THE SPECTRUM SHOW
Magazine

MISSILE COMMAND
COMPARING THE SPECTRUM CLONES

XMAS GAMES
FESTIVE GAMES REVIEWED

MAKING BALDYZX
PART TWO OF THE STORY

FLASHBACK 86

GAME

HAR

Includes material not in the video show!

XMAS GAMES SPECIAL
Festive fun and games.
Extended reviews inside.

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24 CHRISTMAS GAMES

Want to help?

Send me your reviews or features.

Randomkak.blogspot.com

Welcome to another issue, thanks for downloading and reading. It has been an interesting time since the last issue with several highlights.

Anyone following me on Twitter will know that I attended Replay Expo in Manchester and had a fine time playing the arcade games and console on offer. It was great to get my hands on classics such as Galaxian, Missile Command and Phoenix. It is a totally different experience to playing on Mame on your computer.

While there I settled down in front of a Speccy, loaded up my favourite game Jetpac for what I thought would be a quick blast. Nearly thirty minutes later I was still locked to the keyboard, tuned to the game and going further than I had ever done before.

A date for me to remember is Sunday 11th October 2015. On this date I finally completed Jetpac, and on a real Spectrum too. My score of 66585 was not tremendously high but the fact I completed the game was all that mattered.

Moving on a few days and I was woken about midnight by a friend sending me a text. It just ask would I be interested in a Speccy and some games for £40, as he had seen one for sale on a local (to him) sales website. I sleepily replied no. He persisted and asked if I wanted just the games. Again I replied no.

Something then triggered in my head and I asked what model it was. He had no idea, not being into Spectrum's, but he sent me some pictures. I reluctantly climbed out of bed, fired up my PC and checked my email. Staring back at me was a Spectrum 128.

I quickly rang him and told him to buy it. Within a few days I had driven a few hours to his house and was in possession of a highly sought after 128 machine. Not only that

but 25 games that I didn't have. What were the chances of that!

The machine worked fine, but a few keys were dead, so off it went to Mutant Caterpillar. It was soon back and ready to use. It will no doubt appear in the show soon enough.

Onto this issue and as you have already noticed, it's the Christmas Special. So many magazines of the time did specials for Christmas, and it was something to look forward to along with the Radio Times and of course your presents.

My Christmas Presents 1983

Many people got Spectrums, games or peripherals as presents, and had to split the time using the television between scared parents, angry siblings and your computer.

The best times of course was when you got your own television in your bedroom, meaning you could spend the whole holiday playing your games while the rest of the family did something boring downstairs.

What ever your computing memories of the festive season, I hope this year brings you all you asked for.

Thanks for reading and watching the video show.

SPECTRUM 128 ARRIVES

The big news this month that dominates most magazines is the arrival of Sinclair's new micro, the much anticipated Spectrum 128.

It's been months in coming and the public have been eagerly waiting to get their hands on it after the rumours, speculation and hype that has been circulating since it was first mentioned by *Popular Computing Weekly* in May 1985.

The official launch date has been set to 13th February with trade viewings already taking place and some software companies already possessing development units. The machine should hit the shelves later in the month for the public to buy at £179.99 including a software bundle.

The unit will not come with a numeric keypad as it did in Spain, but this will be available to buy for an additional £19.95.

Software ready to load includes an enhanced version of Ocean's Never Ending Story, Daley Thompson's Supertest 128, an international version of Match Day, Formax from Gargoyle – the follow up to Marsport and many more, in fact there are over 30 companies producing titles already.

In a surprise announcement too, Sir Clive stated that he intends to work on a disk drive system for the 128 machine as soon as possible, saying that Spectrum technology will certainly be around in 1987 and beyond.

TIMEX TV

Sinclair has sold all of the marketing and distribution rights for its pocket TV to Timex, the company who has been manufacturing it from day one.

This means that, although the unit will carry the Sinclair name and logo, it will not be a Sinclair product and all profits will go to Timex.

Sinclair are keen to point out that they are still looking at flat screen televisions and are hopeful that they will play a large part in future products.

SPECCY TEXT

If you were ever jealous of televisions that had teletext features, then help is at hand.

Volex has produced a device that when connected to you Spectrum, will let you view all UK broadcasts including telesoftware downloads.

The unit will cost £99.99.

SINCLAIR LEAD

Two independent surveys both place Sinclair at the top of the list when it comes to home micros.

One company, AGB, gives Sinclair 37% share, while the second, Wood Mackenzie give them 35%.

This is a much larger share than their nearest rivals Commodore and Amstrad, who both have around 16% to 23% depending on who you believe.

On the whole though, micro sales are down by 17% with only 1.1m units sold last year.

MICRO SHOOTOUT

Comparing other micros to the ZX Spectrum

Oric 1

Memory (RAM)	48kb
Screen Size	40 lines x 28 columns
Resolution	240 x 200
CPU	6502a @ 1Mhz
Colours	8
Sound	4 channels. 6 octaves.
Joystick Options	Via third party interface
Connections	Printer port. Cassette port. RGB port.
Games	<300
Average Price	£169.00

ZX SPECTRUM 48K

Memory (RAM)	48kb
Screen Size	22 lines x 32 columns
Resolution	256 x 192
CPU	Z80 @ 3.5Mhz
Colours	8 + 7 bright
Sound	1 bit beeper.
Joystick Options	Via third party interface.
Connections	Tape in/out. Expansion bus.
Games	Approx. 20,000
Average Price	£175.00

Opinion

Marketed as a direct competitor to the Spectrum, this machine certainly had a lot to offer the user. The processor, although only running at 1Mhz could match the Spectrum in most games and the sound, produced by a separate chip, was also much better.

The graphics were similar in resolution and didn't suffer from the infamous colour clash, but sadly companies seemed to be a little bit lazy. Games were often ported from other systems with no changes, so games from the Spectrum such as Manic Miner had no improvements. Newer games such as Stromlord shows what the Oric is capable of.

A capable machine let down by poor support.

ALTAIR IBM 2014

Altair was a rarely seen arcade game released in 1981 By Cidelsa and was a shoot-em-up old school style with diving aliens, starfields and boss battles.

When a Spectrum conversion was released in 2014 by IBM, I quickly downloaded it and fired up the emulator.

As with all old school shooters, the idea is simple, avoid being blown up, shoot as much as you can and aim for a high score.

The game has elements of Galaxian, Gorf and Phoenix with attack waves of various colourful aliens in different attack patterns. The movement of these attacks is tricky to predict though, so this is no walk in the park.

Control of the player ship is smooth and responsive, which is paramount for shooters, but even this does not make things any easier for this game, it will be a challenge regardless.

The sound on the arcade was a little odd, and I'm not sure if that was the actual sound or a problem with emulation. The Spectrum version has better sound in my opinion with some nice affects.

Graphics wise the game comes quite close to the real thing. Obviously not being able to reproduce the multi-coloured aliens from the arcade, but everything else is nicely done.

Gameplay wise its tough but then again so is the arcade. It was designed to eat coins and give players something to attain by getting further each play.

That doesn't mean it's not a good game, in fact I really like it.

It's not often we get a good shoot-em-up on the Speccy and this one more than fills the gaps.

If you're a shoot-em-up fan, especially of the early style arcade games, then you'll love this.

Go give it a try...

INVASION FORCE

Artic Computing 1982

ZX81 version

Invasion Force is a mixture of arcade games and was released very early in the Spectrum's life. Because it was an early release, and the fact it is a 16k game, makes for a rather basic looking affair. However the playability includes many elements making for a challenging game.

The games that spring to mind when first seeing this are Astro Clone, Gorf and Phoenix. There is a large mothership at the top of the screen, like Phoenix, but the actual gameplay is quite different.

To destroy the mothership, you first have to blast through the moving force field (like Gorf), and then blow a hole in the ship to get to the core. The force field is continually moving and has points in it that if hit, repairs any damage you have caused to the mothership. Accuracy is the name of the game here.

You also have to contend with smaller alien birds that fly around dropping bombs and also the force field pieces that fall down when hit. This falls in pieces of three, similar to Astro Clone, and have to be dodged to avoid your ship being destroyed.

If all that wasn't enough, there is a time limit involved. You have to blow up the mother ship in a set amount of time otherwise you lose a life.

Losing a life produces a nice animation of an articulated lorry (the logo of Artic Computing) driving on-screen and filling up our broken ship ready to start again.

Controls are the usual left, right and fire and are responsive, which is a bonus in this reflex hungry game.

The graphics, as mentioned earlier, are blocky with very little use of UDGs. The game looks like a direct port of the ZX81 version, with only the small alien birds being in high resolution. Movement too is in eight pixel jumps. Despite this the game play is frantic at times, with a few pauses thrown in as you try to avoid falling bombs while lining up your shot.

Sound is weak during actual play, but there are some nice sound effects for refuelling and game over.

Later levels see an increase of flying aliens, more speed and the force field changing directions randomly. A lot of variety in just 16K.

Overall then, a nice, simplistic early shooter that can be fun but is also challenging.

A fun little game.

SNOOPY

The Edge 1990

Snoopy is a game based on well known comic strip Peanuts and sees you taking control of Snoopy having to find the lost blanket of Linus. Your task doesn't seem to be difficult because the game area isn't large, there is no time limit and you can't die (well, actually you can but our dog detective has unlimited number of lives).

Snoopy is an arcade adventure, so there are puzzles to be solved and arcade sections. Controlling Snoopy is simple: left & right for walking, up for jumping, down for picking up and dropping objects, fire for using them and space bar for entering houses from the street. There are no menus with options and you don't have to type in any text commands. All you have to do is walk, find objects and use them in the right places.

At the beginning this game looks very promising. The graphics are good, other characters from Peanuts are here and there is a mystery to solve. But is it really a good game? Unfortunately it's not.

The weakest part of this game is its storyline, it's too short. Your adventure can be completed in half an hour. Few puzzles are illogical and to solve them you must use good old trial and error. Snoopy can carry only one object at the same time, so it's often a lot of walking just to get the object you need now. There is also a weird thing, probably a bug, with one of the objects, the rubber ring. It can only be dropped once, so if that happens in the wrong place the game cannot be completed.

Graphics in Snoopy are well drawn. They are black & white like the original cartoon and Snoopy plus a few objects are animated, but other characters from the comic strip are not, they just stand still.

Soundtrack consists of music at the beginning and one sound effect during game. The most interesting thing in this game is that it can be completed in two ways.

The Spectrum version looks like a cut-down product, with many features removed just to fit into 48k of RAM. This game should have enhanced version for 128 machines with all locations from 16-bit version, more animations and better soundtrack. In its present form it's a disappointment.

Review by Piotr "PopoCop" Szymanski

MILLIONAIRE

Incentive Software 1984

This is not related to the game show on television, but does offer an interesting change from action games, and gives you the chance to try your luck at running a company.

I don't think there was a Spectrum fan who didn't wonder what it was like to own their own software company or retail shop, and this game gives the player a tantalising glimpse. Every Spectrum owners dream was to make a game and sell it and become a millionaire just like the heroes presented in the press at the time.

Beginning in your bedroom you take your first steps into business via a series of questions that sets up your little empire and gives you a starting fund of £500.

Initially you are asked if you want to specialise in a particular market or just produce a wide range of titles. You are asked what constitutes a good game based on four factors, and what resources you want to put into each. These can be changed each year too, to adjust your plans if things aren't going well.

Each month you are given choices about how much to spend on advertising, whether to make any special promotions, how much to spend on duplication. and how many units you want. The program then calculates how your business decisions worked out and shows you your progress.

There are options to see Honest Harry who may offer you some cheap games or other dodgy deals. You can also take out a loan with interest.

Every month you are told of the news such as poor attendance at computers shows or bumper Christmas for software, and these affect sales.

As each month passes, the idea is you slowly build up your business , but at the end of the day it's just a lot of key pressing, a bit of wait and then some figures are displayed.

As older games become less popular you obviously supply less, but if suddenly there is a surge in interest and you run out of stock, again they are missed sales.

The aim is to make a million pounds, but this is far from easy and you don't even have to make a million, the game assumes you can if you managed to get to £250,000.

The initial few games are interesting, but it soon begins to be repetitive, or maybe it's just me being bad at business, either way if you don't like strategy games this won't convert you.

As a break from shooting aliens or racing down a track, this is a nice little game that can pull you in quite easily early on.. but don't expect any long term game play...
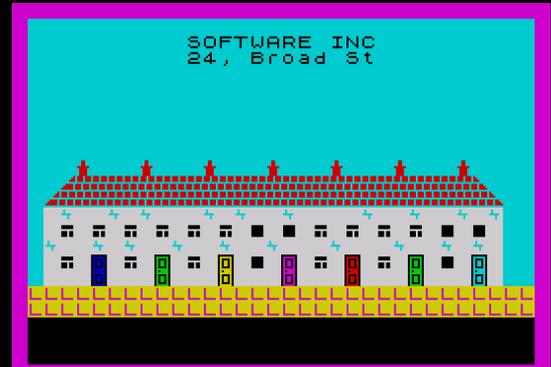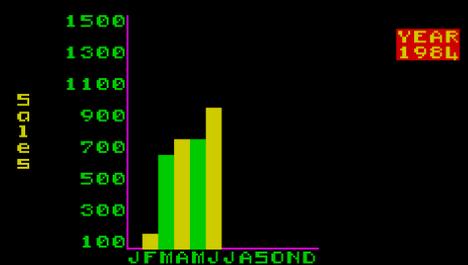
MISSILE COMMAND

ARCADE SHOOTOUT

WHICH SPECTRUM CLONE

COMES CLOSE TO THE ARCADE

CLASSIC?

The Arcade Game

Missile Command is an intriguing game that was launched in 1980 by Atari and licenced to Sega for distribution in Europe.

The cabinet was different to other arcade games of the time due the unique control system the game required. Unlike most other cabinets, it didn't have a joystick, instead it had a large trackball. This may at first seem odd, but once you play the game, you soon realise it is the ideal control system. Playing Missile Command without a trackball, after using one, is just not the same experience.

The game's simplistic graphics made it ideal for home conversion and all of the early consoles and micros had at least one version of the game.

The idea was simple, protect your cities from falling missiles with a limited supply of your own in three locations at the bottom of the screen; left, centre and right.

A crosshair on screen, moved via the trackball, sets the target for your missiles and you can fire from either of the three bases. You have to allow for timings too, so that your missile explodes just as the enemy projectile reaches it.

Later levels include planes and satellites to hit and the game ends when all of your cities are destroyed.

An unofficial mod, released later called Super Missile Attack added many changes including palette differences and levels with background colours other than black. Some of the Spectrum clones took this idea, some successfully other not so...

Simple game, simple concept, great gameplay, but which Spectrum clone can match up?
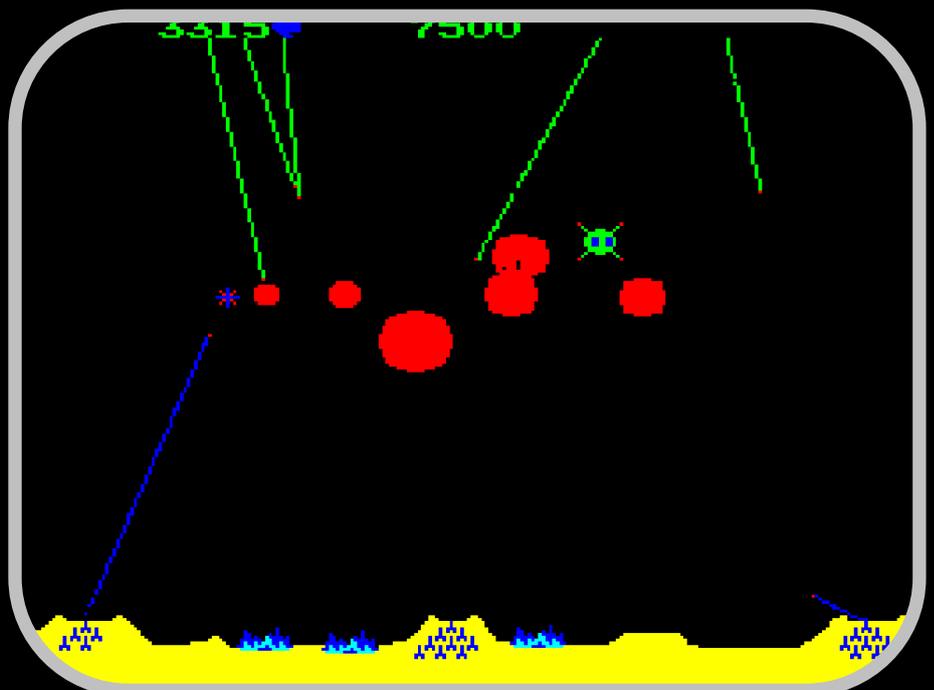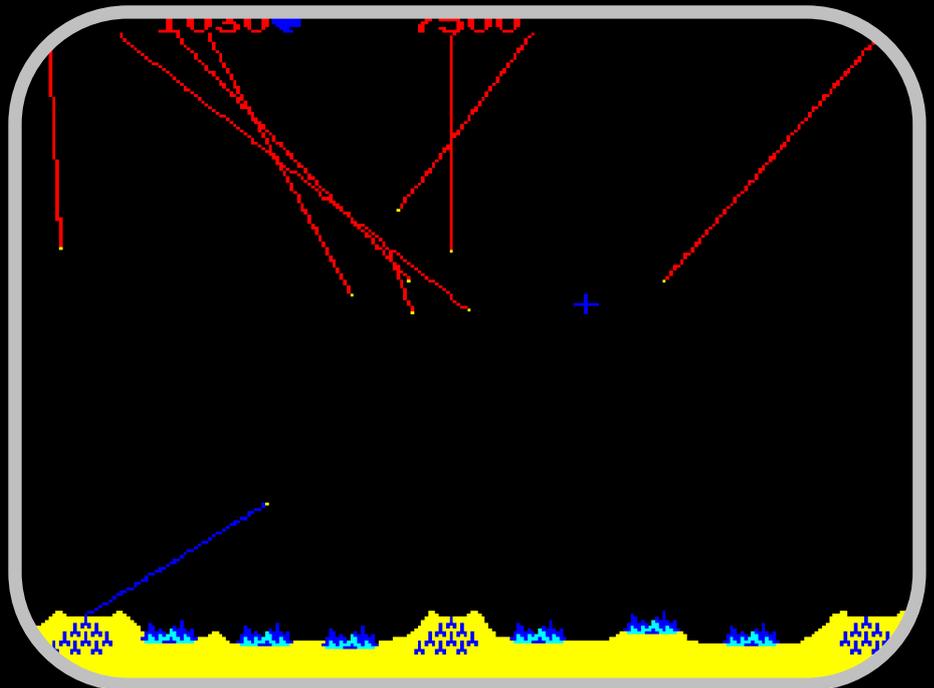
AFTERMATH ALTERNATIVE SOFTWARE – 1988

Initial impressions of this game are good. The graphics have been updated and look really nice, the gameplay is smooth but there are a few problems.

Firstly there is only one laser base so if this gets destroyed you just have to wait and hope the rest of the buildings don't get hit. The arcade has three, so there was much more room for extended play.

The explosions are a bit small meaning your accuracy has to be good. There is also no branching of the inbound missiles and the sound is a bit minimal too.

Another problem is the random speed of the enemy missiles which seems to be set too high. Some just slowly float down screen, which is fine for the first levels but every now and again you will get one that just blasts downward way to fast to react to. This normally takes out your base and renders the game over.

It's a pity about this as the game is really nice to play when things are working to arcade speeds, and the addition of another base would make this a potential winner.

ARMAGEDDON OCEAN SOFTWARE 1983

This game has very minimalistic graphics and like Aftermath does not have three missile bases. On the plus side it doesn't have missile bases at all so your main concern if to defend the cities.

The game plays really well, much better than Aftermath with smooth movement and nice explosions. The game speed is about right making it easy to progress and the sound compliments the action very well.

I actually enjoyed playing this game and it even mimics the arcade with branching inbound missiles which really spices gameplay up.

The speed of the game slowly increases and everything seemed to be going great until the colour scheme changed – presumably to give some impression of advancing through levels.

Sadly the inappropriate use of BRIGHT ruins it with the screen becoming a mass of BRIGHT and non BRIGHT character squares. There was no need for this and it really does lower the games score.

It would have been far better to keep the black background.
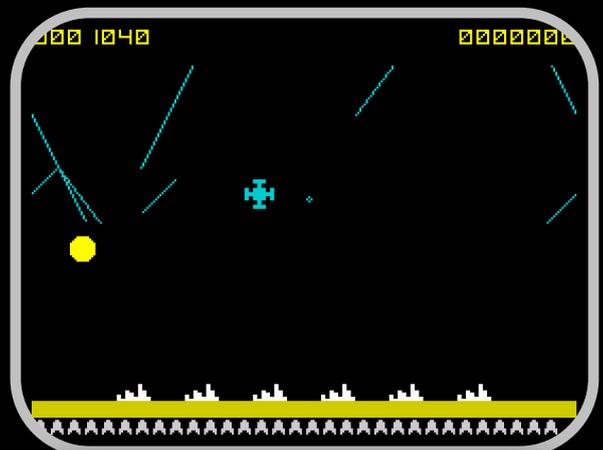
ARMAGEDDON SILVERSOFT 1983

So far this is the only game brave enough to attempt three bases that the player controls. This adds a lot more strategy to the game as well as extra controls, one key to fire each base.

The graphics are minimalistic and suited to the game but the cursor moves in character based jumps making aiming a bit tricky.

The difficulty is pitched a bit too high and the game sets off in a frenzy of button pushing rather than planned, strategic defence. The addition of aliens that drop down and destroy things is unnecessary and just cause frustration, when you are trying your best to manage three missile bases and defend your cities.

The sound is adequate and the explosions are sufficient and last long enough to be useful.

Again this game opts for colour changes to depict level changes, which can at times be a distraction when you are trying to track inbound missiles on a yellow background.

As the game progresses things speed up as you would expect, although in this instance, with the attacking aliens it all becomes too much as the screen inevitably fills with explosions as you just keep pressing the fire buttons.

CRUISE ATTACK MIKRO GEN 1983

This is Mikro-Gen's entry that came at the same time as there other early arcade clones. It has some nice graphics and good sound, and even two missile bases to control, adding to the potential gameplay.

The key layout is difficult to use though, which is a major flaw. P as left as L as right, the fire keys are Z and Symbol Shift, this combination causes many miss fires and sees you wasting missiles as you fire instead of moving.

The game levels seem to be decided by how many missile you destroy, so even after you have no cities to defend, the missile still keep coming until you have destroyed them all, only then does the game end.

The difficulty is a bit high to start with as a mass of inbound missiles arrive at the same time, there is also no branching, but the addition of that would have raised the difficulty much too high.

EARTH DEFENCE ARTIC COMPUTING 1984

It seemed all the big players were giving us missile command and Artic was no exception.

This game gives us three missile bases, but no individual control to fire from them. This is a good balance of easy gameplay and offering better resilience for longer play time.

The graphics are simple, which is pretty much expected for this game, they are smooth and responsive and the explosions are particularly nice, lasting the right amount of time to provide a fire and forget feeling, just like the arcade.

The sound too is good, having some nice effects and lovely explosions.

This, like previous games, chooses to switch colour schemes as you progress, but unlike the others, this, for some reason, isn't too distracting. Maybe it's because of the combinations used.

The game play is excellent and very close to the arcade machine. Not having to decide which laser base to fire form removes the awkward controls and leaves the player free to concentrate, ideal for a home micro clone. The inbound missiles don't branch, but that doesn't matter in this game as you get so much more.

I got caught up in this game, something that had not happened with the others, and I spent a good 30 minutes blasting my way through the levels. A real contender for top spot.

MISSILES COMMAND CASCADE GAMES 1984

What did I really expect from Cascade games?

A poorly written, BASIC game with beeper sound, jerky graphics and awful gameplay.

The firing is very hit and miss, the target missile has often moved on before the fire key is actually registered, meaning you missile just ends up in the middle of nowhere.

Let's move on quickly...

MISSILE COMMAND PRECISION SOFTWARE 1983

This is.. terrible.

The graphics are jerky the sound is average and the control is awful.

I think for everyone's sake, we should just pretend we never saw this.

MISSILE COMMAND C.TECH 1982

This has to be some kind of joke. I know the software industry was just getting started in 1982 but to put out a 3.5k basic program and expect people to buy it.. really….?

This mess is headache inducing. The border continually changes colour, the controls are so unresponsive you think your keyboard is faulty, the sound consists of the same single beep for everything and the missile trails are just laughable.

Yet another early game consigned to the rubbish bin.

MISSILE DEFENCE ANIROG SOFTWARE 1983

After some initial setup problems, I finally got my emulator to emulate a joystick properly, and at this point the game came to life.

You can choose to use the keyboard, which will allow you to control each laser base independently, or a joystick which uses the central one. The second option I found best, allowing me to concentrate on defending my trucks and not cities as the arcade game.

The game play is good, surprisingly for early Anirog games. The graphics are nice, the sound is good, the implementation is right, it's just a shame about the background colours changing.

The difficulty is just right, allowing you to progress and If you can get over the colour schemes, you'll find this an entertaining game.

MISSILE DEFENCE MAGNUM COMPUTING 1986

This is a weird variation of the arcade game in which you have to drop mines instead of firing missiles. This may not have been bad if the controls were not such a nightmare.

The crosshair continues to move, even after you stop pressing the keys, so you end up with a virtually incontrollable sight laying mines randomly around the screen, while the fast moving inbound missiles just wiz past.

The sound is grating and the graphics are below par and each level seems to be over too quickly just as the controls seem to be obeying you!

Not a game I can recommend.
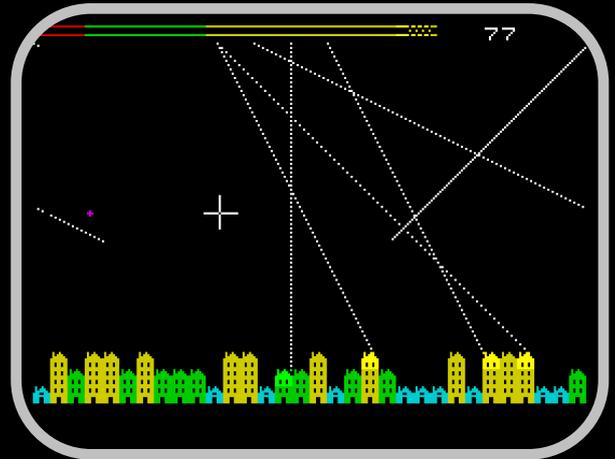
SPACE MISSILE COMMAND PROFISOFT 1984

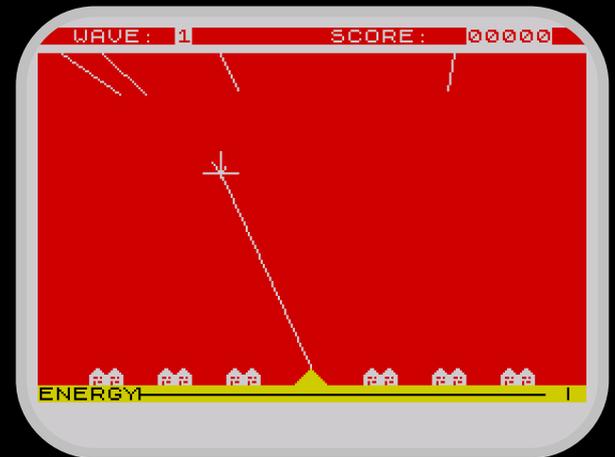A commercial game, released in 1984 written in basic. Yes I am not lying.

As you can see it's pretty terrible for a commercial offering.

This would have been a good type-in game in a magazine, but to release it commercially...?

Being basic it has all the usual drawbacks.

Slow jerky graphics, un-responsive controls and terrible sound.

Keep clear.

REPULSAR SOFTEK 1983

Here we get a single laser base and the usual cities to defend.

At first the gameplay seems a bit pedestrian, your missiles explode quicker making timing a bit more essential, but later levels the gameplay improves and things begin to get hectic.

Planes and aliens soon appear, dropping more missiles from lower down and the number of inbound missiles increased.

The graphics are smooth, the control is responsive and sound is well used.

This is not a bad game really, but somehow it just doesn't get the heart pumping like some of the others.

Worth trying though.

WAR GAME ABBEX 1984

Not, as I was hoping, some kind of tie-in with the movie, but an average clone.

There are two missile bases to control but the speed of the missiles makes for an unplayable game.

The graphics are ok, the sound is bit noisy and there are some nice effects.

The control is a bit confusing using odd keys to control the cross-hair, but that could have been ignored had the gameplay been decent.

As it is, this is let down just because the missiles fire at such a slow pace and the fact you can only fire one at a time.

Not the worst game tested by far.. but certainly not a contender.
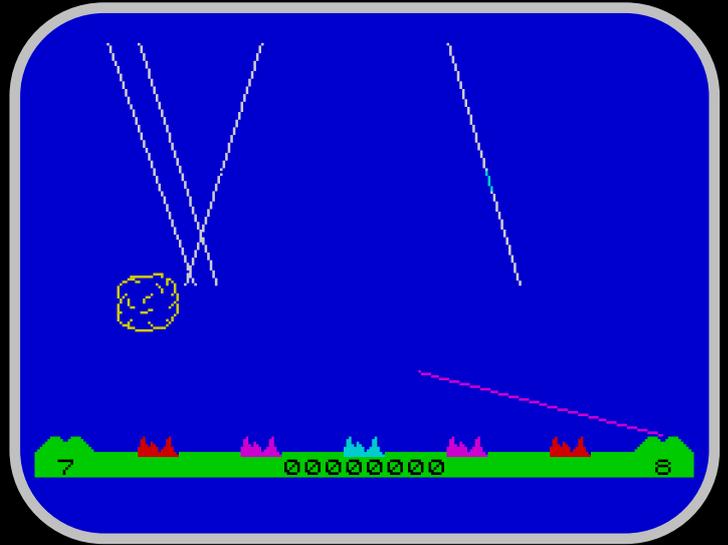
WINNER

If you're looking for a game that plays really well, and gives you that arcade feeling then there is only really one choice.

A game that delivers the fire & forget feeling of the arcade on your Spectrum and that game is...

EARTH DEFENCE

From Artic Computing.

It may not look the best of all the games tested, but it certainly beats them all for playability.

METAL MAN
RELOADED

Oleg Origin 2014

It's the future, and crime is running rife in New York. Only one man can put an end to it, Mathew Cranston – aka Metal Man.
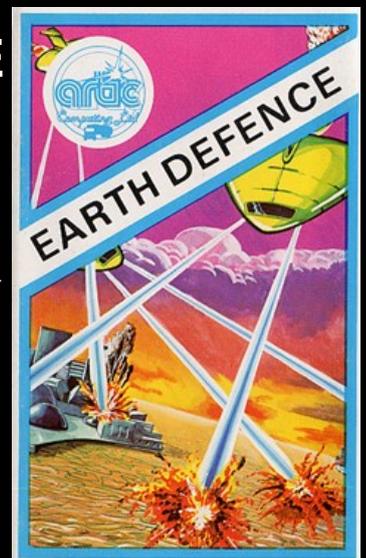
The plot reads like Robocop and the game follows the same format as the Robocop game, and many other run and gun games.

Before you even get a few seconds into the game the first thing you notice is the graphics. They are large, very large, excellently well drawn and very colourful. A lot of effort has gone into making this game look stunning and it can be seen. The author has done a great job of squeezing the Spectrum until it screams.

Once that shock has passed, you soon realise that the game has started and you better do something otherwise you'll be dead.

There are many missions to complete, the first one is to find a number of computer chips so that you can upload a virus into the computer. Here you walk around and use lifts to access other levels. There are of course the bad guys out to stop you. These come in various forms, all very well drawn and animated.
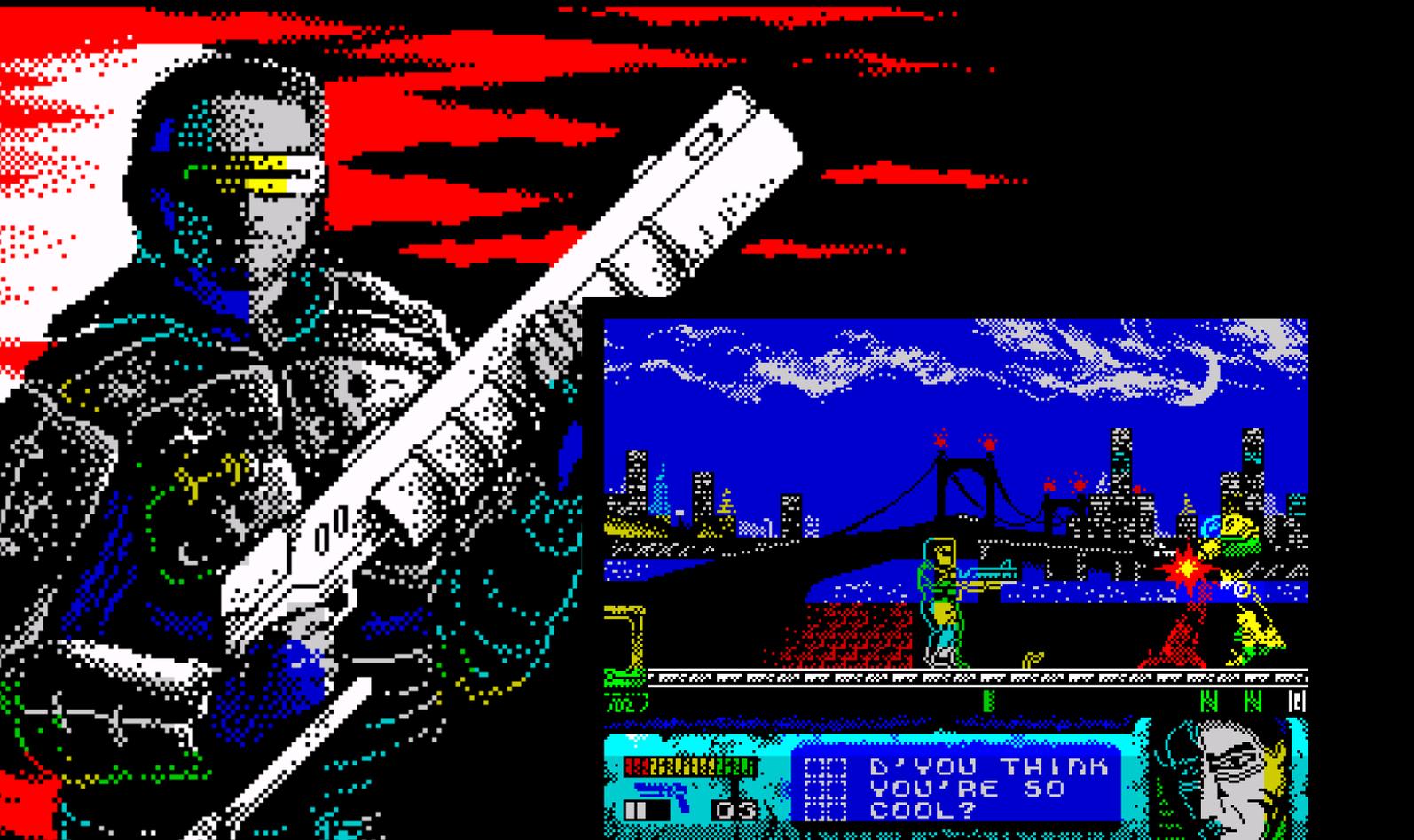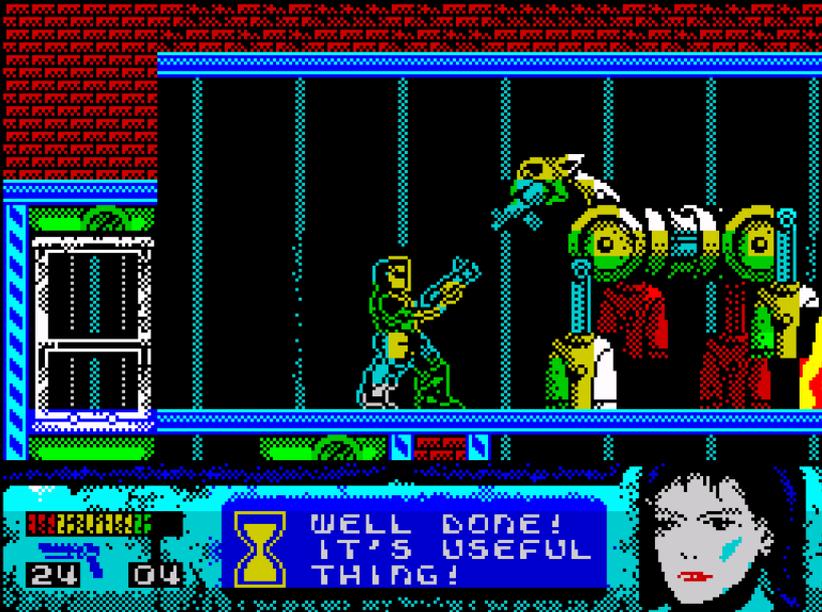
Its action all the way as you explore the areas, shooting anything that moves and trying to locate the chips.

It's not an easy game, and all too often I found myself dead after a few minutes. Maybe it was because I went in guns blazing, when I should really take a more strategic approach. In fact there are many puzzles to solve, so this is more than a mad shooter.

The controls work really well, allowing you to control lifts, crouch and fire diagonally all with just the four directions plus fire. The ease of the control makes this game better than others that use different controls and fail miserably.

The backgrounds are great, really well drawn and colourful, but don't stand around admiring them.

Sound and music are great, with an impressive intro and well thought out effects.

There are things to collect like power-ups, shields and health packs, with the later being very important. There are also a sections where you can fly on a space scouter and operate cranes in later levels. There is just so much here.

I spent quite a while playing this game once I got into the puzzle elements and didn't just go for glory. Even though I didn't get very far I did enjoy it.
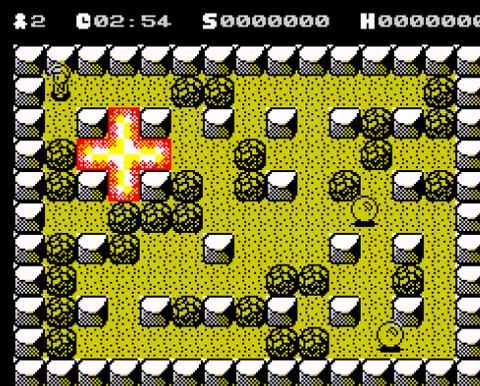
If you like this style of game, definitely give Metal Man a try.

Its very well done and will provide a great challenge.

Highly recommended.

I expect most people have played Bomberman in one form another. The classic strategy, maze bomb-em-up was originally released by Hudsonsoft in 1983 and has gone on to spawn well over 70 versions across nearly all gaming platforms.

This then is Flynn's Adventures in Bombland, written by Tom Dalby and released in 2001 and is arguably the best version for the Spectrum. There's is a plot, something about rescuing friends, but did anyone ever pay attention to it in Bomberman? The game at heart is just level after level of maze bombing action.

The idea, for those who have never played this type of game, is simple, drop bombs to destroy the enemy, blow up blocks to reveal extras, find the exit, and don't die. By timing your bomb drops, and trying to anticipate the enemy movement, you can successfully clear them off the screen, but you have to be careful. It is easy to blow yourself up by miss-timing the drop or blocking yourself in. The bombs explode outwards in a cross pattern so you can hide behind blocks to protect yourself.

There is a time limit ticking away for each level, and if you get lucky and clear all the enemy quickly, you can then go and find some bonus items by blowing up the remaining blocks.

As the levels move on, things get harder, with more enemies and fast moving enemies, but you can collect power ups. By picking up the cyan heart bomb symbol, you can get bombs that you can control. Dropping them leaves them in place, and you can trigger their explosion by the space key, a very handy tool that only lasts the level sadly.

If you manage to get past the first stage, which is five levels, the next stage awaits, and the graphic change, giving you a nice green maze with different enemies. The stages change every five levels, so lots to aim for.

As an added trick, you also have to be careful not to blow up the exit, as this sends the monsters into overdrive... not good!
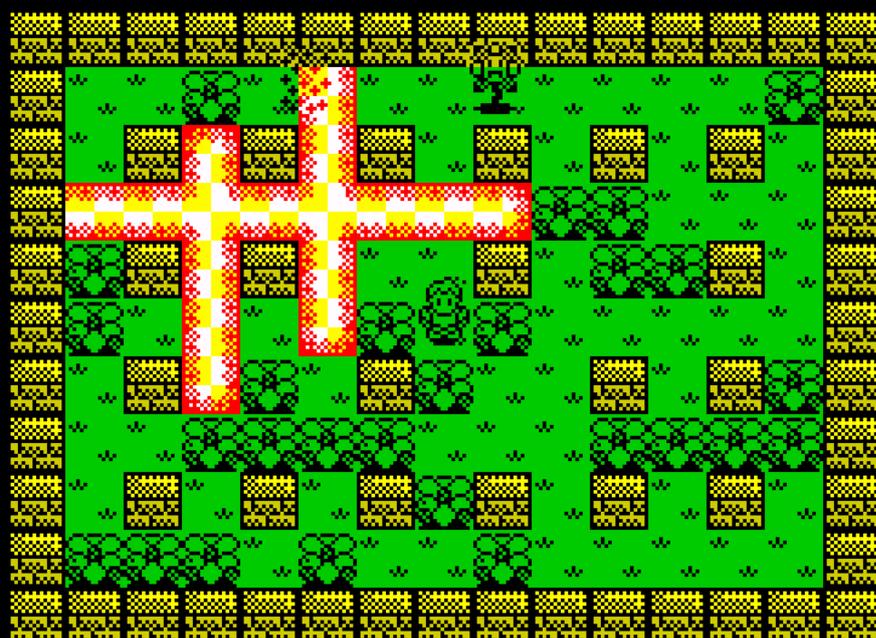
The graphics are really nice, well-drawn, well animated, easy to see and very smooth. Control can be by keyboard or various joysticks and is very responsive. Sound is minimal, but functional, and works well for this game.

The gameplay is brilliant, classic Bomberman style with plenty of fast and furious action.

Definitely recommended

THE NINJA MASTER

Firebird Software 1986

In what seemed like a never-ending attack on gamers in the 80's, this is just one of many Ninja based games. In this particular one we try to guide our hero through various challenges to allow him to rise through the ranks and finally become a ninja master.

There are four tests in total. Complete all four and you rise a grade and it all starts again, but with greater difficulty.

There are many keys, but luckily you can define them. The keys are different for each of the sections and consist of the usual left, right low, mid and high kicks, punches and blocking. Don't worry though, you are reminded of the keys before each test.

The first test is defending yourself against various projectiles thrown from both sides. Here you stand in the centre of the screen and have to react at the right time. The objects either come at you at shoulder height, or ankle height. Pressing the right key sends out an arm or leg to block it.

If you get it right, you get a nice Eyaaaa speech effect, get it wrong and your man howls in pain. Strike enough of the objects, it's on to the next test.

Here you just have to press the two power keys to build up your power until you have enough to break the wood. This section is very much a button masher.

Level three and we have objects thrown at us from the right and we have to choose high, middle or low to block them. Some of these object move quite fast, so again it's down to reactions. This section is harder than the others, as the objects move faster giving you less time to react.

The next and final test, if you can ever get there, is to shoot a tin can as it moves across the screen.

The graphics are OK, although the animation is a bit jerky, with only two positions per action. Colour is used well though, and it looks good, with the large Ninja well drawn.

There is a tune at the start of the game and before each level, but in game is limited to either the yeahhh or arghhhhh sounds. Well, there is the sound of the crowd... but that's just a lot of noise. The best sound effect is the wooden block being broken – it's a nice thud.

Playability... well.. there's not much story, no progression apart from the repeating four levels, and at the end of the day it just a reaction test. It's fine to play for about 30 minutes, to see how far you can get, and without emulation, the multi-load system could soon become irritating.

Enjoyable for the first few plays then..... but there is little skill progression. You just need fast reflexes.

LIGHT-WRITING

The Datel Light Pen

There were several light pens available for the Spectrum including one from DK Tronics, and this one from Datel Electronics consists of the same three components. An interface, a tape and the pen itself.

The light pen itself, which is the same size as a normal pen but a little lighter (no pun intended) is comfortable to hold and it was soon plugged in and ready to test.

There is a short calibration tool which allows you to save the settings and then the drawing program is loaded.

The package called Lightwriter gives you various functions such as circle, line and fill. In my version, probably an early release of the software I couldn't find on the internet, there is a series of boxes at the bottom of the screen with a letter above them.

Each one represents a command for example K allows you to clear the screen. We'll look at a different version of the software later.

The boxes are selected via the menu at the bottom of the screen, but to select them you have to hold the pen on the box and press the key on the keyboard. A bit strange really.

Screen Flicker

One of the first things you notice is the screen flicker. As with the light gun, the raster is used to get the position of the pen so the screen has to blank when it detects where the pen meets the screen, and this means that there is a lot of flickering. This is more prominent when using the free hand option.

The cursor position is moved by placing the pen on screen and pressing any key. Once at the point you can draw circles, lines or use the fill tool.

To do this you first have to set the cross hair centre by pointing to a start point and pressing any key and this will move the cross hair to that location. Then hold the pen over the C box and press C. You then hold the pen over the D box and press D to draw a circle.

Drawing freehand produces a constant screen flash which was very off putting, and you had to press a key to stop drawing rather than pulling the pen away.

Pulling the pen away caused the program to switch to a white screen meaning it has lost the position. Putting the pen back onscreen would result in a line being drawn from the last point the software

knew about to the new location.

Drawing to the edge of the screen causes the software to think the pen is at the opposite side, and promptly draws a line straight across the screen. This was very annoying.

All too often I found myself clearing the screen and trying again. There is no undo feature and the delete function seemed to cause more lines to be drawn!

The fill tool works well, but is a little slow on larger areas. It is very easy to miss a pixel on a shape meaning the whole screen starts to fill up which take ages.

You can change INK and PAPER colours, but you obviously get colour clash at certain points.

Once you have drawn your masterpiece, you can then save it to tape.

You can draw lines quickly by entering freehand mode and lifting the pen away from the screen and placing it back where you want the line to end.

Software

The version of the software on World Of Spectrum replaces the boxes with icons and looks a lot more professional.

In operation it is also a lot better. You don't have to press the correct keys now, any key will do, and the software picks up the command based on what the pen is pointing to. So much better than the earlier version.

All of the commands have been placed in larger menus too, making selecting an option faster and easier.

It was interesting to use the pen, but the constant flickering and the cross over from pen to keyboard meant it was far from a fluent experience. Maybe I was expecting too much.

As a gadget its cool to have and fun to mess about with.

As a serious tool though I have my doubts it could be used to produce anything of merit.

The software is too clunky, and it's too easy to make mistakes.

The screen flicker gets in the way and it's hard sometimes to see what you are drawing.

Fun but.. that's all...
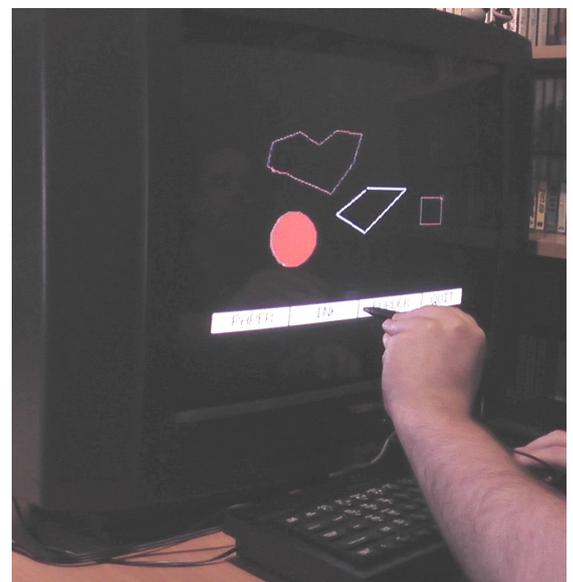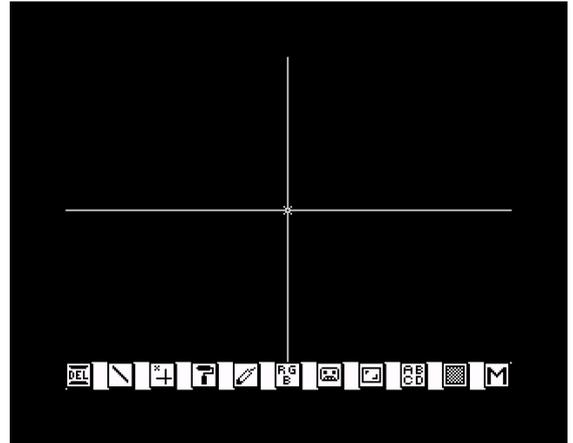
CHRISTMAS GAMES

What could be more attractive at this time of year, than a Christmas themed game.

Of course it didn't matter that the shelf life was very limited, or that they wouldn't be played much after December, or that, because of these factors, the games were almost always rubbish. What mattered was that they were available and people bought them, and now we're going to take a look at some of them.

Bauble Blast

Stonechat Productions 2012.

Here you play Santa, who has to shoot the stinky baubles to score points.

The screen is set out in a standard grid layout with Santa at the bottom and the baubles at the top.

As the game gets underway the baubles move randomly around.

Moving around you simply have to dodge them or shoot them.

Shooting them all moves you to the next level with more baubles.

The game is fun to play despite the simple graphics, but the main problem is the movement of Santa.

Pressing a key sets him off at a slow rate, building up to his normal speed after a second or so.

This can cause problems if you want to change direction, and often causes the baubles to crash into him.

Santa can also only shoot one shot at a time, so you have to make sure every shot won't leave you open to the marauding baubles.

Sound is used sparingly, but there is some nice sampled speech when you complete a level.

Overall, not a bad game, which could have been improved by changing the way Santa moves.

Christmas Cracker

Jonathan Cauldwell 2007

This game features one of Jonathan's game characters, Egghead, in his quest to rescue the Eurogamer magazine team.

This is more than just a simple platform game, and although it is quite small, having just 9 screens, it does have an element of strategy behind it.

Once Egghead collects the shovel on the first screen, he can then dig down through snow.

Doing this however, could trap him, so you have to plan your route to make sure that once you rescue a member of the team, you can get back to the exit to continue you task.

The game can be completed very quickly once you know the correct route, but it's fun to play, well designed with nice graphics and good gameplay.

Sound is kept to just walking, digging and collecting, and control is nice and crisp.

One to try...
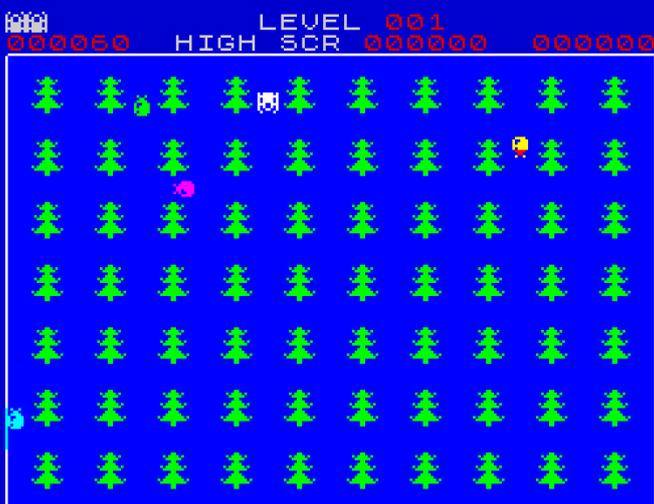
Crimbo – A Gloop Troops Tale.

2010 by Little Shop Of Pixels.

In this new game Santa's helpers have gone on strike and you have to collect all the presents from around the house yourself.

A nice tune plays on the intro before taking you into the game itself.

With lovely bright and colourful graphics, this game instantly appeals, although early plays proved a little tricky.

Getting used to the jump mechanism takes time, but soon pays off. To jump to maximum time and distance, you have to hold down the jump key. You then stay in the air for a set period, after which you drop down. This has to be used to get over many of the obstacles and make those tricky long jumps, and the jumps where you have to change direction mid-air to climb upwards.

The levels are nicely designed and each one has a set time limit in which to collect the presents. Once you know how to complete a level, it becomes easier, but the challenge is completing them the first time against the clock.

Some screens allow you to leave on one side and appear at the other. This can be used to plan the fastest route through the level.

A nice bouncy tune plays throughout, and the gameplay, I would say, is medium to hard. Or maybe I'm just rubbish at these types of games.

If you like this type of game, it's certainly well worth giving this a go.

Merry Xmas Santa

Icon Software in 1984.

This game will only work on 48k machines by the way, in case you wanted to try it, but read this review first.

Here we play Santa again, delivering presents down chimneys set across several roof tops.

Santa can jump and climb down ladders, and as he passes each chimney, presents are deposited automatically. Of course it's not that easy as there are things that he has to avoid.

Snowmen, snowballs, slippery rocks and icicles are some of the things to watch out for, although the snowballs seem to be random and difficult to see, let alone avoid.

The game starts with a terrible tune and the game begins. Control is OK although some of the collision detection is off, especially around the holes that Santa has to jump.

He can pick up items of food for additional points too, but most of the time you will be trying to just complete the level.

Things moves along at a fast pace, and with a few tweaks this could have been a half decent game.

As it is, it soon becomes frustrating as you fall down a hole for the 20th time because the collision detection is off, or a snowball hits you that suddenly appeared at the exact time you reached the edge of the screen.

I wouldn't play this at Xmas unless you want to spend the whole time swearing and feeling cheated.

Moley Christmas

Your Sinclair in 1987.

Gremlin Graphics produced this short platformer for Your Sinclair magazine, featuring their famous underground character, Monty Mole.

In this game he must collect various objects to help him create and release a new game.

Screen one he must collect a game listing.

Screen two, he must drop it into the mastering plant and collect the master at the other end.

Screen three and Monty has to collect eight tapes.

Screen four and Monty has to hitch a lift.

Screen five is the magazines offices and screen six is the newsagents.

This is a typical Monty Mole platform gamer with moving platforms, ropes and enemies a-plenty.

The graphics are great, the sound is good, especially on 128k machine that has a great tune. The game play is spot on if you are used to the other Monty Games.

Each level has a time limit based on Monty's health, so you have to be quick. This I found a bit annoying. I would have preferred to play at my own pace rather than been forced into errors because of a tight time limit.
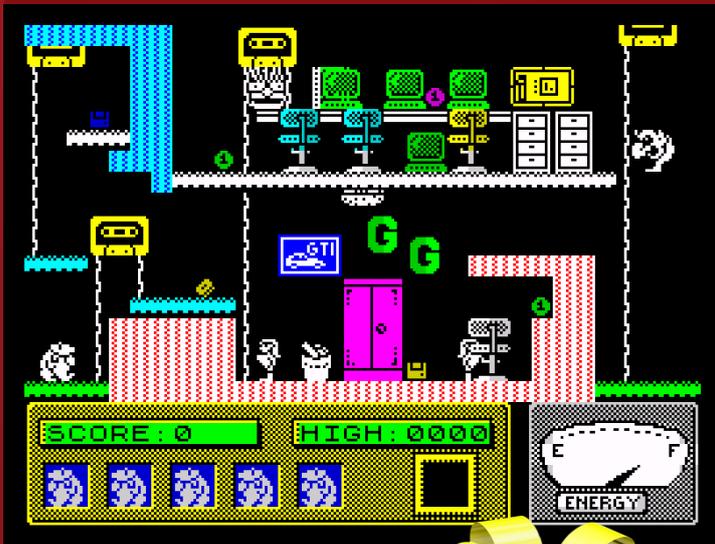
Santa

Artic Computing 1983.

This has to be the worst commercial Christmas game ever, and I am surprised Artic released it.

There are six mini games, all of them terrible.

Let's take a look at just a few of them, which is as much as I can take.

The first is Peek In The Pudding. You have to find nine hidden coins hidden in the pudding and avoid eating the worm randomly placed in the festive desert. You move your 8 pixel hero around the pudding, blindly moving about in the hope of landing on a coin.

The graphics are terrible, the sound is terrible, the game play is terrible and yes, it's obviously written in BASIC.

The second game I played was Stop The Snow Flake, which was equally as bad.

Here snow flakes drop down the screen one at a time and you have to move, what looks like a laser, to stop them landing. Again we have slow, jerky gameplay obviously in BASIC, with terrible sound.

The third one I forced myself to play was Burst The Balloons. Here you have to burst balloons floating up the screen.

As the game progresses, you move down, making the game more difficult.

Yes it's basic and everything is awful.

There is nothing here that wouldn't be out of place as a type-in in a magazine, so why would Artic release this?

One to avoid at all costs...

Sant's Xmas Caper

Zeppelin Games 1991

This is very thinly disguised shoot-em-up and not even a particularly good one, especially for 1991.

Taking control of Santa's sled, you have to... ah never mind about the plot, it's rubbish anyway, this is a shoot-em-up, who needs a story!

Fly around and shoot stuff.

This game has terrible graphics and gameplay. The whole thing just screams that is was thrown out in a rush to grab some Xmas money from kids.

Some things can't be shot and have to be avoided, and you also have to collect presents as you go these are usually little Santa heads or glasses of wine.

You also have to avoid the landscape, trees and igloos.

If you manage to get to the end of a level there is a boss battle, but I could not get that far and ended up watching this on the RZX recording.

Lots of things on screen mean a tricky game, which can be over very quickly and there is no real enthusiasm to go back and try again. It's not really worth the effort.

Just terrible... no wonder I hate Xmas...
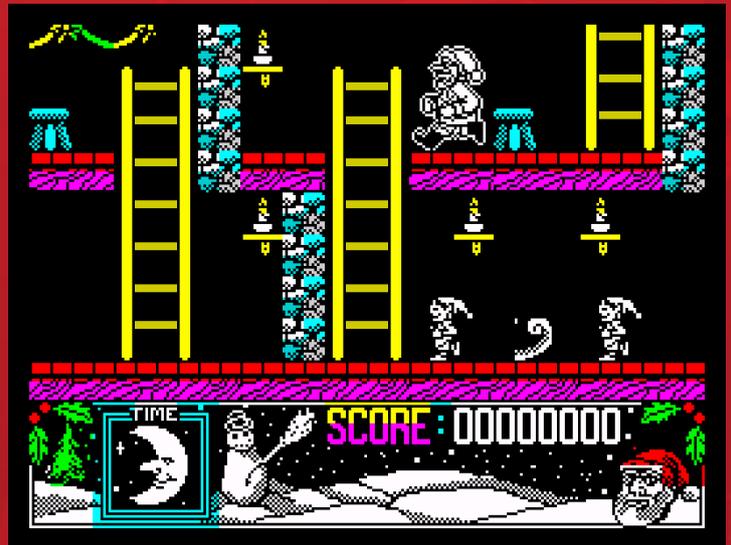
The Official Father Christmas Game

Alternative Software 1989

I suppose there had to be one, so here is the Official Father Christmas Game released late in the Spectrum's life.

The game consists of several sub games, with the first one being a straight forward platform challenge, controlling Santa as he moves around his home collecting bits of his sledge so he can set off to deliver presents.

His house is very small, consisting of just 6 rooms, so mapping is not really a problem. The graphics are large, well-drawn, well animated and easy to control. Despite this, this level is a challenge due to the time limit imposed. Along with little helpers that slow him down, Santa has to keep moving to make sure he completes this first task.

If you manage this, then Santa has to select six presents from a list, and then collect these in a rather dull section of the game. Here all the presents drop down the screen, and Santa has to pick out the one's he selected.

The last stage finds Santa flying over different landscapes dropping presents on selected targets. The landscape scrolls smoothly and there are various things to avoid in the air. The locations for the presents are shown by flashing arrows, and you just have to hit them.

Overall it's not a bad game really, fun to play and getting progressively harder the further you get.

A jolly little game worth a look at.

Plum Duff

Bug Byte 1985

Yet another game that finds Santa having messed up present deliveries. Really, Santa must get his act together or I'll never get my new Wafadrive!

In this game you have to guide Santa around all of the houses to collect the wrong presents and then re-deliver them to the correct children.

Flying through the night sky, you guide the sled to the nearest chimney and head down into the sleeping household. Once there, you wander about trying to locate any presents and anything to eat and drink. Once you have a present, you are told what it is, and this is important.

Back up the chimney and you now have to try and locate the house that should have had that present. When you enter a house, you are told, in the form of a letter, what the children had asked for. If it matches the present you are carrying, then you can deposit it in the stocking and move on.

Various things in the house are to be avoided like angry parents, woken children or man eating plants, but on the whole just avoid anything that looks nasty.

This is a simple platform game with average graphics, but you do get a choice of different sound options depending on what device you have connected. Some of these do play rather nice music too, but I think that is the best part of the whole affair.

Overall, a bit monotonous to play and it soon becomes very repetitive.

FESTIVE GREETINGS

To All Readers

ICICLE WORKS State Soft 1985
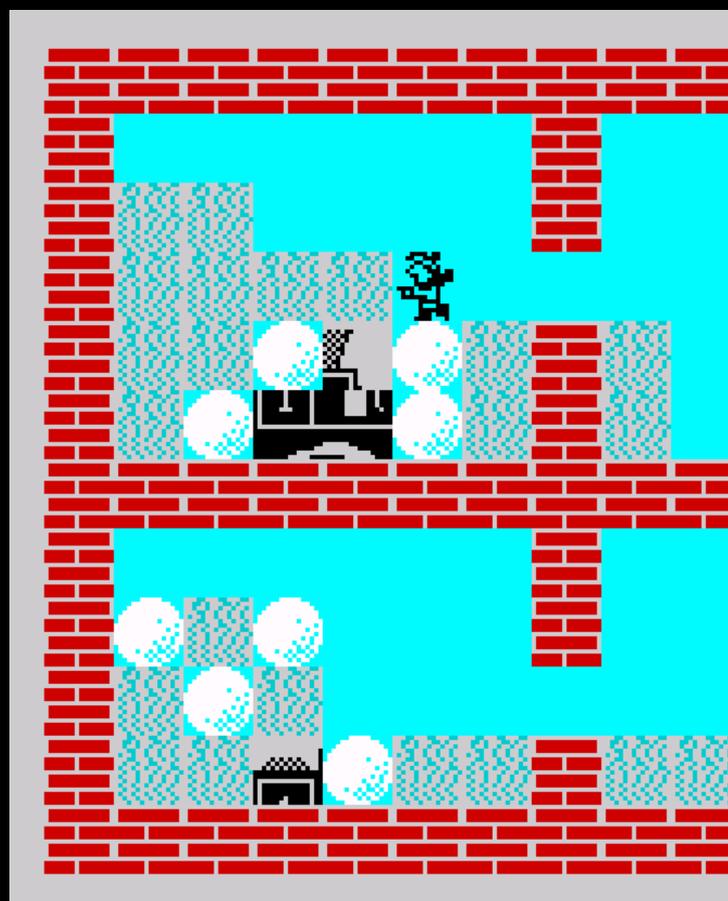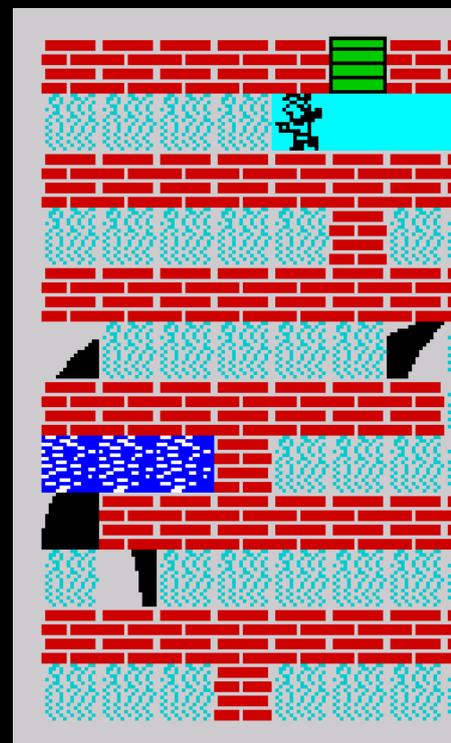
It would be tricky to review Icicle Works without mentioning Boulder Dash, so I'm not going to try. Instead I will just say that this game essentially IS Boulder Dash, but in a wintery setting. A nice concise review for once; now I can go and make a cuppa. What, you need more than that? Sigh.

For those 3 people reading this who haven't played Boulder Dash, the premise is actually fairly simple. Controlling your main character, you have to dig through dirt to collect diamonds while avoiding being crushed by boulders and avoiding baddies. Now replace dirt with snow, diamonds with toy parts, and boulders with giant snowballs, and you have Icicle Works.

Baddies in this case are polar bears and penguins. They are initially restricted to set patterns of movement, as they cannot dig through the snow, but once you clear the snow that was keeping them safely out of the way they will explore the path that you have just opened up to them.

Contact with either beast results in instant death, but if you manage to drop a snowball on their head (by digging away the snow underneath at an opportune moment, or by pushing one left or right into a vertical shaft) then they will explode, clearing a small square around them. This can be useful for breaching walls that you might not otherwise be

able to get through. An added benefit of an exploding penguin is they turn into toy parts, which is essential in some levels where there are not enough toy parts to unlock an exit.

Talking of exits, that is another difference from Boulder Dash. Unlike its inspiration, a lot of levels in Icicle Works have more than one exit, which is actually a great idea because you get a sense of exploring, rather than the same linear progression every time. There are a few other features, some of which will be familiar to Boulder Dash fans, but I won't spoil them here, and instead move on to how the game actually plays, which unfortunately throws up some problems.

One of the first things you will notice, other than the graphics, is the sluggish scrolling. Your character moves in 16 pixel blocks, which is fairly typical in a Boulder Dash type game, but when you reach the edge of the screen it seems to take forever to scroll the new section into view. Another problem is that movement is slow to react to your input too, which can occasionally be a problem when you have to perfectly time a move. You do get used to both these things, but either might be enough to dissuade people from persisting long enough to find the decent game buried in a poor engine.

A further issue is the tight time limit on some levels, which are incredibly challenging. However, I find this in general to be a good thing, as it forces you to improve your strategies and really think about the best way to progress – although the difficulty curve might be too much for some players.

Lastly, the graphics in Icicle Works are basic (the term "programmer art" springs to mind), with moving characters only having a couple of frames of animation. They do the job, and playability is preferable over prettiness any day, but if your gaming needs to have both then you might want to look elsewhere. The same can be said about the sound, which is minimal, although I do enjoy the sound effect when a penguin explodes into a collection of toy parts!

Yet despite these undeniable problems, there is something about Icicle Works that compels me to have one more go. Whether it is knowing I was just one toy part away from completing a level, or spotting an exit that I hadn't been through before, I would return to it time and again just to see if I could get a bit further. And yes, at times the slow pace would bother me, but I get the feeling that some real care went into the design of each level, and the satisfaction of finding the best solution to them overcame any other frustrations I might have.

If you don't enjoy Boulder Dash then steer well clear of this, it won't win you over, but otherwise I would recommend that you at least try a few levels to see if you can look beyond what is likely to be a poor first impression.

ASTRONUT

Software Projects 1984

It seems a space freighter has been hit by asteroids, scattering its cargo of resource blocks across the planet surface, and it's your job to collect the blocks and gather them together on the transporter pad, ready to be collected.

The planet though is unexplored and you have no idea what awaits you...

Each screen consists of various platforms, vanishing walkways, volcanoes and some nasty aliens. There are three blocks to collect per screen, and you do this by pushing them left or right so they drop down, eventually reaching the flashing transporter pad. You can get to the top of the screen again by climbing ladders, or using the volcanoes to blast you upwards.

Choosing the correct route is the key, so you have to time your moves carefully.

Each level is different and has another set of aliens to avoid.

If this game looks familiar, it's because it's by the same author as Thrusta – and shares quite a lot with that game.

The graphics are large, colourful and well animated, and control is very responsive.

The sound consists of the Thrusta-like warble that plays continuously and bleeps when a block is placed on the transporter.

The aliens can be killed by using bombs. Dropping these gives you enough time to move away before they explode, but these are pretty pointless.

If you lose a life, all of the blocks are reset and you have to start again, which is a bit harsh. I found the best plan was to locate a safe area where you don't get killed, and then watch the movement patterns of the aliens, then you can plan your route.

Gameplay wise, it's very much like Thrusta, but I don't think it's quite as good.

Each level has a time limit too, so there is an urgency about things. There is plenty of variety in the levels, but some I found to be very frustrating and before you know it, you get killed and this leads to more frustration.

A nice feature is that the game allows you to start from any level.. so at least you don't get stuck just playing the same level if you can't get past it.

Not a bad game then... but I prefer Thrusta.
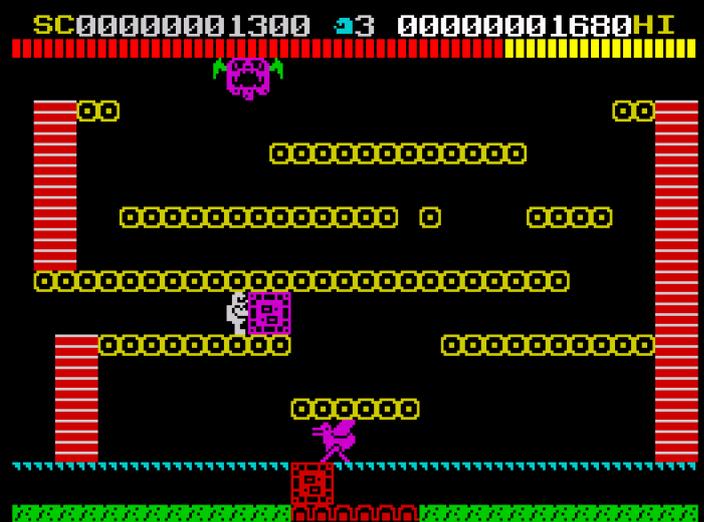
Fighting Warrior

An Egyptian princess has been kidnapped by the evil Pharaoh and as the country's most acclaimed warrior it's your task to rescue her.

To do this you have to march across the desert and fight anything that gets in your way.

So we have a beat-em-up, but not a particularly good one. The graphics are really nice though and the characters are well animated.

Your warrior can strike high, middle or low blows with his sword, and avoid arrows at the same time, fired by some hidden, off screen villain.

As each enemy is killed a vase will appear and destroying this will produce one of five effects. These range from killing the next enemy straight away, giving you more stamina, removing stamina or removing the enemy stamina each time they hit you. Discovering the order in which they appear is the key to the game.

Fighting wise, the best tactic is to keep hitting to the middle. This is because the upper and lower take longer to execute, meaning your enemy has more time to hit back.

It is also not worth trying to avoid the arrows during a fight, as again, this takes time which your enemy will use to hit you.

As you fight, your stamina and the enemy's stamina, seen at the bottom of the screen, lowers until one of you keels over. If it's the enemy, you get to fight on with renewed stamina. If it's you, its game over. You only get one life too which is a bit mean.

Once you get over the nice visuals, the game soon becomes boring. The landscape moves along, but it's just so repetitive. Kill something, pick up a jar, if it's a good one, walk a bit... repeat.

After about 17 minutes you do make it to the princess.. but I just didn't have the interest to keep trying.

Response is good, which is a good factor, but the sound is limited to hits.

I wanted more from this game, coming after the great Exploding Fist, I expected more, but sadly it was a let-down.

Yes the graphics are nice, but there is just no playability.

The Making Of...

BALDYZX

Part Two

Continued from last issue....

Next Level

With most of the game mechanics in place, and the collection routines done, it was time to introduce the next level – but how to get there?

I added a few lines of code to keep track to the number of tapes collected, and when a certain number was reached, the game branched and stopped all normal movement, key detection and collisions. A message was printed on screen to indicate the player was about to go to the next level, and with a suitable pause the next level begins.

Taking my original level graphics, I tried to keep things looking the same, so level two has circuit boards as platforms. With the game engine almost complete I just had to add the code for each tape position and of course the new enemy sprites.

Sprites

The original Amiga game had a large number of enemy sprites;

Flying arrows, darts, burgers, paper planes, knives, forks, cigarettes and lemmings, all in both directions. Falling skulls, plant pots, darts, TVs, rocks, bricks, Coke tins and spoons.

The Spectrum version will have less due to memory and of course the sprite limit on AGD;

Flying arrows, burgers and lemmings plus falling lemmings, skulls, plant pots and bombs.

Horizontal enemies will also, like the original, move at two different speeds.

Death

Level two was quickly put together and the next major bit of work would be the death sequence. The Amiga game saw Baldy fall down screen with a sampled scream. The sample was actually myself, slowed down a lot!

Obviously the Spectrum is not well suited to samples, but I could get the falling routine in.
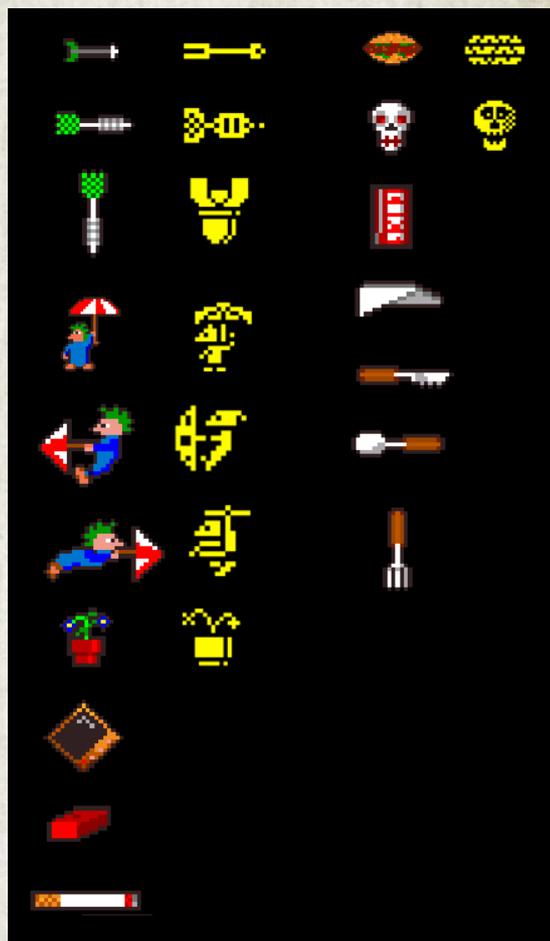
Sprite comparison

Amiga and Spectrum sprites compared. Some sprites from the Amiga are not included in the Spectrum version.

To do this I again branched from the main game engine when a collision was detected and executed a simple piece of code that changes the sprite to a falling Baldy and moves him down the screen ignoring any collisions with platforms or enemies. When he hits the bottom of the screen a life is deducted and if there are more than zero left, the sprites position is changed to top left and the level restarts.

If we run out of lives AGD bounces you to the game over section where I simply display a message before restarting the game at the main menu.

Spikes

With two levels now working, something was missing – the level killers. These are various evil objects like spikes or pointy rocks that sit on different platforms blocking the way for the main character.

Because I had made the decision to use sprites for the tape, this left me with AGD's objects. These are ideal for this, and can be placed anywhere on screen.

The downside is that, without a whole lot of faffing about with level detection and code, each object can only be placed on one screen. That meant that for each object on each screen I needed one object plus the detection code.

I know I could have re-used the objects and written code to re place them on the next level, and looking back I think I should have made that effort. But the aim of the whole game was to re-create the Amiga version on the Spectrum, and to do that I had enough memory doing it the easy way.

Drawing an object and placing it on screen was easy, the code was equally simple thanks to AGD. I simply had to detect if the player had collided with any object and if so, trigger the death routine. This took just 4 lines of code.

Now, whichever object Baldy jumps into, he will die. This was another addition to the game engine and only had to be written once and it could be used on every level by simply drawing and placing an object on the screen.
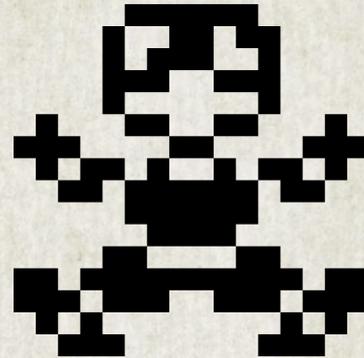
The Making Of...

BALDYZX Part Two

Levels

With the engine nearing completion adding levels became a matter of drawing the blocks and placing them on screen along with the spikes and sprites. I tried to keep faithful to the Amiga version the best I could given the palette of the 8 bit machine.

My original intention was to make every level the same as the Amiga, but as the levels were added I decided to move away from the 16 bit version.

The first ten levels are almost identical, but I wanted to create the last ten just for the Speccy version. I also wanted to add an extra element to the game, and this happened quite by chance.

As I was building level 18 I ran the game to see how the platform were looking, but because I hadn't yet added all of them, Baldy dropped down to the lower platforms when he jumped into the space. This triggered the idea of intentionally leaving gaps that Baldy could fall down. This would add a further level of strategy and timing to screens 18, 19 and 20.

The game engine didn't even have to be changed for this to happen, which made it even better for me. All I had to do was design the levels to include missing platforms, coupled with the right placement of spikes and sprites, and the players path suddenly became a whole lot different.

As I added more sprites, again I tried to stay faithful to the Amiga version, but stopped short of having every single sprite copied. This is think was a mistake, as there was room for a few more.
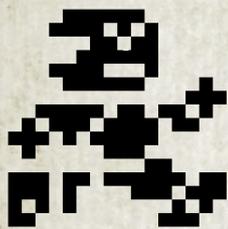
And Finally.

Now with all 20 levels complete it was down to playtesting and trying to create a loading screen.

I got some help with playtesting from Jason Bullough, and finally on 9th May 2015, my quest to create a Spectrum version of my Amiga game was complete.

It had taken a long time, over 20 years in fact, but now it was finished and pretty playable too.

I had said many times the conversion was not meant to be special, or to improve the game or even to break new ground on the Spectrum. It

was meant to be a straight conversion and to stay as close as possible to the Amiga game. This I think has been achieved.

The Amiga version got average reviews at the time, but to be honest I was pleased the game even got mentioned in popular magazines. I was even more surprised when it was included on the cover disc of Amiga Action!

So that's the story of how BaldyZX came about. It was interesting reading through some of my other game diaries, particularly those I did on the PC and were once included on my previous website. It brings back memories of the stereotypical late night coding sessions, the frustrations and joy, the trials and tribulations of days long gone.

Thanks to tools like AGD, many of the time consuming elements have now gone from my average game development but there is still a bit of me that misses those days. I certainly miss my trusty Amiga 4000. I do have several source discs that I can no longer access as I don't; have an Amiga. It would be interesting to see what other games I was working on back then.

I can recall a game about tanks, one about a baby on a mission and I think one vertical shooter! Maybe they are best left alone.
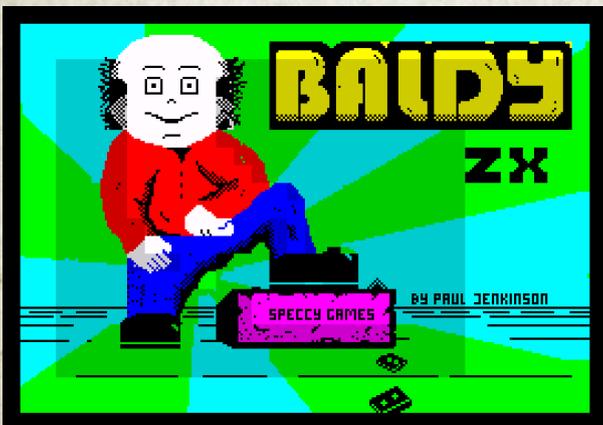
Amiga Reviews

"This little game had us chuckling quietly to ourselves, so we've allowed it onto your screen so that you might delight in the legend that is Baldy."
Amiga Action Magazine

"It sounds simple, and it is simple, but it's very addictive. Great fun all the way."
The One Amiga Magazine

"Looks great, and is a fairly amusing puzzler...but its life expectancy is less than its hero's."
Amiga Power Magazine
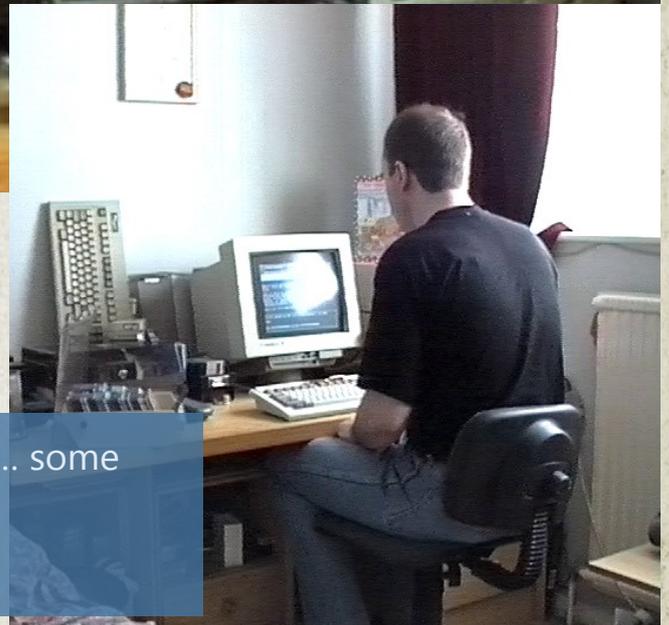
Somewhere in a bedroom long, long ago... some bloke works on an Amiga PD game...

Elvin The Elf

ZX Format 2006

Seeing as though this issue is linked to Christmas, let's take a look at a festive game on the Vega, Elvin The Elf.

When I first started this game on the little device I immediately thought it was a Manic Miner mod. All the signs were there including repeating background tune, screen layout and various obstacles like conveyor belts and crumbling floors.

As it turns out, it is not a mod of Mathew Smith's classic, but a game created using the Platform Game Designer from Johnathon Cauldwell.

The premise is simple, collect all the letters on the screen and make your way to the exit.

Some platforms can be jumped through, some can't, some crumble and some are conveyor belts. The problem is, these are not easy to identify. Even some blocks that look identical do different things, making this game pure guess work a lot of the time.

Despite that, the game is easy to play with simple controls ideal for the Vega.

There are two vital things missing in my opinion, first is the lack of drop height. This means you can fall from any height and not die. Without this peril, you can simply try every jump out in the knowledge you wont go crashing to your death.

The second problem is the lack of any enemies. Most screens have none at all, so again it's just trial and error to complete. Some screens do have them, but these are easy to avoid.

There is a timer for each screen, but this moves so slowly that it doesn't really matter how long you take.

Overall, an average game that is easy to play but doesn't really show off the Spectrum.

Once is enough.

Mothership

Artic Computing 1984

This early Artic title takes ideas from the Arcade game Buck Rogers, and presents the player with a nice 3D view on screen.

The large player ship is at the bottom and moving towards it are waves of bouncing aliens. The ground is represented by a grid that moves smoothly and the overall effect is good.

As with the aforementioned arcade blaster, you have to destroy a set number of aliens in the time limit, or in this game the fuel limit.

The fuel and alien count are displayed at the top of the screen however looking at these will probably cause your ship to be destroyed as there is very little space for manoeuvring and the pace is hectic.

The mountains in the distance look nice and slowly grow larger as you approach, and if you are a good player, or just get lucky, you can move onto the next level.

This also mimics the arcade game by taking you into space with a different set of aliens to shoot.

This level is impossible to get past, even when using infinite lives, it's just too difficult to dodge the aliens because of their movement patterns.

Sound is used well and the graphics are passable, but the difficulty is a bit too high.

I don't know what the other levels hold, if indeed there are any, but this is one game I really couldn't recommend.

Using the Vega made playing it easier than using a keyboard though, so it was suited to that device. Sadly players may get frustrated and as a result, never come back to it.

Too difficult.
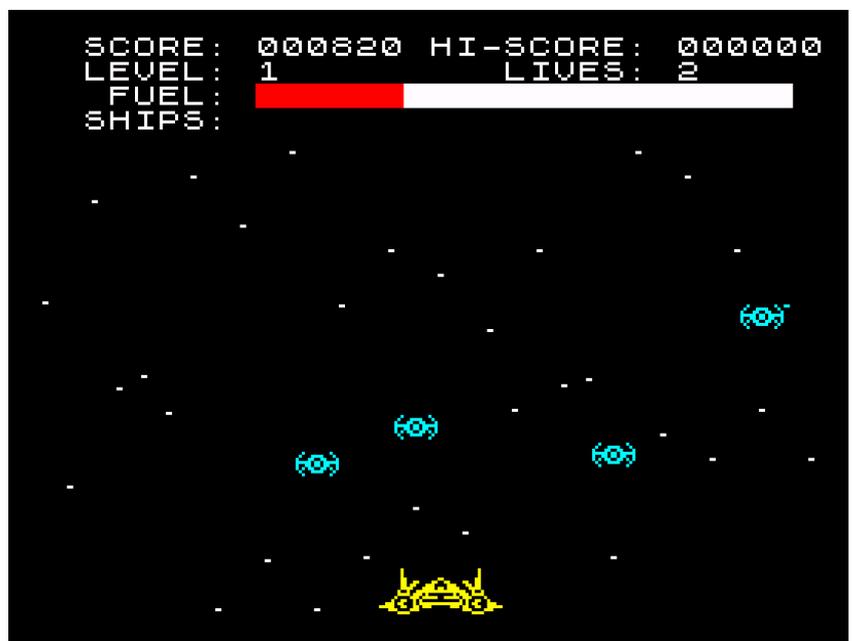
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Memories of magazine festive covers

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