

How punk and Thatcherism came together in the surreal ZX Spectrum Pimania craze

April 24 2017, by Alan Bilton



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Listeners tuning in to Portsmouth's independent station [Radio Victory](#), late at night in 1977, would have found themselves confronted with a mysterious electronic squeal. It sounded more like a transmitter malfunction or cat-like yawl than a music show. And yet, for the few hobbyists who owned a new-fangled "micro-computer", this tinny squawk could be recorded and then fed via a tape-deck into one's machine to play a puzzle game with "real prizes."

The idea of "[broadcast software](#)" never really took off. But these strange nocturnal laments marked the beginning of a relationship between technological innovation and tongue-in-cheek gimmickry that would blossom into a series of provocative, absurd and genuinely [Dada-esque](#) computer games in the 1980s.

The Radio Victory broadcasts were the brainchild of Mel Croucher and Christian Penfold, who formed [Automata](#) in 1977. Automata originally started off putting together audio travel guides, until, lumbered with a surfeit of blank tapes, Croucher hit upon the idea of making cassettes with synthesised pop on one side, and simple computer games on the other.

These non-violent, politicised, "adult" games for the [Sinclair ZX81 computer](#), were sold purely [through mail order](#). With potential naughtiness hidden behind "censored" stickers and warnings that "these games are not for the squeamish", titles such as Smut, Vasectomy, and Reagan promised a salacious playground of racy graphics and moral corruption. Though, in truth, the block graphics could do little more than suggest a blocked toilet, urinating stick figure, or Ronald Reagan's head.

Though not particularly inflammatory, this [collection of games](#) laid the foundation for one of the most famous of these puzzles, [Pimania](#), best known in its ZX Spectrum form.

Punk provocation

The now 35 years old, the ZX Spectrum was a tool of innovation for many. Unlike the consoles of today, the ZX Spectrum was a platform on which legions of fans and "bedroom coders" could create their own games and other software.

Pimania's fame rested on the creation of its vaguely obscene mascot, the

Piman – though his droopy proboscis was rather less worrying than the condom-like pink suit Penfold wore to gaming fairs when in character – as well as the offer of a real golden sundial worth £6,000. The dial was buried in a secret location as the reward for the first player to successfully decipher the clues.

Although in appearance it was little different from other text-based adventures, Pimania, like all of Automata's work, can be read as a dada-inspired "anti-game." It was a source of entertainment and yet went against the traditional format of gameplay.

To many players' frustration, the game only began with the use of a mysterious key – in actual fact the mathematical symbol π . Navigation was by a clock face (three for right, nine for left) rather than a compass. The objects to be found seemed deliberately meaningless or mundane: pork pies, rubber ducks, Valium. Moreover, the Piman himself was a mocking presence, constantly shifting in mood from hungry, to bored, to scared.

This deliberate sense of alienation – an opening screen tells the player "You are cast into an arena of despair. A cage surrounds you" – suggests a punk sensibility wholly appropriate for the times. Croucher conceived of the game as taking place inside the innards of an enormous horse (like Nathanael West's 1931 surrealist novel, [The Dream Life of Balso Snell](#), which opens with the hero entering the Trojan horse through its anus); a Thatcherite landscape deep inside the bowls of the beast.

Play was arbitrary and capricious: sometimes a rubber duck would placate the Piman, at other times it sent him into a rage. Abuse, or foul language, got one ejected from the system. While taking a telescope to the observatory allowed for a view of some lost green and pleasant land, most players spent most of the time in the horse's rear end, surrounded by jingles and adverts, throwing up after eating another pork pie. There

were red herrings and dogs barking up the wrong tree. Meaning was either infantile or absent, the player endlessly searching for wealth in an empty and absurd landscape.

Less a [game](#) than a Dada provocation, it seems in many ways unlikely that there should be any real prize at all. And yet, in driving rain on July 22, 1985 (22/7 approximating π), two women who had followed the clues to the white horse at High and Over, a feature carved into the chalky Sussex Downs, were surprised by Chris Penrose in full Piman-regalia – who leapt out from behind a rock to [present them with their prize](#).

It says much for Penrose and Croucher that the pair were still prepared to travel there every year: by this stage Automata was all but over, bankrupted by the failure of [Deus Ex Machina \(1984\)](#), whose synthesised dystopia suggests another version of the 1980s.

Yet it was Pimania which arguably best captured the spirit of the times. For all their counter-cultural sensibilities, Croucher and Penfold created, marketed and distributed their products with a Thatcherite entrepreneurial spirit, helping to create the [video games industry](#) in the process. Unafraid of publicity stunts and gimmicks, and founded upon notions of prizes and the pursuit of wealth, Automata simultaneously embodied and subverted the values of the decade.

The winners of Pimania were actually looking at the white horse's head when they should have been scrabbling around at its rear: a fitting punk metaphor for the times.

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