

Sinclair Scene

Timothy Green scours the world in search of Sinclair news – and blank microdrive cartridges

Longtime adventure columnist Mike Gerrard has written a book of hints for Spectrum adventure gamers. The A5 paperback is self-published, with a plain white cover and 120 pages of densely-packed NLQ text.

Gerrard has written for many magazines that are no longer published, and currently hangs out as adventure columnist in *Your Sinclair*. This may explain why he promoted the book with a flimsy note showing a witch with a pair of scissors, and the message "Give it a good review or I'll cut your goolies off... heh-heh-heh!".

The first chapter of *Adventures on the Spectrum* is rambling; it sets out to help people who are unfamiliar with adventuring, but consists of a collection of general hints, rather than an introduction.

The second chapter makes up for that, charting the history of adventure games from role-playing *Dungeons and Dragons* to Crowther and Woods' first computer adventure, *Colossal Cave*, and onward through the development of Spectrum games.

The next two chapters are both quite short, and discuss adventure suppliers and clubs. There's a useful table of contact addresses and phone numbers at the back of the book.

Chapter five is entitled 'How to do it yourself'. The section on submitting stuff for review is good, whatever machine you're using, but the part on writing games is rather disappointing. Perhaps that's to be expected as neither of Gerrard's own games have set the world alight.

The bulk of the book consists of hints on 43 best-selling Spectrum adventures, including *The Hobbit*, *Colossal Cave*, *Sherlock and The Pawn*. It also covers popular spoofs like *The Boggit and Bored of the Rings*.

The tips seem quite comprehensive, but their presentation is not consistent from one game to the next. Sometimes Gerrard gives solutions to the puzzles, sometimes a guide to each location, or instructions showing how to get full marks in the game.

Adventures on the Spectrum



A rare photo of Timothy Green, seen here preparing next month's *Sinclair Scene*

costs just £5 including postage, or £6 outside the UK. The style of writing is easy-going, but the printing is rather tatty, with fifty-odd lines of dot matrix text on each page. The book is good value if you've got several of the games covered, or if you'd like to have your own games reviewed, but not much help if you're planning a game, or looking for original ideas.

Show news

Sinclair Scene reader Alan Jones was 'absolutely gobsmacked' to read my report on the Alternative Micro Show in the January issue. He contends "AMS was a superb show. The attendance was just right – enough people to make it a dynamic affair, but not the stifling crowd which blighted the *Shopper* Show."

"There were bargains galore. My friend bought an Amstrad CPC 6128 for £130, while I got an Acorn Atom with books and software for £5, and 20 microdrive cartridges in a Transform box for £15. It would be interesting to know the views of other people who attended both shows".

I'm certainly keen to hear comments from others. My main point in the report was that the goods were there, at the AMS, but the punters stayed away. What's 'just right' for a customer may be a very poor attendance for traders, and that seemed to be the general impression at AMS.

Many of the traders at AMS were familiar from the radio rally circuit, where crowds are common but prices are usually much lower than at computer shows. In the April issue last year, we discovered the Norbreck Radio Rally, in Blackpool, where MGT unveiled the SAM prototype. Despite the name, it was a fascinating day out for any gadget enthusiast, with lots of computer bits up for grabs. Radio rally prices are very low, but you need an expert eye to sift the gems from the rubbish.

The London Radio Rally will be held on Friday 9th and Saturday 10th March at Picketts Lock Centre, Picketts Lock Lane, Edmonton N9 0AS – near junction 25 of the M25. Admission is just £1 on the door. There are facilities for the disabled, camping and some free parking.

Last month I reported on Sinclair attractions at the *Shopper* Show, so I won't go into that again. The first *Shopper* Show was certainly crowded at the weekend, but it was easy enough to get around on the Friday – and CPC 6128s sold for less than Alan's friend paid at AMS. The biggest bargain may turn out to be the box of cartridges he bought, if we are to believe reports from the QL scene.

Microdrying up

Stocks of Sinclair microdrive cartridges have run out again, and

this time the future of the medium is in doubt. Last summer, production manager David MacSorley told *Shopper* that cartridges would remain in production "For the next 18 months". Supplies of tape ran out for a while last year, but West German giant BASF came up with new stocks which tided production through until the end of October.

Since then, the manufacturer, Ablex Audio Visual, has been unable to make new cartridges. Stockpiles ran out at the beginning of this year. MacSorley says that BASF is no longer able to supply the tape, and no alternative is available.

Specialist Sinclair stockholder EEC still had a few hundred cartridges when we contacted it in mid-January, but the company is keen to see production restart. Sinclair Research is known to earn a substantial royalty on each cartridge sold; this leaves little money and a lot of hassle for Ablex.

EEC says that Clive himself is trying to find a new supply of tape, with a view to restarting production. "We hope and pray that we do get them", EEC commented. EEC still has large numbers of 'new' drive mechanisms, recently purchased from Sinclair Research.

Last summer, Sinclair assured us that microdrive cartridges would continue to be available, and hinted at the existence of a new product that will use the tapes. This seemed rather a far-fetched idea, and we have heard nothing of it since.

Sinclair Research earns a big royalty on each tape made, so it makes much more profit out of the microdrive than Ablex. Mr Blieland-Body, the accountant at Sinclair Research, phoned me in January to say that Sinclair has received "A substantial order" for new cartridges. It has stocks of perhaps half a million cartridge cases, ready to accept tape.

It is rumoured that Maxell – based, like Ablex, in Telford – can supply the required grade of tape, but Mr. Blieland-Body says that "We're rather stuck", and it might be "A matter of months" before production could restart, assuming a new source of tape is found. "We must test the new tape fairly

vigorously", he said.

Microdrive cartridges are used in ICL One Per Desk and British Telecom Tonto computers, as well as the basic QL and expanded Spectrum systems. Ablex says that ICL still has tapes in stock, but an afternoon tour of ICL switchboards left us none the wiser.

Many QL owners have upgraded to disk storage, which is cheaper, faster and has a higher capacity. To date, QL software has often been supplied on cartridge, but microdrive programs run from disk without modification. QL disk controllers are still being manufactured by Miracle Systems, on (0904) 423986. Specialist suppliers have other makes in stock.

Spectrum users can continue to run microdrive software with Sixword's Swift Disk system, which emulates up to four cartridges on a single 3.5" disk. The Swift interface mimics the microdrive hardware and software, so it runs all Spectrum cartridge programs. It is also several times faster than Sinclair drives. Sixword is on (0243) 771689.

Other Spectrum disk systems, such as the Disciple, Discovery and Plus D, accept microdrive commands in ZX Basic. Sadly, these interfaces may not work with programs that make direct calls to the microdrive Rom software.

Sinclair USA

We've received details of a range of QL software produced in North America and marketed by Emsoft. At the beginning of the 80s, Sinclair subcontractor Timex sold millions of ZX-81s in the States, under the name TMS-1000.

Later models, like the 16K TMS-1500 and the 'Super Spectrum' TMS-2068, were less successful, but in 1984 Sinclair set up a US office to market the QL in North America. Sinclair Inc sold a special version of the machine, manufactured in South Korea and adapted for the crummy US TV standard.

Despite this bodge, the machine has a die-hard following in the States. A couple of years ago the QL was advertised in the techie magazine *Dr Dobbs' Journal* as 'a mainframe condensed down into a keyboard', and it is still covered in the original, US edition of *Computer Shopper*.

Emsoft acts as agent for QL programmers in the USA, so its catalogue covers a wide gamut, ranging from engineering programs for mechanical designers, compiled with *ProFortran*, to business

applications running inside Psion's *Archive*. Typical prices are between \$10 and \$30.

The most bizarre title is *CAM Master*, a complete package for the automatic design and manufacture of circular cams, which are often used in automatic machinery. The program needs a 256K QL with one floppy disk drive. It can program a vertical mill controller directly with CNC information. The price is a snip at \$2850 ("A fraction of the cost of a Cad workstation") - or just \$9.95 for the demo disk!

Emsoft also distributes *SiriusWare* software for the ZX-81 and its big brother, the TMS-1500. *WORD** is a simple word processor that runs in 4K of Ram, while *A*SORT* is a fast Shell-Metzner sorting routine. *FILE** is a collection of Toolkit routines. All these cost \$19.95, while *COPY**, a tape-to-tape copier, weighs in at \$10. So don't say we've forgotten the ZX-81.

Dansk freaks

Danish Sinclair fans have their own newsletter, packed with Spectrum, QL and ZX-81 info. The 40-page monthly fanzine *Sinclair Freakeren* was launched late in

1988. It includes Danish contacts for followers of the ZX-81, Opus, Plus Three, Z88, QL, SAM, Disciple and Plus D.

The issue we have seen covers hardware projects and software reviews, along with simple Basic and Assembler programs to type in, plus POKEs and USR calls. The most interesting article explained that it is possible to extract a 'free' Basic compiler from eleven old Spectrum games, including big sellers like *Sorcery* and *Blue Thunder*.

Sinclair Freakeren aims at a wide range of readers, limiting coverage of each machine, but it contains some interesting information and contacts, particularly if you're reading this in Scandinavia. Presumably someone must be, or we wouldn't have been sent a copy.

Next month

I had hoped to report on the Amiga QL emulator this month, but after weeks carrying the disk round in search of an Amiga I found it was corrupt and have had to order another copy from Softville.

QL coverage should be back to normal next month, and we'll

have yet more on the SAM, plus the usual news and comment.

Timothy Green is running out of room to plug in his Sinclair-compatible computers

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CLUB NEWS

Issue six of Garner Designs' monthly newsletter *Plus Three Contact* has grown to 21 A4 pages. The content and variety of the magazine has improved considerably since the Plus Three Users' Group was founded last year. The spelling and grammar is still rather erratic, but the articles are plentiful and interesting, if sometimes rather self-congratulatory.

Issue six leads with news of the launch of the SAM Coupe and Plus Three disk compatibility snags, which sound as if they stem from poor drive alignment. The good news is that disks formatted on a particular computer seem reliably readable on the same machine, so Garner asks subscribers to format disks on their own machines before sending them in for Public Domain software.

The newsletter reports a disaster at the Home of the Gnome, a popular London bulletin board which has covered the Spectrum extensively in the past. It seems that the system operator accidentally wiped almost the entire hard disk holding the pages, user details, and software for downloading. After

several years building the Gnome into one of the best independent bulletin boards, the sysop is himself up the creek without a backup. The Spectrum area may be a permanent casualty of this accident. One of its editors told *Plus Three Contact* "Although I have backups of some of the Spectrum area, it would take absolutely ages to get it back on the board".

Other newsletter articles include a eulogy for Codemasters' CD Rom compilation for the Spectrum. This £20 package includes a compact disk, a special cable, and a short startup program on cassette. Once the tape is loaded you can read any of 30 back-catalogue Spectrum budget games from the disk, simply by selecting the required track on a domestic CD player. Loading is said to take 20 to 40 seconds per game.

The stereo data comes out of the CD headphone socket and into a special cable which converts it into parallel form so that it can be read from port 31, via any Kempston-compatible joystick interface. We shall try to get hold of a copy of this system for review in *Shopper*.

A 'technotalk' article lists and begins to explain the control ports used by the Spectrum 128 sound chip. The new 'On Line' section discusses computer communication by phone.

CP/M users are now catered for in the magazine, and JR Cleveland explains some useful ways to reprogram the Plus Three keyboard for easier editing in *Mallard Basic*. This is useful information, as the Basic is supplied configured for the Amstrad PCW, which has a very different screen and display.

Program listings in *Mallard* and *ZX Basic* display calendars on the screen. Games reviews rave about *Operation Thunderbolt* and *Chase HQ*, while a 'review' of *Masterfile Plus 3* says more about the manual than the program, but concludes that it's better than the venerable 48K Spectrum version.

After six months, the Plus Three Users' Group has over 300 subscribers, a library of 19 Public Domain programs, and an entertaining newsletter which reflects the enthusiasm of its members.

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