"Magicland Dizzy"
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Abstract / Primer

This reflective narrative piece examines the formative influence of Codemasters' early 90s video game *Magicland Dizzy* on a childhood gaming experience initially characterised by disappointment. Framed within the context of a snowy Christmas morning in 1992, set in the rural northeast of Scotland, the narrative recounts anticipation and excitement, explores themes of nostalgia, the cultural significance of early gaming, and the enduring impact of technological encounters on personal and familial creativity during childhood. The following was published in *GameTripper* in June 2021.

Magicland Dizzy

My personal gaming adventure began on a blisteringly cold and wintery Christmas morning. The year was 1992, and the fields outside our old family cottage in the remote, north-east Scottish countryside were covered with deep drifts of snow. As myself, my brother and my sister awoke that morning, we knew it would be particularly special this year.

I was eight, my brother six, and my sister five. Christmas then held a certain magic – an air of endless possibility. Perhaps part of this feeling came from growing up in the early 90s: an era of seemingly continuous innovation and global connectivity, as the world grew ever more together, especially via the miracle of the World Wide Web – then only whispered about, and yet to become a household standard. Whitney Houston was Christmas number one; Marathon had recently changed its name to Snickers. Life was good and anything seemed possible.

My mother and father hinted for the last month that we'd be receiving a "collective present", and using our combined brainpower, we felt we'd calculated exactly what this was. When we ran down the short corridor at a frankly unimaginably early hour that morning, we were not disappointed.

We arrived into our front room breathless with anticipation; our collective hysteria was likely sufficient to be considered mania. As was tradition, a selection of smaller parcels sat under the fireplace in our cottage sitting room, arranged into three piles labelled with our names. For a second, we looked around, momentarily fearing the worst: the absence of the "big gift".

However, our fears were unfounded, and as our levels of excitement reached a crescendo of near-catatonia, our collective gaze acknowledged the giant, wrapped box on the living room table, which sat directly behind the door.

Leaving our smaller gifts for later, we all ran to the parcel and together, we tore off the wrapping paper to reveal not only an Amiga 500+ *Cartoon Classics* pack – resplendent in all its bright red glory, adorned with images of our favourite cartoon characters – but a brand new black Toshiba TV-Monitor to use with the system.

Faint with anticipation, and warding off the tachycardia nearly brought on by my sheer excitement, I was soon gripping the boxy-styled Amiga mouse – with white knuckles – as my parents assembled the various components.

There was the beautiful, off-white elongated keyboard that housed the CPU, keyboard interface, and 3.5" disk drive; the matching grey-coloured "ergonomic" two-button mouse that could elicit a three-day hand-cramp after any freehand drawing session in *Deluxe Paint Three* longer than 30 minutes; and a Zipstick joystick that claimed to provide an enhanced level of control and "auto-fire", which simply paused the game at random and sporadic intervals when activated.

Finally, there was the A520 modulator: a large, parasitical monstrosity that latched onto the back of the sleek design of the Amiga, wires sprouting in all directions, as if operating as a kind of warped visual metaphor. It transformed the simple action of decoding the RF signal from console to TV into something akin to maintaining the Amiga A500+ on permanent life-support.

Despite a few hiccups setting up the system, I was soon ready to play. However, here we encountered our problem.

Missing in action

The games claimed to be included with our Amiga included our most anticipated presents that Christmas. *The Simpsons: Bart vs the Space Mutants* and *Captain Planet* were based on cartoons that played out regularly on Saturday mornings, at deafening volumes, from the small TV in our living room, as my brother and I re-enacted "skateboarding Nelson" or "our powers combined", jumping around on our sofa, usually until one of us got injured.

To our horror, my father – reaching into the box to retrieve the games – found each box empty. We stared into space, our adrenaline receptors burned-out through sheer excitement, to the point that our tired synapses offered no back-up plan for the inevitable emotional crash that followed. However, there were no tears: we simply engaged ourselves in loading-up and playing with the Amiga Workbench disks, resigned to waiting until the following Monday, when my father went back to our local Currys to have a stern word (not really) and to retrieve our games (really).

A few days later, we were in gaming heaven. The three of us delighted ourselves with crisp full-colour displays of *Lemmings*, *Bart vs the Space Mutants*, and *Captain Planet*, all gloriously presented with faithful buzzing-bleeping digitised-midi soundtracks, and we were soon working on developing legitimate works of art (and concurrently developing acute early-onset arthritis) using *Deluxe Paint Three*, including short animations, afforded by the 500+'s enhanced chipset and 1MB (yes, you read that correctly – one megabyte) of memory.

However, that Christmas day, it was the *Codemasters: Super All Stars* pack – an additional Christmas gift to my brother that wasn't unwrapped until later that afternoon – that really delighted us. Given the situation, it ended up saving our Christmas Amiga gaming experience. One particular game in the collection captivated both me and my brother: *Magicland Dizzy*. Naturally, we played through the four other games included in the pack – *Steg The Slug, Captain Dynamo*, *CJ in the USA*, and *Robin Hood: Legend Quest* – but the Oliver Twins' Amiga classic was what I fell in love with fastest.

Sitting that Christmas afternoon on the purple ottoman in our bedroom, with the Amiga and monitor on the desk my brother and I shared – and high as a kite on Christmas sweets (Mackintosh's Toffos and Mintolas, Cadbury's Strollers, and probably the occasional Ring-Pop) – we tentatively and carefully inserted the *Magicland Dizzy* disk into the Amiga.

The music was the first thing to catch my attention; the opening chords blended together, in perfect synthesised sequence, alongside a punchy drum beat and a see-saw, slightly off-key, electronic bass that provided a deep, pulsing rhythm that pounded in perfect harmony.

Magicland Dizzy's graphics were beautiful. Immediately, the screen displayed a lush backdrop of green grass and shaded wood, plus the initial setting of a tree-house, as the game cycled rapidly through a short demo program to show off the animations of characters and

backgrounds, rivers and wishing wells, ghosts and mediaeval landscapes, as well as the dialogue boxes and the objects used in puzzle elements of the game.

My brother and I let the demo play out in its entirety, sitting open-mouthed at the montage of carefully drawn and coloured pixel-art that accompanied the initial introduction; a rotating gallery of what were to be some of the most memorable characters from the *Dizzy* franchise.

A whole new world

Only minutes after pushing "Fire to Start", I was transfixed by the complexities of the game design and the character animations. As I began to play *Magicland Dizzy*, I moved the joystick left to right and encouraged the little egg on the screen to roll this way and that; often becoming incredibly frustrated as he inevitably, and regularly, rolled off the side of embankments, fell down wishing wells, and generally slipped off platforms and sunk through clouds (who knew!) to land in water, where he instantly met his demise.

However, these gameplay elements were never frustrating enough for me to completely abandon it. They were roadblocks to overcome, extending the game's lifespan. The elements of *Magicland Dizzy* that transfixed me most were its puzzles. In hindsight, these were simple and quite logical, and certainly not at the level of the complete off-the-wall abstractions that would become commonplace in later 1990s PC games (such as *Sam and Max* and *Discworld 2*).

Yet for a young, eight-year-old child, these puzzles often appeared near impossible, and I remember vividly writing out lists of the various items that Dizzy could pick up, transcribing these carefully in the notes section of my FunFax before trying to match them to the various plot points in the game.

Adventures for two

As that long Christmas evening finally drew to a close, my brother and I went to sleep talking over the various puzzles we'd encountered, planning our next steps for the following morning. Although we played many other games over the remainder of that snowy Christmas break back in the early 90s, *Magicland Dizzy* remained one of our favourite and most revisited adventures. The game lent itself perfectly to taking it in pairs, turn-by-turn, with one of us operating as a "spotter" and "chief puzzle solver", and the other as the "controller" moving the character. Looking back, it must be said that teamwork was the key element of our playthroughs, and I like to think we each brought something different to the gameplay experience.

Over the next few weeks, we progressed further and further into the game, displacing bridge-trolls using a billy goat, gathering hot water in buckets to unfreeze careless characters now encased in ice, and negotiating various hazards and clues that adorned the diverse and colourful Magicland landscape.

Despite our numerous playthroughs, and having successfully dodged angry ghosts, killer birds, moving chess pieces, and the seemingly ever-present and most significant danger of all to Dizzy – water – we always remained stuck at one particular section: "The Active Volcano!".

Try as we might, we regularly succumbed when trying to simultaneously negotiate Dizzy between moving clouds while avoiding fireballs that rose upwards from the lava below. Eventually, after what must have been several years of only ever getting as far as this later stage in the game, we collectively gave up, and the *Magicland Dizzy* disk moved further and further back in our stack of games as newer, more advanced games came to our Amiga: *Theme Park*, *King's Quest VI*, *Beneath a Steel Sky* and more.

However, *Magicland Dizzy* always had a special place in my heart, and even as I reminisce about it now – listening to that familiar opening theme on YouTube – an overwhelming feeling of nostalgia reminds me of that Christmas, when genuine excitement and enthrallment was at

my fingertips, and that single blue Codemasters diskette was first popped into the 3.5" drive of our brand new Amiga 500+.

After being edged into obsolescence, our Amiga 500+ – a once-resplendent, novel, and cutting-edge piece of technology – was slowly displaced and eventually relegated to the cold, dusty loft of our country cottage. It followed our embrace of Sega and Nintendo consoles, as well as a huge moment, several years later – in an almost identical Christmas to that of 1992 – when we all received another collective gift: our first PC. The Amiga's reign was officially over.

We bid a sad yet respectful farewell to the A500+ workhorse as we slid it back into its original, but now quite tatty, *Cartoon Classics* box, complete with *Deluxe Paint Three*, and laid it to rest in the attic, by way of thanks for its loyal service record.

Solo success

Since then, the topic of *Magicland Dizzy* has arisen several times, but it took a few years. My brother, who was away at university, sent me an email asking me to identify a small capture-image at a gaming exhibition. Within minutes, I correctly answering *Day of the Tentacle* – but something in the background caught my eye: a pixelated silhouette of Stonehenge with a familiar-looking egg, mid-roll, in mid-air.

I immediately asked my brother if he remembered *Magicland Dizzy*. Of course he did. A few days passed without contact but, towards the end of that week. he told me he managed to get *Magicland* working on his PC. Not only that, he'd played it throughout the previous night and finally completed it. He didn't want to give anything away to me, knowing I'd never managed it myself.

However, life continued on and, over the years, *Magicland Dizzy* once again drifted to the back of my mind. Yet one very late night, when I was working on a university thesis, I heard a familiar theme in the background of a randomly cycling YouTube playlist: a theme that was unmistakable: the opening bass and drum loop from *Magicland Dizzy*.

I immediately paused the video and explored the topic "Top Amiga Games". With all the presence and trepidation I felt on that impossibly wintery, Scottish Christmas afternoon in 1992, I downloaded an Amiga emulator, bought the relevant Kickstart ROMs and dragged the Magic.adf file into the DF0 drive 1 destination on the Workbench emulator.

As the familiar opening beats of *Magicland Dizzy* pulsed through my headphones – the bass and synths sounding fuller and more present than ever – familiar feelings rose up in me: nostalgia for my childhood home, the simplicity of being a kid in the early 90s, and memories of a time when anything seemed possible… when great discoveries and unimaginable new technologies were only just around the corner.

"Tonight, I'm going to beat it," I thought to myself. In my mind, I was back in my old, shared bedroom, sitting on that purple ottoman. The posters of oil rigs and *Teenage Mutant Hero Turtles* were on the walls around me. The Zipstick was gripped firmly in my trembling hands and my eyes were inches away from the 14" Toshiba monitor.

I brushed from my brain nearly 30 years of gaming cobwebs and steeled my muscle memory for action, as I tapped the arrow keys on my Macbook and began to play.

My memory served me well and I soon acquired the castle key, the power pill to appease the swamp ghosts, and managed to melt Denzil. Things were going well. Before long, I'd de-thorned Dylan and transformed the frog into Dora, and was on my way back across the haunted swamp.

A bitter end

However, this progress eventually took a turn when I encountered my old nemesis: "The Active Volcano!". While I still had all three of my lives, these were reduced one by one as I missed

the first cloud-jump, then the second, before being scorched by the fireballs arising from the lake.

After two attempts – the second of which forced me to replay the game entirely – Dizzy met similar ends. I was done. Twenty-five years later, my old foe *Magicland Dizzy* had risen from the depths of my past to taunt me.

Alas, the completion of *Magicland Dizzy* was simply not meant to be. Maybe one day, the time will come for me to conquer it – more specifically "The Active Volcano!' – but it hasn't happened yet. My feeling at this stage is that if it's meant to be, it's meant to be. And so, it's with a heart heavy with nostalgia, as well as countless happy but frustrated Amiga gaming memories of *Magicland Dizzy*, that this tale draws to a close – for now.

Not too long ago, my parents sold our old family home where we first received our A500+, and relocated to a new town, as well as a much smaller but newer house. One day, when returning home to help them move, my father handed me a large, unmarked cardboard box and said: "Amiga – I thought you might want to keep this". He'd stored it, carefully and thoughtfully in his tool shed for nearly 25 years, remembering the joy it had once brought me, reluctant to throw it away after a loft clear-out many years prior.

Upon opening the box, I was delighted to see the A500+ exactly as I remembered it. Not only that, but nestled next to the modulator – which was still attached to its sprouting of cables, looping almost comically around into different sockets and plugs – was a smaller, long, sealed container of floppy discs.

Overcome with nostalgia, I opened the box and flicked through them. Close to the front was a familiar blue disk. Although faded, and not without some wear, the old Codemasters logo was clearly visible, stencilled in grey in the top right-hand corner, emblazoned with the proud declaration of "16-BIT". I think we can all guess the name printed on that disk.

Author Biography:

Nicholas Norman Adams is a researcher and Chartered Psychologist, an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, and a Science Council Registered Scientist. His academic interests are interdisciplinary and draw from applied psychology, sociology and poststructural feminist theory. His research examines gender; *men and masculinities*, safe and risky behaviours, and mental health. He is also greatly interested in nostalgia, in particular the concept of *hauntology*.