



MAELSTROM IN A TEAM

MIKE SINGLETON, *Lords Of Midnight* creator, the man behind *Doomdark's Revenge* and the notorious *Games Pack One*, decided it was about time he spilled the beans. During a visit to Ludlow with fellow-members of the CONSULT programming team, he was pressed hard by RICHARD EDDY and BEN STONE, and answered irrepressible questions such as 'What's really happened to *Dark Sceptre*'?



'I got into computers through a business venture that went badly wrong. I took the computer and ran ...'

When you think of a computer games programmer, you probably imagine a fanatical whizz-kid, Coke-swigging into the late hours as he develops highly innovative and exciting games. Such frenzied activities aren't usually associated with retired school teachers – and yet that's exactly what Mike Singleton is.

He stopped teaching in 1980 to enter into a business which happened to involve a com-

puter. But as he says, 'The venture went badly wrong, so I took the computer and ran ...'

The machine in question was a Commodore PET (there's one on display in the Science Museum), and with it he hoped to produce a few programs to re-establish his diminishing bank balance. The first game was called *Space Ace*, and it occupied a staggering 12K of memory. Written entirely in machine code, it had to be hand-assembled, a memory that still causes Mike to shudder. 'By the end of that I must have known every Op code off by heart', he says bemusedly.

Bank account still firmly in mind, *Space Ace* was handed over to Petsoft for marketing, and it broke box-office records when it sold around three hundred copies – a very respectable achievement in those days! But Mike's association with Petsoft and Commodore machines was to be short-lived. At the time Petsoft were due to sign an agreement with Sinclair to write software for the Cambridge-based company's new 'mega-machine' – the ZX80. Mike spent some time messing about with it, eventually getting a tiny machine code program up and running in its 1K of memory.

'Actually, the ZX80 didn't even have 1K's worth of memory', Mike recalls. 'Because of all the bits of bobs inside there was only about 750 bytes of memory left to play with!'

Before the agreement details were finalised, a change of mind resulted in Psion securing the software contract with Sinclair, and Petsoft were dropped; a situation which left Mike up the creek without a joystick, so to speak. 'So, I rang Clive – just plain old Clive in those days – and he told me to send my games along. I did, and heard nothing, until one day when I was invited to Cambridge to look at his new project.'

The new project was, in fact, the ZX81. At that stage it was hardly a computer in its own right, merely an Eprom fitted into a ZX80. Mike, along with some other programmers, were all given an Eprom to take away with them so that they could 'Do things with it.'

'Believe it or not', he says with the fondness of remembrance, 'the 81 had even less memory than the ZX80, because it had an extra 32 system variables occupying its memory banks, er, make that bank. I knocked together six BASIC programs which fitted into its miniscule memory and sent them off to Clive.'

The six games became *Games Pack One*.

A happy Consultation; Back Row, left to right: Consult's Dave Kelly, Jane Denning (Melbourne House), Consult's Glenn Benson. Front Row: Mike Singleton, Jo Meads (Melbourne House) and Consult's Dave Sharp.



EACUP

and notched up the kind of sale that today would be the envy of any programmer or software house – some 90,000 copies. Gratifying for Mike's ego, the success was even more welcomed by his bank manager when a cheque for six grand finally arrived.

Mike's next project was *Computer Race*, a horse racing game, designed to be used in betting shops when the racing was off – a little gallop which was soon stopped by an obscure law. However, the Singleton career continued with a few games on various machines for Postern, a now-defunct Cheltenham-based software house, the most notable probably being *Snake Pit*.

And then came the big time . . .

'I wanted to create an adventure with the same degree of atmosphere as others, but with graphics which really meant something.'

Lords Of Midnight, Mike's epic adventure quest for EMAP's newly launched venture into games software, Beyond, became his next game. He is still very coy when it comes to explaining how he designs a game, and especially those areas where imagination is foremost, preferring to deal in technical topics. When you ask him how he leapt from the arcade simplicities of *Snake Pit* to the atmospheric sophistication found in *Lords Of Midnight*, all you get is – 'Ah, that would be telling! Seriously though, I very rarely start with a concept or theme with an intention of working around that. Instead I usually begin with a technique and build a game around it – doing it that way you're sure of getting the guts of a program together first.'

Mike thinks that's where a lot of today's licensing deals go wrong: 'The programmers have the problem of working a game around a theme and then fitting the technique round it, and, as well you know, that can end in a real mess.'

'Landscaping' is Mike's own technique, and

is the one on which his *Midnight Trilogy* is based. 'When I was considering the game I felt the graphics had to be more relevant to the action. So often the graphics in other adventures appeared purely decorative.'

Using Landscaping, a player can actually see his journey in real time, with, in the case of *Lords Of Midnight*, 32,000 views. From the technique, perhaps, came the theme. Mike wanted to create a massive playing world, so objects like spy satellites were out, because so many view points would be taken away from the landscape below. And so the murky Middle Ages were chosen as the setting, with all the scenes set firmly at eye-level and the landscape features seen from the player's viewpoint.

'The Land of Icemark', explains Mike, 'simply came about from the graphic capabilities of the Spectrum. I happened to like the combination of white on blue and so it fitted in rather well.'

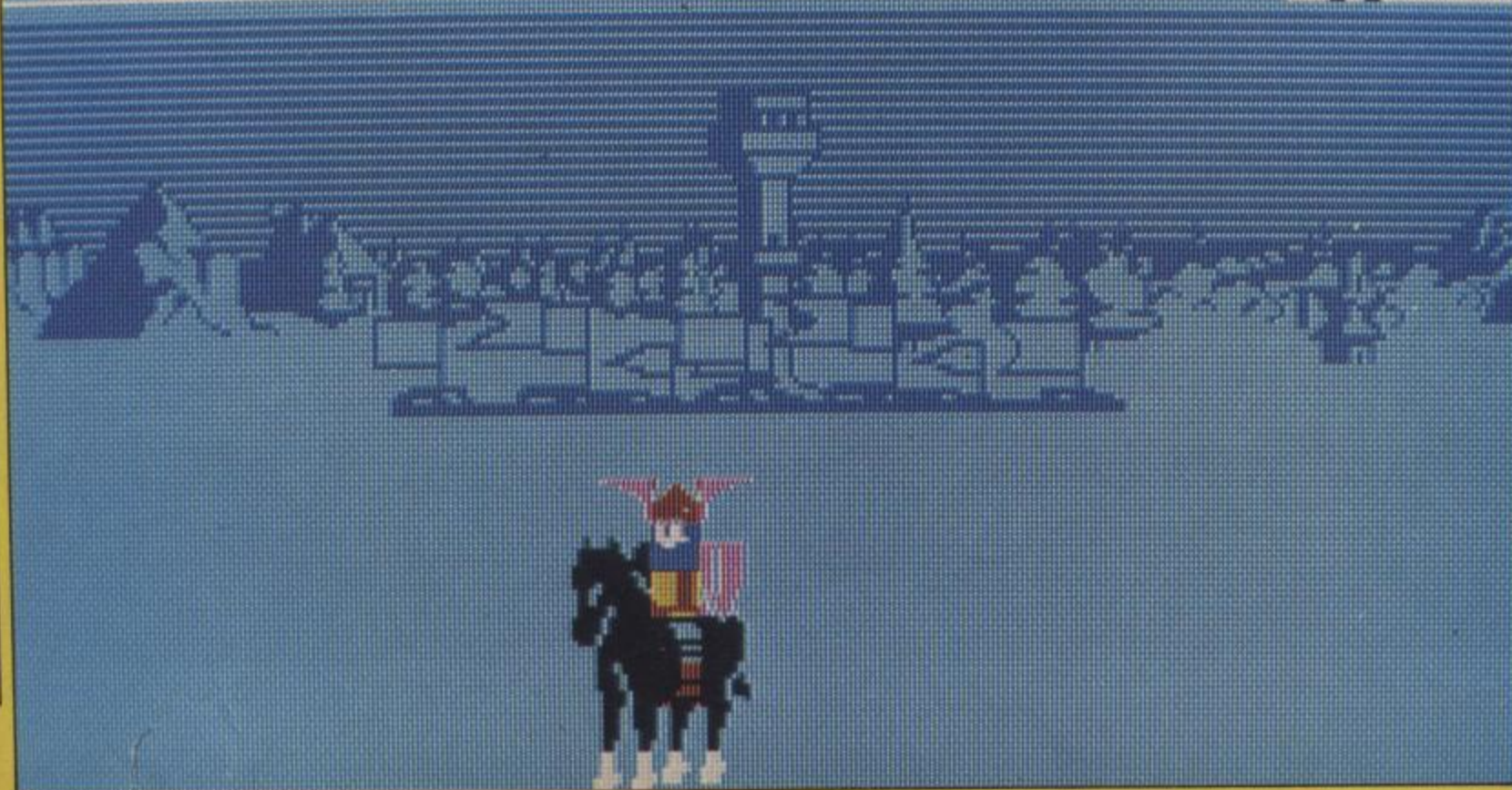
Having developed his Landscaping technique, the *Lords of Midnight* game was planned. 'I plan the game in advance, but should I have a sudden flash of inspiration for an idea then I can usually find room to slot it in.' However, having completed it, Mike saw many ways to further compress his technique and improve the program, improvements which found their way into the next game. Work on *Doomdark's Revenge* started immediately afterwards, and although much of it was already planned, Mike re-wrote many of the battle routines in the light of his new thinking.

So much for history. Talking about the *Midnight Trilogy* made us wonder whatever had happened to the third part, *Eye Of The Moon*? 'Oh I'm still working on it', Mike exclaims, 'not so much as a project, it's more of a hobby. I've been constructing some new graphic routines so that the Landscaping should be in full colour. Oh, and the map should be about four times the size of *Doomdark's*.'

But *Doomdark's* was already pretty vast, isn't he creating a world that's just a bit too big

▼ Doomdark's Revenge

Rorthron the Wise stands on the Plains of Anviniel looking Northeast to the Tower of Thirand.



for one quest? 'There isn't just one quest. The map is divided into 12 realms, and within each realm is a mini-game. This means that *Eye* can be played quickly, because you can just solve one or two problems, or tackle the whole game. I think that was one of the faults of *Doomdark's* – it took too long to get into. Hopefully with the 12 mini-games it should appeal to a much wider audience.'

With regard to characters, Mike's intending to have even more in the game than before, but this time a player can select a commander and then make up teams of characters which are controlled as a whole rather than individually.

There's no date for completion for *Eye Of The Moon*, 'It'll be finished when it's good and ready – and it won't be published by Beyond, or Melbourne House for that matter.' So, that leaves one alternative – his own software label, Maelstrom Games.

'Dark Sceptre – oh that, it's nearly finished ...'

Maelstrom was set up to deal with the Play By Mail (PBM) version of *Dark Sceptre*. Are we ever going to see the computer version? Mike says it's nearly finished, which prompts screams of merriment from the assembled members of Consult! 'He's been saying that for years – well, it seems like it', says one.

'It is nearly finished,' Mike pleads, 'After all, I've got you lot working on it.'

It becomes apparent that Consult (Dave Kelly, Glenn Benson and Dave Sharp) are having some problems because they want to keep all the original ideas from the PBM version in the game, and it's proving difficult with only 48K to play with. The PBM *Dark Sceptre* is still going ahead – but only on Microdrive. Which brings up the question of how many Microdrives are around these days. Offered figures indicate as many as 100,000 units have been sold, but as Mike gets through one Microdrive every year it's dubious that so many are still in use. However, the Spectrum Plus Three with its built-in disk drive may come in useful. Mike sees it as a possible re-birth for the Spectrum, and looks wistful as he says, 'There's all sorts of things that I could do with it – if I could get my hands on one!'

'Can you imagine a game with 16,000 characters, and you've got complete control over every one of them?'

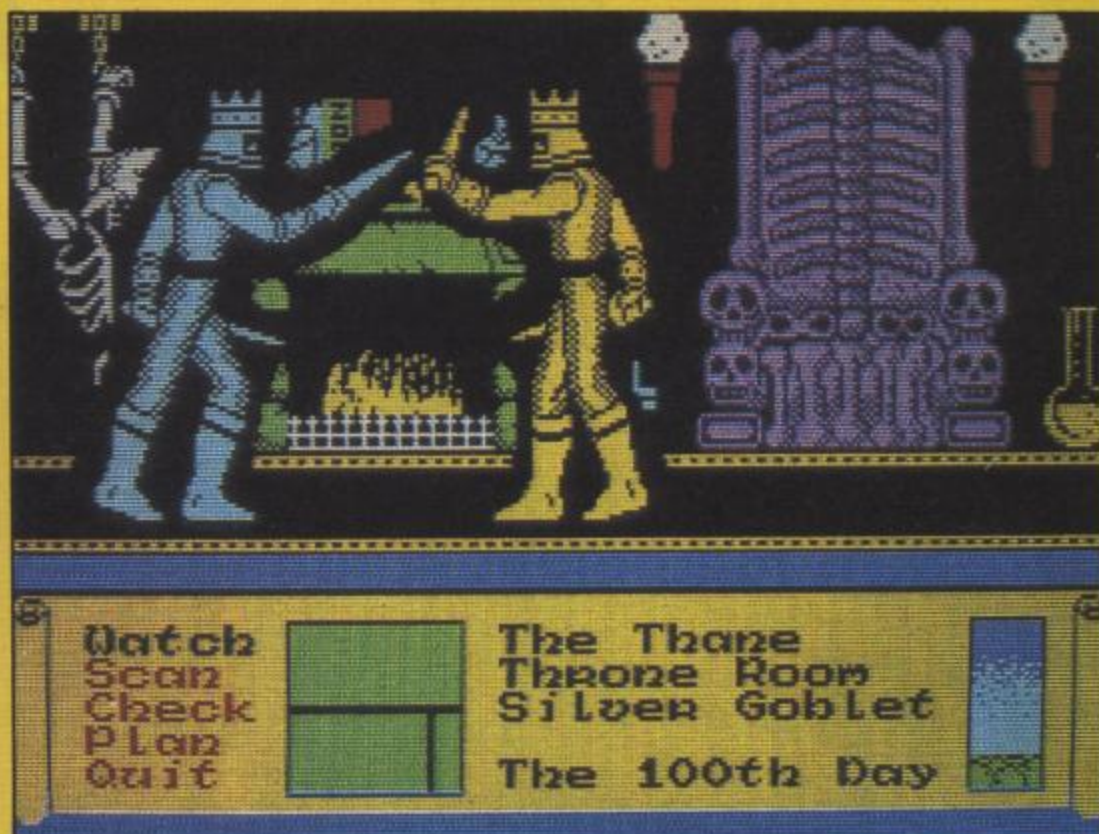
For Melbourne House, Mike Singleton and Consult are working on *Lord Of The Rings – The Arcade Game* which, unlike the adventures, concentrates on the battle scenes. The player should be able to hold sway over the entire map of Middle Earth, and control all the characters and armies to which they belong. Fights take place in real-time but, of course, you won't have a constant view of all of the action.

The 3D battles will be displayed in isometric perspective, having characters standing an average 70 pixels high – so there should be about 20 to 30 figures on screen at any one time. 'The control system is a very interesting one', enthuses Mike. 'It's possible to give orders by selecting a character to attack, move, or help another character. And don't worry, a player won't miss out on any of the fighting as characters are controlled directly – all ready to hack the opposition to pieces. There'll be a total of 128 armies, each with a legion of up to 128 men.'

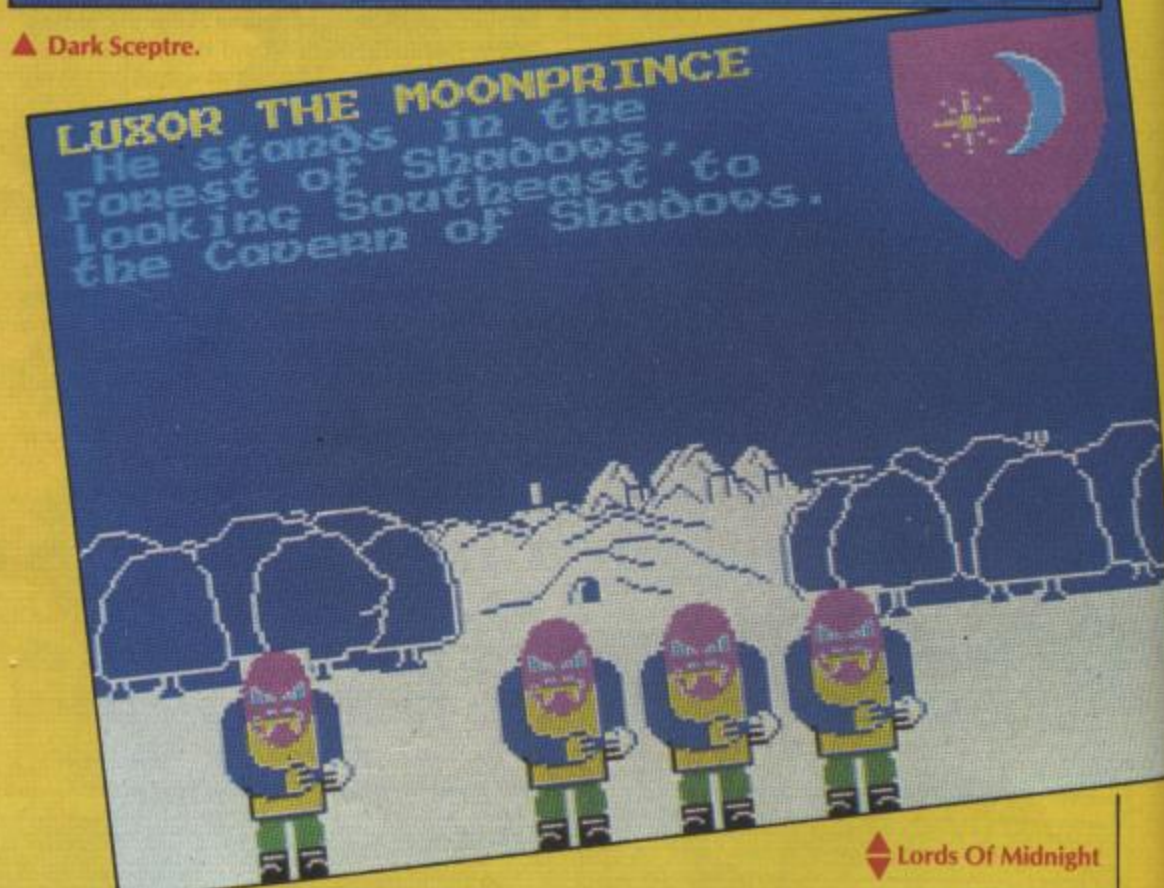
As far as the graphics go, there's quite a bit of freedom. Some may be taken from the film, others from RPG miniatures, but we do have to work within the Spectrum's limitations.'

For the future Melbourne House have signed him up to do a few more titles – 'One of which,' he says proudly, 'is totally new. Nothing has been done like it before.'

Yes Mike, but how long will we have to wait this time?



▲ *Dark Sceptre*.



◆ *Lords Of Midnight*

