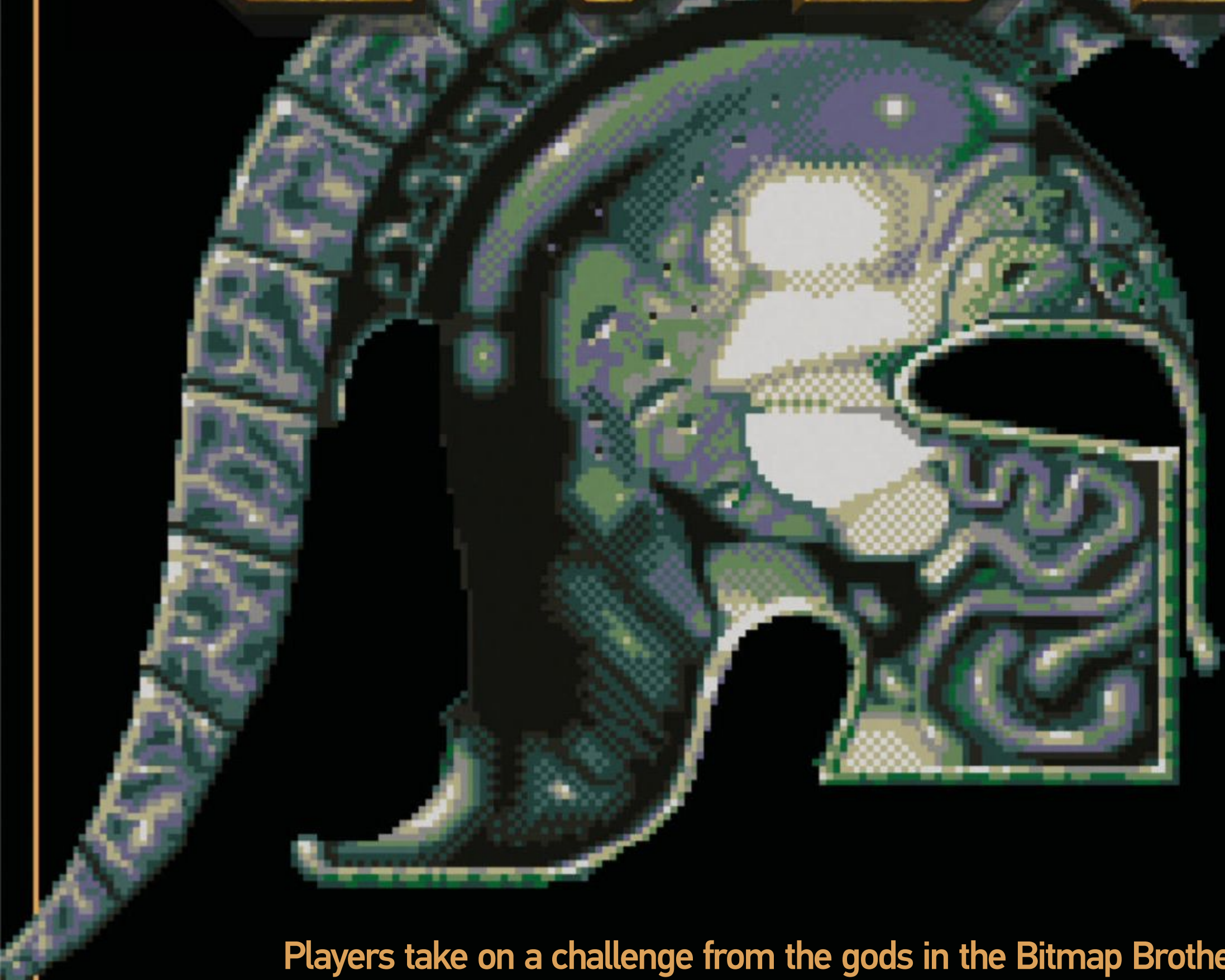# THE MAKING OF

GODS

Players take on a challenge from the gods in the Bitmap Brothers'
platform adventure, and while the task of coding it might not
have been a Herculean one, it still required plenty of work.
Steve Tall tells us how it was done

Words by Nick Thorpe

» [Amiga] Flying enemies are a real pain, as they're completely unhindered by the level's terrain.

To any kid reading games mags, working for the Bitmap Brothers must have seemed like the best job in the world. Not only did you get to make games – really good games, actually – but you wore cool sunglasses and got to ride around in helicopters. Heck, we're a bit jealous, and we get to "sit around playing games all day" (according to our parents).

Of course, we know that this was more image than reality, but the reality of working for the studio was pretty appealing. "In 1989 I'd been working at Tynesoft for a couple of years, but I was looking for an opportunity to make games that were more like the ones I enjoyed playing," says Steve Tall, who joined the team in the early days of Gods development. "I put together a tech demo of a full-screen side-scrolling shoot-'em-up on the Atari ST. Full-screen scrolling on the ST was a challenge as it lacked the hardware scrolling capability of the Amiga. The gameplay in the demo was simple… but I used a technique where I rendered the player's ship every frame during the vertical blank. Even though the main game was running in three or four frames, the player's ship being rendered every frame made it feel extremely responsive. I sent the demo off to the Bitmaps and got a call to come down to London for an interview."

Without knowing it, Steve had created the perfect way to pitch himself. "It turned out that they were looking for a programmer to work on their new game concept which was a platform game that needed full-screen scrolling, and luckily my demo convinced them that I could do the job," he recalls. The concept for Gods had already been fleshed out a little by the time Steve got to work. "There was already an outline design document and some early art at the time I visited the office for my interview, but I believe it was Eric
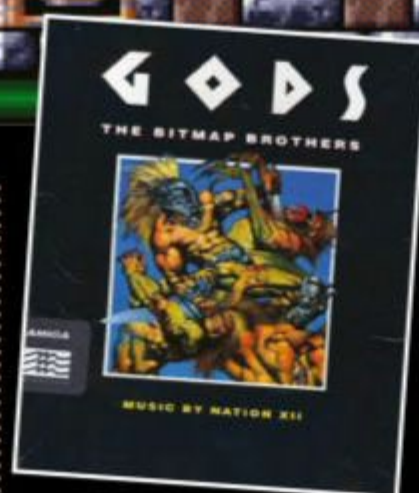
IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:**
RENEGADE SOFTWARE
» **DEVELOPER:**
THE BITMAP BROTHERS
» **RELEASED:**
1991
» **PLATFORM:**
ATARI ST, VARIOUS
» **GENRE:**
PLATFORM/ADVENTURE

[Matthews]' concept. I thought it had the potential to be special as soon as I saw the first sprite art from Mark [Coleman]." With his new job secured, Steve went back to the northeast to begin work.

In Gods, players would take control of Hercules in a platform hack-and-slash, battling through challenges set by the gods in order to achieve immortality. Journalists of the time often compared it to Capcom's Black Tiger, which featured a similar hero, but Steve can't confirm any influence. "I've never played Black Tiger, but I can definitely see why people might make the comparison. Given the timeline it seems possible that it had some influence on Eric or Mark but I don't remember it ever coming up in conversation."

Steve's first job was to create an editor tool, which would aid the process of designing the stages. "It was the first game editor or significant tool of any kind that I'd created and I remember being sceptical at the time about whether it was really needed. It absolutely made sense though, especially given that I was working almost 300 miles from the office. It allowed Eric to work independently on the game design and balance without being reliant on having a programmer next to him." The editor was a powerful tool, too, allowing you to do just about everything you could want to do with a stage. "It had a visual level editor, with an undo feature. It also allowed the user to place platforms, doors, trapdoors, levers and switches, and enemy spawners. You could edit the attributes of weapons and enemies, and there was an enemy wave designer." As well as the visual editor, there was a multicondition puzzle editor.

Steve and Eric split the level creation duties, as the task was particularly time-consuming. "There was a lot of experimentation and iteration, and we would play through each other's work-in-progress and give feedback and suggestions." As it transpired, the

» [Amiga] Hercules can add considerable firepower to his arsenal, including fireballs and magic hammers.

BOSS RUSH

The four great beasts that Hercules must slay

LEVEL 2

■ While this dragon looks pretty scary, it isn't actually as tough as you might think. It mostly just hovers on the right side of the room. Dig you feet in on the left side and you'll avoid its fiery breath completely, then just duck the shots it occasionally makes from its tail and keep firing.

LEVEL 1

■ This giant walks back and forth slowly, throwing fireballs that bounce in a high arc. Since they actually bounce so high that they can clear Hercules entirely, you just need to walk back and forth to the safe spots and keep laying on the damage until the giant is finally slain for good.

LEVEL 3

■ Here we have a Minotaur, and it's a bit trickier than the other bosses. It'll constantly advance towards you while shooting from the mouth – try to stay at least half a screen away at all times. When it jumps, it'll cause tremors. Go underneath it if you can't otherwise escape.

▶ two designers also approach their stages with different philosophies. "Eric preferred to plan out as much of the level as possible ahead of time and think in terms of the flow and story of the level before laying it out in the editor. For my levels, I'd just jump into the editor and start playing around," Steve recalls. "Generally, Eric created levels one and three while I did two and four. You can tell which are which because Eric planned ahead and always liked to start the player on the left, which makes sense since it generally feels better to play from left to right."

Much of the prerelease hype for Gods centred on the intelligence of the enemies – their behaviour was slated to change based on what you were doing. "I'd say that there was desire to get more

> ## "I would just jump into the editor and start playing around with layouts and trying different combinations"
> Steve Tall

variety in the gameplay puzzles, and make the world feel more interactive and less predictable," replies Steve. However, in reality the illusion of intelligent behaviour was created using conditions that the game was already tracking for puzzles. "Eric and I would talk through ideas for different puzzles and gameplay setpieces and I think the thief came out of one of those discussions. Sometimes I would extend the editor functionality to be able to set up the situations we wanted, but we were also brainstorming how to create interesting puzzles from the editor controls we already had in place. The moments where the enemies do unexpected things like stealing a key were all prescribed in the editor and based on triggers for things like position, health or what the player had in their inventory."

One area where there was less freedom was with the bosses, as they had to be designed around the finished art assets. "I'm sure that Eric and Mark

had some conversations about what the bosses should look like before the art was created, but my input started after the art was finished," Steve tells us. "I would get a new sheet of sprites with a boss and it was up to me to work out how the pieces fit together and then to come up with a design for how it should move and attack in the game."

Speaking of balance, another major feature that was touted in the press was Gods' dynamic difficulty. Steve reveals that this was another task achieved using the versatile editor. "We would pick certain points in the map progression and use the player's inventory, health and remaining lives as triggers," he explains. "In the right circumstances, we might provide an extra life or drop a weapon that we thought the player would find helpful."

Despite not being in the office directly, Steve recalls the development work on Gods going pretty smoothly. "I did almost all of my work from my home in the northeast," he recalls. "I would usually only make day trips or overnight trips to London maybe once a month or so, and then Eric or Mike would come up to visit me at other times. In between, we would have long discussions over the phone and I'd use a modem to deliver code and download assets."

Inevitably, this couldn't last as the game's deadline approached. "Towards the end, I made more trips to London, culminating in a trip that was supposed to be two days but turned into two weeks without leaving the office. I'd sleep on the floor at night and work during the day. Apparently, the smell was getting pretty bad so after about ten days

» [Amiga] Enemies can spawn from anywhere, so you'll be wise to constantly look for threats.

LEVEL 4

■ You'll want to be on the left side of the top platform for this skull. Your target is the snake thing that emerges from it – duck when it first shows up, then turn right and fire until it perishes. Since this is the last barrier between Hercules and victory, you'll need to destroy a few of them.

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Mike took me over to his sister's home so I could have a bath. That was some old-school crunch."

Gods was able to live up to the potential it showed, earning acclaim from the likes of CVG, The One, CU Amiga and Amiga Power upon its release in 1991. Only Amiga User International's 79% review stood as an outlier. Decades later, people still fondly remember Gods. What is it, in Steve's opinion, that helps the game to remain popular? "That's a difficult one for me to be objective about," the coder replies frankly. "Gameplay-wise the puzzles provided a lot of replayability since it was hard to solve everything on any single playthrough and, even with the adaptive difficulty, it wasn't an easy game to finish.

"Mark's art was just beautiful and his style was so recognisable and synonymous with The Bitmap Brothers, and the music worked so well too," he continues. "The Bitmaps just had a dedication to quality, and I think people could see that and appreciated it. A few times over the years I've had people tell me that it's their favourite game and hearing something like that is incredibly gratifying, and humbling at the same time."

Gods never received a sequel, and later ports to other platforms failed to materialise – most famously Crawfish Interactive's Game Boy Advance version, left unfinished due to the developer's collapse. However, Hercules would return – even if it did take a couple of decades to make it happen. ✱

» [Amiga] There are plenty of treasures atop those trap doors – but do you have to release them or walk on them?

CONVERSION CAPERS

When faced with many Gods, which do you worship? Find out the differences here…

ATARI ST ▶

■ As the lead version of the game during development, the Atari ST version of *Gods* is naturally rock-solid. The game plays very well and the title music sounds just as good as you'd hope. Unlike many of the subsequent versions, your inventory only pops up on screen when accessed.

◀ AMIGA

■ As you might expect, this is a little nicer than the ST version – but really only a little. The intro music sounds a touch better and the background gradients benefit from the Amiga's greater ability to handle colour, but that's about your lot. Nobody minded, though – it's just as good.

ACORN ARCHIMEDES ▶

■ This port by Krisalis is an odd half-way point between the computer versions. The ST/Amiga HUD is used and there's no background music in stages, but like the PC/PC-98 versions the background colour gradients have been removed.

◀ PC

■ This is the first version to use a fixed status bar, and you get to see somewhat less of the level around you as a result. If a Roland MT-32 sound card is present, you'll be able to play with background music – your mileage may vary on whether this improves the experience.

NEC PC-98 ▶

■ This Japanese computer version published by PCM Complete is completely in English, so don't worry about being able to read it. It's based on the PC version and includes the background music and simplified backgrounds as a result. Speed and performance depends on your CPU.

◀ MEGA DRIVE

■ The Mega Drive version includes background music and adds new intro and ending sequences, plus recoloured graphics, new backgrounds and slightly revamped controls. The game is much faster than on the computers, and the difficulty jumps up as a result.

SNES ▶

■ On Nintendo's console, *Gods* retains all of the features of the Mega Drive version. The music benefits from the excellent sound hardware of the SNES, but the console's lower resolution results in a reduced horizontal field of view, which makes things slightly trickier.

REMASTERING GODS

Despite being an extremely popular part of the Bitmap Brothers tapestry, Gods has never been revisited. That's all changed thanks to a brand-new remaster. Nils Hammerich explains how it happened

Words by Nick Thorpe

With so many memorable games in The Bitmap Brothers' back catalogue its not surprising that titles like The Chaos Engine and Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe have had high-definition updates in recent years. Gods Remastered is the latest game from the acclaimed developer to receive a similar interest from a modern developer, and like those earlier games, it has been completely overhauled for a new generation of gamers. The Gods you would have enjoyed back in the day is suitably enhanced, and it's currently available for PC and Xbox One, with PS4 and Switch versions on the way and even a mobile version planned. What you might not know, however, is that Nils Hammerich, CEO of Gods Remastered developer Robot Riot, also tried to get a revival

off the ground several years ago and he came tantalisingly close to making it happen.

"I used to own a company that was focused on mobile games, years before the iPhone came out when the Java phones were around. No one took this whole mobile gaming thing seriously, so there were a lot of opportunities to get these famous brands back then," he explains. "At one trade show we had the opportunity to licence games from The Bitmap Brothers, and among them was Gods. For me personally, I played the game a lot on my Atari ST back in the day, so it was an obvious choice to go after this one." However, the project ultimately never came to pass. "We secured that licence and worked for quite some time on the Java version of the game, but it never got released – the company was sold and basically, the licence got lost," Nils says.

Thankfully, that failed endeavour would be the seed of what ultimately became Gods Remastered and it allowed Nils to revisit one of his favourite Atari ST games. "The project

» [PC] Hercules has a variety of weapons to help him deal with the trials that lay ahead.

never really left my mind, so a couple of years ago I tried to dig it up and pursue it again, and contacted the company that owned all the assets of our original company, and finally managed to get this licence," Nils explains. "I started work on a mobile version on iOS and Android, and when this was almost done I contacted Mike Montgomery and asked him what he'd say about releasing the game on other platforms as well, as the original licence only covered mobile. He liked the idea and as the game was far in development, he was able to take a look and he liked what he saw, so we agreed to push it on all other platforms as well."

Development on Gods Remastered has gone rather smoothly as Nils had access to a great deal of original development material. "The original licence covered all the source code for Amiga and PC, as well as the original graphics assets, so there was not much work on my end to acquire the original assets. It was actually fun to learn the Motorola assembler, since I stopped working with

» [PC] Although it features a brand-new engine, Robot Riot's update remains faithful to the 16-bit original.

» [PC] Dynamic difficulty returns in Gods Remastered, giving the Help Bonus seen here.

assembler on my C64!" We had to ask if there were any surprises in the code, but the main thing Nils found was good programming practice. "What surprised me the most was how well it was documented – it was quite good to read and the implementation was pretty straightforward. I think they were very professional guys at work."

Gods Remastered runs at a silky smooth 60 frames per second, but with the original pacing retained from the home computer versions. The major change is that there is a brand-new presentation layer with 3D models, shadows and lighting, and you can switch between this and the original graphics at any time, a neat trick that's also featured in remasters like The Secret Of Monkey Island and The Dragon's Trap. "Everything is rendered in parallel, you just switch it on or off," says Nils. This was arguably the trickiest area of the remaster to achieve. "Obviously there are a couple of restrictions – when you look at how the remastered version lets you switch between the two modes at any

time in the game, at the same time, we wanted to keep all of the original gameplay intact. So for animation, particularly transitions between animations and things like that, this was a bit limiting because everything needs to happen instantly so like the games worked back then, but nowadays we'd flesh out these transitions much more than we were able to do in the end."

In order to ensure that the game meets expectations, Nils has been working with Mike Montgomery. "He playtested it quite a bit and had some good suggestions, for example to

> ### "The project never really left my mind, so a couple of years ago I tried to dig it up and pursue it again"
> Nils Hammerich

modernise the controls." But things are by and large the same, with the level designs, puzzle and enemy layouts all carried over intact to the remaster. There's only one major exception: "The only thing that was a bit sad was that we weren't allowed to use the original title music," says Nils. "Everyone remembers it so it would have been nice to use it. We even contacted the music publisher, but they didn't show any interest in pursuing this opportunity. That's the only change to the original version."

Nils may not have been able to source that original intro music, but his team has still been able to create a game that not only pays tribute to the original, but also freshens up Hercules' classic adventure for those who never got around to experience it on the 16-bit systems of the time. It would appear that even after 28 long years, Gods still has plenty of appeal.

So Gods, much like its own hero, has braved some tough times but was ultimately able to achieve immortality – or something as close as possible in the world of videogames, at least. If you've not played it for a while, give it a try and see if you're up to its considerable challenge. ✳

» [PC] There are plenty of items to buy in the shop, providing you have the cash.