

ORPHANED COMPUTERS & GAME SYSTEMS

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How orphaned are these game systems that Chris and I cover if there is so much to write about? There are still new games appearing for most of the old systems, with most of the activity seeming to center around the Atari 2600.

Last night, using my Supercharger, I played a recent Freeware game that I never could have imagined appearing on the VCS: a text adventure! There's no keyboard, of course, but it still works rather well with just a joystick. It is rather more like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book than, say, an Infocom game.

I also had the rare experience of playing what Chris and I suspect to be a pirate version of *Ms. Pac-man* at a local pseudo-arcade called Block Party. The coin-op's case is labeled *Ms. Pac-man*, and everything about the game is the same -- except that all of the action-related graphics have been replaced! Instead of playing the part of the famous yellow heroine, you play a fire fighter who's being chased around by packs of cigarettes. The Energizers have been replaced by lighters, the consumption of which enables you to smoke the now-fleeing cigarettes. The usual dots deployed along the maze have been replaced by flames which you must extinguish. I was amazed to find this game at a mainstream venue. Does anyone know where to find more details about this?

Before the next issue appears, there will an *Orphaned*

Computers & Game Systems web page that will contain back issues and additional information not available in paper copy. The site will be set up in a similar fashion to the newsletter you're holding, with issues available for downloading to print hard copies. It will employ an easy-to-navigate hierarchy set up for quick access to whatever you're looking for. You'll find no advertisements and no graphics -- just a cool, fast download! -- AT

I was surprised to find that Block Party, which Adam mentioned, had not only the pirate game but also a semi-circle of other classic coin-ops. And people were playing them! There were *Missile Command*, *Centipede* and *Stargate*. It was obviously a thrill to play *Stargate*, remembering how to use the button controls effectively (and actually not making a fool of myself, if you can believe that!). But it made me realize that these "orphaned" games actually make up a new, reasonably lucrative industry.

When Adam started this newsletter a mere four years ago, it could still be considered an inarguably underground forum. Classic games were already being collected by a lot of people, but it wasn't considered an actual market; it was, more or less, an affront to the idea of getting newer, more expensive slicko systems. But now, after the appearance of *Williams Classics* and other CD-ROMs available

for IBM computers, classic gaming has ceased to be a mere hobby. Are we, as classic machine enthusiasts, simply part of the new mainstream? If you were to take a look on the Internet, you'd certainly wonder. Sure, we don't make up the majority of the gaming fans in the world -- not even close. But interest in the boxes of yore is gradually becoming more rampant, and it'll be interesting to see how far it goes before the status quo of gaming hops back off the nostalgia train and finally gets on with being its usual, supposedly progressive self.

You'll notice that this issue contains a lot of stuff about creating games, alongside the expected material dealing with *playing* them. It's safe to say that Adam and I have felt the slight pangs of a dilemma we're both having: We own tons of video games, old and new, but the flames in our heads scold us for playing more than creating. Sure, we get this tasty hunk of text out to you fine people every couple of months, but we've both undertaken projects that are still in progress, and the main one is the programming of a game. We've both written tons of programs before, but now we're attempting to write a super-sonic Amiga game. We need to learn *Blitz BASIC*, but we can't stop playing games long enough to concentrate! I suppose that the relevant material herein is an attempt to make sense of our irresponsible impulses. -- CF

I'LL START TOMORROW

Why don't people make games, even when they really want to?

by Chris Federico

When I was 11 or 12, Atari 2600 games and select coin-ops were on my mind constantly. I wasn't interested in whatever the teacher was talking about, for instance. I'd sit there and invent video games instead of listening to the lecture or doing the workbook exercises.

These tentative games were brought from my mind to notebook paper via drawings and lists of plots and rules. I even got blank-screen-drawing down to a science; the edge of a notebook cover was the straight-edge against which I drew the four lines. Then -- wow! A blank screen on a piece of paper! My mind would reach anywhere and everywhere to come up with neat ideas. I got more creative experience and confidence from these self-imposed activities than any lesson or quiz.

I obtained a Commodore 64 around that time, and immediately learned BASIC. I found out that it was a pretty slowly executing language, and from reading *Compute!* and other magazines, I learned that machine language was what I needed to make fast action games. But it seemed really hard, so I continued to make games in BASIC, always thinking, "I'll learn machine language someday..."

Someday is here, folks, and I still haven't learned machine language with any real skill or savvy. I've managed to understand the basics (no pun

intended), and I've made a couple half-assed attempts at code, but I've never really attacked Assembly with the tenacity I applied to those first months of developing a style in BASIC. *Garry Kitchen's GameMaker* by Activision was really my savior, and I designed a lot of games on that well-made tool right up into the mid-90s.

Eventually the Amiga entered my world (courtesy of a certain Mr. A. Trionfo), and I attempted to make games in AMOS (a drastic upgrade of the ideas behind BASIC). But I was soon confronted with the same sort of revelation: It wasn't a fast enough or dependable enough language with which to create great games. So now I'm looking toward *Blitz BASIC*. In other words, fifteen years into my era of very intense involvement with computers, I still haven't fulfilled my childhood dream: to make a really, really good video game that has longevity. Selling it is beside the point, y'know?

Are any of you like this? I thought it would be interesting to try and figure out why a lot of people who know the basics of programming don't get motivated or confident enough to sit down with a low-level language (meaning better and faster than BASIC or whatever), design the game of their dreams, and go through with all the coding. You folks who have actually created good games in your rooms or garages: Shut up. We're mad at you.

I'm going over the possible reasons because I feel that therein lie the solutions. Realize that this is as much a lecture to myself as other would-be world-creators.

1. A computer is a mean, confusing monster that will only run *Myst* or *Office* with any friendliness.

I'm starting out with the most new-user-ish reason. People think computers are mysteries, not realizing that they're like calculators or musical instruments: You get results that are directly congruous with the effort you put into learning how they work. And they work in a sensible, logical way. There's no mystery. They do only what they're told. It's an exact science, of course -- but a very tangible, understandable one.

2. Machine language (or insert your own bane here) is too hard to learn; I need more free time than I currently have.

Well, how does one usually learn something? By taking a month off work, staying home and doing nothing but reading up on the subject? Nope. You *gradually* accumulate the knowhow you need. Sit down with a language manual and a computer once in a while. You don't even have to use up all of your spare time. Just learn bit by bit and monkey around on the ol' keyboard. As your knowledge of the subject increases, so will your enthusiasm -- it'll go faster and faster. Saying "it looks really hard" is like calling yourself stupid. Give yourself some credit, for godsakes! You came *this* far with the machine, didn't ya?

3. What's the point? The game industry is corrupt anyway, so I won't be able to sell anything unless I get really lucky.

Well, true. But if you're not creating a game that you would want to play yourself, it won't come out good anyway. And if you're not doing this mostly for your own enjoyment -- regardless of how nice it is to have an audience -- you should write-off the project as a pipe dream. Without your own interest, your

work won't come out good.

Besides, not trying to get your game to a lot of potential players is another laziness to be confronted. Send your original programs away to Aminet (Amiga), Shareware.COM or Download.COM (PC), an 8-bit FTP site (Atari or C-64), the online *Loadstar* magazine (C-64), or any of the companies that release CD-ROM compilations of public domain software. Get the address off the back of one of the compilation CDs you find in the software store.

4. I can't afford to buy the language software.

Well, save up! Put money away like you did for your game software, or your Playstation, or your N-64, or your latest CD player. Because creative hobbies take priority over everything else if you're good to yourself and you're hoping for a rich, full life -- using your brain to its fullest renders much greater rewards than beating the bad guy at the end of someone else's game, or sitting there listening to someone else's music.

Pull out a piece of notebook paper, design a game, choose a language, and entertain yourself. For one thing, it's easier than it looks. I mean, we all know that. There's no magic program farm that all the old, famous software designers knew about. There was nothing special about them that you lack, no mysterious alchemy they'd mastered but wouldn't spill the beans about. There's no reason your own creations can't stand up to theirs. Whatever you achieve in life, even something seemingly trivial like a video game, you'll always have that. That accomplishment, that thing you created with your own head and hands, will never go away. (Well, provided you make a backup copy.) -- CF

So Where Do the Ideas Come From?

Well, songwriters and authors are asked the same thing. I guarantee that nobody has ever located a secret wellspring of ideas for any creative work they've produced. The filter that turns notions into projects is your imagination. The less picky that filter is -- the more you allow into that imaginative part of yourself -- the more original, or at least really *nifty*, your output will be.

It's easiest to discern where an idea to write a *utility* program comes from: the *need* to take manual control of a situation, of a lack in your available library of tools. You start by thinking, and usually at a time when you're not looking for ideas, "Man, I wish there were a program that did such-and-such." And then you're suddenly thinking, "Wait a minute! That wouldn't be too hard to *write*, now, would it!" It's almost like having a new game at hand -- programming is like a puzzle or brain game, and it's really exciting when you start working on a program, because it's like a big, blank crossword puzzle -- but with looser, more lenient dimensions.

But getting an idea for a *game* is completely different -- or is it? Sure, the designing of a game isn't based on a practical need for anything, other than a craving to create. Games are mainly based on wanting to pull your imagined visions into reality, to play inventor or God. But that's based on the same kind of need as the conception of a utility program, and it's the simplest, most basic idea wellspring of all: "I want to play this sort of game. I would buy something like this if it were

available." It's like writing songs you'd want to hear, or writing the kind of story you'd like to read.

And it really is that simple. What sort of game do you want to play? Is that game around yet? Well, then, write it yourself! The only people who can't do these things are people who are convinced, or who've allowed themselves to be convinced (mostly in their formative years, I'm sorry to say), that they can't.

And once somebody's pegged a language and completed a few things, resting on his laurels is the worst thing he could do. Keeping an open mind and a curious imagination is vital, no matter how successful your last project was. Why bother attaining any self-importance about it? You have fun doing this stuff. What other reason is there? Some people would say "the money." And let 'em say it. A good game is a good game and a shitty one is a shitty one. What matters to the person playing your game, and to *you* when *you're* playing it, is how much fun is being had.

Trust me: You'll surprise yourself with how capable you really are at writing your own programs. It's like a lot of creative talents: It's easier than it looks. As long as you're interested in it and you have the necessary degree of motivation, you can learn and apply this stuff.

What's been a matter of debate for some time is this. Programming: art or science?

It's a little of both. That's what makes it so appealing. Both sides of your mind are engaged. You get to dream up a wild idea; but then you have to program it. But coding -- using your sense of logic and structure -- draws from raw creativity as well, like those brain games I mentioned. You're using the proverbial left brain *and* the right. And *everyone* has both of those! -- CF

THE TOP TEN SINS COMMITTED BY COMPUTER GAME WRITERS

My Pet Peeves -- and Probably Yours Too

by Chris Federico

1. No pause feature. There's absolutely no reason whatsoever to disclude a means of freezing the action. A pause feature is extremely easy to write while one is coding a game, no matter what language is being used. The tiniest amount of memory would be required. The only things I can think of to attribute such an omittance to are laziness and a lack of ability to perceive the execution of a game as a whole.

Maybe in worlds where there really are invaders or Q-Berts, nobody has to stop to light a smoke, get a drink or go to the bathroom. Alien physiology is probably much different from ours. But Earthling players appreciate a way to stop the onscreen activity once in a while. The most inexcusable instance of this sin: no way to freeze long or multi-level games. AtariSoft's *Crystal Castles* for the C-64 is a prime offender here, excellent as it otherwise is.

2. No way to restart. MindScape's stunning *Uridium* and, I'm afraid, AtariSoft's *Crystal Castles* again -- not to mention other numerous, otherwise great games like MicroProse's *Airborne Ranger* and Taito's home version of *Gradius* -- feature no way to escape from a game-in-progress so that it can be immediately re-undertaken from the beginning. This is especially frustrating in games that rely on carefully conserved lives for tougher, later levels. If you make a bad move

on, say, the first screen, and lose a life, the only way to restart a game guilty of this sin is to deliberately get your poor onscreen hero killed over and over until the game ends and you can start again. It takes too long, especially when you're angry and you want to get on with beating the thing. And such a senseless waste of fictitious lives!

3. Title screens that take longer to load than the actual games.

Everyone likes nifty graphics, and any game player can appreciate the detail and sensory satisfaction of a well-done scene. But many programmers attempt to cover up mediocre games with pretty title screens. Doesn't work. And an aggravating side-effect is that a lot of opening screens are part of the actual booting programs for the main games, and those first, graphics-only files often take longer to load than the games themselves! So you're waiting twice as long for a hundred extra blocks to crawl through that serial cable. Good examples of this sin are First Star's so-so *Superman* and Broderbund's attempt at the 8-bit version of *Star Wars*. But some really good games suffer from this needless, annoying delay as well; Electronic Arts's *Skyfox* and *Demon Stalkers* both contain boot programs that, while boasting neat title screens, take far too long to load themselves. When someone invents something that allows you to actually *play* these gorgeous title screens, FINE!

4. Annoying music that you can't turn off.

I don't know why some programmers opt to skip sound effects in favor of background music. It seems that the latter would require more effort, doesn't it? Maybe it's the challenge of getting a nice tune out of an 8-bit, especially one

that's not a Commodore 64. But what about Amiga, Mac, PC, Nintendo or Genesis games that drive you nuts with tedious songs that can't be silenced with the press of a key or button? Creative challenge isn't an excuse here. Most of that stuff is digitized, not manually programmed.

Game music is bound to be repetitious. I have yet to play one of those melodic platform games and actually enjoy the music. And an old, extreme example is AtariSoft's *Congo Bongo* for 8-bits. They put a three-note refrain of percussive sounds into that arcade translation, and that "song" plays over and over and over until you want to, very deliberately and calculatedly, hold the disk over open flame. And experienced, thorough game designers like David Crane should know enough to include options to silence the repetitious harmonies in adventures like the otherwise remarkable *Pitfall II* (I know you can just turn the volume knob down, but then you miss out on the sound effects -- which I've always felt are important elements of the atmosphere and feel of a game).

5. Spectacles that attempt to distract from the actual game play. A bad game is a bad game no matter how good it looks.

6. Too many bad guys. I know this sounds like a complaint from anyone who's ever played *any* challenging game, but hear (read?) me out. It seems like a lot of game creators felt, at the last minute, that their games were too easy. Whether due to self-importance or paranoia about putting a quickly won contest on the shelves, these people couldn't handle the weak-looking possibility of easy play when it came to their creations. The lack of consistent imagination, or simple programming laziness

after a couple months' hard work on a big chunk of code, has often caused inventors to take the easy route and favor irrelevant difficulty over further creative effort. In short: More bad guys or quicker bullets were stuck into a lot of games that made them tedious instead of challenging.

Synapse's free, huge-feeling *Shamus* should have been a fantastic game; it involves exploration, brainwork and smoothly animated shoot-outs. But very, very, VERY huge clusters of droids fire such overwhelmingly accurate, fast, densely-packed swarms of bullets at you as soon as you enter a room that the fun is replaced with frustration. Succeeding has more to do with luck than skill, and anyone can sit around rolling a pair of dice. This is a *video game* we wanna play here, folks.

Taito's *Sky Shark* and Mindscape's *Uridium* both contain enemy fire that's too fast to be evaded (I've been playing the latter for a decade; believe me, skill has nothing to do with avoiding bullets). The end of Electronic Arts's otherwise wonderful *Dan Dare* and the lightning phase in Creative Software's excellent *Joust* clone *Dragonhawk* are examples of the same thing. Players love to be challenged until they're sweating and swearing, but nobody likes monotony.

7. Frequent disk-switching.

There is a lot of room on a disk -- even an old floppy. That's the whole point of disks, really. They were invented because the potential for a lot of room was evident, along with the speed.

Regardless, the makers of a lot of computer games (TSR's ho-hum *Dungeons and Dragons* series, Electronic Arts's incredibly good *Project: Firestart*, and that same group's mammoth *Adventure*

Construction Set all come to mind) felt that their products looked fancier and/or would command bigger prices when spread across three or four disk sides, to be switched-between constantly throughout a session. Having to switch disks once, or loading from a data disk, is obviously perfectly reasonable. But stopping the action itself so the player can flip over or exchange disks several times has no practical reason. All of the games I mentioned could have easily fit onto one disk side apiece. All that the constant switching does is make otherwise smooth programs into erratic, tiresome hand workouts, and the disks are worn down quickly.

Maybe they were marketing moves by the companies. Maybe the programmers *did* fit everything into single directories, but their sales division cohorts felt that buyers were gullible enough to think they were getting more for their money ("Look, Marge! This one has THREE DISKS and it's STILL only sixty bucks!").

8. Anything having to do with Karate.

The one exception to this is DataSoft's *Bruce Lee*, which has numerous screens and focuses more on exploration than redundant martial arts workouts. Also, it's got a green Sumo. Any game with a green Sumo is okay.

9. No chance for extra lives.

This is obviously exclusive to those games in which it matters, but it's just plain mean to make a game with changing or increasingly difficult levels and not include the occasional chance at a backup protagonist (or a continue option, at the least).

The people in financial control of arcade machines had businesses to run, and so the almighty dollar was of course the bottom line, no matter how much

sweat and dreaming was put into the games by the actual designers. Attention, home video game makers: The minimum-extra-lives thing (i.e. only at the first 10,000-point mark) was a constraint placed on coin-operated contests to draw continuous quarters. You do not have to worry about this aspect of your game; the person has ALREADY BOUGHT IT.

Satan's Hollow, the *Pac-Mans*, *Wizard of Wor* and countless other arcade-to-home adaptations are guilty of this sin. It's pointless and frustrating.

10. Copy protection. I know that this doesn't technically concern video games, but it has to be mentioned. Whether encased in flexible plastic or hard, thin cases, disks are flimsy, sensitive pieces of frozen magnetism that are easily worn-out. The idea of someone spending twenty to sixty dollars on a single program and not being able to make himself a safety copy is ludicrous. It's stupid to deliberately include errors on a disk to prevent its duplication. It makes the drive head knock around a million times more than it normally would, and drives are *expensive*.

It's also needless; we've seen that pirates are going to copy a game if they want to, no matter what underhanded procedures are utilized. In fact, copy protection has actually always encouraged cracking, like a double-dog dare. Heavily protected software is a game in itself to pirates; they love it. So much for prevention. Creators who concentrate on producing solid, longetive products needn't worry about such easily defeated techniques in the first place. Their games will sell no matter how many illegal copies are passed around. -- CF

I'D STILL BE WAITING

A Tribute to Fast-Load Software

by Adam Trionfo

In 1983 or '84, I got my first computer: a Commodore 64. I was 12, and I'd saved money for just over a year to buy the main unit. My parents pitched in for a 13" Sanyo color TV, a 1541 disk drive and an 801 printer. I spent most of my free time with this setup until my 1541 died in 1989. Unfortunately, most of that free time was spent waiting for software to load. I have done a very precise calculation of all of the time I have spent waiting for various software to load with the 1541 and have come to this conclusion: It takes too long!

The Commodore disk drives are very slow. This is no secret. I have mentioned before that I think the Coleco Adam tape drives are equally as fast as, or perhaps even faster than, the poor old 1541. It was common knowledge during Commodore's heyday that something to make disk drive access faster was desperately needed. Programmers and companies took the initiative, and there finally emerged some software that did the trick.

In the mid-eighties, Epyx proudly announced a cartridge called *Fast Load*. It was supposed to make your files load five to seven times faster. Although reviews of this and similar products were outstanding, I never purchased or used a fast-load cartridge. When I finally bought Epyx's gem about two years ago at a thrift store, it just went into a box, unused. Since then, I have also

found two other *Fast Load*-type cartridges. One is called *Mach 128*, released by Access (of *Beach Head* and *Raid Over Moscow* fame), for use with both the 64 and the 128. The other, *Warp Speed*, was released by the same company that released *Defender of the Crown*, Cinemaware.

A few years ago, I discovered how fast Atari 8-bit disk drives were compared to the 1541; I was astonished. I surmise that it was for this reason that the 64 fell into temporary disfavor with me. In some ways, the 64 has an advantage over the Atari; but the slow speed of the 1541 was too much for me. The average loading time for a commercial game is about two minutes. It doesn't sound like a long time, right? Picture going through a pack of disks that you've bought at a thrift store. Maybe you've picked up twenty floppies. They contain an average of three games apiece. To load all of these games, one after the other, at an average loading time of two minutes per file, would take two hours! Of just loading! The time becomes unbearable when the lot turns out to hold maybe three games worth playing! It was an ever-increasing injury to my view of the 64.

Fast-forward to the present. I had been curious to see games that Chris made on the 64 using *Garry Kitchen's GameMaker*, an action game construction set released in the mid-80s by Activision. He made me some disks containing copies of his games about a week or two ago, and I was impressed. Unfortunately, the games took forever to load! They each take up 192 disk blocks, since in order to make a game file independently loadable, *GameMaker* saves its whole chunk of allocated memory, no

matter how much is actually used. Just one of these files took me two or three minutes to load. Finally, out of desperation, I pulled out my Epyx *Fast Load* cartridge, plugged it in, and loaded one of the games. I got the shock of my life! A game that would normally take two minutes to load now took about fifteen seconds! It breathed new life into the 64 for me!

At Chris's, we tested *Mach 128* on his 64 -- same results! The things actually work! And all this time, we've been waiting more than playing!

I also have a C-128, which, with the 1571, loads far faster than the 64 with a 1541; but the *Fast Load* cartridge makes the latter combination a pleasure to use. Not only do files load faster, but the frustration is taken out of sorting through new finds -- something that should be fun anyway. Instead of saying, "I wasted two minutes waiting for THIS to load?" I can now say, "I wasted fifteen seconds for THIS?" *Alriiight!* -- AT

Like Books About Video Games?

This is the one you're looking for. It's called *Worlds: The Final, Ultimate Classic Video Game History and Strategy Compilation*. It's everything the title implies and more. It's a work-in-progress, of course; I've completed the introductory chapter and seven game chapters (covering one classic game apiece -- I've hit all the essential, coin-op derived contests so far). It's currently up to about 100 pages. It's the most complete, accurate text ever written about video games.

It's on disk. This way I don't have to send anyone 100+ printed pages. Send \$2 and I'll send you a double-density 3.5" disk containing the book in ASCII form.

Many more chapters are obviously coming; these will be free if you've bought this first disk. -- CF



Last issue, we did an article called "The Legend of Pitfall Harry: From the VCS to the PC." It was a synopsis and commentary on *Pitfall!*, *Pitfall II: The Lost Caverns* and *Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure*. But now we have some exciting news about a *Pitfall* world that most of you have probably never seen.

For months, Adam spoke of a rumored "secret level" in *Pitfall II*. He said that he'd read about it, but that he wasn't sure how to access it. The most tangible evidence he had was the brief, teasing mention of a second cavern in the manual for the Atari 5200 version of the game. He'd heard that the secret part of the game, called the Great Cavern, was supposedly at least as large as the world in the *Pitfall* sequel we all know and love, and perhaps even bigger.

We thought of including instructions about how to get to this alleged Great Cavern in last issue's feature. All we had to do was get a copy of *Pitfall II* for the Atari 8-bit or the 5200 (these are the only two versions in which the secret game is found), and then of course figure out how to get to the hidden level so we could inform our beloved readers!

The first part was achieved

-- we thought. Earnie Reaves, an *OC&GS* contributor, supplied us with an Atari floppy of the game. We set about playing it, wondering how the hell we were going to find the secret. Adam soon discovered, however, that the game locked up when Harry reached the balloon cliffs. It was apparently a disk that had seen better days. So we left the secret level thing alone and completed the article. But Adam kept talking about it, and we both became manic to find out if there did in fact exist a whole new *Pitfall II* hidden inside the common version. I mean, we're talking about a game that both of us have played regularly for about 15 years! Controlling Harry in a whole new situation with the same mechanics sounded thrilling!

The problem was finally solved last week (I write this in late January), when Adam found another *Pitfall II* disk and immediately brought it over to my house. We were relieved to discover that there weren't any wear-and-tear bugs in this one.

Now, both Adam and I have our strengths and weaknesses concerning this game. Adam is much better at getting by the frogs than I am, and I have an easier time with the long condors-and-bats bit near the game's ending than he does. We took turns searching the Lost Caverns, trying to find the hidden Great Cavern that we still didn't know surely existed. Was it accessed from a certain spot on one of the screens? Or maybe through a gap we'd never noticed between some rocks? We had no idea where to look. It seemed futile.

It was my turn to play. Adam was busy installing our new *Blitz BASIC* CD-ROM onto my Amiga hard drive. I was with my Atari 130XE, trying to just win *Pitfall II* and see if that

didn't do something.

I should point out three things: 1) I got all the gold in the game. 2) I rescued the cat, the girl, the diamond ring and the mouse. 3) I did die a few times, so staying alive through the whole thing isn't necessary (thankfully). I'm not sure if getting all the gold and the mouse are required to find the secret level, but that's what I did.

Since Adam brought the hidden area to my attention some months ago, and I'd never had any idea, I'll let him continue with the story of our find. It's only fair to let him write the exciting bit.

-- CF

I have always wanted a sequel to *Pitfall II*, one of my favorite games. If you read the article devoted to the *Pitfall* series in the last issue, then you know it holds a special place in the hearts of Chris and I.

Other *Pitfall* games don't hold the magic for me that *Pitfall II* does. *The Mayan Adventure*, for example, is a very well-done game, but it lacks the legendary *Pitfall* qualities that have always lured me (for one thing, if it really belonged in the series, the player would be penalized some points when Harry falls too far). What I have been seeking for over ten years is a true *Pitfall III*. I've always hoped that I might eventually find a worthy PD version, but I have yet to. (Programmers?)

A few years ago, I learned that the Atari 8-bit version of *Pitfall II* supposedly contained a secret/bonus/extra level. I'd never owned an Atari version of the game, so I could not look for this extra level. But recently, I finally did get a working copy of that version, and as you'd expect, I was eager to look for the mysterious extra cavern!

While *Pitfall II* is among

my favorite games, I am really no good at it. I have only gotten to Quickclaw, the cat Harry has to rescue, on one occasion. Rather than wasting hours looking for the extra level, I handed the joystick over to Chris, who happens to be much better at most games than I am. Since neither of us really knew what we were looking for, Chris decided to collect as much gold as possible. In about twenty minutes, he had already saved Quickclaw without finding anything different about the game. But it was a moment later when we both were shocked.

A door appeared from the floor. Pitfall Harry, without player intervention, proceeded to walk through it.

I received the C-64 version of *Pitfall II* for my 12th birthday, over thirteen years ago. Since that time I've grown to know the game as well as it can be known (except, I suppose, for the correct timing to dodge bats and condors). Watching as this door appeared on the platform where Quickclaw had been was amazing for me. It may sound pathetic, but I could not wait to see what was beyond it.

I began babbling to Chris that he had done it! But he ignored that; he just said that he didn't have control for the moment. What happened next was far beyond anything I could have hoped for.

Beyond that door does indeed lie an entire new cavern. Not a few rooms, not an extra little playing area to explore, but a huge new cavern containing new monsters and treasures! I was breathless, but not speechless. I kept dictating to Chris what he should do (I'm surprised he didn't give me a good ol' New York smack!).

Is there anything that you've wondered about, as far as why it wasn't included in *Pitfall II*?

How come there aren't any deadly fish in the water, for instance? Why aren't there rooms that can only be entered by swimming underwater? And how come the frogs restrict their jumping patterns to ladder-tops instead of whole platforms? Well, all of these extras are included in the second cavern!

The first incredible things I noticed were new adversaries. How about a fire-ant that's about the size of a scorpion, racing back and forth across the ground at a nearly impossible speed? Or bats without restricted movement patterns? They're both in there. Chris calls the latter wacky bats. Some quick research in the Atari 5200 manual reveals their true name: rabid bats!

There are also new things to rescue, and they are much harder to reach than the required items in the main game. There is a stranded cowboy-type character, something that looks like a rope and a treasure chest.

Some of the other new features of this extra level give new depth to the mechanics. There are now segmented platforms that must be jumped-across in a serial fashion. Some of the platforms are separated so that it looks like they can't even be jumped-to from one another, but they can. Features like this make this extra cavern the *Pitfall III* that I have always longed for. Make no mistake -- it is definitely meant for people who have mastered the first part of the game, since it's very difficult (we haven't beaten it). But the difficulty is satisfying, not frustrating. All *Pitfall II* fans must find the Atari 5200 or 8-bit version, even if it means purchasing one of those platforms. When you play it, you will know why! -- AT

That Fascinating Dot

By Adam Trionfo

The pixel is the smallest element available on the computer screen. It is the light that shines forth from our television sets when we play our games. It is the power that binds a game as it keeps us interested. It breathes life into empty blackness. Without the pixel there would be nothing to put on the black screens in our homes. But to look at the pixel (so tiny!), it appears nearly worthless. Can it really do anything?

What secrets the pixel holds! Alone it is barely noticeable, but never unseen. The brightest and darkest colors that are available are brought to us by that little dot that's insignificant by itself, and which nobody ever seems to think of, but which holds all of us fast with fascination. The pixel proves that it really isn't size that counts, but rather how you use that size. -- AT

The Building Block

by Chris Federico

The pixel (or literally, picture element) is the only object you can see on the screen that you can't criticize. It's not like an alien character, or a cloud-drawing or even a bullet. It doesn't call for an opinion, because it's like a snowflake in an igloo. You don't argue about the building materials, you look at the whole structure. But a pixel is also like one card in a house of cards; if it's the wrong color, put in the wrong place, or not added where appropriate, it can screw up an entire drawing -- tiny or not. Because graphics are, after all, illusions achieved through the assembly of a bunch of these blips.

Sorry, Adam, but it IS the size that counts. Has it been so long since you've played an *Odyssey 2* game? Smaller is better. Maybe that's why a lot of programmers don't do very well with women. -- CF

Is It Beyond Us to Accept the Newer Systems?

by Chris Federico

It all started simply enough: with a single game.

For many years, I smirked insults about newer systems. My trepidation started with the 16-bit era and continued through to the Nintendo 64 and Sony PlayStation. Compared to my classic systems, they all seemed like overpriced, overrated crap.

I've always stuck with machines that were obsolete. I learned how to program on my Commodore 64, and that was the only computer I owned from 1983 through early 1997. I did get a C-128 in the mid-80s, but I found myself sticking with the old BASIC, afraid that any public domain programs I might write with the newer commands would be inaccessible to most users, since the older BASIC was so common.

The only game system I owned until last year was the Atari 2600. I found the hunt for cartridges fascinating, and was satisfied with playing games that were released during my childhood but that I never got to play when they were new. When Adam and I started hanging out in 1997 after ten years without seeing each other, my time had mostly been occupied with creating C-64 games. Adam suggested the purchase of a cheap Atari 7800 we found while shopping, so I bought that and loved it. He's recently added to my collection of classics by gifting me with a ColecoVision and an Atari 8-bit computer. So I got out of the rut of playing only 2600 and 64 games, but I still found only the classic machines

to be worth my time. As far as the computer side of it went, Adam broke that rut for me as well.

We decided we'd begin writing a game together, and Adam told me that the Amiga would best suit our needs. I thought that the Amiga would be a difficult computer to get familiar with, and besides, I'd written-off all of the newer computers as being overblown and irrelevant to my pleasures. I was stuck fast in the classic era, and I didn't want to hear from anything new. But the fact that Commodore had made it warmed me to the idea a little, so I decided that it couldn't hurt to see what I was missing. Adam gave me an Amiga to use, and I found it fascinating, efficient and more than capable of doing anything I wanted. I now spend most of my time writing articles and stories, programming, drawing cartoons, composing music or playing games on the Amiga 2500. So now I only hate IBMs!

The same sort of thing happened when Adam suggested that I'd like the Atari Jaguar. I didn't think it offered anything I didn't already have going with my classic systems. But I realized that *Tempest* and *Defender*, in their classic incarnations, were available for the Jag -- so I bought one, and became enraptured. There was one game that I'd seen on PCs in the past but had never thought much of: *Doom*. I bought it for the Jaguar, since it was made cheaply available to me. I found it much more fun with a joystick than the PC cursor keys; in fact, it became one of my favorite video games of all time! Imagine that! A *recent* game! I became quite literally addicted to it, and not a single night went by from October 1997 through February 1998 that I didn't play *Doom*.

Sure, I got to know all the levels by heart, but there's something about the sensation of playing that game that one constantly craves.

But again, I was hooked on a bygone system. I thought the PlayStation was overrated and too expensive; the games I'd seen relied on digitized graphics, and there was no imaginative game play involved that I felt could capture me like the classics or the Jag contests. I figured that people were fools for buying mere screen wallpaper. It's the same reason I find *Myst* overrated and stupid.

But Adam informed me that *Doom* was available for the PlayStation. Three *Dooms* on two CDs, in fact. With different levels than the ones I'd memorized in the Jaguar version.

Then my tax refund check came in.

Need I inform everyone of what my time's now taken up with playing?

So that's how an avid fan of the classics, a new-system hater, came to purchase a PlayStation. And I don't regret it, because I have a couple of games that I absolutely love playing.

I am entertained by these games, as I've always been entertained by playing *Adventure* on the 2600 or *Raid On Bungeling Bay* on the Commodore 64. It's all entertainment to me: *Frenzy* or *Pepper II* on the ColecoVision, or *Doom* on the PlayStation. My only goal is to have fun.

So I guess that's my point: Don't hate the new systems just because they're new, but certainly don't buy one just for the sake of your collection. If there's a game you love that's available for a new machine, then that's the only reason for buying it; try not to attach anything to it. You wouldn't buy music by a band you hate just because you're

trying to build your collection, right? You buy music you like. So you buy games you like -- don't avoid something just for the sake of avoiding it, but don't buy it just to have it. A game system does not have to come along with a new hunk of loyalty on your part, and it's certainly not an abandonment of your classic machines. Nothing's evil based solely on the year it was released! Sure, a lot of glamorous crap is constantly being foisted on the public. But there are gems, as always. You like it? You buy it.

There's something else to be taken into consideration. The new games of today are the classics of tomorrow. Why limit the rest of your life to the enjoyment of 2600 or Intellivision games that will just get older and older? You'll feel that ol' nostalgic, fascinated feeling for PlayStation or N-64 games in fifteen years. Sure, the 2600 was a completely new kind of toy, and we were much younger and more easily fascinated, giving our present selves more attachment to them than we'll ever have to games we buy today. But can't you just see some thirty-year-old in 2010, saying that the new systems are crap and that he only loves his classic Nintendo 64 games?

Sure, be wary and remain picky about what new products you align with your old games. Beware of anything that's being presented as a great new trend just because it's a technological novelty. There are more rip-offs available for the PlayStation than were ever available for, say, the Vectrex. But be open-minded. Enjoyment is the name of the game, not loyalty. -- CF

IDEAS

By Adam Trionfo

There can be no relaxation if there is inspiration. Those that are tormented by a never-ending barrage of ideas know this to be true. There is no time to sit around and be lazy. The mind and hands must be creating something, anything. It isn't a matter of "What can I do today?" but rather, "What *will* I do today?"

Asking the former question puts emphasis on wondering what to do, which is different. It means that effort has to be made to figure out what there is to do. It could easily be rephrased as "Is there anything to do today?"

On the other hand, asking "*What* will I do" means that the choices are natural. No effort has to be made to come up with an idea. All that needs to be done is that a choice must be made from a mental list that has already been defined, sometimes existing for weeks. The spare time becomes rare and precious.

It has been said that ideas are a dime a dozen. It is completely true. That is why there can be no relaxation with inspiration. One's mind doesn't allow it. Now, bringing this all back to video games, there can be no new games without inspiration. There would just be clones of popular games.

Not all cloned games are bad; some are wonderful improvements. But the great majority of creative effort is wasted upon rehashed ideas. Why? There is so much more to be explored! Granted, not every good idea is new. Money does need to be made to keep the industry alive. But why does the video game industry get stuck in a rut all the time? And why do companies release games that

they know to be intolerable?

The 2600 era had a boatload of garbage shoot-'em-ups. Then the NES era gave us the tired platform game/movie tie-in concept. This idea seemed to hang around forever, living well into the 16-bit era. Now what do we have? We have fighting games, the titles of which may as well all end with "3-D." If Atari had lasted until now, the batch of games after the 2000 series would have been called, without a doubt, the 3-D series.

There is nothing to blame for any of this except for relaxation. We all want to relax. We all need to relax. It is what the video entertainment business is all about. People pay for games so that they can sit back in their living rooms and immerse themselves in other worlds. But too much of this, on the *creation* side, is unhealthy. Inspiration will not occur. Creativity will not emerge while emulating someone else's work. It will lead to, at best, boring imitation.

We do not need more imitation in the video game market; we need more imagination. There is only one way to let this happen. Put down the controller and do something. Create something. It doesn't have to be game-related -- just a creation which has come to mind through true inspiration, and brought forth with effort. The more effort, the better. Because eventually, an effort becomes a joy.

All right, put this down and get started. Give it some thought, but don't get caught-up in those thoughts. Get started when the first vague notions of inspiration take root. Grab that inspiration and go with it. Keep going until there is nothing left to be done. Then start on something more, something greater! -- AT

THE OC&GS REVIEW PANEL

As you know, we usually dedicate this column to Atari 2600 games. We thought we'd make it a little different this issue and go over some ColecoVision titles that aren't very common. Why the hell not? So, here we go. Adam, you first!

FRENZY -- This sequel to *Berzerk* is much more enjoyable than the first episode. I never thought *Berzerk* was the classic it's been made out to be, but *Frenzy* has made me yearn to play the 2600 version of *Berzerk* again for some reason (which I've done; I still can't consider it a great classic, though).

Frenzy sees many of the elements removed that were *Berzerk* trademarks, such as electrified robots and walls. This makes the game stronger and not as annoying to play (how many times have you convinced yourself that a wall has practically jumped out at you in *Berzerk*?). *Berzerk* is one of the few games in existence for which the sequel is far superior. *Frenzy* was not just a rehash released to make some quick money. Instead, it was created with special care and attention to detail.

Some of the new additions that make the game so special are what I call "no one else to blame but yourself" features. For instance, as stated earlier, running into a wall cannot harm you. But some walls are reflective, bouncing back both your shots and the robots'. This can be a fatal mistake if you fire at a wall from a close proximity and you don't get out of the way of the bounced shot quickly enough.

While this bounce effect may seem frustrating and useless, it can be put to great use. One strategy of the game is to bounce your shot at

an angle that makes it hit a robot in a remote area of the maze. Not all of the walls bounce shots, though. In fact, most walls are destroyed by your shots, bit by bit. With enough of a wall destroyed, you can walk through it to the other side. If this happens to be an outside wall, it allows you to create your own exit from the room!

There are so many other exciting additions to this game that I am very surprised that I have never heard mention of it in talks or publications about classic games. Most ColecoVision games were superior in most every way to those on other consoles, including most computer adaptations of the period; but *Frenzy* goes beyond just "good game." It is rapidly becoming one of my favorite games of the period, and is easily one of the best for the ColecoVision. Check it out. You won't be sorry. -- AT

FRENZY -- This is a terrible game. All it does is display a menu of erratic "difficulty" options, numbered 1 through 8. It's like a demented counting game or something. It's definitely not working with my 2600 joystick, and it doesn't even do anything when you press the numbers on the other...oh...wait a minute...

Adapted from one of the most underrated arcade games is the best game Coleco released for their home system. *Frenzy* makes *Berzerk* look positively one-dimensional, but this isn't really a fair comparison; they're two different games. If you want simple'n'sweet, play *Berzerk*. *Frenzy* is a more involved adventure requiring a more multi-faceted strategy, more complex maze-wending and wider peripheral vision.

It really fulfills the meaning of the word "sequel," I'll tell ya *that*. The mazes are randomly generated, and are mostly comprised of walls you can shoot up. There are also shot-rebounding walls, and nothing's more thrilling than being

at one end of a corridor made of these reflective surfaces and seeing a bunch of robots walking toward you from the other end. You can let a barrage of bullets fly at any diagonal angle toward them, and watch your shots bounce back and forth until the poor bastards walk into the line of fire. It's great how a bullet lasts through several bounces, even if it's just retracing its own path at a straight vertical or horizontal angle. It takes forever to dissipate.

The game is executed flawlessly. The animation is smooth and varied, and the music -- versatile and mood-setting for an old home contest -- is often surprisingly intricate. The graphics, sounds and mechanics were worked-on very hard by whichever programmer 'ported this to the ColecoVision, and the elements make the game feel decidedly classic, even if you've never played the coin-op original (which I haven't). It brings back visions of dark, old-school arcades as your heart races in hopes of escaping through the gangs of mechanical fiends, or shooting the new Evil Otto three times before he gets to your hero (during which his expression gets meaner and meaner before he finally deflates).

The other superbly crafted and incorporated extras are the special devices, one of which appears in the middle of every few screens. Shooting whichever machine appears deactivates it. There is a robot factory that churns out new enemies until you blast it, a computer that destroys all onscreen baddies if you hit it, a device that stops the villains' collective movement when zapped, and, perhaps strangest of all, a *huge* Evil Otto who smiles when you die and frowns when you exit the current maze. This Big Otto assumes a scary growling expression and sends out an unavoidable barrage of Ottos from the borders if you kill his smaller counterpart.

This is a fantastic game, made even more fun by the system's

fortunate ability to accept 2600 joysticks. Essential! -- CF

LOOPING -- While not a bad game, this does make very apparent one of the drawbacks of the ColecoVision -- the scrolling is poor. I'm not bashing the system; it is a fine game console. What I am complaining about is that *Looping* brings to the forefront some of the weakest points that the ColecoVision has to offer. Considering that it was one of the earlier games and relied on less experienced coding, it would initially seem to have been a bad choice as a translation from the arcade. But that isn't the whole case. The game visually makes up for the scrolling dilemma with well-drawn graphics and good use of color.

I do not have the directions for this game; nor am I very good at it. It took me until this evening to figure out how to get past the first obstacle: the wall! I came to the wrong conclusion a long time ago about what you're supposed to do. I decided that the object was to destroy all of the buildings. It never occurred to me to try shooting the ground-based rocket, because I thought it was part of the background. That was all it took; the wall vanished.

The difficulty level of this game is set too high. I can't even get past the first level. I think that it would be much more fun if the game were just a little more simple. However, since it isn't, it isn't more fun, and thus I find it extremely frustrating. Frustrating games, as most people know, are not fun. My conclusion? Did you guess it? *Looping* is frustrating and not fun. Such a pity, as it misses by so little. -- AT

LOOPING -- Great concept, and probably a great coin-op. I like the idea of a plane that can loop 360 degrees and shoot at things; it's a pretty basic idea, but when you think

about it, those two elements hold a lot of potential for obstacles, mazes, and even puzzles. The drawback with this early adaptation is that the possibilities are barely explored.

There is an open area containing lethal balloons that float up at you and bounce around for a while, and there is a tiny maze of tubes that drip green stuff at you in harder levels. If more *Super Cobra*-type obstacles were laid out, or even if *Zeppelin*-like mazes (the old Synapse 8-bit game) were considered, this would be an innovative contest. But it's kinda boring.

Also, one of Coleco's project supervisors apparently told the programmer, "Look, I need a game really quick. Make the end of the first level really hard, so nobody can beat it, because we don't have time to let you design a second level." The end relies on frustrating cop-out bad-guy addition instead of exuding any satisfying strategy. Four huge colored balls (huge colored balls?!) bounce around, and it takes forever to shoot even one of them. There's no way to get through them, so you apparently have to shoot all four, but in my very many attempts I've always crashed into the wall first. Even if I were to beat the end, it wouldn't make me feel like I achieved anything, because it would be pure luck that I didn't loop into a wall. The area is TINY. A little innovation in this segment would have definitely been nice.

Most of the graphics, especially the bad guys, are simple and resemble Vic-20 sprites, but their animation and movement are executed smoothly. Not one of my favorite games, but an interesting idea with a lot of possibilities. Anyone wanna make a cool game with a looping plane? Now there's an idea. -- CF

ZAXXON -- I do not like this game, yet there is nothing that I can find wrong with it. *Zaxxon* is one of the

few games that I admire for what they are and what they did, but which I can't stand to play myself.

As it is, the ColecoVision version has a lot going for it. The sounds are good, except for one high-pitched keening that's quite annoying. The sprites are well-defined, although the ColecoVision moves the background, as always, with starts and jerks. The effort that went into this version is high, however.

Zaxxon was supposed to be one of the first 3-D games, but it falls far short (not that a true 3-D world would have made a difference). It's an isometric game; that concept bores me to tears. The few elements that should make the game more exciting just add frustration. For instance, aligning your position with that of an alien craft is an effort of trial and error.

While *Zaxxon* isn't fun for me, I admit that it may be fun for some folks. I wouldn't question them. I've just never understood why it's so fondly remembered. -- AT

ZAXXON -- This can be a great game. With a little imagination, the premise of *Zaxxon* can lead to some extremely creative layouts. The designer can work with the various types of walls and targets to come up with a unique obstacle course.

In the 80s, I got hooked on Synapse's Commodore 64 version. It's the best one I've ever seen. The scrolling is smooth, the graphics are incredible, and the mechanics are free and fast. The ColecoVision version is, by contrast, the *worst* home version I've ever played. The movement is jerky, the angle of firing is inaccurate (you have to sort of aim to the left of everything), and the narrow playfield allows for maybe five inches of side-to-side movement!

The layout of targets is predictable, and it never changes, even once you survive the end-of-fortress encounter with *Zaxxon* himself. This translation is clumsy and not much fun. -- CF