Beer and Gaming in Las Vegas- Part 2

A Collectors Look at the Classic Gaming Expo

by Geoff Voigt

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(From L to R: Steve Cartwright, Bob Smith, Steve Woita, and Andy Fuchs, at the 2600 programmers keynote.)

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:
The first one was the 2600 programmers;
Rob "Demon Attack, Missile Command" Fulop,
Howard "Raiders of the Lost Ark, ET, Yar's Revenge" Scott Warshaw,
Bob "Defender, Road Runner" Polaro,
Steve "Megamainia, Plaque Attack, Seaquest" Cartwright,
Bob "Video Pinball, Dragonfire" Smith,
Steve "Asterix&Taz, Quadrun" Woita,
and Andy (Atari sound design) Fuchs, who regailed us with Marketing Idiot stories, how to categorize every game, ("Clean 'em up", "Kill everything" "Turn the Tables" "Survival" Competition/sports) , the importance of fine-tuning a game, and the importance of having actual gamers make the games.

(Rob Fulop giving us the categories of all gaming.)

(Brad Stewart telling his "Breakout Story", basically he had the highest score on the arcade version, so he got to program the 2600 version.)

Brad "Breakout" Stewart and Joe (helped with Combat and design of the 2600) Decuir also came out of the audience to give their 1/50 of a dollar. Good way to start the Expo. Vectrex programmers was the second one; with Tom Sloper and Bill Hawkins, but the majority of the talk derailed into discussion of the validity of the overlays for the system. Arcade Programmers was just Warren Davis from Q*Bert, and Jamie Fenton of Gorf. Discussion entailed how titles get made, and the decision process back then on how specific titles made it through marketing. 5200 Programmers; (Steve Woita, Keithen "RS Baseball" Hayenga, John "Gremlins, RS Soccer, Xari Arena" Seghers was mostly about sound design for the system, questions about how Tempest on the system was, and comparisons between the 5200 and the 2600; most preferred to program on the 5200.

There was also some discussion of how Atari changed through the years, from the early years through the Warner times to the Tramiel years. Joe Decuir gave a speech about the making of the 2600 itself; how the idea came about, the inner workings of the system, and he gave all of us a neat handout to go with the seminar. Naturally, the presentation was _very_ tech heavy, and much of it went over my head, but still all the major (and hopeful) home-brew game programmers were in attendance. (My own handout went to an aspiring home-brewer who couldn't attend the speech.) It's interesting to know that the 2600 was just intended to be a pong system with some potential to play football and SpaceWar. Geez. Rampage came out for the thing. :/

(My own 2 cents) Van Burnham (of Wired magazine) debuted a promotional 2600 cart for her book; "Supercade". the game is called "Escape from Supercade" and the gameplay is much like that of M-Network's Adventures of Tron. the player controls a figure on a traditional 'floor and ladders' screen, collecting small blocks while evading steamroller-type vehicles. 24 carts are being made available via lottery to those who filled out their name and address at the Expo. The ROM image for Supercade is going to be made available after the book comes out.

The first seminar for Sunday was the Intellivision developers:
Blue Sky Rangers
John P. "Astrosmash, B-17 Bomber"Sohl,
Stephen "Space Spartans"Roney,
Keith "Solar Sailer" (Did graphic work for box art) Robinson,
David "2600 Star Strike" Akers,
David "Beamrider, Steamroller, Major Leauge Baseball"Rolfe,
and Peter "Frog Bog, Inty River Raid"Kaminski informed the audience of how Mattel contacted Aph Engineering in Pasadena to make a console for Home Gaming, personal decisions and how they affect game programming, and Tron got most of the questions. I'd always wondered if the Inty could handle a port of the arcade Tron, and if there was ever discussion of porting it to the Inty. They all staunchly believe it could handle the arcade, with some bank-switch between the 4 games, and no; no _serious_ talk of porting it was ever done.

An award for "Geekiest question" was awarded by Keith Robinson when it was asked why the colors of the "Tron's Deadly Discs" figures were reversed from the movie. To refresh the few of you that don't remember, the Movie had the good guys in Blue (and Green, if

you count Art Carney's 'Gatekeeper' character), and the MCP minions, and the big face himself, were all red. TDD has the player red, with opponents in blue. No one had a good answer for that.

Rob Newman may not be a well known name in classicdom, but his job at Atari now tells us why neither Atari nor Activision ever joined the Gameline service. Mr. Newman's job was to design and test a FM frequency game subscription service for the 2600, downloaded in the system via radio waves. the technical notes he mentioned were astounding, how the receiver (a specially made cart for the 2600) would capture game data off of radio waves not used by conventional audio. Amazing stuff.

(Brown Box Close-up. Yes, that _IS_ carboard!)

I was in the museum, taking pictures of certain items for this article, when I came upon the now-legendary Brown Box. After I took my pictures, I was surprised to see someone who I easily recognized from pictures I've seen on the net and in gaming magazines standing nearby his own creation. "You keep this in your basement?" "For the time being, yes." "Wow. Could I get a picture of you next to it, Mr. Baer?"

(The living legend himself, Ralph Baer!)

And that's how I got the picture above. I also shook his hand and told him "Thank You", not just for the picture, but for the whole inventing thing. I honestly feel like I met a Henry Ford or Alfred Farmsworth. I'll be telling my grandkids about that. Ralph Baer, considering his achievements, was very accessible, and was delighted to be among admirer. His presentation was packed; probably the largest attendance for any of the keynotes. There was some problems with the connectors before the talk, but being the engineer and inventor he is, he had the tools in his pocket to fix the problem. He told his tale of working at Loral industries in the 1950's building TV's, and asking the management "why don't we do anything new with these things, like play games?" his idea got shot down. (Imagine what games would be like today if they had liked the idea..) The idea got renewed in 1966, and to shorten the story, the ending development became the Odyssey 1, the first home game system.

(Ralph Baer showing his grandson John how to aim and fire.)

After finishing his story, he brought his grandson up to play the Brown Box; they played tennis/Pong, volleyball, and the rifle shooting game. Questions he answered included my own, wondering what his permanent plans were for the Brown Box itself; he doesn't like the idea of putting it in the Smithsonian, (but he's not ruling it out) because, "they keep stuff in storage 99 out of 100 years." He also mentioned wanting to put it in the inventor's Hall of Fame in Akron, Ohio because it could still get played. This had to be my favorite presentation of all; the history explained by one of the Prime Movers in this field was wonderful.

The Writing staff of the much-Loved and remembered Electronic Games were on hand for their say. Bill Kunkel, Joyce Worley, and Arnie Katz. they talked about their impressions on the Vectrex, who got what to do, and their opinions on the state of gaming media today; "If I can't play a game in a month, I don't want to read a review of it" (Katz) They had a real beef with collusion in today's magazines. There was a story of how Atari didn't want them to report on Activision, "But they came around in a few months" They even had a few comments on the collectability of the old copies, "You don't want the mags to read our old stuff, it's for the ads, it so you can say to someone who wasn't there, "this is what it was like!" (Kunkle) I asked them about efforts to digitally reproduce and preserve their magazine. "We'd love it! We'd like to see it!" Unfortunately, the current property holder of EG may not be interested, but you never know...

There was also a keynote by the Activision developers, but I couldn't attend because I needed to check out of my suite; had to lug all those systems back to my car! :6 Many of the other sites should have highlights of this speech.

PARTING THOUGHTS:

I loved CGE; I'm going next year. I've realized a major truth of our hobby from coming to CGE 2000: We're all nuts. We, as a group of classic collectors, need this yearly get-together to make sure that we're not alone, to understand why others do "this"; I get strange looks from others when I explain this hobby in normal social settings. The Alumni, who want to know that their work in the 80's won't be forgotten. They made history, its up to us to make sure that everyone else remembers. We have an opportunity right now to make sure that the early days of this new art form get preserved and told. We can prevent holes in history from happening. For three lovely days in Las Vegas, I felt blissfully... Normal.

This article took up a lot of my time; so much that I need to make the following thanks and acknowledgements: Chris Breedon, for saying in May after our last meet and after several hours of "Regan Years" in old Pasadena "We need to do something on Fri. night for the Expo." My brother Rob, for coming with me. The Expo planning staff, for ending Fri. night with a bang and jut for putting the damned thing together. Next year, it's not a crash, just a late arrival.. :) Joe Santulli, for the use of the Crowd Line pic previously seen on the Digital Press site that has me and Chris B. in it. The other Classic gaming press guys; Cav and staff from Classic Gamer, Hans "Cyberroach" Rutter, William Cassidy of Classicgaming.com, and the DP staff, for letting me know what a plush Q*Bert looks like. And last but not least, Tom Z. for putting up with all this. (Geoff Voigt is currently being threatened by his brother to be kidnapped and taken to the Coffee wing of the Betty Ford

clinic. He's now back at work on his RGVC FAQ and a one-shot article for Classic Gamer Magazine)

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