



THE STORY BEHIND...

CHRIS WILKINS STARTS A REGULAR FEATURE TALKING TO THE OLIVER TWINS - THIS ISSUE, THE STORY BEHIND PROFESSIONAL SKI SIMULATOR

■ Of all the many Oliver Twins games on the ZX Spectrum, Professional Ski Simulator is the one I knew and loved. Yes — I didn't play a Dizzy game back when I was a kid! I found them later in life after meeting them. So I thought I'd start this series asking the Twins why they wrote this game, how they wrote it and if they were happy with it.

CW: So when did you write this game?

Oliver Twins: On the back of the success of Super Robin Hood, Ghost Hunters and Grand Prix Simulator, and our new found friendship with the Darlings and early Codemasters folk — we all headed off to the slopes of Kaprun in Austria in February '87. We were just working on a new game called Magic Kingdom at the time, which

was later renamed Dizzy — but that's another story. We'd been Skiing a couple of times before with our family, so we were fairly confident, but not very good. In fact there's a lovely 8mm video our brother shot of us on our first skiing experience in '81 on YouTube.

CW: What inspired you to write it?

OT: With the success of BMX Simulator (by Richard Darling) and Grand Prix Simulator being top of the charts at the time, it was natural that we needed another aspirational sport to 'simulate' to follow them up. So clearly skiing was the answer.

The Darlings were keen that we should do a football one, but since we had no interest in the sport one of the other members on the skiing trip, Peter Williamson, took up that challenge. The tricky thing was trying to work out how to squeeze a decent skiing experience out of an Amstrad and Spectrum — our chosen computers at the time. Both BMX & GPS had fixed screens and rotation controls that kept them manageable within the constraints of these 8-bit computers, with limited speed and memory. We felt most

Below: Can you guess which one of the twins this is taking off on the slopes?



people's experience of skiing would be through watching it on TV— shows like 'Ski Sunday' showing fast downhill runs through 'gates' (2 marker poles). So we needed players to be travelling down a ski slope, through gates and we contemplated how we could achieve this. The answer was found in one of our favourite arcade games at the time — Marble Madness. However, this isometric 3D scrolling approach was, at the time, the height of computer graphics and that scared us. But the more we thought about it, the more we realized that this was the only way to do this.

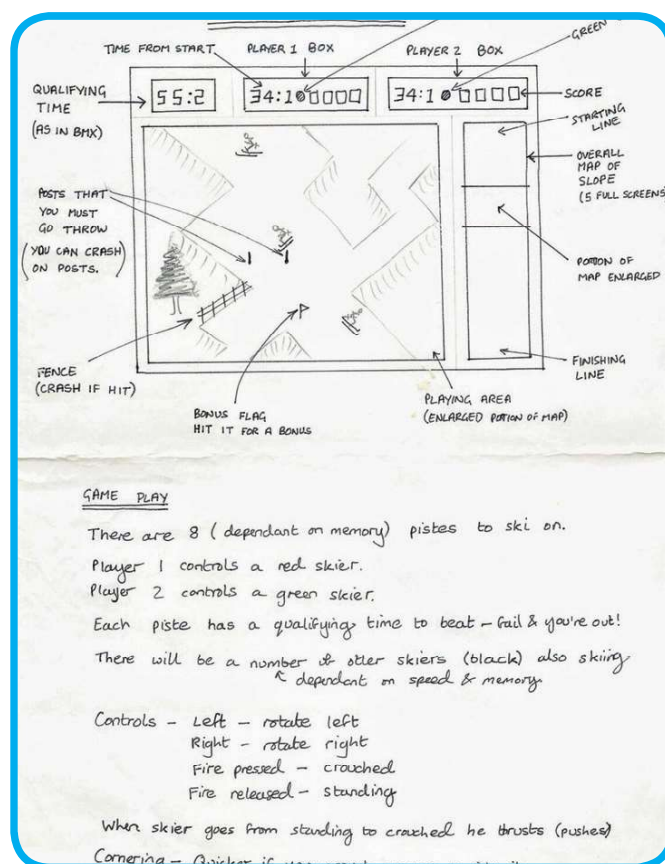
CW: So how did you tackle development?

OT: We knew the hardest part was working out how to store, display and use the isometric slope — so we obviously tackled this first.

We drew out a rough screen concept of what we

Below: The icy blue slopes of the ZX Spectrum version of the game.

wanted, using the common trick of borders, scores and a slide panel map to reduce the area that needed to be scrolled — since the pixel based screen mapping on both the Amstrad and Spectrum were very slow. Then we broke the hillside into a number of columns (8 across the slope, multiplied by the length of the map — 80). Each column had 4 bits (0-15) to store the height, and 4 bits (0-15) to store the slope at the top, so one byte of memory per column. Then we had to add a second table of data to set dress each surface. So each column had the ability

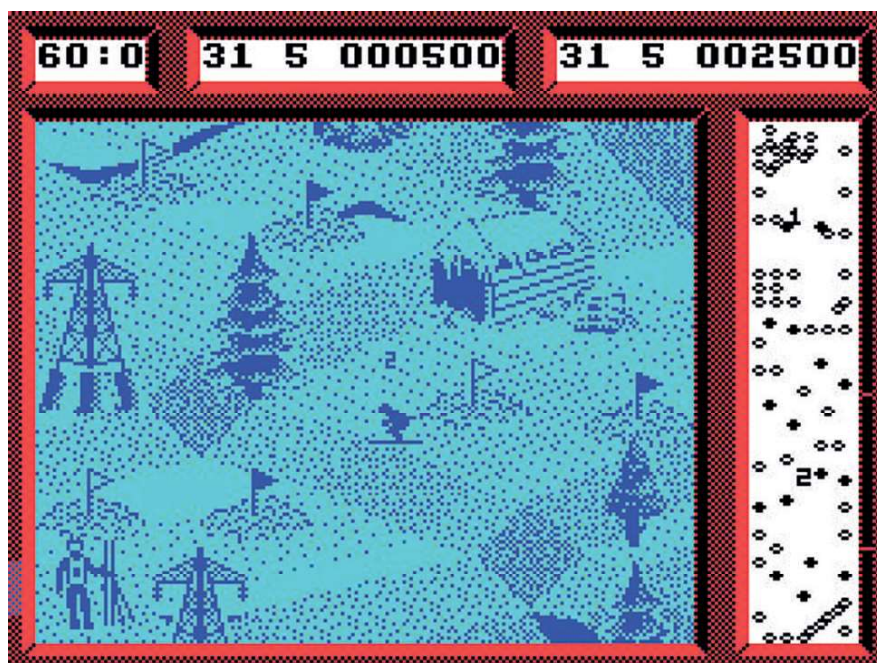


Above: An early sketch and some design notes for the game.

to have a single sprite placed on it — either a tree, gate, fence, hut or gate. Some were invisible 'markers' that would be seen by the computer acting as check points. These techniques meant that each slope took just 1,280 bytes. So the 7 slopes took about 9k out of the total 34k of RAM we had available for all the code, graphics and audio.

We wrote an editor, within the game, to allow us to move around the grid of columns, alter their heights, slopes and 'set dressing' sprite. Towards the end of development the editing code was commented out, to free up the memory to complete the game.

The code had to calculate which slope the skier was on to create a force (acceleration) based on the slope, which would accerale the skier in



the direction of the slope and try to turn them to that direction. Obviously it was up to the player to steer the skier, complimenting the forces of the slope, to ensure they chose the optimum route down the full slope through all the gates in the quickest time.

We used the Amstrad's Mode 1 graphics which allowed an identical small square pixel size to the Spectrum but gave us 4 colours, as opposed to the mono graphics of the Spectrum. We were disappointed that after the essential Black, white, Blue and Red, we were out of colours for green trees. We had no choice to make them black and were pleasantly surprised that they looked pretty good and then realised that trees in the Alps in winter set against the cold harsh snow and ice are closer to black than green.

CW: How long did it take to develop?

OT: We could only start work on the game once Dizzy

Below: The 7 slopes side by side of the ZX Spectrum version.



Above: The Amiga version of the game is as you would expect a lot more colourful.

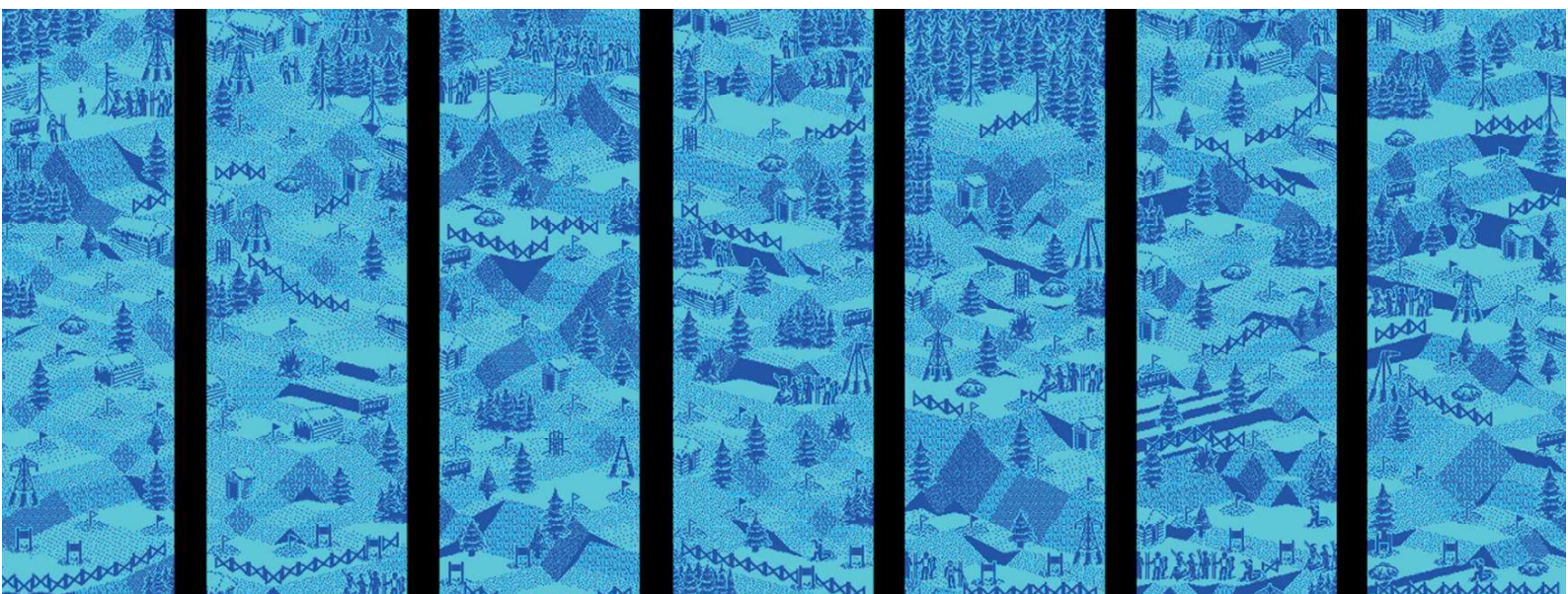
was completed, so bizarrely we wrote it in the height of the summer of '87. (June - August). We took occasional breaks in Jon-Paul's swimming pool — he lived in the same road and was the guy creating the music for our games when he wasn't at school as he was two years younger than us. His family had a swimming pool, those pool scenes in 'The Social Network' film were like our Summer of '87 — only they had much more of a party atmosphere than us! :-)

In all, it took about 3 months to develop the Amstrad version (lead) and port across to the Spectrum which probably took about a

week, since we were using the same code base and had the unique Spectrum code already developed for our previous 2 games. At this point we were still using two Amstrads for development with a Maxam ROM assembler and a link cable to pass the code through to the Spectrum. We produced the graphics in Panda Sprites, whilst the loading screen was produced by Jim Wilson using OCP art Studio.

CW: What's with the "Professional" in the title?

OT: Superlatives sell.





Above: The action packed Amstrad CPC cassette cover.

Below Right: Amstrad CPC action!

What's better than a man? Superman. That's why we added Super to Robin Hood, and it worked. Shigeru Miyamoto did the same with Super Mario Bros, but we weren't aware of that at the time, since the NES wasn't big in the UK. Adding 'Professional' just gave it that extra mark of quality. Codemasters became famous for adding as many Superlatives on a box that they could. Eventually the strapline of the company became 'Absolutely Brilliant'.

It worked!

CW: How do you feel the game turned out? Any regrets?

OT: We were really pleased with the design but felt there were two things holding it back. The speed we could get out of the scrolling on the those computers was so poor that the movement was not the fast slick experience anyone expects from skiing.

If the computers could have scrolled smoothly about five times faster that would have been great, but the courses would also have needed to be five times longer to ensure each slope was around one minute of gameplay. Sadly that would have blown the memory limits. The other regret we have was how we implemented the controls. We used the same controls as Grand Prix Simulator, but these don't work great coming down the screen. We should have reversed them.

It annoys us when people compare Pro Ski to Horace goes Skiing, frankly they are in a different league! We only saw Horace afterwards, since we never played games on the Spectrum. it was just there for us to develop games on.

CW: It appeared on multiple platforms, tell us about those?

OT: Andrew, Stewart & Robbie Graham did a great job converting the game to C64 & then ST and Amiga. Like the true professional, and quiet developers they are we developed them a conversion pack, source code and graphics etc, and had very little communication with them. Each version looked amazing, but also suffered from the speed and control issues of the original. We can't blame them for that!

CW: I heard you put your skiing holiday through as a business expense against tax?

OT: By this time

and the success of all our games through Codemasters we were high rate taxpayers and our accountant asked us to list all business expenses. We decided to put all the skiing expenses down, as they were pretty hefty.

The taxman was not too happy until we were able to show that we'd used it for research into producing Pro Ski Simulator.

CW: Was there ever talk of a sequel?

OT: It would have been good to revisit Pro Ski Simulator and fix the issues, as we did with Grand Prix Simulator 2, but we never found the time to do this.

CW: It's not too late it'd look and play great on mobiles or the Nintendo Switch surely?

OT: Umm, interesting idea...

CW: Thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me about one of my favourite childhood games.

Shall we cover Ghost Busters 2 next issue?

OT: Sure. Would love too.

