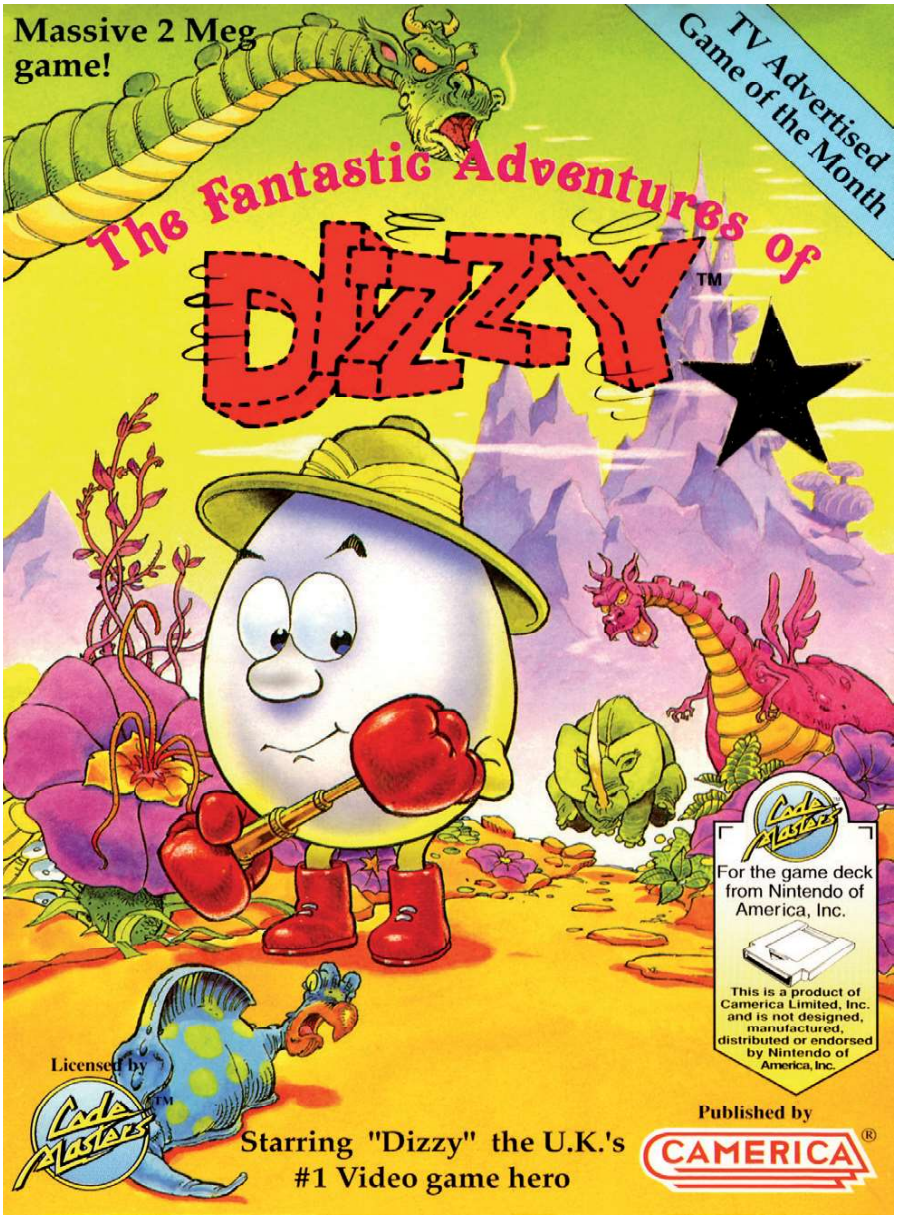
THE STORY BEHIND...

Yet again I'm interviewing the Oliver Twins, Philip and Andrew — this time to explain why they wrote The Fantastic Adventures of Dizzy on the NES.



Chris Wilkins: Thank you again for joining me, can you take us back to the time you decided to abandon the Amstrad CPC and the Spectrum in favour of the NES.

Philip Oliver: It was November 1989, we'd just completed Ghost Busters 2 and Fantasy World Dizzy, which were expected to do very well that Chistmas season, but we could see this would be the last successful Christmas for these 'long in the tooth' 8-bit computers. Come the New Year we were expecting many shops to reduce shelve space considerably for all the old 8-bit computer games. So we thought it was time to move on which is always a little scary.

CW: So what did you decide to move on to and why?

Andrew Oliver: We really weren't sure. Many 8-bit game developers before us had moved onto Atari ST & Amiga, but things weren't great there. Games were expensive to make and then getting pirated heavily. We also felt that we'd be very late to the party if we now started to develop on these platforms. In fact, the ST game sales were already falling. The answer came from our trip to CES (Consumer Electronic Show) in Las Vegas in the first week of January. They had several huge halls dedicated to games — and most of them were centred

around the 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). We looked at these games and felt that we could easily write everything we were seeing and they were selling for high prices and in huge volumes. Approximately £30 each and in the hundreds of thousands if not millions! We heard that Super Mario Bros. had sold around 20 million copies! We looked at this and thought 'we could have written that'.

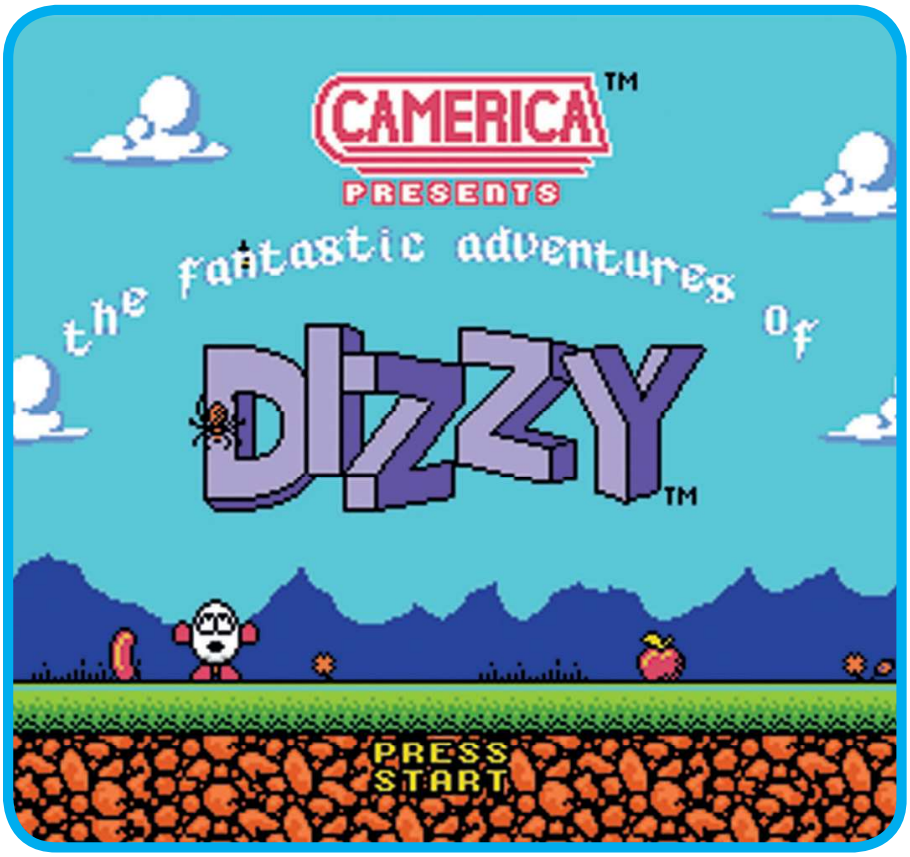
CW: So was this your first experience of consoles and cartridges?

PO: Bizarrely yes. Most of the UK games community had left VCS & C64 cartridges behind. The SEGA Master System and NES had been launched in the UK, but were not very popular and they were not something we'd ever looked at, because there were no keyboards and development environment they seemed closed systems for developers like us.

CW: So why did you think you could now develop for the NES?

AO: Back at Codemasters they'd come up with the 'Game Genie' idea for NES. Whilst developing it, they created an early development system for the NES. Andrew Graham was tasked with using the early prototypes, firstly to develop the Game Genie Interface, but then moved on to starting to write a demo game. That demo was Treasure Island Dizzy.

PO: So when in Vegas, Codemasters were able to show an EPROM cartridge containing an early Treasure Island Dizzy demo. So we knew the development environment was no longer an issue.



Above: The Fantastic Adventures of Dizzy welcome screen on the NES.

CW: So it was full steam ahead on Fantastic Dizzy when you got home?

AO: Not quite. We got our NES Dev. Kit from Codemasters and started to make BMX Simulator as a test case. Remember we had converted Richard Darling's Pro BMX Simulator from Commodore 64 (6502 code) to Amstrad and Spectrum a year before and felt like that was a good starting point given the fact the NES was based on 6502 and had a character mapped screen and hardware sprites — like the C64. It turned out it was very similar, as far as we could tell, to the inner workings of a C64.

CW: So when did Fantastic Dizzy start?

PO: During February, we were close to completing our first NES game, but we all felt that budget titles were not going to make any sales if launched in the US at $40 and more. This was a big opportunity — if Codemasters was going to launch NES games in the US then we all needed to make some big games worthy of those price tags. Two games were identified as the front runners — a large new Dizzy game and a racing game. Initially, this started as Grand Prix Simulator, but this morphed quickly into California Buggy Boys which eventually was overhauled and set in a miniature world and branded Micro Machines.

CW: So February '90 you started on the biggest Dizzy ever, to be worthy of a $40 (approximately £30) price tag. Was that daunting?

Above: Andrew in a very 90s looking setup! Not bad for a portacabin!

AO: It was, we decided to move to Leamington Spa to be closer to Codemasters and the other programmers and artists. We'd written previous games from our home town Trowbridge, near Bath. We asked Peter Williamson, one of the other prolific game makers working at Codemasters to join us on the game, together with a new artist Paul Adams who had just arrived at Codemasters.

CW: Where did you all work?

PO: Funny you should ask — sadly it was in a bunch of portacabins out the back of the Codemasters farmhouse, in Southam, near Leamington Spa. One of the portacabins was assigned to us and the creation of The Fantastic Adventures of Dizzy— it was a horrible environment in which to work. I'm sure it's not the life people thought we'd be leading given our huge successes to date. But we just wanted to knuckle down and make the most of this new opportunity.

Below: Not the most romantic of places to work — scorching hot in the summer and freezing in the winter!

CW: How was the work divided up?

AO: Philip acted as designer and producer — coordinating everything and everyone. The plan was he'd do the full design including level layouts, some art and help me on the code, but he did very little code in the end. He easily got sidetracked into other things like designing Kwik Snax and some of Magic Land Dizzy on the side! Peter would do the mini-games and Paul would create most of the graphics. The music and sound effects were done by Gavin Raeburn.

CW: Did it go smoothly and according to plan?

PO: Sadly we'd underestimated the time it would take, originally we'd hope (but not planned) that it might take about 4 months. In the end, it took just over 7 months, finishing in early September. It really felt like it dragged on too long, but we were pretty happy with the final game.

CW: So did it then go into production and gain critical and commercial success in the US?

AO: We wish! Sadly not. Codemasters was in the heat of a legal battle with Nintendo over the Game Genie. Therefore they could not release the game until this was resolved — we all naively thought this would be quick and cracked on with making more NES Games.

PO: It was eventually

Above: I'm thinking Indiana Jones here and humming the theme tune — are you?

released in November '91, along with Micro Machines, a year later than planned. It was critically well received winning Game Player NES Adventure Game of the Year, a Parent Choice Award and N-Power rated it 92% — the same score they'd given Super Mario Bros.

CW: So I assume it sold really well?

PO: Sadly not, being a year late, the Super NES (SNES) was released and was taking all the attention away from the NES. Retailers had to reduce space for NES games to make way for the exciting new 16-bit console and there was little appetite for 'unofficial NES games'. Retailers didn't want to upset Nintendo by stocking games that weren't officially licenced and endorsed by Nintendo.

CW: So did you make any sales?

AO: The market was so large for NES in the US then, and had Nintendo endorsed it, it would have been stocked in all outlets and probably would have sold several million copies. Sadly it went on to sell around 100,000 copies, we believe.

CW: You must have been very disappointed.

PO: We were, but, we were also used to making the most of our work, so we set about arranging the game to be ported to lots of other computers and consoles. We commissioned Amiga, MegaDrive, Genesis, and PC versions, and set up an office in Leamington and employed several people to convert it to Sega Master System and Game Gear. We even started a GameBoy version and I'm pretty sure a SNES version was started over at Codemasters, but with all the trouble with Nintendo these were abandoned. We shortened the name to Fantastic Dizzy and released all these versions and the NES version across UK and Europe in '93.

CW: So finally the game was commercially successful too?

AO: Sadly, by this time our relationship with Codemasters was coming to an end. The game did ok, but the costs of creating all these games and all the other NES games, 10 in all, that were unreleased, or barely released, had taken

Left: A fine couple of screens to give you a feeling of how the game looks when playing.

its toll on us and we ended up practically bust.

CW: I wasn't expecting a sad end to that story.

PO: It's ok we went on to build relationships with other publishers and created many games for most of the global game publishers under our new company name Interactive Studios, which we later renamed Blitz Games. Maybe parting company with Codemasters, whilst painful, was the right thing to do. It's just sad that Dizzy became the casualty. He was the biggest computer game character of the late 80s in the UK, and across Europe. Recently we learnt he was the biggest game character of the 90s in Russia. We're very proud of the games we created, especially Dizzy.

CW: Thank you for sharing your story with us. Always a pleasure.

PO: Likewise.

AO: I hope your readers enjoy it!

Above: That is one impressive looking trophy!