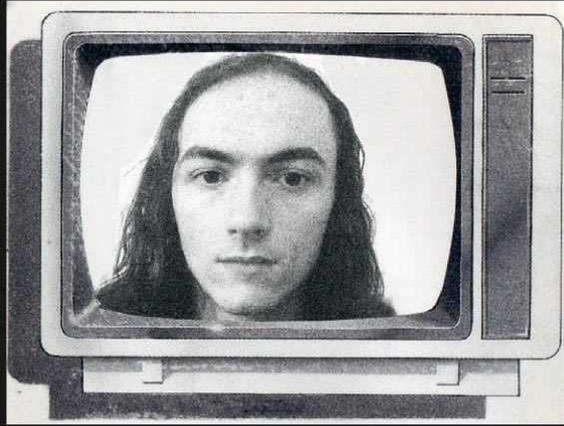
The background is a pixel art illustration of a forest. Two large, brown tree trunks are prominent on the left and right sides. The ground is green with scattered brown pixels representing grass or dirt. In the center, a brown moose with yellow antlers stands facing left. The sky is a light blue color.

TERRIBLE OLD GAMES
YOU'VE PROBABLY
NEVER HEARD OF

STUART ASHEN



This is Kymo Misenica Kobayashi. Kymo pledged for the HALL OF FAME level when I crowdfunded this book with Unbound. Now he will be forever enshrined within its pages. Sorry Kymo.

unbound

Dear Reader,

The book you are holding came about in a rather different way to most others. It was funded directly by readers through a new website: Unbound.

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This new way of publishing is actually a very old idea (Samuel Johnson funded his dictionary this way). We're just using the internet to build each writer a network of patrons. Here, at the back of this book, you'll find the names of all the people who made it happen.

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Thank you for your support,

Three handwritten signatures in black ink, arranged horizontally. The first signature is 'Dan', the second is 'Justin', and the third is 'John'. Each signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dan, Justin and John

Founders, Unbound

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Hello!

I'm Stuart, AKA Ashens. I make videos for YouTube, write comedy scripts and sometimes act in things.

I recently realised that I miss writing articles and stories, so have joined forces with Unbound in an attempt to rectify that by writing books. I live in Norwich, in a house filled with all sorts of useless items that I tell myself I need for my work. I'm obsessed with old video games and things that aren't quite good enough for their intended purpose.

My favourite soup is crab meat and sweetcorn.

[@ashens](#)

youtube.com/ashens

questforthechild.com



**This book is dedicated
to anyone who ever
bought a terrible game,
wiped the tape with a
magnet, then took it
back to the shop.**

Superfriends List

Listed here are the Superfriends – people who pledged a substantial amount of money to help ensure that this book became a reality. May their game cassettes never demagnetise.

Leo Baggerreft

Michael Barrett

Alan Boyd

Michael Brown

Dua9in Cameron

Gregor Cameron

Christopher Cobb

Chloe Cresswell

Thomas Edge

Matthew Faulkner

Brent Friedrich

Sam Glennie

Alex “Peggy” Grant

Richard “dragonridley” Hatton

Ian Hopkins

Daniel Fink Jensen

Trent Johnson

Joshua Kahn

Joseph Kawa

Lucas Kmiecik

Kymo Misenica Kobayashi

Ephraim Leadon

Marko Mannonen

Matthew Mitchell

Tanja “Tikal” Pattberg

Jeroen Richters

Dominic Rossetto-White

Aidan Rothnie

Nathan Schlosser

Aaron Scott

Mike Sleeman

Sam Thompson

Mark Tolladay

Tommy Törnqvist :)

Justin Trueland

Adam Unwin

Sean Zoltek

INTRODUCTION

BY STUART ASHEN

Hello! And welcome to *Terrible Old Games You've Probably Never Heard Of*, a compendium of some of the most obscure and appalling titles spewed out by the video games industry.

This isn't a guide to the very worst – it's a showcase for games that I personally found intriguing as well as mind-bleedingly awful. I've included a variety of game types and release formats, and largely ignored the prices to find objectively awful games. And most importantly, you won't find the usual suspects like *E.T.* for the Atari 2600 and *Superman* for the Nintendo 64 as they're already covered extensively on many different websites and YouTube videos.

For inclusion in this book, a game must have been:

- Released some time between 1980–1995 inclusive
- Sold commercially
- Released for a home computer format, not a games console*
- So utterly terrible that it would be almost impossible for a reasonable person to enjoy playing the game.

A lot of games we played thirty years ago seem crap now, but *Terrible Old Games You've Probably Never Heard Of* is about the ones that were crap then.

I've also asked some knowledgeable and interesting people what the most disappointing game they ever bought was. Those won't necessarily be terrible games, but they will have made people angry which is as equally entertaining. I even allowed mention of a Nintendo game as it provides a great point about what gaming was like before the Internet.

Giant heaps full of thanks go to the people who pledged to get this book published via Unbound. Now the games mentioned inside will finally receive the recognition and derision they deserve – because they're terrible, they're old, and you probably haven't heard of them.

Stuart Ashen

Norwich, 2015

*For the purposes of this book I've counted the Commodore Amiga CD32 as a computer, because it's essentially an Amiga 1200 with the keyboard chopped off and a CD drive stuck on. So there.

Alien Raiders

Format: Commodore VIC-20

Year of Release: Approx. 1983

Developer: Harteveld Software

Publisher: Micro-Spec Ltd

Original Price: Unknown



There's confusion with this game before it even starts. The title screen calls the game Alien Raiders, but the next screen calls it Alien Invaders – a name also shown at the top of the screen during the game! For the purposes of this book, I'm going with Alien Raiders as that's what was written on the cartridge, but either name is valid I suppose. If only video games had birth certificates.

The first thing Alien Raiders does is assault you with four seconds of random beeping, which is never a nice thing to experience. It then tells you the controls for left, right and fire, and away you go into possibly the most worthless single-screen shoot 'em up ever made.

You control a classic Space Invaders-style ship that sits on a black line. Four green alien ships jerk down the screen extremely slowly. Occasionally two aliens will start in the same place, which leads to one of them disappearing and there only being three on screen for the rest of the game. They move straight down, one at a time from left to right, then sit

still for a second before the movement wave starts again. Your ship moves much faster and can shoot straight up, with a single bullet on screen at any time. When you shoot an enemy ship it turns into a black waffle that blocks your shots until the next time the aliens move, although sometimes they remain on screen until an alien moves over them. When an alien is shot, it's replaced with another from the top of the screen.

Soundwise, Alien Raiders makes only two noises after the initial random beeping. There's a warble when you shoot and a sound like spit hitting a tom-tom drum when an alien is hit.



The fun never starts in Alien Raiders! Or Alien Invaders, for that matter.

The game is written in BASIC, and both the aliens and your ship only move along the 8x8 character blocks of the VIC's standard screen mode. The result is there are only 20 horizontal positions the aliens can be in, and your ship is restricted to the same columns they travel down. A combination of this restriction, the aliens' inability to move sideways, and the speed of your ship means Alien Raiders is painfully easy. It's a very simple task to line yourself up under the extraterrestrial idiots, and you have absolutely ages to do it. If one of the invading raiders reaches the bottom of the screen, it's instantly game over, but that's not going to happen unless you deliberately allow it.

This leads us into the game's strangest design choice. When you shoot an alien, you receive 10 points. When you accumulate 100 points, you win and the game immediately ends. So all you have to do is shoot ten aliens, which takes approximately 36 seconds. It's so easy that I managed to easily complete three versions of the game at once by simultaneously running multiple VIC-20 emulators.



The inevitable outcome of playing Alien Raiders. The correct answer is "NO".

The only chance of losing without it being on purpose is if you encounter a bug that makes the aliens invisible when you shoot them – they sometimes become impossible to shoot and will just progress down the screen unless you can get the score to 100 first. Otherwise, you effectively have to choose to lose. Also, when the game ends, it asks if you want to play again with a Y/N prompt – but entering Y ends the program; you have to enter the whole word YES. Not that anyone would likely want to play the game more than once, but it's annoying anyway.

Alien Raiders is an absolute swindle. It's 36 seconds of utterly tedious gameplay for what was almost certainly a premium price, as it was released on an expensive cartridge rather than a cassette tape.

ALIEN INVADERS



THE ALIENS LANDED
ANOTHER GAME Y/N?

You won't see this message unless you really want to or if you're the victim of an annoying bug.

The game is also a bit of an enigma. It consists of only 88 lines of BASIC code. Was it designed as a game for toddlers? Was it a magazine type-in that somehow got released commercially? And who was the publisher Micro-Spec? There's no record of them releasing anything other than this game.

A look at the source code reveals an extra final line numbered 65000 that says "Harteveld Software" surrounded with asterisks. Harteveld were a Dutch developer who released the puzzle games Kolom Raden (Guess the Column) and Memory – both simple BASIC games and both of which have the same line 65000 in them. It therefore seems likely they made a game called Alien Invaders that they never released themselves, but that for some reason Micro-Spec published as Alien Raiders. What is the story behind the whole affair? We may never know... or care.



All of the alien types. I call them Harold, Susan, Engelbert, Boffo and Revenge of Boffo.



REVIEW SCORES

None known.

other versions

None. Just play any version of Space Invaders on any machine and you'll almost certainly have more fun.

Alien Sidestep

Format: Commodore 64

Year of Release: 1983

Developer: Unknown. VIC-20 version

by Kerry Enderson

Publisher: Mr Computer Products

Original Price: Approx. 7 pounds



Space Invaders was a worldwide phenomenon, but five years after release it was getting a little stale. The time had come to put a new spin on a classic. And who better to do that than Mr Computer Products? The answer, tragically, is anybody.

It's been said that the key to a good game is choice. Some games offer multiple ways to beat a challenge, but even the simplest examples need you to make the right choice at the right time to win. Do you move left or right? Do you fire one last time or retreat to the side? Or do you play Alien Sidestep, which effectively eliminates player choice and therefore any potential fun?



This is Strategy Alpha. During Level 2. You will probably be asleep by this point.

Rows of aliens appear on the screen from the top left. They move horizontally to the right, at which point they reappear at the left further down. If they reach the bottom of the screen, then it is officially a bad thing, because the game ends if it happens three times. Nothing revolutionary so far.

BUT! The aliens have mastered the dark art of the sidestep, a bit like the drivers in the fourth *The Fast and the Furious* movie. This means that when they are about to be hit by a bullet, they stop moving so it passes harmlessly to their right, which presents a massive problem. The bullets fired from your crude blue rocket crawl painfully slowly up the screen and you can only have 16 on the screen at once. This means the usual tactic of aiming at where the aliens will be is useless, as they just stop moving before they're hit.



This is Strategy Omega. And also the least impressive firework display in history.

In fact, to actually progress in Alien Sidestep, there are only two effective battle plans. I shall refer to them as Strategy Alpha and Strategy Omega, and both rely on shooting a bullet directly to the left of the previous bullet.

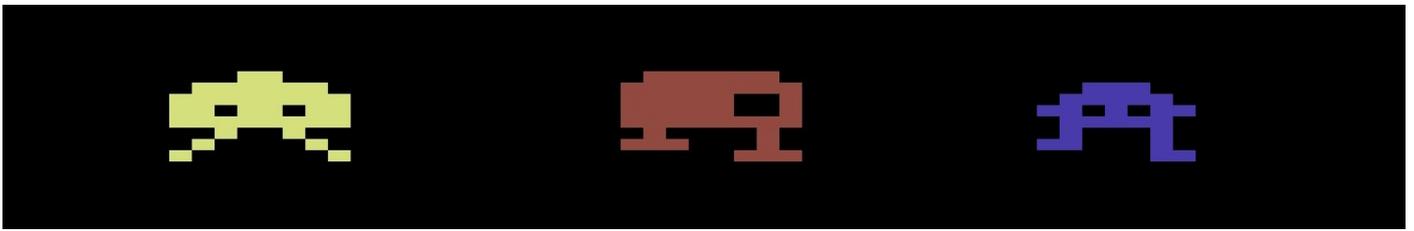
Strategy Alpha:

1. Move from the left of the screen to the right, hammering the fire button so there isn't a gap in your bullets for the aliens to slip through.
2. Move your ship back to the left as your bullets crawl up the screen.
3. Repeat steps 1 and 2 forever.

Strategy Omega:

1. Move your ship slightly to the left, then slightly to the right, firing constantly.
2. Repeat step 1 forever.

And that's it! Any divergence from either strategy will result in not shooting anything, and ultimately game over. And Strategy Alpha is far more effective than Strategy Omega, so you can't even mix it up by swapping between them without risking failure. There is no room for deviation, improvisation or fun.



These are all the enemy types. They are worth 10, 20 and 30 points respectively, and they are all suspiciously familiar.

The depressingly repetitive gameplay is further reinforced by a total lack of variety in the game's levels. Shoot enough of the Space Invader rip-off aliens on level 1 and you will get to shoot identically-acting aliens that look slightly different on levels 2 and 3. And if you complete level 3, then the words "POINTS DOUBLE" appear on screen and the charge fanfare that Scrappy-Doo loved so much plays. Then everything starts all over again. And because it never gets more difficult, it's pretty much impossible to lose if you follow Strategy Alpha. You could actually play Alien Sidestep forever – the only real obstacle is maintaining interest through the mind-crushing tedium.

There is only one unpredictable feature in the entire game – sometimes, if you hit an alien (usually on the top row) you get 50 points and the little "you've picked up an item or jumped a barrel!" tune from Donkey Kong plays. It seems to happen at random and is not even 0.001% enough to save the game from being a boring, monotonous chore.



This is the actual game label. Notice the inexplicable wavy quiff encroaching bottom centre.

Alien Sidestep was released by Mr Computer Products (also known as O.E.M. Inc.), who may well rank as one of the worst game publishers in history. They released about eight games, all in 1983, and they're all rubbish at best. Alien Sidestep wasn't even their worst effort – that accolade goes to Close Encounters of the Worst Kind, an astonishingly honest title for a game that is simply a shrieking, pulsating mess of sprites that seems specifically designed to induce a headache.



The much nicer VIC-20 version. Still no fun to play, though.

REVIEW SCORES

None known.

other versions

Commodore VIC-20: All of Mr Computer Products' games were also available on the VIC-20, with the possible exception of their dire Donkey Kong rip-off Mario's Brewery. In fact, their C64 titles seem to be bad ports of the VIC-20 originals! Despite the C64 being a much more powerful machine, its version of Alien Sidestep is slower, jerkier and has annoying sprite flickering. The VIC-20 version has a lower resolution but is otherwise superior in every way.

Battle Probe

Format: Atari ST

Year of Release: 1988

Developer: Capital Software Designs Ltd

Publisher: Crysyst

Original Price: 14.99 pounds



And so Human Kind went out of Earth and, like locust, spread and devoured the Galaxy. The Earth was contaminated but out of the contamination there evolved a new life form which regenerated the land, sea and air until once again greedy Human Kind attempted to return.

That's the text from the back of Battle Probe's disk case. The usual idea for a case is to write an exciting description of the game to entice browsers to buy it. But publisher Crysyst decided to provide what seems to be a Russian poem automatically translated into English by faulty software. I don't know if it helped sales, but I suspect not.



That's a very unconvincing star field. The skulls are quite good though.

A simple, vertically-scrolling shoot 'em up, Battle Probe has you controlling a spaceship, flying over space stations of some kind as enemy ships attack you. The only slight deviation from the basic template is that your ship has an ever- diminishing fuel supply you need to replenish, although it never came close to running out when I was playing.

Battle Probe is an amazingly orange game. The status area is orange. Your ship is orange. Most enemies are orange. The backgrounds are orange. Your bullets are orange. Even the stars are orange. This game is more orange than a clownfish addicted to fake tanning lotion.



This emplacement exists to shoot eight eyes into space simultaneously. Warfare in the future is weird.

The graphics themselves are generally well defined, but it can be hard to discern what's going on as so many things are the same colour. There are also a lot of eyes featured. Some enemy ships are eyes, gun turrets spew eyes at you, and different coloured eyes in the backgrounds confer extra lives, fuel and bonus points. If I had to create a single image to sum up this game, it would be an orange eye.

When I first loaded Battle Probe, I was impressed with how smooth the scrolling and the ship's movements were. My positive impressions ended there, sadly.



The player's ship narrowly avoids a space satsuma as two eyeball enemies pass over the game's border, possibly in an attempt to escape into the real world.

As soon as a few enemies appear on screen, the whole game slows to a crawl. Your ship moves so slowly anyway that it's almost impossible to dodge things fired at you. The collision detection – one of the most important parts of a shoot 'em up – is absolutely atrocious, with bullets frequently passing through your ship. Sometimes after losing a life, you restart on a bullet or background obstacle and die again immediately. It's difficult to tell which background objects can be passed over and which will kill you. All the enemy ships have identical attack patterns, appearing in threes and waving left and right. The upshot is that Battle Probe is no fun to play whatsoever.



A row of bonus eyeballs. They trigger the spoken phrases “Another ship!”, “Bonus!” and “Gas-o-line!”

Interestingly for the time, the sound consists entirely of sampled audio. The title screen constantly plays a scratchy three second music loop which grates on the nerves after a few plays. The vast majority of the game is silent, punctuated by an explosion effect when an enemy is killed or your ship is destroyed. There are also three different snippets of speech reserved for when you pick up items, although they’re almost unintelligible – more due to their odd intonation than the low sample quality.

Battle Probe is a depressingly fun-free experience. The whole package feels painfully cheap, especially considering the substantial £15 asking price. There isn’t even a game over message – it just cuts abruptly back to the title screen and the three second music loop.



The box art isn't particularly noteworthy; I just wanted to use a picture that isn't mostly orange.

The developers, Capital Software, produced only Battle Probe before forming a new company called New Dimensions. They then made two very weak games before finding their strength in application software – they went on to re-release the immensely successful Technosound Turbo audio sampler for the Amiga, which dance group The Prodigy used in their early work.

Publisher Crysysis only released Battle Probe and three dull sports management games that all used the same game engine. By 1989 they'd disappeared, which was probably for the best.



REVIEW SCORES

The only magazine to review Battle Probe was ST Action, who awarded it a generous 25%.

other versions

None. Possibly no other computers could handle so much orange on screen at once.

THE MOST DISAPPOINTING GAME I EVER BOUGHT

by Alan Boiston, racing game journalist and YouTuber

SDI: Strategic Defense Initiative

Format: Amstrad CPC

Year of Release: 1989

Developer: Source Software Ltd

Publisher: Activision

Original Price: 9.99 pounds



Back in the '80s, pocket money was very limited – a few pence a week besides a couple of

10p pieces for the arcade. This encouraged me to play as well as possible to extend those arcade experiences, but that short session was never enough and I always wanted to play those games at home. After weeks or even months of saving, I would eventually be able to buy a new game, usually at Woolworths or WHSmith. On one occasion I was lucky to be taken to Hamleys toy shop in London. On the top floor they featured an amazing selection of all of the latest computer games, and it was there that I saw SDI: Strategic Defense Initiative for the Amstrad for the first time. Wow, the excitement! The box art and screenshots looked amazing. OK, they were screen shots from various formats, but surely the Amstrad version couldn't look too bad? I spent my hard-earned savings and couldn't wait to get home and indulge in hours of Star Wars Defense System action!

I waited for the 20 minutes loading time with building excitement. The loading screen wasn't all that impressive: as the lines came across and built the picture piece by piece, it looked limited colourwise. But no fear, I knew the game was going to be amazing. As I played my first game, however, the shock of disappointment washed over me. No in-game music, poor audio and only a single blue colour used in the entire game. And to top it off, it played super slowly with a terrible frame rate. Everything that I loved about the arcade was gone. Instead it felt like an empty shell.

It was horrible. I'd spent all of my pocket money and was left with a game that wasn't worth playing. If you grew up and played computer games in the '80s, "screenshots from various formats" is a phrase you'll be familiar with. They usually displayed the arcade, Amiga and Atari ST versions on the back. But every now and again they would feature shots from at least the Commodore 64 or Amstrad CPC versions. I felt like I had been completely misled, as it was effectively a conversion of the ZX Spectrum release and not the arcade at all.

I was determined not to be fooled again. From that point forward I was more selective, and if I didn't like a game or if it wasn't as represented on the back of the box, then I would take it back. I also stopped buying a lot of budget software and instead focused on the bigger names even if it meant taking longer to save. With that approach I eventually saved enough to buy Domark's Star Wars Trilogy box set – now that was awesome!

Alan can be found on Twitter at

[@VVVGamer](https://twitter.com/VVVGamer)

FACT!

Amstrad Action magazine really liked SDI, awarding it 82%. Even though it plays like a particularly dull dog. The 49% given by Amstrad Computer User makes more sense.

Bionic Granny

Format: Commodore 64

Year of Release: 1984

Developer: Unknown

Publisher: Mastertronic

Original Price: 1.99 pounds



For years I thought that this game was made to cash in on the popularity of Super Gran, a TV series about an elderly Scottish lady who receives super powers. However, it actually predates the show! It seems that unnaturally beefed-up grandmothers were just a popular idea in the mid-eighties.

The cassette inlay describes the titular Granny as lurking outside a school at home time, trying to “zap” children with her laser-powered umbrella. It describes the aim of the game as “Run for your life before she gets you too!” which is nonsense since you actually play as her. It’s not a good sign when the people writing the game’s description don’t know anything about it.



Terrifying skull-faced goons hang out near the school as Bionic Granny goes for the frog-headed child on the right.

More pertinent instructions are given on the game's title screen, but it is so full of grammatical and typographical errors that it would make a middle school English teacher faint. But the aim is clear: you are Bionic Granny, and you must assault as many children as possible. They never say how Granny came to have parts of her body replaced with cybernetic equivalents or why she is compelled to physically injure kids. That's a shame as I'm sure it would be a fascinating and tragic story. I'll have to wait for a novelisation.

On starting the game, you're presented with a road system leading into a school at the top of the screen. A giant clock floating in the air shows the time as four o'clock. Then, children run out of the school and down the screen. Either the scale or perspective is insane – the entire school building is the same width as the road, and the children leaving the school are as big as a quarter of a football pitch.



Granny appears to be firing a rifle in the air, but she is actually just waving a stick.

Bionic Granny herself is stuck at the bottom of the screen, only capable of moving left and right. She has two frames of animation and no leg movement, so she appears to glide around on roller skates. She constantly waves a wooden stick in the air, presumably having lost her laser-powered broom.

So you can only move left and right, trying to crash into the school kids as they attempt to run off the bottom of the screen. If any touch you, they instantly disappear and points are earned.



Oddly, a giant red face appears when Granny dies. Perhaps it's her soul escaping in the form of a demonic terminator skull.

But you do not stand unopposed in your quest to violently assail innocent youngsters who cannot fight back. The lollipop lady, who has sworn to use her crossing guard powers to stop Bionic Granny, frantically runs around the screen firing stop signs from her infinite supply. This may be possible due to magical powers or futuristic technology – she appears to be the offspring of Skeletor and one of the aliens from Close Encounters of the Third Kind, so she probably has access to both.

And... that's it. You just slide around horizontally, trying to avoid the lollipop lady's projectiles and smack as many kids as possible into oblivion. Not only is it mind-meltingly dull, it is also annoying – the stop signs launched by the lollipop lady move at a terrifying speed and are almost impossible to dodge if you're directly under them. Eventually, your score gets near 5,000 and the supply of kids dries up, leaving only one that runs down the right-hand side of the screen. Breach the 5,000 point barrier and you reach level 2 – which is exactly the same as level 1. The fun never starts with Bionic Granny!



The game's cast: Bionic Granny, lollipop lady, school girl, school boy, school girl 2, school boy 2. Wonderful.

The sound consists of two audio annoyances: a jolly, twinkly tune that plays constantly in the background and an odd noise like a rubber band being pinged against a damp towel that pipes up when you injure a child. Earplugs are recommended.

Bionic Granny is utter, utter tosh. Even for the budget price of £1.99 (about £6 today, taking into account inflation), there's no excuse for such half-baked nonsense. Well, I say half-baked, but frankly this game isn't even one-fifth-baked. It's become infamous in the Commodore 64 community, to the extent that it spawned an enhanced – and differently spelled – remake in 2010 called Bionik Granny Returns.

Commodore 64

MASTERTRONIC

BIONIC GRANNY



199
RANGE

MASTERTRONIC

The game's cover art has a truly terrifying face in the background, like a mummified John Lennon.

The publisher Mastertronic was incredibly prolific, releasing well over 100 games for the Commodore 64. But the actual developers of Bionic Granny remain uncredited and unknown. It's possible, however, that it was written by brothers David and Richard Darling. Bionic Granny was put together using Mirrorsoft's "The Games Creator", an easy-to-use construction kit that required no programming experience but imposed heavy limitations on any game made with it. The Darlings themselves actually made "The Games Creator", and they used it to produce several substandard games for Mastertronic such as BMX Racers and Mind Control. The text on their title screens often included grammatical errors, too. But they went on to found the very successful company Codemasters that still publishes hit games to this day, so even if they did make Bionic Granny, I think we can all collectively forgive them.



REVIEW SCORES

Commodore User magazine's weird scoring system gave Bionic Granny 6 points out of a potential 20, which is at least 4 too many.

other versions

Some online sources mention an Amstrad CPC version – I am very pleased to announce that it doesn't seem to exist. Nice to end on a positive note. Continuing the genre of overpowered pensioners, TV's Super Gran had its own rubbish game released in 1985.

Car Race

Format: MSX1

Year of Release: 1983

Developer: Ample Software / Panasonic

Publisher: Ample Software

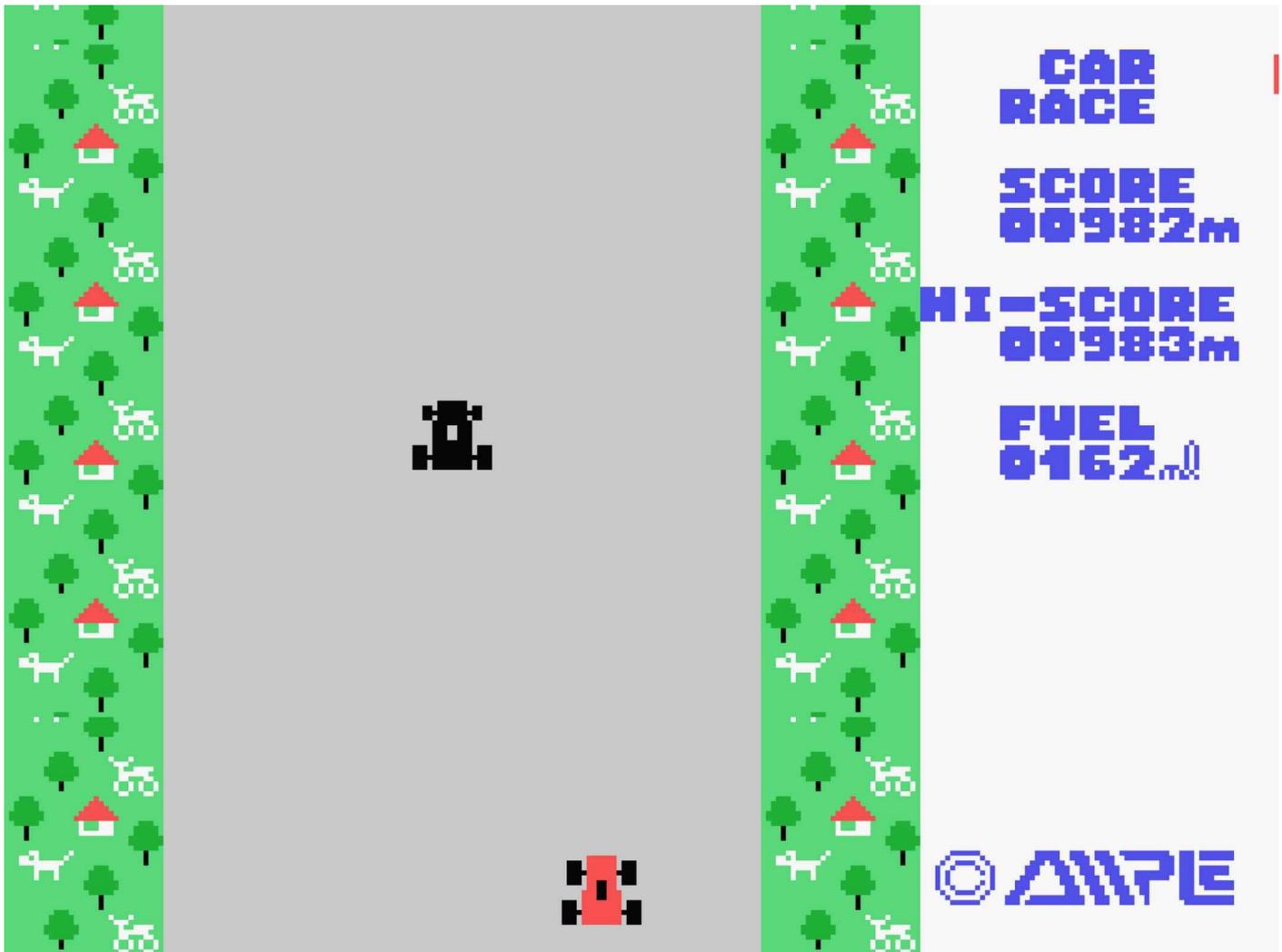
Original Price: approx. 13 pounds



No messing about with the title here – you know exactly what you’re getting. It’s like calling the latest FIFA game “Ball Kick” or calling Bioshock “Weirdo Shoot”. Except it isn’t really a race at all, meaning half of the title is actually inaccurate.

Clearly inspired by the arcade game Bump ‘n’ Jump, Car Race (or Car-Race as it appears in the game) actually involves driving at a high speed down an infinitely long, entirely straight road until you run out of fuel. It’s a bit like a nightmare induced by driving on a

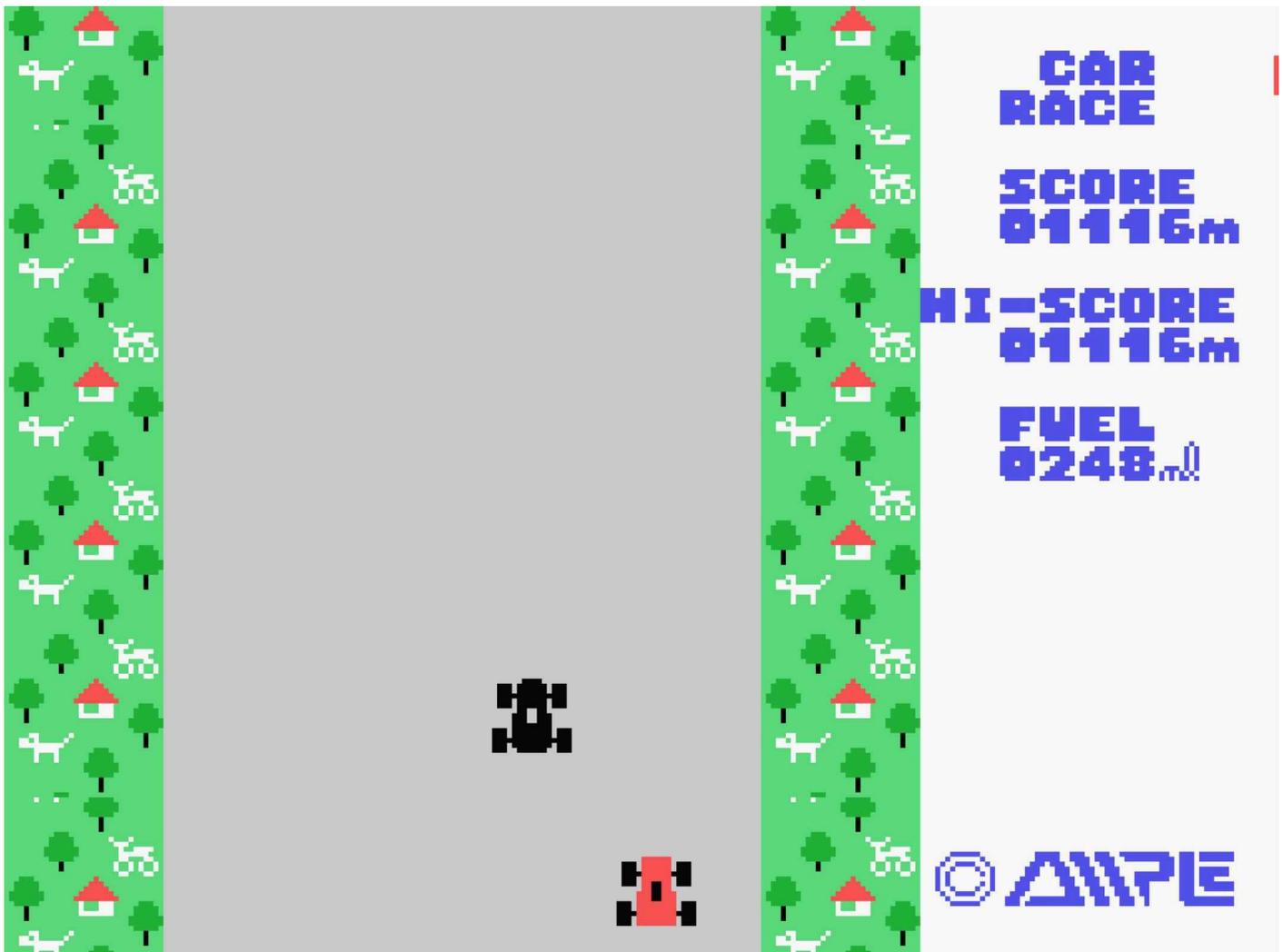
German autobahn for too long.



Red car goes up, black car goes down. That's the way Car Race goes.

First impressions are that it's a fairly basic affair. The title screen is entirely text-based, and a jolly but repetitive tune plays in the background. Sadly things do not become more sophisticated when you play the game.

The graphics are about as primitive as they can be before you can't tell what they are. The road you race down is entirely blank, and at the sides there is a continual loop of infinite dogs, trees, huts and bicycles. It feels like the game was written in a weekend. Worst of all is the audio, which is a constant, horrible whining sound that's presumably supposed to represent your engine noise. After a few seconds, it feels like there are drugged bees trapped in both your ears.



A road that stretches on forever through an infinitely repeating suburb. This is purgatory.

Your first game of Car Race will inevitably proceed as follows:

You press the space bar to start.

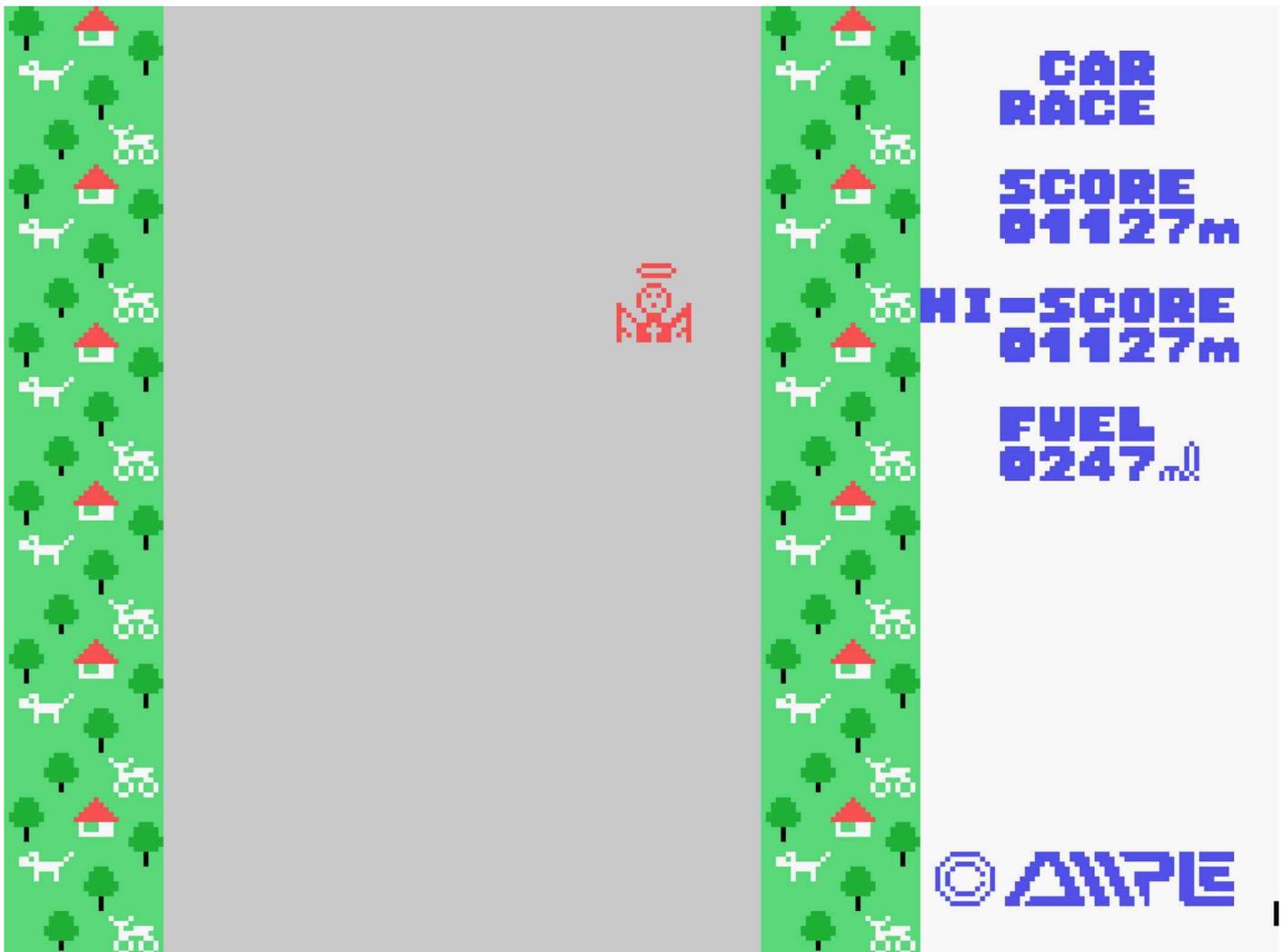
You take in what's on the screen – your car is at the bottom and a straight road leads upwards. A black car is swerving towards you.

You hold down space to accelerate.

The “Game Over” screen appears within five seconds of starting.

You are extremely confused.

The reason for the game ending is that you've run out of fuel, despite your score telling you that you've only travelled about 80 metres. This is because the way Car Race deals with fuel is utterly bonkers – you burn more petrol the slower you go. At the minimum speed your car starts at, the entire tank empties in about 3.5 seconds. The instant the game starts, you have to hold down the space bar and never release it – and even then your 1,000 units of fuel will have reduced to about 350 by the time you get up to speed!



When you crash, the top half of an angel flies off up the road. Although it could be an alien chasing an inner tube.

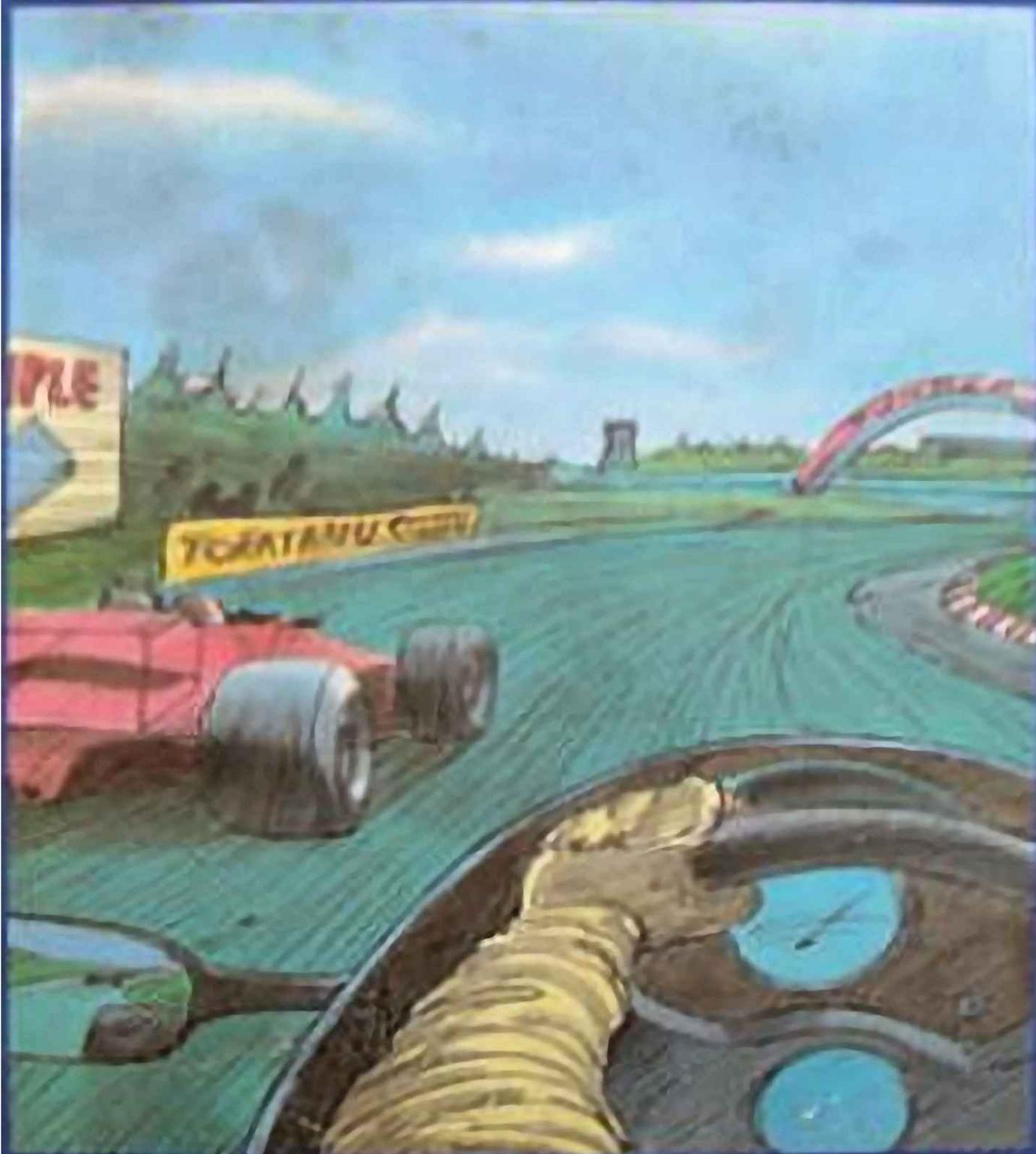
So, you've worked out how to actually play the game for more than a few seconds and discovered just how barebones it is. Then, black cars appear at the top of the screen, weaving down towards you. There is always exactly one of these cars on the screen at all times. Your car moves left and right quite slowly, and the enemy vehicles are a lot faster – some of them swerve all over the screen at an insane speed, making them effectively impossible to avoid. Collision with one of them makes your car explode and costs you 100 units of fuel, but your car is immediately replaced by one moving at the speed you were last travelling at.

Your ever-diminishing fuel supply can be replenished by running over tiny blue petrol pumps that randomly appear in the road, granting you an extra 100 units. Tragically, they fly down the screen so fast that you can't possibly move over to them in time; you have to hope they will appear pretty much directly in front of you.

MSX

ROM PACK

CAR RACE



アングルフトウェア

Here's a low-quality picture of the cover art, because the screenshots are all the same.

And that is all of Car Race's gameplay. Hold down accelerate and never let go for a second or your fuel evaporates faster than a drop of water on a lightsaber. Shuffle left and right, hoping that a fuel pickup appears in a favourable position and the next black car isn't one of the crazy, swerving ones. The best strategy by far is to move over to the far right of the screen and swerve carefully, as the enemies mostly stay on the left and fuel often appears on the right. By a combination of this and saint-like patience, you can reach the maximum score of 65,535 metres after about 20 solid minutes of mind-numbingly tedious play.

Car Race's biggest sin is that of wasted opportunity. The movement and scrolling are smooth and the collision detection is solid. If they'd actually put some time and thought into the game design, it could be quite good fun. But sadly, it's just a bleak lump of nothing that's so dull you could fall asleep playing it – if the horrifying engine noise didn't keep you awake.

Ample Software released two other games: a bizarre alcoholism-based platformer called Super Drinker and Scramble Eggs, a rubbish, simplified version of Scramble where the enemy spaceships are replaced with eggs. Yes, really.



REVIEW SCORES

None known

other versions

None, but you can play Bump 'n' Jump (AKA Burnin' Rubber) on various systems, and it's pretty much the same game but a million times better.

Count Duckula 2

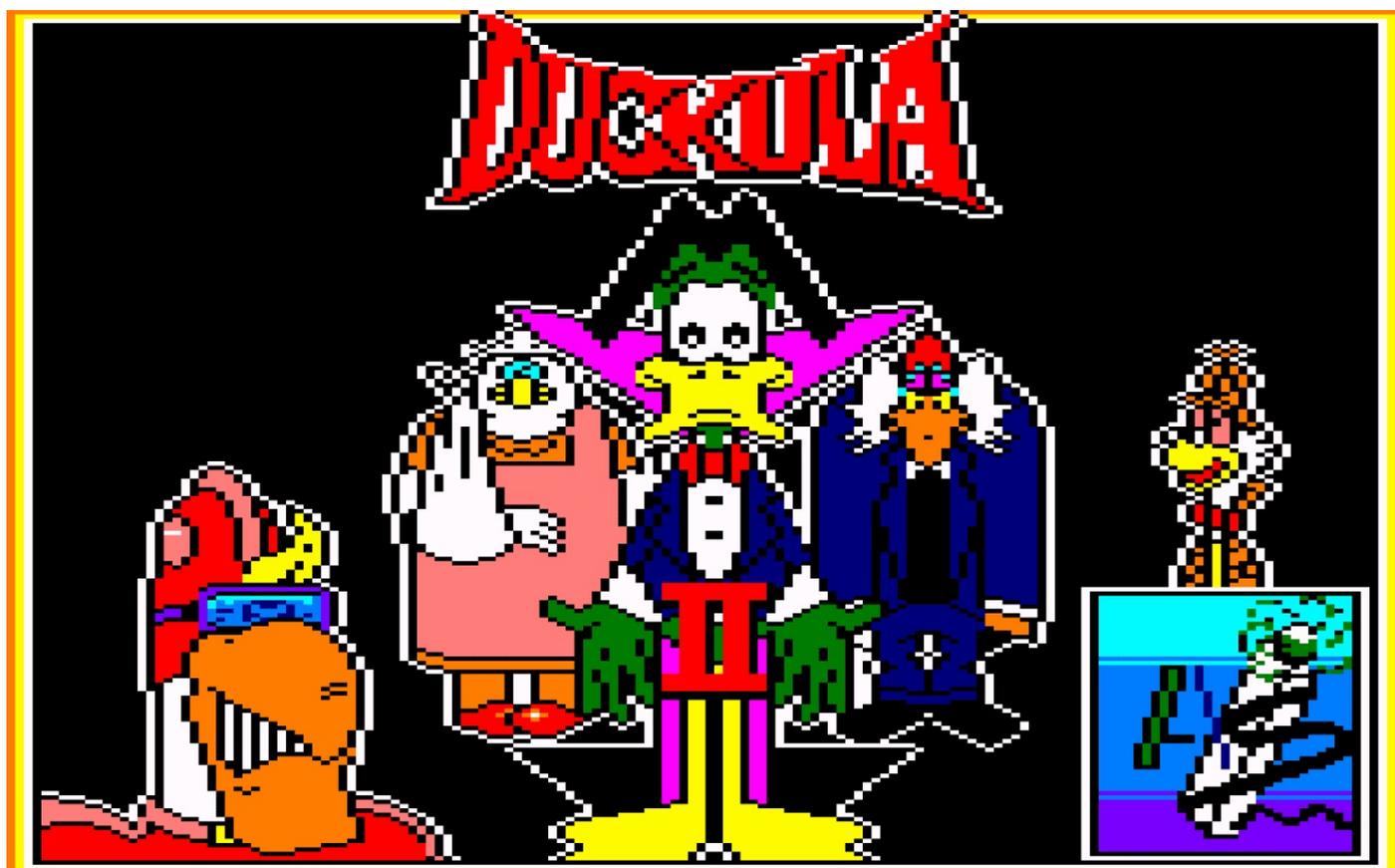
Format: Amstrad CPC

Year of Release: 1992

Developer: Unknown

Publisher: Alternative Software

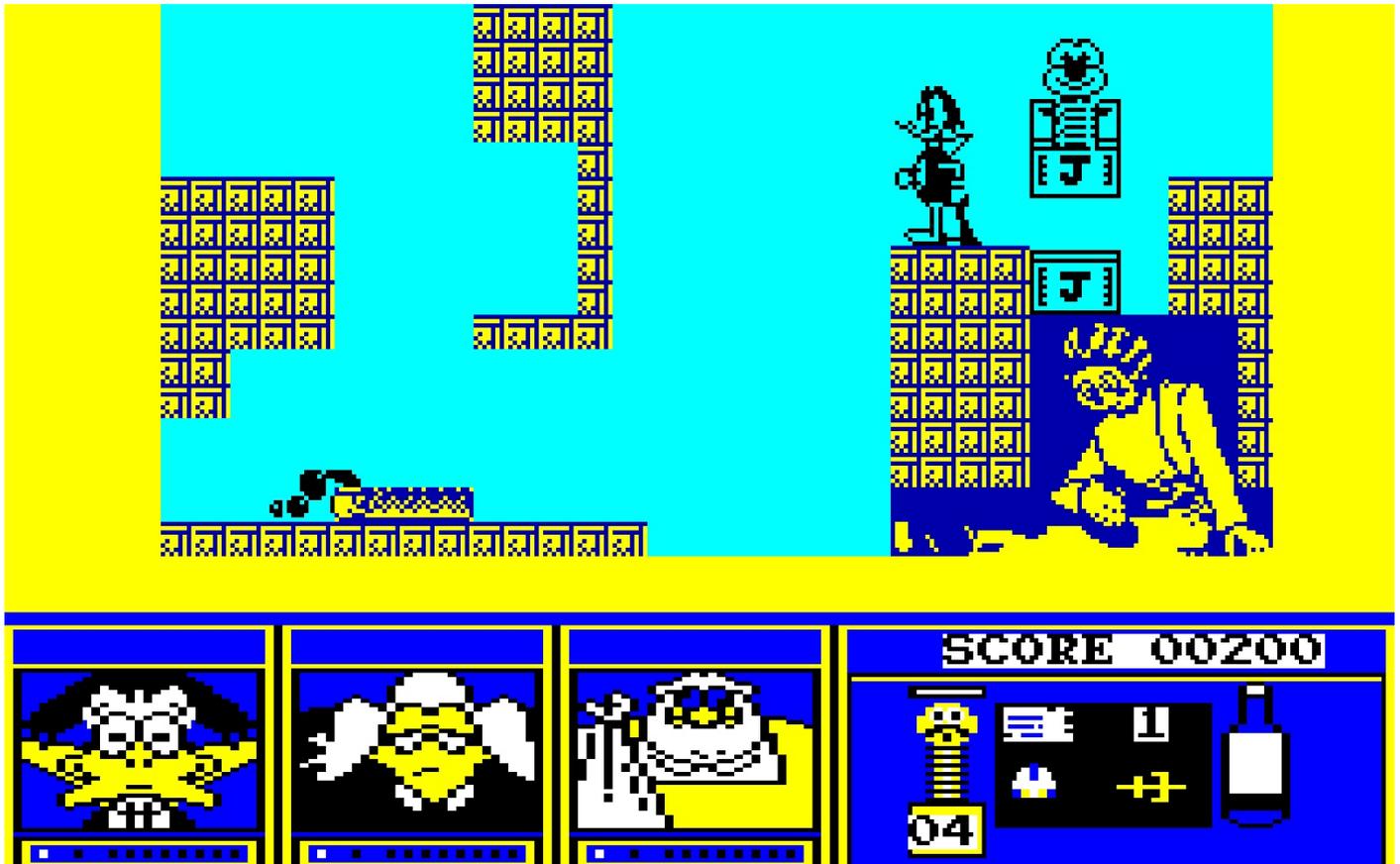
Original Price: 3.99 pounds



The Amstrad CPC suffered from a horrible plague throughout its lifespan that affected many of the games released for it. It was a particularly insidious disease known as Lazy ZX Spectrum Conversions. The only cure was an injection of money and time from game publishers, and as you're probably aware from the contents of this book, that medication was in extremely short supply.

The Amstrad is capable of displaying a low resolution mode with 16 colours, similar to the Commodore 64 but with a larger potential palette and more vivid hues. But it can also produce a higher resolution screen similar to the Spectrum, albeit with only four colours at once. It also shares the same processor which led to developers realising they could just port over the code of a Spectrum game in a few days. It would have fewer colours than the

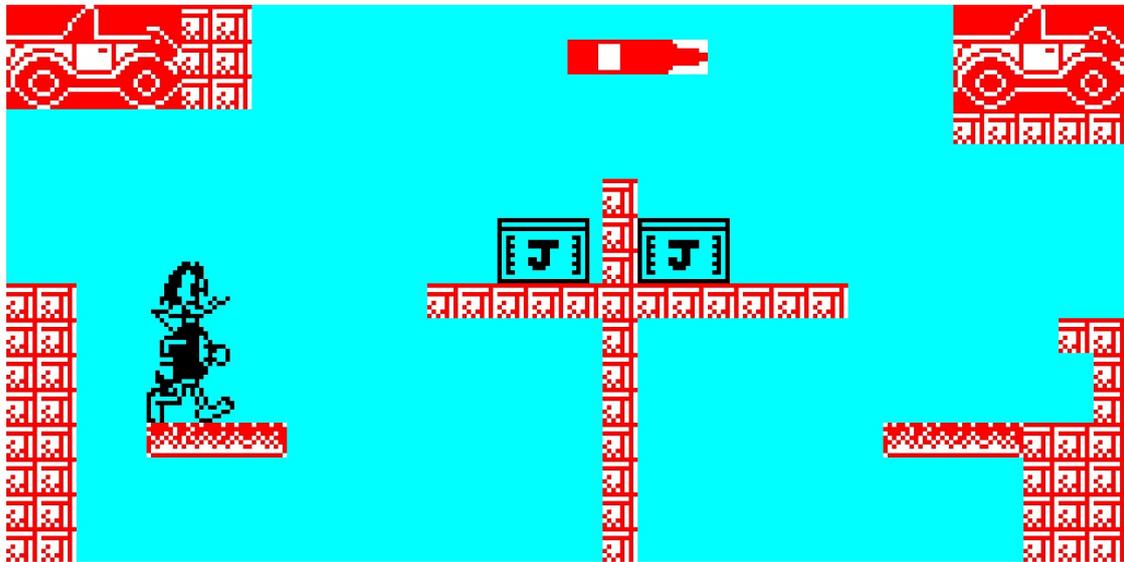
original version and run much slower, as the graphics were converted to the exact Amstrad format in real time. But some companies simply didn't care – the Spectrum had a much bigger market share in the UK so the Amstrad versions were treated as an afterthought. That didn't stop them charging the same money for them though...



This screen appears to feature a fresco of Raggedy Ann after being stabbed in the stomach.

Count Duckula 2 is one of the very worst examples of a lazy conversion. And as the game is distressingly poor in the first place, Alternative Software took something dreadful and made it into something frankly unholy.

The second game to be based on the popular children's cartoon from British animation studio Cosgrove Hall, Count Duckula 2 follows the exploits of the vegetarian vampire duck as he gets stranded on Planet Cute. The entire world is covered with animated toys whose touch slowly kills our hero, apparently because he doesn't like cute things. Fair enough.



That's a bottle of ketchup at the top of the screen. Yes, really.

Things start off well with a colourful and nicely drawn loading screen that leads into a funky remix of the cartoon's title music. Then things fall off a cliff faster than Wile E. Coyote strapped to Acme's finest rocket-powered anvil.

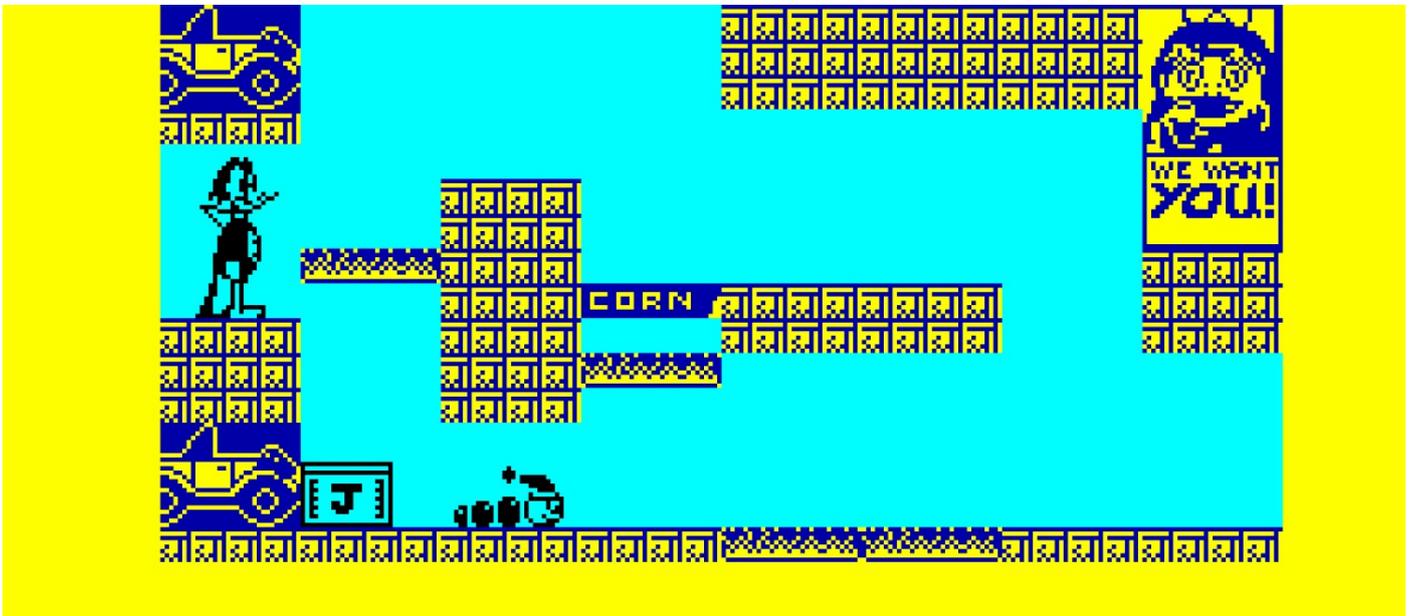
The graphics are absolutely dreadful. A pixelated mess representing Duckula stands in a mostly empty screen peppered with ugly blocks that look like they've escaped from a 1982 magazine type-in. Occasionally there are large images of toys in the corners, but they've been reduced to two colours without being redrawn and are a total mess as a result.



Count Duckula dies because he touched the bottom of his screen. His hair is duplicated due to hideous graphical errors.

Then the graphics move and the true horror begins. Everything is jerky and flickery beyond belief – the top of Duckula’s head seems to be detached from the rest of his body as he shuffles and twitches across the platforms. There is no jumping animation, meaning he takes Aled Jones’ advice and just walks in the air. The enemies feature minimal animation. Everything runs like it’s being updated in real-time by a tranquilised sloth in a bath of treacle. Sound is limited to a handful of beepy spot effects.

The game is based primarily around waiting for constantly moving platforms to be in the correct place to allow you to progress. And when I say “moving” I actually mean “flickering in and out of existence at different points on the screen”. As the game runs at half the speed it was designed for, you spend an awful lot of time waiting. The evil toys that sap your strength can be stunned with your ketchup gun, except for the jack-in-the-boxes which can’t be shot or avoided.



According to the instructions, the thing saying “CORN” is the torn-off top of a cereal packet. Even the items you collect are things you’d find in a bin.

Beyond the stiflingly tedious game design lie even more technical problems. The controls are painfully unresponsive, with a lag of around half a second between you pressing a button and something actually happening. You frequently merge into the corners of platforms as you try and jump on them. And there’s yet another massive problem caused by the lazy conversion from the Spectrum original...

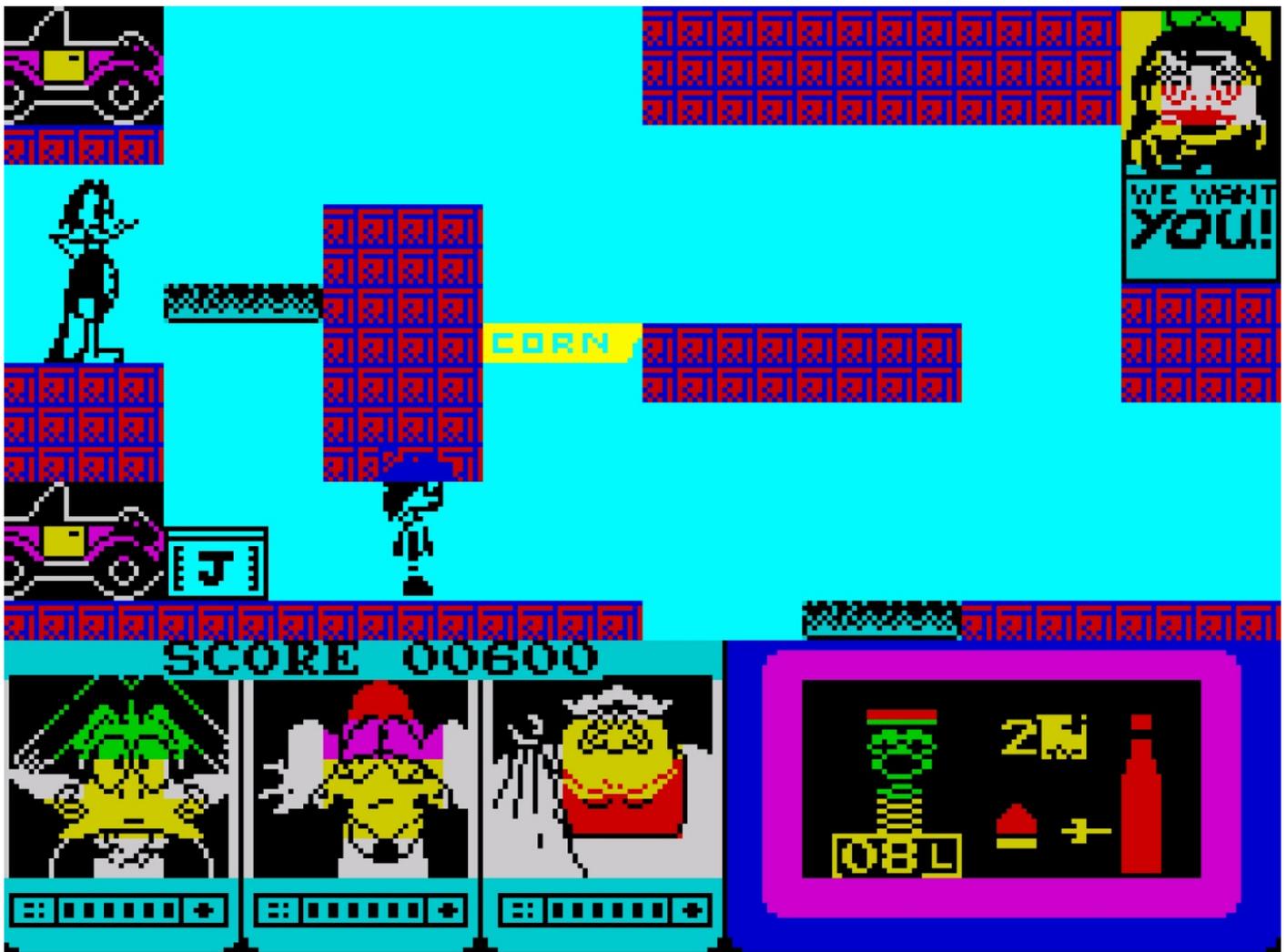
For some reason the Amstrad version stops you jumping off the top of the screen. If you try, Duckula bangs his head and plummets straight down. As the levels were designed assuming you would have this ability, this oversight causes multiple problems. The most serious is that the second screen is impossible to complete by standard means, as any attempt to reach the moving platforms leads to falling off the bottom of the screen and instant death. The only way to progress is to call Tremendous Terrence, a superhero who carries you to the next screen. You can only use this level skip every so often, so it’s a kick in the teeth to be forced to use it on screen two, especially since you will need him on the very next screen when you inevitably get your head stuck in the ceiling.



Tremendous Terrence helpfully provides a way to avoid a game-crippling programming oversight.

Count Duckula 2 is an absolute travesty. Amstrad owners deserved better than lazy Spectrum ports, and the people who paid money for the game – possibly on the strength of the first Count Duckula title – certainly deserved better than this digital farce.

The people responsible for producing this dreadful conversion remain unknown as they understandably didn't put their names on it anywhere. Alternative Software released dozens of budget games for the Amstrad, including multiple children's television tie-ins like Postman Pat and Fireman Sam. They also spewed out the nightmarishly dreadful BMX Ninja and Rik the Roadie, and as such are still considered beyond redemption to this day.



The Spectrum version. Still dreadful... just less dreadful.

other versions

Spectrum: As previously mentioned, the original version is effectively the same game except it works properly and there's no sound. The graphics are far more colourful, the crippling bugs aren't present, and it runs literally twice as fast. However it's still an utterly atrocious game – in fact, in 1993 the readers of Your Sinclair magazine voted it the worst Spectrum game of all time by a landslide. (Clearly they had never tried to play SQIJ!)

Commodore 64: This version had a lot more effort put into it and is far superior in every respect as a result. It even has an extra shoot 'em up section at the start. It's not great by any means, but it's the best version by a country mile.

REVIEW SCORES

Amstrad Action felt that 3% was a fair score, and I can't disagree.

THE MOST DISAPPOINTING GAME I EVER BOUGHT

by Jeff Minter, game coder and founder of Llamasoft }:-D

Asteroids

Format: Commodore Vic-20

Year of Release: 1983

Developer: S. Munnery

Publisher: Bug-Byte

Original Price: 7.00 pounds



Think about the defining characteristics of the coin-op Asteroids: precise, smoothly-animated gameplay that was extremely challenging but ultimately fair; sparsely beautiful and pure vector graphics; simple but effective audio that served to ramp up the tension. Now imagine something with characteristics the diametric opposite of those, and you have Asteroids by S. Munnery. Tiny character mode “asteroids” lurched around the screen in giant character-grid-quantised steps. Occasionally, the game would begin with one of them placed directly on top of your ship, killing you instantly. Your ship was a strange kind of horseshoe-shaped thing that would trundle around the screen forlornly making noises like

a Hoover, and when you pressed the FIRE button, a line of full stops would come out of its nose.

It was a complete and utter pile of smeg, and for me, it was one of the final straws that broke the dromedary and convinced me to start Llamasoft. I believe my thinking on the matter was along the lines of “For fuck's sake, even I could do better than that.” Inspired, I founded Llamasoft and made a completely shit version of Defender for the Vic-20. I did go on to do some other slightly less shit things later on though.

Playing this game felt like being repeatedly stabbed in the eyes with recently sharpened pencils whilst being comprehensively kneed in the bollocks by Margaret Thatcher. S. Munnery did do another game called Cosmiads on the Vic-20 years later; it was actually marginally less terrible than Asteroids and only made you feel like flushing your own head down the toilet.

Buying Asteroids made me a bit wary of buying games from software houses that sold a bunch of games by different authors. I'd bought a game off Bug-Byte before that hadn't been entirely dreadful, and it was on the strength of that experience that I ponied up seven whole Earth quid for that traumatising Asteroids. There was a lot of a “buy any old crap from shitty programmers and shove it out there because people will buy anything” attitude that a lot of early software houses succumbed to in those days, and this was just Bug-Byte doing that, I suppose. I think that's why Llamasoft ended up being such a one man band in the end. I may have made shitty games myself in the early days, but at least I actively tried to get better at it instead of just selling any old crap because I could get away with it.

Jeff can be found on Twitter at [@llamasoft_ox](https://twitter.com/llamasoft_ox) – follow him for Sheep Time on Periscope.

FACT!

S. Munnery is Simon Munnery, who went on to have an extremely successful career in comedy, performing stand-up and writing for TV and radio.

Crazy Kong

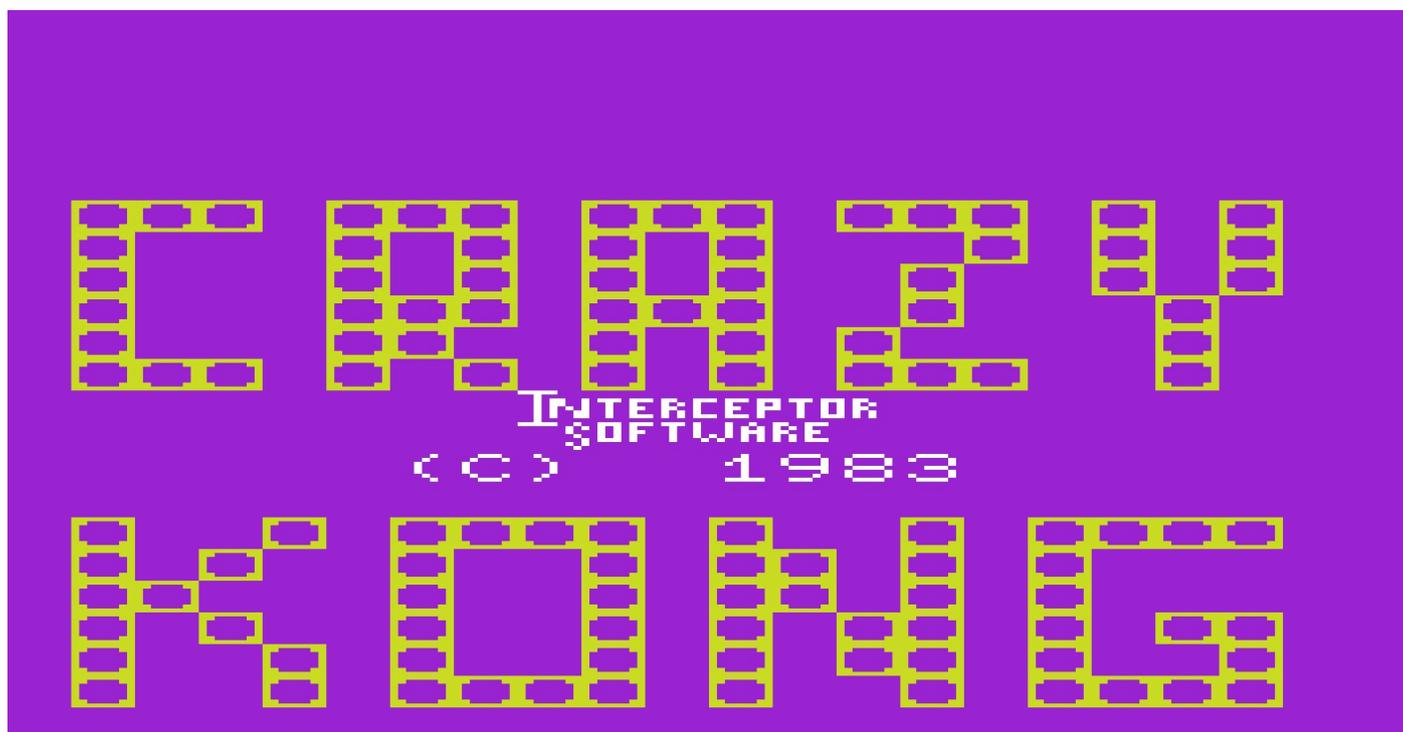
Format: Commodore VIC-20

Year of Release: 1983

Developer: Unknown

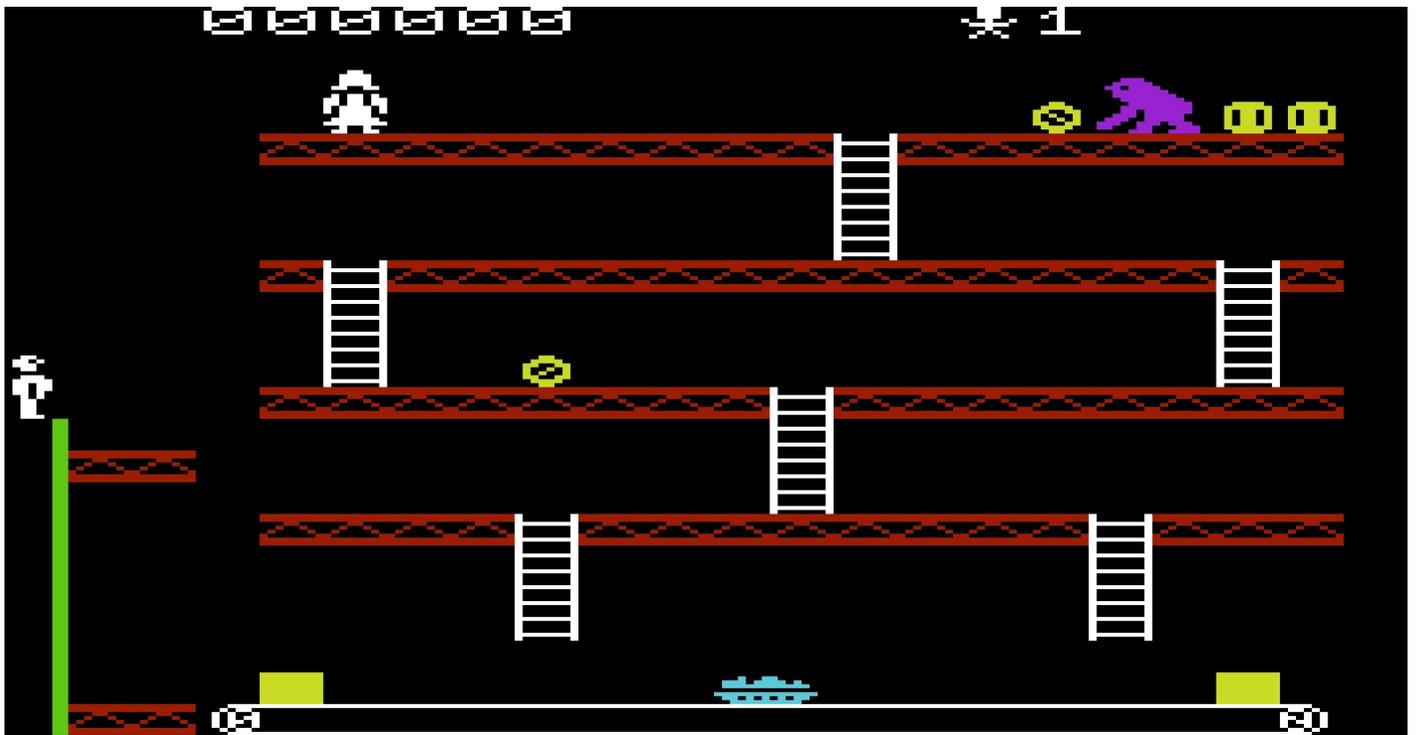
Publisher: Interceptor Software

Original Price: 6 pounds



Along with Pac-Man, Donkey Kong was a cultural phenomenon in the early 80s, and every home computer had multiple unlicensed clones made for it. Sadly, most of them were pretty rubbish, and Interceptor's Crazy Kong is certainly no exception.

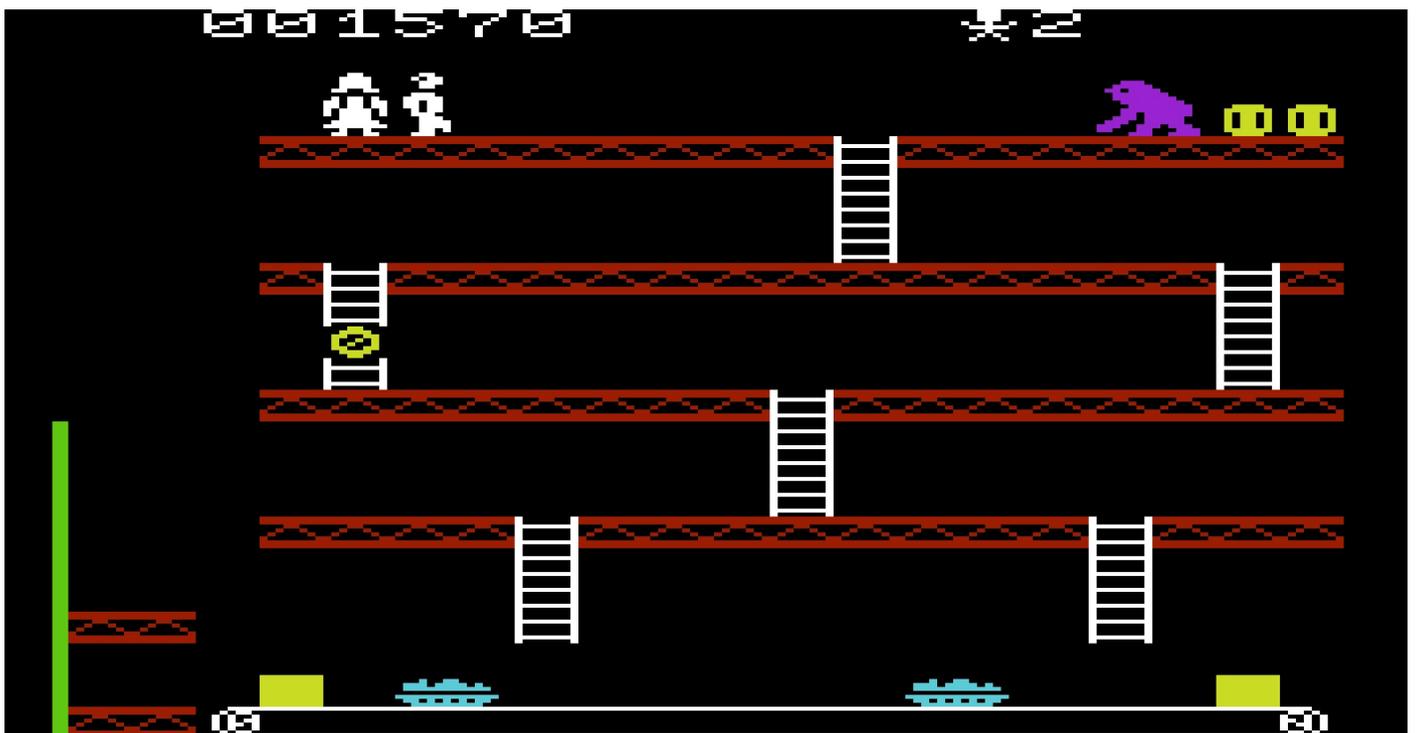
The usual set-up applies – an oversized gorilla has kidnapped your girlfriend for some reason, and to rescue her you have to climb up some gantries whilst the ape throws barrels at you. The instructions even specifically call the main character Mario. Copyright was not well-respected at the time, to say the least.



Mario's head is not attached to his body. If you suffer from a similar ailment, seek medical help immediately.

Things start badly with an ugly title picture that isn't centred in the middle of the screen and offers no discernible way to start the game. Tragically the game does start up after a while, and your buyer's remorse really kicks in.

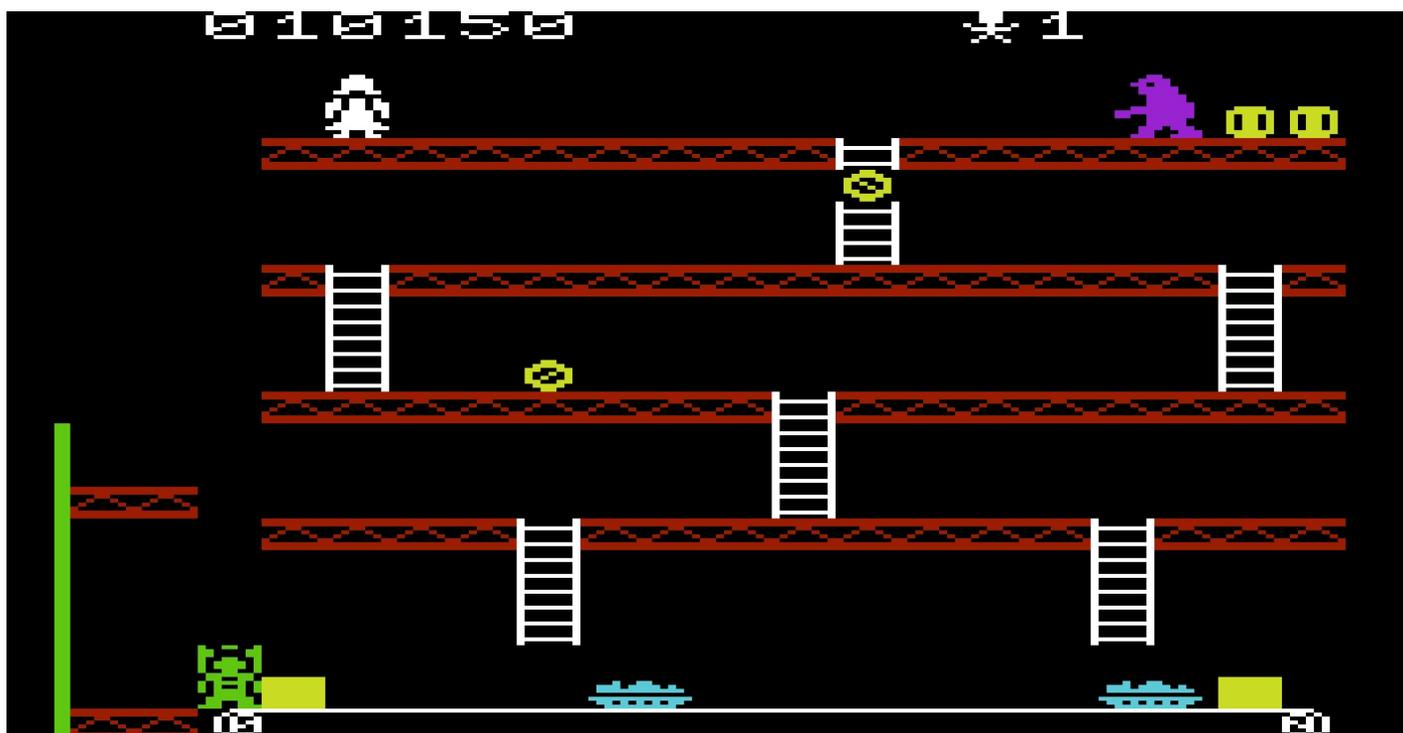
According to Interceptor's mail-order advert for Crazy Kong, it "includes some of the best graphics ever seen on the VIC-20". I'm not sure where they're hidden, as all the ones actually displayed on screen would be better described as "adequate". Kong himself is a purple sloth. Mario's girlfriend is a ghost with a bell on her head. The row of blue boats at the bottom of the screen are supposed to be custard pies. And when Mario dies, he turns into a green angel that looks more like some kind of monster from a 50s B movie.



Mario is victorious! Sloth Kong could just run up and punch him, but instead he stays close to his comforting barrels.

Animation is almost absent – things jerk around the screen, and Mario just flicks one leg out behind himself when he's not standing still. The jumping animation is bizarre – Mario slowly hovers into the air, floats forward one character space and lands. Sound is limited entirely to an annoying beep every time you move and a weird laser gun effect every time you jump.

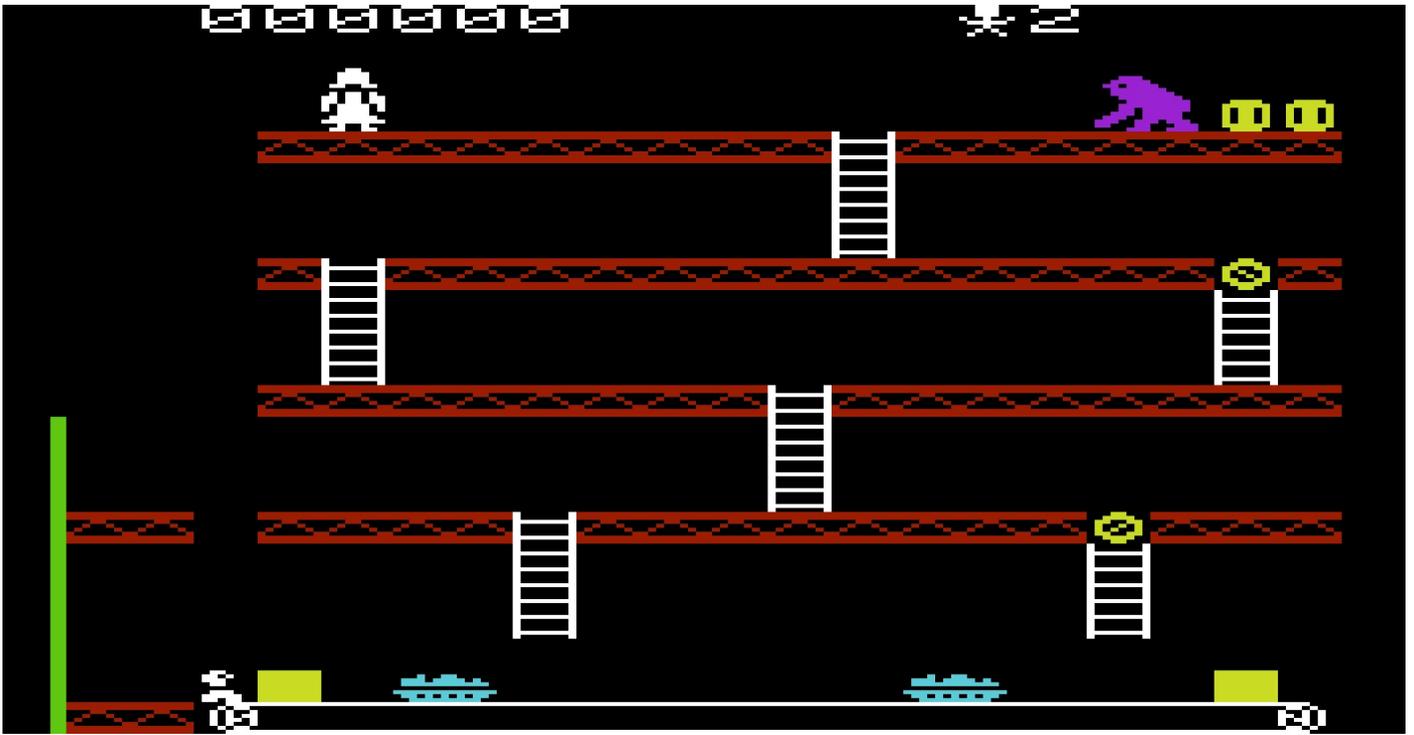
The very first thing you have to do in Crazy Kong is extremely frustrating. You have to walk onto a constantly falling platform just as it teleports back into its starting position – an irritating leap of faith that takes several games to get the hang of. One wrong move and you fall to your death, or you glitch into the conveyor belt below, which forces you to kill yourself by touching one of the deadly yellow blocks. The lethargic controls do not to help.



On death, Mario apparently transforms into the X-Men villain Sauron.

The rest of the level involves jumping over the bright blue pies, which is extremely easy, then dodging the barrels as you make your way to the top. There are no hammers with which to smash the barrels in this version, so you rely entirely on timing your movements and jumping. The barrels alternate between two different paths, so it doesn't take long to figure out an optimum route. The only real threat are the controls, which will occasionally leave you stuck on a ladder when a barrel's coming your way. Oddly, Mario moves faster the closer he gets to the top of the screen; by the time he's reached the third girder, he's zipping around like a coffee-addled businessman on a supercharged Segway.

So you reach Mario's phantasmic, bell-headed sweetheart and the level ends! You are awarded some points and... that's it. The same level starts again, just running slightly faster. As you can easily get to the top in 30 seconds, there's a serious lack of variety and value for money. Eventually it gets too fast to actually complete, or at least it seemed that way to me after playing it for far, far too long.

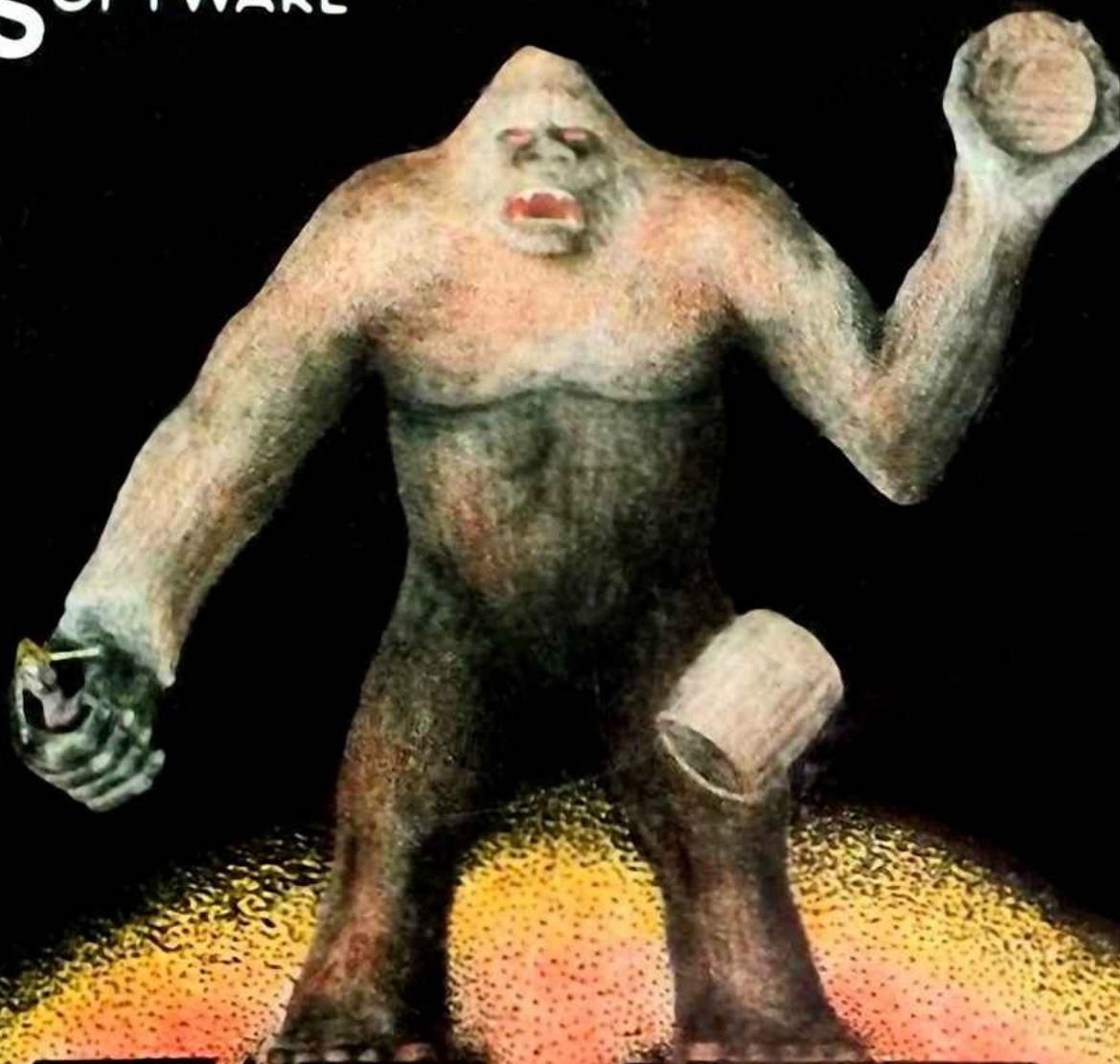


Our hero gets stuck in the floor. Tragically, his only method of escape is to gnaw his own legs off.

Crazy Kong is one of the worst examples of an early eighties Donkey Kong rip-off, and that's saying something. The graphics are actually better than some other attempts (yes, really!) but everything else conspires to remove any rational reason to play it. It's a buggy, fiddly, annoying mess with almost nothing to it. It's still better than C-Tech's infamous Krazy Kong for the Spectrum, but then so is having explosive diarrhoea on a long train journey.

Interceptor published a huge number of games in the 80s and early 90s, both under their own name and the Players, Players Premier, Pandora and Fun Factory labels. Whilst there were some absolute stinkers amongst their early games, the quality increased hugely as time progressed.

INTERCEPTOR
SOFTWARE



CRAZY KONG

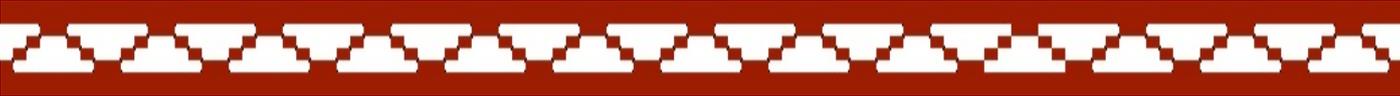


SUITABLE FOR THE
LINE EXPANDED

VIC 20

WRITTEN IN
MACHINE CODE

The box art is terrifying. If this was the cover of a VHS tape, I would have rented it without question.



REVIEW SCORES

Computer and Video Games magazine described the game as having “more bugs than a flea-bitten moggy”. Yet somehow they gave it 6/10 for both value and playability! They misspelled the name as Krazy Kong and claimed the game cost 95p more than it did, so perhaps they were distracted by a particularly impressive dance routine at the time.

other versions

Commodore 64: Pleasingly, this version is totally different. It has appalling graphics and is brutally difficult, but it is far more fun to play than the VIC-20 version.

Dangerous Streets

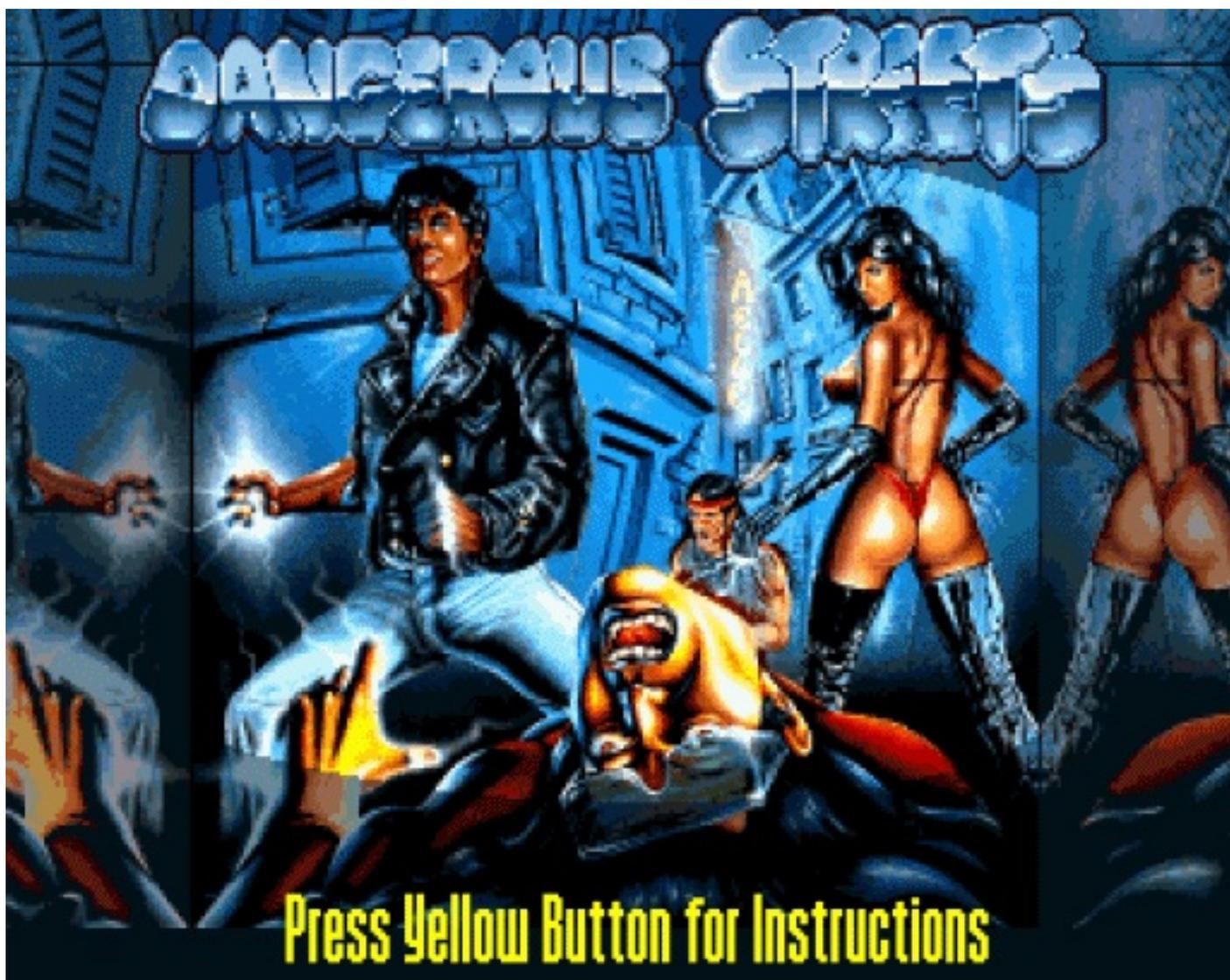
Format: Commodore Amiga CD32

Year of Release: 1993

Developer: Micromania Software

Publisher: Flair

Original Price: 25.99 pounds



Ignited by the home release of Street Fighter II the previous year, the market for fighting games was huge in 1993. The Amiga had few exclusives to call its own – the only one of note was Body Blows, a fairly simple affair with nice graphics. A really solid fighter would be a license to print money, surely? It seems that Micromania Software certainly thought so, but they somehow replaced the word “solid” with “unplayable” in their design

documents.

The characters in *Dangerous Streets* are an odd bunch even for a fighting game. They have a very 70s vibe to their designs, and they mostly seem to be refugees from an Italian disco of that era, with the inexplicable exception of a blue monk who has springs strapped to his feet. The two female characters both wear stripper outfits so skimpy you wouldn't let your kids play the game.



From left to right, top to bottom we have: *Sgiosa Capeli* (works in a disco), *Pinen* (lorry driver), *Tony* (playboy), *Luisa* (gym teacher), *Macalosh* (spiritual boss of the Sioux), *Ombra* (expert palmist), *Keo* (custodian for an old castle), *Lola* (top model)

One of the most notable things about *Dangerous Streets* is that it looks quite pretty in screenshots. The characters are competently drawn and well-defined, and the backgrounds are colourful. This was possibly a marketing strategy to make magazine reviews and the back of the box more impressive, because as soon as you see the characters move, any prettiness flies out of the window with a speed that would startle a cheetah on steroids.

The animation is beyond laughable, to the extent that you begin to wonder if the movements were designed by a primitive computer that had human motion explained to it by a semi-comatose drunkard. The characters jerk and twitch like a low-budget zombie movie that has half its frames missing. A particular favourite is the way *Luisa's* head twitches alarmingly as she walks, making it seem like she is auditioning for an especially disturbing remake of *The Exorcist*. And *Macalosh's* standing pose manages to look ridiculous through using only two frames of animation – he half-squats at a gravity defying angle as if he is trying to defecate in an invisible toilet without his arse cheeks touching the seat.



Macalosh has some kind of bowel problem whilst Keo struggles with his foot springs.

The fighting moves that the characters use are worse still. They're an almost animation-free cavalcade of seemingly random, jerky attacks with no thought put into how they would affect the gameplay. Each character has several ridiculous, wannabe-comedic moves that only further ruin any potential fun: Lola can fire lumps of hair gel out of her hair. Tony can project a small, blue demon from his fingertips to hide behind. Pinen has a hollow chest cavity which opens up to reveal a tiny version of himself that flies along the screen, fists pummeling. Macalosh tries to whip his hair into his opponent's eyes and can turn into a monster so ill-defined that I have no idea what it's supposed to be. Keo can summon a squid to protect himself, whilst Luisa's defence involves turning into a solid block of metal. Sgiossa can make his hideous, fluorescent catsuit glow, which apparently protects him. Ombra somehow dives into the floor and flies back out again further along the screen, a protracted move which actually counts as his forward jump so he does it all the bloody time.

I can only assume that the game designers were trying to make things light-hearted and tongue-in-cheek. But for that to work, it needs to be backed up by charm and wit and not be one of the worst fighting games ever commercially released.

The sound is equally poor. Dull, bleeping Euro disco tracks are streamed from the CD for background music. The contact sound effects only seem to kick in if they feel like it, and some of them are just blasts of white noise. Or possibly the game just blasts white noise

every so often, I can't tell. Worst of all are the pre-fight announcements of the characters' names, all of which sound like they were recorded from people shouting across a bathroom into a dodgy microphone.



Top five ridiculous moves! Slab defence, large cap shield, hair gel attack, scalp lash, and mini man attack.

But as bad as the audio-visual horror gets, it's the gameplay that really plumbs the depths of incompetence. Fighting games need to be carefully balanced with tight controls and clear feedback at all times. Dangerous Streets eschews these things in favour of a man who blows into his hat so it expands to giant size and he can hide behind it.

I will now attempt to explain what it's like to play Dangerous Streets without resorting to sexual swearwords. Firstly, the controls make no sense. Some of the four face buttons on the horrible CD32 control pad duplicate each other, but not all the time. Moving your character across the screen quickly is a nightmare due to the bizarre jump animations that most characters have. Hit detection is a joke, and characters don't always react to being hit – add in the almost random sound effects, and most of the time you have no idea if you've actually landed a blow on your opponent. Each character's limited “super-move” is far less effective than his or her standard forward attack. Characters can move slightly off-screen so you can't see them. If both players select the same character, they look identical and there is no way to tell them apart. There is no sense of weight to any of the fighters, and it feels as if you have very little influence over what they do – unless you just hold down one button... you can beat the computer by holding down one button.



Macalosh has turned into a thing. Possibly the offspring of a panther and a gorilla?

Dangerous Streets is an utter travesty. A twitchy, jerking mess far worse than even the infamous fighting game failures Shaq Fu and Rise of the Robots. The CD32 hadn't been out for long and you might think Commodore would want to keep this garbage as far away from their new console as possible before people compared it to Street Fighter II and bought a Super Nintendo. Instead they included the game with all new CD32s and named the resulting bundle the Dangerous Streets pack. I am not making this up.

Use Direction control on joypad to move the instructions pages.
Press RED button to exit.

DANGEROUS STREETS

LOADING : - Insert the CD as described in the CD32 manual and switch on.

OPTIONS : - You may select the Joypad or Joystick by pressing the yellow button.

The options screen gives you the following options.
Play against another player
Play against the computer
Play in a tournament

Music & SFX

Sound Effects

Easy
Normal
Hard

It also gives you instructions on how to load the game after you have loaded the game.

Commodore had made several questionable business decisions over the years, but this was possibly their most ridiculous. It, of course, did nothing to help sales. After a slew of legal problems and component supply failures, Commodore declared bankruptcy in April 1994 and the Amiga CD32 went off sale only eight months after its release. It was never released in North America.

Developer Micromania were never heard of before or after Dangerous Streets, which is in itself a beautiful mercy. Publisher Flair were responsible for various other CD32 pack-in games and also the execrable Surf Ninjas – an Amiga CD32 exclusive that is so bad the only reason I haven't covered it in this book is because I wrote so much about Dangerous Streets.



Luisa versus Luisa. Can you tell which is which? No? Neither can the players.



The Amiga 500/500+/600 version, with smaller fighters and less colours, but all the perverse costumes!

REVIEW SCORES

Amiga Power awarded the game 3%. As in three out of a hundred. At the time I assumed the score was comically low as some kind of protest against substandard games having entire console bundle packs named after them. Then a few months later, I attempted to play it and realised they were entirely serious.

The One magazine gave it 22% and described it as a “freshly laid turd”. German magazine Amiga Joker somehow decided it was worth a frighteningly inflated 44%, despite utterly eviscerating the gameplay in their review. But they thought the graphics and sound were good so they may have been mentally incapacitated by paint fumes or something.

other versions

Commodore Amiga 1200 (AGA): This version is extremely similar, as internally the CD32 is essentially an A1200 with an extra chip in the graphics architecture to help take advantage of the added CD drive. However, without said CD drive, the music is reduced to slightly discordant Street Fighter II-style tunes and the loading takes

forever. What's more, it comes on three disks so you have to keep swapping them. As a result it's actually worse than the CD32 version.

Commodore Amiga 500/500+/600 (OCS/ECS): Amazingly, this version is worse still! The lesser power of the older Amiga models led to smaller game characters, less colourful backgrounds and no in-game music at all. Even Amiga Joker couldn't stomach this version, which they blessed with a 20% rating as it flew into their rubbish bin.

PC: A rare PC port of an Amiga game! If only it were rarer. The fighters in this version are huge and far more detailed, and if both players select the same character they are actually different colours. But the good news ends there. It is horribly sluggish on the hardware of the time and the soundtrack consists entirely of lifeless jangly music. For reasons I cannot begin to fathom, huge foreground items were added to each stage, obscuring about a third of the screen.

Graffiti Man

Format: Atari ST

Year of Release: 1987

Developer: ReLINE

Publisher: Rainbow Arts

Original Price: 24.99 POUNDS



The game starts. The screen is filled with grotesquely ugly freaks jerking around everywhere. You move your character slightly, and he apparently touches a freak, despite clearly not being close enough. He instantly explodes in a mess of blood. You lose a life and respawn at the start. You try to move carefully along the screen, but attempting to move vertically in the play area means you can't tell exactly where your character is. He gets near a freak and explodes again. You are now on your last life. You manage to navigate past the freaks for a few seconds then explode for no noticeable reason. The game is over. You have played Graffiti Man for less than 30 seconds, have lost all your lives, and have no idea what happened. You weep hot, bitter tears of anger and frustration. Graffiti Man is a truly horrible game. The idea is to guide Mickey, "the multi-talented

Graffiti Man”, across several locations so he can spray some paint on some walls. This will apparently enable him to join a famous graffiti gang. It’s never made clear what Mickey’s many talents are, but from the game we can assume they don’t stretch to being able to see more than a few feet in front of his own nose or move at the speed of a normal human being.



Why is the road that colour? And why do the life counter men appear to have been boiled?

The instant you start, you are thrown into a mess of sensory overload with a screen chock-full of caricatures on a hideous, orangey-brown background. It becomes obvious that you need to run from the left side of the screen to the right, dodging the various freakish stereotypes in your path. The playfield is split into three vertical planes that you can move between. The freaks, unable to change lanes, move horizontally from one side of the screen to the other, looping back round when they disappear off the edge. It sounds simple, and it absolutely is simple. But one thing it is not is easy.

As previously described, your first game of Graffiti Man is likely to last only a few confusing seconds. There is stuff everywhere and it all kills you instantly. But it is only when you understand how things work that the true horror begins.



The bearded man releases tiny clockwork spies from a cardboard box. It's a hobby, I suppose.

The game chugs along, usually around a painfully slow six frames a second, meaning our hero Mickey walks in slow motion as if in a bad dream. This also makes the fast-paced enemy freaks jerk around in an astonishingly ugly manner. The controls are painfully unresponsive, meaning quick reactions to onscreen events are impossible, and it's very difficult to stop on the middle plane. When you reach the right-hand side of the screen, it begins to scroll with very little space in front of Mickey, meaning that freaks can appear and kill you before you can possibly react. Coupled with the dodgy collision detection, the only way to proceed is to predict the behaviour of the looping enemies like some kind of freak-obsessed sociologist.

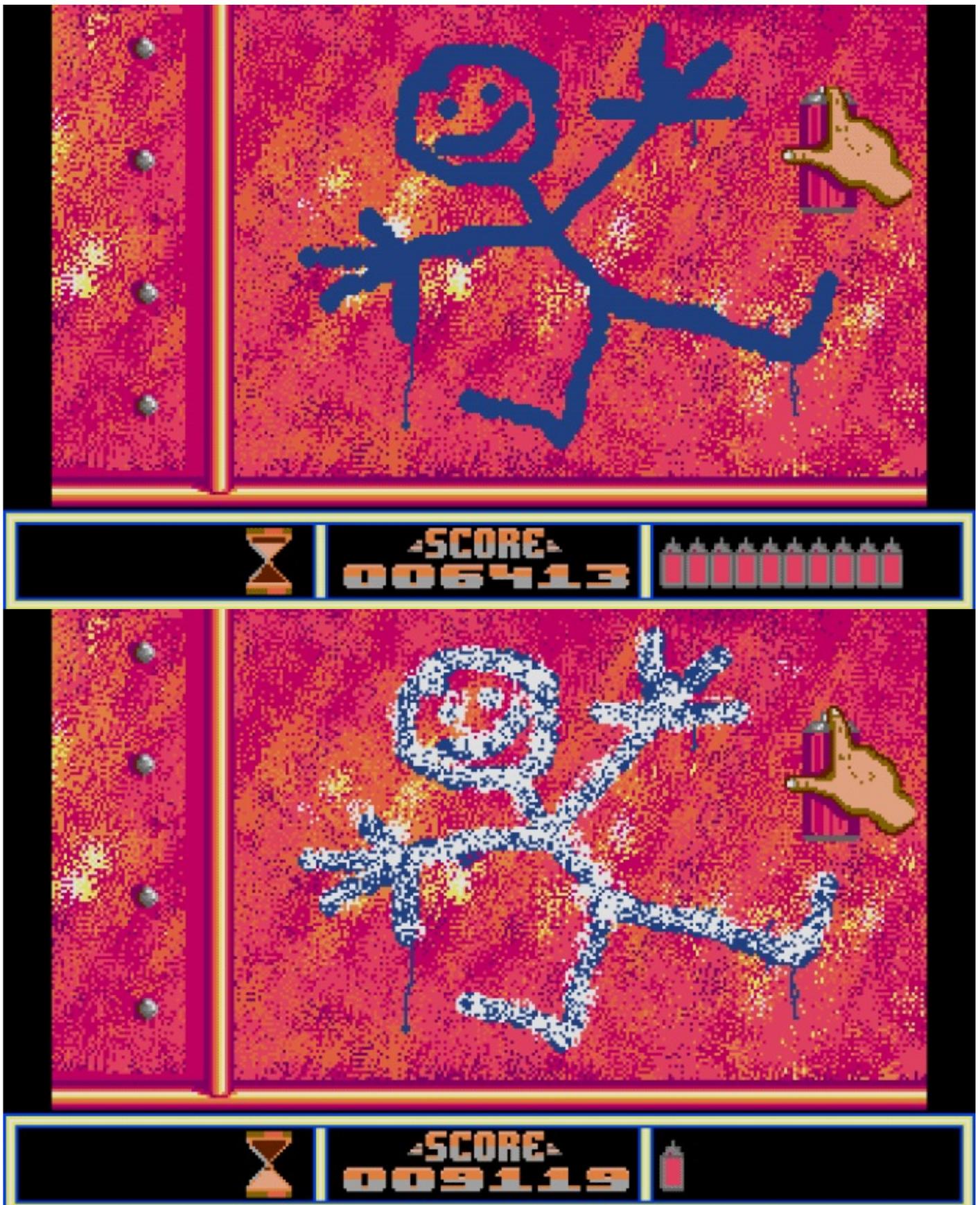
So! You are now the world's leading expert in predicting freak movement patterns and getting an unresponsive, slow-motion graffiti artist to navigate them. What else do you need to look out for? How about the super-fast projectiles that some enemies fire at random and will kill you if they get anywhere near you? How about the way you can outrun the screen scrolls on level 3 and disappear off into the digital ether? How about the small objects that fire diagonally across the screen and are almost impossible to dodge in certain positions? How about the fact that Mickey can jump and duck, but that both moves are completely useless? How about the way these problems make the game so frustrating that you may furiously punch through the TV connected to your Atari ST? Master all of these and you may make it through all four levels!



Top row: Freakishly ugly roller skater, dangerously barefoot skateboarder, Steve Martin in Roxanne, blatantly racist caricature. Bottom row: Crazy octopus, constantly punching sailor, creepy spy cliché, inexplicable shears-wielding spy.

You start off in a street full of punks and pensioners, move on to a train station full of psychotic porters, pass through some docks filled with deadly sailors and wildlife, and then finally graduate to what appears to be the lawn of the White House covered with spies and dogs. I don't know what part of Washington, DC, Mickey lives in, but I think it's safe to assume the house prices are low and insurance costs are high.

Successfully completing a level leads to a bonus stage, but never has the word "bonus" been used more erroneously. You are presented with a piece of incredibly poor graffiti, such as a stick figure, and the game switches to mouse control to let you spray white pixels over it. The more of it you cover, the more points you get – the instructions say that you fail the bonus stage if you don't reach a certain score, but this is untrue. As there is no high score table, it's utterly pointless and dull. It also means that the pinnacle of Mickey's graffiti prowess is to make other people's crap childish drawings look even worse.

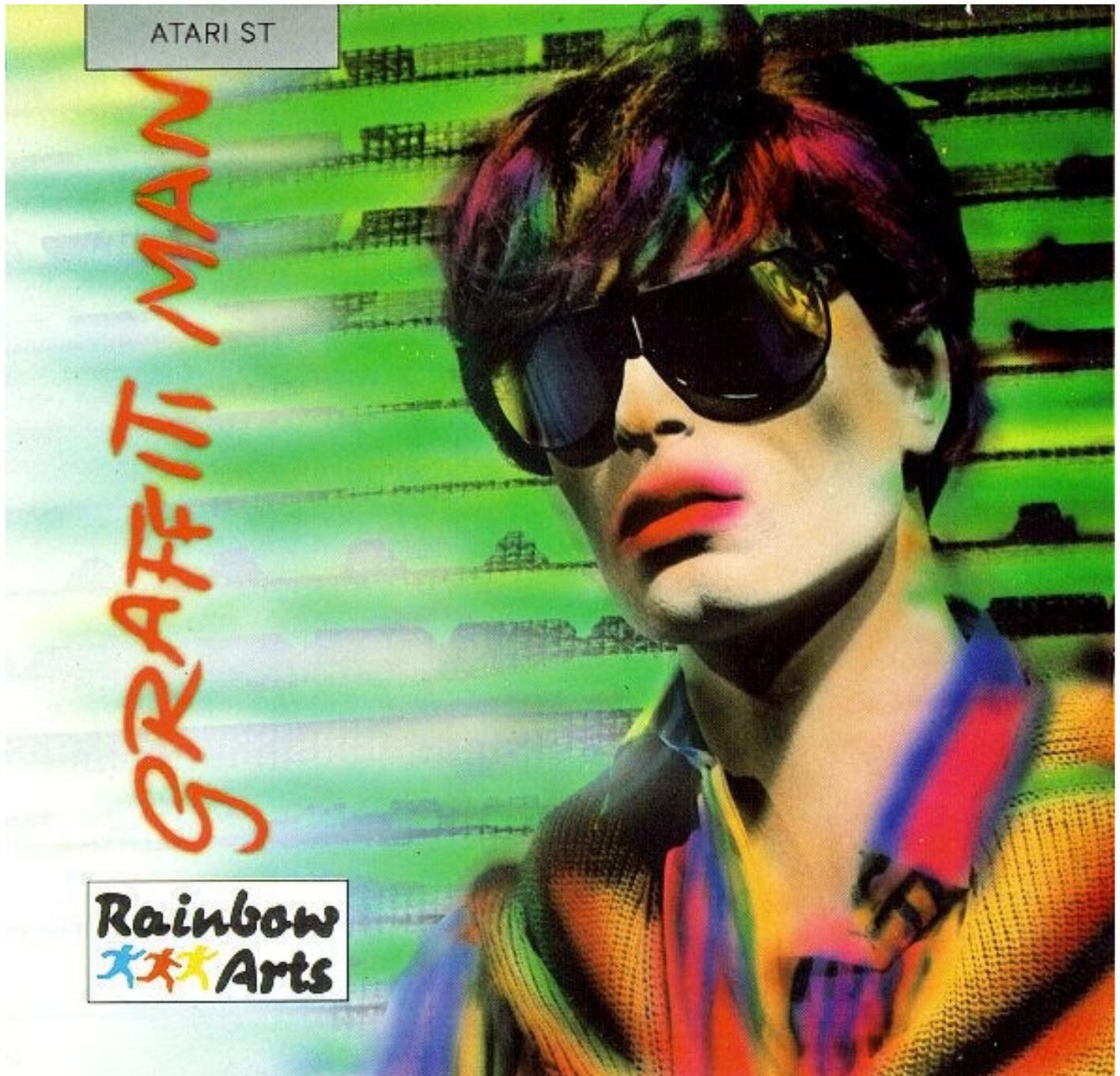


Before and after Mickey's artistic endeavours. No wonder everyone wants to kill him.

By this time you've probably worked out that purchasers of Graffiti Man wouldn't be very happy. Adding to their considerable buyers' remorse is the length of the game – each level takes less than a minute to complete, as does the bonus level. So in the unlikely event that you could make it through the four levels of frustrating dross, you would complete the entire game in well under eight minutes. The final insult is the price: an eye-watering

£24.99.

But there are a few positives lying among the wreckage of Graffiti Man. The freakish caricature sprites are generally well drawn and amusing, and the animation of main character Mickey is excellent. The music is comprised of beepy-yet-funky little tunes that fit the game well, although the title theme is oddly bleak until the funk kicks in. And, most amazingly of all, there is actually a proper reward for beating the game! After the final bonus stage, you are treated to a very basic paint program that allows you to make your own crappy-looking graffiti and save it to a disk. That doesn't sound like much, but it's impressive for the time, considering the vast majority of games used to give you nothing more than a message saying "Congratulations!" for playing through them.



Presenting the horrible box art, where someone dressed a mannequin as Clint Eastwood then badly airbrushed it!

It's amazing to think that this rubbish was one of the first games released by major publisher Rainbow Arts. It seems to be nothing more than a substandard port of the Amiga

version that runs like a dog. Developers ReLINE somehow went on to make a game using the Pink Panther cartoon license as well as a semi-pornographic business management sim for the German market. It's hard to know which stigma was harder for them to bear: the creation of this game or the stupid capitalisation in their company name.



REVIEW SCORES

No known ST reviews, but in their review of the Amiga version, Australian Commodore and Amiga Review understandably said, "I didn't like this one at all!"

other versions

Commodore Amiga: This superior version is far faster and smoother, running at double the frame rate, at least. As a result, the controls feel much more responsive, although the speed increase also means the entire game can be completed in less than five minutes.

Commodore 64: This 8-bit conversion also runs far more smoothly, although the graphics are featureless and drab. The scrolling is replaced with a flip-screen system that makes it possible for enemy freaks to seemingly appear out of nowhere and kill you instantly.

THE MOST DISAPPOINTING GAME I EVER BOUGHT

by Mentski, Bearded retrospective
idiot and occasional face

Out Run

Format: ZX Spectrum

Year of Release: 1987

Developer: Probe Software

Publisher: U.S. Gold

Original Price: 8.99 pounds

(12.99 pounds for the disk)





The story has many layers...where to begin?

Let's start with a bit of foundation: Back in those days there was a concept that floated around the schoolyard – the quest for the “arcade-perfect” port. Now we all know a Speccy conversion would never be perfect, but we were happy enough if it faithfully recreated the gameplay.

In 1986, Elite released a conversion of Sega's Space Harrier, seemingly doing the impossible and creating a reasonably playable port considering the hardware limitations. We were suitably impressed, and began to ask questions. Converting Space Harrier to the Speccy was considered nigh-impossible; surely there's no way you could ever squeeze Sega's latest arcade hit, Out Run, into Sir Clive's novelty doorstep?

Then some time in 1987 U.S. Gold declared they'd acquired the Out Run license and that it'd be released for home computers in time for Christmas.

The hype for this was huge. U.S. Gold were attempting the impossible. Then we saw the screenshots and our jaws dropped...



The Speccy screenshot showed the iconic Ferrari about to overtake a truck. The sprites were huge and looked like accurate representations of the arcade games graphics (albiet in monochrome of course, because ironically for a computer called the Spectrum, colour wasn't its strong point).

Maybe, just maybe, the programmers had been able to do what we all thought was impossible?

Release time came, and I remember rushing down to my local branch of Boots on a Saturday morning to get a copy. I finally had in my hands a copy of Out Run that I could play at home. On the back of the case were screenshots of the game on multiple formats, including the same shot for the Speccy that had made my mouth water in the magazines... This was it! The time had come!

Here's where it all turns for the worst: first up, the tape containing all the levels was accidentally recorded backwards.

On bringing the game home, I hurriedly loaded it only to find that I couldn't play it due to a bloody tape mastering error! I rushed back to Boots to get a replacement, only to find out all their Spectrum copies had the same error, and I'd have to wait three more days for new stock to arrive!

Three more days of sweaty anticipation. Three days of loading up the main program, staring at the menu, listening to the Speccy's beepy rendition of eminent background tune "Magical Sound Shower", waiting for a replacement copy so I could finally recreate the sheer joy I felt playing the greatest arcade game ever made.

Three days finally passed and I hurried to Boots after school to get my replacement copy. I know I said the time had come last time, but now I really mean it... The time had finally come!

Oh dear.

This was not the game they advertised. I mean, it looked similar, but it was clearly different. The giant sprites? Nowhere to be seen. Everything apart from the car had been shrunk by about 50%. The giant palm trees now looked more like roadside bonsai, and the towering trucks were now barely any taller than your Testarossa. The road was a pixellated, undefined mess... and worst of all was the speed.

Out Run on the ZX Spectrum is very, very slow. This game is supposed to be about driving a 180mph Ferrari through beautiful European-inspired locations. Playing this port made you wonder if you'd get there quicker if you got out and walked!

You'd think something like this would have been trashed in the press, but no! It got favourable reviews! Many said that despite its flaws, it was the best the Spectrum could have done... which was utter bunk too, as we found out shortly later when Ocean ported Chase H.Q. to riotous applause, blowing poor old Out Run out of the water in every possible way.

It was the first time I felt outright lied to by a games publisher. Those screenshots shown before release were pure fabrications (not just the Spectrum but shots for the Amstrad CPC and Atari ST, too!) A bond of trust was broken the day U.S. Gold lied about the quality of this game.

I also felt let down by the magazines of the day – not only for falling for U.S. Gold's propaganda, but for giving the game favourable reviews despite how bad it was and for not once questioning why the finished product didn't resemble the marketing bumpf. In time, older, cynical me would wonder if these magazines were on U.S. Gold's payroll.

Nearly 30 years on and we're still dealing with publisher lies and questioning journalistic integrity. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

And yet it didn't change my attitude to buying games. I still purchased appalling conversions of awesome arcade games for years. After all, it was the only way to play those games at home at the time.

Does anybody want a second-hand copy of Street Fighter II on Atari ST? Only played once...

Mentski can be found on YouTube at [youtube.com/mentski](https://www.youtube.com/mentski) and on Twitter at [@mentski](https://twitter.com/mentski)

FACT!

This is the infamously inaccurate screenshot, stitched together from two sources as tragically the high quality one was only partial. It was used for preview articles in Your Sinclair, Sinclair User and Computer & Video Games magazines as well as the back of the game box. There is no excuse.

BUTTON PRESS 3000

An exclusive, original terrible game
for you to play!



Simply enter this program into a Sinclair ZX Spectrum and RUN it to experience the dead-souled frustration that only comes from playing a truly dreadful video game!

```
10 PRINT "PRESS T TO WIN"  
20 PAUSE 0  
30 IF INKEY$ ="T" THEN GO TO 70  
40 IF INKEY$ ="t" THEN GO TO 70  
50 IF INKEY$ ="C" THEN GO TO 80  
60 CLS : PRINT "WRONG KEY, YOU LOSE": STOP  
70 CLS : PRINT "WELL DONE, YOU WIN": STOP  
80 CLS : PRINT "CHEAT MODE ACTIVE"  
90 PRINT "PRESS T TO WIN"  
100 PAUSE 0  
110 GOTO 70
```



Look out for details on how to pre-order the Button Press 3000 Game of the Year Collector's Edition and DLC Season Pass!

Highlander

Format: ZX Spectrum

Year of Release: 1986

Developer: Canvas

Publisher: Ocean

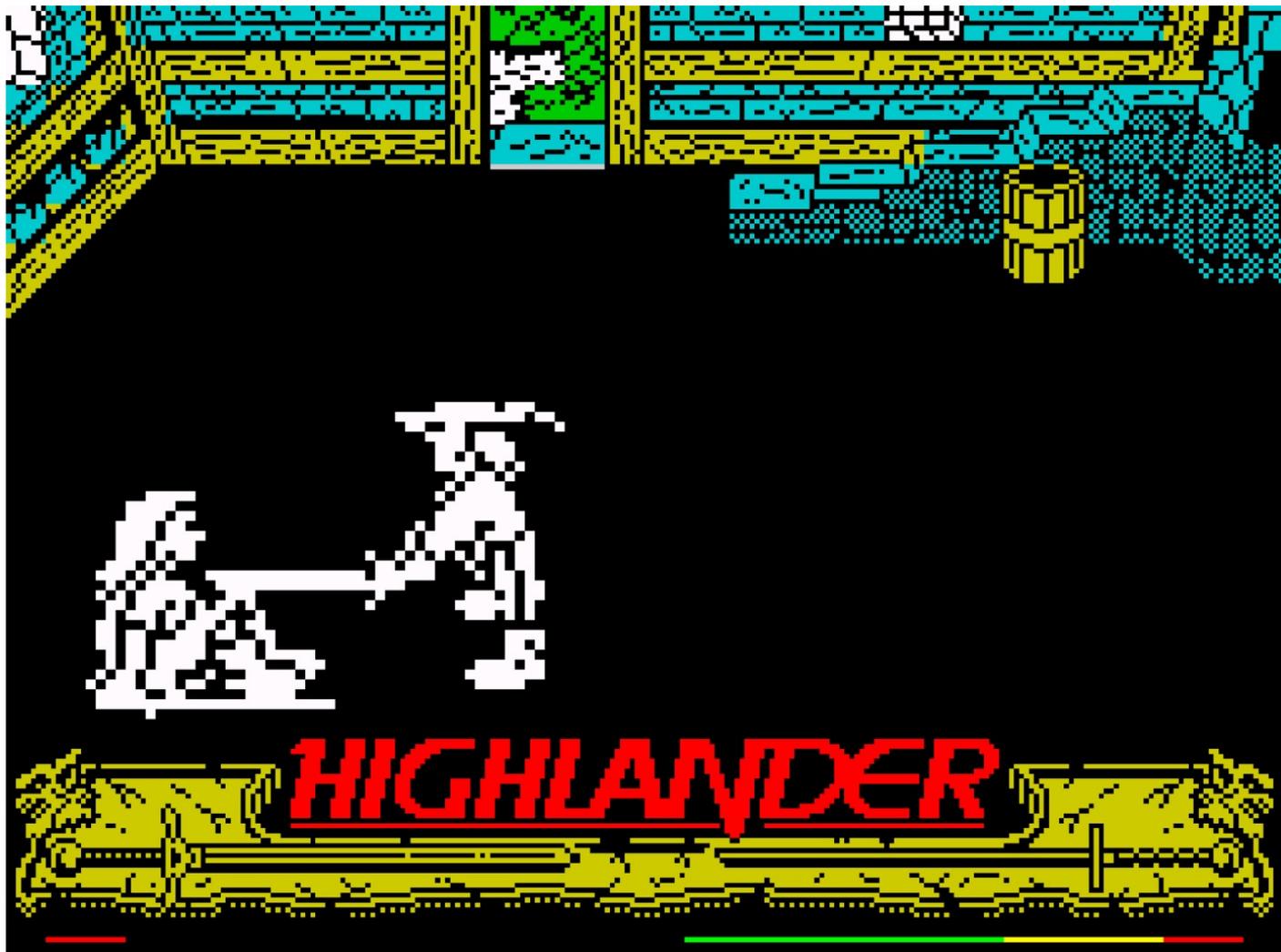
Original Price: 7.95 pounds



Highlander is without doubt the best film ever made about an immortal Scotsman who only dies if you lop his head off. Unfortunately it spawned several awful sequels, none of which are worth the time it takes to watch them. But it's the 1986 home computer adaptation that takes the filthy, tarnished crown for being the worst of the franchise.

The Highlander game concentrates entirely on the sword fighting aspect of the film, pitting hero Connor MacLeod against three increasingly difficult opponents – friendly

mentor Ramírez, creepy murderer Fizir (called Fasil in the film) and vicious maniac The Kurgen. Each opponent is loaded separately from the cassette tape, and you do not have to beat one to progress. This lack of continuity would be a shame if there was any joy to be had from playing the game at all.



You've been knocked over in the corner and will be hacked to bits. Get used to this.

On starting the game, the first thing to hit you is how incredibly ugly the characters are. MacLeod and his opponents are nothing but a mess of big white blocks. They're decently animated big white blocks, but it doesn't matter how well something moves if you can't see what it's supposed to be. The graphics are those used in the Amstrad CPC and Commodore 64 versions, which were designed for a lower screen resolution in multiple colours. The Spectrum's monochrome rendering leaves them an incomprehensible mess.

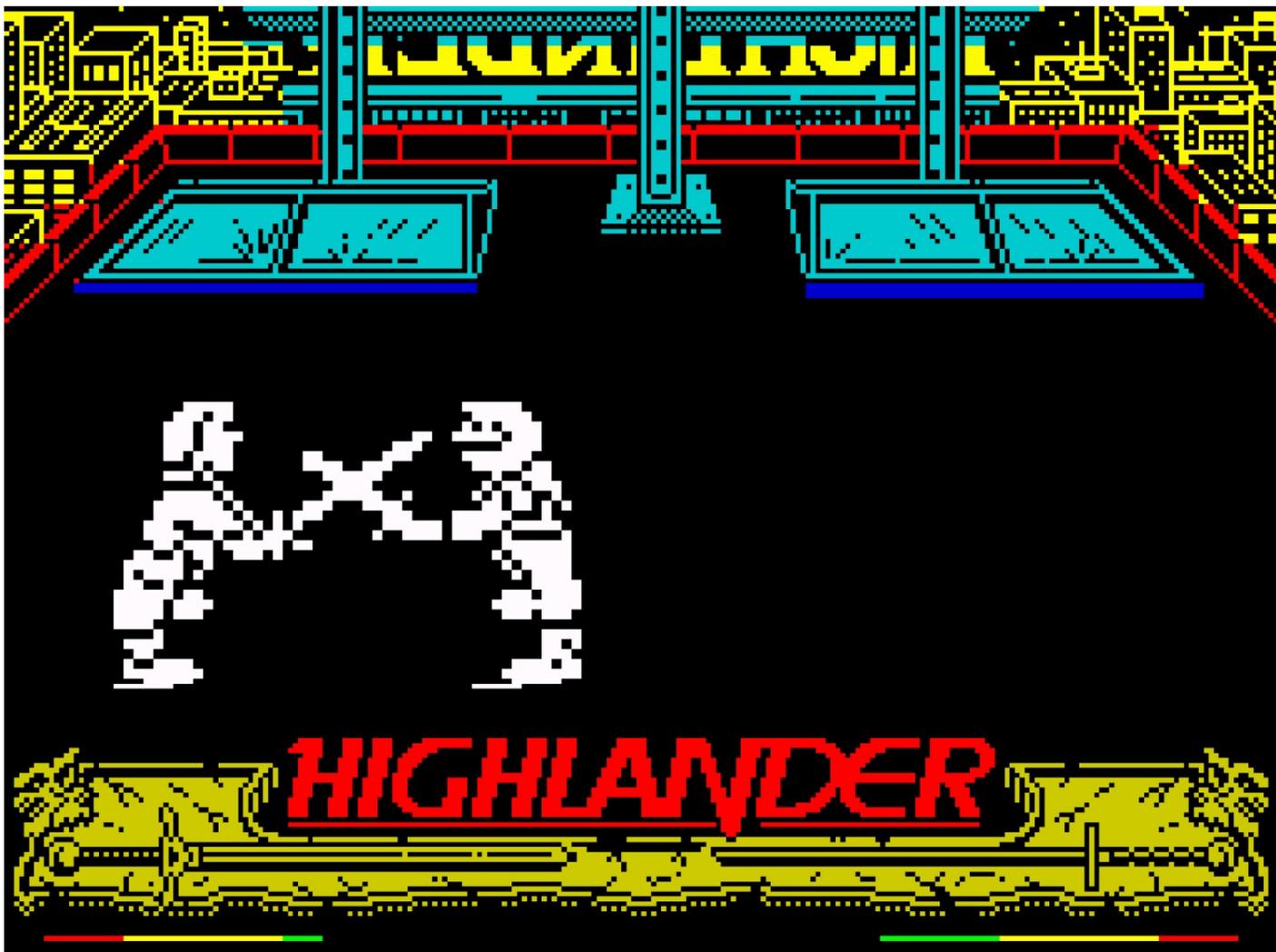
So the game appears to be two albino Lego models trying to smash each other apart with sticks. And astoundingly, it plays even worse than it looks. None of the sword fighting moves seem to do much – if you're lucky, then your opponent's energy may go down a bit, but you can't really tell who is successfully hitting whom. Generally a fight will last less than a minute as your opponent knocks you over in the corner and depletes your energy, at which point your head falls off. Your energy does start to regenerate if you don't attack or get hit for a second, but it's so hard to move away from your opponent that it's rarely useful.



MacLeod's sword proves too heavy, allowing Fizir to stab him in the eye.

The instruction manual tells you to watch for your enemy's attacks and respond to them, which is effectively impossible due to the clumsy movements and horribly unresponsive controls. You could only effectively respond to an opponent's attack if he sent you details on a postcard a week in advance. The single tactic that seems to have any effect at all is to mash the fire button and hope, turning Highlander into a slapstick routine of two nitwits flailing sticks at each other until one falls over.

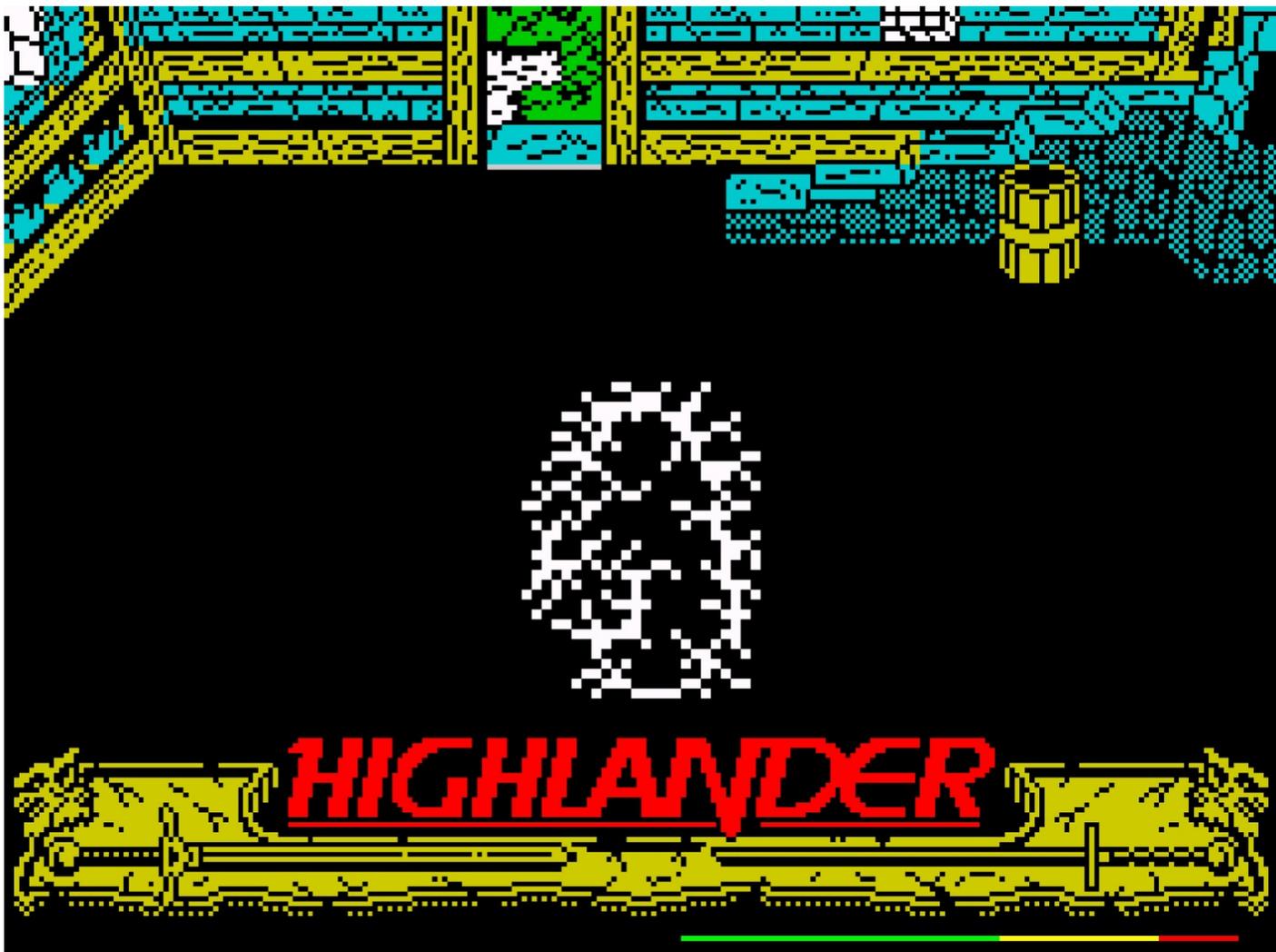
The sound is almost non-existent. There is no music whatsoever and just a weird, popping noise if someone gets hit. And the laziness doesn't end there – despite there being three different opponents that you have to load separately, they all have identical moves. They just look different, and some can take more of a beating. I can only assume that Highlander must have been written in an incredible hurry.



Due to illness, The Kurgen has been replaced by Toad of Toad Hall.

Have you ever tried to get an elderly relative to play a video game? Highlander is a way to experience the confusion and bewilderment they feel, even if you're well versed with the medium yourself. What's going on? Why isn't the little man moving? Why does he keep falling over? Why can't I ever win? Can I stop playing and watch Columbo now?

Playing Highlander is one of the least entertaining ways you could possibly spend your time. The fighting feels futile, as if you're just wasting your time watching some unnecessarily large white pixels move around. At least there's a simultaneous two player option so you can have a companion in your misery – until they leave and never speak to you again because you made them play Highlander.



Ramírez absorbs the “quickening” energy from MacLeod’s corpse, which seems to turn him into some kind of mole-man.

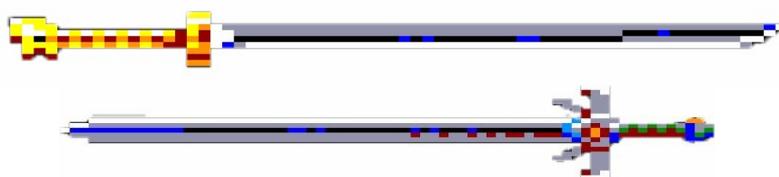
Developers Canvas also made the crappy TV tie-in Miami Vice. But they also produced conversions of the excellent golf game Leaderboard and the graphic adventure Killed Until Dead, which may have the greatest name of any game ever.

Ocean Software were an absolute powerhouse in the 8-bit days, releasing a huge number of licensed games as well as original titles. The peak of their success on the Spectrum was the brilliant Robocop, which broke records for the longest time spent at number one in the Gallup sales chart. They eventually became the UK arm of Infogrames and released their last game in 1998.



The Amstrad CPC version kindly displays what the characters should actually look like.

This wasn't the last attempt at a game based around Highlander. Nine years later, Lore Design Ltd made Highlander: The Last of the MacLeods for the Atari Jaguar, based on a spin-off cartoon series. It was an interesting game ruined by an overly simple plot and abysmal controls, but it was still far better than Highlander. There was also an original game in production from Eidos Interactive for the Xbox 360, Playstation 3 and PC, but it was cancelled in 2010.



REVIEW SCORES

Sinclair User absolutely slammed the game, describing it as a “Golden Turkey” and awarding it 2/5. Crash described it as “totally boring and quite unplayable” yet gave it a stupidly inflated 57%. Oddly the other major Spectrum magazine Your Sinclair didn't review the game, but it did deservedly appear in their reader poll of worst games ever.

other versions

Amstrad CPC: This version is far prettier and is the definitive Highlander experience for what that's worth. It received around 50% in reviews. Commodore 64: This is also much better but runs slower than the other versions. It was absolutely reviled by reviewers – ZZap!64 magazine gave it 30% and revised the rating to 19% when it

was re-released five years later at a cheaper price.

Hunter

Format: Atari 8-bit series

Year of Release: 1995

Developer: Condor Soft

Publisher: Power Per Post (PPP)

Original Price: Approx.6 POUNDS



In the early nineties, software support for Atari's 8-bit line of computers began to dry up, leaving the format with a dwindling supply of new games. This led to mail order companies, like Germany's Power Per Post (PPP), becoming increasingly important to diehard enthusiasts. This is a shame, really, as it meant they were able to sell them unadulterated garbage like Hunter.

An attempt to recreate the sporting pastime of fatally wounding wild animals by shooting them with a big gun, Hunter spectacularly fails on several levels. It also spectacularly fails at being a video game that anyone could enjoy playing, so at least it's consistent.



I am resorting to using a screenshot of the menu, as all of the in-game shots look the same.

The title screen is promising – a majestic, golden stag stands in front of a stylised sunrise as a funky, crunchy, bass-heavy chiptune plays. Oddly, the music doesn't fit the displayed image or the feel of hunting in a forest at all, implying that it was produced for something else entirely. It is good quality, but sadly this is the last time anything from Hunter will feel as if any effort was put into it.

After dismissing the title screen, four options present themselves, together with another totally incongruous tune. Or possibly three options, as it doesn't actually seem possible to change the "level" setting. It is, however, possible to select ammo values of 80, 160 and 240, the higher numbers doing nothing more than stretching the game out past the point of sanity. It's also possible to turn the sound off completely – and as the only sound is the same astonishingly ill-fitting music played constantly throughout the game, that may be a good idea.



I hope you like this scene, as you won't be seeing any others. Ever.

On starting the game, you are treated to a single static scene of two trees on a grassy landscape. And that's it location-wise, as there is no movement or alternate scenery. The animals, for reasons best known to themselves, start sliding across the screen from right to left. And I mean they literally slide – there is no animation at all, meaning that the animals look like cardboard cut-outs drifting across the screen on roller skates. Once one has disappeared off to the left, another appears immediately and slides across in almost exactly the same place; there are only a few pixels of height variation between the paths they take. The beasts must have politely formed a queue to glide along a hidden train track and be shot one at a time. You can't really blame the hunter for not moving location after finding a hunting ground like that...

Your job, of course, is to stop the animals from reaching the left side of the screen by killing them dead with bullets. This is achieved by moving a circle over the animal and pressing fire. In order to stop that being too easy, the crosshair circle jerks and flickers around to an insane extent. It's not just like the hunter has unsteady hands, it's like he's operating a pneumatic road drill at the same time as aiming. (But on the plus side, "Jerky Crosshair" is an amazing name for a tongue-in-cheek Country and Western music act.)



From left to right we have: Slug / rabbit hybrid (2 points), Dog with head-mounted helicopter blades (4 points), Sock-faced elk (5 points).

If you're lucky enough to press the fire button at the exact moment the circle flails over the animal, then the animal instantly evaporates – a major disappointment for any hunter wanting meat or a trophy, although you do get some points. This task is made easier by your gun being fully automatic, holding all its ammunition in one clip and having a fire rate of approximately 480 rounds a minute. As all the animals take the same path, the most effective strategy is just to position the circle where you know all of them are going to pass and leave it there. You simply hold down the fire button as your prey reaches the circle and release it when they've vanished into the ether. Then the next creature from the queue immediately starts sliding across, and this continues until you run out of ammo. At no point do you enjoy yourself.

Hunter's only shred of variety is that there are three different mammals to slay, they appear in random order, and they are worth different points.



Here we see the crosshair circle in full jitter. Excitement fails to ensue.

Yet another intrinsic flaw with Hunter is that the smaller animals that give fewer points are actually harder to shoot. As there is no time limit and an infinite supply of woodland

creatures with a death wish, the best plan is to ignore the slugrabbits and only shoot at the helidogs and sockelks in order to conserve ammunition.

The game finally ends when your bullets run out. At this point, a text box appears telling you that when your ammo hit zero, you turned around and ran away, accidentally smacked into a deer and fell over, and had to spend a few days in hospital. A final insult, although it's at least more colourful than just saying Game Over.

Hunter ends up not being a hunting game at all; instead it seems to focus on a jittery-handed lunatic wielding a huge automatic rifle and raking in an endless stream of wheeled cardboard cut-outs at the edge of a forest. Somehow I doubt this is what the programmers set out to achieve.

This is one of the most egregious examples of a game being knocked out quickly for the cash that I've ever come across. The whole thing feels unfinished on a conceptual level, let alone a practical one. The only decent part is the music, which was clearly not written for the game and was presumably only used because Condor Soft had access to it. I'm filing this one under "Cheeky to charge money for it".

Some PPP games were translated into English and sold by companies in the UK and America, but for reasons that should by now be painfully obvious, they decided to give Hunter a miss. I was unable to find any published reviews of the game, but I really, really hope that a German magazine somewhere was able to warn its readers against throwing money at this quarter-arsed semi-game.

PPP continued to sell games with such evocative titles as Rubber Ball and Glaggs It! well into the 90s. Condor Soft made no other games at all – presumably as they'd already brought the world a premier cardboard-elk-on-roller-skates-shooting simulator, they had nothing else to strive for.

REVIEW SCORES

None known. Which is a tragedy, as I'd love to know what the magazines of the time made of this embarrassment.

other versions

None. Although you could claim that Cabela's Trophy Bucks for the Xbox 360 is a spiritual successor, if you don't mind being completely wrong.

THE MOST DISAPPOINTING GAME I EVER BOUGHT

by Paul Rose AKA Mr Biffo, Editor of former Teletext games mag,
Digitiser-turned-screenwriter



Jack and the Beanstalk

Format: ZX Spectrum

Year of Release: 1984

Developer: Chris & Steve Kerry

Publisher: Thor Computer Software

Original Price: 5.95 pounds



I was sucked in by the graphics on the packaging of Jack and the Beanstalk – which, at least in screenshot form, did a fair job of aping the Ultimate Play the Game aesthetic. Not only did it not live up to the promised visuals, it was infuriatingly difficult. I don't think I ever got past the first level, which had Jack attempting to scale the beanstalk while being knocked off it by the endlessly-circling birds.

I was disappointed, naturally – but more than that, I felt cheated out of my pocket money. Consequently, I attempted to erase the tape using a magnet, then went to my parents and told them that there was something wrong with it. My dad took me back to the shop to get a refund, but the manager refused – of course, he tested out the game, and it worked fine. My dad pressed the point, getting increasingly angry, until the manager caved and said he'd replace it, but only with another copy of the same game. This led to a horrible escalation of events, which culminated in my dad using a racist term and storming out of the shop. The guilt of it haunts me to this day.

The horrible domino effect caused by my initial deceit utterly scarred me. I became much, much more cautious lest any knee-jerk purchases led to a further display of my dad's hitherto – and subsequent – buried racism.

Paul can be found at www.digitiser2000.com and on Twitter at [@mrbiffo](https://twitter.com/mrbiffo)

FACT!

Jack and the Beanstalk supports the Currah μ Speech, a hardware speech synthesiser add-on for the Spectrum. When plugged in, the unit emits a slurring, mostly unintelligible buzz that is supposed to mimic human speech. When you turn on the game it shrieks “THIZZIZ ZUH SLORY OFF JAFFAND ZUH BEAN STORK,” then stops the game and drones rubbish at you when you lose a life. It makes an already almost unplayable game far worse by slowing it down and hurting your ears.

Killer Caverns

Format: Oric-1

Year of Release: 1983

Developer: Daryl Bowers

Publisher: Virgin Games

Original Price: 6.99 pounds



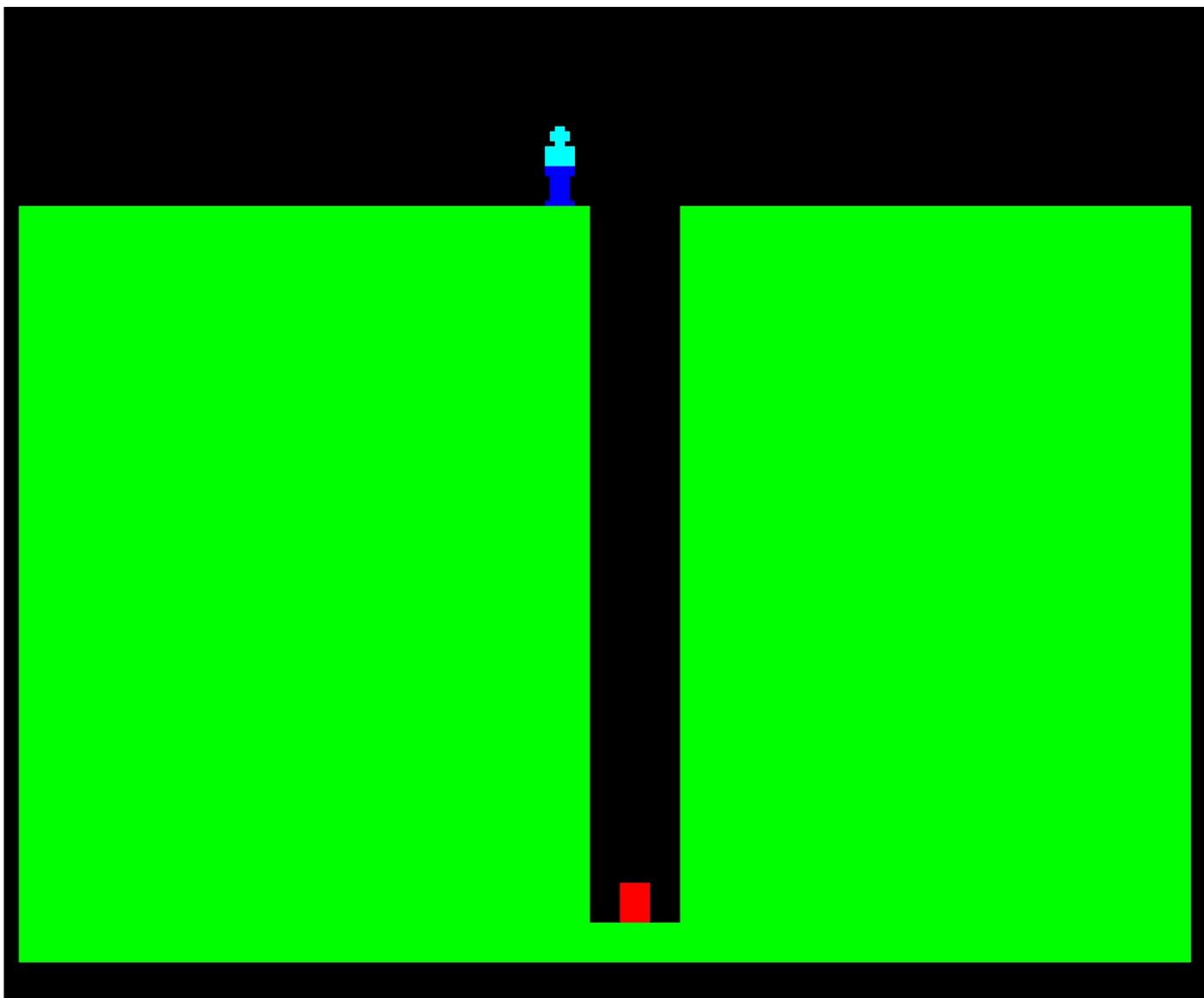
KILLER CAVERNS
BY
DARYL BOWERS .

COPYRIGHT 1983 VIRGIN GAMES LTD .

Have you been waiting all your life for a game about caverns that kill people? Well even if so, I cannot recommend this game. Sorry.

Killer Caverns tells the story of Helpless Harold, a man desperate to get his hands on a

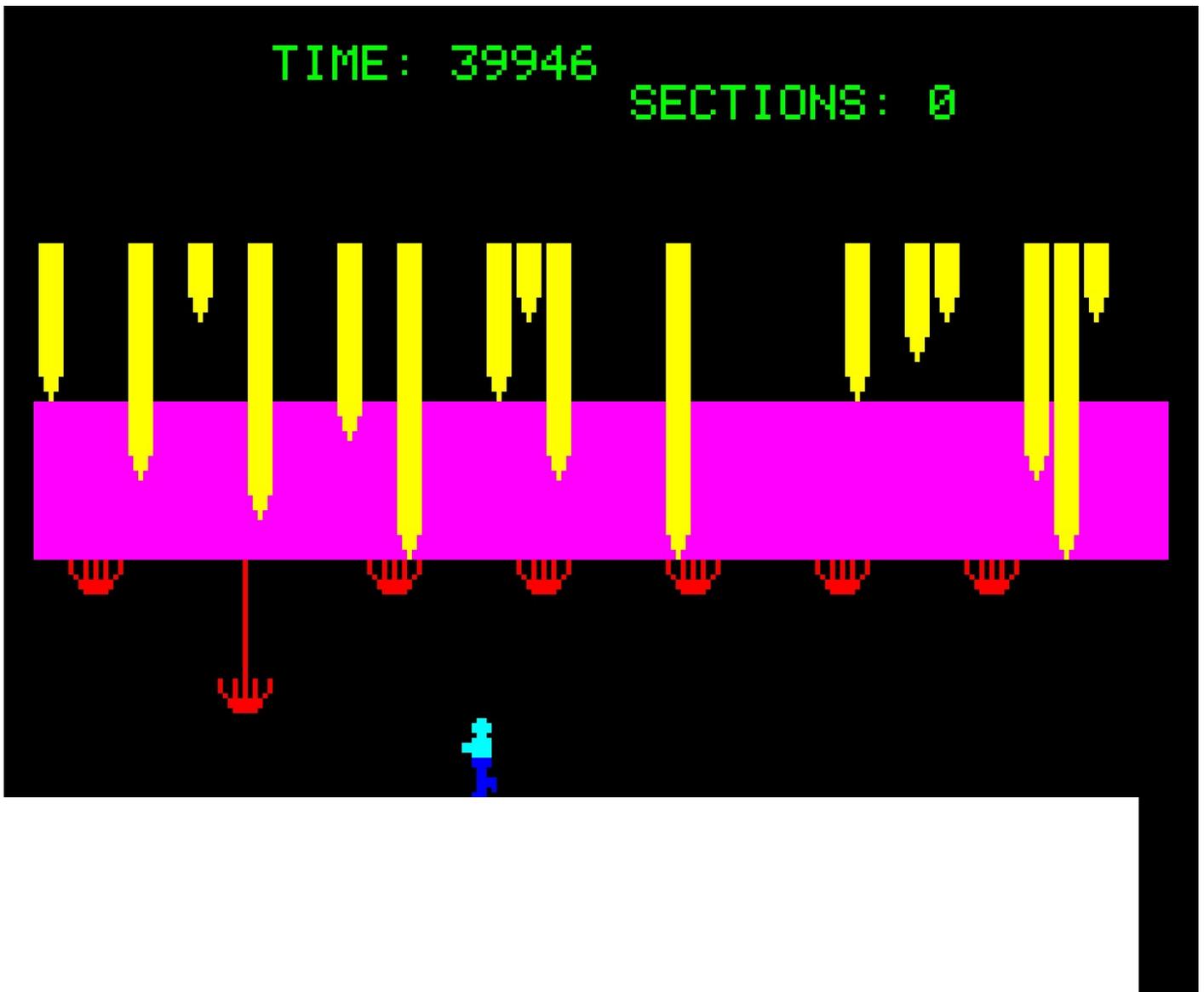
certain treasure chest. Usefully, he starts the game standing near it! But less usefully it's at the bottom of a well, and he can't actually reach it. So rather than go and get a rope or something, he decides to search through a nearby cavern system full of lethal dangers to retrieve seventeen parts of a ladder that a madman hid there. Helpless Harold is not a clever man.



This is where “ultra-minimalist” ends and “crap” begins.

The game begins by asking you to select a difficulty from 1-9, but it doesn't seem to make any difference whatsoever when you play. In fact, nothing you do makes much difference, but we'll come to that later.

Killer Caverns is graphically primitive, even for the time. The treasure chest is literally a red block, the caverns have flat, purple ceilings containing pencils of varying length, and Harold himself looks like the logo for a courier service. There is very little sound, save for an occasional hiss made by one of the cavern's traps.



I think these are spiders. They could also conceivably be crabs or defective wigs.

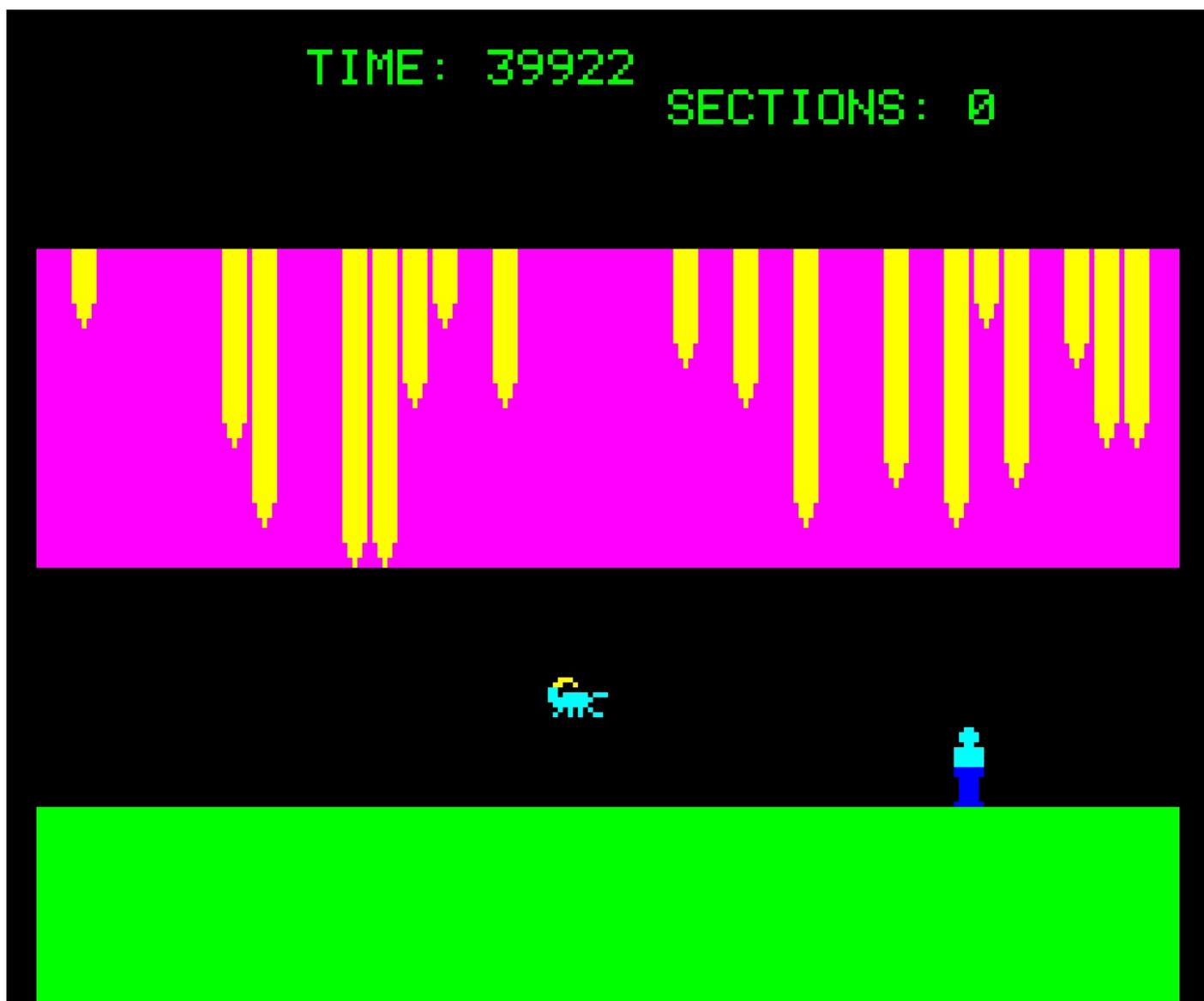
There are only two controls: one for moving left and one for moving right. Harold seems incapable of jumping as well as basic human reasoning. From the starting location next to the treasure-bearing well, you move left and keep going in the hope of stumbling over a bit of ladder. There is no route selection, you just repeatedly go from right to left.

Some screens are empty, but most contain some kind of horrifying, deadly problem you need to get past. These are:

- Spiders on the roof that randomly lower themselves
- A deadly jet of steam that randomly appears
- A set of spikes that randomly fall from the ceiling
- A giant blue snake/worm thing that randomly pops up from the floor
- A flying scorpion that randomly floats around the screen making comical noises, as if it's propelled by flatulence

You will notice that each obstacle has the word “randomly” in its description, and therein lies the absolute downfall of the game. Every danger appears and disappears entirely at random, meaning it's impossible to time your run past them. You may as well just hold left

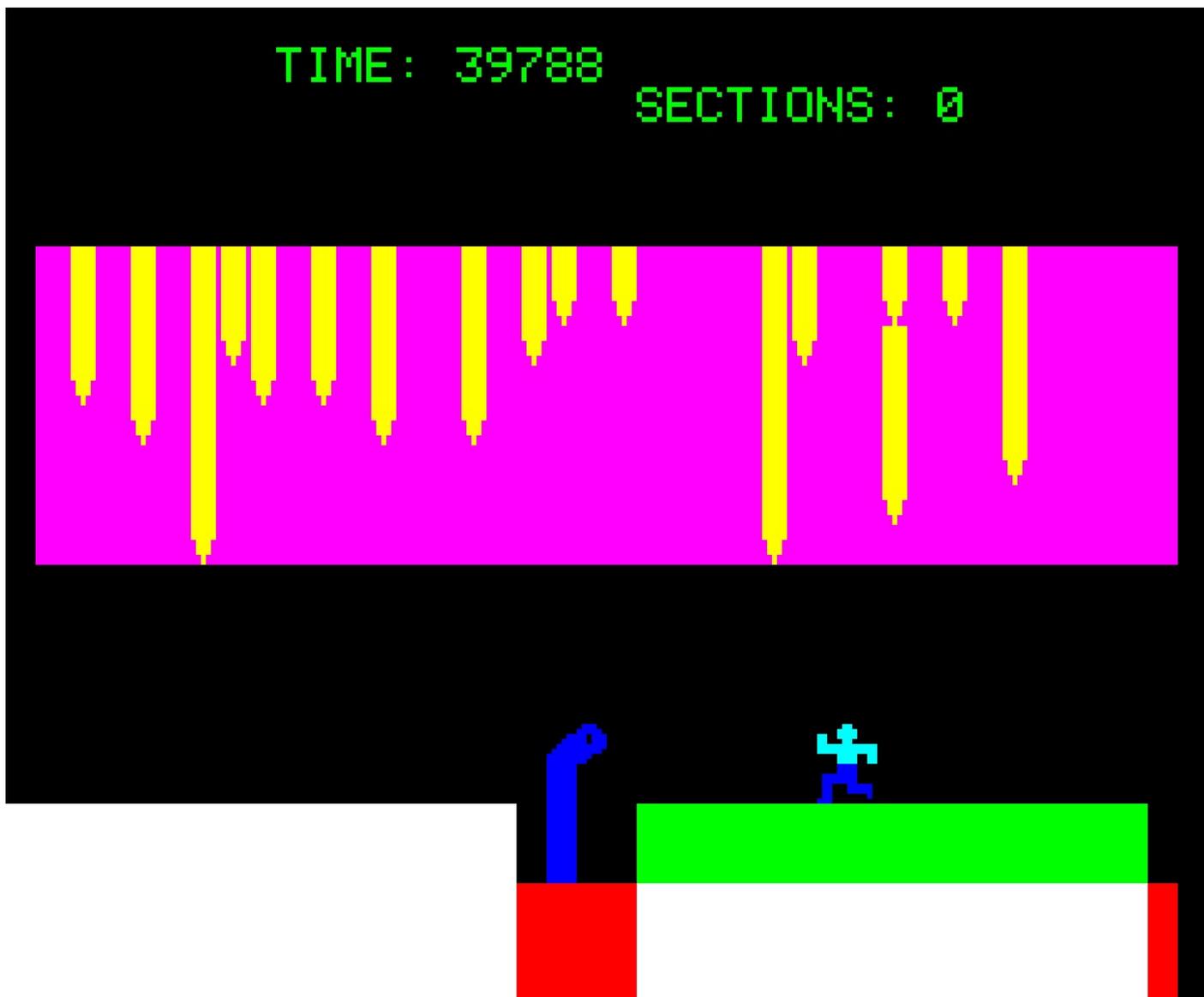
and hope, as trying to assert any control over your character is totally pointless. You've heard the phrase "more luck than judgement"? Well Killer Caverns is all luck and no judgement. It may as well be a coin-tossing simulator.



Farty the Floating Scorpion in action. Heaven help us.

There's also precious little variety in the caverns you run through. I could only find the five obstacles listed above and the occasional piece of ladder inexplicably suspended from the ceiling. You frequently run through the same screen twice in a row, and sometimes three or more times. Occasionally you die immediately on entering a cavern, which could either be due to a bug or extreme bad luck with the random obstacles. Either way it's bad news, as you only have five lives, although depositing an umbrella piece down the well earns you an extra one.

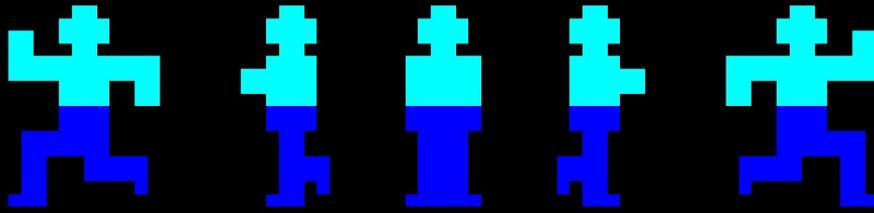
On the plus side, as the game is written in BASIC, it's trivially easy to get more lives. You can just break into the program and change a single variable to give yourself as many lives as you'd like. The downsides to being written in BASIC are that the game is sluggish, the controls are unresponsive, and the collision detection is vague at best. Not that the last point really matters due to the random nature of the game...



Kingseeker Frampt from Dark Souls makes his first video game appearance.

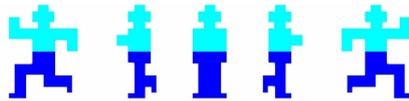
Even in 1983, Killer Caverns was totally unacceptable, especially for what was full price at the time. It looks awful, plays badly, and ultimately there's no point in playing it at all. The final insult is that after the game ends, it asks if you want to play again with a Y/N prompt. Pressing N does nothing, and it simply waits forever for you to press Y. Curse you, Killer Caverns.

Virgin's game releases of the time featured a photo and a mini-interview with the programmer, from which we learn that Killer Caverns was written by a 15-year-old schoolboy called Daryl who played synthesiser in a local band. It's hard to stay angry at him for this game though, as he seems like such a nice guy. If you completed his later Commodore 64 game Cheap Skate, it gave you his home phone number and invited you for a drink if you were ever in Kings Lynn. Plus he went on to program the excellent C64 version of comedy war game North & South, which obviously redeems him.



Here is every single one of Helpless Harold's animation frames. You're welcome.

Virgin only released one other game for the Oric – a strange collection of mini-games called – Them: A Paranoid Fantasy that was actually pretty good.



REVIEW SCORES

Personal Computer Games magazine gave it 1/10, declaring that “This game is so bad in so many respects, it amazes me how Virgin could have released such rubbish!”

other versions

None whatsoever. If you want the authentic Killer Caverns experience, you'll have to get yourself an Oric. (I suggest going for the upgraded Atmos version as it has a cool black and red keyboard.)

Killjoy

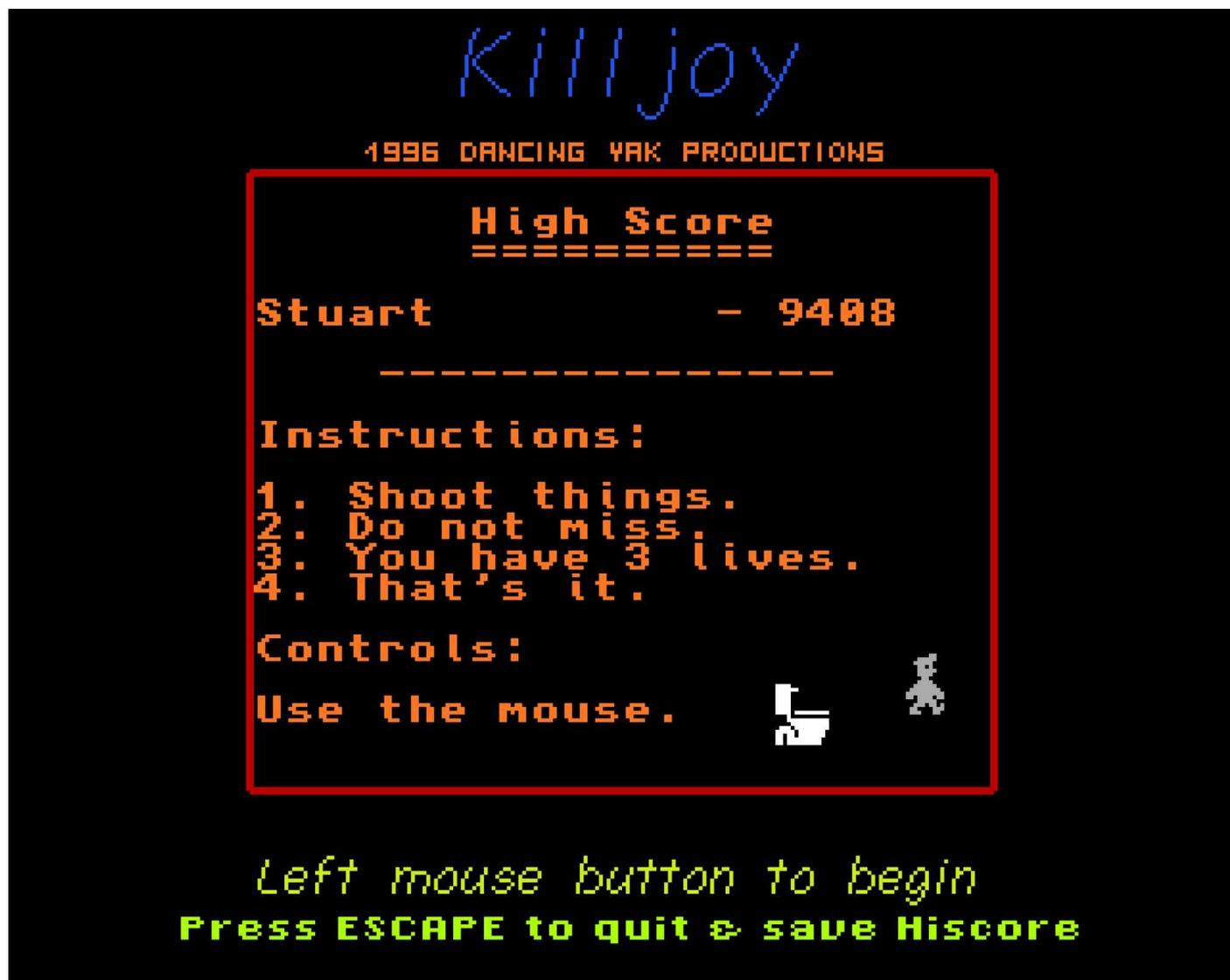
Format: Commodore Amiga 1200

Year of Release: Unreleased (Finished 1996)

Developer: Stuart Ashen

Publisher: Unpublished

Original Price: N/A – Freeware



Warning: This entry is a bit of a cheat as it wasn't released commercially – or at all, in fact – but I am honour-bound to include it as a consequence of the way this book was originally funded. You can blame Alice Broadribb. (And it's only fair that people laugh at my crap attempt at a game since I've been laughing at others' the whole time.)

Back in 1995 I was tinkering with AMOS Professional, a BASIC programming language for the Commodore Amiga. The main program had been included on a magazine cover disk, and I'd managed to find a copy of the associated machine code compiler at a car boot sale. All I'd actually made were a couple of novelty programs to amuse my friend Raymond, but I'd sent them off to the public domain libraries of the time anyway. Bolstered by the success of seeing the names of my programs listed as two tiny lines of text in a magazine, I decided the time was right to make an actual game.

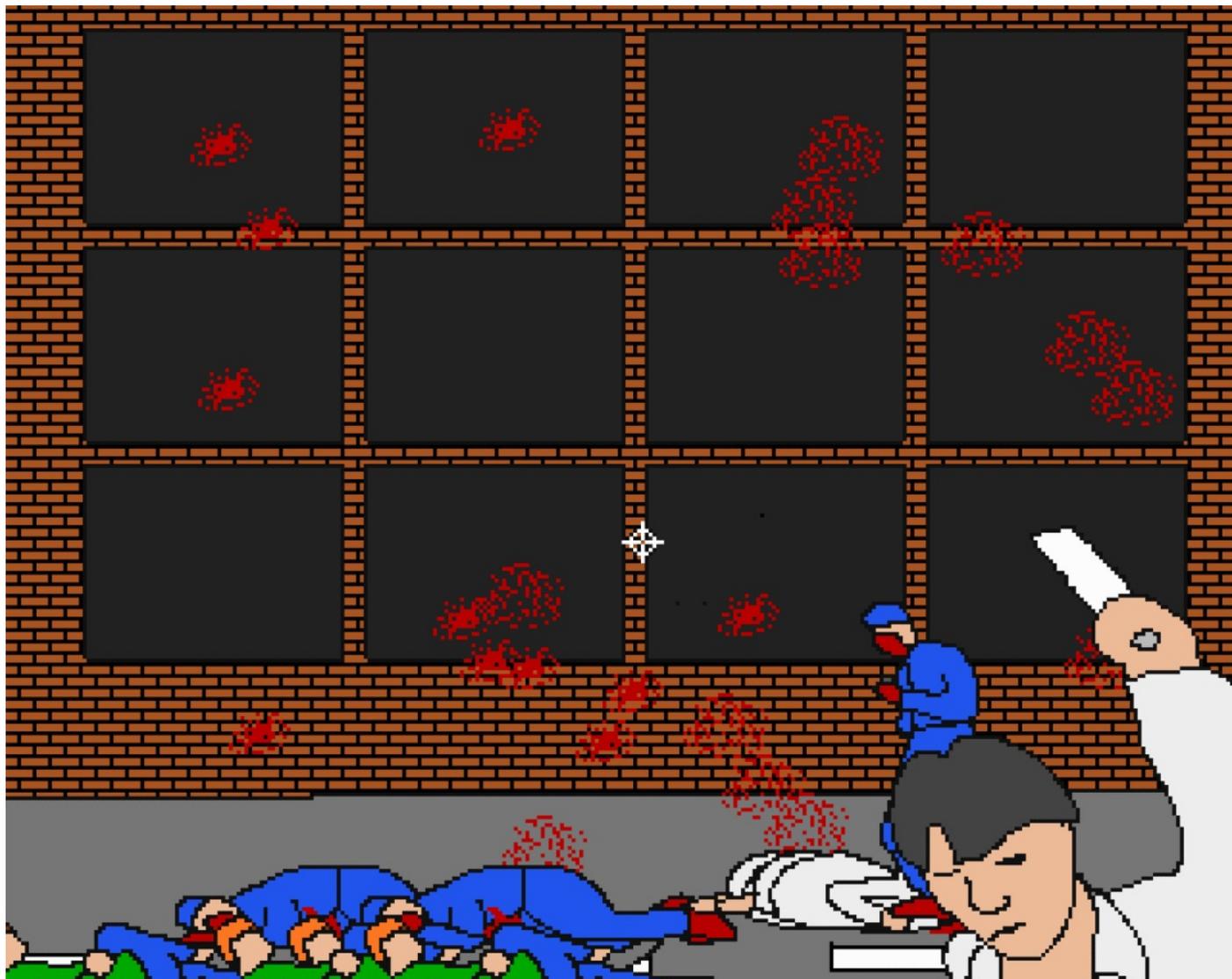


Suit-man is about to shoot. The background and blood spatter continue to look dreadful.

Unfortunately I was painfully aware that whatever I made would have to be extremely simple, as my programming skills were pathetic. I decided to opt for a target shooting game, since all it effectively entailed was having the player click on things with the mouse. Even I could handle that. Unfortunately I still had to deal with my lack of artistic skills when it came to the game's graphics.

Sega's 3D light gun game Virtua Cop 2 was popular at the time, and it made me realise that the graphics could be heavily stylised rather than traditionally drawn. Obviously full 3D was way beyond my abilities, and realistically those of the machine I was writing for, if I wanted the game to run at a decent frame rate. But there were other options. I had recently bought a device called Videomaster AGA that allowed me to import footage from a VHS recorder. A plan formed – I would borrow my dad's creaky Ferguson video camera,

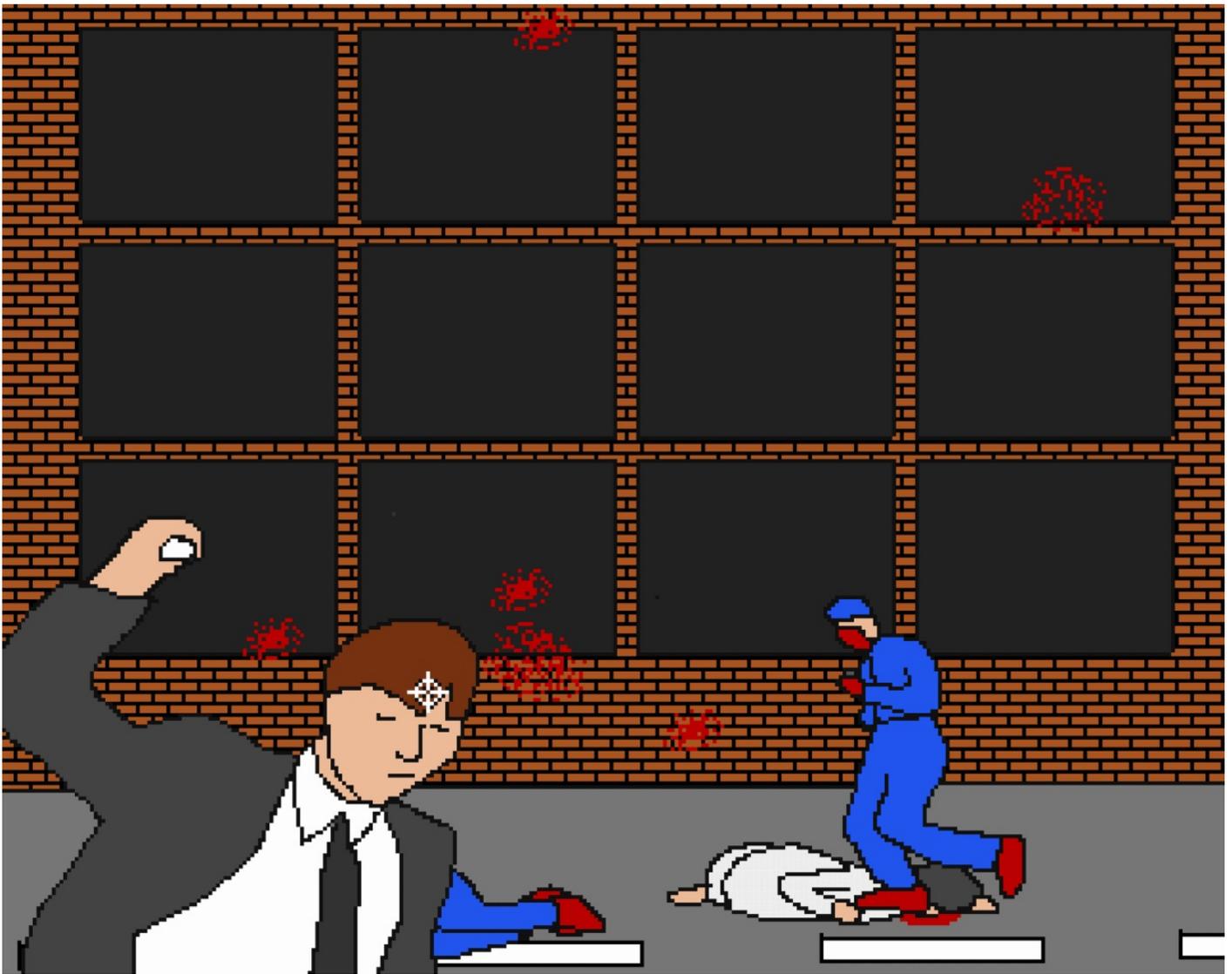
film myself arsing around in front of it, transfer the footage to my Amiga, and then draw over every other frame. This rotoscoping technique was rarely used in games at the time, but it worked incredibly well, giving the game a unique look. Sadly, every other aspect of Killjoy was awful.



Everyone you shoot is me. It's like Hunt the Ashens or something.

After the loading message, which I entered as “Loading, please dance” (I thought “Please wait” was boring) the game starts up by telling you how much RAM your computer has free. This is totally useless information from the player’s point of view, and it doesn’t even help me as the programmer because AMOS manages the memory itself. It may as well tell you the average annual rainfall in Helsinki.

The title screen tells you to shoot things without missing in order to accumulate score, whilst various characters from ZX Spectrum games scroll past. This wasn’t really an aesthetic choice – I was just excited that I’d got a Spectrum emulator and ripped a load of graphics from it. A jolly little tune called “Cabbage” plays in the background and in no way matches the feel of the game. Like all other sounds in Killjoy, I took it from somewhere else – in this case I’d found it on a public domain disk somewhere.



My centre part haircut was the height of mid-90s fashion. (No it wasn't.)

So before the game begins, we have irrelevant information, graphics and music. This total lack of cohesive design is a feature of most of my early projects, in which I was overexcited by disparate ideas and threw them all together to the detriment of the overall enterprise.

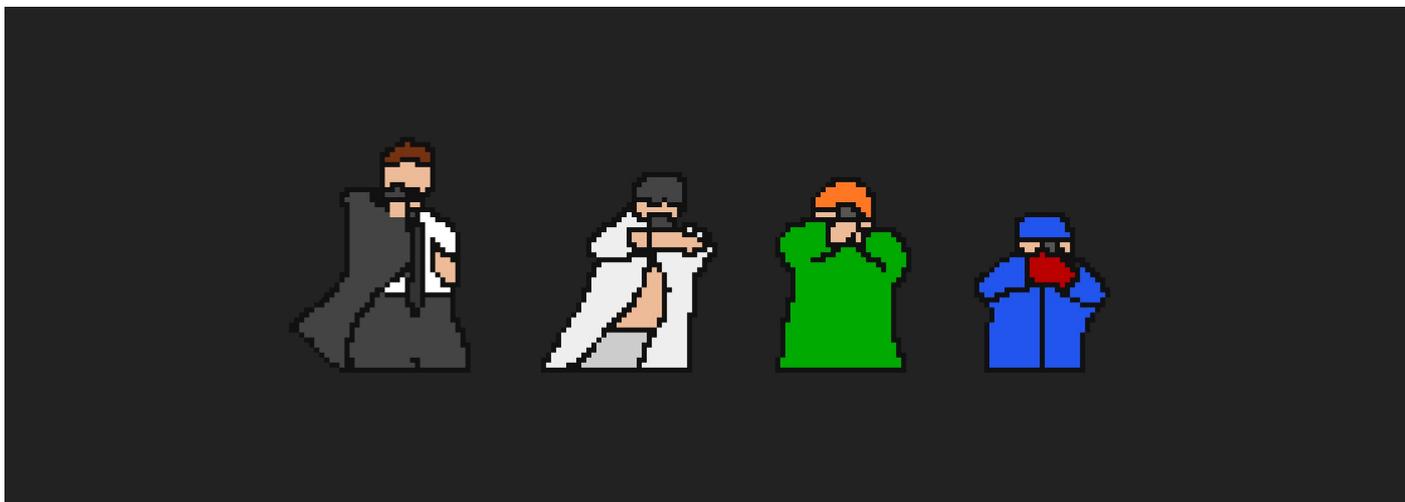
The game itself is barebones and frankly not much fun. The single view is of an unbelievably poorly drawn road and a building full of windows. (I recall that it was a test background that I never got round to changing.) Featureless but realistically animated characters appear at the windows and shoot into the screen after a few seconds, unless you shoot them first. Other enemies run along the road, but they don't actually shoot or pose any threat; they just serve as a distraction. Occasionally, in a nod to *Virtua Cop*, people appear very close to the screen and try to slash it with a knife or meat cleaver. Unfortunately the slashing effects are so badly drawn that it looks more like they've been drawn on the screen with a red crayon.



Bang! One life gone. Green-man here is the only character not rotoscoped from my movements – the running animation is taken from Jodie Foster at the very beginning of Silence of the Lambs.

And that's it really. You just have to shoot as many people as possible before you lose all three of your lives. It becomes easy after a bit of practice, but you'll still be killed off by an annoying bug that makes your shots go straight through the melee of attackers about a third of the time. Other exciting programming errors include duplicating corpses and the ability to kill the people who appear in the building by shooting the frame of the window they're in. Also, the game only works on higher specification A1200 computers when it could easily run on the standard A500 machines.

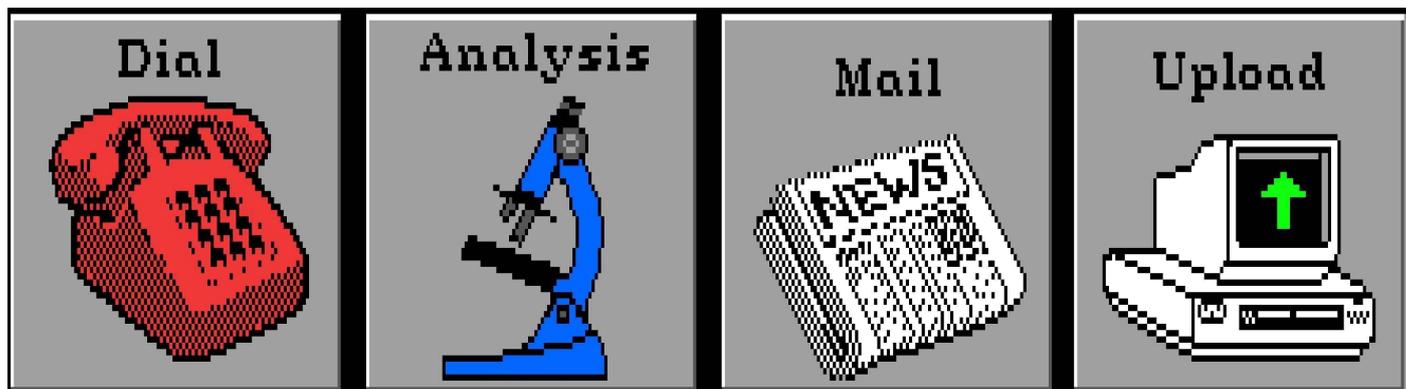
When you do finally succumb to the onslaught of rotoscoped maniacs, the game plays the clichéd soundbite of Hudson from Aliens shouting "Game over, man!" and you're presented with statistics showing how many shots you fired and what percentage of them hit their mark. That's actually one of the few features I'm pleased with, as it adds an extra element to the game – making you try to keep your accuracy at 100%. Or at least you might do if the game was enjoyable in any way.



The Killjoy cast: Suit-man, Shirt-man, Green-man, Hazmat-man.

Killjoy isn't actually as bad as I remembered. It's utter rubbish, of course, but it might actually be possible to enjoy yourself playing it for a minute or so before the bugs and boredom force you to play something else. The sprites still look well animated and are vaguely reminiscent of *The Last Express*, an excellent PC game released the following year that made heavy use of rotoscoping to much better effect. But everything else about Killjoy is concentrated arse wash.

At one stage, I had plans to make a bonus round where you had to shoot an apple off a person's head while hindered by the targeting crosshair flickering around. I put together a test version, but it simply wasn't any fun so I abandoned it. Many years later, I discovered *Hunter* for the Atari 8-bit computers is exactly that idea but stretched to fill an entire game. It's amazing to think that only a year previously, people were charging money for something I considered too crap to include with a low-quality freeware title...

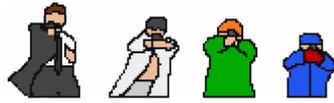


All that remains of my next game – a hacking simulator – are these icons. Why are “Mail” and “Upload” written lower down than “Dial” and “Analysis”? RUBBISH.

I finished Killjoy in early March 1996. Before I compiled it properly, a murderer shot dead sixteen primary school children and a teacher in the Scottish town of Dunblane. That made me decide the world didn't need a plotless game where you shoot random people, so Killjoy was never released.

Shortly after, I started to write another game – a kind of hacking simulator set in the early eighties and based on the 8-bit games *Hacker* and *SATCOM*. I put together the game's back end but never actually added any content, as the Amiga was on its last legs. Instead I got a PC, and then an internet connection the next year, and I started writing comedy

articles instead of substandard games.



REVIEW SCORES

No reviews – the game wasn't released, and freeware games were rarely reviewed at the time anyway.

other versions

None.

Licence to Kill

Format: Acorn Electron

Year of Release: 1987

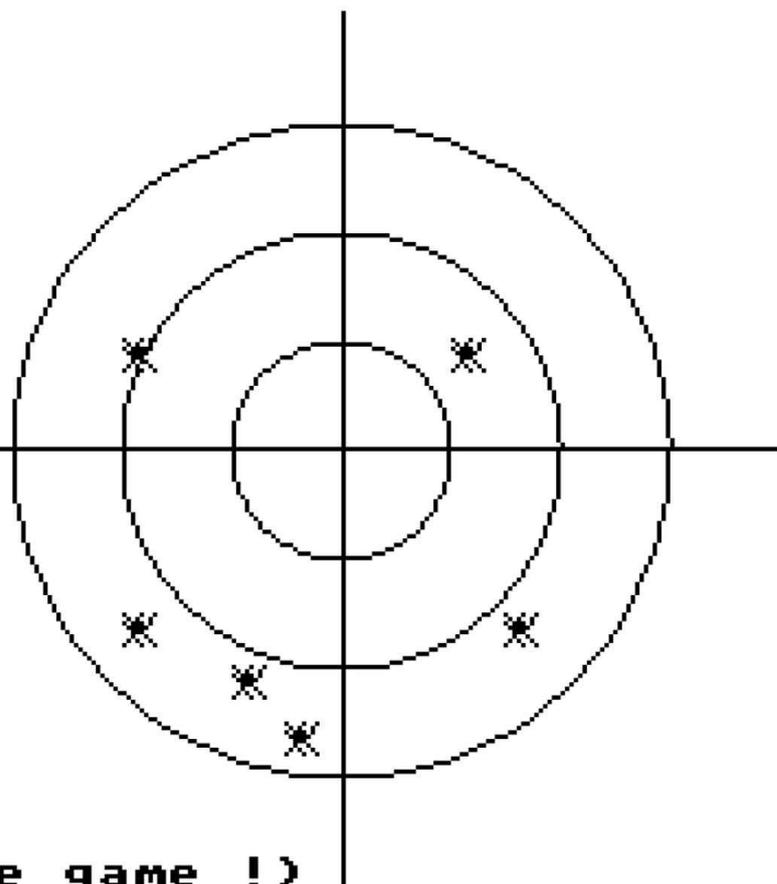
Developer: Simon Guest & J. Hamblett

Publisher: Alternative Software

Original Price: 1.99 pounds



**Thank You
for buying this
Alternative
Software
You are now
LICENCED
TO
KILL
(But only in the game !)**



Before I delve into the well of fetid bum rot that is Licence to Kill, I need to make it clear that it has nothing to do with the James Bond film of the same name. That was released two years later, and the tie-in game wasn't released for the Electron. Here ends the public service message.

Another entry on the list of old budget games that couldn't decide what they were called, the cover of this game proclaims the title to be Licence to Kill, but the actual in-game text calls it Licenced to Kill. I'm going with the name on the case because it seems more official, and it's one less letter to type.



Fun fact: You do not have to be facing enemies to hit them. This is not a good game.

On loading, Licence to Kill presents you with 27 seconds of a black screen with occasional fart noises. The noises seem to be gunshot effects for the target logo that eventually appears and gets riddled with bullet holes. So far, so weird.

You are then given an amazingly long list of instructions for a budget game. The plot revolves around you being a top secret agent who must infiltrate a factory that has been taken over by a “neonasty organisation” to recover a valuable prototype. There are various digs at the ZX Spectrum in the names used – the factories are owned by “Sink-Lair” and the villains are known as the “Surclives”, references to Sinclair Research and its founder Sir Clive. Even the prototype is called the “C7 3/4” which pokes fun at Sinclair’s ill-fated electric tricycle, the C5.



Our hero stands impassively, accepting that his imminent death is unavoidable.

In order to retrieve the prototype, you need to get access codes from six different computers whilst collecting cassettes, keys and a disk. Enemy robots will hinder your mission by trying to murder you, but you're armed with an electromagnetic screwdriver which makes them teleport away when you prod them with it.

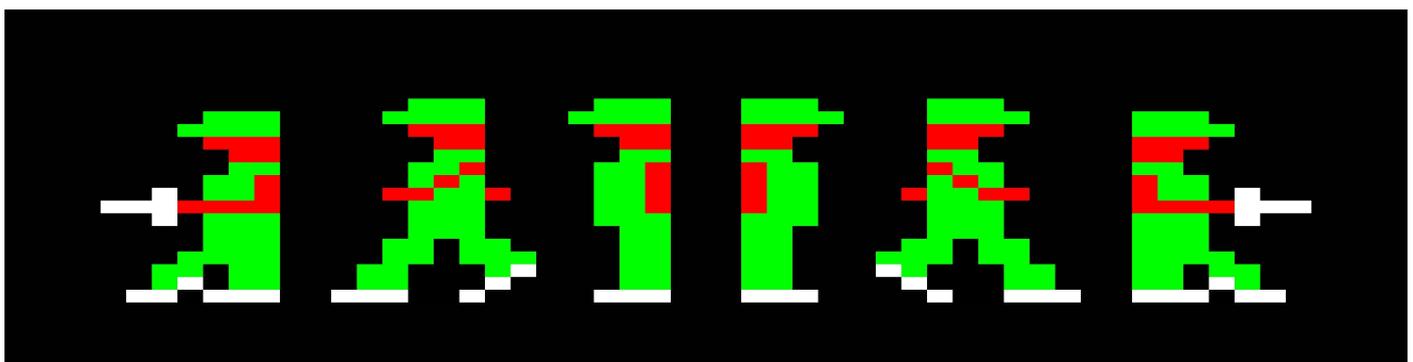
Got all that? Excellent! Now to start the game and wish you were doing almost anything else.



This is what happens when you climb the ladder. Not pictured: deep regret for playing this game at all.

The title screen is a hideous slab of green with black bars and an ugly custom font plastered on it. The title music seems to consist mostly of randomised, discordant beeping. A thin strip near the top of the screen has some text scrolling in it. You start the game and discover that the thin strip is the whole of the play area.

It's like you lost the keys to your house and are having to play the game looking through the letterbox. Amazingly, Licence to Kill uses only 12.5% of the available screen area for gameplay. There isn't even a lot of status information shown on the rest of the screen – it's nearly all empty!



This is the high score table with default entries! Because we've seen quite enough of the in-game graphics.

The graphics are about as basic as you can get. The almost featureless main character has two frames of walking animation and a frame for jabbing with his screwdriver... and that's the lot. The enemies are just palette swaps of the main character. The floor looks like a rope made out of unravelled Christmas jumpers. And the only background features are red doors, each of which is marked with a swastika. So rather than the game being set in a robot-infested factory as the instructions state, it actually seems to be set in a Nazi base of some kind.

You start off on the 32nd level of the astonishingly tall "factory" next to a ladder, which you can use to climb down to any of the other 31 floors. Each floor appears identical. You move right and your character shuffles along at high speed, a shrieking bleep accompanying every single step he takes.



The image shows a terminal window with a black background and white text. At the top, the title "Classified Agents" is centered. Below it is a list of 10 items, each consisting of a number, a name, and a score. At the bottom, there is a prompt "Press space bar to continue.".

Classified Agents		
1	J.R. WAS A	10000
2	BAD GUY, BUT	9000
3	I BET YOU	8000
4	CAN'T TOP	7000
5	HIM!	6000
6	IF YOU GET	5000
7	A HI-SCORE	4000
8	YOU WILL	3000
9	RUIN THIS	2000
10	MESSAGE!	1000

Press space bar to continue.

Every frame of animation for the main character. I reckon that's a knife and not an "electromagnetic screwdriver".

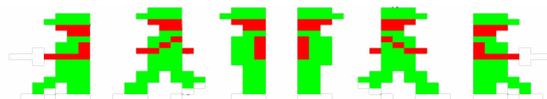
After a few seconds, the enemies appear and rush towards you from both in front and behind. You press the return key for a screw-driver jab, and chances are you instantly die. This is because the stabbing animation only appears for a tiny fraction of a second and doesn't seem to work all the time, and the enemies jolt along the screen so fast you can't time the attack properly. Actually hitting an enemy is largely down to blind luck – and when you do manage it, they sometimes just teleport right next to you anyway.

By employing super-human patience I was able to actually run a fair distance along several of the levels, but I encountered absolutely nothing except for background doors that are just for show. The levels seem to go on forever, and at no stage did I see anything to pick up or any computers to interact with for codes. I had a look online, and nobody else who played the game seems to have either. Are the instructions mentioning non-existent features and the game is actually a sham, with nothing to actually do? Or is it just so insanely difficult that nobody has ever got far enough to find anything?

I actually hate Licence to Kill. I have pretty neutral feelings about most of the games in this book and mostly think of them as amusing curiosities. But there's something about the sheer disdain this game seems to have for the player – and by extension the buyer – that makes me want to punch it right in the tape spool. It's painfully difficult, as progression is based more on blind luck than skill. The insultingly small letterbox that the game plays in is utterly unnecessary. Most of the game's described features don't actually seem to exist – or might as well not exist. The stated plot seems to have no bearing on the game, which actually seems to be about infiltrating a Nazi base armed with a knife. The high score table plays an off-key version of the cancan. And worst of all, it's called Licence to Kill but features no killing, just forcibly teleporting androids. This game hates me and I hate it right back.

It's amazing that a game this primitive and dreadful was released so late in the Electron's life. If the cassette inlay didn't clearly state the copyright date as 1987, I'd have thought it was a bad mail-order title from 1983.

Alternative Software released a slew of budget games across most of the 8-bit computer formats. Many of them were poor, to the extent that two of them are featured in this book. The development dream team of Guest & Hamblett also made incompetent Breakout clone Spheroids (AKA Round Ones) and the horrifying, flickery mess Indoor Soccer, making them the equivalent of war criminals in the Electron world.



REVIEW SCORES

No known reviews. I imagine the staff of Electron User magazine hid in the basement for a week when they heard it was being released. A wise choice.

other versions

None. I am pleased to report that all other platforms remained free of Licence to Kill.

THE STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

Ste Pickford is a veteran games designer, graphic artist, and half of the Pickford Bros with his brother John. The Pickfords have worked on over 36 games since 1984 and were responsible for many successful, critically acclaimed budget games including 180, Feud, and Zub and Amaurote, as well as full price releases such as Glider Rider and Plok! Here's some insight into the industry that spawned the terrible games in this book, from someone who made good ones...



Beautiful loading screen for Feud on the Amstrad CPC.

My insight into the industry comes largely from my time working at Binary Design Limited which was a fairly large place (at least by the standards of the time).

It was actually a pretty professionally run place in many ways, probably ahead of its time as a proper, work-for-hire development studio in the mid-80s, which I don't think was especially common. There were maybe a couple of other places around the country similar to Binary Design, making games for budget developers like Mastertronic, but I think bedroom coders – amateur teams, essentially – made a good chunk of budget games. It was a weird mix. About half of budget games were made by teenagers in their bedrooms, and the other half were made at reasonably professional, large studios with several teams

and multiple projects on the go at any one time.



The brilliant darts game 180 for the Spectrum. I played it so much that I became dart-perfect.

I'm not sure you'd be able to tell by playing the games which were made by professional studios and which were made by amateurs at home. We weren't necessarily making better games, but we were probably making them more quickly. I guess the budget publishers weren't getting enough games sent in on spec, so they had to commission more to satisfy the market.

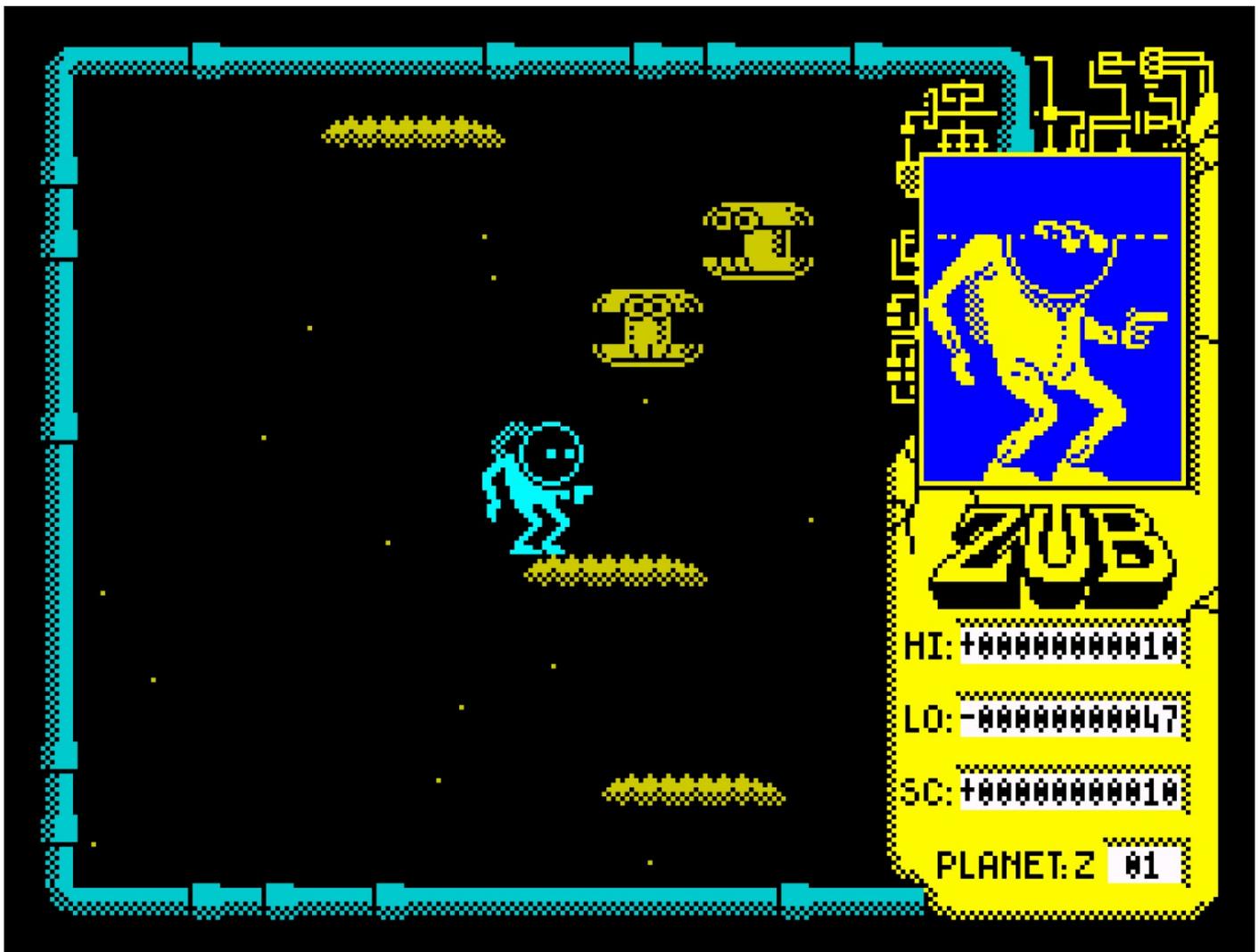
Interestingly, at Binary Design we also developed full price games for Quicksilver and some other publishers. There was absolutely no difference in how we developed full price or budget games. I don't know if the money was any better (the boss never shared that information), but in terms of deadlines, which team was given the gig, how much effort we put in, etc., full price and budget games got exactly the same treatment.



Strategy and action collide in Death Wake, much like the aircraft and bullets seen here.

The full price publishers generally had a clearer idea of what type of genre they wanted (a flight simulator, future sport, etc.), whereas Mastertronic were more hands-off and just wanted it on time, but neither were very strong on judging quality or playability. That was really down to us. All that publishers were really bothered about was if a game was late or if there were serious bugs.

We (the development team) were really the only ones who cared about the quality of the games. The reason we were always late was because we were determined to make our games good, if we could. We took some pride in our work, we wanted players to like the games and we wanted good reviews. I don't recall any publisher caring about how a game would review while it was in development, although they were pleased with good reviews after release.



In school I became so enamoured of the Zub character that I drew comic strips about him for my friend Phil. I hope he doesn't still have them.

Binary Design definitely wasn't a tiny operation. They were about as big as development studios got in those days, and may well have been the biggest in the UK at the time. They just developed a lot of games for budget publishers.

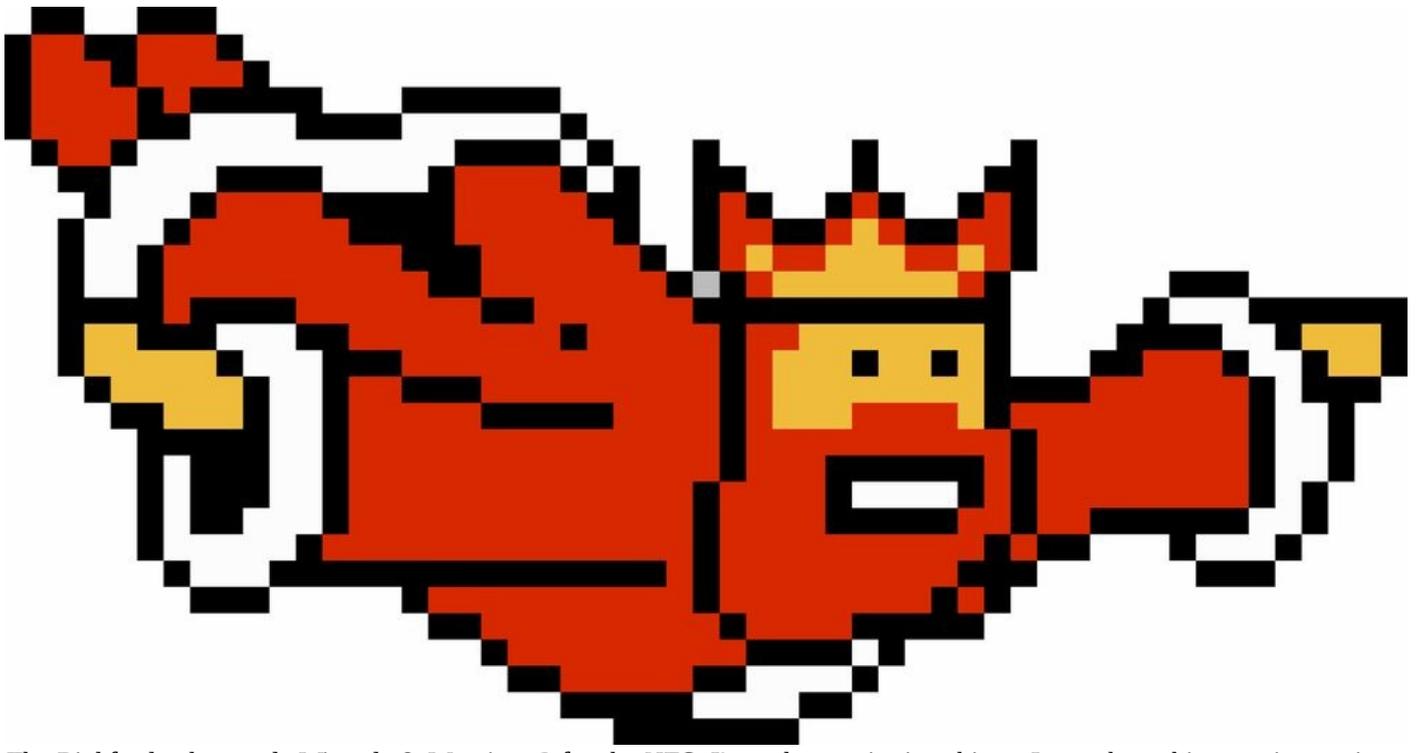
When I started at Binary Design, the setup was five "teams", each of which consisted of an island of three desks pushed together in a large, open plan office. One of each team's desks was home to the ZX Spectrum programmer, one to the C64 programmer, and one to the Amstrad CPC programmer. All three members of the team would be writing the same game, each for their respective platforms (other conversions, like MSX or Atari were handled by freelancers). One of the three would be the designated lead programmer, which usually meant they designed the game as well. Depending on the game and the relative skill of the programmers, the lead would either write the game and the other two programmers convert the code, or they'd each write essentially separate versions of the same game better suited to their platform. Sometimes the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad programmers would write the game together, sharing code (each guy writing different Z80 "subroutines" shared between both versions), and the C64 programmer would write something different (6502 code, using C64 specific hardware sprites and scrolling, which couldn't be shared).



Plok! The Exploding Man for the Super Nintendo. Ste currently draws a comic about the character.

Music and sound were handled by a separate department comprising one musician (David Whittaker when I started – my line manager), and two or three graphic artists. We would provide sprites and backgrounds and loading screens for each of the five projects and their three versions, on an ad hoc basis. Mainly it was who asked first, or who seemed most in need. At one point our boss tried to introduce a “graphic request form” system, in which programmers had to submit forms listing a sprite or tile or something they needed, and we had to draw whatever was on the form at the top of the list, but that didn’t work very well. It was easier to talk to the teams and judge for ourselves what was needed and in what order.

Deadlines were always an issue, though – we never felt we had long enough. My brother’s very first project (Death Wake for Quicksilva) was given eight weeks. He was a new employee and didn’t even know machine code at the time, so he was learning assembler while developing the game. He took 12 weeks and was in some trouble for being so late. Generally I think we had around 16 weeks for most games (and it was the same for budget or full price), but we always took a few weeks longer and were always slightly in trouble for being late.



The Pickfords also made Wizards & Warriors 3 for the NES. I'm only mentioning this so I can show this amusing sprite.

We would be scheduled to have, say, half a day allocated to getting the main character moving (this was in Zub on the Spectrum that John was programming). John spent half a day getting it working, but it didn't feel quite right. It wasn't enjoyable to simply run and jump. So John spent the rest of the day tweaking the feel of the jump and the movement. He might alter the speed of animation, or I might tweak the pixels in a frame of animation or add a new frame; then John would alter the strength of gravity and maybe the speed of movement, or add an extra delay before taking off from a crouch, etc. John would play it and tweak it until he was happy. All told I think the running and jumping in Zub took two days. John was then in trouble for making the game one and a half days late as only half a day had been allocated to main character movement. This pattern repeated itself over the development of the whole game (and every other game we worked on) – the boss's main focus was finishing on time, and our main focus was making the game good.

When the game was finished, two weeks late, we were in trouble for "costing the company money", but very often our games went on to sell really well, bring in royalties, and (I'm certain) help the company secure future work. The games made by some of the other teams that were on time were often the most forgettable games that nobody cared about and didn't sell. So we used to argue that we were actually the ones making the company money. There was always tension between us and the boss, though, about being good or being on time.



In Feud, two brothers attempt to murder each other with magic. The Pickford Bros assure me it is not autobiographical.

As the 80s progressed, the industry began to change. The biggest shift was the switch to 16-bit. That was a massive transition, essentially increasing the number of artists needed on a team. With the 8-bit games, we had about three artists servicing 15 programmers (ok, that was five projects with three versions each, so some of the graphics were shared between games). With the 16-bit stuff, however, it got closer to one artist per programmer on each project, and more in some cases.

Toward the very end of the 80s, the consoles started to appear. We got in with Nintendo stuff earlier than most, so we switched from 16-bit to NES development around '88, whereas it was probably early 90s for most other British studios.

The switch to console was MASSIVE. Basically, we had to make games that were genuinely good – that £40 price tag meant the game had to offer a lot more value than a £1.99 game – and we had to make games that were bug-free. We scoffed at first – it was impossible to make bug-free games – but that was the requirement, and we did it, by and large. Console development was a big, big step up in professionalism.

Which of your budget games are you most proud of?

I'd say Feud. That was the first project where John designed the game but wasn't the programmer. We actually sold the design to the company, with the map I drew being part of the game design, rather than something created during development. So this was our first experience of being game designers rather than game developers, and of designing a game before development started. The project was a success as well (on Spectrum and Amstrad at least), and it was a game where the actual design of it mattered and worked. As well as doing the 8-bit graphics, I also got to do the Amiga graphics, which was my first taste of 16-bit graphics work. I have extra fond memories of it for that reason.



Valhalla spoils the ultimate ending to the Avengers movies.

What was the most disappointing game you ever paid money for?

Probably something big. There were loads of games that promised epic experiences but failed to deliver. Maybe Valhalla? I was expecting some epic adventure, and all I got was a buggy mess.

Ste is still making video games and drawing comic strips. He can be found at www.zee-3.com/pickfordbros/ and on Twitter at [@stepickford](https://twitter.com/stepickford)

Los Angeles SWAT

Format: Amstrad CPC

Year of Release: 1987

Developer: Beechnut Creative Software

Publisher: Entertainment USA (Mastertronic)

Original Price: 1.99 pounds



L.A. SWAT



Guest entry

from “Guru” Larry Bundy Jr, a British gaming television presenter who likes nothing more than to talk about obscure old video games in a humorous manner.

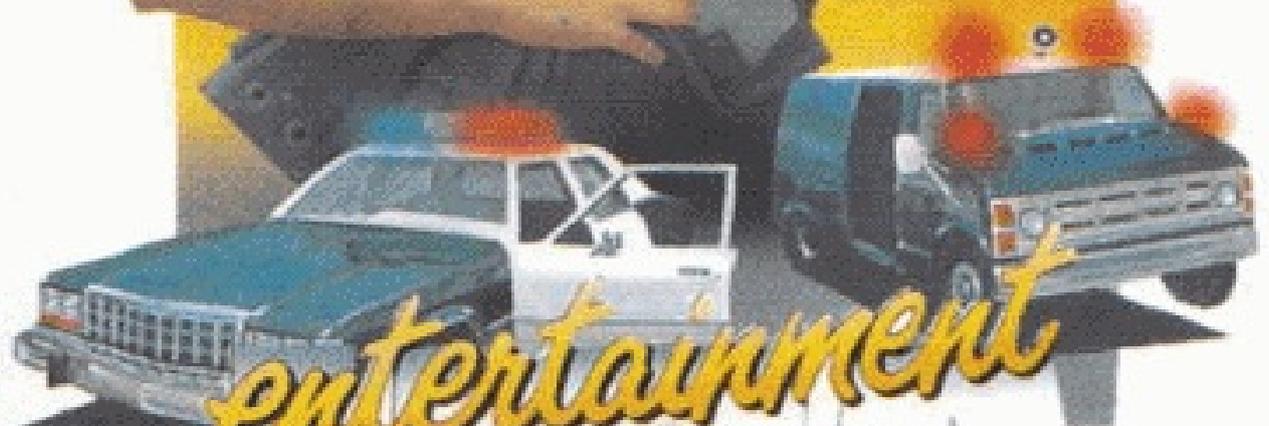
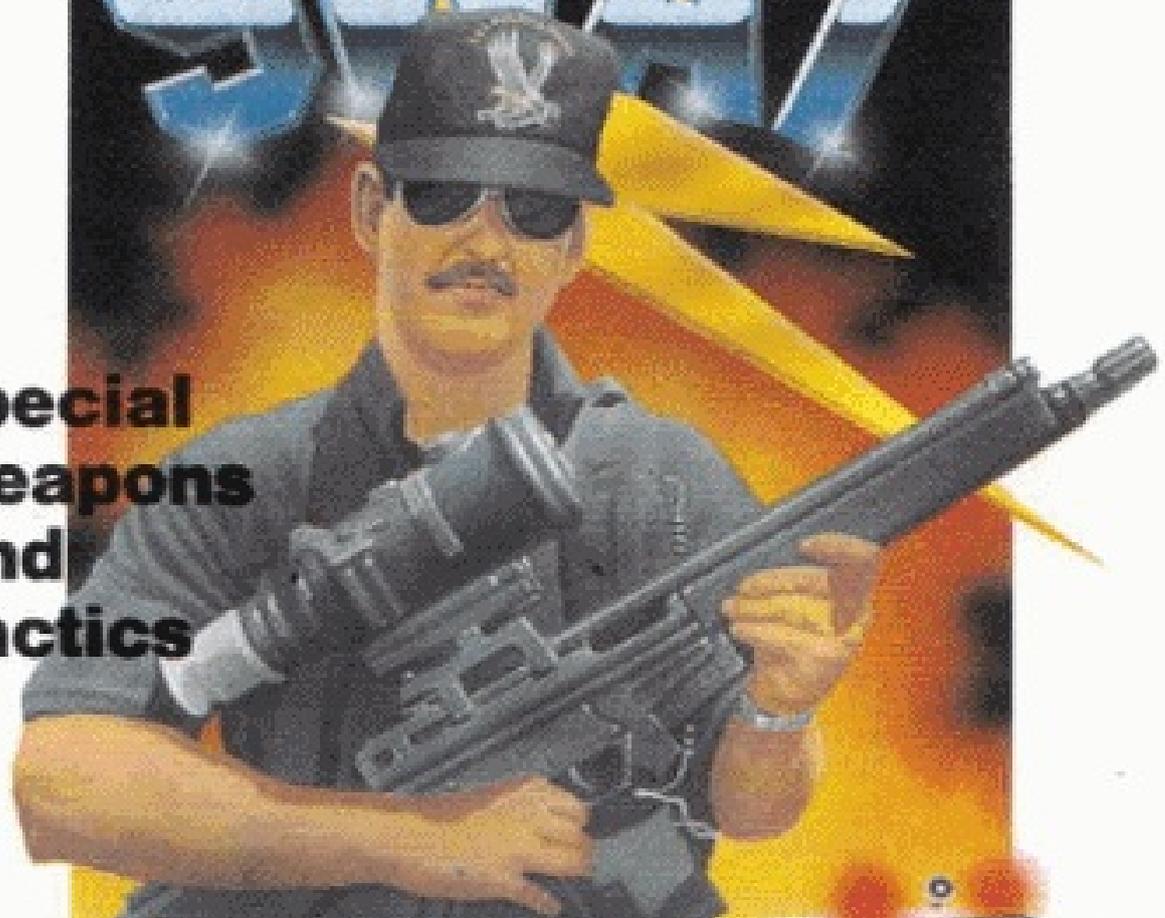
AMSTRAD/SCHNEIDER

464 · 664 · 6128

LOS ANGELES

SWAT

**Special
Weapons
And
Tactics**



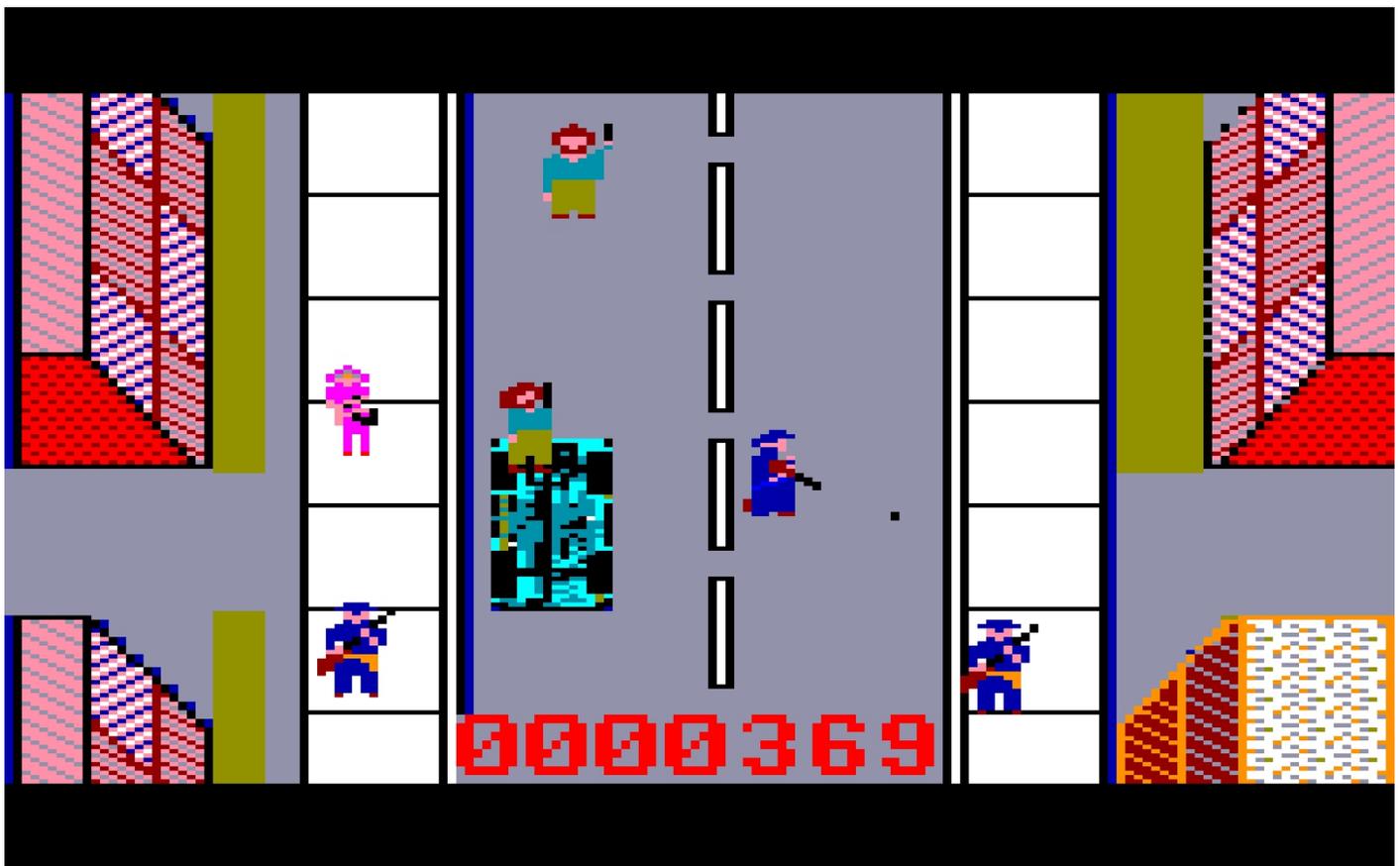
entertainment



If this were any more macho it would be made of raw beef.

One of the weekly highlights for me as a child of the 80s was going with my parents to the newly built Tesco hypermarket in Watford for our big weekly shop. It was a huge, awe-inspiring building which (back then) was made to look like a converted village-barn-come-town-hall, complete with fake clock tower.

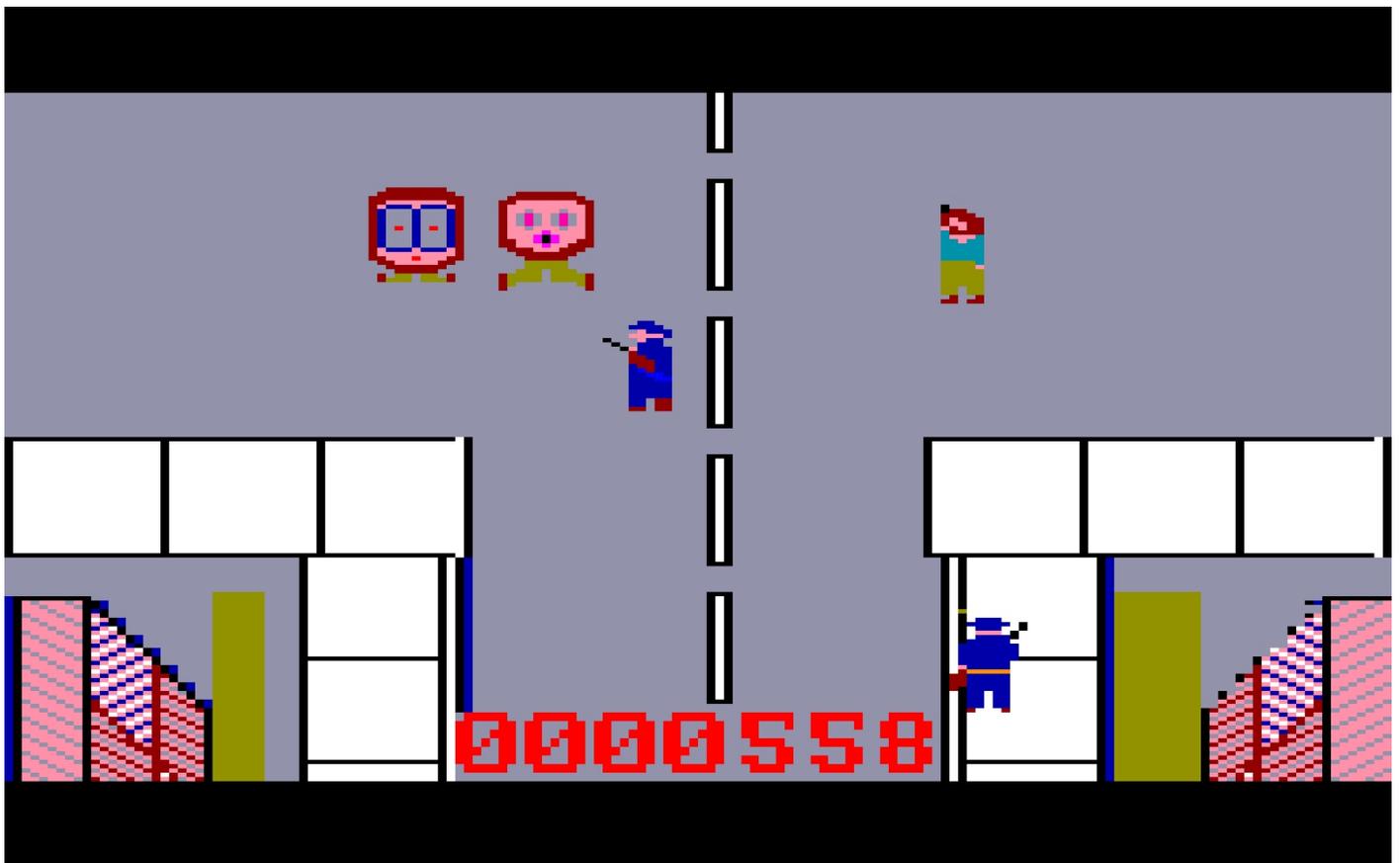
Halfway through our serial zigzagging of the many consumable-laden corridors, we came across an aisle presenting a vast collection of budget games for home computers. There were countless boxed cassettes, each pegged onto the wall in their own individual blister packs, and each one covered in exciting hand-drawn artwork, designed to separate young Johnny from his hard-earned pocket money.



An all-action shot showing a granny falling apart and a SWAT team member shooting at a colleague.

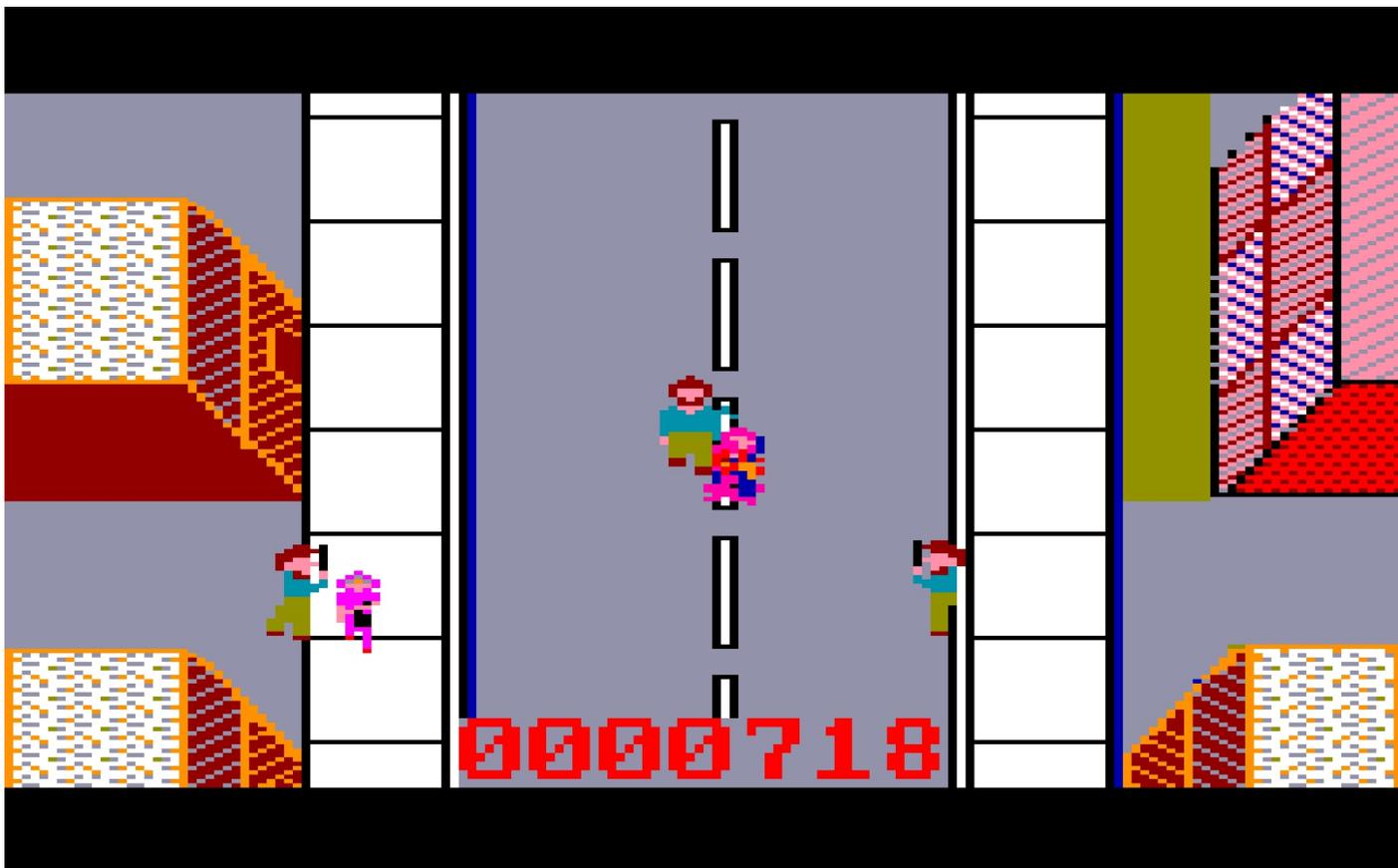
Upon one of these many visits, one game's artwork in particular caught my eye – that of a tough-looking riot cop, all in black, with mirrored shades and baseball cap, and sporting a rather fetching Burt Reynolds-esque moustache. Police cars and vans sped in front of him as he brandished an assault rifle so bloomin' huge he could take out a tank with it. So to my easily impressionable seven-year-old brain, it looked like the ultimate in awesomeness. Only a ninja dual wielding UZIs attached to nunchucks could possibly top it!

That game was Los Angeles SWAT. So I kissed goodbye my £1.99 and anticipated the excitement in my imminent future during my ride home from the supermarket.



Head inflation is a rare side effect of a gunshot wound, yet it happens all the time in L.A. SWAT!

Now, Los Angeles SWAT, or L.A. SWAT as everyone called it (the 80s loved its acronyms), is essentially a knock-off of Konami's arcade game Jail Break. You play a tough-as-nails riot cop, accompanied by two other officers (acting as your second and third lives) in a top-down, vertically scrolling shoot 'em up. You take on hordes of baseball bat-wielding gang members and roof-based snipers, all whilst avoiding innocent grannies and burnt-out vehicles in the riot-stricken streets of L.A.



Our hero is smashed into a bloody pulp as two clones salute each other.

Maybe it was a political statement on the militarization of police forces in the USA, or maybe it was just an excuse to make the game not look like a complete rip-off of Commando. It was a reasonably entertaining arcade style shooter and played essentially the same across all formats... Well, all except the Amstrad CPC version. Guess which computer I had as a child?

To call the Amstrad version “crap” is an insult to excrement. After ten minutes of loading, you’re treated to one of the laziest title images in history – a mostly blank screen with nothing on it aside from a poorly cropped image of the Jaguar car company logo in the top left corner and the words “L.A. SWAT” in blocky italics. And things go downhill from there.



This is what happens when you complete level one. It's not a great incentive.

For starters, the programmer decided that he couldn't be bothered to program in the snipers or any audio whatsoever. There is only one enemy type in the game, and he resembles a Lego version of Daniel Stern's burglar character from Home Alone. He constantly spawns multiple clones of himself while viciously wielding an extremely intimidating stick of liquorice.

Now Mr Stern is a feisty fellow. He will not only have seven or eight clones of himself on screen at the same time, but another will immediately take the place of one you killed the femtosecond he disappears, ultimately making killing them completely pointless – especially considering the main way to gain points in L.A. SWAT is to simply hold up on the joystick.

Luckily, the hordes of Daniels are easy to kill, as a single bullet from your rifle will cause his body to literally explode through his own eyeballs (yes, seriously). But, if he manages to break through your awkward, 30 degree angled firing lines, he will brutally murder you... and I mean brutally. Seriously, your corpse is just a pile of blood, bone and goo after he's finished with you!

But to be honest, the only legitimate danger is from the random grenades that the multiple clones occasionally throw in your direction. If they hit you, then confusingly they turn you into a dying Daniel Stern due to the game loading up the wrong death animation.

Speaking of which, the game is full of graphical glitches. For instance, it appears that the programmer at some point tried to code in the enemy snipers, but gave up halfway through. Their bullets do actually appear randomly on-screen, floating in the middle of the street, but they can't hurt you and the animation has them travelling away from you...

To top it all off, it takes less than a minute to beat the entire game as the single street you

traverse just repeats forever. It may sometimes last longer, but that's solely due to the enemies getting themselves stuck in upturned cars and you taking an extra few precious seconds to run around and find the optimal angle to kill them.

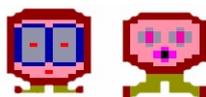
So why was the Amstrad port of L.A. SWAT so bad? Well, it all seems to come down to Mastertronic wanting to port the game to all systems. American developer Sculptured Software, the original creators of the game, worked on the majority of the ports. But as the ZX Spectrum and the Amstrad CPC were British computers, those conversions were contracted out to an obscure and inexperienced local developer by the name of Beechnut Creative Software.

Beechnut must have been an extremely small company, as according to Google Maps, their place of operations was a terraced house on a council estate in Suffolk. Not only did Mastertronic never hire them again, but the only other Amstrad title they ever worked on was the judo simulator Uchi Mata. That scored 61% in Amtix magazine's review of the game, which said, "UCHI MATA is a pathetic piece of programming on what could have been a decent game."

Larry can be found at [youtube.com/larry](https://www.youtube.com/larry)

and on Twitter at

[@LarryBundyJr](https://twitter.com/LarryBundyJr)



REVIEW SCORES

None known. It's almost as if Mastertronic didn't send any copies out for review!

other versions

The Commodore 64 and Atari 8-bit versions are simple, slightly crude budget games that you could have some fun playing on a rainy afternoon. A very short rainy afternoon. The Spectrum version is a hideously ugly, jerky mess, but still far better than the diabolical Amstrad release.

Show-Jump

Format: Dragon 32

Year of Release: 1985

Developer: Unknown

Publisher: Computerware

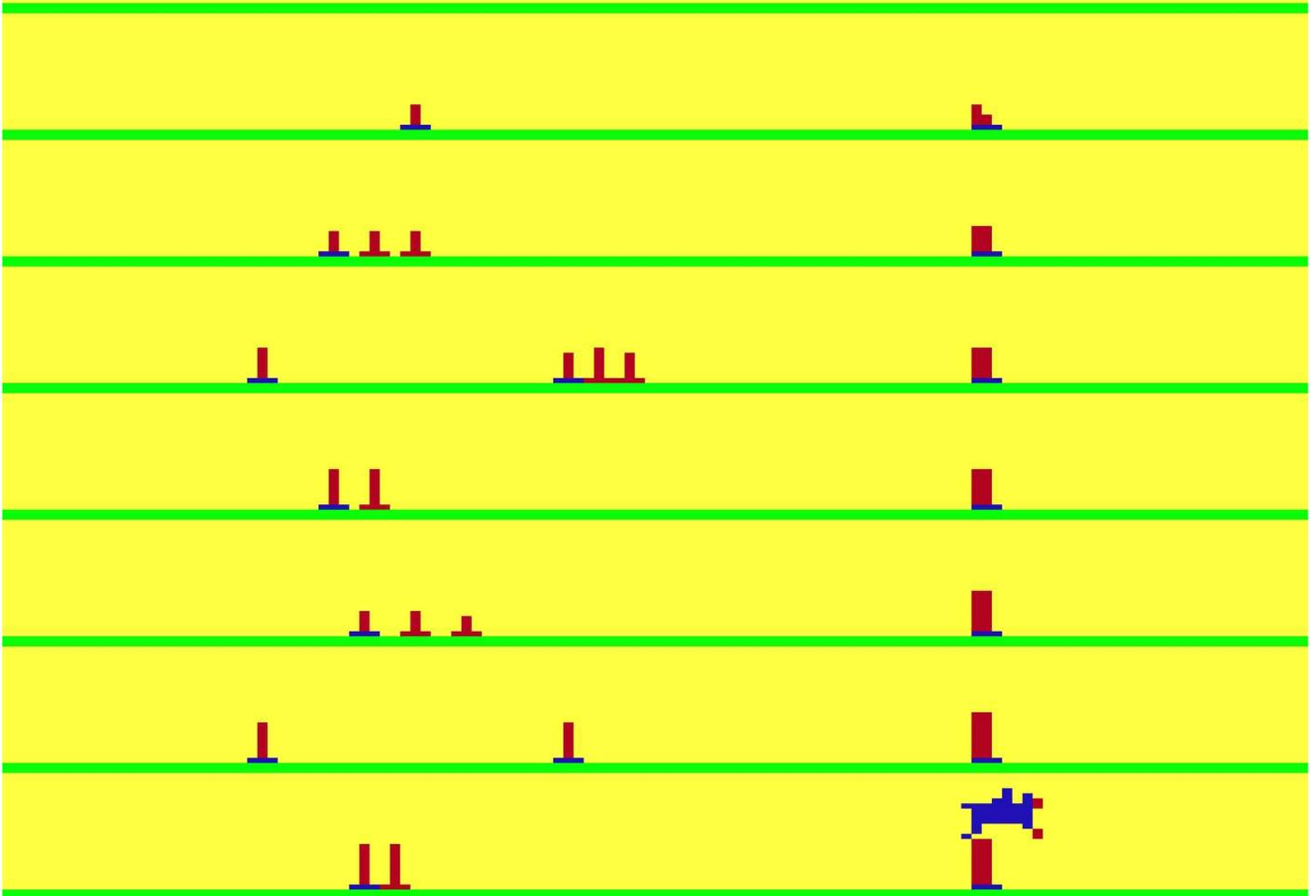
Original Price: 6.50 pounds



If you were making a video game about showjumping, to the extent of naming it after the activity, you'd at least look up how it was spelled, wouldn't you? Maybe the author had a load of spare hyphens lying around that needed to get used up.

Sadly this lack of basic effort leaks through into the whole game. Such were the joys of the mail-order industry for the more obscure computer formats in the 80s – you could release any old tat as long as the description was tempting.

FAULTS 8

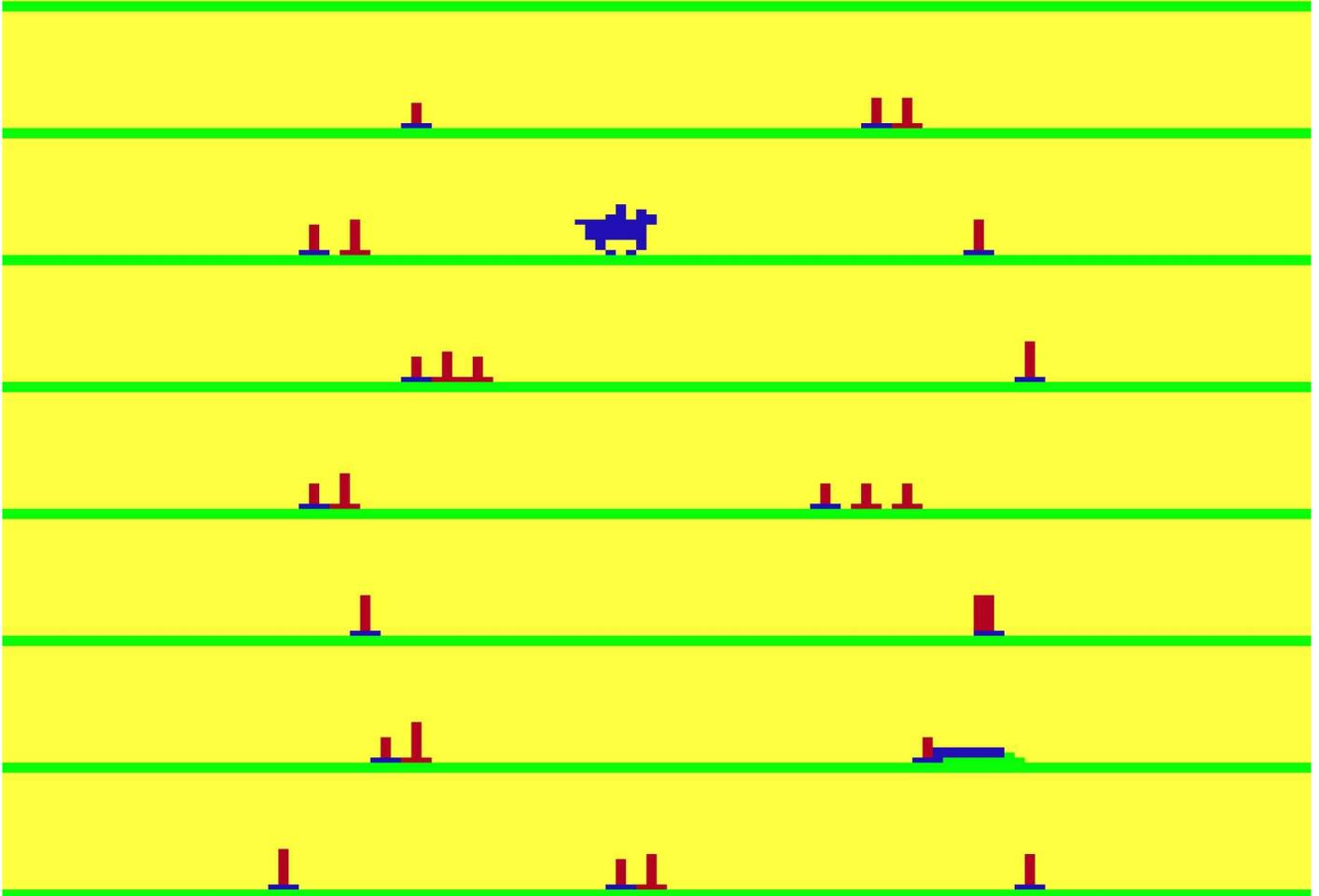


This is the puissance course, which means there is a big wall at the end. Or several, in this game.

Show-Jump is a painfully basic attempt to simulate a complicated equestrian event. The screen is split into eight horizontal strips, with the very top showing the number of faults and the rest showing a side view of the course. Your rider starts at the top left and when he reaches the right-hand side of the screen, he teleports to the left-hand side of the next strip down, which I believe rarely happens at actual show jumping events. Perhaps each segment represents the view from a different, super-ultra-widescreen television camera positioned equally along the course?

Your horse and rider are represented by a handful of dark blue pixels that look more like a St Bernard dog with a desk tidy on its back. There are only two frames of animation, and jumping involves the horse taking a short flight, complete with gradual take-off and landing. Fences are red sticks, and water hazards resemble unmade beds with garish duvet covers. Sound is limited to an ear-splitting bell at the start of a race, popping noises for the horse's hoof steps and some beeps if you hit an obstacle.

FAULTS 0



Tragedy strikes at the equestrian meet as a horse devolves into some kind of crab monster between jumps.

Gameplay is extremely simple. First you select one of the game's nine courses. Then you can control the horse's speed and make it jump, and that's your lot. The faster the horse goes, the further it leaps, so you need to slow down if there isn't much space between obstacles or you will land on them. But it's harder to time jumps the slower you're travelling, so the game is mostly about managing speed.

And here the game breaks its leg and has to be taken out of the paddock and shot. You can't actually tell how fast the horse is travelling as it has no discernible effect until you jump. The accelerate and decelerate controls don't seem to work effectively either, so you have no fine control over something you desperately need them for. It's frustrating as the jump control is extremely responsive and the collision detection seems spot on. I'm not saying that Show-Jump would be a good game if you could gauge speed, but it would at least be playable for a minute or two.

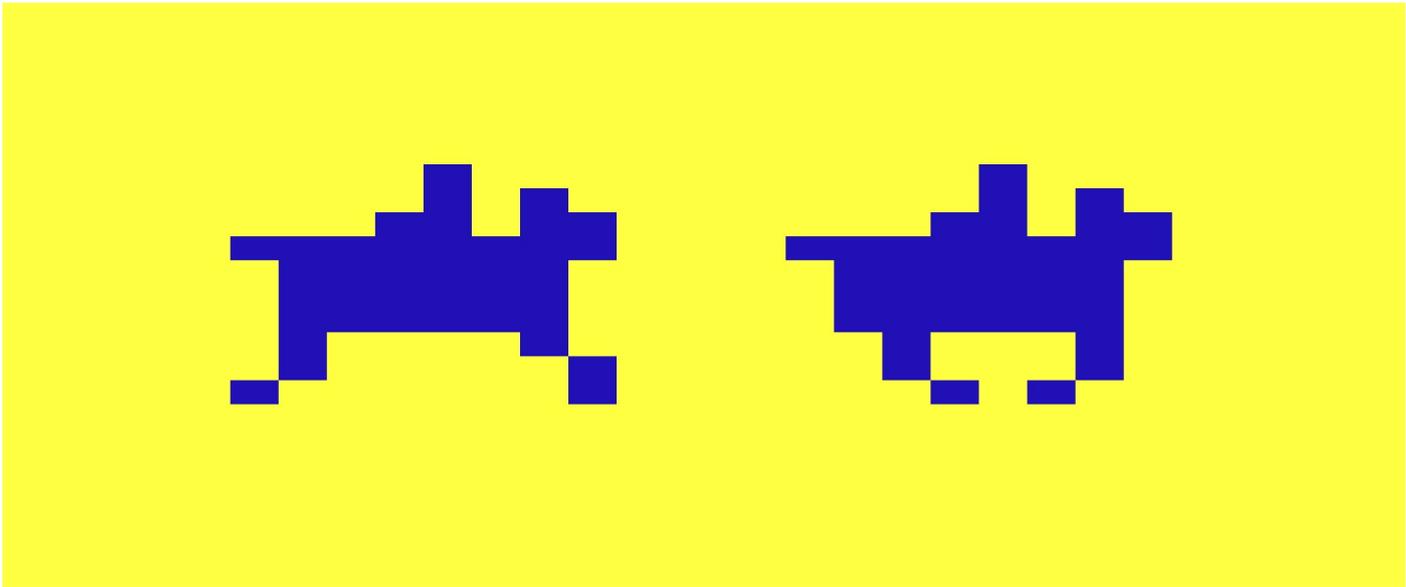
FAULTS 4



Fail to jump a hurdle and, understandably, your horse refuses to run headfirst into it.

The simplicity of the gameplay is vaguely reminiscent of the “endless runner” genre of mobile games such as Canabalt, but lacking the finesse and compulsion that made those open-ended games so successful. (And it’s also almost impossible to play effectively. Let’s not forget that.)

There is one commendable feature in the game: when you clip an obstacle, it gets the top taken off at the height you hit it. A single nice touch in a field of garbage.



All the frames of animation used in Show-Jump. I believe there was no motion capture involved.

No developer is credited for Show-Jump, so I can only assume that it was made in-house at Computerware by ninjas and ghosts. They only released a few games for the Dragon 32, mostly based on existing games like Scrabble and Blockbusters, and they're all much better than Show-Jump.

REVIEW SCORES

Dragon User magazine gave it 1/5 and described it as “boring” – a damning insult for any game.

other versions

None. Phew.

Surprise Surprise

Format: Amstrad CPC (464 Only)

Year of Release: 1986

Developer: Unknown

Publisher: Central Solutions Ltd

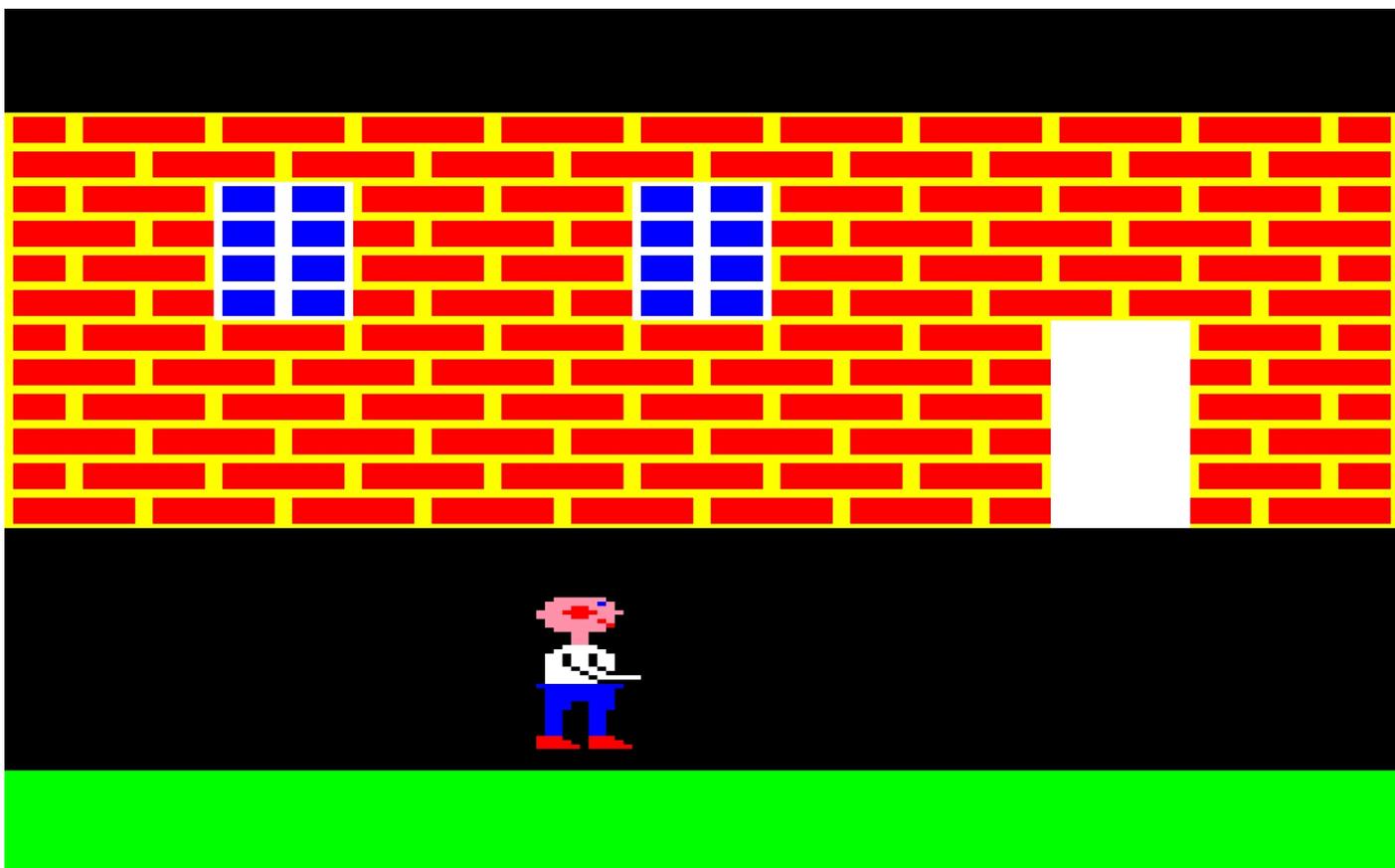
Original Price: 1.99 pounds



It is midnight. A hill overlooks the city. A dark figure stands atop it, gazing down at the lights below. A cold wind whips at its cloak but it does not seem to feel it. A small misshapen creature scabbles to the hilltop, fear etched into its distorted features. The dark figure does not look away from the city as it begins to speak in a low, rasping voice devoid of any positive emotion.

“The plans have finally reached fruition. Soon these people will know true suffering.”

The figure falls silent. Terrified, the creature next to him speaks hesitantly. “Master... Is it time?”



This is from the game's intro sequence. Apparently that's a mansion.

The dark figure turns towards the creature. Under its cowl, its face is a paper-white mask of evil – so twisted by years of seething hatred that it is barely recognisable as human. Its mouth contorts into a terrifying mirthless grin as it spits out the words, “Yes. Release Surprise Surprise for the Amstrad CPC.”

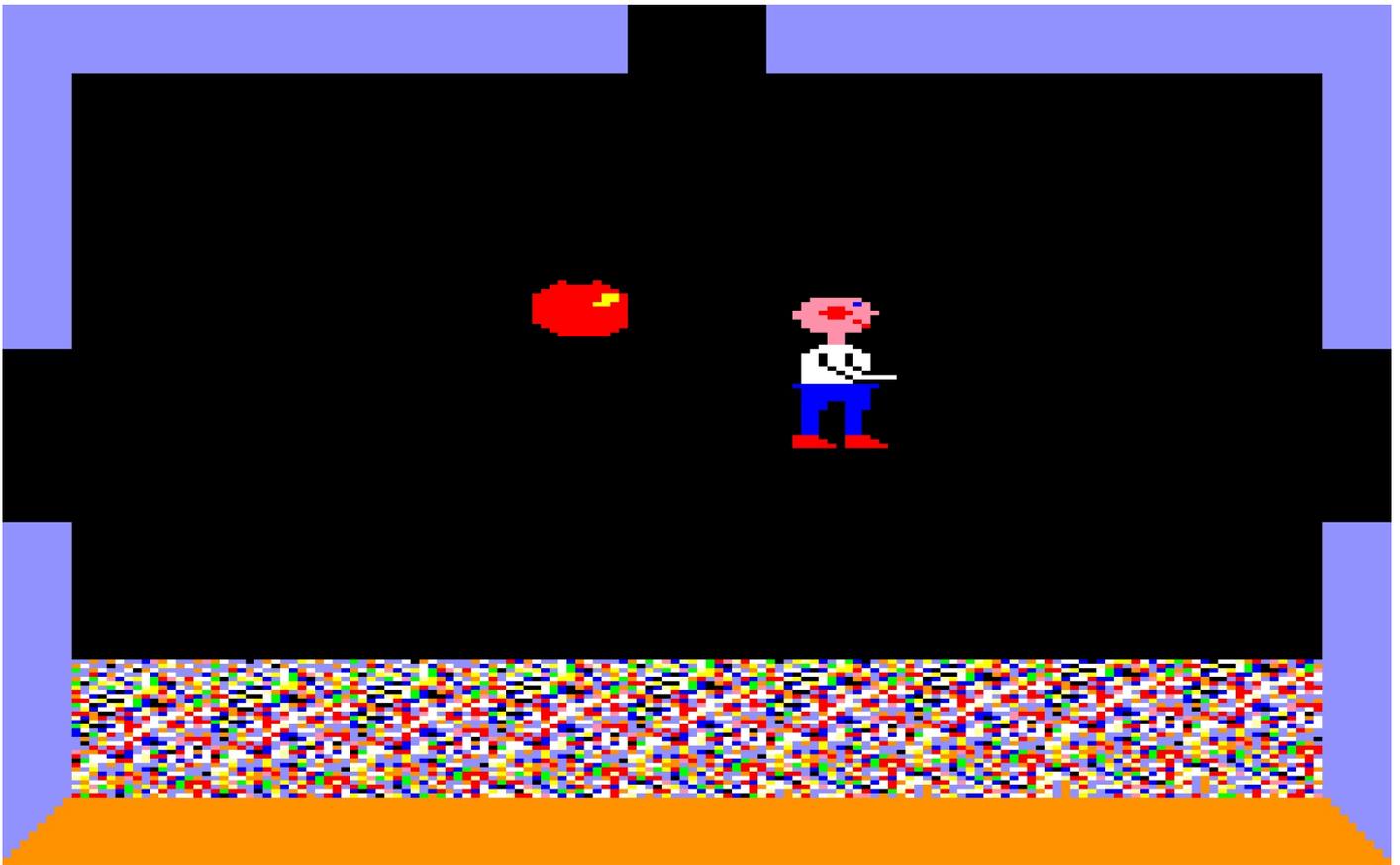
Surprise Surprise is a rare thing – a game that seems to have been actively designed to frustrate and annoy the player to the point of illness. On loading you're presented with a headache-inducing mess of flashing colours, random beeps and randomly generated lines. The result is that your screen looks like it has been smashed, something you'll have the urge to do in real life if you continue and actually play the game.



This is every single frame of animation for the main character.

The cassette inlay reveals a simple plot. You've been invited to a banquet in a 100-room mansion, but on entering you have to find four "clues" to reveal the banquet hall. Also the mansion is full of lethal, giant fruit that flies around everywhere. Yet rather than realise your host is a complete maniac and leave immediately, you decide to take up the challenge! I don't know what's on offer at the banquet, but it must be better than Turkey Twizzlers.

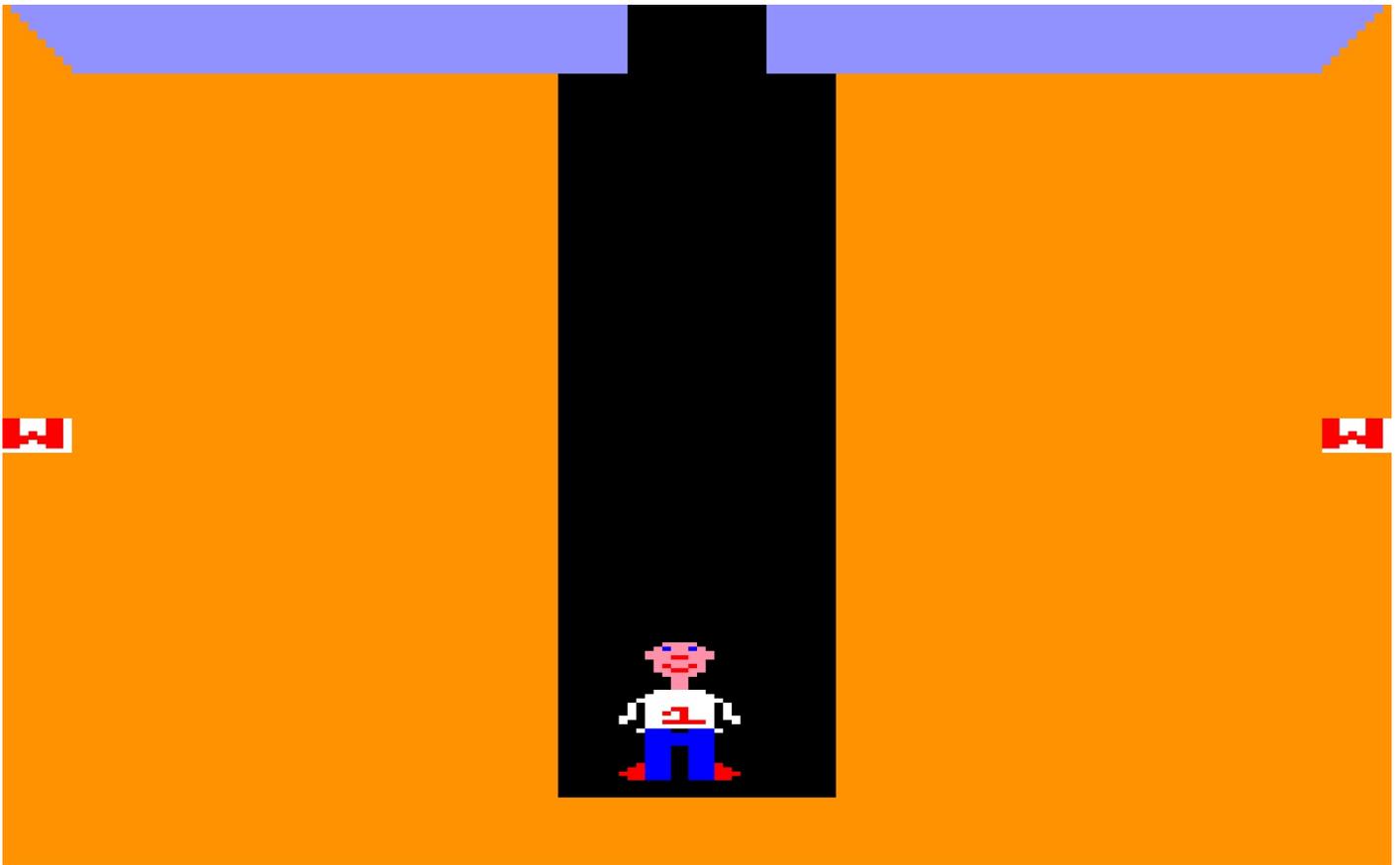
Surprise Surprise is absolutely hideous from the second you take control. The first thing you notice is the main character's ludicrous walking animations – moving left and right resembles a bizarre shuffle, and vertical movement involves his whole body staying rigid while his feet repeatedly dislocate themselves. In a strange design choice, his hair is only visible when he walks upwards.



A red blob falls into some random pixels. Or possibly an apple falls onto the rainbow road to Asgard. Who can tell?

Then you try playing the game, and any remaining hope you may have had for a fun experience evaporates into a cloud of pure hatred. Your character has a seemingly random walk speed: it starts off insanely sluggish in the first room and is even slower in others, to the extent that some screens can take an entire minute to cross. In order to travel from one room to another you have to align yourself precisely with the door gaps or nothing happens, and the alignment isn't precisely based on what's visible which adds an extra layer of annoyance.

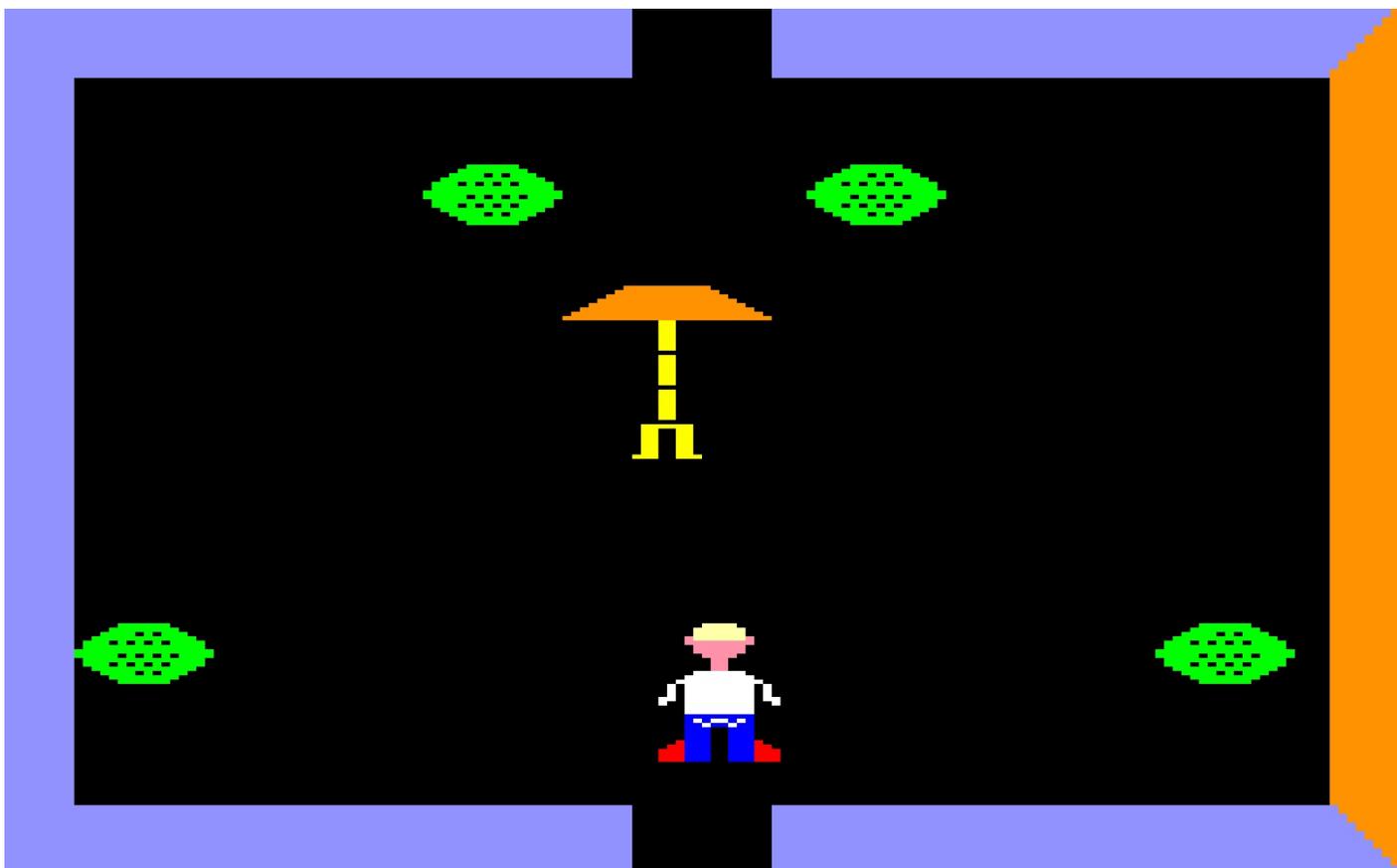
Add these points to dodgy collision detection and it can be almost impossible to avoid the enemies that float around the mansion. That is a shame, as if you touch any of them at any point, it is INSTANTLY game over. There are no lives and no continues. This game can incite levels of frustration so extreme that they can cause nosebleeds.



I apparently found a clue in this dead end! It took 34 seconds to walk to the bottom and then back up again. I hate this game.

But it's the sound that really pushes Surprise Surprise beyond the realms of normal annoyance to somewhere the mind of man should never go. Constantly playing in the background is a hideous cacophony of random bleepy percussion noises. It's like something designed to break the will of captured soldiers that was banned under the third Geneva Convention. And as you've probably guessed, there is no option to turn it off.

As for actually progressing through the game, I only found one of the elusive "clues." Upon walking to the bottom of a weird, brown corridor, the screen flashed and the inevitable Game Over screen appeared. I had apparently been awarded one point out of an available five. Any attempts to take another route through the house led to instant death at the hands of the almost unavoidable enemies. I am a patient man, but this game is actually painful to play.



Our hero impersonates Eminem whilst being hassled by some giant floating limes near the very worst lamp Ikea sells.

The cover art is interesting because it shows a suit of armour shooting lightning from its hand, which has nothing to do with the game whatsoever. This attempt to hide the true nature of the game could possibly explain why it's called Surprise Surprise, as buyers were doubtless surprised by the hideous truth of their purchase. Or maybe the name was supposed to cash in on the television series Surprise Surprise! which was popular at the time.

When a game requires more patience than skill to progress, then its fundamental design is flawed. Surprise Surprise goes way beyond this to a point where it almost seems actively designed to cause the player discomfort. It is a grotesque mockery of an entertainment product.

The writer of the game remained anonymous, presumably so he or she could more easily escape with the money whilst laughing hysterically. Central Solutions Ltd only released two other Amstrad games – a terrible shoot 'em up called Barchou and the dull text adventure Mansion. They released a slew of other text adventures for the Spectrum, some well-regarded, but they never made the jump to the Amstrad.

REVIEW SCORES

Amstrad Action magazine awarded Surprise Surprise 10% and recommended that the reader buy a top of the line Amstrad CPC6128, simply because the game doesn't work on that model. And whilst I don't usually mention internet reviews, I'm going to give the last word to "Ritchardo" from his cpczone.emuunlim.org piece that gives the game zero out of ten: "I'm almost tempted to give it marks for the sheer bloody cheek of releasing this in the first place."

other versions

None. Thank heaven for small mercies.

THE MOST DISAPPOINTING GAME I EVER BOUGHT

by Steve Benway, a retro gaming collector who plays games badly so you can see what they look like



Uranians

Format: Acorn Electron

Year of Release: 1986

Developer: S. Howitt

Publisher: Bug-Byte

Original Price: 2.99 pounds



I was, and still am, a fan of single screen vertical shooters, so when I saw the screen shots on the back of the Uranians cassette case, with lots of descending aliens, a mother ship at the top, and what looked like a really nice glowing effect, I was excited. Something like Phoenix, I thought. Pushing the system to the limit of its capabilities, I thought. Er... not quite.

After the typical five minutes of loading from tape, I hit “play”, and the very first thing that happened was the big mother ship dropped a super-fast bomb which landed a quarter of the way across the screen from me. “Hah! Missed!” would be a reasonable reaction to such a lame attack, except the bomb created an explosion that filled a third of the bottom of the screen. Half a second of game-play... I hadn't even fired, and I'd already lost my first life.

It wasn't all bad. The movement of my ship was fast and responsive, though I'm guessing they used all the CPU cycles to do that, as the aliens' movement was predictable but jerky in a way that made them hard to shoot.

So that early death was just a bad start, you might wonder? Nope. The mother ship proceeded to dump those super-fast bombs with super-wide explosions on a regular basis, and even if they didn't kill you, the explosion would stay in place for around five to ten seconds, leaving you no room to move and allowing the aliens to pick you off.

That just leaves the impressive glowing effect of the graphics, shown in the screen grabs on the sleeve. Yeah, right. They'd just taken a photo of a TV screen, and the glow was from the screen.

Uranians? From Uranus? Yeah... I would say so.

I felt cheated and pretty bloody furious about it. The game was only £2.99, but as a young pup just out of school and suffering the exploitation of what was laughably called the Youth Training Scheme, I couldn't afford to just throw money away. However five minutes playing Uranians did make me want to throw my computer out of the window.

It didn't really change my attitude to buying games, though. I learned not to trust what was written or pictured on the case, but the problem was the Electron wasn't as common as the Spectrum or Commodore 64. As a result, the games were harder to find, and sometimes you just had to take what you could get. The sad truth is I was prepared to settle for really crappy games over no games at all.

Steve can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/user/SteveBenway> and on Twitter at [@SteveBenway](https://twitter.com/SteveBenway)

FACT!

There's also a BBC Micro version which has much nicer music, but it is so fast it's almost uncontrollable.

SQIJ!

Format: ZX Spectrum

Year of Release: 1987

Developer: Jason Creighton

Publisher: The Power House

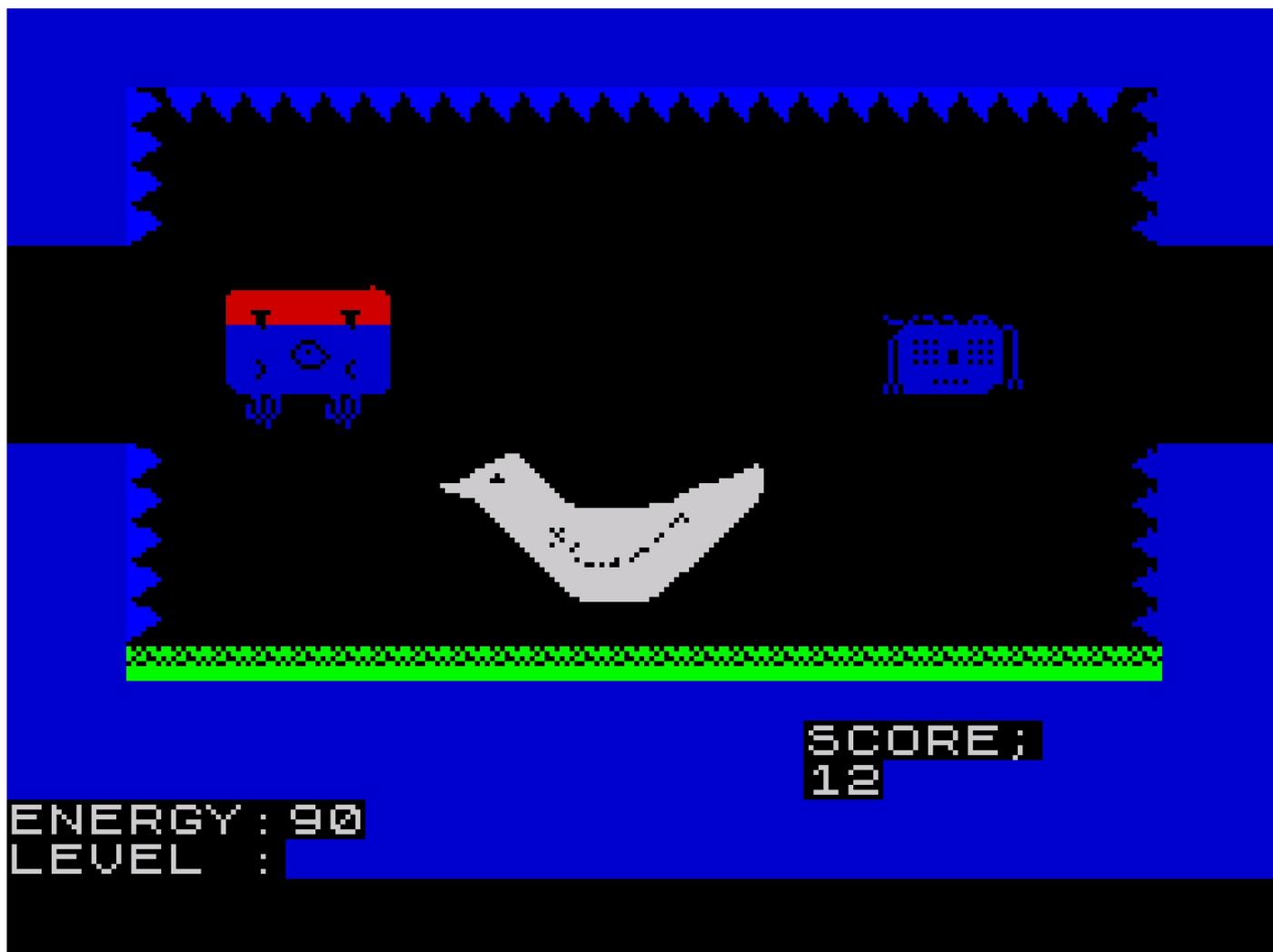
Original Price: 1.99 pounds



This is it. This is the worst game in this book. If anyone ever tells you that the worst commercially released game ever is E.T. for the Atari 2600 or Big Rigs: Over the Road Racing for PC, show them this. In fact, I'm not even sure this is technically a game. It was sold as a game, certainly, but it doesn't actually work as one.

SQIJ! is a conversion of a Commodore 64 game in which a mutant bird called "Sqij" lives in a post-apocalyptic world where food is running out. He must search some caves to find

the parts of the Enertree, which will provide an infinite supply of future comestibles. However, the Spectrum version seems to focus on an immobile piece of folded paper sitting on the floor.



This was all there was to SQIJ! For any buyers who didn't understand the game's code well enough to fix the caps lock problem. Which was about 99% of them.

After starting SQIJ! you are presented with what appears to be a huge origami bird stuck between two scribbles in a dark cave. The scribbles, which look like they've been drawn by a three-year-old girl with her mind on something else, slowly flicker up and down. Your score increases. And that's it forever.

None of the controls listed in the instructions work. No buttons do anything. That's what your £1.99 got you in 1987 – a piece of paper wedged between some flickering infant's scrawl while a number increases.



After moving Sqij about a bit, the screen is a mess of virtual bird droppings as the graphics corrupt.

The problem is the game's code forces caps lock to stay on, but it then only accepts lower case key inputs. Apparently "playtesting" and "quality control" were terms totally missing in whatever alien language The Power House understood. And not only did they release the game in this state, they released it twice – first on its own, and then as part of a compilation.

However! Due to the monstrous, cosmic-level ineptitude of the programming, the BREAK key has not been disabled, so you can dive right into the source code and alter it at whim after pressing a single button. Also, the memory contains the full binaries for Laser Basic, the language the game was programmed in, meaning it effectively contains a pirate copy of a £14.99 utility. This is why testing a game before putting it on shelves and charging people for it is a good idea. So, by stopping the program and switching off caps lock in the memory (That's POKE 23658,0 if you want to try this at home) you can actually play SQIJ!

```

1 GO TO 2
3 PAPER 0: CLS : BEEP 0.1,34:
LET opt=0: LET o=0: INK 7: LET
x=0: LET y=1: LET p=1: LET paz=0
: LET u=10: LET lo=0: BEEP 0.1,9
: BORDER 0: BEEP .2,45
6 LET kl=0: LET ob=0: LET sc=
0: LET trc=0: LET pas=0: LET tre
e=0: LET food=0: LET room=29: LE
T d1=0: LET d2=0: LET d3=0: LET
d4=0: LET d5=0: LET d6=0
7 LET obj3=0: LET obj4=0: LET
obj5=0: LET obj6=0: LET obj7=0:
LET obj8=0: LET obj9=0: LET obj
10=0: LET obj11=0: LET obj12=0:
LET obj13=0: LET obj14=0: LET ob
j15=0: LET obj16=0: LET r=0
8 LET d3=0: LET d4=0: LET d5=
0: LET d6=0: LET xc=0: LET ro=0
9 LET z=0: LET left=0: LET ri
ght=0: LET up=0: LET down=0
10 LET obj1=0: LET obj2=0: LET
POKE 23658,0

```

The start of the source code. Notice that line 1 exists solely to point to line 2. A ridiculous redundancy. Now notice that line 2 doesn't exist.

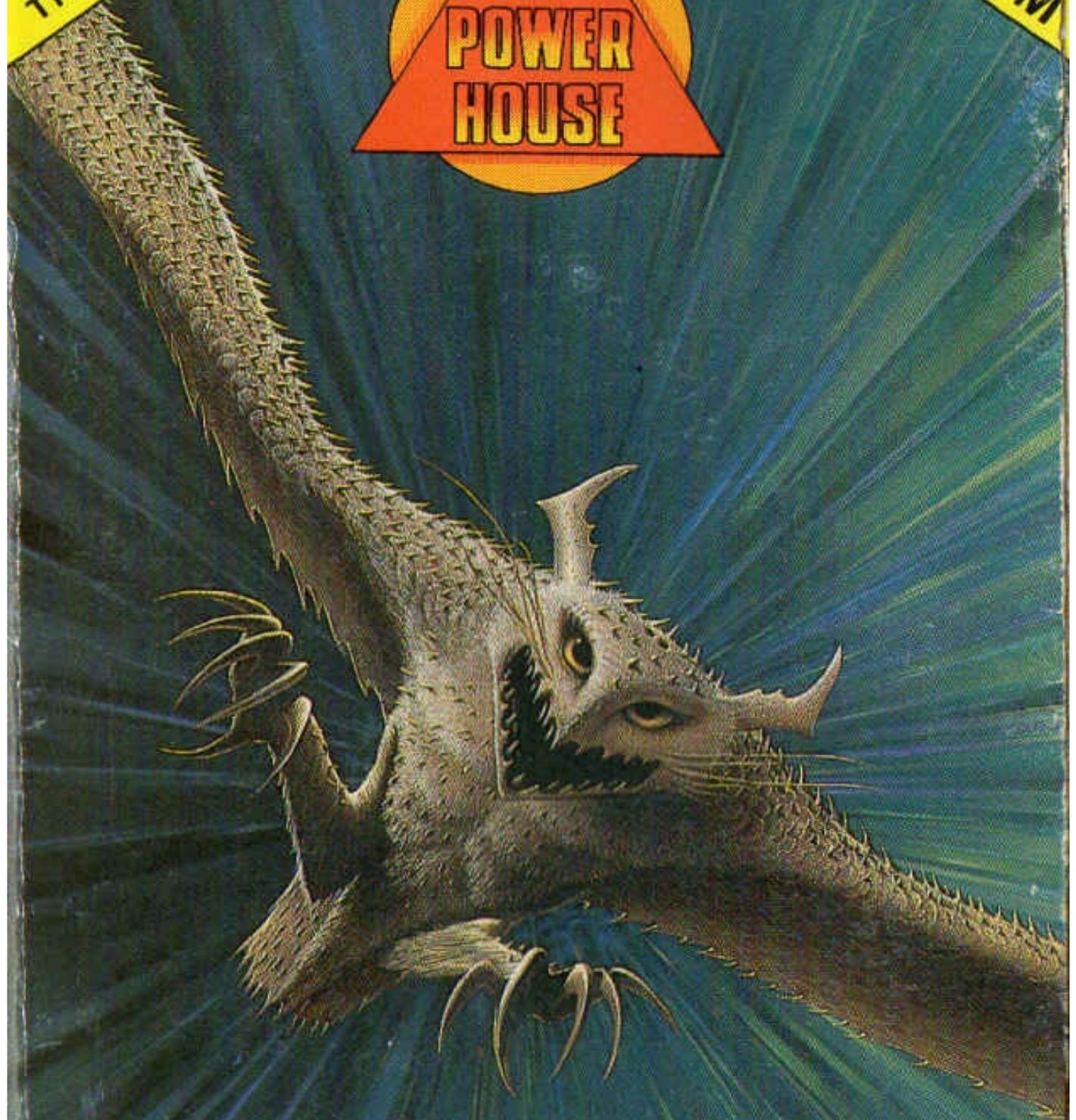
But then things get even worse. Animation is entirely limited to a small spasm on the row of dots representing Sqij's wing. There is no sound other than a few random beeps when the game loads. The instructions list eight control keys, but only four actually do anything, and they are the ones that move you around the screen. Sqij flickers and jerks in a direction if you hold the key down long enough. The scribble enemies move at a glacial pace and stop moving when you do. Graphic glitches are rife – as you move, you leave weird trails and can actually tear parts off the scribbles if you go near them. And ultimately playing the game is futile as any attempt to leave the middle of the screen bounces poor Sqij back and costs him ten energy points. It doesn't matter if you're near an enemy or not; there's no escape.

One odd thing is that when I first played the game on an emulator years ago, I somehow managed to go straight to the exits on each side of the screen (and through the enemies if I recall correctly). One didn't do anything, but going near the other crashed the game. I've not been able to replicate this through emulation or on original hardware, which is heartbreaking, as it means I've spent ages playing SQIJ! when I could have been doing anything else.

FREE
AUDIO
TRACK by H.E.X.

SPECTRUM

THE
POWER
HOUSE

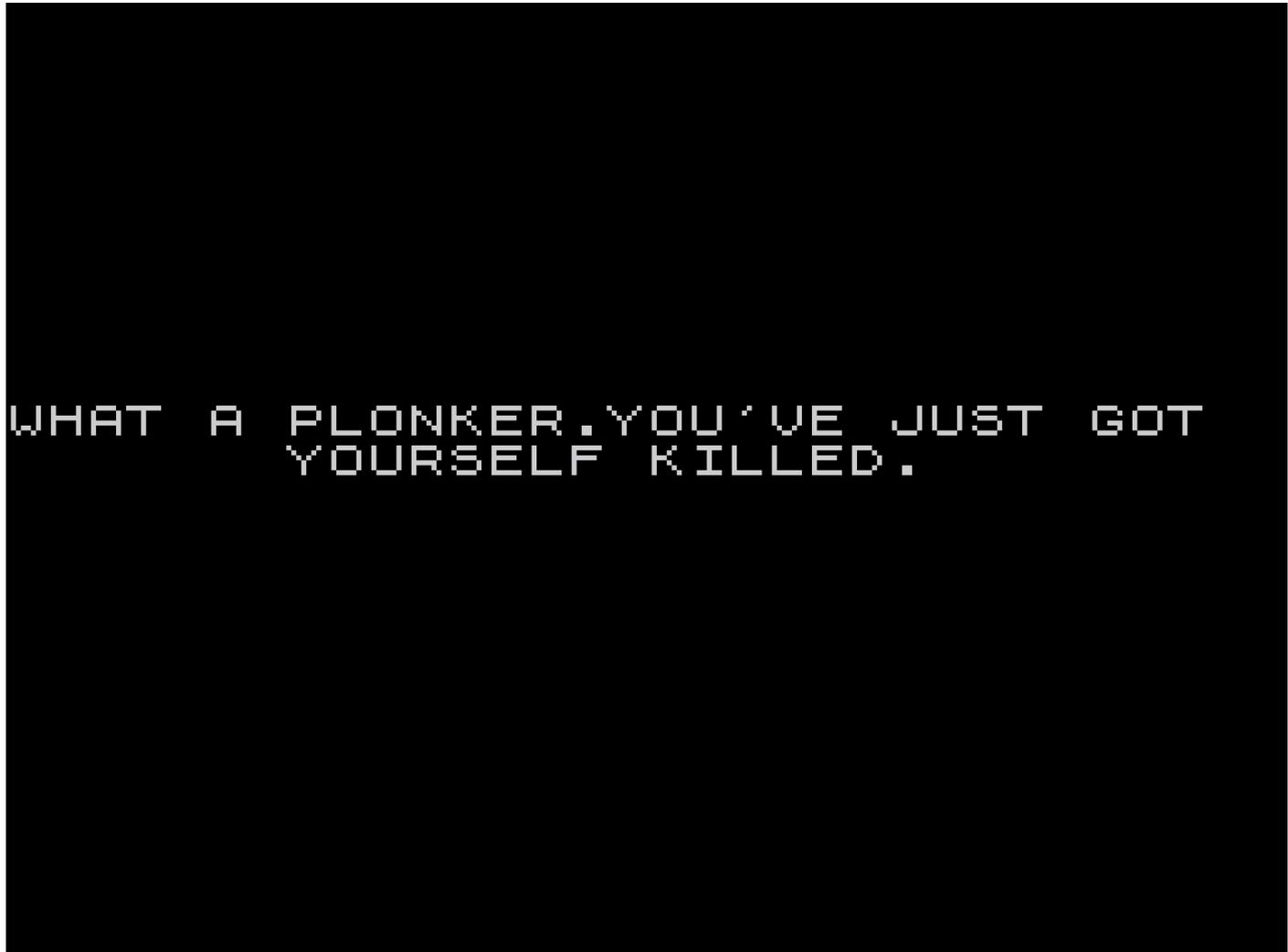


SQIJ!

A scan of my copy of SQIJ! Yes, I paid money for it. Pity me.

Of course SQIJ! isn't the only game to have been released broken, bug-ridden and incomplete. C-Tech's Krazy Kong for the Spectrum was so infamously poor that Computer and Video Games magazine dedicated an entire page to readers' complaints about it. But SQIJ! is the most egregious example I've come across.

By far the best thing about the game is the cover art, which is a shame as it may have enticed people to buy it. The Power House often reused existing art, and this striking, dynamic image of a mutant bat by Tim White is a beautiful example. It was painted for the cover of the 1975 sci-fi novel *Under a Calculating Star* by John Morressy, and it has been used for multiple books since. The screenshots shown on the back of the cassette were from the Commodore 64 version with a note saying "Screen shots may vary from your version", presumably in order to hide the visual horror of the actual version you were buying.



WHAT A PLONKER.YOU'VE JUST GOT
YOURSELF KILLED.

The game over screen, adding insult to already substantial injury.

And SQIJ! just doesn't stop giving! At the time of release, The Power House were adding free audio tracks to their cassettes after the game data. They were promoting the music of a band called H.E.X. (House Electronic Xperience). Presumably they were connected to them in some way. The song on the SQIJ! tape is a repetitive, five minute funk track with semi-audible vocals that sounds like it was recorded on an old tape recorder in a bathroom. There's no title given, but from what I can make out of the lyrics, it's called

something like Swimming Against the Tide of the Time.

So what the hell does SQIJ! mean anyway? Professional video gaming man Larry Bundy Jr suggested to me that it's a corruption of squireon, a colloquial term for a pigeon. As the game stars a bird, I think that's by far the most likely explanation. It annoys me that there's no U after the Q though, as the English language doesn't work like that.



The Power House included digitised photos of programmers in their cassette inlays. Mr Creighton does not appear to be amused.

SQIJ! was written by Jason Creighton, who actually supplied an explanation for the game's startling lack of quality on the Spectrum 2.0 review website. Apparently he was contractually obligated by The Power House to produce the game, but after he fell out with a member of staff, he didn't want to deliver it. After avoiding the issue for a while, he wrote a deliberately terrible game in 40 hours to get them off his back, understanding that they would reject it. But as we all know, they happily duplicated it and sent it off to shops instead.

He also claimed that the caps lock error wasn't in the original game, and that it's possibly caused by modern computers emulating the Spectrum's hardware. I can debunk that immediately – I've played an original copy of the game on both a 48K+ and a 128K+2, and the caps lock error absolutely is present. Maybe it wasn't in the version he sent to The Power House and they added it? Seems unlikely as I very much doubt they paid any attention to it after checking that it loaded up, or they would never have released it...

the background when you enter a new screen. The music is nice, though.

Commodore 16: Wow. This conversion could be an entry into this book on its own merits... or lack thereof. Similar to the C64 version and just as smooth, the positives end there. It's insanely fast, Sqij looks like an apple, every screen has the same weird chain of portraits flying around it, you can't kill anything so your bullets are useless, and there's no sound. Not as frustrating as the C64 version, but worse as a game.

Trench

Format: BBC Micro

Year of Release: 1983

Developer: Unknown

Publisher: Virgin Games

Original Price: 7.99 pounds



The climactic Death Star trench battle in Star Wars is one of the most iconic sequences in cinema. Everyone remembers the exhilaration of watching Luke Skywalker skim along the battle station's surface as half of his friends blew up around him, then seeing him turn off his targeting computer because he heard a dead man's voice. The makers of Trench were obviously fans too, as they shamelessly ripped it off for this game.

Trench doesn't attempt to hide its influences. It specifically refers to "the Empire's Death Star" and "your X-wing fighter" in the instructions, although oddly it refers to TIE fighters as "alien guard ships." The setup is exactly as you would expect – you have to fly along a trench and then shoot an exhaust port the size of a womp rat to blow up the Death Star.



A laser blast narrowly misses the X-wing fighter! Not that the player had any say in the matter.

First impressions are extremely positive. The game starts with a rear view of your fighter flying into the trench as laser blasts hit the walls around you. In the background are constant whooshing noises and the pew-pew of the lasers. Then a siren-like sound starts as a TIE fighter comes flying towards you – it's genuinely exciting as you feel like you've been thrown into the middle of the action, yet it's still easy to take stock of what's going on around you. Then one of the lasers hits you and it's instantly game over, even though you've only been playing for a few seconds. Surprised, you wonder what happened. You start the game again and your second impressions are an awful lot less positive. The hideous, Grand Canyon-sized flaws in the game design become obvious as soon as you fully get your bearings. The first flaw is a disappointment – despite there being a button for "shoot", you cannot attack the TIE fighters. You only have a single shot saved for the exhaust port at the end.

The second flaw utterly cripples the game: the lasers that shoot into the trench appear instantly and at random in the rough area your ship is in. There is zero indication of where

they're coming from and as such they are literally impossible to dodge. All you can do is move around and hope that one doesn't appear on top of you, meaning the game is down to luck rather than skill. And, of course, you have no extra lives, so the slightest hit ends the game immediately.



And that's it – the game is over. And to think they painted that TIE fighter red for nothing.

Other exciting ways to die include hitting one of the TIE fighters that jerk towards you or moving to the extreme edges of the screen where you hit the trench walls. Even travelling to the very top of the screen is enough to end the game, as apparently going “out of trench” invokes an immediate death penalty.

If the Trench gods are on your side, you may survive the short flight to the exhaust point. Here the game switches to a first-person view, showing the exhaust port as a 3D environment made up of a few lines. It runs at about three frames a second, so to say control at this point is sluggish would possibly be the biggest understatement of the century so far. You have to position the tiny port – which inexplicably doesn't get larger the closer you get to it – right in the centre of your targeting reticule before you fire. Your ship is glacially slow in this stage, so it takes ages to line up, and you can only just get a shot in before you smack into the trench wall in front of you. Hit it dead on and – you've guessed it! – you still continue onwards and smack into the wall. The “Game Over” message states, “You have destroyed the Empire's Death Star, but at the loss of your own

life.” I suppose it may be possible to escape in the handful of movement frames left, but I’ve not come close to working out how.

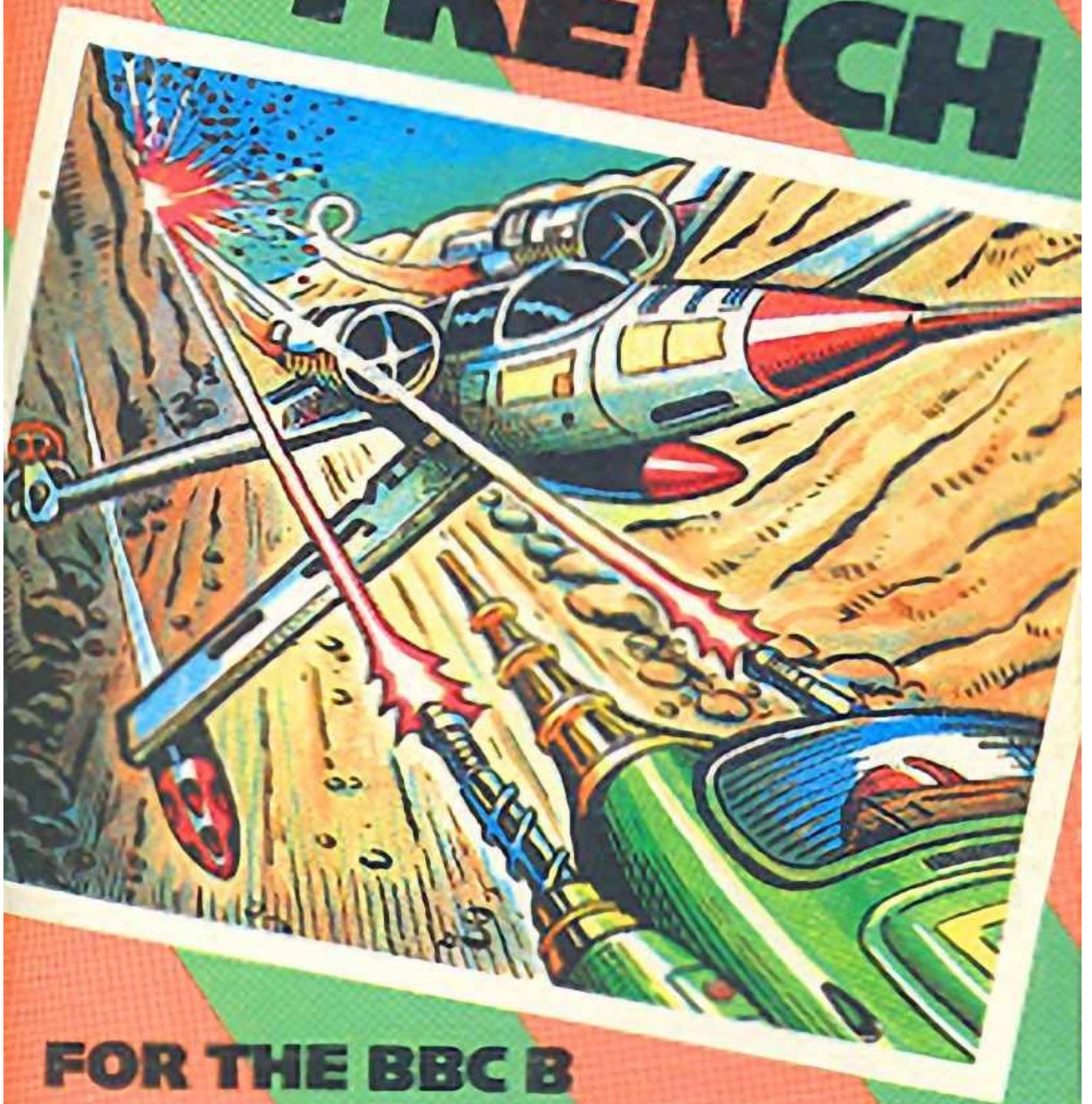


Whoops. Sorry everyone!

Trench is one of the most frustrating games I’ve ever played. But if that irritation isn’t enough for you, the difficulty level can be cranked up, which increases the frequency of the laser blasts and thus the likelihood of instantly losing the game due to circumstances utterly beyond your control.

Games

TRENCH



FOR THE BBC B

No, Mister Copyright Lawyer. That's definitely not an X-wing fighter. Not at all.

REVIEW SCORES

None. The only reference I could find to Trench anywhere in a magazine was an advert selling it in January 1984, which is why I've assumed a release date of sometime in 1983.

other versions

None. Just play Death Star Interceptor on the ZX Spectrum instead, as it takes the same basic idea, but the outcome is actually based on some measure of skill rather than blind luck.

THE MOST DISAPPOINTING GAME I EVER BOUGHT

by Violet Berlin, who made TV shows about games in the nineties and the norties, and is now a scriptwriter for games & other interactive media



Castlevania II: Simon's Quest

Format: Nintendo Entertainment System

Year of Release: 1987 (1990 UK)

Developer: Konami

Publisher: Konami

Original Price: Approx. 34.99 pounds



I loved the first Castlevania on NES. Sooo much. I went hours and hours saying “just one more go”, unable to stop playing, faint from hunger, and staying up all night.

Then Castlevania II came out. Reviewers loved its genre-breaking boldness – it introduced RPG elements and cryptic clues. Amazing! Except that the clues were too cryptic, or even non-existent in some puzzles, and I now know that subtleties lost in the English translation were partly to blame.

Castlevania II was a closed book to me. Or, rather, it was an exciting book that wouldn't open. Today you can just go on the net and find a walkthrough. Not so in those days. I was the only person I knew who played video games, so I was out in the cold with this one.

Reading about Castlevania II now, with hindsight, it is acknowledged that it didn't give proper clues, and without a walkthrough, it was almost impossible to know what to do. Apparently there was one in Nintendo Power magazine back in the day, but I didn't see it.

So even though Castlevania II had great promise, it was actually a mean trick... an impossible game that the reviewers probably got help with. The screen I was stuck on is still burnt into my memory, and I didn't play any Castlevania games after that.

You can find Violet on Twitter at [@VioletBerlin](https://twitter.com/VioletBerlin)



FACT!

The most infamously opaque puzzle in Castlevania II involves the following two clues: “HIT DEBORAH CLIFF WITH YOUR HEAD TO MAKE A HOLE” and “WAIT FOR A SOUL WITH A RED CRYSTAL ON DEBORAH CLIFF”. What you actually have to do is kneel down in a specific place after equipping yourself with a red crystal and wait a few seconds, at which point a tornado takes you further into the game. Unbelievable. The infinitely clearer Japanese version of the second clue states “PRESENT THE RED CRYSTAL IN FRONT OF DEBORAH’S CLIFF AND WAIT FOR THE WIND”, which implies that the translation was completed by a partially concussed nitwit.

ULTRA SUPER REFUND ADVENTURE
TURBO REVIVAL CHAMPIONSHIP
EDITION EX PLUS ALPHA

A text adventure for very all ages

1

It is 1987. You bought a copy of AIRBORNE RANGER for the COMMODORE 64 but the tape does not work. You are DISAPPOINTED.

You are in your bedroom. You have a RECEIPT and a NON-WORKING CASSETTE.

What now...?

> RETURN THE GAME TO THE SHOP

> PRAY TO HACIN, GOD OF LOADING ERRORS

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

2

You walk along the HIGH STREET towards the shop you bought AIRBORNE RANGER from. You pass a NEWSAGENTS.

What now...?

> STOP OFF AND BUY A BOTTLE OF FIZZY DRINK

> CONTINUE TO THE GAME SHOP

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

3

You light INCENSE and intone the sacred words “SHIFT/RUN STOP” that open a direct channel to HACIN. His HOLY VISAGE fades into view above your bed.

You tell HACIN of your woes, but he is ANGRY. He says that your FEALTY is in question as you have occasionally used your BIG TOE to press play on your DATASETTE - a grave SIN.

Before you can respond he shoots a STRING OF RIGHTEOUS FLAME from his SACRED NOSTRILS and you are burned alive.

You are DEAD. THE END.

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

4

You enter the NEWSAGENTS. You survey a REFRIDGERATOR full of FIZZY DRINKS. You choose a bottle of CORONA ORANGEADE, as it is a long defunct brand that poses no potential LEGAL PROBLEMS if used in this TEXT ADVENTURE.

You REMINISCE about the CORONA MAN, a driver who used to deliver CORONA drinks directly to your house. Although the service still exists in 1987, it is becoming UNCOMMON due to broad changes in the SHOPPING HABITS of contemporary consumers.

You also REMINISCE about their ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN based around anthropomorphic BUBBLES passing a “fizzical” examination before they were deemed WORTHY to appear in the drinks.

Unfortunately your REMINISCING has resulted in more TEXT in this entry than anticipated, and your BRAIN reacts violently to the surfeit of POINTLESS CAPITALISATION that this text parser uses. You fall to the floor TWITCHING violently as your CEREBELLUM haemorrhages. BLOOD streams from your NOSE. The NEWSAGENT calls an ambulance but is too late.

You are DEAD. THE END.

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

5

You enter SMITHSON MICROS, the independent VIDEO GAME SHOP you bought AIRBORNE RANGER from. It smells like a WRESTLER'S ARMPIT.

JON SMITHSON, the shop owner, greets you as you enter.

What now...?

> ATTEMPT TO RETURN THE GAME

> HUM THE SONG "THE ONLY WAY IS UP"

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

6

You give JON SMITHSON the RECEIPT and NON-WORKING CASSETTE. He apologises and explains that he has no other copies of AIRBORNE RANGER in stock.

What now...?

> ASK FOR A CASH REFUND

> EXCHANGE THE GAME FOR ANOTHER OF EQUAL VALUE

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

7

You begin to hum the song “THE ONLY WAY IS UP” by YAZZ AND THE PLASTIC POPULATION. Unfortunately it was not released until 1988, and this ANACHRONISTIC EVENT causes a rip in the SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM.

The very FABRIC OF EXISTENCE tears asunder and all of PHYSICAL REALITY collapses in on itself, forming a SINGULARITY that will serve as a COSMIC EGG for the birth of a new UNIVERSE.

You are DEAD. THE END.

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

8

You receive £14.99 in cash from JON SMITHSON and return home even more DISAPPOINTED than before.

Unfortunately he pays you back partially in FILTHY COINS, which are covered in VICIOUS GERMS. You contract multiple forms of INFLUENZA simultaneously and DIE within 48 hours.

You are DEAD. THE END.

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

9

You look over the shelves for a suitable REPLACEMENT GAME. You are tempted by two different titles.

The first is KNIGHT GAMES 2, a sequel to your favourite MEDIEVAL FIGHTING GAME. The second is KNIGHT ORC, a TEXT ADVENTURE with cool box art.

What now...?

[> CHOOSE KNIGHT GAMES 2](#)

[> CHOOSE KNIGHT ORC](#)

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

10

You take KNIGHT GAMES 2 back home and load it up.

You reel in HORROR as you discover that the game bears no RESEMBLANCE to its predecessor - it is inexplicably a SIMPLISTIC ACTION GAME set in the year 3002. Enraged beyond RATIONAL THOUGHT, you hurl the box at the wall. As it comes to rest you notice the PRICE LABEL.

KNIGHT GAMES 2 only cost £9.99, but you paid £14.99 for AIRBORNE RANGER. Not only have you ended up with a NAFF GAME, but JON SMITHSON has ripped you off. Your anger builds to such a level that your ENTIRE HEAD explodes violently.

You are DEAD. THE END.

NO CHEATING!

Please go back and choose a path

You take KNIGHT ORC back home and load it up.

You SMILE SMUGLY as you discover the game is an excellent SPRAWLING ADVENTURE set across three distinct scenarios. You have CHOSEN WISELY and overcome all obstacles in your path to achieve the BEST POSSIBLE OUTCOME.

Then you SUDDENLY DIE for no reason whatsoever.

You are DEAD. THE END.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer thanks and appreciation to:

- Mike Cook, without whom this book would not exist.
- The team at Unbound for all their work and believing in this book in the first place.
- ChinnyHill10 for kindly checking that I hadn't messed up the technical details of the Amstrad CPC.
- Sarah Watts for her useful advice on equestrian matters.
- Brad Taylor, who independently confirmed my research into Sam Coupé games only for none of the information to be used... yet.
- The unknown army of people who scan old video game magazines and upload them to the Internet.
- People who watch my YouTube videos, as without them I'd have nothing. And that would be rubbish.

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Paper-white mask of evil

POINTS DOUBLE

Purple sloth

Sock-faced elk

Strategy Alpha

Unmade beds

Terrible Names You've Probably Never Heard Of

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A tiny Asian man with 17 Welsh sex slaves
"An Excellent Bryan Goldsmith"
AnthonyGiants AnthonyGiants
Akwa
BADMAN 2
The Baryshnikov Twins
Big Hairy Marty
Brandon and Becky
[CITATION NEEDED]
Dom and Faye
GameGlitchGuy G3
Geoffrey, The Meownarch of Kittenia
[INSERT NAME HERE]
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Mackenzie & Yivo
Michael Kitch and Sam Clements
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R M.
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Bart Zuidgeest. Someone You've Probably Never Heard Of. Also someone whose last name you'll find unpronounceable if you're not Dutch. You know, this text box seems to go on forever. I wonder how long I can make my name. Maybe get the entire book in here...

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This edition first published in 2015

Unbound

6th Floor, Mutual House, 70 Conduit Street, London W1S 2GF

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Text Design by Friederike Huber

Art direction by Friederike Huber

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78352-256-9(trade hbk)

ISBN 978-1-78352-266-8 (ebook)

ISBN 978-1-78352-257-6 (limited edition)