Retrogaming Times Monthly

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Press Fire to Start

by Adam King

Welcome back to Retrogaming Times Monthly. It's the dog days of summer, and what better way to beat the heat than by playing a good video game. But I hope you take time out to check out whats in the newsletter this month.

Collecting in Australia

by Tonks

I have been actively collecting classic video games since about 1993. I started collecting for the Vic 20 and Atari 2600. Since then I have amassed a reasonably large collection that my kids love and my wife hates.

However, recently I have begun to think that being a collector in Australia sucks. Let me explain why.

1. All the really rare stuff never came to Australia.
Starting off a collection and building it to a reasonable size is not a difficult task. But when the vast majority of the rare stuff never came down under, you can imagine how frustrating it can be to keep your collection growing. I can keep searching amongst the hundreds of Space Invaders and Combat Carts, but I know that my chances of ever finding "Chase the Chuck Wagon" is as likely as George W. admitting he was wrong to invade Iraq.

So to continue building my collection I need to look to America, Japan or Europe. Which brings me to my next points.

2. PAL Vs NTSC.
Here in Australia we use the PAL format. America and Japan, where most of the really good stuff comes from, use the NTSC format. It is a total pain in the butt to track down that rare game you have searched ages for only to find it won't work due to PAL/NTSC incompatibility. And River Raid with a purple river just looks silly.

3. Lockout chips.
I have never worked out why video games have to be made with lock out chips or some other device to prevent them from working on foreign consoles. It is all Nintendo's fault. It all started with the NES and has infected just about every console since. All I want to do is play the game. So if they are not going to even release it in Australia, why make it near impossible for me to play an imported copy without purchasing an expensive "converter" or risk blowing up my Playstation or Xbox by putting an "illegal" chip? It's just plain stupid!!!

4. Currency exchange.
The Australian Dollar is not too strong against the mighty Green Back or British Pound. The current exchange rate means that if I buy something that costs $10 US, it actually costs me $13 Australian. It's even worse against the Pound. If I buy something that costs me 10 Pounds, it actually costs me $25 Australian. So as you could imagine, this extra cost can add up quite considerably.

5. Postage costs.
Recently I won 4 boxed NES games on ebay for $1 each. I thought I found myself a real bargain until the invoice came through with the postage amount of $29!!!! I nearly died. It can be frustrating to see

something you would love to bid on or buy direct, but then discover that the postage amount makes that "bargain" cost an arm and a leg. Another recent ebay auction I checked out was for a very rare Commodore 64GS. I contacted the seller to ask for a postage quote for the item to be sent from England to Australia. Postage was going to cost me just over $200 Australian!! I suppose that is what we get for constantly beating England in the cricket.

6. Stupid Americans.
Yes, I know that I have just insulted the majority of our readers, as well as my fellow RTM writers. But I am still ticked off with the seller who sent my rare Vic 20 carts to AUSTRIA. Idiot!!!

Anyway, I have moaned and complained enough. Just spare a thought for us poor Aussie collectors. And just in case you would like to show some mercy and send me a mint condition Chase the Chuck Wagon, email me and I will give you my address.

ColecoNation

by Nathan Kozlowski

The second part of the Scott Huggins interview is featured this month here in Retrogaming Times Monthly. Be sure to check out the full version of ColecoNation #3 available on 09.05.05 at http://www.coleconation.com/.

ColecoNation_ Aside from programming, what other steps were involved in getting Astro Invader released?

Scott Huggins_ Well, I was contacted by Albert Yarusso, from Atari Age, last year. He joined the coleco yahoo programming group. He let me know that his website offers services to homebrew authors. Once I got started on Astro Invader, I sent him the rom file. He liked it. Then I contacted someone from AtariAge forums that I noticed is a huge ColecoVision fan, Joe Kollar. He play tested the rom file and did all the artwork for the manual, cartridge label, and box. He did an awesome job, very professional.

CN_ How much were you personally involved with the design of the Astro Invader's label, manual, and packaging?

SH_ None at all. Joe did it all. I had no input, he sent me what he had created and it was perfect. He actually did about three different designs and (of course) they were all great. It was hard to choose the best one. I think he's one of the very best out there.

CN_ From a business perspective, what type of relationship do you have with AtariAge in regards to Astro Invader? Are you financially compensated in any way by AtariAge for the copies of Astro Invader that they sell?

SH_ I think Albert Yarusso is an absolute savior to the classic gaming scene. He has a real passion, a very approachable personality, and a very hard work ethic. His website is so popular because of it. AtariAge is like the central portal for everything classic gaming related. Albert owns the game now, but I receive "royalty" for each copy sold. No way is anyone going to get rich doing this, but it's still very cool to get a little kickback for something you really love doing.

CN_ From a legal perspective, what type of relationship do you have with Stern? Do they even exist anymore?

SH_ I have no relationship with them. Albert did all the contacting with them.

CN_ First Astro Invader, soon Spectar, it seems like you are upholding Coleco's tradition of bringing unknown coin-ops to the CV. Are there any other games that you are currently working on?

SH_ Spectar is about 98% done. One final sound just isn't perfect. That's the hardest part (by far) for me, the sound chip of the ColecoVision. It's the same as the TI 99-4/A. Actually, a lot of the ColecoVision is similar to the TI 99-4/A. I think Spectar and Targ are great games. Simple, but they are pretty dynamic, actually. I'm also working on an original game. I've been working on and off for about 18 months on it. It's a fully playable game, but it doesn't seem to be as fun as Astro Invader and Spectar. I'll probably re-work parts of it before considering releasing it.

CN_ Can you reveal a little more about your original game? Why do you think that most new games tend to be translations over original games?

SH_ My original game is called Cavern Rescue. It's a simultaneous head to head, two player game. That type of game is pretty non-existent on the ColecoVision. A few others have played it (from the coleco programming list) and they agree that it is fun, but not great. So, it needs some work.

CN_ It's great that all you programmers have each other as a resource. You each have your own individual projects, but they wouldn't be possible or as entertaining without the collaborative interaction.

SH_ The original vs. translation question was asked on the homebrew forum on AtariAge recently. I thought Manuel Rotschkar answered it best: it's the most fun. To me, if you do an original game and release it, it had better be a very good idea. It's pretty hard to do. And then take for example, Manuel's Crazy Balloon arcade translation he is doing on the Atari 2600. I doubt many are familiar with that game, but it's a very good game. And so it's almost like it's a NEW game to most people. I suspect Astro Invader and Spectar will feel like a brand new game to most as well.

CN_ These are good points. I've noticed that all the current games are very solid in quality and gameplay, which they have to be in order for them to be worth producing. These high expectations must make it very difficult and nerve-racking to put a brand new game on the market. What's your opinion on the ethics of the unlicensed porting of video games to classic systems?

SH_ I think if you try very hard to contact who ever owns the rights to the title, then you are going about it right. But if you are making lots of money with an unlicensed port of Asteroids, for example, you probably will get in trouble.

CN_ Many believe that if an arcade game is going to be ported to a game system it should be a literal port with bugs and all or it will be seen as incomplete. Do you agree with this purist ideology? Is there value in altering a port to improve gameplay/graphics and to fix bugs or should this be considered an act of desecration?

SH_ Those are hard questions. I know Opcode is very literal in his translations. Space Invaders Collection is astoundingly faithful to the arcade version. I respect that. Astro Invader was as literal as I could get it. Spectar, on the other hand, is slightly different from the arcade, mainly in the graphics. I just thought the colors were really drab in the arcade version of Spectar. I think my version shows off the ColecoVision's capabilities a little bit more.

CN_ It sometimes seems futile to compare arcade versions with their ports (due to their differences in hardware and capabilities). Also, in my opinion, sometimes the arcade version or parts of it are just not worth translating literally.

SH_ Yeah, I agree.

CN_ How would one go about programming a ColecoVision game? Any tips, helpful resources?

SH_ Sure. First, go to Daniel Bienvenu's website and read everything you can. Make a decision on how "hardcore" you want to be. Half the ColecoVision programmers do it the "native'" way and code in Z80 Assembly Language. It's harder at first to get a grasp on, but the results are usually better in the long run. I do all my coding in C. It's easier in most respects (C libraries exist to interface to the BIOS calls, etc), but there is a trade-off. Coding in C always results in bigger rom sizes and slightly slower performance. Second, join the ColecoVision Programmers List on Yahoo Groups. It's free and there are lots of good discussions on it. It's all archived so you can go back and search though the postings.

CN_ What emulator(s) do you use to test your roms with?

SH_ Only MESS32. It seems like the only one that's close to the real hardware.

CN_ What new developments in the ColecoVision community are currently exciting you? What would you like to see get produced for the CV?

SH_ Everything Opcode is working on is exciting. His Super Expansion Module is interesting, to say the least. I wish Daniel would sit down and write another epic like he did with Ms. Space Fury. It's no longer in production and from time to time a copy will appear on eBay (and sell for $350!!!). I'd just like to see some more people get into ColecoVision programming. Compared to the 2600, it's very, very minimal right now.

CN_ Well the classic gaming community is growing every year. Let's just hope that equates to an increase in the population of the ColecoNation. Many thanks, Scott, for your time and undivided attention. Good luck with Spectar/Targ and all your future endeavors.

SH_ This was a great honor, Nathan. I found this interview very interesting!

The Many Faces of . . . Buck Rogers: Planet of Zoom

by Alan Hewston

As we close in on issue #100 (counting our previous existence as the Retrogaming Times), there are still a few titles like this one that really do have "many" faces, and we've gotta try to get them reviewed. I passed over this one a while back as it is not a well known arcade game and I was missing 2 of these faces. I now have the Apple 2 port and was able to borrow the TI-99 cart from fellow staff writer Bryan Roppolo. Bad news is that I did not edit this too well, it is a long article and I was late getting this to our editor, so thank Adam for holding things up for me to keep my consecutive issues streak alive. FYI Buck Rogers is a trademark of the Dille Family Trust, although quite frankly this game contains nothing that would make one think of Buck Rogers. There was no Buck Rogers movie and nothing from the TV show is here - no Planet of Zoom that I am aware of. There's no Twiki (the comedy - voiced by Mel Blanc - bidi bidi bidi bidi hiya Buck!), no Wilma Deering (the babe), no Dr. Theopolis (the brains), nothing.

You are Buck Rogers, and as hinted at, you could be any other pilot, inside a space fighter, racing to save the planet of Zoom, before an alien force devastates the planet. With a behind-the-ship perspective you face 3 rounds of enemies on the surface before a do-or-die space battle with the enemy Mothership and her escorts. If you defeat the Mothership, you are given a full supply of fuel to take on the next assault level of aliens. The aliens increase in number, maneuverability, intelligence and overall difficulty up to level 5 where the action will continue at that level indefinitely. In each of the 4 rounds, you must defeat or clear an increasing number of enemies & obstacles up to a max of 40. Clearing an obstacle is done by either flying between each pair an Electron Posts or destroying the Alien Saucers or Space Hoppers. Any collision with anything results in the loss of your ship. Likewise, running out of fuel/time before clearing all the enemies and then also destroying the Mothership results in a loss of your ship. Your speed is controlled by moving up/down where "up" is faster. You'll see your shadow below you. You can only move a little bit up/down and the height you are at will affect if you hit the aliens who also maneuver up/down left/right and also out/back. So direct your shots in three space. You can move left/right the full width of the screen and moving more so makes the screen scroll more left/right with you at the edge. The faster you fly, the faster the surface scrolls up toward you, and the less fuel you burn. The Arcade displayed your time remaining, whereas some home versions an actual fuel supply is represented. Either way you only have so much time. You can earn bonus ships ~ every 20K, but once your final ship is gone, the game is over. The arcade game allowed you to put in more quarters and continue indefinitely, making the high score table pretty much meaningless there.

Many screenshots for this game can be found at: www.mobygames.com/game/buck-rogers-planet-of-zoom/screenshots

Arcade: Sega 1982 - programmer(s) unknown

Home versions - all from 1983 unless noted and all but CV port released by Sega or Sega/US Gold.
Apple][, Atari 8 bit & 5200 - all 3 by Ken Jordan
Atari 2600, Vic 20, TI-99 (Sega/TI) - unknown programmer
C64 Sega (cart) / US Gold (disk) - unknown programmer
Colecovision '84 Coleco - unknown programmer
Sinclair Spectrum '85 Sega / US Gold - unknown programmer

Rumor Mill: an Intellivision version was in the planning stage, but nothing more that I know of.

Home Version Similarities: The Colecovision port has been dropped from this paragraph as it is just too different. No version has a demo or choice of starting level. Except those in <> all home versions have: a set number of Electron Posts to clear; enemies shot down count as if they were Electron Posts <2600>; round one is only Electron Posts; round two adds in maneuvering Saucers; round three adds in the bizarre Hoppers; enemy Saucers come in waves, and you'll hear them when they are present <2600, AP2, Atari 8 bit, 5200, TI?>, you'll also hear the Hoppers as well <2600, Vic> but I don't think there can be more than 2 Hoppers simultaneously; a counter or a group of icons displays the number of enemies remaining; most versions only show a max of 20 icons; regardless of the max number displayed, every version requires you to collect more than this as the levels increase, they simply are not show above that number; the round ends when you reach zero - with a brief flurry of audio and visual effects <2600 & C64 keep going>; followed by a text message telling you the current level.round round number <C64 & 2600 both keep going>; after completing the surface on round three you (take off and launch - C64 only) enter space for round four; in space the counter or icons track the mothership's fighter escorts; then the Mother ship then arrives and must be hit multiple times on a pass, or at the 5 distinct target locations to defeat her <AP2, Vic, C64, Atari 8 bit, 5200 all require only one direct centered hit>; beware as shots missing the vulnerable spots will bounce back at you, and some versions have engine debris that must be dodged as well; after her defeat, you are given bonus points, a full load of fuel and begin a new level; the new level is displayed in text; and sounded out in a spine tingling alert <2600, Vic, 5200, Atari 8 bit>; you can pause the action <2600, Atari 8 bit>; you always see the current & high score; bonus lives are awarded ~ every 20K; smooth scrolling action is really intense; the action never slows down due to too much on-screen activity <oh yes it does AP2 & Vic>; mountains are seen in the background; and these scroll when you move hard left or right; the most important part of the game is flying between the Electron Posts; which are quite colorful <2600, TI, Vic>; and begin firing shots outwards to prevent you skipping them starting on level

2 <2600>; you'll not only see them fire, but also hear them <2600, C64, TI?>; to keep you from delaying, there is a time limit (or a fuel gauge) for each level - if you run out you lose a life (and on the 5200 and Atari 8 bit you must begin the entire level over again); when getting low, you'll hear an audio warning, and the fuel/time line will change colors <TI?> to alert you as well; to keep the action from being too repetitive, the Hoppers varied 3-D attack will force you to dodge them L/R and by changing speeds <C64, 2600>; you'll see and hear your speed change ; and the Hoppers will fire upon you <2600?, AP2?, C64?, Atari 8 bit?, 5200? - unsure if they ever do>; the faster you go, the more points you score, as your score increases continuously; your ship has a shadow displayed and must be flown at the right height to hit some enemies in 3-space <2600, AP2>; 6 or more enemies will make a run at you simultaneously. The C64, and maybe the TI (I forgot) show the refueling (increasing) of your fuel gauge. Regardless of which version, there is always something missing that should have been added but al of them are playable and fun. Most cart versions are not too hard to find ($8 price).

Missing in Action: Sinclair Spectrum (??)

I do not have this system to review, but with any luck, we'll eventually get a decent review and comparison to these versions by our newest staff writer, Andrew Masters. Don't forget to send Andrew a message if you enjoy his new series, the "Lost Faces of the Sinclair Spectrum". He's premiering this month with Galaxian.

Have Nots: Atari 2600 (36)

My first reaction was they packed quite a lot of graphical tricks into this game. The Gameplay is acceptable (5), but comes in last place. Honestly, all versions scored a point lower than I would have expected, since none of them have any gameplay options. The biggest 2600 deduction is that the entire use of the Hoppers and the strategy for avoiding them was completely missed in the programming. You simply treat them like the Saucers. Only the posts collected are counted towards your goal, not enemies shot. You still earn points for enemies shot. There are only 2 distinct rounds - the Planet surface and in Space. As is the case for all other versions (save the CV) round four begins in space attacking saucers and then after reaching your quota, the Mothership arrives - making this two distinct phases in one round. The Mothership requires 2 successful hits (anywhere) in the same pass - which is a great way to add complexity to the 2600 version - despite its limited graphics. If you only hit it once, it regenerates - cool! Also it should be noted that there is a lot more room to maneuver here than on all other versions save the CV. Now then, the usual first three rounds (all on the planet surface) are merged into one round here. You still need to pass through a set number of electron posts - 20 on the first level. After you pass through about 10 of these posts, the action continues but changes as the Saucers arrive. After collecting a few more posts the Hoppers join in until you complete the round. In level two you need to collect 23 posts . . . up to 34 posts in level nine. As each level increases, the three phases of round one are split about equally (Posts only, Saucers, and then Saucers plus Hoppers) - nicely done. Despite the 2600's limitations, this merged set of three rounds is not a bad way to achieve the arcade-like gameplay elements. . . but I still deducted for it. Finally, your flying height does not seem to affect shots hitting the Saucers, and the Electron posts do not appear to fire. Thus the game is pretty mindless, just go as fast as you can and stay inside the Posts and don't run into anything - not much strategy here. Succeeding levels have more and faster enemies, require more and narrower Posts to be collected, but no other change in strategy. The Addictiveness is also the lowest scoring version, but still very good (7), with enough varying action and gradually increasing skill to make you come back for more. There is no pause, but the background colors change and the scrolling colors change with each level keeping the game moving along and not seem so repetitive. The Graphics also score in last place, but are actually very impressive (8). Despite a lack of multi-color, there are a lot of enemies, lots of fast, fluid action going on, the planet surface, stars and mountains all scroll nicely, and all shots are easy to see. There is a tremendous amount of color variety as well. The enemies are lacking in detail, the animation and Mothership are somewhat weak, but the scoreboard and time remaining are really well done for the 2600. The Sound also scores in last place (did I hear an echo), but is respectable (6). There's no music, but adequate background sounds representing the speed you are going. But then again, a lot of this sounds like "Night Driver". The enemies do not make any sounds, but most other effects are in place and good enough - just not that pleasant. Controls are perfect (10). Overall, despite last place in 4 categories, it's still not too far from the medal winners and worth a try as it ranks just below average in the 55+ Atari 2600 titles I've reviewed to date.

Have Nots: Apple 2 (38)

My first reaction was there is unwanted disk drive access which slows down the game. Only 4-5 seconds, but I guess the programmer had no other choice - maybe it's for the great audio bursts. Gameplay is very good (7), with most of the elements in place. Missing are the Hoppers firing and the 3-D effect, where the shot height matters to shoot down Saucers. Addictiveness is fun to play (7) with the biggest problem being the disk access, and the change in speed of the game depending upon how many items are on screen. Try to stay alert as you may get caught off guard as the round two enemies pounce on you, just after that short break for the disk access. This disk access occurs every time you lose a ship or complete a round. The pause is <Esc>. This is the only version with varying backgrounds, albeit 2, the standard mountains plus a factory/city. The second background may be what forces the disk access - if so, that was a bad trade off. I experienced a glitch that gave me infinite lives (probably 255). On one hand this was fun that I had a chance to play several levels deep, for as

long as I wanted, but then again, maybe this occurs too often/easily which is bad as it takes away the integrity of any high scores, and if it happens at the wrong time, it will invalidate any high score effort you are making. The Graphics are very nice (8), but edging out only the 2600. The number of enemies and fast, scrolling action is great, but the multi-color is limited, details not that great, colors somewhat bland, animation OK, color variety pretty good, with all other critical graphic elements in place OK. One of only a few versions with a star field shown on the planet surface. Sound is cool (7) but is only better than the 2600. The initial starting level music is fantastic & I think the Mothership sounds were good too. Most effects are in place but missing are the Saucers present, the speed that you are going, and any other background effects. The internal speakers detract a little as well. The Controls score a (9), suffering from some analog problems. It's just hard to stay where you want and not over-steer or suddenly move into a post as you are passing it. Hopefully the improved Apple third party sticks correct such problems, which would add in another point back if you are scoring at home. As usual, found only on disk.

Have Nots: Commodore 64 (40)

My first reaction was the Graphics are oversized - more on that later. This is the most common cart to find, and is probably pretty easy to find a copy of the diskette version as well. I did not do much homework on the two releases. Typically US Gold re-released disk versions of games in Europe after they came out in the US. The C64 was really hard to score as it has some fantastic elements that are done the best here, but not everything. Play testing should have identified the problems and then correcting them would have earned a Gold medal. Many C64 fans rate it above average, especially for a 1983 game, but Zzzap!64 was a bit more harsh than I - they reported it as "Utterly Terrible Crap". Gameplay is respectable (6), but edging out only the 2600. Once again the Hopper 3-D attack and your urgency to destroy or avoid it appears to be completely missing. Maybe this changes in later levels but that makes no sense to me. Be careful as the programmer(s) allowed you to maneuver a lot, so much that if you venture too far left or right and end up seeing another set of Electron Posts (or is that the same set from the other side), which of course could be firing at you and you're on the outside of them, thus getting hit before you see or hear them it coming. All other gameplay elements are done well. Addictiveness is exciting (7) with the <Shift/Lock> as the pause. The biggest problem is mobility, as the large blobs of sprites for the ship and Electron Posts severely limit the playfield and maneuverability. Not to mention that the posts start way too close together on level 1, making the game much too hard at the onset. Needless to say the gradual increase in difficulty of the narrowing of the posts and faster, more and smarter enemies is overshadowed by this size problem. When a round ends, there is the usual audio and visual cues, but this is very brief and without showing us that the next round number is beginning. It simply begins, and without the enemies resetting. This is more realistic as in real life, the enemy won't sit back and wait or run away. It takes some getting used to but moves the game along faster. The Electron Posts are ruthless in this version as once they begin firing (in level two), they fire 2 or 3 volleys each pass, so you are almost assured of being hit if you try to pass around them or were flying too fast to get between them. You better fly slow enough to ALWAYS stay between them or get FAR away from them . . . but without getting too close to the next set. Thus there is no forgiveness of errors, not random luck here, which severely limits your use of strategy, or ability to play it safe. Graphics are a mixed bag, overall (9) outstanding. Despite the large oversized main objects, everything else (color variety, details, animation, scrolling, multi-color, speed and number if enemies) is among the best. There's even a star field on the planet surface round, making the play area even smaller - which makes no sense why they took some shortcuts resulting in over sizing. Sound is sharp (8), and maybe the best of the lot. All music (albeit limited) and effects are great, especially the beginning of each level. The only things missing are the Hopper's shot fired, bonus points added for Mothership, bonus life earned (not positive?) and Electron Posts firing. Controls are perfect (10).

Have Nots: Atari 8 bit (40)

My first reaction was there is limited music and no pause. Gameplay is pretty good (7), almost the best with everything in place but the firing Hoppers. The manual says they fire on Level two - not. This and the 5200 are the only versions that make you re-start each level (completely) if you run out of fuel/time. Sure that is cruel, but probably matches the arcade. Addictiveness is very good (7), and would have been the best if there were a pause. No other shortfalls here - you'll really enjoy it. Graphics are fantastic (9), hands down the best. The only feature that is significantly better, or in this case missing is that of the star field on the planet surface. Sound is worth while (7), but missing the Saucers present, the start of a round, and there's no music or background effects. Controls are perfect (10). Like the C64, it was quite capable of being better programmed and thus scoring higher.

Have Nots: Vic 20 (40)

My first reaction was this is one of the best arcade conversions on the Vic. I gave a little more scrutiny to this title as it was as close as you can get to winning a Gold medal but instead getting nothing. The Gameplay is very good (7), the best of all versions with nothing missing here! Likewise the Addictiveness is very fun (8), finishing a close second to the TI. The pause is the <Shift/Lock>, and the only drawbacks are some slight slowing in the action when all enemies are present, and some minor collision detection problems / inconsistencies. Graphics are of just enough quality for a score of an (8). There is some detail, multi-color and animation. The size is a bit big, but not like the C64, and the color variety is fine and the scrolling, number of enemies and fast action is excellent. The Sound is

exciting (7) but no music and a bit limited in range and quality. Missing are the Mothership bonus points, new level starting sound and the Hoppers being present (but this is the only version where the Hoppers firing is heard). Controls are perfect (10). This port wins the award for the best version relative to its system's capabilties, scoring 4 points higher than the average Vic 20 game reviewed thus far & tied for second best Vic 20 game.

Gold Medal: TI-99, Atari 5200, Colecovision (41)

Colecovision

My first reaction this is not the same Buck Rogers game as in all the other systems. The ship looks similar, and its a space shooter, but there are more differences than similarities. As usual, I'll still count this in the medal race as it is the official release for Buck Rogers. Hopefully my penalties (for missing things) and bonuses (for unique and fun aspects in the game) balance out. The Gameplay seems to have some depth and is pretty good (7). The main element of the game is gone - no Electron Posts. The Saucers are altogether different in how they attack and there are no Hoppers. The only real similarity is that the screen is scrolling on the surface of the planet, but then that is not variable, it remains fixed. It is still a space shooter where you move up/down (a lot more here too) and left/right (full width) and you have to eliminate a set number of enemies each round (section). There is timer (not visible) that when it expires you move on to the next section. There is no penalty for playing it safe - i.e. less strategy. The means of hitting the enemy ships is based upon your position on the screen and angle that you are maneuvering at when you fire. This will take quite some time getting used to where your shots will go. You may never really figure it out, or when a collision is to be detected. The enemies still come from both the front & behind you, often in formations, but they maneuver and turn and flank and ultimately will move all about the screen. Besides the Saucers (which look like Eggs), there are Enemy Planes, Asteroids and Rockets. Each has a different tactic for moving about. Instead of 4 rounds there are 6 sections. Section 1 you begin in a long trench, just like Star Wars with only Saucers and Rockets. The manual is completely lame - saying "Don't worry about how it got there . . . " Give me a break - write a better storyline please. The Rockets look like pineapples in space and seem to function more like space mines as they fall from out of nowhere and ultimately will explode when the near an object, including their own ships. Section 2 is hurtling through the stars with lots of maneuvering room facing Saucers and Rockets. Section 3 is scratching the surface, but as mentioned, there are no Electron Posts. The Enemy planes join the existing enemies. Section 4 is back in another trench, but this one has all three enemies, plus energy barriers. The barriers take up half or 2/3 of the width. You really have to be focused as there is not much time to determine where the barrier is and move to avoid it. Section 5 is back in space again now with the same old enemies, plus lots of Asteroids. Asteroids will take multiple hits to eliminate, but you will score more points as well. Finally, section 6 faces the Mothership. This is a bit weird as you start the round with the Mothership and Enemy Planes about. The UFO counter counts down as the enemy ships escape the Mothership. If the counter hits zero, you lose a life. Just like the arcade (I think) and TI (below), the Mothership has 4 large engines which must each be taken out. Then a fifth hit, on the reactor gates finishes it off. Be careful of the engine rings which fall off and must be avoided as well. The C64 also has a similar looking Mothership, but they did not program the hits on the 4 engines. So with all these differences it was hard to score it fairly. Addictiveness seems to be very good (7) when generically compared to all other Many Faces of (MFof) games. The pause has been disabled and there is some inconsistency in the collision detection. There are 4 skill/difficulty settings, but the easiest difficulty is plenty hard (typical of CV) so the net gain is reduced. Finally, a controls issue affects my enjoyment. Instead of moving where you want, the game slowly self centers your ship on the screen. This is bogus as it forces you to be completely attentive to your controller ALL the time. Graphics are well done (9) when compared to any MFof game. Some color variation and nice detail. Decent animation and many multi-colored objects. The scrolling is fast, but not variable. The action is too slow for the most part and almost knocked the score down one more point. There are plenty of enemies, debris, and stars moving about. The Mothership is way too big and lacking detail. The Sound is enjoyable (8) compared to other MFof games. There is nice music and background effects. But nothing for when enemies or the energy barriers are present. The Mothership effects, bonus points and bonus life are well done. The Controls are perfect (10), but only because both sets of controllers are active, thus you can use the standard CV stick in one port to start the game, and your favorite (read Atari) stick in another port used to keep your actions perfect.

TI-99

My first reaction was that this cart is a little harder to find than the $5 listed in the price guides. It keeps eluding me, but many thanks again to Bryan Roppolo for letting me borrow his cart several months ago. I played it quite a bit and made videotapes of all the action, so as to better analyze it now, but now I cannot find my tape - so this review was done from memory. I'm certain that the few details that are fuzzy (in my memory) would not have changed any scores here - so it deserves a medal. It's also among the top 3 TI-99 games I've reviewed to date. The Gameplay is very good (7) and like the Vic has no elements missing. The Addictiveness is enjoyable (8), with a pause, and no drawbacks or problems that I recall. The Graphics are superb (9) with fast action, lots of enemies, great attacking by the (silly looking) Hoppers, nice scrolling mountains and planet surface, enough sprite details, good color variety, a bit of animation, with adequate fuel gauge and scoreboard. There's no multi-color, and I don't think the fuel gauge changed colors or flashed. The Sound is effective (7),

but this is the category that I least certain of. All effects were in place but most were not that great and sounded alike. I do not recall much music, but the real bright spot is the added speech synthesis - when using the voice modulator. More than likely, if I get a chance to play this game again, or find my video, I may increase this score and it could be the lone Gold medal winner. Controls are perfect (10) - of course using an adapter and your favorite non-TI stick.

Atari 5200
My first reaction was it is identical to its Atari 8 bit computer cousin, so all the same scores & details apply, with the only difference being in the controls & pause. The Addictiveness is very fun (8) with the usual 5200 button. The Controls will be crap if you are using the standard 5200 analog controller, and even with a Wico controller you'll be fighting against the analog control and not always able to steer through the Electron Posts. If you have a Masterplay interface or equivalent, then you'll see that this is a Gold medal winner with perfect (10) Controls.

Updates and Errata from last month.
After reviewing the Many Faces of Targ / Crossfire, two months back, I see that there is now a Colecovision port out for the Targ sequel, "Spectar". Hopefully RTM staff writer Nathan Kozlowski, of ColecoNation fame will cover this game some time soon. I know that I look forward to playing it some day on my CV. This past month I finally won a Vic 20 Battlezone cart on ebay and love it! It plays great - and I'm positive that I (we - with Andrew Tonkin's help) did not score it too generously. It may even gain another point on my spreadsheet - but no formal update will be made here in the RTM.

Come back next month, featuring the exact set of US systems in the many faces of "Moon Patrol" on the Apple][, Atari 2600, 5200, 8 bit, C64, CV, TI & Vic 20. We may also have some notes on the Spectrum and MSX versions. Contact Alan Hewston at: **Hewston95@NOSPAMstratos.net** or visit the Many Faces of site: http://my.stratos.net/~hewston95/RT/ManyFacesHome.htm

The Lost Faces of the Sinclair Spectrum - Galaxian

by Andrew Masters

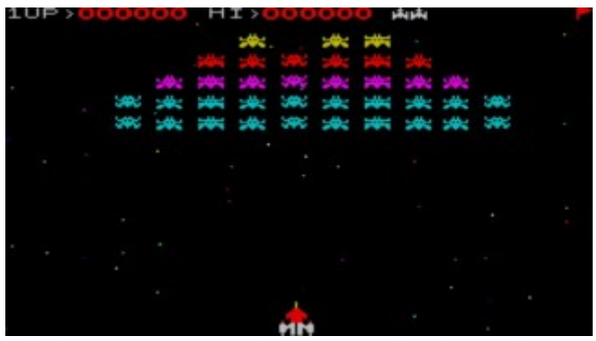
This is the first installment of a column reviewing games that Alan has already covered in his 'Many Faces Of' reviews. However, I'll be looking at the same games as they appeared on the good old Sinclair Spectrum. I'll score the game using the same method and categories as Alan, and that way we'll be able to see how the ZX Spectrum games stand up against the competition. As a die-hard Spectrum fan, I think many games stand a good chance of getting a good score. Where possible I'll also play each game on another major system (MAME emulator, Commodore 64 emulator etc). That way, my scores will be as objective as can be! (As objective as a grown-up Spectrum fan can be, giving my opinion from here in England.) I grew up with the ZX Spectrum, and love downloading great Speccy games of the past and playing them on my PC under emulation. Anyway, on with the review...

INTRODUCTION

Atarisoft (UK) released this game in 1984. The loading screen mentions this game is copyright Namco 1979, Atari 1983 (see screenshot 1). As with most Atari games that were released in the UK through Atarisoft, you got a rather bland cover tape inlay (see scanned image). But in time these built up nicely and were at least all the same. I once had the original cassette for 'Ms Pac Man' and 'Pole Position' and they were the same bland blue/green colour. In time you kind of got to like them in the end (like the original Atari 2600 cartridge packaging). On the World of Spectrum site, the programmer is listed as David Aubrey Jones from England (who would later work on Ghostbusters on the Spectrum). David also converted the arcade version of Mercenary (also by Atari) to the Spectrum and Amstrad. When released in 1984, this game cost £7.99 -- quite a lot in those days for what is still a standard shoot-em-up.

This is actually quite a good game. The Spectrum was released originally in versions either with 16 kbytes RAM, or 48kbytes of RAM. Galaxian is actually just a 16K program (so it works on all Spectrums). Later, Sinclair got a bit carried away and introduced machines with (then) massive onboard RAM sizes of 128 kbytes (!). You could in theory also get RAM expansion packs that plugged into your 48K spectrum, giving you extra amounts (I once knew a guy who had 96K total RAM). This was not useful however, except for home programming - as games required 16K, 48K or 128K (not 96K!). However, as an example of an early '80s game, I still prefer the clone 'Galaxians' released a whole year earlier (1983) by UK company Artic Computing.

GAMEPLAY



The scoring is worked out well - the blue Galaxians at lowest tier are worth 30 points, the middle tier pink Galaxians are worth 40 points, whereas the red guard Galaxians get 50. The yellow Galaxians at the top of the wave get you 60 points. However, hit a yellow Galaxian in flight and you will get 300 points, and a point display on screen! In later levels I have seen a yellow swooping Galaxian get you 800 points. Like in the arcade, the three red and one yellow Galaxian swoop down in convoy (in formation). It is also possible to get more than one attack swooping at once. The Galaxians swoop all the way across the screen horizontally on some attacks, making their range very wide. Starting on the second level, you get swooping Galaxians from the get-go, and the game becomes more difficult. One classic feature included in this Galaxians game is that you can destroy a Galaxian by having one crash into the un-fired missile on top of your gun turret (and not lose a life). This all makes the gameplay on the Spectrum very similar to the gameplay on the arcade.

You can also destroy the first Galaxian on a new wave by shooting before they appear. As long as a Galaxian appears in position where your missile is, you thereby get a headstart on the next wave. But if the player does this, the game delays the Galaxians, to give them more of a chance! (Sneaky!) It becomes increasingly difficult to hit all of the remaining Galaxians on a level, when they are swooping (in this mode, they often just swoop down the screen, and then return at the top for another swoop, and do not stop). The angle of attack can be very low, so the Galaxians can swoop all the way across the playfield almost horizontally, making them hard to hit. One good strategy to get past a level is to try to hit all remaining Galaxians BEFORE they have a chance to start swooping! The latest level I have seen is level 16 or so (with a cheat entered!). On later levels, where there are many swooping attacks, the game does slow down (this does not happen on the arcade version), but this also gives you more thinking time to get in position to make a clean hit. As far as I can tell, the game just goes on for ever, with a new wave (with the same number of Galaxians) being presented. At about level 10 the difficulty remains the same. There is also a two player mode (just like in the arcade version). When the game ends, there is no end game music or even any effects, just the classic 'GAME OVER' text, on the always present scrolling starfield. You then see a list of the scoring, telling you points for 'charging' (swooping) or 'convoy' (static) Galaxians (see screenshot 2). Strangely, you are told a new 'Galaxip' (ship) is awarded every 5,000 points (which is awarded at 7,000 on the arcade). Whoever heard of a Galaxip? Maybe I've been living in the wrong galaxi... Considering the limitations of the Sinclair Spectrum, and that this game was programmed in 16 K of RAM, it is great that everything from the arcade is included here. (Amazingly, the arcade version, when played on the MAME emulator, is only 17 K of RAM.) There are a couple of attack patterns from the arcade not included on the Spectrum version. Considering how authentic the Spectrum version is to the original, the high gameplay score below reflects this.

GAMEPLAY: 9 OUT OF 10.

ADDICTIVENESS This is quite a good and faithful rendition of the arcade original. As you play further into the game, you start to wonder if anything much different will happen on some of the later waves. You can see the high score at the top of the screen, and so it's fun to try and beat this. But it would have been better to have a high score table. However, it is very handy to have a hold key (key H) in the Spectrum version. This helps when the real world drags you away. The game also gets harder as you play into it. The later levels are very hard to beat, as the Galaxians start swooping near the end of the level, and do not stop. The red flags in the top-right of the screen also help you tell which level you are on. However, when there is a full row of red flags, the red flags start appearing again, but flashing red and black. This is a bit confusing. It might have been better to have a level counter (such as 'LEVEL 11'), but at least they tried (and it IS the same as the arcade version anyway, and this is MEANT to be a Spectrum CONVERSION).

ADDICTIVENESS: 8 OUT OF 10.

GRAPHICS
I find the graphics actually quite good - better than Galaxian by Artic (the Artic version suffers from terrible flicker on your gun turret). The Galaxians are one solid colour (this is normal for the Spectrum), rather than the lush multi-colours of the arcade version.

The whole of the screen is used up for the play area, which is good (rather than the thin play area in the arcade version). The red flag icon at the top of the screen (see screenshot 3) to designate level is very good, straight from the arcade. You have your normal score and high score at top of screen as well. The multi-colour background stars actually add a lot, as they scroll down towards your ship, giving the impression you are flying THROUGH space, rather than just staying in one position. However, there is no flicker caused by the starfield effect. Although the Spectrum only famously had 8 colours (16 if you counted the same 8 colours made brighter as well), this just doesn't matter here in this game. The solid graphics do the job fine, but the explosion of your ship when you lose a life is a bit rubbish, not very many frames used. The graphics are fine on the Spectrum version, but are less

colourful than on the Commodore 64 and arcade versions.

GRAPHICS: 7 OUT OF 10.

SOUND
The sound is a bit sparse in places. In fact, when you start the game, it looks just like the demo (no starting music). It's only when you fire that you realise you have control of the game. There is no sound for firing a shot, only when the Galaxians are destroyed. The only other sound is a good shrieking sound as the Galaxians swoop, and the explosion shot as you or the Galaxians are destroyed. Here, the lack of sound does not engage you so much, whereas in classic games like Ghostbusters (which programmer David Jones did the speech for) the sporadic speech of 'He slimed me,' and 'Ghostbusters!' was REALLY atmospheric. However, the arcade cabinet version benefited from a custom sound chip (but the same 3 Mhz CPU as the Speccy!), so the Spectrum sound is OK. There is no sound as you get your extra life at 5,000 points. Also, you must look to see if your ship has actually fired a shot.

SOUND: 6 OUT OF 10

CONTROLS
The controls rate very well. The Spectrum version has sensible keys for control - 'Q' for moving left, 'W' for moving right, and 'P' for fire. Unfortunately these can't be changed (redefined), so I felt I had to knock the scoring down here slightly. If you are left-handed, or if your 'P' key on your keyboard does not work, then you would be stuck. However, you HAVE got a pause (hold) button, which is key 'H.' The hold is easy to press, even when the action is frenetic.

There are options for a good variety of joysticks to be used (on the Spectrum, the joystick interface you want to use has to follow the correct set of keys - all number keys). You can use a Sinclair joystick interface, a Kempston joystick interface and a cursor joystick interface. Into your interface could be plugged in whatever joystick you wanted to use (even the infamous Gravis II expensive joystick that was the size of a small Devastator!). Anyway, all joysticks are catered for here (see screenshot 4).

CONTROLS: 9 OUT OF 10

OVERALL SCORE AND CONCLUSION
Overall, Galaxian on the Spectrum is a solid conversion of an arcade original. More sound would have made later levels more frenetic, and no high score table hurts its lifespan a bit as well.

OVERALL SCORE: 39 OUT OF 50.

You can download this game, and the Spectrum emulator programs at the World of Spectrum site -- http://www.worldofspectrum.org/ . You can also download POKEs for this game from the Tipshop web site -- there is a link from the WOS site. POKEs are software cheats that allow infinite lives, so you can get further than ever before!

The WOS site is well worth a visit, as you can download many Spectrum games - 5,600 games alone, as well as Spectrum utilities and even Spectrum programming languages. The best PC emulator to download is 'ZX32 for Windows' (also on the WOS site).

Andrew Masters runs a web site at http://www.geocities.com/cs0ama Play Java games, see pictures of the world and read movie reviews.

A Retrogamer Interview

by Tonks

Editor's note: This is an interview Andrew Tonkin conducted with a Commodore collector known only as "Mayhem".

1. Tell us a little about yourself.

Doing this always feels like an introduction at a dating convention :p

Anyhow, I'm 31, I live on the southern cusp of London, England just off from a place called Epsom, and at the moment I'm ducking the redundancy bullets from HP. I'm single (so all the lovely ladies reading this, get in touch) and figuring out how to fund a soon-to-be-completed house move. But that's what a brother is for also. I need it. I've run out of room here to store my games!

2. How did you become interested in classic games?

Grew up with them. Had a Binatone Pong console clone around 1979 and spiralled from there. Over the years, I've had an Atari 2600, C64, SNES, N64 and now Gamecube and PS2. Most of what I've had has not been sold either, meaning the collection started at the start and has gotten bigger with

time. In the more recent years I've spread out to niche systems such as the Atari 7800, Vectrex and NGPC in the quest for new (well, old) gaming experiences.

Most people I know into retro are at least a few years older than me. I see myself as being right on the end plate of people who were there at the time, and old enough to appreciate playing these games when they were "hot". That goes for arcade machines as well. I was five when Space Invaders hit the West for example. Before we got the 2600, that's where most of my "schooling" happened, in arcades, where I was surrounded by kids twice my age and twice my size! I recall having to stand on a box to play the periscope version of Battlezone for example. Plenty more memories where those came from.

3. You have one of the most amazing Commodore collections. Give us a brief run down of your collection (Commodore only).

It's good. I'll admit it's not as impressive as a few people I know, but it's good. Easily over 1,300 games about the place, comprised roughly of 400 cartridges, 600+ tapes and at least 300 disks. Actually it's probably more than that in terms of individual units as I've gotten many games on both tape and disk (and cart where it was available).

And as mentioned, it all progressed from the start in 1984. Aside from duplicates, I've not sold a single C64 game I've gotten my hands on. When younger, games were hard to come by and what I bought was either with what I was given or earned via paper rounds etc. Computer shows were heaven to get cheap games at the time. When I got the freelance job for Oracle Teletext in 1990, I almost didn't have to buy another game for the next three years. That was class.

But by the time the C64 commercially died, I wouldn't say I had a lot of games. That really cranked up in the mid 90s when stock was being discovered and a lot of old distributors were selling off what they had fairly cheaply. Computer Cavern (aka Capri Marketing) was a haven for a lot of the disks I acquired. And then came eBay in 1999, and needless to say, it's gotten even more bonkers since then in terms of buying.

eBay also brought one other thing; access to like minded collectors and contacts. We may compete for some things that appear, but I also sell and swap with some of the guys I've come to know from the place.

Why the cartridge side? A lot of people know me for having just a suicidal number of the little plug-in things about the place. Everything featured on my website (http://www.mayhem64.co.uk plug plug) I own. That's the "fault" of Digital Press now. They were looking to start a C64 section for guide #7 in mid 2000 and had gotten a mate of mine John Dyton involved. He knew me from Keith Ainsworth's Retrogamer fanzine and asked me to help. And the rest is history.

4. Are there any other non-Commodore systems you collect?

Yes, though it's gotten a lot slower in recent times because I've got almost everything I need for them! I have almost everything I want for the Atari 7800 now; aside from any prototypes or new games that come out. I have every game, though a few are the NTSC versions and not PAL versions which are available. Though seeing as the HES/Salu releases are not that easy to find overall, then it's a minor point. The major part of owning a 7800 is the Cuttlecart 2; every 2600 and 7800 game at your fingertips. Well worth the money.

On the Neo Geo Colour Pocket front, I have all 39 UK releases and four of the five b&w releases (so if anyone has a complete UK b&w Pocket Tennis, pipe up and let yourself be known!), and I own every Japanese exclusive game that came out. So in essence I have every single game that came out for the machine. Maybe I'll consider getting Japanese versions of the 39 UK games, and the US releases in the future.

Vectrex wise, it's all over the place in what I have. The imager and 3D games (all loose), the lightpen, Sean Kelly's multicart and the odd original release. Maybe once I get some more room I'll try to get a complete set of them. However I do own almost all of the homebrew releases.

Aside from those formats, there's a selection of high profile 2600 originals (such as Malagai, Magicart, Eli's Ladder, Quadrun) and a slowly increasing SNES, N64 and Gamecube stockpile. After a period of time I did manage to get all the N64DD titles, though the two mail order only ones (Doshin 2 and Nippon Tour Golf 64) did take some tracking down.

Actually I'm actively hunting out US Cube titles for cheap prices, so I might get near a full set by the time the machine dies; I'm already approaching halfway there with most of the "rare" titles accounted for.

5. You are one of only a handful of people who own a complete copy of Ultima: Escape from Mount Drash. How did you come across this incredibly rare game?

eBay. Bastion of the rare game now. I had actually lost out on THE one that went for $3,605 due to the

deep pockets of Peter Olafson. Somehow though I don't think I'll be going anywhere near that amount of money again in a hurry. The next complete one to appear on the website however was to be mine. I'm still not entirely sure it was the world's wisest purchase actually, but it can't be denied that it still commands a lot of money.

6. What are some of your other prized items?

For the money I paid for it, you'd think that the Ultima game would be my most prized possession. It isn't. There's more than one of them for starters. The item I do consider my most prized acquisition is unique and cost me nothing. That happens to be Jeff Minter's Spectrum. This is the unit he actually coded his (now quite hard to find) Llamasoft games on for that format, and was given to me by Jeff himself at one of the Llamasoft get-togethers. Now that's the sort of thing you can't just dial up eBay to acquire.

However without power supply or anything else, I've never actually fired it up to see if it is still working though!

Aside from those two items, there's a small group of C64 games that probably appear on most C64 collectors' want list: Double Dragon cartridge (both versions), Gauntlet III, various Dinamic cartridges and Great Giana Sisters on disk. I'm just lucky to have picked them up over the years, but not necessarily cheaply.

Last mention should really go to the GamesMaster joystick sitting in the cabinet. For anyone outside of the UK and in the dark, GamesMaster was a videogaming TV show during the 90s which featured games challenges, reviews, tips and left-field banter. Winners received a trophy which was, in all honesty, a large joystick covered in gold paint. Having said that, it seems they've almost all disappeared; the guy who runs the GamesMaster tribute site has only found I believe three others aside from mine in all the years he's been searching.

7. What is some advice you would give to someone who was just starting a classic gaming collection?

Really the first, and primary, question to ask yourself regarding whatever format you decide to collect for is whether you are after just the games you want to play, or everything that the format offers. Once that has been determined, then it makes it a lot easier to focus on the objective. I generally see collectors fall into one of those two primary groups. I tend to lean towards the latter myself, but that's just me. Certainly regarding C64 cartridges, then it's full-on acquisition mode enabled.

Once you've decided what you want, then the rest of it is fairly common sense. This is now going to sound like one of those Government warning notices I figure. Decide whether you want complete or loose copies of games in your collection. Some people just want everything complete; personally I will only take non-rare stuff complete but anything hard to find I'll have anyway I can get it. Those cartridge based formats (such as 2600, SNES, N64 etc) will turn up a lot more loose copies proportionally as people will naturally tend to get CD based games within the box for protection (and hence far more likely to be complete).

Do your research regarding rarity and value before setting out. It's all well and good wanting to play NeoGeo games, but if you can't afford the price tag on many of the items... well, nothing much you can do about that. Know what to expect to pay for many of the titles you are after; if you can find it cheaper than that, then consider it a saving. Don't go overboard paying for an item unless absolutely sure it's going to be a long time until you see another one. Do assess the condition of the item in relation to the price you will pay; Playstation games are notorious for often being misused and horribly scratched for example.

Finally, as a note, take pride in what you acquire and collect. Don't just collect for the sake of collecting; I've almost fallen into that trap at times. Most people who know me almost know what I give back to the Commodore communities from the items I get for example. So be happy and play what you get as well (and yes, I've never quite understood those people who only collect sealed copies).

8. What are your general thoughts on the following Commodore machines?

VIC 20
Had potential, but killed off before its time by the next generation which happened to be...

Commodore 64
The greatest home computer ever made. I think the sales figures and fan base speak for themselves today on this matter.

Commodore 16
Dead before birth. Why Commodore, why?

Commodore 128

Horribly under-used software wise and it never caught up with games to take advantage of the extra speed and memory. Only Andrew Braybrook seemed to exploit the double speed aspect and 128 only software was thin on the ground (though Kikstart 128 is very nice).

Amiga
I never had one, the games were too expensive (and I didn't pirate amazingly enough back in the day), but there was some good stuff for it (the benefits of friends).

CD32
Where Commodore lead, Sega followed shortly after with ill-thought new machines and/or add-ons. Actually it was a reasonable idea to use CDs (cue PS1 era shortly thereafter) but it seemed to me it never caught on with the public here that much.

9. Your "nickname" is Mayhem, which comes from the Commodore 64 game "Mayhem in Monsterland". Why does this game hold a special place in your heart? And what do you think about Commodore Format controversially rating the game 100%?

I guess it was the last true classic released for the machine and the final calling for the C64 (note here for those about to interject, I actually got my copy of Lemmings before this arrived in the mail). I was always a fan of the Rowland brothers' games and at the time in my life, the word "mayhem" was an apt description. Hence it stuck. Thankfully the Rowlands don't mind the use of their IP here on my part, and appreciated the link I gave to their new gamesite from mine.

Can a game ever score 100%? No. Controversial yes for sure. Maybe that's why they did it. But the game IS very good however!

10. As already mentioned, you are the proud owner of a complete "Ultima: Escape from Mount Drash". Are there any other "Holy Grails" you hope to obtain?

Any prototype for the Vectrex would be nice. Likewise one of the rumoured C64 cartridges out of System 3 that never were released. Thankfully I've got most of what I'm after, but there are still a few bits to acquire still. Like a handful of Vic20 carts that never seem to appear, even on eBay. Even though I'm close to lifelong debt with a future mortgage, don't count me out from springing up with a bid to win on anything interesting.

CCAG 2005 Press Release

Dear Classic Computer and Gaming Enthusiasts

The 2004 Classic Computer and Gaming Show had 16 vendors and 125 attendees. We had so much fun on October 23rd, 2004 that we're doing it all over again in a *much* BIGGER place at the same price, FREE!

On Saturday October 22, 2005 we'll gather again. We hope that you can join us and see some Arcade games machines, classic home computers, video games, controllers, books, magazines, instruction manuals, peripherals, costumes, memorabilia and more. There will be vendors, clubs, collectors, game players, hobbyists, showing off their wares, games, computers, systems and collections. Stuff to see, buy, trade, and play games from Pong and Atari to Nintendo & XBox, Apple and IBM to Commodore and most everything in between with many set up for you to play with and explore.

Location: The National Guard Armory, 3520 Grove Ave. Lorain, Ohio
Just North of I-90 along route 57.
The CCAG 2005 will be open to the general public from 2:00 P.M. until 7:00 P.M.
It's absolutely *FREE*, for attendees, clubs, collectors, dealers - everyone.

We have 5000+ square feet of space. Help us fill it all up! If you wish to attend or be a non-attending, door prize donating vendor, get the latest information on our website, www.ccagshow.com and all vendor information is at http://www.ccagshow.com/CurrentShow/docDealerInformation.html, or write us at **info@ccagshow.com**. And don't forget to spread the word!

We'll see you there. It's gonna be great! :)

- The CCAG 2005 Committee

The Thrill Of Defeat: Radio Shack MC10

by Mark Sabbatini

"A scaled-down Color Computer. That's like saying a poor man's VW Beetle."
- Creative Computing, "The World's Worst Computers," September 1985

When you're considered bad by "Trash-80" standards, it's tough to get much lower.

I'm on the road in Europe with limited access to the Internet and other things I typically depend on to research machines I'm not familiar with or need freshening up on. So this month's "Thrill Of Defeat" is an all-time favorite masochistic experience as a longtime TRS-80 Color Computer fan: its wimpy and short-lived younger brother, the MC-10.

I have a strange liking for the quirky thing and enjoy seeing what modern users are writing for it. But I feel I've done a thorough and objective job here of giving it the beating much of the computer world feels it deserves.

Radio Shack introduced the $119 machine late in 1983 and it had "bomb" written all over it from the start. It was overpriced, underpowered, horribly limited in expansion possibilities, software titles could be tallied on one hand and was only vaguely compatible with the full-fledged CoCo that Radio Shack obviously hoped people would graduate to. It was entertaining watching the CoCo press and loyalists strain to say good things, given the near-universal scorn elsewhere.

An October 1983 review by Your Computer magazine called it a "non-runner." Computers for Everybody's 1984 Buyer's Guide gave it poor to inadequate ratings for everything - especially software - except ease of use (average), summarizing "we don't have high hopes for the Micro Color Computer as a $120 entry in a market where several models under $100 have better features and more software." Owen W. Linzmayer began a 1983 Creative Computing review headlined "Too little, too late, for too much?" with the preface "Not inclined to let the TRS-80 Color Computer fade into obscurity..." and summarized with "I wish the MC-10 luck, but I have a feeling it needs much more than luck to make it."

My reaction at the time: why wish it luck? Let it die its inevitable death quickly so Radio Shack might realize its folly and come out with something worthwhile. It did a few years later with the Color Computer 3 - acclaimed by some as the world's most powerful eight-bit computer - but far too late as PCs and Macs were already entrenched as the still-dominant platforms.

The MC-10 came with 4K of RAM, expandable to 20K with a $50 plug-in pack that raised the price to something approaching its big brother. The 48 keys were tiny "chiclets" too small for touch typing, made worse by awkwardly placed SHIFT and CONTROL keys, plus a BREAK key that stopped programs right above the ENTER key frequently needed to carry out commands.

The processor was a Motorola MC6803 running at 0.89 MHz (loyalists noted BASIC ran 10 percent faster than the CoCo which, like similar boost to the engine of a Bug, isn't exactly turbo-charged territory). The display mimicked the CoCo's barely adequate 32X16 uppercase-only letters, with lowercase appearing as inverse green-on-black. Graphics were 64X32 in eight colors - basically two-by-two blocks on the letter grid - but different colors couldn't appear next to each other within those grids. Sound, like the CoCo, was a single voice of 255 beep-like pitches over a five-octave range that halted all other program functions while playing.

Users could attach modems and real printers for word processing - a potentially strong selling point in the field of itty-bitty machines - but Radio Shack choose to highlight as the main accessory a thermal printer with paper the width of an adding machine and tepid print quality, probably because it was tiny and "cute" like the MC-10.

Its first third-party software title was named Humbug.

Some say this computer was more popular in Australia than the U.S. Also, a similar machine named Alice was sold in France by Matra-Hachette. But its overall lifespan was short, with Radio Shack discontinuing it in 1984.

But as is the case with virtually all machines, loyal users rallied around it then and today. There's a large collection of stuff that, while not always impressive, is frequently intriguing.

Part of the reason is the machine contained extra horsepower Radio Shack tried to keep from the public - a baffling decision along the lines of the thinking that had the company marketing Color Computers with 64K memory chips as 32K machines when the Commodore 64 was the standard of comparison. It was capable, for example, of displaying the same 256X192 high-resolution graphics as its bigger brother (in black and white, although a simple programming technique allowed four colors

including red and blue). Combine that with the sound and speed of the MC-10 and it's possible a really clever person might have been able to make it do anything a 16K Color Computer could do - and there were some pretty good eight-bit titles for it - but nothing even close came to fruition.

The reviews below had to be graded on a curve specific to the machine. Only one or two that aren't conversions of common BASIC programs would likely rise above the failure level by even Atari 2600 standards. This month's list might be considered a teaser and probably more of a "downer" in overall content. Next month's conclusion will feature both the best commercial and homebrew games for the machine (just the way alphabetical order worked out), plus some thoughts from current and past users about why they became fans of the machine.

Those wanting to play these games on an emulator will find an excellent Windows one at James The Animal Tamer's emulators, whose three "fully functional" virtual machines contain three of my favorite computer "whipping boys:" The MC-10, the Video Technology VZ-200 (see last two issues) and the Mattel Aquarius (probably the next in line). His Web site is at http://www.geocities.com/emucompboy. Good program sources include the MC-10 Archive at users.bigpond.net.au/jagf/mc10.html, Charlie's MC-10 page at www.geocities.com/chazbeenhad/ and the My MC-10 Web Page at mymc10.tripod.com. A user group is at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/trs80mc10club.

Demon Attack

Eggs

Basketball (D+)
A simple variation of the "cannon duel" genre where opponents try to shell each other by firing at the proper strength and angle. Here it's just one player and the only question is how much power to use when trying to hit the basket, with the player appearing at various distances away. Not a ton of skill or long-term action, but gets a few points for a simple interface and good animation of shots.

Block Drop (C+)
Hmmm...not bad. This is a simple Kaboom-type game where only one block falls at a time, but with a twist - the player gets 10 "zaps" that cause a block to rebound a short distance up the screen, allowing more time for it to be caught. Ten misses end the game. Speed is decent, but without the progressive increases of the real thing. Little touches like different colors and shapes for the blocks, which fall at different angles and wrap around the screen edges, help make this more than a one-and-done experience.

Breakout (B-)
This is part of Radio Shack's five-game "Micro Games" package, and the fact that it's a commercial title and gets an above-average rating is evidence of just how sorry the state of software was for this machine. There is nothing in this BASIC program one won't find in hundreds of magazine listings and homebrew efforts for every computer out there. Many, in fact, are far superior in offering creative variations or better brick fields than the rather sparse one here. But at least this one runs at a playable speed, is user friendly and doesn't make the common mistake in ball angle calculations that cause endless bounces at the same (or no) angle.

Catch (C-)
Sort of the classic "snake" game without the snaking part. You navigate an asterisk around the screen, trying to ram blocks that appear before they move, the timing of which is determined by four user-selectable skill levels. Miss 10 before they move and the game ends. Aside from being monotonous, there's some problems. It's too easy to win by hitting the predetermined number of blocks in all levels except the hardest, where the time loop is so short it's often impossible. A minor tweak adjusting this and making the game open-ended with increasing levels of difficulty, instead of just ending, would make a big difference. Also annoying, if less so, is the use of the too-close-for-comfort arrow keys (W-A-S-Z) for controls.

Checkers (F)
That Radio Shack sold this single-player BASIC game commercially is a really bad reflection of their support for it, since this sort of program could be typed in from countless magazines and books for any number of computers. But in this case if I was the editor of either I'd reject this immediately because of an unfriendly user interface and terrible error trapping. The player inputs moves using a

number system (i.e. 3,3 to 4,4), with the computer responding fairly quick since it there's only one level of simplistic play. But problems appear quickly and are numerous. Mistakes in typing in moves can easily lead to error messages and other prompts that permanently destroy the screen display. It doesn't handle jumps and other certain moves correctly at times, putting the player into endless loops where the only escape is an illegal move the computer won't allow. And so on. Forget beating the computer; if you can make it to the end of a game it ought to be considered a triumph far greater than beating an advanced player.

Defend (D+)
This Kaboom-type game is a definite step below Block Drop, above. It an example of a decent, simple BASIC program with a critical flaw. Blocks scrolling one at a time toward the top of the screen must be caught by the player, with three misses in a row ending the game. Speed is acceptable for a couple of plays, but there isn't a ton of staying power since there's no waves or speed variations like Activision's title. The big problem is if the randomly generated blocks appear too far apart it is impossible for the player to catch them. The three-miss-in-a-row feature means it's unlikely a game will end due to random chance, but it can happen and is one of those seemingly small details that often gets overlooked.

Demon Attack (D+)
I think of this more as a successful programming exercise using Imagic's landmark Atari 2600 title as a role model than a game. The successful part is a complete package - in-game instructions, logical controls, decent graphics without excessive flicker, solid and error-free implementation of gameplay, and the wisdom not to get any fancier than putting one demon on screen at a time. The problem is it isn't much fun because it's slow and you're just shooting the same-looking demon over and over. There's no splitting of enemies in two, assortment of creatures with various looks/shots, options for guiding shots or mothership stages found on some subsequent platform versions - all of which undoubtedly would slow this to intolerable levels.

Dragon Castles (D+)
Man, talk about a letdown. This opens open with one of the better lo-res title screens you'll see, followed by a prompt for one of five skill levels. Then it's on to a map screen showing eight castles and the player is asked which one they want to enter. I'm beginning to think it's going to be a cool D&D conquest type of thing. But those oh-so-rare high expectations for an MC-10 game are vanquished instead. All you do is type a number from one to eight and the program informs you if you've found an item worth points or something like a bat that takes them away. You must reach a certain number of points, determined by the skill level, before picking the one the dragon is in if you are stay him. Sheer random nothingness, in other words, in a fancy wrapper.

Duck Shoot (D)
Carnival, minus 90 percent of the gameplay and fun. Your cannon, which fires but cannot move, shoots at a row of badly flickering blocks that are supposed to be ducks scrolling across the screen. Score is how many you can hit before running out of shots. That's it - no descending or attacking fowl or anything else. Collision detection is iffy. Saved from a lower grade by moving along at an OK speed for the number of items on the screen.

Eggs (B)
This Kaboom/Demon Attack hybrid is probably the best of Radio Shack's five-game "Micro Games" package, even though it suffers from slow and jerky action due to its being written in BASIC. The concept and graphics are solid, the execution mostly well done except for a couple of quirks. The player catches eggs dropped by the alien at the top of the screen and must do so in the center of their ship - hitting an edge results in the egg bouncing off and landing at the bottom of the screen. The player can also shoot the alien as it descends and therefore drops bombs faster, upon which another appears in a different location. You get a few points for catching eggs, a bunch for shooting the aliens and lose points for missing eggs, but scores below zero are allowed. If the alien fills the bottom of the screen with eggs the game ends (and I do mean ends - the program itself stops without asking if the player wants to try again). The problems are new aliens often appear in place the player cannot get to before an egg or two lands, which is also a problem because aliens can wrap around the screen while the player cannot. Also, it's theoretically possible to play forever simply by putting your ship over the last unfilled hole at the bottom of the screen, even though your score keeps descending. Another small niggle is the alien movement and egg drops are random, so it's always possible it might take a while for the game to end, but this doesn't seem to be a huge issue. Definitely worth a few plays, especially on an emulator allowing the action to be speeded up to decent levels.

Freeway (C-)
Ouch. Frogger-like game with decent potential, but the immediate reaction is to say "finish the effort." You control a frog, or whatever your block is, across the road using only the up and down keys. The cars that must be dodged move at a decent pace and it doesn't feel like you get trapped by the random deaths so common in homebrew action games. But two immediate things: why no four-way control and why no timer display? The extra control would add variety and it'd be nice to know when time is short. Granted, David Crane's Atari 2600 title of the same name is a vertical-only game, but its real appeal was always the two-player option where they competed to get across first.

Frogger (F)
Sorry, but what on Earth is going on here? The screen looks promising enough, with a frog apparently needing to navigate a few rows of traffic to get to the five slots on the other side. But getting there seems to accomplish nothing except getting you killed. And lots of luck with that - collision detection is awful. And when the game is over you're forced to listen a ridiculously long progression of ascending beeps before you can restart. A few good concepts put out of their misery by terrible execution.

Game Over

The big GAME OVER sign just came on the screen which means time to put this issue to bed. Be sure to tune in again next month.

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

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