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Press Fire to Start
by Adam King

Welcome to another issue of RTM. It's the dog days of summer, and what better way to beat the heat than to stay inside your air conditioned house and play some old favorites. So let's get on with this issue.

The Many Faces of . . . Threshold
by Alan Hewston

I forgot to mention it last month, but we've begun reviews for titles that are now 25 years old. This month's quarter century tribute is the Many Faces of Threshold. Of all the classic era action games released only on home systems (not the arcade), Threshold was the most widely distributed of all time - at least up to 1983. Others appearing on multiple home platforms around that time and eventually surpassing Threshold in number include: Atlantis, Demon Attack, Miner 2049er & Mountain King. But . . . it should be noted (thanks Apple][FAQ) that there is a strong resemblance between Threshold and the 1981 Gremlin/Sega arcade game "Astro Blaster". As a clone you risk a lawsuit if the game is too similar and especially if it is successful. Sierra On-line seemed to do a great job of making games similar but avoiding legal problems. Threshold was not an exact copy, lacking some of the best features of the arcade original, but did find its way onto 6 of the most popular 9 home systems of the era.

Let's consider Threshold as a clone of "Astro Blaster" (AB), a shoot'em up, "Death from Above" genre game with lots of variety in enemy types, formations and attacks. Despite me not actually having played AB, here is my take on comparing the two. MAME enthusiasts can send me feedback if I make any significant mistakes or omissions. In AB you are limited to the very bottom row of the screen, whereas a couple home versions of Threshold you could maneuver about the bottom 25% or more of the screen. The most important element in AB is to NOT run out of fuel or the game ends. In Threshold, once you complete each 4 wave mission (fuel tank), you take a break and sit back and watch a 30 second docking and refueling intermission. In AB, after the 4 waves, you then had to pass through a shower of deadly fireballs and meteors - all while the fuel is still running out. Fortunately, shooting a fireball added back in 3 more seconds of duration to your fuel. Then . . . you still had to successfully dock with the Mothership (i.e. you could crash) before you get to your fuel. In Threshold, there is a text display that says "Thanks Ma!" after you refuel.

Another huge element in AB, not in Threshold is that of speech synthesis. "Fuel status marginal" - your first warning. "Fuel status critical" at which point you have 9 seconds of fuel remaining, but you'd score double points during this "critical" time. You'll hear "Laser temperature critical" - when you've blown it. Hit your warp button and hear "Warp activated, 10, 9, 8, 7 . . . 0" - a count down. Warp is named "Hyperdrive" in Threshold. Both Warp and Hyperdrive provide a limited amount of time whereby all the enemy action (movements and bombs) are slowed, but you continue on at normal speed and firing rate. There may be more speech, such as "overheating" or "out of fuel" - I dunno.

Finally, AB is loaded with 25 or more different bonuses to earn. Some require creative or risky game play, most are pretty hard to do (but not impossible) and some may be mutually exclusive. Examples are - docking perfectly without moving, scraping the edge of the mothership when docking, not having any missed shots in a wave, getting all enemies in a wave in their first pass (L/R or U/D). The KLOV.com notes that a few more bonuses [but not all] are mentioned in Tom Hirshfeld's book "Mastering the Video Games" (Bantam circa 1983). If you like the challenge of finding hidden

gameplay elements then "Astro Blaster" is for you. These bonuses REALLY make AB unique and can reel you back in to play over and over trying to unlock or be good enough to earn all of them. I can see why my reviews are finishing late all the time. I'm putting too much text into these reviews. Now, on to Threshold.

For a brief time, Threshold may have claimed the title of the most widely distributed non-arcade, action game.

For many screenshots see: www.mobygames.com/game/threshold/screenshots

This game was first Released on the Apple][in 1981 (On-Line Systems) with a second release in 1982 (by SierraVision). I only reviewed the first release and assume the only differences in these releases was the title screen, packaging and distribution.

•Apple][- 1981 Sierra Online - Designed by Warren Schwader and Ken Williams
•Vic 20 - 1981 by I.C.G. unknown programmer(s)
•Atari 2600 - 1982 unknown programmer(s) for Tigervision (Sierra's 2600 name)
•Colecovision - 1983 Sierra Online
•Commodore 64 - 1983 by I.C.G. by Stu - for Sierra Online
•Atari 8 bit computer - ? unknown programmer(s)
•IBM - released but not covered here.

Rumor Mill: None.

Home Version Similarities. Let me mix things up this month and start by saying that only 1 or 2 versions have a choice of # of players, skill/difficulty, a demo mode, a Pause or maneuvering up/down. Except those in < > all home versions: the fuel supply is the most important part of the game as it constantly drains and once depleted, the game is over <2600>, regardless of the number of lives in reserve; every 4 waves you refuel <2600> with the mothership; the mothership first adds bonus points for your remaining fuel, and then refills your ship back to its capacity; there are many different waves of unique enemies; enemies in the same wave are identical and have the same point value; subsequent waves are worth more points; there are the same number of enemies 10 to 12 <2600 (only 6)> in each wave; the enemies often work together in special attack formations and maneuvers but also have randomness in their attacks; enemies wrap around the screen; most waves move downward, reach the bottom and then begin again at the top; other waves move R/L reach the left edge and then begin again on the right; all enemies can zigzag back and forth R/L and L/R along the edges; other than a slight delay when zigzagging, and a little longer delay when restarting from the top, enemies are always visible ; enemies can become more aggressive or mobile after some combination of time and/or being eliminated; enemies keep on coming (cycling over) until all have been eliminated, then after a very brief delay, the next wave begins; the sequence of enemy waves is always the same; the enemies fire individual or clusters of bombs at you, often 8 or more <2600, Vic & CV> can be seen on the screen at once; you cannot eliminate the enemy bombs, only dodge them; your only attack is to fire one shot at a time, and it moves very quickly and another shot is ready right after that; each shot fired heats up your laser weapon, which upon reaching the maximum , temperature, the laser overheats, and you'll be without firing capability until it cools off to about 50% or 60%; you'll see a text message across the screen "Laser Overheated"; your laser temperature gauge is always reset to zero during the docking; a bonus ship can be earned at various points (40k or 50k); your number of ships remaining, and the gauges for the laser temp and fuel are shown on screen; unfortunately the wave number is NOT shown on the screen; your only other means of attack/defense, the Hyperdrive last about 10 to 20 seconds, but it can only be used once per ship per each fuel tank ; as you move through space, you'll see some background stars <2600>, some falling downward. Typically the Space Bar is used to activate the Hyperdrive, but I did not penalize - as it is a bit clumsy. I figure an experienced player should know which wave to use them on and can activate it as the wave begins without much loss in control. Also note that none of the home versions offer you a choice of starting wave.

Here are some descriptive names that I've given the waves - doubt if any official names exist. This is the sequence from the Vic 20 mostly, but the Apple][, CV & C64 are all pretty similar.

1: Demon Attack
2: Scrubbing Brushes

3: Bow Ties to the Left
4: Bunches of Grapes
5: Many TARDIS
6: Formations of Amebas
7: Bouncing Balls
8: Fish Swimming
9: Wiggling Slashes
10: Heart shaped squadron of pumping Hearts
11: V Formation of V's
12: Scrambled Eggs
13: Space Cubes
14: Anchors Aweigh
15: Tweasers
16: Pig Heads
17: Humanoids
18: Turtles
19: Legged Saucers
20: "LAST"
Then you see . . . Congratulations! The CV reportedly has 24 waves.

Have Nots: Atari 8 Bit (N/A)
Sorry, but my diskette no longer works. From memory and screenshots I expect it may tie or win the Bronze medal. We hope to cover this version some day as a Lost Face of Threshold.

Have Nots: Atari 2600 (34)
My first reaction was with only six enemies, this quickly boils down to a one-on-one battle to see how many times you can fire right through the enemy before one of the sprites finally get detected and someone loses. Can we say "bad collision detection?" Sure . . . Now if you play with the difficulty set to "hard", the final enemy always has a loaded, guided missile coming at you, so prepare your joystick or wrists for destruction if you have a marathon play session. The Gameplay is good (6), but clearly limited with only 6 enemies and one bomb dropped, plus the scale is off - i.e. the relative playfield size is smaller, thus there is less maneuverability and strategy. The main element of AB, that of running out of fuel is gone here - a big loss. Instead you get bonus points after each wave, for how quickly you complete it. Thus there is no mission of 4 waves, where you'd get one chance to use the Hyperdrive, and no break to see the mothership. The action quickly becomes a one-on-one shootout every wave, but there is also no overheating of your laser. Now, considering the TERRIBLE collision detection and firing at will theme, it seems logical that they never added the laser overheat element. The option to have the enemy weapons home in on your position (smart bombs) is nice, but really makes for added challenge. If you last through all 11 waves, AFAIK the game repeats with the smart bombs active the rest of the game. I deducted for only 11 waves, only 6 enemies, and only one bomb. But there is still some of the original charm with the great variety of attacks and kamikaze as well. One great gameplay change (also seen on the CV) is that of allowing the use of the bottom 40% of the screen - to maneuver in. This can significantly reduce the rotten luck and bad timing where a wave begins on top of you. Now you can at least dodge this and any top/bottom wraparound dancing of enemies. Addictiveness is good enough to enjoy (6), helped the most by the start option to add the enemy bombs homing in. There is no pause, and no other options. The already mentioned collision detection scheme is so bad that you either have to consider it part of the game, or simply part with this game right away. Another bad feature is that of resetting the waves each time you die, which does then lead to (but hopefully you can prepare for) double deaths. The Graphics are very good (7) with fast action and a lot of variety in the enemy here and in all versions of this game. The 2600 is limited to only 11 waves but has good color variety for the enemies (better than most). The screen edge effects are excellent - indicative of an experienced programmer or team - like Activision. There is not much detail, or animation as in other ports, but there is some multi-colored background effects and the fuel gauge. There is no demo, hyperdrive, star field, mothership screen or laser temperature gauge. Sound is mediocre (5) with only a few elements. You hear your shots fired, hitting the enemy and then you getting hit - tempting to make it a 4. Controls are perfect (10). This cart is somewhat rare and one of the coolest looking in the entire 2600 library - same can be said for all Tigervision carts as they have bold color, great edge effects and colorful detailed labels.

Bronze Medal: Vic 20 & Apple][(39)
A tie. I did not try hard enough to break the tie - neither deserved to miss a medal. But it's very likely (once I review it) the Atari 8 bit will knock these both off the medal stand.

Apple][(39)
My first reaction was this original version has the best formations and variety in attacks and dropping bombs - not carried over onto the other systems. A few limitations in the system and year of release make it harder to compete with the others, so a job well done. Gameplay has the overall best quality (8) here, with 10 enemies per wave, and up to 8 or so bombs that they can simultaneously drop. Hyperdrive is activated via the . Addictiveness is worth while (7) but could be better - as the standard AP2 does NOT allow a Pause in the action and there is no way to restart, other than killing off your

remaining lives. The action begins fast and furious so the game does not steadily progress in difficulty as would be desired. The action is slowed down when the maximum enemies and bombs are in play. There is also a minor delay (8 seconds) in loading levels for each mission. A bonus life earned at 40k. Also, the original and all versions that keep you fixed on the bottom of the screen lose a bit as you die randomly when enemies loop around and get you coming up from the bottom. This is the only version where the enemies are chickens making the fuel supply run out for no reason while you sit and can do nothing about it. This shortfall was corrected on all subsequent ports. I may be too generous in scoring the Graphics high on all versions, an outstanding (9) here. There is plenty of action and not too much slowing down when all 20+ enemy objects, 15+ stars and your ship are in motion. There is sufficient detail, nice animation, good displays, and smooth movement of enemy formations. The color variety is lacking with only white for the enemies, but at least the bombs are colored green, and elongated, making them discernable from the pinpoint white stars. Sound is fine (6) with all of the effects in place that the others have, save for the enemies dropping bombs. Besides the nice launching effect, everything else seems to be an exact copy of Choplifter, which is not agreeable to me. Hearing a chopper crashing and the blades slowing down just do not fit here. This long audio death sequence of each enemy detracts from the gameplay. Controls are really confusing here. I've not encountered, or have forgotten if I've seen a scheme like this. I guess if I played more Apple 2 games, I'd not be surprised. The analog controls force you to pretty much keep moving all the time. That is, unless you are at the center of the screen the controls move you towards or away from the center - it is up to you to decide. So you'll constantly fight to hold your position else you drift back towards the middle. I really hate this over control or lack of control and scored this a (9). I figure most Atari & Commodore fans would suggest an even worse score. As usual, this game is only found on cassette/diskette.

Vic 20 (39)
My first reaction was excited that the Vic 20 was not forgotten here. And this title often makes Vic 20 fan's top 20 list of action games e.g. the Digital Press. The Gameplay is mostly all here, impressive (8), with 12 enemies per wave, and up to 4 or so bombs that they can simultaneously drop. Like the AP2, you only move along the bottom of the screen. The laser overheat gauge is flaky and when you exceed 75%, you suddenly become all the way overheated - so beware. Hyperdrive is activated via the . Addictiveness is fun to play (7) with the Commodore ports being the only ones with a pause . The Vic 20 sometimes quits after round 16 or so - a glitch? - and so I penalized it. I need more time to check this out, but 4 out of 5 times that I've made it past wave 16, the game ended with fuel and lives still remaining, where the ship mysteriously moved to the left edge of the screen and everything locked up. The other time, when I made it to wave 18 I died legally. There are some minor collision detection inconsistencies which will also reduce your desire to replay. And finally, you'll really hate how the white bombs are NOT easily discernable from the white star. The action is slowed down when the maximum enemies and bombs are in play. Graphics are lively (8) with plenty of animation, action (almost as much as the AP2), and good screen displays. The details are a bit sparse and the motion a bit choppy. All the enemy ships are white, as are the stars and bombs which are hard to tell apart. Sound is good (6) only missing the bonus points tally. But, added in the Vic and 64 are the only versions where we hear the enemy dropping bombs. Controls are perfect (10). Activate the Hyperdrive via the . to Restart. The cart is somewhat hard to find.

Gold Medal: Commodore 64 & Colecovision (41)

Commodore 64 (41)
My first reaction was a bit disappointed the game was not quite as good as I had recalled. There are NO options and everything is white. The Gameplay is mostly all here, (7) very good with 12 enemies per wave, and up to 10 bombs that they can simultaneously drop. Like the AP2, you only move along the bottom of the screen, but there is no Hyperdrive. You see the mother ship every 3 waves instead of 4, and combined with a slower moving fuel gauge - there's never a threat that you'll run out of fuel. Maybe I was just lucky, but I had little trouble completing every wave 3+ times and shut it off after rolling over 1,000,000 points. The Addictiveness scored the best (8), very fun with no collision detection problems and the Commodore ports are the only ones with a pause . Like the Apple, the action begins fast and furious and the game does not steadily progress in difficulty as would be desired. Earning an extra life every 50k with difficulty not increasing appears to allow for a marathon game. The action is slowed down (just barely) when the maximum enemies and bombs are in play. Graphics are fantastic (9) with the most on-screen action, good screen displays, star field and details. Once again, everything moving is white, but fortunately the white bombs are discernable from the pinpoint white stars. The enemy ships are well animated and move smoothly in formation. The Sound is the best here, very good (7), with all the effects, plus the best launch sequence and firing sounds. Controls are perfect (10). Found on cart (uncommon) and diskette.

Colecovision (41)
My first reaction was disappointed that there was no pause. The Gameplay is impressive (8), mostly all here with 12 enemies per wave, but only 2 enemy bombs that can be simultaneously dropped. Like the 2600 you get to move about the entire bottom 25% or so of the screen - this allows for more strategy and planning and lessens the chance of an unlucky death. Addictiveness is very fun (8), with 4 different starting difficulties (the most replay value) and the only port with a demo mode. There is no

pause and do not hit the <*> or you'll restart. Some deduction was made for poor collision detection and the delay in "laser overheated" shows up well after you've already tried to fire again. The Hyperdrive, although easy to use , can be implemented on every wave, lessening its value and impact to strategy. This (glitch?) clearly makes the game easier than was planned. Graphics are wonderful, the best (9) with almost as much action as the others (fewer bombs), but a lot more color variety. There is good animation, nice displays and smooth movement. Still no version has any real multi-colored objects, but the CV easily looks the best. The Sound is good enough (6), with most effects, but missing the enemy dropping bombs. No version has any music or good background effects, or even and effect to let you know that the game is over. Overall, with two fire buttons , the CV Control is the best here (10). Both versions are good, yet have problems, and any one of these pluses or minuses could break the tie. I think the average gamer would agree these two stand out, but probably chose the CV. Warning, this ER cart may disappoint you for the price.

Acknowledgements, Updates and Errata since last month.
Thanks for support from Sir Thomas for the Apple][. I think thanks to Tom Zjaba (tomheroes.com) for my getting me the CV cart - long ago.

Come back next month: See if I get around to reviewing one of those simple, yet addictive games in the Many Faces of "Lock 'N Chase" for the Apple][, 2600 & Intellivision. Contact Alan at: Hewston95@NOSPAMstratos.net or visit the Many Faces of site: http://my.stratos.net/~hewston95/RT/ManyFacesHome.htm

2600 Pac-Man: Redefining A Failure
by Scott Jacobi

Many people have claimed that the official Atari 2600 version of Pac-Man, programmed by Tod Frye, was responsible for the beginning of the end of Atari's market dominance before the crash. This most anticipated home version was, to some, the most disappointing. I'm not here to debate the merit of those claims. What I am here to discuss is another effect that 2600 Pac-Man has been responsible for: inspiring some of the best hackers to provide the 2600 playing community with something that it has always lacked, a decent arcade conversion of one of the most beloved games in video game history. Atariage.com's hacking forums have been the staging ground for those noble attempts.

Let's face it, Tod Frye's version of Pac-Man is no beauty queen. I had the pleasure of getting to know Tod briefly while we worked together at the now defunct 3DO. He had some interesting stories to tell about his efforts with Pac-Man. (My apologies to Tod if I get any of the details wrong, it's been five years since we spoke.) It is fairly well known that his version of Pac-Man was just a demo that Atari management asked him to tidy up and prepare for shipping without giving him the time to make it something better. Tod attempted to compensate for the variation in screen space between the arcade and a television set by flipping the maze ninety degrees clockwise (hence the tunnels on the top and the bottom, and the ghosts leaving the pen to the right.) What may not be as well known is that Tod had actually developed a method to make the ghosts stop flickering. However, his project manager was very patronizing towards him, and Tod decided to provide Atari with the flicker version because of the way the project manager treated him. Tod was one of the first Atari employees to receive a royalty for his work, due to Atari's fear of losing too much talent to the 3rd party companies that were starting to pop up. For his version of Pac-Man, he received over a million dollars in royalties, which prompted an resentful fellow employee to scribble "Why Frye?" on the company's Pac-Man arcade cabinet. Tod's response was to draw a bar over the "Why" so as to suggest "Why NOT Frye?" in scientific notation.

So what have people come up with since those days?

Fair: How do you take the official Pac-Man game and make something better out of it? Well, one approach is to remove all traces of Pac-Man to begin with, and make it it's own game. There are many hacks which simply change the sprites in a game from what they were originally to something entirely different. Since your personal taste will dictate which sprite swap is your favorite, I encourage you to examine all of the sprite hacks for yourself, but my favorite is one called Muncher, done by David Marli, which converts the Pac-Man and ghost sprites in to something reminiscent of the Odyssey2's K.C. Munchkin and even includes a nice font change for the score. The result is something that play's exactly the same as before, but doesn't look like it's attempting to mimic the arcade in any particular way. In a way, it cleanses the palette. Find it here: http://www.atariage.com/hack_page.html?SystemID=2600&SoftwareHackID=34.
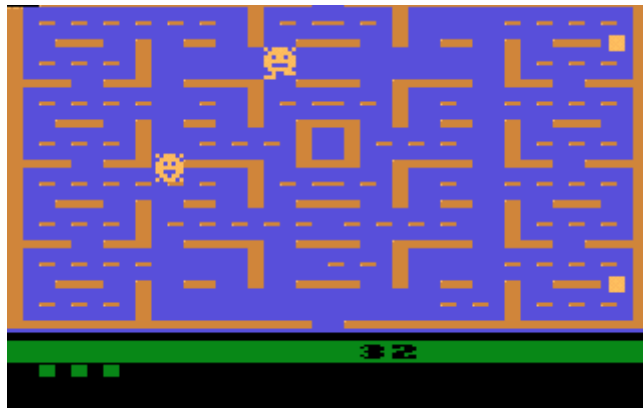
Good: Among the members of the Atariage.com hacking forum, there is no question that Nukey Shay is an undisputed master hacker of the Atari 2600. He has created a number of superb hacks of Space Invaders, Breakout, and a few others, but we're here to focus on Pac-Man. This is the first of two of Nukey Shay's hacks to appear in this article. Although the lesser quality hack of the two, this hack is by no means unimpressive. Nukey has seen fit to pick up the mantle that Tod Frye left behind and do his utmost to take the official 2600 Pac-Man game and hack it to be as close to the arcade Pac-Man as possible, without altering the maze or the "spirit" of Tod Frye's original work. The result is nothing short of amazing. As you can see in the picture (which has been doctored to show all four ghosts,) the colors are more accurate, and Pac-Man actually looks like Pac-Man and not an adjustable wrench. Instead of a "vitamin," fruits appear along with their point value after being eaten. The same is true for the ghosts. After you eat each of them, their point value appears. What you can't see is how beautifully Pac-Man and the ghosts animate, and that the ghosts actually come and go through the top of the ghost pen. The opening jingle is not quite accurate, but recognizable, and the arcade siren can be heard throughout play. Only one extra life is provided when you reach 10,000 points, and not for completing every level. And believe it or not, the intermissions have made it in to the game. Now to be fair, Nukey did this by expanding the ROM from the original 4k to 8k, providing him with much more room to play with, but what he accomplished with that extra 4k is nothing short of amazing. Find the Atariage.com forum thread containing the hack here: http://www.atariage.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=54937.

Better: One of the earliest arcade Pac-Man hack attempts was done, not to the Pac-Man ROM, but rather to the Ms. Pac-Man ROM, as something of a "downgrade." The resulting hack was the first that many had seen that proved their dreams could be made a reality. Rob Kudla initiated the movement by converting the Ms. Pac-Man ROM in to Pac-Man. He stripped away the three extra mazes, converted the colors to the simple blue on black that we all recognize, and striped Ms. Pac-Man of her eye and bow. Throw in a few sprite changes to the bonus fruit, and lock them in place underneath the ghost pen, and you pretty much have Pac-Man. Rob even changed the opening scene to read Pac-Man instead of Ms. Pac-Man. It was difficult, if not impossible, to mimic the arcade maze entirely, so Rob had to make some decisions on how to lay the maze out. Later on, a hacker by the name of El Destructo came along and picked up where Rob left off. He made a few tweaks to the maze in an effort to make it a little more accurate, some minor sprite changes, and attempted to improve the sound a little bit. His second revision contains a bug that causes the sound to loop when you complete a board, so it's recommended that you use the first revision instead. (Rob has many other great 2600 hacks as well, and he even attempted to hack K.C. Munchkin in to Pac-Man, but gave up when he discovered that the Odyssey2 couldn't produce the color yellow.) Find the Atariage.com forum thread containing the hack here: http://www.atariage.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=20975.

Best: Before I explain why Nukey Shay's hack entitled Hack'em is without a doubt the best Pac-Man hack ever made, let's explore how his playground, the Pesco ROM programmed by Ebivision, came in to existence. The programmers at Ebivision were determined to show the world that an extremely accurate port of Pac-Man could be done for the Atari 2600, and in only 4K of ROM. They started programming the game from scratch, and planned on releasing the result commercially. But since we live in a world of litigation, Ebivision was concerned that Namco or other copyright holders would attempt to sue them for their efforts, so they decided to convert the game in to something Pac-Man-ish and named it Pesco. Nukey Shay decided to take what they had released and convert it BACK in to Pac-Man. After some ethical decision making, and the fortunate appearance of Ebivision's original Pac-Man code, he not only succeeded, he surpassed them. How would you like not only Pac-Man, but Pac-Man Plus AND Hanglyman A_N_D a never before seen hybrid of Pac-Man Plus and Hanglyman, all in one ROM? Well, thanks to Nukey Shay, you can. Although he is constantly improving the 16k version of the game over time, the results are unbelievably accurate, even in the now finalized 8k version. No explanation of the game will do it justice, you simply have to play it and be amazed. From maze layout, to intermissions, to all the extras that are found in Plus and Hanglyman (like disappearing mazes, altered bonuses, and multiple mazes) you'd be hard pressed to find a better version of Pac-Man for the Atari 2600 than this. There
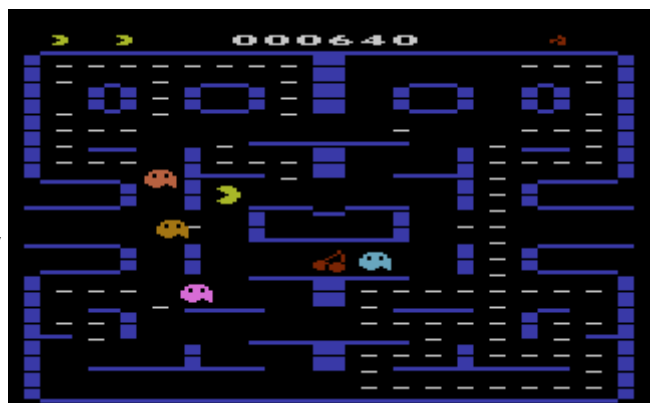
are pause features, and speed selection, and special attention has been paid to ensure compatibility with the Atari 7800. Find the Atariage.com forum thread containing the hack here: http://www.atariage.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=55226.

(Speaking of the 7800, a hacker who appropriately goes by PacManPlus, has completed several hacks on the 7800 Ms. Pac-Man rom which convert it to, among other things, accurate ports of Pac-Man and Pac-Man Plus. Find the Pac-Man version here: http://www.atariage.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=69062) Nukey is also working on giving this wonderful treatment to Ms. Pac-Man in the appropriately titled Ms. Hack. Find that here: http://www.atariage.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=89358

Is it still worth lamenting the unfortunate port of Pac-Man that we got for the Atari 2600 in our youth? Thanks to the movement it created, driving the best hackers to pool their resources and create these marvels, I submit that Tod Frye's Pac-Man is no longer worth despairing over, and should be celebrated for inspiring so many to push their talents to the limit. Besides, at the time, I was playing Atari 800 Pac-Man instead. Wakka-wakka.

Interview with Programmer Christian Oberth - part 3: Recent Game Programming
by Alan Hewston

Welcome back to the final segment of a three part interview with classic game programmer Chris Oberth. Parts 1 and 2 were a few issues back. We delayed this final portion so that we can shamelessly plug Chris' new web site and most recent work at:

http://www.AttnSpanGames.com/

There you can learn about and see a demo of his latest game "Trellis Trouble" and you can order it today!

OK. Let's catch up a bit and list all of the classic credits for Chris, as well as most of his recent work as well.

Programma for the Apple][
- Phasor Zap 1978
- 3D-Docking 1978

The Elektrik Keyboard for the Apple][
- DartRoom 1978-9
- Cycle Jump 1978-9
- Recall 1978-9
- RunAround 1978-9
- Intercepter 1978-9
- Depth Charge 1978-9
- Demolition Derby 1978-9
- Frustration 1978-9
- Moto-Cross 1978-9

Various Handhelds (group efforts)
- Light Fight 1979-80 Milton Bradley
- Finger Bowl 1979-80 Tiger
- Sky-Writer 1979-80 Ideal Toys
- Alfie 1979-80 Playskool

Coin Ops with Stern
- Armored Car 1981, with Gunars Licitis
- Anteater 1981
- Rescue 1982
- Minefield 1983
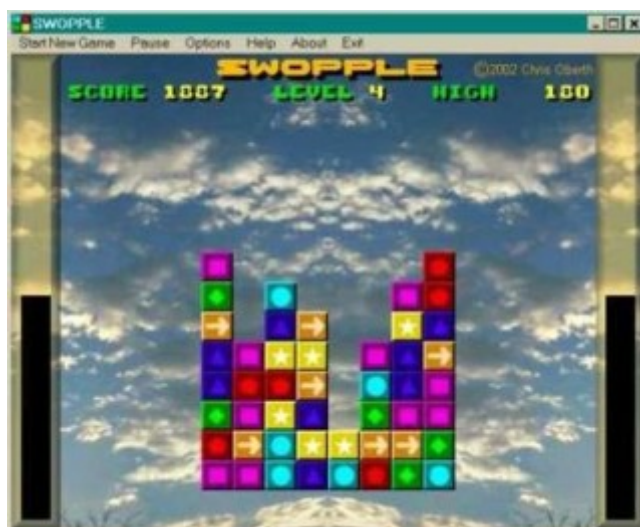- Tazmania 1983

Datamost for Apple][
-Ardy The Aardvark 1983

Micro Lab for Colecovision
- Dr. J and Larry Bird Go One on One 1984
- Boulder Dash 1984

Epyx for Apple][
- Winter Games 1985 (group effort)

"Swopple", a PC shareware game by Chris Oberth - try it today

Mindscape for C64 (group effort)
- Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom 1987 (released by U.S. Gold Ltd.)
- Outrun 1988 (released by U.S. Gold Ltd.)

Mindscape for NES (group effort)
- Days of Thunder 1990 (went unpublished, a different version was published)

Gametek for NES
- American Gladiators 1992 (group effort)

Coin Ops with Incredible Technologies (group efforts)
- Time Killers 1995
- Bloodstorm 1995
- ShuffleShot 1997
- World Class Bowling 1997 (also on PC)

Electronic Arts for PlayStation2
- NBA Live 2001 (sound engineer)

RTM: As you can see, Chris was involved early and often in classic & electronic games and in many different systems and markets, and still plays a part today. Let's start this final session with a question from one of our readers. Chris, when you ported games over from the arcade or original, did you get to play the original version much or look at the original code?

Chris: Oh yes, especially games like Boulder Dash. They used a technique to generate level layouts by deliberately seeding a custom random number generator, to conserve data/code space.

RTM: In a previous interview (not here with the RTM) you covered a lot of your early arcade work but I noticed that some of those arcade screen shots have a high score "OBE". Assumed to be short for Oberth. Also at least one arcade game I found a screen shot with your name credited on-screen. This is great, especially since we know that many early game programmers and artists were not given recognition, or enough credit. Tell us how you feel about being given credit, on screen, or in an instruction manual for the work that you did? Did you ever feel cheated, or that classic programmers in general were cheated in some way in this regard?

Chris: No, not at all. All of my on-screen credits have been appropriate. Yes, OBE is short for Oberth. There always seems to have been an ongoing battle between developers and publishers, where credits are concerned.

RTM: What was your favorite classic computer or game systems to program for, prior to and then after the NES?

Chris: The Apple][and then the PC.

RTM: In searching for game credits, we (the classic gaming community) have not uncovered much of your career from 1985 through 1995, other than the 1992 American Gladiators title at Gametek. Were you still in the computer or video Game industry during most of this time? Can you recall what companies, or projects you worked on, or any games that got started and died?

Chris: Between '85 and '88 I worked for a company called Datamension. I managed a 4 person technical support team for the Amstrad computer. The Amstrad was being sold by Sears as a word processor/spreadsheet system. Of course, I put as many games on it as I could. It ran the CPM operating system. From '88 on I was at Mindscape and worked on Outrun, Indiana Jones (pretty sure both were for the C64), and an unpublished version of Days of Thunder for the NES. That is, two

RTM: Great! Good to hear that you pushed some games onto the Amstrad. We'll be sure to credit you for the Mindscape games with the "Giant List of Classic Programmers". For the NES work, did you learn a lot about overall programming for games, or since these were group efforts, were you more focused on a specific task?

Chris: Programming was my main focus. I learned everything about the NES. You had to get close to the all aspects of the hardware as well.

RTM: You then returned to the Coin Op industry. How was it different for you in the 90's at Incredible Technologies, compared with the early years at Stern?

Chris: Stern was a pre-existing company (jukeboxes) and was branching into arcade games. Incredible Tech. was a much newer company and we had our chops down by then.

RTM: It's good to see that you continued to work on the latest platforms, like the Playstation2 and of course, still programming for the PC. What are you currently working on and where do you see your career going in the future?

Chris: I'm currently working on mobile and casual games for cells and PC's. See my link for my now released PC shareware game Trellis Trouble.

RTM: Tell us about your gaming interests - types of games that you like to play?

Chris: Light strategy, first person shooters, and casual puzzle games. Currently playing Act of War, Panzers, F.E.A.R., Flatout, Call of Duty 2, and, of course, Battlefield 2 and CounterStrike.

RTM: Give us your top 10 favorite computer and video games from the 80s?

Chris: Defender, Robotron 2084, Missile Command, Tempest, Choplifter, Cartels & Cutthroats, Arkanoid, Lode Runner, Germany 1985, and RDF 1985

RTM: You have great tastes and variety. Were you aware of the Retrogaming Scene and how much gamers are still enjoying these games and systems 20 years later?

Chris: Somewhat. Actually I know very little about it, tell me more. This has been fun - to learn that folks are still playing the classics.

RTM: Hopefully we can get you to read some of our back issues and see some of the fun that we still have with the classics. There are always more games out there to review and encourage others to try - especially with all the emulators now available. Some good sites for you and our readers to visit are:

http://www.tomheroes.com/ our parent magazine began here. Tom continues to add more to this site.

www.atariage.com A major sponsor for RTM - they announce each of our issues and cover everything Atari and then some. They have the best blogs & message boards and sell new games, old games and help hackers, programmers and game developer wanna-be's to make their dreams come true.

www.digitpress.com Digital Press has been around for a while with loads of good info, message boards, publish classic game reference and price guides, and publish their own bi-monthly magazine. Help quite a bit with classic shows.

www.atarimania.com The Atari Frog and others on their staff have frequently helped RTM with research and information.

www.gooddealgames.com Sell new and used games and help us here from time to time

http://www.coleconation.com/ One of our writers has his own site and magazine for Colecovision.

RTM: Do you currently have any emulators or old systems from back then?

Chris: Yes, I still have several Apple II's, C64's, and emulators for each.

RTM: Tell us about your family, growing up, any siblings or friends or anyone who got to help you in play testing games?

Chris: I have an older brother that worked for IBM. He was quite an inspiration to me, and he enjoyed play testing and/or playing some of my earlier games.

RTM: Do you have a wife or children, and are they aware of your work and have they been able to play any of your classic games?

Chris: I have a beautiful wife, Mary, and two wonderful daughters, Rosie and Jackie. Occasionally they do some play testing, and I've shown them some of my older games via the emulators.

RTM: Fantastic! I'm sure that they are very proud of your work and there is quite a lot of it that they can enjoy. We are very thankful for your work and even more so for sharing some of your experiences with our readers. We wish you continued success in your latest endeavors. And once again, give us that shameless plug for where we can see the latest games that you have been working on?

Chris: http://www.attnspangames.com/ And if there are any budding artists out there, looking to put some credits on their resumes, email me or leave a note on the website.

This concludes our interview. Don't forget that Chris can be reached at: AttnSpan@gmail.com Also if you have comments for our staff, or you too are a classic programmer who wants to be interviewed - even if you only worked on a game or two - we'd love to hear from you - contact Alan Hewston at: hewston@@95@@stratos.net

NEScade -- Seicross
by David Lundin, Jr.

Another game I personally consider one of those lost near-classics of the early days of the NES is Seicross. Based on an arcade game released by Nichibutsu in 1984 and most certainly inspired by the speederbike chase in Return of the Jedi, Seicross throws the player into a high speed rescue mission. The Basrah declared war on the Petras, sending them to the brink of extinction save for a few Petra who took refuge underground. The last of the uncaptured Petras developed a hoverbike capable of rescuing their scattered comrades, known as a Gilgitt Petra. It is your mission to race along on your Gilgitt Petra, blasting through the harsh wasteland left by the Basrah, and rescue any surviving Petras along the way. Okay, I never claimed Seicross was a complex game.

For the most part the game makes a rather accurate jump to the NES. Movement is controlled by the directional pad and both the A and B buttons allow your Gilgitt Petra to fire. This is a direct reproduction of the original arcade controls so movement and shooting are dead on. Your Gilgitt Petra moves quickly in response to control input yet still is a little drifty but this is again in line with how things were in the arcade. Most of the sound effects and music make it onto the NES without any trouble at all. While the music is slightly different, it's still in essence the same type of audio and unless you went back and forth between them the difference wouldn't be recognized.

Arcade Original   NES Version

It all sounds perfectly accurate so far, until one considers some distinct graphic differences between the two versions. Sure the NES graphics aren't as detailed but that's really not to be expected given the nature of this game. Your rider doesn't turn his head in the direction of his movement, when you pick up Petra refugees they don't appear on the back of the Gilgitt Petra, and some terrain objects are less detailed. That doesn't detract from anything, however what does is the perspective in which the game was originally displayed. In the arcade the terrain scrolled by from the right to the left at different vertical speeds. Objects in the foreground moved slower than those in the background, giving the game a pseudo 3-D look, as if the terrain was wrapping around the wall in the background as you screamed past. It's no surprise that the NES is unable to replicate this, so instead the terrain is presented in a static isometric perspective, which means all terrain scrolls by at the same speed. This means that the difficulty of objects getting closer faster along the top in the arcade is eliminated. Things would always get a bit tense if you got bumped up toward the top of the screen when a large cluster of terrain or debris was on the way toward you. With the NES version the reaction time difficulty remains the same where ever you are.

Another difference with the graphics is the orientation of the screen. Arcade Seicross uses a vertically oriented display, which makes the screen taller than it is wide. Why a horizontally scrolling game would use a vertical display is still beyond me, but it makes the game very difficult since you must be concentrating at all times or you will run into something. In other words it gives you next to no time to react and leaves the safest place on the screen near the bottom left. The horizontal orientation for a normal television of the NES version is a welcome change, since it gives the player time for reaction and allows the game to be enjoyed rather than stressed over.

Most NES players have probably had a brush with this game at some point. While not the most indepth title out there, it's still a quick blast of action that'll easily kill a half hour or so which is what the arcade original did. It is a compromise between the style and strategy of the original and the more open forgiveness of the NES version but in the case of the high frustration level of the original, I much prefer the NES port. Seicross is more than worth the couple bucks it'll run you at most used game stores or swap meets. While no one loves this game, no one seems to really hate it either, it just gets lost in the shuffle of NES cartridges. Personally I think it's worth a little more attention than that since it is a very well done arcade port. I promise, next time I'll do something a little more mainstream for you arcade fans out there.

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

Player's Portal

A reader named Brian sent me an e-mail about an interesting website.

"I am a fan of your website, and thought that I would tell ya about mine..... Called the Player's Portal and features console, computer, and arcade pinball. It's a work in progress, but if you get a chance, maybe could visit and throw a link out to everyone? I will be working on more downloads and such."

You can find this site at: http://www.geocities.com/mazirian_1999/

| **Nintendo Realm - Super Mario Bros. hacks** |
|:---:|
| *by Scott Jacobi* |

As promised, here is this month's special Nintendo Realm feature on Super Mario Bros. Ordinarily, this is where I take the next 8 Famicom games or so in chronological order and review them for you. But SMB is one of the most monumental releases for the Famicom and Nintendo Entertainment system, and I didn't think a plain old micro-review would be appropriate. However, what can be said about SMB that hasn't been said already? I assume that every reader of RGTM is very familiar with this classic. In fact, if you're like me, you're so familiar with it, that the thought of playing through it just one more time isn't as appealing as it used to be. So what can we do about it? Well, many people have attempted to breathe new life in to the game, and I have attempted to explore the vast world of SMB hacks and present a sample of them to you.

Many of you are probably familiar with ROM hacking. It's where hackers go in and fiddle with the ones and zeros in the ROM and change features in the game. There are generally three levels of ROM hacking. From easiest to hardest, there's graphics hacking, level hacking, and gameplay hacking. Graphics hacking is the simplest kind of hacking (although by no means easy to do without some of the fancy ROM hacking utilities that are made available by the hacking community) where graphics, tiles, and sprites are altered to the hacker's whim. Level hacking is a little more involved and is the act of changing and tailoring levels to provide new playgrounds and challenges for players. And lastly, gameplay hacking is the most intense form of hacking and typically requires a great command of assembly language programming in order to change the physics, power ups, or enemy behavior of the original game. I won't go in to the basics of how to apply a ROM hack patch, since there are several very good tutorials on the net, most notably here, so if you're not sure how to do it and would like to learn, please find out elsewhere.
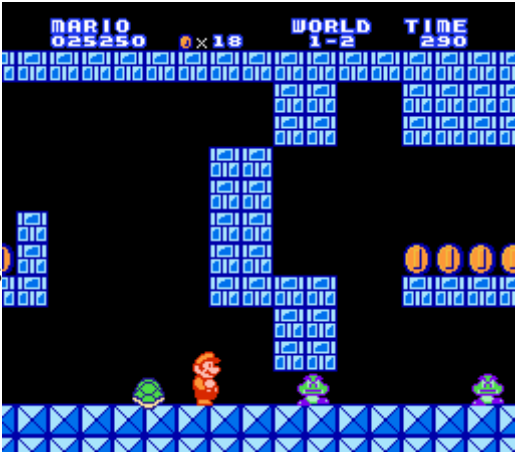
Graphics hacks.

First we'll look at graphic hacks that change none of the levels or gameplay. Due to the lower degree of difficulty, graphic hacks on SMB1 are the most numerous. Unfortunately, a good number of hackers out there have a penchant for toilet or racist humor and contribute very little in terms of quality. As a result, there are only a few stand out contributions in this category.

For pure comedy, I like two hacks that don't upgrade the SMB1 graphics, but rather downgrade them. There's one ROM hack entitled 2600 Bros. by Grimlick that explores what SMB might have looked like if it could run on the Atari 2600. All characters have been replaced with some of the more recognizable 2600 icons. Another is ASCII Bros. by Sl1me, which replaces all of the graphics in the game with an old DOS ASCII 40-width character set. Unfortunately, you can only find the patch at Zophar's Domain and the only emulator that I could get it to work with was Famtasia, a rather old NES emulator.
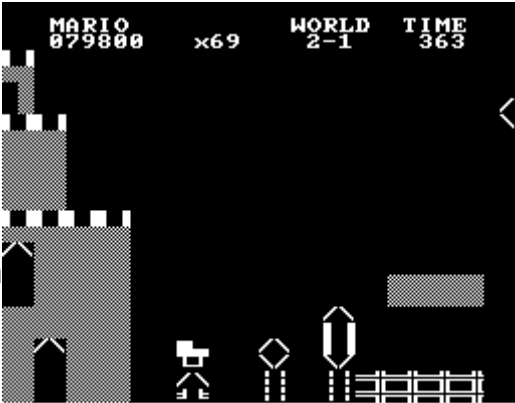
For more serious graphics hacks, there are two high quality hacks that attempt to make SMB look more like Super Mario Bros. 3. Super Duper Mario Bros. by Tabmok99 and Super Mario Bros. DX by flamepanther both do a great job substituting the original sprites and tiles with those found in SMB3, resulting in a fresh look for a familiar game. They each make slightly different decisions on which tiles to use where, and I personally enjoy SMBDX just a tad more than SDMB, but your own personal tastes will vary, so give them both a try.

My personal favorite upgrade is a hack done by notable hacker harmony7, entitled simply Super Mario 4. It alters as much of the graphics as possible to Super Mario World quality, and then relies on Super Mario Bros. 3 for anything left over. The result is rather spectacular, and surprisingly involved. Originally, small Mario was a 2 tile by 2 tile sprite. But in Super Mario World, he is actually 3 tiles high. In order to achieve that effect, Harmony7 had to change some of the assembly to account for the extra height. The only unfortunate side affect that this had was to completely screw up the swimming animation for Mario, but this is very minor and should not prevent you from enjoying the game.

Level and Gameplay hacks.

Now we'll take a look at some of the level and gameplay hacks that I tried. If you're new to level hacks, there's a warning that I should provide you with before you start. There are a few level hackers that pride themselves on creating the most ridiculously difficult level designs ever conceived. I don't know why so many hackers take delight in presenting players, most of whom are not extraordinarily skilled (myself included), with level designs that can not be mastered in under an hour. So I will be sure to let you know how I faired against some of these designs.

We'll start off with one of the oldest SMB hacks that's still regarded as a classic example of what a hack should be. Strange Mario Bros. is a creation by acmlm, who runs a very popular rom hacking message board. This hack is extremely approachable by players of all skill levels, and upgrades the graphics to SMB3 levels. Acmlm provides some interesting twists with underground coin pipes that seem to go on and on, and hidden secrets for those who have the foresight to travel along the roof tops of the levels. Every level in the game has been completely redesigned.

Two hacks that build off of this idea are Bowser's Jumping Challenge by AlexAR and SMB HF by Matt Waggett. SMB HF alters many of the levels to provide new challenges while not necessarily changing the theme of the stages from the original game. Jumping Challenge is only 12 stages long, but it expands upon the well know puzzles that are present in the original, forcing you to think a bit more before you jump and time your landings accordingly. Both hacks retain a classic look for the graphics with a few minor changes sprinkled in for amusement. SMB HF alters Mario by extending his sideburns, but in my opinion, he looks a bit Amish. Going a step beyond these two is Mushroom Nightmare by Shadic, which not only revamps the stages and the palette of the game, but provides you with the choice to play as the standard Luigi, or the higher jumping and higher momentum Mario. All of these hacks up the challenge factor from the original game, but not terribly so.

A hacker by the name of Googie has created an extensive library of hacks, some of which are minor and only cosmetic, and others which are far more elaborate. Two of his SMB hacks that can be found at romhacking.net are Luigi's Chronicles and Super Loco Spoof. Googie particularly prides himself on the difficulty of his hacks, and you will probably notice the level of difficulty in these two hacks immediately. It took me a full ten minutes to get past

the first stage of Luigi's Chronicles, which features Luigi attempting to rescue Mario in a horror-themed world. Super Loco Spoof is a little more approachable for players of average skill, and I believe is the only hack that bears the distinction of using the Mario sprite from the Gameboy Donkey Kong game. You can't ever make Mario bigger with a mushroom in Spoof, but even as small Mario, you have constant access to an unlimited supply of throwing stars. Many of Googie's hacks also feature an altered soundtrack that turns the usually chipper tune of SMB into a darker, sadder version.

Perhaps you would like to play as someone other than Mario or Luigi. Two very well done hacks provide you with that opportunity. [Toad's Adventure](#) by Omniverse (which is an improvement over his original Super Mario Remix hack) allows you to play the game as Toad (obviously.) In addition to this change, the hack features a variety of well thought out and challenging levels. I particularly enjoy how Fire Toad reminds me of Karnov. If Toad's not your thing, how about Yoshi? A hack mysteriously entitled [Mario Evolution](#) by a Japanese hacker known as Mashi allows you to play as Yoshi through nine completely altered worlds. Though he can't eat enemies like he can in other games, he can spit fire when you collect a fire flower. The hack also features a simplified 8-bit remix of Yoshi's Island music.
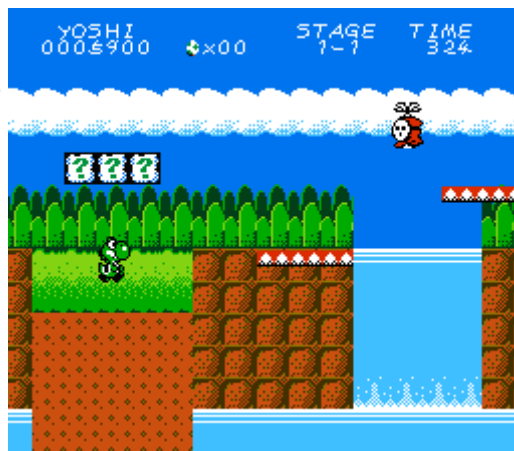
Speaking of Japanese, there are many talented Japanese hackers whose hacks are unfortunately difficult for English speakers to discover. Japanese hackers take their hobby very seriously, creating nearly entirely new games from the original ROM. Two examples are [TOWER RE](#) and the deceptively titled [XXXX](#). Both hacks completely change the way you play through the game. Tower is an immence hack where Luigi must climb 20 floors of increasing challenges with an entirely new soundtrack, new enemies, and even the chance to obtain the hammer brothers power up from SMB3 (which you can kind of see in the screen capture.) XXXX is a little harder to explain but you essentially travel randomly from stage to stage, attempting to collect four stars within your current realm in order to move on to the next, and ultimately to Bowser. You will be amazed at how frequently you end up at a stage you've never seen before, and for those who really like to torture themselves, attempt to see what's beyond "the wall."

Certain Japanese hacks are not only designed to be difficult, they are designed specifically around glitches and oddities present in the physics of SMB such as being able to jump off walls and move through blocks so that only the greatest of Mario players can even attempt to get past the first stage, let alone the entire hack. Two such hacks are [Air](#) and [PM (Promotion Mario)](#). Air was recently made famous by a player who shared his emulator assisted time attack recording on Youtube.com and must be [seen](#) to be believed. Air is particularly relentless since you only receive one life, although you can jump in mid-air indefinitely. Promotion Mario appears to have been a collaboration of several Japanese SMB hackers, designed to showcase their talents. Both hacks retain the classic SMB graphics style, however both are ruthless and unforgiving, and require a vast amount of patience and skill.

Bonus

My last entry here is actually not a NES hack, but rather a SNES hack. All Super Mario fans are familiar with Super Mario All-Stars with it's enhanced graphics and preserved game play. But

peter_ac went for something a little different. He took the gameplay engine of Super Mario World and hack the levels back to SMB in Super Mario Deluxe. This means you can play in all of the original levels, but also pick up shells, spin jump, turn fireballed enemies in to coins, etc. He even hacked the overworld map, and provided the same treatment for the "Lost Levels." This hack is a must-try. Also, I can't give this hack a proper review in this space, but do find and download the Mario Adventure patch by Dahrk Daiz for SMB3. Dahrk is an extraordinarily talented hacker and Mario Adventure is one of the most incredible and comprehensive hacks ever made for the NES. It's not just a hack of SMB3, it's a whole new game.

The ROM hacks presented here are by no means the only hacks worth checking out and playing through. There are many other worthy hacks, and the ones listed here were the only ones that I had the time and space to cover. It's true that for every good hack, there are ten bad ones, but if you spend some time at the romhacking.net forums or acmlm's forums, there is no shortage of discussion and opinions on other hacks that you should try. Sometimes the best part of discovery is the hunt itself.

The Thrill Of Defeat: Commodore Plus/4 & Commodore 16 - The R's
by Mark Sabbatini

Some letters are definitely more equal than others.

This was supposed to be the column where we started exploring space in this long-running series of reviews for the Commodore 16/Plus-4 series, but it turns out there are a staggering number of titles in the "R" category, to say nothing of "S" games before "sp." But they still cover the complete range of genre and quality, so maybe those wanting to sample the machines' potential ought to just try all the titles from R, S, or T and save themselves the hundreds of others unless they really enjoy themselves.

Raffles (C-)
A plodding, repetitive scrolling maze game where the player has to navigate through five buildings and rob the safe at the end of each one. This is accomplished by driving a car through a single-screen maze to each building, at which point the large horizontal maze comprising each "building" appears. There's not much complexity - the "maze" is just door-size openings in a series of walls, with a few obstacles to avoid along the way. On all screens are balls that bounce around Breakout style that will cost one of your three lives and send you back to beginning of a maze upon contact. Get to the end, plant dynamite by touching the safe, move off-screen so it explodes and then collect your booty, and it's off to the next building. Do all five and you repeat them under tougher conditions. There's not much difference between the buildings. The balls in them are hard to see, which keeps this from being much fun. But it's easy to learn, especially since there's only four directional keys to master.

Raider (D)
I was really looking forward to this one - the instructions don't even pretend this is anything more than just shoot and/or bomb everything as you progress through a scrolling cavern. Since Scramble is one of my favs, this seemed agreeable, even if ship control is strictly up and down. But two words: collision detection. OK, a few more: it's worse than awful - you die when your ship anywhere near the cavern walls, making it nearly impossible to get far and - it would seem - completely impossible to squeeze through tight areas. Bummer, but there's enough games in the world to move on.

Raster Runner (B)
If you're doing another Tron lightcycle game it better be a good one - and surprisingly enough this one delivers. The novelty here is the two competing cycles only see a small portion of the overall screen, with a small Defender-like radar display above the side-by-side view of the players' cycles. One or two players can compete, with selectable levels of computer difficulty for one player. The optional action replays of the end of each match get tiring quickly, but the unlimited lives option is a great way to pick up the game quickly.
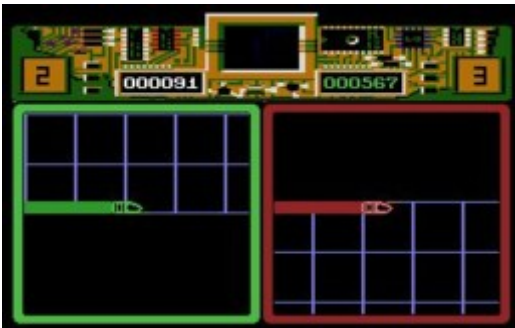
Reflex (C-)
If you're doing another Breakout game it better be a good one - and this falls short despite it's particular novelty. The player controls two paddles, one on each side of the screen, and the one on the right moves in the opposite direction of the left. So up is down and vice versa when the ball drifts

over there. That makes things tricky, but the problem is mostly one of control. The keyboard control of the paddles is quick, but not precise, and it's hard to get even the left-hand paddle in proper position. There's different playfields with different challenges, but mostly it's a lot of frustration when you keep losing balls through what you feel is no fault of your own.

Renaissance (D+)
It's Othello. It's got the usual basics. The controls are hard to figure out, a really stupid thing when it comes to simple games. Next.

Rescue From Zylon (C)
Not terrible, not great game where you control a zepplin rescuing people from a multi-screen cave before it fills with water. Colliding with the cave walls ten times also ends the game. The graphics are colorful, big and primitive; the action rather slow, apparently by design since zepplins are hardly jet fighters when it comes to speed. Navigating through the narrow passages is a bit tricky due to momentum and the slow reaction of the ship - sort of like when the Titanic was trying to avoid that iceberg. While there's no real holes, what's missing is some sort of addictive or special quality to make one want to spend some time with it.

Rig Attack (C-)
Choplifter this isn't, but maybe small kids could play it as their first training mission before playing two or three others in preparation for the real thing. The player controls a helicopter with simple four-directional movement - no momentum, gravity or any complications, patrolling an oil field and dropping bombs on subs that occasionally appear. You also need to land on rigs to refuel frequently, but can't do so if a sub is present. The gameplay is simple, repetitive and gets dull quickly, but it's OK in looks and pacing. One distinction: It has the biggest fuel gauge you're likely to see - the entire border changes color to reflect your status.

Ringwars (Incomplete)
Looks like a 3D space shooter in the Star Raiders/Elite mold, but also seems to play at a really slow pace with a ton of frame skipping. The problem was so bad I find it difficult to believe this is how the title actually plays on a real machine and therefore am simply mentioning its existence in the emulation collection.

Road Patrol (D)
Imagine if, instead of a crayon drawing for the refrigerator, your kid asked you to try out the really neat game he just programmed. This "arcade" shooter might be it. You guide a laser base that slowly moves and shoots "Qs" (hey, at least "I" would look something like a missile) at a short centipede-like enemy, which also shoots Qs as it slowly crosses the screen at random heights. Hit it and the screen flashes a few times and makes you wait a while before the next one appears. Good for revealing the limits of BASIC as a gaming language, but only if you've never played one before.

Road Stunner (B-)
The gameplay actually isn't all that great in this shoot-cars-in-a-maze game, but it has to get some points for its extensive and user-friendly ability to customize all sorts of things. The player is a motorcycle with four-directional movement that drives around a single-screen maze shooting an endless series of cars that appear and try to ram the player. Menus allow everything from colors to speed to the direction your car fires in when moving (try setting it to "left" when you move up and other strangeness and see how far you get). That adds variety to a game that doesn't have much itself.

Robin Of Sherwood (B-)
There's conversion from the gurus at Adventure International is a decent graphics/text story, but a few too many frustrations to hit the bulls-eye. The play must guide Robin on a quest of gathering relics and rescuing allies, starting in the darkness of a prison cell. But it may take you a long time to get out of there, with a solution that isn't completely obvious and a limited vocabulary for executing it. In the meantime, you're looking at a dark screen. Afterwards you get to explore a good-sized world with occasional animations, but the problems of limited vocabulary persist. Also, like many adventure this deals out seemingly undeserved deaths regularly. I waited one turn after encountering John Little, for instance, and he killed me with his quarter staff. Not exactly in character with the story. If you want to try it, find a hint sheet online - you won't get far without it.

Robo Knight 2 (B-)
This is a "level-edited" version of an acclaimed platformer, although I'm not sure the edits or the game itself are all that special. A robot goes from screen to screen (non-scrolling) gathering shields in a castle filled with ladders, moving platforms and various hazards. Everything is vanilla, which would be OK, except the robot has an almost non-existent vertical leap. This can be overcome by very careful timing since everything moves in patterns (another drawback), but it doesn't make for much of a long-playing game experience.

Roller Kong (C)
Oh, did I have strange hopes for this one after seeing the title. Maybe Donkey Kong meets roller derby? Sadly, no. It's another two-screen Donkey Kong spinoff and a mediocre one at that. The player guides someone who looks and moves more like Prince of Persia than Mario through alternating barrels and an elevators screens. Aside from the crude graphic and slow, jerky movement, there's too many problems in basic logic for this to work. First, there's no such thing as gravity on the barrels screen - they'll roll in different directions on the same girders, which adds to the challenge for sure, but destroys any illusion of playing something resembling the real thing. There's no real timing in the pace of things Kong throws at you - long periods of nothing and multiple items almost all at once can both happen. Reminds me of many other Kong titles that tried to overcome memory limits through custom touches and fell short.

Game Over

Time to sign off on another issue, but we'll be back next month for another round of retrogaming goodness. Not much else to say, so see you in 30!

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