MINESHAFT MANIA

Manic Miner, written by Matthew Smith, has achieved cult status in the world of computer games. Its combination of quirky humour and off-beat graphics proved an instant winner, and its central character, Miner Willy, looks set to star in a range of follow-up games.

Manic Miner, available on the 48 Kbytes ZX Spectrum and the Commodore 64, is fundamentally a very simple game that is based on an earlier best-seller called Kong. The object of that game was to climb up ladders and branches, all the while avoiding obstacles, in an attempt to rescue the distressed damsel held captive by the Great Ape. In Manic Miner, you take the role of Miner Willy, a prospector from that well-known mining centre, Surbiton. Willy stumbles upon a forgotten mineshaft in which a lost civilisation mined gold and other valuables. Unfortunately, the mine's former inhabitants forgot to disable the Manic Mining Robots, thus making the job of treasure retrieval extremely difficult.

There are 20 caverns in the mine, and in each of these there are four keys that must be procured before Willy can unlock the door leading to the next stage. Each cave has a number of different ledges onto which Willy must jump in order to reach the keys. Some of these ledges are rather weak (presumably with age) and give way as Willy reaches them. The caves are heralded by phrases like 'Eugene's Lair' (a reference to rival whizz-kid programmer Eugene Evans of Imagine), 'Miner Willy Meets the King Beast', 'Attack of the Mutant Telephones' (another 'in-joke', this time directed at programmer Jeff Minter's obsession with mutant llamas) and 'Skylab Landing Bay'. All of the caverns are inhabited by numerous alien beings whose very touch is instant death. Even the plants are lethal.

You help Willy to avoid all these problems with three simple commands: 'Left', 'Right' and 'Jump'. This is part of the game's attraction — the simplicity of the controls means that there is no long learning period, and you may select the keys you feel most comfortable with.

Willy has three lives, and in each incarnation he has a limited supply of air, indicated by an on-screen meter. As the loss of the third life takes Willy back to Çave One, the game can get very frustrating, and it is hardly surprising that some people have managed to rig the action so that they can start at any chosen cavern.

The Commodore translation is almost an exact copy of the Spectrum version and fails to take advantage of the 64's more versatile sound commands and higher resolution graphics. The playing area on the 64 has been made considerably smaller than the available screen size, so that it exactly matches the Spectrum version.

But both versions are undeniably great fun to play. The pace of the game and the difficulty of the problems posed have been carefully worked out, making it extremely addictive. And Matthew Smith has now produced a sequel, Jet Set Willy, which is rapidly creating a cult of its own...

Manic Miner: For 48K Spectrum, £5.95
For Commodore 64, £7.95

Publishers: Software Projects, Bear Brand Complex, Allerton Road, Woolton, Liverpool, Merseyside L25 7SF

Author: Matthew Smith

Joysticks: Both versions

Format: Cassette

Going Underground
The weird and wonderful objects that are to be found in Manic Miner's underworld have contributed to the game's cult status. Seasoned players often boast about the more unusual things they discover in the caverns

Manic Miner on the Spectrum

Manic Miner on the Commodore 64