QL adventures

by Sid Martin and Timothy Green

Drop your programming tools and business packages. Give your QL a new lease of life with this batch of new games

THIS month we look at games on the QL. Too often the machine is overlooked for the more popular Plus Three. Drop those tools, and get playing.

Printed forum

Richard Alexander's QL Adventurer's Forum is one of the most active Sinclair user groups at the moment. The fourth issue of its newsletter has just been published, and for the first time it's distributed on paper, rather than microdrive cartridge.

Issue 4 contains letters, reviews and hints covering a dozen or so games, maps of the early QL adventure game *Zkul*, plus a long and interesting article about game design by a commercial QL programmer, Steve Sutton.

The newsletter runs to 24 A4 pages, dot-matrix printed in two columns using Dilwyn Jones' *Page Designer* package. *Page Designer* was first published in the Quanta National User Group library, and has since been tarted up and released as a commercial product by Sector Software.

This doesn't make the text particularly easy to read, although Richard has promised to take account of readers' opinions about the layout in future issues. The problem is that QL packages use character shapes designed for the screen display, and some of these look very dotty when output by a dot matrix printer. Headlines are legible, but rather jagged.

The first three issues of QL *Adventurer's Forum* are still available on microdrive cartridge, priced £1 each – send one cartridge for each issue you want. Subscriptions cost £4 for 4 issues. If you play games on your QL – particularly text adventures – it's well worth subscribing.

If you think a 'text adventure' is an attempt to edit a big file with *QL Quill*, read on ...

Towering adventure

Back in May we promised to review *From the Tower of Valagon*, the first game published by Adventurer's Forum. In this text adventure the computer tells you about your surroundings and you type short commands to solve puzzles and explore a programmed world.

The game is programmed by Alan Pemberton. He has written in to say that, contrary to our first report, he is not a professional adventure writer. Well, he could have fooled us!

From the Tower of Valagon is set, like many other adventure games, in a Tolkeinesque world of monsters, woods and ruins. At the start of the game you find yourself in a forest clearing, with thuggish 'orcs' prowling around. The orcs would like nothing better than to catch and eat you, and you have no weapons other than your wits with which to defend yourself.

After wandering around for a while you come across other characters in the game, controlled by the computer. Some of these will help you, some just get in the way, and some – like the orcs, and a knife-throwing dwarf – actively obstruct you.

Playing this kind of 'adventure' game is a bit like reading a book, except every so often the narrative stops and you're expected to decide what happens next. You move by typing compass directions or short commands like 'ENTER HUT' or 'CLIMB TREE'.

Many objects can be examined and collected; often they have special uses elsewhere in the game, but sometimes the most obvious use is not the best

one. Objects can be containers, which may be opened and closed.

There doesn't seem to be any limit on what you can carry, and no concept of object size – you can put your purse in your holdall, or vice versa, but not both at once. For that, you'd need a four dimensional Klein bottle!

The characters around Valagon's Tower include a mercenary troll, killer pigeons, elves, maggots, minotaurs, fish, giants, a defensive tree and a wimp called Edmund who will follow you around making desultory conversation. You need to work out all their roles to complete the game; there's lots to be done, and a logical approach works wonders.

Adventure gaming can be frustrating – it may take a while to find phrases that the program understands. The vocabulary of *Valagon* is only about 120 words,

Supremacy. Public Domain global strategy on the QL

and the rules of grammar are strict and rather arbitrary: "SAY HELLO TO EDMUND" gets the response "YOU CANNOT GREET EDMUND", whereas "SAY TO EDMUND HELLO" elicits "HE SAYS 'HI'".

In the early stages of the game you tend to die, or get stuck, quite regularly. To avoid having to retrace your steps every time

you re-start, you can SAVE the current state of the game at any time, and re-load it later to carry on from that point. Games can be saved quickly in named files on disk or microdrive.

The RAM SAVE and RAM LOAD commands are even more convenient, as they let you save one position in memory, ready for instant recall, as long as you don't turn off the machine. Beware: a normal SAVE overwrites the last RAM SAVE.

The display uses two text windows – the top line shows the name of the current location, while the main part of the screen contains the dialogue between the computer and the player, with messages and commands in contrasting colours.

When a message overflows the main window – 18 lines of 36 characters – output pauses until you press a key; the word MORE... appears at the bottom corner of the screen to explain why the action has stopped.

Valagon uses its own input routine to read your commands, and responds to them quickly. A short beep sounds as each letter is accepted, and you can type ahead, entering commands while the location description is being printed.

The input routine uses a plus sign instead of a cursor, so you can't run *Valagon* at the same time as another task, because you can't switch back to its cursor with Control C, as you can with tasks that use a normal cursor. This is a shame, on a multi-tasking machine.

You can delete text on the input line, but you can't move the cursor back and forth – you must delete and re-type from the point where you made a mistake.
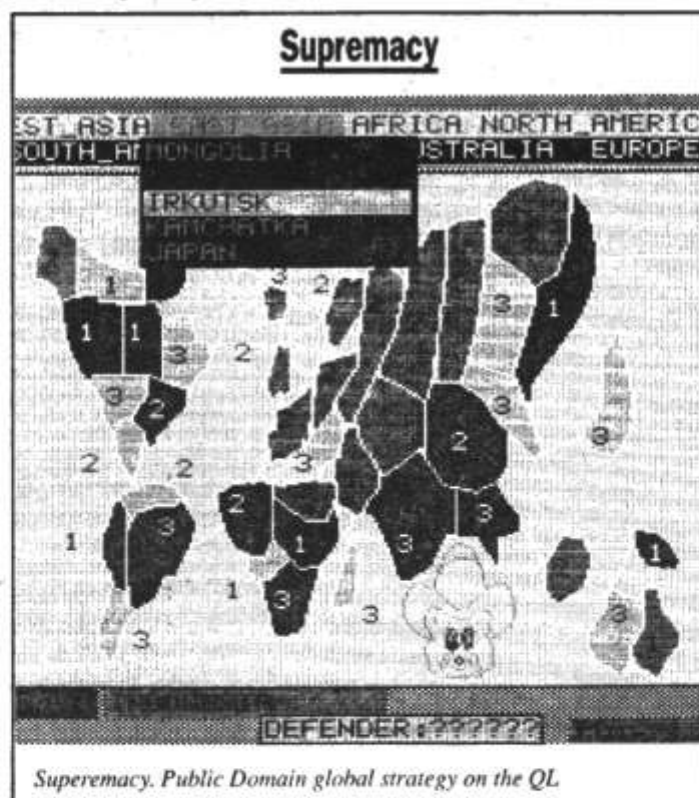
Commands can be entered in capitals or small letters. You command other characters by putting their name before the verb, for example:

SAY TO EDMUND TAKE THE LETTER

Valagon ignores words it doesn't recognise, and only takes account of the first four characters of each word. You can save wear and tear on your fingers by condensing the above command to this:

EDMU TAKE LETT

The word IT refers to the last object mentioned, but you can't use ALL, as in some other games, to manipulate several things with one command.

Simple commands can be joined on a line with words like AND and THEN, and directions can be abbreviated to one or two letters:

GO DOWN THEN GO DOWN

can be entered as:

D AND D

The game is frozen while you enter each command, but action continues in between each part of a multiple command. You can't make a quick getaway by typing a long list of commands on one line.

Valagon contains about 60 locations; most of these are significant, either as junctions or places where you find objects or characters. Directions are almost always reversable, so it's easy to find your way around as long as you make a map; of course, strange things happen in the labyrinth.

From the Tower of Valagon is supplied on microdrive cartridge, with a program to make back-up copies on tape or disk. The main game is a 70K task, written in SuperBASIC and compiled with the 'budget' version of *QLiberator*. Two other files hold the program's vocabulary and descriptions of the locations in the game – both very useful if you need to cheat!

The six-page manual sets out the scenario, lists some of the commands, and gives a little advice. The manual is adequate, but it might include more help and background information for people who have not played this kind of game before.

The HELP command in the game is pretty useless – it only deals with one puzzle. If you get desperate, the author's address and phone number are in the manual; help is also freely available from the publishers.

From the Tower of Valagon runs on any QL version, and is extremely good value at £6. The scenario is cliched, and command recognition takes a bit of getting used to, but it's a well-planned and entertaining game, with just the right mixture of logic, suspense and humour.

Two more QL games are in the works at Adventurer's Forum – *Starburst* is a graphics game, and *Starplod* is an icon-driven space adventure, again written by Alan Pemberton. QL Adventurer's Forum is based in Pencader, Wales. Write to: C.G.H. Services, Cwm Gwen Hall, Pencader, Dyfed SA39 9HA.

Take a risk

Encouraged by the 'PD Profile' in the August *Shopper*, Fraser Harkins has sent a copy of his game *Supremacy* for review. It's a computer strategy game based on the classic Parker game *Risk*. *Risk* is a very playable boardgame – but does it work on a QL?

Supremacy is an ahistorical strategic wargame, set around the turn of the century and played on a map of the world. The map uses the same weird projection as the *Risk* board, so the continents and islands are rather out of proportion, as you can see from the screen-dump.

Supremacy divides the world into 40-odd regions, collected in seven 'continents' – North and South America, Europe, East and West Asia, Africa and Australia. The boardgame used the same regions, except it treated Asia as a single large continent.

Mechanics

The names of the continents are listed at the top of the screen. You select a particular region by pressing the left and right arrow keys to highlight the relevant continent, and pressing down arrow to pull down a menu of regions. The vertical arrows let you highlight one name, and the Space key selects it.

If a region is out of your reach its name does not appear on the menu, although there's still space for it. You must explicitly select every region, even if only one possibility shows in the menu.

Continental boundaries and region names are not shown on the map, but the 'help' menu lets you swap the numeric display of troop numbers for two-letter region mnemonics. The same menu lets you skip from one phase of play to another, for instance if you decide to stop combat.

If you press the 'Q' key at any time during play the entire game is abandoned, returning you to SuperBASIC.

Supremacy enforces all the rules of the boardgame apart from Risk cards, which are military Green Shield stamps you can trade for extra armies, and optional Mission cards, which set strategic objectives. *Supremacy* has its own way of allocating extra troops, based on the interconnection of continents – the single page of documentation does not explain this scheme intelligibly, but it seems to work.

The game can have between two and six players, any of which can be the computer. Computer players can be assigned one of three strategies. 'Neutral' players just defend themselves if attacked. 'Reinforced Neutrals' do the same, but pick up extra troops if there are any to be had.

'Naive Computer' players attack if they see an opening, and redeploy units if necessary, trying to conquer whole continents for the maximum bonus.

At the start of the game the regions are randomly allocated to players, so that the world is scrambled up between several different empires. Each empire has its own colour.

If you play with five or six players you'll find that messages associated with the last two appear in white on yellow and green on cyan. Even on a Sinclair colour monitor these combinations are unreadable at a range of more than about three feet.

Map colours are hard to distinguish on a black and white display, and the two characters at the left of the screen are lost on a TV. You can get by with a monochrome screen if you learn some of the region names and keep the number of players down to three or four.

Game play

The numbers on the map indicate the level of military forces in each region. The idea, as you might have guessed, is to conquer the world, and you're not expected to do it by peaceful persuasion.

At the start of the game you are asked "Do you wish sound?". Type Y and odd bleeps and squeaks will punctuate play. Type N and the machine will immediately disobey and belch at you; the game noises are suppressed, but other burps still surface from time to time.

Then come three unintelligible questions that require numeric answers. You must type a four-digit 'scenario code', 'the maximum number of non-human units for deployment', which seems to be ignored, and 'continental status' – a value between five and nine which affects reinforcement levels. The documentation of these options is gibberish, but the game works OK whatever values you type.

Once the players have typed their names they take turns to put one unit on the map until all the initial troops have been deployed. Then each player handles reinforcements, combat and redeployment in turn until one colour rules supreme.

You need at least two units to attack an adjacent region, and can fight across the sea by following 'connection lines' between continents. If you win, all or part of your force must advance.

Losses are high on both sides, but particularly for the attacker. There's some luck involved in combat, but you can give up part way through a battle if it goes awry.

The bigger your empire the more reinforcements you get, but

the longer your frontiers and the more time it takes to move troops around. You can only re-deploy troops at the end of your turn, and then only from one region to an adjacent one. It's very important to make your attacks in the right order, or you end up with troops stuck out on a limb.

The code

Supremacy was written in SuperBASIC and compiled into a 34K task by *Turbo*. It doesn't display a cursor so it won't multitask with other programs that use the keyboard.

The boot program loads a 10K Pyramide graphics toolkit, containing about 80 commands, but only three of these are used: PLACE and STORE handle the PopUp windows, and PAINT changes the colour of a region.

The map is a 26K screen file, loaded from microdrive at the start of each game. You have to re-direct loading with DATA USE or FLP-USE if you want to run the game from disk.

Supremacy plays much faster than *Risk*, although the rules are almost identical. A six-player game that would have taken 10 to 12 hours on the board was completed in about 90 minutes, with two human players and four computer ones. If you're a fan of *Risk*, this speed is probably the main attraction of *Supremacy*.

Unfortunately the menu selection scheme works too fast for comfort. The program reads the keyboard with KEYROW, so the highlight bars move at top speed as soon as you touch a key. It's easy to overshoot the option you were aiming for, even on a slow 128K QL.

Keyboard handling is yet more fiddly on expanded machines, and most frustrating if you run *Supremacy* in top-speed CST RAM, when the selection bar flicks through eight options in less than a second. We got around this by running another processor-bound task – 10 REPeat L:REMark – at the same time as the game.

Machine play, even on an unexpanded QL, is so fast that it's very difficult to follow the action. The names of attackers and defenders appear and disappear too fast to be read. We mentioned these problems to the programmer, who says he'll lengthen the pause between actions if you mention it when you order a copy.

Rein supreme?

Supremacy has advantages and disadvantages, compared with the board game. On the plus side, all the book-keeping is done for you. The machine enforces the correct sequence of play, and has a go at playing itself. It looks neat, you can't knock the board and you

don't have to keep rolling dice and counting pieces.

Minor snags include the colour-scheme, clumsy menus, and inadequate documentation. If you've played *Risk* before, and you've got a colour monitor, you should be able to work out what's going on without much trouble.

Risk fans will probably enjoy experimenting with this program, but it is unlikely to keep their attention for long unless they use it to moderate games involving several humans. A lot of the fun of the board game comes from treacherous alliances between players, and there's not much scope for them when the only contest is with the computer. The machine players are useful cannon-fodder, but little competition for a human player.

Supremacy costs £3 on your own microdrive, or £5 including the tape. The program is Public Domain, so you can make copies for others if you want to. Write to Fraser Harkins, Longridge, Bridgend, Stewarton, Ayrshire KA3 5HP.

Sid Martin and Timothy Green are Sinclair afficianadoes