



Ooh

We find out how the much-loved children's show **Knightmare** was put together, sneaking past the Catacombite

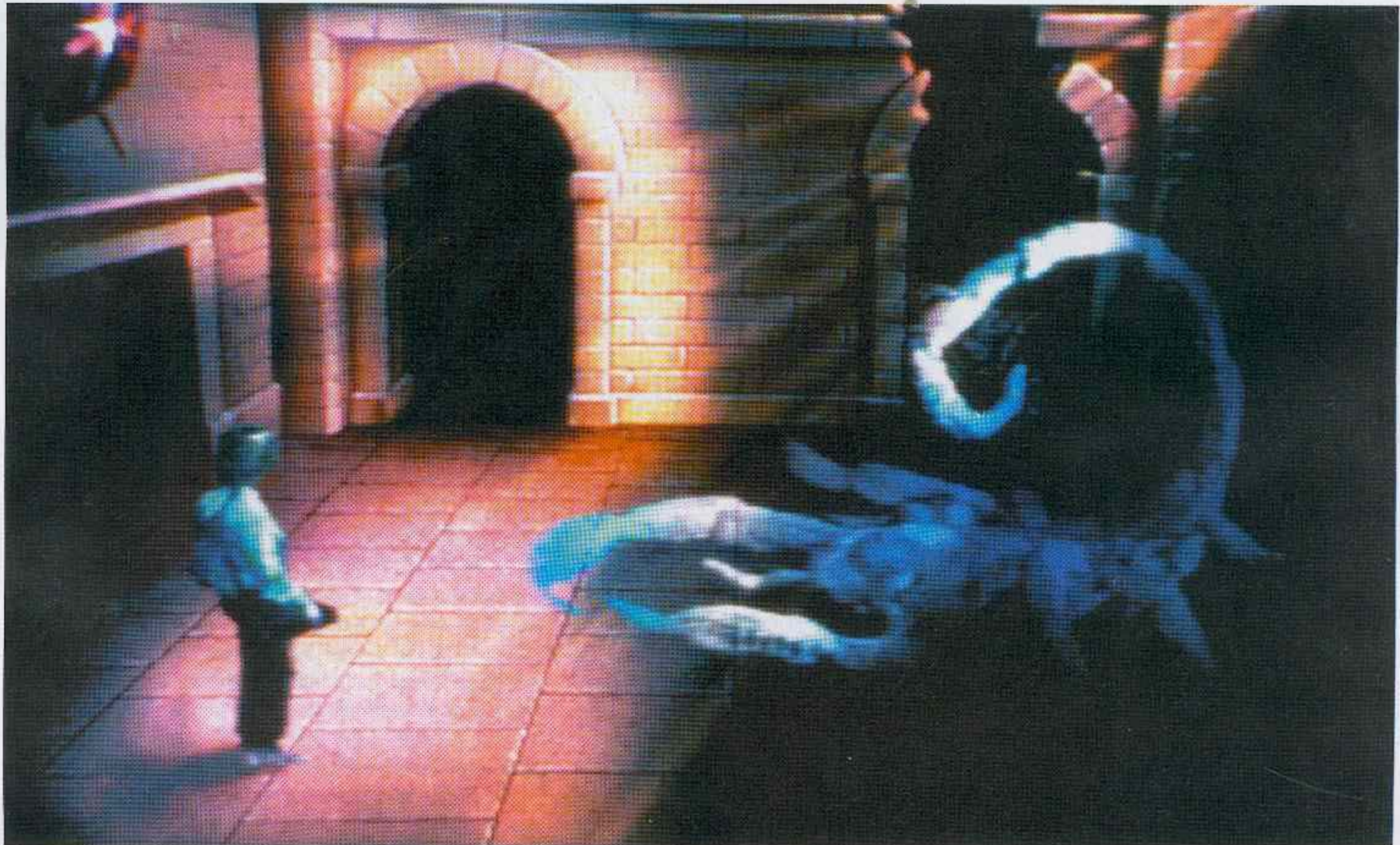
IT IS MONDAY 7th September 1987, and like most school kids of the era you peg it home from school, grunt a vague greeting at your mother, and hurl your vinyl Sport For All schoolbag across the living room as you stake out your position in front of the telly for those precious few hours of kids' TV before the sodding news comes on and spoils everything.

As the smell of fish fingers, chips and beans wafts in from the kitchen, you kick off your shoes and flick between the mumsy wackiness of Children's BBC and the Fisher Price anarchy of Children's ITV in a never-ending quest to dodge boredom. But on this fateful day at 4.45pm, everything changes.

The plunging howl of a synthesizer heralds the start of something new. An animated title sequence shows a bold knight riding relentlessly towards an ominous castle. It's scary as hell, all bleached bones, jagged trees, purple skies and giddy camera angles, as if Prince Valiant has taken a wrong turn out of a fairy-tale and ended up in a *Tales From the Crypt* comic.

The word **Knightmare** glows into being, cast in fiery reds and oranges, and a strange bearded man transfixes you with a stare that lingers somewhere between warm

Nasty ■ ■ ■



Left Treguard: it wouldn't have been **Nightmare** without him

Top A dungeoneer meets a particularly nasty enemy early in his travels

humour and sardonic malevolence. "Welcome watchers of illusion, to the castle of confusion."

HE WAS TREGUARD, a compelling mixture of Obi-Wan Kenobi's avuncular mentor and Willy Wonka's aloof bamboozler. He introduced young David Campbell as the first ever dungeoneer. "I can't say I'm impressed," he sneered. We were intrigued. By the time poor David had magically appeared in a computerized dungeon, blinded by the Helmet of Justice and guided by his friends through traps, riddles and encounters with hideous monsters, kids across the UK were completely hooked. That David quickly came to a grisly end and was sent home empty-handed just sealed the deal. For a generation raised on the Butlins buffoonery of **Crackerjack** or the shrill chaos of **Cheggers Plays Pop**, **Nightmare** was dark, scary and deadly serious. Unlike pretty much every other homegrown kids show, it was downright cool.

The show was the creation of regional TV producer Tim Child. "I was writing and presenting a weekly games software spot for television, in the era of the Spectrum and C64," he says. "I was amazed by the creativity in these games, given the restricted performance of the micros of the time."

Drawing inspiration from such classic dungeon exploration games as *Atic Atac*, and using chromakey technology pioneered for superimposing presenters onto weather maps, the outline that would become **Nightmare** soon began to take shape. "**Nightmare** was always in a constant state of evolution," Child recalls, "but certain factors remained from the original concept: the dungeon master, the obstacles, and the principle of a genuine game in a fake world."

One of the show's biggest innovations was the Helmet of Justice, which blinded the dungeoneer, concealing the blank blue-screen studio from the player and forcing them

"It was only difficult because people expected to win"

Top The rather minimalist real world of the show

Bottom left Aaarrgghh! Is any of this real?

Bottom right Treguard offers some helpful hints

Opposite top An evil dungeon denizen

Opposite bottom One of the few physical sets: Treguard's room in *Knighmare Castle*

to rely on instructions from their friends, who saw a gloomy dungeon instead. "It was absolutely essential," Child says of the helmet. "Otherwise the children would have been acting and there would have been no game and no challenge. Of course, once the principle was in place, it did dictate the form of obstacles, because some things would work better than others."

IF THESE OBSTACLES proved too tough, there was always the inscrutable form of Treguard lurking in the wings, ready to offer advice or insults as the dungeoneer progressed. This memorable and beloved character was played throughout the show by actor Hugo Myatt, whose wife worked on Anglia news with Tim.

"At the beginning Treguard was rather a murky character," Myatt says, "This was actually necessary, as at that stage we had no villains. This meant that Treguard had to be an ambivalent character – not only did he have to explain the process of the game, but to some extent he had to provide the threat as well."



“Frequently dungeoneers did something we had not anticipated”

That's not to say **Knighmare** was easy. In fact, it was one of the most ruthless kids' shows ever broadcast. Precious few of the teams lasted more than one episode, let alone making it through to the end. "It was only difficult because people at that time expected people to win children's TV shows," Child says in the show's defence. "This wasn't a quiz, it was an adventure game, and adventures are meaningless unless they are challenging."

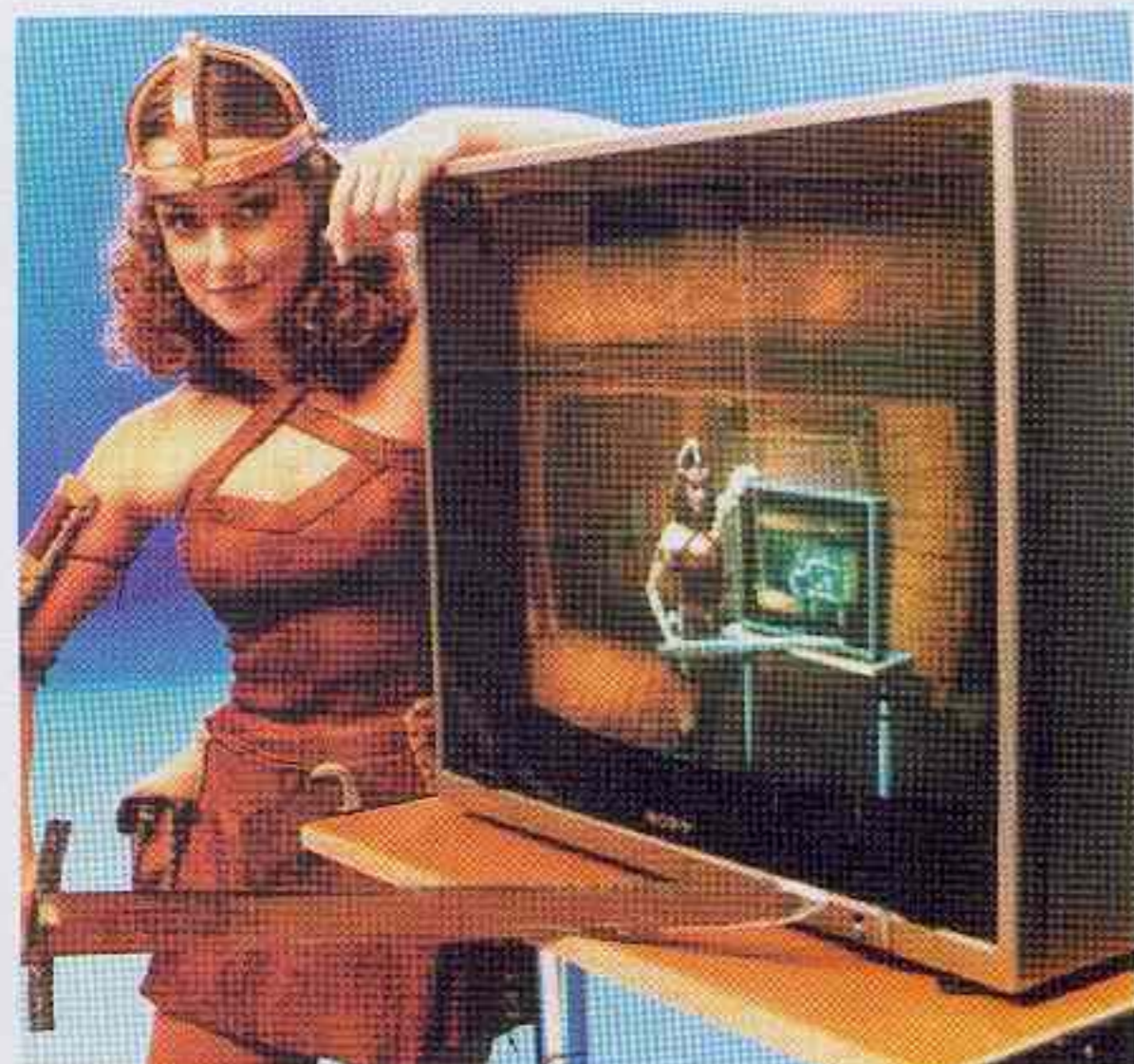
"Some teams were excellent games players but were sometimes dull," remembers Myatt. "Other teams were absolutely hopeless but hysterical to watch. It was always tempting to give them a little help to keep them going just a little longer because they were such fun. In the end, however, the game had to be fair and it was always the best players who won."

GIVEN THE TECHNOLOGICAL hurdles the show had to overcome, it may surprise many fans to know that each adventure was filmed 'as live', with the advisers seeing their friend superimposed in the scene in real time.

"They played the game scene by scene," says Child, "with breaks in between as we got the new scene ready. Production got slicker until we were making just over a 25-minute show a day. At the end of their entire adventure we spent about an hour picking up a few reconstruct shots, like complex death scenes, but this always happened after the game was over – never during."

For Myatt, on set with the children, the maintaining of this illusion was paramount. "Although the show was recorded," he says, "we never rehearsed with the children and there were no re-takes. Every scenario was totally fresh to the children and that's what you see on the screen."

This approach meant that the crew had to be ready to react to unexpected decisions from the young contestants. "I had an earpiece, a direct talkback from the production team," Myatt reveals. "Frequently the dungeoneers did something that we had not anticipated and in order to keep the game going some quick remedial action was necessary." As well as Hugo, there were several actors who





Spellcasting! H-E-R-O!

Jason Dexter Karl was only the second contestant to emerge from the **Knightmare** experience victorious, back on the second series. He enjoyed the experience so much he is now the Creative Director of his own TV company and is putting together a new show based on the *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks.

"I applied to be on **Knightmare** after seeing an advertisement on Children's ITV. I had already become an avid fan after watching the first short series and I jumped at the chance to convince three friends to apply with me. I always wanted to be the dungeoneer and that was decided at the start of the process.

"We used to practise manoeuvres in the garden every evening using benches and ponds as obstacles to get me used to moving around whilst blindfolded.

"Once in the studio, the atmosphere was electric. I remember being honestly terrified of The Automaton, a kind of clockwork knight. It wasn't so much the actor, more the sound effect that accompanied its presence with me in the rooms. Every time that sound effect came through my earpiece a sense of unavoidable doom filled me with fear! There were also several parts of the adventure where I thought we had failed, but logic and guile – Treguard's words! – saw us through to the end.

"I always had leanings towards a theatrical future but it was the **Knightmare** experience which really made me fall totally in love with the TV studio. **Knightmare** played a big part in forging my future and I would dearly love to be part of it should it ever return in the future."

interacted on the studio floor with the dungeoneer. Hugo is full of praise for his colleagues' ability to play along. "I was always impressed at how they produced these characters," he says. "But more than that their ability to improvise unscripted and still remain in character."

KNIGHTMARE LEFT THE screen in 1994, its final series reduced to 10 episodes to make room for the short-lived **Virtually Impossible**, a similar concept from the same team but aimed at a considerably brighter and chirpier younger audience. With the Amiga and Atari ST replacing the Spectrum and C64, **Knightmare's** virtual world had lost some of its lustre, and the advent of big screen CGI in movies like **Terminator 2** and **Jurassic Park** had raised special effects expectations far beyond the realms of British independent television. But by that time **Knightmare** had more than earned its place in TV history, and built up a legion of fans that still has fond memories of the show to this day. "I am very pleased that **Knightmare** has such a fantastic following," says Myatt, who has since provided the narration for videogames such as *Fable*. "It was the most unpredictable and exciting show I have ever done. We always felt when we were making the show that it was something special, something different."

Fan campaigns for the show's return are ongoing, but according to producer Tim Child, who has been developing a new **Knightmare** VR show, they may be waiting in vain. "To my great surprise no one has successfully attempted to surpass any of **Knightmare's** core achievements on TV," he says. "Perhaps the current crop of producers has got more sense than to take the risks we did. The technology is ripe, but the time is still wrong."

Dan Whitehead



For more on **Knightmare**

www.knightmare.co
The biggest and best **Knightmare** info site around

www.televirtual.co.uk
Tim Child's new company

www.jasondexterkarl.com
Info on Jason's TV projects

www.bringbackknightmare.co.uk
Sign the petition to dust off the dungeon!

Photos courtesy David Rowe, Tim Child and Challenge TV

Challenge **Knightmare**
Weekends at 8.00 & 8.30; repeated later, see Cx index for times