THE STORY BEHIND...

If there is one game, or one gaming character, that is synonymous with The Oliver Twins, it is Dizzy and the many games he appeared in spread across the 8-bit and 16-bit computing genre.

Chris Wilkins talks to both of the Twins to find out what is so wonderful about this charming egg...

Chris Wilkins: I'm sure you're aware you are most famous for creating Dizzy — a really popular game in the late 80s especially in the UK and across Europe. Would you mind telling us the story behind this?
Oliver Twins: Sure, we're very proud of Dizzy.

CW: So when did you write the original Dizzy game?
OT: We started Dizzy in late October 1986 whilst developing Ghost Hunters. We were 19 at the time and were in our gap year from University doing our best to ensure that we earned a good living from making games so that we wouldn't have to go to university to study Electrical Engineering. This was the closest subject we could find at the time to making computer games and in hindsight it was not very close at all, but that was the state of how the educational establishment viewed computer games. It's a very different story now with so many universities and colleges running computer

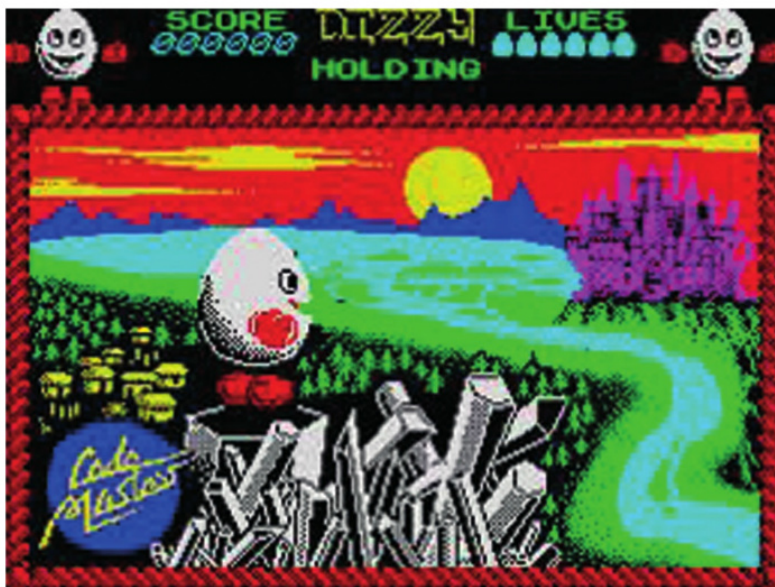**Below:** The completely opened Commodore 64 Dizzy cassette inlay.

game development courses.

CW: Which came first, the character or the world and the idea for the puzzles and story?

OT: Whilst developing Ghost Hunters in November '86, I (Philip) was very frustrated that the head of the main character, Hunk, was so small, that I was only able to use 3x3 pixels with a choice of three colours on Amstrad, one colour on Spectrum. I was drawing the graphics inside Panda Sprites, a sprite package that Andrew and I had written. It was very quick and easy to try out different animations and in my frustration I drew a very large head so that I could define eyes and a mouth with expressions. Since this used most of the space available (24 pixels by 32 pixels) I simply added gloves and boots to try to give him a possibility of becoming a playable cartoon character that was able to traverse a world sensibly — there simply wasn't room for a

Below: Looking over the kingdom — one day this could all be mine!

body or limbs.

CW: Why add a crazy spin jump? Wouldn't it have been so much easier to have him jump like a normal video game character?

OT: The spinning animations were developed first because Panda Sprites have the ability to rotate sprites, a feature added with the idea that people could use it to make games like Asteroids. Having developed the lovely spin animation we wanted to use it in the game and it certainly gave him a

Above: Look a ZX Spectrum tape with Dizzy on it. Fetch a cassette player!

very unique look that would always be remembered by players. Unfortunately it did have the side effect that he would occasionally not land on a surface correctly and do another full roll before he got to his feet and often this was fatal.

CW: He seemed incredibly enthusiastic much like yourselves! How do you achieve it, and did you mean to?

OT: It's lovely that people actually perceived him as so energetic and enthusiastic. I guess this came down to the fact that players were able to see his face which was quite new back then, but also because we gave him idle animations. We decided to make him bob up and down a little just to give him a fun lively personality, but also to help players locate him on the screen since when he moved around the screen it wasn't always obvious to see where he was. This was worse on the Spectrum which had attribute clash and we use the method

FUSION   **15**

of fast sprite printing using the XOR technique, which effectively camouflaged him like a chameleon.

**CW:** How did the name Dizzy come about?

OT: The game was mostly developed before we actually came up with a name for the main character, we just couldn't think of an appropriate name. All during development the game was called Magic Kingdom. It was our dad who accidentally came up with the name after he said that the character must be dizzy after tumbling so much. Much later, he also came up with the idea that the whole family were called Yolkfolk since he'd already decided in his own mind Dizzy was an egg, as did many other people.

CW: What?! Dizzy wasn't an egg?!

OT: During development, Dizzy was just a large happy face with red gloves and boots. After release, we came around to accepting that people saw him as an egg.

CW: What inspired you to write it?

OT: It was the third in the series of our side view action adventures. We'd featured a castle, we'd had a haunted house, so we were looking for another theme and came up with the idea of a fantasy world — inspired by the likes of Dungeons and Dragons (the Cartoon) and the Smurfs. We loved cartoons and wanted to create our own cartoon character and we already had this funny 'large face' character mentioned earlier.
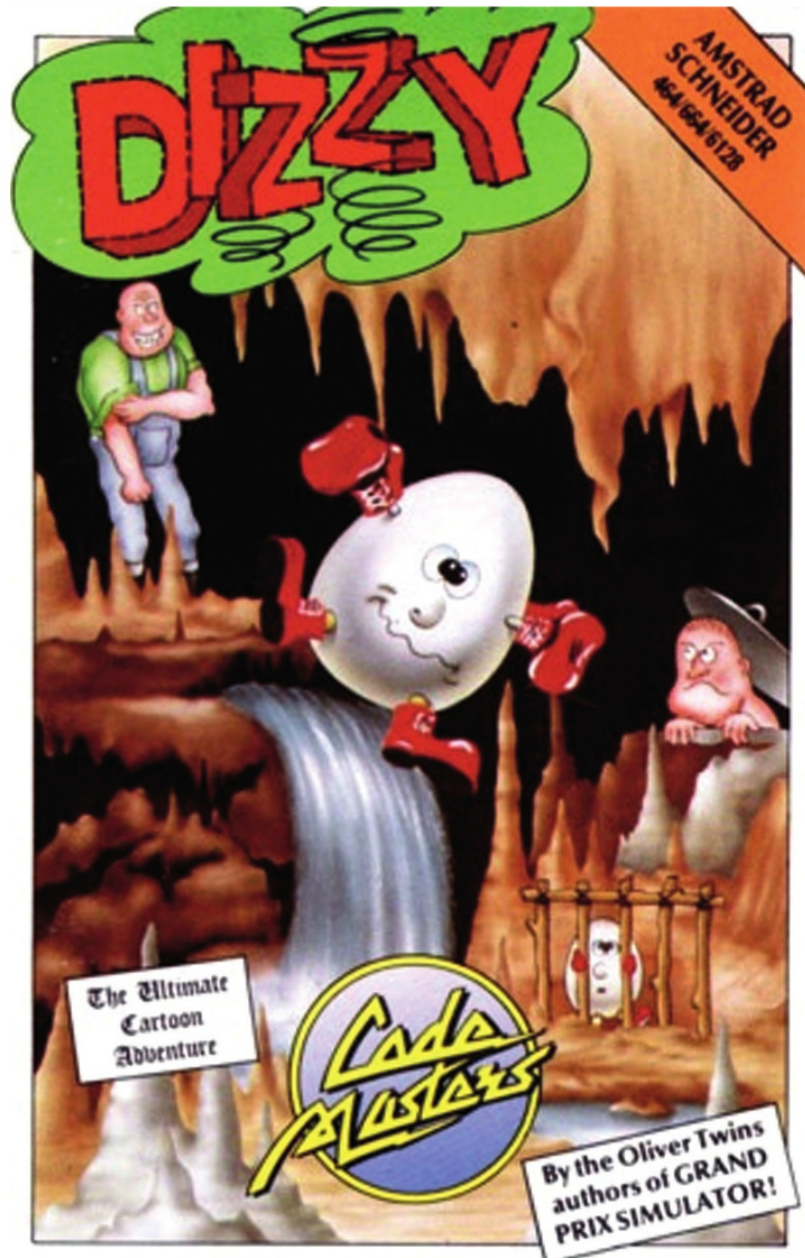
Above: The Amstrad cassette cover of Dizzy — developed by those guys who did Grand Prix Simulator!

CW: Tell me about the world you created for your character.

OT: We really felt that it was important that all the screens joined together to create the illusion of a small land to explore and we wanted each new screen that opened up to look new, different and interesting.

CW: How did you design the map and plan the puzzles?

OT: We sketched rough ideas for sections working away from from the starting screen trying to think of interesting blockers. We then printed all the screens out, gluing them to wallpaper and then worked out where each 'key' should be positioned to make finding them and returning them to where they
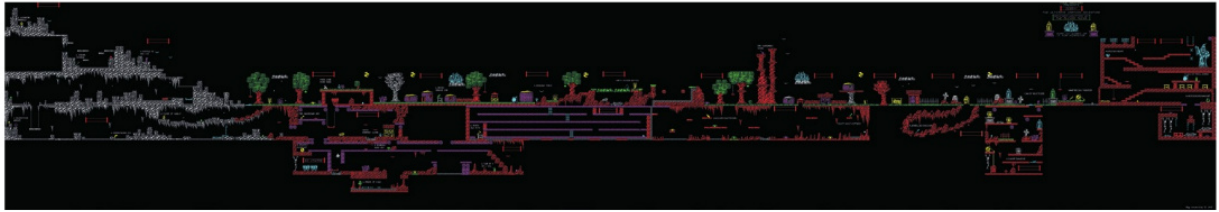
Above: Ths will be a picture
of the game map!

could be used both challenging and interesting. Obviously they didn't look like 'keys' they were things like A Mucky Grease Gun, A Strong Crowbar, A Broken Heart etc. all of which made solving the puzzles a lot more cryptic and interesting.

CW: So how did you tackle development?

OT: We had our original Amstrad CPC 664, and then the other Amstrad CPC 6128 bought with the advance monies Codemasters paid us for Super Robin Hood. These both had disk drives, and we'd purchased 2 Maxam ROM Assemblers that attached to the back of the computers. We linked one of the Amstrads to a Spectrum via our homemade Splink (SPAM) cable. We could simply develop the code on the Amstrad, compile it and send a ROM image to the Spectrum which worked really well.

This was one of the breakthroughs we made in creating games much quicker.

CW: So how long did it take to develop?

OT: All development was initially for the Amstrad version and that took about 8 weeks, we then converted it across to the Spectrum using the code developed for Ghost Hunters which took about another week. So

the Spectrum version is 85% Amstrad game with 10% from Ghost Hunters and another 5% unique code. Of course Dizzy was based on Ghost Hunters code base so it probably contains well over 50% of it's code from Ghost Hunters. We always tried to be as efficient as possible with code reuse.

Top: Dizzy, bless him, trying to work out which computer is best!

CW: It was converted to the C64 where many of your Dizzy fans first saw it. How did that come about and what did you

Below: The primary coloured ZX Spectrum version of Dizzy.

FUSION   17

think of that version?

OT: Codemasters, the Darling brothers and Mark Baldock, yes the guy that converted our Amstrad Super Robin Hood to the Spectrum, arranged all the conversions, and they handed our source code and graphics to Ian Gray who did an excellent conversion. He would go on to convert most of the Dizzy games to C64. We've never played them, since we didn't have a C64.

CW: Did you know you had a hit on your hands?

OT: Not at all. In fact quite the opposite, sales were slow, slower than our previous 3 games, Super Robin Hood, Ghost Hunters and Grand Prix Simulator. So we just got on with our next game Pro Ski Simulator. But within a few months Codemasters were receiving a lot of fan mail. Well, we say fan mail, it was mostly, 'I love the Dizzy game but can you please tell me how'. Thankfully sales continued at a reasonable rate and didn't decrease as is usual with most games, to the point that a year later the game had sold pretty well and the letters were still coming in. It's that which convinced us that we should write another Dizzy game. Hopefully the players who bought and liked the first would like another adventure for Dizzy, this time on a deserted Treasure Island.

CW: Why do you think Dizzy eventually became so popular?

OT: Well it wasn't popular as first. Nobody really knew what Dizzy was from the box. We hadn't used our formula

of using a recognised name. We did add the sticker 'The Ultimate Cartoon Adventure' hoping that this would tempt players, as that i what we were attempting to create and felt sure that players would want this. Whilst we were only using fairly crude computers and graphics were very limited we did manage to conjure up the fantasy world in the players minds. They were able to buy-in to the character, the world and story. Obviously later Dizzy games were converted to computers and consoles with better graphics and he started to look much more like a credible cartoon character.

CW: Any plans to bring Dizzy to modern platforms? These games would be great on the Switch.

OT: Creating modern high quality games is a very expensive business, so it would be a huge financial risk. We have fully designed a new Dizzy game called Wonderful Dizzy, and that's currently in development for the Spectrum Next, so let's see how that's received first.

CW: What else would you like to tell us about Dizzy?

OT: After the Let's Go Dizzy Book came out, late 2016, we were contacted by the Director of a Computer Museum in Ukraine. He told us that Dizzy was the most popular video game character across Russia for most of the 90s. We had absolutely no idea! It took almost 20 years later, and the adoption of the internet, to find out. It does explain why there are so many Dizzy Fan games.

CW: How can people play Dizzy games easily today?

OT: The original games, and all the fan games, are all collected and available for free at www.Yolkfolk. com. Some even play in the browser so you don't need an emulator.

CW: You must be very proud of what you created as teenagers?

OT: Yes, we are always pleased to hear how much Dizzy meant to players. People

18   **FUSION**

Above: Philip showing off the design of Dizzy — on the back of wallpaper!

often tell us of their fond memories of playing them and many in the games industry have told us it's the Dizzy games that inspired them to learn the skills required to make games and have a career in the games industry.

CW: Wow, nice to know you made a real difference to people's lives with a game...

OT: Yes. We're pleased that Dizzy was so successful and so fondly remembered, but we don't want it to be our legacy. We've done a lot since and plan on doing a lot more. We're really excited about the future of games and particular British game developers role in making them.

CW: Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.

OT: Not at all, hope your readers enjoy the article.

Below: And for completeness — the Amstrad CPC inlay.