THE SPECTRUM SHOW
Magazine

DEFENDER
ARCADE CLONE
SHOOT OUT

MAKING OF
BALDYZX

CHEETAH
RAT

FLASHBACK 86

GAME REVIEWS

HARDWARE

SPECIAL FEATURES

Includes material
not in the video
show!

The Sinclair Vega

New machine for a new era.

Full review inside.

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36 THE SINCLAIR VEGA

Want to help out?

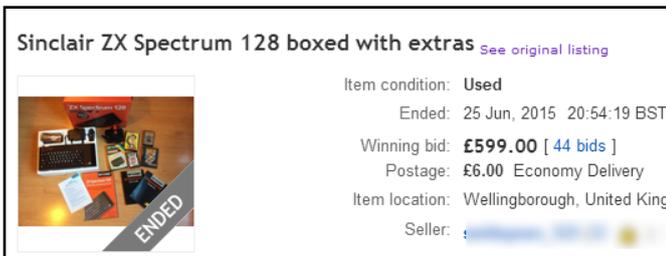Send me your reviews or features.

Simples!
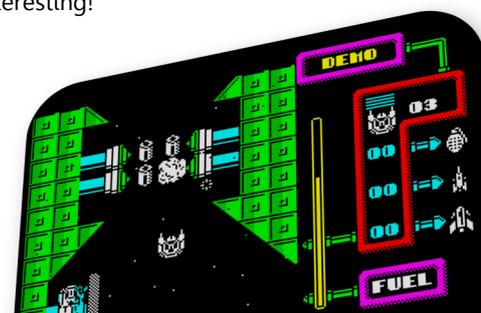
Hello and welcome to issue 8 of The Spectrum Show Magazine.

Last issue I had a bit of a rant about prices, particularly on inline stores like eBay, where things seem to be spiralling out of control.

I don't know whether retro collecting is increasing in popularity or whether the unscrupulous minions have seen a money pot that they want to exploit.

Take the Spectrum 128. Sinclair's final machine before Amstrad took over the reigns. This wonderful machine was always at the top end of price bracket, but last year you could pick a decent one up for about £100. In June one sold for £599. Yes it was in great condition, but really?

Sinclair ZX Spectrum 128 boxed with extras See original listing

Item condition:	Used
Ended:	25 Jun, 2015 20:54:19 BST
Winning bid:	£599.00 [44 bids]
Postage:	£6.00 Economy Delivery
Item location:	Wellingborough, United King...
Seller:	

It's not just old machines that are seeing this trend, the newly released Vega has also seen it's fair share of wheeler dealers trying to make a fast buck.

I found that rather sad, as like myself, I wanted to support the project on kickstarter and I wanted to own the device. I am a dedicated fan and would have kept it and used it.

I would not have bought it to sell on straight away at stupidly raised prices. The problem is, the sellers have no way of knowing who buys their goods and probably don't really care.

I suppose if there are people willing to buy something for three times the price instead of waiting a few months for the next batch to be made available, then fine.

They will be proud owners of one of the first 1000, but is

Sinclair ZX Spectrum Vega Games

£399.99

Buy It Now
or Best Offer

+ £4.99 postage

28 watching

that important? Is it worth paying three times the price?

I waited a few months, paid the normal price and it arrived at the back end of August. So it wasn't one of the first 1000, but it was one of the second 1000.

It was straight out of the box and plugged in, with cameras ready so I could squeeze it into episode 43. you can also find the extended review on page 36.

To celebrate the Vega's arrival, I will be reviewing some of the included games as a regular spot in this magazine.

Soon after my Vega arrived I set up my Spectrum+ with interface one and a Microdrive to check out a batch of carts that came with a large box of peripherals. To my surprise the unit was dead. Odd considering it worked when I last had it out for an earlier episode.

Having sent it to a recommended repairer, I was informed that the interface was working fine. This left the Spectrum (x 2 as I tested it on two machines) looking to be the culprit.

So, off went my two main machines, along with two other Spectrums in need of some TLC. It's an odd feeling when your beloved hardware is handed over to the courier.

Luckily they were only away for a few weeks, and I still had my plus 2 and 3 to play with. Once back though, I now have four fully serviced machines with new capacitors and membranes.

A quick plug for the person responsible for this work, who I recommend for anyone looking to get their machines services or repaired.

www.mutant-caterpillar.co.uk

Thanks for reading.
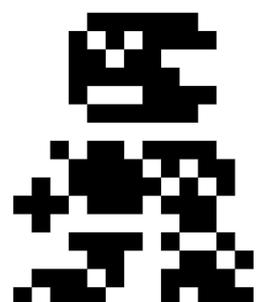
SCOOBY DON'T

Elite's much hyped cartoon like game has been scrapped.

According to the software company, they just kept on running out of memory.

The game had been heavily advertised as a major leap in Spectrum games, with superb cartoon-like graphics and animation.

Elite say they will shelve what they have and begin work on a complete re-write.

BT TAKE OVER
UPTG?

BT has denied that it is about to take over the famous software house, Ultimate Play The game.

Rumours in the trade press hinted at such a move, but these are strongly denied, with BT claiming that they would be very surprised if they or anyone else bought the company.

A few weeks later though and US Gold announced they had taken over all marketing of Ultimate's games, and contracted them to write 6 new titles over a 12 month period.

This takes away the entire marketing from Ultimate and leaves them as just programmers paid on a royalty basis.

The first games to be released under this new deal will be Pentagram and Cyberrun.

SOFT AID 2

Following the success of the charity software compilation Soft-Aid, the same group of company directors and people responsible for the first one have announced a followed up named Off The Hook.

The proceeds of this compilation, which is said to contain 9 games, will go to the Prince's Trust.

Companies involves include Activision, US Gold, Ocean Gremlin, Elite and Ultimate Play The Game.

128 FEVER

Anticipation of the new 128 machine from Sinclair is reaching fever pitch and news that software companies are now gearing up for releases is adding fuel to the fire.

Initially having just Spanish ROMS in their development machines, many companies now have been supplied with English equivalents.

Rumour has it that the machine will be released to the public in late January, and already news of software titles are beginning to circulate.

Tasman has said it already has a more powerful version of its word processor ready, Melbourne House has mentioned an extended version of it's music package Wham Music Box, Ocean claim to be working on 128k versions of Yie Ar Kung Fu, and Mastertronic are plugging the sequel to Spellbound called Knight Tyme.

In typical Sinclair fashion, the launch was delayed.

The official launch date was put back to 13th February with trade viewings already taking place. The machine should hit the shelves later in the month for the public to buy at £179.99 including a software bundle.

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

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

In a surprise announcement too, Sir Clive stated that he intends to work on a disk drive system for the 128 machine as soon as possible, saying that Spectrum technology will certainly be around in 198 and beyond.

Sinclair also received some good news from two new surveys. Both place Sinclair at the top of the list when it comes to home micros. One company, AGB, give Sinclair 37% share, while the second, Wood Mackenzie give them 35%.

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

MICRO SHOOTOUT

Comparing other micros to the ZX Spectrum

Dragon 32

Memory (RAM)	32kb
Screen Size	16 lines x 32 columns
Resolution	256 x 192
CPU	6809e @ 0.89Mhz
Colours	8
Sound	4 voices. 7 octaves.
Joystick Options	2 ports built in.
Connections	Tape in/out. Cartridge port. Disc drive port. Parallel port.
Games	Approx. 950
Average Price	£199.00

ZX SPECTRUM 48K

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

Opinion

The Dragon 32 had some pretty good features and beats the humble Speccy hands down when it comes to sound. The standard beeper just could not compete with 4 voices and 7 octaves.

Game resolution though caused the machine problems. There were several modes but you could only run high resolutions modes in two colours. Here I think the Spectrum wins despite the infamous colour cash.

The processor seems on paper to be slower, but this wasn't a problem for the more powerful 6809, and games ran at a fair speed.

The Dragon's keyboard was better, as was expansion options, but games and cost meant it didn't sell as well.

THE ORACLE'S CAVE

Doric Computer Services 1984

As a hapless adventurer, you find yourself stuck at the entrance to the fabled Oracle's Cave. The only way to freedom is through the Oracle's Cave itself on level four, but there are many obstacles you must overcome first.

The game is a graphic, arcade adventure that depicts your actions with large, animated graphics. The caves scroll as you move but the input is based on traditional adventuring methods.

The cave system is built each game, so there is always a new layout and this keeps the game fresh.

Once loaded you are given the option of which enemy to tackle first The Mummy, The Centaur, The Fiery Dragon or The Black Knight.

To complete the game you have to collect 40 units of treasure, defeat your chosen enemy, steal their trouser and then beat the Oracle. All this has to be achieved in just five game days, with energy that constantly needs topping up, so this is certainly not an easy game.

The game screen is largely taken up by the action window at the top. Other areas indicate your stats and there is also a map showing the areas you have visited and the positions of the various beasts.

Commands are entered by single letter for example M to move and E to explore. There are then sub commands, so after pressing M you can press R to move right. As you move the game window scrolls smoothly in all directions and you characters is well animated as they walk and climb around.

To be able to climb up or down there must be steps or if you find some rope you can use that too.

It isn't long before you meet something evil and are given the choice to move or fight. Fighting is shown as a series of lightning flashes sadly, no animation. The outcome will be good or bad based on your stats and those of the thing you are fighting.

```
Energy      12        Afternoon
Wounds       0        First day
Weapons      d.        cave map
Combat      19    25         E
Treasure    11              K   D   C   M
Articles    rfm                       ⊗
MUMMY'S TOMB
You  meet  a  DRAGON  guarding  some
gold  ingots  and  some  potion

Now  what?L
Options  are:  m  or  f
```

The monster's combat value is shown next to yours so you can decide to fight or run.

As you move and fight your energy is decreased and you can either eat food or rest to replenish it. Resting uses up precious time though and you only have five days.

There are other things to be found in the caves like wine, that will increase your energy, magic rings that make you invisible and potions that heal wounds.

Sound consists of beeps only, but the game I find to be engrossing. It's a pity it is hard, and that you often find yourself dead in less than ten moves unless you are lucky.

Give this one a try, even if it's only once.

Recommended.

```
                          MUMMY'S  TOMB



Energy      12          Evening
Wounds       0          First day
Weapons      d.          cave map
Combat      19    26         E
Treasure    29              K   D   C
Articles    rfm                     ⊗
MUMMY'S TOMB
You  meet  the  MUMMY  guarding  the
GOLDEN  CHALICE  and  some  wine

Now  what?L
Options  are:  m  or  f
```
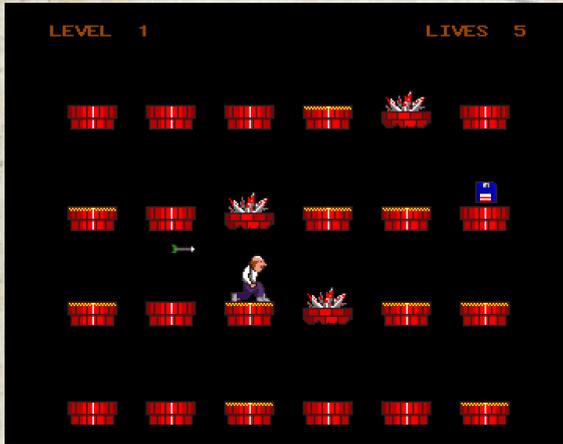
The Making Of...

BALDYZX

Amiga Version

Baldy, if you didn't know, was an Amiga game I wrote in 1992 using AMOS, and was released on Public Domain. Since then I have tried many times to port the game across the Spectrum, using a variety of different methods. None of them, apart from a BASIC version, ever got very far.

The game is a simple platform game with a few twists. There are four rows of six platforms and the jump is fixed so that the player can only jump to these areas. There is no free movement, so in essence there are fixed areas on screen that the player can be in. It was written like that on purpose, as the style of the game is more about timing, route planning and avoiding the various projectiles.

BASIC version

To get from one row to another, there are teleports, and these transport the player down, or up, one level. The player can also duck to avoid certain projectiles, but not all of them.
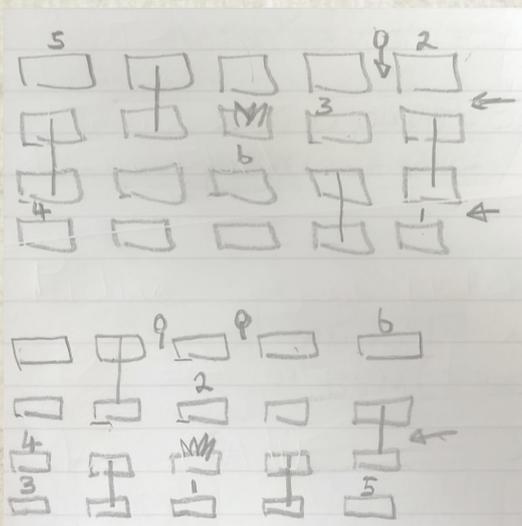
The projectiles include horizontal and vertical moving enemies and each level has a different set to avoid. Early levels are quite easy, but as the player progresses, the game throws everything at them including random falling rocks, which are a real pain if you are on the top row.

Collecting a set number of items, in the case of the original, Amiga discs, takes you to the next level. The Amiga version has 20 levels getting progressively harder.

Of the Spectrum versions I had tried to make, the only one that got very far was a BASIC version written in 1998. This version had a reduced number of platforms with just four rows of four platform.

Level planning

This obviously meant the game wold be different, and being in BASIC also meant it would be painfully slow. Other changes to this version included the removal of the crouch. This was done because I didn't have the knowledge to implement it! Apart from that though, the game plays quite well.

With my discovery of Johnathan Cauldwell's Arcade Game Designer around 2009, a Spectrum version of the game has always been at the back of my mind.

I have tried many times to make one, but each time I either got distracted or hit problems that I could see no way out of. The main issue was the jump mechanism. AGD has jump routines built in that didn't conform to my rather odd structure. I did make several attempts to get round this, but had to give up. One game came very close, but I had to change it so much to fit in with AGD that it ended up being a totally different game.

My next attempt in 2012 failed and so we move to 2014.

A few things conspired to bring me to this point. First the Anniversary edition of The Spectrum Show has just been released and it included footage of my poor BASIC game. In response some people in the World Of Spectrum forums asked if I would release it. That scared me, I mean the game is sluggish, has bad collision detection and is something I wouldn't want made public.

Secondly I have been messing about with AGD trying to make a kind of updated Frogger game. For this I had to limit the movement of the frog to set distances, so the jumps are 32 pixels at a time. The movement between the positions is smooth and animated, but the sprite can only ever be 32 pixels left, right, up or down from its current position. This was more or less the same mechanics needed for Baldy.

Mechanics of Movement

Armed with this new bit of Frogger mechanics information, my first job was to build a few platforms and try to make the player jump in fixed lengths.

The normal jump arc implemented by AGD was not suitable so I had to come up with my own jump mechanism. After a bit of thought I decided to hard code a few simple rules that, when complete, worked really well.

Upon pressing the jump key the sprite is moved up 4 pixels and a variable is set to the horizontal sprite position, plus or minus 30 depending on the direction of the jump. I then move the sprite left or right until this variable is reached at which point I call the FALL routine to allow our hero to drop down onto the platforms.

With this simple piece of code in place, the main control and basic game engine was coming together quickly. To create new levels I just had to draw the graphics for each level, paste them onto the screen and the engine took over.

Frogger-like game that gave me the basic movement.

Evolution of the bald man...

Review of the Amiga version.

BALDY
Fortiss PD,
Assassins 38.

It may be a sad reflection on my lonely life but I find it quite exciting when I first load up a new PD title. As the disk drive chunters away the screen blacks out I sit there... bluntly, less than ecstatic. However, I shouldn't have beem so negative as play proved Baldy to be something of a cracker. It appears our surly slaphead of a hero has lost his precious floppy disks unknown enemy, and it requires quick wits and quicker reactions to dodge the missiles and grab the disks without being hit. It sounds simple and it is simple, but it's very addictive. Great fun all the way.

OVERALL: 84%

The Making Of... **BALDYZX**

Crouching

For this the main sprite had to crouch down to avoid low flying projectiles, but because the sprite sizes are fixed in AGD, I had to take another approach as just changing the image would still detect a collision.

I decided the best method would be to have a flag or variable that indicated if the player was crouched. If this was set, by pressing the down key, the sprite would drop down 8 pixels and the sprite image change to a crouched version of the Baldy sprite.

This would be enough for the projectile to pass over his head and at the same time leave enough room to actually draw the sprite and make it look like he is crouching.

With the sprite drawn, even though I wasn't completely happy with it, I set about adding the code to make him crouch.

This was fairly easy, and much the same as the jump routine. With the variable set, the sprite's vertical position would be lowered by 8 pixels allowing any overhead projectile not to trigger the collision. Then I hit problems.

Crouching and jumping caused a whole world of pain because the jump routine simply moved the sprite up 4 pixels as previously coded. This meant the sprite ended up in the middle of the platform.

To get round this I had to detect the crouch flag in the jump code and subtract the 8 pixels before jumping. With that bit now working the next task was the teleports.

Teleporting

Getting the transporters to work involved using the two types of blocks that AGD will allow you to check collisions for, these are the Deadly block and the Custom block.

Creating temporary up and down arrows to help with the layout, I place a down arrow (custom block) on one of the platforms. I placed the up arrow (deadly) block on the platform below it.

In code I could now check to see if the main sprite was in contact with either of these blocks.

In the main sprite code, in the key press detection loop, I simply checked these collisions. So, if the player pressed the down key and the player was in contact with the custom block then I added 48 pixels to the players X coordinates. In AGD the variable X is used for vertical positioning, so you have to remember that!

Early crouching concepts.
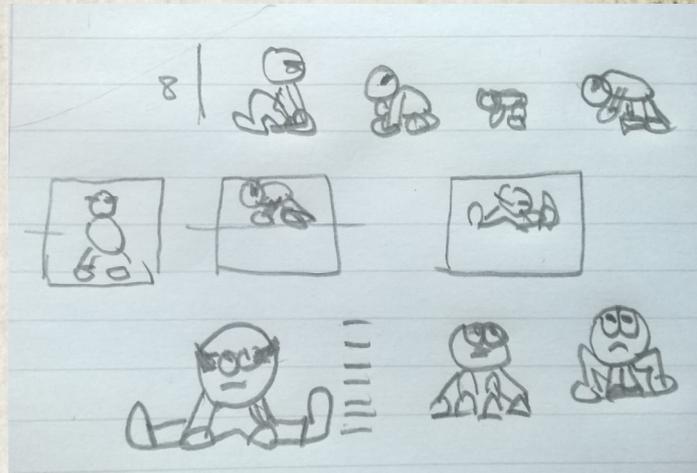
First crouch image. Changed in release version.
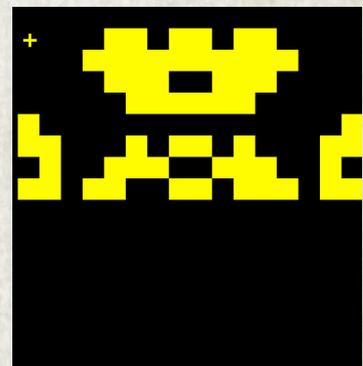
Similarly, in the UP key loop, if the player was touching the deadly block, I simply subtracted 48 pixels from the X coordinates.

This seemed to work, but had the disadvantage of not allowing the player to duck if they were on a downward transporter. In the original Amiga version, the transporters were triggered using the fire button which was un-connected with up and down.

So back to the code. I removed all of the previous stuff and added much the same code in the FIRE key loop. I obviously had to check both block types, but once that was done, play testing revealed the exact same issue I had with the original, and that still can be found in it to some extent.

Pressing fire triggers the down transporter, but once the player is moved down, the code is that fast that it automatically triggers again and sends the player back. Sometimes this bounces the player up and down a few times making the whole thing unplayable.

The fix was to add a counter that triggered when the transporter was activated. This counted down and stopped the transporter from triggering again for about 1 second. This was enough to stop the problem and all was well in Baldy land.

The player could now move across all platforms and transport to all levels of the screen.

I added an image change to indicate he was jumping and that was the transporter stuff complete.

Collecting Stuff

Next on my list was the collection routines. The original game had Baldy collecting discs. For the Spectrum version it was only right to change that to tapes.

I drew a sprite of a rotating tape and added it to the game screen. The collision is all handled in AGD by a few lines of code, but the next problem popped up - how to handle the multi-collections.

Once collected the tape had to re-appear elsewhere on the screen. This meant either using objects, which is a lot of objects, or sprites, which would use up one sprite type.

After a bit of testing and arguing with myself, I opted to use a sprite type. This would involve a few lines of code for every collection, but I hoped would use less memory than huge amounts of objects.

A few tweaks to the code and Baldy could now collect the first four tapes. On to the next level...

Early main sprite - with a hat!
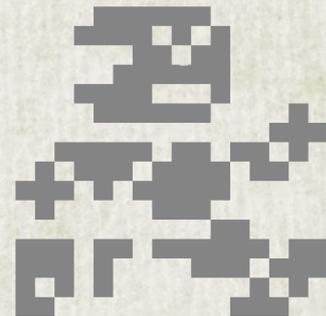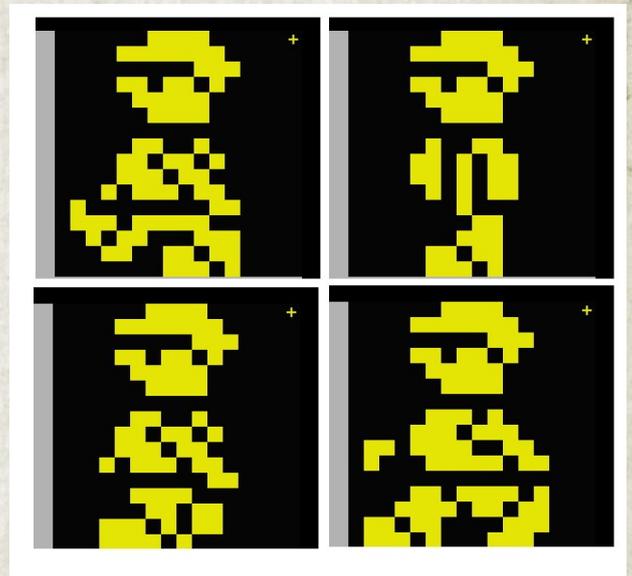

```
IF KEY 0
   IF Y <= 218
      IF K = 0
         LET A = Y
         ADD 30 TO A
         SUBTRACT 4 FROM X
         LET D = 1
         LET K = 1
         LET IMAGE = 1
      ENDIF
   ENDIF
ENDIF
IF KEY 1
   IF Y = > 30
      IF K = 0
         LET A = Y
         SUBTRACT 36 FROM A
         SUBTRACT 4 FROM X
         LET D = 2
         LET K = 1
         LET IMAGE = 3
      ENDIF
```

Continued next issue

Denis Grachev 2013

Sector was released by Denis Grachev in 2013 and is by his own admission, an updated and highly improved version of Transversion originally from Ocean Software.

The idea is simple, as is all the best games, your goal is to clear the grid of pods by flying over them.

The problem is, there are aliens out to stop you, who fire whenever you are in their direct line.

The aliens are continually moving around the outside of the grid, which means you have no time to stand still.

This is a fast paced game from the onset. You have to keep moving and dodging or you won't last very long.

Collecting the pods is made harder on later levels when certain pods cannot be moved. These stop your movement and can only be blasted by the aliens themselves.

Your ship has no weapons, so again it's down to agile flying if you want to survive.

The graphics, although small, are nice and certainly improve the original, with plenty of colour and effects.

Sound is used very well, and there is a nice tune that plays when the game has loaded, but never again, which is a pity.

This is a very addictive game that I found best if played via the keyboard. I tried the joystick option, but for some reason it wasn't as easy for me.

Using the keyboard though gave me fairly long games, and once over, I was straight back into the action.

A great arcade game then that is highly recommended.
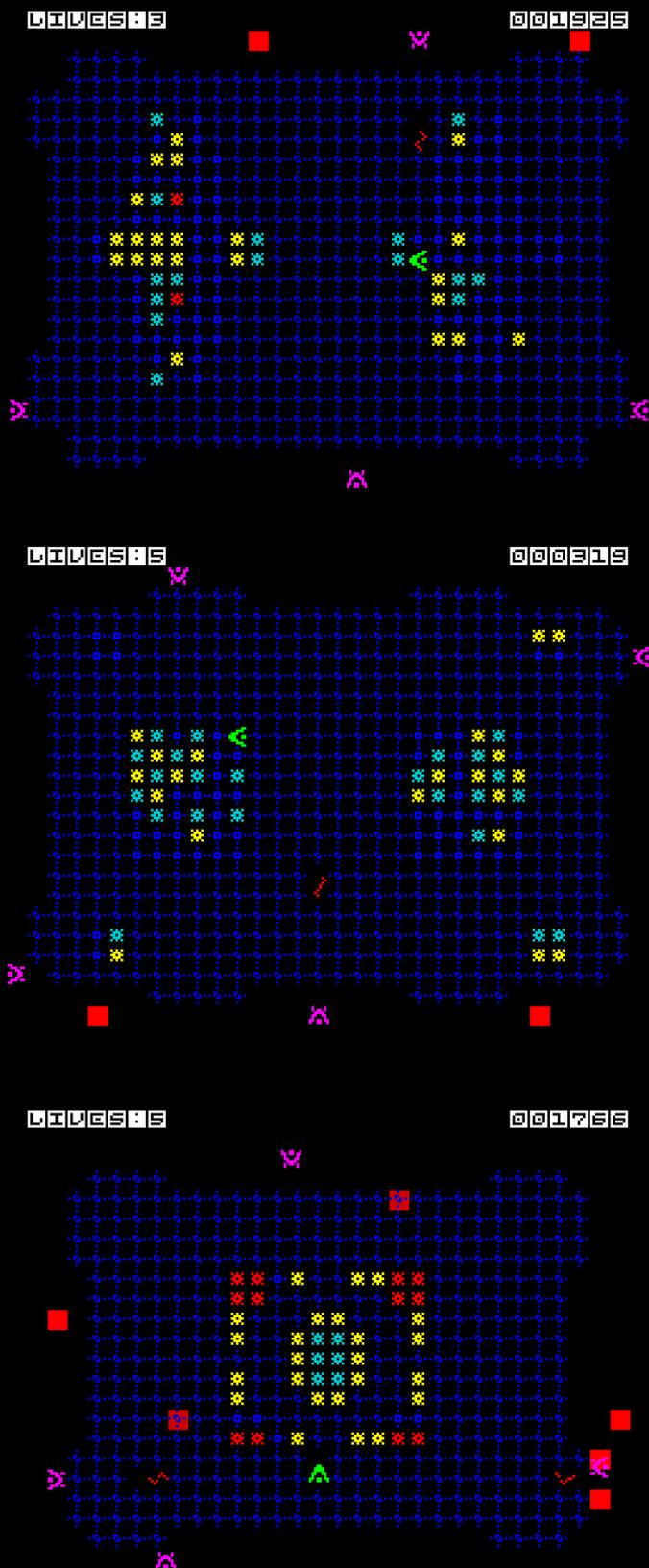
GLUG GLUG

CRL 1984

Released in 1984, Glug Glug was probably one of those games that slipped under the radar from a then relatively mediocre games company.

It's a kind of cross between JetPac and Scuba Dive.

You control a diver, tethered to a boat, that has to dive to the bottom of the ocean and collect three items of treasure.

Under the waves there are all kinds of sea life that can cause instant death, so our money hungry diver has be careful.

Shoals of fish meandering about, jelly fish floating aimlessly, crabs patrolling the seabed and even a shark are all deadly.

Each type of creature has it's own movement pattern making the game interesting when there is a mixture on screen. The hardest ones are the small fish that track your movement causing you to constantly move and dodge.

Luckily you are armed with a gun that has unlimited ammo, and you can quickly see off a deadly creature. They don't stay dead long though, and they soon come back for more.

Once the three items of treasure have been collected, and returned to the boat, you move on to the next level, and a different mix of creatures.

Later levels also see mines, fixed to the seabed by a chain that you cannot move through. This narrows down the play area making things more difficult. You have to be very careful not to get trapped, because although the chains stop the diver, they don't stop the sea creatures.

This is a nice little game that really deserves more credit than it got on release. Its quick to pickup and play, fun and challenging.

Recommended.

GLASS

Quicksilva 1985

Glass is a 3D arcade shoot-em-up, throwing you straight into the action as a newly recruited pilot. No messing about training, instead your mission is to destroy three enemy cities.

Before you can destroy them though, you have to navigate and blast your way past their many defences.

These include various types of robots, tanks and huge motherships, which glide across the screen smoothly.

The game looks really impressive, and after a nice launch sequence you meet your first alien. Bouncing towards you with a reflection on the blue ground, you have to blast it before it hits your ship. This scenario is one of three that repeats throughout the game, with different, nicely drawn aliens.

Each section has a time limit to survive and this is displayed on your control panel along with your shield strength, which is depleted if anything hits you.

The shield is replenished after a few levels, so you just have to keep it clean for a short period of time.

Between each level you get a nice 3D grid effect as you zoom off into the next alien filled zone.

After a few rounds of these, you get thrown into a level that is very reminiscent of 3D Death Chase. Here different coloured towers fly towards you and you just have to dodge them until the timer runs down. Then its back to the aliens for a few more rounds.
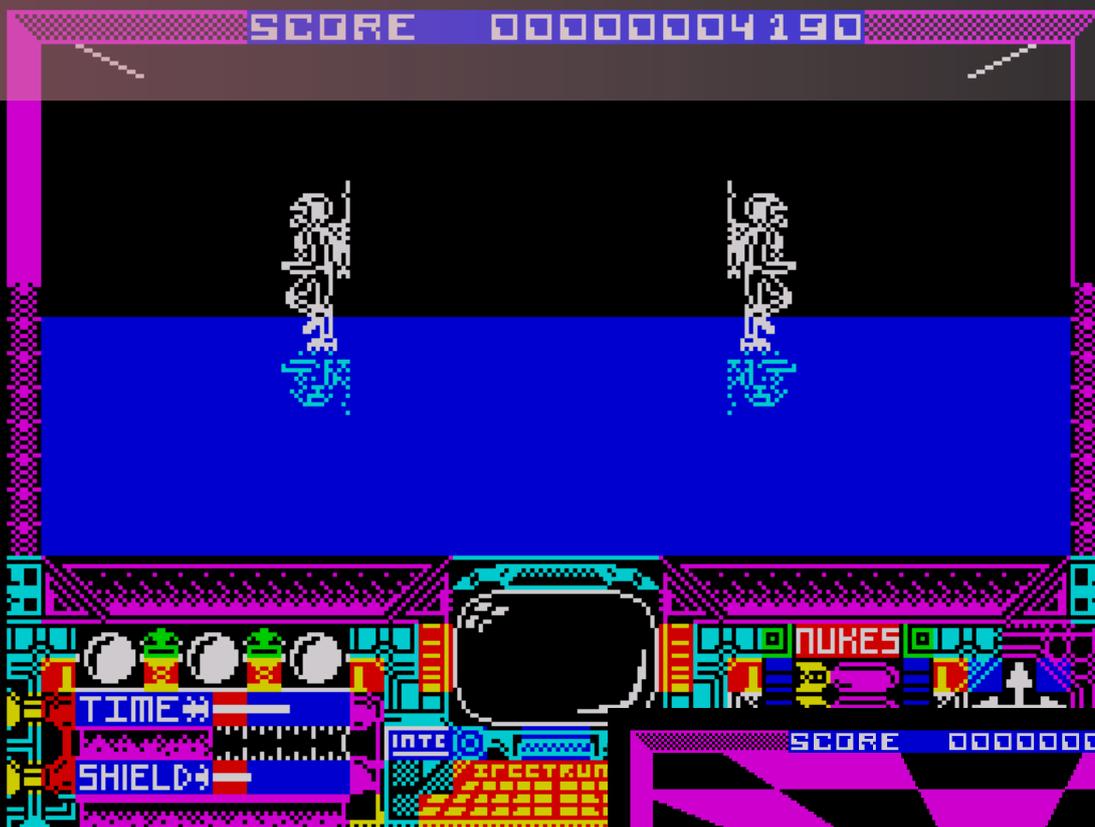
Again, clear a few of these and you get a chance to blast one of the many motherships. This huge vessel glides across the screen and you have to manoeuvre your sites to shoot areas of the ship.

Bouncy bouncy...

Deathchase sequence

SCORE   0000004190

Complete this and it's back to the aliens again. Eventually you'll reach the impressive base, and you can destroy it by just watching as your nukes head off to blow up the unsuspecting aliens.

Once you get used to the controls, the game itself isn't too difficult but after about ten minutes you begin to lose interest, only carrying on to see what the next set of graphics will look like.

There is a very impressive array of art work on offer, all drawn very well but with little animation. Some walking, some bouncing, some creeping up.

Sound is used well although there is only sounds for shooting, explosion and level transposition.

Maintaining your shields is the only thing to worry about, lose them and it's gave over. You can however, take the option to continue. This lets you get further in the game but your score is reset to zero.

After battling through the first 40 or so levels I was graciously awarded the level of Commodore User – nice !

I continued on just so I could destroy the city. Then I ended the game and didn't go back.

Despite some very nice graphics then, the game soon becomes boring. A pity really, as there is plenty of gameplay options but just nothing I would class as exciting.

Try it once…

Taking on the mothership.

Nuke the city.

180

Mastertronic 1986

I love a bit of darts, and it seems there has been dart games for almost every computer and console, even the Xbox or Playstation.

The Spectrum was no different and there were several to choose from, but his time I will be checking out 180 by Mastertronic.

After configuring your keys or selecting a joystick you are thrown straight into the action against the poorest player, Del Boy Desmond. There are two main views in the game, a view of your opponent as they throw, and a view of the dartboard as you throw.

The dartboard is nicely drawn, and a large disembodied hand floats around awaiting your control

Using the keyboard or joystick, you manoeuvre the hand to your selected score, and hit the fire button. Depending on the position and the animation frame of the hand, the dart will fly into the board hopefully where you wanted it.
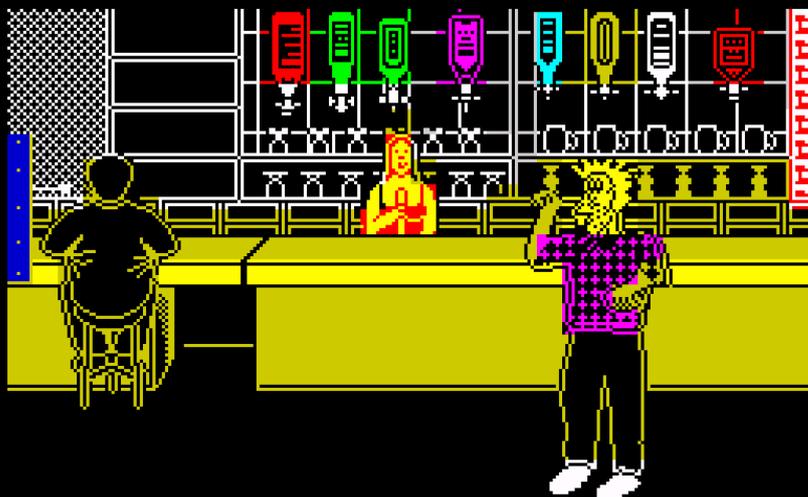
The movement of the hand is constant and like most other dart games, and you have to constantly correct the movement in order to hit the target.

The hand rocks back and forth, and as mentioned before, this is a key part of aiming. If the hand is pulled back towards you, the dart will go higher.

It takes a bit of getting used to, but once you master it, you'll be throwing high scores all the time.

The scoring is done in the side panel, in the style of an old fashioned chalk board with your overall score and points scored. Sadly there is no hint of checkouts, so you have to be good with maths in the later stages of the game if you want to win.

When you have thrown you get a view of the pub and your challenger, as he aims for the board and throws. The pub background includes a barmaid and another drinker, and there are some entertaining animations if you watch long enough.

The opponents are not that easy to beat without a lot of practice and the first one usually kicks off scoring over 100 with each throw.

Sound is limited to a thud as the darts hit the board, but there is a jolly tune that plays on the menu screen and when your opponent is throwing.

Overall not a bad game then and it does offer a solid challenge.

KRAZY KONG

C-Tech 1982

Let me quote from a C-Tech advertisement;

"100% machine code program featuring 3 screens of hi-res gorilla, barrels, fireballs, lifts and a running jumping man..."

Now we have that image in our head, lets load the game and compare. That is, if you can actually load it in the first place. There are numerous unnecessary steps to go through before you get to the point where the game becomes playable. At one point you are asked to turn on CAPS before continuing!

If you do manage to get to the game, after sitting through the terrible jerky intro, then you will very quickly re-read the text above and wonder if you have loaded the wrong game.

The main character is almost uncontrollable, and has two methods of movement; walking and jumping. Not the traditional way, oh no, you can either walk left or jump left - using separate keys. This makes progress very difficult.

The fireballs and barrels move in 8 pixels leaps and often move straight through your player without hurting him. Other times your player will just randomly move and get killed.

As for running, jumping man, well, lets just say its very difficult to tell what he is supposed to be doing!

If you, by some ancient magic, get past the first level, the second level awaits, and although much easier, there is nothing remotely interesting here. Just a few fireballs moving in set patterns and conveyor belts.

Now for the killer... if you complete this level, level three never arrives. There is a bug in the game that sends you back to level one again. There were complaints about this in various magazines at the time, but to my knowledge it never got resolved.

So, here is my challenge to any coder or hacker. Try to get level three of this game working please.

Your staring hint is that it's more than likely compiled BASIC.

The worst game ever!
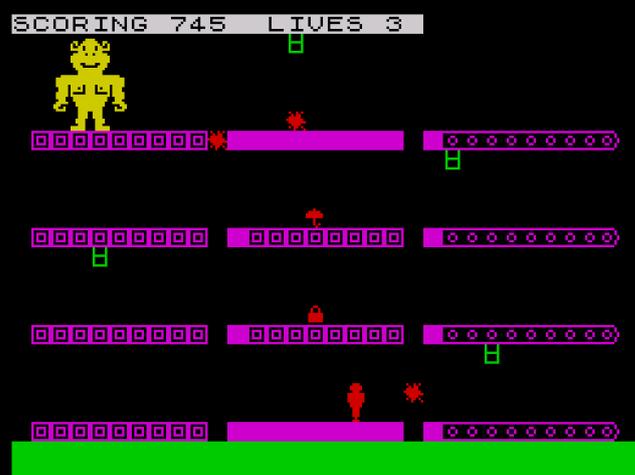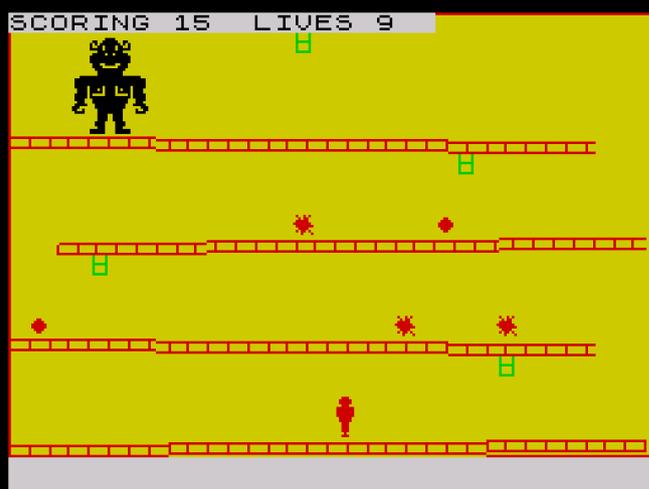
Cheetah
R.A.T.

Back in the good old days of home gaming, if you didn't like using the keyboard, your only option was a joystick. A very popular device, with many varieties, designs and features.

I covered the different options in episode 4, but the joysticks themselves remained pretty much the same throughout their life.

Some had pistol grips, some trigger buttons, some had rapid fire options, but at the end of the day they all plugged into an interface and they all moved the player left, right, up and down, and allowed them to fire or jump.

Even up to more modern consoles like the original Xbox or PS2, the joystick, or the joypad as it was renamed, still plugged into the unit.

It was considered somewhat of a special feature if a console came with wireless joypads, but now it is considered a bare minimum.

This trend isn't something new though, and for the spectrum it all started in August 1984, when Cheetah Marketing announced the RAT. Or to give it it's full title, the Remote Action Transmitter.

This was an infrared controller costing nearly £30. Not a joystick, as there wasn't really a stick. Not a joypad, as the term had yet to be mainstream – but a controller.

The unit had two components, an interface that plugged into the Spectrum, which was not much larger than a normal joystick interface, but had a small infrared receiver in it.

And the RAT itself. A misty grey lump of plastic that looked like it had come from the set of a sci-fi movie.

It was about the same size as a normal television remote control and worked in the same way.

It had a four-way pad, despite having markings for eight, and a large single, orange fire button.
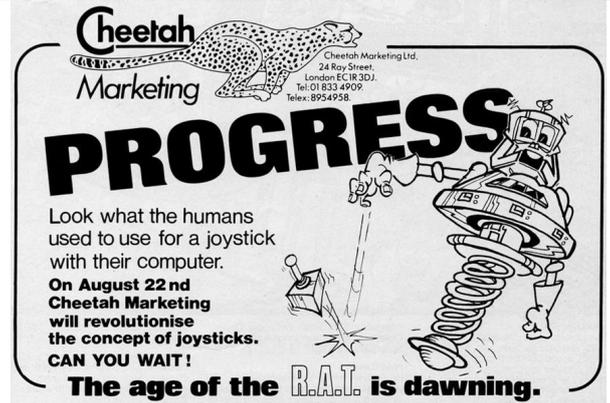

These were not actual buttons though, they were similar to the old ZX81 keyboard, so there was no mechanical parts here.

It had a battery compartment at the back for a normal PP3 battery, and once fitted, you were ready to go.

The best thing Cheetah did with this was to make it Kempston compatible, so any game that worked with a normal Kempston joystick, would work with this.

To test this, I entered simple basic program that printed the signal on port 31 – the
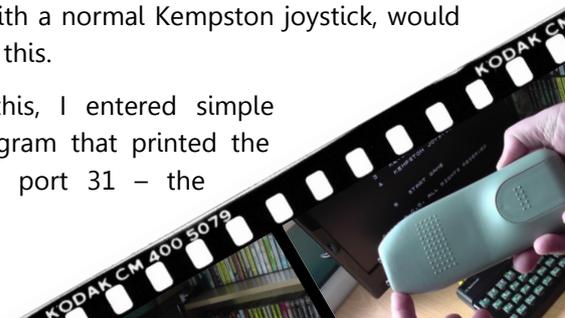
port used by the Kempston joystick, and made a beep if the value was anything other than 0.

Running this and pressing the buttons indicated the four direction and fire were working, and also that the diagonal directions were not detected, as mentioned earlier.

There was sometimes a slight delay in response which could be down to the age of the unit, remember this is over 20 years old, or it could be just the normal delays you sometimes get with infrared.

The best test for this device was obviously a game.. so I loaded Galaxians and got ready to play.

Things worked well, apart from the odd delay, it didn't feel as responsive as using keys, or indeed a wired joystick. This sometimes meant my ship failed to avoid a collision, not very good for gaming.

As I said before, this could be the age of the unit, so I can't really claim it's a bad controller without a brand new one for comparison, which is unlikely.

Next I loaded something that needed all directions of movement – Jetpac.

This is where the RAT fell short.

Moving is all directions meant you constantly had to check your

finger positions, and often you missed the buttons, leaving poor old jetman floundering.

Firing AND moving, although it did work, was even trickier due to the device

layout, and needed two hands to make this work – which again was very tricky.

Overall though, it was a brave effort by Cheetah, and the end result is an attempt to move away from wired joysticks and give the player more freedom.

It is claimed that it will work 30 feet away. In my tests this claim proved to be true. The interface picked up the signal as far back as I could get, around 5 metres, but it was impossible to see the actual game at that distance on my 19inch television!

The unit is well designed and

sits nicely in the hand, but does require two hands to use it properly.
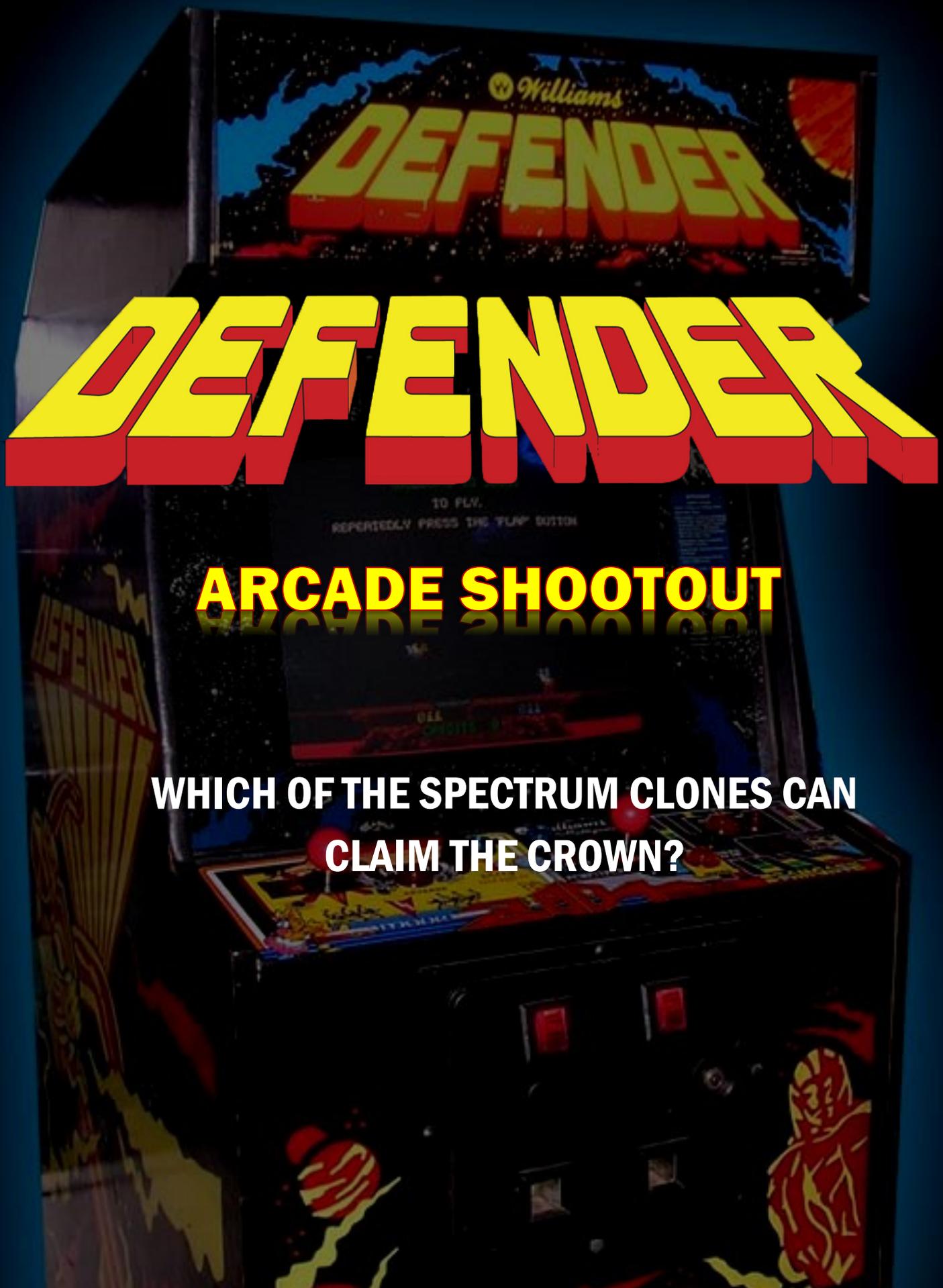
The placement of the buttons means it's quite difficult to move and fire at the same time, but the interface does handle this.

A novel idea that actually worked, and something that only became expected from more modern consoles.

Good fun to play with, but the response is just a bit slow for accurate gaming.

DEFENDER

ARCADE SHOOTOUT

WHICH OF THE SPECTRUM CLONES CAN CLAIM THE CROWN?

Defender - The Game

Defender is one of the all-time great arcade games. Released in 1980 by Williams, the hectic pace, unique gameplay, iconic sounds and difficult gameplay placed this high in the list of favourites for game players worldwide.

The idea is simple, save the planet from invading aliens who are set on abducting humans. Defend the humans at all costs, once there are no more, the game switches up a level and all hell breaks loose.

Graphics wise the game was pretty simple; Horizontal scrolling wireframe landscape that you could fly through and a mixture of different aliens to shoot. There was also a radar screen at the top of the playing area and the addition of smart bombs and hyperspace to get you out of tricky situations.

On looks and gameplay, home conversion should have been easy, but many tried and failed to recreate the arcade feeling, mainly down to speed issues.

On the Spectrum there were quite a few versions., but which one was best?

Lets play...

DEFENDA - Interstella Software 1984

I remember this game coming out of the blue. The company wasn't well known, but when the game loaded it was a great version of the classic.

Everything had been replicated and the scrolling and speed were fast and smooth.

All of the arcade elements were present, from the landscape to the alien types and even the sound was nice. Not the same as the arcade, but still pretty impressive.

The radar was easy to read and accurate, and the compliment of smart bombs were good.

The player ship explosion, one of the best features of the arcade, is replicated very well too, although I did see this a bit too often!

The only bad thing to say about this game is the sound. If you have a 48K machine, you'll be playing in silence, however 128K owners will get the better deal here, with some nice effects.

Control was via keyboard, Interface 2 joystick or Kempston joystick and was excellent. The inertia of the ship was spot on, and really this is going to take some beating.

I am not the best defender player, but I enjoyed this game, my attention was on playing rather than dodgy graphics, jerky movement or poor game mechanics.

This really was a joy to play...

ASTROPLANER - Romik Software 1984

The first thing you notice is the colour, not black as the arcade game, but green.

The next thing you notice if the ship, it looks terrible..

In fact most things about this game are poor. The basics are there, with aliens that kidnap humans and a smooth scrolling landscape, but there is no radar so it makes things a little tricky.

There is also no smart bomb, so you have to rely on your laser for protection.

There is a slight twist in that you have to pick up the humans, or in this game they are mutants, and carry them to the factory, which was tricky to find in the mix of landscapes.

Different aliens attack you and after a few seconds you will be inevitably destroyed by a fast flying light blue projectile that seems to just appear and home in on your ship.

Strangely you can fly through the aliens but not their lasers or bombs!

The sound is very irritating and in fact the whole thing soon annoys you to the extent you'll want to throw it in the bin. A terrible game...

DEFENDAR - Mikrogen 1984

Having played Interstellar version, this one seems much worse than it actually is.

All of the arcade elements are there but the landscape scrolls in character squares, and the aliens move jerkily too. This can be sometimes forgotten with the hectic blasting, that is accompanied by some nice sound effects.

The aliens are all present, but all of the alien types appear from level 1, rather than introducing them in later levels.

The firing isn't as pretty as either the arcade or the Interstellar version, and can often seem to pass straight through aliens without killing them.

Control is by keyboard only and the keys are laid out not as standard, but you soon get used to them. Response is good but the reverse just flips the ship instantly, which can be a bit confusing mid battle and can place you right over an alien, resulting in instant death.

The player ship explosion is a bit of a let down really, which seals an average attempt by Mikrogen, that although plays well, is not arcade perfect.

GUARDIAN II - Hi-Tech Software 1990

I was hoping that this, being released much later than the others, would prove to be a worthy contender, and I was right.

The keyboard layout takes a bit of getting used to, but once you are comfortable, the game just begins to flow. You can also play with a Kempston joystick, and having played with both, I am not sure which I prefer for this game.

The landscape scrolls really smoothly and the aliens all move really well and are smaller than previous games, meaning the game is slightly harder.

The inertia is just right and the reverse is probably the best implementation so far. Nice and smooth and easy to follow, making for a great gaming experience.

Sound is good, but is different between 48k and 128k machines. Oddly I prefer the 48k sounds but the firing does get annoying after 30 minutes playing. I think Hi-Tech were trying to emulate the deep throbbing pulse of the arcade by using low beeper notes, but it somehow didn't quite work.

The player ship explosion is colourful and nice, as are the in-game explosions. The radar is easy to read and the whole thing just oozes quality.

All of the aliens types are thrown in at the start, which is a bit of a shame, and the difficulty level is pretty tough, at least it was for me.

Overall, another great conversion… and now I don't know which is my favourite…

ORBITER - Silversoft 1982

Orbiter is the earliest of the releases in this test, and it certainly shows..

There are different versions of this game, some with sound during movement, other not, which you prefer is down to your own preference. Having the sound while moving does slow the game down slightly, but does add to the game.

The scrolling is character based and all of the aliens suffer the same problem. Graphics are a bit basic, as is the sound. Gameplay is not too bad considering all of the problems, and control, which is keyboard only, is responsive.

The player explosion is very poor, your ship wobbles about and a few blobs drift about.

The radar is a bit tricky to read too. If I had played this first, I would have said it was a good game, but I didn't.. and having seen what can be achieved lowers this games score.

INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS - Crystal 1983

Crystal made a brave move when they released this game because it had no sound at all unless you owned a Fuller sound box. The cost of that peripheral meant the vast majority of users could not afford it, and therefore the game would be silent. It was said the decision was taken to allow the game to run at full speed without tying the processor up generating sound, but whatever the reason, it was a gamble. and the game is certainly very fast, sometimes too fast.

Because the processor doesn't have to generate sound the result is a fast, smoothly scrolling game that easily matches the arcade machine. Playing in silence really does depreciate from the overall experience though.

But, adding the sound, via emulation of the Fuller box really does improve it. The sound is not, in my opinion, as good as some of the other games we have seen that do use the processor , so draw your own conclusions.

Graphics wise the player ship looks more like a jet fighter than the arcade star fighter, but the rest of the game does look quite close.

The colour scheme does make the game look bland at times and the radar, although longer than other games, taking up the full width of the screen, is easy to use.

Control is by keyboard or Fuller joystick and is very crisp, making the game responsive, which it needs to be considering the speed. The controls and movement make gameplay very close to the arcade.

A good effort then from Crystal...
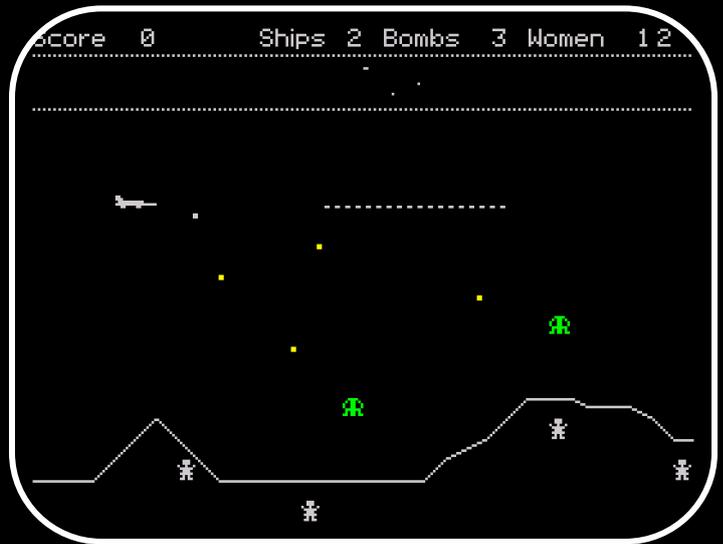
ROCKET COMMAND– Spectrum Games 1983

This is a very interesting game. It was advertised by Spectrum Games who later went on to become Ocean Software, but It didn't make it into the Ocean catalogue like the others.

And the reason? Well as you can tell straight away, it is modified version of Orbiter. The only difference is the graphics, and lack of radar. Apart from that, it all seems very familiar, even down to the keys used to control it, movement, sound and the player explosion.

I wonder if there is a story behind this?

I checked with the author of Orbiter and he says he knows nothing of this game. It would seem Orbiter was released by Silversoft first, around October 1982 and this game was released by Spectrum Games around January 1983, so it came after the Silversoft one. This would indicate it was ripped off. It's all a mystery!

Anyway, the game itself is not as good as orbiter, mainly because it doesn't have the radar, which makes things pretty difficult.

Even with one it wouldn't be anywhere near the top of the contender list.

SCUBA ATTACK - Century Software 1984

Well... things just keep getting stranger....

This game uses the same key layout as both Orbiter and Rocket Command, and the whole thing is so very familiar – why? Well it was written by the same person that wrote Orbiter, Andy Glaister.

So, this I assume is an updated game engine, and to avoid any similarities, the scenario is moved underwater. Despite this, the game play is very similar and you can see it's obviously Defender based.

Instead of defending humans, you have to defend divers, that drop down from the ship randomly. The aliens of the arcade are replaced by jellyfish that float around looking to kill you at any opportunity.

The sound and graphics have both been improved from Orbiter, but I can't help thinking I am playing an updated version of it.

It certainly plays better but things still move in character jumps although the action is fast and furious.

Not a bad game... but not one of the best.

Starblitz - Softek 1984

Starblitz, released in 1984 by Softek must have one of the coolest cassette inlays ever, but what about the game?

Well first, the cassette has two versions, one for normal Spectrum sound, the other for users of the Fuller Sound box. Like several other games on offer here the authors opted to support this expensive peripheral, but unlike the others, you do get sounds if you haven't got one. The standard ZX sounds are pretty good too, in my opinion, better than those of the Fuller unit.

We get some nice smooth graphics and large well drawn sprites that look like the arcade game. The laser looks really nice, it's just a pity it doesn't make any sound on the standard machine.

The inertia of the player ship is well done and the player explosion is really nice, despite the underwhelming sound.

Gameplay wise, it is a little easier than the arcade, which is a good thing for me, meaning I could enjoy some alien blasting. The arcade elements are all there with different alien types and human abductions.

The scanner is easy to read and the action is fast enough to be challenging and there is very little wrong with this game.

STOP THAT THERE ALIEN - David Swan 1984

This is a bit of a strange game. It's obviously written in BASIC and suffers all the usual effects of that.

You can only move up or down and can't switch directions. There's no radar or smart bombs!

This is just a poor game in every aspect.

But a bit of fun to end the tests on.

You shouldn't laugh....

Oh go on then... hahaha...

THE RESULTS

I have to say, of all the shoot outs I have done on the show, this one threw up the best collection of clones. There are so many good ones, so many are really playable and so many are very close to the arcade. Because of that, the goods ones are all close to each other in every aspect and it is almost impossible to pick one. At the end of the day it will be down to personal preference for each player, so my top choices are;

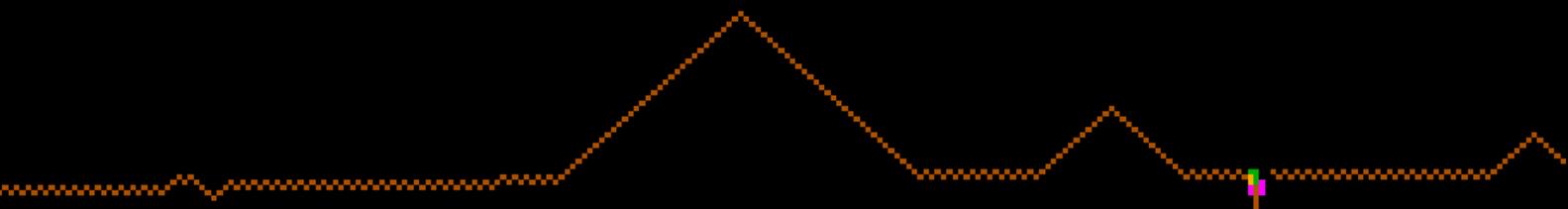| DEFENDA	Guardian II	Starblitz
Insterstella Software	Hi-Tech Software	Softek

Invasion Of The Body Snatchers lost points for not having sound on machines without a fuller box, otherwise there wold be four to chose from.

I can't separate these games, but for my own personal choice, that would be Starblitz.

ABOUT DEFENDER

Defender was Williams Electronics' first attempt at developing a new video game; the company's earlier game was a Pong clone.

The popularity of coin operated arcade games in 1979 spurred the company to shift its focus from pinball games to arcade games. The company chose Eugene Jarvis, who had a successful record of Williams pinball games, to head development.

Space was a popular setting for video games at the time, and Jarvis felt the abstract setting would help obscure simple graphics that lacked realism.

The developers held brain storming sessions and during one session, they agreed that one of Asteroids's favourable elements was its wrapping effect. They felt a game that allowed the player to fly off the screen would be exciting, and decided to create a game world larger than the screen displayed. The game's environment was made longer than the screen, with the visible area scrolling horizontally. Expanding on the idea, they envisioned a version of Space Invaders rotated 90 degrees. By changing the orientation of Space Invaders' design, the ship moved up and down while flying horizontally. Large asteroids, an element from Asteroids, were then added to the game world, but were later removed because the staff felt it lacked enjoyment. Jarvis intended the screen to scroll only from left to right; fellow Williams employee Steve Ritchie, however, convinced him the game should be able to scroll in either direction.

After six months of development, the team felt the game had not made enough progress. They examined other games and concluded that survival was a necessary component to implement. To achieve this, they devised enemies to present a threat, the first of which was the "Lander". Jarvis enjoyed violent, action entertainment, and wanted the game to have those elements. However, he felt the action should have a reasonable objective. Inspired by the 1960s television show The Defenders, Jarvis titled the game Defender, reasoning that the title helped justify the violence. He added astronauts to expand on the space theme and give players something to defend while they shot enemies. The element of flying over a planetscape was added after a brainstorming session between Jarvis and Ritchie. The landscape is depicted as a line only a pixel wide, primarily because the hardware was not powerful enough to generate anything more detailed.

*Text taken from Wikipedia

FUTURE LOOTER

Timmy 2011

Released in 2011 by Timmy, Future Looter definitely has its roots in the classic Spectrum game Cybernoid.

Controlling a large spaceship, you have to fly through several levels, blasting the nasties and navigating the rooms until you find one of the crystals. Things are not as easy as that though and you will have to contend with a variety of aliens out to stop you.

Despite this initial description, and how the game looks, it is not a fast paced shooter, instead more of a puzzle game.

After the intro screen with some great music from Mister Beep, the games begins and you soon discover that moving from room to room involves a bit of brain power.

Some puzzles are simple enough in that you learn the patterns of enemies and slot in behind them until you can get to the exit.

Other rooms have blocks that have to be destroyed to let the floating nasties continue on its path and open up the exit. Shoot out the correct blocks and the alien will eventually create a path for you to move on.

There are still aliens to shoot, but don't be too hasty, you may need them to break through to the next room because some of them destroy blocks that block your exit.

The game is colourful with some well drawn and fine looking graphics. Everything moves smoothly and the player ship is easy to control.

The sound is good with shooting, explosion and collection sounds and the difficulty is set about right. Some rooms you can work out pretty quickly how to navigate, others may take a few attempts and several lives before you can progress.

It's a shame it is so short though, with only 3 levels that keep repeating, but it's still a great game.

Definitely worth downloading.
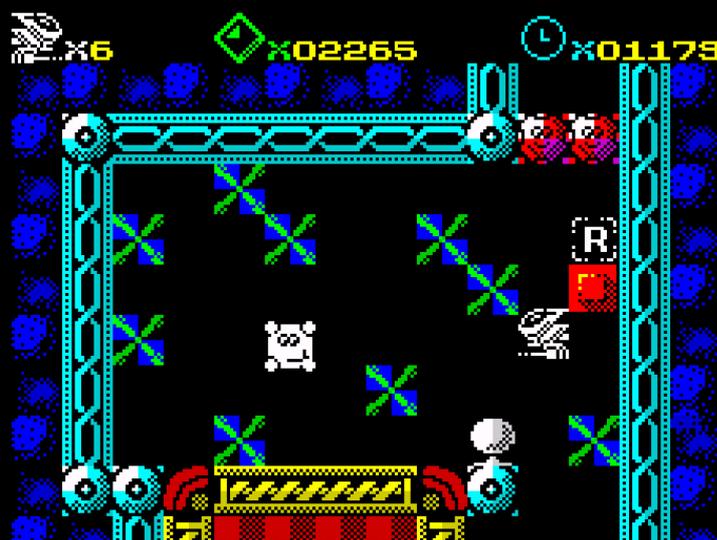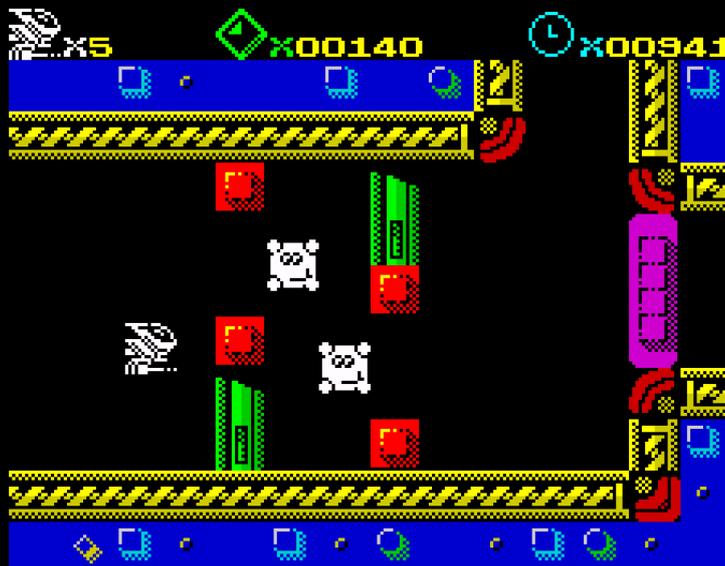
INVADERS

Artic Computing 1982

There were many Space Invader clones for every home micro you could think of and the Spectrum was no different. I covered most of them in the very first issue of the magazine, but wanted to review one of the better ones on it's own.

Artic Computing's version was one of the first too, being released in 1982 when the Spectrum was new on the market..

Featuring large, well drawn and smooth moving graphics, it blew all of the other clones away and with the exception of Psion's Space Raiders, this is the best Invader clone you can get.

The game also gives you different game modes if you get bored of the standard format. One arms the aliens with diagonal bombs, and this really adds spice to the format. The other causes the top level of invaders to mutate when hit, meaning you have to shoot them twice to get rid of them.

The sound is really well done, with the stomping noise and explosions. The only let down is the lack of a firing sound. It's a real pity this was missed off.

There are also 9 difficulty settings, so there is plenty of scope for ramping up the game if you are a seasoned player.

Control is by keyboard with a fixed layout and no joystick option. That said, left, right and fire isn't going to prove tricky as long as the keys are sensible, which they are.

It is really surprising that the game variations, especially the diagonal bombs, changes the gameplay so much. Your tactics have to change and you find yourself thinking very differently than you do for the standard game. It also makes for a more hectic game.

One of the best.
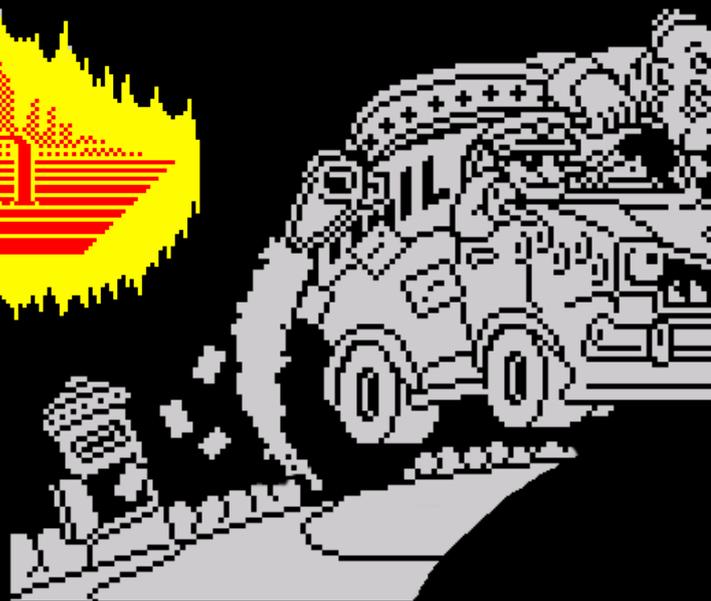
Mailstrom offers you the chance of simulating another vocation on your Speccy, that of a humble postie. But times have changed. Brutal riots have gripped the country, and a coup has taken place leaving major criminal figures in charge. And that's about as much of the nonsensical instructions as I can face recreating here.

All you really need to know is two things. One - you are in charge of delivering the mail, and two - you will be doing so in an armoured postal delivery vehicle called S.K.I.T. Fans of 80's Saturday afternoon TV may have already picked up on the connection, and just to ram it home the name of your postie is Michael Nasty. Yes, this is the Postman Pat version of Knight Rider, just without the black and white cat, and a red van instead of a customised Pontiac Trans-Am.

To deliver the mail involves a few steps. Firstly you must open post boxes in order to collect mail sacks, which are then stored in your van. You then deliver these to the sorting office IN section, to retrieve letters from the OUT section, for delivery to various numbered houses. Finally it's back at the depot to find out how you've done, and get ready for the next day.

To achieve these tasks, you drive your specially equipped van along side-scrolling streets, stopping occasionally to get out and visit post boxes and houses.

So what is special about S.K.I.T? Unfortunately, at first, not a lot. It is pretty much a regular van with the added ability of being able to "talk" to you (in reality, this just boils down to simple status type messages). However, from time to time you'll obtain new equipment that has, for some reason, been placed inside a briefcase and then stuffed inside a post box. These bits of kit (or should that be bits of KITT?) are miraculously fitted as soon as you put them in the back of the van. The most essential, and one of the earliest upgrades you get is the ability to go into "super pursuit" (turbo) mode, which I'll mention again in a bit. Other upgrades include various weapons, and objects that come in handy for opening future post boxes.

Hazards in the game mainly come from the brainless residents of the streets on your delivery round. They mill about aimlessly in the road, with no seeming purpose other than to slow down your already ponderous progress. Most of these are fairly harmless, but occasionally you will come across a thug who - for reasons unknown other than they enjoy it - will attempt to beat you up unless you are in the safety of your van. The good news is that you are allowed to

the game is far too easy as long as you are a bit careful - but I just couldn't face going on.

The streets and businesses that you trundle past are represented well enough, with a nice attention to detail on the buildings and scenery - and the characters are nicely animated - but everything other than your van is the same colour, presumably to avoid colour clash. There is no other traffic in the game whatsoever, unless you count the occasional airborne vehicle passing overhead (including a nod to another classic TV series).

mercilessly run down the thugs, although you are in trouble if you run over a regular citizen.

The only other hazard is that you can potentially run out of ways to open the locked post boxes, and therefore not do your job - which in turn leads to game over. In fact, if you don't pick up an item that happens to be lying on the road early on, then your career will be over before it's started.

Unfortunately, unlike other job related games such as Paperboy or Trashman, this one really is as boring as it sounds. First impressions aren't good, as your postie walks along as if wading through treacle, and initially your van drives in much the same way. This makes progress very tedious, even when you get the turbo mode, as you still have to get out and crawl your way towards a door or post box, and then getting the van going again takes far too long.

The main enjoyment I got from the game was discovering the different upgrades for the van, and other objects. Once most of these are found, which is by the end of day 1, then it becomes a real chore to keep repeating the same tasks in slow motion. During my playthrough for this review, I forced myself to get to day 4, but I couldn't take anymore. I was in no danger of game over - which in truth is another problem, as

Sound is very limited, which in an odd way creates a certain kind of eerie atmosphere as you progress on your lonely journey (aside from the occasional person trying to kill you). The controls seem sluggish, but I think that is more to do with the pace of your character or vehicle - when you are navigating the control panel from inside your van they respond swiftly enough.

Although Mailstrom offers some moments of fun early on, as you discover new objects and see parts of the town for the first time, I can't really recommend it as anything other than a curiosity. As a full price release this would surely have led to disappointment once the shallow gameplay was exhausted. Strangely, it is one of the few Ocean Software titles that didn't get a re-release on their budget Hit Squad label, where it would have represented much better value for money.

Review by Dion Guy

Schizoids

Imagine Software 1983

As a penniless space wanderer you are starving and desperate to earn some money. Stranded on the outer rim of the galaxy you take the only course left open to you and apply for the job of interstellar refuse disposal consultant.

So starts your journey into the second game released by Imagine software. The first game, Arcadia was a massive hit, and all eyes were on the next release, sadly it turned out to be a real turkey despite having one the best inlay images for a Spectrum game.

Taking ideas from the arcade game Asteroids and throwing in some new elements, the aim is to pilot your space dozer around the edges of black holes, and push space junk into them.

Of course being a black hole, it will suck anything that gets too close in, including your ship, so you have to be careful.

What makes this game almost impossible to play, is the asteroids-like control system of rotate and thrust. Coupled with the inertia, you often find you ship hurtling out of control.

Hitting space junk with anything other than the front of your ship will destroy it. Having said that your ship is destroyed sometimes randomly for just flying off the screen!

This takes us onto another bad point, the screen wrap. It worked in Asteroids, but it doesn't really work here. There are times when your ship vanishes from view for about 5 seconds, and then re-appears where you don't expect it.

The graphics are line drawn and flicker badly, but it is a brave early effort from Imagine. Sound is a bit sparse, and all things considered, this is a bit of a let down.

I found the best tactic was to just avoid the black hole and wait for the junk to find their own way in. This gave you points without risking destruction.

TIME 000288   HIGH 000000

TIME 001069   HIGH 000000

Very disappointing.
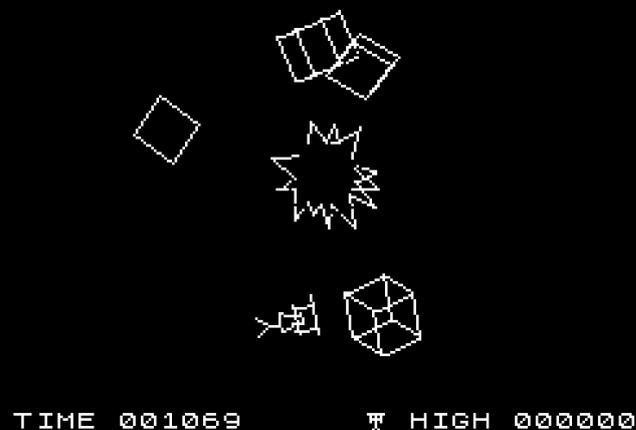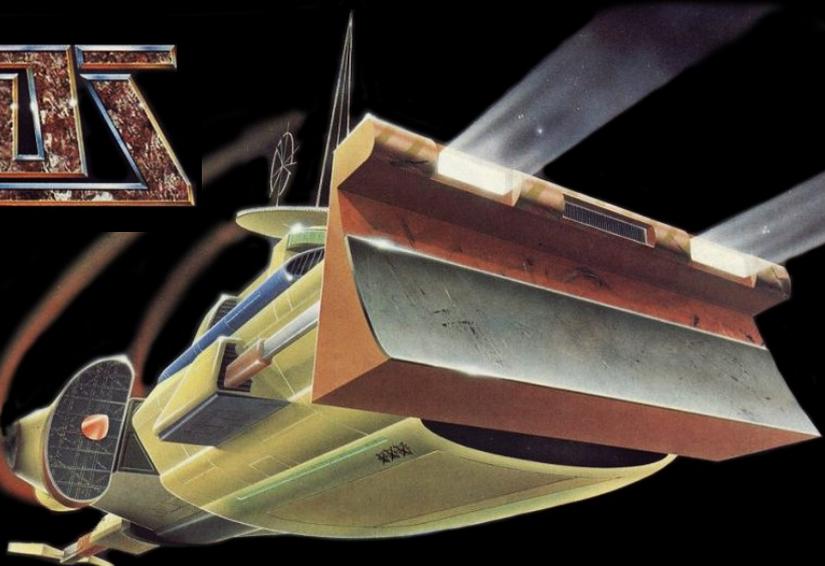
Zeppelin Games 1991

"Tetris" is one of the most popular computer games in history. It's high playability and the simple rules encouraged many people to create their own versions of the game. Many of them were just clones with changed graphics but there were also more original titles. "Stack Up" is one of the latter.

Rules are simple. There are groups of 3 blocks falling from the top of the screen. You can move the group left/right, drop it and change the position of blocks in group. The player's aim is to form lines consisting of at least 3 of the same blocks. Lines can be vertical, horizontal or diagonal and when it's made it disappears.
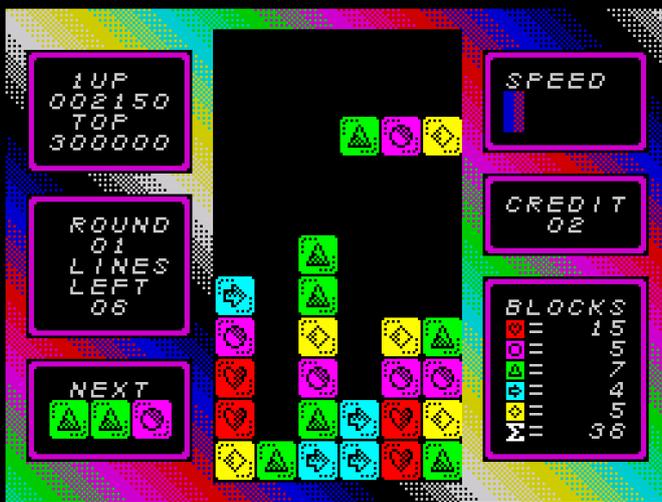
The game is divided into 22 levels. To complete each level a certain number of lines must be formed. There is no time limit but the longer you play, the blocks fall faster. The first levels are quite easy but later ones become harder - random blocks appear on screen, controls are reversed, only diagonal lines count etc.

The game is over when the screen is full of blocks and there is no place for another to fall. There is an interesting feature in "Stack Up" - blocks can be separated from each other. When one block lands, the others keep falling and can be moved or change their positions.

Graphics in "Stack Up" are good, they are colourful and clear. There are 4 sets of blocks and you can change them anytime by pressing Space (it pauses the game) and then use keys 1 to 4. Sound effects are simple but they suit this kind of game well. There is also in-game music but it becomes annoying very quickly (fortunately it can be switched off).

"Stack Up" can be controlled by keyboard or joystick. You can start from level 1, 3 or 5 and the best scores are kept in the Hall of Fame.

I have never been a fan of games by Zeppelin but this one is very playable.

Highly Recommended.

Review by Piotr "PopoCop" Szymanski
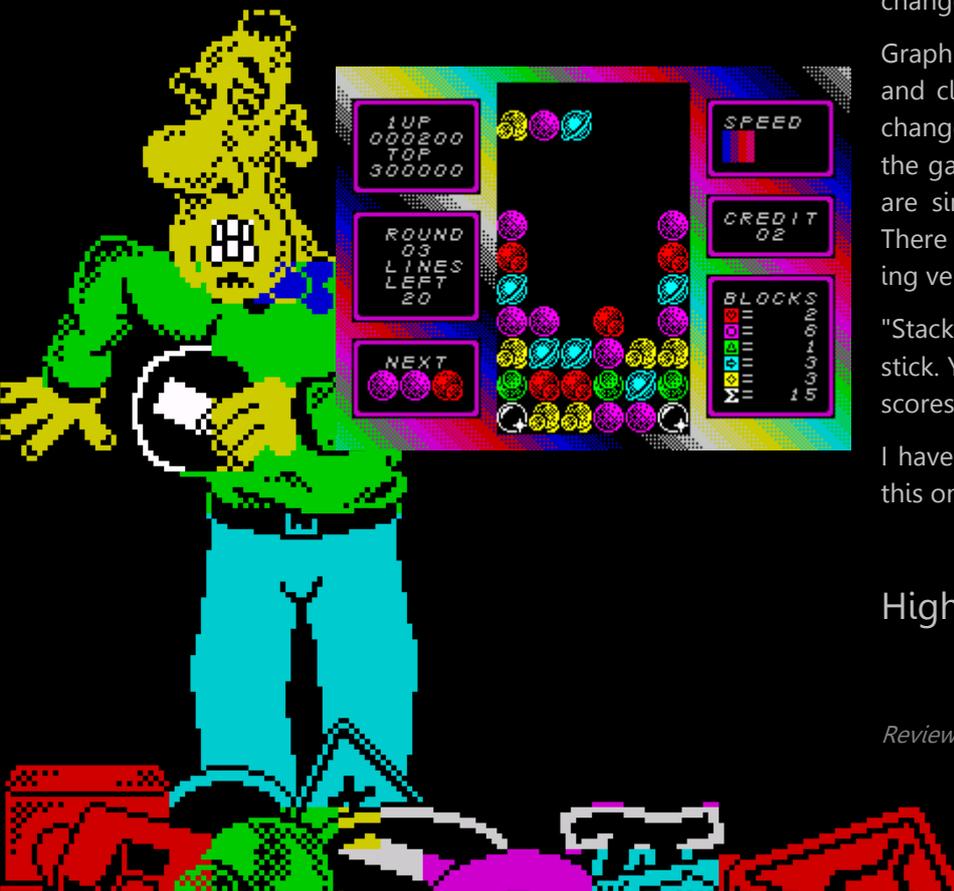
Elite Systems 1985

Commando in the arcade was never going to be an easy conversion for any home micro, especially the Spectrum having no hardware scrolling. Elite Software took on the challenge and produced a surprisingly good version.

For anyone not familiar with the game, you control a commando who has to fight his way across various landscapes, destroying enemy installations and killing anything that moves.

The game format is a vertically scrolling shooter utilising push scrolling, in that the screen only moves when you do, so you have the opportunity to stop in tight situations allowing you to dodge enemy fire and reposition yourself for a better angle of attack.

At your disposal is a simple machine gun, but you can pickup grenades along the way which come in useful for soldiers hiding behind rocks.

As you move up the screen, there are various things to keep you on your toes. Bunkers, motorcycles, trucks, bridges and trenches, all teeming with soldiers. Not to mention the masses of foot soldiers that continually home in on your position.

At the end of each level there is a large installation to take out that is done by first killing all the attacking soldiers. You then get a congratulatory message before moving on the next one.

Given the limited resources available, Elite have done a fine job of including most of the arcade features, and if you were not overly familiar with the game, then you probably wouldn't notice.

The main things missing are the helicopter that drops you off and picks you up after missions, texture on the landscape, a jet graphic on the runway and a large enemy building at the end of level 4.

Of these the most important for me is the land texture. Without it, there is only a limited feeling of movement and the enemy bunkers and other objects just seem to float down the screen.
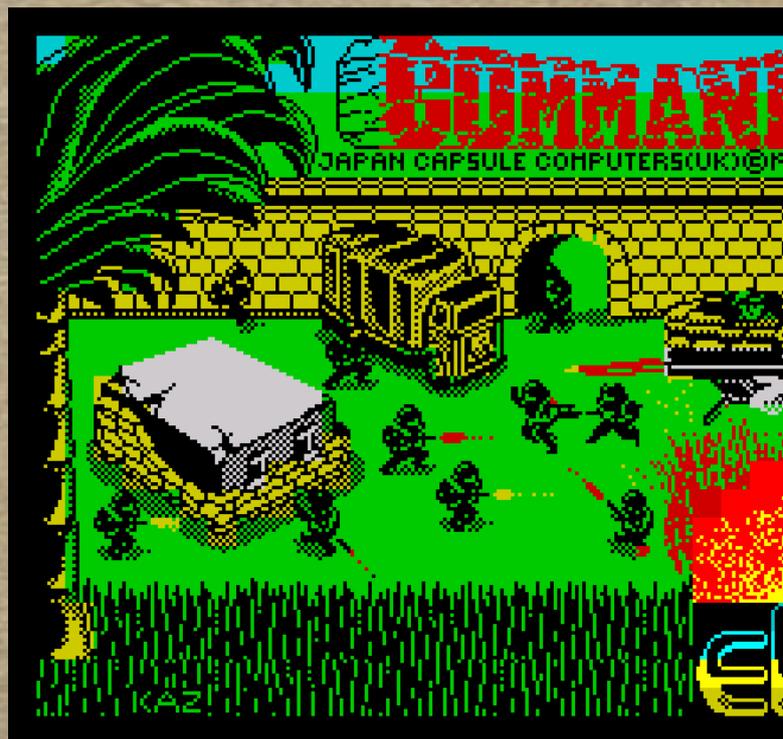
The graphics as you would expect on the Spectrum are not as colourful as the arcade, but they are a very good representation of them.

The enemy installations and scenery are well defined and are sized just right to give the player enough room to manoeuvre.

You also have to take into account the different aspect ratios. The arcade game is portrait like many other vertical shooters, and the Spectrum is more landscape.

The player and other soldiers are drawn well but don't have the arcade definition, not that you see this in the frantic shooting.

The animation is good, with soldiers flailing about as they hit and other effects from various moving targets.

Sound is used well and for 128k users, they get the full music track.

The music originated on the arcade machine and played during battle, but changed slightly for the end of level sequences.

Famously, the Commodore 64 game had a brilliant Rob Hubbard version, and it is this one that 128k users get.

It plays through the game, but does not change for the end of level battle.

Gameplay wise, it is quite close to the arcade, but I think a little harder based on my plays.

Considering how much is going at any given point, Elite have done a great job with this game and it proves very challenging.

This game has been denied from distribution and I am not sure if that is down to Elite or Capcom. Either way it is a real shame that this great game is not available to play officially.

Excellent conversion.

Arcade version on right.

SINCLAIR

VEGA

A NEW MACHINE FOR A NEW ERA

The Sinclair Vega, for those of you had do not know, is a modern, commercial take on the classic ZX Spectrum.

The idea was to produce a small handheld device that you could connect up to your television and just play all of those memorable games from your childhood. It could also help introduce the Spectrum to a whole new set of fans.

The project began on kickstarter and was very quickly funded. Backers got the units from the first batch of 1000, and sadly I missed out on those.

The Vega

The Vega itself is quite small measuring 13.5cm x 8.5cm and less than 2cm deep and sits in the hands quite well. It is styled like the original 48k rubber keyed model, but obviously has less buttons. The lack of a full keyboard has implications that we shall cover later.

On the left is a joypad, in the middle a reset button and on the right are 8 control buttons. Four large ones and four smaller ones. Styled like the rubber keys of the original, the four larger ones are used for selecting, firing and options 1 and 2. The smaller buttons are used for in-game options as well as SD card reading and mapped buttons for various games. On the back there is a slot for a Micro SD card so you can load games of your choosing.

A mass of cables exits the back of the unit ending in composite video, left and right audio and a USB plug used for power. Once plugged in, it starts up on its own and after a logo and the option to see the first 1000 backers, we get to see the list of games.

The unit is shipped with what it claims to be 1000 classic games but to be honest, some of them are a bit obscure.

You can move through the games using the up and down joypad buttons, or to move through the alphabet, using the left and right joypad buttons.

The Games

There are some older gems in there from Artic, DK Tronics, Psion and Ultimate Play The Game as well as some
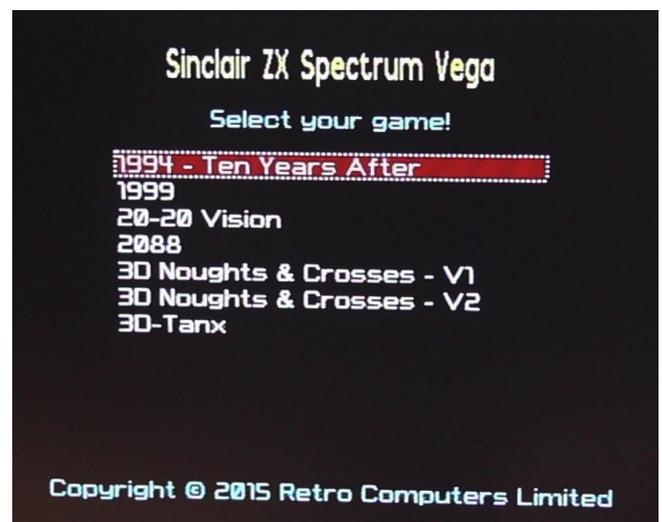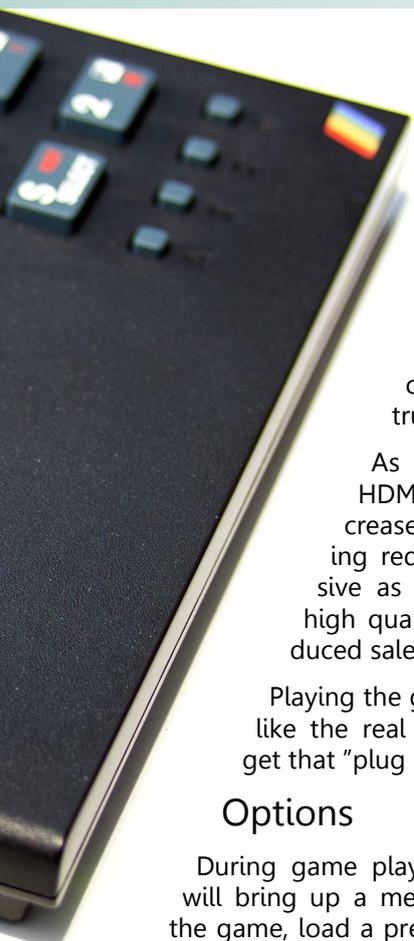
newer games from the last few years like Sunbucket, El Stompo and Sgt Helmet zero.

The list initially shows just the arcade games, to switch to the adventure list, you press the B button.

Pressing the select button will take you to the game where you can usually begin playing straight away. The games have been pre-set to use the joypad and I liked how some of them 'felt' using this control mechanism. Some games were actually easier to play, although the ones requiring four directions, for example Jetpac, took some practice to get right.

One major complaint from other owners is the video signal. Opting for the cheaper composite output rather than going for the higher quality HDMI, the sig-

nal is OK but not brilliant. On some games, for example Rex and Sabrewulf, the dot crawl was a bit bad. Maybe it was my TV, but it usually works fine with a real composite modded Spectrum.

As I understand it, using a HDMI output would have increased the price due to licensing requirements. Being expensive as it is, paying extra for a high quality picture may have reduced sales.

Playing the games is as expected, just like the real thing, and you certainly get that "plug and play" experience.

Options

During game play pressing the M button will bring up a menu allowing you to save the game, load a previous game or exit back. Saving and loading require an SD card, more about that later.

When viewing the menu, pressing the C button will bring in the control options. This acts as a virtual keyboard but also a control option. Be careful here, by mistake I changed this and the game stopped responding to the joypad until I reset it.

This virtual keyboard is also used when playing adventure games. Yes there are quite a few adventures loaded into the Vega, and it isn't particularly suited to them.
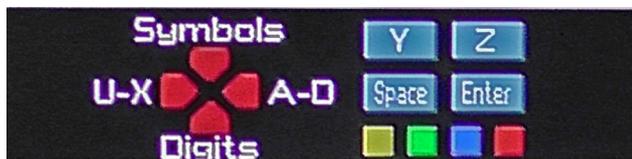
To type a command, you have to navigate the control menu. On the right is displayed what each of the 8 buttons represent, on the left are the options to change those representations using the joypad. A very long and time consuming process if you want to type out long sentences. I doubt this will get much use.

More Games

Once you get fed up of the 1000 games, you can load your own using a MicroSD card. Simple copy the games you want onto it, or place them in fold-

Adding more games with a micro SD card.

ers to make life easier, and insert the card into the slot on the back of the unit.

Power on and press the B key. The manual says the A key, but on my unit it was the B key. You are then asked which folder to scan, highlight the desired folder and press select to scan for any files the Vega recognises.

I copied up a Z80 and a TAP file for one of my games and both were recognised. Strangely, I then copied more game files to the card, re-scanned and it still only showed the two previous files. I tried this several times with Z80 and TAP files. I even tried re-naming the folder, and that didn't work either. Maybe it needs a firmware update.

When displaying your games, the Vega will automatically place them in alphabetical order, showing each letter at a time as it does on the in-built games.

A word of warning though, you have to remember the Vega has a limited number of keys to use for the games, and they currently cannot be manually mapped. This may be fine for shoot-em-ups or games that require joystick control or left, right and fire, but games that need specific keys will be impossible to play.

SINCLAIR VEGA

Firmware

Retro Computers have promised future firmware updates and a tool that will allow users to create map files for their games. This will hopefully mean adding and configuring your own games will become much easier, with users being able to share their custom mappings with other owners.

New firmware, when available, can be downloaded from Retro Computers website, placed on a micro SD card and used to upgrade the unit.

Conclusion

So what do I think of the Sinclair Vega?

It's nice little device that gives quick easy access to play Spectrum games without the hassle.

You can pick it up and take it to any room in the house, plug it in and be playing games within seconds. It was designed as a twitch game device, something to play games if you happen to have ten minutes spare. For this, it is ideal.

The price has been called into question by many users, and the device is expensive coming in at just over £100. Many point to other similar devices like the Sega Megadrive plug and Play device that costs around a third of the price. I agree that £100 is a bit steep considering you only get a composite signal and there are many arguments for and against it.

You are of course paying for convenience. A real Spectrum, with joystick and a mass storage device such as the divIDE would cost you more than £100,

and be a pain to set up every time you wanted a quick blast on Jetpac.

It still needs a bit more work in my opinion, especially around game controls and key mapping. When released there was no information about how to make your own key mappings. You can now though, get the details from Retro Computers website.

For straight plug and play gameplay, it's actually not bad. I quite enjoyed playing some of the old games using a more modern, joypad setup. It actually improved some games for me.

Picture quality can be a bit off, but then again so was the original, and sound is really good.

If you want a quick way to play Speccy games without faffing about with the real hardware, or have no option to run emulators on your television in the living room, then this is ideal.

Can I recommend one?

Yes if you want quick access to games as mentioned before.

No if you are a hardcore fan who loves to delve into emulators or real hardware, and for whom anything new should be buried in a deep hole and forgotten about.

Also remember not all games can be played with the limited number of buttons.

Your choice then.

The Vega can be purchased from the Retro Computers website.

www.retro-computers.co.uk.
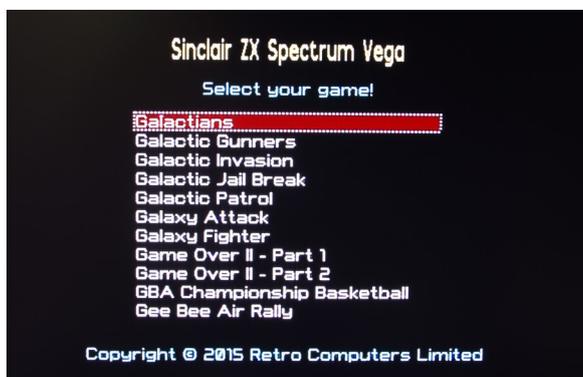
What They Got Right

- ♦ Look and feel.
  The unit looks like it belongs to the Sinclair family and is nice to hold.

- ♦ Twitch Gaming.
  It's ideal to pickup and have a quick blast without having to setup real hardware or emulator.

- ♦ Micro SD Card slot.
  Being able to add you own games is important.

- ♦ Ease of Use.
  The menu system is easy to use and responds well.

- ♦ Packaging.
  The box and packaging are brilliant.

What They Got Wrong

- ♦ Key Mappings.
  Initial release without a key mapper was a mistake. This has now been fixed and you can make your own key map files.

- ♦ Menu Music.
  It's nice the first time but please give us an option to turn it off or use our own.

- ♦ Cost.
  At £100 it is expensive for a plug and play device.

- ♦ Composite Video.
  Bad quality signal means some games look terrible.

- ♦ Virtual Keyboard.
  It is cumbersome to use, and why were adventure games even included?

- ♦ Limited Games Will Work.
  Only game that use joystick controls or a small amount of keys will work. The Vega just does not have enough.

- ♦ Connectivity.
  Not sure is this is a bad thing, but in general there is a

Canyon Warrior

Mastertronic 1989
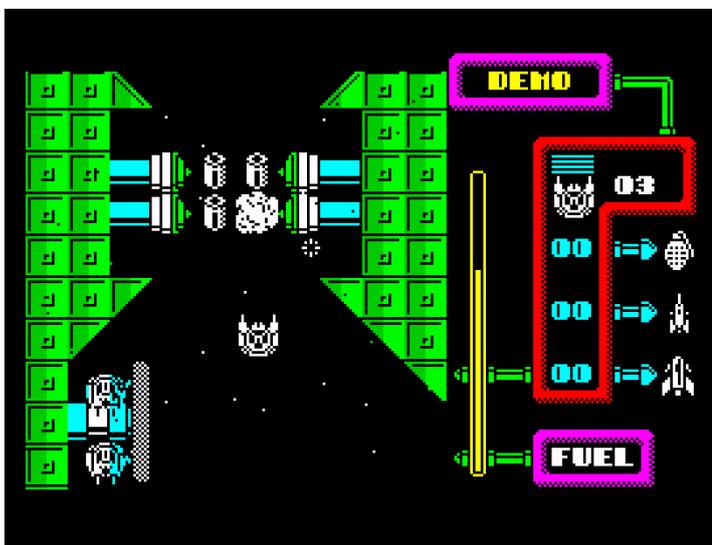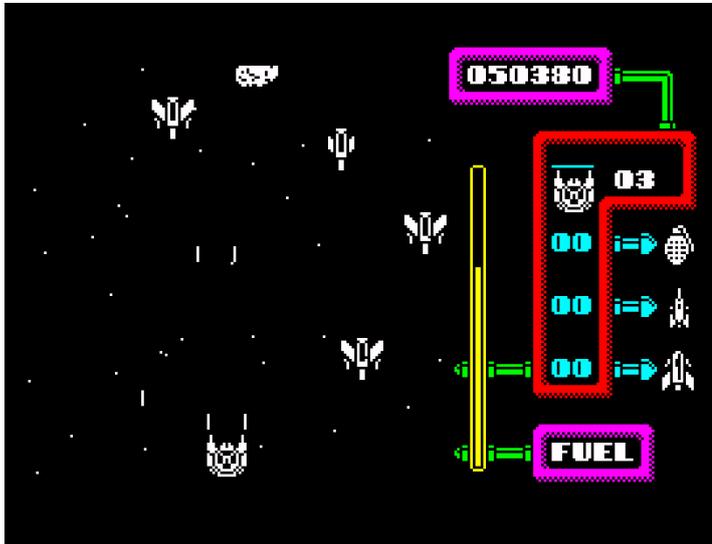
Canyon Warrior was a surprise game for me, having never seen or heard about it previously. From the title you can pretty much guess what it will be, and it turns out to be a fine vertical shoot em up.

There is a story, but who cares about text when you can dive in and start blasting aliens.

The Vega control pad really suits this game, and you quickly forget you are using it, and instead just enjoy the experience.

Starting in open space, the aliens swarm about in the usual way, but you soon find yourself into enemy installations. Here the colourful landscape scrolls smooth down, presenting you with various things to avoid and the obligatory wall mounted canons.

Like all good shooters there are power-ups to collect, but not having the instructions I was unsure what was safe to collect and how to implement anything I did collect.

I worked out that the Coke tins can be collected or shot, but watching the demo mode, that starts if you leave the controls alone for a while, it seems you can also collect missiles, smart bombs and other stuff.

The Coke tins provide more fuel to replenish your limited supply. This is displayed by a yellow meter on the right of the screen. Run out of fuel and it's game over.

The graphics are really nice and remind me of another shoot em up Xecutor. They are well drawn and scroll very smoothly.

The sound is well used with some impressive effects for various elements including firing, collecting and explosions. There is also some music that plays along, but this does slow down and speed up depending on how much there is on-screen.

Gameplay is great, and I'm glad I found this little gem. After a few attempts I got through the level one boss, which was tricky to destroy, maybe because I hade not figured out how to use the power-ups properly and just had lasers to beat it with.

As mentioned before, using the Vega was great for this game, really easy to get into and well worth selecting from the menu.

A Great Shooter.

Jock And The Time Rings

Atlantis Software 1985

One problem with the Vega is that the games do not come with any type of instructions, so if they are complex collect-em-up like Sabrewulf, then anyone new to the game will be totally lost. This is how I felt when I selected Jock And The Time Rings.

You begin by controlling what looks like an old jukebox, moving around a faintly Egyptian styled maze.

There are various other inhabitants too, that will knock over the jukebox, sorry, Jock on contact. There are also rings to collect. These change colour randomly, but again I had no idea why, or what the effect would be if I collected a particular colour.

The game is a flip screen affair, with the next room appearing as you move from one to the other. Sadly, the placement of the enemy sprites does cause instant death syndrome, so you have to be careful.

The graphics are very large, but are not particularly well drawn, in fact I don't know what most of the them are supposed to be. I assume they are some kind of Egyptian thing, but some are just boxes or jellyfish type sprites.

Things move smoothly and Jock has two speeds, normal and fast. This is needed to negotiate the enemies around the often tight corridors.

Sound is minimal, with just effects for collecting and dying.

There is a power reading that lowers as you move, so again guessing, I suspect there is some kind of limit imposed on completing what ever task you are meant to do.

Gameplay is slow, and consist of moving, timing things to miss enemy movement patterns, and collecting rings. That's it, nothing else and the pace of the game really does not help things.

All in all, a bit dull and repetitive.

Skip this one!
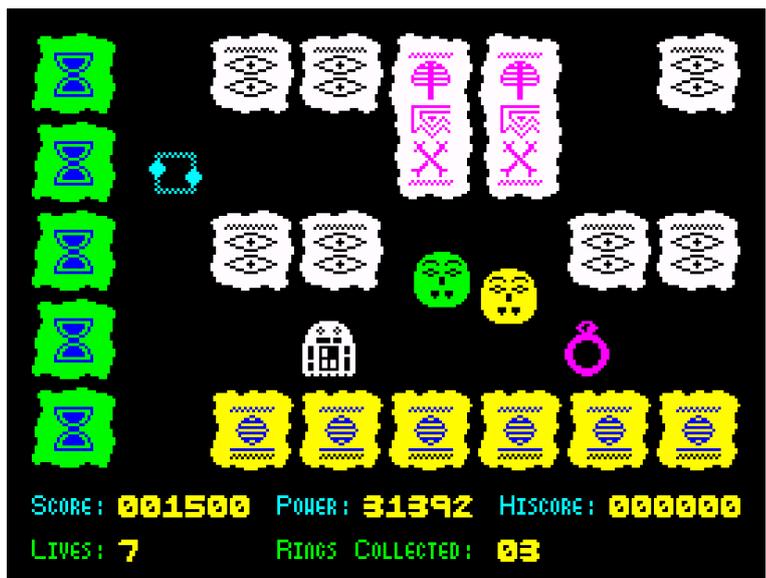
Impressive Spectrum Graphics

Not bad for a micro with only 15 colours*.

These and more can be viewed

On the ZX Art website.

http://zxart.ee

*8 standard + 7 bright