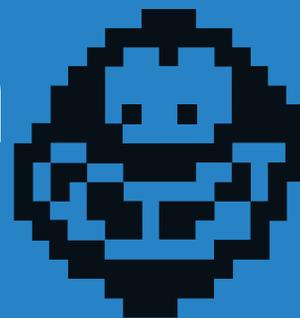**MANIC MINER MODS**

The Resurrection of Miner Willy

Mod-makers re-invent a Spectrum classic

Not all modders concentrate on modern games. The hero of this piece, *Manic Miner*, was released in 1983. A ZX Spectrum game coded by 17-year-old Matthew Smith, it consisted of 20 bright, single screens to traverse and grab objects from, operating under a time-limit based on 'air supply'. Each screen played out a little like classic *Donkey Kong* (indeed, there's a 'Miner Willy meets the Kong Beast' screen partway through your odyssey).

Technically, it was pretty good for 1983, and it ended up being converted to a number of other computers, including the BBC Micro and the Commodore 64. 23 years on, there are mods for it, and also for its sequel, *Jet Set Willy*.

DOWN LOADER
A CLASSIC LIVES
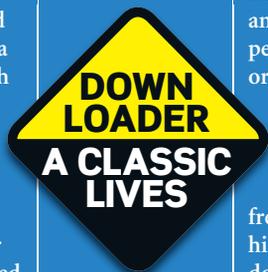
It's interesting that even Matthew Smith's first game started odd rumours about what or who he actually was. His next creation would only fire the rumour mill. Released in early 1984 for the ZX Spectrum, after an extremely long development period (by early '80s standards) of 8 or 9 months, *Jet Set Willy*'s plot starts with Miner Willy basking in the lap of luxury, thanks to the riches gained from his previous game. However, after one particularly frenzied party at his deluxe mansion, his housekeeper Maria puts her foot down, and Willy must collect all the items the partygoers have discarded, before finally making it to bed.

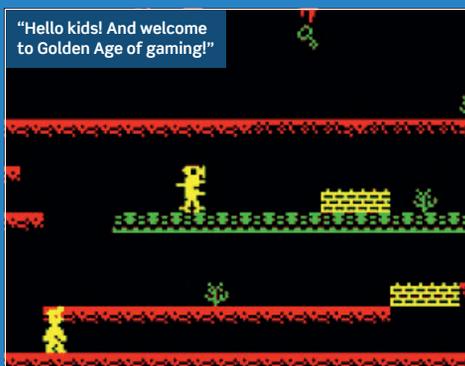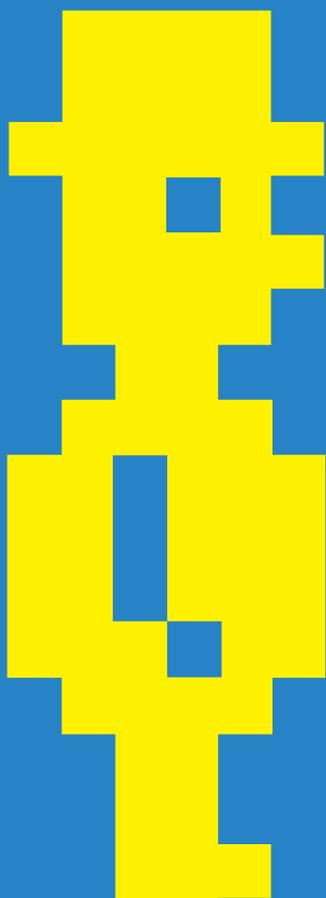And you too will likely lose sleep, since there's no way to save your game, and the items are strewn across 60 fiendish, interconnected rooms, each of which has a unique name and skewed style. From the infamous 'The Banyan Tree', with its evilly embedded tree enemies and ground saw, through the very battlement-like 'On The Battlements', all the way to the rope-tastic *Pitfall*-like gigaswing of 'We Must Perform A Quirkafleeg', there's an almost unprecedented diversity of beautifully designed room layouts.

Then, nothing. Matthew Smith disappeared. Rumours of his whereabouts circulated: he was living in a commune in Holland, he'd taken his earnings and fled to Brazil, he'd caught hell from the Mob. The much demanded third game – *Willy Meets the Taxman* – was never released.

Yet in recent years, there's been quite a buzzing mini-scene (http://geocities.com/andrewbroad/spectrum/willy/list.html) built around the two games, with multiple 'total conversions' sending Miner Willy to whole new locales, dimensions and situations, and even cutting him out of the picture altogether. Why are the few and the proud *Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy* modders quite so enamoured of a pair of games that, after all, are more than 20 years old? Super-modder Andrew Broad has a theory for why people are still playing. "*Manic Miner* and *Jet Set Willy* have exquisite game mechanics. There's an elegant simplicity to the controls... You know exactly how far you can walk to the edge of a platform without falling off, and the pixel-based collision-detection for guardians means you get to weave your way through them at close range."

There you have it. These were near-perfect games. For some near-perfect mods, read on.

SIMON CARLESS

"Hello kids! And welcome to Golden Age of gaming!"

Abandoned Uranium Workings
AIR
High Score 000000   Score 00507

"This is our whole world. Kill us. Please. Kill us now."

TOLKIEN!

JET SET WILLY: THE LORD OF THE RINGS
■ **By** Andrew Broad ■ **Link** http://geocities.com/andrewbroad/spectrum/download

Andrew Broad's *Jet Set Willy* embroidering of Tolkien's masterpiece is nothing if not spectacular. We have intricately imagined standalone rooms named after each chapter of the books, where you can play different Lord of the Rings characters, from Frodo and Gandalf through to Aragorn. There's a witty riff on the 'Master Bedroom' room in the original *Jet Set Willy*, with Frodo meeting the Eye of Sauron (standing in for Willy's housekeeper Maria) in a bonus room: if you've collected all 256 items, then the Eye will disappear, and you can throw yourself delightedly into the fires of Mount Doom to complete the game.

BOWIE!

MANIC MINER: THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA
■ **By** Andrew Broad ■ **Link** http://geocities.com/andrewbroad/spectrum/download

How about a *Manic Miner* game based on 'The Buddha of Suburbia' – not Hanif Kureishi's Whitbread Award-winning novel, but David Bowie's soundtrack album for the BBC Television adaptation of the book? *Manic Miner: The Buddha of Suburbia* includes ten screens named after songs from the soundtrack. Watch out for 'Screen for Monica Seles', created "after the Stabbing (April 30, 1993) and before the Comeback (July 29, 1995)", symbolising the author's desire for tennis champion Seles to return to her sport. And the music? A beep for beep reworking of Bowie's songs.
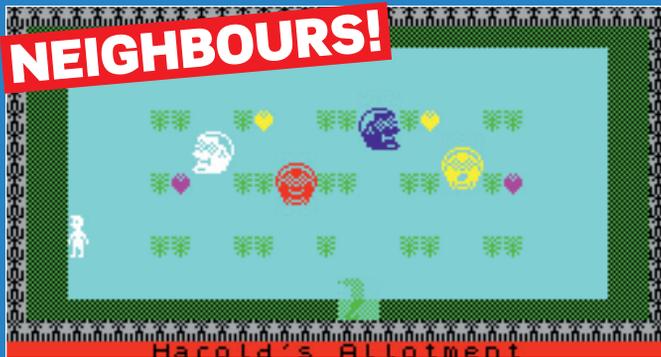
NEIGHBOURS!

MANIC MINER: NEIGHBOURS – ALLANA TRUMAN
■ **By** Andrew Broad ■ **Link** http://geocities.com/andrewbroad/spectrum/download

The plot of this tribute to Star Trek-loving Neighbours character Allana Truman mirrors that of the soap opera. You play Lance Wilkinson, performing seven labours to win Allana's heart before whisking her off to America. Each room is themed around some aspect of the story arc, with Lance forced to retrieve master tapes of classic American sci-fi shows and convert them to video, make a low-budget sci-fi movie, and finally raise enough money to leave the country with his love.

MOBSTERS!

JET SET WILLY: MARIA VS SOME BASTARDS
■ **By** Vidar 'Erix1' Eriksen ■ **Link** http://tinyurl.com/pbuqt

Everyone appreciates a good role-reversal drama, and more than one modder has attempted to make a version of *Jet Set Willy* where Willy's long-suffering housekeeper, Maria, is actually in charge. In this version mobsters have kidnapped Willy, and Maria must collect colour-cycling items as his ransom. Maria is a little less destructable than Willy (she can't die by falling in this version), but *Some Bastards* is hard – particularly the ice rooms at the game's opening.

ZAPPA!

STRANGEL
■ **By** Sendy ■ **Link** www.geocities.com/andrewbroad/spectrum/download/strangel.zip

A genuinely odd, fairly early (2001) mod of *Jet Set Willy* in which the objective, according to the accompanying readme, is to "...guide Willy through the multitudinous locations of the otherworld (which is not actually a real place, but is based in the third world of objective content of thought, which is as real in its way as any actual country on the map)." Enemies include "jelly on a trolley" and "nuclear cats". *Jet Set Willy* mods are often filled to the brim with pop culture references – this one, according to the author, contains nods to "Frank Zappa, Si Begg, Luke Vibert, Hrvatski and Blitter, Orbital, Douglas Adams, and the Soft Machine."

THE BEST OF THE REST

The most recent addition to the scene is the supremely stylish *Jet Set Willy Goes to Paris*, complete with functioning Louvre. We'd also recommend *Willy's Afterlife*, in which Willy has turned skeletal, and *Join the Jet-Set* – the work that kick-started the whole *Manic* modding scene in the late '90s. These mods, together with the original games, can be tracked down from Andrew Broad's site (http:// geocities.com/andrewbroad/ spectrum/willy/list.html). For a Spectrum Emulator, try www.worldofspectrum.org.