ZZT

My family got our first computer when I was three. My dad got a job in San Diego and we lived there for a year. Back home, he had a secretary to type up his notes, but this was California in the early '90s. His new secretary told him to get a computer.

A computer-savvy family friend from Winnipeg came to visit with a bunch of floppy disks containing children's games. The one I remember best was a Sesame Street colouring game where you could pick from a box of 16 different colours to fill in various drawings of Muppets.

Those were the days of DOS. In order to find files and games, you needed to physically type in commands, and the only interface was white text on a black screen. Over time, I learned to navigate DOS without the help of my parents. At age seven, it made me feel like a hacker.

There's a lot of old DOS games out there, and a lot of them look similar. Garish colours beam from the CRT monitor. The PC speaker bloops and bleats. Later on, I used more contemporary operating systems, but occasionally I'd have to boot into DOS to play my favourite games.

One game kept me coming back for a long time.

What is this game?

[This Wikipedia] article says that ZZT is an ANSI-based computer game, discusses its graphics, talks about its licensing and its editor and its add-ons… but, it never actually says what the game *is*. Is it like Nethack, or perhaps Ultima, or Mastermind? Is it single-player or multiplayer, turn-based or time-based? Or is it a logic puzzle game? What's the goal, and what's the gameplay? *– Brian Kendig 18:59, 9 November 2005 (UTC), Retrieved from Wikipedia ZZT entry discussion page.*

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ZZT

It's hard to explain ZZT to somebody else. In fact, it's hard to understand exactly what it is the first time you experience it yourself.

ZZT is a DOS program created in 1991 by Tim Sweeney who was CEO, founder, and sole employee of Potomac Computer Systems. He was 21.

ZZT looks a lot like games that came before, games like *Rogue* and *Kroz*. These games made use of DOS's built in ANSI character set which included the alphabet, Greek characters, and abstract symbols like smiley faces. This meant the game developer didn't need to make their own graphics; they were already built into everyone's PC.

You control a white and blue smiley face (known as the "player") around a map, collecting diamond-shaped gems and firing bullets at Ω-shaped lions and Π-shaped tigers. You collect keys to unlock doors, push around boulders, and explore.

But what makes ZZT so unique is that it's not a game. It's a machine that lets you make games. ZZT is like a VCR, only instead of cassettes, this machine plays worlds.

The program came with a game called *Town Of ZZT*, but you didn't have to play it. Instead of hitting "P" to play, you could press "W" to load a different world, or best of all, you could press "E" and enter the World Editor and build an adventure of your own.

ZZT doesn't stand for anything. Sweeney picked the name so it would appear as the last listing online and in software catalogs.

Life in the Grid

ZZT seems built to make fantasy adventure games, with its
torches, gems and scrolls. In *Town of ZZT*, you adventure
around forests and lakes, through castles and caves in quest of
five purple keys. Pretty standard fare for a DOS game.

But it never tries to feel medieval, or even like fantasy. Unabash-
edly, *Town* has its own quirky vibe. There are singing trees, a
"house of blues," Led Zeppelin quotes. You feel like you're in a
new world, strangely crafted and unique.

For me, *Town of ZZT* represents the spirit of ZZT game making.
It's a meandering, quixotic planet littered with artefacts of
personality. A melting pot of little ideas, and a small corner of a
bigger idea.

Brave new worlds

"You are in a forest clearing. There's some spare ammo lying around, and you think you hear monsters nearby.

Why are you in the middle of the woods, surrounded by monsters? And free ammo?

Because this is ZZT, where crazy stuff like that happens all the time, and not an eyebrow is raised.

I like ZZT." - Quantum P

Town of ZZT was the Gutenberg Bible of the ZZT universe. ZZT itself was the printing press, and it opened up taps of creativity all around the world.

Many early games followed the blueprint laid out by *Town*, typically adventuring, looting caves, finding keys and gunning down ruffians. But as a storytelling medium, ZZT worlds took all forms.

Madguy's *Burger Joint* takes place entirely inside a 1950s restaurant, complete with *Grease* tunes and hula hoops. cly5m's *Kudzu* is a dreamlike stroll through a gallery of absurdist imagery and writing. drac0's *Teen Priest* is the lurid X-rated story of a Los Angeles police officer going undercover as a priest… A teen priest.

On Z2, the unofficially official ZZT archive (zzt.org), there are over two thousand games waiting to be played… and presumably thousands more unfinished on hard drives and floppy disks around the globe.

Picture this

Despite the archaic graphics, ZZT is heavily a visual medium. Originally, there were 8 colours to choose from to apply to terrain elements, like walls, lines and boulders.

These "walls" are represented by ANSI characters that look like halftone dot patterns. They allow the creator to make crude gradients, or create a sense of texture.

It's a little bit like pixel art, but the text-based grid is rectangular and not square, making things look a little stretched-out and awkward.

At the dawn of ZZT, the best artists learned to work with and within these limitations. It was like having a box of broken crayons and trying to paint a fresco. And it was glorious.
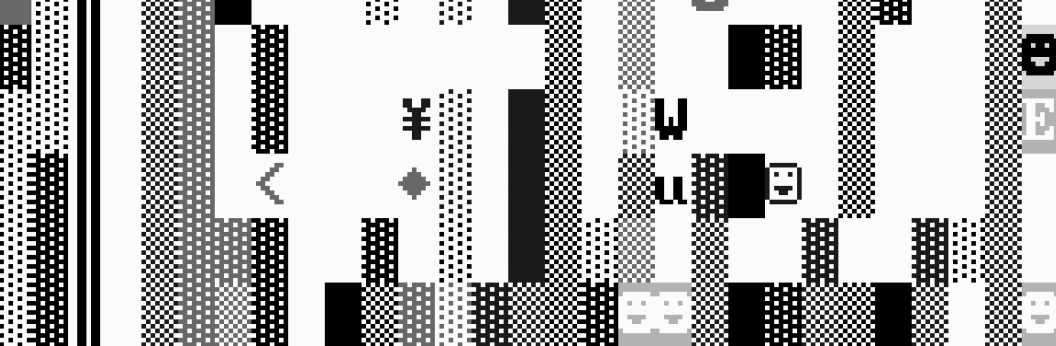
Tim Gallagher's Zap Zak in Epsilon 9, *a ZZT space puzzle adventure.*

Board Game

ZZT worlds are composed of separate 24x60 tile "boards." They can be linked to other boards to make the "map" of the ZZT world. So, if the player traveled off the northern edge of a board,they'd pop up on the southern edge of the linked board. Additionally, they can be linked by terrain elements called passages.

As the mid-tier component of a ZZT world, boards can be exported from worlds and imported into another, which means creators can share single boards with each other for purposes of collaboration.

Every time you add a new board to your world, the default new board looks the same; an empty black field bordered with a rectangle of yellow walls. These dreaded "yellow borders" are the first thing any self-respecting creator should erase before starting to build a new area or risk being labeled a *newbie*.

In this small engine created by Yrrna, physical ZZT objects interact to randomize the dungeon. The triangle object in the top right moves a random number of steps and shoots other objects which send instructions opening up different areas determining the player's path.

ZZT-OOP
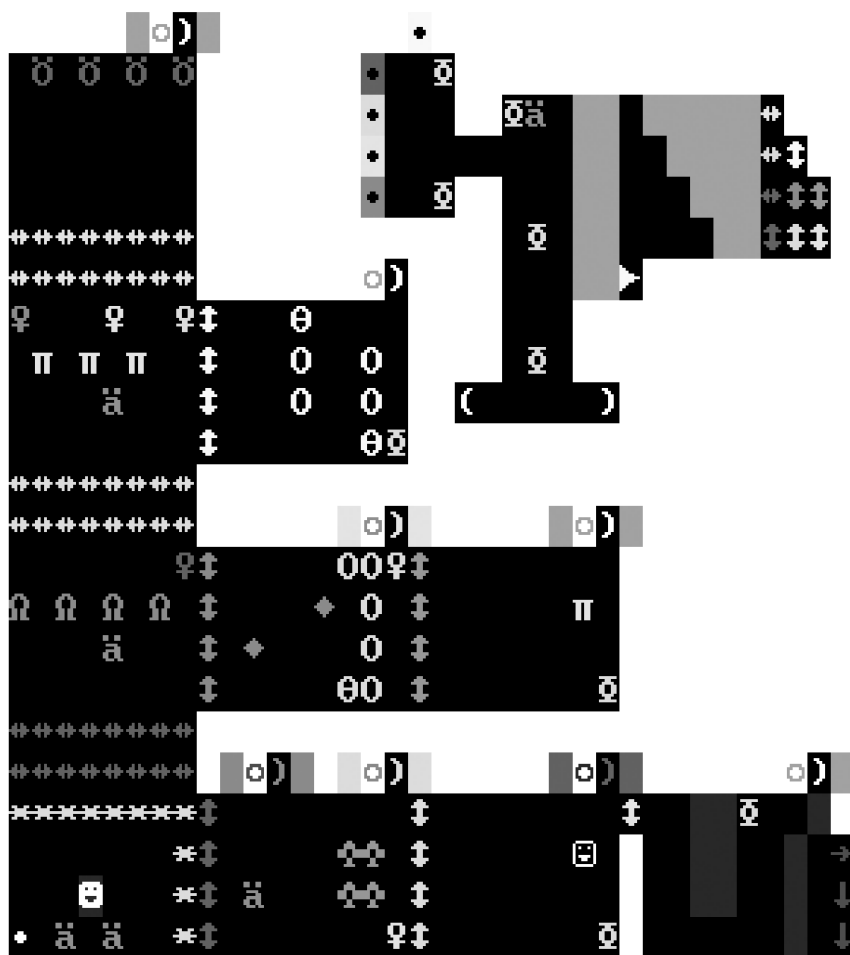
Early on, ZZT worlds were populated mostly with predefined objects built into the editor. These include simple terrain elements like walls, water, forests, and boulders.

There are also items like gems (which give you health) and ammo (which give you bullets to shoot) and creatures like Lions, Bears, and the quintessential Ruffian. It's everything a user needs to make a game with zero programming knowledge.

There's one creature called the "object." An object can be represented on screen by any of the 256 ANSI characters, so it can masquerade as a ruffian, a wall or empty space. It can also be assigned code. Sweeney created a simple language called ZZT Object Oriented Programming (ZZT-OOP).

ZZT-OOP was different from other languages. It was limited and primitive. True programmers would refer to it as a scripting language and not real code.

Objects can do things like move around, check if they'd been shot or touched by the player, and send messages to other objects. Pretty basic.

Nevertheless, savvy coders started building complex systems out of objects, no longer making the traditional enemies and townspeople. People built inventory systems, random dungeon generators and full-fledged game engines. ZZT Rube Goldberg machines.

Because of the open nature of world files, it was understood that your game would be opened up, torn apart, and scrutinized. Your knowledge, and any new inventions, would be assimilated by the hive mind.
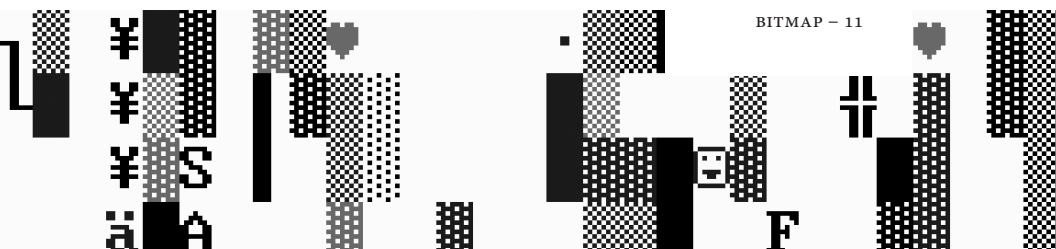
LIVING THE ZZT LIFESTYLE!

By Zam "The Hacker Man" Ross

'Sup everybody? It's your boy Zam—the Hacker Man—Ross. I've been living life kinda on the rocks lately, just cruising through the winter on easy mode, know what I mean? Me and the crew have been keeping warm in *Casa Del Ross* for the last few months, doing some serious gaming and watching a shitload of kickass movies.

But it hasn't been all ether rags, easy slags and skin mags for this guy. Nope! I've been hitting the programming just as hard as I've been ripping my buddy Trey's seven-footer that we call GIGANTOR! I figured out some rad routines for baddies in ZZT. Check out this ice-cold stunner I like to call "Mr. Freezoid!"

So this villain is pretty fucking tough, he runs at you and just shoots like fucking crazy, if you touch him you get hurt and you really need a special weapon (called the FLAMER—it's a flame-thrower—fuckin' sweet!) to do massive damage. I'm putting this rat bastard in my new game *ESCAPE FROM JUPITER ISLE* that's coming out in Q3 2015—watch for it fuckers!

Annotation	Code
Name the object "Freezoid."	`@FREEZOID`
Start of "loop" subroutine.	`:loop`
Try to move towards player.	`#go seek`
"	`#go seek`
Shoot a bullet North.	`#shoot n`
Shoot a bullet West.	`#shoot w`
Shoot a bullet East.	`#shoot e`
Try to move towards player.	`#go seek`
"	`#go seek`
Try to move away from player.	`#go opp seek`
Try to move north.	`#go n`
Go to :loop.	`#loop`
Activates when hit by 1st bullet.	`:shot`
If "flamer" exists, go to :RealShot.	`#if flamer :melt`
Sends message "Fuck!" to player	`Fuck!`
Erases first instance of :shot.	`#zap shot`
Go to :loop.	`#loop`
Activates when hit by 2nd bullet.	`:shot`
Sends message to player.	`Shit! I'm dead!`
Object is erased.	`#die`
Start of "melt" subroutine.	`:melt`
Sends message to player.	`I'm fuckin' melted!`
Score is increased by 30.	`#give score 30`
Object turns into a red fake wall.	`#become red fake`
Activates if player touches object.	`:touch`
Health is decreased by 10.	`#take health 10`
Send message to player.	`Fuck, that's cold!`
Go to :Loop.	`#loop`

Super Tool Kit

A dockside scene from Zenith Nadir's Fantasy World Dizzy. An undisputed master of the limits of ZZT's graphical capabilities, this scene is a good example of Nadir's understated impressionism.

Alexis Janson's Code Red was released in '93, blowing minds by using new colours in ZZT for the first time. Only seven color combinations were typically available in the editor, all pastel on black. The limited set of bright colours on a black background meant all ZZT games had a comparable palette to draw from as sidewalk chalk on black asphalt.

By editing the source code of a ZZT world file, Janson was able to "unlock" the additional eight colours in hundreds of combinations. This innovation was shared with the community as the ZZT utility-world, *Super Tool Kit* (or STK) released by Janson in early 1994.

This marked a divide between the new era of ZZT graphics and the previous "pre-STK" era. With a fully intermixable set of sixteen colours, creators could finally become more representational and painterly.

Later users condensed and improved on STK and made their own "tool kits" to share. Without a true copy/paste function, trading tool kits was the easiest way to share bite-sized ZZT content, not limited to colours but any ZZT content, like writing or code.

Eventually, the colour-unlocking power of tool kits was replaced by more powerful third-party ZZT editors which were more robust in many ways, but many creators would continue using their collection of tool kits which could contain favourite gradients, preprogrammed enemies, and plenty of personality.
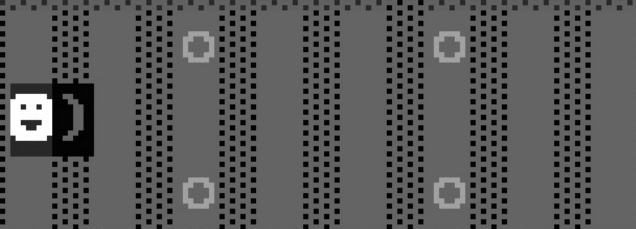
ZZTers

"My friend's dad ran a BBS way back in the very early 90s.

BBSes were, essentially, our Internet. At least, they were mine. They were the portal to information, interactive games, discoveries, and bulletin boards. The audiences were much smaller and more segmented than what we see today, but the BBS framework was still more than enough to keep young me satisfied. Finding relevant topics was secondary to discovery—you never knew what sort of games or people you'd find on the BBS.

That was in the era of "door games," and ASCII graphics were still impressive. I was awestruck with Legend of the Red Dragon, Usurper, *and others. So I stumbled upon ZZT in a downloads section, and I was enthralled at how it would let you unleash your creativity: dialogs, stories, gameplay, art, music (if your standards are really low), programming. It was most definitely the creative aspect that led me to the thing and that made me stick with it.*

In fact, I still stick with it—well, I stick with the general outlet. I made my career in simulation—training, visualization, capturing worldly phenomena in models. You'd be surprised how much gaming and simulation overlap. They both require realism and immersion to varying degrees. Oh, and creativity—lots and lots of creativity. And ZZT taught me all of that." – G. Reed alias craNKGod

Originally, Tim Sweeney distributed
ZZT through software catalogs, mailing
out copies to subscribers.

But ZZT crept from Tim Sweeney's
garage in Maryland to the far corners
of the globe mainly through the
primordial Internet.

People were finding the shareware
version of ZZT online. They were build-
ing games and trading them on BBSes,
and later message boards, and even later
websites devoted to ZZT.

Data never disappears. ZZT continued to
trickle into new hands, on old floppies at
flea markets, discovered on secondhand
hard drives and seen as the last entry on
alphabetized lists of DOS games online.

Through the '90s, a community was
forming around Sweeney's creation. A
community of hobbyist game designers,
testing and stretching the limits of what
ZZT had to offer.

"I like pushing ZZT to its limits. It's fun to think about (for me at least), it's a fun coding challenge, and it's really exciting when this crazy thing you built actually works.

But sometimes it's also fun to cooperate with ZZT. To use it as it was intended, or close to it.

I like ZZT." – Quantum P

Exploring the ZZTer's conundrum.
Comic by Nomad circa 1999.
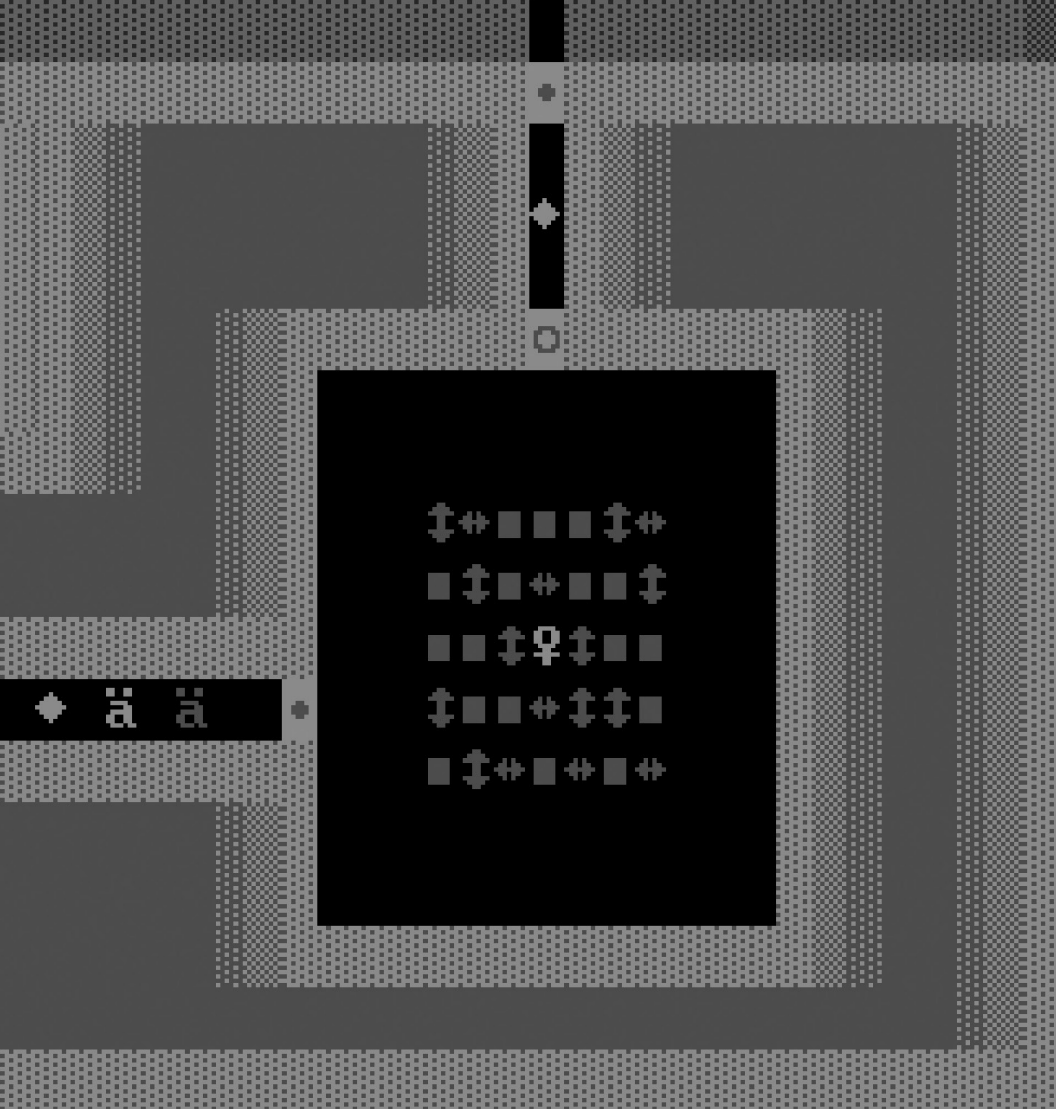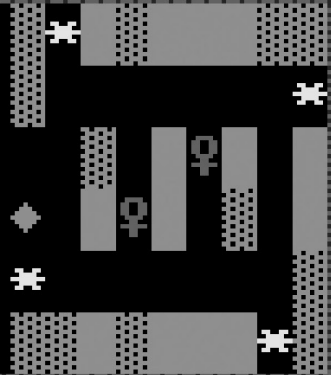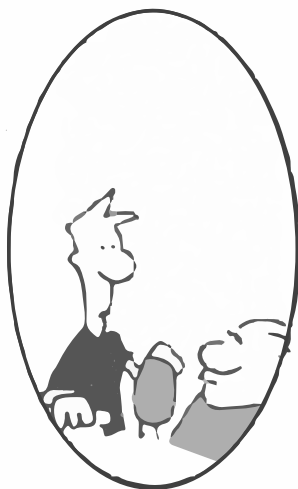
"You don't get into rather esoteric things like ZZT without having a real passion for creating, both as an individual and as part of a community. It teaches you how to get the job done with substance, because you're forced to work within and around certain limits, rather than falling into the trap of overworked style."

—MADTOM

Y2K

Into the early 2000s, ZZT continued to be a magnet for weird creative types with limited programming skills and mountains of free time.

These were ZZTers. Ones who had been around long enough called themselves oldbies. Until then, you were a *newbie*, and had to learn your place.

There were ZZT celebrities. Oldbies who had retired to join real life, leaving behind their masterpieces to inspire future generations.

When I found the ZZT community, it was bristling with energy and humour. It was also awash with drama and cruelty. The community was mostly young, and mainly boys. They were hosting websites, organizing contests and running "companies." It was a little *Lord of the Flies*. I wanted very badly to be part of it.
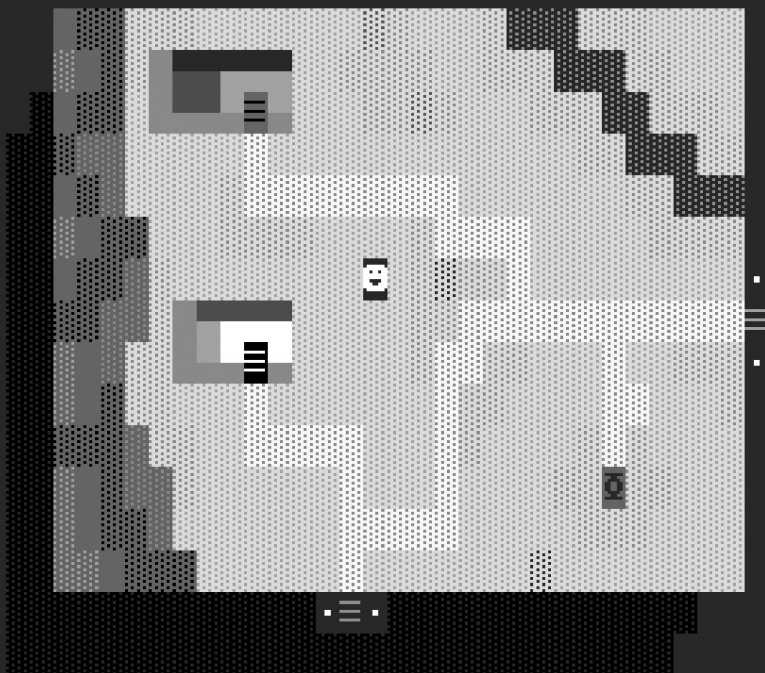
Fresh Tracks

For a decade the ZZT scene has been waning into extinction. But as recently as 2015, a handful of new games continue to be produced. I chatted with longtime veteran DarbyJ about ZZT past, present, and the new game he's developing.

I guess first question is the defacto ZZT interview question: How did you find ZZT? I was basically raised by the NES and SNES, and ever since I was a kid I wanted to make games.

In 1999 I found some website that indexed various GCSes (game creation systems), and ZZT was one of them. I loved *Link's Awakening DX*, and ZZT reminded me of that. It looked the easiest way for me to make the sort of games I enjoyed growing up.

Darby's new game takes place on a smaller playing field within the board, allieviating players from the usually arduous process of navigating large areas.

Why did you stick around and keep using ZZT? I loved ZZT. I understood the basics of creating games, but when I discovered the 'complexity' that ZZT-OOP afforded me, I lost interest in finding anything else, especially because it was easy to understand.

You have no idea how great being able to basically 'sight-read' your program is when you're just learning programming.

I never looked into serious game development after leaving ZZT for GameMaker NL and Macromedia Flash Studio MX. Nothing grabbed me quite as easily or thrilled me nearly as much as ZZT did.

Your new game looks pretty interesting. Want to tell me a little bit about it? Sure! About two weeks ago, I started up Boot-Camp on my MacBook and suddenly remembered that ZZT existed. I started dinking around with it, and I suddenly felt inspired to create something. I got right back into the zen practice of drawing boards, and and experimenting with ZZT programming. I'm really enjoying making this world, and now more than ever, the challenge of making a visually interesting world with ascii art and 20-ish colors is rewarding.

There are fewer people than ever playing ZZT it would seem, and there are a bunch of other resources out there now for making games. What is inspired you to make a new ZZT game? I'm not going to lie, at this point, it's mainly nostalgia. Part of me definitely wants to ditch ZZT for MegaZeux at the moment due to the graphical restrictions. Building ZZT worlds is also a fairly zen process, as I mentioned earlier, and it allows me to relax while still being 'productive.'

You're doing something pretty avant-garde with the board design. What kinds of design considerations are you making when building a ZZT world in the era of smartphones? Board fatigue is what I'm trying to avoid in restricting the board design. As the player skips from board to board, I want the time between boards to be short, and that there should be something interesting going on in each one, either design-wise, or activity wise. That way, not only is there less time between boards, but there is more variety between each board. I don't really have a larger world in mind, I am merely building it board by board, and not having to worry about a larger picture is really nice. I can't wait to see what it looks like.

You talk about being attracted to ZZT by the ease of use, but then you also say you were mostly interested in pushing the boundaries. Do you think it's these boundaries that make ZZT more compelling than newer systems like MZX and GameMaker? Orson Welles said, "The absence of limitations is the enemy of art." G.K. Chesterton said, "Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame. If you draw a giraffe, you must draw him with a long neck." So yes, for me, the limitations of ZZT are interesting. The art style I'm trying to use in my new game is designed such that it is both as abstract and as concise as possible. That's challenging.

February 2015

Bad Company

One of the ways ZZTers used to organize themselves was by the creation of what were called companies. They were really more like teams or clubs, a brand name to slap on your games to give them legitimacy.

You might be surprised that if you type "Interactive Fantasies" into Google, the first hit is a webpage for a ZZT company. The most prestigious and polished ZZT company in all the land! But it was only one of many. Companies popped up and died out with regularity.

Companies became notorious for different reasons. AKWare was famous for its games which mocked the look and feel of amateur "newbie" games. Eagle Rock Interactive was a riotous fraternity of prominent oldbie ZZTers who released a lot of absurd, tripped-out games. Random Inc was a more serious collection of up-and-comers headed by the optimistic community cheerleader Knightt.

These companies, in some ways, represented the cliques within the ZZT scene. I joined a company called Aurorasoft in 2001. My first real job! About a month after I joined, Aurorasoft dissolved and ZZT companies in earnest went out of style for good. Still, mission accomplished. I had made the big time.
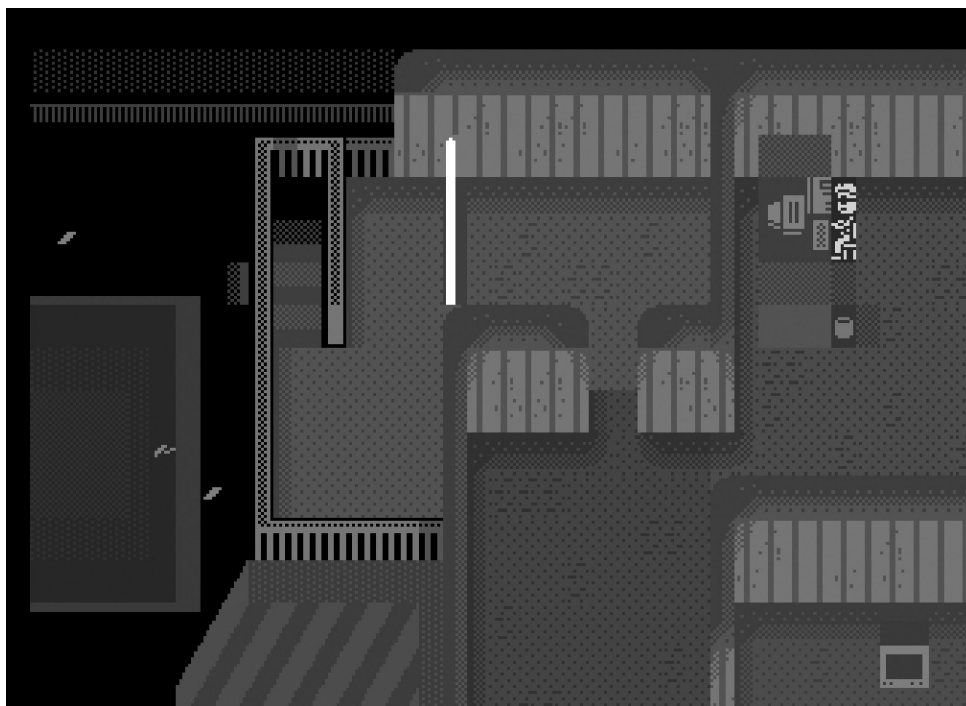
MegaZeux

Tim Sweeney released a game called Super ZZT in 1992, but the true successor to ZZT was MegaZeux.

Also known as MZX, it was created by the legendary Alexis Janson in 1994. It featued impressive customizable graphics and more complex coding than ZZT, and a large fan following in its own right. Janson passed on the development of MegaZeux onto members of the community, who continue to update it.

The ZZTer and MZXer communities clashed frequently in petty immature squabbles, many of which have been immortalized by the unforgiving photographic memory of the Internet.

The above screen from Weirdness SE *by Duhreetoh shows off some of the impressive graphics MZX has to offer. ZZT could be run using a modified " font" to achieve similar albeit limited effect, but most agree this usually resulted in travesty.*

IRC

Internet Relay Chat has been around since the '80s. It's a text-only protocol for chatting, hosted on servers which were subdivided into "channels." Lots of communities of chiefly nerdy subcultures meet on IRC, including the ZZTers and MZXers.

You know that saying, if you had a room full of monkeys at typewriters, et cetera? Imagine that, but replace the monkeys with pre-teens and you've got more or less an idea of what the ZZT community looked like on IRC—only nobody was pounding out the works of Shakespeare.

Truly these were dark portals. Most of the time the dialogue was a cesspool of bullying, rampant homophobic language, and toilet humour. Many of the worst offenses are archived, and still celebrated by the community today for their wit and irony.

But there were bright spots, too. The creative power of the community as a whole took on a life of its own and they built a lot of great stuff, inside ZZT and out. The ZZT community today is less like a fan club and more like a family, complete with all the mess that brings with it. And isn't that a happy ending?

"Having been in the community as far back as 1998 and still being active in it it really has greatly influenced my life. It's given me plenty of friends despite me being introverted, it's given me my sense of humor, introduced me to new and horrible things. Somewhere there's a quote of me saying how without the ZZT community I'd probably be straight, popular, and normal."– DR DOS

```
[00:13] <wildkarrdex> I'M WATCHING NADIRTV
[00:13] <Funk> NadirTV?
[00:13] <Nadir> HE HAS ME DOING LEWD THINGS FOR
              HIM ON WEBCAM
[00:13] <Funk> URL?
[00:13] <Nadir> NETMEETING
[00:13] <Funk> I'll bet.
[00:13] <Funk> Oh :(
[00:14] <Funk> Not a Zamcam affair then.
[00:14] <wildkarrdex> FUNK YOU HAVE NETMEETING
              INSTALLED
[00:14] <Nadir> FUNK CAN JOIN IN
[00:14] <Funk> I do?
[00:14] <Funk> Hurrah
[00:14] <wildkarrdex> ACCESORIS> INTERNET TOOLS
[00:15] *** Viovis has joined #misanthropy
[00:15] <Funk> You mean communications?
[00:15] <Funk> No Internet tools option
[00:15] <wildkarrdex> OH
[00:15] <wildkarrdex> I HAVE INTERNET TOOLS
[00:15] <Nadir> DO A SEARCH FOR "CONF.EXE"
[00:15] <Viovis> fuck, i've worked 6 days in a
              row.. but i'm downloading unreal
              tournament dem
[00:16] <Viovis> i slept for about 16 hours
[00:16] <quiz-masta-piroteckkie> i have ut
[00:16] <Funk> Just setting up Netmeeting
[00:16] <quiz-masta-piroteckkie> im getting a
              mutator for it
[00:17] <quiz-masta-piroteckkie> utf... it
              kicks ass.
[00:17] <Funk> I don't have a microphone
[00:17] <Viovis> ehh, fuck it
[00:17] <Nadir> YOU DONT NEED ONE
[00:17] <Nadir> I DONT HAVE ONE
[00:18] <Viovis> not supposed to care
[00:18] <wildkarrdex> WE ARE USING THE CHAT ANY-
              WAY
[00:18] *** Viovis has left #misanthropy
[00:18] <Funk> How do I call you?
[00:18] <wildkarrdex> PUT 213.122.74.119 INTO
              THE BOX
[00:18] <Nadir> TYPE "/DNS NADIR"
[00:18] <Nadir> TO GET MY IP NUMBER
[00:18] <Nadir> IN IRC THAT IS
[00:19] <Funk> Wow, the little animated phone
              icon is nice
[00:19] * duhreetoh kicks daemon_lotos
[00:20] *** Jaeho has joined #misanthropy
[00:21] <Zechs> HI JAEHO
[00:21] <Jaeho> hi
[00:21] *** quiz-masta-piroteckkie has quit IRC
              (Ping timeout)
[00:23] *** aetsch has joined #misanthropy
[00:23] <aetsch> HEY
[00:23] <Zechs> HI AETSCH
[00:23] <Nadir> AETSCH
[00:23] * Lerris is away: shower
[00:23] <Nadir> KARRDE AND I ARE PLAYING WITH
              WEBCAM
[00:23] <Zechs> 12(aetsch12): HOW DO YOU SAY
              YOUR NAEM?
[00:23] <Nadir> H
[00:24] <aetsch> H
[00:24] <aetsch> HEY NADIR
[00:24] <duhreetoh> ...haha
[00:24] *** drac0 has joined #misanthropy
[00:24] *** ChanServ sets mode: +o drac0
[00:24] *** quiz-masta-piroteckkie has joined
              #misanthropy
[00:24] <Zechs> HI drac0
[00:24] <Funk> Stupid netmeeting
[00:25] *** Jaeho is now known as Jaeho[away]
[00:25] * Jaeho[away] is now away My remotes are
              off
[00:25] *** Vedic has joined #misanthropy
[00:26] <Nadir> LOL@FUNK
[00:26] <aetsch> HEY
[00:26] <aetsch> Y'ALL ARE WORKING ON YOUR ZZTV
              CHANNELS, RIGHT?
[00:26] <Nadir> I HOPE SO
[00:26] <Funk> LOL@FUCKYOU
[00:27] <Funk> I'm not
[00:27] <Funk> Because I can't bothered. Ha!
[00:27] <aetsch> :0
[00:27] <Nadir> =(
[00:27] <aetsch> :0
```

Tim
Sweeney

Sweeney, leaning

Tim Started making games when he was about twelve years old on an Apple II, and wrote ZZT in his college dorm.

"The funny secret behind ZZT is it started out while writing a text editor," says Tim. "I'd used Turbo Pascal and other languages on the PC, but I didn't like any of the editors that came with them, so I started writing my own."

Even though that project became a game, it stayed part game-editor. "It just evolved from creating this editor that turned into a game editor that turned into a game."

The significance of ZZT's built-in editor quickly became apparent, however: "ZZT included the editor in the shareware version and everybody was able to use it whether or not they sent in money. That was a huge factor in it being successful, I think."

When Tim could live off the money coming in from ZZT, he started getting serious. He changed the name of his company to Epic MegaGames. In 1992 he released his second game, Jill of the Jungle.

He hosted a ZZT design contest in '92 to find up-and-coming game designers. He took interest in and hired 15-year-old Cliff Bleszinski (better known by his bad-boy alias "CliffyB") who would release cult smash Jazz Jackrabbit by age 19.

In 1998 Unreal was released. It was a fairly cutting edge 3D first-person shooter for its day, built on a very solid engine programmed almost entirely by Sweeney.

The Unreal Engine was like a ZZT for the insanely popular first-person shooter genre. It was a tool for building games. Tim's company made its millions by licensing the Unreal Engine to other game developers. That year, the company changed its name to the more mature Epic Games.

Tim acknowledges that Unreal wouldn't have been the industry-shattering application it was without ZZT. "I really never had a conception of what [ZZT] was going to be until it approached completion, whereas with Unreal—really, ZZT was the road map of what the thing would look like."

Despite ZZT being the catapult that flung Tim to the top of the game development world, he doesn't carry a torch. "I make it a point in life to avoid being sentimental. Once you look back on the past as 'the good old days', that's when you've reached and passed the peak of your career, and perhaps, life."

Godspeed, Tim.

Quotes retrieved from Kotaku and autofish.net

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*Some games starting with the letter
"B" that use the Unreal Engine:*

BioShock (2007)
Batman: Arkham Asylum (2009)
Borderlands (2009)
BioShock 2 (2010)
Batman: Arkham City (2011)
Borderlands 2 (2012)
BioShock Infinite (2013)
Batman: Arkham Origins (2013)
Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel (2014)
Batman: Arkham Knight (2015)

Flimsy Parkins

Interviewed by cly5m, May 2006

What have you created with ZZT, or related to ZZT? Let's see... *Shades of Gray*, which was a *Town of ZZT* parody. About half my games are *Town of ZZT* parodies, probably.

A lot of annoying maze games. *House of Asterion* and *Garfield ZZT* were the best of those.

Dark Blue on Dark Red, a game where everything was dark blue on dark red.

ZZT Game (confusingly also titled "*Town of ZZT*") - this is my most recent work. Or is it? I don't remember.

Oh wait, my most recent game is *SIN*, not uploaded anywhere, because I'm too lazy to go through all that zipping and text file adding bullshit. I have *pictures* which are larger than the average ZZT game, and they want us to *zip* them? *pictures of lint*.

Sixteen Easy Pieces, my best puzzle game. Each board is cut into a larger number of

parts. I can't remember how to do some of the later ones.

I made a number of toolkits, most notably *Red Ruffian Toolkit*, the toolkit that contains only one tile: a red ruffian.

Some 24hoZZT games: *drip*, *The Day Odin Got Up on the Wrong Side of Bed*, *The Revival of Richard Ravenshead*, *At Least We Have Hope*, *The Day Cthulhu Got Up on the Wrong Side of Bed and Demanded a Sacrifice*, *kamikaze cucumber*. All of them were pretty good. I kind of want to play that Cthulhu one again now, actually.

Landing—actually I only made half of this, asgromo made the first half and then I downloaded the complete game out of the uploads directory and replaced the rest with my own scribblings. It was greatly improved.

And finally, incomplete likely forever, *DINNER*, the last ZZT game. It's made from ZZT games I play in dreams.

"ASCII has a strange appeal, because of the extremity of the abstraction. We order the world with words and symbols, but only in ASCII is the world actually constructed of symbols."

There are some other odds and ends which weren't really games, but which were pretty good. ADAM, a contraption made of green objects and duplicators, which duplicates itself entirely. Really nice looking, everything ASCII animates itself all fancy-like. I'd never be bothered to make something that nice looking these days.

Incomplete versions of a lot of things WiL finished quicker, that Mormon bastard!

When you think about ZZT, what games come to your mind and why? The original Tim Sweeney ones, *PPDV*… my own, I guess. When I think of ZZT, I don't tend to think of specific games, just of an unreached, possibly illusory potential.

Have you created any games outside of ZZT? None of note.

Do you have any artistic pursuits other than making games? Yes, but I can't discuss them. (Because they are illegal)

Here's my website though, with dynamically generated content. A website designed to accommodate the user. MoreStat market research, in partnership with Solburn Computer Systems, brings you: CastleZZT.net.

Has your experience with ZZT or the ZZT scene made any sort of lasting impact on your life? Hard to say, not knowing what I would've done otherwise.

What works of non-ZZT art have inspired you the most? Negativland, *Azumanga Daioh*, *House of Leaves*, *Pokey the Penguin*, *Mystery Science Theater*, *Levels of Organization in General Intelligence*, Mr. Bungle, David Lynch, Terry Pratchett, Scott McCloud, Alex Demko, Bill Stickers.

Those were more people than works, so I mean stuff by them.

Do you plan to create any games in the future, with or without ZZT? No, but I probably will anyway. Depending on your definition of game.

Anything else you'd like to add? ASCII has a strange appeal, because of the extremity of the abstraction. We order the world with words and symbols, but only in ASCII is the world actually *constructed* of symbols. Am I the only one who sees this? Probably. It's a moot point anyway.

About half the community should be banned. The current ZZT administration is too lenient!

ZZT is long gone, and even the community, the tribe of janitors of the museum of failure, are melting into the rest of the Internet, gently being absorbed into a bigger, more impersonal chaos.

But ever so slowly! The ZZT community will probably last till the end of the world, although that's not saying much, what with the singularity.

The end of world is nigh.

Retrieved from www.autofish.net February 2015. Edited for length and lies.

"ZZT is long gone, and even the community, the tribe of janitors of the museum of failure, are melting into the rest of the Internet, gently being absorbed into a bigger, more impersonal chaos." —FLIMSY PARKINS
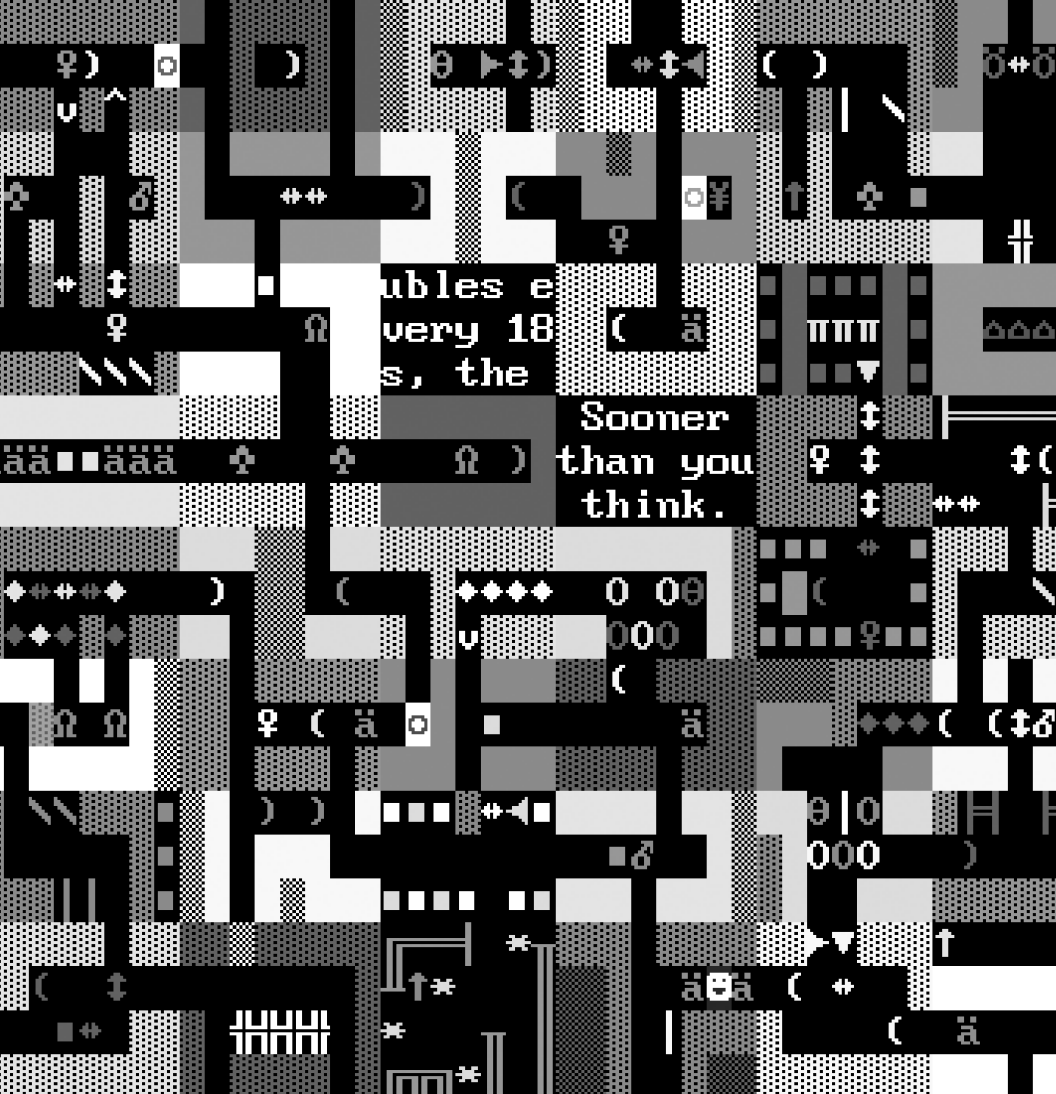
In Sixteen Easy Pieces, Flimsy combines normal ZZT elements into sadistically difficult post-modern puzzlery. An eternal enigma within the community, nobody is sure if Flimsy is a maniac or a genius.

Glossary

ASCII, ANSI - A predefined computer alphabet consisting of letters, numerals and symbols.

BBS, BBSes - Bulletin Board System. A primitive text-based service which allowed users to post messages and participate in public discussions online.

.BRD - A ZZT Board file. One "page" of a ZZT book that could be shared and imported into an existing world

DOS - Short for MS-DOS or Microsoft Disk Operating System, one of the most popular computer OSes ever developed. Made Bill Gates rich.

GCS - Game Creation System. A program for creating games, supplemented by but not necessitating programming. ZZT may have been the first. A modern example is GameMaker.

IRC - Internet Relay Chat. Users connected to Servers and joined channels using an IRC client; much in the same way ZZTers played Worlds and explored boards in ZZT.

MZX - Megazeux, a program inspired by ZZT that outstripped its little brother in every way, outside of popularity and coolness.

OOP - Object Oriented Programming, although ZZT's code was substantially different from true object oriented languages.
STK - Super Tool Kit, a catch-all term for colours outside of ZZT's built-in palette.

Super ZZT — The sequel to ZZT with scrolling boards, a hidden world editor, and non-existent fan following.

.ZZM - ZZT Music file. Did I mention that you could compose music with ZZT-OOP?

.ZZT - A ZZT World file. Max file size ~300kb.

ZZT - Zoo of Zero Tolerance

References

Screens captured from games by Tim Sweeney, Tim Gallagher, Zenith Nadir, Duhreetoh, Darby Janssen and Flimsy Parkins.

Quotes by ZZTers and Flimsy Parkins interview courtesy of cly5m via autofish.net (http://www.autofish.net/video_games/creation/zzt/zprofiles.html).

Comic by nomad, part of a great series that deserves a look (http://zzt.org/?p=nomadcomic&comic=4).

Photograph of a young nerd at her computer courtesy of Miranda McCourt, friend to ZZTers if not one herself.

Tim Sweeney article quotes taken from interviews by Gamasutra in 2009 (http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132426/from_the_past_to_the_future_tim_.php?page=1), and another by Hercules in 2000 (http://www.autofish.net/video_games/creation/zzt/hercules_meets_tim_sweeney.html).

Young Tim Sweeney photo from Kotaku (http://kotaku.com/5865951/the-quiet-tinkerer-who-makes-games-beautiful-finally-gets-his-due) and leany Sweeney from Epic Games (http://epicgames.com/community/2013/02/a-message-from-tim-sweeney/)

Further Reading

ZZT can't really be explained in text, it needs to be experienced. Luckily, it will probably forever be immortalized on the Internet by DOS game archives. It's usually found at the bottom of lists.

You can still download ZZT and most of the games ever released on the officially unofficial ZZT homepage, Z2, at **zzt.org**. You might need DosBox, and you'll definitely need lots of patience and curiosity.

For a more in-depth look at ZZT, the best existing work is a book by written by Anna Anthropy, and looks at not just ZZT but the phenomenon of growing up online. Find out more at **bossfightbooks.com/products/zzt-by-anna-anthropy**.

Plenty of great interviews, reviews and links to more sites have been curated by cly5m at **autofish.net/zzt**. The rest of his website is worth a browse, too.

Special Thanks

Many ZZT games would end with a long list of thank-yous to beta-testers and supporters. In that tradition, thanks goes out to the people who produced such an impressive body of work in such an obscure medium.

Thanks to everyone who submitted something in the collaborative spirit of ZZT, Thanks to Zamros for capturing the rebel-stoner spirit of the mid-2000s ZZT. Thanks to Quantum P and Yrrna for booting up ZZT and building something new. Thanks to DarbyJ for sharing memories and screenshots. Thanks to craNKGod for providing sage insights and proofreading. Thanks to the fantastic, monastic cly5m for his blessing to crib from his vault. Thanks to others who thought about sharing something but didn't, true ZZTers to the last.

And thanks goes out to my friends around the globe who fostered a rapaciously creative environment online, if not for this weird scene I don't know where or who I'd be.