

RETRO



Spinning Dizzy into life one last time

The Oliver Twins' iconic video game character Dizzy stars in its first new adventure for 26 years. But, as David Crookes discovers, it's likely to mark the end of a wonderful journey

Philip and Andrew Oliver have made many games – so many, in fact, that Guinness World Records states they're the most prolific 8-bit video game developers of all time.

Between 1984 and 1992, they developed 26 games for the Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad CPC while designing a further nine for others to make. You may fondly remember *Super Robin Hood* and *Grand Prix Simulator*, for example. But around a third involved an adventurous egg-shaped character called Dizzy, who players would somersault around fantasy environments to pick up objects before using them to solve puzzles.

Venture into the loft of Philip's home in Leamington Spa and the twins' history is laid bare. There are bulging cardboard boxes packed with paperwork and floppy disks, various video games spilling

onto the floor, an assortment of magazines and merchandise, and piles of photographs from years gone by.

Sifting through this treasure trove is an adventure in itself. "We've kept everything," said Philip, who went on to co-found Blitz Game Studios and Radiant Worlds with Andrew, following a lengthy spell at Codemasters. "We simply couldn't bring ourselves to throw away so much unique



work when it was easier to just put it in the loft."

The value of that work has become more apparent in recent years as the appetite for retro gaming continues to grow. Not only has the Oliver's stash unearthed a handful of unreleased *Dizzy* adventures, Philip's frequent trips into his loft have led to a book charting the character's history, a re-imagining of a *Dizzy* spin-off game for a modern console and, more recently, an entirely new adventure created for a revamped version of the iconic ZX Spectrum.

However, it happened almost by accident when, in 2015, the pair attended a huge retro event called Play Blackpool to talk about games development during the 1980s.

They took along various items but one caught even them by surprise.

"I'd been in the loft the night before and one of the props was an old map of a *Dizzy* game," Philip recalled.

"I held it up and said, 'here's *Wonderland Dizzy*', but then I immediately questioned whether it had actually been released."

The audience confirmed that it hadn't so, after the talk, Philip arrived home and decided to go back into the loft to dig around a little bit more.

"I was hoping to find a master ROM cartridge for *Wonderland Dizzy* but instead I found a disk saying it contained the source code," he said. "Unfortunately, rebuilding a game without the full development environment was something we couldn't

do, so Andrew began asking around to see if someone could help."

Cracking on

The twins found a *Dizzy* fan from Poland called Łukasz Kur who said that he could rebuild the game – originally developed for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) console – and create a master from it.



ABOVE Users of FUZE4 on the Switch can make games using Dizzy assets

LEFT The original *Fast Food Dizzy* was the first spin-off from the *Dizzy* games



THE GAME SHOULD BE IDENTICAL TO THE AMIGA VERSION, EXCEPT:-

TROLL BRIDGE

WHEN YOU WALK ONTO THE BRIDGE SCREEN THE TROLL JUMPS FROM THE SCREEN TO THE LEFT AND STANDS AT THE EDGE OF THE SCREEN BLOCKING YOUR PATH. WHILE THE TROLL IS STANDING IT SHOULD BE A STATIC SPRITE.

THERE IS ALSO A GOAT TETHERED TO A TREE USING CHAIN (THE CHAIN SHOULD BE VISIBLE). THE GOAT SHOULD BE IN A DIP TO AVOID SPRITE FLICKER.

TO GET PAST THE TROLL YOU USE SOME HOLY CUTTERS OR A HACKSAW TO CUT THROUGH THE CHAIN, AND THEN ONCE THE GOAT IS FREE YOU HIT IT WITH THE BIG STICK AND IT CHARGES AT THE TROLL.

IF YOU HIT THE GOAT WHILE IT IS STILL TETHERED IT BITES YOU AND MAYBE YOU SHOULD LOSE A LIFE, OR IT COULD JUST BLEAT A LOT.

TO AVOID SPRITE FLICKER THE TROLL EDGES AWAY FROM THE GOAT AS SOON AS YOU HIT IT AND AS THE GOAT GETS CLOSER IT MOVES OFF OF THE SCREEN. WHILE THIS IS HAPPENING DIZZY SHOULD BE LAUGHING ON THE SPOT.

BOTH THE GOAT AND TROLL SHOULD BE ABOUT 5 CHARX WIDE.

THERE COULD BE A SIGNPOST ON THE EDGE OF THE BRIDGE READING 'BEWARE OF THE TROLL'.

SIGNPOSTS

THESE SHOULD BE DOTTED AROUND AND DRAWN ON THE BACKGROUND AS IT WOULD ONLY TAKE A FEW CHARX. THE SIGNPOSTS COULD THEN BE USED TO GIVE CLUES/WARNINGS OR JUST TO ADD MORE CHARACTER AND REALISM TO THE GAME.

THERE SHOULD BE SIGNS NEXT TO WATER SAYING 'BEWARE! PARANIA INFECTED WATER'.



ABOVE The hand-drawn *Wonderland Dizzy* map

ABOVERIGHT The design notes for *Magicland Dizzy* from 1992

LEFT The intro storyboard for *Wonderful Dizzy* is very L Frank Baum



HERE'S CYCLONE COMING, COME ON POGIE TO THE HUT. THE NORTH & SOUTH WINDS MET. DIZZY FELT THE HUT WHIRL UP INTO THE AIR.

EVERYTHING WHIRLED AROUND IN CHAOS. WAS HE DREAMING? THE HUT LANDED WITH A BUMP, AND A STRANGE SCREAM.

Sure enough, Łukasz, who had played all the previously released Dizzy adventures – *Dizzy: The Ultimate Cartoon Adventure* (1987), *Treasure Island Dizzy* (1988), *Fantasy World Dizzy* (1989), *Magicland Dizzy* (1990), *Spellbound Dizzy* (1991), *Dizzy: Prince of the Yolkfolk* (1991) and *Crystal Kingdom Dizzy* (1992) – recompiled the discovered game, tested it thoroughly, fixed a few bugs and even added Polish to the supported languages.

“Since Codemasters owned the *Dizzy* trademark, we asked if we could make a limited run of 150 cartridges to sell via Kickstarter on the provision that we’d give all profits to charity,” Andrew continued. “Codemasters gave us permission and it was just so nice to see a new physical *Dizzy* game with all of its glossy packaging 22 years after we had originally developed it.”

As well as a paid-for physical release, *Wonderful Dizzy* was made available to play for free online and the Olivers also decided to allow gamers to download a free ROM for



“Łukasz recompiled the discovered game, tested it, fixed a few bugs and even added Polish to the supported languages”

LEFT There are dozens of boxes stuffed with memories of the past in Philip’s loft

use in a NES emulator. Philip then went back into his loft.

“I was keen to see if I could find any other finished or mostly finished games, especially *DreamWorld Pogie*, which I remembered with fondness,” he said. “I hunted around and found that game along with some other disks containing source code for *Mystery World Dizzy* and *Panic!*

Dizzy, which also hadn’t been released.” As before, these were sent to Łukasz for recompiling.

“This time, Chris Wilkins from Fusion Retro Books organised a Kickstarter campaign and produced 600 cartridges,” said Philip, who was also working with Chris on a book called *Let’s Go Dizzy! The Story of the Oliver Twins*.

DreamWorld Pogie was then released in 2016; *Mystery World Dizzy* in 2017 and *Panic! Dizzy* in 2019. *DreamWorld Pogie* proved to be the most popular among fans, with pledges totalling £28,943 from 601 Kickstarter backers.

■ 2D or not 2D

In some ways, it was bittersweet. The Oliver Twins had actually sought to revive *Dizzy* in the mid-2000s for the PlayStation 2, going as far as

pitching a 3D concept to Codemasters. In 2012, they’d also earmarked a team at Blitz Game Studios to create a new modern adventure called *Dizzy Returns* for iOS and PC, but they only raised £24,605 on

Kickstarter – a far cry from their target of £350,000.

Dizzy fans, it seemed, didn’t want modern 3D interpretations of their favourite character. Their love of the game was steeped in its simple 2D environments and nostalgia was dictating that they’d rather enjoy more of the same.

Such a message was reinforced when the Olivers caught wind of another development. “On Easter Sunday in 2017, we received a message from Dmitri Ponomarjov through social media which said he and a group of *Dizzy* fans had made a new version of *Crystal Kingdom Dizzy* for the Spectrum,” said Philip. “And it was incredible.”

For years, fans had been making their own *Dizzy* adventures, with many of them available to play at

yolkfolk.com. "But this was different," said Philip. "This group had recreated a big *Dizzy* game on the same system that it was originally released on. They had built it from scratch and improved it in every respect."

Something flickered in Philip's mind. "I thought it would be amazing if we designed a new game and had this team produce the graphics and code," he explained. "But we needed an incentive."

■ The Next step

That came in the form of the ZX Spectrum Next (see issue 309, p48), an updated version of Sinclair's classic machine. Based around the Z80, the plan was to create a computer with twice as much memory, a high-resolution mode and a case designed by original creator Rick Dickinson. It was also set to be compatible with the original Spectrum range.

"Andrew said we could help the ZX Spectrum Next's Kickstarter campaign by earmarking a new *Dizzy* game for it," said Philip. "Dmitri agreed to produce a new game if we designed it and, over the next few weeks, it weighed heavy on our minds."

Drawing inspiration from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the Oliveras took Dizzy and the supporting "yolkfolk" cast and spent six months designing a new game. "We replaced the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion with our own characters and gave Dizzy the central role of Dorothy and replaced Toto with Pogie."

The design included hand-drawing all the screens and mapping them together in a large Excel file to position all the objects. "We had to detail all the characters and items and produce the full script, which in



LEFT The Oliveras have received honorary doctorates from Coventry University

Wonderful Dizzy is probably ten times larger than a regular *Dizzy* script," Philip continued. "We even produced a full walkthrough of every detail to test everything worked and made sense."

Unlike the original games, which saw the Oliveras working 12 hours each day, seven days a week with few breaks, what became *Wonderful Dizzy* was developed as a hobby.

It meant development was slow and, since the team was spread across the UK, Estonia, Russia, Serbia, Spain and Poland, they relied heavily on Facebook Messenger for communication and Dropbox for sharing files.

But no money exchanged hands and the game was released for free. "It was made as a labour of love and a gift for the retro community," Philip said.

Yet that's not all. *Dizzy* has also been dusted down to

promote the coding application FUZE4, which lets Nintendo Switch users program games directly on their console. As well as allowing the use of *Dizzy* assets, the Oliveras have used the software to remake the 8-bit game *Fast Food Dizzy* for the Switch. "We thought it would take a month but feature creep meant it took longer [ten weeks]," said Andrew.

Does this mean we're about to see even more *Dizzy* games? Alas, maybe not. One of the problems faced by the Oliveras, despite all the releases these

past five years, is that they don't own the full rights to their creation.

"We have tried a number of times over the years to buy back the rights that Codemasters own in *Dizzy* so that we can properly

invest in the character and make some great new games but every time they have rejected our generous offers," Philip lamented.

The situation doesn't look like it will change. In December 2020, it emerged that EA had agreed to buy Codemasters for \$1.2 billion and, while the US giant is unlikely to want a character that had relatively little success outside of the UK, Philip isn't hopeful that it will make a difference.

"It will probably make things harder, if anything," he said.

"Currently, the Codemasters' decision makers know us and are local but, in the future, those decision makers will be in California and they won't know us or *Dizzy*. It means that *Wonderful Dizzy* is probably the last official game, but it's been a fun ride, that's for sure." ●

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BELOW Gary Arnott's *Wonderful Dizzy* logo recalls the 1980s and 90s *Dizzy* artwork

BOTTOM Philip and Andrew Oliver hard at work designing *Wonderful Dizzy*

BOTTOM RIGHT *Dizzy* is in pride of place on *The Oliver Twins Collection* cartridge

