



In the chair with...



NIGEL ALDERTON

30 years ago, at the age of 17, Nigel Alderton created one of the most egg-cellent games to grace the ZX Spectrum. Five years later he seemingly disappeared from the games industry. Graeme Mason promises no more terrible puns and chats to the man behind the iconic platformer, Chuckie Egg...

As **Retro Gamer** arrives at the quiet cul-de-sac nestling in the shadow of Stockport County FC's ground, aircraft to and from the nearby Manchester airport punctuate the eerie silence. Behind one of these doors resides a Spectrum legend and enigma; a famous platformer and a brace of arcade conversions is the apparent story of Nigel Alderton. We're here to find out more on the man and, of course, the games.

Upon entry to the quaint, almost stereotypical Northern terraced house, we're greeted by a smiling Nigel who cheerily welcomes us into his home. "Must be convenient for home matches," we comment smugly. "They're not doing too well these days," remarks Nigel, who supports his hometown team, Newcastle. "Still," he continues, "at least match days are pretty quiet..." "Every cloud and all that," we chime, before digging out our trusty tape recorder...

So is this the point where the seeds for *Chuckie Egg* were sown?

Everybody was programming and there wasn't any software to speak of, so the only thing you could do was write your own. So, yes, it was kind of where it started. But they were expensive TRS-80s and the only computer I could dream of owning was a ZX81. Then I remember getting a leaflet about the Spectrum in advance of it coming out and we all sat at school drooling over this thing and its wonderful colours! I waited four months for it to turn up; I can't quite remember exactly the day it arrived but I imagine I was *unbelievably* excited.

So was this where your coding days began?

I had been programming in BASIC on the ZX81. Then I got a book on machine code and this opened up a whole new world as just the speed difference was so exhilarating to watch. I started programming on the Spectrum and had soon written a game called *Blaster*.

Was this *Rocket Raider*?

I called it *Blaster* and when the advert came out they'd changed the name. I didn't care because I'd got a game published and been paid for it, which was fantastic. It was a combination of my favourite arcade games at the time: *Defender* and *Scramble*.

What was it that made you decide to get C-Tech to publish *Blaster*?

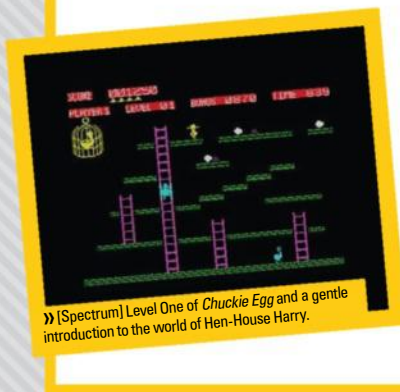
A friend told me about this guy that might want to buy the game. They ran a shop, so I took it up to show them; I walked in and this guy was lying asleep on the counter! I announced myself, showed him *Blaster* and to my astonishment he raved about it and wanted to buy it immediately. He offered me £500 and I was just gob-smacked... I was 15 years old and getting £3.50 for my paper round, so I was just stunned silent. He took that to mean that the offer wasn't high enough, so he said 'alright, £600 then', and I just laughed. Again, he took that to mean the offer still wasn't high enough, so he upped his offer to £700! Then I stupidly spoke up and the guy wrote a cheque straight away. I took it home and when I showed it to my dad, it was the first time I recall him use the f-word. He couldn't believe it.

What was *Rocket Raider* actually like as a game?

I liked it and it didn't seem to have any massive bugs. But it was character-based movement and by the time I'd finished it I'd realised that there was a way to do pixel movement on the Spectrum. I knew from that moment that I wanted to [have] pixel movement in my next game.

So Nigel, when did your desire to program videogames arise?

I was around 13 when one lunchtime at school I saw some kids going into this room. It was almost dark save for the glow of the green screens and all very secretive. So I managed to sneak in and watch the kids use the computers; eventually somebody let me on one and it was fantastic, like a whole new world. I was just absorbed by it for some reason.



» [Spectrum] Level One of *Chuckie Egg* and a gentle introduction to the world of Hen-House Harry.



SELECTED TIMELINE

- Rocket Raider (ZX Spectrum) 1983
- Chuckie Egg (ZX Spectrum) 1984
- Kong Strikes Back (ZX Spectrum) 1985
- Street Hawk – Subscribers Edition (ZX Spectrum) 1985
- Commando (ZX Spectrum) 1985
- Ghosts 'N' Goblins (Amstrad CPC) 1986

“I'd got a game published and been paid for it, which was fantastic”



Would you say that was one of the early driving forces behind *Chuckie Egg*?

Yes, and I'd already developed routines to do that and it just looked so much better, so much more fun and responsive to play as it would just move in little increments.

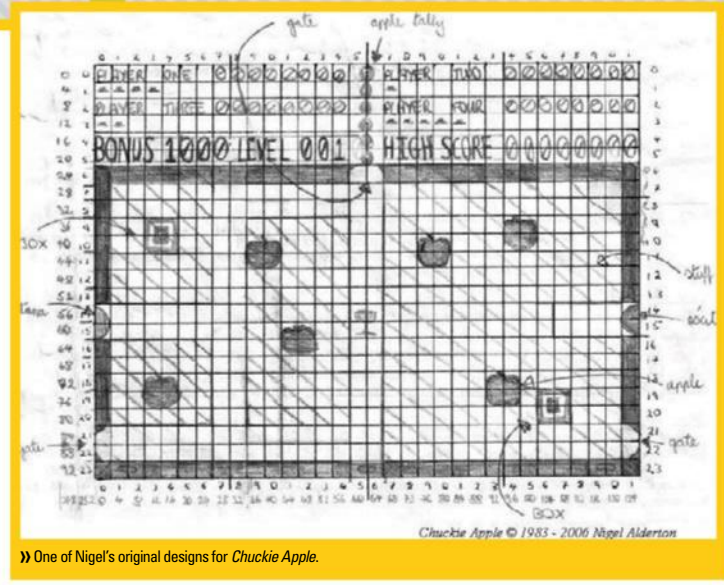
How did the idea of turning it into a platform game come about?

The two arcade games where all my ten pences were going were *Space Panic* and *Donkey Kong*. So I wrote a hybrid of those two games [and it] added to my dislike of games where there's a set path for each level. I like a game where it is all about dexterity and you can find your own way through.

Had you started working at A&F?

Yep, a friend of mine had a job in a computer shop and knew I was after a Saturday job, so he suggested I get in touch with A&F. They sold computers and games and in the back of their shop had two or three programmers writing games. To start with, I was getting the bacon butties and cups of tea, serving customers and generally helping out.

Did A&F encourage you to explore coding at all?



» One of Nigel's original designs for *Chuckie Apple*.

Not really. I was a kid making cups of tea and that was it. I pestered them and said 'would you look at my game?' and they would fob me off. Then eventually one Saturday I finally got their attention. I remember them being really impressed which was what I wanted; I needed somebody to say 'you're on the right track here'. Just a bit of encouragement.

So we imagine that, having demonstrated this soon-to-be legendary game, A&F told you

to forget about the tea and the bacon butties?

[laughs] They set up a little workstation for me and encouraged me to code during weekends and the school holidays. But it was too noisy and they kept trying to tell me what the structure of the game should be. I was determined that I was gonna do it how I wanted to do it and, in any case, their ideas were pretty daft.

Such as?

They had ideas like every fourth

screen should have a *Frogger*-style level where Harry had to jump across logs to get to the next level. I was firm in my belief this would not work.

And presumably there wasn't a huge amount of space for such varied levels anyway?

Indeed. Because you've got such limited memory, I had mapped out what it was going to be used for. And the guys would chip in with ideas, basically because it wasn't finished and they thought I was asking them what should be in the game. But I wasn't, I was just saying 'what do you think of it so far?'.

After having showed A&F the game, did it create any extra time pressure for you?

It got to the point where they wanted it finished and they said 'its finished, you don't need to put any more into it'. And there were just a few more little things that I wanted to do that would have extended the playing time of the game, but I never got the chance. It would have only taken a few more days...

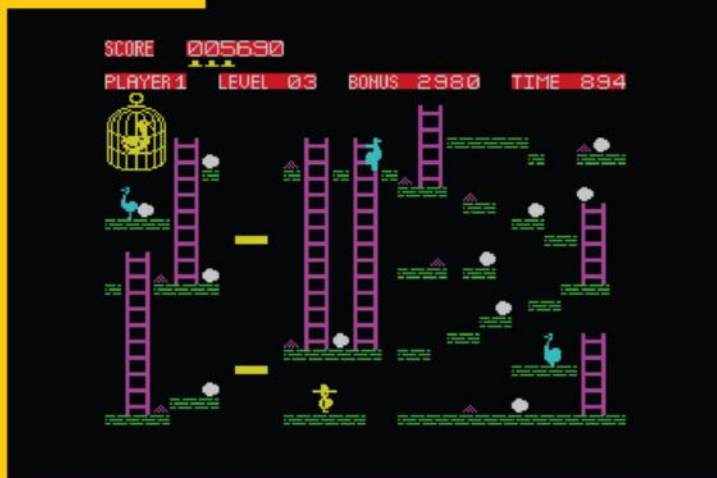
So what was missing or different from the end game that you wish you'd changed or included?

Just a few little tweaks that I'd like to have done, like when you get more than five or six lives it still keeps count but you can't see them. It would have been nice to have a bigger hat that represented ten lives. I really should

* FOUR TO PLAY

Classic games by Nigel you really need to revisit

CHUCKIE EGG



INSPIRED BY NIGEL'S adoration of the popular arcade games *Space Panic* and *Donkey Kong*, *Chuckie Egg* combined the common platform genre with a smooth playability that has ensured the game remains as enjoyable to play today as it was almost 30 years ago. Lacking the frustration and sheer pixel-perfect machinations of many of its peers, each of the game's levels had you dodging feathered nightmares and recovering eggs, occasionally collecting one of the piles of Road Runner-esque bird seed in order to pause the relentless timer. Despite only actually containing eight different screens, Nigel guaranteed *Chuckie Egg* had considerable longevity thanks to the roaming demon duck and a variety of different patterns for the smaller birds. Officially recognised as a classic, it dominates 'best of' lists for most of the platforms it was released on – most notably with the ZX Spectrum and BBC versions – and has inspired several remakes.

COMMANDO

ELITE SYSTEMS BECAME synonymous with arcade conversions in the mid-Eighties: *Paperboy*, *Ghosts 'N' Goblins* and *Space Harrier* were all technically amazing conversions and good games too. But *Commando* was where it all began. With the licence secured from Capcom, much rode on how the game would turn out – and when it would turn out. The two-man team of Nigel (who was still only 19 years old) and Keith Burkhill worked overtime to produce the Spectrum version in time for Christmas 1985, and despite the pressure they were under, they produced an impressive (if rather yellow) version of the arcade run-and-gun.



KONG STRIKES BACK

BEFORE IT MADE its name as a purveyor of mercurial licensed games, Ocean managed to riff unofficially on two separate arcade games in 1984, with *Donkey Kong* helping to provide the name and *Mr Do's Wild Ride* the gameplay. Along with legendary Spectrum coder, Jonathan 'Joffa' Smith (who sadly died in June 2010), Nigel helped develop this graphically quaint clone that, despite its derivative nature, remains sweetly playable and one of Ocean's better earlier games. A solid game that remains a lot of fun to play.

GHOSTS 'N' GOBLINS

CONVINCED THAT A credible version of the arcade medieval fantasy epic was not possible, Nigel passed on the Spectrum version and volunteered to lend his skills to Elite's Amstrad CPC port. Now working on his own, the graphics were created separately by another freelancer, Ste Pickford, although he was hamstrung by Nigel resorting to a restricted screen mode in order to avoid masking the sprites. The result was not particularly pleasing on the eye, yet the game was admirably fast and fun to play, making it not quite the soporific end to his programming career that Nigel suggests.



“ The two arcade games where all my ten pences were going were Space Panic and Donkey Kong ”

have put a pause key in, that was a stupid thing not to do. Other than that, I thought there was easily enough scope to get another eight screens. The platforms would remain the same due to memory, but place a few bricks differently so if people were used to a particular route, all of a sudden that route wouldn't work.

Retro Gamer fondly remembers the first time the giant bird comes out of its cage. You're playing all through the first few levels thinking, 'oh that big bird up in the cage it's just a bit of decoration...' That was the idea!

Then the other birds disappear and the big one's come out of the cage after us! That was quite cool, was it tricky to implement?

It was easy to make it home in on the player but I wanted it so that the bird had momentum, meaning you could lead it astray. But I do wish I'd written it so that when you went back to screen one the first time, the game plays normally for a few seconds before the bird comes out. So it looks like 'oh this is easy, no enemies' and then suddenly you're being hounded across the screen. Slightly more dramatic.

Somewhat unusually for the time, Chuckie Egg had four players.

I did that because I like the atmosphere in an arcade where one person is playing and you get two or three people watching. It's what I was doing and it was lots of fun. I knew lots of people would buy the game and would have their mates round to play it and if you got three friends it was cool if you could all play it on one computer.



» [Spectrum] Nigel's first game, the shoot-'em-up, *Rocket Raider*.

Was A&F paying you anything at this point?

They told me they wanted to publish it and they put me on a retainer of £50 a month with the idea that they'd get first dibs on the game.

What was with Harry's big hat?

I'm rubbish at drawing! But actually the algorithms for the collision detection had to be simple, or rather the game was faster and better if they were simple. The wide hat meant the now 'square character' didn't make it so frustrating when you thought you'd actually evaded a bird.

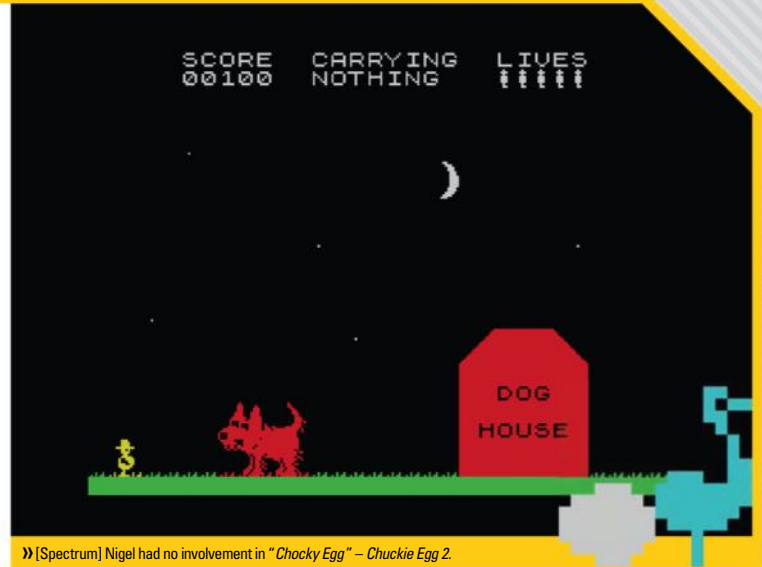
The lifts in Chuckie Egg were presumably influenced by Donkey Kong. They could be a bit tricky – were you happy with them?

Not entirely... I struggled to get the algorithm right to get on and off and in the end I had to make the tolerances so big that if you got anywhere near a lift it kind of grabs you and places you on it. But also, if you walk off the lift your momentum doesn't carry you on to the platform so I probably should've done a bit of horizontal momentum to take you off the lift and to safety.

On the other hand, Harry could fall a long way without harm...



» [Spectrum] Before you took to the streets in *Street Hawk* there was this odd mini-game to play.



» [Spectrum] Nigel had no involvement in "Chucky Egg" – *Chucky Egg 2*.

I think I just didn't like things like that and found them frustrating to play. More realistic, but less fun. Although you could still die by falling through the gaps in the floor in later levels, so the player still had to be cautious.

Chuckie Egg was ported to other computers. Were you involved in any of the other conversions?

No. I believe Mike Webb wrote most of them and Doug Anderson wrote the BBC and Electron versions. They did proper maths for the arc of the man which I kicked myself for not doing.

After the game was released, were you still working in the A&F shop?

For a short time. But on the back of *Chuckie Egg* I got the day job at Ocean which was partly to appease my parents because I was determined not to go to university. The compromise was to get a proper job.

But you were already working on a new game based on another arcade game?

A&F were keen to do a sequel quickly and they had lots of ideas which I didn't like. So I just said 'you do what you want but I want nothing to do with it'. But *Chuckie Apple*, which was inspired by *Mr Do*, was definitely going to be more about pushing things about and dexterity. I abandoned it when I joined Ocean.

Who did you work with while you were at Ocean?

I was in a room with Jonathan Smith and we wrote *Kong Strikes Back* together. Then we got split up and I got moved into a different cubicle with Mike Webb and we wrote *Street Hawk* between us. 'Joffa' was nice but I think I was a bit mean to him really. He was incredibly talented as

a programmer and as a graphic artist whereas I could only program. As a result he concentrated mostly on the graphics, probably because I pushed him into it. I'm not sure if that's totally true, but I always felt I sort of bullied him into doing that. I didn't let him code, and once we'd split up he went on to write these fantastic games.

With your next Ocean game, Street Hawk, there was a bit of a fuss over the game being promised as a gift when you subscribed to Crash magazine. Do you recall there being any particular pressure surrounding its development?

I think the problem with the game was it was a bit sparse... we wanted it to be a bit slick and it was. That's from memory, as since coding it I don't think I've ever seen the thing. But there didn't seem to be a lot to do in the game. I vaguely remember it being a hell of a rush before we even started; we were told to write a game, not quite in three weeks but not far off it.

You then left Ocean?

I had decided to go freelance and was in contact with Steve Wilcox from Elite Systems. Christmas was approaching and the story went that he had virtually bet the company on their next release, which was an arcade conversion called *Commando*. So Steve hired myself and Keith Burkhill to write the Spectrum version which was on deadline for Christmas. I was offered a contract and resigned from Ocean in a rush to get started. I remember feeling bad because when I went to hand my notice in, two other people that day had already handed in theirs. So this guy got a knock on the door from me and his first words were 'oh God not you as well!'



» [Spectrum] Like *Chuckie Egg*, *Commando* loops around, only with more and more enemies to contend with.



» [Spectrum] The lovely loading screen for *Commando*.

What was the contract like?

It was £10,000 upfront fee with a penalty of £1,000 each day we were late. The target was something like nine weeks and it sounds unbelievable – but it was true and a lot of pressure right from the start. It also gives you an idea of the pressure Elite was under and Steve was passing this pressure onto us. Keith and I – who had never met each other before – said, ‘let’s hit the ground running, work really hard to start off with so it won’t be so tough at the end’. So we did, and had a strict regime from the start, working all hours. It was absolutely crazy.

As you were both freelance, where were you working from?

From Elite’s office in Walsall. We were living in a guest house near the M6 called The Larches, and would get up in the morning, go to the office, work until afternoon, have dinner, work in the evening, go back to The Larches, sleep for a few hours, have breakfast before the same the next day. It was the hardest I’d worked in my life.

Did you not look at the arcade machine and think: ‘Bloody hell, how am I going to get this onto a Spectrum?’

Yes! But by now I’d learned a lot of tricks, ways of getting things quicker and using less memory. Mike Webb and I had realised that the fastest way of changing memory was by putting the stack on the screen, pushing stuff

NUMBER CRUNCHING

ZX81, the first computer Nigel owned

£700, the sum Nigel cannily negotiated for his first game, *Rocket Raider*

£1,000 per day penalty for every day *Commando* ran over its deadline

9 and a bit weeks – not a dodgy rip-off erotic thriller, but the time it took Keith Burkhill and Nigel to complete *Commando*

4 the choice of possible replacements offered by Crash to those disgruntled subscribers who actually wanted *Street Hawk* and also the number of players who could join in the fun in *Chuckie Egg*

17 years old – Nigel’s age when *Chuckie Egg* was released in early 1984

200 The number of paper rounds Nigel would have needed to do to earn the same amount of money he got for *Rocket Raider*

onto it and that’s changing the display. But then you’ve got to be careful because when the 50th second refresh comes round, stuff gets pushed onto the stack by the system, so you’ve got to make sure it’s off the screen at that point or it gets interrupted and crashes the game.

Did you and Keith have specific roles during development?

Keith did the logic for the men running around and shooting and I did the coding for the sprites to try and get the speed up. I remember showing Mike Webb the scrolling bridge I’d designed, having worked out a way you could have the leading edge pushed on the screen but then the bulk of the bridge just as blocks of colour, which was a single byte and took up very little memory. He was really impressed, so I thought, ‘if Mike’s impressed we’re definitely onto something here!’

Were there any compromises you had to make to fit the Spectrum version in?

I remember we had two bites of the cherry as far as the men running around and the difficulty of it, because when it first came out it was apparently far too easy and some kid had completed it in a day. So Keith had to come back after we’d finished the game, mastered it and even sold a few copies, just to make the game harder.

How did you go about learning the maps and layouts?

We had a *Commando* machine in the office set to freeplay. One of us would be playing it and the other would be drawing the map and details on a piece of paper. There were no engineers from Capcom helping us – it was all copied by eye.

Did you meet your deadline?

We were two-and-a-half days late but Steve didn’t invoke the clause. We reckoned the threat had already done its job. And it was only that late because we’d had one last bug to solve and couldn’t find it. There was a girl working for Elite called Karen Trueman who would always get the game to crash and it was only her that seemed to trigger it! In the end we thought she was cursed or had static electricity or something. We eventually discovered it was because she struggled to get through the bridge section and would pause there. I was pushing all the data onto the screen using the stack and I’d misjudged it by two bytes; it was running over into memory it shouldn’t

do and corrupting the screen, causing the crash. It wasn’t witchcraft, it wasn’t her... [laughs] it was my code...

After *Commando*, you were behind another Elite arcade conversion, *Ghosts ‘N’ Goblins*...

Yeah, but I was just mentally hammered. In the last days of *Commando* I remember working through the day and night and then again the next day and night and driving home and collapsing. I really needed six months off, but I agreed to do *Ghosts ‘N’ Goblins*, not much more than a month after *Commando*.

But this wasn’t the Spectrum version was it?

Actually I did the Amstrad version. I think I wanted a bit of a change and also I couldn’t see how the game could be converted to the Spectrum, especially the diagonal scrolling in the later levels. So I told Steve I’d do the Amstrad version, which of course had the benefit of extra hardware support. It was interesting learning a new machine but even at this point I was struggling to motivate myself. Keith did a technically amazing job with the Spectrum version.

Were you still freelance?

Yes, and I was back at home now having rented myself a little room above a Post Office. It was a pretty miserable and lonely existence to be honest, and I struggled to put in the hours. I didn’t want to let anyone down but just couldn’t motivate myself and I think it shows in the game.

“ It was the hardest I’d worked in my life ”



» Will Nigel ever make a new game? We’ll have to wait and see.

After these two Elite games, it's difficult to see much else you were involved in. Had you burned out?

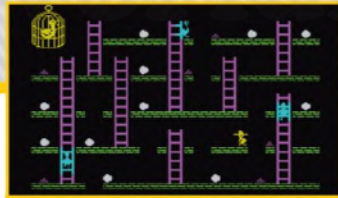
Definitely. I wanted a complete change and had had enough of programming. I was still in contact with Steve and I was round his house one day, chatting about his workload. He was doing a hell of a lot on his own, managing all the staff as well as running the business. I said to him, 'you need a software development manager' – someone to keep track of programmers, deadlines and schedules – he thought I was pitching for the job and offered me the full-time role of software coordinator. I was phoning around the programmers, keeping track of their progress and when they sent in games I'd test them and give feedback. But I wanted to move, I wanted to be a software development manager properly, so applied for job at Audiogenic in London and moved down there. I was software manager there so had moved into management, rather than a mere supervising role.

How did you feel in these new roles?

It was what I wanted to do. I didn't want to be coding, I wanted to have what I saw as a proper job.

What happened next?

After about three years at Audiogenic, I wanted to get out of the games industry completely. Having always loved the idea of computers being able to talk to each other, a friend



» An old **Retro Gamer** survey saw Nigel's brilliant platformer winning by receiving 42 per cent of the votes.

got me involved in the networking industry and I've been doing that ever since in one form or another.

Do you have any regrets about leaving the software industry?

I was in contact with people from the games industry and would hear snippets and it seemed to get a lot more commercial after I left. I don't think I have any particular talent as a businessman and working as a programmer when you're just a cog in a machine wouldn't have been for me either. The fun part of it was the early days when people like me and my next-door neighbour could write a little game about a rabbit travelling around the world, put an advert in a magazine and sell it for £4.50 a tape... so, no, I don't think I regret leaving the industry.

With the prospect of a long-lost Alderton classic to hunt down, we ask Nigel how he looks back at his greatest achievement.

I got a huge buzz the first time I saw *Chuckie Egg* on a shop shelf but it wasn't really about that. The biggest thrill for me was that people enjoyed playing it and I still like that today, that it's popular and people are still helping Harry dodge birds and collect eggs.

And with that, Retro Gamer proffers its thanks to Nigel who kindly wishes us a safe journey home as we head for the eggs-it. Sorry, couldn't resist.

Many thanks to Bagshot Row, The *Chuckie Egg* Professional's Resource Kit site. Check it out at www.bagshot-row.org/chuckie-egg. We also recommend *Atomic Chuckie Egg*, a port of the Electron version to one Acorn machine that didn't receive an original release, the Atom. It can be downloaded from www.retrossoftware.co.uk/atomicce.



» [Amstrad] It wasn't the prettiest game, but *Ghosts 'N' Goblins* was perfectly playable on the Amstrad CPC.

*** YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS**

They're a very knowledgeable lot the **Retro Gamer** readers, so we opened the floor and asked them to test every facet of Nigel's memory...

Joefish: Did you know that in the Spectrum version of *Chuckie Egg*, if you start Level Three holding Right, run right, jump the gap, climb the ladder and run left (all without stopping) you can run straight through the bird there? Feature or bug?

Really? [Laughs] I'll have to test that out. So to answer the question, yes it was a feature. Which level was it again?

Paranoid Marvin: Why a crazy duck in the cage and not a hen or a chicken?

Is it? Probably down to my drawing skills, or lack of. I guess the bill gives it away!

Joefish: How many people phoned up to complain they couldn't use the ladders, and had to be told to hold Up as you run past?

Funnily enough, my Dad first tried the game after I'd finished it and I remember watching him struggle to use the ladders. At the time I got quite frustrated watching him, assuming it was just because he wasn't a games player, but I realised afterwards it could have worked a bit better.

psj3089: How did you do that classic 'squelch' noise when you pick up the bird seed? Sounds like someone who's had a dodgy curry...

[Laughs] That was the Spectrum for you... anything that sounded a bit different was a bonus!

Joefish: What species are the walking blue birds?

Ostriches. Don't ask me why.

Eric: Why is *Chuckie Egg* not called *Hen-House Harry*?

Eggy Kong was my title and A&F changed it to *Chuckie Egg*. I'd never heard of it before but apparently it's a northern phrase that just means egg. They thought it was a brilliant name and I was quite happy because I thought my name was a bit rubbish.

Joefish: Was the intention with *Commando* to get as close to the arcade game as possible, or to make a more playable game for the home? As it certainly turned out to be the latter and was a much better game because of it.

We actually tried to copy the game as closely as possible. Keith [Burkhill] might be a better guy to ask.

psj3089: Do you feel guilty that I didn't get great exam results in school because I was addicted to *Chuckie Egg* and *Commando*?

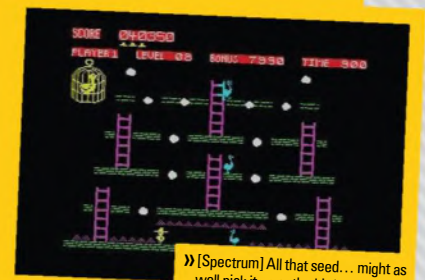
[Laughs] Please don't sue me! If it helps, I was supposed to be revising for my exams when I was writing *Chuckie Egg*...

Joefish: Were you meant to be able to jump across the lift shafts? It's incredibly hard to get it just right to do so.

Crikey, this guy likes *Chuckie Egg* a lot doesn't he? And no, you weren't. I wanted it so that you needed to 'bounce' across a lift. Obviously I didn't quite succeed.

Merman: Do you still play your old games?

Only recently I played a few online, mainly spurred on by talking to **Retro Gamer**. Haven't they got funny names your readers?



» [Spectrum] All that seed... might as well pick it up or the bird will scoff it.

