SABNOCK WORKS | ESSAY 06

WHY WE KEEP REMAKING CHAOS

From the ZX Spectrum and Amiga to War of the Wizards



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Opening

A dragon appears beside the opposing wizard. Maybe the other player took a chance on a difficult spell and got lucky. Maybe they summoned the dragon as an illusion, which is guaranteed to work. I can use *Disbelieve* to wipe an illusion off the board. If the dragon is real, I've wasted my spell for the round, and it's still there. All *Chaos* needs for that decision is a dragon, two wizards and a nearly empty board.

Sources Julian Gollop interviewed by PC Gamer, Original Games Workshop manual

From the tabletop to the Spectrum

Julian Gollop designed *Chaos* in 1982 as a board game played with cards. He'd watched friends at school play *Warlock*, a Games Workshop game in which the wizards stayed put. In Gollop's game, the card for a summoned creature went from your hand onto the board and became a playing piece. When Games Workshop published his ZX Spectrum version, *Chaos: The Battle of Wizards*, in 1985, it came with an idea the computer was particularly good at. It could keep a secret about whether a creature was real. Up to eight players could share a keyboard, and everyone saw the same dragon. Only one of them knew what they'd just summoned.

Sources Gollop's account of the game's development, Wikipedia on *Chaos: The Battle of Wizards*, World of Spectrum

The last wizard on the board wins. Everyone starts with a random selection of spells. Magic Fire and the *Gooey Blob* spread while you're still deciding where to take cover. A successful spell can tip the world towards Law or Chaos and make spells of the same alignment easier to cast. Perhaps that's why *Chaos* gets covered so often. You can explain the idea in a few sentences, and the moment you start rebuilding it, you can think of a spell you'd like to add.

Sources Original manual, Gollop on how *Chaos* plays, in PC Gamer, Chaos Remakes Wiki

Gollop took the game in a more tactical role-playing direction with *Lords of Chaos* in 1990. Blade Software brought the sequel to the Amiga in 1991. Meanwhile, the original stuck around on the Spectrum. *Your Sinclair* gave it away twice on cover tapes. In the magazine's final issue, in September 1993, readers voted it their fifth favourite Spectrum game, and the staff held a *Chaos* tournament of their own. Eight years after release, they still wanted to know who was best at casting spells.

Sources *Your Sinclair*, issue 93, Chaos Remakes Wiki, Amiga release of *Lords of Chaos* at MobyGames

The people who remade *Chaos*

Martin Brownlow and Adam Turnbull brought *Chaos* to the Atari ST in 1992. Brownlow had played the original with friends and wrote his Atari games for fun while he was at school and in his first year at university. He wanted to get the rules as close as he could. His favourite part, he recalls, was taking sounds from films and TV shows and finding the spell that would get the biggest laugh. After university, the hobby became his job. Brownlow programmed virtual reality arcade machines at Virtuality and later worked at Shiny Entertainment.

Sources Brownlow interviewed by Atari Legend, Atari ST release and credits at Atarimania, Brownlow on Virtuality and Shiny

Anthony P. Hamilton carried an idea from his first *Morkin* into *Morkin II*. When you finished your turn, you saved the game and sent the file to the next player through a bulletin board system. Hamilton later ported the Atari ST version from GFA BASIC to C on a 286. He remembers doing it in a week. His older brother contributed a graphics library written in assembly. According to Hamilton, the PC version impressed an employer enough to earn him a job offer on the spot.

Sources Hamilton's account in the Chaos Remakes Wiki, Surviving DOS version of *Morkin II*

For Jim Purbrick, it began with a worn-out cassette. He'd spent many Saturdays playing *Chaos* with friends until the tape finally refused to load. At university he discovered a Spectrum emulator and, soon after, Java. He started writing *Law* after his exams. A turn-based game, he reckoned, ought to cope well with the slow internet connections of the day. When he lost his source code, he carried on with decompiled files. Years later, Purbrick worked as a software developer on *Second Life* at Linden Lab.

Sources Purbrick's account of making *Law*, Purbrick in the official *Second Life* blog

Richard Phipps wanted *Chaos Funk* to be as complete a PC remake as he could make it. He and other fans went right down to the Spectrum code to work out things like how the fire and blobs spread. With *Chaos Groove*, he wanted to see what a different interface could do. The board would highlight valid targets, pieces would find their own paths, and players could put together their own spell packs. After nearly a year, Phipps wrote in his development blog that he'd run out of steam for another release. He published the source code, which later became the basis for a browser port.

Sources Phipps on *Chaos Funk* at flipcode, Phipps's plans for *Chaos Groove*, Development blog and source release, Browser port source code

Richard Quirk brought *Chaos* to the Game Boy Advance in 2003 and later to Android. His old downloads page lists his close recreation of the Spectrum game beside ports of *Elite*, *Castle Master* and *The Lords of Midnight*. Quirk also contributed to the tools that made this kind of work possible. His patches for the VisualBoyAdvance emulator and the devkitPro homebrew toolchain are still there to read.

Sources Quirk's original downloads page, Android version, Contributions to devkitPro and VisualBoyAdvance

The Amiga versions

Sean Irvine's early *Chaos*. Irvine played the Spectrum original with his brothers. They wanted longer games, so they made up a house rule. You could attack a human wizard only after all his creatures were gone. This mostly led to draws. Irvine started changing the program and wrote an editor that let him alter the board when the fire had swallowed almost everything again. The Amiga version he described on Usenet in 1996 already had more than 150 spells, a larger arena, teams and independent creatures. Conference records from the same year list him with the University of Waikato's mathematics department. Later research papers list him as a co-author at Real Time Genomics in New Zealand. He also released a Java version of the game, *jchaos*.

Sources Irvine's Usenet post, "Comments on Chaos", 1996 conference directory, Research paper listing Irvine's affiliation with Real Time Genomics, *jchaos* on GitHub

***Chaos 2.5d*, 1999.** Irvine and James Conwell's package is still on Aminet. It includes a cut-down floppy edition for an Amiga 500 with one megabyte of RAM. The documentation says the demo stops at turn 18 and can't load saved games. Registered players could get a full version with save and load functions and a turn limit they could set themselves. I haven't found a public download of that registered A500 edition.

Sources Aminet package for *Chaos 2.5d*, including the manual, development log and A500 disk archives, Notes on 2.5d and 2.5f in the *Chaos Lite* manual

***Chaos Lite 3.05cd*, 2001.** "Lite" sounds like a handful of spells on a floppy. The developers list 349 spells and monsters combined. You could play with allies or make it a free-for-all. There was support for several languages, and the game could run straight from CD. It required at least a 68020, AmigaOS 3.0 and two megabytes of RAM. The bundled manual repeats older information about the demo, and the program still asks players to register. The exact turn limit in the surviving version is unclear.

Source Aminet package for *Chaos Lite 3.05cd*, including the developers' readme, program and Chaos.Guide

***Total Chaos 4.03 – Battle at the Edge of Yesteryear*, 2002.** James Conwell told *Amiga Arena* that he'd been demonstrating the Amiga 1000 in a computer shop as far back as 1985. He said he'd been working on *Chaos* since January 1997. For *Total Chaos* he assembled a team to handle graphics, music, animation and translation. He wanted to show that a strategy game could use the AGA chipset to run at a higher resolution and still feel quick. There was plenty of feedback, sometimes twenty or forty emails a day. Paying registrations, he said, were much rarer.

Sources Conwell interviewed by *Amiga Arena*, Contemporary coverage at amiga-news.de, Team credits

***Total Chaos 5 – Battle at the Frontier of Time*, 2003–2004.** The arena could now be a maze you explored square by square, with scrolls and artefacts to pick up along the way. Version 5 added play by email and the ability to record and replay matches. The project site lists 640 × 512 pixels, 256 colours and sixteen megabytes of Fast RAM for the AGA edition of the time. The manual for version 5.50 still offered registered players a full edition with an adjustable turn limit.

Sources Team Chaos on the game and its features, Original hardware requirements, Aminet package for 5.50 with the changelog and manual

***Total Chaos 6 and 7*, 2006–2008.** Team Chaos shipped 22 tutorials with version 6.40. The changelog for version 7.11, *Conflict of the Battlemages*, records fixes for saved games and changes to the AI. The English manual now asks for donations. For at least $35, the team offered a customised edition with unlimited saves, loads and turns. The manual leaves the exact turn limit in the publicly available package unclear.

Source Aminet package for 7.11, including the version history from 6.40 and TotalChaosAGA_7.guide

When Gollop came back

In 2013, Julian Gollop and David Kaye founded Snapshot Games. By then, Gollop was best known for co-creating the original *X-COM*. Kaye came from the business side of the games industry and led business development at Snapshot. The studio's first game brought Gollop back to his wizards. In 2014, *Chaos Reborn* raised about $211,000 from 5,051 Kickstarter backers. Early Access began in December, and the full game came out on 26 October 2015. Gollop remembers many of the backers being fans of the original.

Sources Snapshot Games on its founders and Sofia studio, Founders' roles in Fig's SEC filing, Kickstarter campaign, Early Access announcement, Steam

In *Chaos Reborn*, two to six wizards fight on hexes. You can play a match in one sitting or take your turns as time allows. Snapshot built a larger game around the duels, with equipment, leagues and realms you could explore alone or with friends. Looking back, Gollop found bluffing against the AI less interesting. A person can summon a dragon at precisely the moment they think I'll fall for it. For Gollop, trying to read that player is part of the duel. Snapshot later developed *Phoenix Point*. Embracer bought the studio in 2020 and kept it when it sold parts of the Saber group in 2024.

Sources *Chaos Reborn* on Steam, Gollop on multiplayer and AI, Embracer on the acquisition and the Saber sale

What still feels like *Chaos* today

In some versions, the family resemblance comes down to a few ideas. *Realtime Chaos* lets the wizards act in real time. In the surviving alpha of *Domains of Chaos*, units earn experience and level up. Spellcasting was still on the to-do list. *The Last Warlock* has summoned creatures and turn-based battles, and it sends your warlock on hand-built quests with traps, loot and equipment to craft. That interests me as a tactical RPG in its own right. I'd rarely reach for it when I wanted the short, mean little duel I associate with *Chaos*.

Sources Stephen Smith on *Realtime Chaos*, Marek Mauder on *Domains of Chaos*, Sonic Sloth on *The Last Warlock*

Chaos Online runs the Spectrum game itself in the browser. You can invite people with a link and watch replays of matches. To move the cursor on the board, you use the eight keys around **S**. If you still know the layout by heart, you'll probably feel right at home. When I want to click on a creature and have to look up how to move the cursor diagonally, I find a version like this almost too fiddly to play.

Sources *Chaos Online* instructions, Public replay showing the Spectrum interface

Lewis Lane wanted to play *Chaos* with friends over the internet. He dates the earliest plans for what became *Archaos* to 2003. In 2012, he says, he left his full-time job to work on it. When his savings began to run low, he took on web work. The first public beta arrived in late 2021. Online matches are still on his list. The tutorial shows what's already there. You pick a crocodile from the spellbook, see the square where you can summon it and click the board. You learn the first rule by casting the first spell.

Sources Lane on wanting to play online, Lane on pausing the project and taking web work, Development blog on the 2021 beta, Project status on GitHub, *Archaos* in the browser

What survives of the fan projects

The fan wiki lists many projects under "Unpublished or unavailable". What survives of *Openchaos* includes a page announcing plans for a networked version. There's still a description of the *Imbroglio* prototype, which people could once launch as a Java applet. The old link to the *Gooey Blob* fan forum points to Yahoo Groups, which Yahoo shut down in 2020. When forums like these go, so do the places where people reported bugs, suggested spells and posted links to their own versions. Some saved games, builds and conversations are probably gone for good. A list of dead links can only tell you so much about what's lost.

Sources Chaos Remakes Wiki, Archived *Openchaos* page, Archived *Imbroglio* page, ArchiveTeam on Yahoo Groups

Sometimes the file itself is what survives. Jim Purbrick's *Law* is still available as a ZIP at the Internet Archive. There's still a DOS download of *Morkin II*. A working address, meanwhile, can take you as far as a loading screen. That's where the browser port of *Chaos Groove* stalled in a quick check. Richard Phipps's old development blog was still there to read.

Sources Archived *Law* download, *Morkin II* at My Abandonware, *Chaos Groove* development blog, Browser port, checked on 19 November 2026

From Ralf's Amiga to *War of the Wizards*

Most of the time I played *Chaos* with my friend Ralf. He had an Amiga 1200. I had an Amiga 500 with a 68020 accelerator card. I suspect we played several different Amiga versions over the years. When I went looking for *Chaos* again much later, the A500 version I found was the old demo with the turn limit. I wanted to play the sort of match I remembered and be able to finish it on the computer I use today. That became *War of the Wizards*.

Sources The author's recollection and account of the project's origins, A500 package on Aminet, *War of the Wizards* at Sabnock Works

Our arena takes up to eight wizards. You can play against the AI or share a screen with friends. There are 86 spells, and you can switch on the Law and Chaos balance if you want it. The full browser game is free to play while it's in development. When a dragon appears, I want to wonder what the other player was thinking. The game can make it easy for me to pick a spell and point it at the dragon.

Sources *War of the Wizards* at Sabnock Works, Play in your browser