



Printing Help



Retrogaming Times Monthly #91 - Christmas 2011



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- Game Over



Press Fire To Begin

by Bryan Roppolo

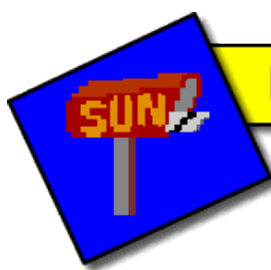


It's that time of the year again when snow starts falling and presents start appearing under trees in houses! This month RTM has included a number of Christmas themed articles for you as well as some looks at new titles that have come out on classic systems, one for the SNES and the other for the Odyssey2 (these reviews appear in Retro Collecting 101 and The O² Kid respectively, which coincidentally are part of this year's RTM Recommended Stocking Stuffers). Therefore, if you are looking to buy something for that classic gamer that you know, this issue should help you out.

In addition to the two games covered here, the Jaguar now has a new title called Kobayashi Maru. You can read more about it on Reboot's website, <http://reboot.atari.org/km/kobayashi.html>.

Now for some bad news, considering the fact that I am moving this month I will have very little time to devote to the site. This means that there will be no more progress on the article index that has been in the works for some months. I still see it opening up early next year, but not just yet. Sorry for the bad news, but I just will not have enough time to devote to it until after Christmas. Don't worry, the January issue of RTM will come out on schedule.

I hope you all enjoy the Christmas season and find this month's edition of RTM not only fun and entertaining, but helpful in determining what to put inside your favorite classic gamer's stocking.



Retrogaming News

[Gary Garcia of Pac-Man Fever Fame Passes Away](#)

On November 17, 2011 Gary Garcia who made up one half of the team of Buckner & Garcia passed away. Gary helped make the early 80s a better place for us gamers who would wear out our parent's record players listening to his and Buckner's album. What retro gamer doesn't remember getting Pac-Man Fever or doing the Donkey Kong in their rooms? Heck, even many non-gamers ended up "enjoying" these tunes (remember, our parents had to endure listening to Pac-Man Fever over and over again). If you want to read the official obituary, head on over to Buckner & Garcia's website at <http://bucknergarcia.com/gary-garica-r-i-p/> where you can also read comments left by others.

[Encyclopedia of Game Machines 2nd Edition](#)

Publication date is set for Monday, December 5, 2011

Game Machines 1972-2012 – The encyclopedia of consoles, handhelds and home computers will be launched on December 5, 2011. This will be the 2nd English-language edition of the renowned gaming history reference and can be pre-ordered at www.gameplanbooks.com. Printed in color throughout and featuring over 700 photographs on 248 pages, Game Machines 1972-2012 is the reference book for every gamer and anyone interested in the history of computer entertainment. Visit <http://gameplanbooks.com/> to preorder or download sample pages.

[Analogue CMVS Slim & Analogue Arcade Sticks](#)

We are very excited to announce four brand spanking new products.

We have redesigned the original Walnut CMVS and replaced it with the latest Analogue CMVS Slim, now offered in ebonized ash. We took the great design of the original CMVS Slim, crafted it out of ebonized ash, slimmed it down, and reduced all video and audio outputs to one single minimal jack.

The Analogue Arcade Stick was a vision we had from day one. We wanted to create the holy grail of all Neo Geo arcade sticks. So we started by designing it to utilize the exact same authentic Seimitsu Japanese parts found in original Neo Geo arcade cabinets.

Moreover, we use the identical ergonomic Japanese button layout used on Neo Geo cabinets. Not only is it as true-to-the Neo Geo as possible, but it works with every single Neo Geo home console ever made. Visit our website at <http://www.analogueinteractive.com/index.php> to read more and place and order.

[London Gaming Con](#)

Saturday, December 3 - Sunday, December 4 (London, UK)

London Gaming Con is a fun and friendly gaming convention that takes place in the UK for those 18 and over. Its aim is to bring something new to the video gaming scene and help to bring the video gaming communities together. It is run by fans for fans.

With a massive Retro-presence, including a number of retro-based exhibitors, a retro-zone with over 40 setups from the 70s, 80s and 90s, live chiptune 8-bit inspired music and more, we'd like to extend our invitation for the retro community to come and check out London Gaming Con! To find out more information, visit our website at <http://www.londongamingcon.com/>.

[MAGFest 10](#)

Thursday, January 5 - Sunday, January 8 (National Harbor, MD)

MAGFest, aka the Music and Gaming Fest (formerly known as the Mid-Atlantic Gaming Fest), will be held in Maryland the first week of January at the Gaylord National Hotel and Convention Center in National Harbor. The usual affair includes loads of arcade cabinets, a large console area, live videogame cover bands and chiptune artists, panels, shops, guest speakers, and more! Presale tickets are currently at \$45 for all four days. Our website can be found at <http://magfest.org/> for more info.

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



Bewitched Brews

by Ian Baronofsky



Getting to Know Grant Thienemann

Last month we looked at Candy Catcher ([click here to read that review](#)) which is a new homebrew for the Atari 2600. This month we talk to the programmer of the game, Grant Thienemann. As with most programmers, Grant has an interesting story to tell about his rise to fame (well, famous in the eyes of us Atari 2600 lovers), so I'm sure you all will enjoy hearing it. Sit back and continue reading to hear the story of Grant Thienemann, one of the newest faces on the 2600 homebrew scene.

Where are you from and what is your background in?

I was born in the mid 1980s in Lynchburg, Virginia and I still live in Virginia today near Bristol, Virginia/Tennessee with my wife, son and daughter.

I didn't really get into console gaming until the late '90s, however the first computer I got was in the summer of 1992 which was an Apple IIc. I remember spending hours playing Impossible Mission II, Zaxxon, and Conan. That was where the spark about computers and programming in general started for me. I didn't play an Atari 2600 until I was in high-school. I got one at a used game store in my hometown for next to nothing, however I remember being completely intrigued with the quality and difficulty of the games considering the hardware limitations of the system. I played it on and off but it wasn't until 2009 after I graduated college and my life had settled down a bit that I really got into the 2600, which was when I joined AtariAge.



I went to Radford University, where I graduated in 2007. I ended up earning a Bachelors of Science in Computer Science and Technology with a concentration in Software Engineering. During my time at Radford I studied many languages and programming principles. The language that I was taught the most was Java, though I did programming in Perl, C, Assembly, Ada, Visual Basic, Visual C#, PHP and Lisp.

I had one professor, Dr. Okie, that taught about efficient programming. I'll never forget his courses. When he gave us an assignment we could end up with working code that put out the expected results, but still fail it. Dr. Okie always stressed efficient programming and not wasting resources. I didn't excel in Dr. Okie's course, but what he taught has always stayed with me. He was the professor that forever changed my approach to programming and it has served me very well in my professional career.

I currently am a consultant in Southwest Virginia. I develop and maintain a Selenium Automation Framework that has been implemented with Java to do automated testing for the software my company sells.

Why did you choose the 2600 for your first game?

I chose the 2600 for several reasons. First, I would have to say imagination. I've never played another video game console that so easily integrated your imagination into the game play. While this is certainly not true for everyone, I've heard this said about the 2600 many times. The ability of the console and the original programmers to spark that imagination with their games was one of the reasons why I choose it.

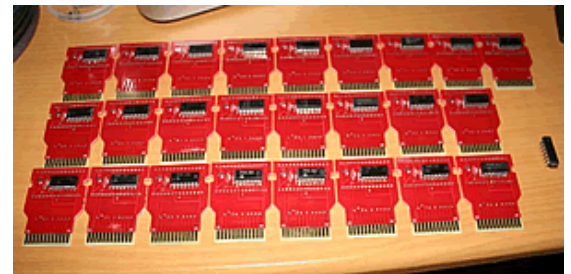


My second reason would be the Atari 2600 community. I don't think I've ever seen a video game community that is so committed and welcoming about their console. I mean that in several ways. I find the 2600 community to be pleasant overall. I don't find very much name calling or bad mouthing except in good fun. Candy Catcher was not my first venture into 2600 programming. I had help on my previous unfinished projects from several people that aided in the design and programming of Candy Catcher. Batari Basic, Visual Batari Basic and www.randomterrain.com were instrumental in making Candy Catcher possible.

My third reason was the challenge. I had set a 4K ROM size limit for myself when it came to making Candy Catcher. To create a complete game when you only have 4K of space, 128 bytes of RAM and 1.19MHz of CPU is extremely difficult. Several times during the development of the game I considered increasing the size to 8K, 16K or even 32K. I didn't think I was going to be releasing this game on cartridge, however a couple of people asked if I was going to and that pretty much set my limit to 4K. When I finished Candy Catcher I think out of the 4096 bytes (1024 bytes equals 1K) I had available, I only had 15 bytes free. This project had never at any point in time been about selling cartridges. It had been about making a fun Halloween themed game for the 2600 community. It's why when I offered the game for sale, not knowing if anyone would be interested, I included the final build as well. I just wanted people to play my game and have fun! From the feedback people have given me, I think I have successfully accomplished that.

Did your formal training in computer science help you in writing Candy Catcher?

Yes, without a doubt. Specifically my courses I took from Dr. Okie. With the 2600 you have to be aware of your limits, you have to be aware what you are doing and how much space it will take, and how many cycles it will require. I can't tell you the number of times I re-wrote various collision detection aspects of my code to save ROM space, RAM and CPU cycles.



My other courses helped me as well (understanding the fundamental concepts about looping, if statements, etc.) and made programming Candy Catcher a much simpler process.

Where did you get the idea for Candy Catcher?

Honestly I don't remember. I just remember doing research on how to make 2600 cartridges with EPROMs and thinking what could I program into 4K that would be fun and simple. I knew it would be Halloween themed, and I started messing with some sprite design and the pumpkin bucket was the first thing I made, and it just grew from there.

Are you happy with the result?

Yes and no. I think any programmer or artist will tell you that they are never truly satisfied with their work. They always wish they had done this or that. Overall I'm extremely happy with Candy Catcher and the feedback I have gotten from the game has been fantastic. For my first completed game, I'm very proud of what I have accomplished in the time that I did!

My goal was to create a simple Halloween themed game for the 2600 community. However, once I got near finishing it, I had been contacted by a couple of members asking if I was going to release the game on cartridge, it was at this point that I decided to set another goal for myself.

My new goal was to create a budget title for the 2600 that anyone could easily afford. I wanted to be able to offer Candy Catcher cheaply, and I think I have accomplished that. To do this I knew I needed to make the cartridges myself, so I started reading about how games were made, and I got the necessary equipment. Oddly enough my 4K limit helped me with the hardware side as it's the easiest cartridge to make since you don't have to deal with bank switching logic. Each cartridge is just a PCB, an Inverter and an EPROM.

What unused ideas did you have for the game and why didn't you implement them?

I had several ideas for the game that never got implemented for various reasons, but mainly because of the space limitations.

I wanted a title-screen and had even started to make one with the title-screen kernel originally designed by RevEng from AtariAge. However, the title-screen kernel requires its own 4K chunk of space which I didn't have. I'd even made a simple title screen out of the sprites which would have been vertical on the screen, but again I ran out of room.

I tried including "healthy" food items that would fall instead of candy, like broccoli, etc. This item would make you lose points if you were hit by them or you caught them in your bucket, however if they landed on the ground they would have gained you points.

I tried using a background image and even had one that was a night sky with the moon, stars, and a house with tombstones. It looked great, however I had to axe one of the failing pieces of candy to fit it in, and I tried playing the game with only 2 pieces of candy and it just didn't work.

Originally in my designs I had drawn out for the game, the robot was going to fall out of the sky with the candy but come down at an angle, if you caught the robot, you would have gotten points, if the robot hit you, game over, once the robot got to the ground, then it was going to act like it does in the final release.

I considered angled candy falling. After you reached 1000 points, all the candy was going to fall at different angles and if two pieces collided in midair they would have bounced off each other.

I thought about multi-player and even had a couple of ideas for this, which all got axed once I realized the multi-sprite kernel I was using didn't have built-in collision detection. I also wouldn't have the space to include it in 4K. The first of my two ideas was a 2 player versus mode where the first player would play, get a score, and once they died or got to X amount of points, the second player would have to beat or match it. Then the second player would start, set a score or reach X and then the first player would have to match. This would go back and forth until someone lost on their second turn. The second idea was to have one person be the player with the bucket while the other would be the robot. The goal here was to prevent any candy from hitting the ground all while not colliding with each other, this would require great communication between the two people playing the game.

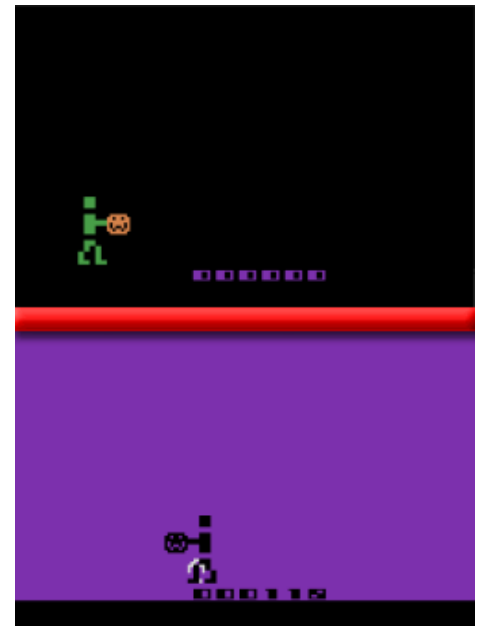
Finally, I considered including music. I worked on a simple theme song to play during candy catcher, but again space and limited knowledge of music on the 2600 prevented this from happening.

Really the other factor limiting my implementation of these ideas was experience with Batari Basic and Assembly. As a programmer, I've found the longer I work with a language, the more tips and tricks I learn about it. I know I can insert my own Assembly code into Batari Basic and refine my code, but I just don't have a solid grasp on Assembly yet.

Do you have plans for another Atari 2600 title?

Yes, I do! Candy Catcher was not my first game idea, nor the first game I started working on. I have several games that are in various states of development at the moment, Atomic Meltdown and UV Eraser.

Atomic Meltdown has been a game that I have been working on since late 2009 and the one that has taught me the most about Batari Basic and coding for the 2600 in general. I'm currently in the middle of a complete re-write of the



entire game. You're an engineer at a nuclear power plant, and during a containment failure you have to manually stabilize the atomic matter. Your atomic matter jitters on the screen making it more difficult to control and you have to dodge other atomic matter that is in the reactor.

UV Eraser was a game that came to my while I was eating lunch the other day. It's a conveyor belt game where you have to erase EPROMs before they get to their boxes to be shipped out to customers. You have 3 conveyor belts and each one will have its own independent speed with an EPROM being sent down the conveyor at random. You control two UV light guns, one on top and one on bottom. Each gun can only reach 2 of the 3 conveyor belts, forcing you to switch between the two.

What did you learn from Candy Catcher that you can use for your future title?

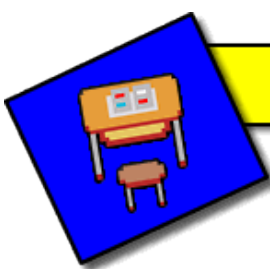
I learned several things from doing Candy Catcher, I think the biggest being code optimization. Also, the sprite collision, which mind you isn't perfect in Candy Catcher, was a big accomplishment for me and I almost canceled the game over that. I also learned a good deal about how the TIA in the 2600 generates sounds. There were a slew of little things I didn't know about in Batari Basic that made this game better from reading online references, and from members on AtariAge pointing things out to me.



What would you tell folks considering programming a game for the 2600?

I would tell them to learn the basic programming concepts on a computer, with a language such as Java, Visual Basic, etc. Meaning looping, variable assignment, if statements, etc. The 2600 is very unforgiving when you don't do something correctly, and I believe anyone new to programming would be completely overwhelmed with trying to learn both programming theory and Batari Basic at the same time.

Programming for the Atari 2600 is truly a labor of love. It's a challenge to create a game for the system. Sometimes the idea that you have just can't be done or perhaps you don't have the ability to program your idea. Start small and simple and work your way up.



Retro Collecting 101

by Jeff Wittenhagen



The Brandon Cobb Interview

This month in Retro Collecting 101 I had the opportunity to interview Brandon Cobb the President of Super Fighter Team; a retro game development and production company that has recently turned its sights on the Sega Genesis with recent game releases such as Beggar Prince, Legend of WuKong, and most recently Star Odyssey. I can only hope that he decides to re-release some of his older console based titles as they have become a bit rare and expensive to locate as they were produced in few numbers.



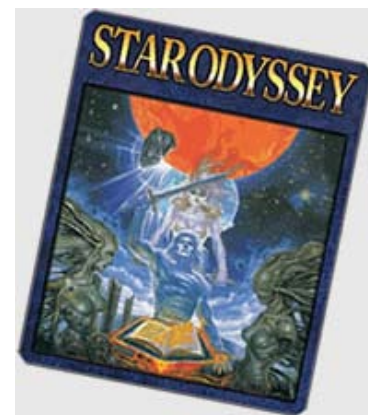
As a way of introduction, could you please give a brief paragraph or two about yourself?

My name is Brandon Cobb. Though I'm 29 now, I don't feel a day over 12. I'm a high energy guy who loves telling jokes and eating snacks. When it comes to business I know what I want and I tend to get it. My staunch perfectionist attitude nearly kills me by stress, but it does contribute to one hell of an end product.

What inspired you to choose Star Odyssey as the company's next project?

Star Odyssey has a visual and aural appeal that, combined with the overall concept, instantly resonated with me. Working on a sci-fi RPG was always something I wished to do, and our partnership with Starfish-SD finally allowed me the chance.

Apart from that, our previous two releases for the Genesis / Mega Drive were undertaken in partnership with companies in Taiwan, and many of our customers and fans had requested we try our hand at a game from Japan next. I'm not one to disappoint the people who support us, so I was happy to grant this request.



What development tools and hardware setups were used to create the game and could you briefly describe the development process?

The development effort consisted of a custom test kit and a wide array of Genesis and Mega Drive machines and compatibles, all mixed in with a heady dose of devotion. We had a dynamite team as always, so development was quick and effective. I had the new script hammered out in record time but despite the speed at which it was completed I find it to be our greatest yet.

Though a couple of bugs left behind by the original Japanese developers left us stunned for a while, I'm happy to say that we overcame them all and that I (barely) survived the intense quality assurance process. Star Odyssey died on the table the first time it was considered for release in English, but the patient emerged healthier than ever this second time around, and -twenty years later- gamers outside of Japan are finally able to enjoy it.

When I initially e-mailed you in regard to placing an order for Star Odyssey, you explained that you were overwhelmed by the response the game was getting and that the game was already on back order. Has this been more or less than your other releases?

The overnight success of Star Odyssey shouldn't have surprised me as much as it did, given our past sales history and the fact that the game was so highly anticipated. Owing to the fact that it was our first contract with a company in Japan, I wanted Star Odyssey to be perfect. Quite simply, my focus on quality assurance overshadowed my prediction of the market.

Though our products always sell quickly, Star Odyssey set a record in that we were able to move the first 300 copies in just six days. This is indicative of the ever growing retrogame fanbase, as well as the number of satisfied customers we've accrued since our company's inception back in 2005.



Were you surprised by this feedback, and has this motivated you to continue work on other games?

My primary motivation behind the projects undertaken by Super Fighter Team has, since the beginning, stemmed from fulfilling the dreams I've had since childhood. Supporting the cause of classic gaming is something that makes me happy. Our ability to entertain thousands of people in the process comes as a blessing. It's the shot in the arm that truly makes all those long, sleepless nights worthwhile.

Are there any other projects that you have planned for the future?

Always. We never stop. At any given time I'm directing the development of at least three projects at a time, though I never feel we're doing enough for the cause of classic gaming.

A few examples of what we have in store for the future are a long awaited English release of Sango Fighter 2 for the PC, as well as the superb French run and gun Nightmare Busters for the Super Nintendo.

Do you have any plans to re-release past games you have developed or are they going to be something on an exclusive rarity?

Serious consideration is going into the continued production of our early titles, as we don't wish for them to go the way of the "Disney vault." At the same time, we must give proper attention to the new products we have in store for the market. It's a delicate balance that I am confident will, given time, work out in the best interest of our customers.

What's the most difficult thing about being a gaming company that focuses on older systems?

I'm happy with every aspect of the business. We have a strong, supportive customer base, great support from the press, and some phenomenal partnerships with companies all across the world. If there's anything about it that's "difficult," I'd say it's the waiting for manufacturing cycles to complete. I'm like a kid in a candy store when stock of one of our games arrives from our factory; few things in life please me more than being able to process and ship those games to our customers.

Thank you for participating in this interview.

It's my pleasure. Thanks for giving me the opportunity.

Is there anything else that you'd like to add before we conclude?

Always follow your heart, act on your best instinct, and see the joy in your life.



You can read more about Star Odyssey and other Super Fighter Team releases at superfighter.com. At the time of this article, Star Odyssey is currently out of stock and has joined the other Super Fighter Team Genesis games on eBay, rarely available for close to \$300. Let's hope for the re-release of all three Genesis classics!



One CoCo To Rule Them All? Not Hardly...

Greeting retro fans! I hope everyone is enjoying the holiday season. When we left off last month, we had just finished a discussion on the differences between the TRS-80 Z-80 based systems and the CoCo. Entire volumes could be written if we wanted to compare the architecture and design philosophy between the systems. For that discussion, I'll throw the 'boring flag' right now on that discussion, as it'd probably only interest engineers. Besides, a Model I, III, IV guru I am not, and when you get right down to it, there are plenty of differences between the CoCo models themselves to write about.

CoCo the Gray??

The very first TRS-80 Color Computer carried the 26-3001 model number. The machine was released in a battleship gray plastic case, with an 8K Microsoft BASIC interpreter (in ROM), chiclet keyboard and a whopping 4K of RAM. Upon release, the very first CoCo 1 had a suggested retail price of \$399. Like many home computers of the day, the CoCo shipped with a TV modulator to hook it up to your television. The display was a 32 x 24 black characters on a 'nuclear green' background. The CoCo also sported a 53 key 'keyboard', joystick, cassette and serial 'bit banger' ports on the back, as well as a 40 pin expansion slot on the right side.

Early versions of the CoCo could be upgraded to 32K, however, it was not an easy task as it required piggybacking two banks of 16K memory chips and adding a few jumper wires. Later revisions to the motherboard eliminated this upgrade. In fact, I have a 26-3001 (picture below) that was upgraded to 32K and Extended Color BASIC by a place in Davenport, Iowa. The 32K upgrade consists of eight socketed MN4164-15 dynamic RAM chips, and two jumper wires.

Later motherboard revisions removed the 4K RAM option; systems were upgraded to 32K with 64K memory chips which were supposed to be 'half bad' as a cost-cutting measure. The boards have jumpers marked HIGH/LOW to determine which half of the memory chip was good. The BASIC programmer was none the wiser, since in either configuration, 32K of memory was available.

The 26-3002 & 26-3003 models looked alike and were basically the same hardware; really the only difference in them was the amount of RAM – 16K and 32K respectfully. As memory production yields improved and costs went down, it's rumored that many, if not most 32K CoCo 1s were shipped with perfectly good 64K memory chips. In fact, clever coders began to write utilities and programs to take advantage of this 'extra' 32K.

Eventually the 32K CoCo was dropped entirely and only 16K or 64K versions were offered. All versions of the CoCo which shipped with just Microsoft Color BASIC could be upgraded to Extended Color BASIC by simply plugging a ROM into an empty socket provided on the motherboard. ECB offered many enhancements to the BASIC interpreter, making it much easier to program than most other computers of the day.



The TRS-80 Color Computer models 26-3002 and 26-3003:

The second generation Color Computer models are also easily spotted. The TRS-80 nameplate is centered above the keyboard, and there is no 'RAM button' mounted to the top case. Additionally, the keyboard surround is no longer flat black.

(image courtesy of the internet could not find the source to credit it...)

Below are a couple machines from my collection.

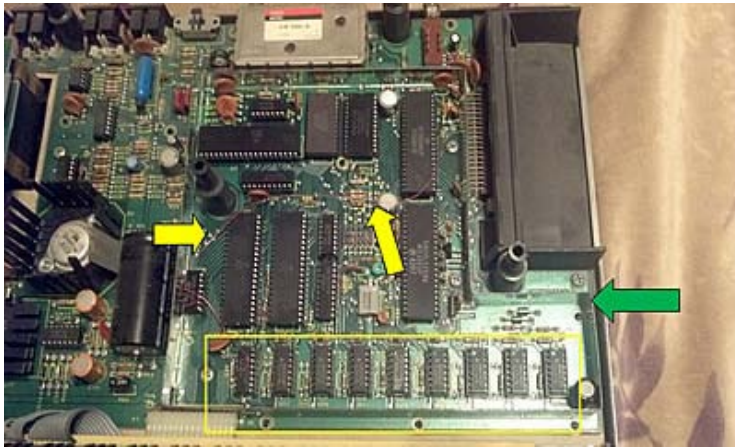


This unit is a 26-3001 - first generation CoCo1. It has a 32k upgrade and an aftermarket keyboard. I'm not sure of the model of the keyboard, but, I think it's a Mark Data SuperPro keyboard. It has a really good feel to it and is easy to type on.



This unit is a 26-3004 - one of the last generation CoCo1s. It has 64K, and as purchased from eBay, had a CoCo3 keyboard. Notice the case-mod from the very poor packing the seller did.

Side by side, it's easy to see the cosmetic differences between the two models. The outside isn't the only place where differences existed. As stated earlier, Radio Shack made numerous changes to the CoCo1 motherboard throughout its production run. As I understand it, there are seven different revisions to the PCB, the last one being referred to as the 'F' board.



To the left is the motherboard of the 26-3001. Notice the jumper wires (yellow arrows) added to complete the 32k upgrade.

Also, for comparison to the 26-3004 picture coming up, pay close attention to the layout of the board. That green arrow points to the outline of the RF shield the CoCo1s were sportin' back in the '80s. Those are the SDRAM chips in the yellow box, taking up some real-estate.



Here's the 26-3004 motherboard. Notice the difference in the layout ? They're the same machine, run the same software and use the same hardware and peripheral devices; advancements in the manufacturing process lead to a more optimized PCB.

The 26-3004 motherboard area underneath the RF shield, where the SDRAM chips reside. Much more compact, and no jumpers...

The White CoCo

That about tells the story for the CoCo1. However, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the 26-3003b CoCo model - CoCo the White. Okay, so it doesn't sound as impressive as 'Gandalf the White', but, it IS a 64K CoCo1 built into a white case, with the bonus of an improved keyboard. Ironically, many still scratched their heads at this keyboard since it looks like someone put it in an oven and melted the keys. Seriously. It's still referred to as 'the melted keyboard' by CoCo fans world-wide.



The TRS-80 Color Computer model 26-3003b:

The second generation Color Computer sold in a white case with a funky 'melted' keyboard. As with the other 26-3002 & 26-3003 lines, the TRS-80 nameplate is centered above the keyboard, and there is no 'RAM button' mounted to the top case. This model was sold only with 64k RAM. About this time Radio Shack also offered peripheral devices in white as well.

I purchased this unit off of eBay in 2008 for \$42.00. Still don't even know if it works.

The Clone Wars...

Well... I guess I'm not yet done with the CoCo1. You see, Radio Shack, in its infinite wisdom, decided the CoCo was such a success they should attempt to duplicate its sales volume in another venue... department stores. Regardless of the venue, it's still a CoCo1. In a tan case. With vents all across its back. And a chiclet keyboard. The TDP-100 was sold only with 64K of RAM, and Microsoft's Extended Color BASIC was standard, ran all CoCo1 software and used the same CoCo accessories.

For a more in depth look at the CoCo1 line, Glen VanDenBiggelaar did a complete tear-down of a CoCo 1 (and 2 and 3), and posted it at his [CoCo Lounge](#) site back in 2005. Unfortunately he's no longer active in the CoCo community as he's now chasing around Amiga's as a hobby. He has not closed the CoCo Lounge, so, if you are interested in the CoCo, his site is a good place for more in depth information than is possible in magazine articles.



The TDP-100:

Crème colored case, chiclet keyboard and vents across the back of the case. Still a CoCo1, just dressed differently.

(image courtesy of Wikipedia)

Dragons and computers?

Whew... that's a lot of CoCo 1 options. What's that? More CoCo's? You're kidding, right? Um.. no. Well, sort of. Maybe. There was a clone of the CoCo that began production in 1982 by Dragon Data, LTD.; a Welsh company. They developed the Dragon32, which was a clone of the CoCo with several improvements, the most obvious being the keyboard. This computer was mainly marketed in the U.K.



The Dragon 32 was more or less CoCo compatible. There are caveats to that since the keyboard map is somewhat different. Also, you could use CoCo floppy drives, if you had the Dragon Disk BASIC ROM for the controller. A later version of the Dragon, the Dragon 64, contained 64K of RAM and a real serial/RS-232 (the CoCo has a bit banger port). Other than that, there were very few differences between the Dragon 32 and 64. During the run of the Dragon computers, multi-industry company Tano decided to get into the computer marketing business, and struck a deal with Dragon Data to bring the Dragon line to the U.S. with the Tano Dragon nameplate. Due to a number of flubs regarding software and missed release dates, the Dragon never really took off in the States.

Are we done...?

There are two more CoCo clones out in the wild, that deserve mention here. The first one I'll mention is the Prologica CP-400 (below left). While its case design was an attractive, yet radical departure from the afore mentioned machines, its internals were not. My next statement might be predictable, but, I'm going to say it anyway; I don't think I'd like typing on that keyboard...



Above right, we have the Sampo color computer. As you can see, it's... different. Not much is known about the beast, except it has same basic feature the original CoCo, with the addition of true lowercase characters and a REAL

keyboard; both lacking in the original CoCo.

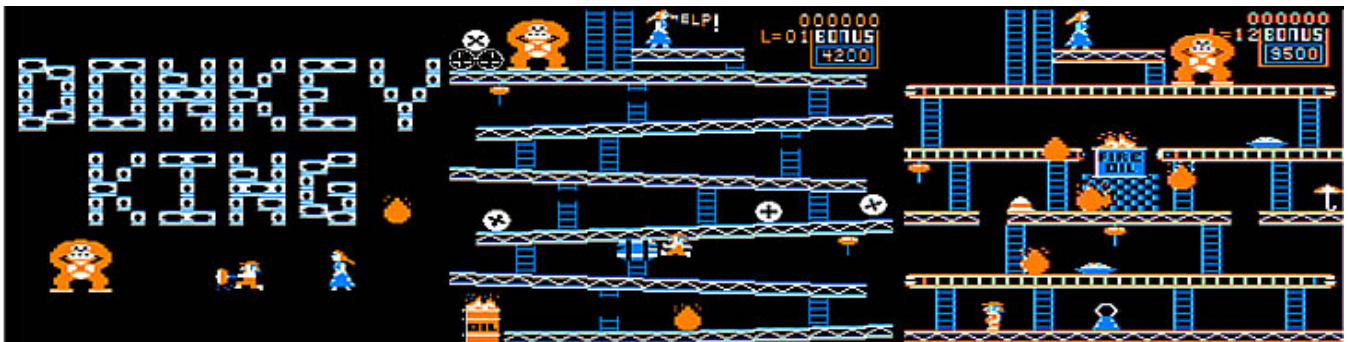
Well, I cannot speak for the other computers of the day, however, the TRS-80 Color Computer was represented by several variations of its own. When you include the clones, it becomes easier to understand why the CoCo was confused with so many other model - quite literally, it had lots of siblings. And clones...

Now imagine my surprise, considering I just thought I had finished this article, when I realized I left out one other extended family member of the CoCo - the Fujitsu FM-7. I'm including it here because it is somewhat CoCo compatible - rumored to be the equivalent of a CoCo 1/2; on steroids.

These Japanese made 8-bitters were actually rocking two 68B09's; one for a CPU, the other to handle graphics. They could run Microware's OS-9 operating systems, as well as Frank Hogg's FLEX OS. If you're interested, you can get MUCH more information from Larry Greenfield's web page: <http://www.nausicaa.net/~lgreen/fm7page.htm> , as there's more info there than is appropriate for this article series.

Doing the research for much of this article, as well as some business obligations, kept me from having the time I needed to write any reviews of some CoCo games as I had planned. In lieu of that, I'll give a link to Curtis Boyle's web site of CoCo gaming: http://www.lcurtisboyle.com/nitros9/coco_game_list.html

The following are pictures of some CoCo games I'll be reviewing in the future. They come from Curtis' web site:



This was obviously a clone of Donkey Kong; it also had all four screens - a claim many systems that had licensed versions couldn't make.



This game is called Qiks, and is a clone of the arcade game Qix, I remember being quite addicted to this game.



This Popeye clone, called Sailor Man was an outstanding game and had all of the elements of its arcade counterpart.

In closing, I'd like to give you a glimpse of next month's article - which is part three, and focuses on the CoCo2. It'll be a much shorter article, so I should have time to do an actual game review for a change. For February's issue, I'll be discussing the CoCo3, what made it different from the other models, and its special modes.

One last thing; in the spirit of The Season; here's a video I made a couple years ago using the VCC CoCo3 emulator and some free screen capture software: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUJWtyaS55w>

The O² Kid

by William Cassidy

AstroDodge

Console video gaming today is tightly intertwined with the modern networked world. Most of today's games can be downloaded and played against online opponents. Practically all of them seem to offer online leaderboards where you can match your scores against those of players from around the world or brag about the special achievements you've managed to unlock while playing. These Internet-enabled amenities have added a "meta" level to modern gaming: games aren't just about gameplay anymore; they are about exploring the game from different angles, attaining specific goals, and posting your accomplishments online for all to see.

AstroDodge, a new homebrew by Revival Studios, is a valiant attempt to bring the technologically humble, three-decades-old Odyssey² console into this brave new modern world. And yet, AstroDodge is a retro game at perhaps its most basic, reductionist form. As a result, it's a game that straddles the line between old and new, not quite fitting solely into either era. This means it may not appeal to everyone, but it's certainly an exciting idea.

The gameplay of AstroDodge is as simple as can be: don't get hit. You control a spaceship that must navigate a deadly asteroid field. Space debris – represented on screen by rapidly-cycling letter X and circle characters, a technique used to similar effect in the Odyssey² classic UFO! – rains straight down from the top of the screen. Your spaceship starts out at the bottom of the screen but can move in any direction. Your task is simply to dodge the bombardment as long as you can. That's all. No lasers to fire, no enemy spaceships to fight, no waves to break up the action... just endless falling rocks.



This may sound simple, because it is, but it also makes for a very straightforward, uncompromising gameplay experience. It's just your twitch gaming skills against the machine; how long can you stay focused? The real challenge of AstroDodge is to hit what retrogamers often call "the Zone" – that trancelike state where you are hyper-focused yet detached enough to take in the game as a whole – and stay there. It's not easy. Your score increases constantly while you stay alive, going up by 100 points every 10 seconds. As of this writing, the highest-ranked AstroDodge player has a score of 2330. That means the longest AstroDodge game ever played lasted less than four minutes.

How do I know this? It's because of how AstroDodge has leveraged the online world. After each game, you are given a 10-digit code that can be entered with your name at the [Revival Studios web site](#). This code contains your score along with whatever "Rewards" you've managed to unlock. The game contains four Rewards, including a hidden gameplay mode which, as of this writing, nobody has been able to find. This is what makes AstroDodge an exciting Odyssey² cartridge. It uses the vintage hardware and gameplay styles we all know and love, but grafts them onto the modern, 'Net-enabled world we all live in now. Not all retrogamers are fans of that world, at least when it comes to gaming. However, you really don't get the full AstroDodge experience without embracing the desire to up your rank, to unlock that final reward, to show off online. Without it, all you have is a basic game, albeit one that can be quite fun for the occasional short burst of play.



Despite its simplicity however, AstroDodge is quite polished. Even leaving aside the online codes and secrets, it contains other elements rarely seen in Odyssey² games. The spaceship sprite is multicolored, displaying a level of

graphical detail well in advance of most O2 games. When you move from side to side, the ship appears to “bank,” and it emits a sparkling exhaust that looks like flames. The asteroids, which are colored according to the four different speeds at which they fall, create a “dripping” visual effect reminiscent of the trickling characters seen in the Matrix movies. AstroDodge also contains a separate company logo and title screen, features which are virtually unheard of in Odyssey² games. You can start a new game simply by pressing the fire button – a very nice touch. Owners of the Odyssey² Voice module hear spoken encouragements every 100 points, and those lucky enough to play AstroDodge on a European Videopac G7400 machine will see enhanced background graphics. Revival Studios paid a lot of attention to “the little things” when designing this game.

There is one significant problem I must point out, however, but it's not Revival Studios' fault. In my opinion, the stock Odyssey² joystick is totally inadequate for the game. AstroDodge demands quick, precise movements, and the O2 joystick is incapable of providing them. I first played AstroDodge on my main O2 console, which has been [modified](#) to work with standard controllers. I used a Sega Genesis control pad. I didn't expect this to make much difference, but when I entered my high score online I was surprised to find myself ranked #1 (I've since been surpassed). I suspected the pad had given me an advantage, so I dug out an unmodified console to give the standard controllers a try. After dozens of attempts, my best score was four times lower than when using the Genesis pad. To be fair, I almost always do better with control pads than joysticks, but the difference is too striking to ignore. To me, AstroDodge with stock O2 sticks is not nearly as fun. But with pads, it's an enjoyable twitch game, made all the better by its polish and modern trappings. Martijn at Revival Studios has some great ideas; I look forward to his next Odyssey² title.



AstroDodge is available from the [Revival Studios web site](#) for 39 euros plus 5 euros shipping.



The Pixelated Mage

by Jeff Wittenhagen



Christmas Craze

Platform: Super Nintendo
Developer: Retro Zone
Release Date: 2011
Genre: Platformer
Game Modes: Single Player, Multi-Player
Tag Line: "While everyone is drunk on egg nog trip out to the colorful blinky lights that surround the edge of the cart!"

Christmas Craze

Each year Retro Zone, a website dedicated to releasing NES and SNES related retro gaming gear and games, puts out their 8-Bit Xmas game cartridges which they only sell for roughly a month before discontinuing orders. This year, 2011, is a special year as they are introducing their first 16-Bit version of the highly collectible game series. Just like with previous iterations, the 16-Bit Xmas 2011 cartridge itself will come with blinking Christmas lights so you can decorate your gaming room in style! Of course, those of you who are 8-Bit aficionados can still get the new 8-Bit Xmas as that series has a 2011 version as well.

The game included with 16-Bit Xmas looks to be a step up this year from the previous 8-Bit minigame iterations. Taken from RetroZone's website, "Gather up all of your best friends for the first SNES homebrew game by RetroZone, Christmas Craze, written by Shiru. Dodge aliens and grab gifts or fight your friends with snowballs in two player present picking battles. While everyone is drunk on egg nog, trip out to the colorful blinky lights that surround the edge of the cart! When you gather presents in the game the lights dance with the sound effects."



16-Bit Xmas will only be available until December 31st so make sure you get a copy before it is gone forever. You can order it at http://www.retrousb.com/product_info.php?cPath=30&products_id=111.

Rating = 5 Santa Mages out of 5 simply for spreading Xmas Cheer!





Commodore Du Jour

by Marc Douglas



Toy Bizarre

Amazing how quick 2011 was. I have to say that I'm really enjoying being a part of RTM and going back and taking a more critical look at many of the C-64 games that I grew up playing. I would just like to say thanks again to Bryan for allowing me to be the keeper of all things Commodore and thanks also to all of the readers as well. I appreciate the feedback that you have given and I look forward to hearing from you for many months to come.

Now on to the game. With Christmas being so close the first game that came to mind was Activision's Toy Bizarre by the (I believe) underrated game designer, Mark Turmell. This was one of his first computer games as he first did games for the Atari 2600 under the Fox label. He is best known for the NBA JAM series of videogames that dominated the arcades in the late 1990s.

After you load up TB, you will notice that the game is heavily influenced by Nintendo's Mario Bros. arcade game in terms of layout and design. Turmell makes no bones about saying that he used Nintendo's game as a template, but I feel that he adds many new twists that make TB seem...fresh.

You star as Merton the maintenance man whose job is to keep the toy factory running smoothly overnight. That wouldn't be a problem if it wasn't for the valves that are malfunctioning causing harmless balloons to turn into evil toys that Merton must collect before the end of his shift. Not only must he deal with the evil toys, but he also has to avoid the deadly Hefty Hilda, a wind-up toy that has it out for him and always seems to hone in on our poor hero. Oh and one more thing, you only have an hour to complete each level.

Merton does have some weapons at his disposal. First, he can shut off the bottom four valves on any level by running past them. Hilda can turn them back on, though you can't totally control where the balloons will inflate, you do have some say, so make sure you use it to your advantage.

If the balloons do morph, Merton can jump over them to freeze them making them harmless to touch, they can then be picked up for points. Or if Merton is feeling tricky, he can use the pistons (a variation of the Mario Bros. POW box) to stun the toys and again, he can go and pick them up. You had better be quick as the toys are only stunned for a short amount of time. When they come to, they will become a bit more angry. You have to be careful using the pistons, as the toys and Hilda can use them as well. If you are caught on a piston that gets triggered, you will be launched off the screen and to your death. The opposite is true as well, if you can catch Hilda on a piston, you can launch her off into the stratosphere and collect a nice bonus. Beware, she will return later. Remember, if a toy is on a piston, Hilda can stun them too, making your life a little easier.

Two other things that can help you on each level are the coffee cups that grant you immunity for a few moments and the free man icon that will randomly pop up. You start with four lives and get an extra man for every 10,000 points, but as any gamer knows, the more lives you have in reserve, the better.

If you clear all the toys off a level, you will be rewarded with 50 bonus points per minute left on the game clock. So it



pays to clear a board quickly. You should also know that if your hour runs out, you will lose a life but will still be allowed to clear the level, sans bonus.

Every few levels there is a bonus round called a safety check, but instead of collecting coins, you have to shut off the eight valves on the screen. If you can do it before the hour ends, you'll net a nice 3,000 point bonus.

So how do the graphics and sound stand up? Quite nicely. There is a nice tune at the beginning of each level and again when you clear a level. The sounds Merton makes as he walks and jumps are not annoying and are at the proper volume. The valves make a nice dingy sound when they are switched on and off. The Commodore is not tested in any way, but the variety of sounds and music are nice.

Graphically, the game is of the usual high Activision quality. All the characters are nicely animated and move smoothly. I like the animation used when Merton loses a life, he turns black and white and quickly runs off the screen. Hilda moves like a wind-up toy but actually has menace. The color palette of the C-64 is well represented and the game holds up quite well when compared to Mario Bros. I won't go into all the differences, I would much rather you play the game and find them out for yourself. I found no graphics or sound glitches in the game.



My only complaint is with the controls. They will take a little getting used to as Merton can jump pretty high and the space between each level on the board can be cramped at times. You can also control Merton's direction in mid-air and this can be a blessing and a curse at times. You will find yourself on occasion after making a jump, making a dead landing on top of an angry toy, or a cranky Hilda.



A Well Deserved 8 (out of 10), Give Yourself A Gift This Christmas And Play Toy Bizarre!



Apple II Incider

by Donald Lee



Street Sports Basketball

Happy Holidays everyone! As I write this, it's the Saturday after Thanksgiving and this is late hitting Bryan's INBOX. I've been out of the house pretty late the past few days and did not get a chance to write anything. Hope everyone had a safe Thanksgiving holiday.

Since Christmas is rolling around, this month is a Christmas and Basketball themed column all rolled into one.

There are two reasons for this. The first reason is I am a certified basketball fan. I've been playing, coaching and officiating basketball for years. In fact, I was up bright and early this morning to squeeze in several hours of pickup basketball.

The second reason is that the NBA Lockout is just about over. The owners and players have come to a tentative agreement to end the lockout shortly. As a season ticket holder for my local NBA team, I am looking forward to going to some NBA games shortly. Thank you to Santa for allowing the NBA to grace our presence again!

I've covered a couple of other basketball games previously in the form of Electronic Arts' classic Julius Erving and Larry Bird Go One-on-One (or usually just known as One-on-One) and GBA Basketball (IIGS Version).

Another one that I knew about but never played was Epyx's Street Sports Basketball. Conceptually, Street Sports Basketball is interesting. It brings the concept of 3 on 3 full court pickup basketball to the computer screen. As a person that likes to hit the court a lot, I usually wouldn't play full court with 3 on 3. That's a lot of real estate for players to run around, but hey it's a game.

Street Sports Basketball takes the fictional route like GBA Basketball by allowing you to pick three players from the ten available to represent your team. The computer will also pick three and the two teams will play a game to the point total of your choice.

While I liked the concept of the game, the execution didn't feel that great. I will note that the emulator I was using had problems recognizing my gamepad so I was forced to play with the keyboard. While the gamepad might have been a little better, I think the game itself was a little too ambitious for the 8-bit Apple II computers.

Like GBA Basketball, the game jumps between screens to simulate the full court experience. For anyone used to the current generation of NBA basketball video games, this experience is a little disconcerting.

The graphics are ok as the players have some detail and identifying features. However, the colors of the game screen are somewhat bland and not all too exciting. I found the animation very sluggish. The Apple II's graphics capabilities were not meant for games that had a lot of objects on the screen at the same time and I think Street Sports Basketball pushed the Apple II to its limits.

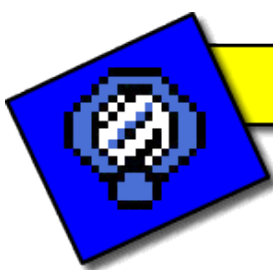
Sounds and music are very much lacking and that's a bit of a detraction.



It's understandable as most of the Apple II's resources were dedicated to the graphics, so the sound had to be sacrificed a little bit.

As for gameplay, I had difficulty getting into the flow of the game. In using the keyboard, I had the ability to move around but apparently there is only ONE action button. Remember, the Apple II used a two button joystick, so I found that somewhat surprising. Not having the game manual I wasn't sure WHICH player I was controlling, though I assumed it was the player who has the brighter jersey color. Alas, I didn't know how to switch between players on defense. I figured out pretty quickly how to shoot (hold the action button down and then release) or pass (press the action button quickly). Dribbling was another matter. Those of you expecting fancy crossovers and stuff better temper your expectations. The players can get up and down a bit but with the keyboard controls, I had difficulty maneuvering through defenders.

All in all, Street Sports Basketball was a nice attempt to capture the feel of pickup basketball but I'm not sure it succeeded on the Apple II. Perhaps other platforms with more graphics and sound horsepower did better, but I would stick with One-on-One or GBA Basketball if you want to play basketball on your Apple II.



Dual Perspective

by James Sorge



Super Mario Bros. 3

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 Super Mario Bros. 3, the best independent-selling Mario game until New Super Mario Bros. Wii.

Graphics: 9/10

While some of the NES limitations show at times, the way this game has been done has held up even in its SNES remake. Everybody knows what this game looks like and it stacks up well today.

Sound: 8/10

While no song is as classic as Super Mario Bros. 1, the tunes in this game fit the levels and hold up even in today's world. There really isn't much classic to the music though.

Difficulty: 8/10

I might have had a harder time with this game than most (especially the World 8 airships, I still can't clear it without a P-Wing!). I think the length of the game, especially warpless, can present a challenge, and you are limited on items heavily in a warps run. I think I have only beaten this without a continue once, but other people have had an easier time, so the score is knocked down a bit.

Replay Factor: 8/10

There are a few levels in this game that do drag the replay value down (Level 8 Airships are a big one, but there are others). This is a well-liked game though and people do enjoy it, so it gets some marks here. Me personally, it's not one of my favorite games to run or play, but I have enjoyed it when I have had time.



The World Record Perspective:

The new speed run for warpless is killer and will be very hard to beat, but the other runs have room for improvement. Now for the particulars:

Speed Runs With Glitches:

- [Mitch Fowler](#) - 55:43 warpless
- [Freddy "Frezy Man" Andersson](#) - 10:48

Speed Runs Without Glitches:

- [Richard Ureta](#) - 11:15
- [Kyle Goewert](#) - 1:27:34 warpless

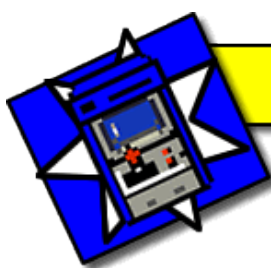
High Score:

- [Tom Votava](#) - 4,961,280



The Penguin Says:

"The game is fun to play for most people (and penguins too), so you should enjoy it. As long as you avoid the warpless with glitches, which will probably take you thousands of attempts to do unless your name is Andrew Gardikis, you can still make a name for yourself with this game. The records are tough to beat, but it hasn't been maxed completely. The without glitches warpless run definitely could use a nice improvement. Overall, I give this game a 9/10, but in the world record department that's another story. On that side of the coin, I would give it a 0/10 for the warpless with glitches record (meaning you aren't going to do it), and an 8/10 for all other runs."



MAME Reviews

by Mark Sabbatini



AV Hanafuda Hana No Christmas Eve & Snow Bros.

The true meaning of Christmas (besides a pagan celebration of Sol Invictus) has something to do with a woman's naughty parts. So surely the family values crowd can't object if the only coin-op arcade game with the holiday's name features naked women?

It's not like family exists without sex, so maybe it'll get MAME fanatics away from their computers and in an old-fashioned spiritual mood on that second-most sacred of Christian days.

Planning to stone me along with the shrimp eaters, football players and cotton/wool wearers? Stick around afterward. Much of this month's column is actually about a cute and cuddly Bubble Bobble wannabe featuring snowballs, the only other arcade title I could find that actually has some kind of Christmas theme.

I didn't expect to find many coin-op games paying tribute to Jesus, Santa, Sol or whomever your late-December deity of choice may be. It's hard enough making a successful game without limiting its appeal to a tiny bit of the year. But I was surprised by the absolute dearth of them, or even any Easter Eggs since a number of well-known home games contain that extra (my favorite is the medieval torturers of Dark Castle spiffing it up with Christmas decorations)..

The only coin-op title to appear in many, many database and webpage searches is AV Hanafuda Hana No Christmas Eve by Nichibutsu. That is not at first glance a discouraging thing, since they're the folks who brought us under-appreciated gems like Crazy Climber and Moon Cresta. The sequels for those were hardly landmark achievements, but the company generally wasn't releasing the dreck plenty of quick-buck outfits were.

It's the second glance – seeing virtually any screenshot of it – that causes second thoughts.

The 1990 release is a mahjong coin-op, which I guess is an OK video game concept – the Amiga and IBM's laughable OS/2 actually included it in their operating systems during the same era (maybe I'd be laughing less if Big Blue had offered a copy of Go instead). I always thought of the ancient tile game as something my foster parents brought out when company got tired of the sales pitch at Amway parties, but it remains the most popular table game in Japan (even if it does cause the occasional epileptic seizure).

As for an actual review of the game, the truth is I have no idea what the hell is going on. I'm not fluent in Japanese and I have no intention of becoming so in order to learn the rules of a game I'm not particularly interested in. Besides, my understanding is the solitaire version played here is basically a bastardized Western atrocity having little to do with the real game. I can say it doesn't appear to differ a lot from a bunch of Nichibutsu's other strip mahjong titles with names that quickly become a similar-sounding jumble. In that vein, to quote Andy Slaven's "Video Game Bible:" "Mahjong and nudity go together like peanut butter and antifreeze."

There's obviously a market for this stuff since Nichibutsu made a lot of them, kind of like Ed Wood descending into pornography because he's wasn't content being a cult hero for directing the worst general-audience movies of all time. It's bewildering to think people are turned on by cheesy VGA-quality boobs, but since plenty of people are into



emetophilia, harpaxophilia and necrophilia I'll adhere to that Christian policy of not judging others.

But if you're going to baptize yourself in the experience, go for what has to be an all-time video game camp classic in Mahjong The Lady Hunter. Actually, I'd recommend anyone watch an absolutely hilarious and tastefully censored video review at www.heisanevilgenius.com/?p=412. As the narrator puts it, the game involves a shameless Batman rip-off who "hunts down female jewel thieves so he can play Mahjong with them and then strip them naked." The plot would be right at home in that Adam West series from the '60s and, as the video notes, it has probably the best continue screen ever in a video game.

Since we're on the topic of recommended video game pornography, my final contribution is to suggest downloading the Atari 2600 homebrew 21 Blue if you want to try something truly fun and impressive. It's a high-quality blackjack game with all the rules, along with options to adjust the number of decks and payouts, where the dealers just happen to give you an article of clothing for every \$500 you win from them. Anyone up to the semi-fanatical level can actually use this as a serious learning tool for card counting, proper strategies (believe it or not, sometimes it's proper to hit on 18 when the dealer's up card is a seven), and how different payout odds affect your bankroll over the long haul. Serious players will bemoan not having a table full of players and the increasingly sophisticated variations and side bets casinos offer. As a bonus there's also a blackjack solitaire minigame called Blakjuko. The graphics, apparently converted from digitally scanned images, are awfully impressive for a 2600 title. I only wish I could have seen the reaction if this had debuted in place of Custer's Revenge, since it would have been an above-average title in the overall market with genuine appeal "for the articles," so to speak.)

For those of you needing a cold shower after all this or (more likely) impatiently still reading to settle a bet on whether anything in this column is worthwhile, we now present the chillier part of this month's double feature.

Snow Bros. is a 1990 coin-op by Toaplan that's unquestionably a derivative of Tatio's 1986 landmark hit Bubble Bobble. For the truly picky, Snow Bros.' gameplay is actually closer to the 1991 release Parasol Stars, a home-only release that came third in the Bubble Bobble series after Rainbow Island. If all that means nothing, basically it involves you and an optional second player chucking snowballs at various enemies on constantly changing single-screen platform layouts, with a boss battle every 10 waves.

It's a game that, like a good Christmas album, can be engaging for a short time around that worship-of-Wal-Mart date and easily forgotten the rest of the year. Being able to play with another family unit is a huge plus, since you can escape a nagging by justifying it as quality time with your kid/sibling/parent. Plus MAME users can invoke a feature that ensures even the most clueless dad or youngest demon spawn can still feel like a winner.



The latter element is courtesy of the DIP switch settings. They aren't numerous with four difficulty levels from easy to very difficult, starting with three to five lives, continue on/off and offering extra lives at 100,000 and/or 200,000 points (or not at all). But a final setting offering invulnerability is a huge gift under the tree for joystick jugheads and gamers who just want to see the features of a moderately interesting game without investing hours on its challenges.

Learning to play is about as complex as Dig Dug – about five seconds to learn the essentials, but there's a variety of things you'll need a bit of time to figure out. I mention that particular coin-op because Snow Bros., like the Atari hit, is mostly about repeatedly blasting your enemies into submission. In the case of Snow Bros., the player(s) take on the role of snowmen Nick and Tom, who toss snowballs at enemies until they are buried. Also, like Dig Dug, if the enemies aren't destroyed they can shake off the damage in short order. Unlike Dig Dug, in Snow Bros. destroying enemies means touching them in their snowball state to roll them. Kicking the snowballs causes them to roll around the screen for a bit, which is great if they take out other enemies and rack up point totals that can be huge with multiple kills, but dangerous if they take you out instead.

Kicking an enemy may also reveal a power-up, in the form of lanterns in four different colors. Things move quickly enough I didn't figure out the effects until I started reading about the game, except for the green one – it's hard not to

notice how your snowman balloons up and can fly around the screen wreaking havoc for a few moments. As for the others (which last until you die), yellow increases the distance you can throw snowballs (less useful over time as platforms tend to get shorter and more complex in layout), red speeds you up (a mixed blessing for me since, as will be seen shortly, I'm a bit of bumbler at this) and blue results in larger snowballs (useful to anyone who knows how to press a "start" button).

The final touch on normal waves – a real killer for me, so to speak – is a pumpkin head that appears if you're taking too much time. It can't be killed, only briefly stunned, and if you don't finish the wave quickly it starts spawning ghosts that ...

(Stop. Since this is the Christmas column I gotta ask: What spiritual mating occurred allowing this particular form of procreation? OK, back to regular programming.)

...ghosts that move around with no concern for physical objects like platforms and snowballs. They become numerous quickly, so you can count on becoming one of their family in short order.

The boss waves are pretty much what you'd expect: One big meanie who can take a lot of hits and a few minions who are more mortal. Maybe this near-universal concept is really a subtle and complex statement about the homogeneous traits of corporate management and/or tyrants, but it'd be nice to battle something not easily confused with a thousand other games.

A touch with more creativity is money drops, with the bills worth 10,000 points each, if you kill all the enemies on a level with a single snowball. Occasionally such marksmanship results in a cake appearing instead, and if this is collected four things resembling blue snowballs briefly pop up. Collecting all of them before they disappear rewards the player with an extra life.

Playing Snow Bros. doesn't seem overly difficult at first. Enemies aren't all that aggressive in seeking you out and can be buried pretty easily early on. But since they don't always come to you, you have to go after them and that's when (for me) trouble sets in. First, I feel like I'm giving them first crack at me in that moment between landing on a platform and chucking snowballs. Also, the occasion errant jump has a good chance of resulting in fatal contact with something, especially when the bad guys are clustered fairly close. My initial instinct to play it safe and pick them off as they approached was, of course, folly since pumpkins and ghosts don't take long to appear and make mush out of your snowman.

Eventually I just switched the invincibility option on, getting the superior but short-lived entertainment value of exploring Snow Bros.' creations and experimenting with various gameplay options/techniques. Having done so I can toss it into the virtual closet without much thought, although I can see digging it out again next year, especially if there's someone else around who's up to a virtual snowball fight when it's too cold for the real thing outside.

Snow Bros.' biggest hitch for the more skillful (not already suffering from Bubble Bobble fatigue) is waves are monotonous other than becoming more difficult until the first boss stage. More intriguing enemies, bonuses and platform layouts seem to appear with much greater frequency after, but modestly skilled players may have already given up by then after finding the waves just before that first boss too much of a challenge.

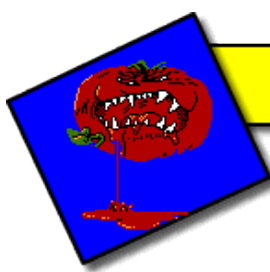
Something that may be of more potential interest with today's gamers into those "X-Treme" updates of old classics is the 1994 sequel, Snow Bros. 2 With New Elves. True to the textbook mass market formula it's basically a bold all-caps version of the original statement. The enemies, tricky layouts and power-ups all get a dose of steroids from the start, as do the sometimes overbearing colors. A couple of notable changes is



four players are allowed at once instead of two and there's four types of characters with (modestly) different abilities. The good news about the latter is any player can be any elf so you can always go for mass confusion by having four of the same characters on one small screen at once.

Snow Bros. isn't exactly a rarity, getting a rating of 47 out of 100 (most common) from The Killer List of Video Games, although the sequel has a high scarcity rating of six. The original wasn't a huge commercial hit either, but apparently it did somewhat better as a home game for the NES, Gameboy, Genesis, Commodore 64 and other platforms.

On a sad note, Snow Bros. 2 turned out to be Toaplan's final video game, with the company declaring bankruptcy a short time later after 10 years in business. Maybe instead of all those derivative arcade shooting/platform games they should have done more of the first games that launched them on the road to success: "Mahjong King" and "Mahjong Mania."



Standalone Spew

by Mark Sabbatini



A Better Christmas List Then Or Now?

The Coleco tabletop Pac-Man I coveted during the holidays 30 years ago cost about \$150 in inflation-adjustable dollars. These days the actual arcade game is regularly on sale for about \$2 as a mobile device app (or, for the one percent, \$2,999 for a full-size upright or cocktail table replica at The Sharper Image).

Similarly, Mattel's Football 2 handheld costs at least \$50 on eBay for a unit in good condition, while the mobile version of Madden 12 is regularly on sale for 99 cents (or, for the 99 percent, the free LEDhead offers perfect emulation of Football 2 and 11 other titles for a handful of home platforms).

This is why giving a standalone handheld game to your kids in the hope they'll appreciate the nostalgia is generally a really stupid idea. But a new generation of interesting - and occasionally ingenious - devices may still have the power to enthrall the young, not to mention retrogamers who will also continue to appreciate the old days' finer offerings.

Rifling through Christmas catalogues then and now, two things really stand out: 1) Wow, do I miss the days when Lincoln Logs and Lego sets with basic bricks instead of motors and name-brand characters were hot items, and 2) If I had to make a Christmas list of standalone handhelds either from that era or the present I'd have to toss a coin to decide.

There's enormous differences in the two generations, obviously. The old days had easy-on-the-eyes LED displays, units that felt more rugged than today's cut-all-costs throwaways and some surprisingly great takes on classic arcade titles (sadly, the Coleco Pac-Man I finally bought with many weeks' allowances wasn't of one of them, but their Ms. Pac-Man, Zaxxon and Frogger conversions were pretty darn good).

The best of the newer breed offer far deeper gameplay and thinking person's genres not possible in the days of limited memory. Widely available pocket chess and Scrabble games might potentially be enough on their own to settle the decision, except most gamers who aren't nerds would consider that idiotic. Similarly, a couple of niche items I found would be decisive if not for their rarity and/or complications such as requiring the user to assemble them (three words to Google for those who don't want to endure the rest of this column: "Super Pixel Bros.")

So I've made a list of personal now-and-then favorites in various categories. I'll tally the winners of each up as I go and reveal the ultimate winner to everyone (including myself) at the end. Mostly I'm basing my decisions on fun factor, although affordability does matter to the extent it might affect the realism of purchasing it as a gift. With some categories I'm also tossing in reviews of strong runner-ups, disasters and whatever else is noteworthy for some reason.

One tricky aspect of this is defining when "then" ended and "now" began. Handhelds pretty much fell off my radar in the mid '80s as computers and consoles increasingly dominated my free time. The Gameboy, of course, made standalones a relic in the eyes of just about everyone a short time later. Also, I'm not sure I realized how bad the Great Video Crash was until I looked at the 1985 Sears Wish Book, which has no video game consoles or cartridges and only a handful of mostly awful handheld games. I didn't give handhelds much more than a glance until I started getting into the retro thing thanks to the proliferation of the internet (a.k.a. easily obtainable emulation and pirated files) during the late 1990s.

So I'm mostly dividing the contenders into pre-Gameboy and 21st-century eras, with a few exceptions for handhelds that really stand out from the interval period for some reason. I know this omits a huge number of often-worthy games. But there's no way I can pretend to have a comprehensive knowledge of even the games from the eras I'm covering,

much less those I've never heard of - let alone played.

On to the competition, where the true winners are the companies that manufacture alkaline batteries:

Official coin-op arcade port

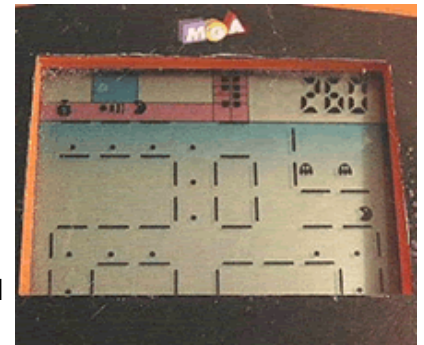
Then: Tie among several games by Entex

Only a small percentage of handhelds bearing official titles are any good, but that still leaves an enormous number of contenders. Picking a single one is difficult and might change on any given day depending on what I'm in the mood to play. But one consistency in many efforts at a list of rankings is a number of tabletop-size games by Entex are near or at the top of the list. My first purchase in the series was Super Cobra, which actually is a highly playable clone of the preceding Scramble that includes all but the UFO stage. Defender and Stargate do a similarly impressive job of cramming most of the essentials into the limited potential of a fixed-display portable, although Stargate has to get the nod in a competition due to its extra complexity (I always liked the arcade version better as well, an opinion I realize is not universal). Turtles has the bizarre distinction of being an obscure and mediocre coin-op game, but excelling in some of the most limited home formats (the standalone and an Odyssey 2 version are considered among the top arcade titles available in both formats). I'd certainly rather play the portable version of Turtles than almost any other Pac-type game except for Coleco's Ms. Pac-Man (although Entex's Pac-Man 2, where a second player can be one of the ghosts, is probably the best of the official single-maze Pac-Mans). Crazy Climber is another remarkably well-captured translation of a personal favorite that didn't enjoy overwhelming coin-op success. The Entex tabletops weren't cheap and I confess I acquired them mostly by playing one obsessively until I mastered it, then exchanging it for a different title (rotating among stores in an era when the "lost" receipt line worked). But in hindsight (and freed from the hardship of a \$5 a week allowance) I wish I'd held on to the entire lineup so I could set up a little arcade of portables along my other machines.



Now: Pac-Man (MGA version)

This is by far the new generation's weakest category. Search the mainstream stores and you get a lot of Sudoku, casino games, solo versions of popular board/card games and cheap LCD action games based on Disney characters. Things got so bad I was actually looking at modern-release Tetris games to see if any were particularly clever. A worthy contender finally surfaced when I discovered the \$10 Space Invaders Carabiner Edition by Basic Fun, which also makes several other games in the keychain-sized format. It looks incredibly true to the coin-op version, but gameplay doesn't live up to that initial impression. I ultimately retreated to MGA's tiny 2005 LCD Pac-Man - with a huge caveat. It's got the same vague movement, tinny sounds and iffy ghost AI you know and hate from the 30-year abundance of LED/LCD Pac-Mans, but with one huge difference that should be apparent just looking at the screenshot. The maze is a larger-than-the-screen scroller that's a decent replica of the real thing. I hated this approach on the Gameboy, but in the lesser expectations of the LCD universe it's a massive leap above the simple single-screen layouts that get monotonous by the end of your second game. The problem is MGA's Pac-Man is out of production and, while still fairly easy to find online, costs in the neighborhood of \$60 to \$120. The reason it wins this award is MGA released a number of other classic arcade conversions that, judging strictly by screenshots, appear to be also high in playability and sell for far more reasonable prices. Their Ms. Pac-Man game, for instance, sells for \$30 to \$40. Versions of Asteroids, Centipede and Missile Command start at \$10 and can be commonly had for \$20 (the first two look promising, the latter not so much).



Also beats a lump of coal: Moon Patrol

I seriously considered giving this conversion by Gakken top solo honors in the older games category, but just couldn't decide if it clearly beat the best of the Extex series. Actually, Gakken probably deserves a multi-game tie for the silver since, like Entex, they released a lot of decent games I wouldn't necessarily expect someone to attempt on a fixed-display portable. If you need more than subjective proof, look at the prices of their handhelds on eBay and elsewhere - they're consistently among the highest of any major manufacturer. Moon Patrol shines from the combination of what's really a pretty simple blend of gameplay elements in the coin-op version (craters below, rocks ahead and things flying above), and the scrolling display that allows things to constantly change and become more difficult. Yeah, the pixel-precise moves you have to execute in the arcade are gone (sometimes to your advantage, sometimes not), but in the handheld universe it still beats most shooters on the market. Moon Patrol fetches some of the highest secondhand prices of any Gekken handheld, with some selling for more than \$300. Other official titles games worth seeking out include Pooyan, Amidar (although I'd fear for my mortality if I brought it to school with those pastel-colored decals on the folding lid), and their versions of Defender and Super Cobra (Entex edges Gakken out in tiny ways, but players won't be disappointed with either choice). The company also has plenty of unofficial ports and original games that, while I'm not familiar with then, get great reviews from owners and collectors.



Better off with underwear: Donkey Kong (Game & Watch, Multiscreen)

Ignore the reviewers who rave about this one - they're probably the same people on Yelp who post five-star reviews of restaurants they've never eaten at because there's some kind of under-the-table perk. I swear this game is my punishment for the one time I sneaked into the master bedroom closet and sneaked a peak in advance at one of my gifts (I also did a lousy job of trying to re-tape the gift wrap, so I was embarrassingly busted as well). Putting the Donkey Kong moniker on this was someone who obviously got their kicks being cruel to kids since what little resemblance it has to the arcade hit is horribly awry. Your guy looks nothing like Mario from the coin-op (who I always thought was a janitor, sort of like people who think mistake "Secret Asian Man" as the lyrics to a certain song). Instead he looks like a paranoid, anorexic latchkey child who's facial expression alternates between misery and terror. In fact, "Mario" must be suffering multiple-personality disorder because he appears under different names in bucketloads of other G&W titles. The one gameplay element preserved from the arcade is barrels you have to jump over, but even this is horribly implemented (you can only do it in a few locations on the two(!) girders you scale on the bottom half of the screen. You can't jump while running and half the time there's a moving girder overhead that will kill you if you hit it). The top half involves pulling a switch on the left side of the screen so you can jump onto a crane hook on the right, thus grabbing one of four wires holding up the platform Kong is standing on. Yeah, I remember that part well from the arcade – and even if I didn't it's incredibly lame. This portable cashed in on its name to become a huge commercial success, of course, which leaves a taste in my mouth every bit as pleasant as lutefisk.



Now vs. Then Winner:

Then

As if you really needed to be told

Arcade (unofficial port or original)

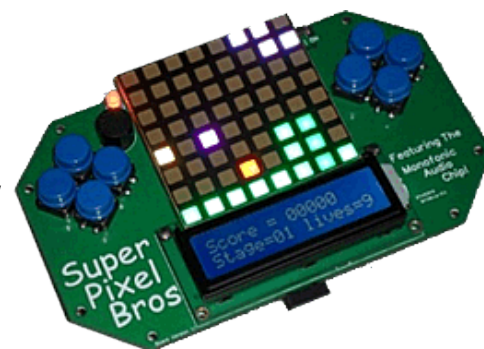
Then: Firefox F-7 by Grandstand

Clint Eastwood has been my favorite actor since The Outlaw Josey Wales came out when I was eight. But he's also done a lot of stuff that ain't nothin' but dogs**, including 1982's Firefox where he steals a plane out of Russia. Sitting through that left such a bitter taste there's no way in hell I'd consider buying an electronic game associated with the movie, or so I thought. Some modern gamers claim there's a tie-in to the movie, but I don't remember anything blatant and there's no mention of it in the manual. Instead, it's a cross between a Star Wars trench game and the ultimate early-era vertical shooter Astro Blaster. The first thing that blows you away from the opening screen is the display is incredibly detailed and varied. Whether it's simulating the 3D trench, the assorted enemies and obstacles, or the haunting energy base of your nemeses the visuals seem to straddle the line between fixed-display and pixel-based gaming. The gameplay is just, if not more, impressive. There's six distinctly different waves and each is often more complex than many decent handhelds offer on their own. The first is the trench battle, the second requires shooting bad guys while avoiding oncoming asteroids, the third requires shooting at least eight bad guys with extreme firepower in less than 70 seconds, and so on. One incredible asset for the player is you seem to be able to fire any number of shots at once - I'm still wondering how they managed to get so many elements moving so fast. But don't mistake this for a mindless shooter. You also need to keep an eye on your energy level, which depletes when you take damage or fire too many shots without hitting something. You have a spare tank in reserve, but unless you make it through wave six there's no more to be found if you're hapless. At that point you're out of bullets. And you know what that means. You're s**t out of luck.



Now: Super Pixel Bros.

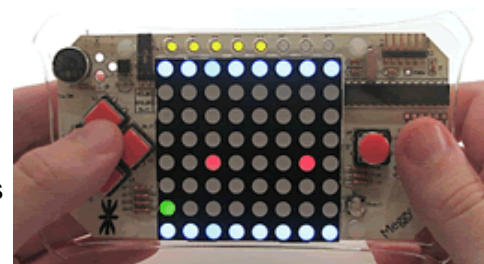
An accurate port of the original Super Mario Bros. on an eight-by-eight-pixel LED display. That's all that really needs to be said about this astonishing project by Brad Slattery. It features 20 levels bearing more than a passing resemblance to the original's and it's possible to design your own. The price? A mere \$55 (on sale for \$45 as I write this). Now for that other shoe you know is going to drop: it's a DIY kit requiring soldering. That's anything but a deal breaker for me since I've wanted to learn how since took apart my first computer at 13 (violating the warranty and incurring parental wrath), but it definitely keeps the gizmo out of the hands of the masses. The other hitch is the levels editor requires a Windows computer and a full version of something called Swordfish Basic, although it seems certain the deprived will be able to download custom levels made by others. Judging strictly from YouTube clips and user reviews, gameplay appears close to exact and the visuals are surprisingly effective. A separate two-line LCD displays score and other data, while a one-bit sound chip provides sound that, to quote Slattery, is "ideal for a low resolution game such as this." Given that the hardware specs aren't that far removed from the original handhelds of the late '70s it's mind-boggling to think of the impact something like this might have had if introduced at that time. Details about the project and ordering information is at Slattery's website (<http://www.bradspjrojects.com/electronics/Bradsprojects-SuperPixelBros.html>).



Some Assembly Required: Meggy Jr. RGB

If Super Pixel Bros. sounds enticing it's definitely worth checking out this eight-by-eight LED matrix kit that's more flexible in terms of playable games and programming, but with nothing (yet) as fun as SPB. It's got the same basic components, with maybe 30 games and other programs (i.e. a scrolling-text Twitter reader and a couple of simple synthesizers) from various users available through the main hub site

(www.evilmadscientist.com/article.php/meggyjr). There's also programming guides, a Wiki, and loads of other projects and musings. Enough of the games are clever enough on their own to make this a no-brainer for those able to assemble it, but the real plus is the programming environment is a free open-source download. As someone who couldn't get past BASIC during the '80s and is now feverishly trying to



make up for lost time that just adds enticement to the prospect of getting a hardware education by assembling the thing. The realistic starting cost is \$100 for a kit with a USB cable and power adaptor (plus another \$15 for expatriots like me who are plugging into non-U.S. outlets). Even if the DIY concept isn't vaguely in your universe of interest, it's well worth surfing the site and YouTube videos to see what a tiny new generation of young bedroom programmers is creating.

Now vs. Then Winner:

Now

By a slim margin despite its DIY handicap, tying the score

Multi-game unit

Then: Select-A-Game (Entex)

There a few other units I'd rather have own out of pure nostalgia and sentiment, mostly notably Milton Bradley's Microvision. But Entex's Select-A-Game gets the nod for having probably the best collection of pre-Gamneboy fixed-display games, even though they were few in number. I've already noted the company's single-title arcade games are exceptional and their sports games also frequently rank at or near the top against the competition. The Select-A-Game offers six games very similar to their single-title kin including Football 4, Pac-Man 2, Space Invaders 2 (the pack-in game), Basketball 3, Pinball and Baseball 4. Alas, a promised Turtles game was never released. It's a bit surprising Entex's games were superior to the Microvision's given that the former's seven-by-16 dot display is less than half of the Microvision's 16-by-16. The Select-A-Game also had alternating row colors of red and white, a bit of an advantage if used properly. The decisive element is Entex's unit allows two players at once, elevating the sports titles in particular to the level of the company's single game titles. The one big negative is Entex cut short its plans for the Select-A-Game to release the Adventure Vision which, while a great concept, ranks high in the all-time letdown category since it was hugely unreliable (thus the award it receives below).



Now: 9,999-in-1 Brick Game (and its infinite clones)

From the first-class lounge at Amsterdam's airport to Nepal's tea hut villages at 15,000 feet, I can't think of a video game in any format that's killed as many hours on the road as this ubiquitous device. There's better handheld games and there's (barely) cheaper ones, but in a world where Tetris became the killer application that sold a gazillion Gameboys there's still room for a version in whatever game collection happens to be within reach. These 9,999-in-1 (or 99-in-1, 999-in-1, 999,999-in-1, etc.) gadgets play numerous other oldies-but-goodies as well such as snake, auto racing, invaders and breakout, plus a few strange originals. Basically it's a collection of 10 or 20 distinct games with a massive number of difficulty and speed settings, thus allowing those absurd titles with all the nines. You'll probably pay \$5, give or take a few bucks, at any larger retailer for a unit that should be reliable. On the road, especially in any number of seriously underdeveloped countries, these things are seeming available at every other street stall along with the khaja and frogs-on-a-stick. They often don't cost much more than a can of Coke (although that can be pretty high when porters spend a week hauling it to a village). Alas, the game units often have the longevity of the snacks they're sold with - my goal was simply to find a working unit and throw it away at the end of that particular excursion (or mail it home on the off-chance it still worked). Yeah, this award comes with a lot of personal sentimental value, but the odds are this will still be far more fun than any currently selling handheld at the same price.



Gee, You Really Shouldn't Have: Adventure Vision

Given that not buying this now super-premium collector's item by Entex is one of the big regrets of my video gaming youth, this "award" might seem like a shock. But the logic is simple: \$4,000 for a device that's unreliable, meaning the initial euphoria will shatter into eternal heartbreak when it stops working.

Now vs. Then Winner:

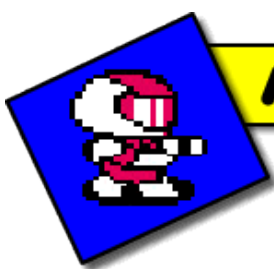


Gotta go with the longer-term diversion

Belated Hallmark Greeting Card Award

Me

Remember that awful guilt as a kid when somebody gave you a gift and you had nothing for them? That's me right about now, realizing there's no way to get all the categories into a single column of readable length and by deadline (which I've actually already blown by a couple of days). So it seems that, like well-meaning parents and Santa Claus, I lied (for anyone wondering what I mean, Santa's real workshop is about 700 miles from the North Pole in an abandoned coal mine about a mile from my house). I'm going to wish you a happy holiday with the "Now" category up 2-1, leaving the remaining categories and ultimate decision until next month. Since that'll be only a few days after the actual holiday, I'll just use the old "must have been a delay at the post office" excuse and hope it somehow sounds less lame now than it did then.



A Pixelated 21st Century

by Paul Zimmerman

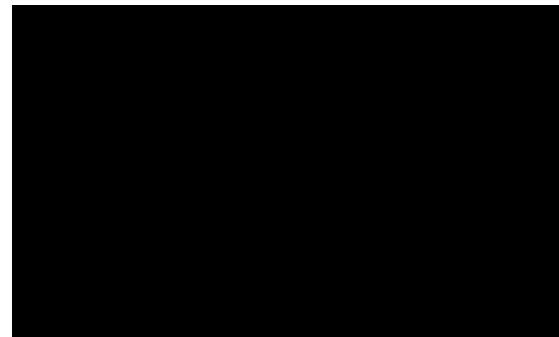


Hello Pixelated fans. "Pixelated Paul" is here to let you know about some of the retroware highlights for the month of November. Enjoy! And, Happy Holidays!



Gnomz (Video to the right)

A real-time, Gnome, multiplayer, battle platformer, fighter. Wow! 25 different arenas, up to 4-players, magical power ups and 3 different game modes.



3D Classics Kirby's Adventure (Video to the right)

3D update of the Kirby, NES classic.

Castle Conqueror Heroes ([Click here to see a video of the game](#))

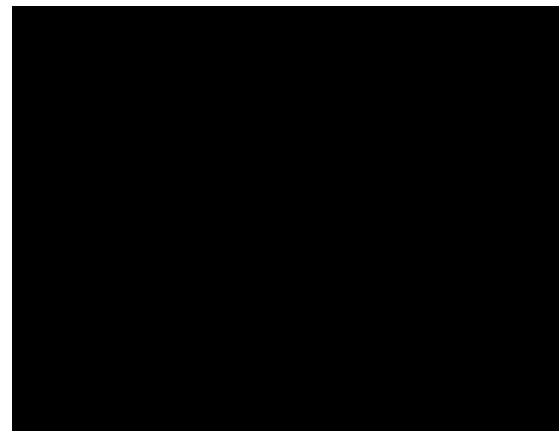
A strategy game with over 20 hours of play time, 9 chapters, collect items and upgrades.

Come On Heroes ([Click here to see a video of the game](#))

An action game that tests your reflexes. Defend your lovely heiress with many different weapons.

Freakyforms Your Creations Alive ([Click here to see a video of the game](#))

Create your own creatures and objects then control them in this platformer.





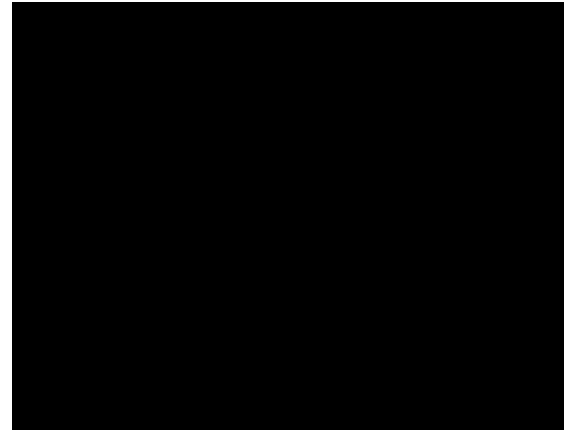
Note: most of the videos for the games below are of the originals (meaning they not being played on the Wii). This is because the Virtual Console is emulating the original system and therefore they are identical.

Balloon Kid (Gameboy) ([Click here to see a video of the game](#))

Play as Alice and save your brother! Fly through 8 stages, collect balloons, and avoid enemies. Sequel to Balloon Fight.

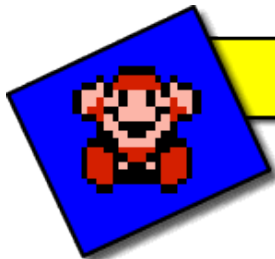
Metroid 2 Return of Samus (Gameboy) (Video to the right)

The sequel to the NES classic Metroid.



As always, send me an email and let me know if you purchased any of these games and what are your thoughts about the games. 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!



Game Over

by Bryan Roppolo



I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas and get a chance to play some of the new titles that have recently come out on the classic systems. With the release of Candy Catcher, AstroDodge, Christmas Craze, and Kobayashi Maru all within the last 2 months, you have to admit that there is a good selection of new games that many classic gamers have never played before. You should be able to find something to fill up that Christmas stocking !

See you all in 2012, the year that world might end!