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Year Released: 1984

Original Price: £199 with green screen monitor, £299 with colour

Buy it now for: £10 to £25

Associated Magazines: Amnix, Computing With The Amstrad (later known as CPC Computing), Amstrad Computer User (official publication – began life as CPC 464 User, then Amstrad CPC 464 User before changing name when 664 was introduced in 1985), Amstrad Action, CPC Attack – and a host of top fanzines, including Artificial Intelligence, Better Than Life and the biggest of them all, the serious mag WACC!

Why the Amstrad CPC 464 was great... You didn't just own an Amstrad CPC464 – it became an integral part of your life. It was the ace up your sleeve, to be used when someone said: "What's best: the Spectrum or C64?" You could smugly answer: "Neither! The CPC beats them both!" And it did. This underdog of a computer had a few tricks – great graphics, decent sound and so many enthusiastic users who refused to let go when the machine died. CPC owners were proud of their choice and rightly so.



AMSTRAD CPC 464



IN THE EIGHTIES, GAMES WERE PRODUCED FOR THE SPECTRUM AND COMMODORE. AND, OF COURSE, THE AMSTRAD. BUT MANY PEOPLE PAID LITTLE NOTICE TO THE UNDERRATED UNDERDOG THAT WAS THE CPC 464. YET SIR ALAN SUGAR'S 8-BIT ENTRY INTO THE WORLD OF HOME MICROS NEVERTHELESS PROVED TO BE A HIT, AS DAVID CROOKES EXPLAINS.

The best things come to those who wait – and with the Amstrad CPC 464, that was certainly the case. When this marvellous machine was launched on April 11, 1984, to more than 400 journalists packed into the Great Hall of London's historic Westminster School, it was commonly agreed it had its work cut out.

It was competing against the Spectrum and Commodore 64, but Alan Sugar was confident his technically superior CPC – affectionately codenamed Arnold – would win.

It certainly struck a chord with the press: The Guardian called it Amstradivarius, Personal Computer World boldly said it was the Sinclair Beater and Computer News referred to it as Arthur.

The Grimsby Evening Telegraph called it the Mean Machine, but the London Evening Standard went one better. "After the People's Car [the VW Beetle] the People's Computer," it gushed.

Mr Sugar was planning worldwide sales of more than 20 million computers and was keen to shift an initial 100,000 that had been created prior to launch.

The launch had tried to capture the imagination of journalists by using historical figures ranging from Einstein, Ravel and Archimedes to Monet and Shakespeare to highlight the various attributes of the CPC (Shakespeare, for instance, showed how easy writing *Hamlet* would have been with a word processing package).

Amstrad was keen to portray the CPC – the Colour Personal Computer – as a 'jack of all trades'. Whereas the Spectrum and C64 were becoming firmly established as decent games machines, the CPC was being marketed as equally good for business.

And Amstrad wanted to get the machines out in the shops by the end of June, with Bill Poel, the general manager of Amsoft, telling Your Computer: "I will be prepared to eat one in Trafalgar Square if it's late." He didn't have to. On June 21, the machine was made available to buy

Post-production

When the 464 Plus was scrapped, it heralded the end of this great machine. For a while, commercial companies continued to support the computer, knocking out a host of budget and full-priced titles, including the brilliant *Super Cauldron* and *Prehistorik* in 1993. But as time went on, the market was placed in the hands of hard-core users who set up their own software companies. Among the best was Radical Software, makers of *Fluff* and *Ball Bearing*. The majority of these games were available on tape (the brilliant *Zap T Balls* was not, being disc only and 128K). But as more and more games began to be released into the public domain for free, it became difficult for 464 users to find people willing to copy the latest homebrew titles onto cassettes). Unless they bought a disc drive, 464 owners found themselves shut off from many of the new wave of games, among the best being *Croco Magneto* and *Les Mings* (typically available by sending a disc, an SAE and 50p).



AMSTRAD CPC 464



▶ Sir Alan Sugar, now star of BBC2's *The Apprentice*, with more hair at the launch of the CPC 464



▶ Roland Perry – Amstrad's group technical manager at the time of the CPC 464's launch

at Rumbelows in Edgware Road, London. Around 60 people queued for nearly an hour to get their hands on it, rushing forward when the doors finally opened at 9.30am. By 10.30am, 100 computers had been sold and software was being snapped from the shelves. It was reported that one man had even flown in from Bahrain!

Roland Perry, then Amstrad group technical manager, says: "We were pleased with this initial success. Sir Alan had wanted to create the CPC 464 because he wanted to get into the home computer market. It was the 'latest thing' that was clearly catching on as a mainstream item in the shops and we wanted to be a part of it. To see it sell was very pleasing."

Prior to the launch, Amstrad had been desperate for software, particularly games. The solution was to launch Amsoft at the beginning of 1984, tasked with approaching third-party companies to create 50 CPC games. Some of the games were given away with the CPC 464 for free and these included *Harrier Attack*, *The Galactic Plague*, *Roland On The Ropes*, *Fruit Machine*, *Bridge-It* and *Xanagrams*.

"Games were very important for the 464," continues Perry. "The subsequent CPC 664 and then 6128 with their disc drives started a trend towards small business use with CP/M and word processing and accounting packages, but for me the CPC 464 was 100 percent a games machine."

The 8-bit CPC was impressive. Amstrad decided to use tapes as the storage medium because they were cheap. It was a good decision – it placed the CPC within the affordable reach of children and so the machine slowly became a strong games contender.

Although programmers wished it had hardware sprites, at the CPC's heart was a Z80 processor running at 4MHz. It had 64K of memory, a built-in tape drive (an external 3-inch disc drive was available to buy later), and the choice of colour or green screen monitor.

The computer had three display modes. Mode 0 allowed 16 colours from the 27-strong palette to be shown in low resolution. Mode 1 used up to four colours from 27 in medium resolution. And mode 2 – which had the highest resolution – was able to show two colours from 27.

The 464 used the General Instruments AY-3-8912 sound chip that outputted in mono via a tiny, four centimetre, built-in loudspeaker with volume control. It provided 3-voice, 8-octave sound capacity. In later 464 models, stereo output was made available through a 3.5mm headphones jack which could also be linked to external speakers.

While it didn't hit the heights of the C64, the sound capabilities were good enough to allow digital sound samples in games such as *Robin Hood* and *Robocop*. But for the less technically savvy, the machine was striking for other reasons. Aside from the all-important joystick port, the keyboard, computer and tape deck were combined in one unit connected with just two wires to a monitor, which contained the power supply unit. The whole thing was powered by one plug in what proved to be a tidy, simple system, attractive to the public.

It also kept manufacturing costs down. But the keyboard itself was



▶ The CPC was marketed as the all-in-one solution, playing into the hands of the technophobes

more striking. Long and thin, and with the tape deck to the right of the keyboard, it had garish red, green and blue keys.

Perry says: "We wanted the keyboard to look like a 'real computer' – the sort of thing people saw at the airline check-in desk when they went on holiday. The integrated tape deck was created because Amstrad's success had been making integrated consumer electronics like the Hi-Fi that had nothing extra to buy and no complicated wiring. For this reason we bundled the CPC with a monitor."

Although the Z80 chip powered the CPC, Amstrad initially pondered using a 6502 processor, the same one used in Commodore's Vic-20 and in the Apple II. It was to have 32k of RAM and Microsoft's BASIC. In the end, Locomotive Software, which produced the CPC's BASIC, persuaded Amstrad to try the faster Z80 instead.

"We started the development of the Amstrad by having a basic idea and coming up with an outline spec, then filling in more details as we went along," continues Perry. "Sir Alan was pleased with the end result. Anything he didn't like we changed. I remember him wanting the cursor keys to 'work' at all times, which wasn't how people typically made BASIC interpreter interfaces at the time."

The CPC continued to pick up sales and was even making an impact in the classroom – in November 1984, Sir Keith Joseph, the minister of state for education and science, toured Thorpe Bay High School in Southend which was the first to have 464s.

But although the 464 sold well in Britain, it became a phenomenon in Europe, particularly in France where it was the best-selling home micro. In Spain it was distributed by Indescorp as the CPC472 (it had an extra 8K of – unusable – RAM to get around a Spanish ruling that computers with 64K or less had to contain a tilde (~) on the keyboard). In Germany, it was sold under Schneider's name but without the coloured keys.

"We would have been happy to sell 100,000 CPCs and get into the top ten sellers," continues Perry. "But we surpassed our expectations, got to the top of the charts and sold a couple of million. Much of that was because we insisted on distributing the machine in well-known High Street stores rather than solely mail order or in specialist computer stores. It was a complete system, not just a console."

Buoyant sales of the machine meant the vast majority of the major third-party software houses soon supported it. Games produced for the Spectrum and Commodore

were created for the CPC, although, because the Spectrum shared the Z80 processor, many initial Amstrad games were lazy Speccy ports. Some of these games were sluggish and jerky and did not take advantage of the four and 16 colour modes nor the hardware scrolling. But when done well, the





CPC more than held its own with colourful graphics, great sound and smooth scrolling.

In 1985, the CPC had its first show, which took place in the Autumn at London's Novotel. Not many games software houses turned up – neither, come to that, did Amstrad itself.

But some great games were being released – David Braben's *Elite* made an appearance that Christmas. By this point, Sugar was claiming a 25 per cent market share and he boasted that the 464 was "the machine that everyone knows and loves... reputedly used by a well known vacuum manufacturer to stock control his cars!"

Leading software houses were also beginning to love the CPC. Nick Alexander, of Virgin Software, which had produced *Sorcery*, said the Amstrad version was the biggest seller of the three platforms it had made the game for. "If you compare the Amstrad with the Spectrum and C64," he said, "I think our programmers' attitude toward it is that it's superior – the leader of the pack."

The following year, Infocom announced its acclaimed adventures, including *Hitchhikers Guide To The Galaxy* and *Zork I, II and III*, were at last being released on the CPC.

But in the same year, Amstrad bought its rival, Sinclair, and began to produce the Spectrum, prompting speculation that the CPC 464 would be discontinued. Amstrad denied it would get rid of "a machine that is making us money", though industry observers said the disc-based CPC 6128 was making more cash. But Sugar did say the Sinclair purchase would mean the Spectrum being marketed as a games machine and the Amstrad for more serious stuff.

Such backing of the 464 by Sugar didn't quell speculation about the 464's future – by October, many software houses complained that software sales had slumped and blamed Amstrad, saying it had not produced enough 464s. Some claimed it had stopped production.

It was not the case and as the sales began to pick up again, the 464's golden era came as games were produced by the bucket load and a whole host of peripherals were created, one of the best being the Multiface 2 which allowed gamers to hack into games and input cheat codes that were printed in the mags (the Multiface could also

Games are the order of the day for the 464 – if you choose the green screen, Amstrad says, "but still want to play your arcade games in colour – don't worry! There's a power supply and modulator for linking to your colour TV"

make copies of games!)

Despite rumours abounding that Amstrad would manufacture a 16-bit machine, the 464 continued (Amstrad did indeed produce a new machine in 1989, however – the flop games-based PC, the Sinclair P200). The 464 came under threat again in August 1987, when the disc-based Spectrum Plus 3 was launched – meaning that Amstrad had three machines coming in under £300 (Plus 2, Plus 3 and 464) on sale. And in 1988, Amstrad's club for CPC owners was sold off, prompting further speculation.

Instead, the 464 was dusted off and placed into a fresh bundle, adding a TV tuner allowing users to watch television on their monitors, 17 games including *Trivial Pursuit*, *Roland In Time* and *Scalextrix* (the only fun part of which was designing new tracks), a desk, a clock radio and a terrible joystick. It was the all-in-one solution.

At the same time, Amstrad posted profits of more than £90 million. In 1990, the 464 ceased production – only to be replaced with the revamped 464 Plus. It was white, with greater width, similar to an Amiga or Atari ST in style, and came with a cartridge port for games that took advantage of a palette of up to 4,026 colours. The coloured keys were banished and the old cardboard edge connectors were replaced with more robust expansion ports.

The Z80A processor running at 4MHz remained, as did the 64k. But it benefited from four-channel 16 sound stereo with the addition of Direct Memory Access that allowed music to play without burdening the processor.

The old 464 refused to die, however. Ground-breaking games continued to be released – *Prince Of Persia* in the Summer of 1991 looked so lush, it appeared almost identical to the Atari ST version. With fluid animation and smooth and detailed backgrounds it was one of the best games ever released for the system.

But with the 16-bit Amiga and Atari ST becoming increasingly popular, the 8-bit technology of the CPC, no matter how spruced up with the cartridge slot, failed to attract enough punters and although sales did rise, it was not enough to save the machine and it was finally, and sadly, discontinued.



Behind the curtain

The East Germans created a CPC 464 clone called the KC Compact. It was around 95 per cent compatible with the Amstrad-made CPCs and could be connected to either a tape machine or external 5.25-inch disc drive (the CPC 664 and 6128 used 3-inch discs). Although ruining the Amstrad concept of everything in one box – the KC had an external power supply, a standalone computer/keyboard and used a standard television rather than a dedicated monitor – it still ran BASIC 1.1 and had 64k of RAM, although it used a U880 processor rather than Z80. An extra 64k was added when using the tape or disc drive adapter. The machine was scrapped shortly after the Berlin wall was pulled down. Over in West Germany at the time, the 464 was being produced by Schneider, which replaced the Amstrad badge on the computer's casing and had Schneider on the boot screen (as well as proper non-cardboard expansion edge connectors).



Above left: Amstrad Action was the biggest selling CPC magazine – at its height it sold 37,000 copies, easily beating the official ACU, Amix, Computing With The Amstrad and the short-lived, six-issue CPC Attack Right: Amstrad begins to change strategy – promoting the disc-based 6128, leaving the 464 in the background



A new case and the addition of a cartridge slot – for expensive £30 games – transformed the 464 into the 464 Plus



This French-coded games became one of the CPC's best public domain titles

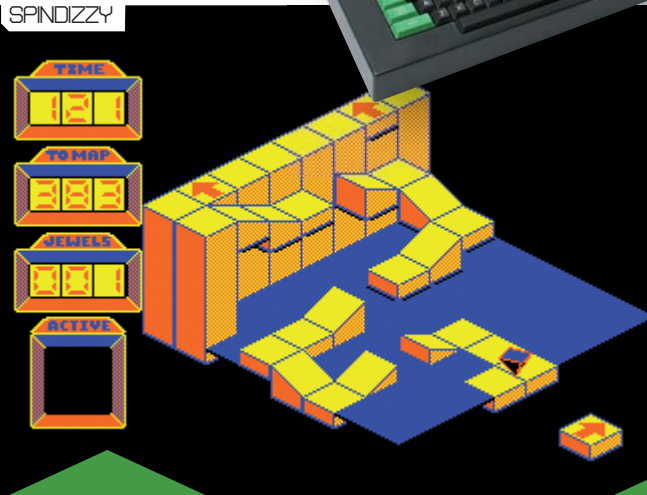
PERFECT TEN GAMES



NORTH & SOUTH



SPINDIZZY



TOTAL ECLIPSE



NORTH & SOUTH

- » RELEASED: 1991
- » PUBLISHED BY: INFOGRAMES
- » CREATED BY: NEW FRONTIER
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: HOSTAGES

North & South is a great example of what the CPC could do when it wasn't being overloaded with Spectrum ports. Whilst Infogrames' classic strategy title obviously can't hope to match the visuals of the impressive 16-bit versions, it's amazing how well it captures the spirit of the original French comic *Les Tuniques Bleues* on which the game is based.

Fortunately the gameplay proves to be just as immersive as the striking visuals and you'll soon find yourself frantically trying to regain as much of your opponent's land as possible while you fight it out with infantry, huge cannons and even mobile forces. Excellent stuff.

THE GUILD OF THIEVES

- » RELEASED: 1987
- » PUBLISHED BY: RAINBIRD
- » CREATED BY: MAGNETIC SCROLLS
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: FISH

There's a selection of great text adventures for the CPC, but it's the wonderful *Guild Of Thieves* we constantly return to. It's a meticulously crafted story, features some beautifully drawn locations and has some extremely devious puzzles to solve. Basically everything you'd expect from creators Magnetic Scrolls.

Like *The Pawn* before it, *The Guild Of Thieves* featured a lavish boxset that was filled with plenty of goodies that ranged from a Bank of Kerovnia credit card, to 'What Burglar' magazine and was once again set in Kerovnia. It's definitely a lot tougher, but is a far superior product that will have you scratching your head until the cows come home.

SPINDIZZY

- » RELEASED: 1986
- » PUBLISHED BY: ELECTRIC DREAMS
- » CREATED BY: PAUL SHIRLEY
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: CONFUZION

The simplest ideas are often the best and they don't get much more straightforward than the wonderful *Spindizzy*. All you have to do is guide your spinning top around 386 isometric screens in search of jewels. Sounds simple right? Well no, not really, but that's why it's so great. While many of the jewels are easily placed, they soon start to appear in all sorts of hard-to-reach locations, many of which require real ingenuity to obtain. Later jewels can only be reached by flicking switches, using lifts and even jumping chasms, and that's before you even consider the terrain that becomes increasingly tricky to negotiate the further you progress. Oh, and did we mention you have to collect all these jewels within a strict time limit...

GRYZOR

- » RELEASED: 1987
- » PUBLISHED BY: OCEAN
- » CREATED BY: JOHN BRANDWOOD
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: RENEGADE

It's a sad matter of fact, but most Amstrad conversions were a poor third to the often-superior Spectrum and Commodore 64 ports. Every now and then though a game came along that totally blew its 8-bit peers away – *Gryzor* is one such game.

Not only does it look absolutely stunning (it features similar graphics to Mark Jones' other Ocean hit *Renegade*) it plays like a dream as well. Controls are extremely tight and responsive; the difficulty is just right and there's an array of superb weapons. Indeed, barring a few minor differences (and a big decrease in aesthetics) this is as close to the original game as you could expect an 8-bit to get. Simply amazing.

TOTAL ECLIPSE

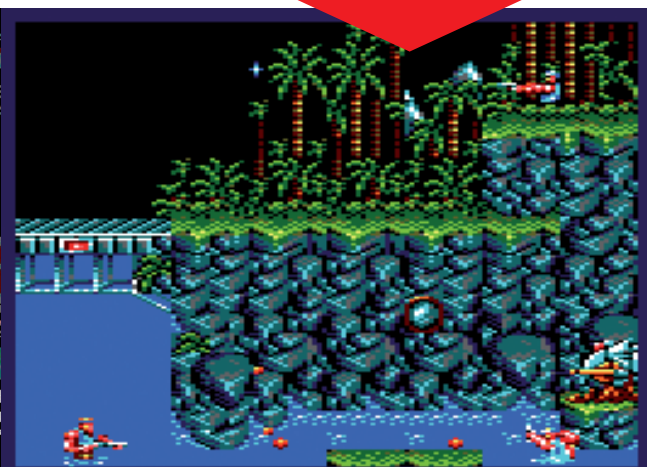
- » RELEASED: 1988
- » PUBLISHED BY: INCENTIVE SOFTWARE
- » CREATED BY: MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: DRILLER

By the time *Total Eclipse* appeared in 1988, developers Incentive already had two Freescape titles under its belt. While there was nothing wrong with the sci-fi settings of *Driller* or *Darkside*, the familiar setting of Thirties Egypt makes *Total Eclipse* far easier to relate to. It also helps that it's more technically proficient, has superior puzzles and a creepy tone that makes exploring the pyramid extremely atmospheric. A number of play mechanics were introduced and there was a tight two-hour timeframe to complete the game in, which would have been fine if the pyramid itself wasn't so confusing to navigate.



The lounge has many comfortable chairs and a shagpile carpet which refreshing spring to your step. A coal fire blazes away by the hearth off a warm, soft light which makes you feel relaxed and easy. The south and east walls. A black iron bucket stands close to the

THE GUILD OF THIEVES



GRYZOR

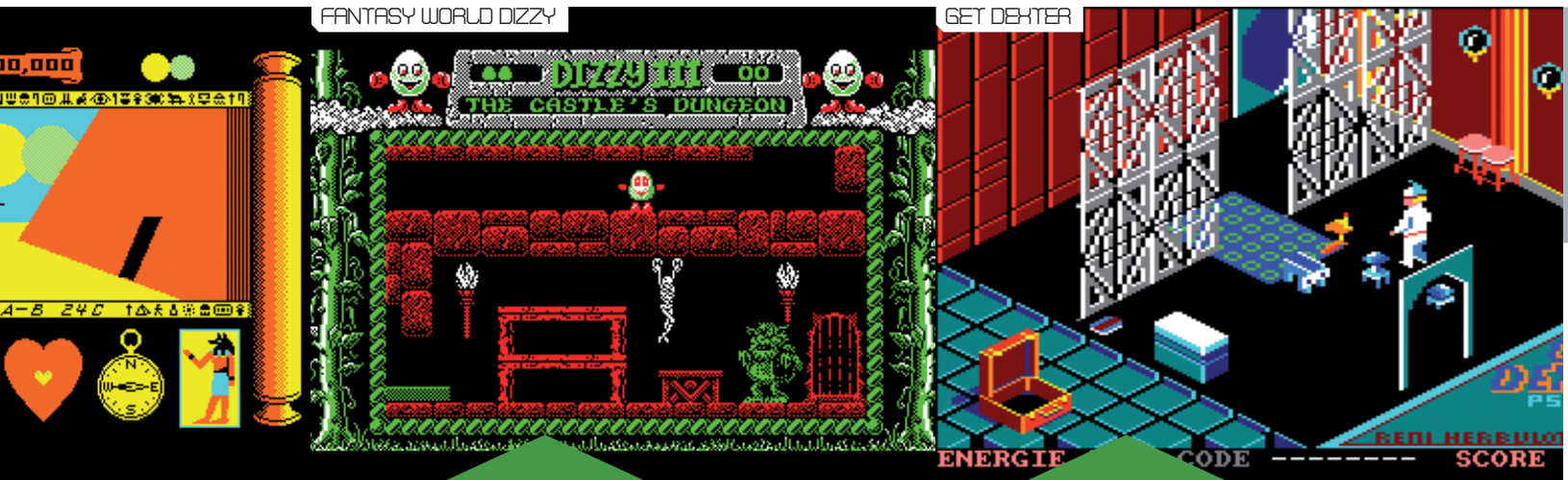


PRINCE OF PERSIA

AMSTRAD CPC 464

It always came a poor third to the Spectrum and C64, but as the following games show, there were plenty of classics available for the 464. Before you write in, our top ten is bound to be subjective and open to violent debate, and that's what Retro Gamer is all about. Bring it on.

PERFECT 10



FANTASY WORLD DIZZY

- » RELEASED: 1989
- » PUBLISHED BY: CODEMASTERS
- » CREATED BY: THE OLIVER TWINS
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: GRAND PRIX SIMULATOR

You can't feature an Amstrad top ten without at least one Dizzy game, so we've decided to plump for his third adventure that sees the intrepid hero exploring Fantasy World in search of girlfriend Daisy. Fantasy World is a big place however and Dizzy has to solve a variety of different puzzles and make his way past several ferocious enemies before he's finally reunited with his loved one. After the difficulty of *Treasure Island Dizzy* (you only got one life) *Fantasy World* is far more enjoyable to play – throw in some superior visuals and great puzzles and it's easy to see why the lovable character remains so popular.

PRINCE OF PERSIA

- » RELEASED: 1990
- » PUBLISHED BY: DOMARK/BRODERBUND
- » CREATED BY: BRODERBUND
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: MYST

Prince Of Persia is quite possibly one of the most striking games to ever appear on Alan Sugar's 8-bit computer. Released in 1990 it's a true revelation and easily showcases what the CPC can do when it's truly pushed. While the levels look sumptuous it's the staggering animation on the prince himself that truly impresses. Gameplay is just as good, with the prince perfectly responding to either the press of a joystick or stroke of a key. Who knows? If games like *Prince Of Persia* had appeared at the beginning of the CPC's life (and not god awful rubbish like *Bridge It*) things may have been quite different.

HEAD OVER HEELS

- » RELEASED: 1986
- » PUBLISHED BY: OCEAN
- » CREATED BY: JON RITMAN, BERNIE DRUMMOND
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: BATMAN

We've already featured Drummond and Ritman's classic in the Spectrum Perfect Ten Games, but we love it so much we had to include it here as well. Like *Get Dexter* it's one of the finest isometric adventures that the Amstrad (or any other machine for that matter) has to offer, and remains as fresh as ever. Level design is near perfect, the interaction between the two characters is a stroke of genius and Drummond's creations feature more character in a few pixels than a dozen of today's gaming heroes can muster. One of the best adventures ever made.

GET DEXTER

- » RELEASED: 1986
- » PUBLISHED BY: PSS/ERE
- » CREATED BY: ERE INFORMATIQUE
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: PACIFIC

Produced by French company ERE Informatique in 1986, *Get Dexter/Crafton & Xunk* really showed off the CPC's power by injecting both originality and humour into the isometric adventure, easily surpassing anything that Ultimate had produced on the CPC.

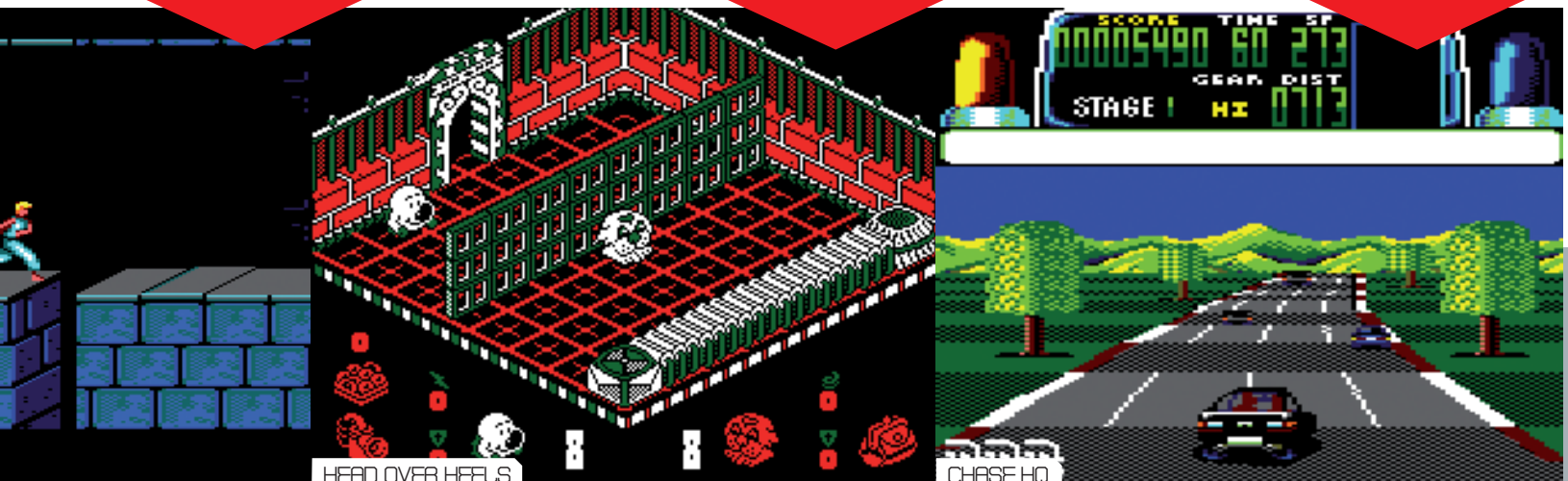
Get Dexter's graphics are superbly defined and colourful with it and your character can interact with virtually everything on screen. The playability is finely balanced between being frustratingly difficult and enormously enjoyable, the perfect learning curve.

Visually stunning, *Get Dexter* is a true CPC classic.

CHASE HQ

- » RELEASED: 1989
- » PUBLISHED BY: OCEAN
- » CREATED BY: JON O'BRIEN
- » BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: NORTH STAR

On an unexpanded CPC 464, the digitised classic line delivered by your boisterous partner – "Let's Go, Mr Driver" – could not be heard. But that didn't detract from the gameplay of what was certainly a legendary CPC arcade conversion by Ocean. If there was one complaint about this game, it was that it got your adrenaline pumping to the nth degree, making your palms sweaty as you closed in on the bad guy with the clock ticking perilously close to 'Game Over', and smoke pouring from beneath your tyres. The graphics were colourful and chunky, the speed, particularly when pressing the turbo, was surprisingly fast. Few games could match the pace, or indeed the action, of this game.



HEAD OVER HEELS

CHASE HQ



AMSTRAD CPC 464 and the rest...

Yes it had its fair share of detractors, but there were plenty of great games to love on the Amstrad CPC 464, and what's more, many of them weren't actually Spectrum conversions.

- 01 ADVANCED PINBALL SIMULATOR
- 02 RAMPAGE
- 03 ZYNAPS
- 04 DAN DARE III: THE ESCAPE
- 05 PIPEF MANIA
- 06 DRILLER
- 07 RAINBOW ISLANDS
- 08 KUNG FU MASTER
- 09 SPINDIZZY
- 10 MONTY PYTHON'S FLYING CIRCUS
- 11 DIZZY
- 12 MATCH DAY II
- 13 BARBARIAN
- 14 JET SET WILLY
- 15 TRAILBLAZER
- 16 ALIENS
- 17 IKARI WARRIORS
- 18 WAY OF THE EXPLODING FIST
- 19 PLATOON
- 20 UN SQUADRON
- 21 CRAFTON & XUNK
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