flashback

Will Head looks back at efficiency, piracy, censorship and the horrors of music on the Spectrum.

January 1980

The first month of 1980 saw *PCW* running with the cover line 'Artificial Intelligence without Tears', referring to David Levy's new series describing the logic behind how to program realistic games. The in-depth tutorial covered all the aspects involved, such as input and output, one-person games, algorithms and even a section on *What to do when memory is exhausted*, the golden rule being: try and make the program as efficient as possible – a lesson modern programmers could draw a lot from. No doubt many a new games programmer was unleashed on the world as a result of the guiding hand offered here.

For those readers not lucky enough to get a computer for Christmas, we also featured an article entitled *Brew-It-Yourself Z80 Micro*. Readers were advised to follow Martin Lea's instructions and for just the price of the parts they could have their very own working computer, based on the Z80 processor. Not for the faint-hearted by any means, but given the prohibitively high prices of computers at the time, for some this was the only way to get their hands on some kit.

The benchtest (as grouptests were then known) looked at the Luxor ABC 80, a sub-£1,000 computer. Old themes die hard it seems. Unfortunately your £790 (ex VAT) did not include the 'Datadisc 80 Dual Disc Unit' coming in at a whopping £1,190. Long gone are the days when adequate storage cost more than the computing power supporting it.

January 1985

The infamous phrase 'Don't Panic!' adorned 1985's *PCW,* along with a picture of the two-headed Zaphod Beeblebrox, all in celebration of Infocom's Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy adventure game. The contents entry described it as 'the game of the book of the play of the TV series of the radio programme'. Nowadays we are more accustomed to seeing the film of the TV series of the comic of the computer game. Although 15 years may have passed, The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy is still alive and well on the web at www.h2g2.com – if you need to know the answer to something pop along right now.

We also ran a rather interesting article entitled *The Sound of Music* accompanied by a rather fetching picture of Julie Andrews, who probably hasn't appeared in many computer magazines since. In our round-up of music creation software we covered Music Master and MusiCalc on the Commodore 64 and Music Typewriter on the ZX Spectrum. MusiCalc was the firm favourite, but at £49.99 was a little expensive compared to Music Master at £17.95.

Music Typewriter fared the worst, mainly due to the hardware limitations of Sinclair's machine – it may have seemed like a good idea at the time to create music on a Spectrum, but nowadays that squeaky buzzer would just drive you mad.

Finally, we also let everyone out there (including our competitors, no doubt) know how we ran our benchmarks. All the programs were written in Basic for reasons of portability, given the number of computer platforms there were – the fastest machine was a Sage II, based on Motorola's MC68000 processor.

January 1990

January usually features some sort of list of what the *PCW* writers would like for Christmas, and 1990 was no exception. The team were 'given' £500 to spend on the kit that had caught their eye over the past year. Commodore's Amiga featured highly, with good reason – here was a true multi-tasking computer that produced amazing graphics and sound, complete with a usable GUI (Workbench) in the days when bleak, unfriendly command prompts were the norm. One writer, Chris Cain, even requested a copy of MS-DOS for the sole purpose of burning it in protest of its unhelpful, ugly interface.

This month saw Martin Banks talking about the next generation of speech recognition software. Here we are, 10 years later and we have yet to see the mass introduction of speech recognition. True, these programs are improving but they are still not common-place and there is always something better 'just around the corner'.

Although it seems as if it's been here forever, Windows had yet to make its big impact on the world, and even the word processor we used to write the articles for the magazine was just a shadow of its present self. We ran a head to head of Word for Windows against Ami Professional, both of which came with a runtime version of Windows thrown in. We favoured Word for Windows, but at the time the market was very much open and things could have turned out differently.

January 1995

Back in 1995 we were starting to see the emergence of the Internet as a serious entity, not just an experiment in the labs of the techies and hackers. But the themes don't change. *Sex on the Net. A lot of fuss about nothing*? our cover read. Apparently not, the debate still goes on and Nik Rawlinson adds his two penneths worth on page 58 of this issue.

Software piracy has always been a burning issue, so we decided to add some fuel to the fire with our feature on the dubious software trade in Hong Kong. Francoise Derollepot found that most leading titles were available for as little as £10 and some packages were simply priced on a 'per disk' basis.

Another sensitive issue covered five years ago was that of video game classification. Tim Green wrote: 'What sort of game is Doom II? Is it good fun or sick corrupting violence?'. As time has moved on we have seen games get even more graphic and violent. At the time, games had managed to escape classification, due to them being considered 'cartoon violence' and viewed on a similar level as *Tom and Jerry* videos.

On a lighter note, as the Pentium had all but replaced the 486 we did a round up of Pentium machines for the group-test. Of the 18 manufactures in the test, 13 supplied 90MHz chips with the others opting for 60 or 66MHz versions. Elonex was top dog this month with a 90MHz-based system – yours for £2,355. ∎