□ FIRETRACK
□ SPINDIZZY
□ MILLENNIUM 2.2
INSTALLATION: Mo
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LIFE SUPPORT
RESOURCES
RIPLEY 001
GORMAN 001
HICKS 001
□ ALIEN UH

FROM THE ARCHIVES

RETRO GAMER DIGS UP THE FILES OF THE CLASSIC COMPANIES OF OLD

Electric Dreams

Forged from a band of Quicksilva alumni by US publishing giant Activision, it was responsible for some of the finest 8-bit arcade conversions and movie licences of the Eighties. Join Graeme Mason as we discover Electric Dreams...

Rod Cousens CBE may not be a name that immediately springs to mind from the history of videogames, but as the letters after his name confirm, the current Codemasters CEO has overseen the development of some of the best-loved games of the last 30 years.

Yet his career did not begin at Electric Dreams. Rod began work at Quicksilva in 1981, quickly becoming managing director of the Southampton-based company. "A close friend had introduced me to Nick Lambert," begins Rod, "who had started the company with John Hollis, Mark Eyles and Caroline Hayon. I met Nick in manic circumstances, with schoolchildren coming into their office at 4pm to put ZX81 RAM packs into Jiffy packs to meet mail-order demand." Quicksilva was one of the early adopters of the new Sinclair Research

computers, and it wasn't long before it began to develop its own software for both the ZX81 and its popular follow-up, the ZX Spectrum. "It was organised chaos to begin with and the energy vibe was magnetic," smiles Rod, "and I was intrigued. I got on well with the team and felt I could bring something to the party, so it went on from there."

"I certainly can't program, but games and creativity were then, as they are now, compelling forces to me," says Rod, explaining what he brought to the company. This, coupled with his astute business brain, meant he was soon an integral part of the famous software house.

Leaving Quicksilva

The story of Quicksilva is one for another day; Rod left the company in 1984, a short time after overseeing its sale to the

Argus Press Group. "There was a strong rumour going around that Argus wanted to relocate Quicksilva's office to London," he explains, "and I opposed this as I thought it went against the culture of the company." Fortunately, Rod had a get-out clause in his contract that enabled him to leave Quicksilva under such circumstances, not that this was an easy thing to do. "Leaving Quicksilva was an emotional wrench; it was more of a way of life than a job and I was very close to the people who worked there," he says. In addition to Rod's mixed feelings upon leaving Quicksilva, the get-out clause didn't come without a price: non-competition conditions meant he was essentially in exile until the period of his contract expired. Of course, being Rod Cousens, he did not rest on his laurels during this time.

"Quicksilva's games were distributed by CBS Records, who handled a few other publishers, and I got a tip-off that they would be exiting the videogame business shortly after I left Quicksilva," Rod explains. "One of the other publishers they worked for was Epyx, so I was about to fly to San Francisco and pitch to Epyx for European rights for a new company I was planning." One fateful phone call the day before Rod was due to leave for the US changed his path immeasurably. "A head-hunter called me about a job for a leading multinational

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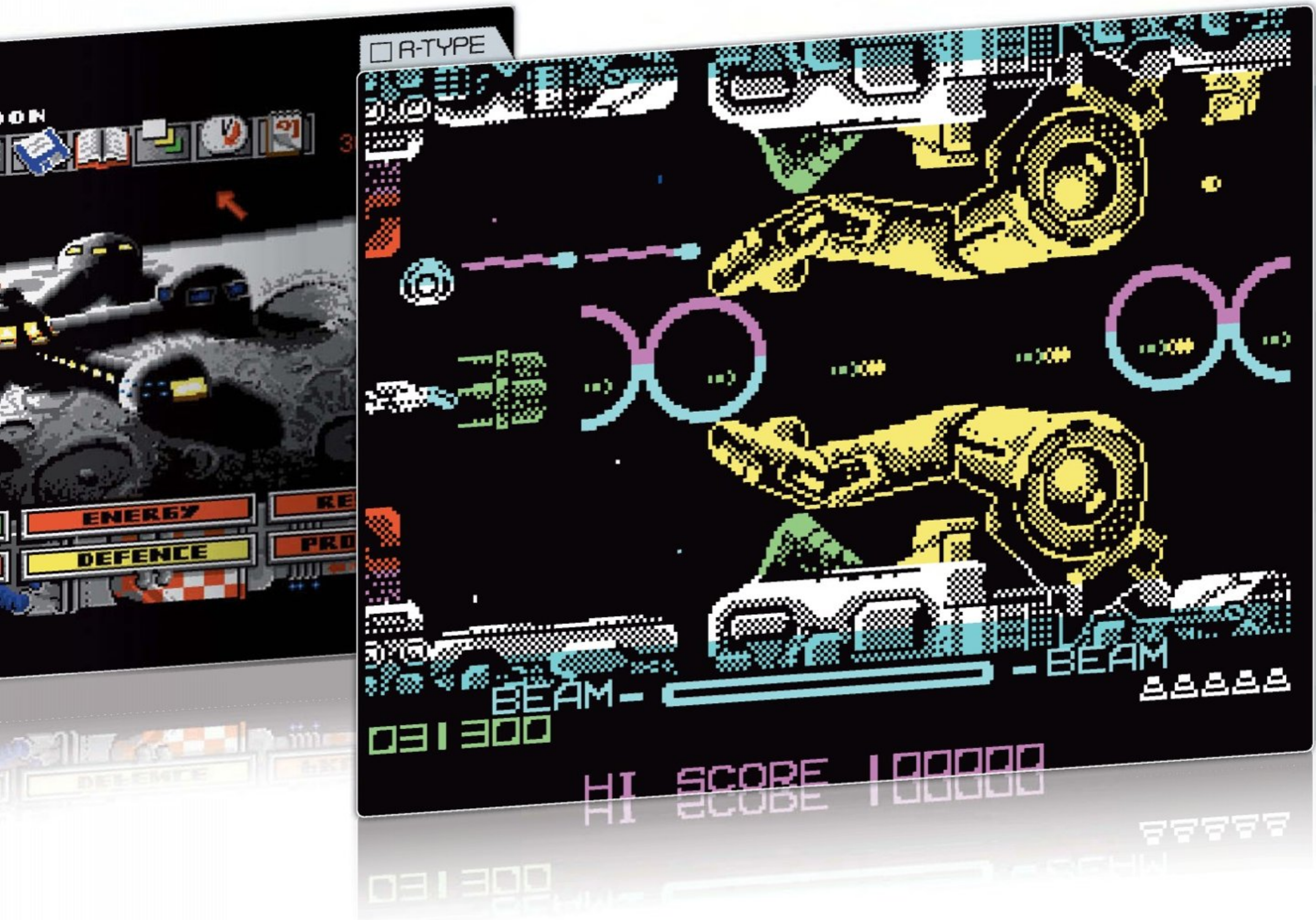
> ## " Greg called me the day after and said: 'How would you like to be funded?' "
>
> ROD COUSENS ON THE CREATION OF ELECTRIC DREAMS

software house who wanted to establish a presence in the UK. I pretty much knew who it was, as there was only one company of that ilk at the time: Activision."

With several high-profile Activision personnel already known to Rod from his Quicksilva days, he boarded his plane the next day to California with this key change to his US agenda. In a meeting with Activision's Greg Fischbach, Rod explained his new venture, a software publishing house based in Southampton in the UK. "Greg called me the day after our meeting,"

remembers Rod, "and said: 'How would you like to be funded?' And that was the start of Electric Dreams." Rod never got to Epyx, and later that year it signed a deal with rival publisher US Gold.

The first wave

With an office established on the top floor above Rod's other business interest, an insurance brokerage, and with the backing of the US giant in place, Electric Dreams began to develop games, aiming for a strong line-up at the 1985 Olympia Computer Games Show. Joining Rod at the new software house were former Quicksilva colleague Paul Cooper (product development), Clare Hirsch (marketing) and ex-Atari employee Jon Dean, with the sales, distribution and finance departments all handled by Activision. Electric Dreams was in the enviable position of being able to concentrate solely on acquiring and developing its products.

This first wave of games, like the majority of Electric Dreams' output, would be focused on the European market and its popular computers, as Rod explains. "Electric Dreams was geared to European platforms whilst Activision's development was US-centric, and on Commodore 64 for the most part. Our role was essentially a local market imprint for Activision to gain a market share in this region."

In 1985, the main local rival to the Commodore machine was the ZX Spectrum, and Electric Dreams initially concentrated on this computer. "I was a huge fan of Sandy White and Angela Sutherland's work," continues Rod, "and had built a close relationship with them over the years, so they followed me to Electric Dreams where we published the brilliant I, Of The Mask." The developers of the massively influential Spectrum game Ant Attack appreciated Electric Dreams' support, creating a special piece of artwork depicting Rod's face in place of the iconic mask. "I hold both of them in deep affection," he says with obvious emotion, "and it was a privilege to work with such technically and creatively gifted people."

Despite the innovative I, Of The Mask and the well-received maze game Riddler's Den, it was Electric Dreams' initial move into the world of movie licences that would first bring its name to attention. The hot hit movie of 1985 had been the Michael J Fox time-travel extravaganza Back To The Future, and Electric Dreams successfully secured the licence to produce a videogame adaptation on the 8-bit computers. Yet despite a faithful re-creation of the film's plot, the game failed to spark much excitement with the press and public alike. "Licensed properties of those times were often very constrained by artistic controls ▶

□ BY THE NUMBERS

2: Electric Dreams games based on the movie Aliens.

6: Years between the release of the arcade and home versions of Tempest.

32: The number of universes for the player to explore in I, Of The Mask.

360: Degree wraparound background for Aliens.

£350,000: The amount raised by Rod's charity compilation, Soft Aid, a precursor to Electric Dreams' Off The Hook.

40,000,000,000: Number of locations in Explorer.

ARE YOU THE BRIGHT SPARK WE ARE LOOKING FOR?

Electric Dreams Software is a publisher of original programs for Amstrad, Atari, Commodore and Sinclair home computers. We are interested in hearing from authors conversant in machine code on the Z80 series, 68000 series and 6502 processors who are involved in recreational software development. If you are seeking full international exposure and promotional support for your programs and wish to enjoy the rewards your efforts merit, please contact Paul Cooper for an informal discussion.

SOFTWARE HOUSES
Allow Electric Dreams Software to market and distribute your titles, leaving you to concentrate on product design and development. To take advantage of this opportunity and gain financial security, please do not hesitate to telephone Rod Cousens. All enquiries will be treated in strictest confidence.

Contact: Rod Cousens or Paul Cooper at Electric Dreams Software, 31 Carlton Crescent, Southampton SO9 2EW. Tel: Southampton (0703) 225282.

Electric Dreams SOFTWARE

» An early recruitment ad for programmers.

⬚ WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Rod Cousens
At Electric Dreams, love blossomed and in 1988, Clare and Rod married. Rod became international president of Activision before moving to Acclaim in 1991, where in 2003 he was appointed CEO, succeeding Gregory Fischbach, with whom Rod had struck the Electric Dreams deal several years earlier. In May 2005, Rod was appointed CEO of Codemasters, and he was awarded a CBE in recognition of services to the videogame industry in 2010.

Mark Eyles
After Quicksilva, Mark set up his own holography studio while designing games for Electric Dreams on a freelance basis. After a four-year stint as head of design at Rebellion, he now teaches game design at the University of Portsmouth.

Clare Hirsch
After leaving Activision, Clare worked freelance in marketing with developers such as System 3 before setting up her own company called In The Pink and moving into interior design. She married Rod Cousens and nowadays shares her time between their four sons, two horses, cats and dogs!

Jon Dean
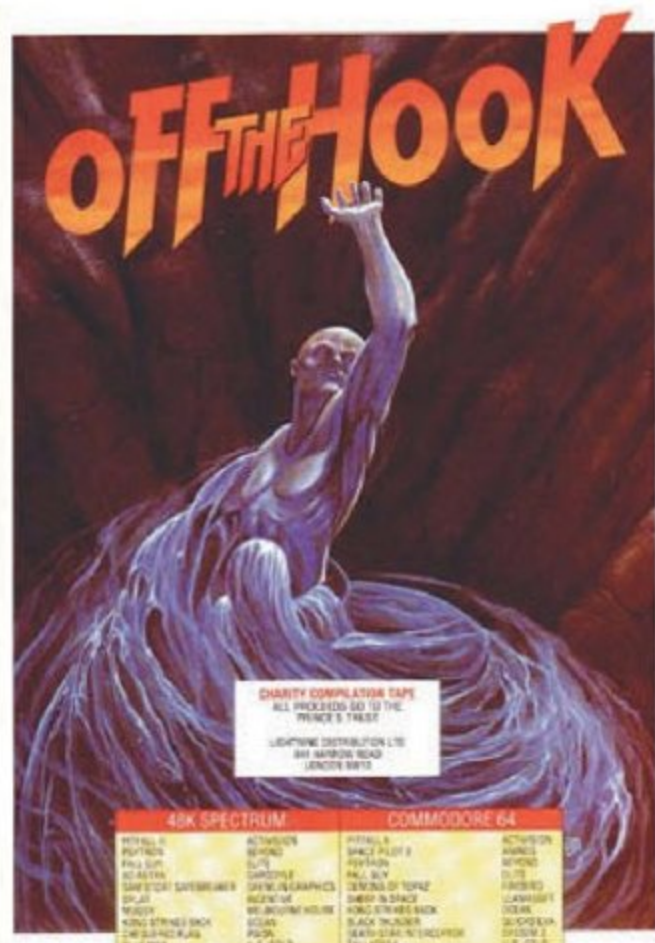Jon works at EA's Tiburon studios, where he is executive producer on the Tiger Woods franchise, among others.

Paul Cooper
Went on to join Thalamus, Newsfield's renowned game-publishing company, as well as enjoying stints at Activision and Acclaim.

» Striking imagery for Electric Dreams' charity compilation, Off The Hook.

and had little interest in the game side, which invariably came after the release of the film," says Rod. "We liked the concept but felt we were too constrained and were unable to overcome the shackles."

Another former Quicksilva worker, Mark Eyles, worked freelance as lead designer for Back To The Future. "It was one of those absurd rush jobs where everything had to get done within a couple of months," he recalls with a grimace, "but, in my opinion, although the game was not great, it was still fun to play thanks to the tight feedback

demographic, I believed we should give back to the young, disadvantaged people. Therefore the area we targeted was those who needed help to kick drug habits."

The result was Off The Hook, a compilation of ten games from several software houses that supported various charitable organisations. "We had all been stirred by the Ethiopian famine appeal and the efforts of the music industry via Band Aid," says Rod. "We were the coming industry and I felt we should contribute, and continue to do so." A strong cover image was the final element. "We were very fortunate in that we had Dave Rowe do the artwork, as he came up with a cover that really helped to sell the compilation, and we were all passionate about the cause because we wanted to make a difference. Fortunately so were the retailers and wholesalers, who all got behind Off The Hook to make it an outstanding success."

❝ In some ways, Electric Dreams was a continuation of Quicksilva ❞
MARK EYLES

loop we generated as you tried to rebuild the photo of Marty."

Notwithstanding this inauspicious start to licensing, Electric Dreams and Mark Eyles would soon acquire and develop another movie licence with considerably more pleasing results.

Good causes
Before then, more original games would appear, with varying degrees of success. Paul Shirley's excellent Marble Madness clone, Spindizzy; the intriguing action-management game Hijack, which was again designed by Mark Eyles; and The RamJam Corporation's commendable Gauntlet clone, Dandy, were all released in 1986 to generally positive reviews. In the same year, Rod had the idea of releasing another charity compilation of games after having previously enjoyed success in organising Quicksilva's Soft Aid in support of the starving in Africa. "Having started the fundraising, it seemed to me important that we continue," says Rod, "and as computer games had a largely male teenage

Alas, these early days in the life of Electric Dreams harboured the occasional misfire. Winter Sports was a lacklustre attempt to mimic the success of Rod's near-miss, Epyx; The RamJam Corporation's Explorer was a beautiful tech demo without the game; and Prodigy was a barely above average isometric title. "There's no doubt those games had plenty of potential," says Rod, "but I admit they didn't always live up to it, especially Explorer." These lapses in its output and the changing way games were

» [Spectrum] Dandy from The RamJam Corporation was an accomplished Gauntlet clone.

» [Spectrum] *Hijack*, the action strategy game designed by Mark Eyles.

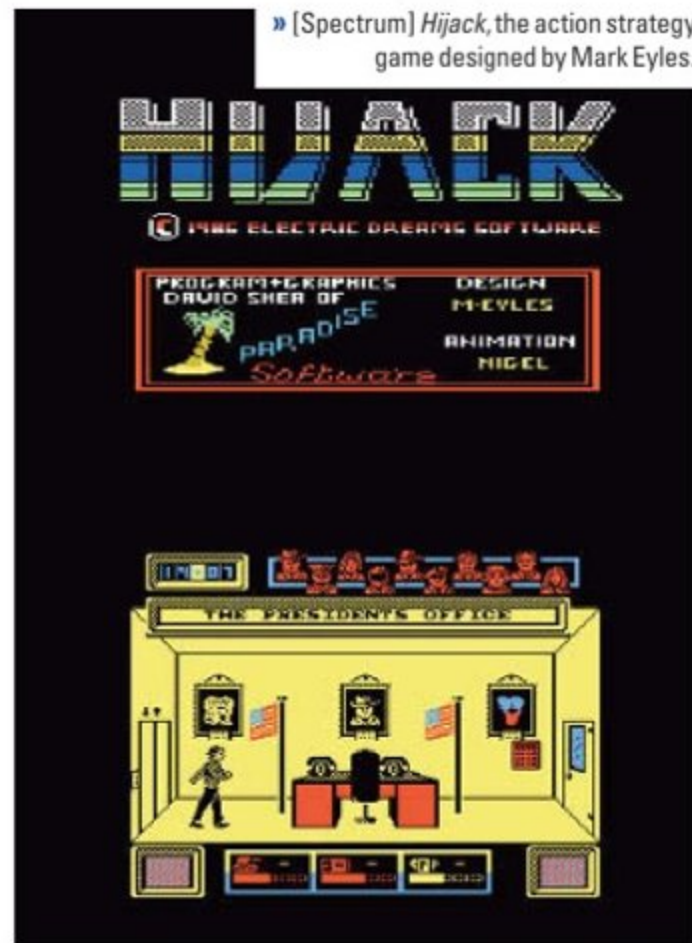» [Spectrum] *Big Trouble In Little China* was a poor seller for Electric Dreams.

being made soon instigated a change within Electric Dreams.

"The market was moving on," Rod explains, "and the idea that you could simply place an advert in a magazine and attract programmers was not valid any more. Development costs were rising and the teams were getting bigger. We were wary of the risks, so wanted to have ownership ourselves of the IP." As a result, Rod formed Software Studios, a development team that, as part of his desire to merge Electric Dreams' and Activision Europe's game production, reflected the globalisation that was beginning to take place in the gaming market. The team was initially led by Jon Dean and then later by Charles Cecil and would go on to produce numerous arcade conversions for both Electric Dreams and Activision.

Shift to licensing

As 1987 dawned, Electric Dreams stepped up a gear with its licensed material; it was clear a shift in focus had occurred.

"It was a reflection on market conditions at the time," states Rod, "and we all wanted the marketing muscle as we tried to establish computer games as a form of mainstream entertainment." With the marketing emphasis still on print magazines rather than expensive TV advertising, licences expanded the reach of videogames as they benefited through attachment to global properties such as movies, TV

shows, books and arcade machines. "I used to liaise with licensing agents such as Copyright Promotions, IDG, coin-op companies and book publishers," Rod explains, "as we explored rights for anything we considered suitable."

Of course, Electric Dreams wasn't the only software house on the hunt for third-party material on which to base its games. "Ocean were doing great things with licences, as were US Gold," remarks Rod, "and they were formidable competitors. But although you always looked at the ones that got away, we got our fair share. We won some and lost some." With the backing of Activision, which had been the trailblazer of movie licensing with the outstanding success of *Ghostbusters* three years earlier, Electric Dreams was in an enviable position when it came to acquiring film properties, and one of its finest would soon see gamers trembling in fear.

In 1986, James Cameron cemented his place at the Hollywood top table by directing one of the biggest cinematic hits of the decade. The sequel to the 1979 sci-fi horror *Alien*, cleverly titled *Aliens*, was, like *Back To The Future* before it, a
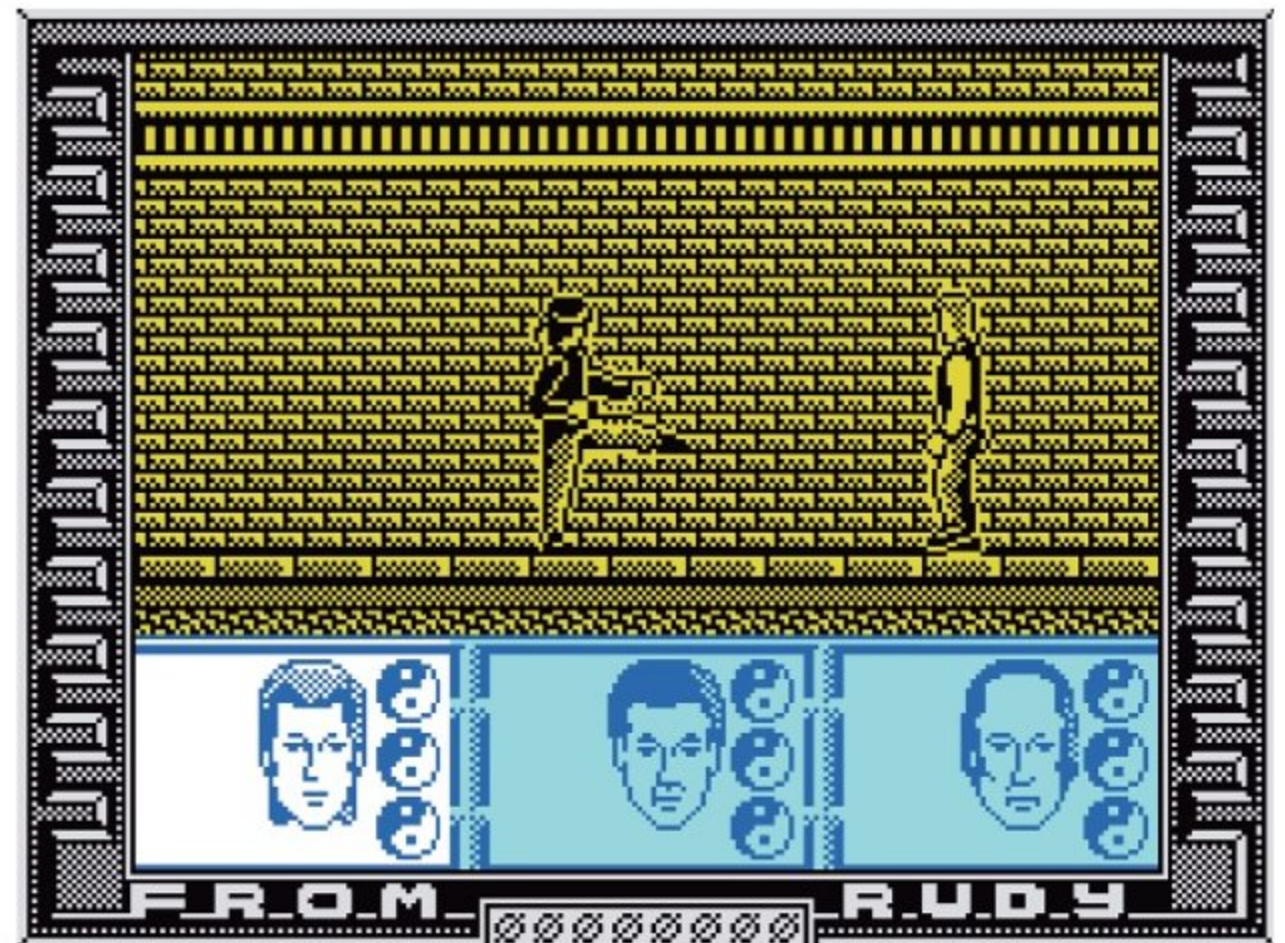
worldwide smash and, not for the last time, Electric Dreams' relationship with Activision proved to be a significant advantage. "The film was a Fox franchise and John Dolgen of Fox had previously worked at Columbia – who had released *Ghostbusters*," divulges Rod. With Activision already enjoying a working relationship with the Fox executive via Greg Fischbach, the licence for a game adaptation of *Aliens* on the 8-bit computers was duly secured for Electric Dreams. ▶

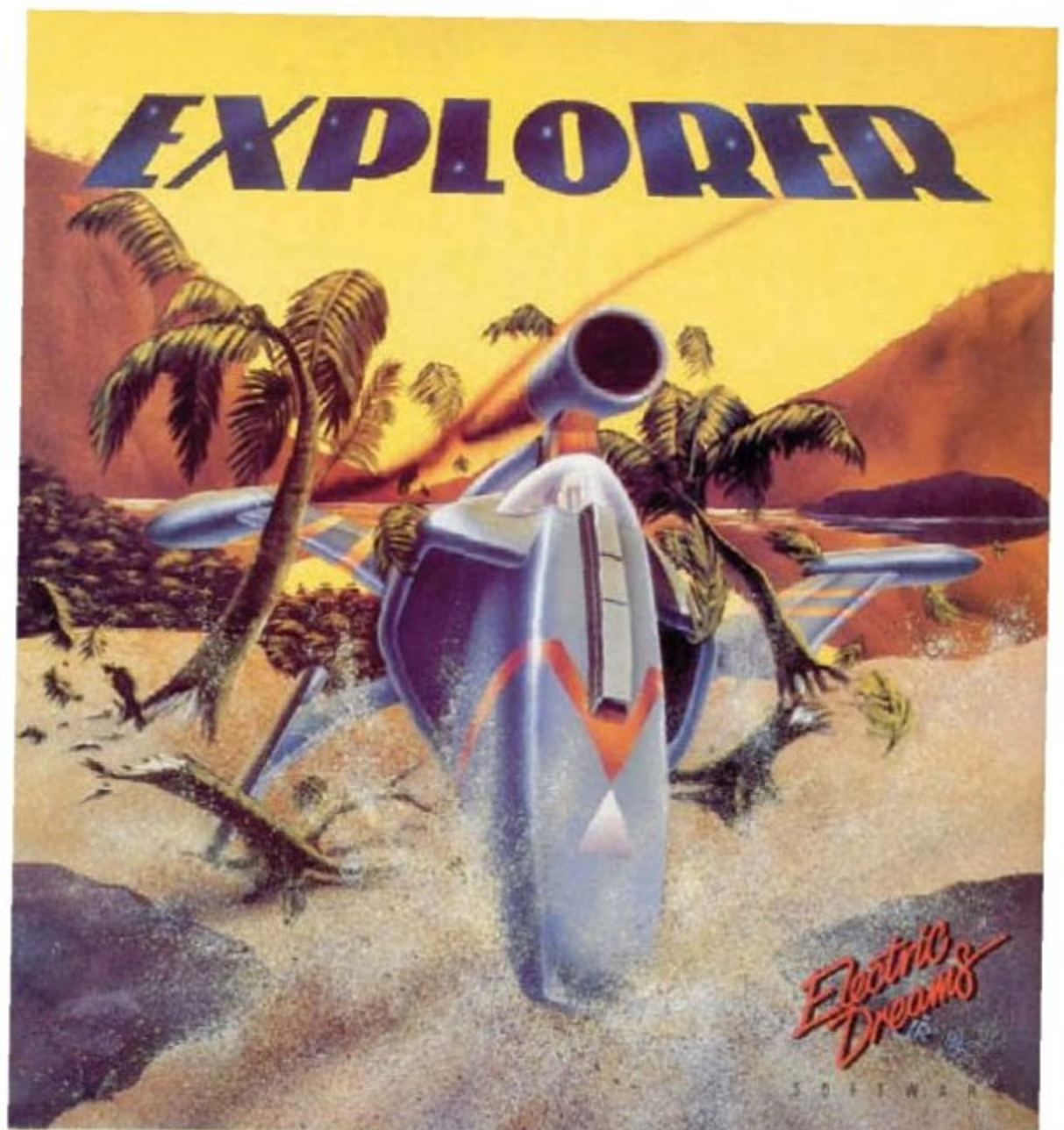» Effusive claims abound with the *Explorer* advert.

SIX OF THE BEST

I, Of The Mask
(Spectrum) (1985)
Sandy White and Angela Sutherland teamed with Rod Cousens for a third time and the result was this. Your task was to negotiate the maze, collecting robot parts and finally the mask itself for your creation.

Spindizzy
(Amstrad CPC) (1985)
Paul Shirley's *Marble Madness* clone was an intensely devious and addictive game. *Spindizzy*'s only enemy was yourself as you explored the nefariously designed maze.

Aliens (Amstrad CPC) (1987)
Mark Eyles' treatment of the sci-fi action movie not only resulted in an entertaining and fast-paced game, but also a tense and nerve-wracking atmosphere that evoked the feel of James Cameron's cinematic masterpiece perfectly.

Firetrack (C64) (1987)
By 1987, the Commodore 64 had seen more than its fair share of vertically scrolling shoot-'em-ups, yet *Firetrack* boasted such manically enjoyable gameplay that it was impossible not to have a blast with it.

R-Type (Spectrum) (1988)
The Software Studios team did a superb job of converting Irem's famous horizontally scrolling shooter, with particular kudos going to the impressive ZX Spectrum version, which was programmed by Bob Pape.

Millennium 2.2 (Amiga) (1989)
Ian Bird's expansive space strategy adventure game certainly didn't lack for atmosphere and also delivered thrills aplenty. Bird improved even further on the template with its sequel, *Deuteros*, published by Activision.

THREE TO AVOID

Explorer (Spectrum) (1986)
There's no doubting The RamJam Corporation's ambition, with the advertising for *Explorer* boasting over 40 billion graphical locations to explore. In reality, however, the game was an empty experience and poorly received, not living up to its promise.

Super Hang-On (C64) (1988)
The Spectrum version of the motorbike racing arcade machine was a qualified success and hailed as a worthy rival to Activision's own *Enduro Racer*. On the Commodore 64, however, it was a massive disappointment, hamstrung by the machine's poor sprite performance.

Championship Sprint
(Spectrum) (1988)
The Electric Dreams conversion of *Super Sprint* had hardly been a classic, yet sequel *Championship Sprint* was even worse, with *Zzap!64* being particularly savage on the C64 version, awarding it a lowly 24%. The other formats fared little better.

Rod in his office circa 1987.

The appeal of the movie to software houses was clear: the stark and futuristic scenario coupled with an abundance of guns and aliens to shoot at had massive potential to produce a fantastic game, even on the 8-bit computers.

Mark Eyles was fortunate enough to once again be working as lead designer on a huge licence. "The design process began when I received a script for the film, and I was very excited," he remembers fondly. "I was already a big fan of *Alien*, and when I read the script for *Aliens* I could see it was going to be a worthy successor, and if I recall correctly, much of the initial design work on the game was done before the film was even released."

The treatment for the game created by Mark was indeed something special, and regarded by many as a bridge between the 2D shooters of the time and the shift

the action, the game's brilliant use of the film's motion trackers and other audio cues cranked up the tension and delivered a powerfully intense experience. Yet with *Aliens* released in 1986 to universally positive reviews, Electric Dreams had already decided to go one better.

Aliens x 2

"We had two great design treatments of the material," says Rod proudly, "so rather than choose between the two, we made the decision to give the go-ahead on both versions and rely on the strength of the licence to make them both bestsellers."

The result was another *Aliens* game, the 'US' version, based on the same movie but offering an alternative style of gameplay. "The US version took a very different approach," says Mark Eyles, "where rather than providing a world in which the player

" Electric Dreams enabled Activision to maintain relevance in the European market "

ROD COUSENS ON THE CREATION OF ELECTRIC DREAMS

towards the now-ubiquitous first-person format. He agrees: "We saw it as a way to involve the player more emotionally with the action. The big issue, however, was that the computers of the time really struggled with 3D, so the approach we used had to give the illusion of being in a 3D world." Mark and the development team created this effect by scrolling the 2D background – essentially the walls of the rooms – and this, coupled with other gameplay elements, made *Aliens* an exceptional success.

"The squad-based action was another innovation for the time," continues Mark, "as you could freely switch between the six characters as they moved throughout the base. We combined this with elements from the film – for instance, if a Facehugger got to one of your characters, you lost control of them and had a limited amount of time to go and rescue them." With the squad tactics and shooting providing

could replay their own version of the film, it followed the movie via a series of episodes that re-created key plot events." Released a few months later, the US version proved to be less successful than its forebear, but as many remarked at the time, it was at least a bit easier to play with the lights off!

With the exception of Spectrum *Paradroid* clone *Nihilist* and C64 vertical shooter *Firetrack*, 1987 also saw Electric Dreams begin its assault on the arcade conversion market. "We'd seen what other companies had done and knew there was a big market in converting arcade games to home computers," says Rod. First up, released early in the year, was *Tempest*, an arcade machine that was as legendary as it was ancient. Lost somehow among the rash of *Space Invaders* and *Frogger* clones in the early years of the 8-bit computers, *Tempest* echoed Domark's official *Star Wars* arcade conversion (also released in

» [Amstrad CPC] This was the first of the *Aliens* tie-ins, and the most successful.

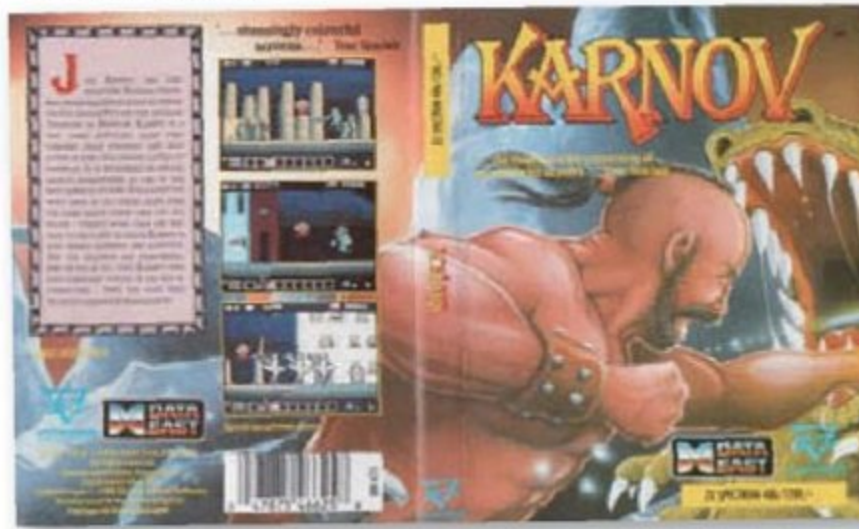» Mark Eyles in 1986, the year of *Aliens* and *Hijack*'s releases.

» [C64] *Chameleon* on the C64 didn't turn out as Rod had hoped.

» Russian hi-jinks with the conversion of *Karnov*.

» [Amstrad CPC] This was a poor alternative to the excellent Spectrum conversion.

1987) by reaching homes many years after the release of its arcade parent.

Further arcade licences would be swiftly procured by Rod with mixed results. The odd isometric firefighting game *Firetrap* was a moderate success, thanks mainly to its novel subject, but *Super Hang-On* proved to be as dreadful on the Commodore 64 as it was accomplished on the ZX Spectrum. In addition, the popular multiplayer arcade racer *Super Sprint* translated adequately to the 8-bits, yet its sequel, *Championship Sprint*, was roundly panned despite the inclusion of a track designer. Arcade conversions, as for most software houses, were proving tricky for Electric Dreams.

Blast off

Late in 1987, however, Rod returned from Japan with a licence he considered

something of a coup. "It took a lot of work and persistence, but eventually I managed to get the rights to the Irem shooter *R-Type*," he says proudly, "and I felt the conversions we carried out were excellent." Magazine reviews of the time would bear his feelings out, with the Spectrum version especially attractive and playable considering the limitations of the machine. A conversion of Data East's *Karnov* followed later in 1988 to somewhat lesser acclaim, with Commodore 64 owners in particular feeling short-changed, this time thanks to a virtually identical port of the Spectrum version – something that Julian Rignall and his fellow reviewers in *Zzap!64* magazine took particular exception to, awarding the game a measly 13%.

There's not much information available on how the end came for Electric Dreams,

» [C64] *Star Raiders II* was a popular follow-up to the Atari classic. Electric Dreams handled the Spectrum, CPC and C64 versions.

☐ FROM THE FORUM: THE BATTLE OF THE ALIENS

Matt_B: I'd definitely go with the UK version; it's like a precursor to the FPS genre.

Scunny: I used to play it in a dark room, and picking your shot as it was running along was hairy, and if you missed – causing it to run straight at the screen – it really was brown trousers time.

Merman: The US version was interesting. The dropship level echoes *Master Of The Lamps*, the infirmary lock-in sequence, even the weapon identification intro. But the varying quality of the graphics let the atmosphere down.

Necronom: I like them both, but for different reasons. The UK one looks much better and is very atmospheric, though is far too hard. The US one follows the film and has more variety. It's easier and has level codes, and I can finish it, so have probably had more fun from it.

ToxieDogg: They complement each other quite well. It's worth playing both of them.

Greenberet79: UK for me. Loved it – one of my favourite ever games. An early survival horror and an early FPS.

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probably because of the way the brand was assimilated into Activision, thinks Rod: "Electric Dreams never really took hold in the US; I had been appointed as international head of Activision, so we merged the resources and concentrated on the main brand, which was obviously Activision itself. The regional markets had begun to converge with common platforms, so the necessity to establish and maintain local imprints was greatly reduced."

With the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST 16-bit computers being chiefly US platforms, although they found some success in Europe, it made sense for the development of global franchises to be routed via the main company. Electric Dreams, without fuss or fanfare, quietly disappeared late in 1989.

Closing thoughts

"In some ways, Electric Dreams was a continuation of Quicksilva," says Mark Eyles, "and Rod was the key to its success. At the time, the games industry was just getting established in the UK and moving onto a much more business-like footing. Without the business acumen of people like Rod, it would not have succeeded the way it did."

Rod adds: "Electric Dreams enabled Activision, who had a US-skewed product slate, to maintain relevance in the European market, as this was a growing part of their business and, in addition, it crucially allowed the creation of a local development talent pool, which then had access to a powerful global distribution force." It's clear the legacy of Electric Dreams is not just some damn fine videogames; Rod sees its role as a pivotal part of Activision's subsequent success and strength, as well as providing a range of talented people the springboard to careers that continue to this day. 👾