FUSION
CPC

ROLAND TOP GAMES

FUSION celebrates the CPC mascot - Roland!

AMSTRAD

The Amstrad hardware had quite a few different looks over the years. We examine each of its incarnations.

CONTENTS

Editor's Note

I've always loved an underdog and Sir Alan Sugar's Amstrad CPC is a prime example. Despite being touted as an all-in-one system and offering some fantastic games, it struggled to gain the same success as rivals like the Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum. Friends at school teased me for owning one (I only knew of three other kids at school with Amstrads) it lacked the many great C64 exclusive shooters I loved playing when I visited my friend's house, and even developers seemed to care little for the machine, as they would often churn out quick and easy Spectrum ports that failed to take advantage of the Amstrad's capabilities.

I didn't care though because I genuinely loved my CPC along with the incredibly diverse library of games it boasted. I discovered both Codemasters and the Dizzy series through Amstrad's machine, was blown away by the work of Raffaele Cecco and fiercely championed games like Gryzor, Renegade and Chase HQ, which felt miles better than their 8-bit counterparts. Granted there were travesties on the system (I'll never get over that atrocious Out Run conversion) but that was true of all home computers of the time and great magazines like Amtix and Amstrad Action became essential bibles and ensured I always knew what to spend my pocket money on.

I'm delighted then to be associated with this brand-new magazine that's dedicated to all things Amstrad and I truly hope that it leads to similar projects in the future. The Amstrad home brew community has really come into its own in the last few years and it's been producing some sensational games, many of which are featured inside. My 14-year-old jaw would have dropped if I had seen some of the titles you'll be reading about in this issue and their quality is a testament to the talented coders who have been able to coax so much magic out of Amstrad's 8-bit micro. So sit down, put your feet up and enjoy what you read and in doing so, you'll hopefully realise what I've known for years: the Amstrad CPC is absolutely brilliant.

Retro Gamer Editor
Darran Jones
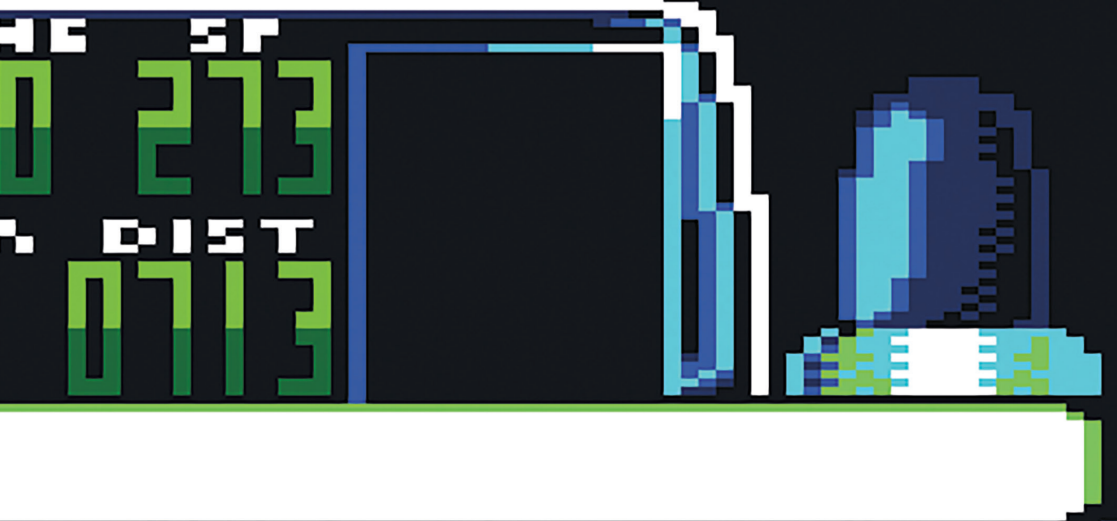
FUSION

Game : Chase HQ
Year : 1989
Publisher: Ocean Software

'Let's go Mr Driver!' Jump into your turbo charged Porchse 928, catch the criminals and ram them off the road in this coin-op conversion! I'd easily put Chase HQ in my top 3 arcade games, so imagine my joy when the Amstrad version turned out to be this good! If pushed for a quick answer, without hesitation I'd say this is my favourite ever CPC game! Incorporating all the features of the arcade original including sampled speech is an incredible feat of programming on its own! But to have it running at a decent pace with all the complex maths involved to get road movement and physics right, coder Jon O'Brien is a certified genius and it's mind blowing to see in action. Jon had great success previously with WEC Le Mans, and the game engine code was re-used here, but WEC was criticised for dull graphics. This time however, Bill Harbinson stepped in and produced some absolutely gorgeous 8-bit pixel art. Chase HQ on the Speccy blew everyone away, but the CPC port topped even that thanks to Bill!

JEWEL WAREHOUSE

WHAT DOES FUSION MAKE OF THIS LITTLE GEM OF A GAME?

Jewel Warehouse was coded by the talented Egochip and sees you take Amy on a journey through 42 charming levels with the aim of collecting all the jewels that the Cyborg Queen has mischievously stashed and scattered throughout her warehouse. In all, there are a whopping four hundred and sixty-two jewels to collect.

The game is presented in beautiful MODE 1 graphics, each level represented by a single screen — the aim of each one is to simply claim all the jewels and get to the exit within a very tight time limit. Sounds straight forward doesn't it? Things are never that easy — there are conveyer belts that pull you in the direction you do not want to go; platforms that break up (thinking Manic Miner here!); spikes that burst through the platforms that kill you on impact and flames that block your way. And we still cannot work out what those spiky blobs are that prevent you taking certain routes!
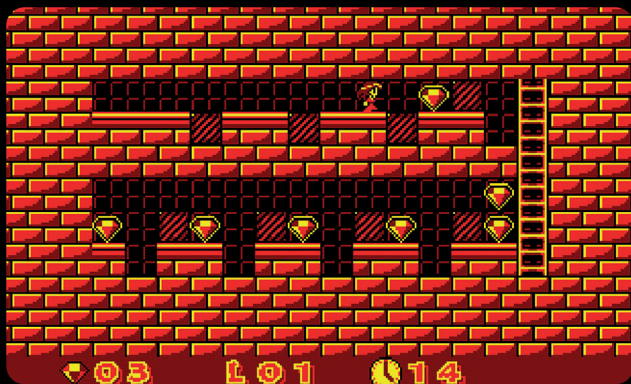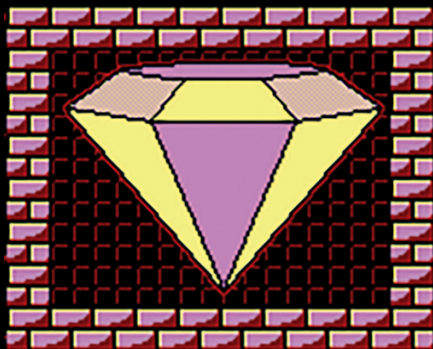
As always in these types of game, there are ways to solve every problem — you can pick up water to extinguish flames; find a special boot that will allow you to go in any direction on the conveyer belts and even blocks which when placed in the right place, will allow you to safely cross spikes or provide a bridge across gaps.

There is no lives system in Jewel Warehouse — when you're scorched by the flames or impaled by the spikes or run out time, you're given the chance to restart the level or quit the game. If you do complete the level with ten seconds or more left on the clock, then the game does reward you with a bonus jewel.

When the game first loads you can pick from any of the 42 levels provided by the game, this is quite a nice touch as it means you can resume your progress on the

Above & Right: The early levels of Jewel Warehouse going from the simple first level to the rather more challenging seventh level.

level you finished at or even jump ahead and see all the levels the game has to cover — remember the aim is to collect all the jewels so it does not matter what order the levels are completed.

A mention has to go to the music that plays throughout when playing — it is catchy and not too annoying.

Jewel Warehouse has that really addictive one-more go quality as you try to figure out how to complete level.

This is one of the best games to play if you are an Amstrad fan.
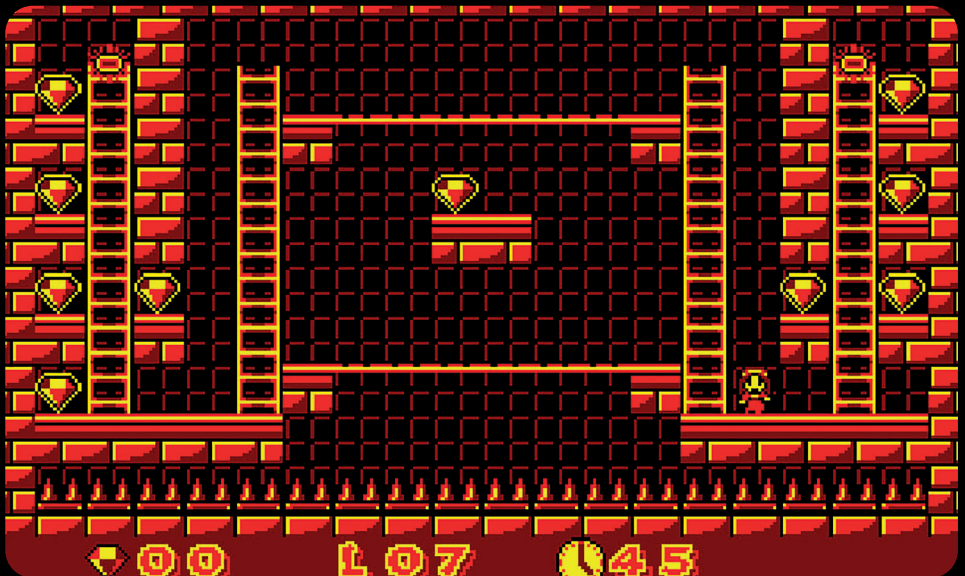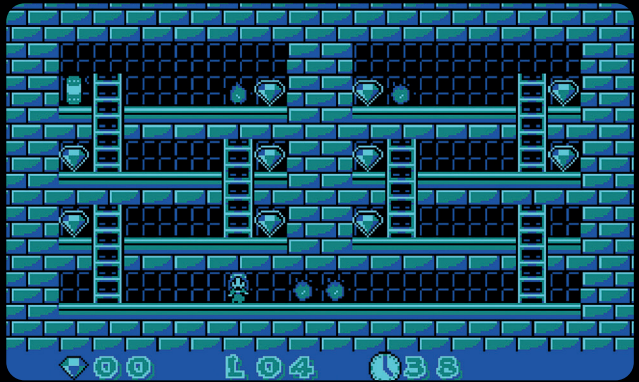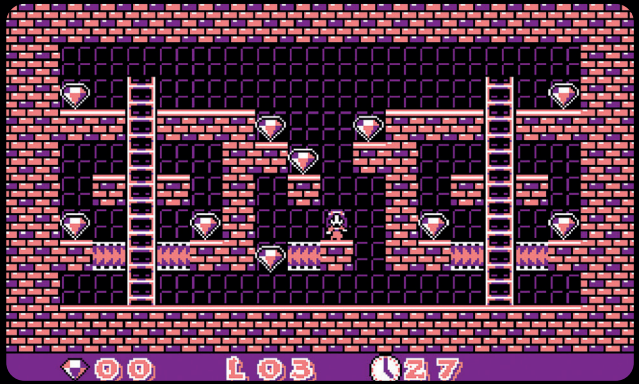
Roland

Article by Colin Bell

Best games on the CPC

Roland is one of computer gaming's oldest mascots and yet most people, including a lot of you CPC fan boys and girls out there, will never have heard of him? He should be up there with the other 8-bit greats, Mario, Alex Kidd, Dizzy, and yet he's never quite managed to achieve the same level of success and fame. So why is this? Join Colin Bell now as he sets out to find out what happened to Amstrad's unsung hero.

It all began back in 1984 where to coincide with the launch of the new Amstrad CPC home computer range, Alan Sugar, the CEO of Amstrad and Luis Dominguez, a game designer and latterly the president of Amstrad's Spanish division, set about developing a recognisable mascot who would feature in, and help promote, their in-house software titles. It was also believed that a mascot would give Amstrad that crucial edge over main rivals Sinclair and Commodore who by this point were already established on the market.

The result was a character named Roland, who is often credited as being named after Amstrad's system designer Roland Perry. Now Roland led a rather varied, and some might say, intriguing life with a CV that rivals any of the iconic 8-bit era mascots.

He starred in a total of eight official releases, the first two being Roland on the Ropes and Roland in the Caves which were included as part of an Amsoft twelve pack that was initially bundled with the CPC 464 upon release. Most Roland games were actually just ports of other previously released games that had already made an appearance on the ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64 a year or two prior. The Roland range of games tended to be of good quality with most making good use of the Amstrad's delightful colour palette.

So where did it all go wrong for Roland? Well a clue may lie in the above paragraph where we highlight the fact that most of the games, especially the earlier titles, were all just ports of other previously released games. Or perhaps it may down to the inconsistencies within each of the game's storylines. Whatever the reason, let us take a look back at Roland's adventures and see if we can shed any further light on the matter...

Roland on the Ropes — Indescomp

This game marked the start of Roland's illustrious career and saw him take up the guise of an 'Indiana Jones' like adventurer who finds himself lost in a dark vast tomb full of 8-bit nasties such as ghosts, mummies, skeletons, rats, acid drops and vampires!

The aim of the game? To ascend the many ropes, collecting treasures along the way, and work your way to the top of the map and find the exit in order to progress to the next level. Now to be fair for 1984 the graphics were decent and helped even more so by the good use of the Amstrad's gorgeous colour palette. The later levels of the game however are extremely difficult and almost feel like they are nigh on impossible to complete but overall the challenge of the game is well balanced. Sadly however the game does suffer from a constant flickering and jerky scrolling which detracts from the gameplay and becomes rather annoying after a while.

The game is also a port of an earlier ZX Spectrum and C64 game by Indescomp called 'Fred' and is near identical. All that said however, Roland on the Ropes will always be seen as a CPC classic that introduced many a child of the 80s to computer games, this big child included!
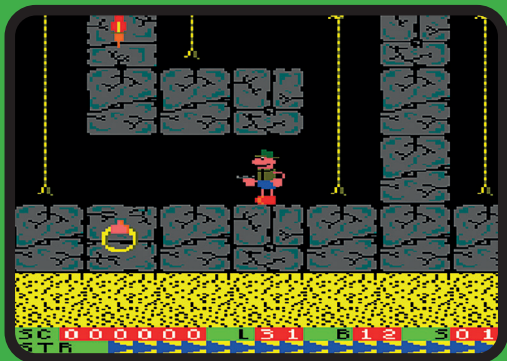
Roland in the Caves – Indescomp

Roland's second outing — this time our intrepid adventurer is back, although now he resembles an insect and has taken up the role of a time and space traveller whose machine has sadly broken down leaving him stranded on an alien planet in the year 2464 AD. Confused? Stay with me, it gets better!

You have, according to the games instructions, also been gifted a 'special kind of power that aides you when exploring alien planets' and to make matters even worse you've fallen into a large dark cave with flesh eating plants and a hungry pterodactyl!

The aim? You guessed it, use your special powers, which by the way is the ability to leap like a super human flea, and make you way back to the surface, avoiding the deadly plants and pterodactyl along the way. Again the game is yet another Indescomp ZX Spectrum port this time of a game called Bugaboo the Flea.

Still, the games looks colourful and bright making good use of the Amstrad's palette but to be honest actually getting anywhere in the cave feels like a matter of sheer luck, and the reward for getting out the cave? Well, you rather clumsily fall into another and start the whole process all over again, Oh! the Joy!
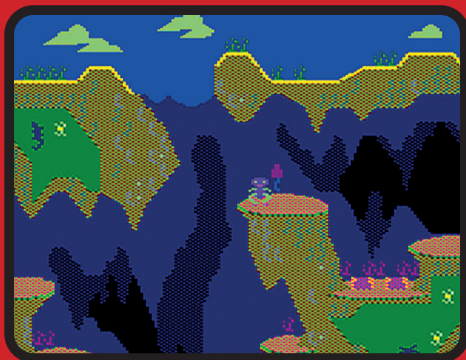
Roland goes Digging — GEM Software

Back to Earth this time and Roland's taken off the adventurers hat, ditched the time and space traveling (for now at least) and has taken on an honest labourers job. Oh! and he looks human again, this time sporting a rather nice tan.

The plot? Aliens have invaded and taken over the building site and Roland's boss, with the promise of a hefty bonus, has entrusted him with the task of clearing the site of these pesky space squatters. Armed with only his trusty spade, Roland must climb up and down the platforms, digging holes to trap the aliens, then digging them out again so that they fall to their death. If all that wasn't enough it turns out that the aliens are a form of plant life and are consuming all the oxygen on the site which is represented by the slowly depleting oxygen bar at the side of the screen which when reaches empty causes our poor hero to suffocate.

The game is yet another clone, but this time of an early arcade game from 1980 called Space Panic. Overall, slow paced tedious action with simple graphics that will leave you bored after ten minutes or so. One of Roland's poorer career choices.
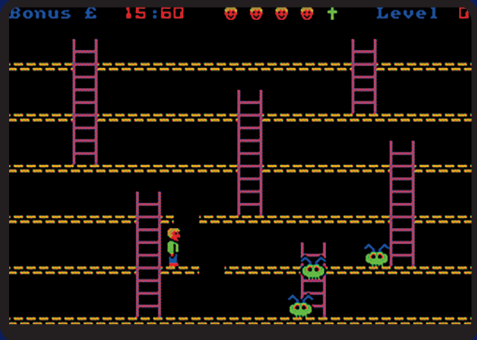
Roland Ahoy! – Computersmith

Yarr me Hearties! Roland, clearly fed up with man-eating aliens, has jacked in the builders job, gone back to his adventuring roots and become a pirate. Along with your trusty pirate ship the 'Falcon', you must sail the seas, avoiding various sea monsters, load up on cannon balls at 'Powder Quay', destroy the boom to gain access to the 'Golden Harbour' to steal the precious treasure and then take it to 'Treasure Cove' where you must hide it. Each location is just one screen, and all contain an obstacle or trap, the spider in the cave at treasure cove being one of the most particularly devious.

A simple, yet colourful game with nice graphics and basic sound effects. Even though the game only has four screens in total it is actually a really fun and fast paced game to play and by far one of the strongest in the series. Good career move Roland!

Roland on the Run — Epicsoft

The fifth game in our series, not unlike the new Terminator movie, simply dismisses all of Roland's previous outings and takes us back to his Amsoft roots. Because you see, after all this time it transpires that Roland and his colleagues have in fact been held hostage at Amsoft HQ for months but have now hatched an ingenious escape plan to catch the 16:45pm freight train to Brentwood where they'll escape to a small village just outside of Guildford. No, seriously, this is the plot!

The only thing standing in their way includes jumping from a moving train and an extremely busy road full of cars and lorries which they must cross in order to reach salvation. Yep you've guessed it, the game is a rip off of the arcade classic Frogger.

The game only has one screen, but it's a nicely drawn and colourful screen. Sound effects however are woeful, some of the worst I've ever come across on the Amstrad and sadly that's about it! Roland on the Run is viewed as the worst game in the series, although I would have to argue that award goes to Roland in the Caves because, I actually really enjoyed it (Just don't tell anyone!)

Roland goes Square Bashing — Durell Software

Now don't panic! Roland hasn't taken a turn for the worse and become a bully, running around beating up nerds and squares! Oh no, believe it or not he's now morphed into a sugar cube with gangly arms and legs. How does he keep getting into these predicaments?

Another arcade inspired clone, this time of the 1982 classic Q*bert. In the game you must traverse across twenty increasingly difficult levels of floating square platforms which disappear as you step on them. The aim is to find the correct path across each of the squares and clear the screen.

A simplistic and yet rather addictive puzzle game which doesn't win any awards for graphics but none the less is great fun to play.

Roland in Time — GEM Software

Having escaped Amsoft in Roland on the Run, our intrepid hero is free once more to put on his time traveling hat. And this time his preferred time travelling mode of transport is a red phone box. Wait, this all sounds a little familiar? In fact the intro screen music which is a blatant rip off of the Doctor Who theme confirms what you were thinking. Thank goodness for lackadaisical 1980s copyright.

This time Roland has been stranded on Earth by his evil arch nemesis Maestro and the crystals needed to power his time machine have been scattered across different time periods in history. Your task is to visit these periods in time, collect the crystals, fix your time machine and get back to the present to confront Maestro. The game is essentially a platformer with a Manic Miner feel to it. There are fifty three screens in total each with their own enemies and puzzles to solve. Decent graphics with rather annoying repetitive music that will drive you crazy after a very short while. One of the more challenging in the series.
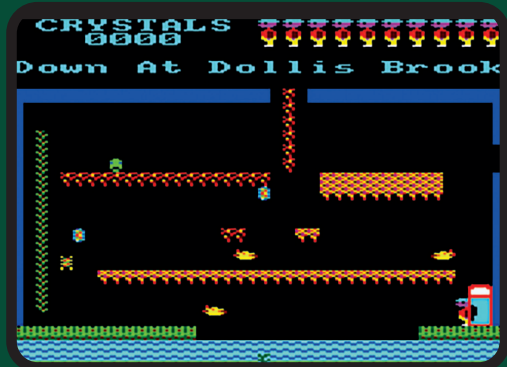
Roland in Space — GEM Software

The first and only sequel to a Roland game, and the last release of the series. The evil Maestro is back and it's time to deal with him once and for all. So this time, instead of travelling through time, you must travel across space visiting seven different alien worlds in order to locate all 158 components of a super weapon which can be used to destroy your arch nemesis once and for all.

Each of the seven alien worlds has a theme which range from a futuristic city, a pirate ship, a tree house and an Egyptian pyramid. There's even an interesting underwater section which adds a new element to the game.

Overall, Roland in Space is essentially a remake of Roland in Time and as before is full of nasty enemies and puzzles to deal with as you attempt to collect all the pieces of the super weapon. Same graphics, same annoying music and just as challenging, if not that little bit more than its predecessor.

Conclusion

So there you have it, a real mixed bag of games starring our chameleonic hero Roland. It's a real shame that a company like Amstrad with its marketing power didn't give Roland the treatment he truly deserved and provided him with a universal look and feel. No, instead what we got was eight rather mediocre games that just had the original back story re-written to fit around the Roland character, and it's clear to see why he never reached the dizzying heights of some of his other mascot rivals.

As for these days, no one has seen Roland in a long time. I like to think he's out there somewhere, still traveling the cosmos, raiding tombs or sailing the Seven Seas in search of treasure. Or perhaps he lives happily retired now in that small village just outside of Guildford free from the clutches of Amsoft. Either way Roland, gaming's most inconsistent mascot, we salute you!

CPC
Peripherals

Article by Colin Bell

Amstrad SSA-1 Speech Synthesizer

A talking Amstrad? Well, yes! that's just what the SSA-1 Speech Synthesizer provided, it allowed the power of synthesized speech on the humble home micro, something that just a few years previous was unthinkable even on some the most powerful micros of the day. But how? A little micro chip known as the SP0256 that's how. Simply combine this chip with an interface to connect to your micro of choice, amplify the output, connect it up to a twin set of speakers, bundle it all together with some software and hey presto! The SSA-1 was born!

The interface was very similar to that of the DDI-1 floppy drive interface with the internal stereo sound being fed into the CPC via a jack plug into the sound jack. A master volume control was located on the right hand side. The twin speakers, which were basic in design, plug in to either side of the interface and output sound at a decent quality.

The manual that accompanied the hardware was excellent, with page after page telling you everything you ever wanted to know about speech synthesis. The software provided on cassette was also very good and contained lots of useful demonstration programs and tips on how to incorporate commands and a rather smart talking clock that tells the time every 5 seconds.

Now before you all get too excited, remember this was still only 1985 and despite the reasonably accurate text to speech conversion, ultimately the speech that came out of the speakers was no better than that of a Dalek from the Doctor Who universe. But with a little tinkering and minor adjustments made via commands you can make sentences sound very understandable.

Sadly with regards to speech found within games, most software houses didn't adopt the technology and very few games actually made use of the SSA-1. Those that did however included: 3D Boxing, 3D Stunt Rider, Alex Higgins World Pool, Alex Higgins World Snooker, Darkwurlde, Glen Hoddle Soccer, Tubaruba and Roland in Space which was one of the more notable titles.

Amstrad MP-3 Television Tuner

The Amstrad MP-3 Television Tuner was a little gem of a peripheral that sat neatly tucked away under your Amstrad monitor. It acted as a TV tuner for your CPC and let you tune in and output terrestrial television on your colour CTM644 monitor. The unit worked by plugging the RGB connector from the monitor into the MP-3 TV tuner and was powered via a connector from the MP-3 TV tuner into the monitors 12V output port. Once connected up, all you had to do was plug in your RF cable at the rear of the unit and with a bit of tuning, hey presto! You now had a fully functioning television set.

Tuning a channel was a straight forward affair thanks to the rotary channel selector knob located on the far right of the unit. Other smaller rotary knobs included adjustments for colour, brightness and contrast. Picture quality was excellent, as good as any other stand-alone CRT television set. The only minor criticism however would be that there is no switch to select between CPC and Television mode, meaning you have to disconnect and then reconnect the RGB and power connector each time when switching between computer and television tuner.

Amstrad DMP-2000 Printer

Dubbed as yet another 'milestone' in the Amstrad range of low cost peripherals, the DMP-2000 was a dot matrix printer that was capable of printing over one hundred characters per second, which was no mean feat for 1985.

Looks wise the printer resembles an old style lawnmower minus the rear handle giving it an odd shape compared to other dot matrix printers of the time. The reason for this unusual design was due to the print head being tucked away behind the paper feed mechanism meaning that paper was fed in through the front and printed out to the rear which was completely opposite to any other printer of the time. This made no difference to the quality or speed of the print but did leave you rather short of desk space.

The DMP-2000 also featured the implementation of dot addressable graphics and a standard set of Epson command codes along with a complete set of ASCII and international characters. This meant the printer was compatible with almost all word processing and graphic software applications.

Overall a no-frills, no nonsense dot matrix printer that featured all the basic printing facilities you'd expect to find back in the day at an attractive cost.

Amstrad CT-1 Radio/Alarm Clock

Similar in size and shape to that of the MP-3 TV Tuner, the Amstrad CT-1 radio alarm clock was yet another great little add-on that fits nicely under the CTM640 / 644 colour monitor.

The unit featured three different wave bands, Long wave, Medium Wave and FM. A small tuning display indicated what frequency the tuner was currently at. A three way selector switch to swap between each band and a volume slider was also present. In the center of a unit a classic 80s style red LED display acted as the clock alongside several adjacent buttons for setting the time / alarm. The alarm could either be set to on / off or auto.

Power was obtained directly from your standard 220/240V wall socket while a small white wire that hung out the back of the unit acted as the antennae for the radio. Once again, like the MP-3 TV Tuner the CT-1 doesn't actually interface with the CPC itself and there is no way of controlling the unit via the computer. Sound quality was perfectly decent although one minor issue was that the monitor did cause slight interference to the signal, especially when set on the Medium Wave band. Overall a perfectly dent decent radio alarm clock and a nice addition to your CPC.

Amstrad RS232C Serial Interface

Like most early home micros, the Amstrad CPC range didn't come with an in built RS232 communications port so hence the need for an external Interface.

The size of a small brick with an external transformer power supply to boot, the interface attached to the expansion socket located to the rear of the computer and essentially gave you the means to communicate with other computers and / or other external peripherals such as modems, printers and disk drives. Using a modem meant that data could be transferred via standard telephone lines all over the world, no mean feat when you consider that we are talking many years before the birth of the World Wide Web.

All nothing short of wizardry I hear you all cry! and Amstrad clearly thought so too as the user manual was presented in the form of a 'Book of Spells' with each interface command labelled as Spell 1, Spell 2 and so on. Spells helped to facilitate the transfer of data between other systems using a proprietary protocol located in the interface's own ROM and gave access to terminal software for connecting to the then popular British Telecom Prestel Service. Rather somewhat childishly, the UK version of the interface included spell commands for file transfer entitled |SUCK and |BLOW which had to altered for the US market as they were considered unacceptable there.

This was one of the first ever peripherals released for the Amstrad CPC but due to the external power supply and software limitations it was ultimately replaced with an Amstrad-branded version of a vastly superior alternative by PACE modems.

Amstrad JY1, JY2 & JY3

A total of three official Amstrad joysticks were released, the JY-1, JY-2 & JY-3. The JY-1 was the first and was your standard black plastic affair with a contoured grip and thumb operated fire button. The quality wasn't great so the JY-1 was soon replaced by the slightly smaller yet more robust JY-2 model. The JY-2 featured a second trigger fire button and had a smaller base which made it easier for holding in your hand. Movement was also sharp and responsive.

Both the JY-1 & JY-2 models featured a unique built in 9-pin socket on the base which allowed you to connect a second joystick for gaming with a friend although you were hard pushed to actually find a game that supported this feature.

Another reason for this unique built in socket was to help boost sales of Amstrad's own joysticks. Rather cleverly, or sneakily, Amstrad only fitted the CPC range with one joystick port which had two different ground signals. Connecting one joystick to the CPC would forward a second ground signal to the in-built socket on the joystick which in turn allowed you to connect up your second joystick. Not a bad idea in terms of cost cutting and innovation, however sales of the Amstrad joysticks were poor due to the quality with most users opting for a more reliable third party joystick that were becoming more increasingly available.

The JY-3 was the last of the official Amstrad joysticks released and was essentially a Cheetah Annihilator with a slightly modified grip. Again the quality and robustness were poor and I actually recall breaking the shaft of this joystick myself whilst waggling away furiously locked in a grapple as Hulk Hogan against Sergeant Slaughter in Ocean's WWF game. Ah, fond memories.

Amstrad LP-1 Light Pen

The LP-1 was the official light pen of the Amstrad CPC range and in 1985 it was one of the new must have peripherals, or so the magazines and advertising would have you believe. The set came with the pen itself, which plugged into the joystick port, and a graphics program on cassette. Once the cassette was loaded you were presented with a short tutorial which you could use the pen with to turn the pages. The tutorial also goes on to explain how you can use the pen in your own BASIC programs.

With the tutorial out of the way you could either play a game, called Nim, which involved you moving blocks using the pen or go straight onto drawing. There were two modes for drawing in, mode 0 which allowed 16 colours and mode 1 which only gave 4 colours. Functions were fairly basic with point to point line drawing, shapes, filling, spraying, text entry and magnification to name but a few. You were also able to save, load and print your work, although you were restricted to Amstrads own printer.

On-screen results were average at best and the plotting system wasn't the easiest to master. Programming your own sub routines required a good degree of programming knowledge and the pen only worked with the more expensive colour monitors.

Not a bad introduction in to what the newly emerging light pens were capable of but not as sophisticated as other light pens that were available.

Amstrad DDI-1 / FD-1 - 3" Floppy Disk Drive

The Amstrad DDI-1 / FD-1 was an external floppy disk drive that was released for the original CPC 464, 664 & 6128 micro range. The drive came in two parts, the interface (DDI-1) and the drive (FD-1). The drive unit was a rather large and bulky affair with a built in power supply and took CF2 Compact Floppy 3" disks. It was fast when loading software and nice and quiet when in operation. The interface connected the drive to the expansion socket located to the rear of the computer via a ribbon cable which had a parallel connector for attaching a second drive. Two drives was the maximum the Amstrad could handle.

The drive could be operated in two modes, either under AMSDOS, the Amstrad disc operating system which was already loaded onto the ROM located within the interface or under CP/M, an operating system that came on a separate disk. The disks themselves were very well protected with the magnetic media protected by a metal shutter and encased within a hard rectangular plastic casing. The disks could be inserted into the drive on either side making it possible to use the both sides with a single sided disk drive. A total of 180 Kilobytes could be stored on either side of the disk giving the user a total of 360 Kilobytes of storage capacity.

An external disk drive was never released for the latter CPC 464 and 6128 Plus model range and sadly due to the different socket types used on the new models the older DDI-1 / FD-1 was not compatible.

Amstrad MP1 & MP2 Television Modulator

In the 1980s most home micro's such as the Sinclair ZX Spectrum and the Commodore 64 could be simply connected to the television in your home via a standard RF cable giving you a colour output. The Amstrad however didn't come with an RF output and when buying one you had to opt for either the GT64/GT65 Green screen monitor or the more expensive CTM644 Colour monitor. Most, including my folks opted for the cheaper green screen option, but what if you wanted to a colour display at a fraction of the cost of colour monitor? Well, fear not as Amstrad came up with a solution — the MP1 television modulator.

What the MP-1 essentially did was modulate the monitor signal in such a way that it could be output to a regular home television set. It also provided the power required to operate the CPC which was normally supplied via the monitor and it's in built PSU making the whole system just that little bit more portable as you did not need to cart a heavy monitor around with you. I should clarify that when I say 'portable' I mean in the 1980s sense.

The one problem however with the MP-1 Modulator was that it did not provide for the 12V power supply required to power the CPC 664 & CPC 6128's internal disk drive so in enter the revised MP-2 modulator which featured the additional 12V connector required. Later versions of the MP-1 & MP-2 released in Europe also featured a SCART connector.
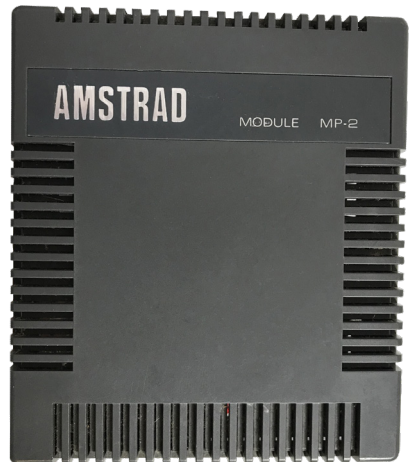
Don't Look Back in Anger!

Lemmings

Article by Colin Bell

Let me set the scene — it's a rainy Saturday afternoon back in 1991 and I'm up in my friends attic surrounded by several networked BBC Micros, Masters and a shiny new computer called an Acorn Archimedes A3000. Now I should explain, my friend's father worked in the Computer Science department at Glasgow University so hence all the Acorn machines. My friend is all excited about some new game that came with the A3000, a game called Lemmings. Needless to say, the rest of that afternoon was spent making these green haired cute little characters, climb, float, bomb, bash, block, build, mine and dig. Oh, and blow up! I was hooked!

Now at this time I didn't have a fancy next gen computer, I still had my beloved Amstrad CPC 464. So imagine my excitement when I found out that Lemmings was due to be ported to all the 8-bit systems including the Amstrad.

But, as fate would have it, it would be a long time before I would ever play Lemmings on the CPC — some 26 years later in fact, as in the end my Amstrad was sold for a new Sega Megadrive in early 1992 just a few months shy of Lemmings being released. And the rest as they say is history.

Below: The colourful artwork of the Amstrad CPC Disk inlay.

Yippeee! as they say in Lemming land!

I had to wait until 2016 until we finally met when Lemmings made it into my ever growing Amstrad CPC collection, and it was even the disk version. Bonus!

It suddenly dawned on me that I'd never actually seen this game in action on the Amstrad and to be honest I was half expecting a ZX Spectrum port, but my oh my, I could not have been more wrong! Lemmings on the CPC was a game that made full use of the Amstrad's colour palette, had music and sound playing throughout each level and looked to have stayed true to the 16-bit original.

Now there are a few differences, the first one is as you might expect the size of the game. The 16-bit versions feature over 160 levels whereas the Amstrad only features 60 which are divided into four sub categories — Fun, Tricky, Taxing and the most challenging, Mayhem.

Some of the more complex levels and puzzles have also been trimmed down but overall there is still more than enough challenging action to keep you occupied. The second difference is the number of lemmings, as the most you'll ever see on the screen at one time is 20 whereas the 16-bit versions can handle 50 plus. The third difference is the control method — the CPC version does not support a
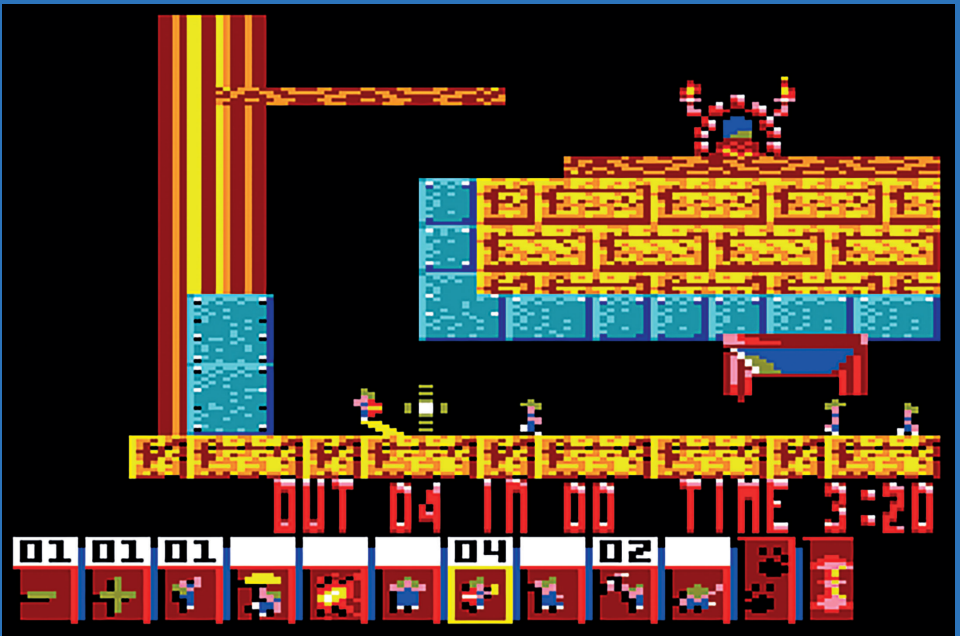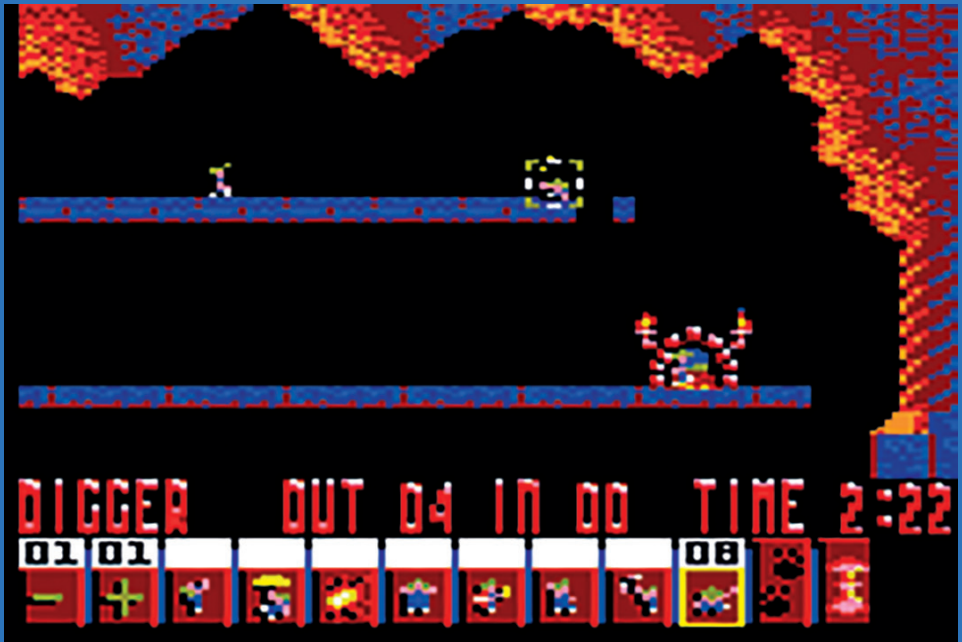
mouse so all actions have to be performed using either the keyboard or joystick. Scrolling the screen with the joystick or keys is in itself very smooth — selecting the desired action for your lemming via the numeric keys though can be slightly sluggish as you locate the lemming you would like the action to be applied to and click on him. This does take a bit of getting used to.

That all being said, you really can't fault this port and it is clear that Psygnosis really went to town on this one and what a fantastic job they did.

Lemmings on the Amstrad CPC is quite simply stunningly gorgeous and a true showcase of what the humble CPC was truly capable of. The addictive gameplay, atmosphere, and cute little animations have all been maintained and captured brilliantly. And while

the sound and music are not quite so polished, it's nice that it does feature in every level and having played the 16-bit versions, you can easily recognise and hum along to the tunes.

The digitised speech is sadly missing but you can clearly pick out the iconic 'oh no!' sound effect when it all goes wrong and there's nothing left to do but obliterate the whole screen.

The disk version I have features very fast loading times and as with original version, a code is supplied each time you complete a level so that can come back to your game at any time and start playing on the level you had got to.
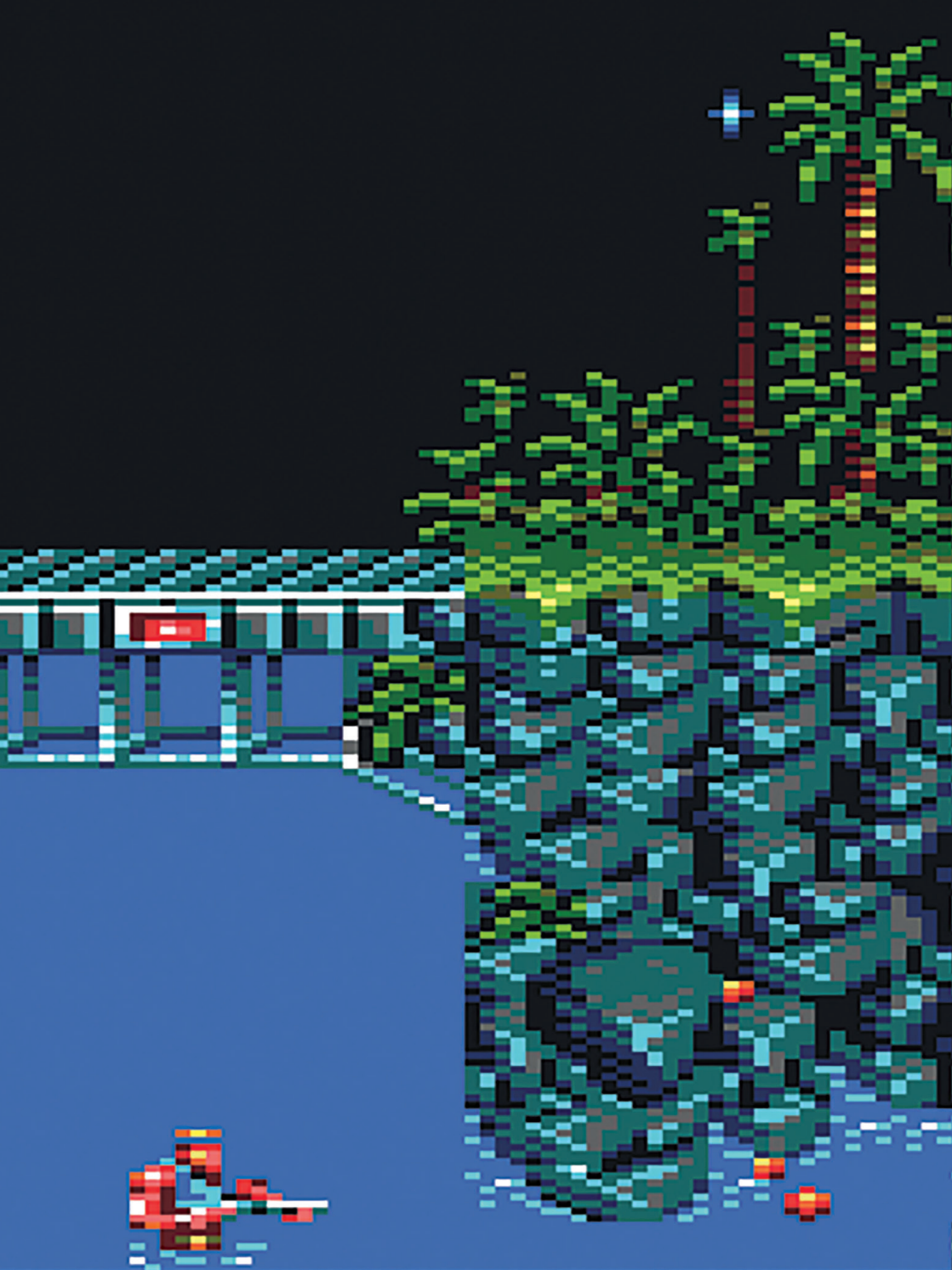
Overall, in terms of a CPC port, Lemmings really is all you could ever have asked for in a conversion. Is it the best

CPC game of all time? Well that one that will always be up for debate. Amstrad Action ranked it as the second best game of all time for the CPC and as for me, it certainly ranks in my top 5.

A fun and timeless classic that's a must for any Amstrad fan.

FUSION

Game   : Gryzor
Year   : 1987
Publisher: Ocean Software

Bill & Lance have arrived on your Amstrad to take out the alien scum that have invaded Earth!

Run and gun your way through jungles and alien bases to reach a giant pulsating heart surrounded by creatures that looks suspiciously similar to the Facehugger from Alien!

Win this final battle and you are greeted with one of the funniest and most down beat endings in gaming history! This is arguably the most impressive looking port of the Contra coin-op (renamed here due to an unfortunately timed skirmish of the same name being in the news).

If you wanted a game to show off the wonderful graphics that the CPC's vibrant colour palette can produce, then thanks to Mark Jones' stunning sprite and background work Gryzor is the one! It's a shame they opted to keep the action to single screens rather than scroll, so Contra purists may turn their noses up here, but coder John Brandwood has produced fast paced blasting action with tight responsive controls. Along with the smooth sprite movement and animation, it's an absolute joy to play. Despite that ending...

PIT FIGHTER PIT FIGHTER

MATCH 1
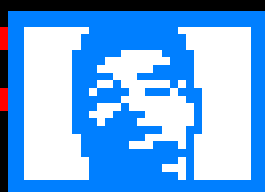
TY $000000
KO's

EXECUTIONER

01:30

FUSION

FAIL

Game   : Pit Fighter
Year   : 1991
Publisher: Domark

Pit Fighter from Atari was unleashed upon the arcades in 1990 and was the second game ever to use digitised sprites whereby all the various actions and movements were performed by real actors in front of a blue screen and camera. The game was a big success and it wasn't to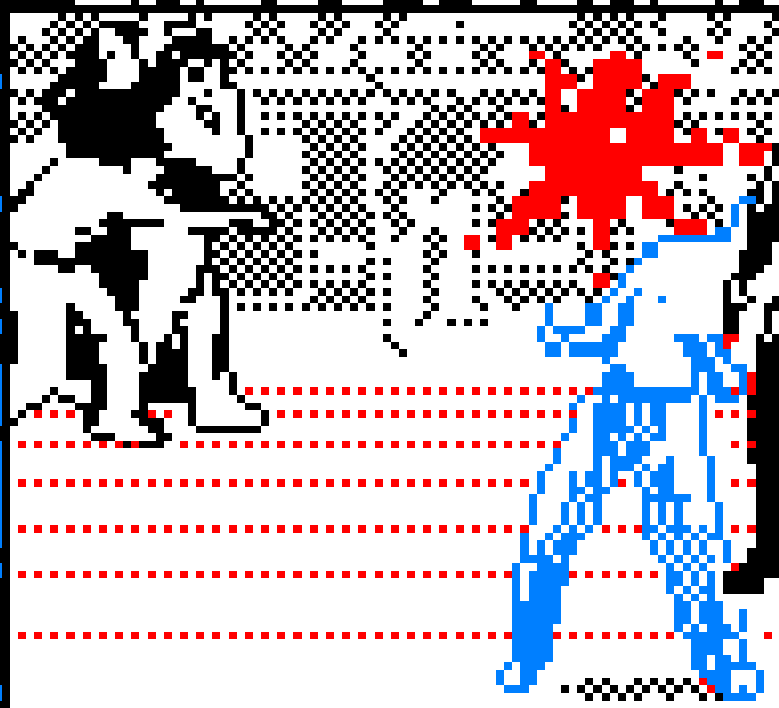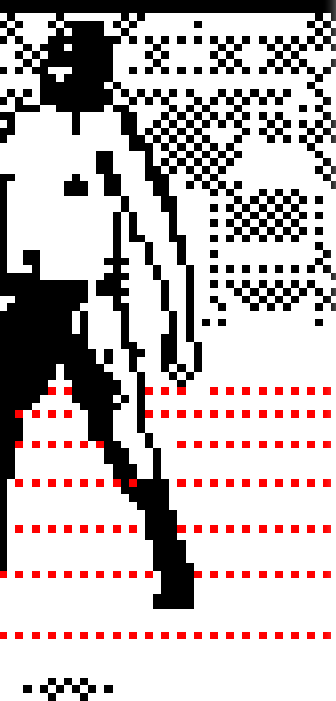o long before software house Domark secured the rights to release ports onto pretty much every home computer and console of that era which included the Amstrad CPC.

Sadly what we got was perhaps one of the worst games to ever to grace the system. Now hold on just a minute I hear you cry! The animated intro graphics and music are pretty good, and yes indeed they are but all they do is lure you into a false sense of security — when you get past that intro section and into the game it is a complete and utter shambolic mess!

Graphics are quite simply awful featuring only four colours and even though the programmers have tried to capture the digitised look of the characters they are just downright ugly. The gameplay as well lumbers along at less than a snail's pace and affects the responsiveness of the controls massively leaving you quite literally feeling like you have no idea what's going on as any movement you make with the joystick or keyboard doesn't translate on to screen.

The in-game music is the only saving grace and I guess some Kudos must be given to the Domark programmers for keeping the scaling of the characters in the game, whereby they get smaller the further into the background they go and bigger again when moving into the foreground — something not even the Megadrive port had! Sadly though this is not enough to save what is a completely unplayable and appalling game.

I genuinely feel sorry for anyone that wasted their hard earned pocket money on this title. It's a definite top five worst Amstrad CPC game of all time making Pit Fighter, rather ironically, the complete and utter pits!

00:05
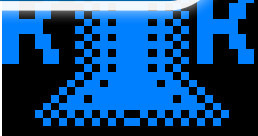
AMTIX!

Article by Roger Kean

To be fair, most 8-bit games promised rather more visual excitement in the blurb than they were capable of delivering on the screen. The Amstrad version of Fifth Axis from French software house Loricels was produced by Activision. The Amtix! reviewers enjoyed the game's 'striking' animation, sound and 'marvellous graphics'.

With a score of 91%, it was a sure cert for the cover, which gave Oli a headache in coming up with a marvellous graphic. 'I took comfort from the notion that Professor Chronos had created a time machine, upset the time continuum — very Star Trek, thank you! — and his creation having done the dirty on him has scattered artefacts all over the shop, which of course he must collect. And of course, just about everything in displaced time is out to get him.'

The result might be labelled a 'Disco Dance of Death', laboratory background delivered in broad dark strokes of indigo set against the harsh under lighting from squares in the floor which illuminate our 'hero' and the varied robotic creatures arrayed against him.

'I wanted a striking contrast and took the risk of using a very bright pink globe as the object that draws the eye to offset the action-figure in the foreground,' Oli recalls. And he has his back to the would-be magazine purchaser, not usually recommended by distributors. 'But I thought turning the tables on usual design concepts would work. Once you have taken in the glowing globe and its alien inhabitant, it makes the threat all the stronger and then you see the man about to deliver a blow to it. It makes him an understated hero', Oli argues.

'In my time I've done illustrations for disco advertisements and had a wealth of sketches of dancers in motion I could adopt. The real trick, though, is to make the picture busy, cram in the detail and by careful positioning of elements within the frame disguise the fact that gravity doesn't have a lot to do with what's going on!'

The printed result shows Oli's skill with the dynamics of figures in action and lighting effects which both separate the characters as well as enfolding them in the same space — or is that a space-time continuum?

Left & Right : The eye is drawn to the rather pink, and I suspect pulsating, robot brain with amazing lighting effects from below.

THE STORY BEHIND...THE...

I'm joined by Philip & Andrew Oliver, **AKA The Oliver Twins.** They are extremely well known to the Amstrad retro community having developed so many of their best selling games for these computers. So who or what made them adopt the Amstrad CPCs and make so many games for them and when and why did they move on?

Chris Wilkins: Well it's just possible you guys are the most prolific developers on the CPC, just how many games did you write for the machine?

Philip Oliver: We actually designed and wrote 25, but there were also another nine games written by other people using our designs and characters.

Andrew Oliver: It was a fantastic computer not just to develop games on, but also to develop them for. There is a difference. We used the Amstrad to develop games for the Amstrad CPC and Spectrum, then in late 1987 we switched to using PCs to host all the development code, whilst still targeting the Amstrad CPC.

CW: Wow! That's a lot of Amstrad games, quite possibly more than anyone else. So what made you adopt the Amstrad and when was it?

PO: We were in the lower sixth at school, and we'd started getting our games published on the BBC micro. We produced a number of games that we just couldn't find publishers for. We were coming to the conclusion that no one wanted to publish games on the BBC and thought that we needed to change platform, on reflection it was probably due to most having been sold into schools, or to people who bought

disk drives and copied all the games they wanted. It was mid 1984 and we felt we were too late to learn and compete on the Commodore 64 and the Spectrum. The Amstrad CPC 464, with a tape deck and monitor had been released, and whilst better than both in our opinion, it was expensive and sales were slow, meaning a smaller market to sell games to.

AO: Firebird (British Telecom Soft) recommended we write Easy Art and Panda Sprites for the Amstrad and they would publish them. They arranged getting us three CPC 664s from the first

batch in May 1985. These had a disk drive and were brilliant computers. Sadly we couldn't afford to have all three and immediately sold two of them to friends Ivan and Jon Paul. Jon Paul would use his to learn to code and produce music for many of our games whilst Ivan helped in producing the SPAM (SPectrum-AMstrad [Also Monty Python reference]) Link cable allowing us to develop games on the Amstrad and send them to a Spectrum.

CW: Was it hard to change from BBC game development to the Amstrad?

PO: It was made easier by having Firebird wanting to publish both Easy Art and Panda Sprites, so we knew exactly what was required.

No redesign was required, it was very clear what we were expected to do. School work got in the way a little!

AO: We'd have been lost without MAXAM ROM compiler that fitted on the back of the Amstrad allowing us to write Z80 code. Maxam combined with the build-in disk drive and a great keyboard made this a fantastic development computer. We had to learn Z80 assembler, having only just mastered 6502 assembler on the BBC B. We were lucky enough to find a small flipbook which showed each of the instructions. I say lucky, because coding was so specialist and without the internet finding such a specialist book was hard.

PO: Sadly by the time we'd completed Easy Art and Panda Sprites, Firebird pulled out of publishing both of them :-(. Thankfully we were able to find

a new publisher, Interceptor Software. This started a short relationship with them as they were setting up a budget label, called Players, and they published Magic Maths, Magic Clock and Killapede. Sadly the money was terrible, so we needed to find another publisher that would pay better.

CW: I'm guessing that's where your relationship with Codemasters started?

AO: Yes, we met them at ECTS (Electronics & Computers Trade Show) in London in September 1986. We showed them our previous games, just the boxes, and pitched Super Robin Hood from a single sheet of handwritten A4 paper. They liked the idea and convinced us to write this for them.

PO: This took about a month and was a massive

Above: Look at ALL the games The Twins developed for the CPC range of computers!

success, becoming our first UK #1 best seller. We'd go on to write many more games for Codemasters. With the first proceeds we were able to buy a second Amstrad, this time the CPC 6128. Now we could both develop games simultaneously rather than sharing our original 664.

CW: You wrote games very quickly compared to others — how come?

AO: Well having first developed Easy Art & Panda Sprites they were great game development tools and made things a lot quicker. Then there were the stupid hours we worked and setting ourselves the harsh goal to ship a game a month. We were also very efficient with code re-use. Each new game used a lot of code from previous ones.

CW: Were there any games you developed that weren't released for the Amstrad?

PO: Well we'd started a game called Excalibur, a top down adventure game inspired by Gauntlet. It would have been similar to Zelda, developed around the same time. Sadly Firebird never came through with the contract and money so it was abandoned.

AO: We had started a game called Safari Madness just before meeting Codemasters, but this morphed into Grand Prix Simulator.

PO: We did complete the CD Games Pack for the Amstrad, but Codemasters decided not to release it as sales were predicted to be too low. Frustrating at the time, but the right decision.

CW: So when and why did you stop producing games for the Amstrad?

PO: Our last game, that we fully developed, on the Amstrad was Fantasy World Dizzy in September 1989. The

Below: The bedroom, and development domain, of The Twins. As one coded, the other slept!

sales of games for the Amstrad had started to decline and we felt that after Christmas many shops would seriously reduce their support for the computer. Sadly all good things come to an end, it was sad and we wished it didn't have to end as we'd got really good at making games for it!

AO: We moved onto the NES console, back to 6502, and Philip took to designing further games for the Amstrad and worked with other developers to create them. Our last game under our design for the Amstrad was Robin Hood: Legend Quest, coded by Lyndon Sharp, at the end of 1992. A great game, but sales were poor, and the Amstrad CPC faded away after a good run of 8 years.

CW: So did you play many Amstrad CPC games, and if so what were your favourites?

PO: We were too busy to play many games but we did have a great selection of games on our BBC, which also had a disk drive.

AO: However, we often played Bomb Jack, Commando, Ikari Warriors, Chase HQ, Spin Dizzy & Green Beret.

CW: Recently the Royal Mail produced some Retro video game stamps. How did it feel to have Dizzy chosen for one of those to represent the first era of British video games?

PO: Chuffed to bits and very proud that Dizzy was selected.

CW: Looking back on your time with the Amstrad, how do

Above: Robin Hood: Legend Quest — check out the tights!

you feel about it now?

PO: Those computers helped us go mainstream and launch our careers. We feel lucky to have chosen to move to the Amstrad when we did. They were brilliant computers for the time and are fondly remembered by all those that had them.

AO: I recently judged the Amstrad Eterno awards and I was amazed by what the Batman group achieved with Pinball Dreams. It's staggering what the Amstrad was capable of, it was certainly far more than we thought possible. Imagine if that had been released back in the mid 80s. It would have sold a lot of

Amstrads!

PO: We certainly couldn't have made more effort to make the most of the opportunity the Amstrad CPC computers gave us and we're very proud of all the games we created for them. We're also delighted that people remember them fondly over 30 years after they were released!

CW: Thanks again gents for taking the time to speak to me.

Below: The Amstrad CPC would have been nothing without Dizzy!

TOP 10

HOMEBREW HEROES

10 — Relentless (Psytronik Software 2013)

If you like horizontally scrolling shooters then this game lives up to its name! Wave after wave of enemies attack whilst you navigate through tight areas avoiding gun fire from turrets. All at what looks like an astonishing (for the Amstrad) 50fps fast scroll! The graphics whilst simple, are detailed and colourful with it all backed up by some wonderful tunes. The game itself is very tough but short too, and is more of a score attack utilising a novel bonus meter that you need to fill and keep topped up by destroying entire waves of enemies. Frenetic stuff! Also check out Super Edge Grinder from the same author.
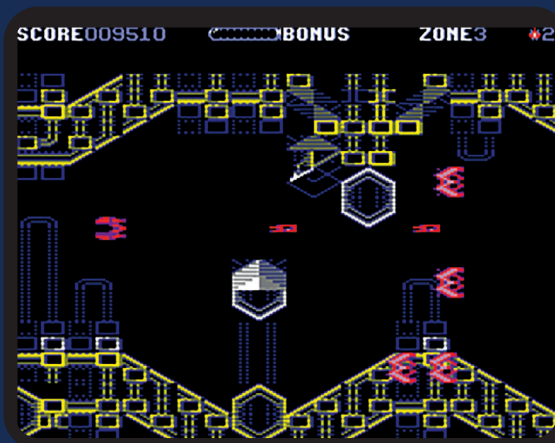
9 — Vector Vaults (Albertoven 2016)

If you have a love for vector graphics that were popular in the early to mid-80s, then this 'Thrust' meets 'Scramble' game is the one for you! It just oozes retro cool! Gravity and inertia pull you around, but this isn't about shooting and destroying things, it's more of a race to the end against an ever depleting energy supply. Tough choices to be made — do you take the more dangerous route which may have a life saving battery? Really smooth and fast gameplay makes this utterly addictive, despite the strange presentation between levels. And there's much replay value with trying to beat your (or your friend's) times on levels!
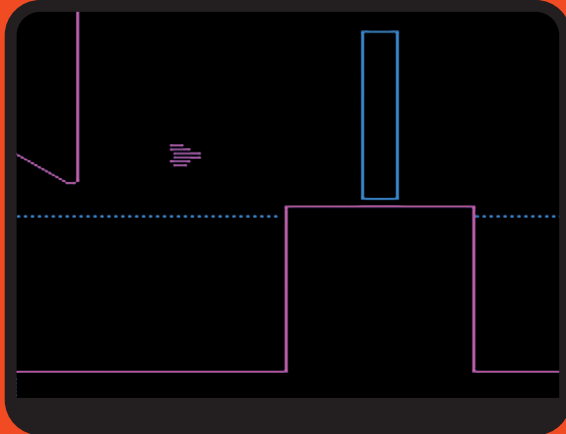
8 — Operation Alexandra (4Mhz 2018)

This was the eventual winner of one of the annual CPCRetroDev game making competitions, and thoroughly deserved it is too! As a Russian soldier, you descend into a previously undiscovered Nazi base from World War II in the Arctic that conceals some very strange monsters indeed! The presentation throughout is fanstastic, and whilst initial appearances may lead you to believe this is another standard single screen platformer, there's much more to it with some puzzles to solve and strange mutant creatures to shoot!
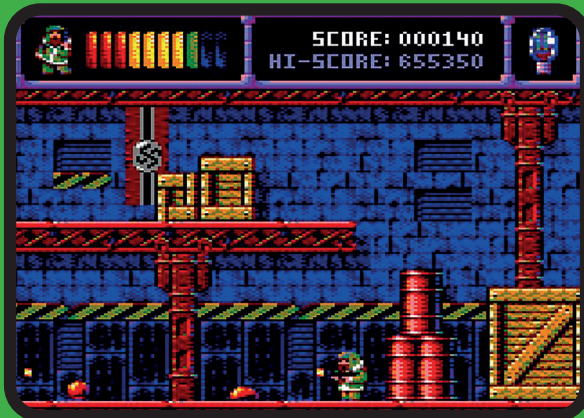
7 — Galactic Tomb (ESP Soft 2018)

Set over 3 stages, the 1st level is a run 'n' gun 'Turrican' inspired romp; blasting enemies, making difficult platforming jumps, disabling energy gates and discovering secrets. All to the backing of one of the best tunes I've ever heard on the CPC! Things change on level 2 with a jetpack now strapped to your back, but it's more of a maze and a puzzle with you figuring out which energy gates to shut off in what order. Lastly, the final level finds you underwater in a mini-sub exploring caves and blasting alien sea creatures. Galactic Tomb is packed full of variety, wonderful graphics and music, and a tough challenge. It would have placed higher if the frame rate could have been improved.
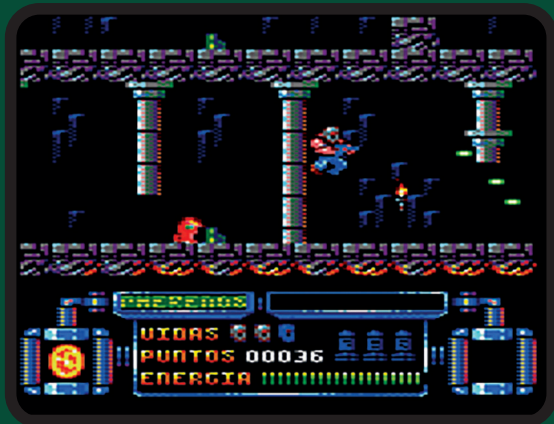
6 — The Adventures Of Timothy Gunn (CNGSoft 2018)

If you loved Joffa Smith's 'Cobra' on the Spectrum, then you're going to be blown away by this souped-up version on the CPC! Timothy Gunn is another CPCRetroDev game that unbelievably only finished in 4th place in the compo that year, and I guess its simplicity may divide opinion. If you want pure fast frenetic blasting action to a brilliant sound track (including that famous Peter Gunn Theme) with gorgeous graphics — you'll find no better. I find myself coming back to this game time and time again, more so than any other entry. Addictive, enduring and that elusive 'just one more go' factor!
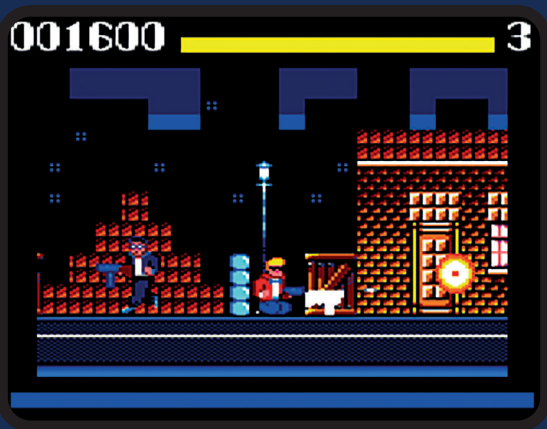
5 — Baba's Palace (Rafa Castillo & John McKlain 2017)

Inspired by Catrap on the Gameboy (and Pitman on the Sharp MZ-700 before that) is another well deserved CPCRetroDev winner and the only puzzle game on our list. Over 100 levels and rooms in the palace, you have to destroy all the monsters and at the end Baba the witch will hand you the elixir of life! This isn't going to be easy though, you're going to have some very taxing puzzles with rearranging blocks so you can reach all these monsters. One bad move and you can find yourself completely stuck! Complicating things later in the game, you'll have to switch between two characters and get them working together. A simple but fiendish concept, executed with beautiful graphics and animation, all backed up by one of the catchiest tunes.
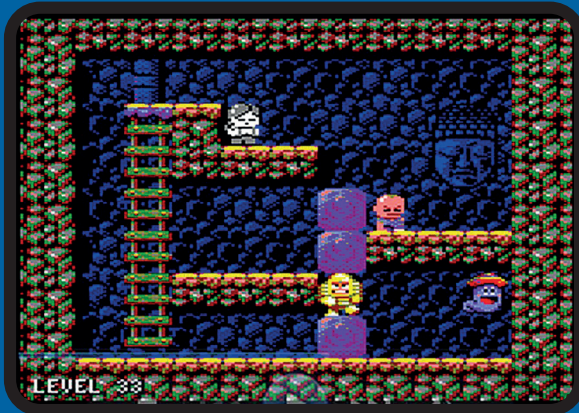
4 — R-Type 128k (Easter Egg 2012)

For many people, this remake reignited their interest in the Amstrad scene and it caused a big stir at the time. C64 and Spectrum owners were already very proud of their R-Type versions, less so CPC fans who received a rushed ZX port. The Easter Egg team undertook a huge project to rewrite the vast majority of the code, and completely overhaul the graphics and sounds. Not only that, new features were made available including an intro and ending sequences not found in the arcade original. Now Amstrad owners had something to crow about, and certainly heated debate occurred across the internet! What can't be denied though, is that the CPC now has a fantastic port of the classic horizontally scrolling shmup!

3 — Megablasters (Odiesoft / Radical Software 1994)

Arriving at the very end of the CPC's commercial life was this impressively massive Bomberman clone. In fact, to write it off as a mere quick clone would be doing it disservice. Set over 10 worlds (not including an entire 'secret world') with 90 different levels, this took up a whopping four sides of two disks! It's also the highest scoring game on the Amstrad when averaging review scores from magazines and websites, with a huge 96% rating. However the most fun to be had though is in the simultaneous 4-player battle mode against friends! Lovely graphics and delightful music compliment a simple, enjoyable but taxing game that's going to stay with you a long long time.

2 — Orion Prime (Cargosoft 2009)

This point and click adventure set on an atmospheric, deserted and creepy space station was a huge undertaking and passion project for several dedicated members of the CPC scene. The game slowly builds suspense and eases you in initially with some light exploration and simple puzzles, but the true horrors of Orion Prime soon reveal themselves! The game builds to a crescendo with horrific creatures stalking you, the reactor about to explode as you desperately try to reach the escape craft you have repaired. Along the way several mini games nicely break things up with some arcade action. Absolutely enthralling stuff, stunningly presented and objectives that will really test you but not so obscure as to put you off. Just like a great novel or movie — you won't want to stop and will want to see this through to the end!

1 — Pinball Dreams (Batman Group 2019)

Some may question the point of pinball games on home computers and consoles. What can beat the real and physical sensation of whacking those pinballs, with all the vibrations, noises and naughty tilts of the table? Pinball Dreams on the Amiga went a long way to change those attitudes, and it's rightfully regarded as a classic. It was also regarded as impossible to convert to humble 8-bit computers. The Batman Group doesn't listen to such opinions! You have to see and play this to believe. Not only have they managed to fit in everything found in the original, but to do so with it running at a liquid smooth 50fps with stunning graphics, music, physics and highly responsive controls is absolutely sensational. They truly have achieved the impossible and I don't think we've seen something so ambitious running better on any other 8-bit home computer.
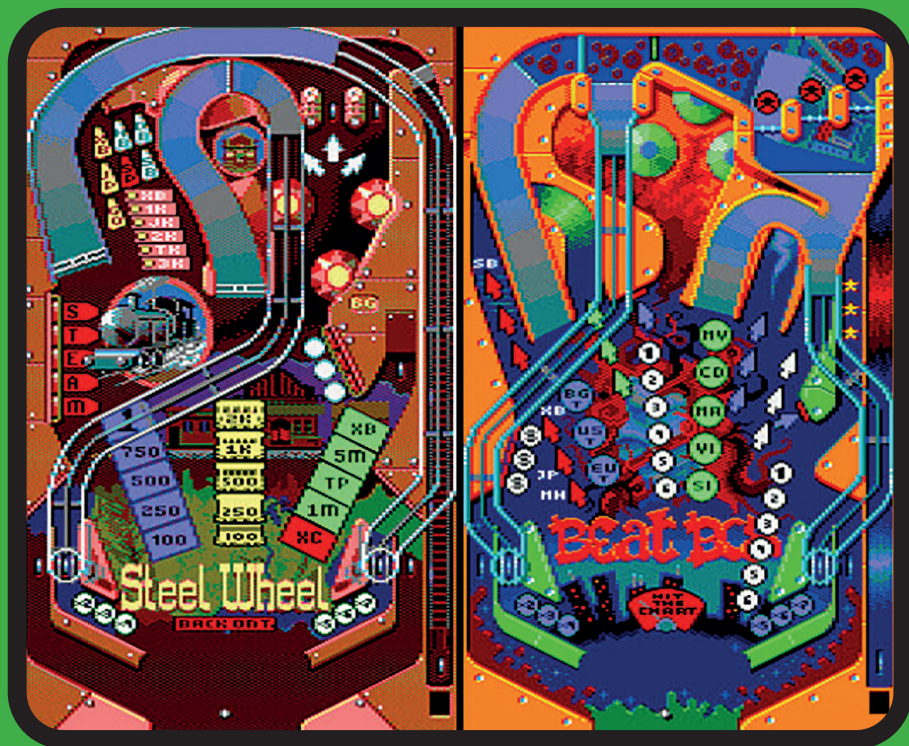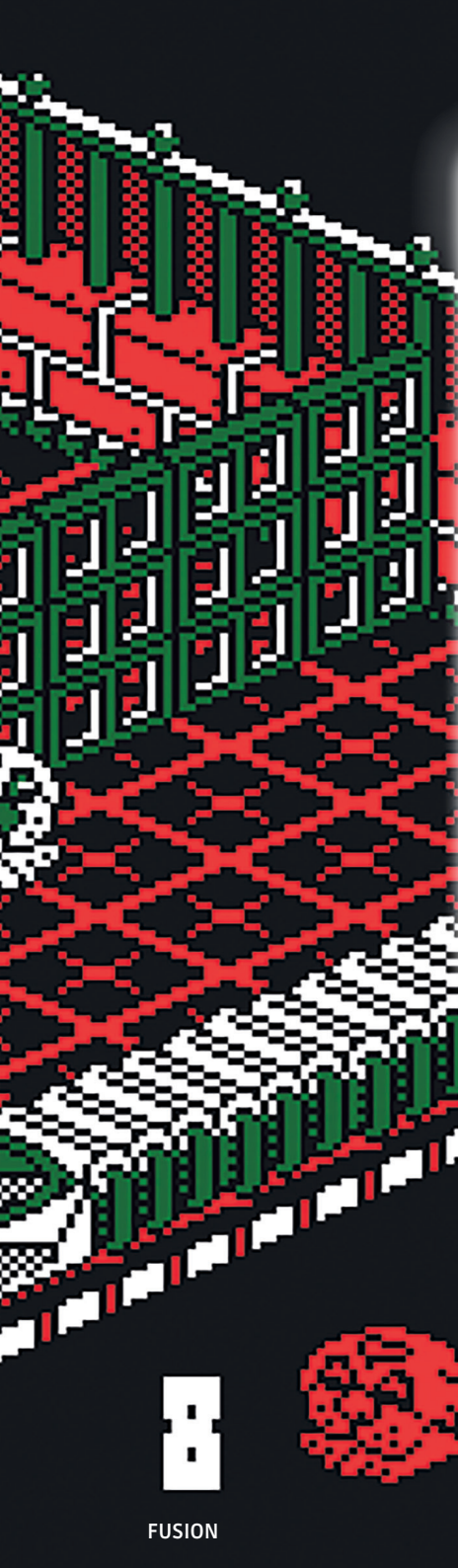
FUSION

Game   : Head Over Heels
Year   : 1987
Publisher: Ocean Software

By the time Head Over Heels arrived, the isometric puzzle adventure genre was already oversaturated. Ultimate Play The Game had dominated this genre starting with 1984's Knight Lore, and many clones followed such as Highway Encounter, Nosferatu and even Batman from the same team behind this game — Jon Ritman and Bernie Drummond. The way they differentiated Head Over Heels from the rest was by having two different characters to control, each with their own unique abilities and strengths. At points in the game you can even combine them together to solve many of the fiendish puzzles found on the dreaded Blacktooth Empire! Head Over Heels is a classic on any system it appeared on, but it's arguable that the Amstrad had the best version — even the 16-bit versions on the Amiga and Atari ST seemed to have the same minor control issues the C64 port had. The ZX Spectrum was the original, but the Amstrad version added in extra colour. It's only small differences, but this is a game Amstrad owners could be proud of.

Breaking the mould
An interview with Adam Peters

Article by David Crookes

■ Adam Peters was a staff writer on Amstrad Action between October 1991 and January 1993 — working on the magazine in the midst of what has been considered its golden age under editor Rod Lawton.

Introducing himself as 'the good looking one with a spiky haircut' and reminding readers that he had written 'a load of tosh' as a freelancer a few years before, he claimed his gaming knowledge was second to none. 'Or second to nuns at any rate, cos nuns don't get to play any games at all, do they?'

He then proceeded to bring a lighter, jokier, more eccentric vibe to the magazine and he engaged greatly with readers, especially within the letters pages which, at times, brought a new meaning to its name, Reaction. One reader, Peter Worley, had strong opinions and was given his own slot.

It was during Adam's time that Amstrad Action had its own Christmas panto, Cinderella, held in Bath's council offices on a budget of £50 (Adam playing Gemima Ugly and drawing on his A-level in Drama). Adam also appeared on the cover of issue 85 with an Amstrad 6128 Plus in the form of a guitar for a music-making guide, popping the tuneful result on the covertape of the next issue.

There were jaunts to France, pieces about desktop publishing which encouraged a host of fanzines, and a ton of quirks including facts about real Lemmings in a game review. Adam even included random guides to European countries (things to do in Spain: 'grow a big bulbous nose like a potato (then paint it red)').

Today, Adam is a television producer and script writer, having worked on animated preschool series such as Pip Ahoy! for Cosgrove Hall Fitzpatrick.

Fusion: What attracted you to Amstrad Action?

Adam Peters: Like writers on a lot of niche publications, I started out as an avid reader of the magazine. I acquired a CPC 6128 (my first computer/gaming device) in 1987, using it for a mix of gaming and putting together fanzines. I quickly realised AA was the best CPC mag out there and began devouring it religiously — i.e. served on a wafer washed down with communion wine.

Fusion: When did you get offered a full-time staff writing job?

AP: Steve Carey (AA's editor when I started contributing) tried to get me to put myself forward for several full-time

jobs at Future Publishing, including games editor of weekly New Computer Express and technical editor of AA. I turned down these advances, partly as I didn't want to quit Uni and partly as I'd have been rubbish at those particular jobs (my techie advice would have been limited to 'try kicking the plug' or 'turn it upside down and shake it'). The conclusion of my three years at University tied in with AA advertising for a Staff Writer, so I did apply for that one. Seemingly they couldn't find anyone better so there I was.

Fusion: What was it like working with Rod Lawton?

AP: Who? In all seriousness, I don't think I could have asked for a better boss for my first day job. Rod had a certain world-weary cynicism that helped reign in and channel a lot of my pie-eyed enthusiasm. He also gave me an incredible

amount of freedom, letting me take on things that are traditionally part of the Editor's role. Since I'd come into the magazine as a reader turned contributor, I had a different sort of connection with other AA readers.

Fusion: How did you balance games coverage with the technical side?

AP: I had the advantage of my own Amstrad usage being 50% playing games and 50% running a fanzine business,

so I had some grip on both markets. Then again I've always been pretty rubbish at games, which gave me a cynical take towards the gaming side. I also didn't like the Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells persona of a lot of the business/hobbyist market, so I could be cynical about that too.

Fusion: AA had a real can-do attitude, with guides to making fanzines, music and getting over to France because there was not enough software on UK shelves. Was this important?

AP: I've always been of the mindset that if you want something to exist you should create it. I was annoyed there was no residents' newsletter on the estate I lived on at Uni, for example, so I got a grant from the housing co-op and started one. With Amstrad Action, I was just trying to turn it into the magazine that I myself wanted to read. And I did read it, from cover to cover, when it came back

from the printers. Even though I'd already read every word 20 times while proofreading, I was still a committed consumer, rather than just a creator, of the magazine.

Fusion: Did that extend to encouraging reader interaction?

AP: I do believe strong reader engagement was vital at that point in time. The CPC always had more of a niche/underground feel to it than the Spectrum or C64. It sold fewer units than either and many people who had one didn't even play games on it, so publishers would just do a half-arsed Spectrum port if they even bothered with an Amstrad version. We'd foster this 'you and us against the world' attitude.

Fusion: You also indulged your passion for music and had your work on the

covertape as well as your photo on the cover? A case of lead by example?

AP: Definitely, although being photographed on the cover was more a case of lead by lack of budget to hire a model. We tried as much as possible to avoid using an illustration on the cover, since the older hobbyist readership would moan that it looked like a comic. This left having a member of staff gurning in front of some hastily assembled backdrop as the only real option, unfortunately.

Fusion: You produced fanzines before working on AA. How much of

that experience ended up being reflected in the magazine?

AP: All of it. Don't discount the influence of Your Sinclair either. AA shared a sliver of office with them and they rubbed off on us. Their surreal sense of humour, that is.

Fusion: What did you love most about working on AA and what did you hate?

AP: I loved the freebies and I hated the fact we didn't

get any. I tell a lie. A couple of days after I started I was among the journos Mirrorsoft took out for a slap-up Mexican meal. The product they were promoting (Robozone) would be my first AA game review. I loved the game and reviewed it accordingly, but also ended with 'it's cooler than a well chilled Sol and hotter than a chilli bean tostada'. That was me tipping the wink to the games company that I was up for being schmoozed more in exchange for good reviews. Unfortunately Mirrorsoft closed down a few weeks later (perhaps they'd blown too much on burritos) and no one else was aggressively courting the 8-bit journalists any more.

Fusion: Was there a lively office environment?

AP: We were in a building with 20 other computer and videogame magazines and this made for a very lively environment. It was great seeing how the different magazines were evolving, with new launches and multimedia things happening too. This also provided opportunities to freelance for some of those other magazines — a financial necessity since my AA salary was less than I made doing football fanzines On the other hand, the 8-bit mags were very much the runts of the litter by my time there, left in the dustiest corners of Future's offices to gaze (like a Victorian pauper pressed up against a mansion window) at the page counts, marketing and resources being thrown at the 16-bit and console mags.

Fusion: Why did you leave?

AP: Because they would have called security if I didn't. I had swiftly taken a dislike to Bath, where AA was based. Yes, Bath wins loads of 'best place in the UK to live' polls, but having lived in and around London all my life I found it far too provincial and isolated. Consequently, I went back to London every weekend to play gigs with my band, attend all-night raves and get almost no sleep on people's floors. This weekend hedonism wasn't really compatible with my workday life so I returned to freelancing.

HARDWARE
GUIDE

Article By Al 'Xyphoe' White

System: AMSTRAD CPC 464
Year   : June 1984

The 'Colour Personal Computer' 464 was Amstrad's first foray into the home computer business, and one actually built in house rather than imported. It follows the success of them being first to market with their all-in-one hi-fi tower solutions, and this philosophy carried over to their first computer too. An integrated cassette deck and included monitor that resulted in only one plug out to the mains with no need to fight over the family TV! It also looked the business, professionally built and with coloured keys making it stand out. The 464 has 64k of memory, a Zilog Z80A CPU clocked at 4Mhz, a three channel AY sound chip and also a CRTC chip and custom gate array for three different graphics modes — the most famous being 'Mode 0' which allowed 16 colours on screen from a wonderful vibrant palette, but at the cost of big fat chunky pixels!

Expansion ports were available to connect external disk drives, printers, joysticks, mice, and many more peripherals.

The 464 was announced to the press on the 12th April 1984 at Westminster School receiving high praise in the magazines and papers. The machine then first went on sale on the 21st June 1984 at a lone Rumbelows store on Edgeware Road in London, selling out immediately with the green screen monitor version at £239 and colour monitor one at £349. The 464 was a big success for Amstrad, going on to sell around 3 million units all around Europe!
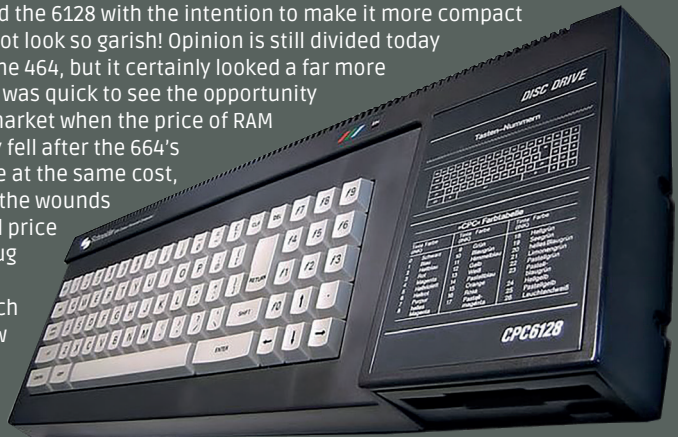
System: AMSTRAD CPC 664
Year   : May 1985

Introduced nearly a year later the 664 was basically a 464 with a redesigned look, an integrated disk drive, and an extra £100 on the price tag! However it was still the cheapest CP/M disk system on the market. With a redesigned look featuring pale blue and grey keys, prominently featuring the overly large MSX-style cursor keys, the 664 is not the prettiest looking computer! However this was more closely targetted at business users, which sadly it failed to attract by not increasing the memory to 128K, and that also meant it wouldn't be taken seriously if launched to the US market. Amstrad were soon to correct this in the 6128 launched three months later when RAM prices suddenly dropped. However ultimately this would hurt them in the long run. Consumer confidence was dented with the 70,000 who bought the 664 annoyed by the 6218 superseding it so soon, and retailers were annoyed they were stuck with a lame duck. Added to Amstrad's decision to cost cut by going with 3" drives from Orion rather than the 3.5" format, that would later become dominant, meant that Amstrad had to stick with them in all their later home computers for backwards compatibility. Put simply, bad calls were made and it was rushed to market. It's sadly ironic then that the 664's internal codename at Amstrad was IDIOT (Insert Disk Instead Of Tape)!

System: AMSTRAD CPC 6128
Year   : August 1985

Amstrad's technical director Bob Watkins hated the 664! Secretly before it was even launched he, along with an artist, designed the 6128 with the intention to make it more compact and smaller, and definitely not look so garish! Opinion is still divided today whether it looks nicer than the 464, but it certainly looked a far more serious machine. Alan Sugar was quick to see the opportunity and used it to enter the US market when the price of RAM unexpectedly and drastically fell after the 664's launch. It could also be made at the same cost, but rubbing salt further into the wounds of 664 owners was a reduced price tag of £299! It was easy to plug in an external tape player to enjoy all the 464 games, which was necessary given the slow uptake of companies to produce disk games taking advantage of the now 128K of memory. Sadly it didn't catch on in America but it would go on to be extremely popular in Europe, especially in France, becoming the leading 8-bit home computer. Many great disk based games emerged from the French game publishers, and eventually even Ocean in the UK would catch up on releasing games that would load in all the levels at once with additional content like sampled speech found in Robocop, Chase HQ, Dragon Ninja and more!

System: AMSTRAD CPC 472
Year   : September 1985

This is a rare Spanish only variant of the 464 introduced to get around a strange new law heavily taxing the import of computers with 64K or less of memory into

Spain. Exact details about the circumstances around this law are hard to come by, but it appears several Spanish manufacturers lobbied the government, and a rough calculation now means that it might have been costing Amstrad around an extra £75 per computer! However Lord Sugar is no fool, and a quick solution of adding in a daughter board containing the cheapest possible 8K memory chip was added (which was basically unusable, not that Spanish authorities had to know that!) along with re-badging the computer from '464' to '472' — because 64+8=72! The law was dropped in January 1986 after Spain joined the EEC, so these are now very rare computers indeed.

System: AMSTRAD GX4000
Year   : September 1990

Nearly 6 years on from the press launch of the CPC 464, Amstrad at great expense unveiled it's new line of 8-bit machines in Paris, France to a swanky gathering for journalists from across Europe. Amongst this launch was the much rumoured Amstrad console — the GX4000! Looking a bit like a Snow Speeder from The Empire Strikes Back, the GX was based on a similar architecture to the 464 maintaining the Z80 processor, AY sound chip and 64K of RAM. However it was bolstered by the introduction of hardware sprites and scrolling, an increased palette of 4096 colours of which 32 could be displayed, a new ASIC chip to handle lots of clever stuff and a DMA chip that unburdened the main CPU and was primarily used for extra sound capabilities like samples. The spec on paper was actually quite impressive.

When it arrived, priced at £99 at launch, it was up against the Sega Master System at £80 which was still struggling to make an impact in the UK market. There was also the Nintendo Entertainment System at £100 which had made next to zero impact. However the 16-bit Sega Megadrive (£190) was about to go on sale and perhaps Amstrad underestimated gamers desire and understanding of 'bits'. 16-bit was in, 8-bit was on its way out! However Amstrad's reasoning behind sticking with old (but proven) technology did seem to make sense. This was a budget console that wouldn't cost a lot to make, aimed primarily at children with the idea they'd later want to upgrade to a 464 or 6128 Plus machine. Amstrad also saw a large business opportunity in the European market, specifically France and Spain which they had dominated with their CPC range, that so far Nintendo, Sega, Atari and NEC had failed to capitalise on. They weren't attempting to become the dominant console, rather they were exploiting

the entry level budget gap in the European market. Even the press at the time seemed relatively impressed and positive.

The problem was they were just simply too late. If the GX4000 was released maybe a year or two earlier it could have had a chance of decent success at least in Europe. When it was eventually released there were severe delays getting games into shops, and that quickly extinguished any hype consumers felt and eroded the good will and faith from software publishers and stores had in Amstrad. By March 1991 the GX4000 had been reduced to £79.95 with a paltry handful of games available, June saw redundancies at Amstrad, and by the end of the year you could find the console being sold for as little as £10. Eventually 25 games were officially released, with the near mythical 'Special Criminal Investigations' having an extremely limited release with only two known copies in existence as of today, and 'Gazza II' seemingly not making it past the magazine review copy stage into production.

System: AMSTRAD 464 PLUS
Year : September 1990

Many had thought that Amstrad had abandoned and given up on its home computers, instead it seemed like they had permanently moved onto their lucrative word processor and PCW business computers. So it was a surprise when the 464 was resurrected with extra bells and whistles, dropping the 'CPC' name and becoming the Plus! Essentially, think of it as a GX4000 console but with a keyboard and integrated cassette deck. They share the same specifications in terms of hardware features including the cartridge port, but you could buy this with a monitor that now included stereo sound and retailed for £229 in mono or £329 for the more desirable colour one. In terms of look and design someone at Amstrad clearly had been paying close attention to the Amiga and Atari ST! It should be noted that there's a very small amount of CPC software that will have issues due to how keyboard scanning is handled on the Plus machines, however many of them have been patched to work now.

System: AMSTRAD 6128 PLUS
Year : September 1990

So if you wanted 128K of memory and a disk drive, then ignore the 464 Plus and go for this beauty! Again it was bundled with a stereo sound monitor retailing at £329 for mono or £429 in full glorious colour. However Amstrad decided not to include internal hardware and ports to attach an external cassette deck, and not having the ability to load tapes was a big bone of contention at the time with many annoyed letters written into Amstrad Action and other magazines. It wasn't an easy process to do this, but companies like WAVE at the time offered upgrades at £20 plus postage to do the job. Otherwise, I'd argue this is the Amstrad computer to own and it's the most sought after by collectors looking to make use of the machine, unlike the rarer CPC 664 or 472 which are more curiosities to sit on a shelf gathering dust. The 6128 Plus with associated monitor however is the one to load up your disk games on, especially the ones that take advantage of the new Plus features like Fluff, Prehistorik 2 and the recently released Ghosts 'N Goblins remake!

System: System: C4CPC
Year   : May 2015

In simple terms this is a custom home-made cartridge designed for the GX4000, 464 Plus or 6128 Plus that boots straight into a menu where with a joystick you can select to play from hundreds of Amstrad games! All you need to do on your modern computer is download the '.cpr' files of games onto an SD card, and the C4CPC has a slot which you can slide that into. Then simply plug the cartridge into the GX4000, turn on and you're away and gaming! There's an ongoing project to convert existing CPC software to cartridge format, which includes bug fixes, plus compatibility issues resolved, remapped controls to work purely from joystick and pads with 2 buttons, and even remastered graphics and sounds in some cases! In fact, get yourself a GX4000 with a C4CPC, and a cable to upscale to HDMI and you have an 'Amstrad Mini'!
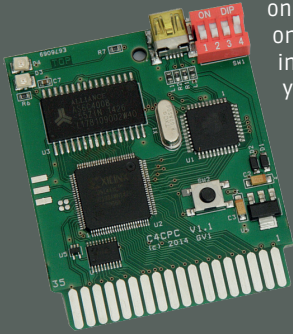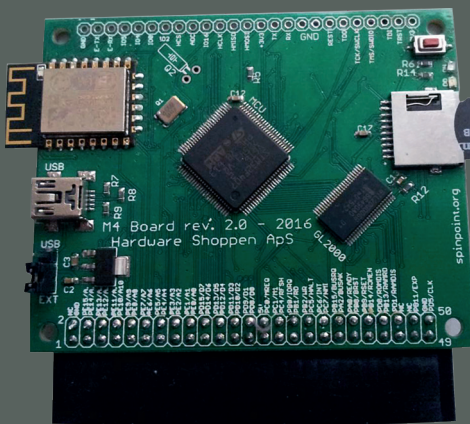
System: M4 WIFI
Year   : May 2016

Getting files to and from your old 8-bit computer can be a cumbersome and laborious process, even with new specialised hardware to do it via SD cards or similar. But what if you could instantly transfer or load files over the internet on your Amstrad without the need for faff? Well say hello to Wi-Fi on your Amstrad with the M4!

This is an expansion card that will slot into any Amstrad CPC or Plus machine, allowing you to connect it to your home Wi-Fi network! It's fast becoming an essential bit of kit for anyone coding, wanting to archive their old disks or just wanting fast loading over the internet of any dumped Amstrad game! It uses an SD card to store the firmware and data you've transferred, and you access the device from your PC, Mac or whatever via a built in web browser over HTTP. Then it's just a case of simply dragging and dropping in files such as disk games in the '.dsk' format. Back over on your Amstrad, using some simple RSX commands (that look very much like like DOS and Linux) you can load games up instantly! It works vice versa too, so for example a BASIC program you wrote as a kid on an old disk, with one command you can send that to the SD card which can then be accessed over Wi-Fi from your PC! There's lots more you can do with it too like changing and adding ROMs, and even upgrading the firmware with just a single command.

BEST AMSTRAD GAMES OF 2019! THEN YOUR REQUESTS!

AMSTREAM

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CHECKING OUT THE BEST AMSTRAD CPC GAMES OF 2019!

IN THE 2ND HALF OF THE STREAM THIS IS FOLLOWED BY REQUESTS FROM THE STREAM, CHAT AND RANDOM AMSTRAD CPC GAMES ALL FRIDAY NIGHT!

My name is Al 'Xyphoe' White and I along with many others over the last 10 years, have been working very hard in our own unique ways to keep the Amstrad alive!

It has been 12 years since I regularly created Amstrad video longplays, game reviews as well as making little documentaries. I eventually started my live stream which has grown to over 4000 subscribers — the videos have amassed over 2.5million views and the weekly Friday evening live streams (the 'AMSTREAM') has become a home for hundreds of CPC fans to congregate, chat and reminisce.

The main reason I started this channel was as a kind of 'preservation project' for Amstrad stuff. YouTube at the time was a barren place for CPC love, and the vast majority of UK channels only seemed to talk about the Spectrum and Commodore 64. I wanted to change that. It was 2008, and after many quiet years people started to discover Amstrad emulators and new

games started to appear. It is no coincidence the growth of the channel and resurgence of the CPC coincided, and none of this would have been possible without new games, demos and software being released. It was the prolific Paul Kooistra (aka 'Axelay') with his games starting with 2008s 'Star Sabre' that really kickstarted the homebrew scene off. Then games like the epic 'Orion Prime' soon started arriving, and now there is a thriving scene supplemented by game making competitions like the annual 'CPCRetroDev', culminating last year in the stunning 'Pinball Dreams' conversion.

Helping push all this along

are websites such as the now sadly defunct 'CPC Zone', then the 'CPCWiki' which has since became the hub and main Amstrad forum.

Alongside are the gamebase sites like 'CPC Power' who specialise in accurately dumping and fully testing every possible Amstrad game, a valuable resource archive featuring box art scans and much more. Without all this, I simply wouldn't be around on YouTube and Twitch doing my thing.

All I can say is thank you to everyone helping me keep the Amstrad alive!

Check me out on www.youtube.com/xyphoe