Retro 8 Times

The Newsletter for the Retro Gamer in All of Us

April 1998

Introduction

Wow! Already up to eight issues of Retro Times. Didn't think I could come up with enough stuff to keep filling the newsletter, but the ideas keep flowing in. Helps to keep ones head empty! This issue our theme will be a homage of sorts to the greatest third party company of the classic game era. I am sure everyone knows who that is! If you just said Mystique or Panda, then put on a dunce cap and go sit in the corner. I am talking about Activision! When it came to addictive games, noone topped this company. And they are still pumping out games, all these years ago. So sit back and enjoy another issue of the FREE newsletter!

IN SEARCH OF.....*FUTUREWORLD!*

I was always proud of my arcade. Sure it was small, and usually only had one copy of a game, but it always had the new games (according to the owner, it was a testing center for new games and how well they did, would determine how many to order for other arcades) and had some cool specials. But one day when we were over visiting our relatives, the Alaimos, I was talking with my cousin Tony, who was close to my own age. As we were talking about the latest video games and arcades, he told me about an arcade called Futureworld. It not only had a cool name, but according to him, it was huge and had hundreds of games. Plus, there were multiple copies of all the latest and hottest games. I was of course skeptical, considering every arcade I ever went to were small. So I asked him to take me there, so I could see this wondrous Futureworld. At first he didn't want to as it was about a 45 minute walk according to him (neither of us drove at the time). Of course I really doubted him then and after some ribbing, he gave in and we started our journey.

Our trip took us up hills and across busy streets. He wasn't kidding when he said it was a far trip, but it would be worth it if it was half as good as he said. So despite my tiring legs, I pressed on. After what was about a 45 minute walk, I saw it in the distance. The large sign said Futureworld. So it does exist, I thought to myself. Will it be as good as said? I would soon find out.

As we walked in the door, I was blown away! This place had to be the size of a grocery store and it was full, I mean full of arcade games. There were rows and rows of games with multiples of Joust, Dig Dug and all my favorites. I easily spent the ten bucks I brought and would have spent even more. The biggest thrill of the evening was a chance to play Hercules, the worlds biggest pinball machine. The gameplay was no big deal, but it was cool to say I played the biggest pinball game in the world.

So I left there with a smile that couldn't have been wiped off with sandpaper. For a gaming fanatic, I had been to nirvana and couldn't wait to go there again! As the years went by, I only visited there twice more before it was closed. While the gameroom is gone and all the machines have been removed, I will always remember Futureworld., still the biggest arcade I have ever been to.

HOW DID I FORGET KABOOM?

In my list of affordable games last issue, I omitted one of the best and quite affordable games, Kaboom. Thanks to Mike Gedeon for pointing this out. I was also asked to put a list of affordable Odyssey games. Lee Seitz asked for this. So here is a list of the affordable and enjoyable Odyssey II games:

Odyssey II Games

KC Munchkin, KC's Crazy Chase, Monkeyshines, Football, Alien Invaders Plus, Cosmic Conflict.

THE MANY FACES OF.....WIZARD OF WOR

This new feature received alot of positive feedback, so I will keep doing it. This month I am doing one of my favorite games, Wizard of Wor. This is one of the greatest two player games and a pretty decent one player game. But which one of the three versions is the best? Read on to find out!

GOLD MEDAL-This was a tough choice, but the gold goes to the Bally version. While it is called "The Incredible Wizard", we all know it is Wizard of Wor. This version looks and plays great! I first was skeptical about it with the Bally joysticks, but they really work very well with it. This game is reason enough to own a Bally system!

SILVER MEDAL-The Atari 5200 version is a great version and is easily as good as the Bally version, but because of the joysticks, I have to give the nod to the Bally. While the joysticks don't inhibit the gameplay as much as many games, it still affects it.

BRONZE MEDAL-The bronze has to go to the Atari 2600. While it plays well and is quite good, considering the system it is for, it just doesn't compete. The main flaw is the flickering problem. Those monsters flicker like mad and can really distract you. Too bad as this is a very enjoyable game.

MAME REVIEWS

This month I decided to review a couple of games that I didn't even know existed until 1995. They are both sequels of one of my all-time favorite games and yet I was oblivious to them. They are the third and fourth sequels to Mr. Do, Do Run Run and Mr. Do's Wild Ride. All I ever knew of was Mr. Do and Mr. Do's Castle. So, I decided to try these two games and see if they kept the legend alive or if they let it down.

Do Run Run

During my youth, I only heard of Mr. Do. As far as I knew, it was a one time game and nothing more. Was I in for a surprise, when I started collecting classic games again in 1995. I soon heard of an elusive game called Mr. Do's Castle. I was overjoyed to know a sequel existed to one of my all-time favorite games. I was even more excited when I heard there were a total of four different Mr. Do games! Is this a wonderful country or what? So after I got MAME working, these were among the first games to download.

Do Run Run is probably the closest to the original of the sequels. The basics are very similar with you finishing a level by either clearing it or killing all the bad guys. The ball also is present as the first line of defense. But unlike the original, there are different opponents, multi-level playing field and nasty traps to pull on the bad guys. There are these huge rollers which you can loosen and have them roll over the villains, killing them and reaping you some points. It is like something out of a Roadrunner cartoon.

Another difference is there are dots you can connect to reap a batch of point making cherries. I don't know the full extent of what you can do with them as I am still making my way around the game. But they can boost the score or get your guard down enough to get killed.

Another return is the spelling of extra to gain another life. I have yet to do this to see if the animation is different, but I will. I am quite persistent at things like this.

Overall, it is a very good sequel to the game. It is familiar enough to interest you, and adds enough to keep it interesting. Hard to believe this wasn't the direct sequel to Mr. Do.

Mr. Do's Wild Ride

This is one of those games that is nothing at all like the original. In fact one of the only carry-overs is the character. You also have the spelling of extra, though I have no clue how you get the letters.

Instead of fighting creatures, this time you are walking up a roller coaster, through the twisting tracks as you make your way to the top. I have no clue why someone would want to walk on a roller coaster? Maybe he is suicidal and you are a guardian angel, keeping him from demise. Or maybe you need to fix it. I have no idea what possesses a clown to climb up a roller coaster.

As you make your way up, there are ladders that you can go up to avoid the zooming coaster cars. These usually have cherries on them, probably snacks left by the maintenance crew. There are usually two coaster cars running and you have to time it so not to get run over as it is harmful to your health. There are other dangers too as you make your way up as quickly as possible to get as big a bonus as possible.

This game is mostly memorization and once you figure out a level, you can move through it with ease. But it is still a fun and unique game and hey, its a Mr. Do game and that is enough for me!

Activision, Consistent Quality

Out of all the classic era, third party publisher, noone was better known and better loved than Activision. They were the first (at least as far as I know, feel free to correct me if I am wrong) and they were the best. Instead of trying to do a bunch of different games, they excelled in one kind of game, addictive, twitch games that always made you come back for one more try. Sure they did other type of games, but most of their most cherished titles were games like Kaboom and River Raid, where good reflexes and quick responses were your best weapons.

One thing can be said for Activision, they realized the limitations of the Atari 2600 and did their best to get what they could out of it. They knew there was limitations in the graphics and sound on the Atari and that huge games with tons of levels weren't possible. So they put the gameplay first and tried to make simple to play games, yet difficult to master. Most of their games were quite simple with a single screen. But the little touches from bright and colorful graphics to simple controls made the games easy to learn and attractive.

While their games were great, you cannot overlook their manuals. While their game boxes were nothing special, their manuals were works of art. Many of them were designed to reflect the game and the picture and brief biography of the game designer added a personal touch to the game. With today's games where there is usually a whole team of people designing them and everything is so impersonal, I often go back and look at the Activision manuals and remember a time and a company that game the usual faceless game designer credit.

One of my only gripes with Activision is that most of their games that were ported from the Atari 2600 to the more powerful Atari 5200 and Coleco, were barely updated. Sure there are a few exceptions like Pitfall II, but most games are almost direct ports. River Raid, Pitfall and others look almost identical to the original. I would have liked to see a revamp in the graphics and possibly some additions, like extra levels or a few more challenges. Just a few things to take advantage of the larger cart size and better performance capabilities of the later machines. A small complaint and one that can be easily overlooked.

In closing, Activision was the best of the early third party companies mainly due to their addictive games, overall quality of the package and their personal touches. Maybe that is one of the reasons why they are still in business today, while most of their competitors are either gone or absorbed by other companies.

A DEEPER LOOK....

With my Activision themed issue, I decided to review a couple of their games. While it is hard to pick out two games from their vast catalog of games, I will do my best.

A Deeper look at...Fishing Derby

This is probably one of the best of the two player games for the Atari. Sure you can play it as a one player game, but you are missing out on the beauty of it. Sorta like playing Utopia by yourself. But as a two player game, it is good fun.

The goal of the game is quite simple, catch enough fish that you reach 99 points before your competitor. So it is more than who can catch the most fish, as that would be too easy To make things more interesting the deeper the fish, the more valuable they are. So do you go deep and get the big points or do you go after the faster, but less valuable fish that are closer to the surface? Makes for a little bit of strategy. And if this wasn't enough, there is the shark!

Truly the best thing about this game was the shark. Not only is it non-judgmental, it is totally unpredictable. The shark doesn't care who is winning or losing, it only wants to eat fish. Much like the spider in Centipede, this is what takes a decent game and turns it into a great game. Nothing is so satisfying than watching the shark eat your opponents fish after he went all the way to the bottom to get it. Of course, nothing is quite as frustrating as this happening to you.

Not only is this a fun game, but it is also a very affordable game. A loose copy will probably only set you back between $3.00-$5.00, and worth every penny.

A Deeper Look at...Pitfall.

The biggest hit from Activision had to be Pitfall. This is the game that really put Activision on the map

and still is beloved. Not only this, but it has had sequels on most systems. There was Pitfall II for the 2600, 5200 and Coleco, Super Pitfall for the Nintendo, Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure for Jaguar, Super Nintendo and others and finally Pitfall 3D for the Playstation. Not many games have continued over all four generations of video games. But Pitfall Harry and his son have continued on and most likely will keep coming out.

The original Pitfall was one of the granddaddies of the side scrolling games that were all the rage in the 16 bit era. Before it, almost all games made the character have to stay on a single screen. But Pitfall stretched things and gave us a feel of a whole world to explore. Sure there were other games before it that allowed movement, like Adventure and Haunted House, but Pitfall was different.

Not only did you have a world to explore, no matter how limited it was, but you had different actions. There were vines to swing on, crocs to jump on and snakes to jump over. There was also ladders to climb up and holes to fall into. The ability to do so many different actions with a single character may seem like nothing today, but it was revolutionary back then. Most game characters could do one or two different things and that was about it. But Pitfall Harry was more advanced. This once again added greatly to the gameplay and helped ensure its lastibility.

Another great feature was that there was an ending. You could actually complete the game. Not something that was possible with most games from this era.

Pitfall was a great game and still remains so today. Not many people who have an Atari 2600, don't own this game. A true testament to its popularity. And once again, it is a very affordable game. A loose copy will set you back between $1.00-$3.00. A very low price for such an important and enjoyable game.

WHERE WAS DONKEY KONG?

During the early days of video games, Donkey Kong was huge! Not only in size, but also in popularity. After the Donkey Kong game, he was launched into the limelight and handled the pressure well. When he was offered a chance to switch roles from villain to good guy in the sequel, Donkey Kong Jr, he gladly accepted the lesser role and put in a good performance. Everything was looking rosy for everyone's new favorite ape. Even the not quite so popular or as good game, Donkey Kong 3 seemed to affect his status as one of the heavyweights of the gaming industry. only Pacman and Q*Bert were in his level of status. Nothing seemed to be able to keep him down.

But then suddenly it all ended. The bottom dropped off and Donkey Kong was gone almost as fast as he came onto the scene. While DK was off the map, his former co-star, Mario was on a one way trip to the top. First there was the successful, Mario Bros with Luigi and then the hugely successful Super Mario Bros series. He was the darling of the game industry and the undisputed number one character of the 8 bit era and that carried on into the 16 bit and even the modern era. But while Mario was reaping in untold wealth and fame, where was Donkey Kong? Where was the gorilla that gave the lowly plumber his first big break?

Rumors spread about the disappearance of DK. Some say there was a falling out between him and Mario and that Mario had him blackballed. Word on the street was Mario never got over having to play a villain and now used his clout to keep the big guy down.

Other rumors spreading around had DK as a very pushy and hard to get along with star. After a handful of verbal and physical attacks on the set, he was supposedly told to leave and never come back. With this reputation, he found it nearly impossible to get decent work and finally packed his

bags and headed back to the jungle.

The final rumor had him becoming a derelict, with an addiction to banana wine. He soon became unreliable and was quietly pushed out the back door. A small, but steady stream of royalty checks kept him from a life of panhandling and saved the reputation of Nintendo.

Were any of these rumors true or just fabrications by a media that was looking for the worst? Noone will ever truly know as now that Donkey Kong has returned to greatness with the Donkey Kong Country series, he refuses to speak of his past. He just eludes the questions and instead talks about his present accomplishments.

While that mystery may never be solved, there is another one brewing, what ever happened to Donkey Kong Jr?

Purpose of Newsletter

While most people seem quite satisfied with the newsletter and really enjoy it, I have received a few emails asking what I am trying to accomplish with the newsletter. What is my reasoning for doing it and what do I hope to accomplish from it. Well, I decided to put an answer to this once and for all.

Quite simply, the original reason for the newsletter was simply to give something back to the gaming community. Since I am not a programmer and since rarity lists and the history of the industry have already been done, I decided to do what I do best, write about the industry and my love of it. There has been two constants in my life, comic books and video games. I have loved both for the majority of my life and feel blessed that I can sell both for a living. So I wanted to capture this pure love of games and the experiences of growing up in the glory days of video games and share it with others who were also there and the people who weren't lucky enough to be alive or old enough to enjoy it. Like our parents who were able to see the beginnings of rock n roll and the golden age of baseball, we were able to live through the beginning of the video game market and its glory days. I was able to see the market be born and grow with games like Pong, Space Invaders and later on, Pacman. I also saw the home market grow and the impact it had on us impressionable youths.

This is my main goal with the newsletter. I do hope one day to get contributors to both ease the burden on myself and more importantly, give their perspectives on the industry. I want it to be a forum for all who enjoy games, whether they are new or classic. While it is slanted more towards classic games, I will do some articles on newer systems. I still am a avid gameplayer and enjoy my Playstation almost as much as my Intellivision. I believe a great game is a great game, irregardless of when it came out and no matter what system it came out for. There is a certain magic that games bring that no other medium can. The mixture of audio, visual and personal interaction cannot be topped by anything else. It still is my favorite form of entertainment today, as much as it was 15-20 years ago.

The other question I keep getting asked is will I do a paper version of Retro Times. I have had numerous requests to do it and while I am flattered, I must say that I don't see it. At least not in the foreseeable future. Having done newsletters in the past (I did 50 issues of Tomorrow's News), I am aware of the costs involved in both printing it and mailing it. In order to do it to the level of quality I would want, I would be forced to charge alot of money for it. This is something I wouldn't feel comfortable with. The other option would be to print it and distribute it free, but I am not in a financial situation to afford this. So I will have to leave it in its very affordable version. Also, with the internet, I can keep working with it and trying to improve it. I also can go back and improve older issues, something that couldn't be done in a paper version. So I hope this answers any questions you may have and give you a better idea of the reasoning behind the newsletter. While it is a bit of a labor, it is a labor of love. Hope you enjoy it!

Tom Zjaba

(All pictures provided by the Digital Press CD. To get your own copy, go to http://digitpress.com and order one).