

Retrogaming Times Monthly

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Press Fire to Start

by Adam King

Welcome back to Retrogaming Times Monthly. No time for long introductions, let's get right into it!

Syntax Era: Nintendo Power

by Scott Jacobi

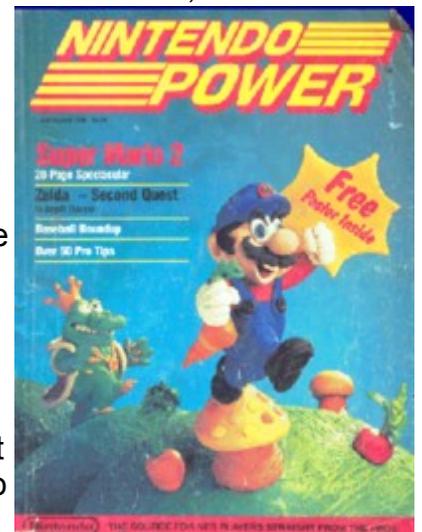
This would be the first magazine that I have ever reviewed which is still in publication. In keeping with the retrogaming theme of RGTM, I intended to focus only on the first year or two of Nintendo Power's publication. But it's difficult to discuss the magazine as it once was without contrasting it with the magazine that it has become today. I have a love / hate relationship with Nintendo Power. I have every issue, and I'm subscribed through 2007 or something, a result of trying to cash in on their many attractive resubscription bonuses. I loved what it once was, I hate what it later became, and I'm hopeful for the future.

As I discussed in the Nintendo Fun Club article, Nintendo Power was the successor to Nintendo's first publication, which was more of a Nintendo only newsletter. As the NES's popularity grew and the system was a success, Nintendo tapered off their 1st party production of games and allowed 3rd parties to provide a majority of the system's content. So there was less for a magazine solely dedicated to Nintendo to cover and the choice was made to expand to a new publication that would cover all NES games from every (licensed) manufacturer.

Prior to Nintendo Power's publication, Nintendo published three books which the content of Nintendo Power would borrow heavily from. The first was the venerable Nintendo Player's Guide. This guide was split in to two sections, the first half including in-depth examinations of key popular games, the second half containing a paragraph or two about every NES game published at the time. Each game in the first half was laid out in a manner reminiscent of Joystick magazine. The game's controls and basic elements were identified before proceeding in to a lengthy discussion of what strategies are best to employ. Entire maps were laid out for some games, which was a new concept for many players at the time. This particular break down of each game became the basis for most of the in-depth reviews within Nintendo Power.

The other books that Nintendo published were English translations of strategy guides dedicated to Super Mario Bros. and the Legend of Zelda. Although they were not the first games to receive strategy guides (certainly Pac-Man had his fair share), they were rather ambitious guides and served to revitalize the strategy guide market, and provided a template which Nintendo Power would continue to use in future publications of strategy guides.

When the first Nintendo Power arrived, I believed that I had never seen so much content dedicated to one system in all my life. It contained the first in-depth articles on Super Mario Bros. 2, Contra, and Double Dragon, among other games. The manner in which each game was presented was imaginative and colorful, surrounded by artwork that was usually provided by the game's publisher. Characters and maps seemed to pop off of the page, and the comments made about the strategy were often times very witty. Almost no piece of information was too secret or too advanced to escape publication in each issue. Of course, it borrowed several successful formulas from Japanese publications, the most influential of all being Famitsu, which covers all manner of consoles today, but



began as a publication to cover the wildly popular Nintendo Famicom in Japan.

Nintendo Power seemed to grow and change for the better through the introduction of the Game Boy and the transition to the Super Nintendo. Strategy guides were published, first as part of an effort to switch from bimonthly to monthly publication, and later as bonuses or premiums for renewed subscriptions. Eventually when the strategy guide market started to boom with the likes of Prima and Brady Games, Nintendo tried to sue other publishers for publishing content about games that were Nintendo owned. They lost that suit and followed the "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" philosophy and began selling their strategy guides in retail book and game stores.

The point where Nintendo Power took a dive for me was around the Nintendo64 days. It was around that time that the internet was only beginning to catch on to regular people outside of the computer science industry. Load times were slow, Netscape was the leading web browser, and most people used 14.4k modems. But still, gaming fans hungry for the latest news began turning to the internet as their primary source of information, and magazines had to play catch up. In the face of the Sony Playstation, Nintendo's image as the undisputed king of video games was also beginning to tarnish, and the Virtual Boy didn't help things much. So in order to salvage their reputation, the Nintendo Power staff tried to come up with a look for the magazine that seemed edgy and progressive. The result was anything but.

I like to think of the style that Nintendo Power used for that period of time as what would happen if a web page could throw up in print. Each issue of Nintendo Power used less creative layouts, interesting filler, and clever designs, and used more large lettering, random photo and paragraph arrangement, and too much "cool" to look cool. To be fair, Nintendo Power wasn't the only magazine struck by this phenomenon, but it was the most disheartening for me because it led me from reading each issue cover to cover, to flipping through the pages in order to find the meat hidden between lots of junk. The worst offense was of course the introduction of advertisements, but the move shouldn't be so surprising since the level of NP readers dropped off quite substantially at the time. So much in fact, that NP began selling the magazine to retailers, which was a big change for the once subscriber only magazine. And of course, throughout the height of the Pokemon craze, it seemed as though half of every issue was dedicated to that one game. They even included inserts in six issues called Pokemon Power which could be torn out and read as a strategy guide. The second half of the insert contained an episode of the cartoon laid out in comic book format.

Over time, the over-achieving attempt to look cool died down and the magazine became tolerable again, but it still looked a bit dated, and was having trouble shedding its child-like image. Until recently, that is. The latest editor of Nintendo Power has begun moving the magazine in a fantastic direction, one that I applaud them for very much. Taking a cue from what I consider to be the greatest English published video game magazine in existence today, and for some time, the U.K.'s Edge magazine, they cleaned the issue up to a great degree, introducing ordinary black on white print throughout most of the articles, and favoring clean layouts highlighted by terrific and appealing snap shots over haphazardly placed text and artwork. It gives the magazine in my opinion, a much needed make over and brings the maturity level up quite a bit.

So if you haven't looked at the magazine lately, perhaps for the same reasons that I had difficulty with, take a look now. It certainly isn't the magazine that I fell in love with as a kid, filled with as much imagination as the content of the video games they covered, but it has a certain quality to it now that doesn't make you feel like you've outgrown the magazine. To put it another way, Nintendo Power finally caught up with us.

ColecoNation

by [Nathan Kozlowski](#)

This month we have an exclusive interview with Scott Huggins, but did you know that this is just one piece of the ColecoNation puzzle? The version you find here is essentially the "lite" edition, while the "director's cut" can be found every month at <http://www.coleconation.com/>. There you'll find extended reviews and interviews, news features, pretty pictures, and tons of other Coleco-friendly material. The first two issues are already up, so be sure to check them out. Three out of four dentists recommend it and the fourth one is just being a jerk.

In Discussion | Scott Huggins

When he's not busy programming new games for the ColecoVision, such as Astro Invader (released last month from www.AtariAge.com) and Spectar (soon to come), Scott Huggins is holding down a day job and talking with us about everything from his proud mother to that punk Tom Petty. Gather around and join in the fun!

[ColecoNation_ What's your background as a video game programmer?](#)

Scott Huggins_ When I was young, I was enamored with trying to program a computer as early as 1981 (when I was 12 years old). I programmed Basic on a Xerox CP/M computer. It was awful. Then I

got a Commodore 64, and that was it. I learned 6502 assembly language and did some pretty nifty stuff. I got my feet wet with "real" machine language coding. I did raster interrupts, character redefinitions, hardware scrolling, programming the very excellent SID chip to make really good sound effects. Then I got bad grades and mom took it all away from me. Fast forward to January 2000 and I discovered emulators...

CN_ What's your background as a video game player?

SH_ My mom got us an Atari 2600 in 1979. I couldn't believe it. My sister and I fought over that thing constantly. The game, Adventure, scared us. The red dragon was something like the horror movie The Exorcist. Whenever it came on the screen, we would scream. It was awesome. By 1982, the ColecoVision came out and I had extreme envy going on. People at school sort of forgot about the 2600 and made fun of me for always talking about it.

CN_ When did you first get a ColecoVision system?

SH_ I first got one in April, 2000. We couldn't afford one in 1982, when I was 13. Boy, did I want one. I couldn't believe the kiosk at Sears that I played it on. It had Venture playing. Wow.

CN_ What are some of your favorite ColecoVision games?

SH_ Galaxian (still amazed how beautiful this game is, it's more fun than the arcade to me), Lady Bug, and Centipede. Frenzy with the Super Action Controllers is so arcade like! Montezuma's Revenge is very good. For homebrews, it's Space Invaders Collection.

CN_ What game systems do you currently play on and/or collect for?

SH_ I love the 2600 still (hey, you never forget your first). Obviously, I have a lot of Coleco stuff. I have nearly every game released for it. I have a ramcart (very similar to a Cuttle Cart), courtesy of CPUWHIZ from AtariAge. I have bought some homebrews for the CV as well as a bunch for the 2600. I also collect for the Vectrex.

CN_ What inspired you to create new ColecoVision games?

SH_ In January, 2000 when I discovered emulators, I started to reminisce about those assembly programs I did for the C64 and wondered if it would be possible to re-ignite that. I also started to look at CV games and wondered how they did all that. I searched the internet. Nothing. I found (finally) a basic technical document about the CV and read it over and over. It explained the characters, sprites, sounds chip, video ram, and had a very basic memory map. It didn't help. Well, in late 2002, I found Daniel Bienvenu's site. That was IT!!! He had some great documentation and then I found the coleco programming group on yahoo groups. I read everything Daniel had on his site and got really pumped. Joined his programming group and immediately started asking questions. Eduardo Mello (Opcode) responded as well as Daniel and several others. I felt at home and was just so excited to get moving along. Funny thing was, my early CP/M knowledge paid off, as there existed a CP/M emulator where you could code your programs in C and compile them to Z80 machine language. I chose that route over z80 assembly language. As I progressed, I would post demos and ask questions. Everyone was very encouraging.

CN_ How many active ColecoVision programmers do you know of?

SH_ I know of about three and a half. There's me, Eduardo (Opcode) Mello, Daniel Bienvenu, and Guy Foster. Guy has released a very nice demo that shows off the sounds and video capabilities of the CV. I'm pushing him to try to put together a game, but life sometimes gets in the way I guess.

CN_ Had you programmed anything before Astro Invader?

SH_ Yeah. When I "thought" I had a handle on ColecoVision programming (very naïve), I decided to try and port the arcade game, Phoenix. Umm, not something a beginner should try. I actually got about 60% done. Daniel and Eduardo gave me a lot of encouragement, but I bit off too much. It will never be continued. What a mess that code is. But, it really helped me (albeit painfully) learn the ropes, so to speak.

CN_ Phoenix?! I know I wouldn't be the only one eager to see that on the ColecoVision. Any chance you'd give a second attempt at programming that one?

SH_ Ha! I go back and forth from time to time on that one. The code is awful. Maybe I should just release the rom image just so people can see how it was going? To do it right, would take nearly a complete re-do. I think someone like Opcode should take on the project. He could do a fine job on something like this.

CN_ What inspired you to bring Astro Invader to the CV?

SH_ First, I always thought it was so cool that the CV had so many very obscure arcade ports. I mean, Lady Bug is far from a "classic" arcade game. And, PEPPER II??? What the heck? But they are such fun games and all of them have value. It connected with me. Astro Invader just seemed a natural fit. Second, I remember vividly playing Astro Invader with my sister at the local arcade in 1980. We loved it and preferred it over Space Invaders. Then it appeared in the Tom Petty music video, "You Got Lucky". Did you know that? He knocked it over. I couldn't believe that. It sort of disturbed me. I loved that game. I just wanted to pay tribute to Astro Invader and I hope others will "discover" it this time around. It's very, very underrated.

CN_ I've got to admit, I never heard of the game, let alone played it. It's pretty fun, very challenging though. What's your current high score on the ColecoVision version?

SH_ I got 16,080. I think if you can get 8,000, you are doing quite well. The bonus at 10k is really hard to attain, but I wanted to keep it like the arcade version. If you read the "strategy" hints on www.klov.com, that will boost your scores up quite a bit. The same strategy for arcade will work for the CV version. You have to know how to get maximum points for shooting the saucer.

CN_ Please describe the process that you went through in programming Astro Invader for the CV?

SH_ I am a Software Engineer during the day. It's so boring. Pretty much all the coding these days is so high-level and business oriented. I get my "charge" by doing stuff like Astro Invader. I understand the software design process. To this, there was NO design. I sat down and just for kicks tried to redefine the character set and place the basic shapes on the screen just to see what it would look like. It looked good, so I tried doing some basic animation and it looked good. All of this took place in about 4 hours! I got fired up. I got it done pretty quickly. About 6 weeks, start to finish. I think all the failed attempts at Phoenix and other projects helped me learn so much about the ColecoVision, that I had a pretty good bag of tricks by the time I started Astro Invader.

CN_ So, do your coworkers think you're crazy when you tell them what you've been programming on the side?

SH_ Some think it's very interesting. Some think I'm a complete nerd. Those particular guys are the corporate types, really into "climbing the ladder" and working 60 hour weeks. Those guys are incapable of "thinking outside the box." They lack creative energy. Strangely enough, my mom was really excited about it. She bought one to show to relatives.

CN_ It's my understanding that you programmed Astro Invader by playing the arcade version, studying the characteristics and patterns of the game, and then programming your own version from scratch. If this is true, then how did you program the higher levels of the game that you weren't personally able to reach on the arcade version?

SH_ Well, there are no higher levels. It's an even/odd thing. Screens 1,3,5,7, etc, have the invaders alternating sending five invaders filling up the left columns and then sending five invaders to the right columns, back and forth. No "AI" so to speak. The even levels (2,4,6,8, etc) are much trickier. Most of the invaders are sent to whichever side of the screen your ship is. So, it's very easy to get trapped on the far left or right because the columns fill up faster depending on which side of the screen you are on. And the speed of the invaders leaving the "mother ship" increases on each level.

CN_ What are the noticeable differences between the arcade and ColecoVision versions of Astro Invader? Why were these differences necessary? The major difference that I have noticed (by comparing screenshots) is that the playing field is shorter. Did you slow the enemy ships down to accommodate for this shortening or is the CV version actually more difficult a version?

SH_ The aspect ratio is the only major difference. The width of the playfield is exactly the same as the arcade, but the height was impossible to attain. Since your TV is horizontal and the arcade game was vertical, I had to compromise. Basically, if you look at the arcade version, your ship is much farther from the columns (that hold the invaders) than the ColecoVision version. And yeah, I did slow them down (only a tad) to make up for this.

CN_ Did you receive any help/guidance as you programmed Astro Invader or was it a solo venture?

SH_ Yeah, Eduardo (Opcode) gave me the sounds for the saucer in Astro Invader. I spent about 5 days straight trying to code something that sounded good. It was awful. I emailed him. He cheerfully agreed to help me out. I am indebted to him for that.

CN_ Are there any hidden easter eggs or bugs in Astro Invader that you want to reveal to the readers?

SH_ No easter eggs. Bugs...well, one. It does not in any way affect the game play. It's a visual bug that is extremely hard to reproduce, but as the demo screens execute and you press "5" on the controller to "insert coin," occasionally part of the Stern Mother Ship will remain on the screen. However, once the game begins, the screen is cleared and that is it.

Last Shot | To be continued in ColecoNation #2...

Head over to <http://www.coleconation.com/> for the complete interview with Scott Huggins. There we discuss the other side of getting Astro Invader out on the shelves (graphic design and production), as well as Scott's future programming plans and his opinions on game design and the future of the ColecoVision. You'll also find a review of Astro Invader, as well as more fun stuff. Take a look and drop us a note to let us know how you feel about that fourth dentist.

The Many Faces of . . . Carnival

by Alan Hewston

This month we celebrate another 25th anniversary, that of the Sega/UPL/Gremlin arcade game "Carnival". It is mid Summer in the Northern hemisphere, so there are plenty of Carnivals, Festivals, Fairs and Amusement parks getting filled with thrill seekers. Such venues will always have some sort of games of chance and skill and stuffed toys as prizes to win. The classic (late 1970s' early 1980s) era arcade video games probably helped in a small way in the demise to the mechanical games that used to fill the arcades and game parlors of yesteryear. Why play an old mechanical baseball or hockey game when you can play an awesome electronic game like Space Invaders.

The arcade game Carnival was one of, if not the first to pay homage to the mechanical era via a digital simulation of the classic carnival shooting games. This game was probably targeted more for the mature arcade customer, such as the adults of those children who were frequenting the arcades. Sure, they'd try Space Invaders with their kids, but eventually want something more mature, older looking, or that brought back the memories of the arcades when they were kids. Carnival was such a game . . . more relaxing and casual, and the world didn't blow up or end when you lost the game or your final life - as in some space themed games.

Carnival provides a bird's eye view of a shooting gallery, however the targets are all seen as if from a front view. Although an unrealistic approach, the made the playfield easy to lay out and not have an obstructions, as you may have in real life. Most of the action takes place on the Gallery rack, where the targets are lined up in front of you and move along a continuous but non-visible loop. When targets are hit they disappear. New targets could randomly be selected and randomly placed along the loop off-screen. In real life, on the old shooting galleries, you would see the target get knocked down but maybe still see it continue on the track, and then behind the scenes get flipped back up again top await another hit. Regardless of if it was up or down, it was always in the same place along the track. New targets only enter from the top (rear) row, which moves to the right and then goes off screen for a split second before coming back onto the screen now in the middle row. The middle row is moving left and its targets would then exit left and re-appear in the front row, moving to the right. Finally, targets departing from the front row then come back around again to show up in the rear row. The only exception are the ducks, which will attack you once they reach some random spot in the front row. Once airborne, a duck is worth no points, but you had better shoot it - as it will "eat" 10 of your remaining bullets. Scoring for targets was displayed along the right edge of the screen increasing in distance from the gun - rear row worth the most. All targets; Ducks, Rabbits, Owls and bonus letters are worth the same score in each row. If the bonus letter targets were shot in the correct spelling order, "B" "O" "N" "U" "S" you'd hear a special audio celebration and receive the bonus points displayed for the BONUS. The displayed score increases with every target hit prior to the letter "B". Once a letter is hit out of order this bonus is cancelled for that round and disappears. There are also numbered boxes that are worth no points, but shooting these targets adds that number of bullets to your supply. You are given a limited supply of bullets to shoot all the targets, and gaining more than the your maximum (60) results in those being lost. There's also a stationary target with 4 possible outcomes that is only lit part of the time. This plus/minus target will either add or subtract to you totals in either points or bullets. Once displayed the amount of the bonus would quickly decrease until zero and disappear. Finally, the most important set of targets are the centrally located pipes. These 4 pairs of different colored pipes go around a wheel that is above (behind) all other rows. Only the ends can be hit (from either side), and again the bonus points awarded for each pipe are shown. The bonus amount counts down with every shot not hitting a pipe. Score 4 times the current value when consecutive shots fired hit the same colored pipe. Pipes disappear once hit, and all must be eliminated to move to the next rack. You begin Gallery rack 1 with 60 bullets, and then received 48 in subsequent racks. The arcade used a rotational button to move your gun left or right along the bottom of the screen. And of course, the Fire button fires your bullets - one at a time, until they hit something. When all bullets are gone the game ends.

But wait there's more. Clearing the shooting gallery rack earns you bonus points for every bullet in reserve and a trip to the Bear rack. Each hit on a bear is worth 50 points but will make it both reverse directions and move a little faster. After several hits all bears will have escaped, ending that rack. You'll proceed to the next gallery rack having the same look as round 1, but a little harder/faster.

Subsequent Bear racks will have 2 and then 3 Bears maximum thereafter.

Arcade Sega/UPL/Gremlin/ 1980 - programmer(s) unknown

Home versions were all released by Coleco in 1982. None are hard to find.

- Atari 2600 by Steve Kitchen
- Colecovision by unknown
- Intellivision by unknown

Home Version Similarities: Except those in <> all home versions have: a classic carnival musical score <2600>; a choice for 4 starting skill levels <2600>; the bullet supply flashes when <10 bullets are remaining <INTY>; a Bear rack <2600> occurs between Gallery racks; Gallery racks have 3 rows of targets that move like the arcade <2600 - rows are independent>; points for targets in each row are shown on-screen <2600>; individual pipes disappear when hit <2600>; BONUS letters works just like the arcade <2600 - none>; if you stall . . . the game speeds up <CV just adds more ducks>; hitting the musical note toggles music <2600>; attacking ducks make a noise <INTY> and will move L and R to avoid you <2600>; every duck on the bottom row WILL attack <INTY>; and more than one can attack simultaneously <INTY?>. Only the 2600 has a demo. Only the Intellivision has the following features: a pause, a negative cumulative score (is possible!), the duck makes a noise when eating, and there's an audio cue to let you know when the game is over.



Silver Medal: Intellivision & Atari 2600 (35)

A tie for the silver, but we'll list the Intellivision first as it is superior in all categories save Controls.

Intellivision

My first reaction was this must have been programmed by the same folks who did PBA Bowling. C'mon now, bullets can't move that s..l..o..w..l..y. The targets seem to move about the same speed in all versions, but you'd think the bullets are moving through a fantastic force field or molasses here. This game is of course a shooter, which means lots of extra pain squeezing off shot after shot on those not-ready-for-repeat-firing Intellivision controllers. And then they didn't even permit you to hold the button in for rapid fire, so you have to press them for EVERY shot. No wonder most INTV fans don't rank this game very high. But wait, even worse, the programming or the controller itself does not allow for the precise left/right pin point accuracy needed. When you're just missing the pipes, you cannot easily tap it over one more pixel and be lined up. Typically, you overshoot by several pixels, or it doesn't move at all - as you didn't really tap it. A stickler may help here, but not enough for my liking. So you have to move away from this spot and then come back and HOPE that the next time you're lined up within that 3 pixel window. This sloppy/sluggish control pretty much ruins the game for me. Just throw any strategy out the door if you cannot make the simplest and most needed moves. Controls scored a (6). If you can master, or ignore the controls challenges, you'll see that this version is as good or superior to the 2600 in all other categories. Gameplay is very good (7) once you get past the slow bullet concept. There are fewer targets to hit compared to the arcade, and for some reason, not every duck will attack once it reaches the bottom row. Then the pipe bonus award 4X has a minor error in that it only considered consecutive "hits" on pipes - instead of shots fired. But the negative sign (if you go after the minus points) in the score is great - not many games allow a negative score. On all 3 home versions the Addictiveness is fun to play (7), but being the only system with a pause <built-in diagonal buttons> this port should have a higher score. The reason why it doesn't is due to deductions such as the Point boxes not being in boxes - although this is partially corrected as the "S" and "05" are distinct. The BONUS letters, instead of all being the same color like the arcade are each different colors. Granted more colors are nice, but in this case they detract as it simply makes it harder to learn the game or at-a-glance know what colors to shoot or not if you are trying for the spelling bonus. The collision detection is a bit off here, so you'll get the privilege of shooting some pipes or targets again. Graphics are the most colorful and exciting (7) but then there is no multicolor, and almost no detail. Heck, the Owls and Rabbits are better looking on the 2600. The bullets remaining counters are a mess and not quick to resolve. Just use one tick mark to represent one bullet - please. And then for probably the same reason these bullets remaining do not flash when < 10. Sound is crisp (8) with a decent carnival tune, and most effects are in place. All versions could easily improve with more creative and varied sounds for each target hit or miss or other effects. The same sound is played regardless if the pipes are hit consecutively or not - for shame - even the 2600 did that right. Finally, the duck does not alert you when attacking, but then again once he's eating - he taunts you! You cannot play this game on the Intellivision II system, and perhaps on emulation the controls would not be a shortfall.



Atari 2600

My first reaction as expected it is watered down. It still plays well, but upon close examination there are so many gameplay changes, mistakes or deviations that scoring all those deductions was tedious. The arcade fun and action are basically there so Gameplay was still marginally acceptable (5). The limited 2600 capabilities reduces the number of targets and they don't flow in one continuous loop. Instead each row is independent leading to more randomness and less planning and the inability to use the strategy of shooting the top row (they're worth more) and ignoring them (save the ducks) on the bottom row, until they arrive back up top. The pipes are too easy as they never disappear individually, just change colors. So any 8 hits and your job is done. Scoring the increased bonus of 4X on the second pipe does not require consecutive shots, but consecutive hits on pipes being the same color. The pipes also do not have a bonus value shown, thus their point value does not count down as it should with shots that miss the pipes. The spelling out of BONUS was not included, but I'd assume this was the hardest element to code and maybe provides the least value added to the gameplay or strategy. Fortunately the +/- bonus is pretty well done here, and so you can concentrate a little more on being greedy there. Clearly the Bear rack is missed, even though it is so simple - I feel that it helps to keep the game from getting boring too fast. This is the only version with a demo (albeit limited) to watch and observe some action. Addictiveness is very good (7) and although not as good as the others, not quite a full point lower either. Graphics are good (6) with better clarity and details than the INTY, but not as much color variety. There are fewer targets, and as mentioned, missing the Bear rack, the BONUS and the barely visible pipes all hurt. There's less action here, but the bullets fire plenty fast, the targets probably move a bit faster and everything is a bit more random to keep you on your toes. Despite no musical score, the Sound is effective (7) with all the effects in place. Controls are practically perfect (10) in every way.



Gold Medal: Colecovision (41)

My first reaction was this will win because it has no competition - but then again the CV programmers could have screwed up right? Not! The Gameplay is the best, very impressive (8). There are more targets than you can shake a stick at, and all the targets and bonuses, and scores and point values are displayed properly. There's even a Bear symbol to tell you how many Bear racks you've seen (up to 3 Bears). The Addictiveness is very good (7), but without a pause there are mostly deductions. The increase in score for having 4 skill levels is wiped out by minor problems such as - a slight collision detection problem, not fast enough bullet speed, delays while objects are off-screen, not allowing negative scores, and too many ducks - I'd prefer the usual "increase in the speed of the action" to remind you that you are stalling. Graphics are enjoyable (8), with good details and clarity and some animation and color variety. There are plenty of objects in motion, but to score higher we'd need more racks, faster action, multi-colors and better detail. Sound is sharp (8), with the best musical score and all the effects in place save for an end of game jingle and also missing a unique tone when the pipes are hit for 4X the score. Oh yeah and why not ask the duck to make some annoying sounds while he is eating bullets. Controls are perfect (10) . . . if you use an Atari stick you can get the much needed pin point accuracy tapping the stick to line it up with the pipes. You can use a CV controller in port 2 to select the game and an Atari or Amiga stick in port 1 to play. Too bad they did not make a sequel, with more racks and surprises. Maybe a fellow collector can program more racks and variety.



Updates and Errata from last month.

Bryan Roppolo confirmed that TI-99 version of "Crossfire" was made, but never released on cart, and not on any other format. Sierra On-Line had declared their TI works public domain, so there are disk versions in TI-99 UG libraries. The game does appear to be complete from viewing the screenshots Bryan sent to me, but I did not find time to ask him more about the game. Maybe after issue #100 we'll start getting to those lost faces more.

Come back next month, I'm planning for another big review, the many faces of Buck Rogers: Planet of Zoom on the Apple][, Atari 2600, 5200, 8 bit, C64, CV, TI & Vic 20. Contact Alan Hewston at:

Hewston95@NOSPAMstratos.net or visit the Many Faces of site:

<http://my.stratos.net/~hewston95/RT/ManyFacesHome.htm>.

Retrogaming Commercial Vault

by Adam King

Since Alan is covering Carnival in his column, I thought the Vault would spotlight a commercial for another Coleco classic: Donkey Kong Jr. In this ad the guy from the Donkey Kong commercial has captured Donkey Kong and locked him in a cage. DK Junior is out to rescue him, avoiding the obstacles as the villian(?) taunts him from above.

PICTURES:



This isn't exactly the Empire State building



Is this supposed to be Mario or Snively Whiplash?



Junior's getting a lot of exercise today.



"Hurry up and get me out!"



"Eek! Paper snapjaws!"



Junior is imploring you for help.

The Titles of Tengen - Road Runner
by David Lundin, Jr.

So far most of the games I've looked at have either been some of the most popular NES games Tengen or some of their more unknown ports. However this time I've decided to reacquaint myself with the NES version of one of my all time favorite coin-ops, Road Runner. Based upon the classic Warner Bros. cartoons Road Runner puts the player in control of the fast running bird in its natural cartoon habitat - endlessly trying to escape becoming a meal for Wile E. Coyote. It's sort of like Pac-Man spliced with a side scroller. Things begin with the Road Runner fleeing from Wile E. and picking up bird seed along the way. Bird seed is picked up by simply running over it, if the Road Runner passes by five piles of bird seed without eating them the seed meter becomes depleted and the Road Runner becomes too weak to evade Wile E. Coyote. If Wile E. catches the Road Runner a life is lost. Obstacles are littered along the roadway that will either slow the Road Runner down or cause yet another life to be lost. The objective is to make it from one end of the stage to the other without being caught or killed, bonuses are awarded for picking up chains of bird seed or causing Wile E. to get caught up in the obstacles along the road. The game is extremely simple to pick up but is very frenzied as Wile E. is always hot on your tail.



This is an easy port to review since it's done perfectly. Nearly every last detail from the arcade version makes it over into the NES home port. In the arcade the whole game had the look of hand drawn animation and that visual look and feel has been translated well onto the home hardware. Play control is exactly the same, the directional pad controls movement and the A button makes Road Runner jump. Although the basic control is spot on, in the arcade the speed of Road Runner was variable but this isn't missed in the NES version. Sound is excellent and the effects and music from the arcade are faithfully recreated however their play order is slightly different. Just the same the game begins with the William Tell March on the first stage, Flight of the Bumble Bee on the second and so forth. Presentation is top notch, nearly every screen from startup to game over is nicely recreated right down to the seed meter atop the screen and the shortcut cave at the start, which allows you to continue at the farthest level reached in the previous play. All of the different devices Wile E. picks up to chase down the Road Runner carry over to the NES version as well, from rocket skates to pogo sticks. The game really does have the feel of being ripped out of the cartoon even today.

If there's one problem with Road Runner it's that it gets repetitive pretty quickly. Although new routes and obstacles come into play in each stage which mixes up the challenge it still remains the same basic idea of running to the left, avoiding obstacles, staying a step ahead of Wile E. and eating bird seed. Some of the routes require nothing more than solid memorization to be able to zip through them quickly so after you get them down the game can become too easy. Thankfully since Wile E. stays so

close you always have something to do and have to keep your reflexes peak. In the arcade the game was a quarter muncher, at least for me anyway, so being able to play it at home was a welcome development back when this cartridge was released. It's not for everybody but it is something different and can be picked up complete for a fair price now days. Not as complex as Road Runner's Death Valley Rally on the SNES but still a great game and yet another absolutely solid Tengen NES port.

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

The Thrill Of Defeat: More VZ-200 Reviews

by Mark Sabbatini

Hamburger Sam (A-)

This Burgertime clone is one of those titles that fueled my suspicions of the VZ-200's TRS-80 roots, since it originated on the black-and-white Model I/III. It was a surprisingly good game on the Radio Shack machines and makes a good transition here. Your chef assembles burgers by running over the ingredients on platform-like playfields that change each wave. All of the arcade's enemies are here trying to stop him - hot dogs, fried eggs and pickles - and they're even reasonably recognizable and move with much of the same artificial intelligence as the arcade version. You can throw peppers at them to stun them and touching a coffee cup that appears at random locations gives you more. That random placement is among a number of minor deviations, the most significant of which is probably that this version is a bit easier than the arcade. There's only three burgers to assemble during the first stage, for instance, instead of four. But it moves along at a good pace, controls well and is generally as good a title as one can expect for this computer.

Hoppy (B)

This Frogger knock-off is another title I believe originated on the black-and-white TRS-80s, although the gameplay itself seems to be nearly identical to an early unlicensed clone for Radio Shack's Color Computer. This version does a pretty good job of capturing the spirit of the original by doing what the "official" TRS-80 version did - split the screen in two so the highway and river appear separately. This allows for more detailed graphics (such as they are) and, more importantly, better animation and more room to display full rows of cars, logs and the like. There's no real holes in this conversation and that in itself makes it one of the better VZ-200 titles.

Ladder Challenge (B)

No, you can't play Donkey Kong on the VZ-200, but this is a pretty good relative of it. The basic idea of climbing ladder-connector platforms to the top of the screen before time runs out remains. The first screen is a slow implementation of the barrels level from the original Mario game, but afterwards it wisely moves onto unique challenges based on simple concepts such as dots (that's what they are) that scroll back and forth on various platforms and must be avoided. Besides speed, the big problem with this game is there's no running jumps. This simplifies things in a way, since in all cases you simply stop and jump when something is within a safe number of pixels, but it makes the game less enjoyable. Also, there's no hammers, bonus prizes and other extras.

Kamikaze Invaders (B+)

I'm not sure I can think of anything that's original about this game, it's a repetitive and nonstop shooting fest - and for some reason I find it rather engaging. A mothership at the top of the screen rapidly deposits pods into five bins on each side. The player tries to shoot them before too many can build up in any given row. When a bin accumulates five pods the lowest one drops toward the bottom of the screen and, if not shot before it gets there, triggers an electrical implosion that is definitely not ship-friendly. Also, every so often the mothership drops a bomb from the middle of the screen that must be shot before it hits bottom or the player's ship is destroyed. A number in the middle of the mothership lists the number of pods remaining to be distributed and, if the player can survive them all, there's usually time to clear the bins while the mothership goes back for more to start the next wave. It's one of those simple games that is quick and mindless enough to play several games' worth when the urge for a simple diversion arises

Key Hunt (C+)

A platformer that would be better if it didn't suffer from severe flicker problems. Players use the keyboard or a joystick to get to the top of ladder-connected screens, avoiding creatures and other obstacles along the way. There may, in all fairness, be more depth to later screens, but I didn't stick with this one long since competing titles were more fun.

Knight (C-)

Not awful as strategy titles go, but a small bit of tweaking would make it better. You control a knight that must get to the castle, avoiding an enemy who tries to intercept you. Basically, it's a turn-based thing: You move a step and then the enemy moves a step toward you, unless there's a tree blocking its way. These trees are distributed at the beginning (the number is controlled by the user by selected from five levels of difficulty), so using them as shields becomes the key strategic element. One of the best features is the game is as quick as you make it; if you hold the keys down the knight will move quickly and the enemy will seek you out with an arcade-like intensity. But you can also make a move

and then take as long as you want to plan the next. The biggest hang-up is the graphics. You're a single blue pixel and the enemy is a red pixel. They can be hard to see and it keeps the game from feeling polished. But it's one of the better variations of this for VZ200 - certainly better than some slow and clumsy text versions.

Lunar Lander (B)

Every system since the beginning of time has had variations of this game, including computers without displays that printed out results as players typed in moves one step at a time. The key is getting a good version and this is a solid choice for the VZ200. The graphics aren't bad, even if they look clunky in screenshots, and there are multiple platforms with various point and fuel bonuses. There is a large, horizontally scrolling landscape; the display shifts to a close-up when a platform is approached; and there are useful speed and direction indicators at the top of the screen. Not much to fault, except that it's the basics and nothing more. My standards for a top-level lander game were altered when I saw a game called Merchant Of Venus for the ZX81 which, despite severe system limits and black-and-white ASCII "graphics," combined a first-rate lander and space-trading sim into a mere 16K of memory. If it can be done there, then a little innovation doesn't seem like too much to ask for on other computers.

Maths Armada (C)

There must have been a market for arcade-like "edutainment" titles like this back in the day, because they were everywhere. Either that or it's just really easy to write titles like these that teachers and parents are more likely to go for than kids. This is a basic concept executed in OK fashion. The player shoots down ships that emerge from the right side of the screen, with math equations printed within, before they can reach the left side. The player moves a laser base along the bottom of the screen using the arrow keys, and "fires" by typing in numbers (hopefully the correct answer) and pressing the space key. An accurate and mathematically correct shot destroys the enemy, which implodes with a rather crude explosion. Several enemies can be on-screen at once, necessitating some arcade strategy. The strengths are good controls, and an ability to select game speed, types of math problems and difficulty level. The biggest weakness is the game is over after one wave. No increasing difficulty levels, no high scores to shoot for. Not a good way to sustain interest.

Melbourne Cup (C-)

This horse racing game is either a good homebrew effort or a weak commercial one. One to four players bet on eight horses with various odds, which try to get the finish line by crossing the screen from left to right three times. There's some good features, including the ability to bet on more than one horse, although the interface is a bit awkward - it goes through every horse and asks each player if they want to bet on it, which is time-consuming. Odds, by the way, are a bit strange, with listings like 28.3 to 1. The races run at a good speed, but the three-lap thing doesn't add any excitement and the more typical one-screen race would likely hold players' interest longer. Before each race "Honest John The Bookie" offers a "tip" on which horse is "sure to win," but I wouldn't put much stake in it.

Missile Attack (B)

This isn't the greatest Missile Command knockoff, but it's definitely in playable territory as far as this computer goes. Players only defend four cities instead of six and have two missile bases instead of three. The graphics are rather large and chunky, making me think they probably could have crammed in six cities and made the game look better at the same time. Control is with keyboard or joystick and, much like using joysticks on the Atari 2600, losing the precision offered by a trackball is an impediment. Speed is OK. The biggest annoyance is the waves are long - evident by the fact your two bases have a total of 70 missiles, compared to 30 in the arcade version - making it much more difficult for novices.

Missile Command (D)

No, this is not an official port and compared to Missile Attack (above) it's like trying to fight off the Russians with a crop duster instead of a B-1 Bomber. It's slow, the graphics are even clunkier than Missile Attack (this one has four cities and one missile base) and the controls are even worse (the programmer crammed them all together in a hard-to-manage Y-G-H-B diamond, with F to fire). Even if Atari knew about this they never would have sued - nobody would ever mistake it for the real thing.

Moon Lander (D)

The best thing about this game is one can contrast it with Lunar Lander (above) and come away with an ideal example of the right way and wrong way to translate an arcade game to a home computer. This version features only a single platform on a landscape that takes forever to draw - and if you thrust off the top of the screen (easily done) the screen blanks and takes forever redrawing another landscape. The controls are too close together to be useful and there's often graphic "garbage" left on the screen caused by the poor drawing routine. The only positive is the player's ship moves reasonably quick and the physics of the controls are reasonably well done.

Penguin (B-)

OK, the gameplay bears some resemblance to the cute penguin coin-op game Pengo, even if little else does. Your character certainly looks nothing like a penguin and the enemies don't look anything like Sno-Bees. You move around with the keyboard or joystick, kicking blocks to crush enemies before

time runs out, at a speed at least comparable to the real thing. But a lot of little touches are missing: no special blocks to line up, the enemies for each wave all appear at once instead of materializing as their cohorts are destroyed and sound is annoying instead of cute. This version probably won't win many new fans, but it's still an above-average VZ title, which says a lot about the overall quality of games on this machine.

Planet Adventure (C-)

This would make a better first impression if the beginning of the introduction/instructions didn't scroll off the screen before you can read them, although you do manage to figure out your goal is to escape from an alien planet. It's not a bad adventure, with descriptions that are mostly useful, a help feature that actually offers some help and an OK storyline. But it also suffers too many pitfalls common to text adventures on computers with limited memory. The vocabulary is small, so you end up playing "outguess the programmer." You can get trapped into inescapable situations through no fault of your own. The input routine also needs some help - there's no cursor and no apparent way to backspace if a typo is made - you just have to hit and retype the command. Perhaps worth a look, since text adventures on this machine seem relatively few and far-between.

Planet Patrol (D+)

This is a pretty good Moon Patrol clone - if you've got an emulator capable of running at 200-300 percent of normal speed. This is another game that looks like the real thing, but plays at a snail's pace due to the limits of the machine and/or language it was programmed in. If speed were OK it'd rate average for graphics and above-average for implementing gameplay elements such as enemies and obstacles from above and ahead that must be navigated as you drive along the horizontally scrolling moonscape. But when the framerate is about two or three a second, something pretty big is lost in translation.

Poker (D-)

When video game players go to Hell, these are the types of games that will be waiting for them. First off, it's not poker - it's a slot machine. You "pull" the handle by pressing P and three low-res color bars appear at the top of the screen - along with occasionally misspelled text - and the computer tells you if you've won anything on your fixed 25-cent bet. First of all, even perfect copies of Vegas slots are dull on computers because there's no money involved. Tacky versions like this are worse because there's less glitz and no realism since spins are random instead of on a fixed-payout basis. I can't imagine how long it would take to either exhaust your \$100 or hit a jackpot large enough to satisfy, but getting there would be an exercise in extreme boredom. The reasons it doesn't get an F: It didn't crash and it'd be good therapy for a degenerate gambler.

Quest (I)

This may be a good D&D type game IF it comes with extensive printed instructions and possibly some sort of gameboard map like Quest For The Rings on the Odyssey 2. Hence the "incomplete" grade. Otherwise it's a confusing mess, as your party of knights wanders around eating rations and getting killed by hazards that are vaguely described in a few words - as is everything in this game. It was programmed in BASIC, which can be a serviceable language for such sims, but the ultimate result still depends on the programmer immersing the player in the storyline. Without printed instructions, that isn't happening here.

Space Ram (B+)

This unofficial Targ conversion is a great reminder that games can be both simple and engaging, and these frequently were the titles most successfully ported to low-end machines. The game is nothing more than driving around a simple maze of squares, shooting other cars before they ram you. But it's the extras that make it worthwhile. Like the arcade version, you can't just reverse direction - your car slows and then reverses - so a lot of strategic planning is necessary. Also, at times a "time bomb" appears that must be shot before it expires or you die. The original wasn't a huge hit and the repetitive gameplay probably won't hook modern gamers, but for those with limited memory/horsepower machines these were the games with staying power. It'd edge into A territory, except occasionally I'd die for no apparent reason, which I suspect is some obscure bug in the game. But it may also be some feature I haven't figured out yet; there's enough of them that incompetence on my part is a legit possibility.

Tennis (D-)

If you want to experience one of the more common frustrations of the early home computing era, imagine seeing a screenshot of this game in a magazine. It looks attractive, at least if your standards are Activision's Tennis for the Atari 2600, and it offers extras such as a demonstration mode and keyboard or joystick control. So you spend four hours typing the BASIC program in exactly as listed, including a couple of hours weeding out the inevitable typos. Then you run it - and find out it has a framerate of something like one per second. In other words, it's so slow as to be an unplayable joke and you just wasted an afternoon on something you'll never play again unless you feel an overwhelming need to justify your effort. Why did so many programmers try to write games like this that aren't suited for the limits of BASIC and why, oh why, did publishers print them?

Trade (D)

Nothing but another version of the text-based Hammurabi/Kingdom resource management classic, with ore mining substituted for crops. I love the original, but this gets knocked for a poor text display that doesn't wrap words properly and the general idea of passing something off as an original program by changing a few names. Included here as an example of the rampant such copycat efforts seen in magazines and even commercial programs of the day.

Triffids 2040 A.D. (C)

A rather bizarre concept packaged into a pretty basic shooter. Based on the cheesy horror movie "Day Of The Triffids," where giant killer plants try to take over Earth after nearly everyone is blinded, here the player controls a shooter that kills stationary pods that pop up randomly on screen. If too many appear (10-40, selected by the user) a triffid appears that will chase the player rapidly, likely resulting in a quick death. The play can move in four directions, but shoot only horizontally. On the other hand, a single shot will wipe out all enemies between the ship and edge of the screen. It's hard to picture even fans of the movie playing more than a game or two of this, but it's not insultingly bad.

VZ Invaders (B+)

I'm sure somebody could do a better Space Invaders rip-off, but this is pretty good. The invaders are larger and there's fewer of them, but the basics of eroding shields, invaders that speed up as their ranks diminish and squiggly shots are all intact. The bonus ship appears a lot more than the arcade version. Probably the biggest difference is the game gets harder than the original in a hurry, since by the third wave the invaders' starting position has already descended to right above the shields - three descents and it's game over. The coin-op never gets that hard (it gets as low as four from the bottom, then resets the starting position higher and begins the descending process again). All in all, VZ Invaders passes the fun test, but is also a clear example of how the better games closely resemble first-generation TRS-80 Color Computer titles. This is very similar in many ways to Space Assault, one of the original titles Radio Shack sold with its machine.

Game Over

And so the book closes on another chapter of RTM. Sorry for the shorter than usual issue. Hopefully we have quite a bit more in store for next month.

- [Adam King](#), Chief Editor

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