Retro Times **4**

The Newsletter for the Retro Gamer in All of Us

December 1997

Introduction

Time for another issue of Retro Times, the new classic gaming newsletter. I am going to take this time to thank all the people who took the time to respond to the last issue. After the first issue of Retro Times, I received no feedback. After the second issue, I received three emails. After the third issue, whammo, over a dozen responses and more still coming in! And what did most people ask for? Longer issues! They wanted more. Well, I'm not one to not give the public what they want, so I will do my darndest to increase the size. I will be adding new features and giving you more to read. Like always, I am open to submissions (hint! hint!). So here we go with another issue, hope you enjoy it!

After Christmas and the Intellivision

When I was a teenager (around 1982), I used to do comic shows with my father and uncle. There was this one show that was held at the Chapel Hill Mall, the week after Christmas. It was a five day show (some real bright planning) and I was usually asked to attend all the days. My cousin Dave used to come along and we were close to the same age, so we hung out. After the first day, we had seen all the dealers tables about ten times and did a lifetime of window shopping. So we became bored, really bored. That was until we found a Sears that had an Intellivision set up for customers to play. So many hours that week were spent in heated battles of Auto Racing, Sea Battle and especially Baseball. We literally spent hours playing this game. Sometimes against each other, sometimes against other customers. We always made sure to let others play and usually went easy on them. Well, to make a long story short, we came back at the end of the week to play one more game before we had to pack and leave. As the game progressed for the world championship, I overheard a salesman talking to a manager behind us. This was a salesman we had befriended and even played against. The manager was saying something like "Those darn kids are back again. Why don't you do something to get rid of them." The salesman responded, "Get rid of them? Are you kidding, I am sorry to see them leave. Do you have any idea how many Intellivisions they sold over the week?". The salesman then pointed to a half empty display. While I don't know the exact number of units we helped sell, I know it was enough for them to allow us to keep playing. At the time, I didn't realize that I was an ambassador for Mattel and the Intellivision. But I am glad to know that I did my little bit to help the success of the system.

What's the big deal with the Vectrex?

When you get into classic gaming, one of the first things you will learn is how coveted the Vectrex is. You know, the black and white system that came with its own screen. You will see them sell for more than any other system. And you will see quite a few people looking for one. But is the Vectrex all it is cracked up to be or it the most overhyped classic system? Well, you will have to answer that one for yourself, but I personally think it is a bit overhyped. Sure the system is cool, with some of the best joysticks around. Sure you have the cool vector graphics. Sure John Dondazilla makes some awesome games for the system. But is it worth the price (which is still eons less than the original asking price)? Well, I personally don't think so. First and foremost, you have one of the smallest game libraries around and only a handful of great games among them. Every time I own one (I have owned 5 of them), I play it for about a month and find that I only play about five games and that is about it. Without John Dondazilla's great Patriot game, I wouldn't have spent quite so much time. Now things may be different if I owned the very rare and very expensive 3D Imager. I would like to play 3D Coaster and 3D Minestorm, but I am not going to dish out that much money. While the system is quite good, it never had a chance to really shine. If it would have lasted a few more years, maybe it would have more great games to play. Don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking the system. It was innovative for the time and still is quite playable. It is just that a system is only as good as the games for it and this is the Achilles' heel of the Vectrex. So before you buy a Vectrex, I recommend trying the emulator first. Sure it is a neat addition to a collection, but it is a limited one.

A Deeper Look At...

A Deeper Look at Keystone Kapers

One of the new features in the newsletter will be to review some older games. But unlike my regular reviews, I am going to go deeper into it and really get into the game. Let me know what you think of it.

I still remember how excited I was when I first played Keystone Kapers. I was going to be the long arm of the law and do my best to capture those dastardly crooks. I liked the clean graphics and the neat little map that showed where the crook was. I remember how the game kept me coming back to see what was on the next level. The bouncing balls, the speeding shopping carts, the deadly planes. Every new obstacle was a new challenge. Even when they just added faster carts and two radios, it was the small glimmer of hope that something different was just a board away. Sure it wasn't, but us kids had faith and that was enough to keep us going.

I quickly learned some strategies to improve my scores. It didn't take long to figure out when to duck from the plane or to keep an eye on upper levels for those two radio rooms (still gets me to this day). I soon learned that an elevator must be plotted out, so the crook doesn't run away. I usually just ran it out. I was young and full of energy!

This is one game that I recommend to anyone to add to their collection. It is fast, fun and quite colorful. Plus, you have a positive role model for the lead character and we all know that the industry needs more of that. My only gripe is that the Coleco version is only slightly better than the 2600 version. The graphics were spruced up a bit, but no extras. Oh well, guess they didn't want to ruin a good thing.

A Deeper Look at Minestorm

While many people may argue with the next two statements, I stand firmly behind them. First, Minestorm for the Vectrex is the best Asteroids clone out there, bar none. Heck, I'll take it over the original. Secondly, it is the best pack-in (or built-in as is the case) game on any classic system and probably any system. The biggest competition would be Donkey Kong for the Coleco and I think this has a lot more in terms of repeat gameplay.

For the people who aren't familiar with Minestorm (considering the rarity of the Vectrex, I would say a few), it is an Asteroids clone. But much like KC Munchkin for the Odyssey II, it doesn't just clone a classic game. Rather it surpasses it. Where in Asteroids you just keep shooting rocks into teeny tiny rocks and get bothered by an occasional flying saucer, until you either die or get tired of it. But in Minestorm, the rocks are more like ships. Each wave brings on new challenges. First it is just rocks, same as Asteroids. But the second level, the rocks send back a deadly fireball when shot. So, there goes the just keep shooting everything in site strategy. If you do that, you will be bombarded by fireballs. Talk about a quick game, you will be over faster than Ross Perot's presidential race. When the third level begins, you will notice a different kind of rock, one that follows you like a love starved puppy. But this isn't no pet, rather it is a tracking ship and you are the target. Get past this and you get a homing, fireball spewing ship that is a real pain in the keister. Get the idea. Plus, there is the typical annoying ship that gets in your way. When you get to higher levels, all hell breaks loose.

One of the best features of this game is that it was made for the Vectrex joystick. Just like the arcade game that inspired it, this game only uses buttons. Two of them move you, one left and the other right. Another button shoots and the last one is your hyperspace. It is a game like this that really makes you appreciate the Vectrex joystick, still my favorite of the classic joysticks. You can really get into a game and the controls are great. So you only have yourself to blame if you do bad. Much nicer than the joystick moving version on the Atari 2600.

Another thing you will notice is that you don't need color for this game. Like Asteroids at the arcades, this game is fine in black and white. I usually leave off the packed in color screen. It is more annoying than anything else. Some classic games, like classic movies are just better in black and white. I always thought the color screens were a little lame. If Vectrex wanted to do color, they should have done it. For the high price you were paying for the machine when it first came out, they should have given you color. I'm sure someone will email me with the specific costs of color versus black and white in the eighties, but I don't care. There was a color version in the planning stages, but the market crash put the kibosh on that. Too bad, cause I would have liked to see some of the games in color. Would have been interesting. To finish this, Minestorm was and still is a great game. It is the best Asteroids version out there and truly showcased how great a system the Vectrex was and could have been, given the time for more software to be developed.

Question of the Month

Last month we actually had some responses to our question of the month. A total of three responses, including one for a new version of Yar's Revenge, one for a 3D version of Space Invaders (yow!) and one for an updated version of Adventure. All were quite interesting and I enjoyed them. But now onto this month's question.

Which Unreleased game would you like to have been released?

This was a toughie for me as there are so many games I would have liked to see finished. Parker Bros alone had a bunch (Incredible Hulk, Lord of the Rings and even McDonalds). But after some consideration, I would probably say the one game I would really have liked to play is.....Tunnels & Trolls for the Colecovision. I have seen the opening screen and it intrigued me. Plus, this was the game I wanted most when I first got my Colecovision and saw the ad for it on the back of the box. I remember bothering the local stores month after month for the game. I really wanted it! I was a huge Dungeons & Dragons fan and any game like it was enough to get me interested. But, it never came out. A matter of fact, many of the games on the back of the Coleco box were never released. Talk about a tease of a company. At least we had the Asphaii game for the Coleco to fill the void. We all know how dull Venture got after awhile.

I'm Finally MAMEing it!

After months of trying to figure this crazy thing out, I'm finally playing MAME (multiple arcade machine emulator). After months of hearing people bragging about how great it is, I can finally join in the fun. And what fun it is! Now games like Discs of Tron, Bagman and Satan's Hollow are available to me after years of just remembering playing them. Plus, I can play full versions of games like Congo Bongo. Is this a great company or what? For anyone who hasn't tried it, I recommend it! You can go to the Digital Press Online (http://digitpress.com) for easy directions on installing and running the system. With over 250 games to try, you will have weeks if not months of fun. Look for some reviews of the games in future issues of Retro Times. Until then, I will be playing....err, reviewing the games.

Video Game Reviews

Once again I will review a few of the newer games that are based on classic games. Hope you enjoy them!

Frogger (Grade C+)-Since everyone else has made a comeback, I guess the Froggster deserves a facelift. The best level I played was the one that was based on the original game. While Frogger (the frog) looks a bit odd, the rest of the game looks quite sharp. The main problems with the game is that the controls are a bit buggy. Takes a bit to get used to. Also, most of the new levels aren't well thought out. Maybe a brief intro to each level telling you what the goal is would help. The new features are nothing to crow about. Overall, it is a good attempt, but once again it is a case of technology ahead of a gameplay.

Microsoft Arcade Pack #1 (Grade B+)-I needed a new mouse (my four year old is rough on it) and went to the store to buy one. As I was looking, I saw the Microsoft one that was bundled with Arcade #1 for $30.00. As I looked and saw the joystick alone goes for $30.00 or the game separate was $25.00. While math wasn't my strongest subject (maybe a little more Math Grand Prix could have cured this), I know a good deal when I see one. So I bought it and went home and tried the disk. Not a bad little package. You get Asteroids, Centipede, Tempest, Battlezone, and Missile Command. All the games played as I remembered them and there was even some bonus info about the games. Would I have paid full price for it? I doubt it, especially with MAME, but as a throw-in it is quite a deal.

Different Eras, Same Results

One thing I noticed in each gaming era, is there is always one forgotten system. This system is usually the third most popular system or lower. It usually had little third party support and while not the main system, does have a loyal following. A system that didn't have a lot of games available (at least not stateside) and one a few dozen maximum of worthwhile games. In the classic era, when the Atari ruled, it was the Odyssey II. In the neo-classic era that was dominated by the Nintendo it was Atari 7800. And now in the 32-64 bit era, that system is the Atari Jaguar. If you really look at the three systems, you will see they have a lot in common. None of them were the big system, not even the second most popular. They all had minimal third party support and a limited amount of software made for the system. But each one does offer a decent amount of great games only available for that system. So, history does repeat and there will always be a forgotten system.

The Wrap-up

Well, I did my best to make this issue even bigger than the last and it is my goal to keep adding to the newsletter. As always, let me know which sections are your favorites and which you would like to see removed. I do listen and appreciate every comment. Have a happy holiday and see you in a month!

-Tom Zjaba