

## Issue #80 - January 2011

- Press Fire To Begin
- Retrogaming News
- Reflections On A Different Era
- Apple II Incider - David's Midnight Magic
- The After-Christmas Special
- Mutated Output - Getting A Lesson About The Superiority Of The BBC Micro
- NES'cade - Salute To The Silver Ball
- Game Over



A mere week or two after our December / Christmas issue, here comes the January issue. There's been a lot going on as I'm sure readers have noticed. Let me note a few of them:

1. Bryan Roppolo remains as the main editor of RTM. Due to the various things that have been going on, Bryan thought it would be good to remain on during a transition period. I remain on as the Rotating (or Roving as I have called myself) Editor to assist with proofreading articles and do anything else that is needed.
2. For the December issue, we debuted a redesign that was not particularly well liked. Bryan is hard at work creating a new design and we hope to debut these changes soon.
3. The need for more writers. Yes, this is a volunteer gig and I think many people feel they don't have enough content to contribute on a monthly basis. When I first signed on, I also thought the same thing. Yet, this month represents my 4th Anniversary writing for RTM. While we would love for monthly contributions, even one-off articles are appreciated.

As for this month's issue, I suggested to our staff that we do a pinball themed issue and we were fortunate to get a few articles. I hope all of you enjoy revisiting the past of pinball machines and video games.

Thanks to all the writers and the readers for their patience as we work through things. We think it will improve RTM and keep it going for many years to come.



### The Retro Computer Games Festival (UK)

Saturday, January 22 (2:00pm) - January 23 (1:00am)

This event returns to the Garden Gate pub for a Multiplayer Gaming Special. We will have the following systems to play:

- 2 Gameboy's Linked with Tetris
- 3 Xbox's System Linked with Halo 2
- 2 Atari Lynx's Comlynxed with Chequed Flag
- 2 Gameboy Advance's Linked with Mario Kart

- 2 Sony Playstation's Linked with Wipeout 2097
- 2 Gameboy Color's Linked with Mario Golf
- Sega Saturn with 10 player Bomberman!
- Nintendo 64 with 4 player Goldeneye
- Atari 2600 with 4 player Warlords
- Sega Mega Drive with 4 Player Micro Machines
- Plus Many More Multiplayer Games & Systems

Pong, Warlords, PGR 2 and Halo 2 Multiplayer Competitions Run Through The Day

The Garden Gate is a small freindly pub that is featured in the Good Beer Guide. It has a nice selection of real ales and will have home cooked food available on the day. So come down, drink a beer(s), play some video games, enter a competition or two and chat with some fellow gamers.

The Garden Gate  
Church Lane East  
Aldershot, United Kingdom

### **MSX Vriendenclub Marienberg (Netherlands)**

MSX Vriendenclub Marienberg has club meetings on every second saturday of the month. In 2011 that will be on the following days:

January 8, February 12 (+Auction), March 12, April 9, May 14, June 11, July 9, August 13, September 10, October 8, November 12, and December 10.

Doors open at 10:00am and admission is free for visitors. All are welcome!

Communitycentre "de Grendel"  
Wicher Hentstraat 17  
7692 AL Marienberg  
The Netherlands

If you would like to have your event featured in Retrogaming Times Monthly, just send an e-mail to Bryan Roppolo at [bryan@retrogamingtimes.com](mailto:bryan@retrogamingtimes.com) and he'll make sure to announce it in a future issue.



### **The Pacific Pinball Museum**

About a month ago, I was searching for some activities to do in the East Bay. While researching via Yelp, I stumbled upon the Pacific Pinball Museum in Alameda, CA. Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to visit at the time. However, I was in the area today and stopped by for a visit. I didn't regret it one bit as I spent a solid two hours at the museum.

While the initial entry cost of \$15 may seem steep for a museum, it is actually quite a bargain. The \$15 entitles you to unlimited play of all the various pinball machines that in the museum. There's quite a selection of older and more modern pinball machines that you can play. In addition, you get "in and out" privileges. So if you need to step out to get a bite to eat and come back later, it is perfectly ok. As I noted, I spent a lot of time at the museum today and had a blast. Strangely enough, I gravitated to playing some of the older pinball machines than some of the newer ones (though I enjoyed a couple of them).

After leaving the museum, I started to think about why I enjoyed my time there today. After all, I was child of the 1980's. I grew up in the era of Pac-Man, Donkey Kong and other well known arcade games as well as the era of the Atari, Coleco, and Commodore (among others) video game and computer systems.

The answer I came up with is that the pinball machines harken back to a simpler era. The purpose of playing pinball is to stay alive as long as possible and get as many points along the way. It didn't matter if you were playing a pinball machine from the 1950's or the 1980's, the purpose remained the same. The same purpose of getting as many points as possible is basically the same purpose as the majority of 1980's arcade games.

It didn't matter if you played Pac-Man (eating dots and ghosts), Donkey Kong (jumping over barrels), Pole Position (driving), or Galaga (shooting aliens), the major purpose was to stay alive as long as possible, advance to higher levels and accumulate



points. Obviously there were exceptions like Dragon's Lair.

Given this, it was no surprise that I found a love of pinball machines. With the ability to have unlimited play at the museum, I kept trying multiple times at several machines and did pretty well toward the end of my stay.

Unfortunately, pinball machines are reflections of a different time before video games and computers existed. From doing some research online, there do not appear to be any companies that are mass producing pinball machines today due to a lack of demand from the mainstream public. With all the fancy graphics and sound available on home systems today, pinball machines are looked at as relics. All the young people today go for Starcraft 2, World of Warcraft and other games.

However, as the Pacific Pinball Museum shows, pinball is still alive in the underground. There were a good number of people of all ages at the museum today. There was a party there with kids and their parents present. There were also quite a few other families who showed up after I arrived. The folks that run the museum also host an annual expo as well.

Pinball might not be as fancy as today's video games, but I think it's definitely worth a visit from gamers of all ages. You don't always need to play the latest and greatest to have a good time.



### David's Midnight Magic

Welcome to the January edition of Apple II Incider. It's been a hectic last few weeks over here at the virtual offices of Retrogaming Times Monthly. There's been a lot going on and writing my columns has been a challenge. In addition, I have been sick for much of the past two weeks including through the Christmas holiday. It seems like something swept through my office and work stress did not help at all.

In my other column this month, I discuss my experience visiting a pinball museum here in California. It was such a nice experience that I suggested to the other writers of RTM to do some articles on pinball. As it turns out, only one other person besides me focused on pinball but that should be good enough to whet your appetite.

This month, I took a look at a classic Apple II pinball game called David's Midnight Magic. Looking up the history of the game on Wiki, David's Midnight Magic was released in 1982. The game was modeled after a real pinball table game called Black Night, which was released by Williams in 1980.

As far as game play, it's what you would expect from a pinball game. You put the ball into play and use your joystick or keyboard to control the bumpers and keep the ball in play on the table. David's Midnight Magic features two sets of bumpers with one at the top half of the game screen and the other at the lower half of the screen. Your controls controlled both sets of bumpers at the same time.



Overall, I found David's Midnight Magic entertaining but having played with some real pinball machines, I found myself wishing for a real pinball machine. The graphics are decent but the sound didn't quite evoke the feeling of playing on a real pinball machine. Unlike today where we can play original arcade hits like Pac-Man, Galaga and Donkey Kong via emulators, there is no way to completely replicate a pinball machine on a computer. You'd have to buy a pinball machine (or start a museum).

All of this being said, if you have a pinball craving, David's Midnight Magic is a good substitute. Hopefully in time, I will also cover two other pinball classics in Raster Blaster and Pinball Construction Set. Have a great start to 2011!



Here's why youths give those strained smiles and strangled "thank you's" to clueless parents and relatives bearing gifts: Do a Google search for best Christmas kids' video games and the first several pages of links is mostly alternatives to satiating pixel addiction. Among the top site's items – replicated at several other sites – are microscopes, digital picture frames and those electronic fish finders weekend sportsmen use on their boats.

If you can't accept a 10-year-old being mature enough to handle "Call of Duty: Black Ops," just give them the cash. No, ten dollars (the amount suggested in the top link of another Google inquiry) is not going make them "perfectly satisfied."

Generational disconnect is something I desperately try to avoid, being among the many victimized by it annually in my over commercialized youth. Not saying Christmas was all about the presents then (there was also food), but there's nothing merry trying to seem excited about a Gin Champion cartridge.

Fortunately, return and exchange policies were a lot less restrictive then. Also, of course, some people hit the bulls-eye – even with some "alternatives."

Gifts labeled "batteries not included" were part of the loot as far back as I can recall, but the first video game I remember besides the inevitable TV pong "for the family" present was the repeat-the-melody Simon disc. I played it obsessively, at least for a few days until I mastered the ultimate 31-tones of level four, after which I don't think I ever turned it on again. It was to become one of a few love-indifference patterns, along with multiple exchanges (play, return, repeat) and trading/pirating.

I asked and sometimes got titles for a bunch of gaming platforms during the decade prior to my kicked-out-of-the-house birthday party one January (mom's ultimatum: get accepted by a college or else. I ended up working at a ski resort that winter). My habit of acquiring consoles and computers by buying, begging, borrowing and (in one bumblingly unsuccessful case) stealing made a healthy percentage of available software a good bet. But two platforms remained dominant: the humble TRS-80 Color Computer I still have an irrational affection for and those LED/LCD handhelds that – especially in latter years – were a cheap out for those unsure what to buy. Both are subjects of this month's reviews, looking at them through the eyes of the good-willed givers and merry/malcontent recipient.

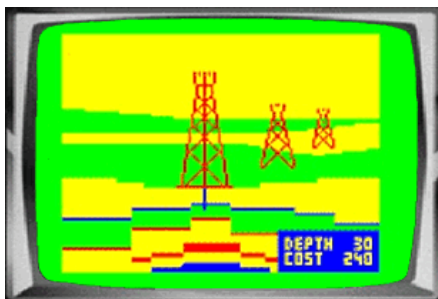
A lot of CoCo games received as gifts have been reviewed previously, so those here tend to lean toward the titles well-meaning adult relatives buy. For example, there's the previously mentioned:



#### Gin Champion (C)

Gin was the card game of choice of a seldom-visited grandfather in the foster home I was in at the time, so I suppose getting this Radio Shack cart was inevitable, especially since I was a pitiable opponent. I'd have been a lot happier with a computerized chess game, an item on wish lists since the pre-computer '70s when the electronic "Chess Challenger" on a real board was an obsession (I'd still love one today, especially since the computer can now move its pieces). But I gave this Gin game a try during the boredom that accompanies post-gift letdown. And...it wasn't bad. It turned out to have a far longer lifespan than a lot of arcade games I played far more intensely during the short time they were hot. Four variations and 10 skill levels are offered and, while its looks are strictly functional, the interface is comprehensive and intuitive. Little things like the ability to shuffle the layout of your cards around and switch between two color sets are useful (I had a black and white TV at first, making the default colors hard to read). I never did stop booting it up every month or so when I was too mellow to shoot things and too incurious to solve adventures. Alas, I never did get another chance to see if I developed any prowess against my foster-grandfather, but it did help make me a competent opponent against someone I dated for a few years.

The educational value of computers was a huge part of Tandy's marketing push for the CoCo, so it was inevitable some of the dreaded edutainment titles would end up under the tree. Not all of it was awful – I've long raved about the circuit-programming adventure Robot Odyssey remaining an all-time favorite on any platform. But a lot of them also were direct from the \$2.99 clearance bin such as:

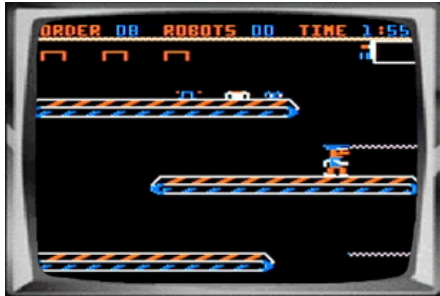


#### Wildcatting (D+)

I suppose a "drill, baby, drill" game has to be expected from a corporation headquartered in Texas. The concept actually has incredible potential, given the complexities of some drilling projects, but this is stripped down to the barest of hit/miss elements. One to four players pick out spots on a map, with a surveyor then offering a few details about it such as per-unit drilling cost and percent probability of striking oil. Pressing the spacebar starts drilling if you're so inclined and you can keep drilling until you either

strike oil or it's declared a dry hole. You then learn how much oil was extracted and how much money was earned/lost. Deposits tend to be clustered on the map, so a strike in one spot means adjacent locations are good bets. Unlike real life where a company might buy all the promising land in advance, here any opponents get to search those areas when their turn comes. It's about as demanding as minefield or Battleship, which might not be bad for a group of young kids, but a true learning sim could have offered so much more. Also, the game mostly occurs on a plain text screen, so those kids may abandon it for more colorful diversions before long.

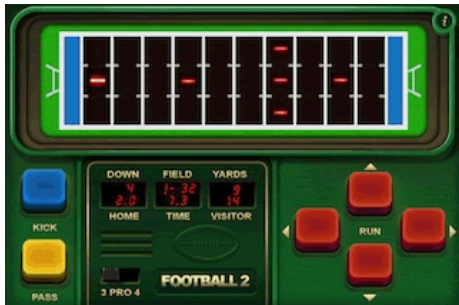
Games making you believe you're at work aren't necessarily a bad thing – I'm amazed at the popularity of everything from SimCity to simulations of real-life activities such as cooking – but despite Wildcatting's flaws I prefer fun simplicity to ultra-real financial or resource management. One that worked, and has had a surprising rebirth today, is:



### **Panic Button (B)**

This "assemble the items on the conveyor line" arcade game exists in all kinds of variations on machines old and new. Panic Button succeeds by being cute and challenging without overreaching. The three pieces of the designated object – robots, cakes, telephones or whatever – drop from bins at the top of the screen onto a conveyor belt. You need to assemble them and put them on a designated delivery belt before the parts fall off the lowest of three belts on the screen. You have a specified number of objects to complete per wave within a time limit, and either missing too many items or the quota ends the game. The title comes from the box with the panic button you can press somewhere on the screen, which halts the belts for a moment (it has limited uses). The challenge builds ideally, with items appearing in order and moving slowly at first, then more haphazardly and quickly later. I once referred to this as a fun game, not a classic, but it has emerged as part of the retro craze in the iPhone Commodore 64 app. But it's a bit of a dubious honor, since it's one of a handful of bargain two-for-one games in the optional titles section. I tried it and either my reflexes are slowing down or the app version is a lot faster than the original. I also find the touch screen less suitable than a joystick for control. But for nostalgia value alone it's certainly worth a couple of bucks.

Finally, speaking of retro app remakes, I can't write a holiday gift column without mentioning handheld football games. I got enough of those to be a column in itself (hmmm.....), because people knew I'd play anything – even Atari 2600 football – beyond any normal person's tolerance limit. Nothing, of course, nothing ever topped:



### **Mattel's Football II (A-)**

Great passing mechanism, special teams as realistic as a ten-yard field allows, and the realism of your QB taking the snap a yard behind the line of scrimmage were the touches I remember most fondly. The sounds are classic, although a headphone jack or mute button would have been useful at school and other places where discretion was advisable. I also never knew about the levels three and four Easter egg until the internet era, but since I never did better than break even again level two it's not much of a loss. The game lives on in iPhone form with LED Football 2, a 99-cent title that's a nearly perfect virtual replica. The virtual buttons don't respond quite as quickly or have the tactical feedback of the real thing (and obviously it's easier for your fingers to stray from them), but otherwise there's no complaints, especially since the developer, TouchGrove, resisted the temptation to modernize it. The company has a number of other Mattel replicas, which will probably be part of a roundup on this topic at some point.





## Getting A Lesson About The Superiority Of The BBC Micro

A new year means a new has-been computer we can surely mock.

How hard can skewing this model be? It's one of those dodgy British things, for starters, made by a company Americans probably never knew about. It represents so many things vile to the vocabulary of 2010 such as government subsidies, product placement, public broadcasting, indoctrinated education, committee think and something about exposure to radiation.

But if I'd known about the BBC Micro back then, you'd have a hard time convincing me to buy anything else.

Essentially Britain's kindred spirit of the Apple II at a far lower price, its technical specifications were astounding for its 1981 release date and still better than most when it finally reached the U.S. in 1984. About 1.5 million machines were sold, reflecting modest British success beyond the education market and virtually none in the U.S., but it remained on sale until 1994 and its unrivaled durability kept it in use long afterward.

"It is certainly more advanced than any Japanese or American product available at the moment," a 1982 review in Practical Computer declared. A 1984 review in Creative Computing repeatedly praised its built-for-the-classroom ruggedness, stating "I cannot recall having seen a sturdier computer."

A few of the specs: graphics resolution up to 640 by 256 pixels (with a remarkable-at-the-time separate chip to handle them), four-channel independent sound, 32K ROM (two to four times the norm), absurd expansion and networking capabilities, a speedy-for-the-time 2Mhz 6502 processor, and components such as a full-size keyboard topping anything personal computers costing less than the Apple II offered.

The base model came with 16K RAM and cost £299 (\$470), which sounds less impressive, but consider the 1981 competition:

- TRS-80 Color Computer with 4K RAM and 8K ROM Color Basic: \$399.
- VIC-20 with 5K RAM and 8K ROM: \$299.
- Atari 400 and 800, 8K and 16K RAM, respectively, and 8K ROM: \$599 and \$899.

It's Beeb's major U.K. competitor was, of course, was Sinclair's ZX Spectrum (48K RAM, 16K ROM: \$275). The Speccy's lower price and high raw stats enabled it to dominate the home market despite chintzy graphics, sound, keyboard, file handling, support and construction. But Acorn, started by two former Sinclair marketing employees, reaped the riches of government contracts when its micro was selected above Sinclair's and those from other competitors by the BBC as the official machine to pair with its Computer Literacy Project TV shows.

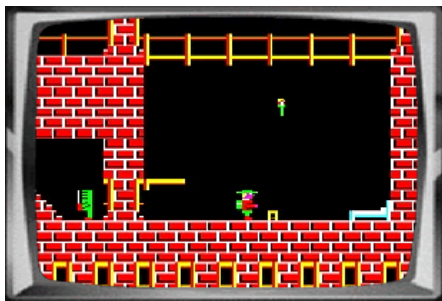
The Beeb became dominant in public schools, with subsidies paying half the cost, as the BBC program aired in classrooms were computer literacy and other subjects were taught. It's supposedly still used by the government today to display timetables at some train stations, but there doesn't seem much optimism the Brits will achieve another similar success in today's tech competition.

"Can you imagine the current government, the current BBC, British manufacturing and BT ever getting together like that again?" wrote one owner in a 2002 user forum. "Broadband Britain could have put us ahead again, like the BBC did, but no, we've stuffed it into a hat and we just argue about hospitals and go round saying 'after the events of 11 September.'"

Obviously specs and market share aren't everything. All an Atari owner had to do back then was say "Star Raiders" and it was pretty much game over among the joystick crowd. The Beeb never had a it game library rivaling the size of Atari, Commodore or Sinclair (it did, naturally, put my beloved CoCo's catalogue to shame). But almost everything significant is there, albeit with wildly varying quality, and the Beeb is the original platform for some landmark titles like Elite and Repton.

These reviews will presume readers are using emulators, of which there are many, but the easiest place to start is with the BBC Micro Online Emulator at [www.drobe.co.uk/micro](http://www.drobe.co.uk/micro). It has virtually every commercial title along with a large collection of CHT (cheat) disks. The drawbacks are the Java interface is a bit clunky – there's a notable delay between pressing the "load disk" button and seeing the window of titles appear – and a number of titles didn't boot properly on my MacBook. Other emulators will be evaluated in future columns for those wanting more compatibility and options such as customizing controls.

This initial collection of capsule reviews looks at some of the Beeb's more noteworthy titles, as well as some "benchmark" games easily compared to other platforms at a glance (for those wondering about the omission of Repton, an all-time influence if there ever was one, it'll get plenty of exposure next month). Grades, as always, are relevant strictly to the machine. Generally the quality is average compared to the competition, somewhat of a disappointment given the BBC's superior hardware specs.



### Castle Quest (B)

"Probably the most challenging game ever devised for the BBC Micro" boasts the title screen of this scrolling platform RPG. Such claims induce dread in the same way as restaurants that spice "macho" dishes beyond recognition of flavor. Unavoidable deaths, lopsided matches against enemies, to-the-pixel navigation "challenges," or whatever. But it turns out Castle Quest is an entertaining and, yes, fairly difficult explorer that's on many users' list of favorites. You guide your hero around the castle collecting useful items like torches and swords, along with jewels and other valuables. Guards, ogres, really stupid monkeys, spiders and such get in your way, and it's not always as simple as contact being fatal. The screenshot, for instance, is sort of a jail the guards escort you to if you're caught. The ultimate goal is obtaining a wand that allows you to retrieve the final treasure. Clearly there's little originality to the plot and the gameplay is typical move-jump-fight platformer, but the quality of the challenges and overall smoothness of play make it worthy. The only version I could get to boot on the online emulator was the "CHT" (cheat) version where you can select the number of lives you want to start with. Don't like it, don't take advantage, but I've got no problem taking my 99 lives and ensuring my quest is epic. This was released by Micro Power and is considered the best or nearly so of its many hit titles, but some observers also claim the cost of producing the game put such a strain on Micro Power's resources they weren't able to recover.



### Drain Mania (D)

The original Mario Bros. is one of my sleeper favorites and I don't recall many home versions, so seeing a screenshot of this unauthorized attempt was quite welcome. But – and this will be an oft-repeated rant – the image and potential suggested by the Beeb's horsepower badly fail to deliver. First, asking to see the in-game instructions is a huge mistake, as it takes forever for them to scroll at a snail's pace up the screen. The game itself misses on every aspect to a small or large extent. The graphics don't look very good when set in motion (again a complaint you'll read here a lot). Everything moves far too fast and your faux Mario moves like he's on ice even on normal surfaces. Creature movement is erratic rather than following the original's more disciplined approach, and coins to be collected hang on ledges instead of spinning their way along the floors toward the bottom. Finally, this is a one-player game, an inexplicable decision given that the two-at-once feature of the coin-op is arguably its greatest attraction. There's a few extras, such as small jumps and brief invisibility, that may or may not be seen as improvements. But a grade curve isn't necessary to say even the so-so Atari 2600 version knocks this one into the brink.



### Elite (A)

The standard in 3D space-trading games and a near-universal inclusion on every "best video games in history" list, Elite began its illustrious journey in 1984 on the Beeb (along with Acron's Electron). It's not the first of the genre, but is the influence for countless games since and the standard by which they're measured. This original release might be a letdown to some who've played admittedly superior versions on other platforms (here's guessing nobody reading this has played the version for Acorn's Archimedes, generally regarded as the best translation, although the NES version gets consistently high marks as well). But true devotees and the four people who've never played it in some form owe themselves a tour of the original's universe. It's not

possible to summarize the vastness of gameplay in a capsule review – you're familiar with the concept or you're not – but in short it offers eight galaxies with 256 planets to explore in each. You start with a humble ship that can be upgraded with riches through trade, asteroid mining and completing missions, plus more roguish professions such as piracy and bounty hunting. As a first-timer to the game on this platform, I was astounded by the overall speed, smoothness and professionalism. I've played plenty of wire-frame space games released a decade or two later that lack the clarity of the simple-but-clean graphics. The only reason it doesn't get a perfect grade is a few well-documented flaws, including an algorithm that can generate galaxies that are impossible to reach. If you are a first-timer, by the way, be prepared to spend some time reading and earning your wings before really being able to progress in this game, because it's definitely not a quick-twitch pastime. The online emulator contains enhanced versions of the game along with a version that lets you edit your stats. But playing this with a desktop emulator is advisable so you can save your progress and have more control over keyboard commands, since I had trouble with function and other keys my Mac uses for various system operations. Finally, if you want the full immersive experience, the novella "The Dark Wheel," a sci-fi adventure detailing the history and politics of the Elite universe, can be read free at [www.iancgbell.clara.net/elite/dkwheel.htm](http://www.iancgbell.clara.net/elite/dkwheel.htm).



### Exile (A+)

Tackling this immediately after Elite is almost a necessity to avoid any North/South Korea confusion about landmark Beeb titles beginning with "E." If that seems absurd to anyone with an IQ above a barracuda, it should be noted both are space exploration games with similar packaging (including a novella) and quotes from Elite's co-author were used in Exile's ads. But this 1988 release is a far different and considerably more sophisticated game – and much more fun for me, although I suspect opinions are evenly split with Elite fans on this subject. The game casts the player as Mike Finn, a jetpack-clad explorer leading the rescue of a crew from ship sabotaged by "a psychotic renegade genetic engineer." It's co-programmed by the authors of the exploration classic Thrust and the well-regarded space shooter Starship Command, and saying it expands on the best of both concepts is as good a way to classify this game as any. There's adventure and RPG elements as well, with a huge amount of terrain to explore and plenty of puzzles to solve. There's also a vast array of other characters from natural creatures to robots, and elements such as water and fire to deal with in addition to space. The realism of the game's physics were hailed as revolutionary at the time and, despite its depth and complexity, it's pretty easy to learn the controls and basics of getting around. One thing I like (others might not) is Mike never dies – if he gets in serious danger he's teleported back to the last "safe" location reached. Finally, the game looks great. It boggles the mind to think all this is crammed into 32K of memory, although if your Beeb has more the game adds digitalized sound and speech. One other note: Exile was ported to numerous other computers and remained advanced enough to be voted game of the year on the Amiga when it finally reached that machine in 1991. I almost never award perfect grades, believing they should be reserved for history's few elite standouts, but after racking my brain for Exile's flaws I can't come up with any other than it's a hard game I'm not very good at. Yet.



### Killer Gorilla (C-)

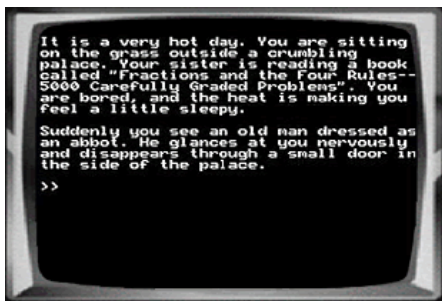
The screenshot of this unauthorized Donkey Kong clone looks great, fans constantly mention it as a favorite in retro forums and it's one of the few on any platform to include all four coin-op levels. So I went in thinking it might finally be a rival for my king-of-the-throne pick, Donkey King on the TRS-80 Color Computer. Sheesh, what a letdown. Those impressive standstill graphics turn into ugly, lurching lumps when animated. Mario's movement is similarly jerky, with jumps resembling the binary up/down teleporting of the Atari 2600. The inclusion of all four levels and a decent level of challenge certainly make this playable, especially if it's the rare purchase you were able to buy with your allowance as a kid, but those with options probably won't find themselves climbing much above street level. In a bad field of official contenders from the 1980s, this version would rank just south of average in a "Many Faces Of" matchup. Considering the Beeb's capabilities, that's inexcusable.





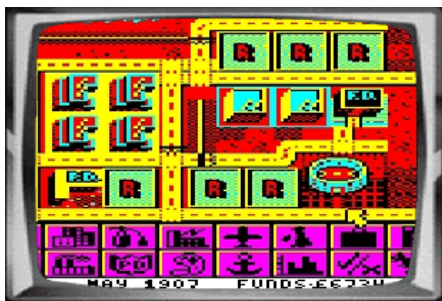
### Killer Gorilla 2 (B-)

I didn't expect much of what's – surprise – an unauthorized port of Donkey Kong Jr., but gave it a look anyhow after the officially licensed version wouldn't boot in the online emulator (I was intrigued because Atari hired the original KG programmer for the task). It's not perfect, but it certainly exceeds expectations. The game looks considerably better than KG – as good as any 8-bit version I remember – and plays much smoother. The small details of creature animation and behavior are true to the coin-op version, something missing far too often on all arcade ports. I wasn't completely happy with the responsiveness of the controls, missing a few jumps and falling to my death, but I'm not prepared to seriously downgrade it for that until I know if emulation is the culprit. One thing it does get penalized for is the countdown timer is incredibly fast. I stopped in a safe spot to take a couple of screenshots and was almost completely out of time after the brief interlude. One confession: I played this late in the writing of this column and didn't make it far enough to say if all four levels are included, but the grade is based on the assumption they are. Some entertaining bugs and tidbits are detailed at the Wikipedia entry for KG2, such as Atari commissioning Adrian Stephens to officially port Donkey Kong Junior to the BBC Micro after seeing Killer Gorilla. But the game was never released since they decided to abandon the Beeb, with DK2 finally appearing with the emergence of the internet.



### 'L' – A Mathematical Adventure (B+)

Since the Beeb is an educational machine, I booted this up and readied the snark thesaurus in anticipation of a too-easy derision of another math adventure, a dreadful genre where lousy programmers made a buck by huckstering them to unintentionally cruel parents. So I began L's quest of sitting outside an old palace, feeling bored to death while my (virtual) sister read from a book of fractions. And I kept playing. And finally I started writing – sketching, actually, as I made a map to keep track of where I was. Even though it's a plain text adventure with an unoriginal plot, it's also one of the better old-school adventures not made by Infocom I've played (strange how a game designed to make you smart can make you feel so stupid). The world is huge, the parser vocabulary decent, and the puzzles varied and imaginative. No, it's definitely not all about math, despite having to use commands from the start like GET TETRAHEDRON. One early puzzle, for instance, requires playing the right notes to "Three Blind Mice" on a piano. The math problems involve things like figuring out recipes, calculating angles to hit pool balls and filing down a blank key to fit locks. It is listed as a top-10 all-time Beeb game, according to the Association of Teachers of Mathematics, which sells a Windows version these days for a hefty £25 (exchange rate is \$1.54 to the pound, for those interested in doing the math).



### SimCity (B+)

Even if you don't like this type of game (I don't), this is a massively impressive effort for one reason: programmer Peter Scott squeezed it into 25K of RAM. That's 100 times smaller than the source code for the Amiga version he was handed to convert (which takes 25K just to determine if buildings are connected to a power station). It's probably not enough memory for the opening splash logo of the 70.6MB iPhone version, which I assume is among the most compact translations for modern platforms. Scott claims the Beeb version "has many more features than the original Commodore 64 one, yet is half the size." His boast is legit, since the C64 is "about as bare bones a version...as you'll ever see," according to Lemon 64, lacking police/fire stations,

disasters, trains, auto-bulldozer and much more. Let's get the bad of the Beeb version out of the way first: This thing is ugly, worse than any other version I've seen. It's more than a cosmetic handicap since the limited colors can make it difficult to discern the finer details of your urban planning. Otherwise it's pretty much the original version I first played 20 years ago on a black-and-white Mac. One minor bummer is it didn't boot in the online emulator on my Mac, but if you have a more sustaining interest in the game than I do it's probably best to use a desktop virtual machine anyhow so you can save your sprawl.



### Snapper (B-)

An unauthorized Pac-Man port that gets a review because it's a game available on every known platform on the universe, is easy to play and therefore a good yardstick against the competition (it was actually the first title I booted up for this column). The maze and monster AI aren't true to the arcade, but close enough to bear a real resemblance. One thing I would like is an option to start at higher levels. Incidentally, make sure you're playing version 1 if using the online emulator, which has the original Pac-Man and crew instead of the lawsuit-producing replacement cast (not sure what they are, other than pixelated and ugly). Atarisoft did release an official Pac-Man for the BBC, but it's a drab and slow effort in the C+/D- range. Tip: Snapper's programmer, Jonathon Griffiths, said in a 2009 interview there's a "white ghost" bug which works as follows: "Eat a power pill, then chase ghosts and eat them, sending their eyes back to the central cave. If you can then eat these eyes, they re-emerge as white ghosts, which can be eaten again."



### System 15000 (C+)

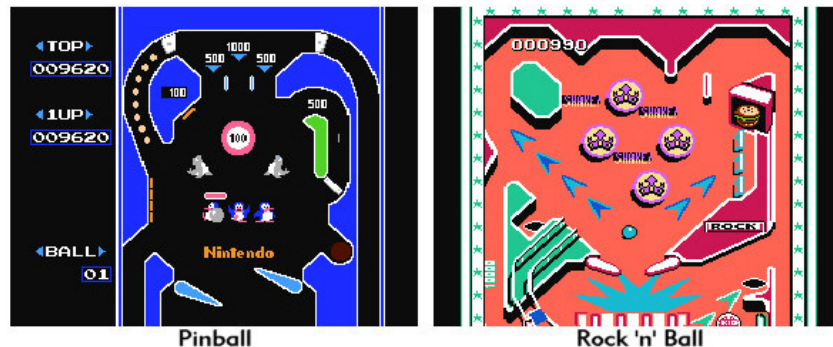
If I'd caught myself hacking into the teacher's grade book disk (it was just a typing class and I didn't change anything), this is the game I'd sic on myself when my detention was finished. It's not a Beeb original, but I've been wanting to try it forever and finding it in the BBC online emulator offered a perfect excuse. Your task is to hack into various systems to retrieve \$1.5 million an evil company stole from your friend, starting with a letter providing a single phone number and access code. After all my anticipation, it ended up being a game of hits and misses with the positives tilting the scale just enough to keep me playing (I did eventually grab a walkthrough to speed things up when I got stuck). The good is it feels completely authentic to hacking into a network back in 1984, with the dial-up line beeping and squawking authentically (in U.K. rather than U.S. phone tones) before connecting at a leisurely 300 baud. Displays of terminals at different locations are simple, but distinct by their text color and formatting. There's also a tension inherent to the task, especially when you're disconnected while the police are scanning your line, which builds anxiety to what may lie behind the whole sordid story. But this is where the negatives start making their presence known. First, the game is mostly about collecting codes that allow you to hack into more systems, without many dramatic messages from your network pals or incriminating e-mails from evil company officials. So you don't get much of a narrative and the ending is a complete dud, although I guess it's not like you'd be getting storytellers and ticker tape parades in real life. Maybe that'd teach me the life of a hacker isn't all its cranked up to be, or maybe I'd just raise my sights and target the CIA instead.



### Salute To The Silver Ball

Video pinball was nothing new by the time the NES was released. Digitized pinball simulations go back to the mid 1970's from standalone consoles to arcade cabinets to computer software to home console cartridges - you name it. Video pinball has been

around since the genesis of the video game industry. And why not, after all arcades began as halls for mechanical games and pinball, it's only natural that some electronic games would attempt to simulate what came before them. What the NES did have over the previous incarnations of video pinball was some graphical horsepower. Instead of just rough outlines of a simulated pinball playfield you could have bright colors, detailed graphics and fast movement. While a video recreation is no substitute for a the real thing, video pinball would become a genre onto itself. Sure, a digital ball may not be "live" like a real pinball but that doesn't mean the games can't be a lot of fun. The NES had a pretty decent, albeit small, line up of pinball games. The nice thing is that there really aren't any stinkers in the group. This is going to be a big one as we're going to touch on pretty much all the pinball games released for the console, including a couple that were Japan only. No order in particular but what better way to begin than with one of the launch games for the NES, simply titled Pinball.



**Pinball** is both one of the earliest Famicom releases as well as one of the original eighteen launch titles for the NES. While it's nothing to write home about it was a solid pinball simulation for the early days of both consoles. The table itself spans two screens vertically, flipping back and forth between each when the ball crosses the center of the table. Pressing any direction on the directional pad activates the left flipper while the B or A buttons activate the right flipper. The game is probably most remembered for a bonus stage featuring Mario attempting to rescue Pauline, his girlfriend from Donkey Kong fame. Actually Nintendo went as far as putting the image of Mario from the bonus stage on the front of the box. So basically Mario's second inclusion in the game was used to sell it to NES gamers. That's like saying Mike Tyson's Punch-Out is a Mario game because Mario makes a cameo as the referee. There is more to the game than just the bonus stage however. As with real pinball there are multiple targets to hit and objectives to complete for higher scores. The top half of the machine has a challenging shot around the left ramp as well as a short loop on the right side that activates the penguin targets. The lower playfield has playing card and number targets to activate as well as chicken and egg matching targets that activate bumpers in the side drains. The problem with the lower portion of the machine is how difficult it can be to get back up to the top. There's just so much stuff on the bottom it can be very difficult to get a clear shot back to the upper playfield. The easiest path back up is the left sink hole which leads to the bonus game but it too is a difficult shot to make. Granted the physics are still solid and the game continues to be fun to play even after all these years. Sound effects are decent but music, outside of the title screen, is nearly nonexistent. If you have an NES, you probably have this game.

**Rock 'n' Ball** starts out with a cool little animation of a reflective pinball that leads into an unsettling title screen. See, the title screen of the NES release has the VAP logo down at the bottom, a developer that made some of the worst games on the Famicom. Thankfully this is a good game and while I don't know which version came first, I'd venture a guess that VAP was simply the publisher of the NES version while Namco handled the development. Namco would actually release a slightly different version of this game on the Famicom but more on that in a moment. **Rock 'n' Ball** supports up to four players and offers four different types of pinball games. You have regular pinball, early era pinball / bagatelle, two player head to head pinball, and finally sports pinball. After selecting which table you'd like to play you then select one of six generic characters to play as. Regular Pinball has a playfield two screens high along with a third bonus stage that takes place on another table. It features a somewhat generic classic American pinball motif but is a solid table just the same. 9 Ball plays like the very earliest flipper driven pinball tables and reminds me of the early Bank-A-Ball series of tables. You place a wager on which sinkhole the ball will drop into and then attempt to will it that direction with nudging and limited flipper use. Battle Flipper is two player head to head pinball, with one player on each side of the table. There are three games in this series - Bomber, Thunder and Attack - all with different playfields and themes. Each player can send their flippers up or down when on the attack or attempting to defend their side of the table. The objective here is to get the ball to drain out on your opponent's side of the table. It's actually a lot of fun with two players. The last menu of games is Sports, which features Soccer and Ice Hockey. Both play kind of like Pong if it was on a pinball table, with a single moveable rotating flipper and a goalie for each player. Both play okay but neither are as entertaining as the three Battle Flipper tables. All the tables have the same solid ball physics and the feel of each table is easy to pick up on. The two player tables may take a little while to get used to with the changing perspective but it's not really an issue with the game.

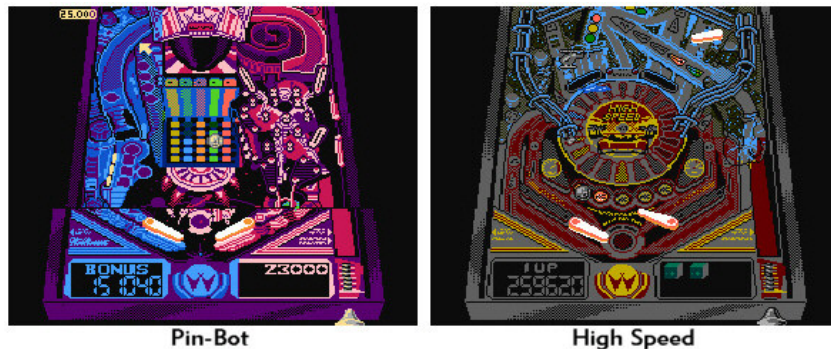
Controls are pretty much the same across all the tables when applicable. Left on the directional pad activates the left flipper while the A button is used for the right flipper. Right on the control pad nudges the machine from the left side while the B button does the same from the right side. Up or Down on the directional pad will move your flippers up or down along the playfield for the tables that support the function, such as the Battle Flipper games. Sound effects are solid and the music is quite catchy and varied. You get a lot of value with this game since it features four different game types and seven different tables. **Rock 'n' Ball** is worth a serious look if you enjoy pinball.





**Family Pinball** is the Famicom counterpart to Rock 'n' Ball on the NES. For the most part the two games are identical and in terms of gameplay they are. However Family Pinball does stand as its own game and is definitely worth taking a look at. The first difference is the Namco logo being reflected in the pinball on the introduction screen, which is a really cool little effect. Upon starting the game the first real change becomes apparent on the table selection screen. The generic "Pinball" table from Rock 'n' Ball is now a Pac-Man themed table. Once reaching the character select screen the second difference shows up. The generic characters of Rock 'n' Ball have been replaced with characters from Namco games, mainly consisting of characters that would be rather alien to NES players but popular in Japan. Pac-Man is easy to identify but you also have characters from Tower of Druaga, Wonder Momo and more. They may seem just as odd as the generic characters in Rock 'n' Ball to most American gamers, but I do always enjoy seeing Valkyrie make appearances in games as Valkyrie no Densetsu is a criminally underrated title outside of Japan. Getting back to the Pac-Man themed table, it shares the same basic gameplay as the Rock 'n' Ball "Pinball" table except with Pac-Man graphics and a redesigned upper playfield. While not radically different, the targets are moved around and the overall shape is just a little different. Personally I think the Pac-Man table plays better than the one in Rock 'n' Ball as the orientation of the bumpers allows for more fluid movement of the ball.

**Roller Ball** takes the idea of multiple screen pinball games sky high, literally. Instead of a playfield two screens high, Roller Ball doubles it to four fully connected screens. The theme of the game is that of the New York skyline, going all the way from the Atlantic Ocean on the lowest screen to the clouds above the city on the top screen, with the Empire State Building and Statue of Liberty in between. There is always something to do with multiple targets and ramps on each screen with the main objective to get back to the top and rack up a huge bonus. You can even activate a two ball multiball mode. While being over the top in terms of size, Roller Ball plays a lot like real pinball with very few "video pinball" type objectives. A drawback is that there is no nudge feature, control is like Nintendo's Pinball with the directional pad controlling the left flipper and the B or A button controlling the right flipper. Just the same, it really doesn't feel like much of a loss since the game plays so solidly and remains constantly entertaining. The playfield being bright and sunny up top while becoming a progressively darker nightscape as the ball gets closer to the bottom is another nice touch. The music is jumpy without becoming irritating which is welcomed since a game of Roller Ball can last quite awhile. A second mode called Match Play allows two players to play side by side on a single screen table. While the gameplay there is solid, it simply can't compete with the main Skyscraper table. Sadly Roller Ball isn't well remembered, which is a shame since this is one of the finest video pinball games to ever be released.

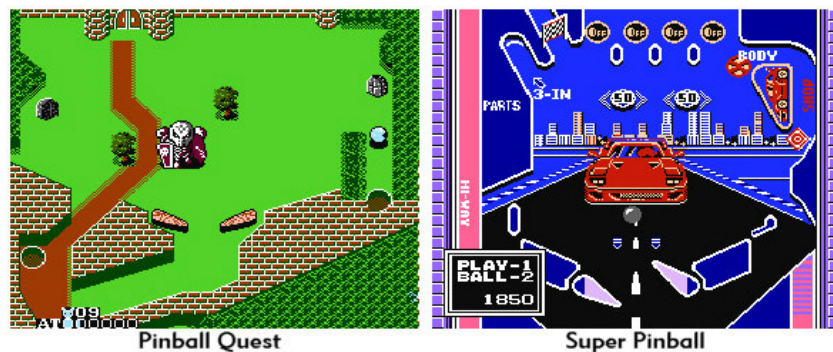


**Pin-Bot** is the first of two real life pinball recreations developed by Rare on the NES. Rather than create a digital pinball game that borrows from the original pinball machine, Rare chose to attempt to recreate the experience of playing the actual pinball machine in person. Nothing incredible these days with modern 3D pinball recreations but in 1990 it was pretty amazing. Pin-Bot itself was one of the most popular pinball machines ever produced, so much in fact it led to a series of games based around the property and Pin-Bot himself even had cameos on other pinball machines. The perspective is as if you were standing in front of the actual pinball machine while the playfield is presented in a continuous scroll that follows the ball, however the lower portion of the playfield is always on screen. This segmented playfield is both a blessing and a burden. Since the bottom of the screen always shows the bottom portion of the table, you always know what's going on down where the flippers are. This takes up about the bottom third of the entire screen. The remainder of the screen follows the ball as it scrolls upward. This is nice because it allows the playfield to be large and have an authentic angle with lots of detail. However it takes a little while to get used to the top and bottom portions of the screen seamlessly joining as the ball approaches the flippers. In other words as the ball rolls down from the top of the screen, the scrolling will stop as the two perspectives join. Many times you'll be watching the ball roll as the screen scrolls, only to have the ball abruptly pass your flippers, since in your mind you were waiting for the screen to continue to scroll. Of course this is something that can be overcome as time is spent playing the game, it could be considered part of the game's learning curve.

With an advanced pinball recreation come advanced controls, although they're a little strange. The directional pad controls the left flipper while the A button handles the right flipper. The B button is used for the plunger. Select nudges the table left and Start nudges the table right. While that sounds good on paper, moving all the way over to Select or Start for table nudging ends up

being a tricky burden. The problem comes from how fast and fluid the game plays. You can't be fumbling around with the control pad in this game, you simply don't have the time to do so. Since it's based off a real table, it requires nudging to get the most out of each ball. I simply never got used to using the Select and Start buttons for this feature. Aside from that minor gripe about the controls and perspective, the game is great. As pinball recreations go, you get a very detailed table with a very faithful presentation and decent coloring. Audio is equally as good with a nice background tune and plenty of voice clips that are well done. A few video pinball type additions do creep up, which is strange in a game which seems to try so hard to be a replica of an actual pinball machine but it's not that much of a bother.

**High Speed** was Rare's follow up to Pin-Bot, also based off a very popular actual pinball machine manufactured by Williams. It uses the same engine as Pin-Bot and uses the same perspective and basic presentation. The area in which High Speed changed things up a little were the controls. The B button now controls the right nudge with is more convenient than the Start button. However Select is still used for left nudge and it's still cumbersome. The Start button actually pauses the game now and allows for either the music or sound to be disabled. Obviously Rare was working out how to integrate as much real life pinball control onto the NES control pad as possible. It's still not perfect but at least they were trying and it is an improvement over the control in Pin-Bot. The table is nicely detailed but it just seems bland compared to the colors of Pin-Bot. This is partly due to High Speed's playfield being mainly composed of freeway ramps but the blue shadow used to add detail on the NES version just looks ugly. To me it just stands out too much and makes the whole playfield look muddy. Still it's a pretty faithful reproduction of the actual table but a little more video game like with collectibles that appear on the playfield. A lot more video pinball hazards show up here than were in Pin-Bot, which makes the game even less of a simulation. Sound is again great with lots of voice but it's not a better game than Pin-Bot. Realistically I don't know who Rare was making this game to appeal to. It's more of a side step than an advancement over Pin-Bot. You have slightly reworked controls that are a little better but then you have over all bland graphics. The playfield may be detailed but then you have all kinds of video game hazards and collectibles that don't exist on real pinball tables. Pin-Bot, for the most part, was a simulation of the original game. High Speed seems to have a bit of an identity crisis, which is a shame because it still plays decently.



**Pinball Quest** is the one game out of the bunch that seems a little ahead of its time. A flawed game yet still a solid attempt at doing something different with the genre. To start things off you have a selection of four different games: Pop! Pop!, Viva! Golf, Circus, and RPG Mode. All the tables feature the same controls which are almost identical to those in Rock 'n' Ball. Left on the control pad controls the left flipper while the A button does the same for the right flipper. Right on the control pad nudges the machine left while the B button nudges the machine right. Up and Down on the control pad move the flippers up or down along the playfield on tables that support it. This is by far the most seamless control method for playing Pinball on the NES, everything is right there at your fingertips in easy reach. The menu screen resembles an extreme close up of a pinball playfield and is a really slick way to present the different game modes. The first table, Pop! Pop!, is based around a 50's Americana theme. The table is red, white and blue with bowling pins, a jukebox and an all over 50's diner type feel. Next is Viva! Golf which, you guessed it, is based around a golf theme. When you pull the plunger to shoot the ball onto the playfield a little golfer girl shows up and tees off with the pinball, complete with 8 bit golf game sound effects. The playfield has little moles or gophers that pop up and bounce the ball around, which I think is a cute touch. Circus is pinball under the big top with clowns, lions, seals - what you'd expect from a table called Circus. All three tables have great music and sound and play extremely solid. Each is two screens high with lots of variety between each including bonus rounds. These three tables alone would make for a solid game cartridge but they end up being an afterthought when it comes to the fourth menu selection, RPG Mode.

The RPG Mode is where the "Quest" comes into play. The easiest way to explain it would be to take an adventure game like The Legend of Zelda, turn the player character into a pinball, then control him via a set of moveable flippers. Objectives need to be completed to open up progressive areas. For instance you may need a key to open up a door but to collect the key you have to defeat a boss. However to make the boss appear you may have to defeat a series of smaller enemies. Of course every function from fighting enemies, breaking down barriers or collecting items is accomplished shooting the hero into the object with the flippers. Between each stage there is an item shop where upgrades can be purchased, such as more powerful flippers or bumpers to block the drains on the sides or bottom of the stage. This begs the question, is Pinball Quest really an RPG? Well, yes and no. Upgrades are purchased based upon the gold you earn defeating enemies and targets on a battlefield. You're on a quest to rescue a princess. You level up after filling an experience meter by defeating enemies. The more powerful you are the easier bosses will fall while if you're weak then you'll be in for a rough ride. I guess it has all the basic elements of an RPG such as stats, shops, enemy encounters, a grand objective - yet it just doesn't seem all that engaging. The later tables in RPG Mode do get more interesting and it seems like this would make the gameplay pick up quite a bit but that's just not the case. Every time the ball goes down the center drain on the lower portion of a level, you're dropped back to the previous shop. Then the game adds insult to injury by making you walk back down the hallway, manually, to replay the previous level. Granted the objective is usually already uncovered in plain sight upon your return but you'll end up playing the same stages over and over again. It gets extremely boring, extremely fast. This is in essence RPG level grinding, except on a pinball machine. If that sounds tedious, believe me, it's even far worse in person. So Pinball Quest ends up being a game with three great standard pinball tables and an RPG Mode that I really want to like but just can't seem to. The more I play it, the more sense it makes that RPG Mode was the selection at the bottom of the table menu, rather than the headlining game.



**Super Pinball** is our only title this column that was a Famicom exclusive, although at one time it was tentatively going to be localized as Super Sushi Pinball. First off this title isn't to be confused with the amazing Super Nintendo / Super Famicom pair of pinball games under the Super Pinball title, this has nothing to do with those. The game starts out by showing some mahjong tiles and then takes you to a pinball table. The table itself seems to be themed around a road rally, in fact it kind resembles an OutRun or Rad Racer themed pinball table. Graphically things look pretty good and there's a nice amount of color. However nearly every time a target is hit there's a disorienting flash effect that quickly becomes annoying. Also the ball always feels extra heavy which slows down gameplay. It's as if the entire table is coated with molasses or something but is at a steep angle. So while your shots up seem like they're fighting to gain distance, the return roll down is faster than ever. It seems like there's some decent RPG type elements to the table, such as upgrading your car, but it just plays so horribly I doubt anyone would stick with it. The poor physics and even more poorly laid out targets simply make it a pain to play. Every other game I've taken a look at in this column has had solid physics and ball control. Essentially the ball did what you would assume it would do, what an actual pinball would probably do. Sure each of the games have a learning curve but at least they were consistent. Super Pinball is frustrating from the start and it just continues to get worse the more you play. Bad physics, inconsistent ball control, impossibly hard to hit targets and tiny ramps equal one of the worst video pinball games ever created. As for the mahjong tiles at the beginning, I have no idea if they later come into play since I wasn't able to get very far. If there's a game in this grouping to avoid, this is it.

Rounding things up here, it's easy to see that pinball games on the NES were quite diverse. You have a launch title for the system, attempts at recreating real pinball machines, experimental hybrid ideas and games that take the traditional idea of pinball and run with it. Granted my favorite video pinball games would be found elsewhere, on the PC Engine / TurboGrafx-16 (Alien Crush, Devil's Crush, Time Cruise) and DOS PC (Silverball, Epic Pinball) to be precise. Still, pinball on the NES is a genre that shouldn't be overlooked. Among the handful of titles that were released, all pinball wizards should be able to find at least one game to interest them. Pop one into your NES and Shoot Again!

"InsaneDavid" also covers all types of video gaming at <http://www.classicplastic.net/dvgi>



After all of the complaints with the look of the last issue, I decided to redesign RTM and make it act more like a regular magazine. Hopefully this new look is more well received; I mean it can't be liked any less than the other one could it? Considering it's a new year and a new look for RTM, I am hoping that things go smoothly in the future. Finding someone who can act as a full-time replacement for editing the magazine is one of my top priorities, since as much as I love editing RTM, I would like to step away from it and get a chance to contribute some articles from time to time.

One thing I do want to mention before signing off is that I appreciated the input people gave on last month's Word Press look. It was nice to get feedback from others, which is why I plan on keeping feedback as a feature of the magazine, since I think it can only help the magazine grow in the future!