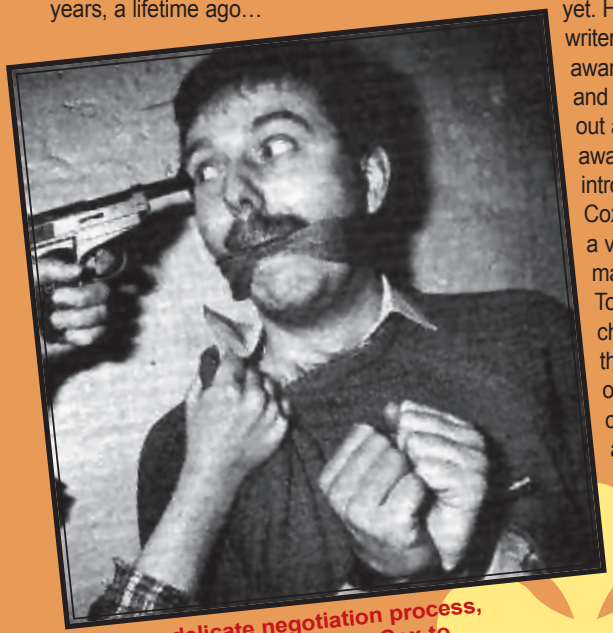
SNOUTY'S ABOUT



Phil "Snouty" South looks back... sniff... at his time on everyone's favourite Speccy mag... sniff

In the words of the great Andy Williams, "Where do I begin?"* It's strange for me to think about my time at Your Sinclair, or YS as it is almost always known to fans and ex-workers alike. Strange for two reasons; the first is the big one – in two thin years it's going to be 20 years since I started work on the magazine. Ain't that a kick in the head? The second strange reason is that the legacy of the mag is so enduring. I'm constantly meeting people who were fans of the mag who say things like "you guys were the people who inspired me to write games/work for games mags/be a writer/buy a pair of fluffy slippers" and so forth. It all seemed to be such a short time ago but there it is in black and white. 18 years, a lifetime ago…



During a delicate negotiation process, Phil persuades editor Kevin Cox to increase his wages

(*You're not going to cry are you? You better not. Ed*) No, I'm fine. I just have something in my eye, that's all.

Back in the day, in this case 1984, I was a struggling young writer, just 24 and struggling because try as I might I couldn't get anything published. That and the duct tape I had wound around my body to make writing a bit more of a challenge. It was the early days of the computer games boom. The Atari 2600 game console had come and gone, having like so many of us peaked too early, and I was playing text-based adventure games on an Apple II with my buddy John Molloy, when he asked me why I wasn't a writer yet. He knew I was a good writer, but also was keenly aware that I was a layabout and wouldn't get up to put out a fire if it was too far away from the couch. He introduced me to Kevin Cox, who was working for a very early games magazine called Software Today. It was an awful, cheaply produced title that reviewed any game on any console or computer going, which at this point wasn't very many. The Commodore 64, the MSX machines, the BBC Micro and a few other lame consoles were all we had, and the games market wasn't what you'd call exciting. The boom was just beginning, and while all the manufacturers were trying to sew up the market, nobody was really in the lead. I still don't know to this day why the Spectrum succeeded and the MSX, Memorex and Dragon 32 died the death.



Well it just wouldn't be YS if this caption didn't draw attention to Phil's unfeasibly large organ

*Yeah, I wondered about that. It's the opening line to the title song of the movie Love Story. Kinda touching, huh?

CONFESSIONS OF A NON-COMPUTER USER

I worked for Kevin, reviewing a number of titles for the above machines, and I did so month after month. The cool (or dumb) part was that I didn't actually own a computer, so not only could I not write the reviews on a word processor, but I couldn't even run the games to see what they were like. I got around this obstacle quite cleverly by turning up at my local college, which by chance used Commodore 64s and BBC Micros in its computer lab, and convincing them to let me use the computers (providing I let them play and even keep some of the games). It was a sweet arrangement; I got to write the reviews, I got paid and they got a line on all the new games. It was a win/win situation. They let me write my reviews on a C64 word processor and print them out and this worked well for a couple of years. This was obviously before email became the norm so I had to post hard copy of my reviews to the magazine. How high tech is that?

After this I got a few other writing gigs for lifestyle and music magazines, cutting my writing teeth interviewing the creators of Max Headroom (and nearly getting sued I might add – long story), Richard O'Brien about the Rocky Horror Show game, and a number of music folk like Brian Eno and Peter Gabriel. I wasn't earning a lot of money doing this – the jobs were infrequent and I was a young married guy by this point. I ended up cleaning a factory on night work and writing during the day. So when Kevin called me and said he wanted me to write a freelance tips section for a magazine called Your Spectrum, I was more than happy to drop my mop and get the cheap coach up to London. This was my first real writing gig. I was embarrassed about my 'other' job so I tried hard to keep the cleaning thing a secret and never told the rest of the team why I had to go home early when I was up at the office. But Kevin found out and he was horrified, bless him, so he said to leave it with him.



Your Spectrum's first cover shows a bespectacled kid and shouts about Forth, keyboard buffers and chess tournaments





That's more like it. The first issue of Your Sinclair features helicopters and soldiers and guns and death

ON THE JOB

The offices of Bunch Books, as it was then known, were located a short way up Rathbone Place, a stone's throw away from the base of Centre Point at the crossroads of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. Right in the heart of the city. Bunch Books was set up by Felix Dennis, one of the co-publishers of the notorious radical, tripped out, hippy magazine from the 60s, Oz. The way I understand it is that Felix founded his publishing empire on one-off kung-fu and pop music poster magazines in the 70s, and once it was established, he successfully rode whatever fashionable pop culture wave hit next. So naturally during the computer games boom of the early 80s, Bunch Books began publishing computer games titles. Under the slightly more serious sounding brand of Sportscene Specialist Press, a rash of computer titles broke out, like Mac User, Your 64, weekly IT news paper MicroScope, and finally Your Spectrum.

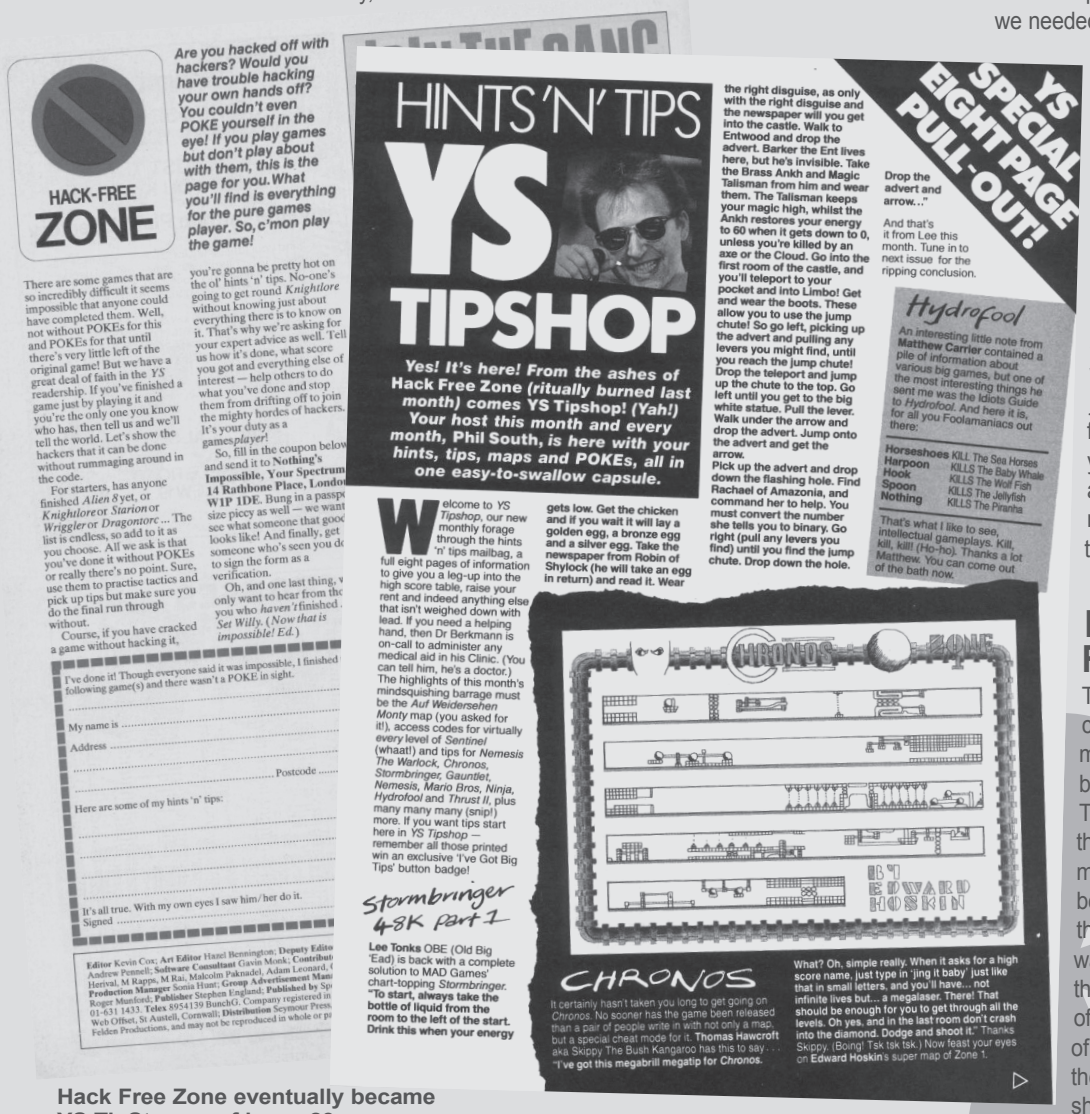
The Spectrum came out after the successful ZX80 and ZX81 computers, and as with all Sir Clive Sinclair's hair, sorry, hare-brained schemes, it was an attempt to bring something revolutionary down in price so it was accessible to all. He's a visionary, old chrome dome, but unlike almost all his other bald, erm, bold endeavours, this was a success – this was the right product at the right time. It's hard to describe the excitement that this simple tape loading 48K computer caused, but it was big. Other magazines – like the wonderfully trashy Crash and the more sombre Sinclair User – also cashed in on the popularity of everyone's favourite rubber-keyed button box. But I like to think, in all seriousness, we were the best.



Team YS. From left to right – Marcus Berkmann, Darrell King, Phil South and Peter George

The name change to Your Sinclair came quite soon after I started, and that (as far as I remember) was just a re-branding exercise. The content of the magazine didn't change much, but the design was made much smoother, more like a lifestyle mag. And that's kind of how we saw it. We didn't want to be Byte or PCW, we wanted to be Smash Hits, and if it's not too immodest I seriously think we were the nearest computer gaming equivalent. Our remit was simple – to inform and entertain, and not necessarily in that order. In fact, in a pinch, if there wasn't that much information we could just stick to being funny. We had the coolest and best people working for us. Originally it was just me, Teresa Maughan (who really was as yummy as she looked) and Kevin in a ground floor office sweating over the mag, served by a number of freelances like Andy Robson, John Minson, Max Phillips, Pete Shaw and Mike Gerrard But we needed a team, a core team to ramp up the quality of the writing. We needed synergy. So we advertised for writers.

When Marcus Berkmann first came in to interview I thought he was a bit too posh, and probably wouldn't fit in. Actually we got on like a house on fire, but as you know house fires can be dangerous. Marcus was a writer and critic who specialized in wry comedy. I was a writer who specialised in surreal jokes about ninja costumes and fluffy slippers. We spent a couple of years getting paid for playing games and laughing at our own jokes. It really doesn't get any better than that.



HACK-FREE ZONE

Are you hacked off with hackers? Would you have trouble hacking your own hands off? You couldn't even POKE yourself in the eye! If you play games but don't play about with them, this is the page for you. What you'll find is everything for the pure games player. So, c'mon play the game!

HINTS 'N' TIPS

YS TIPSHOP

Yes! It's here! From the ashes of Hack Free Zone (ritually burned last month) comes YS Tipshop! (Yah!) Your host this month and every month, Phil South, is here with your hints, tips, maps and POKEs, all in one easy-to-swallow capsule.

YS SPECIAL EIGHT PAGE PULL-OUT!

Hydrofool

CHRONOS ZONE

CHRONOS

Hack Free Zone eventually became YS TipStop as of issue 23

BOOM, SHAKE THE ROOM

The boom happened and suddenly computer games were the new pop music. I was writing game reviews but also tip pages, and the YS Tipshop was my regular feature on the magazine. I would wade through mail from the readers and pick out the best tips and print them. Apart from that I used to do a lot of the big walkthroughs. I would play a game through to the end and take a series of screen shots as I went. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen at the back of the ground floor, in the dark taking shots of the screen with a camera on a tripod. It was all so different from the

modern age of screen capture and Action Replay infinite lives.

We actually took the conscious decision to focus our attention on the people who made the games, and had some regular characters who would always crop up, like Ocean's Gary Bracey, US Gold's Richard "Fluffy Slippers" Tidsall, and of course the excellent Gargoyle Games guys Greg Follis and Roy Carter (who were really funny guys but most of what they said was *totally* unprintable). We interviewed a lot of the games writers, and this was a time when a lot of the programmers were doing their work in back bedrooms, on their own. Anyone could code a game and market it, but once the major labels got involved things began to change. During my stay at YS we saw the first crop of games that were created by teams, and it's pretty much stayed that way ever since.

Despite this, at least initially, the games business was a like a very small town, where everyone knew each other, news travelled fast, and where people slept with their sisters and had babies with two heads. It had delusions of grandeur, actually, and while most people thought it was like the film or music business, it was actually really small time. We did all the promotions for the magazine ourselves, and visited a number of Sinclair computer conventions and shows, with all the team turning up to work the stands, sell subscriptions and meet and greet our public. We even signed autographs, for crying out loud. Sir Clive Sinclair turned up a few times too, and while he had no clue who we were, we pretended to the punters we were really tight. Plus I had a bunch of badges printed containing the words "I've got big tips" and we handed them out to visitors. It was the perfect YS joke – saucy, punny and yet perfectly PG certificate to the naked eye. Ah, happy times.

HERE ENDETH THE LESSON

Writing this piece has been great. I remembered so many things I'd long forgotten; so many days and nights of writing and thinking of jokes with Marcus. I did spend most of the nights totally plastered, but in my defence I have to say that Marcus bought most of the lager. I was one of those "first in the door, last to the bar" kind of guys and I'd like to thank Marcus here, publicly, for being well brought up enough not to point that out to me at the time.

Abiding memories? Writing comic strips with Charles Peattie ("Alex") and Chris Donald ("Viz"), nearly being run over while at my desk



T'zer and Caroline Clayton getting down together

one morning, and Marcus and I being made up to look like the gayest pantomime dames in history for a centre spread.

It was a pivotal time in the games business, and the very stuff on which this esteemed organ is based. We knew even at the time that what we were doing was something really cool. And the games – the *games!* As you know the games were tiny 48K computer programs, with no great graphics or sound to speak of, but they have really stood the test of time. It's amazing, isn't it, how restrictions can bring out the best in people? The same went for us at YS. That's a lesson for life, I think.

THE END, MY FRIEND

Towards the end of 1988, I was getting itchy feet. I know – why would anyone pass up the opportunity to work at YS, play games, drink beer and daydream all day? Well, several things. My freelance career was taking off and I needed more time to devote to that, plus I was considering moving out of the orbit of the M25 and heading West. There's only one thing better than hanging out with cool people and playing games all day in a cool London magazine office, and that's writing in your dressing gown after having got up at 2pm and going back to bed after you've finished. As I said earlier, I was deeply bone idle. Well, in actual fact I'd been working very hard, and was burned out. I needed a little more quality of life.

So my wife and I moved to Somerset, to a nice cottage in a quiet little farming village near Frome. We raised kids, we chopped wood, and I wrote a few books and edited some others. I wrote about 1,000,000 words for various Future magazines. YS followed me down to the West a few years later, when Matt B and Andy D were running the show.

I dunno. After Sarah Biggs, Marcus, T'zer and I left, there wasn't really much of the old YS left. I like to think we took all the talent with us, but hey that's just me being immodest. Jackie Ryan, everyone's favourite pocket cutie and replacement for Sarah, did a swell job, as did Matt and the others who came after us, but it was never really the same.

For example, I used the word "wibble" and many other nonsense words which were actually South family jokes between me and my brothers and sister. To see them being recycled years later in the Future version of the mag just left a funny taste in my mouth.



T'zer, Marcus, Sarah and I all left the mag to grow up, basically, and have grown-up careers and kids, and yeah – we all lived happily ever after. None of us could have dreamed the lasting impact YS would have, and it's great that people remember, that we made a mark somehow in games history. Maybe we should all get together on the 20th anniversary in a couple of years time and make a one off magazine of jokes, memories and game reviews. Or maybe it's more fitting if we just get together, drink a lot of lager and laugh at each other's jokes. Just like old times.



Phil these days. Still acting up for the camera (*Grow up man! Ed*)