RETROGAMING TIMES monthly

Issue #59 - April 2009

'70s '80s '90s

COVERING 3 DECADES OF GAMING

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Press Fire To Begin

by Bryan Roppolo

This issue marks the beginning of some new things, the first being the classic gaming comic section done by Tom Zjaba called "Laughing Pixels". Tom will be doing a classic gaming comic every month to help bring some laughter to those that read this magazine. Also, two new people have come on board for this issue to write reviews about two classic gaming events that took place since the last RTM was published: The Atari Party and The Midwest Gaming Classic. I would like to thank both Bill Kendrick and Erik Olson for taking the time to write reviews about these two great events! Hopefully this is just the beginning of more classic gaming show reviews, since I would think most people find it interesting reading up on what is all going on in the classic gaming universe. In the future I also plan on announcing upcoming shows so that the magazine not only wraps up events that already took place, but also promotes ones that are upcoming. It's no fun to first hear about an event after its already happened, especially if you might have been able to attend yourself! I encourage anyone that is either hosting an event or knows about one upcoming to e-mail me so I can put up an announcement/description in a future issue.

Another important thing to mention is the opening of a TV channel on YouTube called Retrogaming Times TV. I started this YouTube channel as a way to host videos that people want to submit to the magazine. Instead of just doing articles, I thought it might be a nice addition to allow for the use of video's which can be put in an issue here on this site as well as cross promoted on the YouTube TV channel. We'll see how it goes. If anybody out there wants to do a video for RTM send me an e-mail and I'll not only put it on the magazine, but also on Retrogaming Times TV. If enough people contribute it will make a nice compilation of all the classic reviews, commercials, documentaries, etc. that can be viewed at one location instead of spread all over YouTube on various accounts.

In other news, this will be the final issue of *Retrogaming Times Monthly* that is posted at a "weird" date. I say that because we have been trying to play catch up with the issues after falling a little bit behind. Therefore, the next RTM will be released on May 1, and then the first of the month in every month after that. That should help make it easier for the readers to know when each new issue is coming out. I personally can't wait to finally get back on a regular schedule, since it makes it easier for me as well as the readers and columnists. Maybe next year we can do an April Fool's issue since it will be coming out on the 1st, where we cover all the April Fool's pranks that were done in the past

within the classic gaming community. Anyway, I hope you enjoy this latest issue of RTM and some of the new faces that have written columns here for the first time!

Show Report: The Midwest Gaming Classic

by Erik Olson

March 21-22 was the Midwest Gaming Classic in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. This is not a

full report of the show, only some observations from my corner in the Computer Museum where I ran the TI-99/4A table.

The show was busy, with 1500 estimated the first day. There was steady traffic through a room of game systems going back to 1973.

At my station I first set up TI Invaders, which has a great "attract mode" (and also good game play). A lot of kids ran up to try it out. Other Invaders clones could be played in the room for comparison.

I brought only consoles (plus a speech synthesizer) and about 50 game cartridges, but this was enough. Most people remembered playing the cartridges and wanted to see those. I estimate 90% of TI-99/4A owners never expanded beyond this basic setup. A common event was adults showing the games to their kids, or friends, for the first time.

Many people asked to see Munch Man and the space shooter Parsec, two of the most popular original TI games. But these games take a fair bit of skill and practice to master, so people soon moved on. Joysticks were another problem with these. I had one pair of adapted Atari 2600 type sticks, and one pair of the common TI joysticks. The Atari ones started to break down, and the poorly designed TI joysticks frustrated most everybody. Still, one guy insisted on having the authentic TI joystick experience on Parsec.

Alpiner was a popular TI original then, and was popular at the show too. Partly thanks to its memorable (sarcastic) speech like "Did you mean to do that?" when you fall down the mountain.

Hunt The Wumpus got a lot of requests. This was a 1980 graphical version of the classic game where you explore a maze and deduce which room is the Wumpus' lair.

I introduced people to A-Maze-Ing, a 1980 title in which you guide a mouse through mazes to get cheese while avoiding cats. Some were dumbfounded that the sprite, a one-pixel mouse plus another pixel for each ear--just 3 pixels--was ever acceptable! (For reference, the TI-99/4A and its 9918 VDP typically have 8x8 characters and up to 16x16 size sprites.)

The Imagic games were some of the most impressive on the TI-99/4A: for instance Microsurgeon, Demon Attack, Fathom, and Wing War. At the show they were played by people who wanted to compare them to other versions. Nobody "got" Fathom, a little-known graphical adventure game in which you explore the skies as a bird or undersea as a dolphin. (Takes skill and practice...) Many people wanted to see the 4A version of Microsurgeon, where you travel inside the human body. The 4A version has several screens of good bitmap graphics but no scrolling. (The Intellivision version had scrolling but less detail.)

Game brochures got some shouts of recognition. I used "old style" ones on the poster for early games like Hunt The Wumpus, A-Maze-Ing, Adventure and so on, where the cover art still resembled computer graphics. For contrast, from games like Parsec, Alpiner, and Star Trek I displayed the booklets with "realistic" art where the artist's conception has little to do with the gameplay you see.

One person pronounced Sega "Star Trek" on the 4A to be the only decent port of the arcade game. Apparently other ports cut out features like the battle with Nomad. I also noticed this trend in the Atarisoft Donkey Kong vs ColecoVision Donkey Kong. Despite having the same video chip as the 4A, the Coleco port had less graphical detail (and fewer boards?) than the Atarisoft TI port.

When a crowd gathered round a Donkey Kong jock who was clearing board after board of the TI version, I joked "kill screen coming up!" and people chuckled.

Burger Time was the most popular among women, beating out Frogger (the usual suspect). Someone's wife played Burger Time for an hour straight. M*A*S*H (surgery mode) also got one lady's attention.

I can't begin to cover the variety of other game systems on display at the show, but here are a few memories. I played the original Pong with kids. The Timex Sinclair game Mazogs. Took turns at the Vectrex.

I'm glad the Computer Museum organizer, Marty, asked for volunteers, because I had a blast. A lot of people had fun remembering the TI-99/4A and showing it to their kids, or just seeing it for the first time.

Show Report: My First Atari Party

by Bill Kendrick

For three hours on a Saturday evening in March, Davis, California was having a video game flashback covering 3 decades.

A few years ago, I discovered the Vintage Computer Festival, held at the Computer History Museum near San Francisco. I noticed that, among the mainframes and such, some people were bringing Apple II and Commodore 64 systems. I decided that the Atari 8-bit needed to be represented, so I signed up to bring some of my gear. It was loads of fun, and I went back two more times. Then came my baby son, which put a stop to that... temporarily.

This past fall, VCF didn't happen. It had been a few years since I last went, and I was itching to show off my Atari collection. I was also getting jealous of the "Nintendo Wii Parties" people have been having lately. Four players? Nothing a 2600 and two pairs of paddles, or an Atari 800 and four joysticks can't do! And who said Warlords isn't as much fun as bowling? Time to assemble an "Atari Party!"

I asked my friends (via Facebook, of course -- how else does one talk to their friends these days?) if they'd be interested in coming, and the response was much greater than I expected. Having run the local Linux User Group for over 10 years, I was familiar with the meeting room at the local library, and decided to use that as my venue. This required that I make the event free and open to the public, which was fine by me. I wanted to share the retro love.

In recent years I had become aquatinted with Paul Cubbage, who ran Atari's Program Exchange (APX). I invited him to come out, and he offered to do a short presentation. I decided that making the event educational, and not just entertaining, was a great idea. (I'd also feel a lot less guilty about holding it at the library). I set about creating a few silly-looking little educational displays that explained a few classic game programming concepts, such as how sprites work, or how to program a bouncing ball in Atari BASIC.

Again due to my Linux User Group experiences, I had some local media contacts that I could tell about the event. Before I knew it, I was being interviewed on the local college radio station's technology show. And without knowing it until afterwards, the party was mentioned in the Davis newspaper (3 times!), and a regional weekly paper (along side a large photo of an Atari 2600 that they dug up).

As people learned about the event, some started offering to bring their own Atari equipment, to offset mine. One friend brought his 800XL, and another brought a 2600 and Lynx. While someone did offer to bring a 520ST, it didn't show up, leaving the only real gap in platform coverage.

Bob Woolley brought, among other things, one of his famously hacked 1200XL computers (Zork runs quite fast off of CompactFlash). He also brought an Atari 800, for 4-player games like M.U.L.E. and Dandy, the predecessor to the arcade game Gauntlet (the latter being played almost the entire evening by a group of three kids).

Zach Matley, an Atari 2600 homebrew game programmer that happens to live nearby, discovered the party the day before, and brought an extra 2600 and a variety of homebrew games by him and others.

All told, we had 14 systems up and running simultaneously: Two 2600s, a 7800, an Atari Flashback 2 and a Jakks Pacific Atari Paddle TV Games, one 800, two 800XLs, two 1200XLs, and a 130XE, one Lynx and two Lynx IIs, and one Jaguar with JagCD.

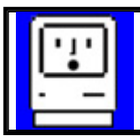
Prior to setting up, two things hadn't occurred to me: (1) I forgot that one half of the room, being windows, had no power outlets, and (2) having all those systems hooked up at once might blow a fuse! Fortunately, someone brought very long power strips and extension cords and we were able to get most things set up quickly enough that we were confident the fuses wouldn't blow (we had the room after-hours, so we would have had to call the police to get someone on the staff to come back and help).

In the end, somewhere between 45 (confirmed) and 70 (guesstimate) people showed up. We collected some cash and ordered 10 pizzas and a bunch of soda, almost all of which were devoured. That, along with some 'pixel cookies' a friend and I baked (it involves using a Play-Doh Fun Factory extruder and a lot of patience) and a dozen cupcakes professionally decorated to look like a game of Pac-Man.

I had a fun time organizing the event, and was excited to have it turn out so well. Which is good, because I didn't get a chance to play a single game all evening!

For more details on the event, tons of photos and a ~40 minute video, visit:
http://www.newbreedsoftware.com/atariparty/

Bill Kendrick lives in Davis with his wife Melissa, his 2 year old son William, and way more Atari's than he has time to play.



RTM Idiocy: Reviews And The Idiots Who Respond To Them

by Mark Sabbatini

I've always written game reviews with a touch of fear, lest I be inflicted with the rampant stupidity plaguing a disturbingly large ratio of people connected with them.

They're also my favorite section of any computer magazine. I also regularly scan reputable critics of other things such as restaurants, movies and hotels. It has little to do with being an informed consumer. Rather, I confess to sadistic glee in the thorough trashing of a product by a writer who knows what they're talking about.

Some of this is my irritation about seeing too much shilling, seen today as long "previews" of upcoming titles that are nothing more than free multi-page glossy ads disguised as "exclusive" or "feature" articles. Or the critic/publication giving everything an "A" or "B" grade, reserving the so-called average "C" for train wrecks that would get "Fs" in a non-grade-inflated world.

There's also the value of knowing what products to avoid, which I find more useful than sorting through puffery to determine what's worthy. But often it's not a bad review that influences my opinion most – it's how the company whose product is lambasted reacts.

Some companies do far more damage in their response than any negative review can, usually by making absurd excuses for flaws or personal attacks on the reviewer. Other times their complaints have merit as the review includes errors and prose that make a 12-year-old (me in the old days, in this case) roll their eyes.

This is a topic that can (and may) be the subject of many columns, but this month we'll just go through a sample of the major culprits beginning with the pathos of the responders.

The "it's not really a problem" defense takes several forms, including the sometimes-defensible claim a defect has been fixed. Even then a company can look ridiculous thanks to the decision making that resulted in the flaw.

"I do note, however, that your tests were carried out on a pre-production unit," wrote A G Fosberry of AGF Hardware in a letter to Sinclair User in March 1985. "Whilst I appreciate that your evaluation has to be based entirely on what you are given, it concerns me that much time and effort can be spent developing a product whose reputation can be instantly marred by comments which might be best leveled at the originator first in order to assess their validity."

Snark hardly seems necessary to make the point, but why did he think sending a product to a

magazine to be reviewed would result in something other than a published review? Also, he's among the army of disciples giving deity-like power to the Almighty Reviewer, able to control the fortunes of their company with a few column inches in a magazine (which does offer the comfort of being able to blame someone for failure).

Denial is another common response, perhaps best summarized by one programmer shouting in italics "our programs don't contain bugs." The cumulative industry wisdom is all programs have bugs; successful software has flaws that don't affect the user. A frequent tactic of respondents is the "it's not a bug, it's a feature" claim, although one author took it a bit far by claiming errors were a deliberate feature.

"I find it much more convenient for a program to abort with an error message than for it to return to editing without an indication you made a mistake," wrote John Hattan of Cosmic Software, explaining in February 1986 why his painting program for the TRS-80 Color Computer lacked error trapping. ON ERROR statements, he claimed, are "often a simple way to dodge hardware errors by having the program ignore them...(and) some apparent fundamental problems can allow for more user convenience than the first glance shows."

This might be a good time to look at some of the sins of the publications since the Cosmic Paint review that ran three months earlier in The Rainbow – panned as slow, buggy and unfriendly – was headlined "Cosmic Paint Features Excellent Documentation." The tendency of higher ups at many magazines to gloss over negative comments was as obvious as the motives (fear of offending advertisers, which was seldom a concern of reviews frequently working on a freelance basis). For that reason I pretty much dismissed any review by in-house staff. Consider this excerpt from a review of the IBM PCjr in the March 1984 issue of Creative Computing.

"I like this machine very much," wrote Thomas V. Hoffmann, who wrote the magazine's review of the original PC two years earlier. "For the home, its graphics and sound features provide a good base for high quality, enjoyable games and educational software. Its compatibility with the PC1 and PCXT make it ideal for occasional work-at-home use, sharing programs and data with the machine at the office. The PCjr makes sense for the office...a great machine for schools as well--at all levels."

Also, Hoffmann wrote, "the 62-key wireless keyboard is perhaps the most innovative feature." Some lines are too infamous for snark.

But as a journalist for 20-plus years, I frequently say the biggest sin of reporters isn't bias or devotion to corporate masters – it's ignorance. This is painfully obvious reading game reviews, a significant percentage by people who apparently never set foot in an arcade.

A few examples from The Rainbow: "Crystal Castles" was praised as a unique game despite possessing the same name of the arcade game it copied (without a license, although the CoCo apparently was so obscure I never heard Atari raise any fuss). Gantelet, another unauthorized port, was dubbed a "maze-type game" by someone who apparently never progressed beyond Pac-Man. Robottack, an unauthorized port of Robotron, was compared instead to Berserk.

The snafus were too numerous to be ignored by readers. "You seem to stick a reviewer with a product and expect him to sink or swim," wrote one person in response to a review of an adventure game where the writer was so enamored by this newly encountered genre that most of the copy focused on the concept of adventuring rather than the game itself. Daniel Fass, 13, responding without any apparent snark to the Robottack review, wrote "I think we shouldn't blame Bob for these things because he is an adult and kids generally understand things better."

Then again, readers could be a bit off themselves, finding meanings and conspiracies that could put Birthers to shame. Next month we'll delve into the murky coverups supposedly masterminded by people too stupid to recognize a clone of Q*bert.

Apple II Incider - Real Life Games Part Deux + Jeopardy

by Donald Lee

REAL LIFE GAMES PART DEUX

In June of 2008, for the first time in my career, I had experienced a layoff. I had been working for a startup which had not done well and I was among a slew of other employees who were let go. Besides the layoff, I had gone through a fairly crazy night before my boss had told me I was laid off. I detailed this in an article in the July 2008 issue of RTM because I thought nothing could top this.

I had been fortunate though. I landed a new job fairly quickly and started on August 25th of 2008. It

was a mid-sized company that was doing well. With the economic downturn that was going on, I was happy to be employed and did my best at my new job.

However, my best wasn't enough, as in a surprise move I was laid off last week along with a few other employees. As far as I understood, there was some restructuring occurring and my position (along with the others) had been eliminated to save money.

The unfortunate part of the layoff? Well, it occurred on April 1st and it definitely was no April Fool's Joke. The other problem? April 1st was also my birthday. It was definitely an unwanted birthday present and I didn't have the best of birthdays.

Alas, as I write this a week later, things have settled down. I took care of some final business with my old company today. My resume's been updated and I'm officially back on the job market. It's a tough time we are all living in. For anyone's who's still employed, enjoy it! For those like me take heart, there's things out there, we just have to be
patient.

JEOPARDY

Continuing the series on Sharedata games, let's take a look at Jeopardy this month. I originally was going to give Card Sharks a spin, but the emulator had trouble running it. However, since I covered Wheel of Fortune last month, I thought Jeopardy would be a great substitute.

Maybe I was young, but for some reason my initial recollection of Jeopardy was that I didn't have a lot of fun. I decided to give the game a second chance and this time around I'd say that Sharedara did an adequate job converting Jeopardy to the Apple II.

The game follows the format of the the Jeopardy series back from the 80's and the dollar values reflect this ($100 to $500 in the initial round, $200 to $1000 in Double Jeopardy). The game allows up to 3 human players. If you have less, the computer will substitute in and does an adequate job of it.

The game controls are fairly straight forward. Each player is assigned a key on the keyboard as the buzzer. Once a player buzzes in, instead of making players type the "entire question", options such as "Who is/are" and "What is/are" are given and the player can select the appropriate question. Once a player selects the question, they can then type in the answer that they think is correct. The game did a pretty good job of letting players get away with minor typos when entering in the answer as well.

The graphics, sound, and music for the game are fairly sparse. The game board is basic black and white, and the main sound effects are for players buzzing in and if they answer questions right or wrong. The best part of the graphics involve the contestants. The contestants react positively and negatively depending on if they answer the question correctly. The only music I heard was at the end of the game when I finished Final Jeopardy.

Each player can select from a few different characters to portray. Don't expect much selection though. Remember, this was the 80's and we're operating off of a 143K Apple II game disk!

All in all, while the graphics, sound and music are nothing to write home about, the game does it's job in bringing Jeopardy to home computers. Just like real Jeopardy, you'd better have some knowledge or you're not going to do well. I surprised myself and did fairly well, but did find myself stumped on some categories.

See you next month!

The Thrill Of Defeat:
Pleasure & Punishment On The Unexpanded Timex Sinclair 1000

by Mark Sabbatini

Ahhh...spring break. When normal youths headed for the ski slopes and beaches, and pathetic geeks like myself saturated themselves with video games in front of TV screens.

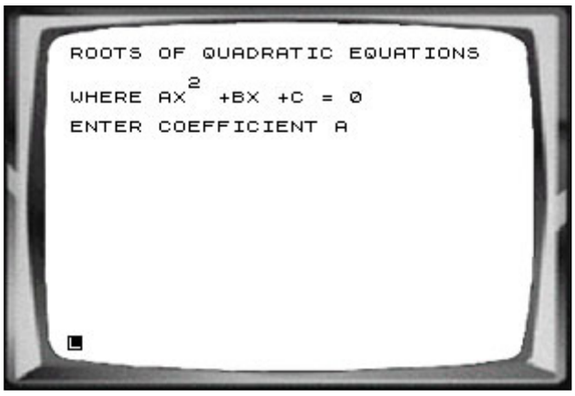
More than 25 years later, it seems little has changed. At the moment I'm typing this in-between reliving my ZX81 gaming days while the kids in my town are tearing up the roads on snowmobiles (I live 800 miles from the North Pole, where "scooters" are more prevalent and useful than cars). For some reason the word "punishment" keeps coming to mind, which is why the virtual version of it is scattered throughout this month's look at retrogaming on the world's worst computers.

It occurs to me some kids might have been forced to use some of their screen time on every hacker's nightmare: math and other educational software. Plenty of youths got stuck with them after using the "it'll be educational" line to con computers out of their parents, who could easily check these programs off on the order form (most of those mentioned here are in-house). The programs get a split grade based on how well they do at their intended function and their value to gamers – virtually nil in all cases unless it's to speed up homework, but RPG diehards might get something out of a few of them.

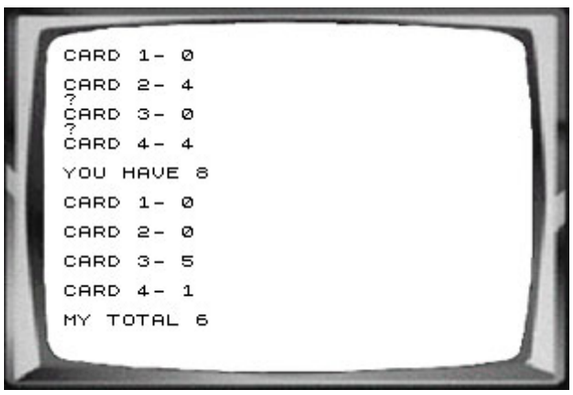
This was to be the final installment of games on the 2K Timex Sinclair 1000, the ZX81's U.S. twin, but that was before I discovered a massive collection of homebrews at foreign sites (the improvement of Google Translate during the past year is literally opening all kinds of new worlds), as well as a few titles running in more than 2K but less than 16K of memory. The latter is an odd category since 16K memory packs were an inexpensive and standard add-on, while anything less probably was done by experimenting hardware geeks. But many of the homebrews are notably better than commercial offerings from the early days, so consider that a reward for enduring some of this month's punishment (don't fret – there's also some entertaining stuff).

Most of the games can be played online using an emulator at www.zx81stuff.org.uk/zx81/indexframes.html. Free emulators and software are also available at numerous sites (www.zx81.nl is as good a starting point as any). As always, the grades below are strictly limited to the category at hand.

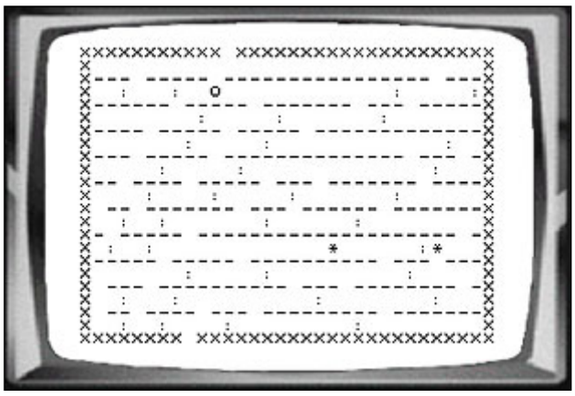
Algebra 1 (B-/F) The four programs on this tape do quadratic equations, simultaneous linear equations, greatest common denominator and prime factors. I haven't even known what most of those are since college so I'm not highly qualified to judge the programs. There is one big problem common to all of the math packages reviewed this month: due to limited memory there's no error trapping. If the user enters something that can't be calculated, the program crashes.



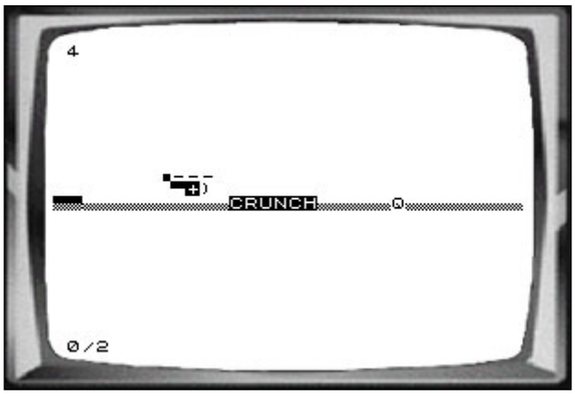
Bumper 7 (C+) A (surprise) seven-game collection that's not really any higher in quality than a gazillon others, but there' s a few relatively unique titles with modest entertainment value. Banco, for instance, is an OK version of the purely luck casino game (draw up to four cards, try to get closer than the computer to a total ending in nine), although I'm not certain the computer follows the exact rules for drawing additional cards. Repeat is a Simon-like game using single-digit numbers, although it's a bit more challenging because it only lists each new number and expects the player to remember the rest of the sequence. The rest is less worthwhile. Ski Slalom is the usual boring scrolling game, keeping track of how many of out of 25 gates you ski through. Paper Stone Knife pits you against the computer's amazing ability to pick a random number from one to three (hitting the computer when you win lacks the satisfaction of doing the same to your sibling/friend). Snowflake is Kaboom in super slo-mo, with one flake dropping at a time at a rate 3-year-olds can keep up with. Patterns is a non-interactive display and Sketch is an uninspired doodlepad.



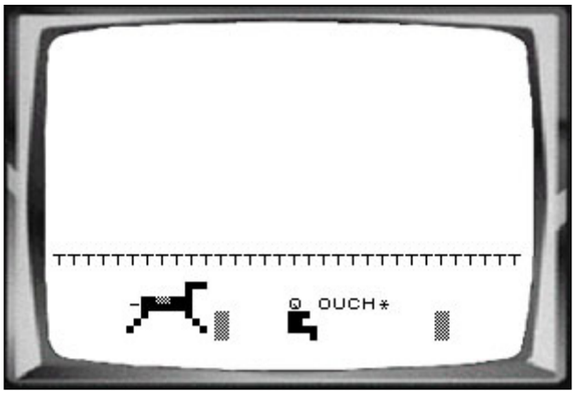
The Challenger 1 (C) Umm...not bad, but where's the rest of my games package? The two "brain games" on this cassette by Timex aren't awful, but it's paltry compared to other collections offering more and better games for presumably the same price. Amazer is the only one offering much long-term value, with the player responsible for guiding a letter "O" from the top to the bottom of a simple maze (horizontal platforms with a few scattered gaps in each). Two "robots" (asterisks) roam the maze and the game ends if the player collides with either one. Their movements seem largely random, but the player's skill is still the main factor in success or failure. There's 10 speed levels and even the slowest is a challenge. The second game is tic-tac-toe which, unless you're more than 4 years old, is an immense waste of time since ties are inevitable. The user interface is nice, but this is a game novices should be programming, not playing.



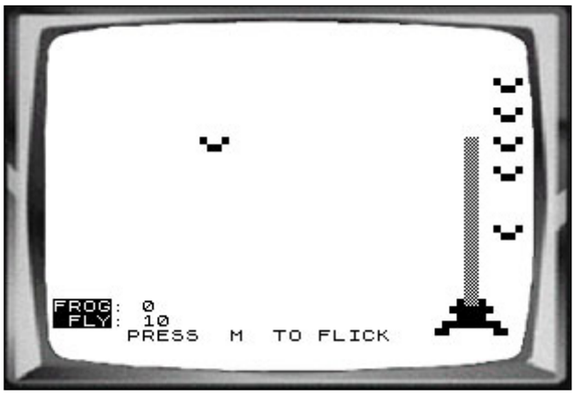
Games Pack 1 (B) This six-pack from Database Software is partially on faith, since there's no instructions and the purpose of some of the games is unclear. But all are written in machine language and are a notable step above nearly every other multipack collection. There are solid breakout and driving games, and a banner message board where you select the "foreground" and "background" characters in addition to the message. One of the better offerings is Air-Sea Rescue, where the player controls a four-direction aircraft rescuing blocks one at a time from the sea and returning them to a base (think a mini Choplifter) while avoiding missiles. There are also variations of Space Invaders and squash, but either the rules aren't completely clear or there are some terrible bugs. Given the quality of the other four programs, I'll assume these have a complexity that requires more than two seconds to absorb.



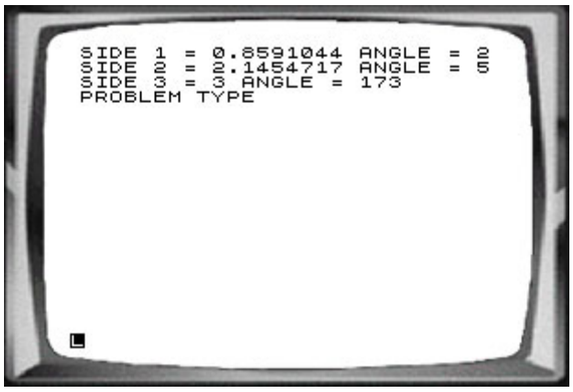
Games Pack 2 (C+) Another good Database six-pack, but not up the quality of its first collection. Still, if I were lucky enough to be familiar with all the compilation tapes out there, I'd might buy these two and be done (I'd also spring for a few individual games of higher quality). Jump Jockey is a graphically impressive (for the memory) exercise in jumping a horse over gates, with the jockey thrown off in amusing fashion if he misses. Stunt Cycle is a jumping game similar to some early coin-ops, requiring some strategy to accelerate fast enough to clear hurdles without crashing due to excess speed. After that things drop off. Invaders is basically a faster version of the game on the first collection, OXO is player-verses-computer tic-tac-toe and the sketch program is every bit as unremarkable as those in other companies' collections.



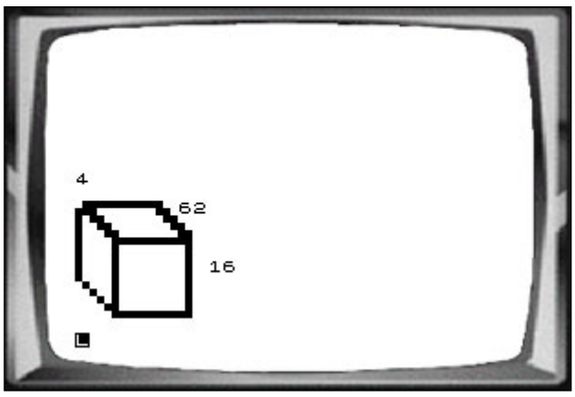
Games Sampler (C-) This mediocre four-game collection offers little not found in various forms on other tapes, although it's mildly passable if it's going to be your one-and-only such thing. Kamikaze Fly is a one-key game where the player is a frog trying to catch flies moving across the screen by lashing out with his tongue. Speed is tolerable for a BASIC program, but the response is less so since there's often a lag that can throw off your timing for subsequent attempts. It also gets very old very fast. Sketchpad is the same doodle tool found on seemingly every collection, although it's more limited because it only draws black and gray boxes. In its favor, the default keys are more logical than the default 5-8 keys and the user can define his/her own. Navajo Rugs is a non-interactive kaleidoscope-type display, making it a nonentity in my book. The final program is a biorhythm plotter, which is a tired concept, but momentarily amusing the way horoscopes are. Not that I'd have wasted minutes waiting for a cassette to load, but with the instant access possible with emulators I'm more tolerant.



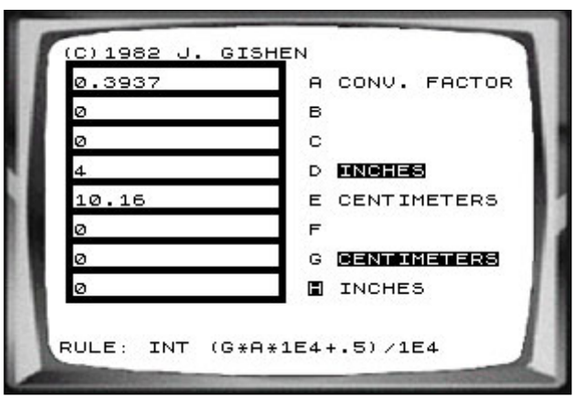
Geometry 1 (B-/D-) Another batch of math misery, although the first program might have some use for RPG types. It calculates the area of polygons, with the user supplying the number of sides and lengths. Other programs compute missing parts of a triangle, analyze vectors, and convert radians to degrees and vice versa. If this sounds like fun, read the instructions for more because I like to, you know, have fun during my leisure time.



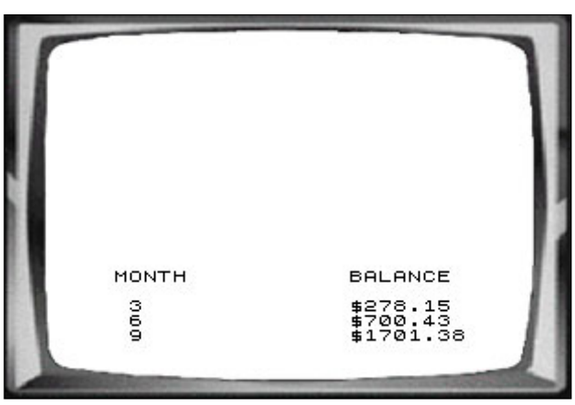
Junior Education 5 (B/D) If you're going to get stuck with an educational tape, this would probably be the pick assuming the age level is right. There's some visually interesting programs mixed in among more pedestrian fare, including a balance program where players have to balance a see-saw using weights. Distance and weight both need to be taken into account and there are three skill levels. Volumes tests your ability to calculate the area of cubes, notably mostly because it draws the cubes and the Xtreme Pixelation is mildly amusing. Temperature displays two barrels of water and asks the player to calculate the temperature if they were combined. Base is test of conversion from base 10 numbers to other bases, which could actually be an invaluable aid for aspiring programmers. The other programs include a math drill and display of averages (mean and median).



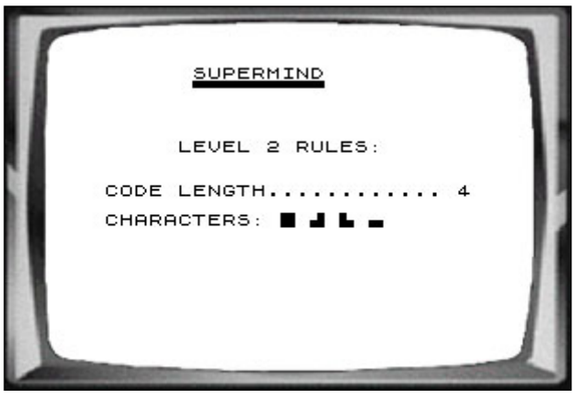
Keyboard Calculator (B+/D-) This is actually an impressive collection of practical miniprograms by Timex, but as with the Geometry tape above its value to gamers is basically zilch. There are three calculators that basically function as eight-cell spreadsheets, with the ability to use complex formulas in each. The first does straight calculations, the other two are metric converters. The main drawback is there's no error trapping – if the user enters something incalculable, such as dividing by zero, the program crashes. The fourth program is a checkbook balancer, one of the most ubiquitous and boring things in the known universe, but it's one of the better types that simply keep a tally (it doesn't keep track of individual checks, budget categories, etc. like any 16K or better program does). The tape fends off a failing grade since it's possible gamers might find some use for the calculator –probably for programming purposes, but I've never ceased to wonder at all the math various RPGs demand.



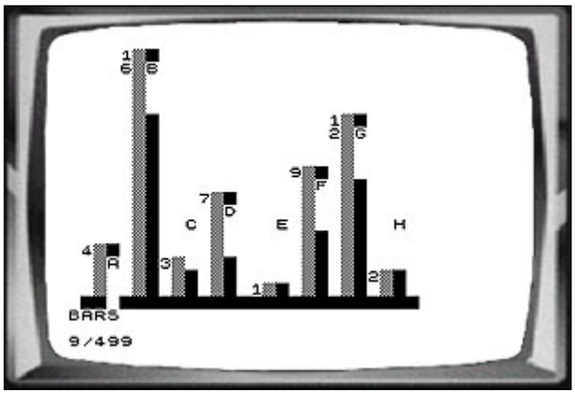
Money Analyzer 1 & 2 (C-/F) Mentioned only because these are from Timex and fit the requisite 2K. Unlike some of the practical programs above, these are mundane versions of programs found in type-in books and magazines everywhere. The first tape calculates savings accumulation based on the amount and frequency of interest payments, the second calculates loan payments according to the same variables. The second tape does depreciation, present worth comparison and rate of return. Ugh. Sadly, I suspect mom and dad bought enough of these for companies to justify charging for such dreck, although as a bedroom programmer I did have fleeting hopes that might be one way I could make some dough with my BASIC-only vocabulary.



Mixed Game Bag 2 (C) This trio of common puzzle games has a high per-program cost compared to similar compilations, but the programs are also a bit more polished than most. Memory Magic is a Simon-like exercise using numbers and/or letters that flash at random locations on the screen (most of the five levels are too fast to be practical). Concentration uncovers two letters at a time on an eight-by-eight grid. The instructions say it can be a two-player game or one against the computer, which is really just the player typing in entries until all the matches are found. In a typical shortcut of mini ZX81 games, the letters are generated randomly and therefore there may be what the program calls unmatched "wildcards" left over. Supermind is a variation of Mastermind, with the computer displaying graphics characters (the number is based on one of five difficulty levels), then erasing and storing them in a random sequence. The player then tries to guess the sequence. The graphics make it more visually appealing than most similar efforts (and a bit trickier for the player to enter from the keyboard) and the multiple skill levels extends the play value if you're into this sort of thing.



Power Pack 1 (B+/D) Oh no...another practical set of programs from Timex. Only this one has some entertainment value, thanks largely to a scrolling banner program that displays messages up to 100 letters at a decent speeds thanks to some machine language coding. A few other game packages have similar efforts in BASIC and they're universally awful. There's also a 10-item calculator where you can enter numbers or formulas in each, making it a mini single-column spreadsheet. There's also a bar graph program and another that plots equations, which make nice eye candy for a few minutes (for some reason I actually would boot programs like this up as a youth and, yes, even threw a couple into school reports). Parents probably didn't buy this instead of math packages for their kids, but maybe they should have.



The Starter (C+/D) If this was Timex's idea of a well-rounded "starter package," the entire marketing department was in serious need of a weekend getting plastered in Vegas. The trio of programs includes a simple version of J.H. Conway's cell-evolving game of Life, with the player allowed to control cell placement and generation cycles. Maths is a quiz, with the player selecting one of the four basic functions and three levels of difficulty. Averages displays bar charts of mean and median from a user-supplied list in what the instructions call an educational program explaining the difference. In short, the tape isn't much good at providing practical or educational value.

Videological Dig

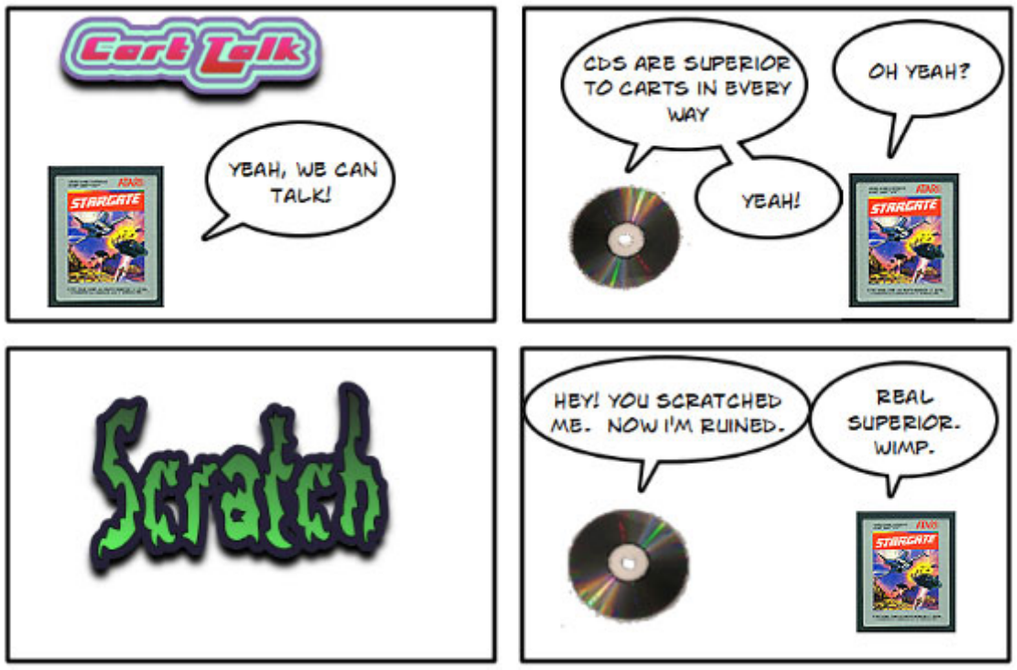
by Bryan Roppolo

In the last 2 issues of this column I have dug up old newsbytes about various big time events in the classic gaming world. However, since this column is not bound to only written articles from the past, I decided to change it up a little bit and bring in a TV commercial. One of the things I always wanted to know was how the original Odyssey was marketed back when it came out in the early '70s. Luckily,

with the help of YouTube I finally was able to watch a commercial from 1973 that Magnavox aired to promote their new game system. I thought it was really neat and wanted to make sure it got air time here in *Retrogaming Times Monthly*. This is probably the first TV commercial ever made/aired for a video game system, so it's pretty high on the landmark list when it comes to classic gaming! Sit back and enjoy this one, since it's probably one of the most highly sought after TV ads in the retrogaming community.

Laughing Pixels

by Tom Zjaba



"Laughing Pixels" is a new section in the magazine done by *Retrogaming Times* founder Tom Zjaba. In addition to being a classic video game buff, Tom is also a comic book enthusiast. Be sure to stop by his Arcade After Dark site to see a plethora of video game related comics which are not published in *Retrogaming Times Monthly.*

Game Over

As usual it's been fun putting together this latest issue of *Retrogaming Times Monthly*, and I've still been busy adding more to the website. As you might have noticed, the RTM archives are now open with a small number of back issues available to view. I really hope to continue to upload the rest of the back issues over the course of the next few months. It might take a while to get everything up and running in that section, but bare with me! I have no idea when I'll be able to get the article index

started, but that's also on my to-do list as well. Hopefully when I see you guys next time there will be even more progress on all this, but until then keep that old Atari, Nintendo, Sony, or whatever classic game system you have running warm!

- Bryan Roppolo, Retrogaming Times Monthly Editor

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