

Interview With An Ex-ACG (Ashby Computers & Graphics) Employee

Background

*Over the past few months on the **ultimate-wurld.com** site, I've alluded to an ongoing conversation with someone who used to work for 'Ultimate', and I promised to reveal some of the secrets that this source had disclosed to me.*

However, you can't just blunder into this kind of thing! Firstly, you have to build up a degree of trust; I need to assure my source that I'm not going to blurt out something given in good faith (and in confidence), and I need to feel happy that I'm not being hoaxed by some prankster!

Trust was duly established, and after some to-ing and fro-ing between us, I've finally managed to get around to conducting an 'interview' via email...

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The Interview

Rob: Hi, and thanks for agreeing to be interviewed! First off; what is your relationship with Ultimate?

ACG: I was employed there for quite a few years up until just before the US Gold takeover. I never worked on the programming side when I was employed at AC&G although I did get to mingle with the programmers quite regularly as we were a relatively small, close and friendly group of employees.

These days I work elsewhere, but I still remain in contact with them!

Rob: Given how hard it is to get ex-AC&G people to talk, I assume that there was some kind of policy not to talk to anyone outside of the company - one that still seems to be in place?

ACG: The quietness UPTG showed towards the press was not intentional and came about purely by accident. UPTG were in fact quite a small team of people who worked very hard to deliver a top quality product, leaving no time to be able to talk to the press etc. Chris and Tim had always wanted to be open with the fans but when they saw the reaction this mystique generated they thought it the best PR they could possibly have - and it worked well!

I am quite surprised by the "Wall-Of-Silence" still apparent with the Rare team and ex-employees, this silence was never written into contracts and I can only assume that it is maintained today as a mark or respect towards the Stammers or the company itself.

The press could not get interviews or sneak previews of the UPTG stuff but as a fan had you written to them and requested stuff they would have just sent it to you - FREE!

Rob: Fair enough - I must admit that I've had a few emails from people who got posters out of them, anyway. Lucky swines! So, I have to ask; are you in the infamous picture of the Ultimate team on the lawn? I guess you wouldn't tell me if you were, right?



ACG: Nope, I'm not - I was not important enough! but the folks in the picture are (from left to right) **Tim Stamper** (Graphics Director), **Carol Stamper** (Company Secretary), **Chris Stamper** (Software Director), **Rachel** (Secretary), **David** (Sound / Music Department), **Mark** (Head Of Software), **Paul** (Software), **Steve** (Graphics) and **Kevin** (Graphics) - most of the brains behind the UPTG team.

As far as I am aware most are all still in some way connected with Rare in some form or another. It is also these guys who were responsible for games like Sabre Wulf, Knight Lore, and Alien 8 among others!

Rob: That's the team?

Well, there are a few more people not in the photo but as far as I know, ALL Ultimate projects were programmed at The Green in Ashby-De-La-Zouch, Leicestershire and the only external work done by other companies was some coding on the C64 and some advertising!

Rob: So John Lathbury's not in the picture, either. Shame - I gather he was one of the founders of the company. I imagine you probably won't directly answer this for obvious reasons, but what was your role at AC&G?

ACG: I would love to be able to tell you that I was responsible for Sabre Wulf, Alien 8 or even a small graphical part from one of the games but sadly I wasn't! A loose description would be "I worked within the marketing / distribution area of the company". Each employee was really treated as an equal - each had their own important role to play and that's why I still consider it to be one of the best companies, if not THE BEST company, I have ever worked for.

The Technical Stuff

Rob: As a hobbyist myself, the aspect of Ultimate that I'm most interested in is the technical stuff - what tools did they use, what were the group dynamics, how did they approach design, how did they deal with playtesting, etc etc.

ACG: I am amused that many websites claim that the Ultimate team ported their Spectrum games from other machine formats?!? Quite simply not true... ..most games were born in the mind, planned on paper and programmed on the humble Spectrum (a somewhat modified Spectrum but never the less, still a Spectrum!)

Most computers within the premises of UPTG had been ripped apart for modification and were being used with most of their innards spread out over the desk, it was really weird back then to see a humble Spectrum in bits on a desk hooked up to a "proper keyboard".

I seem to remember that there were also "many" modified Opus Discovery Disc Drive units hooked up to the development machines and these were used to store and access all the work while it was in progress. I also remember several Currah Speech Synthesizer units entwined in the proceedings but I can't remember if any UPTG Spectrum game featured speech... maybe someone could answer that one?

(Rob: Lunar Jetman is the only one that springs to mind, but I never had a Currah unit so I might have missed some!)

ACG: Design was quite simply an idea born in someones mind - shared with the others and expanded on. The programmers would listen to anyone who had a good idea, they would also listen to the bad ideas to see if they could be made into good ideas.

Playtesting was done within the company, so that the basics of the next game (or screen shots) would not find their way to the pages of the next Sinclair monthly magazine. One of the team would program something and everyone would test it, any good/bad points would be noted and addressed, it was that simple.

Working At The Green

Rob: Whenever I get talking to other fans, one question that always comes up is 'what was it like to work for Ultimate back then?'. Where you all in a big room, were you all working on the same projects at the same time, was there a 'team' spirit, did you socialise outside of work, did you endure 'crunch time' just prior to a product's launch, did you feel like you were in competition with other publishers like Imagine and Ocean, etc etc. So, what was it like to work for AC&G back then? :-)

ACG: There were many different rooms within the "four walls" at The Green with people working on all different parts of the ongoing projects at the time. There was a huge team spirit within the group, each person looking forward to what the person next to them or in the next room was going to produce next.

I remember when the Knight Lore project was in progress - many people thought that the concept would prove impossible to achive on a Spectrum. The 3D concept had been attempted several times before but never looked that spectacular (Ant Attack etc.) but as you can imagine the game was developed and re-developed, programmed and re-programmed, de-bugged and de-bugged again and when we were shown a development version of the game's graphics there were open mouths and chins on the floor all over!

We did endure a kind of crunch time but back then it was not as important as it would be by today's standards. It was more important then to develop a quality product and then ship it, at the cost of deadlines, rather than meet the deadline and ship a half-arsed product!

I think the majority of the UPTG team felt some kind of competition from other software houses but to be honest it was not that great, it was felt that the quality of the UPTG products set the company apart from the others.

There was some out-of-hours socialising but with the hours many of the directors and programmers put in it was quite minimal.

Rob: Did the ideas come from the team collectively or was it more of each project belonging to a particular person?

ACG: Ideas usually stemmed from a single person, who then shared it with the team, who in turn discussed the idea, enlarged on it and the person who had the idea in the first instance then went off and expanded on it.

Rob: Well, that leads me on to an obvious question; what do you think made the Ultimate games the success they were?

ACG: Without a doubt it was the team effort that made the games what they were. Back in the 80's when companies were churning out game after game, most were programmed by one person as a solo project with the assistance of someone else to add the music score etc., whereas Ultimate adopted the style of programming that is apparent in today's standard. That is to say, quite a few people working on the same project at the same time, all giving a valued input.

For one person to start and complete a project today would be quite simply impossible.

Rob: Heh - as a hobbyist bedroom games coder I take a little umbrage at that! But anyway; which is your favourite Ultimate title, and why?

ACG: Sabre Wulf!

Why? Well, in my opinion others tried to copy it but never got close.

Jon Ritman nicked the Knight Lore 3D effect and churned out some great 'clones' in the form of Batman and Head Over Heels, but no-one ever got close to the playability and perfection of Sabre Wulf... If I could have been held responsible for just one game then it would have to be Sabre Wulf.

I have often wondered what the Ultimate games would have been like if they had utilised the extras that the 128k machines had to offer, just imagine Sabre Wulf 128, Knight Lore 128 or Alien 8 128 - how cool would that have been?

Rob: Well, quite.... :-)

(and that reminds me, Jon Ritman was linked with AC&G way back when - I must see if he'll agree to answering a few questions for the site, too!)

Exploring Some Myths

Rob: When we've exchanged email in the past, you've 'set the record straight' on a few myths. Given the 'remote' way that this interview is being conducted, I thought that I'd just shoot off a few titles and let you tell everyone what you've previously told me... :-)

So, first up; Lunar Jet Man's trailer...

ACG: Well, sorry to all the hopefuls out there and to all the people who sat for days afterwards, entering POKES for infinite-lives in hope of finding it - its not there! The Lunar Jetman Trailer does not exist - the Stampers are not totally blameless on this front as there was a rumour that the picture that was sent to CRASH was mocked up by them to cause this controversy - ever wondered why the graphics for the trailer looked so authentic !!!!

Rob: Yep, I think we can close the book on that one now - I know people who've gone through the binary image of the game and not found any trailer graphics, so I'm happy to kill that myth off!

Now, which really came first, Knight Lore or Sabre Wulf?

ACG: It is correct that Knight Lore was completed before Sabre Wulf but would you like another shock so was ALIEN 8!

Knight Lore was completed and ready to ship out 10 months before Sabre Wulf, the coding for Alien 8 had been written and was 95% compiled at the release of Sabre Wulf. As you may be aware - Knight Lore was not released because the Stampers did not think the home games player was ready for it at the time, that and the thought that if they released it then (i.e. before Sabre Wulf) then Sabre Wulf would not have sold like it did.

It was kind of the same scenario with **Mire Mare** and Gunfright...

Rob: Ah, **Mire Mare**. I reckon I get about a half-dozen emails every week about Mire Mare. Do you mind if I delay that one for a few moments longer and cover the other AC&G titles before we cover that one? For instance, where does Pentagram fit into all of this - it has been rumoured that Gunfright was *not* the last true AC&G title?

ACG: Well, it is true to say that Gunfright was the last Ultimate collaboration as a team but if you want to get technical Pentagram was, it was programmed by the newly formed Rare team (ex-Ashby programmers, so still Ultimate!!)

Rob: Does that mean that, technically, Pentagram was the first Rare game?

ACG: No, Pentagram was not the first Rare game. Rare as a company had been set up before the demise and sell-off of UPTG and were already working on Nintendo products while the finishing touches were being applied to Pentagram.

Gunfright was the last Spectrum AC&G / UPTG release whereas Pentagram was the first Spectrum Rare / UPTG release. Most Spectrum magazines published this fact; I think CRASH used to show a 'publisher and label' section in their product info box i.e. the publisher being AC&G and the label being UPTG. With Pentagram and some of the following products they showed Rare Ltd as the publisher and UPTG as the label, later still going on to show US Gold and UPTG.

Rob: Okay, that makes sense.

What about Solar Jetman? I've seen the Nintendo version, but I've heard of other versions too - particularly a Spectrum one...

ACG: I did hear some time ago that there was a snapshot of the Spectrum version of Solar Jetman doing the rounds on the internet but I must stress that this was a rumour and I have not seen anything of it, I never saw anything of it when I was with the team (now if a Mire Mare snapshot was doing the rounds I would kinda piss myself with excitement because I know **the code for this exists - I have seen it and it was a corker!**)

Rob: Mire Mare *again* - okay, I guess it's time for you to spill the beans!

The Mire Mare Story

ACG: The first thing you have to appreciate is that the Mire Mare story is entirely linked with the sale of part of the company to US Gold.

Although Mire Mare was coded before Gunfright the Stampers were already planning to bail out of the market by selling off part of the company to US Gold, and they wanted to keep Mire Mare back as a Grand Finale - given the popularity of Sabre Man this was classed as a good idea, so Gunfright was completed and released first.

At this point the part-takeover moved along quicker than expected and US Gold took control just after the release of Gunfright. It soon became apparent that they were not interested in developing software for release on the Ultimate label (which in my opinion was a good idea, most US Gold stuff was rushed, full of bugs and excuse my french f@#&ing s%^t). They were more interested in taking all the back catalogue and squeezing the remaining life out of them by putting them on the £2.99 KIXX label.

As you can expect this really upset the UPTG / AC&G team, so much so that when US Gold approached Chris and Tim asking where this planned Mire Mare title was as they would like to put it out on the KIXX label they were told that it was not finished (*although it basically was!*)

Rob: [Interrupting] I wonder if there is a legal situation with Mire Mare then, which might explain why the Stampers have never cleared up the mystery of whether or not it actually exists. I mean, maybe if they suddenly disclose that it does exist in a completed (or mostly completed) state, then whoever owns US Gold now might have a stake in it?

ACG: Well, US Gold were told that the game was still under development and that it still needed another 6 months work to complete - US Gold did not want to invest money in completing this game so it was shelved - *but it does exist - I have seen it, I have played it.*

As far as I was aware, all the artwork had been made and Ultimate were going to return to the big fat cardboard packaging for this game - although this had not been confirmed and I had not seen this (as I departed some weeks before). I can only now assume that the packaging did arrive as you have the Mire Mare artwork on your site.

The Collected Works Mystery

Rob: So the deal between US Gold and AC&G didn't include everything that Ultimate had or owned, just some of the titles? I wonder if this explains why Underwulde wasn't on The Collected Works compilation - maybe there was some contractual problem with that, too?

ACG: Well, if my memory serves me well I seem to remember that Underwulde was left off the Collected Works compilation for compatibility reasons. As you may well remember, the introduction of the Spectrum 128k caused quite a few compatibility problems with some of the older software (Elite, for example), and I think that Underwulde was also one of these titles.

The Spectrum +2, +2a and +3 had the same compatibility problems as the earlier 128k and as the Collected Works was to be released on Disc format as well as on cassette in the same packaging (US Gold being tight) it was decided to leave it off.

(**Rob:** Fair enough, but the final Collected Works packaging wasn't too shabby, with its interview sheet and 'hint card'. I should know, I bought the disc version the same day I bought my +3!)

ACG: Out of curiosity, did you know that the copyright of the Ashby Computers and Graphics Ltd and Ultimate Play The Game logos are still owned by the Stampers and not US Gold - this was not part of the deal...
...neither was Sabre Wulf, that's why it never appeared on the £2.99 KIXX label. Sabre Wulf did however appear on the Collected Works disc and cassette.

Like yourself, I've always hoped that the Ultimate / Rare crew would do some modern conversions of the old classics but I am not sure where the copyright of the other games lay? Does US Gold still exist in some form or another?

Rob: I don't know; I think they were part of Centresoft, which I think ended up being part of Infogrammes? (I'm sure someone will write-in and correct this!)

ACG: It wasn't just the titles; have you any idea why Martianoids and Bubbler were graphically inferior to the likes of Knight Lore? I was told that US Gold were never given the rights to use the Filmation Engine used in Knight Lore etc as part of the buy-out... Apparently the later games (Martianoids and Bubbler) used the development Filmation Engine used on the other games, I don't know if there is much truth in that as it was only a rumour I heard after my departure, but it would explain the later games being so graphically poor in comparison.

Rob: That would explain why there is a marked 'non-use' of the earlier Ultimate style and approach.

The Present

ACG: Although they are no longer trading, Ultimate and Ashby Computers are still registered companies to the Stampers / Rare; it's a mystery to me why they would keep these companies alive and not trade with them.

(I guess I am kind of hoping that the Stampers will use the Ultimate Play The Game logo somewhere in the new Sabre Wulf game - if just for sad old sods like me!)

Rob: Absolutely; I can't wait for the Sabre Wulf game. I'm a bit worried that it might be a bit too cutesy in places (I was *horrified* when I first saw the screenshot with the tea-party) but we'll see. The number of references to UPTG stuff that I've seen in the trailer movie and in the various screengrabs leaves me quite hopeful.

Well, thanks for sharing these secrets with us, it's really appreciated! Who knows, maybe one day we can persuade Tim or Chris to make some 'official' comment on Mire Mare.

:-)

ACG: :-)

And sincere thanks for the photos, cuttings, posters and bits that you have sent and kindly allowed me to share with everyone via the site (the Xmas card, team photo, the pricing catalog, and several adverts so far, with more bits to come).