Retrogaming Times Monthly

Issue #14 - July 2005

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Press Fire to Start

by Adam King

Welcome to another issue of Retrogaming Times Monthly. Featuring another bountiful buffet of retrogaming goodness. We have some fairly large articles this month, so let's not waste any more time and dive right in.

Before we begin I should tell you that because of time and space constraints, there's no Retrogaming Commercial Vault this month but it will return next month. I also have a couple of articles that have been pushed back as well.

Syntax Era: Game On! USA

by Scott Jacobi

File this one under "the coolest video game mag you probably didn't read."

Game On! USA's publishing cycle occurs considerably later than any of the other magazines I have ever covered for RTGM. 1996 to be precise, making it new enough to possibly not considered retro. Bare with me though, this one is definitely worth examining. So much so that I couldn't wait to get to it. The subtitle for the magazine was "The Magazine of Electronic Manga Gaming." If that doesn't scream niche market, I don't know what does. However, don't forget that in 1996, the video game market was still largely driven by Japanese concepts. Capcom's Street Fighting license was still in its hey-day, while the Neo-Geo market was following close behind. The light was beginning to fade for the 16 bit generation while it was only just beginning to shine for their 32-bit (and 64-bit in Nintendo's case) replacements. The American Sony marketing machine would slowly morph the video game market landscape from a Japanese dominated one into the more American contributed market that we see today, but in '96, it's safe to say that that hadn't happened yet.

So perhaps a magazine about Electronic Manga Gaming was quite appropriate. I happened to think so. So when I ran across the debut issue with a large picture of Super Street Fighter II's Cammy gracing the cover, I had to know what this magazine was all about. Totaling 80 pages, it was a decent sized magazine, but what was this? Pages 18 through 72 were nothing but comic books of not one, but TWO video games, the first centered around none other than Cammy, and the second was about Samurai Shodown. That left less than 30 pages for any other content, but that was ok, the comics, or manga, was quite a treat! And they promised more of the same every issue! I was sold.

The content of that first issue was quite impressive as well. It included a 6 page overview of the Street Fighter series, including a "sneak preview" of Street Fighter Alpha 2. I know not every reader was a big Street Fighter fan, but I was pretty hardcore about it, so this was perfect mind candy. After some news bits came an article that examined how in America, it is common for comic book characters to become video game material while in Japan, it's the other way around. And after some new game reviews came an article that beat Capcom and SNK to the punch by about 4 years, an examination of a dream fight between SF2's Ryu and Fatal Fury's Terry Bogard. It wouldn't become a reality until

2000 when Capcom vs SNK finally hit the arcades.

And on it went. Issue 2 continued the saga of Cammy and Samurai Shodown in pencils and ink, while it examined Virtua Fighter 2 and Battle Arena Tohshinden 2 in print, as well as pitting Sarah and Sophia from each of those games respectively, along with Nina Williams from Tekken (and more recently, Death by Degrees) in a dream battle entitled "Three Rom Blondes." Issue 3 continued the manga series, and featured an incredible expose of SNK, an interview with Namco about Tekken 2, and a fictional interview with three famous video game girls, Chun-Li (SF2), Jill Valentine (Resident Evil), and Yuko Aso of Valis of all games. Issue 4 featured the first change up of mangas to be presented. While Samurai Shodown continued, Cammy was given a break in favor of a Battle Arena Tohshinden issue. True to form, Game On! was back with a fabulous article on Square previewing the much hyped and soon to be released Final Fantasy 7.

Interestingly, I have in my collection of issues, two copies of issue number 5. Apparently, the first issue that they sent me contained a printing error and was missing several of the beginning and ending pages, only containing the comic "meat" without the article "bread" that made up the usual Game On! sandwich. They sent me a replacement thankfully. The FULL issue contained, in preparation for the eminent launch of the N64, a great feature about all things Nintendo, from Mario to Shigeru Miyamoto, including an interview with Howard Lincoln. In this issue, the Cammy manga returned alongside the Samurai Shodown manga, and the Ranma 1/2 fighting game for the Playstation was given a special review. Issue 6 took its focus off Nintendo, and on to their once rival, Sega, and examined the production of Virtua Fighter 3. In addition to the manga's and usual reviews, it contained a number of Game Genie codes for the Japanese only released Final Fantasy V for the Super Famicom.

If you're worried that I'm going to do this with every single issue, well, you're right, but fear not for the end is near. Issue 7 represents the sudden and disappointing end to a series I was truly enjoying. I anxiously awaited every issue, but there wouldn't be anymore after this one. Issue 7 returned to Square to take a detailed look at one of the most imaginative and exceptional fighting games for the Playstation, Tobal No. 1 (beaten only by the Japanese released Tobal No. 2, which fortunately has been given an English translation. Check http://home.comcast.net/~hairraiser/Tobal2/index.html) Not only was it worth looking at because Square produced it (it was designed and developed by a team called Dream Factory made of ex-Sega and ex-Namco employees), the characters were designed by famous Manga creator and author Akira Toriyama, known for his Dragon Ball series as well as character designs for the Dragon Quest/Warrior series and Chrono Trigger among many other things.

Despite another great Samurai Shodown manga and the conclusion to the Cammy series, that sad news was that issue 7 would be Game On!'s final issue... in print. They were moving to the web, which meant no more mangas. Like many other sites in the 90s, that also meant spotty connections and (very) infrequent updates. The move to the web didn't thrill me. For one thing, unlike these magazines that I'm reviewing, I can't look at the content or tell you what it even was. In print is forever (presumably, with good care) and that's just one of the reasons I enjoy these magazines so much. The link they provide to you in the magazine now simply takes you to the homepage of anime and manga producer Viz, who was responsible for publishing the magazine. This magazine represented a large portion of what I always loved about video games, the life of a game's universe outside the cartridge or optical disk. The news bits and reviews usually focused on lesser known Japanese RPGs or fighters, especially if they were based on an anime or manga license. If you're looking to find these gems for your own personal collection, as far as rarity goes, they're off the chart. But a quick search on eBay just might net you a copy for very little money. Recently, I have seen three issues for sale for three dollars each, so look around if Japanese gaming and manga is your thing. See you next month. Game On!

ColecoNation

by Nathan Kozlowski

Call me close-minded, uninformed, out-dated, or just plain crazy, but I think that the ColecoVision is the champ. I realize that it wasn't the first, the most popular, or the most powerful. I'm aware that it pales in comparison to the technological marvels of today. However, all of this doesn't matter, because the CV is the best. What's my proof? Well, I really don't have any, because my conviction comes more from a psychological then a logical source. You must understand. I've been diagnosed as a Coleco-centric.

This condition of mine, it was a gift from my father. Who knows what possessed him to go to the local Montgomery Wards in the winter of 1983 and buy a ColecoVision for $128.39 (he kept all of his receipts). What made him pass by the Atari and Intellivision displays that fateful night? The reason has been lost in the sands of time but my future was forever changed by that solitary act. I grew up, matured (relatively speaking) but the ColecoVision was always there, plugged into my television. While my friends and classmates followed the latest video game consoles, I remained faithful to the CV.

I'm not ashamed of my condition, because I know I'm not alone. Currently, eight new games are for

sale, over ten are currently in development, and talk of new hardware and accessories is popping up on the forums. This third-wave system continues to surprise the competition and yet it is given little media attention. My hope is that this column will be a place where people can go for reviews, news, and interviews regarding the ColecoVision. It will honor its past, but more importantly celebrate its present and future. It's an ambitious goal, but I'm up for the challenge as long as I have your help. Email me at **ColecoNation@yahoo.com** and let the ColecoNation be heard!

This month I will be reviewing Sky Jaguar, a top-down shooter brought to us by Opcode Games. While this is not their most recent release, it's the game I've been playing the most frequently and thus caught my attention. Sky Jaguar was initially released in March 2004 at PhillyClassic 5. The game uses the joystick controller and is for one player. The cartridge, with a rom size of 24K, was programmed by Eduardo Mello. The packaging was designed by Dale Crum and the manual text was by Jess Ragan. You can get it directly from Opcode for $22 (+ship).

Released as an arcade coin-op in 1984 by Konami, Sky Jaguar was the little brother of Xevious that no one ever talked about. It was ported to the MSX computer in 1984, whose version was then ported to the ColecoVision in 2004. While the inner-workings of the MSX are very similar to the Adam computer, the difficulty in bringing its games to the ColecoVision is an issue of rom size more than anything. A major factor that allowed this game to be ported over was due to it being an early release of the MSX (a system's initial games are historically smaller in size than its later ones). Lucky for us, this made it relatively easy to bring this unknown classic to a larger audience.

Screen courtesy of Opcode Games

Sky Jaguar is set in a future where Earth, part of a unified solar system, is clean out of resources and looking for a new planet that has low mortgage rates and good schools. Unfortunately, the Zephrians have showed up from out-of-galaxy and want the Earth for free. To show that they mean business those punks destroyed Miranda, a colonized satellite on the edge of the solar system (not the girl with pony tails that sat next to you in first grade), and parked their flying fortresses on your property. So what do you do? You jump in to your Sky Jaguar and fight back, of course.

Sharing a similar concept with games like Xevious and 1942, you navigate a ship over a slowly moving landscape while attempting to shoot everything that comes at you. The game consists of eight scenes, with "bosses" appearing at the ends of scenes three and eight. Once you've completed all the scenes, you start again from the beginning but face increased levels of difficulty (very similar to the early NES games like Super Mario Bros). It would've been nice to have a congratulatory screen to mark your accomplishment (like with Gorf), but your only prize is another wave of ships, meaner than before.

Many have stated that Sky Jaguar is too difficult to play and enjoy. I once felt this way, but now I realize that it's not so much difficult as it is intense. Your ship can only shoot as fast as you can press the button and, with no rapid fire, pause features, or a "Player 2" to give you a break, this can quickly wear you down. The waves of enemies are unrelenting, attacking faster and with more fire power the farther you advance through the scenes. This intensity can become frustrating if you let it overcome you, but once you start to understand the gameplay it becomes a very enjoyable challenge. There appears to be a conscious effort to stagger the waves of enemy ships, often alternating difficult challenges with easier adversaries, and the vital "power-ups" are also spaced out well throughout the scenes. Games that plateau at a certain level (as in Coleco's Donkey Kong) become stale over time, but ones like Sky Jaguar that continually test your abilities with increasing tasks will always remain entertaining.

The graphics are only hurt by the rough scrolling of the landscape, which is a necessary evil of the ColecoVision's hardware, but only really shows where there is dominant horizontal elements. The ocean and forest scenes run relatively smoothly and the red canyon landscape is simply amazing. Minimal sound and music may have been a result of size restrictions, but I think having music only at the start and after the destruction of the "bosses" was well done. With each ship having a different sound, as well as your laser fire, the addition of music during this would have been distracting in an already overwhelming game. The attention to detail with the packaging of the game is also noteworthy. The customized "Opcode" cartridges and detailed written material all add to the professionalism of the product.

Sky Jaguar is a great addition to the ColecoVision library of games. The fluid and challenging gameplay is rivaled by few and the graphics and sound give us a good idea of the true capabilities of this game system. I give this game an **A** and encourage everyone to try it out. Just be sure to use a controller that can keep up with the frenzied pace.

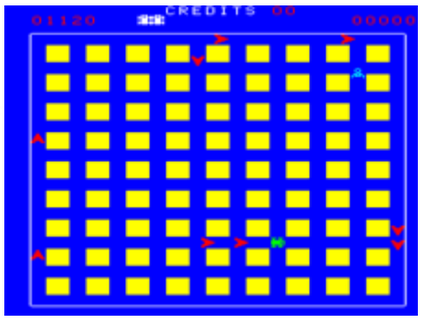
I hope you enjoyed the maiden voyage of ColecoNation as much as I did writing it. My mission is to

make ColecoNation as interesting, extensive, and accurate as possible so email me with any questions, suggestions, or comments you might have about the column. Thanks for paying attention and not misbehaving, you all get gold stars for the day.

The Many Faces of . . . Targ (Actually, Crossfire)

by Alan Hewston

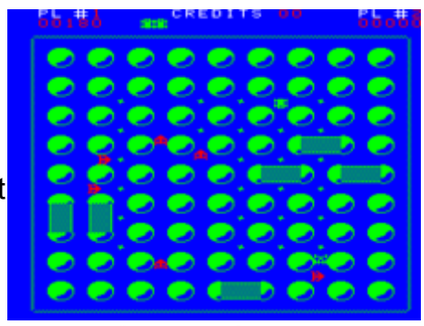
This month we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the arcade game "Targ". But there is a twist to this month's Many Faces. This 1980 Exidy title was never officially released to any classic home systems, so we'll do the next best thing, and review "Crossfire", a game somewhat similar to "Targ" and just as addictive. Let's begin with some background on Targ but ultimately focus on Crossfire. First, there was Targ, the arcade game, then its sequel "Spectar", then the Atari 2600 port of Targ by CBS, then onto 2600 "Universal Chaos", and finally Crossfire - by Sierra Online Systems.



Targ arcade screen

Targ is played on a 10 X 10 city block (grid) where all the action takes place on the streets of the Crystal City. There are 10 Targ ram ships all out to get you. Each round, you, the Heroic Wummel, begins in the lower right corner, whereas the Targ ships begin along the left edge of the screen, one in each row. None of the enemies have any weapons, rather, they attempt to ram you, and any contact means you lose your Wummel. The Targ ram ships are always in motion and cannot stop, they move in a search pattern to crash into you or at least to get behind you. The Targ are easily eliminated by one shot from your unlimited supply, but you only get one shot at a time, and must wait for it to hit an enemy or reach the edge of the screen. The other challenge that you have is that your shots can only be fired the direction you are moving, and it is very hard (i.e. slow) to turn around and fire behind you. When 2 or 3 ram ships remain, they become smarter and at least one is faster in its pursuit. The final Targ is always at full speed and will fake you out in an attempt to get behind - which pretty much means you are dead.

You can move at 2 different speeds - half and full speed. From a stop, any direction (L/R/U/D) you push the stick will move you that way at half speed. Pushing that same direction again will double your speed - to your maximum. From the max speed, pushing the stick in reverse will then slow you down, then again will stop you, and again send you the other direction etc. But as mentioned before, it is not a quick sequence to reverse directions. Going through any intersection, you maintain your speed when going straight, or turning left or right. You only slow down by reversing your direction and will be stopped when you hit the end of the street without turning. The enemy ships are worth 10 points each (times the level number) and when all 10 are eliminated, the level ends, and a bonus of 1,000 points (times the level number) are awarded. I think the max level bonus is X 9 - as that is what was ported onto the 2600 version. There is one additional enemy called the "Spectar Smuggler". Occasionally, you'll hear a siren, and then see a visual change to one building (city block). A few moments later the "Spectar" shows up at an adjacent intersection and begins moving about searching for you as well. Once again, no enemy has no fire power, but it looks different than the ram ships and cannot match your top speed. You do not have to eliminate it to complete, but on early levels, you'll want to, as it is worth (100 to 500) more points than other Targ. Only one Spectar can be present at a time, and with each level all Targs get smarter and faster.



Spectar arcade screen

The Exidy sequel to Targ, "Spectar", also came out in 1980. The premise is the same, with the same 10 X 10 grid and same enemies, but now there are randomly placed blockades connecting several of the city blocks to one another (thus no passage in between). The size and number of total blockades increases as the levels increase. There's new added bonuses, twirling stars, which fill up the inner most 6 X 6 blocks of the city and can be collected for more points. Either destroying all the Targs, or collecting all the stars will end each level.

Atari 2600 Targ was licensed to CBS and targeted for a September 1983 release, showing up in catalogs and at the '83 CES. Despite having completed the programming, the great videogame crash and declining sales likely prevented its release. Along came Telegames, who bought out and/or otherwise ended up with the CBS stock (and this prototype), made some graphical changes (like eliminating the CBS logo) and released it under a new name, "Universal Chaos". The origins of Universal Chaos were not confirmed by our VG community until recently, when Digital Press team member, Scott Silphen found the missing link, a CBS Targ prototype, which he shared at the 2004 CGE. A comparison of the game codes revealed that besides the graphics changes, they are nearly identical, with the only other difference being the (earlier) CBS prototype did not have the Spectar Smuggler active in the game, but it was programmed in. For the purposes of our 2600 review, we'll use the fully functional "Universal Chaos" ROM. An exercise for our readers is to play both versions via emulation and tell us if there are any other subtle changes.

Finally we come to "Crossfire", which you may have heard referred to as an unlicensed, home port of Targ. It is very similar at a glance, but I think you'll agree that Crossfire is pretty much a unique game, and most likely Sierra Online did as well. Even if it had its roots as Targ, it was changed significantly, to eliminate any risk of a lawsuit. Specifically, in Targ, all enemies are present and on the streets in pursuit of you at all times. In Crossfire there are 11 sets of 4 enemies by location, which must deploy before they pursuit you. In Targ, no enemies can fire weapons at you, but they do early and often in Crossfire. In Targ, you can only fire the direction you are moving in, but in Crossfire you can move one direction while simultaneously firing in another. The name says it all - as you are caught in the crossfire.

Home Version Similarities in Crossfire: Except those in <> all home versions have: a demo; a pause <AP2>, bonus ship/life every 5k <Vic 20 ? AP2 ?>; a 6 X 5 city block playfield (grid) that you and the enemies traverse; begin each round/life on the lower right side of the screen with your maximum allotment of missiles, which is 35 for round one; in subsequent rounds your maximum is decreased by 5 per round until round 5 where you begin with 15; any time in the game that you have 10 remaining, an icon appears at a random intersection which must be ran over - as the only means to re-supply your missiles; the enemies all begin off the grid and behind the buildings, 3 along the left edge, 6 along the top edge, and 2 along the (upper) right edge of the screen; these 11 enemy starting locations or encampments will produce 4 enemy types throughout each round, 1 emerging at a time, always in the same sequence, but only one for each encampment can be seen or is active at a time; before they can emerge onto the streets, they first move one step left/right or up/down - so that they are now at the end of a row or column; once there, they fire at you, or be fired upon by you, but they may also move right back into hiding; usually they sit or play hide and seek for a few seconds before emerging, but will spend less time doing so as the rounds increase; once onto the playfield they keep moving non-stop chasing you - until they are eliminated; as in Targ, these enemies know where you are and are always closing in, but fortunately they're not as fast as you; only after the current enemy from any encampment has been destroyed will the next type in sequence be allowed to appear - eventually all 4 types are deployed; all 11 enemy ships (i.e. from the 11 encampments) can be active, firing and/or moving simultaneously, but typically no more than 8 are in motion at once; all versions allow 6 or more enemy shots simultaneously; you can only fire one shot <Vic 20 (6 can be fired)> at a time, until it hits an enemy, or reaches the end of the street; near the very end of each round all remaining enemies (about 8 to 10) will deploy and emerge simultaneously or continue chasing you for an all out assault against you - this continues non-stop, with no delays in deployment or emerging until there are none left, which ends the round; for every 12 missiles you fire, one of 4 bonus items will move from its initial location inside a building - to an adjacent intersection; these bonus items somewhat replace Targ's Spectar Smugglers, but are not enemies, do not move and are always located in, and show up in sequence from the same 4 (innermost) intersections; they remain in the intersection until 6 <Vic 20 (4)> more shots are fired; if ran over (collected), you score the bonus; those missed go back inside the building, but will eventually come back out again - 12 shots later; the bonus points are 100 for the first one collected and then 200, 400 & 800 if each is collected; points for these are displayed on the screen; if you lose a ship, they are reset - and all 4 will be seen again <Atari 8 bit, does not reset> and you start over again at 100 for the first one; fortunately, if you lose a ship, the rest of the level does not reset, but all active enemies go back to their encampments; each level has the same 44 enemies which get a little faster, fire more frequently and deploy more quickly each round/level. The manuals state that you earn 1000 points upon completing a round, but this is incorrect and does not occur on any version I have played.

Targ: Arcade by Exidy, programmed by ?unknown?

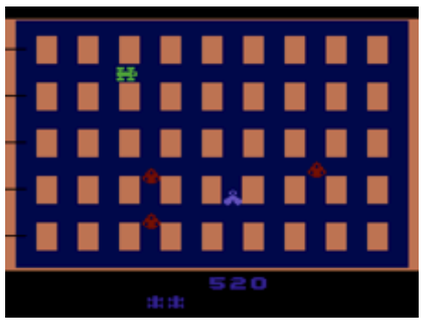
•Atari 2600 ('83 ?unknown? [Targ by CBS, later modified as "Universal Chaos" by Telegames])

Crossfire: all home versions by Sierra On-line Systems

•First made for the Apple 2 in '81 by Jay Sullivan
•Commodore 64 ('83 by Jay Sullivan & Charles "Chuck" Benton with music by Carl Hagen
•Vic 20 ('81 by Doug Witaker [but screen says programmed by Gordon])
•Atari 8 bit ('81 by Chris Iden)
•TI-99 ('83 (not released on cart) by John Graham)

Sequel to Targ: "Spectar" 1980 by Exidy (arcade) (unknown programmer)
Remake of Crossfire: Commodore 64 - Crossfire version 2 - by Cosmos Design Hannes Sommer 1994.
Rumor Mill: Spectar was planned for the Colecovision - too bad it or Crossfire did not come out.

Disqualified: Atari 2600 (37)



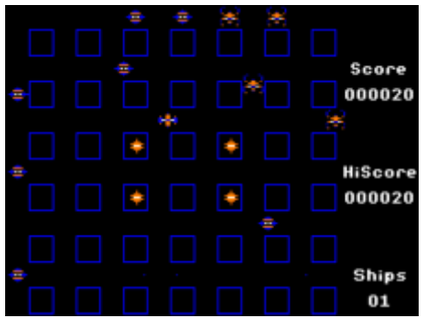
My first reaction (as already noted) was the game was never officially released as Targ, or Crossfire, so we cannot allow it in the medal hunt as Crossfire. But, we'll do the next best thing, by acknowledging it and giving it some scores - based upon "Universal Chaos" version.

Gameplay is very good (7), with enough going on that you should devise some strategy, and adjust and adapt as the difficulty increases. It appears that all the arcade elements from Targ are in place and done well, but there are no gameplay options. A glitch in programming, probably to match the same bug in the arcade version of Targ where you are invulnerable at times when firing from the lower corners. Some shots will pass through the Targ on higher levels. Addictiveness is fun to play (7), starting off easy, but gradually building up to quite a challenge and faster action. Graphics are pretty good (7) with some details, good action, and each level has different city colors. There is a limited color palette used per round and almost no animation and no multi-colored objects. There is some inconsistency in the collision detection, but not enough to worry about. Sound is very good (7), with musical effects that vary with your speed and progress. Controls scored a (9) as the change of speeds and reversing directions is so hard to do, and maybe there is a bit of time lag in the programming that makes it this way.

Have Nots: TI-99 (NA)

My first reaction was Online Systems planned for a cart release nut it never happened. I've not verified if the ROM image of Crossfire is that of an official Crossfire release i.e. those from diskette or cassette. For now, we will not disqualify it, but hopefully some day we'll hear more about this port from our TI-99 expert Bryan Roppolo.

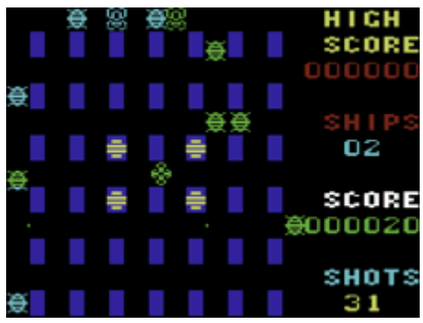
Have Nots: Apple][(31)



My review is limited as I may not have a final or the official version of this game - there is no menu, no game play choices, and only a cheap looking intro screen where you are told to "hit any key" to begin. Segue: Was it Opus who "hit" any key on his MAC with a sledge hammer back in the late 1980's Doonesbury? This was the original version of Crossfire, putting it at a disadvantage, which may explain why there is no joystick support. Another possibility is that my disk version is NOT the final or official release, and so there could be a joystick option or other elements missing/disabled. Another possibility is multiple versions, which may be the case on other systems. That is, the instruction manuals for both the Vic 20 & Atari 8 bit mention keyboard commands, but these are inactive on my cart version - regardless if a joystick is plugged in or not. Anyhow, please accept my apologies and consider that these scores would only go up if some features are missing.

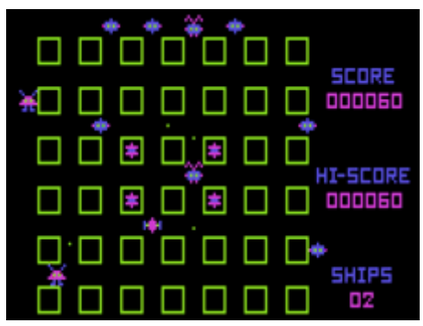
My first reaction was one of my favorite things about Crossfire is the charming music and its exciting tempo - too bad that wasn't added here. The internal speaker makes the sound effects a little less desirable, and despite a couple missing sound effects, overall the Sound is still adequate (5). Assuming only keyboard and no joystick, the Controls are very difficult to use/master - dare I score them as pathetic (4). Likewise, all other home versions without a stick would be just as futile (at least for me). The action is too intense for a keyboard where you'd simultaneously and quickly use 4 buttons to fire, 4 buttons to move and 1 to stop - too much for me - gimme a joystick or forget-about-it. The keyboard commands are: <ESDF> to fire, and <IJKL> to move, with <Space Bar> (a good choice) used to stop moving. Regardless of my past problems in self-centering, or maze games, I'd expect a score of 8 or 9 if a joystick is compatible. Now then, based upon only making it to the second round of play once so far (recall I stink at using the keyboard), the Gameplay appears to be very good (7), missing the final all-out onslaught and having only minor differences in quantities of ammo (45 max), and number of shots taken before bonus items come and go. The Addictiveness is exciting (7) with loads of action, strategy, a gradual increase in difficulty, many random, complex elements always changing - so no game is ever the same. The only negatives are the pause was not added, and some minor collision detection inconsistencies. Graphics are of good quality (8) with plenty of movement and shots firing, multi-color, multiple enemy shots, some color variety, some details and a splash of animation. As usual, Apple][games are only available on disk, typically the hardest of the popular 8 bit systems to find an original disk. Those apple collectors don't easily part with their wares.

Bronze Medal: Vic 20 (39)



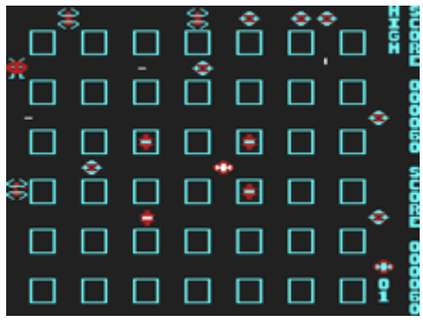
My first reaction was there is both a cassette and cartridge version and so there could be more differences (other than the keyboard disabled on the cart version). I did not try (for the first time) to see if I can load any games from tape or disk to my Vic 20. Gameplay is nearly all there (8), with only a few slight differences. But most notably missing is the final onslaught where the remaining enemies all emerge. Bonus items only are very difficult to earn, lasting only 3 or 4 shots, and are then gone. This version is by far the hardest, with the most aggressive firing enemies, and most difficult (on average) location of the re-supply intersection. The action also gets slowed down when too many objects are moving, but overall I still felt that the Addictiveness was enjoyable (8). The pause is toggled via <F7>. To make up for some added difficulty, you can almost fire at will, with as many as 6 shots firing off, in any/all 4 directions. But then again, you'll need to adjust for this and be careful to not go running out of ammo too fast. The re-supply icon only lasts for a few seconds and then goes away and comes back, but - do not fret. This is just a graphics glitch or limitation because as soon as you run over that spot, regardless if the icon is displayed, you are re-supplied. Your full supply is confirmed by a great graphics feature only found here - a "shots remaining counter". Overall the Graphics are the worst, (7) but still pretty good and do not detract from playing. There is less detail, less color, less variety and no multi-colored items. The animation is OK, and all enemies can be in motion, but then that may slow the action accordingly. Sound is respectable (6), better than the Apple, but no where near as good as the Gold medal winner (and its musical score). This is actually the best version sans music, being the only one where there are sound effects for shots fired - both by you and the enemy - how can they have overlooked that? The Vic is missing the sound effect when your ammo is re-supplied, but then you see the shots remaining counter reset instead. Controls are perfect (10), but there is a difference here as well. It's not a problem, but may take some getting used to moving the stick back to re-center and then moving it again for each time you want to move/fire. You cannot just hold it in a direction and fire repeatedly. The cart is semi rare, but also found on cassette and maybe on disk.

Silver Medal: Atari 8 bit (40)



My first reaction was disappointment there is no music. The Sound is still fine (6), with nothing missing and the only version (AFAIK) to add a chime for earning a bonus life. Likewise you (usually) hear an effect when the bonus items are introduced - not found on any other version. Gameplay is solid (8), the best. Addictiveness is very fun (8), with a pause <P>, and the only version where screens change colors (nice!) for each level. Speaking of which, the Graphics are very nice (8), with the color choices, variety and multi-color being the best here. The animation is OK, and details are good enough. The Controls are perfect (10), but again the keyboard option appears to be removed on the cart version. A little difficult to find the cart, but there are probably cassette & disk versions out there too.

Gold Medal: Commodore 64 (41)



My first reaction was this was the first version I played and I still recall many nights playing this one non-stop - gotta play just ONE more game. Gameplay is impressive (8) with all elements in place, and the best demo. Something I hadn't noticed years ago was that when differing enemy types collide, they will wipe each other out, but no points earned - so better for you to shoot them. This also occurs on the Atari, and likewise, enemies of the same types will not destroy each other. The Addictiveness is the best and is fun to play (8) with all the excitement, plus is the pause, toggles music, and invokes the keyboard command list - where you can adjust which keys do what. also allows you to select the game speed as either slow or fast (the default) - neither of these options were found on the other versions or their manuals. Graphics are quality (8), probably having the best detail, and just about as good as the Atari everywhere else, other than there is no change in the maze colors from level to level - boring. Sound is the best, (7) with exciting music, and most of the effects in place. The music may get too repetitive, so you can toggle it off. The music would not be so repetitive if it changed during the action, especially for the final onslaught. Controls are perfect (10). Strange that there was no cart release, thus it's only found on disk or cassette. There is still room for improvement, but being the final version made allowed time to add a musical score, which helps to put this one atop the medal stand.

Exercise for readers - Try the 1994, C64 remake of Crossfire and see if the enhanced graphics, or any added options make it more fun for you.

Finale: Overall, there is room for improvement on every version, be it adding music, filling out all the effects - like shots fired, or hearing a bonus life earned, or getting a re-supply, adding more graphic detail, color variety, multi-color, increased animation and a shot counter, not to mention a pause,

starting level or game play options. And why not add the Spectar differences as options as well. Even so, Crossfire has a good simple charm and challenge to it that I think you'll find enjoyable on any of these versions. Thanks go to NE Ohio's Classic Computers and Games organizer Tom MacLaren for helping me with the Apple][port, and a couple years back former RT staff writer Fred Wagaman who saved and sold me the Vic 20 cassette version and manual.

Updates and Errata from last month.
Didn't realize I had an autocorrect spellchecker mistake. I keep misspelling Intellivision, and have been for a while. Sorry about that. I can't see the forest from the trees.

Atari 2600 Venture fans should look here for a very nice update / hack that includes the 3rd level in the rotation. Venture 3 - can be downloaded and played courtesy of AtariAge, and hacker "Batari" http://www.atariage.com/hack_page.html?SystemID=2600&SoftwareHackID=269.

Come back next month, for a 25th anniversary salute to the Gremlin/Sega arcade game "Carnival", and its many faces, well actually only 3 (as I need a vacation) on the Atari 2600, Colecovision and Intellivision. Contact Alan Hewston at: **Hewston95@NOSPAMstratos.net** or visit the Many Faces of site: http://my.stratos.net/~hewston95/RT/ManyFacesHome.htm.

The Titles of Tengen - Shinobi

by David Lundin, Jr.

Everybody likes Ninja games especially those that begin life as a cult arcade classic and one of Sega's most cherished retogaming properties. Well, everyone but me that is. Just so I can get it out of the way I suppose I should make it known that Shinobi is a game I have always disliked. Not to say it's a bad game or the worst of the Tengen ports (I still have to review the Tengen NES port of Toobin' after all) but simply I have never been able to enjoy Shinobi as much as I would have liked. The game has a lot going for it: nice graphics, good music and one of my all time favorite bonus stages however the difficulty ramps up way too quickly. The game turns into an exercise in point A to point B enemy memorization instead of a quick reflexes beat-em-up. I can't begin to imagine the amount of money I must have dropped into the Shinobi machine at the local bowling alley in frustration in my younger days. Still, I'll put all that aside since this is supposed to be a comparison review between the arcade original and Tengen's NES home port.

Shinobi lets the player take the role of a ninja sent by the government to defeat a terrorist band called The Ring of Five. The Ring of Five is headed by five extremely powerful ninja assassins and they have kidnapped the children of the world's leaders. Armed only with an endless supply of shuriken (throwing stars) and skill, you set off to battle the Ring of Five's henchmen and defeat all five of their ninja leaders. The game is composed of twenty levels, four stages of five missions.

Right off the bat there are some big game play differences between the arcade and NES versions. The one that impacts game play most is the health bar. In the arcade version of Shinobi one hit meant instant death which is one of the things that made the game insanely difficult at certain parts. The NES version changes this by giving you a life bar that decreases each time you are hit. Additionally aside from the point and weapon powerup bonuses you are given for rescuing hostages in the arcade version, on the NES you are also awarded with life replenishment. Both games feature weapons upgrades that are obtained from hostages and the attack mechanics are the same between the original and NES port. It's still one button to attack and another to jump, holding up or down while jumping will allow you to either jump or down one level. In the NES version you don't have ninja magic (special attack) by default, you have to earn it by completing the bonus stage. To use ninja magic on the NES you must hold down the B button, then press the A button - which attack you use is selected

by the Select button. It's not better or worse, it's just different.

Graphically one would assume that Shinobi would be an easy game to make a decent conversion of, I mean of course there are going to be compromises but at the very least the graphics should be pretty close to the original. Sadly that is not the case and the NES port of Shinobi comes across with backgrounds reminiscent of some Atari 2600 titles and undetailed sprites. The hostages look like sheep in the NES version! While most Tengen NES ports sport high production value Shinobi come across looking like a pirate of a Korean bootleg Famicom ninja game that never had a US release. Even the bonus stage gives the impression that the graphic designer just got lazy. In the audio department things are a mixed bag, while much of the music from the arcade original is ported over, some of the key tunes such as the music in the bonus stage didn't make the transfer to the NES.

At the end of the day if you loved Shinobi in the arcade and picked up the NES port chances were that you'd be back in the arcade the next day. Lackluster graphics, poor choices when it comes to audio, and over all weak presentation make this one of the dimmer examples of Tengen's work on the NES. It would be a bit longer until a suitable home version of Shinobi became available and Sega continues to use the Shinobi franchise for games to this day. I'd have to say the NES port of Shinobi is for Tengen collectors only.

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

Musings of a Spectrum Owner

by Andrew Masters

Here are some reminiscences of classic gaming in the '80s, from a Spectrum owner's perspective. (I notice that there has not been much written yet for Spectrum owners, but the newsletter is great!)

In the UK, the main two computers of the 80s were the Commodore 64 and Sinclair Spectrum. There was such rivalry at school about whose system was 'best' -- Speccy games 'had great gameplay', whereas (admittedly) the Commodore 64 had better sound, better colours, and 16K more RAM than the Spectrum. But I am a die-hard Speccy fan!

One of my all-time favourite games was Manic Miner. It was truly a great day when 'Sinclair User' magazine printed the fabled code for MM, which was 6051769 -- this was famously just the telephone number of the company who released the game! You started the game, typed in the code and could then visit any of the 20 levels in the game! You played Miner Willy, who had to get through all of 20 platform levels down the mine, then get back home in time for tea. It was a 2D platform game, and you had to collect the keys on each level, and then get into the lift to the next level. You had to do all this before your air supply in each room ran out.

We also used to play Jet Set Willy (the sequel to Manic Miner). In Jet Set Willy, miner Willy had made a fortune on the stock exchange, and now owned a huge mansion with many rooms. He had to collect all of the items in the house (again a 2D platformer), and only then would he be allowed (by his wife) to go to bed! Sinclair User printed the code for this game as well (WRITETYPER), which allowed infinite lives. The thing I remember from JSW was that there were many rooms of the house all with their own names such as Entrance to Hades, The Ship and The Bow. The mansion was huge, as it had The Priests Hole, The Orangery and many others (including The Bedroom). It was an amazing challenge at the time to try and explore each room in the mansion without losing all your lives. There is such as huge fan base of JSW that people even write and release their own versions of the JSW mansion -- even by as late as 1997! These can all be downloaded from the World of Spectrum web site, as can all approx 6,000 Spectrum games.

Each week I would go to my local town centre with friends on the double-decker bus. We would get to the town early and be in the computer shops, seeing what new joysticks or games were out that week. The famous haunt was Sunderland Computer Centre. I bought my Quickshot II joystick there -- this was a good stick as it had an auto-fire switch. I also remember the buzz in that shop when the Live Aid games compilation came out (for the original international aid concert in 1984) -- you got about 12 games on one cassette (cassettes ruled!), all for five pounds. This was a very good price at the time for 12 premium games like Kokotoni Wilf from Elite, and Gilligan's Gold (another mining game!).

Another fond memory was typing in listings from the computer magazines. You would sit there patiently for hours typing in the listing. The reality of the running game would almost never live up to the expectation! As you typed away diligently for hours (sometimes days!) on end, your mind's eye would build up a picture of just how GREAT this game would be. In the end, it might be rubbish or might even not run. What made it worse was that I used to rely on a huge 20 inch TV with poor faded colours. The sun would shine in through massive windows in the summer, which made it almost impossible to see what you were doing!

The listings in BASIC were easier to type in, because it was more interesting (you could customise the game's colours or number of lives etc). You could also use this as an exercise to learn BASIC

programming. However the games in BASIC were worse than those programmed in machine code. But the games in machine code were all listed in hexadecimal -- so you would find yourself typing in things like:

```
10 LET A$ = "a5f43b651ca12e"
```

These listings would run to dozens of multi-line paragraphs, spanning many pages! It was extremely hard to work out where you were!

Many commercial games that were written in BASIC anyway would be customisable. Press Shift and <space bar> and 'break' into the running program. This was a common way of playing soccer sim Football Manager. You would go into the program and alter the team name to be your favourite, and also customise the manager name. You could then type RUN and start the whole game again, with your customisation. Or you could SAVE a copy of the game onto a blank audio tape for yourself (naughty, as this pirates the game!).

The listings magazines themselves would be huge tomes, with hundreds of pages! There would be about four or five magazines released each month. You could buy Your Computer, which had games listings for many computers, including the Spectrum. Also famous were the mags reviewing games, like Your Sinclair and Sinclair User. Crash was a great Speccy mag, very glossy. Sinclair User pioneered the printing of codes for games, when they did a long article exposing all the codes for Jet Set Willy.

Also infamous were the POKEs for games. The magazines would get would-be programmers and hackers to disassemble parts of games, and find out how they worked (again, slightly naughty). You would then get short listings in mags. You would then type these BASIC listings in, stuff like:

```
10 POKE 32767, 255
20 LOAD "JSW"
```

This would then load the game (i.e. Jet Set Willy). You would then end up with 255 lives (very handy!).

The TI-99/4A Arcade: Mix & Match

by Bryan Roppolo

After taking a break for 2 months I decided to get my act together for July. While reading through some of my past articles and debating on which titles to review this month, I realized there was an obscure arcade conversion done for the TI-99/4A that I never got around to doing. This game is none other than SNK's Munchmobile, which should have been reviewed many months ago but for what ever reason slipped under my radar! Therefore, this month's Arcade is more of a Mix & Match than any set theme just to catch up with some missed review opportunities. In addition to Munchmobile I tossed in Slymoids and Tunnels of Doom. Slymoids is an awesome little side scrolling shoot-em up which definitely deserves more recognition, while Tunnels of Doom is well...Tunnels of Doom (and I mean that in a good way!). Anyway, sit back and enjoy this month's Mix & Match of reviews and have a good Fourth of July!

Slymoids (1983 TI)

This game cartridge came out near the end of the 99/4A's lifetime and seemed to be overshadowed by the more popular offerings (such as Parsec and Munchman). However, don't let the rarity of the game fool you! Slymoids is one of my personal favorites and makes my TOP 10 TI-99/4A video games list. Slymoids displays some of the nicest graphics, sound, and depth when compared to other offerings from 1983. The object of the game is to move your little cowboy through various levels of play all the while shooting creatures that come from the left, right, and top of the screen. If you manage to make it through a level, you then advance to a harder round with even more enemies. Beware though, on harder levels of play many times the numbers of enemies on the screen can easily overtake you.

So far, Slymoids sounds like a fancy shooter game but there is more to it than at first meets the eye. The first aspect of the game that I really enjoy (and deserves comment here) are the various zones that you do battle in. Instead of simply controlling your little cowboy around a single static screen, there actually are various places you must travel to complete each round. There are 3 scenes in the game: a green grassy field, the inside of a castle, and the inside of a cave. The neat thing is the fact that as you travel on the grassy field, all the other places you must journey later in the game can been seen in the background (such as the cave nestled in a hillside). This really helps add to the depth of the game, as it provides the sense that you are battling in a more 3 dimensional world. It's also

important to understand that Slymoids is a side scrolling shooter, which helps make the game a little more strategy oriented as it allows you to retreat from battle simply by running left or right from the enemies. This is nice if you ever find yourself trapped with no way out!

In addition to the fancy scenery and side scrolling, another great aspect of the game is the ability you have to aim your gun to the left, right, front, or top of the screen! When the Slymoids themselves come on the attack, they all approach from off in the distance (the background) and gradually get bigger as they reach the front of the screen. Once at the front of the screen, they move sideways towards you in hopes of having a good meal. I like this element in the game, as typically in most shooters the enemies simply approach from your right or left, but this adds a little more depth to the action. One thing to keep in mind while playing the game is the fact that you have the ability to shot towards the back of the screen, this allows you to try and keep the Slymoids from reaching the front where they can harm you (on later levels though, since there are so many baddies it is almost impossible to not allow some to get to the front of the screen). In addition to enemies approaching from the sides and back, your cowboy can also be clobbered from above, as there are flying Jelloids, spiders, bats, and falling rocks which must be shot down before they get a chance to take one of your lives. However, if you happen to run away from any of the above mentioned enemies, they will multiply while off screen which in turn creates more problems for the next time you visit the area where you left them. Needless to say, it's crucial to finish off all the bad guys before moving off as otherwise the Slymoids will end up multiplying, and it is your job to clear the land of these hideous creatures!

One other important thing to note in the game is the little status bar which is located on the bottom left of the screen. This bar shows where you are located in the level (the arrow points to your current location) and also provides color codes to show the status of each zone. Once a zone is colored green, that means it has been cleared of all the Slymoids. The indicator can range from Green (good) all the way to Black (so bad you don't want to ask!), which gives the player an idea as to where he or she must go next. This is definitely nice as there is no guessing as to where you need to venture.

What also makes Slymoids enjoyable are the sound effects and music present in the game. The intro music is one of the best themes for a TI video game and makes you want to dance! Okay it's not *that* good, but it's a good theme as far as video games go and fits the game pretty well. Now as to the sound effects, this is where the game really gets interesting. Each time a slymoid appears on screen, a creepy little tune plays. However, this is not the end of the story, because as the number of slymoids on the screen increases the tunes being played also increase in number. Therefore, once the screen becomes filled with slymoids (usually on later levels) the number of tunes being played is so great that it's hard to even concentrate. This makes you want to blast all those slymoids, just so you can quiet things down a bit! In addition, different bad guys have different sound effects which makes it easy for the person playing the game to know who is approaching. Needless to say, the sounds are a great aspect of the game and help make it even more entertaining.

Overall, I really enjoy Slymoids due to the action of having to shoot enemies from all angles and also the nice scenery that is presented through out the game. If Slymoids had simply all took place on a single screen, it would have still stood out somewhat from other shooters due to the fact that the creatures attack from all directions, but with the various places you must do battle, it makes the game into a very fun and exciting adventure. So be sure to check out Slymoids if you ever manage to come across it, as it deserves a place in my Top 10 TI-99/4A video game list!

Munchmobile (1983 SNK Electronics) - Port of "Munchmobile" (1983 SNK Electronics)

This is an arcade port which I forgot to review early on when I was looking into all the obscure arcade translations that made their way to the TI-99/4A. Munchmobile fits that category nicely since I've never seen this game on another system, and actually have never seen the original arcade unit either. The object of the game is to drive your car down a road while grabbing pieces of food scattered on the side for points. Now you might be wondering how does a car grab food on the side of the road? Well, this car has eyes and arms which can extend to the edges of the screen. However, you must be careful, because if your arm gets caught on something while driving (as a note, the screen is continuously scrolling up so you must be sure to bring your arm in before it hits a garbage can, bush, etc.) it will flash red for a few seconds and you will not be able to extend it again until it heals. In addition to simply grabbing food and money that's alongside the road, it is necessary that you also pick up gas cans since your fuel decreases as you cruise down the road. Once you reach the end of a level, there is a little home where you have to pull into a garage and soon after a new level will begin.

Now that you have an idea as to what the point of the game is, let me go into a few more of the obstacles that are present on your journey (since there are many). Now first off, this game would be no fun if there were not some forms of enemies trying to get you, and luckily Munchmobile does not

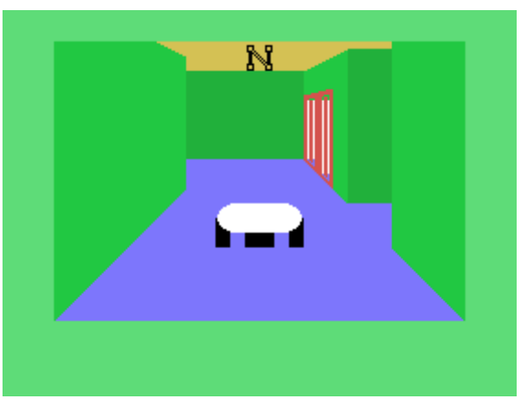
disappoint in this category. On your trek home there will be numerous white cars on the road. In the early stages of the game, these cars are easy to avoid since all one needs to do is move to the far right or left hand side of the road. But in later stages, these cars can be coming straight towards you on a narrow road (and therefore you cannot simply drive all the way to the right of the street). The only way to avoid these cars is to pull off the road into these little pulloffs which are only slightly bigger than your car. Timing is crucial for this stage since you can only speed up or slow down, which means you have to speed up and pull into one of these pulloffs, slow down, and speed up after the car has passed. If you sit back too long at the bottom of the screen, you will not have enough time to reach the pulloff before the enemy car has already passed it. This part of the game makes sure you are not sleeping at the wheel! A few other obstacles include a covered bridge which you can only slightly see through (so avoiding oncoming traffic can be tricky) and traffic signals at intersections where if you run the light you might crash into another car. Overall, many of these obstacles prove challenging and personally I have never managed to get to the level with the traffic light intersection.

As mentioned earlier, the object of the game is not just to avoid the bad cars, but mostly to pick up the various items scattered along the way for points. All the things that your Munchmobile manages to gather are shown on the right hand of the screen on a black "billboard" (as stated in the manual). This "billboard" keeps track of not just the items you gather, but also your score, fuel, and number of lives left. Oh yeah, this reminds me of something I forgot to state earlier which is crucial to getting a high score. Once you get a food item and bring it into the car for points, the next time you extend that arm to try and get something else on the roadside you will drop trash from the previous item gathered (before you can pick up another item you must drop the leftovers from the previous item, such as an apple core). However, throwing the junk on the ground will not add (or subtract) from your score, but if you manage to be courteous and throw the old item into one of the trash bins located throughout your drive, you will be handsomely rewarded with bonus points! Who ever though that a video game could try and reward you for dropping trash in a trash can :)

Another important thing to mention about Munchmobile is the fact that there are two different levels (Professional and Amateur) and also 3 different car speeds (Slow, Normal, and Fast). Having the ability to select different levels of difficulty and speeds really helps allow someone who is more skilled to receive a challenge while someone less skilled can start things slower and easier. One thing I have noticed is that many people who play Munchmobile on the TI-99/4A think it is too slow for their tastes, so I encourage anyone who does try out this title to play it on the highest speed since the slower speeds do tend to drag a little. It's not that the fastest speed is too fast anyway, it's actually about the right speed (and closer to the speed in the arcade game).

Tom Zjaba gave this game a great review years ago for Retrogaming Times, so I decided to give a little more in depth look into the game. My comment to those who try the game is (as mentioned earlier) to start out on AT LEAST the Normal speed, and quite possibly the Fast speed since too many write the game off after playing it through Slow. Another thing is that the challenge of the game gets very hard as you progress (if you ever manage to get to the part where you must speed up and slow down for those car pulloffs you'll know what I am talking about!). I was one of the guys who initially wrote the game off, but that was before I attempted playing the game on Fast speed, which seems like it should have been the Normal speed setting. Anyway, try this game out since it's a decent game with a completely original concept!

Tunnels of Doom (1982 TI)



One of my favorite types of video games is the RPG. I have been an avid RPG player ever since I was a little kid, therefore there is no way I would pass up the best RPG that the TI-99/4A has to offer, that being Tunnels of Doom. Tunnels of Doom was another one of those popular 1982 releases that TI put out, the others being Parsec and Alpiner. The unique thing about the game is that there are various plot lines which have been developed for the Tunnels of Doom cartridge, but this review will be focusing on the original 1982 "Quest for the King" plot. This game centers around the story that your king has been taken captive by monsters into the depths of a ruined castle and it's your mission to try and rescue him before he is killed. In addition, before rescuing the king you must find and retrieve the powerful Rainbow Orb which is hidden somewhere deep within the castle. One important thing to note is that your time is limited, so plan your moves wisely since each 10 moves you make is a tick off the game clock and a tick closer to the king's death!

When you start the game your first task is to choose how many floors you want the dungeon to be, from 1-10. Of course, the greater the number of floors the harder the game is! But, this is not just because there is more territory to navigate, but because the monsters become harder the deeper you go. After selecting how big your dungeon will be, the next task is to come up with names/attributes for your players (attributes such as Fighter, Wizard, Rogue, and Hero can be selected and all can perform unique functions) and also the number of people that you want to have on your quest

(ranging from 1-4). After this, you then have to come up with names for each of the members, however I have always found the names provided in the Tunnels of Doom manual to be the best (Eric Seablade, Mauve 'd Orm-Mul, and Forestall Grimm). Once this is accomplished the game truly begins, and you find yourself at the General Store where you can stock up on goodies such as swords, shields, potions, bows/arrows, etc. After stocking your party with the proper equipment, it's then off into the depths of the dungeon!

Once you descend down the first flight of stairs you find yourself in a 3D world filled with halls and doors. Inside different doors are monsters, treasures, armor/weapons, vaults, fountains, and even living statues (which can bring someone in your party back to life if you give up a valuable item to the statue). Anyway, Tunnels of Doom is LOADED with features, and sadly I will not have enough space to go into depth for each one. Luckily, most are self explanatory so I decided a quick listing of some of the options available should be discussed. On your quest you have the ability to break into a room, listen to walls/doors for monsters (each monster makes a different noise so you may want to listen whose inside a room before entering!), check for secret doors, change your player formation, save the game at any point, change weapons whenever you want to, trade items, drop an item, get status reports on each player, get party reports for the whole team, and get monster reports (which shows you how many hit points a monster has, his weaknesses, etc.). In addition to all these special features, there of course is a map provided for each floor which you MUST collect in order to descend further into the depths of the ruined castle. This little extra makes sure you cannot just zip through the game to the bottom without exploring most of the rooms. Besides, there are many things that can be found throughout the dungeon that make it worthwhile to leave no place untouched.

Now as to how battles are fought, typically when you open a door to a room there will be monsters inside and then the game will switch to an overhead view where you control who will attack which monster. However, every now and then there will be a monster that will pop up in front of the screen as you wander through the halls, and in turn the game switches to an overhead battle screen. Sometimes I even found myself startled when running into a monster on the lower levels of the game, since they do appear out of the blue! One other thing you'll encounter out in the halls are the drinking fountains which can increase/decrease various stats of the person who drinks from it. Drinking from the fountain can be risky, since it could increase damage to a player to the point where he dies! Therefore, my recommendation is to drink wisely...If you are on a streak of decreasing player damage don't press your luck.

One nice feature to the game is that it can be saved at any point during gameplay (except for in a battle). Therefore, if you manage to get far down the dungeon and it's late at night, just save the game and pick up where you left off the following day. I have to admit though, that even with the save feature, Tunnels of Doom is a tough game which probably will take a few days to beat. Even to an RPG fan such as myself, I keep coming back to this game due to the fun factor and skill needed to complete it. Tunnels of Doom increases in difficulty at the right rate and therefore never becomes overly difficult or painfully easy. I suggest this title to everyone out there, and unsurprisingly It is one my of TOP 10 games for the 99/4A and will probably remain there forever. As a matter of fact, it is in competition for my #1 favorite game!

Interview with Denial Creator Jeff Daniels

by Tonks

TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF

I'm Jeffrey Daniels, and I started the Denial Website for Commodore Vic 20 enthusiasts. My day job is far from the tech industries. I am a professor at a college in Chicago where I grew up.

CAN YOU GIVE US A LITTLE OF THE HISTORY THAT LEAD TO THE CREATION OF DENIAL?

My father bought the family an Atari VCS at the height of video game popularity. I was too young to play, but I was greatly influenced by watching my older brothers play. I wanted to become a video game designer; I would draw game ideas on bits of graph paper. Eventually I figured out that a computer was needed to make any of these ideas real games. My dad bought a Vic 20 just for me. It was quite a treasure in my neighborhood for a kid to own his own computer. I loved that machine. It took months to figure out how to use it, but once I developed a love for programming, I never stopped. Years later, as a college student, I still produced programs for the now obsolete Vic. I would go to the library and dig up old copies of Compute magazine and analyze the type-in programs. After getting into the fan Zine scene, I decided to make a zine/newsletter just for the Vic; someone else out there had to share my obsession. I called the newsletter "Denial". I thought it was funny. Denial is actually the letters of my last name rearranged and a joke on the small readership I expected. One had to be in Denial to be slightly interested in 8bit computers. The Denial newsletter was mostly old pics and my BASIC game programs and only ran for 4 issues. I paid for it all myself on a student budget. There were a handful of subscribers contributing to the costs, but I couldn't afford the postage at some point. Denial died. I was late to the internet, but the access to international Vic users made Denial a viable project again.

DENIAL HAS CERTAINLY BECOME A SUCCESSFUL FORUM. DID YOU EVER BELIEVE YOU

WOULD GET MORE THAN A HANDFUL OF MEMBERS?
No. I remember the newsletter went out to about twenty regulars. I didn't imagine that any more than that would visit my website. At the time, I was only really aware of Rick Melick's page. The only hint I had to a greater community was the activity on eBay. I had often been outbid on Vic items. Whoever was bidding on this stuff had to be interested in discussing it on my forum.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE OF DENIAL?
I hope to develop the front page much more in the next few months. I still need contributions. It would be great to have rare pics and documents. I hope to make it a central resource for the system.

WHY THE VIC 20? WHAT ATTRACTION DOES IT HAVE FOR YOU?
Developing a 3.5k game is like writing a poem. The artful economy of language is irresistible to me. In a week's worth of development time I can produce a simple but meaningful program. My most impressionable moments in video gaming were based around the Atari 2600 and other early 8 bit systems. Games were magical at that time: simple premises, easy learning curves and fun! I wanted to make games as pure as those I first played. The Vic 20 and BASIC programming opened the door, but there's more to it. The large colorful characters and simple interface capture all of the charm of a generation of gaming.

THE VIC 20 WAS ALWAYS A FORGOTTEN SYSTEM, BUT IT NOW SEEMS TO BE GAINING A RENEWED INTEREST. WHY DO YOU THINK THIS IS SO?
The Vic was so quickly overshadowed by the [Commodore] 64 that most collectors returning the world of games will forget its significance. The Vic sold a massive number of units! As Ward Shrake points out in his FAQ, the Vic had more carts produced than many popular systems of that time. This doesn't even include the popular tape medium and untold numbers of user programs. As collectors become more savvy, they are reminded of the VIC 20's important contributions to computers and gaming.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON SOME OF THE VERY HIGH PRICES VIC 20 GAMES HAVE BEEN GOING FOR ON EBAY?
As collectors grow older, the disposable income of the young and employed will lead to exaggerated prices in all areas of game collecting. I watched a Neo Geo game finish at ten thousand dollars on evil-bay. That would never happen in the early 90s. The kids who grew up with these games and hold them dear now have real jobs! You can't put a price on childhood memories. The Vic was the first affordable "friendly computer". Many of us started here and learned how to program here. I expect many more Vic-heads (now upper income programmers) to pop up in the next decade and want their VICs back.

WHAT ARE YOUR FAVOURITE VIC 20 GAMES?
Mine. Nothing beats making and playing your own game. I have a great one in the works. Other than that I love the first cart I ever owned, Gridrunner. I also love Quakers, Omega Race, Creepy Corridors, Alpha Anxiety, Scare City Motel, Adventure Land, and Big Bad Wolf (in that exact order).

ARE YOU A FAN OF ANY OTHER CLASSIC SYSTEMS? IF SO, WHAT SYSTEMS AND GAMES ARE YOUR OTHER FAVOURITES?
I have a Joust arcade cabinet. It takes up a lot of my time. I know have it wired to a MegaDrive with a cart demo system. I can rotate between six games at a push of a button or by an adjustable timer system. I love it, but it has me paying attention to the Sega Genesis/ MD scene. I spend a good deal of time overseas where hacking makes for interesting homebrews on this platform. I always come back with great pirate games. I am still hunting down a few roms. I also enjoy the Atari 2600, Sega Saturn, Dreamcast (I am desperately seeking games for this one). I recently got into Gameboy advaced because of its emulation ability. I now have a few VIC games on it. I recently gave up on my more obscure collections: Bally Astrocade, handhelds, Turbo Grafx and Tomy Tutor.

WHAT IS THE FIRST THING THAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU THINK OF THE FOLLOWING?

Commodore - I'm not really a Commodore nut. I love the VIC, but never could get into the 64 or later computers.

Jeff Minter - Genius. Gridrunner changed my life. I've always admired his work for the creative storylines and strange nuances more than the coding.

Ward Shrake - An early Denial subscriber and fore-father to our VIC community. At one point in the newletter days of Denial, I thought He, Paul LeBrasse and I were the only VIC collectors in the world.

The Commodore 16 - Never had one, never touched one. I've always wanted to put a Vic in the black C16 case. I thought it would look cool, but now that I hear it may not be physically possible because of the different read ports. I really want one anyway just to see it up close.

Tom Griner - Machine language is beyond me. A million things happening at once.

Emulation - A necessary evil. I love the convenience, but I would hate for someone to try my programs

for the first time on this format. Nothing beats the real thing.

Denial - I am constantly amazed at the geniuses who have wandered to my site. We have a great bunch of friendly, helpful and wicked intelligent members. I can't be anything other than optimistic (smile).

The Thrill Of Defeat: The Video Technology VZ-200

by Mark Sabbatini

Even if you're selling a cheap and tacky product, consumers usually don't want it reminding them they're cheap and tacky. This basic concept constantly got overlooked during home computing's early days, with machines resembling glorified toys flooding and usually making a quick exit from stores. Much of this was due to the success of the tackiest and cheapest machines of all: Sinclar's ZX80, ZX81 and Spectrum. These were the exception because they were the pinnacle of cheapness, possessing a quirky charm like plain-label generic groceries and Ed Wood movies. Once companies started trying to tack on a few extras for a few extra dollars, forget it. Few buyers took seriously machines that were often about six inches square, had tiny rubber keys without spacebars and brittle-looking plastic cases. Customers flocked instead to bargain machines that looked like real computers such as the VIC-20, even though they were often inferior in computing power. A historian would be challenged to name a non-Sinclair bare-bones machine that achieved real success. But the list of failures is plenty long: the Mattel Aquarius, Radio Shack MC-10, Texas Instruments 99/2, Tomy Tutor, Jupiter Ace and others (many of which will get looks in future columns here). Even IBM played a high-end version of the game with its PC Jr., which helped knocked the company from its seemingly unassailable spot on the computer throne.

At the bottom of this food chain is the cheapest home computer with color ever: the Video Technology VZ200.

This computer was a decent price/performance contender when it was introduced in 1982 (I know I'm deviating a bit from the chronological progression of obscure computers in previous columns, now in the late 1970s; I'll return there soon). But being second lowest in price (behind the ZX81) is like being the second-to-last guy picked in the NFL draft. The last guy - known as Mr. Irrelevant - gets a vacation, a photo shoot with models and all kinds of media attention, while nobody remembers the person picked just before him.

Other computers eventually sold for less than the VZ200's $99 retail tag once the price wars of the early '80s got into full swing, but its initial tag was unmatched. It bombed in the U.S., but managed to eek out sales in Germany and Australia, the latter thanks to it being carried widely by Dick Smith Electronics (a store similar to Radio Shack), which sold it at least until 1989. Many of its most dedicated retro fans are there and an exceptional Web site featuring emulators, software and documents is maintained by Jason Oakley at www.vzalive.bangrocks.com/.

I was intrigued by the machine (also sold as the Laser 200), perhaps because it seemed to bear a strong resemblance to my much-loved TRS-80 Color Computer for one-third the cost. This proved to be mostly because they shared the same Motorola 6847 display chip, a 32-column, uppercase-only cost-cutter with 2K of memory than ranked among the lesser options of the era. The guts of the machine were a combination of the best and worst components found in its bargain-bin competitors. The good included a 3.58MHz Z80 processor and 16K of BASIC ROM (twice that of many competitors), and it was large enough (about 11 inches long and six deep) for people to use it comfortably. The negatives included a rubber keyboard with poor response and no spacebar, a slow and unreliable interface for storing programs on cassette tapes, and a number of ROM bugs that triggered system crashes (if a user tried to print something with no printer attached, for example).

As a games machine, it was lacking. The 6K of user RAM wasn't enough for anything in-depth, although a 16K plug-in expansion pack was available (and larger ones up to 64K in subsequent years). The single-voice sound chip had a limited range and - like the Color Computer - brought everything else to a halt while playing. Maximum graphics resolution was 128X64 with four colors, perhaps the lowest of any machine except the black-and-white Sinclairs. At least it supported joysticks.

Overall, the best VZ200 games were roughly equal in quality to first-generation Color Computer titles (or Mattel's Intellivision for those needing a more well-known, if somewhat less accurate, reference point). In other words, just about every machine on American shores could eat it for lunch, especially beyond its few "premier" titles. Virtually all look cheesy and pixilated; when I talk about games having good graphics in the reviews below, it's only in reference to other VZ200 games.

A stronger interest in the VZ200 might have led to better games as programmers pushed the machine to limits its designers might not have intended, much like the Atari 2600. A graphics resolution of 256X192, for example, might have been possible with the built-in chip.

Even so, it's possible to have fun on this machine. Titles such as Hamburger Sam (Burgertime), Dawn Patrol (Choplifter), Space Ram (Targ) and Kamikaze Invaders (an original) are all quality diversions for a newcomer. Others are worthwhile from a historical or quirkiness standpoint, if only because they're so awful they'll make modern gamers appreciate even the worst titles in their collections.

The ratings in the review capsules below are in relation to other VZ200 games. They are in alphabetical order, although I was unable to play some gamers favored by loyalists such as VZ Panik and Asteroids. The remaining games reviewed will be listed next month.

3D Maze (C-)
This will seem seriously lame to anyone acquainted with even the most basic first-person shooters (i.e. Doom), not to mention old-school types used to encountering hazards in mazes (i.e. Wizardry). But for a primitive puzzle game this isn't bad, mostly because you can select the maze size, it moves along speedily and the display provides useful information such as your grid coordinates. Still, it probably won't hold anyone's attention for long, except those too tame to encounter even a mosquito when dungeon crawling.

Airstrip (C)
This is one of those simple games programmed in BASIC that exist for nearly all computers, the sort that can be fun if well-executed. The mission, described more amusingly here than most, is your plane needs a place to land, but unfortunately doing so requires wiping out the city below. Your plane fliers across the screen from left to right, dropping down every time it reaches the edge and "wraps around." Pressing the space key drops bombs on the city below and you must clear out sufficient space to land before hitting the buildings. It's sort of like an upside-down Breakout. This version has 35 skill levels, a limited supply of bombs and occasional "superbomb" capability, all extras from the usual versions. It doesn't have a ton of staying power, but among homebrew games it's one of the better short-term diversions you'll find.

Blackjack (D)
I could see a student in a BASIC programming class submitting this if the assignment required writing a blackjack game, and I can see myself as the teacher giving him/her a slightly above-average grade for implementing the rules and a considerably below-average grade for gameplay. The fact you start with no money is not a good sign, nor is being able to bet any amount and having the computer accept it (and start displaying your winnings/losings in very strange scientific notation when you get into the billions and trillions). The game is entirely played through a series of time-consuming, text-based prompts - no graphics at all. The positives are it understands things like doubling down and insurance, which a number of BASIC games don't. But I still wouldn't recommend it to anyone.

Bust-out (D-)
Breakout may be one of the easiest games to write in any computer language, but that doesn't mean plenty of people don't come out with versions that are inexplicably horrible. This is your typical bedroom BASIC programmer's effort - incredibly slow, lousy oversized graphics, a ton of flicker and a sparse playfield of bricks to hit.

Chess (B+)
I confess I haven't played this extensively enough to judge its value for hardcore players, but for casual fans this offers a lot - albeit a bit slowly. There are six computer skill levels, the ability to modify boards, take back moves, switch sides and make other adjustments. Control is wisely implemented by typing moves with standard notation (i.e. E2-E4) and the graphics are easy to decipher (although the use of red and blue pieces would be a crippling problem for someone with a black-and-white television). Biggest problem - I'm not aware of any way to save a game and using the setup option to resume a game would be time-consuming.

Dawn Patrol (B+)
Wow - Choplifter for the VZ200? After playing a bunch of horrible games I felt sure I was in for a serious letdown reading the in-game instructions, which are amazingly close to one's objectives for the Apple megahit. You rescue hostages from four stations using your helicopter, while dealing with enemy tank and missile attacks by firing missiles and bombs at them. Most of the little touches such as guard towers to avoid and the need to drop off hostages when your chopper gets full are preserved, although it doesn't quite have the full forward/backward flying and firing controls of the original. On most other computers this version would be decidedly subpar (even the official Vic 20 version is better), but on this limited machine it's a breath of fresh air.

Defence Penetrator (C)
In a fair world I'd get the programmer's side of this story. About how, after writing about as good a Scramble clone as one can expect on a VZ200, he/she/they decided to cripple the whole thing with an insane firing system that uses a single key for both shots and bombs. No big deal - other adaptations do the same - but here the "bombs" don't actually fall from your ship; instead they drop a few pixels and disappear. This makes it nearly impossible to hit the fuel tanks you need to keep going, and the strategic bombing needed to hit enemies while navigating those caverns is hellishly difficult. Since we're not talking about system limitations like Atari 2600 player/missile graphics I can't imagine the

reasoning for this, beyond the fact calculating the bomb's fall path must have been more than they could/wanted to deal with. A shame after so much effort to get much of the rest of this game right.

Digout (B)
A decent unofficial port of Dig-Dug that looks a bit clunky and lacks a few flourishes, but captures most of the spirit of the original when it comes to gameplay. You guide a pumpman who tunnels through the underground screens, destroying bad guys by pumping them full of air until they explode or by dropping rocks on them. The two types of enemies will occasionally morph through the soil like the original and the dragons - if that's what they are - breath fire at you (and here they do so vertically as well as horizontally). There's no bonuses to collect after dropping multiple rocks and the playfield resets itself after you die (but not the enemies remaining). The "pump" graphics are a little awkward, leading to some early deaths as I was unclear on what was happening, but one gets used to them pretty quickly.

Formula 1 (C-)
Oh, the frustration - I really wanted to like this Pole Position-type racer. It offers first-class presentation, six selectable tracks, a user-selectable number of laps, good graphics for the VZ200, and a simple and logical control scheme. But it suffers from one problem that will cause you to bail out within the first few times (if not the first) you encounter it. Basically, if you crash on a very sharp turn it's nearly impossible to get restarted because you can't redirect or reposition your car before accelerating - so all you do is drive into the barrier again perhaps a pixel's length down the road. This can happen literally dozens of times before you hit a straighter stretch. If not for this it'd be one of the system's highest-rated games; as it is the only reason it rates this high is because it shows the potential of the machine.

Galactic Invasion (C-)
There's a pretty good Demon Attack/Megamania-type shooter in here just itching to get out, but an incredible flicker problem involving enemy shots make this title impossible to enjoy. Aliens appear at the top of the screen, attacking in various horizontal and vertical patterns - always a good start for a simple shooter. But their missiles seem to be visible perhaps one-third of the time, so one that's well above you may cause your destruction when it reappears. Maybe it's done to speed things up on a slow machine, but it renders the game to the scrap heap unless you really like this sort of genre.

Galaxon (C+)
A simple port of Galaxians that gets a lot of basics right, such as decent graphics and playing speed, but also misses in key ways. The biggest is a complete lack of variety in enemy attacks. They descend at 45-degree angles and bound off the screen edges like balls in Breakout. This makes games rather predictable. Also, if you die at the wrong time this can result in your being trapped in a nearly impossible situation when your next ship appears at the left edge of the screen. One of those games you wish the programmer had spent just a bit of extra time with.

Ghostblasters (D+)
I've played worse arcade games written in BASIC, but nobody's ever going to mistake this for a commercial-quality release (even though it seems to be derived from part of the top-selling "Ghostbusters" game on other platforms at the time). Based on the movie, the player tries to capture ghosts that move overhead by shooting them Missile Command style, sort-of. The "sort-of" refers to relying on the long laser-like lines that intercept the intruder. At the right and left edges of the bottom of the screen are your supposed "helpers," but all they really do is make the game nearly impossible because they fire "streams" at the same time as yours, and if they get "crossed" the game is over. The problem is this will probably happen on any missed shot, since everyone fires at a 45-degree angle (your player's shots are controlled by which direction he's facing), and even on accurate ones where the ghost is high enough on the screen that shots cross under him. The action is typical for BASIC, with the ghost "jumping" rather than moving around the screen, more or less at random, and rather sluggish overall gameplay. The author gets credit for providing instructions and selectable keyboard/joystick controls.

Ghost Hunter (B+)
A pretty good unofficial port of Pac-Man, although the "mediocre elsewhere, good here" curve applies. The maze is reasonably close to the coin-op and the monsters move intelligently enough to bear a similar resemblance. The gameplay differences are minor - the entire screen switches colors when a power pill is eaten, flashing a few times before returning to normal, and the center prize is always what appears to be a heart. The speed is good and difficulty increases at a reasonable pace. A "hacked" version commonly found on the Web lets players select the number of men and starting wave.

Grave Digger (D+)
Imagine Lode Runner or Space Panik as a really slow turn-based strategy game and you may get a good idea about this one. It seems like variations of this type of puzzler were making the BASIC rounds on computers at the time; the best were interesting in a Minesweeper sort of way. In this one the player (a capital "O") moves around a screen filled with obstacles ("+" signs) by typing in directions (N, S, W, E). After each turn the enemies ("X") move one space in his direction. The player

can fight back by making good use of the obstacles and digging a limited number of graves that enemies can fall into. This is a below-average variation mostly because of a clunky user interface. It's very slow and the game display scrolls off screen every time it asks the player to type in a move and whether they want to dig a grave. I'd be proud of this as a beginning programmer if this was my first complete game, but too many other similar programs offer more interesting and faster-paced challenges.

(Note from editor: Look for more VZ200 reviews next month.)

Game Over

Well, another issue is in the can. Thanks for sticking with us all these months, and we hope you'll join us again next month for another issue of the longest-running free online gaming newsletter.

- ***Adam King***, Chief Editor

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