Printing Help

Retrogaming Times Monthly #83 - April 2011

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Welcome to the April edition of Retrogaming Times Monthly! This month we have a great turnout with a number of new faces writing articles. This should prove to be a great issue and hopefully a sign of things to come as the new writers get their feet wet. One of the things to look out for this month is the fact that there are a few April Fools articles contained within the pages of this magazine. If you need help in determining which ones are jokes, read the “Game Over” section. However, I think it will be pretty obvious which are pranks. But, just in case…

In other news, I am working very hard on the Article Index for RTM. This is something that I mentioned would be done back in 2009 when I took over as editor. Sadly, I did not ever get around to getting that project off the ground. Luckily I can now say that I have the mechanics worked out and am adding every article to the database I created which will be fully searchable and can be arranged depending on your needs (alphabetical, chronological, by system, by category, etc). I started at RTM 82 and am now back to RTM 29. That’s over 50 issues already indexed and RTM 83 will be joining that group by the time you read this. I have found this index to be greatly useful just to see what all has been done in RTM, and I’m sure the readers/authors here will find it even more useful than me since you’ll most likely be searching for a specific article. Full text article searching will be supported. A year ago I would not have been able to do this, but with my dabbling in more and more PHP and mySQL, it made something which I had no idea on how to start a year ago possible today.

One last thing I want to mention is that I still plan on getting all the back issues on-line. After getting an e-mail from a reader of RTM who was wondering where all the back issues are, I assure you they are coming. I did get all the 2008’s up and recently got 1998 & 1999 all up as well. It’s down to 2000-2004 and then the database will be complete. Anyway, I’ll have to get all the back issues up before I can index them, so those of you waiting for the Article Index, that should come this year (finally!) and for those waiting for all the back issues, that also should come this year (another finally!). Anyway, enjoy this month’s issue and I’ll be sure to update everyone next month on the status of the index and back issues.

Retrogaming News

2nd Annual Cowlitz Gamers for Kids Video Game Show!

Saturday, April 9, 2011 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM (Kelso, WA)

Annual Cowlitz Gamers for Kids Classic Video Game Show on April 9th in Kelso, WA. Last year we helped John raise over $1,300 for the Childrens Justice and Advocacy Center (CJAC) and we're convinced we can do better this year with your help!

The show will be on Saturday, April 9, 2011 at the Kelso Red Lion Hotel in Kelso, Washington. Kelso is about 1 hour north of Portland or 2 hours south of Seattle on I-5. Doors open at 10:00 AM until 5:00 PM. Admission is a suggested donation of $5 to CJAC, although we invite you to contribute more if you can!

Confirmed vendors include Kelso's own Classics collectibles store, Y-Bot Classic Games, RecycledGamer, AtariCollector.com's Rick Weis and Specialty Gamer. Expect a lot of good deals on classic video game merchandise. In addition to outside video game vendors, there will be T-shirts and other merchandise specifically made for the event that will also be sold specifically to suport CJAC.

In honor of Super Mario recently turning 25 years old this last year, there will be a speed run challenge on Super Mario Brothers 1-1 this year at the event.

12th Annual Pinball at the 'Zoo 2011

Friday, April 15 1:00 PM - 10:00 PM & Saturday, April 16 9:00 AM - 6:00 PM (Kalamazoo, MI)

Rediscover Pinball @ The 12th. Annual "Pinball at the 'Zoo". It will be held at the Kalamazoo County Fairgrounds located at 2900 Lake Street, Kalamazoo, Michigan. It will feature Multiple Pinball Tournaments and Vending Booths with parts and machines for sale. All games will be set on free play. An auction will be held on Saturday the 16th. at 3:00 PM.

You can choose from over 100 pinball and arcade machines and there will even be an Amateur Pinball Tourney. Be sure to check out the links above for more detailed information!

AC 2011

Saturday, April 16 and Sunday, April 17, 2011 (Congis, France)

The RGC association is happy to announce the upcoming AC 2011, which will take place on April 16th and 17th.

This 6th convention dedicated to 8, 16 and 32-bit vintage computers will be located in Congis (France) in a friendly atmosphere. As usual, software and hardware presentations will be featured, as well as the yearly Medieval Mayhem tournament (on Atari 2600). You'll also be able to discover and play freely on machines from iconic brands.

For 3 years, the AC has included a gaming centered speed coding contest. Previous editions have seen the birth of ambitious projects. A new challenge in 2011? We'll let you know more soon.

If you're an Atari, Amiga, Commodore, Amstrad, MSX, Thomson (or any other brand you'd like to promote) enthusiast, you'll be welcome.

Be sure to circle the date on your calendar not to miss this must-attend event for the retro-gaming community.

Retrocade VI

Saturday, April 30, 2011 6:30 PM (Harrisburg, PA)

Harrisburg's only classic gaming party! At the party there will be many games for the ColecoVision, including the recently released Track & Field, a Centipede arcade cabinet loaded with popular trackball games like Centipede, Millipede, Crystal Castles, and Reactor. It also has spinner games like Tempest and Arkanoid. Star Wars is even loaded on it as well!!! From this unit we will be hosting a Centipede tournament starting at 7:30 PM.

The console lineup is subject to change. At this time the lineup is: ColecoVision, NES, Nintendo 64, Playstation 2, Sega Genesis, and Vectrex. The arcade cabinet lineup at this time is also subject to change, but right now includes: Galaga (MAME), Pole Position II, Donkey Kong 3, Centipede (MAME), Missile Command, Make Trax (MAME), Congorilla, Monaco GP, and Mr. Do!

My vision is to make Retrocade the largest classic gaming party in Dauphin county. I encourage gamers of all skill levels to attend as well as collectors and/or vendors to bring their arcade cabinets for setup in the garage. If you would like to be added to the invite list, please send me a message using the link on our Contact Us page (http://retrocadeweb.webs.com/contactus.htm).

Too Many Games 11

Friday, May 6 - Sunday, May 8, 2011 (Oaks, PA)

Gamers get ready! TooManyGames is returning to bring everyone together for another festival of gaming awesomeness! In 2011 TooMayGames is expanding the event from just one day to a three day long extravaganza!

More games, more tournaments, more concerts, more vendors, more party!

Start preparing now for the greatest gaming event to ever rock Pennsylvania! TooManyGames 2011 is taking place at the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center in Oaks, PA. We have 80,000 square feet we're packing with games and gaming gear!

In our main exhibition hall you can check out all our vendors in the marketplace and score some sweet games to add to your collections or some awesome arts and crafts! In our 15,000 square foot tabletop gaming battleground you can compete in Magic: The Gathering, Pokemon, and Yu-Gi-Oh tournaments and also participate in RPGs all throughout the weekend! Stop by our console arena to check out gaming's greatest hits of yesterday and today and compete against your fellow gamers for prizes and glory! Stop in the Power Bar to recharge your mana and check out some of our hot bands performing all weekend long! Throughout the weekend stop by our panel and movie rooms to check out great movies and fan-made videos as well as listen to some cool people talk about how awesome it is to be a gamer!

PC gamers, we've got a 17,000 square foot BYOPC LAN room, powered by The GXL, where you and hundreds of fellow PC gamers can fight and quest all day and all night long, non-stop! Stop by The GXL's website at www.thegxl.com for more info and to sign up for the LAN!

Registration for TooManyGames is now open! Just visit our website at http://www.toomanygames.com to get more info on what's happening at the show and to register for a pass or to set up in our marketplace!

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 annouce it in a future issue.

Show Report

by James Sorge

The Kong Off

I was in attendance at the Kong Off at Richie Knucklez' Arcade in Flemington, NJ. This featured 11 of the top Donkey Kong players in the world, and was billed as two things, "The Settling of King of Kong" and "Can the MAME computer players hold up"? Among the top billing there was current World Record Holder Hank Chien, former World Record holder Steve Wiebe, Hall of Famer Billy Mitchell, MAME champion Dean Saglio, Ben Falls, Donkey Kong Jr. champion Mark Kiehl, Vincent Lemay, Ross Benziger, Eric Howard, Dave McCrary, and Ross Benziger. Not only that, Richie upped the ante, and for an entry fee, anyone in the world could take an attempt at winning it that wasn't invited. There was to be "no dispute" at the end of this event who would be the King of Kong.

The event started out kind of slow. I got there Saturday, and most of the early games resembled more of what I have done with world records. A lot of the attempts did not get off the ground, people were pressing too hard, and scores were generally ending up around 200,000 range. The first kill screen award went to Eric Howard, who ended up with a 941,800. The first day came to a close, and there were some 700,000 scores hanging around, and "Doctor Kong" Hank Chien in the lead with 981,000.

Interview with the wicked Richie Knucklez

The second day started, and the players really started to get serious. Steve Wiebe, in his last game before his plane arrived, hit a kill screen and took the lead of 986,900 and the crowd went nuts. Then, after Wiebe left, about a half hour later, Hank Chien hit a kill screen, and hitting a score of 994,400 (which was the high score of the day). There were two other notable scores of the day: Dean Saglio hitting a 912,900, and Vincent Lemay hitting a killscreen on the last game of the day and ending up with 851,900.

The atmosphere was excellent, with many world record holders from many different platforms there. I'm sorry if I don't get you all, but in attendance were Dean Saglio (MAME Donkey Kong), Mason Cramer (Battletoads, among other games), Triforce Johnson (vs. Super Mario Bros.), Chris Whiteside (Ghosts 'n Goblins arcade), Bill Carlton (ex-Frogger holder), among many others. It created for generally a good atmosphere and everybody got along and there were no arguments or real heated incidents. Kudos to everyone on that.

Besides Billy and Steve (which we all know), the big question going into the day was, "could the MAME players hold their own on a legitimate arcade machine?" After this event, I think the response is a resounding "Hell Yeah!" Dean Saglio had a 912,900, Vincent Lemay hit a killscreen, and Ben Falls had an impressive 846,800. Say what you want about MAME and how "illegal" it is, it's a valuable tool in learning how to play and in my opinion keeps games alive when arcade machines are becoming extinct or in some ways inaccessible due to having to drive long distances, among other problems. Give the people the proper time to adjust to the controllers and proper practice, and they're just as skilled as the people who play on the real machine. And save states, whether you love them or hate them, it lets you break down screens in ways that we haven't seen before. I take this from my personal experience when dealing with

some of the toughest games of all time on other emulators, and I'm sure these guys did it as well.

And before I go out, I want to give a final shout out to Richie Knucklez, who without his hard work we wouldn't have had this event. I look forward to returning to his arcade when I get some time for his Classic Friday exhibition events for $10 and posting some classic arcade scores. It wouldn't have been possible without you.

Final Scores (courtesy of http://www.aurcade.com):

1. Hank "Doctor Kong" Chien: 994,400; killscreen
2. Steve Wiebe: 986,900; killscreen
3. Eric Howard: 941,800; killscreen
4. Dean Saglio: 912,900
5. Vincent Lemay: 851,900; killscreen
6. Ben Falls: 846,800
7. Billy Mitchell: 821,200
8. Ben Mazowita: 817,800
9. Mark Kiehl: 774,600
10. Ross Benziger: 765,200
11. Kyle Goewort: 702,800
12. Clayton Brookins: 620,600
13. Dave McCrary: 564,800
14. Steve Sanders: 386,400
15. Richie Knucklez: 145,800
16. Dana Ash: 128,200

Interview with the majestic Vincent Lemay

Apple II Incider

by Donald Lee

Apple News And Bits

Apple plans updates for the iPhone, iTouch, and Machintosh

Now that the iPad 2 has been released to great fanfare, Apple Inc. is looking forward to its next product launch. While most think that the iPhone 5 is next on the agenda, sources within the industry confirm that Apple has a little surprise up their sleeves.

Within the next few months, Apple Inc. will release updates to the iPhone, iTouch, and Macintosh operating systems that include Apple II compatibility. For those not born in the 1970's or 1980's, the Apple II was a line of computers that preceded the Macintosh. Apple originally premiered the Apple II line back in 1977 but has been out of production since 1993.

While this would seem to be an unusual move, sources say that Apple is looking for a new revenue stream as they see the end of life coming for the iPad and iPhones. With the popularity of Retrogaming and Retrocomputing on the rise, Apple wants to take advantage of this trend.

What is the plan? With the introduction of Apple II compatibility to nearly the entire line of Apple products, Apple plans to acquire the rights to thousands of Apple II programs (mostly games, but perhaps others) and sell them through the iPhone and Macintosh App stores.

Of course, what does this mean for all the Apple II emulators and freely available programs on the Internet? That remains to be seen but do not be surprised if Apple enforces it's copyrights and forces the various individuals and companies that maintain emulators and archives of old games to shut down.

Apple Inc. announces they are reviving the once popular Apple II line of computers

What is more surprising is that Apple, Inc. said the Apple II computers will be re-released with their original hardware/software configurations. When asked why the Apple II's were getting revived, Steve Jobs commented: "We listen to our customers and we read the news. There is a huge Retro Computing Market out there and the Apple II series is one of the most popular. We decided to release the machines as they were back in the 1970's and 1980's Fans want to experience the original and that's what they will get".

Apple has lined up companies to release such classics such as Lode Runner and Ultma among other games in anticipation of the Apple II relaunch. In addition, Apple has announced that a version of iTunes will be released for the system. While iTunes will take up about 20 floppy disks, Apple promises the experience will be similar to their iPhone, iPad, and Mac counterparts. Additionally, Apple has paid for companies such as Blizzard to convert Starcraft to the Apple II. Blizzard commented to RTM: "We look forward to converting Starcraft over to the Apple II. It will take a little while to find developers who know how to work with the Apple II, but we are confident we can convert the game and make it a worthy experience for Apple II users. "

Apple was asked how Apple II users with iPhones and other devices would connect to the computer since it doesn't have a USB port. Apple did not comment. Blizzard also did not comment when asked how Starcraft would be converted to a 128K machine with 560x192 16-color graphics.

Retro Collecting 101

by Jeff Wittenhagen

Keeping Your Collectables Minty Fresh

Keeping your game collection from deteriorating is perhaps one of the most integral parts of collecting, yet most rarely pay attention to it. I'm here to shed some light and give a few pointers on how to preserve your collection so you may enjoy it for many years to come. It doesn't matter if you play your games or just put them on a shelf and admire them.

Storage

Storing your games properly is essential to making sure your collection has a long and healthy lifespan. While some of you aren't blessed with temperature cooled facilities where you can store everything, there are some things you can do to help minimize deterioration. First off is storing items in sealable bins, bags, or cases. Using NES games as an example, you can store your system, games, and accessories in a container when not in use. If you use a clear container then you can see the games through it for easier access and some are big enough to fit everything. This option while the best bet for convenience, isn't the optimal way for displaying your collection.

Image complements of Drakul (RetrowareTV Forums)

If you are like me and have a crazy amount of games and like to have them on display, you can go the route of custom game cases. Nintendo actually made clamshell cases during the lifespan of the NES but those are rare now, so finding them can be an expensive chore. As I've talked about on my own website in the past, Universal Game Cases are the ultimate way to go about this as not only do your games get protected, but you can also design the outside with box art.

I use gallon sized ziplock bags for my power and a/v cords plus one or two controllers. Some of these bags have labels, but as they are see-through, labeling is largely unnecessary. As for instruction manuals, if you don't go the UGC route where you can store them inside, there are binders that fit the manuals perfectly. Binders allow for protection while also letting you flip through and admire what you've accumulated.

Maintenence

Sometimes when you get a game from unreliable sources they don't look or perform all that good. The easiest step is having rubbing alcohol and goo gone on hand along with some Q-tips. A majority of the physical defects that you come across can be corrected through some simple cleaning. If the label is torn, you can go the route of printing off a new one on sticker paper or going to a reproduction website and purchasing one from them.

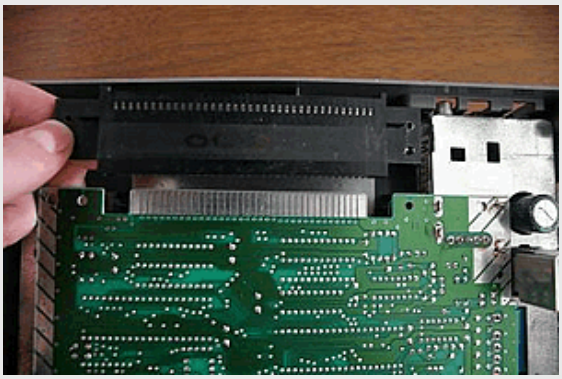


Image complements of http://www.jandar.net/nes72pin/

Getting rid of that pesky rattling needs to be done to help create a flawless experience when you are gaming. Having a universal driver kit on hand is essential as it will allow you to take apart virtually any system, cartridge, or controller with ease. A valuable resource for this is YouTube, as you can find video tutorials on virtually anything. If you are having trouble with your NES, there are video tutorials on how to replace the 72 pin connector, etc.

Some useful tools to always have on hand are a soldering iron/gun and a hot glue gun or super glue. Sometimes a system or game isn't working and a quick dot of solder will get it back in tip top shape. Other times a label is coming loose and some glue will hold it in place. A tiny bit of work now will save you the headache of having to either send it back or getting it repaired by a professional.

Just the other day I got my Rock Band 3 Squier guitar in the mail, after locating the Midi adapter and plugging it all in, the A String wouldn't work. The first thing I did was look at the instruction manual. I made some simple adjustments to the pickups and bridge to no avail. Next I googled my problem and was taken to the official forums where tons of people were having issues. Apparently multiple people were returning the guitars which are very limited in stock. It was discovered that in the battery case there are some potentiometers that allow you to adjust the sensitivity of the strings. I thought that was the answer and made the adjustments and it still didn't work. As a last ditch effort I loosened the strings and took off the face plate to access the electronics. After checking all the cables I noticed that one was slightly loose, which was the one that connects to the pickups. After tightening it up and putting everything back together, my guitar now works perfectly! Long story short, just a little bit of time and effort will save you a ton of headache and money.

General Care

Taking care of your stuff seems like a no brainer, but so many times have I seen people using their game systems as drink coasters or throwing their NES games on the ground. You can put all the work and effort into how you store your items but if you don't take care of them in the short term, it will all be for nothing. Besides cleaning with rubbing alcohol and Q-tips, taking some simple habit forming steps will prevent you from having to do some unneeded maintenance to your games and consoles. Putting away your games after playing them is one of the most overlooked and simple things that you can do to preserve their “mint-ness”. Systems don't move as much, so they tend to get left out, but you need to make sure they don't accumulate too much dust otherwise it could impede how they operate.

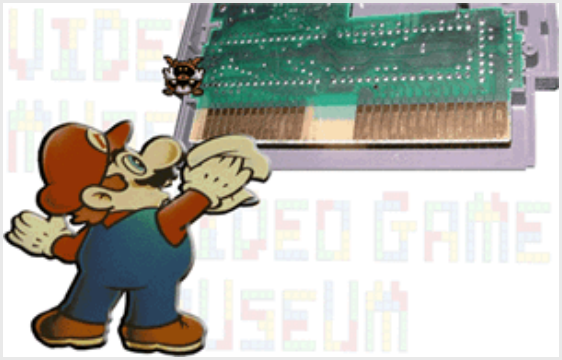


Image complements of The Video Game Museum

One of the worst things for a collector to do is to allow people to borrow games, as you never know what happens behind closed doors. I've let people borrow games only to have them move away and take them with them! One of the worst was many years ago when my parents allowed a friend to borrow my NES games while I was away at college. Once I got home for the summer, I realized this and asked her for them back. When I got back the games, half of them were games that I never owned. Gone were my copies of Mega Man 2 and Legend of Zelda, in their place were two copies of Top Gun 2. The fact is that only you care about your games as much as you do, if it's not theirs even good friends won't take care of your stuff like you would. Overall, it's not that hard for us collectors to take good care of our games, we just tend to overlook it until it's too late.

The Videogame Bookie

by Jonathan Imberi

Arcade Fever

Subtitled *The Fan's Guide to the Golden Age of Video Games* this book is definitely that; at 160 pages and with its glossy full-color photographs it deserves a place on every gamer's coffee table. Author John Sellers, pop culture writer and "Donkey Kong" 1983 world champion, has done an excellent job cataloging the arcade era that lasted from 1978 to 1985.

The book does not cover much information on the industry itself; gamers can turn to another excellent book such as The Ultimate History of Video Games for that information. No, Arcade Fever is a history of the games that we saw, touched, played, and grew up with. There are interviews with programmer Eugene Jarvis and Atari founder Nolan Bushnell, among others, but the overall focus of this book is to take you back to the arcades of twenty years ago.

Fifty classic games are covered, beginning with "Pong" and "Computer Space", the first coin-operated arcade games, and ending with "Punch-Out!!" and "Gauntlet". Other featured titles include "Pac-Man", "Dragon's Lair", and "Tron". Each entry includes a description of the game, as well as screen shots and cabinet art, when possible. Sidebars describe failed sequels and spin-offs, but there are no screen shots or other pictures to help the reader envision them.

The years 1978-1985 were not just about games and neither are the descriptions presented in this book. Each year of games presented highlights what was also hot that year in headlines, movies, TV, and sports. From the title to the writing, the author invokes the era he describes, incorporating aspects of popular culture such as collectibles, quotes, brand names, and themes.

The book is written from the perspective of someone firmly entrenched in the present, who is nostalgic yet realistic. Fond memories do not cloud his opinion that, looking back, some of these games did not deserve accolades. He gives honor where it's due, but don't be shocked if the next comment slams a game, or even some of the people who played it.

One downside: the book is repeatedly disrupted by a juvenile and distracting ribald sense of humor. Two examples: the author opens the book with "I lost my video-game virginity at the age of six…" and later introduces the game "Asteroids" with "If Pong was heavy petting and Space Invaders was getting to third base, then…" His comments feel out of place amidst the wealth of worthwhile information and captivating pictures.

Arcade Fever is neither a reference nor a resource: it is a look into the hearts and minds of an entire generation of gamers. It helps the reader understand not only the roots of the gaming industry, but the people who guaranteed the pastime's place in American culture.

For anyone who grew up during the golden age, this book is sure to bring back the memories of having a pocket full of quarters and heading to the arcade...Wocka!! Wocka!!

Gaming Year In Review

by Owen Brand

1983

1983 was a unique and exciting time in the world of gaming and computing. Technological advances made the home computer and the stand-alone game platforms more affordable and available, thereby introducing them into more homes than in any years prior. At this time, the competition in the home computer market (in particular) was intensifying, causing prices to drop drastically. It was also during 1983 that the Famicom game system (known as the Nintendo Entertainment System in America) was released in Japan. In the next few paragraphs, we will discuss a few of these developments and try to determine what made 1983 such an interesting year for retro gaming history.

The TI-99/4A Computer
Image from shawweb.myzen.co.uk

During the early 1980's, the home computer industry was growing more rapidly than the market could handle. Computer manufacturers overestimated demand during the last quarter of 1982 and through 1983. One such manufacturing company was Texas Instruments. Due to diminishing demand and several unfortunate marketing mistakes, the home computer division of the company was forced to shut down near the end of 1983. Texas Instruments (it is estimated by the TI Timeline) held as much as 35% of the home computer market-share in America by 1983. The "computer wars" had wiped out the single largest home computer manufacturer in the market, making way for the failure of dozens of others in 1983 and through 1984. Companies such as Timex, Atari, Jupiter Cantab, and others would fold up their computer businesses and focus on other endeavors.

Bill Gates - Early 80s
Image from abdulqadeer.wordpress.com

While computers such as the 99/4A would "go down in history" in 1983, software developer Microsoft was just beginning. Microsoft released "Microsoft Multi-Tool Word" for the Xenix and DOS operating systems, creating one of the most successful software packages in home, business, and personal computer history. (A. Allen, Roy (October 2001), "Chapter 12: Microsoft in the 1980's"). The software would later be adapted for the Apple Macintosh in 1984, the Atari ST in 1986, and Windows in 1989. Word continues to be the highest selling word processor in 2011; 28 years later.

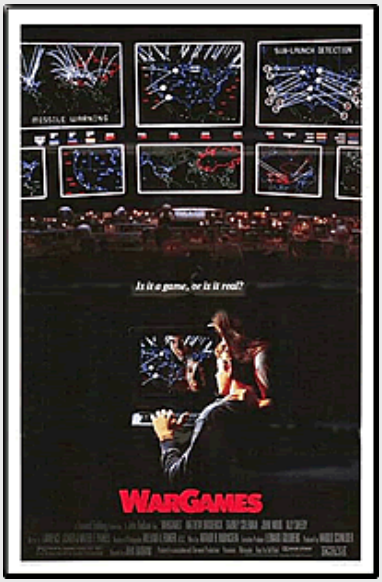
Manic Miner & Ultima III
Images courtesy of Wikipedia &
my DosBox emulator

On the video game front, several groundbreaking titles were released in 1983. Game developer Origin's "Ultima III" role playing game was released on several systems, including Apple II and the Commodore 64. Intellivision released "World Series Major League Baseball," the first sports game to feature multiple camera angles. "Manic Miner" was released on the ZX Spectrum computer to great acclaim and fanfare, spawning dozens of re-makes and clones. The Atari 2600 saw the release of "Journey: Escape"… marking the first time a pop music hit ("Don't Stop Believing") was licensed into an Atari game… This had the effect of introducing a large number of new people to Journey's music. This formula would be used again and again in the years to follow by many different artists, culminating today in games whose soundtracks consist of nothing but modern radio hits.

Perhaps one of the most significant developments in gaming history occurred in 1983: the release of the Famicom console in Japan. The Famicom (family computer) would be adapted and released in the United States two years later as the Nintendo Entertainment System. In a time of upheaval in the gaming markets, Nintendo shined as the beacon of consistency and a testament to the appetite for games in the United States. Consoles sold in the millions, cartridges in the tens of millions. The NES would set the standard for the next 7 years as the world's powerhouse gaming console.

Nintendo Famicom
Image from theoldcomputer.com

1983 would also see the release of United Artist's "WarGames". The plot consists of a young man who is able to hack into N.O.R.A.D.s defense computer--- code name: W.O.P.R.. This computer begins a war game wherein it calculates the effects of a thermonuclear war with communist Russia. The problem? The Department of National Defense staff has no idea it is a game and nearly destroys the world by launching nuclear counter-attacks to simulated Soviet advances. The whole thing is quite brilliant and a very interesting time capsule. It succeeds by showing us the national attitude towards the Cold War, the emergence of computer technology, and plays to the "man vs. technology" plot so prevalent in modern culture. Game developers would attempt to capitalize on the success of the film, prompting releases such as Thorn-EMI's "Computer War" which came out/was planned for the TI-99/4A, Atari 8-Bit, and VIC-20.



War Games Movie Poster
Image from soundtrackcollector.com

In all, 1983 was a magnificent year for games, culture, technology, and history. It provided us with new and innovative games, a juggernaut gaming console in the Famicom/NES, and a memorable computer/war movie which has stood the test of time and even garnered a modern sequel ("Dead Code", ©2008). As I looked back at 1983 while writing this article, what interested me the most was the sense of optimism that seemed to flow throughout the gaming community and American culture in general. Computers were new and exciting, games were rapidly becoming better, faster, and cheaper, and the Cold War would be coming to an end in 6 years. It was also the last year before the great video game crash of 1984 which would wipe out the majority of manufacturers across America. The dominance of American game and console developers was over, and the power would shift to Japan. But in 1983, virtually nobody saw this coming.

MAME Reviews

by Mark Sabbatini

Ninja-Kid II (a.k.a. Rad Action)

There's no way – *no way* – this qualifies as an obscure arcade game. I...I...fed so many quarters into it, the last of oh-so-many machines to have that honor.

Then again, maybe its availability for all those marathon sessions at my college's tiny arcade should be a clue.

I have no idea what made me put my first quarter into Rad Action, since I'm not a big fan of side-scrolling ninja games. This was back around the late 1980s and it seemed the genre was assimilating all game programers of the world, depriving us of the classic and creative concepts from the previous decade. But the fact the machine was one of the few usually not being played had to be a factor. A relatively long initial game went a long way toward motivating a second (my first quarters lasted mere seconds on games like Stargate and Gauntlet).

Rad Action thus became an ideal first pick when I accepted the task of reviving an RTM column reviewing little-known MAME ROMS and pontificating the history of their life as arcade games. It was the ROM I most felt like playing when I took on the assignment and is one of those games potentially appealing to most gamers. The people most likely to be put off by Rad Action, oddly enough. are those expecting a martial arts beat-em-up. The game is more of a cute side-scroller à la Super Mario Bros. and the wide-eyed main character looks more like Kenny in South Park (with a red coat instead of orange) than a ninja.

Our hero, Ninja Jajamaru-kun, began life as a mascot destined for countless buggy-eyed deaths in 1984 in a game called Ninja-kun by the Japanese company UPL. The stubby warrior starred in several other games in arcades and on home systems including the NES, SNES, various Gameboy models. the MSX computer line, Saturn and Playstation (which I didn't realize until writing this column, so my leisure time for the next few weeks is probably spoken for). He lost his cartoonish good looks on a few latter releases, particularly the 1997 Saturn/Playstation release Ninja Jajamaru-kun: Onikiri Ninpou Chou, which goes the 3D platform route with a character resembling a cross between Red Riding Hood and a tall Marvin The Martian.

Rad Action is the second in the series, released in 1987 under that name in the United States and the name Ninja Kid II elsewhere (in Japan it's known as Ninja-kun Ashura no Shō). It vastly expands on Ninja-kun, which was an upward-scrolling game with three repeating levels (with tougher enemies each cycle). Rad Action is an all-directions scrolling platformer with far more levels (that are generally much larger in size), enemies, weapons and types of terrain.

Controls consist of a four-direction joystick and two buttons – one for jumping, the second for weapons. You can fall a long distance without taking damage, but exceptionally long drops will momentarily stun you unless you learn a trick detailed below. One thing that takes some adjusting is moving the joystick up selects the various weapons you acquire. The screen is horizontally oriented, so home conversions for MSX and the NES are closely matched in appearance.

Home versions also benefited from the arcade game's modest technical specs. The coin-op features a 6Mhz Z80 main processor (slightly less than twice as fast as a Sinclair ZX81) and a 5Mhz Z80 to process sound, which was generated by two YM2203 chips. The video resolution was 256X192 pixels with 768 available colors.

It's not the rarest of arcade consoles in existence today, but it's at the high end of the scale. The Killer List of Video Games states "There are no known instances of this game owned by one of our members … No members have added this machine to their wish list." Its clone, Ninja Kid II scores five out of 100 in rarity (lower is scarcer), with two of the KLVG's 7,285 members owning a functioning cabinet unit (nine others own the circuit board for the game). By way of comparison, Venture has a rarity score of 25, Crazy Climber 46 and Space Duel 83. I have no idea how much a functioning game/board might cost, if any existed for sale (the KLVG lists one seller for NKII, but I'm not sure that info is current). So for the lawyers' sake we'll assume those surfing for the ROM already own machines.

ROMs for Rad Action and Ninja Kid II are at all the usual sites, but I suggest downloading the Ninja Kid II (Set 3) ROM, as others seem to have problems ranging from not functioning to lack of sound.

DIP-switch settings of interest include Japanese/English text, starting with three or four ninjas, normal/hard difficulty, continue game on/off, and a default setting of extra ninjas at 30,000 points and every additional 50,000 points (with options for 20,000/50,000, 50,000/100,000 or none). The coin/credit slots are a bit strange: slot A ranges from four credits per coin to one credit for nine coins, while slot B ranges from three credits per coin to two coins for one credit (gotta think it'd be interesting talking to the arcade owner charging nine coins per game).

OK, time for the assault of the lil' ninja.

The first thing you'll see is a simple screen with three brown rectangles, with a finger at the bottom of the screen rotating between them every second or two. This selects your route for the first two screens and it has a significant impact for both novice and expert players. Novices should definitely pick the first box, which is almost literally a walk in the countryside. The second box I consider a death trap with little appeal, with a lot of enemies in confined spaces and a premature need to know the special bounce-jump move detailed below. Anyone past the beginner stage should pick the third box, a not-too-hard route offering the chance to get off to a great start by racking up points and extra men. Choosing a route brings up the introductory animation for each level, featuring your ninja crossing a featureless landscape to a quick sunrise/sunset rainbow of colors.

Completing each stage requires killing all the enemies or, in some cases, reaching a specific exit location before a timer runs out. Your ninja can generally stun enemies in Super Mario fashion by jumping on them and kill them by shooting them. His initial firepower is an unlimited supply of ninja stars, which also block ordinary shots enemies fire at you (they tend to fire faster, so trying to win face-to-face showdowns is not advisable). Bumping into lesser enemies merely stuns you, but touching other foes or getting hit by a shot is fatal. Every few stages, beginning with the third, is a bonus screen where successful completion results in being another weapon from some mentor/master who curiously isn't around to help fend off all those fearsome creatures intent on doing bad things to your homeland. The first addition weapon are boomerangs, which act something like guided shots by following your movements and doubling back into your possession.

Enemies tend to be cute and cartoonish, much like your ninja, and on the smallish side. They include black-clad ninjas, blue creatures with yellow hair that fire lighting bolts, mini skeletons and so on. Landscapes vary from lush countrysides to rocky cliffs to caves to underwater. Sounds are generally on the whimsical side, with more haunting overtones when the setting dictates.

There's plenty of extras to learn as you progress, beginning with the "special" weapon on the first two screens of the third route (it's also on the second screen of the second route). It's a blue triangle with a red gem at the center (not sure what it's called) that triggers a circle of fireballs around your ninja when fired. It doesn't last long, but will take out everything in your path and rack up huge point totals if used properly. You get increased points each time you hit a defeated enemy, so the trick is to avoid any killing until you reach the weapon (there's two on the first "C" stage and both are reachable without too much shooting), then start firing like crazy and tapping the joystick down so you descend at the same rate as your defeated foes. Anyone with minimal experience should be able to come away from the first two stages with at least a few extra ninjas.

The first challenge stage is where you'll learn the critical skill of bouncing off the walls. It's necessary for scaling vertical passages with no ledges to jump on (you can climb the walls by jumping on to them, keeping the joystick to the proper side an pressing the jump button furiously, but it's so slow you're virtually certain to be killed by an enemy or run out of time for anything more than the briefest of ascents). The bounce jump involves a running jump against the wall, shifting the joystick in the other direction while your ninja is in mid-air and hitting the jump button right as he collides with the wall. It'll become second nature quickly, but not necessarily on your first game. If you find yourself running out of time on the first challenge stage there is a chicken-out exit at the bottom of the pit you start in, but you won't get the extra weapon a successful completion provides.

Stage four is the first where you need to reach a specific location (a cliffside cave entrance) and is a good preview of some of the unexpected things you'll be doing as you go along. First, you start the level in free-fall and, unless you know better, be temporarily crippled when you splat into the ground. Generally you'll need to move/fire quickly to get away from an initial enemy assault if this is the case. Hitting the jump button in mid-air makes you do some sort of ninja summersault and, if timed right, will allow you to hit the ground with a roll that allows you to pop up right away. The level consists of a series of cliffs requiring a few tricky jumps and it will seem at a certain point there's no way to reach the exit door roughly in the middle of all the action. The trick is to work your way up to a specific point above and to the right of that ledge and take a long blind leap.

The fifth screen, the last individual level I'll cover here, is what I've always considered the gateway to the "real" game, since if you complete this it becomes possible to play the more intriguing larger levels for quite a while if you're reasonably proficient. But getting past the fifth screen is half of Hell, and almost certainly will involve a lot of curses and continued games. I'm betting a lot of players gave up here and thus were deprived of the game's true charm. The setting is underwater, where your ninja is armed only with a knife that kills at immediate range (much like the old game Jungle Hunt) and the enemies are a variety of sea creatures who are deadly to the touch. Killing the smaller creatures isn't overly hard once you master the timing, but their sheer number can overwhelm if you're not careful. The much bigger problem is a huge fish that swoops in suddenly and is impervious to your puny blade. I have found only one way to complete this level: Move to the bottom and swim right as fast as possible, killing everything small without pausing. Time it perfectly and you will manage to barely swim under the large fish. But it's something I never completely mastered and it was rare to get through it on my first quarter. When money was tight I often would replay the game from the beginning so I could collect those extra ninjas on those first two stages and increase my chances.

After this begins the joy of exploration and discovery, with a creative variety of terrain and enemies (some of them massive, but not necessarily as difficult to overcome as their size suggests). I can't say how many levels there are, having made it into the mid teens in my better days, but getting that far makes for a long session.

The sequels offer varying concepts and enhancements, although my initial impression is none quite match Rad Action's charm. My initial pick for a long session, in fact, is for the most primitive gaming system titles were ported to, the original black-and-white Gameboy. Maru's Mission/Oi Jajamaru! Sekai Daibouken, released in 1990 appears to have many of the same weapons and gameplay concepts in a series of stages in locations like New York, Romania, Greece and Egypt (apparently Japan is your final destination). One disconcerting note is you apparently have only one life with a certain number of health points – and no continues – although more health points can be collected along the way. This would be a serious drawback for me if not for the wonder of being

able to "freeze" game states in an emulator. Another sequel, Super Ninja-kun for the SNES, appears to be a reasonably close relative expanding on Rad Action's concepts, but the formerly rolly-polly main character now resembles Calvin in a red ninja suit. Jajamaru No Daibouken for the NES and Gameboy Advance is also similar, but is mostly a horizontal scroller where the goal is simply to reach the end of each stage. The relatively recent Jajamaru-kun Jr. Denshouki - Jalecole Mou Arisourou for Gameboy Advance, released in 2004, revives the formula after several titles venturing into Zelda/Super Mario/3D territory, but a description of the game suggests it's an unimpressively simple and flawed effort.

Sources for this article include Arcade History (http://www.arcade-history.com), International Arcade Museum (www.arcade-museum.com), Universal Video Game List (www.uvlist.net) and Hardcore Gaming 101 (www.hardcoregaming101.net/jajamaru/jajamaru.htm). The latter in particular offers detailed history and analysis of Ninja Jajamaru-kun's origins and quests, and is highly recommended for anyone finding Rad Action appealing.

Standalone Spew

by Mark Sabbatini

The Golden Era Of Handhelds For Mattel

It was the year of the Camp David Peace Treaty between Israel and Egypt. The first cell phone, computer bulletin board, and test-tube baby. A currency crisis in Japan, resulting from the invention of Space Invaders.

Pausing a moment to let everyone make their guesses of that momentous year (tick, tick, tick…), 1978 was also the golden year for Mattel's electronic handheld games. The company laid claim to the first all-electronic handheld with Auto Race in 1976 and followed that up with the enormously successful Football a year later. But the vast majority of that first-generation collection appeared a year later, a few of which remain among the best handhelds ever.

They're relatively simple compared to some latter efforts, but for Mattel's better titles this is actually a plus. The LED-blip displays are bright and easily understood, in contrast to later LCD screens making lame attempts at 3D perspectives or trying to squeeze too many different things from the fixed-display elements. Controls are similarly simple the size of the games are conveniently small and immediately recognizable. The only thing they needed – desperately – was a volume control or headphone jack.

Lots of competitors started appearing around that time and Mattel's games weren't superior in all cases (we'll get to those others in future columns). But it's hard to think of any other company's pre-1980 collection I'd rather own. For those who are collecting, the good news is Mattel's games are generally common enough to sell for anywhere between $10-$35 in good condition, although some rarer in-box titles can cost a few hundred dollars.

Mattel remade a few of the games about a decade ago, but they're generally inferior to the originals in various ways large and small. A better option for those not needing the originals are the emulation options detailed last month, most notably the free LEDhead (http://peterhirschberg.com/mysoftware.html) featuring 12 titles that run on Windows Pocket PC and Palm Pilots. There's also a series of four imperfect iPhone titles by touchGrove, LLC for dollar or two each. Those and a few other scattered options are noted when they're available for the handhelds reviewed below.

The games reviewed this month are roughly listed in the order they were released, although I've grouped some that are similar (i.e. Basketball, Soccer, and Hockey). Generally that means they increase in quality, with one huge and inexplicable exception. The screenshots for the most part are from emulators for the sake of clarity, although care is taken so nothing not found in the originals is depicted.

Missile Attack (a.k.a. Battlestar Galactica Space Alert) (D+)

A lot of people, including former Mattel employees, mistakenly think this was actually the first all-electronic handheld released by the company. If I were guessing based on the quality of these games, I might make the same mistake. It's hard to say definitively if this game is more or less primitive than Auto Race, but it definitely is less exciting to play. Missile Attack has a copyright date of 1976, the same as Auto Race, and the similarities in design are obvious. The player controls an LED blip with a left/middle/right lever (a tiny flimsy "joystub" instead of the decal-adorned plastic knob of Auto Race). Descending LED blips are the enemy, much like the oncoming "cars" in Auto Race, but instead of dodging them you're trying to shoot the incoming "missiles." The higher on the screen you hit them, the more points you get. The game ends after 20 missiles are launched, or if you ship takes a hit. Not a terrible concept for the infant stages of handheld gaming, but there's one huge problem: You take a hit only if a missile in the center position reaches the bottom of the screen. So a lazy/safe player can just hit the fire

button when a missile appears there and watch the left/right blips vanish harmlessly. Getting high scores is supposed to motivate more daring behavior, of course, but I like my games with some kind of constant threat. Another problem is there's nothing to vary the difficulty level. At least in Auto Race you can select one of four gears in your effort to get to the end of the course in the least time possible. Finally, the manual for Battlestar Galactica (the same game, but released in 1978 to capitalize on a more appealing commercial theme) notes "the Cylon Raiders fire their missiles in certain definite patterns," which presumably means the programmer didn't both with anything as complex as a pseudo-random number generator (then again, *you* try writing one from scratch using add/subtract functions, which was the way of things back then). There's an intriguing explanation for the handheld's "rebranding" at the Handheld Games Museum (www.handheldmuseum.com), which says Missile Attack went on the market in 1977, but was quickly withdrawn from distribution because NBC refused to air TV commercials for the game. "The little city at the bottom (that the missiles are attacking) is actually an outline of New York City, and people at NBC were concerned about the impact it would have on children to think that New York's 8 million inhabitants would be dead if they lost the game," the HM notes, based on an interview with ex-Mattel employee Howard Cohen. Apparently the extermination of Commander Adama and/or the Twelve Colonies by the Cylons was no big deal. Obviously the market got sufficiently (if not entirely) past their fears by the time Missile Command hit arcades in 1980, although Wikipedia notes programmer Dave Theurer "suffered from nightmares of these cities being destroyed by a nuclear blast" and the Atari 2600 port wimped out by making it a conflict between the planets Zardon (the defending player) and Krytol.

Emulation/remakes: LEDhead does its usual fine job of replicating the experience. There's also an Amiga version by Ronny Nordqvist, although it's a little elusive to find on the Web. I obtained a version at handheld.remakes.org, but the site was down temporarily when I revisited it to check something because the owner had exceeded his monthly bandwidth limit.

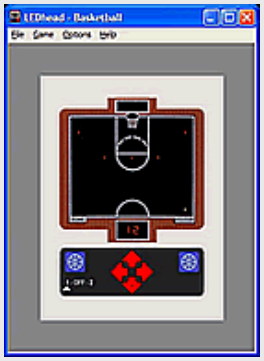
Football II (A)

Some argue better LED handheld football games exist, but they're wrong. Nothing else does a better overall job of capturing the feeling of the real game, from returning kicks to the quarterback receiving snaps behind the line of scrimmage to the receiver moving independently of the QB. It's not overly large or odd in shape, unlike many competing handhelds, and the four selectable speeds for your computer opponent offers a challenge for humans of any skill. Plus. that dark green color is soooo cool. Devotees of head-to-head games undoubtedly are among my strongest dissenters, but all of those handhelds have gameplay shortcomings that leave me dissatisfied. Furthermore, the vast majority of my handheld gaming hours as a youth were solitary, so the defensive controls were just an unwanted protuberance (I could concede this prejudges my view somewhat, but open-mindedness isn't part of what passes for debate these days). The first thing I noticed when I saw Football II in a Christmas catalogue was two obvious and welcome changes from the original Football: a "pass" button and four-directional movement instead of up/down/forward. Something that escaped my notice is the field is 10 yards long, compared to nine in the original Football (a limitation due to the modified calculator chip the older handheld used). It's mentioned in the manual, but I didn't get around to reading that until my retrogaming phase more than 20 years later. Something else I missed all those years from skipping the manual was the two highest difficulty levels, activated by pressing the "kick" key while powering the unit up on either "pro 1" or "pro 2" speed. But I did notice Mattel allowed you to switch between pro 1/2 during the game, fixing the annoying setup in the original where the "off" position was between the two. Those little external clues were only a hint of the extra depth I discovered the first time I played Football II (I think it might have been in a store, when things weren't locked up behind glass the way they are today). The first thing was starting with a kickoff you could return. For that alone I was hooked for life. Opposing blips start appearing one at a time when you return kickoffs, so usually it's possible to get that satisfying feeling of crossing the field a couple of times unless you're unlucky or a stiff. Figuring out how to run plays from scrimmage took some time, beginning with the harsh reality it's now possible to lose yardage. The original has that Denver Broncos-caliber defense lining up three yards off the ball, whereas the sequel puts them right at the line. So mindlessly rushing the QB forward to start a play means losing a yard, just like real football. Instead you'll need to drop back a couple of yards (think of it as making the handoff if you're planning to run) and wait for gaps to appear in the defense. Meanwhile, a flickering

blip that's your receiver works his way downfield through the open spaces. In most handheld football games with passing the receiver mirrors the QB's movements, but I vastly prefer Mattel's approach since it's closer to real life. The rules of passing are also superior: other versions require a completely clear lane between the QB and WR, in Football II the QB can throw over defenders in the backfield (there's a reason scouts are concerned about QBs lacking height). One other big change that really irked me until I figured it out was kicking. Just pressing the "kick" button on fourth down results in a punt that can be returned (although there's a small dilemma with two players: press the button and hand it to your nemesis – forcing them to get their bearings quickly – or trusting your opponent will hit the "kick" key instead of gaining an advantage by just running the QB into the defense on fourth down). What caught me off-guard was field goals: Mattel's original Football automatically figures out if a kick goes far enough to score a field goal by reaching the end zone (in real life there's those 10 extra yards – not to mention the seven or eight necessary to snap the ball – but that's pushing expectations way beyond reasonable). In Football II I kept seeing the ball go to the other team on their 20-yard line with no points scored. It took a while to figure out those were touchbacks and attempting a field goal requires dropping back two yards before pressing "kick." It's cool having this option, although I wish Mattel had followed NFL rules that place missed FGs at the line of scrimmage or the 20, whichever is farthest from the end zone, since it would definitely add a strategic element to long kicks. The other thing the game (and all early Mattel handhelds) could use is a headphone jack or option to turn the sound off, since all those beeps and high-pitched "charge" ditties have very little appeal to parents and teachers. But one famous music group liked the sound enough to include a snippet on a song – any guesses, trivia buffs? Answer: Supertramp's "The Logical Song."

Emulation/remakes: AVOID Mattel's 2002 reissue of "Classic Football 2," by far the worst of their modern remakes. Like the others it has a harder-to-see LCD screen with a red overlay instead of real LEDs. The batteries are pre-installed, so collectors with in-box units will eventually see them destroyed by corrosion (it also proclaims "try me!" and makes the controls accessible through the plastic packaging, so others may deprive you of that complimentary gameplay if they've worn out the batteries). Sounds like the familiar "charge" theme have been changed. But the worst travesties are the changes to gameplay. There's no kickoff to start the third quarter, so no adrenaline-fueling two-minute drives at the end of the first half. Finally is this unforgivable bug: incomplete passes are now counted as interceptions, although the instructions say otherwise. It seems inconceivable this could be missed in playtesting unless Mattel simply didn't give a damn about quality control. Football II wasn't one of the games that also got a keychain-size remake, but given all the flaws that's no loss. Another disappointing remake attempt is LED Football 2 for the iPhone by touchGrove. They got most of the details right with their remake of Mattel's original Football, but all sorts of things are wrong with the sequel. First, there's no kickoff or kick returns (including punts). Next, your receiver merely goes two yards down the field, and then moves up and down waiting for you to throw. So much for staying alive in the pocket to hit a long gainer. But then, insanely, is the exact opposite of Mattel's bug: You cannot throw an interception. Throw it right to a defender no matter where it is and it's still an incompletion. Another big problem not related to emulation is the touch-screen controls, which are slow to respond. There are plusses, including the four selectable speeds of the original and generally accurate sound/appearance. It's got enough of the original feel to be worth the $1.99 price tag, as long as the imperfections don't offend you. But LEDhead again reigns supreme with seemingly perfect emulation. The only hitch is the lack of an iPhone version means most mobile gamers are stuck with a second-rate alternative, so it'd be nice if that "coming soon" promise were fulfilled.

Basketball (C)



Probably the most popular, but least interesting, of Mattel's Basketball/Hockey/Soccer trio. All three are identical in appearance (other than the colors and button logos) and feature the same basic gameplay. But Basketball lacks any extras beyond the move-and-shoot gameplay, possibly because it was the first of the trio (model number 2,437, with Soccer at 2,678 and Hockey at 2,946). Still, the basic formula can't be too bad since it spawned the clones/sequels. You're on the short-handed end of one-on-five, half-court action, using the four directional arrows to maneuver your blip around the spaces not occupied by the somewhat randomly moving defenders, The idea is to get a clear path between yourself and the basket, thus

allowing you to shoot and hopefully score. The closer you are to the basket, the more likely you are to make a shot. If it bounces off the backboard or a defender blocks a shot by getting in the way, the player can retain possession by recovering the ball before it goes out of bounds. Otherwise it's a turnover (which on a defensive block, of course, is completely contrary to the rules of real basketball). The rules are "make it, take it," so the player has 24 seconds to score as many baskets as possible, unless there is a turnover. At that point it's time to hand the unit to your human opponent, if there is one. The game consists of four quarters lasting two-and-a-half minutes in real time, shown as 12 speeded-up minutes on the scoreboard, and the teams alternate possessions at the beginning of each quarter beginning with the visitors. In many ways, it's a simplified version of the street game Twenty-One, which might have been more fun (but probably less commercially viable) if Mattel had thrown in the rest of the rules. As a one-player game this feels like the most monotonous of Mattel's sports handhelds, especially on skill level one where layups quickly become the norm, although hoops fans not keen on football would probably disagree. It's considerably more entertaining with two players, maybe even more so than the original Football since the action is quicker and the idle player isn't stuck being a spectator as long.

Emulation/remakes: Mattel's remake is above average if you're not fanatical about getting an exact replica of the original. The updated version adds a three-point shot and an on-off switch. Thankfully it uses real LEDs for the display instead of LCDs, but the pre-installed battery annoyance again rears its head. Less satisfying is touchGrove's LED Basketball, which looks and sounds like a replica, but the movement of the defense is off. They move far less than in the real handheld, camping next to the basket and making successful shots rare. Also, the timer is flawed, with the so-called 24-second clock draining a couple of minutes of game time each possession. LEDhead, on the other hand, hits nothing but net.

Soccer (C+)

Better than Basketball, not as good as Hockey, which makes sense since this is the second game in the trio. There are obvious minor tweaks to the clock (two halves of four real-time minutes) and scoring (one point instead of two for successful shots). More significant are gameplay changes to both the offense and defense. The player now has 54 real-time seconds (which count as a rather lengthy 10 "game minutes") to maneuver and kick the ball. There's no "make-it, take-it" – the other side gets the ball after a score – but if a player recovers a missed shot the possession clock starts over. The defense looks like the same five blips from Basketball, but their movements are more complex. The two defenders starting at the corners closest to the goal move randomly within zones close to the net, while the three remaining defenders "move to a point midway between the offensive man with the ball and the goal, each within his zone," according to the instructions. The casual player might not notice the difference compared to Basketball, but for the rest of us it adds a most welcome strategic element. Games are likely to feature scores higher than real soccer – probably for the best, especially among U.S. players – but when I put this on skill level two my tallies aren't all that far from what's in the pages and pages of my local (European) sports section. I didn't play this until well in to my retrogaming years, but the additional touches are enough for me to pick it up instead of Hockey on occasion, which is more than I can say for my dust-infested Basketball game.

Emulation/remakes: Mattel's did a keychain-size remake of Soccer (manufactured by Fun 4 All), but oddly no full-size version. It has an LCD display, but I haven't played it and can't comment on how well the gameplay is replicated (I also didn't see any user reviews in perusing a few pages of Google links, but they may be out there somewhere). LED Soccer by touchGrove is again a passable interpretation of the real thing, with some flaws that keep one from feeing fully satisfied. LEDhead is the one to fire up the next time you have to stay up half the night to catch the World Cup in some time zone on the other side of the planet.

Hockey (B)

As I teen I couldn't believe how stupid Mattel thought we were, thinking we'd buy the same game twice if it put a couple of hockey stick decals on the "shoot" buttons of its Basketball game and changed the name to Hockey. They also changed the handheld's color from white to blue….<sarcasm>oooooo, now we're talking</sarcasm>. Then I noticed something different: You could skate behind the net. OK, maybe I was as stupid as their marketing department assumed, because I thought that was way cool. I discovered this while "borrowing" it from a peer at summer camp (there's a few interesting handheld game tales from my couple of summers there that'll get mentioned in the future). Since my attention was partially occupied with the door that people might walk through at any minute, it took a short bit to notice some equally obvious changes. There's only four defenders, which seemed like it was going to make scoring insanely easy since the five in Basketball weren't all that much of a challenge. Then I notice I was turning the ball, er, puck over a LOT more. In Basketball the defenders just get in your way. Here I was getting the annoying turnover beep just for getting close to them or attempting to move into a space they occupied. Then I noticed something ever weirder: One of the defenders kept disappearing, leaving me with one-on-three matchups. What the hell??!! It took a little bit with an allowance of five dollars a week (plus a few babysitting dollars), but when I got back from Camp Flaccid I saved enough to buy a unit with the all important instructions so I could figure out what was going on. As mentioned before, Mattel seriously tweaked this game for the better. The clock, obviously, is now three periods of 20 "game time" minutes, with the visitor starting with the puck and the computer determining possession at the beginning of the other periods. The four defensemen includes one goalie that hovers near the net while the other three seem to have free rein (no "zones" like Soccer). The offensive benefit of fewer defenders is more than offset by limits on where you can shoot (the seven closest locations to the net), defenders that can steal the puck if you're adjacent to them and penalties you incur for running into them. The first "bump" results in merely a warning; a second results in a turnover and a penalty lasting two minutes of "game time" (or until the opponent turns the puck over). The changes add immense depth to strategy and replay value, making it my second favorite Mattel sports handheld after Football II. That opinion most definitely does NOT apply to the Canadian version of Hockey, which I didn't realize existed until I played it as part of the LEDhead emulation package a few years back. It appears you 1) can't skate behind the net, 2) the defenders don't steal the puck and 3) there's no penalties. The result is a game that's arguably worse than the original Basketball and certainly not distinct enough to make anyone in their right mind purchase both. But since it was Canada, Mattel obviously figured people would be stupid enough to buy anything with a Hockey label on it. What I can't figure out is how it was any kind of advantage to make the changes instead of just shipping the "real" versions up there, unless the Canadian version is an early production unit that was abandoned for the improved one. If anyone has a clue, let me know, eh?

Emulation/remakes: Similar to Soccer, Mattel again did a keychain remake, but not a full-size version. LEDhead is the only other version I know of, but it's all you need.

Armor Battle (C)

If this game were to win an award among Mattel's initial handhelds, it'd probably be Least Playable Without Instructions. It doesn't take much to figure out the objective is to maneuver your tank around a five-by-five grid into a position where it can shoot the computer's tank before it shoots you. It also doesn't take much to figure out the beeps you hear are warnings you're next to something dangerous (mines, it turns out) that send you back to the start if you hit them. Finally, the intuitive will deduce your tank needs to be in an adjacent square to the computer's tank to destroy it. But … how? Pressing "fire" doesn't work, nor does moving onto the tank's space, nor anything else I tried in my younger years (I can't remember whether it was at a store or using a unit I "borrowed" from somebody). The secret, I learned after buying one for a quarter at a garage sale several years later, is you have to press "fire" and the arrow key indicating the

direction you want to shoot at the same time. In retrospect, the phrase "well, duh" comes to mind. Armor Battle isn't overly sophisticated or engaging in the larger world of handhelds, but it's decent non-sports title for its era.

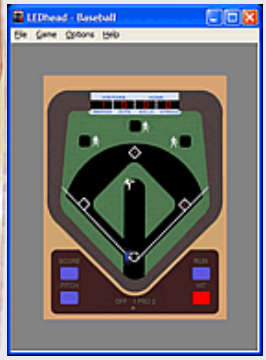
Emulation/remakes: This is LEDhead's worst conversion, at least for the Palm Pilot, since the Palm can't recognize two keys at once and your tank is thus unable to fire. Windows users also have the option of an authentic remake from Madrigal Design (www.madrigaldesign.it), where numerous other free titles from a wide range of companies are also available.

Sub Chase (B-)

Similar in some ways to Armor Battle, but more sophisticated and easily my favorite of Mattel's early non-sports handhelds. The objective is to maneuver your destroyer around a three-by-seven grid searching for the computer's sub. A slow beeping will sound if the sub is one space to the left or right, while a fast beeping means its either space above or below – or you're right on top of it. Pressing "fire" drops one of your 30 depth charges. A hit is worth five points on the first attempt, three on the second, two on the third and one if it takes four shots or more. The sub, of course, can fire back. One or two dots depicting torpedoes will streak across the screen and you'll need to move quickly to avoid them. The game continues until you've fired all your charges or your ship is hit. The improvements compared to Armor Battle should be apparent from the description, beginning with the difference in alert tones and increased variety in what constitutes a successful kill. The ability to dodge enemy shots is another huge plus, whereas in Armor Battle it's essentially random if the computer's shot hits you. Some may dislike the one-hit-and-you're-dead aspect, but that's how things are in real combat. Finally, basing the game's length on a set number of shots rather than the usual timer furthers the feeling of giving the player more control of the situation. It appears Sub Chase was the last of the shooting/arcade games in the handheld series so, much like Hockey, it benefitted from being able to expand on the concepts of earlier titles.

Emulation/remakes: LEDhead scores another dead-on hit, making the inability to play Armor Chase on a Palm Pilot all the less significant. This is also another handheld with a Windows remake by Madrigal Design.

Baseball (C)



Some people love this game, but I felt it was too simple and seldom played it. The average grade is in recognition of the enthusiasts and for being the first of its type. It's the only instance, however, where I preferred the versions by competing companies to a Mattel sports handheld. The first thing worth noting is the 16-page manual may be the worst in the series, with Mattel repeating the rules four times (explaining the functions of the keys, a "how to play" section, a description of a sample game and a summary). To quote C.S. Lewis in "The Screwtape Letters:" "It seems to me that you take a great many pages to tell a very simple story." Ultimately the game is about two things: tapping one button to swing at pitches and tapping another to run forward if you make a hit (OK, you do get to press a third button that makes the computer pitch the ball). There's a short and variable delay before a pitch is delivered, it can be straight or curved, and the speed varies. The player tries to hit the ball by pressing "swing" while the ball is over the plate. Swinging when the ball's not over the plate is a strike, but the rest of the outcome (hit or miss, ball or strike) appears to be random. A hit results in a quick set of beeps indicating how many bases you can probably run, or the entire field will light up to beeping fanfare in the event of a home run. Pressing "run" advances the runner at one of three speeds randomly picked by the computer, which is one of the key strategy elements since a slow runner might not reach second safely on a presumed double. Any runners already on base will

automatically advance with your runner. If the player doesn't reach a base safely, whichever runner is closest to where the ball was hit is thrown out. Games last five innings, which never bothered me since it's always possible to play four more if you really want the full-length experience. One reason the enthusiasm for the game is surprising is because it's too easy to master, with scores more like football than baseball quickly becoming the norm. Playing the faster "Pro 2" level is challenging for a while, but eventually succumbs to the same fate. Sadly, Baseball is the only "field sport" handheld Mattel didn't release a sequel for (if you don't count Hockey since Basketball/Soccer are in the same ballpark, so to speak). But the larger World Championship Baseball, released in 1980, is a good example of what the better handhelds imitating the sport offered, including two players alternating offense/defense, flexible pitching options, customizable lineups and so on.

Emulation/remakes: Mattel's 2002 remake of Baseball is the closest to the original, using LEDs instead of LCDs for everything except the scoreboard. LEDhead's version, on the other hand, is a rare disappointment. There's no ability select difficulty levels, so mastering it is short work. Also, there's no on-screen "hit" key, which isn't a big deal unless you're using the touch screen for the controls (they're notably less responsive than the Palm's real buttons, so presumably there are few going this route).

Basketball 2/Soccer 2 (not rated, but almost certainly A or better)

I haven't seen, much less played, these two rarities, so all I can say is they look damn impressive. Basketball 2 now has two offensive players you can pass the ball to and three selectable defensive matchup (man, zone, press). There are three-point and foul shots (including three-point plays). Staying in the key too long is a three-second violation. And finally (literally), there's overtime in the event of a tie at the end of regulation. Soccer 2 goes to even greater dimensions, with the action taking place on a field nine times the size of the screen (like the football games, reaching one side of the screen returns the action to the opposite side). You have five teammates to pass the ball to (pressing the "teammate" button toggles the one you control, and the ability to make high and low kicks on goal (low ones might fall short, while high ones might go over the net). There's kickoffs, throw-ins, corner kicks and much more. Just … wow. LEDhead programmer Peter Hirschberg keeps promising these are coming as an update and I wish he'd deliver, because these games are maddeningly elusive on sites like eBay and the asking prices are likely to be way beyond my comfort range.

Ski Slalom (D-)

"People are stupid." It's far more likely that phrase was uttered by Mattel's marketing hacks than "people like skiing" when this game was conceived. Apparently they figured that since it'd been four years since Auto Race launched the handheld series, lots of people were unfamiliar with that game or too stupid to remember what it was like to play it. So they dug Ski Slalom out from their mausoleum, which is nothing more than Auto Race turned upside down. And I do mean the exact same game – no tweaks like the Basketball/Soccer/Hockey trio. It's even got the same 1976 copyright date as Auto Race, but for some reason Mattel mothballed it. By 1980, of course, handhelds had advanced way beyond dodge-blips-in-three-columns gameplay and Ski Slalom took a commercial wipeout (imagine the letdown of playing this if you previously bought Basketball 2 and/or Soccer 2). Ski Slalom was mostly sold in foreign markets, according to the HM, which would be consistent with other countries often getting stuck with our outdated/inferior electronics at first-run prices. The really sick thing is its rarity has boosted its value on the market today, with in-box units selling from $250-$350. I didn't find any sellers with both games, but "like new" Auto Race handhelds are being sold for around $25. I know there's a difference between "boxed" and "like new," but that's still a monstrosity, especially given Auto Race's historic value as the first all-electronic handheld. What's that? No assessment of actually playing the game? Why bother? Oh, very well, read on in the emulation section, which is the only option I can recommend.

Emulation/remakes: LEDhead is obviously the way to go if you have the platform for it, especially since you can also play Auto Race and strain to find any differences between the two. Both feature an LED blip you control with a left/center/right knob (but, hey, one decal is a car and one a skier). Both require you to dodge oncoming LED blips as you try navigating your way across the screen four times in less than 99 seconds (but there is that up/down difference). Both allow you to move forward at four different speeds (but whereas the decal on Auto Race reads "1/2/3/4," Ski Slalom's is "Slalom/Bronze/Silver/Gold"). The sounds also are apparently the same – a low-pitch click at slower speeds and an engine-like hum at the fastest (that skier must really be flying to generate that kind of wind noise). As for remakes, at least Mattel didn't try to play us for suckers twice when did their re-releases a decade ago.

It's awful to end on such a negative note, so I'll offer a more optimistic conclusion by putting next month's preview here. Mattel might have been first to market, but competitors have their own all-time classics from that initial era in the late '70s. We'll examine some of those as the foundation is laid for the more advanced second generation of games I'll get into this summer.

The Pixelated Mage

by Jeff Wittenhagen

Crypts Of Chaos

Platform: Atari 2600
Developer: 20th Century Fox
Release Date: 1982
Genre: Adventure, Role-Playing
Game Modes: Single Player
Tag Line: "A bit awkward at first, but can be entertaining as you get the hang of it."

Synopsis

Crypts of Chaos was a revolutionary game for its time and went above and beyond what you would expect from an Atari 2600 game. It is an adventure game that has 3D aspects where you can attack, get items, and move in multiple directions; virtually unheard of in the early 80s. Your goal in Crypts of Chaos is to survive in the crypts while attempting to get the treasures within and escape. There are four difficulty levels where each level starts you in a different area.

Gameplay

The controls in Crypts of Chaos are a bit awkward at first, but as you get used to them they can be entertaining. Limited to a Joystick and one button, it is a miracle that they were able to implement as much as they did. Up goes forward, down switches between actions, and moving the upper cursor will turn you. There are a bunch of actions to choose from. You get of the option of using a dagger, magic wand, a ring that wards off evil, make peace, make a 180 degree turn, or steal a treasure from a monster lair. This is a huge advancement from the Pong and tank game variations that the Atari 2600 hardware was initially designed for.

Graphics and Sound

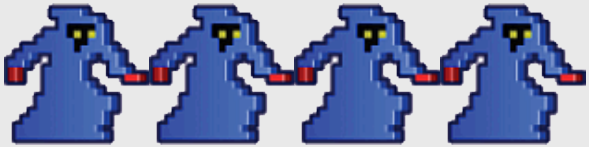
The graphics in Crypts of Chaos are minimal which is usual for the Atari 2600. The walls and the ground have the usual monotone visuals that the generation is known for. You will need to draw out a map as you go along otherwise you will get lost. Drawing maps out on paper was commonplace in the 80s as almost no games came with any kind of strategy guides and when you have a maze to traverse through, like in Crypts of Chaos, you need to have some kind of reference point. One unique feature of the graphics is the way that the monsters scale as they get closer to you, a prelude of things to come.

Sounds are simplistic and don't do a whole lot, which again is standard for the Atari 2600. As you move through the crypts you will hear the sound of your footsteps. When you begin a fight with a monster, there is a little musical chime that will play which can almost be classified as just a sound effect. None of the sounds really add anything to your experience besides alerting you to various things, and they get annoying very quickly.

It's Rare, So Is It Worth Getting?

Adventure/Role-Playing Games are unheard of for the Atari 2600, so Crypts of Chaos is a rare treat in the second console generation. It is easy to get lost so you will have to bust out your old retro map making skills that have since diminished, due to the easy availability and over simplification of in game maps nowadays. Crypts of Chaos is one of the great flea market finds that you will see as you will rarely find a copy online. When you do see it, expect to shell out around $10 which is reasonable for an Atari rarity.

Rating = 4 Pixelated Mages out of 5



Dual Perspective

by James Sorge

E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial

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 “E.T.”, the game everybody knows for the Atari 2600.

Graphics: 9/10
This game has some of the greatest graphics displayed on an Atari 2600! The blockiness goes a long way, and E.T. looks lifelike. Nothing ever beats it, not even modern games.

Sound: 10/10
The game also has a great soundtrack. The blips and beeps hold up well against every game from its time period. You will be humming to this game in no time.

Difficulty: 5/10
This game has the perfect difficulty. It is not too easy and not too hard. It even tells you which holes to go to in order to find the items needed to repair E.T.'s ship. You can complete this game really fast and go for world records, just like Super Mario Bros.

Replay Factor: 10/10
This is an addicting game. You will play this for hours on end. Who knows, maybe you'll be able to break the 999:59 internal clock that is in the game!

The World Record Perspective:
This is one of the most competitive games of all time. Todd Rogers has defied the competition and holds the world record here! Submitting a score for this game will net you the popularity you want!

- Atari 2600 Record: 1,011,657 by Todd Rogers

The Penguin Says:
"Overall I give this a 10/10 with a world record potential of 5/5. This is one of the greatest games of all time, bar none. Easy to take the world record too..and you'll get all the fame in the world. Well, not as famous as this penguin, but close!"

Mutated Output

by Mark Sabbatini

The BBC Micro Gets One Software Company's Knickers In A Twist

Britain and the U.S. are "two countries divided by a common language," according to George Bernard Shaw. Both speak English but, much like a married couple, that doesn't always mean they understand each other.

The two nations tend to think the other speaks an "odd" variation of the language, which always makes for lively mockery depending upon which side of the ocean you're on. Imagine a kid bringing a can of a common British dessert – spotted dick – to a classroom in the U.S. for instance. Similarly, a girl named Randi Nickers might make it through a U.S. school without irreparable psychological damage, but in Britain it's inconceivable that could be anything except the stage name of a porn star.

The differences in dialect can cross the line from amusing to problematic, in degrees small and large. A diner requesting chips or biscuits, for example, will probably be convinced those foreigners screwed the order up. And a Brit might find himself in serious trouble requesting permission to light up a fag in the U.S.

The same-but-different element also plays a non-linguistic cultural role. Both can watch the same program on TV, but the pictures will be different. What plugs into an outlet fine in one country won't in the other – and a good thing, too, since older items in particular might short out.

Such differences manifested themselves in a bizarre manner for one U.S. software company trying to port its games to the BBC Micro back in the early 1980s. This month's column of reviews for that machine continues our "Many Faces Of" matchup from last month by looking at those ill-fated efforts, which generally played poorly if they were playable at all – but nobody can possibly deny the results were entertaining.

Parker Brothers is all over the map in terms of quality when it comes to their original and licensed titles for machines ranging from the Odyssey 2 to modern Windows computers. But only one word comes to mind when describing their software for the Beeb: confusion.

This was the pre-internet era, so things commonly known or researched today were often a mystery. Also, computers were new enough that bringing one to a foreign country could present serious issues when going through customs at the airport. Finally, the Beeb was introduced in Britain in 1981, but machines didn't make their way to the U.S. until 1984.

The result was a two-pronged set of errors that spelled doom. First, specs for the Beeb and Britain's technical requirements were collected by the marketing and research personnel at Parker Brothers, who provided them to programmers. Second, because no Beeb's were easily obtained in the U.S., programmers had to make do with emulated machines on minicomputer workstations, something more typically done for heavyweight productivity applications.

Hence, when Brits booted up games such as Popeye, Gyruss and Super Cobra on their machines, the experience was remarkably different than that of playtesters back at Parker Brothers' corporate office. I'm not certain of all the mishaps, but these are among the highlights:

- U.S. televisions use an NTSC display system, whereas those in Britain use PAL. One of the differences is NTSC has 525 scan lines (485 visible), while PAL has 625 (575 visible). This resulted in the researchers at Parker Brothers concluding British TV screens were "taller" and graphics needed to be adjusted accordingly. As a result, the games translated to the Beeb looked "squished" when played on British TVs.

- Another problem with the NTSC vs. PAL issue is NTSC has an interlaced refresh rate of 60 frames per second, while PAL's is 50 fps. The difference means "related to NTSC, PAL has a shorter run time because of the higher amount of 'fps,'" according to the European Telecommunications Standards Institute, "PAL movies are (normally) not cut, but they are 'faster.'" This bit of information didn't make it to the programmers at Parker Brothers, meaning all of the games play noticeably faster than intended. I've mentioned excessive speed as a problem in previous games I've reviewed for the Beeb and thought it was likely the result of the computer's relatively fast CPU, but it's possible the display issue was at least partially responsible.

- Brits use numerical references for some things that are a bit different than the U.S. The first floor of a building in Britain, for instance, is what people in the U.S. think of as the second (those worshipping the Queen refer to street level as the ground floor). This errantly led the research team to report the Beeb's color pallet is one step removed from the U.S. standards at the time. Not surprisingly, the hues in the games therefore range from mildly to massively off-kilter.

- Finally, saving the best (worst?) for last, programmers were informed the Beeb uses the conventional graphing point of origin, where "0,0" is the lower left corner rather than the microcomputer norm of the upper left corner. The information came from one of Parker Brothers' marketing gurus who owned a Sinclair ZX81, which uses such a graphing system and suggests in the manual such numbering is the standard. As a result, *every game from the company is displayed upside down on a Beeb*. Equally bizarre is this never got corrected during the 20 months the company worked on arcade titles for the machine. The reasons given are more speculation than hard data, but include 1) low sales of the titles, presumably based on high prices compared to British software companies and poor word-of-mouth; and 2) the fact many users simply weren't familiar with the U.S. arcade/home originals and therefore didn't know any better (although even on a game like Gyruss you'd think the upside-down title screen, score display, etc. would have clued in even people who'd eaten beans on toast for breakfast).

Not surprisingly, a meaningful "Many Faces Of" comparison is worthless for anything but entertainment value given those misadventures. So we'll give them short shrift without worrying about numeric scores for graphics, sound, addictiveness and the like. Surprisingly, in at least a couple of instances a reasonable argument can be made the Beeb's versions don't deserve to be at the bottom of the pack.

Frogger

Like most of the Beeb conversions, this is at least playable if not exactly enjoyable. Getting used to hopping toward the bottom of the screen rather than the top isn't too tough an adjustment, but this is an instance where the color scheme is way too weird – at times it's hard to discern vehicles from the road and creatures from the water. Plus, the speed up is really noticeable when things are already fast and crowded after the first level. What does work in the Beeb's favor is the catchy sound from the arcade is almost perfect, thanks to the computer's beefy sound chip. I probably wouldn't place it last among every licensed version released because of the colorless, soundless, split-screen versions released for the ZX81 and Radio Shack TRS Model I/III. I actually enjoy those versions, but recognize the at-large gaming community would likely see them as more flawed than the Brit-impaired port.

Do not attempt to adjust your monitor! This is how all the Parker Brothers games looked when played on the BBC Micro

Gyruss

Other than the color scheme, this is definitely the most successful of the Parker Brothers translations thanks to the 360-degree gameplay of the hit space shooter. Sure it takes a moment to adjust to the aliens entering from different points than usual, but since they encroach from all four compass points at the start of each wave this is negligible. Other differences are similarly minor, with only the warps really reminding you of the topsy-turvy situation (I was never one for keeping a close eye on my score, which undoubtedly helps). Actually, the slightly oval playfield is also a bit of a bummer. The speed issue … well, I guess that depends on your skill level. I consider myself pretty good, so it didn't bother me (indeed, I never really noticed it). Best of all is the awesome sound from the original is retained – not perfectly, but as good as one could possibly hope for on an '80s micro. I just wish the colors were on. As it is, the dogfight looks like it's taking place inside one of those nebulas you see on "Star Trek" instead of deep space. In a "Many Faces Of" matchup I'd be tempted to score it above average, but would probably keep it mid-pack because of those colors. If you snag one Parker Brother title for the Beeb with the intention of actually playing it, this is the one.

Popeye

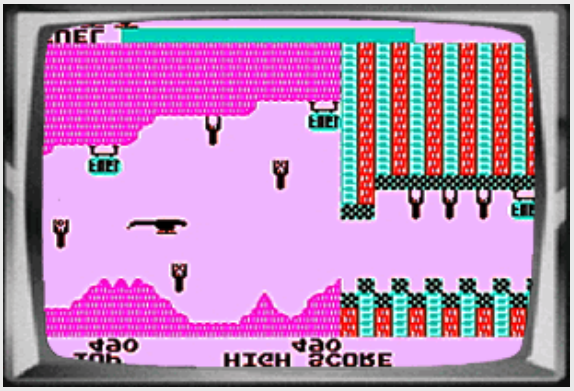
Playable, but on the severely low end because it's difficult mentally coping with concepts such as falling up when walk off ledges. The walking-on-ceilings thing is also weird (even if Lionel Richie's "Dancing On The Ceiling" was #1 on the charts around that time), but since that's a constant you kind of adjust. The color alternations are more problematic than most, especially with smaller elements like the hearts from Olive Oyl and bottles hurled by the Hag. I never thought Popeye was a particularly fast platformer so the speed-up isn't an issue for the overall pace. But it does again plague those hearts that need collecting too quickly and bottles that are a bit unreasonably hard to avoid. The sparse sound is a letdown compared to Parker Brothers' better titles and, while it's hard to be certain, it looks like the graphics would also be below par if rendered properly. The only way I can see this even threatening to move out of the basement in a "Many Faces Of" competition would be if I ultimately decided gamers would prefer this with all its flaws over the incredibly poor Odyssey 2 version (which is definitely the case with one of the remaining titles reviewed below).

Q*Bert

Ugh! The only thing the Beeb version of this gets right is Q*bert's swearing when he dies, which is a certainty of alarming frequency. Ever seen those pseudo-3D pictures in art galleries and puzzle books where the perspective can change while you're looking at it? That's what Q*bert on the Beeb is like – when you can tell what's going on at all. It's nearly impossible tying to figure out what squares (rectangles, of course) he can jump onto and the same applies to all of the enemies' movements. Think it's hard to figure out Ugg and Wrong-Way in the arcade? Psychiatrists could use the Beeb's as a Rorschach test for patients they wanted to drive insane. And it's not like you can get acclimated during each stage because the colors are changing all the time (or the little bit of time you stay alive on the pyramid). Speaking of color, the off-kilter numbering just furthers the sheer chaos to the point where it's sometimes impossible to tell which squares still need changing (and what color you're trying to change them to). Finally – and I mean this only in the sense it's the final thing I'll mention – the diagonal movement in Q*bert has never translated particularly well to home versions. Several of them, you may recall, require the player to rotate the joystick. Using a

diagonal foursome of keys on some computer versions was also something I never got completely comfortable with. On the Beeb I'd wager a trained monkey hitting just the four movement keys could equal my longevity, and maybe even exceed it since I lost count of the number of times I hopped to my death thinking it was the right move. Overall this is so classically bad it deserves some kind of all-time spot on games that should be tried once for their sheer infamy.

Super Cobra



We return to playability with this port of Stern's less-popular horizontal navigation shooter. Sure it looks funny, but playing it isn't a radically bizarre experience. Especially if, like many Brits, you never played the arcade version and can pretend those rockets, etc. are dropping on you rather than launching themselves into the ground. Everything is reasonably discernible in their new colors, so the key to mental success there is pretending you're on the surface of some alien planet. The speed can definitely be an issue for newer players, however, since Super Cobra is a pretty tough game to begin with. Otherwise it's got all the stages and enemies from the arcade, along with the extra benefit of not having to feed in coins to continue your flight. This version would definitely pass the non-scrolling Odyssey 2 version in a "Many Faces Of" competition, plus the Atari 2600 version I'm not particularly enamored with. Worth a spin for the play value as well as the laughs.

Mercifully, it's possible to end this with something where the BBC Micro might have been able to contend for a medal, even if it's not in the arcade arena. By the time Parker Brothers got around to converting its classic board games such as Monopoly and Scrabble to the Beeb during the latter half of the 1980s it farmed the job out to the London software company Loofli, R.P.A., which maintained its reputation for above-average titles for the platform. Modern versions of those games have gotten so advanced it's tough to appreciate the play value on early computers, but Beeb fanatics and those exploring them machine's capabilities will find they're a match for anything else in the eight-bit arena.

To see what all the above games would have looked like if they were programmed correctly for the Beeb, here they are in all their rotated glory:

FROGGER GYRUSS POPEYE

Q*BERT SUPER COBRA

Sega Rocks!

by Christian Matozzo

Burning Rangers (Sega Saturn)

It's the final year of support by SEGA for the Saturn, 1998. The game releases have dwindled to a point where the amount of games being produced are few, and print runs are becoming less and less. But that didn't stop SEGA from putting out some of the greatest games for the Saturn from their top-notch development staff, among them being Shining Force III, the fabled Panzer Dragoon Saga, and the highly underrated Burning Rangers.

Burning Rangers was released in 1998 by SEGA, and developed by Sonic Team, also known for the fantastic game NiGHTS into Dreams, and the famous Sonic series. Their choice to ruin the development of Sonic X-Treme helped cause the Saturn's quick downfall in the US. But oddly enough, they created what I consider two of their best games during this era. Burning Rangers is a game about a team of futuristic firefighters that go on missions to save people in danger. You play as either Shou or Tillis (again male and female leads) as you go on four different missions to save your fellow man, and encounter some....extraterrestrial things along the way. The concept is very unique, and Sonic Team jumps leaps and bounds to give you the best storyline experience as possible, including anime cutscenes, voice acting, and even a special mail system that helps flesh out the storylines of the different people you rescue. The presentation of the game is done extremely well to say the least. The only problem is that the game is all of four levels long. But on the bright side, the game has great replay value.

But you're probably thinking: “Firefighters? How exciting can putting out fires and rescuing people be?” Well that's where Sonic Team gives everyone a surprise, and provides a really great platforming experience. Your character jumps leaps and bounds with a jetpack, and puts out fires with a gun that charges up and sends out earth-shattering beams. You explore 4 extremely-detailed locales with multiple paths to take with dozens of rooms that feature plenty of hidden areas and special goodies for you to find. Don't fret at the thought of only four levels total, these levels are LONG, you'll get at least 30 minutes of playtime from each one. The main objective is to put out the fires and save victims by collecting crystals that you get from dousing flames. These crystals act as a one-hit shield, much like Sonic the Hedgehog. When you get hit by fire, the crystals scatter. Get harmed without holding any crystals and it's Game Over. But that's not all the crystals do. The crystals also help you transport any victims that you find throughout the stages. You need at least 5 crystals to teleport the victim to safety. However, if you rescue them with 10 crystals, you get a continue that you can use as an extra life in case you happen to get hit with no crystals later in the level. One thing to note is that the more you charge up your weapon, the bigger the radius of the blast to put out flames is. However, charge it up to maximum (A purple blast) and you won't obtain any crystals from the fires you douse with that blast.

Score Card

But where's the suspense of real firefighting? This game would be boring without something that will keep you moving as fast as you can through the levels. In the game there is a limit meter that keeps a percentage that's always on the rise. But watch out, every 20% that the limit meter increases (up to 100%) flames will burst out of the ground that you can't put out! Dousing flames and saving victims decreases the meter, so you had better hustle when getting the job done. So keep on your toes when wandering around exploring. Get lost and you might end up trapped by hordes of flames! But don't worry, if you do happen to lose your way inside the gigantic maze that is the levels of Burning Rangers, your guide Chris will give you vocal directions of where to go at the push of a button. But be forewarned! This critical feature of the game makes the

Gameplay:
10

Fighting fires and saving people has never been this exciting in video games! It's as if someone decided to put astronauts and firefighters together to create a really awesome hybird.

Graphics:
8.5

The graphics are breathtaking and stunning for Saturn standards, but there are a lot of graphical errors that can be a tad irksome.

Sound:
7.5

Most of the music is hardly noticeable, but the game's 3 awesome vocal themes and excessive amounts of speech make up for it.

Overall:
9

Burning Rangers is a wonderful Saturn title that can't be enjoyed elsewhere. If you have the chance to buy a copy, don't pass it up, or you may not see it again.

Japanese version impossible to play if you don't know Japanese.

When you make it to the end of the level, then comes the boss fight. You must use your firefighting weapon to fight a special enemy that's set on harming you. It's got a health meter showing you how many times you have to hit, and once defeated you will be allowed to progress to the next stage.

But that's not all. Once you complete the game (and at four levels, it won't take you long), new parts of each level open up. Thought you went through every room the first run-through of the game? Guess again. New areas open up that weren't accessible before, as well as different victims to rescue. And overall, there's 3152 different combinations of levels that you can encounter. Not to mention that you can rescue special victims to get codes for special features, such as different playable characters, debug menus, sound tests, and the like. Not to mention that you get a letter each time you save a victim (up to 3 per victim that you save), so there's plenty to unlock and explore.

But the gameplay isn't the only strongpoint of this game. Sonic Team has managed to practically pull off miracles with the Saturn's hardware when it comes to the game's graphics. The polygon count is great, and Sonic Team has managed to pull off real-time lighting effects as well as transparencies, which are unheard of for the Saturn hardware. On the flip side however, the game also has a great amount of graphical errors as well. There's pop-up, polygon glitching, clipping, ghosting, among other things. If you can think of the error, chances are it's in Burning Rangers. But overall the graphical effects are minor considering how nice the game looks for the time. And on top of that there's some really nicely-done full motion video anime cutscenes.

The sound is a mixed bag. The duo of Hatay and Kumatani who did the fantastic music for NiGHTS into Dreams... have come back to do the music for Burning Rangers. Unfortunately, aside from the 3 awesome vocal themes of the game (a fast-paced rock song, a catchy rap, and a soft ballad), the soundtrack is highly forgettable. There's not too much music to listen to during the gameplay, and when there is, you'll barely notice

it's there. A real disappointment considering how great the soundtrack to NiGHTS into Dreams... was. But on the bright side, there's a TON of speech. Literally everyone in the game talks, in-game as well as through the cutscenes. Each person you save says something and has a different voice, on top of all the things that the main characters of the game say. Needless to say, SEGA gave this game quite a localization budget. And the game really benefits from it.

Overall, Burning Rangers is the hidden gem of the Sega Saturn library. With only around 30,000 or so copies produced, it's quite a tough game to find. Expect to pay in upwards of $60 for a complete copy. But it is worth every penny of the high price it brings. I'll even go as far to say that the experience you get from this game can't really be conveyed in a mere text review with some pictures, between the explosions, the sound, and the constant tension you have throughout the game. So if you're looking for a new title for your Saturn library, I'd definitely recommend Burning Rangers. You can't go wrong with this fast-paced energy-packed title that will keep you on the edge of your seat as you play.

A Pixelated 21st Century

by Paul Zimmerman

I hope everyone is having a great Pixelated new year so far. March was a great month to be a Pixelated fan. Here are some of the retroware highlights for the month of March:

WiiWare

Arcade Essentials (Video to the right)

A collection of 5 retroware games. There are clones of Qix, Space Invaders, Bust-a-Move, and Missile Command, along with a game that is a bit more original. Music is not that good sadly, however there are nice visuals. Overall, not a bad buy for $5.

Liight (click here to see a video of the game)

A puzzle game using different, colorful light sources. There are 100 puzzle levels and a non-stop mode, plus you can create your own puzzles and share them on-line with friends.

DSiWare

Go Series Earth Saver (Click here to see a video of the game)

Looks similar to Dig Dug 2.

Rabi x Laby (Video to the right)

A nice looking puzzle platform game with 50 levels.

Shapo (Click here to see a video of the game)

A puzzle game that takes parts of Lonpos, Tetris, and Art of Balance. There is a classic mode (which is like a quest mode) and a puzzle mode.

Note: most of the videos for the games below are of the originals (meaning they not being played on the Wii). This is because the Virtual Console is emulating the original system and therefore they are identical.

Bomberman Hero (N64) (Video to the right)

Similar to Super Mario 64, but with Bomberman and more like a platformer. There are over 70 levels. No multiplayer.

Natsume Championship Wrestling (SNES) (Click here to see a video of the game)

Not very good. Originally from the creators of Cho Aniki. Nice music though.

As always, send me an email and let me know if you purchased any of these games and what your thoughts are about them. Also, let me know your thoughts about any games I did not list.

I will see you next month for hopefully some more retroware goodies!

Yet another issue of Retrogaming Times Monthly comes sadly to an end. It was pretty hectic in the month of March from getting this issue done, to working on the article index, to putting up back issues. April will be more of the same. Hey, it keeps me busy and out of trouble!

For those of you that were not able to deduce which columns this month were April Fools jokes, they were Donald Lee's Apple II Incider and James Sorge's Dual Perspective. See you all next month!