



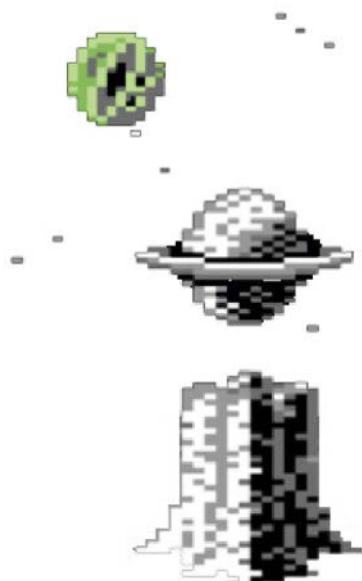
Wizball

How songwriting experience can transform game design

Sensible Software's *Wizball* is a C64 classic, but it wouldn't have been the same without the studio's other passion: making music

WRITTEN BY
Kim Justice

▼ In the beginning, you bounce almost aimlessly in a grey and sparse world, as you wonder if the game actually loaded properly.



The year 1987 was a high point for the Commodore 64. The system had been around for a few years, and coders were wringing the absolute best work from it; it was the computer's prime, evidenced by the likes of *Auf Wiedersehen Monty*, *Pirates!*, *IK+*, and *The Last Ninja*. Adding to this millionaire's row of classics was a strange yet innately playable game from an Essex studio by the name of Sensible Software – more accurately, the duo of artist-designer Jon Hare and programmer Chris Yates.

The game was called *Wizball*, and it truly put them on the UK software map. Having set the stage with 1986's *Parallax*, a title snapped up by Ocean Software on the company's very first day of business, Sensible's success – in particular, the critical adoration that was poured onto *Wizball* upon its arrival – showed that there were still plenty of young teams willing to keep the C64's line of great software going. But as young as Sensi might have been as a games company, their story actually goes back further, to a history that not only informed their games, but changed how they approached their creation when compared to other studios.

MOVING PICTURES

Jon Hare and Chris Yates were friends of friends whose paths crossed in the early eighties on the

way to a Rush gig. Their shared interests in both progressive rock and similar school subjects quickly resulted in a firm friendship, as well as the formation of a band called Touchstone. Hare reminisces that, "we started writing music together very fast, and found a man who was a drummer... well, he said he was a drummer, but he was actually using saucepans for drums. Our first gig was terrible – he couldn't even drum to *We Will Rock You*, which is pretty basic."

The band would perform in Chelmsford, Southend-on-Sea, and various other towns on

the Thames estuary for around five years, developing something of a following, and performing shows that

could have only come from the creative minds of a bunch of youngsters with absolutely no money and a penchant for mocking each other.

In a fit of teenage angst over the break-up of his first relationship, Hare composed an earnest and quiet ballad called *Narcissus*, which, when performed, Yates would interrupt by playing a speaker-breaking widdly guitar solo. Hare and Yates would also wear rubber masks and dressing gowns as a budget tribute to Peter Gabriel.

"We wanted to make stuff that was successful," Hare points out with a hint of wistfulness, "but we also wanted to do art stuff, purely because we wanted to do it... and this would also be important to the games later on."

"I went to Chris Yates' house and he'd done this weird spinny-ball thing"



^ Now we're cooking on gas. Enemies everywhere, because we're starting to make things vibrant. And there's Mount Rushmore, for some reason.

SENSIBLE STARTERS

In the world of Sensible Software, there's no firm separation between the music years and game years – Touchstone was still ongoing, as a two-piece, while Yates taught himself programming by endlessly 'renting' ZX Spectrums from Littlewoods and Kays catalogues and returning them before he had to pay for them. The knowledge Yates gained from this landed him a programming job at LT Software in Basildon, and he was quickly able to get Hare on board after he impressed the bosses with some pixel art.

After making the Spectrum game, *Twister: Mother of Charlotte* for System 3, they left following a dispute with LT over the division of profits – and thus, Sensible Software was born in 1985. "Chris and I learnt that LT, who commissioned us, took 85 percent of the money even though we'd done all the work," Hare says. "And we were like, 'OK, we're not doing that again!'"

They quickly established a relationship with Manchester's Ocean Software, finding a champion for their games in Gary Bracey, the company's mercurial software manager. The pair also met a young Irish musician named Martin Galway, who would be tasked with soundtracking what Sensi put onto computer screens.

MAKE A JAZZ NOISE HERE

Sensible Software's approach to making games was different from the processes that are more common today. With no producer to oversee their work and no milestones to reach except for a firm deadline, they didn't plan an awful lot of their games out on paper, preferring to improvise on the screen itself. *Wizball* started out as little more than a circle and a line – there were no project guidelines or design documents to speak of, purely one of Yates' programming experiments.

Says Hare: "I went to Chris Yates' house and he'd done this weird spinnny-ball thing, and he said, 'I've got this ball – it was just a circle and



^ The box art for *Wizball* was, as with most Ocean games, created by the late, great Bob Wakelin.

a line of land at this stage – you spin it and it bounces, and I'm not sure what to do with it."

The Sensible approach was to gradually add to this on the spur of a moment, in much the same way a band writes and then arranges a song. That circle and line can almost be thought of as the initial riff, something that comes into a musician's head and has to be hurriedly transferred to a musical instrument or hummed into a Dictaphone.

From here, Sensible Software's approach was iterative – they would continuously look at what they'd done and add more and more touches to it each time. First, there were the initial ▶

▼ Balls quite literally fly in all directions as *Wizball* informs you, in no uncertain terms, to prepare yourself for some gamey goodness.



▼ Gary Bracey, Ocean's lead software producer, had a rare nose for both the commercially successful and the unique outlier.

MAN AT THE TOP

Ocean's Gary Bracey transformed his company's fortunes with licensed games like *RoboCop*, but his creative streak and love for unique games made for a great relationship. Hare says: "Gary was a great champion for us – precisely what I believe we're missing in modern publishers. He presented us and protected us within the organisation as a creative force. He didn't feel the need too much to tell us what to do, and he was extremely supportive, which was great for us."





THE OTHER HALF

Chris Yates, the programming side of Sensible Software, was the yin to Jon Hare's yang, and his own contributions to the company were equally as important. To date, however, Yates has chosen not to share his personal view of the company's history; he left the industry soon after Sensible closed, and has amicably but firmly chosen to stay out of the spotlight.



▲ A young Yates doting on Nifta, who would later be an important part of *Wizball*. Fortunately not spherical in real life.

▼ A big old flash of colour greets another filled paint pot. If this were a video, there would probably be an epilepsy warning.



▼ A human Wiz mixes up paint in his lab, while you choose a power-up that'll stick with you, even after your inevitably stupid death.



brushstrokes: a circle that could be a placeholder for a ship, and a line that represents the ground. These could have been the foundation stones for a typical arcade shoot-'em-up, a genre which inspired Sensible greatly.

"We got all our inspiration from arcade machines," Hare recalls. "We'd be in the arcades, or pubs and chip shops where these things were everywhere, and we'd play them. Chris in particular was into games like *Nemesis* [also known as *Gradius*] and *Salamander* that were quite big at the time."

Wizball was particularly inspired by Williams' classic, *Defender*, but the unconventional movement of the ship – it's a ball that bounces, don't forget – also brings to mind Archer MacLean's *Dropzone*, a title where it's functionally essential to master both the X and Y axis.

With *Wizball*, it was decided that the player should work towards power-ups that would not only give the ball better weapons, but also allow



▲ Hare in 1987 outside a programmers' den that not only housed Sensi, but various other 1980s micro-luminaries.

a much freer and traditional control over it. In a power-up system inspired by *Gradius*, the player can keep a stock of pick-ups and choose when to power their ball up, although the initial power-ups that give the player control over vertical and horizontal motion are the most essential.

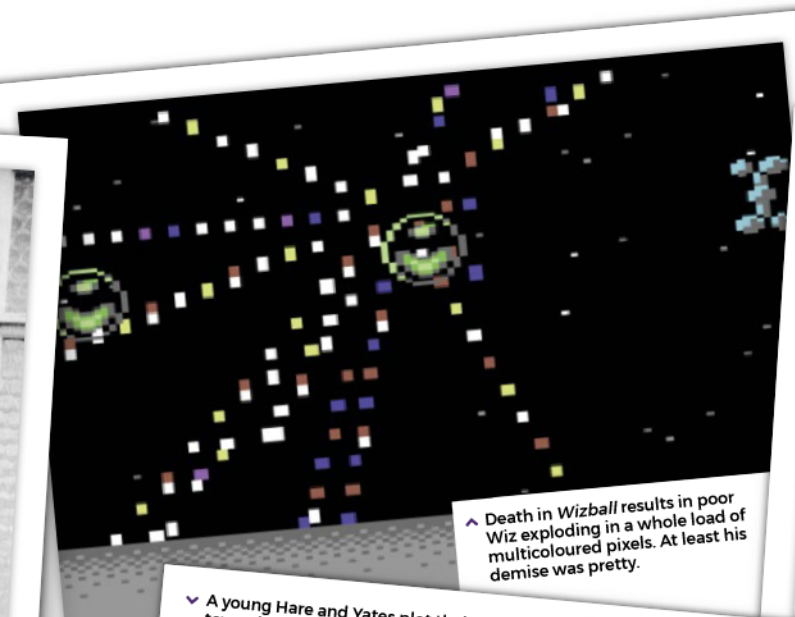
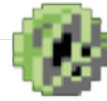
THOSE WERE THE DAYS

This iterative process was, in many ways, the mark of a different time. Games weren't 'produced' in the same way they are now, and coders and designers were left to their own devices. It's time that Jon Hare looks back on fondly. "There wasn't such a thing as a game producer – the word didn't exist," Hare says. "You didn't have written game design plans – certainly in the UK we didn't – it was a bit more like constantly iterating, and all the way through Sensible Software this follows through."

After forming *Wizball*'s general structure – and giving the initial circle a smiley face and a spinning movement – the duo continued to add new flourishes, like so many harmonies, solos, and middle eights.

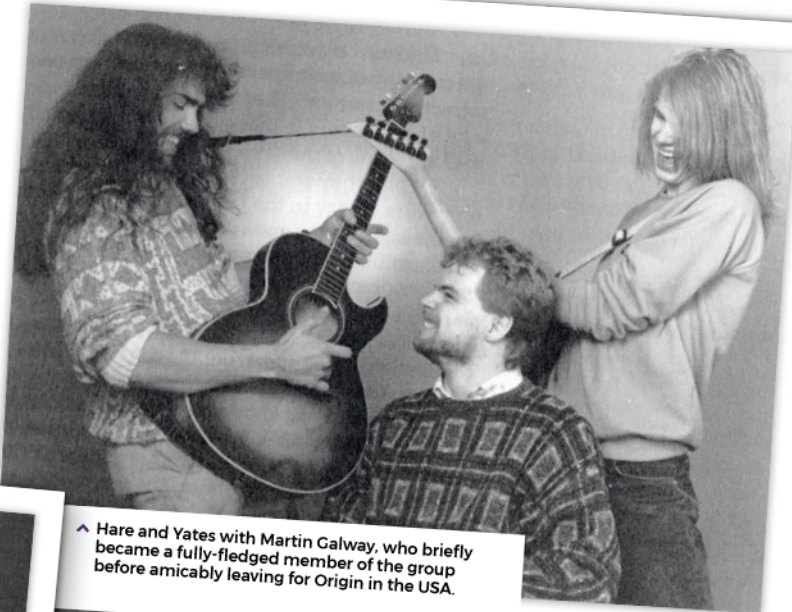
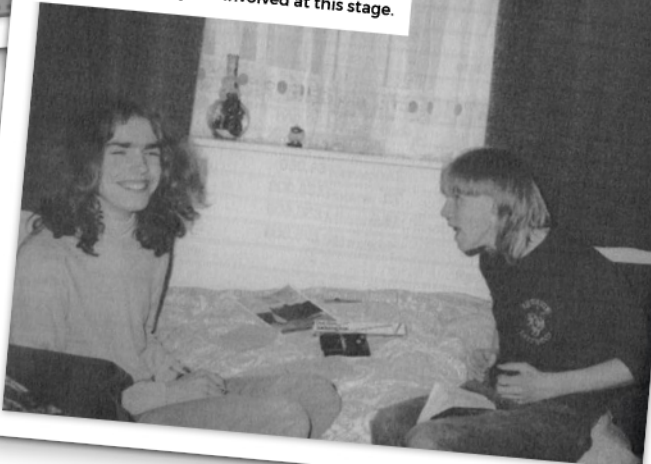
Unlike a typical shooter, the aim in *Wizball* is to pick up drops of colour and use them to colour in the world; you also have a smaller





^ Death in Wizball results in poor Wiz exploding in a whole load of multicoloured pixels. At least his demise was pretty.

^ A young Hare and Yates plot their path towards world domination. Computer games probably not involved at this stage.



^ Hare and Yates with Martin Galway, who briefly became a fully-fledged member of the group before amicably leaving for Origin in the USA.

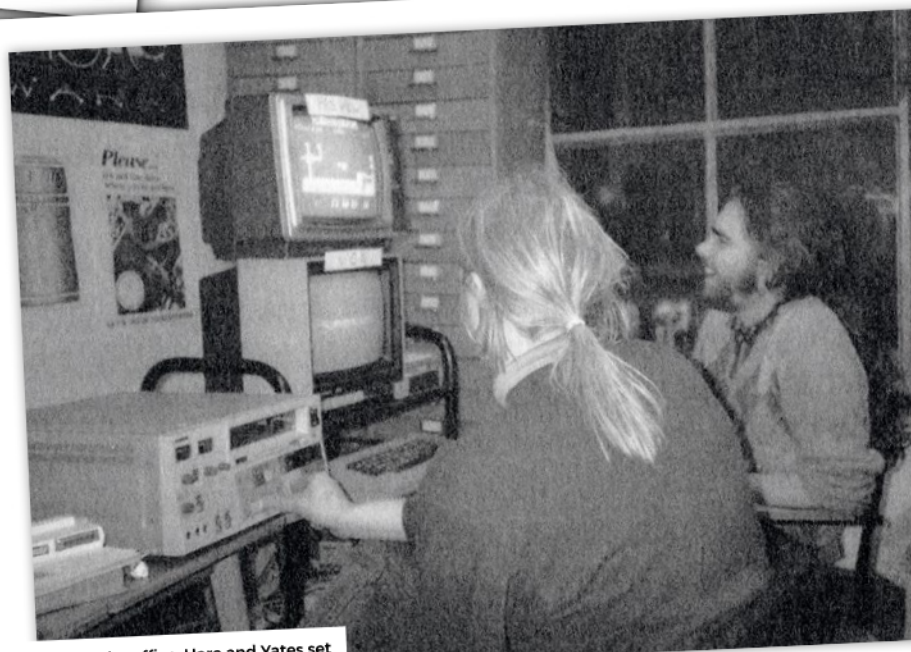
STATE OF PLAY

As someone with over 30 years and counting of industry experience, Hare says it's a shame that it's so difficult for those breaking into the industry today. "Generating a new brand... the failure rate is about 99 percent right now. Even when people feel like they've got their break making games, it doesn't mean that the game is going to be finished, or come out, or be a success... it's so hard now, and from the perspective of when it was easy, it's almost heartbreakingly hard. It doesn't need to be that way."

ball – later dubbed the Catellite – specifically designed for this purpose.

The addition of bonus stages, switching between different levels of a stage, and the hidden time limit you have on a level before the arrival of the dreaded Filth Raid, were all added before Hare and Yates even thought of a plot to tie the whole game together. The evil wizard, Zark, has drained all the colour out of Wizworld, and it's up to Wiz and his equally spherical cat, Nifta (named after Yates' real-life pet), to get rid of all the grey.

Hare recalls: "I'd been interested in colour from the lighting stuff I'd studied in college, so I said, 'Why don't we do this RGB mixing kind of thing?' Although we weren't sure whether it would be with paint or light... so in the end we did this thing where it starts off black and white and you add colours, and then put the story around it. This is the way these kinds of things often work – the mechanics drive what the narrative you make up around it is." ➔



^ Back in the office, Hare and Yates set about pounding Wizball into shape.



^ Team Sensible strike a rock star pose, not dissimilar from the famous shot the Bitmaps took on top of the Maxwell Building.

FRIENDLY RIVALRIES

The character that Sensible showed in their games was also shown in their press interviews at the time, and they would often be fighting for inches with fellow Essex studio, The Bitmap Brothers, for the spot of essentially being the rock stars of computer gaming. The unspoken rivalry would often come through in passive aggression – Hare recalls that they were named ‘The Bitmap Wankers’ in Sensi’s Filofax – but the pair would later establish a firm alliance at the head of publishing house, Renegade Software, with Hare and Bitmaps founder Mike Montgomery beginning a lasting friendship.

MEATY BEATY BIG AND BOUNCY

When playing *Wizball*, there’s a sense of being part of the creative process. Essentially, you start with an unfinished game: a bouncing ball that is only controllable in a very basic sense. After shooting down a bunch of stationary enemies, you get the pick-ups required to control the ship properly; from there, you can start to paint the world in. You’re right at the front of the game, flying on top of it. If *Wizball* were a band, Hare and Yates would be the rhythm section and you, the player, would be the vocalist. Seeing as vocals are usually the last thing to be recorded in a studio, this way of looking at the game is justifiable, if not a little oblique.

Through all of the interesting touches, the game itself doesn’t let up – the cocktail of classic shoot-’em-up mechanics never ceases to be engrossing, from the almost aimless fumbling and bouncing around at the beginning to the tight and fast experience you discover once you’ve fully got your motion. Thanks to this, *Wizball* became a critical if not massively commercial success, and it would be widely

regarded as one of the greatest games ever released on the C64.

Jon Hare’s opinion of the game is equally positive. “*Wizball* is our best C64 game,” he says. “I think it’s when we found our feet as a creative force, which goes back to the music stuff – we already worked together as a pair anyway, and then you added Martin [Galway]’s music over the top. I remember the hairs on the back of my neck standing up when I first heard his music for Parallax, thinking ‘this isn’t normal!’. The C64 had such warmth in its sound and was essentially a proper instrument in its own right, and Martin’s work was incredible.”

PASSING YOURSELF COMING IN

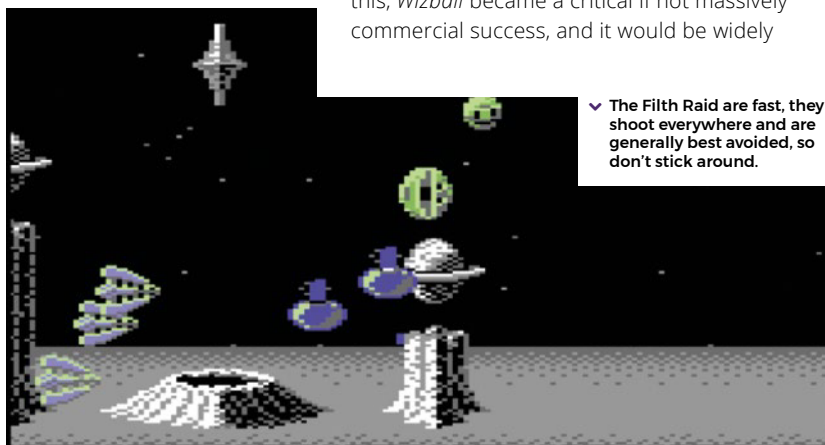
Sensible’s way of creating things wasn’t just limited to *Wizball* – indeed, it would use the same philosophy to create games that were not only famed for their playability, but also for their character and humorous touches. Hare and Yates would continue to run through their games at every step; one of them would come up with some new idea, or a new riff on what was already there. And sometimes, this riff might change a project in a highly significant way.

“When playing *Wizball*, there’s a sense of being part of the creative process”

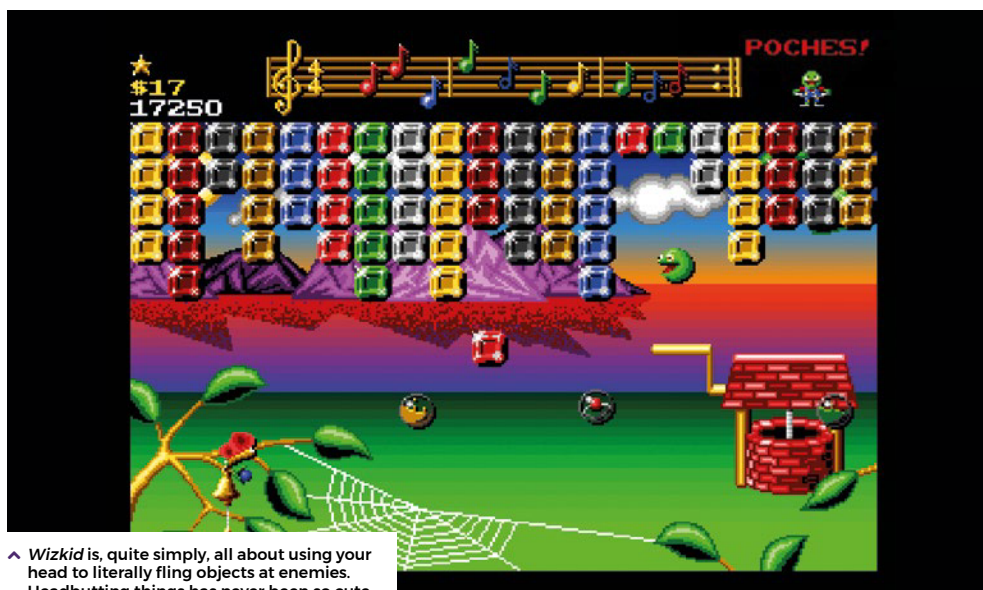
Where other teams might have given such things more thought to see if they could play with the original design, Hare and Yates would just go ahead and implement them – it’s not as if they usually had an extensive design document to work from anyway. This practice reached its summit with the spiritual sequel to *Wizball*, 1992’s *Wizkid* – something approaching an art game that still ended up being released by Ocean.

At other times, this experimental approach resulted in entirely unrelated new ideas. While working on the strategy title, *Mega-Lo-Mania*, and waiting for a build to compile, Hare had the idea of turning the game’s map into a crude football pitch – he even used the game’s little character sprites as players. This would stick with him, and become the genesis for what was perhaps the studio’s seminal title: *Sensible Soccer*.

“We would say that what you throw away is as important as what you keep,” Hare says. “So a



✓ The Filth Raid are fast, they shoot everywhere and are generally best avoided, so don’t stick around.



^ *Wizkid* is, quite simply, all about using your head to literally fling objects at enemies. Headbutting things has never been so cute.

lot of the things we tried in a game we'd just go, 'Nah, bin it' or 'Let's go back'. We did a lot of what we called 'backwards to go forwards' work. We were very much treating it like music – 'Let's try this out; no, that didn't work, but that thing you did before was good, try doing it again, doubling it up...' When we settled on it, Chris would write some code, I would do art, the words in the game... we'd go away and come back – which is how we were writing songs."

SUPERSTAR HEROES

When people think of Sensible Software and their games, music is often one of the first things that springs to mind – after all, their games were often soundtracked by indelibly catchy original songs composed by Hare and their official music man, the late Richard Joseph, or in the C64 days they would have appropriately epic SID tunes from Martin Galway (who would also briefly join the studio in the 1980s), as was the case with *Wizball*. Even *Narcissus*, the angsty teenage power ballad mentioned at the start of this article, would take on a new life in a video game, used as the recruitment screen music for 1993's *Cannon Fodder*.

The composing of music would be important all the way to the end, where it would be the central part of *Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll*, the Viz-esque rock opera adventure game that was sadly never released. But people might not have figured that rather than just being catchy tunes in their games, the process of making music was something that Sensible transposed to the very creation of their games, too – if it hadn't been

for those first years when Hare and Yates were more interested in writing songs and found an iterative process that worked for them, their games would have been completely different.

There's no end of stories in which people messed around with music and bands before they headed into the world of game development – with varying degrees of success – but in the case of Sensible, the band never really broke up. It was this unique approach to game design, particularly in the case of their breakthrough title, *Wizball*, that helped them become one of the great British games studios. In closing, Hare shares the moment when they suddenly figured out that, with *Wizball*, "we had total freedom."

"Ocean liked *Parallax*," Hare recalls. "They wanted our next game and didn't know what it was, it could have been anything – it was a bit like getting an album deal. They just wanted our next thing, and they trusted you." 🐾

^ We've got our cat, and we're in control! Careful, though: much like *Gradius*, one death will result in the loss of all those power-ups.



THE SECOND ALBUM

Wizkid, Sensible's 1992 sequel to *Wizball*, offers a whole new concept: a take on *Arkanoid* filled with typical Sensi flourishes and flat-out weirdness. "*Wizkid* was a good example of what we did," explains Hare. "We balanced our commercial games like *Sensible Soccer* with games like *Wizkid*, which is a very out-there art game. Both of them are very good in their own ways, and we were lucky to be able to do that and have Ocean, Renegade, and later Virgin [publishers of *Cannon Fodder*] supporting us for these different sorts of games."

^ Only Hare and Yates – or rather Jovial Jops and Kuddly Krix, their oft-used nicknames – are good enough for high scores.

