

on the trail of mire mare

MIRE MARE – the mythical Sabreman game that never saw the light of day. Some believe it exists; others claim to have actually played it. Martyn Carroll dons his pith helmet and boldly goes in search of the truth behind the most intriguing of retro tales



» According to Rare's Leigh Loveday, Tim Stamper was bemused that anyone would want to see this cover art.

I picked up the trail to *Mire Mare* later than most. I played, and adored, nearly every Ultimate game on my old Spectrum, but I never managed to complete a single Sabreman adventure. I therefore didn't see the finish screens to *Underwulde*, *Knight Lore* or *Pentagram*, all of which mentioned the mysterious *Mire Mare*, so the promise of this new Sabreman game completely escaped me.

That changed when I first visited the official Rare website in the late Nineties. The site, put together by former *Your Sinclair* contributor Leigh Loveday, featured a lovely retro section that looked back to the firm's ACG/Ultimate days. And it included a 'Limbo' page where a few of the games that never made it were mentioned. Headlining this page was the fascinating story of *Mire Mare*. Leigh revealed that some work had been done on the game and that it was to have more in common with *Sabre Wulf*, Sabreman's debut, than the later isometric adventures: "The basic game design and cover art were both completed, but when the actual coding aspect became entangled in the chaos of the company's hectic career-peak schedule, it became

inevitable that *Mire Mare* would never see the light of day."

So that was that. There was no *Mire Mare*. All that remained was the A2-sized cover painting, which Leigh grabbed from Tim Stamper's personal artwork folder and scanned for inclusion on the website.

the revelation

The investigation would end right here were it not for an interview that appeared on the Ultimate Wulde fan site in 2002. Site owner Rob Uttley was contacted by someone who claimed to have worked for Ultimate in a marketing role and was willing to share some inside secrets. This was big news, as former Ultimate staff rarely went on record. Even bigger news was this anonymous person's revelations about *Mire Mare*.

"It does exist," he told Rob. "I have seen it, I have played it, and it was a corker!"

At this point, anyone with any interest in Ultimate would have

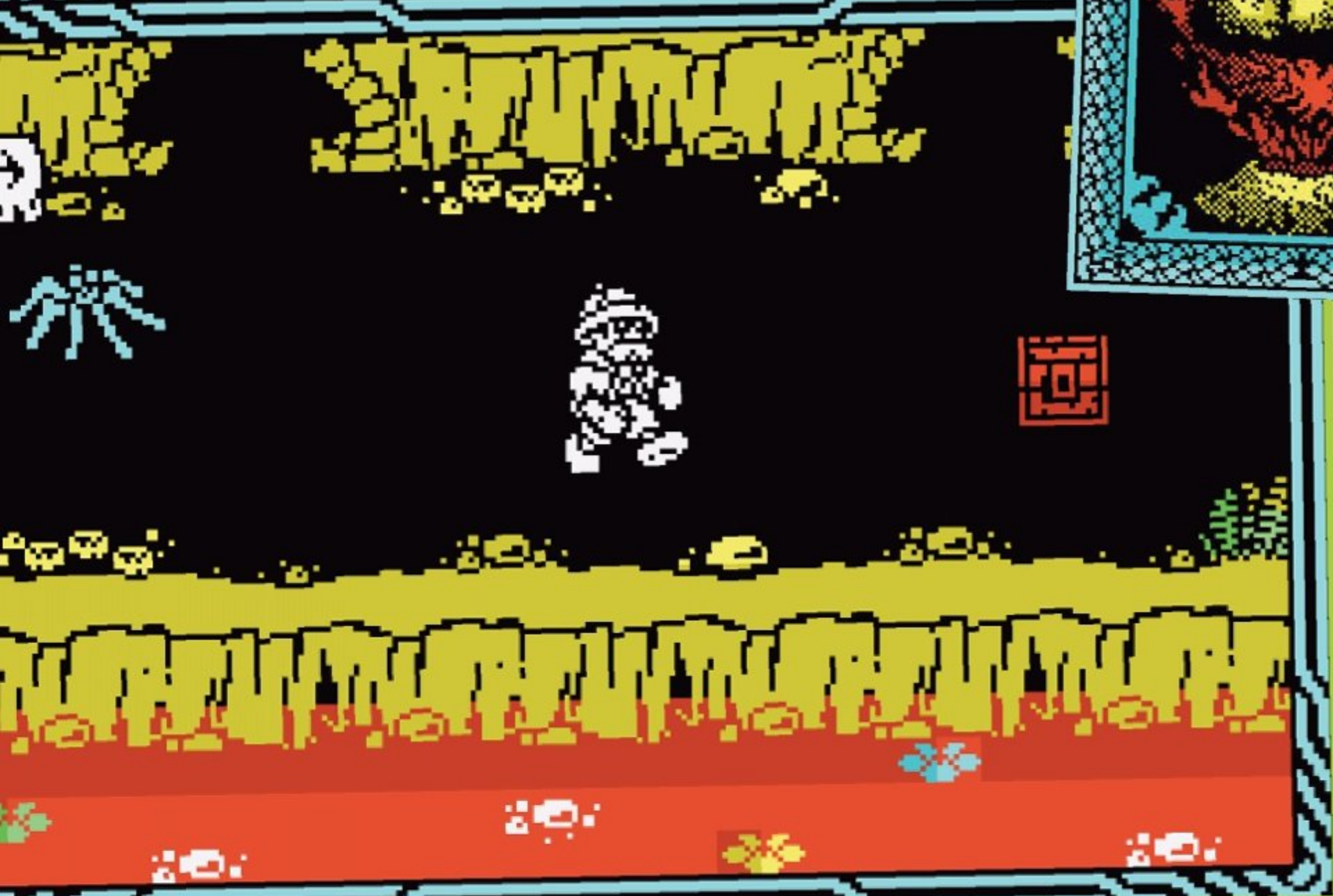
surely jumped for joy and kissed the dog-eared *Sabre Wulf* poster on their wall. The rumours were true – *Mire Mare* did exist. And, incredibly, it was playable! But why wouldn't Ultimate release such an impressive game if it was complete? It was because of US Gold, apparently.

It's well known that at the beginning of 1986, the Ultimate name and back catalogue were sold off to US Gold. According to this insider, *Mire Mare* was actually completed before *Gunfright* – the last Ultimate game the Stampers worked on – but the pair wanted to hold it back as a "grand finale" before they left the Spectrum behind and moved over to the NES. However, the Stampers learnt that US Gold was more interested in whacking out the old Ultimate hits on the Kixx budget label than marketing new, full-price games. "This really upset the team," he revealed, "so 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."

This was riveting stuff. We now had a semi-plausible reason for why it was never released, and another reason to moan about US Gold. Surely it was just a matter of time before a copy of the game surfaced.

“ Why wouldn't Ultimate release such an impressive game if it was complete? ”

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THE FOOTHILLS OF MORN

■ If *Mire Mare* had been released, we're guessing – all right, hoping – it would look a little like this.



MIRE MARE: an artist's impression

If *Mire Mare* had been released, what would it have looked like? Speculation is tricky as the only known fact is that it was to hark back to the top-down style of *Sabre Wulf*. Hopefully it would have retained the vibrant colours of Sabreman's debut rather than a drab monochrome

display, and would have featured scrolling, instead of a flick screen approach. It's conceivable too that the gameplay would evolve from a simple collect-'em-up, into a more structured adventure with specific, usable objects and NPCs that may help or hinder Sabreman.

The title alludes to a swamp setting, and the cover art shows a fiery pit with what appears to be a phoenix in the flames, suggesting an environment that features both humid, tropical jungle and arid, volcanic scenery. Additional clues may possibly be found in Tim Stamper's 'Land of Ultimatum' map, which came with the *Collected Works* release. The first four Sabreman games are all referenced, and there's also a series of volcanoes, which must surely relate to *Mire Mare*. Surrounding these volcanoes are several named locations – Stone Hills, Dark Mountains and Mount Sol. Maybe these were to feature in *Mire Mare*?

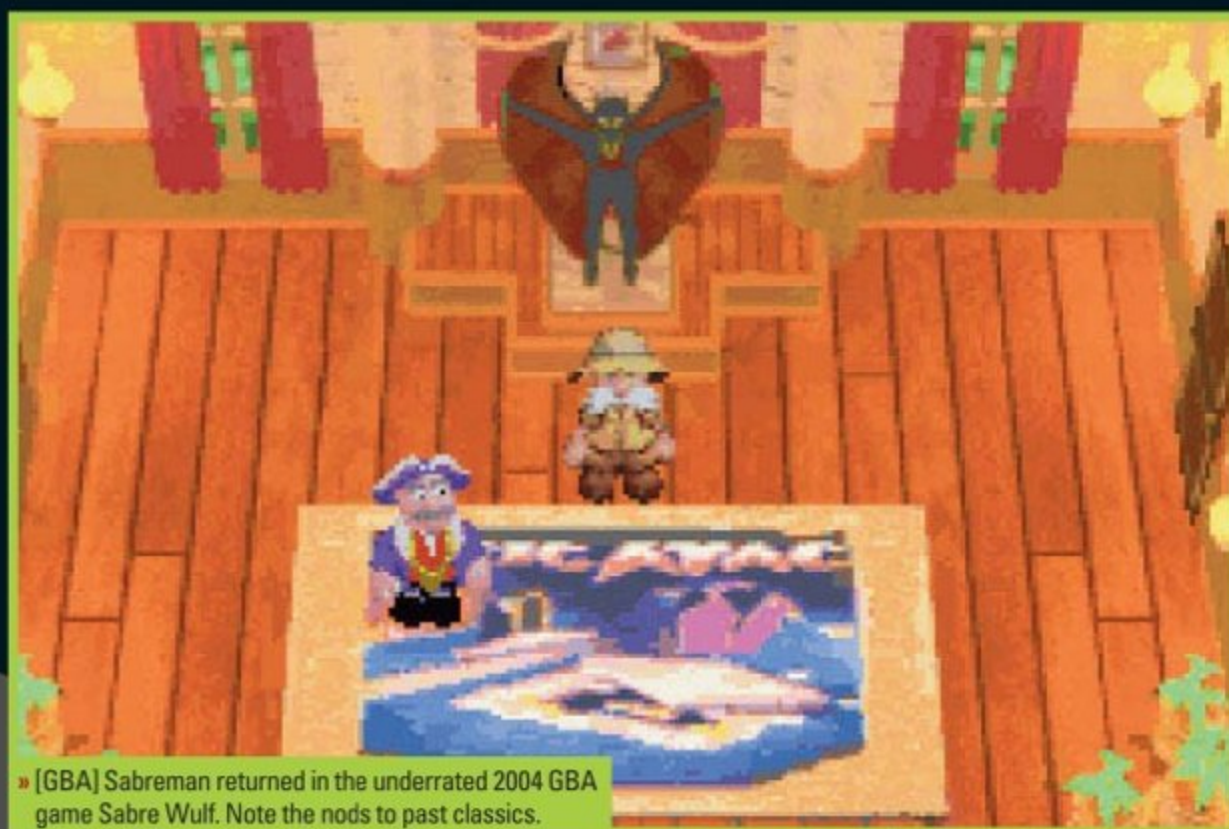
Based on this guesswork and speculation, graphics artist Jarrod Bentley (*Crystal Kingdom Dizzy*, *Turbo The Tortoise*, *Ghost Castle* games) has mocked up a screen showing how *Mire Mare* might have looked on the Spectrum...

In 2005, the same ex-employee spoke to Spectrum fanzine *ZX Shed*. Still under the guise of anonymity, he repeated most of the same claims, although this time he did say that the game looked like *Sabre Wulf*, tallying with what Leigh Loveday revealed years earlier. He also claimed something that simply didn't add up. Talking about *Solar Jetman*, he said that the game was being worked on when he left the company. And when did he leave Ultimate? Before the US Gold takeover, apparently, which meant that Ultimate would have been working on *Solar Jetman* prior to 1986. Yet *Solar Jetman* was actually developed for the NES by Zippo Games, and according to the Pickford brothers, work on the game didn't commence until mid-1989.

I decided to go back and re-read the Ultimate Wurld interview to see if I could spot any other oddities. The first thing that stuck out was his assertion that "*Knight Lore* was completed and ready to ship out ten months before *Sabre Wulf*". It's a well-worn tale that *Knight Lore* was completed before *Sabre Wulf*, and *Knight Lore* was held back because Ultimate felt that it was so

ahead of everything else out there that it would hamper sales of *Sabre Wulf*. Tim Stamper himself claimed this in an interview in the March 1988 issue of *The Games Machine* magazine, yet evidence suggests that he may have been exaggerating to some extent. A few years back, former *RG* contributor Chris Wild poked around in the code of both games and discovered that *Sabre Wulf* uses more primitive coding routines in line with Ultimate's earlier releases, whereas *Knight Lore* employed more optimised techniques. In short, the code evolved. It doesn't make sense that Chris would revert back to develop the supposedly subsequent *Sabre Wulf*. What's more likely is that *Knight Lore* was in production and put on hold at some point to develop *Sabre Wulf*. The interviewee's claim that it was "ready to ship" ten months before *Sabre Wulf* is implausible. *Sabre Wulf* was released in June 1984 – ten months before then would be roughly the time when Ultimate was busy working on *Lunar Jetman* and *Atic Atac*.

The other questionable answer came when Rob asked him about the memorable team photograph that appeared in the *Games Machine* article. The photo shows staff outside



■ [GBA] Sabreman returned in the underrated 2004 GBA game *Sabre Wulf*. Note the nods to past classics.

Rare's Twycross HQ, but the caption only gives full names for Chris, Tim and Carole Stamper – the rest are just listed by their first names. When naming the people featured, the insider quotes the magazine caption almost verbatim – and fails to fill in any of the missing surnames. You'd think that if he'd previously worked with some of these people he'd reveal their full names! That got me thinking – I wonder if any of the Ultimate staff remember him?

I needed his name, and this was given to me by the guys at *ZX Shed*.

“Getting in touch with ex-Ultimate staff isn't easy. Getting them to speak is even harder”



» [Spectrum] Sabreman in Gandalf guise gets to grips with mystic runes in *Pentagram*.



» [Spectrum] Mark Betteridge was responsible for the technically impressive but tough-as-nails *Cyberon*.

I also got hold of his email address and, in May 2008, sent him a quick message saying that I was looking for additional information about *Mire Mare*. At first he seemed slightly annoyed that I'd tracked him down, but then agreed to answer my questions. Unfortunately, he added nothing new and simply referred me back to the Ultimate Wurlde interview. But at least I now had his name.

Getting in touch with ex-Ultimate staff isn't easy. Getting them to speak is even harder. However, I managed to make contact with Huw Ward via the Friends Reunited website. At the time, Huw was Rare's head of testing, and he's been involved in QA roles since the early days when he was Ultimate's original game tester. He's one of the company's longest-serving employees, and he also happens to be Carole Stamper's brother. He's a very credible source.

Huw wasn't prepared to grant us a full interview, no doubt due to his links to the Stampers and his continued employment with Rare, but I was able to put this questionable marketing guy's name to him. His reply wasn't entirely surprising. He'd never heard of him, and revealed that Ultimate never employed anyone in what could be classed as a marketing role. And as for *Mire Mare*, Huw doesn't remember seeing a single graphic or line of code.

I later contacted Leigh Loveday, who still works at Rare, and

mentioned the guy's name and his claims. The Stampers had left Rare by this point so he wasn't able to ask them directly, but he quizzed some of the old boys at the company and they were all in agreement with Huw – no one remembered this guy or saw anything to support his claims regarding *Mire Mare*. The whole thing was clearly a hoax.

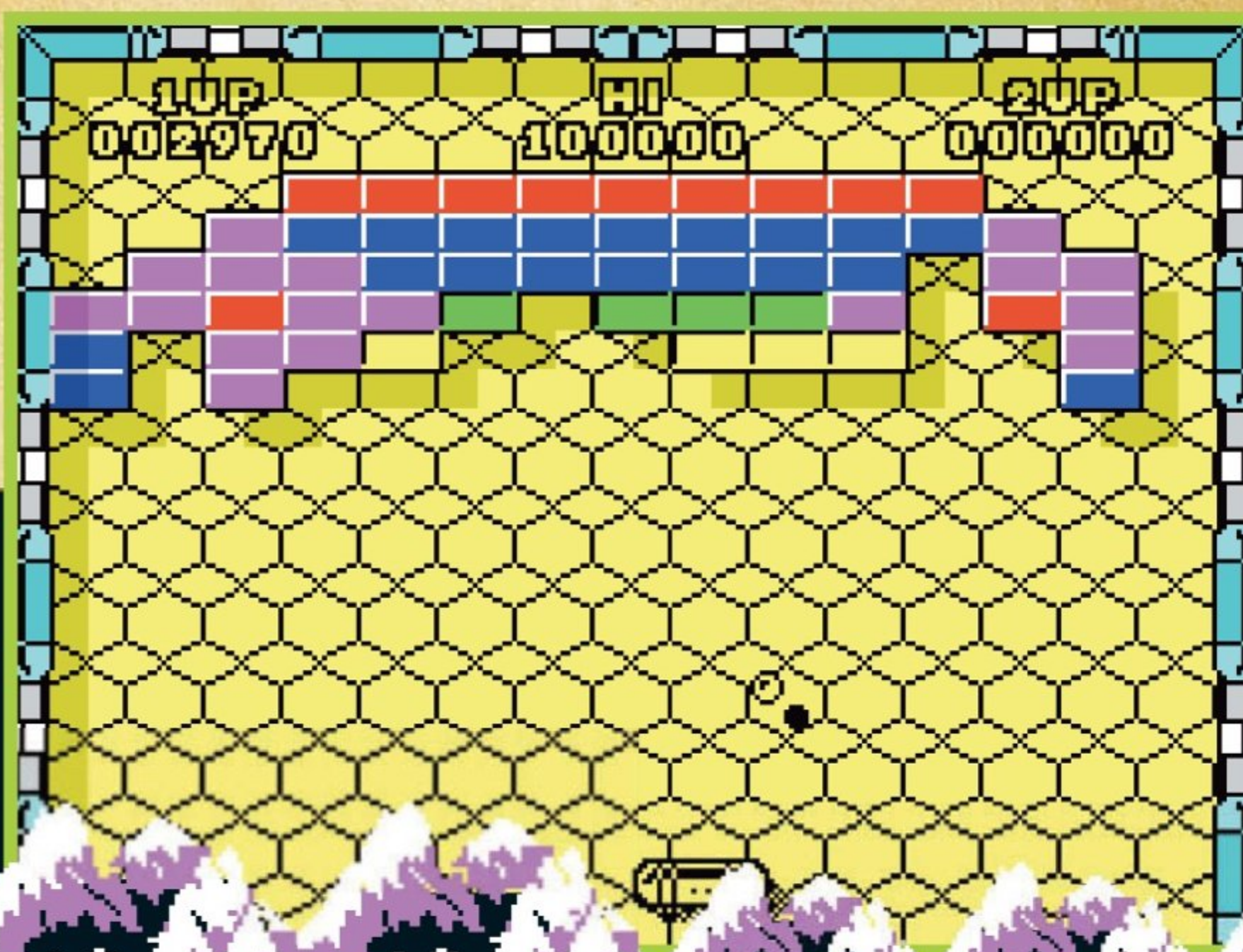
the resumption

Fast-forward to 2012 and unsurprisingly no new *Mire Mare* details have come to light. I'm positive that the claims of a playable game are untrue, but I'm still keen to discover specific details about the game's design – plot, location, objectives and so on – and determine whether any actual coding was done. The next step was to find out who might have worked on *Mire Mare*.

To focus my search, I needed to try to determine when the game would have been in development. The *Mire Mare* name was first revealed in 1984, yet Ultimate continued to release Spectrum games until 1987, *Bubbler* being the last. Thankfully, a brief news item in the June 1987 issue of *Sinclair User* dates it. "Ultimate still exists," went the text. "What with *Bubbler* being moderately OK, we now have top secret news of upcoming games. First up will be *Mire Mare*. Nobody at US Gold knows anything about it and Ultimate is, as usual, locked away in a bunker and

MIRE MARE SECRETS

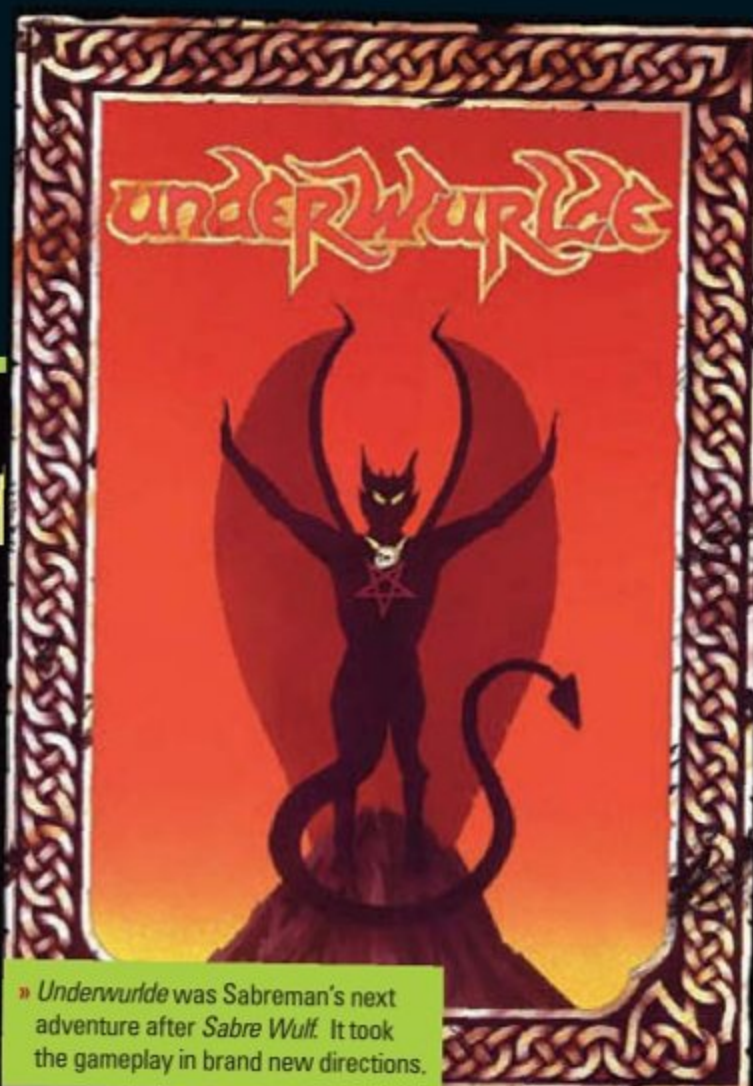
While researching *Mire Mare*, a couple of interesting facts came to light about Mark Betteridge, the programmer who started at Ultimate as a teenager and eventually became Rare's studio director when the Stampers left the business in 2007. The first is that it was Mark, not Chris Stamper, who wrote the scrolling Filamation II engine that was used in *Nightshade* and *Gunfright*. The second, more surprising fact is that Mark briefly went freelance during 1987 and wrote the brilliant Spectrum version of *Batty* for Elite under the pseudonym Mark Crane. His original version of the game, entitled *Wipe Out*, carries the credit KB.RAM – an anagram of MARK.B.



» [Spectrum] In *Underwurld*, Sabreman had to deal with grumpy guardians blocking his path.



» *Underwurld* was Sabreman's next adventure after *Sabre Wulf*. It took the gameplay in brand new directions.



» *Knight Lore* was a further example of Ultimate's brilliance. It introduced filmation and was endlessly copied.



not talking to anybody. Right after *Mire Mare* there is the prospect of 'Jetpac brought up to date'."

So *Mire Mare* would have followed *Bubbler*. This seems feasible, as the finish screen to *Bubbler* promises a sequel, suggesting that the game wasn't intended to be Ultimate's Spectrum swansong. It would seem that whoever was responsible for *Bubbler* and the other post-Stamper Ultimate games – *Cyberun*, *Pentagram* and *Martianoids* – was probably involved with *Mire Mare*.

I emailed Leigh about the authorship of these games and he confirmed that in-house programmer Mark Betteridge definitely wrote *Cyberun*. The others were more uncertain, with the general consensus being that Mark and John Lathbury, one of the company's directors, were responsible. I was then reminded of an old email I'd received from former Rare community manager George Kelion, which listed Mark's selected softography. Among the NES and SNES titles was *Bubbler*. If Mark did *Cyberun* and *Bubbler*, maybe it was John behind *Pentagram* and *Martianoids*? One of them might know something.

Well, we can cross Mark off the list straight away, as he's already revealed in *RG* everything he knows about *Mire Mare*. "I don't think the game itself ever got very far," he said in issue 73. "It certainly wasn't completed. There was every intention of finishing and releasing it, but Ultimate's time on the 8-bit home

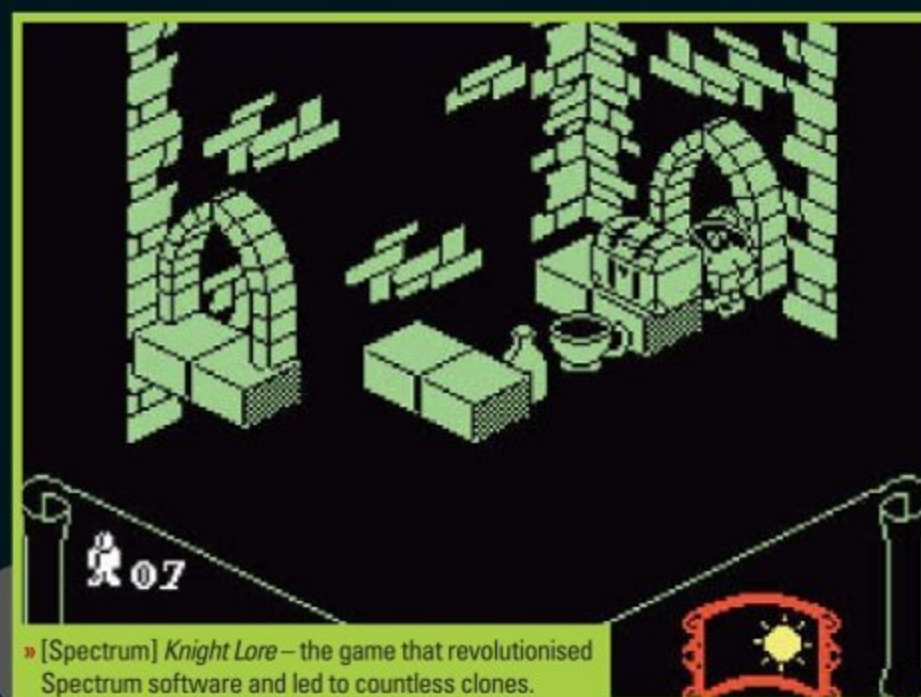
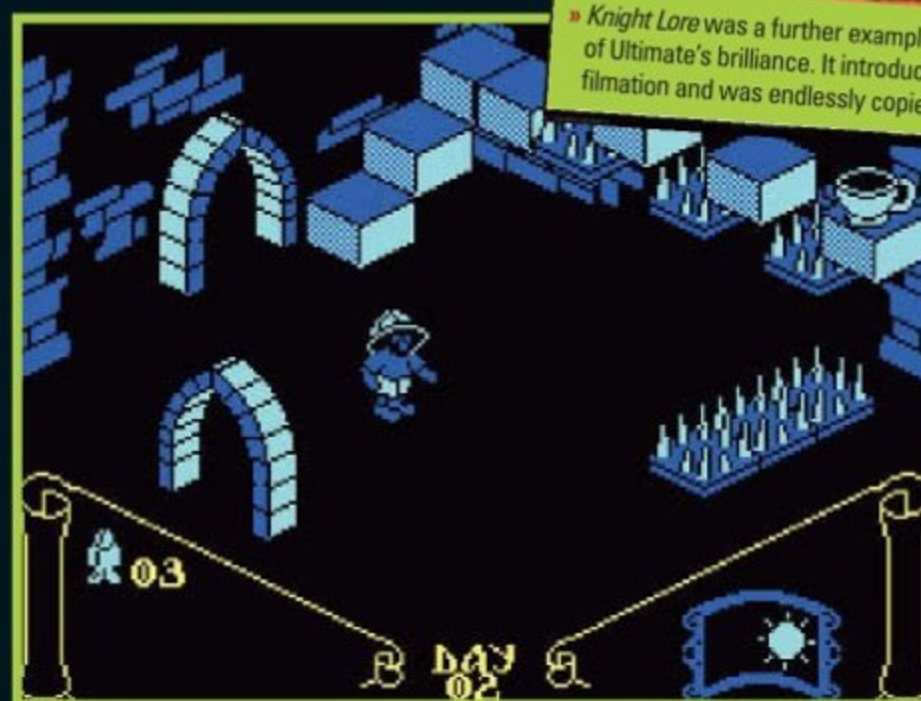
computers turned out to be limited before it morphed into Rare and changed direction."

That left John. Unfortunately he appeared to have left the company following the transition to Rare and then seemingly vanished. An online search revealed his likely home address, so I posted him a letter but received no reply.

I began to wonder if any other Ultimate/Rare employees had additional information. This brought me back to the *Games Machine* article and the people in that team photo. Our friend Mr Anonymous wasn't able to provide full names for all of the staff, but by checking their first names against the credits for Rare's early NES games I was able to quickly identify them. I then managed to speak with three of them: Dave Wise, Kevin Bayliss and Paul Byford.

Musician Dave had very little involvement with the home computer side of the business, saying: "I only worked on one Ultimate game, but I have no idea which one it was." Graphic artist Kevin was similarly assigned to Rare projects: "I wasn't really involved in Spectrum game development. I joined Rare in late 1987 and we were working on new NES projects. The name *Mire Mare* is definitely familiar, but I'm not sure what happened with that game."

Programmer Paul drew a blank too, although he did offer some fascinating information: "I can't help you with *Mire Mare*. I only ever worked for Rare. The



» [Spectrum] *Knight Lore* – the game that revolutionised Spectrum software and led to countless clones.



» [Spectrum] The *Knight Lore* completion screen points to *Mire Mare*. In retrospect – worst ending ever!

mysterious figures of gaming

Over the years, Retro Gamer has spoken to dozens of UK gaming people, but a few have remained defiantly distant. Here are just some of our most wanted interviewees...

Chris and Tim Stamper >

Wanted to discuss: *Everything Ultimate*

Ah, the supremely secretive and talented Stamper brothers. The pair have been interviewed at length before – memorably in *The Games Machine* in 1988, and in *Edge* ten years later – but most of these concentrated on Rare rather than the early Ultimate days. When they were both still at Rare, RG editor Darran bugged them so much that Chris eventually agreed to answer a few questions for the Spectrum Legends feature in issue 29. It was hoped that once they'd dispensed with the day-to-day running of Rare they'd be more open to interviews, but the exact opposite is true. Please, Messrs Stamper, kindly gift us an afternoon of your time!

< Greg Follis and Roy Carter

Wanted to discuss: *Gargoyle Games, Cuchulainn*

The talented twosome behind such hits as *Tir Na Nog*, *Light Force* and *Hydrofool* could often be found talking about their games in the Spectrum magazines. They seemed quite a pair, cracking jokes and ribbing each other. It's surprising, then, that neither seems at all interested in discussing Gargoyle these days. Emails have been sent, letters have been posted, calls have been made – and all have gone unanswered. What's particularly galling is that only Greg and Roy can reveal what really happened to the unreleased *Marsport* sequels and *Heavy On The Magick* expansions.

Paul Woakes >

Wanted to discuss: *Novagen, Mercenary*

As far as we're aware, the genius behind the *Mercenary* series has never been interviewed about his games – but he very nearly was. In the early days of RG, freelancer Andy Krouwel was in the process of writing an article about Novagen and was in contact with Paul. Andy even managed to secure permission to covermount the unreleased PC version of *Damocles*. However, the article was continually delayed and then Live Publishing went under. Shortly after, Andy wrote a *Mercenary* feature for *Edge* magazine, but it only featured input from Novagen co-founder Bruce Jordan, suggesting that Paul bailed out at some point.

< Mervyn Estcourt

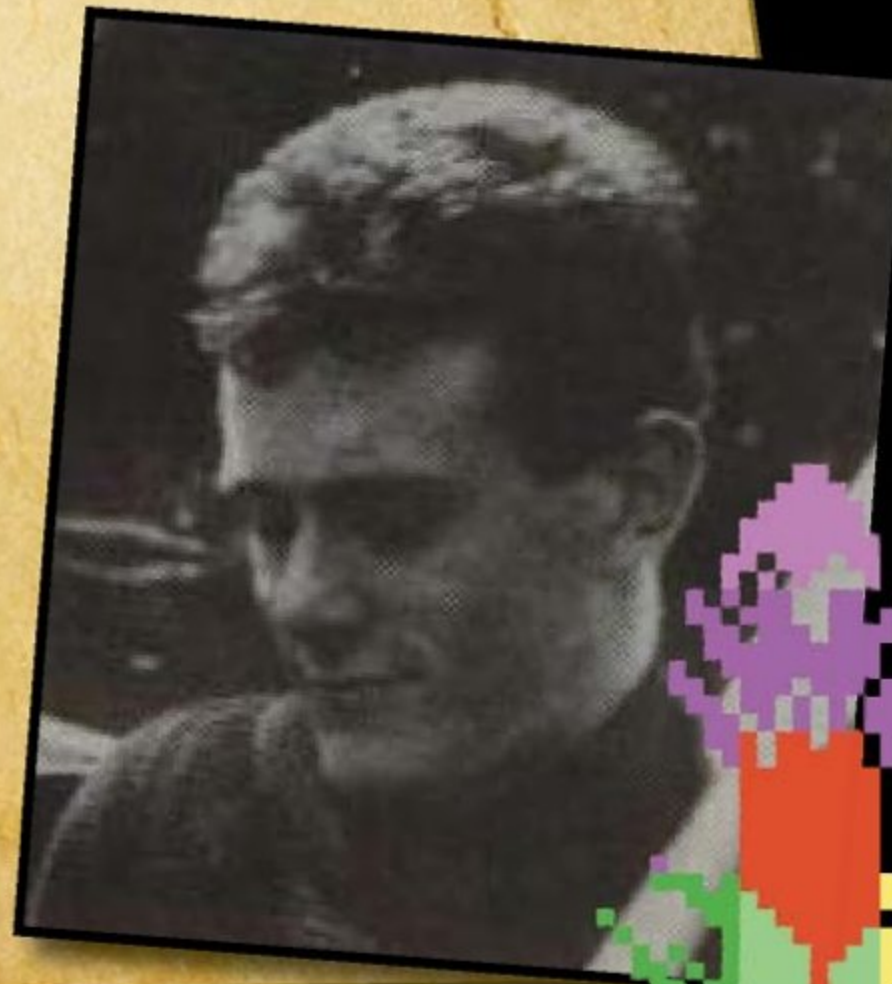
Wanted to discuss: *Deathchase, Deathchase, Deathchase*

In the Micromega feature in RG81 we revealed that we'd tried to track down the *Deathchase* author for many years but got absolutely nowhere. We thought that he might have emigrated or maybe even shuffled off this mortal coil. That all changed earlier this year when freelancer Graeme Mason managed to get in touch with Mervyn's cousin, Tim Estcourt. Tim reported that Mervyn was alive and well, but sadly he wasn't interested in talking about his programming days, preferring to leave them in the past. Still, it's the 30th anniversary of *Deathchase* next year, so fingers crossed he'll change his mind for this special occasion.

Chris Butler >

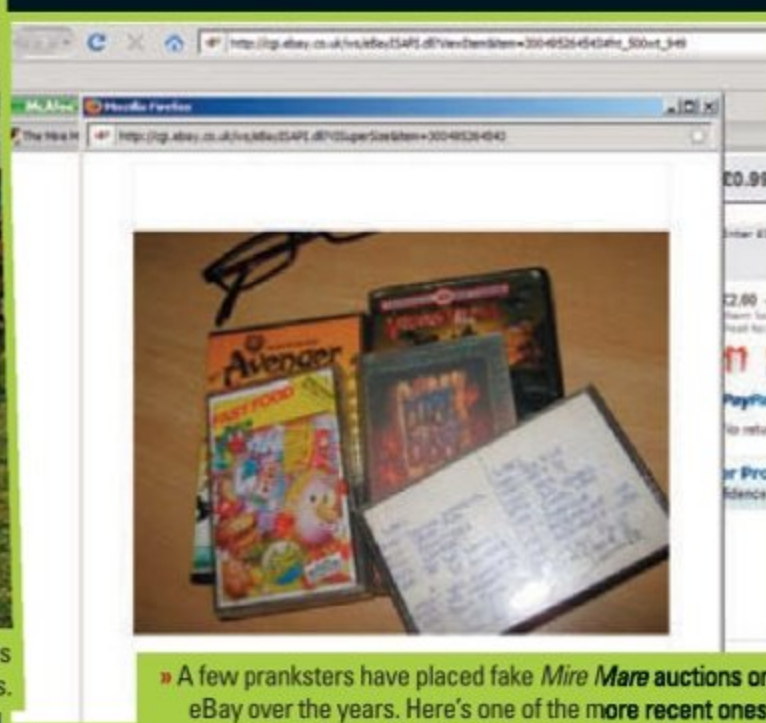
Wanted to discuss: *Classy coin-op conversions*

Chris was the C64's conversion king, producing brilliantly faithful versions of arcade hits like *Thunder Blade*, *Power Drift* and *Ninja Spirit*. He also wrote some very good original titles: *Z*, *Turbo Charge* and budget title *Arnie*. Chris appears to be lying low these days and we've been unable to arrange an interview. A few years back he appeared online via a mobile development company, but emails to him went unanswered. On a positive note, the website outlined his C64 work, so he's obviously proud of his old games. The next time he pops up online we'll try to snare him for sure.





■ The photo from *The Games Machine*'s article. From left to right: Tim Stamper, Carole Stamper, Chris Stamper, Rachel Edwards, David Wise, Mark Betteridge, Paul Byford, Stephen Stamper and Kevin Bayliss.



■ A few pranksters have placed fake *Mire Mare* auctions on eBay over the years. Here's one of the more recent ones.

Stampers made a complete break from Ultimate at the end of 1986 when they moved to Twycross and set up Rare. Ultimate was never talked about at Rare. Occasionally I would come across something from Ultimate; I recall finding a code printout titled 'Adventure Game', which turned out to be the source for *Sabre Wulf*. I also recall an occasion when someone commented that US Gold was bringing out a collection of the old Ultimate games. Tim looked at Chris and said: 'That's the end of that, then.'

the realisation

That would seem to be the end of this investigation too. It would be great to hear what the Stampers had to say about *Mire Mare*, but that's unlikely given their apparent reticence to talk about the Ultimate days. I was about to give up when I read a post on the World of Spectrum forum where a member mentioned that one of his friends worked at Rare and had personally asked Tim Stamper about *Mire Mare*. I asked if the poster would put me in touch with his friend, and a few hours later I was exchanging emails with Trevor Attwood, a programmer who worked at Rare between 1995

and 2009 and was involved with the *Donkey Kong Country* series and many handheld titles.

I naturally began by asking him about his chat with Tim. "Shortly after joining Rare in 1995," he told me, "I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to ask Tim about *Mire Mare*. Asking Tim about *Mire Mare* and Chris about the *Lunar Jetman* 'trailer' was one of those things many new Rare employees did at that time, because we all grew up playing Ultimate's games. Anyway, Tim's answer was that some of the design had been completed on paper and

years, particularly in conversation with their own employees. Trevor went on to tell me that he was lead programmer on the 2004 Game Boy Advance title *Sabre Wulf*, and revealed that at one stage the game was going to be called... *Mire Mare*! "The development team was asked to think of a name for the game. I remembered *Mire Mare* and thought it would be a good opportunity to finally get it released to the public. So, this and other names were forwarded to the management team. Initially, Tim and Chris thought it was a good idea, but it was later rejected because the game was going to have a worldwide release and the name wouldn't have any weight outside of Britain. Also, *Mire Mare* didn't represent the new GBA game, which was intended to be a reboot of the franchise and hence contain elements from the original *Sabre Wulf* game."

According to Trevor, Rare was hoping that the rebooted *Sabre Wulf* would be a hit and mark the resurrection of Sabreman as a major IP on other platforms. Unfortunately, the game wasn't the big seller they hoped for and our pith-helmeted hero was retired once more, with a Sabreman game in development for the Xbox but cancelled in 2005. "*Sabre Wulf* on the GBA was probably the closest *Mire Mare* ever got to release," observes Trevor.

So that really does conclude the investigation. There truly is no finished *Mire Mare* code sitting on an old drive in a dusty cupboard at Rare HQ. For those Sabreman fans and Ultimate aficionados who live in hope of one day finding this 'holy grail', the trail ends here.

Special thanks to Frank Gasking, Jarrod Bentley, Chris Bourne and the Ultimate/Rare employees, past and present, who offered up information.

“Whoever was responsible for the post-Stamper games was probably involved with Mire Mare”

the cover artwork had been done, but nothing else. Basically, no software existed. Over the years I worked there, I saw a few other employees asking Tim the same question, and his answer was always the same."

That seems pretty conclusive. If the Stampers did indeed hide the existence of *Mire Mare* from US Gold, it's improbable that they'd continue the pretence after so many



■ The 'Land of Ultimatum' map shows where *Mire Mare* would have most likely taken place.



■ This is the very first, little-seen Rare company logo, kindly provided by Paul Byford.



■ Former Rare programmer Trevor Attwood quizzed Tim Stamper about the *Mire Mare* mystery.