Retrogaming Times

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Get Into the Game

In what looks to be one of the coolest things at Phillyclassic, Alan Hewston has created something to literally put you into a classic game. For the low price of free (much like this newsletter), you can go over to Alan's booth at the Phillyclassic and put your head into a video game mural. He has created one for Pacman that will allow you to put your head in and take a picture as the ghosts come after you or Pacman gets ready to chomp down on you! The real ingenious part is that the mural has removable pieces, so you can set Pacman and the ghosts where you want, making each picture unique. He showed me an early look at it and I came away very impressed. So you may want to bring a camera to Phillyclassic as this will be a Kodak moment and a nice souvenir of the show.

Click below to see an early preview of the Pacman mural. With any luck, he will have the Dig Dug one done in time for the show! Now if we can get him to do a Crazy Climber (my personal favorite arcade game) for next year's show, then I can have a photo of myself climbing a building and getting bopped on the head by a flower pot.

http://my.stratos.net/~hewston95/PC4PacManFever.html

What's your favorite videogame from 1983?

By Alan Hewston

It was Twenty Years ago today . . . 1983 was a very good year for newly released video games at both the arcade as well as for original games on home systems. Listed below are 40 of the better video games released that year. I hope that I did not miss any of your favorites, if so, let me know. I'd like your choice for which 10 you enjoy playing the most, on any platform in any era - take your pick. Don't make it too hard on yourself by ranking them, just keep them in alphabetical order or whatever order is easiest for you. If you only like a few, then just vote for those.

Vote ASAP and I'll compile the list for next month. I'll also post a message on RGVC and get votes that way as well. So click and scroll across the list below and grab a copy of them, then click on "email here to vote" and paste the list in an email. Then just delete those you do not like until you get to 10 or fewer. Thanks

Here they are:
Arabian, Archon, Beamrider, Boulder Dash, Congo Bongo, Crossbow, Crystal Castles, Decathalon, Discs of Tron, Domino Man, Donkey Kong 3, Dragons Lair, Elevator Action,

Evolution, Food Fight, Frogger II: Threeedeep, Gateway to Apshai, Gyruss, Journey, Jumpman, Junior Pac-Man, Keystone Kapers, Major Havoc, Mario Bros, Montezuma's Revenge, Mr. Do's Castle, Munch Mobile, Oil's Well, One-on-One Erving vs. Bird, Pit Stop, Pole Position II, Q*bert's Qubes, Roc'n Rope, Space Shuttle: A Journey Into Space, Spy Hunter, Star Wars: Arcade, Star Wars: Return of the Jedi Death Star Battle, Tapper, Track 'n Field, Up 'n Down.

Email Here to Vote

Alan Hewston can be reached at hewston95@stratos.net and hopes to hear back from you as this list will influence the games reviewed in the Many Faces of Articles of the RetrogamingTimes.

Well, We've Been Waiting

by Mark Scott

Well I have been waiting….and waiting….and waiting….and still I wait. For what you may ask? Well, and stick with me here, I have been waiting for a decent “home computer”.

Now I can hear the gasps of disbelief and horror, and feel the shaking heads. But before you write me off as a complete nutter, let me just raise a few points.

Way back when I were a lad (Yes, its going to be one of those articles), There was a humble and exciting machine called the Commodore 64. And what a marvel it was. Able to play some outstanding games, capable of a fair whack of business type functions, all in one, no upgrades, simple and classic. No screwdrivers, no new motherboards every five seconds, no wanky graphic cards, no extra RAM every week, (64k was it). One seemed to be in every second house. There were Commodore’s in library’s, homes, schools and seemingly everywhere.

Of course having a limited amount of RAM was neither a good nor a bad thing, it simply WAS. This of course caused programmers of the day (Hey to you all…and thank you for some of the best memories of my childhood) to do their absolute best to push the limits of this little machine. Simply check out a game from early in the Commodore’s lifetime, such as Bounty Bob Strikes back from 1985 (great game), to Impossible Mission from 1988 (one of the best produced on the 64) to Mayhem in Monsterland from 1993, late in the life of this machine. Notice the improvement in graphics and in sound. This was the SAME MACHINE!!. No new CPU, no more RAM, no more nothing. This improvement was simply caused by very clever programmers experimenting, trying and learning new and better ways to program for the C64. And a very good job they did to.

Now compare two PC type games, such as Castle Wolfenstein and Medal of Honour , from the late 80’s and 2002 respectively. Ok yes, I grant you the graphics have improved amazingly between the two games. But check the minimum requirements on these games. They have gone from a fairly simple 386 & VGA graphics card to the super systems required today. 700MHz P3 CPU’s, 32MB Graphics cards, Open GL Direct X 8.0, Stereo Sound Cards etc etc etc. and that is MINIMUM Recommended equipment. I simply can not believe that this explosion in hardware requirements is necessary. I am POSITIVE that some one, somewhere could have programmed MOH to run on a much slower machine, but the whole mentality of the PC game world seems to be “write it sloppy, and if its too slow, simply raise the hardware requirements and let the consumer worry about it”. I know personally over the last few years, it became necessary to “upgrade” my PC every six months or so to simply be able to continue to play games. NONE of these upgrades were necessary for any other function of my PC. It was still able to word process, surf the web, play music etc etc etc, this was all about games. I finally had enough of this mindless march and called a time out.

But what about the games consoles I hear you ask? PS1, PS2, Dreamcast, X BOX, Gamecube etc? Well they are simply the “ATARI 2600’s” of the modern era. When I was younger, We had the ATARI, the ColecoVision, the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and fine machines they all were. But they are not “Home Computers” and should not be

thought of as such. We had our Atari's…But we also had our Commodore 64's.

There is also the social aspect to consider. I can remember large amounts of people getting together to write demos, work on games, create music, and yes it must be said, engaging in a bit of software piracy, all on the Commodore 64, and later on the Amiga & Atari ST. These were fairly large gatherings in my little hometown of Perth, Western Australia, so there must have been much bigger ones in the large cities of the world. There was clubs, groups, both official and friendly. There was BBS', home newsletters, friends, foes, music, pictures, games and CREATIVITY. And now it is all gone.

Simply put, I believe it is time for a revival. It is time for another true "Home Computer". One that is capable of approximately PS1 type graphics & sound for games. One that is capable of the most common home requirements i.e. word processing, web surfing etc etc. One that is relatively simple to program, so that people can again LEARN how to do so. One that is relatively cheap (I would imagine in the 500-900 dollar range), uses the current peripherals (Mouse, printer etc etc) and most importantly is an ALL IN ONE UNIT just like the Commodore 64, Amiga, Atari ST and the like. I want a machine that I can be proud of. I want a machine that I can buy and not have it turn into a doorstop or a boat anchor overnight. I want a machine that is supported and programmed for and tweaked and learnt, and yes, god damn it, even loved for a long, long time. I want a machine that I can again be proud of, not a beige box in the corner that I kick every so often.

That is what I am waiting for….

(Words & thoughts by Mark Scott, a 33yo gamer with far, far too many Commodore 64's, Amiga's, Atari 2600's and time. Written whilst I played Syndicate on my Amiga 1200, in Perth, Western Australia. During the day I was a mild mannered Telecommunications Technician, but at night, I collect and enjoy C64, Amiga, Atari 2600, ST, NES, SNES, Coleco, basically just about anything involved with old style gaming. I can be reached at gene.simmons@optusnet.com.au (yes THAT Gene Simmons)

Atari Video Club To Host First Two Spots on Jagfest Tour

Atari Video Club/Jaguar Community United (AVC/JCU) is honored to be hosting the first two US stops on the Jagfest 2003 tour (AKA Jagfest 2003 "Thriving in the Jungle "). First we return to the site of Jagfest 2001, Milwaukee, WI to be part of Goat Store's second annual Midwest Classic gaming event on June 7th, 2003, then we return to the site of Jagfest 1997, Chicago, IL (actually Lombard, IL) as we present The Video Game Summit video game trade show on July 12th, 2003. We will have a special Jagfest section at this show as well.

AVC/JCU chairperson, Daniel Iacovelli has stated: "That he is exited that AVC/JCU is hosting the first two US stops of the tour", He also added: "AVC/JCU has been involved with Jagfest since 1997 in one way or another, either by attending the event it self as we did in 1997,1999,2001 and 2002, or by producing the yearly Jagfest issue of the Atari Zone Fanzine" (AVC was actually one of the organiziners in 1997,2001 and 2002).

Jagfest 2003 "Thriving in the Jungle" will demonstrate the Jaguar is still alive and kicking with numerous hobby game efforts underway nearly a decade after the Jaguar's first release. Each event will feature demos of lost and upcoming games, as well as one or more tournaments with prizes for some of the best Jaguar games out there.

AVC/JCU is need of your help to make these first two US tour stops to be successful.If you would like to help out with Jagfest @ MWC or VGS (or both) please e-mail us at AtariVideoClub@yahoo.com Use the subject: Jagfest Help and in your e-mail please state which location (or both) you are interested in helping, or you can join the Jagfest mailing list which can be done at the Jagfest website (or either at the Jagfest at MWC site or VGS site).

For information on Midwest Classic visit: http://midwestclassic.net
For information on Jagfest at MWC visit: http://avc.atari-users.net/Events/FestMWC.html

For information on Video Game Summit visit: http://avc.atari-users.net/Events/FestVGS.html
Visit the official Jagfest website at http://jagfest.atari.org

Classic Video Game Munchies

While most people think that Pacman lives on energizers alone and Donkey Kong is always chucking barrels at Mario, this is not the case. Video game characters have real lives outside the monitor. And like most people, they like snacks when they are watching videos or hanging out with friends. So we decided to ask some of the classic game characters what type of munchies they like to eat. Here are their responses:

Pacman -"I am quite fond of round items, so I tend to gravitate toward cheese balls."

Donkey Kong -"<translated from Gorilla>I like dried fruit, especially bananas and pineapples. Donkey Kong like healthy food."

Q*Bert -"Not having hands, it makes it tough for me to grab handfuls of snacks, so I need something easy to get ahold of. I like to chow down on a big watermelon. Then I spit the seeds at Coiley. Makes him so mad."

Sinistar -"When I am not devouring puny ships, I like something with a serious crunch. With my highly developed jaws, I crave a strong snack. Peanut brittle is my choice. Beware brittle, I hunger!"

Frogger -"Bet you thought it would be flies, right? Even a frog cannot live on bugs alone. I love jelly beans, especially all the wild flavors they make now. Think they will ever come up with fly flavored jelly beans?"

Pitfall Harry -"A real man needs a real snack. Something that will give me energy, but not bog me down while I am swinging over crocodiles and dodging snakes. I like a good hunk of jerky to chew on as I face my countless obstacles."

Atari 8-Bit Game Reviews

By the Video Game Critic, www.videogamecritic.net

Anyone who's checked out my site knows that I only review console games. Trying to collect and review games for classic and new consoles keeps me busy enough, so I try to avoid the worlds of computer and portable games at all costs. However, I've always have a soft spot for the Atari 8-bit computers. See, an Atari 1200XL was the first computer I ever owned, and it was my first step towards a career as a software engineer. I got so much use out of that thing. I would be up all night programming games on it. I did my homework on it, ran a BBS on it, and of course, played countless excellent video games on it. I really didn't think I'd ever get to relive those old days, until a friend pointed out a console system that was MISSING from my collection: The Atari XE Game System. Yes, I know, the Atari XEGS is really nothing more than a repackaged 8-bit computer, but *technically* it was still a game console (you can rationalize anything). Now that I have an Atari XEGS, I'm reliving those golden days of the early/mid 80s. The XEGS was ill-fated, but being able to run any of the those old Atari 8-bit games gives it an unbeatable library of titles. It's amazing how well most of these have held up. Here are a few reviews from my site:

Castle Wolfenstein (Muse 1983) B+
Most video game players are familiar with Wolfenstein 3D – the precursor to Doom. But how many can say they've played the original Wolfenstein? This 8-bit computer classic is admittedly weak in the graphics department, but excels in terms of pure gameplay. You assume the role of an Allied soldier trying to infiltrate a Nazi fortress. At first glance, the game looks terribly sloppy. The rooms are simple mazes, and the soldiers are poorly rendered in only 4 colors. Some of them actually look like clowns! The animation is choppy and when you run into a wall, it appears as if you're getting electrocuted. But the gameplay is no joke. You can stick up guards a take their belongings. You can search chests for ammunition and supplies, and you'll often stumble upon German food and drink. Just don't drink the alcohol because it will screw up your aim. One thing I hate is how it takes real time to open a chest, although shooting the lock expedites the process. In addition to bullets, you can also find grenades and bulletproof vests. And once you find a Nazi uniform, the dynamics of the game change completely, as you can now walk around freely. Castle Wolfenstein requires a great deal of stealth and technique. German soldiers "shout" when they see something suspicious. Despite the 1983 technology, the game makes an admirable attempt at voice synthesis. The control scheme uses both a joystick and keyboard, which is awkward to say the least. You're better off with a second player manning the keyboard. Despite its primitive nature, Wolfenstein's attention to detail is commendable. For example, if you steal a guard's bullets, he can chase you - but can't shoot. And I appreciate how when you kill guards, they remain dead even when you re-enter the same room. But when really impressed me was the ability to save my place. Even using the 20-year-old 5¼ inch floppy, my game saved without a hitch. Castle Wolfenstein is a landmark video game, and if you can stomach the minimal graphics and awkward control, you're in for a good time.
1 player

Centipede (Atari 1982) C
Usually the 8-bit versions of Atari's games are fairly comparable to their arcade counterparts, but this one really falls short. Perhaps because it was programmed earlier than other versions, it really doesn't compare to the Atari 5200 or Colecovision editions. The graphics are plain, with solid-colored mushrooms. The centipede moves in a somewhat choppy manner, and the sad-looking spider isn't nearly as aggressive as he should be. In general, the game seems too slow and easy. I was able to rack up scores that far exceeded anything I could do in the arcade (over 37K!). Using the Atari 2600 track ball makes the game feel more arcade-like, but it's also more work on your arm. There's only one skill level. Despite the problems, this is still Centipede, one of the best video games of all time. But there are better, more challenging versions out there.
1 player

Karateka (Broderbund 1985) A-
Before the NES unleashed a deluge of ninja games on us, there was Katateka, a stylish title that treated martial arts with the reverence it deserves. I remember watching the kids in high school play this on the Apple II in the computer lab and not letting me have a chance (may those heartless bastards burn in hell!). With mind-blowing graphics and a cinematic flair, Karateka was far ahead of its time. There's an opening text crawl, an elaborate introduction, and several cut-scenes intertwined with the action. In the epic story, you must rescue princess Mariko who is being held in the palace of the evil Akuma. In order to infiltrate the palace, you'll have to defeat a series of guards, one by one, before eventually facing Akuma himself. The fighters are large and fluidly animated, although admittedly slow by today's standards. Each guard has his own unique headgear and fighting style, and in general they get tougher as you progress. The keyboard controls let you punch or kick high, medium, and low. You can run but be sure to stop before you reach a guard or he'll knock you out with one punch. The keyboard control could be more

responsive – your fighter lags behind your commands somewhat. The fights require patience and skill, and can be lengthy because fighters recover health as time passes. While Karateka is basically just a series of one-on-one battles, there a few surprises thrown in, such as Akuma's attacking hawk. And the ending(s) are truly classic. All in all, Karateka is a stellar achievement that stands as a showcase game for the Atari 8-bit system.
1 player

One on One Basketball (Atari 1987) B+
It's been a long time since I've played this one, and I'm happy to say One On One has held up quite well over the years. The characters are a little slow by today's standards, but since you're only playing on half a court, it's not a big deal. You can be Dr. J or Larry Bird, and each player has his own strengths and weaknesses. The graphics are great. The players have large heads but are nicely animated. It's surprising how well the game controls with only one button, considering the latest basketball games use about ten. Tapping the button lets you spin 180 degrees, keeping the ball away from your opponent. Holding the button shoots, and releasing it at the right time is key to nailing shots (a convention used in most basketball games ever since). You can perform some nice turn-around jumpers, fade-aways, or 360 degree jams. Not too many basketball games let you dunk when this game was originally released by Electronic Arts in 1983! The defensive player can steal the ball and block shots. It's great fun and very competitive, especially with two players. A referee who looks like Mario calls penalties like traveling, charging, hacking, and "reaching in" (a little outdated there). Extra features include automatic instant replays and the ability to shatter the backboard. That's right, and when the backboard is broken, a robot with a broom shows up and screams profanity at the players (I'm exaggerating a bit). Another thing I love about One on One is its extensive options menu. You can select between four skill levels and set various rules. This game was, and is still, all that!
1 or 2 players

Frogger (Parker Bros. 1983) A-
Given the fact that this is basically the same game as the Atari 5200 version, why did this one score so much higher? Because you can actually control your friggin' frog, that's why! I still have painful flashbacks of trying to play Frogger with a Atari 5200 controller, despite trying to block it out of my mind. Fortunately on an Atari 8-bit system you can just grab your favorite Atari 2600 joystick and have a grand old time. The arcade-style graphics won me over in a big way, especially those big, crazy looking cars. Too bad the in-game melody

of the original game is missing or this would have been the ultimate Frogger. There are two difficulty settings, and the fast one is a worthy challenge that kept me coming back for continual punishment. The turtles dive quickly, and the game is rather unforgiving when you try to jump onto the very edge of the a log. But thanks to its simple yet engrossing gameplay, Frogger remains a timeless classic.
1 or 2 players

Flight Simulator II (Atari/SubLogic 1987) D-
Originally released for the Atari 8-bit computers by SubLogic in 1984, this was one of the three pack-in games for the Atari XE game system. It's understandable why Flight Simulator II (FS2) was selected; it utilized the keyboard and made the package look more sophisticated as a whole. When first released in 1984, this program was certainly impressive. The physics and aircraft control are extremely realistic, and you can fly over four real areas of the United States. Taking off is easier than one would expect. You basically just set your flaps and apply throttle, and the plane takes off automatically. But once you reach the proper altitude, you begin to notice just how incredibly boring this whole affair is. There's really not much to see besides a few lines on the ground. If you're lucky, you'll fly over some wireframe buildings, but there aren't many of these. There's not a whole lot to do either. While there's an impressive array of gauges and controls, you won't even need most of them. Besides using most of the keyboard, FS2 uses the joystick which is terribly unresponsive. The plane's movements lag far beyond your joystick commands, making you prone to oversteering. FS2 comes with two 90-page highly technical manuals. The Operations Manual contains plenty of good information but is poorly organized. The second book contains all kinds of crazy flight physics information and diagrams which you'll never need to know. Certain games do not age well, and I think flight simulators fall into that category. I bet few people who bought the XE game system ever completed an entire flight. Even the WWI flying ace variation is sleep inducing.
1 player

Want to read more? I have over 1700 reviews on my site! Check it out
www.videogamecritic.net

Letters to the Editor

Bring me your questions, your comments, your insight and I will do my best to answer them. Time once again to dig into the mailbag and read a few letters. Enjoy.

I really like horror games like Resident Evil, but are there any cool horror games on the old systems?

If the classic systems are considered old, then I must be old since I was around when they were first introduced. Sigh...what a terrible way to find out that you are old. Anyway, there are a handful of horror games on classic systems, but none even come close to today's games. A game like Haunted House for the Atari 2600 or Dracula for the Intellivision would seem pretty tame compared to today's games. About the only games with any real horror would be "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" and "Halloween" for the Atari 2600 and even these are very tame next to Resident Evil or Silent Hill. The only other classic game would be the classic for the Commodore 64, "Forbidden Forest". With the gory deaths (like the spider chewing on your head and the blood draining down) and dramatic music, it may give you some excitement.

There seems to be alot of interest in retrogaming now, but how long do you think it will last? Is it a fad like Beanie Babies or what?

Depends on how you want to look at it. If you are looking from an investment standpoint, then I think video games, at least the classic ones (meaning before Nintendo) have pretty much peaked. The prices have leveled off and some have even come down. With the exception of the ultra rare games, most the rest have leveled. But the interest from a fan's perspective is just really taking off. Look at the increased attendance at the two big shows (CGE and Phillyclassic). Look at the amount of people doing homebrew games. There is a big demand for classic games and I think that will remain for quite some time. But there will come a day when the interest does wane, especially as systems and carts become next to impossible to find. But classic games are not a fad. They are a vital part of the history and the lore of the video game industry as a whole and preserving them is a good way for future generations to see the roots of the industry.

COMMERCIAL VAULT

by Adam King

Greetings, gamers and welcome to a special edition of the Vault. Last issue Tom reviewed Activison Anthology for the PlayStation 2. Let me add that is is a must-have disc for all retrogamers. One of the neat things is that you can unlock old Activision television ads. This month I'm presenting three of those ads, as well as how to discover them.

River Raid

Our first ad is for River Raid, one of my favorite 2600 games. For this spot we're trated to some guys in a warroom guiding the player down the river.

"We have no choice, he can't turn back."
"River Raid, target 039er."
"Roger, Control."
"Fuel critical, sir."
"Choppers at 3 o'clock."
"Roger. I copy."
"Fighters closing. Should I direct, sir?"
"No, he'll decide that."
"Fuel critical, sir."
"HE KNOWS THAT!"
"He's almost to the East Canyon."
"NEGATIVE! It'S A TRAP! RIVER RAID, CAN YOU MAKE IT!"
Finally the announcer comes on, saying, "It's only a game. River Raid, for the Atari Video Computer System, Designed by Carol Shaw for Activision."

"Watch me steer this plane up the river."

All this over a simple shooter?

"Sir what if he fails to complete the mission?"

"Don't worry; he still has two planes left."

To unlock the commercial, you need to score 8,000 points on Game 1. Also Alan Hewston covered the Many Faces of River Raid in Issue 40.

Stampede

This ad, for Stampede, features two cowboy brothers arguing over who can handle playing the Stampede video game. I should mention they're play their VCS outdoors.

"I've been driving cattle most of my natural life and you're tellin' me I can't handle a Stampede?"
"Not this one, Buck."
"Stampede, by Activision, for your Atari Game System. One of the toughest game around, Stampede is more than expert ropin' and ridin'. It's a test of strategy and skill."
The brothers continue playing, until their mother calls them inside.
"Luke, Buck, you boys come in now."
"Awww, Ma!"
"Stampede, by Activision."

"Betcha I'm a better virtual cowboy."

"Don't be a backseat wrangler."

Shouldn't they be playing that inside the cabin?

"Aww, do we have to come in now?"

To unlock this commercial, you need 1,000 points on Game 3.

Kaboom!
Our last ad is for Kaboom. Here we find a guy on a rooftop, dressed in stripes and threatening to throw bombs off the roof. I'm guessing he's supposed the be the Mad Bomber.

"So ya think yer fast enough to be the Mad Bomber? I don't think so."
"Kaboom! By Activision. Plug this cartridge into your Atari Video Game System, and get ready to handle high explosives. Don't sneeze, don't even blink, 'cause the faster you get, the faster he gets."
"And if you miss.."
"KABOOM! By Activision!"

I'M supposed to be afraid of *this* guy?

"You caught my bombs. Dang!"

"Something to remember me by?

To unlock this ad, score at least 150 points.

That's it for now, but now I want to address something. Last month I mention the possibility of producing a CD-Rom compilation of all the television ads. I have gotten some feedback on that, but I would like more before I decide anything. If you're interested in a Commercial Vault CD, contact me at Hal_3000@rocketmail.com and let me know you want it. Until next month, keep gaming!

What About A Tank Controller?

By Fred Wagaman

“Why I in my day, we had Combat. That was all the tank fightin’ we need by gum! And we liked it ! Silly young-uns…” The old man’s voice trailed off as he faded back to sleep.

Grandpa must have caught a glimpse of one of the newest tank games.

In the beginning, there was Combat. Target shooting against a moving opponent. They could have just as easily used space ships or gunslingers. (Wait a second ! They did !) But really, it didn’t matter what it was. It was 2 things trying to shoot each other.

Space Wars, Artillery Duel, et al had the 2 dimensional aspect to the game. You were moving up and down, left and right or lofting things vertically, but never all at the same time.

First person shooters began to offer us a world where we could move in 3D. Not at first mind you, but the games eventually opened up the “up and down” aspect of the game to go with left/right and forward/backward.

But even then, there was something missing. We were running around in tanks or with rifles and we were still using a control pad or keyboard or mouse. Action just wasn’t natural. Just as you couldn’t really operate a tank with a joystick and a single button (ala Combat), you couldn’t do it with a PS2 pad either.

Racing games have their steering wheels. Gun games have their guns. Even some baseball games can use a bat controller. There are even train controllers modeled after real passenger train controllers for driving trains. Why hasn’t there ever been a controller for driving a tank ?

There wasn’t. Until this came along…

The Steel Battalion Controller.

Steel Battalion is an XBox game where you drive a tank. What is referred to in the game as a “Vertical Tank” (or VT). Two joysticks, a speed lever, a dial, 40 buttons and 3 foot pedals. This is a controller that would closely model a real Mech controller, if such a thing existed.

I do not intend to review the game here. Suffice it to say it is pretty good.

Ahh, but the controller.

When you activate the game, and make your selection, you start in a hanger. There is a button to close your hatch, another to link in fuel, some switches to start the fuel and other necessities flowing. And a “Start” button. Not the start the game, but to start your tank. As you do, the on-screen, heads up display goes through a boot-up routine. All the lights on the controller flash as your tank gets ready to go. That’s right. The buttons flash. Usually

when you need to use them. There are buttons for communication as well as a dial to change the frequency. There is a button for activating the windshield wipers. How cool is that ! And, what may be the most important button of all, the “Eject” button. Placed under a cover so you do not accidentally activate it in the upper right hand position of the controller, the eject button is critical to your game. If your VT is severely damaged and you do not eject and your character dies, it is game over. Your save file to that point is cleared and you must start over from the beginning if the game. Yikes.

Sure. Some of the buttons are not that important. But it is still cool to have them.

What will make this even better is a rumored on-line version of the game coming out next. Imagine the concept of 10 VTs per side marching their way through an urban landscape. You’re teammates maybe be from around the world, but they are communicating with you just as they would in the tank right next to you.

No wonder grandpa was complaining. He’s jealous.

Fred has been playing games for over 25 years and actively collecting them for almost 15. The 2500 + (he thinks) games that he has takes up most of his home office and living room. He lives in Denver, PA with his understanding wife Jennie, his 7 year-old, Smash Brothers Melee-playing son, Max and his 3 year-old, 4th player. If anyone has some extra time for sale, he’s interested. He can be contacted at fcw3@mail.ptd.net

The Many Faces of...Space Shuttle: A Journey Into Space

by Alan Hewston

As a tribute to the crews and the families of both the STS-107, Columbia mission, and STS 51-L, Challenger mission, we bring you Steve Kitchen’s Space Shuttle: A Journey into Space, by Activision. Several months ago I made plans to review this game early in 2003 as a 20th anniversary tribute for this 1983 game. As a member of the NASA team for 16 years, there was no way that I was going to skip over or postpone this title. I am proud to work for the US space program, despite many failures and some tragedy and hope that my personal perspective will make this review a little better. I’ve worked with and met several astronauts over the years and hope that this review will both give you a good reason to try (again) this most excellent simulation, and help you to appreciate the hard work and sacrifice that the astronauts, and cosmonauts too, make for the “Benefit of all Mankind”. I’ve actually been inside of the Space Shuttle Discovery’s cargo bay, while atop pad 39 B, just a few months prior to the Sept.1993 launch of the STS 51 (not 51-L) mission. The primary cargo for STS 51 was the satellite that I worked with then, the Advanced Communications Technology Satellite, which was successfully delivered into a stable parking orbit. The TOS upper stage booster energized ACTS into a much higher, geosynchronous transfer orbit. An apogee kick motor then nearly circularized the 24 hour orbit, where it lasted for the duration of its 3 year experimentation mission, and several years thereafter. I hope that none of our readers are offended by this selection, given the recent tragedy. Now onto the review.

If you crave playing shoot ‘em up video games and getting high scores, then this simulation is not for you. Here, you rise above all of that violence and shooting and come to peace with the Earth - in fact you rise above indeed, up into space, above everyone on Earth. As the commander of the Space Transportation System (STS) 101, your mission is to recover an errant Earth-orbiting satellite. Actually, you perform the combined tasks of the pilot and mission commander. There are no mission specialists and no experiments performed as part of the simulation, only those dynamic phases common to all space shuttle missions. But the highlight of the mission is possibly the most exciting and challenging of all shuttle tasks, that of a satellite rendezvous. You take control of the vehicle and several of its controls, but most importantly you wield the most prized of all joysticks - that of the Orbiter. Use your eyes, ears and the computers displays to size up the situation and properly control the vehicle. Counteract and maneuver through all disturbances during Launch (& ascent), Stabilizing Orbit (& orbital rendezvous), Docking, De-orbit Burn, Re-entry, Final Approach (& landing). I dare-say that this highly sophisticated simulation was the ultimate for the Atari 2600 programming and probably

marked the peak of the classic, “joystick era”. “Space Shuttle” literally pushed the envelope of how much data and simulation parameters can be crammed into one program and still be challenging and fun at the same time. So throttle that engine to 100 percent and then “press (on) to MECO” and see what this baby can do. Sure, you may become frustrated at first, but you’ll definitely get an appreciation of how complex a machine the Space Shuttle was and still is, not to mention you’ll experience in a small way how demanding the training, reflexes and skills are required for our astronaut heroes. They are truly the cream of the crop and we salute them!

Arcade: None, first on Atari 2600 (’83 Steve Kitchen)

Home versions: all by Activison

Atari 8 bit & 5200 (’84 Bob Henderson & Steve Kitchen), Commodore 64 (‘84) & Apple II (’85 Tim Wilson).

Doesn’t count: (‘92, ST/AMI, Virgin) by Ian Martin, with Andy Craven & James Fisher.

Home Version Similarities - all versions have: three game options to play out the mission 1) with unlimited fuel & almost no way to abort the mission – much like a demo, 2) unlimited fuel, but any severe deviation from the plan and the mission will abort, and finally, 3) you are in complete control every step of the way and must match the mission profile very closely. Each version came packaged with a quick reference card and an extensive flight manual; the on-screen displays show most parameters, save a few that are combined into one display and must be toggled through; when any thruster or engine is fired, your combined display will immediately show the parameter affected by this activity; the cockpit windows show the Florida clouds prior to launch, flashes of color when engine activity changes, the stars through varying thickness of atmosphere, the edge of the Earth scrolling along and at times, the satellite that you are trying to rendezvous with, the darkness and data dropouts upon re-entry, the mountains of the California desert during the approach, and the runway at Edward’s Air Force base. The flight manual is very detailed and provides stat codes telling what the errant condition is, and solutions to overcoming most problems.

Additional home version elements, with those Missing In Action (MIA) <listed here>: the extremely useful pause feature <2600> allows one to get a grasp on the situation, search the manuals for the error code, or plan what to do next; an overlay to place on the keypad and/or console <AP2, 8 bit & C64 not sure if these all had overlays>; all non-joystick commands and toggling the combined display are executed by a distinct keypad or keystroke or display toggle <2600 uses all console switches - some are combined>, finally, a chance to earn one of two Space Shuttle Activision patches <APII & C64 manuals don’t mention this>.

<These are among the most deserved patches Activision ever offered us>

Have Nots: Atari 2600 (39)

My first reaction was the challenge of three axis control during ascent is awesome. The programming challenge to write such a simulation on a 2600 was nearly mind-boggling and the research, and play-testing hours must have been astounding, probably the most ever for a 2600 game. The Gameplay really show it and is awesome on all versions (10). There is a toggle switch for every control function needed (albeit a few are shared). The three game options are great for slowly learning the game and minimize the frustration. The transitions from one mission stage to another are flawless. The physics are applied through a full 6-DOF (6 Degrees of Freedom – ie 3 axes of translation & rotation) dynamic model, thus providing a complete orbit and attitude control simulation. This is both highly effective and the action occurs fast, if not instantaneously! The duration of each phase is

well timed (condensed, not in real-time) to keep it realistic, without being boring. The addictiveness is average (5), hurt by the significant complexity of the simulation, time needed to learn how to play and tedious nature of the multitude of tasks and sometimes simultaneous tasks at hand. There is no pause button – which unfortunately would help an awful lot. All the others versions have a pause and because of its value, I consider it worth 2 points.

I expect that most folks either love or hate the simulation due to its complexity and possibly never give it a second look (not just the 2600, but any version). So having a pause feature to stop and re-read the manual is critical. In fact, you will not get very far unless you study the manual and practice playing. If this doesn't sound like your type of pastime, then play game 1 once and then put it to rest n your collection.

There are several events, controls and displays that require interpretation and familiarity with, in order for you to have any success. A possible suggestion is to play another version first, that has a pause. I'm pretty sure that you will enjoy this version more once you have learned the basics. Graphics are superb (9) with the visual effects of the launch vibration very realistic. Now where is that Atari 2600 rumble controller? Sound is respectable (6), for a simulation, but there is no motivational music and few aesthetically pleasing audio effects. The Controls are great (9) and the joysticks are responsive on all versions. The use of the controllers to perform the simultaneous 3-axis orbit/attitude control, left/right up/down and fire button on/off are brilliant. Of course I started my career as an Attitude Control Engineer, so go figure I'd be impressed. Using the 2600 switches for multiple tasks and switches is a little harder to do on this version. The chance of powering off, or upsetting the system is increased, but then there are fewer switches to worry about as well. The biggest limitation which I did not penalize was that it takes longer to toggle through the all the combined display parameters than on the computer versions. The cart is semi-rare and the manual and overlays even harder to find. Fortunately all of the manuals and pictures of the overlays can be found and re-printed, thanks to sites such as Atariage.com. It will also help significantly for you to look at the screen shots while you are reading (heh heh studying) the manual to become a pilot.

Have Nots: Apple II (39)

My first reaction was the Sound bytes - it is weak (4), primarily due to the AP2 internal speakers. But the sound is not that great on any version. Gameplay, however, is awesome on all versions (10). The Addictiveness is very good (7) helped by the pause <esc> button. The Graphics are outstanding (9), but has a little less detail than the medal winners, and too much red. The Controls are well done (9), but, as is the case for all versions – using the stick and several buttons at nearly the same time is awkward. The AP2 has additional keyboard controls to toggle between joystick and all-keyboard maneuvers and some keystrokes that will change the polarity of the joystick control axes. This game is only found on diskette. The computer controls are: <L> to start the Launch clock, <E> for Engines, <Space Bar> to cycle through the displays, <C> for Cargo bay doors, <G> for landing Gear, <T> for Translational thrusters, and <R> for Rotational thrusters.

Apple II disk and manual.

Bronze Medal: Atari 5200 (41)
My first reaction is “Who’d want to fly the Space Shuttle with a 5200 controller?”. Gameplay is awesome on all versions (10). The Addictiveness is very good (7) helped by the pause <pause> button. Graphics are a work of art (10). Sound is good (6). The Controls are impressive (8), but make sure to locate and print out a copy of the 5200 overlay. All functions are combined onto the keypad, making it more organized and easier to access than the computer keyboards, but the buttons are very small. When using all the buttons, which this game does, it is a little easier to make mistakes. The only real drawback is those darn 5200 analog sticks, making it difficult to get precise control. Going ONLY 1 direction at a time is not easy and leads to an increased amount of thruster firings than needed – wasting more fuel and time. I did try the track ball, the Wico sticks and my new Masterplay Interface, but having 2 controllers, one of which must be the small 5200 keypads, is still worse than the computer keyboard with a separate 2600 standard joystick. So everything I tried seemed just a little worse than the other versions. 5200 fans who can manipulate those tiny keypad buttons error-free, and handle the analog stick should have no problem giving the 5200 the gold medal, or at least a share.

Gold Medal: Atari 8 bit & Commodore 64 (42)
Another tie this month, and the 5200 is just barely third.

Atari 8 bit:
My first reaction was that yes, this is exactly the same version as the 5200, so nearly every score will apply as is mentioned above. The only difference is the keyboard and the joystick for controls. The Controls are well-done (9) and there’s no need to put off this version, like the 5200 - unless your keyboard is bad. This version is somewhat hard to find on cart, but is also on disk. The pause is the <esc> key.

Commodore 64:
My first reaction, having played this version first (years ago) – “was this is the simulator they did on the 2600?”. How could they possibly make it any good there? But Activision did! The Gameplay is awesome (10) on all versions. Addictiveness is very good (7) with a pause <Commodore key> aka <C=>. The Graphics are a work of art (10) perhaps better than the Atari 8 bit/5200. Sound is decent (6). The Controls are well done (9) – same comments as all others. This version is probably the most common, found on both cart and disk. Oddly enough, I could not find the manual online, but it matches most of the Atari 8 bit & AP2 controls/commands, but use <F3> = main engine toggle, <F5> = cargo bay door. <F7> = landing gear toggle. I recommend this version only because the systems are more plentiful to find.

Unfortunately, PC4 preparation and projects have cut short my PT (playing time) for this review. I don’t think that I missed anything significant - but usually have become more

skillful on all versions of these reviews. Pitfall Harry hopes to see you at PC4 - stop by my table and say hello, and take a picture in the game of “Pac-Man”. Special thanks go to Tom McLaren who let me borrow his original Apple II diskette & manual - check out Tom’s Apple stuff at: http://www.digitaldinos.com/. Also thanks to our editor, Tom who saved and traded me the Space Shuttle 5200 cart, manual and reference card a few years ago.

Come back next month for more 20th anniv. tributes of game(s) from 1983 with the Many Faces of “Oil’s Well” (CV, C64, Atari 8 bit & Apple II) & if I can find the time, “Keystone Kapers” (2600, 5200, Atari 8 bit & CV). Alan Hewston is an Aerospace Engineer who works for the NASA John H. Glenn Research Center and when not working for the International Space Station - microgravity control and disturbance predictions can be contacted at: Hewston95@stratos.net or http://my.stratos.net/~hewston95/Hewston_vg.html

Stardate 7800

by Adam King

SD7800 is back after a one month hiatus. Well thus far we've covered classic arcade games, modern arcade games, computer ports and sports titles. You're probably wondering "That's all well and good, but aren't there any ORIGINAL games on the ProSystem?" Believe it or not there were several titles made specifically for the 7800. Let's take a look, shall we?

Scrapyard Dog

We first start out with this platform title, which was later ported over to the Lynx. Nintendo had Super Mario Bros, Sega had Alex Kidd, and Atari has - a funny looking guy with a huge nose! Specifically, Louie, the owner of the junkyard. One day he comes back from lunch and finds his faithful dog, Scraps, is missing. He then receives a call from the dognappers, demanding the deed to Louie's junkyard, or else. Instead of backing down, Louie decides to get his pooch back the only way he knows how: by going through the city and finding the dognappers. This came has six levels, with the first five having three stages each. Louie has a certain amount of time to reach the end of each level, but standing in his way is an assortment of enemies and obstacles, including rats, tires, basketballs, and bombarding birds. Louie can battle them by flinging cans or by jumping on them. He starts with a shield that can absorb one hit, but if Louie is caught without a shield, he's done for. Each level also has several shops. There Louie can recycle cans for cash, and can use the cash to buy weapons and shields.

The graphics are decent, with okay backgrounds and decent characters. The sounds have good effects, but the music gets a little too cartoonish. The controls work fine, though it can be hard to determine what you can or can't land on. The gameplay is challenging, but many parts do get frustrating, especially with all the obstacles flying through the air. Still this game is addicting, and provides a decent platformer for the 7800. Overall, this game isn't the greatest, but it's not totally down in the dumps.

Score: 7/10

Planet Smashers

Now we move on to a vertical shooter, which is said to be the prequel to Alien Brigade. Once again aliens are attacking the Earth, and guess who gets to go out and battle them. Yep, you, the guy piloting the lone ship against an army of Planet Smashers through seven levels of space shooting action. When you start out, your ship is pretty much weak, but shooting several enemies yields you capsules that power up your weapons, shields, and even gives you a cloaking device, making your ship temporarily invisible. However if you let any enemies slip by you they take a chunk out of the Earth's shield. You can also gather three warp gems. Once you have all three you zoom to the boss of the level. The game is over when you lose all your lives or if the Earth completely looses it's shield.

As far as vertical shooters go, this one isn't too different from what we've seen before, though it still provides some enjoyment. The graphics are decent, with a scrolling starfield

and okay enemies. The sounds are just bleah, with no music except for the opening theme, and only three sound effects. The sad thing is the box said there was amazing sound effects. The controls work pretty well, letting you move along easily. Planet Smashers does bring some unique things to the genre, namely the cloaking ability, the warp gems, and the Earth Shield, tha keep it from being just another shooter. Overall, not the greatest, but still a fairly decent title.

Score: 6/10

Dark Chambers
We finish up with an exploration game. It's pretty obvious this cart was heavily inspired by Gauntlet. You (and a friend) play a treasure hunter, who's searching for gems in 26 levels (from A to Z). The object of each level is to make it to the ladder at the end, grabbing any treasures or items along the way. As you may have guessed, ghouls and creatures are out to hunt you. You cam shoot them, which will cause them to change into weaker monsters.

One things' for sure: this game is NO Gauntlet. The graphics consist of small sprites and hardly any variety in the mazes. There's no music and weak sound effects. The worst part is this game is just boring. You hardly run into more than twelve guys at once, and they're easily dispatched, so there's no suspense. There's also alot of tedious backtracking, and lastly, if you do get past level Z, you just start over at a higher difficulty level. A good cure for insomnia, but otherwise stay out of this dungeon. One of the worst on the 7800.

Score: 2/10

So we could say that the Atari of the late 80s didn't have the magic of the early 80s, based on what I've reviewed this month. Maybe if Atari put out better original stuff, they could have competed with Nintendo and Sega (Gee I sure say that a lot).

Sites of the Month

We search high, we search low, we look everywhere to find the sites that you want to see. This month offers two more fun sites to enjoy. Stop by and see what they offer and let them know that you saw them in Retrogaming Times.

Atari Commercials
Sure there are only a handful up, but they are fun to view and the price is right, free! Who knows, you may even see Adam do these in an upcoming issue. Click below to check these out:

http://trident.mcs.kent.edu/~clisowsk/8bit/movies.html

Handheld Games Museum
Not sure if I mention this site before or not (after 60+ issues, the brain is a bit fuzzy and I am too lazy to look back), but it is well worth mentioning again. This site has a ton and I do mean a ton of information on just about every handheld ever created. From the Coleco ones to the Mattel ones to the obscure ones. If you want more information about a handheld, then this site is for you. Click below to check it out:

http://users2.ev1.net/~rik1138/index.html

Conclusion

What do you know, I actually put an issue out on time! Raise your hands and cheer! Hopefully it will be the start of a new streak or it could be a mirage in the desert. You may notice some ads in the newsletter. Yes, it is my way to raise a bit of money towards legal fees. My prior attempt was not very successful, though I would like to take the time to personally thank the handful of people who did contribute, the money has been used for the ongoing battle (though thankfully it is on hiatus right now as the school system tries to put together a plan). Will this be more successful? Who knows, but a man must try.

Back to video games, if you are headed to Phillyclassic, stop by my stand and say hello. I will be selling a ton of stuff. And stay for all three days as I think it will be worth your while. I will end with hope that the war ends quickly and some peace returns to the world.

-Tom Zjaba

(This issue done while listening to Oasis, Carly Simon, David Bowie and Chicago). (Favorite game of the moment is Everblue 2, a very different and fun game for the Playstation 2. If you are looking for something different, it is worth the bargain price of $29.99).