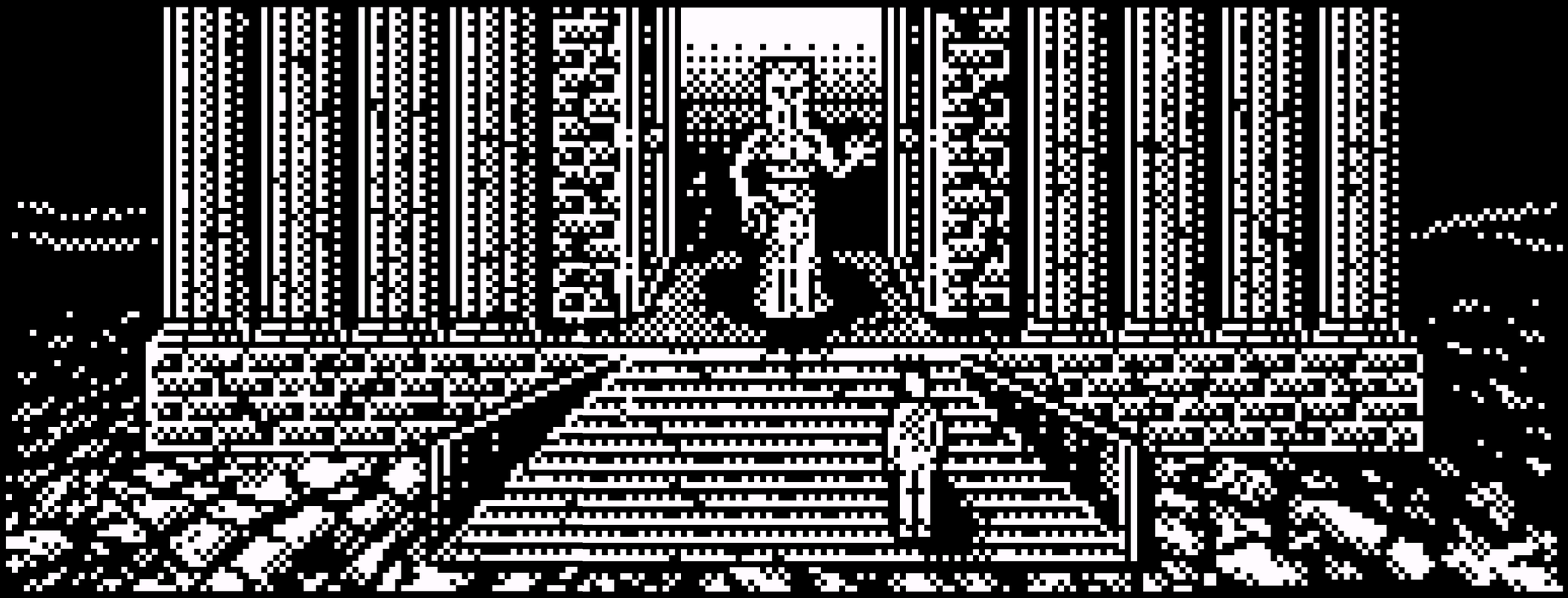
The new horror-fest text adventure from new kids on the block Bitfans is a technical masterpiece.

A brand new development collaboration to the Spectrum homebrew/indie roster is Bitfans; a collective that has recently delivered one of the most astounding debut titles that the text adventure scene has seen in recent years.

Donum, "the most terrifying interactive fiction you've ever played", features an atmospheric narrative, exquisite sound effects and music, and beautiful bitmap illustrations. Location description can be scant and the game features a range of detailed cut-scenes which at time makes the experience more akin to a point-and-click adventure than a text adventure.

Planet Sinclair were so impressed, they awarded it their text adventure Game Of The Year Award foe 2022. It's certainly is a technical tour-de-force and is obviously the work of an exceptionally talented bunch of developers.

At €2.50 for the digital version - it's an absolute steal. The physical version, priced up to €29.95 is available in a single cassette and deluxe version (though the single cassette version was sold out at time of writing) via the Bitfans itch.io site.



ZYLL

Though not a familiar name to British adventurers, IBM's *Zyll* was as much an influence on the text adventure and role-playing game genre as Crowther and Wood's *Adventure*. Its expressive, non-linear storytelling, real-time dungeon crawling, innovative interface and multiplayer capabilities meant that it was years ahead of its peers. Co-creator **Marshal Linder** helps **The Classic Adventurer** fight the evil sorcerer and save the Land of Magic and Enchantment.

Format: IBM PC, IBM PCjr
Publisher: IBM
Developer: Marshal Linder & Scott Edwards
RRP: $39.00
Release Date: October 1984

Marshal Linder grew up in a rural area in central New York state. His first experience with computers came when the US government launched an initiative to place teletype machines into area high schools and encourage an interest in computing and communications technology. These machines were directly connected by a modem to a mainframe system and the young Marshal was fascinated enough by their operation to hunt out a book on BASIC to teach himself to program.

Marshal Linder [ML] My first projects were simple games for my friends to play. This led me to major in Electrical and Computer Engineering at Clarkson University.

After graduating from Clarkson in December 1981, Marshal married and applied for employment at IBM – purely on the basis that they had an office close to a school where his new wife could complete her own degree studies. He was quickly set to work by the Federal Systems Division, developing software and systems for the military before moving on to design a new computer system for the US Navy.

Marshal's employment timing was perfect, and several serendipitous events would come to shape the inception of the Computer Role-Playing Game [CRPG] genre. On his very first day at IBM, he was to meet and form a lifelong friendship with another programmer, Scott Edwards. As they got to know each other they quickly discovered that they shared a love of games.

[ML] [Due to a shortage of space] Scott and I shared a one-person office and a telephone and we quickly became friends. He had been hired just a couple years earlier, and we were both recently married. We thought programming was fun and enjoyed torturing our other co-workers with practical jokes.

As the two became acquainted, IBM announced an internal "Employee Purchase Program" where staff could buy a brand-new Personal Computer, packed with the latest features and high-end specifications: a huge 384KB of RAM, two 5.25" floppy disk drives, a dot matrix printer and a monochrome monitor. Costing a princely $4000, around $10000 in today's money, it was a substantial investment for the newly wed 22-year-old.

[ML] Scott and I talked each other into getting on the list for the first deliveries. IBM had a payment plan with payroll deduction which made it possible, and we both sprung for the "fully loaded" version that had dual 5¼" floppy drives. I bought a copy of *Microsoft Adventure* along with the PC and that was the first time playing on the computer other than the simple games I wrote myself.

Microsoft Adventure is often cited as being the world's first commercial IBM PC game, and was a port of *Adventure*, or *Colossal Cave* – the mainframe classic that spawned the text adventure genre. It was written by one of Microsoft's employees, a programmer called Gordon Letwin who originally transposed the original Crowther and Woods classic to the TRS-80 home computer in 1979 - coincidentally when it also become Microsoft's first ever published game.

[ML] I think that *Adventure* was the only game available at the time – it wasn't really a matter of "choice"! I bought it with the computer because it would be part of the payment plan.

Marshal played the adventure over and over again and managed to collect the treasures and get through to the end. He found it interesting and frustrating but become absorbed in its narrative and atmosphere. *Microsoft Adventure* offered an opportunity to enter a digital world of role playing – something that he was already engaged in as part of a local group of friends.

[ML] We played a second-generation RPG called RuneQuest from Chaosium, and this was my first exposure to RPG. By the time I left college I was frequently a Dungeon Master as well as playing. One of our group was a faculty member that had actually published board and role-playing games, and so I was immersed in gaming.

Despite the captivating storytelling, Marshal laboured with having to arduously enter commands into a traditional command line interface. He spent the majority of the time struggling to make progress, his actions thwarted by a common occurrence for many text adventure players –the endless search for the correct verb / noun combination that the game's limited vocabulary understood.

[ML] At first the idea of being able to type in anything was appealing, but constantly running into roadblocks trying guess the right command wasn't fun. [So] I started playing around to write a more flexible parser.

Encouragement for his new endeavours came in the shape of IBM's next project announcement, and one that the computing giant hoped would encourage the sales of its own hardware to the public - the "Employee Software Submission Program". The idea was to establish and encourage a process where employees developed software in their own time, and for the majority using their own equipment and then submit it for publication. Accepted software would then be packaged and sold by IBM themselves.

It seemed innovative and forward-thinking, but didn't specifically indicate that IBM saw a future in games, and neither did they particularly see themselves as a games publisher. The submissions weren't limited to any particular field - utility software, tools, or anything else of interest could be tendered for scrutiny. It was a merely a means-to-and-end for the corporation.

[ML] I believe that part of the original plan was to sell PCs to individuals, and they saw a need for software including games to drive interest, but the software was always secondary. There were no dedicated resources in the IBM PC team for applications software, [...] so [the] idea behind this program was that employees could develop software entirely on their own time and submit it for consideration. Games was one of the areas they were interested in, because they were already developing the PCjr.

As soon as the submission program was announced, Marshal saw it as an opportunity to exercise a hobby he loved and to make some much needed additional money. He told Patrick Hickey Jnr, in his Minds Behind Adventure Games interview that "faced with a bi-weekly payroll deduction to pay for our PCs, we decided that we should sell some software. Prior to the submission program, the IBM employment agreement prohibited us from selling anything we developed—it was this program or nothing."

[ML] It was our employment contract that we couldn't develop [or] sell software, and the PC employee purchase program prevented us from using the PC for anything but personal use for two years after purchase.

Marshal recruited his friend Scott to the cause, and they set out to develop "a better adventure game" with a less frustrating interface, some simple playable character types, and a more expansive world [*Microsoft Adventure* had just 130 locations]. Where better to start crafting an idea for a storyline than his own role-playing group.

[ML] The original working name for the game was *Quest*, and the idea of exploring and gathering objects was part of my thinking from the beginning. The overall story and some of the names came from a RuneQuest scenario I had actually run.

Zyll was born (more on the name change later) and its "Once upon a time" tale wasn't particularly imaginative nor original, given that its genetics could be directly traced back to its RPG ancestry. It came crammed with the usual fantasy clichés and was stuffed fill of the usual tropes of evil sorcerers, spells, magical objects and a land conquered by dark powers: In the Land of Magic and Enchantment a young man named Zyll dreamed of becoming an all-powerful sorcerer. He's efforts were all in vain, and "his potions never peaked and his spells seldom worked". But Zyll somehow, in the midst of his magic misdemeanours managed to create a mystical Black Orb, filled with power greater than he could ever imagine. He harnessed the Orb's power, and for reasons unknown decided to wreak havoc on his adopted world, stealing treasures and turning the once fertile landscape into a barren wasteland.

You, as the player, must therefore challenge the power of Zyll, capture the mystical Black Orb, find the Great Treasures and carry them home to restore beauty to the Land of Magic and Enchantment.

The opening gambit allowed the player to select their character from a roster of three classic archetypes: Warrior, Wizard of Thief. Each of the characters came with varying levels of abilities, and certain advantages or disadvantages: Warriors were physically strong, able to carry more items and defeat larger foes – but were unable to cast magic spells or use stealth to pick locks and the pockets of other creatures and players. Once the player selected a character type, they armed themselves with armour, equipment and spells.

It's here where the adventure started, and where *Zyll's* genre conformity with what came before it ended. Linder told Hickey Jnr that he and Scott wanted to make something fun that removed the constraints and exasperations of their experiences playing *Microsoft Adventure*. "*Adventure* used typed commands, but didn't tell you what was possible—you had to guess what actions the designers allowed at each point in the game." Marshal said. "It was painful to keep getting 'I don't understand that' as the answer to a command that seemed perfectly reasonable." Their brainstorming led to *Zyll's* Eureka moment -and key design decision:

[ML] I realised that [command input] could be made "menu driven" with the available options populating the menus. This made the mechanics of playing more intuitive.

As a location was entered, the "menu" area on the screen would populate with only the actions that were available (such as TAKE OBJECT) and the player would press the associated key on the keyboard to choose the command. If a certain command wasn't available, then three dashes would appear in place of that item in the menu (for example if no object was in the location to TAKE).

The organic development of the menu-driven system led to another feature implemented by Scott and Marshal that gave *Zyll* another unique selling point – a multiplayer mode. They soon worked out that the neat and compact UI could be duplicated, so two players could participate side-by-side on the same PC. "Nobody had two PCs back then, and there wasn't such a thing as networking and so there wasn't really much thought about multiplayer games those days," Linder told Hickey. "Once we prototyped the menu-based interface, it became clear that it would be possible to have two people play together—there was enough room on the screen, and each player just needed a few keys mapped to the keyboard. It is a lot more fun playing with another person."

It sounds archaic, but it can't be overstated how revolutionary this thinking was. Even with IBMs corporate grunt, networks outside of Universities were for enterprise applications only. Having a home version of a game that

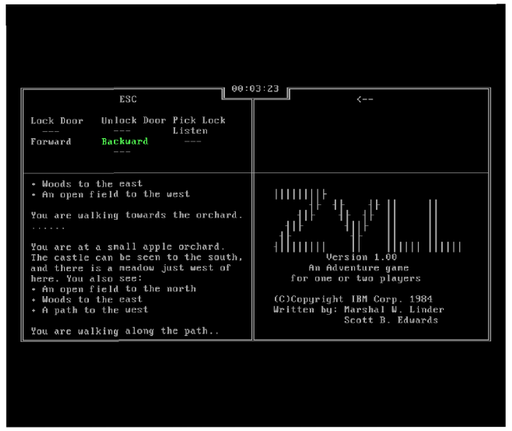
SUBMISSION WOES

Zyll was published via IBM's Employee Software Submission Program - an enterprise that was pretty much a disaster for the corporation.

They received thousands of submissions from employees who had invested enormous amounts of money and time developing their games, utilities and applications.

Zyll was a very early submission, and one of only 7 that were accepted as part of the program. Since employees were prohibited by their employment contract from doing anything else with their own submissions, once the program was abandoned it left many unhappy members of staff.

[Above] Welcome Adventurer! The introduction screen to Marshal Linder and Scott Edwards' *Zyll*.



[Above] A real-time clock stipulates each action has a cost in terms of time. In the example we are crossing a path, during which we can decide to go backwards and undo the decision.

allowed simultaneous play was a decade ahead of domestic LAN gaming and lightyears ahead of today's internet-connected gaming world.

[ML] Multi-player was a very early focus, and what I think "sold" the idea to the team at IBM. It was designed-in and so not really an issue from a development perspective.

Scott and Marshal began to test their new mechanic. They implemented a solitaire or solo mode and a competitive mode for two players. Though they worked well, the gameplay balance in two-player mode felt awkward, and the enforced wait until your opponent selected their action added unwanted sluggishness and drained the excitement. So, they added a real-time element; dragging the game further from its turn-based RPG lineage and placed the onus on managing the game world to the computer. Time progressed without interaction from the players.

[ML] Once there was an idea of time, it made sense to add features like torches that burned out and wandering monsters.

The dynamic element of a constantly ticking clock energised the relationship between the players and the game. As Marshal hinted, if you had a lit torch, then you had to move fast – no more waiting a number of turns before it became distinguished. Each action had a realistic weight of time too. Moving through a doorway or corridor was less expensive and quicker than crossing a path over a wide field. During movements, the players could even decide to cancel their progress, reverse their decision and go back to their previous location.

Marshal's verbose and expressive text brought the Land of Magic and Enchantment to life, drawing from his understanding of what was required of a good Dungeon Master. Each location text had to be consumed, understood and considered before any action could be made. It was the perfect symmetry between efficient decision-making and accessible and maintaining the suspense of events and danger occurring in real-time. It wasn't just a case of who could push keys the fastest being victorious: "Reflexes shouldn't be what determines the winner." Marshal clarified to Hickey.

It's notable that most early adventure developers had the benefit of learning from Scott Adams, who trailblazed with his own adventure system in the late 1979. Ken Reed took Scott's intuitive system of separating a parser/game interpreter from the game's data/text and documented it in Practical Computer magazine in August 1980. Though the reference was available, Marshal and Scott developed their engine from scratch.

[ML] I never looked at any of the other software – *Zyll* was bottom-up design. The database was a multiply-linked set of lists. There was a very simple iterating executive that handled the user interface and any timed events from that list.

A prototype was completed in a couple of months with Scott working on the boot loader, copy protection and operating system functions. He also handled most of the game's extensive play testing. The multi-player mode was further evolved, adding a competitive mode to compliment the purely cooperative system already available. It would all add to the re-playability of *Zyll*. Even if the game was completed, Marshal and Scott ensured the added elements meant every new game could be different and presented a fresh and uncharted challenge.

[ML] Some things such as item placement could be randomized, and I played around with the idea of changing the map configuration as well. We had a severe memory constraint and this was the biggest reason the idea was dropped.

Changing the map would have meant a very early implementation of procedural generation for *Zyll*. Having locations that could have been algorithmically generated, changing on every execution of the game, would have meant players exploring a contrasting world on each play.

[ML] This would have been limited to a few areas like the maze in the caves and the underground river. It was dropped because it wouldn't have made that much of a change to the overall "mission" and with our memory constraint it would have taken away from the size and scope of the world.

It took a further 9 months or so of toil, working evenings and weekends at home for a final version to be ready for submission to IBM. Before the advent of Integrated Development Environments and the internet, the pair worked without effective development tools or distributed version control, and would often go back and forth with disks of modified code, swapping floppies at work and combining their efforts and compiling new builds at Marshal's home.

[ML] [*Zyll*] was over 30,000 lines of assembly code! This was all done completely independently of IBM or our jobs. The only thing that IBM provided, late in the process was a prototype PCjr to develop the modified keyboard layout and test.

The final version was mailed, including a completed submission form, description of the software and a floppy disk for evaluation. A few weeks later the Software Submissions team in Boca Raton, Florida replied to discuss the game and tendered a publication contract for Scott and Marshal to sign.

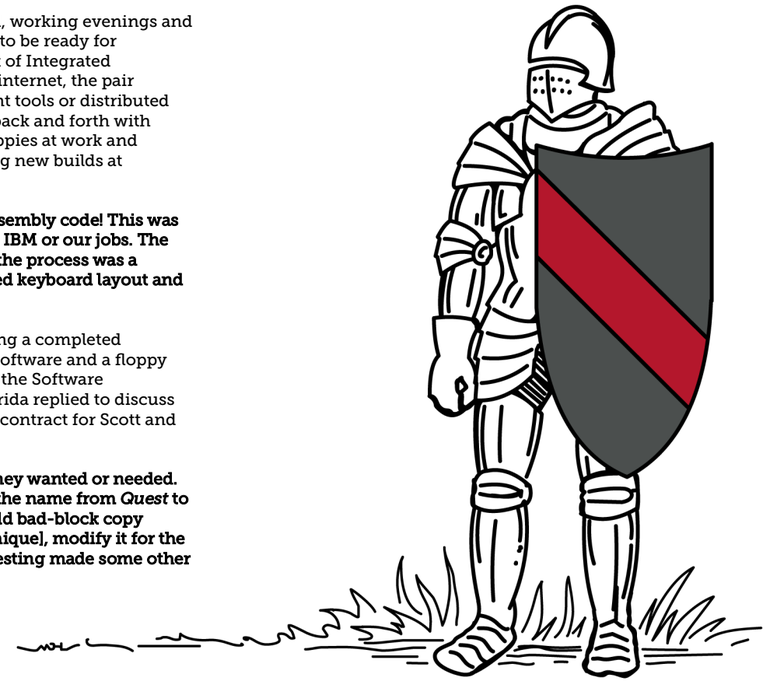
[ML] There were several things that they wanted or needed. For example, they wanted to change the name from *Quest* to something else. They wanted us to add bad-block copy protection [an early anti-piracy technique], modify it for the PCjr, and in the course of their play testing made some other requests such as the ability to disable the random object placement so that things would be in the same locations.

The reason IBM wanted to change the game's name was significant in videogame history, though it wasn't obvious at the time. Unbeknown to Marshal and Scott, IBM were working in close collaboration with Ken and Roberta Williams of Sierra On-line on their graphic adventure game *King's Quest*.

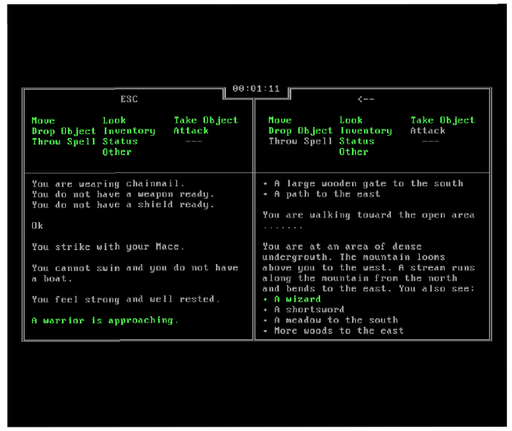
[ML] IBM required the name change because they were using Quest for *King's Quest*. At the time, they didn't disclose *King's Quest* to me – they just said it was due to 'copyright issues.'

To avoid confusion, they "floated a bunch of other names", but the corporation didn't like them and the duo eventually came up with *Zyll* - "just because it couldn't possibly be used for anything else!" The IBM PCjr that the pair had been provided with, was now put to use as the contract required a version for new hardware, and the game had to be ready to ship alongside its release.

[ML] The keyboard layout [on the PCjr] was different. We used the left-side function keys on the original [PC] keyboard - and they weren't available. The biggest thing was the memory limitation – just 64K – so we had to run without DOS and limit the size of the code. [...] [We used] tricks like



[Above] *Zyll's* clever user-interface uses key presses for actions and selections. Green text highlights those actions we can take in the present location.



[Above] Two adventurers can play side-by-side, cooperatively or competitively, on the same PC in *Zyll's* revolutionary multi-player mode.

using a single ASCII character for a word or phrase that appears multiple times that we had to use. [...] It was a couple of months of work. Moving to BIOS-only services for I/O and implementing the copy protection took most of this, and some changes were required to reduce the memory footprint.

Unfortunately, the PCjr project was doomed to failure. The machine had been conceptualised sometime before 1984 as a trimmed down version of the PC, substantially cheaper and aimed specifically at the home market. The design errors, the awkward keyboard and limited memory hinted at by Marshal would ultimately lead to its demise along with a lack of support from software vendors. Sales were poor and IBM struggled to gain a foothold in the home marketplace fighting against its own stuffy corporate image and two flamboyant machines from Apple.

Despite the botched hardware, IBM did a good job with the launch of the software library to accompany the PCJr. Each of their releases was packaged in a smart silver folio case, with bold artwork and a comprehensive manual. *Zyll* was published as "a text adventure game" alongside *King's Quest* and other games such as *Scuba Venture* and *Crossfire*.

[ML] It was great to see it in our local computer store, and I think that they did a good job with the artwork and packaging. But, we received almost no feedback from any users and so other than the royalty statements we didn't have any insight as to whether people really played it or liked it.

Sales were healthy, and even with the disappointing lack of traction of the IBM PCjr hardware Marshal estimated that the game sold over 50,000 copies. Given the size of the market, its competition from emerging graphical adventures and the fact that the entire industry was still in the midst of recovery from the US videogame crash of 1983 it was a substantial number.

[ML] We didn't really have any idea of what to expect in terms of sales. The entire PC software market was brand new, and as you mentioned before there was no internet or other ways for people to learn about available software. We were entirely dependent upon in-store sales. I was pretty happy with that. [...] [I received] a small up-front payment and a per-copy royalty. It made the PC purchase a good investment, and helped me make the down payment on my first house!

Despite this success, *Zyll* would ultimately be the one and only game that Linder and Edwards would develop, and the curtain came down on one of the briefest, but in retrospect, a highly influential career in computer game development. Tragically, the IBM employee submission programme turned out to be a flop [**see Submission Woes box out**] and was quickly wound down.

With Edwards and Linder's employment contract preventing any conflict of interest - if by any likelihood IBM developed their own software - the pair decided to focus on their work instead. "The royalty money helped us with our first houses, and we went back to work" Linder told Hickey Jnr.

It felt like a missed opportunity for IBM. They certainly should have continued with the program given the raft of talent at their disposal, or at least considered forming a dedicated games development division in order to support the push for their machines to be more attractive to the home consumer market. Instead, the PC remained in the main, an expensive hobbyist's toy and corporate device for the entirety of the subsequent decade.

[ML] I did think that games were a big opportunity, but never thought that IBM would be active in this. It always seemed clear to me that they saw software as "necessary" to create demand for the hardware, and were happy to have others such as Microsoft provide it. The software submission program was just something to fill the void in the earliest days of the PC.

Sierra's *Kings Quest*, one of the aforementioned launch products on the PCjr and no doubt an influencing decision on many to purchase a PC, went onto be one of the most commercially successful product series in the history of computer entertainment. It's not known exactly how many copies *KQ* sold, but some estimates but sales in the region of over 8 million units. "After a few years, PC gaming became a big business with large teams of writers, artists, and programmers and it wasn't practical to develop a commercial game in our spare time" Marshal commented to Hickey Jnr.

Though not generally known or remembered in Britain and Europe, *Zyll's* legacy is as important as *Microsoft Adventure* on PC in the US, and as significant first implementations of *Colossal Caves* on the early British-centric home micros from developers such as Austin Brothers at Level 9 [*Colossal Adventure*] and John Jones-Steele's Abersoft [*Adventure I*].

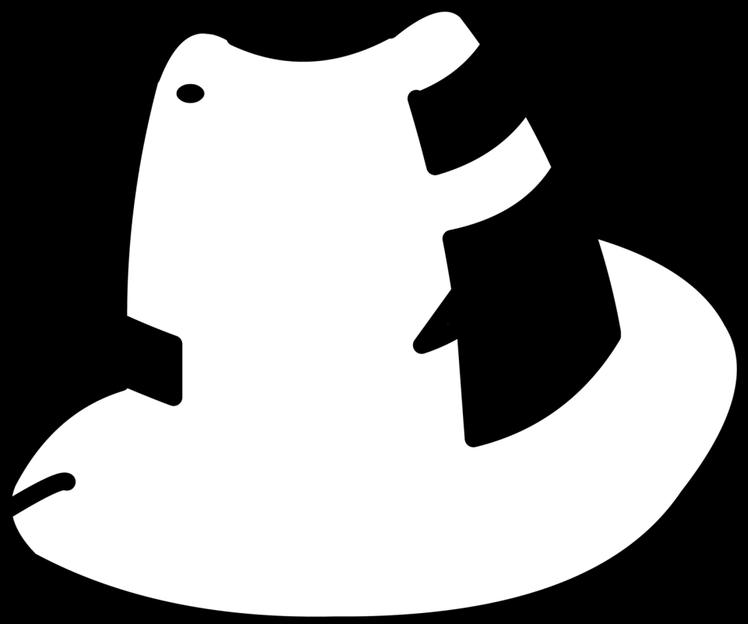
It certainly advanced the adventure art form, introducing the idea of real-time, multi-player worlds. It was one of the first home versions of a *Multi-User Dungeon* and showcased gameplay characteristics taken for granted in games like *Valhalla*, *Ultima* and *The Bard's Tale*. After more than 40 years, people are still playing the game and contacting the authors to express their thanks.

[ML] It was only many years later that we understood that it was well received and there were even a couple of fan sites! [...] It never occurred to me that people would even remember it after so long. I have also enjoyed hearing from people that have good memories of playing it as kids with their friends. After receiving no feedback at all when the game was actually being sold it was really surprising to hear from people that liked it. We are so used to connecting with a community of game players that it is easy to forget how solitary PCs were back in the 1980s.

After *Zyll*, Linder stayed with IBM as Program Director until 1997, ending over 15 years of loyal service to the corporation. During that period he held a wide range of positions, and led the development of the IBM Simon, considered to be the world's first SmartPhone. He has been President and CEO of an array of cutting-edge companies and has invested the past two and a half decades of his working life to medical device innovation. He was instrumental in leading the development of a wearable artificial lung and the world's first wearable defibrillator for patients at risk of cardiac death. He is currently Corporate Senior Vice Principal at ZOLL Medical Corporation, part of the Asahi Kasei Group, who manufacture hardware and software that help advance emergency care.

Scott Edwards continued to work for IBM until his recent retirement. Both he and Marshal remain friends.

[Above] IBM published a series of launch titles in a set of smartly packaged products. This copy of *Zyll* is from the personal collection of AventurasAD co-founder Juanjo Muñoz.

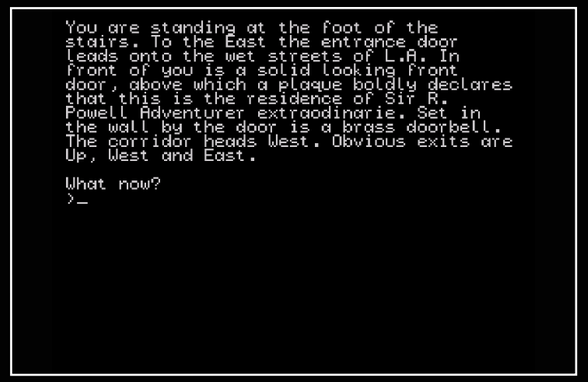


EDWARD TOOVEY

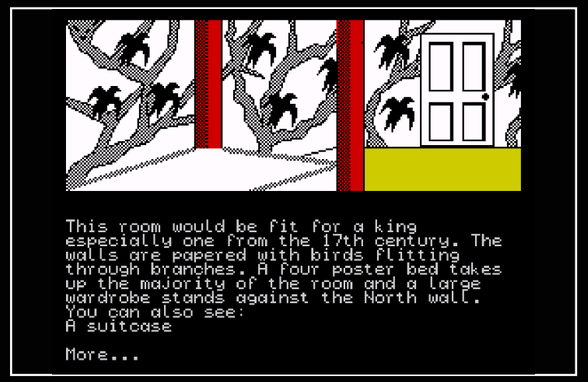
Edward Toovey, along with friend Robert Powell authored *Dragnet;* an unreleased hard-boiled Detective Noir game that mysteriously surfaced on a Spectrum archive site. **The Classic Adventurer** puts on its fedora, draws its trench coat over its shoulders, smokes its last lucky and takes up the case.

Edward Toovey grew up in the village of Henfield with parents who were resistant to the influx of home computers that were beginning to occupy many teenage bedrooms. "My Mum thought they were a waste of time, and my Dad thought they were a waste of money" Edward recalled in one of his Spectrum Computing forum posts. Undeterred, he bought a second-hand Sinclair ZX81 for £14 at a car boot sale, and scrimped and saved his paper round money to buy a ZX Spectrum from a second-hand shop in Brighton.

[Edward Toovey] I have always been extremely independent and at age 14 I went to our local newsagent to see if they had any paper round jobs. They did and I came home and told my parents I didn't want pocket money anymore as I was going to earn my own money. I did a morning and evening paper round and later on I got a Saturday job at a local nursery fixing up the greenhouses and potting plants.



[The Dragnet Case, ZX Spectrum] A classic noir setting, out on the street in front of the office of an adventurer in downtown Los Angeles.



[The Mystery Of Markham Manor, ZX Spectrum] The third game in the Sam Boon series and the second in the *Murder, Mystery, and Suspenders* prequel to *The Dragnet Case*. .

[The Mystery Of Markham Manor, ZX Spectrum] In the game, Lord Markham of Markham Manor, England has contacted you to solve the mysterious haunting by his late wife Lady Mary Markham.

At Steyning Grammar School all of his friends were into computers, especially his best friend Robert Powell - a kindred spirit who wanted to create software with the machine rather than just consume games. Adventure games captured the teenagers' imagination along with the Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone's Fighting Fantasy series of game books.

[ET] I used to buy the Choose Your Own Adventure' books whenever I came across them. The first time I played *The Hobbit* I got the same feeling I used to get from the books and knew I wanted to be able to create worlds for others to experience. I can remember *Mad Martha* and *Moron*, though the latter I couldn't complete until one of the magazines published the fact you needed to stick a button with chewing gum. Maybe my sheltered life prevented me from sticking chewing gum anywhere other than my mouth.

Edward was an avid reader of Your Sinclair, and flicked immediately to devour Mike Gerrard' adventure column whenever he bought a new issue. Adventure writing utilities had been featured heavily in the magazine and through more diligent saving, Edward purchased a copy of Sean Ellis' *Graphic Adventurer Creator* [*GAC*] [**see Issue 09**] and Gilsoft's *Professional Adventure Writer* [*PAWS*] [**see Issue 02**]. For a kid with parents who viewed his pastime as an expensive waste of time and money, buying two of the costliest utilities available on the market was a significant investment.

[ET] Tell me about it! I lived in a village not too far from Brighton which was a regular haunt at the weekends. There was a fantastic computer shop there that sold home computers and all the peripherals for them. They had a bargain bin out the front which supplied many of my games and utilities, unfortunately, neither *GAC* or *PAWS* were included.

Originally Edward wanted to buy Gilsoft's earlier adventure *utility*, *The Quill*, but during 1986 Incentive released *GAC*, and then *PAWS* appeared a or so year later: Since both were superior they were the obvious products to buy. He and Robert talked endlessly of stories and ideas that they wanted to bring to life. The youngster's imagination and enthusiasm caught fire and they dreamed big. Of course, they didn't need to actually write any software first, their priority was to setup a development studio and come up with a suitable name. Taskmaster Software was born.

[ET] The name was my own creation. I wanted something that sounded like a proper software company. Many of my games came from Mastertronic so I would guess that was a subconscious prompt towards Taskmaster.

In the partnership, Robert had a natural flair for storytelling, scene setting and narrative ideas. He surprised Edward one morning as they journeyed to school on the bus with a rough outline of a game and a hand drawn picture of a potential game location – an office. Robert came up with a title, *The Dragnet Case* and the two laboured for around four months to write the first adventure to feature a new street-wise, hardboiled Detective on the block – Sam Boon.

[ET] Robert would provide me with ideas for the game while we were travelling and I would go home and code them, then provide him with a tape to try out and he would then provide feedback. Some weekends we would get together to try things out.

Once a rough, working game was completed the pair used their trusted source for adventure support: A call went out to readers of Your Sinclair for volunteers willing to spend some time playing the game and return bugs and recommended changes. They had grand ambitions of self-publishing and didn't give a second thought to sending the game to an established publisher. They spent hours of their time costing blank cassettes and researching companies who could print inlay artwork.

A handful of people replied to the playtesting invitation, and Edward fixed a few bugs and corrected a plethora of spelling errors that they had identified in *Dragnet*. The process took a few weeks, and in this time, unbeknown to him, Robert's family had made the decision to move away from the area. Coupled with a few technical difficulties and the growing demands from Edward's onrushing entry into the world of work, any thought on publishing the game was shelved.

[ET] There were two main factors, the biggest was that Robert's family moved to the Isle of Wight which was about 100 miles away. In days before the Internet, mobile phones and WhatsApp this was equivalent to a move to another country. The second was that shortly after this my Spectrum keyboard died. It temporarily went into the loft then other things became a priority, like work, learning to drive and spending time with friends.Temporarily became permanently.

Edward lost touch with Robert, and he moved to the Far East in his 20s leaving his beloved Spectrum collection in the hands of his parents. In the mists of time, most of his cassettes, computer, and various other peripherals disappeared – though some remnants – one box of tapes and a lonely Kempston joystick - were passed back into his hands.

[ET] I was lucky enough to have a housemate with a PC with a limited selection of games on it which was my first real introduction to PCs. Though by this stage I was more into poetry than computers. When I came back to England I inherited one of the very first IBMs with a double-sized 20MB hard drive. I spent hours writing games for it in BASIC, clones of *Tetris*, *Yahtzee*, and some terrible platform games.

Time rolled on until February 2022 when adventure author and researcher Gareth Pitchford speculatively contacted Edward on a well-known social media site in an effort to clarify an entry for *Dragnet* on the Spectrum Computing website.

[ET] I couldn't believe that a copy of the game had survived, in fact two different copies and that they had been preserved. I was also unaware that the retro computer scene was as active as it is, despite watching shows like Mark Fixes Stuff [a retro enthusiast YouTuber]. Lastly, I was amazed that anyone would have any interest in an unreleased game produced in a bedroom in Henfield.

The two copies that had originally been posted to the World of Spectrum [WoS] database were incomplete and had very little supporting information. Pitchford delved into the games using modern tools that were able to extract data and logic from the *PAWS* source. The tools revealed a host of information, including credits and an end-game location that proclaimed that more games were planned in the series. To complement his research, Gareth also scoured various publications and was able to find Edward's original plea for playtesting help in Your Sinclair.

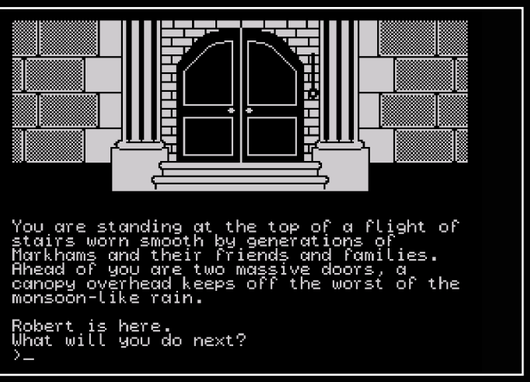
[ET] One version is definitely the play tester version, this didn't have the extra information on forthcoming games. I no longer have records of who I sent the game out to, the only one I remember is someone who replied from a house literally around the corner as I dropped that one off by hand. The second version is a bigger mystery, this would have been the copy destined to be sent out to magazines for review, so it would either have been mine or Robert's as the review copies never went out. I know that after I moved out of home all but one box of my Spectrum paraphernalia vanished from my parents' loft when they had a major clear-out, both Spectrums and certainly a number of tapes were included in that so maybe one of those found a good home?

It certainly is a romantic message-in-bottle tale that perhaps one of Edward's own backup cassettes were sold along with his Spectrum and the recipient took the time to archive what was on it, leading *Dragnet* to be reunited with its author some 35 years later.

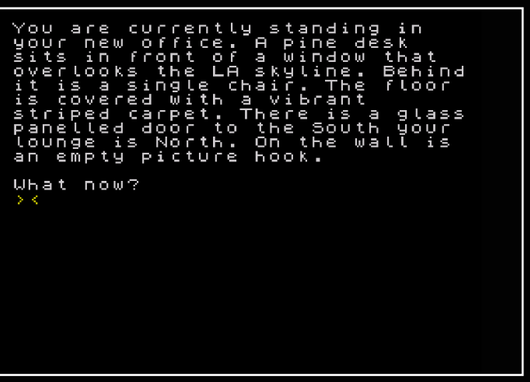
[ET] Initially, I only had the downloaded files to play until I could recover the master copies from tape. I was surprised that my younger self could outwit me. I remembered the need to wear trousers, but still got stumped. The text descriptions were far more detailed than I remembered as well.

One of the other mysteries with the original WoS database entry was that the game was labelled as "text-only". Gareth's research had also uncovered a raft of locations that did have some impressive graphics.

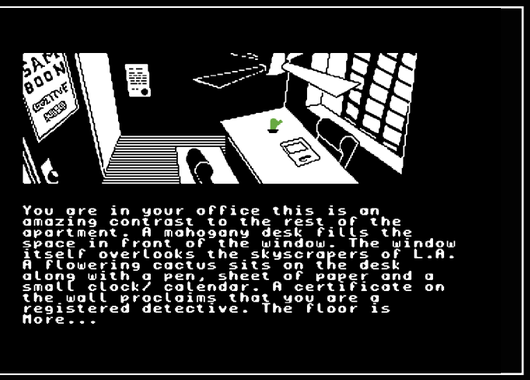
[ET] [*Dragnet*] was always supposed to have images in key locations.



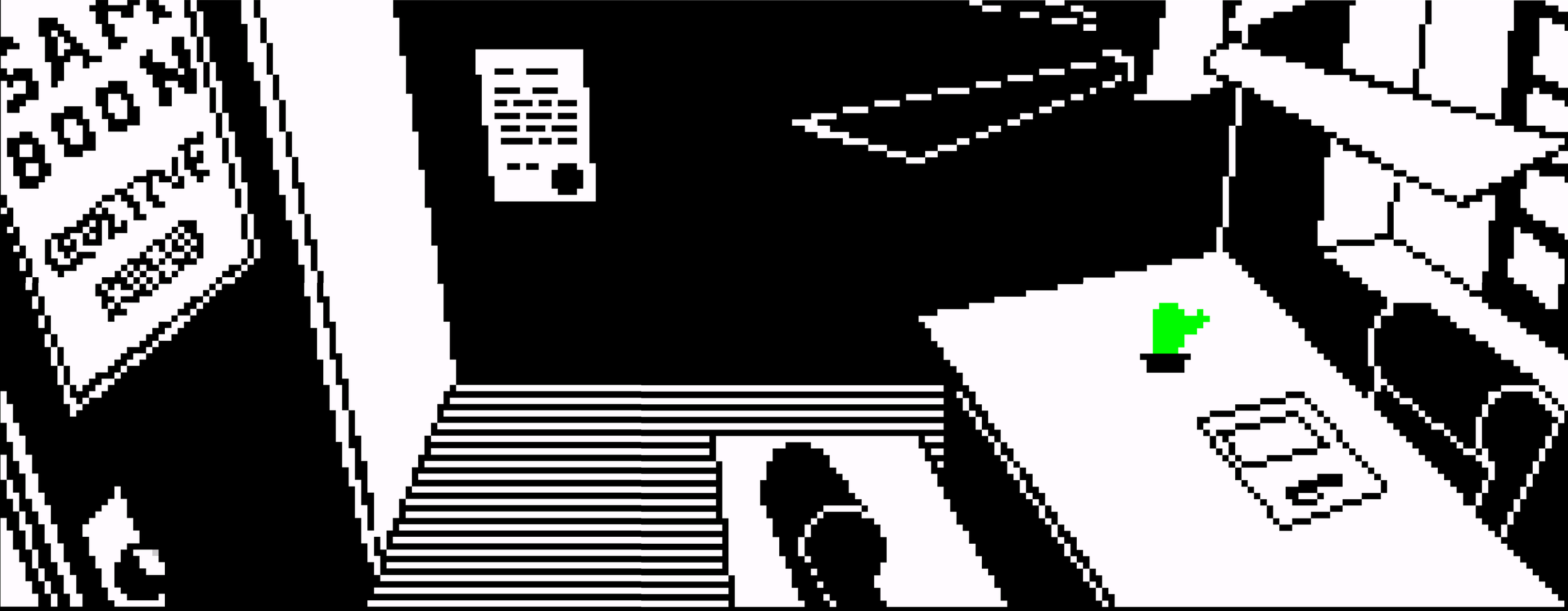
[The Mystery of Markham Manor, ZX Spectrum] Robert Powell has joined you as a sidekick eager for an adventure. He has been useful in the past with an extensive knowledge of poisons and fluency in several ancient languages.



[A Case of Murder, ZX Spectrum] The opening gambit from the Sam Boon prequel *A Case of Murder*.



[The Dragnet Case Re-Release, Commodore 64] Edward has used the *power of DAAD to create text and graphic versions of his tweaked* original game for several different platforms.



The picture of Sam's office was drawn by Robert on the page of one of his exercise books to match my description, the others were mine. [...] Robert's picture I took home and drew a grid over it so that I could convert it into drawstring commands in *PAWS*. The rest were drawn directly and painfully in *PAWS*.

Inspired by the serendipitous contact with Gareth, Edward climbed the stairs into his loft, rummaged through the various remnants of what had been passed to him by his parents all those years ago. He found a bunch of games and four C15 cassettes, which after examination held various master copies of *The Dragnet Case* and parts of the proposed prequel – *The Mystery of Markham Manor* - not based or related to a manor of a similar name from Melbourne House [**see Issue 06**].

[ET] Hmm, this one is a little embarrassing. The title was a nod in the direction of a childhood friend Mark Holcombe, which I squashed into *Markham*. I wasn't even aware of the game by Melbourne House until Andre Leao mentioned the similarity in his post on Planeta Sinclair. I went and looked up the game and um, yes much too close for comfort.

Edward disposed of the scant pieces of *PAWS* code that remained on his cassettes and started to rewrite the prequel to *Dragnet* from scratch. Having now immersed himself back in the retro community he was made aware of *DAAD*, choosing to build the game using the much more capable tool.

[ET] [...] I was working on it in *inPAWS* and converted this *DAAD* using *PAWS2DAAD*. The game was completed in *DAAD*.

The work of the retro community in creating modern development tools to produce text adventures for retro computer systems has been extraordinary. Stefan Vogt and Uto have worked tirelessly on *DAAD* and its workflows, Chris Ainsley's work with *Adventuron* and his syntax highlighting plug-ins, *InPaws*, *PunyInform* - the list is endless. For Edward, having access to modern tools was a godsend.

[ET] It has been a few years since I last coded in an IDE and I initially longed for a *PAWS* style shell to hide away the code behind. Once I got passed that the benefits are so much better. The ability to define labels makes the code much more readable

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Makes the code easier to maintain. The same for locations and objects. Using an IDE like *Visual Studio Code* which provides the label as an auto-fill option speeds things up as well. Being able to see all the code just by scrolling is much easier as well. In *PAWS* I would add a location, then come out and go to the process table to do things there, and then come out and go to objects to add a new object to the location. Once the game got bigger it was necessary to swap parts of the editor in and out of memory which from tape was a great delay. I think I had more patience in my youth.

Dragnet had around 70+ locations. With *Markham Manor* a cap of 50 locations was set, though the text was greatly expanded given the greater compression ratio offered by *DAAD* over *PAWS*. Reducing the location count gave the game a tighter feel, with the player concentrating more on puzzle solving than map making. Edward's friend Robert also made another return as a character in the story.

[ET] Robert appeared in the first game as a grumpy neighbour and washed-up adventurer. He then appeared in the first prequel as a wannabe adventurer and in this one to explain why his experiences might have put him off adventuring. He is due a final return in *The Feud*.

To complete the package, and to give *Markham* an extra fuzzy warmth of nostalgia, Edward reworked an image from the original *Dragnet* game as a loading screen and used another image as the basis for the sequel screens too. Instead of a digital snapshot, he authored a complete tape image allowing the game to be "loaded" in real-time by an emulator, as well as making it possible to be transferred to physical media.

[ET] For me in the 80s that was the first moment of excitement, loading a game and seeing the screen slowly being drawn. For a start, there was the chance that the game would actually load and the really good screens promised so much graphically which sadly often wasn't fulfilled in the game itself.

Over the Christmas period in 2022 the original Spectrum version was ported to the Commodore 64 using *DAAD*. Despite some slight differences in disk handling, colours and pixel sizing, Edward used *Multipaint* to cross-compose the location graphics over to the Commodore. The Commodore's chunky pixels and pastel colours gave him a challenge, turning the super-bright Spectrum palette into something more drab and squashed – given the wider character screen of the 64.

[ET] Sadly I used the conversion to high-colour expecting it to do wonderful things, instead all the pixels got spread out making the image blurred. [...] I learnt some valuable lessons for the *Dragnet* rewrite, which was to design it for the Spectrum and then convert it to high-res C Plus 4 format. Use the extra space to widen the picture, then save this a PNG for the other formats, and always stay away from high-colour rectangular pixels!

The game is still receiving platform updates, having a special

Spectrum 128K version and conversions with full graphics planned for Commodore Plus/4 and the MSX machines. Edward plans on continuing to fix bugs if required, but is dedicating future development time to further games - including one mentioned in the original *Dragnet* end-game location - *Murder, Mystery and Suspenders*.

[ET] The original idea was for it to be released as one game in 3 parts, work had started on it before the death of the Spectrum. What remains on the tapes I have is the rooms from the first part and a few sections from part 2. There was also a notebook with some scribbled notes surviving. [...] The initial idea for it was a whim. I had finished *The Dragnet Case* and before giving the tape to Robert I added something like 'look forward to the next game *Murder, Mystery and Suspension Bridges*'. Robert's feedback was that *'Suspenders'* would be much better than *'Suspension Bridges'*. Each of the three parts was going to explore part of the title.

The game now is available, with each part as a standalone adventure on itch.io as part of the Sam Boon series.

[ET] *A Case of Murder, The Mystery of Markham Manor* and the final part *Both a Belt* and *Suspenders*. Cheers Robert for leaving me to weave *Suspenders* in somehow.

The Sam Boon series has been relatively successful for Edward, with a total of 1500 downloads (at the time of writing) across the three releases. As for the *GAC* title promised in the *Dragnet* credits, *The Plastic Man*, did that copy survive the loft cull?

[ET] This one is a mystery to me, I can vaguely remember working on it. Though I don't have *GAC* in the box of tapes I have left and don't

> "Cheers Robert for leaving me to weave *suspenders* in somehow"

appear to have the masters for the game either. It certainly wasn't anywhere near as complete as *The Dragnet Case*. I suspect I stopped working on it when *PAWS* arrived. Though who knows maybe someone somewhere will upload the remnants to the Internet.

Taskmaster's most recent release is a re-release of the *Dragnet Case* with the entire source code ported over to the more flexible *DAAD* system. Edward made use of the long dark winter nights to completely overhaul the Spectrum's source and produce a new version updated with brand new graphics and a host of other changes to the game's logic.

[ET] Since DAAD Ready didn't support drawstrings it meant creating new raster graphics. As before I chose to have fewer images than locations, about 1 in 6 locations got images at key points. Since *DAAD* provided better compression and didn't support graphics for the 48K version I was able to use the space to write a better intro. I was also able to add a couple of easter eggs. Some of the location descriptions got cut down. For example, the description of your kitchen sink was moved from the location description to the description of the sink. Many more items got descriptions. Lots of the back end of the game got overhauled due to me not fully understanding how to do things in *PAWS* back in the 80s. Once the 48K version was complete graphics were added for the larger memory computers.

Working back through the original source code in a modern editor also meant that bugs were easier to spot, especially around the heavy use of flags - something that the game relied heavily upon as suggested by Edward earlier. Parts of the original game that didn't work, or could lead the player into dead-ends, and contained the much maligned "instant-death" conditions that plagued some game designs of the 80s were fixed.

[ET] I've left most of the instant deaths in as they were a period touch, though the rest of the games will focus less on killing the player. The original game that was leaked had a bug where you were unable to avoid certain death while time travelling. The original release meant you could get stuck in the taxi cab forever if you didn't know what directions to give the driver. You could get stuck in a police cell in the future if you didn't bring the correct item from the past. [...] There are still a few gotchas left. The biggest is the ability to leave home without your door key, but they will remain.

Edward's old friend, Robert remains in the game, but his character has received a tweak and was given the opportunities of moving to a modern adventure system: Instead of slamming a door in the original game, Robert's rudeness [due to a lack of memory] has mellowed over the years, and he is now far more gracious towards the player's theft of an object in the game.

[ET] [I met] with Robert Powell a couple of weeks ago solved the mystery of the original *Dragnet* loading screen. I could remember the screen but I couldn't remember drawing it, having the skills to produce something that good or any software to help produce it. Robert remembered that he had produced it by first drawing it on graph paper, then using a routine from a computer magazine turning it into UDGs in BASIC. He still seemed to be scarred by the experience with memories of the program refusing to run. He also remembered excitedly cycling to my house on his chopper to deliver it once complete.

And what next for Edward, Robert and Taskmaster Software.

[ET] Hmm, well there are two more Sam Boon games to finish the series. *Both a Belt and Suspenders* and *The Feud*. The latter is further along in writing than the former. I have ideas for a more RPG-style adventure game, but I'm not sure *DAAD* will support all of my ideas, if it does it will need to be a multipart game. [Robert] was so excited by the interest shown in a game he had almost forgotten about that a couple of days after meeting he sent through a long description of a proposal for a new Sam Boon game.

AWARD-WINNING PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS

The Mystery of Markham Manor was awarded 2nd place in the adventure category of the Planeta Sinclair Spectrum Game of the Year awards for 2022. It was also winner of the Outstanding Retro Game of 2022 - Author's Choice - an annual competition designed to award excellence in creating interactive fiction. - at the Interactive Fiction Database website.

DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Edward Toovey is the latest casualty of the adventuring high seas, alone on a desolate desert island with five adventures to hold his sanity.

To avoid overloading the boat that deposits me on the desert island I'll stick to one device and of course, it has to be the ZX Spectrum, though a later 128K model if I can be fussy - I have nowhere to go and plenty of time. The tapes can also double up as relaxation aids to listen to while not playing.

First and foremost, ***The Hobbit.*** This is where adventuring started for me and also seemed to end with one of the main characters getting his skull cleaved. I've yet to finish the game and could happily lose myself for hours in it.

Next up is ***The Shrewsbury Key***, another uncompleted adventure from my youth and one I want to tick off the list.

After that is ***Donum***, the demo I played was a very impressive production, plus it knocked The Mystery of Markham Manor into 2nd place in the Spectrum Game of the Year competition.

After this, the choice gets so much more challenging. I bought Gareth Pitchford's book Twilight Inventory a couple of months ago and there are so many games listed in there that I have missed out on and want to experience. Two on the top of that list are ***The Antallis Mission*** and ***Murder He Said***.

The last requires a 128K Spectrum hence my fussy request. It sounds like a proper example of a detective adventure and would no doubt help improve future Sam Boon adventures. ***The Antallis Mission*** intrigues me with the description of being more a strategy game than an adventure though it is written using ***PAW*** and also including some decidedly ***unPAW*** like elements like drop down menus.

THE OCEAN ADVENTURES

Ocean Software's reputation was built upon a catalogue of high-quality arcade conversions and licenced games, but the Manchester giant wasn't afraid of creativity and innovation. In the mid-80s it published two text adventure games, one based upon its own well-established series, and the other brought a children's fantasy film to life. **Simon Butler,** a designer and graphic artist on both titles takes **The Classic Adventurer** on a voyage across the Ocean adventure waves. .

David Ward and Jon Woods founded Ocean Software in 1983 and for much of the subsequent decade competed with Geoff and Anne Brown's US Gold in Birmingham to be the biggest software house in Britain. Ocean grappled with US Gold and other companies such as Elite Systems and Gremlin Graphics for the rights to produce games based upon popular arcade and film licences. Its arcade output, however, was disrupted in December 1985 with the release of a graphic text adventure game created by ex-Denton Designs employees Ian Weatherburn and Simon Butler.

Ian Weatherburn was born in Huddersfield in 1963 and developed a love for the fledging computer scene during his student days at Huddersfield New College and when he studied one of the first computer science degrees at Liverpool University. He purchased an early ZX Spectrum and started to write his own game which in the end was good enough to catch the attention of superstar development startup Imagine Software.

With a little polish, Ian's game become *Zip Zap*, and he took great interest in Imagine's other ongoing game projects. He joined in April

1983, and his first full game as their employee came with the arcade-adventure *Alchemist* – a critically acclaimed classic on the ZX Spectrum.

Also new to the Imagine staff, was Simon Butler, brought to Imagine by Steve Cain to port the graphics of a game-in-development called *Pedro's Garden*. Butler commented to the Retro Gamesmaster website that he was paid an "obscene amount of money for very little work" giving a hint that the company didn't have the strategic and financial management to be a successful long-term enterprise and warning of the calamity to come.

[Simon Butler] To be brutally honest I never gave Imagine a second thought regarding their viability as a feasible or successful company. I saw them purely as someone prepared to pay me tons of hard cash for two days work and walked away with no plans to see them or any other video game related company ever again.

Ian and Simon were briefly introduced to each other at Imagine, but never really shared the same game development space. Ian had a reputation for being difficult to work with, even though his appearance in various documentaries and historic videos portrayed him as a mild-mannered young man. Eugene Jarvis, another teenage star developer at Imagine [only 17 at the time, when Ian was 19], and Peter Harrap at Gremlin Graphics often commented how being thrust into the limelight at such a young age had detrimental effects on their mental wellbeing.

[SB] Ian was tactless and rude, and they were his good points! Whether the limelight affected him, I cannot say. [...] He was hard working and an exceptionally talented coder. Our relationship was purely professional, there was no friendship, no bonding. He needed pixels, I provided them. That was it in a nutshell.

Business at Imagine was disorganised and chaotic, as many early British computer games companies endured. It was the "wild west", and most were making it up as they went along. Though many of the first British companies managed to navigate this period of operational chaos, Imagine were destined for an early demise. Butler commented to Retro Gamesmaster that Imagine was "was spiralling towards destruction from an early stage" stating that "money was thrown around with wild abandon on everything except the bills and wages". Simon refused to accept that the naivety of those in the boardrooms was an excuse for companies failing.

[SB] I'm not sure naivety comes into it. It was the start of the 80s where "greed is good" was the mantra and people were living fast. Those behind the wheel at Imagine obviously had their own reasons for living as they did and throwing cash around like it was going out of fashion. [...] They made a set of decisions that can only truly be judged with hindsight.

Imagine's ruination came abruptly and catastrophically, with BBC television documentary cameras on-hand to provide a unique and highly public fly-on-the-wall commentary on its fall from grace. *Bandersnatch*, it's illustrious and much-hyped "megagame" distracted the management team, and their extravagant spending drained the coffers - until the bailiffs brought their troubles into razor-sharp focus as they moved in to repossess the shiny sports cars and other playthings.

Attempting to recover any positive from the ruins of the company,

VIDEO NASTY

Imagine's astonishing fall from grace is painfully documented in a BBC documentary series about commerce called Commercial Breaks. Both Imagine and Ocean feature in an episode called The Battle for Santa's Software - a "story of two companies both searching for the magic ingredient which will make their game a Christmas hit."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChmQBK_EaUQ

Ian, along with some of the displaced development talent co-founded a new studio called Denton Designs in September of 1984 with colleague Steve Cain. The relationship was short-lived, and Ian became unhappy with the ethos of Denton as a work-for-hire studio instead of his own vision, forging its own path as a boutique developer, in control of its own destiny.

[SB] Ian was with Dentons for no more than a few hours. Imagine had imploded magnificently, on TV no less, so the staff all went their separate ways. Steve Cain, Ally Noble, Karen Davies, John Gibson and Graham "Kenny" Everett all decided to set up their own company along with Ian. They found premises on the other side of Liverpool and on the first day Ian basically told them that he was the boss and they mere underlings.

"For Ian, Imagine was heaven on Earth" Steve Cain told Sinclair User, "He wanted Denton to be just like Imagine. When we signed the contract to do *Shadowfire* [an icon-driven strategy game conceptualised during the *Bandersnatch* development], Ian said we had to do it his way or he would leave. So, we sacked him."

[SB] Steve's quote clashes with fact. *Shadowfire* came long after Ian had gone. Denton produced *Gifts of the Gods*, *Roland's Rat Race* and *Transformers* before they got to *Shadowfire*.

To bolster its staff, Steve turned to his faithful friend Simon to join him at Denton. Butler was back working in London but was struggling to find full-time employment, so he leapt at the chance to earn and started to commute back and forth to Liverpool to be part of Cain's new project. He found the new company focused, and well organised, with several game contracts in place and lined-up for the development teams.

[SB] I worked on the Commodore 64 on *Transformers*, their most successful title regardless of the fact that it was fairly awful. My "happy-go-lucky" nature didn't sit well with Karen Davies [another graphics artist] and we butted heads on a far-too regular basis, so I went to work freelance.

Both Ian and Simon were now back working for themselves. Ian used his connections and reputation from his abortive stint with Denton and approached Ocean Software to continue the relationship as a third-party, freelance developer. He needed a graphics artist to work on a text adventure game he had pitched to the Manchester company.

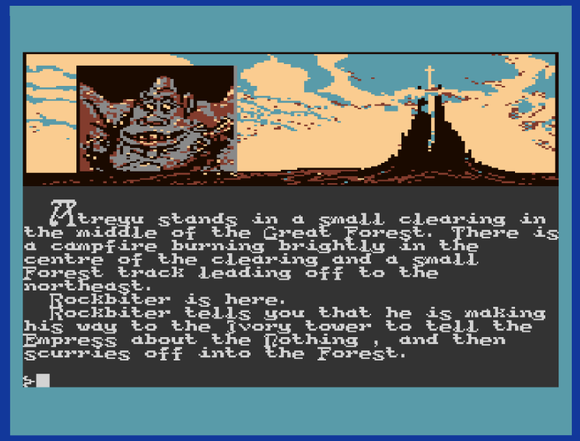
[SB] I teamed up with Ian as he was looking for a pixel pusher. [...] The idea behind a text graphical adventure was Ian's and he simply threw the idea at Ocean, and they accepted.

Ian and Simon worked out of Ian's flat in Mossley Hill, Liverpool. The proposed text adventure, *The Neverending Story* was already in development, and Ian had scoped out the design of the game from having read the book - written by German fantasy author Michael Ende back in 1979.

For Ocean, contracting the development of a text adventure was a departure from its usual arcade output. But they were a serious outfit, open to new ideas, and both Jon Wood and David Ward, the founders, were business people who had learned from their mistakes and those of the competition around them. They knew how to explore new genres – but how and why Ocean acquired the licence for The Neverending Story movie and decided on a text adventure remains unexplained.

[SB] How the project came along I cannot say. I seriously doubt [...] that either David Ward or Jon Woods [had read the book]. This was well before Ocean became the movie license kings, so until asked this question I have to admit I had never given this topic any thought. [...] I have no idea what discussions may or may not have taken place regarding the game. I simply got asked "would you like to do the graphics on this?" and answered in the affirmative.

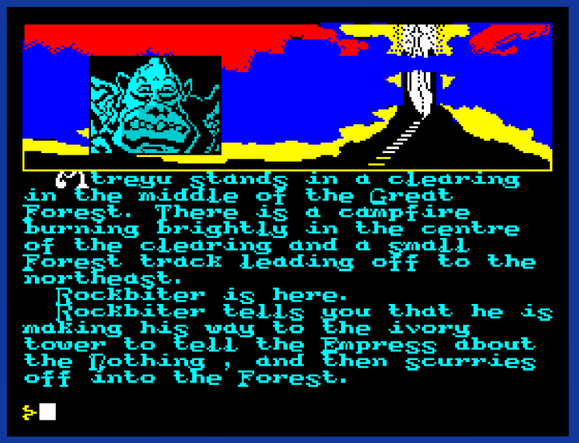
Despite the cataclysmic collapse of Imagine, its illustrious image avoided being tarnished completely and still possessed some value. When Ocean stepped in to purchase the bankrupt business it



[Above] The Atari version received a US release thanks to publisher IntelliCreations, Inc and DataSoft.

[Above] The Commodore 64 version and graphics were complete when Simon Butler joined the project.

[Above] The Amstrad's moody colour pallette show off the beautifully designed and detailed illustrations.



[Above] The colourful ZX Spectrum version suffered with a squashed text display and a font that was difficult to read.

inherited a strong and prestigious brand which they used in their favour to speculate on film, TV and coin-op licences. Woods and Ward did the groundwork and found themselves flying all around the world from the US to Japan in order to secure "creative relationships" with the likes of Konami, Taito, Capcom and Data East.

Gary Bracey joined Ocean as Software Development Manager at the start of 1986, taking over from Tony Kavanagh who had left to cross the Pennines and join Gremlin Graphics in Sheffield. Bracey recalled their commercial strategy to Chris Wilkins and Roger Kean in The History of Ocean Software: "The way it went in the early days was we got the game out well after the film was released as we'd wait to see if it was going to be a box-office success. If it was, then we had to go round knocking on doors, saying we'd like to license your film, please, and maybe we'd get it out in time for the video release if we were lucky."

The Neverending Story movie was released in cinemas in July 1984 and was a winner with film critics and audiences alike. Backed by an international smash-hit title track from 80s heartthrob Limahl, the film went onto gross over $20million domestically, and an estimated $100million in takings worldwide. The fact that the theme tune, performed by a well-known Manchester-born artist had reached No. 4 in the British charts, coupled with Oceans speculative approach to licences could have contributed to their willingness to take a punt at developing the game. Whatever the reason, Ian Weatherburn took the lead in developing the narrative and started on the game design and challenge of writing the puzzle logic of an adventure game.

[SB] I think Ian just planned out a thread that needed to be followed to stay true to the narrative of the novel. You made right decisions and progressed successfully, you made incorrect choices and it was game over. It wasn't particularly advanced. I had no hand in the design, as I said it was in place when I started work on the project.

According to game historians and retro gaming canon, Ocean secured its first movie licence, *Rambo*, in 1985. This may have been true if *Neverending Story* was part of its bundle of negotiations that year. However, the licenced adventure was certainly the first game to hit the previews in the press and eventually the shelves, with Home Computing magazine in August mentioning the game in dispatches as having a Christmas release [*Rambo* would arrive a month later].

Adverts for the adventure featuring renowned Italian artist Renato Casaro's exquisite film poster started to appear in November, and by the time of a second preview in December in Crash magazine, development was at a mature stage and release was imminent. Crash's preview article featured a host of information about the game's narrative, engine features and size – with the blurb boasting that the text was over 100K of data in three sequential parts.

The game followed the main narrative of the film, set in Fantasia, "a world of the imagination facing extinction by the 'All Consuming Nothing', eroding its very fabric and condemning it to oblivion." A boy, Bastian Balthazar Bux discovers an old book on the shelves of an antique bookshop that is entitled "The Neverending story". Blowing away the cobwebs and dust from its jacket, he becomes engrossed in the compelling tale – Fantasia's ruling Empress is ailing, and its people needs a hero to save them from the Nothing. That hero is calling Atreyu – a young warrior tasked with discovering a cure for the Empress and restoring her to health in order to fight. Atreyu is armed with a medallion called the Auryn that guides and protects, but the Nothing summons a highly intelligent wolf-like creature called Gmork to hunt the hero down. It's here where the game begins, with the player taking the role of Atreyu.

As Simon states, when he arrived to work on the project with Ian, he found it very much towards the end of development. Steve Cain had contributed most of the pixel work, and for some reason had not stayed around to complete the small amount required to finish off the game. This left Ian to turn to Simon to fulfil the remaining artwork requirements and translate all of the graphics over to other computer formats.

[SB] Steve had done all the graphics for the C64 so I simply had a Commodore set up on one side of my desk and then tried to copy the existing graphics as best I could onto the Spectrum [and Amstrad]. Why he never continued with the other versions will have to remain one of life's little mysteries. [...] [Anyway,] Ian either liked or disliked what I had done and if there were changes required, I changed things until he was satisfied.

Timescales differed, but Simon remembers that every game project followed the same development "plan" – if such a thing could be attributed to making games in the 80s. As an artist he would be provided with a list of images that he had to complete and would methodologically work through them, from start to finish.

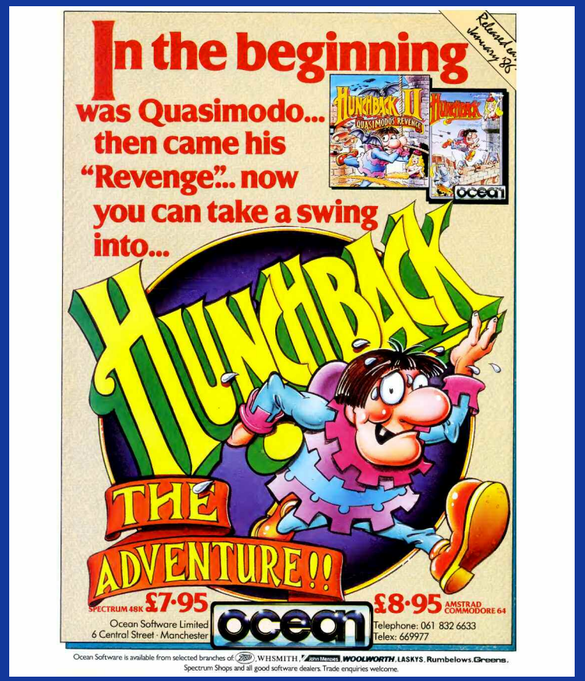
[SB] There were one or two images where simple copying would not suffice - if I recall - and then I had to come up with my own original ideas. [...] The coder on each project would prioritise what was needed first and you bowed to their demands. It made life easier.

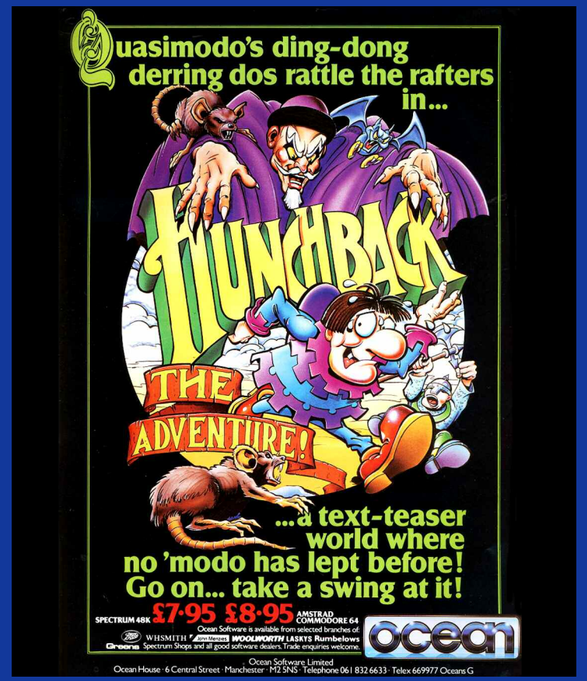
The *Neverending Story's* graphics layout really promoted the quality of Steve and Simon's artwork. The bottom half of the screen was dedicated to text, and the top devoted to Cain and Butler's intricate pixels, with a narrow graphics window that displayed an attractive landscape background overlaid with small avatar portraits of characters you encountered throughout the quest. There was also a very neat, oversized icon representation of the player's current inventory. "If only other companies spent as much time over the appearance of their games" quipped The White Wizard, reviewing the game in issue 8 of Zzap!64 magazine.

[SB] The Layout of the screens in all versions other than the C64 was down to me doing the actual pixels but Ian would give me sizes and specifications and tell me what would go where. The look was my area. Each version had its own size restrictions, so we attempted to get as similar a layout on each [computer] as possible. Whether we succeeded I cannot recall.

For the majority of the game the detailed image of Atreyu engrossed in his book remained in the corner, but as the adventure continued it was replaced by other characters he encountered. Simon's graphics conversions to the Spectrum were particularly impressive, with the Sinclair version of the game being the most colourful and detailed.

[SB] Spectrum pixels always came closest to a pencil sketch due to the resolution. The only problem after that was attribute clash. I am





Ocean Software's legendary artist Bob Wakelin enhanced and evolved Century Electronics' original Quasimodo character with help from Simon Butler for its inlay and advertisement artwork. **[Above-Left]** The teaser advert that ran during 1986 before being replaced with **[Above-Right]** the final art that featured characters from the finished game.

proud of the work I did on the Spectrum version but was always a fan of my friend Steve's work. I felt some parts of mine were better in some ways while his had more colour.

Unlike most of the adventures before it, there was no restriction of the game's contents in order to fit it into RAM. There was no need to squeeze the game into a single load as Ocean lavished money on the game's production and The *Neverending Story* spanned three individual parts on two sides of a cassette. Butler's graphics were able to shine, and to add a further unique touch, there was a terrific rendition of Limahl's chart topping theme tune to accompany the action – something only seen in very few games like *Kentilla* and its Rob Hubbard soundtrack. The engine was quick, and responsive and the text was displayed in a pseudo-gothic font, designed by Steve Cain. It added atmosphere and gave a medieval feel but at times could be a challenge to read.

[SB] If it had been then Ocean would have requested the font be changed. It was never changed therefore the Ocean testing department had no issues with the font.

It was a thoroughly professional product and contained the mastery and polish that was expected of Ocean. To fight the high quality of US Gold's imports, both Jon Woods and David Ward knew they had to deliver some of the best products in the marketplace. The critics across all platforms agreed. Crash magazine awarded the game 7/10 saying that *The Neverending Story* was "a very professional piece of software with really good looks. The pictures that represent the different locations, objects and characters are of a very high quality". Sinclair User commented that the game was "a big, attractive adventure with plenty of polish and professionalism in its production." However, they all agreed that the omission of an EXAMINE command in the game left players befuddled (perhaps Ian felt the iconic representation of objects was enough) and the literacy level of the prose and difficulty of puzzles were a little light and fairly simple – understandable given the nature of the film which was aimed squarely at a younger audience.

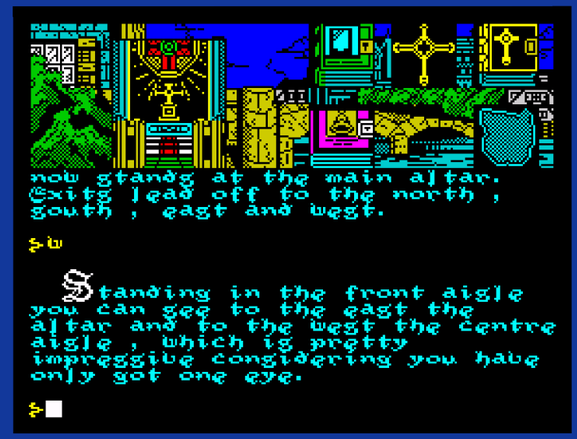
In a last hurrah, the Atari 800 received a port, one of the last games to be pushed onto the ageing platform by Ocean. The credits have Steve Cain as providing the graphics for conversion outfit IntelliCreations, but Simon was the man who performed the transformation.

[SB] I did indeed work on the Atari 8-bit version. It may have been an oversight or perhaps a sly dig at me from Ian as I had decided to quit games at that juncture. The 8-bit version was my final game or so I thought, and I created the graphics in 8 hours and was paid handsomely.

Whether it was a dig at him or not wasn't an issue for the obstinate Butler. He had made the decision during *The Neverending Story's* development to quit games development and return to his advertising career in London.

[SB] Ian got Steve to convince me to do the Atari 8-bit version which I grudgingly agreed to do, and I completed the graphics in 7-8 hours. I then went down South but things didn't pan out and I came back to Liverpool whereupon Ian offered me the pixel work on *Hunchback the Adventure*.

Ocean's very first licenced has been *Hunchback*. The original coin-op was a frequent sight in the emerging arcades of Britain and was manufactured by a small company called Century Electronics in Oldham. Jon Woods recalled to Chris Wilkins that "Everything was totally arcade-driven then. Finding an arcade company from Manchester, we thought, 'Oh wow, that's great, we'll nip over and see them.'" Ocean's original platformer based on the arcade machine was released in March 1984 and did exceptionally well. The Manchester outfit continued the series [with another arcade game] in February 1985 with *Hunchback II – Quasimodo's Revenge*.



[Above] Simon Butler's superb pixel work shines in the ZX Spectrum version of *Hunchback: The Adventure*. Though a rework of Ian Weatherburn's *The Neverending Story* adventure engine, *Hunchback* featured several graphical improvements and a combat system that called for some rather grisly images. Also notice the *NOMAD* Easter Egg in the final image to the bottom-right.

[Above] Simon's movie artwork inspired loading screen for the ZX Spectrum version of *The Neverending Story*.

[Above] Another ZX Spectrum loading screen. *Hunchback: The Adventure* showcases Simon's excellent expression of detail.

They switched direction for the third game in the series and decided that Quasimodo would appear in a text adventure in his next outing. As with *The Neverending Story*, the commercial decisions around continuing with the genre are not known. *The Neverending Story* seems to have sold well. It appeared in a plenty of adventure help columns with players requesting hints and tips and received a boost in sales from having a dedicated 128K version bundled [with all three parts strung together in a single load] with the new, upgraded Sinclair Spectrum computer.

Whatever the reason, Ocean commissioned a new text adventure from Ian. For the programmer, it would be a straight-forward reworking of the existing engine, albeit with new narration and a brand new set of puzzles. For Simon, however, he didn't have the starting point left to him on the previous game from Cain - he would have to create the entire graphics library from scratch.

[SB] *Hunchback's* graphics were all created straight on-screen, it was easier that way and I have rarely, if ever, created graphics on paper and then translated them into a digital version. It was a challenge, but one I think I rose to adequately and something that became de rigueur as the years passed.

You played Quasimodo, on a quest to rescue his sweetheart, the alluring Esmerelda who was being held against her will by the evil Cardinal and Bishop of Notre Dame. As with *The Neverending Story*, there were three parts to complete; escaping from Notre Dame avoiding the many denizens and guards dispatched by the Cardinal; navigating through the many perils of Paris to find the Cardinal's mansion; and finally challenging and defeating the two foes and escaping with your sweetheart in order to live happily ever after.

The adventure did offer a very similar experience to the previous game, but the graphics provided extra opportunities for Simon. There were a few additions, extra touches and embellishments to the imagery, including simple animations using the Spectrum's flashing attribute colours. It was a far more violent game, and Quasimodo would occasionally clash and fight with characters he would meet in his quest. Combat meant a frequent need to KILL GUARD [and more repetition of commands] thus the graphics did call for more grisly visuals. In contrast to their criticism of *The Neverending Story*, some commentators now questioned the gruesomeness of the graphics and content, and the non-child friendly actions required (or allowed) in the vocabulary such as KILL.

[SB] I simply drew the graphics that Ian requested. He had no qualms about content and I merely did what I was being paid to do.

Still, there was some fun to be had and *Hunchback* didn't take itself too seriously. The game's text was far jollier and even the instructions had a certain feeling of merriment not found in the previous game. There was an Easter Egg in the pixels too, as a nod to Ian and Simon's other contribution to the Ocean canon. In one of the locations, you can pick up a cassette labelled *NOMAD* in tribute to the duo's colourful 1985 hit.

[SB] To be completely honest I cannot remember, [...] whose idea that was is anyone's guess. Everyone put little trademark tricks in where they could. There were none that I know of in *The Neverending Story* and I only know about the *NOMAD* cassette in *Hunchback* from you telling me. But yes, artists always tried to hide things in their graphics.

Hunchback The Adventure was released in September 1986. Ocean stalwart Bob Wakelin created the inlay and advertisement artwork working from an early preparatory sketch drawn by Simon. Bob took his familiar Hunchback character from the first two games and incorporated him into a fun collage with the evil Cardinal, Rats, Bats and a palace Guard. Ocean had run a teaser advertisement campaign in the run up to the September release featuring a slight alternative series of artworks by Wakelin – proclaiming "In the beginning was Quasimodo, then came his *Revenge* now you can take a swing into *Hunchback The Adventure.*" Despite the obvious rehash, critics generally enjoyed the game, though it received a mixed bag of review scores in the press. Butler's graphics elevated the game beyond the usual line-up of formulaic adventures, even if the plot did feel listless in places. Crash magazine, however, did enjoy the comedic elements in the game saying "*Hunchback the Adventure* is an attractive, stylised adventure with much humour and a great amount to play, what with it coming in three parts. It won't enthral adventure freaks, but it will keep many a novice chuckling before they get the hump." Thomas A Christie perhaps summed up the title best: "*Hunchback The Adventure* ironically seemed to be almost anachronistic in its approach, offering largely simplistic gameplay beneath its highly polished veneer" he commented, going on to conclude that "the title's impressive visual appearance and drolly humorous prose [are at] variance with the lacklustre performance of the parser and unambitious execution of its overall narrative strategy."

A third adventure, using the same engine as *The Neverending Story* and *Hunchback* was completed but never released. Ocean's Batman licence had proved to be a huge critical and commercial success and paved the way for three memorable and high-quality titles: The first from Jon Ritman, an isometric adventure in 1986, Jonathan "Joffa" Smith's *Caped Crusader* arcade-adventure in 1988 and Mike Lamb's *Batman: The Movie*, a fantastic multi-genre game that accompanied the blockbuster Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson film from 1989.

[SB] [*Batman: The Adventure*] was exactly the same format as the previous two adventures, but knowing Ian as I did, if anyone can be said to have truly known him, if he could reuse something with no changes and still get paid then that is exactly what he would do. The only difference [to the artwork], if that word can be used, is that I attempted to make it look like a comic book.

Simon claims that a version of *Batman The Adventure* was finished on all three of the main home computer formats of the time – Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC – but for some reason, the game never reached the market. "It was actually finished. As for why it never got released, well that's between Ian Weatherburn and the top brass at Ocean" Butler told Frank Gasking at the Games That Weren't website. "We were simply milking *The Neverending Story* engine for all it was worth."

[SB] I have a vague memory of it being down to the fact that Ocean already had Jon Ritman's isometric *Batman* title and they didn't want to muddy the waters with a text adventure that perhaps people might think was in some way connected. We got paid, so released or not it was one in the win column for me financially.

No previews appeared in the press, or even mentions in dispatches despite the high-profile licence and the funded investment both Ian and Simon had put into the development. It is difficult to comprehend any game so far through a development cycle not receiving any column-inches in gaming magazines, even if it was eventually cancelled. Ocean's Gary Bracey confirms that the game did exist, despite the lack of archival evidence.

"Oh, God! I don't think our text adventures really deserve a place in history – [they are] better forgotten! "

[Gary Bracey] Oh, God! I don't think our text adventures really deserve a place in history – [they are] better forgotten! As I recall there was a *Batman*, a *Hunchback* and a *Neverending Story*. All were pretty unremarkable, as I recall. I also think these preceded me at Ocean so - rightly - I imagine they'd learned their lesson to stick to arcade-style games from then on. In later years I was keen to re-explore the genre in a more updated presentation and so we published *Billy The Kid* [see Issue 01] by Level 9, and *Lost Patrol*, both of which were gritty adventures, but not text-driven.

Post *Batman*, Ian and Steve Cain setup their own boutique development studio called Canvas Software and were later joined by Simon. Cain had left Denton Design with the ambition to create a larger team able to deliver multiple titles for multiple publishers and generate greater revenue. He didn't stay long, failing to find a working relationship with Weatherburn and stepped back with other colleagues to create ST, PC and Amiga games as a studio called Frames. He would be replaced at Canvas by Roy Gibson who became Ian's new partner.

Canvas produced a catalogue of fairly dire and unforgettable conversions and ports, mostly for Ocean and US Gold. The occasional glint of gold did emerge from the murk, but these tended to be limited to the original US developed Commodore 64 versions of fantastic games such as *Leaderboard* and *PSI-5 Trading Company*. When it came to the Z80 ports, corners were cut, and products were turned out as quickly as possible. Unsurprisingly, Canvas entered bankruptcy two years after forming, and Butler left having not being paid for his work.

[SB] I left before they started on *Road Runner*, so [Canvas] survived at least until 1988. I quit due to disinterest and their general lack of professionalism. I cannot recall what my final project was, but I completed all my tasks and simply resigned.

Dealing with the collapse of another enterprise must have weighed heavily on Ian's shoulders and it is rumoured that he was deeply in debt and under threat of serious litigation. Tragically he would commit suicide in 1989 at just 25 years of age. Assistant Deputy Coroner Mr David Ludlam contributed to the inquest into Ian's death and stated that the "computer expert" had "business worries" and "gambling debts."

We should also remember the considerable contribution that Steve Cain made with the original *The Neverending Story* adventure for Ocean. "There were times, I am privileged to say that I accompanied him in his endeavours, at other times we went our separate professional ways, but he always remained my friend." Butler recalled of Cain to the World of Spectrum website. Heartbreakingly, Steve was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2004, and despite his disease continued to work in the games industry for over a year until his death in July 2006. "In his passing, the industry has lost a founding figure but is richer for his time and influence" eulogised Simon.

Simon moved on from Canvas, worked for Frames, had a period freelancing for many clients including the late Fergus McGovern and Virgin before ending up with another Manchester-based developer - who were also working for Ocean - Active Minds. "They had the most inactive minds I had encountered to date" he told the Retro Asylum podcast.

With Active Mind's development of *Total Recall* hitting the buffers, Butler offered salvation to Gary Bracey in order to rescue the game. "You let me cherry pick who I want from Ocean and the one or two from Active Minds and I'll fucking save this" he recounted on the podcast. "There's a proviso" he added, "I get a job at Ocean." Bracey agreed, and Simon returned to the Ocean fold.

[SB] I offered Gary a lifeline and what eventually became an olive branch between us. [...] I told him that [...] we would give them their Christmas Number One. With no other options open to him, I was back in Ocean.

Despite Simon's often downbeat responses to his time in games in the 80s, it remains one of the highlights of his professional career, especially his later time with Ocean.

Simon remains a candid, charismatic and outspoken personality of the retro community and is still actively involved in development for the Spectrum Next as well as games on PC and Switch. He can occasionally be seen and heard at various retro events up and down the country as well as co-hosting the Retro Gaming Roundup podcast.

Format: IBM PC, Apple II, Macintosh and Commodore 64
Publisher: Bantam Electronic Publishing
Developer: Imagic
Release Date: June 1985

SHERLOCK HOLMES: ANOTHER BOW

Imagic was a vibrant start-up games studio making a name for itself in fast-paced arcade games for the Atari 2600 and IntelliVision consoles. It was therefore a surprise when it partnered with New York book publisher Bantam to develop a series of text adventure games. Writer Peter Golden and programmer Steve DeFrisco are Watson and Holmes ready to open an investigation for **The Classic Adventurer.**

Imagic was a development studio founded in 1981 by disgruntled ex-employees of Atari and Mattel Electronics - Bill Grub, Brian Dougherty, Dennis Koble and Jim Golberger. Grub had ambitions of Imagic becoming the best games studio in the world, so he returned to headhunt his staff of creative developers from his former employers. In March 1982 the studio started by shipping games as a

third-party developer, releasing a raft of titles for the popular Atari 2600 and Intellivision consoles.

Steve DeFrisco, a 25 year old San Jose State University graduate was contacted by Brian Dougherty and was brought into Imagic to be part of their intern program. Steve had written a game on the Atari 800 called *Save the Schmoo* and this impressed Dougherty so much at the interview panel they employed Steve in the summer of 1982.

At the start of 1984, Imagic were contacted by Bantam Electronic Publishing with an offer to collaborate on a joint venture to write and produce text adventure games based upon several books in the Bantam stable. The Digital Antiquarian, Jimmy Maher outlined the growing fashion to develop "bookware" in a 2021 blog post: "Book publishers, book authors, [...] spurred by the commercial success of early text adventures [...] which described the new frontier of text-based digital interactive storytelling as the beginning of a whole new era in literature [...] made significant investments in the field."

[Steve DeFrisco] Honestly, I think the idea of moving gaming to computers rather than consoles, and different type of gameplay was the driving force for these types of titles.

In order to help its designers understand the writing process, Imagic proactively sought the help of a professional author to provide a masterclass into story telling. Peter Golden was that man.

In 1984 he was working as a magazine journalist in Albany, New York when he received a phone call from Bruce Davis, then the CEO of Imagic inviting him to Imagic's Los Gatos Headquarters located on University Avenue. He was shown a copy of Infocom's *Zork* and asked to share his thoughts on how such a game could be made, but made better.

[Peter Golden] A friend of mine called and asked if I'd come to Los Gatos and talk to the programmers about how to construct a story from the books Bantam wanted to translate into computer games. I read the books and talked to the programmers. [...] [I] liked playing [*Zork*], but it wasn't much to read. [...] I knew I could, from a literary point of view, write a more literary game.

Peter initially stayed for two weeks with the development teams at Imagic. "I talked about structure in novels", he told The Times Union in May 1987, "I was a computerphobe like all writers, but the problem of where things go and why in the structure of literature is similar to the programmer's problem of how to structure things for a computer intelligence. We dealt with information and deductive reasoning."

[PG] Then Imagic thought that it would be easier to hire me to write the games. I knew nothing about computers, but I was very interested in the structure of novels, so it wasn't a difficult leap for me.

Once he had accepted the offer of employment, he was under contract to Bantam and Peter began to commute from California to and from the hustle and bustle of New York State at least once a month giving updates to the publisher. At Imagic he joined the existing development team of Steve DeFrisco, Mark Klein, Bob Pauley, Wilfredo Aguliar, Michael Becker, Alan Smith, Brad Stewart, Dave Johnson and Bruce Pederson.

[SD] Alan Smith was a good, solid programmer and a good person. Easy to laugh, and if I remember correctly, an avid bowler. [...] I shared an apartment with Brad Stewart for a while. He has a "pun field" that surrounds him. It has been scientifically proven that the more time you spend near him the more you start punning. [He had a] quiet confidence and a dry sense of humour. Mark Klein is still a good friend, [...] Dave Johnson is a bit eccentric, and seemed a bit aloof, but was wicked smart. [...] Michael Becker is a solid person with surprising ideas. Great creative person to have on your team. [Lastly] Bruce Pederson was quite introverted, but very smart. He had trouble in big groups but was very conversant one-on-one.

As innovations go, Imagic were starting to cobble together what would be recognised today as a modern multi-disciplinary development team. It was going beyond the established norm in the early 1980s that a soul developer, or at a push, a programmer and an artist would develop a game from start to finish. "As far as I know, this was one of the first partnering of [professional] writers in the game industry" recalled Michael Becker to the Atari Compendium website. Golden himself, told The Times Union that before him, most interactive computer fiction was dreamed up by "professional computer jocks, amateur writers. I was one of the first professional writers, amateur computer jocks, to add to the genre" he said.

[SD] I was very welcoming of adding more creative people to the teams. We worked with graphic artists who weren't programmers,

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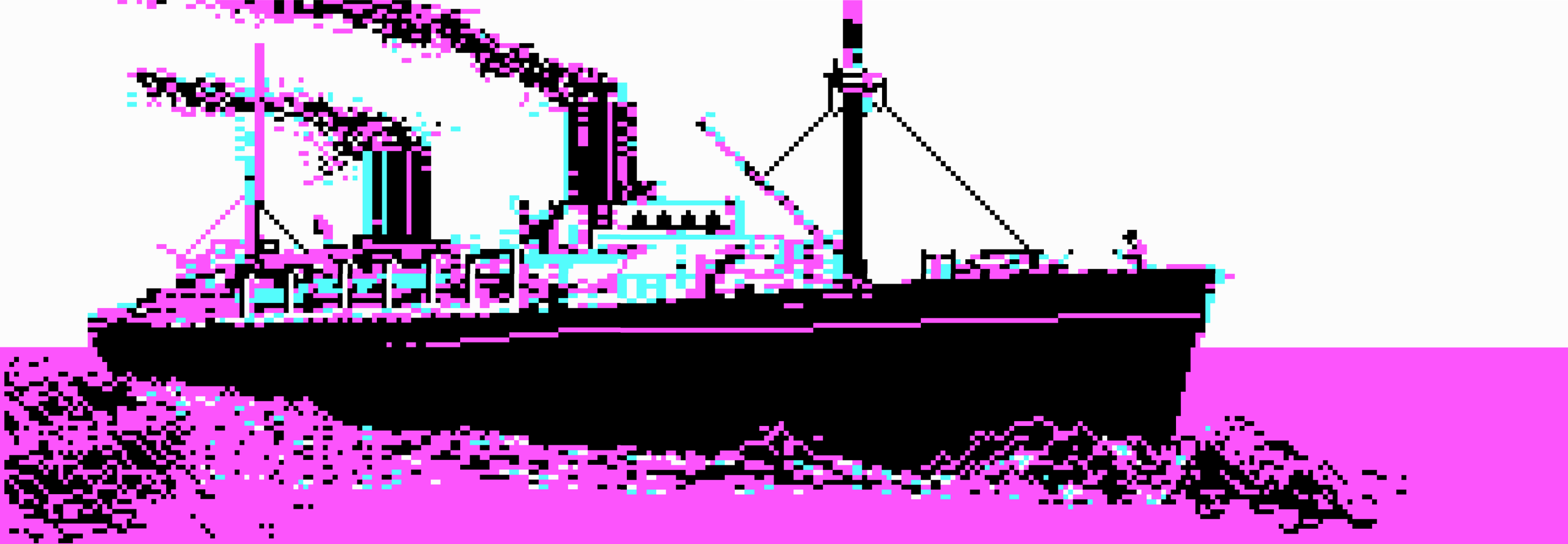
[Below] Magenta features heavily in the IBM PC CGA loading screen from *I, Damiano: The Wizard of Partestrada*.



[Above] Sherlock Holmes joins Dr Watson and a cast of celebrity passengers aboard the ship the SS Destiny in *Sherlock Holmes: Another Bow*.

[so] why not add writers into the mix? The action-based games had a little story telling aspect, and the marketing group helped fill out, or create, stories for the games. Having a dedicated writer is a good idea.

The first book Bantam were interested in converting was *I, Damiano: The Wizard of Partestrada*. The game was originally called *The Damiano Trilogy*, since it was based on author RA MacAvoy's three novels Damiano, Damion's Lute and Raphael. Some work had already been undertaken on the title, mostly on the game design and prose, so when Golden arrived, he found a manuscript in a state where he could further develop the game.

[PG] The original writer was let go, and they asked me to take it in hand. The pressure to complete it was enormous, but we managed to get it done.

Steve DeFrisco worked with Mark Klein and collaborated on the game's two versions: one for the IBM PC and the second for the Apple II. DeFrisco recalled a visit by the author in an interview for the Atari Compendium site. "The Author of the Damiano series, R.A. MacAvoy, came into the office one day so that our writer, Peter Golden, could discuss it with her. She was – eccentric. Mark and I shared all of the data and some code." He recalled.

In the game, you are Damiano Delstrego, a young witch who lives in a different but very evocative Renaissance Italy. Your life is soaked in magic: the angel Raphael drops by from time to time to give you lute lessons, while his evil brother Lucifer scheme with his cohorts to subvert the city of Partestrada. As in the novels, you must find a way to save your beloved city from Lucifer, as well as from evil General Pardo who is about to start a bloody war.

The story was skewed slightly to increase the number of puzzles that the narration could support, and the goal of the adventure was altered to finding a sacred stone that contained the secret of life. I, Damiano had the underpinnings of an excellent adventure - competent writing and a unique setting, combined with some exceptionally controversial topics and a novel idea that actions could be considered good or evil. In fact, the game depicts a constant moral spectrum, giving the player a visual position on whether they are virtuous or wicked. Slide too far along the axis to evil and the game ends with Satan recruiting another malevolent follower.

The PC game was perhaps the best-looking version, even though it used IBM's original restricted 4-colour, 320x200 CGA graphics mode against the Apple II's more colourful palette. The top third of the screen devoted to images and the rest to text and the command line. Damiano himself is depicted as a constant image, overlaid on a background of the location, and each actor that he encounters is displayed alongside.

There are irksome spot sound effects from the PC beeper, and the game also features some small-frame animations for several of the game's actions such as CASTing magic.

The graphics unfortunately showed the hallmarks of a game made with the first implementation of a brand-new adventure engine. The intricate design of each character avatar is spoiled and lost against the rudimentary and often garish background graphics. The parser too, implemented a very basic VERB/NOUN command structure, and although the blurb boasted of an extensive vocabulary most players found it restrictive and uncooperative.

[SD] The scripts were mainly created by the writer. The capabilities of the text scanning and the branch taking was essentially a large database with links to different nodes based on the user input. The challenge was getting it to work in the first place, and the tool that allowed the writer to create the script. I give Mark Klein the most credit for that work.

The critics enjoyed the game, especially the broad and challenging narrative but complained that it downplayed the quality of puzzles in favour of linear storytelling. From the outset there seemed to be a conflict between the programmers and Golden to squeeze in as much text as possible. From his screenplay, he flooded the office with pages and pages of prose for the adventure.

[PG] Memory! Memory! Memory! Going out to the disk wasn't a problem—RAM was the problem, but this was true in those days whatever program was being written.

Eventually the solution was simple, to separate the interpreter that executed commands and displayed location text from the data of text and graphics – and to use disks on the PC and Apple. With this added capacity, as long as the interpreter ran in available RAM it could use the extra storage to dynamically pull the other objects it needed.

[PG] The programmers kept pointing out to me that they had limited space. I replied they were all geniuses and would find a way to crunch the code. They were often unhappy with me. The truth is they were the smartest people I have ever worked with, and they taught me a great deal about computers.

[SD] Well, we had to load and purge different parts of the "database" of the game. In *Damiano*, we had different locations that the character went to - different cities, stops along the way, etc. These became the definitions for loading the different parts of the text database for the interactions for that location. So, we had some RAM dedicated to the currently loaded text, and the currently needed graphics – the backgrounds and overlays.

I, Damiano was given a brief mention in magazines in September 1984 and was released in the fall of the same year. Bantam pulled out the stops in packaging the game, producing an attractive Infocom style, three-flap gatefold folio with a disk in a pull-open pouch. The

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[Overleaf] Every character is represented with a detailed avatar that appears in the location graphic when they are encountered. The game's documentation also comes with a handy guide to each of the passengers aboard the ship.



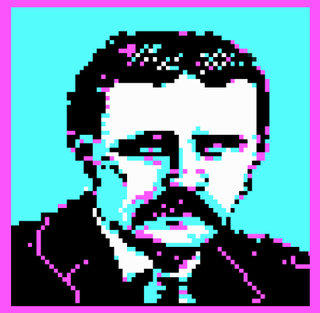

















[Above] Introductory screens for *Sherlock Holmes: Another Bow*. The narrative is told from the writing perspective of Dr Watson, and the game starts at Chapter 4, following on from an rousing three chapter introduction written by Peter Golden.

folio contained comprehensive instructions and two feelies – a letter and beautiful map drawn by Steve DeFrisco's housemate.

For its second Living Literature release, Bantam took the bold decision to create a brand-new storyline from an intellectual property that wasn't uniquely part of their fold. They did mitigate the gamble however, by picking one of the best loved fictional characters of the age – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Holmes had remained at the forefront of popular culture since the last of Doyle's short stories was published in 1927. He was one of the most portrayed literary characters on screen and in print in the tens of thousands of unofficial and official works that added to his canon.

There was another advantage too: The copyright over the works had expired in 1980, so there was an opportunity for Bantam – or any other developer [**see *Sherlock* in Issue 08**] – to create games based in the Holmesian universe.

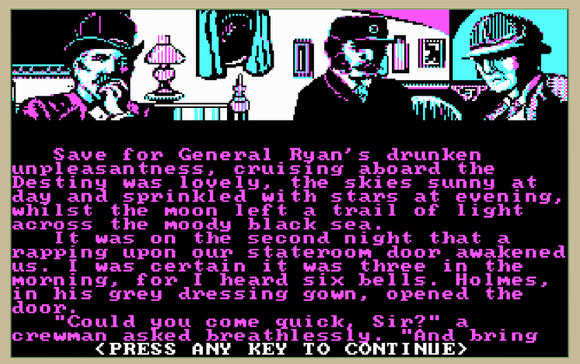
In preparation, Golden's groundwork was to digest as much of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Detective as he could, reading over 1200 pages of stories and "at least that much critical material" on Holmes' creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The exercise was undertaken so he could replicate the famous style authentically "in adding to the Holmes Canon." He told The Times Union.

[PG] My [writing] process remained the same, but I simply read Conan Doyle until I could mimic his style. [...] I knew I could recreate that kind of prose. [...] It's like learning to speak another language. I've always liked doing that. At one point in my life, I spoke three of them.

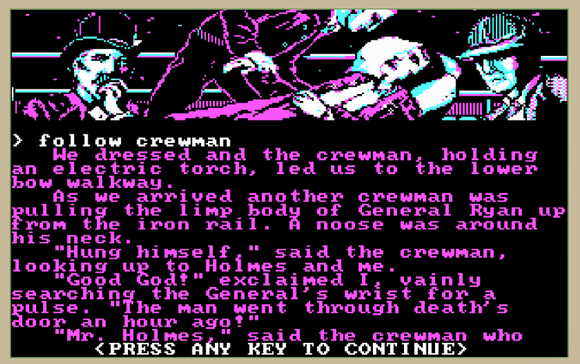
He read the books and short stories and started to conceptualise a plot and narrative. In the Imagic office, he would use an early IBM PC, designing and writing on paper, much like a storyboard for a film before transposing it into a rudimentary database using the computer.

Sherlock Holmes: Another Bow begin in England in 1919 – two years after Holmes' reminiscences in his Last Bow short story. Bantam cleverly allowed Peter to write an introduction in the game's documentation, including a wonderfully atmospheric three-chapter manuscript that set the scene. *Another Bow*, "came to us through channels as mysterious as any Holmes ever encountered" began Golden, stating that since Watson was Holmes' machine-like chronicler do it would be "appropriate that the manuscript be translated to the computer."

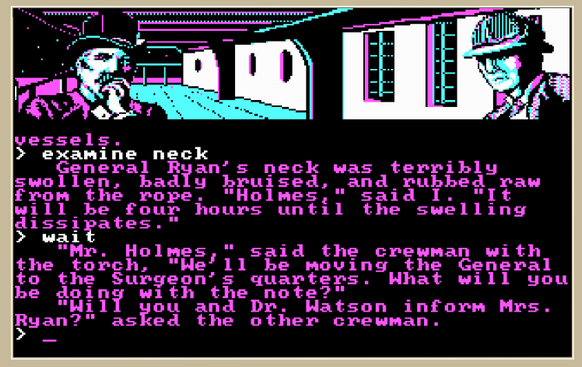
The opening of the manuscript finds Watson meeting with his literary agent, a one Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Its several months after The Great War, and Doyle convinces Holmes and Watson to board a cruise that is heading from England to New York to talk business with Mr Doubleman – an influential American publisher who is interested in our duo's writing and wishes to create a masterwork of their scripts.



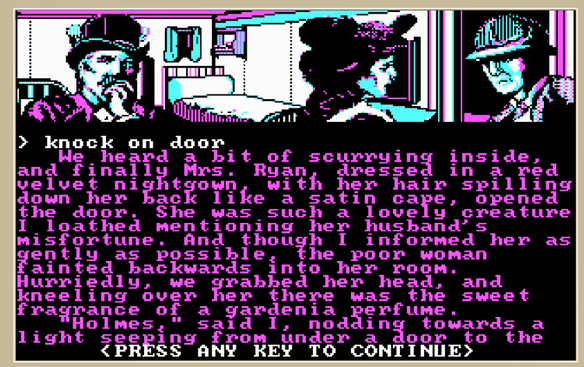
[Above] Two nights into the cruise our duo are rudely awoken by a crew member, and the game is a foot!



[Above] Watson and Holmes scramble to the lower decks to find a mortally wounded General Ryan and a suspected case of suicide.



[Above] Examining General Ryan provides more clues, and Holmes and Watson are encouraged to visit Mrs Ryan by a crewman.



[Above] Watson and Holmes inform General Ryan's wife of the distressing news of her husband's passing.

[PG] I thought it was a nice touch, and Conan Doyle was quite a character in his own right. Sherlock Holmes is the greatest fictional detective, and as I said, I like classic forms in art.

At the docks Watson and Holmes meet an extraordinary cast of characters climbing the gangplank - fellow passengers Sir Arthur and Lady Doyle, Houdini, TE Lawrence, the Baron de Rothschild and world-renowned art critic Renaldo Berens. Bantam included a printed "First Class Passenger List" in the enclosed game documentation that gave a neat and detailed piece of biographical information on each guest, as well as a very useful guide to which stateroom on the ship they were residing. Along with the printed map, this gave the player a nice bridge between the physical and digital world. As the game unfolded, it did enable a sleuth to deduce where potential suspects could at any time and investigate their movements around the ship. Could they have been in the vicinity of a crime, and who was around to hear or be a witness for example.

To follow the opening manuscript to its conclusion, on the second night into the cruise, Watson and Holmes are disturbed in their cabin by the rapping finger of a young crewman on their stateroom door. Beckoning them to follow him the crewman leads them to the lower bow walkway to find a fellow passenger, General Ryan being lifted from the iron rail seemingly having committed suicide by hanging. The game is a foot, and Golden stated the key to the plot was making sure everyone could be a suspect and that conflict between the main protagonists was crucial throughout the adventure.

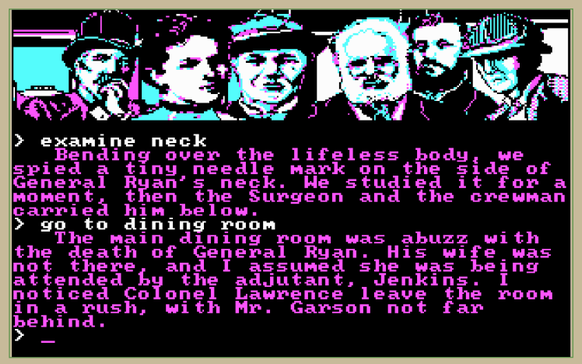
[PG] My process involves putting my rear end into a chair and leaving it there for hours at a time. I concoct characters and invent conflicts for them. That's the key—conflict. [...] To be a suspect, as many of the passengers are, you need to have a reason—a conflict—with a character since that would be why you would commit the murder.

Along with the suspected suicide, several mysteries unfold onboard, including a scheme that threatens to disrupt the post-war peace and derail world history. Holmes and Watson -and the player - have a limited time to save the ship, by steering plot and characters through a virtually infinite number of possibilities to the one and only "correct conclusion," Golden explained to The Times Union.

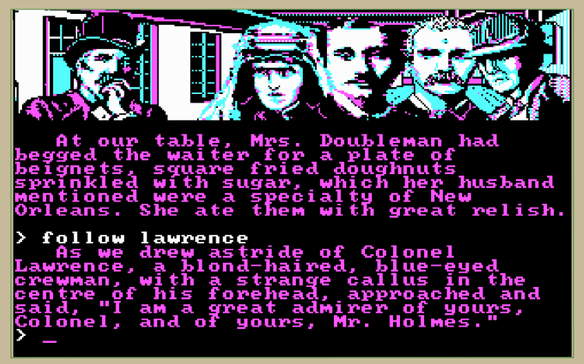
Golden's attention to detail in the text was meticulous, adhering to English currencies and mannerisms and even making sure spellings of items such as cheque (over the US spelling of check) were accurate. The ship however did fall to a little flight of fiction. The SS Destiny wasn't a real passenger liner or based on a historical ship, it was just something concocted to support the adventure.

[PG] Because I was writing fiction and wanted to design the ship to fit the story and not a story designed around a ship.

Infocom had started to set the standards for parsing in adventure



[Above] A very busy dining room. The game engine shows each of the characters that is present to the player in the current location.



[Above] Holmes and Watson meet the redoubtable Mr and Mrs Doubleman and Colonel Lawrence.

games, and *Zork* particularly had an influence on *Another Bow* and the implementation of parsing that the game possesses. That direction might have come from being the game that was demonstrated to Peter and the rest of the team. Michael Becker in his Atari Compendium interview recalled that *Another Bow* was constantly being compared against the adventure peer from the Massachusetts giants. "I thought [*Another Bow*] was a pretty cool evolution of the *Zork* genre with graphics" he recalled.

[SD] We certainly looked and played those games. [...] I was just porting the code. [...] We had brainstorming sessions where new ideas were presented on a white board and talked out. Then a short design document was written. [...] I commented on the design elements early on, but then it was just "get the job done".

Competition certainly was intensifying. Selby Bateman surveyed the landscape, witnessing the ever-increasing number of games being created for the genre and noted that "Electronic novels, interactive fiction, all-text adventure games, living literature. Whatever the names, the landscape of this brand of computer game is changing. New writers and seasoned programmers are together stretching its boundaries with refreshing approaches to plot, writing style, and game interaction."

Peter Golden commented on this stretching of the boundaries, and the introduction of a real-time element in *Another Bow* in his Times Union interview that enhanced the games interaction. He highlighted the differences between reading a book and interactive fiction, noting that "If you're reading and want to put a book down and cook dinner, you can pick it up at the same time hours later and nothing has changed, but with the computer, if you do something stupid you might lose an hour or a day - and all the while the bomb is ticking away somewhere." In an interview with Selby Bateman for an article entitled "The Prose and the Parser: How Writers See Games", Golden asked stated that"what compels someone to turn a page in a book is the same thing that compels an interactive fiction player to hit the return key. You have to get someone to turn the page."

As well as actions occurring in real-time, the parsing engine also took away the serious heavy lifting from traditional text adventures by removing the need for laborious navigation such as GO NORTH, GO SOUTH – you were given the option to instantly move around the ship with GO TO <LOCATION>. This of course, could be confusing, but Bantam did include a ship map with the game, making that process clearer. It also acted, whether deliberate or not, as a strong anti-piracy mechanism. In an addition, there wasn't a need for lots of objects within the game, as it leaned heavily towards a more conversational and observational driven experience.

[SD] It was different, and I think game some more fun to the players.

[PG] Absolutely. I wanted the player to have two experiences. One, the playing of an adventure game. And two, an enjoyable reading experience. [...] I wanted to write prose worth reading. The early text adventures were too stripped-down for my taste.

Having a more narrative, and observational-driven game did lead to some design changes though – the text did have to lead the player more into seeking those non-linear events and needed Watson in his text and responses to prompt the player forward (some even claimed this made Holmes look senile) rather than them finding their own path and finding solutions to traditional puzzles. Golden gave the player an illusion of "free will", though the actual journey was slightly more on-rails.

Peter expanded this idea in his Times Union interview, stating that "A novelist uses literary devices to make a reader feel that the action in a book is occurring while it is being read, when, in fact, the last page is pre-written. The computer gives the reader the sense of actually changing what's going on, when in fact, there is nothing arbitrary about the text."

There was nothing arbitrary about the responses to cursing or ridiculous or out-of-character commands from the player. Golden recalled in his interview that any inappropriate question usually gleaned the response "Have you lost your mind, Holmes?" and that "many readers [were] frustrated or angry during the game and typed in swear words. They're stunned when the program responds tersely, scolding for foul language."

> **"Lots of thought. Long hours. I guess you could say for one game I wrote three or four novels"**

[SD] Some changes [were] made to handle vulgar language - we replied with a comment from the character you were speaking to.

Another Bow's promotional blurb boasted a vocabulary of over 2000 words, and key events or words triggered the retrieval of a particular plot line or a Watson nudge. It was hugely complex having to write multiple strands to a story and implement them into the engine technology to "anticipate every question and answer". Golden claimed the game mimicked human intelligence with smoke, mirrors, and a little magic.

[PG] I don't recall exactly. But let's say straight through there are seventy steps to solve the mystery. I probably wrote three branches per step. In a sense, I played the game in my head and built in the twists and turns. [...] Lots of thought. Long hours. I guess you could say for one game I wrote three or four novels.

The game's graphics were greatly enhanced over the *I, Damiano* original, with a greater emphasis on usability, and clarity in the interface and graphics systems. Mark Klein and Steve DeFrisco collaborated, building the game engine in C and passing it to Bradley Stewart and Alan Smith.

[SD] Mark and I discussed the algorithms and basic design. While we did collaborate, most of the actual work on the engine was Mark's work. [...] Mark provided most of the code, working on the PC version. For the Apple IIe version, I took his code and modified what was necessary to get the graphics and disk I/O to work on the system. We were in the same building but had different offices.

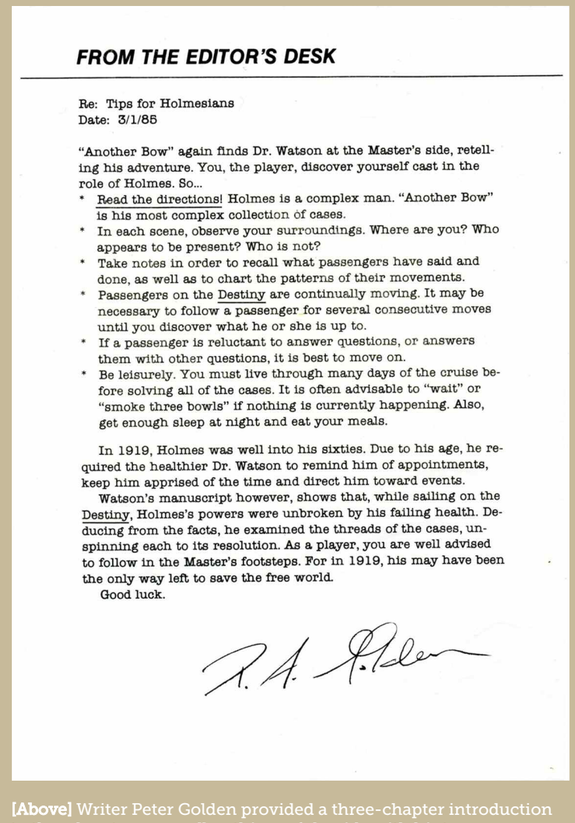
Alongside the IBM PC and Apple II lead versions, a brand-new Commodore 64 port was coded by Bruce Pederson and a rather underwhelming Apple Mac version was created by David Johnson.

[SD] The same way that the game engine and text database was shared between the PC version and the Apple II, I'm sure Dave used the same code and database for the Mac.

The first preview of the game appeared in Home Computer magazine in September 1984, giving the game an expected fall release and erroneously stating that the game was set in post-Victorian England. At the Winter Consumer Electronics Show [CES] in Las Vegas in the same year, Bantam stated that the new game would give "players an opportunity to join the legendary master of detective fiction and his comrade, Dr Watson." British specialist adventure magazine Micro

BANTAM MURDER MYSTERY

In 1986 Bantam started to discount copies of *Another Bow* through a special rebate coupon. Purchasers of the game would also be entered into their Mystery Weekend contest if they deciphered and solved a puzzle contained on a pamphlet that they distributed to participating retailers.



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Re: Tips for Holmesians
Date: 3/1/85

"Another Bow" again finds Dr. Watson at the Master's side, retelling his adventure. You, the player, discover yourself cast in the role of Holmes. So...

* Read the directions! Holmes is a complex man. "Another Bow" is his most complex collection of cases.
* In each scene, observe your surroundings. Where are you? Who appears to be present? Who is not?
* Take notes in order to recall what passengers have said and done, as well as to chart the patterns of their movements.
* Passengers on the Destiny are continually moving. It may be necessary to follow a passenger for several consecutive moves until you discover what he or she is up to.
* If a passenger is reluctant to answer questions, or answers them with other questions, it is best to move on.
* Be leisurely. You must live through many days of the cruise before solving all of the cases. It is often advisable to "wait" or "smoke three bowls" if nothing is currently happening. Also, get enough sleep at night and eat your meals.

In 1919, Holmes was well into his sixties. Due to his age, he required the healthier Dr. Watson to remind him of appointments, keep him apprised of the time and direct him toward events.

Watson's manuscript however, shows that, while sailing on the Destiny, Holmes's powers were unbroken by his failing health. Deducing from the facts, he examined the threads of the cases, unspinning each to its resolution. As a player, you are well advised to follow in the Master's footsteps. For in 1919, his may have been the only way left to save the free world.

Good luck.

[Above] Writer Peter Golden provided a three-chapter introduction to the adventure, as well as this useful guide with hints on success in playing the game.

Adventurer featured the game heavily in an editorial stating that the "American adventure market [was] showing signs of renewed activity" after attending the Las Vegas Expo Centre showcase.
[SD] I attended a few shows, I'm not sure which products were being announced when I went to the shows - you know, what happens in Vegas ...

Another Bow was launched at the June 1985 Consumer Electronics Show held in Chicago alongside another bookware title in collaboration with the Electronic Pencil Company Ltd - *The Fourth Protocol*. *Bow* hit stores in the summer, priced at the considerable sum of $44.95 with the first reviews appearing in the press in September. Creative Computing Magazine were one of the first to get their hands on a copy, with reviewer Russ Lockwood saying that "Sherlock Holmes fans and amateur sleuths will enjoy this complex adventure; however, many will find the right lipped and elusive passengers too tough to crack."

Bantam again produced a beautiful, packaged game with wonderful artwork – akin to Infocom with the quality of the inserts – a huge, detailed fold-out map of the ship, a beautifully composed three-chapter introduction to Watson's manuscript and other pieces of information including a note from the editor written by Peter.

[PG] I thought they did a wonderful job. I wrote most of it, plus a short story that they published and used to advertise the game.

Given their unique architecture, and the reliance on disk drives, both *Living Literature* games failed to wash ashore in Britain. The home PC market in was virtually non-existent in the early 80s, and the prospect of owning an expensive Apple II [retailing around £1000 or £4000 in today's money] was out of reach for most households. British Telecom's Firebird label did strike up a deal to distribute and re-release Bantam's games [in inferior and underwhelming packaging] though it is uncertain whether this included Europe or was limited to their US licensee. Still, the games did receive some UK press, with Computer & Videogame Magazine in April 1985 reporting from the previous CES show in Las Vegas. C&VG said it would be a shock to British gamers to find a second Sherlock Holmes game on the market, given that Melbourne House had released its own game based upon the sleuth, *Sherlock*, some months earlier (this also brings into dispute the claim that *Another Bow* was the first game based upon the IP that can be found in some quarters on the internet).

Commodore User [CU] magazine in October 1985 reported in a US adventure feature that imported titles were failing to "notch-up" meaningful sales this side of the pond. It claimed that early US Gold published adventures such as *Dallas Quest*, *Mystery Manor* and *Ultima* were "evidently too puerile or too pricey for British popular tastes". Given that *Bow* retailed at $44.95 in the US and most British games were a tenner at most, perhaps wasn't wide of the mark.

Infocom did have greater success in the UK, with an exclusive deal with Commodore themselves to distribute versions of 6 games between 1983 and 1985. They also created ports for the 16-bit platforms, and entered a re-release agreement with Virgin-Mastertronic (though somewhat late in the day) in the early 1990s. The CU article went onto mention the possibility of the Bantam games reaching a British audience via a distribution deal with Hutchinson. This certainly never occurred, but Hutchinson, with the development help of the Electronic Pencil Company Ltd did bring Bantam's excellent *The Fourth Protocol* to grateful UK Commodore, Spectrum and Amstrad owners in the same year that *Bow* was released.

In the US, *Another Bow* was a Waldenbooks best-seller for many weeks, but Golden refused to be drawn on the exact success of the game in terms of sales. The Times Union reporter noted he "smiled a lot" and said that "It more than pays the rent."

Any success certainly didn't warrant further titles, and after just two *Living Literature* games Bantam failed to release another title in the series. The Digital Antiquarian recalls "the Mindscape/Angelsoft line made it all the way to eight [games]; other publishers like Activision, Epyx, and Electronic Arts abandoned the genre after one or two experiments failed to bear commercial fruit. [..] The most notable of all the bookware lines [...], the Brøderbund/Synapse Electronic Novels and the Telarium games, were also not long for this world."

In Computer Gaming World magazine in Feb 1985 Bob Jacob, an industry representative for software developers questioned whether adventure games were struggling to sell given the chaotic nature of distribution. "Publishers who can guarantee developers that their products will be seen at retail are in short supply" he committed, citing a "tremendous bottleneck at store level" and noted that the majority of software vendors in the US were quickly moving away from the initial markets of PC, Apple II, VIC20, Texas Instruments and were attempting to build "a line of hot, new C64 titles."

Jacob was probably right in his analysis, given the rushed nature of the C64 conversion (and Mac port – another emerging market) of *Another Bow*. Bantam was obviously struggling post the 1984 industry crash in the US to find an identity. The New York Times had already reported in September 1983 that Imagic had made staff redundancies, stating that the company had been "hurt by the shakeout in the video game and home computer business." A sell-off of its excess inventory as promised by Margaret Davis in the article, a company spokesman, seemed to have kept the wolves from the door, as the cash raised meant Imagic avoided filing for bankruptcy and go on into 1984 with the adventure games discussed.

[SD] The post-crash Imagic was mostly just trying to survive. We took on these contracts hoping that they would bring in enough revenue to keep the company going until sales picked up again.

SHERLOCK HOLMES: UNDER THE BOARDWALK

[Above] Michael Becker provided these slide scans of *Sherlock Homes: Under The Boardwalk* as part of an interview with Scott Stilphen . The images show a game that is very much complete, with a brand new EGA graphics and text engine and finalised packaging artwork.

Michael Becker merely suggests that the problem lay with Bantam, and they just weren't good at distributing games and functioning in the computer game market. "I don't know what happened with Bantam" he told the Atari Compendium website, "but I think they realized that they weren't good at the software business. It forced them to push games into their bookstores when they really wanted to push books."

[PG] I believe Bantam was going through some corporate changes, and they decided to leave the computer market.

Given the success of *Bow*, and the quality of the product, Imagic unfortunately didn't go onto survive and the company closed down with Activision (a software-only company that did manage to navigate the US-crash) acquiring the rights to its games. In total Golden stayed with Imagic for just over two years. In that time, he was exceptionally industrious working on many more titles as a writer. He found the work hugely rewarding if demanding.

[PG] The major challenge was that I didn't know what the hell I was doing. The learning curve was steep. Now that I understand it, the work would be easier.

His major other contributions were on Bantam's *Choose Your Own Adventure [CYOA]* series. The *CYOA* books were hugely popular and one of the most successful children's book series ever with almost 27 million in print between 1985 and 1986. They were the perfect candidate for conversion to home computers, a well-known and popular brand, with the right audience, strong writing and a simple choice mechanic that could easily be implemented into a basic branching-narrative computer game.

[PG] I worked on a number of *Choose Your Own Adventure* games, but I just did the prose, not the design.

The first game, *Cave of Time*, was adapted from Edward Packard's book. You assume the role of the kid who enters the Cave of Time, with a mission to recover four items stolen by the Time Grouches and return them to their proper places and times. These items are a golden crown, Abraham Lincoln's hat, the Loch Ness Monster's egg, and a piece of flint.

Escape was the second and last game in the *CYOA* series, based loosely on the 1983 gamebook of the same name. In the game the player is a secret agent underground in the nation of Dorado, a fractured rump state of the former US southwest in the year 2035. The book concerns itself with escaping from this totalitarian state and returning to democratic Turtalia with the gameplay being a mixed of adventure, arcade action and driving simulation.

Games were rumoured, but it seemed never developed, in the *Living Literature* series; an adaption of HE Well's Time Machine and Shakespeare's Macbeth. Both received a mention in dispatches in Electronic Games Magazine from 1985. There is a possibility that MacBeth could have related to the Creative Sparks release that appeared for the Commodore 64. As for Time Machine, Scott Stilphen's interview with Michael Becker revealed several screenshots showing it to be an arcade adventure rather than text adventure.

In the same interview Michael Becker revealed that a sequel to *Another Bow*, called *Sherlock Holmes: Under The Boardwalk* was in production but never completed, nor released. Becker recalls the sequel, using the same engine "featured Al Capone, Babe Ruth, and the mob as Sherlock visited Atlantic City in the 30s and solved some serious crime while in his 70s." Peter recalls that his work on the title was completed.

[PG] I was paid to write a sequel, but Bantam left the market before it was out. I would gladly write more if someone paid me to do so. [...] [As for *Boardwalk*] It's a bit blurry now, but I brought him to America and mixed him up with famous gangsters. I wrote a short story about it, and Bantam published it and sent it out.

Of the Imagic team, Michael Becker has had the most illustrious career in videogames, one of the few of the original developers to continue in the industry for several decades after *Another Bow*. He's had stints at Hasbro, Apple, Philips Interactive and Electronic Arts, working on games such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Battlefield* and *WWE Smackdown*.

[Above] The underwhelming Apple Macintosh port decided not to overlay the character images onto the location graphics, probably because of forced monochrome pallette.

Steve DeFrisco went onto work at Activision, Atari and several other game companies including Data East, SONY and Digital Pictures. He's now a software engineer at Cypress Semiconductor Corporation in San Jose, California. He is still good friends with Mark Klein.

[SD] We took a trip to Europe soon after Imagic closed up shop. He's been travelling the world on foot and on motorcycle for the last few years. He's currently in Africa. A real go-getter.

Bradley Stewart left the videogame industry after 12 years due to burn out. He worked for graphics display company RamTek before joining an innovative start-up riding the multimedia wave called Digital F/X. He's held various positions at video and multimedia companies since then including Pinnacle Systems.

Peter Golden's reputation as an author and investigative journalist has grown throughout the years. He has never been involved in writing for games since his Imagic days. At the time he was ambivalent about whether he write further, stating in his Times Union interview that despite the financial rewards the process of creating interactive fiction wasn't "private enough" and was too much like "movie work". After such a passage of time, his mind now falls open to the prospect.

[PG] I would be happy to, but as I said, no one has asked me to. Of course, I haven't gone looking for the opportunities - let me know!

Over the course of his long and varied career, he has interviewed a staggeringly impressive group of people: Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush; Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger, Alexander Haig, George Shultz, and Lawrence Eagleburger; Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Shamir; and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. His literary writing has appeared in Newsweek, the New York Times, Capital Region magazine and New York. An author of over 10 books and countless magazine articles he is still writing and enjoys receiving the odd fan mail correspondence about the text adventure games he was involved in those many moons ago.

IAN MURISS

Ian Muriss was inspired by Acornsoft and Level 9's text adventure for the BBC Micro. After his parents bought him a machine for Christmas in 1982, Ian went onto pen ***The Wizard's Challenge*** and the impressive ***The Hunt: The Search for Shauna***.

Ian Muriss grew up in Surrey, England. He was introduced to programming in the late 1970s when he had access to a Research Machines 380Z at school. He enjoyed the pastime and convinced his parents to purchase a BBC Micro B in 1982, in order for him to help with his hobby and aid in producing his homework.

Acornsoft, the software arm of manufacturer Acorn Computers were a huge proponent of text adventures, signing several authors to create games for the BBC Micro and Acorn Electron. Games from Peter Killworth [**see Issue 05**], Paul Fellows and David Hampton [**see Issue 08**], such as *Countdown To Doom*, *Sphinx Adventure* and *The Philosopher's Quest* were shipped as part of an introductory package by some retailers.

Along with the accessibility of BBC BASIC, adventure games

provided the perfect learning vehicle for Ian to explore programming. Learning how to create a game from scratch covered the majority of skills required; from the art of writing a story and devising puzzles, to database design, string handling, loops and the use of conditional or branching statements.

Ian was 15 when he started to write his first adventure game for the BBC. It was completely written in BBC BASIC with a small part coded in assembly language to handle fast compression of the game's descriptive text.

[Ian Muriss] It was very simple, with each byte used to store a character or a sequence of characters. So the 256 possible options included sequences like 'and ' or 'the '.

The game became *The Wizard's Challenge*, a treasure-hunt style game based upon the original *Adventure*. In the game the player is under the control of an evil wizard who requires the return of 12 treasures from another realm. *Wizard's Challenge* demonstrated a deft level of programming talent, and with Ian's compression algorithm the game crammed in an impressive 100+ locations with the inlay boasting of "over 50 problems" that had to be solved.

The parsing was limited to VERB/NOUN, but the responses from the engine, despite being in BASIC were prompt and efficient. The game limited the player to an inventory of 12 objects which added to the puzzle difficulty, and the game world was an odd mix of fantasy and real-world, modern, locations and objects (this was reflected in the game's colourful inlay artwork).

Ian sent the game to several publishers, but the first to respond to the teenager was Micro Power - a company founded by Bob Simpson. Micro Power operated out of an independent computer store on Wensley Road in Leeds and originally released games under the Program Power label. Simpson was a visionary, and appreciated that home computer software was going to be profitable, so Micro Power became one of the first companies other than Acornsoft to release commercial games for Acorn computers. Micro Power released *Atom Adventure*, an impressive 12K port of *Colossal Caves* for the Acorn Atom, and several other adventures; *Adventure*, *Eldorado Gold*, *Seek*, *Labyrinths of La Cosche* and *Caveman Adventure* all for the Acorn Electron and BBC Micro.

Wizard's Challenge was released in 1983, in one of Micro Power's standard jewel cassette boxes accompanied by their trademark crosshatched packaging. Given the game was written in BBC BASIC it was odd that Micro Power didn't release what would have been a simple conversion for the Acorn Electron.

[IM] No. I think the Electron was released later on that year, and I don't remember having much dealings with Micro Power after the game was released.

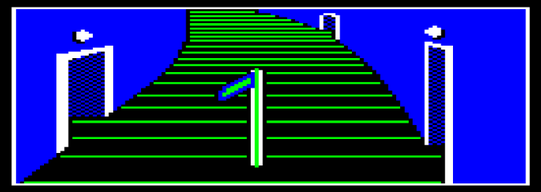
The game seemed to be hugely popular. Micro Power titles sold well, and *Wizard's Challenge* was a regular helpline request in several magazines, including the Mad Hatter's Micro User column. For Ian, having a game published was a huge moment to savour.

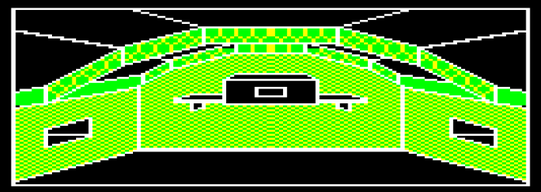
[IM] [It was] fantastic! I didn't see it in many shops, but it was great to see it listed in the Micro Power adverts in magazines.

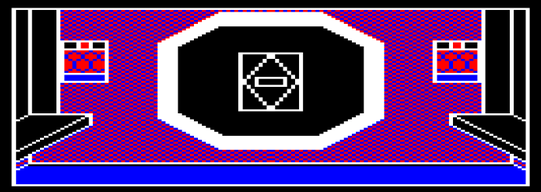
Between 1983 and 1985 Ian focused on studying for his A-Levels so programming took a back seat. He went onto Imperial College in London where he studied Computing. University life gave him plenty of free time to return to his love of adventures, and the inspiration for his next game came from an unlikely source.

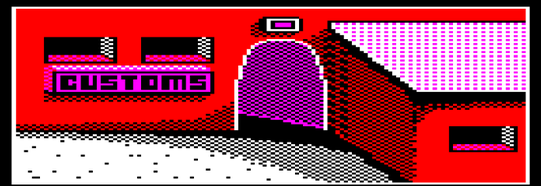
[IM] I can't remember much. Strangely it may have come from a font. I remember thinking that you could draw a space age font by smearing the bottom half of each letter to make it wider. I am not sure if I realised that after I had decided on a sci-fi game or if it actually inspired me to write one -which is admittedly a very odd inspiration!

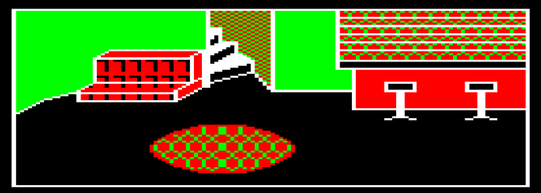
Ian fleshed out a new framework, and then started to write locations and invented puzzles to fit within the game he was evolving.

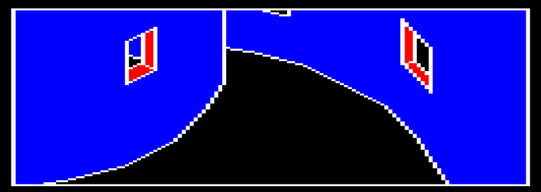


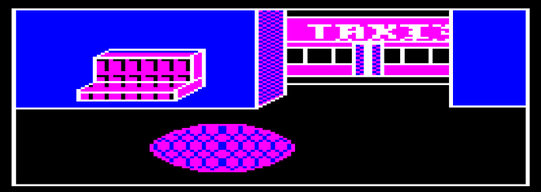












[IM] From what I remember I had a rough outline, but wasn't sure how much I could fit in the limited memory, so fleshed it out as I went along until I ran out of memory.

He coded mostly at home, during holidays and spent the time upskilling from BBC BASIC. Even though *The Quill* and *The Graphic Adventure Creator* had been released for the BBC Micro, Ian attempted to write his new engine entirely in assembly language. Ian recalled on the Stardot forums:

[IM] I don't think I was even aware of the concept of using third-party code back then. It was inspired by *Elite*. I saw how they had managed to change the screen mode part way down the screen and was amazed. The top was "high" resolution but black and white, and the bottom was low resolution with more colours. I figured the reverse would be ideal for a graphical adventure.

He re-used the ideas of text compression from *Wizard's Challenge* and used the additional power and speed of assembly language to refine and improve his method.

[IM] I used a very basic text compression system for *The Hunt*, which was similar to that used in *Wizard's Challenge*. It used 8-bit values which covered the usual letters and numbers but also had numbers which represented common strings. [...] I then wrote the text with the knowledge of what would compress best. I can't remember much about the code for the game itself because most of my focus was squeezing the most out of the limited memory.

It was a constant battle between text and graphics. Where *Wizard's Challenge* was light on location descriptions, Ian attempted to expand the new game's prose. For him, storytelling was key.

[IM] [...] It was the main element of the adventure. I would write what I wanted, in the knowledge that it had to be brief and then use the remaining space for the graphics.

He'd set a goal on adding graphics to the game and wanted an expansive world for the players to explore. Adding a graphics mode meant that the usable memory on the BBC Micro was reduced to around 20K, meaning his was left with a meagre 200 bytes of space per room for the text, graphics and interpreter code.

[IM] I remember the graphics were built up of parallelograms with 4 bits to say which sides were drawn, a few bits for the angle, and a few bytes to specify the fill or pattern.

The graphics were constrained by the algorithmic storage and drawing method that Ian used, so they did differ somewhat from his original ambition. The use of the aforementioned parallelogram method meant that each location portrayed a particular style of drawn image.

[IM] Each location had about 150 bytes of data excluding code. About 50 bytes were for the text description, so that left about 100 bytes to describe the picture. To make the most of this I used parallelograms, which were rectangles with a configurable angle rather than just right angles. You could store the position, size, angle, displayed edges, and fill pattern for a parallelogram in 4 bytes. There were other display elements such as a fill object where I would specify a position and a fill pattern, and it would fill the enclosed area with that pattern. And maybe a few other elements such as text etc. Altogether they allowed an extremely basic picture to be stored in very little memory.

Ian was constantly patching his machine code as he progressed. Changes to assembly without the use of an efficient editor meant that sections of the code were hard coded – specifically instructions that told the code to jump to other subroutines. Even though the Beeb came with an in-built editor, it was a case of managing the code using the limited toolset Ian had at his disposal.

[IM] I had a cassette recorder for storage and was very bad at keeping the source code. [...] When I needed to change it I had to look back through the code and change 3 bytes into a JMP command to the new code, then repeat those 3 bytes, carry out the new code, and then JMP back to the original code. I cringe when I think of it now.

DEBUG & DISASSEMBLE

For anyone that is interested, Level 7, an internet coder released a full disassembly of *The Hunt: The Search for Shauna* which had been completed without any access to the source code.

Full documentation of the code, including information on some of the technical aspects of the instructions can be downloaded from the Level 7 miscellany website.

http://level7.org.uk/miscellany/the-hunt-disassembly.txt

Ian named his space epic the *The Hunt: Search for Shauna* and cast the player as a swashbuckling intergalactic pilot, searching for the namesake Shauna – a fellow crewmate who had been kidnapped by a mysterious force. The mission led the pilot to an enormous space station, devoted to scientific study and experimentation. Once in the station, you had to find your quarry, and return to the flight deck and make your escape.

Despite the RAM limitations, the parser was extended beyond the VERB/NOUN combination of *Wizard's Challenge*. Ian found working with the restrictions of the BBC Micro an enjoyable challenge. He then added several non-playable characters to the game, including several droids, a monkey and a dog who moved randomly around the game map.

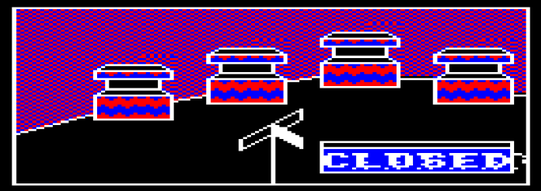
Ian offered the game around several publishers, but with Acornsoft going out of business and the leading publishers Superior Software and Micro Power moving away from the text adventure market he turned to another software house – Mid-Glamorgan based Robico. Robico had been founded by Mike and Robert O'Leary and had started to build a reputation for high quality text-only adventure games such as the *Rick Hanson* trilogy, *Enthar Seven* and *Blood of the Mutineers*. They even made their in-house text compression system, *MIDGE* available to budding adventure authors.

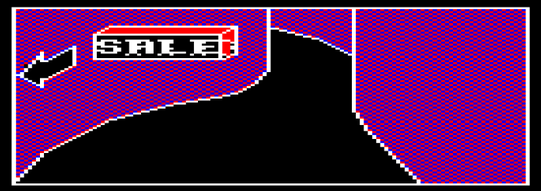
The Hunt became Robico's first published game from an external author, and the first to include graphics. They didn't require any changes to the original game, and worked with Ian to produce a "disk version with special graphics" that used the additional capacity of the magnetic media for a host of additional illustrations.

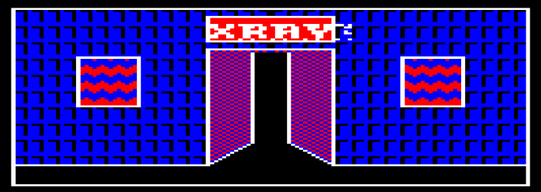
[IM] they were very positive and great to work for. The extra memory afforded by the disk was only used for 21 improved location images, stored as bitmaps. I can't remember designing bitmaps so maybe Robico did that and I included them.

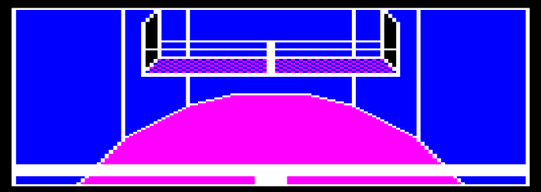
Robico were a huge supporter of both of Acorn's machines, so as well as the additional work on a special disk version, they gave Ian an Acorn Electron and asked him to produce a port for the BBC's baby brother machine. It's limited hardware gave Ian a few headaches in the process.

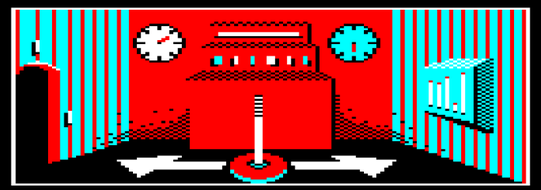
[IM] The main problem was that the Electron didn't have the video timing chip that allow me to split the screen between a low-resolution colour top half for graphics and a high resolution black and white bottom half for text. So, you could either see one or the other.

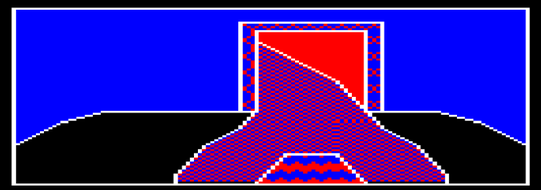


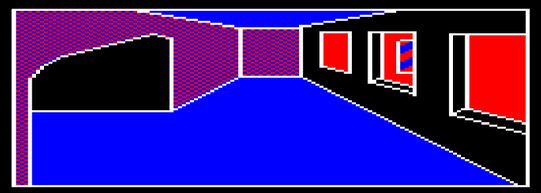


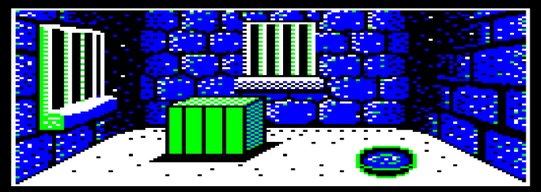












0xC0DE ELECTRON ENHANCEMENTS

0xC0DE's enhanced Acorn Electron version of *The Hunt* can be downloaded from the author's *GitHub* page.

https://github.com/0xC0DE6502/The-Hunt-releases

The Hunt was released in July 1987 for the BBC Micro and two months after for The Acorn Electron retailing at a reasonable £9.99 for cassette and £12.95 for the disk version. Robico made a good effort with the packaging, producing a double-jewel with some eyecatching sci-fi artwork.

Reviews were exceptionally positive. *The Hunt's* graphics wowed players, but some adventure purists did prefer the more verbose locations given in some Robico games. Electron User levelled one criticism at the game saying that the "location descriptions [offered] little atmosphere".

[IM] *The Hunt* was never going to compete with the other Robico games for textual descriptions. Not only was I not capable of such atmospheric writing, but the use of graphics meant that there was far less memory for the text. A text only program could use the teletext display mode 7 which allowed over 30kb for the program. [...] So, a text only program had about 3 times as much space for the text and the code.

Still, Electron user rated it as the best adventure on the platform, gave it 10/10 and said that *Hunt's* "puzzles are devious but logical", heaping more praise by saying it was "an essential purchase for any discerning adventurer." C&VG gave it their Hit accolade and for one month the adventure entered the Gallup sales charts at number 15.

[IM] I saw the C&VG issue where they reviewed it and had a competition to win copies. That was amazing. I was very proud of the game from a technical point of view - especially the compression - so it was great to see that people actually found it enjoyable to use as well.

After *The Hunt*, Ian graduated from university and entered the world of work. He side-lined adventure writing since it didn't pay as well as a full-time job. A year later, A&B magazine ran a two-page adventure special with an update on the next big game from Robico called *Blazing Star:* "Robico's long-awaited Western spoof, *'Blazing Star'*, should be out for Christmas in BBC and Electron versions. Ian Muriss has taken over the programming now."

Ian told the Stardot forum in 2021 " I can't remember for sure but I probably decided that the few quid I made from the games was great when I was a student but not worth the effort when I was earning a reasonable wage and working full-time. Unfortunately, I don't think I have anything left of the game. [...] Abandoned? I very much doubt that Robico continued with the game but I can't remember for sure. I don't remember handing it over, which would have been quite a task given my bad coding practices back then."

[IM] [I made] A few thousand [on *The Hunt*], I think. When I was a student receiving a grant of £2000 a year it seemed a fortune, but when I started a "proper" job then it was less impressive in comparison.

The C&VG review of *The Hunt* did hint that the marketplace was changing and that adventure game sales for 8-bits were on the wane. The reviewer noted that as much as *The Hunt* was impressive, the graphics "weren't up to Amiga standards" - demonstrating that the hardware, the players and the expectations of quality had moved on.

[IM] Probably. I have never had much in the way of artistic talent, so in some ways the BBC's limitations hid my own limitations. I probably couldn't have gotten away with creating my own graphics on more advanced machines.

In 2022 *The Hunt* received a surprise enhancement by Acorn Electron coder 0xC0DE. 0xC0DE had built a reputation for high-quality software for the Acorn machines, including *Elementum* for the homebrew publishing house Retro Software.

[0xC0DE] I love the Electron because it was the computer I had when I was a child. And I like rooting for the underdog and showing the world what it can really do with the demos and games I still make for it! [...] I do remember playing text adventures on my Electron sometimes. Can't remember which ones though! It was a magical feeling exploring a fantasy world and having the computer understand my commands.

0xC0DE hadn't experienced *The Hunt* when it originally was released but when he played it noticed that the game did use an awkward method of displaying a graphic first before then adding the location text on a new cleared screen – much as Ian had confessed to when porting the game back in 1987. He picked up the investigation of the code as a coding project.

[0xC0DE] The usual process is as follows: disassemble the game, add improvements and make changes, reassemble the game. I use SourceGen to disassemble 6502 code and add meaningful labels and comments, as I try to understand what the code is doing. This could take days or weeks if you're going for a fully commented disassembly. I did this for *Loderunner*, for instance, when porting it from the Beeb to the Elk. Disassembling *The Hunt* was a quick job since I only needed to identify a few elements, namely the parts where graphics are drawn, and text is printed to the screen.

The code was moved around, and some parts were rewritten or reorganised to free up valuable bytes of space. Using the space, 0xC0DE then made the enhancement required to convert the Electron version to work like the BBC version.

[0xC0DE] 1, Show graphics and text at the same time instead of switching between them, 2, Added intro text and title screen from the Beeb version. 3, Allowed saving/loading 1 game to/from memory instead of tape, 4, Make it work from disk and not just from tape.

As part of The Classic Adventurer interview, Ian was made aware of the conversion, having never seen it before and was suitably impressed making the effort to update the game worthwhile.

[0xC0DE] I love the idea of having the original author taking a look at my enhanced version! The split screen technique was used in some games back in the day in one form or another. I use it all the time to hide code/data in screen RAM for instance or to code some kind of special effect.

35+ years later coders are still expanding games and adventure players are still exploring Ian's two games. *The Wizard's Challenge* was without a solution for a long time after the game's release and was only recently added to The Classic Adventures Solution Archive.

[IM] To think that people were still playing the game 35 years after I wrote it is amazing! [I'm] gobsmacked! In a really good way. It was amazing seeing people on the forums discussing aspects of games that I cannot even remember writing.

Ian is now back working on hardware that limits the programmer as he is the developer of a workout app called *WorkOutDoors* for the Apple Watch.

My thanks to the generosity of every contributor, who gave their time to humour me and answer questions they've been asked a thousand times before.

Special thanks to many friends, retro acquaintances, and text adventure geeks, including the usual kindness and help from:

Fergus McNeill
Tim Gilberts
Gerrard Sweeney
Gareth Pitchford
Scott Stilphen
Juanjo Muñoz

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

Documentaries

GET LAMP, Jason Scott
The Hunt for 'The Hobbit's' Missing Hero, Great Big Story

Websites and Blogs

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

Research Papers

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

Artwork

Zyll
IBM

Wizard's Challenge
Micro Power Limited

Sherlock Holmes In Another Bow
Bantam Electronic Publishing

The Neverending Story
Renato Casaro, Ocean Software

Hunchback The Adventure
Bob Wakelin, Ocean Software

A Guide to ZX Spectrum Adventure Games - 1982 - 1985
Robin Grenville-Evans, courtesy of Shaun McClure

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**, 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*.