

The Retrogaming Times

THE BIMONTHLY RETROGAMING HOBBYIST NEWSLETTER

TWENTY-EIGHTH ISSUE - SEPTEMBER 2020

PLUMBERS EXCAVATE VANISHING FORMAT!

The Retrogaming Times
- The Bimonthly Retrogaming Hobbyist Newsletter -

The Retrogaming Times
Twenty-Eighth Issue - September 2020
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepare to Qualify• Upcoming Events• More C64! - Type-In Listings• Apple II Incider - Show and Tell• Arcade Obscure - Intrepid• FDSStick - Reviving The Famicom Disk System *COVER STORY*• TurboGrafx-16 Review: Neutopia• Protective Cases From RetroProtection• Weekly Retrogaming Trivia Recap• See You Next Game



Prepare to Qualify

by [David Lundin, Jr.](#)

The last days of summer are just around the corner as most of us continue to adjust our daily lives - some settling more into a routine from home, others preparing to return to work or school, and others still who have been weathering the current situation among the public. It is my hope that our readers and their families are doing well and keeping as safe as possible. I can personally attest that the uncertainty of the current times has affected the amount of gaming I've been doing as of late. The desire to work on other hobbies that don't involve looking at a screen, which while working from home is now the entirety of my workday, is the main catalyst behind that. With that said, it was nice to get back into some specific games and subjects I've wanted to talk about here for awhile, and the same seems to be true of our staff.

Many hobbyist programs were once sold in print that would be typed in by the end user, providing an introduction to programming in addition to new games and applications. Unsurprisingly this method of software distribution was popular on the Commodore 64 and Merman shares memories of this unique part of retro computing in More C64! Donald Lee finds a way to introduce classic Apple II programs to a present day workplace in the Apple II Incider. Spy fiction sneaks into the early days of the arcade with Intrepid, a fitting addition to Arcade Obscure. In this issue's cover story, the often forgotten Famicom Disk System format is given a new lease on life with an affordable and practical modern replacement, preserving an important part of mid 1980's console gaming. Love The Legend of Zelda but find yourself looking for a new challenge? Perhaps the TurboGrafx-16 has exactly what you need in a new review column. If you're looking to protect your retrogames, Todd Friedman shares the results of his findings looking to do just that. All that and more are ahead in this issue of The Retrogaming Times!

I want to again remind our readers if they have comments or questions about anything covered in the newsletter, or there is something they would like featured in a future issue of The Retrogaming Times, to contact me directly at trt@classicplastic.net! Of course article submissions are also always open. If you have something ready to go, the address is the same, trt@classicplastic.net. **"If there is something you want to write about, send it in!"**

If you're stir crazy at home and are a retrogamer, there has to be something on your mind - let us know by submitting an article!



Upcoming Events

Compiled by [David Lundin, Jr.](#)

NOTICE: Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many shows and events have canceled, postponed, or modified their dates. For the latest on the events listed below, please visit their individual websites or contact their relevant customer support channels as the current situation continues to unfold. Thank you.

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KansasFest, July 19th - 25th 2021, Kansas City, Missouri, USA

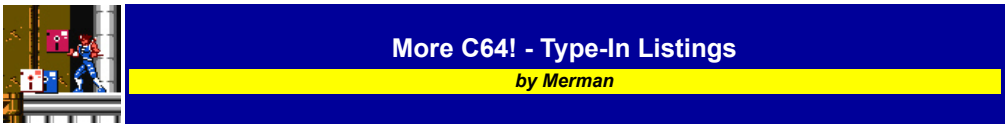
KansasFest is an annual convention offering Apple II users and retrocomputing enthusiasts the opportunity to engage in beginner and technical sessions, programming contests, exhibition halls, and camaraderie. KansasFest was originally hosted by Resource Central and has been brought to you by the KFest committee since 1995. For photos, videos, and presentations from past KansasFests, please visit the event's official website.

For more information, visit <http://www.kansasfest.org/>

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If there is a show or event you would like listed here, free of charge, please contact David directly at trt@classicplastic.net. Please include a short official blurb about your event along with any relevant links or contact information and it will be published in the next issue of The Retrogaming Times. The event listing will remain posted until the issue following the event date. Big or small, we want to promote your show in our newsletter.

Check out these great events, shows, and conventions and let them know you read about them in The Retrogaming Times!



Many of us will remember the days of typing in a program to play a game. That's how many games programmers actually learned how to program, by altering someone else's code and seeing how things worked. For many the 1970s was dominated by typing in a program, either on punch-card or tape and then later from a listing in a book. The front-runner was David Ahl's 1973 title BASIC Computer Games, perhaps most famous for its Super Star Trek game that was much imitated.

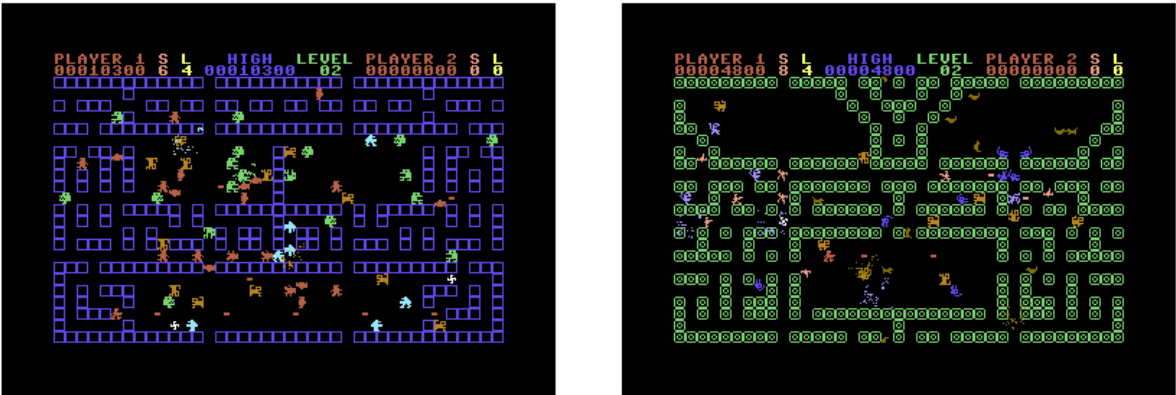
Fast-forward to the 1980s and Commodore's manuals came with many programs to type in and try out. The C64 manual is best remembered for its balloon sprite, while the Programmer's Reference Guide included a cute program called the Dancing Mouse that demonstrated animation.

Many magazines of that period also had listings. (These are not to be confused with "cheat" programs that could be entered before LOADING a game). One issue of the UK magazine Commodore User had a special supplement with type-in listings created by famous programmers, including Triads by Mike Singleton. Jeff Minter's first game for the C64, Rox, was published as a type-in while Commodore Horizons gave away a special "19th screen" type-in based on Lazy Jones from David Whittaker. Ahoy and RUN were two of the top American magazines that included large listings. Compute and Compute's Gazette tried to avoid problems with their listings by having two ways to check what you had entered. The Automated Proof Reader program checked lines of BASIC as you typed them in, while the later MLX system used a "checksum" (adding up the values of the machine code data you entered to compare with the number printed alongside each line of data in the magazine).



Typical magazine covers of the time, Commodore User and Compute's Gazette.

Although I never got to see those American magazines, I have played a few games from them. One of my favourites is **CROSSROADS** and its sequel **CROSSROADS II - PANDEMONIUM**. These frantic single-screen maze games have unique wraparound gameplay and persistent bullets, meaning you have to be careful not to shoot yourself! It was an influence on the iOS game Forget-Me-Not and its later C64 remake called **GET 'EM**.



The brilliant Crossroads and Crossroads II are strongly reminiscent of Wizard of Wor, and can be played by two players simultaneously.

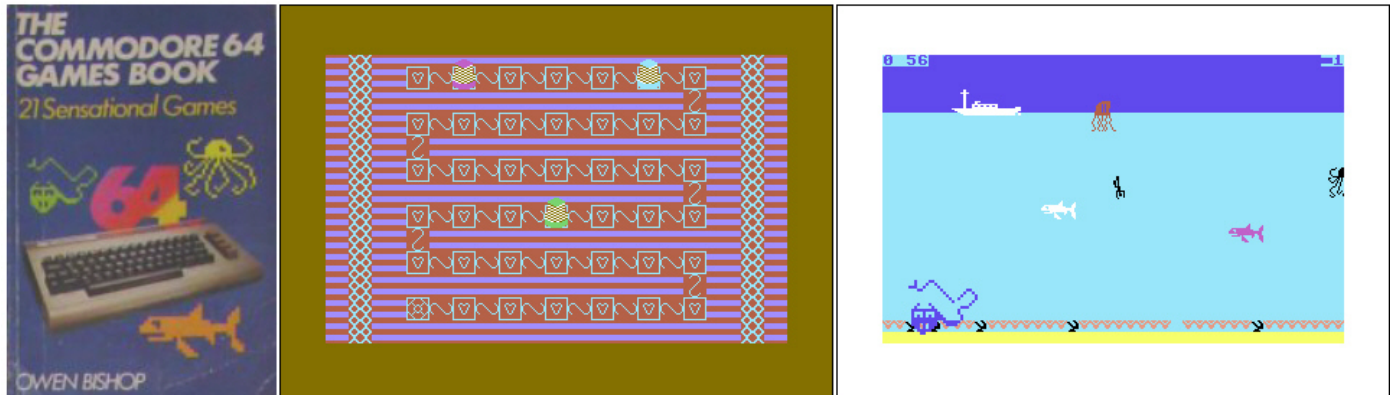


Get 'Em DX was an enhanced cartridge release of the original 16K Get 'Em, with new features including power-ups.

One of the earliest books I remember typing games from was called "The Commodore 64 Games Book -- 21 Sensational Games" from UK publishers Granada. My parents also helped with the task, sitting and reading from the book. I do remember the heavy black type which made deciphering some of the special symbols (the C64's colour commands predominantly, created by CTRL or Commodore and the number keys 1-8) difficult. The book was on loan from our village library, and we borrowed it several times. I also borrowed some of the Usborne programming books from my local library (see WEB LINKS at the end of this column).

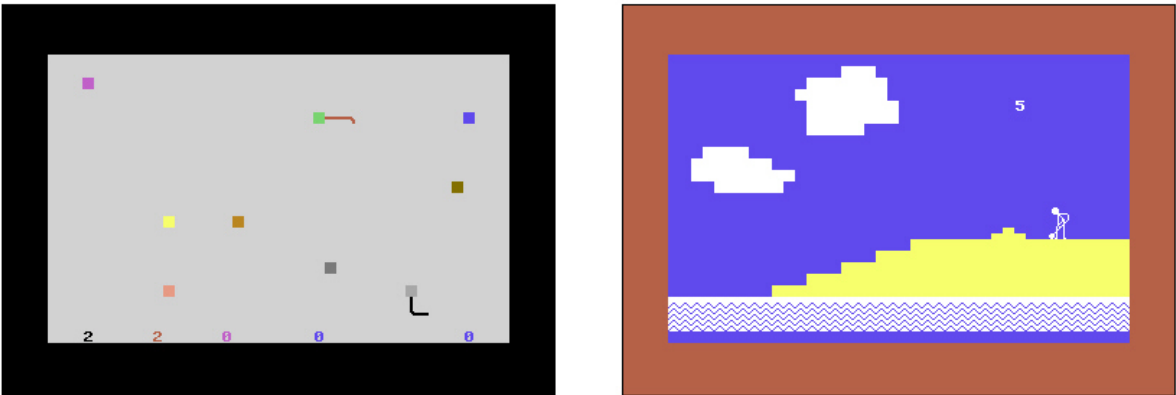
Several of those games were good fun at the time. **NIMBLE THIMBLE** was a classic board game based around sewing thimbles, where you had to avoid being the player to move the last thimble off the board. **SANDCASTLE** simply required you to hit the correct number key to build the castle higher before the tide washed it away. In hindsight **SNORKEL** had really bad graphics but it impressed 11-year old me as I dived for pearls. Finally there was **RAIL RUNNER**, a forerunner of the classic

Railroad Tycoon as you competed against other players to build your railroad. It looks simplistic but has a surprising depth to it.



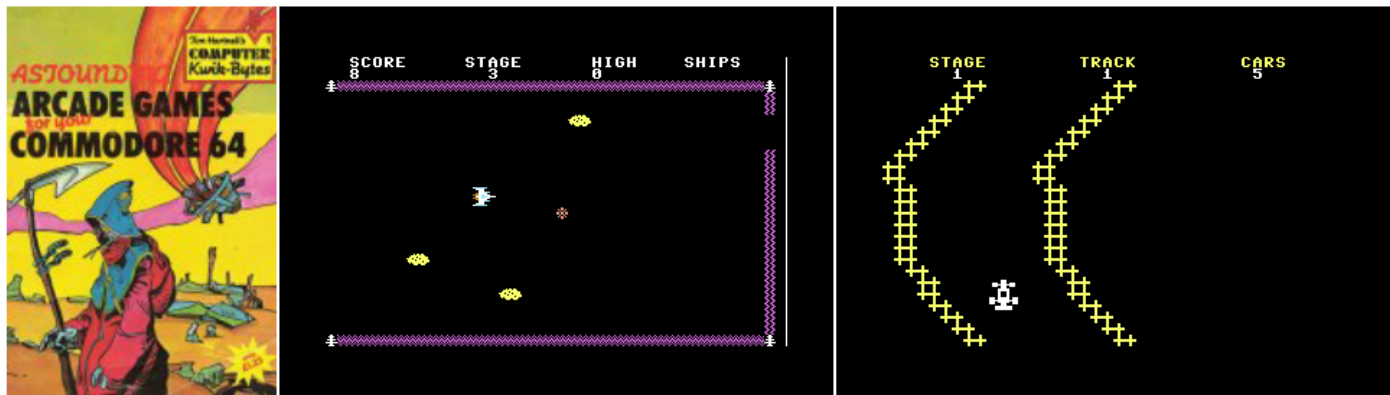
The cover and two of the 21 games in the book, Nimble Thimble and Snorkel.

Sadly the tape that Rail Runner was saved to stopped working. We also discovered another problem. Many early C64 listings used the tape buffer (a small area low in the computer's memory with room for three different sprite images) to store their sprites in temporarily. A type-in listing from a book called Skier did this, and the end result was that saving the game to tape actually corrupted the sprites.



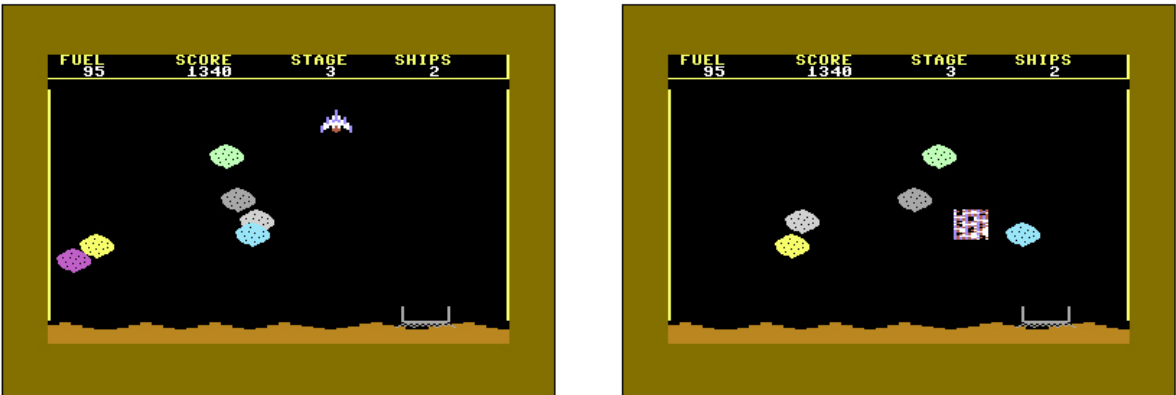
Early in a game of Rail Runner, and the higher the number the more sand you add to the Sandcastle.

My parents actually went out and bought another book of listings for us, with the impressive sounding title of "Astounding Arcade Games For the Commodore 64" from Interface Publications. This had three listings in it, for **ASTEROID DEATH SHIP**, **MARTIAN ENCOUNTER** and **GRAND PRIX**. One evening after a family meal my parents spent nearly two hours typing in MARTIAN ENCOUNTER for myself and my older brother to play. (The title itself is a problem, as it contains 17 characters - and the maximum a C64 file can have is 16, meaning when LOADING it back from tape or disk it is called MARTIAN ENCOUNTE).



The cover of the book, Asteroid Death Ship and Grand Prix are not very astounding games for the Commodore 64...

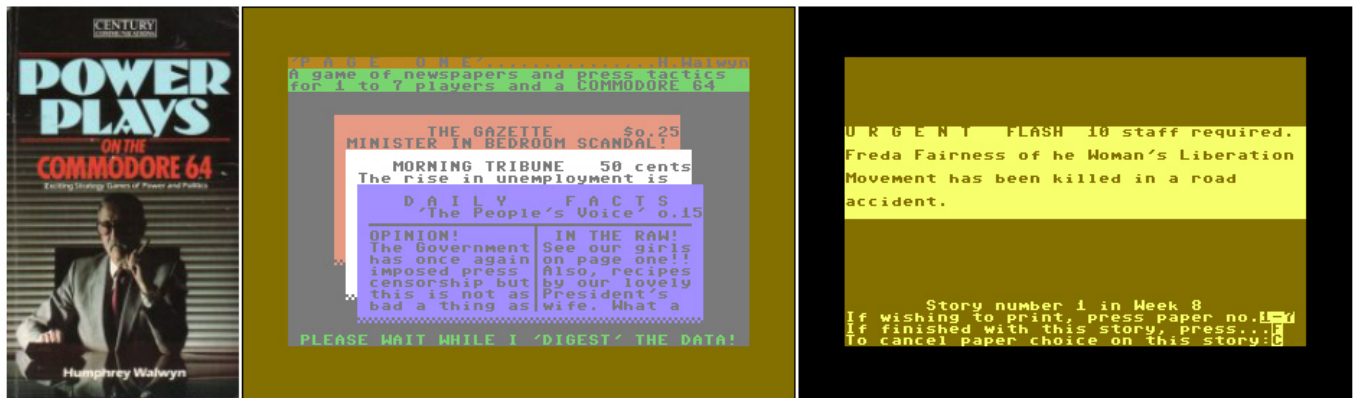
There was a problem. The listing did not work properly and the sprites looked corrupted. The basic idea of MARTIAN ENCOUNTE(R) is to guide your ship down to the planet and avoid the layers of asteroids flying left and right. It is inspired by the classic Taito coin-op game Lunar Rescue. The strange asteroid shapes clued me and my brother that something was wrong, but looking at it onscreen we could not initially spot the bug. We saved the file to tape and came back to it over the weekend. And then we realised something. The listing used a font where it was difficult to distinguish zero from the letter O. We got it working eventually - but even then, the programmer was too lazy to bother creating an explosion sprite and just used random memory locations to represent the player's ship dying!



Trying to reach the surface in Martian Encounter, and the weird explosion sprite "animates" briefly through random memory.

Forward again to the 1990s and I was adding to my retro collection. I started out with a Super Nintendo and then bought more consoles when I could afford them. But I stayed loyal to the C64 and also bought bundles of second-hand games, hardware, books and magazines. One such book was called "Power Plays on the Commodore 64" from Century Communications. The programmer and writer of the book Humphrey Walwyn had come up with some more strategic and simulation-type games that

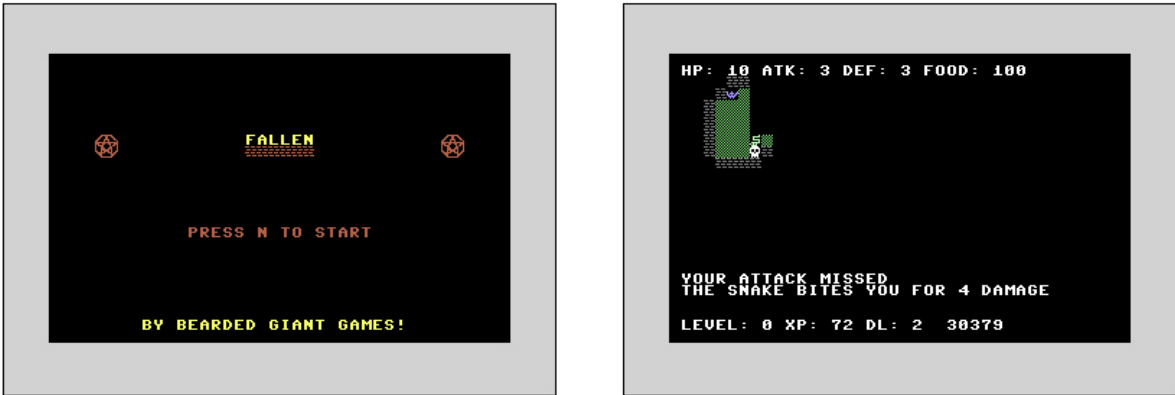
did not require fancy graphics. The one that interested me the most was called **PAGE ONE**, and it was a really long program to type in. It was a management simulation, allowing up to seven players to edit and run their own newspaper (in theory with counters / physical money to play with alongside the computer game). As the political situation in the fictional country changed, it was up to the player to decide what headlines to run - but if the Government falls or you run out of money, it is game over. So your popularity with the Government and the readers is important, as is the staff costs of covering the stories. Interestingly the game situation starts after "simulating" eight weeks, giving variation each time you play. I typed the whole listing in and enjoyed playing it.



The cover of the book, Page One takes time to set up, and the Government may not like every story you choose to print.

So in the modern era of digital downloads you might think that the type-in listing was a thing of the past. But there are still enthusiasts out there typing in old listings. GameBase 64 continues to add new listings to its collection of Commodore 64 games thanks to enthusiasts typing them in, and there are other websites dedicated to type-in listings.

But perhaps most interesting of all was the idea behind **FALLEN**. C64 programmer Bacioiu Ciprian is selling a PDF of the listing, allowing you the pleasure of typing in the game itself and seeing it RUN. (The black & white version of the game is free to download as a PDF; the paid colour version comes with a PRG file to load and play as well as a PDF of the colour listing with extra design notes). The game is an interesting twist on the Rogue genre, with you controlling a character through a maze. The dungeon levels you explore are randomly generated, and you can only "see" where your character has been and can see around them. It's a fun little game and worth checking out.



The title screen of Fallen, and fighting with a snake.

So if you are interested in going back to the era of typing in a game, check out the web links below for some handy starting points.

WEB LINKS

Fallen on itch.io:
<https://zapakitul.itch.io/fallen-a-basic-roguelike-for-the-c64>

C64 Books list (with links to GameBase 64 for listings that have been typed in):
<http://www.c64music.co.uk/books/>

C64 Magazines list (with links to GameBase 64 for listings that have been typed in):
<http://www.c64music.co.uk/mags/>

GameBase 64:
<http://www.gb64.com/>

Type-In Books (a fascinating blog on type-ins, including a new series "re-coding" BASIC games into machine code):
<https://typeinbooks.co.uk/>

Usborne programming books (the UK publisher has made available FREE PDFs of many of its 1980s programming books, designed for use on multiple formats including C64):
<https://usborne.com/browse-books/features/computer-and-coding-books/>



Happy end of summer everyone and welcome back to this edition of The Retrogaming Times! I hope everyone is staying safe in a pretty crazy world at this time. I don't envy all the people who have to worry about their kids in school or loved ones that may be working the front lines in the battle against COVID-19.

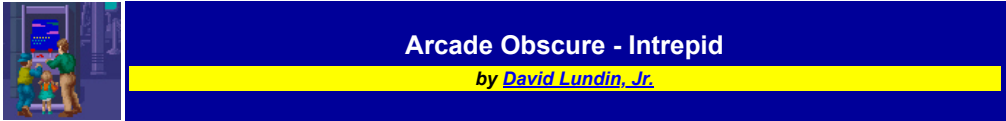
On a happier note, lets talk about this issue's topic. I believe I mentioned in previous issues that I was laid off from my job. Well, the good news was that I got a job offer in late May and accepted a new job which I started in June 2020. I don't think I've mentioned what I do for work but I am a Sales or Solutions Engineer. I assist the sales team in presenting / selling / demoing technical products and services. I've done this for over a decade now and enjoy it greatly.

As part of my new job, I was tasked to do an intro presentation of myself to my team recently. I was told "Get Creative." So rather than your usual boring PowerPoint deck, I snuck in a some bits of my Apple II history there. Namely, I recorded myself starting up my Virtual II emulator on my Mac and booted up an old favorite, "The Print Shop." I then went to create a card and typed a message to my team.



Why did I do that? Well, it dawned on me that when I was in elementary school, I was asked to do a show and tell during a evening event for parents on an Apple IIe. I remember using Print Shop as the program to demo. I can't remember if it was just for my parents or if others stopped by to see. But given my day job is to pretty much "show and tell" I thought it was a good way to introduce myself with the Apple II emulator. I was too busy to notice, but a teammate (who's around my age) asked for a demo of "The Oregon Trail" but I didn't have it.

I also did a few other things too. I took a screen shot of Lotus 1-2-3 as that was my first spreadsheet I learned during college. Later on I recorded myself logging into a Unix account and demoed programs such as Pine (email) and Lynx (text web browser) as well. My team has a lot of young folks who may not be aware of these ancient but still fun and useful applications that exist out there. So that's my story for this issue. Hope everyone stays safe and we'll catch you in the next issue.



Some reasonably obscure games have been covered in this column since it began but I've known at least one person who was previously familiar with one or more of them. That all changes today, as Intrepid is an arcade game that not only have I never seen in person, I have never encountered another in conversation who has memories of playing it. That makes sense as it was developed by the equally obscure Nova Games, Ltd. and apparently only had limited distribution in Canada.

The best way I can describe the game to someone who has never seen it, is to think of Taito's Elevator Action mixed with Exidy's Venture or Data East's Lock 'n' Chase. The player controls a spy tasked with stealing secret plans hidden in an embassy vault and then escaping while avoiding a detachment of guards. The embassy has five floors and a roof, with a maze of rooms and hallways located within a door on each floor. Along the way an arsenal of tools and gadgets must be collected from these rooms to allow access to the vault in addition to assisting with search and evasion. These include a key that allows access to the vault room on the 5th floor, a disguise to sneak past the sentry guard at the vault, the combination to the vault itself, a map that reveals all hidden items without searching, an ID card that allows access across electrified floors, "high-speed jetshoes" that increase movement speed, a wrench to sabotage the elevator and trap pursuing guards, and an umbrella which is used like a parachute when jumping from the roof. In hindsight it sounds a bit like a comedic Metal Gear and it kind of is, as stealth and evasion are the keys to progress.



A list of items to collect (left), moving from floor to floor (center), searching a room with guards in pursuit (right)

Each mission begins outside the embassy at street level where the spy enters an elevator that can take him to any of five floors. Each floor contains a door with a series of rooms behind it. The door on the 5th floor always begins locked as it is where the safe is hidden. In addition to the elevator entering in the center of the embassy there are also staircases between each floor, as well as a staircase leading to the roof. Upon entering a room, the perspective changes to an overhead view in the style of a typical arcade maze game but the character sprites remain the same. Interestingly the upper portion of the spy's sprite will overlap against walls, creating a very slight pseudo 3D perspective, which is kind of cool. Rooms are filled in with solid color until the spy walks into them, revealing if an item was hidden within. If the map has been obtained, all items in rooms will be in the open the moment the spy walks in from the outer hallway.

It is while searching a room that the guards will begin to enter in pursuit of the spy. What makes Intrepid different than a lot of other similar games is that the guards are always on the move, traveling from floor to floor, and sweeping from door to door. That means one could be waiting on either side of a door the instant the spy walks through. It also means that narrowly evading a single guard in a room generally means you'll encounter others closing in the moment you get outside. This is why waiting for guards to enter an area before heading out to the next objective is an important strategy. Having an estimation of where all the guards are and keeping that knowledge in mind when you can't see them is invaluable in Intrepid. Finding the jetshoes early on in each mission is also an excellent strategy as the increased movement speed makes a big difference in guard evasion. Not all items are required to complete a mission but the key, ID card, the safe combination, and disguise must all be in hand to gain access to the safe. If the spy has the umbrella, jumping from the roof is the fastest way to complete a mission after obtaining the secret plans but he can also ride the elevator back to the ground floor. After obtaining the secret plans and returning to the outside of the embassy, remaining time on the clock is converted to bonus points and the mission is completed. Subsequent

missions will feature more guards who tend to better track the spy.



A room search reveals the key (left), odd storm clouds act like faster guards (center), jumping from the roof to escape the embassy (right)

Although it shares a copyright date of 1983 with Elevator Action, Taito's game is much more visually pleasing, as Intrepid is clearly of a graphical design whose era was being rapidly overtaken. The sprites are all relatively simple, as are the level boundaries and items, with everything on a plain black background. Granted, everything is easy to see and identify but there isn't much detail or spice in the presentation. Sound effects are a lot of pings and dings that while aren't anything interesting, never quite get to the point where they are annoying. I do enjoy the "tat-tat-tat-tat-tat" sound of the spy's footsteps as he dashes around however. Intrepid's music on the other hand is a totally different beast as it's a strange mash up of existing tunes. Upon obtaining the secret plans "O Canada" plays, if the spy is caught by a guard a few bars of "The Imperial March" from The Empire Strikes Back plays, and when jumping from the roof with the umbrella "La donna è mobile" from Rigoletto plays. I really can't think of another game that uses music from a national anthem, a space opera, and a classical opera. The renditions themselves aren't great, using the same pings and dings type sound used for the effects, but completely noticeable as being lifts from their respective compositions.

So it may not be the best looking or sounding game. It may have an extremely repetitive objective with little variation between missions. It also may be terribly difficult with frustratingly cheap deaths for new players. Yet I still keep coming back to Intrepid on my MAME cabinet because it provides a quick and addictive challenge. This is the perfect representation of an arcade game that you'd drop a couple credits into now and then, play for a bit, and walk away satisfied. It won't pull you back immediately and it won't create a high score obsession that warrants hours of continuous play. However to me it provides that, "yeah, I'll play a couple games" interest that keeps it in my regular rotation.



FDSStick - Reviving The Famicom Disk System

by [David Lundin, Jr.](#)

Three years after the launch of the Famicom and riding high on its success, Nintendo would release an ambitious and unique expansion known as the Family Computer Disk System. Available to Japanese retailers in early 1986, the Famicom Disk System (FDS) allowed games to be distributed on magnetic floppy disks, a novel concept for a home console. Not only did this allow games to be theoretically limitless in size, it made production far less costly and those savings were passed on to Japanese consumers. The FDS package included both a self-contained magnetic disk drive and a RAM Adapter cartridge to interface with the Famicom through its cartridge slot. Using rewritable media also meant that game progress could be saved directly to a game disk, removing the need for long and complex passwords in the days before battery backup on cartridges. Popular games such as The Legend of Zelda, Kid Icarus, Metroid and many others were developed with this ability as a cornerstone of their design. It also allowed new releases to be quickly manufactured and distributed, in addition to budget priced re-releases of earlier cartridge games, and value-centric lower cost games from some publishers. As the disks were completely rewritable, Nintendo installed Disk Writer kiosks in many stores, allowing totally new games to be written over an existing disk for what amounted to pocket money - an innovative system. In addition the FDS hardware expanded the Famicom's audio processing capabilities by adding an additional sound channel, giving many FDS games unique sound design compared to standard Famicom releases.



Top to bottom: a Famicom Disk System RAM Adapter, Famicom, and Famicom Disk System disk drive

It wasn't all starmen and fire flowers for the Disk System however. Piracy ran rampant as although proprietary, the disk format was based upon the Mitsumi Quick Disk standard and could be duplicated by an enterprising bootlegger. Additionally a vast number of unlicensed games made their way to the system, mostly adult in content. The disks themselves were reasonably fragile and nowhere as robust as a Famicom cartridge. However what ultimately killed off the format was the march of technology, with cartridge memory becoming bigger and cheaper to produce, and battery backed save memory replacing the need for rewritable media. Still, there are a lot of unique games for the Disk System and interesting takes on the origins of popular games that would later be released on cartridge.

Unfortunately time has not been kind to the format, both due to the nature of low cost magnetic media and an overly complex disk drive design. Disks often have read errors or damaged sectors and the disk drive itself is notorious for having a difficult to replace drive belt, which requires a cumbersome recalibration of the drive mechanism after replacement. Although some

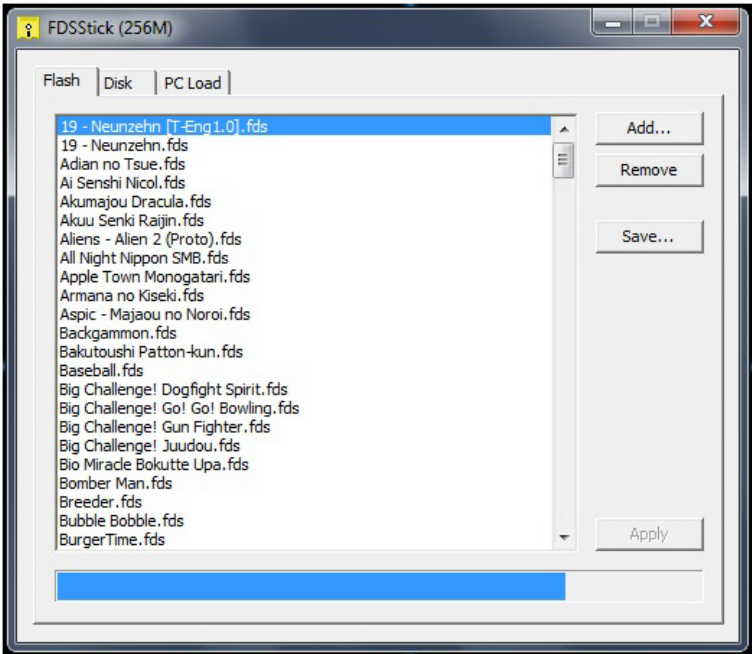
modern Famicom flashcarts have gotten better at emulating the sound and timing of the Disk System, nothing is more accurate than using actual hardware. Loopy of the NESDev forums approached this problem from a different angle. Rather than attempting to emulate the entire Disk System component soup to nuts, he instead would replace the weak links: the disks and disk drive.



The FDSStick (left) and an original case and disk for the game The Monitor Puzzle: Kineco - Kinetic Connection (right)

The result of Loopy's work is the FDSStick, a USB based hardware solution that completely replaces the disk drive and acts as a flash memory device for FDS disks - all in one tiny package. As the FDSStick interfaces with actual Famicom Disk System hardware (either the FDS RAM Adapter or the built in RAM Adapter of the Twin Famicom), sound production and timing are identical to using an original disk drive. As far as the Famicom is concerned, it's just reading data off of an FDS disk. The difference is there are no moving parts or decades old magnetic media to contend with. Roughly the size of a USB thumb drive, the FDSStick features a standard USB plug on one end and an FDS RAM Adapter socket on the other. A single button resides on the top, centered within a smooth depression.

Usage is amazingly simple, even more so than most modern flash memory cartridges. Plug the USB end of the FDSStick into a Windows PC and open the FDSStick loader program provided for free on Loopy's website. The loader will read the state of the FDSStick and display a list of files currently flashed to the stick, in addition to a blue bar showing how much of the total capacity is currently occupied. There are three tabs in the program, each providing a different utility: **Flash**, **Disk**, and **PC Load**.

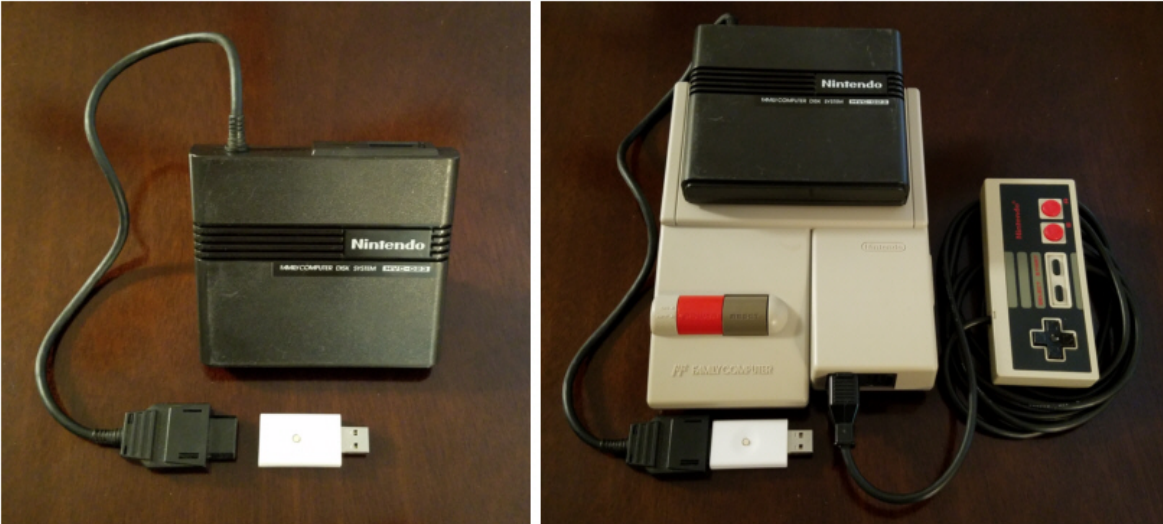


The FDSStick loader program is simple and straightforward with a clean interface

The **Flash** tab is what is shown when the application is launched. This where disk images (in .FDS format) are added, removed, or archived off the internal flash memory of the FDSStick. Clicking the "Add..." button will bring up a file selection window. Simply select the disk images you would like flashed to the stick and click "Open," this will prepare the files for addition to the FDSStick's flash memory. To begin the flashing procedure, click the "Apply" button and the application will automatically flash the internal memory with the selected disk images, displaying a red progress bar as the task is completed. To remove a disk image from the flash memory, simply highlight it on the list and click "Remove," then click "Apply." **Remember, as each operation is flashing the memory chip, changes do not go into effect until the Apply button is clicked.** To abort changes prior to clicking Apply and flashing, simply close and re-load the FDSStick loader. "Save..." is used to copy a disk image off the FDSStick back to your PC hard drive. This is useful as game progress in FDS games that retain such is written directly to the disk image. In essence, as save data is added to a Disk System game, the game data (and thereby the disk image) is no longer virgin. I recommend beginning with a completely clean FDS library and duplicating it to keep a clean and untouched archival set on your PC. Then whenever adding new games or fan translations, copy the entire contents of the FDSStick back to the PC, then mix in the new games as a blended set. Then flash the entire blended set (disk images with game progress in addition to the newly added games) back over to the FDSStick. It stinks to copy a fresh disk image over one where you had hours of game progress saved but even I can admit to doing it more than once. Once changes have been applied and flashed to the FDSStick, simply close the loader application and unplug the FDSStick from the PC - it's ready to go.

The **Disk** tab is used to write or read disk images directly to or from physical FDS disks using an FDS disk drive. This utility requires use of a disk read / write cable to connect the FDSStick directly to an FDS disk drive without the RAM Adapter. As this is a non-standard cable, one must be fabricated by either rewriting a pair of RAM Adapter cables or modifying and rewiring a pair of Nintendo family AV connectors. Loopy provides instructions for how to construct the necessary cable on the FDSStick webpage. The options "Read disk..." and "Write disk..." do exactly what they say, allowing an .FDS disk image to be created from the data on a physical FDS disk or writing an .FDS file to a physical FDS disk. This can allow original disks with corrupted data to have a fresh rewrite or virtually any FDS game to be written to any FDS disk. If you've ever seen people on eBay selling "new" FDS games on disks with handwritten labels, now you know how they do it. One word of caution, a disk written on one FDS drive may not work properly on another FDS drive, depending on how accurately calibrated the drives are in relation to one another.

PC Load allows a PC to directly interface with the RAM Adapter and load games directly without utilizing the flash memory of the FDSStick. More often than not, this is a feature primarily for those developing FDS games or fan translations that desire instant testing of games on actual hardware. While this doesn't require any additional hardware, it does require the RAM Adapter to be connected to the FDSStick while the FDSStick is connected to a PC.



An FDS RAM Adapter about to be plugged into the FDSStick (left), the setup ready to go in an AV Famicom (right)

The current generation FDSStick features 256Mbit of internal flash memory, which allows it to hold up to 512 disk "sides." This is more than enough space for the entire FDS library with plenty of space for duplicate fan translations. With the FDSStick flashed and ready to go it's time to plug it into the RAM Adapter. If you're using a Sharp Twin Famicom, the FDSStick can directly plug directly into an expansion port on the underside, although you will still need to use a RAM Adapter cable and modify the connection to match the expansion port socket. Definitely the easiest way to go is to use a stock RAM Adapter. Plug the RAM Adapter into your Famicom's cartridge slot, be it either an original system, Twin Famicom, or in my case an AV Famicom. Then plug the RAM Adapter cable into the back of the FDSStick. Upon powering on the Famicom the RAM Adapter BIOS splash screen will load as normal, and then load a menu of what is on the FDSStick.

The menu is very slick and is styled to mimic the FDS splash screen, along with a star field in the background. Menu scrolling is fast and the utilized font is clean and easy to read with excellent contrast. It truly feels like an extension of the Famicom Disk System rather than a homebrew application running on a modern device. Obviously there is a limitation to how much text can be visible in a single line across the screen. However there's enough room (about 30 characters on my CRT) that similar games are easy to differentiate between one another and files can always be renamed prior to being flashed to the FDSStick. Move the pointer up or down to the game you want to load with the directional pad and press the B Button. The menu will scroll away and the game will begin to load just as if its disk was inserted into an FDS disk drive.



FDSStick on-screen menu (left), the RAM Adapter loading the selected game (center), fan translation of Dead Zone running on real hardware (right)

An internal light on the FDSStick will illuminate green whenever the virtual disk is being loaded from, and red whenever it is being written to. This is actually more information than the stock Disk System drive provided, as it used a simple "busy" light regardless of the type of operation being performed. A short moment after loading, the game will come up as if it were being played off a genuine disk. Many FDS games are two sided, with game data on both sides. Changing disk sides once a game is loaded simply requires pressing the button on the FDSStick when prompted to load the desired side: once for Side A, twice for Side B, and so on. So if a game prompts the player to set Side B, simply press the button on the FDSStick twice and you're good to go. Need to flip back to Side A? Simply press the button once. I have seen some videos in the past where people are trying to rapidly press the button to flip the disk, as if there is some trick to getting it to work. There really isn't, just give two regular speed presses - press, press - and the operation will be completed. To save game data where applicable, simply complete the save process as required in the game and the save will be written to the FDSStick as part of the disk image, exactly as if an original disk was being used. To change games, cycle the power of the Famicom and select a new game once the FDSStick menu loads.

Fit and finish of the FDSStick is superb, it truly feels like a commercial product with a simple yet robust design. Let's just say I've owned flashcarts in the past that weren't as nicely assembled or designed as the FDSStick. Although it has been available for years, this is one flash solution that has seemingly slipped under the radar for most Famicom gamers - even those who use flash cartridges for most of their retro gaming. The most striking thing about the FDSStick is that it's only twenty bucks! Yes, you will need a Famicom console and yes you will need a RAM Adapter but if you're interested in accurately playing Disk System games then you probably already have at least one of those.

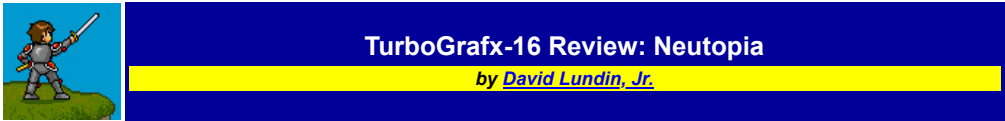


The rare - All Night Nippon Super Mario Bros. (left), the obscure - Moonball Magic (center), the awesome - Otocky (right)

I've been using an FDSStick for over a year now, having played and completed many FDS games without the usual fear that a disk will be corrupted or that I'll need to work on an FDS disk drive. Sure, it fills a niche need but it fills it perfectly and without hassle. The FDSStick does exactly what it needs to do - replace the problematic disk drive and disks - and does so with a no frills and no headaches style. I simply cannot recommend this device enough and if you have even a passing interest in the FDS, this is how to experience it.

For those in the USA, the FDSStick can be ordered directly from Loopy's official FDSStick page:

The webpage may look a little sketchy but is the official webpage and only place to order directly from Loopy. Non-USA orders are currently fulfilled by Tototek, and a link can be found at Loopy's page above.



Most video games owe part of their design to a game that came before, whether directly lifted or mildly influenced. A few games so completely mirror an earlier title that they can't help but being called clones. Such is the case with Neutopia, a game released to the PC Engine in 1989 and localized into English on the TurboGrafx-16 a year later. To say Neutopia was inspired by The Legend of Zelda would be an understatement, as it follows the objectives, play style, presentation, and design philosophy of the earlier game as if it were a blueprint. That doesn't necessarily mean that Neutopia should be dismissed as a shallow copy, especially when the game that it is trying to emulate is often regarded as one of the greatest video games of all time.

Evil demon Dirth has ravished the lands of Neutopia, kidnapped Princess Aurora, and commands his forces from a castle in the sky. Before departing to rule his hordes from above, he stole Neutopia's eight spiritual medallions, hiding them deep within labyrinthine crypts guarded by his fiercest minions. Neutopia drops the player into the armor of Jazeta, a young warrior given a charmed compass by "an old and wise mother" and tasked with recovering the eight medallions and defeating Dirth. Gameplay is presented from an overhead perspective with an inventory of selectable weapons and tools at Jazeta's disposal, exactly as in The Legend of Zelda. On the overworld the charmed compass will always point toward the location of a labyrinth containing a medallion, providing a gentle push in the direction of the main objective.

The world of Neutopia is broken up into four main overworld areas known as spheres, each containing two labyrinths with a medallion hidden in the crypt of each. Initially only the Land Sphere is accessible, with its two medallions used to unlock the Subterranean Sphere, then the Sea Sphere and Sky Sphere respectively. The Spiritual Shrine where the quest begins is used as a hub to move between the three locked spheres, freely restore Jazeta's vitality, and obtain a password or save to internal memory when present. In addition to defeating enemies on the overworld en route to the labyrinths, there are a lot of characters to talk to, buy items from, and complete tasks for. If there is a striking contrast to The Legend of Zelda it is just how much dialogue there is in Neutopia, all very well translated, with just a touch of humor. The majority of these conversations serve to further explain the lore of Neutopia and it requires the player to do a bit of piecing together to understand the full story. It's a pretty standard fantasy narrative but I like the way it is presented, as if you are a wandering warrior learning from townspeople you encounter - which is exactly what Jazeta is doing.



Some parts really do look like a more colorful Zelda (left), a bit of humor and a lot of text (center), entrance to a labyrinth (right)

As with the game it is replicating, the majority of time will be spent exploring the labyrinths. In addition to each containing a medallion guarded by a boss enemy, they also contain useful items required to advance in the quest. Utilizing bombs to blow open hidden passages quickly becomes the norm but unlike many of the dungeons in The Legend of Zelda, the hidden paths in Neutopia's labyrinths don't always follow a logical route. This means Jazeta will often need to bomb nearly every dead end in a labyrinth in search of hidden areas. Bombs actually play a huge role in the game, with even most townspeople in the overworld areas hidden behind sealed doors that must be blown open. Speaking of sealed doors, it's often overlooked but there is one design hallmark Neutopia featured prior to its later utilization in the Zelda series - that of a large key used specifically to unlock the door to a labyrinth's boss room. In Neutopia this is called the "key to the crypt" and each labyrinth features one hidden deep within, usually in an out of the way area. Two years after the release of Neutopia, The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past would feature a "big key" in each dungeon, working much in the same way as Neutopia's crypt keys. Some form of a large boss key would go on to be featured in virtually every Zelda game that followed, proving that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

If there is one small issue I've always had with Neutopia it's that Neutopia feels small. I don't mean the length of the main quest or the scale of the story or the way the game is designed. Visually everything has always looked too small to me - the characters, enemies, items, doors, trees, rocks - you name it. Although characters are more or less twice the height of what was seen in The Legend of Zelda, Neutopia inherits the stubby graphical design of Nintendo's earlier game and is never quite able to escape it. While this adds some variety in having characters of different heights and enemies of different sizes, it has the side effect of making everything appear more miniature in scale - at least to me. I've never been able to totally explain my misgivings concerning this odd perspective but it has persisted no matter the size of TV I've played the game on. That's not to say that the graphic design is inconsistent or poorly detailed, quite the contrary. While the visuals won't blow anyone away, they are very colorful and nicely illustrated from beginning to end.



A familiar looking inventory screen (left), a large and nicely animated boss that still feels small (center), Jazeta fighting enemies (right)

Most of the music is relaxing and calm, even the more action-oriented tunes, which admittedly may not be what everyone is looking for in an adventure game. However the compositions are unique and sound great, especially the rousing title theme. The labyrinth music has always been a personal favorite of mine, with a haunting melody that tends to stick with me even hours after finishing a play session. Effect sounds can be considered passable at best as they're a bit muted and provide only the most basic auditory feedback. Without a doubt the smudge on Neutopia's audio package is the low life alarm. A sound meant

to grab the attention of the player when they are low on health is nothing new but Neutopia's is more akin to something like an unfastened seatbelt or door ajar alarm on a car. The chime sound is so overpowering and constant that it borders on audio torture and nearly makes the game unplayable, forcing the player to restore their health or continue to suffer.

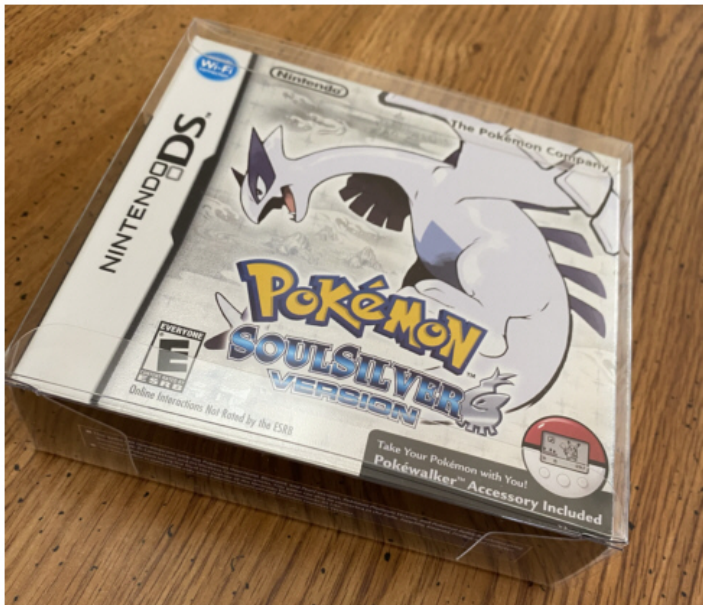
While it doesn't break much new ground, Neutopia is well designed with solid gameplay and a nice length that any fan of action adventure games should enjoy. The game is getting up there in value these days so I'd recommend playing it via the TurboGrafx-16 Mini (which also includes the ridiculously expensive sequel) or other modern means. TG-16 Mini consoles seem to be hard to come by currently but I'm sure a restock is on the way. I've always felt that Neutopia was unfairly scoffed at over the years as nothing more than a shallow imitation. It may be an imitation but it's nowhere near shallow or empty. Neutopia is a far better game than it will ever be given credit for. If you've played The Legend of Zelda to death and want a new challenge rather than walking down the same well worn and memorized path - here's your game.



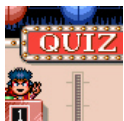
Protective Cases From RetroProtection

by [Todd Friedman](#)

I was organizing my video games the other day and came across an unopened Pokemon SoulSilver Version with Pokewalker accessory in box. I looked up what an unopened box would be and to my surprise saw a range between 250 - 350 dollars on eBay. I wanted to make sure this game stayed in brand new shape, so I searched eBay for a box protector for this specific game. I actually found one there by a eBay seller "retroprotection." I ordered the box protector for what I felt was a reasonable price with shipping. I then went online to a retro gaming group and asked if there was a website that sold most retro game protective boxes and one member sent me the link for [RetroProtection.com](#). I come to find out that the eBay seller and website are the same companies.



When I logged into the website, I noticed right away all the different consoles that they offered box protectors for, including both US and Japanese. I ordered a few more case protectors for my Atari Lynx games, NES games and Super Nintendo game boxes. The cases are sold as individuals, with discounts for bulk packs of 5, 10, 50, 100 and so on. I was very impressed with the speedy shipping. Quality and customer service have been really impressive and I will be ordering many more box protectors going forward from them. If you need protective cases for some of your games, I really recommend giving them a try.



Weekly Retrogaming Trivia Recap

Compiled by [David Lundin, Jr.](#)

Every Friday on The Retrogaming Times Facebook page (facebook.com/theretrogamingtimes), we present a Weekly Retrogaming Trivia question. This just-for-fun trivia challenge provided each week is an opportunity to test your arcane and oddball retrogaming knowledge. The answer to the question from the previous week is posted along with a new trivia question every Friday!

Below is the recap of all questions and answers posted between this issue and the previous issue:

06/26/2020 - WEEK 169

Question: What is the earliest year a Dreamcast's internal calendar can be set to?

07/03/2020 - WEEK 170

Question: What was the first video game to feature a player adjustable camera?

07/10/2020 - WEEK 171

Question: What was the only four-player vector graphics arcade game ever released?

07/17/2020 - WEEK 172

Question: What Atari VCS game included special driving controllers?

07/24/2020 - WEEK 173

Question: The arcade game Space Harrier takes place in what realm?

07/31/2020 - WEEK 174

Question: In the arcade game StarBlade, what is the name of the mechanized planet that serves as the initial threat?

08/07/2020 - WEEK 175

Question: In the arcade game StarBlade, what is Red Eye's power core called?

08/14/2020 - WEEK 176

Question: Although its transformation can still be triggered through a sequence of actions, what jelly bean flavor was removed from A Boy and His Blob: Trouble on Blobolonia?

08/21/2020 - WEEK 177

Question: Densha de Go! EX was the only game in the popular series released on what system?



The early objectives of StarBlade, Red Eye and its power reactor Octopus - full disclosure, StarBlade is this editor's all-time favorite arcade game

Answers:

- Week 169 Answer: 1950, strangely enough.
- Week 170 Answer: I, Robot (1984).
- Week 171 Answer: Eliminator (1981).
- Week 172 Answer: Indy 500 (1977).
- Week 173 Answer: The Fantasy Zone.
- Week 174 Answer: Red Eye.
- Week 175 Answer: Octopus.
- Week 176 Answer: Grape = Wall. The grape jellybean was replaced with Ketchup = Catch Up to remove the potential of Blobert being separated from the boy.
- Week 177 Answer: Sega Saturn.



Indy 500 came in an oversized box with included driving controllers (left) Eliminator was a cool game saddled with a problematic monitor (right)

Don't be left out! Be sure to follow [The Retrogaming Times on Facebook](#) or [The Retrogaming Times Info Club on Twitter](#) for a new retrogaming trivia question every Friday!

We need your questions! If you have a trivia question you would like to submit for possible inclusion in the Weekly Retrogaming Trivia question pool, e-mail it to trt@classicplastic.net! If your question is selected to be featured, you will be entered in our year-end prize drawing!



I'm closing this issue out with something a little different than usual. During the second week of August of this year, friend and patron of the retrogaming community, Frankie Vitarello passed away. I'm terrible with properly expressing loss, especially when I always know there are others more directly affected by someone's passing. So the only way I can think of to show my remembrance and gratitude, is to write about how I knew Frankie and some of the interactions we've had over the years.

I first met Frankie on the Digital Press video game forums, where his user name was Frankie_Says_Relax. At the time the DP forums were massive - it's really hard to explain just how popular and highly regarded they were and how close and diverse its huge community of users were. Eventually he would become a moderator on the forum and be very much involved with community events at the Digital Press physical retail store.

Not too long after he first registered on the forums, he was talking about some Famicom Disk System repairs, as he had just refurbished a Disk System drive. Reading of his repair success caused me to finally bite the bullet and buy a Twin Famicom AN-505 in early 2008. Unsurprisingly the Disk System drive belt had long since rotted away. The correct belts were hard to come by back then but Frankie's recommendation of an eBay vendor (the long since defunct JFGoods) that sold replacement drive belts, as well as their replacement tutorial that he had used in repairing his drive, gave me the confidence that I could get it working. Upon posting on the forums about my acquisition, Frankie offered to send me a duplicate copy of the FDS game F-1 Race (on a loose 3D Hot Rally disk) to assist me in getting my disk drive up and running and because he knew I'm a motorsports fan. Upon taking him up on his offer he dropped it in the mail, refused to take any money for it, and a couple days later I used that disk to get my drive running. As my collection wained over the years, that copy of F-1 Race became one of the few items that I would never part with. I used it to repair and calibrate many Disk System drives and it was always the first game I would try on a newly received system. Whenever I'd be working on one of those FDS drives, especially in the years we'd communicate on Facebook rather than a forum, I would thank him again for sending me that disk - it was just a small gesture but it meant a lot to me back then, and still does. That disk reminds me of how cool the community could be, how **genuine** retrogamers could be toward one another. That may sound lame or stupid to some but the small things like that are

what show a person's character.



I recall our conversations about TRON, The Prisoner, his erroneously modifying a Dig Dug arcade cabinet into a MAME cab (and later atoning for such by beautifully restoring a Mr. Do! cocktail). Bootleg video game copiers, cool gaming gadgets, virtues of the forgotten NES Zapper game Gumshoe, his love of Halloween and his amazing costumes that would give any professional cosplayer a run for their money. His nearly drawing me into the world of unlicensed Transformers figures with more screen-accurate sculpts and accessory sets that we could only dream of as kids. He was also a friend of the newsletter, supportive of the re-launch right from the start, and one of the most frequent respondents on our social media pages. Nearly every week he would respond to Weekly Retrogaming Trivia and every time he would have the correct answer - sometimes a more detailed answer than even what I had in mind.

I keep hoping it's some trick, desperately hoping it's some elaborate April Fool's prank (Digital Press always had some crazy ones), but no... this sad and surreal feeling is so unfortunately true. Were we close friends? No, admittedly we weren't. That's on me though, as I'm a fairly private person but he never held it against me. There are people you encounter in life, no matter how or how briefly, who you know are the real deal. Genuinely good people who make a positive impact on those they cross paths with, full of life without malice. That's what I think of when I think of Frankie.

That he touched so many within the retrogaming community is a testament to who he was, how much he enjoyed video gaming, and more importantly the interactions with the people involved along the way. My deepest condolences to his family and those who knew him better than I.

May your scores always be high, Frankie. You are missed.

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Thank you once again for reading The Retrogaming Times. We'll be back on November 1st with our next issue, the last one this year! Be sure to follow [The Retrogaming Times on Facebook](#) and join our community for the latest updates and information! Additionally [The Retrogaming Times Info Club on Twitter](#) features up-to-the-moment news and notifications for all things The Retrogaming Times! I sincerely hope you enjoyed this issue and that you will return to read the next issue and possibly submit an article yourself. **Remember, this newsletter can only exist with your help.** Simply send your articles directly to me at trt@classicplastic.net or check out the submission guidelines on the main page. Submit an article today and join a great retrogaming tradition!

See You Next Game!



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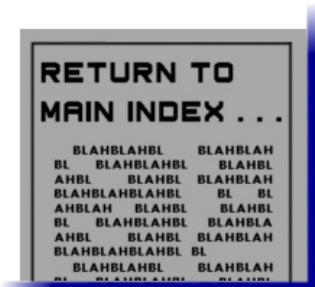


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Assembled and published by David Lundin, Jr. on September 1st, 2020 at ClassicPlastic.net
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