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Welcome to a new year of Retrogaming Times Monthly! 2012 marks our 15th year of publication. That's right, we've been around for 15 years giving you retrogaming coverage. What I find interesting is that when I first got into collecting classic video games in 1998, 15 years prior was 1983 (part of the classic gaming era). RTM now has been around as long as that time span. Hard to believe that 1997 is to 2012 what 1983 was to 1998. I'm just proud to be apart of the team that has been bringing you coverage for so long. I look forward to hitting the 20 year mark and hopefully beyond!

This issue is one of the shorter ones that we've had for quite some time, mainly because of the fact that people are still recovering from Christmas and have not had time to write something up for January. This happens every year due to the holidays so don't be alarmed.

As to the article index, I think I'm going to open up a Beta version of it sometime this month to the public, so watch out for that. Initially I wanted to finish the whole thing and have it completely polished before opening it up, but with the recent move I've made I'm not sure when the finalized version will be done. Since the index can be searched, I figured something is better than nothing, so that will be my gift for the new year. I fully expect that it will become a useful tool for RTM readers. Anyway, I hope you all enjoy this issue of RTM and have a great 2012!

Retrogaming News

MAGFest 10

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

MAGFest, aka the Music and Gaming Fest (prior known as the Mid-Atlantic Gaming Fest), will be held in Maryland the first week of January! 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. Hotel accommodation is available. Visit us on the web at http://magfest.org/ for more info.

Den Draai Gaming Convention

Sunday, January 15 10:00am - 4:00pm (Deurne, Belgium)

This convention in the south of the Netherlands is only a short ride from most parts of Holland and Belgium. There will be traders, resellers and collectors at the show, with everything from MSX to Atari and Playstation 2 to Gamecube. With more than 150 tables of gaming goodness and an arcade event this will be a convention you don't want to miss!

The information
- Location: Den Draai, Blasiusstraat 2, 5754 AV, Deurne (Zijlberg)
- Entrance fee: 2 euro (kids below 12 are free with a supporting adult)
- over 150 tables of retro goodness
- Arcade event with prizes
- Catering and abundant parking space
- Easy to reach with public transport, 10 min walk from the train station

Check out our Facebook page at http://www.facebook.com/RetroGameBeursDeurne 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.

Gaming Tetralogies

by Jeff Wittenhagen

The Sonic The Hedgehog Series

Gaming Tetralogies covers 4 of the best games from any single game series on any platform. The games will not be listed in any particular preference order but by release date and will be more of a must have list for each series. Feel free to comment on any games in the series you feel should have been included.

Sonic The Hedgehog 2 (1992) - Sega Genesis

Sonic 2 took everything that made the original a hit and turned it up a notch. Overall part 2 just seemed to move a lot faster than its predecessor. Added abilities such as the spin dash allowed for more control and made you less vulnerable as you sped along levels at the speed of lightning. Bonuses like being able to become Super Sonic after collecting the Chaos Emeralds were also introduced and the end boss has a very climactic feel to it.

Sonic CD (1993) - Sega CD

Quite possibly the best classic 2D Sonic game with its unique mix of pixels and CD quality sound. Sonic CD had a funky mechanism that allow you to go to different portions of time by going by signs and maintaining your speed. This opened up a more non-linear aspect to the game that would allow the player to choose the path that they wanted to traverse.

Sonic Adventure (1999) - Sega Dreamcast

It might just be nostalgia, but Sonic's first trek into the world of 3D and polygons still stands out as one of the best. The only drawback is that Sonic Adventure is broken into multiple different smaller Adventures with difference characters having their own story, scenario and play style. The Sonic levels are so well put together that you would think Sega would give us a pure Sonic game in this style. It wasn't until much much later that we got our gimmick free pure Sonic game.

Sonic Generations (2011) - Xbox 360 and Playstation 3

Such a late addition to the series, Sonic Generations finally gets the series right again after many years of hiccups with useless additions such as werewolf transformations and a knight's sword. Generations brings a unique combination of 2D and 3D levels, each with their own Sonic and control style, that brings back nostalgia while allowing the game to showcase advanced HD graphics. The controls are pretty much spot on in the 2D sections and the 3D portions bring back the annoying memorization pitfalls that are part of what make a Sonic game challenging.

Apple II Incider

by Donald Lee

Adventuring With Ultima (And Gauntlet)

Welcome to the New Years edition of Apple II Incider. It's a couple of days after Christmas and it was a busy few days between some dinners, get togethers, shopping and some other activities.

Due to the lack of time, I did not have time to explore a game. I will discuss something I was doing recently and turn that into my column this month.

As I mentioned in previous columns, I was a fan of the Ultima serhes in my youth. I started with Ultima IV and later played Ultima III and Ultima V. I seem to recall I actually played Ultima V before going back to playing Ultima III though I am not 100% sure at this point.

Though I played Ultima IV first, I actually NEVER completed the game. I got to the Stygian Abyss and got stuck. Initially it was at the 6th level where there was a pretty long and confusing maze you had to work through. I managed to get a map to work around that level and I believe I got to the 8th level but had trouble with the runes and got booted about out of the Abyss. I never really put in the effort to try again after that. I did finish both Ultima V and Ultima III which was cool.

Recently, I have felt an urge to revisit Ultima. A part of the reason was to potentially finish Ultima IV. The other major reason was to play the original three Ultima games. Later on, I also thought it would be cool to play the Ultima games that were never released on the Apple II (VI, VIII, VI).

I tried playing on Apple II emulators and also some PC emulators on my MAC. Alas, I never really stayed with playing the games. Part of the season was I couldn't save my progress. The other reason is that the games sometimes crashed.

I know that there is an "Ultima compilation" CD that was released some years ago for DOS / Windows, but I'm not sure if I can find a copy AND get it working on my MAC.

Lastly, I'll conclude on why I liked the Ultima series of games. When I was young, I had a pretty good imagination and wished I could go on some grand adventures with my friends. Since I couldn't do anything grand, games proved to be a good substitute. Ultima IV was a perfect adventure for me.

As a side note, Atari's Gauntlet was also another great game that I loved to simulate my adventures with my friends. Alas, it was an arcade game so I didn't love it as much when I was younger as I couldn't play it that much. The good news is that my friends and I actually ended up playing Gaunlet on someone's N64 (and later Playstation 2) quite extensively.

Commodore Du Jour

by Marc Douglas

H.E.R.O.

Happy New Year to all! As quickly as 2011 passed, I have a feeling that 2012 will not only keep the trend going, but possibly go even quicker. It helps to have so many old classics to play and write about. I'm on a bit of an Activision kick right now, so I am starting off the new year by going on a rescue operation. There are several miners trapped deep below ground an only one man can save them. Using a helicopter pack, he will have to face many obstacles along the way. Dangerous creatures, walls of stone and magma, raging rivers and other dangers await. Will this man be remembered as a failure, or as a H.E.R.O.?

I have decided to go back and look at 1984s H.E.R.O., or Helicopter Emergency Rescue Operation, designed by John Van Ryzin. I believe that this was first released on the Atari 2600 right around the crash and found its way to the 5200, Colecovision and the 8-bit computers of the era.

H.E.R.O. Box

The premise is simple, as Roderick Hero (R. Hero for short) you work your way through the various mines and handle the various obstacles as you see fit. You have two main weapons at your disposal, dynamite that can destroy walls and a helmet mounted laser beam that can kill the various creatures found lurking underground in addition to destroying walls. You will want to use your dynamite to destroy the walls that will be blocking your path. There are two types of walls, stone and magma. Both require one stick of dynamite to destroy, or they can be destroyed by the laser beam but this takes longer and it takes the same amount of time to laser through each type of wall. The big difference is that magma in the game is deadly to the touch. Just grazing against it will kill R. Hero, so you must be careful when getting close enough to the wall so the dynamite will destroy it. With the stone wall it is easy, you can run up against it and set the charge and then run away. With the magma, you have to make sure you get close enough to set the charge, but not too close as to touch the wall. After a few plays, it becomes second hand and should not be a problem. Setting a charge is very easy, just press down on the joystick.

Now that you have blown up the wall, you can continue, by running across the ground, or by using the aforementioned helicopter pack to skim across the ground. As you continue down the mine, there will be various creatures looking to put an end to your rescue efforts. Snakes, spiders, bats, flying bugs and other nasty beasties will do what they can to bring your life to a premature end. Some creatures, like spiders and bats are easy to kill as they are stationary targets and a quick burst from the laser will take care of them. The other creatures are not as easy to dispatch as they are moving targets. The snakes like to poke their heads out in narrow caverns forcing you to time your drop down into the lower reaches of the cave so you don't get bitten. The flying bugs like to work in a circular pattern that can cause you to make a move too early and get bitten. One plus about losing a life is that if you are bitten by a creature they will disappear so you cannot get killed by the same baddie again. A nice touch.

Oh by the way, you also have a time limit for each level. At the bottom of the screen is a power bar that slowly ticks away as you make your way through the mine. If you run out of power, you die. But if you get to the miner before your power runs out, you get bonus points for any power left over and 50 points for each unused stick of dynamite. When

you realize that you get an extra H.E.R.O. at every 20,000 points, every little bit helps. One thing I did notice is that the bar does not move any faster if you shoot your laser. So you can go ahead and hold the fire button down the entire time you are playing, as it won't make a difference.

One nice touch in the game is that some passages are illuminated by lanterns that are attached to the cave walls. If you touch one of these, the screen goes black and you will have to make your way through the current screen you are on in the dark. It isn't too difficult as the creatures, magma and yourself are visible, but only in a dull gray color. Setting off a stick of dynamite will briefly light up the screen, but I suggest that you do not do this, as you only get six sticks of dynamite per round and you will be using them all when you get to the higher levels in the game.

As you progress, the mines will get more complex with multiple creatures per screen and as you get down deeper, running water that you must fly over or use a raft if it is available, otherwise, you will drown. One thing though, as you proceed through the mines, you will always move down, you will never be expected to go up. You will go east and west at times, but never north. Also, you will have to deal with pits in the ground that are very easy to fall into. Pay attention, or you could find yourself entering the next screen directly above a section of magma! Another way the game challenges you is the placement of the walls. You will drop into an area where there is a magma wall and the side of the cave is also magma. You must set your dynamite carefully because if you are too close to the blast, you will be killed, but you can't run away too fast or you'll touch the magma on the side of the cave. Again, you can use your laser to slowly blast through the wall, but then you won't have enough time to reach the miner and you will both end up trapped forever. It are these challenges that keep H.E.R.O. from not quickly becoming stale.

Graphically, H.E.R.O. doesn't push the 64 much and is not really much of an upgrade to the 2600 version. The mines look cramped and dark, but the creature graphics do the job. The main hero looks the part as his colors are red, white and blue. The dynamite looks like it should and when it explodes, the screen flashes white for a moment which is a nice touch. But when all is said and done, there is really nothing noteworthy about the graphics.

Sounds are minimal, but solid. When you fly, your helicopter pack's rotor makes an appropriate sound. When the dynamite explodes, the explosion is convincing. Your laser makes a pulsating sound that is suitable. The creatures make no sounds, but when you die the sound could be described as sort of a yell. There is no music to speak of in the game either which is a shame.

Controls are good, you push up on the joystick to fly, down to set a dynamite charge and the fire button works the laser. There is a little resistance when you drop down a shaft and have to suddenly activate your helicopter pack. This can become an issue when you drop down to a lower level of the mine and enter the next screen falling right onto an awaiting spider. Always be cautious when travelling from screen to screen.

In the end, H.E.R.O. was a popular game back in 1984 and it held my interest for many hours back in the day. But the game will start to repeat itself after a while and I feel that more elements could have been added to distance itself from its Atari 2600 roots. It was fun to revisit H.E.R.O. for a while, but I don't see myself coming back to save the rest of those miners for quite some time. Hope they bought something to read.

SCORE: H.E.R.O. gets an okay 6

Next month we celebrate Valentine's Day with a new C64 game that should have been released 20 years ago! Everyone have a safe and happy 2012!

If you decide to give H.E.R.O. a try and get to 1,000,000 points, drop me a line and tell me what happens!

MAME Reviews

by Mark Sabbatini

Splat!

"You need a head to throw food."

Coming a decade after "avoid missing ball for high score," it'd be fascinating to poll joystick junkies ages 5 to 55 and ask how those one-line instructions reflect on the evolution of video games since Pong. Presumably the kids would love it while codgers would grumble about the degradation of tasteful entertainment. At least the older group now has the smug satisfaction of watching their kids' agony as their offspring obliterate decent folk as griefers while racking up huge in-game purchase bills.

Old-timers, however, still have the 1976 cult classic Death Race, which totally punks the GTA franchise when it comes to driving-based fatalities. And the 1982 Williams release Splat! – the subject of this month's review – features a central theme based on continual decapitations, mostly your own. Zombie madness aside, that don't seem to be getting first-tier treatment from major developers these days.

While Splat! came at the peak of Williams' reign as overlord of macho video games, it's one of the company's most spectacular commercial failures as reference guides call it an "almost unreleased" coin-op title. Various articles have included it as one of the most obscure games ever, but apparently some in the modern era think it has play value – it's part of the "Midway Arcade Treasures" disc for Windows computers and the big-three trio of consoles (previous generation, but playable on today's machines).

"The game was designed by John Newcomer, the same fellow who made Joust," notes The Killer List of Video Games, which ranks the game a six on a rarity scale of 100. "Williams apparently bet the farm on it and lost big."

The game is basically the eschewed love child of Robotron and Food Fight, although it precedes the latter title by Atari by a year. The basics involve picking up various foods as they drop from two sides of a conveyor belt at the top of the screen and chucking them at computer-controlled foes, as well as a second human player if you've got friends sharing your macabre sense of humor. You also need to make sure your head is attached before you attack and if you're hit your skull goes on a kamikaze flight around the screen. If you're hit again before recapturing your head you lose a life.

An unusual element of the game – as if the above is normal – is waves are determined by length rather than killing a set number of enemies. I can't say I'm a big fan of the approach, since it feels like part of Williams' ever-escalating efforts at the time to squeeze more and more quarters out of gamers in shorter and shorter amounts of time (although they were hardly the only ones doing so). It's a rare instance, for example, where the operator can pretty much screw players over no matter how the relevant DIP switch is tweaked. The range is 15 (supposedly easy) to 99 seconds (hard). Quick waves may allow the player to progress quickly, but this just brings on the tougher foes faster, while surviving lengthy waves even at the early stages is hugely difficult for anyone not an expert.

Fortunately for the MAME crowd, other DIP switch settings offer a similarly wide range of adjustments and are far more useful in making a tough game easier to master. You can start with one to 79 lives, earn extra lives every 1,000 to 79,000 points and there are 10 levels of difficulty. The simple move/throw controls make it easy to play in any MAME setup (I definitely prefer my Mac keyboard to my Wii controller).

Extras in the game are minimal for a Williams title. You can select one of three characters to play during the start screen, although it didn't seem to affect my success and (mostly) failure. Keys also drop occasionally from the belt and these can either be used as weapons or to warp to the opposite site of the screen through one of four doors at the playfield corners (which the enemies emerge from, so be alert for the telltale flash).

Overall, Splat! is well worth taking for a spin for the novelty, but its long-term value is dubious for reasons beyond its difficulty. The gameplay is more monotonous than Food Fight and Williams' better titles. The graphics aren't very crisp, making it tough for beginning players to figure out who's who and what various elements (such as your head) are when lots of things start flying around the screen. Sound, while not something I ding games too much for, lacks the usual defining cool quotient set by Williams.

Finally, a bit of trivia: Fliers for Splat! promise "No one has fought like this before!" Actually, there were plenty of games featuring flying food for home computers and consoles at the time. More notably, they even got bested on dismemberments by the most unlikely of companies (pause to allow the curious to take a guess). Infocom – that's right, the text-only adventure masters – released numerous titles with apparent bugs allowing you to DROP HEAD and still be able to COVER EARS WITH HANDS. (Note: You can EXAMINE HEAD and whatnot, but not reattach it. Cue punch line involving the phrase "once you've lost your head…"). Not a big deal in most of their games, but anyone familiar with The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy can imagine the improbably large number of scenarios where it'd cause them to be a bit disturbed.

Dual Perspective

by James Sorge

Ninja Gaiden III: The Ancient Ship Of Doom

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 "Ninja Gaiden III: The Ancient Ship of Doom", the last of the original Ninja Gaiden Trilogy for the NES.

Graphics: 4/10

I thought the graphics were a downgrade from the previous Ninja Gaidens I hate to say it. There were a few backgrounds that hurt the eyes, and it wasn't the most pleasant game to watch. The SNES would have been better in this deparment.

Sound: 6/10

This game badly needed the SNES upgrade in the sound department. The music is inferior compared to the rest of the series.

Difficulty: 8/10

Despite the damage table among other things, I don't think this is one of the hardest games out there and might be the most overrated game in terms of difficulty. The damage table is a big thing and the game does have that going for it, but it's really lacking massive tough jumps and regenerating enemies. The game isn't terribly deep on throwing tricks at you.

Replay Factor: 5/10

If you are not going for a remake, you probably are not going to replay this game. After I finished my point runs and stuff, I beat the game on NES and was done with it for a while. I'll eventually do Virtual Console, but it's not a priority.

The World Record Perspective:

A total terror:

- Twin Galaxies World Record for speed without glitches is held by Andrew Furrer at 35 minutes 13 seconds
- SDA Record with glitches is held by Josh Styger with a time of 14 minutes
- High Score Record is held by James Sorge with a score of 1,306,900 points

Both the SDA record and the score record reached the end of game area, and you will probably kill yourself trying to beat either, Act 7 is not fun to do in 1 life, and all the record holders who have ever attempted this game have a real hate affair with it and are public about it. The Twin Galaxies speed record is definitely beatable, but you will not have fun doing it. There are better games with more recognition to go for world records on. I'd not recommend touching this unless you go for the Twin Galaxies speed record.

The Penguin Says:

"Let's keep this short and simple. Overall I give this one a 5/10, with a world record potential of 0.5/5 (mostly because of the Twin Galaxies low record, a 0 otherwise)."

The Pixelated Mage

by Jeff Wittenhagen

Alcahest

Platform: Super Famicom
Developer: HAL Laboratory
Release Date: December 17, 1993
Genre: Action Role-Playing Game
Game Modes: Single Player
Tag Line: "A flawless blend of action game-play and role-playing elements."

Synopsis

Alcahest is a little known gem from the people who brought you Kirby. It is a flawless blend of action game-play and role-playing elements that makes for a uniquely engrossing experience. The word Alcahest is defined as a hypothetical universal solvent once sought by alchemists. This is highly likely where the title's roots come from as alchemy seems to play an integral role throughout the game.

The game starts off with a little historical background. An evil star appears once every 1,000 years which signifies the arrival of the demon Alcahest. Four magical guardians gave their power to a chosen warrior to seal the demon away once again. You take the role of a warrior named Alen, who is being chased by some lizard-men. It is quickly revealed that you're the new chosen warrior meant to seal Alcahest away yet again. Alcahest's general, Babilom, tries to kill you before you can become powerful enough to fulfill your destiny. Fortunate enough for you though, you are saved from certain death by the Guardian of the Flame, who then instructs you to gather up the four guardian blades to gain the ultimate power.

The story telling is short and gives you just enough so you know what's going on, yet leaves it open enough for you to come up with your own specifics and use your imagination. This keeps the game flowing and allows you to play within a minute or so of starting a new game instead of waiting for a ton of story to play out. The characters are simple, yet complex at the same time. You can feel the raw emotion of the main character as he progresses through the game yet they don't go into too much detail which is welcomed as it allows you to put yourself in the protagonist's shoes.

Gameplay

The controls in Alcahest are solid with easily recognizable collision detection. It has been compared to Crystalis for the NES which is another great Action RPG. It does pretty much play like Crystalis but there are a few differences. As you walk around levels defeating enemies, the experience you get from beating them goes towards continues instead of leveling you up. This is integral to know as Alcahest does not offer saves, but passwords to continue. In order to level up you must find power ups that increase your life, magic and SP which are scattered though out the land inside treasure chests.

Besides for being able to normally swing your sword, you also get the ability to charge it for a more powerful attack. As you collect guardian blades, you can switch between the different ones on the fly which allow for different types of charged attacks. Also, you'll also be joined by that blade's guardian to help you in battle, which you use magic in order to call upon.

At certain parts in the game you will be joined by various allies who will fight alongside of you and stay behind you as you move. Although this is sort of like how partners work the Mana series, Alcahest handles partners a bit differently by having a varied cast of characters as you would expect from a solid RPG. Some of the partners have ranged attacks and others heal you. While this can make certain sections easier, it gives you a much needed break from endlessly grinding away on enemies and allows you to hone your skills.

The challenge varies from time to time and requires you to do a bit of trial and error to beat some of the more difficult bosses. The difficulty pacing is spot on and as usual the last couple of levels are controller smashingly insane.

Graphics and Sound

The visuals are another thing that makes Alcahest great. You not only have awesome fantasy settings, but the enemies are very well drawn and look amazing for a 16-bit game. The backgrounds are colorful and varied and encourage exploration. Animations are rather plain, but with the addition of magic attacks, charged sword attacks, and your partners special attacks, you'll be fairly impressed on what the game is capable of putting out visually.

The musical score is a thing of beauty. Like a lot of 16-bit titles, Alcahest's musical endeavors bring you into the game adding to the overall experience. It's mostly very fast-paced string pieces that are drum-heavy which set the pace nicely. The title song sticks out as a very solid piece of gaming music and will be going in your head long after you hear it. Sound effects are your standard fare. Like most games all of the special attacks have their own specific sounds.

Why It's Rare

Alcahest had a much smaller visibility range than other titles during the 16-bit era, as it was released exclusively in Japan for the Super Famicom. Alcahest can usually be purchased online for around $20 which isn't too bad. But what if you can't read Japanese? Thanks to the great work of game translators Akujin, David Mullen, Frank Hughes and Dark Force, we have a fully translated English language version of the game which can be put onto a cartridge and played on your Super Nintendo. It can be purchased premade via websites such as GameReproductions.com for not much more than the original.

Rating = 4 Pixelated Mages out of 5

Grab-'Em-Quick Alert: MAME, DOS, Other iPhone Retro Apps

Some amazing gifts for retrogamers with iPhones/iPads arrived just in time for Christmas. But they may not be there much beyond the New Year, if that.

Emulators for MAME, DOS and other pre-NES retro machines surfaced with little official fanfare – but huge chat board excitement – with perhaps the biggest enticement being the ability to add your own games without jailbreaking. But a lot of people think Apple, which acts in bizarre ways when it comes to such apps, is likely to follow a historical pattern of yanking them on very short notice – maybe days, maybe a couple of weeks if readers of this column are lucky.

So this month's column on handheld gaming is a news-alert deviation from the world of LED/LCD units to do a quick roundup and assessment of retro emulators and collections, along with noting how easy or hard it is to add custom games. It's probably still a worthwhile read for those who cower in terror at the prospect of bricking their iPhone (not a putdown – I still whimper at the prospect of using Windows for any length of time) since there's a lot of good content in the libraries already in the collections.

Also, just to reiterate the obvious disclaimer for those ready to tinker with the digits on their gadget: BACKUP FIRST.

The easiest way to add games is with the free iExplorer (formerly iPhone Explorer) for PC/Mac, which lets you access your iOS thingy the same way you would a USB flash drive. You'll also almost certainly need to edit some text files and possibly add images of your games. Detailed instructions are way beyond the scope of this last-minute column but, rest assured, there are scores of online forums expounding at length on the subject.

The reviews are short summaries offering just enough info to help you decide if they're worth your lunch money, or at least reading about further. The emphasis is how well the titles exactly replicate the originals, since numerous licensed titles are hampered by so-called "enhancements" and poorly designed controls.

(Before starting, a quick not-quite-retro plug for those who may have overlooked it since, among other things, they got released at the same time as GTA III. Among the contenders for the top releases of the year have to be the 3D first-person shooters Marathon and Marathon 2. The Mac titles from 15 or so years ago blew away Doom when that title was considered unworthy of the Mac. These, not Halo, are what originally put Bungie on the map, leading the company to be assimilated into the Microsoft Borg. And the games are free – as in actually free with no infuriating in-app purchase requirements for the full experience – although you can drop a couple bucks on extras such as an all-item mod that basically ensures invincibility.)

iMAME (Grade: B; Hacks: Easy)

This free emulator is the first thing to grab since it's the most likely to disappear. It's a miracle it exists at all, so a number of flaws are overlooked in the grade. The included collection of nine games is nothing special (Targ and Circus were the only ones I recognized immediately). The controls aren't very precise and they're limited to a joystick and several buttons, a huge impairment in terms of what additional titles will be playable and the ability to edit settings for games. Adding games is pretty much as simple as dropping ZIP files in the right directory, but with a huge caveat: they must be version 37b5 ROMS, an older-release format used by illegal Gameboy emulators, and they're not the easiest thing to find on the 'net.

Aemula Oldies (Grade: C+; Hacks: Difficult)

The best iOS app ever for retroheads wanting to add their own collections was the long-vanquished iDOS, which made adding files as easy as drag-and-drop in iTunes. That basically opened the entire retro universe, as users loaded it with everything from machine-specific emulators to Windows. Sadly, it was pulled quickly and rereleased without the drag-and-drop, but users worked around that quickly as well. Now it's back in an even more restricted form as Aemula Oldies, a free app with some pretty cool games such as Duke Nukem, 4D Prince of Persia, CHAMP Kong, CD-Man and Mille Bornes. Two problems: 1) As with iMAME the touch controls are somewhat vague and 2) iPhone users don't have access to a full keyboard, seriously limiting custom use and some options on the included games. It's probably the most difficult to hack, with some precise timing needed to interrupt the program (basically returning it the DOS prompt) as well as coding and image edits.

C64 (Grade: A-; Hacks: Medium)

This grade would be moderately lower if not for the ability to add your own collection, although that some editing of text files and adding images as well as loading files. I gave this $5 app a B+ in a capsule review earlier this year before I figured out the hacking part, since the initial collection is decent and there's a lot of good stuff among roughly 30 other titles available for a buck or two. The hackability raises the grade, but it also gets dinged because a few titles are now being yanked – including from those who've already purchased them if they attempt to update the app – as the games get released in separate packages. If this trend continues – and I fear it might for this and other emulators – the grade will plummet.

Spectaculator (Grade: B; Hacks: Medium)

This ZX Spectrum emulator is much like the C64 app in terms of hacking, but the grade is lower due to a more limited collection of titles most gamers will probably find inferior (Brits will almost certainly go the other way in their preference). It does seem to offer better controls than a lot of C64 titles, but doesn't have as many features such as in-app cheats and online scoreboards.

Atari's Greatest Hits (Grade: A-; Hacks: None)

A must-have for the few who don't already own it. Missile Command is included with the free download, but presumably anybody even modestly into retro will pay $15 for the full collection of 82 games for the 2600 and 18 coin-op titles. There's definitely a mixed grab-bag quality since numerous hit titles (anything with a non-Atari copyright like Ms. Pac-Man or Raiders of the Lost Ark) are missing and controls range from great to awful. But the sum exceeds the parts, especially since almost anyone other than completist fanatics will discover rare and overlooked titles of interest in addition to old favorites. See in-depth review in RTM #84.

ZX Spectrum: Elite Collection (Grade: A-; Hacks: None)

Another personal favorite of mine, although I know plenty of people will reject simply because they hate the Speecy. The $2.99 app includes 12 games and there's more than 20 six-game packs available for $1.99 each. A lot of them can start to feel like remakes of each other (because a sizable percentage of titles back in the day were), but I seem to discover one or two lesser-known gems in each collection beyond the typically included "featured" game.

Well, this marks the end of the first issue of 2012. We shall be back with more in February! By then I should be settled in to my new place and hopefully will be able to continue work on the article index. However, enjoy the beta version of the article index which I plan on putting up sometime in mid-January. See you all next time for a Valentines edition of RTM!