



THE STORY BEHIND...THE...

■ I'm joined by Philip & Andrew Oliver, AKA The Oliver Twins. They are extremely well known to the Amstrad retro community having developed so many of their best selling games for these computers. So who or what made them adopt the Amstrad CPCs and make so many games for them and when and why did they move on?

Chris Wilkins: Well it's just possible you guys are the most prolific developers on the CPC, just how many games did you write for the machine?

Philip Oliver: We actually designed and wrote 25, but there were also another nine games written by other people using our designs and characters.

Andrew Oliver: It was a fantastic computer not just to develop games on, but also to develop them for. There is a difference. We used the Amstrad to develop games for the Amstrad CPC and Spectrum, then in late 1987 we switched to using PCs to host all the development code, whilst still targeting the Amstrad CPC.



CW: Wow! That's a lot of Amstrad games, quite possibly more than anyone else. So what made you adopt the Amstrad and when was it?

PO: We were in the lower sixth at school, and we'd started getting our games published on the BBC micro. We produced a number of games that we just couldn't find publishers for. We were coming to the conclusion that no one wanted to publish games on the BBC and thought that we needed to change platform, on reflection it was probably due to most having been sold into schools, or to people who bought

disk drives and copied all the games they wanted. It was mid 1984 and we felt we were too late to learn and compete on the Commodore 64 and the Spectrum. The Amstrad CPC 464, with a tape deck and monitor had been released, and whilst better than both in our opinion, it was expensive and sales were slow, meaning a smaller market to sell games to.

AO: Firebird (British Telecom Soft) recommended we write Easy Art and Panda Sprites for the Amstrad and they would publish them. They arranged getting us three CPC 664s from the first



Above: The Twins, both of them!, looking very smug with their brand new Amstrad CPC 664s.

batch in May 1985. These had a disk drive and were brilliant computers. Sadly we couldn't afford to have all three and immediately sold two of them to friends Ivan and Jon Paul. Jon Paul would use his to learn to code and produce music for many of our games whilst Ivan helped in producing the SPAM (Spectrum-AMstrad [Also Monty Python reference]) Link cable allowing us to develop games on the Amstrad and send them to a Spectrum.

CW: Was it hard to change from BBC game development to the Amstrad?

PO: It was made easier by having Firebird wanting to publish both Easy Art and Panda Sprites, so we knew exactly what was required.

No redesign was required, it was very clear what we were expected to do. School work got in the way a little!

AO: We'd have been lost without MAXAM ROM compiler that fitted on the back of the Amstrad allowing us to write Z80 code. Maxam combined with the build-in disk drive and a great keyboard made this a fantastic development computer. We had to learn Z80 assembler, having only just mastered 6502 assembler on the BBC B. We were lucky enough to find a small flipbook which showed each of the instructions. I say lucky, because coding was so specialist and without the internet finding such a specialist book was hard.

PO: Sadly by the time we'd completed Easy Art and Panda Sprites, Firebird pulled out of publishing both of them :-(. Thankfully we were able to find

a new publisher, Interceptor Software. This started a short relationship with them as they were setting up a budget label, called Players, and they published Magic Maths, Magic Clock and Killapede. Sadly the money was terrible, so we needed to find another publisher that would pay better.

CW: I'm guessing that's where your relationship with Codemasters started?

AO: Yes, we met them at ECTS (Electronics & Computers Trade Show) in London in September 1986. We showed them our previous games, just the boxes, and pitched Super Robin Hood from a single sheet of handwritten A4 paper. They liked the idea and convinced us to write this for them.

PO: This took about a month and was a massive



Above: Look at ALL the games The Twins developed for the CPC range of computers!

success, becoming our first UK #1 best seller. We'd go on to write many more games for Codemasters. With the first proceeds we were able to buy a second Amstrad, this time the CPC 6128. Now we could both develop games simultaneously rather than sharing our original 664.

CW: You wrote games very quickly compared to others — how come?

AO: Well having first developed Easy Art & Panda Sprites they were great game development tools and made things a lot quicker. Then there were the stupid hours we worked and setting ourselves the harsh goal to ship a game a month. We were also very efficient with code re-use. Each new game used a lot of code from previous ones.

CW: Were there any games you developed that weren't released for the Amstrad?

PO: Well we'd started a game called Excalibur, a top down adventure game inspired by Gauntlet. It would have been similar to Zelda, developed around the same time. Sadly Firebird never came through with the contract and money so it was abandoned.

AO: We had started a game called Safari Madness just before meeting Codemasters, but this morphed into Grand Prix Simulator.

PO: We did complete the CD Games Pack for the

Amstrad, but Codemasters decided not to release it as sales were predicted to be too low. Frustrating at the time, but the right decision.

CW: So when and why did you stop producing games for the Amstrad?

PO: Our last game, that we fully developed, on the Amstrad was Fantasy World Dizzy in September 1989. The

Below: The bedroom, and development domain, of The Twins. As one coded, the other slept!



sales of games for the Amstrad had started to decline and we felt that after Christmas many shops would seriously reduce their support for the computer. Sadly all good things come to an end, it was sad and we wished it didn't have to end as we'd got really good at making games for it!

AO: We moved onto the NES console, back to 6502, and Philip took to designing further games for the Amstrad and worked with other developers to create them. Our last game under our design for the Amstrad was Robin Hood: Legend Quest, coded by Lyndon Sharp, at the end of 1992. A great game, but sales were poor, and the Amstrad CPC faded away after a good run of 8 years.

CW: So did you play many Amstrad CPC games, and if so what were your favourites?

PO: We were too busy to play many games but we did have a great selection of games on our BBC, which also had a disk drive.

AO: However, we often played Bomb Jack, Commando, Ikari Warriors, Chase HQ, Spin Dizzy & Green Beret.

CW: Recently the Royal Mail produced some Retro video game stamps. How did it feel to have Dizzy chosen for one of those to represent the first era of British video games?

PO: Chuffed to bits and very proud that Dizzy was selected.

CW: Looking back on your time with the Amstrad, how do



Above: Robin Hood: Legend Quest — check out the tights!

you feel about it now?

PO: Those computers helped us go mainstream and launch our careers. We feel lucky to have chosen to move to the Amstrad when we did. They were brilliant computers for the time and are fondly remembered by all those that had them.

AO: I recently judged the Amstrad Eterno awards and I was amazed by what the Batman group achieved with Pinball Dreams. It's staggering what the Amstrad was capable of, it was certainly far more than we thought possible. Imagine if that had been released back in the mid 80s. It would have sold a lot of

Amstrads!

PO: We certainly couldn't have made more effort to make the most of the opportunity the Amstrad CPC computers gave us and we're very proud of all the games we created for them. We're also delighted that people remember them fondly over 30 years after they were released!

CW: Thanks again gents for taking the time to speak to me.

Below: The Amstrad CPC would have been nothing without Dizzy!

