

'I BET TOLKIEN DID THE SAME'

● Some games are released that seem to change everyone's concept of what can be done on a computer. *Lords of Midnight* was one such. Now with its successor *Doomdark's Revenge* out, 'Midnight' fanatics eagerly await the third and final part of the trilogy. But will it be the final game in the series, and did you know that *Lords of Midnight* could have been called something entirely different? ROGER KEAN travelled across the Mersey to talk to 'state of the art' programmer and 'Midnight' author MIKE SINGLETON about the past, the present and the future as seen through *The Eye of the Moon* ●

It seemed suitable to talk to Mike Singleton in the coffee lounge of Liverpool's Adelphi Hotel, because the 'lounge' is a vast, carpeted and pillared area echoing to the sounds of the Roaring Twenties, a time when the lounge was probably full of brightly dressed, wealthy Liverpoolians — a bit like a vast game waiting to be fired by the player. The time of the hotel's heyday was also the formulating period of JRR Tolkien, the fantasy fiction author who can justly claim to be the source material for so many computer adventure games today. Mike, who had nipped across the Mersey from his home in Wallasey, and I sat down in solitary splendour and I asked him first whether the solitary life of a programmer requires more self-discipline than his previous profession which was a teacher.

'What I find most difficult is getting started actually, once the program is going it's easier. It's always tough if the deadline is looming. On *Doomdark's Revenge* I did underestimate by six weeks how long it would take to finish. As the original deadline was approaching I was pulling out all the stops and working till two or three in the morning and then getting up at nine and carrying on again. You can only do that for so long. You can do it towards the end of the pro-

gram, and I miscalculated it and I found I'd knocked myself out and still had a lot to do. So finishing *Doomdark's Revenge* was a real grind.'

Between programming stints Mike has another major commitment to the 'play by mail' game which he has run for several years now and which is called *Star Lord*. The game is an investment he made of royalties received for Sinclair programs in the ZX81 games packs.

'I think I'm right in saying that it was the first play by mail game to be processed in this country. We used to have about 700 players — it's come down a bit now. It's done on a PET with a hard disc and a nice little ink jet colour printer so you get colour printouts of your position in the galaxy, and in addition to the maps you get battle reports and how much fuel there is, and a customised order form on the bottom which you send back in with your orders for starships on it. It costs £1.25 a turn to play, so it's really for fanatics. The longest game's been going on for about three years now — it's reached turn 90!'

Which means the players really have to be wealthy fanatics to have already spent £112.50. But it seems you can play for free if you become an Emperor which must be quite an incentive!

'If it's a fresh game you can probably become Emperor, if you're lucky or skilful, within 10 turns. But once a game's got an Emperor they tend to hold onto it quite desperately,' Mike added with a laugh. 'But we have had one or two Emperors recently who have dropped out because they have got rather tired of being Emperor through insufficient challenge although they have got all the other players in there against them.'

Star Lord was set up with money from royalties, and I asked Mike how he started off life as a games programmer.

'I was given a little Sinclair programmable calculator for my birthday — it must be over five years ago — which had 32 programmable steps! I'd done a matchstick game, you know, you've got so many matchsticks in a row and you take off one, two, three. A very simple formula to work out. I had a friend who worked in a betting shop and he was very interested in working out bets on

it. There are some very complicated bets — there's one called 'around the clock' which actually consists of 13 different bets on three horses, and I wrote a little program which would calculate 'around the clock' and then we decided we would try and do it commercially. Between us we chipped in for a Texas Instruments programmable which went up to 200 steps and a magnetic card and managed to have around fifteen different types of bet. Then we graduated to a PET, and the idea of that was not to just calculate the bets but to do all the office work in the betting shop as well.'

It seemed like a good idea but ran into problems when a race was about to start and because of the rush to the counter it was impossible to put the information into the computer fast enough. But Mike and his betting friend were not quite finished with the horses.

'I just messed around with the computer for a bit and came up with something called 'Computer Race' which was a computer-run horse race.'

'That had graphics of the horses?'

'Oh yes. This was specifically designed for betting shop use, say when the rac-

'I just messed around with the computer for a bit and came up with something called 'Computer Race' which was a computer-run horse race.'





On the right tracks, *Midnight* author and programmer MIKE SINGLETON outside Lime Street Station in Liverpool.

ing was off because of bad weather. It was developed to the point where it would do a complete printout of all the operations done during the day, so you had a list of all the races run that day for security purposes, and it was on ROMs so it couldn't be tampered with. We actually sold one to someone in Ireland which apparently is still running. In Britain I'm afraid we had problems with the Betting Laws, which are very strange. You're not allowed to have anything that resembles entertainment or comfort in the betting shop. I mean having chairs is a little bit dicey, you might be contravening the laws — you're encouraging people to go into a betting shop. We had a test case where we had informed the police so that they could bring a test prosecution and it went against us, it was about 49/51. So that was the end of that.'

But it wasn't quite the end of the graphical idea because at about that time the Vic home computer emerged and Mike converted the game for the new machine which offered better graphics but meant simplifying the content. Out of the original idea came the game *Shadowfax*.

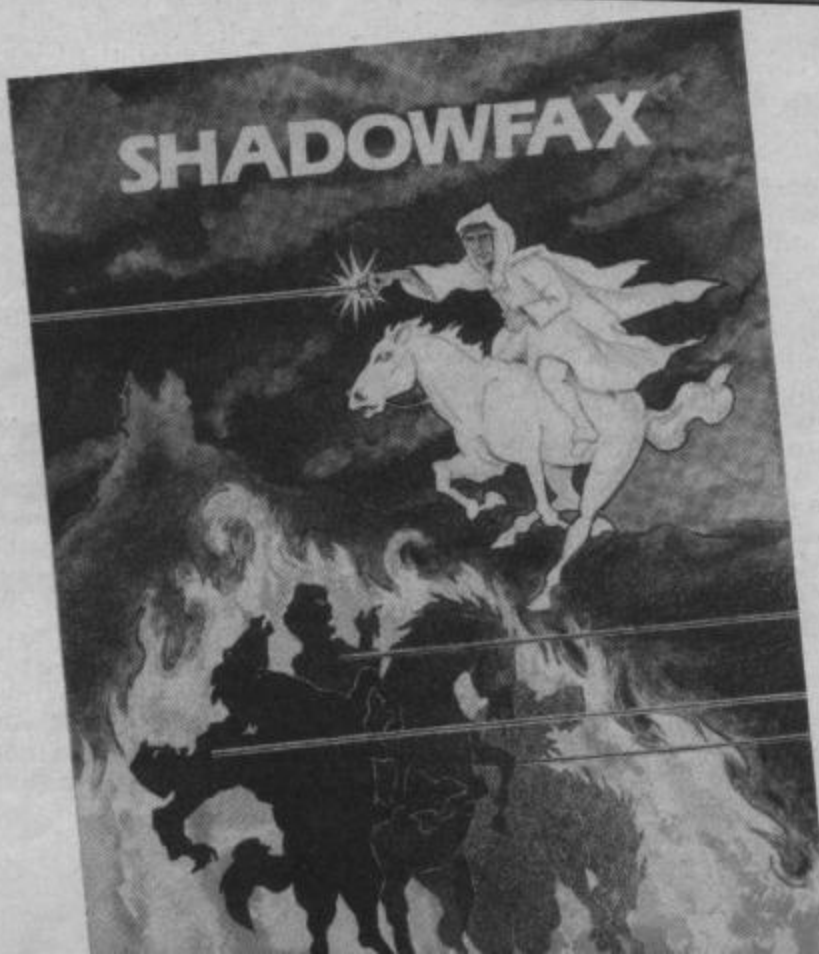
'The moving horses came from the betting game on the PET. In fact I took the graph-

ics from Muybridge's photographs of horses — they must be the oldest computer graphics about! They've been squeezed and stretched a bit since — they were stretched a bit on the Vic as it's got much longer pixels and they were squeezed a bit on the Spectrum.'

Muybridge was a famous early Victorian photographer who became obsessed with capturing moving images by using time lapse still photography, and has often been

credited with being a forerunner of the modern cinema. But Mike seemed to be putting the horse before the cart in this case. I wondered whether he had had any trouble in selling the idea to Postern who released *Shadowfax* and he explained that

I don't know how many got sold, but I got about £6,000 in royalties! I mean it was about the best rate of pay I've ever had!



Limited, one of the larger tape duplicators, had done duplication for Petsoft. Postern was an offshoot of James York and included an ex-Petsoft director on its board. The software house was set up to extend James York's operation into the production, packaging and marketing of software. So for Mike Singleton, there was already the contact and he never had any problems in getting software marketed through them.

'There were three programs I did for Postern in the early days, all on the Vic originally, which were *Shadowfax*, *Siege* and *Snake Pit*. I'd done the snakes about six months before I worked out what to do with them, just spent ages watching them wriggle about the screen! That was all on the 3.5K Vic.'

there had been a previous association.

'Well I'd already been doing games programs for the PET for Petsoft. And they had a deal going with Sir Clive to do programs for the ZX80, that was about 1980, and I did six 1K machine code programs. I'd just finished those when the deal fell through with Sinclair. But they gave me his number and I phoned up and said I've got these programs and he said send them through. In November of that year, happily, I was invited down to Cambridge and I saw the prototype of the ZX81 on EPROM and I was asked if I could do the games for the coming ZX81. Unfortunately I couldn't convert the ZX80 games because of the extra systems variables. But I eventually came up with six short 1K programs in BASIC in about two weeks over the Christmas holidays and those became 'Gamespack Number 1'. I don't know how many got sold, but I got about £6,000 in royalties! I mean it was about the best rate of pay I've ever had or are ever likely to have!'

It was this money that Mike invested in equipment and advertising to set up the *Star Lord* game. But his link to Postern was that James York



'Did you do the Spectrum versions for Postern?'

'I did most of the Spectrum versions except *Shadowfax* which had a listing of all the graphics, well graphics were a major part of the game, but I did all the others. I think *Snake Pit* turned out the best of all.'

'So what happened after that? There's quite a gap between *Snake Pit* and *Lords of Midnight*'

'At the same time as doing that I was running *Star Lord* and it was expanding quite quickly. We had reached about three or four hundred players by then from all over. I think our furthest player was in New Guinea! We still get phone calls from the strangest places. People are willing to spend a fortune on their moves, like when their space ship is about to get blown up! The next thing I did in terms of computer games was the *3 Deep Space* series which was a bit of a flop I must admit. It worked well on the BBC and Postern had insisted on it being done on the Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Vic if possible. And it was just about possible if you fiddled around with the telly enough and your eyesight was A1! It was very tough doing the Spectrum one because the colours weren't right. The trouble with the Spectrum is that there's always too much differentiation not only between the actual colours themselves, their hue, but their intensity. I originally wanted to use blue and red but the blue is just too dark compared to the red. So you could never adjust the television set to get an equal image. And there were other problems such as you can't mix the colour properly in a

character cell. I know that the effect wasn't really visible to many people. It was very visible to me because I'd spent about three months sitting in front of a TV screen with these damned goggles on, and by the time I'd finished that I hardly needed the goggles. I remember driving down to Cheltenham where Postern are based and I found myself driving along the motorway gazing into the distance trying to estimate how many hundreds of yards the next car was in front of me! I think the major problem was that you were bound to get quite a high rate of returns from people whose eyesight just couldn't cope with it. In fact there was one chap, apparently, who wrote to Postern thanking them for the game because having played it and been unable to see the effect, had gone along to the opticians and discovered he really did have defective vision!'

'One of my primary rules in designing a game is to try and make everything as functional as possible so that, hopefully, the graphics should have a purpose as well as being mere decoration.'

It seems a long gap and a huge leap from *3 Deep Space* to the amazing *Lords of Midnight* as well as a change of software house. I asked Mike how he had become involved with Beyond.

'I'd done quite a bit of writing for *Computer & Video Games* when Terry Pratt was the editor. He moved across to set up Beyond within EMAP's framework, and he'd been pressing me for quite a while for a game for Beyond and I'd been saying, well yeah I'll come up with something sometime. It was September 83, he came up to Chester and we had a chat about some of the ideas I'd got. I had some landscaping in mind. I'd never seen anything like *The Hobbit* or I'd never really bothered with it, but a friend of a friend had a Commodore 64 version of it, and I was appalled at the speed at which the graphics came up! I assured him something better could be done.'

'One of my primary rules in designing a game is to try and make everything as

functional as possible so that, hopefully, the graphics should have a purpose as well as being mere decoration. I think that came out best in *Snake Pit* where everything, the shape of the snakes and so on, all had a functional purpose, they actually formed walls and you ended up with a moving maze. So the idea of landscaping popped into my head where you would have to use the graphics to know where you were and to plot your progress through the map. I mentioned it to Terry and, I had some other ideas, but he liked that one best of all. Originally it was going to be called *Lords of Atlantis*, because I'd been toying with an idea, a similar idea, which was more map-based rather than panorama-based, for play by mail. So I grabbed a few of the ideas I'd had for that and mixed them up with the landscaping and that's how *Lords of Midnight* start-

ed off.'

'You make it sound very technical, yet people clearly went overboard when the game came out for the whole fantasy world that's created in the game. You must have had a fairly clear idea of the characters and the way life is carried on in the Land of Midnight?'

'Yeah, but it grew from the initial idea of landscaping, which meant a terrain type game rather than rooms like you get in most adventures. So I made a few tests first to check whether it would work and then drew a large map, which I still have, in nice felt tip colours. It isn't quite as difficult as it sounds and really I bet Tolkien did the same — you start off with a few word endings and tack different syllables on the front until you come up with something that sounds good so you sit there going 'Ush-garak, Ashgarak, Ighrem' to yourself until you get something that sounds nice or horrible according to what you want. And once I got the map then I started doing the story

before I got on with any programming and it was really the story that built up the atmosphere. I managed to get through the story quite quickly, in about three weeks. And that clarified all the major characters anyway — there were a few characters who came in later like Farflame the Dragonlord, he came in during the actual programming stage.'

Many writers of fiction have noted that once created, a character starts to take on a life of its own, dictating further events, and a whole fantasy world can apparently write itself. I asked Mike whether a similar thing had happened when he was working on the story of *Lords of Midnight*.

'That's how I tend to write anyway. I start off and let it take its own course. Although with this it was a little different because I already knew that what I was aiming towards had to be some sort of climax, they all had to set off against Doomdark at some stage. I think the most fun was doing Fawkrin the Skulkrin, I had some real fun with him.'

'Was it to be a trilogy from the outset?'

'Yes. It was really, although Terry Pratt was keeping his options open to see how the first one went.'

'I imagine it didn't take them too long to make up their minds that it would be a trilogy!'

'No!' said Mike with a laugh.

'So when did you actually start on *Doomdark's Revenge*? Immediately after *Lords of Midnight* or was it already under way?'

'Well it wasn't really. An awful lot of new stuff went into *Doomdark*, which is really why it took a bit longer to do than I'd anticipated. To fit the new stuff in I had to restructure the way the game was moderated internally quite considerably. I'd got about 3 bytes spare on *Midnight*, I know I'd already streamlined it about three or four times to get it to fit in, so I had to take a slightly different approach to *Doomdark's Revenge* although certain things remained the same, such as the routines for putting the graphics up on the screen were unchanged.'

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The graphics were different of course but that's just a question of redrawing them. But as I was doing *Lords of Midnight* I realised there were ways I could have done it more efficiently if I'd realised it at the beginning, but by then it was too late to go back.

'What sort of things do you mean?'

'One of the things — I suppose it's only a technical point — is that different types of characters and objects had been stored in different formats of table in *Lords of Midnight*, so I'd got tables for armies, tables for characters, I'd got tables for objects, and being in machine code each one needed its own little routine for access. But what I did in *Doomdark's Revenge* was make all the tables work on the same sort of format so they could all be accessed by the same routine even though they were different tables, which compressed it all considerably. Other things came out of that as well. With each character having his own particular starting location, instead of having to save two x and y co-ordinates I only had to save the one and you get the character's name and his starting location, so that saves a bit more. I have to do a little more text compression yet again.'

'How does the text work in these games then?'

'On both *Doomdark's Revenge* and *Lords of Midnight* it works on words so you've got a token for each word. In fact the vocabulary in both of them only goes up to 250 words. It's all done by swapping round, putting different endings on them — there's a few escape codes, so you can do an escape code for a new paragraph, an escape code for literal *ascii* characters, for commas and full stops, and an escape code for capitals at the beginning of a word. In *Lords of Midnight* I had more trouble fitting it in because it was the first time round and my estimates were further out than they were for *Doomdark's Revenge*. The actual words for *Lords of Midnight* were stored in five-bit blocks so five bits for a letter, which meant having huge long strings of bytes which you had to access five bits at a time — a rather awkward little routine and it made put-

ting the text up a little bit slower than in *Doomdark's Revenge* which had more space and allowed me a byte per letter, which is a great luxury!

'I just rationalised the way the language was being used in *Doomdark's Revenge*. Starting off — and because I started off in *Lords of Midnight* with an idea and then put it into program form, I got sort of strange names that didn't quite fit in with an easy way of putting them up. So you might have, I don't think it exists, but you might have the Plains of Dawn and then you might have Dawnhenge. But if you have everything as the *Something of Something* obviously it's easier to program. Just little rationalisations like that, the way the language was used in *Doomdark's Revenge* meant I could compress it more.'

The second part of the Midnight trilogy has proved as popular as the first. Mike is now at work on the ideas behind the third part, to be called *The Eye of the Moon*. I asked Mike whether we could expect to see some differences between the first two parts and the third.

'Well, perhaps some extra features, yes, but you will still get a lot of familiar aspects. And it takes place to the south of the Land of Midnight. Basically the story as it stands at the moment is that Luxor is dying, it's some years on and he's reached

finds when he looks into the jewel. Someone suggested he finds that Midnight has been turned into a multi-story car park!'

'And beyond the trilogy, are there likely to be any more in the series?'

'I think there could be, I don't want the idea to get stale. Leave it to others to carry on the format perhaps, I think I'd be getting a bit stale. And I think that on current plans *Eye of the Moon* will probably stretch the technique as far as it will go. On current plans anyway, I don't think you can get much more out of the Spectrum than *Eye of the Moon* will provide — it's going to be bigger again. You've only got 6,000 locations in *Doomdark's Revenge* but estimates for *Eye of the Moon* are that it will be considerably bigger than that, hopefully more variety in the landscapes as well.'

Fiction writers are fond of saying that there are only seven original ideas in the world and that all stories are variations of these seven themes. The same is obviously true of computer games. If something new in concept like the Midnight Trilogy comes up, it seems inevitable that other people, other programmers will try and copy its ideas, perhaps even some of the routines. I asked Mike whether, like some other writers and software houses, he was irritated or worried by having

pliment than anything. I think I might get annoyed if someone managed to do it better! I'm sure that will happen at some stage. But until it does, every so-called rip off is a bit of free advertising for the original and in fact I think there is one advert currently going round for something called *King Arthur's Quest* by Hill MacGibbon which has a main headline in the ad which starts 'After Midnight . . .', and some of the techniques are similar. But I think that's more likely to help Midnight more than it'll help Hill MacGibbon.

'Personally I would prefer other people to take up the idea of doing an epic game and produce others in the format rather than keep on doing the same thing myself. One idea I've toyed with is producing something along the lines of *The Quill* with graphics, a generator program for writing epic games. Whether it's feasible is another matter. I think it might be but I don't think it would be as readily usable as *The Quill*. I think inevitably you would have to make the games more compact and I don't think you would quite get the scope of a *Doomdark's Revenge* on a generated basis. It might be interesting to do it on an in-house basis for other programmers to use.'

At this point a waitress advanced across the vast room to collect the coffee cups and we concluded the interview with Mike going off to be photographed outside Lime Street Station before returning across the river to carry on working out the story line for *Eye of the Moon*. We returned to our car and as we were leaving the multi-story car park, I briefly wondered whether once it had been the Land of Midnight...

Someone suggested he finds that Midnight has been turned into a multi-story car park!

the end of his tether, and he wants to see what is going to happen to Midnight in the future. So Morkin goes off in search of the magical jewel called the Eye of the Moon which enables people to see into the future, so that Luxor can then rest in peace.'

'Is there a natural enemy in this one like *Doomdark* or *Shareth*?'

'Haven't decided that yet! There will be enemies. I was discussing this last night with someone, wondering whether we should have an enemy that you have to defeat or just an enemy who's possibly hindering you, but not be the main objective. It's also debatable what Luxor

others copy his ideas.

'I think that's more a com-

