

# Retrogaming Times Monthly

Issue #24 - May 2006

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### *Press Fire to Start*

*by Adam King*

Welcome to another new issue of Retrogaming Times Monthly, and this month we have another heaping helping of retrogaming goodness. We have an interview with a classic game programmer, a new Colecovision game, more games for the Commodore 16, plus Alan takes another look at a game featuring two famous Italian plumbers. So let's not hesitate; hit that START button and let's get going.

### *The Lost Many Faces of . . . Mario Bros.*

*by Alan Hewston*

This month we skip over the third leg of the Mario saga, Donkey Kong 3, as there were no home ports in the classic joystick era. Instead of the Many Faces, this month, we call it the "Lost Faces" of "Mario Bros." as we cover versions that were missed during my first review. Actually, this review will cover all the details for the original Many Faces medal winners from May 2001, in the Retrogaming Times Issue #45. As done in the past, I have revised the previous scores when it seemed off, and especially if I discovered anything new that was good or bad about a version. In RT #45 you'll also find some general background info and details of the systems not repeated here.

Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto continues on with our hero Mario and expands this universe by introducing us to Mario's brother, Luigi. At the same time we are treated to one of the few multi-player cooperative (can also be player cut throat as well) games from that era. Makes me wonder why more companies didn't jump on the multi-player, or at least 2 player bandwagon sooner. Once Gauntlet came along, arcades finally had a way to continuously suck money out of our pockets and keep the same game on-going, other than the obvious "Continue?" option.

**Arcade:** 1983 by Shigeru Miyamoto - Nintendo  
**Home versions** mostly by Atari - most of the programmer credits now found

- Apple II - 1983 by Atarisoft (Jimmy Huey) [not officially released]
- Atari 2600 - 1983 by Atari (Dan Hitchens)

- Atari 7800 - 1988 by Atari
- Atari XE version - 1988 by Atari (Sculptured Software, Inc.)
- Atari 8 bit computer - 1983 by Atari (Bob Merrill)
- Atari 5200 - 1983 by Atari (Eric Knopp)
- Commodore 64 - 1983 by Atarisoft (Juan Alvarado & Greg Tavares)
- Commodore 64 - 1987 by Ocean (Allan Shortt. Music: Jane Lowe. Graphics: Fred Gray)



This is the XE title that several readers knew in advance was the best.

Other systems not covered here:  
 Nintendo NES - 1986 by Nintendo  
 Amstrad CPC - 1987 by Ocean  
 ZX Spectrum - 1987 by Ocean

#### **Rumor Mill: None**

**Sequels:** Unconfirmed and probably NOT an official release, but Thundersoft released only this 1 title. A 1987 release for the C64, called Mario Bros. II, complete with Mario in the hi-res title screen - programmed by Jim van Der Heyden.

The scores for the versions previous covered in RT #45 were:  
 (Gameplay/Addictiveness/Graphics/Sound/Controls)(Total)  
 C64 Atarisoft (9/9/9/9/10)(46) Gold  
 Atari 7800 (10/9/8/8/9)(44) Silver  
 Atari 8 bit (7/7/6/7/20)(37) Bronze  
 Atari 5200 (7/6/6/7/6)(32)  
 Atari 2600 (4/7/5/4/10)(30)

Many screenshots for Mario Brothers can be found at: [www.mobygames.com/game/mario-bros/screenshots](http://www.mobygames.com/game/mario-bros/screenshots)

**Home Version Similarities:** I've only included details on the previous medal winners, plus the lost faces (ie skipping the 2600 & 5200). Shorthand: "C64A" = Atarisoft, "C64O" = Ocean. "800" = Orig Atari 8 bit, "XE" = later Atari XE release.

Except those in <> all home versions have: a title screen; a demo / attract mode <AP2 & C64A>; two player simultaneous joystick action <AP2>; a choice of starting at a higher Phase (wave/round) <800 & C64O>; the Phase number is displayed on-screen <800>; a pause <C64A & C64O> can be toggled at any time; the three different pest types are introduced to the action, one at a time; the beginning of the game and then two more brief intermissions introduce each new pest (ONLY the XE has this); the pests will make a slight noise when they emerge from the pipes and move in that direction until they run into anything and then reverse directions; they will fall down from level to level and if not eliminated will eventually work their way to the bottom pipes and then emerge from that same pipe up top; your only attacks are to punch and upset the platform above you when they are directly (or nearly) above you, or to use the POW; the punch causes that portion of the floor to move and buckle upward <C64A>; the POW simultaneously upsets the entire screen and affects all enemies on a platform; when you hit the POW or punch and upset (flip) and enemy you'll hear a noise <800, C64A & C64O>; the punch or POW make the enemy(ies) flip over or break; the POW also collects all the bonus coins (see below) as well; the POW eliminates all fireballs everywhere <C64O>; use of the POW shakes the entire screen <AP2>; after each type of pests has completed a few phases solo, combinations of pests gradually mix together 2 at a time, until all three are combined; pests must first be flipped and then kicked (when upside down) to be eliminated before they reset; the pest are the Shellcreepers, Sidesteppers (flipped twice), and Fighterflies (flipped when only when landed); kicking the final pest will complete the phase at that instant <800 & C64O>; for each pest kicked, a bonus coin arrives out of a pipe for you to collect (run into them or punch or POW them); you'll hear an effect

and see an on-screen display of the points earned <800 & C64A> when you kick a pest or when you collect the coins; a trivial number of points is earned (not shown) when you flip pests; pests kicked rapidly in succession <C64O> will earn 1X, 2X, 3X . . . the point value (800, 1600, 2400 . . .); you'll also have to avoid up to two on-screen fireballs, one each of two types <C64A & C64O>, which are harmless when you see and hear them forming on the screen edges; these can be on any level, so beware; one fireball type bounces around indefinitely moving to different platform levels, making a noise as it bounces <7800 & C64O>; the other fireball makes only one pass from L/R or R/L across the same platform level; either fireball can be punched from directly below and eliminated <C64O>, or via the POW <C64O>; the next new enemy after the Fighterflies is called Slipice, a moving ice block which can be punched and eliminated, but does not need to be to complete the phase; there is only one on-screen at a time but if left alone, Slipice can transform an entire platform to ice <C64A> making it very slippery; you can hear and see yourself skid on the regular floors and when iced you'll skid even longer; the final nuisance are Icicles that form on the platform ceilings and fall to the bottom of the screen <800?, C64A & C64O? unsure if they show up>; Icicles should be avoided, but if you are greedy, you can punch and eliminate them only while they are forming (which is risky as they are deadly once matured - but you score bonus points if you do get them); in general, contact with any active pests or enemies is deadly; if you die you'll hear it and see yourself transformed and animated into different colors and shapes, then fall to the bottom of the screen and splash into the sewer; your next Mario/Luigi has several seconds to watch the action and decide when to join in by moving or jumping off a small platform near the top of the screen; you can see this platform gradually disappear <800 & C64> at which point you will fall down; you earn an extra life at about 20k; some enemies look differently when bonked once and/or after they have been upset and returned to action; the final enemy on each stages always changes color <800> and speeds up so that you now it is the final one; fortunately there are danger-free bonus phases to break up the action; one occurs just before both the Sidesteppers and Fighterflies are introduced; during phases 8 and 13 and every 5 thereafter, the POW is reset (if needed) and (I think that is when) any icy floors are removed (some versions they are removed each phase); during the bonus phase you have a limited time to collect the 10 stationary bonus coins, while you see and hear an on-screen timer count down; at the completion of this phase, you see and hear the tallying <800 & C64A> of the coins followed by a "Perfect" jingle and bonus points if you collected all 10; as expected, you hear effects when you walk, skid and jump, and hear a jingle at the start and end of a phase, if you die or get a new life; and a jingle when the game is over <AP2 & C64A>.

There are some minor setbacks on some <only these> systems. Lack of "head room" on the top platform <800>. There is a "start delay" <800, 7800 & C64O> where the music starts and you see the screen ready to go, but you cannot move. Meanwhile the pests come out, putting you on the defensive the entire phase/game. There is a "pipe delay" <C64O> where pests go somewhere else (off-screen) and not right back out of the pipes. There are "edge problems" <800, XE & C64O> where either you cannot punch the edge properly, it is inconsistent, or you can never flip the enemies off the edge so that then can be kicked on the same platform as you. An "end of round" delay <800 & C64O> where despite kicking the final pest, the action continues for a couple more seconds - putting you at risk to an unfair death. This is not a bad problem, but you must alter your strategy to compensate. There is too long of a "coin arrival" delay <AP2, 7800 & C64O> where after you kick the pest the bonus coin does not come out right away. There are times when the enemies (other than jumping Fighterflies) do not reverse directions when they bump into each other but can go right past other objects <C64O>. Some versions have inconsistent collision detection problems <AP2, 800, 7800 & XE>. Finally, the 7800 seems to have some variation in how far you jump which will take some getting use to.

### **Have Nots: Atari 8 bit computer - original 800 version (40)**

My first reaction was I scored this a bit too hard the first time, so it does move up some. I never verified if this was officially released (on disk), or was just an unofficial or hacked port of the 5200 version. It has the same 5200 choices to select "#" and "\*" on the title/menu screen. Since only one version can qualify for a medal, this one is thrown out. Gameplay is impressive (8) but comes up

second worst compared to some tough competition. It's missing a few things, such as the final enemy does not change color, there is no on-screen recognition of points scored, there is a "phase starting" delay and "pipe delay" and the "phase ending" delay, and a lack of top row "head room". There's also some inconsistency with punching the edges. Addictiveness is enjoyable (8) with use of the <space bar> for the Pause. There's no choice of starting phase and you cannot reset the game to start over. You may also jump right through the POW. Graphics are the worst of the versions covered here, but still effective (7) with plenty of action and good animation. The color variety is lacking, the numeric displays are poor, there is no on-screen phase number, no starting ledge shown, and not enough detail. Sound is also among the worst, but still effective (7). The music is very shrill or harsh and there are some sound effects repeated. Also seems that some effects get cut out and do not occur when some effects are simultaneous. There is no "game over" jingle or bonus phase points tallied effects. Controls are perfect (10). This title was assigned a part number, but never released on cart.

### **Have Nots: Commodore 64 by Ocean (40)**

My first reaction was this game is hyperactive and out of control. Despite superior musical jingles and sound effects, a bit more detailed and colorful graphics, it falls short of the original Atarisoft release in the other categories. Since only one version per system can qualify for a medal this one gets thrown out. Ocean had re-released games before, but typically they were older titles - those easy to improve upon. I assume that Ocean bought the rights to do ports in Europe (Spectrum and Amstrad CPC) and thus did a C64 re-release. Most players feel that they fell short here. Gameplay is the worst here (7), but still worth while. Most of its drawbacks are minor, but they are numerous: the POW does not affect the fireballs, at times some enemies will go right past another, there's only 1 fireball type, there is no multi-pest bonus, it has all the delay problems "start delay", "coin delay", "pipe delay", and "ending delay". These pretty much make it a different game to play. Addictiveness is fun to play (7) with great two-player action. To start a (one/two) player game press the fire button on joystick port (1/2) [I may have this reversed]. The biggest deductions come from no pause or no start phase options. The game speed is also so darn fast and there's an overkill on the slippery floor factor when Mario/Luigi stops or changes direction. Both of these make it much harder to play. Graphics are fantastic (9), second only to the XE. There is a great hi-res title screen, loads of color, multi-color, good backgrounds, variety, details and animation. If they could add in 2 simultaneous fireballs and the intermissions, then I'd have scored the graphics a (10). Sound is pleasant (8) and the music and jingles are fantastic. But compared to the XE, things are missing - punching enemies, sound effects during the demo, fireballs bouncing & earning a bonus life. Controls score a (9) being awkwardly programmed in an analog mode. Instead of moving at full speed whenever you move, you have varying speeds and so when changing directions or wanting to stop, you may not stop, but instead still have some slow movement that you must then tap the stick the other way to stop. Too much time and risk spent adjusting and correcting for miss-timed jumps. I doubt that I could get significantly better adapting to this analog-like scheme and on a bad day I'd score this an (8).

### **Have Nots: Apple II (42)**



My first reaction was disappointed to learn that Atari cancelled this release just as it was ready to go. I did not disqualify this title as it was intended to be the official release and being on disk, it is just as easy to locate and play today as any other title. Jimmy Huey read the RT #45 and gave me feedback, telling me that he was the original AP][ programmer. Jimmy noted (with slight editing) that "when Jack Tramiel bought out Atari, they "cancelled" all the titles... which meant we didn't get paid. According to Atari, the project was cancelled and never released. Before it was cancelled, the QA department reported a giant list of bugs... which sorta seemed bogus... because I thought

the game was fairly bug-free. Perhaps done to justify canceling the title. Not all the copies you see online are the same. Later versions supported wrap-around graphics - earlier versions did not." Hard to believe as this is easily one of the best ever arcade ports on the Apple II, and only misses a medal due to the late XE release in 1988. Even if you have not played this version, many of you know the



quality of work that Jimmy produced on multiple platforms before, and after 1983. He was one of the best of the era and this game deserved to have been released. We cannot pay him what Atari cheated him of, but we can acknowledge his excellent work. Gameplay is the best (10) with everything in place and well done, except that you have to accept the slower playing speed. This was probably done due to the Apple 2 limitations (I'll have to verify with Jimmy) thus allowing the later phases do not seem slowed down when up to 11 enemies can be a threat. Addictiveness is fantastic (9). I gave this one a huge bonus in scoring as one can choose to start a game from any one of the first 24 phases of play. Awesome! But I did deduct a bit for the slow gameplay and collision detection problems. The pause is the usual . Graphics are quality (8) with good multi-colored enemies and the Bros. The details, backgrounds, and animation are pretty good. The color variety is limited, not much better than the 800. Sound is effective (7) with nice music but reduced a bit due to the internal speakers. Missing are the "game over" effects and the extras such as demo, intermissions etc. Controls allow two-player simultaneous action but one must use the keyboard. Fortunately, you can decide which Bros. Mario or Luigi to play via keyboard. Due to the keyboard I scored this an (8), but for one player the analog stick is pretty good and would score higher (9). This title can only found on a bootleg disk, or via emulation.



#### **Bronze Medal: Commodore 64 Atarisoft (44)**

My first reaction was that I was not so thorough my first time around and maybe gave this one too much credit - but things are corrected now. Gameplay is great (9) but was missing Slipice, 2 types of fireballs, the on-screen display of points, and the ledge disappearing. Addictiveness is wonderful (9). Despite no pause, there is a choice of 5 starting phases, up through starting at phase #16. Both C64 ports seemed to be free of edge problems or collision detection inconsistencies. Graphics are fantastic (9) with nice details, color, variety, animation, backgrounds and multi-color. The floors do not

buckle upwards when punching, but otherwise there is plenty of action and everything looks very nice. Sound is exciting (7), but not as good as I rated it previously - missing effects for punching the enemies & "game over". There are also no extras such as title/menu music, demo sounds, intermissions, and tallying bonus points. Controls are perfect (10). Found only on disk/cassette. Visit programmer Greg Tavares' site is at: [www.greggman.com](http://www.greggman.com)



#### **Silver Medal: Atari 7800 (45)**

My first reaction was that I previously penalized the graphics too much for being squished. The Graphics are fantastic (9) pretty much as good as the C64, but a little squished and a little less color variety. The Gameplay is excellent (10), with plenty of great strategy and action going on in this arcade port. Aside from minor differences due to a "start delay" and "coin delay" everything else is perfect. Addictiveness is wonderful (9) with a pause <Pause> and a demo. There are 3 choices of starting phase but this only gets you to phase 6 - why bother? The only drawbacks are minor collision detection

problems. Sound is very nice (8) with better music than most albeit a bit odd sounding. Most noticeably missing are effects for Fireballs arriving and then bouncing. Controls are nearly perfect (9) but there is something a foot here as not every jump is the same - your results vary too much. If I did score controls a 10, it would still only win the silver, so I will not worry about it much. OK let's say 9.5.

#### **Gold Medal: Atari XE release (48)**

My first reaction was this was anticipated by our readers - who knew that once I played this cart version I will readily give it the gold medal. The Gameplay is awesome (10). The only fault I could find was some edge problems. Addictiveness is superb (9) with a full demo, all the intermissions (how to play), plus 4 choices of starting the game - up to phase 9. The pause <Select> does not earn a full bonus point as this is a very poor choice - hitting any of the buttons just next to it will end your game :- ( Graphics are excellent (10) - the best with great multi-color, details, color variety, animations,



backgrounds, action & speed, and extras. I usually reserve a 10 for those with all of the above plus a little more on-screen action. But all the trimmings are here - the demo, intermissions & bonus scoring. Sound is first class (9) with all the music well-done and every effect in place. Controls are perfect (10). Released via cartridge.

### **Acknowledgements, Updates and Errata from last month.**

Thanks again to classic programmer Jimmy Huey who helped to supply his name as the Apple II programmer and to name a few others who were the Mario Bros programmers for Atarisoft. Jimmy also gave me some other feedback, and the link to Greg Tavares' web site. I'm still hopeful that Jimmy will let me interview him via email some day, to share more of his background and programming history with you.

Thanks for several replies to assist me in collecting more of the Faces that are missing from my collection. I was on vacation right after getting this done, so my time was very short and I apologize if I did not interact much with those who offered some help. I will probably be able to trade for or buy a couple more classic faces that I need, plus secure most of my needed Atari 8 bit games on disk. With your help and encouragement, I also had some success with finding a few more C64 games online and converting them to disk via the 1541 cable. And still others had some suggestions or corrections for what versions existed out there. Your help appreciated.

Come back hopefully next month: I've not decided if I should follow my 3+ year old (slightly shifted) game plan that says Vanguard (Atari 2600, 5200 & 8 Bit) , or since it will be the end of May, cover a driving/racing game (in honor of the Indy 500), as I've often done and flag down "Up & Down". Contact Alan at: [Hewston95@NOSPAMstratos.net](mailto:Hewston95@NOSPAMstratos.net) or visit the Many Faces of site: <http://my.stratos.net/~hewston95/RT/ManyFacesHome.htm>.

## **ColecoNation**

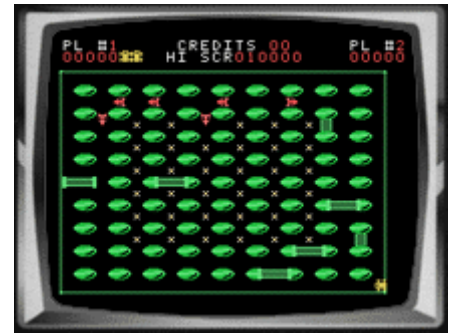
by [Nathan Kozlowski](#)

### **Spectar review**

Back when you were a kid, do you remember looking through the ColecoVision game catalog and wondering when all those great arcade games were going to come out? We had never heard of many of these games, but we were disappointed just the same when many of those listed never made it to the stores. Well, over twenty-three years have gone by and now one of those lost classics has been finally realized for the ColecoVision. Spectar, the 1980 Exidy arcade game, has recently been completed by Scott Huggins and published by AtariAge.

In this latest ColecoVision challenge, you control a Wummel (not a three-armed Muppet, but actually a combat vehicle) as it races through the city of the Spectars. Why, do you ask, must you use a Wummel as you travel through this emerald city? Well, it seems that the streets are full of Ramships that have nothing better to do then crash right into you. Plus, if you stick around long enough, a Spectar appears whose sole goal in life is to hunt you down and destroy you. Supposedly the Spectarians act this way because deep down they're evil, but it's more likely due to you stealing their energy stars (which are required to complete a level).

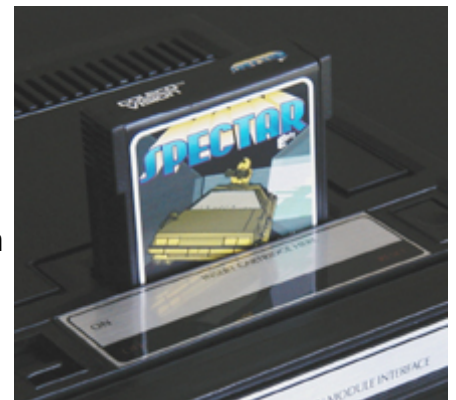
Surviving in Spectar is a difficult task, but the unique gameplay and levels makes this game enjoyable and very addictive. It takes a bit to get the hang of how your Wummel moves, but it won't take long to be an expert with the controls. While you use a joystick in Spectar, you could almost swear that it was a roller ball that you were using. You move by pushing the controller in the desired direction and the longer you hold that direction the more your speed increases. The speed variations that you experience as you go straight, turn, and reverse adds a level of strategy that makes Spectar unique among the other maze games out there.



The game features eight different levels, each with unique looking Ramships and barriers. Additional barriers are randomly added at the start of each level that break up the regular grid and create dead ends, essentially making no two mazes the same. Graphics are brilliant throughout the game with the Ramship variations and explosions being the two most noteworthy examples. I found that every time I plugged the cartridge in, it was difficult to turn it off regardless of how many games I had played. One feature, a head-to-head option, would have been an amazing addition to the game. If a sequel is ever made, allowing cooperative or head-to-head play (like in Omega Race) should be a number one priority.

While your adversaries will constantly torment you, you can't help but admire their unique personalities. The Ramships seem to be standard cannon fodder, but the more you shoot, the faster and smarter they get. You often need to make split decisions about whether you should blast them or deftly avoid them, because either way you'll face a different opponent. The Spectar's behavior is just as interesting. The moment that a Spectar appears in the maze, its focus is on shooting or ramming you. It's almost humorous to watch the little green guy frantically move across the screen, bumping into walls or Ramships, and trying to blast through them to get to you. Enemies that can act and react makes this game truly special.

Spectar's one weak point lies hidden within the programming. There are some minor bugs within the game (most have no effect on the play), but there is one that sometimes makes for an unexpected death. Warp zones announce the entrance of Ramship and Spectars. There are times though when the warp zones aren't visually present, but the enemies still appear. When this occurs, it is impossible to know where they will enter the maze and if they'll appear right next to you. It's worth noting that the bug happens rare enough to ever significantly influence the outcome and is no reason to avoid purchasing this well-designed game.



If you're a fan of maze games then you'll definitely want to pick this one up. It has all the positives of a Pac-Man or Lady Bug, plus it allows you to stop running from your pursuers and give them a face full of missile. Scott Huggins has outdone himself with another accurate translation of a forgotten arcade classic and has finally brought Spectar to the game libraries of ColecoVision fans everywhere.

Be sure to check out <http://www.coleconation.com/> for more great ColecoVision articles including an interview with Dave Johnson, Director of Video Graphics at Coleco from 1982 to 1985.

## Commodore Corner

by [Brett Brunell](#)

As promised, I'm back to review another Commodore 64 classic! As I stated last month, I will be reviewing the sequel to last month's review, Jumpman. The game of course, is Jumpman Junior.

## Jumpman Junior (copyright © 1984 Epyx)

### \*\*\* DESCRIPTION \*\*\*

Jumpman Junior involves you running around the screen filled with girders, ladders, and ropes attempting to defuse various bombs. Enemies range from bullets, clones, dragons, robots, vampire bats, falling bombs, and UFOs. Scattered throughout various levels are secret traps that are triggered by grabbing various bombs. When all of the bombs have been successfully "defused," you advance to the next level. The game consists of 12 levels that were, in my opinion, not as well thought out as its predecessor but still way above the average for typical Commodore 64 games.

### \*\*\* SCORING \*\*\*

**Misc: 2/10** - Fortunately, this game comes on a cartridge, so there is no load time. Unfortunately, there are numerous bugs that take a lot away from this game. For example, in levels 2 and 4, the level can become impossible to finish if you get killed at the wrong time. Another bug occurs when the game ends and your name is entered in the high score list. After you have entered your name, the game will sit there frozen up forever, forcing you to reset with the run/stop and restore keys. This will get you back to the title screen so you can play another game but the high score list has now been wiped. Very annoying indeed!

**Graphics: 7/10** - The graphics are limited because of the Atari version that this game is based off of. They're still nothing to shake a stick at though.

**Sound: 8/10** - The very limited music and sound effects are a charming addition to the game. You get one of four random tunes after finishing a level and a funeral march if you lose one of your lives.

**Playability: 5/10** - Playability is where this game shines. Since this game has such different levels as compared to Jumpman, each level requires a new skill for you to master to get past it. I would definitely recommend playing this game with an old Atari 2600 joystick for best results. The bugs that make this game unplayable to a newbie, drop this score severely though.

**Originality: 8/10** - I won't give this a 10 since it is basically a sequel and based off an idea already brought to us by the original Jumpman.

**Overall: 30/50** - The bugs and sub par graphics really kill the score of this game. It's hard to believe Randy Glover programmed this. Did they even have people test this game before it shipped?

### \*\*\* MISCELLANEOUS \*\*\*

- Jumpman Junior is the "sequel" to the wildly popular Jumpman. It was also programmed by Randy Glover.
- The 1983 original Atari computer version this cartridge is based on had 15 levels as compared to the Commodore's 12 levels.
- There was yet another bug when you try to play the game with more than one player. In this mode, the game is supposed to switch to the next player whenever a level is finished. Unfortunately, when player 1 finished the first level and it was player 2's turn, the game crashed completely, making 2-4 player games completely impossible.
- The upcoming "Commodore 64: 30 Games in One Joystick" by Mammoth will include Jumpman Junior!
- The Jumpman Lounge (<http://www.classicgaming.com/jlounge>) is the place to go for all things Jumpman!

Brett Burnell is a programmer/analyst for Donegal Insurance in Marietta, Pennsylvania. In his free time he can be seen programming video games, being a referee for Twin Galaxies, going to Retrogaming



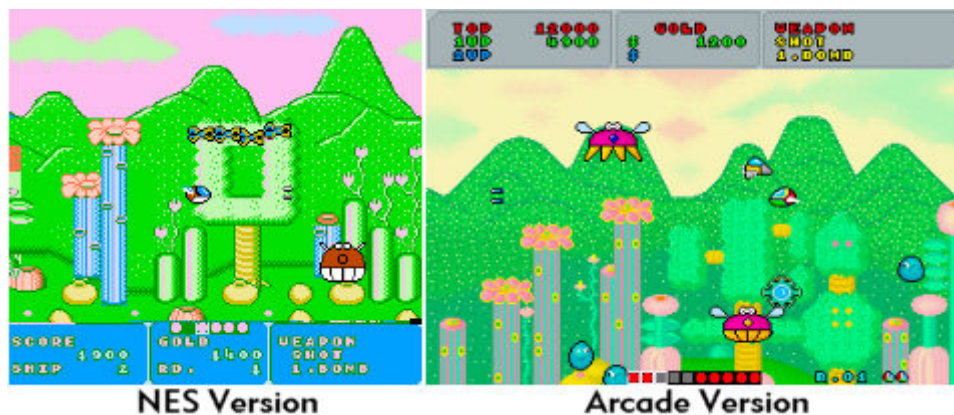
shows, or just playing with his kids. He can be reached at [b2ksolutions@verizon.net](mailto:b2ksolutions@verizon.net).

## The Titles of Tengen - Fantasy Zone

by [David Lundin, Jr.](#)

Sometimes games come along that take a well known genre and go an entirely different way with it. Such is the case with Fantasy Zone, flapping into arcades in 1986. While shooting games had existed for years and were an early staple of video gaming as a whole, Fantasy Zone bucked the traditional high tech laser-equipped starship role the player was usually relegated to. Instead you control Opa-opa, an egg-shaped living spaceship that uses wings for propulsion and can sprout legs to walk along the ground. As Opa-opa it's up to you to rid the Fantasy Zone of an army of alien creatures by first wiping out an armada of ships that constantly generate enemies. Although there are many enemies on each stage, only the larger enemy creating ships must be destroyed which leads to a boss battle. Defeat the boss and it all begins again except on a more exotic and more heavily enemy infested world.

When it comes to Fantasy Zone on home consoles there were more than a couple versions. In 1986 the first home port of Fantasy Zone appeared on Sega's home console of the era, the Master System. The Master System version was, without a doubt, the closest to the arcade experience on an 8 bit console. It wasn't perfect, but the control was spot on and the colors were bright and vibrant just as in the arcade. A year later Sunsoft released their port of Fantasy Zone on the Japanese counterpart to the NES, the Famicom. While very much playable, the Famicom version looked nowhere as nice as the Master System port from a year earlier. One year after that a beautiful version Fantasy Zone appeared on the PC Engine, known as the TurboGrafx-16 in North America, and made good use of the enhanced 16 bit graphics technology to create a solid port. Well one year later, in 1989, Tengen took up the task of creating an NES alternative to the Master System release of three years earlier. Instead of simply porting the Famicom version Sunsoft created in 1987 onto the NES, they would program their own port with decidedly mixed results.



What the gaming world was then left with is the lackluster NES version of Fantasy Zone. While the entire game is still there, it stands as an empty shell of the cutesy and surreal frenzy that made the arcade game such a blast to play. To begin with, the graphics are downright disappointing, drab washed out colors replace the psychedelic backdrops of the arcade. The shop balloons are missing their strings and the Parts Shop menu doesn't scroll left and right, instead it simply jumps from one screen of six items to the next. Boss encounters take place on separate, plain, single color backgrounds instead of scrolling along the current stage as in the arcade. There is a healthy amount of flicker but on most stages it remains at an acceptable level and doesn't hurt the gameplay.

While the music sounds nice and is the same as what is heard in the arcade, it is in a constant battle with the sound effects. Things get to the point where the background music is so garbled by the sounds of firing and explosions that the whole audio package turns into a mess of bleeps and bloops.

Thankfully the control is still good with the directional pad controlling movement, B for firing and A for dropping bombs. Yet the scrolling feels lazy compared to the arcade version which can sometimes lead to cheap deaths. Insult is added to injury in that the paths the enemies follow are nowhere near how they were in the arcade, so any arcade experience is worthless. Additionally there simply aren't all the enemies that are seen in the arcade version. It's almost as if the NES port is "Fantasy Zone Light." To round things out, two player support was removed which makes no sense since players would take turns anyway.

Obviously Tengen set out to make a nice port of an arcade game that gained a ton of popularity on the Master System. Not a rush job by any means but it simply cannot compare to the arcade original or the Master System offering. If Tengen was looking to make a quick buck they most certainly would have attempted a localization of the Famicom version but at the end of the day neither of them do the original justice. While Sunsoft would later on do right by the Famicom with a very nice version of Fantasy Zone II, NES owners were left out in the cold. Once again another popular Sega game was left without a solid conversion on the NES. This is also one of the games that fell victim to terrible Tengen cover art which I'm sure didn't help sales any.

Be sure to check back next month for the final installment of The Titles of Tengen - it'll be a true classic, Gauntlet.

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

### ***Interview with Programmer Christian Oberth - part 2: The classic programming years***

***by Alan Hewston***

Welcome back to part two of our interview where Chris tells about getting his start as a classic video game programmer.

Before we get going, below is a link to an interview from about 5 years ago - mostly focusing on the time that Chris spent programming arcade games for Stern. So as to not repeat what has been published before, we'll skip over much of that time period, but be sure to read it some time, I think that you'll enjoy it.

Interview from Derek's Basement Arcade: <http://thelitttons.net/homearcade/oberth.htm>

**RTM: Tell us about your earliest computer and video game experiences, what was the first computer that you used at home, school, work. And tell us about programming for it.**

**Chris:** My first computer experiences were with the 'Plato' networked computer system that linked many colleges back in the early 70's. I had been going to Wright junior college and Devry at the time. The multi-player games that were on that system were truly ahead of their time and a great inspiration to me. I was 'hooked' on computers and had to get one at home. After evaluating several systems, I decided on the Apple II because of its gaming orientation, color graphics, sound, controllers etc. I proceeded to teach myself assembly language and Basic programming.

**RTM: So when did you first want to be a computer programmer, or video game designer?**

**Chris:** Around 1974-75. My interest in computers was piqued by an amazing book called Computer Lib/Dream Machines by T. H. Nelson.

**RTM: Were you mostly self-taught, or from magazines or books, and did you learn much from any computer classes?**

**Chris:** Completely self taught and via magazines like Creative Computing. I took one computing

class, but dropped it, it was all about punch cards and other ancient stuff. There weren't any classes about microprocessors yet.

**RTM: What kind of fun things did you do on the Apple ][ back then? Did you play a lot of games? Were you more interested in making other people's game better or writing your own games and sharing them with friends?**

**Chris:** I had a blast playing with the Apple ][, typing in games from Creative Computing magazines, and making my own games using Basic and assembly language.

**RTM: What age were you when you first wrote/published a computer/video game for any income and for whom?**

**Chris:** About 24, self published out of my living room. At the time I was working in the shipping department of a musical instrument repair company. I sold my games to local computer stores, on audio tape cassettes in plastic sandwich bags, 'real classy'.

**RTM: How did you wind up working for Programma? And What can you tell us about working for this company? and then the transition to Elektrik Keyboard?**

**Chris:** One day I got a call from Dave Gordon, and drove out to L.A. to meet with them. They were my publishers, first as Programma, then Datamost. The Elektrik Keyboard was one of the musical instrument dealers that our repair shop serviced. I just happened to run into the owner walking out of CES with an Apple ][ under his arm. Apparently he wanted to add computers (midi music) to his store. When I told him I owned one and knew how to program it, he hired me on the spot.

**RTM: Tell us then how you made yet another minor career change - to work on hand-held games and toys at Milton Bradley et al?**

**Chris:** One day while working at the Elektrik Keyboard a guy came in and ordered several Apple ]['s. He was using them to prototype hand held games and toys at Marvin Glass. Turns out, he was the programmer for Milton Bradley's Simon game. I was offered a job there and I jumped at the opportunity. This was the most creative bunch of people I have ever had the pleasure of working with.

**RTM: That sounds like a great job, but then you found one that would appear to us to be even more fun. You landed a job working on arcade games for Stern, which must have been a blast. Can you tell us about these exciting times, especially as it took place in the peak growth years of the industry?**

**Chris:** Well, you summed it up just right, 'a blast', 'exciting times'. Stern allowed us unprecedented creative freedom, in our designs. Several of the titles that I worked on are covered in my previous interview with Derek's Basement Arcade.

**RTM: Alas, a time came where you had to leave Stern and the arcade industry, but we assume that you were happy to return to the Apple ][?**

**Chris:** The arcades were hitting the skids, and I wanted to get back into the home market. Coding games on home computers was my roots.

**RTM: This then brings us to working for Datamost and writing Ardy the Aardvark for the Apple ][. Back in Retrogaming Times issue #68, we covered the Many Faces of "Oil's Well" (one of my all-time favorites) and pondered if there was some connection between "Oil's Well", "Anteater" and "Ardy the Aardvark". Sure enough, I realized the connection was you, writing the arcade game, Anteater and then the Apple ][ Ardy. You read my article and promised to tell me more some day, which then turned into this interview session.**

**Let's recap. Was the original Anteater concept yours, or someone else who worked at Stern?**

**Chris:** The original Anteater concept was mine.

**RTM:** Both Oil's Well and Ardy were released in 1983. Offline you mentioned that the two were not related, so it was probably just a coincidence that they came out around the same time. When did you first notice Oil's Well, and had you completed Ardy by then?

**Chris:** I think I completed Ardy on the Apple ][ before I saw Oil's Well, but I'm not certain. Of course Anteater was the first and all the rest were clones.

**RTM:** Jay Ford wrote the C64 port of Ardy for Datamost in 1983, and of course they credited you as the creator. Did you know Jay? Would you have liked to code the C64 port? Any reason that you did not?

**Chris:** I would have liked to have done the C64 port but was too busy at the time. I didn't know Jay, but was quite satisfied with his take on Ardy.

**RTM:** When porting/creating Ardy on the Apple ][ from the original Anteater at the arcade, did you make many changes? Anything interesting added, and what if anything was sacrificed?

**Chris:** No, not much was added or changed and only graphics and sound suffered.

**RTM:** Would you like to or have you already made Anteater/Ardy for the current computers or portable game gadgets?

**Chris:** Yes, there is an unpublished cellphone version in existence.

**RTM:** Let's continue on as your career made yet another side step, and in 1984 you worked on 2 Colecovision titles "One on One" and "Boulderdash". When did you learn to program on the Colecovision, or was there some conversion tool, or help by someone else on the team? If not, how similar was the Colecovision to your work on past systems?

**Chris:** The Colecovision used the same Z-80 microprocessor, used in the arcade machines at Stern, so it was not very different.

**RTM:** Which one came first? Boulderdash, or One on One? I ask that because in RT#75 I trashed the CV port of One-on-One finding it really lacking in all the extras that made it fun on other systems? It seemed like this one was rushed out the door by Micro Lab. What gives? Or was I being to harsh in my review?

**Chris:** I don't rightly recall. But you're right. One On One was the lesser of the two.

**RTM:** Great. You took my criticism well, but now for some praise. I felt that the CV port of Boulderdash was really well done (Many Faces of Boulderdash in RT#72) and it easily won the Gold medal. Not only that, but at that time, out of 600 classic games that I had reviewed, I ranked it second only to "Pitfall 2". Can you recall what made this port so good? Did you have a lot more time to code it and play test it, or possibly a great supporting team around you?

**Chris:** Yes, we had more time. And access to the original source code, which was very helpful.

**RTM:** What was it like to work at Microlab?

**Chris:** Very interesting and fun. They also had a lot of educational/business software that I got involved in.



**RTM:** You then told us last time how your next task was that of writing "Winter Games" on the Apple II. This makes a good stopping point for us for this month. We hope that you are recalling some fun times and that you'll come back next month to continue reminiscing your career and cover your only NES title. Plus, we'd like to keep going and visit your second go around programming for the arcades, then finish up with what you do today, and what you might be doing in the future.

**Chris:** Sure. There's still more to tell and I'm having fun.

Come back in the next month or two when we wrap up our interview and following Chris' career. We'll find out a little about his family and list all of his classic game credits there as well. Don't forget that you are welcome to contact this classic video game programmer Chris Oberth in person at: **coberth@hotmail.com**. Make sure to check out one of his recent shareware games called Swopple at: <http://www.swopple.com/>. As usual, feel free to forward your questions or comment to Alan and the RTM.

## ***Nintendo Realm - Late April to Late June 1985***

***by Scott Jacobi***

With the Famicom picking up more success, more third party companies want a slice of the action, and that was Hiroshi Yamauchi's plan from the start. He never intended to be anything like Atari, trying to be the majority content producer for their own console and squeeze other developers out of the market. On the contrary, once the system was successful, he envisioned Nintendo being the leader of quality, not quantity, a goal that Nintendo succeeded at admirably.

This month's set of reviews features the first two contributions from video game power house Konami which, along with Namco and Capcom, was one of the most prolific and successful third party companies that graced the Famicom/NES platform. But Konami, along with another company making their Famicom debut, db-Soft, did not start out by bringing original content to the system. Instead they ported their games from another extremely successful platform in Japan, the MSX computer. The MSX was to Japan what the Commodore 64 was to the US; a widely supported 8-bit home computing device that was overflowing with quality games to choose from. The Famicom was comparable in power to MSX2, so it seemed like a good choice to release conversions of popular MSX titles for. In fact, the Famicom owes a great deal of its early catalog to its MSX predecessor. As the Famicom began to overshadow the MSX in popularity, those conversions began to go the other way (for example, many popular RPGs like Dragon Warrior I and II as well as Final Fantasy saw later releases for the MSX.)

### **Yie Ar Kung-Fu, released by Konami on April 22, 1985**

Many people consider Yie Ar Kung-Fu to be the grandfather of Street Fighter II, and rightfully so. While the original arcade version featured the player battling against 11 distinct fighting personalities against a variety of international backdrops, the Famicom version, like the MSX version is was ported from, only features 5 fighters in a static in-door combat arena. The controls on the Famicom version are substantially improved by the presence of two buttons, which represent punching and kicking, as opposed to the MSX's one button which resulted in somewhat confusing controls (up and to the right made the player perform a high kick instead of jumping forward unless punch was held down at the same time.) Still, you have fewer moves to choose from when compared to the arcade version. The game play is solid, if a little repetitive (you start over with a more difficult version of the first opponent when you beat the fifth) and though not nearly an indication of what amazing work Konami would later produce for the system, a worthy first entry. A sequel to the game was released on the MSX that featured an obstacle course of midget fighters before the main fighter could be challenged, but does not appear to have been released for the Famicom.

### **Antarctic Adventure, released by Konami on April 22, 1985**

This game, like Yie Ar Kung-Fu, was a port over from the MSX computer system. Unlike Yie Ar, however, it's not nearly as exciting a game. You are, essentially, a penguin on speed tour around Antarctica to stations sponsored inexplicably by other nations. By pushing forward, you speed your penguin along the ice, while you weave back and forth trying to avoid holes in the ice, and imposing seals. At first glance, you may think that the flags are like slalom flags that need to be properly steered around, and the objects popping out of the holes are to be avoided. The truth is, the flags and the objects hopping out, which happen to be fish, are meant to be collected by you. The only power up to be found is the flashing flag which, when picked up, adds a propeller to the penguin's head (sans hat) and it can be activated by double tapping jump, extending the penguin's jump just once. The game is not exceptionally difficult and can be beaten with ease even at the highest level selection. While the game has no sequel, the penguin went on to become somewhat of an unofficial mascot for Konami, appearing in a few other Konami games, most notably Konami's own parody of its successful shooter series Gradius, known as Parodius, where the penguin appears as one of the selectable "ships."



Yie Ar Kung Fu



Antarctic Adventure

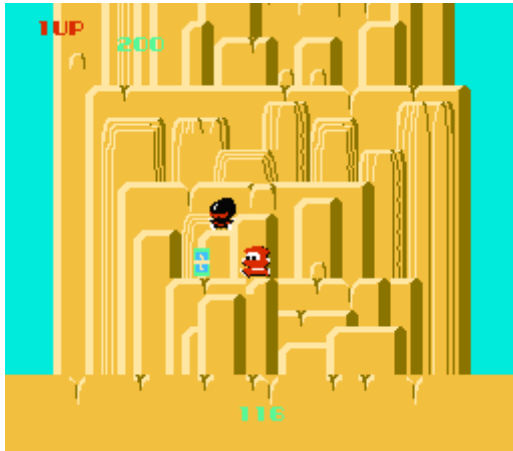
### **Ninja Kun, released by Jaleco on May 10, 1985**

Ninja Kun is the first release by Jaleco that I particularly enjoy. Ported fairly accurately from the arcade, it's a simple game with cute graphics of ninjas and other Japanese folklore. The object of the game is to eliminate all of the enemies in the vertically scrolling stage with your throwing stars before they eliminate you. You can jump to any ledge on the mountain, or building in every third stage, and you can drop down to a lower level as well. Jumping on an enemy's head will not eliminate him but it will stun him for a few moments, but beware as the same is true for you which can leave you vulnerable to attack so be careful. There is usually one enemy in the stage that is stronger than all the others, and it becomes the dominant enemy after three stages have passed. Killing each enemy leaves a scroll behind that can be collected for bonus points. Occasionally, an orb will drop from the sky. After collecting three of them, you will be presented with an orb collecting bonus stage. Though simple like most early NES games, I don't get tired of this one very easily, so I highly recommend trying it out. (Under MAME, it is known as Ninjakun Majou no Bouken, released in 1984 by UPL)

### **Chack 'n Pop, released by Taito on May 24, 1985**

Chack 'n Pop was another arcade port by Taito, and while it may be unfamiliar to many of you, all you Bubble Bobble fans should be aware that this game was the prequel of sorts to one of Taito's most legendary series of games. Chack 'n Pop, unfortunately, was not quite up to the same level of quality. The concept isn't bad, in fact it's quite novel, but the execution makes for a very difficult and somewhat frustrating game. You begin in the upper left corner of every room, and your goal is to escape through the upper right corner. Before you can do so, you must collect the hearts that are caged up throughout the level. Your character can run along any ground, or it can jump up and run along the ceiling if it is within reach. You can deploy bombs in either the left or right direction, with no more than two bombs on the screen at a time. In order to free the hearts, you must bomb the cages.

Determined to stop you are the recognizable purple "Monstas" from Bubble Bobble, which hatch from eggs attached to the ceiling. You can bomb the eggs in order to get a head start on removing them, but once they hatch, they will roam the open space hunt you down haphazardly. Your only defense against them are your bombs, but since they always fall down, and their explosion radius is fairly small (which you are also susceptible to), it leaves you vulnerable from above. If that weren't enough, you have until the little wizard at the top of the screen pushes the crystal all the way to the right to make your escape. I can only get so far in the game before I am forced to quit out of frustration, and it appears that this has nothing to do with the porting process because the arcade game is equally difficult to play through. A noteworthy game in terms of the game (and series) that it spawned afterwards, but it plays more like a failed experiment to me.



Ninja Kun



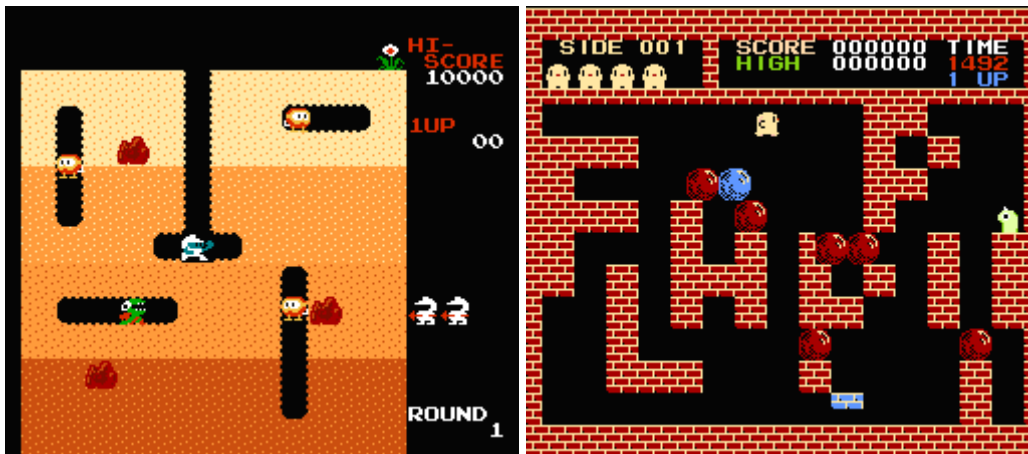
Chack 'N Pop

### **Dig Dug, released by Namco on June 4, 1985**

Even though Dig Dug never achieved the same notoriety of his older arcade brother Pac-Man, Dig Dug held a special place in my heart with his continuous struggle against dragons and goggle wearing tomatoes. Dig Dug was the next stop along the Namco arcade to Famicom port train, and like Namco's previous efforts, the port is achieved admirably. About the only thing missing (somewhat inexplicably to me) is the blue sky above the dirt. I suppose you could pretend that the Famicom version of the game only takes place at night. The size of the screen is a small issue since there is less room to actually move around in, which means you in closer proximity to your enemies most of the time. And the enemies seem less shy about "ghosting" our of their enclosures than they are in the arcade game. But besides that, this port is so accurate that there's really nothing more remarkable to say about it.

### **Flappy, released by dB-Soft on June 14, 1985**

If you actually bother to load this game up, you'll probably be surprised by the primitive standards of this game when taking the Famicom's capabilities in to consideration. The clunky graphics and animation does not appear to be reminiscent of an original Famicom game. There are a handful of games that appear like this, and whenever you stumble upon them, you can be sure that they are port overs from older computer systems like the MSX. Flappy is a puzzle game that requires the player to use a little creature to manipulate boulders so that the blue stone ends up on the blue platform. Gravity is always in effect, and there are enemies scattered about some levels forcing you to squash them with rocks or avoid them entirely. One aspect of the game play that may allude new players is that your creature can crush boulders by pushing down on them in order to make more room for you to push neighboring rocks around. This is not the kind of puzzle game that you can breeze through the rounds of. Each room requires quite a bit of thought and fore planning to successfully clear, as one mistake will lead to your getting squashed, or gravity taking the goal stone away from where you intended. Definitely a thinker's game.



Dig Dug

Flappy

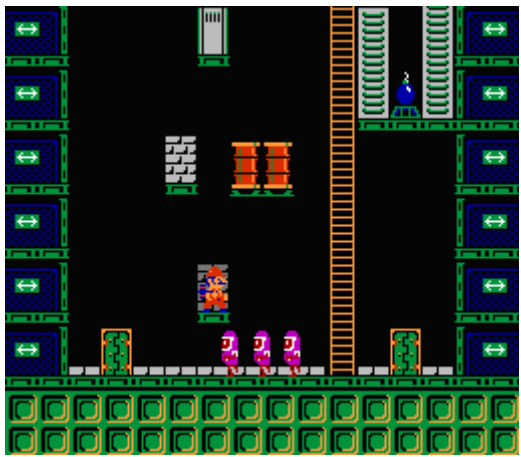
**Wrecking Crew, released by Nintendo on June 18, 1985 and released in the US on October 1985**

Starring Mario in what may possibly be his most obscure role in his video game tenure, Wrecking Crew is like a cross between a light hearted puzzle game, and an arcade action game. This game doesn't quite take Mario back to his supposed carpentry roots, but does solidify him as a construction site man. Only instead of constructing, Mario's job is now to demolish everything in site. Mario must knock down every wall and every destroyable ladder on the stage in order to advance to the next round. Getting in his way are two varieties of robotic wrenches (slow and fast), fireballs, a man named Spike, and the Eggplant men, who would gain a small amount of infamy in a later Nintendo game as a wizard in Kid Icarus. This game actually features a foreground layer and a background layer. While certain enemies may pass through an open door and traverse from one layer to another, Mario is decidedly stuck in the foreground. On the other hand, Spike is forever stuck in the background, which means he can't hurt you directly, but he can knock you off of your ledge to the ground below if he swings his hammer at you before you do the same to him. He's more of an annoyance than a direct threat. Occasionally there are bombs that can start a domino effect of destruction. However, they can sometimes be placed in such a way that if you destroy them too early, you will unwittingly destroy your only access to other parts of the stage, forcing you to start over. The game has a built in stage designer that lets you experiment, but not save. An interesting diversion to say the least, the game was also adapted for Nintendo's Vs. arcade system, which featured a more random layout to each stage, but pitted Luigi against Mario as the player on the opposite layer of the screen. Wrecking Crew made one final appearance on the Super Nintendo in 1998 for the Japan only Nintendo Power downloadable cartridge adaptor, which contained the original game as well as a more modernized Tetris Attack-ish type competitive puzzle game.

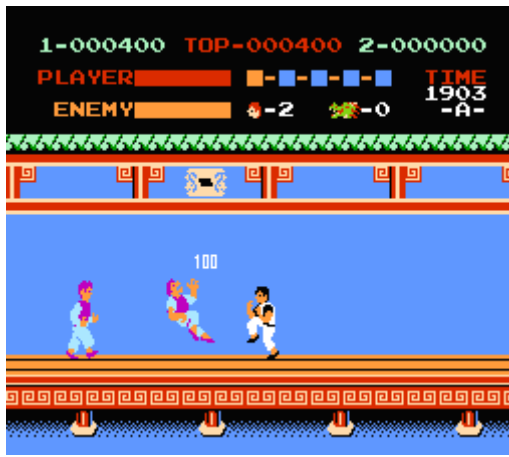
**Spartan X, released by Nintendo on June 21, 1985. Released in the US as Kung-Fu on October 1985**

Known as Kung-Fu in the US, this side scrolling beat'em up game is fondly remembered as the precursor to more legendary games like Double Dragon and Final Fight. When the NES was first released in the US, this game, featured in Nintendo's initial line-up of software for the system, was the most violent and action oriented of the bunch, and so was sought after by tons of young early adopters. Initially developed and released in the arcades by Irem, Nintendo licensed this game, along with 10 Yard Fight, to bring home to the masses. With a traditional "rescue the girlfriend" theme, you control a Kung-Fu master as you ascend your arch enemy's headquarters, fending off attacks from mindless drones who like nothing more than draining your energy by simply hanging on to you. You can punch, kick, and jump your way through each of the five floors until you face that level's particular master. It's a worthwhile play, and still considerably challenging on the higher floors, with a good variety of enemies thrown at you to keep you on your toes.





Wrecking Crew



Spartan X (Kung Fu)

## ***The Thrill Of Defeat: Commodore Plus/4 & Commodore 16 - F-H***

*by Mark Sabbatini*

If it's software, it probably has errors.

Typos have ruined banks and shrunk virtual football players to a few inches high.

The advice "never buy version 1.0 of anything" is as old as the market. Customers generally accept the need for patches - sometimes ongoing - one of the very few products where such flaws are considered acceptable.

As the review of games from the forgotten computers of yesteryear continues in this series, this month focusing on games starting with "F" through "H" for the Commodore 16 and Plus/4, an explanation of why many aren't rated is in order. Some refuse to start in the online emulator used for this series ([www.commodore16.com/play.htm](http://www.commodore16.com/play.htm)). Others crash during execution and some have operational problems such as non-functional controls. Part of the problem is no doubt due to imperfect emulation, but it's also a familiar mishap from an era when programs were a one-person effort.

Reactions from some of those programmers could be amusing. One tax software writer got huffy about a review pointing out the tax forms were full of errors not likely to amuse the IRS, saying it was because he wasn't a good speller. An RPG game author was irate with criticism about a bug that caused the game to crash if you tried to save a quest in progress without a filename, saying he couldn't imagine users ignoring the prompt to enter one. Such defenses were the hacker equivalent of later corporate classics such as Intel offering the replace chips that didn't calculate accurately if customers could prove such capability was needed.

Fixing old programs was a more hands-on experience than today. Many users scrolled through lines of BASIC code, making fixes large and small on their own. Publishers sent errata sheets with "you-type-em" corrections, often involving a long list of numbers used in a series of "POKE xx, xx" statements (although this was nothing compared to correcting misprints about hardware projects that caused users to fry their machines). Calling "help lines" often meant reaching the programmer at home, who (if you were lucky) would suggest code fixes while going through it step by step with the user.

Most of that isn't practical today with these programs. Which is unfortunate when trying to load a title in the online Plus/4 emulator like Giana Sisters, a Super Mario-type platformer that gets a rare 100 percent rating from a German Commodore magazine. Problem is the second screen crashes with an "Illegal Quantity Error," meaning the computer is being asked to do an impossible calculation. Figuring out what that error is all but impossible, and there's no way to save the fix even if it could be made.

Similarly, Flash Gordon is among the games that won't boot and Future Knight seems to be lacking the necessary controls for the player to climb the ladders in its platformer. All told, maybe one-third of the games I've tried so far haven't been playable, obviously a far higher ratio than the market would accept - now or then - but not out of line with many emulators. Those wanting to try some of these titles will almost certainly have better luck with the Windows-based emulators available from several sources (links are found at the emulator homepage).

To the games; this month's roundup features a decent representation of the overall quality of titles available for the two machines from the mid 1980s, including one or two true classics. As always, grading is on a curve relative to software available for the machine.

### **Fantatron (C+)**

A vertical space shooter that's a cross between Centipede and Space Invaders, with much larger on-screen characters. It's simple to learn - move right, left and fire - but incredibly tough to play. A chain of enemies descend rapidly from the top of the screen, shooting large numbers of missiles at you in the process. You must shoot them all without dying to progress to the next level. But by the time they've descended three or four rows - about half the screen - the missiles are already coming so close, quick and often there's no realistic hope of escape. That means starting the wave over with the enemies at the top of the screen. Your ship has a slightly unusual twin cannon firing mechanism, with one shot from each available at a time (so you may get two shots, one or none when firing, depending on whether your previous missiles have detonated). Nothing exceptional about the graphics or any other gameplay elements. A good challenge of basic skills for expert gamers who think they know it all.

### **Finders Keepers (B)**

This "collect and dodge" title scores well among the Commodore-era crowd, even if the plot sounds like something from the mathematical novel "Flatland" (great read, even non-math types). You control a knight, whose goal is to join the famous Polygon Table, hopefully accomplished by rescuing the king's daughter from the Castle of Spriteland. You roam the castle collecting treasures and bartering with traders, avoiding energy sapping ghouls along the way. Just one thing: the plot states "you quickly decide to collect as much treasure and cash as possible and escape from the castle." What about the king's daughter and that Polygon Table? Major plot hole. Anyhow, it was a successful game on many platforms and apparently lost little in the conversion process, with the Commodore Plus/4 Handbook giving it a rating of 83 percent. An excerpt its review: "The screens are so cleverly linked that getting round them is far from easy and does call for some well-timed jumps...negotiating the adjoining screens is no easy task and the game could prove a little long-winded and boring to the ardent shoot-em-up fan."

### **Fire Ant (B-)**

This Commodore 64 maze quest title remains enjoyable on the Plus/4 since it's based on fairly simple concepts and graphics, but it's too slow and random to rank among the top titles. You control a large ant collecting eggs, keys and other stuff in mazes, avoiding other pests while doing so. You must collect all the eggs in a portion of a maze to be able to pick up the key unlocking the door to the next section, and the creatures lay eggs as time passes. Also, take too long and fatal spikes (just a vertical line, actually) can descend from above, blocking the door. The tepid pace would be acceptable if the player's ability to collect items was less dependent on waiting on creatures to move out of their way - these movements all are seemingly at random. In any game like this, making skill the primary key to success is the difference between the challenge being fun or frustrating.

### **Fire-Galaxy (B)**

A solid, if unimaginative space shooter that is much like playing the opening moments of a Galaga wave non-stop. Lines of various aliens emerge from various parts of the screen, moving in various patterns as they try to ram and shoot your ship at the bottom of the screen. Your cannon has rapid-fire capability, which helps even the odds immensely. The graphics, game speed and other factors are

average, but what puts this game a step above most is a nice range of custom options. You can choose the number of players, joystick or key controls (with the keys listed on-screen) and various game speeds. A good choice for mindless entertainment in a crowded field. Strange trivia: The company that released the game, Kingsoft, released a game with the same title during the early 1980s for the Vic-20, except it was a blocky clone of the arcade game Scramble.

### **Firelab (B)**

A *Targ*-like game that gets nudged up just a bit for doing what so many others don't - altering the playfield from a grid of squares to something more complex and therefore thought provoking. You maneuver a tiny vehicle around the playfield, viewed from overhead in a 2D view, shooting other cars and avoiding their missiles and "X"-shaped barriers that pop up as play progresses. The other cars hunt you down semi-intelligently and aren't too hard to pick off, but there are lots of them and getting into situations where you can't react quickly enough to multiple attackers is a definite possibility. One change that will be either a blessing or curse to those familiar with the original is the controls. Reverse directions and your vehicle reacts instantly, instead of slowing down for a moment as happens in the original. For some this means losing a unique element of control (which many found life-threatening when needing to deal with a car behind them quickly); others will no doubt appreciate the quick response, especially with the need to keep more of an eye on the lineup of the corridors here than in the arcade version. Late shocker: It turns out this is a type-in game published in 1988 in the German version of *Compute!* magazine (in machine language, not BASIC), making it one of the better such homebrew efforts my extremely limited knowledge is aware of. Ratings from two users at the [plus4.emucamp.com](http://plus4.emucamp.com) site average out to three out of 10, by the way, so take my sunny words with the required grain of salt.

### **Flashball (C-)**

A freeware breakout/paddle pinball game whose quality of play is exactly what its lineage suggests. There's a sparse set of bricks at the top of the screen, a few bumpers in the middle of the screen and some bonus multiplier targets along the edges. The player controls a paddle that knocks a ball into these elements, with the dual goal of taking out the bricks and getting as many end-of-wave bonus points as possible. Gameplay isn't commercial-quality smooth, with some jerky animation and less-than-perfect physics. But much to its credit the ball does not get caught in the endless loops some homebrew versions do - if a ball follows the same path more than a couple of times while being hit it will switch angles. This alone makes it worth sampling if you're into homemade Breakout clones. But the playfield apparently remains the same throughout and the end-of-screen bonus counter can take a long time to complete, giving this game little replay value.

### **Flipper Set (incomplete)**

This is a knock-off of the innovative (at the time) Pinball Construction Set that was popular during the 1980s on many computers. This version has an early 1990s programming date, well after the Plus/4's shelf life expired, but seems to have all the key elements well implemented. The player uses the joystick like a mouse to build and play custom pinball tables, with the icon system being easy enough to understand without reading any instructions. The game speed and ball physics are typical for the era - inconsistent and sometimes jumpy. One big problem that accounts for the incomplete grade here, since it may be a problem associated with emulation: I couldn't figure out how to get out of situations where I built a table where the ball was trapped in the field of play. Because of this and the learning curve on what icons do what, online users may find themselves designing a table for one-time use, then resetting the program to make changes or a new table.



### **Flopp (C-)**

Plays like the first screen of a promising maze/platform game - over and over. Your man moves through a simple maze, gathering disks at the far edges of the screen. Gather them all and you can

escape through the exit in the upper right hand corner. Hampering your quest are nasties, one on each level, who race horizontally from one edge of the screen to the other at staggered intervals. You need to squeeze through the gap to a level (a bit difficult due to less than perfect controls), grab the disk and get to another level before the bad guy shoots across the screen - being careful not to get pulverized by whoever's on the next level. It all was fairly captivating, at least until I got through a couple of levels and realized nothing changes. Any sort of variety in the maze, bad guys (they do seem to move faster as you go) or anything else would have gone a long, long way toward making this a quality title. On the other hand, this apparently is by a Hungarian programmer and it's not like there was a ton of quality software coming out of Eastern Europe during the Cold War.

### **Formula One Simulator (B)**

Gets points for realism and presentation, loses some for quirky controls in the emulated version. It's basically a Pole Position type racer where you're required to complete laps before the clock runs out, but steering requires a precise and delicate touch and the keyboard isn't responsive enough to allow this. It earned some good-but-nothing-special reviews from users, who also noted that it's still a pretty good deal since it was one of those \$4 bargain titles.

### **Fortress Underground (Incomplete)**

A quality game released on numerous platforms - Commodore, Atari and Amiga among them - that sadly is unplayable in emulated form due to the screen shaking so heavily it induces motion sickness. The game itself is a little like Scramble without the forced side scrolling. The player navigates a helicopter through caverns, avoiding obstacles, heat seeking missiles and other dangers, while keeping an eye on an ever-dwindling fuel supply. The goal of the game is unknown to me, due to the inability to play it. Too bad - the Plus/4 version got an 81 percent rating from one user group site.

### **Frank Bruno Boxing (Not graded)**

Not included in the emulator list, but mentioned here because it gets high acclaim from reviewers. A conversion of a best-selling title from other platforms, it features three boxers fighting at three skill levels, all of whom must be knocked out three times during a three-minute round to become world champion. The player has seven keys to punch and defend, with graphics and gameplay much like the coin-op Punch-Out series. The Commodore Plus/4 Handbook, which rating it 87 percent, says "this is certainly one of the most innovative games around and is far from easy as the keys take time to master. It's easy enough to punch away on one or two of the early boxers, but tactics definitely play a major part on the later boxers." A German Plus/4 magazine gave it a score of 90 percent.

### **Freddie Hardest (D+)**

A side-scrolling beat-em-up released on numerous platforms during the late 1980s, this might be more highly recommended if it weren't so hard to play due to the monochrome graphics. Novices can make themselves invincible (unlimited lives and energy) and take their time knocking out an unrealistic number of enemies. Experienced players might as well go the same route, since I can't imagine anyone legitimately lasting more than a minute against such forces due to the difficulty of determining where you and they are. The supposed sequel, Freddie Hardest 2, looks identical - maybe the enemies are harder or something, but it's not exactly noticeable.

### **Frog Jump (D+)**

Excellent conversions of Frogger exist for nearly every machine from the Atari 2600 onward, so subpar versions get no break regardless of platform. And this one falls short on all kinds of counts. It looks passably like the real thing, with smaller graphics and a larger playfield, but doesn't feel much like it. Movement is less than precise, the logs (and only logs) are hard to see in the river, the timer counts up rather than down - just some of the defects that make themselves quickly known. One of those quick-buck rip-offs that make people resent software companies.

### **Fury (C+)**

An OK Space Panic-type platformer, but a bit shallow. Your man plants bombs to create holes for the nasties to fall through, with higher levels requiring they drop more than one level to die. They pursue



with decent intelligence, game speed is OK and the basic graphics are fine since the originals were never all that impressive. But the original is more complex with a time limit to worry about and the need to bash baddies on the head to actually kill them, plus the ability to fill in holes (here you can't, so don't trap yourself). And subsequent games like Lode Runner and Jumpman went way beyond this with massive numbers of levels, game editors and lots of creative gameplay flourishes. Barely in the above-average category here simply due to a lack of such titles being released for the Plus/4.

### **Galaxians (Incomplete)**

Looks more like Galaga than Galaxians, due to the off-screen entry of aliens in attack patterns at the beginning of each wave. But because the controls in the emulator didn't work for me (keys or joystick) rating the game isn't possible. Graphics and other presentation elements appear well-done and a German magazine gave it a score of 70 percent.

### **Gnasher (C-)**

A less than impressive Pac-Man clone, hampered by a small maze, lousy monster AI and generally poor programming decisions such as having the ghosts turn into hollow outlines of their colors (instead of blue) after power pellets are consumed, which makes it hard to determine if you can eat them. The monsters move randomly rather than chasing you, often moving back and forth over a single passage repeatedly. Not worth much time, IMHO, but that German magazine did give it a score of 80 percent.

### **Grandmaster (C-)**

A basic, easy-to-play, chess game that appears to have numerous features stripped from the Commodore 64 and Vic-20 versions (or maybe the emulator somehow doesn't recognize them). The player types moves in standard notation, or can get a suggested move using the "?" key. The computer responds reasonably fast and plays a competent beginners' game. What's missing at first glance are options, can change colors of board and borders, but nothing else seems to do much. But the German magazine gave it a score of 90 percent and some fans list it among their top 10 favorites.

### **Gremlins (D-)**

This is one of the worst Balderdash replicas I've seen on any platform. The controls are awful, graphics are lackluster, the player dies when you merely touch rocks (not having them fall on you) and key elements of gameplay such as the digging of tunnels to aid in the solving of levels are missing. 'Nuff said.

### **Gremlins Plus/4 (B)**

Not to be confused with the above, this is a decent graphics/text adventure where you must save Kingston Falls "with aid of little Noogwai Gizmo." Not having progressed far to date, the following is from the Commodore Plus/4 Handbook: "The adventure is quite enjoyable and certainly far more playable than Adventure International's earlier Hulk and Spiderman efforts." The review also notes it's useful to see the film.

### **Gunner (D)**

This is one of those oft-seen games that's probably a better programming exercise than diversion. The player tries to hit a target by typing in a firing angle for the cannon. That's it, at least as far as the interactive part goes. The screen then shows how close the shot came. The player has five attempts to hit the target or the game ends. There's a two-player version of this on many computers called Artillery Duel which is entertaining because players input both firing power and angle, there's complicating factors such as wind, and the pressure of kill-or-be-killed. But this has almost none of that, making one wonder why it ever made it off the computer of the author. Saved from a failing grade by the depiction of shots and easy-to-follow in-game instructions, allowing even the most inexperienced user to try it.

### **Guzzler (B+)**

A Pac-Man maze game that's more entertaining than one might expect on first glance. It actually bears a closer resemblance to Super Pac-Man, with the player gathering keys to open doors to passages where the munchies are. Very simple, except for one thing: As soon as you've eaten you get fatter and have to touch some odd creature roaming the edge of the maze in a circle to get thin again. Touch it when you're thin, by the way, and you die. You have to avoid the usual monsters in the maze, but can paralyze them briefly by dropping bombs in their path (you have a limited supply). Control with the keyboard or joystick is good, as are the graphics, and there isn't much to find fault with as long as you're not looking for an incredibly deep or original pasttime. Got a tepid 50 percent score from that oft-mentioned German magazine.



### **Harvey Headbanger (B)**

A clever and original arcade/puzzler that sold for a mere £1.99 (about \$3) at the time. You and a computer or a human opponent move around a screen using a series of horizontal wires, although the ability to jump vertically between wires means it's really a simple four-way movement scheme. The space each player moves over turns that color, with the idea being to trap the opponent in a zone of your color. This is clever on its own - sort of an arcade paced Othello - but there's an additional drinking element to liven things up. Cocktails appear at times and the more a player drinks, the higher the liquid level gets in a straw representing the player on the side of the screen. This becomes relevant when the players (named Harvey and Hamish, for what it's worth) collide. Both are disoriented and move randomly following the impact, but a player who's consumed more drinks will take longer to recover. The graphics aren't terribly impressive and it can be confusing to learn, but it's a worthy diversion and quality port from the Commodore 64/Sinclair Spectrum stable.

### **The Hobbit (B+)**

A classic adventure that isn't as great as loyalists proclaim (voted best Sinclair Spectrum game in a 1985 magazine), nor the overrated snail-paced clunker detractors suggest. But its popularity and impact are unquestionable, perhaps most obvious in the number of sequels, spin-offs and spoofs based on it. It's a solid graphics/text story that closely follows J.R.R. Tolken's book (kill Smaug, get treasure) and has more depth than many titles that use only the computer's RAM memory instead of loading from disks (an enhanced version on disk for some computers besides the C16/Plus4 added content and addressed most of the problems about to be mentioned). The biggest drawback is the slow drawing of the graphics screens - a wait of 10 seconds or so is typical on the emulator. Also, solutions to some puzzles are logical, others aren't. Finally, while the vocabulary and text interpreter are better than most for its day, there's plenty of situations where it's frustrating not being able to get the program to do basic things. Searching around the 'Net will reveal plenty of sources for hints, vocabulary lists and full solutions. Definitely worth playing whether you're familiar with adventures of the era or not; novices will find it a solid example of a popular genre, while the experienced will revive many fond memories puzzling their way through Middle Earth.



### **Hollywood Poker (Isabell, Lorence, Stephanie) (C)**

Covered last month with the game titled Denise, which is the same five-card video game with a different model picture at the top. In summary, no strip poker (for the types hoping for it), unremarkable gameplay, preselected betting and no custom options. Biggest redeeming factor is easy playability.

### **Hustler (B-)**

A decent pool game with simple controls and four variations for one or two players. The title screen tells users to press <SPACE>, but selecting a number key (1-4) lets one play the various games. All of the games feature six balls - I'm not a regular pool player and in no position to say if this is common or they are scaled down versions of what I do play on occasion. The physics are decent and the control scheme - move the crosshair with the arrow keys and press <SPACE> to shoot can be mastered without reading the instructions.



An extra bit of skill is needed to control the power of the shot, since this is determined by a constantly moving power bar at the bottom of the screen. An OK diversion, but true fans are likely to find too many elements missing. Also, I seemed unable to scratch the cue ball - the next shot was simply made from whatever "hole" it landed in.

## Game Over

If you reached this section then it's time to put this issue to bed. I know I said my usual columns would be back, but I couldn't get them in due to lack of time and interest. So I just going to say that the columns will be back in the near future. They may return next issue, but I'm not making any promises.

Next issue will be our big 25th issue, so we hope to have some great features for you. Hope to see you there.

- [Adam King](#), Chief Editor

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