

schoolboy reviewers (who earned modest fees for their services). Meanwhile, Franco Frey kept the mail order on the go and Oliver set about creating the interior art and – most importantly – the cover. He had already adopted the Crash Micro Games Action logo with its squat, uncompromising, tank-like and completely unforgettable CRASH logo (keeping the ‘Micro Games Action’ as a sub-head), but the image to go below it had to be outstanding.

At that moment no game suggested itself as something to illustrate, and besides, Oliver wanted an image that leaped out at the viewer and spoke volumes about the gaming experience without tying it to any particular game. Kean suggested a ‘face’ staring out at the potential reader with something like Space Invaders reflected in his eyes. Oliver sat down, sketched out a few ideas and then began air brushing and painting. The result is probably one of the most distinctive, certainly most famous, images ever created for a games magazine cover (see page XX). Since those days there have been many clever and more polished cover designs than that first CRASH, but none with the sheer brutal impact that the alien they came to call ‘The Chairman of the Board’ possessed. Even today, its simple directness is overwhelming.

The first CRASH – the February issue – went on sale on Wednesday 13 January 1984. It was more than moderately successful in sales, but hardly earth shattering. Issue 2, with another unforgettable cover – King Kong (see page XX), clutching a screaming girl, tearing into a Spectrum with his fangs – did better. Unfortunately, the nice distribution company went bankrupt, taking all the receipts from the first two issues with it. There was no money to pay the printer. Two things saved CRASH – in turn the printer went belly up (not because of CRASH), which bought breathing space, and Britain’s biggest magazine distributor Comag, liking what they saw, picked up the distribution, and managed to collect some of the owed money from the newstrade.

Thanks to Comag, Newsfield survived, and Oliver Frey continued to pour out an astonishing stream of cover and interior art for CRASH, then in 1985 for ZZAP!64, and on for some further ten magazines, as well as numerous game inlays for various software publishers. Oliver’s involvement with the Newsfield story is legend to the publishing company’s readership, less well known are the years of hard work that went into making him such a prolific and versatile illustrator.

The ‘Chairman’

Frey’s cover for the first issue of CRASH announced to the British gaming world that something new had arrived.



Family Frey

Oliver, Lauretta, Franco, Giulietta and Ugo.
Oil on board, Roger Kean, 1972.

THE EARLY YEARS



Eagle and Dan Dare – formative influences on many youngsters growing up in the late 1950s and early 60s.



A very accomplished watercolour from the 14-year-old Frey, signed ‘Oli’ and dated ‘62.

Oliver Frey was born on 30 June 1948 in Zurich, Switzerland. He is the eldest of three children (two boys and a girl) born to Ugo and Giulietta Frey. He grew up a fluent Italian speaker, since his parents hailed from the southernmost canton of Switzerland, Ticino, where Swiss-Italian is spoken. However, because the family lived near Zurich in the north, he also learned German and French at school. His artistic career really started in 1956, when he was almost eight, and the Frey family came to Britain from Switzerland, bringing their car with them on a Silver City air ferry. During the short flight from France a steward handed the puzzled boy a Dan Dare badge. It looked exciting, but who was Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, and what did he do?

The answer was supplied almost immediately in the hotel they were lodged in while the Ugo Frey’s English employers found suitable housing for them. Hidden under the cushions of a sofa in the residents’ lounge, Oliver discovered copies of Eagle comic, and the badge and the Dan Dare strip matched up.

When he started school in Wembley, young Oliver discovered that most of his classmates were comic-mad, especially for Eagle. There had been no such comics in Switzerland, and he was taken by the quality of artwork, and immersed himself in the doings of Dan Dare and his battles with the Mekon. He started copying the drawings of Eagle’s artists, and their styles became seminal influences. The feeling of bodies in movement, often in violent action, captured his imagination and is a quality that has never left his work.