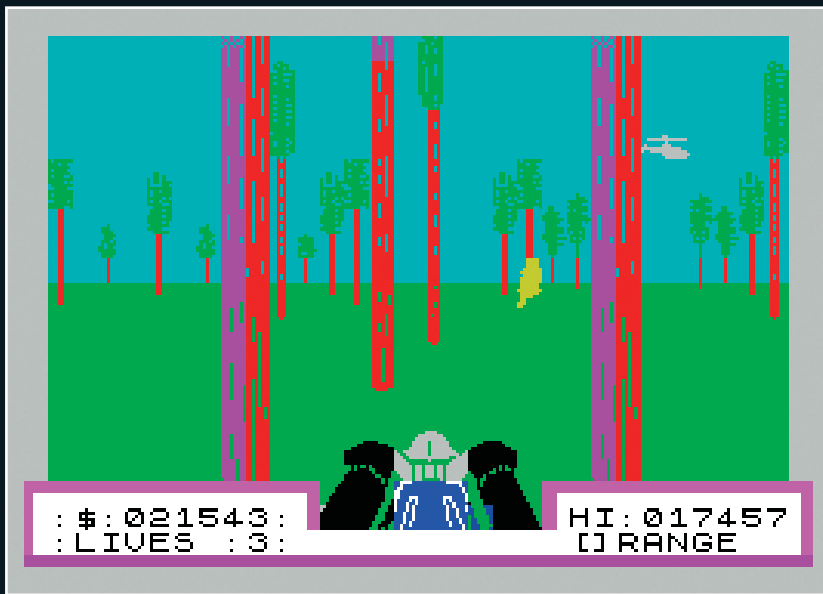# Remembering
DEATHCHASE

Way back in issue 48 of Retro Gamer, Deathchase sat proudly at the pinnacle of our list of the finest 25 Spectrum games. Today, Graeme Mason dons his black gloves and celebrates 30 years of dodging trees and pretending to be Luke Skywalker. . .

» [Spectrum] Shoot down the chopper and more filthy lucre was yours.

» [Spectrum] The main enemy in *Deathchase*: Trees!

::: A 3D game that ran on a 16k machine? It was a dream come true! :::

CRASH REVIEWER MATTHEW UFFINDEL

Some games transcend time. **Their playability does not wither with age; their gameplay does not become stale or stagnant; they remain as much fun as they were on their day of release. One such game is the Spectrum classic *Deathchase*, or as it is more commonly – if incorrectly – known, *3D Deathchase*.**

But we begin the story one step earlier. In the summer of 1983, publisher Micromega released a game called *Luna Crabs*, the debut title of one Mervyn Estcourt. The Clapham-based software house had been formed earlier in the year as an opportunistic off-shoot of a company named Taxsoft, keen to expand into games. This was principally for the purpose of supplying revenue to its line of business products, as Micromega's software manager, Neil Hooper, explains. "When we started, the idea was simply that we could become a software publisher, using our expertise and experience to get games and other programs published."

With Micromega soon cemented as a big player in the early Spectrum games market, Mervyn Estcourt clearly saw it as a potential home for *Luna Crabs*, although why he selected it in particular remains a mystery – certainly Micromega didn't feel the need to advertise for programmers. "These guys making games in their back bedrooms simply couldn't fund mass duplication," says Neil, "and that's where we came in. Mervyn simply came to us with a product and that's how our relationship with him began."

As with many games of the time, *Luna Crabs* dubiously boasted of 3D graphics, which in its case was actually partly true, with the eponymous crustaceans increasing in size as they approached the player's vehicle. Mervyn took this technique (dubbed "planar 3D") and utilised it in his next project, a racing game that echoed his love of motorbikes. The result was another fast-moving action game that he once more submitted to Micromega for it to distribute on his behalf. "Mervyn did everything from beginning to end – his games were entirely his creations," continues Neil, "and he simply gave us the code. Micromega's role was the distribution and packaging." On that subject, all Micromega's artwork was drawn by the same artist, as it tried to encourage a uniformity of image and design, while at the same time promoting

DARK RIDER
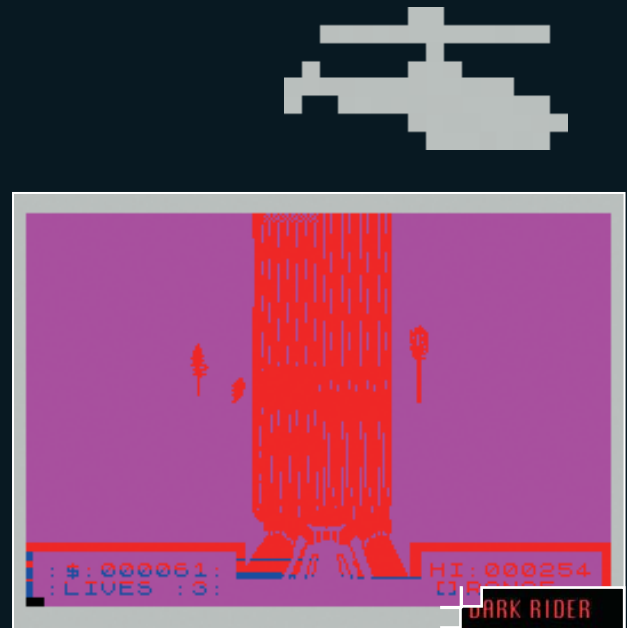
IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** MICROMEGA

» **DEVELOPER:** MERVYN ESTCOURTT

» **RELEASED:** 1983

» **PLATFORM:** SPECTRUM

» **GENRE:** RACING

OTHER FAMOUS MERVYNS

MERVYN DAY - Ex-West Ham and Leeds goalkeeper

MERVYN KING – Governor of the Bank of England

MERVYN HUGHES – Ex-Australian fast bowler

MERVYN PEAKE – Author, best known for the Gormenghast novels

THE MYSTERIOUS MR. MERVYN

CODE NAME MAT

Born in Bristol in 1948, Mervyn Ernest John Estcourt began education at the Lawrence Weston School in the September of 1959 alongside his cousin Gillian, while living with his family in Mancroft Avenue, Bristol. Upon leaving school, Mervyn began work as a docker (most likely at nearby Avonmouth Docks) and at some point in the early Eighties developed an interest in programming. Although this was initially a side-line, a feature titled Code Name Mat in an issue of *Crash* from 1984 refers to Mervyn as an "ex-docker", suggesting he had decided to give up his trade in favour of becoming a full-time programmer. However, sometime after coding the Commodore 64 version of *Full Throttle* (retitled *Speed King*) for Digital Integration, Mervyn disappeared and information on him is incredibly scant since 1986. Did he become disillusioned by the industry? Had the publicity and fame his games had brought him got too much for this apparently shy man from the West Country? Hopefully one day, we'll find out…

its programmers. *Deathchase*'s cover appeared rather more futuristic than the game itself. "We saw it as a bit like the cover for a book, in that it was conceptual and there simply to sell the game. *Deathchase* was all about gameplay so we doubted anyone would care about it, and Mervyn's plot set the game in the year 2501 anyway!"

Neil was naturally excited to see his new star programmer's latest effort. "We were blown away and could instantly see this was probably the best thing out there – an absolute gem," he enthuses. *Deathchase* was subsequently released in the winter of 1983, although the game evaded the specialist Spectrum press, despite *Popular Computing Weekly* praising the exciting gameplay in a roundup of recent releases. Nevertheless, two months later, in the debut issue of *Crash* magazine, there was Mervyn's masterpiece sitting pretty as the inaugural Game of the Month – *Crash*'s award for gaming excellence prior to the invention of Crash Smashes. Editor Roger Kean reminisces: "I remember the enthusiasm of the reviewing pool; this was the game that, once word got around the playground of Ludlow School, had more potential reviewers knocking on the door to review than

any other." The excitement continued at *Crash* HQ. "I imagine passers-by must have wondered what was going on," laughs Roger, "since after school hours for a couple of weeks it sounded like a riot as schoolboy reviewers fought for a go on the game on one of the Spectrums we had set up. Fortunately Matthew Uffindel was always there, prepared to wrestle for control of the Kempston joystick!" As you might expect, Matthew himself still holds the game in high regard today: "A 3D game that ran on a 16k machine? It was a dream come true! It was addictive, fantastic fun and pretty unique at a time when most other games were platformers," he recalls.

With the approving views in, the *Crash* editorial team constructed an effusive write-up. Their comments ranged from "Fantastic graphics and exceptionally smooth movement" to the incredible claim that it was "dangerously addictive to play". *Deathchase* had finally swerved maniacally into view and, helped by the *Crash* review, sales of the game rocketed and

catapulted its author into the limelight. Micromega were inundated with demands for mass supplies of the game. "It was our biggest seller at the time," says Neil Hooper, "and although its sales were eventually eclipsed by Mervyn's next game, *Full Throttle*, it was always in clear second place, sales-wise." It seemed even a curiously muted review in *Crash*'s rival magazine, *Sinclair User*, couldn't stem the flow of gamers eager for a slice of biking and shooting action. The source of the reviewer's ire appeared to be the random and casual nature of the violence in *Deathchase* and a lukewarm score of six out of ten was awarded. "I was a bit disappointed about that at first," mentions Neil, "because they seemed to focus more on the story than the fun of the game. We got the impression that if it had been aliens on bikes it would have been okay.

» Micromega's futuristic advert depicted a ghostlike skeletal rider and a conspicuous absence of black gloves. Very stylish indeed.
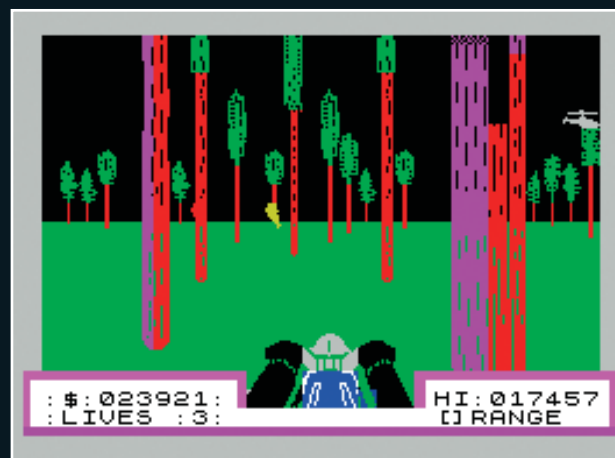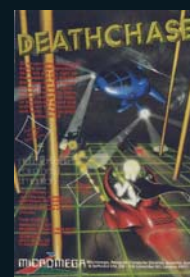
» [Spectrum] Night Patrol soon got very tricky.

MORE SPECTRUM EXCLUSIVES

Pssst! (Ultimate, 1983)

ONE OF Ultimate's excellent early Spectrum games, *Pssst!* also ran on a measly 16k and offered Speccy owners a colourful and entertaining slice of fun. As an added bonus it gave mischievous schoolkids an excuse to say a rude word…

Skool (Microsphere, 1985)

MICROSPHERE'S FOLLOW up to the equally magnificent *Skool Daze* curiously only received a Spectrum release despite the original seeing action on the Commodore 64. It expanded greatly on the first game by introducing a rival girls' school.

Chaos (Games Workshop, 1985)

JULIAN GOLLOP'S fantasy strategy game remains one of the finest multiplayer games on the Spectrum and only ever saw the light of day on the Sinclair machine. The full story on this and Julian's other games appeared in **Retro Gamer** issue 11.
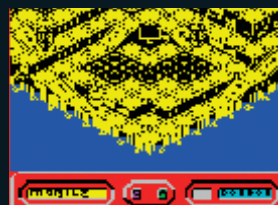
Quazatron (Hewson, 1986)

THEORETICALLY A Spectrum version of the classic *Paradroid*, *Quazatron* was dissimilar enough for some to claim superiority over the C64 game. We're risking splinters and saying they're both damn fine games in their own right.
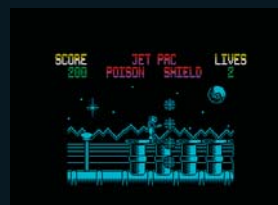
Gunrunner (Hewson, 1987)

BY 1987 it was unheard of for a Spectrum game to not get at least an Amstrad CPC release, but this underrated run-and-gunner remained Spectrum only thanks to the developers and publisher Hewson unable to agree on a price.

» [Spectrum] Night Patrol was a simple yet evocative change of scenery.

» [Spectrum] Sector 4 and things are hotting up.

But I got over it." *Deathchase*'s wafer-thin plot, set after an apocalyptic war, focused on the player hunting down enemy cyclists for cold hard cash. Like practically every facet of the game, it was concocted by Mervyn himself.

So with *Deathchase* a certified hit, we ask Neil why no other version was released to take advantage of its popularity. "I don't think we ever planned it, or asked Mervyn. By the time it came out he was already working on *Full Throttle*, researching tracks and developing the code." At this point the ex-Micromega software manager pauses and ponders for a moment before hitting us with a golden nugget of information – there *was* another version of *Deathchase* – sort of – for the American iteration of the Spectrum, the Timex Sinclair 2608. "I think [Timex] made a big mistake in changing its machine in some way that meant the majority of existing Spectrum games did not work with the machine. Timex approached us and asked for the rights to distribute *Deathchase* in the US which of course meant changing some of the code," reveals Neil. Micromega wasted no time in asking Mervyn if he'd tweak his code and construct a new title screen, the
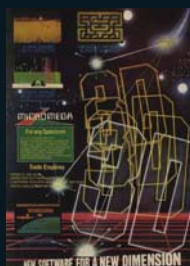

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

LUNA CRABS
SYSTEMS: SPECTRUM
YEAR: 1983

FULL THROTTLE
(PICTURED)
SYSTEMS: SPECTRUM
YEAR: 1984

SPEED KING
SYSTEMS: COMMODORE 64
YEAR: 1985

» Micromega really pushed the 3D aspect of *Deathchase*.

latter task because of Timex insisting on changing the name of the game. "I thought it was a disastrous idea, but we were a small company based in Clapham and this was Timex USA knocking on our door. It looked like it could be a large opportunity if it was successful." Unfortunately, as history shows, Timex was not successful and the re-released *Deathchase* barely registered, probably not helped by its new name: *Cyclepath*. "I believe it was a play on the word 'psychopath' and they though it was a cool name. We didn't argue."

30 years on, *Deathchase* still stands as a mightily impressive piece of programming, especially considering the limitations of the hardware. "The fact it was written in machine code and within 16k was totally amazing," says Matthew Uffindel, "and if you asked a programmer today to come up with a similar idea and do it all in 16k, they wouldn't know where to start." Unsurprisingly, Micromega's Neil Hooper is equally full of praise for the genius behind *Deathchase*. "Mervyn was brilliant on so many levels. I think he just had his brain wired in some way that he could talk assembly code – he saw it and coded it," he extols, "and to go with this, he had this extraordinary capacity for gameplay and fine-tuning to an extent where the way the nerves and eyes reacted to the game's pace were just within the player's capabilities. That was the real brilliance of all of Mervyn's games."

» [Spectrum] Reaching the end of Sector 8 granted the player a big money bonus.

REVISIONS, REMAKES AND REBOOTS

DEATHCHASE (AMSTRAD CPC) – RICHARD WILSON

"The engine itself is quite simple and not strictly 3D – but when those trees are coming towards you at that pace it doesn't really matter! I broke down the code using the WinAPE disassembler, which took a couple of days. Then I went about finding out what each routine does before re-writing the parts that wouldn't work as specified on the CPC. Actually I modified the engine itself very little to run on the CPC – *Deathchase* is quite simple by today's standards, but sometimes it's the simplest ideas that work the best."

DEATHCHASE (TANDY 16K/DRAGON 32) – JAMES MCKAY

"I was a latecomer to the original, but could tell it had great playability and the action was just the right side of stressful. Actually the first computer I owned was a 16k Tandy Colour Computer and I really wanted to make a game that would work on this, and it made sense for it to work on the Dragon 32 as well, considering their similarities. Using the source code as provided by Richard Wilson, I had a choice of monochrome screen if I wanted to use the Spectrum graphics, but opted for four-colour mode instead, even though it meant I had to rework the graphics in a lower resolution. As a result, 'Day' and 'Night Patrol' became 'Forest' and 'Arctic Patrol'!"

DARK RIDER (IOS) – EVGENIY KIYANOV

"From a technical viewpoint I thought the original *Deathchase* was great. I started thinking about remaking it in 2008; nobody was making "endless runner" games then. Then I saw my son playing the original on an emulator and loving it, just like myself years ago. I wanted to make a storyline, and that's where the problems started as I underestimated all the work this would entail. So eventually I removed all cut-scenes, helicopters and story and made something simply endless."