The Story Of



A very American, British software house

Chris Wilkins & Roger M. Kean

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FUSIONRETROBOOKS

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- **Geoff** and **Anne Brown** for creating US Gold and giving us so many games across such a diverse range of hardware. You guys literally brought the USA into our bedrooms in the 1980s and 90s and we thank you.
- **Martyn Carroll** for contributing his journalistic skills to the memoirs in this book and compiling the feature on F.D Thorpe.
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U.S. GOLD
All American Software

foreword

by Geoff Brown



I never really meant to create an international video game publishing and distribution business…it just grew like a beanstalk that I kept climbing. But, looking back I suppose that the archetypal entrepreneurial flame burned bright in me.

I came from a very working-class background in one of the poorest areas of Birmingham, Winson Green, but was lucky to get into a technical school that focused on maths and science which would prove to be useful later.

Apart from the academic sciences the first ingredient for video game success came from music and I was still playing part-time in a band when I started the company. The second ingredient came when I worked at British Leyland in my early twenties as a computer programmer. It really gave me a grounding in how a computer worked and what was possible in the emerging computer industry.

The final piece of the jigsaw was working as a maths/computer-science teacher in 1982. I was around young kids and saw the eagerness and potential for what a game on a computer could do, albeit with very simple applications.

Throw all of those into a melting pot…maths…music…computers…kids…and what came out was computer-based entertainment. Looking back I always say that I was creating a business based around the 'pop music' of computers…video games!

My wife Anne was another vital component of the growth of the business. She was always the *yin* to my *yang*. Her background was in banking and she ruled the business with a strong focus on the financial and business side while I was beavering away with the latest game creation or crazy marketing idea. Anne very quickly came to see that it was a real business as the growth potential was astronomical. Literally at the age of 35, with life savings of £300 at the time invested in buying some games from America, the business grew to a turnover in the millions in the second year!

It was the early 1980s when we started, and they were pioneering days as there were no UK business models or industry for games so we were making up the rules as we went along. There was, however, a fundamental difference between us and any other games developers or publishers in that US Gold sprang from my original games distribution-based company, CentreSoft. This meant we already had a lucrative way to deliver not only our competitor's games, but our own games

too, and indirectly the profits we made from distributing our competitor's games actually funded US Gold.

The 1980s were a somewhat hedonistic era too with lots of new innovation and start-ups of all kinds. Consequently the early years from 1983 through to 1990 were a period of intense growth and challenge when we were determined to be the biggest, the best and the most successful in the business. I travelled the world looking for exciting products, ideas and opportunities and at the same time opening offices throughout Europe and then latterly in the USA and Japan. The distribution company CentreSoft grew to be the largest games distributor in the UK and meant that we were an even more formidable force as we had the exclusive distribution into Boots and John Menzies and most independent stores which dominated the High Street for game sales.

I was lucky to make personal friends with many of the CEOs of major Japanese console and coin-op manufacturers. This gave me access to many of US Gold's famous coin-op conversions like *Gauntlet* and *Out Run* and some of our biggest hits. This also led on to our relationship with Sega as one of the early publishers with our officially licensed Olympic Games and other products.

The control of one's own destiny in games was diminished somewhat with the onset of the games consoles as control of production, titles and the enormous costs and risks of the business model took away the entrepreneurial risks I would take in the early days. Also taking the company public in 1993 meant pressures to perform financially were formalised and didn't really suit my skill sets. It was almost inevitable that when I lost my drive and the control of what went on that the company would suffer as a result, and it did as the sale of the whole Group in 1996 proves.

But what a fantastic, exciting, creative trip along the way. I am a great believer in karma…what goes around comes around…and even though I had to be very tough in some situations I think I was always fair and even-handed. I hope this is reflected in the many anecdotes and 'legends' woven around the company.

The story is told in the book, but nothing can be achieved in isolation and it was the dedication, contribution and sheer hard work of all the key people that shared my dream at the time that steered the company to massive international success.

I still now enjoy every moment of life. I like this quote: *Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life... as by the obstacles which have been overcome while trying to succeed...* Quote: Booker T. Washington





the history

The fortunes of US Gold and Ocean – those two early British games software giants – are inextricably linked. Yet while the story of US Gold is in many ways parallel to that of Ocean it is in more ways quite different, perhaps most in that US Gold rarely developed any games. However, music is the key difference, and to understand its significance it is necessary to go back in time – more than twenty years before the emergence of the ZX Spectrum and the Commodore 64.

At Lordswood Technical School in Birmingham's Harborne district some friends – as teenagers will – formed a pop group in 1960. They called themselves The Castaways (not to be confused with the almost contemporary American group of the same name). Prominent in the youthful line-up was the 14-year-old future panjandrum of US Gold, Geoff Brown (rhythm guitar and lead vocals). With him were Richard Pannell (lead guitar), Sudashan Khalsi (bass guitar) and Graham Smith on drums.

Geoff came from a very working-class background in one of the poorest areas of Birmingham, Winson Green, but was lucky enough to get into Lordswood. Technical schools were the new thing in the 1960s…schools that focused on maths and science, an education which would prove to be useful later.

The Castaways were typical of those wannabe school pop groups who played vocal and instrumental music during the pre-Beatles era, sounding like a 'cross between The Shadows and Buddy Holly'. In spite of their tender years and lack of funding for top-quality instruments – young Geoff made his own guitar in the school's woodwork class – The Castaways made a name for themselves locally.

They gigged at such salubrious venues as Yardley Wood Youth Club regularly, but also at The Plaza, Handsworth, once in support of Ricky Valance (best known for his haunting 1960 number one single 'Tell Laura I Love Her'). For around a year in 1962 they even secured a residency at the Barn Restaurant. They must have felt like they had made it.

Move on two years and the British music scene had changed dramatically. In the wake of the Beatles' extraordinary

GOLD U.S. GOLD U.S. GOLD U.S. GOLD

success Merseybeat dominated the airwaves, but if Brumbeat wasn't topping *Juke Box Jury* every week it was gathering a huge Midlands following; it even boasted a February 1964 Top 10 single in 'Tell Me When' by Solihull-based Applejacks. *New Musical Express* counted over 500 bands playing in the city, a 'seething cauldron of musical activity'.

In March of that year, inspired by newly imported American blues music, The Castaways changed their name to The King Bees to reflect their new, raw sound. The line-up remained the same although the bass player left the band in mid-1965 to be replaced by Len Cox. As he later recalled, Cox was thrilled to be a part of the progressive new sound.

'The music landscape in Birmingham was alive with exciting bands and we were forerunners of the emerging R&B scene.'

In May another Birmingham band coalesced around Denny Laine and by the end of the year The Moody Blues had hit number one in the UK and the USA with 'Go Now'.

'Blues music and the mod-scene were really taking off in Birmingham,' Geoff says, 'and we were starting to make a name for ourselves along with another up and coming band, The Spencer Davis Group. I have a flyer from the Ritz with The King Bees headlining on Friday 16 October 1964.'



The Castaways, above, with young Geoff Brown second from left.



Showing the Birmingham blues influence, The King Bees, with Geoff Brown third from left.

Since blues music was particularly popular among university and college students during the mid-1960s there were many bookings for The King Bees on the university circuit. 'We really came to establish ourselves at the time as one of the city's top blues bands and headlined lots of clubs and pubs.'

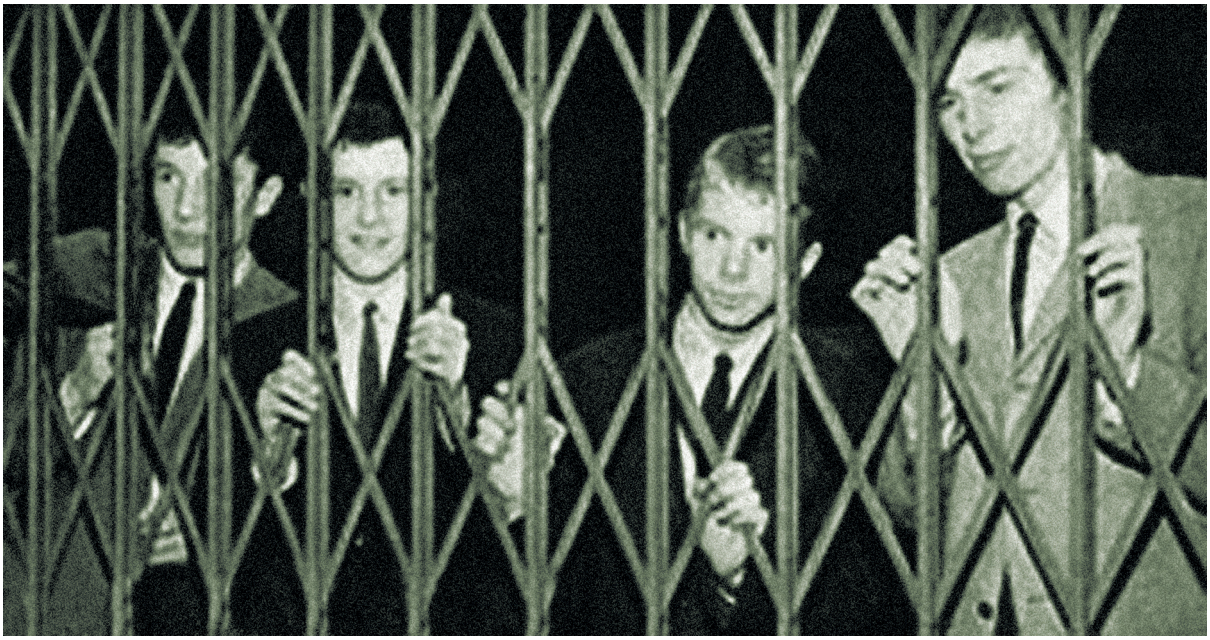
In 1965 the band came under the management of Alan Clayton from Wolverhampton's influential Astra Agency at about the time their drummer Graham Smith parted company with them. 'We auditioned lots of players,' Geoff says with a hint of past pride, 'including a 15-year-old from Handsworth who came with his dad, but I was very impressed with him.' In spite of his youth Gene Krupa-inspired Carl Palmer had already been earning the staggering sum of £23 a week with the local Mecca Dance Band. Eventually, Carl would go on to drum with Chris Farlowe, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown, Atomic Rooster and Emerson, Lake & Palmer – as a part of ELP Palmer would sell over 40 million albums, and similarly with super-group Asia in the 1980s.

"We really came to establish ourselves at the time as one of the city's top blues bands…"

By this time Geoff was at Birmingham University studying mathematical physics – a subject that would have some significance in the near future – but he remained heavily involved with The King Bees. Len Cox later recalled that they were playing six or even seven nights a week, sharing gigs with many chart bands at various venues, including Whisky A Go Go in John Bright Street where they shared a residency with the Spencer Davis Group. John Bright Street was to play an entirely different part in the US Gold story in the fullness of time. The King Bees also played all-night blues sessions at Birmingham Town Hall alongside top acts from London, including Chris Farlowe.

Early in 1966 Alan Clayton introduced the group to influential record producer Larry Page who had worked with The Kinks. Page signed The King Bees to a recording contract with the Fontana Records label and because he thought too many other groups were calling themselves Kings of Something, changed the band's name to The Craig.







The King Bees, who became The Craig, with Carl Palmer second from left and Geoff at the right.

Chip Taylor, who wrote 'Wild Thing' and bass player Pete Staples of The Troggs flank producer Larry Page.

Their recording of 'A Little Bit Of Soap' failed to chart but – allowed more freedom to indulge their then-revolutionary psychedelic sound in the studio – the second single gained a lot of recognition. The *Daily Telegraph* listed the Geoff 'Buzz' Brown penned 'I Must Be Mad' as the number two psychedelic single. An *Observer* poll voted it second only to Pink Floyd's 'Arnold Layne'.

Interestingly, Geoff's B-side, 'Suspense', featured a guitar solo by Chris Britton on the recording. He was lead guitarist of a new Larry Page band called The Troggs. Later the same day the Troggs recorded the cult single, 'Wild Thing'.

Bassist Len Cox later recalled the band's lack of enthusiasm for the Larry Page stable. 'We recorded a few things at a studio in Tin Pan Alley [Denmark Street WC2] but our bid for fame was frustrated by him trying to take us in a musical direction that did not sit comfortably with us.'

'We all had relationships and the band was going nowhere even though we all got on,' Geoff says. 'We weren't really happy about the direction Larry wanted to take us in and we decided to call it a day.' This wasn't by any means the end of Geoff Brown's musical career, however at first he needed a paying job.



The ICL 1906 processor unit – very large but not as powerful as a 1980s 8-bit home computer and possessing a fraction of the processing power of the average mobile phone.

If it weren't for Elvis Presley

'When I left university in the summer of 1967 with my maths degree I went to British Leyland in Birmingham as a programmer. It was the beginning of computers being used in business. I was a programmer on the ICL-1900 series and I worked on their pricing systems.'

While the experience Geoff gained over two and a half years in programming at Leyland would eventually be put to practical use in a very different way, working with pricing was to have an equally beneficial impact when it came to selling computer games.

"The band really began to motor so I left Leyland to go professional with Galliard"

If the days belonged to British Leyland, the nights were given to music. After The Craig, Richard Pannell started to play guitar with an Irish showband which featured a small brass section. Late in 1967 he asked Geoff to join them on a semi-pro basis as they only played weekends. But by mid-1968, tiring of the repetitive showband circuit and wanting something more serious, Geoff and Richard formed Immediate Pleasure. With Dave Caswell (trumpet), John Smith (saxophone) and John Morton (trombone), the Stax-type songs with brass caught the flavour of the moment, and Immediate Pleasure gained many enthusiastic fans. At some point early in 1969 the band changed its name to Galliard, and took on its final form with Lyle Jenkins replacing Smith on saxophone and Les Podraza replacing Frank McGonagle on drums.

'We were a progressive rock outfit with a strong brass sound at the right time,' Geoff says. 'I wrote a lot of the songs and the band really began to motor, so I left Leyland to go professional with Galliard.'

Manager Alan Clayton manoeuvred them into an audition with producer Phil Wainman and so into the arms of Decca Records, who were launching a progressive rock label, a splinter of its massive Deram label.

Released on Deram Nova, Galliard cut two albums, *Strange Pleasure* (November 1969) recorded at London's Olympic Studios and *New Dawn* (September 1970) recorded in the Beatles' Abbey Road Studio 2. A music journalist recently wrote: 'In my humble opinion these are two of the best, most powerful, most vibrant albums of the era.'





There is much of interest in the music and career of Galliard that falls outside the scope of this book, but you can read more at: http://www.brumbeat.net/galliard.htm.

In time the Galliard sound mutated, turning back more towards the R&B/blues roots of The King Bees and the band's members began to drift off to new horizons. Among the replacements was another Geoff Brown drumming discovery, Mel Gaynor, who went on to later fame with Simple Minds. Eventually Galliard ran down. Richard Pannell would later travel the world as sound engineer with the hugely successful Birmingham rock group Electric Light Orchestra while Geoff formed Muscles, with Richard Ford, Steve James and Stuart Scott. They became Birmingham's answer to Level 42 and released one album, *Muscles*, on

Geoff Brown, second from lef, with Galliard. The album cover for *Strange Pleasure* could easily have passed for the design of a video game inlay.

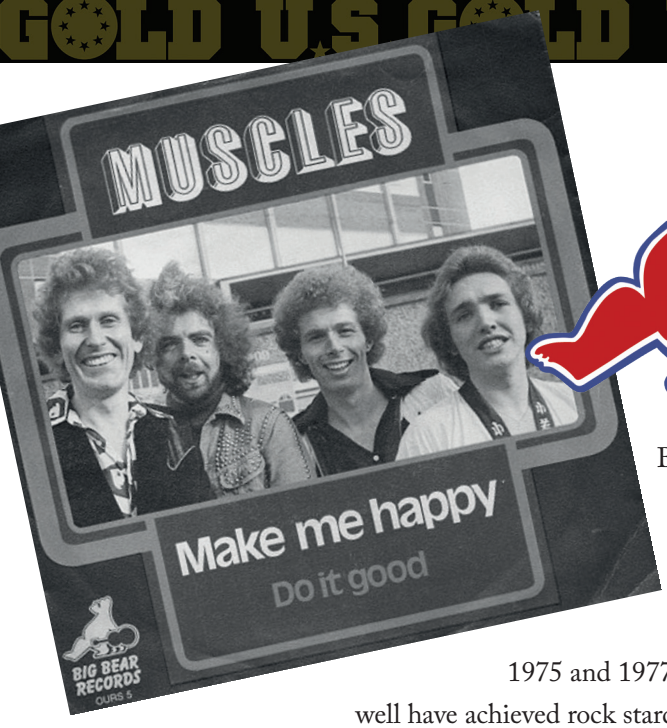
Brumbeat at Youtube

Want to hear the founder of a software house belting out vocals over the frenetic drumming of Carl Palmer? Well, thanks to YouTube the wraps are off:

Craig – 'I Must Be Mad': https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ialVK1wMtsI

Galliard – 'New Dawn Breaking' (long intro), from the *New Dawn* album: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=purWf48ZRvg





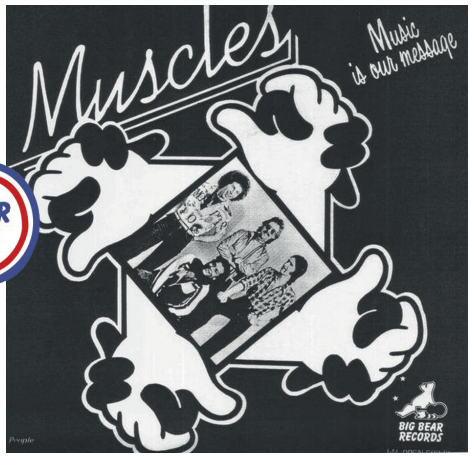
Geoff, third from the left above and centre below in the band Muscles, sporting the 'Afro' look that would come in useful on his first visits to America.

Big Bear Records and eight EPs and singles between 1975 and 1977. Geoff may well have achieved rock stardom instead of founding US Gold... if it wasn't for Elvis Presley.

Space aliens point the way

The Muscles' single 'If It Relaxes Your Mind', written by Geoff, made it to BBC





Radio One's playlist and the station's DJs nominated it as Record of The Week at the beginning of August 1977. It was the big break, made all the better when the band was booked to appear on *Top Of The Pops* to be broadcast on 18 August. Everything was in place for the appearance that would put Muscles and Geoff Brown in front of millions. All they had to do was turn up for the recording at BBC Television Centre on Wood Lane in London on the Wednesday prior… But on the Tuesday Elvis died.

It threw the music world into chaos, and all bets were off. So were Muscles. Rush-re-released Elvis singles hijacked the charts. *Top Of The Pops* went Elvis-mental and Muscles was history.

'That was when I decided to give up music,' Geoff says, though in truth he continued gigging in Birmingham for some time thereafter. 'I always say I'd rather be a Never Was than a Has Been, so I was a Never Was.'

On a flying visit from his current home in the wilds of Mexico back to

where it all began thirty-three years ago in the old stamping ground of Birmingham's western reaches, Geoff outlines how the massive edifice that became the joint companies of CentreSoft and US Gold began life. First there was distribution and then after that came the publishing business. In the eyes of three of the Group's chief executives – Geoff Brown, Martyn Savage and Tim Chaney – there is a strong link between the music business and the games software industry in respect of branding, marketing and sales.

At Ocean it could be argued that games came before commodity; at US Gold games were first and foremost a commodity to be marketed and sold. It goes without saying, however, that even an object for sale has to have a level of quality within it or it won't sell. It is one of the differences between Geoff Brown and Ocean's Jon Woods and David Ward – they came into the business through creating games (or causing them to be made) while Geoff came to games from distributing them.

When the hopes of Muscles expired as certainly as did Elvis on his bathroom floor at Graceland, what music lost, the computer games industry gained… slowly at first. 'Because I'd got a maths degree I decided to go to teachers' training college some time in 1978, when I was about 32. After three years I got a teaching certificate and then I taught for a year and a term at the Joseph Leckie School [now Academy] in Walsall. I was also working part time – had been for a while because my wife Anne and I weren't making much money and there hadn't been much financial return from playing in the bands.'

"I always say I'd rather be a Never Was than a Has Been, so I was a Never Was."

As the name implies, Woodroffe's



Geoff's young students at school were his first games playtesters.

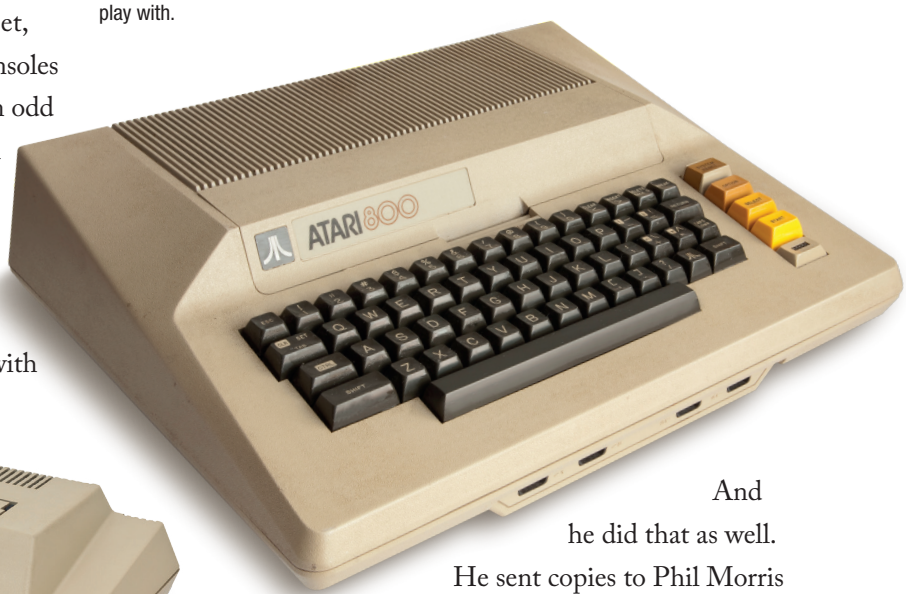


The Atari VCS – later named the 2600 – popularised the use of microprocessor-based hardware and ROM cartridges for games. Sales leapt after Atari licensed Taito's arcade smash hit *Space Invaders*. At the end of 1979 the 8-bit Atari 400 and 800 were released, each with 8K of RAM to play with.

Musical Instruments shops in Birmingham, one on Dale End and a second close by New Street station in John Bright Street not far from where The King Bees had played with the Spencer Davis Group, primarily sold musical instruments. For a little over three years Geoff worked in one store or the other on Saturdays for the extra cash. Alongside the musical instruments and sheet music at John Bright Street, Woodroffe's also sold Atari 2600 consoles and some software. It might seem an odd addition to the range but in the UK it was musical instrument maker Selmer that acted as the distributor for Atari at the time. First launched in 1977, the 2600 looked dated by 1980 and Atari was ready with the 400 and 800 home computers. The lower-cost 400 caught part-timer Geoff's interest.

'I thought to myself, I'm a musician and I've been a programmer, so I'll buy one of these. I bought an Atari 400, and after a few days I thought, God, that's terrible so I swapped it for an 800. My wife Anne said, oh my God why are you wasting our money on that thing? And I said, well this is a home computer. I think I can do something with it.'

And he did. in 1982 Geoff wrote two 'very simple games in BASIC with some machine-language subroutines'. *Maths For Fun* and *Word Olympics* were educational games, so naturally he took them to school and tried them out on the kids. 'They liked them and I thought, I've got these games, now I want to sell them.'





And he did that as well. He sent copies to Phil Morris at English Software in Manchester. Morris liked what he saw and agreed to publish *Maths For Fun* and *Word*

Olympics, which joined what would be, by the end of 1983, the UK's largest catalogue of educational software for the Atari 8-bit computers.

In support of its computer hardware sales, Woodroffe's sold the influential monthly American magazine *Compute*. Type-in program listings covering virtually every platform in existence made up the periodical's principal content. 'I read *Compute* magazine avidly. Machine language and subroutines interested me, and *Compute* had tons of stuff like that in there. I got a hard drive for the Atari and thought I was really flying.' *Compute* also reviewed games. 'And it sparked my imagination because I wondered what were all these American programs? They looked fantastic compared to the little that was available in the UK at the time.'

After studying the screen shots and driven by curiosity Geoff sent money to a mail order company in the States for a game he thought looked good – *Galactic Chase*. The *Galaxian* clone, developed by Stedek Software, was published by (ironically) Spectrum Computers the year before Atari's own home computer port of *Galaxian*. His expectations were met. 'I got the cassette version because it was so much cheaper and on loading it I thought *Galactic Chase* was an eye-opener. It was an absolutely fantastic game and it ran on the Atari 800 better than any game I'd ever seen. I was still teaching at the time, but selling *Maths For Fun* and *Word Olympics* to Phil Morris was the first time I realised there was money in publishing games.'

Money, yes, but not necessarily in programming. Seeing *Galactic Chase* gave Geoff another idea. Woodroffe's sold Atari's own cartridges and cassettes, though there was very little of the software around at the time, a lot less than shown in *Compute*. Put this together with the fact that Spectrum Computers was independent of Atari (so Geoff thought they would be easier to deal with than a giant American corporation) and he had the germ of a crazy plan to order bulk copies of *Galactic Chase*.

'Don't ask me how Mike Woodroffe did it,' Geoff says, 'but he'd moved on



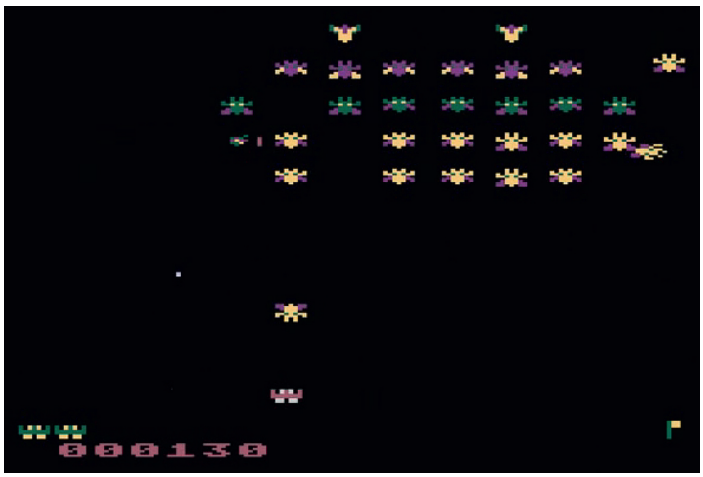
The American magazine *Compute*, published from 1979 to 1994, included programs for many popular computers starting with the Commodore PET, Commodore VIC-20, the Atari 8-bit machines and the Apple II. Later the Commodore 64, Atari ST, IBM PC and the Commodore Amiga were added.

Currys

Published by Spectrum Computers, Stedek Software's *Galaxian* clone *Galactic Chase* has a lot to answer for… it was indirectly the start of CentreSoft and so in turn US Gold.

from merely selling Atari 800s to become a distributor of the machines and games because he was convinced they were going to be popular home computers at this price. So I sort of stole the idea of distributing from Mike really. I thought, I'm not going to sell my copies of *Galactic Chase* to him when I get them, I'm going to start my own little business bringing in games for the Atari.'





In distribution, sourcing product is only half of the equation. Now Geoff needed a retailer to sell the games to the public. Prior to 1984, when it was taken over by rivals Dixons, Currys was Britain's largest electrical goods chain and the larger stores did stock a small amount of Atari software. 'I went to Currys in Birmingham and showed the buyer my copy of the game. He loaded it up and said, Wow! That's fantastic. And I said, I'm the distributor for these games… I just made it up as I went along. And he said, Great, I want twenty copies. I thought, my god, where am I going to get twenty copies? I'd never phoned America before, never even thought of it. But I did and I said I want twenty copies of your *Galactic Chase*, and the guy at the other end said, Would you like an account? I hadn't a clue what he meant.'

The man in America patiently explained that they would send Geoff the games and give him 'terms'.

'I didn't know what that was all about either. So he told me it meant I had pay within thirty days of receipt of the games. I put the phone down and thought I haven't got to spend any money here. They're going to send me the games, I'm

going to sell the games to Currys, Currys are going to pay me for the games, and then I'm going to pay the Americans. This sounds brilliant! Blimey, I said to Anne, I buy these copies and it's not costing me anything up front!'

The first office

Being given these 'wonderful terms' was the kick-off of the business because the phased payment made it all possible, as Geoff points out: 'I had no money at the time – I was a poor musician and schoolteacher – I think my life savings were about £300.'

The games arrived, although there was a slight hitch. At Birmingham Airport, HM Customs & Excise didn't know how to clear them or what duty should be paid. 'They'd never had product like this before. *What is it?* It's a cassette with data on it for an Atari computer… it's a computer game. *What category does it come under?* I don't know, you tell me. *Well we haven't got a category for it, so we'll call it a toy*. I paid the duty on it, picked up the goods, went to Currys, gave the buyer – I think his name was Mike Griffin – his twenty copies, and he sold the lot almost instantly. Can you get some more? he asked, and I told him no problem!'

Nothing to that point in Geoff's life had prepared him for the paperwork. 'I had to write an invoice and I didn't even have any invoices, I wasn't even a company. It was Anne – she was more business like, she worked at a bank – who said we must become a small business venture and set up a bank account. So I made up a trading name, Softcell, and I doubled the price of the cassettes to Currys that I'd have to pay the Americans.'

Few entrepreneurs scorn the element of luck in business and in Geoff's case his good fortune rested in the hands of Mr Griffin who showed *Galactic Chase* to colleagues in other Currys stores, and they wanted copies too. 'Very soon I was buying like a hundred copies… I don't know what it cost, maybe a thousand dollars, but it was more money than I'd ever seen before. And here's the coincidence of it all: Mike Griffin became the games buyer for all Currys stores, so there was I, his distributor, bringing games in from America and they were selling everything I gave them. And at that time there was nobody doing distribution except me. And there we were with the trading name of Softcell and a distribution business.'

Opposite page: The 1980s Currys logo – cuddly compared to its hard-edge current form.

"I had no money….I was a poor musician and schoolteacher – I think my life savings were about £300."

And an overflowing garage.

'I took the stock personally to the Birmingham branch of Currys and I delivered to the other branches by post, so I had to go every evening to the post office to send stuff off. Quite soon I was selling more and more to Currys from

my home, from my garage in fact. Ours was just a normal house, a regular little terraced house and the small garage was stuffed full of product front to back, floor to ceiling.'

If he were to continue it was obvious he would need an office and found one in nearby Halesowen, at 26 Great Cornbow. 'Things went crazy,' Geoff says, contemplating the months of 1982. 'Currys wanted more and more games. *Galactic Chase* was great but I could see lots of other games in the magazines and I thought that if *Galactic Chase* was selling maybe other titles would as well. The games came in, they sold, we made a profit.'

However, having to import and hold an increasing amount of stock began to put a strain on their finances. 'Anne's step-father loaned us some money to build and buy more stock. I think it was £17,000. To me it seemed like an astronomical sum.'

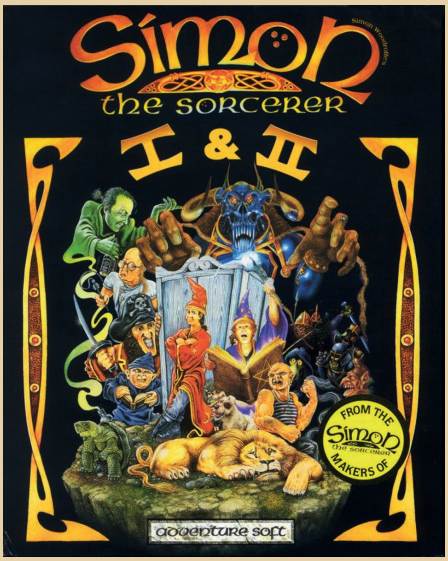
Everyone loves a soft centre

The expansion was so rapid that Geoff gave up teaching to concentrate on Softcell, much against Anne's wishes, and they decided it was high time to form a proper limited liability company to handle the business. The Browns approached the Birmingham branch of Coopers & Lybrand (now PricewaterhouseCoopers) and one of the senior account managers went to

From music to adventure

Geoff Brown's part-time employer Mike Woodroffe has enjoyed a by no means backwoods career. In 1983 Woodroffe founded the games developer Adventure Soft. The first success was *Gremlins - The Adventure* (1984) based on the eponymous film. *Robin of Sherwood*, based on the TV series, was favourably reviewed in the November 1985 issue of *Zzap!64*. Much later, after a largely successful move away from text-heavy adventures, in 1992 Adventure Soft Publishing began releasing the *Simon the Sorcerer* series.





Halesowen in early March 1983. He was hardly likely to forget his first meeting with Geoff and Anne Brown because he would join the company two years later.

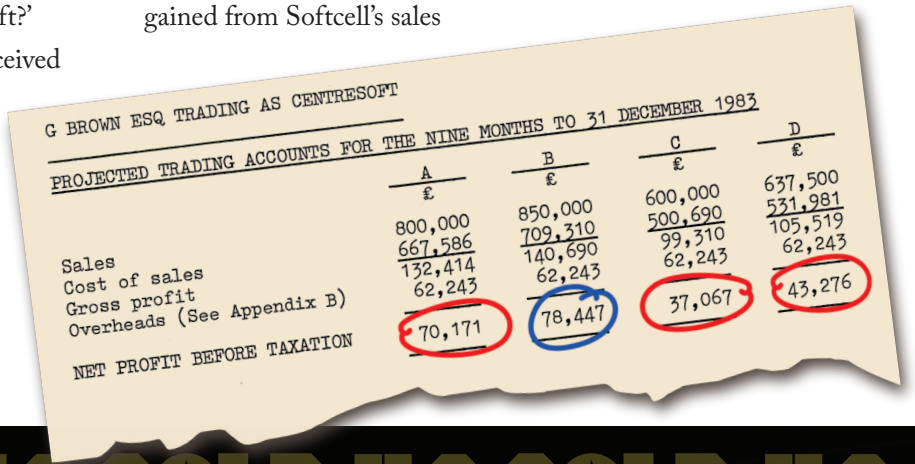
'I specialised in advising small businesses and I remember I went over to a very small office where all they had was a table to gather round and milk crates to sit on,' says Martyn Savage. 'We went through certain figures and put through a business plan to raise some money. When I went back to the office in Birmingham people wondered whether we'd get our fees out of them. I said, well we were sat on milk crates and stuff like that! Let's hope so.'

And then there came a hiccup. It turned out that there was a Softcell in America and its CEO wanted to open up business in the UK. He had been going longer and threatened to sue. Geoff points out that Anne could be sharp with people. 'She said, we're a British company, you can't sue us, so he said he'd pay us to change the name. And we thought why not? We got a useful £7,000 out of it and we had to think of a new name. We're selling software in the centre of the country, we said to each other, so why don't we call ourselves CentreSoft?'

On 22 March 1983 Geoff received a letter and business plan from Coopers & Lybrand addressed to 'G BROWN ESQ, TRADING AS CENTRESOFT' and details on the pros and cons of remaining an individual trader against becoming a limited liability company. It contained a cash flow projection for the period 1 April to 31 December 1983 (assuming they would be ready to incorporate a new company at that point, which as it turned out they were not) and showed an opening bank balance of £20,000 represented by share capital that would be subscribed to on the theoretical incorporation date for CentreSoft.

The company that was rapidly to be established as Britain's biggest distributor of computer games had already started life on 26 November 1982, incorporated under the name Bamville Ltd. It was sitting on the shelf of a firm of solicitors specialising in company formation. On 28 April 1983 Geoff Brown paid for the initial 'ordinary' shares, plus the fee for a name change - probably £100 - and Bamville Limited became CentreSoft Limited.

The figures in the business plan showed four projections ranging from a best turnover of £850,000 to a worst of £600,000 for the nine months of trading (equivalent to an annual turnover of £1 million to £750,000). The ambitious assumptions – based on information gained from Softcell's sales


G BROWN ESQ TRADING AS CENTRESOFT

PROJECTED TRADING ACCOUNTS FOR THE NINE MONTHS TO 31 DECEMBER 1983

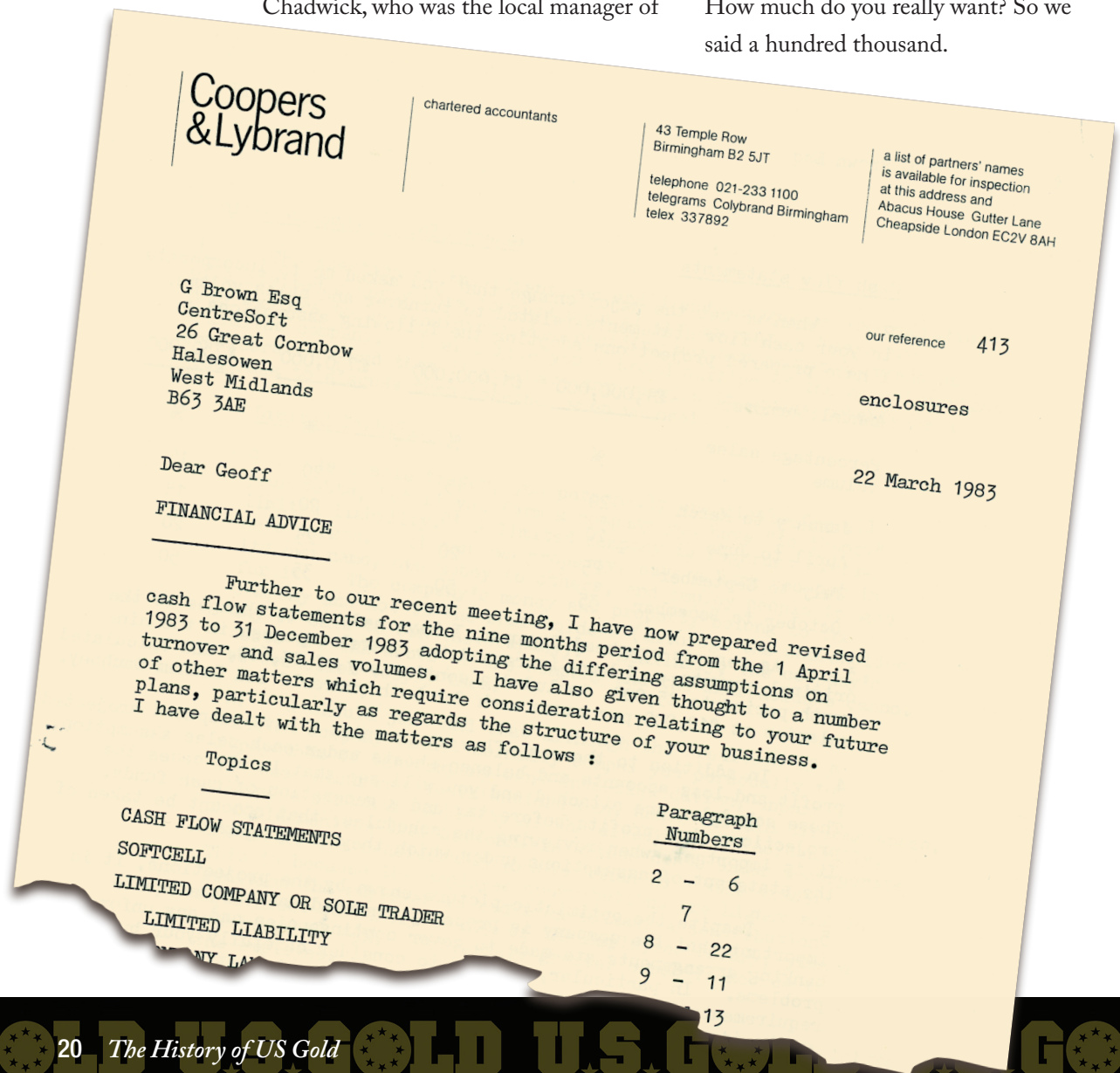
	A £	B £	C £	D £
Sales	800,000	850,000	600,000	637,500
Cost of sales	667,586	709,310	500,690	531,981
Gross profit	132,414	140,690	99,310	105,519
Overheads (See Appendix B)	62,243	62,243	62,243	62,243
NET PROFIT BEFORE TAXATION	70,171	78,447	37,067	43,276

A detail from the projected profit and loss for the first nine months (April – December 1983) of CentreSoft Ltd's trading.

patterns to that point – showed retained profits ranging from £37,000 to £78,400. If the higher figure could be realised it would be a remarkable achievement. After a further couple of months' work on the figures it was time in May to go and see the bank manager to persuade him that CentreSoft was a viable proposition to extend credit to.

Martyn Savage recalls the subsequent meeting with considerable amusement. 'Geoff and I went and saw Tony Chadwick, who was the local manager of the Nat West bank – a typical old-school bank manager. Tony, who was older than us, had a reputation for drinking, and we hadn't. But you have to do certain things to get a deal,' he adds with a laugh. 'Now Anne's financial input was that the bank facility would be against a portfolio of shares that her family held, but of course we needed a lot more than that could provide. So we went in there and talked about games and distribution and America, and we got to the question: How much do you really want? So we said a hundred thousand.

The letter of 22 March 1983 to G Brown Esq covering CentreSoft's first professionally calculated cashflow and profits. Note that while it is addressed to CentreSoft, CentreSoft is only a trading name, not yet a limited liability company.



Coopers & Lybrand

chartered accountants

43 Temple Row
Birmingham B2 5JT

telephone 021-233 1100
telegrams Colybrand Birmingham
telex 337892

a list of partners' names is available for inspection at this address and Abacus House Gutter Lane Cheapside London EC2V 8AH

G Brown Esq
CentreSoft
26 Great Cornbow
Halesowen
West Midlands
B63 3AE

our reference 413

enclosures

22 March 1983

Dear Geoff

FINANCIAL ADVICE

Further to our recent meeting, I have now prepared revised cash flow statements for the nine months period from the 1 April 1983 to 31 December 1983 adopting the differing assumptions on turnover and sales volumes. I have also given thought to a number of other matters which require consideration relating to your future plans, particularly as regards the structure of your business. I have dealt with the matters as follows :

Topics

	Paragraph Numbers
CASH FLOW STATEMENTS	2 - 6
SOFTCELL	7
LIMITED COMPANY OR SOLE TRADER	8 - 22
LIMITED LIABILITY	9 - 11
[illegible]	13

'Tony says, Oh I think that will be all right, shall we go and have a drink now? And that was it! So we ran over to the pub, and Tony was knocking them back…he must have had three or something…and Geoff and I had to catch up with him. So then we got into a taxi and we got back to the office about two-thirty a little unsteady on our feet. Anne asked did we get the money and we said, Yes!'

The assumptions showed an American purchase price of £12.10 for each piece of Atari software and a UK selling price of £14.50 excluding VAT, pointing to how tight the margins were. It meant Geoff had no leeway – everything he bought in he had to sell. He decided to go to America to see if he could secure more product and develop relationships with the software publishers over there. 'I'd never been to America and I didn't really know what to do. Because of my teaching background one company I visited was Santa Cruz Educational Software in California.'

This was hardly in the same excitement league as *Galactic Chase*, but the trip did lever some more deals for Atari software, and no longer in paltry amounts. As Martyn says, 'The Nat West facility enabled Geoff to bring in entire palettes of games in the hundreds. The idea was to expand and sell to independent computer retailers as well as Currys, wholesaling really. It wasn't very sophisticated.'

Indeed, it wasn't, as Geoff points out. 'At this time Anne was still working at a bank so I did all this by myself, single-handed. Delivery notes, invoices etc. - I just entered the details in a little blue book.'

Shortly after, CentreSoft took on its first employee, Jenny Richards, who would later become CentreSoft's head of sales and also marry Ian Stewart of Gremlin Graphics.

The Great Cornbow office in Halesowen was soon inadequate to the task and CentreSoft moved to a warehouse on an industrial estate in Tipton.

"I'd never been to America and I didn't really know what to do."

'We thought we'd never fill this warehouse, but we soon did. We outgrew it and took a bigger place in Tipton.'

That warehouse fared no better, soon overflowing with product, so CentreSoft moved again in 1985, this time to Parkway Industrial Estate, Heneage Street in Birmingham's Aston district. And that wouldn't be the last



Parkway Industrial Centre off Heneage Street, close to the centre of Birmingham. Unit 10 was home to CentreSoft and then US Gold from 1984 until the companies moved to new premises at 2–3 Holford Way in the June of 1986.

move to ever-bigger premises before finally settling in Holford Way on another industrial estate nestling in the crook of the M6 overhead and the Aston Expressway into Birmingham centre. Eventually even that proved to be insufficient, as Martyn says, 'We soon had to have another building in Holford Way, and then we outgrew that and added another one in Holford Way.'

G Brown esq, *trading as* CentreSoft was incorporated as CentreSoft Limited and commenced operating a little later than anticipated on 1 July 1983. And those ambitious Coopers & Lybrand projections were to surpass expectations.

A beach-head in America

Later in 1983 Geoff Brown made a second trip to America. 'In the magazines I'd seen something that interested me at two companies, Cosmi and Access Software [now Indie Built]. I visited the Cosmi offices, which were actually CEO George Johnson's fantastic house in Pasadena.'

Having inherited money from his father, Johnson had established a solid market for cheap audio cassettes made in Asia and marketing music compilations. Because Commodore programs were stored on cassette as well as disks there was a natural crossover. In fact due to an alarming rate of returns because of defects on Commodore's 1541 floppy



Bill Bertram

A series-2 48K ZX Spectrum and a Commodore 64, both from 1982.



Amos Evans

Spectrum versus Commodore 64

In 1982 the first ZX Spectrum computers were released in the UK towards the end of April, with 16K of RAM for £125 (£390*) or with 48K for £175 (£550*), beating the release of the $595 ($1,500 or £990*) Commodore 64 in the US by a little over three months. It would be a mistake to think that both machines flooded the stores within days of their release. The build up of retail confidence was actually quite slow throughout the remainder of 1982, matched by the lack of outlets prepared to stock software until the end of 1983, when pre-Christmas sales

disk drive, a problem to dog the drive until well into 1984, most games players preferred to use the 1530 Datasette. So Johnson started recruiting programmers to develop C64 games for Cosmi.

Among them was Paul Norman and his game *Forbidden Forest* impressed everyone who saw it in development. Norman later recalled the effect the game had. 'My simple trick of moving two sprite trees a little slower in the background to simulate 3D seemed to be effective. They also liked the blood splatter. These elements seemed natural and necessary to me so I was surprised to hear that such things were state-of-the-art at the time.'

Norman was also working on *Aztec Challenge*, which differed from the earlier Atari 800 original. The C64 version looked like a must-buy for CentreSoft, as would his *Slinky* and *Caverns of Khafka*. Norman later recalled that at the Las Vegas CES (Consumer Electronics



Commodore's 1530 Datasette, popular with gamesplayers until early problems with the 1541 Disk Drive were sorted.

began to indicate that home computer games was something more than a passing fad. During 1983 the installed base of Commodore 64 computers and Commodore's 1530 Datasette player, promoted games development in the US at a faster rate initially than in the UK, where the Spectrum attracted the most attention.

There was, of course, competition in the form of Commodore's VIC-20, the Acorn-Electron and BBC Micro, MSX, Oric 1, Oric Atmos, and the Dragon - but the Spectrum and a little later the Commodore 64 (after a dramatic price cut) effectively wiped the floor with the others when it came to games.

* *Approximate adjusted prices for 2015*



MSX
BBC Micro
Oric Atmos
Dragon
Acorn Electron





Before *Forbidden Forest* appeared in the UK under the US Gold label, Norman had completed *Aztec Challenge*, the US artwork shown here.

At Access, brothers Bruce and Roger Carver stand in front of a *Beach-Head* poster.



Show): 'I always went off on my own to gamble and what-not while George stayed in the suite making deals with European buyers.'

Basically Geoff Brown.

From Los Angeles, Geoff went to Salt Lake City to see Bruce Carver at Access Software. 'I'd seen they were developing a game called *Beach-Head* for the Commodore 64, a computer which was just gaining ground in the UK. I thought that's a very good game, I like that one. So I said, I really love *Beach-Head* and I want to license it… I want to buy the game from you, you give me a price, you give me a copy and I'll import the game in a bag to the UK.'

Geoff returned and told Anne that he had secured licences to manufacture and sell *Beach-Head*, *Forbidden Forest* and *Azetc Challenge* as a start. 'But Access wanted a guarantee of sales so I'd plucked a number out of the air and I told them



we'll guarantee a hundred thousand units; something ridiculous. I thought, well what can you do? They're not going to chase me down in England. They didn't even realise there was a market in England, none of them had any export business at all, they were making a lot of money in America and couldn't care less about anywhere outside of the States – which was great for me. And with me coming from England they thought I was the Beatles! You know, I had a bit of an

Afro at the time and I'd got my accent, and they'd go *Whoo!* And we didn't even sign a contract, because they're Mormons we just shook hands.'

No signatures on contracts, then, but the Americans wanted the comfort of Letters of Credit (LCs)… of which, more below. Both American publishers were to be pleased with the deals they made. 'We sold millions of their games, millions!' Geoff says with a degree of calm glee at the recollection.

In the first nine months or so, there would be a staggering 46 titles…and it was just the beginning.

A time for All-Gold hits

CentreSoft's distribution business was on the point of massive growth. From being a small two-person outfit (three, if you include Jenny Richards) importing Atari cartridges and their Commodore 64 cassette versions and selling them directly to branches of Currys, there were now deals on the table to import data and manufacture US-developed games in the UK and sell those in to the retailers as well. This was a game changer.

A little research showed that to import cassettes in such enormous bulks as Geoff had guaranteed was not as cost-effective as buying the licensed data and then duplicating the cassettes in England. The same could be said of disk versions, except the price of the 1541 disk drive would be prohibitive in the UK, at least initially.

Geoff still laughs at the thought of



cassettes. 'How we ever sold so many, I don't know. When you think about their fragility – just one tiny bit of drop-out of data on the tape and…no game. It's a miracle they ever worked in the first place.'

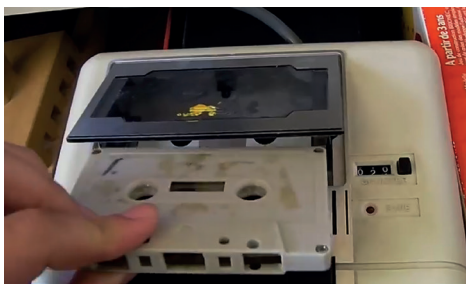


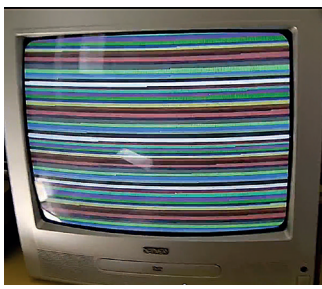
Paul Norman, writer of the 'classic' game *Forbidden Forest.*

Currys were now happy to take home-grown product from CentreSoft as well, bought in from the numerous small software developers beginning to emerge from the mail-order-only model to find proper distribution to retail – among

"How we ever sold so many [cassettes], I don't know…it's a miracle they ever worked in the first place"







Cassettes – a miracle they ever worked for loading games…



'I wanted [the logo] with stars on it and a typeface to make it look all American.'

them the Manchester-based Spectrum Software owned by Jon Woods and David Ward.

Adding in British software for VIC-20, BBC, ZX Spectrum to the distribution catalogue gave a big boost to CentreSoft's sales figures. The 1983 turnover far exceeded Coopers & Lybrand's projections calculated from the experience of Softcell – not the £1 million best-projected turnover, but in fact £3.3 million. The estimated turnover for the trading year from November 1984 to October 1985 was put at just over £5 million with a profit margin of almost £600,000.

In the first instance Geoff envisaged selling his imported but UK-duplicated games into retail through CentreSoft under their Cosmi, Access or MicroProse labels (MicroProse had come to his notice through an agent), as he had done with the Atari games. But it didn't feel quite right. Now Geoff's music background prompted a much better answer: set up a new entity much like a record company, like a Decca or Columbia or EMI Records, with several labels under the one umbrella.

'It was the Cosmi guy George Jonhnson who had already given me the idea, really,' Geoff says with a restrained grin. 'When I was out there he'd said to me, I was doing these music cassettes and I had something like *All-Gold Hits*. They were really popular music compilations. He suggested that I should bring the games in under a generic compilation name, something like *Gold-Hits* rather than as Cosmi games and I said, I don't know about that, I think I'll still call it Cosmi Software. But I must have stored the idea away.

'I woke up one morning and I said to Anne, I've had a brilliant idea, let's create a record-style brand and call it US Gold, US Gold – All-American Software. The Cosmi or Access or MicroProse logos would still appear on the box but they would have the US Gold logo on them as well. That meant I could advertise all the US licences as a brand, I could sell them as a brand, I could market them with brand awareness. For our logo we had a guy we worked with who'd done the CentreSoft logo and I told him I wanted

MICROPROSE

it with stars on it and a typeface to make it look all American.'

On 12 March 1984, Geoff and Anne purchased an incorporated shell, formed on 30 January 1984 with the resonant name of Covsound Ltd, changed its name, and so US Gold Ltd was born. Almost immediately the first of the licences Geoff had negotiated in the States came to fruition. He'd given – perhaps rashly – guarantees to sell in the UK a hundred thousand units each of *Beach-Head*, *Forbidden Forest* and *Azetc Challenge*, and the licensors wanted the guarantees locked in through Letters of Credit.

Put simply, an LC is issued by a bank on behalf of its client guaranteeing that a seller will receive payment in full as long as certain delivery conditions have been met. In the event that the buyer is unable to make payment on the purchase, the bank will cover the outstanding amount. It follows that no bank would issue an LC without the client having sufficient funds on deposit to cover the amounts involved. With Martyn Savage's help CentreSoft had secured a £100,000 facility from the local branch of Nat West, and while at the point of US Gold's start CentreSoft looked to be on a sound footing and expanding, it wouldn't have sufficient liquidity to fund all the licences Geoff was now after for US Gold.

At a licence fee rate of 20% per unit, at the then upper UK game price of £5.95, CentreSoft would owe Cosmi or Access £1.20 per unit, or £119,800 on 100,000 guaranteed copies. Multiply that sum by the first three games and CentreSoft's exposure to the American companies was in excess of £359,000. Even allowing that they only paid an advance and deferred the balances until sales income was generated, a 10% advance represented £35,900 locked up in LCs. A bank treats an LC in the same way as it does an overdraft: once issued, even though the seller has yet to deliver the 'goods', the bank blocks the money as though it had already been spent.



US Gold was the first software house to price Commodore 64 cassettes at £9.95, but Geoff Brown hedged his bets when it came to the Spectrum versions, an admission that the sound at least would not be as good.

INDIANA JONES, J.R. & BRUCE LEE JOINED THE U.S. GOLD CLUB... ...NOW YOU CAN TOO!

You are aware only too well, the ability of U.S. Gold to bring to you the very best of American Software at British prices. Previously American Software, whilst recognised as being of brilliant concept and quality, has been prohibitive in cost compared to home produced packages.

In April 1984 that situation became history!

During 1985 U.S. Gold will be releasing titles from the following well known software houses: DataSoft/Synapse/Sega/Microprose/Cosmi/Access/Sydney/Sierra On Line/Advantage/Mindscape/American Eagle/S.S.I./Big 5/Funsoft/Penguin/PDM– and thats only Sixteen excellent reasons to join the U.S. Gold Club. Here's some more:

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Desire for U.S. Gold Software might seriously affect your bank balance!!

To U.S. Gold Ltd., Unit 10, Parkway Ind. Est. Heneage St., Birmingham B7 4LY.
I would like to become a member of the U.S. Gold Club. I OWN A COMMODORE 64/SPECTRUM/AMSTRAD/BBC/MSX/ATARI. (Delete as appropriate)

I have enclosed a cheque/Postal Order for £9.99 + 75p (p+p) to U.S. GOLD CLUB For my Membership Fee I will receive a Sweatshirt (26/28" ☐ 30/32" ☐ S ☐ M ☐ L ☐), U.S. Gold Badge, U.S. Gold Poster, and my first Newsletter. I will receive a regular Newsletter and special U.S. Gold offers exclusive to members.

Name .....

Address .....

..... Post Code .....

U.S. GOLD
All American Software



Two things were immediately apparent.

First: the £5.95 price point would be too low to guarantee profitability of the new publishing venture. Geoff had the answer to that. 'I wasn't going to have my games selling for £4.95 or £5.95,' he says, thinking back on the reasoning for such a price hike. 'My games are so much better than yours, I said. We're going to sell ours at £9.95. It doesn't seem like anything much today but then that was revolutionary… and I was going to do full page advertising in the magazines, and double-page spreads and take back pages.'

Second: if Geoff were to continue licensing product from America pretty soon he was going to need a partner with access to ready cash to help fund future LCs in return for a share of the eventual profits. The prospective partner seemed obvious… but more of that in a while.

Launching US Gold

At the outset, US Gold was always going to be an aggressive marketer, the attitude went with the territory, rising like lifeblood from the cut and thrust of distribution. An early indication of the software house's marketing ethos was a brilliant stroke – at the launch of the company Geoff founded 'the UK's Premier Software Club'.

INDIANA JONES, J.R. & BRUCE LEE JOINED THE US GOLD CLUB the flyer inserted in computer entertainment magazines proclaimed. It went on, somewhat ungrammatically, to say: *You are aware only too well, the ability of US Gold to bring you the very best of American software at British prices. Previously American software, whilst being recognised as being of brilliant concept and quality, has been prohibitive in cost compared to home produced packages.*

In April 1984 that situation became history!

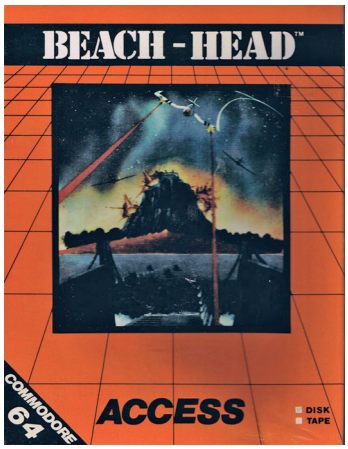
The incoming American data needed nothing changing (though the need for redoing loading screen graphics to incorporate the US Gold logo would soon become one coding task), so the only work before duplication was to prepare the inlay artwork.

'You see in the States they sold their games loose in bags,' Geoff explains, noting that this was a practice British retailers would not tolerate. 'We had the guy who designed the CentreSoft and US Gold logos do a lot of our inlays. We got the American artwork and then had to change things like the screen shots, the American spelling, things like that, and downsize it to fit a cassette case.'

And the games started rolling off the production line at Ablex of Telford, commencing with *Beach-Head*. American magazine *Ahoy!* issue 4 said of it; 'Because of the many levels of play, it would take a long time to get boring. If you enjoy arcade style games with good graphics and sound, your money won't



Ahoy! – an influential Commodore 64 vehicle in America and later for the Amiga, as in this November 1997 edition.





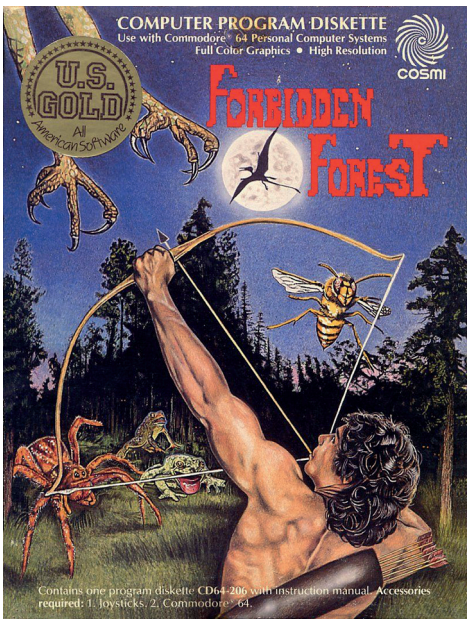
All US Gold had to do was redesign the cassette packaging from the American version (left), otherwise the American data went to Ablex in Telford for mass duplication without further change.

be wasted on this one. It is a remarkable programming achievement.' *Computer & Video Games* reckoned the game left 95% of British Commodore 64 software standing, underlining Geoff Brown's boast that his games were better than anyone else's. It went on to be runner-up for *C&VG*'s 1984 Golden Joystick Award.

The Spectrum version was available for review some three months later. *Crash* reviews of the time were notably harsh but still gave *Beach-Head* an overall rating of 79%. '*Beach-Head* arrived in Britain,' went the intro, 'as one of those US games that had to be seen. US Gold are now busy bringing all sorts of famous games under licence like *Zaxxon* (already available for the Commodore 64 and hopefully soon for the Spectrum).' Of the three reviewers, two liked the game but felt it lacked something in the graphics – the third disagreed: 'Do you suffer from those disgustingly horrible people so crudely cast as Commodore 64 owners saying how superior their machine is, saying your beloved Spectrum isn't capable of producing excellent programs like *Beach-Head*? You do! Now all you have to do is turn around and beat the asterisks out of them, and while doing this you can tell them that your Spectrum has a version of *Beach-Head* that is every bit as good as the 64 version, if not better!'

Cosmi's *Forbidden Forest* was a solid hit with players as well and some retro







Beach-Head on the Commodore 64 sporting the best graphics - if you were a Spectrum gamer, you tended to disagree.

fans today still make claims for the game as 'a classic'. *Personal Computer Games* gave it 80%, *C&VG* 70%. *Commodore User* 80%, although – often a bit sour at that time – said: 'Shame about the intrusive sound and interminable jigs…' But most players raved about Paul Norman's outstanding use of the C64's SID chip to create the atmospheric spooky-horror music, about which he was typically modest: 'As a musician you keep mixing and matching the finite notes and chords available until they make you feel something.'

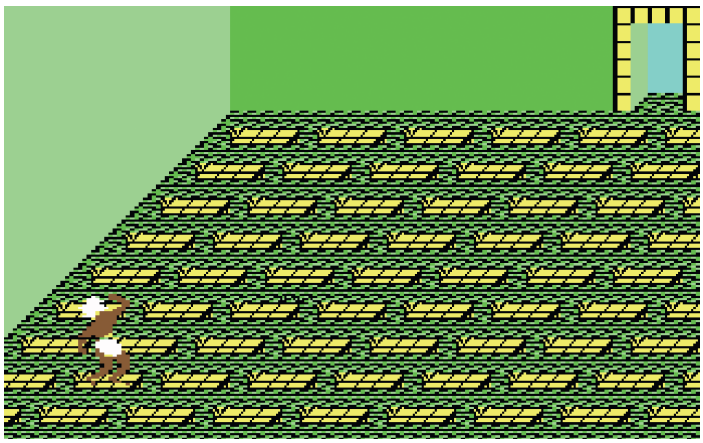
Easy, really.

Norman's exciting and immersive music for *Aztec Challenge* was also a triumph. There was an earlier version for the Atari 400 and 800 programmed on an Apple II by Robert Tegel Bonifacio, but that had been a side-scrolling, platform-jumping game that Norman later likened to *Mario Bros* in appearance. For the Commodore 64 version he simply went home and wrote his own game from scratch. 'It in no way resembled the first except for the title. The ideas that arose as the game developed were suggested by movies about ancient tribes from South America to Greece. So many B-movies of past cultures included scenes where the hero has to run some gauntlet of arrows, spears, alligators… whatever.'

UK games players soaked it up and gave US Gold a third hit.

Geoff's rash claim to sell a hundred thousand units came true almost overnight. 'We became the biggest customer of Ablex, who did all our







Aztec Challenge on the Commodore 64 – a title that had nothing in common with the earlier Atari 400/800 version.

duplication. It was nothing to ship 300,000 units of some games to Boots alone. One day we sold almost a million units on the day of release.'

Before the year's end, US Gold had something in the region of 24 titles in the licensing pipeline and money for advances to support them all was running out fast. But before seeing that looming problem solved, it's time to backtrack a couple of years.

Mastering the art of stiffing

While Geoff Brown was building the start of what would become Britain's largest software distributor, in a different corner of the burgeoning computer world another contributor to the US Gold story was cutting his teeth on the High Street.

Tim Chaney joined Commodore International early in 1982, in time for the UK launch of the VIC-20, the more economical and smaller brother of Commodore's popular PET. While the PET was sold through authorised dealers as a business machine, the VIC-20 primarily sold at retail – especially discount and toy stores, where it could compete more directly with the 8-bit Atari computers. Which is where Tim came in.

'It was really a kind of purple period because we were introducing something to consumer durables that had never been there before at sub-two hundred pounds,' he says. 'Commodore's philosophy – an American corporation owned by Jack Tramiel, a survivor from Auschwitz – was: this market isn't going to last for long, it's not a real market. The real market is going to be bigger computers doing more interesting things, and so let's make as much money as we can while we can and be as tough as we can because people need our machines. This is before Sinclair ever went to retail and Commodore was barnstorming,' Tim adds, and then laughs before describing how he had to go about supporting store sales teams.

'I remember doing training sessions to a group of a hundred people from Currys. You put a hundred people in a room and try to teach them BASIC in a day. It was quite a challenge, you know, getting through to them the idea of RUN… And they were thinking, what am I doing here? I'm not going to sell this thing. I want a Hoover. Where's the VHS video? Anyway, we did that and we educated the entire High Street basically.'

It's noticeable that in talking to CentreSoft-US Gold's executives all agreed that first and foremost it was a marketing organisation and Tim Chaney learned hard-nosed marketing and selling from his days with Commodore. 'In Commodore's philosophy there were ten golden rules and one of them was: *Business is war.* Another was: *We don't have competitors, we only have enemies.*'

> ***"…this market isn't going to last for long, it's not a real market."***

The term *stiffing* describes the process of persuading (read 'bullying'…) a retailer into taking product whether or not they need it, can sell it, or in much greater quantity than they might reasonably be able to sell. 'We stiffed everybody basically. In fact the reason I got the job with Geoff Brown is I stiffed him,' Tim adds with a laugh.

'I stiffed this shop in Greenford, and the guy couldn't pay his bills and



Tim Chaney cut his marketing teeth selling Commodore's VIC-20 into High Street retail outlets and learning Jack Tramiel's philosophy that business is war – kill all competition.

Commodore were going after him to close him down. I remember saying to my boss Paul Welch, I put six grand's worth of stuff in the shop, he was a believer but it hasn't worked for him, we need him. We need to show some good will. And Paul said, Tim, when I need goodwill I'll fucking pay for it. And that was the mentality of Commodore. It was a really good time and I was promoted four times before I left late in 1983 to join Camputers.'

The move to the Cambridge-based hardware company founded by Richard Greenwood proved short-lived. 'They launched a machine called the Lynx, and for me as a salesman I got a company car – a Saab – a better position as sales director, a lot more autonomy, and international travel, which was as well because what became clear was that we couldn't sell the Lynx in the UK, the competition was just too great. Cambridge alone was churning out the Oric, the new Grundy, the BBC, obviously the Spectrum and then there was the Commodore 64. And the Amstrad range was showing up on the marketing radar. So I sold the Lynx in France, Iceland and Norway and anywhere I could. It didn't really work out because we had three million pounds' worth of orders, which I got, and we couldn't get financing from the City. The City became very nervous of micro computing because there were too many of us. Richard Greenwood had already raised something like four million and burned that.'



The ill-fated Camputer Lynx. BYTE magazine thought that it: *offers more computing power for the money than any other machine…* after seeing a preview of the Lynx at the Personal Computer World Show in the run-up to the 1982 Christmas period.



And so Tim went back to Commodore, hoping to return to selling hardware, but to his dismay he was given the position as head of software sales. 'Commodore only had one piece of software that was any good, written by Andrew Spencer, called *International Football*, and it was on a bloody huge

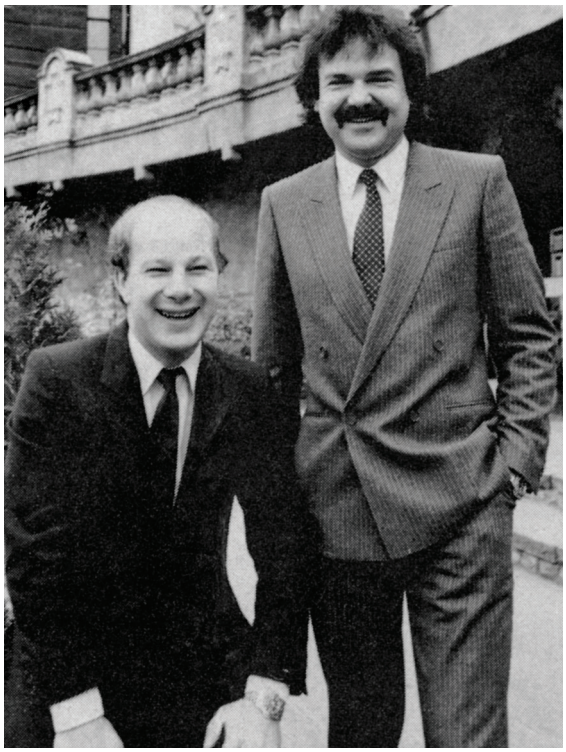
cartridge. Everything else was pretty much shite. So I went to see WH Smith and Boots and software distributors like Tiger, Websters, Microdealer and Leisuresoft with the intention of stiffing them with software before I got back into hardware – the Amiga was on the boards and that was much more interesting to me at the time. In my travels I went to Tipton to see this Geoff Brown guy at CentreSoft. They were getting going. I sat down with Geoff and he said, Tim, I don't know anything about Commodore software, so you advise me. You tell me what you think I should buy.

'Brilliant! When someone does that you can expect a couple of 32-tonners to turn up in a couple of weeks to your door. So I loaded him up with all the old shit that hadn't moved off the shelf for a long time. And he didn't say anything. I sent him a bill for, I don't know, fifty, sixty, seventy grand, which was a lot of money back then, and that was a good day's work as far as I was concerned. Commodore had done the checks to see if the guy could pay and concluded he could.'

Ocean waves

'Come December I got a budget to go and take out our best customers for a meal,' Tim Chaney says, and having 'stiffed' Geoff and Anne with thousands of pounds of virtually worthless old Commodore software, CentreSoft was his biggest customer. 'So I had dinner with Geoff and Anne. Now Anne had these piercing blue eyes and she was psychopathically dangerous in business. She looked me in the eyes towards the end of dinner and said, Tim, we're looking for a boss for this software company we've got called US Gold – I'd picked up a bit about *Beach-Head*, a huge game on the Commodore 64 – and she said, We thought we'd ask you if you wanted the job. I asked, Why me? And Anne said, well, you're the only guy that's ever stitched us up, so now we want you to stitch everyone else up!'

Tim always suspected there was more than that motive for offering him the job. 'You know the worst thing Anne could ever say to you was: Tim, I'm not being funny, but… If she said that you knew you were in for it. And in the same way if Geoff said: Tim, I've just been talking to David Ward and we think… I'd know it was probably going to be something I wouldn't want to do or wouldn't agree with. But at the time they offered me the job there was talk of putting Jon Woods in



Part-owners of US Gold, David Ward and Jon Woods in Manchester posed outside the Ralli Building, which housed Ocean Software.



Jon Woods and David Ward of Ocean, standing, with Geoff and Anne Brown in a press photograph of September 1984, when Jon and David took a 50% stake in newly formed US Gold.

US Gold operated in a different manner to Ocean, which had its 'Dungeon' of basement programmers and the upper floor management level. 'They were like that,' Geoff says. 'Our culture was exactly the opposite. All our staff knew exactly what we were doing. They worked with us, not for us and that used to be our motto: At US Gold you work with us, not for us. It was very different to Jon and David's way of working with their staff.'

as caretaker managing director of US Gold because he and David had money in the company, and I don't think Anne wanted Jon Woods that close to the US Gold business. Geoff had probably said to Anne: I've just been talking to David Ward and he thinks… and Geoff had said, yeah, good idea, David. But Anne said to Geoff, that's not a good idea. So I got the job instead.'

At some point in September 1984, Geoff and Anne Brown had done a deal with Jon and David. As Tim Chaney tells it: 'At the time Geoff was bringing over a few games from the States, wanted more, and he didn't have a lot of cash. He was working on an overdraft at the bank with CentreSoft and he needed to pay the American advances – five thousand, ten thousand to get each product. Ocean

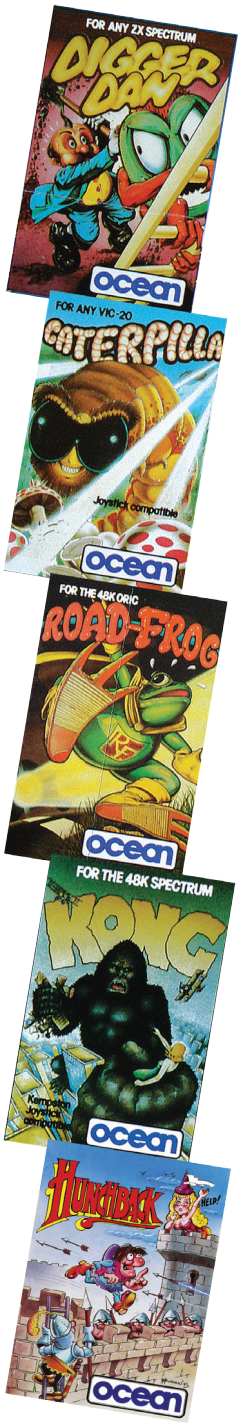
gave him fifty grand to do that, which would have been a lot to Geoff and Anne in those early days. In return Jon Woods and David Ward took fifty per cent of US Gold. Otherwise it could all have stopped right then. But in fact they funded it and it was a masterful plan, a stroke of genius on their part.'

During the last two quarters of 1983, while CentreSoft was making money as a UK wholesaler of imported and some home-grown product, the owners of Spectrum Software, Jon Woods and David Ward, were raking it in hand-over-fist from a slew of successful games, mostly for the ZX Spectrum. They had a list of coin-op clones such as *Frenzy*, *Monster Muncher*, *Digger Dan*, *Caterpillar*, *Road Frog* and the first title to bear the Ocean logo on the cassette box, *Kong*. Their strong 1984 line-up, which included the previous Spectrum Software titles repackaged under the Ocean logo and all selling well again to the ever-expanding market, included games like *Moon Alert*, *Hunchback*, *Gilligan's Gold* and the sports celebrity licence *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* in production.

The profit margins in creating and selling games was far higher than the typical distribution margin of about 16.5% that CentreSoft was generating – by September 1984 Ocean had the spare cash to fund US Gold's growth.

'The success of the Spectrum was a big sea change in the business,' Geoff says. 'Obviously there were no Spectrum games in America. There was Atari and Commodore 64 and, although they were popular in the UK, the Spectrum was obviously number one. It became an overnight European phenomenon. It was at that point I had a choice as far as software was concerned. Either I stuck with the small business I had with Commodore and Atari games or I came up with a way of getting the Spectrum market under control. I wanted games like *Beach-Head* converted to the Spectrum but I had no in-house development because I hadn't needed to convert anything before. Now not only was CentreSoft the biggest buyer of Ocean games, but I was very good friends with David Ward and Jon Woods. They were building a development facility for Spectrum games, original games mainly, and I thought why don't I get them to take my American Commodore 64 games and translate them for the Spectrum?'

In the memory bank of those involved on the US Gold side of the divide there is some confusion as to whether or not Ocean actually did any ports to Spectrum, which is understandable because initially in a way they did and in a way they didn't; certainly the expanding Ocean in-house team didn't. In fact David Anderson's firm Platinum Productions handled the Spectrum versions of *Beach-Head*, *Raid Over Moscow* and *Tapper*, but Platinum regarded itself as Ocean's leading outside developer at the time, so the point is a moot one.



A string of successful arcade clones earned Spectrum Software and then Ocean a fortune, enough to back Geoff's ambitions in the US.

Nevertheless, Geoff Brown wasted little time thereafter in organising other routes. 'What happened was that Ocean just got too busy with their own work and I was getting second fiddle,' he says. 'And that's really when we took control

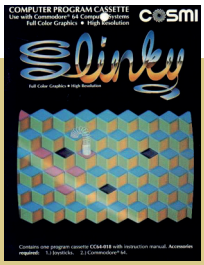
"Geoff was…the kind of guy who has five ideas a day and four are shit, but that doesn't matter because you only need one good idea…"

of our Spectrum development and began to build relationships with other software developers like Tiertex and Probe.'

Tim Chaney started as general manager of US Gold in April 1985 at what was by then CentreSoft's fifth set of premises (counting the Browns' garage) at Unit 10, Parkway Industrial Estate, Heneage Street just off the centre of Birmingham. 'I was interested in taking the job because they looked like they were going places. Anne was smart as hell, Geoff was incredibly bright and he had lots of ideas – you know, the kind of guy who has five ideas a day and four are shit, but that doesn't matter because you only need one good idea – you get that ratio you're not doing badly. Someone like Alan Sugar had one idea a year and he did okay with it.

'I got my Audi 100, I was living in Newport Pagnell then, and I commuted to Birmingham every day. I sat in an office with Geoff and he'd not long come back from CES with loads more American software deals. It seemed to me he had all the software in America signed to US Gold… and I think he nearly did, apart from Electronic Arts, Broderbund and we didn't yet have Epyx. I didn't know who half these people were. I just saw all these deals coming round. And I started selling the product we had to every retailer I could reach.'

Meanwhile, Geoff was on a roll with his American contacts. 'I had lots of other dead certs, other than *Beach-*





The US Gold catalogue as at April 1985, as given to *Zzap!64* launch editor Chris Anderson. By no means were all these titles yet on sale, however.

Access: *Beach-Head*, *Raid Over Moscow*
Cosmi: *Aztec Challenge*, *Caverns of Khafka*, *Forbidden Forest*, *Slinky*, *Super Huey*, *Talladega*, *Monster Trivia*
Datasoft: *Bruce Lee*, *Dallas Quest* (disk), *O'Reilly's Mine*, *Pooyan*, *Pole Position*, *Pac-Man*, *Mr Do!*, *Dig Dug*, *Conan the Barbarian* (disk)
Artworx: *Strip Poker*
Funsoft: *Flak*, *Snokie*
Sega: *Zaxxon*, *Tapper*, *Spy Hunter*, *Buck Rogers*, *Congo Bongo*
J. V. Software: *Mystic Mansion*
MicroProse: *NATO Commander*, *Spitfire Ace*, *Solo Flight*, *F-15 Strike Eagle*
Mindscape: *Indiana Jones*

Head, like *Infiltrator*, *Zaxxon*, *Bruce Lee*, *Impossible Mission*… the games from the States just kept flowing, just fantastic. And I was the UK publisher *and* I was the UK distributor.'

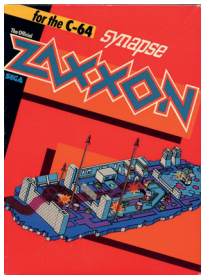
A fighting stance

Almost the first ordeal facing US Gold's new general manager was a press interview.

'Back in those days anyone who answered the phone used to put a note on your desk saying somebody's called. I had a note saying that a Chris Anderson had phoned from something called That 64 and wanted to interview me.'

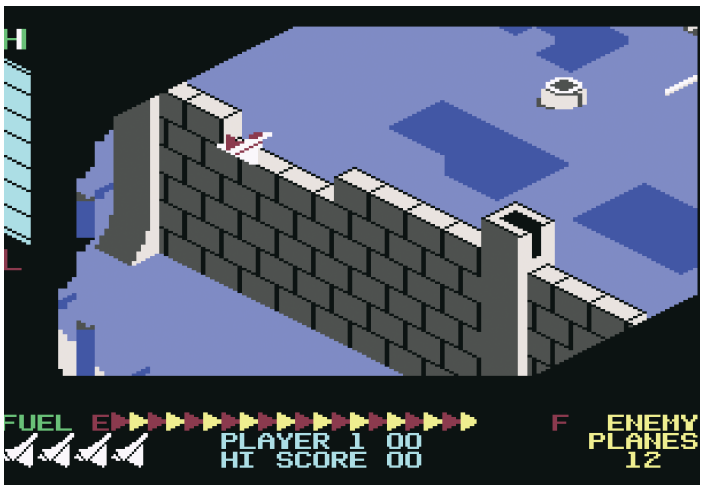
Discovering that the mysterious something was a magazine called *Zzap!64* and its editor Chris Anderson wished to interview him was probably no more enlightening to Tim at the time.

'God, I was young then, so fucking arrogant – and I was dissing everyone! To me, it was a war. I didn't want anyone else to exist. But in a way that's how it was. We didn't want anyone else to be in the industry. Before I talked to Mr Anderson there was something Geoff said – that he doesn't know why people bother being



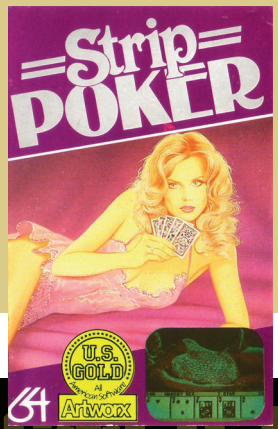
Zaxxon on the Spectrum (left) and C64. The missing floor put off many Spectrum players but the C64 version worked well.



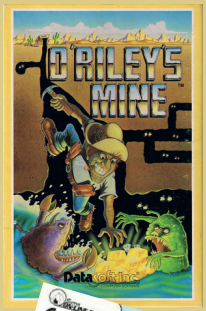


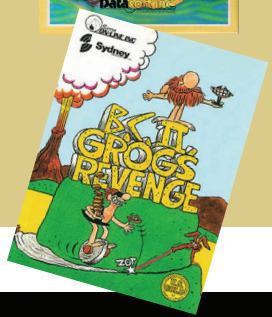
Graphics People: *Stellar 7*
Synap e: *Fort Apocalypse*, *Blue Max*, *Sentinel*, *Drelbs*, *Doughboy*
SSI: *Battle For Normandy*, *Combat Leader*
Big Five: *Bounty Bob Strikes Back*
Sydney Development: *BC II: Grog's Revenge*, *The Dam Busters*
Origin Systems: *Exodus: Ultima II*
Arena Graphics: *Dropzone*.
For June: *Kennedy Approach*, *Championship Boxing*

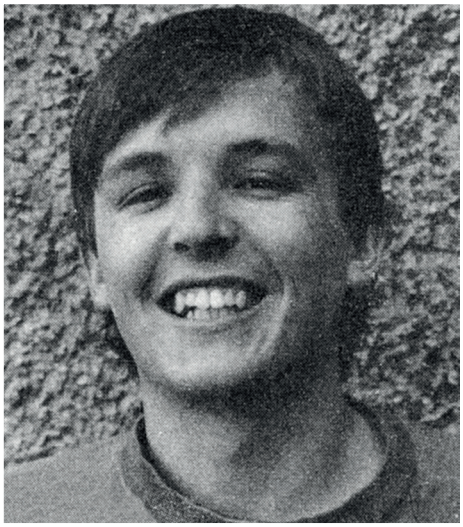
For July: *Stunt Flyer*, *Blue Max 2001*, *Tigers in the Snow*, *Knights of the Desert*, *Ghost Chaser*, *Mig Alley Ace*



For August: *Beach Head II*, *Beer Belly Burt's Brew Biz*, *Whirlynurd*, *Castle of Dr Creep.*







Chris Anderson ran the Tim Chaney interview in issue 2 of newly launched *Zzap!64*.

'The 64 is still the best machine to play games on,' Tim Chaney told *Zzap!64*. 'Here [at US Gold] we have the task of converting 64 games onto the Spectrum, and believe me it's like drinking champagne and then drinking house wine afterwards. The 64's capabilities are far superior – in sound, handling of colour, scrolling, everything.'

Geoff and Tim, piling up the C64 licences and rushing them to Ocean for conversion to the Spectrum.

in the industry because *we're* here. I don't know why they bother, he'd say. Why are they releasing games? Why are they doing that? Elite Systems, they're sitting there on top of a fish and chip shop in Walsall. Let's kill them!'

The tone shows in the resulting interview recorded in April which appeared in *Zzap!64* issue 2, June 1985. 'I suppose our turnover is actually comparable to our output – and our output is immense,' Tim began. 'We do put a lot of products onto the market. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Basically the UK market in 1985 is big enough for, say, a maximum of 400 hit products, a hit product being one which maybe sells over 10,000 units.'

Anderson expressed surprise at the quantity Tim claimed for US Gold, 150 new games?

'That figure takes it across all the machines. On the 64 alone I think we'll probably be putting out 70 to 80 new titles. That's a lot of product. More than anyone else I would have thought.'

Geoff Brown was also bullish about why US Gold was releasing so many products. 'If we don't release these titles someone else will anyway, because they're available for British licensing,' he told Chris Anderson. 'So when we put them out, we try to choose the best programs, and because we're so strong now on licensing, people are offering them to us before they offer them to anyone else.



A lot of the American games released here by other companies are the ones we rejected.'

'The thing is,' Tim added, 'if you're an American software company, why should you give your software to anyone apart from US Gold? Some good American titles brought to the UK by other companies have not done well.' And he returned to the subject of numbers: 'As far as I'm concerned there's nothing wrong if US Gold have 150 of those 400 products, if that 150 has been advertised okay and gives the consumer better value for money than its counterparts. But there again we spend nearly five times as much on advertising as our nearest competitor.'

'We used to give Newsfield ten to twenty pages a month of advertisements, guaranteed, for a price. David Ward did the deal.'

'We got special rates,' Geoff recalls. 'Other software houses couldn't compete on our advertising rates that easily. We did double-page spreads and gatefolds… I remember we did one which was just a black page with US Gold overlaid. I was asked, what are you advertising? And I said, well, nothing, just the brand. Sometimes David would say Ocean can only use ten pages this month, and I'd say that's okay David, I'll take the rest.'

Tim was less certain of the quantity. 'I didn't know from where we were going to come up with twenty pages of adverts a month quite frankly. We didn't have *that* much stuff.'

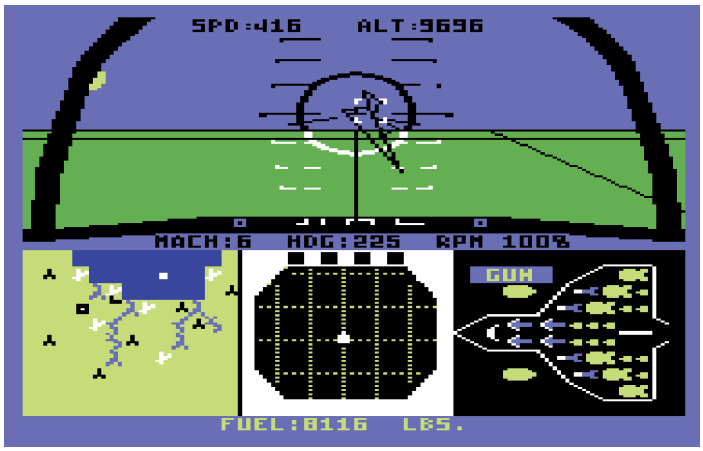
But there really was a lot of stuff (*see the side panel on the previous spread*) and that of course doesn't include whatever Ocean wanted to market at the same time. In fact between them US Gold and Ocean booked 142 pages in *Zzap!64* over the first twelve issues, an average of 11.8 pages per issue. Of those, 88 pages advertised US Gold product, 55 pages Ocean product, of which 14 were for Ocean's Konami-Imagine label. And that's not counting numerous sponsored prizes for reader competitions. The same went for *Crash* covering the Spectrum versions… and Newsfield was but one of several computer games magazine publishers carrying US Gold and Ocean advertisements.

To Chris Anderson, when he asked Tim whether the average American game was better than the average British game, Tim projected an attitude of pride backed up by the results of several of those initial US imports. 'A lot of American titles take a lot longer to write and are a lot more costly to research. Things like *F-15 Strike Eagle* took nine months to write, was play tested by three F-15 pilots, and the president of the company is a combat pilot with 3,000 hours, so he knew that the end product would be identical as a program can be



Geoff Brown, wondering why other software houses even bothered to compete with his company.

"If you're an American…why should you give your software to anyone apart from US Gold?"

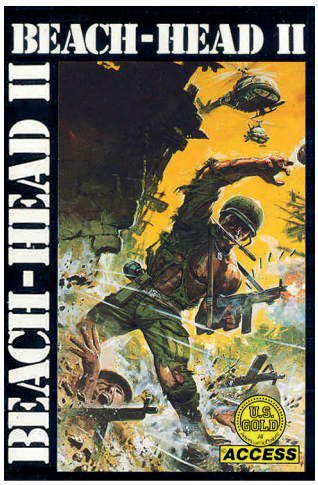




F-15 Strike Eagle (above) and *Solo Flight*, extensively tested.

to a real simulation. *Solo Flight* is used at twenty flying schools in the States. The same kind of work goes into the arcade games. Things like *Beach-Head II*, it's been about eight months in the writing. And programmers over there are paid anything up to £35,000 to produce decent software. Which is why software in the States is so much more expensive.



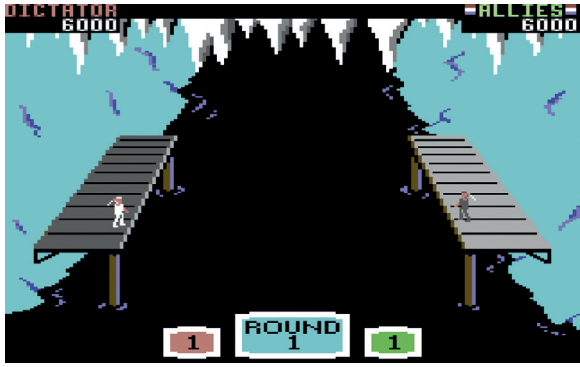


US Gold rejected the American artwork for *Beach-Head II* and instead used the painting Oliver Frey did for the cover of *Zzap!64* issue 4 (August 1985).

The going rate at the moment is $29 or $34 a time, but an ad in the States costs £4,000*. And then you have to pay people like K-mart £40,000 to do promotion. You are talking big bucks. We are not there yet. We're still at the level where you try to do a deal here and a deal there.'

* Chris pointed out to *Zzap!64*'s readers that this was about four times the cost of an advertisement in a British magazine.

Today Tim recalls that it was a great honeymoon period for them before American software developers wised up to the European market. 'We used a few agents later on but most relationships were direct. We'd go to the shows – two CES events a year at Las Vegas and Chicago – and we'd meet everybody. Geoff did most of the talking. He knew these guys were a long way from England and they didn't know what was going on. Geoff quickly covered a lot of ground and his story was, you've got a disk market, we've got a cassette market, it's a tiny-shit market so give us the rights for nothing, five grand, ten grand, we'll pay you in dollars and put them on cassette for you. They didn't much care… at first, and then Europe began to become



interesting and MicroProse was the first company to bolt from the US Gold stable. On the other hand we got Epyx and then LucasArts. Those two shifted the sands a lot in our favour.'

As a result of aggressive marketing and the continuous buying of product


ZAP!
64
OLIVER FREY



The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was not amused at the thought of *Raid Over Moscow*. The C64 version was released before Tim Chaney joined US Gold – he had to deal with the Spectrum launch.

from the States US Gold's rate of growth was astronomical, partly reflected in the sales figures for CentreSoft, projected to reach just over £5 million by October 1985.

A bug's life

While he was catching up with the games already in the shops or at Ablex or on their way across the Atlantic, Tim's first encounter with the public came when the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament went up in arms over the Spectrum release of the Access follow-up to *Beach-Head*.

'I didn't do much for the launch of *Raid Over Moscow* because it came out about two weeks after I joined the company, but I made my first public pronouncement as general manager of US Gold. We did have CND picketing the offices. Bruce Kent, the spokesman







for CND, called me a miserable little man, or something, because I said *Raid Over Moscow* is just the present-day equivalent of Cowboys and Indians but with atomic bombs. Horrible little man, he called me… I probably was, actually!'

'Yes. The office got picketed, in Birmingham they came, the Ban the Bomb people and picketed the offices with slogans,' Geoff remembers cheerfully. 'I called the local newspapers and said, C'mon down, have a look at this. It was just brilliant PR! It was gold for us. How could you get better PR? *Raid Over Moscow* was a big hit for us.'

Back in 1985 Tim Chaney was unapologetic about the controversy. 'The only controversial thing about it is the title. I can't get away from the fact that it is an offensive title. In fact in the States it was marketed under the title *Raid*. But the actual scenario isn't going



When US Gold put the game out on a compilation to avoid any further controversy they just called it *Raid*.

to indoctrinate anyone. It's just a very good game – technically a clever game, graphically brilliant. C64 users deserve that standard of software whether it's got a title like that or not. And I'd rather have a generation of kids that extend their aggression on a computer rather than take it onto the streets. I don't think you can compare a computer game to reality, not that kind of computer game.'

"Raid Over Moscow is just the present-day equivalent of Cowboys and Indians but with atomic bombs."

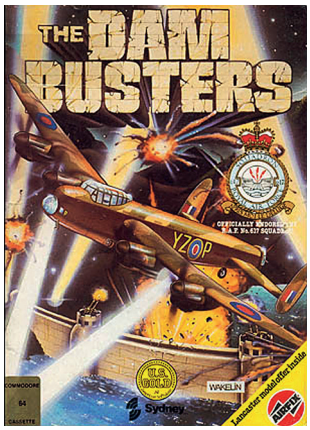
Nuclear armament and the fears of imminent thermo-nuclear destruction were very present at the time, reflected in popular music as effectively as anything by Frankie Goes To Hollywood's 'Two Tribes' and 'War' – *what is it good for?* 'Oh there was a lot of nuclear stuff at the time,' says a blithe Tim. 'We did a game about Chernobyl – that was like watching paint dry!'

US Gold spread its wings and marketing budget by being one the first software houses to launch a new game in

THE DAM BUSTERS

Sydney Development Corp.

On 16 May 1985, a computer program will be launched, so full of excitment and realism that it will change the course of games software production. So claimed US Gold.



Both the original C64 game and the Spectrum conversion (title and in-play screen on the right) did well in reviews.

some style. The first one Tim remembers was *The Dam Busters*, programmed by Sydney Development and published in America by Accolade.

'When I joined in April Geoff had loads of stuff lined up to produce or in the conversion process, and that one was just in. It became a pretty good hit. I remember taking Julian Rignall and Gary Penn, the *Zzap!64* hot-shot boys down to Hendon [Royal Air Force Museum] to do the launch there with all these veterans. In those days you could get the place for like a grand, you took a couple of journalists – Newsfield, if you could get them – and they wrote a fantastic review, you did some ads with them because they wrote a fantastic review, and you got a great deal, and the game sold well. It was kind of A, B, C in those days. It wasn't sophisticated – advertising, screen shots hopefully that didn't represent the gameplay,' he chuckles. 'If I could get a couple of good reviews I'd pull out a couple quotes that were kind of misquoted, you know like: "The game is the most brilliant on earth *but I hate it*…" and you use the first bit and forget the hating bit.'

Cynicism aside, Tim learned from this particular event that it was good to have a close association with critical

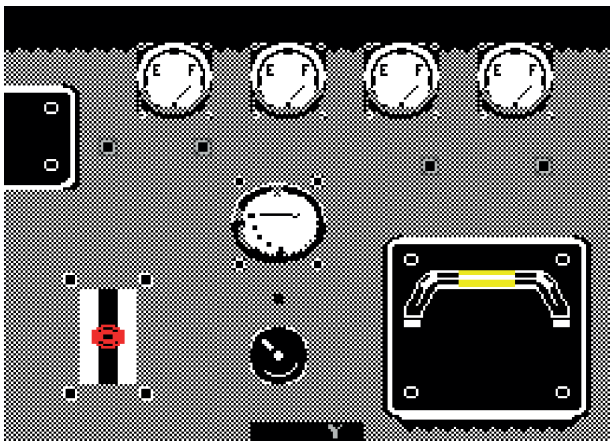


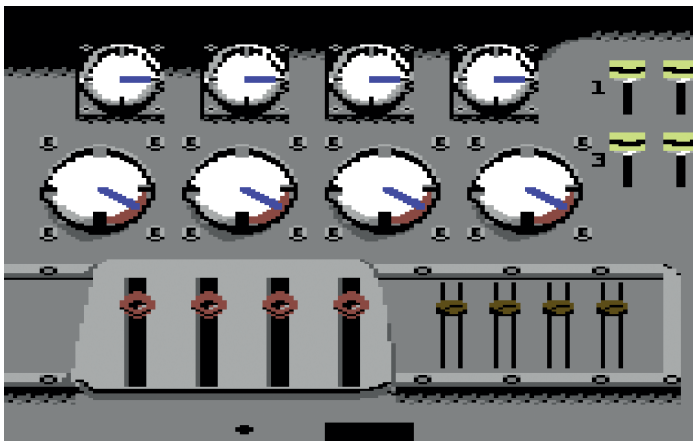
games players, and to bring them onside as early as possible. The *Zzap!64* review outlined a problem with *The Dam Busters* that might have badly coloured future magazine reviews as well as disappointed purchasers of the game. *Zzap!64* had been given one of the pre-production copies sent to British magazines to assess and the reviewing team was stunned by 'the great graphics, superb authentic atmosphere, etc… but.' There were some unnecessary frustrations detected which were passed on to US Gold, who contacted the Canadian programmers, who in turn telephoned the *Zzap!64* offices. The conversation soon established that the copies sent to Britain were defective. A correct version was expressed from Canada to Newsfield's Yeovil office and *The Dam Busters* received its coveted Sizzler status.

This experience must surely have raised questions about the code he was starting to get from those developing the conversions from C64 to Spectrum and Amstrad. At that time there was no playtesting at US Gold, so how did he know the gane was bug-free? Did he assume the conversions – ostensibly by or through Ocean – were ready to go so he could take a master tape from them one day and send it to Ablex for duplication the next without any checks at US Gold?



Gary Penn, seated on the left, and fellow *Zzap!64* colleague Julian Rignall, with Geoff Brown, Tim Chaney, Anne Brown and Martyn Savage at the Royal Air Force museum for *The Dam Busters* launch.





'To be honest I don't think I had much of a clue about development in the early days, and I certainly never warmed to it, but it became part of the role as we introduced testing and production departments. I think Ablex did some basic testing and more than once masters came back from them with notification of bugs to be corrected. After we moved to Holford Way we did have Bob Kenrick in production and Charles Cecil installed for test and development.'

But in his first days in the job Tim had been given to believe that the conversions were happening in-house at Ocean, so presumably he trusted them?

He laughs. 'Not as long as they were breathing…' and then adds, 'no one would have cared at the time, just yell when it's ready? Does it have any serious bugs? OK to release tomorrow?'

When Charles Cecil took control of development and testing in the 1987–88 period the process remained hectic: 'I remember some people on conversions doing a really cheap job, but because US Gold was primarily a sales and marketing company ultimately we had to ship the game and there was nothing I could do.'

Games tester Simon Hadlington found little had changed in 1990. 'We had to get stuff out quite quickly and it wasn't necessarily about getting the best games, it was about getting the best bang for your buck, just getting stuff out in a tight time scale.'

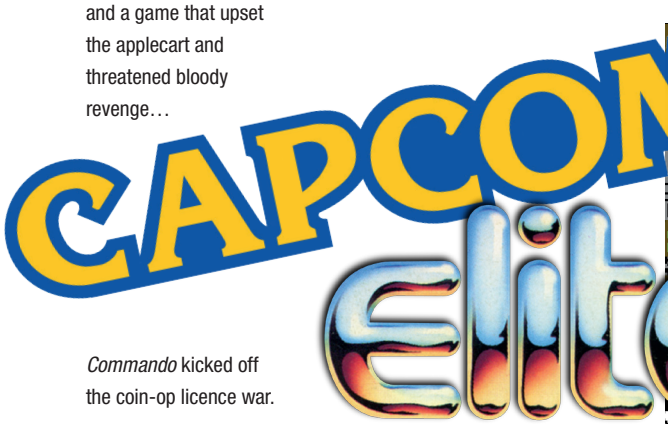
A matter of fish 'n' chips

In almost all respects, 1985 turned out to be an extraordinarily good year for US Gold, but at the very end there was a shock in store, and a brutal lesson to learn. 'We were psychologically scarred by Elite getting *Commando*,' says Tim. Capcom's classic coin-op game had captivated thousands of arcade gamers all over Britain. US Gold's eyes were focused across the Atlantic on ready-made Commodore 64 games but the presumption of a local software house to have picked up a massive Japanese coin-op licence was a terrible affront.

'They were Midlands, Black Country, like us!' Tim can still inject the appalled sense of grievance into his voice as he recollects the horror of being bested at

Had Tim Chaney and Geoff Brown had a free hand they would have happily sent an axe warrior to deal with Elite Systems, the 'upstart' Black Country software house. Oliver Frey's artwork for the *Gauntlet* cover of *Zzap!64* issue 20, December 1986.

Whoops! Two logos and a game that upset the applecart and threatened bloody revenge…





Commando kicked off the coin-op licence war.


OLIVER FREY



Aimed at Christmas 1986 – and Elite be damned – US Gold notched up its festive number one with *Gauntlet*, popular on both C64 and Spectrum.

their own licensing game. 'I mean they had development offices above a fish 'n' chip shop in Walsall! If we could have got away with it we would have had Steve Wilcox and his Dad done for!'

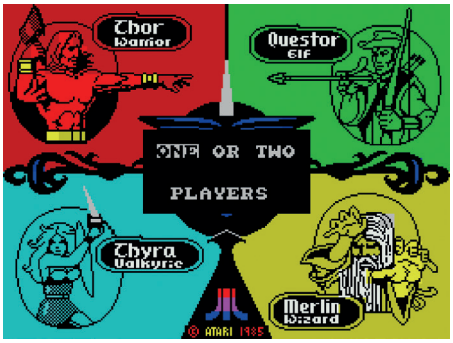
Elite had the all-important Christmas number one for 1985. The *Crash* Christmas Special gave *Commando* a Crash-Smash at 95%; *Your Spectrum* gave it 90% in its February 1986 issue, although in the February issue the *Zzap!64* crew were not overly enamoured of the conversion. However *Commando* remained in the number one or two position for months in the *Crash* charts and won the readers' award for best shooting game as well as *C&VG*'s Golden Joystick award for best arcade-style game.



The perception is that US Gold was in permanent competiton with Ocean for coin-op licences, but Geoff says: 'They didn't really do as many as we did. In fact I stole the idea from Steve Wilcox of Elite, but – I hate to say it really – I had lots more money. I could go in and guarantee a million dollars to the licensor. I signed loads of million-dollar guarantees and fulfilled them.'

'What happened when *Commando* went to number one,' Tim continues, 'we went, What the fuck! These guys on top of a fish and chip shop in Walsall got *Commando*, got the number one so… let's go after coin-ops. And we went after coin-ops like crazy. We then paid an agent, Manlio Allegra, to pay Capcom £750,000 for a ten-game licence deal, just to make sure it didn't happen again, that there was no way Elite could ever get their hands on a Capcom game again.'

US Gold was just too late, however, to have prevented Elite getting the licence



for Capcom's *Ghosts 'n' Goblins* and on its release in mid-1986 it received rave reviews all around.

'Coin-ops were really popular,' Geoff points out. 'So I thought, well I can do that, I've got tons of money, I can just fly out to Japan. So I went to see Sega, met with the president there, and I managed to get an exclusive on Sega's coin-ops, which gave me *Out Run*. It was the same with Atari games in the US, I went and got *720°* and *Gauntlet* for the next Christmas.'

And was Tim Chaney as convinced as Geoff that Atari's *Gauntlet* was it? 'Yes, there was nothing better out there… as



The Japaese arcade and coin-op trade shows have been a vital conduit for buying licences since the 1980s, and still going strong, this is Tokyo in January 2015.

long as we got it out! [*see side panel on the following spread*] We developed that one in Birmingham with some of the Gremlin guys and our own Tony Porter, and to Geoff's credit he spent nights with the developers. I don't know what he was doing, but he was with them making sure that thing worked. That was definitely going to be number one.'

'Once I decided coin-ops were going to sell we went to all the coin-op trade shows and became the biggest buyer of licences,' says Geoff. 'It was like a snowball, the more licences I bought, the more I got, and the more people came to me to do them.'

As the man at the sharp end of US Gold, Tim Chaney swiftly got himself up to speed on what was buzzing in the world's arcade palaces. 'Mostly I did it by attending every arcade show, all the Japanese shows and all the American coin-op shows. There was always something new because the developers were there to launch and promote new products to the dealers. So we saw everything that was coming and went after what we wanted. After a bit Geoff became less interested in the travelling. I did two Japan trips with him and then he left them to me. I went lots of times a year, looking after Capcom and our Japanese office. So my second part of the US Gold story took off after the coin-ops became the thing. Of course it was great if Epyx came up with *Impossible Mission*, but really it was coin-ops then.'

It is almost a hallmark of US Gold that the software house developed conversions and rarely created anything from scratch, as did Ocean. 'I believe our creative game design and development skills were very thin,' says Tim. 'All our hits were based on a coin-op design or made in America.'

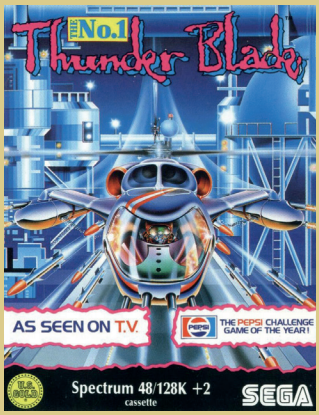
Though 1984/85's *Dropzone* was certainly a home-grown exception. The *Defender*-style shoot 'em up from Archer MacLean (calling himself Arena Graphics), gave US Gold an early number one hit. US Gold had already published the Atari 800 original. *Dropzone* has the distinction of being the only title to appear on its own specially created label - UK Gold. But Tim considers *Dropzone* to be the exception



Geoff devoted all his energies to ensuring that *Gauntlet* would be the 1986 Christmas number one.

Tim Chaney on being number one

The kudos of having the Christmas number one was enormous – nothing has changed. You get someone going up against Simon Cowell, taking him on for a number one. You don't remember the ones who were number two. So the focus on getting number one was enormous, you'd do anything for it.





ThunderBlade – not quite good enough to be a Christmas number one for US Gold.

A founding member of the British computer gaming business with Quicksilva, Rod Cousens has overseen Activision, Acclaim and Codemasters. Since April 2015 he heads up games developer Jagex.

You had to have Spectrum and Commodore, to be number one. If we could build it, and if it was a decent emulation of the coin-op experience, particularly on the Spectrum, then there was nothing going to stop that. In fact in 1988 when Ocean was number one with *Operation Wolf*, we'd pinned our Christmas hopes on getting *Power Drive* from Sega, and Activision got it (which didn't do the animosity between me and Rod Cousens any good). We got *ThunderBlade*. It was a great product but it didn't have the oomph of *Operation Wolf* and we ended in the Christmas number two slot.

'The window we were working in was always very tight, about three months. You expected things to come when you were told they were going to come. Of course, they *never* did, except for the Commodore 64 games that had already been released on disk in the US, such as *Leader Board*. A Spectrum conversion in those days took about three months to do, so it had to come out after the C64. By that time the C64 version was so well known, having already been number one or a big hit anyway, there was already a following for the Spectrum and Amstrad versions.'

And that 'animosity' between himself and the UK Activision boss Rod Cousens?



ACTIVISION

Anne Brown wrote this letter to Jim Levy, CEO of Activision. Rod had pissed her off because when we got *Gauntlet* he tried to knock us off by doing something the same. So she wrote to Rod's boss in America and put my name on the bottom of it. And that kind of started the antagonism – to put it mildly – between the two of us to the point we were set to have a punch-up over it at an industry events dinner. After that it was just bad blood, for a long time.







that proves the rule. 'Giving us a film or band licence – Ocean's *Frankie Goes To Hollywood* comes to mind – would end badly, like giving us a major football event licence.'

The last, a reference to *World Cup Carnival*, is said with more than a touch of irony.

Draped on a Testarossa

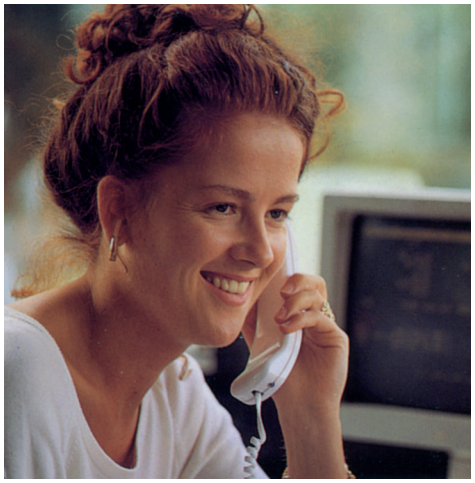
The stack 'em high, sell 'em long philosophy certainly worked, even if it did mean sometimes releasing less than a wonderful product, as Tim remembers. 'In addition to all the hit games we took a lot of crap stuff, a ton of it that we were committed to launch because Geoff did package deals.'

This had the advantages of getting bulk-deal discounts and keeping rival British software houses out of the picture, but came at another price. 'He didn't say, we want that one but we don't want these four because they're rubbish. He'd say, we'll take everything. We'll market everything and release everything… and the market kind of decides. Some software houses he dealt with had forty products, thirty, twenty… and we had to release everything otherwise we'd get someone saying, why haven't you released our game on the Civil War that we did in 1981? Oh… that one, yes, we're doing it next month! Which reminds me of every

Archer MacLean's C64 version of *Dropzone* sold for years, although there was a dispute between author and publisher when the royalties ceased because US Gold claimed *Dropzone* had stopped selling after 18 months, which wasn't the case. Archer sued, won, and bought a Ferrari from the proceeds of the back royalties.

game from Strategic Simulations Inc. and other wonders like *Time Tunnel*, *Grog's Revenge*, *Zorro*… the list goes on.'

But the powerful drive of CentreSoft selling US Gold product into the retailers meant there were few rejections. Martyn Savage joined CentreSoft in April 1985, the same month as Tim Chaney, as finance director of CentreSoft and chief financial officer of US Gold, by which time the distribution business was handling numerous domestic publishers' accounts and dealing with a growing list of retailers including the then powerful software outlet of Boots the Chemist.



Telesales at CentreSoft, the heart of the ditribution business.

One of Martyn's initial financial responsibilities was a presentation to the stationery and bookseller chain J. Menzies, which had 119 High Street stores. 'After Boots our next big break came when Websters lost the John Menzies contract for the distribution of games,' he says. Websters – now long defunct – was an important book distributor. 'We put a proposal together where we would give a telesales service to all of J. Menzies' stores. So we'd come out with a catalogue of product. One of the things we did was to say, look, your software in store is crap. You've been dealing with Websters who are a book

John Menzies

Anne Brown, the steady hand

'There are stories about Anne Brown in the industry that are legendary,' Geoff says, shaking his head at the memories. Anyone who worked for one of computer games magazines and dealt with US Gold would know what he means. Anne certainly never let the grass grow if she had a complaint about something stated or even implied about US Gold that she didn't agree with.

'I started the distribution business on my own but then Anne joined me. Her name was Anne Sharpe. She used her maiden name for quite a while so we didn't appear to be married. I was the person thinking the creative things. Anne was the steady hand on the tiller. She had more business expertise than me and she was tough when it came to money collection. I think a main difference between Ocean and us was Jon and David worked together as a team; Anne and myself weren't really a team. We were in the same company but we had completely different things to do.'

Did being married to the business partner mean that the day job never really ended?

distributor and you are now coming into a computer games environment, it's not like books, it's like food – it has a sell-by date.'

Like Geoff and Tim, Martyn is an unashamed believer in video games as a commodity, and it's the attitude that made CentreSoft such a powerful force in the computer games market at the time. Martyn explains succinctly what made them so different to Websters.

'Anne Brown and I went up to Menzies in Edinburgh. We profiled the catalogue that we took with us to represent what the square footage was at each branch. We built stock depths for the store – if you have a high footfall in London you have a certain stock depth. So if we settled on a stock depth of 20 copies all our telesales people had to do was get on the phone, get the local manager or buyer to count the stock. If it was 17 the CentreSoft order would be 3 copies. And we'd be analysing the catalogue and revising according to what was or wasn't selling any longer.

'Anne and I did the deal, and on the aircraft back to Birmingham she said, what would you really like, Martyn? And I said I really wouldn't mind a Porsche!'

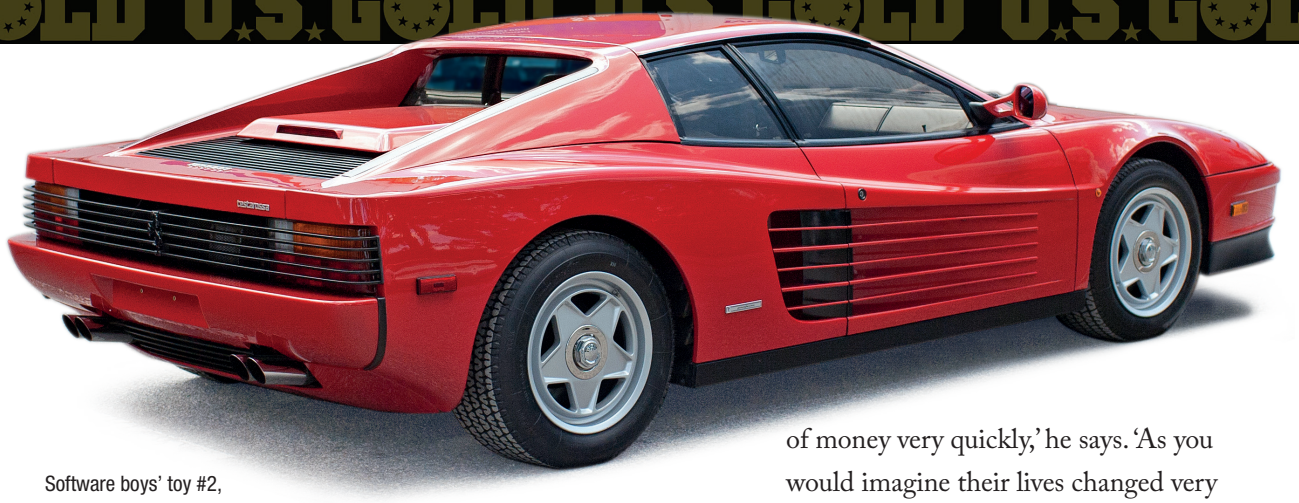
Presumably, getting his Porsche put Martyn in mind that the Browns had now made enough money to move up-market. 'I wasn't really a car person,' Geoff insists, 'although having said that we had two Porsches, myself and Anne, and Martyn came in and said, you know what, you should have a car that's better



Software boys' toy #1, a 1980s Porsche 924.

'Well that's why we split up in the end… it was an intense time. Anne became very aloof, haughty in a way. It affected her a lot, I think. We split up about eight years into US Gold, before we took the Group public in 1993, but Anne stayed on the board. And then I paid her some millions and she left.'

Martyn Savage remembers that Anne, 'ensured that staff were on time and that they were presentable on the telephone to the outside world. She went with me to see people like Alan Sugar, Richard Branson. She was very personable, but having said that, like anyone you develop in life. Geoff was very much into his software and they just grew apart really. I can say for almost ten years it was 8 am to 11 pm five days a week and other days were spent travelling here or there. It was full on, so I can understand why she didn't want to continue. You have to give a lot of credit for what Anne did behind the scenes. And yes, she got some money when we floated the Group.



Software boys' toy #2, a Ferrari Testarossa, or 'Redhead'.

than that. Why don't you get a Ferrari Testarossa? I've seen one for sale in Jersey. And it was shipped in from Jersey and we paid for £64,000 cash for it.'

Tim Chaney feels that the new-found wealth brought its own problems. 'You know Geoff and Anne made a lot of money very quickly,' he says. 'As you would imagine their lives changed very quickly. They were thinking about other things, like should they go to St Moritz or Aspen? Should we get a Ferrari this or a Ferrari that? I'm not saying they were taking their eyes off the business, they weren't, but they wanted to be at the Majestic in Cannes, not in bloody Aston

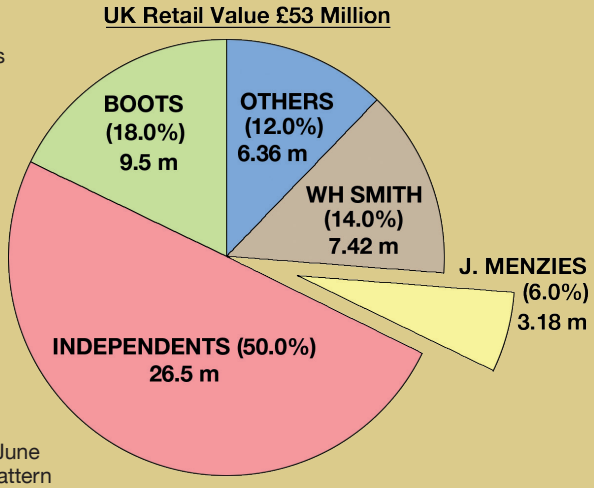
Menzies revealed

The presentation given to directors of John Menzies by Martyn Savage and Anne Brown in August 1986 throws up some interesting statistics of the time. Of the chain's 119 stores nationwide, 110 regularly stocked software during 1985 making sales of £3,156,600. Centresoft forecast a slight rise during 1986 to £3,184,000, with a climb to just over £4 million for 1987. As can be seen from the pie chart, the estimated retail value of computer software for 1986 was £53 million, of which J. Menzies represented 6%, less than half of WH Smith. Note the enormous boost in sales over the pre-Christmas period.

It's interesting to see the market share of the various platforms over the same period. In 1985 the Spectrum represented 43% and the Commodore 64 31%, but in 1986, Spectrum software sales fell more than sales for Commodore 64 software. Over the same period sales of Amstrad and C16 software made substantial increases.

OTHERS

Supermarkets
Allders
John Lewis
Laskys
Littlewoods
Toys R Us
HMV
Revolver Records
Currys
Dixons
Virgin



July 1985 to June 1986 Sales Pattern

July	£161,000
August	269,500
September	169,000
October	269,600
November	579,990
December	576,100
January	328,600
February	216,900
March	205,500
April	269,100
May	252,400
June	164,900
	£3,462,600

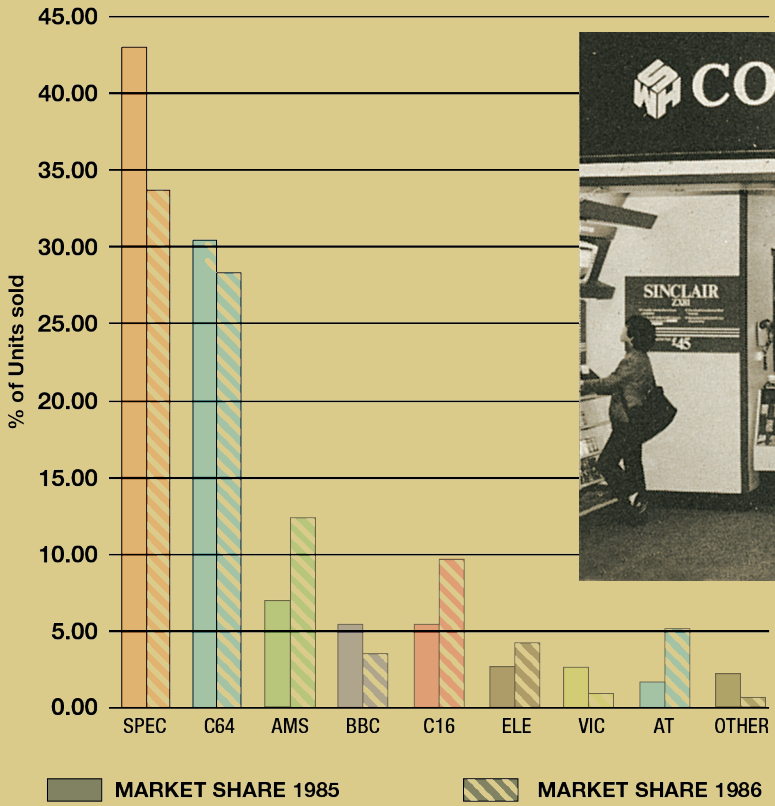
in Birmingham, so they were changing quite a lot. And that whole life-change broke them up eventually.'

It's said that boys with toys attract girls, though one incident that raised many an employee smile failed to amuse Anne-Sharpe-Brown. It happened on the weekend when all the staff was engaged in moving the stock and paperwork from Heneage Street to the first premises in Holford Way, as Tim O'Connell who had recently joined the financial department remembers. 'On the Saturday afternoon there was a knock on the door and a guy asked whose Ferrari was parked outside and could he take some photos. Geoff had just bought the Ferrari and said yes, of course. Within a few minutes there were jungle whispers round the office and warehouse and then everyone rushed to the windows to see two beautiful, scantily clad female models draped over the car with the photographer taking many photos – it made the lads' afternoon!'



A similar but unrelated incident – this is what happens all the while to Ferrari owners…

'I had my Testarossa in the car park,' Geoff agrees, 'and I was working in the warehouse. I look out the window and there's a girl, draped across the car with just a bra and pants on. I go down and there's this guy says he wants to take some girlie photos, saw my car, thought it was great. Do you mind if





CentreSoft was at the midst of persuading the High Street to take computer gaming seriously.

I drape her on your car and take some shots? Well of course I said, okay…as long as my number plate's not visible on the pictures. Anne is with me and wants to know what the fuck's going on here. You arranged this! No I haven't. And Anne says, Over my dead body!'

Some twelve months after concluding the Menzies deal, Boots fell into CentreSoft's lap, as Martyn says. 'We got a call from Boots saying we've got bad problems and could we go and see them.'

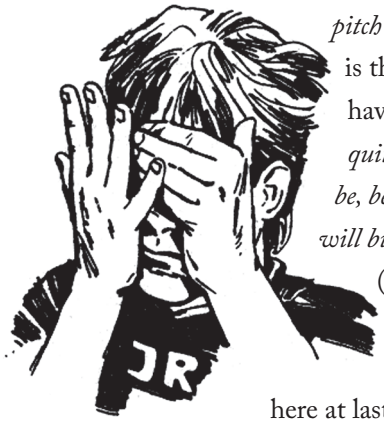
They certainly did have a problem. The same Websters who had been handling the Menzies account went into receivership shortly before the vital Christmas period. Tim Chaney takes up the story of serendipity.

'Boots had changed their buyer and they took on a girl called Liz who was an old school friend of mine. And she called me up in a panic and asked if CentreSoft could cover Christmas for them with Websters gone. So I walked ten meters across to Anne's workplace and said, I've got Boots on the line and can you cover them for Christmas? And of course CentreSoft could, did, and kept the account for six years after that. What are the chances of something like that happening?'

There was one fly in the Boots ointment. CentreSoft had an exclusive arrangement with Menzies not to serve any other major chain, but Geoff and Martyn got around that by simply offering them an extra 2.5% discount on the stock prices, and that solved that.

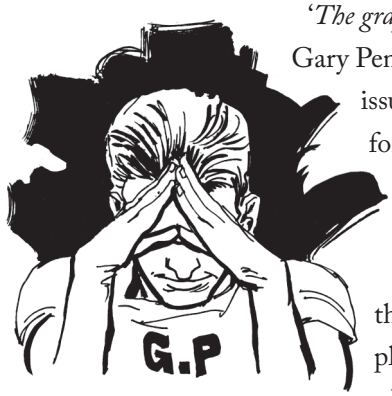
The Carnival is over

'World Cup Carnival *is an appalling game and it's a disgrace to see a big software house like US Gold releasing it. The layout of the pitch is as basic as you can get…* This is the worst football simulation I have ever seen … *the freebies are quite good; but then they have to be, because I don't think many people will buy the package for the game itself.'* (*Crash* July 86, awarding a generous 26%)



'World Cup Carnival is here at last, and what a load of complete and utter crud it is…' Julian Rignall.

'The graphics on the whole are crap…' Gary Penn, both in *Zzap!64* July 1986 issue. They gave the game 92% for Presentation but an Overall result of just 11%.



Amstrad Action gave it 0%.

Something went wrong, that's for sure, and games players have ever after asked what and why? The World of Spectrum website says: 'The explanation which US Gold gave for the *World Cup Carnival* fiasco (re-releasing the ancient Artic game *World Cup Football* at twice the price for anybody who can't remember) was that they had commissioned a programmer to write an original game but the game was terrible and they did not have enough time to have a new game written before the World Cup. There must therefore be a completed unreleased version of *WCC* floating about somewhere.'

Note that a tad over two years made a game 'ancient' in those heady days of rapid technological advance. It turns out that if that was the 'official' explanation given to the World of Spectrum it was quite a fudge. Tim Chaney kicks off the story. 'I got the licence for the FIFA World Cup 86 from a company in London called Character Merchandising or something like that.'

According to Geoff, because US Gold had so many games in development, Tim came to him. 'He asked me, who's going to do the World Cup game? And I said, you do it, and I think he just forgot about it. And it got to January and I asked Tim how the game was going. Oh I thought you were doing that, he said. And I said, Christ Tim, you got this licence, we've paid all this money for it and we haven't got a game, we're going to have to find one.'

Tim remembers it in a different light. He always thought there was an obvious partner to bring in on this prestigious project. 'At the time Ocean knew something about football with Jon Ritman's *Matchday*, so Woods and Ward said to Geoff, look, football games are really hard, let us do this. We'll get a World Cup game for you, and we'll use our *Match Day* code. Anyway, something happened there and theoretically Ocean were going to go away and develop the game. Three months before the World Cup we were so busy I hadn't given it much thought. So I asked Geoff if he'd seen anything of the game from Ocean, and he said, no, I'll call them up. He phoned to learn they'd done nothing on it. So we had this licence, we had the World Cup coming – we probably dreamed England could win it – and we said, shit we need a game.'

'That's when we went out to every single developer in the UK,' Geoff takes up the tale. 'I said we'll pay you a lot of money to take your game and overlay it with the properly licensed items, graphics… Artic were the only one who came forward and said they could do it in time.'



'So we went to Charles Cecil at Artic,' says Tim, 'and said, hey, you got a football game, right? We want to use it for the World Cup, can you do something to it?'

Charles Cecil admits to complete bemusement. 'I got a phone call from Tim Chaney one day, and he said, can Geoff Brown and I come and talk to you about maybe doing some work for us? So Geoff turned up in his Testarossa and he said he basically needed a World Cup 86 game using our *World Cup Football* Artic engine. I pointed out to him that

"So we had this licence, we had the World Cup coming…and we said, shit, we need a game."



Charles Cecil at Artic thought US Gold would be better off working from Ocean's *Match Day* – and who knows, they would probably have done so, but because of crossed wires it all slipped away.



Matchday was more contemporary and they were in bed with Ocean. But they definitely wanted us to do it. So we wrote it on the proviso that we had to keep absolutely quiet, we weren't allowed to tell anyone what was going on. The packaging was brilliant, but of course the game looked five years old.'

Chaney and Brown were probably unaware that Artic was a company on the skids, as Charles says. 'I joined Artic shortly after Richard Turner and Chris Thornton founded it. We were fabulously successful for a couple of years. And then like so many then we were unable to transition - companies like Imagine had taken over, and Imagine was all about marketing and they treated marketing as god more than we did.'

'With the World Cup only two months away Charles Cecil did say he hadn't got enough time,' Tim remembers with a chuckle, contradicting Geoff Brown's recollection. 'So we said, can't you put a couple of things at the front, like penalties or ball-in-a-hole or something? And he said, yes he could do that, and we paid whatever we paid, which would have been a lot of money.'

Something Charles agrees with. 'It was a very good deal, yes. It saved the company.' But as it turned out, only for a short while because in the interim between Artic's *World Cup Football* and the launch of *World Cup Carnival* Richard Turner had sold off rights to the code to a man called Geoff Young. 'And Geoff looked at the source code – which he'd bought for £100 – and saw there were similarities in what we'd used as the basis for *World Cup Carnival* and threatened US Gold.'

As the man in charge of financial operations, Martyn Savage remembers the incident very well. 'It was Geoff Young of Prism Leisure and he put a writ on us saying if you don't pay £25,000 by midday we'll make trouble for you. We were going to ship it out through all the channels, so we paid him.'

'It was an extraordinarily tight-fisted, really mean thing to do,' Charles says bitterly, and with reason since Artic had to indemnify US Gold. 'We had to spend





quite a lot of the money we'd negotiated with US Gold to pay off Geoff Young and that was basically the end of Artic; so we should thank Mr Young for bankrupting Artic.'

Time was running out, but when the game landed on Tim Chaney's desk he realised that in reality things were bad. 'So Charles gave us the game, which was Artic's *Football* with a little bit at the front end and of course a big World Cup ball when you loaded it. I said, this is shit, we've got a problem with this. This game is gonna get panned.'

It was time for serious damage limitation. Tim again: 'In those good olden days of no Internet and reviews only if you wanted them, we said let's make a fantastic package. So we got this big box and we put inside stickers, a wall chart, loads of stuff … oh, and a game. Then we marketed the hell out of it but we didn't show the game to anyone – Smiths and Boots and Dixons, everybody, the French and Germans, no magazines. You know we sold in shedloads of it in preparation for the World Cup to start, but at the root of it, when anybody pushed a cassette in to load, was a game from early 1984 with a penalty thing at the front. And of course everybody went completely ballistic.'

Not surprisingly, the retailers were upset. Geoff remembers distributor Leisuresoft's reaction. 'He wanted to buy a hundred thousand copies, and then he called me up to say this was nothing more than the old Artic football game in a different box. So I said, right send them all back. And he said, oh well, I've got a lot of orders for it. And I said here's your choice, you either send them all back or none of them. You've got five minutes, ring me back. And that was that.'

'It doesn't even have nets in the goals,' cried Spectrum owners. 'Hahaha,' crowed C64 owners, 'ours does…' but that was about all.

"I said, this is shit, we've got a problem with this. This game is gonna get panned."

Boots got similar treatment from Tim. 'When they called and said, *what the fuck's inside this?* I said even the stuff inside it is worth £9.99, forget about the game. *But it's supposed to have a game in it.*

It's got a game in it. *But it's not about the World Cup*. What was I to say: we got let down by Ocean?'

With marketing the keyword at US Gold Tim remains unrepentant to this day. 'I mean it was a masterpiece of packaging, it was a masterpiece of marketing – unfortunately the product you got was slightly disappointing if you wanted to play it, but with the wall chart, the stickers, it was bloody brilliant, it was worth the money just for that stuff! We were big enough that we could stiff everyone and come back afterwards and say, sorry about that. Here's a new game. And Boots, Smiths and the retailers always needed the next game.'



Greg Ingham, editor of the industry's trade press, gave US Gold a hard time over *World Cup Carnival*…and then not so long after went to manage Future Publishing.

'I feel guilt over it now,' Charles admits. 'At the time we were in absolutely dire straits and there was this lifeline thrown at us, so we kind of turned a bit of a blind eye to it. It's certainly not anything I'm proud of in the least. After all these years it's seen as a bit of a joke and people tease each other, but at the time people got really cross because of course they expected a contemporary football game building on the success of Ocean and Jon Ritman's *Match Day*.'

And what of Geoff Brown? Wasn't he concerned about the public reaction? 'Yes! I was. It was terrible. We did some other bad games, but that was the one that stands out. I think we went too far with that one to the point where it taught us a lesson. It wasn't a mistake. We *had* to have a game and it got to the point where I was going to sell an empty box. So we'd put the box on the shelf empty of the game with the other stuff in it for £9.99 and a voucher. Give us the voucher back and we'll give you the game…'

He pauses with a wry smile. 'But it would have been crazy, innovative, but crazy. So we had to put something, a game, in the box. And you know, people could have sent it back and got a refund, but we didn't get many back and I think we shipped half a million. Yes, I cared that it could have been better and we did get a lot of complaints. Tim even went and got under the desk. He wouldn't take any calls!'

Tim remembers it a bit differently. 'When Geoff heard that Greg Ingham at *Computer Trade Weekly* had got hold of it I remember him saying he was going to hide under the desk. Unfortunately he picked up the call from Greg, but most of the rest of the day I had to pick up the phone because Geoff wouldn't. And Greg just slaughtered us.' (Tim got his own back by pulling any trade advertising from *CTW* for a year afterwards.)

'With *World Cup Carnival* we'd got to the point where our marketing was very often better than the game,' Geoff admits with a laugh. 'Just like music – you have an average track, you promote it on the radio and it becomes a hit.'

the success of the continued Epyx *Games* licences and the many variations on *Leader Board*.

The most important person at US Gold so far as the magazines were concerned was Danielle Woodyatt,



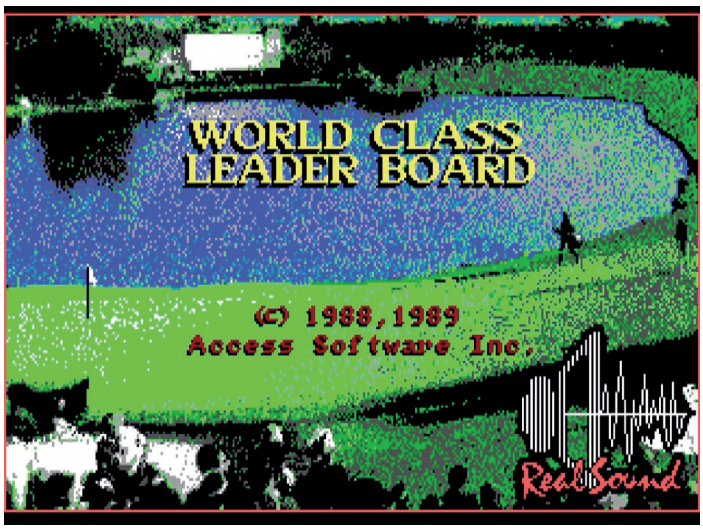


World Cup Carnival never became a hit but despite its reception it sold and US Gold hardly suffered. 'We didn't take many games back,' Tim explains, 'because we said to the retailers you've got *Leader Board* coming, so keep *World Cup Carnival* and we'll give you a discount on *Leader Board*.

There was consolation. In spite of the game being the worst imaginable kick-off for a franchise, US Gold held onto the FIFA licence for a further two more World Cups. And to back up Tim Chaney, in the same issue of *Zzap!64* that slated *World Cup Carnival*, US Gold won the month's Gold Medal for the Access-developed *Leader Board* to put US Gold at the forefront of sports simulations, a position only amplified by universally known as Woody. She was the press interface, and whether the game was great or a disaster, it was Woody who went out to wow the universally young male reviewing teams.

'We got good service from Newsfield,'

Leader Board was a surprise hit and spawned a series of follow-up games, later editions enjoying the enhanced 16-bit Amiga and Atari ST graphics.





Looked after well by Woody (below), the Newsfield *Zzap!64* crew: Julian Rignall, Gary Liddon and Gary Penn.



Tim says, and adds with something of a wink, 'and Woody looked after them well, particularly Julian Rignall and Gary Penn who were incredibly influential at the time.'

Geoff was equally aware of his secret weapon. 'Woody was crazy! She could drink more than any guy. She was a great PR person. All the guys fancied her.'

Charles remembers first seeing Woody in less exalted circumstances. 'Bless her, Woody was the receptionist, which was extraordinary because she was clearly much brighter than most people. She knew exactly what was going on … she was just great. I remember her asking me if I thought she could do the PR job, and I said, Woody, you could do it in your sleep, you'd be brilliant. And I guess the rest is history.'

"It was a strange thing because it was a male industry, completely male, yet most of the PR people were girls."

Tim, who came to treasure her talents, also first came across Woody in reception, though he was clearly not so certain as Charles that she was there as a receptionist. 'I don't know where she came from. By then we were at Holford Way, and I was in reception and Anne says, this is Woody, she's brilliant at PR, she should join US Gold, why don't you give her a job? Well, you didn't argue with Anne, if she said Woody was good enough, then she probably was. And she really was.

'I never went to Newsfield in Ludlow. That was down to Woody and Richard Tidsall. It wasn't something I could do very well, I couldn't deal with journalists.'

So was Woody's principle job to sway reviewers' minds into giving a game a better review than it maybe deserved? Tim nods his head. 'Mentioning no names, but some people were swayable…

I'm not sure how easily swayed Julian Rignall, Gary Penn or Gary Liddon would have been, the Newsfield star kids, there were some people you could get a better review from than you deserved. But it was down to Woody, that interface. The thing about Woody was she never played the games, she didn't know how the games worked, but she had such an enormous personality and passion that she could do things that no other PR girls at the time could do. It was a strange thing because it was a male industry, completely male, yet most of the PR people were girls. That means they probably weren't technical, probably didn't even like the game, they never played them in their spare time. But they could hand the game to a reviewer, tell them to play it, and then tell them how good it was… and then they would probably write how good it was!'

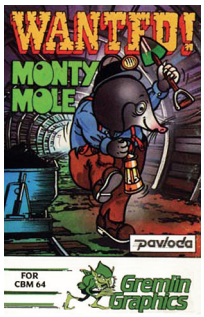


Ian Stewart pictured in 1985 in the Gremlin Graphics offices above Just Micro in Sheffield.

Never feed it after midnight

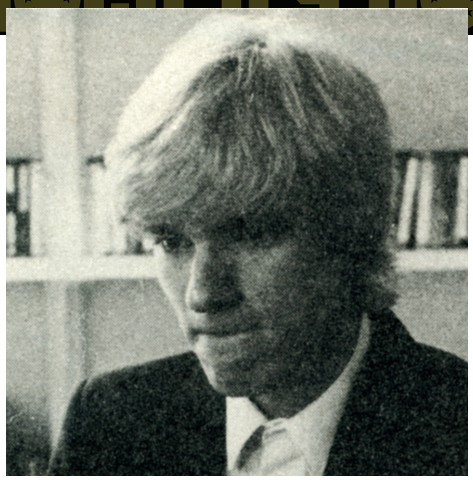
In the course of a decade Geoff Brown had fingers in several pies besides CentreSoft and US Gold and among the most successful was Gremlin Graphics. Geoff argues that his interest in the Sheffield software house founded in 1984 by Ian Stewart and Kevin Norburn above the Just Micro store they ran was not because he was looking for business expansion. 'I wasn't really a business guru or sharp in any way, but Ian Stewart needed some money and it was suggested to me that what I should do is up the share capital, buy the shares, and if Ian hasn't got the money I could take over the company. So I came to own 75% of Gremlin Graphics, although indirectly through another company I had called Woodward Brown Holdings.'

The connection between Birmingham









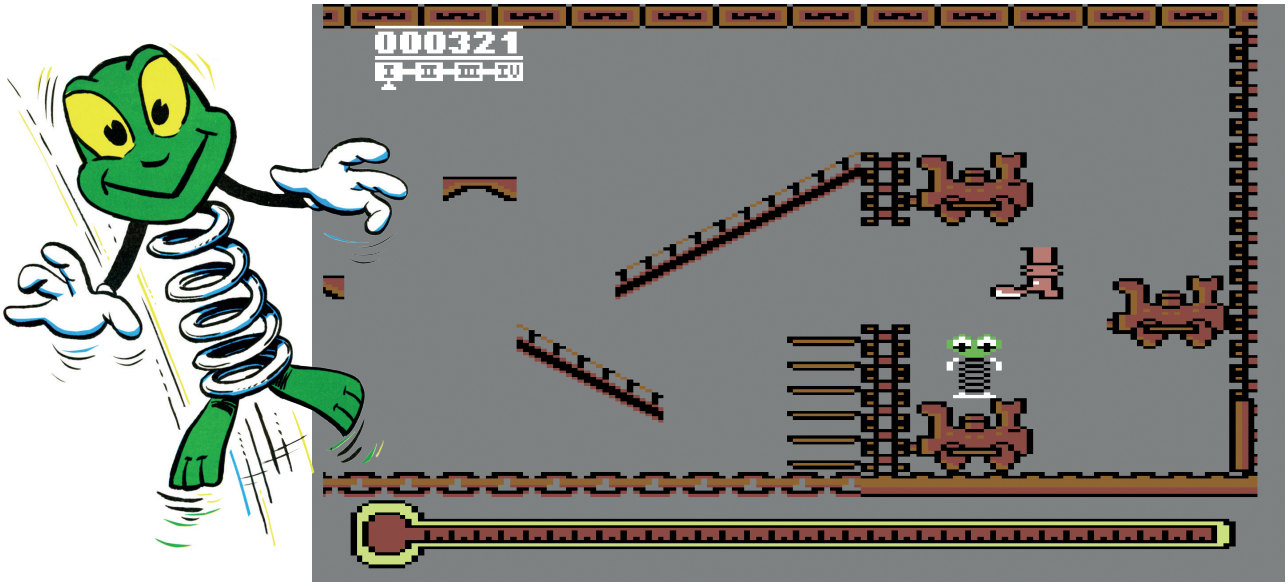
Wanted! Monty Mole became Gremlin Graphics' first big hit in 1984, written by wiz coder Anthony Crowther (right above, pictured at Gremlin Graphics in Sheffield). No one at the time knew that he was an indirect employee of US Gold.

Thing On A Spring gave Gremlin Graphics another major hit game…and added to CentreSoft's coffers.

and Sheffield was CentreSoft's head of sales and first employee, Jenny Richards, who was romantically involved with Ian Stewart. However, his employer's new venture challenged Tim Chaney's position as head of US Gold. He can look back and laugh at it now. 'I love Ian, he's a bubbly, lovely, lovely man, but back then we were bitter enemies because you had Geoff owning US Gold and me as his guy there; Geoff owning Gremlin and Ian as his guy there; US Gold this big thing, Gremlin a little developer from Sheffield with nice product and good marketing.'

So was it a case of simple professional jealousy? 'Basically, if I could have put Gremlin out of business I would have done. If I could have trampled on Ian, I would have done, or anyone else sticking their head up in the way of our business.' He laughs at his own past feelings. 'It was a strange relationship. You had Jenny Richards in CentreSoft, the most powerful person under Anne, going out with Ian Stewart… Jenny, Ian and Geoff quite close.'

As Martyn recalls, Stewart was quite



a frequent visitor. 'Ian came down from Sheffield to CentreSoft a lot, presenting his games. It got to the point that if he wanted to grow the business that we bought a percentage of his business. What was in it for us was basically product. We invest in them, they make the games and they come back to CentreSoft for distribution.'

A nice and clean arrangement, but for Tim Chaney there were other irritations. 'It was a personal thing, but Ian employed Jeremy Heath-Smith, who went to Core Design, who I didn't like at all, couldn't stand him. And then he employed a guy called Tony Kavanagh, who came out of Websters, who I didn't like at all. So I had Ian's guys always around the office, always buttering up Anne, Geoff, Jenny, all the CentreSoft people – always taking them out. It was a strange constellation of guys in their early thirties, aggressive, in an industry that was exploding, in one kind of furnace, in one place at one time, and lots of crossed wires. There were days when Anne would come up and say [drops into hissed whisper], 'Let's fuck Gremlin, let's fuck 'em… do something…' And then there would be a day she'd come up and ask me to help Ian get his games into Smiths and bundle one or other with *Winter Games*, or something similar.'

During the crucial period of US Gold's hold over the games industry Geoff Brown also held sway over another useful organisation. 'I bought half of Camel Advertising, so we also had our own advertising and creative company that would do all our covers and adverts, and they'd work with the magazines. So we'd get a brand new game and we'd sit down and say, right we got this new game, *Out Run*, and what are we going to do with it? And we'd dream up the marketing campaign for it. Which was very much like the music industry.'

Newsfield's Roger Kean remembers that Camel were always on the ball. 'Nothing was more frustrating for a magazine publisher to have advertisements booked but no printer's film turning up from whoever the software house had hired to do their artwork. Often enough in the early days when everyone was making it up as they went along, the Newsfield production department would receive a packet of bits and bobs that the software house thought might make a nice ad, if we could put it together, please. That was never the case with Camel. Their stuff was always immaculate, ready to print, and just as well when they were handling all those US Gold and Ocean adverts.'

Starting off with a staff of seven in Sheffield, Camel grew rapidly to more than 60 employees at several locations, including Birmingham to be handy for US Gold.



Ostensibly an Ocean invention, The Hit Squad compilations were really a CentreSoft-Ocean co-operation – more an exercise in distribution and secondary marketing than a single publisher release.



GOLD U.S. GOLD U.S. GOLD U.S. GOLD

Slap a label on it

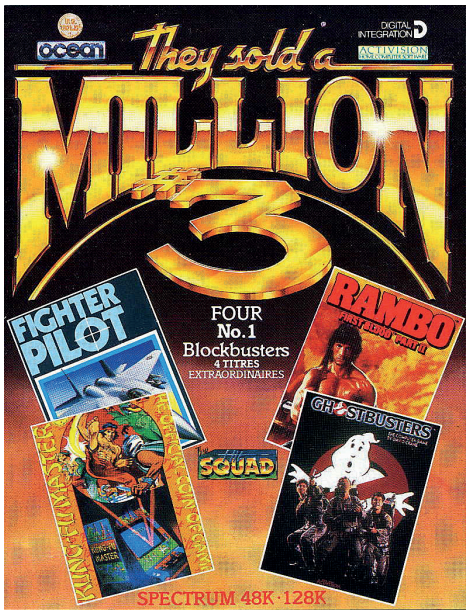
Then there were the labels, the ones that ran in conjunction with US Gold – UK Gold was mentioned earlier. The first to emerge – The Hit Squad – came about as a four-way co-operation on a compilation package. One thing that irked Tim was the relatively short sales life of a game. 'We were working in a business that what you sold in April that year, no one would want by September because the market had moved on. So these games really were like commodities with a short shelf-life and after that you couldn't do anything with them. And we just had so much product.'

As Tim points out, in the music business compilations had been around since Tamla Motown started doing them in the mid-1960s, none more famous than the long-lived *Now That's What I Call Music*. Geoff remembers speaking to David Ward about the wastage. 'I used to say to him, let's make some money. I said, what about a compilation of games that have already sold a million. And he thought it sounded like a good idea. I'll throw in *Daley's*, he said, and I'll put *Beach-Head* in… and the funny thing is the compilation sold a million.'

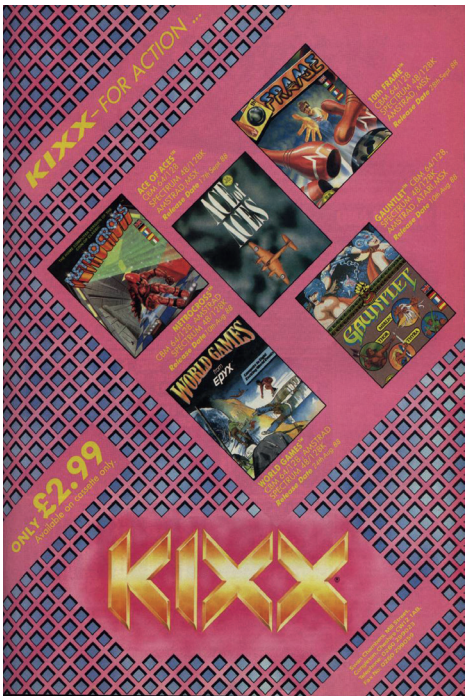
'That was one of those, Tim, I spoke to David Ward last night… moments. We give him two products and he uses two of his own, and I said, right, and that's how *They Sold A Million* came about.'

The first for the Spectrum offered four games: Ocean's *Daley Thompson's Decathlon*; Ultimate's *Sabre Wulf*; Software Projects' *Jet Set Willy*; and US Gold's *Beach-Head*. With such strong hit titles it was of course useful that CentreSoft acted as the primary distributor for all the major players in the British computer games community. They capitalised on their position again for the *Arcade Hall of Fame* compilation that resurrected *Blue Max*, *Raid!* (*Over Moscow* dropped), *Flak*, Gremlin's *Rocco* and Ocean's *Hunchback II*.

With a business model that kicked off charging more for the games than anyone else, a budget label might seem an uncomfortable fit with US Gold policy, but the success of *They Sold A Million* pointed the way to creating a label on which to re-release games that had already passed beyond their first release sell-by date. To the initial horror of software publishers trying to maintain a decent price point for their



The compilations all went on to sell a million copies as well as the original releases of the games included.



As a budget label, Kixx continued putting out previoius releases for several years under the simple first logo below to the 16-bit Kixx XL, bottom.

games, Mastertronic had already proved a success selling games for as little as £1.99. Tim opted for a bit more at £2.99 (£4.99 on disk) and so the Kixx label was founded in the later half of 1988, organised by former Mastertronic employees John Mearman and Lesley Bossen. The first releases were compiled from the US Gold and Gremlin back-catalogues, but there were also plans to release some original games – not always a US Gold strong point. Several 16-bit disk titles followed from 1989 and Kixx XL was launched in November 1992 to cater for more serious gamers.

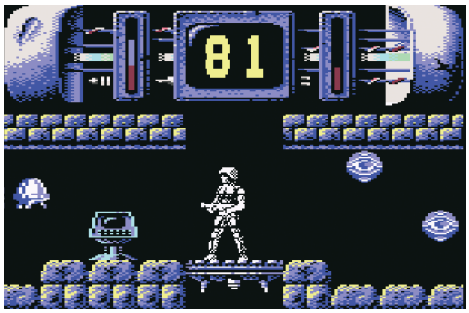
The rational for Kixx is straightforward – more mysterious was the emergence of another full-price label. *GO!* first appeared in 1987 with the slogan TOMORROW'S SOFTWARE TODAY and EXCITEMENT FROM BEYOND TOMORROW! Initial releases were *Gun Smoke* and *Side Arms*, both from Capcom, and *Lazer*, *Trantor* and *Brave Starr*. But there was a rationale behind launching *GO!* which had a lot to do with the fact that of every US Gold game that sold half of the proceeds went to Woods and Ward. As Tim admits, 'We launched *GO!* to shift products away from US Gold into another brand and company and keep them out of Jon and David's hands.'

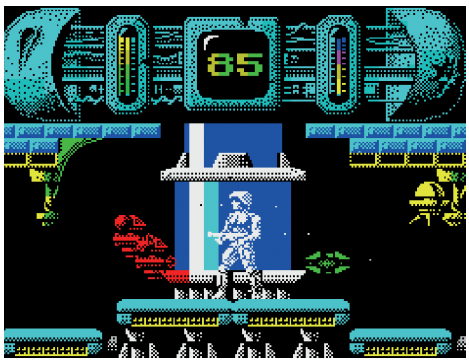
The company was called GO! Media Holdings Ltd, but it could hardly have missed the attention of watchful Ocean eyes that the adverts carried the address: Units 2/3 Holford Way… US Gold and CentreSoft's offices.

'Jon and David caught on very quickly what *GO!* was there for and threatened to sue us,' Tim adds, chuckling at the folly. '*GO!* had a very short life. It did about six games, several from Probe, one called *Trantor*, but there was no point in continuing because it was there really to squeeze the best it could out of US Gold and move the product to the other side of the table where Jon and David didn't own fifty per cent.'

It's interesting to see that in the prospectus printed for those wishing to purchase shares in the Group in 1993 *GO!* is described as being '*established to specifically publish original games and European sourced products. It was a failure*'.

The relationship between US Gold and Ocean was frequently a complex one, a bit like siblings caring for each other one day, squabbling the next. There was always a suspicion that Ocean and US Gold acted in a cartel-like manner when it came to the 'Christmas number one release', though Geoff insists there was no 'peeking' on the release schedules of





other software houses for that vital slot. 'What we did know is what each of us was doing, though there came a time when we knew less… in the early days we were really very close.'

So it was really Ocean and US Gold



that dominated the industry. 'Yes, but mainly because we worked hand in glove, buying advertising space, doing compilations. I always said the Beatles and the Rolling Stones didn't release their singles on the same day and we always agreed when we were going to release certain games. It was a bit of a mafia in a way, I suppose. US Gold became a mafia of its own because it also controlled distribution channels in the UK. In the nicest way, of course!'

There was another important way the two giants co-operated, as Tim explains. 'The market changed after 1986, after

Trantor – The Last Stormtrooper received mixed reviews. *C&VG* awarded it the equivalent of 90%, *ACE* thought it was only worth 52% and *Zzap!64* 55%; *Crash* gave the Spectrum version a warmer 68% but the general consensus on both machines was: great graphics, poor gameplay and character handling.

ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME

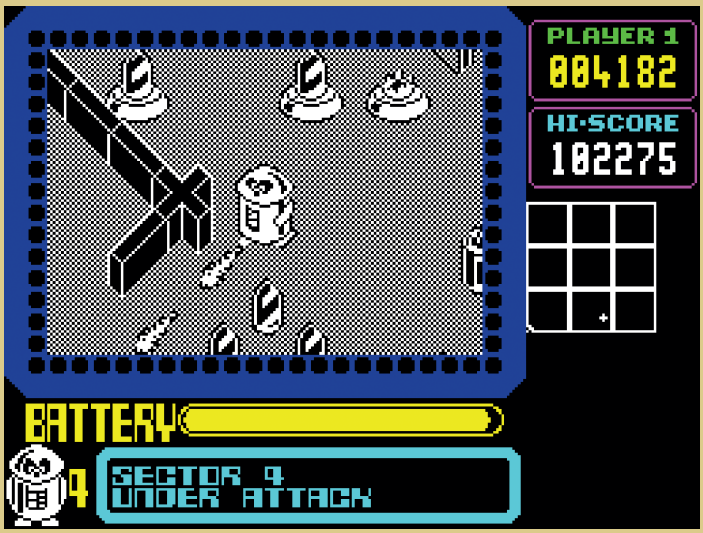
What happened to the Ultimate games?

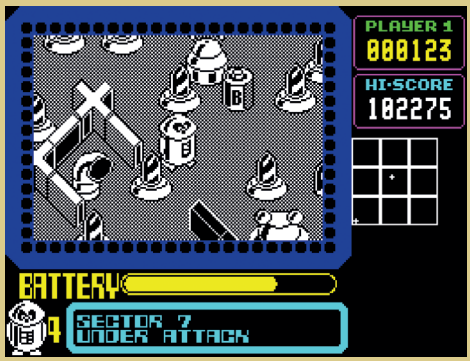
Martianoids, Bubbler and Mire Mare

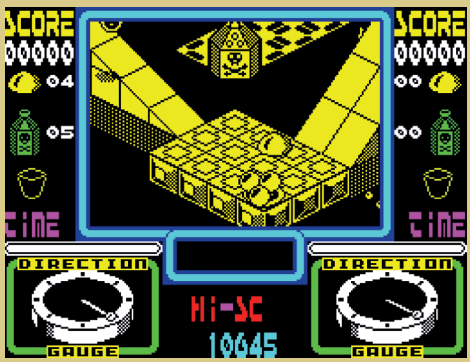
From May 1983, when Ashby Computers & Graphics released *Jetpac* for the 16K Spectrum, Ultimate Play The Game became one of the most revered names in computer games. A list of hit titles followed for the company's owners, brothers Tim and Chris Stamper – *Lunar Jetman*, *Atic Atac* and in 1984 *Sabre Wulf* (when they followed Geoff Brown's lead of pricing a cassette game at £9.95). Other brilliant games followed but the gloss was looking dull by 1986, and the last two games released by Ultimate were not well received.

At the time of its release in March 1987 *Martianoids* initially looked like an Ultimate game, there was the familiar isometric projection for instance, but reviewers sensed that something was not right. *Crash* reviewer Ben Stone wrote: 'Shock, excitement, hysteria... An Ultimate game, hooray! Oh, hang on, it's not very good is it?' Colleague Mike Dunn said, 'Ultimate have gradually gone

Two games that were released under the Ultimate label but not programmed by the Ashby Computers & Graphics team. Both *Martianoids* (below and right) and *Bubbler* received poor reviews.







down in everyone's view, and producing a game as boring as this just emphasises the apparent demise of the once mighty company. The third voice came close to hitting the nail on the head: 'Ultimate return with a new distributor, but the same old 3D game…don't buy it because of the name.'

The following month out came *Bubbler* to equally unhappy comments: 'Once Ultimate was on a pedestal above all other software companies. Sadly those glorious times are long since gone.' '*Bubbler* breaks no new ground…I'm left with a slight feeling of disappointment.'

The game still received a reasonable overall score of 72% (*Martianoids* only

> *"Ultimate return with a new distributor, but the same old 3D game."*

managed 58%), but the comments seem to underline the sense that the players wanted to like *Bubbler* because it was by Ultimate… except it wasn't, and neither was *Martianoids*.

In the May 1987 issue of *Crash*, *Martianoids* and *Bubbler* were advertised on page 38. At the bottom the address given is Ultimate Play The Game's at The Green, Ashby de la Zouch and yet according to the record the page was booked in the name of US Gold.

It's been a question often raised: were the games the work of Ultimate or US Gold? Tim Chaney answers, 'They were certainly *not* programmed by Ultimate.



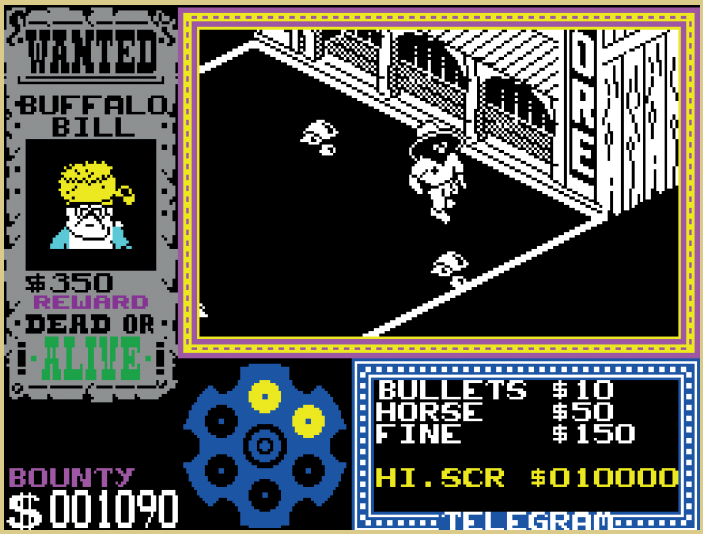
The Stampers were Nintendo kings by that stage. Would the Stampers care if those games went out on their label but had nothing to do with them? Chris maybe. Tim probably not as long as it got him another Morgan.'

A magazine advertisement for *Martianoids* and *Bubbler* with the Ultimate Play The Game logo in plentiful evidence, but booked through US Gold.

One thing is not in doubt. Very soon after the genuine Ultimate releases of *Gunfright* for Spectrum (93% in *Crash* magazine) and *Outlaws* for Commodore 64 (not so good, only 35% in *Zzap!64*), the Stamper brothers sold the rights of the Ultimate back catalogue to US Gold. Stories abound about the fate of *Mire Mare*, the fourth part of the *Sabreman* series (*Sabre*



Boys' toy #3, a venerable Morgan – there were many editions of the collector's car.



Wulf, *Underwurlde*, *Knight Lore*) which was caught up in the machinations of the sale. To fans the given story is well known. US Gold wanted the Ultimate games for the £2.99 Kixx label – not an unreasonable way for US Gold to use titles already well sold through – but Tim and Geoff also wanted the apparently ready-to-go *Mire Mare* for Kixx as well. This annoyed the Stampers who wanted *Mire Mare* as a grand Ultimate finale full-price game, but US Gold wasn't interested in investing the money needed to finish it. The Stampers claimed the game was months away from completion (though an insider working at Ultimate claimed to have played it). And that was effectively that.

Looking back, Martyn Savage says, 'I think it was a lost opportunity. We didn't do much with the Ultimate back catalogue. It was one of those things that we probably had too much product and just left it.'

Subsequently, the Stampers were adamant that the code of *Mire Mare* was nowhere near completed…perhaps that's the truth, or perhaps they felt that historically they should stick to the story.





Genuine Ultimate: *Gunfright* (above) did well on Spectrum, *Outlaws* less so on the C64. Right: a speculative cover design for the mystery *Mire Mare*.



Commando, and we went for the coin-ops… but so was Ocean. So we split the market up between us so we wouldn't compete on coin-ops. They went after Taito, we went after Sega, they went after Nintendo, we went after Capcom.'

Martyn Savage agrees. 'There was almost a gentleman's agreement with Ocean that certain coin-op companies, such as Williams, were Ocean; Nintendo Ocean; Sega US Gold – that was the kind of relationship. And because we built a relationship with Sega, Ocean wouldn't do Sega, they'd do Nintendo.'

'There was never a meeting with Ocean,' Tim claims. 'Never a meeting where David and Jon, Geoff and Anne and me, or Martyn were at a table together to talk strategy. This was something that just manifested itself, it came out of midnight conversations, over dinners. At some point David or Jon would have spoken to Geoff and said, we don't want to compete with each other, we want to kill off anyone else out there after our licences. We want to kill Elite, of course, BT's Jane Cavanagh who was after licences, Activision, everyone out on the bandwagon. So let's not compete, you go after those guys, we'll go after these guys. And that's what we did. We never bid for *Operation Wolf* and they never bid for *Out Run*. Some others did. BT did, but we could just trample on anyone.'

'It was understood that if we fought over a licence the only winner was the licensor,' Martyn adds.

The licensors were winning more and more in any case, largely thanks to the emergence of hard-nosed agents who saw the strength of the big coin-op games for conversion to home computers and upped the ante. 'One of the most successful was Manlio Allegra of the International Development Group,' Tim says of the man he joined on leaving US Gold in 1989. 'They represented a lot of the coin-op brands, so the prices just went up because there's an agent telling his clients how much they've been underselling their games. For *Out Run*, we probably paid a quarter of a million in guarantee,

"It was understood that if we fought over a licence the only winner was the licensor."

which is a lot of money, especially if you could only make it work on Commodore and Spectrum.'

Ocean's relationship with CentreSoft was equally important and they enjoyed what Tim Chaney called 'favoured nation status'. Martyn saw Ocean's marketing people frequently. 'Ocean came to present each new game to the telesales team. And the big retailers held quarterly buying meetings at which the software houses presented their products and their advertising schedule, so Tim Chaney showed them which magazines we were going into, whether there were extra promotions inside, like wall charts or balloons, and the type and size of the packaging.'



The Empire's headquarters in Birmingham.

Pretty Damn Quick

Geoff Brown says it's a little known fact that he had another distribution company called PDQ. 'It was actually housed in the same building where CentreSoft and US Gold were based.'

PDQ Distribution Ltd came into being on 3 April 1987 'to provide independent administration and distribution services to other software publishers' and that it could 'build on the distribution expertise and infrastructure already developed by CentreSoft.'

In fact it was a clever way of expanding CentreSoft's hold over the distribution of computer games in the UK, while offering a genuine benefit to the smaller software houses. It also provided US Gold a unique opportunity to monitor the general goings-on of rival companies.

Geoff explains the basic principles. 'PDQ held the stock of many UK game publishers. When a new release was due out they delivered all their stock into the PDQ warehouse and we sent it out to the distributors for them according to the distributors' stock orders. One of the distributors, of course, was us – CentreSoft. Well that cost us nothing, after all we just reallocated the stock from PDQ to CentreSoft with a few taps on a computer keyboard. The physical stock never moved, until it went to retail, whereas all the other distributors had to wait until their stock got delivered by PDQ.

Martyn Savage points out that PDQ added considerably to the Group's working capital. 'As some American said to me, so let's get this right, Martyn, you're going to have my stock in your warehouse and only pay me when you sell it? I said, yes, that's it. Out of the warehouses, with the addition of PDQ, we were distributing up to 40% of all UK software.'

PDQ offered genuine benefits to small publishers, many of who did not use CentreSoft as their primary distributor. In fact they could only reach retail by using several distribution channels with a resulting low efficiency rate and a high cost.

'I said to them, I'll tell you what I'll do,' Geoff continues. 'If you use PDQ, which is just a big warehouse, you bring all the games you've got and put them in this warehouse and then I'll ship

them for you. I'll keep a percentage of shipping products out on your behalf and I'll collect your money. So we had another whole profit stream alongside distribution and publishing, what we called "fulfilment" at the time, and that was completely innovative. Nobody had done that before.

'The second benefit to publishers came because we were making so much money we could afford to factor their invoices. As soon as we shipped out stock to, say, Microdealer or Leisureosft we were able to pay the software house their invoices so they didn't have to wait the months it would take for Microdealer or Leisuresoft to pay according to their terms. So we also bankrolled a hell of a lot of the software houses in the UK.'

PDQ and CentreSoft provided the Group an invaluable insight to its customers' trading strengths – a strong basis for subsequent acquisitions – but also revealed other vital information, which Geoff was happy to utilise. 'All of my competitors who used us to distribute their products to other distributors through PDQ or direct to the High Street through CentreSoft had to come to me and show me the games they were working on, that they were going to release for Christmas. So all of a sudden I knew what my competitors were doing because they had to come and tell me. That gave me an idea where the market was headed, what people were going to do and how much they were going to charge for it. I also knew how many units they sold. Which meant I could say, *hmmm* that's been a really good seller, so we'll do one like that.

'So there was PDQ, CentreSoft and US Gold, a sort of Holy Trinity of companies that were all independent but all interlinked…and I was the one who pulled them together.'

PDQ DISTRIBUTION LIMITED

Some of PDQ's customers in 1994–95 and the sales figures.

Accolade	£65,979
Activision	£414,676
Adventuresoft	£887,381
Core Design	£1,247,926
Dimensional	£496,411
Domark	£38,971
Elite Systems	£10,682
Gremlin Graphics	£72,885
Impressions	£1,490,933
Infogrames	£654,217
Interplay	£4,897,180
Jumping Bean	£75,646
Kompart	£487,578
Konami	£228,290
Krisalis	£556,352
Labtec Inc.	£3.426,805
Millenium	£113,141
System 3	£13,928
21st Century	£990,589
Ubisoft	£22,960
US Gold	£3,411,684


Still on top!
U.S.
GOLD
All
American software

Building a software team

Being the next-door neighbour to the country's biggest distributor of games software was clearly an advantage for US Gold. Seeing all the games coming in from other companies must have supplied an invaluable insight into what others were doing. In the 18 months Charles Cecil filled the role of head of development, he saw many of the competitors' products.

'We were allowed to take any games we wanted from CentreSoft, and they weren't logged in or out, which seems extraordinary. We were encouraged to take games which we could play at home. In theory we could have seen release schedules from other companies, but that wasn't my business. My business was our games and it went no wider than that. Beyond playing competitors' games I had no interest in what any other companies were doing.

'We didn't consciously spy,' insists Martyn Savage. 'It wasn't like, oh let's see what the competition is doing this week. If anything we got it more from reading the magazines than looking through our stock file. And it wasn't as though CentreSoft was the only distributor in the land.'

Anne and Geoff Brown sometimes acted as though it was, and at times Tim found himself in conflict with his employers. 'I did try and trade with Leisuresoft, Gem, Microdealer and everyone else in the independent section at least. But I think if I hadn't been there at US Gold, by 1987 you wouldn't buy US Gold software anywhere in England, from any distributor, except from CentreSoft. Geoff and Anne wanted to cut the other distributors out, but I refused.'

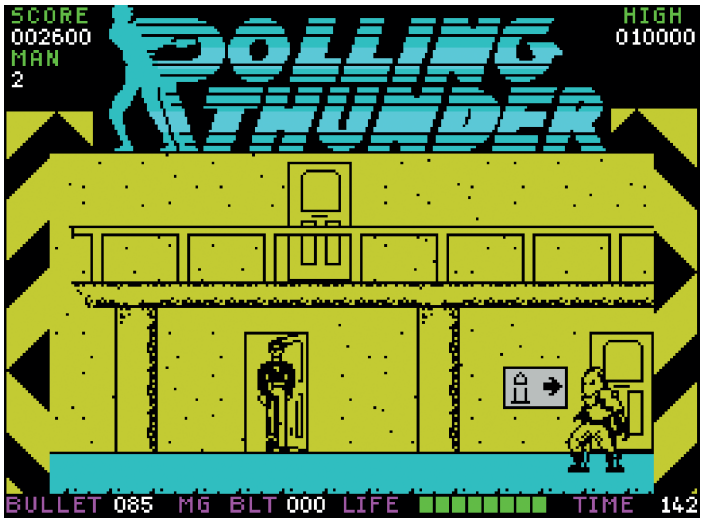
Nevertheless, the fact of sitting next door to a partner company like CentreSoft had enormous advantages. Tim again: 'The real underlying story of those years is the way US Gold and CentreSoft used each other to try and completely dominate and make a killing. You had in one building in Birmingham the biggest software publisher of the day – you could argue it was us or Ocean, but let's say it was US Gold at some points – and the biggest distributor in England who served all the major retailers and a mass of independents - we set out to beat everybody. I was a part of what they used to call the Birmingham Mafia because it was all kind of tight. You had Geoff on top of both companies and Martyn Savage on top of both, and Anne on top of both, and then you had Jon Woods and David Ward owning half of US Gold…'

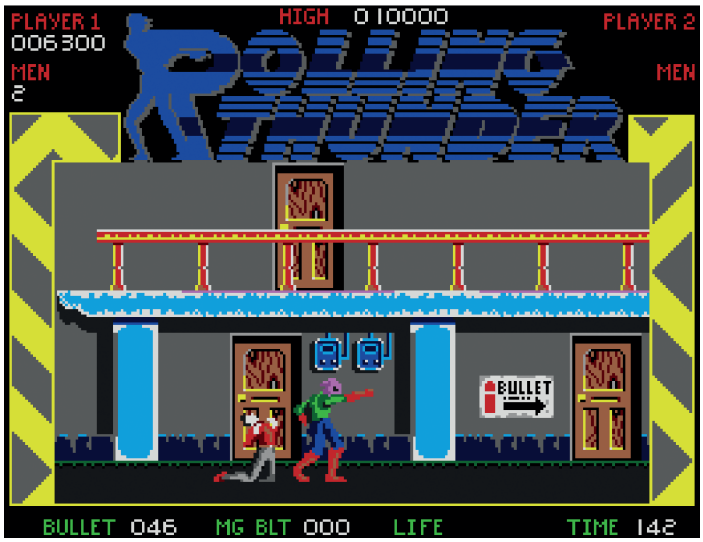
"We didn't consciously spy…it wasn't like, oh let's see what the competition is doing this week."

…And Geoff owning three-quarters of Gremlin Graphics and having fingers in several software developers, like Tiertex for a while, or having them eating out of the Birmingham Mafia's hand.

In those months when there wasn't quite enough product to promote in the large number of magazine pages David Ward booked on behalf of Ocean and US Gold, Tim Chaney often ran a generic advertisement… just to let the competition know who was still the Boss.







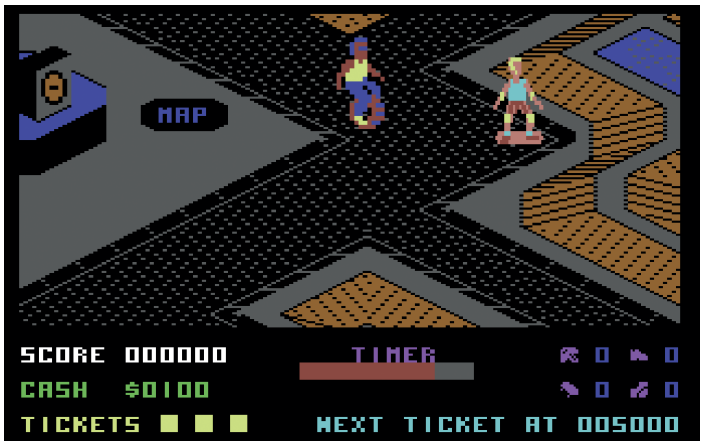
Rolling Thunder in three formats: Commodore 64, Spectrum, Atari ST.

As Geoff points out it was important to get the best quality developer to work on the formats that sold the most, but cost was also a factor. 'Very often, to save money, we'd get one company to do the lot – Tiertex, for instance, did *720°* and *Rolling Thunder* for us on all formats. It was cheaper that way – a hundred thousand pounds for four formats whereas it might be fifty thousand for one. They got a lot of economies of scale by doing all the formats because they could reuse the graphics and a lot of the overall code.' The role of choosing a UK developer to handle conversions of a licence devolved to Tim Chaney when he joined US Gold, but his principle focus was distribution and particularly the expansion into Europe (*see side panel on the following spread*). Several software houses found the transition from 8-bit to 16-bit gaming a painful experience and with US Gold's extraordinary level of output it must have been even more so, but Tim disagrees.

'No, it wasn't painful really because we didn't have an in-house development team, we never had a team. I've always been averse to having in-house development teams and I favour contracting out to external resources, as opposed to Ocean which did have teams, and Elite, over that fish 'n' chip shop…and really most software houses had a team. At US Gold we never even talked about it. But producers… that was different. The number of products we had meant we needed them and we certainly had producers in place by mid-1986.'

Well, one to begin with.





A developing business

Charles Cecil, formerly of Artic, became US Gold's first 'producer'. His first impressions came as something of a surprise. 'After I left Artic I started up Paragon Programming and because of my relationship with US Gold I was given lots of conversions to do. I think our first game was *Infiltrator* in 1986, which we converted from the Commodore 64 version done by Chris Gray to Spectrum and Atari later on. Then Tim invited me to come and join US Gold as head of development. I imagined I was going to rule over a massive great department and it turned out it was me and Steve Fitton, and Dave Partington part time. It was absolutely insane!'

Who did he actually report to? 'From my perspective Tim did an awful lot of the decision making. I saw him as my immediate boss. Presumably Geoff was his boss, but to me it felt like Tim had his finger on the pulse, and he understood the market. Anne had very little to do with me, but we were all terrified of her.'

Up to that point Tim Chaney had been running marketing, development

Re-released later on the budget Kixx label, the arcade conversion of Atari's skateboarding game *720°* met with general approval on its first full-price outing for the Christmas 1987 period, but it was Sega's racing game *Out Run* that earned US Gold its Christmas hit in spite of a cool reception from the computer games press.







'Poacher turned gamekeeper', US Gold's first games producer Charles Cecil pictured in 2007.

and increasingly licensing and he must have been glad to have Charles to hand. 'I got given an enormous stack of papers because Tim had obviously been totally overwhelmed. I had to negotiate contracts, sort out problems with development times, put together development teams, and monitor the quality as well. The problem was that I tended to focus on the games that were problematic, probably not such a bad thing, but it didn't give me the opportunity really to get to grips with the heart of some of those original games that we did, which I really regret.'

One of the first games was the smash hit *Out Run*, which created its own internal problems. 'CentreSoft and US Gold were housed in the same building and all the arcade machines were in the warehouse area. Now we had to compete with the lovely warehouse guys because whenever their break was on they considered it was their right to play all these games. With a game as great as *Out Run* there were long, long queues.'

Conquering Europe

In 1983–84 Geoff Brown manoeuvred his American software partners into giving him UK distribution rights of their games because the likes of Cosmi, Access and MicroProse had no idea what the market was like in Britain. Their initial lack of interest created the opportunity to grow both CentreSoft and US Gold. But as Martyn Savage points out, 'By around the start of 1986 we realised we had to tie up Europe, so Geoff and I went around Europe and we blitzed it.'

'US Gold was the first software house to do this,' Geoff says, pointing out that Ocean did something similar soon after. 'I went around with Martyn and we opened offices in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, France, Germany, all throughout Europe, more or less in a whirlwind tour of a couple of weeks. They were all US Gold-exclusive offices and they went on to become distributors and in some cases publishers as well. All of them were incredibly successful.'

'We were a pioneer in that,' Tim agrees. 'We set up all these European subsidiaries of US Gold and put them inside a wholesaler – with John Holder at Leader in Italy; with Hans Rabe and Jürgen Goeldner inside Rushware

Micromania's 1980s logo and opposite a 21st-century store, one of numerous throughout France, which came out of the original US Gold European organisation.

MICROMANIA

in Germany, inside Micromania with Albert Loridan in France, inside Erbe with Paco Pastor in Madrid. It was to

Given the quantity of games US Gold released every year there were bound to be (and there were) some turkeys, dross among the gold, which Charles felt came down a lot to the third-party developers US Gold had to rely on. 'The good developers would really focus on the quality of the product,' Charles says. 'The bad developers would try and make as much money as possible, as quickly and cheaply as possible. I whittled those guys out quickly, and we had a pretty good range of developers.'

Did he have any gripes? 'I think Tim and Geoff's mistake was not to respect development to the extent they probably should have done. That would be the only criticism I would make. I can't emphasise that US Gold was a company very much based around marketing, and that was the most important thing: that you delivered the game to a reasonable quality, on time. I found this process frustrating because I could see the faults



Out Run spawned *Turbo Out Run* in 1989, another C64 hit game for US Gold.

that were going on and the weaknesses of certain developers and I didn't have the time to really deal with it.'

There were surely penalties for a build an international base, because by then distributors like Leisuresoft were selling to foreign distributors. CentreSoft was selling to Rushware, who then distributed in Germany. But we cut all that out and started going direct, for instance, to Rushware with our little US Gold-Deutschland.'

'We set it up so the local agent could distribute US Gold product,' says Martyn, 'but more importantly we could tell the American licensors that if they wanted their game distributed we had the full European presence. We took the US licence for all of Europe, and we kept our costs low because it was the local agent's warehousing, so their responsibility. For example, with US Gold France based down near Nice, what we said to Albert Loridan was you can run US Gold France, shipping out products, and we'll give you an extra 10%



margin on the product to fund it.'

Geoff gives a lot of credit for the incredibly successful assault on Europe

84

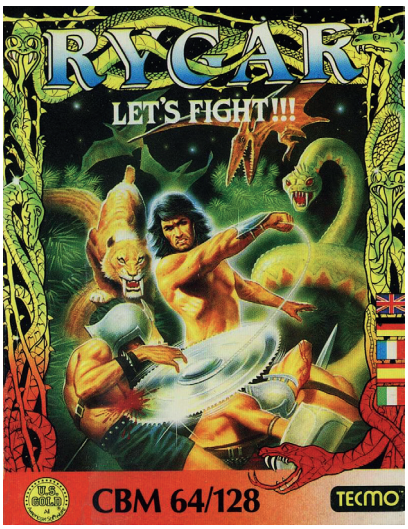


Actor, singer, software entrepreneur Paco Pastor, US Gold's Spanish partner in his heyday as a recording artist.

to Martyn Savage. 'I couldn't have done it without him. He was the steadying hand on the tiller, the guy who did all the financial presentations, looked after the money. He and Anne together were a formidable force and I was just the person who was pulling out these ideas – some worked, some didn't, some were crazy, but fortunately most of them were good.'

The operations they chose were major players who sold the most software in their territories. Leader SpA had been the leading independent distributor in Italy since it started business to the south of Milan in 1984. In Germany Rushware was the software sales division of Rush Records, formed by Hans Rabe and Jürgen Goeldner in 1984. In France, Albert Loridan founded Micromania in 1983 selling games through mail order. Micromania opened its 100th store in 2002 and today, as GameStop, has 444 stores throughout France.

Perhaps the most fascinating of US Gold's partners was Pastor Francis Pueyo, better known as Paco Pastor. He was a popular singer, songwriter and television



developer delivering a poor game? 'No. The only thing I could do was to hold a game back and so delay payment,' Charles insists. 'But for a company that is marketing-led you're in a difficult position because there are contracts that have been signed, distribution deals have been agreed, retailers are expecting it. You get caught in a difficult position because you have to deliver this game. So you do your very best and then you have to ship it.'

It might be thought that with all his varied responsibilities that Geoff Brown would no longer have time to devote to the games US Gold was actually producing, but Martyn Savage thinks otherwise. 'If you cut open Geoff he was more US Gold than CentreSoft because he got more of a buzz out of publishing.'

'Oh I saw all the games I bought, at least at first,' Geoff insists. 'In the early days I even played them all as well but there came a time when I'd just look at the game's reputation. *Gauntlet* is a good example of choosing a game on its reputation without me having seen it first.'

Charles remembers Geoff giving him a hard time over *Rygar*. 'The one where you had a long chain and you jumped up and down and it had a shield on the end of the chain and you smashed things? I remember Geoff was upset because *Rygar* had lower ratings than he'd expected.'

So Geoff did read the magazines and check the reviews?

'Oh yes, and occasionally he'd come and ask why something hadn't been

and film actor in Spain during the 1960s and 70s. In 1984 he founded Erbe Software and was a force behind Topo Soft. For the remainder of the 1980s Erbe published the Spanish editions of some 300 UK Spectrum games, mainly from Ocean, Gremlin and US Gold.

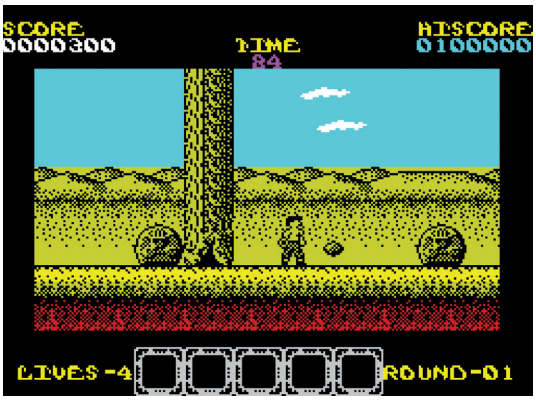
In connection with these overseas offices a new face appeared in the Group's financial department in 1986. Tim O'Connell's first connection with CentreSoft was back in 1984 when he was training with Coopers & Lybrand to be a Chartered Accountant. 'I was seconded over the Christmas period to help this fast growing "'crazy" company which only had a few people including Geoff and Anne Brown and Jenny Richards,' he says. 'Martyn Savage was the audit manager then and a year later he joined CentreSoft, by which time US Gold was also started. They headhunted me to join and my first role was to help set up and police all the overseas operations of US Gold in Europe. Later on I oversaw the US operation where we employed Bob Botch to run the business. I used to visit each of the offices three or four times a year.'

well received. He wasn't mean. He'd ask me to explain why this game got a bad review. He usually accepted the answer that we were working with the wrong developer for the format or type of game. Geoff had a real passion in terms of the company. He cared about all aspects of it, but where he came from was marketing and licensing. But he did talk to me if he thought quality was dipping below a certain threshold.'

One developer who gave little in the way of headaches – with perhaps the exception of *Rygar* – was Fergus McGovern's Probe. 'Fergus was building a really good relationship with Geoff and Tim, and with me,' Charles says. He usually came up from Croydon to see us and show us what he was working on. When we did *Out Run*, Fergus came and he said, "I know you haven't given it to me but I've started working on the Amstrad and Spectrum version of *Out Run*." And I looked at him and said, "But we haven't

'The latest conversion from US Gold isn't disastrously bad,' reported *Zzap!64*'s Julian Rignall of *Rygar*, 'it's just totally bland…' The Spectrum version fared no better: 'The graphics are dull…the first level is far too easy and the others offer no stimulation,' said Mike Dunn of *Crash*. A disappointing outcome for a coin-op conversion with promise.





even thought who we're going to give it to." And he put those sort of sad eyes on… and he's like Puss-in-Boots… and so you'd give him the project.

'The Amstrad, Spectrum and MSX versions went to Probe, and later the Amiga and Atari ST versions. The Commodore 64 port went to Amazing Products, programmed by father and son Martin and David Webb. We were doing dozens of games across all the formats and usually those formats were split between different developers. Tim and Geoff had their favourite developers and you kind of had to use them regardless of whether you wanted to.'

Tim would disagree with that, while hinting that he and Geoff had every opportunity to interfere. 'Charles Cecil – who was by then a poacher turned gamekeeper – picked teams of developers to work with. He sent them up to me or Geoff to do a deal, and off they went.'

Or not…sometimes Tim put his foot down, as he did with a game offered to Charles by Phil Harrison. Not long after, Harrison would join Mindscape International (1989–92) and then Sony, where he held executive positions in Europe and North America for years before switching to Infogrames and then Atari. He is currently a corporate vice president of Microsoft. Back then in 1988 he was merely a young games designer. 'Charles wanted to do this Phil Harrison game and he sent it to me. I said I'm not going to do this piece of shit, and Phil Harrison never forgave me for



Phil Harrison at E3 in 2006. When Charles Cecil showed one of the young games designer's offerings to Tim Chaney, he was not impressed.

that…' he gives a sharp laugh. 'Bad news for us later on when he was at Sony!'

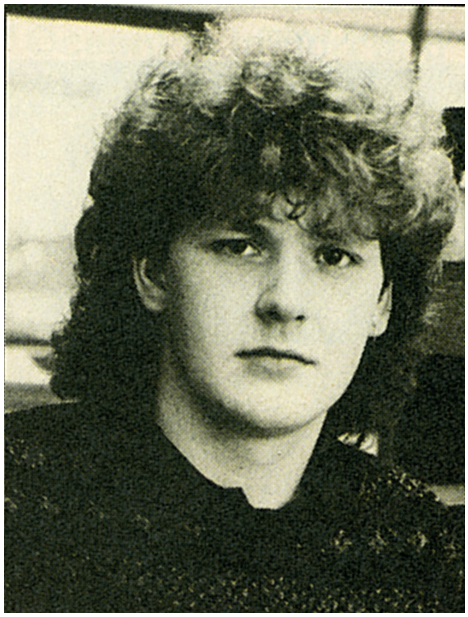
One less game to put through the production line for Charles was but one drop less in the ocean (pun not intended). 'We had a huge number of projects coming through and bear in mind there were just two of us full-time. It's extraordinary that we did what we did – as the tester Steve Fitton worked really hard, Dave Partington was the masterer, and I was the one-man product development department. And then Tim introduced to my department a guy called David Baxter.'

David Baxter had started over that 'fish 'n' chip shop' in Walsall at Elite Systems before he moved to US Gold in October 1988 to look after the Capcom/Rainbow Arts labels, and when Charles left, Baxter took over the role of US Gold's software manager until February 1990, when he left to set up his own business.

By then Tim Chaney had also left

US Gold. He gave Geoff his notice in April 1989 and set up TecMagik in partnership with the International Development Group, the agency that had handled the Capcom licences, among many others. Still based in Birmingham, TecMagik released some eight games for the 8- and 16-bit consoles, enjoying hits with *PacMania*, *Populous* and *Shadow of the Beast*.

'As US Gold evolved and became bigger towards 1988,' Tim reflects on his departure, 'we took on some heavyweights like Roger Swindells, Andrew Chorzelski and Bob Malin. I was leaving behind an efficient machine-like structure that was working really



well. We had a very good position in the coin-op market – in that period the only licensor we lost was MicroProse. By then I was getting on for 35, I'd been in the business ten years with Commodore and US Gold and what I was doing was kind of boring by then. It was time to do my own thing'



Dave Baxter, left and above – with Steve Fitton (front), Martin Hutchinson and Tony Samuels on the right. The US Gold production and playtesting team epitomised the 'pop-star' ethos of the 1980s computer games business.

At the time he left, Tim Chaney was titled managing director. Andrew Chorzelski took his place but with the title of sales and marketing director.

A Zzap! Challenger

According to Simon Hadlington, a youngster who had a summer holiday placement at US Gold in 1989 as a 'teaboy-tester' before starting his final A-Level year, not much had changed in terms of scale in the few months since Charles Cecil had left and gone to work at Activision.

'CentreSoft was the first building on the Holford Way industrial estate at Aston. There was a small entrance with framed *Zaxxon* and *Beach-Head* posters







The 'smug little brat' Simon Hadlington can't help a gloating smile at defeating Zzap 'experts' Maf Evans and Paul Rand. But winning comes at a price, a knockout blow from Paul and then *Zzap!64*'s editor Gordon Houghton gives Paul a hand to stuff Simon's head down the Newsfield toilet. Life in those days was violent in the world of computer games.

on the wall. From there you turned right and that's where the games testing area was. In a bigger room next to it Bob Kenrick managed operations, where people were doing returns or mail order. And beyond that was the PR department headed up by Woody with Nicola and Leigh Whitehead. So the bit that was US Gold was tiny, literally a couple of rooms built of MDF boarding and glass into the CentreSoft warehouse. What we had in those rooms were arcade machines and people testing the boards.'

Simon had got himself a computer games player's dream summer job after entering the Birmingham round of the National Computer Games Championship in 1988 (*see the side panel opposite*). 'I read about the competition in *Zzap!64*, which I'd subscribed to since the beginning. I entered the competition and won the Birmingham round, and that's where I met Woody who was heading the PR department, and I stayed in touch with her. I ended up going to the final, which was held at the PCW Show in London, and Stuart Campbell won it.'

Not content with that, next year Simon took the *Zzap!64* team head on. 'It was the *Speedball* issue of *Zzap!64* [50, June 1989] where I'd written in and I did

a *Wizball* challenge against Paul Rand and Matthew "Maf" Evans.'

Headlined A KICK IN THE WIZBALLS, the by-line read: Matthew 'Beef Head' Evans takes on a smug little brat and doesn't thrash the trousers off him…

'I won it!' Simon crows.

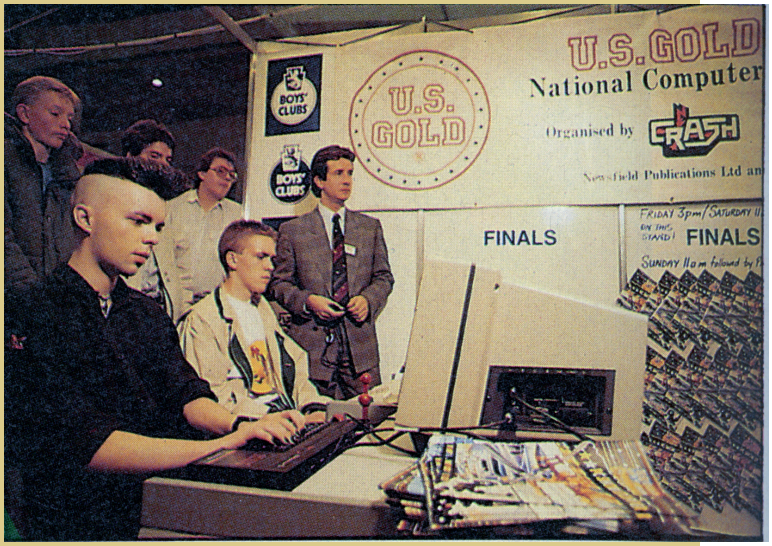
A fact which he brought immediately to Woody's attention and got him the summer placement. 'I remember we had a *Final Fight* arcade machine in [which came out in 1991 on most formats] and I was testing C64 stuff like *LED Storm* and *Forgotten Worlds*.' As far as development was concerned, nothing had

The National Computer Games Championship 1988

Organised by Newsfield Publications on behalf of the National Association of Boys' Clubs and the Personal Computer World Show, and sponsored by US Gold as an extension of their US Gold Boys' Clubs, the competition to find the country's top Spectrum and Commodore 64 games players began in April 1988, with the regional heats held between May 14 and June 18 at Birmingham, Gloucester, Belfast, Edinburgh (where Stuart Campbell won on the Spectrum), Leeds and a platform of Waterloo Station in London. The finals were held at the Personal Computer World Show at Earls Court, 16–18 September.

US Gold provided *RoadBlasters* as the championship game and the contestants lined up under the cameras of London Weekend Television. On the Spectrum they were: Stuart Campbell (West Lothian); Paul Roberts (Sheffield); Paul Burridge (Wheatley, Oxon); Michael Deer (Swansea); Steven Smithwhite (West Lothian); Mark Sivill (Newent, Glos). On C64: Mark Young (Fife); Michael Bonham (Nuneaton); Glen Pickersgill (Hull); Neil White (Edinburgh); Jeffrey Lane (Herts); and Stuart Witts (Swindon).

Stuart Campbell was the Spectrum champion and 14-year-old Mark Young Commodore 64 champion and they both won £1,000 worth of hardware and US Gold software. Campbell went on to become a prolific video games journalist and for two years a games designer at Sensible Software.



Stuart Campbell, nearest the camera, and Mark Young in a play-off to find the best gamer, playing *Mad Mix Game* on the Atari ST. Mark won by a narrow margin.

changed in five years. 'The only in-house team US Gold had was Tiertex – and they weren't in-house really because they were up in Manchester. They worked in a seven-bedroom house called The Yews on Palatine Road in Didsbury.'



67 Palatine Road, Didsbury, home turned office for the Tiertex team in the 1980s.

Martyn Savage was instrumental in advising Geoff Brown and Tim Chaney to buy a stake in Tiertex. 'They had been doing quite a bit of work for us, and we didn't want to get caught out – as we sometimes did – with certain developers who did a good job of coding but then were doing conversions for every man and his dog. If we were putting our money into the developer it was in our interest to get some capital growth out of them. Before we bought a stake in Tiertex they were just a coding shop and went wherever the work was.'

As Simon returned to school for his A-Level year he had some more exciting news - Woody was helping to organize the UK team for the European Video Games Championship and included him and Stuart Campbell, along with former Newsfield people Julian Rignall and Paul Glancey. The event took place towards the end of 1989 at the Salon de la Micro Show in Paris, sponsored by *C&VG* and US Gold. The UK team won, beating their Spanish and French competitors.

'I remember I got smashed on the train going over, with Woody and Julian Rignall and Paul Glancey, who were stars back then. I definitely remember chucking up in front of them after we'd been to a posh restaurant!'

In September 1990 Simon went to Swansea University, 'because they had a massive Amiga lab – it wasn't PC-based', and became involved with an American girl who was on a yearlong exchange. He decided to take a year out and went to the US with his girlfriend, but it all went wrong. 'I was there two months and that was it, we split up. I came back and went to US Gold and said, Woody can I have a job as I've nothing to do until at least next summer because I've taken a year off from Uni and I've stuffed up this relationship with this American girl.'

In the ten months Simon was employed at US Gold he worked alongside testers Martin Smith, Phil Bradley and Dan Llewellyn, and producers Bob Armour, Tony Porter – who had done the Spectrum conversion of *Gauntlet* – and Steve Fitton. Production management was in the hands of Bob Kenrick, who as well as







handling product packaging looked after returned games that didn't load and the production of games onto tape and disk.

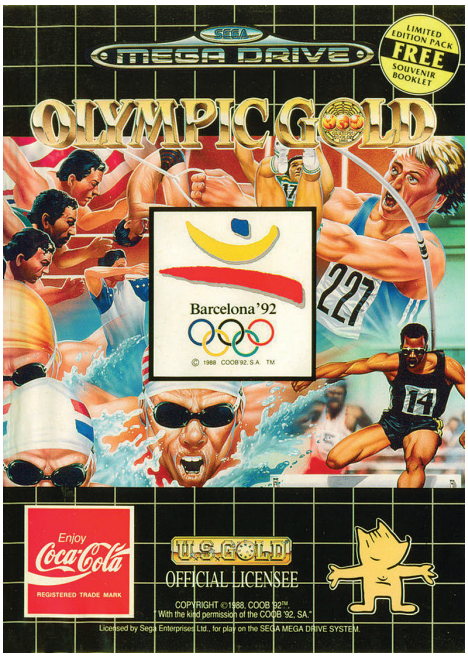
As a play-tester in addition to time spent in Birmingham Simon also went out to visit the various software developers. 'I went down south to see Probe in Croydon and Climax in Fareham, Portsmouth, up to Manchester to Tiertex and Creative Materials in Bury. I went to see others, often bedroom coders. Most sent their code in by courier and we'd test it or if it was coming close to production we'd go to them to do testing. We made video recordings of everything that we did and noted down any bugs or playability issues, or any suggestions. We'd note down where a problem was located on the video and try to explain as clearly as we could what caused the issue to happen or what we thought would make a game flow a bit better.'

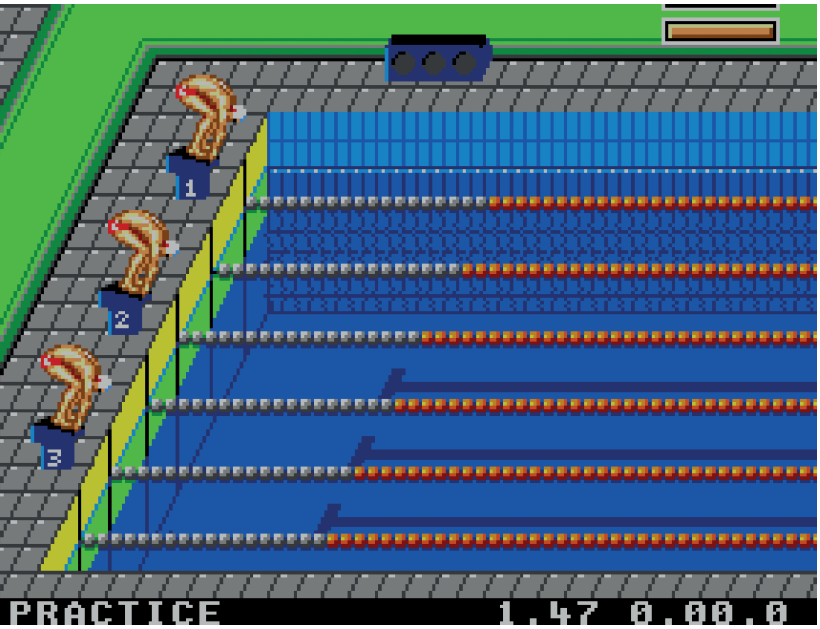
Bottom picture, L to R: Julian Rignall, Stuart Campbell, Paul Glancey, Martin Deem and Simon Hadlington at the European Games Championship, Paris. Woody can be seen between Paul Glancey and Simon Hadlington in the top picture.

What games stood out? 'I remember being producer of *Olympic Gold* in January to March 1992. The last thing I did was *Street Fighter 2*. That was awful! A four-week start to finish debacle. Although I didn't have the title I was effectively acting as producer before I went back to university for my second year.'

Back at Swansea, Simon continued in the role of US Gold remote tester. 'Geoff Brown was really good. US Gold bought me a video recorder and my first 486/33 computer. I used a DOS-based package to type up reports. They'd send me the games by courier to my halls of residence. It was PC games by then and I was getting games for consoles, Mega Drive and SNES games. I was sent a disk with the game on it, and I had a ROM burner on my PC, so I'd burn ROMs and get all my mates to test them, video it and send back the bug stuff to US Gold. I got something like eight quid an hour and US Gold just trusted me on the kind of hours I did. The guys who did the testing were happy. They got to see games before they came out and they got a beer!'







Olympic Gold: Barcelona 92, the official game of the XXV Olympiad and one game Simon Hadlington enjoyed producing for US Gold on Master System, Game Gear and, seen here, on the Mega Drive.

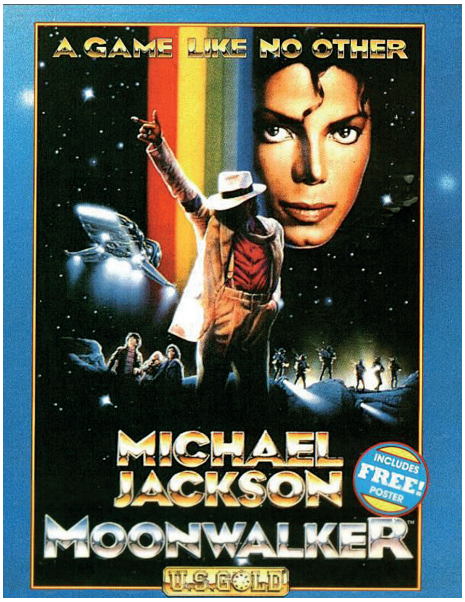
In spite of Tony Porter offering him a permanent job starting at £25,000 Simon went on to get a first and after graduating took a job with British Gas at a substantial pay cut. 'They only offered me £14,000, but it was a proper job and it was my dad's influence because he still thought games were a flash in the pan. He thought I could still play my games but he didn't think I should be in the games industry because that could crash at any point while people were always going to need gas.'

Aiming for the moon

Martyn Savage dates the arrival of serious play-testing and in-house games production management to the turn of the decade and the first years of the 1990s. 'Testers came in when we began to do more conceptual games. Take *Flashback*, an original product that needed production managers on it, or the Michael Jackson *Moonwalker* game. The game needed more TLC because you're not going from a point where the gameplay had already been done in some form, whether it be C64 or a coin-op.'

While *Flashback* (1992) was an

unqualified success on every format, two years earlier the Michael Jackson licence had fared less well. In the February 1989 issue, *Crash* announced that 'Megastar Michael Jackson is set to appear on the Spectrum this autumn, thanks to US Gold…' and the November issue warbled on in a preview, 'Just around the corner is what US Gold hopes will be what all Jacko fans have been waiting for…about a young chap who sees shooting stars and turns into spooky



things like a huge robot and a sleek racing car.'

Emerald Software, an Irish game publisher-developer founded in Waterford in 1988 was hired to interpret the Michael Jackson film and design the game across all the platforms: Commodore Amiga and C64, Amstrad, Spectrum, Atari ST and PC. It wasn't the first work Emerald had done for US Gold. During 1988–89 they also did

Simon takes on the Street Fighters

'As a producer I was in charge of everything,' says Simon Hadlington, 'from bug-testing to hitting the deadline, and coordinating to making sure that when a milestone was met I'd okay it so the developer could get paid if they were being paid on instalments.'

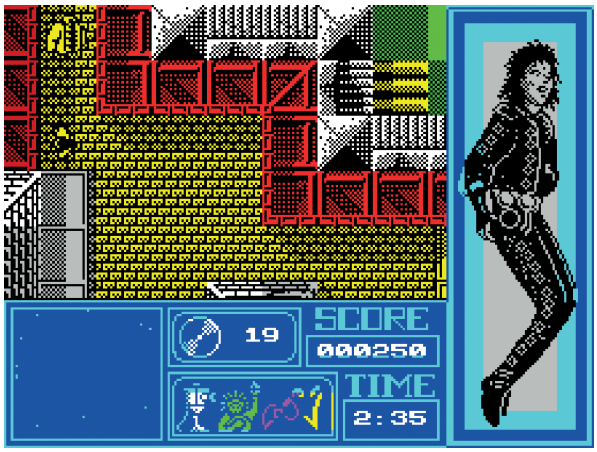
How did he choose which company to use for the conversions?

'Geoff would get the licence and then it was a *fait accompli* and it was over to you then to turn it into something. Really it was a question of who was the



cheapest and who could do it the quickest. It was cash that talked, or timing. It didn't matter about the quality back then. For example, on *Street Fighter II* there were certain teams who could be used – Creative Materials, Tiertex, Probe – and you'd say we've got to start this and finish it in four weeks. Have you got a team that can do this? There was a preference to use Tiertex whenever possible because of US Gold having a stake in them. For this game Tiertex got the job of producing the Spectrum version and Creative Materials did the rest.

'Quite honestly US Gold just released stuff with bugs in it, and didn't care because that was Woody's job to cover it and try to get the good reviews even if the game was a pile of crap.'





Tim Chaney reckons that US Gold's creative skills were thin and that they were better at converting existing games such as arcade coin-ops. 'Giving us a film or band licence would always end badly.' The Michael Jackson licence should have been US Gold's *Frankie Goes to Hollywood*…but it wasn't. Screens above are from the Spectrum, Amstrad, C64 and Amiga versions.

conversions of *Vigilante* and *The Deep*, but this was much more critical because Michael Jackson's 'people' had final approval of the finished game and back in Holford Way Geoff Brown and the production guys were jittery over what they'd seen of *Moonwalker*.

'It was an abysmal game! I thought,' says Geoff. 'Oh my God I can't take this over. I know, I'll send Mike Wilding over. So we sent him out to L.A. He stayed in a fantastic hotel. The night before he was going to get the approvals from the lawyer, he decided to do a… well, a selfie. So he put his camera on the balcony, ran around through the living room and through the bedroom door, and got a photo of himself. The thing was the

"That's a good story for a bad product!"

bedroom door was glass, and it was shut. And he ran through a glass door. There's a picture of him, covered in blood and shards of glass. He was taken to the hospital by paramedics and called me up from the hospital. I've got a problem, he says. What's the problem? And he says, I'm in hospital and I'm covered in blood, I've cut my head and slashed my nose and I've got to go and see Michael Jackson's lawyer tomorrow.

'I told him he'd better discharge himself then, and get on with it!

'So he goes to see this lawyer next morning, covered in bandages and blood all over his head and walks in. Mike's dripping blood on the lawyer's white carpet and the guy says, What am I supposed to do anyway? `Mike tells him he just wants him to approve the game. So the lawyer says, well I can't run it – I don't have a PC. But he's feeling so sorry for Mike, he signs it off never having seen the game. Mike gets back on the flight all bandaged like the Invisible Man… he comes back to me and I said, did you get it done, Mike?' and he says, yeah I got it done.'

Geoff has a good laugh. 'That's a good story for a bad product! But you know, US Gold was a little bit like that; it was a very good marketing machine.'

In spite of Geoff's gloomy prediction,





Moonwalker did a bit better than he'd anticipated and received a mixed reaction from the magazines, *C&VG* giving it a resounding 90%, with the rest of the specific 8-bit titles ranging between 60% and 70%. But that wasn't good enough for what was supposed to have been the Christmas 'biggie', US Gold's *Frankie Goes To Hollywood*.

The case of *Flashback* was different, as Geoff explains. 'I'd heard about Delphine and I went to visit them in Paris and they said, we've got this game in development – but we haven't got a name for it. I said, I'll think of a name, and they showed me the way the rotoscope worked. I was knocked out. I said, that's it! I want it. And that's all I saw of the game. I just knew it was going to be good, so I said okay, I'll buy it.'

The rotoscoping – an animation technique in which tracings are made on computer from live action footage to give extremely fluid movements – was not unique, having already been used on *Prince of Persia* (1989/90), but the rotoscoped action in *Flashback* was more sophisticated. Delphine's programmer, Paul Cuisset, designed the Amiga game and US Gold got Chris Gray Enterprises





US Gold pushed out the boat for *Flashback: The Quest For Identity*, not only in going with an original concept that hadn't been on an arcade machine previously but also in converting it for other platforms than its initial 1992 Amiga launch. In 1995 it came out on 3DO, Acorn 32-bit, CD-i, DOS, FM Towns, Genesis, Macintosh, PC-98, SEGA CD, SNES and Jaguar. An iPhone version is also available 'An instant classic…' agreed many magazine reviewers.





Moody and mesmerising screens – two levels from the Amiga version of *Flashback*.

to undertake all the conversions 'Chris Gray had already done some great games for me like *Summer Games*, *Infiltrator* and *Infiltrator II*,' Geoff says, 'so I didn't feel I had to see them all, and I didn't play all the formats.'

By 1990 two new hardware formats every software house had to consider were those of Sega and Nintendo. Sega's 8-bit Master System hit Europe in 1987, the Nintendo Entertainment system during 1986–87, and both giants moved into 16-bit gaming with Sega's Genesis or Mega Drive in 1990 and the Super Nintendo Entertainment System or SNES in 1992.

Among the most valuable of relationships Geoff built was that with Sega over their coin-op games that led to a series of hits and eventually to a valued position when the console market blossomed. The intense rivalry between Sega and Nintendo meant being associated with one prevented any approach to the other. Martyn Savage recalls an incident which could have had fatal consequences.

'We were at CES and received an invitation to attend the big Nintendo party. We'd just signed with Sega to be the only independent Master System publisher in Europe so Geoff said, Do you think we ought to go to the party, Martyn? And I said, as long as we keep a low profile. If we do that we'll be fine. So we go in and it's in this big warehouse with a stage and a long bar table, so I went and got the beers, and I was walking back and all I could hear was this voice saying, and we've got Geoff Brown from US Gold in England. He's now going to give a rendition of "I'm All Shook Up". And so there he is on this stage going *I'm all shook up, uh huh*. I thought, if that's low profile…!'

For US Gold, the relationship with





The original MS DOS version of *Flashback* and below the oleagenous graphics on the Jaguar as Conrad finds himself on the Purple Planet's surface.



Everything was going nicely with 8-bit games and the improved speed and graphics of 16-bit… and then Sega and Nintendo had to go and ruin everything with cartridges. Almost overnight, the gaming world changed as software publishers started to merge in order to cope with the hugely increased manufacturing costs over tape and disk. Only the biggest would survive the changeover.

Sega stood them in good stead when it came to the consoles. 'Sega actually invited us to go and sign up as the first non-Japanese publisher for the Master System,' Martyn Savage insists, though he admits that not everything had gone their way with the Japanese company. 'US Gold enjoyed a free run with Sega for a couple of years or so, as had Ocean with Nintendo, but then Activision got very aggressive and began spending vast amounts of money on licences. Sega very cleverly split what they had between Activision and US Gold, so we had *Out Run* (1988) but then Activision got *Galaxy Force* (1989) and *Power Drift* (1990).'

Nevertheless, the satellite US Gold offices in Europe made them the most attractive partner for Sega.

The coming of (or considering old Atari, the return of) cartridge software was a game changer for software publishers in terms of finances.

SEGA®

Nintendo®

'We were into a different ballpark with cartridge games,' Martyn explains. 'Say you wanted to do a hundred thousand *Indiana Jones*, you had to put up a letter of credit, which came off your bank facility, for a hundred thousand units times whatever the manufacturing cost was. The actual raw material cost of your ultimate selling price is exceedingly high, something like 40%. And therefore it became a different ballpark because not only were you paying the licensors for the licence – LucasArts with *Indiana Jones* – but you had to pay Sega to manufacture the cartridges and deliver them.

'On top of that there was a secondary licence to be able to use the Master System, which they added onto the cartridge manufacturing cost. You're talking a hell of a lot of money, so really we had to float the company on the Stock Exchange and go public if we were going to remain a publisher in the new formats.'



The famous red Nintendo logo turned a medium grey some years ago,

Cleaning up to float

Going public is what a privately owned company does to raise capital for the purposes of expanding its business. It makes an initial public offering (IPO), and thus becomes a publicly owned entity. In principle the process is a simple one, the actuality rarely so. The IPO process starts with the company getting an investment bank to become owners of the shares, to become the underwriters of the IPO, and with the company to set out the number of shares to be issued and their price. The underwriting investment bank's goal is to sell the shares for more than what was paid to the company's original owners.

The path towards floating the Group began with several acts of consolidation and removal. In the first stage in August 1991 US Gold, CentreSoft, and the other businesses were formally brought together under the consolidated name CentreGold. Back in August 1984 Geoff Brown had purchased an off-the-shelf company with the name of Fivefast Ltd, which he renamed Woodward Brown Holdings Ltd, and it was this company which purchased all the shares in all the separate companies within the Group, and was then renamed CentreGold Ltd.

The other businesses were IBD (distribution of low-cost business software and peripherals to small business and retail customers and worth £3.9 million a year), PDQ, (with a turnover of £6.4 million), Electric Dreams which retailed entertainment software, hardware and peripherals through luxury outlets like Harrods, and In-Store Marketing which was basically a support to CenterSoft's customers to provide marketing and merchandising services to software houses.

CENTRE GOLD PLC

CENTREGOLD PLC

No jazzy logos for CentreGold Plc, just whatever typeface suited the situation. These two come from the same annual accounts document, top from the glossy cover, bottom from inside.

And then bit by bit the shedding of relationships commenced. CentreGold bought Jon Woods and David Ward's fifty per cent of US Gold (although David Ward retained 2,500 ordinary £1 shares and a place on the Group board of



Farewell Ocean… farewell Gremlin Graphics… time to simplify US Gold's connections.

directors for the time being). As Geoff says, 'It was good for them. For their initial fifty thousand we bought them out for something like £8 million.'

Tim Chaney's thoughts on the matter are a little darker. 'Later, when US Gold got bigger and CentreSoft became a lot bigger, and Geoff didn't need that funding, he thought about that deal he did back in 1984 and was kicking himself – maybe more Anne than him, but he was so pissed off. Ocean was equal to us, great at marketing and licensing – *Frankie Goes to Hollywood* and *Rambo* – so they were good guys to be associated with. Hah! Rather them than Llamasoft! But the price that Geoff paid for getting them out was a big one. He had no choice, he *had* to get them out of US Gold before he took the Group public because it just looked odd that his biggest competitor in the market held fifty per cent of the publishing company.'



The Tiertex crew in 1989: Chris Brunning, John Prince, Donald Campbell, Andrew Ingram and Mark Tait.

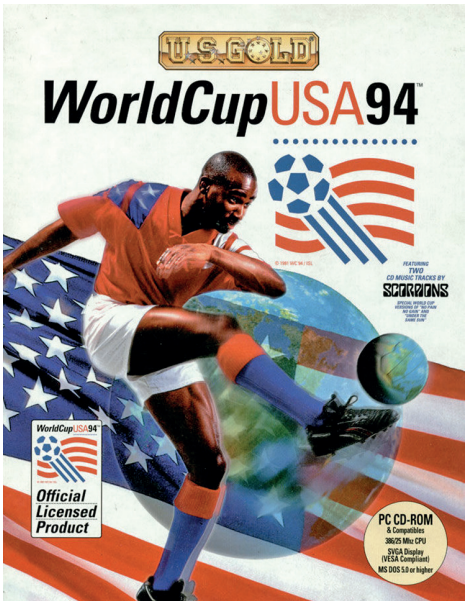
Ian Stewart and Jenny Richardson did well out of it too because Geoff's shares in Gremlin Graphics were held by Woodward Brown Holdings which was becoming CentreGold. 'I gave them all those shares in Gremlin Graphics back for… I think it was £17,000 they paid me,' Geoff recalls. 'Gremlin was doing really well at the time and they both became millionaires.' Which they did: Gremlin Graphics also went public in 1994 as Gremlin Interactive. Two years later Gremlin acquired DMA Design, the developers of *Grand Theft Auto* and *Lemmings*. At the turn of the century Infogrames acquired Gremlin Interactive for a reported £24 million.

Tiertex were dealt with similarly, gaining their independence as software developers and they continued working with CentreGold on games such as *Strider 2*, *Super Kick Off* and *World Cup USA 94*.

The period between the turn of the decade and 1993 were highly profitable.









Indy earned US Gold £5.5 million.



Just four games indicate the level of sales achieved by October 1993. *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (last half 1989) published on seven computer formats and three Sega console formats earned £5.5 million. *Olympic Gold* (May 1992) on Sega consoles hit £8 million. *Street Fighter II* managed £1.5 from its release in December 1992. But the real

staggering winner was *Flashback* on PC, Amiga and Mega Drive, which had delivered £8.5 million since March 1993.

In 1992 US Gold Inc. was established to market and distribute console cartridges published by US Gold in the USA and in the three years from 1991–93 its turnover and profits rose at an astonishing rate. The figures below are in millions.

Turnover	**1991**	**1992**	**1993**
Publishing	11,426	22,385	31,022
Distribution	26,711	32,719	36,963
Totals	38,137	55,104	67,985

The prospectus for potential purchasers of CentreGold shares included a summary of CentreSoft and US Gold's trading record, which makes interesting reading (*see side panel and charts, right*).

In August 1993 David Ward resigned his place on the board, Martyn Savage became Group managing director and Tim O'Connell, who had advanced to the position of financial director for US Gold, became Group financial director in time for the Group to go public. 'As well as the European offices I looked after our US operation. I also become responsible for the Group's legal side of things and in that capacity I was involved with the solicitors on all the commercial and licensing agreements including with LucasArts for *Indiana Jones* and for the Olympics.'

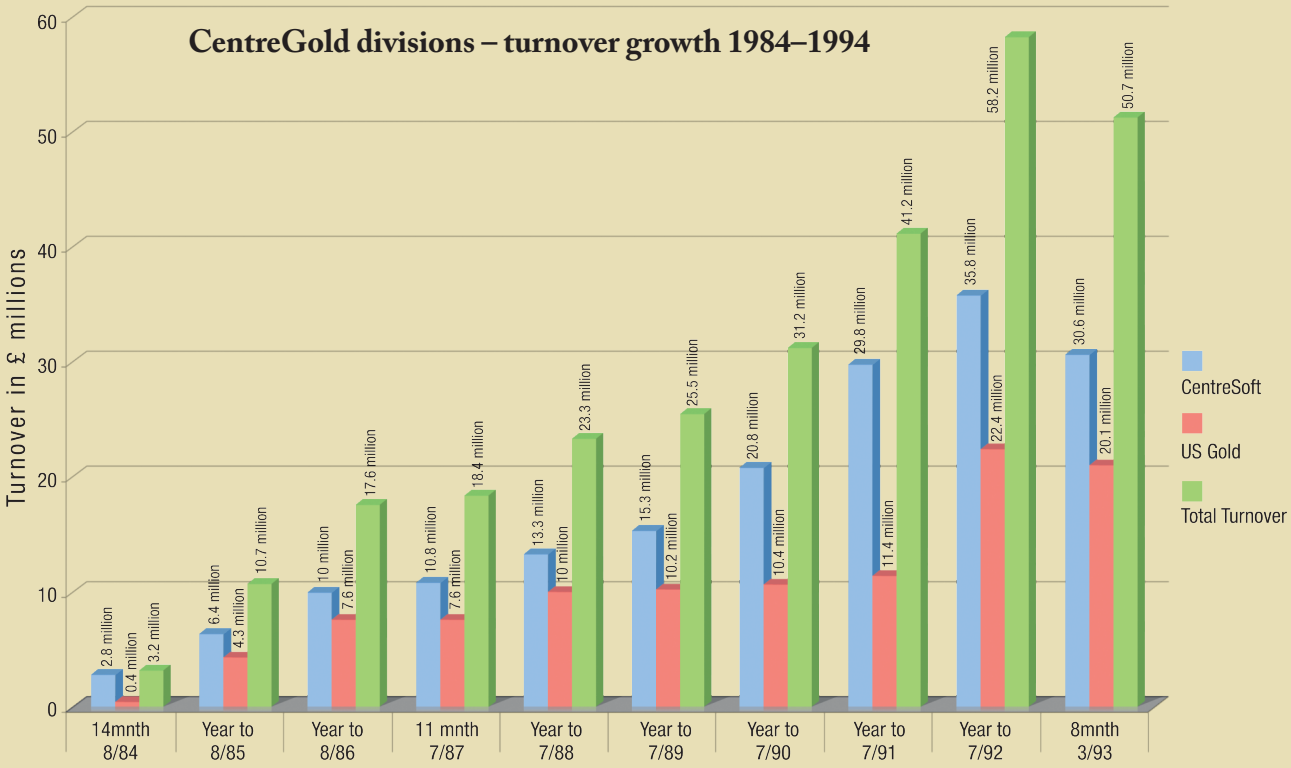
US Gold secured the International Olympics Committee's endorsement for *Olympic Gold*, based on a number of events at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games. Programmed by Tiertex and released on Sega Master System, Mega Drive and Game Gear, reviews were largely favourable, with *Sega Force* awarding the game 85%.

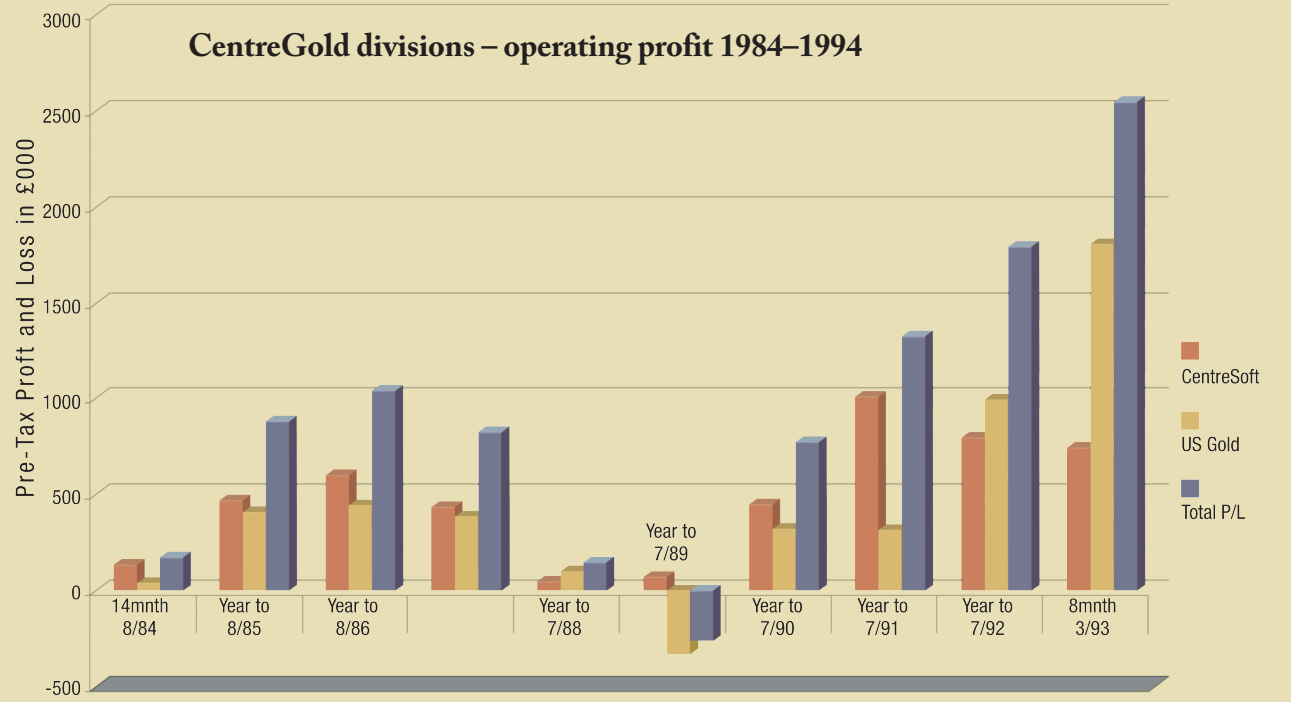
To general industry astonishment 1992 represented another milestone, when long-standing negotiations with the other console giant came to fruition and Nintendo signed a contract to allow US Gold to publish games on its formats without any caveat about not also working with Sega.

And may all who sail…

In mid-October 1993 *The Birmingham Post*'s City correspondent announced that CentreGolds's prospectus was published, that the price of shares would be announced to the City of London on 19 October and the deadline for applications would be 22 October. He wrote: 'More people in the UK buy video games than recorded music, according to Mr Geoff Brown, who for a one-time rock guitarist is surprisingly happy about the fact.' He noted that CentreGold 'will make its stock market debut valued at £50 million, bringing Mr Brown, retaining a 35% stake in the Group, a £17.5 million windfall.'

The Times reported that CentreGold would raise about an extra £10 million to fund growth after winning exclusive video game rights for the Winter Olympics and the 1994 football World





Despite continuing growth, CentreGold's profitability was subject to the hardware generation cycles and this chart shows the dip in profits in 1988/89, between the home computer boom and the introduction of the 8-bit hand-held consoles and the Sega and Nintendo 16-bit consoles. Note in 1992/93 US Gold's profit overtakes CentreSoft's.

Stampede for shares as investors go for Centregold

A MASSIVE stampede is taking place for shares in stock market newcomer CentreGold. And a big premium is on the cards when dealings start on Thursday.

Applications have flooded in for a total of 120.5m shares [illegible] 34m up for grabs. The video games











Computer king to zap stock market

By STEPHEN KAHN

COMPUTER games whiz Geoff Brown — a former rock musician and maths teacher — has turned a £200 investment into a £17 million fortune in just 10 years.

His **CentreGold** company — a Birmingham-based computer and video games publisher and distributor — is set to join the stock market with a £50 million price-tag on October 28.

Apart from his 35 per cent stake, Brown, 47, will collect £1 million or so in share sales.

A computer buff, he began importing games for his own amusement from the U.S. but quickly realised the potential to supply local retailers.

With a £200 nest-egg and the help of his now ex-wife, Anne Sharpe, they built up CentreSoft distributors and in 1984 formed games publisher US Gold.

Anne is now a non-executive [illegible] her share [illegible] about £5 [illegible] flotation.

[illegible] is run [illegible] managing [illegible] Savage and [illegible] O'Con-

[illegible] in a [illegible] by [illegible]

CentreGold seeks listing and funds for growth

By MARTIN BARROW

[illegible]EGOLD, which [illegible]5 per cent share of [illegible]mputer game mar-[illegible]g a full listing on [illegible]xchange, with a [illegible] of about £50 [illegible]mpany is going [illegible]a placing and [illegible] offer worth [illegible]illion.

[illegible]treGold, which will [illegible]aise about £10 million for expansion, says that it wants to fund growth after winning exclusive video game rights for the Winter Olympics and football World Cup next year.

Since 1989, CentreGold has been distributing Sega video games and intends to extend links into Nintendo games formats. In the past two years, CentreGold's profits have doubled to £2.7 million on sales of £68 million. The lion's share of its profits, about £[illegible] million, came from the [illegible] lishing side of the busine[illegible] the last trading year to Jul[illegible]

The price will be announc[illegible] on October 19 and the dea[illegible] line for applications is Octobe[illegible] 22. The basis of allocation wil[illegible] be made public three days [illegible] later.

CentreGold's existing man-agement, headed by Geoff Brown, the chief executive, and including Martyn Sav-age, managing director, and Tim O'Connell, finance direc-tor, will retain an interest in half of the company. P[illegible] to the issue ar[illegible] Court.

Deadlines set for CentreGold to hit market

By ANDREW LEACH
City Correspondent

More people in the UK buy video games than recorded music according to Mr Geoff Brown, who for a one-time rock guitarist is surprisingly happy about the fact.

The reason is that while still a keen musician with a record-ing studio in his home Mr Brown is also chief executive of Birmingham-based computer games company CentreGold.

Later this month CentreGold will make its stock market de-but valued at about £50 mil-lion bringing Mr Brown a mul-ti-million pound windfall.

Mr Brown, a former maths teacher in Walsall, will keep a stake of about 35 per cent in the group, worth about £17.5 million. He founded the business as a hobby with £200 ten years ago.

Other management will hold on to about a 15 per cent stake in the company. The first of its kind to join the publish-ing sector of the stock market, CentreGold yesterday pub-lished its pathfinder prospectus which revealed the price of the group's shares would be an-nounced on October 19.

The deadline for applications is October 22 with the basis of allocation made public three days later and dealing expected to begin on October 28.

The flotation is via a placing and intermediaries offer and after some existing sharehold-ers have taken cash will raise about £10 million.

The company, which employs 231, will use the cash to fund its development including a game based on the Winter Olympics for which it has the worldwide computer licence.

CentreGold also has the worldwide video game rights to next year's soccer World Cup finals in the US.

The group claims a share of up to 15 per cent of the UK computer games market which is forecast to be worth £1 bil-lion by 1995.

Since 1989 CentreGold has been distributing Sega video games and intends to extend links into Nintendo formats.

In the last two years its prof-its have doubled to £2.7 mil-lion on sales of £68 million with most of its profits, £2 million, from the publishing side of the business in the last trading year to July.

Birmingham's professional firms are helping CentreGold with the float including its solicitors Needham & James, Wragge & Co solicitors to the issue, the Birmingham office of Arthur Andersen as auditors and the group has been ad-vised by brokers Smith New Court.



off Brown, left, chief executive, Tim O'Connell, centre, and Martin Savage yesterday

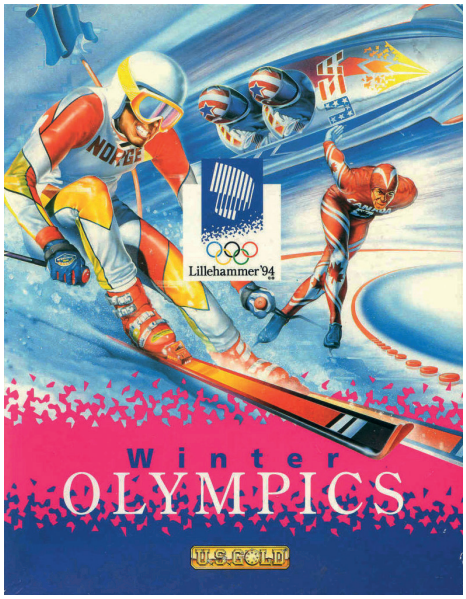


Gold-diggers: From left, Tim O'Connell, financial director; Geoff Brown, chief executive and founder, and Martyn Savage, managing director of CentreGold.

6 October 1993
Press launch of CentreGold's pathfinder prospectus: Geoff Brown, Tim O'Connell and Martyn Savage pretend to be games players for the press cameras.



Winter Olympics: Lillehammer 94, one of the biggest sellers of the year.



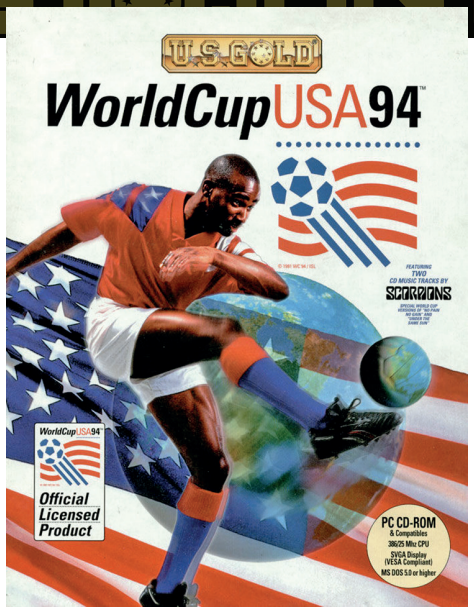


Cup. The *Daily Telegraph* reckoned 'CentreGold has the Midas Touch', and in a more typically brash announcement the *Daily Express* headlined 'Computer King to zap stock market'. The smiles in the press pictures reflected that Martyn Savage and Tim O'Connell, as well as several other senior managers, were to share in the 15% stake retained in the Group. Shortly before the IPO David Ward, the last Ocean director, resigned his position on the board of CentreGold's directors.

The flotation was a staggering success. Applications flooded in for 120.5 million shares, compared to the 8.34 million up for grabs, meaning the IPO was oversubscribed by more than 14 times. It was now down to CentreGold plc to perform to the City's satisfaction. For the first time the publishing arm's turnover began to overtake CentreSoft's distribution income (*see the lower graph on page 105*) as a reflection of the16-bit consoles' advance into the gaming market and the higher price of cartridges. Even the higher-quality budget label Kixx XL put on a spurt from its initial launch-year sales of £1.8 million to £3.1 million by 1994.

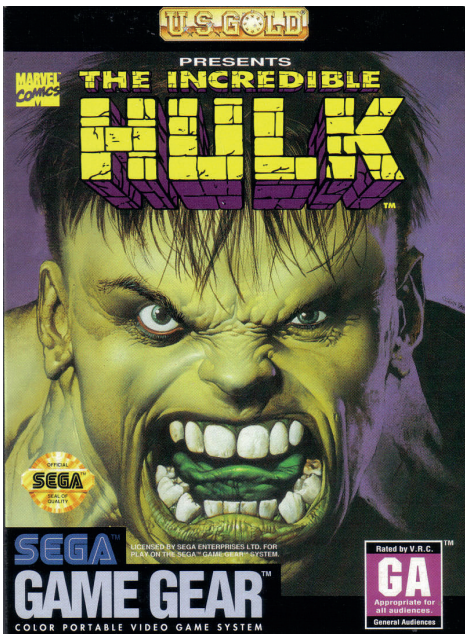
In the States US Gold rapidly established itself, starting with a staff of two and expanding rapidly to eight. In 1993 *Flashback* on the Sega Genesis was a huge hit and the first Nintendo titles began to come through. *Winter Olympics: Lillehammer 94*, *World Cup USA 94* (both programmed by Tiertex) and *The Incredible Hulk* (Probe) were big sellers before the downturn set in. In 1995 the existing hardware platforms lost sales momentum and software sales correspondingly declined markedly.

'I wouldn't have opened US Gold in America,' Martyn says in reflection. 'I wouldn't have gone into the American market. I think that was a step too far.





It wasn't profitable. Distribution in the States is all based on sale-or-return, so it hurts if you're going to sell a 100,000 units and then you get half of the copies back.' He agrees it was important to be seen as a publisher in America. 'If you got the licence for, say, the Olympics you had to give the IOC a guarantee for the world, so you had to be seen in the States. But there was no CentreSoft-US so we had to subcontract the distribution, which meant we had no control.'



Silicon at the Core

On 26 October 1994 Colin West, CentreGold's non-executive chairman, wrote to all the shareholders. The letter opened with: 'The Company announced today the signing of agreements for the acquisition of Core Design…for a consideration of £5.34 million.'

Ian Stewart's former Gremlin Graphics business partner Kevin Norburn, who founded Core with Jeremy Heath-Smith, had sold his 990 shares in Core on 15 January 1993, leaving Tim Chaney's *bête noir* Jeremy Smith as the sole shareholder and beneficiary of CentreGold's acquisition.

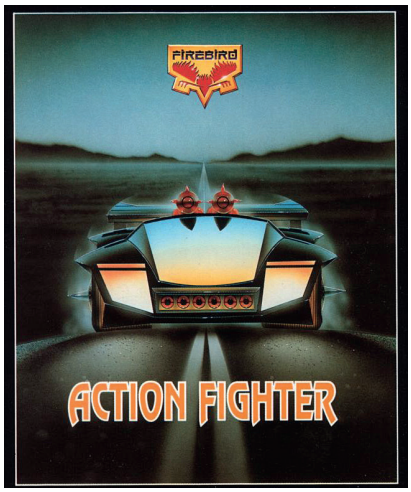
The chairman went on to write, 'Core benefits from stable management and development teams and employs 34 programmers, artists and designers. Core develops and publishes games across many sectors of the market, including

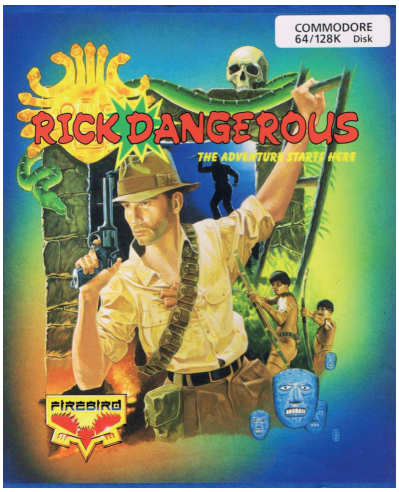
World Cup USA 94 proved a popular hit in the States as well as Europe, while *The Incredible Hulk* received all-round critical praise, particularly on the Game Gear, though *Game Pro* was cooler on the Mega Drive version, while liking the well-done graphics.

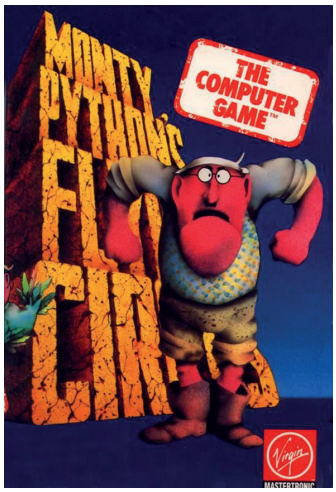


role-playing games, arcade style and platform games. Core publishes its entertainment software under the "Core Design" label and a related budget label, "Corkers".'

One sound reason for the shareholders of CentreGold agreeing to pay Heath-Smith a fortune (he signed the final agreement on the 27th) showed in the letter's sixth paragraph. 'In addition to products for existing hardware formats, Core is also developing games for the new 32-bit games consoles which are gradually expected to replace the existing hardware platforms. The first Sega 32-bit system is due for launch in the UK in November 1994.'







Pre CentreGold Core, a selection of the publisher's games: *Action Fighter* (1988), *Rick Dangerous* (1989), *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1990), *Chuck Rock* and *Heimdall* (1991), and *Blob* (1993).

Core, set up in 1988 in Derby, had enjoyed a string of well-respected games among some forty released at the time of the CentreGold acquisition, but as Geoff Brown knew, Core had serious funding problems; this in spite of having become the smallest publisher to get a Sega licence to develop for their platforms. Releases for Master System, Game Gear and Mega Drive went well, but Core committed heavily to development for the ill-fated Mega CD accessory that allowed the Genesis/Mega Drive to play games developed on CD and for the short-lived Sega 32X add-on (which the anticipated Sega Saturn wiped out). When the cash ran out, Geoff stepped in looking to expand CentreGold through acquisitions.

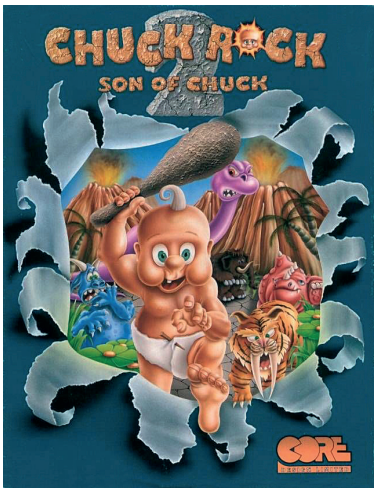
'I knew Jeremy through my ownership of Gremlin Graphics as he was Gremlin's sales manager for a while where he learnt the ropes from Ian Stewart and then went off to form his own company, taking some of the Gremlin staff with him – something Ian was not too pleased about at the time. So I went to see their products and made an offer to Jeremy of almost three million

in cash and £2.7 million in CentreGold shares. But I'd seen development on *Tomb Raider* and I thought, Shit! That is a fantastic product.'

Martyn Savage was less sure, particularly with the advent of fifth-generation, 32-bit consoles. 'When it comes to investing in a new product I think it's a no-brainer for something like *Indiana Jones*. It's when you come out with new ideas it's more of a concern because you haven't got a back history for it and what you're going to do with the game. And we paid a lot of money for Core, and if you'd said then that *Tomb Raider* was going to be a massive hit… well, you just didn't know at the time. For me, as a risk-averse person, it was new territory.'



Jeremy Heath-Smith, executive producer on the two *Tomb Raider* films is now CEO of software specialists Spike Global.







However Geoff was convinced that he was seeing the next generation of video gaming in development. 'It was saying here's a great game. Like with *Beach-Head*, I went and spotted it and thought it was great. I went to France and thought the same of *Flashback*. So I had this nose or eye, you could say. I never really played any of these games, I just saw them and said, Yes! I like that. That's innovative. That's great. Let's market it. Let's sell it. Sometimes it didn't work but most of the time I was spot on.

Geoff had always agreed with Tim Chaney that US Gold needed no in-house programming teams, but 1994 turned out to be a watershed on that matter. 'I never wanted an in-house team,' he says in defence of his 1980s position. 'If you pay someone's salary every month, they expect it – regardless of whether there is a quality issue or they're late, they still get their salary. Working with a third-party developer we can say we're not paying you because you didn't meet this milestone or you didn't meet this criteria, or quality. And so I always thought it was better to use external people rather than





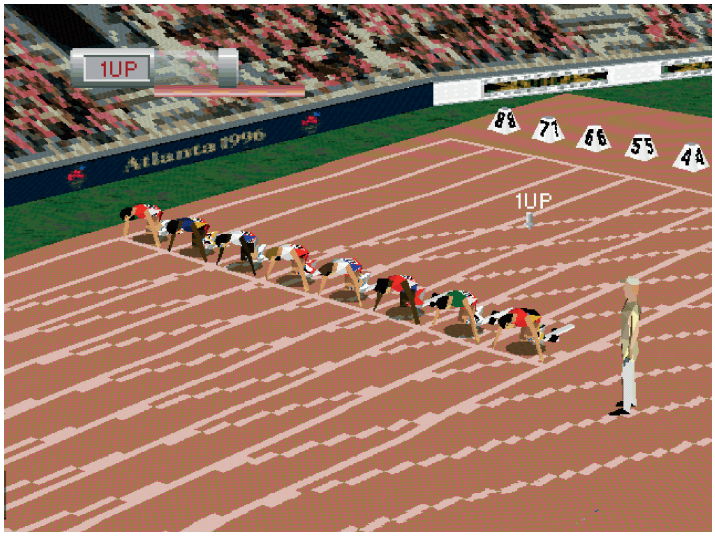
The coming of the 32-bit consoles upped the ante for British software publishers and developers, even as manufacturing costs dropped from cartridge-based ROMs to CD-ROMs. Top: Sega Saturn, released in July 1995 in Europe, shortly after the first Sony PlayStation. Above: the 3DO Interactive Multiplayer, the first models released in 1993, proved a dead end for developers.

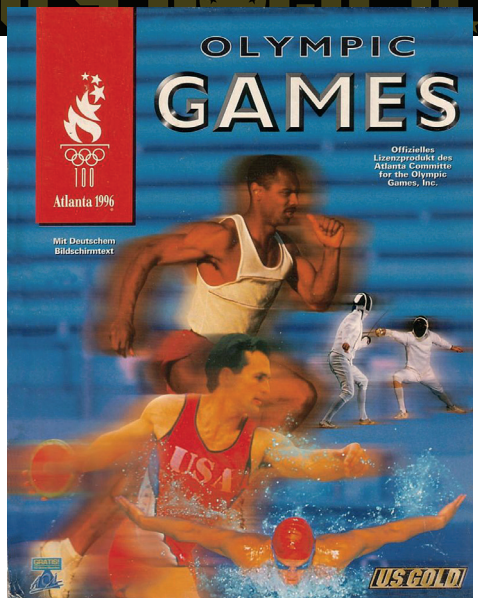
Silicon Dreams

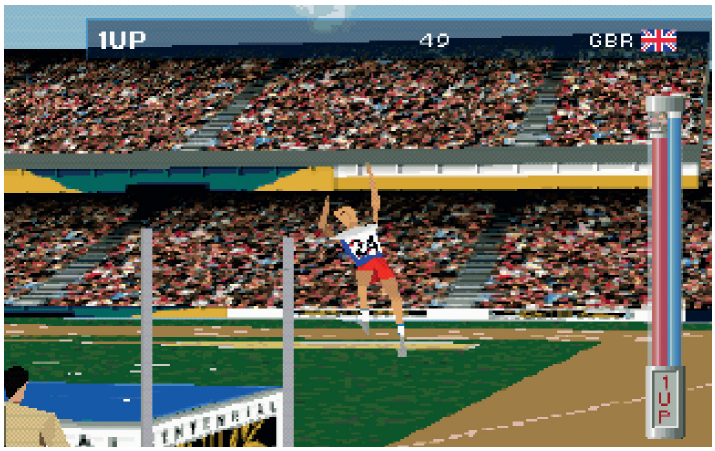
an internal team because you could crack the whip a little bit more.'

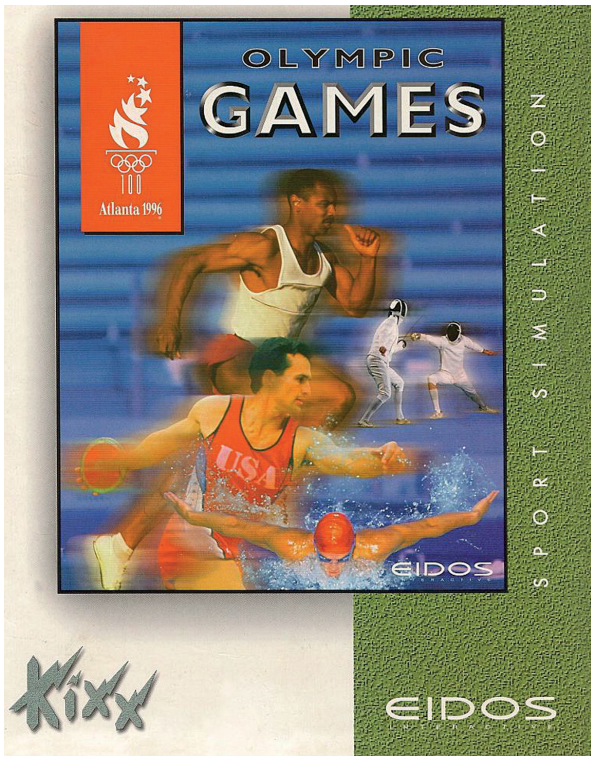
Charles Cecil might disagree with the payment-withholding whip, but in any event the directors of CentreGold 'recognised the increasing importance for game software publishers to have their own in-house development capability.' Somewhat earlier in the same year the Group acquired Core, US Gold set up Silicon Dreams as a US Gold sub-division, principally to develop sports games for the new 32- and 64-bit CD-based consoles. High on the target list was the Atlanta 1996 Olympics. Silicon Dreams was no small facility. Nobuhiko Ishihara, who set up the Sega Enterprises third-party licensing and development programme in Europe, headed up a team of 56 personnel based in Banbury and expected to expand to over 70 by the end of 1995.

The equipment inventory was mid-1990s state-of-the art: 11 Silicon Graphics Indigo (Series 2) Extreme workstations; 'Flock of Birds' motion capture system – a rotoscope capture for human movement; several Pentium DX2 workstations for code development; 16 Apple Mac Quadra and PowerPCs used as graphics workstations; five Sony PlayStations, five Sega Saturns and four 3DO development stations; two fully equipped sound studios; video production facilities for producing promotional videos; and – which tells you this it was twenty years ago – a staggering 40GB of server storage! (It is reminiscent of the memory restrictions laid on Spectrum coders twelve years previously with 16K or 48K to work with.) However, apart from *Olympic Games: Atlanta 1996* the remaining output of Silicon Dreams, as with Core, was to belong to Eidos Interactive.









Silicon Dreams' first and last US Gold game based on the 1996 Atlanta Olympic games was a big hit. Eidos then released it on the budget Kixx label acquired along with all US Gold's subsidiaries.

Dissolution and dispersion

It seemed as if nothing could stop the steamroller that CentreGold plc had become, with its global reach, its continuing valuable portfolio of licensors – if suddenly without LucasArts – just about the most successful software brand and two of the most powerful games development units. And yet it fell apart at the moment of its greatest achievement.

'We were the first video game distributor-publisher to go public on the Stock Exchange, and I made a hell of a lot of money then, tens of millions of pounds…' Geoff pauses, trying to find the right words. 'I don't know, but I sort of lost the motivation, took my eye off the ball. And then we started to suffer really. We had problems with LucasArts, which we lost, and I just lost the impetus.'

It certainly was a blow when LucasArts became the second major licensor after MicroProse to part

company with US Gold. (LucasArts signed up with Virgin Interactive where CEO Tim Chaney had lured them.) The loss of such lucrative product had a predictable effect on income.

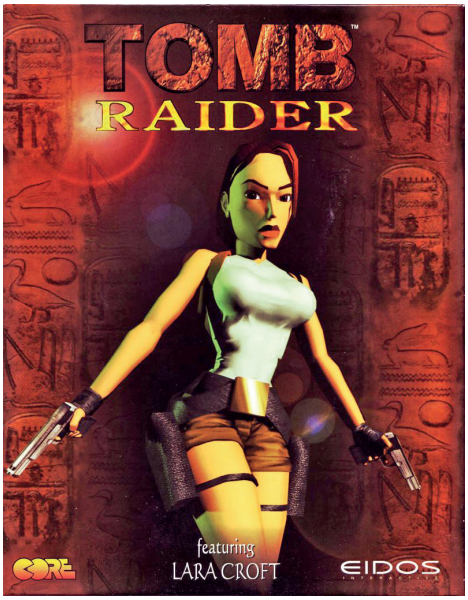
'*Tomb Raider* is going to be a phenomenal game…' Below: screens from the PlayStation and Sega Saturn versions; opposite page: a beautiful waterfall in the DOS edition.

EIDOS CLOSE TO MAKING AN OFFER FOR CENTREGOLD wrote the American *Computer Business Review* on 4 March 1996. 'A year or so after it floated, CentreGold stumbled badly as buyers held off from mature 8-bit and 16-bit games on the promise of snazzier 32-bit ones. Eidos is at an advanced stage of due diligence and CentreGold chief executive Geoffrey Brown has given Eidos an irrevocable undertaking in respect of his 29.1% of the shares provided any Eidos offer is worth at least 40 pence per share.'





And on 29 March: 'Furiously integrating vertically, Eidos Plc, which already bought three games companies to complement its multimedia hardware side, has now reached definitive agreement for the acquisition of games distributor CentreGold Plc. The offer



values each CentreGold share at about 40 pence, against a price in the market of 37 pence ahead of the deal. It values CentreGold at £17.2m – a far cry from the 1993 valuation on flotation, when

the shares were placed at 125 pence and soared to 167 pence in first-day trading. CentreGold Plc accompanied the above news yesterday with figures showing a first half pre-tax loss of £1m on turnover that slipped 4% to £39.3m.'

'Looking back I should have stepped aside because I was never designed to be CEO of a public company,' Geoff says. So there were no regrets? 'None at all! After fourteen years I was really glad to sell it. I should have perhaps become chairman and let someone else run the public company. It's a very different animal, reporting to the City, constantly showing profits and stuff, and interviews with business magazines. Well, that just was not me. I was more the rock 'n' roll businessman. But I was fed up with it all to be honest, and I was cashing in,' Geoff says with no evident regret. 'I thought, let's sell it, sell it and make even more money. In the end it actually became a bit of a chore, a conveyor belt that I really couldn't step off.'

Which oddly echoes Tim Chaney's sentiments of eight years back. Although Tim was aware Geoff disliked the thought of him joining International Development Group when he resigned from US Gold he thought they had parted on reasonably good terms. So he didn't expect what drifted back to his ears before Christmas 1989. 'There was an annual awards dinner at the end of the year called the InDin, which I didn't go to that year. US Gold won an award and in accepting it Geoff said: Three good things have happened this year. We've done this so-and-so, we've done that so-and-so, and Tim Chaney left. That got back to me the next day, and I didn't understand why he would say that. Was it funny? I guess people laughed because

The final version of the US Gold logo, 1994–96.

"Looking back I should have stepped aside because I was never designed to be CEO of a public company."



by then they were all pissed. Well the day CentreGold went public I bumped into Geoff at some industry thing, and he sat beside me, and he said, Tim, I don't care what happens to US Gold now. I've made so much money I don't care any more. I said, oh okay, that's good, good for you.

PIVOTAL GAMES

Since then I've done a couple of deals with Geoff and we're fine.'

'We had moments when we didn't agree about some things,' says Geoff, 'but he was the MD of the company and we got on okay, we never rowed. But Tim was a very strong character.'

Geoff became worldwide publishing director for Eidos with Jeremy Heath-Smith as his assistant. 'On the completion of the sale I immediately focused the Eidos board's attention on the potential of *Tomb Raider*.



Conflict: Desert Storm, released in September 2002, spawned four more successful sequels for Pivotal Games.



'I held a massive meeting at the International Convention Centre in Birmingham. We presented the game to all the Eidos staff, all the sellers and the magazines, and I said *Tomb Raider* is going to be a phenomenal game. And of course, it went on to be a massive success and it became a franchise. And in Lara Croft it was the first video game with a woman as the hero.

'More than any previous product I had released I paid a massive amount for *Tomb Raider* – and did so against the CentreGold board's advice – so to protect that investment I was involved intimately in the design, development, timing and branding of the product. I knew it would be a massive hit and that was proved right as the franchise went on to sell well over 40 million copies and spawned two

movies. It was really a kind of swansong for me as I didn't even publish it through US Gold because the company was sold to Eidos prior to its release. It was good to be proved right anyway!'

Tomb Raider appeared first on the Sega Saturn, but the game is largely held to be responsible for Sony's PlayStation success in the mid-1990s, helping to ship over 100 million PlayStation consoles before going on to appear on every platform then and since.

Olympic Games: Atlanta 1996 was the last game to bear the US Gold Logo. Eidos did away with the brand and in 1997 sold off CentreSoft to Activision, and it remains to this day Britain's biggest distributor of hardware, software and peripherals, based where Geoff left it on Holford Way, Birmingham. The end of the US Gold tale is not the end of the Geoff Brown story. 'I was just never really cut out for the corporate life,' he says now. 'I enjoyed the more creative and entrepreneurial side of the games business.' He was as unhappy in the corporate world of Eidos as he'd been in CentreGold Plc and soon resigned to pursue his own interests.

'I did *Conflict: Desert Storm* with Pivotal Games and I owned the company at one point before Sales Curve Interactive acquired it, before SCI bought up Eidos. I did *Rollcage* with Attention to Detail, and I owned that company as well — that was all part of what I called the second group. Psygnosis published *Rollcage* for Windows and PlayStation. I did more Olympics and stuff like that, that was Gusto Games, for which I took on former guys from Silicon Dreams in 2003 and put them in a studio near Banbury. For a short while we had a second studio in Derby, but I



Android app *Soccer Moves* from Geoff Brown's Fairplay Media has been a hit in numerous countries.



Hanging out on your phone for a game of fottball, *Soccer Moves* and *Soccer Moves 2*.



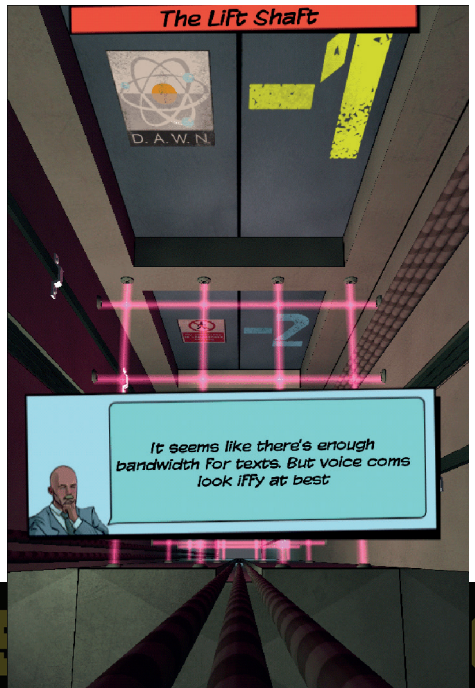
liquidated the company in 2012, and I've ended up with Fairplay Media, based in Birmingham.'

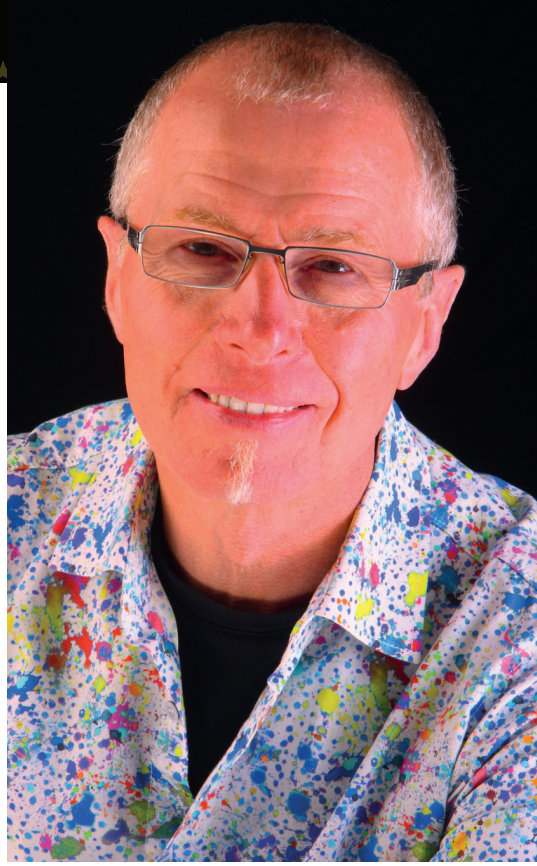
Fairplay started up in April 2007 and specialises in sports-related games for iOS and Android. At the time of interviewing Geoff, Fairplay was about to publish *Soccer Moves* on Android, which has since been number one in 41 countries. 'Yes, we're an app company, and we just licensed the International Table Tennis Federation of China, the number one table tennis federation worldwide, so yes, I'm still working.'

When he looks back at his career in computer and video games, what makes Geoff Brown smile? 'I think really you could say I had an unsuccessful









Geoff Brown, pictured in 2015, still keeps busy with games publishing while enjoying a revived music career in America.

Comic-strip action on Android: In Fairplay Media's most recent release, *MacGyver – Deadly Descent.*

music career – I had some great bands but I never really made it. But I took that model of music, with its musicians, with its charts, singles, great hits, compilation albums, and I sort of overlaid that onto the games business. That makes me smile in some ways because I think coming from a non-business background, from the pop music side to the fledgling video game business, I brought creative thinking to the software scene. It was like pop music – except no one knew who the artists were. If Probe wrote a great game you wouldn't go and buy the next Probe game, but if it was *Out Run* you'd buy *Out Run 2*. So what makes me smile is that it was quite a simple concept that I created.

'And it all came from four things: my initial education in maths and physics; my musical background in bands and recordings; my first job as a computer programmer; and my last 'real' job as a maths teacher. Roll all those up and you have… VIDEO GAMES!'

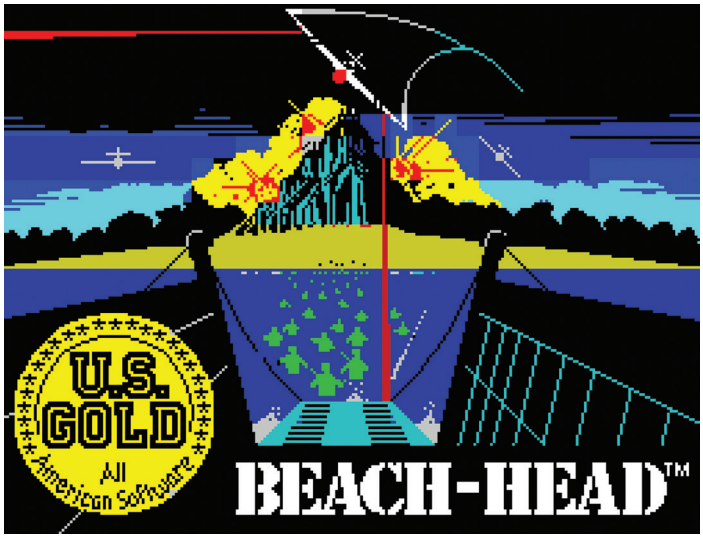
■ ❑ ■



F.D THORPE

A celebration of the noted architect and illustrator who enjoyed a short second career as a loading screen star, working on the ZX Spectrum to produce fantastic pixel compositions for many of US Gold's best-known games.

The quality of US Gold's early Spectrum games varied wildly, with the likes of *Beach-Head* and *Spy Hunter* celebrated as classics while flops like *Flak* and *Buck Rogers* are all but forgotten. But there was one consistent element to all of these games, good or bad, and that was a fantastic loading screen. The distinctive style identified a single author who was clearly head and shoulders above everyone else creating Spectrum artwork at the time. The screens were packed with detail, splashed with brilliant colour and deftly composed so that attribute clashes were all but eliminated. In short, they were as close to the cover art as anyone could expect on the Spectrum.



Beach-Head, Thorpe's first loading screen for US Gold.

Not only were they created by someone at the top of his game but also somebody with modesty to spare. There were no initials to identify the author on any of these screens for US Gold games and you'd have to wait until 1986 and *Kung-Fu Master* to finally see a moniker. There, on another great screen (attached to a not-so-great game) was the name F.D Thorpe.

Unlike the whizz-kid coders of the games his screens fronted, Frederick David Thorpe came to computers later in life. Having enjoyed a twenty-year career in architecture, with illustration as a sideline, he purchased his first computer – a ZX Spectrum – in 1983, when he was in his mid-forties. He acquired a copy of the popular art program *Melbourne Draw* and used this to create his screens – although his overall method owed a lot to his technical training. 'I always drew my loading screens on squared paper before converting them to the Spectrum with *Melbourne Draw*,' he says. 'In many cases it was difficult to convert game





Aerial action in *Blue Max* and *Zaxxon*.



Contrasting colours used to fine effect in both *Raid over Moscow* and *Spy Hunter*.





Bruce Lee on the Spectrum, developed by US Gold rival Ocean Software.

artwork onto the Spectrum, bearing in mind the two-colour limitation on an eight-by-eight pixel square. It took me approximately twenty hours to produce a loading screen – the drawing out of the design on squared paper taking the majority of the time.'

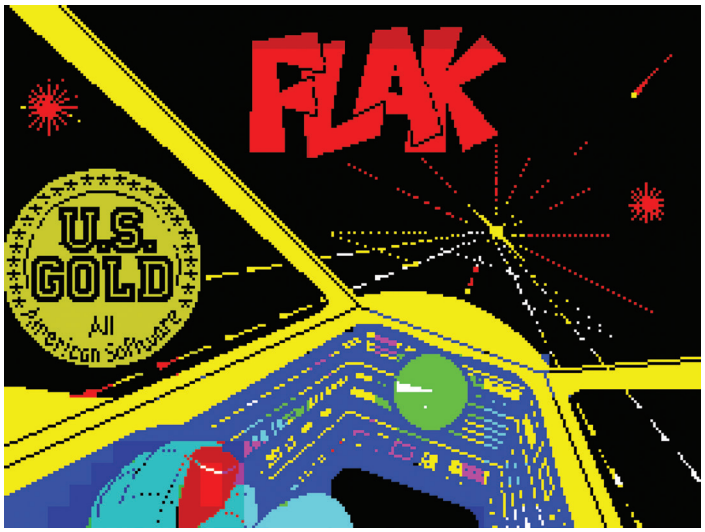
Thorpe's initial work was for Ocean Software. The relationship began when the company decided to publish *Royal Birkdale: Championship Golf*, a game Thorpe had written in BASIC. Ocean's David Ward asked him to add a loading screen to the game and he duly obliged, drawing an instantly recognisable picture of the Royal Birkdale clubhouse. Ward was impressed and asked him to create screens for many of Ocean's early releases including *Kong Strikes Back*, *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. Thorpe was not tied to Ocean however.

'I was totally freelance so I was able to work for any software company,' he says. By late 1984 he was so busy with commissions that he gave up his day job to concentrate on graphics work full time.

As a freelancer he would produce a total of 17 Spectrum loading screens for US Gold (including two for the unreleased games *Conan* and *Up'n Down*) and the results were consistently excellent. His architectural training was clearly evident in the striking screens for *Zaxxon* and *Raid over Moscow* where perspective played an important part. In contrast, it was more straightforward when he wasn't replicating original



Tapper sending under-age bartenders to work across the country.



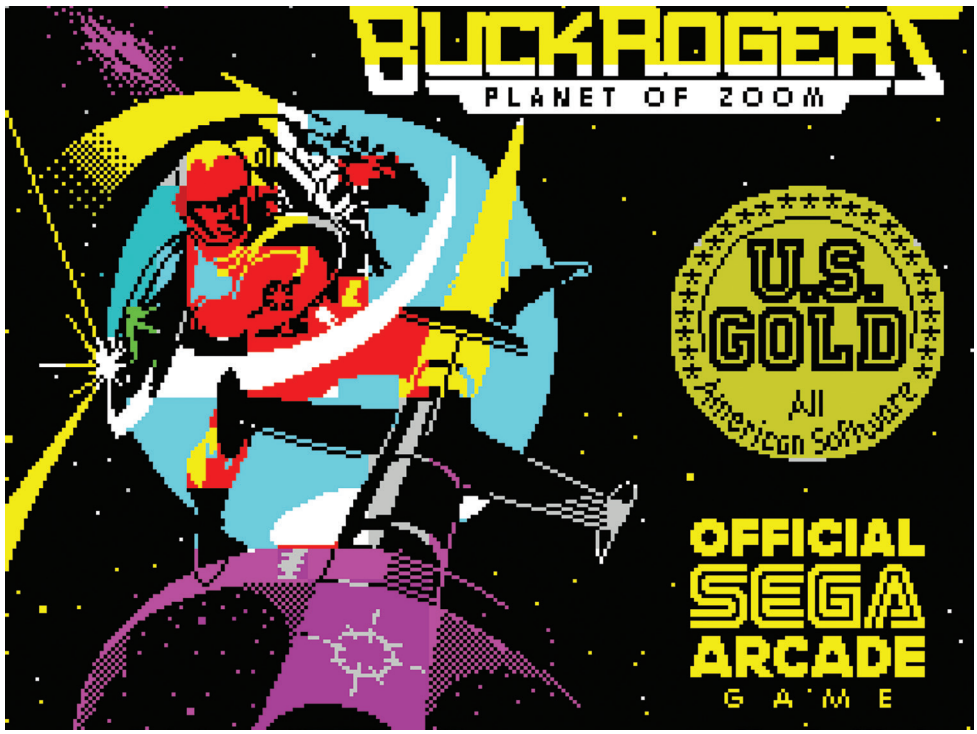
Flak and *Buck Rogers*: memorable loading screens for otherwise forgettable games.

artwork. 'The easiest was the *Winter Games* screen,' he says, 'simply because it was my own design and I had a blank canvas, so to speak.' *Winter Games* and its follow-up *World Games* were slightly different projects for Thorpe as he was called on to create the in-game graphics as well. 'I did enjoy producing sprite animations and background graphics, particularly the *Winter Games* screens. However the loading screens were the most satisfying.'

With the launch of the Amstrad CPC in 1984, several of his Spectrum screens were quickly converted to the Amstrad machine and the results were disappointing.

'The Amstrad screens which were ported from the Spectrum were awful and I really disliked them at the time,' he says, referring to the oddly stretched screens for CPC versions of *Beach-Head* and *Bruce Lee*. 'The CPC was much more flexible with an individual pixel colour available.'

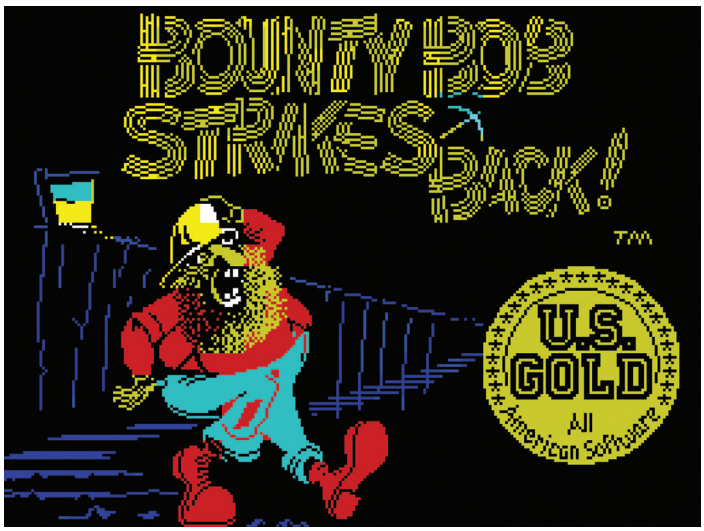
For the CPC version of *Raid over Moscow* (re-titled *Raid*) he created the





The screen for the unreleased Spectrum version of *Conan*, and below *The Dam Busters*.





Bounty Bob scrambles onto the Spectrum, seeking treasure.

loading screen himself from scratch and the result was a multi-coloured classic. He was clearly a fan of the CPC's flexibility so it's surprising that he never drew a single screen for the Commodore 64.

'The ZX Spectrum and the Amstrad CPC were the only systems I used,' he reveals. 'I enjoyed the challenge of the Spectrum but the Amstrad was a much better prospect, and then just when I was relishing the prospect of more commissions it all came to an end.'

Thorpe dabbled on the CPC with this Amstrad *Raid* loading screen.



Thorpe believes that new techniques rendered his services redundant. He says: 'The reason I left the software business was the introduction of digitising, when any skills I had acquired were no longer required by the software companies.'

Digitising – the process whereby the actual artwork is 'captured' and then converted to the target machine – was becoming more and more common, although the results were not necessarily better (look at the digitised loading screens for the two *Indiana Jones games* – *The Temple of Doom* and *The Last Crusade* – and imagine how superior they'd be if Thorpe had interpreted Drew Struzan's original movie artwork instead).

Having created dozens of memorable screens over a four-year period he went back to his original career in 1988.

'I returned to architecture which had its own rewards, as I produced Quay West which is a prestige office building located next to the Imperial War Museum North on the banks of the Manchester Ship Canal.'

Thirty years on and Thorpe is surprised yet gratified that people still admire his screens. 'I'm very touched to think that anybody was interested in my work after all this time. I have now retired, although I do produce a drawing now and then. It might be fun to have another crack on *Melbourne Draw*...'





Beach-Head II, above, and,Kung-Fu Master, one of Thorpe's final screens for US Gold.



The *Leader Board* lady on the cover of #15 *Zzap!64* magazine, painted by Oliver Frey.

memories
are made of this



Donald Campbell

The developer of *World Cup Football* for Artic, Donald went on to head up Tiertex with John Prince – a company that developed a huge number of conversions for US Gold.

The relationship between myself, John Prince and US Gold started before Tiertex was formed. And to be honest, it wasn't really the best of introductions.

I was at University, and my mate's brother had written a game (*Galaxians* which was very good by the way) on the Spectrum for Artic Computing. I thought, 'I could do that,' and indeed I could, so I wrote a few games for Artic – *Milimon* and *Earth Defence*. It was during my second year at University that I decided to write a football game for the Spectrum, which would have been the first of its type for the machine. It took all the Easter break (all of two or three weeks), but *World Cup Football* was written and it was quite a hit with Artic, charting well and receiving some okay reviews, even considering the limited development timescale. It paid off all my Uni costs for the next four years. During this time at Artic I met John Prince who used to write freelance for them.

A few years later US Gold bought the rights to Mexico '86, the official world cup licence. That's one thing about Geoff, he really excelled in picking up big licences.

I can't remember the exact reason why, but US Gold was approaching the World Cup and still had no football game to use. Geoff then struck a deal with Richard Turner (Artic MD) to use my original game and re-badge it as *World Cup Carnival*. This would have been fine if several years with big improvements in games quality hadn't passed, and Jon Ritman (another Artic connection, although ex-Artic by this time) hadn't released the excellent *Match Day* through Ocean. I believe there were some other issues, including some dispute as to who actually owned the game copyright (not me by that time).



Right: The original Tiertex logo.

Skip forward a year or so to Artic's demise, and a few other Spectrum and C64 games in the bag, John and myself then teamed up with Charles Cecil

(who just left Artic) to form Paragon Programming. We did a few conversions for various publishers, but John and I (both being based in the North) didn't really feel part of Paragon, (which was based in Wandsworth, London) so we left and formed Tiertex in 1987.



Atari's *720 degrees* for the ZX Spectrum.

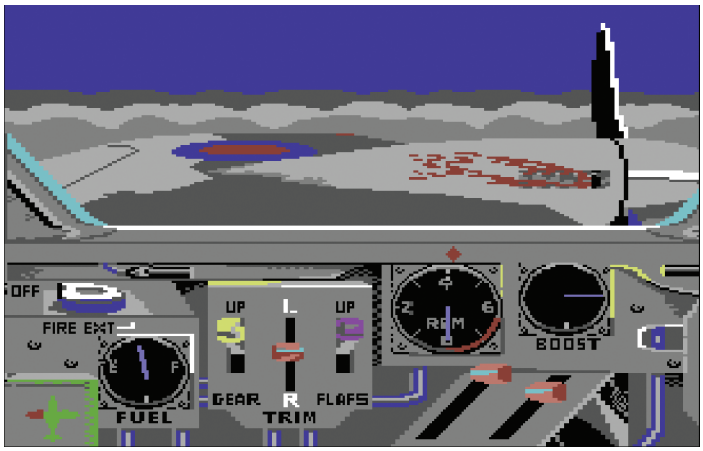
Immediately we signed up to do Atari's *720°* for US Gold. John was responsible for most of that conversion and it was a great success with some great reviews. We followed that up with a succession of conversions – *Rolling Thunder*, *Black Tiger*, *Ace of Aces*, *1943* (and about 30 others). We took on our first employees Mark-Haigh Hutchinson and Chris Brunning and found an office at Barlow Moor Road in Didsbury Manchester; we were off and running.

Initially we were in competition with quite a few developers including Probe and Source. But it wasn't long before we were effectively 'US Gold's development house'. We were set up to do all the formats for a conversion, and quite early on we had around thirty staff working on two or three projects and often across seven or eight formats. We were a one-stop shop as we did (mostly) all the graphics, music and coding in-house. We did employed Blue Turtle (Nick Pavis) for some external graphics in the earlier years.



The *Rolling Thunder* conversion for the Commodore Amiga.

We didn't really mind being looked upon as a 'work for hire company'. There were occasions we would be slated for doing quick Atari ST to Amiga ports but we simply didn't have the budget to write an ST and an



Ace of Aces on the Commodore 64.

Amiga version. We didn't receive royalties either, and it was quite a lot of hard work, with quite a few memories of myself and US Gold's Steve Fitton and Tony Porter staying up all hours trying to assist programmers in getting masters out in time for Christmas.

Over the years we did go on to develop all of US Gold's big licences including *Thunderblade*, *World Cup Italy '90*, *World Cup USA '94*, *Olympics Barcelona '92*, *Indiana Jones & the Last Crusade* and *Winter Olympics Lillehammer '94*.

We were also involved in one of US Gold's most well received games, *Flashback*.

Flashback was written in Paris by Delphine Software and we went on to produce five or six conversions of the game including the SNES, PC CD, Mega CD, Jaguar, CDI and 3DO versions. Initially we would split a conversion up into separate programming teams. The networking and code sharing simply didn't exist as they do today.

We developed our own development software – assemblers/debuggers/graphics tools – and hardware tools in-house, which was one of our strengths. When US Gold first started to look at developing for consoles, we were given an early Sega Master System with no documentation, tools or help and managed to produce a demo for Geoff to show off to Sega by reverse engineering the hardware.

Over the 16 or so years of Tiertex we employed about a hundred staff members. There wasn't a massive staff turnover, but there was some moving about on the Manchester games development scene. Mainly from us to Software Creations if I can recall.

We also created some original titles for US Gold – we did *Human Killing Machine (HKM)*, which was actually a Tim Chaney brainwave. We had delivered *Streetfighter*, and Tim wanted us to do another *Street Fighter*-ish game and came up with the title. I think there was a little bit of controversy over the



Loading screen of *Strider II* on the Commodore 64.

name, which I'm sure Tim would have been quite pleased about.

We also did a follow-up to *Strider*. The *Strider* conversion we had previously undertaken was a success, receiving good reviews, and it sold well. Geoff managed to convince Capcom to allow US Gold/Tiertex to do *Strider II*, but in truth it didn't perform very well.



During the period of 1992 to 1995 we started working with other publishers alongside our US Gold work. We wrote some of the early 8-bit versions of *FIFA* for EA – we also worked with Domark, Grandslam and THQ among others.

When US Gold/CentreSoft floated on the stockmarket as CentreGold we split off from US Gold. The company needed an association with a 'AAA' development studio and went into partnership with Core. At Tiertex we never actually thought a great deal about this to be totally honest. There was never the feeling that we were doomed. We had slimmed down in size and had become a much more profitable enterprise writing Gameboy titles for THQ, Lego, BBC and EA. Gone were the days of 'crunch' which is still endemic in the game business today.

We went on to develop several million-selling titles such as *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2*, *Bug's Life* and various versions of *FIFA* for the Gameboy/Gameboy Colour.



In around 2003 Tiertex withdrew silently from the games development world. There was a major stall in the handheld market and mobile games was still hit and miss. Sixteen years though was not a bad innings.

Below the SNES packaging of *Flashback* and above an in-game screen for the same format.



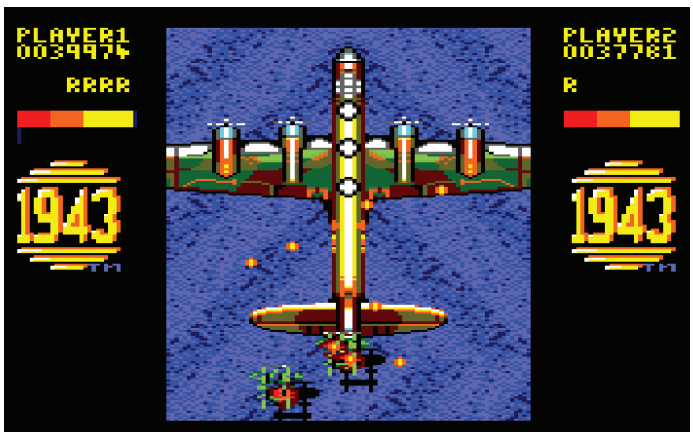
Fergus McGovern

Probe Software became synonymous with cross-platform conversions during the 1980s and 90s and forged a long and successful relationship with US Gold. Fergus, Probe's founder, remembers the early days of the company and how US Gold became a partner.

Every kid loved video games, and having the opportunity to make games changed my life. I was fortunate to enter the games industry from a completely different angle than most of the programmers and artists during the early 1980s.

My neighbours Peter and Pam Fisher, in a suburb in South London, had been transfixed by a new type of technology that had been designed by Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs, the co-founders of Apple Inc. In 1975 Steve Wozniak decided to combine computer circuitry with a regular typewriter keyboard and a video screen, and in doing so gave birth to the first Apple I. Pete and Pam Computers, who later became known as P&P Micro Distributors were one of the first Apple distributors in the UK.

I was 15 years old and doing my O-Levels at school. It was all the rage at the time to have a Saturday job and by chance I noticed an advert in a local newspaper shop for HELP URGENTLY NEEDED. So I phoned the number and it turned out to be my neighbour a few doors away from where I lived. I made an appointment for an interview and within hours I was hired by Pete and Pam, who were up to their eyes in boxes and paper in this little three-bedroom house in Streatham. Pam was from the United States and they quickly established their links with Apple and the supply of the early business software from the large US publishers, such as the spreadsheet *VisiCalc*. However, they also imported from the States the early Apple games to complement



1943 on the Amstrad CPC released by US Gold in 1988.

the business software.

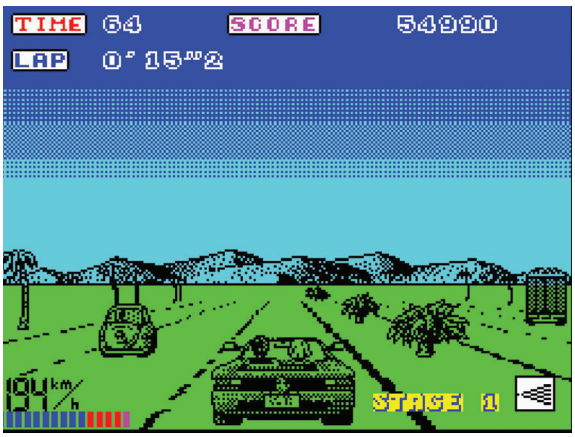
So, apart from stapling software catalogues together, helping shift boxes around an extremely small three-bedroom house and answering phones, I was now also the resident expert in all things to do with the newly imported Apple games. By the time I turned eighteen I'd witnessed the remarkable growth of a company start-up that was now turning over millions of pounds and selling hundreds of thousands of Apple II computers. But games intrigued me and in the same year I started my own company called Probe Software with Vakis Paraskeva, a friend who was making Commodore 64 music software.

We decided to make our first game for the Commodore 64, as this was a popular computer in the UK and Apple was more focused on business customers. The first game we made was called *Escape from Alcatraz* and we tried to sell this in local shops in Croydon, Surrey as a games publisher. But no one took us seriously and we barely got our money back.

So, we made another one and the same thing happened. We soon realised that we were very good at making games and had only achieved moderate success with our third effort called the *Devil's Crown* for the Amstrad CPC.

It was only after a chance meeting with a legend in the games industry, Mr Frank Herman, the owner of a hugely successful budget publisher, that Probe made its first conversion. Frank encouraged us to convert

Above the familiar Probe Entertainment logo.





The distinctive green roads of *Out Run* on the ZX Spectrum.



The Commodore Amiga conversion of the arcade hit *RoadBlasters*.

Devil's Crown from the Amstrad CPC 464 to the Spectrum 48K but this time, Mastertronic would publish the title and not my fledgling company. This was a great relationship; we would design, program, and build the complete game with in-game art, music and sound effects and Mastertronic, for their part, would fund and publish our game.

This did not go unnoticed by a large video game publisher in Birmingham.

US Gold was a titan of the day and rapidly becoming one of the premier video game publishers in Europe. It had great relationships with Sega of Japan and all the large arcade coin-op manufacturers and was licensing their games to be converted to home computers. However, reliable and talented programming teams were difficult to find and even if they were, would normally be consumed in finishing their current projects.

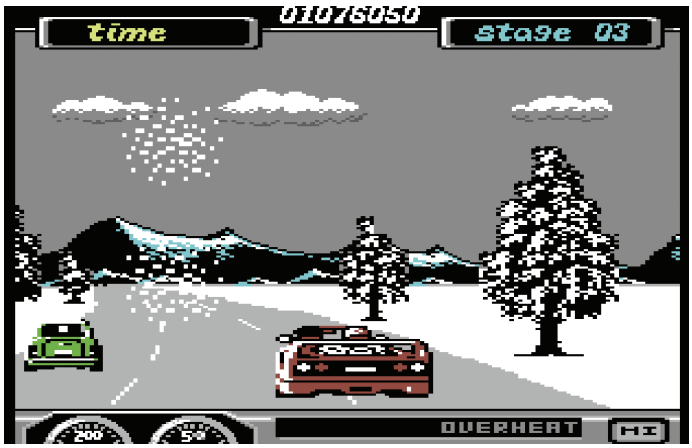
One day I received a call from Tim Chaney, the head honcho at US Gold, who asked if I would be interested in converting one of their games to the home computers. After the success of working with Mastertronic and the prospect of making a high profile games for US Gold, I immediately jumped at the chance.

And this was the birth of Probe, the video game developer.

Next day, a *Metrocross* arcade machine arrived from US Gold and we set about the task of extracting the code and graphics from the ROMs. We now had a network of freelance programmers and artists and the company grew very rapidly. The expectation on US Gold to make the conversions across an ever increasing format base such as the Atari ST and Commodore Amiga only endeared Probe further to US Gold,

Right: the snowy level on *Turbo Out Run* on the Commodore 64.
Above: the colourful cassette inlay.



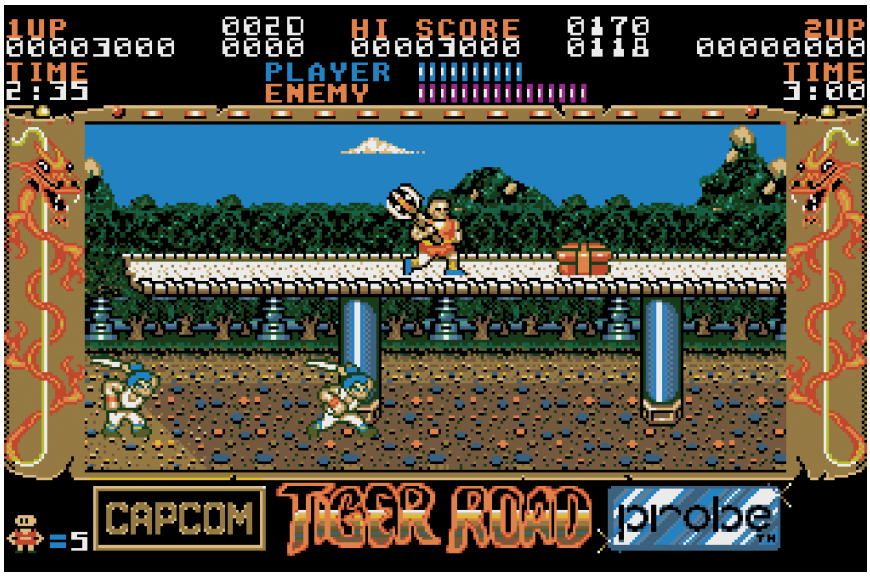


as we were generally on schedule and the reviews of our games were in the high 80s and 90s.

Tim was delighted with our work and asked if Probe could handle the pressure of converting their next Christmas number one.

US Gold had just experienced a Christmas number one in 1986 with the massive selling *Gauntlet* and Sega had entrusted them to produce the coin-op conversion of their mega-hit *Out Run*. The game was the successor to Sega's *Enduro Racer* and took the state-of-the-art, thrills, spills and fast-track action one step further than ever before. It was a massive project for Probe and the skill sets required by the programmers to handle such a technical advancement on the humble 8-bit computers was challenging.

Probe recruited the team that had made the excellent *Enduro Racer* for Activision and now the race was on to complete the game in time for a Christmas launch. I always said that Father Christmas would not wait up the chimney for us to finish our games and there was no *ifs* or *buts* about hitting our target. Christmas is Christmas and we had to deliver the game. The pressure was enormous. Tim, now realising the huge sales potential for the game, decided to hedge his bets and place all the conversions with Probe except the Commodore 64 version, which he contracted to another developer.



The Atari ST conversion of the popullar arcade hit *Tiger Road*.

The original *Out Run* arcade machine had a lot of graphics on screen, so keeping the frame rate up while drawing the graphics was a real challenge for the 8-bit systems. Additionally, we had no bitmap scaling hardware, so the programming team had to store each graphic at a range of different sizes. Obviously, there was a massive trade-off between having enough sizes of scaled graphics so the game looked reasonably smooth considering the available storage space within the limited 48K Spectrum.

I remember flying the lead Spectrum programmer down from Scotland, where he lived in the final weeks of development, at the end of November 1987. Christmas was just six weeks away and we had to finish the game in time for it to be shipped into the stores by early December.

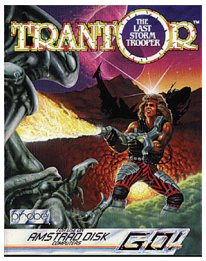
Alan Laird arrived in London

and began to set up his development system at our offices. As he unpacked his Spectrum hardware kit, he realised that the micro tape that contained the source code for the game was broken and could not be loaded onto the Spectrum ZX Microdrive. The game was being developed on a PC using a PDS development system, but for whatever reason, part of the code was on this fragile, tiny micro tape and it was broken.

You can imagine my horror as the thought of what had occurred was now a reality sitting in front of me. So, we got some sticking tape and tried to patch the one inch micro tape back together. We carefully managed to wind the tape back onto its wheels and slotted it into the fragile Microdrive unit, hoping the kinks on the tape would still allow the data to be read. Alan then typed a few commands into the Spectrum and hey presto, the Microdrive began accessing the data on the repaired tape. The relief was enormous and we quickly backed up the data to the PC and managed to download the game into the Spectrum. I remember asking Alan at the time if this was really his only back up and he said it was as he had saved his code from the past few weeks onto the cartridge. After an exhausting two weeks, the game was finally completed and delivered to an expectant US Gold.

Out Run stormed to the top of the Christmas 1987 Gallup charts and remained there for what seemed to be most of the following year.

Xevious, *Metrocross*, *Out Run*, *Turbo Out Run*, *Out Run Europa* and a whole range of top-selling titles ensured Probe became one of the big hitters of the British games scene and a vital development resource. In fact, US Gold launched a new publisher label on 31 July 1987 called *GO!* to complement their publishing activities with a Probe-developed title as one of their main launch titles; *Trantor: The Last Stormtrooper.*



The rather lengthily named game, *Trantor: The Last Stormtrooper* for the Amstrad CPC.



As the home computers stood aside for the console revolution, US Gold again partnered with Probe to develop Sega console titles and Probe had become the first choice developer for most publishers and transformed into one of the most successful console developers in the world.

Many eons ago, an advanced technologically oriented civilization was forced to evacuate the Earth prior to the Ice Age. Now, these Xevious people are returning to reclaim their heritage through conquest.
From the controls of your Solvalu super spacecraft, you must defend the Earth from takeover by the Xevious invaders!
Flying a search and destroy mission, you will cruise over the scrolling landscape, bombing Xevious ground entrenchments and zapping the air targets that come into range. Easy. But now look out for the flying mirrors — impossible to destroy; a collision will spell certain death!
In the event of your surviving wave after wave of enemy onslaught you will encounter the controlling force of the Xevious offensive; the Andor Genesis Mother Ship! This is your goal. A direct hit to her central reactor will disable her, but do not be lulled into a false sense of security. Xevious forces will soon re-appear to renew their attacks with increased determination!



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*Xevious is engineered and designed by Namco Ltd. Manufactured under license by Atari Inc. and U.S. Gold, 2/3 Holford Way, Holford, Birmingham B6 7AX.



Tony Fagelman

Founded together with Howard, his brother, and John Mullins, Sentient Software was responsible for converting Epyx's *Games* series onto the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC platforms.

Sentient Software was born out of a collapse of a retail games operation, with limited publishing specialisation. Microcell Computing had started life in Leeds in 1982 selling ZX Spectrum and Amstrad hardware and a vast range of software for all computer formats. Additionally, the computer store also sold business computers to the local corporates and small business community. During this time, Sentient published a small range of adventure games, developed by the fledgling team and local computer scientists studying at Leeds University.

With my older brother, Howard, and John Mullins we formed the company in September 1984. The plan: to offer development services to publishers as it had been noted that many publishers couldn't devote resources to conversions – they were far too busy trying to find the next big hit.

We had a varied background: Howard had been working on mainframe computers since leaving school; my experience was in selling, initially in the family jewellery business and then in business computers at Microcell; John was a Chemistry graduate who had started in retail as he couldn't get anything degree-related – he loved the new home computers that were appearing in the marketplace so ended up dabbling in self-taught coding.

My experience with computers had started in the 1970s at the same time as Howard when our father had bought an Apple II+ to help with his business. Fascinated with the technology and bored with playing the limited games



Hurtling through the air on the 'ski jump' in the *Winter Games* conversion for the Spectrum.



The Games: Winter Edition – the start of the 'luge' section on the Amstrad CPC.

available, we set about writing our own games where I came up with the stories and Howard did the coding.

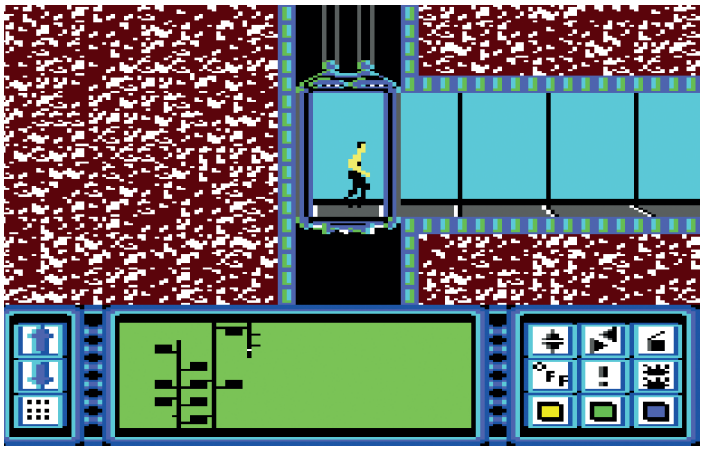
I saw a business opportunity with what we were doing and, after we formed the company, went out to meet all the publishers and presented the 'opportunity'. The first contract we won was with Leisure Genius to produce a Spectrum version of *Monopoly*, based on their C64 product. This was quickly followed with other format conversions for *Cluedo* and *Scrabble* on various platforms.

In February 1985, following a meeting at Ocean Software, we were given a test product. Ocean had been told that *Match Day* couldn't be done on the Amstrad CPC. In eight weeks we had a finished product and a successful launch. The close ties between Ocean Software and US Gold led to Charles Cecil contacting us about another 'impossible' Amstrad conversion. Six weeks later we had produced *Impossible Mission* for the software giant.

This led to our first major signing – creating the multiple formats of the Epyx C64 game *Winter Games* and making sure it was ready for Christmas 1985. Three weeks before Christmas, I found myself in Telford at Ablex, the tape duplication centre, watching thousands of *Winter Games* tapes



The Games: Summer Edition loading screen for the Amstrad CPC.



Impossible Mission – they said it could not be done; the conversion for the Amstrad CPC.

being produced for the Spectrum and Amstrad CPC.

What followed thereafter was a collaboration with US Gold and Ocean that was to last another four years and saw the release of multiple award-winning and chart-topping games. Sentient became the company to go to for arcade conversions on multiple formats.

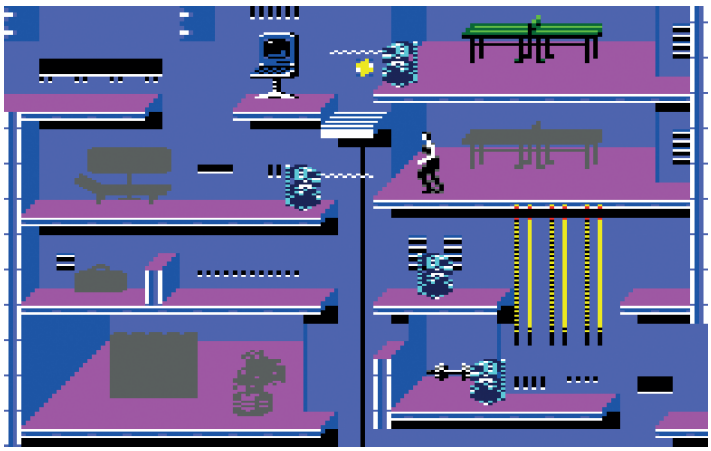
We also converted a number of Epyx releases including, *Winter Games*, *The Games: Winter Edition* and *The Games: Summer Edition* as well as a return to the *Impossible Mission* franchise with *Impossible Mission II*.

As well as being Sentient's managing director I was also the producer and designer, thus one of my jobs was to amend existing designs for new hardware formats or designing new games from scratch. John became the technical director and was responsible for at least one format of every US Gold conversion that we embarked on. Howard managed the art and music as well as looking after coding services.

My storytelling expertise was further developed during this time and I moved from producing to game design and plot development. This resulted in a number of original projects being developed by Sentient for a range of UK publishers.

By 1989, the company had grown from the three directors and an apprentice to seventeen staff, filling the offices in Leeds and working with the biggest and best names in the industry. Unfortunately, the migration to consoles caught the company out and having turned down investment the previous year from one of the top UK publishers, Sentient could no longer continue.

John continued in the games industry, Howard left the industry and I went on to Millennium Interactive and then Virgin Interactive Entertainment and finally News International, before moving into internet games and services.



Impossible Mission 2 for the Amstrad CPC.

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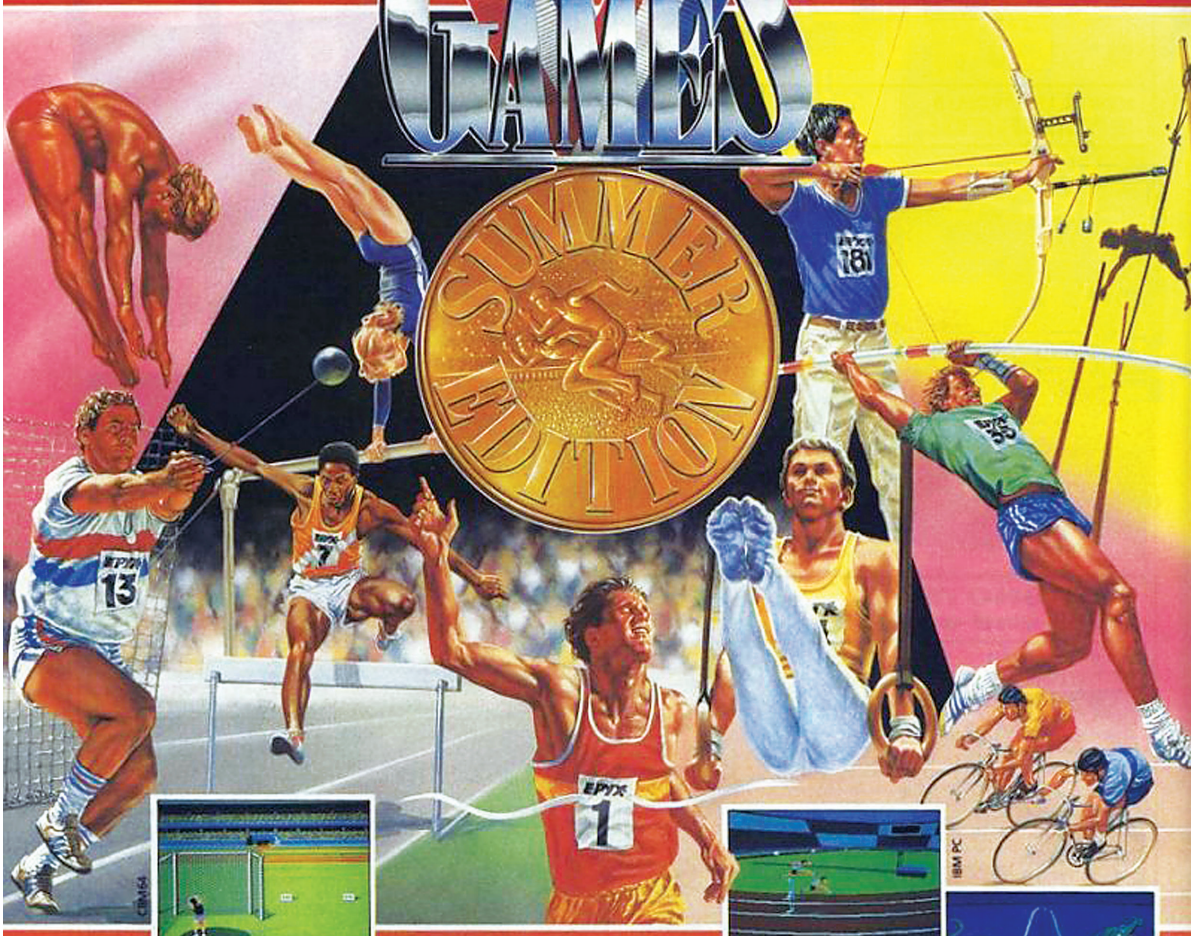





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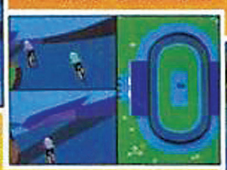







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David Anderson

The author of many of US Gold's top titles on the ZX Spectrum, namely *Beach-Head*, *Tapper*, *Raid Over Moscow* and more – David gives his thoughts on *Kung-Fu Master* – a game that received mixed reviews.

My firm Platinum Productions was a development house and we had a retaining arrangement with Ocean Software. US Gold was a joint venture company, in which Ocean owned 50% of the shares, and mainly licensed arcade games and other titles from US-market home computers such as Commodore or Atari machines. As one of their leading developer houses, we tended to get offered a lot of their top titles and our relationship started off by helping them with the launch of the company and the production of their launch title *Beach-Head*. The label was launched in September 1984 – heady days for the games industry in the UK – and the beginning of the first real boom in market adoption.



Beach-Head, published by US Gold in 1984.

We were asked to convert the arcade game *Kung-Fu Master*. The term 'conversion' always irked me as we didn't convert anything. We never had access to any source code or design specifications. We had to reverse engineer the specification from playing the game – in this case from the Commodore 64. What we did was interpret and adapt a game design for the ZX Spectrum.

I outsourced the melody of the music to a sub-contractor but other than that I did everything – all the coding, the engine for the sprites, the engine for the sound and music – everything. I'm not sure that people reading this today can comprehend how basic the Spectrum was as a machine. It had no graphics or display chips. It had no sound chip. The sound was a simple tweeter that you simply switched on and off by writing a bit to an output port. There wasn't even volume control. To



make sound you had to drive the waveform digital synthesising it from square waves and to do that you had to drive it with interrupts. To make decent sound you had to dedicate serious processor time to it and effectively run all the graphics and gameplay in-between. We were effectively pre-emptively multitasking to run sound, graphics and gameplay in parallel.



And yes, I drew the graphics too. I'd also implemented a lot of our internal developer tools including our 'sprite grabber' application that could grab images from a drawing package and encode them for use in the game including the sprite masks, if applicable.

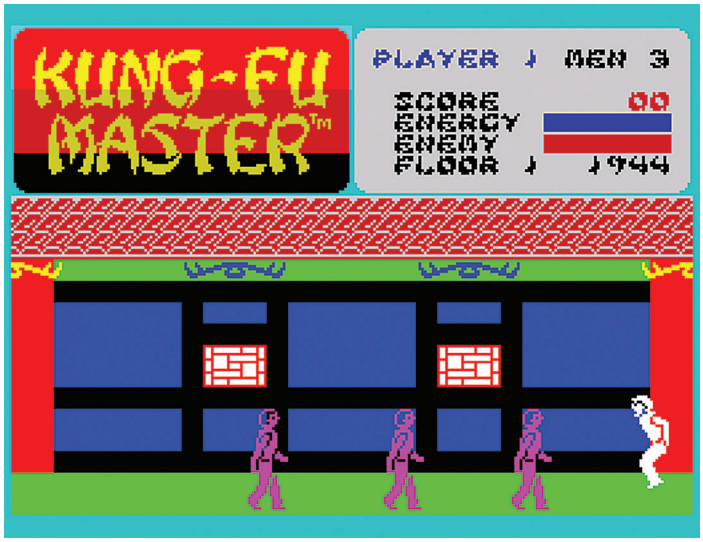
I don't actually remember any specific schedule pressure. I had a reputation for producing games of high technical quality very quickly with most of the games I worked on taking between five to eight weeks to complete. Development wasn't the constraint on launching, often we could move faster than others who were designing the packaging or advertising.

Kung-Fu Master on the ZX Spectrum was a compromise from the start. Sinclair's machine was seriously underpowered for the game and I remember having similar issues with *Tapper* as well. As a designer you need to make trade-offs and reflect on which aspects are most important to preserve the essence of the game on a lesser-powered machine. Trading off masked sprites for music for example, or deciding how to compromise the graphics because of the Spectrum's character block colour mapping.



Above and left: *Raid Over Moscow*, published by US Gold in 1985.

There was nothing technically challenging in writing the game as such as I had the algorithms to do



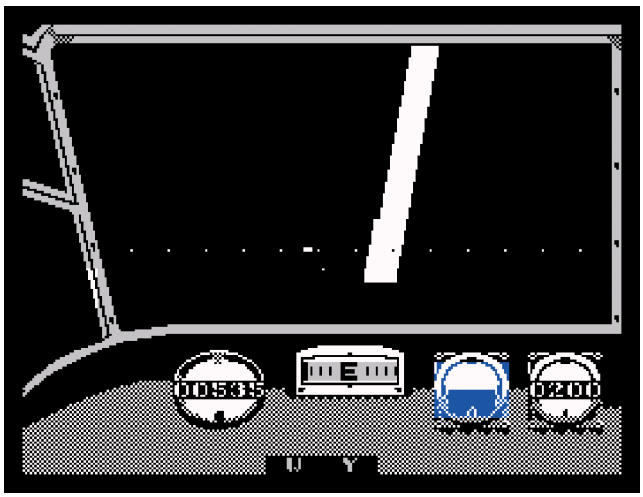
Kung-Fu Master – a difficult conversion for the ZX Spectrum.

everything very efficiently. There was simply too much for the 48K computer to do and maintain a reasonable frame rate. The issue was design compromise. As an artist that is never a very comfortable place to be – it's frustrating. We targeted eight-twelve frames /second for the game – given all the things that needed to be done we chose what was possible with those processor cycles. The game could have been twice as fast without sound but who would want to play a game without aural feedback.

Graphics flicker was another design compromise – you could avoid flicker by buffering the display and masking sprites but doing so eats a lot of processor cycles. The sprites in *Tapper* flicker because they are XORed onto the screen and not masked. It's fast but it causes flicker. If you want continuous music or extravagant sound effects you needed to get that processor time somewhere. Do you want music or flicker free graphics? Unfortunately the Spectrum forced us to choose.

Converting arcade games of that generation to the Spectrum wasn't the best choice artistically or aesthetically. I was paid for the work – licensing arcade games for home computer adaptation was a business and if US Gold and I hadn't done it someone else would. As a creative person it is never pleasant to have to make so many design compromises and I guess the business people weren't really capable of knowing where the limitations were until games like *Kung-Fu Master* were completed – even then I'm sure it was a commercial success and made money regardless of whether it was an appropriate choice of title to build for the Spectrum.

Crash magazine at the time only gave the game 56%. You have to remember though the guys at Crash were probably fifteen or so. I was seventeen. We were



Dam Busters – sparse graphics but an engrossing game.

U.S. GOLD U.S. GOLD U.S. GOLD U.S. G



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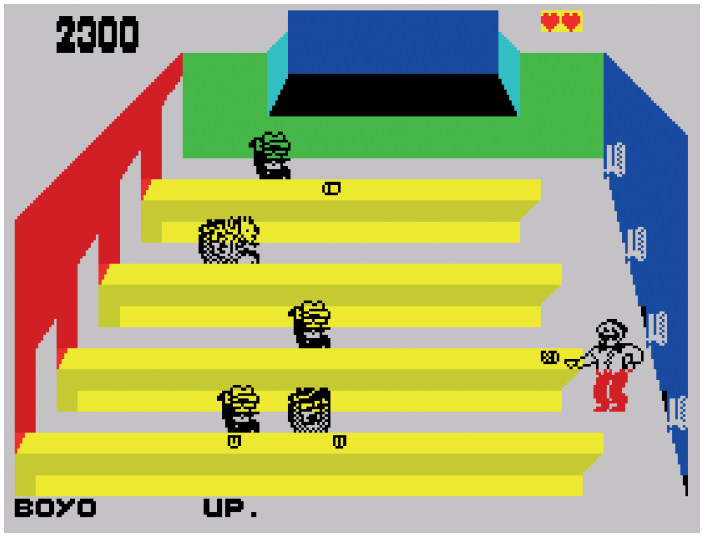

Tapper – a great conversion of the arcade machine in just 48K.

all kids and kids can be ruthless. I think the guys at *Sinclair User* magazine were older and had a better understanding of the technical challenges and this made them more sympathetic reviewers and gave the game a more favourable review. Were the guys at *Crash* wrong? No, probably not. Working in such a constrained environment and having to make so many design compromises ultimately wasn't rewarding – it was a job. I was technically accomplished at it but overreaching wasn't fulfilling. If only the Spectrum had a sound chip.

After *Kung-Fu Master* I produced a few sports sims and I was most proud of the football game I did for Imagine, *Super Soccer*, which broke some new ground in terms of animation and the actions the players could complete such as diving headers. It was one of only two games I did that was released with a bug in it. I found it prior to release but unfortunately a huge volume of cassettes had been duplicated and we couldn't prevent some of them making it into the retail channel. Also the reviewers all got that version. The bug was quite bizarre where it caused some players to get stuck in mid-flight in a diving header when oriented toward the viewer. The graphic animation frame was such that they looked like a frog. One review reported the pitch littered with frogs.

I then went on to create a 3D engine to drive a dungeons game like *Wolfenstein* (this is a few years prior to *Wolfenstein*) but it only ran at four to five frames per second on the Spectrum. I ported it to the Atari ST and Amiga but couldn't find a publisher who would support the idea. Later my firm created a game inspired by the movie *Innerspace.* It had elliptical organic tunnels – the veins in the body. It was another technical overreach even for the Amiga and wasn't fast enough.

I quit the games industry in 1990 and graduated at university the following year with a degree in electronics and computer science and specialisations in control systems engineering and computer architecture and processor design. I took a job as a development manager in a five-year-old startup company making video capture devices and related animation, sound and video editing software.

I look back on my games developer days very fondly. It was the 1980s and I was right in the middle of it with games in the Top 20 pretty much every week the chart was published. It was a great experience.

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Bill Hogue

Miner 2049er was an inspiration to many a platform game on many formats. It was Bill's follow-up, _Bounty Bob Strikes Back!_ that US Gold published.

I originally worked at a Radio Shack in Reseda, California when the TRS-80 was released. I played with the computer in the store when there were no customers buying something or asking for their free batteries. I first started writing games in BASIC until I convinced the store manager to order a package that allowed machine language programming. I believe RS also published a book which helped me learn Z80. There was once a time when I had most of the Z80 opcodes memorized.

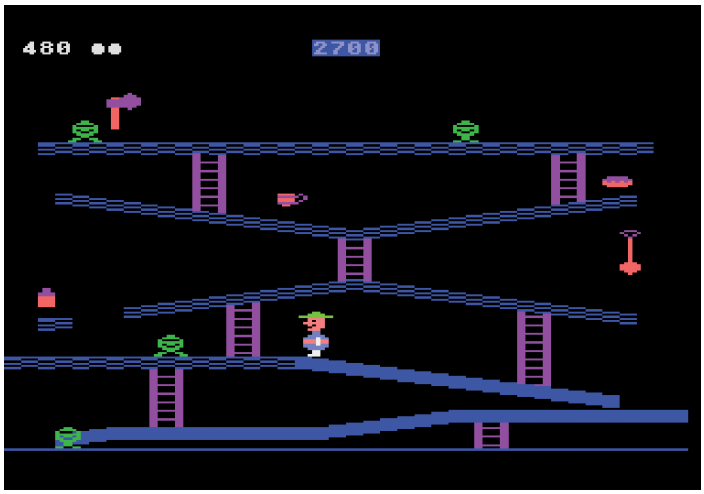
I didn't really do too much on the C64 actually. I was a big fan of the Atari 800 system. It's probably because of that system's *Star Raiders* game that Jeff Konyu and I first played in a computer store in Northridge, California.

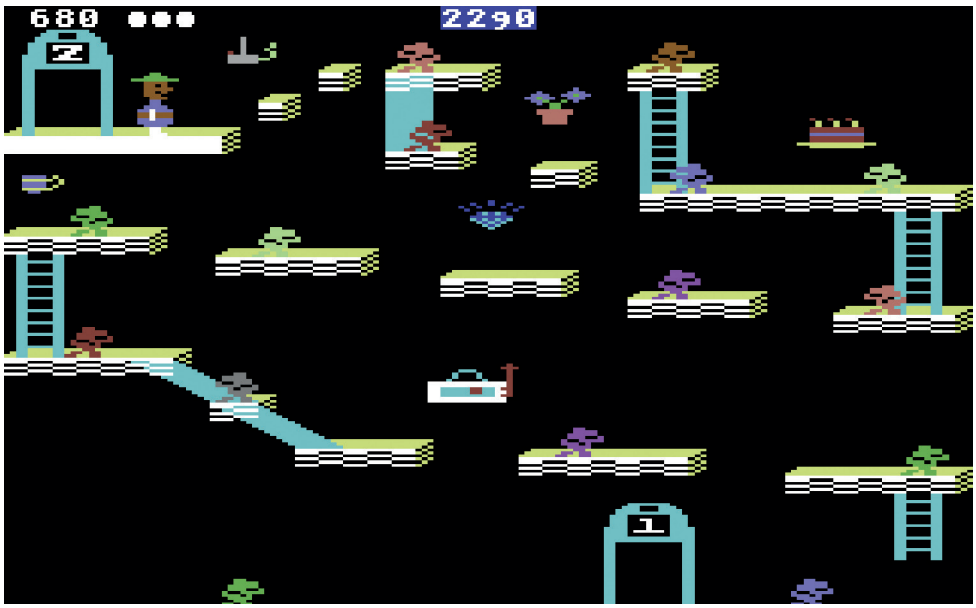
My inspiration for *Miner 2049er* was a combination of a few different arcade games I loved playing. It's sort of a cross between *Donkey Kong* and *Pacman*. I don't remember many details about the editor and assembler I used for the 6502 code... other than the fact that everything had to be stored on a 5¼ inch floppy drive.

For *Miner* I didn't write the code for any of the ports that were done on the other computers and consoles. My original Atari 400/800 version is the one that all of the other versions attempted to match.

For *Bounty Bob Strikes Back!* I wanted a better development environment so I ended up creating my own. I purchased the larger TRS-80 Model 16 computer which used an 8-inch disk drive and ran on the 68000 processor. I then wrote a source code editor and a cross assembler. The final machine code was then sent to the Atari over a serial port. It was a really slick system that speeded up development.

Miner 2049er on the Commodore 64, a platform game that spawned a ream of copycat games across all platforms.



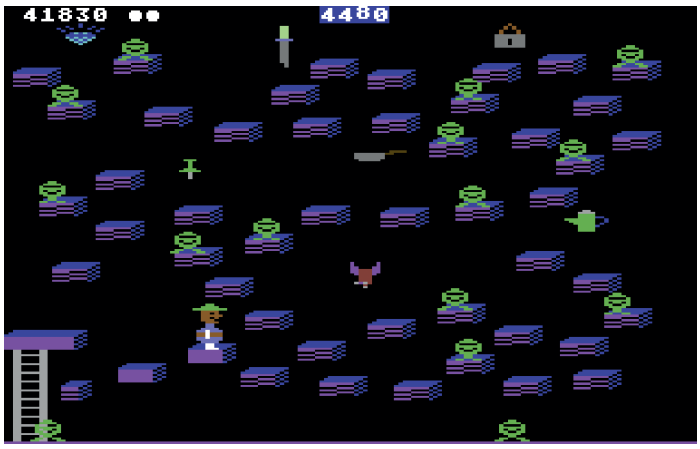


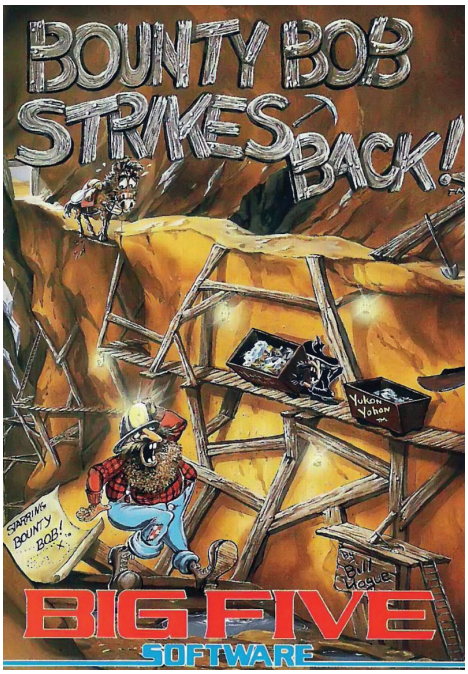
Left and below: levels from *Bounty Bob Strikes Back!* on the Commodore 64.

The problem with *Miner* was that it was too successful and I really wanted to go better with the next game. I put a lot of work into this vertical scrolling game we were calling *Scraper Caper* where you controlled *Bounty Bob* in a tall building on fire. I should have probably finished it and released it but I decided to try something else because it wasn't coming out the way I wanted. The next version of *Scraper Caper* had *Bounty Bob* chasing little fireballs around a perspective playfield sort of like Atari's *Crystal Castles*. That looked pretty nice but again it didn't play as well as I wanted.

So Curtis Mikolyski and I started toying with just making a new and improved version of *Miner 2049er*. The 3D look of the framework was probably a bit of a leftover feature from *Scraper Caper*. I don't remember the actual time it took to create. But for some goofy reason Curtis and I kept it secret from everyone else in the company. I even installed an ultrasonic sensor under my desk that would blank my monitor if anyone came in! Everyone was pretty surprised when we finally showed them the nearly finished product.

Miner was a 16K cartridge and I wanted *BBSB* to be over the top. A chip company up in Sunnyvale developed a bank selected ROM that we were able to use so *BBSB* had 40K of ROM. That was a *huge* amount at the time!





The UK front packaging of the sequel to *Miner 2049er*. US Gold published *Bounty Bob Strikes Back!* in 1985.

I created a full level editor for Curtis to use so he spent a lot of time aligning all of the framework to get it just right. We were also pretty proud of the opening title and high score screens. It was pretty fun to watch all the birds flying around with all of the letters.

I wasn't directly involved in the development of conversions of the game to other platforms. I think the only other programmer of any of the other ported versions I ever met was Mike Livesay. He did the Apple version of *Miner*.

The Atari 5200 version of *BBSB* used the identical ROMs from the Atari 400/800 version. I found a way to figure out at runtime which machine the code was running on. That made cartridge production a lot easier since we only needed to order one set of ROMs for both versions. I also did a tape version for US Gold of either the Commodore 64 or Atari version of the game. It's been so long that I can't remember which, honestly! But I do remember the difficulty of locating a PAL monitor to work with that computer. I think th ere was only one place in downtown Los Angeles that carried them.

I'm still surprised at the popularity of my games after so long. But I totally understand the comfort that people feel from playing their favorite games repeatedly. I've played *The Last of Us* on both PS3 and PS4 an embarrassing number of times since it came out. I might take a break from it, though, to try out *GTA V* at 4K on my PC!



A further level from *Bounty Bob Strikes Back!*

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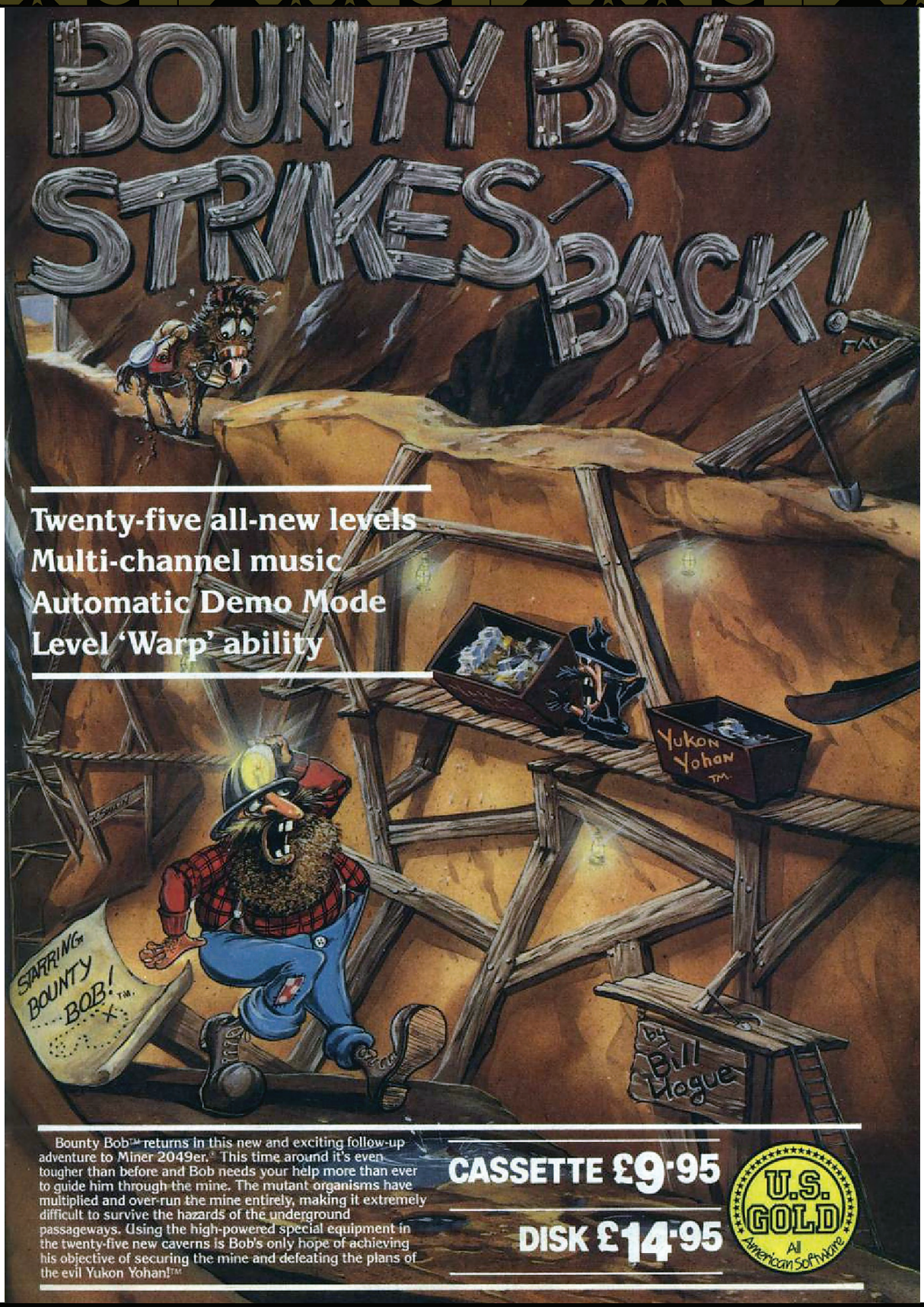

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Dennis Caswell

Impossible Mission is one of the most iconic games on the Commodore 64. Featuring fluid animation and speech – the game was cutting edge at the time.

I left UCLA in 1981 with a Masters in Computer Science, having no idea what sort of job I wanted. A former roommate informed me that his brother, who had been working for Atari, was starting up his own game company. This company eventually became Starpath. I was hired straight out of school because I had my own Apple II computer, which meant they didn't need to buy me one, and because I could reach the top of the fourth building in *Crazy Climber*. When the Atari 2600 market crashed and Starpath floundered, the company was acquired by Epyx, and I went along for the ride. I distinctly remember my elation at trading in my 2600 for a Commodore 64. When I was given permission to start a C64 project, I unplugged my 2600 and threw it out of my office and into the hall!



Above: the colourful Commodore 64 cassette inlay. Rght: the game's welcoming home screen.



I got the idea for *Impossible Mission* from watching the movie *WarGames*, though it may not seem that they're very closely related. Somehow, the HAL-like computer in *WarGames* led to the idea of a platform game in which the player is required to infiltrate a computer-controlled complex. I've never been very good at naming things. During most of its development, I don't recall that *Impossible Mission* had a title. Eventually, we had to call it something and someone noticed the similarity to the TV show and suggested that *Mission: Impossible* would be appropriate but, of course, we couldn't actually use that, so we cheated and gave it a title that was legal while still creating the desired association.

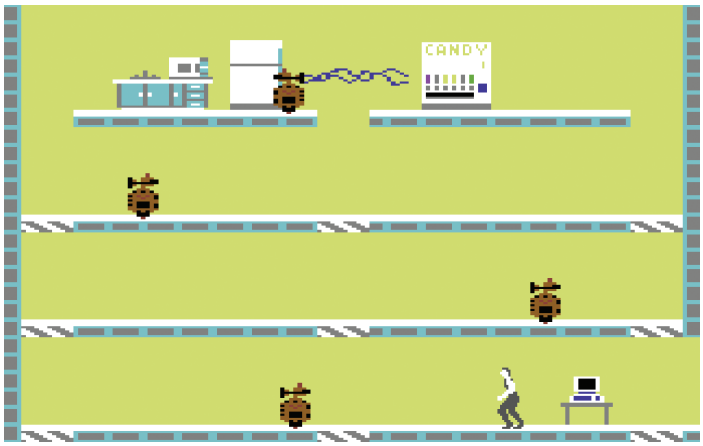
Apart from what was

provided by Electronic Speech Systems, I conceived, designed and executed the game. I had no artist or sound guy or whatever. That's why there is no credits screen. The title screen says all there is to say. There were no graphics or sound design tools, either. The graphics, for example, were drawn on graph paper and converted into hex strings that were hand-typed into the code.

I imagined the underground complex as being not only Elvin's workplace, but also his residence, so the standard residential accoutrements seemed appropriate. If there sometimes seems to be an implausible profusion of bathrooms, bookcases, or what-have-you, we'll just have to chalk that up to his reclusive eccentricity.

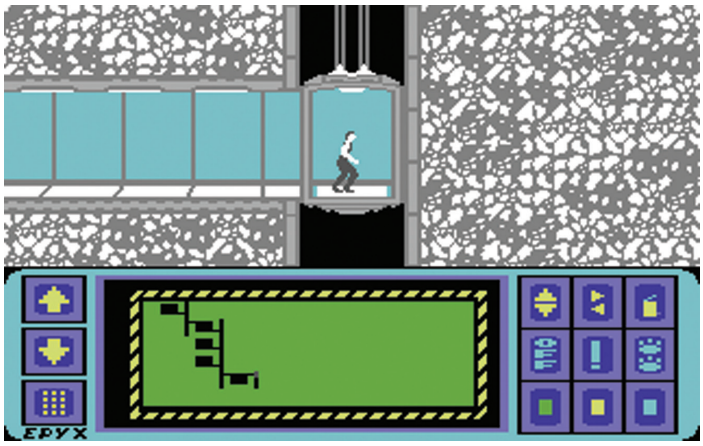
As I recall, the game took about ten months to complete. It was definitely not designed in detail before I started to code. The first thing I came up with was the animation of the running man, and part of what sold the game to the Epyx brass was the idea that the main character would be larger, more realistic, and with more elaborate animation than typically was seen in platform games at that time. After that, I more or less made it up as I went along.

A big problem was getting the whole game to fit into the available memory. The running man has lots of frames of animation, and he has to run in both directions. I ended up just storing the frames for running (and flipping) in one direction and letting the game flip them back and forth as needed. The game probably spends more time doing that than anything else.

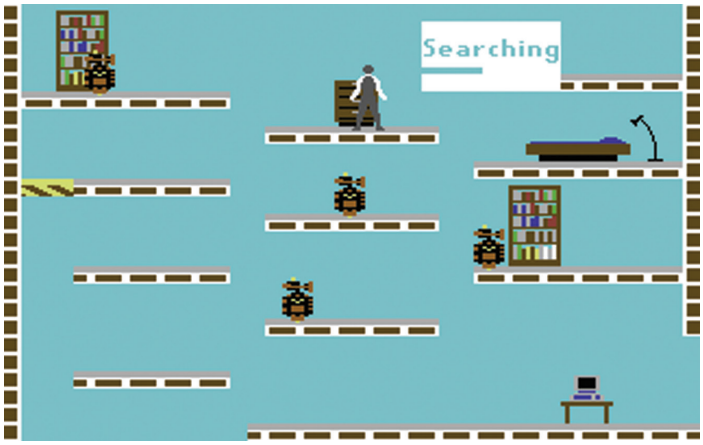


Exploring one of the many rooms within *Impossible Mission*.

The speech in the game was real, digitized speech. The performances were provided by Electronic Speech Systems, who also provided the software for reproducing the speech on the Commodore 64. I told them what I wanted the game to say, and when they asked me what kind of voice I had in mind, I said I was imagining a fiftyish English guy, like a James Bond villain. I was told that they happened to have such a person on their staff, so, instead of hiring an actor, they let him take a



Taking a lift to the next level – going up!



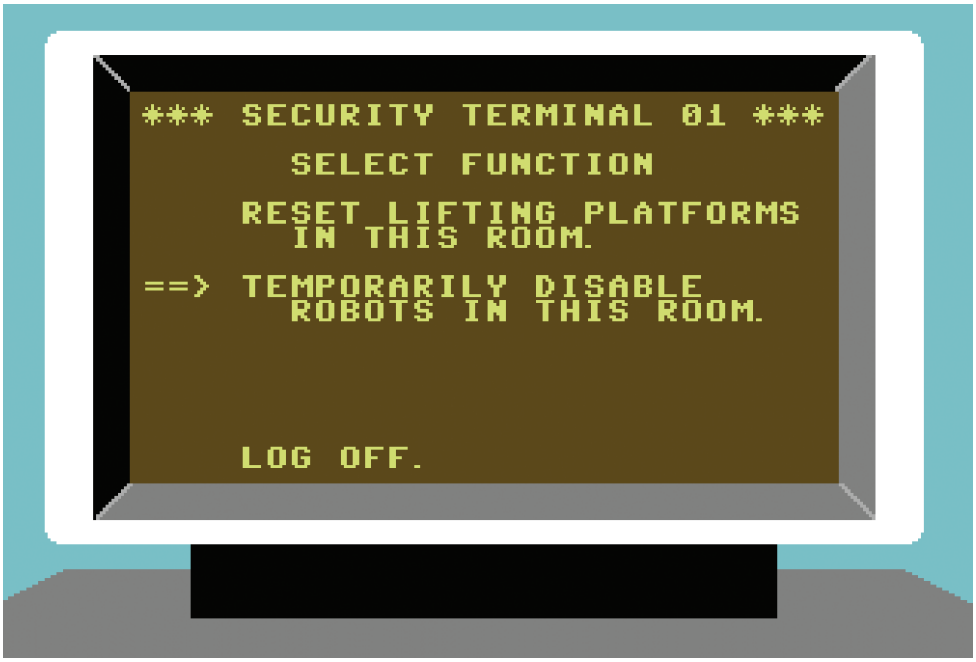
Searching ...will anything useful be found?

whack at it, and I thought he was just fine. I never met the guy who provided the voice, but to my knowledge, the recordings were not altered or processed, apart from being digitized. It is certainly possible, though, that Electronic Speech Systems could have tweaked them without my knowledge. There are no other digitized sounds in the game. As I recall, the digitized speech was not planned from the start; we grafted it on later because it was relatively easy to do.

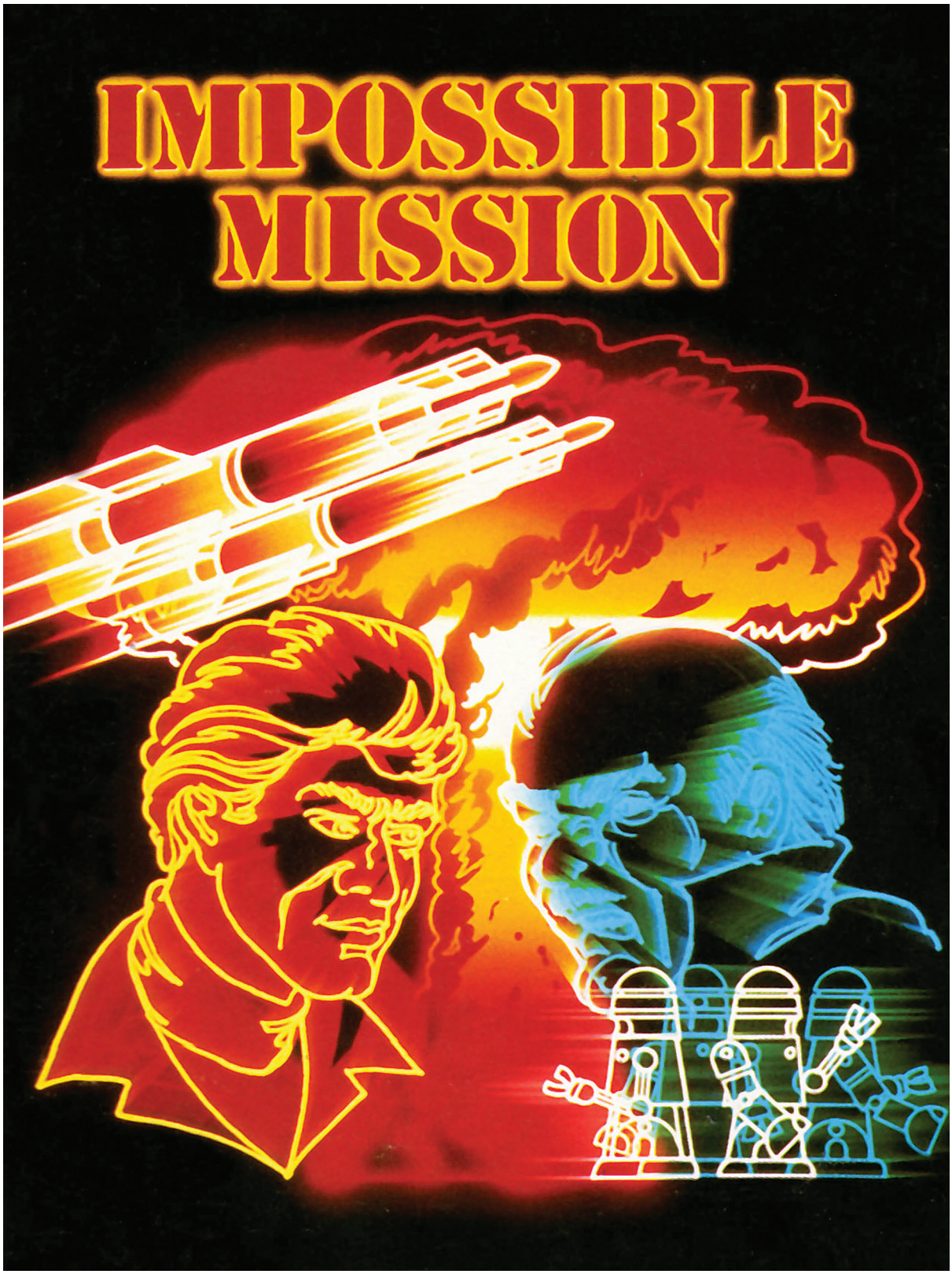
As for the passcodes, I probably just used the first eight nine-letter words I thought of. A few years ago I found a source listing of *Impossible Mission* tucked away in a drawer, and I looked them up. Here they are: swordfish, asparagus, artichoke, crocodile, alligator, albatross, butterfly and cormorant.

The end section is really just a jigsaw puzzle. It does seem likely that I made the puzzle pieces resemble punch cards for sentimental reasons. I haven't heard specific feedback about the puzzle pieces, but I have observed first-hand that the mental skills required to assemble the puzzles (you have to be able to reflect and superimpose images in your head) seem entirely distinct from those required to defeat the robots and the Rover ball.

People who can handle the joystick twitching fairly easily have been known to struggle with the puzzle pieces.



Logging off the many terminals scattered across the rooms.


IMPOSSIBLE
MISSION

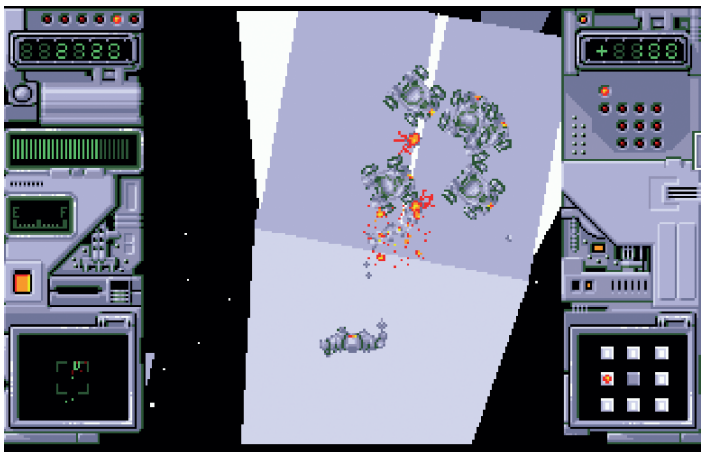


Mick West

The US Gold relationship started at Binary Design for Mick with *Rotox*. When the company went bust, he moved to Tiertex and was responsible for the Amiga and Atari ST conversions of *UN Squadron*.

I started programming on the ZX81, when I was 14. I was immediately interested in programming games. I moved on to the ZX Spectrum and then by the time I went to university I had an Atari ST. I spent my time at university just playing with the ST, learning 68000. When I left, I dossed around for three months, and then applied for a job at Binary Design. So I started to work in games relatively late in life, at twenty-one. The first game I worked on was *Steve Davis World Snooker*.

My relationship with US Gold started with my second game *Rotox*, which was an unusual shooter game with an overhead rotating perspective.



Rotox, on the Commodore Amiga, developed for US Gold while Mick West was at Binary Design.

I developed this at Binary Design for US Gold, but then Binary went under and everyone was laid off, so I moved to Tiertex before *Rotox* was a hundred per cent done. Tiertex did a lot of work for US Gold, and they were actually testing *Rotox* at the same time I was working on *UN Squadron*.

At that time, US Gold seemed a mysterious far-away force. I'd heard of Geoff Brown, and someone told me that he was someone not to cross, but that's all I knew at the time. There was almost no contact from US Gold with me, it all went through the higher-ups at Binary and then at Tiertex.

For the programming of *UN Squadron* we used *Devpac* on the ST. For graphics probably *Degas Elite*, also on the ST, as at that time we focused on the Atari first and ported to the Amiga after it was done.

Like many ST/Amiga games around at that time there was a full-time programmer and artist, and then the sound and music was done part-time by the single sound guy who was shared by the whole company. On *UN Squadron* I

was the programmer and James Clarke was the artist.

It was a conversion from the arcade machine, which meant that I had to spend a lot of time playing the game and studying video to figure out the patterns of the attacking planes, etc.

The graphics were actually ripped from the arcade machine by taking video frame grabs, which James would then clean up and fit the reduced palette.

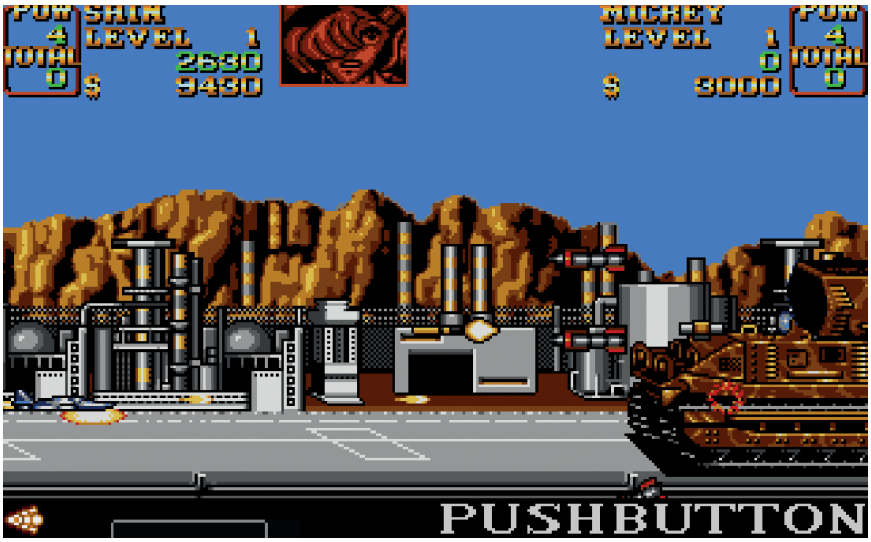


The loading screen and a level on the Atari ST version of *UN Squadron*.

Just getting everything into the game in the time available was a challenge. Unfortunately there was very little in the way of quality control, or even any sense of desired quality. We were just to copy the game, and do it as quickly as possible. The hardest thing was duplicating the game's last levels: if I had some question that I could not figure out from the video I'd have to play through the entire game from the start just to check out one little thing near the end.

The Amiga version was the best, but unfortunately it was only a little better than that on the ST. I spent all my time working on the ST game, and then I was offered a job at Ocean. I wanted to leave after the ST version was done and let someone else do the Amiga version. However Geoff Brown actually asked Dave Ward of Ocean to hold up my employment, and forced me to stay at Tiertex to finish up the Commodore version. I just knocked it out in about a week. Graphically it looks almost identical, and simply has a bit smoother scrolling.

In hindsight, that was a poor move on my part. I should have voluntarily stayed and done a better job. There was potential for a much better game on the





One of the colourful screens from the Amiga version of *UN Squadron* – spot the difference?

Amiga there – something more like the SNES version. But I don't think Tiertex would have given me any more time regardless.

There was remarkably little in the way of testing for *UN Squadron*, especially for the Amiga version. I'd just shoehorned it in, mostly just converting the graphics routines to account for the different screen layout. When I said the game was done, Donald Campbell (one of the Tiertex founders) just sat down with me, and we played all the way through in two-player mode. About eighty per cent of the way through there was a vertically scrolling section I'd forgotten to convert, which meant the screen was corrupted for a few seconds. I actually asked Donald if we could let that slide. Of course he said no. So I fixed it, we played through the entire game again once, and that was it – the entirety of testing was just two play-throughs.

The equipment selection screen for your plane on the Amiga version of *UN Squadron*.



ST Action gave it 67%, which was fair. It was not a very good conversion. While it was very faithful to the arcade version in terms of everything that happened, it was just not that playable due to the low frame rate, the jerky scrolling, and the messy graphics making it hard to spot things.

At the time I was focusing simply on getting everything in, it wasn't until later in my career that I would concentrate more on pure gameplay and user experience. But I learned some useful lessons working on *UN Squadron*.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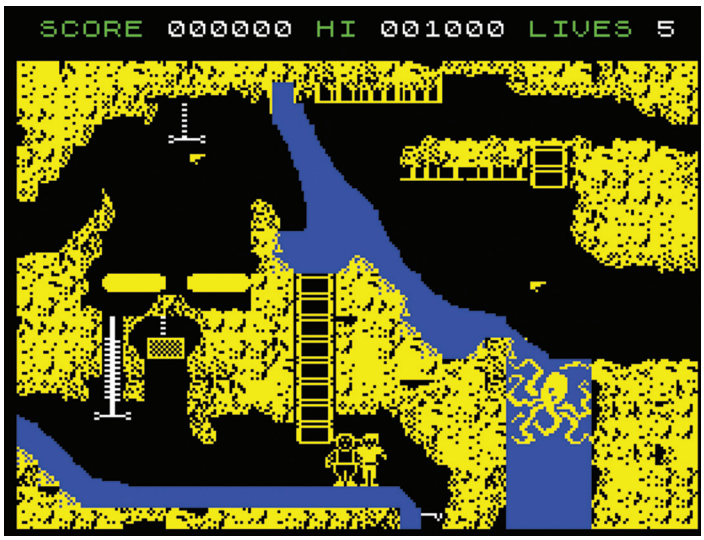
John Ludin

John was part of the team that brought the blockbuster movie *The Goonies* to home computers. The game was developed in 1985 by California-based Datasoft, initially for the Commodore 64 and Atari 8-bit, and was published overseas by US Gold.

The Goonies game was created by five people. Scott Spanburg (programmer) and Kelly Day (graphics) worked for Datasoft, while Terry Shakespeare, Roy Langston and I were on loan from Don Bluth Studios. We were the ideas guys. Every day, the three of us drove to this industrial building ten minutes from Bluth. We were based in a very small room, with a small rectangular table, and we'd work with a whiteboard, drawing out the ideas. I don't recall both Scott and Kelly being in the room while we worked, but Terry and Roy were every day. We would throw out ideas and then Scott or Kelly would tell us why a particular bit wouldn't work, or how it could work. The bulk of the actual ideas came from us three.

Former Disney animator Don Bluth set up a production company with several other Disney colleagues, with headquarters in Van Nuys and Burbank in California, and later in Dublin, Ireland.



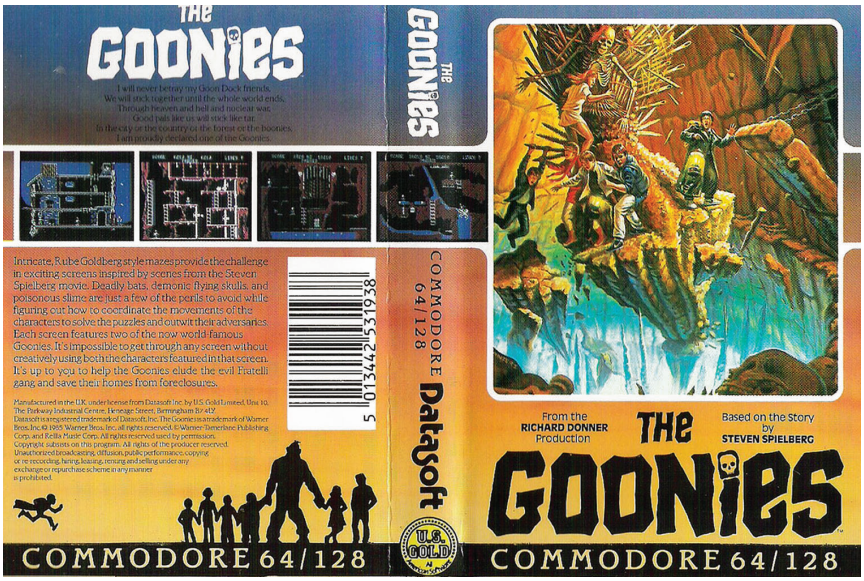
The ZX Spectrum version of *The Goonies*.

There was no leader as such, and we were all a bit different in our approach. Roy was very pragmatic, a real problem-solver. Terry would come up with really goofy, very cartoony ideas. He was an artist first, and a great ideas guy. Terry and I were pretty close friends at this point and we worked with each other a lot.

We clicked well together. I am not sure how I would categorise myself, but the cleverer something was, the more I liked it.

Our backgrounds were in writing for television, so Datasoft gave us a crash course on how these games worked. Types of gameplay were still being created and developed, but there was a definite 'what had been done to date' to serve as a starting point or springboard. The learning curve was huge. Computer characters could only do so much, which was frustrating. But it made us think differently. What I do remember is not wanting the 'computer physics' to hold

us back in trying to come up with new ideas. I particularly remember this process with the *Zorro* game which we did after *The Goonies*. We became more and more clever as we got the hang of it. I thoroughly enjoyed challenging the computer guys, saying, 'Is there any way that a character could do this?' I remember them saying no at first, then thinking about it, and then solving the problem and creating programming to allow for the gameplay. Now it is such rudimentary stuff but it was cool back then.

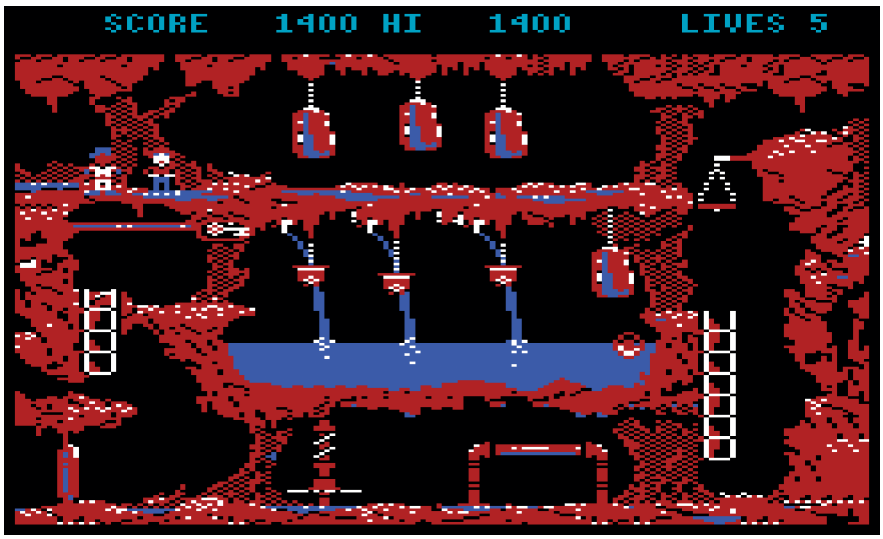


The Commodore 64 version of *The Goonies*. Above the cassette inlay and below one of the many levels.

In terms of the design for *The Goonies*, we had goals. We needed to create a certain number of rooms to get through the game, and there needed to be a certain number of tasks in each room. A lot of it was thinking of things that were hard, but that could be solved through trial and error. And it was important that the tasks were very different. We never wanted to repeat a particular type of task. I'd say for every one good idea we had, we threw away nine okay ideas. When we would strike on a good idea we all knew it immediately: it fit the story, it was different, clever, tricky or crazy.

We were 'allowed' to read *The Goonies* movie script, which was this big, secretive process, like we were handling the Rosetta Stone. The script was extremely close to the final film, so it was a matter of simply coming up with ideas that mirrored what we read.

I can't fully remember if Steven Spielberg or any of the film's producers had to approve the game. I will say this though – as I moved from Don Bluth





The Amstrad CPC version of *The Goonies* and below the loading screen on the same platform.

Studios to other jobs, I ended up working closely with Amblin and with projects in which Spielberg had a hand. If it was something he really liked, he was very into it. For other things, there were so many layers of people, who knows what he did and didn't see. I worked on a project where we were told to tell the network that a particular idea was Steven's even though it was actually one of our own. Because this gaming thing and movie tie-in was fairly new, my guess would be that he was certainly keeping tabs on things. And writer Chris Columbus probably was too, to protect his film.



It was a very intense schedule to get the game finished to tie-in with the movie's release. We had to come up with a certain number of good ideas and tasks every day, and it was draining.

They kept moving up the launch date and the programmers needed more time to do the actual work. I recall that they were trying to beat some competitor to the marketplace, although I can't remember who that was. We would not be happy with B material, so that's why it was intense. An idea had to be great to get in the game. I have no idea how it all turned out as I don't think I ever saw the finished game, but working on *The Goonies* was a terrific process.

I never thought I'd have a job creating a video game, but it was fun and challenging, for sure.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Anthony Ball

Known for the conversion of *Mercs* while at Tiertex, Anthony also got arrested twice; for hacking into BSkyB and Cellnet.

I first started programming on an Atari 8-bit. I then bought an ST (I couldn't afford an Amiga A1000) and started programming some game demos with Andy Ingram, who later worked at Tiertex, then was co-founder of Traveller's Tales. We were both offered jobs at Tiertex – I was also offered a job programming the NES at Zippo (Rare) and so I went to work at Zippo while Andy went to work at Tiertex. While at Zippo I bought an Amiga and started creating graphics demos on it in my spare time.



The initial screen on the Amiga version of *Mercs*.

As I was finishing *Cabal* for Zippo/Rare I was offered another job at Tiertex that allowed me to pick which coin-op I wanted to convert plus I would also be investigating/creating new forms of copy protection for the Amiga and ST.

While a lot of the programmers at Tiertex used the Atari ST to code, I used Devpac on the Amiga linked to another 'slave' Amiga with the program code being sent over a parallel cable. I wrote a map editor for *Mercs* on the Amiga that could also link to a digitizer so we could grab graphics from the arcade cabinet RGB signal. I coded the 68000 versions of the game. David Bland was in charge of the graphics. I added bits to the map editor as he requested to make the conversion easier.

I struggled with the Atari version and I couldn't add too much to the Amiga version or it would make the ST game look worse in comparison. I had various scroll methods I was testing on it, but none matched up to the performance on the Amiga. Anything that was any good took up a lot of memory. In the end I decided to make two scroll routines and

switch to the second one if the game was played on a 1040ST.

The Amiga was the better version with better scrolling and an overlaid panel rather than a side panel.

As soon as I saw the game it was in my head how to code the Amiga version. By the end of day one the vertical scroll was in together with the overlaid panel using the hardware sprites. The actual arcade machine was in the attic at Tiertex – that's where the main team of artists resided. Myself and the programmers who did the 8-bit versions of *Mercs* were in a room at the bottom of the attic stairs, so we could easily play the game whenever we liked.

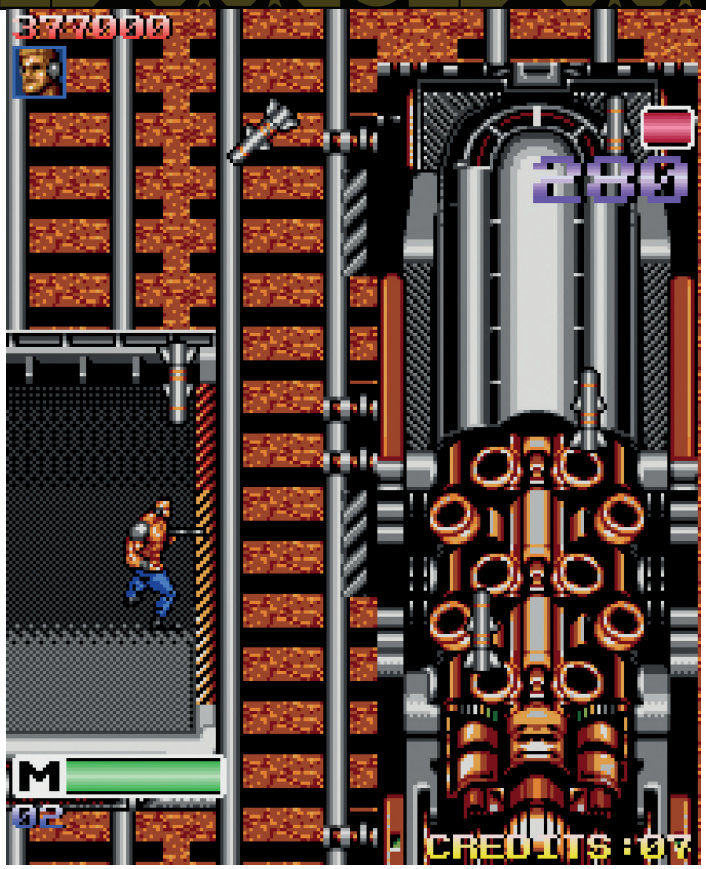
David Bland and I added a whole extra level that wasn't in the arcade version of *Mercs*, we also added a 'secret garden' on the right of one of the later maps with every weapon and power-up in the game hidden within it. Parts of the game we liked most were extended – for example the swamp section with dinghies. As well as extra power-ups we added power-downs that take energy away! At the very start of the game we added a clown's-nose mega-weapon – it was in the water on the far right. Unfortunately a game tester at US Gold spotted it so we had to take it out – but it was still present in the secret garden. About ten days into the Atari version I had a few days' holiday and during this time someone decided to take the disks to be mastered early – but they took the wrong ST disks. I'm not too sure what they took, but I remember it had one of the worst scroll methods, possibly the clown's-nose mega-weapon in the sea, and I'm not sure if it was copy protected. No one seemed bothered about it though.

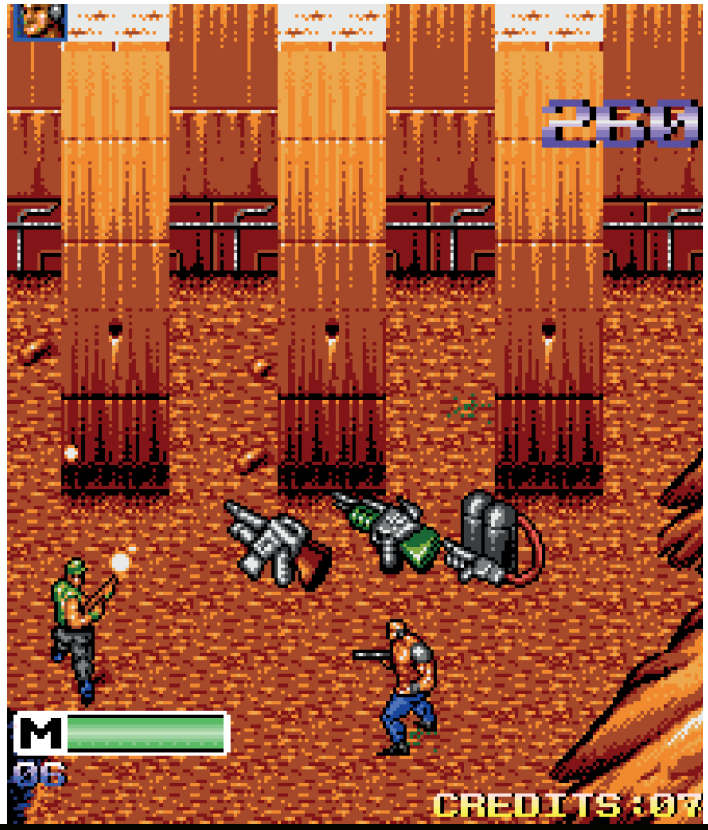


The vertical scrolling action of *Mercs* in the Amiga version sporting the clown's-nose mega-weapon power-up found in the secret garden.

I think that the huge baddies are the most impressive things in *Mercs* – the train in particular was about seven screens high. I myself liked the waterfall on the swamp level and I think the flame-thrower was much better than the one in the arcade version.

We were not allowed to put our names in the games at Tiertex, I don't know why – I sneaked mine and David's names in anyhow, to see them press the keypad '*' and then take a look at the title screen.





C&VG seemed to like the game and most of the reviews I saw were positive from what I remember. The magazines played easier versions of the game than were released. The game that came out was much harder than the review copy.

Tiertex was very quick at arcade conversions. US Gold must have been pleased with the speed of output and I had the impression that Tiertex had the pick of the best arcade games that US Gold licensed.

A lot of people used to complain about Tiertex games, but when you think that virtually every one from Tiertex was coded and published within six months it's pretty impressive. The programmers had no access to the original arcade source code – the game had to be played over and over again in order to make the conversion accurate.

At the end of *Mercs* I was asked to do *Die Hard 2*. Unfortunately Tiertex also wanted me to sign a pretty restrictive contract so when I refused it was made pretty clear that life there would get difficult – I resigned the same day.

My time after Tiertex is pretty complicated, I was arrested for hacking – twice (BSkyB and Cellnet) – and was on bail for seven years before I was cleared. I have started coding games again on mobile through my company – SinisterSoft.

Seven screens high, the baddie train, and weapons galore! Two action screens from the Amiga version of *Mercs*.

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Tim O'Connell

As well as looking after the Group's accounts as financial director, Tim has some interesting stories to tell which are not totally accountancy-related.



The football trophy that US Gold and Ocean Software spilt blood over!

My role at US Gold grew into becoming the financial director and then prior to the flotation, Group FD, which was US Gold, CentreSoft and PDQ.

I soon realised very quickly after joining the company what a crazy but wonderful industry it was to be in.

During my first week at US Gold Tim Chaney asked me to come down to London to one of the then consumer/trade shows. I went down as the pin-striped accountant. Within minutes of the doors opening I was bombarded by thousands of kids wanting to know when the products were being released and could they take souvenirs from the stand – I was exhausted after an hour!

My first trip to the US included a visit to the LucasArts Ranch to negotiate a contract – I went again as the pin-striped accountant to find that all their vice presidents and staff were in Bermuda shorts and t-shirts – I soon changed.

My first visit to France was to meet Albert Loridan and we met in Paris on the Champs Elysses and had a Kir Royale at Fouquets – that was the life.

We had a strong football side made up of a combination of US Gold and CentreSoft, though we were called US Gold – Charles Cecil, Bob Kenrick, David Neal and Stuart Furnival were all part of the team and had matches against accountants, lawyers and local Sunday league sides. One year a joint summer party was arranged with Ocean for charity, held at a school. We pre-arranged that it would culminate in a football match between Ocean and US Gold. We were in a marquee with plenty of drinks, however for once our lads did not participate much because of the upcoming match. Someone at the school realised that the Marquee was on the football field so the match could not take place, and you can imagine the amount of drink that was downed in a very short period of time after that discovery.

The organisers organised a second date and provided a professional referee. Ocean did proper warm-ups and drills – half our lads had a fag leaning against the goal posts. We won nine-one. We also played Leisuresoft – then the biggest

competition to CentreSoft and beat them five-one.

Another football anecdote relates to the secretary of Everton Football Club. I'm an absolute fanatical Everton fan. One day he just arrived at our premises in Birmingham and said he represented the 1st Division clubs and in one of our software titles we had used likenesses of the clubs. That was before IP was so important and expensive. I had to negotiate a very fast licence agreement which we did there and then. It was surreal being in awe of the secretary while negotiating a business licence.

Once on a trip to visit our San Francisco office with Martyn Savage we'd finished early and Martyn wanted to buy a present for his niece from GAP. So at about 4:30 in the afternoon we entered the store and noticed that it and surrounding shops were deserted of customers. The shop was closing and they suggested we return to our hotel as soon as possible as the LA riots were happening and they were going to come to San Francisco.

We went back to the hotel – which was a lovely place on one of the main streets. Martyn suggested we meet in reception about 7:30 pm and then go to Fisherman's Wharf as we thought there would be no trouble there. In my room I put the TV on to find that someone had been shot in Fisherman's Wharf! So needless to say when I met Martyn I persuaded him that we should eat at the hotel. Half way through the meal there was a smashing sound as a brick was thrown at the majestic glass doors of the hotel. The waitress asked the diners to follow her quickly to go and hide in the ladies' toilets at the back of the hotel.

Martyn just sat there and in a very English voice stated he was not moving as he was eating his dinner! Which we both did, and luckily no looters entered the hotel. Late that night it was a bit surreal as I telephoned to my wife – I could see from my room a load of looters throwing things at the shops like Radio Shack and having to keep my wife calm by saying very little was happening.

The next day we hired a car and went down to Monterey and Carmel where we had a great couple of days before the flight home.



The troublesome three – Geoff Brown, Tim O'Connell and Martyn Savage.



Ian Morrison

Forming a strong partnership with David Anderson, Ian can put his name to a large number of US Gold classics converted to the ZX Spectrum.

My dad was a high school teacher and brought a Commodore PET home to play with. I figured out how to write a game on it – a simple canyon game with walls that randomly moved left and right and closed in on you. I remember it so well! The feeling of power and creativity from having made this game was amazing and still lives with me to this day. I got my hands on a ZX80 and sold the games I wrote through classified advertisements in computer magazines and then, by the time the ZX81 came out, we were being contacted by games publishers – and that's where it all started.



Beach-Head II: The Dictator Strikes Back!, the sequel to US Gold's massive hit.

When the ZX Spectrum arrived, we were amazed by its graphics, memory and CPU and found we were able to start producing relatively decent clones of the C64 and arcade games that our publishers challenged us with.

Beach-Head was our first gig with US Gold. We'd been down to show off our Silversoft games at a show – this was after cutting our teeth with *Shark Attack* and *Color Clash* for Romik. It all went very smoothly actually and that was the real joy – it all came together very quickly. David Anderson and I paired up, alternating graphics and coding on different levels. We hit our deadlines, and went on to hit our stride with *Raid over Moscow*. David then went on to University and I stayed out for a year to do *Out Run*.

The 68000 machines then arrived, providing a brand new language and hardware that gave us a lot more memory and graphics capability. I paid Alan Laird (and John Bankier) to take over the conversion of 8-bit titles and

I focused on the Atari ST, developing cross platform tools to let the same code run on the Amiga. We rented a house in Romford (I had a summer internship at Fords in Dagenham) and the *Out Run* arcade machine lived in the garage. All the necessary computers to do the conversion of this colossal arcade game were strewn across the kitchen table – and that is where we worked.

The Spectrum version of *Out Run* was a result of tight code and the experience I had gained programming other racing games. We had to do lots of optimisation and had to make the graphics smaller than we would have liked. It was all a trade off of size against frame rate. The publisher wanted big graphics for effect – we wanted small graphics for speed. I think they won in the end. Probe were pleased with the versions we did.

I'm very proud of the road drawing algorithm I created for the racing games. The key problem was always optimising the code to get it as fast as possible to allow more to be done. Knowing what I know now, game play would have received better attention. It was somewhat 'random' and pot-luck to get it right.

Looking back I wish I had not got into the games industry at that time. From high school to business success without going to university was not the norm and when I did go to university one year after my peers, I was removed somewhat and always distracted from studies, not by the usual partying but by games and game development.



The arcade conversion of *Zaxxon*, published in 1985.

It got to the point that I quit university one year early to get back to games…my first love. I had trouble balancing the two, I guess.

I had to pay much later to do my MBA to get back the proper feeling of going to university full time – after selling my US games company for a good whack – and loved it.



Turbo Out Run, published in 1989 and still sporting the lush green road.



Alan Tomkins

Alan produced the graphics for a number of Atari ST and Amiga games before arriving at Probe. He then worked on US Gold-published *Out Run*, *Turbo Out Run* and *RoadBlasters* on the same platforms.

I've always been good at art. At school I got an A for art in my exams at school in the 1960s.

In June 1985 I bought an Atari ST from the Selfridge's branch of Silica Shop and after purchasing a couple of lacklustre art packages, I stumbled upon *Degas*.

The two guys that worked at the store asked why I was always buying art packages . I told them that the early ones I had bought weren't up to much. I found *Degas* very different in its ease of use and features. They asked if they could see what I'd been doing, so I took a disk into show them. To my surprise, they asked if they could show the screens I had done as a show-reel in the shop. It was then that they said they were both programmers and had been looking for a graphic artist to do the graphics for a game they were programming.

They told me to go to an arcade and look at a game called *Flying Shark*, as they wanted to do a space version of it on the ST. A couple of weeks later I had finished the graphics, and a few months later the game was released as *Foundation's Waste*. To my surprise it went top three in the ST charts.

I went to the computer trade show at Olympia and handed out copies of my work. Elite Software had previously asked me to do the graphics for *Paperboy*, the downside was they ultimately refused to pay me saying they had decided to use someone else's work. As I was passing the Elite stand at the show I saw that they had in fact used my graphics for the game and after pointing this out to them they then reluctantly paid me. This happened a few times with other development teams, but



Trantor: The Last StormTrooper, Amiga version.

then I did a game for Probe Software and was paid in full, on time. This was a refreshing change, so I stuck with Probe for my freelance work.

In October 1989 I was offered the post of graphic manager at Mirrorsoft, an offer I couldn't refuse, even though it meant travelling to their Coventry office every day. The game I worked on there was *Battlemaster*, the first full-screen animated fantasy role playing game. I am pleased to see that even to this day the screens I did for the game still set the benchmark for FRP games. The other games I worked on at Mirrorsoft included *Xenon 1* and *2*, *Speedball 1* and *2*, *Back To The Future*, *Mega-Lo-Mania*, *Predator 2*, and *Lord Of The Rings: Riders Of Rohan*.

When the Mirror Group folded, and everyone was suddenly jobless, I was offered the role of graphic manager at Domark Software and while there I did the graphics and animated intro for *Harrier AV8B*, *Flight Sim Tool Kit*, *Mig 29* and *World War 2*. I then headed up the new graphics department of Eidos US in Silicon Valley working on a number of Flight Sims, including the follow up to *AV8B*, *The Flying Nightmares*.



The original *Out Run on* the Atari ST. The 16-bit versions of this arcade conversion are arguably the best.

While at Probe I drew the concept screens for *1943*, and *RoadBlasters*, as a guide for the artist that worked on the games, likewise on *Out Run*. *Trantor* followed and then the sequel to *Out Run*, *Out Run Europa* – on which I created the backgrounds and car animations



Turbo Out Run on the Commodore Amiga.

including putting in a London bus, which the programmer had a problem with because for those days it was a very large sprite. I was particularly pleased with the way the detailed backgrounds of the City of London turned out.

The screens for *1943*, *RoadBlasters*, and *Out Run* were originally drawn using the Atari ST, with the *Degas* art package; but *Trantor* and *Out Run Europa* were drawn using a Commodore Amiga and *Deluxe Paint*.

When I started at Probe it was more like a close family rather than a a big company where most people are just ships that pass in the night. There was a great camaraderie amongst the staff and we worked with each other instead of being prima donnas lording it. Fergus McGovern was a good boss, a man-manager who got you working for him. He wasn't slow in telling you your work wasn't good enough – in a way that inspired you to do better instead of getting the hump and not trying. Even when we moved into larger premises, the new guys soon slotted into the 'family'. Although I was an artist, Fergus trusted my opinion and I was made product manager on some of the games, which meant I'd visit the developers and guide them towards what we wanted.

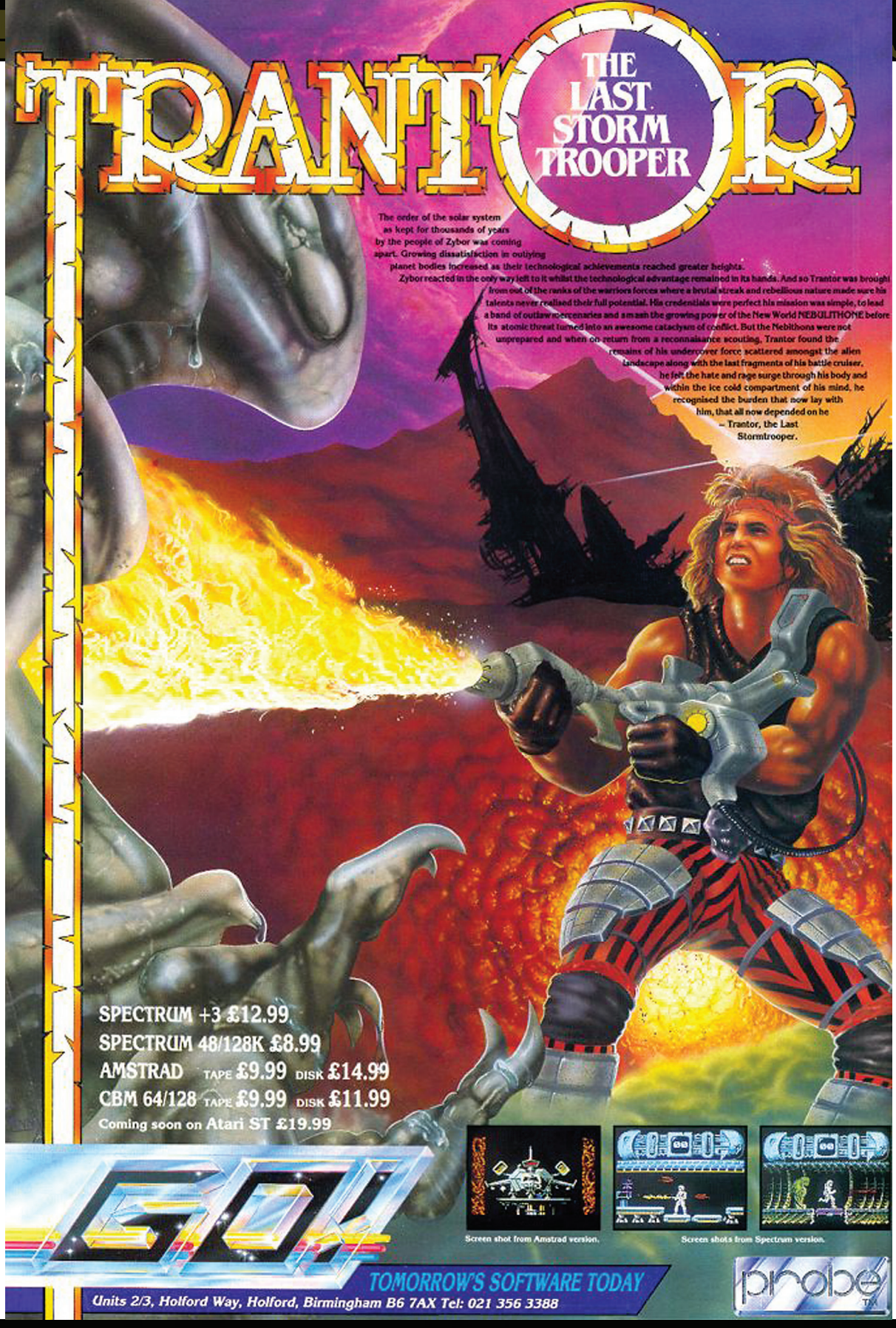


Tomkins helped with the art on *RoadBlasters*.

The relationship we had with US Gold was very good – I went up to their Birmingham head office a number of times and found them very friendly and got on well with them. Even with a deadline looming I would visit them with a programmer and do last-second code changes – the guys at US Gold were always pleasant.

What we found at the time was that it didn't matter how many adverts were placed, the public weren't stupid – they knew what a good game was or what constituted a stinker. Word of mouth sold a game better than any advertisement campaign and once Joe Public liked a few games from a publisher the trust was formed and a loyal customer bought future products no matter what the press said; though I always believed that quality sells better than quantity, and I've always strived for quality. I never checked the magazines for the reviews of my games – everyone has a different opinion – one magazine may say ten, another five. You know in yourself if your work is good or bad, and that's what really counts.

In 1999 I retired and returned to London to retrain retired Greyhounds. I still do the odd graphic work, but mainly using *Photoshop* these days, and have recently got back into doing 3D animations.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Darren White

The programmer of *Out Run Europa* reveals why the Spectrum version featured monochrome graphics when the magazine previews and even reviews showed eye-catching, full-colour screenshots.

Despite colour screenshots appearing in magazines, the Spectrum version of *Out Run Europa* shipped with monochrome graphics.

I was responsible for the Master System, Game Gear, Amstrad CPC and Spectrum versions of *Out Run Europa*. The design was a bit of a mix.

We all sat down at Probe and brainstormed, and things changed as the project progressed. Game projects weren't as structured in those times, at least not with most of the companies I'd worked with. I do remember Mark Kelly working on the Commodore 64 version of *Turbo Out Run* and that's where I got the idea of using a character-based scenery system, as the C64's *Turbo Outrun* used something similar. I think we added the other vehicles during a brainstorming session.

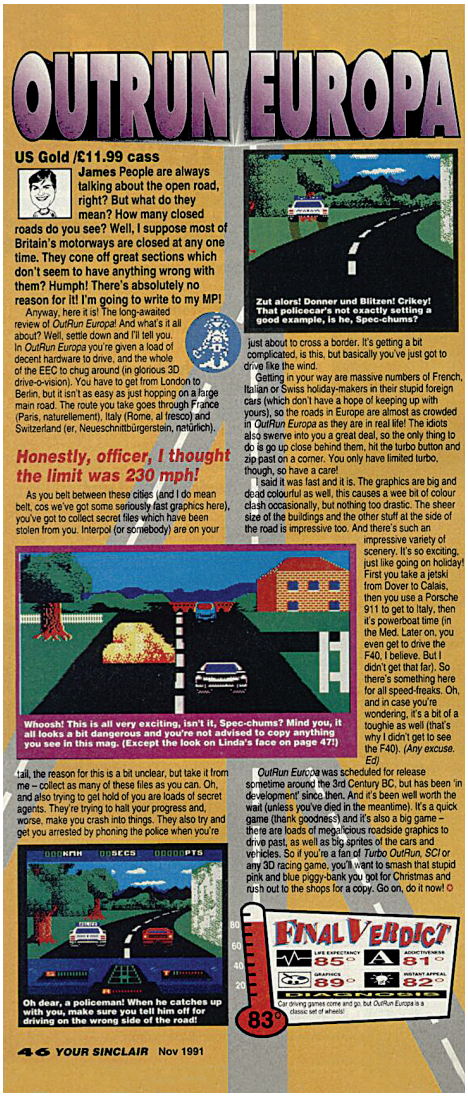


Out Run Europa – pictured here on the Sega Master System – was not an arcade conversion, but an exclusive sequel developed by Probe for home computers and consoles.



All the code from all of the Z80 based versions was pretty much the same. The only real difference was the machine specific stuff such as drawing, sound, input and loading code.

The monochrome Spectrum graphics were partly due to budget issues – the boss didn't want to pay for extra graphics work for the Spectrum – but mainly time constraints. I wrote a tool that took the Master System graphics and converted them for the CPC to be touched up, but when it came to converting to the Speccy ones, they looked a bit rough because of the two-colour limit per character square and needed a lot more touching up. Also, there were a few issues with blending



OUTRUN EUROPA

US Gold /£11.99 cass

James People are always talking about the open road, right? But what do they mean? How many closed roads do you see? Well, I suppose most of Britain's motorways are closed at any one time. They cone off great sections which don't seem to have anything wrong with them? Humph! There's absolutely no reason for it! I'm going to write to my MP!

Anyway, here it is! The long-awaited review of *OutRun Europa*! And what's it all about? Well, settle down and I'll tell you. In *OutRun Europa* you're given a load of decent hardware to drive, and the whole of the EEC to chug around (in glorious 3D drive-o-vision). You have to get from London to Berlin, but it isn't as easy as just hopping on a large main road. The route you take goes through France (Paris, naturellement), Italy (Rome, al fresco) and Switzerland (er, Neueschnittbürgerstein, naturlich).

Zut alors! Donner und Blitzen! Crikey! That policecar's not exactly setting a good example, is he, Spec-chums?

Honestly, officer, I thought the limit was 230 mph!

As you belt between these cities (and I do mean belt, cos we've got some seriously fast graphics here), you've got to collect secret files which have been stolen from you. Interpol (or somebody) are on your tail, the reason for this is a bit unclear, but take it from me – collect as many of these files as you can. Oh, and also trying to get hold of you are loads of secret agents. They're trying to halt your progress and, worse, make you crash into things. They also try and get you arrested by phoning the police when you're just about to cross a border. It's getting a bit complicated, is this, but basically you've just got to drive like the wind.

Getting in your way are massive numbers of French, Italian or Swiss holiday-makers in their stupid foreign cars (which don't have a hope of keeping up with yours), so the roads in Europe are almost as crowded in *OutRun Europa* as they are in real life! The idiots also swerve into you a great deal, so the only thing to do is go up close behind them, hit the turbo button and zip past on a corner. You only have limited turbo, though, so have a care!

I said it was fast and it is. The graphics are big and dead colourful as well, this causes a wee bit of colour clash occasionally, but nothing too drastic. The sheer size of the buildings and the other stuff at the side of the road is impressive too. And there's such an impressive variety of scenery. It's so exciting, just like going on holiday! First you take a jetski from Dover to Calais, then you use a Porsche 911 to get to Italy, then it's powerboat time (in the Med. Later on, you even get to drive the F40, I believe. But I didn't get that far). So there's something here for all speed-freaks. Oh, and in case you're wondering, it's a bit of a toughie as well (that's why I didn't get to see the F40). *(Any excuse. Ed)*

Whoosh! This is all very exciting, isn't it, Spec-chums? Mind you, it all looks a bit dangerous and you're not advised to copy anything you see in this mag. (Except the look on Linda's face on page 47!)

OutRun Europa was scheduled for release sometime around the 3rd Century BC, but has been 'in development' since then. And it's been well worth the wait (unless you've died in the meantime). It's a quick game (thank goodness) and it's also a big game – there are loads of megalicious roadside graphics to drive past, as well as big sprites of the cars and vehicles. So if you're a fan of *Turbo OutRun*, *SCI* or any 3D racing game, you'll want to smash that stupid pink and blue piggy-bank you got for Christmas and rush out to the shops for a copy. Go on, do it now!

Oh dear, a policeman! When he catches up with you, make sure you tell him off for driving on the wrong side of the road!

FINAL VERDICT

LIFE EXPECTANCY 85%
ADDICTIVENESS 81%
GRAPHICS 89%
INSTANT APPEAL 92%

DIAGNOSIS

Car driving games come and go, but *OutRun Europa* is a classic set of wheels!

83%

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against the background properly. All of the scenery moved in character-sized increments so the colour clashing wasn't an issue, but the sprites sometimes clashed badly.

This would have taken extra programming time so in the end it was decided to just go with monochrome. The code handled the colour version, but shamefully wasn't used as it was intended to. That's what the screenshots were in *Your Sinclair* – a pre-release version using the colour-converted graphics from my converter tool. Although it looks like they may have been touched up a bit in places. The screenshot with the dashboard showing looks like the original.

I don't have a clear memory of when the reviewers came to see us, only a vague recollection. The Spectrum version was in a pretty advanced state and would've probably been close to completion using the colour-converted graphics, but with some glitches due to the issues I already mentioned. It would have taken longer than a few weeks to fix and the project was already running late. The artwork as well as the code would have had to change.

I no longer have the colour version, much to my dismay. I've lost all of my source code from more than fifteen years ago. Some was stolen during a burglary, some I stupidly decided to throw out during a house move as I had too much junk! Isn't hindsight remarkable?

Your Sinclair's infamous review which mentions 'dead colourful' graphics and features touched-up colour screens. Speculation is that the review was probably based on the Amstrad CPC version, which the Spectrum version was planned to resemble before the last-minute switch to monochrome graphics.

Members of the World of Spectrum community have since 'fixed' the Spectrum version by reintroducing colour graphics. The project is currently a work in progress but it's great to see the breezy, blue-sky visuals return to the game.



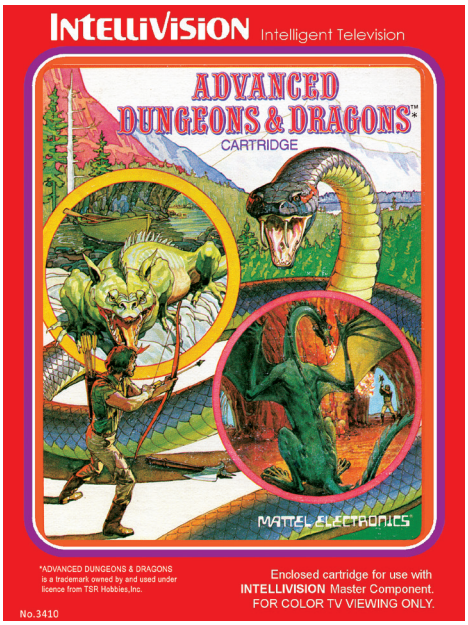


Bob Malin

Bob was the SSI product manager at US Gold and ensured that *Dungeons and Dragons* was well represented in the games published by the company.

Today's gaming, and being a gamer, is cool and computer games are now bigger business than the movie business. Games like *World of Warcraft* and *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* are role-playing games that generate millions of dollars. In the 1980s very few people knew what role-playing games were and enjoyed them almost in hiding, as they were considered to be something played only by nerds and anoraks.

The original tabletop role-playing game was *Dungeons and Dragons*, created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson as an extension of their medieval wargame rules in 1974. While a myriad of other role-playing games were produced based on many other subjects such as *Space: Traveller* (1997), *Cowboys: Boot Hill* (1975) and even *Sentient Ducks: RuneQuest* (1978), *Dungeons and Dragons* (and *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*) was the market leader by far.



The first officially licensed *Dungeons and Dragons* games appeared on the Mattel Intellivision system in 1981.

The hobby grew slowly in the UK until Ian Livingstone (later to become a board member of Eidos who acquired US Gold in 1996) and Steve Jackson founded Games Workshop and began importing D&D in 1975 and supporting it with the magazine *White Dwarf* in 1977.

The early 1980s saw strong growth of tabletop role-playing games and the new nerd hobby based on the new home computers that were being produced; The BBC Microcomputer (1981), ZX Spectrum (1982), Commodore 64 (1982) and Amstrad CPC (1984) were the 8-bit first wave of computers being used in the home, which was followed by the 16-bit, second wave of home computers, with

the Atari ST and Commodore Amiga (both 1985) battling for dominance, and Amstrad's range of low-priced PCs helping to bring Microsoft DOS into the fray. By the late 1980s it was inevitable that the two hobbies would converge.

The first officially licensed Dungeons and Dragons games had appeared on the Mattel Intellivision system in 1981. I was working for Games Workshop at the time, selling this in their branch in Manchester's Arndale Centre.

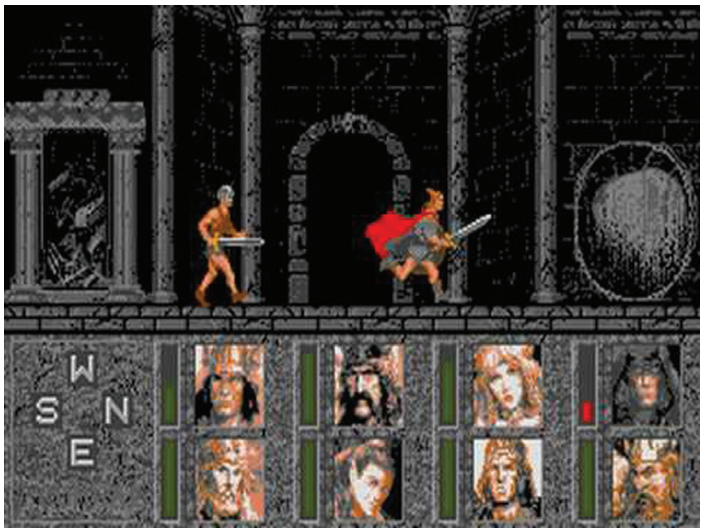
In 1987 TSR, the owners of D&D, offered the computer game rights up to bids from the major computer games publishers in the US. The winner, somewhat surprisingly, was Strategic Simulations Inc. (SSI), which until then had been known for producing military wargame simulations.

This is where US Gold came into the picture, as SSI was one of the US publishers that they represented in Europe. US Gold and SSI set up a joint venture whereby US Gold would produce D&D games on formats such as Spectrum and Amstrad that were unknown in the US.

The first advanced Dungeons and Dragons game to be produced for the home computer was *Pools of Radiance* packaged in the famous gold box and released in 1988. US Gold's first more action-based game was *Heroes of the Lance*, which was based on a best-selling series of novels. US Gold's games were packaged in silver boxes.

I joined US Gold at the end of 1989.





Heroes of the Lance, based on a best-selling series of novels – box art above and game screen below.

I was a product marketing manager with absolutely no marketing experience. I think I got the job because Tim Chaney and Roger Swindells, who interviewed me, were so amazed to find someone who knew what Dungeons and Dragons was and who played SSI wargames.

From 1989 to 1990, three more gold box games were released and US Gold produced another silver box game, *Dragon of Flames*.

The initial sales and critical reaction to these first D&D games were muted, as



Dragons of Flames (in the singular on this French advertisement), one of the first ads produced by Bob. Below: a screen from the game.

non role-players struggled to understand the complex rules of the tabletop games they were based on, and magazine reviewers had even less idea of what role-playing games were about.



In 1991 all this changed as SSI commissioned Westwood Studios (who would go on to produce one of the best-selling games of all time: *Command and Conquer*) to produce the second generation D&D computer game: *Eye of the Beholder*. I remember when I first saw *EOTB*, and feeling the same as when I saw *SimCity* (that US Gold nearly licensed to publish) and *Tomb Raider*, that I was looking at a genre-defining game.

The 3D step-view and increased focus on playability rather than the statistics-focus of the previous games was a hit with the reviewers and consumers alike and gave US Gold its first chart number one with a role-playing game.

The last D&D game US Gold developed, *Shadow Sorcerer*, was released in 1991. Sequels to *Eye of the Beholder* were released in 1992 and 1993 and again were chart-toppers.

The third generation engine for D&D used a 2.5D engine and was first seen in *Dark Sun: Shattered Lands*. This series did not make the same impact as *Eye of the Beholder* but achieved strong sales nonetheless.

As well as publishing D&D in the UK and Europe, US Gold was also instrumental in establishing many of the iconic games brands of today, including *Might and Magic III*, *IV* and *V* as well as the precursor for the *Heroes of Might and Magic* series: *King's Bounty*.

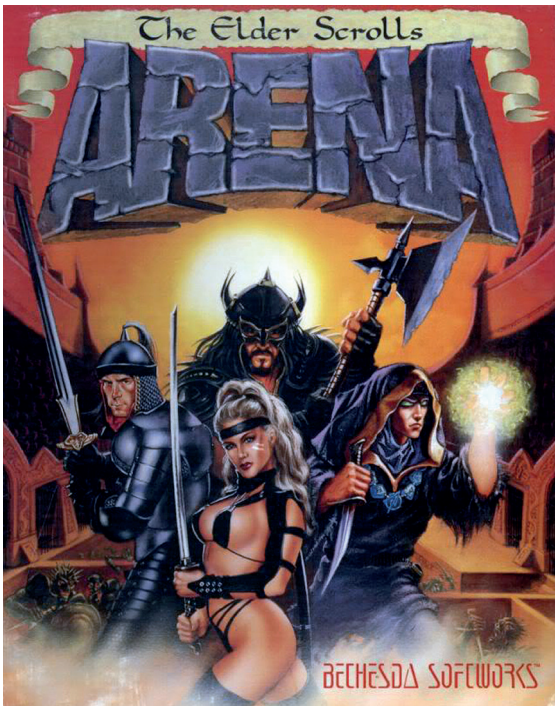
US Gold also marketed and distributed the first game in the Elder

Scrolls series, *Elder Scrolls Arena*. Other major role-playing brands that were introduced to the UK by US Gold included the Wizardry series and the German equivalent of D&D *Der Schwarze Auge* (The Dark Eye).

US Gold also developed its own role-playing game: *Legends of Valour*, in an attempt to establish its own role-playing game brand. *Legends of Valour* was designed and developed by Kev Bulmer who sadly passed away in 2011, and featured a scrolling 3D engine rather than the step-3D of *Eye of the Beholder*. Unfortunately it launched at the same time as *Ultima Underworld*, which also had scrolling 3D, and was unable to compete. It did however influence Bethesda Softworks' Todd Howard when they were developing the Elder Scrolls series. I also think it had the best packaging of any of the games I worked on.



US Gold also marketed and distributed the first game in the *Elder Scrolls* series called *Elder Scrolls Arena*.



In my five-year career with US Gold I must have worked on well over a hundred products. In addition to the the role-playing games series I worked on SSI's core range of strategy games. US Gold also produced a strategy game for which I was the producer, *Kingmaker*. I was really proud of it and wish it had sold better than it did.

I also achieved number one chart hits with two flight simulations; *Comanche Maximum Overkill* and *Jetfighter 2*.

All in all, it was great to be a nerd or an anorak in the 1990s!



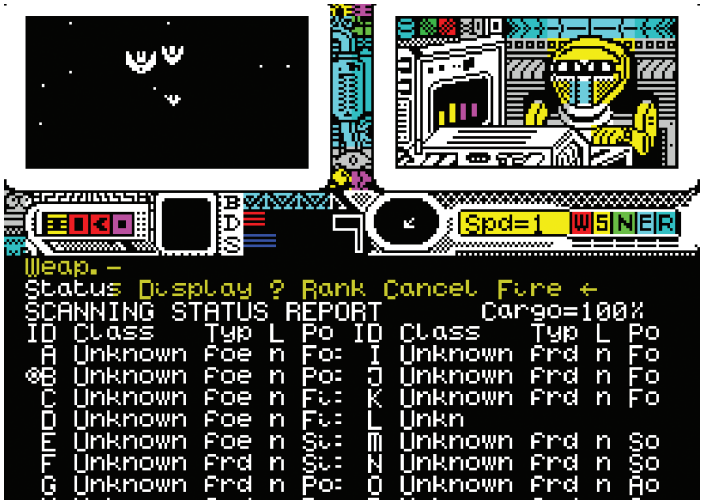
Chris Pink

While at Canvas, Chris worked on *PSI-5 Trading Company* on a number of formats then moved onto developing the huge hit *Leader Board* on the ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and Amstrad PCW.

Because of my passion for technical drawing I had a huge collection of technical blueprints and sketches of space ships of my own design. Computers entered my life in the form of a Commodore PET at high school. I got to play a couple of games on the PET and the course of my life changed.

I started to program a little immediately, but it wasn't until the arrival of the Amstrad that I wrote some games and sold them locally. During this time I wrote an art program for a tattoo shop that led me to updating it and having it published by HiSoft.

PSI-5 Trading Company on the ZX Spectrum.



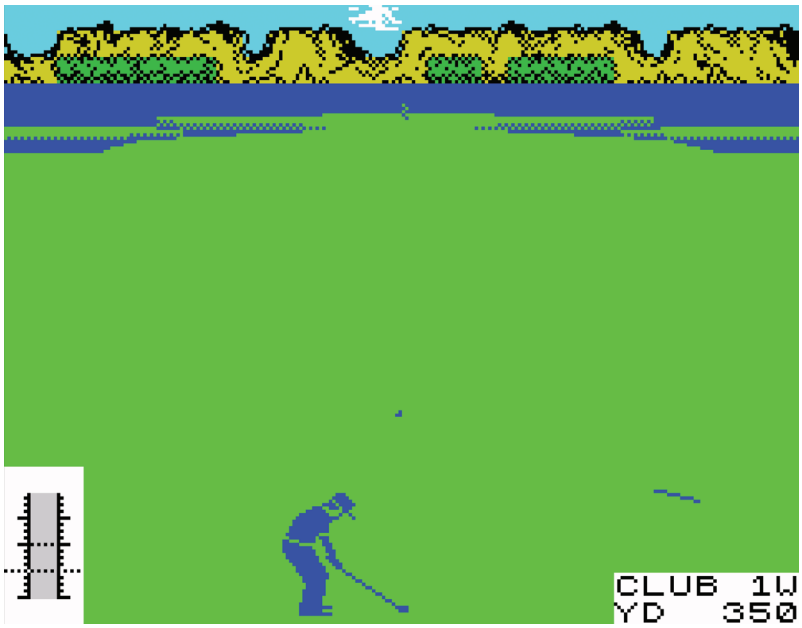
By this time, I was getting known locally and it led to an opportunity in Liverpool for me. That fell through quite quickly but I did end up in the games industry because of it.

The project was to have me doing artwork and Roy Gibson doing the programming. It wasn't a game but basically an electronic bulletin board for a large company with offices around the world. The intent of the project was to display information on screens in all their offices about the company and its employees; both local information and company-wide stuff. Very forward thinking for the time – we are talking the age of 2400 baud modems.

First I worked on a Battleship game for Argus Press (just artwork for that one) and *N.O.M.A.D.* for Ocean software – just sound effect programming. These were done in the back bedroom of Andy Sinclair (aka Tharg) with Andy and Roy Gibson doing most of the programming. This led to my first full game that I was being paid for (I had continued to do independent work for myself) working on *PSI-5 Trading Company* at

Canvas (a company set up by Ian Weatherburn and Steve Cain). Both Roy and I moved to Canvas. Andy left the industry then I think, he did pop up a year or two later with an art program he was writing for the Atari ST. By the time I arrived at Canvas Steve was no longer part of the day-to-day running of it – a role Roy assumed alongside Ian.

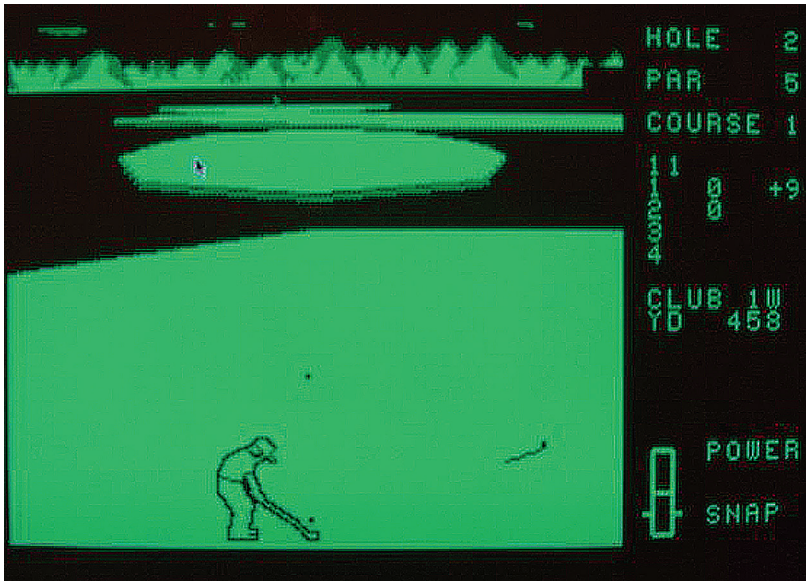
I produced *PSI-5 Trading Company*, published by US Gold. I was the coder on this project and worked on the Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and Amstrad PCW versions of the game. I was a little lost at first on this project, it being my first port. It took me a fair while to get a good direction going. For all of these versions, I used ALDS (a CP/M based assembler) on the PCW to build the game and *Mince* as the editor. When I did art for anything, it was using my own program or *Melbourne Draw*. For the PCW, I wrote a converter to bring the assets across and then a very simple touch up tool to do some pixel modifications for the images that didn't convert very well. That last build wasn't something US Gold contracted us for, I remember, I just did it because I was interested in seeing what I could do with the PCW and it led to us doing *Leader Board* for that platform too.





Leader Board on the Spectrum above and the Amstrad CPC below.

I then worked on *Leader Board*. After finishing *PSI-5*, Roy Gibson and Ian Weatherburn had decided to take back *Leader Board* from the lady they had sub-contracted it to and do it in-house. The deadline was very tight – we ended up doing it in three days as I remember and then on the fourth day, Ian and I added a PCW version. Roy wrote a 6502/C64 emulator in Z80 while Ian optimised pieces



Leader Board on the Amstrad PCW.

of the code that needed it in Z80. I wrote hardware emulation for sound, sprites, etc. Meanwhile the secretary typed in the original C64 source code. The core challenge for this was getting the program done for the deadline and then getting it done to the point it was playable. The PCW suffered the most from this because it meant converting a C64 screen into a Spectrum screen and then finally into a PCW screen for display.

After *Leader Board*, I was supposed to work on *Road Runner*, based on the arcade machine. I had the parallax scrolling road system up and running on the Amstrad before I left the company.

At Canvas, I shared a lot of the routines and knowledge I had created for the CPC with people there. So titles like *Breakthru* (Paul Houbart was the coder on that project) and *Supercycle* (this was the last project I saw Ian working on before I left) likely had code I had written in them (I know *Silent Service* and *Miami Vice* did to name a couple). I remember a long – as in a whole afternoon long – conversation over the phone where I dictated my code to them and then helped them get it set up and working. This would have taken minutes today.

Canvas's set-up provided challenges in the relaxed nature of the working environment, such as the three-day-long Scalextric event – all the desks and chairs where pushed to the side and everyone raced cars on a track that consumed most of the lower level of the office. There was the day-long *River Raid* (by Activision) playing session, I remember Steve Cain and I talking about the game – he said he held the record and I set about beating it.

It was a fun time to be in the industry to say the least and there were some great characters around Liverpool at that time that I feel lucky to have met – John Gibson, Steve (RIP) and Martin Calvert, Steve Cain (RIP), Simon Butler, Dawn Drake, Scott Johnson, Paul Hobart, 'Kenny' Everett to name a few.

I did read the reviews in the early days but I got more out of watching people play the games in stores when I could and seeing the games on the shelf, or the promo videos that stores would run – I used to get them from a buddy who worked for a distributor.

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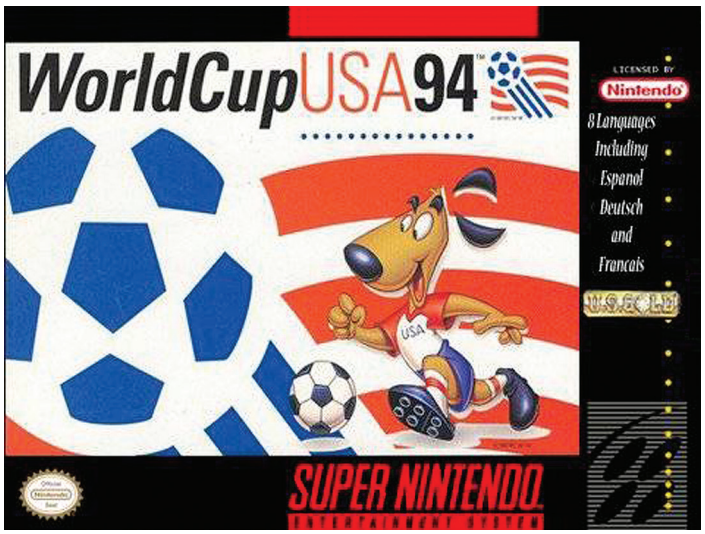
Paul Gill

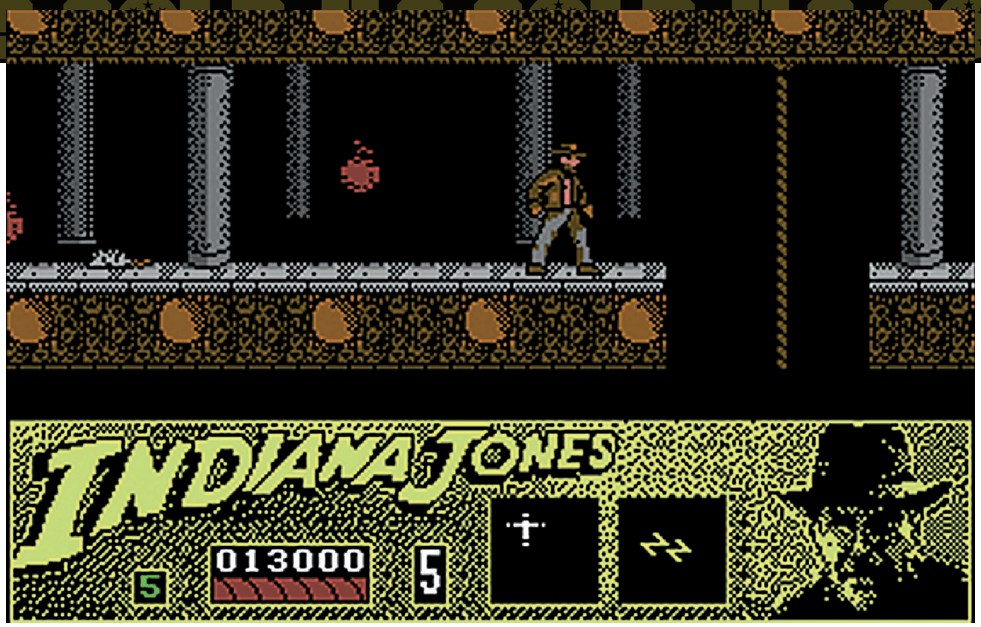
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade was Paul's first title published by US Gold - he is most proud of _World Cup USA 94_ for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System.

I managed my way into the games industry by not kissing girls in the 1980s – I got a VIC-20 instead and spent my evenings devouring the Commodore manual. I learnt machine code from copying listings from the back of *Your Computer* magazine – getting stuff flying around the screen for the first time was so exciting. My friend Ste was working at the games company Binary Design and he got me a job there – I wrote Mastertronic games for a year before moving on to Tiertex to write games for US Gold. My first, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, was for the Commodore 64. Two months, and a lot of New Order on my Walkman later I finished it on the Saturday before its release the following week. Big displays for the game were being set up in stores around the world. I left work at lunchtime on Saturday punching the air and spent the rest of the day celebrating in Manchester. I got no sleep that night. Sunday morning I got a call that there was a problem – I had to go and fix it. *Now*. In Birmingham.



The front cover of *World Cup USA 94* on the Super Nintendo Entertainment System.

I got the train and arrived blearily at US Gold. I must have drunk enough coffee to wake up a corpse and there I was, sitting in a strange office, staring at my code over and over again while on the phone to an angry salesman in America. It was a 50HZ/60HZ anomaly that caused the problem. I fixed the bug and we mastered it at 2:00 am the following morning. While waiting for American approval I wandered around the warehouse. I'd never seen so many games in my life! We eventually got the call from America. We were good to go. If you play *Indiana Jones* you will find that Indy now doesn't fall through the floor at a certain



Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade on the Commodore 64.

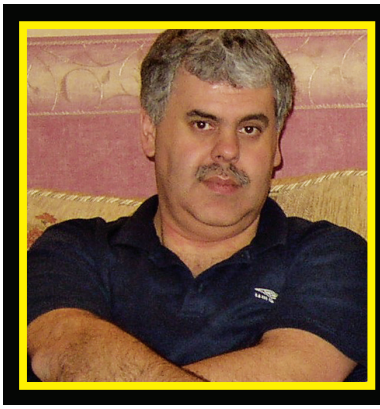
point on the 60HZ version of level five. US Gold's Tony Porter drove me back to Manchester and believe me it's the only time I've been driven in a car at over 120 miles an hour. I then slept for a day.

I had a great five years working at Tiertex and we had a good relationship with Geoff Brown. I remember one time Geoff turning up and parking his classic car in our car park. He went into a meeting while we were stood in the upstairs room, looking out of the window, drooling over his motor. Then two half naked ladies walked past with a guy with a camera. They were doing a shoot for a gentlemen's interest magazine. They spotted the car and thought it would make for a great shoot. The camera guy knocked on the door to ask permission to take photos. I said I'd ask. I ran upstairs to the room where the management were having a meeting, for a discreet word with Geoff. 'Would it be okay if two naked women drape themselves over your car for a porn magazine?' He found it funny and said yes. So, if do you find yourself reading an early 1990s copy of Paul Raymond's magazine you may see Geoff Brown's car.

The thing I'm most proud of writing for US Gold was the SNES version of *World Cup USA 94*. It took a year of 12-hour working days, no weekends off, pizzas, Stella and grim determination. It was worth it; I'm very proud of the game. I left for pastures new but I have many fond memories of the five years I worked at Tiertex. Thanks to John, Donald, Chris and Geoff.



A game of two halves, *World Cup USA 94 on* the SNES.



Tony Porter

Gauntlet was a huge 4-player game in the arcades at the time and Tony had the 'simple task' of converting it for the ZX Spectrum.

While still at school, a friend and I became interested in programmable calculators. Not really a classic games platform, but I soon had my Texas TI-75 playing a very good game of noughts and crosses, even though it only had nine memories and 57 program steps.

Another friend, William, who lived next door had a ZX80 for Christmas soon after, and I loved playing with it. I got hooked into what things like this could do and helped William write software to do pulse with modulated speed control via a circuit board he had made out of circuity on his mother's vacuum cleaner.



Tony cut much of his first programming teeth on the Commodore PET.

At school we had a range of Commodore PET computers, but no staff who knew anything about them. So we embarked on our voyage of discovery, teaching ourselves PET BASIC, writing software to play Checkers, Reversi and ultimately a chess game – though it was very easy to beat.

Following that I saved up and, with the help from my parents, got a ZX Spectrum. Even with the fun of tapes and the infamous dead flesh keyboard I still loved it and while at university I set about learning machine code and unlocking the true capabilities of the processor and computer. At this time I wrote my first commercial game – a version of the classic *Centipede* called *Fallout*. It was sold in a local computer store where I helped out at weekends. I think it sold ten or so copies…

Through the shop I got to see all the classics of the time – *Jet Set Willy*, *Atic Atac*, *Ant Attack*. A fellow student, Bill Allen, also became hooked on computers and after the course we took a year out to

really learn how to program – we wanted to do a *Jet Set Willy* of our own.

During this year our the circle of geeks expanded to include the whole crew that would eventually do *Gauntlet*, but that was a bit down the road.

We made demo programs by the bucket load, played games by the bucket load, and really cut our teeth to the point where we felt we could write a game for the mass market. On the back of the demos we got a chance to do a conversion.

Bill and I set up a partnership with another programmer, John White, and we did two conversions for Activision: *Barry McGuigan's Boxing* and Lucasfilm's *The Eidolon*. We were very proud of both, but the partnership broke up as Bill and I moved to Gremlin Graphics and John moved on to do his own thing.

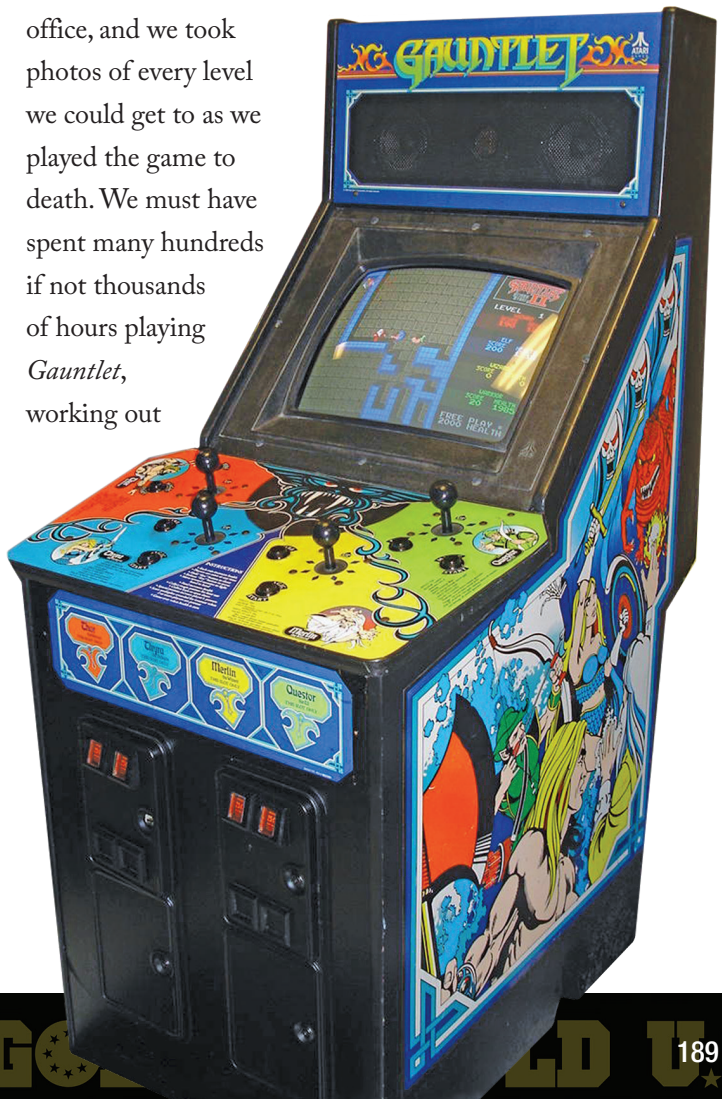
At that time anyone who went to the arcades – and of course we did to see what was happening in that area (we were all Atari fans) – knew *Gauntlet*, a fast-paced, fun, four-person multiplayer game. We loved it and must have pumped pounds into the thing.

One of our group, and I can't remember who, knew that US Gold had acquired the home computer conversion rights, so using our contacts we let it be known that as a group we wanted to do the conversions. We all had some products under our belt, so I guess we must have looked a decent bet (well either that or they could not find anyone else). US Gold gave the project to Gremlin Graphics, and Gremlin Graphics hired our group to be their 'Birmingham branch' and do *Gauntlet*.



A busy screen from *Gauntlet* and the arcade machine that emptied so many pockets.

We had an arcade machine in the office, and we took photos of every level we could get to as we played the game to death. We must have spent many hundreds if not thousands of hours playing *Gauntlet*, working out





A level of *Gauntlet* squeezed into the compact memory of the 48K Spectrum.

the logic for the enemies, the mystery of controlling the transporters, all the sounds and all the other nuances that made the arcade version so good.

The problem was that *Gauntlet* is not as linear after level eight – it's actually pretty random. Given some of the later levels' size even when compressed, the most we could fit in was eight levels. But we wanted to emulate some degree of randomness, so in a trick – which Atari used in the arcade sequel *Gauntlet II* – we flipped levels left–right and/or up–down, and only ever played a random four of the eight loaded levels between loads. So although not truly random, it actually gave you a variable experience each time you played it.

Other limitations were target-machine-specific. None of the target machines could really do speech so most of that had to bite the dust. The C64 had a nice hardware scroll and sprites so it was the smoothest, the Spectrum used character scrolling and actually played the fastest of the bunch. My personal favourite was the Amstrad, which I think had a nice blend of graphics and played the best – but I might be biased.

My role was lead Z80 programmer, so I did the majority of the game on the Spectrum and Amstrad, while we tried to share as much of the logic and data blocks between the C64 and Z80 versions – no point in reinventing the wheel. We also had an artist, Kevin Bulmer, another Z80 programmer, utility and sound man, Bill Allen, and two 6502 programmers. We shared things like using the level editor to make the levels. Not a particularly exciting job, but it had to be done.

While we were working on the game – which from memory was about nine to ten months – many clones were coming out, some got poor reviews, some got decent reviews, but blowing our own trumpets, we got the best review scores of them all by a good margin. I think the lowest I saw was still in the 90s and one was 98%.

One thing I will never forget. As we worked though the arcade machine's code dump I spotted a hex dump of something that looked familiar…It was Z80 code. I typed it back in, disassembled it and then worked out what it was for. The coin-op machine actually had a Z80 processor in it. The code's purpose became clear. While we were trying to write the whole thing – logic, graphics, sound, the whole

ball game – on a Z80 processor, the arcade machine used the same processor solely to read the joysticks, buttons and coin slots!

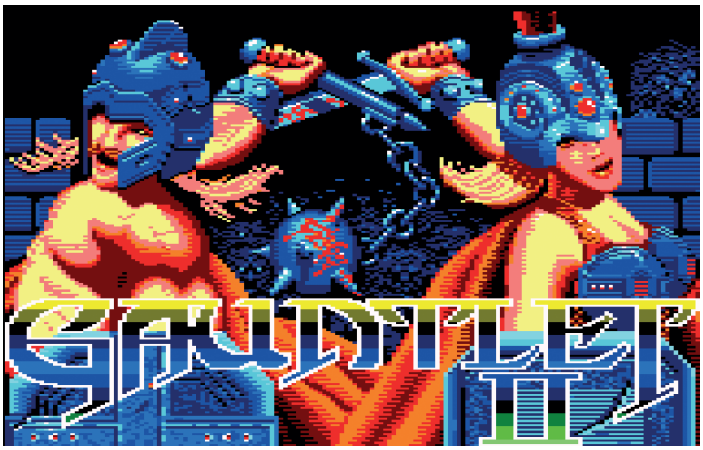
Now that puts things into perspective if you ask me.

The *Deeper Dungeons* came along because we left the door open to be able to swap tapes when the game was playing. In the original if the tape reached the end of the level side you just rewound it and played it again – the same blocks would load up but because of our clever tricks you would get different levels. *Deeper Dungeons* just meant swapping to a new tape.

A public competition gave us the levels – everyone wanted to see their level in the *Deeper Dungeons* expansion packs, so we were not short of submissions. Many did not work, almost all needed work to some degree, but they were the public's levels, and they loved it. Again, if I recall correctly, anyone whose level was on the tapes got a free copy of the game and some other goodies.

Gauntlet II was a revamp of the code, adding in new features, improving the game to match the arcade it was based on, and a mammoth job of compressing and rewriting to cram everything in. We even did an MSX version; for anyone who can remember what that was.

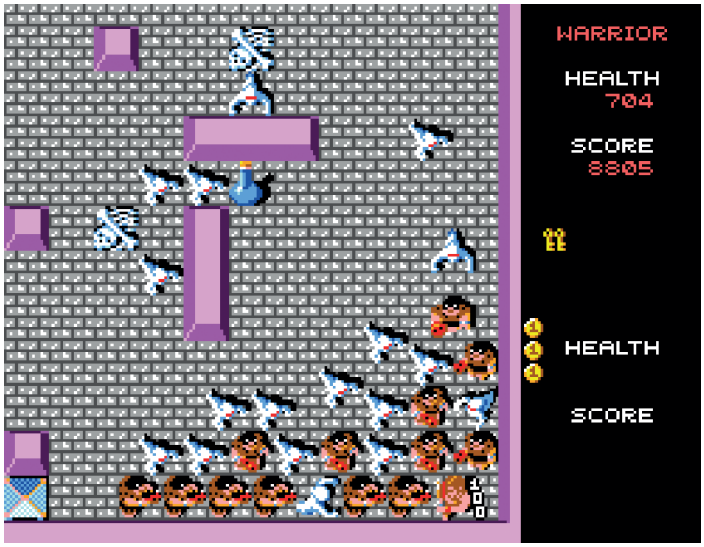
In terms of Gremlin and US Gold, we had fun working in their offices during the early days and watching the staff play the arcades at lunchtimes. You could sense that they really did not know what we did and on more than one occasion we had 'Do not feed the programmers' signs hung in our space as a joke, but it was all good humoured.

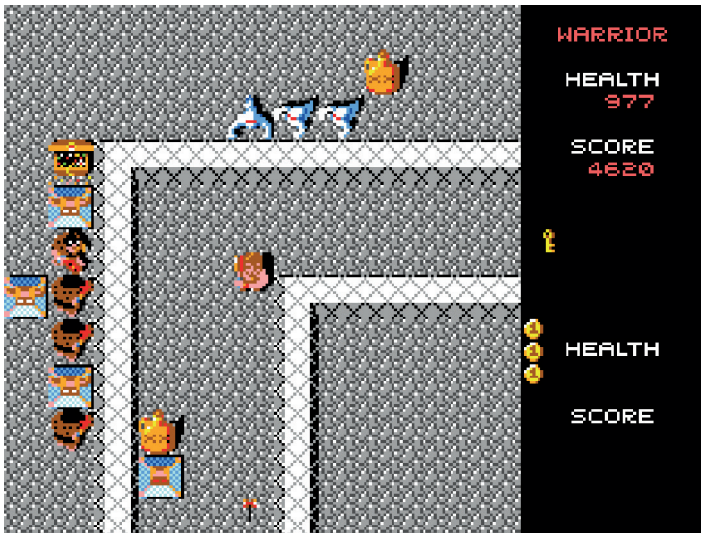




Gauntlet II with new features and a closer match to the arcade original: the Amstrad title screen and a level from the Atari ST version.

I did a few other games for Gremlin – some original, some conversions or licences. I then moved over to US Gold to head up their Sega team, and lo and behold my first task was to put *Gauntlet* onto the Sega Master system. Now that was a fresh challenge, but I like to look back at that version and in terms of man *vs* machine (especially having been told that you can't get a static panel on a full eight-way scrolling game on a Master system by the tech guys at Sega) – it





The much more colourful Sega Master System version of *Gauntlet*.

Opposite: *Deeper Dungeons* let the public design their own levels.

was the best version we did. Again not a review under 90%. Sega were amazed.

Later on I went on to game production, heading up US Gold's external development team for a good few years, before taking a deliberate step back and producing such titles as *Judge Dredd* and *Die Hard Trilogy* for Probe Entertainment/Acclaim. Eventually I moved over into IT, where I am to this day. Still doing odd bits of programming and scripting work, but these days I support the system the programmers use to make games, rather than do the programming.

In those days it was a cracking place to work, with loads of stuff going on, and seemingly always growing. I got to see some really excellent US titles that we distributed, such as the Access *Links* titles, which I was particularly fond of.

When the American boss made it over, he picked up on my love of the game and we spent a good few hours playing and talking about it. He had me take him out to a good old fashioned British chippy for an evening meal – we sat in a local park in my car eating. He just wanted to experience this aspect of England – a memory that has stayed with me.

I also remember a predecessor of mine as development manager taking his car round to a favourite lunchtime pub, having his usual meal, and then coming out to find his car on bricks with all his wheels nicked. Some thought it was an 'inside job', but I just wish we had the smartphones of today then – his face was a real picture to behold…

US Gold was good for me, and I like to think I was good for them as well – they were my first experience of working in a company environment, and as such were important in many ways, but all in all a time I will always remember with fondness and a sense of accomplishment.

More adventures from the Arcade Sensation.

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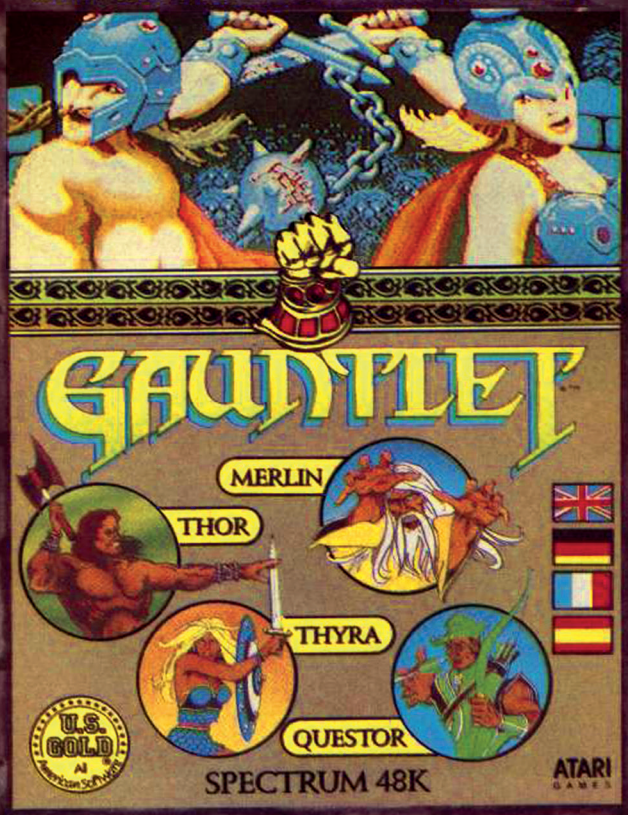

Did you buy the no. 1 Arcade Smash Hit of 1986 – Gauntlet? If not, you certainly should have. If you did, then you'll be delighted to know that you can play another amazing 512 levels with this super add on.

Requires original Gauntlet to run this version.

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ATARI GAMES



David Looker

Father and son duo, David and John Looker, ported *RoadBlasters* to the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC for US Gold.

I was an electronics engineer working in the music business, fixing electronic organs, synths, etc, but I'd always been interested in arcade games, so when the ZX81 came out I decided to get one. I built it from the kit and started learning to program, initially in BASIC, but soon discovered that it was too slow for arcade-type games and so I taught myself machine-code programming. I wrote a couple of arcade game clones, *Pacman* and *Frogger*, but the lack of colour and graphics was a severe limitation, so when the Spectrum arrived it seemed an ideal progression from the ZX81. Initially I just ported the ZX81 games to the Spectrum, with colour, graphics and sound additions, but then I managed to get a contract with AtariSoft to develop the official Spectrum *Pacman* and *Ms. Pacman*. This led ultimately to getting a contract with AmSoft, developing games for the Amstrad CPC. Further Amstrad CPC work followed, including *Monty On The Run* for Gremlin Graphics.



Good-sized vehicles for *RoadBlasters* on the Spectrrum.

As a sideline from games programming, I developed (in association with a couple of other guys) a tape copy-protection system known as SpeedLock, which became popular with several game companies, including Ocean, Ultimate and US Gold.

The guys at US Gold were looking for a programmer to develop a port of a game called *Super Cycle* for the Amstrad CPC, so they offered me the job as

I'd already developed a road racing game called *Electra Glide* (a copy of an Atari game) for a company called English Software in Manchester. The game was a pretty straightforward design really, with no sideways camera movement – just the bike tilting as it went round bends. The road scrolling was just colour switching in the usual way; pretty easy on the CPC. I was quite pleased with the final result, which was better than the other versions in my opinion.

The Spectrum game I developed that US Gold published was a version of the arcade title *RoadBlasters*, which I also developed for the Amstrad CPC. My son, John Looker, did the graphics using a tool called *Screen Designer* which I had developed for AmSoft, on the Amstrad CPC. At that time I was using a Z80 assembler running either on the Spectrum or the Amstrad CPC, as no other suitable tools were available. I think we did the sound effects, but can't remember if there was any music. The only help I remember was from Charles Cecil, who was the producer at US Gold at the time, typing in track data for me – there was quite a lot of it!



The colourful Amstrad version of *RoadBlasters*.

The most challenging part was getting the performance up to a reasonable level, especially on levels where there was a lot going on. I think we did a reasonable job in the end though, within the limitations of the hardware. I never actually saw any other computer versions, we worked from the arcade machine, which was loaned to us by US Gold (we had to give it back though!).



Monty On The Run for Gremlin Graphics, another hit to fatten CentreSoft's coffers.

Super Cycle for the Amstrad CPC.





Matt Furniss

For US Gold Matt composed the music for *Out Run Europa* on the Sega consoles and the Commodore Amiga, *Gunship* on the Genesis/Megadrive and *The Incredible Hulk* on the Sega consoles and the Amiga.

I wrote my first C64 music in 1989. I'd just started working for Teque Software in Rotherham. The audio development tools were just a C64 and an Action Replay cartridge and I wrote using Teque's in-house SID driver. I typed in the music as source code and found it quite hard to use. Soon after I changed to a 'tracker' type system, used for *Shadow Warriors*, *Space Harrier II* and all my later C64 games.



Matt composed the musical tracks for the Sega Megadrive *Gunship*.

The first game to feature my music was *Toobin*, the arcade conversion published by Domark in 1989. I was on an annual salary at the time of about £7,000. Not much money but as a sixteen-year-old fresh out of school I didn't complain. I always wanted to make sound for computer games, it was a dream job for me.

By the time I entered the game business US Gold was a huge publisher. I'd played the first games, like *Beach-Head* and *Raid Over Moscow*. Those games were great and I loved the US Gold loading screen accompanied by Stars and Stripes music; very clever!

In my career I was really happy to work on *Out Run Europa* and convert Jeroen Tel's amazing C64 music to the Amiga and Sega Game Gear. By that time Krisalis' s technical director, Shaun Hollingworth, created a really great audio development system for the Sega consoles. It was custom made to my requirements. The music data was written on an Atari Mega ST and sent in real-time to the Sega console, similar to a MIDI sequencer and synthesizer. This system enabled me to write the music quickly and hear exactly how it would sound in the game.

For US Gold I composed the

Gunship music for the Sega Genesis, *The Incredible Hulk* for the Sega Genesis and Sega Game Gear and *Out Run Europa* for the Sega Master System and Commodore Amiga.

Sometimes – if I was lucky – I'd get to play an early version of the game. The developer uploaded a console ROM via modem to our office Bulletin Board System. I then ran the ROM on my development system to get a feel for the game. That helped a lot. For other projects I'd have less to work with, sometimes only a written description of the game delivered by fax. Not everyone had a modem back then – the finished music was delivered via postal mail on floppy disk.

For the Sega Megadrive *Gunship* music I took inspiration from the game's level locations – Middle East, Asia, South America and the Arctic. I made the other songs in that game suitably uplifting and patriotic sounding. I'd played the home computer versions of *Gunship* years earlier. I knew the console version was less simulation and more arcade game, so I took that into consideration when composing the music. The Sega Megadrive had excellent sound hardware for its day. A six-channel stereo sound chip made by Yamaha, three channel PSG and a Z80 co-processor. The *Gunship* audio was pretty good in the end, each game level had two songs plus an assortment of extra songs for the title screen, map screens, and so on.

For my other two US Gold games, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Out Run Europa*, I converted the existing music by ear: in the case of *Hulk*, from the SNES to the Sega consoles, and *Out Run Europa* from C64 to Sega and Commodore Amiga. I did, however, write an original title song for the Amiga version of *Out Run Europa*.



Furniss based *Out Run Europa*'s music for the Sega Master System version on the Commodore 64 score.

I now work for Sony Computer Entertainment America in Southern California. I'm part of the team that created Gaikai – a cloud-based streaming game service. It's now part of Sony and known as PS Now.



The Incredible Hulk on the Sega Megadrive – the music was based on that of the SNES version.



Peter Johnson

US Gold entrusted Peter to convert their massive hits *Beach-Head* and *Impossible Mission* to the BBC Micro and the Electron. The results were impressive.

I loved playing games, and was attracted to computers from the first time I got to use one. In hindsight it also seems to have been the perfect way to combine my interests in graphics, design, sound and the theatre into one career.

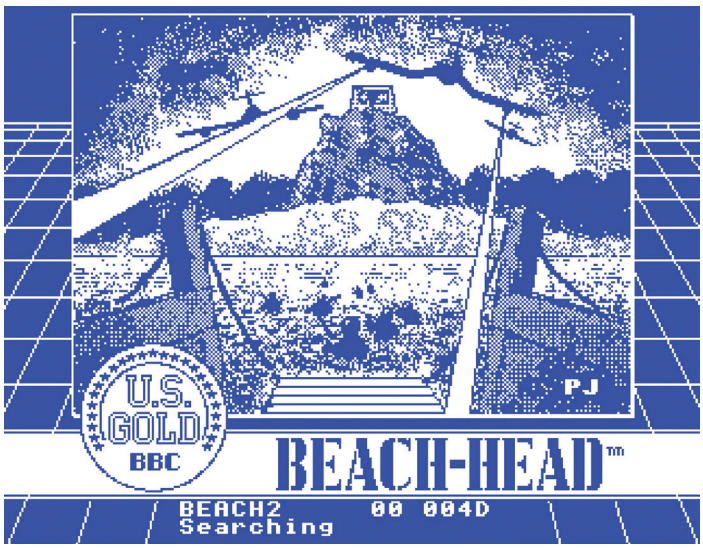
First contact with a computer was back at the beginning of the eighties, when I was doing my A-levels in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Someone left a Commodore PET in the corner of the maths lab one day. That lunchtime I got a book from the library and tinkered about with it a little and got interested. I started to read computer magazines every month, devouring information about systems I'd never seen.

That led to a ZX81, cruelly limited. I still have it in the loft, with an old calculator keyboard welded to it to bypass the rubbish keyboard. A BBC Micro rapidly replaced it, and I started a course in HND computing, which was designed to train systems analysts – there were no computer games courses back then, obviously.

The BBC Micro came with brilliant manuals, especially the *Advanced User Guide*, but it was a book about the machine with a chapter on assembly language that really got me started. It contained an example of a simple bat and ball game, but I found I could understand enough to modify it to add a second player and enemies and I was off and running. That's still how I learn new things – start with something that works then modify it to make it different.

I wrote a *Tron* light cycles game on hand-duplicated cassettes and sold about ten copies in a neighbouring shop, and then a more ambitious *Q*bert* clone that I sent off to publishers a few days before

Beach-Head's BBC Micro loading screen.



my final exams. As they started, the offers kept coming in, and I rushed back each day to find out what was in the post. I went with Superior Software in Leeds as they were run by a programmer with six or seven titles under his belt, and I figured that he could help me if I needed it.

The game only stayed on the market for a few weeks before we got a cease-and-desist letter from Coca Cola corporation, who owned Gottlieb – makers of the original game. But it made a thousand or so in royalties, which felt like a lot at the time, and that led to many more games for Superior – mainly arcade clones but avoiding the originals' names this time!

That led to Ocean, and US Gold, via Atarisoft. I wrote *Beach-Head*, *Crystal Castles*, and *Impossible Mission* all for the BBC Micro and Electron. *Crystal Castles* was originally written as an official arcade conversion for AtariSoft, who were starting to put their IP on other systems, but just as the game was completed they decided to stop all development for non-Atari platforms.

A year later, as I finished a different game for Ocean, they asked if I had any unpublished games. By pure luck they were about to handle the conversion of *Crystal Castles* to home systems, for US Gold, so the game found a home at last.

For the BBC Micro I used the built-in assembler, with the only extra equipment being an RGB monitor from an Amstrad CPC 464 and a hard disk



Impossible Mission on the BBC Micro.

drive, which cost more than the BBC Micro itself at the time. I didn't have a debugger and errors had to be diagnosed with on-screen text or colour bars, so you had to be very good at figuring things



The initial level of *Beach-Head* on the BBC Micro.

out, and (ideally) not making mistakes in the first place.

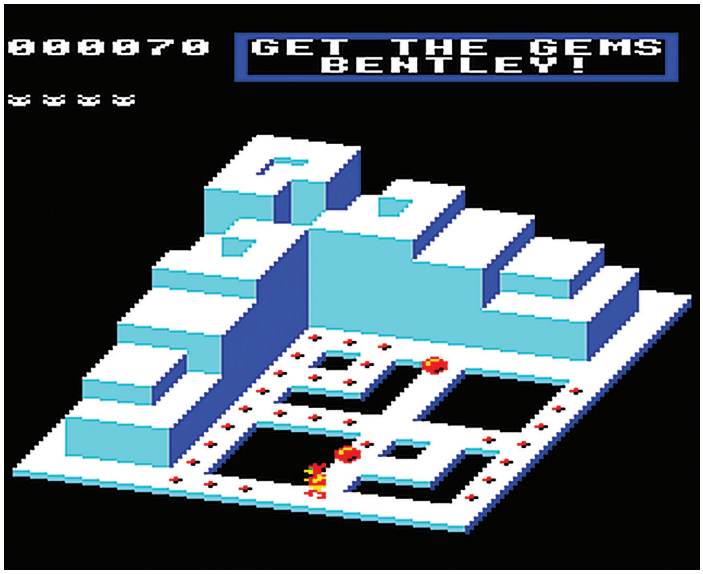
Just before doing *Beach-Head* I got an AMX mouse, which enabled me to draw the loading picture by hand, based on the game cover art.

I worked from home throughout all this period. Typically, I created everything from scratch to match the Commodore 64 original. I usually had no access to graphics, sound or level designs from the original. Sometimes Ocean supplied a

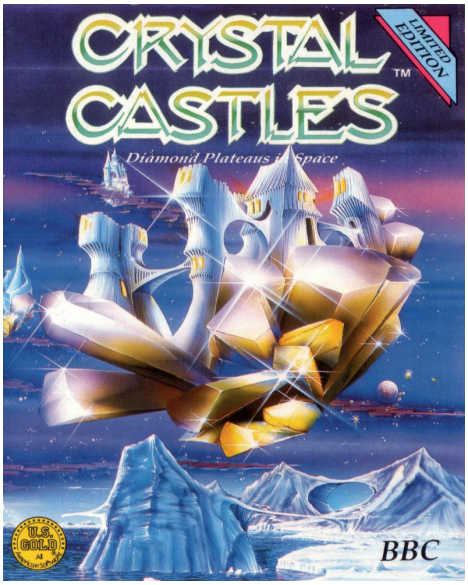
playthrough video, which was great for seeing later level designs and gameplay. With conversions I usually tried to make it look and play as similarly as possible to the source, given the differences in colour palette and sound capabilities.

The BBC Micro only had 32K of RAM, and 20K of that was used up if you had a 16-colour screen (which only had eight usable colours, anyway). One significant trick I used to get the most from the hardware on most of these games was to use a four-colour screen with interrupts going off to change colours as the electron beam travelled down the screen, making it appear much more colourful. This recovered an extra 10K for code and graphics.

You couldn't do that trick on the Electron, due to the lack of screen interrupts, which is why those versions are much more obviously only four-colour. I was proud of the main character's animation in *Impossible Mission*. It used loads of frames for his walk and jump cycles. To replicate the animation I used a VHS video of the original game, advancing it a frame at a time. It was famous for its fluidity, along with *Prince of Persia* which used a similar rotoscoping technique, so I felt it was very important to capture it faithfully.



Multiple castles and a maze of hallways filled with gems and bonus objects – a worthy puzzle for BBC Micro and Electron owners.



I'd done several games for Ocean and their Imagine label in a short time. The BBC wasn't one of their main platforms, and I simply agreed a price upfront that they would pay when the game was done, so it wasn't a big financial investment for them.

I think Ocean were happy they could just let me get on with it, and trust that I'd turn up before too long with the finished article, with little drama.

I'd travel down to Ocean in Manchester once or twice a year to stay in touch, and work out the next project, but I never visited US Gold or CentreSoft.

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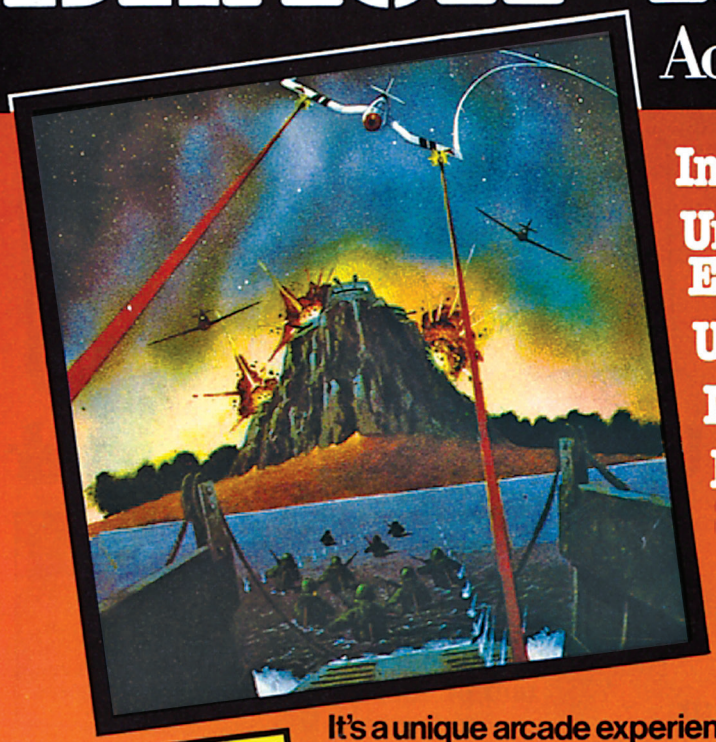

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Chuck Sommerville

The Epyx *Games* series is synonymous with the US Gold brand – Chuck programmed many of the events across the series.

I arrived at Epyx from Sirius Software, who also did a few games for the Commodore 64 – including *Gruds in Space,* an adventure game I created. Sirius was around for three years and was one of the premier publishers at the time here in the States for the Commodore 64, Apple II and Atari 2600. They got into some financial trouble and had to fold. When I left the company president Jerry Jewel and I went to Epyx. I became a programmer and Jerry a project manager.

I was more an Apple II expert so my first work was a port of *Summer Games* onto that platform. I had one other programmer working on it with me – there were six people who worked on the C64 original. It was an interesting project because the game was optimised for the Commodore 64's sprite hardware and that machine was a much more capable piece of hardware than the Apple II. The original C64 team looked at the work I did on the Apple II version of their game and I was accepted into their inner circle – they embraced me as a worthy programmer as I had passed the 'test'.



Summer Games on the Apple II – Chuck's test to get into the inner circle.

The *Games* series was spread out over a number of years – I was at the company in total for seven and worked on other titles in between those. One was a naval destroyer simulator, aptly called *Destroyer*. Towards the end of my time at Epyx they started a project to design a handheld that ultimately became the Atari Lynx. Epyx was developing this mainly for their own games but ran out of money, so Atari bought it to bail them out. The Lynx project I worked on at that time was *Chip's Challenge*.

Summer Games was the first of the C64 series I worked on and in total I programmed *California Games*, *Summer Games 2*, *Winter Games 2* and *The Games*

Summer Edition – contractors were brought in to do the conversions.

With *California Games* copy protection was taken very seriously. We used Epyx's new disk copy protection system called Vorpal Loader and as we developed our separate events we made sure that the loader was still installed in our code. If it was not, the game gradually degraded until it became unplayable in different and devious ways.

We wanted to make sure it was the best game copy protection ever – and it was. In standard software you could not copy the disk because you needed Epyx's enhanced 1541 drives to make the copy.

When US Gold came along, their distribution model was not like ours in the States where disk was the platform of choice – they wanted cassette. We said that we could not do that as the copy protection would not transfer across. Our marketing department said tough – so we had to provide US Gold with the source code so that they could modify it to work on cassette. That cassette release was the source of all known pirated copies of *California Games* – the disk version even today has not been pirated due to the excellence of the copy protection. We have to thank US Gold for the dent in our sales.

Each of the *Games* series followed the same approach. The main program is called the MCP (Master Control Program) and is a menu of events – when the player selects the event to be played it loads from disk. When the event is over the game returns to the MCP and it keeps track of everyone's score.



'Skateboarding' in *California Games* on the IBM PC, programmed by Sommerville.

Summer Games 2 – I programmed the MCP and the 'skull' and the 'bicycling' events. We spent a lot of time with this game optimising the code to make sure the frame rate was kept up on a machine cycle by cycle basis. As this was a sequel, the market demanded that it be bigger, better and bolder than its predecessor.

On *Games Winter Edition* I did the 'luge' event. I wanted to make the experience as realistic as possible so I interviewed an Olympic competitor and talked to him about how he controlled the luge. He stressed to me that the

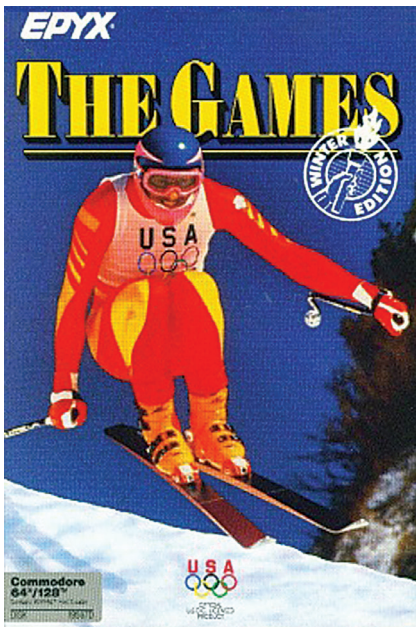


The MCP (Master Control Program) for *California Games*.



Chuck's 'luge' event in *Games: Winter Edition*.

difference between a winning time and a losing time was micro-seconds and it was a matter of having a tight line down the luge track. So this is what I programmed – as long as you didn't hit the edge of the run the luge went the same speed across every screen. As the screens went by you could adjust the luge's position to get some gain frames on the screen. Maybe on reflection the game was a little too realistic.



I implemented the MCP once again for *California Games* and handled the skateboarding event. John Leupp did the surfing game; we were all very impressed with that event. John grew up in Hawaii so he knew how the waves worked. I ended up with a sweet deal moneywise on this game – I was still being paid royalties at Epyx when *California Games* was produced (this changed later) and my salary was an advance against royalties. Kevin Furry and I co-managed the game and during negotiations Kevin gave all his royalties to me. I'd previously joked that he didn't need royalties because he had a trust fund – and so he handed them over. It turned out the royalties from the C64 and IBM version of *California Games* (which I also had an input to) allowed me to put a down payment on a house!

California Games: Oliver Frey's cover art for issue 29 of *Zzap!64*.



Leigh Christian

Even as a young child Leigh realised he had an eye for graphics and imagery. For Tiertex, he pushed pixels for big titles like *Street Fighter*, *ThunderBlade* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

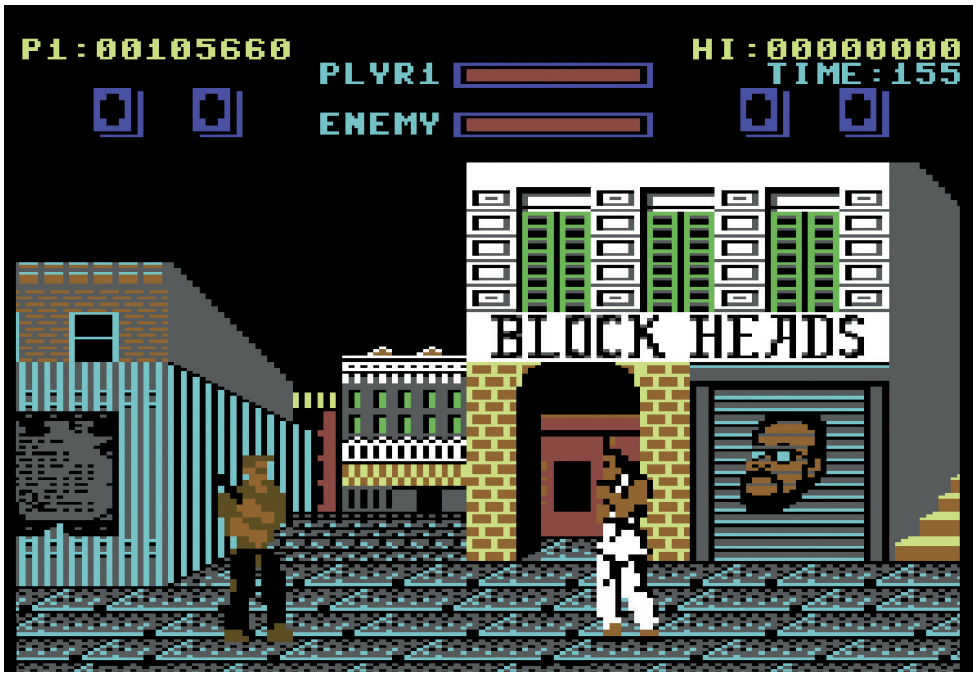
I've been an artist as long as I can remember. It's what I love doing the most apart from football, but I never had the talent to bend it like Beckham. I remember being about four years old when I made this picture at school with coloured wool, the image is still clear in my mind today. It looked a bit like tree growth rings. I guess looking back, it was really tight and precise for a toddler and I think that's where the art addiction began.

A few years later, it was 1978 and I was about six or seven. I'm not sure where or how it arrived, and I don't even remember where I was while playing, but I distinctly remember the iconography on our Conic'TV sports console. The Hockey setting was my favourite with the extreme angles, top speed and tiny bats. You could even take the knobs off the dial control to make it even harder.

By the time I borrowed my uncle's Sinclair ZX81 I was hooked with the new games phenomenon. I remember making a picture in crude black block squares of my Dad's lorry with the logo on the side by using the space key to reach the next line and adding more squares to slowly form a picture. I then became a massive Spectrum 48K fan and by the age of fifteen my best friend Nick Pavis and I started a small company called Blue Turtle and began making games



The greatest retro graphical achievement in two colours – St Basil's Cathedral in *Human Killing Machine* – a great looking game on the ZX Spectrum, sadly let down in the playability department.



Street Fighter: a game that failed to raise much excitement among the Commodore 64 magazine reviewers.

on the Amstrad CPC. I had to make a business card by drawing it freehand as *Photoshop* and font lists didn't exist. I just copied letters out of a Letraset book. The one I have left is a bit tea-stained now but it is almost thirty years old!

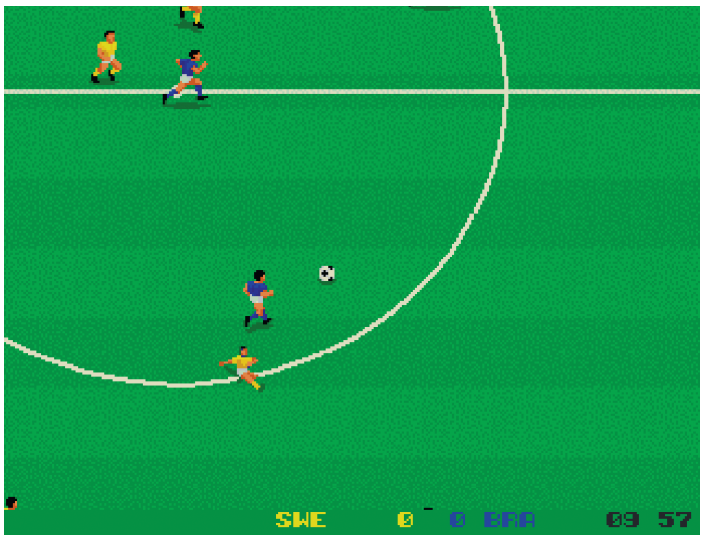
Our first client was Tiertex and I knew they developed games for US Gold. Over a period of roughly three years I worked on several US Gold titles including *Street Fighter*, *Human Killing Machine*, *Thunder Blade*, *Italy 1990*, *Last Duel*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and *Heroes of the Lance*. I worked on Nick's Amstrad to create the graphics using a program called *OCP Art Studio*.

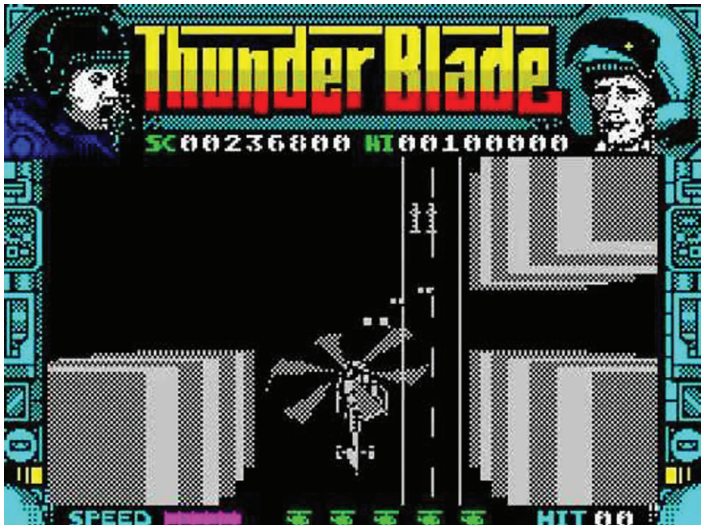
It had this red plastic security optic called Lenslok. You had to place it on top of a pattern on the screen. It revealed a security code and that unlocked the program.

We didn't have computer mice or Wacom tablets, so we produced the graphics using the keyboard cursor keys. It seems ridiculous looking back now.

Nick's Amstrad had a disk drive which was very futuristic and we saved the graphics to disk and posted them first class to Tiertex in Manchester. I remember my friend bought an early modem around that time, I figured he'd

Italy 1990: screen from the Commodore Amiga version.





Thunder Blade on the Spectrum: programming magic to get such an advanced arcade game into the 48K machine.

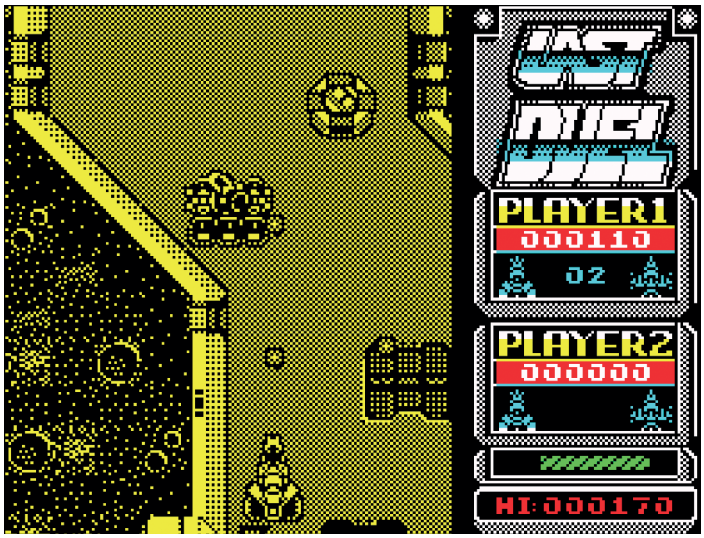
stolen it from the Starship Enterprise. After school we worked on games at Nick's house while listening to endless Lou Reed and The Stranglers. The evening meal was always the same; Marmite on toast, tea and Mr Kipling's Country Slices. Some lads at school mocked us for trying to make games, but they soon stopped when we bought our own cars at seventeen.

Once the games were published we were always eager to read *Crash*, *Sinclair User*, *Zzap!64* for the latest reviews. I don't remember getting any poor graphics reports despite some ropey animations. I always preferred the Spectrum to the C64. Despite better colours, those fat C64 pixels made everything look very blocky and difficult to work with.

I remember getting 10/10 for *Human Killing Machine* in *Crash* and feeling very chuffed. I had to draw St Basil's Cathedral in two colours for the Spectrum as one of the backgrounds – I think it was my greatest retro graphical achievement.

The game sucked and contained some very questionable racial stereotypes like a hooker in Amsterdam and a bullfighter in Spain – you even had to fight the bull and a Russian dog called Shepski. Somehow we managed to get away with it! My excuse was youthful ignorance.

Last Duel: Spectrum conversion of this arcade vertical shooter.



I didn't really have much contact with the team at Tiertex. Nick organised all the deals and logistics. Occasionally we drove up and milled around the office. They took photos of the arcade machine graphics for me to copy for the home computers and we went for lunch then headed back to Rugby in the XR3i.

Nick went to the US Gold office once and met Geoff Brown but I was too busy pixel pushing to get involved with the networking side of the business – which is probably why Nick is now CEO of Munkyfun in San Francisco and I'm still pushing pixels!

U.S. GOLD U.S. GOLD U.S. GOLD U.S. G



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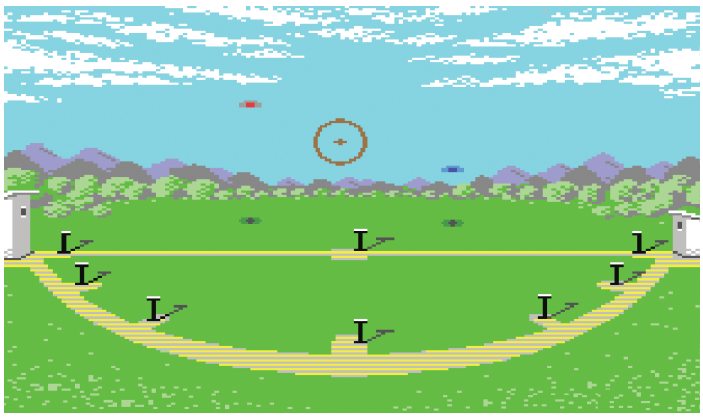
Jon Leupp

Part of the Epyx team that created the *Games* series, Jon programmed the 'surfing' event in *California Games* – arguably the outstanding event of the whole series.

When I was a kid I always enjoyed playing games and I designed a few for my own entertainment. I created dice games and card games. In junior high school I created bell tag, an ongoing game of tag that was only playable while the school bell was ringing. Like musical chairs meets tag.

When computers like the TRS-80 came along it was just a natural thing to start simulating some of the arcade games like *Missile Command* and to write new ones, like a first-person *Lord of the Rings* adventure and a game where you commanded a Federation starship and fired at Klingon warships.

I started college studying Zoology but quickly realised it would be more challenging and fun (and lucrative) to create video games.



The 'skeet' event in *Summer Games*.

While in college I published a Cribbage game that paid for my TRS-80. My first job was programming coin-op arcade games for Taito America in Chicago. The winters there were way too cold so when I was approached by a company called Starpath in Silicon Valley I jumped at the chance to move to sunny California and the heart of the industry.

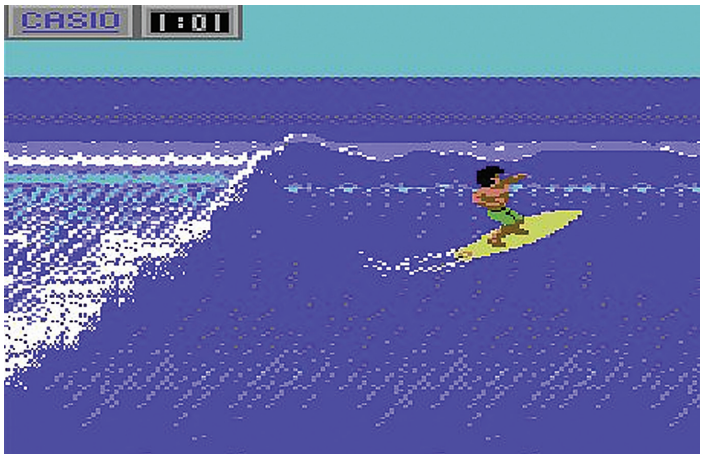
They had created the Super Charger to add memory and functionality to the Atari 2600 and were making games like *Communist Mutants from Space*. Shortly after I got there, they were bought by Epyx where we instantly began programming for the Commodore 64. I don't think I actually ever owned one but I programmed games for it for over four years.

With *Summer Games*, anyone who had a C64 was familiar with the multi-event Olympic style game. Stephen Landrum was originally creating this entire game by himself but we ended up throwing most of our programmers on

it to get it out for Christmas. Mainly, I programmed the 'skeet shooting'. Erin Murphy did much of the art and Randy Glover (designer of *Jumpman*) did the audio. The toughest thing was to try to translate these events of physical skill into satisfying joystick-controlled experiences.

I then moved onto *Summer Games II* – when *Summer Games* became a huge hit we started working on this follow-up. I think we had five programmers and three artists on this game, so it was much more elaborate than the original. I created the 'javelin' and the 'kayaking' events. The biggest challenge and most satisfying part was creating river currents that affected the movement of the kayak. Michael Kosaka created most of the artwork. Scott Nelson, Chuck Sommerville, Kevin Norman and Larry Clague worked on the other events. Some of these events were very hard on joysticks. I had a bunch hanging on my wall as trophies.

The most memorable of the *Games* series is *California Games*. When *Summer Games II* and *Winter Games* went high up the sales charts we tried our hand at some non-Olympic event games like this one based on classic California activities. Surfing seemed to me like a really exciting challenge on a C64 and no one else was interested in taking it on so I stepped down from my new role as a project manager to work on that. I spent a month first writing an animated character editor for the C64 so my artist Suzie Green could create an animated wave using the character set. That was the biggest hurdle. Bob Vieira did the audio.



A ride on the ocean wave: the iconic 'surfing' event in *California Games*, programmed by Jon Leupp.

We were a close team and we often played jokes on each other. I remember Steve Landrum typing things like *del *.** on the computers of new starters, followed of course by the 'dir' command and an apparently empty list of files. I also remember Scott Nelson discussing this cool idea he had for making disks load super fast on the C64. Our Marketing people never saw the value in it so he worked on it on his own time. And of course, Fast Load became one of our best-ever selling products.



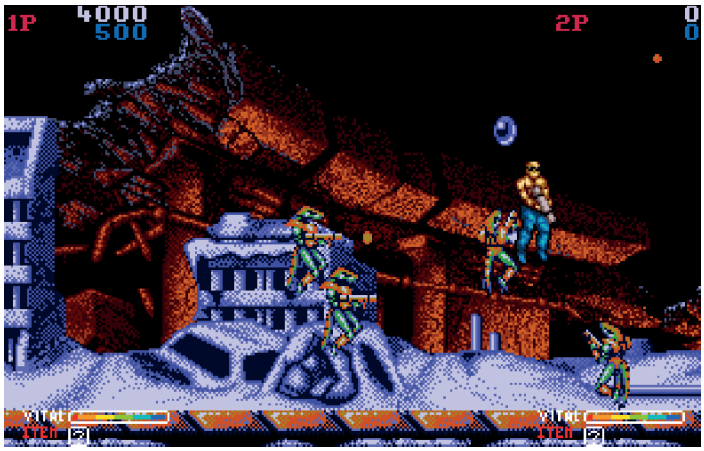
The 'javelin' event in *Summer Games II*.



Richard Underhill

Richard and some colleagues from Elite Systems founded Arc Developments. Arc converted the arcade game *Forgotten Worlds* for the 8- and 16-bit formats as well as Sega's *Crack Down*.

I started in the games industry while studying for my A-Levels. I had been working with electronics and low-powered computers ever since they became generally available and knew that I wanted a career doing something involving those. I became aware of the rising popularity of games and that people were making substantial amounts of money even then from doing something that many still regarded as just a hobby. I started working with a group of friends I'd met in a local computer shop, after the owner had decided that he was going to set up a developer-publisher outfit. Some of these guys started working with another well established programmer on platform conversions and I started working on a title called *Pentacle* with another chap. We started going to a computer club in Birmingham and showed our game to others and there seemed to be a lot of interest. I'd heard of US Gold and Geoff Brown from playing some of the Access titles that he was publishing over here and just out of sheer naivety – and I guess a little arrogance – I decided to phone him at US Gold and was quite surprised when I was just put straight through. We arranged a meeting for me to show him the game and he agreed to talk to Gremlin Graphics about it, which they eventually signed up. *Pentacle* was never completed and that was unfortunate because it was shaping up to be something quite special. We had created a game similar to *Knight Lore* on the C64 and Atari computers. It was a great looking game and very

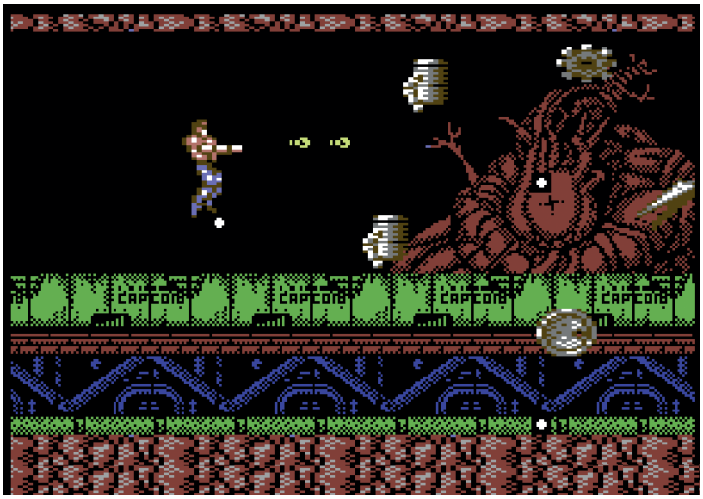


Forgotten Worlds on the Commodore Amiga.

sophisticated for those early days. I take complete responsibility for the game not being completed. I was not as committed as I should have been and my partner-in-crime got very frustrated. Eventually, we went our separate ways. He remained with Gremlin and I went to Elite, where I met my future Arc business partners.

Four of us had decided that we wanted to leave Elite and form our own company but we needed a project to get us off the ground and we knew it would be difficult, although not impossible, to do this without some form of income. So we asked our contact if there was any work going and after a few meetings, got the contract to convert *Forgotten Worlds*. We left Elite and asked a couple of others to come and work for us, and thus began Arc Developments.

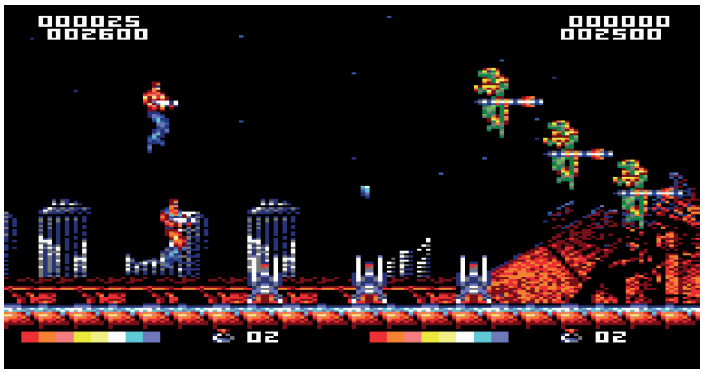
Forgotten Worlds was based on the arcade machine that was delivered to the house we were working from, before we eventually rented an office in Walsall. That was really only the source material. We had to play the game, making notes about game-play and sketch the graphics as best we could. It was a game with a lot of content and so we had to be careful about what we included and what we didn't and as much as possible what we could achieve on each platform. I would say that the challenging machines were the C64 and Amstrad, as the C64 was limited in speed and the Amstrad limited in memory. I worked on the C64 version and some technology that was used in the Amiga version. Software sprites and blitter objects meant that some of the platforms weren't as constrained as a machine like the C64, so the conversion wasn't as successful as the others. It looked the part, but the game play was pretty rough and there were technical challenges throughout. It also didn't help that I went down with a quite a serious illness halfway through development, which delayed things somewhat. The company consisted of five programmers and one artist. We also used a freelance



Forgotten Worlds was a challenging port to the Commodore 64 because of processor speed.



Forgotten Worlds on the ZX Spectrum.



Forgotten Worlds on the Amstrad CPC.

sound guy to come up with ports of the music and similar sound effects to the arcade machine. We were very pleased with the reviews. It was awarded a Gold Medal in *Zzap!64* which was pretty much the highest accolade in the land at the time. How much of that was down to the US Gold and Capcom marketing effort I wouldn't like to say.

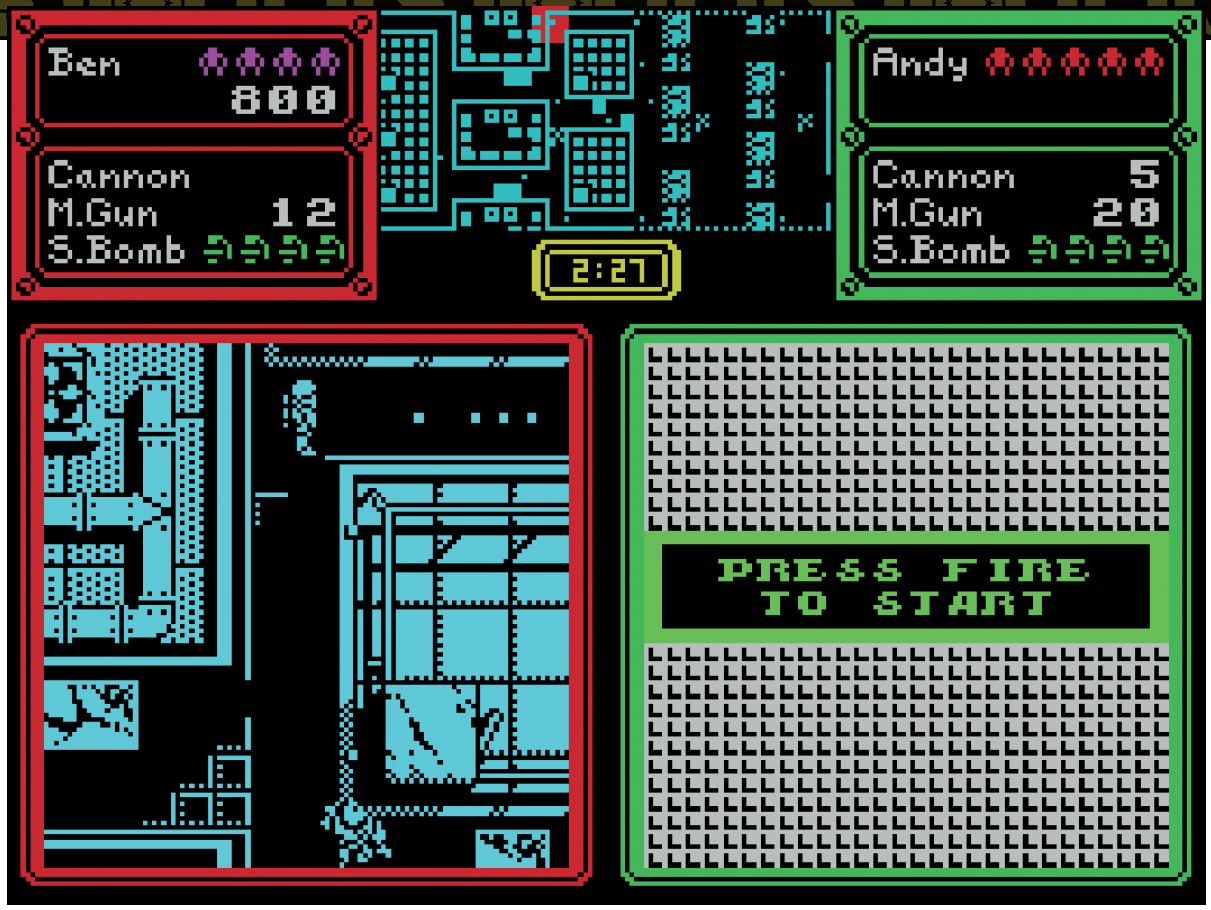
I think development took around nine months for all the different formats. We did PC, Spectrum, Amstrad, C64, Amiga and Atari ST all on simultaneous release (maybe the PC was later; I can't remember), which was quite an achievement.

The Spectrum loading screen for *Crack Down*.



Crack Down was very similar to *Forgotten Worlds* in its development experience. It was nice that we had a proper office to work in and we could afford a lot more development equipment than before. An arcade machine was delivered with a *there you go, lads, get to work…* and that's what we did. We'd started working with a few other outfits at that point and were forging close relationships with Rainbow Arts and Activision so our Spectrum-Amstrad programmer moved onto one of those projects and I took on the Spectrum and Amstrad ports of *Crack Down*. Again we did multi-format on all of the main systems except I think the PC as there was already a port on that platform or there was simply no desire for one.

On the whole the relationship between Arc Development and US Gold was a good, productive one. We worked very closely with the US Gold development management and their QA department – guys from both areas were with us for long periods of time or actively involved at pretty much every stage. I think there was a necessity to expand our client base quite early on and any concept of the relationship being any closer wasn't something we would have entertained, although at one time a possible buy-out or share deal was discussed, I recall. Working with US Gold led us to tight relationships with Ocean and several other major players in the industry and of course it was US Gold that gave us our initial contract



to work on. I don't recall any particular animosity between the two companies. *Forgotten Worlds* for me was a difficult period and despite my illness, there was a lot of personal pressure on me to perform at the time I felt, and still do, was unfair. However, I think that was due to a lack of proper support from the other members of Arc, rather than Geoff Brown in particular.

I think we decided that we'd outgrown just being a conversion house and that future developments would need a relationship with others to be successful. From what I remember we just gradually drifted apart. We did a few more titles for US Gold after *Crack Down*, but they were quite low-key and filled up capacity at Arc rather than formed the main thrust of our projects. Arc Developments shut its doors in 1997 and many of our key staff moved to CentreGold's Silicon Dreams outfit, so we were still contributing in some fashion even then.

Crack Down: a busy screen on the Spectrum.



And an even busier looking *Crack Down* on the Amstrad CPC.



Kevin Norman

Another from the Starpath stable of developers, Kevin contributed to a number of the *Games* series during his time at Epyx.

My plan when I got out of school was to design electronic instrumentation. I was a 6502 guy. I fell in love with microcomputers and joined the 6502 club at the Colorado School of Mines in 1977. The Commodore PET was just released, but in the club we were hacking things together out of kits. I moved to California in 1979 and worked for a company making small wind generators. I was designing a 6502-based power inverter for wind machines, but the tax credits for wind generators was repealed and the company went out of business. I knew Craig Nelson, who was starting Starpath, he took mercy on me and gave me a job.

We used Apple IIs as development systems to program the Super Charger for the Atari 2600. The 2600 was a real on-the-metal machine. The 6502 processor was synced to the TV gun and generated the graphics on the fly. The Super Charger had 6K of memory, which was far more than the 2K that the Atari cartridges had, but still not very much.

When Dennis Caswell was finishing *Escape from the Mindmaster* he had a bug that took two bytes to fix, but he had no extra space. They spread the listing down the hall and all of us crawled on our hands and knees looking for two bytes that could be taken out of the code. Finally Steve Landrum found two SEC (Set Carry) instructions in places where the carry bit was certain to be set.

I wrote *Killer Satellites* for the Super Charger, which was not a very good



The Apple II – the computer on which many an American developer learned to code.

game, but a learning experience for me. The programmers at Starpath were a very brilliant group of guys, and most of them were a lot better programmers than I was.

When we moved to Epyx and started programming the C64 it was extremely exciting because it had so much memory and such powerful graphics capability compared to the 2600.

At Starpath, and when we first got to Epyx, the programmers drew the graphics on grid paper, then converted the grid drawings to hex and typed it into the code. Most programmers were not good artists and I was below average even for a programmer. Erin Murphy was an artist working for the marketing department at Epyx, and wanted to do game art, but she was not a programmer. Erin and I had some chats in the break room, and decided that we could solve our mutual problems. I went to Toys R Us and bought a C64 and a Koala Pad for Erin and she started drawing things. I wrote some code to convert her art to formats that could be used in games. We both got into trouble because we weren't doing what the management thought we were supposed to be doing. Craig Nelson saw some of Erin's art and realised that it was much better than the art the programmers were doing, bailed us out of our trouble, and assigned Erin to do the art for *Summer Games*. That launched the art department at Epyx.



The 'equestrian' event in *Summer Games II*.

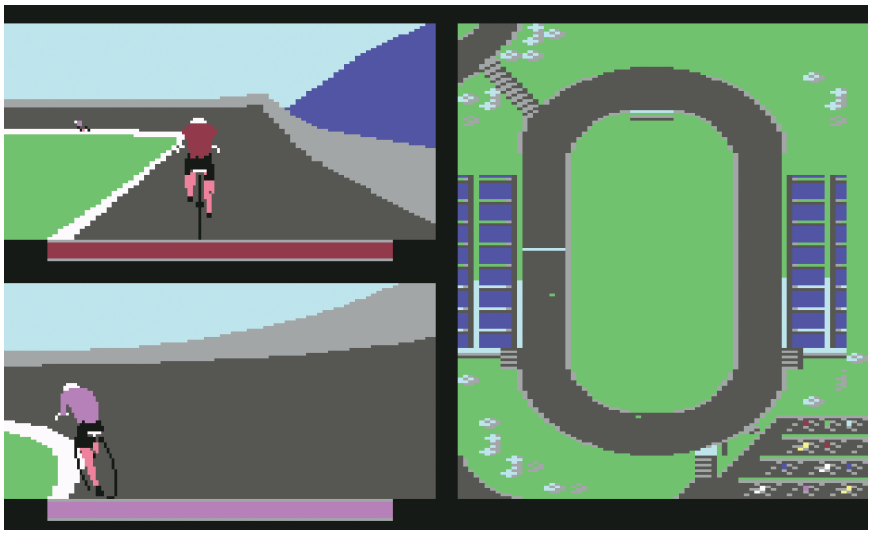
When we first started working with the C64 we were all excited about the bitmapped graphics mode because it was so attractive. The downside of the bitmapped mode was that it took a lot of memory and to rewrite that memory and scroll the screen took seven frames of processor time. I wrote a program called *Charred* to crunch bit mapped screens into character sets. The C64 had scan line interrupts so you could switch character sets on the way down



The 'high jump' event in *Summer Games* II.

the screen and emulate bitmap mode with a lot less memory. *Charred* was the fundamental program that allowed Epyx to do much better graphics on the C64 than anyone else for many years, until someone stole my program and gave it to Electronic Arts.

I programmed the 'high jump' and the 'equestrian' events for *Summer Games II*. I wrote a sprite editor to animate the equestrian event. Mike Kosaka named it *Wilbur* after the TV talking horse. *Wilbur* became the animation tool used for all of the Epyx games.



The 'velodrome' event in *The Games: Summer Edition*.

It was an exciting time. The format of the *Games* series allowed each programmer to design and program their own event. The C64 was good enough that you could make fairly good looking games, but not so strong that you could be sloppy about anything. You had to think about every machine cycle and every bit of sleight of hand you could to make a top product. The programmers at Epyx were extremely bright guys and mostly great to work with.

The last game I shipped for Epyx was the 'velodrome cycling' event for *The Games: Summer Edition*. I developed this cool code to convert a series of full frame animations into character sets so that I could fake 3D imaging. It was near the limit of what a C64 could do. Paul Vernon and I struggled mightily to create acceptable graphics with a data density that my code could deal with.

It was the end of an era. The C64 was fading, being replaced by the PC, which had far more primitive graphics than the C64 and made me at least feel unclean. I brought a bowl of sour grapes to the Epyx bankruptcy pot lock, and moved on.

I ported *Bard's Tale III* to the PC and Amiga and worked for MediaVision for a while. I worked with my wife on her ScienceWiz line of educational books and kits for twenty years and learned to source product in China. I also ran the ScienceWiz summer camp in Berkeley California where I taught the C programming language to elementary school-age children for eleven years.

I am currently 'retired' and working on a project in China with other expats and young Chinese programmers to develop robots using Raspberry Pi and Arduino computers for educational purposes.



Steve Fitton

A long-term employee at US Gold who has many a story to tell about those he worked with – for now here we have just the two.

Martyn Savage was and still is a great golf fanatic and loved the *Leader Board* game that US Gold published. We had the Atari ST version of the title and he asked if he could borrow an ST computer over the weekend with a copy of the game. At that time we hadn't had the Atari long – up to that point we were all used to loading up games via tape.

I am sure that those of you who played the game remember it had a joystick dongle as part of the protection system to minimise piracy. So we gave Martyn the machine and all the stuff he needed to get the game up and running. And that was that – we all went home for the weekend none the wiser.

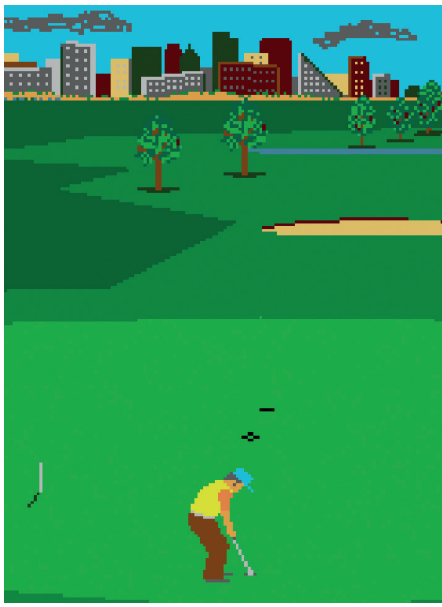
When we got back into work on the following Monday Martyn moaned that he hadn't managed to get anything to work. We connected the ST to a screen and the picture came up; we loaded the game from disk and played the game – everything looked OK. We checked the protection dongle and to us this looked fine also.

Martyn, who had been quiet in the corner up to this point, then piped up and said that the main issue he had was that he didn't know how to rewind the disk. We just looked at each other – it wasn't easy for us to keep a straight face at that point…

Another story is about Geoff – I am sure that anyone who has worked with him would agree that he is the kiss of death to any game being tested. He'd regularly walk into the testing department, pick up a joystick and make a random move that instantly crashed whatever game was loaded up at the time.

We may have spent weeks testing the game up to that point and never actually seen it crash once. One touch from Geoff killed any game. We never did manage to recreate any of his crashes even with extensive testing therafter. The guy was a bug magnet!

At one point we actually banned him from entering the testing department – it wasn't good for our health!



Rewinding a putt on the Atari ST edition of *Leader Board*.



Bob Kenrick

Fast-tracked to operations manager at US Gold, Bob was responsible for stock, game instructions and pretty much anything else that needed doing to get games out of the door.

Before I joined US Gold I worked in the printing industry in production for Purnell Books and for Brooke Bond and IBM. I moved to the Midlands from Reading and then worked in an office supply company for nine months as general manager.

Tim Chaney interviewed me for the role of production supervisor. I joined and very quickly I was promoted to production manager then ultimately operations manager.

My initial role was to monitor and reorder stock; write game instructions and organise translations.

During my time at US Gold I worked with the programmers to establish the accuracy of instructions; Red Bus Music Publishing to produce *Mike Read's Pop Quiz*; Doc McGhee for the production copy of two tracks from The Scorpions for the Sega Mega CD version of *World Cup USA* 94 and much more.

World Cup USA 94 was one of the first entertainment interactive products and the idea came about after we had recorded the *Out Run* game music from the arcade game sound board and placed it as an audio track on the B-side of the program tape on the Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC. The concept was that after loading the game code the player turned the tape over in the tape deck and listened to the audio on Hi-Fi while playing the game; talk about innovation.

One memory I have involves Access Software's *Leader Board*. We thought it had merit but we would be lucky to see 5,000 copies sold across all formats – how wrong we were when it became a million seller!

Another was when we released a Gold Collection, which was a US Gold Greatest Hits box and we didn't have an unprotected C64 version of *Goonies*. All of the packaging had been produced including gold foil print and embossed lid and we were three days from pressing the production button. Our US partner only had a protected disk which could not be copied.

To solve the problem I attended a car boot sale and obtained a non-protected cassette version on a C90 tape which we compiled and protected and put out!



Inlay for the C64 version of *The Goonies*.



Danielle Woodyatt

Initially fulfilling the role of receptionist, 'Woody' became the public face of US Gold with the gaming press in the PR department.

I joined US Gold in the summer of 1987. I was a friend of Ann Brown working in the fashion industry – so this was a totally new line of work. I was determined to be accepted and started on reception, meeting the publishers and media people visiting US Gold and CentreSoft. I was confident and loved to chat, so when a position became available in the PR department everyone encouraged me to go for the job.

I hit the ground running when I was sent to Newsfield in Ludlow to present C64 *Dream Warrior* to Julian Rignall and Gary Penn. I'd been told these gaming geeks didn't take to PR types very easily, so this first assignment was truly nerve-wracking. I stayed up until three in the morning to finish every single twist of the game so I wouldn't be seen as some blonde bimbo who knew nothing about games… Little did they know!

My hard gaming paid off, and within a few months I had an amazing relationship with Newsfield, regularly driving over with Richard Barclay from Gremlin just to hang out with Richard Eddy, Nick Roberts, Steve Jarret and the gang – the Bull Inn soon became my local. I even attended Julian's wedding and helped him to move to the US where he became even more famous. Success with Newsfield led me to forging new links, not least with EMAP and Future. Geoff Brown was so impressed with the way I handled the media that he encouraged me to set up my own team with Nicola Whitehead, Leigh Whitehead and Andy (Bart) Watts – before long we proved unstoppable, and in 1992 Tim Chaney and Sean Brennen head-hunted me to join Virgin. The month before I left, we scooped nearly every award at that year's ECTS in London, including publisher of the year. My work was done. US Gold was a unique place to work and have fun.



L to R: Gary Priest, Richard Tidsall and Woody in between Newsfield stars Dominic Handy and Richard Eddy in the yard of the Bull Inn, Ludlow.

It says a lot that so many US Gold veterans went on to success which was was something to do with the culture and being nurtured, pushed and challenged by the likes of Geoff and Anne. Being in that team was an amazing experience.



Richard Hancock

As one of the testers at US Gold, Richard knew how every game worked and where the bugs were.

The time I spent at US Gold was only brief, but the experience changed my life forever. I had a one-week testing trial down at Silicon Dreams, before going up to Cuckoo Wharf for an interview. During the interview I was visibly shaking at first, but Tony Bourne's calm manner soon put me at ease. I later learnt that Tony Bourne was usually anything other than calm, due to high demands and tight deadlines; I'd become familiar with that too.

We (the testers) worked in 'cells' on all the projects which went through US Gold, and it felt like being part of a family. The monotony of testing is not glamorous and we had each other's back, taking over from someone when a particularly taxing level had broken them. I volunteered for all the extra work I could, and I couldn't get enough. Then my first ever European Computer Trade Show experience happened which took things to a whole new level. This was the glamour and glitz you see on the television. The elaborate stages made to look like pirate ships, the huge displays, the zombie actors, the booth babes, it was all true!

Of course, I'd been there at 5 am scrabbling around in the dark desperately trying to get the hardware set-up and the software running within the most insane restrictions. Now its five hours later, the lights are glaring, I'm suited and booted, standing in a complete daze smiling at visitors and attempting to form coherent sentences.

Being a tester came with an advantage when demonstrating games, as we knew exactly where the issues were. During one particular show as I flitted between stands, demonstrating the games to eager visitors as best I could, I happened across a joke one of the developers had added to a test build.

A Japanese translator was showing some very important looking people around, I think they may have been from Capcom, no big deal. So the translator asks me to demo our Amiga version of *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*, which immediately puts a huge grin on my face. I'd tested this a lot and in all honesty it was a solid game which couldn't possibly

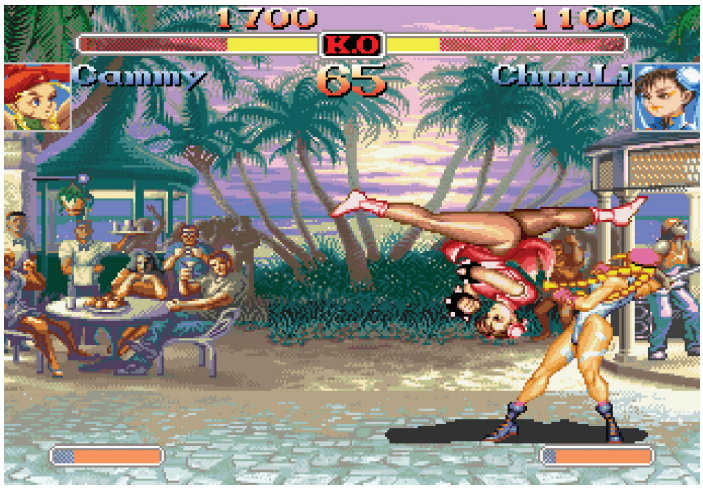
go wrong, unless you had this particular build.

I start ripping through my opponents, taking them out with surgical precision. At the end of each fight the translator read the winning insult in Japanese and the group laughed away. Then came the fight against Guile. This is where the developer had hidden that special message in this test build, you know, just for fun. This particular fight took longer and I almost lost towards the end. Given the ferocity of the fight my winning insult would surely cause a roar of laughter, but it didn't.

I stood there in horror and as sweat poured down my face, the translator remained silent, there was no laughter. The message eloquently said, 'Take that, knob cheese!' I immediately found Geoff and urged him to come to see the 'issue'. To my surprise he simply smiled, then had a very calm conversation over the phone with the developer.

At another launch for a football game PR had decided to put thousands of branded foam balls inside a net over the entire, very high ceiling of a nightclub. As the intense launch game promo video played on a huge video wall and the sound blasted through the PA system, the foam balls were released. This must have sounded awesome during the planning meeting, what could go wrong? Well, the balls were released to several hundred rather drunk people.

The entire crowd were playing with the foam balls as they danced to the tunes which pumped so loud the bass made your chest vibrate. This was the best. Then it happened. The drinks were free, so why wouldn't you take one of the balls and dip it into your pint of Guinness? As the first beer soaked ball soared across the crowd, retaliation quickly turned to escalation. Within minutes the entire club had turned into a scene reminiscent of Omaha Beach, but with foam balls. Everyone was soaked to the skin with sticky alcohol, then the music stopped and the battle died out as a guy came on stage to announce the next event.



Street Fighter II Turbo on the Commodore Amiga.

We were being treated to a stand-up comedian, someone relatively new on the scene and I'd certainly never heard of him. No one was in the slightest bit interested and after ten minutes of him telling jokes to an inebriated audience shouting 'Booooh!', the comedian finally gave up, exclaiming 'Fuck this!' before storming off stage. I later learned the comedian was Steve Coogan.



David Semmens

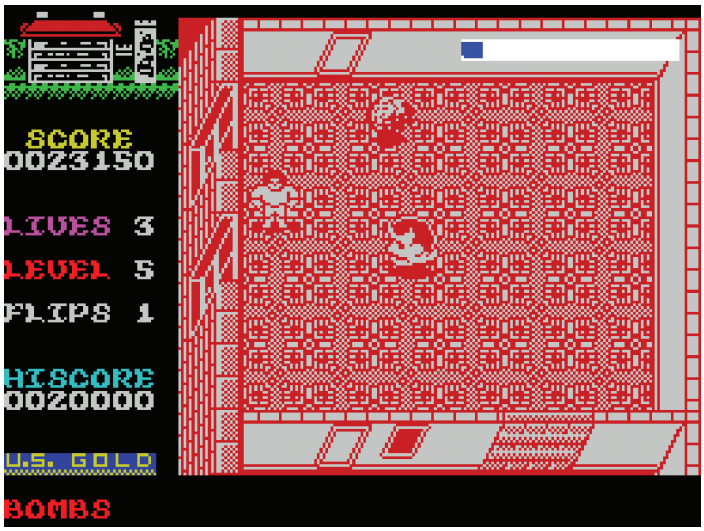
Specialising on the 8-bit computers, David programmed *Desolator* on the ZX Spectrum then Sega's *Shadow Dancer* for both the Spectrum and Amstrad CPC.

The glamour attracted me into the games industry. Apparently everyone was driving sports cars and lived like rock stars. As with most things in life it wasn't quite like that. It was a hard slog with very long days (usually all nighters), unhealthy food and not much pay. I must say I bloody loved it. Fantastic people, big challenges and some great nights out. I loved the work and thrived on the challenge of having no speed or memory on the 8-bit machines. It really did make your brain work.

I used a programmer development system (PDS) that allowed you to write the code on a PC then download it to the target computer. This meant that you did not lose your code if the target computer crashed. All it required was to reload a small download program to get started again. You have to remember in those days we didn't have networks and the computers didn't always have hard drives – just the floppy drives. The artists brought the graphics in on disks, we copied them off, and they went off to do some more. And of course there was no internet. Tell that to any modern day programmer and watch them sweat. Imagine it! We had to read books and learn by trial and error. I still have my Rodnay Zaks' Z80 book – it's well worn.

I worked on a couple of US Gold games: *Desolator* in 1988 and *Shadow Dancer* in 1991.

Below: *Desolator* on the ZX Spectrum.
Right: interestingly, US Gold retained the original *Halls of Kyros* title for the Amstrad version.



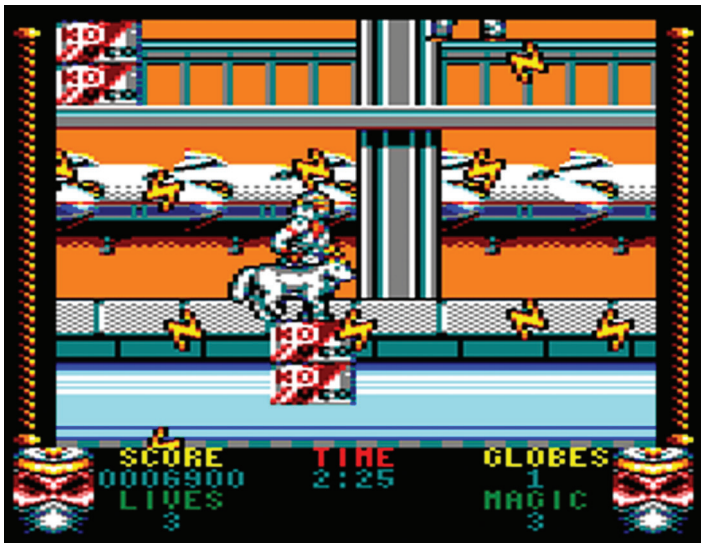


Desolator was an arcade conversion from an obscure game called *Halls of Kyros*. It had the hero running through a castle to save something or other. You had to punch baddies and when you punched mirrors little babies would appear and run away. I think the original arcade game idea must have come out of a drug-fuelled, all-night session. I don't remember much about the game but it was a top-down scroller and not too challenging. We normally got these types of games done in a few months, working from a video and photos.

As a freelance programmer I was contracted to a company called Images and they offered me the Spectrum and Amstrad conversions of *Shadow Dancer*. I spent a few days at Images going over the arcade machine and the full video of the game on VHS, taking lots of notes.

Challenges in *Shadow Dancer* involved the logic for the dog and the pseudo parallax effect. We also included animated water on one of the levels. Both the parallax and water effects were achieved by animating blocks in the map. The map was continually redrawn to the screen – so animating a block based on the scrolling gave the illusion of parallax.

We struggled to fit all the graphics in to the game so had to resort to splitting the character sprites into multiple sections: legs, bodies and heads if I remember correctly. This allowed the reuse of sprites and saved memory. We also used flipping routines so that all the sprites stored only faced left. We normally stored them facing right but in this game the sprites normally came on and moved left on most levels – so not using the flip routine was quicker. There was never enough memory or speed with the 8-bit machines – even a small detail such as the way the graphics faced could save you much needed time.



Shadow Dancer on the Amstrad CPC.



Looking back on my early programming days, I think the challenge of planning and fitting a game onto the Spectrum was more appealing than actually writing the code. You really had to push for every byte of memory and for every cycle of time.

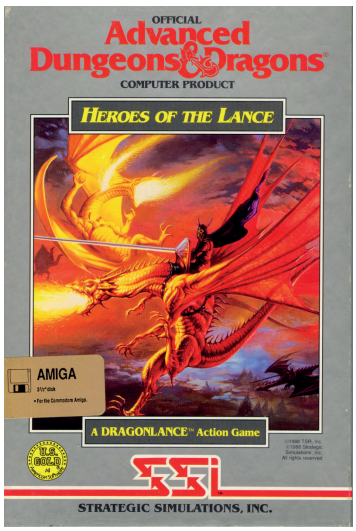
We always bought the magazines and read the reviews. I still have around a hundred magazines in a cupboard somewhere with all my reviews from *Crash* and *Your Sinclair*. I also have all the games I worked on but no computers to play them on…luckily we have emulators these days.



Jerry Howells

Product manager for the RPG and War Games catalogue, Jerry bumped into many an interesting character on his travels.

The one thing that struck me about working for US Gold was that it was a young company in a young industry making all the right moves. I was part of a phenomenon that broke all the rules. I can only think it must have been like the record industry boom of the 1960s. As a business we were infallible. Geoff Brown was a true visionary and he amassed a team of movers and shakers, a team who got results.



The American Amiga box art for *Heroes of the Lance.*

At the time I joined there were only twelve of us led by Tim Chaney. As a boss I had a great deal of respect for him and as a leader he was decisive and results orientated. He often gave me a hard time about getting my weekly reports in on time and in those days there were no PC-based word processors, they were either hand written or typed by one of the girls in the typing pool (Julie, Eunice or Diane). I preferred mine to be typed so if the girls weren't too busy I would get them to do it – otherwise I would find a typewriter and do it myself.

The other thing he gave me a hard time about was emptying the ashtray on my desk. The cleaners and the non-smokers didn't like it. How things have changed!

Working for the industry's number one software house also brought along certain pressures and expectations. Whenever we did something it was often bigger, brighter and louder than any of our competitors and this included our sales presentations. The one occasion I recall all too well nearly ended in my demise – all thanks to Mr Chaney.

As the joker in the team and the one that always went that little bit too far, Tim asked me to come up with some ideas for presenting a new compilation we were planning to launch. A round trip of distributors was planned to present a range of new titles including a number of RPG and War Games from my product portfolio. I set about coming up with some ideas.

A day or two later I had gone to grab lunch at a nearby shopping area. Parking

outside a joke shop, I couldn't help notice a full-sized coffin in the window. Ideas began to flow. Before long I was the proud owner of said coffin. The pitch I made to Tim was to use the coffin as a finale to the presentation. I was to act as master of ceremonies, introducing each of the presenters in turn. On the stage the coffin was to be covered and used as a prop to display the product. I also came up with the idea of at the end of the presentation Tim would come on to the stage with an imitation gun and shoot me. The other presenters were then remove the cover, drop the coffin to the floor , place me inside and carry me off stage. For effect I had acquired some bangers used on Guy Fawkes night and an ice bucket to contain the explosion.

Tim loved the idea and told me that instead of a replica hand gun he would bring his shotgun (not sure why Tim owned a shotgun as he did not strike me as being one of the green wellie set, but as it wasn't a sawn-off I didn't question it further!)

The day of the presentation arrived and we prepared the stage and props. Tim and his gun were there as scheduled. Throughout the lead up to the event he had a big smile on his face and in hindsight I should have known better. The presentation went as planned and as I made my closing presentation Tim came on-stage, shotgun hidden by his side so the gathered audience could not see it. Interrupting me (as per the script), he turned to the assembled and said, 'I think we've heard far too much from Jerry,' and raised the shotgun.

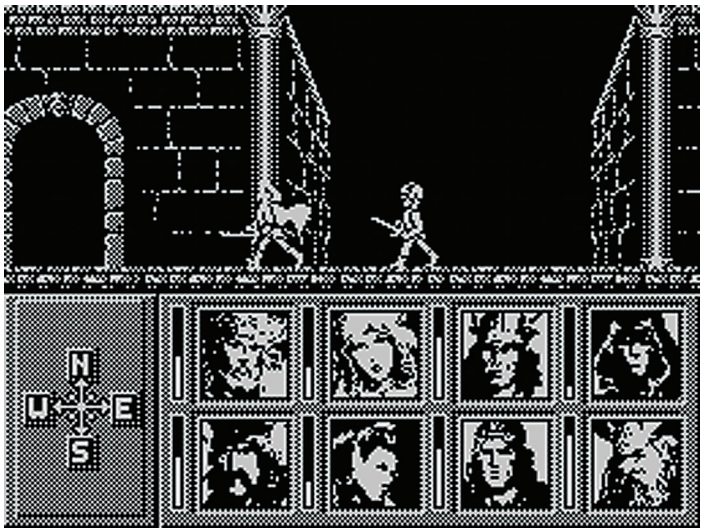
Now at this time according to my plan, off-stage another member of the team would light the blue touch paper and I would await the explosion before dropping to the floor – what happened next was he fired the gun.

To my complete and utter surprise he'd decided without my knowledge to use blank cartridges and I can still remember the panic that enveloped me. It was all I could do to contain certain bodily fluids from escaping! To this day my doctors attribute this event to the partial deafness in my right ear and the constant ringing in my ears, diagnosed as tinnitus. Suffice to say I recovered from the shock and was carried off-stage in the coffin as planned.

As product manager for the RPG and War Games catalogue I was charged with producing the very first ever computer game from the newly acquired licence tie-in with SSI from TSR publishers of *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons: Heroes of the Lance*. I was in charge of producing versions for the UK and European markets for Spectrum, Commodore 64, Atari ST and Amstrad.

Gary Gygax and Don Kaye founded Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) in 1973 to publish their *Dungeons & Dragons* games.

The team was assembled and the programmers contracted to work on the titles here in the UK. A time-frame of six months was outlined for production. Meetings were set-up with the

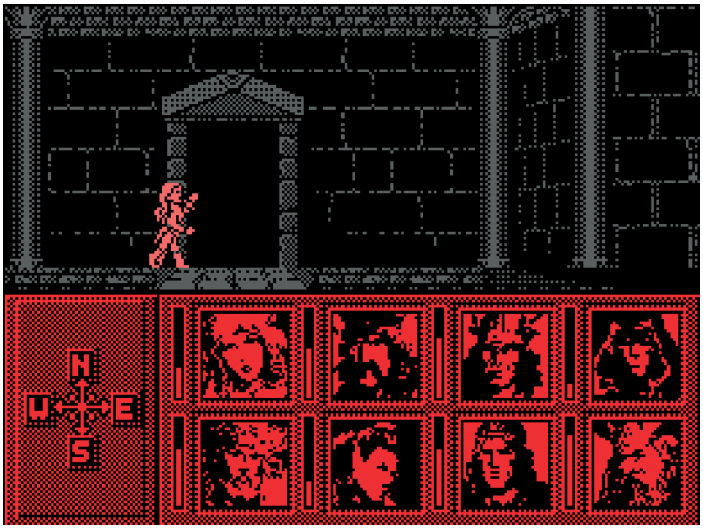


Heroes of the Lance in monochrome on the Spectrum.

SSI team at Mountain View, California. They were the principal licensor and as RPG experts provided project support. The coding was to be completed in the UK by a team of four guys scattered around the country. I learnt quickly that programmers were a special breed.

One thing became apparent very early on and that was the exacting standards required by TSR on virtually every single aspect of the game, including very much its style and look. Back in the day we relied on telephones, fax machines and international couriers, and of course there was an eight-hour time difference between the UK and California. The cost of communication was high and obtaining approvals excruciatingly slow. Managing the programmers was altogether another story. They were independent and only worked from home, which meant regular jaunts around the country from Manchester to Brighton, to Bath and the West Midlands. On one particular day I had to drive to meet all four of them in their respective places of work, namely their bedrooms at home. Communication with these guys was also very difficult, being solitary creatures who preferred to work in the early hours. It transpired that much of my work would take place in the evening and through the night to communicate both with California and the four amigos.

Heroes of the Lance in a lovely shade of red on the Amstrad CPC.



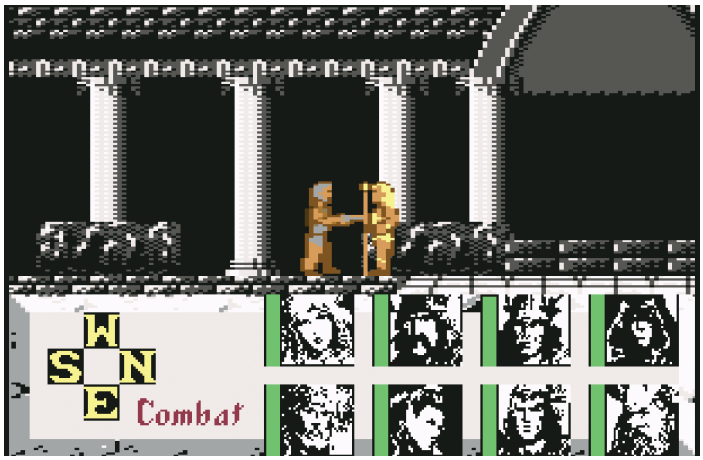
As time ticked on so the project got further and further behind. If I wasn't awaiting approval from SSI and TSR, I was waiting for the next bit of code from the keyboard bashers. Soon enough Tim and Geoff called a crisis meeting and we decided we needed the programmers to be closer to the SSI team to speed up approvals and hopefully create an environment to nurture a team spirit.

SSI located and rented an apartment in Mountain View as I set about persuading the four programmers to leave their respective bedrooms and fly to California. You would think most people

would relish the prospect of being flown to such a hotbed of innovation in the Silicon Valley epicentre. How wrong I was. After long and protracted talks with each individual I finally convinced them, partly by threatening to recruit a new team (which wasn't really practical), but largely by the lure of increased fees.

Finally they arrived Stateside and I continued with the task of producing the game. I met and hired Lawrence Miller – a big name in the AD&D community and well respected by TSR and Gary Gygax himself. He helped shape the game to follow TSR's exacting requirements as well as the technical aspects of gameplay. He also wrote the UK manual for the finished game.

Choosing the artwork to adorn the finished packaging was a major chore in itself. Lawrence found a number of references that could potentially be used and we set about the task of getting TSR's approval. Things were beginning to move along at a pace until I arrived at work one Monday morning to be called into Geoff's office. There was a problem, he explained, with the programmers. No surprise there, I thought. Following calls he'd had over the weekend with Joel Billings, SSI's president, they decided I needed to visit our team to find out why they were not meeting their targets. Geoff arranged flights for me the following day. I was to spend three days in California and return by the weekend, which happened to be my wedding anniversary and a date I could not miss.



The more colourful loading screen and main playing area of *Heroes of the Lance* on the Commodore 64.



Arriving in California, I made my way to SSI and met Joel and the team. They updated me on the lack of progress and what I needed to do to recover the situation. Around midday I arrived at the apartment and knocked on the door. Nothing! I continued knocking for several minutes until finally one of the guys opened the door with bleary eyes. 'Late night?' I asked. He shrugged his shoulders. About an hour later I had all four guys assembled and, following some heated discussions, two returned to the UK and the other two set up a base at



The Atari ST version of *Heroes of the Lance.*

SSI where they could be monitored and if necessary whipped into action.

I now had to find additional programmers to pick up where the dearly departed had left off. Fortunately the coding was in a place where it could more easily be picked up by new guys, who I found back home in Sutton Coldfield and run by a guy called Mike Woodruff. The three days I had planned to spend in the States had extended to over three weeks. Back on track with the programming and approvals it was safe to return to the UK with the programmers in tow and set up a base at Mike's house where he would now manage the programming team, liaise with Lawrence and allow me to get on with marketing *Heroes of the Lance*.

Finally the game was ready and none of us was happy with the final product – but we had to release. We'd set the release date and the annual computer show loomed; I'd hyped the game and taken advanced orders which should see it chart in its first week.

I knew it could get slated and I wanted to maximise sales, so in a ploy to maximise sales of the much anticipated first ever AD&D computer game release I decided not to distribute advanced copies for review. We shipped the product and initial sales were promising – then the reviewers got a hold and it bombed.

However, it wasn't the last of the AD&D-licensed titles to be developed nor was it the last to bomb. To this day I still believe the exacting standards placed on the development by TSR in some way contributed to the lack of success.

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