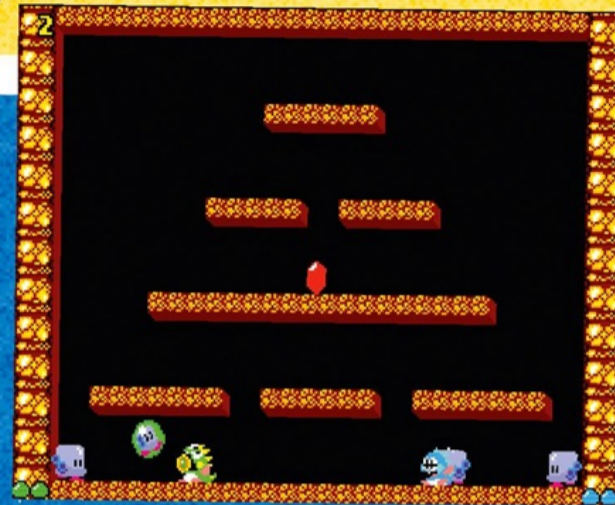# CREATING CHARACTER

THE EIGHTIES SAW AN EXPLOSION IN RECOGNISABLE VIDEOGAME CHARACTERS, INSPIRED BY THE CARTOON CHARACTERS BELOVED BY KIDS WORLDWIDE. WE LOOK BACK AT THE WHY GAMING HEROES BECAME SO IMPORTANT

» [Arcade] Plenty of Eighties heroes gained fame across genres – Bub and Bob hit the puzzle scene later on.

When you look at the growth of gaming during the Eighties, so much of it is driven by the popular characters of the era. While abstract games were still capable of becoming huge hits – just look at *Tetris* – companies that found their star character could rake in tens of thousands of sales, maybe even millions. If that happened, the chances were they would prosper for a long time to come. When Hollywood eventually came knocking in the Nineties, the first projects to make it to the screen featured characters conceived in the Eighties – Mario, Billy and Jimmy Lee of *Double Dragon*, and *Street Fighter*'s Ryu.

But why were characters so important, and what was it about the Eighties that allowed them to prosper? "People connect better with personalities than machines or abstract objects. Even though the graphics were basic back in the Eighties, we all had imaginations that filled in the details," says Philip Oliver, co-creator of the *Dizzy* games. Until the very end of the Seventies, graphics technology didn't really offer sufficient levels of detail and animation to convey character. "It was hard to relate, or get excited about the cannon in *Space Invaders*, or a low resolution, top-down car or tank," Philip

continues. "Then Pac-Man, Jump Man (later called Mario), Smurfs (one of the first character games we saw on an Atari 2600 – which amazed us) came along and even though the game itself didn't show the character in much detail, the box art, and sometimes the loading screen helped fill in the gaps."
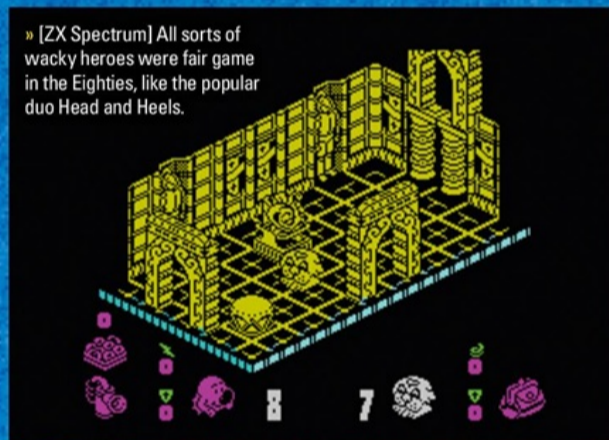
Of course, creating a memorable character is far from a simple task. "For a character to become memorable it needs to be unique and a bit quirky! Dizzy achieved this by being a large happy face on legs… which everyone decided was an egg," says Philip. "His energetic movement and facial animations (tough to do on characters in low resolution games) gave him a fun personality that captured player imaginations – *eggsactly* as we hoped

» [ZX Spectrum] All sorts of wacky heroes were fair game in the Eighties, like the popular duo Head and Heels.

for!" Once the character is set, the game designed around them comes with its own considerations. "You think about the game as a world, a place in which your character needs to live and move around. So many decisions now revolve around this, his appearance dictates the art style, the gameplay mechanics revolve around what he looks like he's capable of doing," Philip explains. "The story and missions need to put him, or her, central to the events."

With gaming seen as a hobby for young people at the time, many of the characters back then resembled cartoon characters in their design. "Pac-Man was the first videogame character as far as we're concerned, but other popular characters for us included Frogger, Q*Bert, Mr Do (a clown), Chucky Egg, Manic Miner, Frak! and Thing On A Spring." On the consoles, a different set of stars was emerging from the Japanese scene – Mega Man, Link, Samus Aran, Alex Kidd, Bonk and arguably the most popular gaming character, Mario. "We knew him as Jump Man from Donkey Kong (or

HALL OF HEROES

A SELECTION OF THE MOST RECOGNISABLE GAMING HEROES OF THE EIGHTIES – AND WHAT THEY'RE UP TO NOW

PAC-MAN • 1980
▶ This hungry yellow chap was an arcade phenomenon in the Eighties, despite being designed so that you couldn't discern his emotions. It didn't matter – he ended up starring in many sequels and a cartoon series as well as adorning all sorts of merchandise, both in the Eighties and far, far beyond.

MARIO • 1981
▶ While *Donkey Kong* was named after its starring villain, the unassuming plumber that battled him soon became a bigger star thanks to a series of incredible platform games. As the most recognised of Nintendo's many famous characters, he'll surely be around for decades to come, too.

MINER WILLY • 1983
▶ What type of character could be more emblematic of Eighties Britain than a miner? His third proper outing never saw the light of day thanks to creator Matthew Smith's difficulties in finishing the game, curtailing his career, but we'll always have the excellent *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy*.

SABRE MAN • 1984
▶ Ultimate's hero was one of the few characters to undergo development between games – as well as changing gameplay styles between *Sabre Wulf*, *Underwurlde* and *Knight Lore*, he actually become a werewolf at one point. *Sabre Wulf* saw a 2004 remake, but he's been inactive since.

» [Arcade] Billy and Jimmy Lee prove that siblings were popular choices whenever a second player got into the mix.

DAVID CRANE TALKS ABOUT THE CREATION OF ONE OF GAMING'S FIRST HUMAN HEROES, PITFALL HARRY

What made you create Pitfall Harry?
Pitfall! came about primarily from my desire to make a game with a human main character. At the time, most game characters were inanimate objects – tanks, space ships, etc. I animated the character and placed him in a jungle setting, and it worked very well.

Do you think giving your character a name and personality helped players bond with him?
Pitfall! was one of the first times that you would control a human-like character in a videogame as your avatar. As my alter ego it was natural to name him. I made him do all the fun things that I would have enjoyed – from swinging on vines to hunting for treasure. Frankly, he didn't exactly have a 'personality', but the game-player could identify with him as they risked the hazards of the game together. If a player bonded with him, it would likely have been because you were risking your lives together.

Why do you think so many videogame characters started appearing during the Eighties?
Videogame technology went through a rapid growth in the Eighties, allowing more detailed animations to be created. Controlling an on-screen avatar was clearly enjoyable (whether it was a jungle adventurer or a plumber), so it was only natural to use that newfound animation capability to make increasingly complex characters. I think that led to the ability to imbue characters with personality as well.

Did you have much involvement with Harry's appearance in *Saturday Supercade*?
I offered to be Pitfall Harry's voice, trying out sort of a Dudley Do-Right characterisation. But I was never taken seriously since I was needed in the lab making games.

What things should you keep in consideration as a developer when creating a videogame character?
Character development is an important aspect of mainstream media, but it wasn't much of a factor in the Eighties. We first figured out how a character would act in the context of a game; then figured out his 'look' given the available technology. What authors refer to as 'character development' took a distant third. These days, on the other hand, with videogames rivalling films in complexity and interaction, game characters deserve every bit as much breadth as characters in other media.

Why do you think Pitfall Harry remains so loved by gamers?
Pitfall! was a huge success during the rise of videogames. Virtually every game-player at the time either owned the game or played it at a friend's house. It was also visually stunning for its day, so everybody who played it had fond memories (even if some found it hard to play). That was many people's 'golden era' of gaming, and *Pitfall!* was very much in the game-players' minds at the time. I suppose Pitfall Harry benefits to this day from the nostalgic glow of those good old days.

» [Atari 2600] David says while Pitfall Harry didn't have a personality, gamers bonded with him as you were taking on deadly situations together.

Killer Gorilla on BBC) as we didn't see *Super Mario Bros* until late 1989 when we went to America," says Philip, providing a reminder of how gaming scenes were so much more regionally distinct at the time.

Of course, as we grew up our tastes shifted and big hits today tend to star realistic human characters. "Many games these days are trying to appeal to 15-plus year olds who generally prefer more mature characters and realistic environments," says Philip, explaining the decline of the Eighties-style cartoon hero. "But new characters are still being introduced, targeted at kids, take for example the Angry Birds which even lead to two movies. Then there's Steve and Alex from *Minecraft*, although since their names are less unique they are less memorable. More recently you have Goose, from the *Untitled Goose Game* – they really needed to work on their marketing names!" ▶

» Some characters had relatively low-key debuts – Solid Snake only became a true superstar in the Nineties.

MY FAVOURITE LOADING SCREENS

URIDIUM BY STEPHEN CROW
ZX SPECTRUM 1986
"I loved the ship. Coming out of the screen at an angle, it looked like a solid object I could reach out and pick up off the screen. Simple but effective rendering of the title, too."

WONDER BOY • 1986
▶ This hero has had a variety of odd names, much like his own series, and turned from an axe-chucking skateboarder into a shapeshifting swordsman. It seemed like his glory years were long behind him until recently, when a surge of new activity gave him a welcome career renaissance.

ALEX KIDD • 1986
▶ Sega's hero was a little kid with a huge fist and a love of rock-paper-scissors. Though he starred in some cracking games, ropey outings like *The Enchanted Castle* and *Hi-Tech World* meant he never gained a reputation for consistency before he was sidelined by a blue show-off in the Nineties.

DIZZY • 1987
▶ The prince of the Yolkfolk was a smash hit on the home computer scene, doing the business for Codemasters across a series of arcade adventures. He'd later star in plenty of spin-offs and even make a move to consoles, but his career stalled in the mid-Nineties and he never moved to 3D.

MEGA MAN • 1987
▶ Capcom's most prolific character has starred in an enormous number of games, selling over 36 million copies, and enjoys great popularity amongst nostalgic NES owners. He's slowed down in recent years, but his retro-style outings since 2008 have been consistently popular with players.