May 2015

Issue 5

THE SPECTRUM SHOW
Magazine

ULTIMATE
PLAY THE GAME
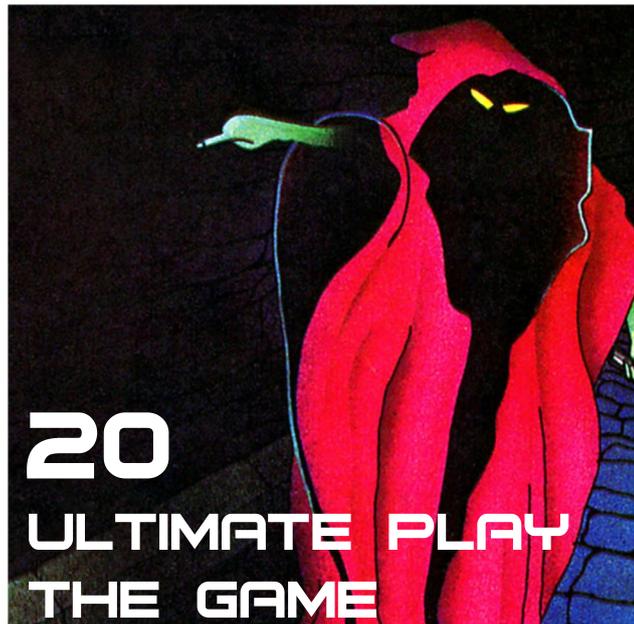### SPECIAL

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FLASHBACK 85

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SPECIAL FEATURES

Includes material not in the show!

The magazine of the show dedicated to the Sinclair ZX Spectrum

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EDITORIAL

Hello and welcome to issue 5 of The Spectrum Show Magazine.

Keen eyed readers will spot a few more tweaks to the general layout of the magazine, nothing too drastic just a few bits of tidying up. I think I am settled now, so there should be less changes in the next few issues at least.

This issue as you already know, covers the first part of the Ultimate Play The Game story. A company that took the gaming world by storm and proved just what the humble Spectrum could do.

Some people bemoan the company, especially in the later years, but personally I believe they changed the opinions of game players and software companies in 1983.

Like any young industry, there were the pretenders, companies making big promises in adverts but had poor quality games - C-Tech anyone? There were the enthusiasts, people who wanted to keep learning, keep pushing, and you can see this evolution in their games - Quicksilva are prime examples.

Then there were the professionals. The people who worked in similar industries and saw an opportunity based on the current quality of games, and this is where I would place Ultimate.

When they released Jetpac it had two affects. First it made other companies up their game. They had to if they were to compete. Secondly it made the game players change their expectations.

They now knew what the Spectrum could do and would no longer settle for poorly written buggy games.

For that alone I think they deserve thanks, but they did more than that. They kept pushing and introduced a whole new genre to the market, isometric games.

There were games similar before Ultimate released Knight Lore, games like Ant Attack and All Or Nothing from Abbex, but Ultimate again raised the bar.

Yes, they did fade in later years and the take-over by US Gold certainly didn't help, but by then they had already been looking to change markets.

Another group of people who continually push the Speccy are the demo groups. They systematically create new effects and dazzling graphics, multi-coloured images and multi-channel music.

The Spectrum is very much alive and it will be interesting to see the new Spectrum Vega when it arrives. Will it bring in a whole new league of fans or will it become another below par attempt to fall short.

Interesting times.
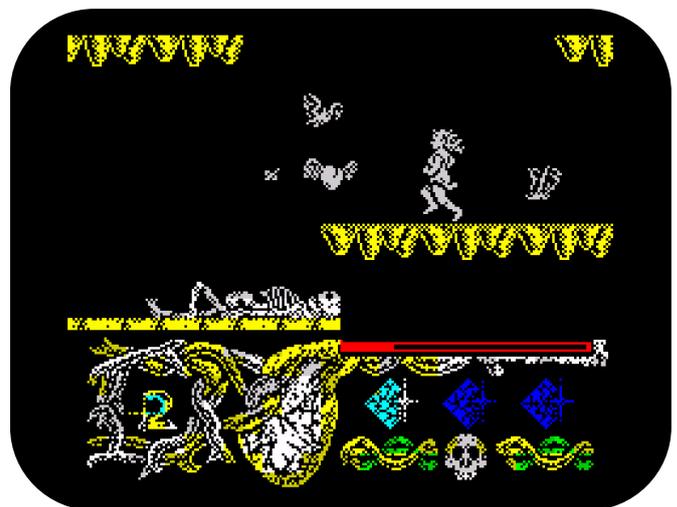
NEWS FROM 1985

SINCLAIR SHOCK!

Sinclair have run into trouble trying to finance future projects and maintain profits. Sinclair Vehicles, set up to produce the new electric car, the C5, may have to be sold. This has raised concerns over the future of the company itself.

Sir Clive confirmed the company need to raise between £10m and £15m pounds to be able to continue, and he also stated he would be stepping down as Chief Executive, although he will continue to be Chairman.

Sinclair have been given additional credit terms by some suppliers in a bid to help and some, like Thorn EMI and Philips, have been approached with a view to buying a stake in the company.

In a shock announcement later in the month, it was announced that Clive Sinclair had sold the company to publisher Robert Maxwell, and in doing so reducing his stake in the company from 80% to around 20%. He also stepped down as chairman.

Sinclair Research, the company that gave the world the ZX80, ZX81 and Spectrum now belongs to Hollis, a subsidiary of Pergamon Press – a Maxwell company.

Clive Sinclair wants to form a new company solely focused on research, and rumours that he may try to buy MetaLabs with 10% of his stakes are also circulating.

The company, estimated to be worth over £130m last year, is now said to be worth around just £12m.

Very sad news for all Spectrum owners, but the company will continue.

Following the news, other stories concerning the knock-on effects of the announcement began to filter out. Timex reduced their manufacturing capacity, meaning the loss of 400 jobs and Sire Clive's role was confirmed; he will head up a new company called Sir Clive Sinclair Ltd and offer services to Sinclair Research.

Hoover, the company that manufacture the C5 electric car claim they are about to serve a writ on Sinclair Vehicles for non-payment. The write will be for £1.5m of unpaid debt.

OCEAN ARCADE DEAL

Ocean software have signed a deal with Japanese arcade game producer Konami.

This will allow the Manchester based software house to release 8 versions of arcade games across several formats including the Spectrum.

Games to watch out for include Hypersports, Tennis, Yie Ar Kung Fu, Hyper Rally, Golf and Ping Pong.

DIXONS DEAL

Dixons has announced they are to sell a Spectrum bundle that will include everything a user will need.

The deal will cost £199 and include a Spectrum+, a Sinclair flat screen TV, a ZX Printer and a software bundle including Space Raiders, Hungry Horace, Vu-3D and chess.

The move is seen as a clearance of old stock by the high-street chain, as Sinclair stopped selling the ZX printer a year ago and many of the software titles are quite old.

RELIABILITY MEASURES

In a bid to produce accurate and reliable figures for faulty hardware, Sinclair and other companies are going to participate in a new monitoring experiment.

At the moment it is difficult for buyers to get accurate data about the return rate of a particular computer, reading figures in various magazines that are often inflated and trying to see through the figures quoted by the companies – obviously trying to play down any issues.

Some magazines claim that over 30% of Spectrums are returned while Sinclair state that it is much lower, at around 12%.

The new scheme will see a two part card shipped with every Spectrum. Upon finding a fault, one half is sent to Sinclair to initiate the repair, the other half is sent to a trade newspaper, so that figures can be accurately recorded.

PIRACY IS ILLEGAL

With a recent change in the copyright bill, it is now illegal to pirate commercial games, and software houses are hoping that this will stop the thieves from ripping of the public and taking their profits away.

The MP William Powel, who initiated this bill states that the pirates must now stop, because what they are doing is illegal.

Copying games at home, so say many software houses, is killing the business, with lost revenue causing many companies to become bankrupt.

SLOW SINCLAIR

Sinclair have admitted that production of its computers have been slowing down since Christmas as demand for its products has decreased.

They are said to be disappointed, and even with a turnover of more than £100m, they say they are looking for new ways to keep the cash flowing.

They hope the new flat screen TV will help, but as the new 16 bit machines begin to appear, could the 8 bit micros be under threat?

SPELLING AID

We all take spell-checkers for granted now, but in 1985 they were a rarity, especially on home computers, where they practically didn't exist.
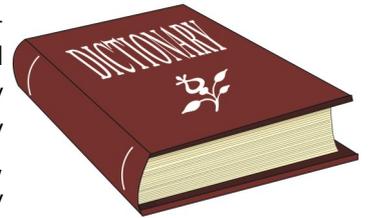
Tasman, makers of the excellent TasWord word processor for various computers, have released a spell checking program that will allow users of its software to check and correct their spelling.

A step in the right direction for many small businesses that use home micros to run their concerns.

PIMAN PRIZE CLAIMED

Pimania, the advanture game from Automata UK, was one of the few games to offer a prize for the first person to complete it, but this game was different. Not only did you have to solve the game, but also work out a location, date and time from the clues and turn up there to be able to claim the prize.

In this instance it was the golden sundial of Pi said to be worth £6000. The prize was originally offered when the game was released in 1982 and some thought it was all a hoax, as it was never claimed.

The main problem was of course, it could only be collected at a given location on a given date, meaning there was only one chance per year.

But, against all odds and to the surprise of the doom-sayers, it was finally claimed on 22nd July by Sue Cook and Liz Newman, who turned up at the chalk horse in Sussex to meet the Piman and collect their prize.

Activision 1987
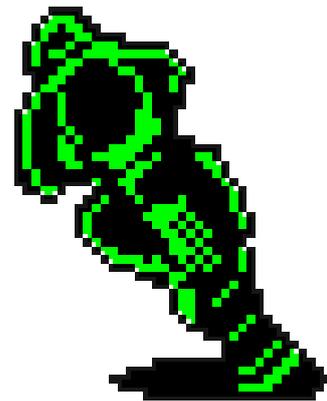
EnduroRacer was an arcade racing hit from Sega, released into the arcades in 1986.

The cabinet had a sit-on motorbike that allowed you to experience the thrills of racing through various terrains, dodging other riders and jumping over them by using logs. Like Pole Position earlier, the controls provided a much better control and feedback mechanism, immersing the player into the race.

The gameplay and 3D graphics in the arcade were great, and it wasn't long before the home conversions began to arrive.

With the fast silky visuals of dedicated arcade hardware to copy, how would the Spectrum version match up?

The game came in a large box with attractive cover design, matching that of the arcade flyer and came in two versions. One for the 48k machines and one for the 128k models. The game for both was identical with only the sound being different as you would expect.

On the 48k version you get just the rattling sound of the engine, the 128k version however gave you a nice engine sound and a very irritating tune that keeps repeating, and doesn't seem to give you a choice to turn it off.

Both versions have the same gameplay though, which follows the arcade machine with log jumps, changing scenery, time limits and other riders.

The game mechanics are slightly different to the arcade, but players wouldn't notice them unless, like me, they jumped straight from the arcade version to the Spectrum version within a few minutes.
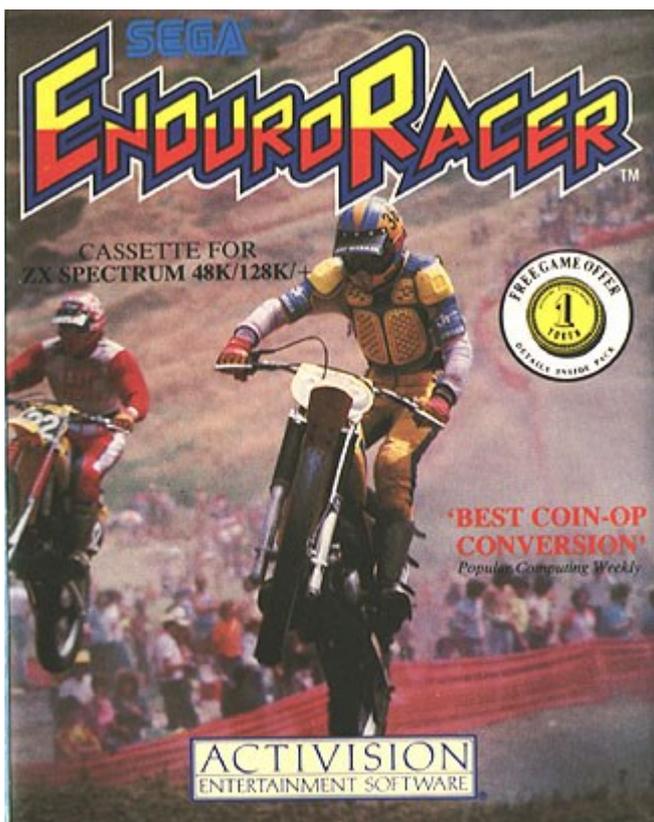
Graphics wise the Spectrum version looks really nice, with well drawn and animated sprites that are large, and react well to controls. I prefer the style to that of the arcade strangely enough, they seem a lot more defined to me.

Things move along smoothly at a nice rate, with the road giving a good sense of speed and the horizon slides left and right as you take corners. This, plus the great sprites make the game look just fantastic.

The difficulty is in my opinion, slightly harder than the arcade game because of the subtle differences between this and the arcade machine.

The arcade version was tricky during the jumps, you had to pull a wheelie just before the log to make sure you cleared the rocks at the other side, this is easier on the Spectrum version. However the Spectrum version is a little more unforgiving on the corners, forcing you to slow down to avoid hitting road side obstacles much more than the arcade.

You also get more large rocks in stage two compared to the arcade, which causes the difficulty to increase and it can become a little frustrating continually hitting these when you are trying to get back onto the race.

The Spectrum version can also feel sluggish at times, especially when accelerating just after you have fallen off, but this is to be expected, the machine doesn't have the dedicated hardware of the arcade, and in general the arcade machine is faster.

This doesn't take anything away from the Spectrum version though, which is a great achievement and a
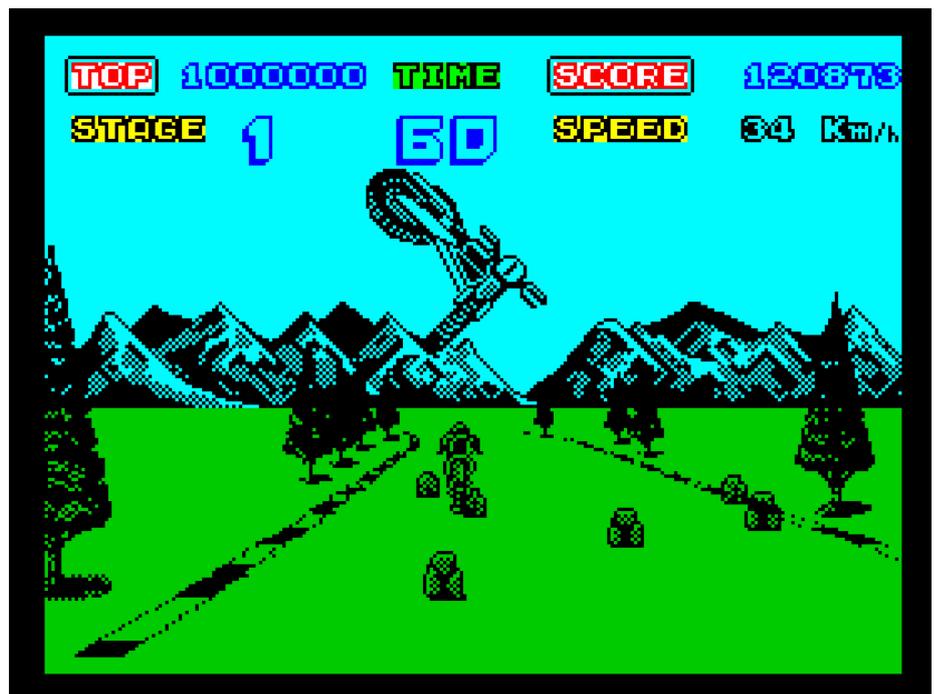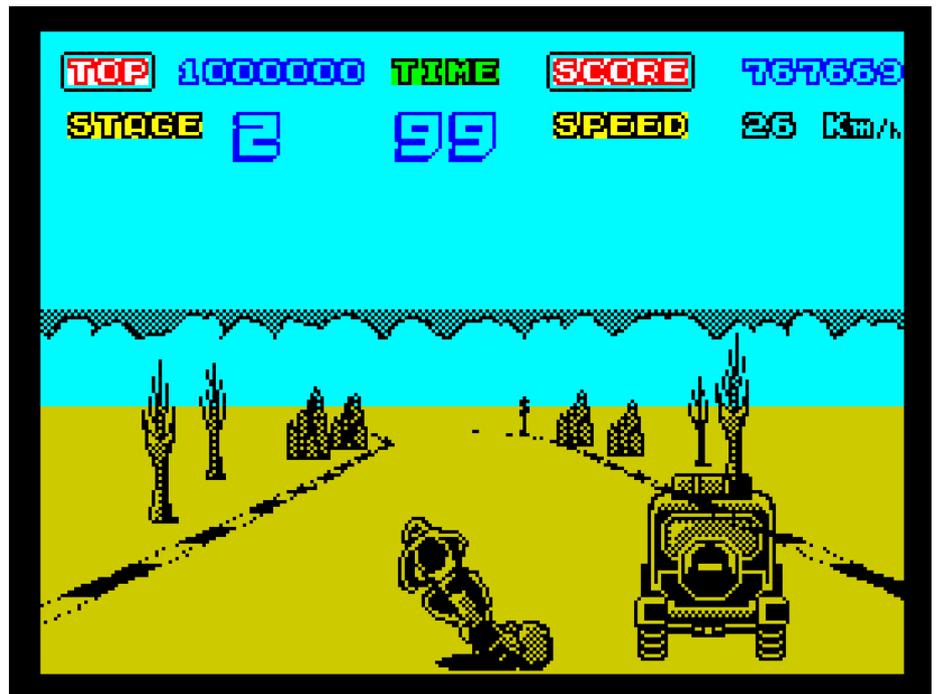
brilliant conversion.

All of the arcade levels have been included, all of the animation and all of the gameplay, it's a race fans dream.
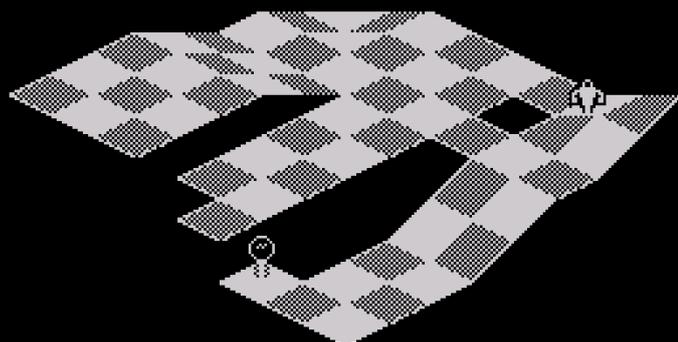
A cracking game all round then and highly recommended.

REVEAL

Mastertronic 1989

REVEAL Ian SCORE=000570 HI=000000

LEFT 07   TIME 33

REVEAL Ian SCORE=004410 HI=000640

LEFT 13   TIME 15

Reveal was released in 1989 by Mastertronic and cost just £1.99. You can't even buy it for that on eBay these days.

The cover is packed with text, limiting the cover graphics, which does not really indicate what the game is about, unless you look carefully.

You play a member of the Planetary Liberation Force whose job is to travel to various planets and free them from the darkness. How is this achieved? May by just turning on a light – no, you have to travel around a 3D grid changing the base colour.

Before each level, the full grid, or world, is shown and then becomes invisible. It's now down to you to turn on those tiles.

Once all the tiles are lit, the exit tiles flashes and reaching that allows you to travel to the next world.

Beware though, it is possible to become trapped when the exit tile is enabled, some other blocks close off and cannot be used. It is very frustrating to find yourself blocked in and unable to complete the level!

Levels have to be complete is a time limit too, so there is no time to stand about and plan your route especially when there are also aliens wondering about. These sometimes bring darkness to your previous illuminated tiles.

The game is a mixture of Marble Madness and Q-Bert and the concept is simple enough.

The time limit is sometimes a little too harsh, and more time would have been better in my opinion, especially in the early levels when you are getting used to the controls. These are tricky as the game is isometric 3D and the joystick just doesn't work that way. Using the keyboard is a better option, as you get set keys that correspond with the actual diagonal direction.

Graphics are monochrome, which was normal for this type of 3D game, and are smooth and well defined.

Sound reminds me of early Quicksilva games, but is adequate and suits the game well.

Remove the frustrating game-ending blocks and tight time limits and this could have been a great little game. I know it only costs £1.99, but it could have been so much better. Still, well worth a play though.

GOMMY

Retroworks 2009

Released in 2009 by Retroworks, Gommy Medieval Defender is certainly not a unique game, and the concept has been done many times before, but this game just does it better.

The idea is a simple one, as many of the best games are. You have to defend a castle from invading troops armed with only a supply of large rocks. As the enemy arrive, they begin to slowly climb the wall and our hero must grab a rock and hurl it down to stop them.

New rocks appear at either the left or right of the screen depending on where Gommy was when he last dropped one.

The initial levels ease you into the game, but things soon start to heat up as other elements are introduced like areas of the wall that stop the rock. You can use these to kill enemy soldiers that are about to move around it, so planning is important..

As the levels progress, so does the speed and number of enemies until it becomes a frantic grab and drop fest.

There are end of level boss battles too, to break up the game play, and these feature some very colourful graphics.,

The in-game graphics are very colourful with some nice level introductions and the music and sound are well done.

Control is very responsive, all the things you need for a great game. And the gameplay is just right. You always want to go back and try just one more time.

A great game that you should try when you next have half an hour to spare..

But don't be surprised if you find yourself playing a lot longer.

Highly recommended.
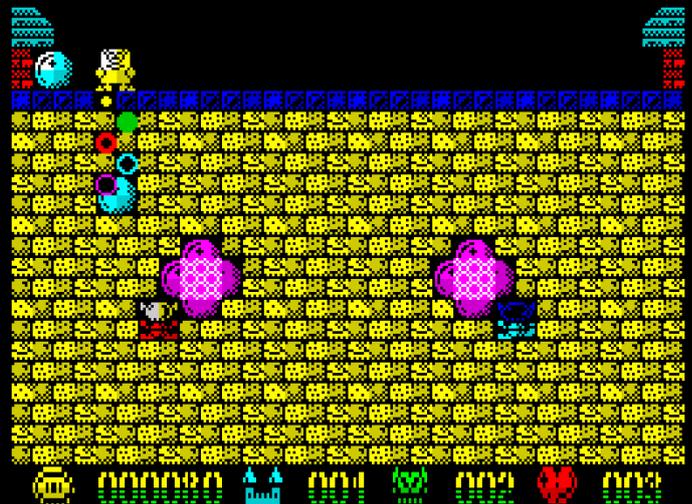
INVADERS

DK'Tronics 1983

Space Invaders is probably the most converted arcade game ever. It's simple but addictive gameplay meant it was easily transferable to both the home micro market and the consoles and TV Game machines.

Every micro had its fair share of clones and the Spectrum was no different, and in fact I covered them in Episode 1 of the show.

This then is Invaders, released by DK'Tronics in 1983 for the 16K Spectrum.

The invaders line up across the screen and move along much as you would expect, however, their path is not smooth. They move in 8 pixel jumps, line by line, making the whole fleet look rather odd.

There is the usual barricades to hide underneath, but these are much larger than the arcade.

You small ship, or laser, or gun, or whatever it is supposed to be, guards the bottom of the screen.

Using keys 6,7 and 0, the gameplay does not need introducing, and this version does have some nice playability despite the juddering graphics.

Sound is used well with some nice zaps and blurps, and the game includes the usual mechanics of faster aliens the more you shoot.

The aliens do change colour as they get lower, and getting the last few is quite tricky.

An average version all round.
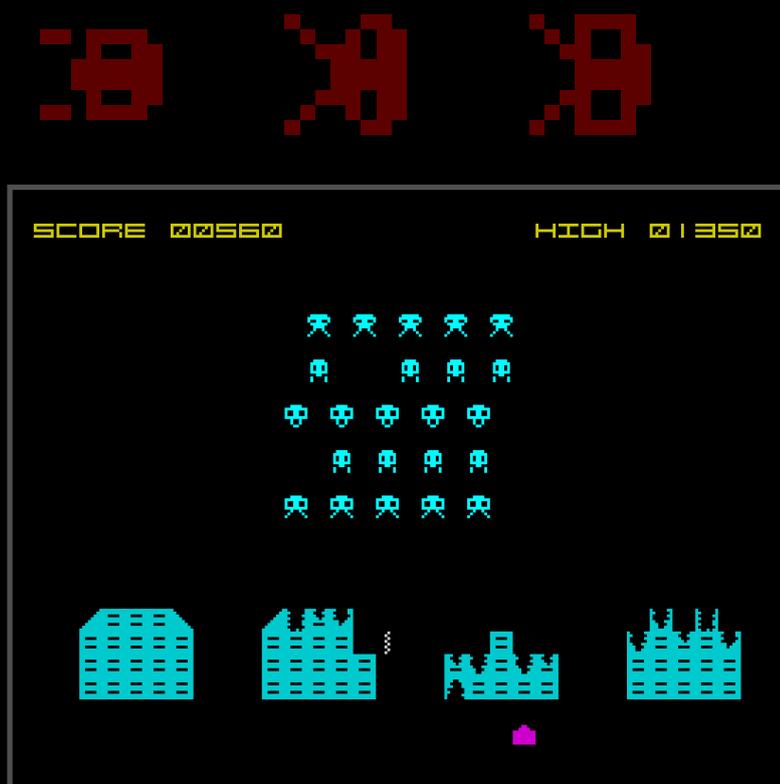
Horace *in the...* MYSTIC WOODS

Bob Smith 2010

Sinclair released three Horace games for the Spectrum and they were love or hate type of games. Personally I couldn't see the attraction, but there are plenty of people who do.

In 1995 Horace made a return, in Horace In The Mystic Woods, which was only released for the Psion Series 3a Palmtop glorified calculator.

In 2010 though, thanks to Bob Smith, the 4th Horace game finally came home to the Spectrum, and his conversion was made available free of charge.

This incarnation sees our hero Horace lost in the Mystic Woods and trying to get home. There are 64 screens to get through, which involves collecting all objects before heading for the exit, very much like Manic Miner.

Unlike Manic Miner, and many other platform games however, is the movement of the main character. He now has inertia, which can very easily catch you out. Horace doesn't stop when you release the key or stop moving the joystick, he takes time to slow down. The longer you move, the faster he moves and the longer he takes. This is an added feature that makes the game a little tricky to master.

There are collectable bonuses too, giving Horace invincibility or stopping enemies for a few seconds for example, so more than just a collect-em-up.

The graphics are good, well defined and smooth, and capture the feel of the previous Horace games well.

Sound is good with some nice music, spot effects and a terrible scream when Horace bites the dust.

If you run out of lives you can continue from the last level you got to, which is a nice feature, and one I think that is needed in this game, due to the difficulty level and number of screens.

This also adds to the playability, as you are not forced to repeat already completed levels.

Overall, a great conversion and a great game.

As massive fan of Amiga demos, I horded hundreds of them, but sadly they all went when I sold my Amiga. Luckily I can still watch them via emulation or on YouTube. Although there is nothing that can beat watching a real Amiga being pushed to its limits.

I enjoyed them sometimes more than the games. It wasn't just the music or graphics that I liked, but the fact that these coders, often in faraway countries, could squeeze so much out the machine in real time, often producing much better results than the top game makers.

I knew other machines had thriving demo communities, but what surprised me was the demo scene for the Spectrum. I knew it could not match the Amiga, but was fascinated by what this little micro could produce.

So.. What is a demo?

A demo usually refers to a presentation of graphics and sound that are calculated and displayed in real-time. The machine is doing all the work, this puts everyone on a level playing field, so the emphasis was on technical ability, style and skill rather than expensive hardware.

Demo groups sprang up all over the world and continually tried to outdo each other. This was brilliant for demo fans, as each new demo would often bring something new and exciting.

Upon loading a few Spectrum demos up, it soon became apparent that the scene was very much alive, with new demo's coming out all the time, some pushing the humble Spectrum to its limits. Some were even written to run on specific models and some only work on real Spectrums.

Amiga demos usually consisted of a few basic concepts, a set of techniques that produced specific affects, and those have made the transition to the Spectrum.

Demos - in pieces

Copper bars: So call because they are generated by the copper on the Amiga. The Spectrum does not have a copper, or a blitter chip, but we still find them in the demos. Copper bars are vertical or horizontal shaded bars, usually coloured to look like tubes or pipes, that spin around each other and move across the screen. A good example of these can be found in the Dust demo.
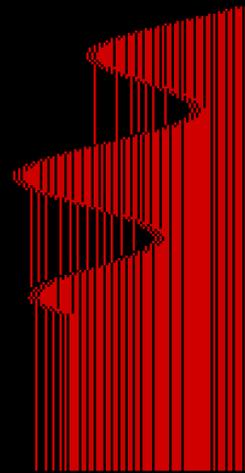
Vectors: Initially they were wire frame, moving to hidden line removal and finally filled. To produce these a lot of calculations have to be done. The Spectrum too has these, a great feat of coding considering the speed of the CPU, which is having to do all of the maths.

Blobs or vector blobs: These are impossible on the Spectrum due to hardware restrictions and yet we find instances of things that look very close.

These are usually shaded balls that spin around each other or form shapes. They are plotted in real time and can pass behind or in front of each other based on calculated distance from the viewer.

Scrolltext: One or more lines of text, scrolling across the screen. Relatively easy to do, so no surprise to
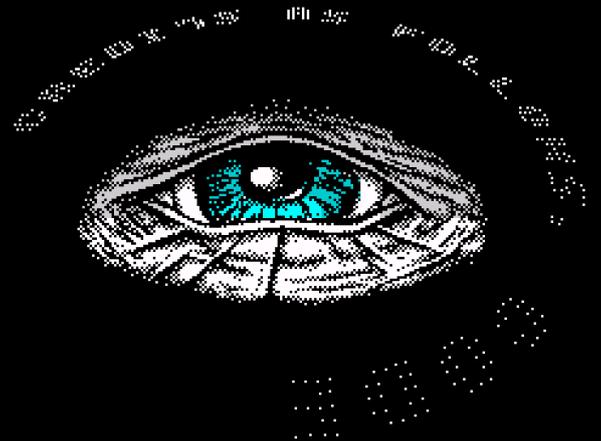
the see them on the Spectrum. Sometimes we get variations too, with text moving in other planes or being warped around the screen.

Bitmap manipulation: A full screen image that is spun around, zoomed or morphed into or around another object. Very tricky on the Spectrum because it just hasn't got the hardware to move that amount of graphics around quickly. We do get some impressive image effects though, like the wobble, shake, bounce and explosion.
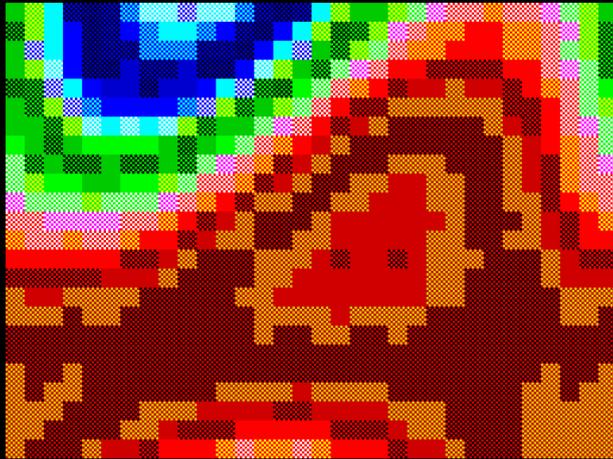
Plasma: This is a graphic effect that takes thousands of colours and washes them around the screen in a liquid like fluid effect, changing shape and colour as it goes. Obviously this is also difficult on the Spectrum only having 8 colours, but the coders still managed to do it.

Parallax effects: This is where there are several layers

of images moving at different speeds to give the impression of depth.

Music: The Amiga had its own dedicated four channel stereo digital sound chip and produced some truly memorable tunes. The AY chip can also give us some nice music, sadly most demos opt for a house, acid, thumping tune..

Greets or greetings: Reams of greetings to other groups and sometimes the odd dig at how another groups uses poor code. This can be just scroll text or a more imaginative method.
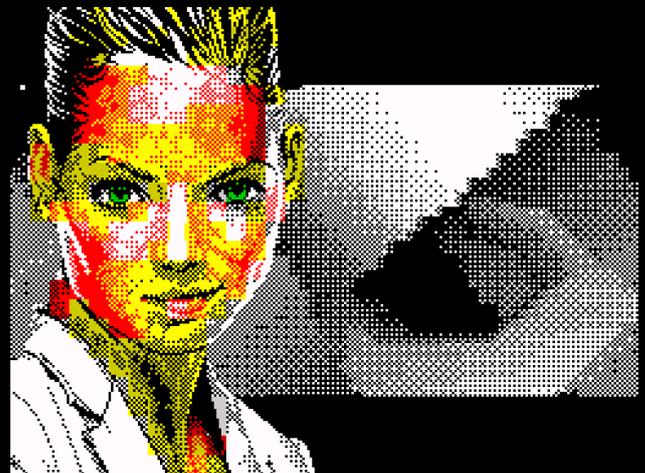
Story: This is often missing from demos, but the ones that did incorporate a story, no matter how short or bad, often proved more popular. Take Dessert Dream or Odyssey for example on the Amiga.

On the Spectrum I couldn't find any with a story, but a few had some nice concepts like planetary exploration.

Animation: Occasionally demos would include cartoon like animation, this usually helped to join sections of the demo together, or was part of the story being told. The Spectrum, even with its limited graphics, pulled this off.

Graphics: What demo would be complete without

some great art work.

Weird stuff: Stuff that doesn't have a proper name and yet looks amazing on screen.

In the mix

Throw some or all of these elements together along with some clever colour manipulation, nice scrolls and transitions, and you get the feeling of a demo.

Each one is different from the next, and it's great to spend a few hours trawling through the masses of files available. Watching, listening and comparing, as well as enjoying them.

You can pick up these files from several internet sites listed at the end of this article, and there are some really great demos out there. Many of the new ones seemingly ignoring the colour limitations of the Sinclair machine, by using interlacing.

Interlacing is a technique where two screens are flipped continually to simulate more colours. Although these cause the screen to flicker badly, they look slightly better on real hardware, especially when using a CRT television.

There are more than I could possibly have time to watch, and that doesn't even include the demos for the Russian machines like the Pentagon and Scorpion.

If you don't fancy downloading them and using an emulator, you can even watch them on YouTube.

However you watch them, or indeed if you watch them at all, I would certainly recommend viewing at least a few on offer to get a feel for what the humble Spectrum can do when put into the hands of talented coders.

And finally..

Remember when looking at these screenshots and watching the demos, the Spectrum only has 16 colours. 8 bright and 8 non-bright. If you take away black (as it's the same bright or otherwise), then we are actually only talking about 15.

Amazing!
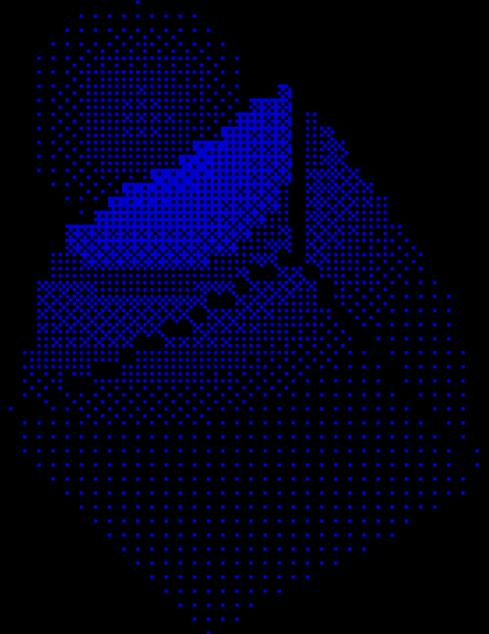
Interlacing Explained

To make it look like the Spectrum could display more colours than normal and without colour clash, coders used a technique called interlacing.

Interlacing allows two images to be displayed on top of each other very quickly, each having their own attributes.

To make this affective though, the switching has to be faster than the eye can detect, which sadly isn't possible on the Spectrum.

Despite this coders use this method, some better than others, but in all cases you will see the screen flickering.

Because of the fast swapping it is very difficult (I have yet to find a successful method) to capture these images using normal desktop capture software.

For the show I use a camcorder. It is also hard to capture a screen shot, as when pausing an emulator, the screen will show one of the two images only.

The images here are simulated. I took both images and mixed them in Photoshop so you can see the result.
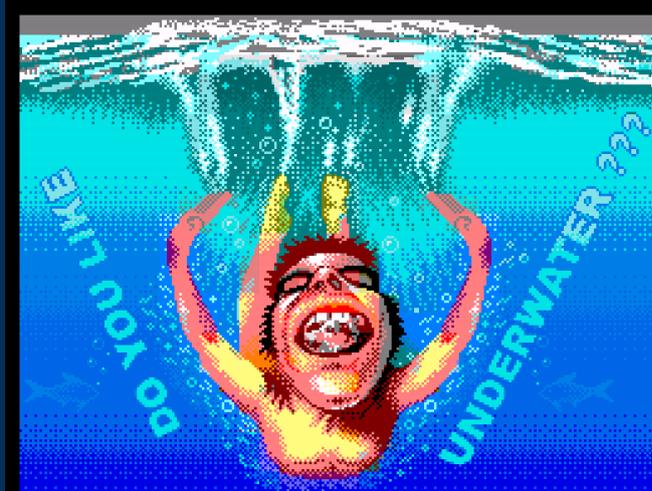
Where to get them from:

www.pouet.net

zxaaa.untergrund.net

www.worldofspectrum.org

F1 TORNADO SIMULATOR

Zeppelin 1991

F1 Tornado Simulator, released by Zeppelin Games in 1991, is not, as its name suggest, a flight simulator but an out and out shoot-em-up.

Ignore all the back story of having to identify enemy positions and what not, just pick up your joystick and blast away.

The mission is simple, take off from the aircraft carrier, locate and destroy the enemy headquarters, and blow as much stuff up as possible.

For a budget release this is a great little shooter, once you figure out how to select the power-ups. Initially you have just machine guns, but like most good shooters, destroying enemies can leave collectable power-ups. These range from reverse fire and double fire, to missiles and bombs.

Once collected you have to select to use them by pressing zero or space if using a joystick. Each power up lasts for a short period of time, indicated by a rather annoying beeper sound.

The graphics are well drawn and smooth, and respond well to controls, which can be keyboard or joystick. Whichever method you use, you still have to select power-ups by using the keyboard.

The landscape is detailed and scrolls very smoothly, changing as you complete each level.

The enemy comes in a variety of different forms, planes, gun emplacements, ships, helicopters and tanks and at the end of a level, there is a boss to fight. These are fairly straight forward to beat, unless like me you are only average at shoot-em-ups.

This has all the elements of a great game, but is sadly let down by the sound.
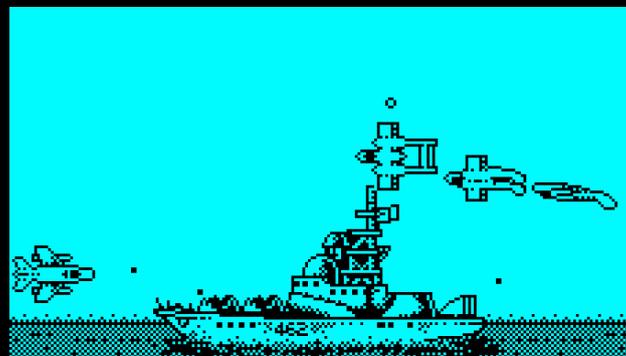
The same effect is used pretty much for everything apart from collection and selection of power-ups and there isn't even a firing sound.

That said, this is still a great shooter that should be tried by any fan of this style of game.

3D ESCAPE

New Generation Software 1982

Escape was released in 1982 by New Generation Software and written by Malcom Evens. Malcolm was the man who wrote 3D Monster Maze for the ZX81, the classic game always used to show off that machine. 3D Monster Maze was a smash hit, probably the best known game of it time, so when the author released a 3D game with dinosaurs for the Spectrum, under a new company, you can imagine the excitement.

Sadly Escape is not the Spectrum version of Monster Maze, which is a real pity.

There is no in-depth story, just the simple instructions that tells you what to do. To escape the maze you have to find an axe, which is hidden from sight due to the 3D effect of the hedges, and then head for the exit. However, the maze contains a nasty T rex, out to eat you.

Viewed from slightly above, the 3D effect is quite nice, but still a little disappointing when you expected a 3D maze game. The T-Rex homes in on your position, so you have to continuously move around trying to locate the axe. Once you walk over it, you have to then press 0 to pick it up.

Because of the chasing monsters, it may not be possible to do this first time, so you have to lead them away first.

Once you have it, you move much slower, so you have to plan your route to the exit at the top to make sure you don't meet a dinosaur on the way.

There are 5 levels to the game and you don't automatically move through them, instead you can select which level you to play at the start. It would have been better to let the player work their way through them I think.

Each level introduces more dinosaurs to chase you, the number is based on the level you chose, and level 5 includes a flying pterodactyl, which is almost impossible to get away from.

Graphics wise it looks OK and the 3D effect works quite well, and was used by other programmers later on. The maze is different each time, which adds to the game, and stops it being too repetitive.

The sound is limited to beeps when you walk, nothing else.

Control is via the cursor keys, which can be awkward on a real machine, and there is no option to use a joystick.

For 1982 this was an OK kind of game. Nice graphics and playability that would probably see you good for 10 to 15 minutes or so.
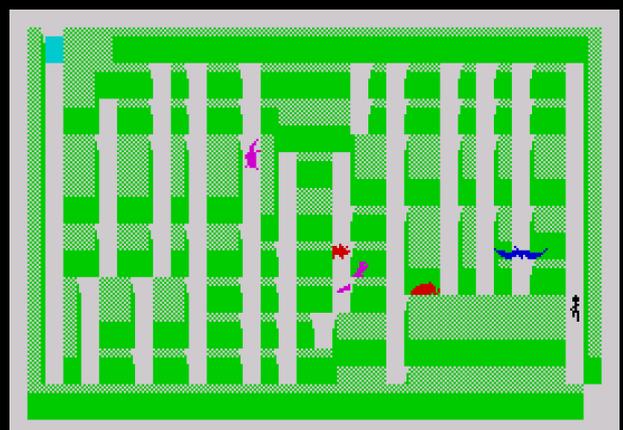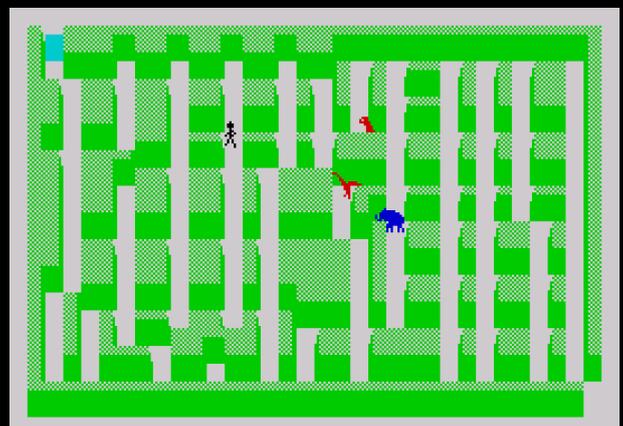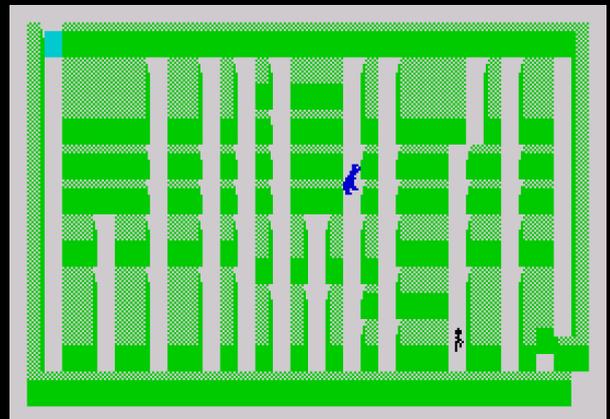
MAGIC MOUNTAIN

Phipps Associates 1983

An out-of-reach rope above a rock fissure is the only way into the Magic Mountain - or is it? Rumour has it that there are vast stores of treasure inside, but legend also tells of huge poisonous spiders, lizards and magic at work. You'll need more than just cunning to come out of this in one piece.

That is the only clue you get about this adventure game, so it would appear to be the usual treasure collection fest used by many early games. Upon loading you get a little bit more detail and are told you have to retrieve the ancient Scroll of Wisdom.

The game uses wire frame filled graphics like the Hobbit, but nowhere near are detailed, and the location descriptions are sparse.

Once you start playing the first thing that strikes you is the long response times, sometimes taking up to 4 seconds to reply to one of your commands.

A little exploration and you very quickly find yourself in the maze. The thing most adventurers hate! You have to wait for the image to drawn each move, and you can spend ages just trying to get out of this thing! In the end I re-loaded.

It was then I discovered the game does not tell you all of the available exits all the time. So there are other directions to go from the first location! How frustrating.

As with most games of this type you can spend a lot of your time playing hunt-the-word, and this is played out when trying to open a metal door. Only by using PULL DOOR can you open it!

As you get further in, things get worse and the game suffers from illogical puzzles. For example to get out of the secret room you have to type RETURN. Nowhere does anything give a clue to this! You also can't CLIMB ROPE in one location but have to SWING ROPE! In another location though, you can CLIMB ROPE!

The games needs to either tell you the exits or not instead of only telling you some of them. This just makes it more annoying as you then have to try every direction from every location.

All of this makes the game difficult to play and overly frustrating.

Overall then, stay clear unless you enjoy playing the guess-the-word or like random commands that may or may not help you!

There are much better adventures out there!

TERROR-DAKTIL 4D
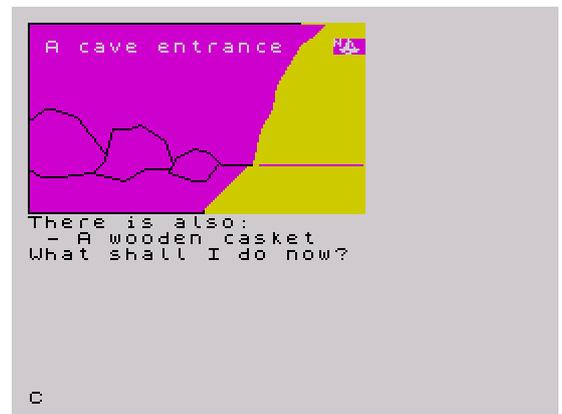
Melbourne House 1983

Terror-Daktil 4D was released in 1983 by Melbourne House, and featured a rather nice animated intro section where you are a passenger on a flight across a jungle. The plane gets into difficulty, lunges about and then crashes on an unknown island.

You find yourself on a plateau in an un-explored part of the jungle and in the distance strange flying creatures are beginning to gather.

You discover a canon near by and quickly set it up to protect yourself from what ever these things are. As the creatures swoop in you identify them as Pterodactyls.

And so starts the game...

You have to survive for 6 days and 6 nights before you are rescued, and as each hour passes, more and more of the creatures start to attack.

As the creatures swoop in, in pretty impressive 3D, you have to shoot or avoid them. In essence this is space invaders with the added bonus of the attacking Pterodactyls.

Smaller creatures march across the screen in the background in three rows and can be picked off if you get the angle of the canon right. The angle is displayed on the left of the screen and once you know which angle hits which row, its just a matter of taking them down one by one.

Every so often one will swoop down and you have to hit these in the body to kill them. Hitting them is pretty tough and I found the best option was to just keep firing and sometimes you get lucky.

All of this is played out in absolute silence, unless you manage to hit one in flight, then the game stops to play a sound effect, the creature drops down and everything continues again.

This is a major failing of the game and there should have been at least a gunshots or a stomping noise as the smaller ones march across the screen. Playing in silence detracts from the overall game and it soon becomes dull and repetitive.

To add to this, the game actually has a bug that stops the game from being completed, it stops counting the days once it reaches 6. This can be fixed by using a poke, that is if you want to play in
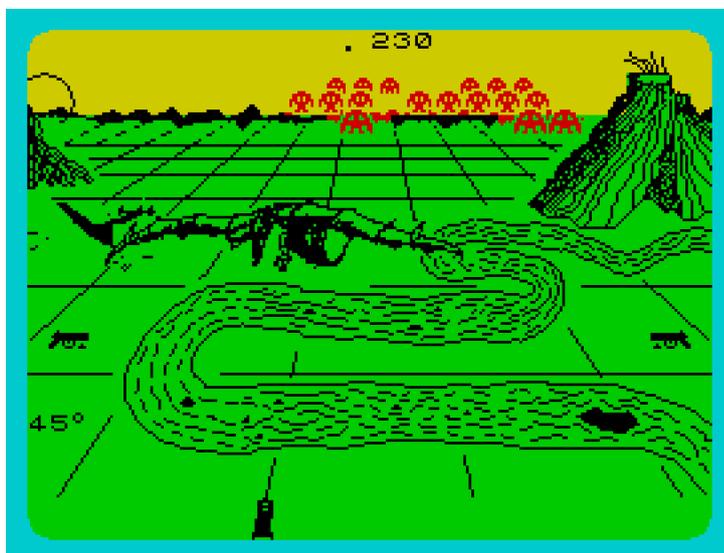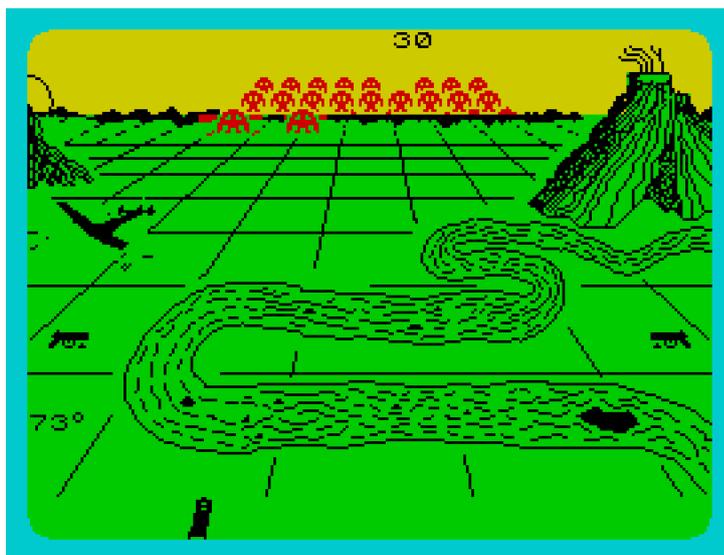
silence for a long time trying to finish it.

Graphics wise, it's not bad and everything moves smooth enough. Control is by keyboard only and is responsive.

Overall then a twist on the space invader theme, but nothing really special.

THE
ULTIMATE
COMPANY

In 1982, in the village of Ashby-De-La-Zouch, two brothers were working in the arcade game field, producing games for the growing industry that dominated the sea fronts of many UK holiday resorts.

Between them, Tim and Chris Stamper, along with their friend John Lathbury, produced four arcade games that they sold to US and Japanese arcade manufacturers.

The first released in 1982 by Bally Midway was called Blue Print, and featured a man trying to collect parts for a machine. The next three were all released in 1983 and varied in style.

Saturn, a shoot-em-up was released by Jaleco, Grasspin, again for Jaleco, a kind of maze game with spinning wall sections and finally Dingo, again for Jaleco, a game they managed to at least get their company name in, ACG, which stood for Ashby Computers and Graphics. This name would soon become synonymous with quality for many Spectrum owners.

By 1983, the home computer market was starting to pickup and that coupled with ever more expensive arcade design tools, forced the young company to look for something more economical.

Initially not too impressed with Clive Sinclair's new micro, the ZX Spectrum, saying in an interview in Crash magazine that they thought it was a "piece of garbage", the market was too good to ignore especially as the machine used Z80 processor, used in many early arcade machines, including the ones produced by Tim and Chris.

Creating a new company that would become linked with quality, the Stampers embarked on an all-out attack of the software industry.

They knew they were good, probably better than all of the current crop of game companies in 1983, and with the added knowledge of game design from the arcade days, they were ready to make their mark. With this, they decided on a name that would emphasise their confidence and Ultimate Play The Game were born.
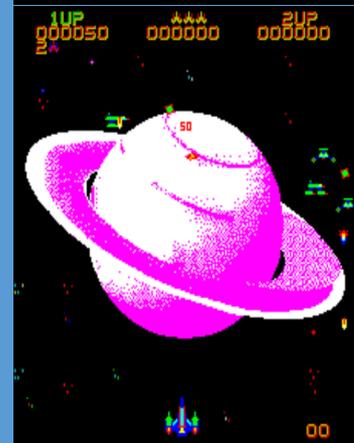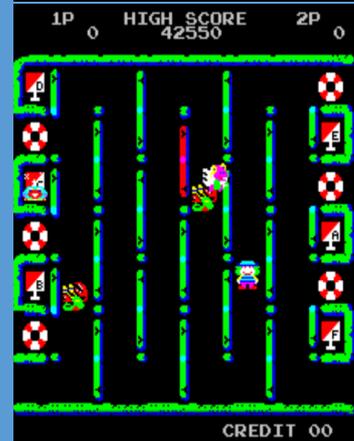
The Arcade Era

BLUE PRINT

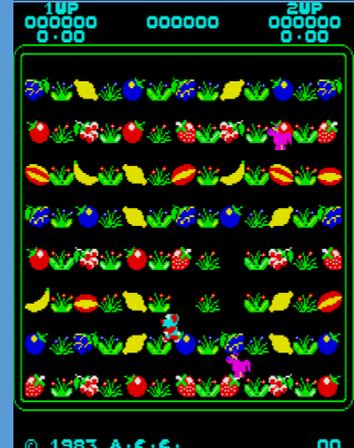SATURN

GRASSPIN

DINGO

JETPAC ARRIVES

With the Spectrum having only 16K of memory, programming had to be tight, and the games had to be as close to arcade quality as possible, and they were.

Jetpac hit the shelves in mid 1983 and sent shockwaves through the industry, who at times had been content to pump out low quality BASIC games, but this single game acted as a wake up call.

A game of this quality, with large smooth graphics, good sound and superb playability made everything that had gone before look ordinary.

Almost in the blink of an eye, the industry were now playing catch-up. They either had to improve or risk failing, as the game playing public now knew what their little black computer could really do. The game got great reviews in the press, and Ultimate had arrived in a big way.

Controlling your Jetman, you had to collect parts of your rocket, and then refuel it before moving on to the next planet. Hoards of aliens were set on your demise, and there were four ships to build, each having four levels of play, something unheard of for 16K games.

Jetpac sold over 300,000 copies, helping to keep this young company going and producing more games.

Wanting to keep ahead, Ultimate quickly followed the game with PSSST.

Controlling a gardening robot, who would later make another appearance in a future game, you had to help a flower grow by squirting garden pests with the correct spray.

Again, the game had large, beautifully drawn graphics that were smooth and well animated. The sound and playability were excellent, and this, like Jetpac, sold in the thousands.

It wasn't just the quality of games that seemed to surpass most other companies, but also the packaging, marketing and mystery,

Using high quality cover art and full colour, full page advertisements, Ultimate certainly knew how to drawn the punters in, and at the same time surrounding the company with a vail of secrecy, or so it seemed.

"We're really excellent at arcade games.."

Tim Stamper - Aug 1983
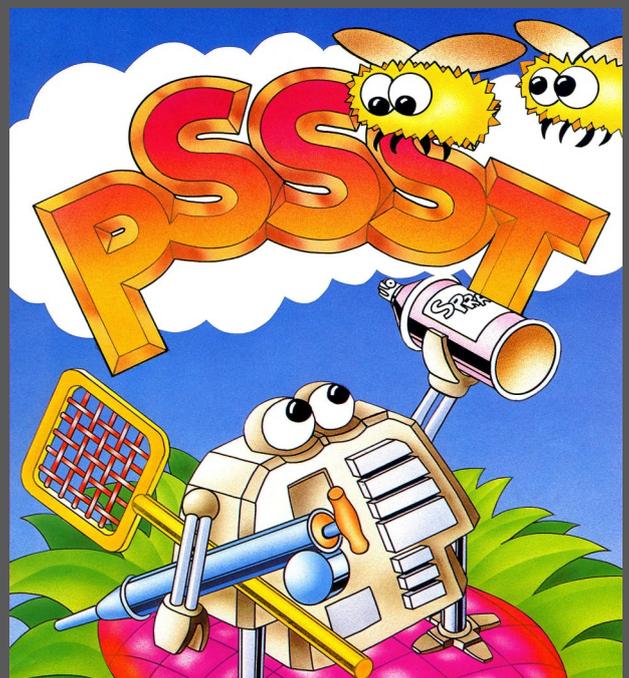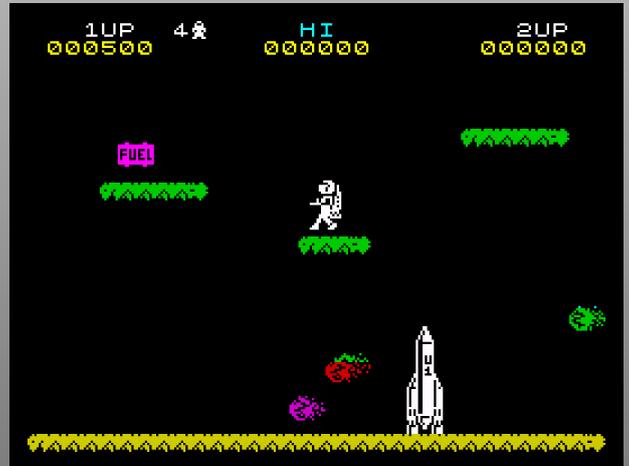
The Ultimate Company....

Their games were written using an expensive development system that allowed code to be uploaded straight into the micros. This meant for rapid development, and their initial aim of producing one game every two months seemed optimistic, even for them.

Within a few months though, two more games hit the market;

Cookie allowed you to control a chef who had to gather ingredients for a pie. It wasn't as simple as this though, as the ingredients were misbehaved and moved around randomly.

Each stage required a set amount of ingredients to land in the pie dish, and you did this by throwing flower at them, and knocking them downwards.

If this wasn't enough, there were also other things being thrown at you that you had to avoid.

The game had nice intro sequences for each ingredient reminiscent of Pacman, and some nicely drawn nasties to avoid.

Tranz-am, for me the weaker of the releases, had you driving a car across the US in a bid to collect 8 cups.

The play area was large and you had a map to help you navigate, but your fuel was limited and you had to remember to keep filling up.

There were also other cars out to hinder you, so you had to stay on your toes.

Remarkably enough, these four games were 16K, and they outshone many of the 48K titles at the time. Because of the size they were ideal for Sinclair's new ROM interface, and were the best releases for that medium.

THE MOVE TO 48K

As Ultimate's games grew in complexity, they made the move to 48K, giving them more room to flex their game design muscles. First came the follow-up to Jetpac, Lunar Jetman in late 1984.

This expanded the world, giving us a scrolling landscape and a lunar buggy to drive. The gameplay was also swapped to a more involved game where you had to destroy the alien base by using a bomb.

The buggy was used as a refuelling point, and as transport for the bomb. You also had to build small bridges for craters to allow the buggy to move. All in all a much more complex affair.

There was a rumour that the game featured a trailer too, and an image appeared in Crash magazine proving the point. Sadly it was all a hoax, as Ultimate confirmed in an interview, and scouring of the code found no graphics that matched the screenshot.

Games On ROM
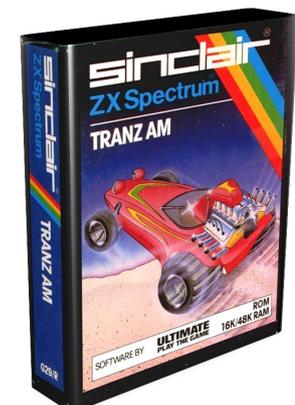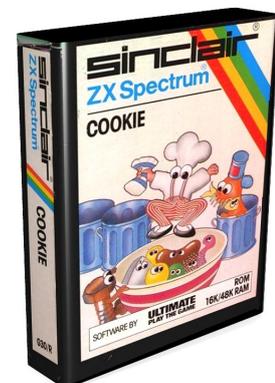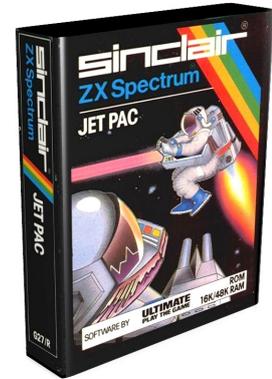
Lunar Jetman Trailer?

Some say the Stampers sent it to the magazine to gain publicity... but I guess we'll never know...

Just making it before the end of the year came Ultimate's 5th game, Atic Atac.

Getting rave reviews in all magazines, this game again changed the way developers and game companies looked at the Spectrum. It was something different and offered much deeper gameplay than the average release.

You could play one of four character types, and which one you chose gave you access to different secret tunnels around the castle.

The aim was to escape, and to do that you had to find the parts of the ACG key.

The game was a top down maze game, with different areas to explore, different monsters to defeat with different objects, and coloured door keys needed to access some rooms.

There was also trap doors that sent you plummeting down levels, staircases and a rather well drawn chicken that displayed your health status.

Another genre defining moment for Ultimate Play The Game.

By now, the company were gaining a very large following, helped by the mystery that surrounded not only the company, but the games too.

They very rarely gave interviews, especially during this busy period. The only ones that spring to mind is one in Home Computer Weekly from August 1983, Crash in April 1988 and The Games Machine in March 1988.

Working 16 hours, 7 days a week meant they just didn't have time, but it did build up a certain mystique, in in reality they preferring instead to work on new games, that were only promoted, in the days after the 16K games, by single page images.

There was no hype, no quotes saying it would be something never seen before, no previews, no trade shows, just these wonderfully drawn images.

This made the buying public eager to get their hands on them, and sales were booming.
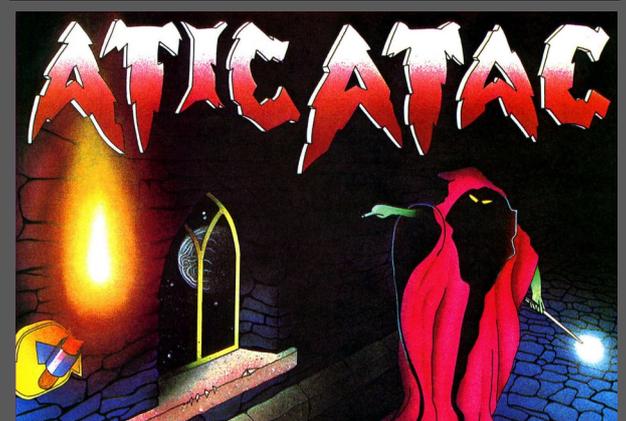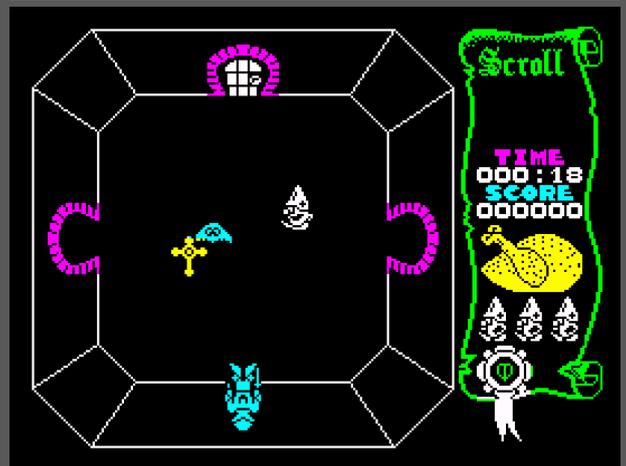
The Ultimate Company....

As 1984 arrived, Ultimate made the decision to move to larger boxes, and although they looked nice and stood out on the shelf, it also meant a price increase.

Their normal tape games released so far retailed for £5.50 but the new cardboard boxes would cost £9.95.

Ultimate stated it was done for two reasons, firstly to reflect the amount of time put into the games and secondly to try and combat piracy. They thought having paid nearly ten pounds for a game, you were less likely to allow your friend to copy it. Looking back I think they were wrong about the second one though, as Ultimate games were very popular amongst playground pirates.

LARGER BOXES

The first game to be released in 1984 with the larger boxes was Sabre Wulf.

A top down maze game, again with added depth of having to fight enemies with your sword, protect yourself by eating a variety of plants and trying to locate the four pieces of an amulet.

This game introduced a new character, Sabreman, who would go onto to more projects later including a GameBoy game, cameos in Banjo-Tooie, Donkey Kong Country and Golden Eye on the N64.

The game was a top seller, selling over 350,000 copies and enjoying a long period in the charts. It also spawned a mass of map making, with magazine running competitions for the best entry.

Following this came the further adventures of Sabreman in Underwurld.

This side-on platform game didn't break any new ground apart from having a massive 597 locations. There were three exits, each having a guardian to defeat, and each guardian requiring a different weapon. Each exit would take Sabeman to one of the three sequels of the game, Knight Lore, Pentagram or MireMare.

It was obvious that, if these games were actually named, that they must be under development, which got fans in a frenzy waiting to see what Ultimate would do next.

The truth was, that at least one of them was finished before SabreWulf, but more on that later.

As Underwurld hit the shelves, news of something very special was beginning to reach the magazines.
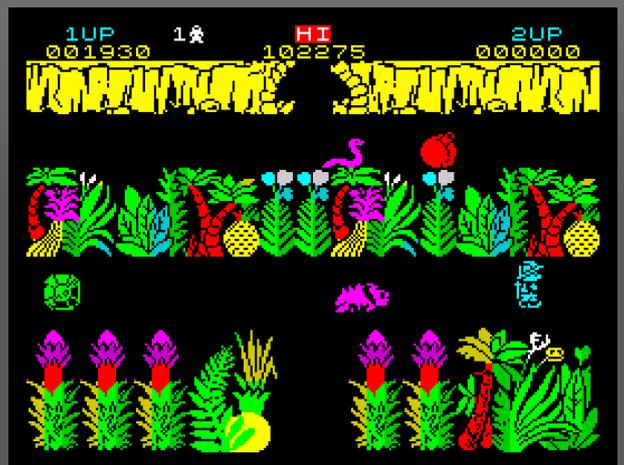
SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL

A new style of game had arrived and it took gameplay, style and graphics to another level. Normally when companies made these claims, they were politely ignored, but this time it was Ultimate.

As 1984 was coming to an end, the game that created a whole new genre, and that made everyone stare at their Spectrum in disbelief was released.

Knight Lore used a new technique, labelled Filmation by Ultimate, to display the game world in an isometric fashion. The result was stunning. That type of graphic details and look had never been seen before.

Games like Ant Attack had come close, but this was something very special.

The game saw Sabreman searching for items to put into a wizard's cauldron that would cure him. Oh yes, didn't I mention, he has been cursed and at midnight turns into a werewolf?

Each room has a different set of blocks, some requiring careful jumping, others required the manipulation of objects to be able to get to exits. Things could be picked up, moved to another room, dropped, stood on and jump from.
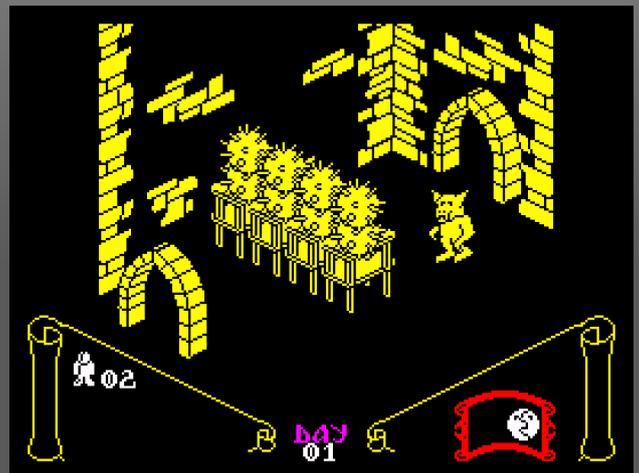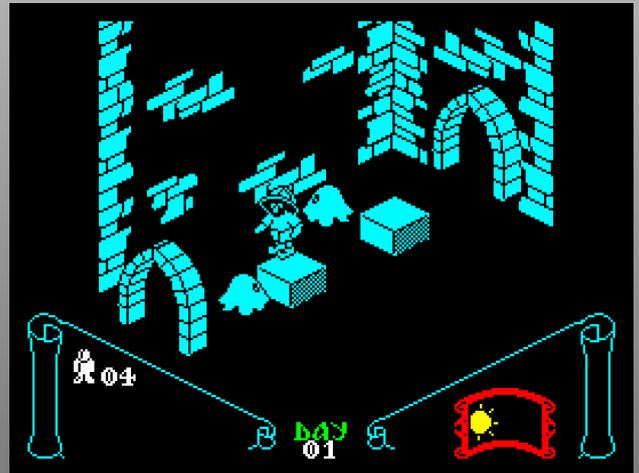
This game stormed the charts and players everywhere were again praising the innovation that Ultimate were bringing to the Spectrum.

Ultimate won game of the year with it in 1984 from C&VG magazine.

What people didn't know until much later though, was that remarkably, this game was finished before Sabre Wulf. Not only that, but Alien 8 was also well into development.

But, being in tune with the market, the Stampers knew that Sabre Wulf's sales would be affected if they put Knight Lore out first. With that, they sat on this game, biding their time until it was right to release. That must have taken some guts.

The game spawned a whole avalanche of copies, and the genre was well and truly established.

ROBBIE RETURNS

The next game saw the return of Robbie The Robot from PSSST in Ultimate's first game for 1985. This time he was given the isometric treatment in Alien 8.

He has come along way from his garden, and is now in charge of fixing the cryogenic units of a space ship that were damaged during an attack. His thankless task is to collect 24 objects that are to be found around the huge spaceship, and place them in the correct sockets to keep the cryogenic units functioning.

The controls were the same as Knight Lore making this game easy to get into and the task was simple.

The gameplay is very similar to Knight Lore, triggering some complaints from the press and game players that the game was just Knight Lore with different graphics.

This game, for me at least, relied more on jumping precision than its predecessor, and some of them were very tricky, requiring direction changes at crucial points.

Regardless of this, the game sold well.

Using an upgraded game engine named Filmation 2, the next game sees you playing a knight on a quest to rid a village of four demons, in Nightshade.

As with previous Ultimate games, each demon has a specific weapon required to defeat it.

The village is populated by plague ridden people that can pass on their disease to the knight if bumped into. To reverse the affect, the knight can use antibodies. which also doubles as a throwable weapon.
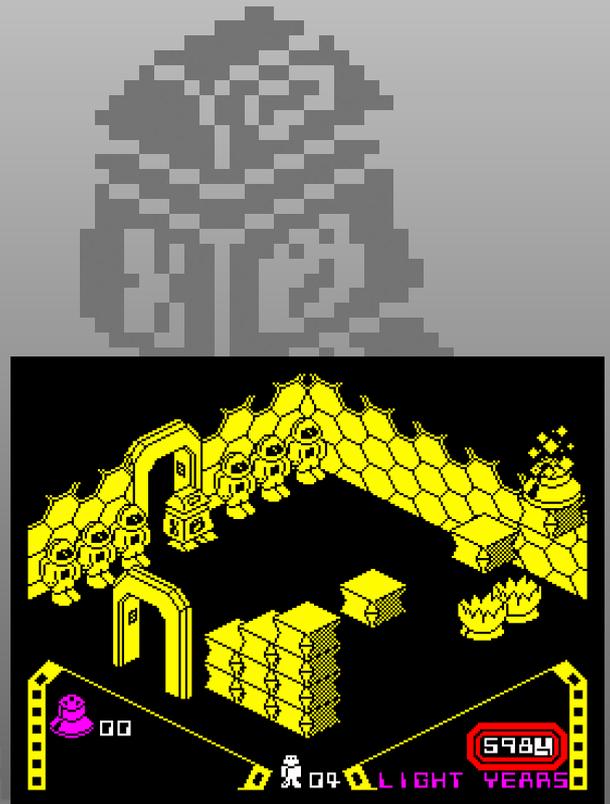
The game engine moves away from the previous isometric flip-screen and onto scrolling, which is a nice improvement, although the actual screen area is reduced somewhat.

For some fans, it seemed that Ultimate were losing interest in the market, as their next released did not break any new ground or introduce anything new to the Spectrum.

The Spectrum games market seemed to hold less interest with the Stampers, their attention now firmly on the blossoming Japanese console market.

In the background they had been working on this for quite a while, since 1984 in fact, trying to reverse engineer the Nintendo Entertainment System so they could start to write games for it.

To allow them to move on, they had to part with the company name, and so it was sold, along with Ultimate's back catalogue, to US Gold in 1985 bringing to an end a great and innovative time for Spectrum development.

They still had a few games in development that US Gold distributed under the Ultimate name.
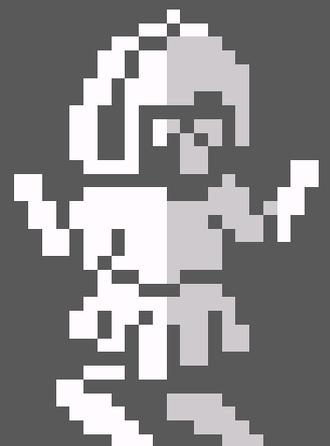
GO FOR YOUR GUN

Gunfright released in 1986 swapped the knight for a sheriff, out to rid the town of outlaws.

Again using the filmation 2 engine, the only main difference between this and earlier games is the shooting section in which the hero has a duel with the outlaws.

He also has some money that is reduced if the outlaw shoots someone and is ref-filled if the outlaw is disposed of.
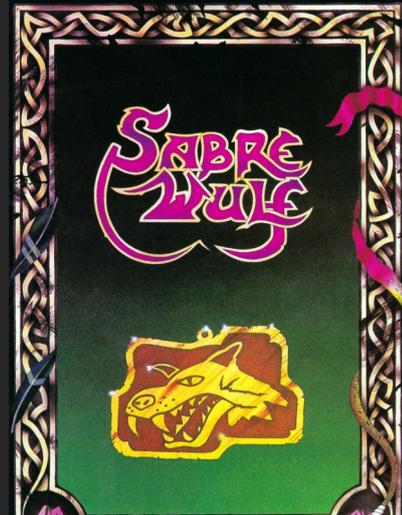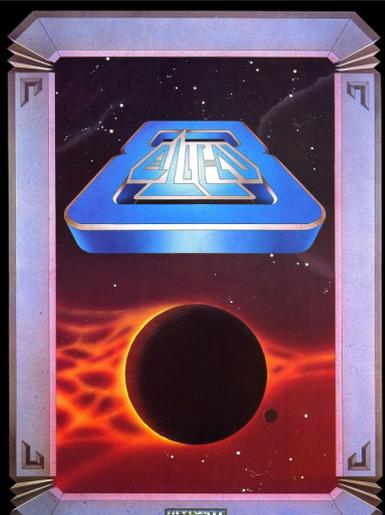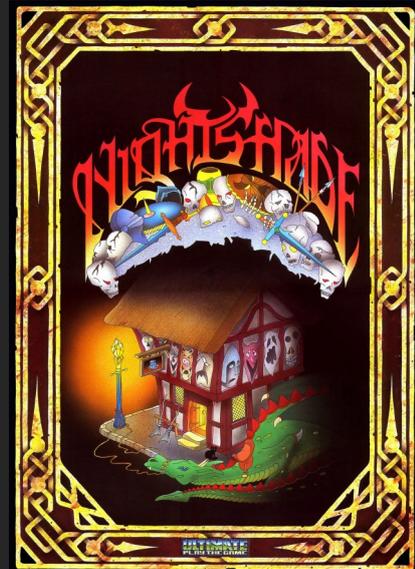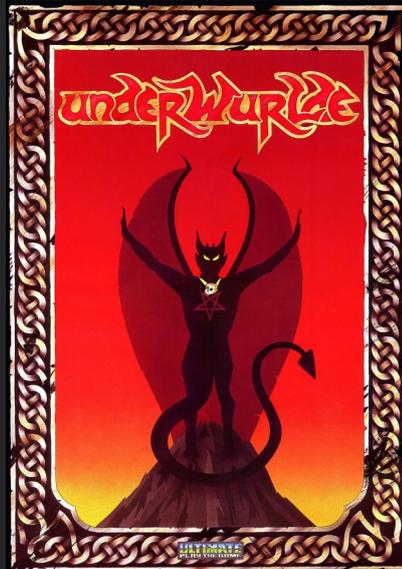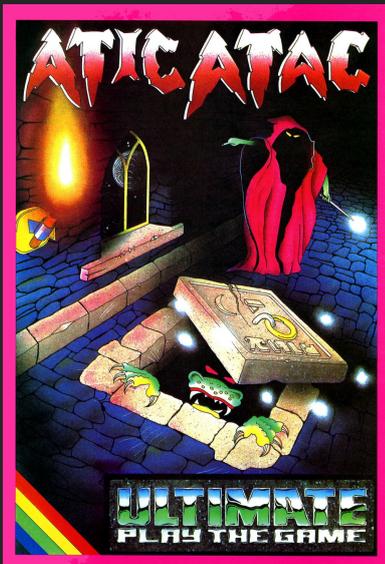
There are 20 different outlaws to track down, one at a time, each becoming faster on the draw, and therefore more difficult to kill.

The Stampers claimed that this was the last title developed by the proper Ultimate team.
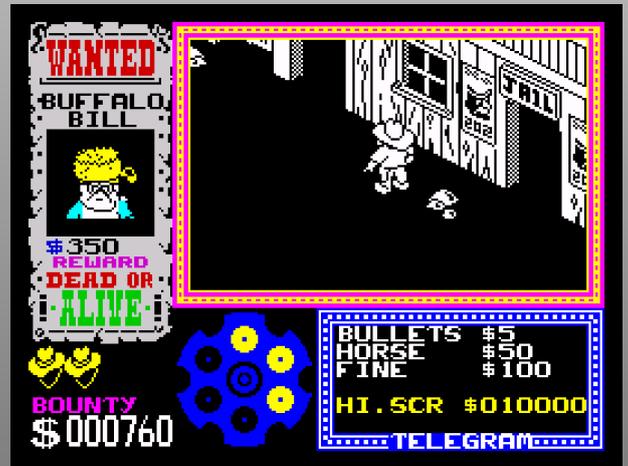
Iconic Adverts

Ultimate produced some of the most icon artwork for a Spectrum game, and teased the buying public with full page, wonderful images.

Colossal Adventure

Level 9 1983

For those of you who are new to text adventure, I would recommend watching episode 13 of the video show where we take a look at the roots of adventure games.

Level 9 produced some great games for adventure lovers, and Colossal Adventure, their first game, was a clone of the very first text adventure called Colossal Cave.

Level 9 certainly knew how to package games, we have a nice instruction booklet with a short background of the cave you are about to explore and details about how the game works and what commands to use. There is an envelope and post card that allows you to send off for a clue if you get stuck and a level 9 catalogue advertising their other games. Oh and the game cassette.

This version of the classic stays pretty close to the original and even extends it. All of the objects and puzzles are to be found; the plovers egg, the trident, the magic rod and of course the lovable snake.

The response is nice and fast and the vocabulary is extensive although you still get the "I don't understand that" message if you try obscure or unrecognised commands.

This game will challenge you if you have never played it, and it is always worth making a map. Indeed, map making is a vitally important part of the game.

Level 9 later added graphics and released the game as part of the Middle Earth trilogy called Jewels Of Darkness, with Adventure Quest and Dungeon Adventure.

The white background and black text can hurt the eyes after a while, and I preferred the Abersoft version that used black backgrounds.

I continued to enjoy playing this game for months, in fact I never actually finished it until about 1999, that's over ten years of playing, on and off.

I admit I looked up some of the problems, but it was still a great feeling to complete it, and I had of course played other adventures in the meantime.
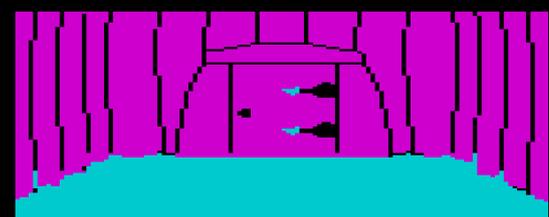
If you want the granddaddy of all adventures, this is the one to get, closely followed by the Abersoft one that was bought by Melbourne House and released as Classic Adventure.

This is the type of game that led the way to online multi-player gaming, long before the internet. Using a modem you could connect to games like MUD or SHADES, and play text adventures against, or with, players from all over the world.

A great heritage for a great game.

Aquaplane

Quicksilva 1983

Aquaplane was released in 1983 by Quicksilva, and takes us away from the usual arcade games of the time.

Picture the scene, the Cote- d'Azur, relaxing with a pernod and lemonade and as the temperatures rise you decide to go water-skiing, what could possibly go wrong?

As the boat speeds off, you somehow find yourself lost in a sea full of obstacles that you have to avoid.

The first thing you notice about the game is the border effect. This splits the boarder horizontally to make the horizon, a great effect that is not always perfect on emulators.

As the game starts, you control the boat, pulling along the hapless character for the initial story.

Old trees and rocks bob about in the water and you have to guide the skier safely through them.

This is more difficult than you would think, as you not only have to watch the skier, but the boat as well.

Using thrust, you can move forward, and hopefully keep out of trouble. If you manage to stay clear of the obstacles long enough, the next level begins and the next set of obstacles appear, motor boats.

As the levels progress you get a whole host of other things including sharks, and mixtures of all of them. Each has their own movement patterns, which make navigating the screen pretty difficult at times.

The animation is great, and you little skier bobs about quite realistically.

Control is via the keyboard or Kempston joystick and is nice and sharp.

Sound is the typical John Hollis effects found in many of his early games and included in the Games Creator package he wrote. They fill the game with nice effects, and have enough variety.

Playability is also good, having that just one more go feeling... and wanting to see what the next levels holds.

I like this game.. it's a pick up and play game that can entertain you for 5 minutes of 50 minutes..

Give it a try...

Electronic Dreams 1987

Tempest was an all-time great arcade game. Released in 1981 by Atari, It used the same vector graphics as first seen in Asteroids, but used the new engine to produce added colours.

Although simple looking, the maths required to calculate and draw the lines was CPU intensive, something the Spectrum was somewhat limited in.

In 1987, Electronic Dreams released the Spectrum version to mixed reviews.

The idea is simple, clear the wireways, a kind of corridor in space, from alien infestation.

You move around the outside edge of wireway, and the aliens appear from the far end and move slowly outward.

You can zap them, or, if you have enough power, zap the whole tunnel with your Super Zap. But you only get one of these per level.

If any of the aliens get to the edge, you cannot make contact, and the level is pretty much over unless you have a super zap left.

Clear all the aliens and you move onto the next tunnel.

Each tunnel is a different shape, giving the game some variety, and the action is fast and furious.

Graphics wise it is pretty good, but because of the lower resolution, the aliens can sometime be hard to locate amongst the wires, especially closer to the centre. Despite that though, things are smooth enough with some nice effects to compliment the action.

Sound could never match the arcade, but it is good and it is used well to accompany the blasting and dodging.

Difficulty is pitched about right I think, and you can usually get a good few waireways under your belt before things get tough.

Controls in the arcade consisted of round knob that when turned, moved your ship around clockwise or anti-clockwise. The Spectrum gave you a choice of joystick or keyboard, neither of which replicate the arcade. The controls though are responsive making for a good experience.
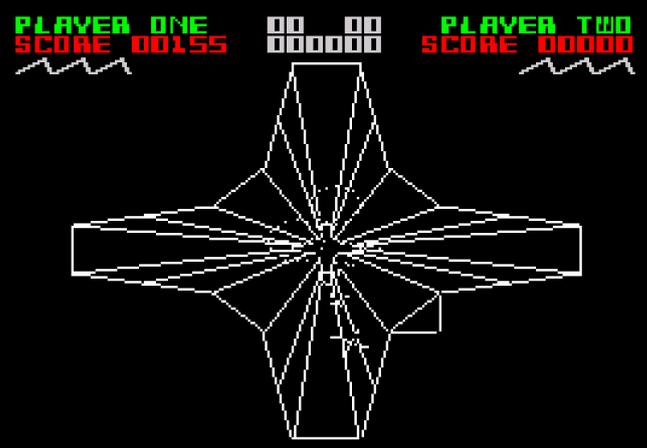
I really like this game, despite some magazines scoring it low, and it gives a good arcade experience. The adrenalin certainly gets pumping as the action hots up.

I played this for ages when reviewing it and in fact, I'm going off to have another go right now.

A superb game.

TEMPEST VECTORS

First seen in the arcade game Lunar Lander, vector graphics differed from convention sprite based (raster) displays in that the images consisted of straight lines drawn on the screen.

Atari took the technique and used it in Asteroids to great effect.

Expanded further to support multi-colours and using Atari's Quad-rascan technology, Tempest was an instant success.

The game was originally going to be a 3D version of Space Invaders, but due to technical issues, the format was changed into a "tube shooter".

TEMPEST LEGACY

Tempest has spawned many copies and updates, even to this day.

A name that always comes to mind when talking about these newer versions is Jeff Minter.

Being in the industry since the very early days, he blasted his way onto the Atari Jaguar with the brilliant Tempest 2000. A superb version with stunning graphics, sound and gameplay.

He continued to update and improve the game releasing Tempest X3 on the PS1 and Tempest 3000 fort the Nuon DVD.

Tempest 2000—Atari Jaguar

His latest version is TxK for the PlayStation Vita released in 2014.

TxK—PlayStation Vita

HUNDRA
Dinamic Software 1988

Hundra, at first glance, looks very impressive, with large well drawn and animated sprites, beautiful backgrounds and good control, however, things are not always as they seem.

The premise of the game involves a lot of mythology, Gods with strange names and places that you don't really care about. What you care about is the aim of the game, and that is to rescue someone called Jorund.

To do this you have to collect various gems and keys, open doors and avoid anything that looks remotely dangerous.

At heart this is a standard platform adventure, sugar coated with nice graphics and the difficulty turned up to get round the fact that the game map is only small.

Once on your journey there are things you can collect that do various things like improve your health or help you fight, but there are only a few of these and pretty much the rest of the time you will be constantly moving to try and avoid collisions.

You can throw things, but anything you do manage to hit quickly regenerates.

This is the main problem with the game, too many enemies that constantly chase you. There is no resting place, to wait or to plan your route, no healing time, just perpetual jumping and running.

This soon become tiresome especially in tight areas where you can't avoid them, and just have to accept that you are going to lose a lot of health on that particular screen.

The game map itself, apart from being small, contains several traps that unintentionally (at least I hope its unintentional) mean the end of the game. You simply cannot get out of the area no matter what you do and just have to wait for your health to drop.

Another issue involves, again, the game map and the bad placement of platforms. If you make the smallest mistake you have to track back nearly half of the game screens before you get to the same place again.

Onto the good points then.

The graphics are great as previously mentioned with nice detailed backgrounds and good looking sprites. Colour is used well and apart from the few layout problems, the game map sits together in a logical way.

Sound is minimal with just short 'tick tick' sounds when firing and zap sounds when collecting items.

Control can be via keyboard or mouse and is responsive giving a nice playing experience, it's just a pity that the designers made the decision to add lots of flying things that just keep draining your energy.

This isn't a bad game, just a frustrating one!

SPEED TEST

LETS RACE

Having done several features on the show previously about storage systems I wondered how loading times would compare across all of the options. Obviously to make things fair, I would have to use the same game, but for technical reasons the actual code format could not be the same, however I tried to keep the size of the data as close as possible.

The game I selected was one that I had used before, and in some cases the only game I could transfer to selected storage systems; Bug-Byte's The Birds and The Bees.

Loading the original game from tape took two minutes and fifteen seconds which wasn't bad for a 32k game.

How would the competition do?

Introducing The Competitors

The Wafadrive.
Tape loop system from Rotronics reviewed in show two. For this test I used a 32k wafa.

Wafa sizes do have an affect of the speed due to seek speeds.

Sinclair Microdrive.
Another tape loop system reviewed in show 27. Sinclair's offering suffered many delays before getting to market and the cartridges have problems with the felt pads.
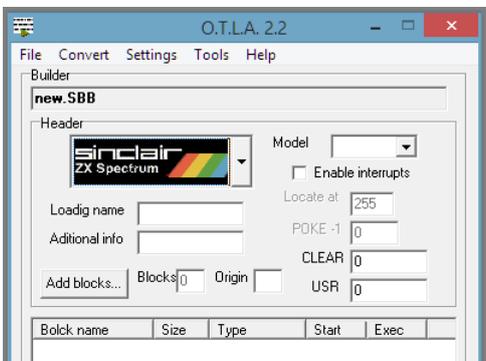

Plus 3 Disk.
Amstrad's 3inch drive fitted to the Spectrum Plus 3 reviewed in show 14.

DIVide.

Modern compact flash based storage reviewed in show 23.
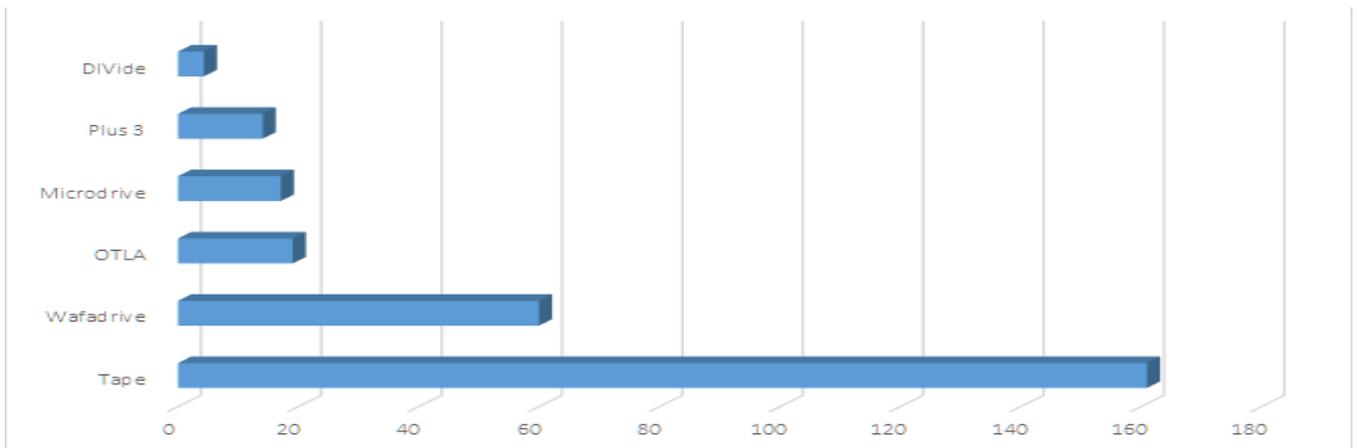
I used a 512mb compact flash card.

OTLA.

Modern turbo tape loading system reviewed in show 26.

This system does not use hardware, instead it packs the signal and outputs a turbo loading file.

The Results

As expected, the DIVide came out on top with a blistering 4.3 seconds.

In a close second though was some surprising results. The Plus 3 drive managed 14.1 seconds and the Micro-dirve 17.1 but giving them a run for their money OTLA, a software only option loaded the game in just 19.1 seconds. The Wafadrive struggled with just 60 seconds.

These speeds are the averages based on testing each one three times. It could be possible you get different speeds especially considering the age of the hardware and tapes/cartridges used.

TSS

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Your monthly fix of all things Spectrum

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