Allister Brimble

For Episode 1 we spoke to Allister Brimble, a British composer who has been making video game music since the mid-1980s. We discussed his beginnings in the music scene and the difficulties of writing music for one channel...

Composer

1987-present

Main platforms
Amiga, ZX Spectrum,
PlayStation, SNES

Known for
Driver
Project-X
Body Blows Galactic
Superfrog
Alien Breed
Assassin
Colonization
Descent
Descent II
Lego Knights' Kingdom
Slightly Magic
RollerCoaster Tycoon
Glover
Screamer
Chris Sawyer's
Locomotion
Fluidity/Hydroventure
Sonic & Sega All-Stars
Racing (DS version)
Zeewolf
Mortal Kombat

DW: So Allister, we'll start by asking: How did you first get involved in making video game music?

Well I guess my dad was fairly musical. I was really into computers and pretty amazed by some of the music they were creating at the time – I think there was a game called *Glider Rider* that David Whittaker did a soundtrack for that really inspire me. And of course, like everybody, I moved onto the Amiga, managed to get some software to allow me to compose my own tunes, and sent them off to a software company called 17-Bit software – it's actually a public domain company. I guess there's quite a few people listening who might not even know what a public domain software company is. I guess it's like... today you might show something on YouTube – you might show your music or your graphics on YouTube – well, this was kinda the same thing, but they put it on a disk, [and] they distributed it for the price of the disk. So I sent something off to them and they loved what I did – I did a Jean Michel Jarre *Rendezvous* remix – and I sent this tune off, not thinking anything would come of it, and I was kinda amazed to get a reply back saying they liked what I did. And I think 17-Bit later turned into Team 17, and of course they did *Alien Breed* and *Project-X*, and I was chosen to do those games. And it sort of went on from there.

DW: And before the Amiga you were involved in the Commodore 64 music scene as well weren't you?

Actually, it was strangely after the Amiga.

DW: Oh ok.

So I did some Amiga projects for Codemasters software – I think it was a game called *Nitro Boost Challenge* – and then a football game which came out a couple of years later called *Italia 1990*. And after that they asked me to do some music for the Spectrum and the Commodore 64, because they were at the end of their life. So it was kind of a backward step, but it was really nice to be able to do some of the stuff that my childhood heroes had been doing, like Rob Hubbard and David Whittaker, on those 8-bit machines.

DW: What did you think of the SID chip?

[The] SID chip was awesome, it still is today. I've just done a project with it actually, which is called *Sidology 2* – remixes of Jean Michel Jarre done with the SID chip – and I've used something like four or five SIDs at once. It's a SID emulator made by Mike Clarke that runs on *Cubase* and it sounds... it's 100% realistic. So yeah, I've been having fun with that. You've just got so much expression with the SID chip that you don't get later on the

above
Allister at home with
his Korg Z1, circa 1997

Amiga. You kind of have to push it quite hard to get any expression from a sample. But yeah you had it all – with the 64 you couldn't have the samples... it was just a very rich, flowing sound.

DW: What software did you use to make music on the 64 then? Was it all machine code or BASIC, or were there trackers for it?

"The good thing about making music on] the Amiga was you could just do it with an Amiga, you didn't need anything else"

I had some software where I could type the notes in one at a time and that was given to me by another composer called Wally Beben. Later on a friend called {Michael Delaney} – who's really good at writing sound drivers – made me a proper tracker program that would run on an Amiga. Then I could plug it

into the... I think you managed to get it onto a Commodore 64 disk and get it into the 64 like that.

DW: On a 5¼ inch floppy was it?

Yeah it was.

Laughs.

DW: Old school! Going onto the Amiga then, what was your setup that you used originally?

Originally... the good thing about the Amiga was you could just do it with an Amiga, you didn't need anything else. So I had an Amiga and I had *Aegis Sonix*, which was a nice software package where you could do samples and almost Commodore 64-like synth leads and stuff on it. And then later on I moved... well not much later on – a few months later – I probably moved to *Soundtracker* like a lot of people. And then you got all that amazing sample manipulation [that] you could do real time.

RA: So Allister, I know you were doing lots of stuff later on after the Amiga [on other platforms] – did you use the Amiga at all to work with them? [Did you use] any Amiga software for the PlayStation tunes?

For PlayStation I think I was on *FastTracker* on the PC, but before that I did quite a bit of music for the Super Nintendo and there's a game called *Lawnmower Man* that did quite well.

RA: Yeah I remember that! That's got a very good soundtrack actually.

Thanks. And I used David Whittaker's sound driver on that, but you had to type the notes in one at a time in an assembler. So what I did was I used a program on the Amiga called *Delta Music*, which is another tracker-type thing, but it's really good in that all the channels are separate. On a tracker there'll be all linked together, all four channels, so you can't change them independently really.

RA: I remember around the time big musicians in the Amiga scene used to have their own sound format, so there was a special David Whittaker sound format [for example]. Did you have an Alistair Brimble one?

Laughs. No I didn't, I just used the... well actually sort of. I started using a program called {Samone?}, which was by a guy called {Brian Posmer?}, who's brilliant at writing tracker programs, and that allowed me to do *Alien Breed*. Actually by the way I couldn't have done *Alien Breed* on a tracker because it would've taken too much memory because each of those patterns takes, y'know, several k of memory – you probably know better than me, it's probably 1k a pattern or something like that. But on {Samone} I could have the four channels independent so I could construct it like a jigsaw. But he actually found out that I used his {Samone} on *Alien Breed*, so [*laughs*] I said to him: "Well I really probably should have paid you a little bit of that", so I paid him £100. In return he actually wrote me {Samone 2.0}, which had loads of extra features in that only I could use.

RA: So essentially you just paid for a private upgrade.

Laughs.

DW: £100 – not bad is it?

Yeah I know! So yeah, I was quite pleased with that. And you could do some quite interesting stuff, like... you could set a vibrato going and it would continue going through all the other instruments that you played after it. That's what David Whittaker used to do on the Commodore 64 – specialist basslines, and the vibrato used to continue. I just couldn't do that on a normal tracker because it would keep resetting.

RA: To play 3 notes at the same time I remember there was a trick David Whittaker did – there was a timing trick where you could play

3 notes at the same time. I think it was on the Spectrum?

Yeah on the Spectrum beeper he came up with something where you could mix channels together. And I think later on Tim Follin did something – he did like five or six channels at once.

DW: Well you mention before about fitting music into memory – did you ever find any limitations where a software publisher would say you only have a certain amount of space on the disk for the music?

So yeah on the Spectrum and stuff you had 3K of memory and so the biggest problem wasn't the sounds, it was the note data itself. And you had to really compress that down, so... instead of like on a tracker [where] you've got 64-length patterns, you had 16 or 8-length patterns and you had to sequence them very, very efficiently to get the most out of it. And then I guess when you get to the Amiga you'd have 40 or 50k of memory to play with. I remember when I did the full *Alien Breed* tune it came out at 80k and it was too big for the game so... [*laughs*] I had to cut that down.

below
Alien Breed, 1991

DW: Laughs. Was that heart-breaking having to cut your projects down?

It was but the one everybody heard they seemed to really like because... what I did is I took away the samples and I replaced them with single-cycle waveforms, just tiny waveforms, like a vocal waveform, and added some vibrato, and it seemed to work in context with the tune, so... yeah, it didn't end up too badly that one.

DW: You also worked on the Mortal Kombat series as well, which obviously was massive. How did you get involved with that?

Yeah Mortal Kombat... that was Probe Software. I think they just phoned me up or

"The title tune was easy enough because I could get that into four channels, but in-game they wanted three channels for sound effects, and that only left me one channel for the music"

got in contact via Matryn Brown at Team 17 perhaps, and got me over to see the arcade machine. Now the problem I had was the title tune was easy enough because I could get that into four channels, but in-game they wanted three channels for sound effects, and that only left me one channel for the music.

DW: Wow.

So I had to use a little trick that Jeroen Tel from Maniacs of Noise had used a few years before on the Commodore 64 and get a kick and a snare *and* a bass and all that out of one channel, and a little bit of melody as well I seem to remember.

Laughs.

RA: So you could have the "Toasty!"...

DW: Yeah it was a very sound effect heavy game wasn't it?

It was yeah.

DW: When you first saw the arcade of Mortal Kombat did you have any idea how big it was gonna be? Did it make an impression on you at all?

Yeah, I mean it was a totally different game to anything I'd seen... especially all the vocals, that really stood out I think. All those special kill moves and stuff you can do.

DW: Yeah it was the game that brought in the age rating for video games wasn't it?

It was yeah. I remember that, all those blood and guts. Brilliant.

DW: Looks primitive today but yeah, it was shocking stuff back then.

RA: How did you feel about *Driver* when you first did that? 'Cos I listened to your soundtrack and it's absolutely fabulous – sort of 1970s cop movie. Did you feel it would be successful when you first started?

No, I had no clue. I realised who Reflections were halfway through the project and thought "Oh yeah, shit, they did all that stuff of the Amiga as well" [*laughs*]. So I did that and I did the music on a PC with *FastTracker* in eight channels. But when it got into the game, a lot of people don't realise it's not playing properly – it's missing notes all over the place! There was some timing issue so you're kind of hearing half the music. On the second version, *Driver 2*, it plays correctly.

RA: That's really odd, 'cos lots of people say that the *Driver* soundtrack is one of the best

on the PlayStation 1, so the fact that it's not fully there is quite interesting!

Laughs.

It is yeah! Also I think... I'm not sure but I think quite a few people have confused the PlayStation one with the PC one, which had different music – I didn't actually do the PC stuff, they were full CD tracks.

DW: I imagine a lot of the time you wrote music for a game obviously before the game was finished. Was there any occasion where you did a soundtrack and then the game was disappointing after?

Um... I think you tend to know when a game's gonna be good just by who's making them. So, if you're doing a Reflections game you know it's gonna be good. These days that's more common: I'll do a really big expansive sounding soundtrack and then the game's absolutely rubbish – [it's] on the iPad for 3-year olds or something like that.

Laughs.

Yeah that can be a bit disappointing. But in the Amiga days I think generally the games were pretty good.

DW: What would you say is your favourite and least favourite formats that you've worked on?

It's hard to compare really isn't it because they all had something special. But I think the biggest jump forwards was the Super Nintendo. At the time suddenly you could have eight channels of music – or probably six [for] music and two [for] sound effects – and you could do so much more with it. It even had it's own sound chip just for processing sounds, so you could do DSP effects and stuff like that. Super Nintendo probably stood out the most.
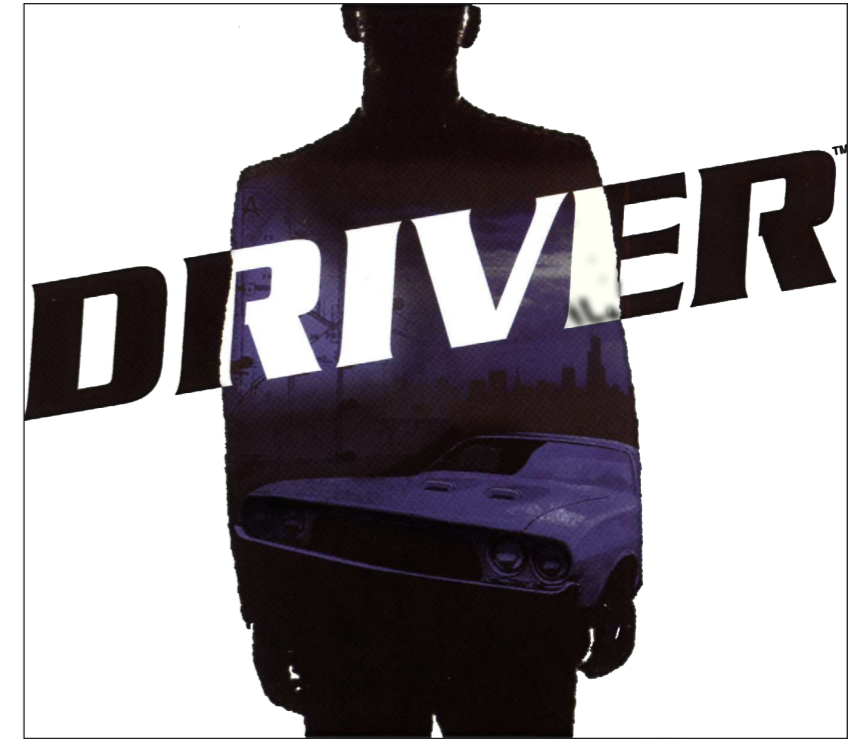
DW: Now recently you've brought out an album called *The Amiga Works.*

Yeah, so I've been asked over the years to make remixes of my tunes, and... actually a guy called Chris Huelsbeck who everyone will know did a project first called *Turrican Anthology*, and I saw how well he'd done on that remaking his *Turrican* tunes. And he got a lot of backers, so I thought, well, let's copy it basically.

Laughs.

RA: He even released that on vinyl, didn't he?

Yeah. So I talked to Chris and I asked him how easy it was to do, and he explained how to use Kickstarter and stuff. And I put mine up there – not expecting too much – and yeah, people seemed to want it. Kickstarter's great: if people don't want it they tell you by not pledging, and then you don't have to do the project. So I remade all my tracks from the ground up and tried to keep the essence of the original – so sometimes I'd do something that was too good

and I'd have to go back to the Amiga and hear how everything was exactly on the beat and try and copy that – rather than put any swing or anything on the tracks – and try and make the sounds as simple as the Amiga ones but then make it modern and easy to listen to on your hi-fi speakers.

DW: So they weren't too polished.

Sometimes they were... they were polished, but sometimes I added too many new sounds I think and then you distract from – or detract from – what the original was. And you've gotta remember that its people's memories you're playing with. So you've gotta... they've gotta remember the original and realise it's the original as well as it sounding good.

DW: And theres a documentary being made about you?

Yeah, it's Paul Bridger, one of my... he's kind of the original guy that bought my first CD, which was *Sounds Digital*, which was advertised in the box for *Project-X*, and yeah he's always bought my stuff ever since. And then he got... on Kickstarter he got the executive producer credit on *The Amiga Works* and... yeah so he's decided to make this documentary. I don't know what's in it at all, I haven't seen anything of it yet.

DW: That must be quite an honour though, having a documentary made about you.

Yeah absolutely, yeah! Brilliant! I'm looking forward to seeing it!

DW: So what projects are you currently working on?

I've got a big indie project coming up soon with an Australian developer – it's like a big adventure game. Also I'm working on a game... I'm not sure if I can say, but do you remember I did a game called *Train Fever* recently? Well it might be something along those lines. If you have a look at that online its done really well, so there's more to come

of that sort of thing. And other than that it's few little iPad projects. And we're doing a lot of... me and my partner Anthony Putson, we're doing a lot of virtual reality games at the moment.

DW: Oh wow.

They're not really games... stuff like presentations for BP, where they're putting their headset on – an Oculus Rift headset – and we're having to do the 3D soundtrack for it. They'll be used as like a presentation in a big hall.

DW: Virtual reality's very exciting this round though isn't it? I think the technology's finally there.

It is. I think... in fact I dunno if you saw it, but I saw the first version of virtual reality on the Amiga at the Trocadero in London, and it had three Amigas running it?

RA: Oh the Virtuality one?

DW: Yeah that was it, Amiga 3000s weren't they.

That's right! And it was one for each dimension. It was absolutely brilliant and I thought, "Wow, this is the way forward!" And then nothing happened.

Laughs.

RA: I remember that had seizure warnings as well.

DW: Yeah, very low framerate wasn't it.

It was, yeah. But it was still amazing the way you could round you or even behind you, stuff like that. I've thought ever since that it would be the next big thing, and now finally it looks like it will be.

DW: It only took 25 years.

Laughs.