Printing Help

FRONT COVER

>THIS ISSUE'S TABLE OF CONTENTS

Retrogaming Times Monthly #109 - June 2013

ATTRACT MODE

Insert Coin to Play

- Press Fire To Begin
- Retrogaming News

THE RETROWORKS

The "Anything Goes" Retrogaming Times Monthly Section

- Game Evolutions - Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles
- Des Gamer - Fanboyism, And The 16-Bit Console Wars Part 3: Sound
- Mobile Gaming - Karateka Classic

The Game Review HQ

IF IT'S GAME REVIEWS YOU WANT, IT'S GAME REVIEWS YOU'LL GET!

- Turn To Channel 3 - Skate Or Die
- The Retro Junkies - Zombies Ate My Neighbors
- The Thrill Of Defeat - A Quest For The Dragon 32/64's Best Exclusive Title
- MAME Reviews - Chicken Shift

POWERING DOWN

The Final Bits of RTM Goodness

- Game Over

I hope everyone had a great Memorial Day weekend and put their barbeque's to good use. I decided to change things up a little bit starting last month so instead of making each issue based on a holiday or season, I would instead spotlight an article and revolve the look of the issue around it. Well, this month we have a new columnist by the name of Nick DeMarco who wrote up a nice Skate or Die review for us, so I decided to give him the spotlight this month. Nick actually runs a small business selling video games in the Scranton, PA area and he's bound to have some interesting stories to tell in the future. We're glad to have you on board Nick!

I also want to mention that The Retro Junkies have released their latest Supershow at http://retro-junkies.podomatic.com/. This show takes a look at Zombie's Ate My Neighbors and is a load of fun to listen to. Also, be sure to keep a look out for their next show which will feature none other than Skate or Die. It looks like if you're a Skate or Die fan, you have a lot to look forward to this month.

Now on to this month's RTM, featuring Skate or Die!

Retrogaming News

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Upcoming New Releases from Revival Studios

Revival Studios has just released its 2013 release schedule. In the next two months they plan on putting out the following new games:

June:

VIDEOPAC / ODYSSEY2: Mage2 - The Dark Mirror (cartridge)
Commodore PET: Rush (tape)
SEGA SG-1000 / SC-3000: Shifted! (cartridge)
MSX / MSX2: Shifted! (cartridge)

July:

COLECOVISION: Shifted! (cartridge)

They put out some very good stuff, so be sure to check out these new releases once available!

EVENTS

5th Annual Game Play Festival

Friday, July 5 - Sunday, July 28 (Brooklyn, NY)

The Brick is pleased to announce the fifth annual Game Play festival, taking place July 2013 in Brooklyn, New York. This year's festival will once again feature cutting-edge works that lie at the intersection of video gaming and performance.

"The most ambitious effort I know of to fuse the techniques and live presentation of theater with the themes, structures and technology of interactive electronic entertainment." - The New York Times

"Explores the intersections of technology, theatre, performance art and video-game culture in delightfully inventive ways."
- American Theatre Magazine

This genre breaking festival will play at The Brick (579 Metropolitan Ave at Lorimer Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn) July 5-28. Tickets ($15) may be purchased online at www.bricktheater.com or by calling 866-811-4111. Performance schedule TBA.

Atari Party 2013

Saturday, July 6, 12:00pm - 5:00pm PDT (Davis, CA)

Atari Party is an annual (more or less) exhibition of classic Atari video games from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The event is free, and open to the public. No registration or RSVP is required. Volunteers donate their time and loan their games and systems to the event.

Atari Party is for anyone interested in reliving their childhood, or showing their own children the games that mom & dad grew up with. Come join us as the Davis Public Library as we play games and give away prizes!

KansasFest 2013

Tuesday, July 23 - Sunday, July 28 (Kansas City, MO)

Apple II users, programmers, hobbyists, and retrocomputing enthusiasts are invited to Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Missouri, from Tuesday, July 23, through Sunday, July 28, for six days and five nights of sessions, demos, announcements, contests, and camaraderie.

The week kicks off with keynote speaker Randy Wigginton, Apple employee #6, who worked on the Disk][disk drive, Apple DOS, and Applesoft BASIC. Wigginton will be available immediately afterward for a Q&A and autograph session.

The week then offers a variety of presentations and workshops, including but not limited to:

- Teaching kids to program with Matthew Hellinger
- Disk][theory of design with Tony Diaz
- Hardware hacking with Stephen Buggie
- How to build an arcade machine using MESS and MAME emulation with Carrington Vanston
- Disk copy de-protection with Martin Haye
- HackFest, an annual programming challenge open to coders of all skill levels
- A vendor fair and exhibit hall for attendees and the general public to show off, play with, and buy and sell new or unusual hardware and software.

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.

Game Evolutions

by James Sorge

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Welcome to a new column in RTM, called Game Evolutions. In this column I will be looking at titles that were part of a series and seeing how the series as a whole evolved from game to game. This month I am taking a look at the NES and Arcade Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles games, spanning 1989-1992. TMNT Tournament Fighters is not covered here as it has little to do with the main series of TMNT games. We will be starting out with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 1 for the NES and going to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 4 on the SNES.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

Developer: Ultra Studios, Konami Games
Release Date: May/June 1989

Ah, the lore of Konami, using their development house Ultra to make a NES game for Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles for the NES. This game wasn't the greatest (the average review score of 6.3 is not the greatest: Even Call of Duty tends to get better scores). But anyway, this game had you go through six stages: A buildings/sewers stage, a dam and underwater stage, the streets of New York City (both overhead and buildings), an airfield, underground, and finally, the Technodrome.

This game had several issues. First was the lack of recognizable characters as bosses. The best you had were Bebop and Rocksteady, the large Mouser in Stage 4, the Technodrome in Stage 5, and Shredder in Stage 6. Second of all, I question some of the sprite quality, as things like normal Mousers didn't even look right. Third of all, the game was incredibly difficult, as it took me until I was a teenager to be able to beat it (though I was in the Technodrome a few times, so dedication to the game could be said to be an issue). The game just didn't feel right, and didn't feel like the cartoon at the time. So, we'll move on, to:

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

Developer: Konami
Release Date: Approximately Christmas 1988/January 1989

Arguably my favorite game in the series, this game was the penultimate of TMNT games in my opinion. You had several

stages, and you fought life-size versions of the bosses, and recognizable ones. Stage 1 was Rocksteady. 2-A was Bebop, 2-B was Baxter Stockman, 2-C was Bebop and Rocksteady together, Stage 4 was Granitor, Stage 5 was Tragg, Krang, and Shredder. The game was loosely based on the first 5 episodes/the first miniseries of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. You fought several familiar foes, including Foot Soldiers of all variety and well-colored Mousers. The presentation was terrific and despite the game being difficult, it was fun, and you could play with multiple other players, like one of the first games you could play with four players together. I spent tons of money on this game, and I once did get to Shredder in one quarter (unfortunately never beat him on that run.) Now you're saying that they wanted to cash in on this for console, right? We move onto:

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 2: THE ARCADE GAME

Developer: Ultra Studios, Konami Games
Release Date: December 1990

Why this game gets such high marks still puzzles me to this day. First of all, the game is completely nerfed compared to the arcade game. The NES can't display the proper amount of enemies or palette swaps. Second of all, this game DOES NOT play like the arcade at all. Third of all, on a game supposed to be based on the first few games, WHY do you have a wolf boss and Shogun, and even Baxter the Fly in this? They are SO out of place. Last but not least, you can only have 2 players instead of a maximum of four. This is a game that the NES showed its age unfortunately, and this game should've been held back for the launch of the SNES (it might've taken time, but it would have been well worth it). Avoid this at all costs.

Now, we're moving onto:

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 3: THE MANHATTAN PROJECT

Developer: Konami Games
Release Date: Christmas 1991

I guess greed works well, and the second Turtles arcade game sold well, so this was released. Once again, I don't know why the company would release an inferior product and they didn't wait until the SNES. There were some key differences in mechanics, including some arcade moves brought back and new flips added. They also seemed to add new mutants: Two I don't know their names offhand, BUT they were in the show, and Tokka and Rahzar from the second TMNT movie. The other bosses were Bebop, Rocksteady, Shredder, Krang, and Super Shredder. Once again, why?

TURTLES IN TIME

Developer: Konami Games
Release Date: Christmas 1991

The arcades had a follow-up to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles released. This featured four players, and had new bosses, including Metalhead, the Pizza Monsters, Mudman, Tokka and Rahzar, Leatherhead, Krang (humanoid and spaceship), and Beam Sword Shredder. While the game looked great, it was a quarter-muncher and the bosses were a bit obscure. Now, moving onto one of the best ports of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle game:

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 4: TURTLES IN TIME

Developer: Konami Games
Release Date: Summer 1992

This game seemed to fix the arcade game's problems and the problems encountered by Turtles 2 on the NES. First of all, you could fight more than one variant of Foot Soldier in the game. Second, the bosses were more recognizable, like the Rat King, Slash, Bebop and Rocksteady replacing Mudman, and Tokka and Rahzar being moved. This also felt like the last game in the Turtles series, as you fought everybody including Super Shredder at the end in an epic battle. This is my favorite port of all of them, though I have had trouble playing it for I broke the game really bad in a 3000 point run one day.

Other Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles games that have been released over time, but I haven't played, include Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Tournament Fighters, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Hyperzone Heist on the Genesis, two Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles games by Konami for recent consoles, the awful remake of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Turtles in Time for the PS3 and X-Box 360, and TMNT based off of the CGI movie, the latter two made by Ubisoft. The games I didn't cover were relatively inferior, and the others out of RTM's coverage area.

Well enjoy, see you next month!

Des Gamer

by John Wedgeworth

Fanboyism, And The 16-Bit Console Wars

Part 3: SNES vs. Genesis - Sound

Two months ago, I started a series on Fanboyism, and the 16-bit Console Wars. My intro can be found here [link], and last month's installment, where we dealt with the graphics between the SNES and the Genesis can be found here [link]. Now we'll deal with these two system's sound. This is simply a matter of two completely different styles of sound system. One's a sampler, one's a synthesizer. It's apples and oranges. What kind of comparative work can we do here? We're about to find out. Let's insert coin to continue.

Before we get into the particulars of the systems themselves, I should spend a little time on what the major differences are between a sampler and a synthesizer. Some people will say that sampling is not synthesis per se. Others will say that sampling is just another form of synthesis. It seems to me that this debate would at best be academia, and at worst, semantics; most likely semantics, though I will say I personally find myself in the not synthesis per se camp. If someone feels strongly that the discussion of whether sampling is or is not a form of synthesis is more important than simple academia or semantics, and/or feels strongly that sampling is, in fact, a form of synthesis, let us know in the comments section. Otherwise, we'll operate on the assumption that it's something different and move on. The easiest way to grasp the difference is that with a sampler, you are manipulating prerecorded clips as opposed to actually generating sounds. But a sampler can sample real instruments, or voice clips, or sound effects, or synthesizers, or...well, anything. By contrast, the synthesizer is actually generating its own sounds in real time, yet it is entirely restricted to the parameters set by the synthesizer's own hardware and software.

Maybe this is a lame analogy, and I can think of at least one point where it breaks down, but say you've got a guitar and an amp on the one hand, and then you've got an MP3 player, and a pair of speakers on the other. The guitar and amp, you're generating sounds in real time. They are crisp, they are fresh, they are not suffering from the lossiness of conversion to .wav or .mp3, or whatever...yet, you can only make sounds that can be made on guitar and amp. You can't make trumpet sounds, for instance. At best, you can only emulate them…badly. However, with the MP3 player, you're not generating anything at all, you're only playing it back, and you're suffering the lossiness of a pre-recorded clip. But you're not limited to a guitar sound, you can have any sound you want. You want trumpets? You got em! Want a KORG? There ya go! Want a heavy metal guitar, a tuba, a kazoo, and a church choir….together? Hey, go nuts! Well, in this analogy, the guitar and amp represent the synthesizer, and the MP3 player represents the sampler. Make sense? Now, most samplers have memory resources, etc to accommodate anything from single voice, single note samples, to long, drawn out clips of pre-mixed, multi-instrument recordings; anything from bytes to megabytes. However, for our purposes, since the sampler we're dealing with here is the SNES sound hardware, the sampler is limited mostly to small single note samples in the xx number of bytes territory

The SNES has an 8-channel Sony SPC700 PCM sound sampler. The SNES CPU, the 65C816 which is a 16-bit version

of the 8-bit MOS 6502 CPU found in the NES (and Atari 2600, I might add), is contained in a chip called the Ricoh 5A22. The NES 6502 is contained in a chip called the Ricoh 2A03 (the 2600 did not use the 2A03). The 2A03 also contains the NES' PSG, which is comprised of two pulse wave channels: 12.5% 25%, 50%, or 75% duty cycle. Duty cycle is the percentage of time the wave form is "on" (or up on the oscilloscope). 50% means it's on and off an equal amount. 25% means it's on 25% of the time, and off 75% of the time, etc. A 50% pulse wave is the same thing as a square wave, and 75% is a redundancy of 25% since they sound the same. In addition to the pulse wave channels, the 2A03 had a triangle wave, a fairly advanced white noise channel, and a rudimentary sampler. The SNES designers were originally working with backwards compatibility in mind, so supposedly, the 5A22 essentially contains the 2A03 within it. It does stand to reason that the PSG components in the 2A03 are still present, and for a while, I wondered if those features might still be in use for SNES games, since the rarely heard PSG voices sound so much clearer and crisper than the other samples, which tend to be muffly (I'll explain the muffle in a second). However, my research has confirmed that the 2A03 PSG is in fact NOT used on the SNES, and the reason the PSG samples sound cleaner is simply because they're smaller, more basic, and thus, easier to reproduce with the very limited sample sizes the SNES worked with (and when you compare the sampled, SNES PSG back to back with Genesis PSG being actually generated, you can still tell a difference - the sampled version doesn't sound quite as good.) Whether the 2A03 PSG is actually not there, or whether it was just disabled for 16-bit applications is irrelevant, except for academia. What's important is that only the 8 channel Sony PCM sampler is ever used.

So, with SNES, and its virtually total limitation to working with single note samples, the way you get melodies is like this: imagine a musical keyboard. Imagine a sample put in on middle C of a trumpet playing a middle C. Now, press middle D, and the sample is pitch shifted up to produce a middle D, even though the actual sample is of a middle C. Now, of course, the further a sample deviates from its original note, the worse it's going to sound, so over the course of our imaginary keyboard, there's going to have to be multiple host samples at different points so that you don't have to pitch shift any one sample too far. My point is, with sample sizes being so restricted, you're not going to have a sample of a guy playing a 30 second trumpet solo. Instead, you're going to have, let's say 5 samples across the span of the imaginary keyboard of a guy playing one trumpet note each, then you're going to metaphorically bang out that trumpet "solo" on the keyboard. Make sense? Now, I don't know how often they actually used real keyboards to program SNES music. Jeff Van Dyck did, but I'm guessing very few others did. Tim and Geoff Follin allegedly did their compositions in .txt files of all things! But you get the idea. Though it might be simplifying things a bit, imagining this keyboard makes sense out of how samples work in SNES music creation.

To add to this, the SNES has a 32k frequency cutoff, and a feature called "Gaussian interpolation". The easiest way to explain Gaussian interpolation is to use the example of a picture, rather than a sound. Gaussian interpolation is an anti-aliasing device. Aliasing is tearing. In the case of pictures, aliasing would manifest itself as "jaggies". G.I. would smooth out a picture to get rid of the jaggies. But the result would be the picture wasn't as crisp, or even a little blurry. It basically blurs the picture to get rid of the jaggies. The worse the aliasing, the more heavily the G.I. is going to have to be applied, and the more blur is added. Well, it works pretty much the same way with sound, only in sound the "jaggies" become "scratchies". G.I. gets rid of the scratchies, but the trade off is the sound is made muffly. Most people would agree that G.I. does more good than harm, as otherwise, the sound on SNES games would be scratchy and harsh (look at Amiga and Gameboy Advance games, which I do not believe have G.I., or anything that does what it does) but since the samples are so small (much smaller than those two systems, I believe), the trade-off of having that size of sample without the scratchiness is to have the muffle. SNES games do vary in sample quality, and the games that used the best samples don't sound nearly as muffly as the ones that used more nominal level samples, but even the best ones have some muffle, and the average game has quite a bit more. For your reference, an example of below average samples would be the title screen to the Chessmaster. An example of above average samples would be the map screen in Waterworld, and games which we could say make up the "average" would be, oh let's say, games in the F-Zero to Super Castlevania IV territory.

Now the Genesis sound centers around the 6 channel Yamaha YM2612 FM synthesizer. Channel 6 can be sacrificed for a fairly basic sampler channel, which is better than the NES sampler, but not as good as the SNES sampler (or even TG16 sampler, for that matter.) The Genesis also supplements the 2612 with the same 4 channel Texas Instruments SN76489 PSG synthesizer that came in the 8-bit Mastersystem (this same chip is also found in the Colecovision, the Texas Instruments TI99/4a home computer, and in a modified-for-stereo form in the Game Gear). The Mastersystem's PSG is pretty rudimentary, significantly more basic than the PSG in the NES' 2A03. On the SN76489, you can only do three square waves and very basic white noise. Though I'm not aware of it ever having been used in Genesis music, there is a special mode on the SN76489 where you can sack both the white noise channel and one of the square wave channels to create a "highly controlled noise" channel, which was typically used to produce beefier percussion (I know of at least one Game Gear game where this was used, and it was probably a lot more prolific than I think). But it can also be used in more high profile ways to generate TG16-like waveforms that are more advanced than a simple square. I'm not aware of this higher-profile use being employed in any official release on any system that uses the SN76489, though I have heard it used in a home-brew / chiptune context (this "highly controlled noise channel" is a feature that the 2A03 did not have, and while I still think the 2A03 is appreciably more advanced, this feature does give the SN76489 a much needed niche, and a richer sound, when used right). In any case, the otherwise basic PSG has a nice sing-song quality, which makes it a terrific compliment to the dazzling, and expressive, but typically not sing-songy FM, and thus, makes it a strong boon to the Genesis sound hardware as a whole. In fact, a lot of my favorite Genesis tracks are ones that make strong use of the PSG.

Now, the PSG was put in the Genesis for backwards compatibility with the Mastersystem, but I had long operated under the misconception that the reason it was also used extensively in Genesis music was because the 2612 chip could not also produce square wave tones, and had to rely on the PSG if it wanted that sound. While it is true that the 2612 cannot produce an actual square wave (which we'll get to in a minute), it turns out that, in fact, it can approximate a square wave's sound pretty convincingly by opting for a sine-sine two-operator voice with a 2:1 algorithm. Times where you'd want to opt for the "FM-approximated-square waves" over actual PSG square waves is when you want the option to have stereo panning for square tones. Also, there is a limit to how low you can pitch the PSG, so if you want to go lower than that, you've got to use FM. Also, while the FM version isn't as clean, and has some FM artifacting, all else being equal, it is even more expressive than the real thing, and can be better controlled for bends, and oscillations, and the like. Lastly, real PSG isn't usually as strong in the mix, so if you really want square to slice to the front and center of the mix, FM is a good way to go. Other than those instances, a programmer was much better off just to kick the square tones down the hall to the PSG, using real square waves, and leave the FM channels freed up to do more expressive, more "FMy" stuff. For your reference, tracks that use the "FM Approximated square waves" exclusively for square tones are Raphael's Theme, Sisyphus's Theme, and especially, the Continue Theme from TMNT: Tournament Fighters, as well as the entirety of the Mortal Kombat 1 soundtrack. Streets of Rage 1 and 2, as well as Revenge of Shinobi and Shinobi III are soundtracks that exclusively use actual PSG for the square tones. And I found a couple tracks in Sonic 2 which are actually using the "FM Approximated square" AND the actual PSG in tandem (even doing the same things at the same time). They are Oil Ocean Zone, as well as both the one and two player versions of Mystic Cave Zone. The square tones you hear in those tracks are actually both FM and PSG doubling each other (and predictably, the FM voice in those instances is the dominant one).

Between the PSG and the FM, the Genesis has a total of 10 sound channels. The only limitations I'm aware of with the YM2612 is that it can only work with sine waves (hence the need to approximate square waves with the 2-op, 2:1

algorithm), and only on channels 3 and 6 is there total freedom to set to the modulator oscillators however you want. Modulator oscillators? Say whaaa? Alright, crash primer on FM: FM works by taking a root wave form (carrier oscillator), and modifying how it sounds with other waveforms (modulator oscillators - sometimes carrier and modulator are both just called “operators”). Root waveforms are sine, square, triangle, and sawtooth. High end FM synths can use any of these four as the carrier, and any combination of these four as modulators. I suspect there are even some out there that could use custom waveforms (though that’s just conjecture.) Well, presumably to keep the Genesis from getting out of hand expensive, they used the 2612, which limits all its operators to just sine waves. This is clearly a limitation, but not one that really hurts it too much, as the number of possible FM sounds using just sine waves is still very, very broad, especially considering each channel can still have up to four modulators. Or for more flexibility, each channel can produce two – two operator tones, instead of one – four operator tone….Or it can do four plain sine waves per channel, though this option is not as useful – and I’m not aware of a game where this mode was used.

Okay, so now that we have the basics on synths, and samplers, and how they’re different, and now that we have the basics on the SNES and Genesis in particular, let’s start comparing them: The SNES does have double the audio memory of the Genesis, but a sampler requires so much more memory than a synthesizer, that despite the Genesis having only half as much memory, it has plenty, while the SNES doesn’t have enough. As a result of this, the SNES has to resort to those very small samples we talked about, which, thanks to Gaussian Interpolation, and a 32k cutoff sound muffly. The Genesis, although limited only to what could be done to a root sine wave (per channel) by one or a few other modifying sine waves (per the same channel), a few square waves, white noise, and a pretty rudimentary sampler, nevertheless had the funding from the bank (RAM) to do pretty much anything sine-based FM and square-based PSG could do, and since it did not rely primarily on small samples, but real-time generated synthesis on-chip, with memory sufficient to the task, and no funky stuff like Gaussian interpolation and 32k cutoff, the Genesis was crisp, clear, punchy, and dazzling…assuming you had one without the cheapened circuit revision…the last revision of the model 1 Genesis, as well as the first several revisions of the model 2 Genesis featured a cheapened audio output circuitry which resulted in hissy, distorted sound. It was still punchy, and crisp in its own way, but it was no longer clear or dazzling. On the other hand, ALL models of the SNES had the muffle, whereas only certain models of Genesis had the distortion….**Advantage: Genesis**.

Granted, the SNES could, and usually did sample real instruments, but it was almost always single note, short note samples that it had to loop for sustained notes, and had to pitch shift for other “keys on the keyboard”. The further away from the host sample the note, the worse it sounded. And while these were at root, real instruments, and were thus, easily discernible as what they were intended to be, it was also equally easy to discern the difference between someone playing, say, a flute solo in real time, and someone [figuratively or literally] banging out a “flute solo” on a keyboard with flute samples on it, meaning that a lot of the time, to a lot people’s ears (my own included), the samples sounded “cheesy”. Nevertheless, the SNES was a) much more diverse, and b) much more “life-like”, especially when used properly. When treated with extreme care, it could almost even approach CD-ROM-level realism and depth, which IS truly an impressive feat considering the memory limitations and everything else. **Advantage: SNES**.

On the true multiplatform games, once again, neither system is really utilized very well. But once again, the Genesis tends to suffer more than the SNES. It seems to be a sound rule that whichever platform the music is designed around originally, that is the version that sounds the best. When you port from synth to sampler, you lose something (even when they “remix” it, which is what they always, or almost always did), and when you port from sampler to synth, you lose even more. It seems that the heavy majority of these multiplats were audio designed around the SNS and then hack ported to the Genesis. Since neither system is truly being pushed very hard in these games, this is a small advantage to be sure…but an advantage nevertheless: **Advantage: SNES**.

However, once again, there is an exception to the “SNES multiplats are better” rule, and that’s where the multiplats are arcade ports, prior to say, about 1994. Since most arcade games from the early-mid 80’s through the middle 90’s used some form of FM for its sound, Genesis ports tended to sound much more authentic: Advantage: Genesis. Moreover, even games that were not arcade ports had that nice, raw arcade-like sound to them, or, if used rightly, the Genesis could even nail that great old early avant garde electronics music sound from the 70’s and 80’s …**Advantage: Genesis**.

So, with all this in mind: once again, I think when making objective comparisons, “better or worse” is not a very helpful way of distinguishing. Though you may want to tweak the exact language of the following, I think a better way of framing it would be: “SNES: ‘The Jack of all trades’ - more diverse, more lifelike, and often richer (more CD-Rom-like)” vs. “Genesis: ‘The Kraftwerk Concert at the Arcade’ - crisper, clearer, punchier, more dazzling (more Arcade-like, more ‘video gamey’, more ‘70’s avant garde electronica’).” Objectively, neither category is inherently superior (and once again, I’m going to unabashedly call them a tie objectively), but yet again, this lends itself very well to subjective preference differences, and speaking on a strictly subjective front, I definitely favor the Genesis. I deeply appreciate the awesome things that can and have been done with the SNES sound system, and have been enriched by it. Moreover, on one axis, it absolutely trounces the Genesis. The problem is, on the other axis, it’s completely trounced by the Genesis, and it ultimately comes down to personally finding the Sega’s strengths simply more appealing, and it’s weaknesses simply less bothersome. However, while I’m always “Genesis of center”, if you will, I do fluctuate on how far from center I am. As of this writing (which is about three months before it shows up in RTM), I’m a little closer to center than usual.

Alright! So that’s SNES vs Genesis: Sound! Next month, we’ll look at overall hardware design, and performance. After that, we’ll take a quick peek at software, and then finally, we’ll bring the Turbografx16 into the fray! See you then!

Mobile Gaming

by Donald Lee

Karateka Classic

Welcome to the June issue of Retrogaming Times Monthly. The month of May has been both good and bad. Let me expand on things a little bit. On the good side was my participation in two spring basketball leagues. Both of the teams I was playing with won their respective league championships. The teams were playing in the same league just different levels of competition. Regardless, winning both championships was a good experience and I enjoyed it every much. With the two championships, I have now played on eight teams that have won recreational basketball championships.

On the other hand, there are some family things that I am still working through. Not really interested in expanding too much, but it is a stressful time. Additionally, this week has been a bit of annoyance at work. I had early meetings just about every day this week. I tend to sleep late and had to get up early quite a few times.

It is because of work that I have been tired and motivating myself to write up an article was tough. However, things were made easier when I remembered that the classic Karateka was remade and released for the iPhone and iPad. Alas, the REMAKE couldn't be played on my iPhone 4. I chose not to download it to my iPad 2 for now.

Instead, I saw that Karateka Classic was ALSO RELEASED to the iPhone / iPad. As I had some gift card credit, I spent the 99 cents to download Karateka Classic to my iPhone 4.

What I can say about the game? The starting screens, graphics and sounds are pure classic Apple II. If you played the original Karateka on your Apple II, then you will be right at home playing on your iPhone. I used to play Karateka with my keyboard on my Apple IIe so adapting to the touch screen of the iPhone was easy.

"Additionally, the game has some interesting touches. When the game accesses the "disk drive", the sound of the drive is simulated on the iPhone. You could play the game in color, green or amber colors like some of us had back in the old days. You could also choose to have the iPhone emulate a LCD or CRT monitor. Lastly, you could have the control icons displayed on screen or removed. I found it better to have the controls displayed.

Due to the advanced nature of the iPhone, I think the game plays a lot faster than the original version. I made it about halfway through the game before I started writing this review. If you're a sucker for old games, then getting this for the iPhone is a no-brainer. 99 cents to bring back some old memories is well worth it. Plus, you can show your kids or younger friends how games were back in the "old days".

I highly recommend checking this out. I also hope this encourages developers to port over some of these classic games "as is" to the iPhone (and other smartphones). I found the older games have more replay value than some of the newer more "advanced games".

If time and interest permits, I will aim for reviewing the Karateka Remake. Have a great start to your summer!

Image Credits:
Karateka being played on an iPhone: http://portablegamingregion.com/news/original-karateka-classic-launching-today/
Karateka 2012 Trailer: http://blog.gsmarena.com/karateka-resurrects-now-available-for-the-xbox-360-soon-for-ios-pc-and-playstation-3/

Turn To Channel 3

by Nick DeMarco

Skate Or Die

It's the summer of 1988, and like any child of that era, when it was raining outside, unless there was a game of football to be played, I was inside, glued to my television and my beloved NES console. Earlier in the day, my mother had taken me to the now long defunct Montage Video in Scranton, PA. I remember distinctly looking over the games and my eyes instantly becoming moved towards Skate Or Die. In one of those rare moments when a new NES title wasn't instantly snatched off the shelf, I was one of the first people in my area to play it. It would go on to be one of my favorite childhood memories, even though it never quite ranked up there with other titles I would toil away endlessly with during the summer months. Years later, with a gaming collection bursting at the seams, Skate Or Die proudly sits on a shelf with the rest of my NES games. I decided, for the sake of memories, and the fine folks at retrojunkies.com, to sit down once again and play Skate Or Die, in hopes of stirring up old memories.

One of the first things I feel Skate Or Die doesn't get enough credit for is the soundtrack. It's easy to see why this happened, considering the era in which this game came out. There were definitely a lot of games with some terrific soundtracks, but I feel Skate Or Die deserves to be among those greats in this aspect, if nothing else. For me, as someone who plays and loves classic games, and as someone who loves music, I am instantly grabbed and drawn into a game by the tunes. Skate Or Die not only has a great title screen tune, but there's also the Rodney music, as I call it, as you select where you want to go, what you want to do, as well as individual tunes for each event, all of them special in their own way. We take for granted in gaming now the music, we expect great things, but a composer of any kind doing music for each individual event, that was probably a hell of a lot harder in 1988 than it is now. Skate Or Die had sound effects that really showcased this niche in society at the time. Sure, some of it was goofy, but you still cringed whenever your skater fell or crashed into something.

Sound

8

When you're younger, you don't really notice flaws in games, those things that are less than perfect. You merely accepted what was, drank your Ecto-Cooler, and had a blast. This is not to say the graphics in Skate Or Die are terrible, I mean, the Rodney screen itself is still just as awesome and iconic as it was all those years ago. But for me, the graphics in the actual events don't seem to have aged well. Things just don't seem that impressive anymore, and while that's pretty much a given in comparison to today's games, I had always hoped Skate Or Die would age well, and it just doesn't seem the case. Graphically, I feel like I'm looking at a poor man's California Games, which I think is what most critics of this game thought at the time. The Jam event still seems like the strongest one graphically.

Graphics

7

No one can deny that Skate Or Die is still a blast to play. Sure, the controls are still a bit tricky, and when you haven't played the game in a long time, it certainly takes time to get your feet wet once more, but once you do, it's kind of like riding a bike. Some events are better than others, but I feel every gamer has their own distinct feelings as to which one is the best. For me, I still enjoy the Jam event and the Joust as my personal favorites. I don't like how the Freestyle and Jump Events are the same layout. I didn't in 1988 either. I find it lazy on the part of the programmers. Skate Or Die is a lot of fun, especially to play among friends, which was very important in 1988, and in some ways Skate Or Die was one of the first great examples of that on the NES. We take co-op play for granted now, but back then, this was innovative, this was a game that in some ways was ahead of its time.

Gameplay

8

While it is all but a certainty, Skate Or Die will never be ranked among the NES elites, your Super Mario Bros, your Zelda, your Mega Man. But I still feel it is a hidden gem that a lot of gamers are foolish to overlook. Keep this in mind, I purchased my copy of Skate Or Die, for the incredibly low, low price of only 3 dollars at a local video game store. Games with that kind of price tag usually aren't very good. As the saying goes, you get what you pay for. Still, Skate Or Die, once you get past the controls and the graphics that might not be up to your standards, is a terrific game with enough replay value to keep you and a friend busy for a couple of hours. Highly underrated, Skate Or Die is a hidden gem in the vast Nintendo library, and is certainly worth tracking down.

Tune in next time, as we journey into the likes of Food Fight for the Atari 7800, Super Smash Bros for the N64, and Streets Of Rage for the Sega Genesis!

Until next time, GAME ON!

Overall

7

The Retro Junkies

by Rob Luther & Landon Long

Zombies Ate My Neighbors

What would happen if Dracula bit The 50 Foot Woman? What if The Creature from the Black Lagoon fought The Man with the X-Ray Eyes? What if Frankenstein's Monster had The Brain That Wouldn't Die? Imagine a world that blended classic monster movie elements from the 1930s and 40s with some of the notoriously cheesy, albeit, charming elements from the monster movies of the 1950s and 60s. Now imagine that same world with 16-bit graphics—a world where a boy with spikey, blonde hair wearing 3D shades, and a girl wearing a red baseball cap and purple cardigan are humanity's last hope as they rescue neighbors who seem completely oblivious to the classic monster apocalypse! Get your Uzi squirt guns and exploding sodas ready, because it's time to review Zombies Ate My Neighbors!

It Came From LucasArts

Zombies Ate My Neighbors was a game developed by LucasArts (RIP) in 1993 for the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo. Interestingly, ZAMN owes its unique art style and gameplay to LucasArts' lead designer Mike Ebert. Growing up, Ebert strived to be a comic book artist. Ebert studied Computer Science at Berkely from 1982 to 1984, and then attended the Academy of Art College in San Francisco with a major in Illustration from 1985 to 1988. Ebert was also a production manager and art director of a Japanese magazine called Animag and freelance artist during the last 80s. By his own admission, however, he never felt that his art skills were up to par for the comic book industry. In 1989, he earned a position at Lucasfilm Games (which was renamed LucasArts in 1990) as an artist, and quickly earned a solid reputation after co-designing the NES port of Maniac Mansion in 1990. Ebert then helped design Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis for the PC in 1992 before becoming a lead designer for LucasArts in 1993. Then, like an artist who's about to create his finest work, Ebert designed Zombies Ate My Neighbors!

…And we've never been the same since!

Return of the Living Run-Down

Publisher: Konami, Inc.
Developer: LucasArts
Released: 1993
Platform: Sega Genesis, Super Nintendo
Genre: Action

The Screaming Storyline

While we'd love to provide the story of Zombies Ate My Neighbors ourselves, we feel that LucasArts puts it best: "Zombies have invaded your neighborhood and are trying to eat your neighbors! Try to save the neighbors, cheerleaders, and babies in 55 levels of action and adventure. Battle zombies,

mummies, evil dolls, lizard men, vampires, and giant ants with a wide range of weapons including Uzi squirt guns, exploding sodas, bazookas, weed whackers, and ancient artifacts. If you have a hard time getting through one of the levels, have a friend come over and help you out in Two-Player mode. Save your neighbors from a terrible fate in Zombies Ate My Neighbors!" …What more could we possibly say?

The Ghostly Gameplay

Zombies Ate My Neighbors takes place from an isometric, overhead camera angle. The players are looking down on their characters as they squirt gun blast their way through 48 of the toughest levels on the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo (plus seven bonus levels if you so choose!). The camera angle fits this game perfectly as side scrolling action type of game would take away from some of the more humorous enemies and situations in the game. Plus, players are essentially running in a maze trying to collect neighbors before the ghouls get them first!

ZAMN starts out with the player (or two players) picking which character the player will guide through the game. This is purely for aesthetic reasons as both Zeke and Julie have the same play mechanics and abilities. The character portraits are very well done and very detailed on the select screen for a game from the 16-bit era. After characters are chosen, the players are thrown right in the middle of a zombie outbreak at a neighborhood BBQ. The goal of this level (and the remaining levels) is to rescue the neighbors before the monsters get them. Once this is accomplished, the player may advance to the next level. If the player fails in rescuing the neighbors or loses his health, a life is taken. Once the player's lives reach zero, it's game over. With forty-eight levels, this is certainly challenging—especially with no continues—but, every five levels, players are given a password that allows them to start back at that level should they get a game over.

The controls are some of the best compared to most of the games from that time period. They respond almost instantaneously. In a maze/collect type game like ZAMN, this is a must. This responsiveness shines through in levels like "The Hedge Maze of Doom" where hockey masked psychos are chasing the player with a chainsaw and looking to do some major damage! The ability of the controls to respond immediately is the difference between life and death in this game.

The player will have a main weapon and an item to help fend off the hordes of undead and ghouls. Everything from squirt guns, soda cans, and even a bazooka can be used as a main weapon. Certain weapons are effective on certain monsters (i.e. zombies and the squirt gun or werewolves and silverware). Players don't have to know which weapon a monster is vulnerable to, but it's imperative to know which weapons are effective for the intense boss battles. The items include sneakers for a speed boost, health packs, and a potion that turns your character into a purple beast that takes zero damage and can punch almost any enemy into submission! We know from experience that the beast potion is great in levels like "The Hedge Maze of Doom" because players can literally punch a path through the hedge maze to rescue neighbors. The items add a little bit of a strategic element to the game as using an item too soon or in the wrong situation can put players in harder situations than they were in before.

Zombies Ate My Neighbors is a who's who for B-movie monsters. Zombies, as mentioned above, are rampant and occupy most levels in the game. There are also killer dolls, ala the Childs Play series, werewolves, mummies, vampires, Martians, pod people who assume your identity, giant ants, and even a giant baby (Yes, we hate that giant baby too!). Since this is a LucasArts game, there is also an enemy that makes reference to the tentacle from the classic hit Day of the Tentacle that is simply a purple tentacle. Some of the enemies that are considered bosses are giant spiders, the chainsaw psychos in the hedge maze, and the final boss—the sinister Dr. Tongue!

The levels aren't stale or bland (as this game is nowhere close to bland!). ZAMN includes a neighborhood with pools and BBQs, shopping malls, hedge mazes, high schools, football

fields, pyramids, and castles. The levels use a lot of the same set pieces (i.e. backgrounds and floor tiles) but, are so different, players should barely notice.

Rob and Landon's Famous Last Words

It's certainly hard to believe that Zombies Ate My Neighbors garnered very little attention in 1993. It's also hard to believe that we've been playing this game for twenty years now! Zombies Ate My Neighbors is a gem that has everything: fun, challenging and timeless gameplay, beautiful graphics, quirky music, and a huge library of classic monsters to obliterate! If LucasArts or the Zombies Ate My Neighbors franchise ever rises from the dead, we'll be here waiting with our Uzi Super Soakers in hand!

We give Zombies Ate My Neighbors
9 Soda Can Bombs out of 10!

Rob Luther and Landon Long

www.facebook.com/retrogamingjunkies

The Thrill Of Defeat

by Mark Sabbatini

A Quest For The Dragon 32/64's Best Exclusive Title

Every failed computer I've ridiculed during many years of writing for RTM has at least a few unique quality games that are almost certainly a new experience for retrogamers. There's never been a machine where I doubted I'd find such titles, until now.

Not a huge doubt, mind you, just a nagging twinge.

But the dominant phrase in my mind during an initial encounter with the Dragon 32/64 series, which I wrote about in the December issue, was "second-hand." Every game I came across was seemingly an inferior port of something from another machine, as the Dragon seemingly never breathed enough fire to ignite interest among fans who happened to be first-rate programmers.

"Nobody would buy a Dragon simply in order to play a particular game, as some people might be tempted to purchase a Spectrum or Commodore 64," an editorial in the Oct. 1984 issue of Dragon User magazine stated. Then there's the derision from the geek community, such as a modern-day retrogamer who in a U.K. chat forum who recalled "the poor kid at school with the Dragon 32 was only one off the bottom of the bullying pecking order from the guy with the Jupiter Ace (who was pitied rather than assaulted)."

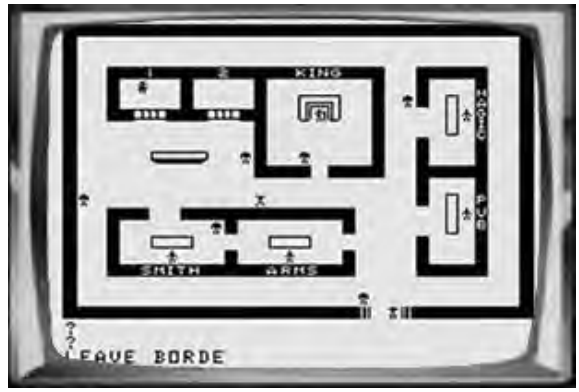
The Dragon is essentially a somewhat crippled twin of Tandy's Color Computer due to changes necessary so it could function in the United Kingdom where it was made. The primary limitation is it can't properly display the hi-resolution graphics mode used for virtually every noteworthy game on the CoCo, so adapted versions either settle for black-and-white or a lower-res mode with garish colors horribly suited for most games.

Not surprisingly, only a small fraction of CoCo software titles found their way across the seas to the Dragon market, although it's reasonable to argue a majority of the CoCo's top 20 games were among them. The Dragon also got some landmark U.K. titles such as Gridrunner and Jet Set Willy that didn't get the necessary tweaks to run on the CoCo. But in all those cases the games were afterthoughts and often second-rate in quality, making the Dragon sort of like a quarterback suitable as a backup on multiple teams but a starter on none.

So this month's challenge was simple: There's obviously unique titles for any machine, even if one has to resort to type-ins from magazines and bottom-dollar efforts sold in classified ads by bedroom programs. So my mission was to find and scrutinize what was/is there, and figure out what deserves at least consideration for the best unique Dragon game.

I'm happy to say the quest has paid off, even if the game of choice suffers from impediments that are rather comical and put to rest the argument emulators are always inferior to playing on a real machine. Or, in this instance, a competitor's machine, as versions ported to a couple of other British machines are vastly superior in at least some of the problematic areas. So if the description of the game has any appeal make sure to check out the final paragraphs of this verbiage, where I'll also mention a sequel for the Dragon that most people consider a vast improvement (I'm on the fence since it's unquestionably far better in a technical sense, but I'm not sure it's as fun).

I won't pretend the game of choice – Ring of Darkness, to finally reveal the title – has much originality. Consider these opening lines from the instructions:



"Four rings the ancient wizards forged and cast upon the Earth.
One ring the Evil Sage called forth from the void...."

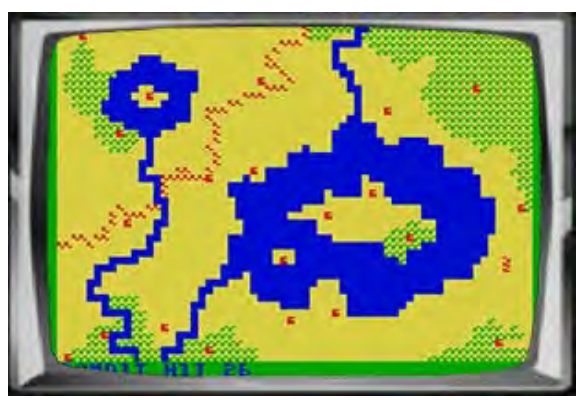
Thus begins your adventure into The Ring of Darkness, an obvious Tolkien ripoff that "borrows" from various early hack-and-slash RPGs, mostly notably Akalabeth. Not that there's anything wrong with that but, like Peter Jackson's neither-there-nor-back-again marathon mangling of The Hobbit, it falls notably short of the source material it's "flattering."

A one-paragraph summary of the gameplay before delving into some things you'll probably need to know to actually run the program and keep it from crashing: It has a simplistic single-character setup, but at least you get to choose your character (thief, warrior, wizard) and how to distribute your ability points (intelligence, strength, agility). Moving around land is like playing a version of Ultima written by cavemen due to the crude graphics and interface, but towns and dungeons are rendered in high-res and vastly more playable. Sound is abysmal and will send you lunging for the mute switch. The overall quest itself has a decent amount of depth and longevity, especially for something that runs in 32K of RAM.

The Ring of Darkness does manage to be shrouded in mystery in spite of its plagiarized plot, mostly because the too-brief instructions say little about what you're supposed to do or how. The programmers make a not-unreasonable assumption (for the era) that players are self-sufficient and resourceful in real life as well as pixel land. Remember, back then we were all expected to be proficient programming in BASIC, cassette tapes were the default storage medium, and going online was an immensely complex and slow task. The mentality was even more prevalent among the Brits, who tolerated (and even embraced) eccentricities in hardware and software that would never gain wide acceptance in the U.S. market, and had a higher ratio of DIY tinkerers.

So fair warning for anyone playing this RPG: there is a near absence of idiot-proofing. One of the main reasons is the crude and laborious way it tries to replicate the in-depth experience of disk-based adventures such as Ultima, only using cassette tapes.

If you don't recognize the problem that presents, imagine using the shuffle feature to play a bunch of songs randomly on your MP3 or CD player. Now image doing the same thing with a list of random numbers and the rewind/fast-forward buttons on a cassette player.



ROD isn't quite that bad, since you "merely" need to frequently rewind the game cassette and endure a lengthy loading process every time you switch between sections such as landscapes and dungeons. This is because they're completely separate programs. Furthermore, in order to switch programs you're by necessity dumped into the BASIC operating system, with a few departing on-screen instructions that must be followed exactly with no typos to load the next necessary program.

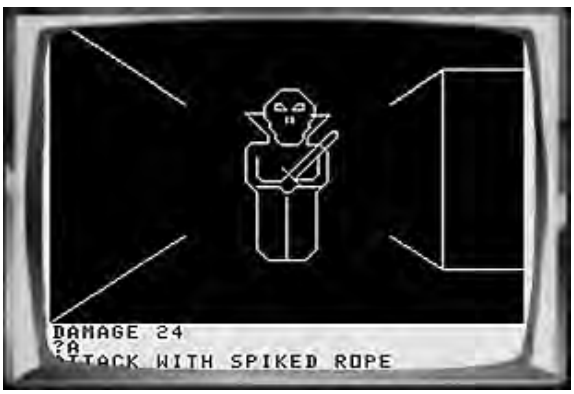
This kind of setup has a number of potential misfires, even for experienced users, most notably input/output errors on the tape due to all that rewinding and loading. A load command followed by a typo in the filename sends the computer into an endless search that requires pressing the RESET button to escape from. The program also crashes occasionally and there's a BASIC command you're supposed to enter to recover, but that's hardly foolproof since whatever triggered the error is still floating around. By the way, you'll need a second cassette to save your character's progress.

Along those lines, there's not much error trapping. Pressing the BREAK key will stop the program, pressing the CLEAR key will wipe out text-only screens in a few situations and there's also a few instances where typing an improper response to something will crash the program.

None of this was seen as a burden by most reviewers back then (indeed, one write that to transition between areas you "simply re-load the original program"). Then again even lazy Americans were rolling down their own car windows and getting up to change the channels on their TVs (many still black and white, no less), so it was indeed the Dark Ages of technology.

I've now written roughly 1,200 words about what's supposed to be the most positive gaming experience I've had on a Dragon computer, maybe maybe ten aren't in some way insulting the computer and/or game. So what the hell is there to like enough to be recommending you get your faux Tolkien on?

In short, two-thirds of the experience is of legit Akalabeth/Ultima quality, cassette issues aside. Wandering around the landscape is amateurish, but the towns and dungeons look nearly identical with what I remember back in my early days on the Apple II computers at school (lunch, study hall and as much time as I could spend in the lab after school).

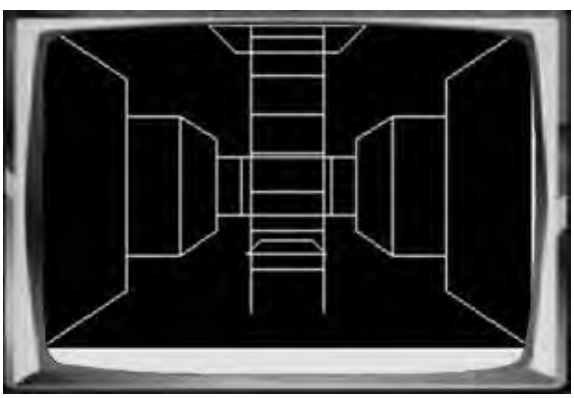


Retreating to what doesn't work for a moment, ROD makes a terrible first impression that may put some gamers off before they get to the good stuff. The title screen is just that – the game's title on the Dragon's 32X16 uppercase-only text screen. Setting up your character is similarly drab.

You'll need to do the first of many "load a new program" and RUN it to actually start playing, at which point you'll see the horribly pixelated and colored landscape map. Your character is an undistinguished tiny blob among many (it took me a minute to figure out he's the one resembling a "Z" in the lower right corner). The towns and dungeons are identical tiny blobs that look like E.T. from the Atari 2600 if he were a two-by-four pixel rectangle. The sounds are just as bad, especially the high-pitched beep every time you move. In short, it resembles the large collection of dreadful RPG adventures amateur programmers in BASIC submitted for publication as type-in listings in magazines.

You'll also need to have the instructions open since there's no clue about available commands or your general situation, save for a single line of hard-to-read text that mostly lets you know if you're being attacked. You almost certainly will be before reaching a town (the nearest being about 15 moves away) so you'll need to know how to do things like ready the leather armor and dagger you start with if you have time. The enemies look even worse than you, resembling an inverse "c." Unlike a few Ultima imitators, at least there seems to be better than 50-50 odds of surviving an encounter or two before reaching a town where you can get properly outfitted.

On the flip side of even-money bets, it's worth noting the two closest landmarks are a town and a creature-infested site that will turn out to be the first quest you're assigned to complete. Since they look identical, that means beginners are essentially flipping a coin between starting off right and starting off into mortal peril. In one of the game's more bizarre twists, if you are killed you're resurrected with a higher amount of experience.



For the first five minutes I was in dismayed belief that even the British were pitiful enough to find this a pinnacle of adventure gaming and I certainly didn't think it deserved any kudos as a "unique" Dragon title. One big reason it seemed to be nothing more than a BASIC bedroom bust is because a large percentage of ROD is indeed coded in that painfully slow language, including what appears to be nearly the entire landscape map portion. The only good thing about this is it makes some portions of the program, such as those awful sounds, possible to modify – except it will take a lot of patience because the Dragon's ability to list and edit BASIC is among the worst on early microcomputers.

OK, time to return – for the most part – to what makes this game a winner.

Enter a town and the display switches to a hi-res black-on-white map with a nicely legible three-line scrolling text display at the bottom. It escapes me why the programmers didn't use this graphics mode for the landscape map (preferably in the inverted white-on-black display used in the dungeons) unless it was some misguided logic they needed some portion of the game in color for whatever reason.

Shops and such are labeled, and things like conversations and transactions work smoothly. The king plays a dual purpose, assigning you quests and giving you extra hit points in exchange for gold. An example of the minor annoyances you'll run into at times is offerings are limited to 50 gold pieces, so you're forced to go through this step many, many times when cashing in hauls from even the earliest quests. The initial choice of weapons, armor and magic is limited, but expands as your gold and experience grows. One drag is it will take a while before you can afford a raft to transport you beyond a small section of the map. Keep at it long enough, however, and you'll apparently create some kind of hole in the space/time continuum as purchasing a hovercraft becomes possible. I actually was a bit put off by that, since a humble eagle was always sufficient for my flying needs in the Middle Ages (and don't suggest the programmers were worried about copyright stuff, having cloned everything else).

Dungeons look exactly like towns on the surface, but entering one (after the inevitable "load new program" ordeal) is far more enjoyable as the display switches to the 3D wire-frame mazes so familiar to Akalabeth its successors. The creatures that attack frequently also bear more than a vague resemblance of their Apple II brethren, and the usual ladders, traps, hidden doors and such are present. The dungeon is 10 levels deep and the variety and toughness of creatures increases as you descend, but one bummer is the levels themselves are somewhat small and each level has the same layout. Ladders, however, have different locations which helps keeps exploring from getting stale.

Dying is never good at any point, but it's particularly worth making sure you have enough hit points and food to exit dungeons since you're awarded a bunch of experience points based on whatever you've killed. Obviously that needs to be balanced with completing whatever task the king has assigned, such as killing a specific creature.

So after all these words, the short of it is Ring if Darkness is a hack-and-slash fest where lots of grinding matters far more than cunning. That might not pass muster with today's less-patient gamers, but back then the main question was if it was well done. Clearly it trails early Ultima titles and clones, but since the entire Color Computer (and thus Dragon) gaming collection exists in a second-rate universe it needs to be judged by that standard.

It's nearly universally agreed the best RPG in that universe is Dungeons of Daggorath, the real-time and real-heartbeat dungeon crawler involving the not-as-simple-as-it-seems task of killing a wizard at the bottom of a five-level dungeon (Google it if you need details, since this diatribe is far too long already). If DOD gets an "A" grade, then ROD is a "B" on the strength of its longevity and greater variety of gameplay, with the penalties of not being nearly as fun or intense. That means it also would be above average in the CoCo market since I don't believe in the grade inflation that's resulted in proposals by educators to formally propose eliminating "C" grades except for "unsatisfactory performance." In the Apple/Atari/Commodore mainstream market, which had an abundance of crap along with the legendary stuff, it'd probably be right at that "C" level, especially if there was a disk version that did away with the maddening cassette loads.

Of course, it is possible to play ROD on other machines, as I mentioned near the beginning of the article, just not anything that became a bit seller in the U.S. After it was clear the game was a hit on the Dragon, versions were released for the Sinclair Spectrum, Oric and Amstrad CPC. Collectively they have pluses and minuses compared to the Dragon version, but overall the latecomers come out ahead for two reasons: speed and an Ultima-like scrolling landscape mode with distinct graphics for objects.

The Dragon version tends to feel pokey (and downright aggravating at times, such as exchanging gold for hit points), but that's something CoCo/Dragon owners are used to with a large percentage of games. Nobody will mistake the other versions for Ultima and Co. since they're still written with a large amount of BASIC, but they do take the ill-will down a notch (they still have to deal with the multi-load nonsense from cassettes).

The biggest improvement, obviously, is a landscape mode that doesn't feel like something a 10-year-old created as his first programming project. It makes the entire game experience feel professional, and makes it far easier to figure out where you're going and what you're dealing with.

But in a similar vein, the biggest drawback of the ports is losing the classic black-and-white displays elsewhere. All of

the Dragon's competitors have better color graphics and the programmers obviously felt the need to "spiffy" things up because, well, they could. Other gamers may agree it's an improvement, but I found the graphics cruder and a detriment, especially in the dungeon. Something about that dark, minimalist display conveys are greater sense of danger (and nostalgia, no doubt).

Finally, speaking of color-drenched "improvements," the success of Ring of Darkness resulted in the inevitable "bigger and better" sequel. The first part of that is unquestionably true, the second depends on your tastes and expectations.

Return of the Ring tasks you with another LOTR-like task, except "instead of Ringworld you find yourself transported to a mysterious city on a decaying planet, the last vestige of a once-great civilization." Furthermore, the game abandons much of the Akalabeth/Ultima element in favor of a graphics text adventure with RPG elements.

While the changes may or may not appeal, one thing I'm guessing most people can agree on is the graphics are garishly colored and rather crude (the things resembling frogs in the screenshot are actually robots). Also, ROD's worst feature carries over as you're forced to do the cassette multi-load thing. Speed issue, however, is no longer a problem since the game is entirely in machine language.

On the plus side as far as gaming goes, the text adventure element means a far greater amount of strategy and puzzle-solving, although you'll still be forced to do plenty of grinding. Another plus is some characters you meet may join your party that you'll have a limited ability to control (equipping them with weapons, for instance).

Essentially, your opinion of Return of the Ring will come down to how you feel about having some of ROD's characters and storylines in a different type of game that's technically superior and more generic in gameplay (not to mention the whole sci-fi thing, which basically destroys it for me). Setting aside my personal feelings, I'd probably give it the same "B" grade as ROD on the CoCo scale since the competition is considerably tougher once you enter the text adventure category. I'd actually probably drop it to a "C" in terms of pure gaming quality since numerous titles on floppy disc are superior enough to make ROTR a nonentity, but the fact it gives cassette owners a change to experience something on that scale, annoying as the multiloads are, deserves credit since a large percentage of CoCo owners didn't bother with a disc drive that oftentimes cost more than the computer.

So if you play one or both of these, have you played the best of the Dragon? Yes and no. The whole point of the column, after all, is picking out the best game that's exclusive to the machine. But even with the Dragon's limited library there are a number of far superior titles, some of them CoCo ports and some from other British machines. Next time I go Dragon slaying I'll examine some of the British titles and see how they stack up compared to competing machines, as well as the U.S.-based games they're often unauthorized clones of.

MAME Reviews

by Mark Sabbatini

Chicken Shift

This game rooster is scrambled enough to lay every fowl yolk ever hatched on you.

We could feather our nests by cracking such cluckers until the cock crows, but for sanity's sake we won't further egg you on.

Blame it on the developers who named this 1984 action/puzzle game Chicken Shift, hoping to cash in on the obvious word play. It brings to mind Puck-Man, which was changed from its original name due to worries the "P" could easily be changed to an "F" by vandals. Removing the "f" in "Chicken Shift" doesn't seem like much more of a challenge.

Making it stranger is the game was housed in a "Sac Man" cabinet. That's what a chip-swap multigame system was named by Sente Technologies, a company started under a different name by a handful of ex-Atari employees in 1982 that was acquired by Bally Midway in 1984. The only Sac Man title to achieve modest arcade success was Hat Trick, a 1984 two-on-two hockey game that borrows some foosball elements. Also notable in name were several Trivia Pursuit titles that seemed to mostly show up in places like bars. Among the remaining obscurities is the infamous Snacks 'n Jaxson (which I did a mini-review of about a year ago in a column titled "Games That Should Have Been April Fool's Jokes").

Chicken Shift, in terms of legacy, is essentially just another Sac Man title in a collection of games with popularity scores of one or two on the Killer List of Video Game's 100-point scale. But its whimsical think-fast-on-you-feet gameplay stands out among the driving, shooting and other well-worn genres. For a brief time I was convinced I had discovered a brilliant unknown gem that could be a huge hit today – and, indeed, it could be by adding levels and tweaking the difficulty curve. Similar games are spawning by the hundreds these days at budget prices for every gaming format.

The object of the game is to guide eggs or baby chicks through mazes, controlling their movements with various mechanisms including shifting pipes, moveable platforms and pinball flippers. The cycle of waves begins with you guiding eggs laid by hens at the top of the screen into cartons and ends with your placing chicks into nests – and at least some of them are presumably who begin the process anew in a faster and more complex cycle.

I don't recall seeing many games of this genre during the early coin-op era, but they were plentiful on home consoles and computers. Anyone familiar with the likes of Lemmings and Gumball will find certain aspects of Chicken Shift familiar.

The game's controls are a thing of beauty. They're about as a simple as can be, with only two buttons controlling left- and right-oriented functions. But it takes a considerable amount of wit and dexterity to properly guide your eggs/chicks, especially as the pace speeds up. Also, because the method of guidance varies considerably on each wave you constantly have to adjust your thinking accordingly.

The variety of waves, oddly enough, are what sent my hopes about this game soaring and then crashing back to Earth. The very brief attract screen shows just the first wave, where pipes are pointed left or right to catch eggs as they roll down a series of troughs (the left button toggles pipes on the left half of the screen, the right button does the same on its half). If a pipe doesn't catch an egg rolling off a trough it crashes to the floor, with three missed eggs costing you one of your three lives.

The first wave is slow, but some novices may need a few games to complete this wave since a certain amount of multitaking and advance planning is necessary even for the relatively simple layout. Maybe it's just because Chicken Shift is from an era when games were still largely monotonous, but I expected subsequent waves would simply involve the same screen with more complex layouts, faster speeds and more eggs needing to be successfully collected.

Instead, I got a pleasant surprise when a new screen with completely different objectives and colors (a garish mauve-dominated theme, and the objects themselves are crudely awful, but still...). Here the eggs have started to hatch, with just the feet poking out, and the soon-to-be chicks start hopping blindly out of their cartons and onto a series of wood shelves. You need to shift platforms around so the partially hatched chicks reach a window at the right of the screen, where they break free of their shells and fly off into the distance (the only visually charming part of this wave). Again, the speed isn't too bad and I found this easier than the first wave, but that may be because I played a lot of Lemmings and this is a highly simplistic version of the concept.

Again, I thought the chicks flying the coop might signify the end of my involvement with that particular brood. But no, it turns out they just fly back to the dark-hued confines of the chicken coop. Entering through a moon-lit window at the lower right of the screen, they start walking on a platform and you must use pinball flippers to propel them upward (and rightward or leftward) onto higher platforms until enough reach the nests on the screen. It's harder than the first two screens, but easily my favorite (probably because I've been a pinball addict since the age of six, whereas Space Invaders didn't debut until I was 10).

At this point it was beginning to seem like this game was truly something special and there might be a bunch of new screens with different cleverly designed challenges. After all, I reasoned to the extent possible during a fast-paced video game, this was back when platformers with dozens of unique levels were proliferating on home computers. Alas, distraction-induced naiveté overlooked a couple things: 1) Chickens returning to their nests, figuratively and literally speaking, and 2) In the coin-op era things were still largely in the age of Donkey Kong, having not quite evolved to the likes of Gauntlet yet.

So I suffered the letdown of inflated expectations after finally getting through the third screen, only to find myself needing to catch a larger number of eggs on the first screen. It didn't seem all that worth it to just keep trying to do the same thing faster – except, if you stick with it, it's not entirely the same thing since the maze configurations change. The egg-sort screen, for example, has a considerably more complex layout during the second round. When you reach the third round you need to direct eggs into two cartons at the corners of the screen instead of one in the center. (The second reach-the-window screen, true to its form of being the game's weakest, doesn't appear to change configuration – it just gets so fast you have to continuously shift platforms with split-second timing.)

But while there is something of a continued sense of discovery, there is one final problem that's a killer, to use another figurative and literal reference. The difficulty curve is such it seems like most mortals will every have hope of progressing beyond the second round. To complete the third is the feat of a champion player (as I hit the literal-and-figurative trifecta). The claimed MAME world record for Chicken Shift is 159,820 points by Nathan White, whose video capture of the achievement is less than 14 minutes long after subtracting the initial startup stuff. Obviously that's bad news for players feeding quarters into machines, although just as obviously it'd have been great news for arcade operators tired of seeing someone spend hours on a single game of Pac-Man in the cabinet's former life – if only the reincarnated being had showed any signs of life in terms of popularity.

The inevitably short games make one of the game's few options – the

ability to select starting levels once you've progressed – less than desirable. The DIP switch options are similarly useless, merely allowing you to start with two lives instead of the default three. A huge plus would have been an advertised simultaneous two-player mode where they could play competitively or cooperatively, but it doesn't appear to exist – just the usual alternating-life mode.

Chicken Shift's graphics, aside from earlier remarks about good and bad choices in hues and design, are about par by 1984 standards. There's a few distinctive things that bring a chuckle like watching the instantly hatched eggs flying away and the chicks rotating like pinwheels as they are launched from the pinball flippers. The sound and music, however, fail annoyingly in their effort to convey a humorous frenzy.

But of course with chickens it's usually possible to devise plenty of humor and White, along with his record-score video, also has a FAQ (of questions I'm sure few are actually asking) that provides answers to things such as "why is it necessary to have a network of precariously placed flippers to ensure the chicks reach their nests?" Answer: "We asked the farmer, and he tells us it is part of a chicken exercise regime. He also claims the chicks enjoy it, but admits the mortality rate is fairly high."

White's FAQ is at www.skytopia.com/games/score/chicken_shift.html.

There's nothing in cyberspace suggesting Chicken Shift was ported to any home consoles or computers, but as mentioned above games in this genre were plentiful back then and are damn near ubiquitous now. MAME addicts will find this one of those games worth booting up long enough to get a feel for things and add to their historical knowledge, but its limitations – most notably the limited length-of-play potential – don't suggest a lot of people are likely to be addicts of the game itself.

It's great to see new people still coming on board and helping make this magazine even better. I have some interesting plans for the future and hope we can continue to make RTM grow. In case you might have happened to come across the website over the last few days of May, you might have noticed that it was "suspended". Well, I forgot to send a payment in and in turn the account was shut down. However, I am now paid through March 2015, so you don't have to worry about RTM going down again anytime soon!

Thanks to columnist Zach Nyne for informing me of a new summer themed game that is available for free on the NES. It's called Haku no Tsuri and you can get all the information you want right here, http://indiegames.com/2013/05/try_fishing_as_a_turn-based_rp.html. If you are into fishing games, check this one out. Interestingly, I find some of the more modern looking fishing games to be boring, as I enjoy the cartoony and less life-like feel of the 8-bit fishing titles. If you're like me and you want a good time angling without all the reality, check it out. It's just another one of those games to get you into the summer spirit.

See you all next month!