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Karl Hörnell

What cherished games would you take to the island?

While still at school, Karl Hörnell produced a diverse bunch of titles for Interceptor Micros' budget label, Players. Paul Drury wants to know the name of the games…

Aged 14, Karl was not only coding arcade clones, he was even mocking up cassette inlays for his imaginary software house.

As this is the first time we've marooned a Scandinavian on our digital desert island, we're keen to get his perspective on that most enduring of retro squabbles: were Swedish playgrounds divided along Commodore and Sinclair lines just as they were in Britain?

"The Commodore was dominant but yes, I knew people who had Spectrums," explains Karl in impeccably clipped English. "We called that computer 'the eraser' because of its keyboard."

It seems that jibes at the Speccy's zombie-fleshed keys were indeed an international phenomenon in the early Eighties. Growing up in the historic city of Uppsala, Sweden, Karl's first glimpse of videogames was on his neighbour's Atari VCS in 1982, quickly followed by the arrival of a VIC-20 into the homes of two of his lucky classmates. Discovering you could actually type in programmes to tinker and experiment with on Commodore's micro, he knew he needed his own machine. He talked his parents into buying him one and soon his dad returned home with a beautiful beige VIC 64. That's not a typo – the Commodore 64 was initially known as the VIC 64 in Sweden to capitalise on the popularity of its predecessor over there.

"At first I was disappointed," he admits. "I had expected something compatible with my friends' computers. Then he told me the salesperson had called this 'the computer of the future'. Better graphics. Better sound. More memory. And he was right."

It was certainly to be the computer of Karl's future. The lack of available games for the new machine was initially frustrating but actually acted as a catalyst for him to write his own. Not content with simply producing his own clones of *Q*Bert*, *Chopper Command* and the like, he went as far as creating charming hand-drawn cassette covers for his fantasy software house, Center Soft. At age 14, he enthusiastically entered a software competition in Swedish magazine *VIC-Rapport* and bizarrely bagged both first and second prize (see boxout 'The Winner Takes It All'). Spurred on by this unexpected triumph, Karl plucked up courage and sent some of his efforts across the water to Interceptor Micros, based in rural Hampshire, England.

"Their games had some personality," says Karl with admiration. "You could feel the presence of the developer. The most blatant example was *Get Off My Garden* by Ian Gray. It had a long monologue running across the screen while you played. I thought that was fascinating. You could put your own thoughts into a game and these people weren't afraid to do it. That made them feel more real than the other companies and made it easier to make contact with them."

Karl was essentially looking for some feedback from a professional software outfit, perhaps some gentle encouragement that this plucky Swedish schoolboy was doing his best. What he wasn't expecting was to get his games published. Yet his timing was fortuitous; Interceptor was planning to launch its own budget range and Karl's diverse bunch of games fitted nicely with its vision for the new Players label. Four of his early speculative submissions ended up being released in late 1985 and early 1986, beginning with *Fruity*, which involved bouncing an intrepid trampolinist into fruit-laden trees whilst avoiding a ravenous parrot. Ronald Rubberduck, released shortly afterwards, had a similarly off-beat theme, as you guided your bath toy through dangerous waters, avoiding mutant frogs and electrified mazes. Karl, you must have been delighted to see your own creations being sold as commercial releases?

"It was a mixture of pride and terror," he tells us, noticeably sheepish in his response. "I didn't think those games were ready for the market."

Clearly Karl was unfamiliar with the generic dross that often qualified for a budget release (*Bionic Granny*, anyone?), for what his early games lacked in polish, they made up for in character. His third release, *Velocipede*, may have been a simple skit on *Moon Patrol*, but the way your turtle-necked hero assembled his bike before peddling past pyramids and grazing sheep (no prizes for guessing Jeff Minter's work was an influence) was a sweet touch, as was the inclusion of fluttering Swedish flags in the background. "It was a way of

Trivia

Karl's abiding love of cartooning can be seen in *Savage Dragonbert: Full Frontal Nerdity*, his mash-up of *Dilbert* and the *Savage Dragon* comics, published in 2002.

FIRST JOB
Freelance games
programmer

CURRENT JOB
Senior developer

FAVOURITE FILM
Avengers Assemble

FAVOURITE ALBUM
Sorry to disappoint you
but I don't listen to music

FAVOURITE BOOK:
Best Software Guide:
VIC-20 And Commodore 64
Games by Tony Takoushi.
It provided me with a
lot of information and
inspiration

FIRST COMPUTER/CONSOLE
Parachute
(Game & Watch)

FAVOURITE COMPUTER/CONSOLE
iPhone

BEST GAMING ACHIEVEMENT
Developing my online
poker game

BEST-SELLING PRODUCT:
IceBlox Plus

BEST HOLIDAY
Visiting Interceptor
Software in England in 1986

WHO YOU WANT TO BE STRANDED WITH
Jimmy Carr. I'd like to
know what's going on in
his head.

> " I think a part
> of me will always be
> stuck in the Eighties "
>
> *Karl Hörnell*

145235-46748577546542

ISLAND

SEX	NAME
M	Karl Hörnell

DATE OF BIRTH	PLACE OF BIRTH
26.4.1970	Uppsala, Sweden

BIOGRAPHY
As a schoolboy, Karl was inspired by the emerging C64
software development scene in England and sent over his
early coding efforts to Interceptor Micros. The company
ended up publishing nine of his games, including Fungus
and Clean Up Service.

Timeline

FRUITY
- **YEAR:** 1985
- **FORMAT:** C64

Karl's first published game was a pastiche of Exidy's old arcade game *Circus*, with a dash of strategy as you varied the height of your fruit-gobbler.
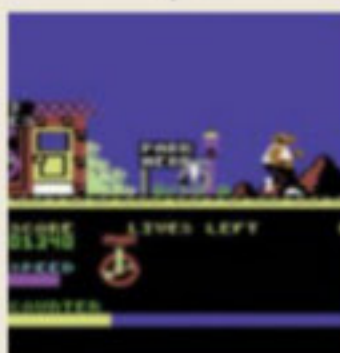
VELOCIPEDE 2
- **YEAR:** 1986
- **FORMAT:** C64

The peddler of the original got off his bike and hopped onto a unicycle for this sequel. Try and spot the nods to Karl's favourite UK developers en route.

FUNGUS
- **YEAR:** 1986
- **FORMAT:** C64

A simple idea, executed well, that has you somersaulting over gaps trying to collect mushrooms as the screen scrolls inexorably onward.
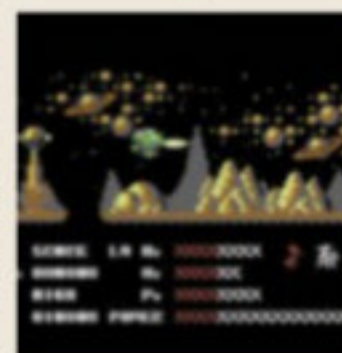
TOADFORCE
- **YEAR:** 1986
- **FORMAT:** C64

Inspired by a mechanical toad he drew for *C&VG*, this sees Karl having a shot at the shoot-'em-up, mixing *Dropzone* and *Fort Apocalypse*.

» Karl's original drawing for the *C&VG* art competition that would inspire *Toadforce*.

[C64] *Clean Up Service* was Karl's final release for his beloved C64 and arguably his best.

Praise for Karl

Here's what **Retro Gamer** has to say about Karl Hörnell's games…

Darran Jones
I didn't own a C64 back in the day, so Karl's releases originally passed me by. Looking back at his games retrospectively it's clear to see that *Clean Up Service* is a damn fine game that has stood the test of time well. It's graphically impressive and boasts some really solid gameplay mechanics.

Paul Drury
Karl's C64 games may not be familiar names but revisiting them after almost three decades, you're struck by their character and sense of fun. His willingness to experiment with genres is admirable and when it comes to online poker, he certainly played his cards right. Plus his English is better than mine.

letting the world know there were programmers from other countries out there," he smiles.

Karl's opening quartet of releases was completed by *Clean Up Time*. Inspired by the teamwork of Taskset's *Super Pipeline 2*, the game tasked a hapless pair of broom-wielding labourers with clearing up various baddie-filled stages and offered some innovative co-op play. It's an interesting and forward-thinking game, though in common with all of Karl's early releases, it remains a stern challenge.

"I had played my games so much while developing them, I had lost touch with how difficult they were," says Karl. "I had become so accustomed to the controls and ended up making more and more difficult levels. You lose your objectivity when you're playing and developing at the same time."

Karl may have lacked impartial playtesters to point out any painful difficulty spikes, but he did have a small team of collaborators. His classmates F Wootz and B Eklund would help with the gruelling task of typing in reams of hexadecimal, as Karl's incredibly primitive machine code monitor meant he would painstakingly write out his code on paper first, and school friend J Vessby provided music for several of his titles. We wondered whether the isolation of Karl and his little gang might even have helped when it came to coming up with original game concepts?

"Not with original ideas but definitely weird ideas," decides Karl. "I wasn't getting any feedback from other developers."

Crafting his titles far away from the vibrant British software scene of the mid-Eighties seems to have encouraged Karl to create his own distinct visual style, with cartoon characterisation and little comic cutscenes punctuating his games. His relationship with Interceptor seems strangely distant in these early days too. After being paid £250 for each of his first four releases ("There was no negotiation," he adds, "they made me an offer and I accepted.") Karl explains he was given free rein to develop whatever games he wished, simply sending away the finished code and receiving occasional polite letters from Simon Daniels, Interceptor's 'software coordinator', accompanying a cheque for purchasing the title outright. "I always expected my games not to sell so a fixed payment was better than royalties," Karl quips, modestly.

However, now he knew his efforts were destined for commercial release, he consciously upped his game. Deciding to revisit *Velocipede*, the sequel added smoother scrolling and shorter, snappier courses, full of dastardly obstacles and clever little details, but oddly lost one of the original's wheels. "I should have called it *Velocipede.5*," he adds dryly. "It was a little ironic I suppose but going from a bike to a unicycle meant I used one sprite not two for the velocipede so that left me more to use for enemies. I wasn't entirely happy with the game but it was clearly an improvement."

Talking to Karl, you sense he was his own harshest critic, constantly noting the limitations in his coding ability, so it's a pleasant surprise to hear him speak so fondly of his next title. Developed over the summer of 1986, *Fungus* was the tale of a portly, mushroom-loving glutton (no relation to Raymond

CLEAN UP SERVICE
- **YEAR:** 1987
- **FORMAT:** C64

Our personal favourite of Karl's back-catalogue, this platform-based clean-'em-up featured two-player co-op action and much frenzied broom work.

FUNGUS 2
- **YEAR:** 1990
- **FORMAT:** C64

Thanks to the work of Frank Gasking at www.gtw64.co.uk you can now see what the mushroom lover did next in this previously unreleased sequel.

ICEBLOX PLUS
- **YEAR:** 2002
- **FORMAT:** Mobile

One of Karl's Java games from the Nineties and beyond, this *Pengo* pastiche features Pete the Penguin pushing through the snowy wastes.

PERMUTO
- **YEAR:** 2014
- **FORMAT:** iOS

Karl's current project is due this year. "The last time a magazine featured an unfinished game of mine was *Fungus 2*, so I hope this doesn't jinx it," he notes.
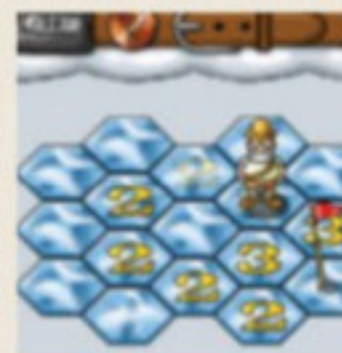
The Winner Takes It All

These days, Sweden is the proud home of many leading games developers, but according to Karl, things were a little different in the Eighties. "In the summer of 1984, Sweden's only magazine for Commodore users, *VIC-Rapport*, announced a programming competition," he recalls. "To hedge my bets, I sent in three entries: some kind of cross between *Manic Miner* and *Donkey Kong* and a couple of two-player gunfight duel games. In what felt like a completely absurd outcome, I won both first and second prize. Third price went to someone's page-and-a-half BASIC implementation of *Snake*. It was like entering a marathon slightly out of shape and then winning because all the other contestants were just walking. It took some of the triumph out of it. I was suddenly hailed as the leading hobbyist game developer in my country. The article ended with, 'The world is waiting for Karl Hörnell'!"

[C64] Brooms at the ready, boys…

» The Commodore 64 was initially known as the VIC 64 in Sweden to capitalise on the success of its predecessor.
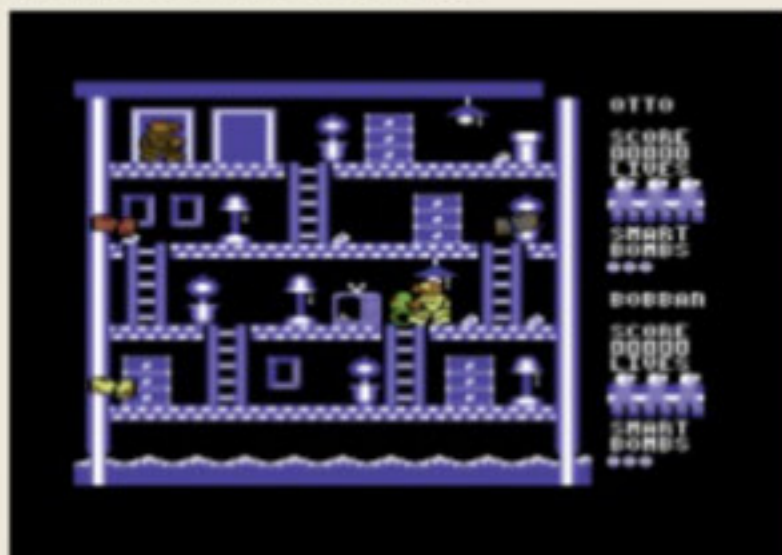
Brigg's bogeyman, Karl assures us), who must somersault his way through a constantly scrolling course, dodging angry birds and annoyed insects on the way. "For some reason, I've always found mushrooms to be kind of cool," he muses. "I'd figured out a cheap way to give the illusion of 3D by checking which type of characters the feet of the player sprite touched and once I got the hang of that extra dimension, classical 2D scrollers felt so primitive."

Perhaps sensing they had a hit on their hands, Julian and Richard Jones, the father and son founders of Interceptor, invited Karl and his parents over during the school holidays so he could add the finishing touches to *Fungus* in England. "I was overwhelmed when I got there," he admits. "My parents did most of the talking. I was constantly nervous. Meeting Simon Daniels and the Joneses was a bit intimidating. I couldn't really connect with them because they were so far above me. In every respect. We had dinner with them and I sat quietly the whole evening. I just couldn't think of anything meaningful to say that they would appreciate, anything interesting enough that they'd want to hear."

We like to think Karl let his programming do the talking and indeed *Fungus*, which could be the great-granddaddy of iOS hit *Temple Run* and has aged rather gracefully, caught the attention of the British press. Issue 63 of *Computer And Video Games* magazine features a three-page spread on the game, including a map and mini-interview with Karl. It wasn't the first time his work had graced the pages of *C&VG*, either. The previous issue had featured his winning entry to one of its regular art competitions, which had asked readers to design their own Zoid, the toy robot craze from Japan that had invaded UK toy shops in the mid-Eighties. Karl's drawing of an elaborate mechanical toad not only bagged him a prize, but inspired his next game for Interceptor. *Toadforce*, released right at the end of 1986, saw Karl blasting new ground as his heavily-armed amphibian infiltrated an underground base, swarming with alien adversaries. "I hadn't really done a space shoot-'em-up before," he explains. "I wanted to do something different, something more technological and less cartoony."

Karl's eagerness to explore different game styles led him to code multi-screen arcade adventure *Melonmania* next, his only game to gain a full-price Interceptor release

» Karl's cover art and sprite sketches for *Melonmania*.

> " A salesperson told my father the Commodore 64 was 'the computer of the future'. He was right"

The future proved very bright for Mr Hörnell's boy…

Hörnell on Hörnell

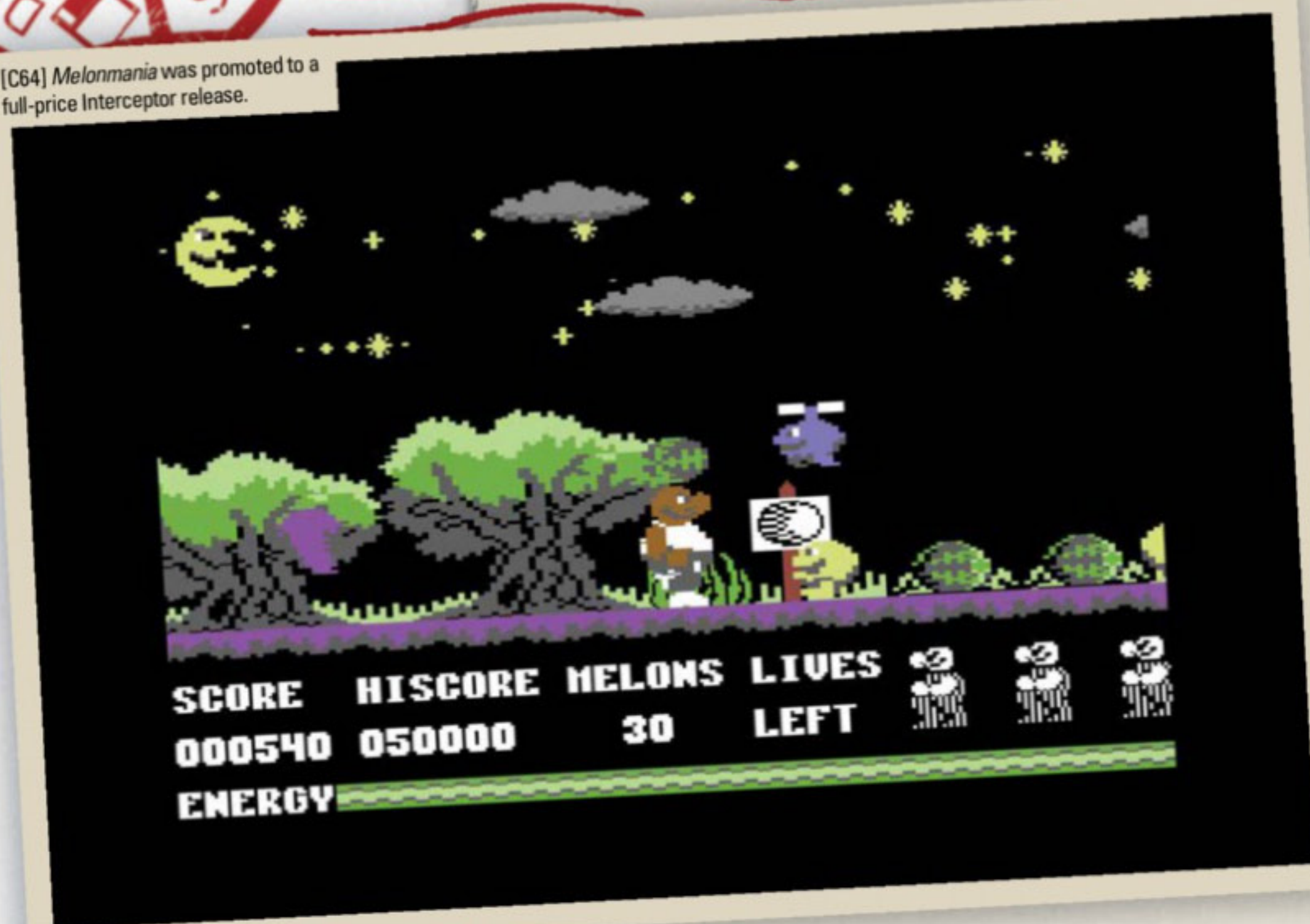Karl picks his three favourite projects

POKERROOM ONLINE POKER

It built an empire, so to speak. I was the only programmer so I had to do all of its parts including the graphics and some of the web design. It was challenging but also rewarding when people started playing it. Then thousands were playing it.

FUNGUS 2

That was the first time where I felt I didn't hold back on anything. I did the best I could for everything in it. The design, the music… I really gave it my best shot. It was something I could be proud of and not look back at with embarrassment.
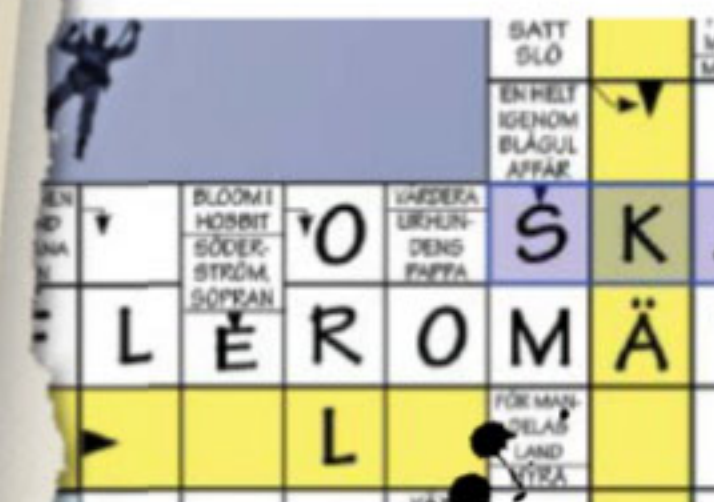
SVD KORSORD

I developed it for a Swedish newspaper, making Swedish-style crosswords available on mobile phones. It's been very well received. Even people who aren't very technical can use it and enjoy it.

[C64] *Melonmania* was promoted to a full-price Interceptor release.

[C64] *Velocipede* was Karl's third game for Interceptor's budget label, Players, and shows his love of cartoon characterisation and rock-hard gameplay…

[C64] Many ducks died to bring you this screenshot.

Readers' Questions

Mayhem: Were the characters in *Clean Up Time* and *Clean Up Service* inspired by anyone in real life?
Yes, definitely. My friend Eklund and I used to draw comics together just for fun. We had two characters Otto and Bobban and they were kind of based on us. It had a lot of toilet humour so when I needed some characters for the *Clean Up* games, I naturally picked those, as they were established in my mind.

Markopoloman: Would you ever consider making another C64 game? One that could be released on one of the current software labels?
Yes, I have a former colleague that has released a new game for the C64 like that. If I had time, I might. It would be some kind of 3D version of *Pengo*, I think.

Merman: Did you re-use a lot of code between games?
The only piece of code I re-used was the one for making music. I had almost the same code in *Toadforce* as in *Fungus 2*. For everything else, I started from scratch for every game.

Fgasking: Have you worked on any other unreleased games?
There are dozens from the days before Players but there are a few from the time between *Clean Up Service* and *Fungus 2*. One was *Clod Jumper*. It had a guy who could step inside a robot suit, but wouldn't be very mobile so had to leave the suit to negotiate ladders and the like. I was going to enter it in a competition in *C&VG* to win £10,000 but the deadline ran out. I also had the idea of submitting a game to *Commodore User* that they could distribute with the magazine. It would be a *Super Pipeline* clone but instead of oil there would be fruits travelling along a conveyor belt towards a juice machine and I'd call it… *Commodore Juicer*!

(earning him £350, a slight pay rise) before revisiting his own unique genre, the two-player brush-'em-up, with *Clean Up Service*. Released in 1987, it's arguably his finest work, full of ingenious touches and oozing personality, and is testament to how far his programming skills had developed in a few short years. With a new found confidence, Karl began work on what he hoped would be his magnum opus. The sequel to *Fungus*, his best received C64 title, would feature full 3D, multi-directional scrolling and expansive environments, teeming with beautifully animated aliens.

"*Fungus 2* would blow everything else out of the water," he sighs. "Unfortunately, I started this project at a time when I needed to focus more on my studies. I could rarely afford to spend more than a few hours a week on the game, the complexity of which grew to monstrous proportions. After a year I still hadn't finished it, but at that point my C64 wasn't in very good shape. The space bar and the RUN/STOP key barely worked anymore. The computer would also sometimes shut down inexplicably, causing me to lose a lot of work. I never knew when a crash was due to my program or my dying hardware. I felt I was going insane trying to track down the remaining bugs…"

We interrupt Karl to ask a rather obvious question. As a prolific coder with nine published titles to his name, surely he could just pop out and buy a brand new Commodore 64 with the proceeds from his work?

"I have to give you an honest answer,' he replies. "I'm a cheap bastard. The money from the game wouldn't have paid for a new computer. It wouldn't have made financial sense at that time."

And it seems it didn't make financial sense to Interceptor, either. When Karl finally submitted a 99 per cent complete version of *Fungus 2* in 1990, its Players label had been discontinued and it explained it now only released new games across multiple platforms. Karl had been working on a scaled-back version of the game for the Atari ST, having been given one by Richard Jones, but admits he struggled to get to grips with the 16-bit machine. "It was horrible. The machine language was completely different and I didn't know anything about how to program it. I much preferred the C64. I knew how it worked and could make it do whatever I wanted but the ST was like a black box to me. I didn't have enough spare time to finish that project, so that was the end of it. I let the opportunity slide out of my hands."

Trivia

As well as coding the game, Karl provided the cover art for his 1986 release *Fungus*. The January 1987 issue of *C&VG* includes a guide to the game.

It seems a sad and abrupt end to a promising coding career and we can't help thinking if he'd just had enough money to replace his ageing C64 and Interceptor had been a little more supportive or generous with its payments, things could've worked out very differently. Instead, Karl headed off to study engineering at university, his finest work left unpublished and his brief time as a videogames programmer apparently consigned to his childhood. He did return to games coding again in the Nineties, producing some sweet Java homages to his C64 days, and at the start of the new millennium, he created one of the earliest online poker games, handling all the coding and graphics himself. His timing was impeccable. Internet gambling exploded and suddenly this little Swedish company largely owned by the Hörnell family was in demand by some of the major global players.

"We sold it for a little over £400 million," says Karl, offhandedly. "We had some investors but my family owned about half of the company. My share of the sale price was 12.3 per cent"

That's a lot of money. Suffice to say, since the sale in 2004, Karl hasn't had to work to pay his mortgage off but he still chooses to, producing a bunch of iOS games ranging from word games to slick *Pipe Mania* clones. We wonder whether he still feels like that young bedroom coder, bashing out C64 titles after school. "Sometimes," he says, wistfully. "I still remember how I felt during those times. It was a wonderful feeling. I've been trying to get it back. Sometimes I sense it again for a moment but not so much these days. I think a part of me will always be stuck in the Eighties."

You can find Karl's iOS games on iTunes under the name Eweguo AB and see some of his old work at www.javaonthebrain.com.

Thanks to Vinny at www.hackersoft.co.uk and www.c64endings.co.uk for the introduction and the always helpful Martyn Carroll.

Karl Hörnell
Desert Island Disks

The games that Karl Hörnell just couldn't live without and why he loves them

01 Dig Dug (C64)
It's such a weird, strange idea for a game. Digging around in the ground and pumping things up until they explode. It doesn't make sense but works in its own context.

02 Paradroid (C64)
Another game that I've recreated. It's a great game. The combination of puzzle and adventure and action makes it very interesting. You don't get tired of it. And of course all those amazing robot designs.

03 Nebulus (C64)
I don't really like playing this but I can watch it for hours. I've seen the Atari ST version but I think that's over-rendered, not as easy on the eyes.

04 Cauldron (C64)
Another one I like watching more than playing. It's beautifully animated. Every detail works, down to the smoke that rises from the chimneys. Everything is just so good looking. The music, the atmosphere… it's perfect.

05 Super Pipeline 2 (C64)
I have to take something from Taskset. This is an old favourite that has to go on this list. It showed me it was okay to put big noses on game characters.

06 Pooyan (C64)
Another game I've played a lot for the same reasons as *Dig Dug*. It was such an original idea – weird but it still worked. It looked like nothing else and that impresses me. Sometimes people do that and it's interesting but not very fun to play. This was both.

07 Fort Apocalypse (C64)
An oldie which I'm taking for the atmosphere. It was challenging but it is possible to beat it if you just focus. I have many fond memories of playing it on rainy summer days.

08 Get Off My Garden (C64)
This was the first game I bought with my own money. It was the first Interceptor game I owned and the game that introduced me to them. It showed me that what happens in a game doesn't always have to make sense as long as it's interesting and kind of cool.
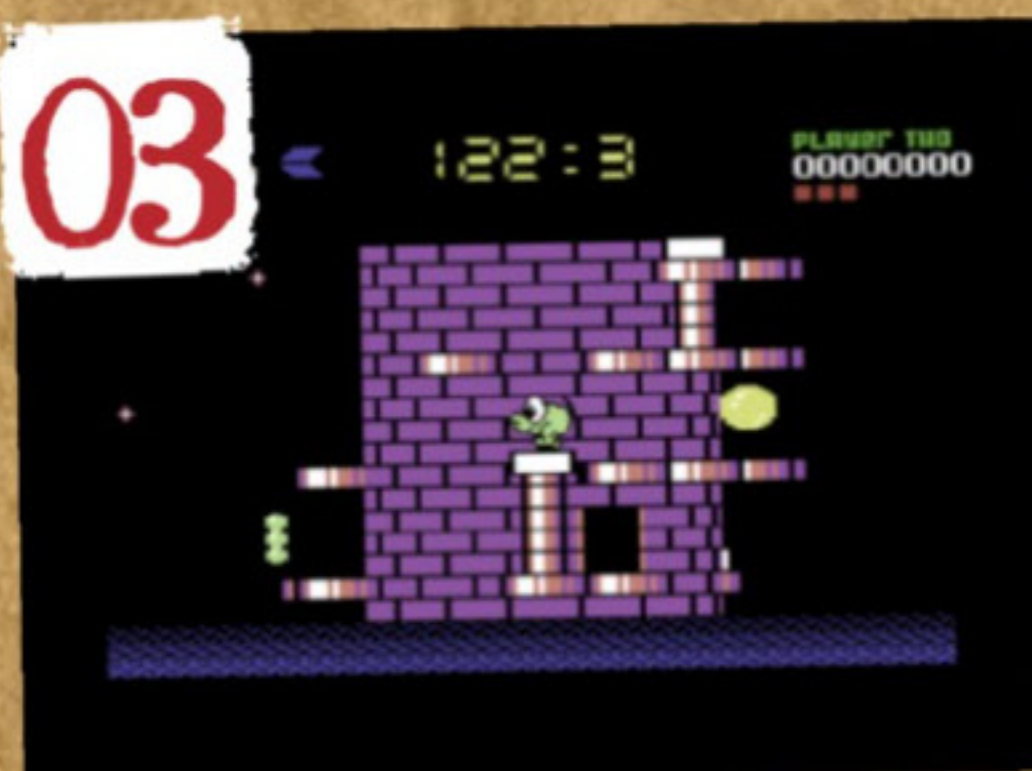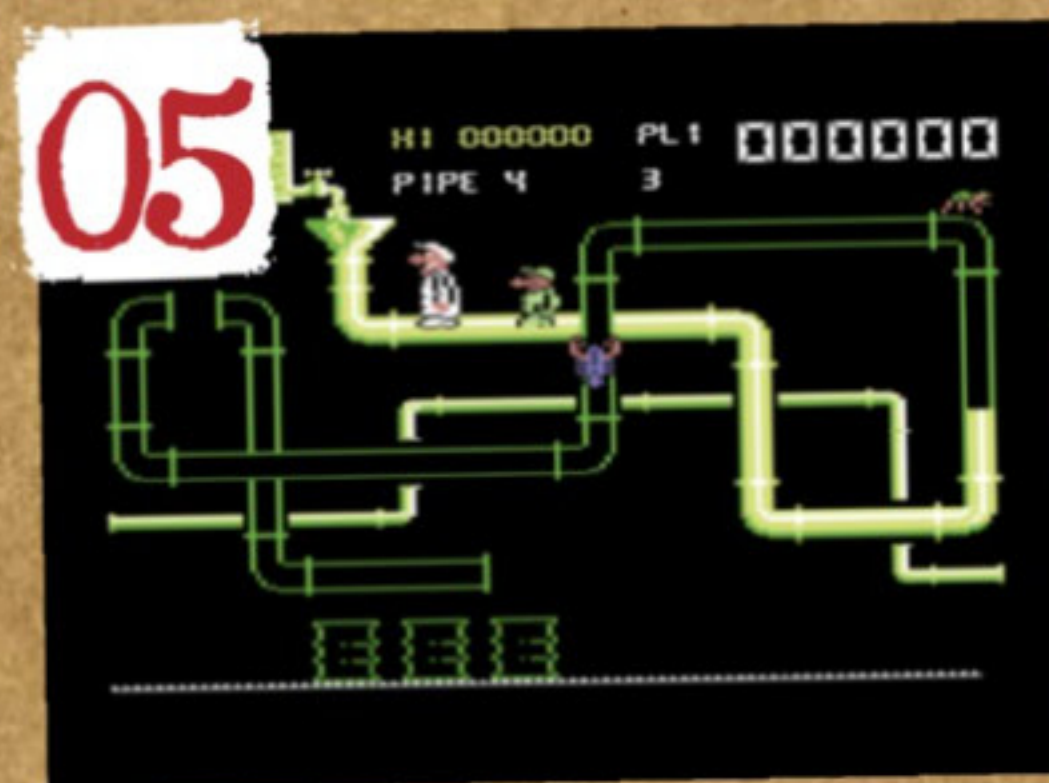
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