

| Table of Contents | |
|-------------------|--|
| 01. | Press Fire to Start |
| 02. | The Many Faces of ... Vanguard |
| 03. | 8-Bit Face Off |
| 04. | NEScade |
| 05. | Nintendo Realm |
| 06. | The Thrill of Defeat |
| 07. | Game Over |

Press Fire to Start

by Adam King

Greetings, gamers. Welcome to another issue of Retromgaming Times Monthly. I hope everyone had a great and safe 4th of July weekend. You'll notice we're a little short on articles this month, btu we'll just have to make the best of it. I hope you enjoy the stuff we have this month.

The Many Faces of . . . Vanguard

by Alan Hewston

This month we feature Atari systems almost exclusively in the Many Faces of Vanguard. With only three faces, this may be a title you've never played at home or the arcade, but rest assured it was quite popular at the arcades in 1981, and is fairly easy to find the 2600 cart as well. First off, let me note that this is NOT just another scroller or shooter. It is very unique in that you fire in multiple directions (4) and the actions scrolls in multiple directions (3). Most of the scrolling it L to R, but there are two zones where the scrolling is diagonally down/right, and then diagonally up/right. Then there is the final zone where your ship is pointed upward without any scrolling. This makes for some good variety and a very creative game, especially when you add in a large number of colors displayed, graphics types, enemy types, attacks, formations, missiles, tunnels, hazards, a timer and great random action. The zone sequence for tunnel one (which changes in later tunnels) is Mountain Zone, Rainbow Zone, Styx Zone, Rainbow Zone 2, Striped Zone, Rainbow Zone 3, Bleak Zone, and City of Mystery. Vanguard is loaded with gameplay elements and strategy and it stands the test of time. My only complaint is that the difficulty picks up a bit too fast and could have been made a little more gradual. By tunnel 3, in the striped zone and other places you cannot even react or maneuver fast enough. You die (or can have a double-death) if the scrolling timing is off, not due to your skill or planning.

The audio and controls experience at the arcade was a lot different than what we get to play at home. The home versions combine the moving and firing functions into 1 joystick and 1 fire button. The arcade was separate so that the joystick was only used for moving the ship about the screen and then there were 4 fire buttons - each dedicated to one direction, U/D/L/R firing. Upon completing a zone, the arcade's synthesized voice told you the name of the next zone. There is different music or effects during each zone, with that at the start partially taken from "Star Trek: The Motion Picture", more commonly heard as the theme song from ST:TNG. The music played when you secure an energy pod is "Vultan's Theme" from the movie "Flash Gordon". A lesser known arcade sequel, Vanguard II came out in 1984, also by SNK. It looks somewhat like Xevious, and you attack a space platform. The joystick steers your motion on screen. It is assumed that the screen scrolls in some direction(s). One fire button is for shooting flying enemies and another button to drop explosives on the surface. Not having played it, the screen shots suggest that you collect or earned "Pods", which may be what you use to attack/drop on the surface.

Arcade: 1981 by SNK Corporation for Centuri
Unless noted - all home version released by Atari

- Atari 2600 - 1982 unknown programmer(s)
- Atari 5200 - 1983 unknown programmer(s) by General Computer Corp
- Atari 8 bit computer - 1983 unknown programmer(s) assumed GCC
- TI-99/4A - 1984 Atarisoft, by Jim Dramis, Paul Urbanus & Garth Dollahite

Rumor Mill: Colecovision by Atarisoft

Sequels: *Vanguard II* a 1984 SNK arcade game with very limited release

Home Version Similarities. Except those in <> all home versions have: a full demo mode showing all zones but the final one; a choice of 1 or 2 non-simultaneous players; choice of starting tunnel (i.e. start level) <2600>, choice of starting zone <2600>; choice of firing options rapid fire or not; firing options can be changed during the game <8 bit>; able to quickly reset/restart the game <8 bit>; when not firing, you can maneuver about the screen slightly faster; when you fire, you always fire from the front of your ship, plus; you must move and be firing at the same time to fire in the other directions; there is a pause feature <2600, 8 bit>; ability to quickly restart <8 bit>; several zones that must be completed before each tunnel (level) is completed; tunnels get narrower, faster and thus harder to navigate as levels increase - a bit too fast too soon; the sequence of zones is varied from tunnel to tunnel; the City of Mystery is always the final zone in each tunnel (level) and you only get one life/chance to shoot the Gond for the bonus; the tunnel map is always displayed on-screen <2600 between zones>; an on-screen fuel gauge (bar) displays your limited fuel supply; the fuel supply decreases one notch per second, 40 notches total; each enemy that you shoot adds back 1 fuel notch; a new life and/or each new level completely replenishes your fuel supply; use of the Energy Pod completely refuels your tanks; the Energy Pod also makes you invulnerable to any object for ~ 10 seconds; when invulnerable, any contact destroys those enemies/items that your missiles normally could destroy; otherwise, when not energized, contact with any terrain, enemy ship, missiles, barriers or force fields results in the loss of one Vanguard ship; the floating Paynes cannot be destroyed; Paynes extend their arms out/in <2600 no arms but float L/R>; contact with the Romeda debris is also deadly; the first three contacts with the Kemlus or its debris is not deadly, but thereafter is; contact with the Kemlus or its debris permits the Kemlus to protect you and give you a ride, scoring large bonus points; there are more bonus points for shooting the enemy bases which are displayed on-screen <2600>; an extra ship is earned at 10k and 50k; enemies come in waves, some enemies are fixed in formation, some are free to move, but may get stuck or freeze temporarily, some shoot, some zig-zag, some will be overtop of each other or the terrain, and finally some will change speeds; at times all enemies in a wave must be completely eliminated to move to the next zone; the upcoming zone's name is displayed on-screen <2600>; and finally after your game ends, you have the option to continue your next game at the same tunnel level & zone <2600 only through the first Tunnel>.

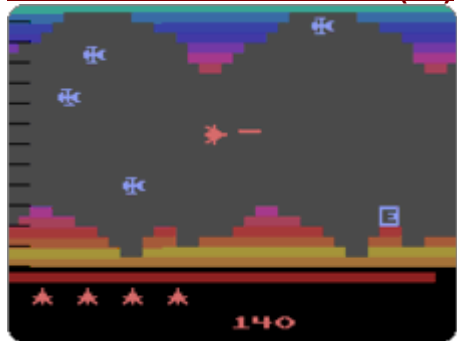


Vanguard was only released on Atari systems.

Disqualified: TI-99 (N/A)

My first reaction was that the programmers credits are well-known, but not much else. I assume that the game was playable or maybe even complete, but never officially released. I did not seek help far enough in advance from the TI-99 community - so I apologize for a lack of coverage here. Hopefully some day we can review this port as a Lost Face. [Exercise for our readers who are emulation fans: See if you can find the TI-99 ROM out there and report back to me with some screen shots & other good info].

Bronze Medal: Atari 2600 (39)



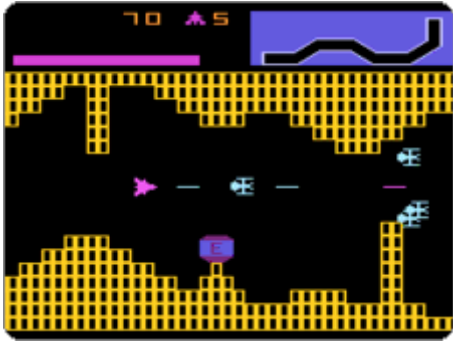
My first reaction was that although I do not recall playing it at the arcade (I was cheap, I mostly watched, waited, and saved then bought 'em for home) it was one of the few 2600 titles that I waited for to come out and paid full price to get it. I was only slightly disappointed - it's a decent 2600 game. Gameplay is impressive (8) with pretty much all the arcade elements in place. All of the enemies are here. It is a bit slower in playing and moving and a closer look also reveals that the Romedas do not fire at you. The Striped Zone is not done horizontally, but vertically - no penalty - just different. This is the only version to let you change control/firing options at any time.

The Addictiveness is very fun (7) but could have been much better. Of course, there is no pause, and you cannot pick your starting tunnel level or zone, but you can continue your next game, up through Tunnel 1. There are only 2 different tunnel maps (which repeat) and the difficulty on all versions ramps up too quickly, thus you'll be at the frustration point (fastest speed) so fast that you'll never get addicted. There is nothing more to look forward to. On all ports the Graphics are a treat, and on the 2600 are dazzling (8), with loads of color, great variety, good details, nice backgrounds, plenty of on-screen action, decent scrolling, variety in tunnels and enemies. There is not much animation and no multi-colored objects. Scrolling here is only horizontal and vertical as it's not easy to scroll diagonally. The Sound is good (6) with some of the effects and a touch of music - when using the energy pod and a warning when the pod energy is almost up. But there is no other music any time and not many background effects other than the Kemlus. There are no sounds for either your shots or enemy shots fired. The effects for enemy hits, your death and explosions and bonus are there, but mostly repeated. The Controls are the best here (10). It may take some getting use to the slower movement of the

Vanguard ship, but you can move diagonally at any time and fire in 1, 2 or 3 directions simultaneously - not so on the other versions. Obviously a lot of the arcade feel of "4 fire buttons" is lost, but that is true on all versions.

Silver Medal: Atari 8 bit computer (41)

My first reaction was that this was not officially released - just a poor copy or hack of the 5200 port. But . . . if I had disqualified this version, then we would not even have a Many Faces of competition. Thus our Vanguard fans would feel cheated. Gameplay pretty much matches the arcade (8), but missing some of the 5200 options. There is a choice to start <Option> using single or rapid fire, or <Select> to select 1 or 2 players, but missing are the selection of Tunnel level or zone. The zones get narrower in subsequent tunnels and unlike the 2600, you cannot shoot through any crevices in the background. The speed of the game is faster than the 2600. The Addictiveness is fun to play (7) but lacks the 5200 pause, has no quick abort/restart and you have to wait a minute after the game if you do not want to continue. There are some minor collision detection problems (enemies butt up against you, yet you do not die), and there are some cruel deaths. If you are not alert, you can finish one zone and if you do not center your ship on the screen, you can get caught in the walls and die. The striped zone can lead to a double death, or even finish off all remaining lives as the timing of the Paynes may make it impossible to avoid death after death - you might not be able to react/adjust to avoid them. It would also be nice to see on-screen the current tunnel #, but then it doesn't get any harder than level 3, so I guess that is pointless. The Graphics are a wonderful (9). While the on-screen action is not as plentiful and frantic as other games, the speed gets going really fast and there are 6 enemies and 2+ shots and other obstacles to simultaneously avoid. The large variety in colors, multiple simultaneous background colors, variety in graphics, good details, and awesome scrolling (especially diagonally) make this very exciting. There is good variety in enemies and just enough animation and multi-color that it secures a 9. The Sound is pleasant (8) with music or good background effects in every zone. All of the effects are well done, and I think all form the arcade made it here as well. More variety in effects and some enemy sounds, sounds during the demo and intro music and game over music would help. Controls are a disappointing (9).



5200 & 8-bit versions

You move faster than the 2600, but can never move diagonally. Thus you cannot retreat and fire to your side simultaneously. You'll either get used to this awkwardness or it may be a major cause to turn you away from this version. There is not cart, and I'm almost positive that it was officially released on disk. The ROMs and bootleg diskettes are out there. Maybe a version exists that is corrected to fix the controls, and add in a pause and start options. If so, then easily add in 3 more points here and the Gold medal.

Gold Medal: Atari 5200 (42)

My first reaction was to agree with the Digital Press Guide wishing for the same controller format (1 joystick for movement, the other for firing) as in Space Dungeon and Robotron 2084. But then I cannot get any variation of joystick (Wico or Masterplay Interface) to work perfectly on this game. I'm fighting the control scheme of no diagonals (-1) and the drifting, analog controls (-1). Controls score an (8). Since the Atari 8 bit cousin is a direct port of this game, all game elements and descriptions are the same except as noted below. Gameplay is superb (9), with the options <7> Start Tunnel, <9> Start Zone, <#> 1 or 2 players, <*> firing continuously or not. Addictiveness is enjoyable (8) with a pause and . Graphics are first class (9) and Sound is crisp (8). The cart is not too hard to find.

Acknowledgements, Updates and Errata since last month.

Thanks go to fellow collector/dealer Rob Rosia who at the Spring 2006 CCAGSHOW.COM held onto & sold to me the C64 NIB disk version of Up 'N Down. I got it just in time to upgrade my photo collage for last month. Thanks again to Steve Knox for his help in getting the Atari 8 bit disk version of Vanguard and many others. Next month look for part 3 (in final editing now) of our interview with Chris Oberth - hopefully including his revised web site.

Come back next month: I be on vacation before then, but see if I can find time to review the many faces of "Threshold" for the Apple II, 2600, 800, C64, CV & Vic 20. Contact Alan at: Hewston95@NOSPAMstratos.net or visit the Many Faces of site: <http://my.stratos.net/~hewston95/RT/ManyFacesHome.htm>

8-Bit Face-Off: Galaga

by Adam King

With Alan covering the many faces of Vanguard. I figured I'd cover another famous space shooter in the Face-Off: Galaga. Every knows about Galaga: shoot the aliens, pass the Challenging Stages, let the enemy capture your ship so you can double your firepower. The game ruled the arcades throughout the early-to-mid 1980s, and even did well into the 90s. Oddly enough, despite its popularity, Galaga was ported to only a couple of platforms (this was long before it was featured on every Namco Museum collection). There was a horrible version programmed for the Commodore 64

(trust me), then were ports on both the Atari 7800 ProSystem and the Nintendo system. Both versions are good ports, but let's see which one is superior.

GAME INFO

NES Version: Developed by Namco in 1985, published in U.S. by Bandai in 1988
7800 Version: Developed by General Computer Corp. in 1984, but wasn't released by Atari until 1987



NES Screen 7800 Screen

1. Presentation

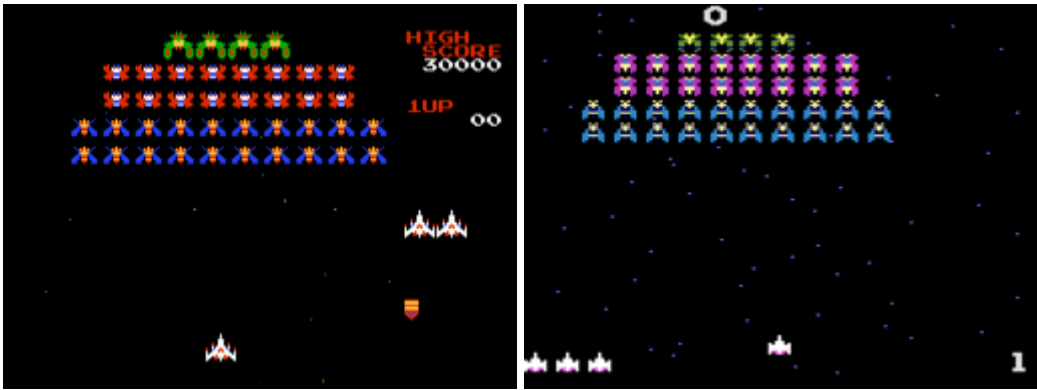
There isn't much difference in the presentation of both versions. Both the NES and 7800 ports feature two player modes (alternating) and both are mainly straight-up ports; you won't find any extra modes in either version. However the 7800 cart does offer three difficulty settings which changes the game quite a bit. While it may seem the 7800 version has the slight edge with the three settings, only two of the settings are any fun, and out of those two only one mode plays like the arcade game (more on this below). With that in mind, let's just say both versions have two-player modes and leave it at that.

Advantage: Draw

2. Graphics

The NES version blows the 7800 port out of the water here. The graphics on the NES cart are just about arcade perfect. Everything, from the enemy ships to the scrolling stars to the badges representing levels, look almost exactly like their coin-op cousins. It's almost like you're playing an emulated version. While 7800 graphics are pretty good and do resemble their arcade counterparts, the sprites still have a blocky, slightly dull look to them. Your ship looks a bit smaller, plus the badges to mark the levels are missing. At least the scrolling background looks good in the 7800 cart. Considering that the 7800 can display up to 256 colors, GCC could have done better.

Advantage: NES



NES Screen 7800 Screen

3. Sounds & Music

Even though *Galaga* was never known for its music, the NES is going to take this round as well. Both versions feature the various *Galaga* melodies, such as the beginning theme and challenging stage intro. The NES music is almost spot on, and the sound effects aren't that bad either. The 7800 tries to match the arcade, but with the outdated 2600 chip providing the audio, the music doesn't quite hit the mark. The 7800 sound effects also sound very wrong. So once again the 7800 can't match the NES in sound.

Advantage: NES

4. Gameplay

Both versions have the classic *Galaga* gameplay intact, from the Challenging Stages to the "let your ship get captured" trick. I used a standard NES gamepad for the NES version, and the 7800 Joypad for the 7800 version, and both controls were no sweat to use, so fans of the arcade original should have no problems diving in. The 7800 version also works well with the 2600 joystick. Unfortunately the 7800 gameplay has some flaws that put it behind the NES version. The Beginner mode is too easy; the ships move too slowly and usually only one of them drops down at a time, unless the commander ships are with them. The Intermediate mode isn't any faster but at least the difficulty matches the coin-op better, with multiple ship attacks. The Expert mode starts you at level 10, with everything moving at the speed it should. The NES version has arcade-perfect gameplay, with correct speed and ship

aggressiveness. So the 7800 goes a good job, while the NES does a great job, giving it another point.
Advantage: NES



NES Screen

7800 Screen

5. Anything Else

Believe it or not, the 7800 version has a special feature that you won't find in the NES version, but you'll need a very rare accessory to use it. This game is compatable with the 7800 High Score Cartridge, meaning you can actually save up to five high scores, just like the arcade version. I don't have a High Score cartridge so I haven't been able to test it myself, but it's still a cool feature just the same. But since most of you don't have the cartridge, you probably won't use this feature at all. But at least the option is there.

Advantage: 7800, just for the fact that the High Score feature is there.

Conclusion

This face-off isn't as one sided as it may seem. The 7800 version is a great port. GCC did a commendable job of bringing *Galaga* to the ProSystem, and fans of the original won't be disappointed. It's just that the NES version is tons better, superior in just about every aspect, but of course it helps to have Namco themselves at the helm of the NES version. So the final call is the 7800 is a good version, but for a more authentic port defineltly pick up the NES cart.

Winner: NES

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|---|
| NEScade -- City Connection |
| by <u>David Lundin, Jr.</u> |

Tengen may have ported a lot of popular arcade games over to the NES however they published only a small portion of arcade conversions that make up a healthy amount of the NES game library. With the jump in graphics and sound over the joystick era consoles, the NES was able to bring home even more arcade realism than ever before. That is no more apparent than in the dozens upon dozens of arcade ports that Nintendo and many third party publishers released over the course of the Nintendo Entertainment System's unusually long lifespan. With all the choices available concerning arcade favorites on the NES, the gaming world got one step closer to having an arcade at home. Yet how would these home versions compare to their arcade counterparts? That's what NES'cade is all about.

Although City Connection was a very rare sight in American arcades, Jaleco saw fit to release the Famicom recreation on the NES. Game play is deceptively simple to begin with but as play time progresses things become increasingly complex. The player controls a small car that has the ability to jump up and turn on a dime, a nimble set of wheels designed for high speed maneuvering. Race around on a tour of the world, marking the highway as you proceed on your transworld excursion, to prove to the world you're the master of the road. However things aren't that simple. Local law enforcement and traffic is a constant burden, blocking the roadway and holding up your progress at every turn. Your only weapon against said traffic are cans of oil that are picked up during your journeys. Tossing one at an enemy vehicle will cause it to spin out, allowing you to bump it off the road and out of the way. A bigger threat to your adventure lies in the form of cats that sit on the road, these cannot be harmed with oil cans and must be avoided at all costs. Once all roads on a specific level have been driven then it's off to the next world locale.



City Connection on the NES is a prime example of what a port of an arcade game to the NES hardware should be, accurate to the technology of the time. Everything is recreated as closely as possible given the limitations of the NES platform. A solid effort was put in place to bring over the sights, sounds, and most importantly the feel of the arcade game. Of course there are limitations when it comes to visuals and sound however the basics of each stage are wonderfully represented. The world city backdrops of each stage have been recreated very nicely, they're not as graphically detailed as the original arcade backgrounds, but are still good looking and nicely detailed for the NES hardware. A couple stages have a slightly obnoxious sky color but it's as close to the original arcade shades as possible using the NES pallet. This quality is the same for the jazzy music in each stage. Although not as full sounding as the arcade version, a real attempt has been put forward to incorporate as much of the original music as possible. Game play is dead on with tight controls and frenzied action from the moment the game starts. The spikes that pop up if the player car remains on the same level have been carried over as well, a nice touch that keeps things authentic. The only real difference between the arcade and NES versions is how the roadway is marked. In the arcade the roadway is smoothly marked off in exacting relation to where the car is located. On the NES the roadway is divided into blocks that are filled in as the car passes over each. This makes the NES version slightly easier than the arcade version as road sections are clearly marked off. Due to this it's very easy to keep track of where you've been and where you need to go, rather than spending extra time driving around looking for the sliver of road surface left to cover which happens a lot with the original.

Controls are solid and very intuitive. With a little practice, covering the edges of each level and reacting to a cat or a stray enemy vehicle become second nature. One very interesting difference between the Famicom and NES versions of the game I noticed has to do with the cutscenes. The Famicom version stays true to the cutscenes of the arcade original, portraying the driver of the player car as female and replicating the end of stage scene as it was in the arcade. For one reason or another these things were changed for the NES version, beginning with a new title screen showing a male driver. All the end of stage scenes have been replaced, now each one is different instead of the same screen over and over again. However what I found most interesting was the image shown after completion of the first stage. The driver is shown smoking a cigarette, which isn't a big deal per se, except that Nintendo was notorious in cracking down on smoking, drinking, and religious images in the US releases of their games. This image isn't something that happened to slip through localization, it's only present in the NES version, in other words it was added for the NES release!



Most that have played this game, even those that really enjoy it, usually aren't aware of the arcade original. Once discovering the origins of City Connection it just goes to reinforce the care that was taken when bringing it to the NES platform. It is, without a doubt, one of the finest examples of how an arcade to home conversion should be done. A super accurate recreation that brings home the challenge and fun of a game born in the arcade. Personally I've always felt that it's one of the unsung and nearly forgotten classics of the NES. This is understandable as the arcade version was pretty much nonexistent outside of Japan but if given a chance, City Connection is a very entertaining and worthwhile game play experience.

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

Nintendo Realm - Late July to Early September 1985

by [Scott Jacobi](#)

It's time for another installment of Nintendo Realm as we examine each and every game developed for the NES/Famicom platform in chronological order, or chronogaming as we like to call it. There is one game omitted from this review, Naitou 9 Dan - Shogi Hiden, released by Seta on August 10, 1985. As the name implies, it is a Shogi game (or Japanese chess) which, like mahjong, I know nothing about so I can't comment on it. As a special bonus, your getting one extra dosage as we cover 9 games instead of the usual 8. Why? Because the next game after Battle City is Super Mario Bros. and I have something special planned for all of you to commemorate that momentous release.

In the mean time, of the 9 games reviewed this month, we shine a special spotlight on the first two, and only two, games to be released for use in conjunction with R.O.B., your Robotic Operating Buddy. But what was R.O.B. really? A stroke of genius? A marvel of engineering? A pioneer of a style of game play that was never fully appreciated? Or was he just a Trojan Horse? Your opinion may vary, but the truth is that R.O.B. was developed to get American retailers more interested in distributing the NES after the video game market crashed in 1983 with no signs of ever returning. Companies did not want to waste money on a product that history had proven to be a flop. So the NES had to be more than just a console. It had to be bigger and better. The light gun was already developed, but Nintendo needed something that raised more eyebrows. Enter R.O.B., the robot that played video games with you... or so it seemed. In reality, R.O.B. was just a pawn to be manipulated while playing, but you can read more about that in the entries for the two games, Gyromite and Stack-Up (or Gyro Set and Block Set as they were called in Japan.) Once retailers discovered what a hit the NES would become, there was no need to carry on the charade, and R.O.B. was unceremoniously discarded from the NES package, replaced by a single game of Super Mario Bros. And while many view R.O.B. as a half baked idea (and the start of MANY Nintendo accessories that would receive little to no support from Nintendo) we owe a small thank you to the bundle of plastic that convinced retailers to take a stab at selling the console that would single handedly revive the video game industry in America. Thank you my friend.



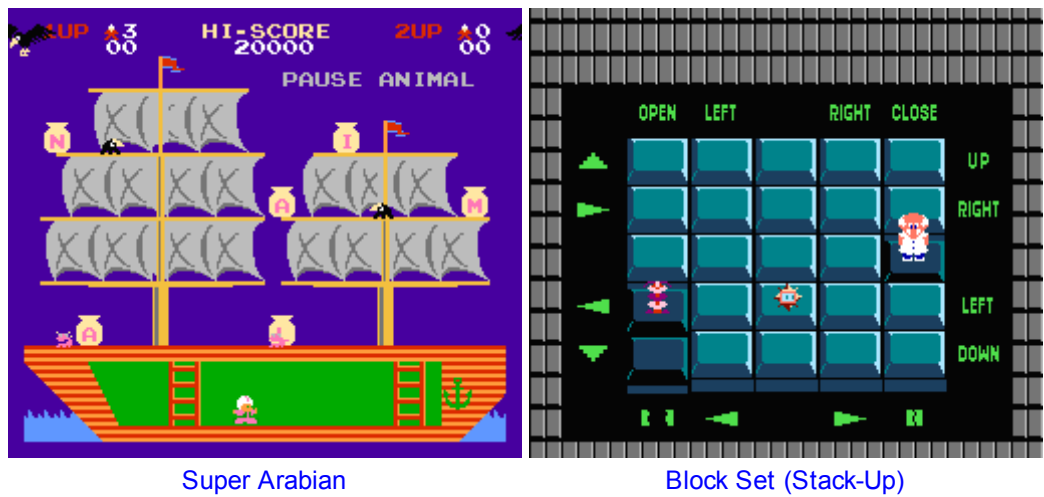
Super Arabian, released by SunSoft on July 25, 1985.

The concept behind Super Arabian is simple. It plays like an early arcade platformer like Donkey Kong, but in order to clear each stage, you must collect all the bags of gold scattered throughout the screen. In addition to gathering them, if you collect them in the correct order, so as to spell out a word, you receive a large bonus. To hinder your progress, little pink blobs and crows appear and wander throughout the stage. You can avoid them or kick them off the screen. If you kick one enemy in to another, you will be awarded more bonus points. The controls are simple, one button jumps and one button kicks, but I found that I would confuse them frequently when I first started playing. Super Arabian is actually a port of an arcade game simply entitled Arabian, developed in 1983 by Sun Electronics, as SunSoft was first known. SunSoft granted the American arcade distributing rights to Atari, along with another game of theirs that was slightly more popular, Kangaroo. The Famicom port really only changes the fact that the goal of every stage is not to spell "ARABIAN" each time, but different words. It's a fun game, if not a little unforgiving. I have difficulty passing the 3rd stage.

Block Set, released by Nintendo on July 26, 1985. Released as Stack-Up in the US on October 1985

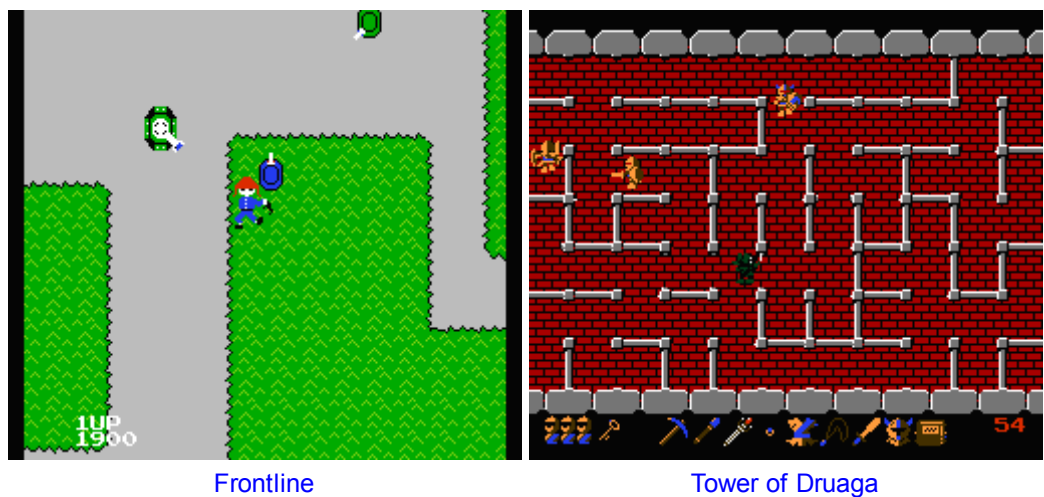
Stack-Up seemed to play second fiddle to Gyromite in America, due to the fact that Gyromite was packaged with every R.O.B. sold. However in Japan, Block Set was the game packaged with R.O.B. (who had red arms instead of gray, to match the Famicom's color scheme.) In truth, it really is the weaker of the two R.O.B. titles as it demonstrates what R.O.B. is capable of doing, but not how much fun he can be to play with. Stack-Up boils down to a simplified game of Simon Says. In every mode of play, you have to go from the current state of stacked blocks to the requested state of stacked blocks. There are two main modes of play, one where you input commands that are executed immediately, and one where you actually program in the sequence of moves that you would like R.O.B. to perform before giving him the green light to try it. There is a third mode of play called Bingo which seems to cross all of the above with Q*Bert, in the sense that you have to jump on blocks so that you turn rows or columns the same color in order to give R.O.B. an instruction, while enemies bounce around and try to screw up your work. Here's my big gripe with the game: There is no accountability. What happens on the screen and what happens with R.O.B. and the blocks have little or nothing to do with one another. The only way the game thinks you've succeeded in your task is when you press the Start button. This game was clearly a tech demo for Nintendo, and very little effort went in to actually making this a game. It would have been very simple to add just enough programming to know whether the set of instructions that you gave to R.O.B. were enough to succeed in your task or whether you failed, or worse yet, whether you completely messed up and caused R.O.B. to knock the stack to the floor with his arms. Why Nintendo didn't take the time to do this is beyond me, and really

speaks to the notion that R.O.B. was never fully thought of as a product worthy of support, but rather a simple sales gimmick to entice American retailers. Never the less, you can have fun with this game if you don't tire of the self-regulation and honesty that the game requires.



Front Line, released by Taito on August 1, 1985.
Front Line is the true forefather of video game classics like Commando and Ikari Warriors. It introduced concepts like the one man army that scrolls vertically upwards to a final destination, using a second button to fire a limited supply of grenades, and climbing in to tanks for extended firepower. Aside from the awkwardness of some of the graphics, like the goofy animation, or the bizarre way that the guns are carried, Front Line was a pioneer in using a separate rotary controller to control the direction that you want to fire in, independent of the direction you are moving. The Famicom port gets all of this right... except for that last detail. And really, you can't blame Taito for omitting that, it just doesn't fit the Famicom's control scheme. Even SNK removed that feature from Ikari Warriors when they ported to the Famicom. But without that detail, Front Line breaks down in to an ordinary, and somewhat unattractive, shooter that does not hold up well against the future releases mentioned above. A terrific foot note in the history of video games which paved the way for better games to follow, but a dull and awkward challenge that is better left alone.

Tower of Druaga, released by Namco on August 6, 1985
Ask a hardcore old school Japanese player what they think of the Tower of Druaga, and you're likely to get a very positive response. Ask an American what they think and they'll probably respond, "Tower of what?" Somehow, Namco created a game that was a masterpiece in one culture and a complete dud in another. (Case in point, the Japanese entry for this game in Wikipedia is substantially longer than it's English counterpart.) I can't even claim to know a great deal about the game, but there is a decent FAQ about the game on GameFaqs.com if you want to know more details. Basically you are a knight that must climb the 60 floors of the tower in order to rescue the maiden Ki from a demon named Druaga. In order to accomplish this task, you must also find the various treasure chests that are contained on each floor, most of which are mandatory to beat the game, but not all. And there-in lies the difficulty of this game: the methods to obtain each treasure chest varies from floor to floor and can become quite elaborate, with absolutely no means of obtaining hints or clues. Ultimately, some players will feel cheated and frustrated by the game when they can't advance because they missed an item, and they have no idea why, while other players will be stimulated by the challenge that this presents. The Tower of Druaga had far reaching effects on future Namco releases, with several references made to items and equipment in the Tales series of games as well as Mr. Driller, Namco X Capcom, and several others. While I personally find this game a little frustrating, I would recommend giving it a shot either in a NES emulator, or even in MAME, just to experience this would-be classic. See where you rank among the players of a game which the Japanese consider to be a true test of skill.

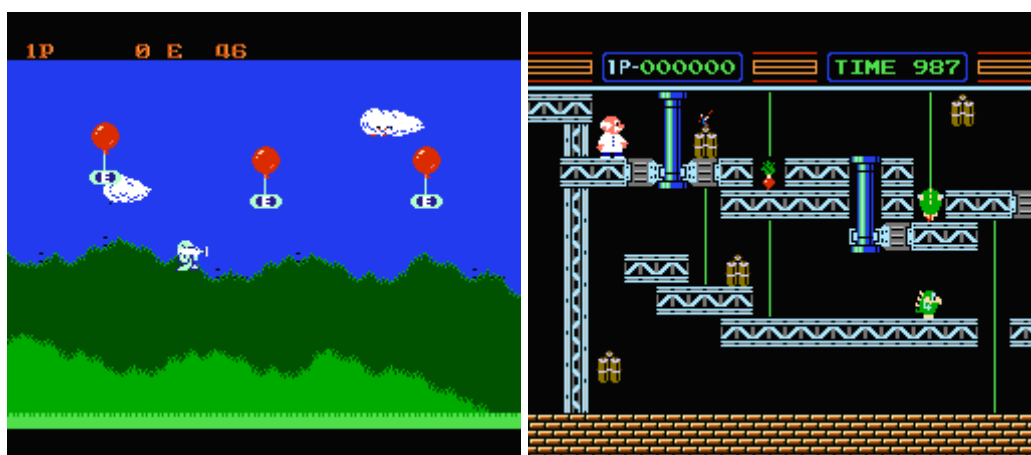


Astro Robo Sasa, released by ASCII on August 9, 1985
If you only get to try one game out from this month's selection of games, this should be the one. Astro

Robo Sasa is one of those whacky funny releases that personify what made the NES so memorable. In this game, you control a little guy who carries a gun with a big kick back. So big in fact, that it can launch you in to the air and you can fly around by aiming it in the opposite direction you wish to fly in, and fire. The goal of the game is to collect all of the energy tanks scattered throughout the level. They will be placed on the screen in various manners, such as tied to a balloon, behind walls, lying in plain sight, etc. You must use your gun to propel you through the air (and water) to collect the tanks and avoid as many obstacles as possible. Obviously, collecting a tank rewards you with more energy, but firing your gun costs you one point of energy, while colliding with an enemy or getting shot costs you substantially more. In the case when the tanks are behind a wall, you must continuously fire at the wall to break it down until you can access the tanks within. The problem is that by firing in the direction of the wall, you are propelled in the opposite direction, forcing you to correct your position in the air. The stages are arranged in themes and come in sets of three. It takes some time to get the hang of the physics, but once you do, you'll have a good time floating around and dodging enemies. And if you get really frustrated on stage 2 or 3, just shoot the cow for a small laugh.

Gyro Set, released by Nintendo on August 13, 1985. Released as in Gyromite the US on October 1985

Here we have the R.O.B. game that most people will remember. Good old Gyromite with it's gyros and gyro spinner. I'm fairly certain that such a toy would never be OKed for release in America today. A caution sticker on the spinner warned you against touching the edge of the gyro while the it sat in the spinner cradle, and you'd be wise to heed it because it could give you a pretty good skin burn (spoken from experience...) But in 1985, this was perfectly acceptable, so you too could enjoy the game that actually demonstrated how R.O.B. could be used as a video game playing partner. The goal of the game was to direct the professor through a lab infested with little green monsters called Smicks that happen to like turnips, and collect all of the dynamite scattered about. The only problem is there are these red and blue pipes preventing the professor from accessing all of the stage at any one time. Pressing A or B on the second controller made the pipes raise or lower, but without a second player to man the control, what's a boy to do? Use R.O.B. of course! By pausing the game, you could issue a command to R.O.B. and have him use the gyros to press down buttons that interfaced with the control pad. But what if you need to press both buttons together? It's simple. Just have R.O.B. pick up a gyro, drop it in the spinner, get the gyro spinning, pick it up, drop it on to one of the button platforms, pick up the other gyro, and press down the other button. This simple procedure could take anywhere from 30 seconds to 2 minutes while the professor stands on the screen patiently waiting for R.O.B. to complete the task. And I always wondered, was it really acceptable to just push the button down with the gyro? Or were you meant to spin it first every time, whether you needed to leave it there or not? Again, like Stack-Up, there was no accountability for how you used R.O.B., and most people I know just played this game with two people and left R.O.B. out (assuming he was even available.) Some of the meaner players I knew would make a game out of trying to squash the professor with the pipes. In an ironic twist, Gyromite is one of the most sought after cartridges, not at all for it's gameplay, but for the treasured Famicom to NES cartridge adaptor contained in most early NES cartridges. (See http://blog.wired.com/games/index.blog?entry_id=1500989)



Astro Robo Sasa

Gyro Set (Gyromite)

Geimos, released by ASCII on August 28, 1985.

In contrast to the last entry on Gyromite, we're not going to spend a lot of time with this one. Geimos plays like a weak version of Buck Rogers: Planet of Zoom with bombs, and a boss mother ship that inexplicably flies diagonally to the surface of the planet that you are flying over. As far as shooters go, it does what it needs to do, but it doesn't do any of it spectacularly. Compared to ASCII's earlier release of Astro Robo Sasa, this one is a disappointment. ASCII made a number of games for the MSX, though I could not find any evidence that Geimos was one of them. ASCII gained a lot of popularity in Japan for porting over the Wizardry series of RPG games. They have also made a number of outstanding controllers for various game consoles.

10 Yard Fight, released by Irem on August 30, 1985. Released in the US by Nintendo on October 1985

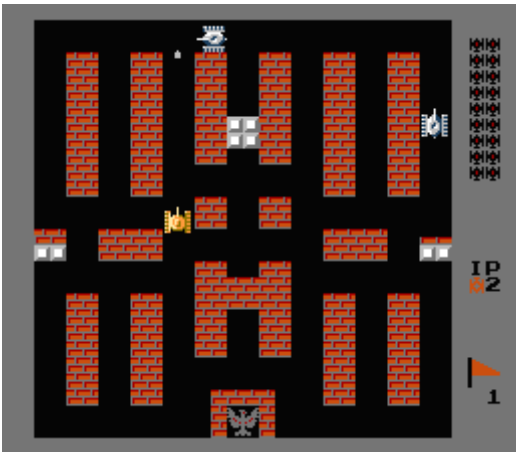
I must confess that I haven't played this game very much since it's one of the earliest football games

available for the NES. As a result, it's very simple, and there isn't a whole lot of configurability between plays. You choose your difficulty level by selecting the degree of academic or professional achievement. The game scrolls vertically up and down throughout the whole game, but the offensive team's end zone is always at the top. On defense, you can choose between two men to control, while on offense, you can pass the ball to an open player, but your best bet is to try to run the ball with the quarterback, or pass it laterally to either player alongside him. There's not a lot of depth and later football games such as Tecmo Bowl will eclipse this title. Interestingly, while Nintendo developed most of their own initial sports titles, they opted to license this one from Irem, along with the popular action sidescroller, Kung-Fu.



Battle City, released by Namco on September 9, 1985.

As promised, here is the bonus 9th review for the month. It's not a spectacular title, but it is a solid one. Battle City was an arcade game that Namco originally released for the arcade under the name Tank Battalion in 1980. While the original game had very stiff popping animation, the Famicom port of the game is much smoother and enjoyable to play. The game plays like a cross between Berzerk and capture-the-flag. You control one tank against a horde of enemy tanks that appear one after another. You must shoot down and eliminate all the tanks remaining on your current stage in order to advance to the next stage. All the while, you must be conscious of the state of your home base, which is protected behind walls. All of the walls can be destroyed by cannon blasts, and your enemies will constantly try to destroy the outer perimeter of your base and blow it up. There are a variety of tanks that appear, some which will bestow bonus items or brief power-ups if they are flashing red when shot. It should be noted that your cannon fire can nullify an enemy's cannon fire, but remember to continue shooting or the enemy may fire another shot and take you out. At the higher stages of play, the game can become quite frantic, and it's less advisable to move too far away from your base or you'll leave it vulnerable to attack. It lacks the charm and imagination of many of Namco's later arcade games, but it does provide a consistent challenge that most gamers will enjoy. You can even choose which stage you would like to start on without any codes (up to stage 35, which is arranged to look like a Galaxian,) or construct a level of your own design.



Battle City

The Thrill Of Defeat: Commodore Plus/4 & Commodore 16 - N-Q

by [Mark Sabbatini](#)

If I were going to give a "coattails" award to the clunkers of computer history, there's no question the Commodore 16/Plus-4 family would make the finals.

I haven't seen all of the games available for other possible contenders like the IBM PC Jr., but what at first looked like a modest roster of available games for the Commodore machines in fact turned into a list many hundreds of titles long. Given the machines' tepid hardware and short market life, the only explanation is the software markets unshakeable assumption that anything succeeding the best-selling Commodore 64 was going to be a consumer - if not critical - hit.

Oops.

I mention this because I got an e-mail a few weeks back asking why my look at games for the two machines are focusing on those available using an online emulator at [commodore16.com](#). No I don't know the person who runs the site and I've only exchanged a few brief messages with people who frequent it. But it was the only way to get the list of capsule reviews down to a manageable size - as it is, the columns on games for this machine will take more than half a year to complete.

Once upon a time I envisioned doing mini-reviews of every title available for obscure computers. I'm

now realizing that isn't going to happen unless it's all I do with my life - which by definition would mean I didn't have one. Besides, I suspect there's a tolerance limit among even junkies for reading about the mediocrity too often found in these games.

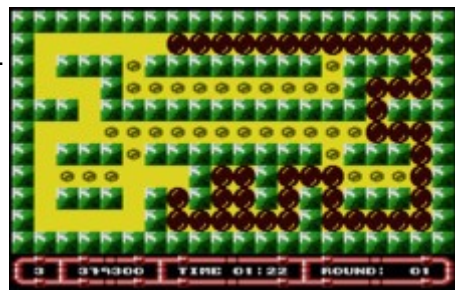
With that, this month's look gets into the latter half of the alphabet and, while not covering too many true classics of gaming history (One On One is an exception), there's a couple of original efforts definitely worthy of passing time with until we venture deep into space (think of how many such "S" titles there are in the software world) next month.

Nest Of Fleas (C+)

A text adventure that generates a number of positive and negative feelings, balancing out into an average grade. The plot is cute, putting you in the role of a dog on a mission. Among my early miscues were scratching and getting fleas, and scaring off the mailman by barking when he showed up with something I probably wanted delivered. The interface is the real mixed blessing. The user doesn't type commands; instead they're selected by keyboard or joystick from an on-screen list. Any extra input, like picking up or moving to something, are then selected in the same manner before the outcome is shown in the storyline window. The good aspects of this are no guessing what words are needed and a simple interface even the rankest beginner can understand. The main drawback is it's slow, requiring too much select-and-choose work for the simplest actions. There's no save game option, a critical omission for adventures, especially since this one can sic you with unexpected death. Still, it's cute enough to have some staying power and appears to be a C16-Plus/4 original.

Nibbly 92 (D+)

Badly flawed variation of Nibbler and the countless other "snake" games on the market. It's closest in appearance to the coin-op game - with the player guiding a quick-moving snake around a series of one-screen mazes, eating dots that make it grow longer, without colliding with itself - but lacking some crucial gameplay elements. First, the player only moves when a key is held down and there's no penalty for staying still (in the coin-op you get a moment's pause at corners before the snake is forced to move in a direction). There's a time limit, but this still makes the game more strategy than arcade action. Maybe even a bigger problem are the graphics. The snake's head is never visible, so when the game starts the timer starts without the player necessarily being aware they're on the clock. When you're moving, it's hard to tell where you are and position yourself correctly for turns and/or eating stray dots. A few finishing touches and this would be fun, but without them there's little point. It's apparent predecessor, Nibbly, did not work in the emulator.



Ninja Master (C-)

Originally a budget title for the ZX Spectrum, this four-stage martial arts game involves earning higher and higher belt colors by proving your worthiness through four skill challenges. The first is fending off arrows that come at you from the edges of the screen (sort of like Space zap), the second is hand-chopping a log in half by hitting the left and right keys to build up enough power (Track And Field?), the third is fending off ninja stars and the fourth using a blowpipe to shoot down canisters. It got OK reviews at the time, especially because of the price, but on the emulator its clunky and lagging response makes it nearly impossible to play. The graphics are large and OK in a cartoonish way, but nothing impressive. I took real karate lessons for a long time and never got anywhere because I didn't have enough patience to execute moves with the exact precision required; same thing there.

Nuclear Ball (C-)

Another example of stupidity bogging down an OK game, even though another Breakout/Araknoid clone is hardly something the world is screaming for. Get through the drawn-out title screen, which has unreadable text, and you end up playing an OK game whose most notable feature seems to be an extra tug of gravity on the ball. Also, when you miss the ball doesn't disappear - it rebounds as if you'd hit it, but you lose one of your nine allotted "misses." When these hit zero the game is over. Controls are responsive and the space graphics are OK, but lacking in color. It earns a mediocre 60 percent rating from the German site c16.de.

Oblido (B-)

Sort of an arcade-pace Balderdash, where you have to move four sets of nine counters in a maze to their proper areas while dodging enemy sinners emerging from the "Sin Bin" on each screen. The instructions call this "the eternally frustrating strategy game" and they're right. I didn't enjoy it much because I got myself stuck in difficult situations to get out of when trying to move counters around, although I can imagine plenty of people who would.

Olympic Skier 1 and 2 (C+)

A polished black-and-white version of the vertical-scrolling ski/driving avoidance games that are seemingly limitless in number. This is top-of-the-line if one grades it by bedroom programmer standards, but only mid-tier as a commercial release. The player guides the skier down slopes with trees along both sides, avoiding or jumping obstacles, and passing through slalom gates and hitting ski jumps right to earn extra time and bonuses. The best element of the game is all this occurs in

waves - first the obstacles, then a bunch of slalom gates just as time is running low and, finally, the screen switches to an entirely different perspective for a ski jump where the goal is to clear a lake. The bad news: the gameplay isn't much different than any other version much of the time, the graphics are tepid and the in-game messages are literally something of a bad joke (and usually inaccurate, like referring to hitting trees when you collide with a rock). Olympic Skier 2 looks like the same game with different messages.

One On One (A-)

If you're not familiar with this best-seller and can lower your standards below "NBA Jam" to the machines of the 80s, this title by a startup company of ex-Apple employees known as Electronic Arts (yes, that EA) brings serious game. The Commodore 64 version is on 1UP magazine's list of 50 essential games and the Plus/4 conversion survives the translation process nicely (this definitely wasn't the case with all platforms - the version for my trusty TRS-80 Color Computer was particularly mediocre). It was one of the first titles to license real



sports stars, pitting Larry Bird and Julius Irving against each other in a contest reflecting their particular strengths. Irving is faster, fancier and can jump higher; Bird, generally acknowledged as the better player in One On One, is a much better shooter, and his rebounding and defensive skills are superior. They also move much like their real-life counterparts, long before the age of motion-capture graphics. Fatigue meters and momentum swings that affect things like shot success add to the playground realism, as do options such as playing timed games or to a specified score (21, anyone?) and "winner's outs" or "loser's outs" after successful shots. There's three-point shots, instant replays, fouls and - famously - the shattering backboard for those able to hit a dunk just right. It's a simple game to learn, but with lots of moves and a tough-to-beat opponent at the higher of four skill levels (two-player games are also an option), this is a winner for nostalgics and newbies alike.

Out On A Limb (C+)

A chunky looking platformer that's simplistic, but very tough. You control Jack, who must climb a beanstalk and grab treasures on more than 20 screens, avoiding ducks, jelly babies and pretty much anything else that moves. Controls are simple right-left-jump and enemies move in predictable set patterns. But there's very little room for error even during the early levels, so it will take a while before players learn the moves needed to get through. After that, of course, the fun factor - not terribly high anyhow - rapidly diminishes. This game has several sequels, but none are part of the emulator collection.

Overload (C+)

Gets this rating purely on guesswork, as it's a strategy game I couldn't quite figure out. You and another player (computer or human) take turns placing tiles on a board, apparently trying to outflank the other, but exactly how is what proved elusive. Numbers appear in each tile, but I never figured out what they meant, even after watching the computer play itself for several matches. If you can figure out the rules, then this is probably your kind of game.

Pengo (B+)

Other than a far-too-long intro sequence that seems impossible to break out of, this is a very nice clone of one of the world's most popular penguin games (OK, it's not a crowded field). Almost everything is true to the arcade, from the size of the playfield with the iceblocks to kick around, to the way enemy Sno-Bees materialize and pursue the player, to the player's ability to defeat them by kicking blocks into them, kicking walls to stun them or lining up the three diamond blocks for large bonuses and temporarily disabling them.



There's intermissions that are close to the coin-op's and the four-direction-and-kick controls are possible with the keyboard or a joystick. The only notable difference is it moves a bit faster than the original, which actually isn't a bad thing. It's not so fast it increases difficulty and allows players to get through the easier playfields faster.

Pipe Mania (D)

This is a good version of a clever and popular puzzle/arcade game - but this emulator is no place to play it. The goal is to place pipe tiles on the screen in a way that directs a soon-to-be-flowing stream of water to a proper location, but there's a major problem - the spacebar functions as both the place and pause key in the emulator. This turns the whole experience into a herky-jerky mess. Too bad, it's a good conversion of an addicting game otherwise and I spent some time hitting all sorts of other key combinations hoping something might work before giving up.

Planet Search (C-)

I remember once reading some sick reviewer who said Defender was a fine game at first, but too easy to master to the point of simply racking up waves and extra men mindlessly infinitely. They should be sentenced to achieve the same feat with this somewhat derivative version, which plays like a 33 1/3 record spinning at 78 rpm (am I dating myself here? Not really - it was something I tried a couple of times as a kid on an aging system that also had an 8-track tape deck). The graphics are nice, the

joystick control is smooth, much of the gameplay seems the same - even though it appears there's no humans to rescue; instead you seem to need to capture "something" after shooting certain aliens. But the whole thing moves so fast it was impossible to make any meaningful progress at all. This may partially be the fault of a reviewer who never got past wave six at the arcade, but I find it hard to believe anyone not on medication will be able to keep up for long.

Platina (A-)

Love at first sight. I'll bet this guide-the-bouncing-barrel platformer exists in a dozen variations on different machines, but it's the first time I've experienced this particular combination. It's a little like Mario meets Marble Madness, as the player guides a barrel around mazes with ramps, walls, pits and other things that may aid or hinder efforts to get up, down and around the large scrolling mazes. It all moves speedily, with charming and helpful graphics (arrows show the way), and the physics are accurate in a cartoonish way - keeping the spacebar pressed adds sort of a turbo boost to your speed which is essential for building enough speed when hitting ramps in an effort to reach higher platforms or make long jumps. Sure it's nothing more than an alternate guidance scheme for a familiar genre, but it's a clever and well-implemented one.

POD (C)

A vaguely Targ-like game where the enemy acts more like Centipede, with some extra strategic complications and lousy keyboard controls. The player moves around a grid, shooting the enemies that emerge in a chain from the top of the screen. They explode when hit, disabling that section of the grid temporarily. The graphics are very basic, but acceptable, and those into fast mindless shooters will like the pace. The keys (3, 4, A, Z and T to fire) are a lousy choice.

Prisoner (C+)

Nice little freeware game that is essentially a complex version of those slide-the-tiles number puzzles. The goal is to free a prisoner by moving blocks around the screen until there's a clear path from his cell to the exit. The controls are simple - type the number of the brick and a direction key to move it - but solving things is anything but. The biggest variance is the bricks are of different sizes, and getting the large ones out of the way is a real bear. Still, there's no time pressure beyond the rather ridiculous comments from the prisoner's cell that flash up from time to time and you can always revert to the original setup if you feel stuck. A good time-killer for the patient.

Prospector Pete (B-)

A combination of Dig-Dug and Pipe Mania (above), where the player maneuvers Pete around 16 levels of underground mines, collecting whatever objects are around and avoiding bad things. Once he collects them all, he can return to the minehead where a ladder has been lowered so he can get to the next level. The biggest hazard is the timer - a stick of dynamite. Once it goes off, the mine starts to flood, with water filling whatever tunnels Pete has created. It's very easy to cut yourself off from items and escape routes. Nothing is really great when it comes to graphics and gameplay, but none of it is awful either.

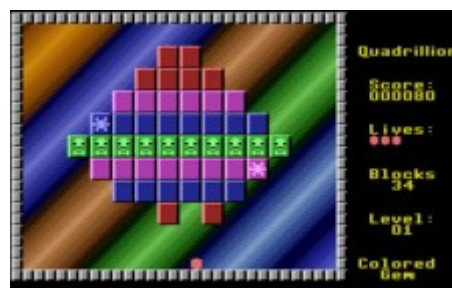
Qbert (D+)

My best guess is this is an unfinished unofficial port of the coin-op classic, which might rate as barely above average if the rest of the programming went nearly flawlessly. You control a little ball-shaped dude who doesn't look much like Qbert, jumping around on a platform mostly resembling the real thing. But there's huge problems here, maybe the worst being that the squares don't change color when you jump on them. In other words, you're simply supposed to jump on them all until they're the right "color" with no visual clue if they are. In latter waves, where the original requires jumping on squares multiple times and/or colors toggle with each jump, this obviously would be an unplayable nightmare. Also, look at the screenshot - notice there's no transport discs? This might matter if there were any snakes, but there aren't during the early stages. There is, however, a time limit, so your racing against that instead of anything that can kill you. And the list could go on, but it's not worth that kind of space. The positives are few, including some user selectable sound/control options and a nicely animated - but useless - demo at the beginning of stages demonstrating the goal (with no color differential, you have no idea what it is).



Quadrillion (B)

To dismiss this as another Araknoid/Breakout clone is to miss a game with a lot to offer, along with a couple of real annoyances. It's perhaps most notable for being the runner-up in the 2004 Minigame Competition, an annual event where programmers write games for classic machines using tiny amounts of memory. As such, it was written with emulators in mind and for the most part is easily played and controlled as a result. The game is similar to many ball/brick games with one important difference: You control the ball instead of a paddle. Your control left and right movements, while the up and down ones are in response to whatever bricks or walls the ball hits. You can only take out bricks that are the same color as your ball, which can be changed by hitting certain bricks with that capability. You must also avoid the green



death bricks with skulls in them, which will cost you a ball. There are 20 levels that get increasingly complex and even the early ones aren't easy. It's possible to get "trapped" with no way out other than suicide (if you hit a color-change brick on the first level before taking out all the reds, for example, since there's no way to change back to a red ball). The biggest personal annoyance is levels start from the beginning if you die - I'd feel better being able to pick up where I left off. In its favor, you can continue from the last playfield completed before the game ends.

Quest (D)

File this one under Text Adventures For Idiots. Not Dummies, since that series is devoted to beginners, not people who are actually stupid for desiring to tackle the subject in question. It's based around an explore-the-cave plot similar to a zillion others, except the command structure is severely limited. You move with single-key commands (press "N" and you move north if you can; no pressing <ENTER> or typing out full commands). If there's a further action you can take, such as picking up a treasure, the program asks if you want to do so. But if you enter a room where there's a torch and the program doesn't prompt you, you can't pick it up on your own. Lame. Saved from a failing grade because it is a simple introduction that's bug-free and it allows you to get out of missteps that might result in death on other titles (such as going into the woods instead of the cave at the start, just to see what's there).

Quick Draw (D+)

This might be an OK version of one of the oldest two-player games in existence if it were nearly impossible to see things on the too-dark playfield. You and other player move up and down on opposite sides of the screen, trying to shoot each other around some cactuses and a covered wagon in the middle. Problem is, the gunfight seems to be taking place in the middle of the night. The desert is black and both of the players are dark in color as well. Add in somewhat slow and choppy movement and it's time to put this one out of its misery.



The last man just expired and the big GAME OVER sign has just appeared, which means it's time to put this issue to bed. Tune in next month for more retrogaming goodness.

- [Adam King](#), Chief Editor

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