



CRASH & Spectrum Software History

NEWSFIELD



CRASH & Spectrum Software History

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ASSEMBLING THE BINDER

This *CRASH & Spectrum Software History* binder has seven strong plastic strings, one for each of the seven sections of text it contains.

To assemble it, first remove the two eight-page sections of the *CRASH Directory* from Issues 48 and 49, and the four 24-page sections of the *CRASH & Spectrum Software History* from Issues 45, 46 and 48. (Though the two years' worth of *CRASH History* in Issue 48 seems to be printed in the wrong order, when detached from the magazine the Histories of 1986 and 1987 will form separate sections to fit on separate binder strings.)

Then simply fix them and this specially-printed section in the binder in the following order, going from front to back:

string one	this section
string two	<i>CRASH History</i> for 1984 (from Issue 45)
string three	<i>CRASH History</i> for 1985 (from Issue 46)
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string five	<i>CRASH History</i> for 1987 (from Issue 48)
string six	<i>CRASH Directory Part One</i> (from Issue 48)
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(To fix each section, open it to its centre pages, lift the appropriate string slightly, and pass the paper beneath the string – carefully, so it doesn't rip! – till the string is in the centre and the section will fold.)

If you do not have all the issues which contain these sections, obtain them from the *CRASH Hypermarket*, which is advertised in each issue.



THE SPECTRUMS

ZX Spectrum

The Sinclair ZX Spectrum was born in April 1982. The original Spectrum came in two versions, with 16 and 48K RAMs; the price difference was a mere £70, and later a RAM pack was made available for the 16K machine at a fraction of that price difference.

Sinclair equipped the early machines with an internal speaker and a rubber keyboard, but these were regarded by the press as bad moves; some critics likened typing on the rubbery keyboard to pounding on dead flesh! Programming the thing was also fairly difficult for anyone not familiar with it, as all the BASIC commands were located on keys (BASIC keywords) and not typed in letter by letter – all well and good if the user wanted to execute very simple programs, but some of the less common BASIC commands required EXTEND mode and a quick hunt around the keyboard.

Despite all this and the supposedly poor keyboard (which is still in 1988 one of the best ways of playing games), by 1985 the Spectrum was the most successful home computer on the market.

Spectrum +

The Spectrum + was released in the autumn of 1984, just over two years after the first Spectrum appeared. It was an improvement on the original Speccy, but not the one that most Spectrum-owners were looking for. The 'dead flesh' keyboard had been replaced with a snazzy concave-keyed keyboard, the circuit board had been tidied up (dispensing with the dirty great heat-sink bar that had caused untold problems with the original Spectrum's glue), and the lowline body was replaced with a relatively bulky plastic case.

These changes made the new Spectrum + look more like an oversized chocolate bar than an enhanced computer. And the first few +s to arrive had dubious keyboards – if you turned CRASH's over and thumped its underside all the keys fell out!

Spectrum 128K

The improvement that owners of the original Spectrum were looking for finally arrived in March 1986. The Spectrum 128K looked much the same as the Spectrum + but it had decent sound created by a synthesizer chip (at long last) and heard through the TV speaker, a 48K mode which ran everything produced for the old 48K Spectrums, a 128K mode with enhanced BASIC and no BASIC keywords (so you had to type every command in letter by letter), and lots of user ports to connect the 128 to monitors, serial printers, a calculator keypad and MIDI keyboards. But still there was no joystick port . . .

Spectrum +2

In April 1986, just a month after the launch of the Spectrum 128, Alan Sugar's giant company Amstrad bought the rights to Sir Clive Sinclair's Spectrums. Sugar promised a new Spectrum with a cassette deck 'glued on', and five months later at the ninth PCW Show that very machine appeared.

The Spectrum +2 was a great improvement on the 128. At last the machine was housed in a nice-looking case with a proper keyboard (one you could actually type on!), and there were two joystick ports, though they weren't actually compatible with any joystick on the market except Amstrad's own. But within days there were plans to make an interface which could link the +2 with any standard joystick.

The glued-on tape drive was well and truly glued on but there were so many problems with its substandard components that Amstrad has since recalled and overhauled many +2s.

Spectrum +3

In September 1987 the Spectrum +3 went beyond the idea of the glued-on tape drive – this time the marketed feature was a built-in disk drive. Games loaded from the three-inch disks much faster than from tape, of course, but months after the machine's debut much software was still appearing only on tape. (Though a tape lead wasn't provided with the +3, it could also load tape software for the price of that lead.)

And the new machine's high price – it started at £249, later dropping to £199 – invited comparison with the more powerful 16-bit Atari ST.

There were also a few technical faults, one of the most notable being the fuzzy sound.

LLOYD MANGRAM'S

LOOKBACK - 1983

1 1983 was an astoundingly good year for the ZX Spectrum. We are told that there are now well over half a million units in our homes, and that figure must have taken a leap upwards before your Christmas turkey got carved. Success for the Spectrum has had a lot to do with its price, but a computer is only as good as its software, and the Spectrum has been well served throughout 1983.

The start of a new year is traditionally a time to take stock, so let's take a brief look back.

Barely established on the market this time last year, there were only a handful of companies producing software for Sir Clive's new colour Spectrum, among them, of course, Sinclair itself. It is quite astonishing to see just how many software producers have appeared during the last ten months to tempt us with games for the Spectrum. Looking through my December 1981 copy of *Computer & Video Games* (yes, they were going back then) I noted that a company in Liverpool were offering a *Star Trek* game for the ZX81 - they were called **Bug Byte**. **Silversoft** were in the same issue with another ZX81 game of, oddly enough, *Star Trek*. I also spotted a small ad in the classified section for **Volcanic Dungeon** (make cheques payable to R Carnell), but of the big names with whom we have recently become so familiar, there was no sign, and the mag was filled with details of Atari, Intelevison and arcade news.

By April 82 Silversoft are indulging in much bigger ads with more ZX81 games available, and other names have appeared. The end of the month will see the third ZX Microfair in London and the new companies are taking advantage. **DK'Tronics**, **Kayde**, a new outfit calling themselves **Micro Gen Quality Products**, Bug Byte have double-page ads, **C-Tech** has a full page, and a lorry profile bearing the letters RTIC announces the arrival of **Artic** on the scene. Other names in the issue which have since become familiar are **Abacus**, **A'n'F Software** (for the Acorn Atom though), **Macronics**, **Hewson Consultants**, **Addictive Games** with a program called *Football Manager* (which goes to show how long a game can last!) and last but most interestingly a small ad from a company claiming to have the 'finest machine code fast moving graphics arcade games available' - **Quicksilva**.

A year later and it's April 83. The Spectrum is well on its way to becoming the top-selling personal computer and the amazing software revolution is just beginning. Opening my April issue of *C&VG* I first notice a blasting full-page ad for *The Hobbit* and *Penetrator* from **Melbourne House**, two games that have steadily remained in the top-selling charts for all year. A spokesperson for Melbourne told me at The *Personal Computer World Show* that they were hoping *The Hobbit* would die off soon, but it shows no sign of doing so. (I'm sure they're pleased really.)

A quick flip through the issue reveals a few names who at the time were not doing any Spectrum games, like **Anirog** and **Rabbit**, but **Softek** has appeared and **Bug Byte** are now in full glowing colour and advertising *Spectres*, **DK'Tronics** already have *3D Tanx* out and the bully from **Ritimba** is *Dictator*, **Romik** have a full page, *New Generation*, **R&R** and *Micromania* are visible, **M C Lothlorien** is wargaming, **Martech** is buzzing, and an exciting new company has splashed out on no less than five colour pages to inform us that **THE INVASION HAS BEGUN!** At the time they coined the phrase **Imagine** probably had little idea of just how right they were. So much seem to have happened between then and now that you could be forgiven for thinking that April was really years ago.

Standing in the crowded aisles of The *PCW Show* at the Barbican in September I had to marvel at the progress Spectrum software had made, at the quantity and the quality of the games available. It is difficult to pick out highlights from the year, and inevitably unfair on those who get left out, but at the risk of being shouted down I'll have a go.

Certainly the early high spot was the success of *The Hobbit* and *Penetrator*. *The Hobbit* was described by one critic at the time as 'a game by which future games will be judged', and it sets the scene for so many go-west-young-man adventures which were to follow shortly. *Penetrator* is still reckoned by many to be the finest *Scramble* game of the lot, although comparing its graphics to present-day standards, it looks pretty primitive. At the time, however, I remember thinking that if you could do this at home then the arcades must be dead.

Both these programs stood out at the time against the flurry of activity that took place in the invading galaxian asteroid belt. Almost everyone on the newly emerging companies has had a go at these favourite arcade

games, many programs being updated versions of earlier ZX81 games. **Imagine's** *Arcadia* comes instantly to mind as one of the better galaxian-style games, **Quicksilva's** *Space Intruders* is also worth a mention, **Softek's** *Firebirds* was one of the better *Phoenix* types, and I always had a sneaky liking for **Mikrogen's** quaint *Space Zombies* with its colourful trainload of aliens buzzing erratically around the sky. No-one seems to have done all too well with asteroidal games however (though they probably sold like hot rocks). All the versions suffer from poor graphics, uninteresting colour and miscalculated attack speeds. Of the type my vote goes to **Abacus** with *Sentinel*, a game with enough complexity to make it exciting to play and watch.

Despite this concentration on the obvious, spring resulted in a number of original games which indicated a serious attitude to the abilities of the Spectrum. **Quicksilva's** *Timegate* by John Hollis gave a new lease of life to the *Star Trek* theme and introduced us to the highly realistic moving star backgrounds. From the same company Ian Andrew's *Mined-Out* deserves a special mention for its nail-biting qualities and the fact that it gave Quicksilva's copywriters the opportunity to come up with the most ludicrously obscure blurb ever written for a game. (Something they've hardly looked back on either.) At the same time **Imagine** were busy introducing us to *Schizoids* which relieved us of the responsibility of zapping aliens and allowed us to bulldoze them to death instead. The game was well received by critics, but I found it unplayable. They were to make up for that shortly by bringing out *Molar Maul* and *Ah Diddums*, certainly two among the most original games to emerge this year.

Leaving the asteroid belt behind and returning to Earth - well almost - **Pision's** *Flight Simulation* proved that computer games didn't have to be all zap and **Hewson's** *Nightflite* provided a creditable alternative for 16K-users as well. Of course, as spring turned to summer you could have turned the nose of your aircraft round to buzz the Empire State Building, where another favourite was turning his back on the Vics, Orics and Beebs of this world to haunt Spectrum owners. Kong games may have been a rave in the arcades but some early Spectrum versions turned out less than wonderful. **Blaby's** *Killer Kong* and **Ocean's** *Kong* were among the best, but the Blaby version has the most exciting sound. Away from the heady heights of New York, *Slippery Sid* from **Silversoft** and *Bozy Boa* from **CDS** were slithering around an English Country Garden eating frogs and snails and avoiding toads and flowers whilst their nastier cousins, the centipedes, were attacking mankind in alarming quantities. Just about everyone had a supermegaspacetrupede on the rampage, and I don't think we've seen the last of them yet. Among the better versions were **Rabbit's** recent *Centropods* and Silversoft's much older *Cyber Rats* (okay, so a rat ain't a centipede, but what's a few hundred legs between friends?). **Softek**, **C-Tech**, **Hewson**, **DK'Tronics**, **Ocean**, **Macronics**, **CDS**, **R&R** and **Protek** to name a few, all released centipede monsters upon us during the year.

Such a host of creepy-crawlies doubtless explains why the frog population also increased drastically. My favourite was **DJL's** version, *Froggy*, with its cute graphics and abominably smug frogs (those that didn't get smugged, that is).

Oddest Frogger Of The Year award goes to **Virgin Games** for their disappointing *Yomp*, which swapped paras for hoppers and then mined them-out once they were across the road.

Leaping neatly from frogspawn to dots, the dreaded pacmania showed little signs of dying out during the year. I must say that I find it difficult to distinguish between the numerous versions, all of which have the usual features and work pretty much as well as another. Perhaps the silliest was **Lasersound's** *Egg Fram* with its easily outwitted hens. If clearing the screen is the object of ghost-gobbling games, covering it with colour is the aim of painters. There were quite a few of those suddenly sprang up midyear, somewhat more variable in quality than their *Pacman* cousins. **CDS** promised a *3D Painter* that turned out very one-dimensional, **Romik** gave us the most complicated and interesting with *Colour Clash*. **A'n'F** came out with the most classic, simply called *Painter*, but my best for all round goes to **Blaby** and their *High Rise Harry*. **Quicksilva/Salamander's** *Traxx*, just released, is also an interesting and frustrating variation on the theme.

Of the host of maze and maze-oriented games it is hard to pick out any for special mention. I liked *Maze Death Race* by **PSS**, **Sunshine Book's** *Androids*, **Abersoft's** *Wizard's Warriors*, and for its delightful graphics combined with hyperpanic quality, **New Generation's** *Escape*. The monsters in this last could easily have been designed by Walt Disney himself. Most frustrating in the worst sense was *ETX* by **Abbex**, though nice to hear him talking. On the adventure scene, I have to confess that I tend to lose patience with the interminable waiting for responses so I'm inclined to prefer programs that are good in this respect. One which wasn't so quick but still won me over was **Mikrogen's** *Mad Martha*, almost a verbal maze game and perhaps the most original of the lot this year. I have heard some players complaining about the arcade inserts which prevent you from getting on with the game proper, so they may not have liked **Rushton's** quirky *Spectrum Safari* with its university-educated wildlife and greedy natives, but I did. Apart from *The Hobbit*, I liked **Derek Brewster's** *Velnor's Lair*, now marketed by **Quicksilva**, because of its sense of humour. **Quicksilva** can also boast the fastest response times yet in *Smuggler's Cove*, but the game suffers from being ridiculously hard to get through.

Arcadventures make an appearance too. **Quicksilva's** *Xadom* and **Phipps Associates's** *Black Planet* deserve a mention, but **Crystal's** *Halls Of The Things* was one of the most difficult, and their do-it-yourself adventure game *Dungeon Master* proved too daunting for me though I'm sure it's triff really.

On a more strategical note we saw **CCS** with *Dallas* and **Corn Cropper** games with perhaps a little too much of the random to really imitate life. *Dictator* from **DK'Tronics** did well, and of course the ubiquitous **Richard**

Shepherd gave us *Transylvanian Tower*, *Everest Ascent* and now *Devils Of The Deep* and *Invincible Island*. I'm afraid I found *Superspy* a little tediously mysterious. *Lothlorien*'s wargames came on strongly after a weak start with rather paltry updates of ZX81 games, but the later *Johnny Reb* and *Redwood* certainly gave value for money.

Coping with airliners that had grown tired of flying seemed popular too. Following on from Psion's *Flight Simulation*, the Scottish company **Protek** gave us *Airliner*, where we landed a BAC 1-11 at Edinburgh – at least that was the idea, but perhaps my talents were more intended for the ground, so I followed **Hewson**'s advice and gave up flying for *Heathrow*, *Air Traffic Control*, an amazing program that packed everything into 16K. Protek too abandon the air in their newest venture, as you take to your periscope in *Hunter Killer*, a submarine game which could well be the first ever two-handed Spectrum game on the market.

Sports simulation programs have proliferated and even been rewarding. **Addictive**'s long-lived *Football Manager* with its edited 'game highlights' and strategy overtones is a definite winner. **Watson** has updated his *Star Soccer*, **CRL** gave us *Test Match* and *Derby Day*, but probably the oddest game was *Championship Darts* from **Shadow**, actually an effective little program, but darts is one of those games that needs the effort of the throw to work. Sitting at home behind your Spectrum keyboard doesn't seem right. It's funny how companies producing software all seem to get the same idea at the same time, and **CDS** is challenging Bug Byte's market leadership with *Pool*, while a brand new company called **Abrasco** also brought out a version in time for The PCW Show. In fact I think all three are better than the pub/arade versions, but the baize could do with mowing as the balls stop so suddenly.

Beyond the obvious, we've been presented with some very original games, but no company has made such an auspicious start as **Ultimate** who put the Zouch into Ashby and zest into the Spectrum with *Jetpac*, *Pssst*, *Cookie* and *Tranz Am*, four excellent and playable games that astonished everyone by how much they managed to pack into 16K. Ultimate are set for the battle of the best, but their work is cut out. The latter part of the year has seen all the old favourites reasserting their position. **Bug Byte**, well ahead at the beginning of the year, slipped and failed to bring out many Spectrum games, something which they have definitely put right with the incredible *Manic Miner*. **Imagine** have maintained their lead, and proved to be among the most original games' producers. Design and packaging delays turned *Zzoom* into the most awaited game of the year.

We've seen Spectrum Games turn into **Ocean** and Quest into **Fantasy**. **JK Greye** makes a comeback from the long-distant past and **Kayde** vanished without trace despite all the colour ads. **Rabbit** and **Anirog** have seen potential in the Spectrum and turned out half a dozen games in the past two months; **Romik**'s 'honesty's the best' policy seems to have kept them well ahead too, and **Psion/Sinclair** are in a strong position. We saw the biggest ever launch hype with **Virgin Games** who limped onto the market in the summer with some of the worst games ever; and 3-D has been the most misused word in the business although **Artic**'s *3D Combat Zone* was wonderful and watch out for **Quicksilver**'s *Ant Attack*.

At this year's PCW Show it was gratifying to see how games software has asserted itself in what has traditionally been a business show, and how much of it was for the Spectrum, today there are well over 80. Whichever of them does well next year, we can be pretty sure that Spectrum-owners are going to benefit by having some of the best games software around.

LOOKBACK – 1984

I T SEEMS amazing that a year has gone by since I was last handed the job of writing an article which looked at the happenings of a past year, for what was then an embryonic magazine with the peculiar name of CRASH. In looking back, I'm tempted to say 1984 was probably the year of CRASH, but I can't really concern myself entirely with this publication, as it's the software I'm supposed to deal with here! One thing I will say is that it has been a hectic and eventful year for CRASH, with the magazine going from strength to strength, often threatening to outstrip the resources of the small team that puts it together, but it's been fun. Actually, I'm at a slight disadvantage, because my ever-ready CRASH Binder is missing Issue One as someone nicked my copy before the binders came along, and then the issue sold out entirely! Anyway, here goes...

SPOTTING trends and commenting on them with hindsight is the main forte of journalists, possibly because it gives us a feeling of superiority linked to a sense that 'we were not responsible'. On the other hand, trend-spotting is not only fun, it can also be truly informative. If I had to sum up 1984 very quickly I

would point to the rise of the adventure, the death of the arcade shoot-'em-up, the software slump, the dramatic improvement in software and programming, the rise of the TV/film/game linkup and the mingling of arcade with adventure.

The year is going out, significantly, the way it came in. **Ultimate** gave us *Atic Atac* and pointed the way to arcade adventures, a trend they have pursued relentlessly through a mere handful of four games to the excellence of *Knight Lore*. Ultimate have steadfastly refused to talk to the computer press, never appear at shows, have avoided all software house linkups that seem to have been the way of life through 84, and have released very little, but very select, product. Obviously the public love it.

Atic Atac was pointing the way towards a new concept in arcade games, and suggested that arcade players didn't just want mindless zap games. Other software houses were to provide more such entertainment, but looking at the reviews in the March issue (many of games which appeared at the end of January and during February), there wasn't much sign of it yet. **Imagine** seemed to be trying with *Alchemist*, but in truth the game was a lot of hot air and *Stonkers* kept crashing, though it did prove that a better-looking wargame was a distinct possibility.

Throughout 84, an obvious trend from 83 is apparent. In 83 everyone was copying arcade originals, in 84 they started copying each other, or is it just synchronicity at work? The March issue carried reviews for **Ocean**'s *Hunchback* (a licensed arcade copy) and **Mr. Micro**'s *Punchy*. Generally we preferred the latter, although sales of *Hunchback* indicated disagreement there. I'll call this the 'self-copy' trend, as it crops up again and again.

If arcade copies were on the wane, arcade hi-scoring games were not. **A&F** had their enduringly popular *Chuckie Egg* out, and **Fantasy** were climbing the charts with *Doomsday Castle* featuring superhero **Ziggy** who, appropriately enough, has emerged again for the end of the year in *Backpackers Guide To The Universe (Part I)*. *Chuckie Egg* has gone into the annals of history along with *Lunar Jetman* as one of the ace hi-score games. **Bug Byte** modestly released *The Birds And The Bees* on which Matthew Smith had worked and followed it up with the much better *Antics* on which Matthew Smith did not work. But Matthew's name was on everyone's lips with the news that *Manic Miner*, the follow-up to *Jet Set Willy*, was imminent. It wasn't though. Two outstanding programs also appeared then, *Fighter Pilot* from **Digital Integration** and *Wheelie* from **Microsphere**. The former showed just how far the Spectrum could go (it's gone further still) and how exciting a simulation could be, the latter was just a damned good, original game with super graphics. Add to this the smart 3-D graphics of *Android 2* by **Vortex**, and at times *Space Invaders* never looked further away. Not so,

however, 84 has produced some real crack games too.

Quite a few cracks appeared in a self-copy battle to be the first with a real *Pole Position* game. Ones that come to mind are *Grand Prix Driver*, **Britannia**, a bit unplayable but novel graphics; *Speed Duel* from **DK'Tronics**, completely unplayable and rather boring graphics; **Psion**'s excellent *Chequered Flag*, which differed from the others by being more of a simulation; there was the scandal over rip-offs from **Spirit Software** and their steering-wheel version called *Formula One*, which when it finally turned up was a very damp squib indeed; **Activision** recently had a go with the novel *Enduro*; the best was probably **Micromega**'s great *Full Throttle*; and last, not entirely least, the one that spawned the whole thing, **Atarisoft** have managed to limp out with *Pole Position*.

Back to the earlier months. **Durell** joined another self-copy with *Scuba Dive*, abandoning outer space for what scientists like to call inner space. The underwater theme was also picked up by **Bug Byte** in *Aquarius*, which wasn't so good, by **Richard Shepherd** in the awful *Devils Of The Deep* and later by **CRL** in their lightweight but fun *Glug-Glug*. Of all, *Scuba Dive* was the best and most playable.

Moving on a month, the crop of the cracks was improving as the Christmas 83 boom receded into the slough of despond. **CRL** offered two completely pathetic games, *Caveman* and *Lunar Lander*. Music publisher **K-Tel** graced us with abominations called 'double-siders' and proved that music for pleasure is one thing but MFP also stands for More Failed Programs. It's a sign of the times that K-Tel took stock during the year, gave themselves a new marketing image in **Front Runner** and have just released the excellent *Boulder Dash*, which is so good it absolves them of their earlier horrors. March and April was also the time when that other publisher of music **Virgin**, who like K-Tel had never found a game worthy of the name, brought out *Dr. Franky* and showed there was hope for them. They too have improved their position enormously, releasing the odd but good *Strangeloop* a couple of months back.

Digital Integration proved that *Fighter Pilot* wasn't a flash in the pan by releasing *Night Gunner*, more a game than a simulation, and **Artic** pulled themselves together on the arcade front with *Bear Bover*. The uneven **R&R** started another self-copy theme in helicopters with *Chopper X-1*, a rather second-rate game which paved the way for **Richard Wilcox** and *Blue Thunder*. Loath to leave a flying idea, the altered Wilcox as **Elite** is about to release *Airwolf*, based on the current telly series. Just recently **Durell** have continued the theme with their excellent simulation/strategy game *Combat Lynx*, and we still await **Digital Integration**'s somewhat belated game based on a helicopter.

Going on to the May issue we were treated to a real mix of good and bad. Ignoring the bad, April/

May saw the release of some excellent programs, among them Derek Brewster's amazing *Code Name Mat* released by **Micromega**. 84 could well be called the Year Of Micromega, having started off well with the 3-D *Deathchase*, **CNM** added to their lustre, *Full Throttle* polished it to a shine and the last three releases *Braxx Bluff*, *Kentilla* and *Jasper* have shown a willingness to go for the unusual and the best. **Hewson Consultants** also went from strength to strength, releasing the third in Steve Turner's Seiddab trilogy, *3D Lunattack*. The experience gained with these games finally led to Steve turning in the advanced 3-D adventure *Legend Of Avalon*.

We had been treated to a special preview of **Software Projects**'s monster release *Jet Set Willy* and took screenshots of it which later caused much confusion because they didn't match with the actually released game. One writer even accused us of faking as the preview shots showed screens all with capital letters for the undertitles on some and a mixture of capitals and lower case on others, Matthew Smith would never do this we were told. But he did. There's no doubt that the release of *JSW* was the biggest event for ages. It wasn't long, however, before the ace hackers started complaining something was wrong with the program, and so it seemed. But the attic bug doesn't seem to have put anyone seriously off enjoying the most torn apart game in history. You could almost say that *Jet Set Willy* was poked to death.

It was also the month that a new company called **Gargoyle Games** delighted us with an old-fashioned shoot-'em-up with modern 3-D graphics called *Ad Astra*. We were all rather pleased with ourselves at CRASH because we were the first to spot the game and push it. Our faith has not been misplaced as Gargoyle's latest mammoth graphic adventure *Tir Na Nog* proves.

Insignificant at the time, was a game called *Space Station Zebra*, which we didn't think much of, from another new company calling themselves **Beyond Software**. Little were we to know (as they say in good adventure stories...)

After a long pause **Imagine** threw out the disappointing *Pedro* and prepared to nose dive into bankruptcy. Summer was approaching.

The June issue looked a bit thin on good games, the cracks predominating. **Hewson's** *Fantasia* **Diamond** gave adventurers a lot to think about, as did the second in **Incentive's** *Ket Trilogy* - *Temple Of Vran*. Otherwise the only bright light really was **Beyond's** *Psytron*, a game which has led many into argument over its merits. We liked it a lot. At the launch in London, we also got to see a glimpse of a new type of adventure/strategy wargame called *Lords Of Midnight*.

June/July brought the summer slump into brighter focus - hardly anything to report, but wait! **Ultimate** to the rescue! *Sabre Wulf* caused controversy over the almost doubling in price, but few

argued with the game's graphics. We liked **Ocean's** *Moon Alert*, also a subject of a self-copy theme, with the **Visions** *Moon Buggy* and **Anirotg's** game of the same name all out. **Rabbit** had also promised a Spectrum version of their C64 hit on the theme called *Troopa Truck*, but the company's demise quashed that.

Sinclair gave us a sudden spate of releases, mostly average to mediocre with the exception of the excellent *Stop The Express*, and **Imagine** continued down the slippery slope with the execrable *Cosmic Cruiser*. **Melbourne House**, now very late with the long-awaited *Sherlock*, diverted our attention from their problems with Philip Mitchell's graphic entertainment *Mugsy*, while **Silversoft**, very quiet of late, slipped out with the highly original *Worse Things Happen At Sea*. *Kosmic Kanga*, and the month saw another brand new software house emerge with the capacity for fine programming - **Realtime** with their definitive *Battlezone*-type game *3D Tank Duel*. Once again the CRASH team felt they were helping to create a software house, by pushing something they believed in, and once again the faith was not misplaced as Realtime worked on their latest release, *Starstrike*, now out.

July/August proved to be about as dead as it could get, with only a furious shoot-'em-up from **Creative Sparks** to enliven proceedings. *Black Hawk* was curiously old-fashioned, but fun to play. For adventurers the long-awaited release of *The Hulk* proved that graphics make adventures look good, but that more is sometimes required to make them good to play. **CRL** take the credit for being the first software house out with the self-copy theme of the year - the Olympics. Their aptly named *Olympics* had been a gross disappointment, and **Automata's** *Olympimania* was a usual load of anarchic fun, but **Database**, publishers of *Micro User*, were the first with a serious treatment in *Micro Olympics*. **Buffer** also did a program, and **Melbourne House** have continued the theme with *Sports Hero* as have **Hill MacGibbon** with *Run For Gold* (reviewed in the next issue), but the best-liked is from **Ocean** with *Daley Thompson's Decathlon*.

Just to prove that although Spectrum games seemed to be improving in technique all the while a real crack could get through, **Mastertronic** got their adventure for all time reviewed after a reader wrote in saying we hadn't done it, and why not as it was fab. *Voyage Into The Unknown* got, I think, the lowest rating ever from CRASH at that time. It was only beaten by **Elephant's** stupendously bad *Kosmik Pirate*.

With September/October, things looked as though they should brighten up with the pre-Christmas rush to look forward to. And in some respects things did. The October issue saw **Micromega** out with *Braxx Bluff* and *Kentilla* by Derek Brewster; **Frank N. Stein** from **PSS**, which proved to be quite a good platform game, while **Silversoft** were busy

proving that old themes could be reworked to provide a tight new game in *Hyperaction*.

Sherlock finally arrived, one year late and catching trains from the wrong station, and a new company called **Gremlin Graphics** introduced us to the dusty wanderings of *Monty Mole*, possibly the first game to really look like it could steal the laurels from the as-much-maligned-as-hacked-and-played *Jet Set Willy*. **CRL** started the trend of producing the game of the film by releasing the slightly disappointing *Terrahawks*, which was nevertheless a better experiment than their game of the music version of *War Of The Worlds*. The competition for securing licences from Hollywood and Shepherds Bush is hotting up with *Ocean* and *Elite* fighting over *Airwolf* (*Elite* won this one), **CRL** releasing the game of megahit *Magic Roundabout*, **Activision** scooping on the super hit film *Ghostbusters*, **DK'Tronics** securing *Minder* and *Popeye*, and now *Elite* have *Fall Guy* out and so on.

Which more or less bring us up to date, as the Christmas software fights it out to be top of the chart. Amongst the recent releases I have a few personal favourites that I would like to see do well, and oddly one of those is *Deus Ex Machina* from **Automata**. I think it's overpriced, but I can see that it must have cost quite a bit to produce. I think **Micromega's** *Jasper* is very good, but I fear it will be, or already has been, overshadowed by games like *Jet Set Willy* and *Monty Mole*. It's different in many respects, however, and deserves to do well. Another favourite is the remarkable *Skool Daze* from **Microsphere**, which I like because it is realistic, anarchistic, and puts school where it belongs - in perspective. Most of my other current faves have already been mentioned in passing.

Company trends over this year have been all over the place. We have witnessed the

disappearance of *Imagine*, *Rabbit* and *Carnell* to name some of the bigger ones. *Rabbit*, like *Imagine*, seemed in retrospect to survive more on hype than product, although *Rabbit's* hype was aimed more at the trade than the public, which was their huge mistake - they just couldn't see that no-one wanted the rubbish they produced for most of the time. We have also seen big business move in with names like *Thorn EMI* (*Creative Sparks*) who, like *Virgin* and *K-Tel*, made a reassessment of what they were doing earlier this year. Now *Busby* has a rival in *British Telecom's* *Firebird*; the overweight and sluggish *Atari* have tried hard to break in with overpriced versions of their arcade originals, but it all seems to be a case of too little too late.

A software house from the earliest days who went quiet during the year is **Quicksilver**. Their *Fred* and *Snowman* made some impact but not as much as the earlier *Ant Attack* or *Bugaboo*. Concentrating rather more on conversions to the C64, they were bought out by *Argus Press* in the middle of the year, and I can't help wondering whether the loss of independence to a corporate giant won't lead to a greater sense of apathy. I hope not. The *Ant Attack* follow-up from *Sandy White*, *Zombie Zombie* was, I thought, a bit of a disappointment.

One of the biggest successes has to be **Ocean**, who started out as **Spectrum Software** but through clever marketing policies, linking themselves to a distributor, buying in American software for conversion and careful control of product, have made themselves the true successors to the image *Imagine* tried to create. As if to seal that image, *Ocean* recently acquired the *Imagine* title. But what has also been most encouraging is that throughout 84, new and often small software houses have emerged, fighting hard and with often excellent product. They still form the backbone of this business and help make it all worthwhile.

LOOKBACK - 1985

LAST YEAR I was able to spot some trends - the death of the arcade shoot-'em-up, the software slump, the dramatic improvement in software programming and the rise of the TV/film/game linkup.

During 85 I think it would be fair to say that the arcade shoot-'em-up made a significant comeback, the software slump continued with many big and small companies vanishing, software programming techniques continued to improve and the TV/film/game tie-ins added books and commercial enterprise endorsements to become the most important aspect in games marketing. I'll be looking at all these trends as they appear month by month, starting with the 84/85 Christmas issue, which was really our January 85 edition.

JANUARY

IT'S becoming a tradition that the year should begin with the end, ie

Ultimately. Play The Game dashed out with the dual release of *Underwilde* and *Knight Lore*. It was a bit 'controversial' in the sense that the high price tag remained and there were those who said *Underwilde* was too

similar to *Sabrewulf* despite the former being turned upright. *Knight Lore* was a different matter with its spanking new 3-D interactive graphics (Filmation) which got around the fact that the game itself wasn't so big.

Fantasy had good presales of their trilogy first part, *Backpackers Guide To The Universe (Part 1)*, partly thanks to early publicity in CRASH, but the review wasn't that hot because, despite very pretty graphics by **Stewart Ruecroft** and some amusing ideas from **Bob Hamilton**, the action content seemed to be lacking and the zoostategical element wasn't sufficient. However, it looked like a promising start to what would eventually build into a gigantic three-part game – but it was never realised. In the February issue we coolly reviewed *Drive In* and shortly afterwards Fantasy ceased to exist.

Software Projects had been a bit quiet, but in January had two games on the go, *Astronut* and *Lode Runner*, both reasonably well received critically but underadvertised and neither seemed to seriously grab the public's attention. Instead, the Soft Proj ad budget went on their **Software Super Savers**, latest in the growing line of low-cost games. Despite good sales, budget games were still a bit of a joke (apart from one or two of **Firebird's**), and with games like *Fred's Fan Factory* and *Moon Lighter* among the six released, **Software Super Savers** didn't seem to be breaking the tradition very much, but at least some of them were quite difficult to play.

Wanted: Monty Mole (CRASH readers' Best Platform Game from 84) had put **Gremlin Graphics** right on top, but their Spectrum *Potty Pigeon* was a bit of a disappointment in the New Year, although it was an original reworking of *Crowther's* already weak CBM64 version. Throughout the year, **Gremlin** would try to recapture the fresh spirit of *Monty* without complete success until **Peter Harrap's** true follow-up *Monty On The Run*.

Not unlike *Ultimate*, **Vortex** is another software company whose reputation rests on few and usually good games written by **Costa Panayi**. Their follow-up to *TLL* was *Cyclone*. It employed very similar 3-D graphics to the former game with the addition of a slight strategical element, but generally we felt there was no significant advance made and it seemed to lack the lustre of excitement needed to make it a big game.

ZZAP! 64's hero **Rockford** made his first appearance on the Spectrum in *Boulder Dash*, a game I thought absolutely marvellous despite its initially primitive-looking graphics. To play it was to become instantly addicted. It came from **State Soft** but was marketed by **Front Runner**, K-Tel's renamed and somewhat short-lived software company.

Two big releases this month were (finally) **Atarisoft's** *Pole Position* and **Domark's** *Eureka!*. Atari had a difficult task to beat the many previous releases all based on their road-racing arcade hit, and in fact they didn't really manage – the game was

reasonable but too late. They did try an abortive earlier release at the 84 PCW Show, but criticism was so heavy it was withdrawn for improvements to be made. *Eureka!*, the multipart adventure with a £25,000 prize for the first to complete it, was described as a real game despite the hype, but **Derek Brewster** didn't agree. However he did like the second ever release from **Dorcas** (formerly **Doric**), *Runes Of Zandos*, but sadly the distribution network failed to see eye to eye with CRASH and the adventure never received the exposure and sales it deserved – very like **Mizar's** *Out Of The Shadows*.

Two other games are worth a mention – **Steve Davis Snooker** from **CDS** and *The Prince* from **CCS**. The snooker game was a typical example of endorsement games, using a well-known personality to help sell a product, in this case one of the best ever snooker/pool simulations. *The Prince* went some way to prove that sponsorship (The Cambridge Awards) can result in good programs.

The only other item of note is that this issue saw the first column from **Robin Candy**, an enlarged edition of **POKES**. **Robin** was to become a fixture if not exactly a fitting from this point on, and the bane of my life (but that's another story).

FEBRUARY

FEBRUARY saw a few major releases, four from **Ocean**, still chasing that seemingly elusive CRASH Smash. The worthiest was probably *Gift From The Gods*, the first game from a new team called **Denton Designs**, who were all ex-Imagine programmers, partly financed by **Ocean** and soon to delight with several more games. The best was *Match Day*, the football simulation to beat them all, and a game many readers felt we dismissed unfairly without it being a Smash. The third was *Hunchback II*, not perhaps as delightful graphically as *Hunchback*, but a better game to play and at least it didn't earn the nickname *Hunchbug* like the first one did. The fourth was another comeback in the form of **Kong Strikes Back**, an interesting but slightly indifferent game that lacked content but proved fairly tough.

Hewson Consultants came out with *Technician Ted* and proved that platform games could be tougher and better than *Jet Set Willy*. The public seemed to like it as well and it made the charts in a big way, upsetting those software houses who had turned the programmers down on the grounds that the game was merely a *Jet Set Willy* clone. **Firebird** proved they could release nonbudget games in *Buggy Blast* and made a move towards reinstating the shoot-'em-up with knobs on. **Elite** did the same with their next TV tie-in *Airwolf* and sparked some controversy – CRASH liked the game because it was tough (though not very big), whereas some other mags slated it as absolute rubbish. It did pretty

well in the charts though. But the two biggest releases in the sense of expectancy were **Legend's** *The Great Space Race* and **Beyond's** *Doomdark's Revenge*. Alas, the former turned out to be the grandest flop in games software history – for once every magazine critic and virtually every reader was in agreement, the box was fine, the contents amazingly poor. **Beyond**, of course, fared much better and **Mike Singleton's** follow-up to state-of-the-art *Lords Of Midnight* was an even better program (though some readers disagreed). The other big hype release was the Spectrum version of *Ghostbusters*. This **Activision** 'mega tie-in' has been claimed as the biggest seller of all time – perhaps, however we felt that the great CBM64 sound track covered a lack of real game, and this was more strongly highlighted on the Spectrum with a flat and inadequate rendering of the disco hit song.

On the budget front, **Mastertronic** came of age with an excellent platform/maze/adventure game called *Finders Keepers*, upsetting some cherished beliefs (including some of ours) that budget software couldn't crack it, while a relatively new house, **Dynavision** chased the definitely elusive *Zaxxon* game with a similar rendition called *Havoc* – we felt it was pretty poor.

A quiet behind-the-scenes battle for the TV quiz series *Blockbusters* came into the open when **Macsen** released a game of the same name, properly licensed, and forced **Compusound** to change their earlier version to something else. This turned out to be *Wender Bender*, marketed by **Ranks High**. They bullied us for some time to rereview *Wender Bender* on the grounds that they had had a raw deal, having received permission to do *Blockbusters* in the first place. Eventually we did rereview it, only to find that **Ranks High** suddenly weren't answering the phone.

Another battle loomed within the pages of CRASH as a result of **Derek's** dismissive review of **Interceptor's** adventure *Jewels Of Babylon*. One of the directors of the company rang and became quite insulting on the phone about both the review, CRASH and **Derek Brewster**. **Roger Kean**, as is his wont, replied stinging in the following issue.

MARCH

MARCH saw six major games with widely differing appeal. **Firebird** kicked off with another large game in their Gold range. After some frenzied last-minute name-changing, it emerged as *Gyron*, a megamaze game with a Porsche as a prize to the first completion. Although reviewed in March, readers had to wait some time for its actual release. Shoot-'em-ups hit the vogue in a big way with *Moon Cresta* from **Incentive**, the first time this venerable and difficult arcade original had turned up on a home computer.

Micromania hit gold with their maze shoot-'em-up *Project*

Future, but sadly it was to be **Micromania's** last appearance and within another two months they were gone, owed a fortune by the collapsing distributor, **Tiger**. **Mikro-Gen's** fortunes, however, never looked better with the release of another *Wally Week* program, the multicharacter graphic adventure *Everyone's A Wally*. The game was reckoned to be good enough not to need the song of the same name by **Mike Berry**, and if **Mikro-Gen** had hoped it might make the pop charts they were to be disappointed – however it did for a while become a regular musical catch phrase on the *Steve Wright Show* on Radio 1.

A company better known for their CBM64 games was **Bubble Bus** who, with their second ever Spectrum release *Wizard's Lair*, made a Smash. Despite the game's visual similarity to *Atic Atac* and *Sabrewulf*, in play it was sufficiently exciting and difficult to earn its own spurs.

For adventurers, **Derek** thought *Spiderman* from **Adventure International** was a worthy hit from the **Scott Adams** stable. Sadly, the **Steve Jackson** games promised from **Ad Int** and reported in the previous issue have never materialised (although they are still being worked on). Another adventure (one from a time previous) well regarded was *Castle Blackstar*, slightly rewritten from its original marketing, and put out by **CDS**.

US Gold, riding high with their rash of American Commodore games, were not doing quite so well with the Spectrum conversions. This month saw the release of *Blue Max* and (finally) the real *Zaxxon*. Both were disappointing, the latter proving that *Zaxxon* was still to be done properly on the Spectrum.

Melbourne House offered us an oddity in *Hellfire*, a three-part game with good graphics but some strange gameplay – it didn't really hit home. Another game that didn't hit (probably because it simply wasn't different enough) was **Artic's** *Mutant Monty*, and the lack of advertising to back it up seemed to point up **Artic's** continuing decline as a software house. **Virgin Games** was another house in some decline (at least on the Spectrum although *Strangeloop* for the CBM64 and *Sorcery* for the Amstrad did very well), but their strategy/simulation based on the evil doings of the pop business and called *The Biz* was well received. Evil doings were responsible for getting *Monty Mole* into prison, but **Gremlin Graphics** still hadn't recaptured the right form for their hero in **Chris Kerry's** *Monty Is Innocent* – it looked as though it required an escape to get things moving again.

Ski Star 2000 was one interesting program we reviewed, one of the first to start using icons to help the player, in this case to redesign the ski slopes. It was from **Richard Shepherd** – an unusual departure for them. But the news everyone wanted was the password to access the very carefully protected second program on **Design Design's** 84 hit *Dark Star*. I was able to 'exclusively' reveal that to see *Spectacle* you had to type in

'Everyone's a nervous wreck'. I was thrilled – my first ever scoop.

APRIL

APRIL was an interesting month not so much for the volume of software produced, which was actually quite low, but because **Ultimate** released the well-advertised and eagerly awaited *Alien 8* – and within days, the letters began to flow. 'It's a rip-off', 'Knight Lore in space with no improvements' were typical of some of the comments. But many thought otherwise, the CRASH team included, and decided that *Alien 8* was an improvement. Besides which, a fair person might have realised that after spending so long developing the 3-D graphics used in *Knight Lore*, *Ultimate* was bound to employ them again. In fact within a few months many other software houses were to have a go at similar interactive 3-D graphics, proving, if nothing else, that the industry believed *Ultimate* were right.

Gremlin Graphics gave us a new hero in *Sam Stoat (Safebreaker)*, related in theory to Monty Mole, but again it didn't quite hit the spot. **Mastertronic** also dipped a bit with *Chiller*, a game that had done reasonably well on the 64 but translated poorly to the Spectrum. **Ocean's** offering was the intriguing *Pud Pud*, a game that was definitely odd odd.

TV tie-ins continued unabated with the masters **Elite** and their *Dukes Of Hazard* and the less-often-heard-of **Red Shift** and a strategical adventure based on the BBC's *Tripods*. *Dukes Of Hazard* seemed typical of *Elite's* recent games, pretty good graphically but lacking in content. Both Derek Brewster and Angus Ryall slammed *Tripods* into the ground. Strategy and tie-ins turned out to be a winner, however, for **Argus Press Software** with the release of their tense adventure based on the movie *Alien* – the first CRASH Smash from Angus Ryall.

US Gold finally struck pay dirt and a Smash with *Raid Over Moscow*, a game that finally presented a reasonable Zaxxon-style screen among others, and was successfully hyped by the press as 'controversial' because of its Kremlin-attacking scenario. The 'new look' shoot-'em-up was given a boost by **System 3's** *Death Star Interceptor*, which we thought was pretty good, especially the space sequence, but which some other mags regarded as utter rubbish. **Romantic Robot**, better known for utilities, surprised everyone by releasing *Wiggler* and getting a CRASH Smash, while **Micromega** surprised us by releasing *A Day In The Life* (of Sir Clive) and disappointing us for the first time. **Addictive Games** had lived successfully off *Football Manager* for an eternity, so the release of a similar game based on the software business and called *Software Star* was greeted with some interest, but it failed to live up to the more exciting world of soccer.

One of the other 'majors', **Bug Byte** gave us a completely indifferent game called *Stay Kool*, but perhaps they were lacking

heart. At the LET Show rumours suggested **Argus Press** was taking a hand in the Liverpool company's affairs, but nothing seemed to materialise and within weeks Bug Byte, one of the oldest software houses in the market, flopped into receivership. It wasn't the end of the story though...

Oddity of the month, odder even than *Pud Pud*, was **Llanasoft's** *Psychedelia*, not really a game, hardly a utility, just a *divertissement* for the eyes, and whilst marginally interesting it did seem a little pointless.

Talking of 'majors' April's CRASHback looked at, among others, Ocean's only CRASH Smash to date, *Moon Alert* – they still hadn't managed another; and we looked at *Worse Things Happen At Sea* from **Silversoft**, another of the early software houses that seemed unable to repeat the previous year's success and pull out of its doldrums...

MAY

QUICKSILVA, who had been quiet for some time, came out with two very different games, *Fantastic Voyage* and *Mighty Magus*, but although they were both quite good in their own ways, neither really made much impact and it looked as though another established and major house was in search of the right product. Unlike **Melbourne House** who released *Starion* and for a while looked as though they might have beaten *Firebird* onto the market with an *Elite*-like game. The 3-D vector graphics were just about the fastest and smoothest yet seen on the Spectrum, and the addition of historical puzzle games made it quite unique.

In fact May was a pretty good month. **Hewson Consultants** came out with Steve Turner's follow-up game *Dragonlord Of Avalon* and it was even better than its forerunner, *Avalon*. **US Gold** had two Smashes in the arcade conversions of *Spy Hunter* and the prekarate-rage *Bruce Lee*. A software house that had been a bit quiet since its Ket Trilogy adventures was **Incentive**, but they put that right with the furious puzzle game *Confuzion*, and at long last **Ocean** made its second CRASH Smash with *World Baseball Series* although that was under the newly-acquired name of **Imagine**. Even **Elite**, about whom we had been despairing of a game to match the graphics, came up with a strong product in the endorsed *Grand National* – the best yet horse-racing game and one which boasted excellent equestrian animation. On the adventure front, Derek was pretty thrilled with **Level 9's** latest graphic-and-text *Emerald Isle*. By and large, everyone was so pleased that even Robin Candy went psychedelic in the Playing Tips.

JUNE

A MIXED BAG this month with

some disappointments and one or two pleasant surprises. The one 'dead cert' was **Beyond's** *Shadowfire*, the first fully icon-driven graphics adventure. There was a danger that the novelty of the icons might disguise the lack of a game, but **Denton Designs** did a good job and the game matched its tremendous look, although **Denton** themselves admitted to wanting more game elements in the follow-up when they got going on it. The other Smashes for the month fell to adventure and strategy with **Gremlins** from **Adventure International**, **Games Workshop's** *Runestone*, a 'landscaping' adventure to rival *Lords Of Midnight*, and *Witch's Cauldron*, an adventure based on **Mikro-Gen's** famous Wally graphics and reviewed a bit later than it should have been as it proved too difficult for Derek to get through without help! And on the strategy front line, Angus was pleased with *Arnhem* from **CCS**, a company he had always regarded with mixed admiration and amusement for their dogged struggle to convince an uncaring world that war games could be fun. He was also surprised that **Lothlorien** turned in another worthy strategy game called *Overlords*. *Lothlorien* was about to be taken under the expanding wings of Argus Press Software – would it make any difference to their performance?

Legend fought back against the poor publicity generated by the flop of *The Great Space Race* by providing us with the graphically interesting 3-D game *Komplex*, but despite its programming worthiness and its immense size, it still seemed to lack something in play. **A&F** were also back with a follow-up, trying to recapture the enigmatic success of *Chuckie Egg* with the appropriately named *Chuckie Egg 2*. In additive terms it wasn't a patch on the first game, but it did offer numerous platform-leaping locations and plenty of adventure elements to keep fans happy for some hours. Another follow-up was *Falcon Patrol 2* from **Virgin Games** (although the original had only been on the 64). This was a disappointment, a rather thin game and graphics that didn't look as though they had progressed beyond Durell's much earlier *Harrier Attack*, which the game strongly resembled.

One surprise hit was *Tapper* from **US Gold**. The game appeared a month before on the 64 and looked like a difficult one to translate well, but the Spectrum version from **Platinum Productions** was well up to scratch despite the inevitable animation clashes, and proved to be one of those hugely and enjoyably frustrating no-win games and one of my personal favourites.

Tie-ins and endorsements were on the increase this month; after much prepublicity, **DK'Tronics** released *Minder*, their tie-in game, based on the Thames TV series of the same name. CRASH had seen one or two very early versions, and wasn't particularly impressed. A number of points made by Derek Brewster were passed back to the programmer, but in the event the

finished game failed to excite us over much. Another tie-in was *Give My Regards To Broad Street*, a novel travel-and-search adventure with arcade overtones based on Paul McCartney's musical film, which **Argus Press Software** brought out under their Mind Games series. As mentioned previously, there was *Gremlins*, our preview of *Frankie Goes To Hollywood*, *Jonah Barrington's Squash* and *911TS*. The latter, from **Elite**, seemed to play too heavily on the graphics used in *Grand National* to be very different and the tie-in with Dunlop Tyres turned out to be more of a marketing element than it first seemed, inasmuch as the game had originally been developed purely for Dunlop. Dunlop also make sports equipment, possibly even *Jonah Barrington's* squash balls (I'm no expert!), which featured in the tough simulation by **Malcolm Evans** of **New Generation**.

On the budget front **Mastertronic** released the unpronounceable

Nonterraqueous, not a bad big-maze semishoot-'em-up, and to underline, as it were, the joke about budget software, **Firebird** came out with *Don't Buy This*, a compilation of the worst ever programs that had been sent in over the past few months. Naturally enough, it sold rather well.

JULY

INTO the second half of the year; traditionally the first of the slump summer months. Yet Spectrum software was holding up very well and many more good quality games were being released than during the same months of last year. One which arrived too late to do it justice in a full review was **Odin's** *Nodes Of Yesod*, so it merely got a Mangram and more of that later...

Tie-ins had a veritable field day with the big guns – *Rocky Horror Show* from **CRL** and *A View To A Kill* from **Domark**. The former, based on the decadent Seventies stage show and film, did rather well to capture some of the film's feeling, and the graphics were pretty good too. Sadly the game just lacked enough content to make it great. **Domark's** effort (programmed by **Softstone**, who took over **Perfection Software**, who produced the early CRASH success *Odyssey 1*) was far weaker. The three-part game followed some of *Bond's* exploits from the movie, but the game ideas were thin, *Bond* looked like a stick insect and all the publicity over how much money **Tony Crowther** was paid to write the music was wasted on Spectrum owners anyway. Nevertheless, the CRASH review was pretty kind and the game was better on the Spectrum than on the 64.

A third tie-in, however, managed to be even more awful – *Super Gran* from **Tynesoft** sent the ageing maternal heroine of *Tyne Tees* TV fame hurtling through landscapes of appalling graphics with a control over her

actions that only a World War I flying ace would remember. Looking at *Super Gran* was like looking through a time tunnel and seeing the past – at least graphically it was. **Quicksilver** also held a mirror up to us in the beautiful-looking *Glass*. It had some fine points but missed one or two in the shoot-'em-up stakes and ended up giving a slight feeling of dissatisfaction on completing it. Mirrors seemed to be in the news when we Smashed *Dynamite Dan* from **Mirrorsoft**, one of my favourites (though Robin Candy has never agreed – his tough luck). The graphics lifted this platform game above most others, but some clever innovations, incredibly tough gameplay and jolly music added the spice.

Endorsement Of The Month award went to **Alligata** for their *Jack Charlton's Match Fishing*. Some people reckon fishing is as interesting as watching a river cutting a valley, but the valleys are busy enough with weekend anglers and the sport is among the most popular. *Match Fishing* boasted an absolutely excellent lakeside scene by David Thorpe and, although the rest of the graphics weren't up to much, the atmosphere it lent carried the rest of this enjoyable simulation along quite happily.

On the Smash side of things apart from *Dynamite Dan*, there was *Herbert's Dummy Run*, the enjoyable romp of Master Week through a department store full of **Mikro-Gen** arcade games, but with a tinge of warning that perhaps the Wally Weekers were getting a touch too similar in style and content; there was *Cauldron* from **Palace**, a hit on the 64 that had been really well translated to provide a broomstick *Defender* and a very hard series of platform games; and surprise of the month was *Lothlorien's Battle Of The Bulge*, their first under the Argus banner, which left Angus Ryall nonplussed with admiration for both Lothlorien and Argus, two companies for whom previously he had had few good things to say. But for many, the big thrill was **Gargoyle Games's** *Dun Darach*, starring Grego-Celtic hero Cuchulainn in his second graphics adventure. It was a big thrill for then CRASH Editor Roger Kean, who got credited on the inlay for inventing the idea of door numbers used in the game. This was one of Robin Candy's personal favourites, and I don't know whether that says more for him or less for the game (but at least he can spell Kookulainn, when I can't).

Two other games in July worthy of note were *Archon*, a weird mix of chess-like board game and arcade action from **Ariolasoft**, and *Super Pipeline II* by **Taskset**, a company venturing off the 64 onto the Spectrum for the first time. The game suffered in translation with colour-clashing characters, but still managed to be addictive and difficult.

AUGUST

THE August issue of CRASH suffered a bit of a setback when it

ran into trouble with EMAP and their *Sinclair User* magazine – but enough of that...

Somewhat belatedly, *Nodes Of Yesod* got its airing and a CRASH Smash. The graphics, action and ideas all contributed to making a great game from **Odin** (who had previously been Thor). In fact there were some great Smashes in August. *Frankie Goes To Hollywood* arrived and proved again that **Denton Designs** could come up not only with an extraordinary mixture of fluent graphics but also with some extraordinary game ideas. They also gave **Ocean** (proper) a real CRASH Smash. Ocean got yet another through the **Imagine** label with *Hypersports*. Not to be outdone **Beyond** released the two totally hateable *Mad*-magazine espionage experts, the black and white spies in *Spy Vs Spy*. Once again, the graphics were excellent, using split-screen simultaneous displays for the two players, but it was the humour (taken straight from *Mad*) that made the game a great one.

Clever graphics were also responsible for the slick presentation of the adventure Smash *The Fourth Protocol* released by **Century Hutchinson** and programmed by **The Electronic Pencil Company** – a name to be reckoned with in the future. Here, for the first time, Macintosh-like business icons were used to drive the adventure along, and it worked a treat – so did the adventure.

The tendency to 'self-copy' was once again rearing its head with all sorts of people about to release karate games, but first came the boxers. **Elite** produced just about their best ever game in the endorsed *Frank Bruno's Boxing*. The fluidity of the animation just had the edge over *Rocco*, a game from Spanish software house **Dinamic** and marketed here by **Gremlin Graphics**. Gremlin had won a battle with **Silversoft** for the rights to this and another game called *Profanation*, a very tough jump-and-peek game that was, in theory at least, the third part of a trilogy of which **Silversoft** ended up with only the first two parts, *Saimazoom* and *Baba Liba*. Gremlin Graphics got the best of the bargain.

We finally reviewed **Artic's** latest release *Paws*, having deemed it sensible to leave it until Artic had made up their minds what to call it. Originally named *Cats*, after the famous musical, Artic had trouble in obtaining copyright clearance so the name changed but the game didn't, and it was cute but hardly megastuff. *The Covenant* from **PSS** was much better, as was **CRL's** unusual *Juggernaut* – the sort of vehicle that gets hung up under the low half-timbered frames of quaint Ludlow town. Biggest disappointment of the month, perhaps even the quarter, was *Jet Set Willy II*. **Software Projects** had, of course, scored an enormous hit with *Jet Set Willy*, and there was always rumoured to be a sequel on its way (*Jet Set Willy And The Taxman* – or something). So news of a second game was good news indeed, except that it turned out to be 40 more rooms added onto the existing game and

that was pretty disappointing, especially as programmer **Matthew Smith** had nothing much to do with it.

SEPTEMBER

THE last month of this unusually busy summer turned out a handful of goodies. Everyone had been awaiting **Costa Panayi's** latest 3-D developments, and expectations were well rewarded with *Highway Encounter* from **Vortex** – a very linear game with extraordinarily attractive graphics and a hero-bot looking not unlike a Dalek. It was voted a CRASH Smash within minutes, and protracted play didn't diminish the delight. **Gremlin Graphics**, after much prewarning, launched the proper follow-up to their huge molar hit of last year by **Peter Harrap** – *Monty On The Run* followed a similar pattern to its predecessor, but there were more rooms and some of the nastiest little traps yet devised for the unwary platform gamer. It tended to rather overshadow the other Gremlin release, written by **Chris Kerry**, *Metabolis*. I thought this attractive and unusual maze/search game deserved better than it got, and its sense of humour was refreshing.

One game based more on a humorous character than on incipient humour that just arrived in time to be reviewed and Smashed was *Popeye* from **DKTronics** by the venerable author **Don Priestley**. Not only did the game boast super large graphics, but one that suffered no attribute problems.

Attractive graphics have characterised 1985, often giving new life to well-tried ideas. The usually novel and innovative **Design Design** turned their hands (or **Graham Stafford's** hands) to a collect-'em-up maze game with great graphics by **Stuart Ruecroft** (who had been responsible for the graphics in *Backpackers*). Despite the obvious format, *On The Run* turned out to be likable, fast and difficult and a Smash.

There were two 'red' releases in September, one an adventure and a Smash from ace writer-explorers **Level 9**, and one a flight simulator from **Database**. *Red Moon* impressed Derek as much for its indication of Level 9's durability as for the game's undoubted qualities of excitement, atmosphere and entertainment value. *Red Arrows* was another matter however, a disappointment after the drawn-out wait for the program's release. It put you in the cockpit of a Red Arrow team jet, flying exhibition formation aerobatics. Unfortunately the simulation turned out slow and somewhat unrealistic.

Probably the biggest disappointment of the month, though, was **Ocean's** *Roland's Rat Race*, a TV tie-in with really very little tied into it. Thinly disguised as a platform/maze game, you had to untangle the knot of passages in search of Roland's kidnapped friends and get to TV AM on time. **US Gold** also turned out a disappointment in *Buck Rogers*. Although a very

good conversion from the 64, it lacked any real spark, not perhaps surprising in such an old arcade game.

However, another, even older game made its appearance on the computer in the form of *Cluedo* from **Leisure Genius** – the official version of this ever-popular board game. The Spectrum version was rated pretty well, with everyone looking forward to the following release of *Monopoly*.

If the *Red Arrows* simulation was a letdown, two others this month were not. **ASP's** *Nick Faldo Plays The Open* turned out to be the best golf game yet, using fashionable icons to make setting up shots as easy as pie and comfortably realistic; while for choo-choo fans, **Hewson Consultants's** *Southern Belle* gave us the freedom of the engine driver's footplate on an old steam locomotive doing the Brighton run. An unusual area for simulations, and one which led one reviewer to think it easier to control an aeroplane than a train! *Southern Belle*, however, captivated all those who had ever wanted to grow up and be an engine driver.

That more or less rounded up September except for **Domark's** release of our very own **Derek Brewster's** *Code Name Mat II*, the follow-up, not surprisingly, to *Code Name Mat*. We had loved the latter game, with its complex 3-D graphics, but the sequel seemed too similar to score heavily, and got hit hard by reviewers for not having 'advanced' with time. The resulting review upset Derek, a man who hardly ever complains unless it's about me, but at least it shut up critics who had made great capital of the fact that all his other games had been CRASH Smashes, and was something funny going on?

OCTOBER

AS IF to calm everyone down before Christmas, October turned out to be a bit arid with only the Spectrum version of *The Way Of The Exploding Fist* from **Melbourne House** really standing out. Of the long-promised spate of self-copy karate games, this was the first to arrive. It converted from the 64 quite successfully, and playing it well meant combining hand and eye coordination skills with action in such a way as to offer plenty of enjoyment and mirror the real martial art in as realistic manner as possible on a computer.

It's true that **Ultimate** scored with *Nightshade*, but nevertheless there was an undertone in the reviewers' comments that suggested they were taking *Knight Lore/Alien 8* a bit too far, and that something original was required to revitalise the classic software house image. It also wasn't missed that a company other than Ultimate was credited with the programming...

The only other Smash was *Touchstones Of Rhiannon*, an adaptation of the Robin Hood story from **Adventure International** and based heavily on the recent TV series.

There was a handful of 'solid' games, two from **US Gold** having

been heralded for some time – *Dambusters* and *Bounty Bob*, both big hits on the 64, both slightly flawed on the Spectrum. *Bounty Bob* especially seemed unable to carry its cult status across from machine to machine and resulted merely in a good platform game. Beyond's second label *Monolith* offered us a rockin' good time with *Rockford's Riot*, the follow-up to the very successful *Boulder Dash* which, while still a fine game, mostly contained the same gameplay elements as its predecessor.

It was left to Derek to discover the two most unusual games of the month in the adventure section, *The Rats* from book publishers *Hodder & Stoughton* and *The Secret of St Brides* by a dubious organisation purporting to be St Brides School For Young Ladies, whose packaging came complete with supporting literature of a slightly offbeat British gels'-school type à la St Trinians (a feeling reinforced by your playing the heroine, Trixie Trinian). *The Rats*, based on the best-seller Herbert book, made a strange combination between adventure of the 'select an option' type and strategy covered in a thick custard of gory horror as the player waded knee-deep through the bloodied remains of rat-gnawed London (reminding me yet again why I left the place!).

Another slightly unusual game turned up from *PSS*, marketing a French pinball-table construction kit under the name of *Macadam Bumper* (it led to the review compiler being able to use the joke: Language: **French machine code** – yawn). With this you could play a preset table or redesign it. An excellent offering, but there's still room yet for a really flexible pinball designer program. We also reviewed a program from our old friends at *Eclipse* aimed at the then-about-to-be-current craze for comet-spotting and aptly named *Halley's Comet*.

But if there were few heavenly bodies to be seen screaming across October's software sky, our forward-looking telescopes were trained on deep space at new games from *Gargoyle Games* and *Hewson Consultants*, an extraordinary-looking one with the appropriately heavenly-body name of *Tau Ceti* from *CRL* and one set on the Zoids planet from *Martech*...

NOVEMBER

HEWSON'S *Astroclone* saw veteran 3-D proger **Steve Turner** back in space from his sojourn in the remote past of Maroc and pitted once again against those indefatigable foes the Seiddab in a complex combination of space shoot-'em-up and 3-D room-exploration game. To some degree Steve and the men from *Gargoyle Games* seem to have been moving on parallel courses in recent months and *Astroclone* had uncanny similarities to *Gargoyle's* release *Marsport*. This introduced us to a new hero, John Kepler Marsh, and the return of *Gargoyle* to space. *Marsport* was the first of a planned trilogy of space games called *The Siege Of*

Earth, complete with an excellent background story from the pen of **Greg Follis** about man's meeting with aliens and its consequent results. The subtle additions to the previous *Dun Darach* together with *Gargoyle's* inimitable mix of puzzle, pun and action made *Marsport* a sure-fire hit.

Tau Ceti and *Zoids* got previewed, but *The Edge* got *Fairlight* out for us to rave over. Here was another 3-D room-exploring game with puzzles to be solved, using graphics that improved upon those employed by *Ultimate* and ones in which objects behaved realistically in interaction with the playing character. *Fairlight* has been the outstanding achievement of The Edge to date. Turning the page of that issue, another Smash emerged – *Elite*. *Firebird* had purchased this cult BBC game for a fabulous sum from the programmers, converted it to the 64, where it was well received, and had spent considerable time making the Spectrum version even better (though alas, not the music)! It's the sort of game (space trader/shoot-'em-up) you either love to death or hate. If the former, then you can't put it down for months.

Bubble Bus also flew us to the deepest regions of space and a black hole with **Stephen Crow's** follow-up to his excellent *Wizard's Lair* called *Starquake*. It had visual overtones of *Underworld* and the more recent *Nodes Of Yesod* in its superb graphics and offered a high degree of playability with many neat touches and novel ideas.

Back on Earth, **Melbourne House** disappointed us slightly with *Fighting Warrior*, a sort of ancient Egyptian martial-arts program, where it was felt that there wasn't quite enough going on to overcome the fact that much of its content was actually the *Exploding Fist* control mode.

Ocean, too, brought us and our joysticks back to earth with a thump and *Daley Thompson's Super Test*. Although undeniably fun, *Super Test* really offered nothing new over *Decathlon* and was overshadowed by *Hypersports*.

US Gold's November game was another monster hit from the 64, *Impossible Mission*, but like its stablemate *Bounty Bob*, it somehow failed to carry the adulation with it over to the Spectrum, resulting in a respectable enough and tough platform/exploring game.

We also saw the first ever release of a new software name, **Electric Dreams**, backed by Activision and fronted by ex-Quicksilver boss, **Rod Cousens**. The game was called *Riddler's Den* and sparked a bit of a controversy with US Gold, who were also launching a budget label under the same name. *Riddler's Den* was a good start, priming the market for their December release...

DECEMBER

LAST MONTH is still fresh in everyone's minds, so I won't dwell too long on its bright points, which were numerous. At last *Tau Ceti* arrived and Smashed, **Sandy**

White (of *Ant Attack* fame) gave us **Electric Dreams's** *Smash I, Of The Mask*. In similar visual vein, **Melbourne House** came up with *Gyroscope* and got a Smash. **Microsphere** surprised us with the quiet release of their skool follow-up *Back To Skool* and proved you can add even to a fabulous program and get another Smash. **Durell** got one as well with their *Critical Mass*, and at long, long last **Digital Integration** brought out *Tomahawk* – the game we waited almost 18 months to see. This flight simulator showed some advances over *Fighter Pilot* and convinced everyone of its Smash merits. Derek enjoyed (and Smashed) the **Melbourne House** spoof 'adventure' *Terrormolinos*, although he failed to rate **Beyond's** *Sorderon's Shadow* quite as highly as the Mike Singleton *Midnight* trilogy which it vaguely resembled. On the other hand he gave a Smash to *The Secret Diary Of Adrian Mole* from **Mosaic/Level 9**.

And that just about brings us up

to date.

So what characterises 1985 as a software year? One thing that stands out to my mind is the way that this summer software kept on coming out, and good software too. 3-D has been almost an obsession with many programmers working in all its aspects and proving that last year's 'comprehensive' 3-D article is way out of date! Gameplay has been worked on very carefully too, supporting our earlier optimistic view that computer games would not die, only improve and change their nature. But to balance the increasing complexity of games like *Dun Darach* and *Frankie Goes to Hollywood*, we've also seen the rebirth of the classic shoot-'em-up – except the graphics have been vastly improved over earlier efforts. Software prices have crept up of course, but budget software has come of age with **Mastertronic** leading the way, and on the pricier end of the range, we've generally been given much more for our money to make up for it.

LOOKBACK – 1986

WITHOUT doubt the prevailing trend of 1986 was for coin-op conversions with the field being led by **Elite** (Capcom) and **Imagine** (Konami). As a result of the success of such conversions, Konami have now decided to go it alone, forgo licence royalties and capitalise on the immense commercial possibilities of 'sourcing their own product', to slip into the jargon so beloved of the trade.

The trend towards budget games was difficult to avoid spotting during the year. A host of new labels were launched, most of them coming from established 'mainstream' publishers, and most of them turning out mediocre product – although there were a few bright spots on the budget front.

It has been an interesting year, ending with dark rumours that at least one of the giant corporations that have been acquiring smaller software houses (another 86 trend) is planning to leave the market in 1987. Whatever rumblings this move may cause if it takes place, the TV, film, book, personality and toy tie-ins look set to continue almost unabated. The views of licence deals expressed by the Canvas team in our feature on **Denton Designs** later this issue are very interesting.

But on with the appraisal of 1986, a year which saw the departure of Clive Sinclair from the home-computer market, and which produced some vintage software as well as some games that have already been cast into the murk of the CRASH Towers cellar, never to see the light of day again... some might even argue that they should never have seen the light of day in the first place...

JANUARY

THE Christmas Special for 1985/86, which is really the January issue, got the year off to a good start for **Mastertronic**, who collected a Smash for *Spellbound*, scoring a very respectable 95% Overall. This was a good beginning to the year for programmer David Jones and his cute character Magic Knight – and it wasn't to be his only Smash of the year...

The year also began auspiciously (LMLWD) for Walsall-based software house **Elite**, who collected one Smash for a surprise game which they were sent from out of the blue – *Roller Coaster* – and another for the first of many coin-op conversions they were to

produce during the following twelve months: *Commando*. In fact, **Elite** had decided to go for a placing in the upper echelons of the software industry during 1986 – and during the year they released a lot of very strong products, concentrating mainly on coin-op conversions.

The end of 1985 saw **Mikro-Gen's** brave attempt at improving the Spectrum's capabilities with the launch of the Mikro-Plus, an interface that included a ROM, and allowed programmers to write larger games for the basic 48K machine. Sadly, the first (and only) game to appear on the Mikro-Plus system, *Shadow Of The Unicorn*, wasn't anything terribly special. At £14.95 it was expensive; retailers, however, didn't get to make their standard percentage of the selling price – the hardware add-on cost

over £4.00 to manufacture – and it wasn't a very attractive proposition to the trade. The whole concept, greeted with enthusiasm in some quarters and as the answer to piracy in others (a Mikro-Plus game could only run with the hardware, and each game needed its own special interface), fizzled out rapidly. Mikro-Gen were left with an embarrassingly large quantity of redundant units, and entered 1986 licking their corporate wounds. Innovation doesn't always pay off...

After one of the longest delays in software-publishing history (but not the longest!), PSS released *Swords And Sorcery* – the innovative dungeon-exploring game they had been working on for an embarrassingly long period of time. Derek Brewster was impressed, and the game duly collected a Smash. Later in the year, role-playing purists were to attack S&S in Signpost, but there was no doubt that Mike Simpson had broken new ground and crammed his game with artificial intelligence routines. Still no news, at the end of the year, of the promised expansion modules for dungeon-explorers, though...

Liverpudlian software house **Odin** followed up their excellent *Nodes Of Yesod* with *Robin Of The Wood*, a graphically stunning arcade adventure. They then began to put themselves on the software map as the producers of quality games – an epithet that their sister company, **Thor**, never quite managed to achieve. Coincidentally, *Robot Messiah* from **Alphabatic**, a new company, was also reviewed in the Christmas Special. Early in the New Year **Odin** and **Alphabatic** were at legal loggerheads over graphic routines – a little dispute that was quickly settled.

Clive Townsend, a newcomer to the Spectrum programming scene groomed by **Durell**, waded in with his first game *Saboteur*, and collected his first Smash. What a start to a programming career! **Insight** also stepped into the CRASH Smash Hall Of Fame with a neat shoot-'em-up, *Vectron*, which was to emerge later in the year as a rerelease from **Firebird**. 1986 was to be a year of corporate acquisitions...

FEBRUARY

CHRISTMAS has become a landmark for the software industry. Obviously, people are in the mood for spending money during the festive season, and software houses have always rushed to get their best products on the shelves in time for the shopping boom. Last year a lot of games missed the peak selling period, and to quite a few people's surprise still sold remarkably well. Again in 1986, games continued selling well throughout the year – we heard reports that even the slump in demand during the summer was hardly noticeable.

The February issue wasn't short of Smashes. After living on tenterhooks for months (ever since Jeremy 'I want a Zoid' Spencer first talked to **Martech** and **The**

Electronic Pencil Company), we were finally treated to the finished *Zoids* in **CRASH** Towers. To a being, we were impressed, awarding the game 96% Overall. I have spotted one or two voices of dissent in my mailbag since then, but looking back I still maintain that the game was a major achievement. One of the better toy tie-ins, that shines like a beacon above *Transformers*, for instance...

The new **Imagine**, run and owned by **Ocean** – who purchased the name from amongst the ashes of the original debacle (LMLWD) – also kicked into February with some powerful products. Two coin-op conversations from the Konami arcade achieved Smash status: *Yie Ar Kung Fu* and *Mikie*. **Imagine** managed to keep up this pressure throughout the year...

An unbroken track record was maintained by **Ultimate** with *Gunflight*, which used the same techniques as *Nightshade*, but included a great deal more in the way of gameplay. *Sweevo's World* finally caught up with our deadlines and was finished in time for a proper review in February – having been treated to no less than two previews in the months before as it neared completion. The game was a gentle departure for **Gargoyle** – it was more of an arcade adventure than previous releases, so much so that Greg Follis described it as 'a piece of whimsy'. More radical departures from the puzzle-intensive style of programming were due from the **Dudley** trio later in the year...

A frustratingly simple game arrived from Spanish software house **Dinamic**, courtesy of **Gremlin**, who also 'imported' *Rocco*, one of three boxing simulations that vied with each other in the Spectrum ring for supremacy. *West Bank* took the reaction-test type of game to its logical limit – all you have to do is press one of the three doors presented on the screen. Shoot the right person or object and points are won, shoot the wrong person or a bomb and lives are lost. Almost minimalist in its simplicity, the game proved mightily addictive. As a budget game it would almost certainly have been a Smash, but at £7.95 it earned a respectable 84%.

Regarded by some as the best of the boxing simulations, **Activision's** boxing game was endorsed by Barry McGuigan. Although it arrived months after *Rocco* and *Frank Bruno* entered the ring, the extra training appeared to give it the edge. On the adventure front, **Activision** did particularly well with *Mindshadow*, which **Derek** recommended heartily to anyone with the vaguest interest in adventuring.

Budget masters **Mastertronic** provided a rapid illustration of the way in which 'cheapiers' can vary in quality. They followed up on their Christmas Smash with an appalling little game called *1985* (this would have been more aptly titled *1982*), and the more respectable *Soul Of A Robot*. It just goes to show that reading reviews is highly important when contemplating the purchase of budget titles.

Two companies that were to fade away quietly during 1986 appeared in **Frontline: Central Solutions**, who specialised in 'budget' budget games (most of their catalogue had a retail price of 99p), weighed in with a mediocre strategy game called *Just Imagine*, while **Reelax Games** revealed their approach to commerce with *The Trading Game*. Neither impressed our tame strategist, Sean Masterson.

Firebird, who had been quiet for a while, popped out with a retuned, machine-coded version of *Runestone*, which they had snapped up when **Games Workshop** decided that publishing software wasn't a role they wanted to play.

MARCH

THE idea of March proved favourable for **Mikro-Gen** – they staged a dramatic recovery from the Mikro-Plus setback by pumping three games onto the market and collecting Smashes for two of them. *Sir Fred* was 'imported' from Spain, and the endearing cartoon graphics combined with tricky gameplay had the hero knight trying to rescue his damsel in the middle of a game which became a Smash. *Three Weeks In Paradise*, which proved to be positively the last of the Wally Week games (so it seems, at least), also collected a Smash. Another Mikro-Gen game, an in-house shoot-'em-up vaguely tied in to the TV series behind its title, *Battle Of The Planets*, fared slightly less well at the hands of our reviewing team.

The talented team at **Denton Designs** also paraded two games in front of the CRASH joysticks – the follow-up to *Shadowfire* called *Enigma Force* and an original, multifaceted romp featuring sludge monsters and slime beasts entitled *Cosmic Wartoad*. Both games missed Smash status quite narrowly.

In fact, Liverpudlian companies featured very prominently in March – **Ocean** turned in *Rambo* and *Nomad*, achieving parallel ratings of 79%, while **Imagine** released the work of a Hungarian programmer in the form of *M.O.V.I.E.*, gaining not an Oscar but a Smash.

In fact, releasing games in pairs seemed all the rage. **Design Designer** Simon Brattel completed work on *Forbidden Planet*, which was in effect a follow-up to *Dark Star*, and **Graham Stafford** sent us a production copy of *2112AD*, the game which starred canine hero Paddy.

Two Commodore specialists also released Spectrum games. *Yabba Dabba Doo* appeared on **Quicksilver's** label and was written by the **Taskset** programmers, and **Wizard Developments**, the company set up by Commodore star **Tony Crowther**, gave Spectrum-owners the benefit of a conversion of *William Wobbler*. They didn't regard it as much of a benefit, it seems...

March was positively a month of twos. Two adventure games were Smashed: *Lord Of The Rings* and

The Worm In Paradise, the third part of **Level 9's** *Silicon Dream* trilogy. Two games came from the **US Gold** stable, one good one poor – *Winter Games* and *Zorro* respectively. And the **World War Two** strategy/wargame that put you in control of Britain's airborne defences during the Battle Of Britain, *Their Finest Hour*, was looked at twice, by both **Derek** and **Sean**, collecting a Smash from **Frontline**. **Mirrorsoft** completed the Spitfire picture for avid fans with the release of their flight simulation, *Spitfire 40*, which zoomed up to the heady heights of a CRASH Smash.

Mel Croucher, the man behind *Deus Ex Machina* and *Pimania* amongst other things, came back from a short self-imposed exile researching into new hardware and the software possibilities it opens up, to produce *ID* for **CRL** – an unusual, text-based entertainment in which the player had to coax and cajole a frightened personality hiding in the Spectrum into revealing details of its past.

A few weak games arrived, including some budget titles and a very tedious football quiz, but all things considered, March was a very good month for Spectrum software...

Not a bad month for the Spectrum itself, come to that. We took a look at the new 128K machine **Sir Clive** launched on the public, and the speculation as to whether it would be a success began. Now that Christmas is here, if the contents of my postbag reflect the real world there is still plenty of speculation about the viability of **Amstrad's** relaunched 128, the Spectrum +2.

APRIL

WHATEVER 'old wives' say about showers during this month – it doesn't hold true for games. Although it rained games at CRASH Towers there was only one Smash in the shower. **Elite** turned in a straightforward implementation of *Bombjack*, which was devoid of frills but deliciously playable. Not a case of pushing the Spectrum to its limits, but a very entertaining and faithfully-executed conversion.

A trio of games from **Firebird's** so-called 'hot' range turned out to be not-so-hot. Worst amongst the bunch was *Gerry The Germ*, a game full of wit – well, all right then, well-worn puerile humour – which lacked in the playability department and attracted a very lukewarm 45%. The duo behind *Costa Caper*, Messrs **Marsden** and **Cooke** (remember *Technician Ted?*) got a bit warmer and collected 64%. 'Hotrangewise', as **Herbie Hyperbole Wright** of **Firebird** might so easily have said, the lead game was *Rasputin*, a jolly 3-D romp against the forces of evil.

Star newcomer to the software world during April was **Richard Welsh**, whose homegrown program *Frank The Flea* warmed everyone's heart, and earned a very respectable 57% for the novice programmer. We haven't heard from **Richard** recently, but his last stated intention was to buy a compiler and start writing games

that run in machine code.

Julian Rignall, one of the 'Spiky-Haired Ones' from ZZAPI who terrorise the Competition Minion, filled a guest slot by looking at the new games released for the 128K Spectrum and found himself gently impressed by the capabilities of the new machine. Praise indeed, from a dedicated Commodore arcadester.

As things turned, the final review for the rather strange surfing game *Surfchamp*, created by Irish software house **New Concepts**, was not as disparaging as most people in the Towers expected it to be. Perhaps the psychological effect of using a rather silly-looking plastic surfboard didn't have as detrimental an effect as we first supposed... The New Concepts advertisement hit an all-time low in terms of artwork standards, while their promotional sweat shirts hit an all-time high in the office. Isn't life strange?

The new **Bug Byte**, now owned in name by **Argus Press Software**, chipped in with a couple of budget games, the best of which was the rather twee named *Sodov The Sorcerer* in which you were involved in asking marauding dragons to go away. Well, *Go Away The Sorcerer* wouldn't have had much of a ring to it according to Bug Byte supremo Peter Holme... *Roboto* contributed little to the world of budget games, but *Realm Of Impossibility* contributed nothing positive to the games-playing world of **Ariolasoft's** credibility. At £1.99 it would have been a very weak title, better suited to release back in the pre-Issue One days, but at £7.95 in 1986 it was lucky to collect 10% Overall. For the same money, **Ariolasoft** were offering *Think!*, a very compelling icon-driven puzzle game designed by **Tigress**, or for a pound more you could buy *Skyfox* from the same company – a very competent flight simulator. Perhaps *Realm Of Impossibility* was **Ariolasoft's** April fool joke...

Other disappointments for April (apart from Robin Candy's face on the cover and all over his Playing Tips supplement) included a new release from **Electric Dreams** who had got off to a reasonable start with *I, Of The Mask and Riddler's* Den. *Winter Sports* was less than state-of-the-art, and arriving as it did almost in parallel with **US Gold/Epyx's** *Winter Games*, a newly-formed reputation was dented. *Blade Runner* from **CRL** was another disappointment – this time for film fans. No doubt the licence was an expensive one, but the product it inspired wasn't... well, wasn't inspired.

Overall, April was an interesting month, which saw a wide range of software released including a football-league strategy/simulation, a couple of puzzle games, a showjumping simulation (from **Alligata** – who resisted the temptation to get their product endorsed and ended up doing a reasonable job on an offbeat subject), a surfing simulation and a collection of more usual, run-of-the-mill releases. Most embarrassing game of the month had to be *Transformers*, released by **Ocean** and programmed by

Denton Designs. Not their best work by a long chalk.

MAY

'NEVER cast a clout till May's out' my grandmother used to remind us all. Now we've entered the binary age, maybe software houses should update the saying and make sure that they never master till the bugs are out. May's games were bug-free, and although rather fewer in number than other months, they tended to be rather higher in quality.

Lead Smash of the month was the eagerly awaited *Starstrike II* from the masters of 3-D (joint holders with Simon Brattel), **Realtime**. According to plan A, *Starstrike II* was due for release before Christmas, and the trio at **Realtime** invested a significant sum advertising the fact. Sadly, as is so often the case, deadlines slipped and the game was ready for release (without bugs) several months later than scheduled.

Nevertheless, it went down well in the Towers. Earning gasps of admiration from every reviewer who saw it on the CRASH office Spectrums, it was clearly worth the wait. As I sit in my cramped office penning (well, Hermesing) these words, all the reviewers in the CRASH office are currently gasping in admiration in front of another **Realtime** game, this time *Starglider*, released by **Rainbird**. They haven't lost their touch...

Ultimate released their penultimate game for 1986 – *Cyberun*, which duly scraped a Smash and joined another Konami conversion from **Imagine**, *Ping Pong*, at the 90% mark. *Match Day* programmer Jon Ritman launched his slick 3-D version of *Batman* on the world via **Ocean**, impressing *Batman* fans everywhere with the gloss and attention to detail invested in the program. And **Gremlin's** combat game *Way Of The Tiger* collected a creditable 93% which pleased the firm's boss, Ian Stewart, and meant that the tie-in with Knight Books and the *Way Of The Tiger* series of interactive ninja fiction had paid off. Three companies had very near misses on the Smash front: **Durell** still haven't completely forgiven us for spoiling their unblemished run of Smashes by awarding *Turbo Esprit* 88% overall; Mike Daniels of **Global** winced audibly when he phoned in to discover that *Attack Of The Killer Tomatoes*, the first of his 'Golden Turkey' film tie-ins, had just been pipped at 89%, while **Imagine** remained inscrutable about the 88% awarded to their conversion of Konami's *Green Beret*.

Rather unusually, a game from **Atlantis** got a double rating! Opinion was so firmly divided in the office as to the merits of *Supercom*, a hacking game, that it received 86% Overall AND 21% Overall. Nothing like breaking with tradition...

Another combat game, this time a simulation of the pointy-stick school of karate, was launched on the world by **Mirrorsoft** but failed to add anything significant to the

genre. *Exploding Fist* seems to be the classic in this field, even today. Another fighting game, this time of the bombs and bullets variety, came from **Alligata**, who dared to upset **Elite**, holders of the official **Commando** licence, with *Who Dares Wins II* which finally appeared on the Spectrum screen after some legal wrangling. With licences being expensive commodities, the precedent for defending game scenarios and concepts was set – a major departure from the early days, when I can remember a host of 'clones' appearing around every 'original' idea...

Electric Dreams set off on the path to film tie-ins with a disappointing rendition of *Back To The Future*, while on the licence front Max Headroom broke the barrier to arrive on the Spectrum. Deliciously different, **Martech** decided to license a front – Samantha Fox's – which appeared in pixelated form in *Sam Fox Strip Poker*. Some commentators suggested that **Ariolasoft** should have been awarded that particular licence...

The first of the Lucasfilm games appeared from **Activision** in the shape of *Ballblazer* – another delayed release – but this time one which was greeted with a measure of apathy, and **Atlantis** did their best to squeeze the last dribbles of humour out of the C5 in *Revenge Of The C5*.

JUNE

HALFWAY through the year, and the June issue was very thin on the ground as regards licence deals and tie-ins. **Ocean's** game about the lizard-aliens that starred in the series *V, The Young Ones* from **Orpheus** and the belatedly-reviewed *Friday The 13th* from gore masters **Domark** were the only games that featured characters who had appeared on screens that weren't attached to a computer. There was nothing special about any of the three, and in fact *The Young Ones* was a fair old disappointment.

An octet of Smashes appeared, including the first ever Smash for a 128K game – *Knight Tyme* written for **Mastertronic** by David Jones (and later to appear in a 48K version). Phil Churchyard, a regular contributor to Playing Tips **POKEwise**, collaborated with Paul Shirley to produce *Spindizzy*, which collected a Smash for **Electric Dreams**, and made up for a couple of mediocre releases from the Southampton-based company started by Rod Cousins.

Two adventuresome games collected Smashes, *Heavy On The Magick* from Derek and Redhawk from the reviewing team. It looks as if **Gargoyle** are going to be giving their adventure/puzzle games a bit of a rest for a while as they concentrate on their arcade label, but **Melbourne House** released the follow-up to *Redhawk*, *Kwahl!*, just in time for a review in this issue. And second time around, Derek Brewster gets to evaluate the caped (or should that be feathered?) crusader's

deeds of derring-do.

Mr Masterson took the unusual step of re-Smashing *Desert Rats* from **CCS** when it arrived in 128K form – claiming that he'd forgotten first time around on the 48K version! And the issue concluded with three more Smashes – **Ultimate's** last game of 1986, *Pentagram*, **Gremlin's** vertically-scrolling platform variant with yet another ball as hero, *Bounder*, and *Quazatron* from **Steve Turner** on the **Hewson** label.

As months go, June was quite high-quality – only five games received less than 60% Overall, which indicated that a summer slump in games of quality was going to be avoided this year: as indeed it was.

Large and complicated arcade adventures were flavour of the month during June: **A&F** waded in with *Core*, **Probe** went all robotic with *Mantronix*, and **Glass** programmer Paul Hargreaves completed the monster game *Tantalus* for **Quicksilver**.

A pair of sequels came under our reviewers' metaphorical microscopes – they liked *Alien Highway* from **Vortex**, the follow-up to *Highway Encounter*, but disliked *Mugsy's Revenge* from **Melbourne**, which was only saved from a trashing by the fact that a free copy of *Mugsy* was included on the tape.

Despite the awful artwork in the advertisement, *Legend Of The Amazon Women* proved to be a passable beat-'em-up from **US Gold**, while the budget arm of the same enterprise offered the pseudomystical *Secret Of Levitation*, which failed to rise above the halfway mark in percentage terms.

The Telecom team at **Firebird** went hedgehog crazy with *Spiky Harold*, but failed to take advantage of the licensing opportunity on the doorstep of CRASH Towers – the British Hedgehog Preservation Society has its headquarters a few miles away from my home and I regularly encounter its leading light, one Major Adrian Coles, as he constructs little ramps for the spiky creatures to use to clamber out of cattle grids... **Firebird's** other June offering, rather late for the event it parodied, was *The Comet Game*, a space romp loosely based on the arrival of Halley's Comet – which had turned tail and travelled deep into space when the game was released.

Time and celestial bodies wait for no man, and nor do American-footballers. All the razzmatazz surrounding the Superbowl had faded in the memory of Channel 4 viewers by the time **Ocean** got to the shops with *Superbowl*.

Unexpected Arrival Of The Month award went to **Addictive** who came to CRASH Towers without Kevin Toms, without *Football Manager* and with Kirel, a cute jumping game that won the heart of our Girlie Tipster, Hannah Smith...

JULY

THE summer season began with a

quartet of Smashes – and four very different games they were. Over in adventureland, Derek was knocked out by **Level 9's Price Of Magic** – a follow-on to *Red Moon* – which sends the player on a quest to learn about the mystical arts. Derek insists that each of Level 9's successive releases contain that bit more magic, in terms of what they can do with the Spectrum. Another classic coin-op conversion left the **Elite** stable in the form of *Ghosts 'n' Goblins*, and marketeers extraordinaire **Domark** finally collected their first ever Smash for *Spitting, sorry, Splitting Images*. A very simple, and indeed ancient concept – the sliding block puzzle – gained a new lease of life.

In May **Gremlin** had a Smash, in June another. July came, and with it the terrible antics of a wicked character who could so easily have been the creation of an artist working for *The Beano*. **Jack The Nipper** put an interesting slant on the arcade adventure format, amused everyone and did indeed collect a Smash.

Three games that everyone had great expectations for also arrived this month, and each of them proved a disappointment. **Biggles** from **Mirrorsoft** certainly hadn't been flying an undercover mission – the game was tied in with the film of the same name, and the level of promotion and publicity which it received meant that few people could have missed its impending arrival. When the game came in to land, however, it proved to be quite unremarkable. After a good six months' delay, **Melbourne House** released *Rock 'n' Wrestle*, which had lost the 'rock' on the way to the ring and, without the endorsement of Big Daddy, had very little to offer. July was also the month that we looked at the game which fell shortest of expectations: the most contentious game of 1986, *World Cup Carnival*. A major licence deal, a large box crammed with 'goodies', a cassette – a cassette containing a marginally revamped football game that originally appeared on the **Artic** label and was now very long in the tooth.

A handful of budget games arrived, most of them mediocre, but **Snodgits** from **Sparklers** – a sort of detective game – took an unusual approach and proved very playable. **Firebird** entered the budget arena with a combat-decathlon variant *Ninja Master*, and the adventure scene with *Seabase Delta* which somehow captured the imagination of Derek's readers, and was to appear in his letters page on a regular basis over the next few months.

Frontline looked at a pair of games from **PSS**, one good, one not so good. *Theatre Europe*, a game with a rather sensationalist subject, was the better of the pair and seemed likely to encourage players to think about the implications of nuclear war, involving them as it did in making decisions about the launch of nuclear missiles. 'Everyone makes mistakes; this is PSS's' wrote Sean Masterson about *Iwo Jima*. You can't win 'em all!

Molecule Man from **Mastertronic** and *Equinox* from

Mikro-Gen offered quality fare for fans of the arcade adventure, while **Martech's** cunning space game, which was tied in with an astronomer, threw new light on the arrangement of our universe. *The Planets* managed to combine elements of arcade, adventure and educational games and presented a complicated and slightly daunting challenge to the player who set off on a mission to – yes, at least that part was 'standard' – to save the earth from destruction.

AUGUST

THE SUMMER of this year was nothing spectacular – maybe people kept releasing games because there was nothing more pleasant to do? Whatever the reason, we were flooded with budget titles this month – unfortunately they were mostly uninspiring.

Games involving balls were popular in 1986. Apart from kicking them and hitting them in sports simulations, they also had to be bounced, rolled and jumped through hostile terrain. **Bobby Bearing** from **The Edge** rolled out into the Metaplans this month in search of his cousins and found a Smash on the way, and an anonymous football negotiated fire, nasty sharp pins and boxing gloves amongst a host of other nasties in **Mirrorsoft's** flip-screen arcade adventure *Action Reflex*.

Pumpkin fans got their chance to strike back in *Cauldron II*, **Palace's** sequel in which a cute bouncy pumpkin (nearly a ball, but not quite) had to make his way round a flip-screen castle in the best arcade adventure tradition, collecting the wherewithal to depose the evil Hag. Another Smash.

Firebird (perhaps spotting Sean Masterson's favourable comments about an old Red Shift game, *Rebelstar Raiders*, some months ago), launched a revamped version on their budget label and collected a Smash for their trouble. Spotting a gap in the market and then filling it is without doubt the route to commercial success!

Two quality arcade adventures also collected Smashes: *Pyracurse* from **Hewson** in which a large South American temple/tomb had to be explored *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*-style, and *Heartland* from **Odin**, who by now had handed over the headaches of publishing games to **Firebird** and were concentrating on writing them.

The first games arrived from the new budget label launched at Chateau Interceptor – **Players** – they were met with an almost unanimous lukewarm reception, despite the hip-hop packaging. Our very own Derek Brewster also met with a poor review for his new game, *Con-quest*, which appeared on **Mastertronic's** **M.A.D.** label.

A couple of clones poked their noses above the ramparts – **Alligata's** *Budgie* label turned in a fair rendition of the *Wizard's Lair* theme with *Labyrinthin*, earning 60% Overall, while **Ariolasoft** published another game from

Dave Harper, *Toadrunner*, which bore a very striking resemblance to his earlier work for **Electric Dreams** – *Riddler's Den*. **Electric Dreams** themselves gave film tie-ins a rest to release *Hijack*, which puts the player in the role of a harassed American official dealing with a terrorist incident.

Even though they collaborated with Ocean, **US Gold** didn't manage to do a particularly good job on their conversion of the ageing coin-op *Kung Fu Master*, and their second budget release on the **Americana** label, *Subterranean Nightmare* turned out to be a bit of a bad dream.

The rush to budget software didn't appear to be producing anything special, with mediocre products from **Mastertronic**, **Central Solutions** and **Atlantis** filling the remaining review pages...

SEPTEMBER

THINGS quietened down over September, but at last Oli was able to do the cover he'd been waiting to get to grips with, ever since he heard that *Dan Dare* was on its way from **Virgin**. Despite repeated requests, the team at Virgin simply hadn't allowed a single early screenshot out of their programming chamber, and when the game finally arrived it was a complete mystery... Moments after it had loaded it became clear that the game did justice to the cartoon hero and a Smash was on the cards. Virgin's other game, *Atlantic Challenger* (which gives the player a chance to control Virgin supremo, ocean racer and litter campaigner Richard Branson) did less well. Maybe there should have been an arcade sequence in the park with one of those pointed sticks...

This was a good year for **Mikro-Gen**, but perhaps a slightly bad month – their new game which introduced 'Teenage Superhero' Ricky Steele missed Smash status by a single percentage point to the disappointment of all down in Bracknell, where Wally Week is in comfortable retirement.

Rod Bowkett's keenly-awaited follow-up to *Dynamite Dan* was completed in time for review and lived up to expectations – another fairly straightforward platform game, but one with so many added touches that a Smash was inevitable. And two Smashes were awarded in the adventure world – one for *The Boggit*, a delightful spoof on Tolkien created by **Delta 4** and published by **CRL**, and another Smash for **Incentive's** adventure-writing utility, *The Graphic Adventure Creator*, which went on to take the homegrown-adventure world by storm.

Flight-simulator fans were treated to *Ace* by **Cascade**, a company whose reputation was founded in the budget compilation market, and which moved towards mainstream games publishing with a very neat airborne combat simulation.

Saving film tie-ins for later in the year, **Electric Dreams** went aquatic, producing a whimsical undersea romp by the name of *Mermaid Madness*, and an aqueous version of *Panzadrome*

written by **Ram Jam** and called *Xarg*.

Rupert Bear and Dangermouse starred in games from **Bug Byte** and **Sparklers** respectively, but failed to achieve superstar status, while Santa Claus made an unseasonably early appearance in a game from **Alpha Omega**, the budget label created by **CRL**. No-one was likely to leave out a glass of sherry and a couple of mince pies for this Father Christmas...

After the problems they experienced with *The Young Ones*, **Orpheus** decided to stop publishing games in their own right, and instead concentrate on providing a programming and conversion service for other companies. *Tujad* had been completed before *The Decision* was taken, and duly appeared on the **Ariolasoft** label, winning some admiration for the graphics, but breaking no new ground as an arcade adventure. French software house **Infogrames** did try to break new ground on the adventure/role-playing front, but somehow lost direction along the way with *Mandrill*.

As the September issue was being written, companies were gearing up for *The Personal Computer World Show* and seemed to be saving the best for their stands... with a massive preview section completed, the rest of the CRASH team departed for Olympia leaving yours truly to hold the fort.

OCTOBER

THE *Personal Computer World Show*, as always, was an event and a half where all the leading lights of the software industry paraded their promises for Christmas. **C&VG** carefully avoided parading *Melissa Ravenflame*. Despite a hard-fought sticker war, the cartoon tipster failed to materialise leaving the Show floor to our own Girlie Tipster Hannah Smith.

Trivial Pursuit arrived on the **Domark** stand at the show, and collected another Smash for the marketeers in the October issue – after a period in the doldrums (as far as ratings go anyway), **Domark** seemed set to make their mark. **Elite** continued their coin-op conversions, launching *Paperboy* and *1942* – *Paperboy* came remarkably close to being a hit in the ratings, while the general consensus of opinion surrounding *1942* was that it was an accurate conversion of a rather dull game. But **Elite** wasn't left out – *Scooby Doo*, a different version to the one originally planned in late 85 – collected a Smash. Domination of the Hotline Charts seemed to be **Elite's** aim...

After a fairly long absence from the scene, **Vortex** bounced back with a ball game from Costa Panayi – an elegant 3-D puzzle-cum-arcade-adventure entitled *Revolution* which completed the trio of Smashes for the month.

Another bevy of budget games scurried in for review and were all poor to awful except for *Lap Of The Gods* from **Mastertronic**, which followed on from *One Man And His Droid* and collected 80%.

Tennis from **Imagine** got a poor

reception – the best of the Konami coin-ops had already been converted, but the reception that *Knight Rider* received was even less favourable. Despite the interminably long wait (and the release of an early, completely different game through a mail-order catalogue) **Ocean** had very little to offer.

The seeds of controversy were sown in two reviews – *Head Coach* (see the Christmas Forum) and *Zythum*. **Mirrorsoft** weren't terribly impressed with our review and felt that we hadn't done the game justice... The favourable review *Strike Force Harrier* attracted did little to mollify the affront.

Newcomers **Piranha** certainly got their teeth into the software market, kicking off with *Trapdoor* and *Strike Force Cobra* and narrowly missing a Smash with Don Priestley's colourful interpretation of the TV series starring Berk and a host of strange creatures confined below the trapdoor.

The Spectrum +2 moved closer to being reality – sample machines had been on display at The PCW Show, but didn't get into the shops until much later...

NOVEMBER

ONCE AGAIN, lots of budget games came under scrutiny, and despite entries from **Mastertronic** and **Americana**, *Firebird* lead the field in terms of quality with *Bomb scare*, *Happiest Days Of Your Life* (a Wally Week clone – maybe the hero's in retirement but the format still lives), *Olli And Lissa* and *Thrust*. The Telecom team were let down a little by *Kai Temple*, but no-one's perfect, especially in the budget world...

Smaller companies led the Smash field this month – **Durell** provided a very unusual 3-D game with an equally unusual title, *Fat Worm Blows A Sparky*, **Gargoyle** treated everyone to an attribute-clash-free shoot-'em-up, and

CCS impressed our tame strategist with *Napoleon At War*. **Infogrames**, though by no means a small company, came very close to a Smash with *L'Affaire Vera Cruz*, as did **Gremilin** with *Trailblazer* and **Ariolasoft** with the original concept of *Deactivators*.

Street Hawk finally got into the high street and proved to be a disappointment, but not as great a disappointment as *Knight Rider*. *Asterix* was another long-awaited game that proved less than wonderful, despite the protracted development time, and **Melbourne House** did nothing to improve their gently slipping image by releasing *Conquistador*, a cute but unremarkable arcade adventure.

Controversy began to rear its head again when we awarded *Glider Rider* a Smash for the 128K machine, but didn't make a song and dance about it because the 48K game only merited 80%.

Another bumper 164-page issue was planned for December, to cram in all the game reviews that we expected to have to cope with...

DECEMBER

WITH Christmas fast approaching, software houses began revealing their prime programs. Out of some 30 games which we looked at last month, only five scored less than 60%. Overall, **Alpha Omega** somehow don't seem to have penetrated the budget market with quite the right approach – their games have consistently failed to achieve good ratings. More Omega than Alpha, in fact, with *Dr What* collecting a mere 17%.

Code Masters entered the budget arena with a pile of titles, which received a warm reception.

Otherwise no major surprises as promised Christmas games arrived for review... Another 12 months of CRASHISTORY was ruled off in the ledger, and the New Year awaited eagerly.

good or not.

Yet 1987 has seen at least one major software house come to terms with its reputation for unevenly implemented licences and tackle the problem in the only sensible way – place more stress on better game design, programming and, most importantly, better playtesting. A pointer to the future, and a hope, perhaps, that the more professional this industry becomes, the better the product may be, rather than poorer and less caring.

The other 8-bit trend, most noticeable with Spectrum software, has been the growth of budget labels and titles. Had **CRASH** opted for a 'budget review ghetto' a few months back, as had been internally suggested, then today there would be few pages of reviews! No-one has quite agreed yet whether the burgeoning budget is a Good Thing or a Bad One. On the whole the quality of budget releases is still universally poor when you consider how many there are, and despite the notable exceptions **Mastertronic** (in its various guises) and **Code Masters** have given us occasionally.

The saving grace has been the sheer size of the 8-bit market. Software houses don't yet seem prepared to let full-price games slip away, and ironic as it may be, the advent of a 16-bit market with competitively priced machines like the Atari ST providing a real alternative for upgrading, is likely to force companies to produce even better Spectrum and CBM64 games to maintain the 8-bit sales.

Bearing all this in mind, let's take a trip down cliché lane and rip through some of the good times and some of the bad of 1987...

JANUARY

AFTER a prestigious launch with *The Art Studio* and some complex music utilities, British Telecom's **Rainbird** label had remained quiescent on the Spectrum, now it kicked off the New Year with two Smashes, *Starglider* and *Jewels Of Darkness*. The 48K *Starglider* was hailed as 'amongst the best games to grace the Spectrum', but it was the 128K version that kept the office minions working after hours, and rated at 97%, it was one of the highest Smashes ever. Written by **Realtime Software** (*3-D Tank Duel*, *Starstrike*), it featured incredibly fast 3-D vector graphics, an assortment of enemies to kill as well numerous missions to be undertaken. *Rainbird* gave it the VIP treatment from its lavish packaging to a 64-page novelette which gave clues as to how the game should be played.

Later in the year the Atari ST version featured on the TV programme *Get Fresh*. So impressive was *Starglider* that since then it has reversed natural trends to be converted into an arcade machine. It has been *Rainbird*'s only arcade game to date, but the company has become noted for its adventures. They took over veterans **Level 9 Computing** and *Jewels Of Darkness* was a compilation of three of Level 9's early hits, *Colossal Adventure*, *Adventure Quest* and *Dungeon Adventure*. Each game was revamped with improved text and the addition of graphics. Once again *Rainbird* packaged it lavishly with a short novella by Peter McBride. The compilation was highly recommended by Derek.

The undead were dragged into the Spectrum's 3-D isometric sphere with *Nosferatu*, licensed from the silent Twenties film of the same name. Pitting the player against the dastardly demon vampire, *Nosferatu* consisted of three main stages, the middle one of which had the player controlling three characters! The game was an instant Smash with reviewers, which was nice for **Design Design** who wrote it, and for Macmillan's

fledgling label, **Piranha**, who marketed it.

Piranha's second release of the month, *Rogue Trooper*, again programmed by Design Design, and based on the comic-book hero made famous in *2000 AD*, wasn't received with quite the same enthusiasm as *Nosferatu*. Comments ranged from 'too boring' to 'I could play this game for hours', but one aspect all the reviewers agreed on was that it was just too easy to play.

Other licensed games of the month included *Marble Madness*, *Tarzan* and *Space Harrier*. *Marble Madness* clones had been floating around for months, many failing to impress. **Melbourne House** tried topping the lot by releasing the *Marble Madness Construction Set*. The inclusion of a screen designer did little to push its ratings up and many felt it was a poor effort when compared with *Gyroscope*, a previous variant on the same theme also by Melbourne House.

Martech's *Tarzan* had you hurtling through the jungle in a loin cloth in a bid to rescue your beloved Jane from the hands of the Usanga tribe. We recognised that it contained some pretty pictures but at 73% overall the game was nothing special. Neither was *Elite*'s anxiously awaited conversion of the arcade hit *Space Harrier*, which projected the Midlands company into the New Year on a continuing spate of licensed arcade games. In truth most aspects of *Space Harrier* were reasonable, but it wasn't ideally suited to the Spectrum, and without the original's moving cabinet, the game seemed to lose something and came out with a score of 77%.

The Edge started 1987 with *Fairlight II: Trial Of Darkness*, sequel to the 1985 Smash *Fairlight*. What seemed destined to be a hit failed to live up to our expectations, falling short of a Smash with 81%. Author **Bo Jangeborg** was praised for the highly detailed two-colour graphics, but was criticised for the game's slowness and the extreme similarity that it bore to *Fairlight*. Just going to show that graphics maketh not a game.

January also saw **Microsphere**'s first release for quite some time. Could they keep

LOOKBACK – 1987

TRENDS noticeable in 1985 and 1986 continued not only unabated throughout 1987, but even accelerated; and most major software houses fronted with licences and conversions. There are some very good reasons why coin-op arcade games should find their way onto home micros – about the same sorts of reasons why good novels find their way onto the TV and cinema screen – but good reasons aren't enough alone; just as books can be ruined in their adaption, so can arcade originals in their conversion.

Licences are really much harder to defend, since the source is frequently unsuited to a computer game theme, and if it wasn't so often sad, it would be an amusing sport to watch frantic programmers desperately struggling to pick on something in 'their' film on which they might hang a reasonable game. During 1987 the commercial notion that a 'name', whether it be a famous person, incident, book or fictitious character, can sell a computer game, whether it be good, indifferent or poor, took a much firmer hold. It's a cynical notion, that reckons people are so gullible that because they adored *Rambo Clone Wars* starring Arnold Stalnegger at the cinema, they'll go out in their droves and by the licensed game from Slipshodsoft without waiting to see whether it's any

up the standard set by earlier hits such as *Skool Daze* and *Back To Skool?* *Contact Sam Cruise* certainly did nothing to harm Microsphere's image as a producer of original, high quality software. A Smash with 93%, *Contact Sam Cruise*, written by **Dave Reidy**, was credited with having a Raymond Chandler flavour about it, as the player roamed the city streets trying to solve a case while avoiding gangland heavies partial to a bit of Sam bashing.

Pete Cooke scored his first hit of the year for **CRL** with *Academy*, the long awaited sequel to *Tau Ceti*. Following in the same vein as its predecessor, *Academy* set tasks of varying difficulty for the player to overcome. The game also included an option to define your own skimmer, but as weight had to be taken into consideration it was impossible to equip yourself as an indestructible super fortress. Described as 'amazingly good', *Academy* was Smashed at 92%. Pete Cooke's programming abilities seemed to have improved with his last few games, and as it turned out, *Academy* was not to be his last hit in 1987.

FEBRUARY

FEBRUARY deluged the Towers under an avalanche of software – obviously lots of Christmas releases that had just missed the seasonal deadline. It seemed to be the month of the tie-in with *Gauntlet* and *Top Gun* topping the bill. Incidentally a third of February's releases came from either US Gold, Imagine or Ocean. It was also the first time in CRASH history that the ratings system was overhauled to bring it more in line with the times. From February forth the reviewers' comments would be credited with their names.

After months of clones and poor imitations the official **US Gold** conversion of *Gauntlet* arrived, and blasted away the competition. Smashed with an overall of 92%, *Gauntlet* was a great game and one not to be missed. To accommodate the original's great size the programmers had elected to use a multiloop system to expand the game's potential – not the first time a Smashed game had used this system and certainly not the last. Nevertheless even with this system the graphics were not very impressive. Where *Gauntlet* differed from many of its imitators was with its simultaneous two-player option, not quite as much fun as the four-player original but nevertheless a vast improvement on the one-player, antisocial clones, and a huge saving in 10ps.

Electric Dreams' first release of the year was a licensed game based on the scary movie *Aliens*. The player controlled Ripley, four space marines and an android as they entered the Alien Queen's egg-laying chamber to kill her. The graphics were neat and it certainly had atmosphere, but thankfully the game wasn't as gory as the film. We had no real complaints but just felt that it wasn't quite good enough to warrant a Smash.

Ocean fared a touch better with

their film licence, the fine aerial dogfight simulator *Top Gun*, which tested the player's flying abilities to the hilt. Although it lacked Tom Cruise, and while the graphics were simplistic vector affairs, the game made up for these shortcomings in its gameplay. The player chased the computer's plane through the heavens, trying to gun it down before it got you. If this became boring then a two-player option allowed for head-to-head combat with your best friend. Yet another hit game which proved that playing computer games isn't necessarily antisocial.

Eccentric tie-in of the month awards went to *The Archers* and *Donkey Kong*. *The Archers* was released by **Mosaic**, but it was the skillful programming by the bunch at **Level 9** that turned what was potentially a very dull game into an enjoyable experience. The object was actually to keep up the long-running radio show's audience ratings. As with *Adrian Mole*, also released by **Mosaic**, you didn't have to input replies but were given a number of options to choose from. Strangely, although its overall rating was 90% it wasn't a Smash, probably an oversight between editorial and art, rather than Derek's intention.

Ocean's *Donkey Kong* was an oddity because they had released *Kong* some years previously. In those dim and distant days people didn't seem to bother so much with the proprieties of licensing, so perhaps **Ocean** thought it was time to redress the balance and do it properly. In the event, this version was licensed from the Nintendo arcade machine, and while the reviewing minions thought it a good conversion, they also felt that it was just a few years too late.

Speaking of **Ocean**, February saw them releasing *Highlander*, another game based, although loosely, on a film. Programmed by **Canvas** (the splinter from **Denton Designs**), it centred on only one aspect of the film, the fight sequences. You played the part of McLeod set against three opponents, Ramirez (very strange as he was McLeod's friend in the film), Fizzir and Kurgen (the mighties of the bunch), and each character had to be loaded separately. On the whole it was a disappointing product that bore little resemblance to events in the excellent and quirky film.

Imagine released a real clutch of games including *Yie Ar Kung Fu II*, *Super Soccer* and *Konami's Golf*. Probably best of the bunch was *Terra Cresta*, yet another coin-op conversion. This shoot-'em-up with its vertically scrolling format bore a striking resemblance to that old arcade favourite, *Xevious*, the Spectrum conversion of which **US Gold** also released in the same month but it got a lower rating. Graphically *Terra Cresta* was nothing special, but shoot-'em-ups can always be great fun and this was no exception. Given an 81% rating, it was felt to be just a touch too expensive, considering what you got.

Torus, the programmers of *Gyron* and the Spectrum version of *Elite*, unveiled their third game, *Hive* on the **Firebird** Gold label. Set on the insect-populated planet

of Gamma V, the player penetrated the hive's complex defences to eliminate the Queen at the centre of a network of tunnels, and needed to find a laser and other assorted goodies such as key cards to gain admittance into areas sited about the tunnels. We were divided in our opinions of the latest **Torus** game. Some thought it looked impressive but lacked enough real excitement to make it brilliant, while Ben felt that the game would become a cult. I guess Ben's prophetic powers aren't fully developed yet...

Impossaball narrowly missed out on Smash status by receiving 89%. Written by newcomer to the Spectrum **John Phillips** and marketed by **Hewson**, it had the player guiding a bouncing ball down eight progressively harder corridors. The scrolling of the graphics was excellent, and in general the whole package was very polished, but it just lacked that little something that turns a good game into a Smash.

Then spring arrived...

MARCH

AFTER flushed February mordant March was most notable for its absence of good software. Perhaps the spring hadn't quite sprung then...

Most games released hovered around the sixties mark with *Feud* and *Ranarama* standing head and shoulders above the rest.

The major event of the month was the take over of veteran **Melbourne House** by budget software giants **Mastertronic** for a claimed seven-figure sum. Both software houses still published under their own names with **Melbourne House** occupying the full-price range and **Mastertronic** concentrating its labels on the budget market.

In a doubtful attempt to prove they were still in operation, **Melbourne House** finally released *Judge Dredd*. Based on one of comics' most famous cult characters from *2000 AD*, it was always going to be a risky licence in the eyes of Dredd fans, and perhaps **Melbourne House** took it in entirely the wrong direction. It was basically a platform game with the player jumping around the screen shooting perpetrators (perps to the cognoscenti) who threatened Mega City One. *Judge Dredd* was inevitably a great disappointment to **CRASH** Towers, especially after waiting so long for it. The comic stories provided plenty of scope for a game but **Melbourne House** failed to implement any elements that made the strip a hit.

Perhaps we could be kinder to **Melbourne House's** second March release? *Fist II*, sequel to *The Way of the Exploding Fist*, set you the task of finding a temple, entering it thus making you invincible, and overthrowing the evil Warlord who ruled your land with terror. Sadly, we couldn't. Expectations ran high but the game didn't quite deliver the goods. Despite the 16 fight moves available, the action in between fight sequences was dull, and it gave the impression of being very

mundane.

Programmed by **Binary Design** and released by **Mastertronic's** **Bulldog Software** label, *Feud* was one of the highspots of the month. Playing the part of one of two feuding medieval brothers, the object was to run around the playing area collecting ingredients to mix spells and potions which created havoc for your sibling. *Feud* was the first **Bulldog** release, and further showed how **Budget** games were coming of age. At £1.99 the game provided excellent value for money, with large, well animated graphics and the real bonus of gameplay which really kept the player on his toes.

Greyfell was the first release for another new games label, **Starlight Software**. An evil wizard had brought misery to the forced perspective world of *Greyfell*, and only by stomping on meemies to kill them, and by collecting useful objects, did you have a chance of ridding the land of the wizard's baleful influence. *Greyfell* was well presented but its gameplay left a lot to be desired.

After eons of waiting **Activision's** *The Little Computer People* (LCPs) finally emerged from our Spectrums, although it transpired that only 128K machines were big enough for them to inhabit. You remember the story; not so much a game more a way of life, the package supposed that *Pet People* were little beings who lived inside your (128K) computer, and you were responsible for feeding and keeping them happy. Each pet had its own personality and preferences, and simple keyboard instructions could request the pet to do things such as play records, take a bath or play a game with you on its (128K) computer. tedious.

But it had taken too long in coming out on the Spectrum and excitement created initially by the **CBM 64** disk version had worn off. Novel it may have been, but the Spectrum's limitations imposed on the program made it less flexible, and in truth it was a touch tedious.

Ever one for turning principles into frogs, **Steve Turner** took the *Gauntlet* theme a step further for **Hewson** with *Ranarama*. Much in the same vein as the original, *Ranarama* expanded on the idea and improved it a great deal. Turner, author of *Dragontorc* and *Quazatron* among others, cast the player as Mervyn, a failed sorcerer's apprentice who, by a series of miscast spells, ends up in amphibian form. The castle has been overrun by evil warlocks and other assorted unpleasanties and Mervyn must save the day by annihilating them, and restoring himself to human form in the process. Its presentation differed from *Gauntlet*, fitting more than one room on screen at a time, and while the graphics were good the animation tended to get a bit messy at times. But once again it was the highly addictive gameplay that made this game a Smash for **Hewson**.

On the down side, **Brian Clough's** *Football Fortunes*, which had featured on the Christmas Special cover, enjoyed less favour than fortune, with 42% for **CDS**, occasioning comments typical of

many hybrid board/computer games reviews before it – it seemed the software side had been neglected.

Fortunately there was a highlight though, and undoubtedly the event of the month was an interview with **Bernie Drummond** and **Jon Ritman**, the men behind the hit game *Batman*, which gave the reviewing team their first glance at *Head Over Heels* – but more of that in a moment.

US Gold's *Masters Of The Universe* licence hit rock-bottom, while **Leisure Genius** fared only slightly better with the licence they had been working on for well over a year, *Scalextric*. **Electric Dreams**, too, seemed to be a software house in search of success after its pre-Christmas launch; *Explorer*, the game boasting a ludicrous 40 billion mappable screens, and *Tempest*, the wire-frame shoot-'em-up from the arcades, failed to impress deeply.

APRIL

THE APRIL issue of CRASH saw some spring-cleaning at the Towers. Founding editor and all-round slave-driver Roger Kean was taken off the mantlepiece, given a good dusting and reinstated at the helm while Graeme Kidd departed with the wintry weather for the editorship of trendy magazine LM. Hannah Smith departed from the Playing Tips for the sweet smell of pastures new, and a newcomer to these hallowed pages was Richard Eddy, who made the transition from AMTIX to CRASH reviewer with the minimum amount of fuss besides the odd cry of 'bwah, monster' and his driller killer laugh.

US Gold's CBM 64 hit *Leader Board* finally made it on a Spectrum green. It took us all hours of persuasion to dissuade Roger Kean from donning his flat cap and awful houndstooth-check plus-fours and giving it a bash. *Leader Board* was the very best golfing simulation we had seen. Featuring a four-player option, budding golfers could play on any of four 18-hole courses with three levels of play. Notorious for their boredom factor, reviewers don't look forward to golfing simulations, but *Leader Board* surpassed all past expectations, and although a bit slow to play at the start, perseverance resulted in an enjoyable game which got 80%.

A strong contender for game of the year was *Head Over Heels* released by **Ocean** and written by the duo **Ritman** and **Drummond**. It had the reviewers raving.

Set in a far away galaxy, four planets ruled by the tyrannical Emperor (from the planet Blacktooth) are in turmoil. Two spies from the planet Freedom have been sent to provoke revolution and recover the lost crowns from the slave planets. *Head Over Heels* utilised the isometric forced perspective now a commonplace. It led to an immediate comparison with the earlier *Batman* as well, but Ritman and Drummond injected much into the stale format. For a start the

spies *Head and Heels*, separated at the start, had different abilities, and were controlled as separate units or could be united to perform tasks that each alone could not. Added to this novel approach were the many puzzles, collection of objects whose purposes were not immediately apparent, and the marvellous arcade action. *Head Over Heels* more than adequately proved that good computer games do not depend merely on appearances but on game design as well, and it certainly deserved its rare accolade, a Smash at 97%.

Breakout games enjoyed a comeback, and **Imagine's** *Arkanoid* received an overall score of 59%.

This souped-up version of the ancient hit, despite some odd programming which made some of its idiosyncracies a bit hard to handle, proved to be thoroughly addictive. After five years the game hadn't made any major improvements on the original, but just went to show that some games never die, they simply get rewritten. The review led to a battle when many readers, horrified at the low rating, attacked in the Forum, a fight which was to hot up in the following month when *Gremlin* Graphic's version, *Krakout*, received a higher percentage.

Breakout was not the only golden oldie to be rewritten this month with the advent of *Classic Muncher* from **Bubble Bus**, a variant on the well worn *Pacman* theme. Consisting of six infinitely repeating screens, *Classic Muncher* played exactly like its inspiration, and while bringing back flashes of nostalgia, it did little to impress, scoring a miserable 41%.

Telecomsoft's first Smash of the year came in the form of **Firebird Silver's** *I, Ball*. At £1.99 it provided astounding value for money, and after some tediously sub-average product, showed that Firebird still had it in them to produce an excellent low-cost game and give Mastertronic a run for their budgets. Most notable was the excellent digitised speech, best heard through some sort of

inbuilt buzzer wasn't really up to it. The gameplay was terrific and it had us all addicted within a short time.

If addiction be the food of love, then indigestion is much the same as repeating things – we had **Elite's** *Bombjack II*, which didn't do too badly at 71% but failed to satisfy as much as its predecessor had done, there was *The Growing Pains Of Adrian Mole* from **Mosaic** (but marketed by **Virgin Games** this time round), which did almost as well as its ancestor at 88%, and there was **Software Projects**, striking back with *Escape From Singe's Castle: Dragon's Lair II*, which also did pretty well with 83%. In each case the game was more than reasonable, but the surfeit may have caused the reviewers to sicken. It looked like it was time for May...

MAY

MAY'S edition of CRASH was a bit fat as spring/summer issues go

due to the inclusion of a giant 32-page Playing Tips bonanza lovingly compiled by yours truly over many sleepless nights. Past years had always seen the so-called summer slump, but May managed to produce a remarkably good crop of games from a surprisingly large selection, including the latest releases from both **Firebird** and **Ultimate**.

Over 24 months **Activision** had not found much success with its Spectrum games but with the advent of *Enduro Racer* they set the record straight. Licensed from the arcade machine of the same name and programmed by **Giga Games**, it followed the original closely. The object of this bike race game was very simple – outrace the other bikers and complete each course in the quickest time possible. Each course contained different backdrops with logs, rocks and opponent racers acting as obstacles. Race games have always been firm favourites with the public and each year they improve in ingenuity, *Enduro Racer* lodged its way firmly amongst the greats of this type.

After Silver, it was Gold's turn; following hot on the heels of the budget *I, Ball*, **Firebird** secured themselves a second Smash in as many months. Costly at £9.95, *The Sentinel* still provided wonderful value for money. Once again we had a game that had been a huge hit on the CBM 64, and had then taken an age to appear on the Spectrum, but the implementation was finely tuned. The daunting task of rescuing 10,000 planets from the Sentinel and its Sentries through a process of power absorption, offered the player a game of thoughtful, chess-like strategy – where much consideration had to go into each move to ensure success – and sometimes furious activity. Its originality and the sheer depth of play made it a winner.

Martianoids was **Ultimate's** first release of the year – and for some time. A 3-D forced perspective game, it cast the player in a defensive role with lasers for protection against marauding Martianoid machines. The tide had been slowly turning against *Ultimate* over a period, and *Martianoids* was criticised for below-standard graphics and poor gameplay, receiving only 58%. And it wasn't the only disappointment in May; *World Games* from **US Gold/Epyx** didn't quite live up to expectations either. Like *Winter Games* it was divided into several events with the player having to wait what seemed an eternity for individual events to load. Its graphics didn't impress as much as had its predecessor's, but it was otherwise an adequate sports simulation.

Indigestion was narrowly avoided by **Gremlin Graphics** when they released *Auf Wiedersehen Monty*, latest in the long line of Monty Mole games which had started back in 84 with *Wanted: Monty Mole*. Written by Monty's creator, **Peter Harrap** it followed his usual style of game, a complex platformer with devious traps and neat graphics and sound. It also sparked off a controversy within the reviewing ranks between those who were bored stiff of Monty, and those

who still reckoned a game could be good despite its formulaic convention. The latter won out and *Auf Wiedersehen Monty* got 85% as Monty trekked across Europe to buy himself a nice Greek island so that he could be safe from the prying attentions of Intermole, the international crime fighting organisation. But in that missing five percent that would have made it a Smash like the previous *Harrap 'Monty'* games, perhaps there was a buried message that the formula was risking staleness.

Ocean hoped to give everyone a pleasant shock with *Short Circuit*, based somewhat loosely on the movie. It contained two distinct games, an arcade-adventure and a chase sequence. The arcade-adventure saw the hero-robot Number Five searching offices for extra parts and a means of escape, while the chase sequence, staged on a horizontally scrolling background, had him attempting to reach a van at the end of the track and escape to further adventures. Unfortunately the shock was more of a tingle, for despite the above-average graphics, the game suffered from tie-in-itis, a failure to pinpoint the film's best aspects.

In a bygone age **Gilsoft** released the marvellous *Quill*, a machine code utility which acted as a writing system for those who wanted to create adventures but couldn't program. Later they gave us the *Quill Illustrator*, and between them they supplied many a good game but were equally responsible for an influx of many bad ones. In 1987 Gilsoft excelled themselves and achieved a Smash with *The Professional Adventure Writer*, or PAW as it became known. A continuation of adventure writing systems, PAW was extremely well documented, making it much easier to use than existing systems. As with many adventure writers, graphics could be drawn, but PAW really came into its own with its handling of vocabulary. Derek Brewster gave it 97% – and made it must for hopeful adventure programmers.

Reeling from the shock of a **Firebird** budget Smash the month before, **Mastertronic** hit back through their **M.A.D.** label with the peculiarly named *Amaurote* – and they got a Smash too. In *Amaurote* you freed sectors of a city from invading insect armies, destroying the Queen before she could produce more insect warriors and overwhelm you. **Binary Design's** highly original monochromatic graphics made it look stunning. It was both playable and addictive and, in 128K mode, boasted extraordinarily atmospheric music which Ben Stone kept playing until we all felt like lasering him into oblivion.

For two years **Mike Singleton** had held Derek Brewster in his 'Land Of Midnight' thrall. Now he reappeared somewhat outside the adventure area with *Throne Of Fire* for **Melbourne House**. Though in fact he hadn't programmed it, Mike played an important part in the game and graphics design. *Throne Of Fire* – three brothers battled for the throne of power with the player taking on the part of one of the brothers and the computer controlling the others – used a split-screen format similar to that

of *Spy vs Spy*. It looked very good, but we felt it was a bit too easy to be really satisfying, although the game scored through an option for two players to take on a brother each while the computer played the remaining brother.

JUNE

TALK OF THE DEVIL, having just mentioned it, in June *Spy vs Spy II* popped up. **Beyond's** prequel had been a Smash some years before. The follow up, titled *Island Capers* and released through **Databyte**, saw the familiar black spy and white spy running around a tropical island searching for parts of a missile, using the Trapulator to lay devious traps as the means to exterminate each other. Oddly, the monochromatic presentation of the earlier game was dropped in favour of colour – too much in fact, and ugly attribute problems gave it a rather garish appearance. This wasn't really progress, with slow, jerky scrolling letting down a reasonably playable game, and reducing it to only 53%.

You didn't have to be on a tropical island to enjoy the heat – this was sunny June for a change, and there were 37 games in review! Could this really be summer? I can remember past Junes when we were lucky to scrape 15 games together. Mind you, a lot of the titles were budgets. No, we lacked not for games, but the Smashes were few.

Luckily *Hydrofool* from **FTL**, the Gargoyle Games label, gave us something to rave about – and kept us cool, for the sequel to the acclaimed *Sweevo's World* had Sweevo on a new mission this time under water, cleaning out the filthy world known as Deathbowl. The famous Gargoyle sense of humour clearly emerged in Sweevo's task, pulling out each of the four plugs that held the water in, as assorted nasties tried anything to get rid of him. Stunning 3-D isometric graphics set on several levels, amusing animation and devious puzzles made it a hit, but *Hydrofool* was very derivative of *Sweevo's World*, and more likely to appeal, it was felt, to fans of the previous game.

In quick succession **Ultimate** slipped out another release in a marble vein of madness – *Bubbler*. It was an improvement on *Martianoids*, though not by sufficiently large a margin to improve their flavour to full. The planet Irkon, under the sway of the evil wizard Vadra, could be saved by corking magical bottles that controlled his power. Once again **Ultimate** chose to use monochromatic 3-D graphics with smooth screen scrolling. Inertial effects coupled with the awkward control method made movement along the walk-ways difficult. Presentation may have been fine but gameplay was lacking, and mixed feelings amongst the reviewers, led to an overall rating of 78%.

Not one to be outdone, June saw Derek Brewster following the Playing Tips supplement with his very own *Adventure Extravaganza*. **Rainbird** finally released a Spectrum version of

The Pawn, an acclaimed Atari ST hit. Sadly it came minus the pretty graphics but still enjoyed Derek's approval at 90%.

Melbourne House managed to top this, however, with *Shadows Of Mordor*, follow up to *The Lord Of The Rings*. Following the further adventures of Frodo and Sam in *The Two Towers*, it left the player to choose which character to play. *Shadows Of Mordor* retained the use of English (the vocabulary system which made *The Hobbit* such a big hit), but only 128K Spectrums had enough memory for the graphics to be displayed.

Durell were also in full sequel mode and chasing another Smash with *Saboteur II* (or should it have been called *Sister Of Saboteur*?). With the hero of *Saboteur* dead, it was his sister who took up the central role in a bid to stop the Dictator from using his hi-tech missile systems, while android warriors were out to stop the avenging angeline. There were improvements, but in style of play and graphical presentation it followed the first game very closely. These similarities resulted in a rating of 83%. Had a little more originality been used it might have made it to Smash status.

Elsewhere the software front was dismal. **Ocean's** *Army Moves* looked good but odd collision detection made it frustrating. **Hewson** slipped up with *Gunrunner*, a scrolling shoot-'em-up with a stale format. **Quicksilver's** wire-frame *Red Scorpion* was a poor *Battlezone* rehash that left everyone wondering whether the once-great software label would ever find a game of merit again. Even quirky *Piranha* disappointed with *Mr Weems*, while *Mario Bros* from **Ocean** was hardly the coin-op/games console conversion we were hoping for, and most ludicrous licence (probably) of the year to date came from **Activision** in the quacky shape of *Howard The Duck* – and it was out for a duck as well.

At the very last moment **Barbarian** dashed to the rescue. **Palace Software** not only caused controversy with their adverts, but the review of the game didn't go down too well in some quarters. Simple enough in theme, it was a savage beat-'em-up with swords in a gladiatorial arena, but the first-rate practice mode and two-player option (on the cassette's B-side) together with fine monochromatic animation, made *Barbarian* one of the best fight games to emerge for a long while. Not quite a Smash, but very nearly.

JULY

NOW the 'summer slump' really started – it seems to get later every year – and not only did the number of games decrease but there was also a distinct lack of quality software, only *Zynaps* and *Killed Until Dead* saved the day.

Recovering from the uninspiring *Gunrunner*, **Hewson's** next shoot-'em-up (an old-fashioned genre which had hardly ever been in their repertoire) saw a change of pace, ideas and presentation. *Zynaps*

was a classy, high-speed, horizontally scrolling game, just about the ultimate in *Nemesis* clones in fact. Additional weaponry could be collected, improving your chances against the aliens but, basically you were on your own. With code by **Dominic Robinson** and snazzy graphics by **Steve Crow** looking like colourful, smooth-moving works of art, this shoot-'em-up was a joy to play. *Zynaps* served to relieve the boredom of a software-starved month.

The big surprise, however, was *Killed Until Dead* – a surprise because although the reviewing began early enough, no-one noticed how much this quiet game affected everyone else... but more of that below.

Before the month descended entirely into a slough of despond, we had *Stormbringer* on **M.A.D.**, latest in the long line of **Mastertronic's** 'Magic Knight' games. Having returned from *Knight Tyme* the hero had split into two personalities; one good and the other decidedly off colour. In merging the two egos you restored White Knight to his former glory. Programmed as usual by **David Jones**, it followed the same format of the previous 'Magic Knight' games in collecting objects and grouping them together to solve the numerous problems. And although it lived up to expectations already set with colourful, detailed graphics and devious puzzles, we were split over it; two reviewers reckoned it an excellent buy at £2.99, the other pointed out that it added little to the well-worn formula. The result averaged out at 86%.

And then there was *Thing Bounces Back* – a sequel without a Spectrum predecessor. **Gremlin Graphics's** *Thing On A Spring* had been a big CBM 64 hit with its uniquely cute boinging character in battle against wicked toys in the evil Goblin's toy factory. In the unprecedented sequel *Thing* attempted to stop the flow of evil playthings by collecting components of a computer. The toy factory was an industrial complex of platforms and pipes which provided a game on par with the Monty Mole series, but disappointing documentation and awkward controls let it down considerably.

In the same month **Gremlin** released, at the slightly lower price of £4.99, *Alien Evolution*. A 3-D scrolling game with more than a passing resemblance to the ancient hit *Ant Attack* (reviewed in Issue One), it had the player ridding the planet's surface of invading aliens. Though very derivative, it remained playable and reasonably addictive, but the passage of time elapsed since *Ant Attack* lowered its rating to 75%.

The **MicroProse** association with American **Origin Systems**, noted for their accurate attack-flight simulations and software personality boss, ace fighter pilot Wild Bill Stealey, finally resulted in the Spectrum release of *F-15 Strike Eagle*. Flight sims rarely look their best on the Spectrum, but this one contained as many thrills and spills as could be reasonably expected, and scored a very high 84%.

As for the rest – well July is

probably better forgotten except for...

Killed Until Dead. So there we were, sitting at the back end of the schedule, putting the last of the reviews together, when suddenly Paul Sumner noted that he'd given it 93%. Roger Kean looked at the other comments already in and let fly with a gasp! A Smash had crept up on us! **US Gold's** detective game was set firmly in favourite sleuthing land, a closed environment with only fellow amateur sleuths as the victims, murderers and hunters. At the Gargoyle Hotel all the world's greatest mystery writers had assembled for a reunion but one is a murderer and another the intended victim. Your task was to solve the mystery before the event could actually take place. *Killed Until Dead* was an enjoyable and involving mixture of intrigue and action in a race against time, topped off by atmospheric graphics and compelling gameplay – it illuminated gloomy July.

AUGUST

NOT CONTENT with resting on their recently regained laurels, **Hewson** followed up July's Smash with yet another all-blasting shoot-'em-up called *Exolon*. The theme was hardly new – mercenary is hired to rid a world of numerous beasts and unfriendly military installations using a powerful laser system and grenades for the more stubborn obstacles. But *Exolon's* main assets lay in its very large, brightly coloured and highly detailed graphics and the smooth animation of its central character. And the gameplay was all you would expect from a lavishly presented piece of action software. The 125 screens also showed that there was more to *Exolon* than just pretty graphics.

It has always seemed strange to me that no-one had picked up *Flash Gordon* to turn him from celluloid hero to a pixelated one, but **M.A.D.** finally did it and obliged with the game. Sadly the result aped some of those features which are nostalgically regarded today with fondness in the films but which don't look so endearing in a computer game – such as a poor plot and dreadful effects. Divided into three sub-games, *Flash* dashed through jungles, beat up cave dwellers and showed off his prowess as a motorbike rider. The graphics were quite dreadful, and as one reviewer remarked, *Flash* looked somewhat like a deep-sea diver. A disappointing game that held few surprises in store for the player.

After many rumoured launches and subsequent delays, **Ocean** scored a Smash with the 128K version of a game based on James Clavell's best-selling novel *Tai-Pan*. Central to the plot was trader Dirk Struan who wanted little out of life other than a vast fortune and to be boss of a trading empire – its *Tai-Pan*. It was, not unsurprisingly, a trading game where you started with a £300,000 loan to be paid back within three months. Trading

games have a long and sometimes respectable Spectrum history, but they're usually let down by repetition. *Tai-Pan's* action couldn't be described as high speed but the wealth of things to undertake, such as purchasing and crewing ships, risk taking and avoiding the depredations of pirates on the high seas, made it one of the most enjoyable games of the month.

Derek's adventure *Smash* for the month marked a return to form of Macmillan's software arm *Piranha*. *The Big Sleaze* was written by **Fergus McNeill** and it was a different approach for the writer renowned for his hilarious parodies of better-known works such as *The Lord Of The Rings* (*Bored Of The Rings*). Cast as film noir private detective Sam Spillade you had to solve various cases that fell into your tawdry office. As with Fergus' earlier hits it was the wit and humour perforating the text that made Derek give *The Big Sleaze* 93%.

Veteran 3-D Smashers **Realtime Software** released *Starfox*, their second game of the year, this time marketed by Ariolasoft offshoot **Reaktör**. Piloting the mighty craft *Starfox*, the player had to save the universe yet again from marauding aliens. It had many of the good points that made *Code Name Mat* and *Elite* such classics, and it deviated slightly from Realtime's shoot-'em-up format. Planets had to be located, mother ships docked with, enemies destroyed and numerous other tasks had to be carried out. A combination of filled-in graphics and vectors were used to represent the enemy ships. While both Mike and Robin thought it highly impressive, Ben was not so convinced. He labelled it 'unplayable' and brought the overall rating down to 77%.

US Gold's *Road Runner*, a conversion from the arcade game which was, in turn, based on the cartoon, failed to convince everyone. The game design wasn't entirely satisfactory - *Road Runner* hurtled along roads collecting seed chased by the infamous Wile E Coyote, while trucks, crevasses, boulders and exploding mines all barred his path to long life. Through a multiloop system, US Gold tried to capture the cartoon's atmosphere with garish multicoloured graphics, but this led to the dreaded attribute problem rearing its ugly head once again, and together with complaints about the awkward character control, led to an overall rating of 73%.

The other big licence was **Domark's** second attempt at a James Bond film, *The Living Daylights*. It was divided into several levels following the main action scenes from the film. In the game this took the form of several similar scrolling sectors where you killed baddies. The only thing that seemed to change were the sector backgrounds, giving an all round sense of disappointment. Poor on-screen presentation and slack gameplanning let down what was potentially a fine game.

As a refreshing change from coin-op conversions and tie-ins, **Pete Cooke** released his second hit of the year. *Micronaut One* represented two changes in

direction for Pete, he had moved from CRL to **Nexus**, and after two *Tau Ceti* games, abandoned the formula to do a very fast wireframe 3-D tunnel game. At that, it might have been quite ordinary, but the underground network of tunnels were infested by an insect form with three distinct biological stages to their lives which added interest to the game. And of course there was the by now accepted intricacies of Pete's front end with multiple options, plus a racing game to improve the player's steering abilities. Rated at 92%, it reaffirmed Pete Cooke's position as a top programmer.

A pity as much couldn't be said for most other programs reviewed in the issue. **Ariolasoft's** licensed *Challenge Of The Gobots* palled very quickly, **Ocean's** attractive looking *Mutants* turned out to be unaddictive, **Reaktör** had three disappointing sisters in *Killer Ring*, *Deadringer* and *Mountie Mick's Deathride* (such an obsession with death!), the much-heralded *Leviathan* from **English Software** flapped and then flopped, *Championship Baseball* made **Activision** look dull and even **Martech** slowed up with the interesting but sluggish *Catch 23*. At least **Virgin Games** stuck firmly with their collective tongue in cheek and amused us with (was it a licence?) *Trans-Atlantic Balloon Challenge*. The game couldn't possibly detract from adventurer-boss Richard Branson's brave exploit, because it was really too silly to be taken very seriously, and we couldn't resist giving it the very first (and probably last) CRASH Splash.

SEPTEMBER

IF CRASH had a Game Of The Month award it would undoubtedly have gone to **Novagen's** *Mercenary*. Almost two years in the making, *Mercenary* must be the longest-awaited conversion ever. And the Spectrum coding by **David Aubrey-Jones** resulted in *Mercenary's* fastest incarnation - a triumph for both programmer and machine. The player has crash-landed on the inhospitable planet Targ, and the essence of the game is to seek a craft to escape from Targ's gravitational well. It's to your benefit that war has raged on Targ between the Mechanoids and the Palyars for years, because to gain enough credits to buy a super ship you can be a freelance fighter for either side.

Novagen used vector graphics to represent structures above and below the planet's surface. And while the game featured exceptionally fast, smooth-moving graphics, it also mixed in puzzle-solving to give a sense of depth. The reviewers were united in their opinion of *Mercenary*, giving it an Overall rating of 96%.

Virgin Games's uneven record improved a touch with *Rebel*, another in the long line of bird's-eye-view scrolling games that characterised 1987. The graphics were attractively detailed, but *Rebel* split reviewers over the value of its content - Paul thought it hard, Ben unoriginal. It got 76%.

US Gold's attractive but strange-looking *Survivor* also split the reviewers, coming in at 70% Overall.

On the budget side, there was little to recommend though quite a lot of it, few of the games achieving more than 45% (the same could be said of the full-price games, to be fair). **Players** made a fine exception with *Joe Blade*, but even that caused controversy; Mike and Paul loved the game (90%) while Mark thought it only above-average at 65%. After a few nasty scenes involving a nerf ball and a Biro our exalted editor Roger Kean intervened with a cry of 'enerf's enerf' (I've been waiting to pull that joke for months) and an Overall rating of 84% was agreed. Playing the part of Joe Blade you explored the evil Crax Bloodfinger's stronghold to rescue six world leaders, armed with disguises and a trusty machine gun. The cartoonish but monochromatic graphics enhanced play, and it was agreed that *Joe Blade* had playability in abundance with enough thought required to keep the player returning to it time after time.

Odin had developed an ultrafast horizontal-scrolling routine which at one point they hoped might be used by Thalamus for a Spectrum conversion of Stavros Fasoulas's Commodore 64 hit *Delta*. In the event nothing happened on that front, but shortly afterwards **Firebird** put out *Odin's Sidewize*, which did bear more than a passing resemblance to *Delta*. Other magazines rated it quite highly, but it found less favour with CRASH at only 50% because the attack waves were all the same and predictable. And with **Quicksilver** going down the tubes, **Imagine** sliding disappointingly out with *Game Over* and even **Piranha** failing to impress much with **Don Priestley's** *Flunky*, it was left to Ocean, Palace and Elite to score top arcade marks along with Novagen.

Continuing the spate of beat/maim/kick-'em-up-type games, **Ocean** served up *Renegade*, much to the gratification of certain bloodthirsty reviewers. Here was one of the very best street-fighting games of all, where you had to cross five landscapes to reach your lady love Lucy; the basic theme of each was to defeat muggers before they stretched you out. The graphics were detailed, marred only by the odd attribute problem. And there was certainly plenty of action, though perhaps home-computer entertainment needs a little more variation than games in the arcades.

In CRASH it looked like Novagen, not content with just one *Smash* in a month, had scored a second with *Stiffly & Co* - but it was, of course, a terrible error that apparently occurred in layout, and fortunately fooled no-one, for the game belonged to **Palace**. And a fine oddity it was too, featuring Viscount Stiffly and some friends in an attempt to scupper Count Chameleon's dastardly plans for that last bastion of British hope and glory, the beloved cricket ball. By manipulating icons, you could control all four members of your team. Windowing techniques just like those in *The Fourth Protocol* showed the action, which prog-

rammers **Binary Design** had helped create. The presentation was polished and garnished with humour; plenty of puzzles and a second game on the cassette's B-side contributed to a great product.

Elite's contribution was *Batty*. Through the year there'd been a resurgence of the old *Breakout*-type games; we'd had *Arkanoid* from Imagine and *Krakout* from Gremlin Graphics, but *Batty* was the main selling point of *Elite's* 6-Pak Vol. 2 rather than a solus game, and is best described as an improved version of *Arkanoid*. *Elite* pushed the *Breakout* theme about as far as it could go, with beautiful presentation and simple but compelling gameplay. *Batty* went to show that good ideas never fade, they just get rewritten.

Derek's *Smash* of the month was a budget game from **The Power House**. *Custerds Quest*, a humorous adventure about the antics of Sir Coward de Custerd, may have been a cheapie but programmer **Craig Davies** sacrificed nothing and provided a first-rate game. Derek was also pleased with *Masters Of The Universe* from **US Gold**, who successfully made amends for earlier releasing the abominable arcade version of the same game, also based on the TV series. Programmed by a large group including **Mike Woodroffe** (*Gremlins*) and **Teoman Irmak** (*graphics for Touchstones Of Rhannon*), it played much like other, pricier *Adventuresoft* releases and Derek rated it at 84%.

OCTOBER

THE month's most obvious feature was *The CRASH Sampler* precariously taped to the front cover, with demos such as the graphically breathtaking *Driller* from **Incentive** and **GO!'s** *Trantor - The Last Stormtrooper*. Christmas and the PCW Show loomed large, so many software houses were holding back on their latest products. Nevertheless the October issue contained its fair share of fine games.

Software Projects had been noticeably absent since *Dragon's Lair II* but *Hysteria* marked their return. Reminiscent of Ocean's *Cobra*, it failed to live up to the high standards set by the hit game despite well-defined, colourful graphics and reasonably compulsive gameplay. We felt *Hysteria* offered little long-term challenge. Perhaps the appeal of the beat-up-the-baddies genre was waning...

Ocean had two high-class games, *Athena* and *Wizball*. The industry watchwords were 'computer nasty' and 'sexism'. In September CRASH had reviewed *Soft And Cuddly* from **The Power House**, which unfortunately coincided with the Hungerford massacre and thus became associated with psychopathic violence, while for *Game Over* Imagine had pushed women about as far forward on packaging as the marketing men dared decently go, and the portrayal of women in derisory passive roles was being watched closely.

But *Athena* reversed the

traditional stereotyped roles of men and women, with the Goddess Of Wisdom herself wielding destructive weapons in a bid to clear six levels of nasties. Unhindered by stiletto heels and running mascara, Athena could do anything the typical male hero could.

For all that, in SNK's arcade game Athena is more Bambi than Rambo, and on the Spectrum screen she was more cute than killer; Ocean also undid their sexual-equality programme by portraying her on the packaging in male droolerama style. The gameplay closely resembled that of *Ghosts 'N Goblins* – Ben thought it unplayable but Ricky and Nick rated it an excellent conversion.

Wizball, on the other hand, was a different cauldron of frogs, for once uniting all the reviewers. For a start, its scenario was involving: Zark and his unpleasant horde had invaded Wizworld and bleached the once-colourful land, so the local wizard set out at once to paint the town red and annihilate the colour-blind swarm. A big hit on the Commodore 64 from **Sensible Software**, it was translated faithfully to the Spectrum. The graphics were very good, with lots of attention paid to detail such as the magnificent Mount Rushmore. And even the odd colour clash didn't stop it being Smashed.

The other two Smashes of the month were for the **Firebird** labels, one Gold and one Silver. *I, Ball 2* (Firebird Silver) was the follow-up to the equally Smashed *I, Ball*. Unusually for a follow-up, *I, Ball 2* was not derivative of its predecessor. It was a neatly-presented game but the real crux was its instant playability.

Bubble Bobble gave Firebird their Golden Smash. Though retailing at a higher price, the pretty coin-op conversion wasn't a complex game (just expensive in licence fees, no doubt). The conversion was competently carried out, and helpfully the coin-op graphics were already suitable for smaller home computers. Simple it may have been, but all the original's addictive qualities were retained.

Plexar was good too. The **M.A.D.** game had distinct echoes of *Gremlin's Trailblazer* – you controlled a ball bouncing along treacherous crystal roads. The playing area featured highly detailed monochromatic graphics, and the lack of colour in the playing area was cleverly disguised by colourful backgrounds. Again, it was a very simple idea but proved frustrating in the right way – just enough to keep you coming back for more.

As the year wore on, we were seeing more and more budget games, and they were better than ever before. **Hewson**, presumably reckoning that if you can't beat 'em-up, join up, launched their budget label **Rack-It** with *Draughts Genius* and *Ocean Conqueror*, and both performed reasonably well. *Draughts Genius* was a good implementation of the ancient game, but apart from offering a one-player-versus-computer option it didn't have much advantage over an ordinary

draughts set. *Ocean Conqueror* got 77% for being an accurate submarine warfare simulation with 3-D periscope graphics and plenty to do once you'd got started.

TV cartoon series continued to spawn Spectrum tie-ins with **Gremlin Graphics's** release of *MASK I* (possibly the first game to add the numerical suffix – they were already working on *MASK II*). Playing hero Matt Trakker you had to enter a time vortex and rescue your fellow MASK agents from the clutches of the VENOM organisation. It was a bird's-eye-view, multidirectionally-scrolling shoot-'em-up-cum-puzzle-solving game played across four different backdrops. Though small and monochromatic, the graphics were well-defined, and the gameplay was enjoyable enough, but the story line bore little resemblance to the TV series.

NOVEMBER

WE had 33 games to review – not so bad, perhaps a bit on the low side for the time of year, but what was disappointing was that few of them really grabbed the attention, only four getting over 75%.

The one Smash went straight, and without argument, to **Elite** for *Thundercats* – yet another tie-in with a TV cartoon series. But the accolade really went to **Gargoyle Games**, who wrote the game, firmly underlining their 1987 status as developers rather than as a software house involved in marketing and distribution. *Thundercats* was a frantically fast, horizontally scrolling slash-'em-up that made you want to get on to the next screen just to see what happened there – the prime quality of addictiveness. And if Lion-O rather resembled Gargoyle's older Celtic hero Cuchulainn, who cared? It was nice to see him back again.

Another TV cartoon tie-in flopped miserably for us, and that was **Virgin Games's** *Action Force* by the ubiquitous **Gang Of Five**. Its neat concept was wrecked on the rocks of poor scrolling, unfair gameplay and mind-numbingly absent game. One suspected it had been rushed like mad into production without much playtesting.

Just missing the top by a few per cent, **Gremlin Graphics's** rerun *Jack The Nipper II In Coconut Capers* proved again that the adage 'if you have a good formula then do it several times over' makes financial sense. The reviewers all agreed in their comments that this was a good sequel, with perhaps fewer puzzles to solve but more to see. Paul's only grudge was that the *Nipper* wasn't as naughty as before... strange, coming from an aspiring policeman.

From mid-1987 onward, **Code Masters** had been pushing like m.a.d. to make themselves the top budget house, with massive coverage in both computer and general media (including several national papers), much of it concentrating on the two youthful whiz-kid owners, **David Darling** and **Richard Darling**. By November there was a touch of hysteria in the publicity machine's

hype for the company's products and the young celebrities, characterised in so many headlines and captions as 'The Darlings Of The Industry'. In fact they had produced some very good budget titles, but everyone happily overlooked the fact that they also produced some terrible ones. November was no exception; of the four games, *Professional Ski Simulator* scored 79%, *Dizzy* received 78%, *ATV Simulator* scored 66% and *White Heat* got 17%, being described by Ben as '... the most simplistic, primitive and dull game I've had the misfortune to play...'

Professional Ski Simulator was regarded as an admirable attempt at recreating a difficult sport. Nick gave it 87%, but Robin Candy, who had developed an expensive taste for the sport and regarded payment for his CRASH writing as a 'slush fund looking for hard snow', gave it 71%. *Dizzy*, written by the **Oliver Twins** (made almost as adorable by the media as their bosses The Darlings), was a playable arcade adventure of sorts, but to a raucous bunch like the CRASH reviewers its cutesy appearance was something of a drawback.

US Gold, as themselves and as their new label **GO!**, disappointed, especially with the latter's *Trantor – The Last Stormtrooper*. Who could forget the graphics? They were tremendously exciting and it looked so atmospheric, but what happened to the game? Through its slick, glossy appearance *Trantor* received 68% from a grieving reviewing team.

And *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom* and gloom fared a little worse. Ironically, Spectrum-owners enjoyed the best version of all (apart from the Atari ST's) because the inevitable monochrome graphics lent clarity to an otherwise muddled and confusing series of screens. Gameplay was poor too: three screens wasn't enough and they were too easy in one sense, being made hard only by frustrating factors such as pop-up thugs that killed you on the edge of the screen.

Electric Dream also came a cropper with what should have been a great game, *Supersprint*, converted from the Atari coin-op. A few values carried over from the original earned it 58%, but the Spectrum implementation added nothing.

Even Derek, despite a dreadful dose of 3-D red-and-greenness he picked up on holiday, only managed a minor fit of enthusiasm with two adventures, one of which was a GAC-ed **Incentive** release, *Karyssia Queen Of Diamonds*; the other, a budget double bill from Tartan consisting of *The Prospector* and *The Crown Of Ramhotep*, was *Quilled*.

All in all, apart from some bright spots later in the month, it was a gloomy few weeks for software that left the Spectrum addicts feeling a bit like Indy – plunged in that temple of doom.

DECEMBER

FOR THE LAST month of the year, things picked up to give us two

Smashes of great merit. First and foremost, 18 months of hard work paid off for **Incentive's** new solid 3-D technique *Freescape*, and *Driller* – the first game to use the routines – proved to be among the all-time top-rated Smashes with 97%.

Flight simulations have always been a difficult area, and CRASH often accused of not understanding them enough to be able to review them sensibly. It's an unworthy accusation, though it's true they tend to have a limited appeal; not so *Gunship*, which received 92% and so earned **MicroProse's** Smash as one of the best-ever helicopter simulations.

And there were five other highly-rated and entertaining games. **US Gold** skated back on boards with the novel *720°*. **Digital Integration** gave us the very dangerous ice-sport simulation *Bobsleigh*, thrilling high-speed 3-D. **Hewson** showed with the unique rotating game *Nebulus* that the sudden loss to Telecomsoft of their long-term program-developers Graftgold (a team which includes Steve Turner and Andrew Braybrook) couldn't deter them, and Mastertronic finally provided U.C.M. on the **M.A.D.** label.

Wrapping up last year's Lookback, I noted that at the very last **Code Masters** 'entered the budget arena with a pile of titles, which received a warm reception...'. And despite the occasional bug-ridden cheapie, it certainly has been the year when budget titles came of age, though often enough along the lines of 'might is right, or never mind the quality fill the length of shelf'.

The fear of full-price software houses such as Ocean – that a danger of budget games is their price relative to the shelf space they occupy – is still real.

One shelf-foot of full-price Ocean games earns the shopkeeper some five times what the same foot of budget games would. But if a shopkeeper has a few feet of budget games in there with his full-pricers, that drags down what he sees as the per-foot profitability of his whole computer-games section. Will he (or his counterpart, the executive at a high-street chain) decide it no longer makes economic sense to sell computer games AT ALL?

And then I still contend that the lack of advertisements from budget houses (which they simply can't afford out of the low profit they make on each game) does far more damage than merely denting magazines' revenues – it actually creates a lower level of awareness about computer games, and with a lower thrill factor, fewer people are interested and the whole market becomes depressed.

On the other hand, the growing strength of the 16-bit market is forcing 8-bit software to grow up as well, and one thing you can say of 1987 – some three years after it was firmly declared that the humble Spectrum had gone as far as it could – is that the barriers of what is possible have been pushed outward yet again, in many different ways but always to our benefit as games-players.

Already, I can see 1988 will be another interesting year...