

Special Interview with Clive Brooker (23 August 2001) Former Videogame Programmer

Clive Brooker has had several published titles on the Spectrum, *One Man And His Droid* being his most successful. All his games as well as a Spectrum emulator can be found at his own site - [Clive Brooker Spectrum Games](#). There are all fairly quick downloads and the games are as playable as ever so check it out. But read the interview first of course. Many thanks Clive for giving us your time to do this interview. It's very much appreciated. Enough talk now, let's take it away.....

1. What was it like coding videogames back in the early stages of the videogame industry?

Great fun though I never started out to become a games programmer, I simply enjoyed learning to program (and tape copying commercial games - whoops). As I became more proficient at coding, I needed a project and a game just seemed to be the way to go. Learning Machine Code was the tricky thing. It made no sense at all, until one day it suddenly became clear. I did actually write machine code and didn't use an Assembler. I even converted all the hex values into decimal before they were poked into memory. All sounds a little crazy now, but I simply didn't know any better and it worked for me.

2. Was there much support from the industry, or did you have to go it alone?

I published some of my early work, mail order but spent more money than actually came in. Not a recommended practice and time for a rethink and learn machine code, games in Sinclair Basic were too slow and limited in scope. With my first project complete (Knight Driver), time to find a publisher, it was quite difficult, not being an outstanding game. I seem to remember that Melbourne House and Ocean showed some interest but it came to nothing. Bug Byte gave a very good scored feedback sheet, so you could see what areas were not up to scratch. As far as support was concerned, for a freelance there wasn't any. Mastertronic did give me some Sinclair programmers notes before the release of the 128K Spectrum, helpful for sussing out how to program the sound chip and switching memory banks. It may have had 128K, but still only 48K of Ram could be active at any one time. No doubt other programmers would have a different story to tell.

3. How long did it take to create a game like *One Man And His Droid*, from first concept, to game on shelf?

This game came together from scratch in around 10 weeks, take a look at <http://www.autolaunch.co.uk/omahd.htm> for where the concept came from. It is true to say that I didn't have a concept when I started programming it! Incidentally, its working title was NEWGAME4 (probably because it was the fourth major project, becoming the third published game). I usually spent 6 months to a year

designing and coding games, so 10 weeks for OMAHD was a bit of a one off - never to be repeated.

Getting it published was almost instantaneous. Mastertronic signed it up very quickly, then around another 2 - 3 months before it hit the shops. This allowed Mastertronic to deal with the artwork - cassette sleeve and loading screen - and get the game converted to other computers. On signing the contract, I had to give them a completion date, but I only needed to design a few more mazes, the rest of the code was already working. It's funny really, that what was my most successful game, was the quickest to design and code and easiest to sell to a publisher. I've always had a full time job, programming being only a hobby, and the 10 week working development, amazes me today. One Man and His Droid stayed on the shelves for just over a year, though title turnover would radically reduce in the future.

The final 1991 unpublished sequel, One Man and His Droid II may well have taken a year to produce and most of the concept was in place before I started. There was a lot more work with the graphics, difficult for me not being artistic. Quite a bit of work to program and produce the three sound chip tunes (again, no musician). Also, the maze designer was built into the game (no more graph paper) and the game code had to be able to cope with any maze anyone could create. I seem to recall that I found the creation of the routines for the small scale maze map, was rather hard to get working and scrolling in synchronization with the Droid's position. Technically, OMAHD II is considerably more advanced than its predecessor though they play a similar game.

4. What was the first thing you ever created on a computer?

It has to be with the Sinclair ZX81. The card game pontoon, but somehow I managed to make rather large cards with the quarter character "plots". I did undertake a rather large scale version of Monopoly and 75 % of it worked with scrolling screens. The project was never completed, two things happened. Running out of the 16K Ram coincided with the arrival of my first Spectrum and that project was shelved. Very first stuff would have been working through the Sinclair Basic manual and simple thinks like, type in your age, then print a response for several fixed lines of text in certain age ranges.

5. What was the first videogame you ever played, and what did you think of it?

This has to be two player tennis, with a blob for the ball and a bigger blobs for the bats. Very crude now, but I thought it was amazing at the time, even bought one for my home TV! This was followed by colour Breakout (primitive Arknoid) and I thought wow. Then Space Invaders next and the videogame revolution had begun, though I never thought that I would have a small part to play in it. I certainly never achieved "fame" as a known programmer, yet it is One Man and His Droid that I would be most known by. Nowadays, I find it quite interesting how many hundreds of links are thrown up, by using the name of the game in search engines.

6. What's your favourite game of all time?

I did think Age of Empire's but seeing a half price game for the Dreamcast in Dixons at the weekend brings it all back. It has to be the Sonic the Hedgehog games (1-IV in 2D). The look, feel, music all worked, the games were magic on the Megadrive. Oh, the Quake series must get a special mention of course.

7. What games are you playing today?

Oh dear, I tend not to and bought Who Wants to be a Millionaire for last Christmas, sad, isn't it. I do seem to be a little busy or not have too much spare game time. One of these days I will make an impulse buy of perhaps a PS2 or Xbox, when I see a "must have demo" running in Dixons.

8. On average, how many hours a week do you (or did you) spend playing games?

Oh dear again. Actually, I have been spending some time recently playing my own games so I can write up the web site. I did have a little fun with OMAHD II because the Ramboids can be a little tricky to manoeuvre and I had to work out how to interact with them even though I wrote the code 10 years ago! I do still enjoy computers one way and another and probably do at least 15 hours a week.

9. How much money (you don't have to answer this if you don't want to) have you made in the videogame industry approximately?

It was somewhere between £20,000 - £25,000 I think, though I did have to pay tax on it. Not a huge amount, but certainly very nice for what was also a hobby I enjoyed doing and of course, I still had the day time job. The daytime job is now a Company Buyer for a Steel Bridge and Motorway Gantry Fabricator. The next time that you look at the London Eye, we built the pontoon bridges at the very bottom. They are rather big, though dwarfed into tiny matchsticks in comparison to the wheel. At work, I use two material optimisation pieces of software that I wrote, to calculate the amount of steel to buy for any one project. Traditionally, this type of software costs thousands of pounds and they are both on my web site for free download. Current site statistics show the following:-

Top 3 downloads:

Position	File	Frequency	Percentage
1	omahdii.zip	147	96.71 %

2	lineal optimiser download.exe	3	1.97 %
3	area optimiser download.exe	2	1.32 %

Certainly OMAHD II is more popular, I really must update my site to find out what other games are downloaded. Here is a plug for an excellent free site statistics engine that I use, owned by the man behind The World of Spectrum. <http://www.thunderstats.com>

Incidentally, Mastertronic were very good at paying their programmers on time with the correct amount. I have heard some horror stories of programmers being ripped off by other companies, though I was always fortunate in this respect.

10. What do you think will happen to the videogame industry in the future - will it crash and burn or develop and prosper?

The videogame market, I'm sure, will thrive and continue to mature. As the hardware becomes more powerful, the realism of the games, sounds and entire experience will increase. You only need to compare the look of Grand Turismo III with car games from 10 years ago, to see how far they have come. Realism seems to be where it is going and consoles can survive the PC onslaught by becoming a more domestic product ie DVD & CD player as well. I do wonder however, whether there will be as much originality that became prevalent in the Spectrum's days, simply because, there were hoards of one off hobbyists that could create the whole game. Good Bad and Indifferent, the volume was there for innovation. Still things move on and it is the big question for you to answer, as you may well become part of its future!

And here is a final thought for the future that applies to us all.

Anything that you enjoy doing immensely, you can easily become good at if you persevere. If you enjoy it, then it, becomes a joy to persevere, without even thinking about it. Back in 1981 when I bought my first computer, the Sinclair ZX81, I never considered for a moment that I would be recounting my time 20 years later, on a medium that we all know and love, the Internet. My only aptitude then, was a flair for mathematics and comprehension of abstract thought. Ideal for computer programming as it turned out. I do wonder how we will reflect on all this in another 20 years' time. Will we be recounting that 20 years ago, it was possible for one person alone to build a web site..... ???? One thing is for sure, now, we can have no idea what it will be like in 20 years' time and there's the fun in it.

See you in 20 years' time and we can have a chat about this interview..... and reminisce another bygone era.

PS Great TV shows has to be The Simpsons, TNG, DS9, and STV. One thing in common with them all, is great care in crafting interesting and innovative stories. Oh, let's not forget the X files (a midi is buried in one of my web pages, but don't tell anyone)

Notes Added 10 October 2020.

I recovered this ancient document from betagames.co.uk, stored at archive.org. Archive.org contains impressions that span the internet generally and more importantly, it's "wayback" history. I had forgotten many of the things I had written about almost 20 years ago, so found this a pleasant surprise to read.

Clive Brooker