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Press Fire To Begin

by Donald Lee

Welcome to the February Issue of Retrogaming Times Monthly. At the time I wrote my columns and the Introduction to last month's issue, I didn't realize that we were publishing Issue #80. For those who aren't aware, Retrogaming Times Monthly was started after Tom Zjaba decided to end publishing the original Retrogaming Times magazine. The original Retrogaming Times magazine (started in 1997) ceased publication in April 2004 at issue #80.

With the publication of last month's issue, we matched the number of issues the original had. With this month's issue, we will have surpassed the original and that is something all the current contributors and readers of Retrogaming Times Monthly should be proud of.

In other news, I was reading some Apple II news on the A2-Central website (http://www.a2central.com) recently. Among the news I saw was an interview done by Wired magazine on Bill Budge. Budge was the creator of Raster Blaster and Pinball Construction Set. I found it interesting as we had just done a pinball issue in January.

For those who are interested in reading the interview, here is the link:

http://www.wired.com/gamelife/2011/01/bill-budge-pioneer/

Please enjoy this month's issue and see you next month.

Retrogaming News

The Midwest Gaming Classic
Saturday, March 26 from 10:00 AM to 8:00 PM and Sunday, March 27 from 10:00 AM to 5:00PM

The Midwest Gaming Classic is the largest all-encompassing electronic gaming trade show in the Midwest, celebrating it's 10th anniversary in 2011! Take a look at a brief introduction from one of the event founders to see what to expect.

Our 10th anniversary event will be held on Saturday, March 26, 2011, from 10:00am to 8:00pm and Sunday, March 27, 2011, from 10:00am to 5:00pm. Also, don't miss our Arcade: Factory to Floor tour Friday, March 25th.

The Midwest Gaming Classic is also a great opportunity for people who usually only play games online to get acquainted with electronic gaming and play some great classic arcade games.

Southern California Classic Collectors
Saturday, March 5 2011 12:00 PM to 12:00 AM

New Venue, New Location, New Attractions, Old Games (just the way we like 'em!).

SC3 is teaming up with Nucleus, an art gallery and store in the northern L.A. area, to bring you a blowout arcade and console event. The party will take place on Saturday, March 5, 2011, from 12 noon to 12 midnight, at the Nucleus gallery in Alhambra, CA. Admission to the event is $10 if you pre-register online or $15 at the door. Visit the Nucleus event registration page to order your tickets.

Nucleus is already making a name for itself among videogamers by featuring cutting-edge exhibits of game-inspired artworks and live nerdcore/chiptune concerts. Now it will be introduced to classic gamers in a big way as SC3 brings over 40 classic arcade machines and dozens of vintage home consoles to the exhibit floor for 12 hours of pure, nonstop gaming. Live music, featuring 8-bit and chiptune artists, will begin late in the evening. An all-videogame version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" will challenge your knowledge of gaming trivia. Traditional SC3 attractions, including SC3-TV, '80s music, a video game trading room, and Rock Band will also return. Free refreshments will not be provided at this event – food and drink are not allowed within the gallery – but food trucks will be offering fare outside, and there are any number of local restaurants within easy reach of the venue.

You must register at Nucleus to attend this event. Go to our website (by clicking the link at the top of this entry) for more information.

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 and he'll make sure to announce it in a future issue.

McAllister M.D.?

I haven't been in North America for the past two months, and in that time a lot has happened: A Tron-off, a new doubles Joust world record, Donkey Kong has changed hands – again! And my own world record is no more. But as I was packing my bag for a wedding in India I interviewed classic arcade game extraordinaire John McAllister: Asteroids (marathon) World Champion, Joust (marathon) World Champion, and Robotron (5 lives) World Champion, and about another 10 or more world records on classic arcade games, but it was the aforementioned three games that interested me most. I wanted to talk to John about the time length of games and different skill sets required. His answers (which are short. John's not a man of many words. He's very much to the point) got me thinking about a few things I'd read in the past, so please bare with me as I introduce two medical practitioners – an Australian, and an American.

Australian brain surgeon Dr. Charlie Teo is known for his surgery on what many other surgeons around the world would see as inoperable. Some of his contemporaries see him as brilliant, even a hero. While others see him as a reckless maverick offering false hope to his patients. The brain surgery Dr. Teo performs requires many hours. In an interview with Andrew Denton on ABC TV's Enough Rope:

Denton: Thank you you've just come from a hard day at the brain is that right?

Dr. Teo: Ah that's right [laughs].

Denton: How many operations have you done today?

Dr. Teo: We just did the one operation on a little girl and took out three well actually a total of eight tumours out of her brain, but three of them were quite large and the rest were relatively small ones.

Denton: And how long was that operation?

Dr. Teo: We started at 7:30, finished at about two o'clock so what's that yeah about five, five hours all up, five and a half hours.

Denton: Not a particularly long operation?

Dr. Teo: No.

Denton: No. What's the longest operation you've ever had?

Dr. Teo: Ah 26 hours.

I have a good deal of difficulty sitting through a movie without a toilet break, obviously not a problem for Dr. Teo. There is a book about Dr. Teo's unique skills: Life in his Hands. The book discusses many things about his life as a brain surgeon, including his strict exercise routine. Dr. Teo needs to be fit to sustain a focussed mind and a steady set of hands. He keeps fit by doing various activities including intense rowing. Let me tell you John's hours of alertness, and his exercise routine.

John's Joust world record was 50 plus hours, and his Asteroids world record was 57 plus hours. The strange thing about this is the casualness John has in regard to these ridiculous length of consciousness. The British Medical Journal, published a study in 2000 having done extensive research in Australia and New Zealand on the sleep deprived skills of drivers in cars. Researchers found that people who drove after being awake for 17–19 hours were worst drivers than those who had a blood alcohol level of .05 percent (the legal limit for drunk driving in Australia). After 21 hours of being awake and driving the equivalent performance as a driver was that of a driver with a blood alcohol content of .08 percent – this is the blood alcohol limit in the country where I'm currently domiciled – Canada. Logic suggests that John could be well drunk and still beat most 'ordinary' people at his game of choice.

I asked John if he had any daylight hallucinations, or giddiness, anything that might suggest it was time to go to bed when he played for world record marathon scores (I also wanted to find something that suggested he was an 'ordinary' person like the rest of us). He said: "I would see a shadow out of the corner of my eye."

I've had sleep deprivation; I was at university at the time, I was working pretty hard. I think the worst hallucination I had was when I was smelling the room for a friend's mother, then looked for her in a pile of clothes next to the bed. I don't think I had slept much for a couple of weeks – I was in no condition to play any video games, and I certainly wasn't fit to drive a car). I'm amazed at John's ability to stay awake and concentrate for hours – days – on end. I don't understand how he does it. I've met John, he looks fit, but maybe he did more exercise than I thought. But no. He does very little. So little in fact it hardly seems worth mentioning. He said: "I do cardio. I went for a ride for half an hour a day, for about week before the Joust game. For Asteroids I walked an hour a day."

I still find his responses weird as I write this, especially after meeting Joel West at the 2010 Big Band. Joel was getting ready for an attempt at the world record on Frenzy, a marathon that would require about two days of staying awake. Joel was on a diet of barley sugar and water to shrink his stomach in preparation for the game. This way hunger wouldn't distract him, and presumably toilet breaks (he looked at lot thinner than he does in Chasing Ghost). John does none of that. "Nope. I eat the whole time." John said.

Now I know that the type of surgery Dr. Teo performs doesn't allow for any error, nor does driving a car (rarely). It's not as if you get five lives in either of these tasks, and you don't get bonus lives for performing particularly well. Nevertheless, there is, apparently, a link between video games and surgery. Enter the American medical man: Dr. James 'Butch' Rosser of Beth Israel Medical.

In an article titled: Surgeons may err less by playing video games. The reason a surgeon may 'err' less thanks to video games, Dr. Rooser argues, is that much of today's surgery involves minute incisions into the body, inserting little camera inside sending images to a video screen, and the surgical tools are controlled remotely by the doctor while watching the screen. Video game enthusiasts, does this sound somewhat familiar? Dr. Rosser believes there is a useful link. He believes playing games like Super Monkey Ball can help hone the necessary skills for surgeons today, I quote: "This is a nice, wholesome game. No blood and guts. But I need the same kind of skill to go into a body and sew two pieces of intestine together." If this is true, the type of skill he's talking about on a game like Super Monkey Ball couldn't possibly be more difficult than Robotron. Not a chance.

John's Robotron (five lives only) world record score of 1,236,950 points took only 11 minutes. He was the first person to officially pass one million points on this setting. That's how insanely difficult this game is. If you can stay alive for 12 minutes there's a good chance you will have passed his score. 11 minutes! The new world record score on Donkey Kong took over two hours. For those of you who don't know, Robotron requires two 8-way joysticks, one for movement and one for firing. Personally, I think Williams made the greatest games of the Golden Era, and I personally think Robotron is the most difficult game that Williams produced in that era. There are no safe spots, there is no point pressing, there are no patterns to learn by route. It really is a game of steady hands and quick decision (for those of you who think Defender is a better and more difficult Williams game, well, John is ranked 3rd).

Now you're probably wondering where I'm going with all this medical stuff meets video games. I'm not suggesting that John should go and start performing root canal therapy on any of us who don't want to fork out the dollars, nor am I suggesting he remove his own kidney should it give him any trouble. But I am suggesting that credit should be given where credit is due. Combining John's epic ability to remain awake and functioning for excessive hours (days), and his amazing skill set with a joystick, may not give him recognition by any medical practioneers in the world, or by any medical colleges, or hospitals, or journals, but, I would like someone to give him a PhD of sorts for his continued research into higher point scoring of classic video games. Dr. McAllister, I think you've earned it.

A Valentine To My Newest Binary Beloved

I'm not attracted to women who wear makeup, revealing clothes or have Playboy figures. And if they light up a cigarette it immediately negates the rest of their qualities.

Everybody has their quirks that draws them toward or away certain people and, luckily for companies not contending for prom queen, the same certainly applies to computers. To think anyone could be smitten at first sight with a Sinclair ZX81 or Radio Shack Color Computer seems laughable, but my infatuation with both developed into enduring love that remains alive today.

I don't know about others, but some tiny detail, rather than the whole package, is usually behind the initial spark with things living and not. That certainly applies to the latest object of my affection and, as with people, it's odd enough to be a bit embarrassing to admit. (Relax, it's not a foot fetish video hidden in the ROM.)

The BBC Micro, affectionately known as the Beeb, possesses mind-blowing vital statistics for a 1981 computer, as I wrote in my introduction column to the machine last month. That was enough to pause my wandering gaze, but what got me chatting it up is a feature probably ignored by 99 percent of its users. Here's guessing nobody reading this will be seduced by this sonnet from the Beeb:

```
10 PRINT "HI! THIS IS A FEW LINES OF A SAMPLE BEEB PROGRAM – HONEST"
20 MOV R0,#32
30 LOOP
40 SWI 0
50 ADD R0,R0,#1
60 CMP R0,#126
70 PRINT "I AGREE, THIS DOES MAKE ME BEAUTIFUL."
```

For those without a clue about what is being communicated (as is often the problem in real life), everything but the first and last line of code is actually 6502 assembly language. The Beeb's BASIC contained its own assembler, a feature I've never heard of on another computer, allowing anyone familiar with that primitive dialect to add some blazing speed to one of computing's slowest languages. Once I discovered that, all the Beeb's other virtues shinned much brighter and its flaws – um, I'm sure I'll discover them as the puppy love stage passes – went unnoticed or chalked up as cute quirks.

I went through several start-and-stop phases of just dipping my toes in assembly language on other machines, but never saved up the $100 necessary for a decent assembler/textbook package (some new game that was cheaper somehow always seemed to claim my savings). Consequently, my hopes of a career in computer programming never got past the $25 earned for one tiny article in a magazine. The Beeb's BASIC also allows structured programming, another skill that might have changed my career had I learned it then before it became the standard for all commercially viable software.

This being a gaming publication, my brief serenade of the Beeb might seem out of place, except for one thing: the awesome potential BBC BASIC offers for modern for homebrew efforts.

A testament to the ingenuity of BBC BASIC is its conversion to nearly every computer platform I can find, including today's Windows and Macs, again something I haven't seen elsewhere with the exception of Microsoft's BASIC. That means forums and programming hubs stretch far beyond the already vast BBC Micro community into other groups, most prominently Windows users. Reviews of some of the better projects will be part of future capsule reviews here – although major commercial titles will continue to dominate – but getting started is as easy as Googling "BBC BASIC games."

For those wanting to start their own projects, downloadable BBC emulators are many, although after much hunting I retreated to the familiar MESS emulator on my Mac since I'm familiar with it after using it to replicate any number of older machines I own or wished I did. Manuals and programming examples are also plentiful, as are enhancements that I strongly suggest people avoid if they want to maintain true compatibility with the larger community.

Not the most romantic words I've penned (although, sadly, probably not much better than those I have), but any relationship where you're willing to work on long-held deficiencies has to be a promising one.

Apple II Incider

by Donald Lee

Not Always Fun And Games

January was a busy month for me. Beyond hanging out with friends to begin the 2011 year, I traveled to Virginia a week later for work. I work in a Sales organization and our company dedicated to have an All-Hands Sales Kickoff meeting in our corporate office. We had folks from California, Chicago, and London traveling to Virginia for several days. In addition, my team stayed an additional day for more meetings. While the flying and all day meetings were tiring, it was great to catch up with my own team as well as meeting folks I had never seen before.

For this particular month, I am going to take a different route than my usual game discussion. While RTM is primarily a game magazine, at the end of the day, no matter what application you're using, you should be having fun. This month, I'm going to discuss a few non-game programs I enjoyed throughout my youth.

THE PRINT SHOP (Br0derbund)

I can't say that I am a creative person. I can't draw to save my life. I don't play a musical instrument or sing particularly well. However, one particular thing stands out from my youth. I loved played with The Print Shop from Br0derbund. My first exposure was when I was in grammar school. My computer teacher had several of my classmates and I demo various software on our Apple II computers to parents during a nigh visit to the school.

I was assigned to demo The Print Shop and had great fun picking the graphics and designing the layout of a few things. The Print Shop could print cards, flyers and banners. After that night, The Print Shop must have made a great impression as I eventually got my parents to purchase the program for me.

From about 6th grade on, I used The Print Shop on my Apple IIe and trusty Epson MX-80 printer to print cards for friends, teachers and others. I printed banners and flyers for events. The Print Shop remained in use into high school when Epyx (yes, the game company) released Print Magic.

The Print Shop's graphics had always been clunky and designs a little limited. Print Magic took the concept of The Print Shop to another level and I used it for a few years after.

However, The Print Shop was my first "desktop publishing" program and I'll always great memories of using it in my youth.

APPLEWORKS

Appleworks was one of the first integrated office applications that included a word processor, spreadsheet and database all in one program. While Appleworks was originally released in 1984, I don't recall using it until late high school or early college.

Many people may ask why Appleworks was fun. Well, I used all three applications for different things. I used Appleworks to type letters to friends and write Letters to the Editor. These days, writing letters is passe due to emails and texting. Back in the old days, writing letters was the way to go.

I used the database to track all the programs I had in my Apple II library. The most fun I had was using the spreadsheet. As a basketball coach, numbers and statistics are important to me. I created my first ever spreadsheet that auto calculated players shooting percentages, scoring averages and other things.

I heavily thank Appleworks for teaching me the basics of word processing, spreadsheets and databases. I think it was a benefit I learned to use these programs fairly early and using Word, Excel and other applications these days are much easier.

APPLE II TELECOMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMS + 2400 BAUD MODEM

An old high school friend had attended a four year university in the East Coast and mentioned something about Electronic Mail. I had gone to a junior college instead and tried to figure out the mystery of email. Yet, in my two years at junior college, I never figure out if the school provided email to students.

When I transferred to a four year university, it was then I was introduced to email and the Internet. I signed up for a Unix account and was given my first email address. I used Pine to read and write email. I used Tin to read Usenet groups and other programs to look up information. During those years, Mosaic was the first graphical browser then the Internet was still text and static graphics at that time. It wasn't until a few years later that Netscape Navigator made it's debut. Given that I still had an Apple IIe at home, I spent a great amount of time at my school's lab playing with email and surfing the Internet.

However, one summer, my friend and I went shopping at some computer thrift shops. I found some equipment that changed my life. I had purchased my first ever 2400 baud modem. With the modem and a serial card on my Apple IIe, I was now able to dial up to my school's network and access the Internet from home. I spent hours at my computer reading news and other things.

I remained using a modem throughout college and after I graduated before I starting using DSL. Despite the advance of the Internet and the use of graphical interfaces for computers, I still retain a love for dial up Internet and Unix accounts. My DSL line goes down every now and then so I easily switch over the dialup. I retain the usage of a Unix shell account for personal and work uses. At work, I still like using the DOS prompt for certain things. This is all due to the fact that I had no graphical user interface to use on my Apple II and everything is text based. Those were some great days.

All images in this article courtesy of http://school.anhb.uwa.edu.au/personalpages/kwessen/web/Collection.html

Galaxian

Before we begin with this issue's NES'cade I want to announce a couple changes for the column. Although no one other than myself has known it, I've always had a couple rules for this long running part of Retrogaming Times Monthly. NES'cade began as a solution to the problem of running out of NES arcade conversions published by Tengen for my original column. Once the supply of these games were exhausted, I would be out of stuff to write about and the column would end. So a couple months before my regular Tengen column was to run out of content, I came up with the idea of doing the same but with any publisher. Arcade ports have been big business since the earliest days of video games in the home and they continue to be a profitable part of the industry to this day. Now that I would be walking face first into the entire NES library, I had to lay down some ground rules to prevent the column from becoming a simple series of NES game reviews.

Rule 1: Each game had to be in the arcade before being on the NES. I call this the no reverse-conversion rule. In other words, there had to be an arcade release prior to the NES version. The game can't begin on the home hardware and then appear in the arcade. An example of this I can think of off the top of my head is Cosmic Chasm on the Vectrex, which later had an expanded arcade version made.

Rule 2: Each game had to have a US release on the NES. This makes sense since this column is from an American perspective. It's okay if the arcade release was originally Japan only, as long as the game had a legitimate NES release.

The second rule leaves out a lot of classic arcade games that appeared on the Famicom (what became the NES outside of Japan) but never had NES releases. This was mainly due to the amount of time between when the Famicom versions were released and when the NES was picking up steam. By the time the NES was popular, some of these games were already over seven years old. With limited shelf space and Nintendo's tight manufacturing regulations, it makes perfect sense that these games never had NES releases. It's a bit of a shame to us retrogamers as there were some great ports of some classic arcade games. So in the era of emulation, compilation releases, multicarts, gaming history studies, easy importing and a strong and ongoing retrogaming movement around the world - I'm throwing my second rule out the window. From time to time NES'cade will compare and contrast Famicom conversions against their arcade counterparts going forward. I'm going to kick things off with one of my favorites, Galaxian.

Galaxian was released to arcades in 1979 by Namco and was essentially their answer to Taito's Space Invaders which took the world by storm just one year earlier. Galaxian took the basic game play of Space Invaders and made it faster, more colorful and increased the challenge and variety. Enemy invaders would now break off from the convoy and directly attack the player's ship, running different attack formations and moving at varying speeds. Galaxian would be the game that bridged the inventiveness of 1978's Space Invaders to the refinement of 1981's Galaga. While Space Invaders is regarded as a shining classic and Galaga became the common game player's go to classic shooter, Galaxian instead became a bit of a footnote to the general gaming populace at large. This is a shame since Galaxian is a very challenging and rewarding game, elegant in its simplicity.

The player takes control of the space fighter Galaxip in a battle against a series of never-ending alien squadrons. Each squadron, or convoy as they are called in the game, consists of 30 low value invaders, 8 middle value invaders, 6 high value escort invaders and a pair of Galaxian flagships. Each stage begins with the squadron appearing at the top of the screen, moving back and forth. Unlike Space Invaders the entire squadron doesn't descend as a unit but rather invaders will break away from the main group and dive at the bottom of the screen as they shoot, usually going after the Galaxip. If an invader gets passed the Galaxip it will return from the top of the screen and rejoin the squadron in formation. Point values for all invaders are doubled when they are away from the squadron so if you're looking to rack up a high score, shoot the invaders when they are on the attack. If you'd rather just blast everything on screen that's fine too, as the squadron is always open to your assault. The middle value invaders will make longer and faster left to right sweeps as they descend, requiring some fancy maneuvers to shoot them down or avoid them all together. The escort invaders aren't too bad on their own but they will often break off from the squadron in pairs, with a Galaxian flagship in tow. These can be both a problem and an opportunity. While the Galaxian flagships have a higher point value while attacking, that

value increases even more based upon how their escorts are taken out. Shooting both escort invaders and then the flagship while the formation attacks will yield 800 points for the flagship, not to mention the 100 points a piece for the escorts, a cool 1,000 points total. However if you shoot the flagship first or only shoot one of the escorts before hitting the flagship, the flagship bonus will decrease. Once the squadron gets down to just a few invaders remaining, they will blitz the Galaxip, diving constantly without forming back up at the top of the screen. Any Galaxian flagships that may still be on screen during the blitz will only make a few passes before flying away. When the next squadron of invaders appears the flagships that escaped will be at the top of the formation. A maximum of four flagships may form up at the top of the squadron if they continue to get away during the blitz.

While a powerful craft, the Galaxip does have its limitations. The Galaxip can be moved left or right at the bottom of the screen but cannot advance up or down. Additionally only one blaster shot from the Galaxip can be on screen at a time. So if you miss the squadron completely you must wait until your shot clears the top of the screen until you can shoot again. This doesn't seem like too much of a problem, and it takes less than a second for a shot to clear the screen, but this is one of the most challenging aspects of the game. Missing a shot when the invaders are diving fast and closing in can mean a quick death. You have to make every shot count, especially as the invaders get faster and faster as the stages progress. Success rarely comes in the form of rapidly tapping away at the fire button in Galaxian.

Arcade Original | Famicom Version

I play a lot of Galaxian. In fact a Galaxian cocktail table rests less than two feet away from where I'm writing this column. I'm also pretty good, not record breaking good, not even close but I can hold my own and get a solid play out of a quarter. The Famicom version is one of the earlier titles on the hardware, it was actually Namco's first game on the system. Even with how young the hardware was at the time, the game is pretty impressive. Galaxian in the arcade used a vertically oriented display and the Famicom version does a decent job of squishing the graphics down to a horizontal orientation without changing how things look. The sprites are a little squished down and stretched out but not by much. If anything the area where you really lose screen real estate is between the squadron and the Galaxip. This makes the game a little easier than the arcade version since you're right up on the squadron to begin with and can quickly take them out before things get too crazy in the earlier stages. The NES port of Galaga had this same problem. The flag markers for current stage and Galaxips in reserve have been relocated to the top of the screen near the score information, freeing up some space at the bottom of the screen. The colors are vibrant and look good although the starfield is much less densely packed than it was in the arcade.

Control is fast and accurate - left, right and fire - pretty hard to mess up. Sound is also really good with accurate reproduction of game sounds although the enemy droning sound is nowhere near as intense as it is on the arcade hardware. In addition to the difference in screen orientation making the game easier the game is just, well, easier. On the first few stages you can have almost the entire squadron taken out before the flagships and escorts will begin to attack. Things get better the further you get into the game and it starts to play more frantically, which is when things get really good. Still, even early on when the game is playing slow and easy, it still feels like Galaxian. While other home ports of Galaxian looked good, sounded nice and played solid, most just didn't "feel" like Galaxian. The Famicom version excels in this regard because in addition to the sounds and visuals, the game plays exactly how Galaxian should. The scoring works properly, the enemies react how they should, it plays like a slightly miniaturized version of the original. While I understand that a release of this game on the NES would have been a mistake during the retail era of the console, it doesn't mean the game isn't worth playing. I'd put the Famicom version of Galaxian as my favorite classic conversion of the title. It may not be perfect but it's close and really showed that the Famicom could play more arcade games than just Nintendo developed titles. No substitute for the original but if you have to play it on the Famicom / NES hardware you'll have a good time.

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

Donkey Kong Country

Hello, and this is James Sorge back with Dual Perspective, the column that reviews games from both the playing and the World Record Perspectives. This month, the victim is “Donkey Kong Country”, the rebirth of the Donkey Kong series on the SNES.

Graphics: 10/10
One of the best looking games ever bar none. This game has enough eye candy and more to keep a casual gamer interested for a very long time. It definitely showed what the SNES was capable of and holds its own even today

Sound: 10/10
The music will keep you going. It sounds good and you will be singing the tunes to this game even if you don't like the gameplay that much. It stands out among other video game tracks.

Difficulty: 5.5/10
A fairly average game. This is one where the average player will be able to pick it up and keep up with it. Secret rooms provide plenty of one-ups among other things, so it's relatively easy going.

Replay Factor: 2/10
For me, this game was not that fun to play through, as the enemies kind of bored me, and it felt like your classic eye and ear candy game. It didn't have the charm that Super Mario Bros. or other good platformers did and really fell flat on its face. I haven't bought another Donkey Kong Country game since.

The World Record Perspective:
Where other games have disparities in time, Donkey Kong Country tends to have similar times on both the SDA and Twin Galaxies sites (within 5 minutes of each other on the standard track). If you're going to play this game, you pretty much know what time you're going to need to beat.

- **SDA Time (with glitches):** 23 minutes, by Timothy "tjp7154" Peters.
- **TG Time (without glitches):** 28 minutes, by Carlos C. Krueger.
- **101% Run**: 44 minutes, by Adam "Lucid Fala" Sweeney.

The game got a recent update on the glitch side in 2010, but the “no glitches” run would make a great challenge as it hasn't been topped since 2002. The 101% run is 3 years old, so that’s another long standing record that you could set your sights on. It would be tough to break these records, but you know the times and can practice for it.

The Penguin Says:
"Overall I rate this game a **6/10** with a World Record potential of **3/5** (beatable, but will take some practice. The game might get really competitive with the Wii version that just came out too)."

How A Religious Buzz In Ancient Persia Begat Handheld Video Gaming

Boy sees girl. Girl sees boy. Boy invites girl to play his handheld Head-to-Head Football game. Sparks fly.

I'd love to know how many times that scene occurred in real life. To me it's about as elusive as seducing a girl with porn. I'm sure it happens, but not in any version of the world I inhabit.

As I kick off this column on vintage standalone games (LED/LCD handhelds, tabletop, etc.) and the various ways of playing them in the modern era, I'm unable to think of a single moment in my 35-plus years of video gaming having anything to do with romance, a theme suggested for this month's RTM. So, forced to troll for another connection, the most natural one seems to be the ultimate result of true love: birth. (OK, biologically that's the byproduct of sex, which doesn't eliminate Custer's Revenge from the topic, but since love itself is illogical bear with me).

It's hard to say exactly what qualifies as the first handheld/portable electronic game. Browsing through decades of "wish book" Christmas catalogues, it quickly becomes clear that 1) a lot of stuff classified as toys in the pre-PC (in both senses) era was way cool compared to now and 2) the date of the "first" game can vary by decades depending on what you think qualifies.

The first battery may date back to the Iranian dynasty in Mesopotamia around 200 A.D., where ceramic pots containing rolled-up sheets of copper, an iron rod and some type of food acid acting as an electrolyte may have been used to produce electric shocks as a religious experience (according to the always-reliable Wikipedia). While doubtless entertaining – at least for spectators – hopefully everyone will stipulate this doesn't qualify.

Fast forward to the end of the 19th century and we get one of the holy grails of handheld gaming: the dry cell battery, which was miniaturized into the D-cell in 1898. Skip ahead another 60 years and battery-operated toys begin showing up in Christmas

catalogues with some frequency, although they were mostly walkie-talkies and noisemakers at that point. One electronic tabletop game, however, was nearing its peak of popularity. I couldn't determine when they scaled down from large 30-pound AC-powered units to battery-operated ones small enough to be classified as a standalone, but they deserve mention for nostalgia and the somewhat surreal experience of playing them on a tiny modern video gaming platform.

Hint: It's also a timely choice for a February column about games, although back then January was the norm.

Electric Football, featuring those vibrating fields that jerk players around after you set them in formation, was created in 1947 by Tudor Games, according to a history of the company by current-day copyright holder Miggle Toys. Players were lined up in formations and then a motor would shake them around to determine the outcome, with the QB throwing or kicking the ball by flicking his arm or leg (hitting the receiver with a ball resulted in a completion). Player movement was partially determine by the base of their figurine: "rookie" players could only move forward, while a dial on more advanced players adjusted prongs on the bottom allowing them to move left or right. That description alone should tell you gameplay was notoriously unpredictable and, while the design of sets keeps progressing even today, the mechanisms of the game remain pretty much the same.

There's a number of leagues offering tournaments featuring real, fictional and arena-rule teams. A good place to start is www.electricfootballzone.com, but be warned: a tacky and largely unplayable set costs about $35 from Miggle Toys and a reliable starter board retails for $75 to $100. The sky's pretty much the limit from there since, as with many hobbies, it's possible to assemble elaborate and realistic player sets and stadiums, and spend hours applying suitable paint, decals, etc. to them. And, depending on the league's rules, some hobbyists will go to extensive length trying to modify prongs and other aspects of the players to maximize performance.

A far cheaper and easier (and totally unworthy, I'm sure purists will argue) option is available to anyone with $1.99 and an iPhone or similar device, which is this month's lone capsule review:

Super Shock Football (C)

This 2009 release by Steamroller Studios is a lot like someone at an online dating site who seems like a perfect match on spec, but inspires only a regrettable "meh" during the date. This is one of those "it's not entirely you" situations, since some of my gripes seem a tad unreasonable given what it's emulating. The vintage cartoonish players look far better than most sets of old, and a multitude of options allow quick casual games as well as setting each player up for every play just like the real thing. There's five fictional teams to select from, one- or two-player options, three computer player skill levels, adjustable game lengths and so on. Playbooks allow a quick initial setup, but you can rotate and position players as desired before the snap. An in-game tutor guides you through the required tap-and-drag moves necessary to run, pass and kick, and there's an optional nudge feature to get players moving more in the direction you'd like. Completing passes by dragging a finger from the QB toward an open receiver is much easier than the real thing, which I count as a plus even if some old schoolers won't. But beyond that my main gripe is the lack of control. The classic sets aren't exactly known for this, so it's an odd criticism, but the tendency of a player to wander the wrong way or in haphazard circles is annoying. I also abandoned the running game as futile, but it's too easy to beat the computer by running the same pass plays repeatedly. Finally, the nudge option is nice, but unless I'm missing something all the players are "rookies" that can only be "programmed" to move straight. I'd still definitely recommend this game since it costs about the same as a Big Mac, but most people will probably find its long-term play value questionable.

Some believe the first electronic battery-operated game is Cragstan's Periscope-Firing Range, which appeared during the 1960s (among those making the assertion is the Handheld Games Museum, which is the source of the picture here). It was the first of a number of electro-mechanical games (and thus not a true electronic portable in the view of naysayers), with the terrain consisting of an endless "film strip" of ships with a light behind it. Pressing the fire button triggered a red light beneath the ships and loud mechanical noise, but no score or indication of a hit or miss, according to the museum's description.

The device itself has a coolness factor that might compensate for the obvious lack of gameplay. The boxy periscope is about 12-by-12-by-9 inches, with an adjustable eyepiece, handles, a tripod allowing the periscope to rotate and a "realistic instrument crackle black finish." That description of a "highly desirable gem" is from wallystoys.com, where a working unit in "very good" condition is on sale – for a mere $325, down from $425. I didn't see it in the Sears catalogues from the '60s, but I'm guessing the original price was less.

Also prominent during the 1960s were miniature pinball games that appeared under a few trees at my house but, despite spending enough time at real pinball tables at arcades to get some personal bumper abuse from my dad, I don't think any of those plastic wannabes ever kept my attention for three games in a row. Equally lame were other mini-tables such as air hockey where the clunky puck movement didn't seem to be affected whether the air streams were on or off.

A different faction argues the first electronic handheld game came in 1972 with Waco's OXO, a tic-tac-toe game based the 1952 game of the same name for the EDSAC that was the first digital graphical game on a computer. I found almost no information about the handheld, except it apparently consisted of a grid of nine buttons that turned red or green when pushed. I didn't find any pictures or sites offering it for sale, although eBay and its ilk are full of Waco's electronic poker and blackjack handhelds from the early '70s, which were basically slot machine-style games where spinning wheels randomly determined cards you could keep or reject. I owned one of the draw poker gizmos and, as I recall, all the battery did was replace a spring-loaded button that spun the wheels on earlier devices.

As for OXO, however, it is possible to play the EDSAC version on any number of online and downloadable emulators a quick Google search away (the URLs are frequently absurdly complex lines from educational institutions, hence the avoidance of specific links here). Tic-tac-toe may be one of the lamest games ever, but there's few better ways to play than with the telephone-dial interface and cheesy replicated mechanical sounds many of the emulators feature. Libraries of other games are also part of some packages, along with programming instructions for the really ambitious (having bought an ancient cardboard Heathkit a few years back, I'm having a ball with the so-called possibilities of early '50s programming).

Another electro-mechanical game trying to cash in on a home gaming craze of the early '70s was "TV Tennis" by Marx Toys in 1975. This mechanical version of Pong, selling for a patriotic $17.87 in the Sears Christmas catalogue that year, uses an

illuminated flashlight bulb connected by rubber bands to the players' control knobs to the sides of the "simulated TV screen." The company also released "Electro Hockey" ($19.87), boasting features such as automatic scoring and shutoff. There's barely a mention of either on the internet today and the odds of finding one on eBay are slim.

Which brings us, at last, to the first undisputed all-electronic handheld game. Or, more precisely, a challenge to guess what it is before the answer appears in next month's column, where the entire line of these gaming pioneers and the many ways of playing exact emulations of them today will be examined. Hint: The manufacturer is well-known, but a surprising number of people get their first release wrong in favor of a far more popular game by the company.

Well, even though I was 3 days late in getting this issue out, it is out! Sorry for the delay which was entirely my fault.

As to the design of the issue, I decided to keep with this look since I got both good and bad responses to the new look, but not enough bad to outweigh the good. I know, the comments left in the Game Over section last month were pretty much all negative, that was not the case with comments I got via e-mail or posts made in Blogs that linked to our issue. However, the one consistent negative that did come up which I feel needs attention is the fact that a number of you out there were printing these issues out to read them and now you cannot do that since each article is on a separate page. That's something that I would like to fix, so that there would be a Print option at the top of the page which prints out the whole issue. Maybe I could somehow make it so that you could view the magazine in "Classic View" for those that want to see/print it on a single page. That would be something to please both the magazine-style and single-page supporters. Anyway, I do want to work on this and will see what I can do. In the meantime, enjoy the magazine-style of RTM. The nice thing about this magazine is that it is dynamically put together with PHP, Javascript, and Flash (which was all hand coded by me, just to get that out there *wink*). This in turn means less work for me or any future editor as the code is doing some of the work automatically. I'll keep everyone posted next month on the progress made towards having a single-page version of the magazine as well!

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