Al's SPECTRUM
Annual 2020
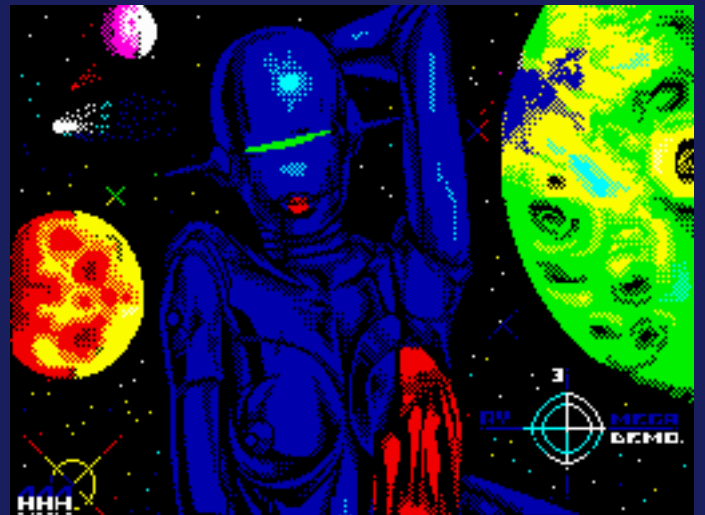
ENGLISH EDITION

Spec-Art 2019
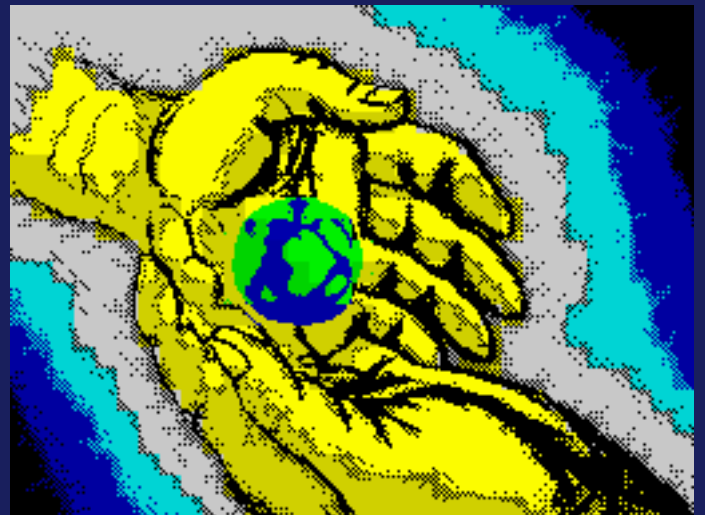

r0bat - privet2

MAC - Jabato

Piesiu - The Eyeball Collector

AAA - AY Megademo 3 Part 2

at0m - astrodeath

Dovakin, Shuran33 -
save the world from people

Editorial

Towards the end of 2019, I had the idea of making a video to be published on my YouTube channel, in which I would show short sections of those Spectrum games produced during that year, which impressed me the most.

In fact, 2019 was an exceptional year regarding the production of games for the Spectrum, both in terms of quantity and quality, and I also wanted to have my say on the matter.

With the arrival of 2020, however, it occurred to me to do something different from the usual summary video. Why not writing down my views, possibly in a form that makes you think of old magazines from a long time ago?

So, *Al's Spectrum Annual 2020* was born: an annual magazine in digital format, where I reviewed 25 Spectrum games released in 2019, picking – not an easy task! – the most representative ones in my opinion, with due respect for the efforts of all those who spent a part of their time to create something for the old Sinclair home computer, now nearing its fortieth "birthday".

At the same time, I wanted to enrich this work with interviews with two realities I have been close to this year, namely the staff of El Mundo of the Spectrum and the driving forces behind the new "retro" Bitmap Soft label, which made its debut in the past year.

Finally, since I am also a developer, I added some background information about the two titles I recently released, *Sophia II* and *Ad Lunam,* and revealed some details about my plans for 2020.

The magazine is published simultaneously in Italian, English and Spanish to reach a wider audience of fans. I hope it will be interesting for those who will read it, and who knows if it will become an annual event.

Messina, January 2020

Alessandro Grussu

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REVIEWS RATINGS

★ **TRY IT:** keep it into consideration.

★ ★ **PLAY IT:** start with it, and if you like it, keep going at it.

★ ★ ★ **DON'T MISS IT:** give priority to these.

★ ★ ★ ★ **MASTERPIECE:** the best that can be wished for.

GAME OF THE YEAR: the most impressive title among those released in the year. Essential!

CÓMEME EL CHIP ★★★

Beyker Soft/Beyker [Sergio Vaquer Montes], Errazking [Igor Errazkin], EquinoxeZX, ThEpOpE
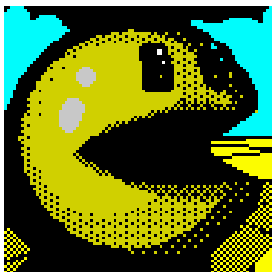**Language: English**
Note: programmed in BASIC

The Boliche family, made up of adventurous Pac-Man-like beings, disappeared during its last excursion. It's up to the younger member left at home, Baby Boliche, to start searching for his loved ones along five worlds full of traps and pitfalls. This is the simple plot of *Cómeme El Chip,* a puzzle inspired by *Chip's Challenge,* and a pleasant surprise as well, with the complexity and variety of its level design and the remarkable technical realization, considering that it is entirely coded in BASIC.

Each of the 25 game levels is a maze seen from above, where the character controlled by the player moves one space at a time. To complete a level, you must collect all the keys scattered around and reach the door that leads to the next one within one minute. Among the features of the levels, you will find arrows that force you to move in a certain direction; water pools that make you drown, thus losing a life, but can be destroyed by bombs; teleports and more. Help can be activated by collecting a number of yellow chips (actually similar to diamonds). There are several: for example, the door will immediately take us to the next level, while the arrow will destroy all the arrows of the same type present in the current level.

Upon finding a member of the Boliche family, at the end of the

five stages of each world, you will take control of him/her and the game will continue until the end. There is also an alternative ending for the more curious! Longevity is increased by the "Crazy" mode, where the 25 levels will be randomly generated: screens made up of a huge number of arrows, with bombs and diamonds here and there. A challenge for advanced players.

Although the graphic style is simple and essential - all the elements of the game are just one character large - what makes *Cómeme El Chip* a gem of a game is its extreme ability to attract the player through increasingly difficult challenges. Level design soon becomes very complex, and this forces you to think carefully before moving, but not too much, because time is not on your side. Regarding the sound, there are some effects, a music played upon loading the game and a digitized voice saying "Get ready!" at the beginning of each level. It is not very much, but it does its duty, also taking into account the fact that the game was designed for the 48K.

Like every good "retro" title, *Cómeme El Chip* proves that you don't need tons of special effects or latest generation hardware to have fun. A good basic idea made real in a playable way is enough. And there is playability in spades here!
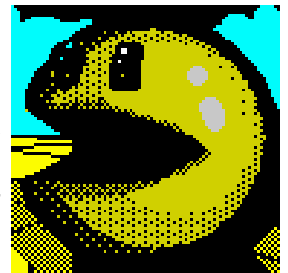
GODKILLER NEW TIMELINE EDITION ★★
Apsis, Neil Parsons [Ignacio Prini Garcia]
Language: English
Note: authored with MK2

In 2014, the beginning of the *Godkiller* saga impressed me favorably: a labyrinthine exploration game characterized by well-drawn graphics and a superb presentation. In 2019 *Godkiller* returns with a new timeline and adaptations due to the arrival (scheduled for 2020) of *Godkiller III,* the final episode. This chapter contains a series of alternative revelations and events which prompted the authors to modify the story behind the game, so that everything fits together.

In the beginning of our universe, supernatural forces created a race of superior beings. They dared to rebel against their creators but were defeated, and in turn gave life to a species completely devoid of divine blood, the present day humanity. The old gods intervened against the growing power of the new ones by creating the Godkillers, a mortal race with great powers, to eliminate the rebellious deities. The player impersonates one of these characters, reborn in 2012 to complete the work left unfinished 25,000 years earlier with the destruction of the legendary continent of Mu.

In the course of the game, you must collect a series of objects that will allow you to move forward in the adventure, the ultimate aim of which is to destroy the last acolytes of the rebel gods, responsible for the murder of the protagonist's wife.
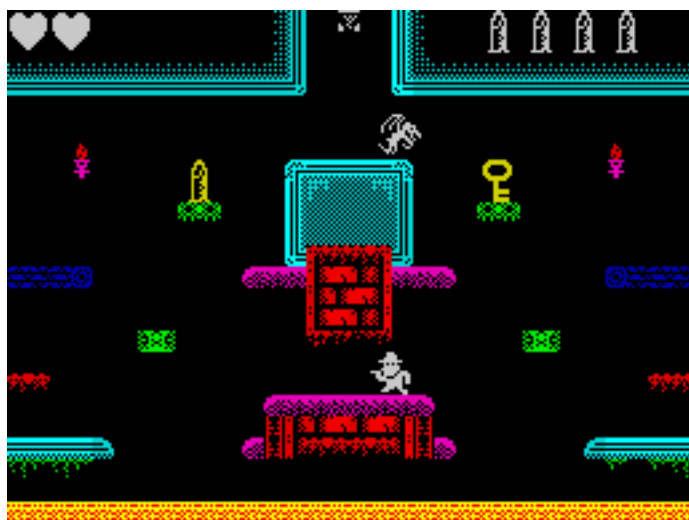
Godkiller NTE, like the other chapters of the saga, shows a proper use of the new version of the Churrera: graphics and sound are well crafted and contribute to make a classic and established game scheme more palatable.

LOVECRAFT MYTHOS ★★
Ancient Bytes/Coelhart, Cebrian
Languages: English, Spanish

The primordial horrors are back! The world is doomed… unless someone takes the situation – and a Colt pistol – in his hands, and fills the murderous nasties with lead. This is the simple plot of *Lovecraft Mythos,* a platform/shooter game where, in the role of the hero without fear, you will have to proceed by collecting nine keys that will be placed one after the other on the screen, and at the same time avoid or kill the four types of monsters attacking you without pause. Each one of them, from the slightly dangerous Shoggoth to the fearsome Deep One, behaves differently, and it is up to you to find out the best way to deal with them.

Ammunition is limited; to increase it by one unit you must collect the bullets that occasionally appear on the platforms. Upon leaving a screen, you will receive a code to enter to resume the game from the last screen reached. There are eight of them in total: after the last one, the game starts again until you lose all of your lives, in purely "old" style.

Lovecraft Mythos is an absolutely "retro" game: colorful and minimal graphics, beeper sound effects, simple but smooth and fast-paced gameplay. Negotiating its levels will make you sweat a lot, but the classic "just another go" syndrome is guaranteed!

AUTOMATED CAVE EXPLORER ★★
Alexei Borisov
Language: English

I confess that I am not a great fan of *Boulder Dash*-style games, I often find them rather frustrating. However, *Automated Cave Explorer* looks graphically good and demonstrates great care and enough variety in the level design - at least as far as I was able to proceed.

As you know, in this type of puzzle game the player commands a character who must collect a certain number of objects, usually diamonds, by digging in a level seen from the side view, in order to open the exit which must then be reached to go to the next level. The main problem is represented by boulders, which, in case they fall on the character's head, make him lose a life, but sometimes they are necessary to eliminate some annoying presences. Also, be careful not to get trapped among the boulders…

The author started programming in Z80 Assembly only a few months ago, but if this is the debut, we expect great things from him in the future.

MANIC PIETRO (128K) ★★★
Noentiendo/Cristian M. Gonzalez, Alvin Albrecht, Einar Saukas, Igor Errazkin, Sergio Vaquer Montes, Davos, Mick Farrow
Languages: English, Spanish

Manic Pietro is, as you might already guess from the title, a tribute to *Manic Miner* starring the Pietro brothers, the Spectrum counterparts of Mario and Luigi, already seen in Pietro Bros, which in turn is a remake of *Mario Bros*. Just like in the classic title by Matthew Smith, the aim is to collect all the objects on the screen, jumping from platform to platform and avoiding enemies, then reach the exit, all within a limited amount of time.

The main feature of the game is the excellent use of the Nirvana+ multicolor graphic engine, now a true "trademark" of Cristian Gonzalez. The twenty screens, many of which are clearly inspired by some 80s games (*Abu Simbel Profanation, Bruce Lee, Game Over, Jet Pac, Chuckie Egg, Horace And The Spiders* etc.), will offer a great challenge even for the most skilled players! The AY music that accompanies Pietro's vicissitudes is an arrangement of the first movement of the Symphony n. 40 in G minor K. 550 by W. A. Mozart. If you complete the "Pietro" part, you will receive a keyword to access the next one, a faithful multicolor rendition of *Manic Miner*.

Not very original maybe - after all, it was created for the ZX Dev Remakes 2018 competition - but made with great care, full of "retro" quotes and a joy to see as well as to play, *Manic Pietro* is an unmissable title.

MOON AND THE PIRATES ★
Iadvd
Languages: English, Spanish
Note: authored with a custom version of MK1

In the past year, Iadvd has entered the world of "retro" development with some titles authored with the first edition of Mojon Twins's Churrera. His latest game, *Moon And The Pirates,* is the sequel to Moon's Fandom Festival, and like that title, is a dynamic adventure where you need to interact with a group of non-playing characters, in order to keep going on in the story until the end.

The protagonist is Moon, a girl who accidentally ended up on a pirate galleon. They seize her ferry ticket and put it in the treasure chest. Moon will have to convince them to be a true pirate, in order to obtain the key to the chest, reach Coconut Island and go back by ferry. By collecting information scattered around the place, looking for objects and above all talking with non-playing characters - there are seven of them, each with their own personality and interests - Moon will have to win their respect. When all the pirates will have the highest consideration of our friend, indicated by a series of icons placed at the top of the screen whenever she is close to each character, Moon will be able to open the chest.

The game was created with a custom version, modified by the author, of the Churrera MK1: it can be noted, in particular, that the sprites are larger than those normally manageable with that tool. *Moon And The Pirates* reminds of a simplified version of the Magic Knight games created by David Jones for Mastertronic in the 80s, with a greater emphasis on dialogues, rather than on the manipulation of objects, which should only be given to pirates, in order to increase their favor towards us. The playing area is small but fairly well represented, each pirate is immediately recognizable. Sound on the other hand, apart from a short tune in the initial menu, is almost absent.

Moon And The Pirates is characterized by little action and a lot of text to read. It is long, perhaps too much, and can be somehow repetitive. There is no possibility to save the state of affairs, which under emulation is not a big problem, but on a real machine it is. For these reasons it may not be suitable for everyone. But it is also true that this kind of games, in the new production for the Spectrum, is far from being common, so it is worth trying in any case, more so if you like the genre.
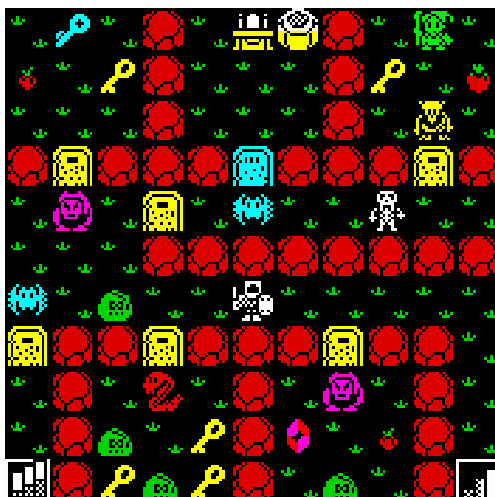

MAGICAL TOWER ADVENTURE - 2019 VERSION ★
Timmy
Language: English

From the Netherlands, Timmy arrives with a revised and expanded version of his 2016 title, *Magical Tower Adventure.* By collecting keys and facing monsters of different strength and endurance, you have to make your way through a dungeon divided into twenty screens full of dangers.

The system used in combat is a classic attack-against-defense scheme. Whenever our knight attacks a monster, his attack capacity less the monster's resistance makes the monster's hit points to decrease. Then the parts are reversed until one of the two succumbs... and if it's you, the adventure will obviously end. In addition to this, care must be taken to use the keys that will open the doors scattered on each screen. This is the most puzzle-like aspect of the game: you don't always have to use brute force, it is also necessary to reflect. Sometimes you will also meet wizards who will give you useful advice.

Graphics, in the usual style of the author, are pleasant and colorful, while the sound is almost non-existent.

Overall, *Magical Tower Adventure* is a good representative of an "ancient" genre, which continues to interest many players nonetheless.

CHEMAN ★

**The Mojon Twins/na_th_an [Jose Luis Castano Gonzalez], Anjuel [Angel Lo Perez], Davidian [David Sánchez]**
Language: English
Note: authored with MK3

Poor Cheman is in trouble. His favorite metal band is going to play live, but in order to attend the gig he has to find the medallions of power and bring them to collection centers, while getting rid of the annoying batukadas - samba-reggae-style street percussionists - that infest the two levels of the game, by jumping on their heads

Quite surreal as many other Mojon Twins titles, *Cheman* is mostly a demonstration of the new MK3 authoring tool, the third edition of the Churrera. As a game in itself, it is faithful to a pattern that the Mojons made us experience for years by now. This means it is not particularly original, but is likeable enough anyway: platforms, enemies to be defeated by jumping over them, objects to collect and so on. The graphics are pleasant, while the sound is limited to a tune in the options menu and to the classic beeper effects. The protagonist, larger than the usual Churrera sprites, moves quickly (maybe too much...) and

smoothly. *Cheman* may not be the "return to form" we were expecting from the Mojons, but it is not bad and can be played without too much effort.
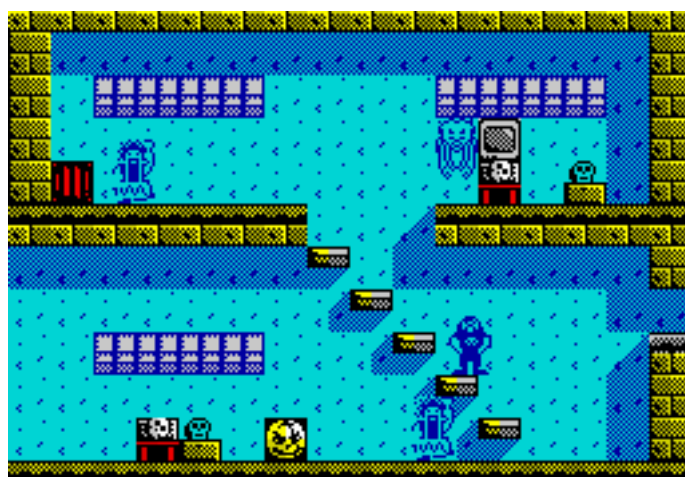
GLUF ★★★

Denis Grachev, Oleg Nikitin, Dmitry Kalinin
Language: English

Denis Grachev has been churning out platform games which might be simple in the gameplay department, but really well-finished graphically, with a magistral use of multicolor. In *Gluf* you control a strange being, a "Tesla frog", capable of storing energy from batteries if he stands on them. Gluf can store up to 10 energy tabs. When he is fully charged, your goal will be to turn the inactive platforms on by simply making Gluf walk upon them. Turning on a platform costs an energy tab, and once discharged, the frog has to be recharged by finding a

battery and standing on it. When all the platforms have been turned on, you have to go back to the starting point, thus exiting the level and reaching the next one.

As usual, strange monsters will do everything to prevent Gluf from completing his task. Their touch will force you to start the current level again. Other risks, such as platforms that disappear after the frog passes over them, make for additional obstacles. Since you cannot do anything against the enemies, you will just have to avoid them at all costs, often forcing you to come back - whenever possible! - on your steps. However, lives are endless and there is no time limit to complete the levels, which lowers the overall difficulty level.

In the best "retro" tradition, the basic idea of *Gluf* is extremely simple, but captivating and very well carried out. The game shows the typical Denis "trademark", a remarkable and colorful graphic detail, especially in the sprite design. Worth mentioning as well are the nice AY tunes, by Oleg Nikitin, which play along Gluf's antics. Another fine title to add to Denis's already rich "gameography", and to play for all of us.

NINJAKUL 2 - THE LAST NINJA (128K) ★★★
Pat Morita Team [Antonio J. Pérez, Igor Errazking]
Language: English
Note: authored with MK2

Hong Kong, 1984. A ninja receives a letter stating that his brother, Akul, has been kidnapped. He promptly sets out on his search. In the end, after facing some dangerous criminals on the wagons of a runaway train, he believes he has found him, but it is a trap. Instead of his brother, he finds a bomb, which explodes and kills him instantly. Akul, also a ninja, learns that the crime was committed by the Gunshi gang, dedicated to the opium trade. Akul, who is now the last member of his clan, has only one aim: to avenge his brother's death.

This is the background, narrated in a playable prologue, of *Ninjakul 2 - The Last Ninja,* a platform/action title developed by the Pat Morita Team. The story unfolds through various stages: the prologue, which we have already seen, and five others, of which the first four can be tackled at the player's choice from the beginning. The game environments, shown in flip-screen, range from a public park, where it is also possible to climb trees,

to a port with a large submarine, a market, a cemetery and finally the Gunshi residence, accessible only after defeating the final bosses waiting for us at the end of each section. However, it will not always be possible to negotiate the sections in any order. For example, the second screen of the harbor section can only be crossed if we find a sacred scroll hidden somewhere in the park, which allows Akul to jump further. In each of the first four phases, in fact, a scrolls is hidden; once collected, he will be bestowed a special power, indispensable for going further into the game.

As for weapons, Akul can count on his trusty sword to attack enemies at close range, and on shurikens to hit them from a distance. The latter are limited in number and Akul will have to find others around the levels if he runs out of them. Sometimes they will also be necessary for proceeding into the adventure, for example to operate an unreachable lever. The enemies' touch decreases Akul's life force, but to restore it, you must collect a heart-shaped icon.

It should be now clear that there is really a lot of content in *Ninjakul 2.* Levels are wide and depicted by simple but clean graphics: the small sprites move smoothly on the screen, while the settings are varied and characterized by a good use of color. The narrative screens seen in the early parts of the game add a touch of class. Equally noteworthy are the oriental background tunes playing during the storytelling and the gaming action. Longevity is also increased by the ability to choose between three difficulty levels at the beginning. On the other hand, I was left perplexed by having to use two separate controls to jump and climb stairs, which I always find uncomfortable, but I suppose it is a limitation of the Churrera MK2. Ultimately, *Ninjakul 2* is a game that will keep you busy and leave you satisfied. A must play!
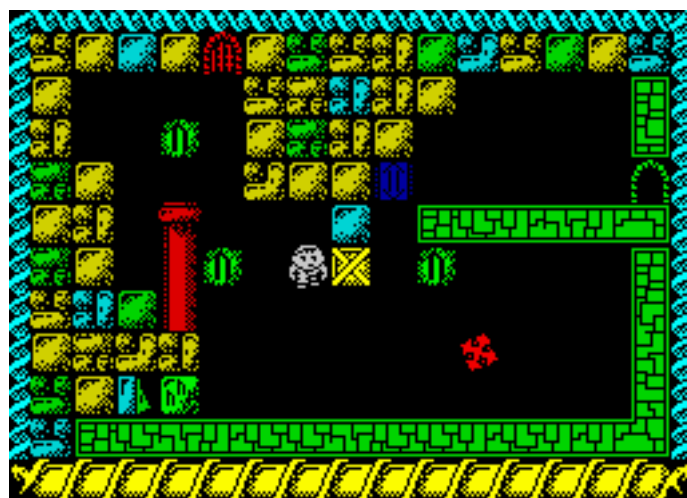
YANGA ★
Vitali Serdjuk
Language: Russian

A puzzle similar to the classic *Sokoban,* but with some surprises. There is not much to say about the setting: you control a character seen from above, that in each screen must move one or more groups of three blocks marked by a different color, aligning them so that they all touch each other. By doing this, the walls of the same color of those blocks will open and allow you to access other parts of the level or the exit to the next one. If you align only two blocks, you lose a life.

Advancing into the game new features appear. For example, you will have to operate switches in order to activate some mobile blocks, or to avoid enemies whose contact is lethal.

Yanga is an interesting and well put together brainteaser, with a good progression of difficulty from one level to another. Graphics are colorful although somewhat schematic, but the real weak point of this title is the complete absence of any sound. In addition to that, a system of keywords to avoid repeating all the levels from the first after losing all of your lives would have been welcome.

REDSHIFT (128K) ★★★★
**World XXI Soft Inc/Ariel Ruiz, Richard Armijo**
Languages: English, Spanish

In 2992, mankind risks being swept away by the usual alien invaders. Space fighters piloted by artificial intelligence are unable to repel the attack. Therefore, it is necessary to go back to the old ways: a new class of vehicles, called "Redshift", driven by a human being. At the controls of the Redshift, you must drive the enemy out of five levels (galaxies), with three levels of difficulty, parallel universes populated by different foes. Only if you survive through the three universes, your mission will be accomplished.

Your spacecraft, at the start, is armed with a simple laser, but by eliminating aliens you obtain power-ups that will make your life easier. The Redshift also has a plasma shield available, which protects it from three impacts. You can also take advantage, for a limited number of times, of a support drone and an allied bombing, to aid you in the most difficult situations.

Ariel Ruiz, author of two very different masterpieces - *Escuela De Ladrones* and *Carlos Michelis* - never ceases to amaze, trying his hand at yet another game genre. The result does not disappoint expectations: *Redshift* is a real gem, a vertical scrolling shooter of excellent technical realization and great playability. Graphics and audio are on very high levels, scrolling is fast and smooth and the action is frantic but precise, as it should be the norm with this kind of game. There is not much more to say, if not to play it without further ado: titles like this are certainly not seen every day on the Spectrum.
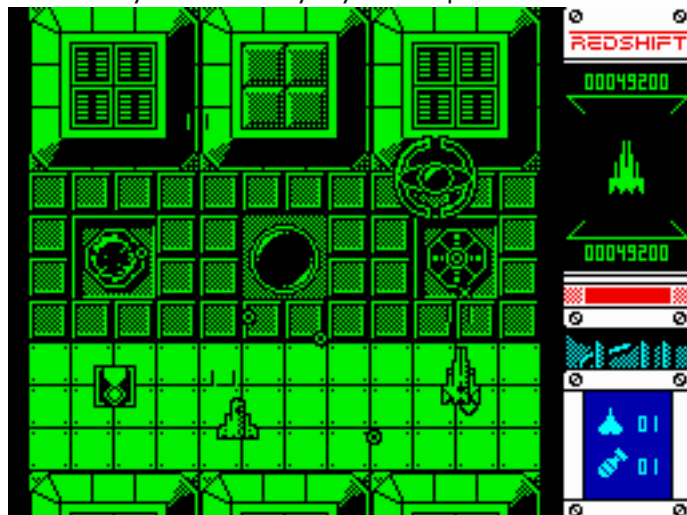
BOOTY THE REMAKE (128K) ★★
Salvakantero, Davidian
Language: English
Note: authored with MK2

Another remake of a famous Spectrum game, created for the ZX Dev Remakes 2018 competition: a new version (128K-only) of the platform-and-ladders game *Booty* by John F. Cain. In the role of Jim the cabin boy of a pirate ship, you must wander around 20 screens, connected to each other by an intricate system of passages, in search of treasures hidden in the hold. Your task is hindered by the presence of numerous doors to open, each one with its own key, by the pirates themselves - who certainly do not like the booty being stolen under their nose - and by other risks such as mice, parrots and hidden bombs. Falling off the platforms will also cause Jim to lose a life. The screens of the classic Firebird title have been faithfully reproduced and playability is not lacking. However, in all honesty I continue to prefer the 1984 *Booty.* The old larger and differently colored sprites on a black background perform better than the new game's small sprites on monochromatic and perhaps too much detailed backgrounds, which also give a certain impression of monotony. AY music is certainly much better than *Booty*'s beeper tune, but I would have preferred old seafaring songs instead of generic, good-for-anything themes. In short, this remake is good as a game in itself, but the original is still unsurpassed.
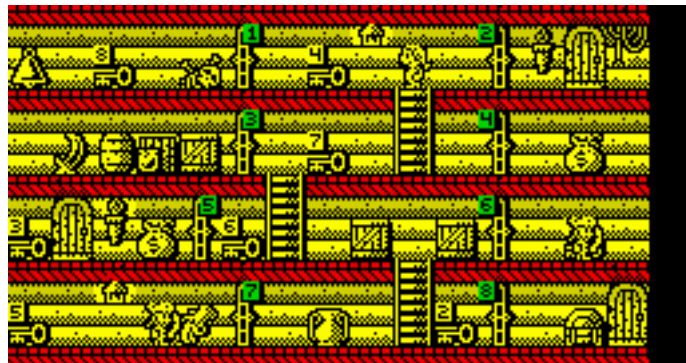
TIKI TACA ★★★
Climacus [Eduardo Martin Torices], Errazking [Igor Errazkin]
Language: English

There is no Spectrum aficionado who does not know *Atic Atac*. Well, thanks to Climacus and Errazkin, there is now *Tiki Taca,* or *Atic Atac* in isometric 3D. This remake of the famous Ultimate title reprises the layout of the rooms, doors and secret passages of the original, thus making the transition to the new point of view less unsettling to those who already played it, and perhaps completed it.

Of course, the aim of the game is also the same as the 1983 title: to find the three parts of the large key necessary to open the door of the castle, infested with hostile presences, that we recklessly sneaked in. The castle is spread over several floors, from the attic - where there is always a part of the key - to the basement, where large mushrooms, lethal when touched, are scattered.

The three playing characters, namely the knight, the magician and the servant, have been kept, as well as the possibility of exploiting the respective secret passages, i.e. the grandfather clock, the bookcase and the barrel. Even the roast chicken indicating the life force has been rendered in isometric 3D.

Tiki Taca is less frantic and anxiety-inducing than *Atic Atac:* sprites are a little slower, doors open and close much faster than in the original game, and energy drops less conspicuously when you hit a monster.

Of course, this operation also involved some limitations. The stairs have been replaced by the animation of an elevator; the characters all fire the same weapon; the sprites can only move horizontally and vertically; colors have completely disappeared with the exception of two squares located on the sides of the doors to indicate the key which opens them.
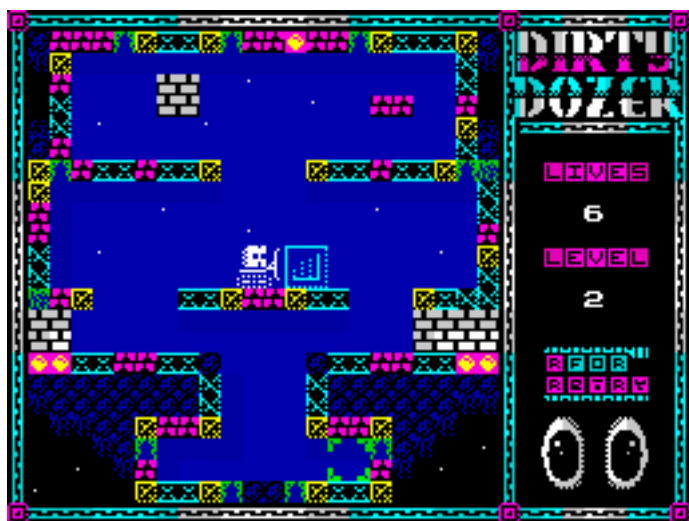
Nothwithstanding these small compromises, *Tiki Taca* is a great success, a faithful and enjoyable reinterpretation of a title that made history.

DIRTY DOZER ★★
Miguetelo [Miguel Ángel Tejedor]
Language: English
Note: authored with AGD

Despite the allusion to the "dirty dozen" of a famous movie, *Dirty Dozer* has nothing military about it: it is a hybrid puzzle, a crossing between a classic platform game and the good old *Sokoban*. At the command of Rusty, an old bulldozer who does not resign itself to being scrapped, your job will be to place crates at certain points on the screen. Sounds easy, right? In fact, as lovers of this type of puzzle will already understand, it is not like that at all! Apart from the layout of the platforms, which often makes it necessary to study the screen thoroughly before setting off, there are presses, electric shocks, cannons and other dangers which will give you a lot of trouble.

Also, sometimes you have to jump to break rows of bricks above Rusty in order to break through - unless there is a crate located right there - and, if you are not pushing a crate, you can go from one side of the screen to the other (like in *Pac-Man*).

Finally, if you play on a Spectrum equipped with an AY chip, game action is underlined by some tunes composed by the author himself.

Dirty Dozer, in addition to being a lovely example of a puzzle game that revises a classic scheme in an original way, reveals a noticeably creative use of AGD: it is worth mentioning that Miguetelo did it all by himself.

RESISTANCE ★★
Andy McDermott
Language: English
Note: authored with The Quill

Strangely enough, there are few text adventures for the Spectrum set in WW2, a potentially endless source of inspiration. It is worth noting, then, that Andy McDermott's *Resistance* not only takes its subject matter from the most tragic period of world history, but also gives the player the opportunity of impersonating a really unusual alter ego.

It is 1943 and the protagonist is Mari Roux, a French 17-year old girl living in a small village, whose father was killed during the Nazi invasion. Her mother died of grief soon after; her older brother was forced to work in Germany, and has not been heard of for a year. No wonder, then, that she developed a deep hatred for the invaders.

Offering herself to help the local Resistance, Mari receives one day a note from a man called Jean Agreste, the leader of the local undercover freedom fighters. Agreste will assign her several missions of sabotage and counter-propaganda, such as covering Nazi posters with Resistance ones, exposing a Nazi informer, and even stealing the Nazi flag from the town hall and throwing it into a public toilet!

After each mission, Mari has to meet Agreste again, who then assigns her another mission, until something very bad happens…

Resistance is divided into several sub-adventures, and the player, as Mari, will have to perform the assigned tasks without being discovered by the ubiquitous Nazi thugs and their local bootlickers, against which she will even have to fight for her life. The game has been authored with The Quill and is text-only. It is not very difficult, so it can be suitable for beginners. Puzzles are linear and do not require an excessive amount of ingenuity. Veterans, on the other hand, will appreciate the unusual and intriguing setting.

DROID BUSTER ★

Ariel Endaraues, Pedro Pimenta, Juan A. Fernandez
Language: English
Note: authored with AGD
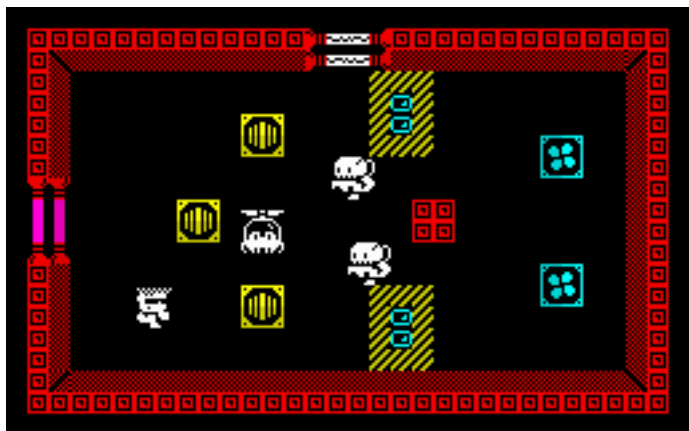
Inspired by *Mandroid,* released in 1988 by CRL, *Droid Buster* is a noteworthy game, despite the fact that the title it is based upon is certainly not a masterpiece, quite the contrary in fact…

You play as Frank Talbot, a man armed with cyber punches capable of destroying the fearsome droids animated by the Arcon defense system, which artificial intelligence has triggered a deadly attack on humanity (echoes of *Terminator,* maybe?). For this peculiar characteristic, Frank is known as "Droid Buster".

Moving through a maze consisting of about 40 screens, you have to punch the enemy droids on each one of them, eliminating them all in order to open the door that will give you access to the next screen. Some droids will always be vulnerable, while others will only be under certain circumstances. In other screens you will have to free prisoners by hitting the doors of their cells.

The maze is divided into four sections accessible through a central hub. As soon as all of them have been cleared, you will be able to access the final section, where you will have to destroy the central electronic brain.

From a technical point of view, graphics are somewhat sketchy but rather varied, without too much "color clash", while Pedro Pimenta's music (AY only) accompanies you adequately while you wander searching for droids. Strangely, Frank only shows his profile although he can also move up and down, and this limits our possibilities of action: it would have been better to be able to hit the enemies from those directions too. Furthermore, having just one life seems inadequate, since it is enough to touch the enemies to quickly see our already limited energy drop noticeably.

In any case, with *Droid Buster,* Ariel has made a significant leap in quality compared to his first title, *Pumpkin Poe.* Ad maiora!

ASTRO BLASTER ★★

Matt Jackson
Language: English

It is truly surprising that not only games continue to be produced for the Spectrum, but that there are even those who still create coin-op conversions for this historical platform. This is the case of *Astro Blaster,* conversion of the 1981 Sega arcade game of the same name.

At first glance, *Astro Blaster* may seem yet another variation on the *Galaxian* theme: a classic "kill-the-Martians" title where you control a spaceship capable of moving only sideways on the lower part of the screen, shooting the different waves of aliens and meteorites coming one after the other. In truth, *Astro Blaster* has peculiar features, which make it stand out from the mass of similar titles.

First of all, the laser, if fired continuously, overheats, making it impossible to use it. In addition, you must pay attention to the fuel level - if it reaches zero, it's Game Over even if we still have spare lives.

Another thing to note is the good level of technical realization: the sprites move smoothly on the screen and, on machines equipped with the AY sound chip, you can hear sound effects reminiscent of the old coin-ops of the early 80s.

Astro Blaster is a great representative of a "more retro than retro" genre of games, with no other goal than testing our reflexes, since after the last alien horde the game starts again from the beginning. But going "back to the origins" from time to time is always a pleasure, even in retrogaming!

SPROUTY ★★
Stonechat Productions/Dave Hughes, djnzx
Languages: Czech, English, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian
Note: authored with AGD

Sprouty is a nice living Brussels sprout. Christmas has come and, overwhelmed by the joy of finally opening his presents, he cannot stop jumping. Here the problems begin, because to reach the presents Sprouty must go through screens full of traps. Our friend can only move left and right; if he doesn't, he jumps continuously on the spot, unless you decide to move him while he is in the air. Jumping from platform to platform, you must guide Sprouty towards his presents while avoiding the strange creatures that populate the screens, as well as some sharp spikes. Contact with all of this will force you to start again. In addition, in order to get your hands on the gifts, you also have to operate switches to open barriers. If Sprouty falls from a certain height or more, he will lose consciousness for a couple of seconds, and this will make him vulnerable.

Sprouty spans across 18 screens of increasing difficulty. The first ones will be negotiated fairly easily, then things will get complicated. However, the game is never difficult to the point of frustration. There are no time or life limits anyway.

Graphically *Sprouty* is pretty good, its appearance is simple but clean. Background music (AY only) pleasantly accompanies the action. In a nutshell, *Sprouty* is an immediate, fresh and above all fun Christmas themed platform game, also suitable for younger players, who perhaps are "discovering" the Spectrum just now.
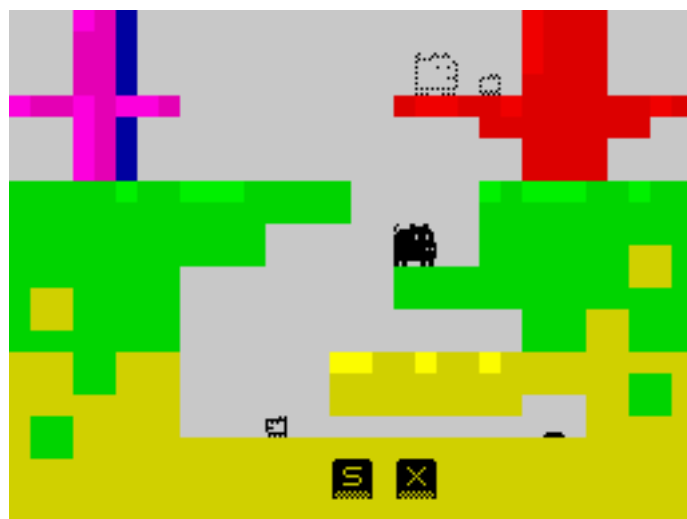
PRE-ZU (128K) ★
Vjaceslav Tretjak
Language: English

At first glance, *Pre-ZU* is simply unsettling: a stylized black sprite similar to an ox moves along a scenario seen from the side and composed solely of colored squares, while a strange music is heard in the background. The only indications are given by some icons that inform you about the keys you must press to move the character. By proceeding further into the game world, at some point we notice a "linear" version of the sprite. You move the character until it coincides with the other one... and here you go to another level.

After a few levels, where you also find disappearing platforms and pools of water to avoid – if you fall into them, you must start the level from the beginning – you meet another being, a sort of a small dog. He too must reach a "linear" version of himself. Other characters, namely an elephant and a llama, will join later.

What you are playing is a peculiar puzzle, characterized by some very stylized graphics and an extreme simplicity of action, which however hide some refined design choices. The key to success is teamwork: the dog, for example, can sneak into tunnels where the others are unable to pass, thus operating a button that will make new platforms appear once pressed. Smaller creatures will often need to use larger ones as a ladder to reach places otherwise inaccessible to them.

Pre-ZU is an original brainteaser disguised as a minimalistic and curious platform game, which only real flaw is its shortness. If you negotiate all the levels without making mistakes, not too hard to do with a certain amount of exercise and memory, you can complete it in about five minutes or little more.

ALIENS NEOPLASMA ★ ★
### SaNchez [Aleksander Udotov, Oleg Nikitin, Yevgeniy Rogulin]
Languages: English, Russian, Spanish

March 15, 2169, 06.25 pm: aboard the *Achilles* cargo spaceship, flying to Earth with 15 crew members, ore samples and 45 colonists from the planetoid LV-426, the artificial intelligence maneuvering the ship awakens medical lieutenant Ashley Smith from cryogenic sleep. Soon, she realizes to be the only alive human presence there. The ship is infested with a dangerous extraterrestrial species, presenting itself in the form of Facehuggers, crustacean-like beings that attach themselves to Ashley's face to suffocate her, and the horrible Xenomorphs, huge monsters which assault is immediately lethal. Ashley will have to run through the corridors of the ship, facing the alien hordes and trying to find out the truth behind her predicament. This is the plot of *Aliens Neoplasma,* the latest title of the SaNchez group, inspired by the *Alien* universe. A platform-and-ladders game where you impersonate Ashley, guiding her around the cargo, looking for terminals to interact with the on-board AI, thus allowing you to open doors and reconstruct past events through short conversations. Other refueling points will allow you to replenish ammunition for the pulse rifle and hand grenades, or to restore your vital energy. If this drops to zero, play will be resumed from the last reached terminal. Grenades not only allow you to blow aliens up, but also to stop the large fan blades that reduce Ashley to slices if she falls into them. Sometimes fans can also be used to get rid of Facehuggers.
The initial impact is certainly positive: sprites are well defined and convincingly animated, with the Xenomorph being
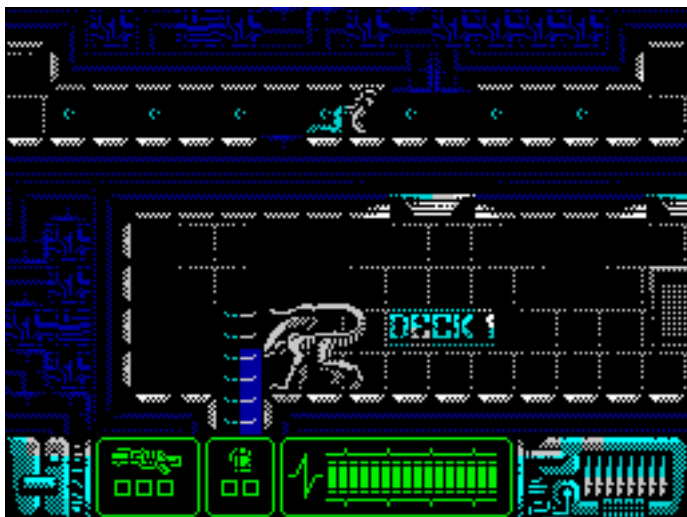
especially remarkable. Background music is a kind of "light" techno that can be pleasantly listened to. Seeing the mighty extraterrestrial monsters fall under our shots undoubtedly gives satisfaction. However, as we enter the meanders of the *Achilles,* doubts begin to emerge.

The setting on a cargo spaceship, with the main character as the only survivor of its crew, ends up giving an impression of monotony. Forget the inner monologues of *Survivisection,* the dialogues of *Castlevania Spectral Interlude* and the
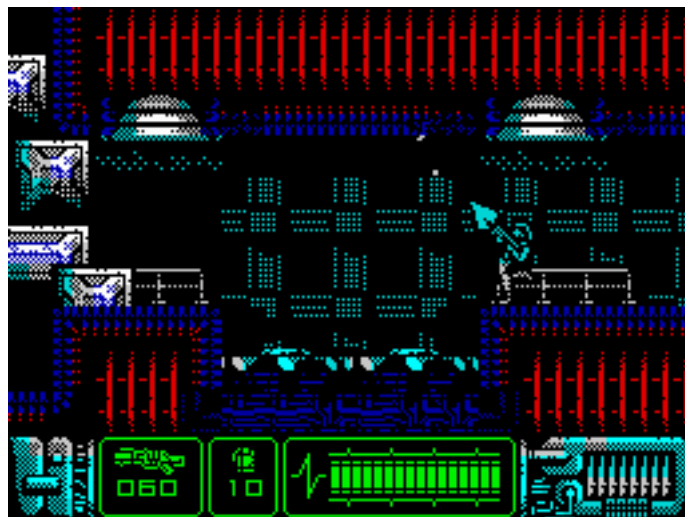
scenographic variety and width of scope of both of those titles: here, you can see nothing but tunnels, stairs, doors and containers. Aliens themselves are more fearful for their numbers than for their offensive ability, as to get rid of Facehuggers and Xenomorphs it is enough to get in line with them at a safe distance as soon as we spot them, possibly taking advantage of the doors - which do not open until we are close to them - and press the fire button until they are dead meat. Moreover, interaction with the ship's AI is limited more than anything to Ashley's insults against it.
Regarding gameplay, apart from the inconvenience of using two separate controls to jump and climb stairs, it is not pleasing being forced to resume the action, after the protagonist loses all of her health, from the last reached terminal. Checkpoints may be understandable on consoles, but on a simple computer like the Spectrum they are just a nuisance.
In summary, *Aliens Neoplasma,* beyond the undeniable care that has been put into its production, looks rather like a single episode of a larger and more varied title, enlarged to assume the proportions of an entire game. Does this mean that it is not worthy of being played? Of course not. Fans of the *Alien* franchise in particular will appreciate it very much. Furthermore, a certain longevity is given by the two different endings which, depending on our actions, will be shown upon completion. However, compared to what we have seen in the previous productions of the SaNchez group, style seems to prevail over substance here.

MR. DO! ★★★
Adrian Singh, Mark R. Jones
Language: English

It took 37 years, but finally, the Spectrum has its conversion of the classic *Mr Do!* coin-op. And what a conversion it is! True that there was already a clone of the famous 1982 arcade for our platform, the excellent *Farmer Jack In Harvest Havoc!* by Bob Smith and Lee DuCaine released in 2006, but an "official" version was still missing.

The aim of the game is known: the main character must collect all the cherries on the screen to move on to the next one. While moving, he digs tunnels exposing himself to the danger of being chased by monsters whose touch makes him lose a life. To defend yourself, you have a sphere of energy to throw at enemies at your disposal, which however takes some time before recharging, or you can drop apples on them. A level can also be completed by collecting all the letters of the "EXTRA" word. Monsters come out from the center of the screen, indicated by a prize - a slice of cake, an ice cream etc. - which, if collected, brings up the Alpha Monster and its four henchmen. These cannot be hit by the sphere and can also eat the apples that are thrown at them. Once you have passed the thirtieth screen, the game starts again from the beginning.

This conversion of the historic arcade Universal is an authentic exercise in style: in addition to being faithful even in the details - the intermission animations also appear every three levels - the graphical and sound realization is truly superb. Sprites move smoothly and "color clash" is almost absent. In particular, on Spectrums equipped with AY sound chips you can hear music (including the famous "Can Can" by Jacques Offenbach, played when you pick the cherries) and sound effects almost identical to the original. In addition to that, the sheer playability of the coin-op has also been kept intact. There is nothing more to say: *Mr Do!* for the Spectrum made us wait for a long time, but it was definitely worth it.

SPACE MONSTERS MEET THE HARDY (128K) ★★
Mayhem & Conscience/Sand, Alone Coder, Bfox, Nq, Kael
Language: English

As usual, when aliens invade the earth, there is nothing better than a fearless hero armed with a laser gun to put an end to their evil aims. Hardy - that's the name of our alter ego - jumps from platform to platform while shooting everything that moves. Each level is composed of an increasing number of screens, and in order to move on to the next we will have to find the keycard that opens the exit door and reach it.

Levels must be completed within a very short time, from 14 seconds for the first to one minute for the last. This is actually the main limit of the game: once you memorize the path to collect the keycard and get to the exit, it can be completed in a very short time, about five-six minutes. Before you can do this, you will have to sweat a lot, though!

However, it must be said that the game looks very good graphically, with a remarkable use of multicolor and the smoothness of the character movements, especially the main one, and for the pleasant background music.

In short, *Space Monsters Meet The Hardy* will not keep you busy for a very long time, but as long as you play it, you will be enticed by the lovely graphics and sound and the fast and furious action.

THE ORDER OF SLEEPING DRAGON (128K) ★★★

Evgeniya Zapolnova, Nikolay Zapolnov
Languages: English, Russian

In a fantasy world, a village in the woods is under attack by demonic creatures. A young man throws himself at them armed only with a rusty sword, but while he is fighting, the mysterious invaders kill his father. Eager to avenge him, the young man goes to a nearby monastery; his occupants, he thinks, could help him train to make him able to defeat demons more easily. But something is not right. There are strange rumors about the monks, and then, why didn't they come to help the villagers when the protagonist rang the bell for help? Nevertheless, after some initial resistance, the young man gets to speak with the abbot, who teaches him the first spell, the fireball, and assigns him some tasks to perform, before admitting him to the awakening ritual of the great green dragon. As the protagonist will discover at his expense, all that glitters is not gold…

These are the first events in which you are involved in *The Order Of Sleeping Dragon,* a surprising adventure and exploration game with role-playing touches. The young main character - whose name is unknown - will have to face hordes of monsters and interact with various non-player characters to complete his mission: avenge his father by wiping out the dark threat once and for all.

The game unfolds by guiding your alter ego through various environments: the village, the woods, the convent, the city and so on. The graphic representation is colorful, but rather sketchy, and the one-character-block-at-a-time movement, necessary to keep pixels and attributes together, is not smooth. Moreover, sound is almost non-existent. Despite this, *The Order Of Sleeping Dragon* is an extremely engaging title, able to excite the player and make him/her plunge into the setting from the beginning. In addition to the main mission, in order to advance in the story, or even just to gain experience points and level up, you will have to tackle others, ranging from cleansing a cemetery from ghosts, to obtaining and delivering certain objects.

The inventory gathers spells, potions, food, weapons and, at a certain point, a very convenient key, which allows you to open the numerous chests scattered throughout the game world. Moving on to a higher level, your vital energy will be brought to a new maximum quantity, and your offensive ability will also improve. The monsters to face, in fact, will initially fall under your blows easily enough, but later on they will become more and more resistant. Some of them attack from a distance by shooting spells, others charge at close range. If you die, you resume the action from the current section, with a minimum amount of life force. Killing monsters will also give you experience points.

Hotkeys can be assigned to certain objects, so you can employ them immediately. In this way, spells can be quickly recalled, even if sometimes, especially when you are surrounded by multiple enemies, the presence of so many controls to deal with ends up being somewhat uncomfortable. This is perhaps the only real defect of a title that is still excellent in terms of playability and atmosphere, and belongs to a genre not very often seen on the Spectrum. Play it, and you will hardly be able to put it aside before reaching the end!

VALLEY OF RAINS ★ ★ ★ ★
Zosya Entertainment
Language: English

My mother is Water Lily, the most beautiful flower on the Earth. My father is Ant, the strongest being on the Earth. Volcano has given me fire. Wagtail has blessed me for great deeds. I went on the road to return life to Valley of Rains.

With this monologue, narrated by the protagonist of the game, a young woman with flaming hair, *Valley Of Rains* opens. This is the game that stunned the Spectrum fans community at its appearance in December 2019 and won the Yandex Retro Games Battle 2019 contest. There is not much to say about the plot and the setting: from the words spoken by the main character you can guess that the story takes place in a fantasy world invaded by evil forces, against which our heroine will have to fight relentlessly to restore peace to her Valley.

GAME OF THE YEAR 2019
AL'S SPECTRUM ANNUAL
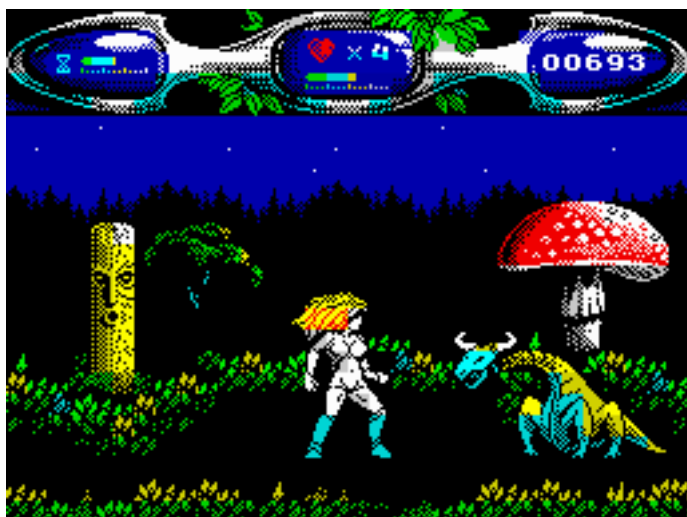
Surprises actually begin when the game starts, set in a forest of dead trees. One character sprite stands out immediately, namely the one representing the main character: very large, well defined and well animated. Going forward, it can be noted that the backgrounds, in addition to being wide, colorful and rich in details, move on two, and in some cases three, parallax levels. The first enemies, resembling huge bats, come against her: she immediately begins to shoot energy projectiles, and with a few shots she gets rid of them, but later, a bigger enemy, a sort of dragon, blocks the road, showing itself to be well more resilient than the previous foes. Other dangers are then revealed, such as large acorns that fall on the young woman when she passes under them, or sharp spikes that suddenly come out of the ground. All of this takes precious life force away from the heroine. Fortunately, she can also find some help at times, such as flowers that restore some of her energy,

or alternative weapons and shields left on the ground by dispatched enemies. During the adventure, she will meet other bloodthirsty creatures and move along meadows dotted with strange and huge mushrooms, lakes, caves, buildings and more. Sometimes it will be necessary to operate mechanisms to open passages that will allow her to proceed further until she reaches the last of the eight levels the game is divided into.

Valley Of Rains is clearly inspired by the first section of the famous *Savage* programmed by Dave Perry and Nick Bruty of

Probe for Firebird in 1988, but manages to do better than the latter. The attention to detail is impressive, from the splashes when the heroine moves in the water, to the animated waterfalls present in some levels. It's a fairly long title, and quite varied in terms of backgrounds and sprites, which is even more surprising if you keep in mind that it was designed to run on the 48K Spectrum. The great diversity of environments, as well as the fast, but not excessively frantic action, keep the player's attention well awake. Beeper sound does its duty, but a unique solution has been found for background music: an audio CD with themes specifically composed for the game.

Valley Of Rains is a masterpiece and fully deserves the praise it has been given, which includes my personal award as the Spectrum game of the year 2019.

El Mundo del Spectrum

Almost 25 years of activity, interviews and articles on everything related to the Spectrum, a podcast followed by thousands of fans, a book that entered the top ten bestsellers in Spain. This and more is *El Mundo del Spectrum (www.elmundodelspectrum.com),* the reference website for the Spanish-speaking (but not only) user community of the most notorious Sinclair computer. We talk about it with three members of the tireless team behind it: **Alejandro Ibañez, Javier Ortiz** and **Jesús Martinez.**

Let's start with the presentations: tell us something about yourselves...

Alejandro: My name is Alejandro Ibáñez and I am an entrepreneur of new technologies, lover of old ones and creator of EMS. I have had a Sinclair ZX Spectrum since I was a child, which forever left a mark on me both personally and, above all, professionally. I am also a presenter and director of the podcast. I live in Zaragoza and every day I strive to innovate by analyzing the lessons of the past in those creative, risky and improvised origins that stood for the Spectrum.

Javi: I'm Javi Ortiz, an EMS member who started with a grey Plus 2 in 1986/87. A machine that left a mark on me and is still more than a hobby for me: it is passion and great devotion. Unfortunately I don't have a stable job... I have been a postman for many years, worked in factories, couriers, etc. ... A complete evolution.

JMV: My name is Jesús Martínez, but I have dedicated myself to graphic humor for 25 years and since then I have nicknamed myself JMV. That's how I sign all of my work. I published many comics, particularly parodic ones (Starwars or The Lord of the Rings) and in the past I worked with a character very popular in Spanish universities called Bok. I worked for several years for the *El Jueves* magazine. a reference for graphic humor in Spain for decades; currently I produce a weekly cartoon for the *El Mundo* newspaper. Since 1998 I have also been an architect and worked in the field of administration designing and at institutional buildings.

How did your involvement with the Spectrum, and the "retro" scene in particular, start?

Alejandro: Shortly after the commercial "death" of the Spectrum, I came across a PC emulator with games. Being able to use my current computer to play all those titles that were still in my memory caused a change of perspective that years later, when I discovered the Internet, made me wish to create EMS.

Javi: Like Alejandro, many of us returned to the Spectrum after its commercial end with that wonderful invention called emulation. Pedro Gimeno's emulator, distributed by *PC Mania,* allowed us to revive our beloved machine on a powerful PC... it was magic! I have been on the Spanish Spectrum scene almost from the beginning, that is, since 2000, when I joined the legendary *es.comp.sistemas.sinclair* (the Spanish newsgroup about the Spectrum and other machines by Sir Clive). I was also part of the CEZGS group and subsequently of Retroworks (of which I am still a member).

JMV: Around 1998 I started collaborating with Alejandro on EMS, which was born not long before. I wrote some simple articles and drew the illustrations for each monthly edition. Other than that, I've always been tied to the Spectrum as a fan and was part of a user club where we exchanged information and tapes. With the third version of EMS, Alejandro brought us together with Javi Ortiz and Juanfra to relaunch the website, which has become a much richer compendium of articles and opinions. It was 2010, but a few years later we launched the podcast and the size of our work has been significantly expanded. Javi, Alejandro, Juanfra and me are great friends. We spent many years doing things together and there is high esteem between us. Without such a basis, it would be impossible to carry out many projects.

What motivated you to create the site and the book?

Alejandro: In 1996 I discovered the Internet and its ability to reach people all over the world. I studied how to create Web pages and thought to pay homage to Microhobby magazine by creating a site with different sections to be updated every month. At that time there was nothing like it, and I also wanted it to look very attractive and feature the best possible content. These ingredients remain the fundamental pillar of all of our releases: web, podcasts and books. Over time, other contributors have joined the site. Today, after almost 25 years, the EMS team is fantastic.

Years ago the idea of writing a book on the Spectrum was born, and we thought about it for a long time. We wanted to create a quality product in both text and design, but it took a lot. Since we could not devote the necessary time to it, it remained in a stand-by state until Manu Rico kicked off and we then followed. We began working at the second book, *El Mundo Del Spectrum Plus,* soon after releasing the first. The question we ask ourselves now is: will there be a third volume to conclude a trilogy?

Javi: I can add little to what Alejandro said. I will only say that without the podcast there would be no books, and I had something to do with it, by suggesting that it should be created for my participation in Fasebonus, one of the main retro podcasts in Spain.

JMV: The book came out in 2016 from a common project. We thought it was a good idea to give the website and its contents an editorial form as a printed text. We wanted to give importance to design (David Saavedra did an excellent job) and to provide the book with a general content that encompassed the whole dimension of the Spectrum phenomenon, its past and present, avoiding an exclusively nostalgic orientation (even if the simple fact of being dedicated to the Spectrum implies that there is also a part of that). Manu Rico, a friend of the site, offered himself to write a first draft because our daily chores did not allow us to go on with the project as we would have liked. His work has been fundamental. In January 2016, we put down a scheme of the first chapter, about 6,000 words, and from there we created a guideline to assemble it correctly. In September of that year, we managed to publish the book with a lot of effort.

How satisfied are you with the site and the book?

Alejandro: EMS has given me a lot of joy. It allowed me to meet many good people, some of whom have become my friends. I have been able to communicate with thousands of people who share my hobby. We entered the top ten best-selling book chart in Spain, something I never imagined. With the podcast I was able to create content listened to by thousands of people for each program. And of course, the creation of that first website in 1996 helped me become more professional on the Internet and make a living today. I could not be more grateful for this project.

Javi: I'm proud of the books, the site and the podcasts. These in particular allowed us to meet people who are very important for everything that the Spectrum stands for, and create audio documentation of them: Jon Ritman, Andrew Hewson, Paco Pastor, Gabriel Nieto, Los Ruiz ... Many others (of the so-called Golden Age) have passed and will pass in front of our microphones. In addition, we also focus on the present, with a news section about the current creators who keep on giving life to this machine, which died commercially years ago, but is very much alive in terms of current developments. On the other hand, as a personal project, I have my YouTube channel, *El Spectrumero Javi Ortiz,* where since the beginning I have given much space to contemporary authors, supporting the invaluable activity of those like you, Alessandro, who are creating some real art with every new work of theirs.

JMV: The book is already in its third edition and has achieved extraordinary success, with over 5,000 copies sold. I sincerely believe that it is a beautiful book, very attractive, intentionally generalist but with rather exclusive and unpublished content. There are interviews with people like Ponce, Gabriel Nieto, Barbero, Prades, Paco Pastor, Rafa Gómez, in which things never told before are told. It is a text for the initiates, but not only. Although it is a book of considerable thickness, it had aspects that could be improved. In the second book we managed to go much further and I am convinced that it is better and deeper. Each of them covers different needs and fields, and they both complement each other very well.

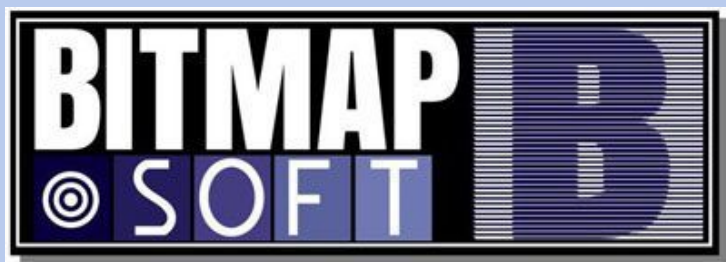**Any Spectrum -related project for the future?**

Alejandro: EMS is something alive and I don't know how it will evolve. In the near future, we will continue to cultivate the website that we launched a few months ago and that opened the fourth era. We also plan to improve our YouTube channel, which remains an open topic. Obviously we have other ideas, but we always keep them secret until they become reality. We are expert creators of hype.
As long as there is interest in what we do, we will be here. Thank you for contacting us and thank you for your work, we follow it closely.

Javi: As far as EMS is concerned, this is a team, we could call it a family, which I will always support and continue to try contributing to in my own small way. With the current website, we made a significant step forward, while the arrival of Darío Ruellan as a news editor has been a great acquisition. I don't want to forget our classmates who write articles like Kidsaguf, Deckard and others, they are also EMS. As for my channel, the same thing: stay on the same line and try to improve, but always, always, always strongly support homebrew authors.

JMV: Continue completing and documenting stories of the protagonists of those years to the best that we can through the podcast and articles in specialized magazines. Also keep on with the writing of books, perhaps with a third volume of EMS. I am sincerely convinced that it is necessary to approach the protagonists of that time and save their direct experiences. It is not enough to spread out on an armchair closed under a glass case, writing articles translated from English magazines and basing all your "work" on videos and texts made by other people. Nor is it worth to give up nostalgia from a supposedly erudite perspective. How can you talk about games and programmers of a computer with 40 years of existence, that was part of our youth, pretending not to do it with a certain amount of nostalgia? Sounds stupid. But you can reconsider that production as objectively as possible: not everything we thought to be wonderful is like that in fact. Programs we watched with uncritical eyes are manifestly unplayable, and the companies we only knew from logos were sometimes full of incompetent people, greedy for money, or programmers dominated by teenage egos. It is an era that can be studied rigorously like any other. In short, as long as our (increasingly scarce) time allows us to do it, we will follow the entire EMS team with our work. Personally, I am preparing another book that moves beyond the 8-bit era and connects with other types of sectors and markets, and I also continue with my little work as a collaborator of RetroGamer magazine together with a large management team and fantastic colleagues.

*2019 saw the first steps of **Bitmap Soft,** a software house focused on releasing new games for old systems. Covering the C64, Amstrad and Atari 2600 as well as the Spectrum, Bitmap Soft started with a varied and interesting offer for retro fans, with some other promising titles just around the corner. Its two founders, **Jamie Battison** and **Darren Doyle,** tell us about the past, present and future of their project.*

How did you get involved with the retro scene in particular, and what made you create the Bitmap Soft label?

Darren: I think the reasons behind starting up our own software house was that Jamie and myself were very interested into homebrew titles. Although I admired them greatly, Jamie was the driving force behind the project and wanted to be radical in his approach to really have some amazing software get released and create a unique label for 'New-Old' software titles.

Jamie: I have been involved in the retro scene for a long time. I am not as well know as many would expect considering I have ran Retro Video Gamer *(www.retrovideogamer.co.uk)* for over 20 years, I guess I missed the boat in terms of what that site could have achieved but it was that very site that introduced me to Darren, we formed a great friendship and worked on many retro related projects together.

One of those projects was an Atari 2600 game called *RVG Blast,* developed for us by a forum member with the aim of creating a limited run of physical games. Sadly, this never got off the ground for one reason or another.

As the years went by, we started to do interviews with developers of homebrew games and what struck us at an early stage was the sheer amount of games being released for all

manner of systems. We got a feel for the thirst people had for 'New-Old' games.

How satisfied have you been with the state of business so far (sales, customer feedback etc.)?

Darren: The response to our first two releases has been nothing short of phenomenal. When we begin to create awareness within a day we had nearly had the stock sold, which was such a high for Jamie and myself, and made it clear that we had done something good. Plus I think our unique style to customise artwork with cassette colour styles is very exclusive to us - we think had really made people fall in love with the releases, so yes, I believe we've impressed those that needed to be.

Jamie: Yes, one thing that has been received well is the fact we are not hiding that the games are freely available to download. What I would like to highlight though is that our versions are enhanced for tape. There are some changes for copyright issues, minor updates within the game and so on, and we are looking at offering these updated versions as digital downloads to those that purchase the game.
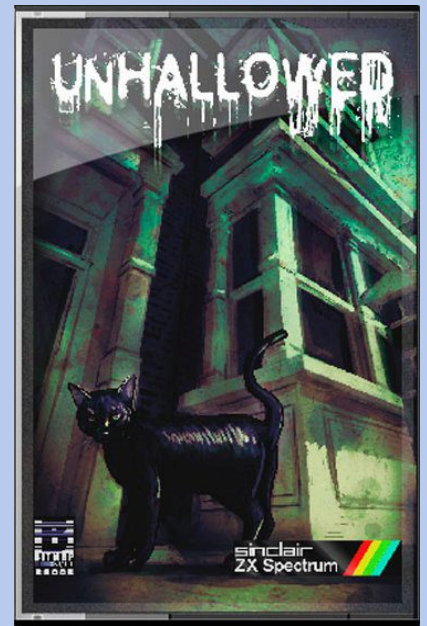
Your retro plans, not necessarily limited to the label …

Darren: The *Incredible Shrinking Professor* and *Rubicon* both for the ZX Spectrum, will be coming real soon, while a world-first exclusive of a technically ground-breaking title for its content alone called *Cousin Horace*, again for the ZX Spectrum, was sold out a few days after its release. After this, we will be focusing our time on other platforms with a potential 12 titles in the pipeline spanning across a couple of computer formats.

Jamie: As Darren mentioned, we will be releasing John Blythe's *The Incredible Shrinking Professor* and *Rubicon* at some point this quarter of 2020. I must stress that both are available for free from the Rucksack Games website, the versions we will be releasing will be enhanced versions, some will be minor adjustments for better use in tape format and so on.
For the ZX Spectrum, we also have an extended version of *Dirty Dozer*, as well as *Octu Kitty*. Recently, we also struck a deal for distributing the two games of *Sophia* on tape, both coming with an exclusive bonus level especially created for this release and unavailable anywhere else.
The C64 will see us releasing a port of *Unhallowed* on disk, kindly converted by Stefan Vogt from Puddle Soft. On the Amstrad front we have teamed up with ESP Soft and will soon be releasing *Galactic Tomb*, and we hope a few more, as the Amstrad needs more physical games. There are a few more on the horizon but I would have to be tight lipped about those now until we are 100% on a release.

Finally, we are running a beat 'em up compo on *itch.io* from January 2020 until 1st July 2020, we are open for developers to submit their games to potentially get it published with us. As a spin-off from that and not Bitmap Soft related we have setup the *RVG Squad* - a group of developers that may need help from other developers to get a game complete, the idea being that we may as a band of people create a game ourselves. See the *retrovideogamer.co.uk* forums if this sounds interesting to you.

For information and purchases, visit:
www.bitmapsoft.co.uk

In 2019, I made and released two new titles for the Spectrum. Two games very different from each other, that were my chance at experimenting new techniques and keeping producing something that should not be, for the most part, a photocopy of previous works. Here, I tell trivias and background information about them.

BEHIND THE SCENES

SOPHIA II

Sophia II was not originally going to be called *Sophia II*. The origins of the game lie in the ZX Dev Remakes 2018 competition, to which, in the end, it was presented, reaching the ninth place in the final ranking at a short distance (less than a hundred points) from two notable titles such as *Tiki Taca* and *Ninjakul 2.*

Sophia II is in fact a reinterpretation of *Styx,* the very first game created by Matthew Smith, for the 16K Spectrum in 1982. The game is very simple: the player guides along the screen, divided into three parts from top to bottom, a character who can shoot a sort of laser just left or right.

The first part is a maze crossed by spiders incessantly generated by a spider queen placed near the exit. Killing the queen stops the generation of spiders, but is not necessary to open the exit.

The second takes place underwater. The character swims from right to left; hordes of cannibal fish rush against him, and they must be killed to reach the exit. The poisonous algae that cover the lower part of the level should also be avoided.

In the third phase, it is necessary to pass through a sort of hall populated by diagonally-moving monsters, beyond which lies the final enemy, the Grim Reaper. A laser shot on his skeleton face and the game starts again from the beginning, this time with a greater number of monsters to face.

Why did I choose *Styx* as a game to "redo" to participate in the ZX Dev? For two reasons. The first is that *Styx* was one of the very first games I experienced on the Spectrum, when in the summer of 1984 (I was 11 at the time) my father bought me a 48K. I must specify that I did not try it in the original version, but as... a pirated copy of a pirated copy, in the sense that it was a homemade copy of the fourth issue of *Load 'n' Run,* a mixed paper/tape magazine which, alongside to games, demos and utilities created by its readers, published games of English origin translated into Italian with false names and without mentioning their real authors. The latter was, as I wrote in the *Spectrumpedia,* a common custom in Italy at the time, and it would have been so until the early 1990s. So *Styx* was initially known to me as "Survival". It wasn't until many years later that I learned that it was the debut of Mr. "Miner Willy".

The second reason was that *Styx,* due to its simple and

at the same time modular structure, lent itself well to being re-proposed in the form of a game consisting of distinct parts linked by a common narrative, a scheme that I previously followed when creating *Cousin Horace.*

So it was that in November 2018 I began to design the new game, a considerably enhanced reimagining of Smith's game. As a working title I chose *Acheron,* the name of another river in Hades. While I was designing the general lines of the game, I reflected on the type of characterization given to the main character, something that was completely absent in *Styx.* Soon it occurred to me that the setting was generic enough to include, instead of an anonymous sprite, a character whom I had already given a shape and a story to. In fact, *Sophia,* which came out a year earlier, had been received very favorably, and I was intrigued by the idea of continuing to tell the story of the magician girl. At that moment, *Acheron* became *Sophia II.*

Compared to the first title, *Sophia II* would have had, given its being a remake of *Styx,* three levels instead of four, but larger and more diversified by type of action: a dungeon, an underwater environment and a sort of residence for the Reaper. At the end of each part there should have been be a final boss. For the first and third part there were no problems, since the spider queen and the Reaper were already present in *Styx,* but the second would have required a totally new one to invent. I chose a giant hippocampus because I find these beings fascinating and I loved the idea of including them in my game.

Styx's laser beam tended to discharge, becoming shorter and shorter; in *Sophia II* I kept the need for the player to keep an eye on the mana, which in fact constitutes the magic "ammunition". Unlike in *Sophia,* however, mana is unique here. The part most reminiscent of the first episode is the second, with skulls replaced by amulets which shape recalls the famous eight-pointed star of Chaos and an underwater volcano instead of the cauldron.

For the design of the basement of the first level I took inspiration from the excellent work done by Jarrod "BiNMaN" Bentley for *Ghost Castle,* while the cursed bones are reworked from the *Gauntlet* ghost generators and the tombs from some details of *Mr Weems And The She Vampires.* Other elements - suits of armor, fireplaces, trunks etc. - are wholly designed by myself.

A significant issue concerned the third part, which in *Styx* was just one large room. *Sophia II*'s third level had to match the vastness and complexity of the other two, and at the same time be distinct from them in terms of game mechanics. I

therefore adopted a "platform and ladders" scheme, where Sophia would not have been able to use her offensive magic, since this has effect only against living or undead beings, or against other spells such as the Reaper's astral projection. Therefore, threats would have come from robots, acid pools, burning floors, spinning blades and weights ready to fall on Sophia's head. To make things even more complicated, I decided not to give any clue to the player about which magic barrier would have been disabled by each of the switches, unlike the amulets that in the first two parts each open the door bearing the geometric figure (triangle, circle, square) corresponding to the shape of the amulet itself.

The last level of *Sophia II* also contains a secret room which, if thoroughly visited, allows you to strengthen the offensive magic, so that it is twice powerful against the Reaper. To this day, it seems that no one has yet been able to find it!

From the point of view of technical realization, I consider it a point of pride to have made sure that pressing the "up" key, or pushing the joystick up, allows Sophia to both jump and climb a ladder when she is under it, thus eliminating the inconvenience of having to use two separate controls to be able to perform the two actions, and that she cannot go up a ladder by jumping over it sideways. These design choices are motivated by the desire to make the game more refined and immediate to enjoy.

As always, I paid attention to user feedback: *Sophia II* was received very positively – even more, if possible, than *Sophia* - and strengthened the charm of the young sorceress with many players. Immediately after the launch, a player commented that

it was strange to see Sophia underwater, in the second level, appearing identical to the other two. It sounded like an interesting suggestion to me: I quickly created a sprite of the protagonist while swimming, and I realized that it actually conveyed the impression of an underwater setting much better. Also in the second level, I tried to insert particles to simulate the air bubbles of Sophia's breathing, but I did not like the effect, they looked superfluous.and distracting. Not always more is better!
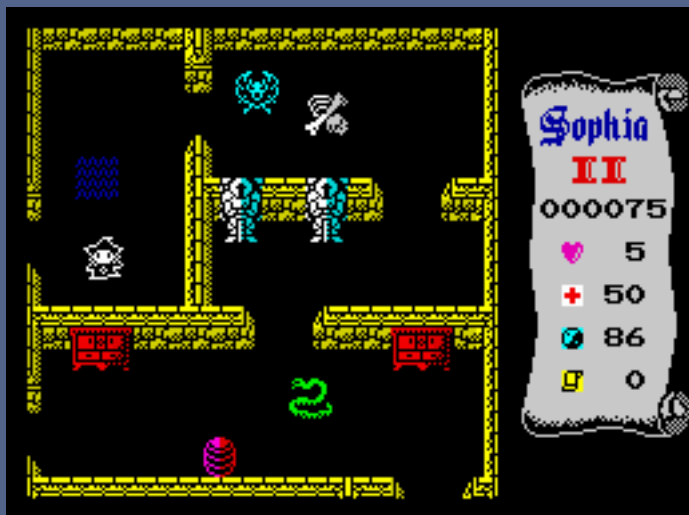
The ability to choose two difficulty levels was an idea that came to me when the development of the game was heading towards its conclusion. Of course, the player must feel enticed to finish *Sophia II* in both cases, so I designed two different endings. From the continuity point of view, the canonical ending, which would set the starting point for a possible *Sophia III,* is that of the Princess level (difficult).

As in *Sophia,* I wanted to emphasize the game action with music inspired by real compositions. However, while in *Sophia,* except for Mozart's *Dies Irae* for the fourth level, background

music is inspired by folk tunes, for the second chapter I wanted to draw inspiration from classical music. In the end I chose the *Danse Macabre* op. 40 by Camille Saint-Saëns for the first level, the Waltz n. 2 from the *Suite for variety orchestra* by Dimitri Shostakovich and the ending of the *William Tell* overture by Gioachino Rossini. The first composition expresses the somberness of the dungeon, the second suggests the movement under water and the third Sophia's momentum

against the terrible threat impending over her small principality and the world. The music for the endings is the first movement of the fanfare for trumpet, violins, oboes and timpani by Jean-Joseph Mouret; majestic, as befits the triumph after an arduous struggle.

Finally, I would like to spend a few words on the underlying issues. Like the first title in the series, *Sophia II* eschews the two main stereotypes of women in video games, namely the "damsel in distress" and the "curvaceous bombshell" a là Lara Croft. Ersh, who translated the game and documentation into Swedish, called her "cute and badass", and this is precisely how I imagine her. Sophia is a cute character - her appearance is inspired by Chibi figures after all - but at the same time she is courageous and confident, aware that evil can only be defeated through knowledge and its application for purposes of utility and emancipation for herself and the others. In contrast, the Reaper transforms individuals into mindless beasts with the false promise of individual fulfillment, exploiting them in order to build lethal machines which would allow him to dominate the world.


AD LUNAM

The interest in space exploration and astronautics predates my interest in the Spectrum. I still remember the TV broadcast of the first Space Shuttle mission launch on 12 April 1981, shortly before I turned 8. At the same time, I was avidly reading books on the subject - in particular, the *Astronomia* encyclopedia published by Armando Curcio Editore - and in newspapers and magazines circulating at home, as well as on the TV, space-related news always caught my attention. It was not difficult to imagine that sooner or later the two paths would cross.

Years ago I discovered a DOS game, already old at the time: *Buzz Aldrin's Race Into Space,* programmed by Fritz Bronner and released in 1992 by the legendary - and unlucky, alas - Interplay. Based on a board game, *Liftoff!,* created in 1989 by

Bronner himself (a unique case of a board game and its videogame transposition made by the same person), *BARIS* placed the player in command of the US or USSR space program starting in 1957. The aim was to send a crew to the Moon and make it return safely to Earth before the adversaries, and within twenty years. To achieve this goal, it would have been necessary to design, build and test rockets, probes, capsules and so on, recruit and train pilots, organize and perform missions, trying, year after year, to make do with the always limited funding and to cope with the inevitable accidents and unexpected events.

Back in 2018 I thought about the possibility of translating *BARIS* into a Spectrum game. From the beginning it was clear that it would have been a simulation, a category that in the early years of the commercial "life" of the computer had been present with many titles, but gradually had given way to other genres and remained almost exclusively represented by football simulation titles, epigones of the classic *Football Manager.* But then, towards the end of that year, I started working on *Sophia II* and put the idea aside for a few months.

In April 2019 I resumed the idea and played several games at *BARIS,* studying the manual carefully at the same time, trying to identify the main lines of the game, being aware of the fact that on the Spectrum it would not have been possible to reproduce everything exactly as it was. Besides, I shared the criticism made to *BARIS* at the time of its release: an excess of micromanagement, which made life difficult for the player. Trying to convey the dynamics of the race to the moon as faithfully as possible, Bronner had created an incredibly complex and deep title, but far too detailed and frustrating at times. For these reasons, I would surely create a complex, yet

RACE FOR THE MOON
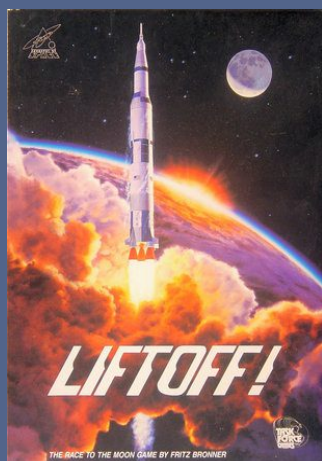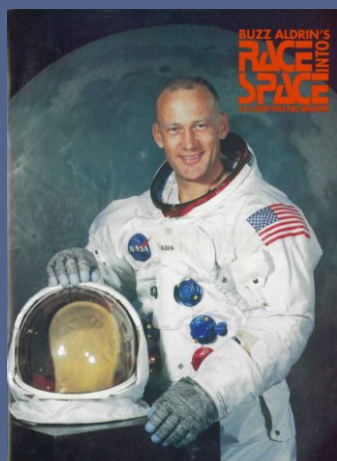
straightforward game, where the player should receive the information necessary to make his/her choices without having to browse too many menus or take care of aspects that end up being extremely marginal when compared to the general scheme of things.

In early May I drafted the initial game plan. It would have been my very first work in ZX-Basic, the programming tool created

by José "Boriel" Rodriguez, derived from Spectrum BASIC but enriched by numerous enhancements. I had been following the evolution of ZX-Basic for some time, but I hadn't done anything yet with it, apart from a few simple test programs. In short, I realized that, on the contrary, the new game would have been my most complex and demanding title ever.

Choosing the name was easy. Since I wanted a culturally "neutral" one, as I usually do with my games, I baptized it *Ad Lunam,* "towards the moon" in Latin. Likewise, I had in mind from the beginning to use the Robert Grossman's historical illustration which appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* on 6 December 1968 as the inspiration for the loading screen. The character set was modeled on that of US Gold's *Dream Warrior;* that horrible game proved itself to be useful for something, after all...

I discarded some aspects from the beginning, such as exploration missions towards other planets, since I wanted the game to focus only on the race for the Moon; or the different research centers for each space program (Mercury/Vostok, Gemini/Voskhod etc.).

Later in May I moved on to the coding phase. Some things were streamlined, in order to make the gaming experience more accessible, but also because I soon understood that I had to use every means to save memory. In fact, *Ad Lunam* had to run at least on a 48K, and this meant leaving aside graphics and sound, apart from some sparse use of the beeper. I did not

want to leave out those features I believed to be essential to the gameplay because of that.

The difference between "astronauts" and "cosmonauts" was also omitted for memory reasons, so they are generically called "pilots". In contrast to *BARIS*'s complex recruitment scheme, which reflects the practice of the time, pilots are all usable from the beginning, instead of being selected through training. From this it follows that the "Soviet" player does not receive any advantage in terms of prestige if he/she chooses Valentina Tereskova as pilot for a mission: this would give him/her an advantage over the "American" one. In *BARIS* it may happen that one of the aspiring fictitious American pilots present alongside the real ones is a woman, but the simplified recruitment system of *Ad Lunam* does not allow for it.

Initially, not only pilots, but also scientists and technicians had to be recruited. The former would carry out the research, while the latter would make vehicles and equipment, a bit like in *Ufo Enemy Unknown.* Hiring more technicians and scientists would speed things up. However, it seemed too convoluted in a context like that of the race to the Moon, so I decided to keep the scheme already present in *BARIS,* where each project can be assigned to a maximum of five technicians, with a different cost per technician depending on the project, while manufacturing is assigned to an external company, to which you order what you need.

The simplified structure of *Ad Lunam* made it necessary to modify the time flow. In *BARIS* a turn stands for six months, in *Ad Lunam* three. It takes more time to research vehicles and equipment, and the actions that the player can perform in each turn are not many, since they derive from the amount of funds available, and funds can only be received in spring.

While working at *Ad Lunam,* I had the confirmation of something that I considered in the planning phase: the most complex and difficult parts to create would be the planning of missions and their execution. The great variety of programmable missions meant having to establish a series of points in order to frame all the possibilities within certain lines, so that there were no inconsistencies, for example sending a Mercury capsule, or a Soyuz without a lunar module, to the Moon; or again, selecting a pilot without specific training for a given mission.

Other types of initially planned missions, such as those with animals, suborbital flights, or joint missions with docking in orbit, were also put aside. On the contrary, I wanted to keep giving the player the opportunity to choose one of the four approaches considered in the early 1960s by both sides to the problem of how to send a crew to the Moon and make it go back to Earth.

At times, programming *Ad Lunam* was almost a nightmare. Some features, such as the selection of pilots for the missions, were remade several times, because the solutions initially adopted did not convince me after I tried them in practice. Other times it happened that when one thing was fixed, another two would fail. For this reason, I allowed myself several breaks, even though I managed to present a first partial version for the 20th of July, the fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 landing, starting to arouse considerable interest. With some wonder on my part, I must say: *Ad Lunam* belongs to a genre that was considered somewhat of a niche already in the golden age of the Spectrum. Besides, I would have expected, given the anniversary, some other "lunar" themed game. Mine was the only one instead.

One part that I like to underline about the game, even though it may seem impractical, is the possibility to save to and load the game from tape, as it used to be. All of my games are designed for use on real hardware, and a complex and extensive title like *Ad Lunam* is no exception. I know that the vast majority of users play it, and will play it, under emulation, where a couple of clicks are enough to save a memory snapshot. However, I wanted to keep the opportunity to memorize the state of things even for those who intend to run it on their Spectrum.

In the end, after numerous tests, I released the first official version on December 20, almost as a Christmas gift to the Spectrophile community, together with the source code (first time ever for me), and a detailed nine-page manual, coming, as the game itself, in three languages: Italian, English and Spanish. Someone already managed to complete it without a hitch, and this confirmed the good debugging work done before release.

There are still some marginal imperfections, such as some writing not completely erased during certain missions, or some sentences left in Italian in the English version, but these are marginal defects that do not affect the good performance of the game, and that I will correct after publishing this annual magazine on the web.

I can say that programming *Ad Lunam* was not easy, but it was worth it and satisfying; I learned a lot from this experience. As with my other creations, I hope users enjoy playing it, as much I enjoyed making it, and even more.

WHAT NOW?

A look at my projects for 2020.

This year should finally be the time for something that many continue to ask me about: the release of *Sophia* and *Sophia II* on tape. The publisher with whom I initially struck the deal for that, due to reasons beyond his and my will, was unable to do it, and kindly left me free to publish the games with whoever I wanted. And this was what I did. Therefore, *Sophia* and *Sophia II* will appear in physical format under the **Bitmap Soft** label, which recently released my *Cousin Horace* on cassette. Both games will include an exclusive bonus level, made specifically for these tape versions and not available elsewhere. The screenshots above refer respectively to the bonus levels of *Sophia* and *Sophia II*.

Already made, but not yet released, **Funky Fungus Reloaded** is a revised and expanded version of my 2013 *Funky Fungus.* The game was created for the Play On Retro project, a forthcoming collection of titles for the Dandanator cartridge. Like its "ancestor", *Funky Fungus Reloaded* runs on 128K Spectrums and later models and is available in six languages, but includes various graphics and game improvements, eight extra screens and different music for each level, inspired by the great masters of funky and soul like James Brown and Herbie Hancock. After the Play On Retro release, the game will be made available the usual way.

2020 will mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the liberation of Italy from Nazi and Fascist oppression. Drawing inspiration from this event, I am planning a two-part title set in 1944, in German-occupied Italy. It will be an exploration and adventure game where the player, acting as a member of the Italian Liberation Corps, will have to accomplish a dangerous undercover mission behind the Gustav Line.
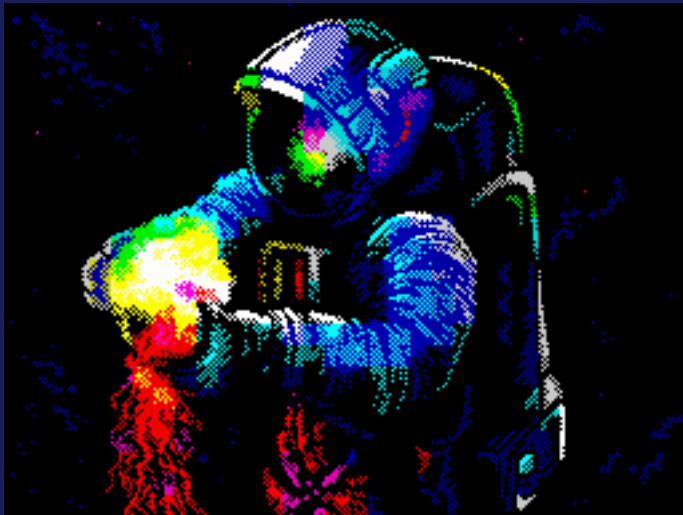
Spec-Art 2019

Andy Green - N.O.M.A.D.

ER - Myth

CVM - Aliens Inside Us

Nootrac4571 - Doom

Dimidrol - Street kids

ruguevara - Little PRINC-E