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You're probably wondering why the Sinclair Quantum Leap deserves coverage in **RG**. It was, after all, a business machine with bugger all games, right? Well that's where you'd be mistaken. Join Martyn Carroll as he celebrates the QL's 25th anniversary year by lifting the lid on its best kept secret

SINCLAIR QL

When looking back at the QL, it's easy to get bogged down in the reasons why it was a commercial failure, so let's start by getting that out of the way. The QL wasn't a disaster of C5 proportions, but it barely made a dent in the business machine market when released in 1984. On paper, the QL looked like the perfect package. It was powered by a Motorola 68008 processor, came with 128KB of RAM, housed two internal microdrive storage devices, featured its own multitasking operating system (QDOS) and structured BASIC language (SuperBASIC), and came bundled with a complete office suite. The best bit? All this was yours for £399, at a time when a similar specced IBM PC would have set you back upwards of £2,000.

In order to undercut its rivals so severely and still turn a profit, Sinclair was forced to make crucial compromises to the machine's design. David Karlin was the QL's chief design engineer and he believes that economics compromised the project: "The price point prevented the inclusion of peripherals of an appropriate quality, an essential – and ultimately fatal – omission for the business market." Rather than the core 68000 processor, Sinclair opted for the cheaper 68008 version, which had a smaller address and data bus, limiting the performance of the chip. The biggest setback, though, was the inclusion of

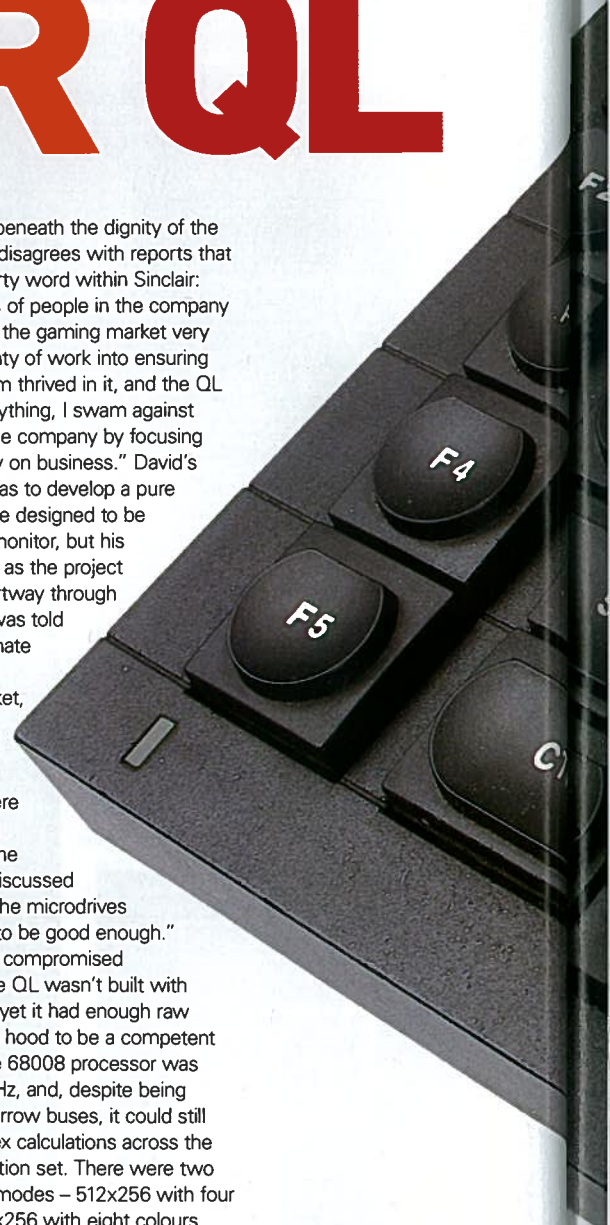
Sinclair's famously unreliable microdrives rather than a standard floppy disk system. "Overwhelmingly, the QL failed because of the microdrives," comments David. "I still think it's highly probable, and thought so at the time, that the QL would have made a much bigger mark had it dropped the microdrives and been bundled with a decent monitor, a floppy disk drive and a printer at, say, £799 instead of £399."

To compound matters, the QL was treated to a trademark Sinclair launch – everything went wrong. Punters waited months for their machines, and when the first models finally arrived they were plagued by software bugs and reliability issues. All of this was diligently reported by the computing press and Sinclair's once strong market image took a battering. Sir Clive predicted that 200,000 QLs would be sold in 1985 alone, yet by the middle of the year, the total sales figure stretching back to its launch in early 1984 stood at just 60,000. Sinclair took drastic action and in September 1985 the price of the QL was slashed in half in a bid to capitalise on pre-Christmas sales. At £199, it moved within easier reach of the hobbyist market and positioned itself as an upgrade option for Spectrum owners. And with that the demand for QL games grew.

Sinclair seemed to have a love/hate relationship with games. On one hand, the success of the Spectrum was fuelled by the abundance of low-cost gaming software available, while on the other, insider rumblings suggested that gaming

was seen to be beneath the dignity of the company. David disagrees with reports that gaming was a dirty word within Sinclair: "There were lots of people in the company who understood the gaming market very well and put plenty of work into ensuring that the Spectrum thrived in it, and the QL did its best. If anything, I swam against the tide within the company by focusing the QL resolutely on business." David's initial intention was to develop a pure business machine designed to be hooked up to a monitor, but his hand was forced as the project progressed. "Partway through development, I was told firmly not to alienate it so far from the Spectrum's market, at which point things like the TV interface and joystick ports were added. Retaining a tape port à la the Spectrum was discussed but discarded – the microdrives were supposed to be good enough."

Even with the compromised configuration, the QL wasn't built with gaming in mind, yet it had enough raw power under the hood to be a competent pixel pusher. The 68008 processor was clocked at 7.5MHz, and, despite being hamstrung by narrow buses, it could still carry out complex calculations across the full 32-bit instruction set. There were two generous video modes – 512x256 with four colours and 256x256 with eight colours – and unlike the Spectrum's rudimentary display, each pixel could be assigned its own colour value, which meant no ugly attribute clash. On the downside, the hi-res display occupied 32KB in memory, which was a meaty chunk of screen RAM to funnel around the QL's contended innards.



🇮🇹 The QL wasn't built with gaming in mind, yet it had enough raw power to be competent 🇮🇹



Year released: 1984

Original price: £399 at launch

Main Processor: Motorola 68008
(running at 7.5MHz)

Secondary Processor: Intel 8049
(running at 11MHz)

RAM: 128KB

ROM: 48KB

Operating system: QDOS

Onboard language: SuperBASIC

Internal storage: Twin microdrives

Display: 512x256 pixels (Mode 4);
256x256 pixels (Mode 8)

Colours: Black, white, red, green
(Mode 4); black, white, red, green,
yellow, blue, cyan, magenta (Mode 8)

Sound: Single channel

Associated magazines: *QL User*,
QL World, *QL Today*

Why the Sinclair QL was great...

The very fact that the QL was forged within Sinclair's hallowed halls ensures greatness alone. In all seriousness, the QL did not live up to its rather grand moniker, but its ambitions were admirable and any initial hardware shortcomings were soon sorted using updated chips and expansion boards. Regardless of its commercial fortunes, the QL remains an important Sinclair milestone alongside the ZX80, ZX81 and ZX Spectrum.

Different Versions



Sinclair never significantly developed the core QL design, but a collaboration project with ICL resulted in the One Per Desk, a desktop computer that borrowed the QL's hardware and bolted on a number of 'executive' additions; notably a modem and telephone handset. The machine was also marketed by British Telecom as the Merlin Tonto (pictured). In more recent years, enthusiasts have developed powerful QL clones based around the 68040 and 68060 processors.

Damon Chaplin Q&A

Damon was one of the most celebrated QL programmers back in the day, with a quintet of quality games to his name. He currently resides in the Lake District where he develops Linux software for a living.



■ Retro Gamer: Can you describe your path to programming games on the QL?

Damon Chaplin: My first computer was the ZX81, followed by the Spectrum and then the QL. I did some programming in BASIC on the ZX81 and Spectrum, and then ventured into assembly language. My aim had always been to write some games, so when I finally got a QL and an assembler that's what I did. And since *Pac-Man* was one of my favourite arcade games, I couldn't resist trying to emulate that. Hence *Spook* was born.

■ RG: Spook was published by Eidersoft. How did that come about?

DC: By a strange coincidence my parents bumped into Sir Clive Sinclair in a pub in Cambridge just after I'd finished *Spook*, and he was kind enough to give them Psion's phone number. I thought it was my lucky day, but unfortunately they weren't interested. So I skimmed through the adverts in the QL magazines and noticed that Eidersoft were based fairly close to us in Essex. We visited them and showed them the game, and that was that.

■ RG: What was the main difficulty you encountered in programming for the QL?

DC: For me, the graphics were the hardest part. I did get some help for *Spook* and *Deathstrike*, but the others were all my work. Sound was also a problem, due to the strange way that the sound chip was controlled. Each sound effect required a lot of experimentation.

■ RG: How did you achieve full-screen scrolling in your games?

DC: The MOVEM (Move Multiple Registers) assembly instruction was the key. You could move quite a few bytes in one go, fairly quickly. It took eight instructions per line of pixels, which wasn't too bad, although it didn't leave much time for the sprites and the rest of the code.

■ RG: Do you look back on your QL days with fondness, and did your games open any doors for you in later life?

DC: I was just a student at the time and did it mainly for fun. I never made much money out of any of it, but it helped me through university. The games did help a little when I applied for jobs, but I felt that some companies didn't take it seriously. I went for an interview at a large bank once and was asked to circle the errors on a trivial 30-line piece of C code. I'd written several published games in assembly language, for goodness' sake! Actually, I did miss half the errors, but that's beside the point!

It's estimated that as many as 100 commercial games were released for the QL

(In comparison, the Spectrum reserved just 7KB for the screen.) This pretty much ruled out fast, full-screen scrolling in games, so the majority of them were static-screen affairs.

"I thought being able to have full-colour graphics was critical based on the assumption that the user would want fully bitmapped pictures within documents," says David about the display. "I wasn't so concerned about the speed of shifting things around the screen, which reflected my business versus gaming bias. If I had been designing a raw games machine, I would have worked very differently – no high-resolution mode, no co-processor, and a bit block transfer module in the video card, to name but a few. The QL core was basically fine for a business machine and not all that well suited to games." But this didn't deter software houses from trying regardless, and although it's difficult to elicit an exact figure, it's estimated that as many as 100 commercial games were released for the QL.

The first game of note was *QL Chess*, published by Sinclair stalwart Psion in December 1984. At the time, chess was only going to be of interest to the bearded and the bespectacled, yet the QL version deserves special mention because its slick presentation pointed to what was possible on the machine. On boot up the game displayed the board and playing pieces in a typical plan view, just like Psion's earlier versions for the ZX81 and Spectrum, but by hitting a key you could switch to an impressive '3D' view, where the chunky pieces slid gracefully around the board. The sprite movement was fluid and flicker-free, and this boded well for Psion's second QL game, a

conversion of its popular Spectrum tennis title *Match Point*.

Match Point was famously fast on the Speccy, but the QL version was even quicker. The graphics were more detailed too, with multicoloured player sprites stepping in for the Spectrum's featureless silhouettes. The smooth sprite movement and impressive level of detail was possible because Psion opted to use the QL's four-colour mode for *QL Chess* and *Match Point* instead of the more common – for gaming, at least – eight-colour mode. The chief benefit of using four-colour mode was that the full resolution of 512x256 could be displayed, whereas eight-colour mode was restricted to 256x256. So the first job for any programmer was to weigh up the benefits of more detail against more colours. Most chose the latter.

The UK's biggest software labels showed no signs of supporting the QL and this allowed cheeky opportunists to release their own takes on popular titles. Early examples included *EVA*, a ropey *Jetpac* clone from Westway; and Microdeal's *Lands Of Havoc*, a vast, vaguely interesting *Sabre Wulf*-style maze game. Microdeal's Cuthbert character also made an appearance in *Cuthbert In Space*, another *Jetpac* rip-off, but the closest the QL got to its own mascot was BJ, star of three platform games beginning with *QL Caverns* and followed by *BJ The Return* and *BJ In 3D Land*.

Rather unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the QL games were arcade clones. Just for starters you had *Zapper (Galaxian) Hopper (Frogger)*, *Knight Flight (Joust)*, *QL Meteor Storm (Asteroids)*, *QL Jabber (Centipede)* and *Hyperdrive (Pole Position)*. The quality of these wannabes was generally pretty good, with the standout effort being *Spook*, a faithful *Pac-Man* clone from Damon Chaplin. Damon went on to release a further four arcade games for the QL between 1987 and 1991 – *Deathstrike*, *Assault And Battery*, *Speedfreaks* and *Pudge* – and each one is a superb showcase for the QL's gaming capabilities. You can read an interview with Damon elsewhere in this feature.

One title that deserves a special mention is *Wanderer* from French software house Pyramide. This thoroughly bizarre space adventure featured 3D visuals – as in 'proper' 3D when viewed through coloured specs – and a crazy plot involving card-hustling man-cats – how very French! Yet it's notable because it demonstrates how deftly the QL could display vector-style graphics. Basically, when it came to



► Beyond the QL... Rick Dickinson's prototype design for the QL Plus, with built-in wafer drive and accompanying wafer stack. The design never progressed beyond this model.

INSTANT EXPERT

The **Quantum Leap** was known as the ZX83 during development. This was referenced in the names of its two custom chips: the ZX8301 and ZX8302.

It was the first mass-market computer to use a Motorola 68000-family processor, beating the Apple Macintosh to launch by just 12 days.

The first machines off the production line had just 32KB of ROM, which wasn't large enough to store all of the QL's operating software. As a quick workaround, an additional 16KB dongle, affectionately known as the 'kludge', was plugged in to the ROM port.

Using memory upgrades it was possible to boost the QL's RAM to 640KB. A third-party device known as the Trump Card later increased this further to 896KB.

The keyboard and case design were the work of Rick Dickinson, who designed all of Sinclair's computers. The subsequent Spectrum+ and 128 would go on to adopt the same styling.

Despite having more keys than the Spectrum, the QL did not have a dedicated 'delete' key. To remove characters you had to hold Ctrl and press the left and right cursor keys.

The QL was named 'Microcomputer of the Year' at the 1985 British Microcomputer Awards. Sir Clive was on hand to receive the trophy and received a standing ovation.

The QL's commercial life ended in April 1986 when Sinclair's computing arm was sold to Amstrad and the bearded one chose to axe the machine.

Linux creator Linus Torvalds owned a QL and originally learnt to program on it in his youth.

Legend has it that software developers received early QLs with power packs that were not properly earthed – with hilarious, often hair-raising consequences.

calculating the co-ordinates of wireframe 3D objects, the 68008 could eat 8-bit processors for breakfast. *Wanderer* was certainly no *Elite*, but it clearly signalled that Bell and Braben's masterpiece would have worked extremely well on the QL. In fact, *Elite* just might have been QL-bound at one point, as publisher Firebird announced in January 1986 that it would release software for the machine with an update of the classic budget game *Booty* as its debut title. *Booty* never appeared, however, and with that any prospects of QL *Elite* were presumably condemned to Witch Space.

So the QL may have missed out on *Elite*, but it did play host to another classic title from fledgling software house Magnetic Scrolls. *The Pawn*, surely one of the finest text adventures ever written, made a low-key, text-only debut on the QL in December 1985 as *QL Pawn* before going on to find great critical and commercial success on the Atari ST, Commodore Amiga and other platforms. Rather tellingly, the follow-up, *The Guild Of Thieves*, was denied a QL release as Magnetic Scrolls focused on more profitable platforms.

Such is the popularity of *The Pawn* that the QL version fetches £30-40 when the occasional complete copy surfaces on

COMMUNITY THE BEST QL RESOURCES ON THE WEB

RWAP Software

www.rwapsoftware.co.uk

Rich Mellor of RWAP Software has been supporting the QL since 1987 and his site should be your first port of call for information about QL software and hardware. Rich also has lots of items for sale and offers a repair service for faulty machines.

Dilwyn Jones
Sinclair QL Pages

www.dilwyn.me.uk

Dilwyn's site is perhaps the most regularly updated QL resource and is definitely worth bookmarking. There's a wealth of software available to freely download, including games, plus a vast library of QL-related documentation and information.



QUANTA

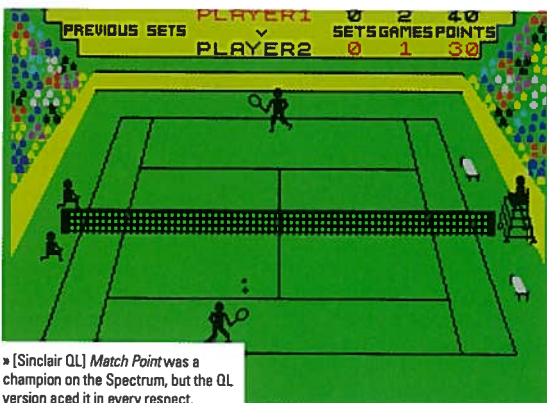
www.quanta.org.uk

The independent QL user group QUANTA (The QL Users and Tinkerers Association) was formed prior to the machine's launch and is still going strong today with regular meetings and workshops organised around the UK. The group also publishes a bi-monthly magazine for its members.

Q-emuLator
Homepage

terdina.net/ql/q-emulator.html

There are several QL emulators available, but if you're looking to run QL games on a PC or Mac then you should opt for Q-emuLator. The full version is shareware, but the free trial includes everything you need to run the vast majority of games. Visit the site for downloads and support.



» [Sinclair QL] *Match Point* was a champion on the Spectrum, but the QL version aced it in every respect.

BJ 3D Land NEW ONLY £12.95

Amazing! BJ is off again, this time in a 3D maze that will pose a challenge to all. Over 75 screens of 3 dimensional action, as BJ battles against treants, energy zombies, lasers and even giant Chess pieces! Definitely a must!

» Eidersoft published some decent QL software, including Damon Chaplin's first game, *Spook*, and the second and third *BJ* games.

eBay. This high price isn't just because of collectors wanting to own a piece of adventure gaming history: if you want to play *QL Pawn*, the only way is with an original copy. Due to clever copy protection methods included on the original release, which have yet to be cracked, there is no digital version available to use on a QL emulator. Thankfully, working dumps of many other games are available, but the problem then is that there's no repository of commercial QL software anywhere on the web. You can't just nip online and download a few games and fire them up under emulation. This is mainly due to the fact that those who have dumped the games and made them compatible with emulators do not wish to run the risk of distributing commercial titles, which are still copyrighted to the original publishers or authors. So, we're afraid the original hardware and software route is currently the only way to go.

That may sound off-putting if you've grown accustomed to using emulators to satisfy those pangs of retro gaming curiosity, but if you're a collector you'll know how rewarding it can be to get your hands on old kit. A quick check on eBay reveals that there are always three

or four QLs for sale at any one time, ranging from £40-50 loose to £100+ boxed. And if your QL develops a faulty keyboard (likely) or dodgy microdrive (highly likely), there's plenty of support out there to help you get it fixed (see the 'Community' boxout). Games turn up for sale less often, but they're certainly not uncommon and most titles – *QL Pawn* aside – can be picked up for only a few pounds each. So if you're a Sinclair enthusiast looking to kick-start a QL collection, turn the page to discover ten shining souvenirs of the QL's little-known gaming legacy.

Special thanks to Rich Mellor of RWAP Software (www.rwapsoftware.co.uk) for his help and generous assistance.

» Under the hood: the empty space on the left was an expansion bay for housing additional memory and peripherals.





PERFECT TEN GAMES

THE QL WAS NOT HOME TO A LARGE LIBRARY, BUT THERE'S ENOUGH QUALITY TO MAKE CHOOSING TEN OF THE BEST A TRICKY TASK. THE FOLLOWING TITLES ALL SHOWCASE ITS GAMING CAPABILITIES TO SOME DEGREE, BUT ABOVE ALL THEY'RE AN ABSOLUTE BLAST TO PLAY. IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER...



01

MATCH POINT

- ▶ **RELEASE:** 1985
- ▶ **PUBLISHER:** SINCLAIR RESEARCH
- ▶ **CREATOR:** PSION
- ▶ **BY THE SAME DEVELOPER:** QL CHESS

01 Such was the QL's low profile when it came to games, if you walked into a high-street chain store in 1985 looking to buy software, chances are you'd find no more than a couple of Sinclair-published games: *QL Chess* and *Match Point*. Luckily, both were fine titles, with *Match Point* standing out as probably the best game ever released for the machine. Great graphics and super-fast gameplay saw this power past other versions without breaking a sweat. If anything, it was perhaps too fast on the higher difficulty settings, making the use of a joystick essential. And no, you wouldn't find one of those for your QL in WH Smith or Boots either...

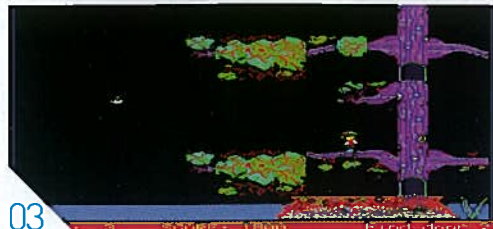
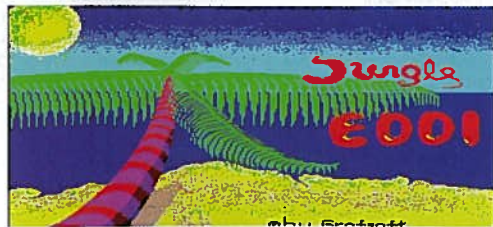


02

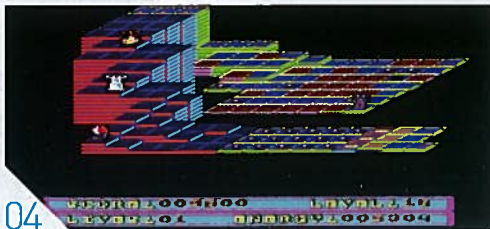
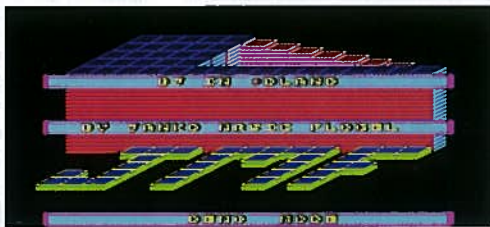
JUNGLE EDDI

- ▶ **RELEASE:** 1986
- ▶ **PUBLISHER:** GRAFSOFT
- ▶ **CREATOR:** STEFAN KUHNE
- ▶ **BY THE SAME DEVELOPER:** THE LOST PHARAOH

03 Clones of *Ultimate* games were rife on the QL, and programmer Stefan Kuhne was one of the chief culprits. His earlier title *The Lost Pharaoh* borrowed wholesale from *Sabre Wulf*, while *Jungle Eddi* was his take on *Underwulf*. The setting may have shifted from dark caverns to dense jungle, but the way your character leapt around the screen was drawn directly from Sabreman's second adventure. It was a lot of fun and made you wonder why Stefan didn't attempt a *Knight Lore* clone next. It also made you speculate what the Stampers themselves would have come up with if they'd supported the QL.



03



04

BJ IN 3D LAND

- ▶ **RELEASE:** 1986
- ▶ **PUBLISHER:** EIDERSOFT
- ▶ **CREATOR:** JANKO MRŠIĆ-FLOGEL
- ▶ **BY THE SAME DEVELOPER:** QL CAVERN

04 The brilliantly named Janko Mršić-Flogel achieved some press on the publication of his first game, *QL Cavern*, on account of him being just 16 years old at the time. He went on to become one of the machine's most prolific programmers and this second sequel to *QL Cavern* is his best. Unlike the previous two games in the series, *BJ In 3D Land* swapped the 2D approach for an isometric viewpoint and gameplay that was similar in style to Atari's *Crystal Castles*. It was also much more forgiving than the earlier *BJ* games in that you had an energy bar rather than a meagre and dwindling supply of lives.

KARATE

- ▶ **RELEASE:** 1986
- ▶ **PUBLISHER:** EIDERSOFT
- ▶ **CREATOR:** POINT BLANK
- ▶ **BY THE SAME DEVELOPER:** N/A

02 If a game was a huge hit on other platforms, you could pretty much guarantee that an unofficial version would land on the QL at some point. And so here we have *Way Of The Exploding Fist*, complete with all the moves lifted straight from the Melbourne House masterpiece. But it's hard to criticise blatant copies when they're done with such aplomb. The use of the high-resolution four-colour mode allowed for detailed visuals and precise collision detection, and the all-important speed of the scrapping was sixth dan stuff. The only thing missing was a two-player versus mode, although on later stages you could face off against a couple of fighters.

QL QUBOIDS

- ▶ **RELEASE:** 1986
- ▶ **PUBLISHER:** SINCLAIR RESEARCH
- ▶ **CREATOR:** AJS
- ▶ **BY THE SAME DEVELOPER:** N/A

05 *QL Quboids* was one of the fresh new games that Sinclair put out as it renewed its efforts to support the QL following its price slash in late 1985. Talking its cue from *Lode Runner*, it was a platform and ladders affair where you had to dig holes to trap various enemies. The pleasingly chunky main character was reminiscent of the astronaut from Odin's *Yesod* games and sprite movement was fast and smooth. The only downside was that the game suffered from that peculiar Eighties ailment 'ladderitis', where your character would stubbornly refuse to budge from the ladder unless he was lined up perfectly with the platform. Damn ladderitis...



05



06



07



08

DEATHSTRIKE

- RELEASE: 1987
- PUBLISHER: TALENT COMPUTER SYSTEMS
- CREATOR: DAMON CHAPLIN
- BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: ASSAULT AND BATTERY

06 It was a long time coming, and sceptics said it wasn't possible, but *Deathstrike* was the first game to successfully implement full-screen scrolling on the QL. Okay, so the game in question was an unashamed *Scramble* clone, but it was a playable and faithful one, and certainly up to the standard of the arcade original. Navigating your ship through some of the tighter caverns was cruelly difficult, but the desire to push on and see the next stage ensured that you'd try again. Fans of vertical shooters would do well to check out another of Damon's games: the brilliant *Assault And Battery*.

SPEEDFREAKS

- RELEASE: 1989
- PUBLISHER: KAOS SOFTWARE
- CREATOR: DAMON CHAPLIN
- BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: ASSAULT AND BATTERY

07 *Spook* was great and *Deathstrike* was even better, but *Speedfreaks* was Damon's crowning achievement. This utterly fantastic *Super Sprint* clone featured eight challenging tracks and support for up to three players. With or without multiplayer, it was easily the most fun arcade game available for the QL. The cars were small but slickly animated and the controls were nice and tight. It was also one of the few games to make decent use of sound, even if the rumbling of the cars' engines sounded vaguely flatulent. This is a great little game that's still as playable now as when first released.

PUDGE

- RELEASE: 1991
- PUBLISHER: KAOS SOFTWARE
- CREATOR: DAMON CHAPLIN
- BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: DEATHSTRIKE

08 Another Damon Chaplin game in the top ten? That may seem slightly blinkered, but not if you spent a few minutes in the company of *Pudge*. Rather than a straightforward clone, *Pudge* takes a bit of *Boulder Dash*, stirs in some *Solomon's Key*, and cooks the whole thing up to create a tasty slice of puzzle pie. On each screen you had to first surround a ticking bomb with boulders, preventing it from exploding, then gather up the radioactive barrels and dispose of them. It's a real shame *Pudge* arrived so late in the day that only the QL's most stalwart supporters will have ever played it.



09

MORTVILLE MANOR

- RELEASE: 1986
- PUBLISHER: PYRAMIDE
- CREATOR: KYILKHOR CREATION
- BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: MAUPITI ISLAND

09 You may be familiar with this sumptuous adventure game from French publisher Pyramide, as it was also released on the PC, ST and Amiga. It made its debut on the QL, however, and while the original may not pack the visual clout of the later versions and is comparatively sluggish – you have to watch as each location image is painstakingly drawn on screen – it's still a very playable piece of interactive fiction. The game saw you exploring the creepy old dwelling of the title, finding objects and speaking to people in a bid to uncover a killer. All in all, it was a welcome change of pace from the QL's many arcade-style games.

QL PAWN

- RELEASE: 1985
- PUBLISHER: SINCLAIR RESEARCH
- CREATOR: MAGNETIC SCROLLS
- BY THE SAME DEVELOPER: THE GUILD OF THIEVES

10 With the QL having a wide display and being able to drag data quickly off microdrive cartridges, it was ideally suited to hosting text adventures. It was strange, then, that only a handful of titles were ever released for the machine. Still, it wouldn't be right to grumble when an adventure as groundbreaking as *The Pawn* was one of those available. If you're a fan of the genre then the game needs no introduction, and if you don't care for boring old text adventures, *The Pawn* might just change your mind. The QL version lacked the stunning location graphics of the later releases, but that shouldn't detract from what is a first-class adventure and a true QL original.



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