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Press Fire to Start

by Adam King

Welcome back to Retrogaming Times Monthly for another does of gaming goodness. This moth will be a shorter issue than usual. My life was pretty busy this past month, so much that I didn't have much time to work on the newsletter. Hopefully next month I'll have more time to put some stuff together. In any case some columns, such as the Retrogaming Commercial Vault, are taking a break this month but will be back next month. Anyway he still have some good stuff this month so let's get to it.

Syntax Era: Atari Force

by [Scott Jacobi](#)

I decided to take a break from reviewing video game magazines and focus on a different form of classic video game literature. The subject of this month's Syntax Era is comic books, particularly the Atari Force series. If the only point of writing these articles was simply to be informative, then I could do no better job than to point you to Lee K. Seitz's Atari Force website, found at <http://home.hiwaay.net/~lkseitz/comics/AtariForce/> and be done with my article. I mention that, not because I don't wish to share my own thoughts with you, but simply because you will not find a better resource and collection of material on the Atari Force comic anywhere. But there is another point to writing these articles, and that is hopefully to be entertaining. So without further ado, I shall begin to entertain.

My first Atari Force comic book was probably yours as well. It came with the Atari 2600 version of Defender and began part one of a two part prelude to what the Atari Force's actual mission and adventures would become. Now, opening a new video game box has a special appeal all it own. It's something of a ritual for me. Tearing off the plastic shrink wrap, and gingerly trying to open the top flap without creasing it, I examine the contents inside, from the cartridge to the manual, unconsciously gathering a whiff of the packaging plant air trapped inside the box until I allowed that rarified gas to mix with the rest of the air. After pulling out the cartridge to examine the art, I would pull out the manual and read it cover to cover, providing that immediate access to a console was unavailable. So it was an extra special treat to open Defender and find not only a manual, but a comic book story packaged along with the game as well.

This bonus was extended with the arrival of Berserk, Star Raiders, Phoenix, and Galaxian, as well as with comic books outside of the Atari Force series contained in Yars' Revenge, Centipede, and the tragic three issues of the four part Swordquest series. It was a concept introduced by Howard Scott Warshaw, designer and programmer of, among many games, Yars' Revenge. In the days of 2, 4, and 8 kilobyte roms, the inclusion of a story was next to impossible. It wasn't uncommon for a little background story to be included in the introduction of the game's manual, but for Howard, that simply wouldn't do. He wanted to flesh the story out, give it depth, and ultimately provide the player with some fashion of motivation, perhaps even a passion, for picking up the joystick and beating the enemy in to oblivion. It is interesting to note, that in those days of Atari, when game authors were not credited with their work, Howard was only given permission to credit himself with one aspect of the game, either it's programming, or the writing of the story. He chose to be listed as the programmer, and credited Hope Shafer as the writer.



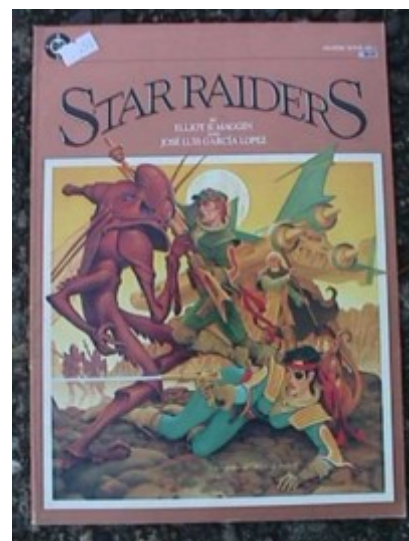
At its roots, Atari Force was the product of a similar concept, but with an entirely different presentation. There have been quite a few articles written on the development of Atari Force, many of which can be found at Seitz's site, but none as telling as the final issue of the full size comic book series of Atari Force. It seems that Atari Force was originally intended to be group of adventures that traveled from place to place solving one kind of problem or another, as it related to the game that the issue came packaged with. Therefore, each issue would be a contained story, beginning, middle, and end. For the writers at D.C. Comics however, that idea ultimately gave way to a grander concept where each issue would have an over-arching theme, creating an epic story that continued from issue to issue, rather than solitary episodes.

The Atari Force team as we came to know them was born, and the series gave birth to a myriad of other ideas. The original five issues that came with Atari games set the premise of a dying earth in the year 2005 (ironic?) whose fate is in the hand of Atari, or should I say A.T.A.R.I. or the Advanced Technology And Research Institute. A.T.A.R.I. was looking for the solution to a world wide famine after the results of a five day world war that included nuclear holocaust. If that wasn't a grim enough picture, the series also predicted that much of California would have split off from main land United States by this time. Five specialist were chosen to be the world's savior by piloting a top secret vehicle that was capable of breaking out of our own dimension and exploring the multiverse, a collection of parallel universes, in an effort to find a new inhabitable home for all of mankind. Along the way, they develop of multiverse traveling enemy, an entity known only as the Dark Destroyer. Throw in a racially diverse cast, and your run of the mill romance and you've got the concept in a nutshell.

Of these three issue, I personally enjoy the third issue, shipped with Star Raiders, the most. But it's the fourth issue that I find particularly interesting as it relates to Atari itself. This issue was packed in with Phoenix, and it refers to the game of Phoenix in a loose way. But you can't help noticing a few odd things about it, like how the quality of the art is different, or how it's shorter than the other four issues, or how even though they mention Phoenix several times, the concepts in the game just don't seem to fit very well. Well, if you ever happened to chance upon an Atari made game in the arcade called Liberator, which happened to be rather rare, than you might have more clues to those differences than most people. And if your weren't, you have the chance to experience this game through the magic of MAME. It turns out that the fourth issue of Atari Force was intended to be an introduction to the game Liberator, making it the first arcade game that would ever have a back story provided by a comic book. The story was planned to appear in the pages of a New Teen Titans issue, and all mentions of the name Liberator were changed to Phoenix in order to pack it in with Atari cartridge of the same title. Reading the comic with Phoenix in mind made little sense. Reading it with Liberator in mind is an entirely different experience, and highly recommended.

After the initial run of the Atari Force, it was decided that the mini cartridge pack-ins would evolve in to their own full fledged published title that would share shelf space with Superman and Batman. The comic series would take place 25 years after the original series, and contain a slightly darker story than the suitable-for-all-ages stories that shipped with the games. It developed quite a following, but that only gave it enough momentum for 20 issues, and one additional special issue. Not surprisingly, it ended in 1985, not too long after the video game market itself had imploded. Over the course of the series, readers got to see what became of the original team along with both the good and bad fortune they saw as a result of their interdimensional travels, as well as the off spring of two partnerings who would made up the next generation of the Atari Force. The rest of the crew was made up of a rag tag group of aliens, some noble, some not, and all with many surprises of their own. If the original series promoted diversity through the nationalities of it's cast, the second series promoted diversity with multitude of alien cultures.

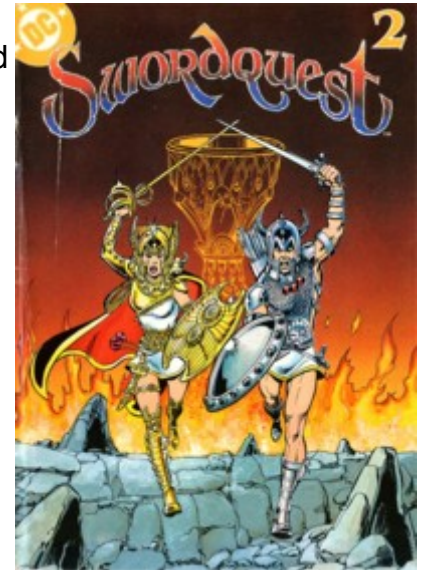
Another impact that Atari Force had on the comic book industry is the little known credit for birthing the concept of the graphic novel. The very first graphic novel that D.C. Comics ever published was a direct result of the third original Atari Force comic, and it was appropriately named Star Raiders. The third Atari Force comic touched upon the concept of the game and explored it enough to keep the overall story flowing. The Star Raiders graphic novel mixed what the Atari Force issue had laid out with more of the Star Raiders game itself, and weaved the combination into a fascinating story with some of the richest art ever dedicated to an Atari project at the time. Now, I have to be honest and say that the story itself didn't hold up to the expectations I had of it by the time I finally got to read it, which was long after it had been published. Much like the second Atari Force series, the action focuses around a few key human beings, and the actions of a number of odd looking and indescribable aliens. The result is something less than spectacular, but the attempt to take a game like Star Raiders, and turn it in to it's own little universe was astounding. It seems as though the story could have been a launching point for an ongoing series, had they chosen to continue with it, but ultimately they never did. It should also be pointed out that D.C. Comics' second ever published graphic novel was based on yet another Atari game, Warlords. However, this title was even less successful at holding the game's concept together, and the story left your caring very little for the fate



of the story's protagonist troll.

As for other Atari comic books, there was Centipede which, while forgettable in many respects, held a special place in my heart for a while. It was definitely designed to appeal to a younger audience, and was more in keeping with the original concept of a story that tied itself up neatly in one little package. Despite the childlike writing (and bad insect or mushroom puns on every page,) I enjoyed the story quite a bit at the time.

Which leaves us with the Swordquest series. If ever there was a story in my life that I would really like to hear the ending to before I die, this would be it. Because, as we all know, the fourth Swordquest game was never published, and as a result, the fourth Swordquest comic book that was to accompany it was never drawn. So the story died with the original management of Atari. Ironically, the gold sword that was to be the ultimate prize of the Swordquest contest was made, and it is rumored to be hanging above the Tramiel's mantle place. If only the fourth comic was with it as well, it could have been scanned by now so my torture would end, but alas it is not meant to be.



Based on what I know thanks to the three Swordquest comics that were published, the story revolves around two twins who are born to the greatest warrior of a king, whose mystical advisor informs him that the twins will be his undoing. The king trusts the mystic, who is really just manipulating him for more power, and commands that the twins be destroyed. The father, outraged, protests and dies in battle, while the mother asks a commoner to care for the children and raise them as his own, and proceed to jump off a cliff holding two jars wrapped in cloth so as to fool the soldiers who chase her to her death. The twins grow up and become skilled thieves and one day chance upon a talisman that attract a monster guardian. Upon deciding to ditch the talisman, it breaks apart, freeing two spirits who proceed to guide the twins on an adventure through four worlds composed of the very elements themselves, that will train them in all ways of becoming the ultimate warrior and finally getting revenge for their fallen parents and fulfilling the mystic's prophecy. They get through the zodiac realm of earth, and the warrior realm of fire, and suffer through minor amnesia in the realm of water which is for some reason mostly frozen... and then... and then... well, no one knows for sure. They were to end up in the realm of air from which they would escape and extract their revenge, but it is up to your own imagination to determine how that happens.

Why did I bother to spell out the story that has no ending in such detail? Perhaps to share the misery that I have with you, because if that story seemed intriguing to you to want to know what happens in the end, then guess what? You'll never know. Oh the heartache. But what was the Swordquest comic book in reality? It was just one piece of a puzzle that would ultimately lead you to the real life rewards that were valued at \$25,000 a piece for each individual game, and \$50,000 for the gold sword that I spoke of earlier. The other piece of the puzzle was the game itself, which presented numbers to you as a reward for dropping the correct items in the correct rooms. The numbers would correspond to page numbers and panels that contained cleverly disguised words in the artwork. But not every clue was valid, and only some of the hidden words belonged to the final solution. If you'd like to learn more about the solution for yourself, head on over to <http://yosemite-sam.net/Solutions/Solution.htm> and see why I can't figure out how you were supposed to win the contest through anything other than dumb luck.

And finally, before I go, I would be remiss if I forgot to point out that, like the near complete scans of the Atari Age magazine, Atariage.com also has full scans of all 10 published comic books that came with cartridges at <http://www.atariage.com/comics/index.html> which saves you the need to hunt them down on eBay in order to read any of them. However, if you would like to read the second Atari Force series, it is not uncommon to find someone selling the entire series, all 21 issues, for around \$10 or \$20, depending on their condition. So enjoy reading them, and I have a million dollar check ready to go to anyone who can produce that fourth Swordquest book for me.

## The Many Faces of . . . Battlezone

***by Alan Hewston & Andrew "Tonks" Tonkin***

This month we have another 25th anniversary tribute from the 1980 arcade classic Battlezone. This was the first true first person shooter with free movement. It was quite realistic being maneuverable while having that first person view, and all the more when you were hit as your display makes it appear that even the arcade screen has cracked. You have the only tank(s) left in the control of mankind since all others have been set on autopilot and are out to destroy mankind. You alone must destroy these tanks, super tanks, missiles and flying saucers. You can only fire one artillery shell at a time, waiting until it hits another object or reaches its maximum range. Your tank is controlled using 2, two-directional joysticks, one with a fire button. Each stick can be placed in 3 ("up", "neutral", or "down") positions, thus leading to  $3 \times 3 = 9$  combinations of movement. Resting, rotating (CW or CCW),

forward, reverse, and then the 4 combinations of turning and moving simultaneously. The controls took some time getting used to but are realistic of a tank. The high speed rendering of the B&W vector graphics were enhanced by adding green & red color overlays to the arcade cabinet. The entire battlefield appeared green and the remainder in red for the text messages, score and full 360 degree field of view radar. The arcade instructions tell you to: "Use the radar. Keep moving. Don't sit and spin in place or you will be hit. Use the cubes and pyramids as shields. Listen for the enemy's tank shots". The least realistic limitation is that your turret does not spin. So you can only fire in the direction that you face. Thus there is no rotating your turret to fire one direction, while driving in another. Fortunately this applied to you're your tank and all enemies as well. The battlefield terrain was completely flat with the scattering of pyramids and cubes to represent obstacles. The battlefield was endless and you could never reach the scrolling mountainous background. The highlight of the background was the active volcano (added at the last second). The original title was "Future Tank" and then "Moon Tank" before the more generic name "Battlezone" was settled upon. The game plays the 1812 Overture during a high score.

### "Don't Attack Dirt"

Just the opposite from last month's Missile Command motto, "Don't Defend Dirt", I've made up my own saying here as you had better not be firing at the dirt (ie nothing). You only get one shot at a time, and as the manual warns - the Saucers are distractions - they are no threat. Hitting the Saucer involves too much luck/timing. Sure your target indicator lights up, but odds are your shot will pass right underneath the saucer and only hit dirt. And let's not forget that you need to pay immediate attention to any incoming missiles (or fighters) as their weaving L/R (or U/D) path will already cause some of your shots to hit dirt. So "Don't Attack Dirt".



**Arcade:** 1980 Atari Ed Rotberg et al. with Morgan Hoff - project lead; Ed Rotberg - lead programmer; Jed Margolin - electrical engineer; Roger Hector - vector modeling; Owen Rubin - active volcano code.

All home versions by Atari/Atarisoft unless noted

- Apple II '83
- Commodore 64 '83
- Vic 20 '83
- Atari 5200 '83? prototype
- Atari 2600 '84
- Sinclair Spectrum 1984 Quicksilver by Bill Witts
- Atari XE/8 bit ('87 Ken Rose)

**Arcade Sequel:** Not quite a sequel, but a more advanced version for the US Army used as a training simulator for the Bradley fighting vehicle. At least one prototype cabinet was known to exist with much the same look as Battlezone, but with a few more buttons. The added capabilities were: friendly units, variety of ordnance, realistic trajectories, two additional magnification levels, controller system with a thumb, finger and palm switches.

**Home Version Similarities:** Except those in <> all home versions have: a demo; pause <2600>; a choice of skill variations <5200, C64>; arcade enemies and scoring <2600 has fighters with their own missiles>; the battlefield is flat with only pyramids & cubes as obstacles; the horizon can never be reached, but scrolls nicely in the background as you rotate; a volcano is active <AP2> in the background; a single <2600> color, green, is used for all elements and enemies in the battlefield, all done using polygon/vector style graphics <2600>; a second color <2600> is used for everything else - that is the 360 degree view radar, the score, high score, number of tanks remaining and all text <2600> messages (enemy in range, enemy to the Left/Right/Rear, blocked); your current field of view and the enemy position and distance can be easily determined from your radar; your targeting site/crosshairs change appearance <2600 changes color> to indicate when the enemy is in the line of fire; an enemy may not be visible on the screen but is there; if you do not move, the enemy fire will always hit you <AP2, 5200>; enemy tanks and missiles <2600 fighters> will not go away until destroyed; the saucer however, will come and go and taunt you; you'll hear an audio alert when an enemy appears, which is just after the last piece of debris falls from the previously exploded enemy, or when your new tank begins; you can hear and then see (if in front of you) their shots being fired and of course if they hit your tank; if hit, your tank display/windshield will crack, and you will have lost that tank forever; the enemy tanks make no sound after their arrival, but the saucers make a continuous high pitched sound when they are in range; the missiles make a sound as they weave back and forth,

with a low groan that drowns out most of the sound; the enemy's sound louder on a few versions, and appear bigger as they get closer; your tank has a low revving sound when stationary and more noise when turning or driving <AP2, 2600>; if you hit an obstacle or a tank, you'll hear a noise <2600 no obstacles> to indicate this and see the text message "blocked" <2600>; your shots ring out when fired but only make an exploding sound if they hit the enemy; a visual debris shower from the enemy (quite a treat) will take place; there is no sound if you miss and unfortunately no sound to indicate when you can fire again; a bonus tank(s) can be earned on some game variations, but an audio cue is only heard on the Atari 8 bit. There is no stop in the action, no rounds, or waves. Once the battle begins, there's no end to the enemy - they just keep on coming. Besides the occasional distraction of a saucer, there is always one and only one enemy present to contend with - save for the wonderfully enhanced 2600 which has 2!.

### Disqualified: Sinclair Spectrum (N/A)

Disqualified only because I do not have this system or an assistant to help review it. Some notes combined from the Dec 1984 "Sinclair User" & "Crash" magazines. The game is Atari approved, yet it is no better than the tank games already released on the Speccy. Why did they bother releasing it so late? It has a demo mode all the enemies and a good number of obstacles and looks like the arcade - with the two color schemes. Joystick or keyboard controls for caterpillar track movement. Scrolling horizon, but an unanimated volcano. The next enemy shows up quickly, no waiting around. Smooth graphics but not fast, and some cracking up of the graphics from time to time. An on-target missile sometimes misses. Nice gradual increase in difficulty, but only 1 starting difficulty to select. In all likelihood, it could have contended for a medal here - seems to be similar to the C64.



Battlezone on Atari 5200



Battlezone on Apple II

### Disqualified: Atari 5200 prototype (38)

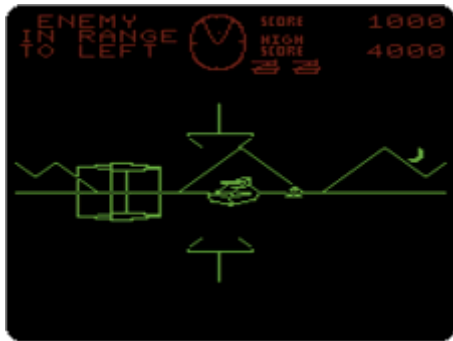
My first reaction was disappointment that this didn't get released, but the multi-cart prototype version seems to be just shy of being completed. Gameplay is all there and very good (7), missing the full details of the radar, and also having somewhat poor physics. That is, you appear lined up to hit each other but can fire volleys back and forth just missing for no apparent reason. The Addictiveness is fun to play (7), scoring the highest of all versions I played. The pause is the <pause>. But in all versions with a pause I only awarded +.5 points as no game lasts very long that you'd need one. Go figure, the exception is the 2600 which has no pause, but you can play for a while longer and could use one. There is no choice of starting level (ie not finished) and the already mentioned firing and missing is frustrating. The Graphics are crisp (8) with probably the smoothest, fastest and overall best vector rendering. The background is in detailed hi-res graphics, but there's no volcano. The screen cracking effect is unique. The Sound on every version is pretty good (7). A few things are missing, but the enemy shots can be heard hitting obstacles - unique here. Title music I think is the "Flight of the Valkyries". Controls score a (9), are a little off - possibly as it was not completed. The Masterplay Interface craps out at times and starts playing analog like. The standard 5200 stick is not too bad, but the Wico seems to be your best bet.

### Have Nots: Apple II (35)

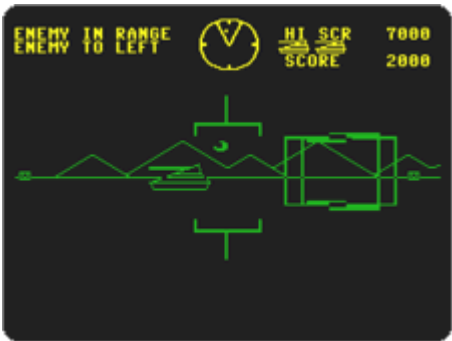
My first reaction was since no version will have much audio, the Apple has less of its usual disadvantage. This came somewhat true as the Sound is respectable (6) with pretty much all effects but nothing sounds very good. Missing are any driving & moving sounds, but the saucers and missiles effects are different enough to keep you content. A nice little musical intro "1812 Overture" Gameplay is fairly good (7) with all the enemies in place, a functional radar . . . the basic arcade game in tact. A big drawback in the logic or AI is that if you remain fixed, the enemy shots don't always hit you as they should - more pitiful than the 5200. The saucer's are really hard to hit. Addictiveness is decent (6) but the worst of the lot. The game speed is so darn slow there's no sense of fluidity, no feel for the action. The terrible collision detection (shots missing) keeps the game boring for a while as you're just not on the edge of your chair - it's not life and death. Then, once you do get going, the dreaded missiles are extremely hard to defeat. The pause is . The Graphics are not bad (6), but it's hard to tell what is what and see the enemy shots. The details are not that good and the animation seems lifeless. Two unique, but not too helpful features are some added (different) colored text for when the game is over and in the menus, plus the crosshairs flash while your shot is in progress. So you kinda know sooner when you can fire again. Controls score a (9) losing something, perhaps due to the analog nature, or as a reaction to the slowness and poor feedback of the game. You think that you're locked in and then just as you fire, you move slightly and are not aimed where you thought. I have not quite figured out if or how to compensate. Fortunately, keyboard fans will enjoy the option of using the keyboard, and you

can re-select your own set of keys. Only on disk.

**Bronze Medal: Vic 20 & C64 (39)**



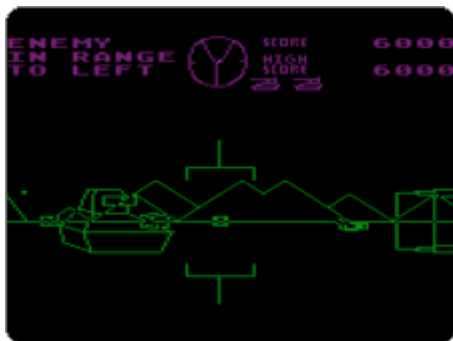
Battlezone on Commodore Vic-20



Battlezone on Commodore 64

**Commodore Vic 20:** My first reaction was that staff writer Andrew Tonkin has again come to my aid (as I don't have this uncommon cart) to give this game a proper detailed review. Gameplay is impressive (8) with pretty much everything in place, but the Saucers are really hard to hit, making them much less of a distraction. Addictiveness is fun to play (7), with a pause using the <space bar>, but overall a tough game to play. Only 3 lives and you won't get much chance to play a long game. 5 skill choices give you a little chance to play a faster paced game, but alas, the most common means of dying by a skilled player is getting blocked while retreating. It would appear this excessive blocking is not quite as bad as on the C64, and all other things being equal, I scored this port a little higher. The game is pretty fair about resetting the enemy after you lose a tank. The Graphics are cool (7) and the screen shot looks great and appears to match the C64. I've assumed that the details, smoothness and speed are just a bit worse than the C64. There are also not nearly as many obstacles. The Sound is very good (7) but some effects are less pleasant than other ports. The enemy's shots are hard to hear from all the engine noise, but nothing detracts from the rest of the game. Controls are perfect (10). The cart is uncommon, but probably more scarce than its \$15 value suggests.

**Commodore 64:** My first reaction was there are no options and too many obstacles. The Gameplay is of good quality (8) matching the same score and remarks as the Vic. Addictiveness is decent (6) with the <space bar> as the pause. There's no choice of starting level/difficulty, which is unusual, but fortunately, the game starts off fairly easily. The C64, Vic 20, and 2600 have less randomness (most of the time the next enemy appears in range, not aiming at you, but usually right in your view). A glitch in having too many obstacles and/or the relative size of your tank and the obstacles really cripples this version. 80% the time you die due to hitting obstacles while retreating to avoid shots. Graphics are sharp (8) with good details, smoothness and speed, and to me, the easiest version to determine which vector enemy is which. Sound is very good (7), not missing a thing, but add in the saucers and missile effects get louder when the enemy gets closer. Controls are perfect (10). Available on Cart and disk. Disk version appears identical, but may have a white (not black) screen border.



Battlezone on Atari XE



Battlezone on Atari 2600

**Silver Medal: Atari XE/8 bit (40)**

My first reaction was there may have been a version released by Andromeda S/W, but I came up empty in my search. It may have been one in the same as this one came out so late - 1987 - thus there was time to correct previous version's flaws. But that was not the case. The Gameplay is impressive (8) with everything in place, unfortunately the saucers are not only rare to see, but then even harder still to hit. Addictiveness is fun to play (7) with a pause and you can move the stick to resume the action. The biggest drawbacks are that the game is too hard - the missiles are really tough to hit here, and then when you die, you often are thrown into a double-death, with the same enemy right on top of you with no reset in their location. Too many enemies make their first appearance very close to you and behind you. 90% of the time you die from behind, never seeing your cowardly enemy. Where did they come from? Another reason you die more often from behind is that (despite this version having the most obstacles) shots from the front can be avoided if you are alert, as you can successfully retreat and somehow avoid nearly all these obstacles that otherwise spell your doom on the C64. The Graphics are beautiful (8) with a veritable plethora of obstacles, including some new shapes (flat blocks as well as the cubes and pyramids). Sound is very good (7) with a chime when you earn a bonus life, louder effects as the saucer and missiles get are closer. But the tank noises are

a bit excessive and make it harder to hear the enemy shots fired. Controls are perfect (10).

### Gold Medal: Atari 2600 (41)

My first reaction was this version fails to be arcade-looking but its use of multi-color is wonderful. This is one of the best examples of how one could disqualify a version (as this system is not capable of copying the arcade vector graphics) or let its unique approach go un-penalized. I chose the latter here, and am glad as it wins the Gold medal for being so much more playable. The Gameplay is outstanding (9), throwing out the arcade ad allowing 2 enemies attacking, plus the saucer to distract you. This adds so much more complexity and allows for actual strategy in how to attack or retreat. Attack which one first? With only one enemy, the only choice is if you wish to be greedy and go after the saucer or not. Otherwise, react to the tanks and blow them away. Another huge difference which is part good and bad is that there are NO obstacles. The obstacles are the only thing that keeps the battlefield from being barren, so this is surely lacking here. But then you never have that lame (random) problem of backing into the obstacles. Never fear, this works well with 2 enemies as you only back up long enough to dodge one shot and get back on the offensive, least that 2nd tank gets you from behind. I guess the silly randomness and stupidity of getting blocked all the time is why I never enjoyed Battlezone much, until the 2600 version found me. The Addictiveness is exciting (7) - on the edge of your chair as the battle really moves along fast here. As mentioned before, there is no pause, but this is the version you'll want to play the most and play the longest and thus a pause would come in handy. There's 3 skill settings and nothing seems unfair or like you were cheated. There's even the thrill of dodging the shots that can come out of the fighters (where the fighters replaced the missiles). The Graphics make the biggest impact to the game and the color is quite enjoyable (8). The details are less and the motion is a bit choppy, but you never feel cheated or get confused. The color tells you which enemy is which right away which helps keep the game moving, fun and adds that strategy greatly. The text readouts are gone, but did you really need that anyway since your radar works as it should? The background and collage of colors is great, especially the animation of the tank's tracks. The explosions are not as cool, but are done faster, more realistically anyhow, and the screen cracking effect is replaced by a computer monitorGoing haywire - excellent! The crosshairs are replaced by a single bar, but this works fine and is effective. Sound is very good (7) - yes, there's and echo in here. There's no driving noises, but the action is so fast, that you won't miss it. There's a nice musical intro. Controls are perfect (10).

Note that the Artwork for Saucers in the manual look just like 1980's Battlestar Galactica's Cylon fighters. The cart is not too hard to find and one of the best 2600 arcade ports ever.

### For the next generation:

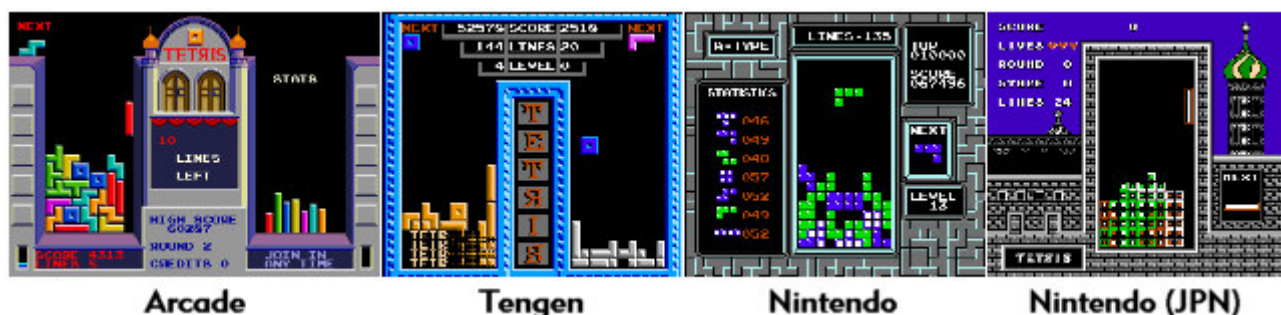
Why didn't any version include the obstacles in the radar - at least that would reduce the luck factor. Taking a break between playing a set of rounds composed of 12 to 15 enemies would be neat. Keep adding one more enemy every time one is eliminated, and then add one more for every 30 seconds you go without hitting to add more realism. Finally, driving one direction and shooting the other would be the ultimate enhancement, providing of course, that you could find a way to control this and there were already more than one enemy at a time anyhow.

Come back next month, but I am still unsure. My time looks limited, so I may do a simple review like the Many Faces of Venture - oh Boy! all 3 of them on the 2600, CV & INTV. Contact Alan Hewston at: [Hewston95@NOSPAMstratos.net](mailto:Hewston95@NOSPAMstratos.net) or visit the Many Faces of site: <http://my.stratos.net/~hewston95/RT/ManyFacesHome.htm>.

## The Titles of Tengen - Tetris

**by David Lundin, Jr.**

It's hard to think of a more popular puzzle game than Tetris. Originally created in the former Soviet Union by Alexey Pajhitnov it spread like wildfire throughout the world of computing and made its way into the arcade in 1988 thanks to Atari Games. Gameplay is deceptively simple as all uber popular games are: arrange falling blocks in a well so that they create horizontal rows, once created they disappear, if the well fills up to the top it's game over. Naturally Tengen would create an NES version of this arcade superhit but due to a mishandling of copyrights things would get dirty fast and Nintendo would have its own version of Tetris shortly thereafter. Since the Tengen version is based upon the arcade version and the Nintendo version is based upon the original computer version, I'll leave the comparison between the arcade original and Tengen port.



Right off the bat you get a variety of gameplay options. Single player lets you play in the left column while your stats are tracked on the right side. Two player lets you square off with a human opponent, player one on the left and player two on the right. Cooperative is a special mode that uses a single well and lets both players use that same play field and work together - it's an interesting play mode that stands out in the Tengen release. Versus Computer is the standard two player mode except the computer plays the right hand side, which is really no challenge since the computer opponent just slowly plays the game at a snails pace. With Computer lets you play the cooperative mode with a CPU assistant but again the computer drops its pieces so slow it can turn into an exercise in frustration. Screwing around with the AI is fun for a few minutes though.

As with most Tengen ports the graphics are faithfully recreated as accurately as possible on the NES hardware. In the arcade the divider between the two wells is dressed up to look Russian, somewhat like St. Basil's cathedral with the domed tops. The Tengen port replaces this with a simple column in the center with "T E T R I S" spelled down the middle. Once you complete a level in the arcade the door on your side atop the center column opens up and a little dancer pops out as your bonus points are totaled. This is carried over to the Tengen version except each one of the doors behind "T E T R I S" opens to reveal a dancer. The more diverse mix of line eliminations the player created (single, double, triple, tetris) the more dancers that come out and dance around during intermission. The animation during the intermission sequence is actually better in the Tengen port as the dancers do back flips, spin around, and perform traditionally Russian looking dances. The only real difference graphically is that the individual blocks change to the current level's color once they drop to the bottom instead of retaining their original colors as in the arcade.

Surprisingly all the background music is there and is dead on. In the arcade the background music changed between levels but the Tengen port lets you select which audio track you want looping in the background at the start. Personally "Bradinsky" is my favorite and is far better than any of the background music that Nintendo put in any of their versions, in my opinion it has always been the definitive Tetris theme. Play control is smooth and accurate, just as responsive as in the arcade original. The arcade version is still more difficult in that block acceleration picks up a lot quicker and different levels present different challenges such as starting with blocks already in the well or having blocks randomly appear atop the stack. These extra mid-game challenges are not present in the Tengen port.

There are a few things to keep in mind when comparing the arcade and Tengen versions against the Nintendo release. First and foremost is that the Nintendo release was not meant to be a port of the arcade version, in fact Nintendo and Tengen were locked in legal battles at the time. There's a huge backstory about the creation and rights leasing of Tetris but it falls outside the spectrum of a comparison review and could fill an entire volume on its own. Second is the Nintendo releases were based upon porting over the original computer version and the Tengen release was designed to port over the Atari Games arcade version.

To be fair, the first console release of Tetris was in Japan on the Famicom (what was repackaged as the NES in the rest of the world) and was fairly close to one of the earlier PC releases. However the controls on the original Japanese Famicom version are what ultimately makes it a pain to play. Down on the directional pad rotates the currently falling block and the B button drops it - straight to the bottom, there's no gradual acceleration to the bottom, you hit B and it's at the bottom of the well. This takes away a lot of strategy of sliding tetrads into place since it's an agonizing and frustrating wait for them to get down to the level of the stack so you can position them. Another difference is you have "lives" in the Famicom version, when you top out your score is totaled and a life subtracted, then you begin again from the start of the level.

There is no two player option in the Nintendo version which single handily makes it far inferior to the Tengen port. It seems a lot of people view Tetris as a loner game or a game to simply waste time playing - killing an hour or so in your cubicle when you should be getting work done. Granted, Tetris was originally a single player computer game - but once the versus mode in the arcade and Tengen home version was created, it made the game competitive beyond the high score and that to me is what gives it longevity. Tetris in the arcade was always very much a social experience, playing head to head for points. What you did on your side didn't effect the other player (that wouldn't come into play until more recent ports) but it was always impressive to slam down row after row of blocks in quick succession while the other player and any onlookers notice who is playing better. Blame it on growing up at the end of Silicon Valley arcade culture I guess.

Quite a few gamers and retrogamers ended up only knowing of the Nintendo NES port of the game since most of the copies of the Tengen port had to be pulled from store shelves after it was revealed that Tengen did not own the rights to publish Tetris. Most NES collectors will come across a Tengen copy of Tetris every now and then however they're fairly hard to come by but not impossible to find. Everyone that enjoys Tetris owes it to themselves to check out the Tengen port of the arcade original, it's a totally different game than the Nintendo version the world was force fed and still holds up remarkably well to this day and cements Tengen as part of video game history.

"InsaneDavid" also runs a slowly growing gaming site at <http://www.classicplastic.net/dvgi>



Last month I focused on some of the arcade clones available for the TI-99/4A, those being Hopper, Carwars, and TI Invaders. Well, this month is going to follow in the footsteps of March's issue and will focus on Parsec, Alpinar, and Munchman which all are clones of arcades (Parsec is the exception, while not really a clone many people consider it to be inspired by Scramble). Before beginning, I must say that there are some very good titles being reviewed this month, so be sure to not just read the reviews but also pick up these games at your local thrift/flea market (or even eBay). These are all very common titles and should be easy enough for anyone to get their hands on and enjoy. Now off to the reviews...

### [Parsec \(1982 TI\)](#) - Inspired by "Scramble" (1981 Konami)

Hands down this is the cartridge that everyone thinks about when it comes to TI-99/4A gaming. Not only did it become TI's flagship game, but also it continues to be the most popular TI game cartridge out there (at least according to the number of hits the TI-99/4A Videogame House gets for Parsec every month!), and it doesn't take a genius to figure out why. With all of the features Parsec has to offer, in addition to the great gameplay, this cartridge is a must for anyone with or even without a TI-99/4A. If you are to play only one game on the TI system, this would be the one.



As can be seen from the screen shot to the right, Parsec is a space shoot 'em up where you take control of a little green ship called the U.S.S. Parsec. The game itself takes you through 7 waves of different enemies, which range from flying saucers and fast moving crafts all the way to meteors. To make things harder, each enemy craft has different abilities and some can't easily be shot down. For example, the smaller alien ships (such as the first wave of enemies) will just swoop down towards you on a collision course, but the bigger ships can actually shoot back at you. Knowing the abilities of the different enemies is key to the game, as you need to be ready and on guard at all times. In addition to the regular waves of enemies, there are the Killer Satellites which come after the asteroid belt beginning on level 4. These Killer Satellites act like bosses in the later levels and personally I have never made it past them, the addition of these enemies really help fuel the excitement of the game as I find myself on a mission to play up to level 4 just to fight them.

Now that you have an idea as to the enemies you face, you might be asking what makes Parsec any different than other space shooters? Well, it's all in the little extras that are tossed into the game. The first little extra that makes this game harder than its counterparts is the fact that your laser can actually overheat! That's right, if you hold down the fire button for too long your ship will start flashing red and eventually explode if you do not stop shooting. On the first levels overheating is usually not a problem, but later in the game when all the enemy crafts take more hits to destroy (and in addition your lasers will overheat easier), making sure you don't keep your finger on the fire button for too long can be a problem! On top of the fact that your lasers can overheat (which was an awesome addition, as it makes sure the player cannot simply blast his or her way through the game), there's also the problem of refueling. Now in a game like Scramble, all one would need to do in order to refuel the ship is blast a few fuel tanks resting at the bottom of the screen. However, the programmers of Parsec decided to try and make refueling a challenge of its own, because instead of simply shooting for fuel you have to navigate your ship through a long narrow tunnel where your tanks will in turn be filled. Doing this can prove very tricky, as just the slightest brush with the top or bottom of the tunnel will send you and your ship to never never land. Oh yeah, I should also mention that the further you make it in the game the twistier and longer the tunnels get! But luckily there is some good news, to make things a little easier for the player a Lift System is provided. This lift system gives an option of 3 different speeds that your ship can travel at: Lift 1 makes your ship move very slow but in turn can be maneuvered much more precisely (this is ideal for the refueling tunnels), Lift 2 is the middle speed which from what I have heard is good to use during the meteor belt stage, and Lift 3 is the fast speed that is ideal for battling the waves of alien ships that come at you. The lift system, in addition to the refueling tunnels and overheating lasers, really add more dimensions to this already great game.

Another factor that adds to the challenge of the game is the fact that in later levels, the number of hits you need to kill each enemy increases. Luckily for the player, however, is the fact that when level 3 is reached (and therefore it takes 3 hits to kill each enemy), the enemy crafts in future levels do not take any more hits to be destroyed. If this was not the case, you might have been shooting at a single enemy all night by the time level 16 rolled around! One interesting thing to note is that while the manual lists 16 levels for Parsec, I personally am not skilled enough to get past level 4, so if anyone knows what happens after level 16 let me know as I would love to hear about it! I have no idea if the game keeps looping or if the gameplay actually ends. BTW, there is a secret in Parsec which allows the player to warp to later levels: After the game says "Press Fire to Begin", crash one of your ships into

the ground instead of firing. This will cause the first wave of enemies to appear, and if you can blast through them without losing any lives there is a random chance of being warped to a further stage in the game. Note that the Warp Cheat does not work every time, so it may take a few tries before you manage to actually warp. It's pretty neat to try your luck at warping, one time I found myself on one of the Killer Satellite waves but sadly never managed to get past them.

One other neat feature in Parsec is the speech that occurs during gameplay. Some of the most famous TI-99/4A phrases come from here, such as "Press Fire to Begin". However, besides just being a neat little addition the speech actually serves a purpose. When you are approaching a wave of alien crafts or an astroid belt a woman's voice comes across and warns you of oncoming enemies. I guess it's all these little things that add up to elevate Parsec from being a good game to a great game and a must play for any video game enthusiast. As can be expected, Parsec makes my TOP 10 TI-99/4A cartridges list. So if you are interested in playing a good space shoot 'em up, then Parsec's for you!

**Alpiner (1982 TI) - - Clone of "Crazy Climber" (1980 Taito)**

This game is a clone of the Crazy Climber arcade which many people seem to love. Interestingly though, I've seen many comments from people that really enjoy Alpiner and those that really hate it, and personally I never could figure out why there was such a wide array of opinions for this game (compared to most others). In my opinion, Alpiner is pretty interesting since avoiding all of the mountain hazards can prove to be quite a challenge and also trying to steal those little "balls" from the various mountain animals is always a fun little side quest. The idea of Alpiner is similar to Crazy Climber in that you have to scale to the top of the mountain (in Crazy Climber's case it was a building) while avoiding all types of hazards along the way. At first the game may come off as too easy, but as you play your way to the 6th level (the tallest mountain) there will be a noticable increase in the level of difficulty. Therefore, don't write it off too soon.



When the game is started, you are presented with a listing of all 6 mountains that you must climb. Interestingly, not only do these mountains exist in the outside world (Hood, Matterhorn, Kenya, McKinnley, Garmo, and Everest), but the elevations given for each mountain are their actual heights. The fact that these details were payed attention to when programming the game is just one of the many things that I love about Alpiner (and probably one that many people overlook). Now when you make your way up each of these mountains there will be various obstacles in your way, which range from wild animals all the way to an Aboominable Snowman! The most common obstacles are the rockslides, avalanches, and rockfalls which can send you plummeting to your death below. Quick reflexes are often needed to avoid these falling dangers, as the only way to not get clobbered is to move your climber either down, left, right, or up on the screen. If you do manage to navigate your way through these falling objects, you will then find yourself coming upon various mountain animals. At the low elevations, skunks and snakes roam freely but luckily cannot do you any harm, although the skunks might make you smell bad! The one thing these creatures can do, however, is send you falling back a few steps down the mountain (making you lose some of the height that you had climbed). A little higher up the mountain there will be bears, bats, vultures, rams and mountain lions roaming about, but the only way they will harm you is if you happen to run into them (sometimes they might block part of the path up the mountain so you have to be careful getting around them). One neat little feature though is the fact that most of the animals dribble little balls in their paws. If you manage to grab the ball then bounus points will be awarded (note: the ball disappears and reappears, so if you happen to touch the animals claw instead you will be sent down the mountain). This is definitely a cool addition to the game, as it adds a little side quest on your trek to the summit. One other thing to note here is the fact that the vultures will not attack you unless you get too close to their baby birds (which are sitting in thier nest), but if you do get too close then the mother bird will come out across the screen and try to egg you!

Now of course, all of the animals mentioned above are ones that you might expect to find on a mountain. However, there is one more animal (or should I say monster?) that awaits for you atop Mt. Everest, and only Mt. Everest...the Abominable Snowman on skis! If he happens to ski right into you, that quickly ends one of your lives and in turn you will have to climb ALL the way back up Mt. Everest (and with an elevation of 8848 meters that's no easy thing!). However, if you manage to get past the snowman you will be victorious and then have to climb the 6 mountains again, only this time with more obstacles and harder terrain (more trees are added as you progress through the game which limits the paths you can take up to the summit). I have only managed to get to the second level Matterhorn and was never able to get beyond that, but according to the manual there are 3 levels of play (meaning you have to climb each mountain 3 times for a total of 18 climbs). Just like Parsec, it would be interesting to see what happens after the last level and if there might be any kind of actual conclusion to the game as it apparently does not keep looping around.

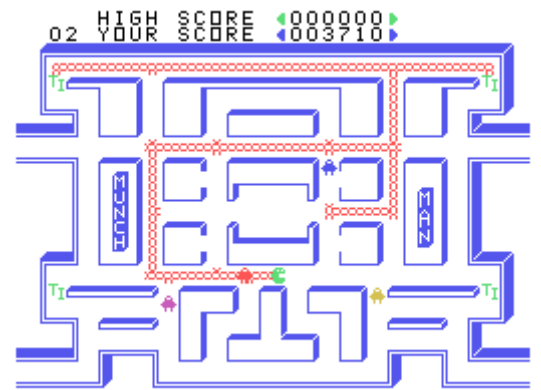
In addition to all the animals and falling hazards that plague your journey up the mountains there is

one more set of obstacles, that being the environment itself. Trees, stumps, and brush fires all can send you tumbling down to your doom, and in addition can act as blockades in your path. Therefore, you might find yourself having to go back down the mountain a small distance in order to find an open route up the mountain. Now that we have all of the baddies out of the way there are some notable additions to the game which help make it play stronger, such as the background music and the speech. The music played in the background during your climb is a nice little addition which helps move the game along, but the speech can either prove to be helpful or annoying. At various points during your climb the voice of a man or woman will come across either telling you that there are falling objects heading towards you (the phrase "Look Out!" is used quite often before you can even see the hazard on the screen) or insulting you for a bad move (the phrase "Did you mean to do that?" can be heard when you accidentally do something which causes you to plummet to your death). The speech is a welcome addition to the game and really helps add more excitement to it. BTW, just as a note you will need the separate speech synthesizer to hear the speech. The speech synthesizer plugs right into the TI-99/4A console on the side and is compatible with all the games that have speech available.

Phew! This was a longer review than I expected it to be, largely in part due to the fact that there are a ton of things going on in this game. Anyway, if you are a fan of Crazy Climber then be sure to give Alpiner a shot as you shouldn't be disappointed. A good player might be able to get through the first level of mountains, but just try getting through all 6 of them on levels 2 and 3!

### [Munchman \(1982 TI\)](#) - Clone of "Pac-Man" (1980 Namco)

Now I'm sure that everyone can tell this game is a clone of Pac-Man, the game that every system back in the early 80s seemed to have a variation of. But, luckily for all of you video game players out there Munchman is not a complete rip-off of Pac-Man as some other clones are. The one important twist Munchman changes from the original arcade is the fact that chains are layed down across the maze rather than gobbling up dots. This variation makes Munchman stand out somewhat from some others, and actually adds a little bit to the challenge of the game.



The object of the game is to cover the entire maze with a chain link, once completed you will move on to the next level. But standing in your way of connecting the entire maze are little creatures called Hoonos, which when touched will send you to munchman heaven. However, Munchman himself does have one weapon against these baddies and that is the energizer which will allow him to gobble any one of the Hoonos on the screen for a number of seconds. The game continues with Munchman running away from (or eating) the Hoonos through 60 levels of play, with each level getting increasingly more and more difficult due to the increasing speed of the enemies, decreasing speed of your Munchman, and the decreasing amount of time the energizer pills will allow you to eat an opponent.

So far, everything I have described sounds like it just came off of the Pac-Man arcade instructions, however, here are a few of the aspects which make the game more interesting than a straight Pac-Man clone. The first thing that will stand out is the chain link that you must spread across the screen. Now while this might not sound any more difficult than gobbling dots, it actually is. Sometimes, I have found myself looking for that broken link in the chain which is not easy to spot when it's just one missing section that you have to connect. The difficulty in having to search for a broken link in the chain is harder than it sounds, since it does not stand out as clearly as a dot would in Pac-Man and in turn helps make Munchman a little bit more complex (which is nice considering that I am always looking for a challenge!). Another unique aspect to Munchman that really adds to the game is the fact that the Hoonos chasing you change from level to level! That's right, these are not just the same enemies chasing you around the screen through all 60 levels. Hoonos can range from little bouncing robots (BTW, the Hoonos are animated too) all the way to swirling tornados. I've many times found myself playing Munchman through the night just to try and get a glimpse at all of the enemies in the game since there are some really interesting guys (I especially like the ones that look like chomping robotic dog heads).

In addition to changing enemies, there are also little phases displayed in the center of the screen after completing each level. Phrases such as "Link-It!" and "Good Work", while minimal, are just one of the extras tossed into the game to encourage the player to keep on playing. One thing that should also be mentioned is the fact that even though the maze never changes through gameplay (well, it does turn invisible in later levels), the colors of the maze change every 3 levels. This helps add some variety so that you are not looking at the same exact maze everytime. In my opinion, the changing color of the maze along with the changing Hoonos really help make the game differ enough between levels that it never becomes boring at any time.

As can be seen, Munchman is not just your standard Pac-Man clone since it offers enough variations on the arcade original to warrant game play by even those who have played Pac-Man to death. In addition, Munchman even has a cheat mode where you can set which level you want to start at and the number of munchmen you wish to have (which can be read about at

[www.videogamehouse.net/munchman.html](http://www.videogamehouse.net/munchman.html)). This is especially good for those players who find the early levels too easy and want to start later on in the game for more of a challenge. One last bit of info that should be of interest to the classic video game collector/player is the fact that Munchman was initially supposed to gobble dots in the maze (and hence the name "MUNCHman"), but was later changed when TI thought it was too close to the arcade original (screen shots from the original version can also be found on the Munchman link provided above). So even though Munchman might just be another game in that long list of Pac-Man clones, it is one that is definitely worth checking out and one that I highly recommend due to all the variations and secrets it has to offer!

For more reviews, graphics, and information on TI-99/4A video game cartridges stop by the TI-99/4A Videogame House at <<http://www.videogamehouse.net/>>. This site is run by a staff of TI-99/4A enthusiasts, including Bryan Roppolo himself and has been responsible for finding unreleased TI-99/4A video game cartridges such as Lobster Bay.

NEW VIC 20 GAMES

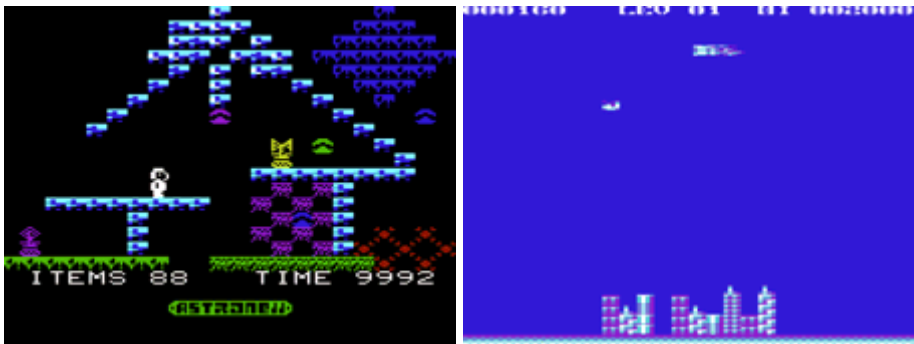
by [Tonks](#)

It would easily be 20 years since I have seen a new Vic 20 game being sold in a Computer shop. I got my first Vic 20 in 1983. The very next year the Vic was discontinued and new games dried up completely. The last new game I ever saw sitting on a store shelf was during a post Christmas clearance sale at the very beginning of 1985. Game listings in magazines lasted about another year. And that was it - the end of the line for new Vic 20 games.

So imagine my surprise when I discovered that a software label was planning on selling at least 2 brand new Vic 20 games. I'm not talking about simple PD style games. I'm talking about proper commercial games released on tape with full professional packaging. You might think I've been dreaming or that I am pulling your leg (an Aussie slang term for playing a trick on you). Well I am telling you the honest truth.

Cronosoft is a game publisher from the UK who specialises in releasing brand new games for retro consoles and computers. They have already released games for the Commodore 64 and Sinclair Spectrum to rave reviews. Now it is the Vic 20's turn.

Not a lot of information is available, and little more than a couple of screen shots have been released by Cronosoft themselves. But taking the quality of Cronosoft's previous games into consideration, all Vic 20 fans can set their hopes high.



Astro NellLunar Blitz

The first game being released is called "Astro Nell". It is a platform game with some very similar elements to the classic Manic Miner and Jet Set Willy games. Graphics are colourful and reasonably detailed. The finished game is claimed to have 20 levels and will run on an unexpanded Vic.

The second game is called "Lunar Blitz". There is even less information available about this game than "Astro Nell". From the screen shots available it seems to be based on the classic blitz games where you must bomb and flatten the city while your bomber flies over the city gradually flying lower and lower. "Lunar Blitz" will require 8k expansion.

For further Vic 20 development, these first two games will need to sell reasonably well so Cronosoft will know there is a viable market for new Vic 20 games. So come on Vic 20 fans, log onto [cronosoft.co.uk](http://cronosoft.co.uk) and make an order when the games are finished and ready for release. In the mean time I will hopefully find out more and report in these pages as information comes to hand.

The Thrill of Defeat: The First Home Computers

by [Mark Sabbatini](#)

Sure it's annoying Windows computers require endless bug fixes and Macs are pricey fashion statements lacking software. But imagine a machine requiring days of assembly, made more

frustrating by missing and surplus parts.

The early era of home computers beginning in the mid 1970s may be the most nostalgic, since users were rare and forced to be far more hands-on with their hardware than subsequent generations. The ads alone probably scared off most people: instead of fruity futuristic plastics and alien-embellished towers, pictures of circuit boards and phrases like "firmware in PROMS" were the industry's idea of catchy marketing.

With many of these machines you didn't bring home a box. You brought home the board and surrounded it with your own. In some cases (no pun intended) this resulted in some of the most charming desktop setups ever (see the wood Apple I case built by one user).

Hobbyists purchasing the Altair 8800, Sol-20 and original Apple I almost certainly didn't have games near the top of their list of planned activities. The Altair didn't even have a screen, just a panel of LED lights that responded to a series of switches flipped on the front panel. When a lunar lander game was written for it, decisions were entered step-by-step and printer gave a clipped technical narrative of the ship's progress.

By this standard, video game consoles of the era offering titles like Pong, Breakout and Skeet Shoot were recreational accomplishments of Homeric proportions.

Those able to get past the hump of typing get-acquainted-with-your-machine lines like "0 : A9 b 0 b AA <RET>" eventually discovered entertainment of greater depth, if not flash, was possible. Many titles were adoptions of mainframe text games such as "Hammurabi" and "Hunt The Wumpus," detailed in January's RTM. An excellent source of these is the "Creative Computing" series of BASIC game books found at [www.atariarchives.org](http://www.atariarchives.org), which feature instructions, program listings and sample games. On a more advanced level were text adventures requiring weeks to solve, strategy titles that didn't need graphics for an interesting one- or two-player challenge, and even arcade games that (sometimes) did an ingenious job of making ordinary letters act like invaders from space.

Now the confession: I never got a chance to play games on the original machines, nor have I had much luck configuring emulators to do a thorough modern-day evaluation. Some criticize emulators as lacking the real experience, but much of what I've gone through the past few weeks is a little too authentic: typing in long listings of BASIC and machine language code, only to have nothing happen when trying to run it. This was common in the old days since a single typo was usually enough to cause a malfunction or crash, but emulators also have the additional irritation of sometimes inexact machine replication and spotty file-saving systems. So my ability to offer reviews and information about playing games for these systems is limited.

Luckily, there are devout users of just about everything electronic, with a number of publications and Web sites helping provide the listings below (giving credit where due in all cases, I hope - if someone feels I missed them, let me know). Links and resources for playing some of the titles are also provided. Most are for the Sol-20 because it proved to have the largest and easiest to access library of software and documents. Also, to my untrained eye the titles appear to be the best available among the machines featured here.

## ALTAIR 8800

This 1975 machine is considered the first successful microcomputer, selling thousands of machines (the builder hoped to sell 200) before quickly being bypassed by better machines the following year.

The \$400 kit featured a 2 Mhz Intel 8800 processor, 256 bytes of memory (equal to about a long paragraph of text) expandable to 64K, input through a set of front panel switches and a display consisting of a series of LEDs. Input and output consisted of the most basic computer data possible: binary. Programs were a series of zeros ("off") and ones ("on"). That's still the case today, but obviously elaborate operating systems and programming languages do all the hard work.



A Creative Computing magazine review of the machine lavished praise on it despite the fact parts were missing from the kit and others appeared to be surplus when it was assembled. It seemingly assumed most people buying the machine would be able to figure out what was missing, buy them at the local electronics store and complete the job.

Primitive as the Altair was, it should be noted a Popular Electronics article describing it also had a feature in the same issue about building a calculator for less than \$90. And, much like DOS machines a decade later, numerous companies came up with products designed to make the end-user experience easier, such as keyboards, video displays and a device that read programs in a paper-

tape format.

Because it was capable of running BASIC and CP/M, a number of simple text-based games seen on many other machines were available. One of the more entertaining to read about is:

**Lunar Lander**

"You had a certain amount of fuel and you could instruct the computer to do rocket burns to brake the descent," noted John McVeigh, technical editor of Popular Electronics in '70s, in a January 2005 interview. "The teletypewriter would print out a profile of the trajectory. However, the teletypewriter was so noisy that some of the other Ziff-Davis staffers (we shared an office suite with Stereo Review) started complaining about the noise, so Leslie had to keep his door closed when the thing was running."

**APPLE I**

Stop me if you've heard this pitch: Spend a few hundred bucks for a remarkably small base machine, plug in a keyboard and display, and enjoy a "hassle free" and "extremely powerful" computer.

The Mac Mini is hailed as a breakthrough, but has strange similarities to the first machine produced by Steve Jobs and his Apple brethren. Advertising for the original 1976 computer even goes into similar details about features lacking in the competition such as a dedicated video card and near silent operation.

"Since you'll be looking at letters and numbers instead of just LED's, the door is open to all kinds of alphanumeric software (i.e., Games and BASIC)," one ad notes.

Still, this was a long ways from the "Hello world" friendliness of the Mac since users still didn't get anything beyond a circuit board. The BASIC manual was an example early computing quirkiness, containing classic warnings such as "(this manual) will most likley (sic), contain errors, incorrect wordings, etc." As their first hands-on step, users were told to type the following to display available characters on the screen: "0 : A9 b 0 b AA b 20 b EF b FF b 08 b 8A b 4C b 2 b 0."

The Apple I might best be thought of as a smudged rough draft of the Apple II that took the home and education market by storm the following year and established the company as an industry giant. It featured a 6502 processor that became the heart of many popular machines (including the Apple II), 4K of RAM, a cassette interface capable of loading a 4K program in 20 seconds and 1K of video memory to enable a display of 40X24 uppercase characters.

The price was \$666.66. Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, in a 1999 interview, denied any Satanic connection - he said the Apple I cost about \$540 to make and the "all-six" pricing seemed like an eye-catching and reasonable markup.

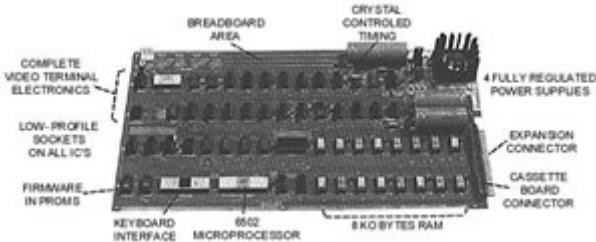
Games seemed largely to be translations and variations of titles like "Star Trek" and "Mastermind" found in publications like Creative Computing. Those wanting a taste of gaming on the machine can use the Pom1 emulator, which comes with the following:

**Little Tower**

This text adventure is one of the few games I was able to review hands-on. It's an average title by the standards of the day - admittedly low - with about an equal number of pluses and minuses canceling each other out. The storyline is unremarkable, although many programmers seem to have varied little from the explore the forest/castle/cave concept during the past three decades. Probably the best feature of Little Tower is the built-in instructions and command list, since too many adventures forced gamers to play "guess what the programmer is thinking" by solving problems with unlikely commands like "BRAID FRONDS." The worst is a frequent sin of text adventure games - the sudden, illogical and unavoidable death for innocent acts such as moving to a location for the first time. Death ought to be result of player neglect - Zork, for example, warns players they'll get eaten in they stay in a dark location, giving them a turn or two to escape their predicament. Also, the game unglamorously dumps the user out of the program if they die, with no option to restart.

**KIM-1**

Mentioned in passing because, like the Apple I, this was the initial offering from a company who soon afterward produced a consumer market hit. Commodore acquired the machine from MOS Technology and began selling it in 1976, a year before introducing the truly all-in-one PET, which many consider



the world's first "real" home computer (an in-depth review of its games will be in a future issue). The KIM-1 was a hobbyist machine with its six-LED display and hexadecimal keypad, but had one feature associated with Commodore's more famous machines: a low price tag - in this case \$245. The computer featured 1K of RAM, a 1 Mhz 6502 processor, a cassette interface and came assembled. There were games for it such as "Lunar Lander" and "Chess," but I know nothing about them. The KIM-1 can be simulated through the MESS emulator ([www.mess.org](http://www.mess.org)) and a listing of the chess program, for any soul brave enough to attempt entering it, is at [www.floodgap.com/retrobits/ckb/secret/uchess.txt](http://www.floodgap.com/retrobits/ckb/secret/uchess.txt).

SOL-20

As is often the case with technology, the best comes last.

The Sol-20, a 1976 machine by Processor Technology, drew raves for its relative ease-of-use. Creative Computing ran a review called "The Sol-20: Simple Enough For A Six-Year-Old," stating "perhaps the best testimony comes from three children, ages 6, 7 and 8 who simply follow a set of instructions completely on their own to run their programs."

The instructions were hardly intuitive - loading a program might consist of typing in a series of commands such as "TC," "TXEQ BASIC/1" and "XEQ-CAI" - but were superior to long lines of programs in hexadecimal format.

The machine featured an Intel 8080 processor; 2K of RAM expandable to 65K; 1K of video memory supporting a 64X16 display, a 1,200 baud cassette interface and an 80-key keyboard. One of the most notable feature was the ability to plug-in "Personality Modules" - chips resembling cartridges without a case - that added various programming commands and capabilities.

Although the Sol-20 was one of the biggest successes of the moment, Processor Technology eventually became one of the losers in the home computing wars because it lacked a successful successor product. Similar problems would plague companies ranging from tiny startups to industry giants like Atari. Even survivors like Apple experienced similar struggles, missing on the Apple III and Lisa machines, but the overwhelming popularity of the Apple II allowed its increasingly outdated technology to keep the company afloat until the Macintosh took hold.

A relatively large number of games can be found for those running emulated versions of the Sol-20, with [www.thebattles.net/sol20/sol.html](http://www.thebattles.net/sol20/sol.html) being an excellent resource. Many details of the games below come from that site, plus articles in Creative Computing and Popular Electronics.

STARTING UP

1. Turn on computer and TV set, upper case should be lit

2. Plug in cassette recorder

3. If tape is not rewound,

A. Press "REW" on recorder

B. Type TC␣ (␣ =Return Key)

C. When tape is rewound, press "MODE SELECT"

4. Press "PLAY" on recorder

5. Type TXEQ BASIC/1␣

Screen should say: Sol BASIC-5 READY

6. Type XEQ-CAI␣

(Addition drill and practice)

7. Press "MODE SELECT" To exit program

6a. Type XEQ-MULTI␣

(Multiplication and division)

7a. Press "MODE SELECT" to exit

6b. Type XEQ-GUESS␣

(Guessing game)

7b. Press "MODE SELECT" to exit

To restart a program, Type "RUN" key

To clear an error, Type "DEL" key

Tape Counter

0-25

25-28

28-32

32-35

SHUTTING DOWN

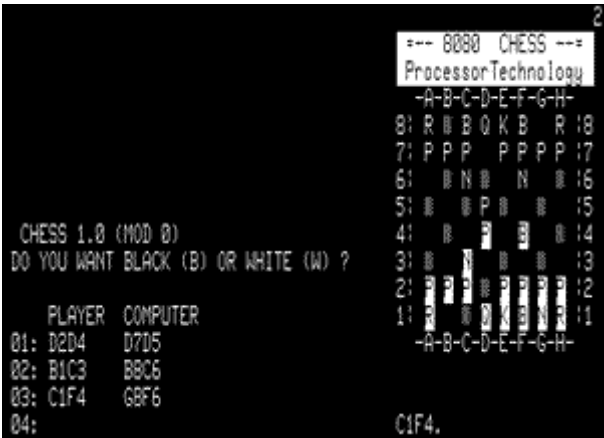
1. Press "STOP" on recorder

2. Turn off computer and TV set

3. Unplug recorder



ATC



Chess

ATC

An air traffic controller simulator that Paul Schaper at [www.thebattles.net](http://www.thebattles.net) describes as "the best game I ever found for the Sol." I can't comment specifically on this version, but it appears to be similar to versions for a number of other computers where players issue simple commands to have planes land, take off and hover without colliding. Difficulty levels on many versions controlled the number of planes, weather conditions and, in some cases, how quickly real-time action progressed.

Chase

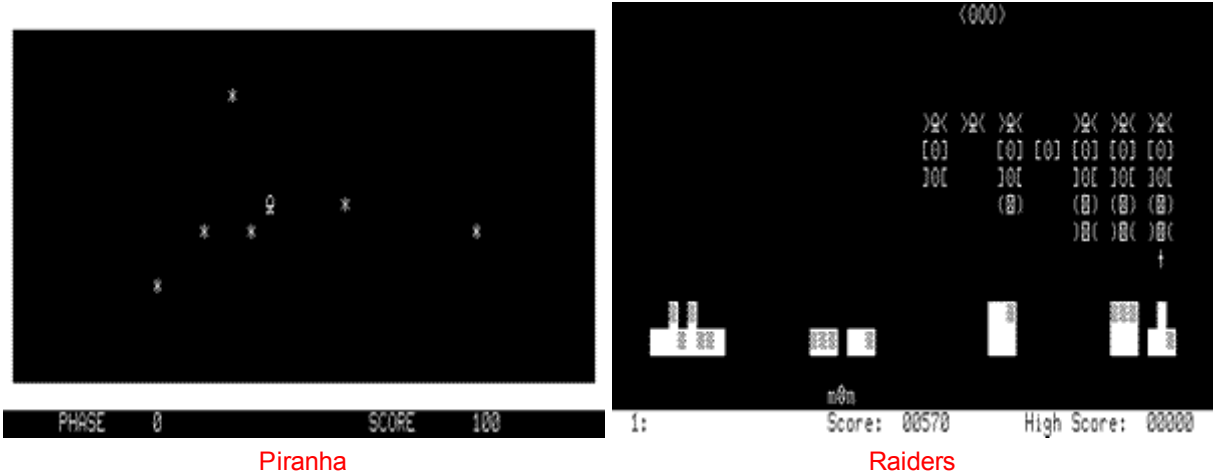
Imagine the classic arcade game Berserk as a step-by-step strategy game, minus the ability to shoot them. Instead you move through the room trying to lure robots into electric walls while avoiding them and other obstacles. It was published in a newsletter for CP/M, a business-oriented operating system that was dominant until DOS and Windows came along.

Chess

Another description from Schaper: "A middle of the road chess program at the time. Good for their first effort. It outperformed all the other chess programs I had for the Sol (I never got any of the CP/M ones) but Zargon ran circles around PTs chess." Zargon, eventually available on virtually every major platform, would for years be the standard by which all other personal computer chess games were matched.

Galaxy

A puzzle game from the newsletter Processor Tech Access. The description: "You try to 'shoot stars' (flip bits) to change the starting pattern to the goal pattern." Sounds like a Rubik's Cube or the game of Life with a cannon.



Piranha

A sort-of original game resembling BASIC programs I typed in and played throughout the 1980s - simple, mindless and fun. Piranhas that look remarkably like asterisks move around the screen - sometimes at random, sometimes not - and the player simply tries to avoid them.

Raiders

This is supposedly a good Space Invaders clone using letters instead of graphics, although one of the more interesting historical aspects is the acclaim given programmer Steve Maguire ("the source code is worth looking at - beautiful"). Considerations such as programming techniques and efficiency were at least as important to many users as entertainment value.

Targ

Billed as the program that made the Sol famous. Players shoot spaceships created from ASCII characters - hardly an original concept - bit it's also possible to get sound effects by placing an AM radio near the display (an audio sample can be heard at [www.thebattles.net/sol20/targ\\_am.mp3](http://www.thebattles.net/sol20/targ_am.mp3)). It's essentially random low-pitched static, but works well for space and tank games. Similar techniques would be used to generate sound on "silent" computers such as the Sinclair ZX-81.

Target

A CP/M game with the following user group description: "Your player is in a fixed location on the left side of the screen and you attempt to shoot a bouncing object on the right side of the screen. It is quite inane."

A few others I know about only through the screenshots here are Pac-Man, race car and Star Wars adaptations.

Next month the real meat of this series begins (and gets back to more familiar territory for me) with a month-by-month look at individual machines. It begins with those introduced about the same time as the Apple II in 1977 and, while some enjoyed a decent run of success, they ultimately got left in the dust by their fruity foe.



That's going to do it for this month. Hopefully next issue we'll have more cool columns, rad reviews, and other stuff. Again I apologize for the short issue, but after all sometimes less is more. See ya!

- [Adam King](#), Chief Editor

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