



the history



the history

*Compiled by
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A



PRODUCTION



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foreword

by David Ward

The story of Ocean parallels the evolution of interactive software as mainstream entertainment with the adoption of personal computers by the general public, which created a paradigm shift in the use of information technology. From dots on a screen to immersive simulation, the company's time-line spans the emergence of a global industry using computer processing to deliver fun and games.

Formed at the beginning of the 1980s alongside the birth of home computers and not long after *Pong* was sprung on an unsuspecting world, the Ocean pioneers had the good fortune to be able to blaze a trail through uncharted territory in a world where anything seemed possible.

Harnessing raw development and marketing talent, the company invented its way to success, honing a new business; one in which there were few guidelines and little or no descriptive language. In the space of

ten years the Ocean team grew from a handful of enthusiasts contacted through specialist magazines to nearly 300 staff, embracing art and design, software development, marketing, sales and administration. A new kind of company with few of the rules or constraints of traditional business and little appreciation of what couldn't be achieved.

By the 1990s the computer and video games market had become global and Ocean's products were sold in all the major markets of the world; subsidiary companies were formed in Europe and the United States. The bottom line got bigger and the corporate structure more sophisticated and yet the essence of the business was still its people, its assets the talent of the individuals who made up the workforce. The mission statement was to provide innovative, compelling entertainment to a waiting world and Ocean did just that!

The ability to recognise that this new kind of entertainment would

represent the primary engagement of a demographic of young players – as important as film or music in shaping and stimulating the interests of the new computer generation – was the key to understanding this new market.

It triggered an enormous amount of experimentation, of trial and error, and produced an ever widening variety of gaming categories from sports simulation to fiendish puzzles, action adventure to role playing. Anything that could be imagined by programmers and designers barely older than their audience was sanctioned; success was quickly built on with the software cul-de-sacs quietly consigned to history.

Of course the work/life balance for a group of young talented individuals was always going to be a challenge and so it proved to be.

Ocean's social calendar became a symbol of the spirit of freedom which characterised the production and marketing process, as those who worked hard inevitably wanted to party

harder. As the company's events diary became fatter and more glamorous, and the out-of-hours activity ever more risqué, working to play became almost as important as playing to work.

Ocean was a company very much of its time, it could only really have existed at the dawn of an era; the driving force behind its growth and importance was the necessary change and invention for its survival. It succeeded in bridging the chasm between an untrained, informal development resource and the requirements of sophisticated business finance, to invent a new industry and bring it to market.

To all those who worked with the company it left an indelible stamp on their young lives. That most remember those times with affection, even advantage, is testament to the skill and humour used to address the many obstacles that stood along the way.



ocean

the history

For much of the 1980s, the UK led the world-wide revolution in home computing which began at the start of the decade. At the heart of the fledgling industry, which grew to be a billion-dollar-a-year business, Ocean led the way as a creative developer and publisher. Its history of innovation, expansion and triumphs established the company as a global brand. This is Ocean's extraordinary story.

Above: This shiny chromium-plated Ocean logo was fixed to the exterior wall of the company's Castlefield premises.

Over a period of a decade and a half, Ocean became Europe's largest video games developer and, more importantly, publisher. The company's creators were Jon Woods and David Ward, and their story is one of growth and commercial success in an industry, which – as David once rashly (but accurately) boasted – would become bigger than the movies.

Four other figures joined Ocean and made their managerial mark in the early years of the company: Paul Finnegan, a founding shareholder, acted as the company's sales director up to 1987; Gary Bracey and Paul Patterson started out as software development manager and sales manager respectively; and Steve

Blower joined Ocean as creative director.

It is 16 years since Jon Woods and David Ward last worked together, and while time has wrought changes to the company they founded, Jon is still recognizable as the gruff rough diamond of the duo, the no-nonsense businessman – 'the Engineer', as Paul Finnegan calls him – and fast-talking David, the raconteur and visionary, or 'the Brains'.

The company which started life as Spectrum Games, then to become Ocean, altered a lot over the years, eventually to disappear into the French corporation Infogrames. In that time, rumours, as they will, circulated to suggest the two towering figures of the British games industry, Jon and David, had fallen out, become reclusive and refused all interviews about the past. Not entirely true, as it turns out.

'We've known each other since we were not quite old enough to drink a pint in a pub,' Jon says. 'We actually didn't go to school together but our parents lived in the same road, in a place called West Kirby. It's on the Wirral. Yeah, we met when we were about 17, mere youngsters.'

David nods. 'The relationship we had and the kind of trust we had in each other enabled us to do very different jobs in the company – and that contributed to Ocean's success. We got on in the sense that we could add different things into the mix. Jon's sense of structure was very important. The story of Ocean is really the beginning of this industry,' David says, and then hesitates. 'But it wasn't an industry then... it was an invented thing. One of the most interesting things about what we did was that we made it up on the hoof as we went along. There were no parameters, there were no business models, there were no... even the nomenclature was invented to try to characterise what we were doing.'

'Frankly, the business didn't exist back then,' Jon joins in. 'So to a great extent we could make the rules up as we went along, within reason. Obviously there were other software houses creating

"It was an invented thing... we made it up on the hoof as we went along."

games, but it got to the point that when a movie was announced, say *Jurassic Park*, ninety per cent of the time Ocean got the licence. I worked at creating relationships with the arcade and movie people, whereas David booked all the advertising in the computer magazines. I never



actually spoke to a magazine to buy space or to discuss editorial.'

Joined at the hips, then? Jon shakes his head. 'No, we're like chalk and cheese, completely different. I did what I did and David did what was needed to take things forward. We never needed any board meetings. The two of us had a chat, that was our board meeting. You could do it like that, you see, and instant decisions were made. There was no one else to consult.'

But inventing a games industry wasn't Jon and David's real beginning. That goes back to the 1970s when they were in business together doing something a million miles from video games.

David Ward (seated) and Jon Woods, appearing in the May 1984 edition of *Crash* magazine, photographed outside the Ralli Building, the first home of Ocean Software.

Galaxian, Namco's arcade coin-op of 1979, found popularity on the Atari 5200.

Gary Bracey, who was a representative for a clothes company, recalls them importing Afghan coats. David paints it with a little more sophistication.

'We created an iconic retail brand selling clothes. We invented the idea of the unisex boutique...well, we didn't *invent* it, we kind of parallel-invented it... in the north-west basically.'

Jon, the quieter of the two, nods his agreement of the recollection, as David goes on.

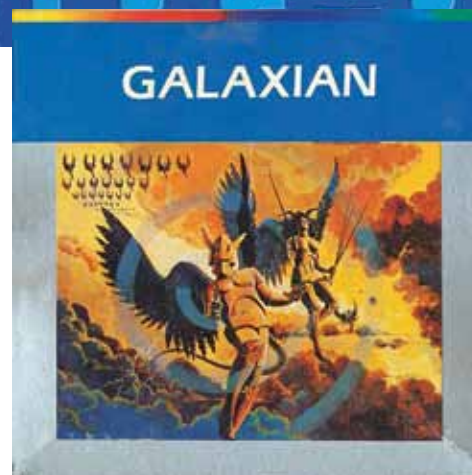
'Towards the end of the 1970s, though, the chain-stores had caught up.

"The local mafia decided that they would do a deal with us and put these machines in our club. They were the first colour video game machines."

David Ward and Jon Woods face an 'amazing new business'.



Burtons and their ilk – who had been selling very prosaic clothes to teenagers so the kids looked like their dads – had caught up with the idea of fashion, and started selling tee-shirts and jeans and brightly coloured clothing, like we did. We found it more and more difficult to compete, so we sold out and I went to



America for four years. In a sense, that's where the Ocean story really begins.'

The Ward family moved to Los Angeles where David opened a nightclub.

'The local mafia decided that they would do a deal with us and put these machines in our club. They were the first colour video game machines. *Galaxian*, I think, was the first one, and *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* soon followed. We had lines of people queuing up to play these games every night. People, you know, who should have been dancing were playing on these machines. On Monday morning the guys would turn up with a Cadillac and pour all the coins into the boot...'

Hand gestures graphically suggest how far the Cadillac sank on its springs under the weight of the loot.

'We got half the money back in dollar bills, and away they went. Every two or three weeks they'd take away one of these machines and replace it with another one. It was an important revenue source for us.'

It was David's first brush with arcade video game machines and the opportunities they represented immediately caught his interest. 'I did a

bit of investigation and discovered that Atari existed... the *Ping-Pong* consumer product had begun, but because these products were captured on a ROM chip it made it a very high cost to enter that business in America.'

The way forward – computers

David returned to England in 1981 and noticed, through reading features and snippets in the papers, that people were playing video games, but more so on computers than in America where console machines like the Atari VCS had held sway since 1977.

'I spoke to Jon about it at the beginning of 1982 and remember saying



Created in 1972 by Alan Allcorn and Nolan Bushnell for Atari Incorporated, *Pong* in its arcade form was the earliest video game. Home *Pong* (above) came along in 1974 as a controller which could be connected to a television set.

what an amazing business it would be if we could get the compelling arcade games onto home computers. But I had no idea how it was done. It turned out they were programs loaded onto a tape cassette, and you bought these cassettes and you took them home, and you spent about an hour and a half loading the game...'

Jon puts on an amazed tone at the 'ancient' technology. 'You had to use your own cassette machine. You didn't get a cassette machine with the ZX Spectrum. Imagine it... with filthy heads and the azimuth out of line. There was no cartridge. No one had heard of a disk at that point. And so you can imagine the frustration at loading the damned game!'

'Didn't the Commodore 64 have a disk?' David pipes up.

'It did, but the one before that didn't, the VIC-20 didn't,' Jon insists.

David shakes his head at the memory. 'Yes, it was very early days. There were two companies then which caught our eye – Bug-Byte and the more recent Imagine.'

Paul Finnegan was involved in both companies. In his mid-twenties, he and a partner had a printing business



in Liverpool. One day he went cold-calling for business in the city centre and happened on a little office, with two young guys sitting on boxes. 'It was the two Tonys from Bug-Byte, Tony Baden and Tony Milner. They were just out of Oxford, and they'd started doing these games. I started doing a bit of work for them, and suddenly we were printing thousands of these inlay cards, black and white originally and then they went on to colour. And our printing business grew somewhat off the back of that.'

David Ward and Jon Woods had their eyes firmly fixed on what was happening

with these new-fangled computer games right on their doorstep. 'Sure enough the local games companies were beginning to sell quantities of games, even though there was no real retail environment to sell them into,' David says. 'You sold a few in a shop down the road and a few more elsewhere. I think in Bug-Byte's case they were making these cassettes one by one. There is a tale of them with five or six cassette machines in a line and pulling a string so that they all started recording from the master at the same time.'

Paul Finnegan confirms the impression of increasing sales. 'The

two Tonys were in a great position in those early days to take advantage of the market. Two 22-year-old lads, very bright... but I think they just didn't see the opportunity like others.'

The Tonys took on several enthusiastic programmers, but in 1982 Mark Butler, Dave Lawson, and Eugene Evans left to form Imagine, and asked Paul if he would help them on the sales side. 'I thought it was a great opportunity and definitely the market to be in, so I sold my half of the print business to my partner and I jumped into Imagine. It was an incredible business, you know, the amount of money coming in was fantastic... but it was going out the other door. Everybody had a nice car, even the cleaners had a Porsche! I was with Imagine for about six or seven months and I got to know all the buyers at the different stores. Boots, WH Smith and Menzies were the big people.'

Is there a market?

The sudden success of Liverpool's games software houses was being compared in the press to Beatlemania all over again. It gave Jon and David pause for thought. 'Liverpool was swamped with the two then quite large companies,' Jon says, 'not to forget Software Projects as well. So we made a conscious decision to locate our company in Manchester.'

Knowing that Bug-Byte, Imagine and the less prolific but very successful Software Projects were making sales was one thing, discovering the best way of



doing it for their fledgling Manchester company was quite another.

'We did a bit of research,' David says. 'The predominant magazine at the time was *Your Computer*. So we took a punt and bought the magazine's back page for six months to advertise four games. The ones we chose were versions of famous games... like *Missile Command* and *Frogger*. It was a kind of ridiculous thing to do but we had no market in which to sell anything, and no actual game to sell at that time... it was just an idea.'

And of the various computers on the market, who owned what? No one had any idea, but David came up with a marketing wheeze to find out.

'There was no research at all, nothing

Mark Butler and Dave Lawson outside the Liver Building in Liverpool, photographed in May 1984. Imagine Software, the company they founded with Eugene Evans, would become an important label for Ocean.

Bug-Byte Software Ltd

Tony Baden and Tony Milner, two Oxford chemistry graduates, founded Bug-Byte in 1980. Bug-Byte, based in Liverpool, was among the very first to develop a range of 8-bit computer games for machines like the Commodore PET, VIC-20, Acorn Atom, ZX81 but principally in time for the launch of the Sinclair ZX Spectrum and the Commodore 64 in the spring of 1982. Among Bug-Byte's better known titles are platformer *Manic Miner* by Matthew Smith (who moved to Software Projects and took the game with him in the autumn of 1983) and the text adventure *Twin Kingdom Valley*.

Bug-Byte failed to make the grade in the mid-1980s, as the consolidation of software houses into larger groups with bigger financial clout squeezed the smaller developers out, and was liquidated in May 1985. Argus Press Software, a subsidiary of newspaper owners Argus Press, purchased the rights to the games and brand and continued to release games under the Bug-Byte name. Argus had already swallowed Quicksilver, Starcade and MC Lothlorien by then. In 1987 a management buy-out headed by Argus managing director Stephen Hall took all the brands under the GrandSlam Entertainment banner.





The main contenders: Commodore's VIC-20 and Sinclair's 48K ZX Spectrum. These were the machines into which Ocean's programmers would have to compress code to make copies of the most popular coin-op arcade games.



Bruce Everiss, Imagine's operations director.

on how many of each machine had been sold, the demographic of those buying the machines, or what they were being used for. We just knew that this games market might exist. So we created a tiny graph on the advert where the customer had to tick whether they had a VIC-20, a Spectrum or whatever, and which of the four games they liked the look of. And sure enough, on Monday morning – and remember, this was a mail order only business – we got all these envelopes in the post, and we opened them up. They had five-pound postal orders in them. We began to do a chart of the portion of users who had this machine or that machine and which game they wanted. And this was on the

ridiculously naïve assumption that we could get the game done and delivered within 28 days, otherwise you were outside the protocol of the Mail Order Association.

'There was no question in my mind that within 28 days we would deliver and it wouldn't be a problem. You must remember that a lot of these games existed in some form as programs written by hobbyists who weren't intending necessarily to commercialise them. They just wrote a version of *Frogger* because they thought that was a great thing to have for themselves, and very often thought no further than that.'

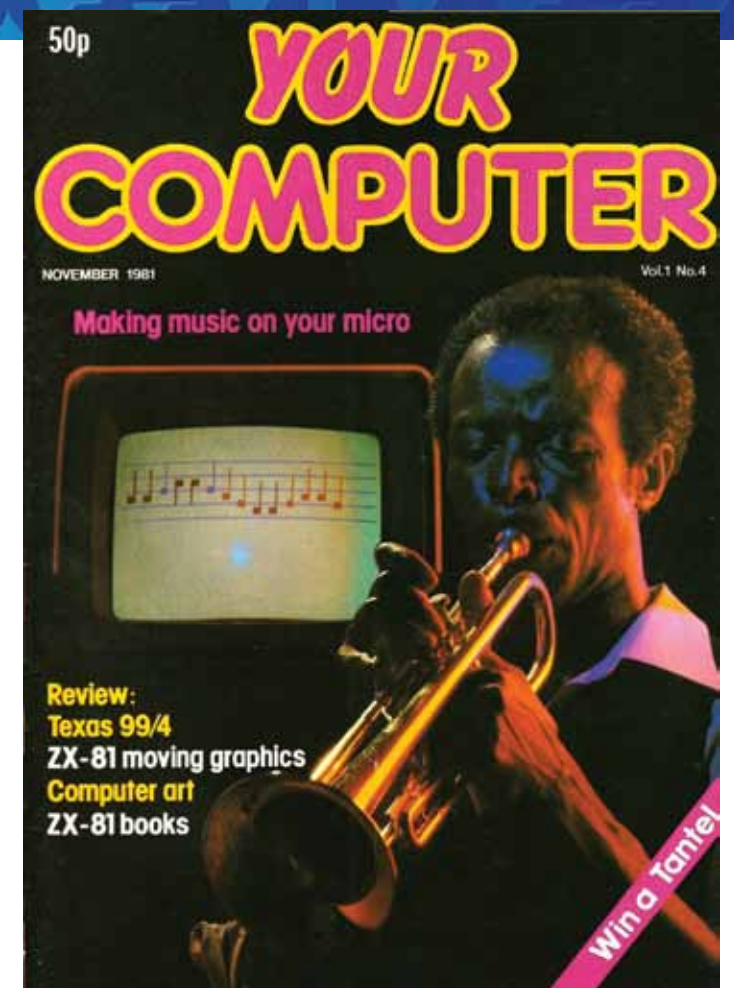
Calling themselves Spectrum Games, Jon and David decided to build an initial catalogue of games programmed by local enthusiasts. They would all be copies of arcade coin-op favourites as the research in *Your Computer* had shown that these were the kind of games the kids wanted. But mail order alone was never going to grow the company. They needed to get into the shops. Fortunately, over at Imagine Paul Finnegan had a falling out with Bruce Everiss. 'He was operations director and it just didn't work for me, so in the end I decided to get away from Imagine. And within a week I got a phone call from Jon Woods saying, "Heard you left, do you fancy having a chat? We're struggling to get our games in any of the stores." This was the early days of Spectrum Games. I think their first game out there was a *Kong*... everybody was doing those sort of games

at the time. I met Jon and David in a pub and they asked if I would come and help them for a month and see how I got on. It was the best thing in work that ever happened to me!'

In parallel with the new mail order business, Paul set out on the road with a handful of games in embryo in, as he recalls, very different transport to what he'd become accustomed to at Imagine. 'I was used to having a nice company car, and at Spectrum Games all I got was the old props van. It was a Peugeot estate. If you'd put a rocking horse on top it'd look like the Clampett wagon from *Beverly Hillsbillies*. And this thing used to break



down about three or four times a week, and I'd be ringing up at half nine on the motorway telling Jon I had broken down again. It was a nightmare. In the end I used to go on the train, I couldn't take the



chance of taking the old jalopy with me.'

At the end of that first month, Paul says money was very tight. 'There was Mike Barnes, who was the financial director and a shareholder, and Jon and David, and they were struggling trying to fund my wages, so I suggested taking a little bit of equity in the company instead. They had a chat and gave me what I was asking for, ten per cent of Spectrum Games.'

And in due course of Ocean itself.

Steve Blower, who was at Imagine at the time, remembers Spectrum Games from one of the primitive early games shows. 'The Spectrum Games stand,

The amateur programmer's first choice for advice, *Your Computer* became Ocean's chosen vehicle to advertise the mail order operation, and to market those early arcade game copies, such as *Road Frog*.

Kong hits the front cover of *Crash* magazine. The young teenage market can't get enough of arcade conversions for their ZX Spectrums.



Rhymes with "Pong" – there was a *Kong* out there, just one of the earliest games to bear the Ocean brand.

which consisted of a few trestle tables stocked up with computer games, was near the Imagine stand. The Imagine guys went about super-gluing down the games on sale at the Spectrum Games stand. I had no idea who Spectrum Games were and, of course, Imagine's Mark Butler and David Lawson would have had no idea that one day Spectrum Games, as Ocean, would be buying up their beloved Imagine!

All name change

It was Paul Finnegan who brought back from his travels a potential problem – one of the buyers at Boots had highlighted that Spectrum Games were also selling games for the Commodore VIC-20, so the company name was confusing. 'Within a couple of days we had a chat

"We certainly didn't want to be limited to the Spectrum."

back at the office and decided we needed to change the company name. I think there was a van passing the window with Ocean Transport on its side, and Jon shouted, "What about Ocean?" He got the idea from a van!

'We quickly realised calling ourselves Spectrum Games would put off owners of any other machine, and we certainly didn't want to be limited to the Spectrum,' David says, with a shudder at their greenness. 'We thought we



needed a name with a basis of ambition attached to it, something we thought had a global feel. Ocean was chosen because we thought it meant the same, and was spelled the same, in most languages. It gave the impression that we were bigger than we actually were.'

Jon is quietly dismissive of the first incarnation. 'Spectrum Games was so brief. It was only two or three months. And then we realised that the VIC-20 was at least half the market. We had to have another name so as not to alienate or confuse people. But certainly, by the time we got to the *Hunchback* game, Ocean was our brand.'

The new software house still needed to find competent programmers to develop the games to fulfil those mail order demands. As Paul Finnegan says, 'Those early days – I think we had only one employed programmer, Paul Owens

– and we were advertising, trying to get games in from the hobbyists.'

David picks up the story. 'So we put out feelers for programmers in the *Manchester Evening News*. Within two weeks of placing that first advert in *Your Computer* we had a fairly cogent understanding of the machines people owned in terms of the proportion of them, and which games to make for which machines. We originally included the BBC Micro as an option but there was very little response to that so we dropped it quickly. The Commodore VIC-20 and the ZX Spectrum at the time were the two main contenders.'

'That was the 16K Spectrum, which had just replaced the ZX81,' Jon says.

'So we eventually had these three games for both those machines and delivered them to those who ordered. We sent the postal orders back to those

we couldn't deliver to in the 28 days', David adds. 'By that time, even after only a month, it was evident that our business was alive. And then to cap it off,

we got this flood of programmers contacting us, and lots of them were still at school.'

'Totally self-taught, they were,' Jon points out. 'When we started, I was software development manager, and I'd never programmed a single thing. But someone had to run these... not necessarily school children, they were just out of that, perhaps just at university, you know, 18 or 19. And it was... difficult. Because they all believed in their own publicity.'

One young lad believed in himself so well, he resorted to a highly sophisticated operation a few days before one of the early computer games shows in London, as Paul Finnegan recalls. 'He



Newly branded Ocean gets to grips with recruiting programmers.

brought this game in, and Jon, David and I were looking at it thinking it was really good. And we asked, "You done it all?" And he said, "Yes, all the graphics, all the code, and music." Now Jon and David, ten years older than me, had been around a bit, and they said, "Look, we'll take this, but obviously we want everything, we want the copyright to the whole thing, and what are you looking for?" The 16-year-old kid said, "Dunno, haven't a clue." So Jon said, "Well, we can give you five thousand pounds for everything including the rights," and the kid went,



Youngsters in control: Christian Urquhart and Nick Pierpoint discuss program writing with David Shea on the *Crash* stand at the ZX Microfair in London, 1984.

“Yeah, that’s fine.” We were all getting a bit excited... five grand and we’d made a killing here. So we went down to the show that weekend, and David and I went for a wander around to see what the competition was like. We must have



“You were a hostage to your programmers, whether they were little corporate outfits with a dozen people or a single guy in the bedroom.”

seen this same game on about five stands. The kid had only gone and sold his game to everybody for five grand! David and I looked each other and said, “Oh shit!” I just thought, well done!

Putting aside individual enterprise of this kind, an interesting and probably forgotten aspect of these early days of bedroom games programming is that no infrastructure existed, nothing that provided support or a forum for

discussion and dissemination of ideas. Not even the few magazines really acted in that capacity. As David recalls, ‘None of those programmers had any connection with each other. There was no commonality about how they developed

anything. They were all individuals who wrote games in their own unique way in order to make things work, and only they could understand what they had developed. If anything went wrong, like the kid keeled over or he decided he did not want to do it anymore, that was the end of it. You just threw it all away.’

‘You were a hostage to your programmers,’ Jon agrees, ‘whether they were little corporate outfits with a dozen people or a single guy in the bedroom. You couldn’t change them and get someone else in to finish it. It was not like digging a hole in the road where you get more pickaxes and more JCBs. The code was theirs, it was their style and it

was impossible to get someone else to pick it up.’

The amateur coders, though, got them through the first two or three months of operating with versions of well-known arcade hits, the titles of the games slightly altered to avoid possible copyright problems. *Caterpillar*; *Cosmic Intruders*; *Galaxy Invaders*; *Road Frog*; *Hopper*; *Missile Attack*; *Monster Muncher* and *Rocket Command* brought sufficient success to prove the evidence of a real business.

Going iconic

Imagine Software was still the leading games software house in late 1983, with the best-looking cover art. Already impressed at the quality, David Ward had tried to poach Imagine’s art director, Steve Blower, the year before. Steve turned him down then, but a year on he accepted David’s second offer.

‘The management approach of David Ward as chairman and Jon Woods as managing director couldn’t have been more different to that of the directors of Imagine: Mark Butler and David Lawson. During an early discussion I had with Jon Woods he insisted that Ocean were doing things seriously and were in it for the long haul which was really encouraging.

‘I’ve an early fond memory of my relationship with David and Jon that I will never forget. My wife and I had seen a house in Birkdale, Southport that we wanted to buy. It was a beautiful house



but, unfortunately, had been converted into two flats. We couldn’t secure a mortgage on the property without first converting it back to a single dwelling. It was a Catch-22 situation, as we didn’t possess the funds to purchase the property outright. David and Jon stepped in and gave me a cheque for the full amount of the property, which I repaid when we received the mortgage. It was such a kind gesture and one for which my wife and I have been eternally grateful. We still live there!’

There are those who naturally think it was Steve who created the famous Ocean logo, but in fact it remains a mystery. Others assume Bob Wakelin, the artist who painted many iconic Ocean covers, did it, but both are adamant it was nothing to do with them. As Steve Blower recalls, ‘The logo was already in existence, in its spot-blue-on-white form, prior to my joining Ocean.’ And independently, Bob Wakelin backs

Did Steve Blower do it? Or was it Bob Wakelin (pictured below) who did it? ‘Not me,’ they both say, ‘I didn’t create the Ocean logo.’





him up. 'I got a flat Ocean logo to work with. It was just the typestyle, just that flat navy blue on white, and I was just asked to tart it up.'

Jon remembers that the iconic logo was designed in the old fashioned way.

'It was the days when you had an art board and paper rather than some CAD arrangement. Yeah, we played around with the logo until it worked. We used a Manchester design group up by Old Trafford.'

The minute there is a brand, the promotional goodies soon follow.



'I doubt anyone will ever find out who did it,' Bob states. 'In those days there were loads of these old guys in print-shops who did unbelievable things. When I first started in the early 1970s, I'd take a piece of artwork for printing and there were these art guys who drew things like lettering, freehand, and they'd be having a fag and talking to you... the skills were incredible. And Jon and David probably went to a guy like that and asked him to knock something up.'

'What we wanted was something that you could stamp onto a packing crate and you would still see it for what it

The basic Ocean logo had the elegant simplicity to stand out on paperwork and onscreen. As David points out, early 1980s business technology was primitive compared to today's.

'When we started, the only computers were development machines. Our only visual communication with the outside world was a thing called a Telex. There were no fax machines. And this thing was the size of a...' he stretches his arms wide, '...and weighed about two hundred



Rebranded – Spectrum Games' programmer Paul Owens becomes a part of Ocean..



Bob Wakelin's 'tarted up' Ocean logo. It altered little over the years, other than by the variations in printing processes.

was,' David Ward says. 'A logo you could literally stamp on the side of a steer – like branding. It would stand out on boxes, crates, in shops, everywhere.'

Bob Wakelin took that basic flat logo and made it more elaborate for colour packaging. 'I did the airbrushed version with the highlights, flashes and reflections. David Ward asked me to make it more like the Imagine logo, which Steve Blower had done.'

'Yes, we had all sorts of 3-D versions of the logo drawn,' David recalls. 'Bob Wakelin did a fantastic version, with a picture of me leaning on it.'

"We wanted something you stamp on the side of a steer – like branding. It would stand out on boxes, crates, in shops, everywhere."

kilograms. Huge! And it had punched tape in it. You got a message in hand. The fax machine put Telex out of business overnight. But faxes were expensive machines, which most offices couldn't afford, so there were bureaux on the high street where you could go and send a fax. That was all thanks to the Japanese, who invented it because of their character set,



The Ralli Building – swept away like almost all of the Industrial Revolution warehouses, mills and factories, and the later Victorian emporia – stood on the banks of the River Irwell, in the heart of Manchester.

Paul Finnegan looks over the shoulder of 16-year-old wannabe, Jonathan 'Joffa' Smith as he demonstrates to David Ward *Pud Pud*, the Spectrum game he wrote at home. Finnegan and Smith were to form a firm working relationship.

which you couldn't reproduce successfully. So they had to have something where you could write on a piece of paper and send it to whoever it was supposed to go – something like a logo.'

The business of Ocean couldn't have been further removed from what David and Jon had been doing up until then, as Paul Finnegan says. 'When we started we were in an old warehouse, because the guys used to provide theatrical props for the BBC and Granada TV productions. That was their main thing at the time, and we had a couple of offices in there for Ocean.' The offices were situated in the Ralli Building, a huge warehouse on the banks of the River Irwell built by the Manchester-based Greek shipping company Ralli Brothers, one of the most

successful of the Victorian era.

'It was beautiful, like a Cunard liner sitting there on the river bank,' Jon says. 'We occupied the ground floor, and the few programmers were in there, and we had some offices and some of it was empty. And I think from memory the price was forty pence a square foot that we rented it at. It's gone now, demolished for new offices occupied by HMRC.'

And there in the Ralli Building, Ocean conceived of buying its first licence. David understood the benefit of having an official status for an arcade coin-op conversion, so rather than copying existing arcade games, licensing the real thing appeared to be the best way forward.

'What quickly became clear to me,' Steve Blower remembers, shortly after joining Ocean, 'was how astute an entrepreneur David Ward was. He had realised very early on that the big opportunities lay in licensing. From what I remember, in the early days of Ocean, the prime target for licensing were the already well-established arcade games



produced by Konami. Later, Ocean stepped up a level, licensing movie brands including *Rambo*, *Terminator*, *RoboCop* and *Batman*.'

Quasimodo makes it

With growing confidence in their new market, and with the mail order money underpinning expansion, Jon and David scoured the market for a suitable arcade candidate.

'*Hunchback* was the game that we looked at for the very first licence we bought,' David says. 'We found this company in Oldham, Century Electronics, who were in the arcade industry. And they had developed the *Hunchback* game, which was very popular in the arcades.'

Jon interjects, 'Everything was totally arcade-driven then.'

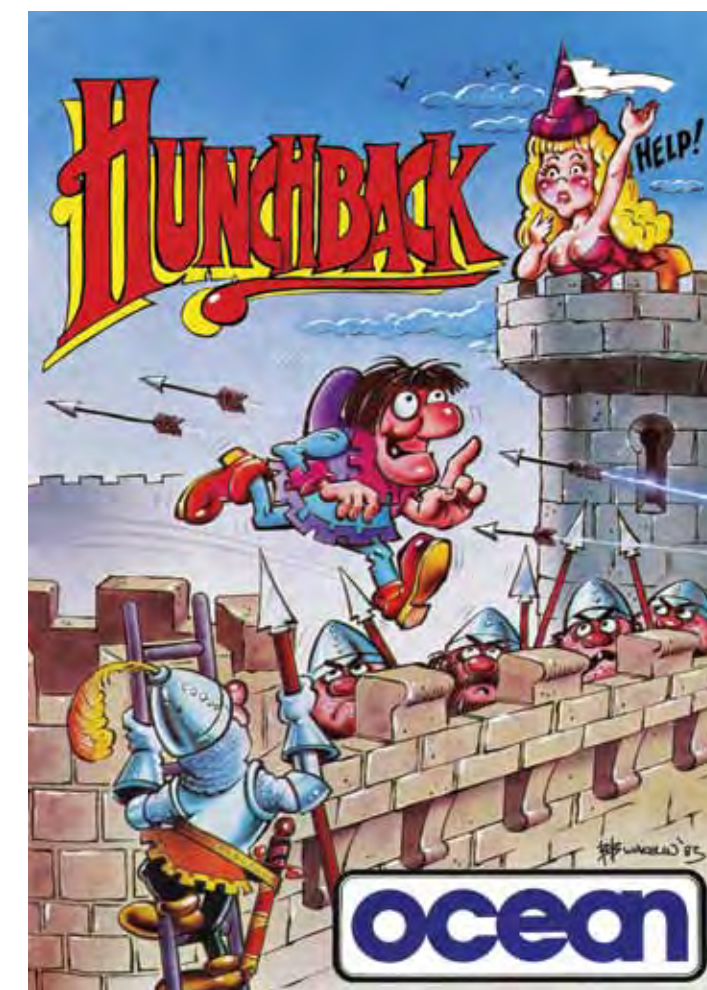
'Finding an arcade company from Manchester, we thought, "Oh wow, that's great, we'll nip over and see them." Which we did, and offered them a deal they could not refuse even though I don't remember what it was—'

'I remember exactly what it was. Three thousand.' Jon laughs at the thought of such a cheap deal. 'You see, the machine, the upright, was just a screen inside a cabinet and they put this thing inside with the chips on which the game resided – which we just didn't understand it at all. No-one could get into it (especially their competitors) to see how it worked and they'd flog these machines around to arcade operators.

Hunchback was a reasonably good game, but the real thing is that in the arcades the kids all related to it because there was nowhere else they could go to play these games. You couldn't afford an Atari or its games, which were expensive imports...'

David agrees. 'Atari as a games console never really took off here. The games were 20, 30 pounds at the time and our market – British teenagers on pocket money – couldn't possibly afford that. But our computer games sold at £4.99, on a cassette. So we licensed *Hunchback*—'

Teenage programmer Christian Urquhart helps to promote his home computer version *Hunchback* at a London ZX Microfair.



‘We did it for pretty much every format eventually – VIC-20, Dragon, Oric, Spectrum, Commodore 64, Amstrad... just not the BBC Micro and MSX.’

Ocean’s first licence might well have been *Robin Hood*, for that is what *Hunchback* was supposed to be, right down to the arcade character wearing green and the game having stages

of the iconic television brands, though subsumed now. At first no one could figure out how to do this. We hadn’t got the money to hire a production company to make the advert, so we made it ourselves, in much the same way we made the original press ads, with felt pens and then photographed it. The idea was to show *Hunchback* being played. So we got someone to play it and someone

– unlike the Spectrum Games presence Steve Blower remembered – Ocean stands always looked very professional compared to other contemporary software houses... but then, nothing was very sophisticated back in 1983, as Jon recalls.

‘There weren’t yet the big shows. Back then there were computer “events”. This was in the days when people put these things on to sell stuff and make a profit, not because it was the annual thing to show off new games. That

the shows we went to, we had a game called *Chinese Juggler*, and David had hired (at a distance) this married couple to be on the stand – and it turned out when we got there they weren’t even Chinese, they were just a London couple.



Paul Finnegan acts as the face of Ocean at an early London computer fair. The DIY Ocean stand, a wall with cut-outs to take the Sony monitors, was just about the most sophisticated of the stands at these shows.

with arrow shooting. It seems Century Electronics decided Quasimodo was a more intriguing subject than Robin. The original programmer had left and the game was too far along in development, so the graphics remained as they were. If the guys at Century were making it up as they went along, so was Ocean. David recalls the way they plugged the new game on the Spectrum, which was the main early platform.

‘We decided to advertise on the local Granada television station – one

else sat in front of the monitor with a camera and videoed it. And it looked great. We sent it off without realising that when it was shown on television all these ghostly scan lines appeared... you couldn’t actually photograph a monitor in those days and replay it through a television. You had to have some sort of thing plugged into it, but we didn’t know that.’

The same pioneering spirit went into their first primitive exhibition and trade show appearance, although from the start



developed later. Well, in the back of the Ralli Building we had the warehouse space and I physically built the stand, you know, painted it black, or white, cut the holes in it for the Sony monitors, and then took it to bits, chucked it in the van, and off we went to wherever it was and set up our stall. We weren’t exactly flush so we had to build our own stand and even buying the Sony TVs to put in it, you know, 12-inch, 15-inch, was quite an expense.’

The sophisticated ‘gimmicks’ of later exhibitions had yet to take root, but Ocean tried some things, and Paul Finnegan remembers that not everything went according to expectation. ‘One of



A double-advert for *Pogo* and *Chinese Juggler*, which might well have been titled ‘Chinese Chuckler’ for the mirth its London computer fair promotion caused Ocean management.

And when we saw them... they must have both been about 70. He looked like Fu Manchu and she had a bikini on with all these rolls of fat hanging over. And David and I looked at each other, and we couldn’t talk to them because we were laughing our heads off. We had to go off the stand. And then she started doing a demonstration with all these plates and all these acrobatics. David said, “We can’t have them on the stand, we’ll be the laughing stock.” We had loads of incidents like those over the years on the shows.’

David vigorously defends their

Following pages: Ocean’s 11 – all those early arcade clones emerging from the Ralli Buildings on Manchester’s Stanley Street, were the forerunner of the great licensed properties like *Rambo*, *Terminator*, *RoboCop* and *Batman*.



ocean's 11

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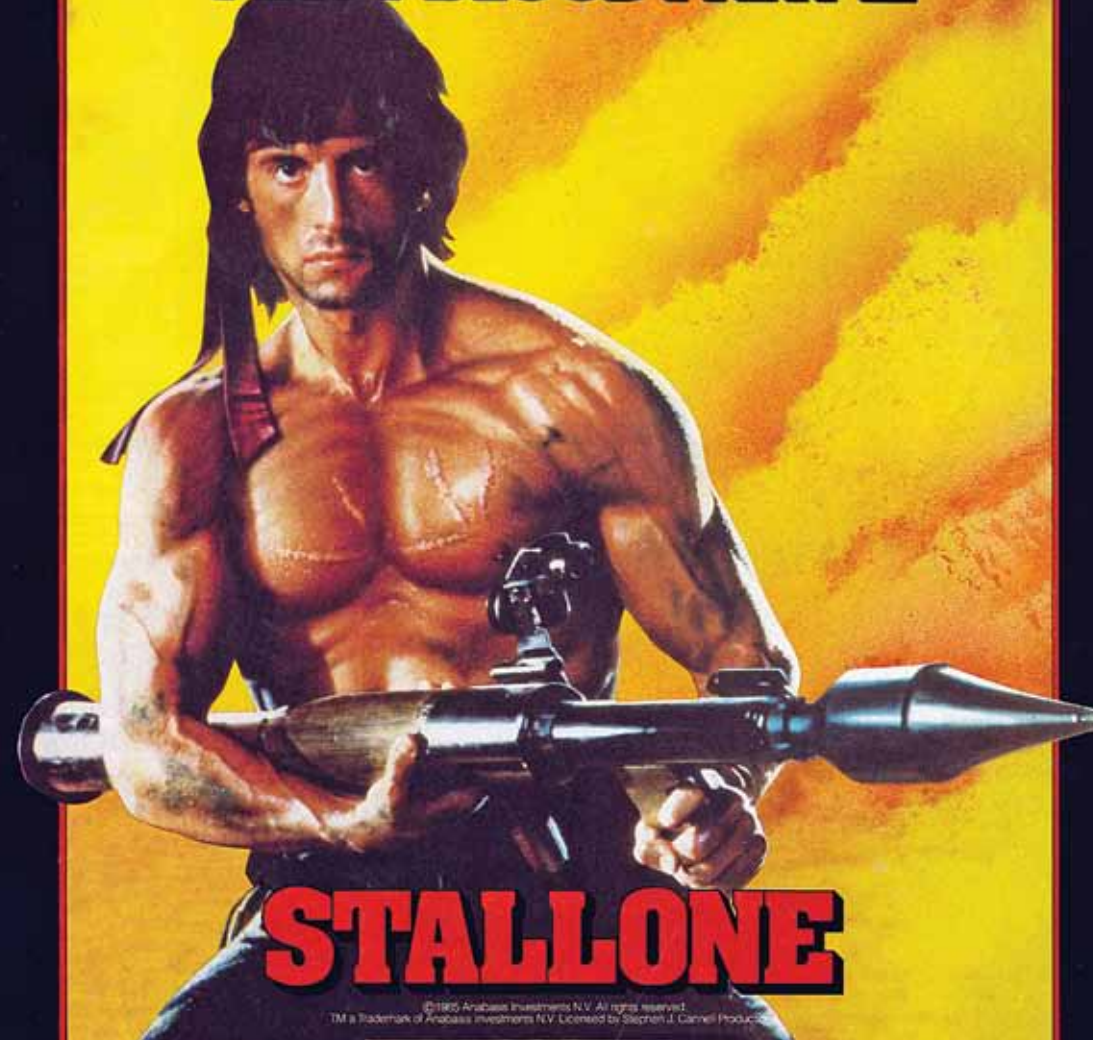


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David Ward, hoping for repeat orders of games from the big retailers.

enterprising DIY approach. 'Other people at the time just had an ironing board with a monitor on it. That was it. So yes, we were reasonably advanced then, again I think because we were renting warehouse space at forty pence a foot! And apart from Bug-Byte and Imagine there were a few other companies who compared – Rod Cousens' original company Quicksilver, Hewson Consultants—'

'Artic as well, but Imagine had the best artwork.', chips in Jon.

David agrees. 'They were leaps ahead in their presentation.'

A reason for hiring Steve Blower then. 'I was employed to add a professional quality to Ocean's packaging and advertising design,' he says, 'and to enhance Ocean's brand in the specialist press with creative advertising

"We couldn't believe it. I thought there must be a digit wrong, or two digits wrong on this...!"

campaigns.' With Steve's help, *Hunchback* proved to be a big seller in spite of (or perhaps because of) the Granada TV advertisement. Its success coincided with the real get-going of retail interest in the new games 'fad' from high street giants WH Smith, J Menzies and Boots – and Ocean speedily felt the beneficial impact.

'In the early days money was so tight we used to run a lot of it on Mike Barnes's credit card,' says Paul. 'But when we got one or two of the titles

in, like *Kong* and *Hunchback*, that was incredible... we used to get orders drop in on the mat from Boots – they'd never even ring you – for five thousand copies of *Kong*, more of *Hunchback* at... like three quid a time. It was a fortune.

'The newsagents and big retailers decided it was a good idea to start selling computer games,' David says. 'So within six, seven months the mail order business we'd started began to shift pretty quickly to a business where we were responding to a retail environment that was growing apace. And one of the reasons why we were reasonably successful is we responded in a more professional way than others. We were older than our contemporaries, we had a degree of hard-won business experience in terms of sales, marketing, financing – the kind of components you need to make a business. Because, lo and behold, instead of these envelopes coming on a Monday morning with an order for a game on whatever machine, we had a repeat order from WH Smith...'

Jon does his astonished face. 'A cheque just dropped through the letterbox, you know, for twenty-five grand. We couldn't believe it. I thought there *must* be a digit wrong, or two digits wrong on this...!' He feels there was another element to Ocean's early success with retail sales which for a while kept the micro shops in business. 'Our distributor, Microdealer – then in Hounslow and later St. Albans – they were a very pushy wholesaler. They were able to supply shops that began

to spring up all over the place in 1982 and 1983, mostly owned by individual proprietors. We couldn't have sold to those guys successfully, I don't think.'

Hiring a shop-keeper

Ocean was on a roll and urgently needed a management structure. Those 18 or 19-year-old prima donna programmers were becoming too much for one man to handle. Jon Woods looked around for someone to help out, and quickly he found the right people for the job: Gary Bracey for software development and Colin Stokes for operations.

Paul Finnegan also knew both men. 'After Imagine went bust Colin Stokes went to Software Projects first, then joined us as operations director. Gary Bracey had a little computer shop in Liverpool, Blue Chip, and I used to drop off games. And he was good, Gary, because he'd tell me what was going on, what the kids were buying. And then he had a chat with Jon and he came and joined us as the software development manager.'

As a shop-keeper Gary also dealt with Microdealer, from his own side of the counter. 'There was a really pushy sales guy who kept pushing and pushing – and I was only a little shop and he was dealing with all the big chains like WH

Smith, and he used to ring me every day with new releases and I used to order like half a dozen. I didn't realise until last year that this was Sean Brennan who's now the managing



director of Bethesda Softworks Europe. And this was the pushy sales guy in Microdealer!' 'I think perhaps by this time those shops had had their day,' Jon says. 'People were beginning to go elsewhere, to the mainstream shops, to buy the stuff – the micro shops began to have difficulties.'

'I knew Jon – David to a lesser extent,' Gary says. 'Jon had a wine bar in Liverpool and I used to go there quite regularly. I used to get *stay behinds*, as we called them. I started Blue Chip – the first solely computer games seller in Liverpool – in 1983, with a video game library in Allerton Road, and I sold

'WH Smith Expand Computer Shops – the high street retailer will open at least 11 more Computer Shops by the beginning of September,' reported *Crash* magazine in June 1984. These were an addition to the already existing 35 Computer Shops and 220 Computer Know-how departments. The major retail chains were catching on fast, and Ocean was gearing up to supply the numbers.



Colin Stokes, formerly of Imagine Software and Software Projects, became Ocean's operations director and then persuaded Gary Bracey – pictured right doing his *Buy A Game Just Around The Corner* From This Cinema number – to come aboard as software development manager, and turn into a Suit.

Ocean games. Actually, there's a funny story I guess I can tell now. Just the day before I knew Ocean was releasing a new game, Jon Woods would walk in with a box of cassettes... "Here you go, don't tell anyone. Give us a fiver." It was very cheap... "Thank you very much!" Then a couple of hours later Paul Finnegan walked in with another box. Even Colin Stokes brought me a box! I remember the game where the Ocean guys all came

had just left when I joined. I know because I inherited his car. Tony went on to Krysalis Software, a development studio we dealt with quite a bit.'

With all the cheaply gifted boxes of Ocean games, Gary's relationship with Jon Woods and David Ward must have been a warm one. 'I had respect for them because they were the force behind the company, but neither of them were into games,' he says with a laugh. 'You



in with cheap cassettes for me was *Pogo*. That would be early 1984.

'A bit later I was chatting to Colin Stokes and he said, "You know about games. Why not come and work for us?" Well, I was getting a bit fed up of this retail lark, it wasn't for me. I saw Jon, call it an interview if you like, and there it was. I started at the very beginning of 1986 for the princely sum of £13,000 a year. Tony Kavanagh, the sales manager,

don't have to be a techie to play games, but they didn't even play. There was no actual interest in the product, it was a commodity, and I'm sure they would be the first to admit that.'

'Yeah, I remember David saying it's like toothpaste,' Paul Finnegan agrees. 'Jon and David really didn't know anything about computer games, so they did as smart people do, they took on good people to do the work. And Gary



Odin Computer Graphics

Another of Liverpool's software developer-publishers, Odin's managing director Paul McKenna kept faith with Norse mythology – the company's first name had been Thor. The name change came about when McKenna decided to commence in-house studio development, like Ocean, rather than acquire rights from homegrown bedroom programmers. Success came in 1985 with *Nodes of Yesod* and *Robin of the Wood*, which led to a development contract with Telecomsoft that ran for two years before Odin closed down. The name lives on after Paul McKenna reformed Odin Computer Graphics Ltd. in 2005 to produce titles for iOS and other mobile phone platforms.

did a good job. He tidied it all up, made it a bit more professional.'

At the time of his hiring Gary had no clear view of Ocean's forward momentum compared to other software houses he knew well. 'The big one for me was Software Projects. I knew them well because I was friendly with Alan Maton and Tommy Barton. Matthew Smith and Paul Patterson worked there, Paul was a sales manager, and later became sales director of Ocean. So I knew Software Projects well, and I knew Bug-Byte well. I was very friendly with Paul McKenna of Thor, who later renamed themselves as Odin. They did *Nodes of Yesod* and *Robin of the Wood*. Quite a few of those programmers went on to work at Ocean.'

Asking if he was provided with a clearly defined job description provokes another laugh. 'The industry was still in its infancy, you see, so there were no protocols or roles that had been

established as a standard, so you just got on and did it. And you know, I had no technical background. I couldn't program, I couldn't draw, so I was in awe of these talents. I like to think of myself as a creative person, but I had maximum admiration for the people who had these amazing skills, like programming skills, technical skills, graphical skills, audio skills, because I don't. I wish I had! And I tried to make that clear with everyone.'

Changes in the sales team

Steve Blower recalls the sheer energy of the early days. 'It was relentless, hard and totally exhilarating. At that time Ocean's offices were situated in Ralli Building, a warehouse which also housed another business owned by Jon, David and Mike Barnes supplying theatrical props. They sold this business shortly after I joined. After the rock'n'roll craziness of Imagine, with Ferraris and Porsches arriving

In this extremely rare picture from 1983 of the Spectrum Games portion of the Ralli Building, not everyone is identifiable. Paul Finnegan is seated at the centre-back, on the left is C64 programmer David Selwood, and in the forefront is Spectrum programmer Paul Owens.



weekly (well, almost), it was quite sobering to see the chairman of Ocean driving a several-year-old BMW with a cracked windscreen. It wasn't very long, though, before his Porsche arrived. We weren't at Ralli Building too long before

we moved to offices in Manchester city centre at Central Street.'

'The office on Central Street enabled us to have programmers in a dedicated environment,' Jon Woods says. 'We started to employ people to write the

programs instead of just hoping these games would walk in the front door. We employed more sales people to sell the games, and the two of us sat there kind of pulling the levers, and visioning what we were going to do next.'

The 'levers' were the newly appointed senior staff, one of whom was Paul Patterson, persuaded to join Ocean from Software Projects, a move he never regretted. 'I was fortunate to be part of the management team that saw Ocean rise to the very top of the games industry. When I joined Ocean we were located in Central Street, Manchester. The building was an old Quaker meeting house and the car park was built on top of a graveyard!'

It seems on occasion the spirits were restless as well, as Paul Finnegan says. 'There was a ghost there. I remember that. The noises we used to hear at night. I'd be sitting there late, going through my bits, and there was no one in the office at the bottom end yet you could hear things moving around.'

Paul Patterson, with a newcomer's eyes, saw what those involved in production often did not. 'Even though some people would disagree, there was a structure in place – David and Jon at the head. At that time David was heavily involved in all marketing and PR decisions and Jon looked after finance and logistics.'

In fact, a switch-over was taking place in the sales department. Paul Finnegan was arranging with Jon Woods and

David Ward his departure from Ocean, a process which had begun in 1986. Ever since, rumours have suggested the parting was acrimonious, but Finnegan insists that this was never so, though it did come with some strings attached.



'It started when Mike Barnes decided he wanted to move on and do something else, in Portugal, I think. And he asked if I'd be interested in selling my shares to Jon and David. As he said, "If I sell my shares, I know the lads won't want someone between them because they're close-knit. And they won't like the fact that you're still there." Mike was right. It was a growing business, and if I'd stayed in there as a shareholder, I think it

Ocean and CentreSoft had first joined forces in September 1984 to import and manufacture under licence American software under the name of US Gold. Jon Woods and David Ward with Anne and Geoff Brown, directors of CentreSoft and US Gold.



Paul Finnegan chats with visitors to the Personal Computer World show at London's Olympia, October 1984. The Ocean stand already looks more professional. Beyond the gathering is the stand of CentreSoft, the West Midlands games distributor.

FINNEGAN BEGINS AGAIN

After a peculiar interlude with Ocean apparently denying that his departure was imminent, founding director Paul Finnegan has indeed left the firm. Now he's running software development company Special FX. An unwise career switch? Apparently not, as TANIA YATES has discovered...

Anyone leaving a good position in a top publishing company to set up a small development house understandably would be anxious. Not Paul Finnegan.

He was one of the founders of Ocean and had a 10 per cent stake in the company. However, he didn't have a major say and had always wanted to develop his own

software. With this realisation he offered his shares to the remaining directors David Ward and Jon Woods and invested the capital in Special FX. "It was the right time for

me to cash in my chips." Although Finnegan freely admits it's a big risk he is fairly convinced that it's a risk worth taking. He is the sole inventor in Special FX but that doesn't worry him too much; still his wife is more than a little nervous. What makes him so confident? "It's a gamble but I thought it was worth it and relished the idea of running my own business. I'm not gambling everything. I had a considerable amount from my shares in Ocean." That's not

all he had from Ocean; he also brought with him several handy contacts in the industry. Based in Albert Dock in Liverpool Special FX boasts the talent of a couple of reputable coders formerly employed by Ocean. Jonathan Smith is one of them. *Green River*, *Hypor Sport* and *Cobra* are three of the best selling games he's well known for while Tony Pomfrit of *Darkkron* and *Rambo III* fame is also coding for the firm. Both of them had left Ocean before



Computer Trade Weekly reports on Paul Finnegan's departure from Ocean and the start up of Special FX.

would have caused problems between the both of them if it wasn't 50/50. Maybe they thought this business is really going places and they wanted the shares because it's going to be worth a lot of money in the future – which it was – but I made the decision to say: yes, I'll go.

We had a chat and David came up with a figure and we agreed.'

However, negotiations over a final deal took some six months while Paul went about organising his future beyond Ocean. Paul wanted to set up

his own games software house but this plan unsettled Jon and David, with some cause. 'I got on well with all the programmers,' Paul explains. 'I used to spend a lot of time down there. I loved watching the things being developed. I should have been out selling but I was down in the dungeon talking to Gary and the gang, and when I did leave quite a number of the programmers wanted to

come with me. In fact Jonathan "Joffa" Smith did leave with me and we formed Special FX together. But Jon and David said to me, "Look, if you're going to do that, we want first option on your product..." because Joffa was a great programmer and they wanted to make sure they didn't lose the talent. And that's what we did. I gave Ocean the option to publish each title we would do.'

With the deal in principle struck, the three dealt with the nitty-gritty of Paul's departure. 'I remember sitting around the board table, and David mentioned one figure and I said, "That wasn't the figure we agreed, it was five thousand pounds more than that." David is a great talker, and he started going on and on, and I thought, "I'm losing this five grand here." So I looked at the both of them and said, "Shall we toss for it?" And we're sat there around the board table, and we looked at each other and went, "Okay!" So, we were like three school kids... and it bounced on the table and then the floor, and we're all searching round, and I shouted, "Heads!" And when I got down there, it

was heads. That was the best five grand I've ever won in my life!'

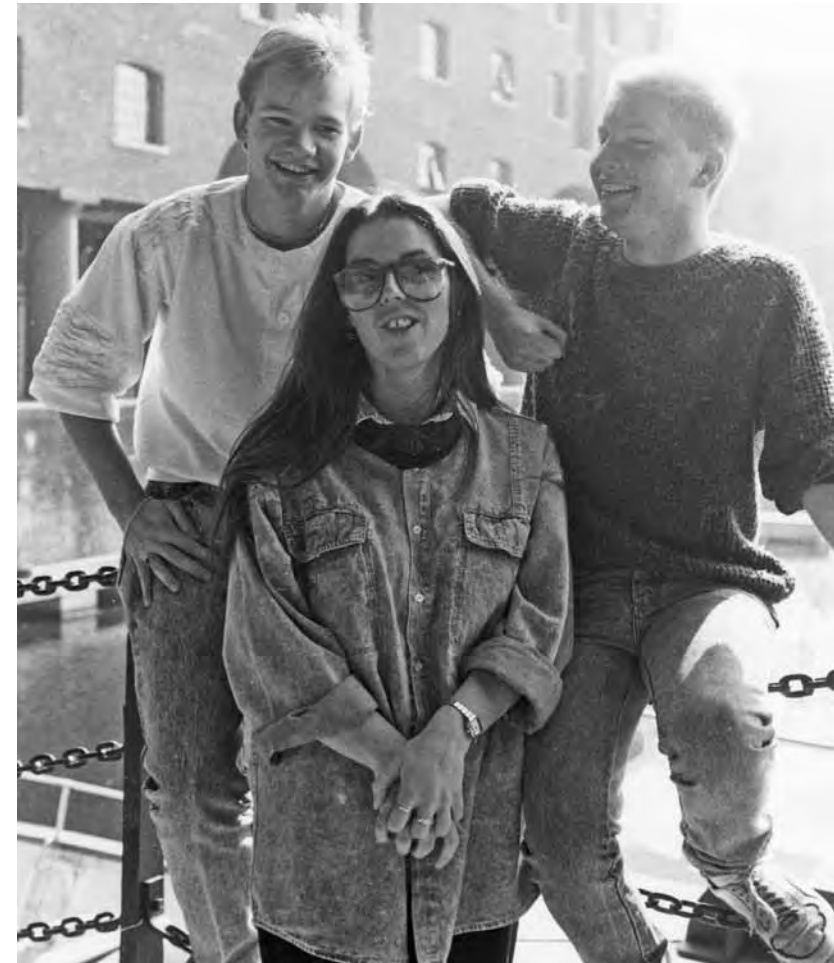
And so in September 1987, Special FX opened for business. 'We set up in the Albert Docks in Liverpool and started producing games for Ocean, different ones like *Cabal* [1988], and arcade conversions like *Midnight Resistance* and *Rambo III* on the PC. All kinds of games for certain systems they didn't have the resource in-house for.

'When, after a couple of years, Jon and David said we'll take the company on and we'll look after you going forward, it made financial sense. Except in the end they said it was too expensive and turned the tap off.'

Is he angry about the way it happened? 'A lot of people say I should be really bitter, but I owe Jon and David a lot because they taught me a lot, and you just take it in your stride, you know. And I thought to myself that when one door closes another opens. This is a great market to be in... I'll start again. And in 1991 I formed Rage.'

Upstairs and Downstairs

Paul Patterson recalls that, while they overlapped working at Ocean, he never worked with Paul Finnegan. 'I originally reported to Colin Stokes and David Ward. Paul had arranged his departure with Jon and David and was finalising things when I arrived. He was agreeing a deal with Ocean to have the rights to sell the games he would be developing at this new company. I spent several



weeks downstairs getting to know the development team and trying to become familiar with both existing and future releases. It was only then that I was given the sales manager role. We simply had a two-man sales team and a small accounts/admin department. Gary Bracey headed up the strong development team together with the testing department. And Steve Blower headed up the art department.'

'My description as creative director related only to the marketing, advertising and packaging, etc. I had no input regarding games design and

Ex-Ocean programmers Tony Pomfret, Jonathan 'Joffa' Smith with Karen Davies at Liverpool's Albert Docks.



Jonathan 'Joffa' Smith becomes a company director.



The Quaker meeting house on Central Street, home to the weird and the wonderful and Ocean.

development,' Steve says.

The games were developed in the basement, as Gary remembers with one of his typically broad smiles. 'The Central Street offices were above and below the ground-floor Quaker meeting house. It really was an upstairs-downstairs culture. There was the ivory tower on the first floor and then in the basement, or the dungeon as it was known, were the programmers. I sort of bridged the two. I was the interface between the upstairs and the downstairs, a butler if you like!'

Steve saw this division as well. 'As Ocean grew it became more and more unwieldy. I don't think there

was anyone in the business that really understood how to go about effectively managing it. My department was very small in comparison to that of games development which must have employed around 40 programmers, sound engineers, and so on. That was a big team that rarely had any interaction with the top-level management apart from their own controlling director, Gary Bracey.'

'I was the one who represented the development to David for marketing and Paul Patterson for sales,' Gary explains. 'When they wanted information I disseminated that. I was, more often than not, the mouthpiece when we had to talk

about the games because the sales people talked about the brands, the movie licences and whatever, but not many of them – and certainly Paul – didn't play the games really, so they used me to fill in the magazines and try to get the actual developers in front of the camera as well.'

'No, I was not a big games player,' Paul says with a smile. 'I'm afraid the only game I played for any length of time was Software Projects' *Jet Set Willy!* As for games that I didn't like, well any with bugs in due to the problems they caused the sales/marketing team. The pressure to release games was so great that we sometimes let games go out before the development team were completely happy with them.'

'When I started there was only a handful who were programming, most of the development was still external,' Gary says. 'And that brings us onto the *Knight Rider* and *Street Hawk* business, which I inherited. They were already in development when I started and very delayed.'

These two games highlighted two distinct problems facing the early software houses: maintaining discipline among freelance (and frequently teenage) programmers; and dealing with one of the major revenue streams, the mail order catalogues which dominated retail sales of the 1980s. As a result of conflicting needs, *Street Hawk* emerged at slightly different times as two completely different games. Gary elaborates the nightmare of dealing with one of Britain's

largest catalogue operators at the time.

'Kays printed so far in advance. Of course there was no internet, so you had these huge, glossy catalogues which must have cost a fortune to print. If you didn't have your product ready in time they would fine you a lot. Because they already had the printed catalogues ready to distribute, so they couldn't change anything, whereas today with a



"I sort of bridged the two. I was the interface between the upstairs and the downstairs, a butler if you like!"

website it's instantaneous.'

And that led to a serious headache if you couldn't rely on the developers, as Gary points out.

'Ocean didn't really have anyone overseeing the out-of-house development. It was kind of, "Oh, can you make us a *Street Hawk*?" "Yeah." "How long will it take?" "Three months." "How much do you want?" "Ten thousand pounds." "Okay, deal, we'll see you in three months." And that was pretty much how it happened. So I was asked to see what was happening because *Street Hawk* and *Knight Rider* were supposed to be finished and no one had seen anything. I remember one of the teams was in Brighton, a couple

of brothers. I'd never been to Brighton before. So I drove down, a long way, and the game just wasn't there. And then I went to see the people who were doing

a one-page document... and they'd say we'll do it in three months, and they'd overrun. So you paid a bit more to keep it going, and I think with *Knight Rider*

the original code, we just got our guys to cobble something together in the shortest time possible. It was a question of delivering to Kays, fulfilling that obligation and avoiding the fines, rather than looking to create a stunning piece of art that would be lauded in the halls of fame.'

But what about that second, slightly later version of *Street Hawk*?

'We had a two-tranche strategy. One was to get it out to the catalogue, and then – because it was quite a strong licence – I think we had a second shot at getting a decent game which we wanted to sell to all and sundry. So the first version was just for Kays and never went out on general release. You see Ocean had done ever so well to that date. They had an incredibly talented in-house team and obviously saw the opportunity to capitalise on the licensing trail and build up a list of projects, but unfortunately they didn't have the talent pool to meet the development of those concepts. So that was my first remit, to try and get the development on track.'

position and market the products we were developing. You've got to remember, the challenge for programmers at the time



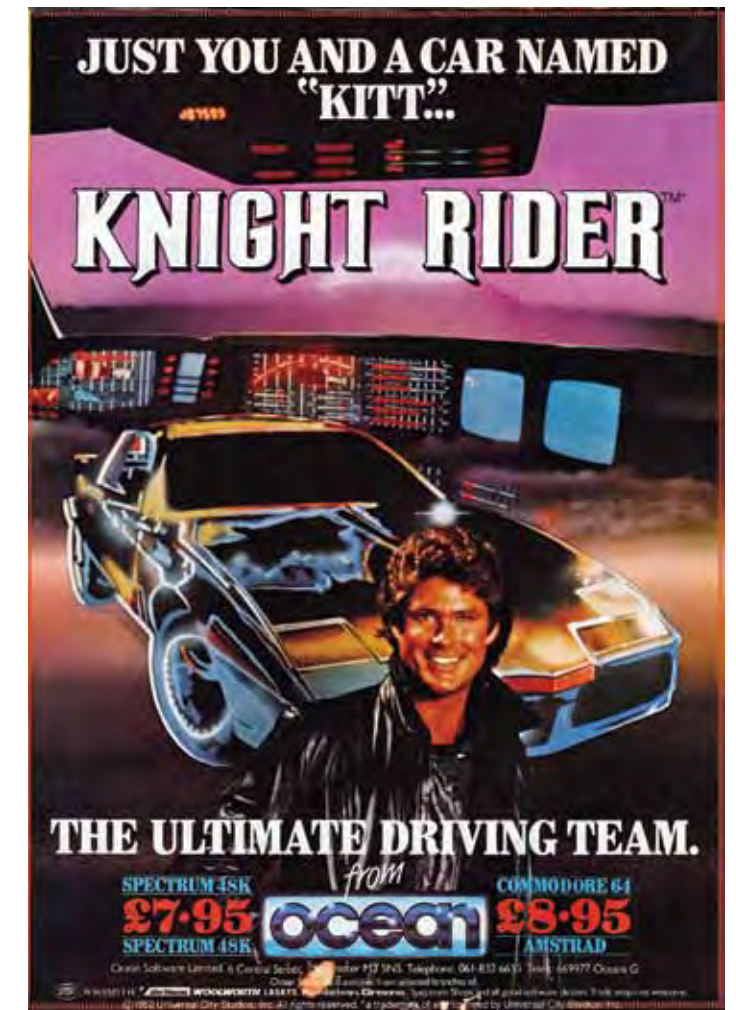
Sinclair User magazine said: 'Never has a game been more aptly titled than *Street Turkey*.'

Street Hawk and it was the same story. They didn't give a shit, you know. They had the money and it was, "If you want to see more of the game, give us more money." That was common in those days.'

The programmers needed some money in advance in order to live, and typically received half of the money up front, usually £5,000. 'So you had a two-man team, you had a back of a ciggie packet game design or concept, maybe

we almost had something. So we paid a bit more... "Provided we get this amount of money, you will get the game." So we managed to massage that through although it was never going to be any good. It was just a case of getting it out there.

'*Street Hawk* was a different problem. It was at the stage where it was obviously never going to be finished so we brought it in-house. I don't think we even rescued



Daley does it

In the Central Street office environment Ocean began to flower. 'In a sense that building, and what we did in it, defined the Ocean story more than anything else,' David Ward insists. 'Everything that subsequently happened certainly wasn't as ground-breaking. What we looked at then was the prospect of how we could sell products and how we could

was mostly technical – how you made realistic imagery using an incredibly small processor and memory size. You can't imagine... even a 128K Spectrum now... compared to this instrument in my hand [holds up an iPhone]. He shakes his head at the wonder of it. 'One of the most amazing things is how quickly the market in terms of processing development took place. Most of it was challenging, most of

At least *Knight Rider* was completed by its original development team.

Opposite: Chris Clarke and Jon Ritman, creators of Ocean's hit *Match Day*. Ritman 'just walked in off the street with it.'



'We can't make railway engines anymore but we can use our education and culture to create interesting software of all kinds. I'm not saying this is some kind of great cause. We do it to make money.' David Ward, November 1985 – *Amstrad Action*.

Ocean's in-house programmers worked in the dungeon, or the basement of the Central Street Quakers' meeting house.

the programmers' task was to make things look real in an environment that was incredibly restrictive.'

'It occurred to me very quickly,' Gary continues, 'that if we wanted to have a little more confidence in what we were developing we had to create a better core of outside teams we were comfortable working with, like Denton Designs, and a bigger in-house resource. And so we went on a recruiting drive, advertising for programmers and artists, and we got some very good people through the door. Mike Lamb was in that first intake, just an incredible talent. He had done games for Artic and the first project he was given was *Top Gun*. He made a wire-frame simulator, shoot 'em up, and it was great. He went on to do *RoboCop* and many other things. Jon Ritman was another from Artic.'

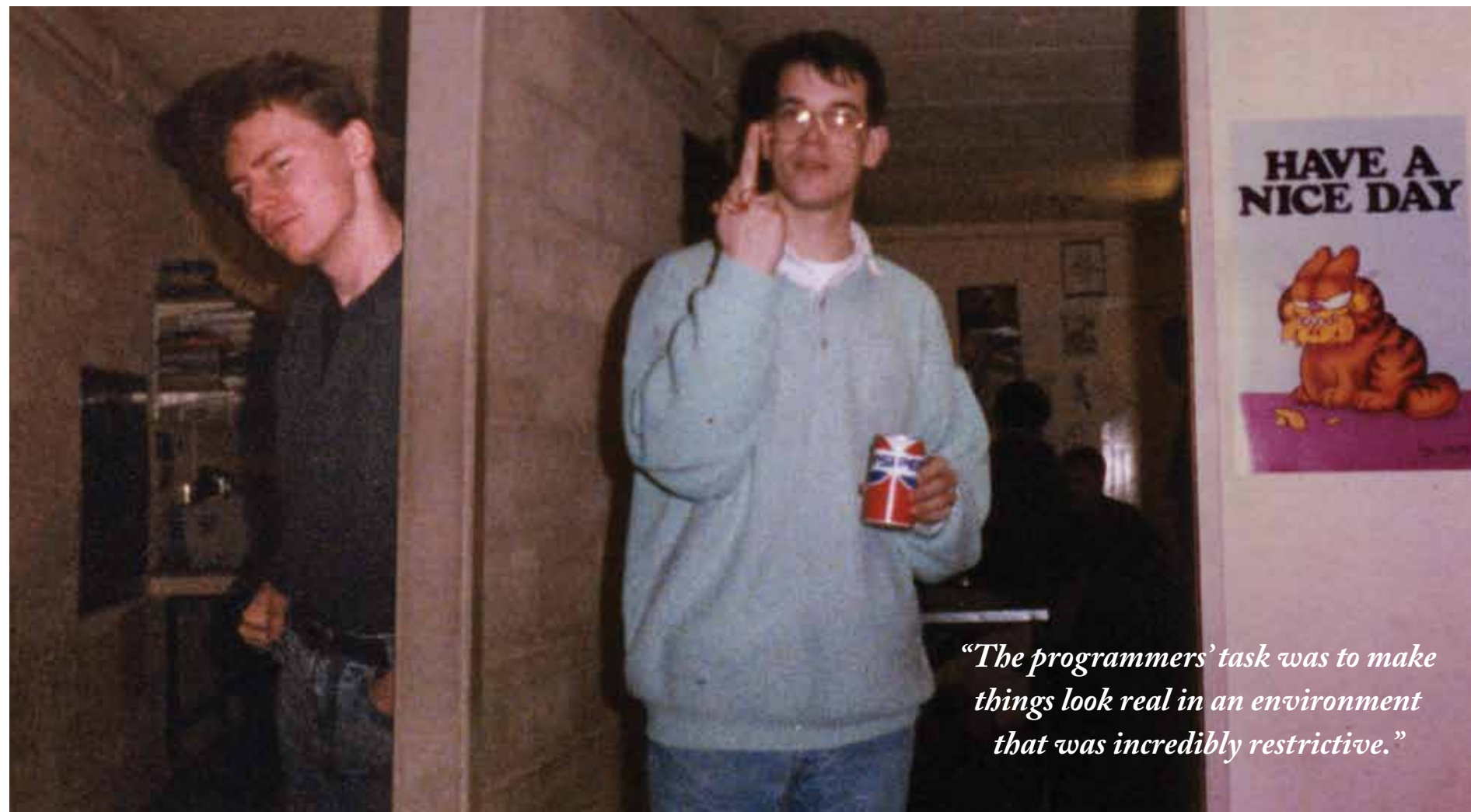
Paul Patterson remembers well the sense of passion everyone at Ocean brought to their jobs and to the company, filled with the conviction that they were all at the beginning of something big. 'In the early days strategy meetings didn't exist,' he says with a laugh at the simple freedom of those times. 'It was apparent from the beginning that we simply wanted to be the number one software house and in order to achieve this we had to be the best at everything we did, from a strong licence and game to a high quality sales/marketing/PR campaign. We achieved this by having staff that fitted the Ocean criteria. "Work hard, play hard." By a mixture of luck

and design most of the Ocean staff from the top to bottom had the same passion, personality, loyalty, work ethic and most importantly was a party animal! Every single employee had the same desire – to see Ocean get to, and remain, at the top of the industry. Checking a Gallup chart or a WH Smith chart to see what position we'd achieved that week was something that every employee would relish.'

'The first 10 to 11 years of my 14 with Ocean was a real blast,' Steve

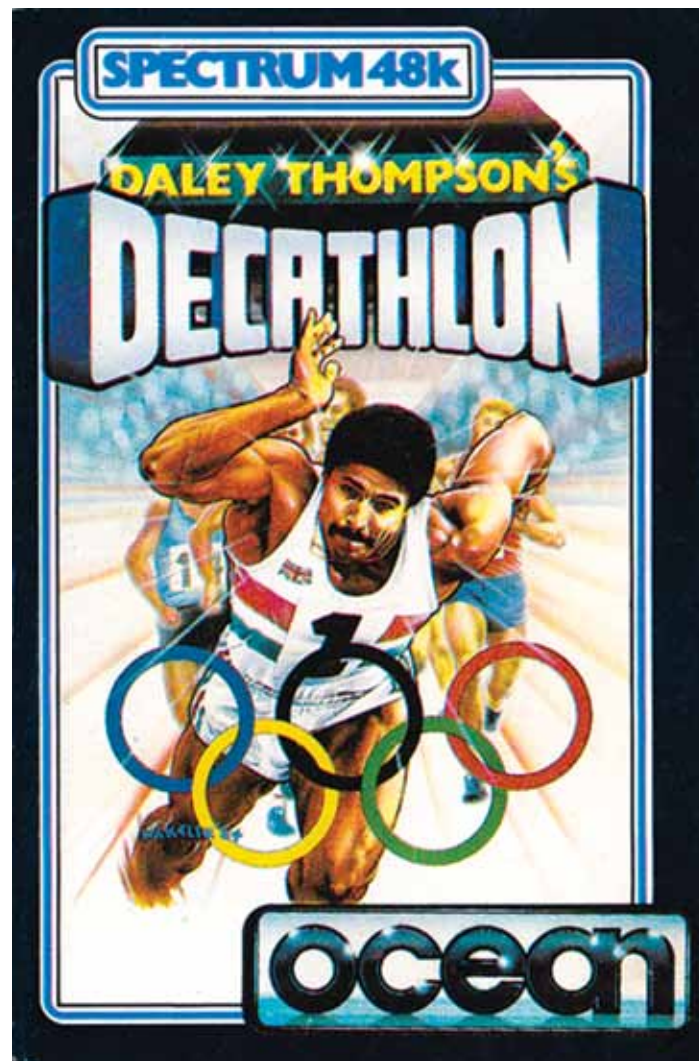
Blower agrees. Word got around: Ocean was open to good ideas, and often enough talent simply 'walked in off the street', like Jon Ritman, who strolled through the doors of Central Street with rather more than his *CV*, as Jon Woods remembers.

'One of our games at the time was called *Match Day*, that was Jon Ritman. It just came in, didn't it? Off the street. Well, we licensed the BBC's *Match of the Day* music – we didn't call the game *Match of the Day* – and you can imagine



"The programmers' task was to make things look real in an environment that was incredibly restrictive."

what it looked like on a Spectrum, but it played very well. So it had the gameplay, but it didn't have the... well, you couldn't have the graphics.'



In winning gold, Daley had it easy – back at Manchester base everyone was biting nails, wondering whether they had a game winner on their hands or an also-ran.

Jon concedes that their massive hit *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* – effectively based on Konami's *Track & Field* coin-op – was a major turning point in Ocean's local fortunes. 'It was the 1984 Olympics, which were held in Los Angeles,' Jon says.

David nods at the memory. 'We'd developed the game ahead of the

Olympics and there we were, ready to launch it. We had to wait for the results and pray that Daley would win.'

'The concept of a date-defined opportunity would be completely accepted now, but back then the idea seemed irrelevant, no one had thought of it. *Daley's* was a date-defined game and we had to get the thing out to capitalise on his Olympics win.'

'And when it charted,' Jon says with satisfaction, 'it was number one. Someone said, "Can we have a recount," and I said,



"If you add up all the sales of the titles from number twenty to number two, it's still going to be number one". It was just a... phenomenon.'

Daley Thompson's Decathlon was a huge success and it was the first game to truly challenge the increasingly available joysticks. Many a player reckoned the game's programmers, Paul Owens (Spectrum) and Dave Collier (C64), owed them the money for broken joysticks. But the man at the centre of the game's success may not have received any financial benefit, as David points out.

'Ironically at the time, because of the

Amateur Athletics Association rules, the licence deal meant paying the money to the AAA and not to Daley himself. I'm not sure that he actually got much, if

you know, many times an Olympic gold medallist and American. So it wasn't exportable. We released it on all the formats, anyway.'



anything, out of it because as an amateur he wasn't allowed to benefit. If he'd taken any money he would have lost his amateur status and wouldn't be allowed to compete in the Olympics. So they were going to keep the money for him until he retired. Whether he ever got it is another thing.'

Probably not, Jon thinks. 'They did go bust, the AAA.' In spite of the way the game changed Ocean's fortunes, its success was only in Britain, as he points out. 'The obvious problem with *Daley Thompson* is that it was only a British-understood thing. It wasn't Carl Lewis,

Daley proved to be the catalyst which began Ocean's global licensing reach, even though at the start, as David says, they had – once again – to do it by trial and error. 'At the time we were inventing the licence process. No one knew the parameters for any of this stuff. If you pay twenty per cent is that too much? Five per cent, is that too little? Nobody knew what business model would emerge.'

Buying a brand

One business model David and Jon had no intention of following was that practised by their Liverpool rivals

Far right: Laughing all the way to the bank. David Ward's belief in the power of the licence paid off with *Daley Thompson's Decathlon*. The athlete himself, when faced with the Spectrum's limited palette, chose to have his sprite in white.



'The time may come when you can buy a 1000K machine with built-in disk drive for £200. But you may then have to pay £50 for each piece of software to run on it.' David Ward, November 1985 – *Amstrad Action*.



Personal Computer Games magazine had Imagine Software wound up, to the eventual benefit of Ocean.



KONAMI®



Ocean purchased the rights to the name of Imagine, which allowed the Ocean to license Konami's coin-op games. In time, many other Japanese arcade giants appeared for home computers under the Imagine brand.

Imagine. That company's shocking collapse in the middle of 1984 was an ill wind that blew Ocean a deal of good. As a part of busy negotiations with Japanese coin-op companies, Ocean formed a successful licensing relationship with Konami, although there was a hurdle to leap, as David explains. 'Initially they were very reluctant to let us have their products because they feared they would get swamped into the Ocean brand and only we would benefit. We persuaded Konami to join us by basically suggesting that all Konami games would be released via a separate label or brand, and we'd have a separate sales force to go and sell it. They agreed to that.'

That brand was Imagine, the label purchased from the liquidators of a company that, as Jon colourfully puts it, 'literally pissed the money up the wall.' The Imagine story was one of those rags to riches tales, of ambitious, clever, young men coining in vast sums from a brand new market which Imagine dominated. But in splashing out on a lavish new Liverpool headquarters, with expensive sports cars stacked in the basement garage, bills for essentials like paying the tape duplicators fell into arrears. The company's substantial advertising bills went unpaid until VNU Business Press, owners of *Personal Computer Games* magazine, issued a writ against Imagine for the £10,000 it was owed. Imagine was wound up on 9th July 1984.

'Those guys spent most of their



money on Ferraris,' David says with the wry smile of a Porsche owner. 'We were most amused, because we bought the label – not the company, its assets and liabilities, only the name. An interesting thing is that one of the main creditors was a building supplier who had reinforced the roof with steel structure for helicopters to land on... and they were only renting.'

He shakes his head in disbelief even after all these years, but in purchasing the name, Ocean had its new brand for the Konami coin-op conversions. A total of nine Konami titles and seven from other Japanese coin-op companies followed between 1985–89. One up-front expense was the purchase of the particular arcade machine, or at least the game board for the cabinet. But even with the board in hand, there was no way of extracting the code.

'That would have been great, in theory, if you could get the code, but it was impossible,' David says. 'We were writing in a very different and very particular environment. We had to stare at the screen and make notes to get the timings and collision detection right. All we were trying to do was to copy the generality of what was there on the screen.'

No matter how smooth the copy of an arcade hit was or how clever an original concept might be, it remained vital to make the computer games magazines aware of a product and its qualities, and also the distributors and

retailers who had to be persuaded of the need to order thousands of copies. Paul Patterson says this was another function that often fell to all the staff.

'Entertaining buyers, whether they were foreign distributors, UK retail buyers, editors of magazines from home and abroad or hardware companies interested in bundle deals wasn't always just the domain of the sales team.

Everyone from sales, admin, accounts, development and art would at sometime get involved on a night out to help attain our goal. All presentations were done without the aid of PowerPoint, Nobo boards or any other sales aid. We simply talked with passion and commitment about what we could achieve with our product. David would blanket-buy magazine back pages, inside front covers and centre spreads in order to help promote the company. I would spend as much time as possible at Newsfield or Emap, hoping to improve a review and get as much coverage as possible for a particular game. I was aided in this by one of the developers or Gary Bracey. Our aim was simply to be in everybody's face and to make sure whoever we were with enjoyed our company.'

One type of computer game Patterson was to find himself selling



Ocean's back cover advertisement on the February 1985 issue of *Crash* magazine.



Paul Patterson took up the reins of Ocean sales after the departure of Paul Finnegan. He's seen here picking up a *Crash* Readers' Award.

A part of Oliver Frey's *Crash* magazine cover for Ocean's *Frankie Goes to Hollywood* game.

was the licensed product. 'As far as I can remember it was David's idea to pursue any sort of licence. I believe we were the first to sign a personality – Daley Thompson – the first to sign a movie – *Neverending Story* [1985] – and the first to convert a hit coin-op. As far as I am



concerned a licence not only gave me an obvious marketing strategy, it also allowed me to approach Commodore, Atari and several other companies with bundle offers. We were one of the first companies to do this and over the years it increased Ocean's turnover by millions.'

In a long history of licences, perhaps the boldest and oddest was the 1985 pop-band tie-in with Frankie Goes to Hollywood, developed by Denton Designs. The game involved exploring the town of Mundanesville to find the Pleasuredome, and the packaging came with an intriguing extra, as David recalls. 'When we did the *Frankie Goes to Hollywood* game we got the group to give us a version of the song *Relax*, a tweaked version which had never been published so we didn't have to pay for any other rights. So, we had this two-cassette pack and I came up with the idea of *Data*



The Power of Love: Steve Cain, Ally Noble, John Gibson, Karen Davies and Graham 'Kenny' Everitt – the Denton Designs team.

Tunes. The idea was that in the future people would all want a cassette with a separate music track along with the game. How I ever thought anyone was going to play on two cassettes, one running the audio track, the other loading the game data, I don't know!

Wooing Japan

The great movie licences were still an undreamed of future. First in the firing line came the arcade coin-ops, and that meant Ocean crossing the oceans to the Land of the Rising Sun in the belief that to do business with the coin-op creators you had to go to them. In the course of their travels David and Jon founded the valuable relationship with Konami which resulted in the *Imagine* releases. Jon grimaces at remembering the first efforts. 'We trudged around Japan, got the creative relationships... we got all the majors...'

On the other side of the world, and with jet-lag, it was an exhausting mission

agrees David. 'On the first night, we'd almost fall asleep on the dinner table. Not good. Dinner in Japan is a very honour-bound thing, and it's very important. Meals in Japan at these exclusive restaurants are incredibly expensive, way beyond the capacity of normal employees in the company to afford. So for them it's a huge thing to go with the boss to dinner at the New Otani hotel, or whatever, where they number the ducks from 1946 – you had the eleven hundred and fifty-third duck since the restaurant opened. There is a great story. One night we were having a dinner with Data East and this live lobster was brought out, flicking away...' David waves antennae-like hands above his forehead. 'They take the lobster away and they bring it back having shown it some hot water. They'd taken it out of the shell, put it back in and brought it to the table—'

'We were trying to use our chopsticks, and the thing is still moving...' Jon adds with a chortle.



'New techniques are being developed to help us write very large programs very quickly. You couldn't have created *Frankie* on the Spectrum two years ago.' David Ward, November 1985 – *Amstrad Action*.

Ocean spotted *Platoon*'s potential and seized global rights, which allowed Ocean to sell on the Nintendo rights to Sunsoft.

DATA
EAST

TAITO

CAPCOM

SNK
PLAYMORE

DINAMIC

'I went to grab a bit of the meat and this ruddy claw grabbed my finger!'

'And they're eating it alive. Of course this is a real treat for the invited employees.'

Vicious crustacean claws aside, the tiring visits to Japan paid off, although David is quick to admit that they found the oriental mindset far from transparent. 'We got quite attuned to the protocols and ways in which Japanese business was struck, but always knowing that you only ever got so far. There were these underlying relationships that you could never get past. And the Japanese way of saying "no" is to simply say "I see" or "yes" or whatever. No one ever said "no" because it's not what they did. So we had an interesting period of about five years when we'd go to the JAMMA show in Tokyo.'

"And the Japanese way of saying 'no' is to simply say 'I see' or 'yes' or whatever. No one ever said 'no' because it's not what they did."

The Japan Amusement Machinery Manufacturers' Association was (and still is) the world's principal trade fair which the great and the good of the coin-op world attend.

'We had a fantastic reception the night before the show in the Okura – which is the traditional Japanese Tokyo hotel,' David says with a smile. 'The sort of place with endless girls bowing



and scraping. Then we'd go to the show the next day and try to sell the idea of representing the coin-op companies in Europe.'

'And we did!' Jon says with glee.

'The more people who signed up with us, the easier it was to sign up another lot. Once we set the precedent the others no longer saw licensing to Ocean as a unique decision over which they had to labour.'

The ripple effect brought the giants of their day on board: Konami, Taito, Capcom and Data East. Ocean made several lucrative movie licence deals with Data East when Hollywood woke up to the new medium, as Gary Bracey recalls. 'The way it went in the early days was we got the game out well after the film was released as we'd wait to see if it was going to be a box-office success. If it was, then we had to go round knocking on doors, saying we'd like to license your film, please, and maybe we'd get it out in time



for the video release if we were lucky.'

In 1987 Ocean spotted the potential of *Platoon* before any other organisation and Jon Woods made great capital from it. 'For some reason the Americans wouldn't touch it. We took it all, we took the world rights on all formats because no one wanted it. And we made a great game out of it and sold it back to Sunsoft who then wrote it for the Nintendo, an exact copy of our game. From then on, we had the credibility of *Platoon* and it changed everything. After that many more film studios listened to us.'

'Suddenly the movie companies – and it started with *Platoon* (1987) I think – recognised that computer games were

actually a profit centre for revenue,' Gary agrees. 'They started to get proactive. So they started sending a script before the movie was even being made. And this was wonderful, because then we stood a chance of getting the game out at the same time as the movie.'

Striking RoboGold

Of course there was the risk in releasing a video game at the same time as a movie – if the film bombed so might the game; but the benefit to a game of a hit movie was inestimable. Shortly after securing rights to *Platoon* came the licence which would project Ocean into the stratosphere and rights which

Design elements made during the development of the *Platoon* game.

ROBOCOP™



Jon Woods was able to resell on a global scale. As a self-confessed cinema geek Gary Bracey became very involved in the movie licensing process. 'Every six weeks I was going to LA. On one of the days I was flying out Jon sent me the *RoboCop* script. I read it and gave it back with a Post-It note attached saying, "Get this. I think it could be big." *RoboCop* was the best gamble we ever took. You see we were taking a gamble on every licence, because we didn't know how successful that film was going to be. I read through the script and I thought it was awesome, and we had to do it. Jon negotiated the licence with Orion Pictures and we got it, and I'm sure it was practically for buttons, and the royalty was very low.

'When I was leaving Ocean, quite a few years after *RoboCop*, Jon showed me the script and on it was the Post-It with my scribbled message. Amazing – he'd kept hold of that all those years.'

'I got the world rights in everything you could think of for *RoboCop*,' Jon takes up the story. 'And we licensed the arcade and pinball machine rights back to Data East, which is why Data East became our closest relationship. We had all the rights for everything very cheaply. It was all these agents doing the selling for these film companies, and they're getting... whatever percentage, say thirty per cent, and the agent must have thought, "Here's thirty thousand dollars for us, let's have it." They didn't know what they had, and we didn't know either because the movie hadn't come out then.'



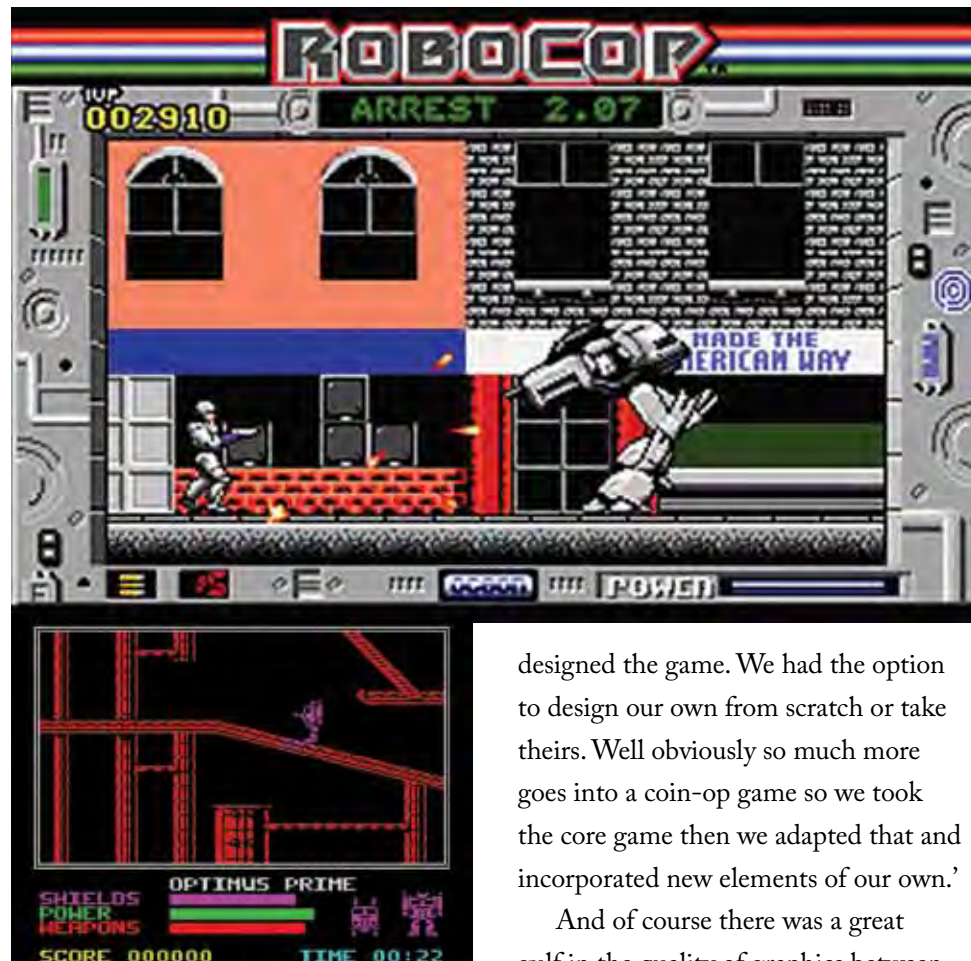
'I think it was the first million-unit seller,' Gary recalls, speaking of the game. 'It went massive and it was a combination of a great movie and actually a great game as well. I did a contra-deal with the video company – we didn't get it out in time for the movie's release. We put an

"Get this. I think it could be big."

advert for the VHS video on the game and they put a thirty-second advert for the game on the video, which was one of the biggest-selling videos of its time. *RoboCop* was the game that put Ocean on the world map.'

David Ward says that everything grew rapidly with Data East and other major coin-op manufacturers from that point. 'To have your name on an arcade machine and a pinball was hugely prestigious, not to mention the global video release, and it opened doors for us to other organisations. I think we dealt with every single one of the Japanese companies, even some obscure ones forgotten now completely.'

A Commodore Amiga screen of *RoboCop*. The game was unique in being the first to be developed for home computers and then sold under licence to the Japanese arcade giants.



Transformers – don't show the licensor the Spectrum version in development!



'*RoboCop* made us a global player,' Gary says. 'We'd done very well previously with the Imagine-Konami games and the arcade games, but they'd always been on computers, the Spectrum and 64 and to a lesser extent the ST and Amiga, and with those we sometimes struggled to find wider distribution because we didn't distribute in the US. *RoboCop* became a catalyst for us to seriously consider starting Ocean of America. Up until then Data East was our partner in distributing Ocean games over there. They got the rights for the *RoboCop* coin-ops from us and they

designed the game. We had the option to design our own from scratch or take theirs. Well obviously so much more goes into a coin-op game so we took the core game then we adapted that and incorporated new elements of our own.'

And of course there was a great gulf in the quality of graphics between a dedicated coin-op arcade machine and the humble Spectrum, or even the Commodore 64. Tactics became an important part of getting the conversion to the 8-bit environment approved by fussy licence holders. 'We did fear showing the Japanese stuff early on,' Jon says. 'In that era we were making games principally for the ZX Spectrum, of which they had no knowledge – in fact no understanding of the domestic UK market at all. We couldn't tell them this is it, this is what can be done within this technology. They'd say it would damage the brand, and all this kind of nonsense.'

Transformers, first time around, we had that for the 8-bit Acorn Electron and Commodore 64. Well on the Commodore 64 you could make it look good, you know, the bit where Optimus Prime had to grow bigger. So we went down and presented this to some woman on a sort of roundabout in the middle of Slough, where their offices were. And we got away with it. They said "okay". But we never presented the Spectrum version. They'd just have said "No" to it.'

Ocean always excelled in another area of presentation: its game inlay and advertising artwork, much of it created by freelance artist Bob Wakelin, and overseen by Steve Blower. However, with the increased number of games in development and for various different machines, it could be a tedious task to prepare the final artwork, as Steve recalls. 'This was before digital design so the process was really time consuming: laying out the artwork on art board; resizing elements using a photographic process; cutting and pasting paper based graphics – and all this so that it will fold down correctly into the page size of an audio cassette.'

'When Apple Macs emerged as the digital alternative for graphics production I had no resistance whatsoever from David and Jon to fund all the equipment I, and my department required. My department grew from just myself to a team of eight, producing advertising and packaging design for all of Ocean's titles.'

Batman – Dark Knight rising

It was timely that as the need arose to convince licence holders of an 8-bit game's quality, the 16-bit Amiga and Atari ST arrived. With their vastly improved graphics, they became the machines to showcase what a game



Steve Blower's art department was under greater pressure to produce all the artwork for the increasing number of products – a task which was often tedious before the Apple Mac made life easier.

would look like, and that was essential to winning the rights to Ocean's next grand-slam game, as Gary Bracey remembers.

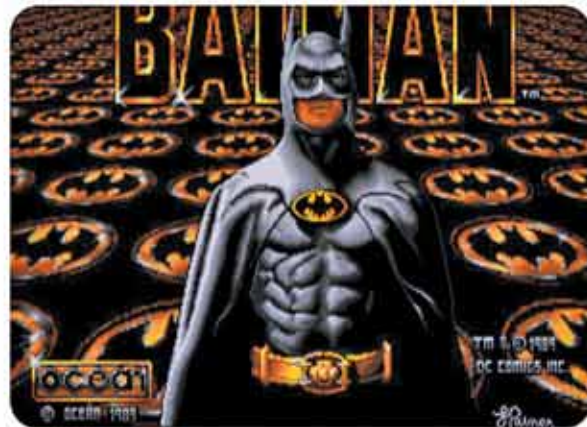
'We had already done *Batman* in 1986 – Jon Ritman and Bernie Drummond did that one – and *Batman: The Caped Crusader* in 1988, which we put out to Special FX to develop. Jon wanted to relaunch the franchise with a third follow-up for another European licence.'

Jon takes up the story. 'I got *Batman* through having a relationship with Warner Brothers in London where we'd licensed *The Neverending Story*, and it



“I was made up about it and when they sent the designs to DC, I was thinking, “Oh God, they’re gonna come back and I’ll have to change everything.” So I was really pleased to get them back, and the only change they wanted, they got me to shorten his ears. It sailed through, which was quite amazing actually.”

– Bob Wakelin –



The 16-bit Amiga made a timely arrival as a far better development platform for 8-bit games, but Ocean soon had any number of Amiga titles in their own right.





slipped that we wanted to do another Batman game. “Another *Batman* game?” they said. “What about *Batman the Movie*?” Well, what do you think my answer was? And so we got that and, importantly, we got it for the Amiga as well, and that was the version we would show off. Even better, we were granted permission to bundle the game with the Amiga as a “Batman Pack”, so there it was – a huge *Batman* box with Ocean emblazoned all over it. If we had asked Warners or DC Comics... real anal people with a view on everything... they’d never have allowed it, but Commodore did.’

The earlier success of *RoboCop* even opened the studio doors for Gary Bracey.

‘Jon told me we’d got the *Batman* rights and I said we need more information. We had full access, something we never got for example on the *RoboCop* film licence. We went to Pinewood and walked down Gotham City; we had a big licensee day and we were told every thing we needed to know about the film. I could just go and walk around the sets and see Tim Burton and Michael Keaton as they were making the film.’

Gary is particularly proud of the game’s concept and development. ‘We started it with *RoboCop* to a certain extent, whereby we adapted elements of the arcade game but brought in different sections because what we wanted to do was feature key scenes from the film

which didn’t necessarily integrate with the actual game. We did it with *Platoon* whereby we started to create these multi-sectional games, which I don’t think anyone else had been doing. And so it was like three or four games in one, and we did that with *Batman*. Within the main game we wanted to feature the Batmobile, the Batplane, and so on, so we came up with these sections. That was very ground breaking.’

The next big movie licence was *The Shadow*, directed by Russell Mulcahy who’d also done *Highlander*. Gary was not particularly impressed with the script, but he remembers being enamoured with the wife of leading man Alec Baldwin. ‘He was married to a lady called Kim



Basinger. On my trips over to Hollywood I got quite friendly with Russell and Alec Baldwin and through him, with his wife, and I invited them to my house, you know, “Next time you’re over would you

Ocean and Amstrad

When Amstrad went up against Sinclair and Commodore with a range of home computers, Ocean were among the major software houses asked to prepare some games to run on the CPC464. There was a deal of muddled thinking behind

Amstrad’s computer range, and it seems clear looking back that Alan Sugar held to the theory that the most use of computers in the home was for word processing. Ironically, the designation CPC (Colour Personal Computer) was hollow, for the first machines were not colour – at least, not unless the owner splashed out another £110 for a colour monitor. As David Ward well remembers, there was another big problem for games developers.

‘I don’t know why the screen was this green and brown, only Alan Sugar knew that, perhaps he didn’t think of it as a games machine. We wrote a few games for the machine but the problem we found was the way the screen responded to the programming meant that games moved

vertically up the monitor, not laterally across... And initially the only way you could play these games was to turn the monitor on its side. Someone in our R and D department figured out with a couple of pokes you could actually get the game to run on a lateral basis. And presumably the industry then figured out you could do these few pokes to make it happen.’

Gary Bracey also recalls that dealing with the boss of Amstrad could be difficult. ‘He was so, so rude! I took John Ritman and Mike Lamb along with me to meet Alan Sugar and it was all “Oh, I tell you what you f***ing do, you’re going to make a f***ing great games, you going to make a f***ing lot of money.” He didn’t give a shit about what the games were or what

the product was, it was just make “f***ing money, f***ing this, f***ing that”. And for this meeting I put a suit on! No, he was obnoxious. I’m not taking away from his success, but it didn’t really impress. But he predicted that Amstrad would make us a lot of money.’

In general terms, while Amstrad products were a useful revenue stream, Ocean made more money with the games in France, where the machine became more popular than it ever did in Britain.

But in attempting to tackle the growing Japanese console threat, Amstrad came unstuck. David Ward again: ‘When



Sir Clive Sinclair sold his computer business to Amstrad boss Alan Sugar in 1986.



After a successful launch, the Amstrad never knocked the Spectrum or Commodore 64 off the spot, but went big in France.



and Kim like to come round for dinner?" And he said, "Oh sure." So, Alec and Kim came over to the UK and he said, "So whereabouts in London are you?" And I had to say, "No not London, we're in Manchester." We lived in a three-bed



semi. I said to my wife, "Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger are coming for dinner." "What! Oh, Jesus Christ!" But Alex said, "Oh I can't come to Manchester..." Can you imagine Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger coming all the way to



Ocean and Amstrad continued...

Alan Sugar launched the Amstrad games console in 1990, the GX4000, he decided the console would have a cartridge slot for the games. We were one of the early companies commissioned to develop half a dozen products for the GX4000. Due to the time constraints of manufacture and shipping Sugar realised he couldn't get the cartridges made in the Far East, so decided to go to Italy to buy the RAM-chips. They cost about twenty pounds each to source which meant the raw materials cost more than the actual game sold at retail. He had this launch party

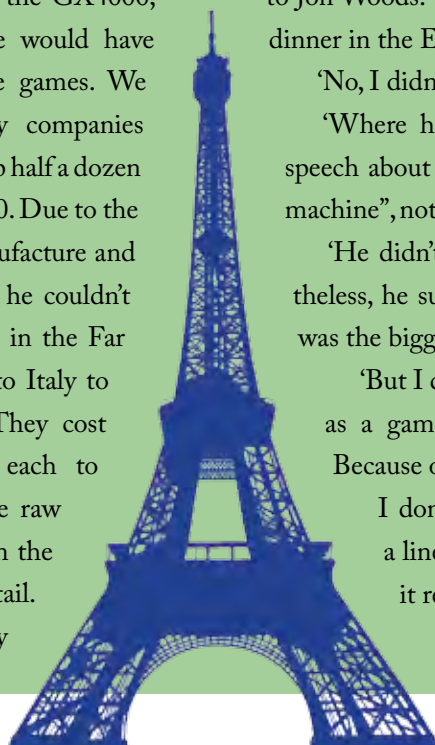
in Paris on the Eiffel Tower...' He turns to Jon Woods. 'Do you remember that, dinner in the Eiffel Tower?'

'No, I didn't do that one.'

'Where he made this ridiculous speech about his console the "arcade machine", nothing at all about games.'

'He didn't understand it. Nevertheless, he succeeded. The Amstrad was the biggest format in France.'

'But I don't think the Amstrad as a games machine succeeded. Because of the cost of the games. I don't think there was ever a line of software to go with it really.'



Manchester for a pie and chips! No, he was very gracious about it. He said, "No, we can't fit it in the schedule, we've got to be in London." But they were game for it otherwise!

Towards the end of 1987 a few magazine critics were moaning that Ocean was all about licensed product at the expense of originality and in retrospect perceived games like *Head Over Heels* and *Wizball* as a sop to their complaints. Paul Patterson disagrees. 'Yes, we became famous for licensed products because that was a choice that was made early on – we wanted to stand out from the rest of the pack. A licence was simply an opportunity to have a marketing head start on a non-licensed product. You still had to do everything in your power to produce a great game. There are great and poor quality licensed products and there are great and poor quality non-licensed products.'

'We never had any concerns whatsoever regarding taking on a licence. We knew it was the right thing to do. Of course we wanted to improve the quality of the game and sometimes if it didn't cut the mustard it was generally down to the pressure on developers to release it to coincide with either the movie or video. We produced many original games as well, and it is just coincidence that two of our best came out in the same year.'

Hollywood tie-ins

Disney was one Hollywood giant treasure trove Ocean steered clear of, and

David Ward is quite scathing towards the studio.

'Disney wanted far more control over the creative process than was actually realistic. And they wanted a lot more money. Disney's view was that anyone who makes any money out of this other than us is somehow wrong. "We'll give you enough margin to not go bust, but



that's all. And we want total control." They treated video games just like the T-shirt industry. They didn't think you did much more than stamp something on the side of a mug or the front of a T-shirt. They never really paid any proper intellectual credibility to the creative process. And then, of course, every five years, they'd decide to do it themselves. They'd hire in a whole bunch

Paul Patterson collects the C&VG Golden Joystick Award for Software House of the Year, April 1990, with Julian Rignall and Jonathan Ross.

of studio people in Burbank, and they'd fail within two years, and then go back to licensing again. And then as soon as anyone made any money out of licensing they'd decide to go back into it again and do it themselves with an in-house studio. No, we never dealt with Disney. They were much more of a problem, and they had all sorts of nightmare attitudes about

the characters, that they were in the wrong colour or too big, or too small. But in a sense they were protecting a different issue, which was long-term established intellectual property.'

After *Batman*, business for the British software house started to toughen up as Hollywood began to recognise the financial goldmine games licences represented, reflected in the kinds of high flyers Gary was meeting on a regular basis.

'I'd go to the Sony sets in Culver City where they were shooting *Hook*, and there was Steven Spielberg and Dustin Hoffman.

I used to have lunch in the commissary and these mega stars were everywhere. I remember having a meeting with Joel Silver in the commissary and while I

was there along came Mel Gibson, "Oh hi, Joel," and stopped by and had a little chat. And we'd carry on talking, and Kevin Costner would come along, "Hi Joel...". Because of the nature of the films we did I met pretty much everyone in them. *The Addams Family* was another one and we'd go to the premiere night, red carpet and all, and it was very exciting.'

Not every big film guaranteed a hot game, though, and Gary regrets licensing the 1991 movie *Hudson Hawk*. 'I recall getting the script and it was probably the best I'd ever read. It was funny, it was exciting, and had Bruce Willis – a hot action hero of the time. It was a Shane Black script, one of the hottest script writers, and a big director, Michael Lehmann, but the components didn't mesh well. And as you know it was a massive turkey. The reason was, I understand, that Mr Willis's ego got the better of them and he/they changed the film as it went along. The end result became unrecognisable to the original script. And so Ocean inherited the turkey. I was really upset as I always said the original script was brilliant. The game was okay. We were always constrained by time and what we could and couldn't do as you've only got certain scenes you can work with and with *Hudson Hawk* it was quite difficult to extract key scenes that we could develop.'

Situations like these projected Gary into advance damage limitation with the expectations of magazine reviewers. 'You

got to a certain point when you knew the game's going to be shit, or you know the game's got potential to be good. I always got into a quandary when the film was good or you knew it was going to be successful but the game was wanting. And what you normally found with things like *Red Heat*, which was not a big film, the game was mediocre. *Hudson Hawk* was a flop, the game was mediocre. *Cobra* was okay, the game was okay. I don't think we made bad games – in the film jargon we made formulaic games but only because you can't do some ground-breaking creative stuff every time. It became more of a sausage machine, which is why I was keen to nurture original stuff as well. And that's when the Ritmans, the Sensibles, the DIDs came along. We got people like Shadow Development involved, who did *The Lost Patrol*, and Mike, Nicholas and Pete Austin of Level 9 Computing in to do the next generation of adventure games.'

Dealing with licence-holders

Jon Woods recalls his worst experience of dealing with organisations when licensing their intellectual property: *The Simpsons: Bart Vs. The Space Mutants*.

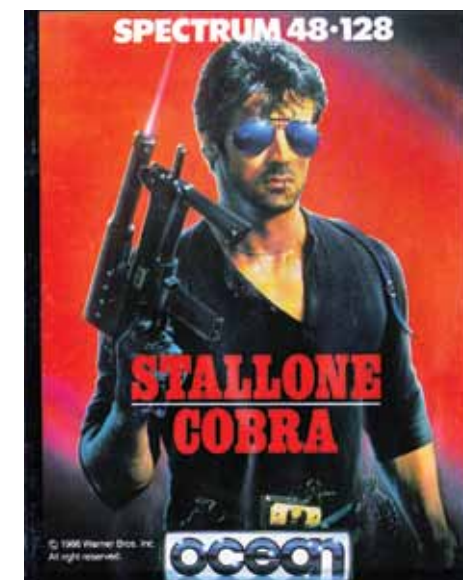
'We got the PC rights and then had to go through some process of approval with Matt Groening. We developed the game from the Acclaim version for the Spectrum and for some music we nicked it off a Simpsons TV episode. "We don't like this, we don't like that, it's not from the Simpsons, it doesn't belong in the Simpsons world," comes back. That process of dealing with these people... just ridiculous. They've got egos and they're king of the world, aren't they?'

'There were lots of associated problems connected to licences when it came to artwork and approvals,' Paul Patterson says. 'Sometimes this could delay launches and deals for weeks or even months. I do remember later on development having problems with the *Flintstones* licence. In the game we had Fred Flintstone walking away with his back to the screen. Unfortunately there was no artwork available from the studio because Fred Flintstone's back was never seen on TV and this became a real problem getting it signed off.'

The rivalry between the console giants Nintendo and Sega made dealing with both a tricky business for publishers like Ocean, but sometimes it played into their hands, as Paul remembers. 'I persuaded David Gardener and Mark Lewis who ran the Electronic Arts operation in Britain to allow us to publish all of their SNES games (*FIFA*, *John Madden*, *Tiger Woods*, *NBA* and so on) because they felt that with the success of the Sega catalogue, publishing Nintendo games might damage the relationship. It was a good deal for Ocean but it got better in that we persuaded Sony to take all our SNES games (*Mr Nutz*, etc.) to test their new distribution arm in Europe before the launch of the PlayStation. A substantial guarantee was agreed.'



Game flops because the movies bombed at the box office. *Cobra* fared better – as did the film.

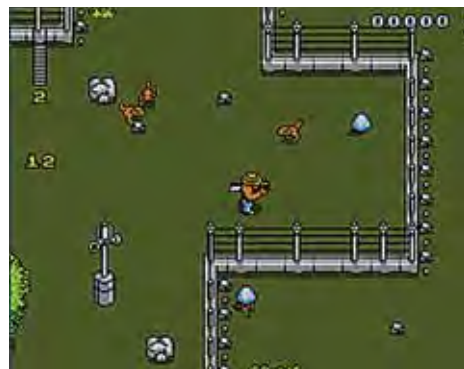


Steven Spielberg's 'ground-breaking' blockbuster dinosaur movie was destined to make a fantastic game, but in the end the pressure of schedules meant the result didn't live up to its potential.



A dinosaur of a game

Gary is still happy to defend many of the film licences. 'There are movie tie-ins of which to this day I am incredibly proud to have been part of. And that's all down to the talent of the teams. From when I was there at Ocean it started with *Top Gun*, then *RoboCop*, *Platoon*, *Untouchables*, *Batman* and *The Addams Family*, which actually became my favourite. We designed that in-house and it was so clever. The concept was a bit formulaic, with platforms and stuff like that, but it was beautiful to play, the look of it was



brilliant and it was well designed. It was just great fun to play.'

But he is not so proud of Ocean's biggest movie licence, the most expensive and, as it turned out, the last. 'We knew *Jurassic Park* was going to be huge,' Gary says with a grin.

And so was the cost of the licence. David Ward physically winces at the memory. 'Batman was our first inkling that the only way forward would be to merge with other companies because of the vast financial resources required to purchase a licence, let alone develop a game from it. *Jurassic Park* was the last movie licence we did. And that licence cost us three million dollars – our first licence was a few thousand. So we'd moved from a few thousand to millions of dollars in the space of ten years.'

It was clear to Gary that Ocean's



development costs for *Jurassic Park* would be ferocious as well. The director anticipated something wonderful. 'I had a meeting in 1992 with Steven Spielberg, a creative meeting about the game. And he used the words *ground-breaking* a lot. "The movie's going to be ground-

breaking, I want the game to be ground-breaking." I went to the Amblin Studios at Universal Studios, went into the board room with the documents and I'll never forget, on his wall was a cartoon. Remember, *Ghandi* and *E.T.* came out the same year – and there's this cartoon of Ghandi with an armful of Oscars and standing next to him E.T. with a armful of dollar bills!'

It must have been intimidating holding a meeting with one of the world's most famous and successful film directors, but Gary says it was not. 'There were just three or four people in this big meeting room and it was like being with a games geek. He was almost childlike in some ways. It wasn't this mega-super-star, it was just a passionate creator, talking on equal terms. Spielberg didn't have this persona that made you feel you were



in the presence of someone special. The meeting was followed by a visit to the Stan Winston Studio to see the models they'd been building and then to the Phil Tippett studio. I'd never seen Silicon Graphics computers before and they had

the wireframes of the dinosaurs already conceived and that was mind-blowing in itself – so far ahead of what we were doing. It was just science fiction! I'm just a huge movie geek. I never asked for autographs, though. I should've done, but I never did that.'

Naturally, given the prestige of the



Gary Bracey swears he never asked Steven Spielberg for the great man's autograph.

licence and the enormous expectations of the global cinema-going population, Ocean was under enormous pressure to 'break ground' with the game, as Gary recalls only too well.

'I came back to the UK having been given the blessing of Mr Spielberg to proceed. I think *Doom* had just come out and it opened a whole new thing of walking down a corridor and not knowing if something was going to jump out at you from around the corner. And I thought the scene with the raptors, if you could get that sort of fear into the person playing the game. So we went for that and attempted to develop a 3D game in six months. We just couldn't do justice to it. We had some great ideas, some



Nintendo's Family Computer, or Famicom, with its two stored player controllers. The cost of producing cartridge-based games and the fact they had to be ordered so far in advance, placed financial strains on many British software houses.



Juggling the new formats

At the height of the 8-bit era, how did Ocean react to the 16-bit Atari ST and Commodore Amiga coming over the horizon, particularly in respect of programming teams familiar with Z80 and C64 assembler? Paul Patterson's view is very much that of the sales person.



First 16-bit and then 32-bit machines promised ever better graphics... one day. They also promised an escalation in costs to an unprecedented level.

'I think we always wanted to produce product for the most successful platform. I'm sure Gary and the developers might have had a favourite platform or a cost might be cheaper from one platform to another but as far as I was concerned I wanted product for a hardware platform that most of retail would give shelf space to.'

David Ward says they responded to the devices in the market place. 'Demand was

what we wanted to do. I believe *Jurassic Park* was not a waste of opportunity but the game did not fulfil the potential.'

Putting the cart before the game

Rights purchasing and development costs rocketed, and the delivery systems' technology changed dramatically too, as David reflects. 'Towards the end of the 1980s came the second generation of video games console, starting with Nintendo and to a lesser extent, Sega. In a sense it put us back into a competitive

created from there. I think what happened was the machines arrived first, but the 16-bit era enabled much more deliberate programming to take place. It was less serendipitous than the 8-bit market. We set up the facilities for the people in-house to work on those machines. We moved to a studio production. We had a music studio, graphic artists' studio and the beginnings of what you may call a collaborative creative process, like making films. That wasn't so in the 8-bit era. If you look at the way 8-bit games were written, the way the programmers created the images onscreen was quite different, with the sprites.'

Jon joins in: 'You know originally with those back bedroom programmers everything was done in Basic. The only efficient way to write a game was in machine code where you wrote to the device, you wrote to the metal. If you

position again because a much larger financial commitment was required to afford the chips.'

'With Nintendo,' Jon says, 'there was a lead time of many months before you got the games into the shops – you had to pre-order and pay for the number of cartridges you wanted up front. That meant raising letters of credit, which of course thinned out the market because some software houses didn't have any fat on their backs to do that. Fortunately, we did. But it was a huge risk then. You

knew machine code you were in. That was the only way to get the thing looking any good at all. The 16-bit machines allowed the beginnings of a structured environment. Also, at the time the 16-bit market was emerging we were beginning to interview people who actually had learned programming at university.'

The new programming-designing-music-writing studio may have been more structured, but the 16-bit machines came with their own problems for developers.

'The PC with all those cards and add-ons was a headache because there was no simple user-base. Ignoring all the amazing bolt-ons, we had to write for the lowest common denominator, otherwise the game wouldn't work for those with the basic machine and they'd want their money back. The PC was a nightmare! Whether you had a VGA card or not, and you put it on the

know, with the 8-bit machines you could develop whatever, and if it didn't work well, throw it away. And if a game was selling well, with cassettes, or even the Commodore 64 disks, you could go to Ablex and get another ten thousand done and bang them into the shops. But you couldn't do that with Nintendo... you ordered whatever you thought you needed, and that was it. You found yourself with either unsold games or the shops wanted more and you were unable to do more.'

box, but...' He waves his hands in a way that suggests that Ocean's early packaging efforts for PC games were unhappy ones. Added to the hardware problems, the 16-bit market was a very different one to the 8-bit, as David points out.

'Because it was a much wider demographic of audience, the PC market was a much more difficult one for us to identify. I mean, there were women suddenly playing games!... People who wanted flight simulators!... The American companies tended to be better at PCs because they had a bigger domestic audience. And they were able to address the fact that, for instance, lots of people want to

Just one of numerous expansion cards to beef up IBM PC clones to give brighter, better, faster graphics, or louder, crisper sound, as this one promised.



▶ Juggling the new formats continued...



F-29 Retaliator needed so many PC versions it made the game virtually unviable.

play games about hunting, or something niche like that, but niche is still big over there. Nothing like that existed in Europe where it was always a more difficult market. Development costs went to millions as opposed to tens of thousands of pounds. I'm not sure we were ever successful at doing that. It was difficult for a UK company to develop in-house PC product to a very high standard because

of this non-common user base. And of course what the programmers wanted to do was develop the best thing for the most high-end specification PC, for which in reality you wouldn't sell many copies.

'Take something like *F-29 Retaliator*. We had to write different versions of the game which made promoting it and selling it much more difficult. At that time we could say to ourselves that on the one hand I've got Nintendo and we just carry on cracking these cartridges out – even though having to gamble on numbers when ordering them three months in advance – but on the other hand we've got to make 18 different versions of any PC game.'



In Europe – and with a very different appearance – the Famicom was named the Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES as players knew it.

'Obviously with disks, and more recently downloads, it's changed again,' adds David, 'but the way in which those chip-based games were ordered, bought, distributed and sold meant that a lot of the smaller software houses who set themselves up as publishers just had to back out because they didn't have the acumen or the financial resources. They

ended up becoming programming houses again; although sizeable companies as opposed to the individual bedroom programmers of the early eighties.'

Ocean's broad relationships with the Japanese coin-op producers led naturally to a deal with Nintendo. 'In 1986, having had a very successful *Kong* game on the Spectrum, we went back to Nintendo and licensed *Donkey Kong* for real,' Jon says. 'And I got *Mario Bros*, and of course I wanted the new *Super Mario Bros*, but they wouldn't let us have it and we didn't know why at that time.'

'That was before they'd launched their Famicom in America,' David interjects, referring to the Nintendo Entertainment System or NES as it

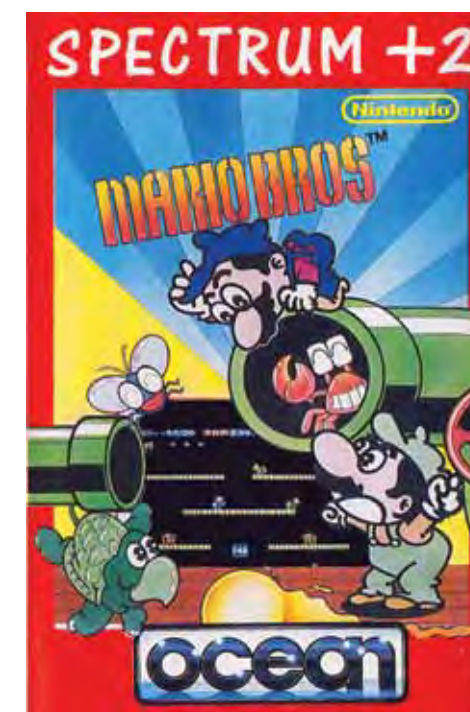


became known in the UK. Nintendo was determined no one would get their hands on their new *Mario* game and they published it themselves in all the territories, including the USA, within which they dramatically increased their presence. As David recalls, Nintendo was rebuffed in America...

'When Nintendo decided to sell the Famicom under the Nintendo brand, they went first to Warner Brothers and said, "Look here, we've got this thing, it's like the Atari but it's better, would you represent it? You can call it what you like, you can call it Atari, brand it as Atari." And they were so badly dismissed by Warners in a "don't ever talk to us again" manner that against their better judgement at the time, they set up in America to launch Nintendo products. "We'll do it ourselves," they said. And

so the company happened in Seattle, which was chosen only because it was the nearest point from Tokyo to ship the games consoles to. And by the second Christmas most of the people selling at Nintendo of America were ex-Atari sales people, who couldn't believe this second-coming bonanza had actually happened!'

And America couldn't get enough... and it was the same in Europe. The machines and the games sold out quickly



with Ocean capitalising on their early connections to the Japanese giant. David continues, 'By that time we were able to license some of the Nintendo products for Europe. But eventually, like most of the Japanese companies, Nintendo set up their own offices in each European country and the ability to represent them was gone. We could still license games

The relationship forged with Nintendo resulted in Ocean finally releasing a legitimate version of *Kong* – *Donkey Kong*.

Mario Bros was a coup for Ocean, but the real prize, *Super Mario Bros*, escaped the company.

Marc Djan headed up the French operation. Initially, Ocean Software France was set up in 1986 to make 16-bit conversions of existing Ocean/Imagine 8-bit games. Later, it became a distributor more than a game developer.

for the Nintendo machines, due to the relationship we had with the company. Just as we had, in fact, with Sega, only to a lesser extent. In a sense you had to pick your horse, which side you were on.'

As David says, Ocean did develop some products for the first Sega machine, the Master System. 'But we sold a lot more products on the Nintendo. Nintendo had some horror stories too. Remember that thing, the 3-D glasses they did? Virtual Boy. Somebody pointed out that if any child in America walked into the street with this thing on their head and got hit by a truck, they would



The two giant Japanese console manufacturers Nintendo and Sega preferred exclusive deals with the British software developers and Ocean found itself more drawn to Nintendo.

be out of business for ever! Quickly after launching it they dropped it, and it never appeared in Britain, or it never went mass market. Different story with the Game Boy, of course. We developed products for the Game Boy,' he sighs, 'unfortunately not *Tetris*.'

Ocean in France and America

If Ocean no longer enjoyed the benefit of representing Japanese companies in Europe, David had no intention of missing the opportunities Continental Europe offered towards the end of the



1980s, particularly France. However, as Jon points out, 'To sell products in France you had to sell in French.' Which meant having a French base.

Gary Bracey recalls David Ward as something of a Francophile. 'He was very pro-active and spent a lot of time out there, it was his little baby, his territory. But there was a bit of a cultural gap, so he decided we should open up an office in France and asked Marc Djan to set up a team there in 1986.'

'We couldn't have operated properly without a French office,' David says. 'You needed relationships with French people, retailers, French advertisers and French magazines for editorial stuff. We got away with it in Germany because we had a very good distributor in there, who represented us. Previously we had done the same in France with a French distributor, but as he had a chain of outlets he was obviously only selling to his own shops. In Germany the distributor remained independent and we carried on with him. I had a great mate

in Spain and he ended up representing Nintendo in there. So we had distributors in each European territory and our own French company, Ocean Software France.'

This left America untended other than indirectly through distributors there, an unsatisfactory state of affairs for Ocean.

'By 1988-89,' David says, 'we had no choice but to open an American company to try and address the US market. Our administrative resources were getting very stretched at that point, you're trying to compete with American companies in a worldwide market all from England. We needed to be in America to compete internationally for Nintendo rights. Particularly for licences. You see we were competing with American companies who were grabbing world rights to games, and if we didn't get worldwide rights it meant the European rights were also no longer available to Ocean.'

Jon's strong relationship with Data East helped cement a deal with Ray Musci, Data East's chief salesman in America. He left and set up Ocean of America with offices in San Jose. As Jon points out, it had the benefit of further strengthening Ocean's relationship with Nintendo since both companies were now in the same time zone. And being there placed Ocean in a stronger position to acquire licences, especially at a time when the rising giant Electronic Arts was not interested in them. During its life,

both Jon and David spent time out on the West Coast overseeing the operation, but Ray Musci was responsible for licensing and dealing with retailers.

Paul Patterson's view of the two subsidiaries was different. 'In my opinion both Ocean of America and Ocean Software France were mainly left to their own devices. Ocean of America was at best moderately successful in the publishing arena but was tremendously successful and helpful in building relationships with movie studios, Nintendo and other important companies in the USA and Japan. Ocean France was a small office, just the two

"We couldn't have operated properly without a French office. You needed relationships with French people, retailers, French advertisers and French magazines for editorial."

people who looked after marketing and PR mainly. They were bloody good at spending money and put our entertainment budgets to shame!

In the unceasing battle for licences, were there any they would have liked for Ocean but failed to get? 'Well, of course there was *Tetris*, but that was already locked up with Mirrorsoft,' Jon says with a rueful shake of his head. 'Otherwise the one that stands out was *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. We thought we'd got it, but Konami had an angle on it, and it went to Mirrorsoft... and we

know what happened to Mirrorsoft...’ he adds darkly. Published in Europe as *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* by Mirrorsoft’s label Image Works in 1990, for C64, Amstrad and Amiga. Image



One that got away from Ocean.

Work’s reputation was never high, and Mirrorsoft disappeared in the shakeup of the Mirror Group of Newspapers after proprietor Robert Maxwell’s death in

“When I received the phone call to tell me that the deal for the Ninja licence had fallen through, it was certainly no laughing matter.”

November 1991. The muddle gave Paul Patterson a headache too.

‘That was one of the most embarrassing stories with licensing. I was told we had agreed a deal to sign *Ninja Turtles*. I immediately rushed off and persuaded Kelly Sumner at Commodore that together with *Ninja Turtles* and the Amiga he would have the best pack on

offer that Christmas. It took a while to convince Kelly but the deal was done and artwork for Amiga packaging was started. I do look back now and laugh, but when I received the phone call from Jon Woods to tell me that the deal for the *Ninja* licence had fallen through, it was certainly no laughing matter. I had to fly down to London to meet Kelly personally to tell him the news. I’m still not sure that I’m completely forgiven!’

Budget and bling

While the costs of securing licences and developing games soared, the proliferation of very cheap 8-bit games in the UK was beginning to have an adverse effect on sales of anything that wasn’t based on a mainstream box-office success at the cinema or a massive arcade hit. Budget games companies like Mastertronic and Codemasters were selling their titles for as little £1.99. Ocean decided to compete by relying on its by now extensive back list of titles which had already earned their keep at the full price, as Jon points out.

‘We had our back catalogue, which we could compile as the Greatest Hits, or whatever, under the label The Hit Squad. But more than our own titles, we’d gone round and licensed specially for this – we had the whole Activision catalogue from Rod Cousens, for instance, and a few others, and we just kept this collection buried in the ground, waiting as it were for oil to go up in price, ready to release it. There was nothing in it for Ocean



at £1.99, there was not enough margin. And then the price point went up and we launched The Hit Squad at £2.99.’

David Ward picks up the story. ‘This was the end of the 1980s, while the cassette games were still current and machines like the Spectrum were still there. It was a good market at £2.99,

you know. You’re talking about a new audience of then 12-year-olds who’d borrowed their brother’s machine, and we had the beginnings of a second generation “hand-me-down”. And by that time we were moving to a growing Nintendo cartridge-based business that was as successful as the 8-bit market. But

When budget games started to sell at £2.99 it became viable for Ocean to sell the full-price games on the back list as the Hit Squad; 8-bit above, 16-bit below.



Both Paul Patterson and Gary Bracey were regular visitors to the Newsfield offices above Victoria Wine in Ludlow, home of *Crash* and *Zzap!64* magazines.



Rivals and the press

'I viewed Ocean's position, at its peak, as way ahead of anyone else,' Paul Patterson asserts. 'Certainly in terms of profile and sales. Without a doubt US Gold was our main competitor. This was the derby match of the software industry! We always went head-to-head for shelf space, number ones, magazine coverage, but to be quite honest there was never any malice and at the end of the day I spent a fair amount of time persuading their sister company, the distributor CentreSoft, to help achieve our goal of being number one.'

'We were fortunate that all software houses were selling different products and so co-operation and working and mixing together was what was so great about being part of this wonderful industry. I worked with Domark on bundle deals at Commodore and with US Gold and many other software houses in putting together compilations. We would team up with

Domark at Christmas to arrange joint parties for distributors. All in all working with the competition was a pleasure.

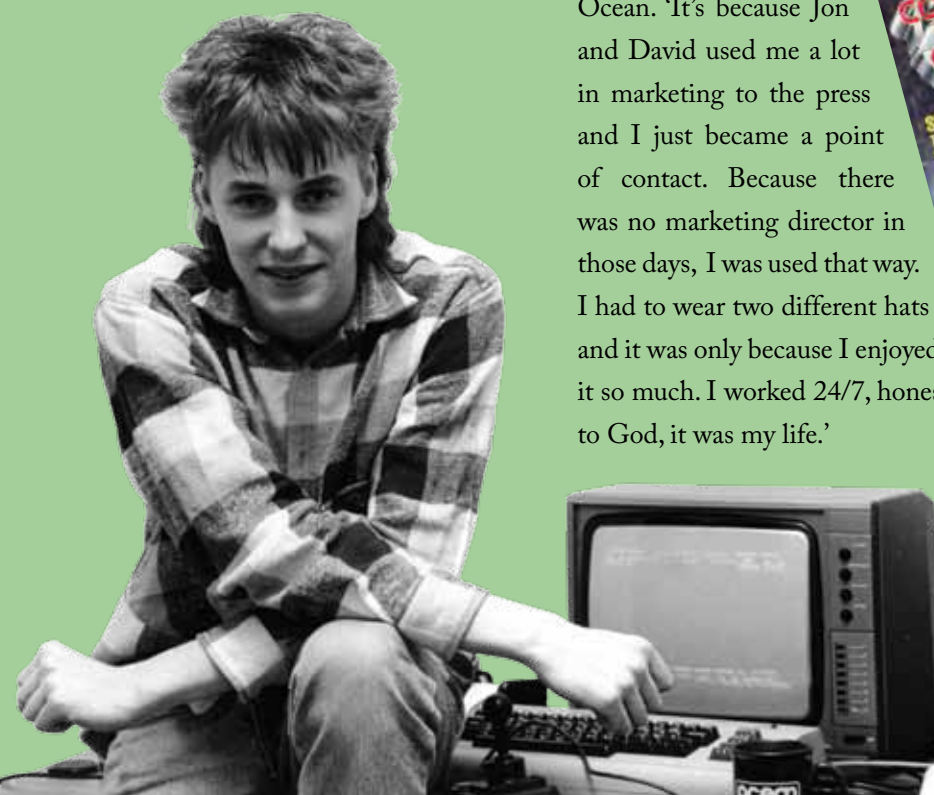
'I was just one of many people at Ocean who spent time with the press, from arranging games to be reviewed, competitions, editorials, advertising and so on. We had good and bad reviews, there were those that loved us and those that didn't but overall I think our relationship with the press was excellent and some friendships formed in those early years have continued to the present day.

'I never had a favourite individual magazine but my favourite publisher was Newsfield. I loved travelling down to Ludlow and built up several friendships with the likes of Ciaran Brennan, Julian Rignall and many more. The whole of Ocean seemed to have a soft spot



for Newsfield. At the time, specialist magazines were the best and only real way to market your product direct to the consumer, although we used *Computer & Video Games* a lot as well.'

In spite of his role as a development manager, Gary Bracey also acted as a front man for Ocean. 'It's because Jon and David used me a lot in marketing to the press and I just became a point of contact. Because there was no marketing director in those days, I was used that way. I had to wear two different hats and it was only because I enjoyed it so much. I worked 24/7, honest to God, it was my life.'



Julian Rignall – ace games player, reviewer and later *Zzap!64* editor, with his Ocean mug of coffee.



for us, the challenge of cartridge software was that it was all controlled by the device manufacturers. So with Nintendo and Sega you didn't actually manufacture anything, you just ordered it from them. You presented them a gold master of what you'd developed. They either didn't like it or they did like it.'



'Or they told you what was wrong with it,' Jon says. 'It had to be perfect for them or they wouldn't let it go onto their system.'

'They couldn't, because obviously you can't have bugs in a cartridge product.'

'The whole process became so elongated and much more sophisticated. Basically, what you needed to do with a

cartridge product was add nine months onto the finishing of the game in gold master form before you released it. So it was nine months as opposed to nine days for a cassette or a disk, what with the de-bugging during alpha testing, beta testing, and so on.'

However, it was an uneasy time for the whole computer games industry. Some five to six years of steady production for effectively only three machines – the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad – suddenly became complicated by a wave of new 16-bit computers and 8- and then 16-bit cartridge-based console games systems.

David Ward continues: 'Commodore was still there, with its Amiga range, but

"For us, the challenge of cartridge software was that it was all controlled by the device manufacturers."

their dabble in the console market went wrong and that was the beginning of the end for them.' The world's first true 32-bit games console, the Amiga CD32 released in September 1993 came too late for the venerable computer company, and Commodore International went bankrupt in April 1994. 'The Spectrum by then had been phased out too and all the other home computers for which we had made games – the Dragon, the Oric, BBC Micro, Amstrad, MSX –

The Amiga CD32 games console came too late to market to save venerable Commodore's bacon.



they had all gone, so we were left with a market that was either PC-based or cartridge-based: Nintendo or Sega. There were others who tried to compete with these systems in the market, but of no consequence.'

Jon points out that Ocean got a lot more from Nintendo if they avoided working with Sega, and David agrees. 'Yes, a lot more help. And to be honest,

it was more a question of getting the cartridges out of them. It was complicated enough dealing with one let alone two, and we were much closer to Nintendo. You see, by September you had to place your orders to get products in the shops for Christmas. And that completely altered the logistics of doing business. With the 8-bit tape or disk-based games your duplicator could

The console battle heated up with the release of the 16-bit Super Nintendo, or SNES, and Sega's MegaDrive.

All gone: Oric, Dragon, MSX, along with the Amstrad and BBC Micro, while the ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64 were waning rapidly in the face of the consoles.





'What might have been true in 1986 sounded ironical a decade later. David Ward on the advantages of being Ocean's size: 'There's no politics here. We're too small. You pass everyone else in the corridor 25 times a day.'
David Ward, November 1985 – *Amstrad Action*.



E.T. – a time capsule buried in the burning Nevada desert.

run them off and deliver within days, so if something was selling well, you just ordered more and there they were soon after. But the lead time for the complicated chip-based cartridges plus shipping was at least two months, which meant you had to take a stab at the quantity to order. And you just knew that Nintendo wouldn't deliver the complete order. So you often ordered more than you thought you'd need in the hope that you'd get as much as you really wanted.

'There is a good story about over-ordering of cartridges which goes back to the Atari days. Having been under-supplied for three consecutive years – 1979, 80 and 81 – every retailer in America ordered *five times* as much as they wanted of Atari's *E.T.* game, believing it was going to be the greatest thing since sliced bread in terms of sales. And lo and behold Atari delivered it all, without checking the fact that they were delivering software three and a half times more in quantity as the hardware base had sold cumulatively since the beginning! They buried all those unsold cartridges out in the desert somewhere near Las Vegas. In a million years, when aliens land, they'll dig them up and play them, because silicon doesn't degrade!'



Heading for France

By the late 1980s, Ocean was arguably the biggest games developer and publisher in the West, but another force had also grown rapidly across the Atlantic – Trip Hawkins' Electronic Arts. However, under Trip, EA was dedicated to creating original product, but as David Ward explains, that all changed in 1991.

'When Trip ran EA they wouldn't touch anything to do with licensing at all. And in a sense it was the success we had with creating licensed product which turned them into a licensing house when Trip left. And of course, Electronic Arts' success when they began to make their real headway was to do with licensing sports franchises. They adopted our *modus operandi* which had been heavily criticised by the artistic community, that we were undermining the creative process. And EA simply copied it. And because of the volume of the American business they were more difficult to compete with. Having said that, when we merged with Infogrames the value of the Infogrames company was virtually the same as EA. At the start of the 1990s we foresaw the necessity of having a public company to have access to funds to compete with Electronic Arts. That was why the merger took place, to give us that access to public funding. We had no choice. We could either go public in America, which would have been very difficult without more American personnel, without a finance director, without an MD, without a CEO, and all the rest of the stuff. Or we

could try to merge with someone who had access to a public market.'

The experience of almost a decade with Ocean Software France, and David's affinity for the French way of life, and given the lack of obvious American

So a merger with Infogrames was a way of accessing public finance. And EA had by this time a stock price which enabled them to raise hundreds of millions of dollars if necessary. The overheads for a games development

Painting by Oliver Frey



partner, made a merger with France's most powerful *informatique* company the best option.

'*Informatique* [computing] was a very important cultural part of French political life and the French have always had this kind of affection for technology.

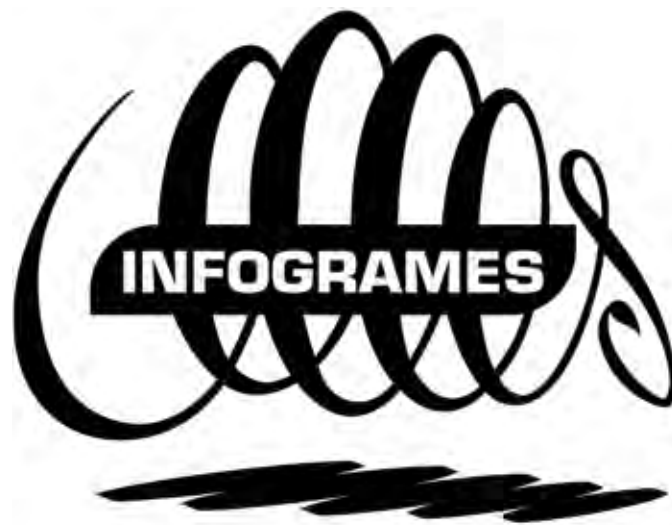
company had become massive. You see, the music publishing industry, or book publishing industries never needed to employ creatives directly as we did. The problem with hiring two or three hundred creatives is that you have to find something for them to do, and you get

A new American force in original games, such as 1988's *Powerdrome* (above), Electronic Arts began to threaten Ocean's dominance when it started to license properties in competition.

these void periods where they wonder what they're going to do. And in the end that's very wearing on a budget. You've got to be incredibly successful over and over again. And even EA then moved, as we did, to a form where half the

programming development resources were out of house and half in-house.

'What decision you make at any particular point in the evolution of a business may be right, but it won't stay right. Something else will happen, particularly in an industry geared to technical change which happens so



The different guises of Infogrames. Top: the logo in use from 1983 until 1993. Centre: from 1993–1997. Bottom: after a few variations, the main logo from 2000 until the transition to Atari SA.

rapidly, and alters the whole parameters of what means success, of what makes greater success. Unlike the movie industry, we went from the equivalent of 1900 to 2000 in the space of five years. How can anyone adopt that amount of change and still remain relevant or viable in financial terms?'

Paul Patterson's view matches David's but concentrates on the damaging role PC games played. 'Ocean grew to an unmanageable size with an overhead to match. We had all mistakenly decided to allow all our in-house development team to focus on original PC games only. The overhead for this alone affected Ocean greatly and in 1994 a portion of the company was sold to French company Chargeurs. Unfortunately most of the money from this sale was allocated to help prop up Ocean of America who were themselves running at a loss.'

'Yes,' Jon says, 'we took an investment from Chargeurs, who took 23 per cent of the company.' The French corporate group has interests in textiles, but shares in any number of companies and in 1992 bought the media group Pathé, which in turn looked to Ocean as an investment opportunity. 'We needed the finance to fund Nintendo development, and we'd got to the point where we could only manage so much of our own finance.'

But within a year of the Chargeurs input, Paul felt it was insufficient, merely a stop-gap to keep Ocean afloat until a real merger could be leveraged. 'It became apparent from the autumn of 1995 that while Ocean was enjoying success in the charts and had some very lucrative bundle deals it wasn't enough to cover our incredibly large overhead. David started talking to Infogrames about a possible sale. Infogrames wanted to raise their profile worldwide and in their words they wanted to buy the "rock

'n' roll" company – Ocean. We had to fight to survive until that day arrived, and sometimes we had extraordinary luck. Like the fax sent to us that should have gone elsewhere, which allowed me to sell a distributor in Australia the rights to our games for three years for \$10 million with a 20 per cent up-front payment. The payment arrived *just* in time.'

'Of course, it wasn't all fun and games,' Steve Blower says of the increasing pressures. 'In the years around 1990 onwards, the general management had become more organised in order to deal with the pressure of meeting deadlines set within licensing contracts, etc. Consequently the production meetings could be really tense affairs, particularly when the same products, meeting after meeting, were still nowhere near completion. In one such meeting, the production director, the late Paul Harrison, gave one of the young marketing executives a piece of his mind, "Don't tell us how to do our jobs, we were cutting the mustard when you were cutting your teeth!" Scouse accent as well.'

'I remember a few months prior to the sale of Ocean to Infogrames, David Ward called a meeting of all the staff to explain what was happening with Ocean. This took place in the basement cafeteria of the offices at Castlefield [Ocean had moved to much larger premises in a redeveloped canalside building in the summer of 1992]. David spoke for around twenty minutes about the sale of the company. He was an



excellent speaker and could really hold an audience's attention. I chatted to a few of the programmers after the meeting. Some of them had not even seen David Ward before. One of them commented, "He was awesome." In this respect, I think David missed an opportunity with the management model.'

In 1996 Infogrames acquired Ocean for a reputed \$100 million and was renamed Infogrames UK. David insists this was not the outright sale depicted by the press at the time. "It was a merger and we got shares in Infogrames. A little later Infogrames got caught up in a series of changes which meant they didn't get as much out of the Ocean merger as they should have.'

'And I left the company the year after, which was a part of my deal,' Jon says.

President of Infogrames, Bruno Bonnell (above) said of the merger with Ocean: 'This is the most important event in the European market in the last decade. It consolidates the major software interests under one umbrella and provides a magnet for developers and a vehicle for Japanese and American publishers seeking the best European distribution. Our on-line expertise in particular will be a factor in competing successfully on an international basis and driving the group through the 21st Century.'





A late-issue Zzap!64 poster celebrated Movie Action Heroes and the fact that – while Ocean didn't get every licence going — it certainly got the most of them.

OLIVER
TROY

The Ocean Party Animals

By a mixture of luck and design,' Paul Patterson says, 'most of the Ocean staff from top to bottom had the same passion, personality, loyalty, work ethic and most importantly was a party animal! Ocean was known for working hard and playing hard, and this went right up to the Chairman, David Ward.'

Those magazine journalists who were invited to an Ocean 'do' knew they were in for a good time.

'The parties were great,' David reminisces with a grin that can only be described as sly. 'We spent a lot of ill-gotten gains on them.'

'There was the riverboat on the Thames in 1989...' Jon adds.

'Some of the artists we had... We had a couple of the hottest Tamla Motown groups. We had a great party once with an Abba group. It wasn't Abba themselves, it was Abbalike.' David turns to Jon. 'Do you remember the party when we had Bob Monkhouse? He was the filthiest... he had a line of blue conversation, as blue as you could imagine.'

'The sharpest guy I ever met.'

'Yes, very sharp.'

Gary Bracey remembers it well, as if anyone could ever forget. 'It was at a London hotel during the annual ECTS [European Computer Trade Show]. Bob Monkhouse was brilliant, a legend. About

three hours before the party we met with him and he had a load of questions about the games, the staff, who our competitors were, and so on. So he stands up and comes out talking about people. I'll never forget one industry joke that just cracked us all up. "You have Ocean, who are a sixteen-bit company and then you have US Gold, which is a two-bit company!" And he had this running joke. One of the girls in PR was Danielle Woodyatt, who everyone in the whole business new as "Woody", and



Bob was briefed about this and... well, you can imagine the amount of "woody" running jokes, you know Woody this and Woody that. Then about six months later

"The night before I'd gone to a nightclub and got so drunk that I couldn't stand up."

I was flying to the States, and I was in the lounge and Bob Monkhouse was there, I think he was flying out to Barbados. I went up to him and I said, "Bob, I just got to say I haven't seen you since you

did that thing for Ocean Software." And he said, "Oh yeah." "I just wanted to say it's legendary now, it really is." And he comes back, "Is Woody still there?" We're six months later and with all the people he's met in between, he still remembers Woody. Amazing guy.'

Paul Patterson remembers a party at which the hired entertainer caused Ocean embarrassment with some of its invited foreign guests. 'It was in London and we'd invited UK and European retailers, distributors and journalists. We booked the Drifters to play and for some obscure reason we decided the evening needed



a comedian. Quite why we decided that Liverpool comedian Stan Boardman would fit the bill when we were mostly entertaining Europeans and UK people from the south of England, I have no idea. A short way into his performance Stan asked if there were any Germans in the room and would they put their hand up and they did. He immediately asked them



Smart Bob Monkhouse turned the party air blue, but Stan Boardman made Ocean's German guests feel blue.

After a week of unending pressure to get games finished and out the door, the Ocean staff tended to party hard as well.



to put their other hand up and promptly said, “Now I recognise you.” There was a deathly silence before he added, “You lot bombed our chippy!” It wasn’t the best way for us to endear ourselves to our representatives and journalists from Germany.’

Not all the humour came from the hired entertainers. Among the Ocean party animals, boss-man David Ward was infamous. ‘I remember making a speech once at one of those conferences that Newsfield started. It was in the mid-1980s. The night before I’d gone to a nightclub and got so drunk that I couldn’t stand up. And there was a kind a large muddy hill behind the hotel, which

I rolled down. I remember Gary Bracey waking me up in the morning and I’m in bed in a suit covered in mud, and I’m being told there’s an audience downstairs waiting for this speech—’

‘It was Computer Arena,’ Gary takes up the tale. ‘They happened every year in a different country... really it was just an industry piss-up and to justify it they had one day of presentations and speeches. And David was scheduled to speak, and everyone turned up, and we’re talking to people from every major computer company in the industry and they are sitting down in this big hall waiting, and ten o’clock comes and, “Mr. Ward?” No one. So I rushed to his room and banged on his door, and I hear all these groans. And I say, “David!” And eventually the

“David was ordering vintage port and drinking it out of a teapot.”

door opens. More moans. “Oh my God. I’m covered in mud!” He got so pissed the night before.’

‘So, quick shower, with the suit on!...’

‘...while I had to go downstairs and make all sorts of apologies for twenty minutes. And then he bounces down, freshened up, a bit the worse for wear.’

David shoots imaginary cuffs. ‘And I predicted that one day our industry would

be bigger than the movie industry and bigger than the music industry, and Nick Alexander of Virgin just laughed outright at me.’

‘I can remember one night we all met up in Liverpool,’ Paul Finnegan recalls. ‘I was with my wife Joan and a few other friends. And one was staying in the same hotel as David, and I told him this, and he said, “Come on, let’s go to his room.” And we barged in, and David was ordering vintage port and drinking it out of a teapot. I remember him driving about town in his Porsche – he always had a Porsche – and he was absolutely legless then!’

Gary reckons the worst of David’s party faux-pas occurred at the Summer CES (Consumer Electronics Show) the



forerunner of E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo). ‘One was in Las Vegas in January and in Chicago in June. And we always used to stay at the Hyatt Regency, which is a very nice hotel in the centre of Chicago.’

Paul Patterson takes up the story. ‘I arrived back at the hotel in the early hours

of the morning to find David prostrate and fast asleep in the revolving door of the hotel. It took seven of us to push the door around and get him onto a couch in the lobby where we left him for the rest of the night.’

Back to Gary... ‘I come down in the morning, about nine o’clock, and I’m walking out for a ciggie – we used to smoke then – and in this massive ornate lobby they have these sofas, and there lying on a sofa was David, who’d spent the night crashed out, pissed out of his head. “David, wake up!” “Mmmmmrrr...” was all I got out of him.’

‘There was also a time,’ Paul Patterson recalls with a wry grin, ‘when I was with David Ward and a couple of other people having dinner coincidentally in the same restaurant as Jon Woods and Gary Bracey who were attempting to tie up a deal for *Jurassic Park*. It was during the meal that David noticed that Jon had started to nod off and it would be very difficult for Gary to wake him up without making it more than obvious. David asked me to march over and give him a hearty slap on the back and a hug as though I hadn’t seen him in many years, which of course I duly did and they both managed to tie up the deal that same evening.’

And thus are the big deals done.



Even sober, the dungeon crew found it difficult to get past the Guardian of the upstairs management level.

An Oceanic Aftermath

The merger with Infogrames, in visionary terms,' David says, 'was the correct thing to do. It made us part of a worldwide company – you couldn't compete any longer on a national basis only. You had to be a worldwide player to get access to creative resources and access to the product categories – you needed a global footprint. And Infogrames were very motivated about that and they had a second string to their agenda which was

“Infogrames had acquired a very well loved brand and just didn’t use it.”

to buy GT Interactive. And GT already had a quote on the NASDAQ and we had a Bourse quote and so we had the global company. For all those reasons it was the right thing to do. And within two years of joining we pushed up the share price of Infogrames so that in market capitalisation terms it was the same as EA. We had the same potential and opportunities.'

Gary Bracey's perception of the merger is that of an outsider, since he had left Ocean before it took place. 'I was terribly upset that Infogrames had acquired a very well loved brand and just didn't use it. It's not about the products, some of that's history, but you've got a brand there, which was recognised, that was built up over a substantial period and Infogrames just never used it. To

me that was insanity. I would go so far as to say the Ocean brand had better visibility than the Infogrames brand. I would say that at one point we were the biggest games company in the world and the most prolific, we were the most profitable, we had the biggest turnover, and we had the best image.'

Jon Woods agrees. 'Ours was a much stronger name. Infogrames had all the money in the world because of their own stock market evaluation, and being French the market would support them. If they'd been in the States they would have just withered on the vine... and ultimately they ended up owning Hasbro and Atari and God knows what. Atari was a great name, great brand, but it ended up being owned by so many people it's not really much use any more.'

And Paul Patterson had more reason than the others to bemoan Infogrames' short-sighted policy. 'Their message at the beginning was that they wanted keep the heart and soul of Ocean but make one or two sensible cutbacks. Unfortunately, within a year they set about dismantling all that was good about Ocean and replaced it with a subsidiary of Infogrames. Change was absolutely necessary and the overheads needed to be reduced but all this could have been done without destroying the brand – Ocean. I stayed for three years as Managing Director after the sale to Infogrames.'

Infogrames was all big money, *not* big games; Ocean *was* big games. And with





a certain French arrogance Infogrames swallowed Ocean whole and, in the process, lost it.

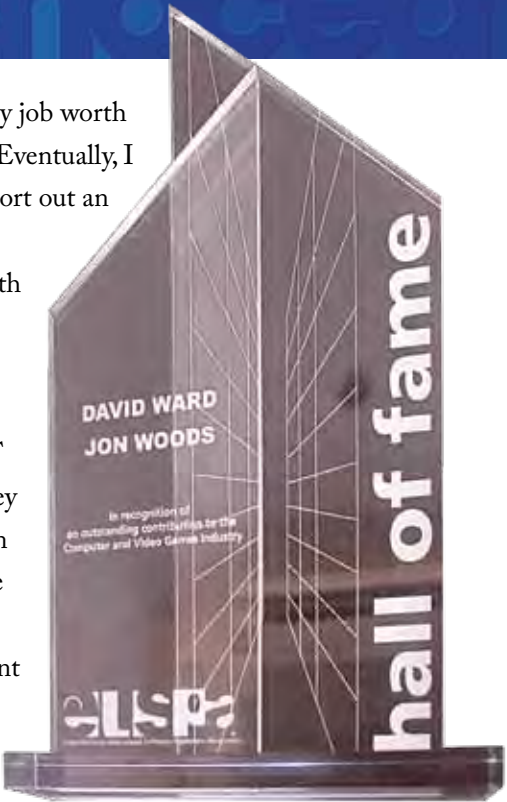
The 'sensible cutbacks' eventually hit the Ocean staff, for whom things were not so rosy. 'Initially they were very attracted to the idea of being part of a larger group,' David continues. 'In the end it didn't work out well for them because after about four or five years, Infogrames decided they wanted a London headquarters. Anyone looking at Great Britain from outside would ask where's the UK office going to be? We have one in Paris, in New York, in San Francisco, in Manchester...? No, it's going to be in London. I think a great deal of the intrinsic value in Ocean was sidelined. Some of the values we had were in our brand and in our publishing expertise, which by that time was as good as any that existed anywhere in the world. Although we were always wedded to the creative process, I always thought that our real forté was in publishing. In a sense, that's where we started, envisioning a business to support a publishing operation.'

Steve Blower stuck it for a while, but eventually he lost heart. 'Towards my last two years at Ocean things became a lot less enjoyable. There were people in management positions that were either not adequately taking on their responsibilities and others who were more interested in increasing their power footprint. The sale of the company to Infogrames had also changed some of the

dynamics that made my job worth getting out of bed for. Eventually, I asked David Ward to sort out an exit for me.'

David remained with the group until 1999, by which time he had resigned as a director of the US board of GT Interactive, because they needed more American board members. 'In the end, when GT moved to London, I didn't want to live in London, so that really was it for me. And I had other ideas by then.'

In parallel, Paul Finnegan had fared well. When Ocean pulled the plug on Special FX in about 1991, he formed Rage with five programmers and artists. 'I put the money in and I gave 70 per cent of the company away to them. That was always my philosophy, to look after them because they're the lifeblood. If it's going to work it's going to be because of the programmers.' Finnegan rejects completely the popular notion that the company was named Rage because he was so angry at the way he'd been treated. 'No. I wanted to call it Elephant Software until they all got me round a table and gave me a good kicking. No, it was Joffa Smith who came up with Rage, just off the top of his head, short and sharp, like *Crash* or *Zzap!*; there was no malice in it. My motto is that you'll meet



Over the years, Ocean won an enormous number of awards from magazines and the industry, but none more prestigious than ELSPA's Hall of Fame award to David Ward and Jon Woods.





Paul Finnegan today, investing in the latest technology.

those people up and down the ladder, going up and down, so stay friendly with everybody. It's funny, at the time no job is perfect, there's always gripes with people you work with, or you're not happy with the boss, but then you look back and you say they were great times. And as David says, we were making it up as we went along and it was fun. One of the best things that ever happened to me was working with Jon Woods and David

Ward because they were very shrewd and taught me an awful lot.'

Rage is a story all of its own. Suffice to say it developed and published an enormous number of games all through the 1990s, and went on to become a massive public company worth many millions of pounds.

A Changed World

The world of gaming is a very different place today and for all the brilliance of cinematic-style, immersive games he's now involved with, Gary Bracey has a soft spot for the past. 'Oh I miss it terribly. It's changed a lot. You know I worked 24/7, it was full-on, managing the projects, and then quite often when a game was finished – it was always late, there was never a game finished on time – I would literally grab the master, jump in the car and drive to Telford to Ablex where they would master it. And then I'd test the thing. I would stay up there all night

testing it, and then press the button to say, "Okay, it can go." And the game would go into production, perhaps as many as fifty thousand for an expansive run. But once the button was pressed for me it was history and onto the next game. And you know there were hundreds of games. Then we had an artist and a programmer per game. Now it's hundreds of people on movie-style budgets, if the game doesn't sell you've lost probably millions. If that happened to one of Ocean's cassette games it didn't break the company. And because of the stakes involved today things have become less creative, the games are derivative like playing the same game as twenty years ago.'

Neither of the original founders wants to replay their lives by picking up all that intellectual property they created. Jon Woods and David Ward have moved on... and as for the games, Gary Bracey says it's just too late to revive the Ocean brand. 'The IP is just gone because there is no Infogrames and it's a pain in the neck to collate the information. You'd need expensive lawyers to sort anything so it's just not worthwhile. I think that IP is just going to stay there in a black hole. And if anyone did want to revive Ocean they wouldn't be able to use any of the licensed material, the movies, coin-ops, only the original Ocean-designed games, so it would be very limiting.'

Did Ocean do the best games? Gary's take is typically modest. 'I'd like to think so. I'd like to think that ours were *among* the best games of the time. We produced

some shit, every company did. You can't be that prolific and get everything right every time. But the coin-ops were crackers. It was a privilege to be there. David Ward and Jon Woods trusted me with an enormous responsibility for which I was not qualified. And they seldom questioned what I did. If I wanted to licence a movie, if I wanted the budget... nothing was ever questioned. The only niggle was with *Wizkid* that Sensible Software did, because *Wizball* hadn't done fantastically – it was a critical

"At its peak, I was part of the best software house in the world."

rave but didn't do well commercially. And so when the sequel came up I had to push very hard to get that published and it probably wasn't the best idea commercially. But it was all part of a strategy to try and get Ocean recognised for original games and not just derivative licences at the time. I always said that after Ocean, if I died no one should mourn because I've done ninety-nine percent more than others because I've been so lucky to be in the right place at the right time and got the dream job.'

'At its peak,' says Paul Patterson, 'I was part of the best software house in the world. It had an incredible development and testing department. From logistics through to sales, marketing and PR, they

were all the best in the business. We even had an accounts team that would join in when we needed to entertain retail outlets, distributors and magazines. I believe that everybody who ever spent time at Ocean would say they were probably some of the best years of their lives. It certainly was in my case.'

But Jon Woods is adamant that the past is the past. 'I probably couldn't stand the business today. I understand how it works, but it's all a long time ago. I'd had enough, to be honest, I had other things I wanted to do. David was happy to hang in with Infogrames, so he did. As Ocean we had a few landmarks. We had a few breaks, right place, right time. Having been in business before, that was the important thing. Most of the competitors were just out of uni or were bedroom programmers. We didn't do that, we'd done our getting street-wise, and yet the whole essence of our business when we were kings was the "just in time" thing.'

For David Ward as he breezes out on his way to another meeting, it's simple: 'If you can remember all this, you probably weren't there...!'



Just two of the scores of awards Ocean received over the years.



*High days and heydays; The Ocean Gang,
1988 – key on page 262*

Memories are made of this

In their own words, many of Ocean's programmers, game designers, artists, testers, warehousemen and producers remember their days working for Britain's biggest games software house.





Simon Butler

Simon joined Ocean for the very first time in 1987 – his history with Ocean is colourful, with credits on a number of high-profile games ranging from the fulsome graphics of *The Never Ending Story* on the Spectrum to the design of *Platoon* on the Commodore 64.

Simon was called on to create the graphics for the less-than-stellar *Transformers* on the Commodore 64. He was working in-house at Denton Designs in Liverpool, a company originally founded in 1984 by former Imagine employees, Steve Cain, Ian Weatherburn, Ally Noble, John Gibson, Karen Davies and Graham ‘Kenny’ Everett. Denton Designs developed numerous titles for the Ocean label, and Simon regularly bumped into David Ward. ‘He was far more hands-on in the formative years of what would become Europe’s leading developer/publisher. I knew David and Jon prior to the games explosion when they ran a hippie clothes shop in the centre of Liverpool, something I was “asked” somewhat strongly not to mention ever again once I was ensconced in the bowels of Central Street.

‘During the Denton era I remember David calling in to check on the progress of something they were working on and he noticed a rough doodle of mine depicting a

strange gun-wielding frog type creature. He asked me what it was, and being the card I thought I was at the time, I merrily quipped that it was a *Cosmic War Toad*. When he enquired if a full game design existed, I never thought twice and assured him that was indeed the case, which could not have been further from the truth. Satisfied with this he then took the “Jolly Dents”, as the upper echelon were known, away into their



The advertisement for *N.O.M.A.D.* The game was released on the Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad in 1986.

“office” and they ironed out a deal for the non-existent title there and then. Not the greatest of games, but it did contain some mighty fine toad animation by Steve Cain and some tasty cover art by Bob Wakelin.

‘I also recall another time when David was waxing lyrical to John Gibson about his latest automotive acquisition, a Porsche if I remember rightly. John, being a fan of such things, was green with envy, but managed to hide his mirth when David returned to the office shortly after to ask if he could use the phone to report the theft of said motor.’

Simon moved on from Denton Designs due to more than a smidge of friction between himself and Karen Davies.

‘I then found myself working with Ian Weatherburn. It was during this period that I started learning my craft, such as



Adventure. All of these were Ocean games and reasonably well received for the most part.

‘Somewhere in the midst of all of this Steve Cain and Ian came together again to form a small independent team called Canvas, who developed a slew of titles of rapidly diminishing quality for Ocean that contained such “gems” as *It’s a Knockout*, *Miami Vice*, *Legend of Kage* (an Ocean/Imagine title) and the woeful *Highlander*.

‘Canvas, while developing some fairly ropey products, was instrumental in attracting Dawn Drake into the

industry. Gary Bracey was a regular visitor to Canvas – I had met him previously when he ran his own software store south of the city. Ian Weatherburn introduced us and Gary asked me to sign a few copies of *Shadowfire*.

Steve Cain departed Canvas for pastures new and the general theory



among the remaining management at Canvas was that the quality of a game was not its main selling point – Ocean, it

Simon confesses to working on a number of ‘turkeys’ – a screen from *Highlander* on the Commodore 64 to the left and the cassette cover of *Legend of Kage* below.



Screens from *The Neverending Story* on the Spectrum –released in 1985.

was argued, released so many titles that they would never notice how bad the games supplied actually were.

As Simon reflects, ‘They were sadly ill informed – Ocean started giving the company appalling arcade conversions and a blind man on a galloping horse could have seen the writing on the wall. When working on a game that finally reached a point where it actually sullied the good name of crap, I decided it was time to get out of the games industry and quit with the intention of returning to advertising.’

As with a great number of Simon’s master plans this did not go as intended.

Ocean’s full-page advert for *Platoon* and an in-jungle screen shot of the game on the Spectrum.



He received a phone call the next day from Gary Bracey asking him to come to the Ocean offices. ‘Gary welcomed me with open arms and, after introducing me to Steve Wahid, Allan Shortt and many more of the subterranean monkeys that were the heart of the Ocean development, I suddenly found myself a full-time employee at Ocean Software. There would be times when Gary would



wish for a fully functional DeLorean complete with flux capacitor.

‘I suppose I was unlike almost every other Ocean employee at that time because I was coming in with at least ten Ocean titles under my belt already. The majority of the development team, almost all male at that point in time, were industry virgins.

‘Contrary to what some might imagine, Ocean was not some magical Wonka-like factory of dreams. It was more like Hogwarts once Voldemort and his cronies had finished with it. The development side of things was a fairly spartan and somewhat grubby basement beneath the Quakers’ place of worship. The Suits, as we called them, held court two floors above in a cramped collection of prefabricated offices competing for the affections of the lissom secretarial types that jiggled around with abandon. But for all its ramshackle veneer it was

for the most part a hive of industry, liberally sprinkled with bursts of total lunacy and more than a healthy dose of talent. Nobody reinvented the wheel while at Ocean or set the world alight with games that broke the mould, but for some reason which I have never managed to fathom, their titles are held in high regard, or if not, then at least remembered with a misty-eyed fondness by the gaming public of the time.

‘My in-house career was broken into two halves, the fun days and then the soulless “Corporate Years”, where every time you blinked there was another Suit wandering around with that supercilious sneer that only the creatively stunted can pull off. The fun days were the fly-by-the-seat-off-the-pants times when the industry was still fairly new and people were making it all up as they went along. Sure, we’d already hit the movie tie-in days but they weren’t so bad and indeed Ocean had some of their greatest hits with such product – *Platoon*, *Batman*, *RoboCop*, etc.

‘It was during these times that the creativity was – at least in my humble opinion – at its zenith. The industry was still young enough to negate the possibilities of asking our predecessors how to do things. There was no guide to game development: people had ideas, wrote them down... sometimes, and then if said idea was given the green light, that person had to somehow guide a team through the torturous process of putting a game together. Original titles seldom,

if ever saw the light of day within Ocean. External developers like Dentons would do things like that; we were consigned to arcade conversions and licensed products.

‘For all its faults – and there were

“For all its faults – and there were many – Ocean somehow worked.”

many – Ocean somehow worked. It was pretty obvious that the entire company was just another “thing” that David and Jon were trying on the road to potential riches. They’d tried the rag-trade, David had been involved in a roller-disco in New York if tales were to be believed, and this was the latest venture. If it panned-out, great! If not, onwards and upwards.

‘Not for a second am I

suggesting that we sat discussing such things in great depth while ensconced in the goblin mines under Central Street. Most of the time the conversation was total rubbish but it was somehow always fun. There were some terrible times, with tempers flaring, and harsh words thrown around, and the occasional scuffle, but my memories of Ocean are predominantly filled with ridiculous antics, larger than life characters, and a general sense of camaraderie that even the most overblown egos couldn’t quell.



Universal Monsters – Simon created the distinctive graphics for the Commodore Amiga, planned for release in 1992. Sadly, the game never saw the light of day.

‘The one undeniable fact about Ocean is that while David and Jon knew they wanted to be successful, they had no precedent to follow, so they were winging it; uncertain if they had hired the right people or not. The core of their company was growing unseen beneath their feet, without which they had nothing, and somehow it came together and all the pieces, while never fitting perfectly moved in a way that was right.

‘It was like catching lightning in a bottle. Out of chaos and confusion, this totally disparate group of people, who ranged from the outright unhinged to

“My resignation was submitted that same day and I left Ocean forever, or so I thought.”

the shy and reserved, managed to create things that people truly liked on a level we could never have suspected. We seldom gave our product any further thought than getting it finished; we never considered our public let alone how they would receive our games or if they would potentially treasure them. Everything had a feeling of impermanence about it. It was the 1980s and fads came and went. We didn’t think we were teetering on a knife-edge by any stretch of the imagination, but I never thought that I was involved in the formative years of a career that would still be in progress three decades later. If it had all fallen round our ears we would have been duly disgruntled, but not thought much

more about it and certainly not been surprised as we are today when we hear of company closures and job-losses.

‘The Central Street days were a hive of activity, intermingled with shenanigans from various members of staff who should have known better or at least waited until there were fewer witnesses. We were praised for our efforts and taken to task for our somewhat irksome behaviour... and how Gary Bracey managed to keep his sanity is at times beyond me. While stepping into the role of the public face of Ocean, Gary trod a fine line between management and mate. He knew almost everything that was happening at any given time among his development staff and what little he didn’t know was intended that way because we got into trouble enough as it was. He was as daft as a brush when he wanted to be, but a total professional when needed.

‘Being one of the oldest members of the dev-team (Colin “Fossil” Porch was my senior), there were times when I was less understanding than I could have been, to put it mildly. I had yet to grow up and out of the role of general galoot and all-round loud-mouth, so my ready quips got me into scrapes on more than one occasion. It can only be expected when you put so many people from different walks of life, of varying ages, into a confined space and expect them to be creative that there will be sparks from time to time, and Ocean certainly had its fair share of times.

‘It is true to say that we had some coding staff who fell squarely into the clichéd slot of those whose answer to anything from their graphics partner would be, “You’re just an artist”. I defy any programmer to write something that shows how good their code is by looking at a screenshot.

‘Towards what I perceive as the end of the 8-bit days, we had a weekly meeting downstairs and I asked when we would be moving onto the 16-bit machines. I was told unequivocally that “Ocean will NOT be developing 16-bit titles”. My resignation was submitted that same day and I left Ocean forever, or so I thought.’

After a period of freelancing for a year or so, Simon found himself working once again in Manchester, less than a mile from his old chums in Central Street. ‘Imagine my surprise when I was told that our main project was a movie tie-in for none other than Ocean Software. It was one fresh hell after another on what was intended to be Ocean’s Christmas chartbuster, *Total Recall*. Matters reached a head after weeks of inanity followed by bewildering numbskullery until my only course was to quit and walk across to inform Mr Bracey of the situation. I was met initially with slight derision regarding my doom-mongering over said project, but was told to sit tight while Gary went to inspect matters. On his return, and once he managed to get his breathing under control, heart rate and pulse back to something near normal, he



Loading screens from some games on which Simon worked: *Combat School* (C64), *Total Recall* (C64), *N.O.M.A.D.* (Amstrad) and *Hunchback the Adventure* (Spectrum).

In-game screen shots from *Total Recall* on the Amstrad CPC (top) and Commodore 64 (bottom).



agreed to my proposals for rescuing their festive number one.

‘Once more back in the fold, I called on those I knew I could rely on and together we gave Ocean a Christmas to remember. That year, Santa put a nice full-time position in my stocking and I looked forward to many more years

under the Ocean flag. Remember what I said earlier about me and master plans? Oh dear...

‘Come the New Year, Ocean was relocated to a spiffy new office, which they started to fill with new talent – yet

something wasn’t the same. Ocean had entered what I earlier labelled “The Corporate Years”, and with it came the first truly annoying iteration of that most misbegotten industry specimen, the producer. Smarmy, shiny people with all the charm and intelligence of a garden ornament. They roamed the vast hallways looking cocksure and smug, and with them came a feeling of change, but not for the better. A strange sense of treading water seemed prevalent with little or nothing being actively created.

‘Then one Friday, with another finished title under my belt, I was unceremoniously told to leave the premises post-haste. I can’t say I wasn’t surprised. Nonplussed doesn’t even cover it and to this day I’ve not been given a genuine reason for such treatment. I have my suspicions, but who cares? It’s a lifetime ago. Gary, bless him, seemed markedly uncomfortable with being the bearer of such tidings, but I thanked him and left – this time for good.

‘I had no axe to grind regarding my dismissal, feeling certain that I was paying some kind of price for matters that arose during the *Total Recall* débâcle and duly put Ocean behind me and moved on; never thinking for a second that I would be called on to speak of these matters at length on numerous occasions, both in public and here on the written page.

‘I was exceptionally fortunate to have worked at Ocean, not once but twice. It was not the greatest company in the

world, but great things happened there. Great people worked there. I am lucky to have retained some as friends to this day, others have fallen by the wayside for one reason or another, a few are sadly gone before their time.

‘Ocean was a product of the 1980s, the glory days were the early titles from their formative years and, although the hits continued through until the 1990s, it is these first games that return time and again when people speak of Ocean Software. It served its purpose; it was a creation with a limited life-span and the creators, once gone, were replaced with people with no drive, no passion and even less vision.

‘Ocean was not meant to survive and its demise came as no surprise. It could not have stood in today’s market and weathered all that the industry throws at a company on a daily basis in a cut-throat market led by franchises or vapid pavlovian button clickers.

‘Today Ocean holds a special place in the hearts of a vast gaming fraternity around the globe; names are mentioned with respect by fans; coders and artists they hold in ill-deserved regard simply because we filled some small part of their youth with something good. For the most part we never sought anything other than a job well done, we were paid handsomely and gave little or no thought to the ripples our titles would cause when thrown into the world.

‘Ocean for me was Central Street, a small and slightly worse-for-wear

collection of over-crowded rooms that fizzed with madness and the general buzz of a group of people who were doing something they genuinely loved. I was honoured to work for David Ward and Jon Woods, who always acted as



Pondering his next move – Simon in Amsterdam in 1989.

if unaware of my less-than-exemplary behaviour. I could not have asked for a better boss than Gary Bracey, who tolerated me beyond all reason yet never failed to give thanks, credit and reward,

“I could not have asked for a better boss than Gary Bracey, who tolerated me beyond all reason yet never failed to give thanks, credit and reward”

and is someone I am pleased to call a friend.

‘I rubbed shoulders with some of the best people I have met in my career including the late lamented Allan Shortt, who hit me regularly and never failed to remind me on an almost daily basis, that I was a stupid Scouser.’





Paul Owens

Paul joined forces with Jon Woods in the very early Spectrum Games days and went on to create some of Ocean's classic early ZX Spectrum titles including *Kong* and Daley Thompson's *Decathlon*.

Paul Owens was a part of the Ocean legacy for 13 years, starting in the early Spectrum Games days and staying past the Infogrames merger in 1997. He started with David Ward as Spectrum Games' only developer, based at David's theatrical props agency in the Ralli Building in Manchester. 'I answered an advert for the job and I believe I was the only one to reply. I was doing a degree in chemistry at the time and thought I would get six weeks' worth of work during the summer break. I actually never went back to college full-time – writing games and doing a degree course was never really on, and I wasn't that keen on chemistry anyway, if I am perfectly honest.

'There were Commodore Pets at university which we used for some of the course work, and I also remember there being a Tandy TRS-80. I wrote *Space Invaders* for that machine in my spare time over the course of a

few weeks. I couldn't afford a Sinclair ZX80 when it was launched, but when the ZX81 came out I managed to buy one of those. I wrote a *Frogger* clone for it as well as *Space Invaders* – just for fun. I wrote the games in machine code – and this was the time when I learned how the Z80 processor worked.

'I purchased a ZX Spectrum the day

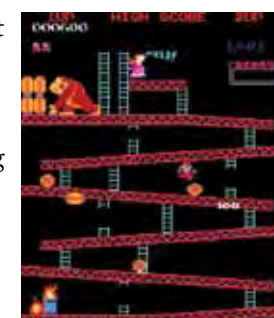
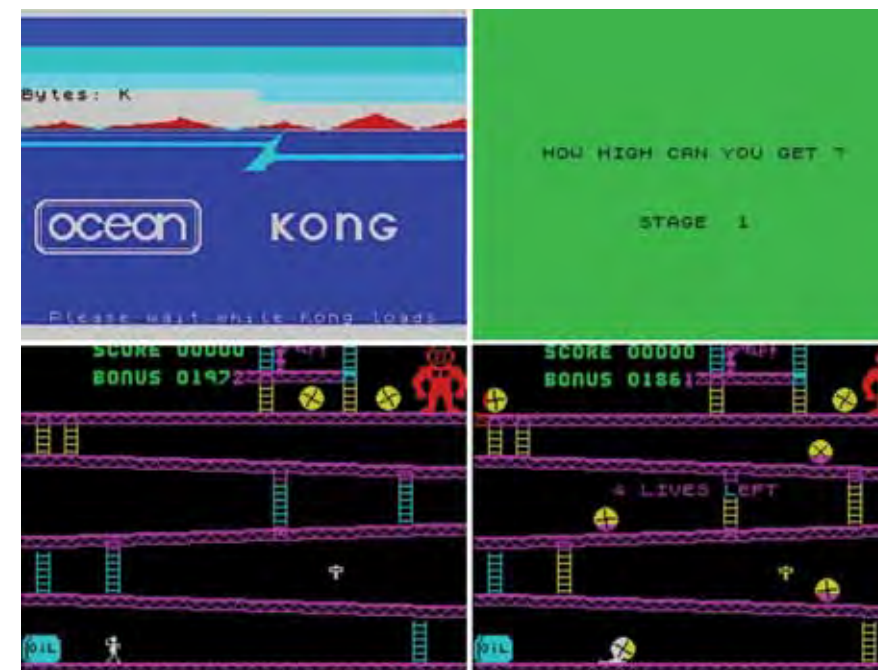


before my interview at Spectrum Games because the advert asked for a Spectrum programmer. The interview with David Ward went OK, he asked me to work for Spectrum Games and then if I had any games on the go. I told him about the *Frogger* clone I'd done on the ZX81.'

Paul converted *Frogger* to the Spectrum. It was released by Spectrum Games as *Road Frog* and sold well enough to give David confidence in the new emerging market. He then approached his friend Jon Woods and invited him to inject some money into the business to help get it off the ground.

Paul started work on a new game, with speed being of the essence, unaware of the problems he was about to face. '*Donkey Kong* was the big arcade game at the time, so I started to write *Kong*. But David was convinced that the arcades were a temporary fad and wouldn't last very long, so I was given only four weeks to produce the game. I came up with the best I could in that time. They just wanted to get the game onto the shelves as quickly as possible – no one was really worrying about quality back then. I remember when the game was done

and Jon, unbeknown to me, had hit the button to get 50,000 tapes duplicated. Subsequently, I found a couple of bugs



that broke the game, which I fixed. The tapes arrived at the Ralli Building and Jon pulled me outside by the scruff of my neck, gave me a hammer, and told me to smash the tapes. A hard lesson learned.'

On the other hand, as Paul recalls, he had reason enough to be grateful to Jon Woods. 'When I left college abruptly to join Ocean, I had an overdraft of £850 at the bank that they started to chase. Jon learned of this and went into the bank to pay it off for me – he did this without me knowing.' However, in respect of another financial arrangement, Paul came off less well. '*Kong* went out and sold well, so Jon

Above: loading screen and first level of *Kong* on the ZX Spectrum.

Left: The original *Donkey Kong* arcade game.

The earliest advert promoting the first four Spectrum Games offerings, including Paul's *Frogger* clone, *Road Frog*.

asked me if I wanted some money for the game or shares in the company. Like an idiot, I took the £5,000 offered to fund my smoking habit and buy a Ford Escort. Not one of my best decisions.'

With the success of its early games,

"I was asked if we could come up with a game around him [Daley]. It seemed logical to use Track and Field as the template."

the company had to find bigger premises. 'We moved out of the Ralli Building and into the Quaker meeting house and I started work on *Hunchback*.

I was not very good at producing sound from the Spectrum so I studied Matthew Smith's *Manic Miner* to see how he'd done it. I used some of the tricks I learned in my subsequent games. I also developed routines which called data from the stack quickly to the screen. They were hard to use, but Jonathan Smith took the routines I wrote and improved them. Without these routines, the scrolling games we did later on would not have been possible.

I also had a hand in the tape security used in the early Ocean titles. I remember going into WH Smith and seeing *Kong Loading, Please Wait* on a TV screen linked to a Spectrum – complete with flashing borders. I thought it was weird, so I investigated and discovered that some kid had used a POKE to create the effect. I guess

that was a piss-take, since *Kong* did take a long time to load. David had at that time gone to a local market when being interviewed as part of the BBC documentary *Commercial Breaks* [1984, the story of Imagine's demise and Ocean's success] and was shocked to see so many counterfeit Ocean games for sale. I had to come up with a solution fast. so I developed a new secure tape loader with the help of a sound engineer working at Ablex, our duplicator. It actually took the hackers till the mid-1990s before they cracked it.'

As the Ocean brand became known, the press labelled many of the young stars at the company 'whiz kids'. As Paul goes on to say, 'We weren't. We were paid well but none of us really believed the hype. I remember signing autographs at events and thought nothing of it – all we wanted to do was go to the pub. The Imagine guys, on the other hand, started to believe their own hype, which I believe, was the start of their downfall.'

In spite of David Ward's concerns over short-lived arcades, their popularity only increased during the early 1980s, and the influence of new games was apparent at Ocean. 'Dave Collier used to work for an arcade machine company in Wigan, so we used to pop over to see what new games were out. *Track and Field* was big at the time and with Daley Thompson going to the Olympics that year, I was asked if we could come up with a game around him. It seemed logical to use *Track and Field* as the template. I designed *Daley*

Thompson's Decathlon and programmed it on the Spectrum, while Dave Collier did the Commodore 64 version. Chris Urquhart had joined Ocean at that time and he helped out with the menu and the crowd cheering animation. Because having curves on the Spectrum wasn't easy, I had to invent something to show the pole-vault bending. I spent a lot of time getting the key presses just right – we noticed younger people could press the keys really quickly and older players less so. The intention was never for the game to be used with a joystick – you can get much better times in the events using the keys because of the way it is programmed.

'We started to hear that joysticks were being broken – Jon Woods laughed when he said we should have got shares in Kempston.

'Daley Thompson came to the office to see the progress on the game. We had to ask what colour he would like to be on the Spectrum – the option was bright red or white due to the limitations of the machine. I showed him the Daley sprite in both colours and he chose white.

'I helped Chris Urquhart out a little on *Cavelon* next. This was the first big title Chris worked on pretty much by himself. I believe the code which plays the continuous tune in the game is what I developed on *Daley's*. The Commodore version of *Cavelon* was done first in this case and the Spectrum version replicated from it.'

Before Gary Bracey arrived, Paul



Above: loading screen and long jump, shot putt and high jump events from *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* on the Spectrum.



Left: The 100m sprint event from the *Track and Field* arcade game.

played the role of development manager, certainly on Z80-based development.

'I kept my eye on the other games in development. I had a knack of spotting when developers were struggling. I was a bit miffed when Gary joined us, if I am honest. He's a great guy but not technical – Jon and David thought that was an advantage. Gary was a natural with people, though, and perhaps at the time I didn't get on with people as well as he did. About the same time Gary started, Richard Kay and Mike Webb split from Ocean to create Software Creations. They asked me to go with them but



Crash Issue 2 celebrated the release of *Kong* on the Spectrum by an Oliver Frey illustration.



The letter Paul received from Sir Clive Sinclair in recognition of Paul's de-bugging of the Sinclair Spectrum 128K computer – codename 'Derby'.

my girlfriend was pregnant, so I felt I couldn't leave a secure job.'

Paul took some time off from working on games to build a Spectrum development environment.

'We used Einstein computers as the host system and I developed an assembler application with which to build the games.' And working within his new environment, Paul went back to the whirlwind of programming. 'Daley Thompson's Supertest was the next game I worked on with Jonathan "Joffa" Smith.

We did half of the ten events each. You can tell which ones Joffa programmed because they had better graphics!

I was then given three weeks to write a *Mr Wimpy* game, thanks to a promise made to the Wimpy management by Jon. They wanted the game to appear at the opening of a new store in Manchester. There was an arcade game called *Burger Time*, so it was an ideal template. With no time to complete the development, I made the final level impossible to finish so no-one got past that point. When we turned up at the store Bill Barna was dressed up as Mr. Wimpy.

'Each incarnation of *Street Hawk* to date had failed. Since Jon had paid a lot of money for the licence, he asked me what I could do with it. I have never admitted to working on it until now – I had four weeks to get the game done and out, so with that kind of pressure you tended to write stuff you were not proud of, just to get the game on the shelves.

'We were never given time to ensure the playability was there.

I then produced *Short Circuit* and wanted it to be an adventure game. Gary didn't agree with this approach and so we compromised. I did two games for Short Circuit which went out on the tape. The arcade version was a side-scroller, where you just jumped over things. It wasn't that good. The adventure game I so longed to do was, I thought, really good, and is what I am more proud of. We had a lot of interest from gamers ringing up and asking questions on how to complete it.

I then finished off *Wizball*, with Mark Jones Jnr because the in-house developer converting Sensible Software's Commodore 64 version to the Spectrum left suddenly. *Gryzor* then followed, with Mark doing the graphics again. The limitations of the Spectrum meant I couldn't use all the graphics Mark created. The games were both well received by the press, though, and both got great reviews.

I don't really recall working on *Dragon Ninja*, even though my name is on the title loading screen, so I must have done something.

I confess that some of the games I worked on were buggy, and I knew many went out with the bugs in them. I recall the lettering "BTF" being put in the game and knowing it meant something to do with the quality. Looking at screens now online, I'm reminded of an argument with Bill Harbison about this animation of a guy with claws coming out of the screen – Bill wanted more up and down movement. I was, like no, it's going to stay as it is. I was probably quite snotty to work with back then.'

When Ocean moved to the new Castlefield premises, the programmers



left behind their ghosts. 'The Central Street Quaker building had a reputation for being haunted. We used to hear the



tap-tap-tap of keyboards from a room, but when we went to talk to whoever was in there, it was empty. I suspect it was all foolhardy stuff by the other guys.'

In the 1990s, Paul also moved – into the production department.

I helped set up the testing department properly and thereafter I was producer on all the Nintendo-based games. I sat down with the designer, talked through the game and how it should work, and then managed it through to completion. I don't really remember what I did in the latter years, probably not very much. I had written game after game after game.

'I think I just got burned out.'



Screens from the second release in 1986 of *Street Hawk* on the Spectrum.

A very young Paul Owens congratulating a competition winner at a games show.



Mark Jones Jr

Mark joined Ocean in 1987 and created loading screens for a number of games then in production. He progressed to producing graphics for the acclaimed Spectrum games *Gryzor* and *Wizball*, and in his spare time 'composed' the soundtrack for *Arkanoid*.

While at school, Mark used to visit a local computer shop in his home town of Northampton where over time he got to know the staff and the owner extremely well. 'I used to buy games from the shop in town for my ZX Spectrum and found myself spending most of each Saturday afternoon there watching and

fascinated by graphics on his Spectrum and started to experiment. 'In my spare time I produced graphics on the Spectrum – copying images from comics, the monsters from *Trap Door* [a British animated television series] and such, and putting them onto a loading screen just to see if I could do it. I took the work I'd done to the shop one Saturday, and those I showed what I'd created were gob-smacked. They said I should try and get a job doing it.

'So I put all the screens on a tape and sent it along with a letter in October 1986 to all the software houses which advertised the games I liked in *Crash* magazine. I didn't appreciate at the time that the likes of *Piranha* and *Mastertronic* only published and distributed games and did not have in-house development teams – they all got the tape though.'

Mark did hear from *Elite* and *Ocean* just before Christmas and both companies asked him to visit their offices to attend interviews. These took place in January 1987.

I went first to *Elite* in Walsall, on

a murky-dark winter's day. The *Elite* offices were bare and empty – it was a depressing day, and I decided very quickly I did not want to work there.

Northampton and Walsall are not so far apart, but Mark had never been as far away from home as Manchester, so the young teenager took back-up with him. 'My mum came with me to the interview. We caught a train to Manchester, found the *Ocean* office in Central Street, and I had the interview with Gary Bracey with my mum sitting next to me. Originally I had not thought of moving to Manchester – the idea was to work from home. Gary insisted I had to move to Manchester if I was to take the job. As it was *Ocean*, and they were offering me £120 a week, I could not refuse. Time would show, though, that after tax £90 a week didn't go very far.

'I started at *Ocean* in February. Gary put me up in a hotel while I looked for somewhere to live. The night before, my parents drove me up and dropped me off at the hotel. All I had was some clothes and a bunch of my beloved *Crash* magazines. Once my parents had left I felt alone – my *Crash* magazines kept me company and without them I may have just rang my parents to come and save me and take me home.

'Monday morning came. Breakfast was included at the hotel, so I pretty much ate everything. I got on a bus to get to Central Street from the hotel – I remember having to go upstairs because the lower deck was full and up there

passengers were smoking, which made me feel queasy. I was suffering with first-day nerves. I felt sick. I got off the bus 20 minutes before the office stop to save myself from being ill. I was going to be late on my first day.'

But Mark was about to meet the relaxed nature of the *Ocean* environment. 'As it was, when I arrived, still feeling sick and expecting a telling off, no one at *Ocean* questioned my lateness. I went downstairs to see Gary, who duly introduced me to where I was going to be sitting, and asked Lee



"On my first day at Ocean I produced a rubbish-loading screen of two children talking to a stranger in a car."

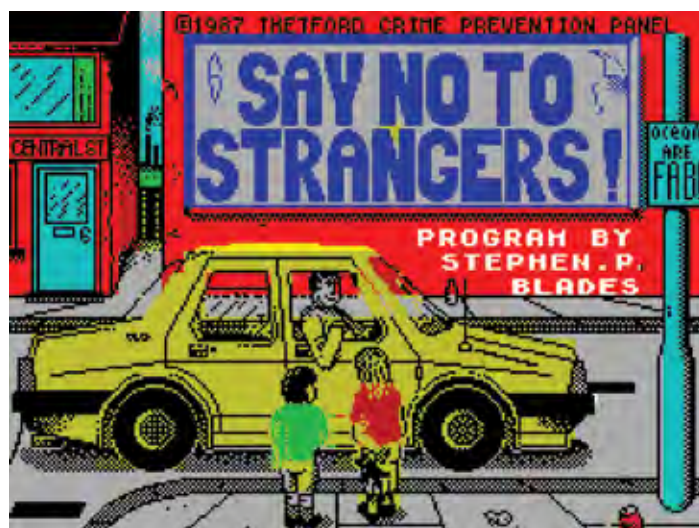
Cowley to sort me out with a computer. I remember thinking – what now?'

Mark was not enamoured with his first assignment. 'I was given a loading screen for *Say No To Strangers*. On my first day at *Ocean* I produced a rubbish-loading screen of two children talking to a stranger in a car to be used by Thetford Crime Prevention Panel. I never saw the game until 25-years later, and it was not too good. I did the loading screen, and it was "thank you", and that was it.'

The technical staff worked in the basement, originally the Quaker meeting house's cellar, and at the rear beside it a car park covered the Quaker burial ground, behind Steve Lavache's office. The upper two floors had no internal

'Once my parents had left I felt alone – my *Crash* magazines kept me company.'

Cartoon by Simon Butler.



Mark's first task at *Ocean*, creating a loading screen for promotional title *Say No To Strangers* on the Spectrum.

playing games. When I left school, the shop needed staff, so I worked there each Saturday and got paid for it – I was 16 at the time.'

At home Mark was becoming

connection to the basement. 'We had to use a side door,' Mark remembers. 'If you worked upstairs you went in the



Using 16 colours, Mark created the Amstrad loading screen of *Mag Max*.

side door and up a few flights of stairs to the reception, where there was a Perspex Ocean sign, a receptionist and a palm tree, and the management. If you worked downstairs, you typed in a security number which unlocked a huge door. Once that opened you went down ten steps or so. The door then slammed shut with a huge bang after you'd gone



Ocean's Arcade Alley, pictured in 1988.

through. When filming with Keith Chegwin, they had to re-do many of the takes due to the loud booming of the door slamming.

'Once you were in the basement there was a smell of mainly coffee and cigarette smoke (smoking was allowed in the office space back then). To the left was a small kitchen and to the right was Gary Bracey's enclosed office.

'I sat half-way between what was known as Arcade Alley, where all the arcade machines lived, and Martin

Galway's room. The game testers sat close by where they would test games in production and also test the games that customers had sent back with problems.'

The basement was a noisy place to work. 'The noise of arcade machines playing their tunes on attract mode; Martin and Jonathan's work in progress music coming out of their office; the sounds of games loading by tape for the testers; the phones ringing; the door to the basement continually slamming with people going back and forth; the chatter of the programmers and artists as they worked on their games.

'If you were on a roll and had stuff to finish, we put on our headphones to focus on what we were doing. If you had your headphones on, you were telling others you did not want to be disturbed. During breaks people would wander about and check out what others were doing or visit

the Odyssey 7 comic shop close by to the office. Simon Butler used to buy *Fangoria* and cut out the grossest pictures and put them up on his "horror wall".

'On my second day I was asked to improve the look of the main character, and produce a loading screen, for *Mag Max*, a conversion of an arcade game we had in the office. I'd seen the game advertised and was thinking I had to do a good job to prove to the others I was capable. I was also given the Amstrad version of the loading screen to do as well – so 16 colours and using software I'd never used before. I believe I did a good job.

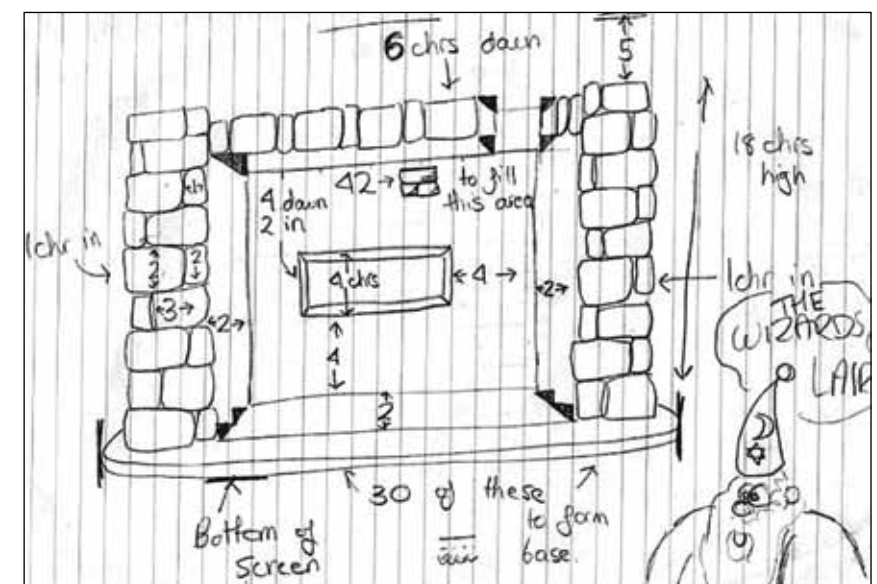
'After *Mag Max*, I was shown a demo of *Wizball* on the Commodore 64 and I was asked to do the Spectrum version with a programming guy called Steve Watson. The initial demo was basic – the Sensible Software guys would send a more advanced demo each week, from which I copied the graphics. On occasions the Sensible guys visited with their big hair and unique joss-stick smell. I remember after working on the game for a week I had to do mock-up screens for *Sinclair User*. During the development, weeks passed with the game making little progress, and then Steve



disappeared. Paul Owens then took on the programmer role and rescued the game. I was expecting bad reviews, as far as I was concerned the game was not finished and a lot of my graphics were not used. To my surprise, *Wizball* got fantastic reviews in all the gaming magazines.'

Loading screen and work in progress and mock-up screens produced by Mark for the Spectrum *Wizball*.

And his design for the Wizard's Lair.



Melbourne House's Spectrum utility *Wham! The Music Box* – Mark used it to produce the *Arkanoid* soundtrack.



Before he started on *Wizball*, in his lonely hotel room Mark turned to another enthusiasm – one which landed him in hot water. 'I used *Wham! the Music Box* by Melbourne House in the evenings to produce an *Arkanoid* tune. The tune was introduced into the game. I had no idea that a licence from Melbourne House was needed to use their software. After *Arkanoid*'s release Gary Bracey asked me if I did the music, and did I use the *Wham! the Music Box*? I subsequently got a massive telling off by Gary, and

Ocean paid Melbourne House a chunk of money.

'I started work on *Athena* – there was no programmer, but I started doing mock-ups. Ivan Horn and Andrew Deakin took on that project in the end and my stuff was not used. I then worked on the Spectrum version of *Gryzor* with Paul Owens and we promised *Crash* magazine a demo. However, it didn't get produced on time by Paul, so a demo of *Athena* was provided to *Crash* to use instead. When *Gryzor* came out it was universally acclaimed in all the magazines apart from *Crash* – the guys at *Crash* criticised the game from every conceivable angle – especially the graphics. Again I produced graphics that were never used, or never used properly, and the scrolling in the game was not

that good. I was annoyed with the end result because it could have looked and played a lot better.

'Ronnie Fowles was doing *Arkanoid* 2 and he asked me if I wanted to do the loading screen because I hadn't much to do. That was soon followed by the loading screen for *Mutants*.'

Ocean wanted a follow up to *Green Beret*, which was to be an original game, so Gary Bracey asked Simon Butler to design it. 'We were not allowed to use the *Green Beret* 2 tag in the end – the game was re-badged *Vindicator*. I made all the in-game graphics except a status panel which Bill Harbison created when I was on holiday. The game got fairly good reviews. After my holiday, I helped out with *Dragon Ninja*, which didn't look very good and got bad reviews. I



put "BTF" on many of the lorries in the game, which only a select few of us graphics guys knew what the acronym stood for...

The loading screen of *Gryzor* on the Spectrum and in-game work in progress graphics.

'I then found myself in another phase of having nothing to do. Eventually, I was allocated to *Rambo 3* and I had to go to the cinema to watch the film on my own – the rest of the team watched it the week before while I was on another holiday.'

Mark worked on the Atari ST and Amiga versions of *Rambo 3*, and found the project quite tiresome. After just over two years at Ocean, Mark decided to leave Ocean. 'I'd just had enough of being moved from project to project without getting anywhere, and the amount of times I had to go to work with nothing to do. But I will always regret leaving Ocean when I did. I should have stuck it out for a few more years at least.'



Mark Jones 'Junior', Salford 1990 (screen grab from an out-of-hours experimental avant garde art nouveau stop-motion Ocean film), and sitting at his desk in the Central Street dungeon chatting with Keith Chegwin on the merits of games design and earning lots of dosh as a teenager.

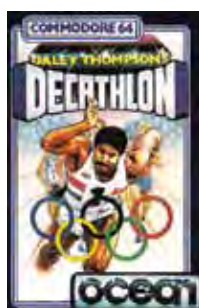
Loading screens from some of the games worked on by Mark on the ZX Spectrum: *Arkanoid Revenge of Doh*, *Mutants*, *Mag Max* and *Dragon Ninja*.





Tony Pomfret

Tony joined Ocean in 1984, skilled in 6502 programming on the Commodore 64. Over his four-year period at Ocean he was the coder behind many C64 high-profile titles including *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* and *Mikie*.



The cassette inlay for the C64 version of *Daley Thompson's Decathlon*.

The C64 100m and Javelin events with loading and intro screen.

Tony joined Ocean at the age of 18 and stayed with the company for four years. Prior to that he worked at Summlock Electric Services – his father's shop in Manchester's Deansgate – selling computers and software. 'I was very good at the shop because of my enthusiasm for the home computers of the time, and in particular because I was like every other 1980s teenager: totally infatuated with playing games.

'I was given a Commodore PET at a pretty early age, way before the home

computer market had really started, and it cost a bloody fortune at the time and offered little less than 8Kb of usable memory, and a rather slow 6502 processor at its heart. Learning how this computer ticked ultimately led me on to employment by Ocean.'

One early summer day in 1984, a group of customers walked into the shop and he got talking to one of them. 'The chap seemed to have the passion and understanding for games that I had – he said his name was Dave Collier, and unbeknown to me he was a lead

Commodore 64 programmer at Ocean, who I later found out were located within shouting distance of the shop. After a good long chat with Dave, I got to show off something I was working on, on the Commodore 64. It was a very colourful game involving a helicopter and an Australian bush fire, with lots of smooth side-scrolling action and some pretty clever raster programming (the ability to split the C64 screen into scrolling and non-scrolling areas, with colour changes

to depict regions like sky and ground).

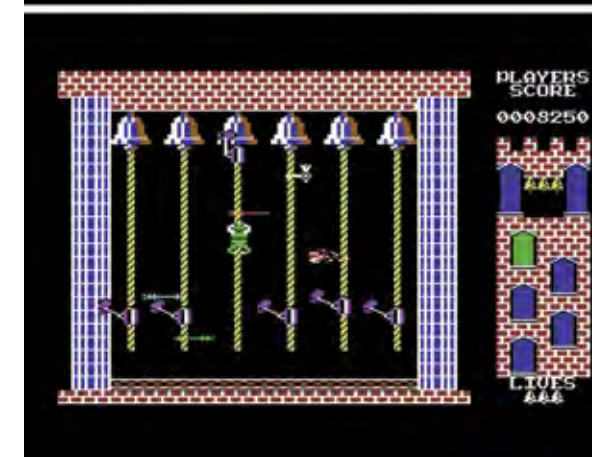
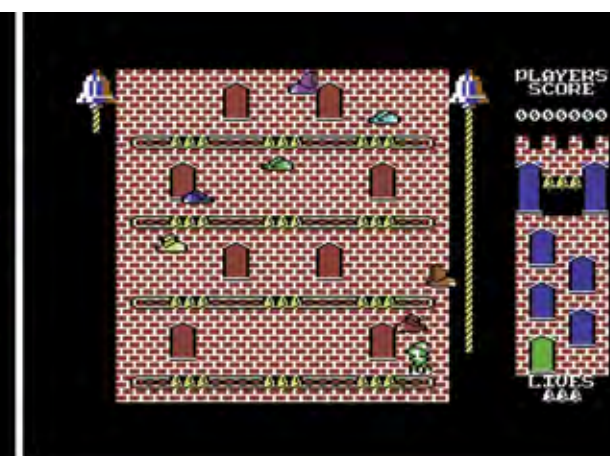
'Dave was extremely interested in my demo and a short time later he came back with the offer of a job to work on a game that would benefit from my 6502 programming skills. It was *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* and it was the game that changed my life.'

Working at Summlock gave Tony access to each and every new game release. 'I knew of nearly every title of the time as I sold them to an ever-increasing number of customers. Ocean titles seemed to appear out of nowhere and sold by the bucket load – my first Ocean experience was that of *Chinese Juggler*

and *Hunchback*. When I joined Ocean I really couldn't believe I'd been given a job doing what I loved. I thought, "Wow, is this really happening and am I actually a part of it?" I joined the *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* team initially and reported to Dave Collier. The team was located just off the central corridor along with lots of other little offices. At the time the main internal game in development was *Daley's* and some of the late versions of the original *Hunchback*.

'It was incredible working for the company. We were all so young and enthusiastic, and the magic just seemed to propagate like wildfire. Ocean was

Screens from *Hunchback II* on the Commodore 64.





Firefly, coded by Tony and Jonathan Smith was released in 1988. Above is the colourful advert for the game.



The inlay for the rather rushed Roland's Rat Race on the C64.

Tony and David Collier demonstrating their muscle power.



a creative madhouse, with some of the most talented, youngest game creators that the new industry had seen. We all knew what we were doing and for 90 percent of the time it was without any real management guidance, other than the lure of a tempting game completion bonus.

'I remember Richard Kay being a real laugh. He was getting close to finishing *Hunchback* on the then-unreleased Amstrad CPC, but he hated the machine. As he finished assembling the code for the last time he "accidentally" dragged the computer off his desk and crashed it to the floor – I don't know if it ever worked again... and this was a prototype Amstrad.'

Tony was taken on by Ocean for his 6502 programming abilities, and he worked on a list of titles for his beloved Commodore 64.

Tony reflects on some of the more memorable games with which he was involved. 'With *Daley Thompson's*

Decathlon I was part of a three-man team comprised of Dave Collier, Bill Barna and myself. I programmed the long-jump, triple-jump, high-jump and the very limited front-end plus lots of raster work involving screen splits and sprite multiplexing. At this time there was no concept of a graphic artist, so all the graphics were done by myself and Dave, including the advertising hoardings. The game borrowed a heavy influence from the very popular Konami *Track and Field* arcade game. It sold a ridiculous number of copies, was given the accolade of first-ever joystick destroyer and, ironically, won the Golden Joystick Award, 1984.

'*Hunchback II* was Bill Barna and myself. This was an original concept designed by Bill and me, and was probably the first game to involve one of the newfangled graphic artists for the main character design and animation.

Jonathan Smith and I programmed *Firefly* with graphics by Jonathan and Karen Davies. This game was developed by the newly formed Special FX studio set up by ex-Ocean sales manager Paul Finnegan, Jonathan "Joffa" Smith and myself. Ocean later absorbed Special FX.

'*Roland's Rat Race* was a real rush job, about one month in development from start to finish, and written in Dave Collier's back bedroom to avoid the travel time to Manchester. Dave lived very close to me, so this was a bonus.

'I programmed *Mikie*, with graphics produced by Steve Wahid and sound by Martin Galway. I loved this game – it

was just a fun arcade conversion of a great Konami classic. I actually finished this game after being sacked from Ocean for some flippant comment I think I made to Dave Collier. I handed the completed game over to Gary Bracey without any reward, I didn't care I just wanted to see the game published.'

Tony was in awe of some of his colleagues, and singles out Martin Galway, Jonathan Smith and Mike Webb as his heroes.

'Martin was the most creative and productive audio programmer of the 1980s, and also a great character with a rather dark sense of humour. Martin had a touch of OCD, everything had a place and a place for everything; his office had a large glass wall (a bit like a modern recording studio) facing into the Ocean dungeon corridor. This office was far too organised, so as a little practical joke Jonathan Smith and I decided to turn it upside down, which even included tampering with the light switches, clothes hooks and computers. The wait for Martin to come in the following morning was torturous. As he observed the chaos of his office he attempted to hang his jacket on the inverted hook for it to only slip unceremoniously to a crumpled pile on the floor.

Jonathan "Joffa" Smith was a very rare type of games creator. He was a brilliant graphic artist and a programmer, which was unheard of at the time. We worked together at multiple companies for the next twenty or so years. I still miss the little loopy "Widnesian".

'Mike Webb was another rare type of programmer because he was platform



agnostic: he could code on any platform and code very well, plus he had a knack for reverse-engineering computer hardware.'

This would help the Manchester games industry a great deal in the future with the advent of machines like the Nintendo NES because Mike reversed-engineered it, and which later led to a pioneering little company named Software Creations.

Tony coded the arcade conversion of *Mikie* for the C64.



Brian Beuken

Brian was contracted by Ocean to convert the arcade game *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* to the 8-bit systems. The Commodore 64 version proved a little too challenging and an off-the-cuff remark soon ended his working relationship with the company.

Brian joined the gaming industry back in the days of the Sinclair ZX81. When the next generation of computers came along he started a small company in Scotland developing games for the Amstrad CPC.

He sold the games in the local computer shops and via adverts in the back of *Computer & Video Games* magazine.

'This was just at the point when people stopped buying games from ads in the back of *C&VG*. Unable to sell enough to make a living, I decided to try and get some contract work and put out a few phone calls to people. I managed to hook

up with a chap in England who was talking to Ocean about some projects. He arranged a meeting with David Ward and then invited a coder friend I was working with and I to drive down to Manchester for a meeting.'

The meeting evidently went well and soon after Brian got a call to tell him he had the contract to produce the Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and

Commodore 64 versions of Konami's big 1985 coin-op, *Yie Ar Kung-Fu*. 'Now at that time I wasn't really a coder, I'd done some work on the Texas Instruments TI99/4a and BASIC on the Amstrad but was not at that point a competent Z80 coder.

'I had my coder friend with me, and I was learning fast, so we said yes we would take the contract. Even so, we didn't have the resources to do three projects, so I placed adverts for Commodore 64 coders in the local papers and quickly employed three guys to help, two local and one in Edinburgh.

'The Amstrad and Spectrum versions were done by a couple of young programmers who were really great coders but both of them struggled with the sprite systems for different reasons. By this time I was becoming quite good at coding, so I came up with two different methods of storing and drawing the sprites. I was especially proud of the Amstrad code. I did all the graphics too, by stop/starting a videotape of the arcade game and doing my best to copy pixel by pixel.'

Development of the Amstrad and



Spectrum versions of the game proved straightforward, but progress on the Commodore 64 version was a struggle.

'The programmer I hired was good but this was in the days before multiplexing sprites, which *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* needed. We came up with an idea on how to multiplex, but no matter how they tried the C64 developers could not get it implemented. This is when I first met Colin Stokes who came up to Scotland to visit us and check on progress. He was impressed with the Amstrad and Spectrum versions of course, but was worried, as was I, that the Commodore 64 was going down a dead end. Colin reported back to the Ocean management and it was duly decided to stop the Commodore 64 version and pass it over to someone in-house at Ocean.'

David Collier progressed with the Commodore 64 version of *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* while Brian and his team continued with the other two platforms.

'We proceeded to finish the Amstrad and Spectrum versions and delivered them to pretty good feedback, though I did make a small cock-up when detailing the controls for the Spectrum so the information on the inlay was wrong.



Screens from the Amstrad CPC version of *Yie Ar Kung-Fu*.



'Not long after that Colin Stokes asked me to come down to meet him and Jon Woods about some further work. I thought it was another contract and popped down for what turned out to be a job interview – something which surprised but intrigued me. As my other attempts at contracting hadn't gone very well, the job offer was tempting. I was broke and needed work. But I think I over-priced myself on salary.

'It was decided I would do the Spectrum 128K version of *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* as a trial and port the original 48K Spectrum version to the new machine. I had family in the area so I came down to live in Manchester. The game took about four to five months to write, though. I was still learning and the original Spectrum code was not in an easy format to transfer to Ocean's development systems – I had to rewrite it from scratch. Just as I was finishing the game, Sinclair

The C64 version of *Yie Ar Kung-Fu* was eventually completed in-house at Ocean by David Collier.

sold out to Amstrad and the project's future became doubtful.'

As indeed did Brian's immediate future. 'The end of my relationship with Ocean came as the result of a smart remark to Mr Stokes which I thought was rather harmless. I was hovering around in Jonathan Smith's room for

full employment I was fully entitled to. I didn't get either. I got a right telling off about the "Bwana" remark and was told to go home. I was somewhat shell-shocked.

'I gathered my thoughts when I got home and decided to try to get back, but Gary Bracey made it clear I'd burned my bridges. I looked for a job elsewhere in Manchester and ended up at Icon Design where – ironically – I worked on another Ocean project a few years later. *Rastan Saga* still gives me nightmares due to its size and complexity and the fact I was working on two other projects at the same time but wasn't allowed to let Ocean know this.'

In spite of the unexpected setback over a relatively petty matter, Brian retains fond memories of his brief stint in

1985 at Britain's biggest games software house.

'I loved Ocean back then. It was small and the development staff were amazingly talented and funny. I was very young, just 19 at the time and had never really been away from my little village in Scotland, so Manchester and all its temptations with a group of hardened drinkers and party people was quite a thrill for me. Also I learned so much from working with Jonathan "Joffa" Smith and Mike Webb who were giants of coding in my eyes.'



Screens from the Spectrum 128K version of *Yie Ar Kung-Fu*.

some reason while he was play-testing one of his games. At some point Colin noticed me and asked had I no work to do. Being 19 and quite a smartarse – and of course thinking I was Colin's best mate – I said something like "On me way, Bwana". As I left the room it seems all hell broke loose and Colin started ranting and raving about the "Bwana" comment. I was oblivious though. I just thought he was angry about the game or something.

'A week or two later my project was finished and I was called to Colin's office fully expecting a pat on the back for a job well done and the offer of the

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Yie Ar KUNG~FU

The name of the game

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Ivan Davies

Ivan started working as an artist on titles for Ocean in 1989 through Special FX – a company started by former-sales director Paul Finnegan. A chain of events then led to Ivan working in-house at Ocean, concluding in him producing a number of titles developed by DID.

Ivan stumbled, literally, into the games industry when he abandoned ambitions to become an architect – he had completed a foundation course and realized it was not for him. ‘I went for an interview at Special FX in Liverpool, all suited up with a portfolio of work I had put together in college on a souped-up 32-bit graphics station. I thought the interview would be a breeze – I didn’t realise Special FX was a video games company before walking into that interview room, so I asked where the drawing board was. What must they have thought of me? I started talking to Paul Finnegan, who was interviewing me, about football and my fortunes started to turn since he’s a big football fan [Everton]. He asked me to stay for a month at Special FX to see if I would like it and that was it. Twenty-four years later I am still in the industry, thanks to Paul.’

Ivan started at Special FX in January 1989 at the age of 20. The company was run and owned by ex-Ocean sales director Paul Finnegan and programmer Jonathan “Joffa” Smith, but Special FX

was contractually bound to give Ocean first refusal on all their products.

‘We used to go to Manchester regularly and show the Ocean guys updates on the games I was working on and they provided us with technical support if we ever needed it. The main point of contact was Gary Bracey, but we did work with Tim Welch as well in QA. There were 15 of us at Special FX, and all the games we produced went out under the Ocean label.’

His first Special FX game for Ocean



Red Heat – produced by Special FX and published by Ocean in 1989.

came at the head of an impressive list, not that all were sure-fire hits. ‘For *Red Heat* on the Commodore 64, I was the artist and Robbie Tinman was the programmer. Andy Rixon started the game but he went on to do the 16-bit version, so I came on to finish it off – the first game I had worked on in the gaming industry. Joffa had read the script of the movie and came up with a design of sorts – a side-scrolling game where the main character punched people. We were under pressure to get the thing out in line with the release of the movie.

‘*Cabal* came next – an arcade



Special FX designed *RoboCop 2* for the PC.



conversion. They were easier to do because we got the arcade machine in a silver briefcase. We couldn’t freeze or jump to levels, so we had to play through the game continuously, again and again, to see what we had to replicate on the 8-bit machines.

‘*Midnight Resistance* followed on the Commodore 64 – another arcade conversion on which I was the artist. Special FX was given the PC version of *RoboCop 2* because Ocean did not have the capacity in Manchester to do it. Steve Cain and Joffa were the designers – it was such a rush job that all five artists at Special FX worked on it. I did the menus; others did the objects, hi-score table and main graphics.

Midnight Resistance – produced by Special FX and released by Ocean in 1990.

‘With *Hudson Hawk* Charles Davies worked with Joffa on the game design the day after a booze-up so he was all hung over. That’s why you have nuns on roller skates and little sausage dogs. Let’s face it, the script for the *Hudson Hawk* movie did not lend itself to a game. We had been playing *New Zealand Story* in the office and were big into platform



The magazine advert for lacklustre *Hudson Hawk* and screens from the C64 version, published in 1991.

games, which is why the game became so bizarre... and a platform game. The reviews weren't that bad – I'm not sure if Ocean made any money out of it though, even so it was a nice game to work on.'

It is said that all good things come to an end – just before Christmas 1991, Ocean decided to end the relationship with Special FX.

'Paul came back from Manchester and told us Ocean was closing us down. A number of the Special FX team continued to visit the office in the Albert Docks – Robbie Tinman and myself were working on *The Legend of Prince Valiant* in 1992, a cartoon licence, for the NES. It was important for Ocean to get a completed game, so Gary Bracey hired us with the promise of a completion

bonus. With a mortgage to pay I couldn't afford to be out



The Legend of Prince Valiant NES cartridge box and game screen.

of work, so I accepted and travelled back and forth to Manchester from Liverpool over a six-month period until the game was done. Ocean then asked me to work on more titles, and that's when I became a full-time Ocean employee. If it wasn't for *Prince Valiant* I would have most likely stayed till the dying moments at Special FX and then

become a part of Rage, Paul Finnegan's new company, which rose from the Special FX ashes.'

Ivan says he never felt a part of the Ocean scene while he was at Special



FX. 'I was never invited to the parties or out with guys of an evening. It was only after *Prince Valiant* was finished and I'd worked on a couple more titles did I feel accepted as part of the Ocean company. I worked on *Jurassic Park*, *Lethal Weapon* and *The Shadow*. In February 1996 I was promoted to lead artist and took on a cartoon licensed PC title called *Zoiks*, which is the worst game I ever worked on: two-dimensional Hanna Barbera cartoon graphics that looked very nice, but the game design was rubbish.'



Working on *Zoiks*, Ivan was notorious for visiting the pub for lunch on a Friday and having two or three pints, perhaps to get over the stress of the game. 'I used to get back to the office and just fall asleep under the desk. Gary would come looking for me and someone said I was fixing the plug under the desk. I was just fast asleep.'

On the other hand, the problems he encountered had a silver lining. 'I remember talking to Jon Oldham and complaining that the designer was not listening to me – he told me I needed to become a producer, a person who was in charge of the whole process. This sounded like a good idea, so during the *Zoiks* development I went to work with John. My first titles as a producer were *F22 Air Dominance Fighter* and *EF2000*



Version 2 with DID – a similar set-up to Special FX in that they developed games and Infogrames published them. I learned a lot about games development in the production department during those informative years.

'Ocean morphed into Infogrames, but we kept up the Ocean mentality. Infogrames had no idea how we got games out on time and consistently got review scores of over 85%. We had to go over to Lyon to teach their producers how to make games. I stayed at Ocean/ Infogrames until 2002 – and became senior producer during that time.'



DID's *EF2000* – Ivan's first venture into games production – received warm praise for the PC graphics, and Version 2 for the improved gameplay. The packaging, below, was very stylish too.

Left: Ivan was lead artist on *Zoiks*, a game which looked fantastic but lacked design. It was never released.





Lee Clare

Lee joined Ocean in 1994 as part of the Quality Assurance team and soon became an integral part of the well-oiled game assembly line. The list of games that Lee tested within QA is endless – experience that put him in good stead for the position of producer later on in his career at Ocean.

Lee Clare was 24 when he joined Ocean's Quality Assurance team. Over the next five years he assumed many roles, from the Ocean Helpline through to associate producer and producer in 1999.

'I was in my first year of university, doing an HND course in software engineering, and by that time I'd applied

"I was finally a part of the one company I always wanted to work for, the great Ocean Software."



Loading screen from *Jurassic Park* – a title that went through quality assurance when Lee was a part of the QA team.

to Ocean for a job position at least three times. Before university, I was an unemployed Commodore 64 demo coder and founding member of the Manchester Commodore 64 demo group. For me as a local boy, Ocean was the Mecca of video game development and I'd wanted to work there since 1986 – it was everything to me.'

Fourth time lucky, then: 'I got the job after being interviewed at Castlefield by Frank Parkinson, a tough no nonsense Evertonian and ex-Royal Marine.'

Asking Lee which of Ocean's huge output by that time he was aware of results in a short answer: 'Which games? All of them – I knew all of Ocean's output. I followed them that keenly.' An enthusiasm he extends to those he worked with. 'I was aware of Jonathan Dunn, Martin Galway, Dave Collier, Tony Pomfret, Paul Hughes, Allan Shortt, Dave Ward, and Jon Woods. These were almost like famous people to me – especially Jonathan Dunn and Martin Galway. I was finally a part of the one company I always wanted to work for, the great Ocean Software. I was proud; my first impressions were exceeded. I used to go in and out of the development rooms and meet the guys and would be in awe – it felt like I was finally part of the Ocean family. I absolutely loved it.'

During his first year, Lee found himself working alongside some iconic names of the time. 'Being in Quality Assurance meant I was sitting among the then-growing internal QA team of Roy Fielding, Paul Johnson, Paul Flanagan, Gareth Betts and many others. I reported

to Frank Parkinson initially, then later Jon Oldham. We were involved in testing the quality of games, and compared to other jobs I'd had the atmosphere was brilliant. I especially liked "going upstairs" and meeting the internal development teams who were so friendly and welcoming. Ocean had grown in size and in comparison to the earlier "golden years" it had become much more of a commercial operation. To support this growth, the QA department had grown from a modest five-man team to over 25 when I was there.'

The list of games Lee handled is impressively long, though some stand out more than others. 'In QA I worked on *Jurassic Park*, *Addams Family Values*, *Jurassic Park 2*, *Inferno*, *TFX*, *EF 2000*, *Mighty Max*... I could literally go on and on. My first as a producer, though, was *Silver*, and by that point Ocean had become Infogrames.

'*Silver* had been running for about 12 months. I was brought on to finish it a few months pre-alpha [the internal testing phase; beta is testing undertaken by a selection of the customer base]. I believe I was chosen for *Silver* because I was really enthusiastic about that particular title. It showed a lot of promise and I was very vocal in defending the game whenever we did code reviews with senior management at Infogrames. Bobby Earl was the lead programmer and was kind of my go-to-man. From art I had Jack Wikeley as lead environment, Christian Johnson lead character, Dean

Evans musician, and Sam Evans was the scriptwriter.

'Warren Lancashire – the original designer of *Silver* – departed (I believe there was some disagreement), so we were left with a project and no designer before the alpha stage. The design had a lot of meat on its bones, and Sam provided a lot of support to get the game finished, with everybody else kind of filling the gaps where the design was still unclear.'

By the end of the 1990s, pre-publicity in the video-games magazines for a major release had become essential, but Lee was uneasy about his project's prospects... and there were internal

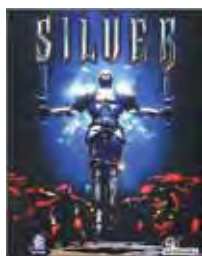


Silver was touted in the gaming press as Europe's answer to *Final Fantasy VII* – it never quite lived up to the hype.



doubts as well. '*Silver* had been ticking along for quite some time and confidence was low about the concept. A lot of time had been spent on it but there were still questions about what we actually had. Did we have a fun game? Could the game ever be finished without its

In-game screen of *Inferno*, produced by DID and published by Ocean in 1994.



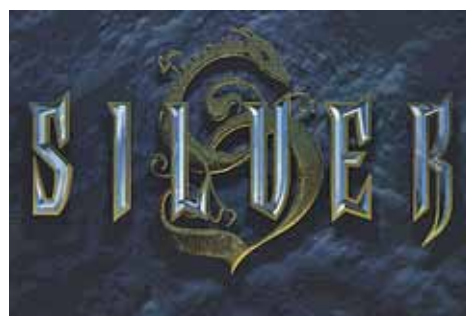
The *Silver* box-art, 1999, with the title screen and an in-game screen right.

designer? And we were under a lot of pressure to get it finished. The team numbered 25 and was obviously costing a lot of money to keep going. When I took control of *Silver* the game effectively had a lot of levels that needed scripting and we did not have a full team to do it in the time we had. The deadline was looming – we either release it for Christmas 1999 or can it. The pressure was clearly on the team and I had to perform.’

The RPG made it for the seasonal period, released initially for Microsoft Windows, then Dreamcast and Macintosh OS to general acclaim. ‘We got some incredible press responses, including the front cover of *Edge* – we were dubbed Europe’s answer to *Final Fantasy VII*. I also recall Peter Molyneux OBE saying he was particularly looking forward to the game.’

Celebrity anecdotes also came in the form of a Doctor Who. ‘We had Tom Baker narrating. I’d actually met him in the White Lion public house like a 100 yards from the studio in Castlefield (he was working on *Casualty* at Granada at the time). After working up the courage I asked him if he would sign my beer mat. He went one better than that and popped back the next day with some signed photos. I asked if he would be interested in doing a voice-over for our game. He gave me his agent’s number, and Jack and Sam went down to meet Tom in London sometime after. A real eccentric, and proper gent.’

Lee has one story about Dave Collier

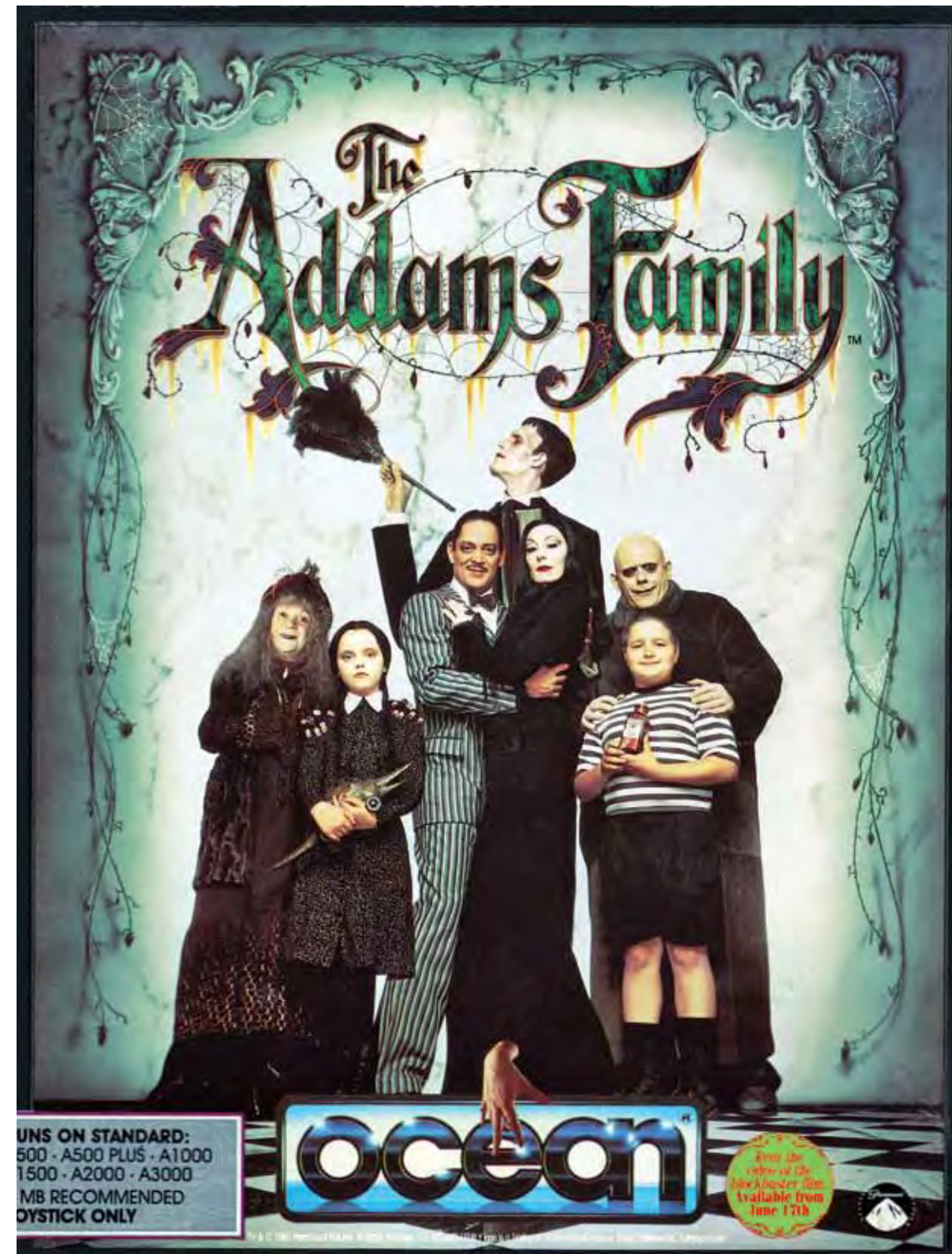


which epitomises the innovative talent present during those younger days of home computing, and in particular at Ocean. ‘Dean Evans had been struggling to deliver music on the SNES (Super Nintendo Entertainment System), as it sounded so different when it was produced using the PC tools. Apparently Dave took a hex screw driver, removed the back off a SNES, traced all the copper lines back from the sound chip, and then designed and built a SNES sound card that you slotted into a PC. He then wrote some tracker drivers, and the lads were producing music for the SNES properly.

‘So not only could Dave write games, he was an incredible talent with microelectronics too. True legend.’



The box art for the Amiga version of *The Addams Family*, published in 1992.





Simon Cobb

Simon formed part of the Amstrad team during his short time at Ocean. He converted such classics as *Hunchback II* and parts of *Hyper Sports* onto Alan Sugar's machine. *Street Hawk* proved to be the final straw and Simon left Ocean to start his own company.

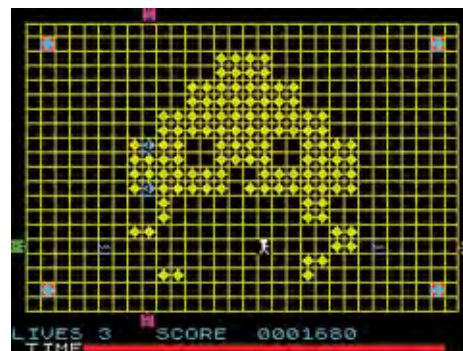
Simon's introduction to computing started with Clive Sinclair's ZX81 – he was first in the queue, a year later, to buy Sinclair's follow up, the ZX Spectrum.

Simon recollects, 'I started writing machine code on the ZX81. I bought a book on "Mastering Machine Code on your ZX81" that I had to read five times before it made any sense – it just eventually clicked. I then got myself a ZX Spectrum, which became my first love. I used to buy the gaming magazines at the time and I saw an advert placed by Spectrum Games, and with being in Manchester I went down there one day not sure what to expect and unsure why I was really going. I think it was because I was devoted to all things Spectrum and

these guys were making games for my beloved machine. I visited a few times when they were at the old Ralli Building just to say hello really and see what they were doing. I am sure they stored props or something there as well – it was a strange place.

'Having been down to the building two or three times, I remember David Ward taking me to the arcades in Oxford Road to play the arcade machines there. He took out a handful of coins, I was 16 at the time, and handed them to me. Looking back on it now I am sure a man taking a load of 16-year-olds to an arcade and giving money to them would be construed a different way – non-the-less it happened and was fantastic. I remember Paul Owens being there as I was a big fan of *Hunchback*, one of his titles.'

Simon had a couple of titles published at the time, one being *Di-Lithium Lift* by Hewson Consultants on the Spectrum. Paul goes on to say, 'They wanted a sequel but subsequently would not publish it as they thought it was too similar to *Rift*. I therefore went on as a

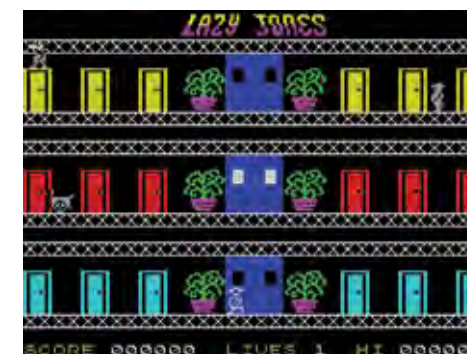


Di-Lithium Lift, was released on the Spectrum by Hewson Consultants in 1983.

freelancer and converted *Lazy Jones* on the Commodore 64 to the Spectrum – the game was a huge hit and I thought this was my opportunity to contact Ocean to see if I could get a job there. They were local to me and my ambition was always to work for them as they had produced some great games and had some great licences and were at the top of their game.

'I phoned them up and explained what I had been doing. I was invited into the Manchester office – it was not an interview as such, I just showed them *Lazy Jones* and they took me on. I remember going back to finalise and sign the contract and on the way out Jon Woods handed me some Ocean games, one being *Match Day*. I got home and played the game thinking to myself that I would not have a clue how to write a game as good as that – the panic set in.'

Simon battled with his unsettling



Lazy Jones conversion for the Spectrum – released by Terminal Software in 1984.

demons and turned up at the Ocean offices to work.

'I started at Ocean and one of the first things they wanted me to do was convert Spectrum screens to the Amstrad. I really did not have a clue how to do this and panic was about to set it again. I then had a brain wave and in ten minutes I had this program written that did the job perfectly – I impressed the others that worked there so the panic subsided, and I settled into my new job.

'Thereafter I wrote *Hunchback 2* on the Amstrad with Jonathan Smith doing the graphics and Martin Galway the sound. I remember Jonathan being busy with his own projects so I had to persuade him to do the graphics for me. There were no teams or structure and very little management so you had to try and get things done yourself or persuade others to help.

'I then wrote parts of *Hyper Sports* – the archery, triple jump and swimming sections for the Amstrad version. I remember never having seen someone doing a triple jump before so implemented that section of the game as just three jumps, as opposed to a hop,

Two screens from the Amstrad version of *Hunchback II*, published in 1984.

skip and a jump. No direction was given – we just got on with it as we thought fit. David Ward duly corrected me about the finer points of the triple jump when he saw the game.

'I was then given the ill-fated *Street Hawk* to start on – a project that was a total disaster. We were sold the game as it being like 'Knight Rider' on a motorbike by the management. Mike Webb was doing the Spectrum version and wanted to do a game where there would be more sprites on screen than any other Spectrum game at that time – a Defender clone where the main ship was replaced by the Street Hawk bike. The problem was that the Amstrad did not lend itself to have as many sprites on screen as what Mike wanted and scrolling on the Amstrad was not one of its strengths. So the thought of working on a game for three months

that you knew was not going to be very good and be panned by the critics was demoralising. *Street Hawk* is an example of where Ocean would have to pay massive penalties if it was not released on time – a deal done in this case with the Kays catalogue. A different version of the game was produced months later once we got Kays off our back.

'I remember one morning whilst on the way into the office seeing all the

flash cars in the car park outside. I was struggling to get in each day on the bus and with being disillusioned with the way the *Street Hawk* project was going, I was coming to the conclusion there were easier ways to make a good living.

'When I took the job on at Ocean, Jon Woods promised that I would get a four figure sum for each game that I worked on that I delivered on time. Well *Hunchback 2* was done well before the allocated schedule and had sold well at retail. I plucked up a bit of courage to talk to Jon, as he was a formidable character, and went and knocked on his door. Jon said he would look at the sales figures for the game and get back to me. He never did.

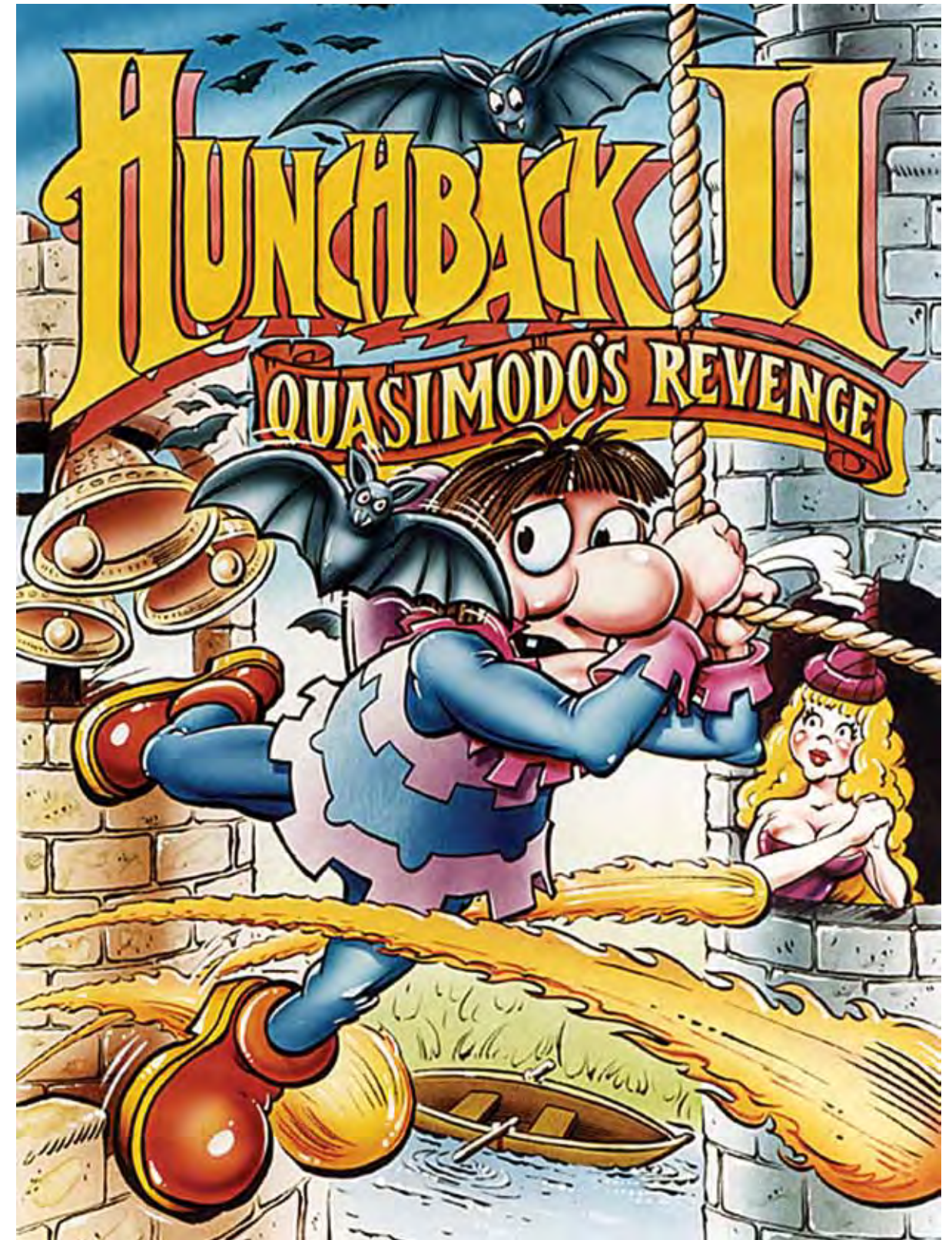
'I came to the conclusion that I was never going to get the bonus, so I decided to leave and resigned. I was pretty shocked to be asked to clear my desk straight away and was then escorted out of the building with immediate effect. And that was the end of my short career at Ocean. I was only at Ocean for seven or eight months but during that time I made some really good friends and will always look back at that time as a fondly remembered period of my career. Sometimes I think I should have stuck it out and stayed longer as it would have been great to develop on the consoles.'



Hunchback II artwork by Bob Wakelin



Two versions of *Street Hawk* were developed, one to satisfy the Kays catalogue orders, the other to capitalise on the strong licence. Both were sub-par.





John Gibson

After the demise of Imagine, John formed Denton Designs with a number of ex-Imagine colleagues. They went on to produce many top quality titles for the Ocean publishing machine, including *Gift from the Gods* and *Frankie Goes to Hollywood*.

John Gibson was a freelance programmer for Ocean between 1985–87. At 38 John was somewhat more experienced than the vast majority of other employees at the time. But his professional story starts a few years earlier. ‘I began my career as a games programmer at Imagine Software in Liverpool in 1983. After Imagine went bust I formed the independent software development house Denton Designs with four other ex-Imagine employees. I left Denton Designs in 1985 when David Ward made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.

‘While I was at Imagine, we regarded Ocean as a rival but when Denton

Designs was formed Ocean became a benefactor. Ocean bankrolled Denton Designs in exchange for our software development skills. We designed and produced the games *Gift from the Gods*, *Frankie Goes to Hollywood* and *Transformers* for Ocean.’

Although John never worked on site at Central Street for Ocean (being a freelancer he worked mainly from home) he did, however, receive a nice perk, something reminiscent of the spending spree at Imagine: ‘They gave me a Porsche for my company car!’ And the times when he was present at Central Street, he wasn’t too impressed with

Denton Designs tackled one of the oddest tie-ins Ocean licensed: *Frankie Goes to Hollywood* for the Spectrum, 1985.



what he saw. ‘I did visit on a number of occasions. I remember that the developers were housed in the basement and that their working environment made one think of a Dickensian workhouse! I certainly remember being glad I didn’t work there.’

Despite John’s evident experience in the games industry, he feels the breadth of his abilities were never fully realised. ‘When I worked directly for Ocean – rather than as a member of Denton Designs – I only produced one game, an arcade game called *Galivan*, which I converted to the Spectrum and Amstrad CPC. To this day I can’t fathom out why

Ocean made so little use of my skills.’ He is proud, though, of one game by Denton Designs in particular – *Gift from the Gods*. Gary Bracey’s outline of Ocean’s often unfortunate dealings with freelance programmers in the History section underlines the company’s nervousness at out-of-house development, which it nevertheless had to use from time to time. Some freelance programmers were prepared to take the considerable advances and fail to deliver; others, like Denton Designs, were extraordinary, and produced spectacular results in the time required. Perhaps Ocean’s failure to use John’s skills to the extent of which he was capable was born from the ‘once bitten’ fear of those who had let them down in the past.



The Spectrum version of *Galivan*, left above; the Amstrad *Galivan* box art, above; and a screen from the original coin-op arcade, left.



Gift from the Gods, published by Ocean in 1984.



Steve Lavache

At the age of 24, Steve joined Ocean and took responsibility for looking after the hardware and software environment to ensure the 'dungeon' development team remained well oiled.

Steve Lavache had a solid CV in the video games business by the time he started at Ocean in 1986. At Psygnosis – the Liverpool software publisher founded in 1985–86 by Jonathan Ellis, Ian Hetherington and David Lawson from the ashes of Imagine Software – he fulfilled the role of R&D manager. Prior to that he'd been hardware manager at Imagine, and before that, Steve says, 'I used to work for the Liverpool Computer Centre and build interfaces for the guys at Bug Byte for their development computers. I also hung around at Micro Digital while I was at college – Bruce Everiss owned the shop and Tim Best used to run it.'

'Gary Bracey interviewed me at the Central Street Quaker meeting

house and half way through he took me to meet operations director, Colin Stokes. On seeing me, Colin asked if I was coming to join them, and I said yup. That concluded the interview!

'Basically, I was on the hardware side – a hardware engineer for a software house, which is a bit of a misnomer but

that is how it was. I had my own office in the dungeon to start with. Gary used to give me a hard time for buying electronics – the essential bits.' His job at that time was to keep the Ocean kit going – repairing machines all too often broken or burnt-out by the developers. It isn't surprising that others remember Steve in his office surrounded by bits of Spectrums, Commodores and Amstrads.

'We often had new machines come in, like the Famicom from Nintendo, which became the NES over here. Gary would come in and ask me if anything could be done on this, and hand over a big cardboard box. That was all the information I had – a Japanese Famicom console in a brown box with a cartridge. Ocean wanted to write software for it, so I had to take it apart and work out how it worked: what the processor was; work out how we could write software for it, etc. In the day you heard of programmers writing games for the Spectrum in their bedrooms – in a professional environment you just couldn't do it that way. So I designed the hardware, and Dave Collier and Paul Owens wrote the

software to create an environment for the programmers to develop on. In the early days the hardware on which the games were to be written and compiled was usually a Tatung Einstein, connected via an interface cable to a target computer such as the Spectrum. Later on the Atari ST and Commodore Amiga were used as host systems.

'The NES console had special chips, no one knew how the ROM-switching worked. I re-engineered the console and invented my own ROM-switching that we showed Nintendo. They liked it so much we were invited to their headquarters in Japan to talk things through. Paul Booth, Gary Bracey and myself attended the meeting with the head of Nintendo, some of their technical guys and an interpreter. The conversation took place via interpreters initially – eventually the atmosphere became friendlier and English was used.'

There were at least two happy consequences of that first meeting: Nintendo handed over documentation explaining the Famicom's make-up; and the Japanese formed an on-going relationship with Ocean. However, relations were not so straightforward with Nintendo's rivals. 'Sega didn't want Ocean to produce Megadrive software at the time, but I managed to get around all the patents – legally – in order for us to create a development environment for it. Once Sega saw that we had a legal way of developing on their machine they started talking to us.'

'It had its serious times,' Steve says, reflecting on his time at Ocean, 'but it was a fun place to work as well. I remember building the Arcade Alley and then all hell used to break loose at lunchtime. When we received the Operation Wolf arcade board and gun, I used a long cable to stretch to the gun at one point – it was like having a real Uzi. It was a pity the monitor was so small.'

He ponders then settles for an anecdote worthy of a Stephen King novel. 'There was one instance when my partner at the time decided she would put me on a very low-fat diet. Some

Steve pictured in his office in Central Street catching up on the latest technology.



months later at the Christmas party we were served a very rich, creamy, fatty, sauce with chicken. Afterwards – and several very large drinks later – I was sitting close to Jon Woods and Ray Musci. Ray was president of Ocean of America and used to be a bare-knuckle prizefighter. Let's just say the vomit explosion was immense and resulted in Jon Woods washing his clothes in the gents while hiding me from a very angry Ray.'



The striking Famicom (Family Computer) console from Japan, better known as the Nintendo Entertainment System or NES in Europe.



Richard Palmer

Richard joined his brother John at Ocean in 1987 at the tender age of 17 as a Commodore 64 programmer. His first project was *Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge*.

The youngest of five brothers remembers well when he was 13 and his older brother was working to save up for a Commodore 64. 'John came home one day with a boxed 64 and told me he was going to do graphics for the computer and I was going to do the programming. Who was I to argue? I taught myself how to program the machine, mainly from reference guides and hacking Tony Crowther games [Crowther worked for Alligata, Quicksilver and Gremlin Graphics]. I still have the reference guides to this day, a little worse for wear

and covered in dirty finger prints on each and every page.'

When John started at Ocean, Richard was studying to get a BTEC National Diploma in Computer Studies and hammering out games. 'After several magazine game publications, and a tape publication, I

started my career at Ocean in 1987 at the age of 17 and stayed for four years.' He doesn't recall attending any interviews because with John already working there his brother got him in. Like so many who remember Central Street with its basement and first floor separated by the Quaker meeting house on the ground floor, Richard's first impressions of Ocean were of those Upstairs and those Downstairs. 'Who were they? Those mysterious creatures on the upper floor that scurried about running the company? You know I thought it was all really cool working down in the basement. Others may have thought differently, I don't know. The "dungeon" was a great arrangement and fun to work in. It was like constantly giggling at the Cavern and I was in the headline band.'

The 1960s Merseybeat culture lived on in the Liverpool-Manchester games creators, but headliner or not, Richard reported like all other inmates of the dungeon to Gary Bracey. 'It was Dave Collier, though, who took me under his wing. I have great memories of working with Dave. I was a naive teenage

programmer and he was very supportive and helpful with my coding. I guess it's best not to single out any specific person because everyone was great and deserves an equal mention, but as a 17-year-old starting out, I was indebted to Dave. He put me firmly on the right road in the gaming industry on my first project with him, *Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge*.

'My brother John was on graphics and Jonathan Dunn did the sound and music. I programmed the throwing events and weight-training section over a three-month period. Then I was another programmer who worked on the rescue of *Operation Thunderbolt*, for which I rewrote the horizontal scrolling sections.

'My finest moment came with *New Zealand Story*. This was the only game I did at Ocean where I was present at the start. My team-mates were Steve Wahid on graphics and Jonathan Dunn again on sound and music. I was the main programmer on this arcade conversion but credit has to be given to Paul Hughes for his sprite multiplexer. I remember the challenge of having no design document and so having to use the arcade machine as reference for every level. To overcome this disadvantage I built a level editor

into the game so I could go back and forth between the arcade machine and the Commodore 64 in an attempt to place everything in the right places. The editor had the highly unoriginal title of Baddie Editor. It's still a part of the delivered game, so it can be activated, if you know how. The media loved the game – the best response so far to any game that I had worked on.'

Beat 'em up games sometimes spilled out into real life, as Richard recalls an incident which occurred towards the end of his time at Ocean. 'It was a fight that broke out at Yates's pub. I think a racist comment sparked it. It started inside then sprawled out onto the road. Steve Wahid, whom I was working with on *New Zealand Story*, saw me looking bewildered (I was no fighter) and shuffled me into a taxi and told me to get out of there. I think he could see me considering joining in and knew I would get properly beaten up. There was this "we're in this together feeling" that nearly had me joining in. There were a lot of people fighting. Next morning, Ocean people started rolling into work looking horrendously beaten up. But they were all laughing and coping really well with it.'



Richard's 'finest moment', 1988's *The New Zealand Story*.

Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge on the C64 – published by Ocean in 1988.



A jolly looking Richard photographed in the dungeon of Central Street.



Michael Lamb

Mike joined Ocean in 1986 as a Spectrum programmer and soon teamed up with graphics artist Dawn Drake. Together, they created some of Ocean's most iconic games, including the mega-hit *RoboCop*.

Mike's early interest in computers started at school programming the Commodore Pet – he could have owned a ZX81 but decided to get a motorbike instead. And then he ordered a ZX Spectrum as soon as they were announced but almost gave up on it because he was too impatient to wait for its delivery. Fortunately, a friend's

Right: *Combat School* on the Spectrum – published by Ocean in 1987.



Prior to joining Ocean, Mike programmed the highly successful *Steve Davis Snooker*, above, and *Spectrum Pool*. Both games were published by CDS Micro Systems in 1984.

experience inspired him – the lad had two games published by Arctic Software and made a nice amount of money for his trouble. Thinking he could do better and make more money, Mike taught himself how to program his Spectrum when it eventually arrived.

Mike wrote *Spectrum Pool* and *Steve Davis Snooker* (1984) for the Spectrum, both published by CDS Software (now Indigicon Ltd). The royalties kept him afloat for a couple of years, but as he says, 'I needed more steady work.'



For its success, Ocean was a natural choice, but his view of Ocean at the time was not positive. 'I thought Ocean had great licences, good marketing and crap games (it was a fairly common view in the press it seemed at the time). I met Gary Bracey at their offices in Central Street, Manchester and he explained they were trying to change that.'

'When I first joined Ocean back in 1986 I was 21 and for me it was a bit like going to university. Ocean had hired a bunch of developers all about the same

age, and most of us were away from home for the first time. We were pretty much left to get on with it. We had some temporary offices across the road from the main office. I was working on *Top Gun* in a room with Lee Douthwaite. I remember Steve Lavache was reverse engineering a Nintendo Entertainment System next door.'

Some of the office acumen did surprise Mike. 'I remember there were two older programmers who'd always come in late – they were gone in four months. It was my first professional job and I suppose it wasn't very different from a lot of offices at the time but I can remember thinking it was a bit slack. A lot of the original programmers would also have a beer or two over lunch.'

'We used to get paid in cash on Thursday. At least half the staff would go down the pub at 5:30 and stay till closing time. Eventually Ocean wised up and moved paydays to Friday so we could be hung over on our own time. Today you'd say a lot of us were functioning alcoholics.'

It seems as though hard cash was the only method of payment in the company's early years. 'Ocean used to pay us bonuses in cash too. I remember counting a couple of thousand pounds in ten-pound notes in the bathroom after we finished *Combat School*. We didn't get rich but we were a lot better off than most.'

But things did get better, as Mike explains. 'Over my time there, the place

became more professional. Some of guys who had been at Ocean some time left and Gary hired more graduate types to replace them. The payday moved to Friday and then they stopped paying cash.'

Gary also made good on his promise of changing people's perception of Ocean.

'Over time the people Gary hired turned Ocean's reputation around. We were getting good reviews and even better sales. We'd joke how the marketing department were meeting to decide which game was going to be Christmas number one. We used to get kids coming by the offices on weekends. One lad wanted to return a game that wasn't working. We gave him a copy of every Spectrum game we could find (must have been about 20). We'd also get the odd letter or two. We used to joke about them, but it was nice to be appreciated.'

'We had small



Dawn Drake's graphics for the 1988 Spectrum version of *RoboCop*.

The arcade version of *RoboCop* by Data East.



Ocean's Three – from left to right: Mike Lamb, Gary Bracey and Colin Porch.



teams and there wasn't a lot of need for top-heavy management. Gary would come by every so often and play the games, make sure the game being worked on was on track. To a large extent, we'd get more pressure and suggestions from colleagues. If a game wasn't so good

Gary might say something.'

Mike talks about the titles he worked on at Ocean.

'The games I was involved in were made on three-

to six-month schedules and I was programmer on all the games. For the arcade conversions there was not a lot of design to be done – the movie licences were much more challenging. Usually we'd try to adapt a proven arcade game concept and make games out of the key

scenes from a movie. There wasn't time to try something really original, find out it wasn't working and start again. Sometimes we used the same game-mechanic throughout with different levels but later we had three or four game types in *Batman* or *RoboCop*. We used to get a lot of feedback from the testers on the quality, gameplay and look of the games we produced, which improved the overall quality of the game. When I went to America I met people who started as testers and were now producers or designers. We never made use of the testing department like that at Ocean and in my opinion it was a big mistake.

'The Ocean game I am most proud of working on was *Wec Le Mans*. I developed the road drawing routines that ran at 25 frames/sec. We looked at *Outrun* on the Spectrum and you could count the frames 1...2...3 frames a second. It was the difference between a game that was fun and unplayable. I didn't finish the



Wec Le Mans on the Spectrum – published by Imagine in 1988.



game because they wanted me to start on *RoboCop* for Christmas. Fortunately they got someone good in to finish it and was Jon O'Brien.

'Next are the *Renegade* games. The original was a great conversion that I got to load in one go on the 48K Spectrum. I also had the balls to make it a one-button game instead of three like the original. Ronnie Fowles did a great job on the pixels. With *Target Renegade* Ronnie left and Dawn Drake took over, and did a fantastic job on the graphics.'

There are many classic games that Mike contributed to or programmed in full while at Ocean. He is his own harshest critic and talks down many of the titles he worked on even though the reviewing magazines of the time acclaimed them.

'The aim with *Top Gun* was to make a 3D combat game on 8-bit machines in



An important Ocean film tie-in of 1987, *Top Gun* on the Spectrum.



And then out again at budget price: the Spectrum Hit Squad cover for *Top Gun*.

three months. A shame, but we had to get it out for Christmas. I took the game home at Christmas to play with my mates – they weren't all that impressed. It had potential but in retrospect it was tough doing the game in only three to four months. With a six-month development time it could have been good.

'The *Batman* game was a big licence but only an average game on the Amiga and ST – one warehouse section too many in my opinion. *Darkman* was a bit

"The aim with Top Gun was to make a 3D combat game on 8-bit machines in three months."

of a drag to finish, and with the movie not being as good as *RoboCop* or *Batman*, I had already decided I wanted to work in the US at that time.

'*RoboCop* was OK – nice graphics by



Dawn Drake's graphics for the 1988 follow-up, *Target Renegade*.

Dawn Drake and the final game fitted the licence really well. It would have sold whoever worked on it at Ocean, but Dawn and I worked hard to make it as good as possible in the time frame we had.

'*Arkanoid* was a fairly good conversion, running at 60Hz. Steve Lavache put most of the arcade games in a room so we could work out how they played. The game got a couple of bad reviews — possibly because I tried to make the paddle accelerate towards the ball in order to compensate for not having analogue control. But I think if you played the game a while it was better my way.'

Colin Porch was seen as the 'Old man' of Ocean — being in his early 40s when he started at the company he was twice the age of many of the others, and soon became lovingly known as 'Fossil'. As Colin's name is mentioned Mike sits back to reflect and with a wry smile continues, 'There was the time we did Colin Porch's work for him over the weekend. Colin was working on the C64 version of *Head Over Heels*. He had all the Spectrum graphics as screens displayed on one monitor and was copying them pixel by pixel to another monitor with the C64 sprites. Andrew Deacon, James Higgins and myself were talking about it one Saturday (Colin wasn't in the office, neither were any management, so there

was quite a bit of chatting going on). We thought it would be funny if Colin came in on Monday and all the graphics were converted. We did it in about half an hour. James made me click "save" in case we got in trouble. The brilliant thing was Colin was completely cool about it. It was a slightly childish thing to do and he could easily have taken the hump. He wasn't like that at all. He found out who was responsible and thanked us. He was happy we'd saved him the work and not worried about his ego at all.'

Mike worked on many titles together with his partner in crime, Dawn Drake, Mike on programming and Dawn looking after the graphics. In a time when almost everyone smoked, they were both were non-smokers, so the management allowed them to work in an office together. Mike recalls the attention that Dawn used to get from the other male developers as they came into the room to try and impress her. The continual interruptions annoyed him because the distractions stopped them getting on with their work. Mike confesses that he himself was a closet admirer and he did ask Dawn out for a drink one evening. Dawn accepted the proposition and turned up to the 'date' with all her girlfriends.

Mike sums up quite nicely the general feeling of all former Ocean staff spoken to in creation of this book, 'It was a long time ago but I'm proud of what we achieved.'



Arkanoid on the Spectrum — published by Imagine in 1987.



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John Meegan

John joined Ocean in 1986 and worked predominantly on Commodore 64 conversions in the seven years he spent at the company, covering the likes of *Short Circuit* and *RoboCop*.

Prior to starting at Ocean, John Meegan worked in a medical records office in Glasgow, but even then he created video games in his spare time. This he did with a friend until events caused them to split. 'My friend got a full-time gig at Alligata

Games, leaving me quite bereft in Glasgow.' It was time to make a decision: give up the job and go full-time in the games industry – or stick with the records office. 'I answered the notorious job advert featuring a catalogue model walking past David Ward's Porsche. A few months later

and Bill Barna, I got hired on the spot.'

John moved south of the border as a fresh-faced 21-year-old, with the dream job developing games for what he thought of as the country's most prestigious software house.

'Ocean was the big boy in the UK. They did the top licensed games and made sure the public were aware of them through high-quality advertising. Plus, as a wannabe Commodore 64 programmer, I knew of Dave Collier and Martin Galway.'

The working reality was a little less impressive. 'The space where I worked lacked natural light, which made it feel like a tomb. It could smell stale at times, adding to the tomb vibe. But I instantly made friends with Mike Lamb and the first few days I shared a room with Bill Barna, Allan Shortt and Zach Townsend. The latter spent his day printing out all his source code to the noisiest dot-matrix printer in the world.' John reported directly to Gary Bracey. 'He had to go off on licensing trips so we didn't see him as much as we'd have liked. Gary hired Lorraine Starr to interact and manage

the staff in his absence, and she did this well.'

John specialised on the Commodore 64 as a programmer and occasional designer, and *Short Circuit* was the first game allocated to him. 'My office roommates Zach were working on *Cobra* and Allan on *Mario Brothers*, while over the road Colin Cresty was knocking his head against a wall with *Street Hawk*. Creating games at Ocean was a finger in the air guess, then just trying to get on with it – planning never happened. Ocean management, though, did take a particular interest in what staff were up to when deadlines were looming!'

Work pressures aside, the staff still found room for fun, and in particular with the Friday afternoon pint liable to become two or three, on occasion things got out of hand. 'Simon Butler had been watching the John Cusack movie *The Sure Thing* and discovered "shot-gunning beer" [If in doubt consult Youtube]. For some reason – while Gary was absent – we thought it a good idea to have a session in his office. As you can imagine, there was spillage. While there was no malice at all in this, I did feel awful at the way it obviously hurt Gary's feelings. We didn't intend any disrespect, but he felt it.'

Despite working among such illustrious company at the biggest name in UK video gaming, John says he never felt special working at Ocean. 'It was a job like any other.' And sometimes tough when things didn't go to plan. '*Operation Thunderbolt* was a rescue job



RoboCop caught the movie-going public by surprise in the summer of 1987 but the big hit handed Ocean a prize of a game licence, timed to match the video release in 1988, seen here on the C64.

after the original programmer bailed out. In reality, pretty much everything was written from scratch. I programmed all the 3D sections and Richard Palmer and Paul Hughes worked on the scrolling sections.' *Rastan* and *Total Recall* proved similarly difficult. Of *Rastan*, John says, 'A nightmare project. The game was way too big and technically demanding for the Commodore 64. But despite its tight deadline, *RoboCop* was a pleasure to work on. It was Steve Thomson's first title and his first time away from home but you'd think he'd been doing it for decades.

The Untouchables was probably the most enjoyable project I worked on – we had the time to design and refine the game. *Navy Seals* had some great work from Steve and was his last game with me. Other memorable games include *Slapfight* and *The Vindicator*.'



John's first challenge: 1987's *Short Circuit* on the Commodore 64.

I sent demos to Ocean and received an invitation to visit Gary Bracey for an interview. It was in the dingy dungeon beneath the Quaker church on Central Street. With input from Dave Collier



Paul Hughes

Paul joined Ocean in 1986 and is most famous for his 'Freeload' code that provided a secure loader for Ocean games that went some way to combatting piracy, introduced scrolling text and music and, later on, games to play while the main game loaded off the tape.



An early version of Paul's loader was used for Hewson Consultants' *Uridium*.



'...the understated but utterly brilliant Mike Lamb.'

Paul started in the industry at a young age. 'From the day I left school at 16, I went straight into freelance game programming. I'd already had a few titles published on VIC-20 and the Texas Instruments TI99/4A while I was at school, so the day I did my last O-Level examination I started pitching "my wares" and got commissioned to do soundtracks for Elite Systems and then Superior Software. I also did some work for Hewson Consultants on their tape protection, thanks to a friendship I struck up with Graftgold, and Andy Braybrook [*Paradroid*, *Gibbly's Day Out* and *Uridium* among others] in particular.'

Even before joining Ocean, Paul was aware of the games software company. 'When I was at school I worked in a local computer shop at the weekends, so I saw all the Ocean and Imagine titles the day they were released. Immediately, certain names sprang out for creating the best software: David Collier; Steve Wahid and Martin Galway on the Commodore 64; and the late Jonathan "Joffa" Smith on the ZX Spectrum.'

With some good demos – and a bit

of luck – Paul landed himself a full-time position at Ocean in 1986 at the tender age of 18. 'I was working, briefly, for the newly set up Software Creations in Manchester run by Richard Kay (himself a former Ocean programmer). I mentioned this in passing to my aunt, who rather nonchalantly mentioned that her other nephew, on my uncle's side, did some programming at Ocean too. It was only David Collier! My uncle mentioned this to David (who knew Richard Kay) and he invited me to have a look around Central Street. He was just demoing *Terra Cresta* to Paul Finnegan, and we got talking about multiplexing sprites, colour scrolls and various ways I'd stopped freeze cartridges.'

'The next thing I know he says to me, "Barbara (my aunt) didn't tell me you knew all this stuff", and promptly drags Gary Bracey in with himself and Paul and says, "Can we offer this lad 'ere a job?"'

Paul had little compunction in abandoning Software Creations at the drop of the proverbial hat, but looks back less certainly. 'It was a bit of a crappy

thing to do, but I'd just had the biggest carrot in the industry dangled in front of me – working for the largest and best games publisher in the world! So many great games were developed in the basement of the building – programmers, artists and musicians crammed into a subterranean office space producing digital magic.'

'By a complete fluke I snagged an office with Jonathan "Joffa" Smith, who had just finished both *Terra Cresta* and *Cobra* for the Spectrum. Joffa had a new idea he was playing with and so I was tasked with doing the C64 version of whatever it was he came up with. Alas, just a few weeks in he decided to leave Ocean to form Special FX with Paul Finnegan and his room went to the understated but utterly brilliant Mike Lamb. I got turfed out to share desks with Allan Shortt who went on to become one of my best friends there.'

'At the same time, Johnny Meegan was just finishing *Short Circuit*, with John Brandwood developing the Amstrad version, Allan Shortt was finishing off *Mario Bros* for the C64, Dave Collier had just finished *Terra Cresta* and was starting work on *Arkanoid* on the C64 – as was Mike Lamb on the Spectrum, and Zach Townsend was just finishing off *Cobra* for the C64.'

With each deadline a challenge, Paul found working at Ocean hard work but ultimately enjoyable. 'Without a shadow of a doubt it was fun, albeit if many times a hard, hard slog to hit deadlines or

technically pulling off a demanding piece of arcade hardware on a sub-1MHz processor. I think it's fair to say we had a laugh while putting the games together.'

Different teams worked in their own idiosyncratic ways – which always got the job done. There was, however, a lot of camaraderie and a lot of sharing of ideas and techniques between the



A screen from *Cobra* on the Spectrum, finished by Jonathan Smith just as Paul joined Ocean.



programmers. There was also an awful lot of beer drinking... and the results of too much drinking come Friday evenings at Tommy Ducks pub and then on to the Square Albert [in Albert Square]. Lock-ins, and...' he adds coyly, '...various levels of debauchery were to be had.'

Paul, relaxing with the latest issue of *Amiga Format*.

Back to the hard work bit... 'Gary Bracey was my first manager and was – and still is – a gamer. It's in his blood. So he was always offering ideas and playing on the games, giving feedback.



'FreeLoad' loading
RoboCop on the C64.

Lorraine Starr then took over my line management when she joined Ocean as assistant software manager. First and foremost both Gary and Lorraine were project managers. They made sure things got done on time and to budget. They patted our young egos when we needed it and told us off when we deserved it.

'Gary was the wizard with the

intellectual properties – he could sniff out a blockbuster from a script when anyone else would pass on it. When demos and partially finished games came in for evaluation, he was the man that spotted the potential. Lorraine was the yin to Gary's yang; in many ways she took care of a lot of us youngsters like a big sister – she would stand in your corner and defend the development team to anyone in a suit.'

Paul reflects on his achievements while at Ocean. 'I believe technically Ocean put out some very accomplished software. I had a few interesting takes on fast sprite-multiplexing that we used, tweaked and reused across projects. I also came up with a novel way of multiplexing on the NES version of *RoboCop* that was used on several Ocean titles after Mike Webb mentioned in passing how the PPU on the NES actually prioritised the sprite output.'

And, of course, there is Paul's famous Ocean front-end. 'FreeLoad, the now infamous Ocean Loader, was a nice piece of kit because it was fast, reliable, could do stuff while loading – music, scrolls, games – and it also had some really clever stuff to stop tape-to-tape copying of which I'm rather proud! With each arcade port we would play the game to death to get a feel for it and then get a complete play-through on videotape to break down how things moved and reacted to the player.

'With any game, be it an arcade port or a movie tie-in, the number one thing

to get right was the player control. If that was not fluid and intuitive you would fall at the first hurdle.'

In the midst of Paul's prolific output, some titles fell through cracks in the floor. 'There were a couple of games that didn't see the light of day, which was a real shame, both with Bill Harbison on graphics. One was a NES version of *RoboCop* which got dropped for a re-badged Data East's US NES version, which was rubbish. And an isometric Simpsons adventure à la *Head Over Heels* for the ST and Amiga, which got overlooked for a straight conversion of the NES Simpsons game.

Of the games themselves, Paul recalls just how ridiculously tight the deadlines for completion could be, as he entered his second year. 'Gary or Lorraine told us when the game had to hit the duplicators for the shelf date and you moved hell and high water to hit that date.'

Making last-minute fixes at midnight was a common event... sometimes even as the duplicators were preparing to run the sales copies, as Paul recounts. 'Mag Max was a conversion of a pretty bad arcade game. I was the only in-house C64 programmer available at the time – an external developer had started on it but had made a bigger hash of it than I eventually ended up making. Simon Butler created the graphics and Fred Grey the sound. I told Simon how I thought we should put things together and wrote him a simple map editor, and

Simon just got on with it and produced a ton of quality artwork at the drop of a hat. With Fred, he had already been commissioned to do the soundtrack, so he just popped in one day with a code-drop and I stuffed it in the game. Mag

"FreeLoad was a nice piece of kit because it was fast, reliable, and it also had some really clever stuff to stop tape-to-tape copying of which I'm rather proud!"

Max's best feature on the arcade was a completely forced-perspective scrolling playfield; every one of the 200 scan



lines moved at a different speed. Now, I couldn't possibly do that on the C64. In the end Simon did a pseudo-isometric layout and I just did a full screen scroll. The game also had some big sprites in the horizontal plane that made multiplexing hell.

'I literally cobbled the game together

Paul assisted with the multiplexing on *RoboCop* for the NES.

The 1986 game *Mag Max* was another Ocean product virtually finished at the duplicators, here seen on the C64.



Lee Cowley, not only a tester, but a driver too.

over a couple of months. I remember desperately trying to get in all the alien attack patterns, knowing full well Gary wanted the game at the duplicators the next day. So I worked through the night and drove down to Ablex, our duplicators in Telford, with Lee Cowley and a development kit in tow.

'We sat in the mastering lab at Ablex and Lee did the final testing while I put together the tape loader. We mastered the game, tested the samples, waited for the first run off the production line, and drove the first boxes of cassettes back to Manchester that evening. I slept for two days after that!'

But sadly, the results didn't match the effort.

'With one exception, all the magazines said it was crap. And it was. The graphics and sound were as good as they could be, and technically it had some nice routines in there... but it played bad. The arcade game played badly in the first place as well, but I managed to make it even worse. Ocean paid out nice discretionary bonuses – I didn't get one for *Mag Max*.'

And another big title was worked on to the last moment. 'With *Combat School* I started work on it with Allan Shortt, but a few weeks in I was dragged off to get some of Ocean's big-box compilations together. Then, with a few weeks to go, I jumped back on board to finish off my section – the assault course. I worked through several days to get it done in time. *Combat School*, for my section at



THE IMAGINE EGGARTIA TABLE		
1	PAUL HUGHES	063000
2	SIMON BUTLER	039000
3	THIS SPACE IS LEFT	000000
4	STEPHEN RUDY	037000
5	ALLAN SHORTT	006000
6	MARK K JONES	005000
7	MARK D JONES	004000
8	DAVE COLLIER	003000
9	COLIN STORES	002000
10	TRACEY CLAIRE HILARY	001000
IP - 000000		



least, was quite a simple affair. The only tricky bits were getting the control right – it was a "joystick waggler" but with eight-way movement – and cramming as much of the game in to as few loads as possible. It was another one of those to-the-wire developments. Allan Shortt was still writing the final section – the fight with the drill instructor – 24 hours before we were supposed to start duplication. Allan was very much the man for this – he'd just come off the back of *Yie Ar Kung-Fu II* – but the development cycle was darn tight as there were several very different sections requiring a lot of bespoke code. I was frantically trying to re-jig the code and data around to lose one of the multiload sections.

'All told, we worked 60 hours straight to get it done. Gary came in in the morning and I waved the master disk at him like a flag of surrender. I then was

driven south to Telford with Lee to get the game mastered at Ablex, and kick off the production run. Suffice to say I slept for a couple of days after that (a familiar tale for me!).'

This time, the effort paid off, although Paul is typically modest in praising his colleagues' efforts. 'The game was well received by the gaming press and players alike. It was basically a *Hyper Sports* type effort with the theme of an officer and a gentleman! It played well – mostly down to Allan Shortt, and it looked great thanks to Simon Butler, and Martin Galway, as usual, provided a classic soundtrack.

"All told, we worked 60 hours straight to get it done. Gary came in in the morning and I waved the master disk at him like a flag of surrender."

Often, the pressure to make deadlines Gary had to meet because the massive sell-in effort to the unforgiving retail chains had been made weeks before damaged the end product. Next up in the production line was *Operation Thunderbolt*. 'The game was being developed in-house by a new junior programmer and it just got completely out of hand. I'd been showing him little tricks of the trade: how to do the scroll copies over several frames; how to multiplex the sprites properly; how to write a mini-language to control the bad guys.

Combat School on the C64 – published by Ocean in 1987.

'I could sense the writing was on the wall so I started to put some code together to do the scrolling sections when, Gary stepped in and asked a few of us to cobble a version of the game together as soon as possible.

'So in come John Meegan, Rich and John Palmer, and Steve Thomson to save the day. I cobbled together all the "glue" routines: the panel plots; the mid-screens; the front-end; high scores and all the crazy input shenanigans that

Ocean had signed up to for the licence, such as light guns and mice, and all the interactions that ensued. The biggest challenge was to get it done in such a crazy short timeline. It wasn't a bad little game, but it felt rushed because it was.'

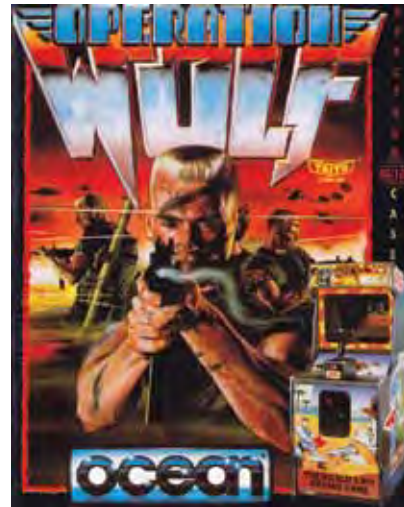
In spite of Paul's concerns, *Operation Thunderbolt* did better than anticipated in the specialist press. 'It reviewed OK, but wasn't a patch on Colin Porch's prequel, *Operation Wolf*. The reviews were reasonable, but it was by no means a *Zzap!64* Gold Medal or even a *Zzap Sizzler*. It was an all right version and reasonably faithful to the arcade game, but just didn't have enough TLC to make it a great game. It had a lot of pre-release press attention after the success of *Operation Wolf* – there were loads of screen shots (mocked up) and interviews

promising the best thing since sliced bread.

'But as deadlines came and went something drastic had to be done and I believe Gary made that call to terminate the original version and ask a bunch of guys to turn it around in no time.



'This started to become a trend at Ocean. It happened to other titles such as *Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge* on the Amstrad and *Total Recall* on everything!'



Box art for *Operation Wolf* above and *Operation Thunderbolt's* magazine advertisement on the right.

Three screens from the C64 version of *Operation Thunderbolt* – published by Ocean in 1989.

OPERATION THUNDERBOLT

BLOCKBUSTER FOLLOW-UP TO LAST CHRISTMAS'S No. 1 HIT... OPERATION WOLF...
NOW WITH TWICE THE ACTION, TWICE THE FUN, TWICE THE CHALLENGE
ROY ADAM IS BACK!
 The Hi-jack report came from a DC10 leaving Paris for Boston – Arab guerillas were in control of flight 102 and had turned the aircraft towards Africa... The plane lands in hostile territory and the terrorists begin their demands...

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 or the bulletproof vest, but watch out for **AIR-TO-GROUND MISSILES**
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Taito



Gareth Betts

Gareth joined Ocean in 1991 on a three-month contract in the warehouse to cover the Christmas rush. He was soon taken on full time as QA manager and was subsequently promoted to the position of producer on titles developed by external supplier, DID.

After school Gareth became a trainee accountant at a local builders merchant and wasn't particularly enjoying it. 'So my mate, Lee, and I went to the job centre in Manchester. There was a small ad in the window advertising a temporary position at Ocean Software at the Quakers' building. We were both keen for it, and the way we settled who would apply was

"I remember there being two huge fellas in the warehouse who came over to Lee and me, questioning us about postal-order fraud."

by flipping a coin – he won and went to work in Ocean in the warehouse, packing games into jiffy bags for the Christmas rush. After he was there for about four weeks, the Ocean management asked him if he knew anyone that would come in and do the same job to help out – so that's how I got into Ocean. That was the end of November 1991 when I was 18.

'I was asked to stay on into January by Paul Harrison as there were likely to be

returns that needed sorting. So I jacked in my accounting job, to my relief, and returned in January. On arriving in the New Year, I remember there being two huge fellas in the warehouse who came over to Lee and me, questioning us about postal-order fraud. Obviously we knew nothing about it – as it transpired two of the girls working in the warehouse had been fiddling postal orders and were sacked on the spot under caution. The two fellas were from the police – the fraud squad. As a result, Lee and I were called upstairs and offered permanent contracts at Ocean to take over the department, and that is how we became full time.'

As the newbies in the department Gareth and Lee had big aspirations.

'Lee and I set up a mail-order system and created a database in the warehouse –there was nothing like that there at the time, unbelievably. Previously Ocean would just throw quantities of games in the back of an Ocean van to be delivered to various retailers and hope that enough stock had been provided. Our system made things more accurate. We elicited

the promise that if we implemented it, and could hand it over to others, we would be promoted into the quality assurance department. And that's what we did. we started in QA in 1992.

'We tested too many games to remember to list

– we ensured there were no bugs and also fed back any gameplay problems, or suggested to the developers where it could be improved. We often tested and signed off two to three games a week – we rarely got design documents, so we just had to play through the game ourselves. With arcade conversions it was a little simpler because we had the coin-op board, so we could play the conversion and see how close it was to the original.'

Gareth and Lee had further suggestions to improve Ocean's customer experience.

'We used to get loads of random questions coming through to us from those who had bought our games. After a short time on the team, we suggested putting in a helpline to the QA department. At the time, the building only had two or three lines and one of was to the QA room. It was annoying that whoever answered the phone was asked things like "how do you get past a certain level?" or "we are stuck on this". So we documented walkthroughs of all the games and then put in a dedicated phone line to help gamers with our games.



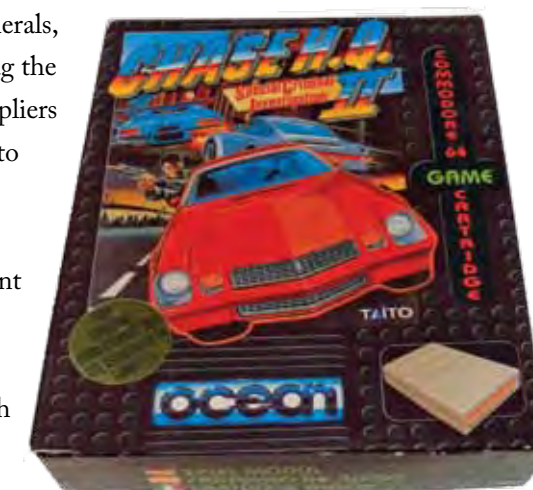
'I also became QA manager, which it seemed everyone did in the team at some point in their career. I then set up compatibility labs – the PC market was exploding, with new graphics cards and sound cards and such. We had to

make sure Ocean games worked with all the PC peripherals, so I had to blag the kit off the suppliers and get them to send it to us.'

Not everything went smoothly in those early days, as Gareth highlights one famous

example. 'We were all ready one Friday evening to go down the pub. Chase HQ was just about to go out on cartridge on the C64GS. The cartridge was meant to have two slots cut out on the front face to click in place into the machine, but for some reason these hadn't been made, so there we were for hours using files to cut these slots out on thousands of cartridges.'

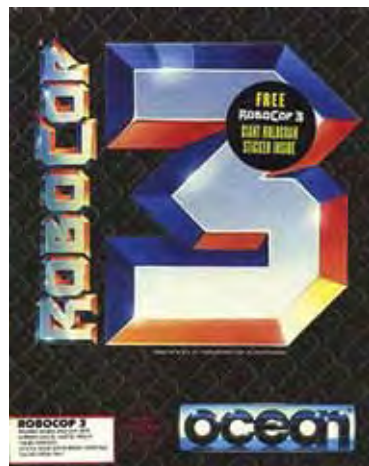
While working in the QA section, Jon Oldham offered Gareth a job in production, which he accepted. 'I worked



Chase HQ II game box above with the cartridge inside below.



Inferno game cover, produced by DID and published by Ocean in 1994.



RoboCop 3 game cover – produced by DID and published by Ocean in 1992, and three screens from the Amiga.

on too many titles to remember – making sure that the projects were on track, milestones were being met, the quality was maintained, and the teams were paid and kept happy. The first games under my management were supplied by the DID team, *Inferno* and *RoboCop 3*. We produced a security dongle for *RoboCop 3* to plug into the back of the Amiga. Half of them didn't work, which proved to be a nightmare.'

But there were lighter sides to working at Ocean. 'Lunchtime visits to pubs happened frequently and we spent much more than the allocated hour break drinking and socializing. Inter-department relationships became common as we all partied together. The trade shows were also very memorable for the wrong reasons: David or Jon would put the company credit card behind the bar to help with the atmosphere and we just used to drink and party all night.'

'As time went on, though, the teams at Ocean got bigger and bigger and politics started to creep in, so it became just too difficult to do your job. The early days for me were much more relaxed, when we all chipped in and were left to get on with things, like too often fixing bugs in the master at the duplicators!'

'When Infogrames took over Ocean it was far from seamless. Initially it seemed like it was all fun, with trips



to Sicily, sitting next to the pool. As management chopped and changed, different methods to produce games were introduced – the culture change was just a little bit too much from my perspective. My manager at the time, Jon Oldham, deflected much of the higher management stuff away from me, but many of the games we worked on were never completed because they didn't fit the Infogrames branding and culture.'



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James Higgins

Ocean hired James for his skills in coding 6809 – this knowledge was used to convert popular Ocean titles to the Thomson range of computers popular in France. He subsequently coded many of Ocean's prolific titles on the Amstrad CPC.

James Higgins was a 20-year-old with a deal of programming experience behind him when he started work at Ocean in 1988. His career, like so many programmers of that time, had humble beginnings. 'I started around 14 years old, when I managed to get a Sinclair ZX81. I tinkered with that in BASIC and typed a few listings in from Your Computer. I then sold my *2000AD* comic collection to get a 16K RAM-pack but by that time the ZX81 was already kind of defunct. I then got a Dragon 32 for Christmas, and soon learned to code in 6809 and wrote my first game, *Jumbo's Troubles*, which went on to sell an amazing three copies! A year or so later I got an Amstrad CPC 464 and progressed

The Thomson M05 was launched in France in 1984 as a direct competitor to the Commodore 64 and the ZX Spectrum.



(or regressed) to Z80 programming, for which I wrote a game called *The Apprentice*, a clone of *Sorcery*, which sold some 60,000 units over time.'

James's introduction to Ocean may never have happened when he applied after seeing a recruiting advertisement. 'I called the number on the ad and spoke to Gary Bracey, who sounded less than interested...' which might have been it until James mentioned he could code in 6809. Immediately, Gary invited him to Manchester. 'A few days later I turned up at 6 Central Street. It was a combination of scary/exciting and I managed to somehow convince Gary that I could handle converting *Green Beret* for the Thompson range of computers. And then I headed back to Glasgow and was soon followed by the M05 development system. About 10-12 weeks later I went back with a finished *Green Beret* and they cut me a cheque for £2,500. The most money I'd ever had in my life at that point.'

What was his perception of Ocean before joining the company? 'Funnily enough I don't really remember playing

any of the earlier Ocean Games. I was more of a Firebird and Mastertronic games player because they were much more affordable at the time. I knew Ocean from the advertising, but I knew nothing about anyone there.'

James says he felt awestruck on joining Ocean. 'I had an over-riding fear of being discovered a fraud or an incompetent. Everyone else in comparison seemed so much more capable and mature than me, although I soon learnt that age and confidence were indeed no indicators of ability. I was hired initially as an Amstrad programmer, but eventually added Spectrum, MSX, Atari ST, Amiga and SNES (Super Nintendo Entertainment System) as the platforms faded and new ones emerged.'

'I moved around a bit within the dungeons of Central Street – my first station was squeezed between Mike Lamb and Ronnie Fowles. Eventually though, Mike had me evicted – in the nicest possible way – as it was a bit of a squeeze. I then moved in with Paul Owens, who smoked like a chimney. I don't smoke at all, so that was unpleasant – although Paul himself was nice enough.'

Many of the staffers testify that the development teams were left to their own devices, and James's experience matches the others. 'I reported to Gary Bracey, and nearing completion of a game he would ask "How long to go?" every day or so. There wasn't really any

organised development processes, but we did have a fairly sophisticated in-house development kit, courtesy of David Collier and Steve Lavache. Everyone had their own methodology. There was no formal production process, no code sharing, and a lot of the early stuff was

"I had an over-riding fear of being discovered a fraud or an incompetent."

arcade conversions.' Ocean considered a conversion complete, he says, when it roughly matched the content of the coin-op original and – more importantly – it didn't crash. 'Original stuff was a little different in that there was a rough four-to-five page design document, and sometimes a mock-up screen or two. With something like *Addams Family* we



James pictured at his desk in 1988.

just had a framework and kept adding stuff, fairly informally, with a push to wrapping it all up sometime before a specified date. The last few weeks were a bit hectic usually – what people call a "crunch" these days.

'For the most part the atmosphere



1988's *The Vindicator*, Amstrad screen and Spectrum inlay art.

The Imagine advertisement for *Game Over* caused controversy over the heroine's prominent breasts. This is the censored version with the nipples covered, extra artwork added by Newsfield artist Oliver Frey to spare the newsagents' blushes.

was friendly and fun,' James says, recalling the workplace atmosphere. 'At times it was a little cliquey, but not unbearably so. The slightly more social or older people were generally one clique, where the rest of us were kind of a "nerd herd". People tended to knuckle down and work

most of the day but every now and then, if you worked in the more open areas, someone would start to whistle a song which would soon be followed by lots of out-of-tune programmers and artists whistling along. The guys would also gather and chat about all of the usual stuff such as movies, television shows or the latest *Fangoria*, etc. When you weren't swamped with work or personal stuff, it was a great place to work and hone your craft.'

Naturally, James was involved in a number of games that underline the growing importance to Ocean of the French market, for his games were ports

to the French-made Thompson M05/T07-70 and T09 range of computers: *Green Beret*, *Arkanoid*, *Yie Ar Kung-Fu II*, and *Game Over* parts 1 and 2 published by FIL. James developed the games on a contract basis each over a four-to-six-week period. With *Green Beret* he recalls: 'I had to fly to Paris for this one. I'd agreed to develop it for the M05, but when I got to the offices in Paris of FIL they sent me back to the UK with a T07 and T09, and I quickly ported it to those platforms too (for free as well – what was I thinking!). Anyway, I had a torrid time trying to get the equipment back through Glasgow Airport, but customs eventually relented. There was no way I was paying the duties on this stuff!'

James then moved on to developing games for the Amstrad platform. '*Combat School* was first and took roughly three



months to develop, with some help from Mike Lamb and Ronnie Fowles on art.' Further games contributed to included *Arkanoid 2*, *Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge*, *The Vindicator*, *The Untouchables*, *Total Recall*, *Navy Seals* and *Addams Family*. Of these, *The Vindicator* and *Total Recall* proved to be problematic projects. '*The Vindicator* was developed with Simon Butler and Martin McDonald on art duties and proved challenging mostly as a consequence of personality issues. Simon Butler and John Meegan were falling out all the time on the Commodore 64 version. John had Simon building each section of the 3D corridors as a char-mapped screen for each step, and it was brutal. They eventually used my automatic 3D generation on all the other platforms. Paul Owens and Mark Jones (Junior) were always fighting on the Spectrum version. Martin and I had a smooth time of it on the Amstrad, but mostly...' he adds with a smile, '...because he was a lot bigger than me.'

James talks about *Total Recall* with a certain amount of pride. 'The game was a rescue project – the previous developer had screwed it up badly – with Warren Lancashire, Andy Deakin, Ivan Horn, Simon Butler and myself doing a complete reboot of the game in about three and a half weeks over the Christmas period. Warren and I did the 2D platform sections; Andy and Ivan worked on the 2D driving and shooter sections, with Simon on various sprites for the platform

section. We were used to pretty fast development, but the three and a half weeks was easily a new personal best. We got good reviews across the board with a few reviewers writing that it was nothing like the game they'd previewed a few months previously.'

Not every project James worked on went as smoothly or as well, including his very last for Ocean. '*Pugsley's Scavenger Hunt* for the SNES was our follow up to the *Addams Family*, and although technically and visually superior in every way, it just wasn't as good a game. We definitely had fun with the hardware, though, with lots of colours, Mode 7 intro, multiple parallax layers,



The box art for *Pugsley's Scavenger Hunt* on the NES.



etc. It looked great, but ultimately missed a certain something. I'd handed in my notice – verbally – to Gary and expected to be shown the door immediately, as was the usual case. Instead, Ocean made me stay and work my notice period during which time I knocked up *Mr Nutz TV Game Maze* for the SNES as a promo game for some TV show that wanted it. It wasn't exactly a labour of love, so an unfortunate swan song to my time at Ocean.'

Total Recall on the Amstrad CPC – published by Ocean in 1991.





Jayne Millar

Jayne joined Ocean in 1990 as a sales administrator but soon stepped up the ranks to international sales manager. Working at Ocean changed Jayne's life – she married Paul whose role at the time was a little closer to home: he was Ocean's UK sales manager.

Jayne worked for the Royal National Institute for the Deaf before joining Ocean at the age of 21. 'I only left because they were relocating to another city. An agency I had registered with phoned through details for the position of export sales administrator at Ocean. I'd been to a clairvoyant that week and she told me that I was about to be offered a job which I would be reluctant to take, but she advised me to take it, and it would end up being one of the

"I was bawled out of the office by the production director, Paul Harrison (now sadly deceased), the very first week I was there."

best things that ever happened to me. I had two interviews and actually turned the job down twice. I really didn't feel it was right for me. I then recalled what the clairvoyant told me, so when I was made a final offer, I accepted and the rest is history. I ended up working at Ocean for ten years and I also met my husband Paul Millar at the company. I guess the

clairvoyant was right after all.

Jayne admits to not knowing much about Ocean before joining. 'To be honest I had no view of Ocean prior to working with them and I knew no one there. I'd played a few games growing up – *Frogger*, *Donkey Kong*, etc., but I certainly wasn't a gamer. I read a few of the UK games magazines before I went for the interview and, to be honest, I was astonished that adults actually read them – they just looked like comics to me!

'My first interview was in the job agency's office in central Manchester with Tony Emmett, who was then international sales manager. The second took place at the Central Street building, where I met again with Tony Emmett and also Colin Stokes. I also briefly visited the "dungeon", where I briefly met with the musicians and programmers. I remember feeling a little scared by this – the building was dark and dank and the guys I met briefly downstairs seemed a little alien to me back then.'

It did not all go according to plan in the first week at Ocean.

'The very first week I was there

I was bawled out of the office by the production director, Paul Harrison (now sadly deceased), for some obscure reason. He took no prisoners and I think it was some kind of sales initiation – it really seemed to be survival of the fittest. Paul actually ended up becoming a really dear friend and colleague and I enjoyed many a drink and a laugh with him over the following years. He never had me break down in tears, but he did have many of the admin girls (and probably some of the men) in tears at one time or another.

I remember one colleague calling the warehouse to ask whether it was possible for someone to count the number of promotional pens we had sitting on the shelves and his response turned the air blue in a tirade of expletives which were screamed down the phone in a five-minute response, which resulted in said colleague fleeing to the bathroom in floods of tears.

We often slammed the telephone down on one another but it was all forgotten the next time we spoke. He sent me a Christmas card one year and signed it "I'm really sorry for all the swearing, Love Father Christmas xxxx".

'As sales manager, I reported to Paul Patterson, and when he was later promoted to MD (when Infogrames took over) I reported to Martin Defries, and when he left the company to Roy Campbell. In the early days I spoke directly to Jon Woods or David Ward if it was concerning customers they were particularly close to. Anything to do with

Australia was always Jon and anything in Germany or Spain or France was David.'

A life on the Ocean wave varied considerably with the season, as Jayne remembers. 'The atmosphere in the office changed depending on the time of the year. From September to Christmas the pressure to get sales in over a lot of different products was immense, whereas the production slots slowed right down after, so we could afford to relax a little



and have a laugh. In the early 1990s, the Monday morning production meetings could go either way. If it were a February meeting with nothing looming on the calendar, we would laugh and joke our way through the full schedule. But if it were an October meeting with ten products to get released in four weeks, the pressure took its toll and there

Jayne, with Pat Kavanagh and Liz Dodds in the Hit Squad department at Ocean's Eastgate Castlefield office.

was shouting, fists banging on the table, accusations, recriminations, door slamming and head shaking galore.

‘It’s easy to look back with rose-tinted spectacles but certainly, for myself anyway, there were real pressures to deal with – especially when we were in lean periods and every sale counted. Being in charge of international sales my workload was enormous and there were

never enough hours in the day. I often used to go into work on a Saturday when no one else was in the building and do a good eight hours’ work just



As the Square Albert had been the Central Street local, so Dukes 92 was for the local meeting place for Ocean’s Castlefield offices. The canal-side pub-restaurant was originally a stable block for the horses delivering foods off barges to the Merchants’ warehouse opposite.



to try and start the next week off without having a pile of work to catch up on.

‘The day-to-day working conditions were very relaxed, however, especially before Infogrames. Most lunch times you’d find a lot of the Ocean staff in the local drinking establishment, Dukes 92. Everyone had a job to do and they got on with it without much interference

from the directors, but each day seemed to provide a laugh and a joke along the way – usually taking the mick out of some member of staff – particularly if they were very young or new to the job. Making the office junior go for a “long weight” in the warehouse, photocopying pictures of the devil’s head and then putting the paper back in the photocopier so that the next person who made a copy thought that they were cursed – that sort of thing!’

It might be supposed that management frowned on the shenanigans, but Jayne says that wasn’t always the case. ‘Gary Bracey was one of the biggest jokers. I remember him pretending to stab himself in the eye with a knife and he was screaming with pain while white fluid oozed from his clenched fist. After my horrified screaming had died down, he burst out laughing and showed me one of those small UHT milk cartons you get in hotels as part of the tea and coffee facilities, which he’d screwed up in his fist.

‘The Central Street sales office was pretty cramped and crowded,’ Jayne says, recalling some of the funnier and more challenging times. ‘If we had an important visitor coming we all ran around like lunatics a couple of hours before and tidied and cleaned. We even had to Sellotape the carpet to the floor before Nintendo visited us. I remember getting called into work over one weekend because the first order using the Commodore 64 cartridges had arrived minus a critical slot in the cart, which

meant the game was unplayable. We had no time to return them to Amstrad, so we went on shift work to cut the required slots in each cartridge before they were shipped out to the stores.

‘Working at Ocean certainly wasn’t all play and no work but we did party hard. We often didn’t get to bed until 5:00am and then we would be in a 9 o’clock business meeting – living off Pro-Plus. Ocean’s parties were legendary and would be the “must have” party ticket at any trade show for customers and fellow publishers alike. We had comedians such as Bob Monkhouse, fantastic groups playing, like The Drifters. We had ice sculptures, vodka fountains and free drinks galore – tens of thousands of pounds were spent on those parties over the years.

‘We always stayed in pretty decent hotels whenever we were away on business and Ocean was not like some companies who flew their staff to the USA the day before the trade show and returned them to the UK the evening it finished. We’d have at least two-to-three days’ free time when we could do whatever we wanted, whether that was hiring a car and going off for the day, relaxing by the pool, or going to theme parks. I remember one particular hot and sunny May day in LA, when most of the Ocean sales people were relaxing in their swimming attire around the hotel pool, I looked up to see Mike Delves sauntering down the hotel steps towards us in a full sheep-skin coat and shades, looking

like a rather sweaty Liam Gallagher. Jon Oldham was beside him but wearing black speedos. An odder couple there has never been! And then a group of us were returning from one particular trade show in London – a mixture of sales and



development personal including myself, Mike Delves, Adele Welsh and Jon Oldham – and we were regaling tales of our escapades at the show and making each other laugh. When we arrived at Manchester-Piccadilly and got up to leave, a gentleman sat near us asked, “Where do you lot work? I’d love to work somewhere like that, it sounds amazing!” And I guess that summed it up nicely.

‘I have to say that I made life-long friends at Ocean. I am still in touch with many of them now, and a group of us met up again only last year in Dukes 92, outside the old Ocean offices in Castlefield. I travelled the world and I also met my husband at Ocean and so I can definitely say that working there changed my life completely.’



Ocean staff at one of the many Ocean parties. From the back, left to right: Adele Welsh (operations manager), Janey DeNordwell (outside PR company), Julia Doyle (PA to the directors), Pat Kavanagh (Hit Squad manager), Jayne Millar, Scott Bagshaw (PR executive). Front row: Martin Defries (international sales director), Paul Millar (UK sales manager).



Kevin Oxland

Kevin started in Ocean in 1990 as a graphic artist and worked on *Lemmings*, *Hook* and *Jurassic Park* in his short stay at the company.

After working as a graphic designer for a small independent developer, Kevin joined Ocean in 1990. 'My role at Ocean was pretty much the same as I'd been doing: background artist and level designer.' But as he points out, he was also a competent programmer. 'I got into the industry by purchasing a Commodore 64 after seeing my friend had one, and from that moment on I was hooked. I started as a programmer, writing my own games at home, totally self-taught. Before joining Ocean, my time was split between coding, art and

design, as it was in those days, but when I joined Ocean I dedicated my career to art and design and dropped coding.'

By the time Kevin started at Ocean, the software house had been in operation for

almost a decade, so as he says it was not an unknown quantity. 'Ocean was always the big publisher in the UK renowned for delivering licensed games or the big movie conversions. When I joined, I

was assigned to *Hook*. I had a couple of friends – John Palmer and Bobby Earl – who already worked there, and I worked with Bobby on *Hook*; and I still work with both of them today.'



A friend recommended he apply to Ocean. 'They needed people to join the *Hook* team and asked me over to see them. I was living in Leeds at the time, so it wasn't such a great hike to travel across the Pennines (which I did every day subsequently). Steve Lavache interviewed me, and it was pretty straight forward. I got the job there and then. The *Hook* team was in the basement, and I can remember Bobby and I sitting in a

tiny room just big enough for the two of us, and we faced a wall that backed onto a graveyard. Pretty creepy at night.'

His first impressions of working at Ocean were equally cheerful. 'It was a fun place to work. People were serious about making games and I remember it being big compared to my previous role with a small indie developer. Lots of projects, lots of people and the control of design and direction were totally in the hands of the developers. Steve Lavache was my line manager, but for more important things we always went to see Gary Bracey. There

"We faced a wall that backed onto a graveyard."

wasn't a rigid management structure in place. I think that's probably one reason Ocean was as successful as it was. The creative people knew what they were doing and were left to get on with it.'

Joining at the end of the 8-bit scene, Kevin worked on the still popular 16-bit machines, and the rising gaming power of the PC. In recalling some of the games he worked on, as his first *Hook* remains an enduring memory. 'I wasn't present from the very start, but joined soon after work on *Hook* began. Bobby Earl was the lead programmer and I became the lead background artist, and together we designed most of the game. There were various 2D animators on the project too, but I can't remember how many now. By today's standards, we were a very small team. Dean Evans joined us in the

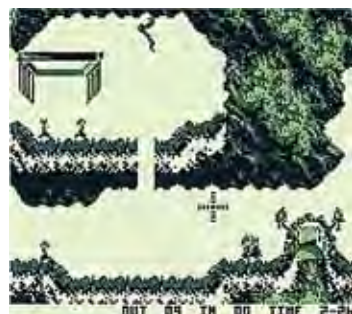
basement to create the sound for the game. I remember he was placed just outside our door in the hallway. There were no real "challenges" as such, only to get the game completed on time, which we did. I do remember we had issues with using the likeness of the actors in the movie and we had to change the art so it didn't look like Robin Williams. I

believe we had a huge following for *Hook* in France. I remember a French journalist mentioning it when he came to visit us in the basement. As far as I remember we weren't paid any royalties, although we did get a bonus. We were promised a figure at the start, but I had to bug Gary for it once we had finished. I got it though, so all was good.'

And other titles? '*Lemmings* on the Game Boy – I had a very limited role on this. Gerald Weatherup was the programmer, and all I did was convert some Lemmings graphics so he could use them. I started design work on *Jurassic Park* after *Hook*, but I left to work for Virgin Interactive in London during that time.'



Hook on the PC – published by Ocean in 1992



The Nintendo Game Boy *Lemmings* came out in 1993.



Julian Hicks

Julian joined Ocean in 1991 as a test manager with the job of ensuring the quality of each product released by the company met the high standards required.

Julian Hicks started work at Ocean shortly after the move from Central Street to Castlefield. In his twenties, he had substantial experience of the games industry through working in and managing computer games shops. He reported to Gary Bracey, an Ocean name with which he was already familiar, and the person who interviewed him.

“There were wonderful moments of silliness, from airsoft guns to strippers.”

On day-to-day business, however, he had more contact with others. ‘Lorraine Starr, Dawn Drake, Martin McDonald, and of course the awesome testers Lee, Gareth and Kane stick in my mind. And then there was Barry Leitch, who produced some great audio and Gerald Weatherup, a prolific programmer. They were very good at their jobs, and always unflappable! So many others were great to work with. I got to know a huge range of great people while at Ocean. All a really good bunch of people to work with.’

Initial impressions of working at the

company are memorable. ‘It was a hive of activity. Ocean was a place where everyone both worked hard and had lots of fun. There were wonderful moments of silliness, from airsoft guns to strippers. There was a work-hard, play-hard approach and mentality. The testers were often expected to play games all night, and all weekend, especially when titles had slipped a little. Some even had sleeping bags under their desks, and we did have a pretty huge pizza bill.’

Although Julian only worked at Ocean for 12 months, his job meant he play-tested so many games they became a blur. ‘I don’t actually know how many games went through test in the year. I was there for dozens, sure, and most of those on multiple platforms. Of course, every title had to come through test. And each platform version of each title took its own path through the teams of testers. Ensuring testing was done to the latest versions was pretty key.’

The testing process of any product must adhere to rigid standards, and as Julian is quick to point out he worked with Lorraine Starr in devising



an effective system. ‘Lorraine and I introduced systems for tracking and fixing bugs that have since become the standards used throughout the industry.’ However, he does go on to say, ‘I was probably not well prepared for game development, coming from retail. I just knew that most games were released with a few minor bugs, the role of test was to remove as many as possible in the time available, but I always knew a few little ones would slip through – it was the nature of the beast.’

Aside from vague recollections of the odd office party, Julian’s memories of Ocean also include burnt-out cartridges... ‘Some of the titles going through test in my time were for cartridge-based games systems. When a new version arrived, EPROMs were blown and installed in a test cartridge before being plugged in. The cry of “Oh the little lights came on” still echoes in my head as chips inserted the wrong way round lit up as they were powered up.’

And truths best left unsaid... ‘In my hazy memories, I think the final straw which brought my employment to an end was admitting to a magazine interviewer that all games had bugs, and that while testing might flag many so we could fix them, it wasn’t possible to promise there were none in the released game. Despite the truth of my words, it was just something you just couldn’t say to the press.’



Julian fondly remembers testing *Sleepwalker* on a multitude of systems, four Amiga screens and one from the PC version at the bottom. The game was made to promote the charity Comic Relief, and all profits from sales of the game went to the charity in 1993.



Dawn Drake

Dawn commenced her career at Ocean in 1988 and soon teamed up with Mike Lamb to create the look and feel of many of Ocean's classic titles. She stayed with the company until 1997 and became infamous for her party persona.

In her early twenties, Dawn went to Ocean as an artist/ animator and game designer after gaining experience with another games developer. 'I started life as a graphic designer when I left college, but I needed something a little more challenging than doing adverts for the local paper, so when I saw

Dawn contemplating her next move in the office of Steve Lavache.



an advert for a board game artist I took the job. Some time later I joined Canvas Software in Crosby [on Liverpool's northern outskirts] as an artist/ animator. Steve Cain and Ian Weatherburn, both ex-Imagine employees, who started the company, and Simon Butler who also worked there, interviewed me for the position. Ian was concerned because he thought I would be a distraction as the only female in the company. But Simon and Steve thought my work was good enough to gain me my first step into the world of computer games.

'Canvas often developed third-party titles for Ocean and US Gold, so I was aware of Gary Bracey and Steve Lavache, since they both visited – Gary for progress updates and Steve to help with any machine/technical problems that we had. When the company hit hard times, Simon left for Ocean and recommended I follow him.'

Duly, Dawn found herself being interviewed again, this time by Gary Bracey, Lorraine Starr and Steve Wahid – and she was in. 'It was a pretty steep learning curve due to my lack of actual

game-graphics experience and one I will admit to finding highly frustrating, but I was eager to learn and fortunate to have Simon as my exceptionally patient and equally talented mentor.'

Dawn's first impressions of Ocean were, like so many, mixed. 'Total amazement! I was actually working for the Ocean Software. And, instead of working in an open-plan room with somewhat "fragrant" men, I had my own room and a programmer! The offices, though, were somewhat to be desired – in summer we used to have a trail of ants walking up the wall. I never worked too late after someone told me that the Quakers buried their dead underneath the meeting house. I found out later this wasn't true, but even the thought scared me. The office was really was dark and reminiscent of working in dungeons, but the atmosphere and morale more than made up for it.



'On joining Ocean I was Mike Lamb's assigned artist and joined him half-way through the making of *Target Renegade* on the Spectrum and Amstrad (as the previous artist had left for the army). It was a success, and I got to stay.

'I remember when I was doing the intro screen for *Miami Vice* on the Amstrad CPC, I sketched out the face designs and tried to replicate what I'd drawn on the screen. I was so angry with myself for not being able to get the image I wanted that I turned the monitor screen side-up and traced the image on to it to speed the process up – much to the horror of the others in the office! But deadlines being deadlines, you didn't really have the luxury of wasting time. Those were the days when you had to work 24/7 with pizza on the side and a promise of a bonus.

'Steve Wahid was the head of the artists, but Lorraine Starr and Gary Bracey were also very pro-active within the department as a whole. I can honestly say that we all worked well together. I consider it overall as a collective team

Stark but stylish graphics for the Amstrad loading screen of *Miami Vice*.

Target Renegade presented in Ocean's 1988 catalogue.



A Polaroid photo of Dawn with TV celebrity Keith Chegwin and the film director. They visited the Ocean offices to shoot material for Chegwin's show *Chegwin Checks It Out* in the summer of 1988.

The mega-licence: *Batman* – Spectrum and Amiga screens.

effort, helping out and giving advice to each other. Good communication, this is what I think made the early years of Ocean very special.'

In his interview Mike Lamb recalled the attention that Dawn used to get from the other male developers as they came into the room to try and impress her. The continual interruptions annoyed him because the distractions stopped them getting on with their work.

So was she a distraction? 'It never bothered me being the only girl, the guys were so great to work with I felt accepted straight away – it must have been my sense of humour. Either that or they were scared of me. I was never backward in coming forward vocally – but that's for another

story. Down in the dungeon there was plenty of harmony between artists and home-grown programmers – although just once in a while certain individuals had to be separated from throttling one another, but it was mostly a relaxed atmosphere. We worked hard all week and then on Friday and into the weekend we "played". In the early years, the whole company (including David Ward, Jon Woods and the girls from upstairs – Hilary, Nicola, Tracy to name a few) met at the Square Albert on the corner of Albert Square, with usually a free-bar to start off the night and with us all ending in a nightclub somewhere. Paul Hughes concocted an emerald-green drink called



Frog Spit. Two of those and your knees went, but it tasted divine. Unfortunately, I always had to catch the last train at 10:20pm from Victoria to get back to Southport, so I never stayed to witness the end results of a good night out.

'The nights out made Ocean special because we all socialised together in the earlier years and it was a great way to boost morale when the going got tough. Many a team-building trek would be made to various far-away places. Unfortunately when Ocean expanded and moved to Castlefield, this started to change.'

Needless to say, Dawn's gaming credentials at Ocean make for a long list, but some notable entries stand out.

'I was the artist on *Target Renegade* on the ZX Spectrum and Amstrad with Mike Lamb programming and Jonathan



Dunn doing the sound. As I started half-way through the project the challenge was to make the graphics look and feel similar to the previous artist's work. The reviews for this game were very good in the press.

'The next game Mike and I worked on with Jonathan was *RoboCop*, again for the Spectrum and Amstrad. Mike and I both watched the movie and evolved a game design around many of the set scenes. I found it challenging giving *RoboCop* the robotic walk, but I got there and then helped the artists on the other formats. The game was number one in UK charts for 18 weeks and won Ocean many awards following great reviews in the magazines.

'With *Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge* I helped out with some of the graphics on the Spectrum version with Bill Harbison. *Batman* on the ZX Spectrum, Amiga and Game

Although Ocean had to buy its own arcade machines for licensed conversions, at least Hollywood provided film stills for reference... here, one of a scene from *Darkman*. And left, one from *Batman* to show the caped crusader's outfit. Someone has scrubbed out his face, first with a blue, then with a red pen.

Mike Posehn, John Patrick Manley and Tony Barnes created *Desert Strike – Return to the Gulf*, first of the successful ‘Strike’ games, for Electronic Arts, released in 1992 on multiple platforms. Ocean gained the licence for the Nintendo Game Boy version.

Boy followed, where Mike and I were parcelled off to New York to see the new Batman film and to devise a game from that. We also managed to purchase gifts as give-away prizes, with first prize a meal at the Midland with myself and Mike! Great reviews.

‘Darkman on the Game Boy was programmed again with Mike Lamb and this time with Gerald Weatherup. The same formula followed, where we watched the film, received some set photos and then designed a basic game from what we saw. I was pretty unhappy on this project. It was rushed and as a result gained average-to-poor reviews.

‘All of Ocean went to a viewing of Jurassic Park prior to the cinema release and I was involved in producing the



Ocean's 1992 Game Boy version of *Darkman*.

graphics for the PC version of the game. The team had to be split into sections for various formats to work on such a big title and the deadline for delivering the game was crucial in that it had to tie in with the film's release. This is the first game I worked on at Ocean where I was paid royalties and the first time working



in such a large team as well.

‘The Untouchables on the PC was next, with Ivan Davies as the head artist and Robbie Tinman programming. I was drafted in to help out with a section of graphics due to a deadline crisis. I was unhappy with the graphics but unable to change anything at that time, due to the tight deadline. The game got generally



poor reviews in UK, but sold well in USA. I then worked on *Desert Strike* for the Game Boy and *Hook* on the PC.

‘Dreadnought was my final project at Ocean. This was the first time I dabbled in 3D graphics. I was part of a very large team for the time, at least 17 personnel, which meant there were too many

graphic and programming styles and personalities that clashed. I had lost faith in my work at Ocean at this time and my morale was really low. The game was never released.’

As the ‘only girl in the village’, Dawn had a special role to play at the many Ocean parties. ‘For me, every Christmas meant I had to be different to the standard dress code of the other guys, and add a little more fun. During the working week I was one of the “lads”, so every year I made an effort and had an outfit made. One year it was rubber, next PVC, next a velvet dress with huge blue taffeta ruffle (looking like one of Robert Palmer’s video backing girls). Another year was PVC pants with a brightly layered top and black wig to create a Spanish Cher look. One year I even sported a beehive and outlandish acid-look 1960s outfit, which impressed David Ward.’

One particular prank sticks in her mind. ‘I can remember a prank being



“For me, every Christmas meant I had to be different and add a little more fun.”

played on Gary Bracey. My friend Caroline had been set up to phone Gary and tell him he was to be interviewed for a programme on Sky television regarding games, etc. Seeing as how Gary held numerous interviews, this was nothing out of the ordinary, except he was excited that he’d be on Sky. Then, once everyone had got wind of him going to appear on Sky, posters started to emerge depicting Gary announcing: “There are those on Sky TV and those that aren’t”.

‘Gary took it well, considering.’



Ambitious *Dreadnought* on the PC never saw the light of day.





Brian Flanagan

Brian created the graphics on a variety of titles during his eight years at Ocean. When he started in 1989 he first worked on *Operation Thunderbolt* for the Commodore 64. He also worked on games on Nintendo's Game Boy and SNES consoles.

Brian Flanagan was a 19-year-old graphic artist when he joined Ocean in 1989. However, his story with Ocean starts a little earlier in his life, while at school, as Brian explains.

'In the UK, we have a system whereby secondary school pupils (generally 14-year-olds) get a so-called work experience placement at a company for a week or two. Most of the time, the school gives you a list of crappy office jobs to choose from within which you will be making cups of tea the entire time

"I had to draw one of the sprites from New Zealand Story as a test."

you're there. I got my careers officer to call Ocean instead. I then thereafter did intern work for them during the school holidays. After going to college for a year, and on Simon Butler's advice, I started working full-time at Ocean.

'Steve Wahid interviewed me for the Central Street office job; I had to draw one of the sprites from *New Zealand* story as a test.'

As it was his first 'real' job, Brian's perception of Ocean, and its current staff were apparent. 'I held Ocean in pretty high regard as they were really high profile at the time, and guys like Steve Wahid, John Meegan, Steve Thompson were names I was already aware of. I had no idea what to expect. To be sat working on graphics, and getting paid was mind blowing to me initially.

'It was all very seat of the pants as well, there were scant design documents for the games and as far as arcade conversions were concerned we just videoed the game and set about copying the art. We figured out what could and couldn't be done on the fly — real sit down design meetings were quite rare.'

It wasn't all work and no play though in the Ocean offices. 'It was fun with always plenty to talk about. There was lots of lunchtime and after hours drinking and often some of the staff would always be getting new toys, whether it be consoles or stacks of graphic novels or videos. Simon Butler, Martin McDonald and Bill Harbison were also always drawing comics and

caricatures of the staff that made everyone laugh.

'Some of the toys were a bit on the dangerous side - Paul Hughes was into Japanese weapons, Martin McDonald and Gary Bracey usually had airsoft guns. In one notorious instance a crossbow was tested on a door, the bolt went right through — I believe John Meegan was in close vicinity when the bolt bounced off a wall very close to his head.'

Brian recounts his position at that time. "Even though I reported to Steve Wahid and Lorraine Starr, it was the programmers who were often self-appointed art directors and made the decisions on the look of the game. Lorraine tended to take care of scheduling and getting review builds sorted whilst Gary would oversee projects in general, asking for changes when he saw fit.'

During his eight years at Ocean, Brian worked on a large number of titles, some of which never made it to the shelves. He then goes on to explain



Game Boy *Pang*, 1990.



Brian blowing onto a partition window in the 'dungeon' at Central Street.

the development work behind some of the games he was involved in. "I started on *Operation Thunderbolt* from about a quarter of the way into development, it was my first game at Ocean and to my horror the programmer was as inexperienced as I was. I guess I was chosen as there was no one else available to work on the game. Unfortunately the game was canned and rebooted in the last few weeks of development, which was a great relief for me.

'Steve Thomson, John Meegan and Paul Hughes were pulled in to do a whole new version of the game and none

of my original assets were used.

'Total Recall was a collaborative effort; for this one most of the art staff at Ocean were called in to work on the game as this was a reboot due to the team at Active Minds failing to create a game worthy of the Ocean logo. I created the backgrounds for the Mars stage; I



YMO242 showing on the background of *The Untouchables* on the SNES.

sneaked in huge "808" numbers on the walls as I was a big fan of "808 State" at the time.

'Pang was the first full project I worked on and this was with Gerald Weatherup programming. I designed the levels as well as creating the graphics - all done on the tiniest available memory cartridge for the Game Boy. This explains why the backgrounds are so sparse. The backgrounds are two colours as the darker colours in the background made the main moving game sprites hard to see.

'RoboCop 2 was the first game I

worked on that never got past more than some sprites that I made with Bill Harbison. We had a rough playable demo and a title screen before it was handed over to "Painting By Numbers" who started the game again from scratch. This was one of Ocean's first attempts at Nintendo Entertainment System development on nasty hacked NES units and on-cart graphics tools that crashed



if you so much as looked at them the wrong way.

'The *Addams Family* was my next game on the Game Boy — it was a disastrous project. Originally my design was more akin to *Parasol Stars*, but in the end it devolved into a very generic platformer.

'I was then called on to design some graphics for *The Untouchables* on the SNES – my brief was to make the game more appropriate looking for the console. I snuck in another serial number this one being YMO242, a small tribute to the Electronics bands "Yellow Magic Orchestra" and "Front 242".

'The second game I was worked on that was canned was *Cold Steel* for the SNES. It was my very first attempt at fully designing a game and was planned to be a mixture of *Castlevania* meets *Strider*. Due to limited resources and

team members quitting the game never panned out past a couple of backgrounds and a character jumping around.'

Some development projects clearly left more of an impression than others.

'*The Shadow* was a rather a messy project based on the movie. We finished the game on the SNES and Sega Megadrive but the film bombed at the box office, and with Alec Baldwin disassociating himself from the movie, I believe the game was never released.'

Finally, Brian recalls the final game he worked at the company. '*Silver* was my final project at Ocean where I was involved in character modelling and animation within a huge team, all inexperienced in 3DS Max with a design document mostly in the head of the designer. There was no cohesive art direction and a huge lack of resources for the amount of work to be done. I got laid off at that time as did many others after the Infogrames buyout.'

Brian then goes on to mention a select few of titbits from the past.

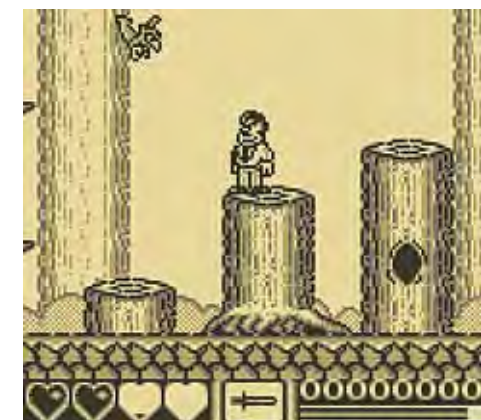
'One of the testers at Ocean had a glass eye and dropped it into James Higgins' pint one evening; James out-grossed him by attempting to tongue out his eye socket.

'We had three offices in that Central Street block; the third time we moved was to an office opposite the main building above a gay club; most days we had to deal with the bass from banging house music coming from downstairs when DJs were practising.'



And finally, he recalls this eye-opening snippet: 'The same offices had a shower which we all thought was a cool addition especially if we needed to freshen up after working all night to deliver a project. They were locked about a week after we

The Shadow – handsome graphics on the SNES.



Ocean's 1991 release of *The Addams Family* on the Game Boy.

moved in, in fear of "some" of the guys using the showers to impress some of the girls brought back in the early hours of the morning from the local clubs.'





Stephen Thomson

Brummie Stephen – ‘Jolly’ because of his happy-go-lucky nature – was all set to start a full-time college course in fine art in 1987, at the tender age of 18. But his guilty pleasure of creating Commodore 64 bitmap images in his spare time landed him with a job at Ocean.

‘I had amassed quite a lot of bitmaps screens, mainly of games I enjoyed playing and images from popular culture, which seemed to be the thing for a computer artist to do back in those days,’ Steve says with a mischievous smile. ‘It was a totally self-taught skill, although I did apply some of the lessons learned at art college to some of my later non-professional pieces.’

Steve dabbled in the games market briefly before joining Ocean. ‘My first contribution to a game title was a loading and in-game screen for Mirrorsoft’s ill-fated *Tetris*.’ As the story goes, Mirrorsoft had a faulty agreement with Atari to distribute *Tetris* – Nintendo sent a cease-and-desist letter to Atari advising them that they indeed had sole rights to the game – so for Steve not the best of starts to make his name known in the games industry.

But he remained undeterred. ‘I was working on an image of *RoboCop* I found in a movie magazine. I tried to get the bitmap as close to the original as I possibly could with the Commodore 64’s limited palette, spending more time

on this than most of the other images I’d done up to that point. It turned out really well. I considered it the best work I’d done in pixels up to that point, so I added it to the rest of the images on my portfolio floppy and went to the CES show in London. I hoped to show off this and the other pieces I’d done. My dream was to get into the games industry. I’d tried a few times to get some work, but I really wanted to do this full-time and I was becoming less and less interested in “real” art at this point.

‘I walked straight up to the Ocean



Stephen at his Ocean workstation with Trevor Brown at Central Street. Trevor left the company after working on *Operation Thunderbolt*.

stand and spoke directly to Gary Bracey, who was kind enough to give me five minutes of his time so I could show him my work. As the file names popped up Gary immediately asked how I knew they were making *RoboCop*. I said (rather cringingly) that Ocean made all the best licensed games. He then said his artist left yesterday, there was a vacancy and I would be perfect. So just like that I got a full-time job. I cancelled my place at university and headed up to Manchester, a member of the gaming industry at last.’

He may have buttered up Gary, but the truth is that Steve wasn’t all that impressed by Ocean’s output in his early teen playing years.

‘If I’m being totally honest, I wasn’t blown away by the majority of Ocean games. A few really stood out as classics. *Wizball*, *Parallax* and *Rambo* I loved, mainly due to the amazing Galway soundtracks. I was aware of all the Commodore 64 development teams, because Ocean tended to put the authors’ names on the title screen or the high-score tables within the game. I really wanted to meet Steve Wahid – I loved his loading screens and looked forward to learning some tips from him.’

After his move to Manchester, Steve wondered initially if he had made the right decision.

‘I was in awe and very quiet the first few weeks; and I was surprised to see how dingy the place was. Everybody smoked (including me) and if you

didn’t smoke you might as well have done, and most days the air smelt more like a nightclub than a place of work. Everything was nicotine-stained and the walls were sticky with tar. This was made worse by the fact that the old Central Street site was in the basement of the

“I was in awe and very quiet the first few weeks; and I was surprised to see how dingy the place was.”

Quaker Church, so the windows we had were tiny. Today’s Health and Safety would have shut us down’.

Steve’s first assignment was with John Meegan, who at the time was starting work on the Commodore 64 version of *RoboCop*. ‘I recall him using Spectrum assets as placeholders, which looked bizarre. He did make me feel really welcome and chatted about the area and pubs etc.

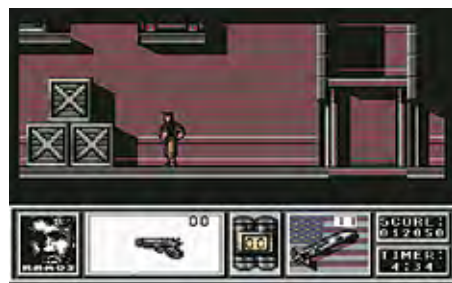
‘Being from Birmingham and not used to other regional accents, I then went on to really put my foot in it – games tester Kane Valentine wandered in to say hello and being stupid I asked him, “What part of Liverpool are you from?”



Cover art for the 1989 *Beach Volley* Amiga game inlay and C64 screen, left.

Kane being a proper Manchester lad wasn't impressed. John on the other hand laughed his head off.'

Fortunately, the faux-pas wasn't held against him.



Navy Seals, 1989, was another big film licence which suffered from a too-tight development schedule.

'I reported to Lorraine for admin type stuff and Steve Wahid for graphical input into games – and Gary from time to time, although he was always out and about so we didn't see him as much. I used to speak to Lorraine loads, got on really well with her, she was like a

big sister, and always had advice for some issue we were having.'

Steve soon settled into life at Ocean. 'Once I got used to Manchester and the people I had a real laugh. Mr. Meegan has a famously wicked sense of humour and I had such a laugh with him. John

Brandwood and Robert Hemphill were in the cubicle room next to John and I. One thing that was really cool was listening

to Jonathan Dunn composing tunes for the games. I think some of the other guys were driven a bit mad by the sounds but I loved it. I used to hassle him by wandering into the music room from time to time as he was composing the *RoboCop* tune, because I loved it.'



Navy Seals also made it as a cart on the doomed Commodore C64GS.

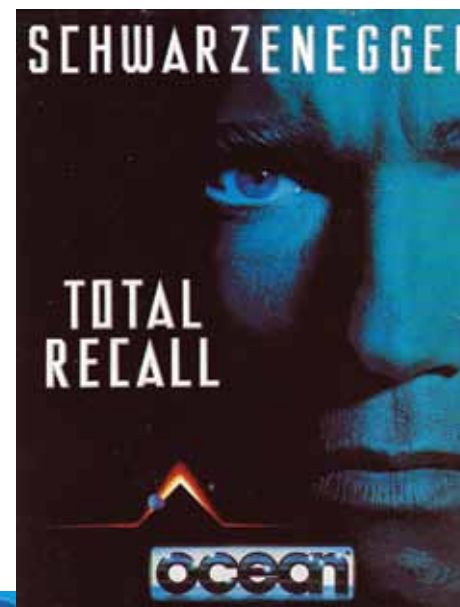
For Steve, his time at Ocean proved to be a happy learning curve. He says that John Meegan left him to do what he liked. 'He would block out a level and hand it back to me to dress up. As we got used to working with each other I would suggest stuff. This was great because I got a much deeper insight into how games were made and the limitations of the machine. John was very good like that. Plus he appreciated the hard work I put into the artwork and always had a strong design ethic when it came to layout of titles menus and other coded elements. I think this gave the titles we worked on an extra edge.'

Steve worked on many of Ocean's licensed games including *RoboCop*, *The Untouchables*, *Total Recall* and *Navy Seals*. With the last, Steve recalls, the time constraints on the development were typical in leading to a licensed product with so much potential being turned into a run-of-the-mill side-scrolling shoot 'em up. 'The game ended up going on a cart for the ill-fated Commodore console [C64GS] so I made sure that there were plenty of loading screens so at least the player felt they got a bit more value for money. *Untouchables* was the first game I worked on that we really thought through its look by using concept art before even plotting a pixel. It was decided pretty early on that we were going to make this a step up from the usual title by designing five very different game types, with radically different representations of the player's



character on screen. The level which gave me the most fun as I worked on it was the one where you protect the pram in the railway station.'

Steve also worked on the conversion to the Commodore 64 of Taito's *Operation Thunderbolt*. 'A real challenge! We had literally no time to do it. I was in charge of the art on the 3D sections, which were rock-hard to set up and a technical challenge to say the least. Nerves were frayed on that one, with many late nights and weekends for all. We tried as best we could to follow the arcade machine artwork. I remember being envious of John Brandwood and Robert Hemphill working on the ST version. The sprites were extracted from the ROM and it was Robert's task to extract and clean up the arcade art.



He did a fantastic job of this, actually improving the look of the arcade graphics.'

Stephen playing *Operation Thunderbolt* (title screen left above) with Bill Harbison.

Not everyone who worked at Ocean had the same generally happy experience as Steve – in such a large company working at the edge of possibility, it would be surprising were that so – but Steve compliments the talent of those he worked with, singling out Jon O'Brien and Matthew Cannon in particular praising their contribution to the Ocean assembly line. 'I had a great deal of respect for Jon O'Brien, he did some amazing things in code. Jon and I part-owned and ran Clockwork Tortoise years later when we lived in the States, making *The Adventures of Batman* and *Robin* for the Sega Mega Drive. I loved Matthew Cannon's music as well.'



Total Recall on the C64 – published by Ocean in 1991.



Mark Jones Snr

Mark Jones 'Senior' specialised in graphics for the Amstrad CPC and he created some of the best ever seen on the platform, particularly with *Gryzor*.

There were two Mark Joneses at Ocean, a concatenation of coincidences at which Mark smiles. 'I shared a flat with another artist, a Spectrum artist, with the name of Mark Jones. So, two artists working for the same company, living in the same flat, with the same names, working on the same titles, but on different machines. I started at Ocean before he did so I got the title "Senior" and he got "Junior", even though I was only 18 at the time.'

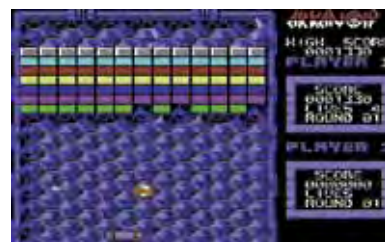
Some claimed Senior was a little older and the wiser, but both produced graphics and loading screens for some of Ocean's best-known games.

Mark was at Ocean for just 12 months in 1986–87. 'Before Ocean, I was simply a very keen amateur. I had just left

grammar school and Ocean was my first job. I was frustrated with the quality of artwork found in many Amstrad games, as they were mostly bad ports from the Spectrum and Commodore 64 versions. I knew the CPC could do better, so I began working on my own versions of graphics seen in the popular games at the time. I was also using the Amstrad to create art – painting with pixels, one pixel at a time: choose a colour, place the pixel, move to next pixel, etc. It was laborious but a great way to learn the trade. I'd hoped to take a computer graphics degree course at art college but I remember being told, quite bluntly, that there was no such thing as computer graphics. So, I began to submit the artwork I finished to various software companies. I even sent my work to *Amstrad Action* magazine and received a very nice hand-written letter back from them, which inspired me to



Arkanoid, published by Imagine in 1987.



keep plugging away. Ocean was one of the first companies to reply.'

Ubiquitous Gary Bracey interviewed Mark (and also John Brandwood, a fellow Amstrad developer) in the Central Street dungeon and soon after he joined the company. 'Everyone at Ocean loved making games. I had a little corner to myself from which I could hear Martin Galway working on the *Short Circuit* music in his tiny studio/office. There were no windows in the arcade game-testing area where I would spend hours playing the arcade games we needed to convert. I actually got very good at *Arkanoid* and videotaped it for reference. It was the first game I worked on, converting it for the Commodore 64. The arcade machines had much more clout than the small home computers, so it was a huge challenge to recreate the "feel" of the original in the conversion with the limited power of the platforms



Another fine looking Amstrad game of 1987 – *Gryzor*.

we were developing on. I know the arcade room was later moved but I do think back on that white-washed basement very fondly.'

And on payday... 'I used to walk down to visit a comic shop nearby called Odyssey 7 and pick up the latest copy of *Watchmen*.'

'I was extremely happy to be working for Ocean. It was one of the major labels and it was my first job. I was working with talented people, producing great games that were well received by the gaming public and the press. Yes. It was a special time.' Mark sat next to and reported to John Brandwood, who with Mark formed Ocean's Amstrad team during his year at the company. Mark worked on the graphics for the arcade conversions of the C64 *Arkanoid*, and for the Amstrad on *Renegade* and *Gryzor*, as well as their loading screens.

'The games took weeks to make, not



Three Amstrad screens from 1987's *Renegade*, and the magazine advertisement – violent but bloodless...

years, so there was no time to get bored. Once the game was done it was often released soon after – it was more like producing a record than a movie. I used to check out the reviews in the popular magazines of the time. The very best bit of creating games is seeing the reviews – we used to get all the magazines early and scan through them. I remember that *Gryzor* scored 10/10 for graphics, which made my day.'

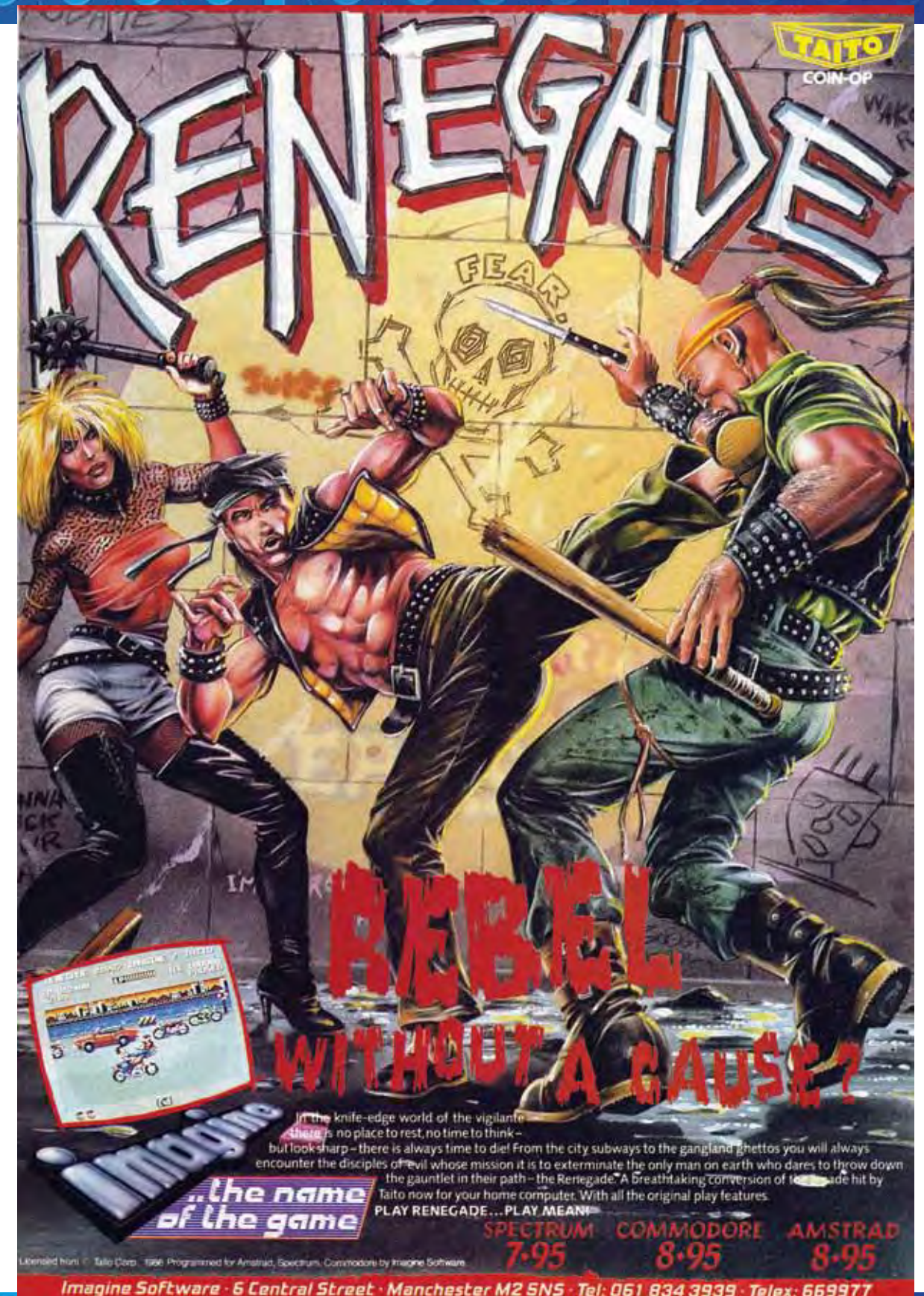
Mark recalls visiting a local computer gaming show in Manchester with John Brandwood and watching visitors to the show playing his games and listening to their comments. 'I vividly remember one small boy's face when I told him that I made that game, pointing to *Gryzor*. His mouth dropped open, and he whispered, "Wow!"'

Gryzor is the game Mark is most proud of. 'I felt we really pushed what the CPC could do with this title and I felt it was the best version. The game got amazing reviews that proved the Amstrad was a great machine which never got the respect it deserved.'

Having been largely ignored by the non-specialist media, computer games came into the public spotlight in an unhappy way as a consequence of a tragedy. On 19 August 1987, in the small Berkshire town of Hungerford, 27-year-old Michael Robert Ryan shot and killed 16 people before killing himself. The seemingly pointless massacre was in part blamed on Ryan's obsession with violent videos and games. Mark well remembers



the reactions to the tragedy as they affected him. 'After Hungerford there was a lot of concern regarding violence in video games within the press. *Renegade* was just about to go out the door and I had put in a blood "leak" from one of the bad guys' head once you had defeated him. I remember it being a nice big pool of blood. It was too late to change the graphics themselves so we changed the blood colour to blue to symbolise "tears"... maybe.'





Paul Millar

Ocean's continued expansion during the later 1980s required ever more from the sales force, and Paul Millar joined Ocean as UK sales manager in 1991. He experienced the merger with Infogrames and fulfilled his sales role until 1999.

Before joining Ocean Paul Millar worked for Impact, a sales and marketing agency, of which Ocean was one of the clients. He visited retail shops all over the north-west promoting and selling games. A key part was installing point of sales displays. All those poster displays of *RoboCop*, *Total Recall* and the Hollywood Collection were Paul's doing.

'Growing up in the mid 1980s, I knew Ocean Software was the daddy of games companies. I had only one ambition back then and thankfully I was able to achieve

it. Given that my brother-in-law was Ocean's sales director I was well up to date with the complete Ocean catalogue.'

And that contact made it relatively easy to get himself hired. 'After serving my time with Impact, I was recruited by Pat Kavanagh to manage the recently won Toys

R Us contract for the budget label Hit Squad. We had four 1 x 2-metre bays to fill with Hit Squad products and needed a team of merchandisers to fill them. After an initial twelve months of madness trying to set it up and understand it, it then became fairly self-running. I had a



very informal interview in the basement of the Italian restaurant just over the road from the Central Street office. "Do you want the job?" "Yes please." "Pasta or Pizza?" That's how it worked.

'Ocean was exactly as I imagined it. Exciting, busy, fast-paced and a work-hard, play-hard ethic. My role was a new position in the company and I spent a lot of time out of the office. I was very much the office magpie, grabbing a desk wherever I could. In the first year I sat with the Nintendo department, the



accounts department and – for a brief spell – I had a small office all to myself. This was the Christmas we almost had a monopoly on the charts with *WWF Wrestlemania* and *The Simpsons*.

'The whole company, top-to-bottom, was really young, so it had that excitement and dynamism about it. We were managing multi-million-dollar accounts and authorising marketing initiatives in the hundreds of thousands, so there was a very serious work ethic involved. The fun side was in the products we were selling and the people we were selling to. Having the biggest and best titles was the first step, then getting your customers/partners enthused was the next, and was a ton of fun. Character dressing-up days at our distributor was the norm. Booze-fuelled incentive nights out were regular occurrences. All in the name of getting the sale you understand.

'In the Central Street office, and for the first year of Castlefield, there was a very flat structure, meaning that you walked freely among departments asking for updates, etc. As the business grew and matured and more structures were put in place, this tended to happen much less – the introduction of inter-



departmental meetings replaced the more free-wheeling system.'

Before the more corporate attitude and restraints crept in, there was plenty of light-hearted fun. 'Neil Critchlow and I scanned a face of Jesus from a book ever so faintly – think Turin Shroud. We then photocopied this multiple times and placed the copies back into the machine at random intervals. The screaming from the accounts department as they printed out over the face of Jesus was a delight. The IT guy wanted to call an engineer. We told them they probably needed a priest. Obviously this went on all day with people then afraid to use it.'

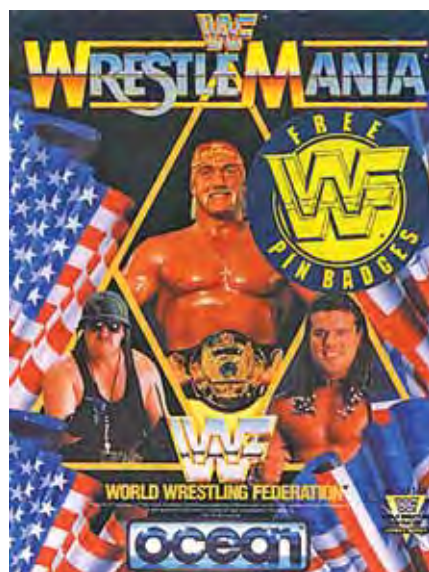
Jon Woods, involved with Everton football club, brought the FA Cup into the office, and all the footie-mad Ocean crew wanted photos. 'On another day Radio 1 held their road show in our building and Ian Broudie turned up from the Lightning Seeds. I asked him to autograph something off of my desk, discovering the next day he had signed my FA Cup photos with the words "You jammy bastards, Ian Broudie".'



The Simpsons – Bart vs The Space Mutants on the Atari ST, and the Sega Genesis/Megadrive box.



WWF Wrestlemania on the Commodore Amiga.





John Palmer

Of the two brothers, John was the creative sibling, producing graphics for many of Ocean's hit titles, while Richard glued the games together in the programming. John joined Ocean in 1987 at the age of 21 and stayed at the company for five years.

Hailing from the West Country, John – older brother of programmer Richard Palmer – carried out any paying jobs he could find to make ends meet. In his spare time he learned his craft: sketching, painting and creating animations. In his early work he took inspiration from Disney, Chuck Jones, Tex Avery and Ray Harryhausen, but finances were always a stumbling block. 'I didn't have access to, or could afford, film equipment to animate, but I saw in a magazine an advertisement for a sprite editor on the Commodore 64. This seemed like a more convenient way of animating things, and it's what sparked my interest.

'Eventually I managed to scrape together enough funds to buy a Commodore 64 and teamed up with my brother to make some games. He coded them, did the music, and I did the visuals and game ideas and design. We had some games published but never really made any money, so I decided to prepare a graphics demo to look

for work while Richard went to college.'

John enjoyed playing Ocean games and recalls the last one he bought before his employment started was *Rambo*. 'I knew of Ocean. They were one of the biggest games companies at the time, and I bought their games. I was a fan of Dave Collier and Martin Galway before joining the company. I attended the 1987 Personal Computer World Show in London with my graphics demo on a C64 floppy disk in my bag, and wearing a new pair of trousers to look for work.'

It was the age of wizkid games-makers, sporting all the trappings of glamour: fame and – above all – fast



John's high-tech desk at Central Street, complete with state-of-the-art reference-card stacking box.

cars. 'I saw the Ocean stand had a big sign depicting a young chap standing next to what looked like a Ferrari sports car, advertising that they were looking for artists, so I thought I'd give them a try. I spoke to Gary Bracey and showed him my work. I remember he gave me a can of Coke, which I promptly knocked over, to my embarrassment. I came away thinking I'd blown it, but a few weeks later I received a letter from Gary inviting me for an interview. They thought my demo was impressive. I was over the moon and was really chuffed.'

John made the lengthy journey from Devon up to Manchester, and Central Street. 'Gary showed me around and of course interviewed me. I was offered the job and was ready to go but soon after accepting I had a sudden death in my family so I called to say I couldn't go. Gary was very sympathetic and held the position for me until I was ready, which was very good of him and appreciated. When the time came, Gary arranged a van with a couple of guys to pick me and my belongings up from Devon. I don't think many people or companies would do that these days.'

And so in 1987, aged 21, John Palmer started at Ocean as a pixel artist/ animator. 'The atmosphere was fun in the early days, and we managed to get the work done as well, so there was a good balance. Later on when we'd all been working at Ocean for some time, we mucked about far more than we should have done. It was all very new to me and

I was probably expecting it to be stricter. I remember being very nervous and very shy most of the time, being the little country bumpkin that I was. When I first joined I sat between Martin McDonald and Allan Shortt, who both smoked, so I used to go home smelling of cigarettes.'

John reported to Gary Bracey and Steve Wahid on the games he was involved with. The first was *Rastan Saga* on the Commodore 64. 'It had already been started, and I guess they needed somebody to help out. John Meegan was the programmer and I joined Jane Lowe and Martin McDonald on the graphics. The sound and music were created by Martin Galway. I worked on the sprites and animations, creating the main *Rastan*

"I remember being very nervous and very shy most of the time, being the little country bumpkin that I was."

character and a number of the baddies. I also created a few drawings for the manual.'

Next up, John worked on the C64 *Dragon Ninja*. 'Again I was pulled onto the team to help with creating sprites at a time when development was well under way, with David Collier programming, Steve Wahid doing the graphics, and Jonathan Dunn the sound and music. The game was a conversion of the arcade machine and we used single-coloured sprites to try and improve the look of the characters. I remember coming up with the idea of the hero having to answer a

telephone at the end of the level and also the eyes in the panel at the bottom of the screen that reacted to the character

getting hit – if he got hit in the private parts his eyes would go cross eyed. The two skinheads were mine as well. If you hit the small one his big brother would come and beat you up.’

John then joined his brother Richard and David Collier on *Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge*. ‘I’d just become available and the team doing the follow up to Daley Thompson’s Decathlon needed someone for the graphics. I was the only artist on the project so it was literally an Olympic challenge to get it all done, I had such a lot to do. The game got rave reviews, especially for the animation and graphics.’

Wec Le Mans followed – a typical Ocean rush-job conversion of the arcade game – before John started on *Batman the Movie*, with a team bigger

than he’d worked with before. ‘We had Mike Lamb, Jon O’Brien and Allan Shortt programming the game, using the graphics from myself, Dawn Drake and Bill Harbison. Jonathan Dunn and Matthew Cannon gave the game the sound and music. This was the first time I worked on the Commodore Amiga so I found producing the graphics challenging to say the least. Some have said that the image of the Joker and Batman were scanned in. This is not true. We didn’t have access to that equipment at the time. I drew these directly in Deluxe Paint with a mouse – after all we were pixel artists. The management noted that my signature was getting bigger and bigger on the screens I created – a cry for fame I guess.’

John moved over to the Super Nintendo System (SNES) for his next title – *Addams Family 2: Pugsley's Scavenger Hunt*. ‘I was drafted in to design and create the sprites and animation on some of the baddies, and the end-of-level baddies. They were fun to work on, my favourite being the washing machine that spits bras, socks and pants out at you. It got good reviews for the visuals but not so good for gameplay. It was a bit hard to play.’

Push Over on the Amiga and Atari ST was John’s last title for Ocean, and on that he did only the animated intro, which



A few of the graphics John created for *Batman*, Commodore Amiga and Atari ST versions.

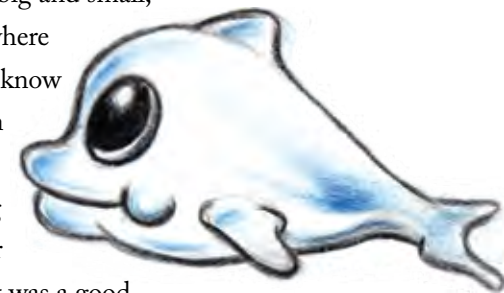


went on one of the two disks. During his Ocean career there were also some missed opportunities. ‘I spent a fair amount of my time working on projects that didn’t get released for one reason or another, or working on odd little things. More research than actual games development. In 1990, I presented an idea for a game based on a dolphin – this was before all the other dolphin games that came out during that time. I was lucky enough to have a go at trying to create the idea at Ocean, with Allan Short as the Programmer on the NES and Sega Megadrive. We weren’t at work on it for long before *Ecco the Dolphin* was

released. Our game was different, it was going to be more cutesy – I had a lot of ideas but I didn’t really get them together quickly enough for management to see, so unfortunately it was canned.’

In spite of some creative disappointments, John’s reflections on Ocean are happy ones... with one important exception. ‘All I can say is I’ve been in the industry since 1987 and worked at many studios big and small, but I never worked anywhere quite like Ocean. I don’t know if it was the combination of it all being new and the fact that I was young and it was my first major job in the industry, but it was a good time to be in games. I don’t think I’ll ever experience that vibe again. It was a very productive and exciting time and I am glad that I got to experience it... but I never did get the Ferrari sports car advertised at the PCW show.’

Graphics produced by John for *The Addams Family 2* for the SNES.



In 1990 John produced ideas for a game based on a dolphin, but before it could be put into development Sega released *Ecco the Dolphin*, and John’s idea was put out to sea.





David Selwood

David started producing games for Ocean's earliest incarnation, Spectrum Games, but is most remembered for the 1984 title *Eskimo Eddie*, one of Ocean's very first games. The game also appeared on the Commodore 64.

While at school in 1983 David purchased a game called *Road Frog* published by Spectrum Games for his Commodore VIC-20.

"The game should have been great as it was meant to be a homage to *Frogger*, a popular game in the arcades at the time. However after playing it, I decided

it was anything but great, so after school the next day I went to the company's Manchester office to let them know my thoughts. I met David Ward and he said if I could create a better one, they would sell it on my behalf. So after school, and at the weekends,

I wrote a new *Road Frog* game for them. Dave Ward and Jon Woods were obviously impressed because they started selling it immediately.



In the pre-licence days, popular arcade coin-op games were fair game for the developing software companies.

David found Spectrum Games' office a strange place. 'You see David Ward was also running a successful props business for Granada TV Studios. His props often appeared on the likes of great shows such as *Coronation Street*. However, the business was never really that glamorous. The propmaster offices were extremely

"One of the most enjoyable aspects of writing various games for Ocean was working with other developers."

large. I used to wonder around looking at all the strange bits and pieces just to amuse myself.'

David remembers that when they were attending one of the first London-Earls Court computer games fairs in 1983 it became apparent from the public that the name Spectrum Games confused people, since they also sold games for other machines, so soon after the name Ocean was born.

'It was during this time that Mike

Barnes, the financial director and another founder of Spectrum Games, allowed Paul Owens use of his new Porsche to go to the shops to purchase some computer gear that we needed. Paul was, I think, 17 or 18 at the time, and had only just passed his driving test and got his driving licence.



One of Ocean's earliest magazine advertisements promoting, among others 'not to be missed', *Eskimo Eddie*.

Anyway it was a complete disaster, Paul didn't even manage to get out of the car park without damaging the car.

'One of the most enjoyable aspects of writing various games for Spectrum Games and Ocean was working with other developers – I have to say they were all great to get on with, always good for a laugh and happy to share knowledge and new ideas.

'But it had its downsides as well and the main one was cash flow. In the newspapers there were often articles on games developers being super rich – the reality was somewhat different. I and other developers were being taken advantage off, which resulted in the good ones moving to business IT for a better deal in life.'



'Joystick Compatible' *Eskimo Eddie* for the Spectrum, with the loading screen and two typical in-game screens.





Richard Kay

Richard got his job at Spectrum Games due to his love of computers and his flare for designing computer games. In his bedroom at home he developed a game called *Mr Wimpy* for the BBC Micro. After leaving Ocean, Richard went on to found Software Creations.

Richard joined Spectrum Games in 1982, before it was rebranded Ocean, and he stayed for three years. 'I was doing four A-Levels at college – mathematics, English Literature, History and Art – and hating it. I was a bit of a loner in those days and preferred my own company, so I welcomed the discovery of the ZX81 as a plaything. I remember seeing the commercial for the computer on the TV and thinking I must have one of those.'

'So I got one and it was the first time in my life I actually understood what I was doing with something new, it was one of those things I found natural. Just touching the keyboard and seeing the response on the TV screen – I just loved the interaction and the control you had of it.'

With Richard's love of computers he soon dropped A-Level history to backtrack and take O-Level Computer

Studies and Applied Mathematics. 'I ended up getting chucked out of the mathematics class when I proceeded to stick pencils in every facial orifice and pretended to be an alien. The final straw was when I said, "the probability of me passing this exam is very slim." The teacher was so rubbish I often ended up taking the computer studies class myself – he ended up sitting in the back of the room, feet up, reading the paper, while I showed the class how to do a bubble-sort routine. I got Fs in all except the computer studies O-Level – my form teacher asked for consistency, and that was what he got.'

'I remember being one of first students to use the RML 380 machines at college and do something with them. [Research Machines 380Z, was an early 8-bit Z80 computer which, with 56Kb of memory cost a mere £3,266 in 1979] They were green and black and I wrote a driving test game that was quite graphical. I remember the teacher telling me that I was not an academic and it would be best if I went out into the real world. So I left and sat around

for quite a while, wondering what to do. My mum knew this guy called Jon Woods. I was heavily into games and loved to figure out how they worked. So, luck being what it is, Jon Woods had this games company, and I got my first job there in the warehouse, which was more of a broom cupboard when I actually



saw it. I remember seeing *Kong* in packs of a hundred tapes, and my job was to package up the orders into the Jiffy bags and send them off to the likes of Boots and John Menzies.

'At home I taught myself how to program the BBC Micro in machine code – the graphics, the music and the coding. I went in one day to the office at the Ralli Building, next to the Granada TV studios, and showed them a game I had developed on the BBC, a three-quarters-complete version of *Mr Wimpy*. As a result I was promoted from my warehouse job to programmer within Ocean on the same salary.'

Richard remembers going on visits with David Ward down to the arcades in Oxford Road. 'He would give us a pocketful of money and send us in to see if there was anything we liked. There was

myself, Paul Owens, Chris Urquhart and a few others, and we played the likes of *Tron*, *Star Wars*, *Amidar*, etc. We used to tell David the games that were good, and if he agreed, he talked to Jon about getting the licence.

'The early days of Ocean were great fun – you could wander in when you wanted and as long as you got your game done, everything was fine – Paul Finnegan used to wind me up about completing my games and I used to tell him "just the music left", knowing full well I had so much more than that to do. The development times were short though – more like weeks than months.'

"Paul Finnegan used to wind me up about completing my games and I used to tell him 'just the music left'."

'As a publisher, I can recall the father of the Stamper brothers from Ultimate bringing in *Sabre Wulf* to distribute. Each master wore out at 200,000 units, and we went through two or three of them for this game.'

'I believe the success of *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* contributed to the fortunes of the company. If Daley Thompson himself had not won gold at the Olympics in 1984, I am sure



Mr Wimpy on the BBC, and the Spectrum version inlay above.



The RML 380 computer that Richard used in college.

things would have been a little different for Ocean – we watched every event he did and just prayed he would win.’ And, of course, he did. ‘We had to get the game to market as soon as possible. We saved the final build to a disk on the Commodore 1541 disk drive, but it



Hyper Sports for the BBC Micro – published by Imagine in 1985.

got corrupted. We were not very good at backing up software in those days, so Dave Collier took like five hours to try and get the drive to read the disk – eventually he used a piece of Sellotape and lodged it in the drive – that did the trick. We kept that disk on the wall thereafter with the tagline “Thank GOD for Sellotape”. I don’t think Jon Woods knew about this – can you imagine if we failed to get the Commodore 64 version out to ride the success of Daley at the Olympics?’

Richard recalls a defining moment at Ocean. ‘We drove to London to do a cross-promotion with Wimpy [the fast-food chain] – they brought kids into the restaurant to play *Mr Wimpy* on the Commodore, Spectrum and BBC computers. As we were driving down with Jon, I vividly remember him saying to me that I would never get the same success in the business that they had

achieved at Ocean. That statement has stayed with me to this very day.

‘Over my time at Ocean I produced *Mr Wimpy* on the BBC, *Hunchback* on the first prototype Amstrad CPC 464. I then did *Hyper Sports* on the BBC – that was a fantastic machine.

And then I left in 1985 to join the RAF, which rather shocked Jon. Up until that time I was being paid the same as I was many years before in the warehouse. I felt I could never shake off that “warehouse boy” image and was never taken seriously.’

The RAF career was short-lived due to Richard having less than the required degree of eyesight. ‘When I left I joined an Enterprise Allowance scheme and with the money started Software Creations. I believe I was the first to pay royalties, which ensured that I retained my staff and meant that they did a good job. I think my success with Software Creations went some way to proving Jon Woods wrong – another company could have the success that Ocean had had during its prime time in the 1980s. I remember Jon and David Ward having blazing arguments, but they resolved whatever the issue was quickly because they were so passionate about what they did. They both drove the business and in my view created the gaming business that we have today. Ocean was the springboard to my career and I am grateful to them both.’



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Peter Johnson

Peter joined Ocean at the age of 21 in 1985 and soon formed a reputation for converting many of Ocean's titles – graphics, sound and programming – first to the BBC Micro and then later to the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST.

Peter, before joining Ocean, was a prolific programmer with many successful titles under his belt for the BBC Micro/Electron platforms, published through Superior Software. The likes of *Q*Bert*, *Deathstar*, *Spitfire Command* and *Space Pilot* were top selling

titles that, as Peter confesses, look crude now but dominated chart positions when they were released. He joined Ocean after applying to a recruitment advertisement in the magazine *Zzap!64* for programmers – he subsequently met Colin Stokes on his visit to the office and was offered a position.

'I regarded Ocean as pretty much the

leading company at the time, and the opportunity to work on licensed games, with a good marketing push behind them, was something that very much

appealed to me.'

Peter reported to Gary Bracey after Gary became software development manager, but he never worked at the Central Street offices. Instead he enjoyed the luxury of working from his Newcastle home on a contract-by-contract basis for the games he produced. Only in 1990 – his final year with Ocean – did he become a full time employee. However, in the intervening years he worked exclusively for the company and their family of labels.

'For most of that time it was a fairly painless experience for me. I completed a game and then came down to the office in Manchester from Newcastle to hand it over. I'd then take a look at what other games they had in the arcade downstairs and in development on the Commodore 64 and pick one I liked, one I thought I could do justice to on the platform I was working on. And then I'd head back home after agreeing the fee, and crack on.

'I worked mostly without an advance and – partly because of this, and my speed and track record, and maybe also because the BBC Micro wasn't a truly

mainstream platform – I was largely left to get on with it. To Ocean's credit I never had any problem at all with being paid for my work, even though it was mostly done on a handshake.'

During his time at Ocean, Peter worked on converting many mainstream titles for the BBC- Electron, Atari ST and Amiga platforms.

'I often wrote an arcade game conversion from a special suitcase containing a power supply and a JAMMA [Japanese Amusement Machinery Manufacturers Association] interface and the original arcade board – this was the case for *Arkanoid* and its sequel *Revenge of Doh*, for example, and several other of the arcade conversions. I received a Japanese MSX cartridge of *Yie Ar Kung-Fu II* and an imported Sony MSX HitBit computer on which to base this conversion. I still have them in the loft! *RoboCop* was converted from a suitcase version of the Data East arcade game. To create the graphics I mostly overwrote them from the Spectrum version of the game. I also often got a play-through of a game on VHS tape, provided by the guys in Manchester, but I never saw source code, graphics or design documentation from the arcade version, or from other platforms. I just had to replicate what I saw. The code was compiled on the machine itself, I didn't use a remote compiler or debugger then, the only luxury item was extra RAM, a floppy disk drive, then later a hard drive.'

Peter can only grimace wryly at the



cost of £400 for a 10Mb Supra hard drive for the Atari ST, about £950 in today's money. You could buy about 120 16Gb flash drives for that now!

Peter's conversion of *Wizball* to Amiga and Atari ST included programming and the fine graphics.

'I did all coding, graphics and



music for most of my titles, and worked all the way through. For something like the animation of the main character in *Impossible*

Mission I drew each frame by hand, stop-framing the video taken from the C64. The animation tools available were crude at the time – I could probably view an animation running on the spot, but I really had to see the frames animate in



The Sony MSX HitBit-10-P home computer. As a platform, MSX never made it big in Europe.

Peter's conversion of *Mikie* onto the BBC Micro.

sequence in the game to see if it looked right, and the feet were transferring body weight correctly.'

Of all the games Peter worked on,

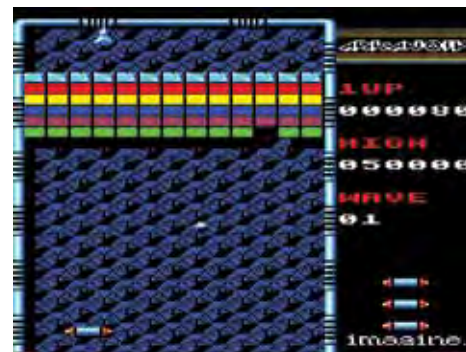


Peter did the total conversion of *RoboCop* for both the Amiga and Atari ST versions (above) and of *Arkanoid*, right, for the BBC Micro

only one was held up. 'I converted *Crystal Castles* to the BBC and Electron for AtariSoft, but they kept raising objections to small details to avoid it being regarded as complete so that payment would become due. Why they were doing this became apparent when AtariSoft announced that they were cancelling all conversions for other manufacturers' platforms, so it was mothballed. After completion of my first title for US Gold, *Beach Head*, on

a tour around the Ocean offices they asked if I had anything unreleased up my sleeve. I said that everything I had started had been released, except for *Crystal Castles*. They explained they were just negotiating to license this game for the Commodore 64 version of the game themselves, and would be very interested in a BBC version. So you could say that was lucky! It was released over a year after completion.'

After leaving Ocean in 1990, Peter had a stint working for television companies. 'I spent two years as a music composer, writing theme tunes and soundtrack music for Tyne Tees TV, Sky-Eurosport and others, then moved back into the industry. I wrote a few games for a local company. And then I responded to an advert from Rage, and found I was talking to Paul Finnegan, who



remembered me writing for Ocean from when he was involved there. I started on a game for Rage, and even before it was completed I was asked to set up their Newcastle studio, which I managed for nine years.'



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The sound throughout is great. This is definitely one groovy game... Enough imagination has gone into it to make it different and still keep it immensely playable. Graphics are fab! **COMMODORE USER**

Screen Star

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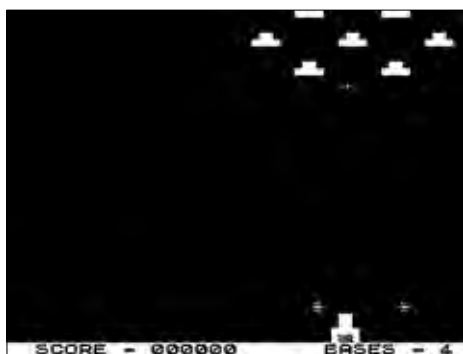
Jon Ritman

Jon Ritman was a freelance who created a catalogue of games for Artic Computing. On teaming up with freelance graphic artist Bernie Drummond, a series of Ocean hits followed.

Although his name is almost synonymous with Ocean, Jon Ritman never actually worked for the company. His professional career began with a venerable software house noted in the early days for its text adventure games: Artic Computing. Not that Jon followed the 'What Now?' route; he preferred action. His first game,

the ZX81, so I had to start again typing it all into the assembler but in proper instruction format this time – no more laborious hex.'

He submitted the end result to Artic, who accepted it, and the game was released in 1981. With the arrival of the ZX Spectrum, Artic sent Jon a machine in order for him to get to grips with it.

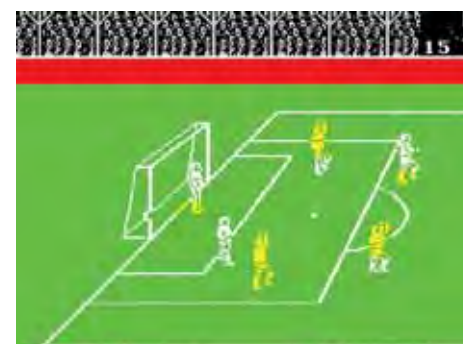


You don't get much more simple than the graphics for Jon's *Namtir Raiders* for the Sinclair ZX81, but the loading screen for *3D Combat Zone* shows more elaboration on the Spectrum, right.

Namtir Raiders (which takes its name from his spelled backwards) took three months to write during the evenings (he worked as a TV repairman during the days). 'Developing a game was very different in those days. I wrote most of it on paper before typing hexadecimal into the computer – it was very hard work. I'd written more than half the game when a primitive assembler was released for



Another popular arcade clone followed in the form of *Cosmic Debris*, a version of *Asteroids*. Jon recalls, 'The game again took three months to create and 5,000 copies were sold, so with the percentage of around 25% of takings coming to me as royalties I couldn't complain. My annual wage as a TV engineer was £6,000. Seeing that I was earning that kind of money in three months I decided



to give up my day job and write games full time.'

Jon programmed two further games for Artic. *3D Combat Zone* (*Battlezone*) was an early 3D Spectrum game for which Jon had to learn 3D mathematics. 'These were the days when computers did not do multiplication, they just added up. When I created a cube on the screen spinning around on the Spectrum it was an amazing feeling – I just sat there and watched it spinning and laughed to myself with satisfaction. There were no game books back then, so you had to just sit down and learn it.' His last game for Artic was *Bear Bover*, which he based on *Burger Time* – he aimed to produce graphics to the quality of Ultimate games. But his real aim at that point was to create the ultimate football game.

'I visited many of the gaming shows

of the time and all I was hearing from distributors was that they wanted to see a football game for the ZX Spectrum that looked as good as *International Soccer*, which was big on the Commodore 64 at the time.'

His ambition kindled the successful relationship with Ocean, quite accidentally. 'I met David Ward at an Ally Pally show [London's Alexandra Palace at Muswell Hill] and he asked me what I was working on. I told him a football game and it was going to be so much better than Artic's *World Cup Football*. This was a big claim considering I had only started programming a week or two before. David phoned me almost eight months later and asked me how it was going. I was close to finishing and when he offered me an advance of £20,000 I accepted on the spot.

'I produced *Match Day* from start to finish without even looking at *International Soccer*. I didn't want to produce the same game so I only loaded it finally after I'd submitted the *Match Day* master to Ocean.

I'm not mad on football but doing the game did make me more of a fan. I had to learn all the rules and put them into the game the best way I could. At the time I probably knew the offside rule

International Match Day on the Spectrum 128K.



Jon Ritman with Head and Heels... perhaps there might be a game in that.



International Soccer on the Commodore 64.

much better than most fans! Looking back at it now, it's woefully slow.'

Match Day was written for two players initially, and Jon avoided adding artificial intelligence for the opposing team because it was hard enough coping with a single team's actions.

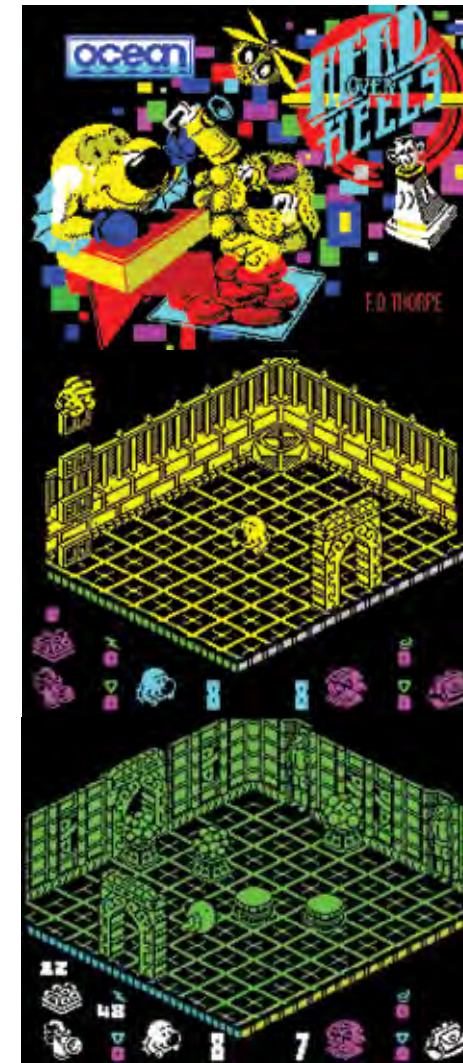
'I left the AI until the end as I had no idea how to do it – there were no books telling you how and the Internet hadn't been invented, so you couldn't look it up. So I bit the bullet and went for it. For the first rule, the opposition player hasn't possession of the ball, so make the

With the appearance of the 128K Spectrum, Ocean released *International Match Day*, but as Jon says, 'There weren't a lot of improvements – some more sounds, music and some full screen pictures were added. It was targeted at the Spanish market first because the 128K machine arrived there first. A little bit of an Ocean cash-in, in my view, but all good.'

The lure of matching Ultimate's quality was never far away.

'On delivering *Match Day* to Ocean, David Ward showed me *Knight Lore*

a good eye in there", and subsequently rubbed everything out and then added another one. And I was amazed – this character just came and we actually used the graphic in *Batman* right at the beginning.'



But at the time *Batman* wasn't in the frame of the young programmers.

'We produced a sort of demo of the engine and took it to Ocean for them to see. I still wasn't sure where the game was going at the time and who or what the

main character was. I think I came up with the idea of using Batman but then thought, No. I didn't think anyone would know who Batman was, what with the 1960s show being such a long time ago and the films being talked about some way off. Bernie, being younger than me, said it would be fine as the 1960s show was being re-run, on Channel 4 I believe, and was getting a lot of attention from a new audience.

'When David Ward saw the demo he got very excited and ran around the room singing the theme song to the old Batman series and went to get the rights from DC Comics to the game.'

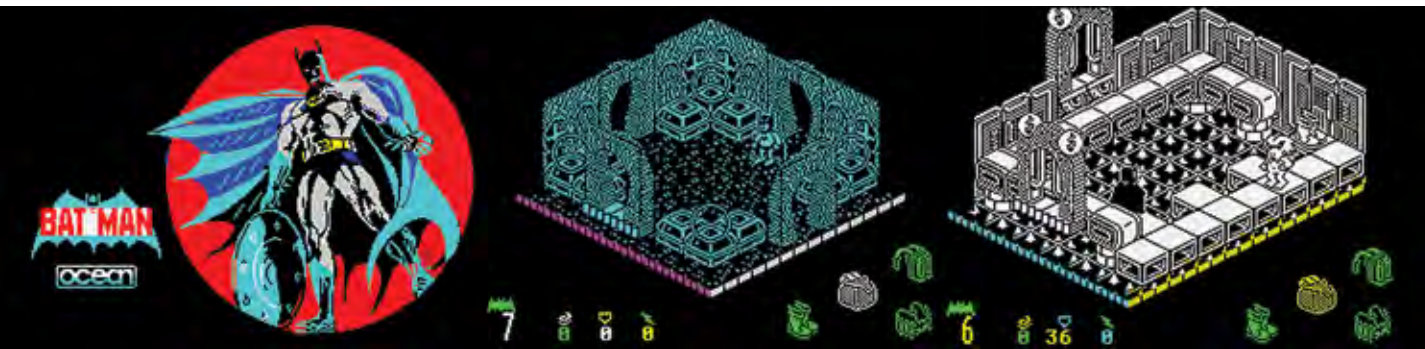
As Bernie lived some miles away Jon instructed him on the types of graphics the game needed. Jon would drive to Bernie's house and get the assets from him on Microdrive cartridge – a popular, but somewhat

unreliable removable storage medium of the time. These included the bad guys, graphics for the rooms and various bits and pieces. Most, if not all, of Bernie's graphic assets were used in *Batman*. 'Everything got chucked in and when the game came out, the press questioned the bizarre nature of some of the graphics but *Batman* got good reviews and sold very well.'

Rights owners like DC Comics can be very finicky about their property, but Jon remembers little friction. 'We had



Head Over Heels holds a special place in the history of computer and video games. It was the first game to let the player control two separate characters, each with distinct strengths and weaknesses, seen here on the Spectrum.



Three-dimensional *Batman* on the Spectrum.

nearest player run towards the ball. So what should we do next? Kick the ball up the field. When I saw one of the players score a goal it was a relief – the game had the beginnings of AI.'

Jon argues that what set Ocean apart from so many of the other early software houses was their marketing. 'Ocean were much better at promotion, which meant the game did very well. The game was actually on the shelf at the same time the promotion was taking place. I believe over 50,000 copies of *Match Day* sold and then it appeared on compilations after that – I get fan mail to this very day.

and I felt I had to do a game like that.' It took him some time to reverse-engineer how the Ultimate game worked, writing routines for the various parts of the engine. Jon confesses to being an indifferent artist, so he invited a friend of a friend who he heard could draw to look after the graphics. That person was Bernie Drummond. 'I wrote a routine to draw graphics and invited Bernie over to see what he could do. He sat there for over two hours and what he produced was a random mess to my eyes and I was about to give up. There was no image I could see – then Bernie said, "There is

some power ups that we called Bat-pills. DC Comics said that Batman doesn't take drugs, so they were re-named to Bat-powers... but that was it.'

For a little over a year Jon was next occupied with *Head Over Heels*.

Having two characters who could do things individually and then together was

quite unique for the time,' Jon says. 'I didn't appreciate how innovative I was being, but looking back no one else had done or was doing anything like this. I remember putting off for months how both characters would work together in the program until there was nothing else actually left to do on the game. It

was a lot easier than I thought and I got it sorted in a few hours, which was a hell of a relief.'

Head Over Heels was intended to be a Christmas release, but Jon missed the season. However, Ocean gave him no grief, preferring that he should be happy that the game was working. 'It was released just before the Easter period and sold very well'.

As Jon was primarily a ZX Spectrum Z80 coder, Colin Porch at

Ocean handled the conversions for the Commodore 64, Atari ST and Commodore Amiga. As Jon recalls, 'Colin did a line-for-line conversion of my Z80 code and we had extended phone conversations where he single-stepped through his 6502 code and I went through exactly the same code on the ZX Spectrum.'

The next game Jon turned his attention to was *Match Day II*. Jon had done all the graphics himself for the original, but with Bernie Drummond now a formidable part of the partnership, he came up with the graphics for the sequel. 'There were many more moves,' Jon says, 'so Bernie had to create a lot more graphics.' Jon also introduced the "kickometer", which gave the player the ability to do different kicks (even back-heels) with the controlled player, and the "diamond deflection system", which caused the ball to behave in accordance with deflection off the player's body.'

When a Crash magazine interviewer asked him whether he would prefer to work as part of a team, in the way Ocean preferred internally, Jon responded firmly.

'No. The trouble with the team approach is that the game designer doesn't know the limitations of the programming. I enjoy being a jack of all trades, playing the intellectual/technical role if you like, as well as the creative side. I look at the market and then add technical expertise.'



1987's *Match Day II* on the Spectrum.

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Steve Wahid

Steve was hired by Ocean as a graphic artist and was promoted to art manager. He produced graphics for more than 18 Ocean games during his nine years with the company.

Steve Wahid joined Ocean in 1985 and was very aware of how high profile the company had become in such a short time.

I produced a scrolling demo as a proof of technology that I showed the guys at Ocean and it got me the job as an artist. After joining, both Colin

“It was all seat-of-the-pants stuff: there was no reporting structure in those days.”

Gresty and I were asked to produce a Commodore 64 conversion of Konami’s *Comic Bakery*. We used the MSX version for reference and the game turned out really well, with a Martin Galway



Comic Bakery on the C64 – published by Imagine in 1986.

soundtrack to round it all off.

‘Ocean was a great company to work for – it was a no frills working environment with less than ten in the development team in those early days. In fact the sales, marketing and other office staff far outnumbered those who made the games. Almost immediately after I started all of the development team were moved down to the ‘dungeon’ to make space for the upper echelons of management. The ‘dungeon’ was in the basement of the building with four or five rooms retro-fitted with long (kitchen) worktops fixed to the walls. these acted as our desks.

‘It was such an exciting time. The games industry was very much in its infancy and it didn’t feel like a job, it was more like being paid to do something you loved doing, a frame of mind that



helped us thrive as developers.

Initially Tony Pomfret, Dave Collier, Bill Barna, Colin Gresty and I were in one big room developing games on the Commodore 64 and we constantly bounced ideas off each other – *Daley Thompson’s Decathlon* was in development at the time.

‘It was all seat-of-the-pants stuff: there was no reporting structure in those days. Jon Woods would tell Dave Collier what projects were in the pipeline and we’d decide between us who was doing what. There was one programmer on each project and an artist could have one, two or more titles on the go at any one time. And Martin Galway was working on sound and music for everything.

‘With the arcade conversions, Tony, Dave, Colin and I collaborated very closely on what gameplay elements and graphics could be taken across to the Commodore 64. It was a constantly evolving process as graphics compression routines improved and sprite multiplexing got better (it has to be said that our graphical background and sprite editors were very basic at first).

‘The biggest challenge we had was to fit a game into the C64’s memory. Arcade game conversions were always very tricky because we had to find the right balance of what we could get into the game and still have it resemble the original; this was always the biggest compromise. The development period always took around six to twelve weeks – there was a huge demand for sales from the management

so we had to keep churning titles out.

‘I used to read quite a few of the game magazines that were around at the time, mainly to see what other games were out there. Reviews of other software houses’ games sometimes helped me decide which games I wanted to buy. Any negative comments from journalists about games I was involved with didn’t bother me too much.’

And to finish on a pleasant memory, Steve recalls a Harbison moment.

‘It was Bill Harbison’s birthday. We got him soooo drunk that Friday night. When we got him home he just lay on



Cassette cover for *Comic Bakery* on the C64.



the pavement outside his flat saying, “Leave me, just leave me.” We got him on my shoulder and I carried him up three flights of stairs. I plonked him on his couch and put a waste bin in front of him – when he proceeded to be violently sick. How lucky was I not to get covered in puke that night!

Steve with Alex Lavelle relaxing at Ocean’s Central Street local, the Square Albert. Alex was in the art department and used to photograph all the screenshots in the dungeon.





Ian Richardson

Ian joined Ocean in 1992 as UK sales manager, and the first title given to him to sell was the sub-par *Hook* for the 16-bit computers.

Ian's previous job prior to joining Ocean was UK sales and marketing manager at Gremlin Graphics.

'I got involved in the games industry in July 1984. I was leaving school looking to join either ICI or British Steel as an apprentice (the done thing at the time in the North East) but my father who had spent ten years in Libya decided he wanted to work in the UK again and wanted to open a shop. I persuaded him to open a computer retail outlet in our home town and I worked there buying

customers due to the licences they had plus the amount of advertising they did in all of the specialist press. I knew all of their products from the high profile games to the more obscure titles that they occasionally launched.'

Before joining Ocean, Ian formed a strong relationship with many who worked at the company.

'I'd got to know the staff at Ocean really well in 1989 when I left the family business and worked for a sales and marketing company called Impact. One of our key clients (and the one all of our rivals wanted) was Ocean. That's when I first struck up a friendship with Paul Patterson and a few others. Even when I left Impact to join Gremlin we always met up for drinks at the various shows and I attended their infamous parties at ECTS [European Computer Trade Show].

'Paul had heard that I may be looking to leave Gremlin and invited me over to his house to stay one weekend as there was quite a few industry people coming up from London for the Everton vs Chelsea game and they were having a

night out afterwards. Paul and Dean Barrett asked me that weekend if I would join Ocean which took me all of 30 seconds to say yes.

'I remember turning up on my first day at the building they were based in at the time in Central Street around 8:30 and there weren't many employees about. After a few days working there Paul told me that I shouldn't turn up until around 9:30am like most of the other sales and marketing people. It was a very laid back environment you were also very focused on getting your job done.

'The first new release title that I sold was *Hook*, not the greatest of games to start your Ocean sales career with but we sold a fair amount into retail and distributors.

'At Central Street I shared an office with a couple of the sales admin girls who worked for me called Kelly and Sherrie, then when we eventually moved to Eastgate I was given my own office. The person who I reported into was Paul Patterson who was the sales director and a thoroughly lovely man. In fact he was Mr Ocean in a lot of our customers' eyes.

'Ocean was a brilliant place to work, stressful sometimes but always fun. The saying "Work Hard Play Hard" was the perfect description of Ocean culture. People wanted to do business with the company because they were great fun to be around and they had the key titles in the market, they also strived to be always one step ahead of their competitors in whatever they did.

'We always had the best parties that everybody wanted to attend, we had the biggest incentives for the telesales staff at our distributors at Christmas or on the day of release of one of our games.

We constantly took alcohol into the sales departments and served it to the staff – even at breakfast just so that there was a buzz about the place.'

Ian did notice an us and them between the Suits (as the management was known) and the developers. 'This did get better when we moved

to Eastgate. There was a production meeting held every Monday when Gary Bracey, Colin Gordon, Lorraine Starr and Jon Oldham would update sales, marketing, PR and production on how development of the various games was going. They were sometimes fun but on other occasions they could be very fiery especially if there was a big release that had been delayed yet again.'



Ocean waves at ECTS 1993 – Paul Millar at the top with Ian below to the right.



Ian with Adele Welch and Paul Millar.

and selling the software and hardware.

'I was very aware of Ocean back in the mid-1980s, there was always a big buzz about their games from our



Hook wasn't the easiest of sell-ins, even on the 16-bit machines like the Amiga.



Bill Harbison

Bill moved down from Scotland to join Ocean in 1988 as a graphic artist. Ironically, thanks to several dreadful releases at the time, Ocean was not his first choice for employment.

Bill was in the process of applying to Glasgow School of Art, but he was thwarted by only having two A-Levels, when he needed three to qualify. His plan was to study further to get the extra result he needed.

‘At the time I had bought a ZX Spectrum and was experimenting with the graphical capability of the machine. I had seen some loading screens done by others, especially the early titles

published by Ocean like *Eskimo Eddie*, so I thought I would have a go myself in my spare time to see if I could do something similar. I can honestly say there was no intention of taking

it up a career – it was just something to keep me occupied while I was doing the extra A-Level.

‘As time went on I realised I was getting better and better at producing pretty good static screens on the Spectrum so decided to buy *The Artist 2* to further develop my skills. I started to

create portraits and mockups of arcade games I had seen in the monthly *C&VG* magazine just to see how they would translate onto the Spectrum. Most were OK, others I thought were quite good so I wrote off blindly to companies such as Electronics Arts, Elite and US Gold to see if there were any jobs going where I could use my new skills. I did become disheartened, though, by the negative responses I received.

‘A friend suggested I apply to Ocean,’ Bill says with a laugh. ‘I had no intention of applying to them because I thought the company was rubbish. At the time Ocean wasn’t doing too well – *Street Hawk* and *Knight Rider* had just been released, which were terrible.

‘But after the rejections from the other companies, I had nothing to lose, so I sent a two-page letter, along with a cassette with some of my screens on it, to Ocean in Manchester. We didn’t have a telephone in the house at the time so I listed our neighbour’s telephone as a contact number. Two weeks later the lady next door came knocking on our door saying there was an English woman on



the phone asking for William – and sure enough it was Lorraine Starr offering me a job interview at Ocean.

‘I was pretty much offered a job on the spot by Gary Bracey, and two weeks after the interview I arrived at my paid-for hotel in Manchester and started at Ocean the next day.

‘The first project given to me was *Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge* on the Spectrum. I was asked to design the game and handle its animation. It was a pretty steep learning curve to say the least. I’d promised my best friend in Scotland I would put him into a game at Ocean so the little guy you see walking around picking up the dumb-bells is my mate Colin from back home.

‘It was important to me to make Daley black. We had to use a video as

reference for his likeness because we just couldn’t find his image in any of the magazines at the time. The loading screen was a cleaned-up screen capture using a digitiser on a Commodore Amiga – I used the same technique for the *RoboCop* loading screen as well. I completed the Spectrum version of the game and then I was given six weeks to port the game to the Amstrad.’

After *Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge* Bill was moved on to *Bad Dudes Vs Dragon Ninja* with Mark Jones. ‘The game had to be done very quickly so I helped out a little with the sprites for the main game and Mark did the background. After that I helped out Mike Lamb on *WEC Le Mans* on the Spectrum. The engine for the game was already in place with the track scrolling – all I had to do was create the graphics

for the cars. John Brandwood had written a sprite editor on the Atari ST so I used that to produce the graphics and Sentient Software put the game together. The reviews were good – but the scores given for the graphics were not as high as I would have liked.

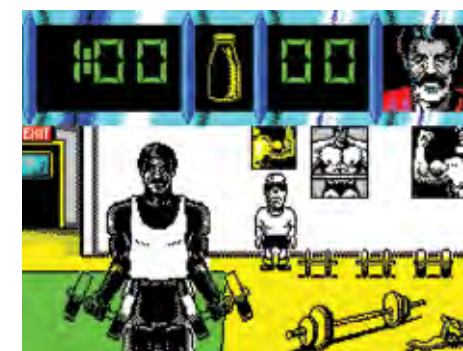
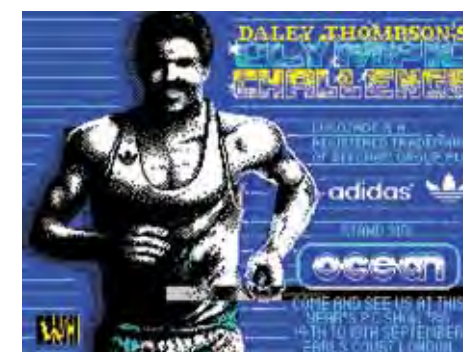
‘I was then

WEC Le Mans on the Spectrum.

Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge – the digitised loading screen, with Daley and Bill’s mate Colin below.



Spectrum tape inlay for *Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge*.



teamed up with John O'Brien who had been tasked to optimise the the *Wec Le Mans* engine. The updated code was much faster and was going to be used for the *Chase HQ* arcade conversion on

from the *RoboCop* and *Chase HQ* games for the 16-bit machines – basically a mash-up. So we produced the same style of graphics for the racing sections using lots and lots of colours that we never



Two screens from *Chase HQ* on the ZX Spectrum, and one on the Amstrad.

the Spectrum. I had to raise my game with the graphics so as to not let John and the “engine” down. The arcade game was in the office, so I played the game and sketched how the cars looked when they were moving and spinning around in crashes on my pad. I then drew them directly onto the Atari ST and created versions for both the Spectrum and the Amstrad. The reviews for both versions of the game were incredible – it was very pleasing.’

To their surprise, Gary Bracey then pulled John and Bill into his office and informed them that they would

both be working on the ST and Amiga from then on.

‘Gary had got the licence for the new *Batman* movie, the Tim Burton one with Michael Keaton, and wanted to create a *Batman* game using the best bits

had on the Spectrum. When I was first told I would be working on this game I found pictures of Michael Keaton in the Batman suit and Jack Nicholas as the Joker in a magazine. One afternoon I decided to do portraits of each. Gary saw them and said he wanted them in the game – they are both used in the health meter at the bottom of the game screen where Batman changes to the Joker as you lose your health. I also created the end screen which I believe is the best pixel work I have done – with Michael Keaton as Batman just standing there with the text congratulating you for saving Gotham City.

‘After *Batman*, there was a year or so where I worked on stuff that never came to anything. For example, I worked with Paul Hughes on an isometric Simpsons game which got shelved when we found out that there was already an official Simpsons game in the works. I then designed some backgrounds on *Toki* on the Commodore 64 over a 6-week period

with John Meegan as the programmer.

‘*Lethal Weapon* came next on the SNES, with Allan Shortt programming. Again I just helped out on one of the screens – I think it was the level select. It was pretty much Ray Coffey’s game graphically. This was Ocean’s first outing on the Nintendo machine, so a big release.

I was then back onto the SNES doing *RoboCop 3* with Frank Knight who had just joined Ocean – I did the sprites and Jack Whitely did the backgrounds. It was just a side-scrolling platform game, nothing like what DID was doing with the title at the time. Frank was not as experienced as the other programmers in Ocean and so he struggled a little – I remember the *RoboCop* game character had his hand held up by his shoulder which made him look like he was a boxer! I had to draw Ed-209, which was really cool – he was vandalised in the game with one gun broken and covered in graffiti.

I then worked on a PC game called *Pushover*, which was sponsored by Quavers with Curly Colin. I was responsible for the animations between the levels. It was great fun because I was given the freedom to do what I wanted and I really did go to town on it.

‘My final game at Ocean was *Jurassic Park* on the Amiga, the ST, the SNES and some parts of the Game Boy version. Ocean of America was doing the SNES game and Gary was not happy with the animations of some of the dinosaurs, so



Jurassic Park on the Atari ST.



he got me to redo some of them. I did the main character on the ST and Amiga and a lot of the dinosaurs in the game. There were at least eight people working on *Jurassic Park*, which was a big team in those days, including some animators who had worked at Disney and with Don Bluth – I learnt so much from those guys.

I left Ocean when the company’s morale dropped quite a lot. I should have left much earlier and I now realise I should have followed James Higgins when he went to America.’



Bill worked on the racing scenes in *Batman* on the Amiga.



Jim Bagley

Jim worked at Special FX and programmed 11 games which Ocean published. Although he was not directly a part of the team, Jim is a huge part of the Ocean legacy.

At the age of 17, Jim asked a local computer shop if there were any game companies local to where he lived and was surprised to find that there were. He applied, and got his first job in 1986 at Consult Computer Systems where his first game was published, *Throne of Fire*. He then went on to work Canvas Software Ltd where he wrote two further games and helped finish a third. He then started at Special FX where his relationship with Ocean began.

I've always stated that I never worked

for Ocean but while working at Special FX, I did write 11 Ocean games on which I was the only programmer. These were *G.U.T.Z.* for

the Spectrum; *Batman Caped Crusader* for the Amstrad; *Red Heat*, *Cabal* and *Midnight Resistance* for both the Spectrum and Amstrad, and *Hudson Hawk* again for both of the 8-bit

machines, plus the original Game Boy.

Thankfully, all the games had great reviews in the magazines at the time, and the scores they received represented the only feedback we developers got from the outside world on our games, so they were very important. It was not until 2009, when I went to my first retro event, that I found out that there were huge numbers of people who enjoyed my games which Ocean published, and they still play them to this very day!

Although Special FX was not actually Ocean itself, it was founded by two ex-



Ocean employees, namely Paul Finnegan and the late Jonathan Smith, who helped us keep our games to Ocean Software's high standard. While I was working at Special FX I made many trips with Paul

to the Ocean offices and got to meet many of the staff including the Suits upstairs. I was always made to feel very welcome.

The coders, artists and the test department were housed down in the cellar, and with each visit made I saw the different games in their various stages of development. We shared tricks of the coding trade and tried to outdo each other with the effects we created in our games.

We always joked at Special FX that we did the games the Ocean team didn't want to do... There may very well be some truth in this but we still had the opportunity to work on some great titles. I remember when I converted the arcade games *Cabal* and *Midnight Resistance* to the Spectrum and Amstrad, we were just given a briefcase containing the arcade PCB inside, with a joystick control panel. I didn't have access to any of the code which made the things tick, so I had to play through both just to see the action and then I had to reproduce what I could see as closely as possible on the destination machine. I refer to this form of game development as a "Visual Port" exercise, and I can now play any game and get a good idea of what the code is doing in the background.

The funniest story I have while was at Special FX involves *Cabal*. I had to go to Ablex, the cassette duplicators in Telford. I couldn't drive at the time, so Ivan Davies, one of the C64 artists, gave me a lift. We were given instructions to



Batman Caped Crusader on the Amstrad.

stay at a hotel nearby and when we got there they only had one room free, so we had to share it. If that wasn't bad enough, it turned out that this room was the bridal suite (which thankfully had two beds, presumably in case the bridal night didn't go well!) – although it did have a swing at the bottom of the master bed... What's wrong with jumping off the wardrobe? Just for info, we left the swing and the wardrobe alone that night.'



Cabal on the Amstrad above and the Spectrum below.



G.U.T.Z. above on the Spectrum.

Midnight Resistance on the Spectrum, right.



Colin Porch

Colin was in his forties when he joined Ocean and as a result, in that young environment, he was known as 'Fossil' by his work colleagues – well, he was just about twice the age of any of them.

Colin joined Ocean in the mid-80's after being head hunted from Software Projects. Colin's story starts a little earlier though, in the late 1970s.

'At the time there were many unaffordable consoles on the market like the Atari 2600. There was another console called the Radofin that was somewhat cheaper so I got one of those.

Radofin



The Radofin 1292 Advanced Programmable Video System.

I saw an advert for a cartridge for the console called a "hobby module" and the blurb suggested that with the device you could put your own games onto the machine. So I went to the local shop and ordered one – the module was £85.

'When I got the cartridge I soon realised you could not program the console in anything but machine code – you had to hand assemble the code on paper then join

the two joystick controllers together, each with their own keypad, and then feed the code in one byte at a time. There was a little DIN socket on the back of the cartridge so you could save games onto tape via a cable. There was also an instruction book that came in the packaging that told you how to program. Unfortunately there were so many mistakes in the text I would be amazed if anyone could do anything with it. I designed and programmed a couple of games on the Radofin – I had truly caught the game-making bug.

'I was undecided which computer I was going to get next, so after some investigation I went for the C64 as Commodore had promised to help with technical support if needed after you bought the machine. I bought a couple of disk drives as well.

'I saw an advert in the local paper for programmers needed for the Commodore VIC-20, Commodore 64 etc. In the interview I spoke about the games that I had developed on the Radofin and that I could transfer them to the Commodore 64 and make them look

more polished in the process. A deal was struck, and that was the first game I had released, *California Gold Rush*. Unfortunately the company disappeared and I got no money out of it. I also lost the printer that I'd lent to them to print out promotional material.'

Undeterred, Colin looked for a new job. 'Imagine had started advertising for programmers in the national magazines. I showed them *California Gold Rush* and, as primitive as it was, I was given a job. Imagine informed the press of their "awesome" new C64 programmer and mentioned me by name – I subsequently got lots of angry mail from customers who had purchased *Gold Rush* and had never received their copy. I ended up sending them tapes to make them happy.

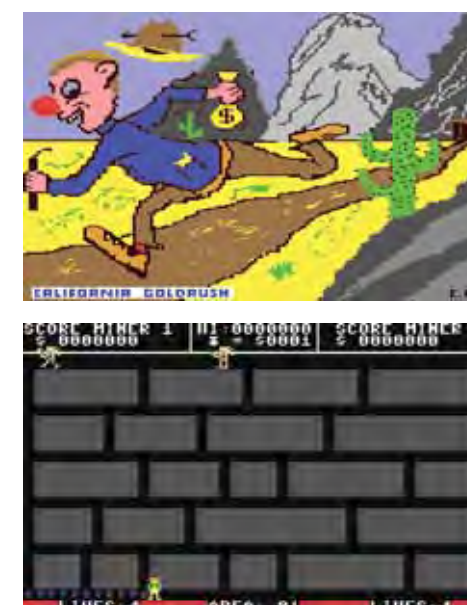
'A few months later Imagine went bust and a large number of us applied for jobs at Software Projects – they took four of us on, myself included. They did not pay as well as Imagine, and I was struggling with my overheads.

'I went to Tommy Barton, one of the owners of Software Projects, asking if I was going to get a Christmas bonus as I was making commitments that the bonus would cover – we had all got one the year before. I was assured I would get one, but nothing came of it, which put me in an awkward position.

'When Colin Stokes phoned me from Ocean early the next year inviting me to join Ocean he made me a terrific offer, including travel expenses from Liverpool to Manchester, that I could not refuse. So

I resigned from Software Projects – they wouldn't pay me for the holidays that I was owed so I took the master disk home of a game I was working on at the time and told them I would give it back once they had paid me. The police turned up and said I was stealing property and to give the disk back. I phoned Colin Stokes and told him of the situation – he said to give the disk back as Ocean would cover the holiday pay, and they did.

'When I joined Ocean in 1986, Gary



California Gold Rush – published by Anik Micro Systems in 1984.

Bracey was development manager. I often talked to Jon Woods and David Ward, they were very approachable.

'Steve Wahid used to drive this big white car, I can't remember what it was, a top of the range thing. We used to park our cars right next to the Quakers' building when we were down in the dungeons. There was a pylon in the car park with a cable attached to it and a group of us manhandled his car around

so it was between the wall and the pylon so he couldn't get it out. Steve was not



very pleased – he was very proud of that car.'

Colin was much older than the average programmer at the time. 'I am a very methodical person so I spend a long time thinking about something before I start, whereas many of the others

A 1987 game Colin remembers little of, *Double Take* on the C64.

when they were asked to do something, off they went. I could see problems they were going to bump into well in advance of the problem happening and at that time they were unaware it was even there. I got a reputation for being a good problem solver – so if the younger developers had a problem they would say go and see 'Granddad'.

'Steve Lavache started at the same time as me and we took turns to drive into the office. I remember him having this posh sports car with a ton of security on it – and it got pinched! He rang me up and asked for a lift the following week – and I said to him it was his turn – and the reply was that he hadn't got a car!'

'The Atari ST became the host machine I used for development and it had a cartridge on the back which connected to a destination machine,

for example the Commodore 64. Steve Lavache and David Collier worked on the development environment, and in particular on the assembler that, when compiled on the ST, converted the written code to machine code which was sent to the destination machine to run.

'The first game I wrote on this development environment was *Gryzor*. I played the arcade game in the office and at first I thought it it an impossible



task. Lee Cowley was the tester at the time and as I was so rubbish at arcade games I asked him to get to a certain level so I could see it to convert to the

C64. The development took a long time because I also helped out on the NTSC version. With all the movements and fire mapped onto the joystick, I had to use the SPACE bar on the C64 for jumping – the reviews at the time questioned the logic behind this because it made the game somewhat difficult to play. I had no option.

'After *Gryzor* came *Operation Wolf* and then *Double Take*. We got one of the *Operation Wolf* machines in the office – after I finished the conversion I got a lot of mail from those who played the game all asking the same question, how did I make different parts of the screen scroll independently of each other? Up until that point, scrolling on the Commodore

given the title to program but said it could not be done so I was asked to give it my best shot. Gary Bracey showed me the game on the Amstrad and asked me if it could be done on the C64 – I had my doubts. To do an isometric game needs a lot of CPU power and I didn't think the 6502 was up to it. I was given Jon Ritman's Z80 listing – I went through it line by line and worked out how Jon was doing everything before I started the conversion. If there was something I didn't understand I rang Jon, who was in London at the time, and he talked me through it. When I had finished the game all the guys at Ocean loved it, as they honestly thought it couldn't be done on the machine. It was awarded 98% in



64 was all or nothing! I was happy to tell them and other programmers how I did it. *Operation Wolf* took around five months to make and was well reviewed by the press.

'I don't remember *Double Take* very well – I did the coding for it and I recall the player being a scientist where a dimensional shift created two worlds you had to explore. I was just given the brief and got on with it.

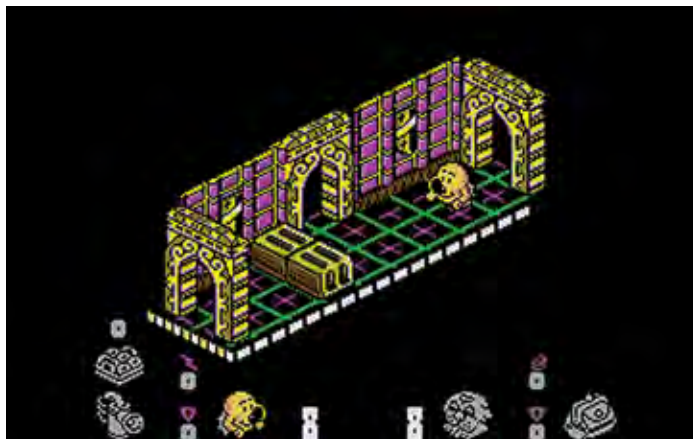
'*Head Over Heels* on the C64 was next. I had heard that others had been

issue 63 of *Zzap!64* magazine.

'I was then loaned to Special FX when they were struggling to write a game on the Nintendo Game Boy and my experience with the processor in the console put me ahead of the others at Ocean.

'During my spare time at Special FX, unbeknown to anybody, I wrote a 16-bit Atari ST version of *Head Over Heels* at home. What a difference 16-colours make! I showed Gary Bracey, and he jumped on it and Ocean bought it from

They said it couldn't be done, but in 1987 Colin did it – *Head Over Heels* on the C64.



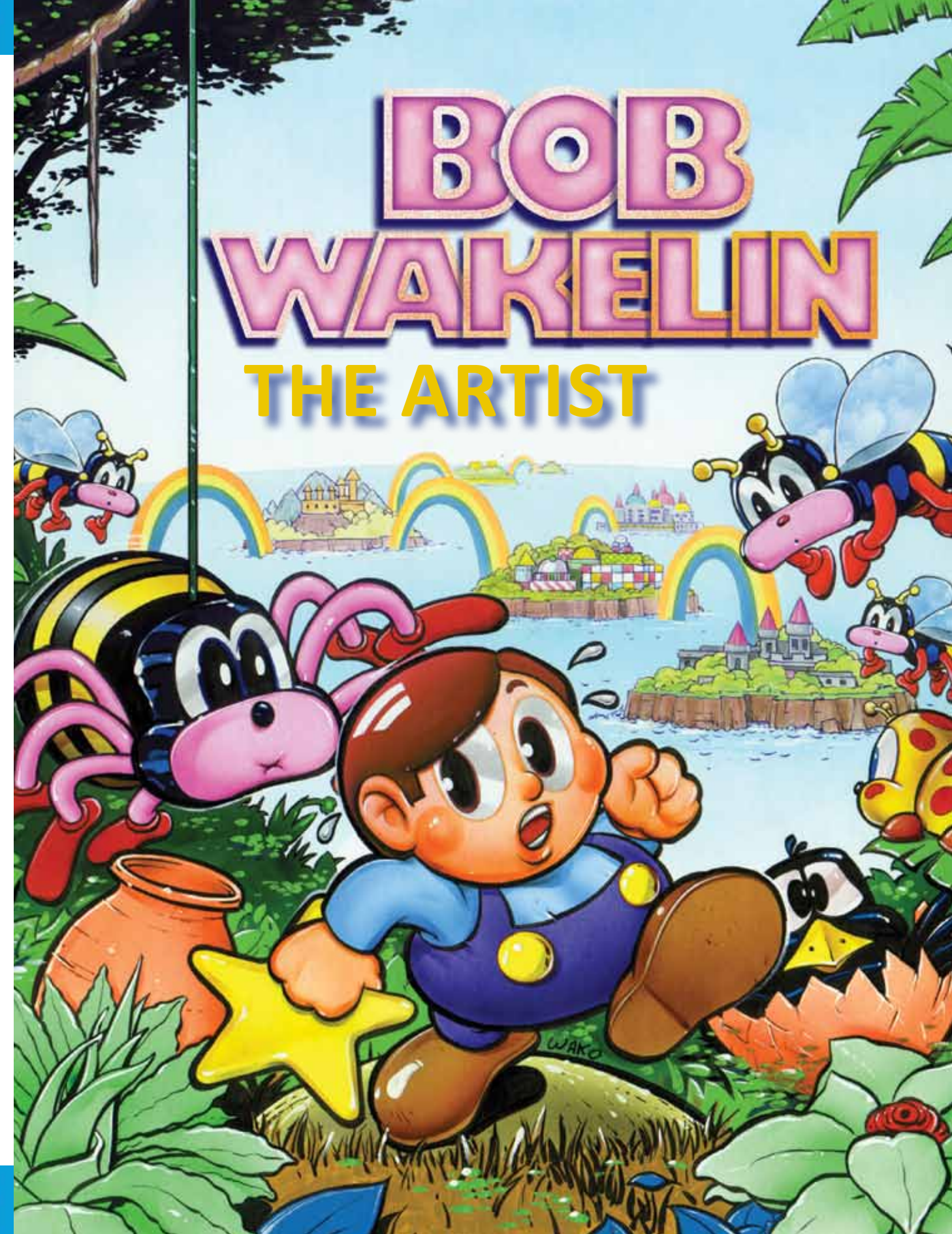
What a difference 16-bit colour makes: *Head Over Heels* on the the Atari ST – written on spec and published by Ocean in 1989.

me. I then converted it to the Amiga as well and that was released to good reviews – *Commodore User* gave the game 94%.

‘Gary called me back to his office from Special FX to a meeting – I was

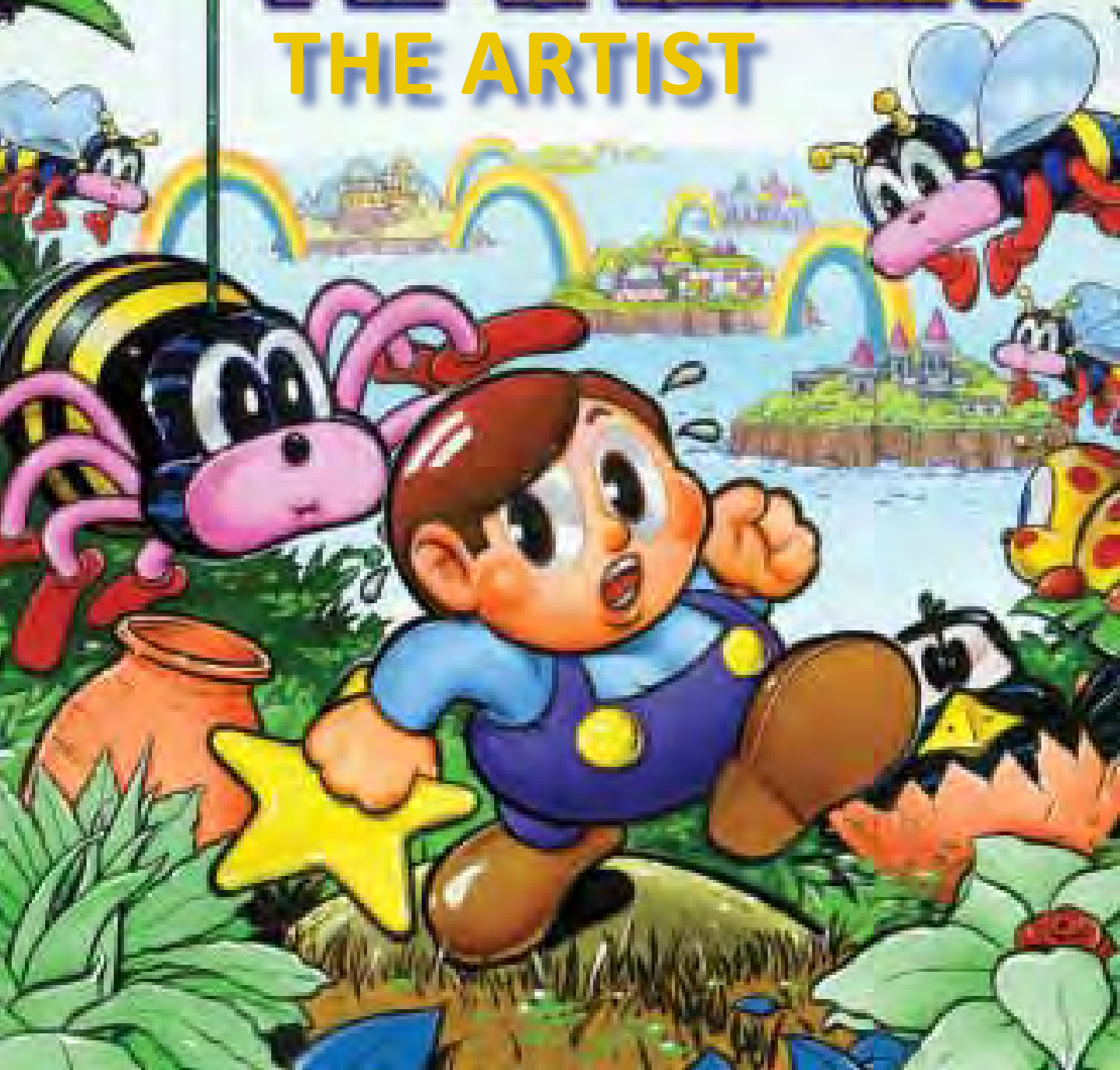
informed that the 8-bit era was coming to an end and he thought I would be better off working for myself. I don’t think I had any input into the matter – I got a letter from Ocean saying they had respected my decision to become a freelancer.

‘A week or so later I got a phone call from Gary who asked me to go to the Ocean office – so I did. I then saw *Parasol Stars* and I was asked if I could do a C64 version. Others had been asked, but again no one thought it could be done. I developed the game over a number of months. Ocean had given me a £17,000 advance payment for the game. Unfortunately I was having marital problems at the time in the course of which the disks containing the game data were wiped. I explained this to Gary. He was very understanding and let me keep the advance payment, but that was the last work I ever did for Ocean.’



BOB WAKELIN

THE ARTIST



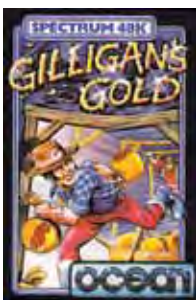


In the fierce battle among games software publishers for market share which marked the early 1980s onwards, Ocean's artwork pulled ahead of just about every competitor, and that was down to the genius of one man – Bob Wakelin.

The Artist



Moon Alert was a *Crash Smash* and the reviewers agreed that: 'Ocean's packaging and title screens have been delightful recently, and *Moon Alert* is no exception.'

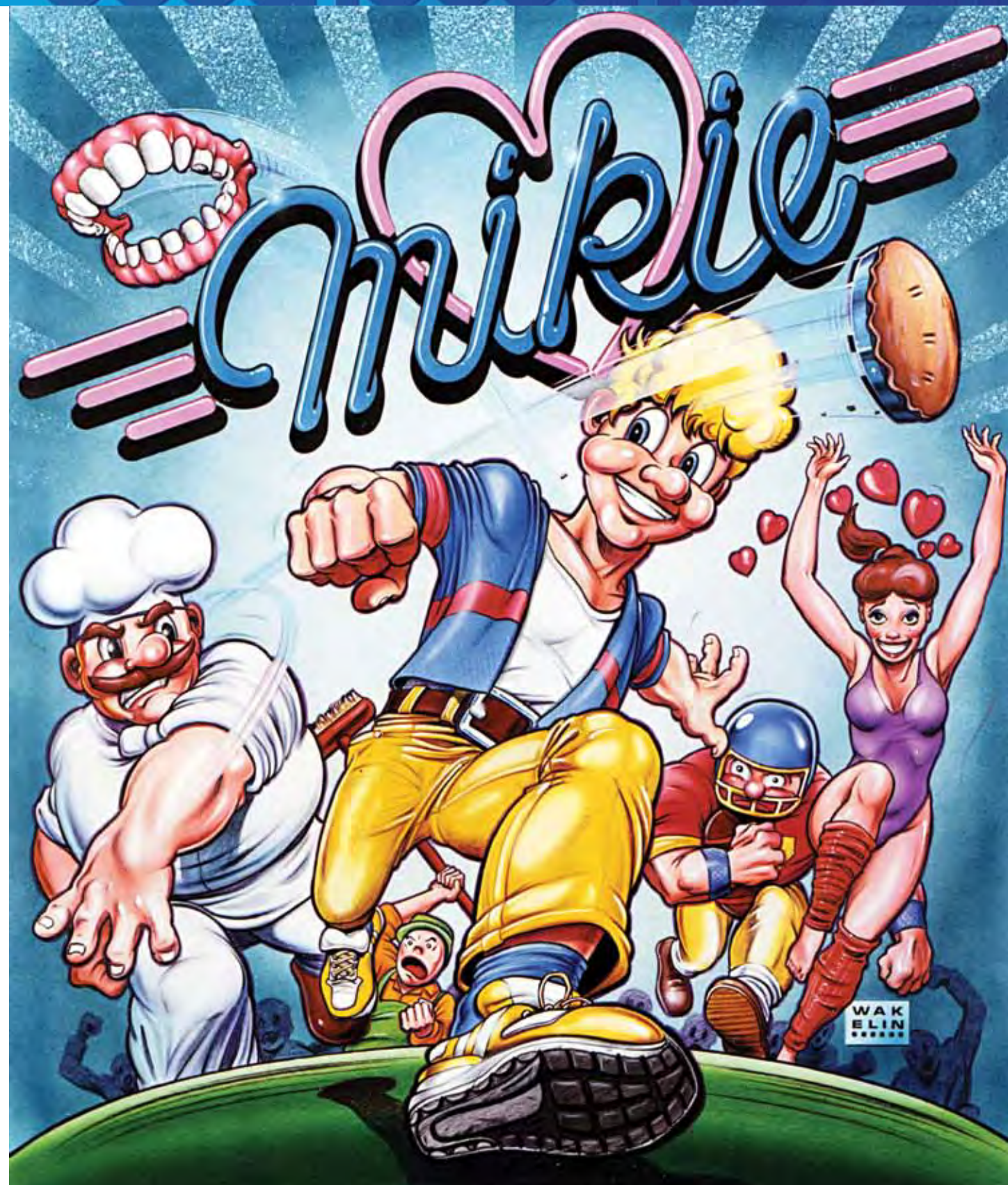


In the first years of the 1980s, the fledgling software houses only had mail order as a sales outlet, and it hardly mattered what kind of artwork they employed on the small audio cassettes which carried the data. And then a few so-called micro shops began to open up the market, soon followed by the chain stores, WH Smith, J Menzies and Boots. Suddenly, there was competition for shelf space and the attention span of the swelling customer base. Brand, design, style became the new watchwords. And in those primitive years, the inlays of three companies stood out: first Imagine, then Ultimate Play the Game, and Ocean.

As occurs so much in the history of British video games, Bob's long association with Ocean came about largely through serendipity and happenstance. 'I'd been working with this guy Blair, who was a decent artist himself, quite a few years older than me. We were working on some projects but getting nowhere, and then he mentioned

he knew Dave Ward and Jon Woods. I don't know how he knew them, but he'd done something for them... *Armageddon* maybe? He thought we could do more for them as they seemed to be doing a lot. We went along to meet them at the pub round the corner from Peter Kavanagh's [a famous Toxteth hostelry at 2-4 Egerton Street].'

Ocean's founders, keenly aware of the importance of marketing and the quality of artwork they required, signed up Blair-Wakelin on the spot, although the partnership fell apart rapidly. '*Moon Alert* [1984] was the first thing I did in conjunction with Blair and then *Gilligan's Gold*. I think he drew the background on that one and I did the main character. And then after that he kind of fell apart really. He was a bit of a hippie, bit of an acid casualty. He couldn't meet deadlines so I started to take everything on. We were working from my flat in Liverpool, and by the time he turned up in the mid-afternoon I'd drawn the damned thing myself. So I encouraged him to move





Jacob Kurtzberg, better known as Jack Kirby, pictured in 1982.

out, do his own thing, and I carried on working for Ocean. That's exactly how it started really. Completely out of the blue.'

Bob says if it hadn't been for working with Blair he would never have become involved with the computer games industry, certainly not at that crucial point, when it was 'all kicking off'. And he's probably right, because Bob Wakelin, game inlay artist *extraordinaire*, had no interest whatsoever in computer games.

'I never touched them. I heard rumours about people with these strange new-fangled machines, but I never touched them. In fact, most of the people I hung with didn't have them either. It was a generational thing. I was already in my late twenties when all this was going on. And it was a kids' thing, so I was thirteen or fourteen years older

"British comics didn't mean anything to me. Marvel was what really inspired me."

than most of the people that were into it. To me it was just a bloody game, that; I'd rather be having sex than doing that. But when you're fourteen it's just a pipe-dream, having sex I, mean! It was in those days, anyway.'

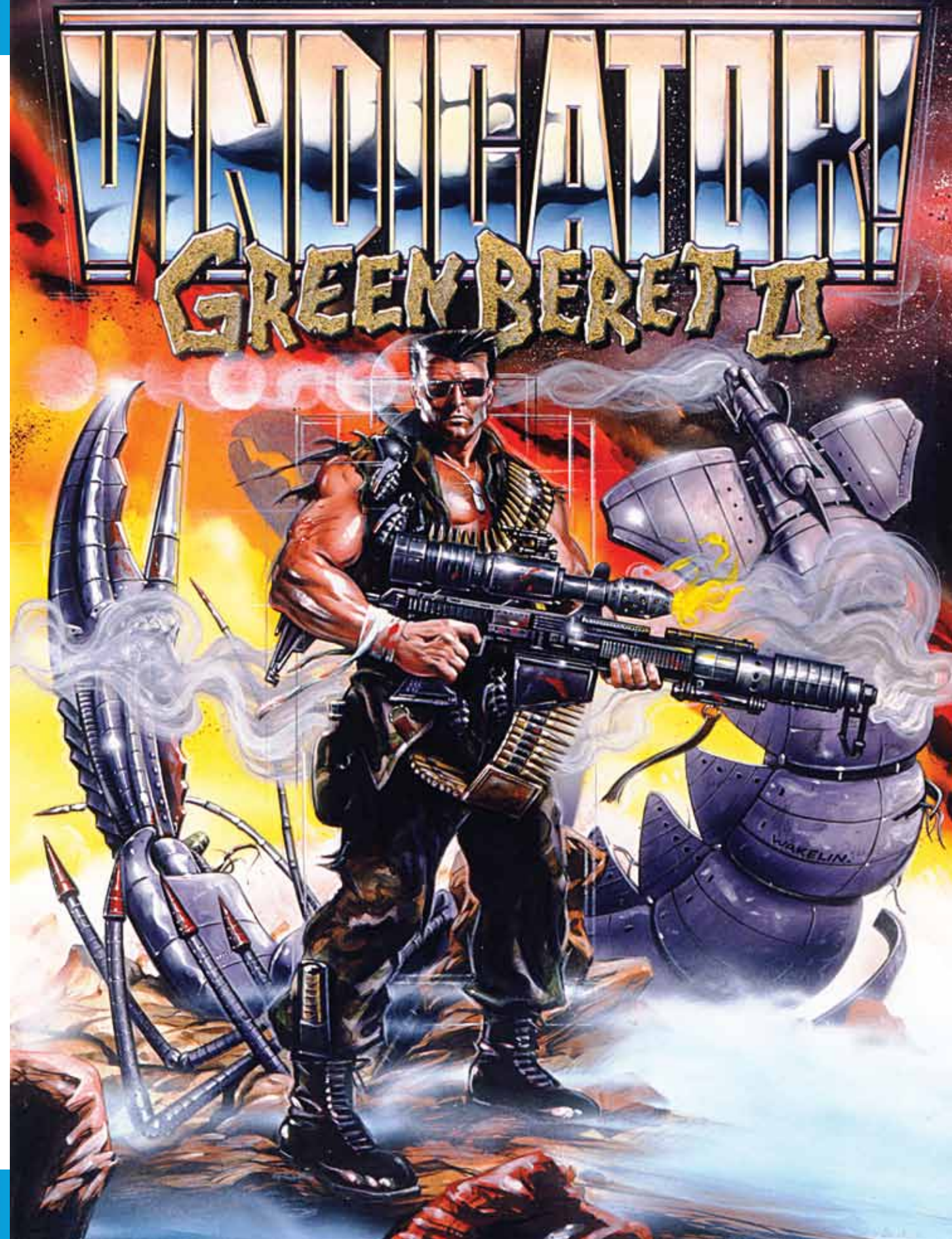
Arcade coin-ops held a slight attraction. 'I loved playing *Galaxian*, *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids*, all that kind of stuff in the pub. It was more of a social thing to me, a fun thing to do with mates. And then I'd go round to people's houses and they had that tennis game on

the telly, you know, the Atari stuff. But it didn't stand out to me as being anything worth getting into because I was more into music and comic books, erm... women and beer.'

Kids aren't interested in trees!

The man who became the public face of Ocean started as an artist in childhood, copying American comics. 'I liked to draw. There were other things at school that interested me as well, but the other things required me to be good at maths and science... so I realised I was better off just drawing. I loved comic books and I think pretty quickly I fancied being a comic-book artist. I wasn't really a huge fan of British comics growing up. When I saw the American stuff initially – some of the DC Comics, stuff like *Superman* – that was more interesting to me than what the British comics were, you know the *Beano* and *Dandy*, which I kinda enjoyed but really didn't mean anything to me. And when I saw the first Marvel stuff, that was what really inspired me.'

As he was to many an aspiring artist, the work of Jack Kirby [1917–1994] for Marvel and DC Comics was a seminal influence on Bob. 'Initially I copied the artists and then I started to be influenced by them, and that influence would show in me work at school in art lessons. And that's when the teachers started to shout at me and tell me that I was completely wrong, that I shouldn't be drawing like that. "It doesn't work, people don't look like that, Bob" – foreshortening, for



instance, exaggerated stuff, they didn't like it. They wanted me to work in a more traditional way.'

But it didn't really work. 'I did people

in skin-tight costumes, leaping about kicking the shit out of each other! I did learn all the shading, shadows and three-dimensional objects and the like. It was obviously useful but I resisted it because I was so bored. I just wanted to draw things that leapt out of the page all the time, I didn't want to learn the

basics. We used to do things like – *we're going to go out and draw horses... and draw a landscape. Yeah,*' Bob waves his arms wildly in illustration, 'like draw a landscape – it's on fire because a huge spaceship has just crashed into it, and there's little things flying out with batwings. That's the way I saw things. I didn't want to draw bloody trees... and I still don't, to be honest. That's why the [inlay] backgrounds, you'll notice, are entirely rudimentary because I can't be arsed. I want to draw the figures and communicate the message, because I think like a child. I want to see something that's right in me face and go, *woah!* Kids aren't interested in trees!'

Before anyone asks, Bob has nothing left of his early work, and thinks his dad trashed the lot because 'he hated me'. If

it were ever to be discovered, the lucky collector would be faced with images reminiscent of Lowry, though he would never have approved of them. 'I can remember doing stick figures, and I have vivid memories of drawing volcanoes and lava burning people alive – stick figures with flames coming off.'

The young Wakelin left school at 16 with low-grade CSE passes in most subjects, though he excelled in English and art, and went to art college. 'In those days all you had to do was take along a portfolio, you didn't have to have any particular qualifications. So

"I didn't want to draw bloody trees...and I still don't, to be honest."

I took me portfolio along, they liked it and I immediately got in, which is unbelievable to think about now. That's the same as how you got a job then. You took your stuff along, you showed it to the art director, he liked it, you got a job. You didn't need to write anything. You didn't need to prove anything. No qualifications.'

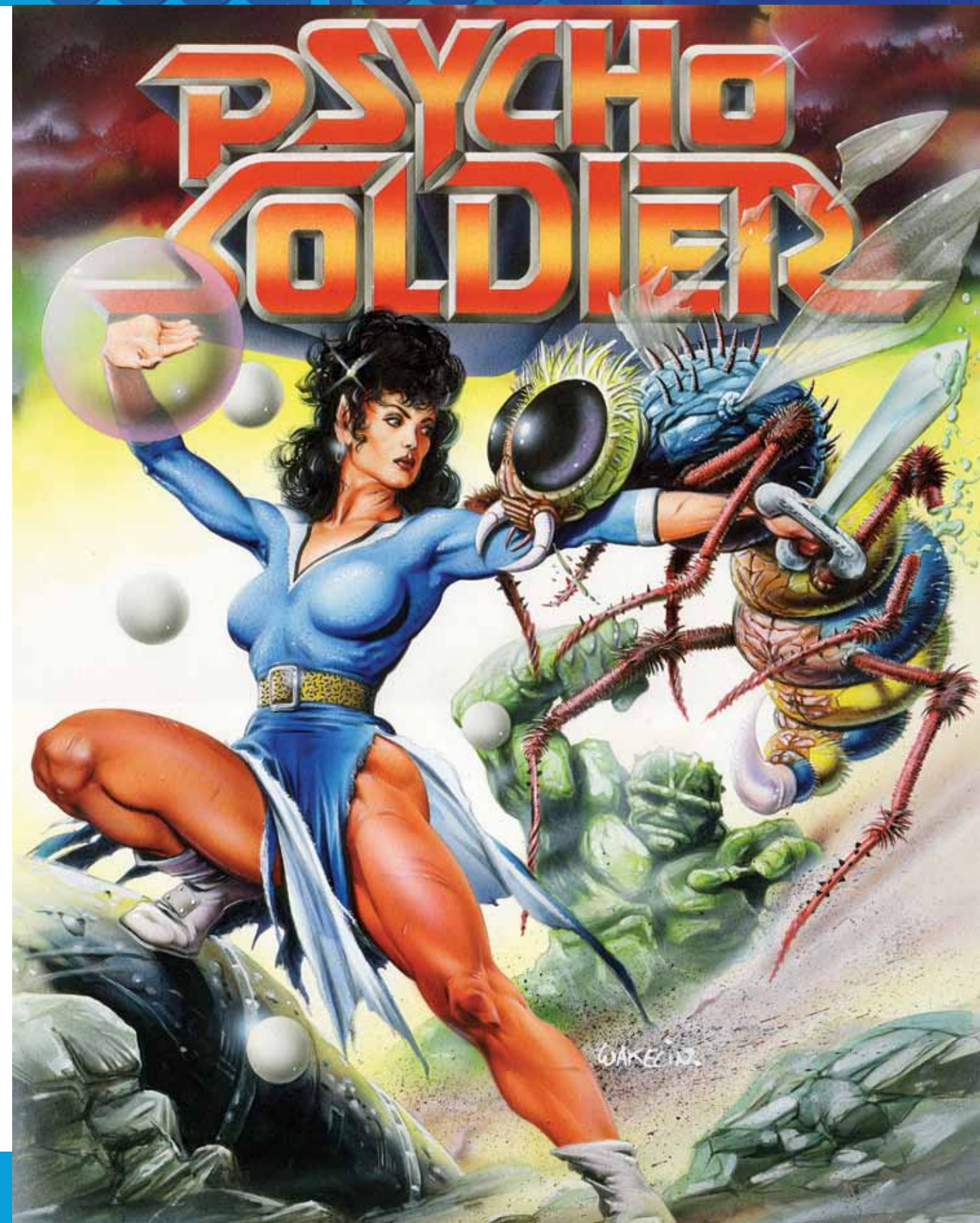
Bob's was in fact attending a 'tech college' where most students were on day release from the John Summers & Sons steelworks in Shotton, an industrial town at the mouth of the River Dee, to the west of Chester. Not surprisingly, Bob's fellow students were suspicious of the arty bunch. 'The art department was



'That's why the backgrounds are entirely rudimentary because I can't be arsed.'



Looking closely at the art for Daley Thompson's Decathlon reveals the truth: Bob says he was never any good at feet and did everything to cover them up or have them fade away.



the only part of the college wasn't on day release. Everyone else was working at the steelworks, and they thought we were complete weirdos – well, they didn't think I was a weirdo! But I was still a skinhead when I went to art school, so I could blend in a little bit with the people who worked in the factories, wearing, like, denims. By the time I left, though, I looked a bit more of a hippie.'

The three-year course included all kinds of topics which Bob wasn't interested in, like photography, and he reckons that in the three years what he

"Now, you can use Photoshop to twist lettering, bevel and emboss, so it's easy to come up with lettering that's so cool."



Flyer Fox – a 1984 Ocean game that doesn't appear on any lists, was eventually released with different art on a Bug-Byte budget label in 1986 for the Spectrum (to poor reviews) and on the C64 by Tymac.

learned that was useful could have been condensed into a year. However, one subject was to have a great bearing on his future at Ocean. 'There was typography – hand-drawing lettering instead of using Letraset, which I kind of resisted for a while and then I got interested in it. Now, you can use Photoshop to twist lettering, bevel and emboss, and even do basic stuff, so it's easy to come up with lettering that's so cool. But when I was doing the Ocean art I had to hand-draw it and use a ruler and everything. I would never have been able to do if I hadn't learned all those basics in art school.

'After I graduated I was on the dole for about six months, trying to find work locally, including Chester. And

the jobs I got offered...' he says with a sour expression. 'There was this studio specialised in agricultural machinery and I immediately thought... No, No, NO! Someone was going to fix me up with a job in a wallpaper factory doing designs for wallpaper. That was my ex-headmaster – he fucking hated me. And then I applied for a job in Liverpool.'

Nutz and Batman

Liverpool changed everything. For about two years he took on a lot of freelance design work, including a little bit for Marvel, but realised he was never going to be a comic-book artist after all. 'You had to work like 18 hours a day to do it and I couldn't get me head round that at all. I liked to go to the pub and do other things, you know? Otherwise I was doing all right, but it was a mixture of stuff like line drawings for small companies who were paying kind of decent money and I could bang it out really quickly. But it was pretty boring.'

So he joined a band as a self-taught keyboardist and virtually stopped the illustration work when the band signed with a label, which meant they all got paid. But Bob kept his hand in with the odd illustration job and after two years started working with Blair, through whom he became involved with Ocean – or, as it was then, Spectrum Games. Jon Woods and David Ward were in the earliest phase of assessing the market through mail order advertising, the 'we'll turn around games from scratch in the



28-day allowed period” phase. One of the games the respondents wanted was a version of popular coin-op *Frogger*. Bob grins at the memory. ‘Yeah, A frog, and you try to run him over in a car or something. “Bob, we’re ripping off *Frogger*... seriously, you know, Bob, there’s this really successful game called *Frogger* and we’re going to do something



Too violent to use – the original art for *Kid Vicious*, who became the much gentler *Kid Chaos*.

exactly the same.” And that was it, basically. *Big frog*, I thought, Super-hero frog, with a cape...’ He bursts into laughter. ‘I didn’t know what I was doing. I thought I’ll just do that, and they really loved it! And a lot of that early stuff I didn’t actually see anything of the game. That was *Road Frogger*

and then there was *Caterpillar*, which was awful, awful bit of work that.’

The artwork may have been poor in his opinion, but the game sold, and more commissions came in to bolster Bob’s income. ‘The pay was all right, as good as anything else, and it was fun to do. Gradually, the Ocean work became so frequent I had less time to do anything else. Some jobs were done in a couple of days, and that’s why so much of that early stuff is bloody awful, because

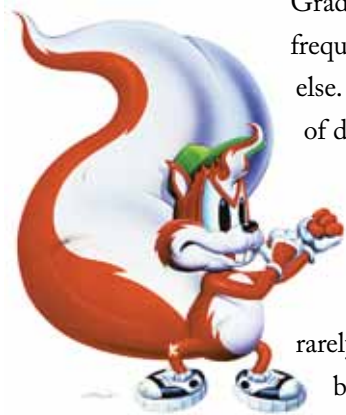
I was banging them out so quick. There was no time to think.’

And – as with *Match Day* – he rarely had much to go by in the way of a brief. ‘It was like, right, find a football

book, you know, copy a load of pictures, alter faces a little bit, change the kits so they’re not recognisable.’ And always the pressure. ‘Sometimes I’d actually plagiarise something because there was no time to do anything else. I couldn’t get an idea, and sometimes the game idea was so uninspiring. I had so little to go on. Once or twice they supplied me with an image they wanted me to work from. But it was incredibly rare. There was no art direction whatsoever. They trusted me to go away and do something. Every job was quite different. The first two to three years, really, you had to move on the hoof with it...’

With so much work going through his hands, and at such a pace, was anything ever rejected? ‘There were one or two things that they changed slightly, and there were a couple of things which weren’t used because the game never got made, and a couple where the licensor didn’t want the artwork, like *Miami Vice*. The only one they knocked back was *Kid Chaos* [1994, for Amiga and Amiga CD32] because it was too violent. It cracks me up that someone shaking a bully with a wooden club is considered too violent! I think they put a nail through the club. I never changed it and I think they got Gary Macnamara in the studio – who did some of the *Mr Nutz* stuff as well – to make the alteration.’

The name brings up another amusing story. ‘I gave the Mr Nutz character Converse-type boots, and David Ward said, “Oh no, kids these days, they’re



all wearing those high-tops with the tongues hanging out of their boots and their laces undone.” Well, that fashion had just gone. I lived in bloody Toxteth. I saw everyday what the kids wore, and they were all wearing the old Converse again. So I gave him Converse, but he wouldn’t have it. He got Gary to change it and give him these awful, clunky boots. Y’see I was always on the money! I

always knew what was going on. I was on the street!’

Given Bob’s comics background, the Batman licence must have been a treat. ‘Yeah. I was made up. Never having done anything for DC, I was really pleased to get that. When they sent them to DC, I was thinking Oh God they’re gonna come

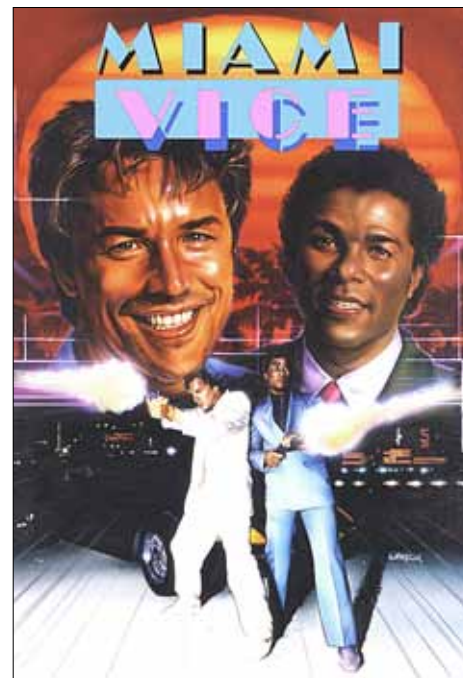
back and I’ll have to change everything. But the only change they asked for, they got me to shorten his ears. It sailed through, which was quite amazing actually.

Skiping out

Ocean’s management was aware that not every game developed or converted from an arcade original came up to scratch, and also that good presentation could help to sell a product less than perfect, as Bob’s experience shows. ‘I wasn’t aware at first that that was what they were hoping for. I wasn’t into gaming. If a game was crap or good it was meaningless to me. But eventually they said to me,

“Look Bob, this game’s crap, so can you do something really good?” Like with *Highlander*: “This is awful so you gotta do a real number on it.” That’s when I realised I was worth a bit more money to Ocean, and I did start putting prices up around then. I became aware that the cover picture actually had a big impact.’

Miami Vice was one game he remembers for which he pulled out all the stops. ‘I don’t think it was very good game, and I was asked to do a really nice illustration for it, which I thought



I did, and they’d already printed posters and point-of-sale stuff for it. But then the licensor knocked it back because Don Johnson’s agent wouldn’t allow illustrations of his face – we had to use photographs. Well, look where he is now! So, Don, if you’re reading this, f***k you!’

For *Wizball*, which many consider



Because his agent demanded a photograph and not a painting of Don Johnson, you never got to see Bob’s much better original art.

Three of Bob's favourites from his prodigious output.



the epitome of Wakelin game art, there was more support from the development team. 'Sometimes, Dave dragged me down to the dungeon and these spotty kids were all sitting there, rattling their chains, and they'd show me a demo. I can

'New Zealand Story... aarrgh. That was a nightmare. That was a pain in the arse, and there was no fun in doing it.'

remember the shots and there was like a cat and a wizard... I can remember there was a ball whizzing round. And that's about it really. And I reflected some of those pipes. And I got some screenshots in the post.'

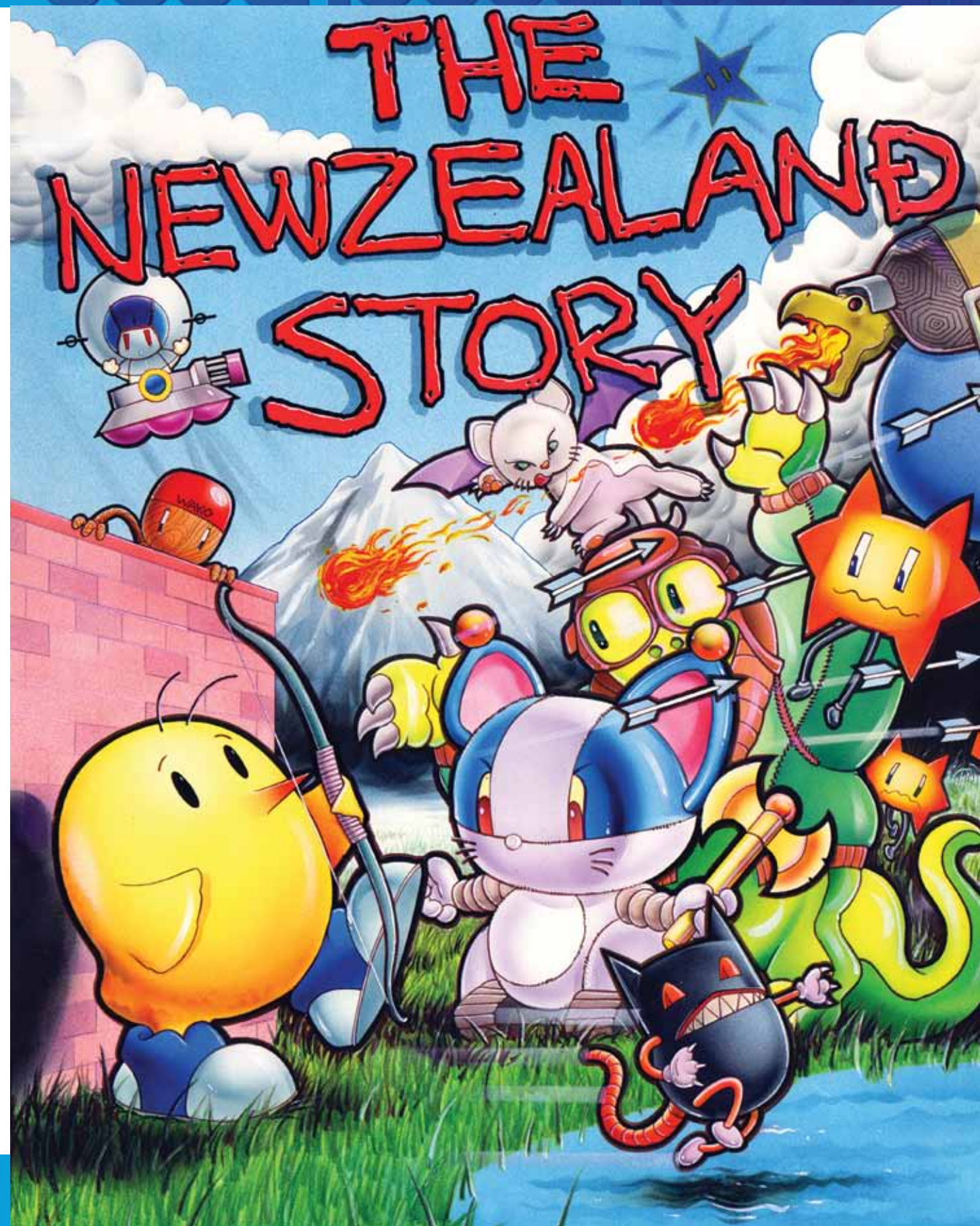
When pushed to name a favourite game in terms of his artwork, Bob gums up. It seems he remembers more the horrors. 'The second *Rainbow Islands* one – *Parasol Stars*. Absolutely drove me crazy. What was the other one, *New Zealand Story*... aarrgh. That was a nightmare. That was one I had loads of screenshots for, and they wanted me to get in as many characters as possible. That was a pain in the arse, and there

was no fun in doing it. The cartoony ones were more enjoyable to do.' Even *Daley Thompson's Decathlon* gets short shrift. 'That's rubbish. Technically it's crap. I can understand why it's iconic. The design and the layout of it works really well, and Daley's coming right at you, but technically... But then, it was 1984... I was still trying to get a grip on what I was doing.'

And then, finally, a handful Bob finds acceptable. 'Athena I like; I like *Batman*, that's pretty good; I like *Billy the Kid*, apart from Steve's lettering; *Central Intelligence*, that was a waste of time the amount of work I put in there, to get released in Taiwan or somewhere. There's a lot I like. If it's a great game and if the cover captured the game.'

The last Bob Wakelin commission for Ocean came a little under two years before Infogrames acquired the company. He had seen the writing on the wall for some time.

'I was getting less work and we were producing fewer games for a start.' Suddenly, it seemed money was tight, Ocean needed to make savings and Bob had become a considerable cost factor.



I got knocked back on invoices. I was doing *Central Intelligence* and Dave Ward said to me, "We're trying something new with this, it's kind of experimental." So basically he wanted me to do something



really amazing. I put this incredible amount of work... three weeks, into it. It was a big piece of art, bigger than anything I'd done before. I sent the invoice, it got to Dave Ward and I got a phone call from Steve Blower telling Dave had knocked the invoice back. He complained that he'd

looked at some of my invoices back over a year or two and seen that I'd been charging a lot more, and he wanted to know what I'd been doing.

'But I was charging what these

"Carl Pugh said, 'Bob, they're going to throw all your artwork in a skip. Everything in the warehouse is going'."

things were worth, because the jobs were becoming more sophisticated, but he still wanted to pay me in 1992 what he was paying in 1985. Which... is a businessman for you. It was at that point where I thought if he's worrying about something like that... I don't think I ever saw Dave Ward after that and I started to look for other stuff to do. I did one or two games after that, the *Alien Olympics* thing, which was only released in... Orkney or somewhere. And that was it, it

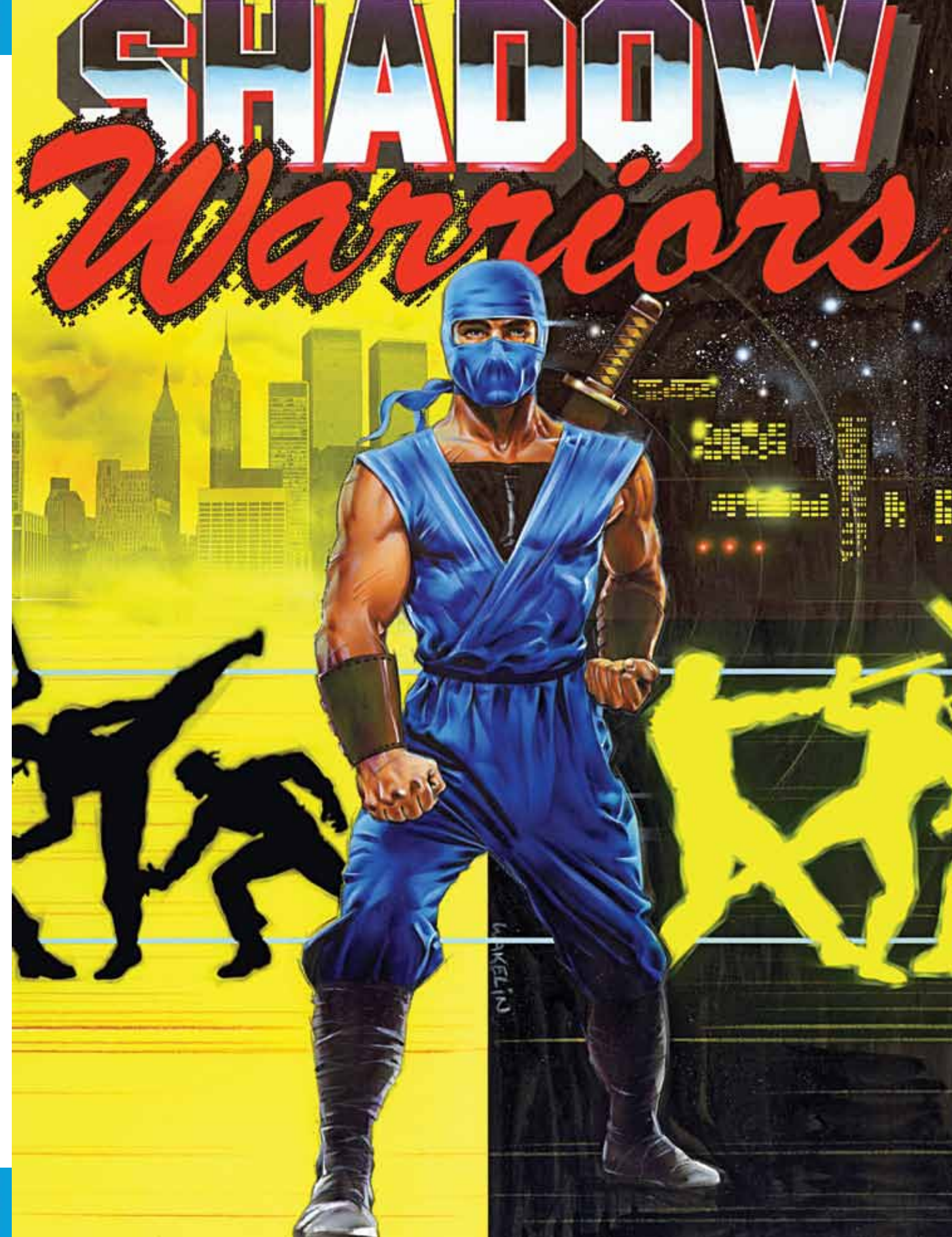
fell apart, dissolved, and I moved on.'

It wasn't, however, the last time Bob visited Ocean's Castlefield offices. In the hot summer of 1997 he received a call from Carl Pugh, who had taken over the art department on the departure of Steve Blower. 'He said, "Bob, they're going to throw all your artwork in a skip. They're closing it all down. Everything in the warehouse is going. Is there any way you can get over?"' So me mate, a photographer, had a small van and we went straight over there and I grabbed whatever I could find. Some was wrecked, footprints all over it where it was all over the floor, so I left it there. It was the drum scanning, where they peeled off the surface of the art to wrap around the drum, and it had never been stuck back on, so it was kind of thrown around. A lot of it was fine, so I grabbed whatever I could and we drove away. But loads of artwork was missing. I had some things I'd picked up previously and brought home from the office, but I'd never thought about it. I just thought at some point I'll get the artwork back. As you do, when you're busy.'

Going digital

In the twelve years Bob Wakelin created game inlay images for Ocean, the world of graphic design changed dramatically with the inexorable march of technology.

'I had an A0-size drawing board – not an easel – a compressor and an airbrush, loads of Dr Martin inks, a few brushes, loads of pencils, scalpels – that



was a crucial thing for cutting out the Frisk masks. With airbrushing you had to protect some areas, so you used Frisk film over the drawing, cutting out areas, pretty much like in *Photoshop* where you use the wand to isolate an area and then work into it. It's very similar in many ways, but without the wounds from the scalpel. I'd use things to create edges. The famous one's doing smoke and dust. I'd have a toilet roll, tear a chunk off and you get like a serrated edge and then I'd spray over the edge of it and keep moving it around, and you end up with an explosion'.

In about 2000, Bob began to use Adobe *Photoshop*. 'I was getting less work as people were moving over to digital, so I mixed it for a bit and within a year or so, probably 95 per cent of what I was

doing was digital. I used to do pencil drawings, scan them and use the mouse. I learned to airbrush with a

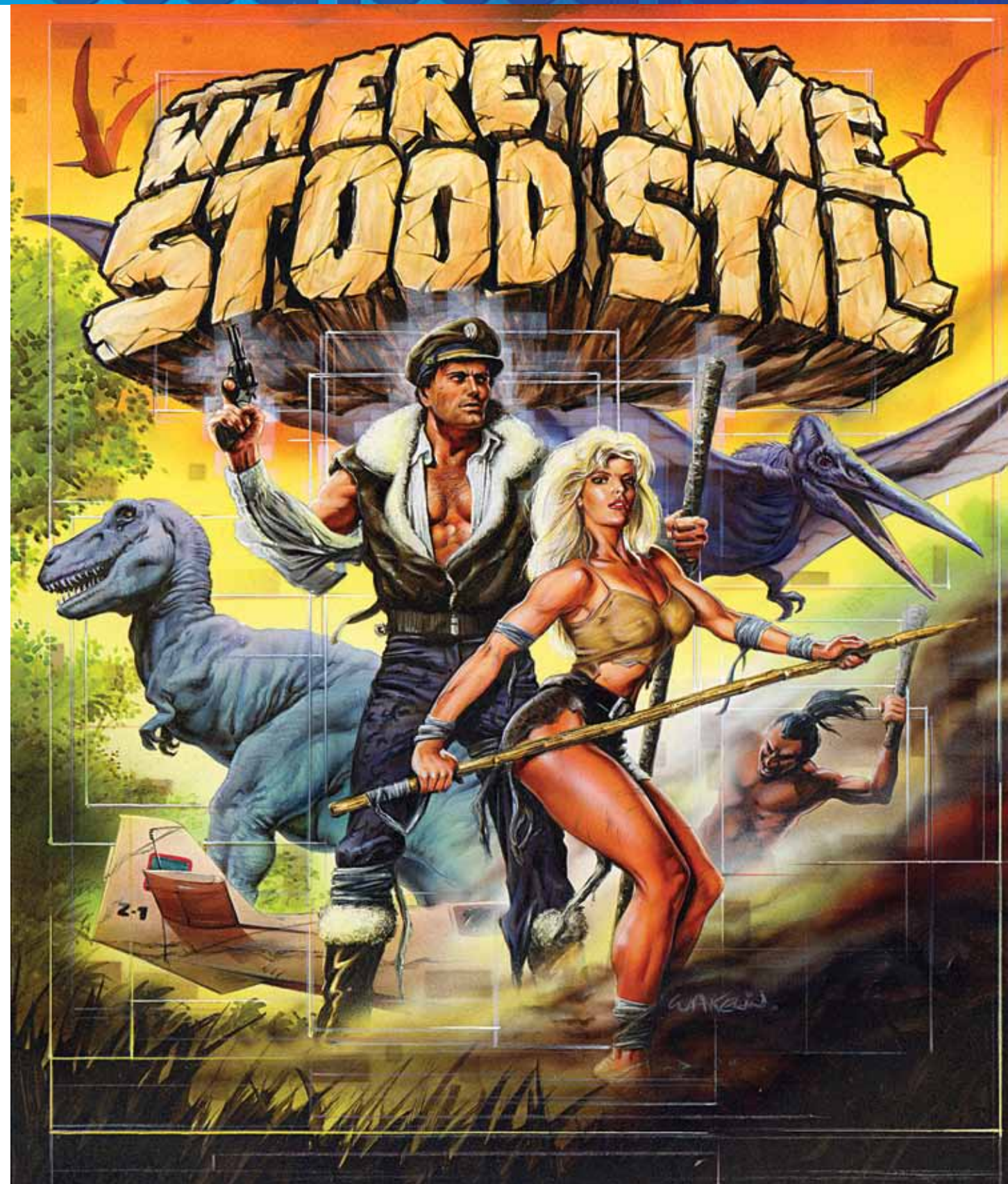
mouse. But in the last couple of years I've moved over to using a pen. Masking and airbrushing that was pretty much like what I did on the drawing board but without getting covered in ink and inhaling it, and dropping scalpels through me toes. It was great. I really liked it, except for the Macs then were like eleven gig hard drives, and I'd do a great big load of clouds and... *vvrrr*... I'd go and make a cup of coffee. And I thought everyone says it's faster on a computer and it's taking me longer to work in *Photoshop* than with a bloody airbrush!' 

Of course, with digital art, there is no original on a board to sell, and any Wakelin art of the Ocean period became very collectible. 'I was surprised when I found out that so many people were still into it. It was only when someone, an enthusiast, got in touch with me that I realised there were all these people who loved it. I thought it was the odd... geek! It did worry me a bit when I attended my first retro event.. I used to collect comics, so I know the amount of seriously disturbed people who are collectors, and I was really worried about what might happen. But there were only a few who seemed seriously disturbed. But that's because I think they're different to comic-book fans, who really are very worrying.'

In the intervening years, virtually all of the old Ocean originals have been sold to collectors. 'I've only got the *Mr Nutz* logo, the *Frankie* logo, and one of the C&VG covers. But I'm quite happy that the people who bought them are people who have them for the right reasons. In the end, Ocean only valued them for what it could bring them. It's that corporate mentality – nothing is actually worth anything other than what they've got in their bank account. I realise some of that work I could sell for a lot more now than I did ten years ago, but I'm not bothered about it. When they were kids it meant so much to them, and now they've got it on the wall.'



'I did people in skin-tight costumes, leaping about kicking the shit out of each other!' And then Time Stood Still...



The Sound and Music of Ocean

When it comes to music and sound design, the early part of the Ocean story is dominated by one man: Martin Galway. 'I didn't know that much about Ocean to be honest,' Martin surprisingly admits. 'The only games which interested me were BBC games such as *Elite*, *Aviator* and *Revs*.' One thing the fledgling musician did recognise, however, was the power of advertising. 'Ocean did a lot of it, and they were often back-cover advertisers. It was basically their high quality advertising that told me they were serious about selling games.'

With Ocean also based in nearby Manchester, they became the first

candidate when Martin applied for work at the end of 1984; by late January the following year he had been hired by David Collier (head of software development prior to Gary Bracey) purely as a programmer and with no particular emphasis on audio.

Until this point, all Ocean's sound and music had been handled by third-parties. 'There was no audio staff of any kind,' Martin recalls, 'just a Seiko music keyboard sitting in Dave Collier's office. So I decided to make a generalised music program that could play any tune. I sat down with the Commodore 64 programming manual and proceeded to write the software that would exploit every feature of its music chip.'

With Ocean Software fast becoming the premier software house in the UK, Martin began to find himself very busy. 'I was unhappy that there weren't enough other audio staff and that I had a long backlog of games to work on,' he says somewhat ruefully. 'I was a disillusioned kid and shouldn't have left. But I've enjoyed my life since, so it's just a case of wondering what would have happened to myself and Ocean if I hadn't left.'

One distinct possibility is that a budding musician named Jonathan Dunn, who had recently sent out several demos of his work to Ocean, would not have been hired. 'I was getting a good response from many publishers, and was pretty certain that I'd get some freelance work from them,' Jonathan says. He was studying music at Preston College and planned to continue his education while working on freelance projects. Ocean's Gary Bracey had different ideas. 'I got a letter inviting me to Manchester and to my surprise, Gary offered me a job!'

So began Jonathan Dunn's illustrious nine-year career at Ocean.

Joining around the same time was Gari Biasillo, who had been working for Hampshire-based Interceptor Software, designing music and sound effects for games such as *Joe Blade*. 'A friend of mine called David Blake had joined Ocean after Software Projects closed down,' Gari recalls, 'and one day he suggested it would be a good idea to work with him and that I talk to Gary Bracey.'

Gari accepted his chance with glee and, together with the demo disks for the work he had just completed on *Joe Blade*, visited Ocean headquarters, meeting one of his heroes in the process. 'I chatted with a few of the guys there, including Martin Galway whose brain I picked for some of his audio techniques,' Gari says proudly. 'I learned quite a lot from my brief chat with him that day and still remember it fondly.'

Gari was offered a job the very same



Chip Wars – SID vs AY

When it came to videogames music in the 1980s it was a clear battle between the Commodore 64's SID (Sound Interface Device) chip and the Amstrad/Spectrum General Instrument's AY programmable chip. But was there a clear winner?

Fred Gray: The C64 was far superior to the rival 8-bit machines with their AY chips. At that point even arcade machines mostly used AY technology. With the AY chip you could only have white noise or square waves. There was no pluse-width or ring-modulation filters, unlike the SID which had all the features of a modern synth.

Gari Biasillo: The SID chip was, and still is, an amazing piece of audio technology. To this day I wish I had composed more music for it. I was never keen on the AY. I found its sounds to be far too mellow and it was difficult to create the raw and gritty sounds achievable with the SID.

Jonathan Dunn: I think the fact that people still have such fond memories of the music and sounds from the SID chip speaks volumes. It was awesome and always fun to try to extract new original sounds. The other systems were an afterthought for me.



Martin Galway in his Central Street studio, from a poor magazine reproduction.



Sound and Music in Videogames

Fred Gray: The music and FX used in computer games are no different to the score and FX used in a movie. They add ambience, create their own drama, set the mood and enhance the realism. Need I say more?

Barry Leitch: Music in games is extremely important to the ambience you want to create. I was a big fan of Goth Rock band Alien Sex Fiend, and one day in 1994 Gary Bracey walked in while I had 'Mrs Fiend Goes To Outer Space' playing on a cassette. We talked about how well it went with what I was working on, *Inferno*. We made inquiries as to whether we could get the band involved. We reached an agreement: the band was shipped to Manchester, housed, fed, watered, and they worked with me for four weeks to create 17 tracks. Alien Sex Fiend received a wee bag 'o cash and walked off with enough material for an album, while Ocean had a soundtrack to utilise on the new cartridge platforms, all with my involvement!

Jonathan Dunn: Back then the role of music in games was unique. It wasn't always about being immersive but being innovative. Everybody was always pushing the hardware to new heights and music was a key factor in this.

Gari Biasillo: Sound is absolutely essential in any visual media. Whether it's sound effects or music. Without either of these you would have a very bland game.

day, which he accepted 'without a second thought'.

Matthew Cannon, who joined Ocean under a work experience scheme in 1989, was similarly in awe of Martin Galway. 'I knew all the [Ocean] games,' Matthew says with enthusiasm, 'and I loved Galway's work. It wasn't until my first

visit to Ocean that I realised he'd moved on!'

Despite the respect the sound team had for their illustrious predecessor, the show had to go on. As was common at the time, game development teams were still relatively small, although often the sound development staff worked from a soundproofed audio room, locked away from the clack of keyboards and light metallic clink of Coca-Cola cans. 'The general atmosphere at Ocean was chaotic, crowded, smelly and a little bit frightening,' Matthew Cannon says with a laugh, 'but for musicians like Jonathan and I, we spent most of our time isolated in "goldfish bowls". When we did venture out, there was a lot of taking the piss, in-jokes, gossiping and machines, peripherals, magazines, games everywhere. Just a mess really!'

Yet despite this, and the copious practical jokes, the work got done, usually with a little nudging from Ocean management.

Initially the audio staff utilised Martin Galway's music program, but eventually they moved to one designed by Paul Hughes, who demonstrated the closeness of the Ocean team by teaching Gari Biasillo in particular a wealth of 6502 processor optimisation tricks. 'He was a genius in that aspect!' Gari says. His first major project was the unusual soundtrack to *Target Renegade*. 'It was an original soundtrack and I didn't want to go down the boring route of creating an action set of cues,' he says, 'so instead I



opted for a melancholic and majestic set of sounds.'

Gari's risky approach paid off – he still gets fan mail today from those still enjoying *Target Renegade*'s soundtrack.

Barry Leitch joined Ocean in 1992. As he recalls, 'Two days before my fiancé was due to move from the USA to the UK to live with me, I got fired from

Imagitec. (I had committed the mortal sin of telling one of the artists which companies were hiring). Imagine the panic I was in. On my way home I had stopped at a payphone and called Ocean (I knew their number by heart from all the adverts). I talked to Gary, and he was upbeat but casual, saying I should pop over in a couple of days for an interview. I had a buddy drive me over, and the interview went well. Gary offered me a job on the spot, and for about 33% more than what I was previously being paid.'

Barry's first released work for Ocean was for the Amiga title *European Champions*.

At the time, perhaps the most interesting aspect is the shift from the mid-1980s in the way music was composed and refined to the complex cartridge-based games of the 1990s. Gari continues: 'I usually started at the keyboard, trying to improvise either a chord progression or motif. Sometimes a melody would appear from nowhere and I'd scramble to record it, preferably on tape, whereupon I would hum the tune into the microphone!'

Fred Gray, who freelanced as a sound and music designer for Ocean, explains his method: 'Basically I wrote crudely at my synth, then converted that to

Martin Galway, photographed in 2009.



Wizball on the C64 had a Martin Galway soundtrack.



Matthew Cannon (right) with Paul Hughes at the Revival 2013 event.

Fred Gray performing live with Jon Hare (Sensibile Software) at Play Expo.



data which I typed into the assembly language software I had. I then looped the parts and tweaked them, which took many days.'

Jonathan Dunn on Keith Chegwin

'There's a well documented story about the day he came to Ocean to film a piece for *Chegwin Checks it Out*. He



was interested in music and had a studio at home, so he probably spent more time than he should have in my office. They ended up filming me and Cheggers miming

on the keyboard to the theme tune of the show. It made it into the title sequence of the show so I had to endure it over and over again!

Matthew Cannon describes how the audio team worked in conjunction with the other components of development: 'As an audio guy you were handed a spec for which levels required which tunes, and which actions required which sound effects. The rest was just about playing it back to the lead developer or designer to get some feedback on your work.'

And while there were often changes in techniques during the 8-bit era, the shift to 16-bit was the point when music development really transformed. 'We had to adapt to new ways of working in every department,' says Jonathan Dunn, 'and obviously for me it was the shift away from synth chips to sample-based instruments and more audio channels.'

Jonathan had to devise a new way to compose music over eight channels and build a brand new music driver. 'I shifted to using a midi sequencer when we started working with the next generation of machines. It was much better that typing notes and durations into an assembler.'

Nevertheless, the new technology wasn't without its own problems. For example, the limited supply of commercial samples forced Jonathan and his colleagues to sample as much as possible themselves, using an Ensoniq EPS keyboard, before converting the results to the other systems.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of Ocean's audio staff have good memories of their time at the Manchester software house, especially the days of the SID

and AY chips. 'Commodore 64 tunes and chip tunes in general have to boil down the essence of a tune and play it,' says Martin Galway, 'and those sounds have rather fixed, unwavering acoustical qualities thanks to their electronic nature. Therefore it was crucial to make sure the melody and rhythmical arrangements were as good as they could be. This made the tunes more memorable.'

And the place that Ocean occupied as the leading British software publisher of the 1980s and early 1990s also instilled glowing memories. 'What can I say? It was Ocean Software!' Gari Biasillo, says. 'They were at the top of their game when I joined and to have the opportunity to work with them was a dream come true.'

Matthew Cannon agrees. 'It was my dream job and it was special not only because of the people I worked with and the games I worked on, but because it was so different to anything my friends were doing. They were doing their A-levels while I was working on games that I would see on the shelves at Christmas!'

Barry Leitch chips in. 'I was blown away. It was amazing. They had professional offices, there were enough chairs for all the employees. We had decent computers, we had synthesizers (although not enough and there was the occasional argument over who would get



Keith Tinman, Dean Evans and Barry Leitch, photographed in 1993 rolling with the sounds.

them on any particular day).'

Even freelancer Fred Gray beams when he talks about his experience dealing with Ocean. 'I look back fondly at my days working with Ocean, mostly the challenges and the diversity. I remember the mini arcade they had installed and taking my young son Leon along with me so he could play them all for free. Leon died young and memories like that are priceless and also indicative of the fun we programmers had back then – amid of course, all the hard work.'



Jonathan Dunn at the European Computer Trade Show, London, 1989.





Jonathan Smith

A TRIBUTE

by Paul Hughes

When you start working at Ocean, there are people, gaming celebrities in their own right, that you just can't wait to meet. For me there were several big names in-house: David Collier, Steve Wahid, Martin Galway and Jonathan 'Joffa' Smith.

Those guys were the hit makers; all the quality Ocean titles in the 1980s bore their names, and so, never in my wildest dreams did I think, day one, I would be sat sharing an office with the guy that programmed and provided the graphics for the likes of *Cobra*, *Hyper Sports*, *Green Beret*, *Terra Cresta*, *Mikie* and a host of other classic titles.

Joff was an outwardly quiet and shy lad, but then, at the time, so was I – I

guess that's why we got on. In 1987, Joff had just finished *Cobra* and *Terra Cresta* and had an idea for a new original game called *Angel*. Gary Bracey wanted me to work with Joff concurrently on a C64 version of the game.

We only worked together for a few short weeks, as Joff was about to leave Ocean with Paul Finnegan to be a director of a new games company called Special FX. Talk about a baptism of fire! While he never let on about his imminent departure, we blasted out code and ideas at a breakneck speed, and had a right laugh – he had a wicked, dry sense of humour.

I learned all about his methods, his philosophies about game play, and all about creating a plethora of core reusable routines – that was his key to churning out quality games at such speed. It turned my way of thinking about game code on its head: make it tight but make it reusable – spend the time upfront to reap the rewards later on; a mantra I still pass on to this day.

Even though he trundled off to Liverpool and Special FX, the company

still had a working relationship with Ocean, so Joff frequently came over for a drink or two at the Square Albert or Tommy Ducks in Manchester. There, I would hang on his every word: what was he up to, what new crazy ideas had he come up with. He always joked that I was his biggest fan, and I guess I was.

He used to chuckle over a beer at how other Spectrum programmers used to disassemble his games to try and figure out how he did his smooth scrolls, or got so many masked sprites on the screen. As he always said, 'All they have to do is ask!' That was Joffa; incredibly clever, painfully modest, but always keen to share his bright ideas.

Years later when Special FX was about to close down, I was asked to complete a conversion he had been doing of Universal's *Mr Do!* for the Game Boy – working with his code took me back to those Spectrum days; even then his code was littered with puns and in-jokes, but still, as always, beautifully crafted.

We stayed in touch all the way through the different companies that our careers took us to: in 2004 with



Joffa in the middle being pulled by Tony Pomfret and Jim Bagley at Special FX.

the closure of Acclaim Studios in Manchester I hired him to come and work for me on Game Boy Advance and then Xbox titles at our games company Warthog. Other than being a little chunkier (aren't we all) it was still the same old Joff – still painfully shy, but still oozing with drive and talent.

What was ironic (and despite us telling him over and over again), it wasn't until the Internet dawned and retro gaming forums started to spring up all over the place that Joff finally realised just how much people loved his work (he really didn't have a clue) and were inspired to start a career in the games industry after playing his games as children. It was wonderful to see. It reinvigorated him to the point that he turned up at a couple of Retro Gaming events, which was colossally difficult for him as his shyness had become debilitating to the point of being almost completely agoraphobic.

But on the forums, he could be



Although it wasn't David Ward's Spectrum 'big hit for Christmas' in 1984, he was happy to publish *Pud Pud*, Jonathan's first game for the company, as seen on the BBC TV *Commercial Breaks* documentary.



Cobra on the Spectrum. Everyone wanted to know how Joffa achieved such smooth scrolling effects.

himself. He was funny, kind and generous with his knowledge, helping out any aspiring game creator that would ask.

It was the 24 June 2010 that I first received an email from Joff's sister Christine, to tell me that he was terminally ill and she was trying to contact all his old friends to let them know. We hadn't spoken for a few

From left to right:
*Hypersports, Terra
Cresta, Green Beret.*



weeks and he had been away from the Spectrum forums that he used to regularly frequent. It transpired he had been in hospital and now was back at home in Widnes with his parents.

It was a shock to say the least. We knew he hadn't been too well and that the demon that was his shy demeanour had taken its toll on him, but I don't think anyone really realised just how bad it was or what affect it was having on his health. I contacted as many of the old gang that I knew to let them know, and a few of us planned to rally round and go see him.

Just two days later while organising a visit, Christine contacted me again to tell me the sad news that Jonathan had passed away that morning.



On 5 July 2010, with an entourage of his oldest colleagues, friends and family, we bade him farewell at his funeral in Widnes. There were tears, there was laughter and there were beautiful, touching eulogies from his friends.

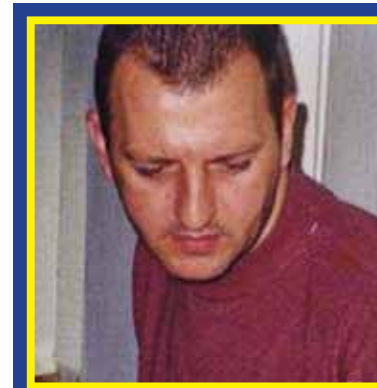
Such was the impact of his passing, the guys and gals from the retro forums, who hadn't even met Joff in person, sent a

huge floral display spelling out 'Frobush', the name of his little software company, to adorn his coffin.

In the ever eloquent words of Dr Seuss, 'Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened'. It was truly a pleasure to work on multiple occasions with such a giving, talented and genuinely funny guy. He leaves us not only with many happy memories but a permanent, irrefutable legacy that is his vast body of work.

You may no longer be around to crack a pun, but I'll always be 'your biggest fan'.

Jonathan M. Smith, 1967 – 2010
Rest in Peace.



Allan Shortt A TRIBUTE by Mark Jones Jnr & Gary Bracey originally posted on Face Book

'Today's post is a very sad one. Allan Shortt, who was a Commodore 64 coder for Ocean during its glory years in the late 1980s, died this morning, 25 September 2012,' Mark wrote.

Allan was already working on his



second title, *Mario Bros*, when I started at Ocean January 1987. He had completed his first title, *Yie Ar Kung Fu II*, for the company, previously. He went on to work on *Arkanoid II – Revenge Of Doh*, *Athena* and *Combat School*, all on the Commodore 64. Today all his ex-workmates from Ocean, and the places



he worked after, will remember Allan and spare a thought for his family and friends.



'Although I hadn't spoken to Al for a number of years,' Gary wrote, 'we did stay in touch via email and I'd like to think we remained friends beyond the Ocean years.'

This comes as a terrible – and painful – shock. I will remember Allan for his dry sense of humour, and I will remember him as a gruff, no-nonsense guy with an intimidating exterior but a good, loyal heart within. He loved his job and was passionate about his work. One-of-a-kind, I'm sure he will be greatly missed by his family and everyone else whose life he touched. I am privileged to be counted among the latter. RIP, mate.

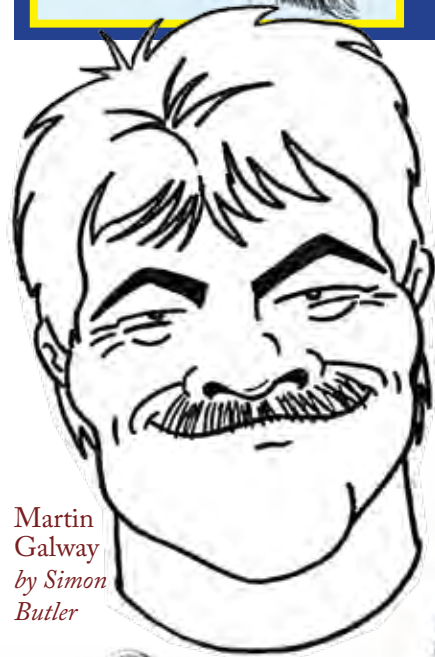


Allan gets in some *Combat School* moves.



A Rogues' Gallery

It should come as no surprise that in a graphically talented organisation many of the staff became the butt of the lampoonist's pen...



Martin Galway
by Simon Butler



James Higgins
by Bill Harbison



Jon Dunn
by Simon Butler



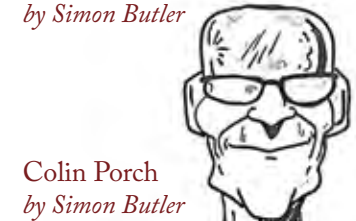
John Meegan
by Bill Harbison



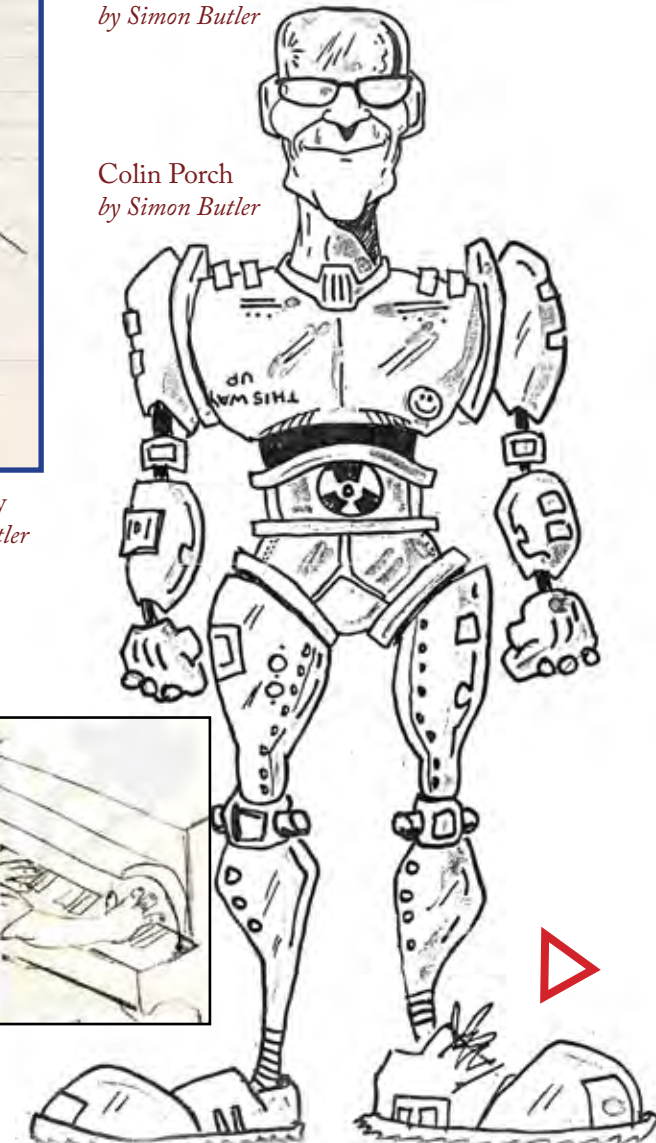
Jane Lowe
by Simon Butler



'Junior' and 'Cheggers'
by Simon Butler



Colin Porch
by Simon Butler



Gary Bracey
by Simon Butler



Mark Jones Jr, TV Star
by Simon Butler



Dean Evans
by Bill Harbison

Well aware of how many players had destroyed joysticks playing *Daley Thompson's Decathlon*, this internal Ocean comic-strip suggests the programmers suspected that wasn't all their fans may have damaged...



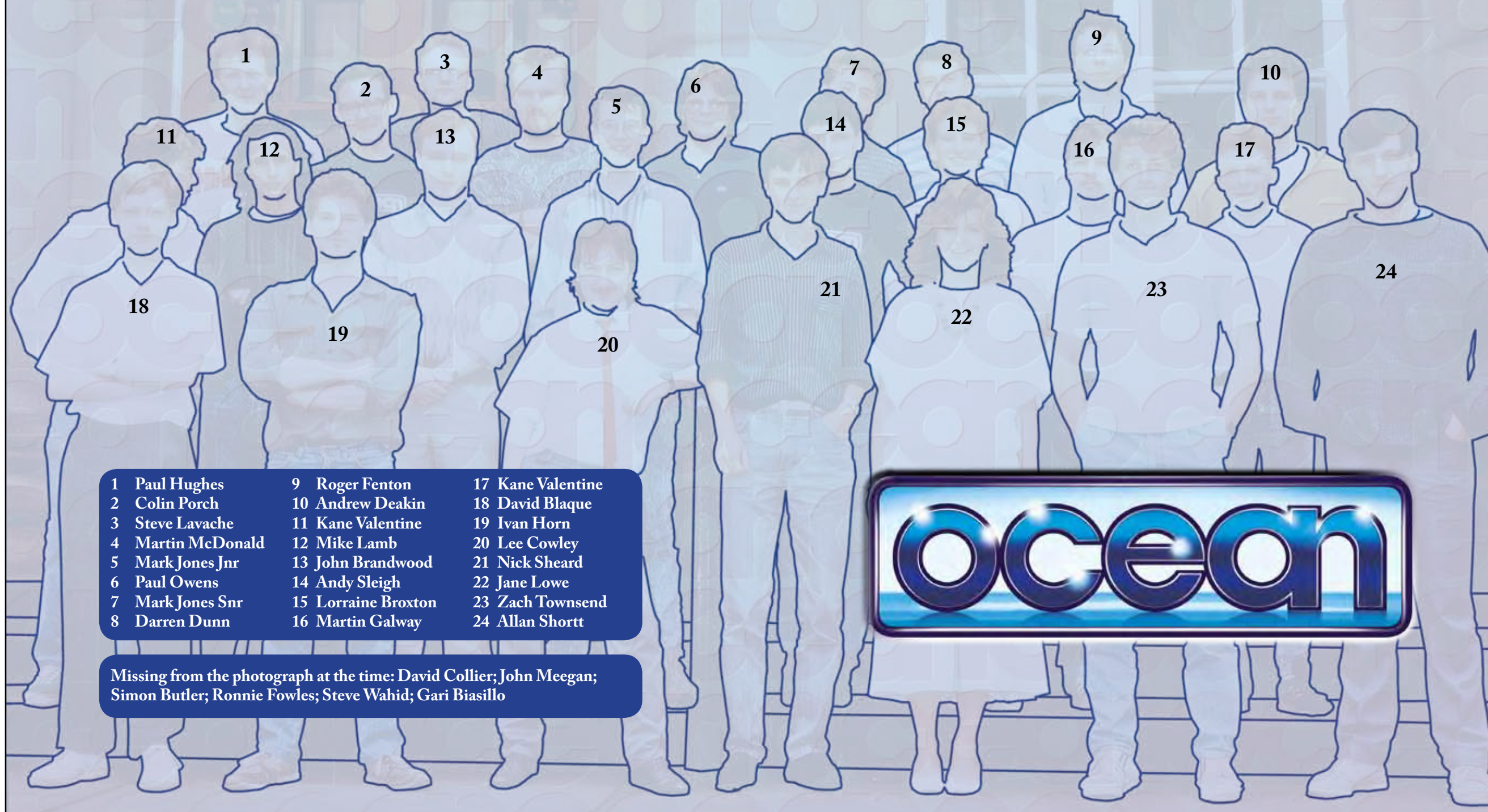
Index of Ocean's game releases up to the point of the merger with Infogrames

The Addams Family	Batman	Beach Volley	Chase HQ II
Arkanoid	Batman: The Caped Crusader	Billy The Kid	Chinese Juggler
Arkanoid II: Revenge Of Doh	Batman: The Movie	Cabal 1988	Cobra
Armageddon	Batman The Adventure (never released)	Caterpillar	Combat School
Army Moves	Battle Command	Cavelon	Comic Bakery
Athena		Central Intelligence	Cool World
		Chase HQ	Cosmic Intruders

Cosmic Wartoad	Hunchback II	NewZealand Story	Slapfight
Daley Thompson's Decathlon	Hunchback The Adventure	Nightbreed	Sleepwalker
Daley Thompson's Supertest	Hyper Rally	Nightmare Rally	Sly Spy
Daley Thompson's Olympic Challenge	Hyper Sports	Nomad	Smash TV
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Galvan	Mailstrom	Rastan Saga	Voyager
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Highlander	Movie	Run The Gauntlet	Yie Ar KungFu
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Hopper	Mr Wimpy	Salamander	
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The Ocean Gang 1988

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- | | | |
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| 1 Paul Hughes | 9 Roger Fenton | 17 Kane Valentine |
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| 5 Mark Jones Jnr | 13 John Brandwood | 21 Nick Sheard |
| 6 Paul Owens | 14 Andy Sleigh | 22 Jane Lowe |
| 7 Mark Jones Snr | 15 Lorraine Broxton | 23 Zach Townsend |
| 8 Darren Dunn | 16 Martin Galway | 24 Allan Shortt |

Missing from the photograph at the time: David Collier; John Meegan;
Simon Butler; Ronnie Fowles; Steve Wahid; Gari Biasillo



the history

With thanks to our Kickstarter backers, whose generosity made this project a reality

Bill Harbison
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