

The Classic-Gaming Bookcast

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For Adam Trionfo

Thanks for being similarly inspiring and helpful: Dominic, Valerie, Nicki, Anneli, Jeremy, Ferg, Strudders, Vic, Alex, Shaun, Sean, Paul, Rick, Will, Scott, Mike, Mike, Greg, Chris, Matt, Jim, Christian, Joey, Mark, John, James, Stuart, Doug, Sacha, Patrick, Freddy, Trusteft, Starscream, Foxy, Sauron, Lawn-Boy Dave, Duane Alan Hahn, Leonard Herman, Bill Loguidice, Albert Yarusso and the *Nice and Games* guy.

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Prologue

Classicism

Adam,

Whether or not I write the book that I mentioned yesterday, my brain can't help but to play with possible titles. I'd like your opinion on what I've arrived at.

Concerning my criteria for the book, the title would have to somehow communicate the following.

1. This is intended as a fun book about old video games. I want that to be evident before the reader even flips past the front cover, as I feel that enough painstaking reference books exist on the subject. As good as most of them are, I'd like to ensure that mine can't be mistaken for yet another. It will nonetheless include scrupulously researched facts, as well as some insights and philosophies. I don't want it to be like any other game-related book out there.

2. The prose is lively, provocative and (hopefully) often humorous.

3. By "old video games," I mean console, computer and arcade games from the 1970s, '80s and perhaps early '90s. Comparatively recent homemade games ("homebrews") will also be featured.

I'm speculating on how I would tie all of that into a clear and descriptive title! If any ideas happen to pop into your head, let me know. I've provisionally settled on *The Classic-Gaming Bookcast*.

Intriguing? Off-putting? Dumb?

Chris

Chris,

It's not dumb.

Adam

See why we're friends? By way of properly introducing the *Bookcast* to my newer friend (you, whether you like it or not), I'll begin with the easy assumption that you're fond of reading once in a while, rather than remaining endlessly passive

and merely watching things on various screens. One of the most enjoyable ways to *interact* with those screens is, of course, to play on them.

The all-purpose term "video games" still works just as well as it has for decades, at least in America. My friends in the United Kingdom often refer to them all as "computer games," which also makes perfect sense, as some kind of internal logic is always involved, even in VCS *Pac-Man*. (I couldn't help it.)

We have reading enjoyment in common, then. I'm kind of a freak, however, as I happen to like reading more than watching, and writing more than both. Back in 1994, my pal Adam started one of the first paper newsletters about old games: *Orphaned Computers and Game Systems*. He published three issues before he was sidetracked. In '97, I encouraged him to continue where he'd left off. He said he would if I'd collaborate, and we went on to type up and mail off a couple years' worth of bimonthly issues. We had hundreds of readers around the world. (This is a fancy way of mentioning that two of our subscribers didn't live in America.)

In 2000, OC&GS became a website, and we've been occasionally writing articles for it since then. Admittedly, it could use some new ones. We're getting there. The website is aimed at readers; we embed no videos, and only as reference points do we include screen shots and other game-related images. Adam is also the webmaster of *Bally Alley*, a phenomenal site about the Professional Arcade / Astrocade. I'm wary of providing online addresses in a book, given the slim chance of change, but the sites are easily found.

Now it's 2015 and I'm 42. To celebrate the fact that I currently embody the Answer to Douglas Adams's rightly unspecified Question, I've decided to try merging two of my joys, writing and old games, and temporarily setting aside my other joy, making music. Any of the common euphemisms for "old" ("classic," "retro," etc.) are fine with me, but in my own prose, I prefer to be as forthright as possible.

There's nothing wrong with age, anyway. In fact, even in our Western culture, it was once respected and revered much more highly than youth. No, I'm not sure why that matters. It just sounds cool when it's pointed out. We all seek greater ages, after all, as we tend to try remaining alive.

How, I thought, will I combine my two fixations in an original and entertaining way? It's a good thought to think, if one's considering writing about something that's more fun to indulge in than to read about. It was immediately clear that if I were to hit upon a relatively fresh idea, and I wanted to enable fellow readers to give the results a chance without spending more than minimal money, the book would have to be made of digital stuff. The printed and bound kind would cost more than I'm willing to ask for, given the lack of concrete credentials that I can supply.

So I thought of two things that we game-players take pleasure in, apart from, you know, playing: video-watching and podcast-listening. I once had a YouTube channel, but the evil Googles, who had purchased the site, decided to try forcing all members to join Google+, their pathetic attempt at competing with other "social networks." I'm not into those, and I'll certainly never be forced into one, so I deleted the *Classic-Gaming Webcast*.

Regarding audio, I immensely enjoy the handful of podcasts that I've listened to, but my hopefully fresh idea has ended up being this: to combine the informative, sometimes opinionated and frequently humorous podcast paradigm with the written word – or, more accurately, 50,000-plus typed words.

To be worth its own existence, the book would have to be much more thorough and, dare I say, edifying than a wise host would ever want to make his podcast, given that he's limited to an hour or six. Granted, he gets to charge nothing; but I can take up as many pages as I like and charge next to nothing, so that's something.

I finally stopped with the "why" and ran with the "why not," and here I am a few months later, finishing up by explaining myself in a prologue. Essentially, I've written the sort of book that I would love to read. And whereas "bookcast" might at first appear to be an especially goofy compound word, it seems no goofier than "podcast," "blog" (a lazy-English abridgment of "web log") or insert-your-favorite-phonetic-atrocity-here.

The title was ultimately determined by the facts that *Classic-Gaming [Whatever]* had somehow not been taken yet, and it made the general theme very clear. I confess that even back when I named the channel, I settled on "classic" with a grain of salt, as that's a matter of individual taste, and "gaming" with a whole jar of the stuff. "Game" isn't a verb. I know that I'm far too late with this observation, but I'm a grammar-head, so the implied action "to game" still strikes me as funny. Again, it's clear, so it'll work.

Lest any of this smack of justification, be assured that I'm only writing because it's fun. Each of us only gets the one life. Of course, it would be great if you felt encouraged to try out the occasional game featured herein, or, if you're only vaguely familiar with it, give it a real chance.

You gentlemen with the podcasts, those awesome radio shows (in effect) that center on our niche infatuation, are doing something extremely munificent and communal in a world that wants us to keep fighting about frivolities. In a way, your work resembles a worldwide show-and-tell, in the most camaraderie-building way. It's also highly educational, in light of the diverse personal perspectives as well as the facts, and a hell of a lot of fun. To me, you're currently the real gaming media.

Pardon the corny sentiment, but this is indeed a "classic"-feeling era, and I hope it lasts. People within a fairly narrow interest group are showing off the creative sides of their hobbyist zeal to one another, and they can take keen receptivity and mutual fist-raising for granted. It rocks.

Differences are inspiring as well, and they're to be celebrated. We game-lovers, at least, are learning that we have no lucid reason to trust xenophobic propaganda, and no convincing basis for finding each other irreconcilably "foreign," let alone with suspicion or enmity. If you're still playing *Robotron: 2084* or *Klax* half a world away, you can't be all that bad. And no matter what our native vernaculars, we can, for instance, crack up at one another's clever replies to the big guy's exclamations in *Sinistar*. "I hunger!" "Oh, stop it. You don't even have a stomach."

As a fervently cartridge-swapping kid, I could never have dreamt of such wide communication with other players. "Oh, you were hooked on that game when you were twelve, too? I didn't even know there was electricity in Borneo."

If you'd like to send comments or whatevers, my e-mail address is chris period federico at ymail period com (they're not dots, damn it. Yes, I know it's a lost battle. Humor me). You can also send me a private message in the *Atari Age* forums. My handle is Chris++, without the comma, naturally.

As you've probably noticed, there aren't any Nintendo, Sinclair, Amstrad or BBC games in the contents. If any of these platforms are among your favorites, try to forgive me, as they're not among mine. I don't dislike them, but my experiences with the latter three are limited, to put it mildly – I'm a Yank – and the only Nintendo Entertainment System games that I've played persistently have been in the *Super Mario Bros.* series. I think we can agree that enough has been written about those three.

Again, there's no implied criticism here concerning any platform, but rather the sensible prioritization of my own tastes when choosing the games to cover. The systems on which they're played are irrelevant. The chapters are sequenced according to platform merely for the sake of convenience.

As for the lack of ColecoVision games, I've no excuse to offer. Its library contains numerous jewels. *Frenzy* and *Pepper II* are particular favorites, but those are just the tips of the double iceberg. I simply had enough subject matter for this book before I happened to consider Coleco's great console. It's mentioned now and then to clarify points, however.

While I provide a lot of details and amusing trivia, and even many of my best strategies, I don't claim to furnish utterly comprehensive game histories or exhaustive instructions, and I never take popularity into account. Again, this isn't a reference guide or a bunch of reworded manuals.

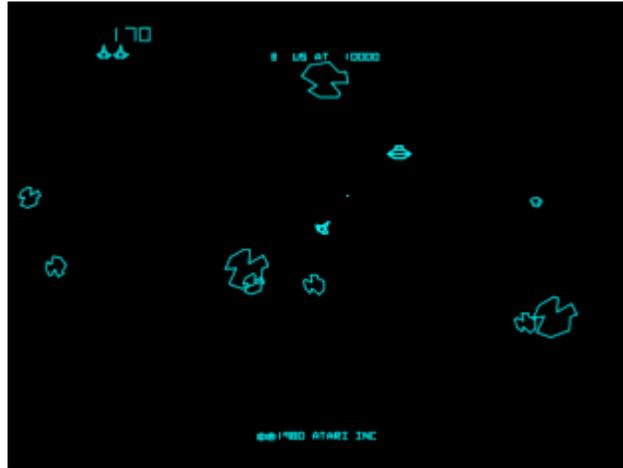
Now that I've shared my thoughts with you (even if you didn't want them; it's too late now), I invite you to share yours with me, especially after you've read the book, or at least enough of it to be pleased or incensed with something.

Thanks for buying this. If you haven't bought it, thanks for reading it anyway. We'll have a great time. Games are wonderful things, after all. They keep our minds sharp while our commodity culture vies to transform us into complacent, uncreative androids without attention spans, and with little desire to learn from each other's outlook or engage in active enjoyments within our fleeting life-spans. They might even protect some of us from turning into walking media casualties.

And very frequently, they're fascinating and intensely fun. At least we can agree on that.

CF 1/15

It's Exciting to Recognize a Revolution in Progress



Holy cow. That's verbose, for a chapter title. It's not exaggerative, though. I remember the first ripples, at least as they filtered through living rooms. Over the following decade, the persistently new, steadily groundbreaking game world would remain exciting and unpredictable. There was so much to take in. It seemed that as soon as my blown mind would recover from the last innovation, it would be re-blown by a succeeding one.

The first home console, the Magnavox Odyssey, reached the end of the assembly line on the same day that I did: January 27, 1972. Video games and I grew up together, and it was spectacular to watch them evolve. My favorite era begins in the mid-'70s and ends around the time when the decidedly unreal, imagination-fueling game was replaced with the real-time interactive movie (for all intents and purposes). The latter hands everything to the player, removing his brain from the scenario's formation. This isn't a wholesale denunciation of modern games. I simply don't find them to be nearly as much fun, by and large, because the *make-believe* is gone.

In '76 or '77, when I was in Kindergarten and my immediate family lived in Cleveland, Ohio, having recently been uprooted from Buffalo, New York, my folks owned a yellow game system that was liberated from the hall closet on the odd weekend night. It played *Pong*, but they referred to it as *Hockey*. It was actually the Odyssey 300. It was easy to identify online years later, as it was the company's only console that was colored like a bumblebee.

Once my father had undertaken the mysterious process of hooking it up, an *event* took place. I found it extremely bizarre and nifty that I could move something around that was on television. We kept the unit when we moved to New Berlin, Wisconsin and I attended the first grade, but I don't remember seeing it after that. Either it had been thrown away as an exhausted novelty before we moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico in '79, or it remained somewhere in the new

house for a few months, and we'd lost interest. Admittedly, the neatness had tended to give way to monotony after an hour or two of playing.

In '81, my father dragged me and my younger brother to wait in the lobby of a fitness center while he exercised. The place might have been called the Atlas Gym, as a man-holding-planet figure stood in one corner. Upon arriving, Mike and I saw a strange coffee table between the reception couches, and walked over to investigate as Dad went off to torture himself by deliberately lifting heavy things over and over again.

It was a "cocktail" model of the *Asteroids Deluxe* coin-op. This was the first arcade video game that I'd ever encountered. The lines and square ball had evolved into floating boulders and a spaceship. I was amazed. You could actually *fire* at things! If you managed to pulverize them all, a new cluster materialized that was more difficult to contend with. This was a *story* of sorts, rather than a predictable ping-pong affair. I ran after Dad and asked if he had any quarters.

For an exasperatingly brief time, Mike and I took turns playing. I remember that it became a whole new game when I'd worked up the nerve to see what the "Thrust" button did. A flying saucer occasionally appeared for a fleeting duel, but it wasn't interested enough in my demise to stop during its flight across the screen. There was also some kind of satellite that broke into segments, which individually attacked my ship. New elements like that had never arisen on our old console. To me, this was the very height of technology.

I've used the phrase "my ship" purposefully, as I also recall the enormity of that very thought. As long as I could keep it in one piece, it was mine. My first ship! How many remote-controlled, genuinely destructive spacecraft does a kid get to command? Each of the three that I received appeared to function on its own, devoid of physical nudging, and yet I covertly controlled its every move. I was entirely responsible for its continued existence. Nobody was going to help me. This was thrilling to a nine-year-old.

We quickly used up the quarters. We could then only watch the demonstration mode that had beguiled us to begin with. I desired so much to take over the spaceship again that I summoned the gall to approach one of the gym's members, a stranger who had just arrived, and ask if I could "borrow" a quarter. The man walked over and looked at the game.

"Yeah, you'd better show me how to play," he said, and got us a couple dollars' worth from the woman behind the counter. Remember when strangers did cool things like that sometimes? (For that matter, remember when it wasn't a big deal to leave your kids unattended?)

When Dad came back out to check on us, the stranger winked and told him, "They're showing me how to play." With some embarrassment, he thanked the

guy and returned to his workout. Our benefactor followed him shortly thereafter, having realized that he could easily extricate himself without being rude. We were still showing *ourselves* how to play, after all.

Over the next few years, playing any arcade game was a huge occasion. This aspect seems to be nearly forgotten among the extensive prose and videos that fill today's various media. Part of the excitement was the intimidation that radiated from this dark, daunting portal between the familiar world and an often literally alien one. You didn't want to make any mistakes, because the end of your visit was brought closer by each, and additional quarters would rarely be supplied. You hungered for enough skills to gain access to as much of that enticing other world as possible – to earn the spatial freedom to explore it and perhaps even subjugate it.

One night in late '81 or early '82, my father decided to bring me to the bar with him. I can't remember the circumstances; maybe my mom had taken my brother elsewhere. Dad seldom drank, but when we got there, I beheld the real object of his patronage: *Pac-Man*. The striking cabinet stood in the entrance area. I'm quite sure that even back then, he wouldn't have been permitted to stroll into the actual bar with me. This was thirty-two years ago, so my memory could be atypically misleading. It might just have been a non-kid-oriented restaurant of some kind.

He dropped a quarter in, pushed a button and explained what he was doing as he steered the featureless yellow head around the radiant blue maze. I'd never seen the game; I was captivated. I hadn't a clue what a "pac" was, but this was surely the most incredible scientific progression from the single-colored *Asteroids Deluxe* that was possible. I didn't even know that these things were called "video games." There were *Asteroids Deluxe* machines and now *Pac-Man* machines. They made pinball tables seem blandly realistic and chance-based by comparison.

I played next, and found my focus distracted by the wild colors and multi-character behavior, with each adversary behaving slightly differently from the others – something that wasn't taken for granted yet. I cleared little more than a couple corridors' worth of dots. I don't think that I even managed to reach one of the Energizers before all three Pac-Men had peeled themselves into nothing like suicidal bananas. "It takes practice," I heard over my shoulder, in that state-the-obvious manner of dads.

He brought home an Atari Video Computer System in February of '82. For the most part, this sort of thing only happened when it was birthday or Christmas time, which it currently wasn't. He'd also bought *Space Invaders*, so he must have been playing the coin-op somewhere. Looking back, I feel lucky that he's always been curious about new technology. In fact, his interest has surpassed mine since then, at least in terms of modernity. He doesn't play video games

anymore, but he's confounded by my unwillingness to get a cellular phone. The minor role reversal is comical.

For some reason, I'd hardly been aware of the VCS (later renamed the 2600, based on its model number). I seldom watched television even back then, so I must have figured this enigmatic "Atari" thing that I'd heard about at school for yet another *Pong* clone. The occasional classmate would announce, "We got an Atari!" in a tone of voice suggesting that his parents had decided to trade the family car for an airplane.

We didn't have the Sears version; it was an early Atari four-switcher with *Combat* packed in. I inspected the console box after Dad removed its contents, and it began to dawn on me: Those extraordinary games for which I never had sufficient quarters could somehow be played on a television. As trite as it sounds, this was utterly too good to be true.

VCS games turned out to be much more intriguing indeed than so-called *Hockey*, of course. They *were* too good. I couldn't "play Atari" enough. That was all I did, when allowed. I also coveted games that I hadn't played yet. I didn't care which ones they were; I just wanted to see what they were like. They *all* looked exciting. I didn't stop running around outdoors, riding my bike or trying to improve on the piano and guitar, but otherwise, I invariably pretended that I was inside some kind of video-game setting.

I obsessed over the screen shots in the green-covered Atari catalogue and Tom Hirschfeld's *How to Master the Video Games*. I'd ordered the latter from *Weekly Reader*, and if memory serves, it had taken precisely sixty years to arrive. I've always gotten a kick out of the title. One set of games had been made, and that was going to be it. "There you go, kid. Now, get lost!"

I invented new games that I fantasized about programming someday. In notebooks and drawing tablets, and on my Trapper Keeper and the wooden slats supporting the upper bunk, I drew the graphics of games that I could "play" by moving the tip of my finger around.

During our summertime '82 visit to Buffalo, I learned how to program in BASIC, the era's common entry-level computer language, by reading a book that I'd borrowed from the library near my grandmother's house. I can't remember the name, but I'd recognize the cover if I saw it. I've actually looked for the damn thing online. I can only recollect the title's science-fictiony typeface on the cover.

I started writing out my own BASIC programs almost immediately. Most of them were *Choose Your Own Adventure*-type games. The instructional book wasn't computer-specific, so it didn't extend to graphics. All that I knew how to work with at the moment was text. After returning to Albuquerque, I continued to fill college-ruled pages with code, but I wouldn't be able to try out any of my ideas until

January of '84, when dependable Dad bought me a Commodore 64 for my twelfth birthday.

I've been playing the old games ever since. In the mid-'90s, I began to notice unfamiliar adjectives, such as "classic" and "retro." I thought, *Oh, they're "classic" now, are they? Well, if you say so.* They don't feel aged to me, as I associate them with recent playing, having never really stopped. I've only added. New favorites are discovered all the time. So nostalgia plays a very, very small part for me. Not that I won't be telling short stories about '80s experiences while opining on the games below, but I dig them in *present* terms as well, which is handy, as the present is all that ever exists.

As a transition into the game chapters, I'll explain how I've approached them. Here, in other words, is the preliminary material that didn't suit the prologue. It will simply make more sense after the narrative that you've just read.

By now, you've probably ascertained that I'm not going to insult you with pithy, digest-it-all-in-a-minute text, the likes of which you're likely to skim from click-bait websites. This is a book. I figure that the more words you get for your buck, the better, so long as they're good ones. It's not as if you can't stop reading when you like, resuming later. To me, a page count of 150 (with my chosen twelve-point Arial, anyway) seems ideal for a book whose chapters are so densely packed with details, viewpoints, jokes and unconventional slants. To avoid appearing haughty, which I'm not, I'll add "for better or worse."

Further, I won't involve myself in that absurd, antiquated Atari-versus-Commodore squabble. It's a bit pathetic at this point, don't you think? "The cool piece of plastic and silicon that my daddy got *me* in the '80s is better than the cool piece of plastic and silicon that your daddy got *you!*" I've always gone with the games, myself, rather than the hardware companies. Some games are better on the Commodore 64, while others are superior on the Atari computers. A few of my favorite C64 games aren't even available for the Ataris, and *vice versa*.

Everyone has his own tastes, after all. There's no good or bad, except subjectively – just as there's no real difference between art and entertainment. Either the thing gives you pleasure or it doesn't. To make yourself so impressionable that you'll allow sociological imposition into your gratifications is to disserve yourself.

Whether or not the item in question is made available commercially is incidental to my admittedly sweeping definition of "entertainment," but it certainly goes without saying that the mythical high-versus-low-art distinction represents lingering class envy at its most infantile. But I could go on. (Clearly.)

My point, if you'll cast your mind back, is that someone else can't possibly tell you what your tastes are. That's why "critics" are useless, with regard to any art

form, software included. No matter how good the writer, you cannot be convinced, for instance, to hate a food that's one of your favorites, or form a sudden fondness for something that makes you gag. One's true tastes in games, music, etc. are just as personal.

Both major eight-bit computers of the '80s had their complementary strengths and weaknesses. That's what's great about having both at hand. The games are available at very low prices these days, and if you don't mind emulation, you can play almost all of them for nothing.

So what, I would ask a contender, is the argument really about? I'm genuinely curious about the motive. What do you hope will occur if you actually persuade somebody to say, "Okay. You're right. Your favorite old computer is niftier than mine." Do you win a prize? What do you get, the lost *Swordquest* treasures?

Brand loyalty is purposeless; thirty-year-old brand loyalty betrays some kind of psychosis. Yet even as I type that, I remain fascinated with a general topic with which I was initially smitten as a child. If there's a lesson there somewhere, I can be guaranteed to steer well clear of it.

Anyway, that kind of bickering doesn't help anyone to learn a thing. Isn't it enough that we have this enthusiasm for old games in common, and that there are so many thousands of them? Isn't it sufficient that we've lived to see a time when we can all finally meet up, regardless of planetary location, to discuss them, share tips and let each other know about so many that we're not all acquainted with?

Before I leave the topic of subjectivity behind, I don't wish to impel you to think like I do; none of the chapters below are "reviews." I've only selected games that are among my absolute favorites, and about which I think I have original things to say. The exceptions are games that are gloriously, uproariously bad. When it comes to apparently crude unfamiliar games, I always try to find the fun, or at least the funny.

Lastly, I strongly believe that the video game, as an entity and an innovation, still hasn't quite lived up to its early promise. I love hundreds of games anyway, so this isn't dissatisfaction so much as reflection. One wants to grab the shirt of every programmer in the world, shake him violently and tell him, "They're electronically rendered alternate universes! You can do *anything!* Break through some established, physics-related boundaries! Make me deal with a new spatial reality that I have to readjust my senses to handle!"

I'll be more specific during the relevant chapter, but Warren Robinett was a visionary (and probably still is, come to think of it). He breached a barrier that most other programmers hadn't even perceived for the breaching. You could now move off of the entire screen, thereby changing your environment. He

implemented this when he wrote the VCS game *Adventure*, consequently constructing the room-changing "engine" that was also used in John Dunn's *Superman*, which was started later but released first.

Few games since those two have truly broken accepted molds. The *Portal* pair might count to some extent, but it's my contention that too much time, money and processing power are still used up with the simulation of things that are more fun in real life, such as sports, racing and playing musical instruments.

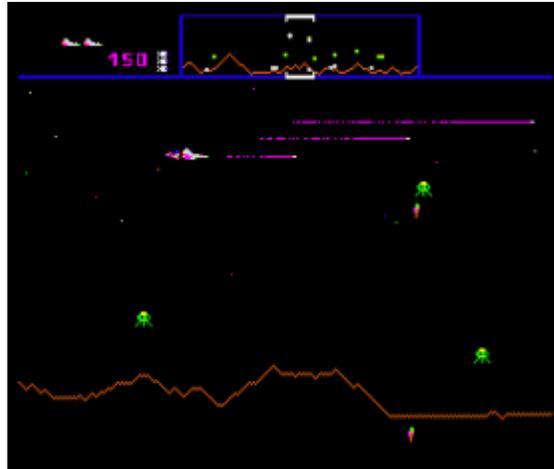
Come on, designer. It's a *game*. Give me something that's literally impossible in real life. Modern humans seem to fear the unusual, even in their escapism. The scenario can be exceedingly fantastical, as long as there's something concretely familiar about it, even if only from other fiction media.

Okay. The games are separated by chapter. Some that don't have their own chapters are mentioned among those that do, mainly for illustrative purposes. As you know, video games are particularly cross-referential.

Arcade

Defender / Stargate

(Williams, 1980 / 1981)



I met this merciless but exhilarating game at a car-repair shop in the 1982 springtime. I'd been brought along on one of those errands that a kid often has to endure. The cabinet was the only interesting thing in the lobby, but I didn't play, as my father didn't have a quarter (or time to wait around, perhaps). I thought it was funny that the attraction mode's character diagram looked like a cast listing, even though it featured exotic aliens and unrecognizable spaceships. It's probably just meant to be a scoring guide, but at the time, I found it hilarious, as though it were satirically asking, "Remember all of your old friends from Saturday morning? Mutant! Bomber!"

During yet another errand about a month later, I finally tried out Eugene Jarvis and Larry DeMar's celebrated beast in a Safeway grocery store on Albuquerque's West Side. I immediately dropped in the quarter that my mother had given me and started the game, making the typical inexperienced-player mistake of not reading (or watching) the instructions first. I was just anxious to blow something up.

I shot a few enemies, tried to figure out how the Scanner worked, enjoyed the vibrant graphics and complained to myself about the controls, which boasted an unprecedented degree of complexity. I didn't realize how much precision they actually granted. I read "Game Over" within something like thirty seconds. ***Damn, this one's hard!***

I watched the demonstration until I learned that I could shoot the Landers as they rose with their Humanoid hostages, catch the latter as they fell, and return them to the hills below. If any Lander made it to the top, he'd merge with his captive and become a Mutant. *What cool ideas!* Frantic to play again now that I knew how, I found Mom and pled in vain for another quarter. I didn't play the game

again until the entire fourth grade at Marie Hughes Elementary went on a field trip to Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza-Time Theater a few weeks later.

I don't remember how well I played, but on the same visit, I first tackled *Red Baron*, *Missile Command* and *Asteroids* itself (I'd only played *Deluxe*). It was also when I seriously decked another kid in the face for the first time. He'd attempted to steal my token from where I'd innocently left it on the *Missile Command* control panel during my game. Apart from that, it was obviously one of the greatest field trips of all time.

Defender is the earliest game in which events take place beyond the screen area, and the first to involve my favorite type of horizontal scrolling. The player's ship can fly to either direction, and can even stop and hover. These days, I find the more appealing game to be the sequel, *Stargate*, whose home versions were renamed *Defender II* just after the machine's manufacture ceased. Williams wanted to ensure its ownership of the title *Stargate*, over which a potential dispute was evidently a concern. (The lackluster MGM film of the same name wouldn't appear until '94.)



One can never fail to recognize the beautiful purity and dexterous grace of the original, but to play the later game well, the player has to vary his strategy more radically from enemy to enemy than in any prior arcade game. *Stargate's* very structure also provides variety, as every fifth wave is a special one, predominantly containing a single enemy type. As in the first game, Waves 6, 11, etc. are occasions of complete Humanoid repopulation. Those people breed fast when they're celebrating your victories.

As far as I can determine, the sequel is also the oldest game to include what amounts to a Warp Zone. If you're carrying at least four Humanoids when you fly into the Stargate, which normally teleports you halfway around the planet (unless there's an abduction in progress, in which case you'll appear at the scene of the

crime), you'll warp three waves ahead and earn all corresponding points. This can be executed only once, but it works during any wave through the tenth.

The Landers are so nervous about your return that they've sprouted zits. And then there's that awesome Inviso power, which renders your ship invincible and lethal – as if your arsenal weren't irresistibly destructive enough, considering its screen-clearing Smart Bombs and the allure-crucial ability to fire your lasers at lightning speed (both happily held over from *Defender*).

Jarvis and DeMar's Vid Kidz development team certainly knew how to make the player feel powerful. The enemies even explode into gratifyingly sprawling clusters of debris-dots.

And good riddance, you mean, slimy things. Thank you for dying! Have a nicely shortened day. You've been killed by Chris. If you've enjoyed this death, you may enjoy our several million other deaths in various games.

Of course, the player can't entirely dismiss the possibility that by trying to be Mr. Hero, he's hurting more than helping. The Humanoids might *want* to be mutated, as they haven't even evolved enough to work out how to build houses.

Elevator Action

(Taito, 1983)



I played this game a couple of times in the 1980s, but I had yet to realize how much fun it can be after sufficient practice. In '95, I was surprised to discover a modest game room on the lowest level of the Student Union Building (meaning "place with food") at the University of New Mexico. Over the next few months, I gratefully divested myself of many otherwise useless quarters, thanks to *Tron*, *Quantum* and, most habitually, *Elevator Action*, whose merits I recognized at last. College was clearly doing me some good. I also remember seeing *Super Breakout* and the mediocre sports game *Discs of Tron*. I was always alone down there. This revealed the indefensibly poor taste of my colleagues.

As a gunman who's chosen to dispense with all of that underhanded "spying" nonsense, your goal in each building is simply to make your way from the roof to the underground parking garage, pocketing all of the important documents along the way by visiting the red-doored rooms. It was awfully kind of the enemy to paint them so conspicuously, wasn't it? When you reach the bottom, you climb into a red car in a gesture of sheer mockery, and gleefully proclaim your victory to all surviving bad guys by peeling out through a cloud of exhaust. Now you're off to another, trickier building full of slightly more intelligent enemies.

The apparent simplicity of this side-on, vertically scrolling action game is deceptive, as your possible routes and moment-by-moment actions vary widely. I'm partial to the sort of game in which the player is free to succeed with his own distinctive, nuanced playing style, rather than finding himself forced along a rigid course, or being called upon to connect the dots, as it were. In spite of the strangely abundant elevators in these buildings, one doesn't feel all that confined.

In a rare case of cutting the player some slack in an ostensible coin-gulper, split-second decisions that are turned quickly enough into controller movements are actually carried out. In many other games, ducking at the last instant, reversing direction and firing almost instantaneously, etc. can't be accomplished so swiftly.

There's not a trace of clumsy programming here, and the collision parameters are helpfully narrow. An opponent's bullet can miss your not-so-secret agent by a single pixel.

Contact with a bad guy is harmless. In fact, I wonder why it's fatal in most games. *Bump*. "Oops. Pardon me. Hey, wait a second...I'm dying! I wasn't walking *that* fast! Whyyy..." Not here. You just swagger right by. Greedy arcade owners must have *hated* this game. Of course, you've got to turn around and fire before your adversary does, but the non-toxic overlap is a nice concession.

The typical control scheme excludes one movement combination or another. In this game, however, you can fire while jumping *or* ducking, jump to the side or straight upward, duck in mid-jump to make certain that you'll land securely crouched, or jump from a duck (which I recommend if he starts to swim away from shore).

You can also jump while standing within an elevator, and, when it seems beneficial, leap over a shaft, as long as the lift itself is on a floor above yours – i.e. its lone suspension cable isn't in your way. It's even possible to spring or crouch while standing on top of an elevator, although you naturally don't have any control over it. If you jump while standing very close to an enemy, you'll kill him with a kick to the head. I usually don't bother with this, but it's cool when it happens accidentally.

It's useful to keep in mind that a bad guy who's taken out his gun is definitely going to fire. Duck and shoot without waiting to see if there's even anything to duck beneath. If he's the one crouching, you'll obviously want to leap right after you've fired. The enemies don't figure out that complicated combat maneuver – ducking – until you've advanced to the second building, in which they still seldom remember how it's performed. They grow smarter as the game progresses.

I'm not sure why your foes normally keep their guns concealed. They can't possibly believe that they're fooling you into thinking they're not villains. The hats give it away. Those are bad-guy hats if I've ever seen one. Are they jointly trying to pose as an enormous hotel staff? How stupid would you have to be? "You know, you look just like the person who tried to kill me a few seconds ago. What are the odds!"

The designers were interested enough in detail to introduce some humorous events amid all of this cathartic violence. In truth, the game has more slapstick than carnage. You can squash a bad guy with an elevator, or kill him by shooting one of the lights that dangle from the hallway ceilings. The unseen leader who evidently means to stop you at any cost – even the cost of many hats – clearly should have hired tougher minions. At the least, he could have sprung for some helmets. What kind of henchman is reduced to death dots when a small chandelier falls on him from two feet above?

Another good strategy is to shoot an enemy in the head while you're riding an elevator; you can nail him before you've even descended into his firing range. If you're traveling upward, take him out at the ankles. Conversely, blast anyone who's being conveyed before he quite reaches your floor. (It's a good thing death dots dissolve quickly, or they'd be lying all over Game Land, and you'd never be able to see where you were stepping.)

You can board and continuously control any of the elevators, unless you've taken a long time to access all of the red rooms and depart, in which case the control panels are sabotaged, making the lifts very slow to respond. Thankfully, you get plenty of time before that happens. Nobody can fire or die while riding one of the escalators that border some floors. It's not called *Escalator Action*, after all. (That wouldn't have been a terribly thrilling title.)

Bullets can be stopped short by rapidly moving an elevator upward and downward. If your aim's decent, they'll harmlessly hit the upper or lower framework. As an enemy can fire only once every few seconds, a smart tactic involves baiting him until he shoots, blocking his projectile with the lift, and finally lining up to blast him, confident that he's powerless for a brief spell.

Fire constantly, particularly when the corridors are crowded in later buildings. There will almost always be some guy slipping out of a nearby doorway. And you thought that having to talk with strangers while waiting for elevators was annoying. If this is indeed a hotel, I want my money back. I've yet to meet anyone who isn't trying to shoot me. Granted, it was only a twenty-five-cent room fee, and there's a free car on the parking level, which is a thoughtful amenity.

An especially satisfying attribute is your ability to blast the hell out of a direction. If you tap the button quickly enough, you'll fire three bullets very closely together. Doing this from a moving elevator will slightly vary their altitudes, all but assuring a hit.

Yet another great element is the random positioning of the red doors. Due to the diverse elevator / platform arrangements, you're often required to figure out a rather circuitous route. You'll never play the same game twice, given the special rooms' unpredictable locations. Getting to all of them is quite a puzzle near the bottom of any later building, where several rows of lifts must be negotiated, and each will only rise and lower so far. It helps to regard a section of elevators and mid-corridor walls as a shifting maze.

You're given vast control in *Elevator Action*, and this is primarily why it's a cut above most other side-view shoot-'em-ups. The designers also seem to have squeezed in as many minutiae as possible, both mechanical and comical. For instance, the bad-guy death is rewarding and subtly spoofy: He practically deflates, emitting a percussive *pa-thwuck*.

I find the 1994 sequel to be substandard, partly because I still can't find Gene Wilder among the characters. Bring him back, Taito, so that he and I can take an elevator through the ceiling and into the sky.

Joust

(Williams, 1982)



This masterpiece manages to be gloriously violent and mercilessly brutal without a hint of firepower. There's nothing else quite like it. It begins with an attempt at levity, in the form of the message "Prepare to joust, buzzard bait!" As if I'm the one who needs preparation. Oh, I'm prepared, you vile birds. Make no mistake. The question is: Are *you*? I must warn you that I'd be administering the mandatory course called *How to Kick Ass at Joust* in a better world.

Thanks to the magnificent imaginations of John Newcomer, Bill Pfitzenreuter (now, *that* would be a great game title) and Jan Hendricks, the game's surreal humor offsets its ruthlessness. You're in control of an ostrich with remarkable wing speed. Continually pushing "Flap" sends your ostrich flying and bouncing around the screen at uncanny velocities. The "Stick Your Head in the Ground" button was left off of the final cabinet, as it hadn't been very helpful.

Lunar Lander-style mechanics have evolved to require that you exploit gravity even as you fight it, since your only weapon against the enemy buzzards is collision from above. Occupying an even slightly higher screen position upon contact kills each rider and forces his buzzard to flee, whereas a lower altitude leads to an ousted ostrich jockey. If it's a draw, you ricochet harmlessly. The birds all apparently possess extremely noxious talons.

When you slay an evil knight, his buzzard lays an egg as she leaves. If you don't snatch it from the air or pick it up when it's landed (scoring less), it will soon hatch and produce a new rider. This represents some interesting biology. What has that guy been doing with his pet, exactly?

Anyway, a faster, more wily buzzard than the last will fly in from one of the side borders. You can stop her newborn owner from mounting by running over him before he's picked up.

A useful strategy is to pacify the buzzards before surprising them with death. Prior to facing each one, get close to the screen and ask, "Who's a big, tough buzzard? I *know!* You're so *scary!* Who wants a carrion treat?" When she seems to have grown submissive, and her jockey is glaring at you sullenly, fly in for the kill.

Well, *I* think it works. In more demanding waves, of course, it's better to resort to convincing threats: "Look, you're all going to die anyway. You might as well just make it easy on yourselves." At least one will appear to withdraw from the battle, gliding to one side to drink from a scalding lake. (They're not terribly bright.) When the Lava Troll's hand emerges and grips the startled creature, zoom over and bounce her to death. You won't have time to rescue the ensuing egg from getting hard-boiled, but it's a nearly risk-free way to rid yourself of a beast who wouldn't hesitate to do the same if your ostrich were caught instead.

Admittedly, it's not always a simple matter of flying directly to your trapped adversary and landing on her. Sometimes, one of the other buzzards will try to intervene. This illustrates how thick-headed they are, no matter how tricky their various flying patterns. You don't try to break up a fight in *Joust!* Why, you could get *killed* that way!

Demonstrate this by quickly flapping against the nearest platform above you, concurrently moving a bit to the left or right. The bottom of each ledge is shaped like a wide bowl; your sporadic skating along the underside will confuse the buzzard as she tries to follow your altitude, and you'll take her out when contact is finally made. This works brilliantly beneath the lowest centered ledge, and it yields much more success than attempting to bounce off of the top border, especially when the enemies speed up in later waves.

The intermittent Egg Wave begins with numerous stationary eggs covering the ledges. If you don't seize them all within a few seconds, they'll start to hatch. Your most effective route commences on the upper right ledge. If it contains no eggs, its screen-wrapped extremity to the far left almost certainly does. Dash through the right-hand border to scoop them up. Then head steadily downward and to the right, running across each egged platform until you reach the ground. This wave gives you the opportunity to rack up a bunch of points in one falling swoop, leading to an extra ostrich if you surpass a 20,000-point interval. And as my father used to tell me, "You can never have too many ostriches."

Now that I mention it, that was an odd thing for him to say. *Joust* didn't even exist at the time.

If you take too long to clear a *Defender* wave, the speedy Baiters materialize. In *Berzerk*, the invincible Evil Otto jumps for joy when he gets to play. *Venture's* equivalent is the Hall Monster who barges in on your chamber combat. Not to be outdone in the refusing-to-give-the-player-a-damn-break category, *Joust* urges

you to hurry up by sending in the Pterodactyl. He's joined by another when yet more time has passed, or without delay in a higher wave.

Let's challenge the screen message's claim, displayed before each Pterodactyl Wave (in which he appears right away), that he's unbeatable. Land on the centered lower ledge before the wave properly starts. Upon noting which direction he's flying in from, turn to face him. Your rider's lance will be lined up to skewer the middle of his beak, and he'll die in writhing agony. Postpone your hysterical laughter to evade any buzzards who've since risen from the other platforms.

Later, when that ledge isn't present, land instead on the left-hand lava beach, halting over the sixth score digit from the right. Except in rare cases, the Pterodactyl will zip toward you on the precise trajectory for suicide.

As the waves grow more difficult, you'll frequently find yourself beneath some heavy, mid-screen buzzard traffic. It looks like a dense asteroid belt, except with feathers. If you wait for an opening and quickly rise just above it, you can bound from bird to bird with just a flap or two in between, sending off a bunch of tumbling eggs. It's like surfing, except for smart people!

Joust is an immensely original game that retains its viscerally gripping qualities over multiple plays and multiple decades. With an inventive use of physics that transcends the mere alignment of targets, it lays claim to some innovative battle mechanics that haven't quite been matched in 2-D, even in 1986's *Joust 2: Survival of the Fittest*, with its clumsy movement and desertion of the precursor's immaculate balance. The latter title ironically says it all about why the first game is the one that's remembered so fondly, and still played so fervently.

Lunar Rescue

(Taito, 1979)



A few elements from previous games are freshly combined here to render something decidedly original. The premise of the thruster-controlled descent through rows of moving things has never been more enjoyably realized, at least in the arcade. This game runs on *Space Invaders* hardware, so the sound effects remain, as well as the screen overlay, which fills the hazardous sky of this hostile moon with an amusingly friendly rainbow.

You're initially dropped from what's probably supposed to be a space station, but which looks for all the world like a giant space helmet. When you've safely negotiated a rocky version of what will become the bottom half of *Frogger* in 1981 (in the other direction) and landed on a platform, one of the six men stranded on the ground sprints over and climbs into your vehicle. He runs so swiftly, in fact, that he could surely flap his arms and just fly to freedom on his own.

Once he's on board, you're headed back upward – now with firepower. The boulders have transformed into flying saucers, and these are a lot of fun to blast. They blast back, but you can blast their blasts, which blastedly protects them more than you.

If you hold down the fire button on the way up, you'll ascend faster instead of firing. This is occasionally a life-saver. As in *Space Invaders* and most of its million derivatives, you can only have one projectile on the screen at a time, albeit a very fast one. When you don't have time to shoot a saucer out of your way, resort to the thrusters. (Maybe I should call them "retro-rockets." This game is from 1979, after all.)

You don't have to land gently, as you do in related gravity games. You can plunk right down onto one of the three landing sites with no finesse whatsoever. This is

especially handy when you've run out of fuel; in that event, your craft doesn't explode, as it would in most any other game for some scientifically unsound reason. You simply lose the use of your engines during the descent phase. You can still move to the left and right, but you drop like a dead octopus.

I've used that phrase in place of "rock" because you indeed appear to be controlling a giant octopus. Of course, hasn't everyone kind of wanted to someday? What I'm reasonably sure of is that this is the only game vehicle whose abilities change halfway through each sub-level. This adds a dimension that keeps the game from growing repetitive, no matter how long one plays.

Every favorite game of mine possesses depth not borne of copious chores, stats, inventories and wardrobes, but rather the inventive combination of uncomplicated elements. Complexity is best rooted in the interrelation of straightforward bits.

As another example from *Lunar Rescue*, one realizes as he progresses through the first level that the landing platforms are disappearing as he uses them. It turns out that two of the three raised areas actually consist of stacked surfaces (two and three high, from left to center, with just one platform to the right). The narrowest ones – closest to the ground – grant the most points. This is a simple element on its own, but it provides a more elaborate challenge when considered in conjunction with all of the other simple elements.

Your fuel doesn't diminish when you accelerate on the way up, mysteriously enough, but I'm certainly not complaining. It's topped off when you've completed the level by rescuing (and / or inadvertently killing, along with yourself) all six men, but not when you've crashed and recommenced. Thankfully, you don't run out of ammunition, but not everything can be destroyed. The occasional meteorite plummets through the sky, imperiling your return trip and resisting your firepower. Of course, even if you *could* shoot it, what would you have? Meteorite-shaped debris falling toward you. Not much of an improvement.

The one-by-one nature of this rescue operation brings a question to mind: Wouldn't it have been smarter to show up in a means of transportation that could carry more than one passenger at a time? I'm aware that this would negate the game's whole concept, but just to deliberately stride too far into its *context*, what kind of rescue vehicle, whether from a space station or an aquarium, only holds one person plus the pilot? The giant helmet at the top was clearly not built to fit the latter's oversized brain.



Matt Rutter's eight-bit Atari adaptation of *Lunar Rescue* is presumably unlicensed, as it has a different name: *Stellar Shuttle*. Broderbund released it in 1982. It's even more fun than the original, because you never run out of fuel. The title makes it clear that in this version, at least, you're piloting a shuttle. A stellar one! This apparently means that the game-play occurs near a star. It can't possibly take place *on* one. Your shuttle would immediately burn to a crisp, and you'd feel quite gyped.

In this unofficial conversion, your vehicle retains its arcade abilities, including the return-trip firepower and acceleration, but the floating boulders never turn into spacecraft. An even bigger difference is that a person-eating dinosaur (or alien monster, or perhaps space yak) shows up on the second level. At first, he's centered between the landing sites, which now number only two and lie slightly below ground level.

Talk about an awful place to need rescuing from! Those guys should look after themselves better. They make me risk life and limb, or at least graphic, simply because it never occurred to them to come up with a back-up exit plan.

They've duly marooned themselves on a moon with an asteroid belt in its sky. So whatever happens, they can take deep breaths and get their minerals. Admittedly, they've managed to get stuck in a very organized fashion, with three standing on each hill.

If you descend close enough to the space yak, you can fry him with your engine flames. This must be done during every trip, actually, or he'll jump over one of the landing pads and devour all of your obviously brainless charges on that side of the screen – one for every time you land. They'll run toward your shuttle as usual, and right into the intervening creature's mouth. Maybe it's a shuttle-shaped orifice. That would certainly represent a very high evolutionary stage.

I'm not sure how those guys even wound up on the hills to begin with. I don't see a wrecked spaceship anywhere. What, did the yak eat that first? *You're* not hurt when the men get chomped, so it's not a big deal; but you receive an extra

shuttle for every 10,000 points, and you earn 300 whenever you bring someone to safety, as well as 1,000 for saving all six. You don't get any for feeding the yak.

That's basically what you're doing when you've let him leap to either side. You're suddenly acting as his helper by luring his prey toward him. You can no longer burn him when he's over there, unless it's much more difficult than when he's centered, as I haven't been able to do it, and I'm pretty damn good. My best guess is that Mr. Never Full eventually forms an extremely strong ice shield.

Even when he's still in the middle, it's not effortless to cook him without crashing into him, as your flames don't extend very far downward. When you've succeeded, he'll recuperate as soon as you safely return to the top. He evidently heals quickly from burns. No version apart from this one contains a yak – or an animal of any kind, for that matter. Except for me. GROWL.

Yes, I know that it's not really supposed to be a space yak. When I allow my brain to complete a game scenario, it most frequently defaults to humor. The manual refers to the creature as a dragon, even though he never breathes fire; but part of the fun of these old games is that one's imagination can do whatever it likes with the figures on the screen. I touched upon this in the first chapter, but on any day of the week, I'll take the beautifully abstract graphics in games like *VCS Adventure* and *Yars' Revenge* over attempts at emulating real life. I love it when a video game is treated purely like a video game by its creator.

The vertically plunging meteorites that periodically endanger your ascension in *Lunar Rescue* have been replaced with horizontally patrolling spaceships. It's always nice when little extras are included that you can...well, obliterate.

Stellar Shuttle comprises excellent control response, impeccable collision detection and a fitting difficulty curve, and I like the random element in the asteroid-belt traffic. There's also plenty of longevity, in spite of the player's deceptively straightforward goal. Most significantly, like the arcade game, it feels good to play.

This is a commonly overlooked aspect when others write or talk about video games – or, alas, make them. When enough fine-tuning has been undertaken, the optimal balance is attained. For what other reason would I keep returning to, say, *VCS Superman*, whose graphics often flicker to such a degree that collisions are curtailed, or *Stampede*, which cheats (in Game 4, anyway, the best variation because of its random and zigzagging cattle)? There's something...I'm sick of the word "addictive" in this weird culture. There's something *compelling* about each of those two games, which is why I still play them a lot.

As examples of games that feel good to play and actually remain influential, the fluid versions of the *Dooms* certainly apply, especially with that "Run" button. Add the exploration element that makes the best first-person games interesting (did

you non-players think it was all about the shooting?), and you have aesthetic hits. id Software's first-person groundbreakers happened to be commercial hits as well.



In 1983, Rabbit Software released an official *Lunar Rescue* for the Commodore VIC-20. That's right: There's an authorized conversion for that computer, but not for the Commodore 64. Nutty.

It was written by Paul Skirrow, and even considering the platform that he was stuck with, he could have done a better job. As Jimmy Huey demonstrated with his *Scorpion* (discussed later), good games were possible on the VIC-20.

Granted, your craft has the familiar abilities: It can still decelerate on the way down, and fire and accelerate on the way up. Timing its re-entry at the top is trickier, as the now very wide helmet stops moving back and forth just before you get there. I suppose that the helmet pilot is trying to be helpful, but failing comically.

In this translation, the men in need of rescue – let's just start calling them astronauts, for easier reference – are, by astonishing coincidence, the same shade of yellow as the terrain on which they're stranded. At least they feel at home. In fact, due to this fortuitous camouflage, their liberation doesn't seem as urgent. Not that any Rutteresque predators are lurking anyway.

The asteroids in this sky look more like fossilized clouds, but the wholly distinctive element is that the helmet can now be destroyed if you shoot it close enough to the center. Not a lot of planning must have gone into its manufacture. Nonetheless, the occurrence is more funny than frustrating. As in *Stellar Shuttle*, a spaceship occasionally flies across the screen; but it now takes turns with an airplane. I don't know which airline that pilot's with, but he's way off course.

This conversion is definitely interesting, as nearly all old games are for various reasons, but some fine-tuning was in order. Such as rewriting the entire game. Still, given that the computer in question isn't capable of hardware sprites, I

guess that he did his best with the redefined character graphics. Frankly, I'm impressed that a VIC-20 version of such a display-busy arcade game was endeavored at all. Also, he randomized not only the ships, airplanes and rocky clouds, but the topography as well.



Also in '83, a praiseworthy attempt at converting *Lunar Rescue* for the C64 was made in a public-domain capacity. L. Smithdale, who called himself Program One Software, wrote the game in Assembly, but he mainly used unaltered keyboard graphics. It's more fun to play than one would think, and it's worth mentioning here. In truth, it's superior to the commercially released VIC-20 adaptation.

Even so, he wasn't terribly attentive to the title screen, which reads *Lunar Recue*. Get ready for a fun-filled challenge as you try to play billiards without gravity!

There's something cool about playing with keyboard graphics at a machine-language speed (also check out the '82 public-domain *Galaga* translation by Henrik Wening). With that being said, if Smithdale had the time and patience to study Assembly, he wouldn't have found it difficult to read just a bit further and learn about sprites.

The controls take some getting used to, due to your ship's very fast left / right speed, but they afford accurate manipulation once you've practiced for a bit. You can finally push upward to slow your descent, rather than holding the fire button. You slow down so much, in fact, that you stop altogether and hover in place. As if to make up for this, you can no longer speed up on the way back.

The asteroids – or bits of confetti – move at a snail's pace while you're firing. Assuming that this isn't a deliberate difficulty reduction, it suggests the possibility that the program is compiled BASIC as opposed to machine language. I've checked in every way that my knowledge allows, and it doesn't appear to be; but that's not proof.

As in every other home version that we've discussed, there's fortunately no fuel gauge / time limit. You don't see these astronauts until you land, so they're finally smart enough to stay out of sight until the coast is clear. Also, the helmet has been replaced with a giant space sombrero.

Another difference between this game and the others is that you don't have to fly directly into the center of the sombrero to dock. Touching it anywhere will do. Moreover, there's rapid fire here; you only need to hold the button down. And it's very *rapid* rapid fire, which is appropriate for such a dense confetti belt. It starts off that way, as the meaning of "difficulty curve" escaped the otherwise sharp programmer. The challenge doesn't increase much as the levels progress, unless you count the dwindling size of the single green patch that you land on.

Come to think of it, the patch looks suspiciously like a putting green. So *that's* what we're rescuing those guys from: having to play golf. And they thought the space yak was as bad as it got!

Impressively precise controls and randomly arranged confetti: L. Smithdale did an admirable job. A great deal of work went into this program. Maybe the Easter egg is that you discover the rest of his first name.

Pac-Man

(Namco and Midway, 1980)



A brief note: The "and" below the occasional title indicates that the second company was licensed to distribute the game in one or more countries (minimally America) outside the place of origin, which was Japan in this case.

Whether it involves maze navigation, platform jumping or firepower, any successful action game contains at least one of two particular elements. By "successful," I don't necessarily mean commercially – even if game popularity sometimes follows creative and aesthetic success.

The first of these elements was articulated well by a proficient programmer during his lecture at the World of Atari, 1998 convention in Las Vegas, Nevada. As Adam and I rolled our microcassette recorder, Rob Fulop summed up the true allure of *Pac-Man* and related games: "I'm helpless. I'm helpless. I'm helpless. I'm powerful." This is a very powerful paradigm indeed, piquing primal passions. Turning the tables triggers instinctual gratification in any animal.

The cute, vivid characters in *Pac-Man* would have only taken the game so far. Its surface aspects drew the previously disinterested into what was still a graphically abstract world, pretty blue maze notwithstanding. To hold them there and ultimately make the game into the phenomenon it would become, deep-seated cravings had to be engaged, whether deliberately or not by its creators. Cereal brands and banal, disco-esque songs, irrelevant to the game itself as they are, don't stem from short-lived, superficial enticement. Consider that the player's character doesn't even have an eye.

While playing Toru Iwatani and Shigeo Funaki's enhanced imitation of the 1979 arcade games *Crash* and *Head-On* (by Exidy and Gremlin, respectively), you're

aware that your on-screen counterpart, Pac-Man himself, literally cannot be killed once he's eaten an Energizer. Only when the briefly blue monsters have changed back to their original colors does the predator become prey again. Simply knowing that the option to be invulnerable exists will affect one's entire approach. When he's contemplating which game to play, he's half-consciously attracted to the helpless-to-powerful element. He imagines himself devouring instead of being devoured.

As another example: For what other reason could the stars possibly be included in my favorite Nintendo Entertainment System game, *Super Mario Bros. 3*? By that point in the series, the power lasts for, what, a hundredth of a second? Granted, some levels are actually structured around the obtainment of successive stars, but this is part of a separate design triumph that makes the game exceptional: Its levels are constructed to take full advantage of the controls and power-ups, rather than the latter elements having been thrown in after the fact.

The pending player knows that the promise of imperviousness lurks out there among the surrealistically arranged platforms, hills, waterfalls and beanstalks. Playing any *Super Mario* game is therefore a somewhat more appealing prospect than it otherwise would have been, even given the games' other lures, such as the terrific secret areas.

Imagine *Defender* without the Smart Bombs or *Tempest* without the Super Zapper. I could go on, but whether or not one intends to utilize the table-turning object within the game in question, the mere awareness of its presence improves the whole experience, as it represents more breathing space, more *freedom*.

Hence the lasting ubiquity of power-ups. The multitudes of forced-scrolling horizontal and vertical rip-offs were made because players kept spending money on them. *Something* must have attracted those people, in spite of the originality famine. It was surely the pull of gradually superior speed and weaponry. Just knowing that it's floating in wait – the ever more destructive firepower and hence greater screen space to roam, to dominate – can make such a game tremendously tempting. To this day, the vulnerable-to-powerful thing still keeps 'em coming back.

An additional aspect to consider is that Pac-Man, as well as his lady and even his child, can incessantly consume without getting any bigger. Everything in sight is up for grabs, and there are no consequences except positive ones. This might explain the game's popularity with women. They generally hadn't been interested in arcades before.

The second essential element entails cleaning up messes. I'll leave the armchair psychoanalysts to their own games, but disposing of all of the *stuff* and making a

large area irreversibly clean (like a good boy or girl, perhaps) is an achievement that usually can't be experienced after just a few minutes of effort.

The connotations abound, but the bottom line is that under any real circumstances, wiping out everything that *doesn't belong* is usually temporary. Behind the screen, however, the last conquered level is now forever unsullied, forever properly itself without blemish or anomaly: eternally true versus false. There are also some masculine tendencies fulfilled by expunging everything that doesn't make sense, or preventing it from intruding on the territory that one seeks supremacy over. How many times have you been near the exit in a first-person game, only to turn back because you haven't killed all of your enemies yet? Whether or not it's required is immaterial.

From a different angle, this also partially explains the popularity of *Tetris*. J.C. Herz touches on this in her book *Joystick Nation* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997; pp. 172-173). Life, I paraphrase, can impose an apparently overwhelming amount of varied concerns that don't seem reconcilable. To find that these can make simultaneous sense after all, and that the components of the mess cease to exist when they're united correctly, can make any game tantalizing.

Pac-Man contains *both* valuable elements, explaining its strong magnetism. And the maze is satisfyingly symmetrical. All of the Energizers, one per corner, have uniform amounts of attendant dots. (Just to be pedantic, the Energizers weren't called Power Pills, nor the Monsters called Ghosts, until the VCS conversion's manual referred to them as such.)

While it makes perfect sense for a living being to eat most of the game's bonus items – cherries, strawberries, etc. – what the devouring of keys represents, I'll leave up to you.

Toypop (Namco, 1986)



I don't know what the reasoning was behind the title – they can't possibly *all* be inflatable – but the game itself is such a blast that it could have been called *Screens Full of Squares* and it wouldn't have made a difference. Maybe *Toypop* just sounded neat. Anyway, when I first played this a few years back (thanks to emulation, as the cabinet doesn't seem to have been released in America), I was surprised to find myself vastly enjoying a four-directional action game that was supposed to be "cutesy."

The idea of a power-up system that was part and parcel of the strategy / puzzle scheme struck me as exceptionally clever, and drove me to figure out what all of the objects were for, by which time I was hooked. It certainly didn't hurt that exploration was a factor.

It still is, for that matter. Games don't go changing themselves when nobody's keeping an eye on them. Well, the *Star Wars* games might, but the war in *Toypop* takes place far from the stars. You're holding the strings of a long-nosed puppet named Pino (speaking of Disney) whose toyshop exploration takes the form of exposing hidden things. This is where the real fun lies.

Every succeeding level of this highly original game compels the player to reorganize his approach to the other would-be playthings, who appear to have rioted inside a store full of inexplicably gift-wrapped toys and an unaccountable forty-four rooms. Each layout is impressively different from the last, and memorizing what every package contains is so unlikely that the sensation of randomness is sustained.

The bad guys (well, bad toys) emerge from the black and red turnstiles, and each type can only be destroyed with a particular weapon. As a legion consisting of one kind doesn't always enter the make-believe battleground in one go, alternating with others instead, you'll want to switch munitions quite often – or

attempt to, anyway, since they're concealed inside the packages and can be wielded only one at a time.

Some comedy comes into play when you're frantically shooting presents, hoping to find the weapon you require. Each currently relevant type is hidden multiple times on the single screen. Regardless, it's beneficial to leave alone any weapon you find that you don't need at the moment, or which you're already armed with. There's a chance that it will be necessary again before the level's over.

The earliest enemies are the wind-up soldiers, who've clearly forgotten that they're toys and don't really have to hunt escaped puppets. These tin-heads are exceptions, in that nearly any projectile will take them out. The cars, however, can only be wrecked with the tires. And you didn't even know that tires could be weapons – at least, not independently of their vehicles.

Those are the only two kinds of toy on the first screen. I'm not sure who has armed these things. Perhaps you're on a mission to keep some kid's eye from being shot out. You complete a level by grabbing all four of the big, yellow hearts, which you automatically throw with great puppet strength toward the exit door. This opens a bit more when each heart arrives. They're effortlessly found at first, but they have to be uncovered like the weapons on later levels.

Shoot a present once – with any weapon – to violently unwrap it and reveal the contents. A second shot dissolves the box, allowing obtainment. The hearts are found inside glass bottles, like sick lab experiments. The bottles may or may not be transparent. If you can see a heart, its bottle can be shattered with a single shot; otherwise, fire twice. You'll find yourself shooting absolutely everything to see what's inside. It's like Christmas morning in southeastern America.

When you get shot yourself, or an enemy collides with you, you lose your shirt. Bad investment, pal. You're down to your toy underclothes, and the next run-in kills you, unless you find a new garment inside one of the packages first. And to think of all those Christmases when clothing was the *last* thing you wanted! Fortunately, you can't unintentionally pick up the single wardrobe to be found every couple of levels (or "boxes," as they're bizarrely designated) if it's not required. The apparel element – armor, basically – is another nifty thing about the game, as it allows you to get hit more than once without losing a turn, and even to re-outfit yourself.

From the second level onward, a boxing glove will spring out of the occasional gunned-down present. This encourages the habit of shooting packages from far away when possible. You're not hurt by a glove-thumping, but it prevents you from moving for about a second, and this can obviously be deadly. You'll also start to see those daft extending-arm toys bursting out of intact presents. These naughty things tear off your shirt, exposing your roughest splinters like a bad girlfriend.

The tanks are razed with the cannonballs, whose blast zones you'll want to avoid. What's especially useful about the explosions is that they blow open all of the presents within range. The cannonballs don't destroy the cars (for some reason), and the tires, as you can imagine, don't wipe out the tanks. These stipulations indicate the type of strategic planning that I mentioned above. It all represents a superb idea for a game. Midway should have jumped on this one.

Acquire the thumbtack weapon to burst the bothersome balloons. A nail gun would have worked even better, of course, but we'll have to manage with many thrown push-pins. The balloons don't fire like the other bad toys, but they can float through the presents and the scattered, indestructible walls. And they sure move fast, for balloons. They want to make you talk funny!

Speaking of speaking, this is another game whose antagonists, I'm convinced, can hear me. You'll see what I mean if you try it yourself. When they team up and threaten to engulf you, loudly reproach them: "Don't crowd me! I promise that there's time for you *all* to die! Don't worry!" They'll back off for a bit, I tell you.

The Carrollian playing cards have the gall to throw endless spears at you. I suppose they could be sewing needles. Either way, the cards plainly aren't bluffing, so show no mercy. Off with their pixels! Incinerate them with the fireballs. (Our puppet is evidently made of some very tough wood.)

Special weapons must be collected in threes to activate. These are found in the packages like the other things, but they're much less common. Accumulating three of the red, ornate number sevens temporarily turns you into a tornado. It's a shame what kids will play with these days.

You're invincible while transformed into a natural disaster, as you might expect. Colliding with any of your adversaries kills him, and you even open the presents that you touch. Alternatively, accruing three stars makes your firepower universally deadly for a while.

When you've exposed either kind of special weapon for the third time, don't shoot the present again unless circumstances indicate that this is a good time for the pertinent ability. Unlike the normal weapons, a seven or star will disappear after a few seconds if you don't take it when it's been completely unboxed.

Now and then, you'll find that you've shot and set a concealed time bomb – batteries included. Get out of there, and hope it nails some of the bad toys. If you can position yourself diagonally from the bomb, you'll be safe; it produces a sizeable but strangely orderly explosion.

When you find a lantern, all remaining packages that contain weapons will unwrap themselves. These are apparently the adults-only toys. The teleports,

which look like Frisbees, make their appearances on the sixth level. Stepping onto one will send you to the corner like a misbehaving puppet; but keep your nose up! It's a terrific escape mechanism. Vulnerable walls show up on the same level, camouflaged to look like the impervious kind.

On the seventh level, a wizard materializes and starts lobbing hot chandelier globes at you. He's a pain in the wooden ass, as he can only be killed with the star power (anonymity doesn't faze him; he's rather shallow, for a wizard) or the tornado. Happily, his appearances throughout the game are rare.

The subsequent bonus round entails catching apples for points. They fall in three groups from one tree at a time. You can run only to the left and right, although you've briefly attained jumping abilities. This is among the least interesting bonus levels in history, and it doesn't befit such a great game.

The robots on the ninth screen (and many thereafter, of course) presumably run on electricity, but you kill them with the lightning bolts. I guess that they can only handle battery power. The bolts merely freeze most of the other enemies. This might be a simple matter of incorrect polarity.

Monkeys with cymbals appear on the tenth level; kill them with the accordions. Or traffic barrels. Or possibly giant noodles. Whatever they are, they chiefly resemble accordions, and toy primates are fatally allergic to them. Good. I don't like monkeys. These particular noisy jerks had better not be throwing their own... well, I don't want to know. I just enjoy finding the more sonically harmful instrument than their cymbals, and helping evolution along.

Also found inside some packages are mere score-bonus items. Except for the diamonds, these comprise the perishable gifts: donuts, cinnamon rolls and candy. Of course, they might be made of plastic. In this store, you *can* play with your food.

Taking one of the very scarce forks changes all of your enemies to food. This is only worth points as well, but it's much easier to swallow than balloons and tanks. The winged boot momentarily speeds you up, and the flower renders you invisible and invulnerable. The hourglass brings all of the bad toys to a short-term halt, and the yellow flag is worth an extra Pino. This appears when you've passed a 15,000- or 20,000-point interval, depending on how the machine is set.

Each level begins with ninety time thingies on the clock (they're not quite long enough to be seconds). If you don't exit in time, the walls will grow and ultimately squash you. Creepy, right? This is also initiated when you grab the final heart, so wait until you've cleared out everything and everyone you wish before touching it.

On the forty-fourth level, your lone rival is an ugly witch named Majyo. She's very bitter about her looks, and she does her best to ensure that you won't make it to

the second massive set of levels. She's an even bigger nuisance than the wizard, but she's still not as difficult to beat as some of the so-called bosses in contemporaneous games. I've always wondered about that term; why are they commonly known as bosses? They never seem to be ordering the other bad guys around. You know what I call one of those hackneyed, frequently unwarranted pests? The Big Bad Guy at the End of the Level. It works well enough.

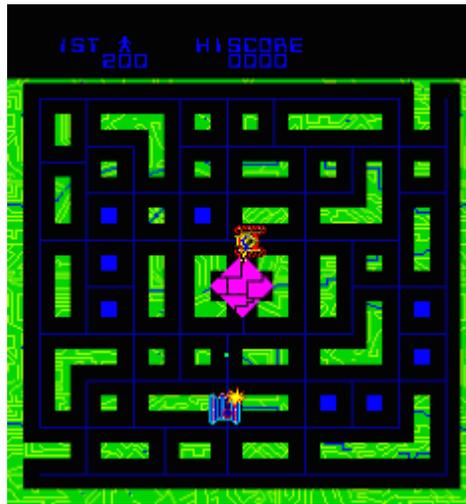
Toypop is outstandingly creative and consistently engaging, even with the annoyingly repetitious upright-piano music. It's a lot of fun to mine presents, so to speak. You might even say that the game is entirely filled with hidden rewards.

Admittedly, I'd play it more often if there weren't a time limit. It's a reasonable one, considering that the player regularly has the luxury of deciding whether to meet the minimal requirements for beating the current level, which is a relatively easy thing to do, or to score as high as possible and increase his life count more quickly. I simply don't feel that the added pressure of time, no matter how fair, supplements the fun. If the timer's purpose is to prevent dawdling once all of the hearts have been nabbed and the enemies eradicated, the countdown could simply have started at that time. This is a mild mulling, however. The game rules, even with its rules.

Now, where's the kid who asked for all of this animate stuff? I've got a monkey projectile for him.

Tron

(Bally / Midway, 1982)



In late 1982 or early '83, we rented the movie *Tron* for our Betamax VCR. Preposterously, I hadn't gotten around to seeing it on the big screen. I figured out how to copy it, using a borrowed second machine, and watched it over and over again. I bought the VHS tape five or six years later, and the double DVD on the film's twentieth anniversary in '02.

Some of the dialogue might have been hokey, even when the movie was new, but I was mesmerized by the visualizations and plot details. I tended to live in my own world half the time anyway; upon seeing *Tron*, I transformed the real one from inside my head. I didn't quite mean to. It just made the repetitious things in a kid's life cooler. I left solid walls of light along the sidewalk, and the glinting tiles and painted-over bricks of my elementary school became circuited tunnels through which I ominously soared. I wasn't noticeably physical about any of this. I didn't have to be.

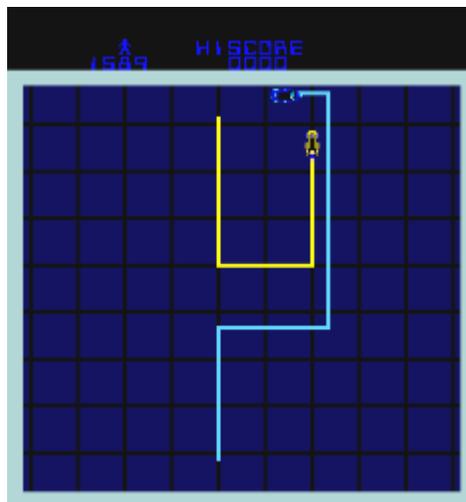
I'd already filled my skull with video-game images over the prior year. Now the three-dimensional ramifications of living in that universe were absorbed into my mental metabolism. The screens that connected the everyday world to these new ones weren't monitors or television tubes, but windows. Locations from various games flew enticingly past me as I walked by things as formerly ordinary as jungle gyms and chain-link fences.

It's not that I didn't enjoy being a kid. There were simply aspects that I found objectionable. Being expected to attend school every day felt like a prison sentence. And I reviled not having the adult abilities to *do stuff*. This didn't concern unrestricted toy shopping, theme-park trips or other external extravagances. I wanted to play real musical instruments and write real books. I could save odd-job money toward the former, and practice the latter on my mom's typewriter; but I wasn't skilled yet, and I was impatient to truly get started.

Something that *was* possible, however, was to competently explore that limitless other place, finding and doing things previously consigned to my imagination. *Tron* alluringly blurred the line. I could even learn to create my own parts of that other place, if only I could get my hands on a computer.

As I was already acclimating myself to a coexistence with other humans by adopting the crucial society-is-stupidly-funny mindset (I didn't know how to apply words like "absurdly amusing"), it was impactful to see just how easily alternate life could be created. My widening eyes watched Flynn and Alan actually communicating with the humanoid programs they'd "written," using secret messages such as "Request access to Clu program. Code 6 password to memory 0222." Outside the VCR, every spinning thing that I saw reminded me of the Master Control Program, and anything laid out in a grid fashion was an electronic, beautifully unambiguous expanse.

When Flynn was sucked into the collective digital world and was able to interact with the walking, talking realizations of his own keyboard work, I was sucked in, myself. The main function of teachers seemed to be to detract my attention from the things with which I really loved to fill my brain. Their inapplicable blather might have prepared me to be a good drone, so it's fortunate that affordable home video games came along when they did.

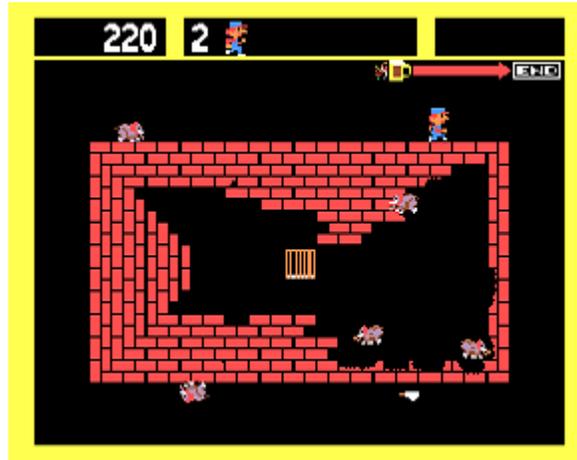


I believe that I initially played the *Tron* coin-op in the small game room at Uncle Cliff's, an Albuquerque amusement park. (The name has since been changed to Cliff's, but he's not fooling anyone. He's still my uncle.) When I play it now, it strikes me as a continually repeated quartet of largely derivative sub-games that rapidly rise in difficulty. It's blatantly designed to scarf up as much money as possible. In this sense, I suppose, it was technologically prophetic.

My associations with the game are so positive that I occasionally play it anyway. I have a great time, notwithstanding any opinions I've formed since the '80s. This is perhaps the only arcade game from which I can't objectively detach my early affection, for the kid Chris was captivated. It was as close as I could get to literally playing a part in the movie, and I watched older players until I memorized their tactics and patterns. I became quite good myself, and still remember most of the maneuvers.

In fact, if I'm out on one of my treasured nighttime walks and I get hit by a falling piano or something, I'll be in trouble when I try to recall my blood type. The poor paramedic will hear little more than, "High speed. Forward. Right. Left. Left. Left." He'll be all set if he ever gives up his work to drive a Light Cycle, though. I should know.

Zoo Keeper
(Taito America, 1982)



All that I'd really like to mention about this Keith Egging / John Morgan game is that your character, Zeke, is clearly not a zoo keeper. He's a mason. Indeed, he lays bricks so quickly that his skills are being altogether wasted on animals who are understandably disinclined to have a zoo built around them. I say that if they're so troubled by captivity that they're willing to chew through bricks, just let them go. At the least, take the time to study them. That's one hell of a phenomenon!

The attraction mode displays the rather desperate message, "Play me!" Even if you feel guilty enough to give the machine a quarter, it will continue to pester you, subjecting you to a lesson in animal-jumping and bricklaying that can't be skipped. While you're learning the point values of multiple-beast hurdles against your will, you're asked, "How long can you hold the animals in?" Your own question might be something along the lines of, "How long can you put off letting me play?"

You'll then find yourself running along the perimeter of a large, horizontal rectangle, building progressively thicker walls wherever your feet fall. Your only goal is survival; each round ends in an unusual and somewhat dissatisfying manner. The fuse at the top reaches the word "End." In the meantime, bonus items and an animal-recapturing net are thrown onto your construction site as the fuse passes through them. The latest object will disappear if you don't grab it before the next is released.

It's not surprising that the demonstration's hypothetical player appears to simply walk away from the cabinet, leaving the mason for dead. *Zoo Keeper* doesn't feel nearly as good to play as it seems like it should. The mechanical fine-tuning and elemental balance weren't quite worked out. I've previously referred to the game-design truism that all of the simple details add up. Here, they curiously don't. One is left with the impression of a clumsily realized good idea.

I concede that the bricklaying ability and topsy-turvy movement are notably original, and that it's fun to steer in mid-jump (three years before Mario will become Super, no less). Given the large character sizes and inadequate amount of maneuvering space, however, the player is ironically the one with a sense of confinement. Maybe the game was more enjoyable in its early incarnation, which was titled *King Crab*. I'll leave the disease jokes to you, and turn my attention toward the bonus round. Hop to the top to rescue the girl. How innovative! Okay; that's enough attention.

Honestly, I just meant to point out that Zeke isn't actually a zoo keeper. I've played this game quite a few times, and I haven't found a single shovel.

The Atari 2600 Video Computer System

Adventure

(Atari, 1980)



A brief note: The copyright date on any given box, label, manual and / or opening screen doesn't necessarily correspond with the actual year of release. The occasional game was issued during the year after the filing of its copyright.

In the *Pac-Man* chapter, I described the two essential action-game elements. Either one can turn an unexceptional game into an absorbing one, but a premium *adventure* game contains a single crucial element: randomness. Game 3 of Warren Robinett's pioneering masterpiece is what its longevity hinges upon.

In a game that neglects the random element, a comparable effect is achieved only when there's such a large amount of screens or levels that chance is inconsequential, due to the extreme unlikelihood of memorization. I'm thinking of the PC *Dooms*, given the massive amount of homemade maps offered online, and the computer versions of *Montezuma's Revenge*.

Whether they can be categorized as "action," "adventure" or both, my favorite games involve exploration. I love looking for things, or keys to locks past which I can look for more things. (How curious that I don't like losing my keys in real life.)

I enjoy the search just as much if it entails flying around in multiple directions and shooting things while I'm looking for the big thing that's most important to shoot. Somewhere in my brain, it's always some form of Death Star or Master Control Program.

As I briefly mentioned in the first chapter, *Adventure* fulfilled video games' not-of-this-world promise like very few have since: It provided a new kind of reality. In specific, it broke through a mechanical boundary and expanded the idea of on-screen interactive entertainment beyond the confines to which designers and players had become accustomed, as if Robinett had stuck his hand into another

dimension that others hadn't noticed. It then couldn't be unseen by anyone who'd witnessed it.

To give his featureless (read: ideal) character the facility to *leave the screen* and emerge onto a separate playfield, and to connect several of these locations in a non-linear but coherent world, was to breathe a windfall over the entire field. Possessing the additional ability to pick up, use and drop objects was amazing to any player who'd previously done little more than deflect, steer and shoot.

Adventure is also the earliest game to involve artificial intelligence. The dragons and bat each harbor a hierarchal list of priorities, and they continue to move around and pursue their agendas when they're out of view. (To some, the dragons resemble ducks, but they look more like seahorses to me.)

A few amusing graphical tricks and idiosyncrasies are present. Sometimes, that's part of the fun: Many old games include nifty but unintentional glitches or circumstantial quirks, left in by choice or technical necessity. *Superman*, which depends upon Robinett's scene-switching code, has some intriguing oddities of its own. Speaking of which, my lowest time is 0:57. This was accomplished without the early-ROM bridge cheat or the late-starting timer. Thank you, thank you.

One aspect that's never discussed is *Adventure's* great atmosphere. The eerie silence and stillness of the environment create suspense about what might be prowling just around the corner. Encounters with the dragons, Yorgle, Grundle and Rhindle (Hansel and Gretel are elsewhere), are often especially startling because of the contrast.

Another reason for which I'm fond of the ambiance is that I'm not crazy about in-game music. I don't understand why newer games must emulate movies as closely as possible to hold the interest of so many players; and in old games, soundtracks are necessarily repetitious. Whenever the option is available, I silence the music. I want to concentrate on the game-play (go figure) and clearly hear the sound effects, which tend to contribute crucially to the total experience. The fact that I write and play music is irrelevant. I take objection when it's used in the service of anything other than itself. (This could be why I typically despise musicals.)

When I've chosen to listen to music, I like to pay close attention. It's as though games and music occupy separate, selfish parts of my brain. I don't like to split my focus between two things I love. Music is not decoration or background noise.

Anyway, during an extended-family visit to Buffalo in 1982, I was shown, and thankfully permitted to play, *Adventure* by an older kid named Robert, whose mother remains one of my aunt's best friends. I chose the cartridge from the

stack in his family's den, always anxious to try out an unfamiliar game. He switched it on and pushed "Game Reset," and I've never recovered.

The game blew my brains out through my hair. You could move off of the whole television! It took me a few seconds, but I caught on – the screen now showed a different room. It all struck me as an uncommonly large, nay *gigantic* area to move around in, with none of the customary constraints. I was later shown *Demon Attack* and *Laser Blast*, but I wasn't as interested in those, flashy as they were.

After demonstrating *Adventure* for a couple of minutes, Robert handed me the joystick and guided me through Game 1. When I'd beat it, he explained that I would ultimately want to play Game 3 if I wound up getting the cartridge, as the kingdom was much larger and the objects and characters were in different places each time.

Regrettably, I haven't been in touch with Robert since that visit, when he also revealed unto me *The Incredible Wizard* on his Bally Professional Arcade (before I ever saw the arcade original, *Wizard of Wor*), and audio cassettes that magnetically stored Atari 400 / 800 programs, which he'd typed in from books and magazines. The very idea enthralled me. Computer games, hidden on innocent-looking music tapes! Imagine that!

It was also during that summer vacation when I borrowed the aforementioned BASIC book from the library, and bought my first copy of *Electronic Games*, the earliest magazine to be dedicated to video games, at a Wilson Farms convenience store in Tonawanda, the suburb where my aunt lived. It was the July, 1982 issue. Her daughters, my cousins Denise and Mary, had *Circus Atari* and the fascinating *Superman*. It was all nearly overwhelming for a relatively new game fanatic.

Back in Albuquerque, I reread that issue of *E.G.* so often that I incidentally memorized it. Part of the reason was that Bill "Game Doctor" Kunkel had written an enticing *Adventure* synopsis (under a pseudonym). Looking back, one of the likable things about his early '80s articles is that he didn't really write reviews. He seemed aware that one's tastes are subjective and impervious to "criticism," so he didn't bother with ratings, grades or anything so futile. What he wrote were overviews, and he often included strategies. Readers were thus informed of what they could expect from each game before deciding how to spend their cash.

Thanks to the *Adventure* article and a dictionary, I learned the definitions of "carcass," "catacomb," "chalice," "cursor," "labyrinth," "origin," "quest," "random," "reincarnate" and "toggle" (having been confused by the phrase "reset toggle"). I'd certainly never acquired so much vocabulary at once from a school textbook. It's all about where one's enthusiasms lie. Whenever I happen upon one of the words, its very shape reminds me of those two magazine pages.

Kindly allow me a few additional words about Bill Kunkel, who granted me an interview for *Orphaned Computers & Game Systems* about ten years ago. Ed Averett's Odyssey² game *K.C. Munchkin!* was released by North-American Philips / Magnavox in November of 1981. It was unreleased by Atari in March of 1982. The latter company had claimed in court that the game was unacceptably similar to *Pac-Man*, whose home versions it held the rights to. Whereas N.A.P. had initially prevailed, Atari won the case on appeal. This was in the midst of its tenacious protection of the *Pac-Man* license from infringement by publishers whose gobble games were superior to its own 2600 conversion of the real thing.

Kunkel risked the perks of his career as a game journalist by testifying against Atari. He rightly felt that *K.C. Munchkin!* contained enough differences to be considered a unique game. This display of integrity was, and obviously remains, uncharacteristic of most people in his general profession. He held neither livelihood nor corporate favoritism above principle. We could use a few more like him.

Back to *Adventure*. As it happened, I literally couldn't wait to play it. Here's the story.

I asked for the game for Christmas, helpfully pointing out to my father that if he couldn't find it locally, it could be ordered from the Atari Club; I regularly received the *Atari Age* newsletter. I remember asking for little else, apart from a couple of 33s and 45s. For young readers: No, those weren't guns! They were wax records. (The term would be widely replaced with "vinyl" a few years later.)

My folks must have realized that my younger brother Michael and I no longer believed in Santa Claus, as the tree appeared to slowly bear gifts – which were much more tantalizing than fruit, of course – over the two weeks preceding Christmas. The Great Dawn of Unwrapping fell on a Saturday that year. By Monday the 20th, a vibrant mound of mystery beautified the living room. I waited for everyone to fall asleep, slunk out of the lower bunk and down the hallway, and found the cartridge box-shaped presents. There were two of them. I guessed (correctly, as it would turn out) that Mike had received the *Donkey Kong* conversion that he'd asked for.

I picked one, carefully detached the tape from one end, and saw the yellowish orange. *Adventure!* At least I knew for sure. Dad must have located it in one department store or another. I refastened the delicate paper, placed the box where I'd found it and fell asleep after about four hours.

Back in the '80s, one's next-door neighbors became family friends almost immediately (unless they were whack-jobs). Two or three nights before Christmas, my family was visiting the recently arrived Scott and Nancy. They didn't have any kids, so Mike and I sat on the couch and listened to bland grown-

up talk. One of the very few things that I'm resigned to feeling nostalgic about is that turning the television on during such a situation wasn't yet a given. Still, routine adult conversation wasn't much better. My mind wandered to castles, labyrinths, catacombs.

Why, for twenty-four weeks, I've thought of it, now. I must play the game before Christmas! But how?

Then I got an idea. An *awful* idea. The Chris got a *wonderful, awful* idea!*

I told my mother that I was hungry, and asked if I could briefly return home and grab a snack. "Okay. Here's the key. Remember to lock up when you leave." I thanked her, ran next door and through the garage, unlocked the kitchen entrance, dashed to the living room, plucked *Adventure* from the undergrowth, and un-Scotched the edge a second time.

Now I slowly peeled open the top of the box itself, taking care not to visibly damage the thin cardboard. I slipped the cartridge out, flew to the television, reached behind it to shove the switch-box slider to "Game," changed the channel to 3, inserted the ROM and turned everything on.

There they were: The centered, green game number and the beckoning southern exit through the purple border. I pushed "Reset" and got my fix, proud that I was remembering where to go and what to do. It was all just as spellbinding as it had been months before.

Upon entering the Golden Castle with the Chalice, I listened to the entire, weirdly cool "winning sound," as I reckoned it – I wasn't aware that it was supposed to be some form of victory music – and then switched off the console, returned all of the settings to where they'd been, and slid the cartridge back into the carton. Before securing the gift wrap, I darted to the kitchen drawer that held the tape, tore off a piece and sealed the formerly glued box flap. I ate a Fruit Roll-Up before I left, just to stay honest.

Come Christmas morning, I unwrapped *Adventure* first. I was fairly certain that I hadn't left any noticeable marks or rips, but I wanted to be safe. My parents are nice people, but being exposed as a premature adventurer would have been highly embarrassing. It was pleasant to tear open the paper without having to ensure its re-sealable state.

I played the game as soon as I'd finished helping to collect and discard the crunchy clumps of wrapping paper, and I graduated myself to Games 2 and finally 3 before the weekend was over. A friend eventually showed me where to find the translucent pixel and the Easter-egg room, and I was delighted to learn that these extra treasures had been buried within an already enigmatic game world, unknown to most players who dwelt there.

In the early 2000s, I wrote an e-mail to Warren Robinett, relating the tale above. He replied that he'd enjoyed it, and we wrote back and forth a few times. He gave me some profound advice that was for me and me alone, pal. (Not really. He did explain some interesting things about the dragons' A.I., though.)

Nowadays, I more frequently play the magnificent *Indenture*, Craig Pell's free, unofficial sequel from 1996. The highest variation, Game 5, comprises a random arrangement and over 300 locations. It's the perfect follow-up for the zealot who wants more *Adventure* in *Adventure*. It was written for PCs with CGA or VGA graphics. If you're keen, find and download the graphical fix, *Indent2X*, as well as the game itself. Place them into a single directory and run the fix in *DOSBox*.

Get Lamp is an entertaining Jason Scott documentary about text adventures that was released in 2010. He's a superb filmmaker, and the feature is extremely well done. For my taste, however, it spends a bit too much time on software collectors and behind-the-scenes politics in place of creative matters, such as insight into the brainwaves behind Infocom's groundbreaking puzzles and geography. I recommend it anyway, particularly for the substantial bonus footage on the second disc. Among the treats are two short Robinett features.

In one of them, he recounts his motive for having devised the first-ever Easter egg to be discovered. (It was also the first to require actions integral to the game-play itself. The actual first is obliquely conjured in a Fairchild Channel F game.) He refers to the secret message, "Created by Warren Robinett," as his signature, akin to those found on paintings.

"I was kind of proud of that game," he says. "It was a good idea [and] it was hard to implement...and then it was just going to be *Adventure* by Atari. And that..." He pauses in a postponed laugh. "...pissed me off!"

*With apologies to Dr. Seuss.

Congo Bongo
(Beck-Tech / Sega, 1983)



The arcade version of this inadvertently funny game isn't very good to begin with, so I find the vast amount of home adaptations to be mystifying. As my enjoyment of *Congo Bongo* lies in making fun of it, the most entertaining edition is the unnecessarily crude 2600 one.

Sega's attempt at applying an isometric perspective to the prevalent climbing motif simply doesn't work. I borrowed the game from a kid down the street in 1983, practiced until I could play as well as I was willing to, replaced my frustration with laughter and gave it back a few days later.

For a start, it's difficult to tell if one of the bouncy coconuts, or perhaps vigorous clams, is about to hit you. Far from being innovative, the mechanics are simply cumbersome. And that music! Two percussive notes are constantly repeated, and they're not replaced with a proper tune until your explorer / hunter / lost tourist gets killed. It makes you want to walk the poor bastard off a cliff just to give your ears a break.

Those monkeys near the river are supposed to cling to your neck, inhibit your jumps and eventually work together to throw you over the waterfall (which, in this version, is evidently sick of its original home in *Surround*); but a 2600 monkey will just attach himself to you and look contented until you shake him off. He doesn't seem as concerned with killing you as with wanting to be your pet. The arcade primates would look at their home counterparts and throw *themselves* off the precipice in shame.

When you've reached Congo at the top and apparently given him a bad case of acne, you get to play on the second level, you lucky jungle devil. This is an endeavored rip-off of the top half of *Frogger*, and it's where your hard-to-judge hops really come to your aid in ending the game quickly. The viewpoint is so unaccommodating that the only effective strategy is to memorize which spots are

safe and which merely appear to be. All told, the game moves like a flip-it cartoon book with every third page torn out.

I think rhinos charge at you on the third level. I'm sure that it's almost too much fun to cope with, so I won't bother trying. Even in the '80s, this conversion was a waste of money. It could have easily been emulated by smashing oneself in the head a few times with a clothing iron. Whether or not there's fun to be found doesn't depend on graphical detail, of course. Unfortunately, this game has neither. It's reminiscent of watching a movie with chewing gum stuck in the projector gears.

The main problem is that your character often doesn't jump to the direction you're conveying. Maybe it's all supposed to be an exercise in telekinesis. Since that doesn't really exist, and annoyance doesn't equal fun in my book, or even my pamphlet, let's move on to another game before I actually start criticizing this one.

Fantastic Voyage

(Sirius / 20th-Century Fox, 1982)



When programmer David Lubar spotted this 1966 movie title on Fox's list of proposed games, he seized upon it, having grown up reading Isaac Asimov's stories. He wrote the 2600 version for Sirius, which handed it over to Fox for distribution. Tom McWilliams converted it for Atari's eight-bits. While the latter cartridge was released by Sirius itself, Fox's name was included on both packages, as it owned the title.

It's easy to hastily assume that this is just another generic, vertically scrolling shoot-'em-up. Even some magazine writers made that mistake in the '80s. If you take time to read the manual, you'll find some significant original elements that appreciably elevate the fun above wallpaper-game tedium. *Fantastic Voyage* feels good to play and boasts pristine graphical accuracy. The console and computer versions are practically indistinguishable from one another, revealing adept coding skills on McWilliams's part.

The story takes place inside somebody. Your spaceship-shaped submarine has been injected into the bloodstream of a sick person (talk about doctor's appointments that you want to put off), and the goal is to wipe out a blood clot. Some of the nasty things along the way must be shot before they scroll out of view. Other, less nasty things have to be left alone. The purpose in each case is to keep the heart rate of your justifiably nervous host from rising dangerously. Don't bring along any girly magazines, or he's finished. When the heart monitor emits a solid tone...well, it's the one flat line that isn't welcome in a 2600 game.

Your sub has the time-honored abilities to fire straight ahead and move from side to side, but it also changes speed along with its forward and backward movement. As only two velocities are permitted in most any other forced-scrolling game – "a bit too fast" and "you've returned to the title screen" – this extra facility makes *Fantastic Voyage* more akin to *Spy Hunter* than something like *River Raid*.

The game begins on Level 0, which is strange and a bit aggravating; but the increase in difficulty is well paced from patient to patient. The instructions refer to the first obstacles as "defense cells." Whoa, now, Mister Scientific Terminology! Let's not get too specific. I'm a layman, here. They look more like Lawn Darts anyway, so that's how I refer to them.

Each of the Darts will budge threateningly as you approach, finally springing from the left-hand artery wall and spearing the opposite. You can shoot it for points before or after it launches, but the heart rate isn't affected whether it survives or not. You can see one at the top of the screen shot. The key-shaped things are enzymes. Blast them to unlock health! (Okay; that was corny.) Taking them out helps the patient considerably, but he's not harmed if they get past you. Think of them as valuable, timer-slowng targets.

Note the soap bubble at the bottom. This guy clearly has to start applying his deep cleansers more gently. As with everything but the randomly appearing enzyme keys, it's usually not solitary; the obstacles scroll by in lengthy groups. To prevent the heartbeat from speeding up, navigate around the bubbles, which are actually white blood cells, rather than shooting them. The opening level's penultimate phase then begins: The artery narrows, and you're tasked merely with steering your way through until you reach the blood clotlets, with nothing in your way except for the odd enzyme.

Colliding with anything, whether it's best left intact or not, causes extreme heart acceleration. The artery walls are exceptions; touching either one releases an antibody, a dot that emerges from the north amid the standard entities, and bounces back and forth across your path. It's not easy to shoot, but letting it by will quicken the heart rate. All of these harms can be offset by eliminating most of the enzymes that show up. Nailing them all is obviously optimal.

The indestructible clotlets precede the main target. You can attack them for a single point per shot, but your survival requires some dexterous weaving. Thankfully, you can run into the walls during this final phase without triggering antibodies. The largest impediment is the blood clot itself. You literally can't miss it, as long as you hold down the fire button. Reduce your speed to ensure that you don't end the game by crashing into the clot; then exploit your rapid firepower to shoot it fifteen times. When it explodes, the artery will noisily widen again. This is all extremely cool to watch.

Beginning with the second patient (or perhaps the next artery over in one exceedingly ill person), the white blood cells are followed by Cheerios with hats. These boost the heart rate unless you destroy them. You can call them bacteria if you like; the manual writer did. Each requires three shots. It will visibly diminish and, if you ultimately let it scroll away, cause proportionally less harm. The

aforementioned cells also take damage before they vanish, conversely hurting the patient more with every size reduction.

I keep typing "patient," but this abnormal procedure might not be quite so official. Have you ever seen a submarine miniaturizer in a hospital? Nor have I. This may be a back-alley voyage! I could probably save the person some cash by simply doing all of this with a coat hanger.

My favorite phase begins after the Level 2 bacteria: Everything but the clotlets (and the clot itself, of course) appears in a random mixture, as seen above. You're now being impelled to consider your shots on a thing-by-thing basis.

The need to dispose of certain obstacles while allowing others to pass is what truly makes *Fantastic Voyage* stand out. The player's attention is firmly held, and his alertness consistently required, for uncommon reasons. The graphics are sublimely abstract and often vector-like. Even within each level's predetermined sequence, randomness dictates the enzyme appearances, organism positions and artery swerves.

The two versions are commendably similar. If you've become good at one, you're automatically good at the other. As you know, this isn't always the case with cross-platform games. Also, it's fun to play a character with very rare skills. One seldom hears about a marksman who's also a doctor who can deftly maneuver submarines. It makes one wonder how he finds the time to play video games.

Fast Eddie

(Sirius / 20th-Century Fox, 1982)



Fox called its 2600 line Games of the Century. In this case, it doesn't speak very highly of the century. Some of the others are among my favorites, however: *Fantastic Voyage*, *Flash Gordon*, *Beany Bopper* and the often overlooked *Breakout* antithesis called *Revenge of the Beefsteak Tomatoes*.

Conversions of this Mark Turmell original were released for eight-bit computers during the same year, but I haven't spent much time with any of them, as I take issue with the controls. While smooth and speedy, Eddie's movement dispenses with transitions through diagonals, so he'll continue running past a ladder that the player's telling him to climb by means of an unbroken controller move from, say, leftward to upward.

Once he does start ascending, he can't step back down until he's reached the platform above (and *vice versa*); there's no changing his mind halfway. When he steps on that first rung, he's committed. But an agreeable factor is that the screen will contain one of several random ladder arrangements, depending on how long "Game Reset" is held.

This isn't among the 2600's worst, but I certainly have no love for it. That's just as well. There's no time for love in video games! Oh, sure, there might be *hearts* – *Donkey Kong*, *Popeye*, *Microsurgeon* and so forth. But a truly valiant game character quickly grows impatient to get back to the battle beyond the hearts, or, in Eddie's case, to eat them. No wonder he looks like he could use some sit-ups.

At least he gets a lot of climbing and jumping in. There are plenty of hearts for him on the first level, but no love, as the *Sneakers*-like aliens who patrol each corridor will kill him on contact. This goes to show that one should always ask before taking somebody's heart.

Just when Eddie is up to his ears in hearts, the alien at the top breaks his own legs in disgrace. His reduced height reveals that he's wearing a large key as a hairpiece. Never you mind. We don't know about other cultures and their customs. When Eddie jumps over the crippled alien, he nabs the key and proceeds to the second level, on which he eats fish who can fly. Those can't be good for the ol' digestion, either.

To be fair, how many Atari 2600 programs have I written? The only games I've completed have been on the Commodore 64. I'm not huffily criticizing *Fast Eddie* so much as having a bit of fun at Turmell's expense. As with any game, I'm sure that I'd get the hang of it over time. That's what I'm afraid of. Let's plow ahead while our standards are still high.

Fire Fighter (Imagic, 1982)



I often take pleasure in spending some serious time with a game to which I've never given a chance. Bothering to truly learn how to play games that have been rashly eschewed in the past can frequently lead to nice surprises and even new favorites. *Fire Fighter* is not one of those. It's entertaining for unintended reasons, however.

I've never understood where the fun is supposed to be found in this Brad Stewart game, apart from the derived humor. Having read the manual, I still don't, but I'm left with the assumption – well, the *hope*, really – that it was written for very young kids. There doesn't seem to be a message on the box to that effect, but it's even easier than playing *Outlaw*. By yourself.

It does provide an opportune example to support my insistence that graphical quality is an entirely separate consideration from game-play enjoyment. Everything looks great and there aren't any flaws, but you can simply stand motionless near your fire engine if you wish, watching the trapped guy panic and not lifting a finger to help him. After slowly forcing him up the building's interior until he's on the roof, the flames die out and he descends, getting back to whatever he was doing before the coffee maker malfunctioned.

Moreover, the blaze takes so long to spread that its captive could get out his tools and install a fire escape before running out of room. The player's role in the game is essentially superfluous. If one contemplates the scenario long enough while gazing at the soothing flames, the game can be perceived as an exercise in confronting one's values.

As the trapped man frantically waves his arms and scrambles to stay ahead of the inferno, the inactive fireman might be pondering whether or not the guy *deserves* to be rescued. Is he a kind person? Would the world perhaps be better

off without him? Is the problem of overpopulation as genuine as it seems? Maybe it all just comes down to whether or not he likes Dalmatians.

It's no wonder that we've never seen an article about a high-scoring champion who's endured a *Fire Fighter* marathon. It would be an amusing read, though. "Local man Duzzinneid Toowerk intends to set the world record. So far, he's been playing for 147 hours and 11 minutes. When asked why he'd chosen this game, he stated that he'd forgotten to turn off his Atari before taking a walk to throw out the trash, check the mail, grab some lunch, go bowling, attend a symphony, enjoy a hike, wrestle bison and return to the bowling alley to look for his house key. When he got home, the game was still going, so he figured that he might as well keep at it and get his name on some website. He says that his sleep pattern hasn't been affected in the least. His only concern is that the television holds out."

Flash Gordon

(Sirius / 20th-Century Fox, 1983)



Fox released this David Lubar creation for the 2600, whereas Sirius, for which Lubar actually worked, kept the Atari computer conversion to itself and issued it as *Spider City*. The console version came out before, or concurrently with, Tom McWilliams's eight-bit adaptation. As Fox owned the movie title, Sirius's change to *Spider City* was possibly based on the company's unwillingness to include Fox's name on the 400 / 800 packaging (like it had with *Fantastic Voyage* a year before). This may also pertain to the 1983 Lubar game *SpaceMaster X-7* and its computer equivalent, *Alpha Shield*.

McWilliams did astonishing translation work. As with *Fantastic Voyage*, the versions are identical, apart from the slightly larger 2600 graphics. In the admirable-try category is VIC-20 *Spider City* by Leonard Bertoni, who also wrote an incredible C64 adaptation of David Schroeder's Apple II game *Dino Eggs*.

In *Flash Gordon / Spider City*, your objective is to liberate the labyrinthine metropolis from an occupation of evil garden windmills. They're called Spider Warriors in the manual, but that doesn't make sense. Why would they name themselves after the place they're invading? Speaking of that place, it can be fully monitored on the radar screen, and it appears to be modeled after an anthill. The citizens were probably averse to calling it Ant City because they didn't want other space people to mistake it for Aunt City, which would have sounded as if it were full of sissies.

As you can see, the city comprises a network of tunnels. Its ultimately chosen name clearly relates to the fact that it's shaped like a spider – with a glandular problem. The upper portion of the screen displays the shoot-'em-up action. The illusion of movement is resourcefully provided via columns of distant stars, or perhaps space-people street lights, which can be observed to the far right in the screen shot. They scroll across the playfield as you fly horizontally, and undulate in place when you travel vertically. It works.

Maneuver your ship through the tunnels and make contact with the intruders, whose factions appear as blips on the radar. You're the city's lone protector, as the residents are sissies after all. The enemy windmills are so confident of this that they're all napping. Individually awaken each group of six, blasting away while they rouse themselves or try to escape you immediately thereafter.

If you shoot five or six before they exit the playfield, you'll hear a low-pitched doorbell. No, nobody's coming to visit your ship. It's now shielded for a few seconds. This also occurs when you've lost a ship and assumed control of another. You'll destroy anything that you collide with until the shield dematerializes, which will take place just after you hear a *high*-pitched doorbell. (If you play this game long enough, you get hungry for pizza.)

The radar blip that represents your ship looks like a hyphen. The large, rough diamond denotes a swarm of multicolored pebbles, the likes of which you find at the bottoms of fish tanks. The swarm slowly pursues you through the tunnels; it's joined by others on succeeding levels. If you find yourself enveloped in it, and you feel like bringing it to a momentary standstill instead of simply flying right back out, you'll want to dodge or shoot the swiftly soaring pebbles until you manage to blow away the fish-tank water filter that zips through once in a while.

I'm not sure if the pebbles can destroy the windmills. I've never been able to align them on the radar for a long enough period to find out, much less start an argument between them. Note the tunnels at the edges of the city; you can wrap around the map. (That sounds like a horrible song intended to teach geography. "If you like 'Rock Around the Clock,' you'll *hate* 'Rap Around the Map!'")

When you rescue one of the oddly numerous people drifting on their own between the windmill groups, you earn bonus points. Shooting them results in score penalties. I don't know how they could have been stupid (or unlucky) enough to find themselves floating shiplessly through space. "I was just shopping for aquariums, and the next thing I knew..."

Taking out the flying saucers that you'll also encounter isn't worth anything but points, either. Well, plus the usual fun of turning a game character into death dots. When you've finished off the last of the windmills, you're rewarded with a hall of mirrors, which you fly down in extravagant first-person style. Some heroic, skillful and fearless rescuers of entire municipalities can be so vain.

Now you're in a Spider City of another color; or maybe it's the same one, and they've repainted. If that's the case, they certainly haven't learned how to prevent occupations. The levels grow more difficult in a very gradual fashion. The enemies steadily speed up, basically.

Flash Gordon / Spider City's rare quality among games with split screens is that you actually have to pay attention to both displays. In addition, the graphical interaction and control receptivity are meticulous. Despite the recurring, uniform invasion, which, frankly, I've fabricated (the manual has you attacking Spider City, which is rather unkind, considering that everyone's asleep), you feel quite triumphant after eliminating a whole maze's worth of bad guys.

Now, where's my reward from the *women* of Spider City?

Frostbite

(Activision, 1983)



This amazing game was designed and programmed by Steve Cartwright. Isn't that the perfect last name for someone who writes console software? He had also created *Barnstorming* and *Megamania*, not to mention the great *Seaquest*, which I'll return to in this chapter, as it shares some significant elements with *Frostbite*. Cartwright would go on to make *Plaque Attack*, which I believe was his final 2600 game. I think it came out just after this one, but don't quote me on that when you're writing your book about *Frostbite*.

In the latter, the strengths of the console are skillfully exploited. The game illustrates how underestimated the system was in its own time and generally remains, in spite of its prevalence. The terrific and solid-feeling graphics, as well as the smooth movement and precise mechanics, exemplify what the 2600 is capable of, provided that the programmer knows what he's doing.

Like the arcade game *Lunar Rescue* far above, *Frostbite* combines pre-existing elements to end up being one of a kind. If you were to isolate the two main ingredients herein, you'd have *Q*Bert* and the top half of *Frogger*. Mixed together, however – especially taking into account Cartwright's clever additions – they make for a unique game.

According to the manual, the player assumes the role of Frostbite Bailey, but I call him Frostbite Frankie, because it's catchier. To be honest, I change his name every time I address him. Not that it happens often; I'm not *that* out of touch with reality. I can assure you that it occurs no more than twice per day. Anyway, he's building himself an igloo, and he has incredible throwin' arms. Every time he jumps onto a floe, it changes color and he flings a big chunk of ice northward to the shore, building his home from an impressive distance.

As you play this part with the might of your own dexterity, bouncing vertically from row to row, each jump's veering distance to the east or west depends on

how long you push diagonally on the controller. The maximum length of your leap increases over successive levels. The great deal of control is what's chiefly responsible for making the game so enjoyable. Once the first several igloos have been built, you can practically hurl the guy across a quarter of the screen. The general game speed escalates, of course, but this is well complemented by your potential bounding coverage.

In fact, the entire game exhibits outstanding balance, and the difficulty curve is suitably gradual. In the "merely cosmetic but still nifty" department, the colors of the playfield slowly change to differentiate day from night, and the Northern Lights cycle on the horizon.

You're not stuck in place between jumps; you're able to walk back and forth across an ice floe when this seems useful. You can even accidentally march right off the edge, thus eventually, one imagines, becoming another floe drifting alongside it. Well, it doesn't have to be an accident, I suppose. You can walk off on purpose, if you're not crazy about ol' Frostbite Franz. Perhaps you don't like his hat.

Familiar elements that are merged to render something altogether fresh are found in many an Activision game; so is the superb twist that's introduced a few levels in. This is something that the designers at many other companies (or in many bedrooms) seem to have neglected. Once you feel that you've got the game down reasonably well, a subtle variation is thrown in that changes your whole approach. While it's brilliantly simple, it has quite an impact on the game-play and prevents monotony.

The twist Cartwright added to *Seaquest* is the Enemy Patrol Sub that suddenly appears on the ocean surface. From the third level onward, you're obliged to time the screen-top emergence of your own submarine so that your new and gradually accelerating enemy doesn't crash into you while you're stuck in place, dropping off the divers you've rescued – and keeping their gold (evil laugh).

The deviation in *Frostbite* is that a Polar Grizzly shows up on the fourth level, expressing great disinterest in your arrival home for some reason. He doesn't eat you when he catches you; he just wants to keep you away from your igloo. Upon collision, he chases you out of view before you finally die. Maybe this delayed heart attack is due to the severe cold.

Among the elements that make the game's ostensible straightforwardness ultimately deceptive is your ability to pick up the green fish that occasionally swim by in lieu of the standard deadly creatures. The risk-versus-reward aspect lies in determining whether or not it's worth attempting the slight detour often required to grab a quick seafood meal. Frostbite Fernando surely works up quite an appetite while he's undertaking his intense construction project. I guess that in *Frostbite II: Hypothermia*, mercury would have been an added hazard.

The temperature steadily drops, even during the day, so you can't take forever to finish a level; and the time remaining upon igloo completion is even better for your score than the fish are. Whether you care about beating your record or not (it depends on the day for me), the actual reason to earn as many points as possible is that you get an extra chance at commanding Frostbite Finnegan for every 5,000 points. The higher you score, the more you can see of this game's level-to-level variety, which hinges on the diverse mixture of floe arrangements, enemy configurations and movement patterns, and overall speed. Cartwright's attention to multiplicity matches his attention to detail.

Speaking of enemies, the weird birds, lobsters and, evidently, hand pliers that swim across the sea don't seem terribly intent on killing Frostbite Phil. They're just going about their business, really. *He's* the intruder here. And he thinks he's so manly, with his numb, painless throwin' hands and his silly hat.

I usually find time limits objectionable. I like to be free to explore all of the possibilities in the game-play without having to fret about a clock hanging over my be-hatted head. The timer doesn't pose much danger here, however. As in another inspired Activision game, John Van Ryzin's *H.E.R.O.*, it exists merely to egg you on and keep things sufficiently urgent-feeling, so that the end-of-level achievement feels that much greater. The timer appears here in the form of a thermometer. It's got a digital readout, of course. We're not savages, even here in the Arctic. Even in 1983.

You know, it's really all of the simple details in a game that add up to a big coolness. As a case in point, you can hold the controller in a particular direction to keep jumping. This might not sound like a big deal, but when you're playing, you can truly appreciate being spared the requirement of a separate movement for every intended hop.

You've also been given a last-ditch ability to avoid death. When you push the fire button, you reverse the direction of the row of ice that you're standing on. This is increasingly helpful as the difficulty rises, because the screen doesn't wrap. The planet's circumference isn't that short, even this far north.

The trade-off is that your igloo loses a brick every time you do this. When it's been completed, however, you can change direction all you like without mysteriously dismantling your home. This is handy, as luring the bear away from it becomes ever more necessary; he speeds up along with everything else. If you ride the northernmost floe from side to side, he'll eventually follow you far enough to the west to allow for one more quick reversal, after which you can hop right past him and through your front door.

A bear-safe spot exists. If you jump onto the shore to the extreme west, you're apparently far enough from your igloo to placate him. He runs up, stops and just

stands there, staring at you. While this might be an awkward situation, you can jump onto a passing floe when you're good and ready. It only works if you hop onto the shore directly from the south; if you run to the safe spot, the Polar Grizzly will remember that he doesn't like you. At the end of the day – even the six-month day – he's not very smart. I like that in an enemy.

In case there's any confusion regarding the completion of your igloo, the front door appears when you're done. The doorway will even flicker if night has fallen; by some means, your character has started a fire from without. Such are the skills of Frostbite Ferg!

Of course, the bear might have started it. Maybe that's why he chases you away: He's got a sauce going in there. All this time, he's only wanted access to your stove. Who are you to interfere with natural instincts? It could even explain why you have to constantly rebuild your igloo. It keeps melting.

There's a funny extra that doesn't quite count as a secret, as it's mentioned in the manual (and if I were to describe all of the Atari 2600 Easter eggs and amusing glitches, the book would be twice as long). At 110,000 points, a fish appears below the score. You've gotten lonely up here, so you're keeping just one as a pet instead of eating it. When the score rolls over at a million, it's entirely replaced with the word "FISHES." This doesn't mean that your pet has somehow managed to breed on his own. It's Cartwrightian for "Stop playing the game already! Go outside and get some exercise!"

("Be-hatted"?)

Hunchy 2 (Atari Age, 2005)



This is the purported 2600 sequel to Century's *Hunch Back* from 1983, but it's so much better than that ineptly handling jump-over-the-holes arcade game that with a different title, it would have had no perceptible connection. As a splendid but possibly unwitting middle finger to the original, Chris Walton has devised an acutely accurate control scheme. You feel that you're unquestionably in command of the character, and, considering that you've got him leaping around like a Super Mario, that he doesn't have the slightest back problem.

As Quasimodo, the highest ambition you've been able to come up with, apart from enlarging your collection of giant bells, is to rescue some lady named Esmeralda from what must be a very noisy cathedral. No wonder she wants to leave. Stealing all of the bells from each room admits you into the next of fourteen.

During a pleasantly low-pitched but inexplicable rendering of "The Teddy Bears' Picnic," you can walk forward at any time to grab the starting bell and embark upon your splinter-filled crusade. While climbing and jumping all over the first level, you'll notice that you can't fall to your death, and that you're able to steer in midair, turning more than once if you choose. You're so unafflicted by scoliosis that you can carry a considerable amount of large, heavy bells without sitting down for a break.

What appears to be a bluebird continually flies across the room at random elevations, and two inhabit the second room; their numbers vary from there. How such creatures could possibly hurt a big guy like Quasimodo is anybody's guess, but he'll drop dead if he touches a single feather. A plain old pellet gun would solve the problem right away. I guess that he had to make room on his person for all of the bells.

The thing near the center of the screen shot that looks like a knocked-over sled is actually a guard, who's really into mathematics, as the plus symbol on his armor proudly signifies. Two of these nerds occupy the third room, but they don't do anything so early on except to stand there and be lethal.

Given that you've had so much fun bouncing around, swiping bells and indulging in the game's speed and fluidity, it comes as something of a surprise when the platform arrangements start to get tricky. On Level 4, some close-jumping challenges await the recovered back patient. The ability to safely plunge from any height becomes immaterial above the row of breaches in the bottommost platform – the floor, basically, beyond which lurks a mysterious, graphic-killing abyss. In light of all the bluebirds, I'd hate to think of what's accumulating down there.

In point of fact, *Hunchy 2* slowly transforms from a platform-action game into a puzzle. This is where its brilliance truly lies, not to mention its nasty cunning. One finds himself pausing to figure out how to reach all of the bells. On later levels, some have to be obtained last, lest the player trap himself between two of the wooden ledges, belatedly discovering that they're too high to hurdle. Note the second right-hand bell from the top, seen on Level 8 above. (You know, all this place really needs is a match.)

The guard on the sixth level is the first who's not under the spell of Inability to Budge. He assumes that he can be lazy and dispose of you by repeatedly poking upward with a stick. Your defiance simply requires timing your jumps over him, as well as breaking his morale by stridently proclaiming, "You'll have to try harder than *that*, bird keeper!"

The ladders are uncommonly unrestrictive; you can hop onto or off of any rung you like. This may seem to be an obvious facility, but try telling that to some programmers.

Walton was so smart about the pacing that the guards aren't even ambulatory until you've made it to Level 7, having been familiarized with all of the other obstacles. The new geek pursues you all over the room. The ledge arrangement has been temporarily returned to the straightforward type, in order to let you adapt to the added element of chase.

Happily, the guard is better at arithmetic than spatial relationships, so the best strategy entails getting yourself above or below him, and then drawing him away from the ladders. He'll wander back and forth as he tracks your horizontal position; he's not smart enough to continue toward a ladder. It's also beneficial to lure him off the end of his current platform, provided that he's already prowling beneath you, of course. He can't jump in that confining armor. Like you, he can survive any fall, but at least he'll be farther away from you when he lands.

Nobody can accuse Walton of having made the game too easy. I've gotten to Level 10 thus far. That's okay, though. What did Esmeralda ever do for me, anyway? Let her take up bird watching.

The levels flaunt substantial variety, and each contains the well known "I'll do it *this time*" aspect. I always have fun playing *Hunchy 2*, but it's only one of the many impressive games that have been homemade for the undying 2600. There's a lot of greatness to come, too. I have a hunch.

Oystron

(Xtype, 1997)



This is the oldest homebrew that I play regularly. It's my preferred type of 2-D shoot-'em-up, excluding the unforced-scrolling kind: Not only do you get to obliterate many, many things, but there's a supplementary action to be performed that gives the obliterations a purpose, and keeps the battle from getting repetitive.

In this case, you collect things that are left by other things when you shoot those other things. Other other things can steal your collected things, but you can shoot the other other things and collect your collected things again.

This is Piero Cavina's first game, and he initially made it available as a free download that could be run in emulation, or on a console via the Starpath Supercharger. A cartridge version was later released. It's a seamlessly flowing and impeccably programmed struggle between man and oyster. So let's get crackin'!

Your spaceship – one of four, with another on the way per every 4,000 points – can fly all over most of the screen in any direction, but it continues facing to the left or right during vertical movement. It's obstructed by an invisible boundary about two thirds of the way to the right. The Space Oysters and other unsafe things soar in from that direction. Finishing off an extraterrestrial mollusk yields a Pearl, which is acquired on contact and deposited in the Pearl Zone to the left with a button-push.

The button is also a firing one, so jabbing it within the Zone, which is demarcated with that column of dots, simultaneously drops a Pearl and fires one of your high-speed, two-at-a-time projectiles. If you've pilfered more than one Pearl since your last delivery, you can effect rapid dropping to go with your rapid blasting. Pearls can't be stacked on top of each other, naturally, but you can jettison them contiguously by holding the button down while you're moving. If you line up a full

row of eight, you'll take them all on board, where they'll be fashioned into a single Space Mine. That's what I call it, anyway, as it's later ejected in the path of the (scary chord) Oystron.

The button's dual purpose in the Zone typifies this game's virtuosic balance. When you're carrying a Pearl and you're far from a nearly completed row, you're obliged to quickly decide between shooting and dodging a looming obstacle. Keeping your itchy firing thumb in check allows you to hang onto the Pearl until you can drop it exactly where you want to.

The things that look like asteroids, or stale hunks of blue cheese, are the Space Oysters. The Pearls that they leave behind are small squares that move to the left, much more slowly than anything else, until they rebound from the border. Even in heavy combat, do your best to swoop across any pieces of pinkness that you see floating around, lest they elude you and exit to the right.

The progressively more deviously zigzagging enemy groups will reclaim the mementos of their dead Oyster buddies if they get past you. After reaching the left end of a Pearl-occupied row, the offending faction will wobble for a few seconds and emanate a harmless strip of screen-crossing colors, making it very clear that they're thinning out your collection and don't see a thing that you can do about it. They would probably look very surprised to be shot during their return trip, if only they had the chance. A Pearl that you've liberated a second time can be recaptured before it drifts out of range.

Any Pearl that does so will be converted, through some evil alien process, into a wooden log. I'm not sure why they went with that, exactly. It's certainly sturdy wood, as your shots only repel it, so that might have something to do with it. It might even be petrified. You can shoot a log all the way back to the right if you want to bother, but what's humorous is that out of all these distinctly durable-looking things, the wood turns out to be the obstacle that you can't blow up.

You'll face other attackers besides the thieving kind. Those that are reminiscent of gigantic bottle rockets destroy all of the Pearls in a row that they've been permitted to overshoot. The aliens that bear strong likenesses to inflatable pickaxes can only be purged from one side, and it's usually not the one facing your ship.

I enjoy the ancillary goal of hoarding Pearls, but I've never needed more than one Space Mine to defeat the person who's ostensibly been throwing all of this lumber and marine life at me, the Oystron himself, who arrives between waves amid the other hazards. One envisions a huge, menacing beast who cunningly encumbers advancement, but he actually resembles a small, bluish-gray alien who's getting on in years.

As his eyesight has deteriorated, the Oystron will fly right into a Space Mine without attempting to sidestep it, unless I just haven't made enough progress to see him with his glasses on. The foremost challenge during this brief wave-ending phase is in being ready for it. When the playfield begins to flash and you hear a loud noise that brings to mind a student-driven car with a manual transmission, fly to a safe-looking row and scour the right half of the screen for an elderly pinwheel with antennae. Zoom into his path, push the button and beat a hasty retreat. He'll explode, and (if the sound is anything to go by) the microwave in your ship's cabin will be set off by the energy release.

You'll promptly engage in a lengthy warp toward the next enemy wave, or possibly the next highly polluted tidal wave. The commotion doesn't stop until you get there, and everything but your ship speeds up, so this is the toughest part of the game. You still have firepower, but the flickering is awfully distracting. Whereas each Oyster's random endurance is a normally pleasing element, firing at one from a short distance is consequently risky to begin with, let alone when it's moving faster. The most dependable strategy is to pick a row, remain motionless and keep firing to the right.

Speaking personally, the thorny warp has its positive side. I tend to fancy myself quite the conqueror when I've gotten through it. Of course, it might just be the profound sense of relief. I don't even care that my ship has been unaccountably emptied of Space Mines. That just makes it fun to accrue them again.

For having commenced as a programming exercise in on-screen object replication, *Oystron* made a staggering impact on 2600 players of the late '90s, most notably those who'd go on to create games of their own. There had been other homemade programs, but Cavina showed that a rock-solid, elaborate and electrifying action game could be written for the system without the benefit of an excessively costly development kit. And this was the guy's debut.

Fast, flawless and full of seafood: A great combination.

River Raid II

(Imagineering / Activision, 1988)



This is one of the few 16 KB games that were released for the 2600 in the '80s, and David Lubar seems to have exploited every byte. At the time, he was freelancing for Imagineering, which was Absolute's design department. The manual attributes the game's creation to Dan Kitchen, but Lubar has since remarked in interviews that the credit is unfounded. Not that the Kitchen brothers didn't write some great games, but we aren't concerned with those at the moment.

I prefer *River Raid II* to the original 1982 game. Carol Shaw's handiwork introduced a vividness, and a highly effective combination of graphical and sound effects, that were astounding at the time, and the game is certainly still fun to play. But it's among the small number of well done '80s games that haven't maintained their initial appeal. After the innumerable, intervening shooting games with forced scrolling, any one of them has to possess some truly exceptional characteristics to keep my knuckles whitened.

There's simply more to *do* in the sequel – but not so much that it becomes tedious or convoluted. For all of the additional elements, the action doesn't feel any less directly involving. Also, while the game is still a vertical shoot-'em-up, it's a bomb-'em-up as well.

In spite of the title, your fighter pilot has nothing against the river itself. The objective during each mission is to destroy a bridge. You begin by gathering speed on a carrier runway and taking off as you approach the edge. This is achieved by holding down the fire button until you've accelerated enough to launch, which is usually just before you plunge into the water. Push downward on the controller at any time; don't let go until you've positively cleared the carrier. It makes no difference if you release the button as you begin your ascent.

Now that you're playing the game proper, the controls are different. The fire button dispatches your forward missiles, which move to the left and right as your jet does. Simultaneously pushing downward launches torpedoes that hit the water and continue straight ahead; they're guided as well. Your missiles take out the black choppers and pink aircraft. The latter are fun to taunt. "What kind of color is *that* for a war plane? Is that why you're banking so slowly? You're doing your nails in there?"

What's peculiar is that you'll collide with anything airborne no matter what your altitude. Perhaps they're actually very tall, narrow, aircraft-shaped boats. By contrast, the targets drifting slowly below are harmless, unless you fly low enough to crash into one (your lowest altitude above water is otherwise safe). These enemy carriers, tugboats, canoes, flood-zone houses, bedpans and hypodermic needles don't fire at you. They exist only to increase your score. The enemy clearly hasn't thought this through.

The two types of flying foe have been armed, however, so your guided missiles make it a bit tricky to survive your own accuracy. The best tactic is to time your banking so that you sweep in front of an opponent without stopping, firing just before you cross his longitude. This will enable you to dodge his fast projectile while steering your own right into his evil hull. Imagine: Protecting bridges! The nerve!

You can always choose to merely fly past everything (except for the refueling planes, which we'll get to), if you're more in the mood for elusion than shootin'. While that's not as much fun as being destructive, I point it out because the kind of game in which the player has a lot of freedom, and can frequently make his own decisions about what to do – within the provided scenario and mechanics – is the best.

Upward and downward controller movements adjust your speed. The faster you fly, the lower your altitude. Your velocity has no bearing on fuel consumption. Speaking of which, keep an eye on that gauge; you'll hear a warning sound when you're getting low on fuel. To replenish, fly through the yellow aircraft. (With technology like that, those bridges don't stand a chance!) Reduce your speed while overlapping one of these refueling planes, so that you receive as much as possible. You can shoot them, but there's no point, as they're worth no points.

Near the end of the ocean phase, you'll encounter a lot of flak: In a last-ditch attempt to undermine your confidence, the enemies shout insults at you. (Okay; maybe not.) Navigate around the flak bursts until you reach the river delta. Take advantage of the large number of yellow planes in this area, because fuel will be scarce during the second part of the mission.

Now you're flying above the river itself, which is often centrally divided by a wide strip of land. The fuel is now floating in yellow buoys – you can see one to the

right in the screen shot – so filling up requires flying low and therefore fast. It's a riskier prospect than refueling in midair; when your altitude's low, you'll crash into one of the intermittently widened strips of borderland if you don't climb or swerve in time.

Annihilating a low target is always worth more points than shooting an aerial meanie. This literally goes doubly for the land-based structures in each mission's river phase. On that subject, the abundance of water towers is baffling. There's plenty of water around there. I guess that the enemy is just *that* unclean. In any case, the towers are fun to bombard, especially considering that yours are the only torpedoes in the world that can skid along land as well as water. "Take that, water tower! I'll get you, too, other water tower! There you go! Arrrrr! I can't stand water towers! Water towers killed my family!" Well, if you're gonna play a game, get into it, man.

The first bridge is easy to align your jet with before it scrolls into view, as the channels merge into one just before you reach it. In most of the missions that follow, the bridges alternate between the left and right waterways. Their locations aren't random, so memorization is useful. They can only be destroyed with torpedoes. If you miss one, you'll simply advance to the next mission, giving up 2,500 points in a game whose other targets average at between 250 and 300. You set out with three jets, but an extra joins your reserves for every 20,000 points (which is something that the manual fails to mention).

Beyond the bridge and another stretch of fighters, helicopters and sea vessels – as well as the resumed profusion of refueling planes, which can be a sight for sore eyes – you'll draw near another friendly carrier. The controls change again during this landing phase. The fire button now boosts your airspeed. Keep it depressed ("Isn't it thankless being a fire button"?) and ensure that your altitude is high. As soon as you're above the carrier, release the button and push upward to descend. You'll glide to a stop, progressing to the following mission after your remaining fuel is counted for points.

The fuel gauge is the only one that you have to pay attention to. I'm uncertain as to why the altitude and speed indicators are there. With a bit of practice, you can tell how fast and low you're flying on the playfield itself. Maybe they were included for partially blind people, meaning those who can only see the bottom halves of things.

The radar screen is fairly useless as well. It displays the distance between your fighter and the upcoming bridge or end-of-mission carrier, but you'll quickly find it gratuitous. Still, my only real gripe doesn't involve the game-play itself, but rather the on-screen indication of how many bridges have been devastated. To be more specific, there isn't one. While it's not vital to know the number of completed missions, it's fun; it's like another part of the score.

Such a signpost would also help the player to recall which side of the river is spanned by the forthcoming bridge during any given mission. He can keep count on his own, of course, but the omission is puzzling, as Lubar's games usually keep track of level numbers (cf. *Fantastic Voyage* and *Flash Gordon*).

River Raid II itself is spectacular. It's the finest kind of sequel: Everything that works so well in the first game has been preserved, but some agreeable elements have been added that inflate the earlier scheme instead of muddling it. The new abilities to change speeds and drop torpedoes have informed the game's very design, rather than having been thrown in as showy extras. Also, I like projectiles that can be steered.

I wish Shaw and Lubar would collaborate on *River Raid III*, so I'd finally get to destroy the traffic lights *under* the bridges.

Save Mary!

(Axlon / Atari prototype, 1990)



In the occasional documentary or imitation documentary, some guy's curiously testosterone-free voice will declare that the late-1982 game *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* is the worst ever made. The odd writer with scant grammatical skills will claim that it's merely the worst game ever made for the Atari 2600.

Complete nonsense, all of it, of course. While *E.T.* might have been one of the worst *movies* ever made, the game is quite compelling, provided that the player is fond of exploration adventures (with random elements, at that), plays Game 3 to forego the irritating bad guys, and isn't afraid of manuals. If he's not into that sort of thing – you know, thinking – fair enough, but simply not caring for something is a far cry from justifiably pronouncing it poor. Incidentally, anyone who truthfully has a hard time avoiding the wells isn't very good at video games.

A couple of friends and I had a blast playing Howard Scott Warshaw's two-month project when one of them brought it over in early '83. I purchased it, as well as the same programmer's captivating *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, as soon as I could afford to – i.e. when several cartridge prices considerably dropped a few months later. None of us kids perceived a "crash," even if the industry itself was painfully lurching when the gravy train stopped. There was no doom and gloom in *our* eyes. The industry's short-lived submergence worked in our favors, not against them. As far as I was concerned, it was a wonderful time, as the easily understood retailer habit of overstocking had begotten two-dollar games at the nearby Revco drug store.

The whole affair is a bit overstated these days, especially regarding its impact on players. In magazines like *Electronic Games*, the tribulation was reported as an inevitable shake-out of the companies that had jumped onto the gold-mine cart and released shoddy rip-offs. Once the inexpensive console games grew sparse, many of us simply added eight-bit computer libraries to our collections. Be assured that we didn't stop playing for a second, kiddos.

If you'd really like to know what Atari's reputation never recovered from, it was Tod Frye's conversion of *Pac-Man*, to begin with. It's not a bad game, but it's not *Pac-Man*. As it was released in the spring of '82, the shake-out wouldn't transpire for quite a while; but most players rightly or wrongly expected something closer to the arcade original, especially given the venerable VCS translations of *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids* and *Missile Command*. (I don't think that the brilliant *Berzerk* conversion came out before Frye's infamous endeavor.)

The swine in suits had chosen inexcusable cheapness and limited Frye to 4 KB. They'd been correct in expecting massive sales based on the title alone, but the company would never fully recapture its devotees' face-value esteem. Irrespective of the programmable-console industry's relative youth, '80s players weren't obtuse. When we saw the game, we realized that even Atari wasn't above cheating us after all. At that time, it was tantamount to learning that Walt Disney had been a deer hunter.

While we're on the subject, Coleco did the same thing to Garry Kitchen when he tackled VCS *Donkey Kong*. He nailed the mechanics and basic feel of the game admirably, never mind that the villain looks like a Christmas cookie and the fireballs have been turned into telephones. Also, horizontal asymmetry, which makes the ramps possible, is incredibly difficult to achieve on the system; but he did it. He's since remarked that had his request for another month and another 4 KB been granted, he could have cleaned up some graphical details that bothered him, and added the missing arcade screens. Two repugnant things have been the banes of video games at large since the '70s: deadlines and executives.

Poor Frye subsequently wrote the latter two installments in a series that cemented the shoes of Atari's standing once and for all, even if the non-centering analogue controllers of the "new" Atari 5200 "console," as well as its already antiquated arcade-port release titles, certainly didn't help. There isn't a worthwhile *Swordquest* game among the three that were ultimately issued, but *FireWorld* is the worst. It plays like a graphics crash. (Maybe if you "Frye" the console by quickly turning the power off and on, the game's a lot of fun.)

Like *EarthWorld* and *WaterWorld*, the second game isn't so much an adventure as an assortment of buggy, arcade-derivative sub-games, tied together with corridor transitions in which nothing actually happens. It's like a really bad *Gorf*. The *Swordquest* series, together with certain third-party games, were what truly convinced players to stop buying fully priced 2600 software.

I've brought all of this up to disclose that Frye finally redeemed himself. He wrote a fantastic action / skill program that integrated some puzzle elements. And wouldn't you know it! The damn game never came out!

I suppose that we can technically count its inclusion on the Atari Flashback 2 pseudo-console that appeared a couple of decades later. I don't have one of those things; I do, however, have the emulated ROM, and it turns out that *Save Mary!* is one of the most enjoyable Atari 2600 games that I never played in the '80s.

If you look for the binary image of this unreleased gem, you'll want to avoid the version whose title screen is bordered in purple and displays a 1989 copyright. It doesn't include all of the power-ups. The one that I've been playing for a few years has a title screen that features Mary herself and a 1990 copyright. This revision actually seems to have been completed; new elements make their entrances quite far into the game. The level-by-level pacing of the difficulty and power-up additions has been noticeably carried out. It's a shame that it was never manufactured. Even Atari founder and Axlon chief Nolan Bushnell enthused about it in interviews.

Frye is rumored to have worked on the game intermittently for two years. He was concurrently coding another unissued Axlon program, *Shooting Arcade*. In 1997, eight prototype *Save Mary!* cartridges were found in the Atari warehouse that Best Electronics had acquired. From descriptions of the period, I get the idea that some or all of them contained the incomplete '89 game. The later version, which we'll be discussing, might have surfaced later on, but this is pure conjecture.

While it incorporates a vaguely *Tetris*-like element, it's another game that's unique in its combination of ingredients, and the overall concept is extremely inventive. In fact, it's outright constructive, as explained below.

As with us men, there are intelligent women and not-so-intelligent women. Mary has decided to take a stroll along the bottom of a deep pit that's slowly filling with water. Maybe a piece of her jewelry fell into a sewage-treatment plant. You know how they can be when it comes to shiny things. It's up to the player to drop bricks into the pit, one by one, that will ultimately allow Mary to climb high enough to be rescued. Your unseen character might simply have been the unlucky construction worker who was hanging out in the crane, peacefully eating his lunch, when he heard the cries for help.

Slide the crane (or the tram, or the giant fishing reel, or whatever it is) back and forth along the top, finally grabbing a brick from the upper left or right cliff by pushing and holding the fire button. Each brick scrolls slowly onto the screen and dissolves in the apparently noxious air above the treatment plant if you don't seize it within a few seconds. Your ability to decide between the emerging left and right bricks is vital during most of the game; the first level is the only one that contains a single shape, which is a rudimentary rectangle that can always be stacked on top of itself, so to speak.

Drop each brick into the water or onto the pile by finally releasing the button. Take care not to squash Mary, since it never occurs to her to get out of the way. In other words, your biggest challenge while attempting to save Mary is that Mary is a moron. Perhaps the fact that her eyes are on opposite sides of her head makes it difficult for her to see. You periodically have some control over her, however, thanks to certain power-ups; but I guess *Mary Command* wouldn't have been such an appealing title to some.

You can lower the crane's cable (or the fishing line) until it's roughly level with the lower cliffs, and raise it nearly all the way up. Its invisible lower boundary explains why Mary has to reach an elevation from which you can grab her. The level is completed when you've deposited her onto one of the lower cliffs.

She'll ascend every time you add a brick that makes your impromptu structure one level higher, so at least she knows enough to get away from the water, which is steadily rising. She can't scale two platforms at once, so another part of the challenge is in ensuring that the bricks are stacked gradually, in something of a staircase fashion. She'll hop over reasonably narrow gaps while she scurries to and fro for no logical reason.

Aligning the bricks isn't pixel-picky; when you drop one, it will shift a bit to the left or right, lining up with the invisible grid to which your growing stack conforms. This can be handy or aggravating, depending on whether or not the brick relocates itself to the X position you're aiming for. The implied framework is composed of minute intervals, so things aren't as crude as they would have been in, say, a 1977 game; the automatic nudging is only just perceptible. There's a lot of leeway, in terms of assembling your own edifice.

Moving diagonally to slide the crane to the side while lowering the chain at the same time, and then gracefully circling back up and over to grab another brick – it's all very smooth and satisfying, like a video milkshake. The elegant game-play is partly contingent on the watertight control responsiveness.

There's also a powerful feeling of accomplishment in completing a level. So many games rely on destruction (which is obviously pleasurable in itself) that it's riveting to construct something for once. The funny thing is that this broad just keeps jumping right back into the water when she's been rescued. It's fair to argue that she's increasingly at fault for her predicament. She clearly can't be trusted around pits with leaks in them. I think that the real way to save Mary is to buy her a ticket to another city.

For now, you'll have to hoist her out of there before the water level surpasses her head. The risk-versus-reward aspect comes into play, especially when the water's rising faster on later levels. If you're the high-scoring type, you'll want to keep in mind that when you rescue her, you receive bonus points according to

the amount of piled bricks. It's an odd way to reward the player: "You had higher priorities than getting her out as quickly as possible! Great job!"

This bonus is of course only a supplement to the in-game points earned for each brick that lands intact. If you release one too far to the left or right, or drop it onto another without giving it enough surface to land on, it will fall into the water and disintegrate. No wonder Mary won't swim; that stuff is highly polluted!

Whenever you've taken hold of a brick that you realize you don't want, it can be released to one extreme side, and you can get back to waiting for the shape that you're after. Until you grow accustomed to eyeballing Mary's altitude, you'll be able to tell that she's high enough for rescuing when bricks won't fit anywhere on top. If you swing one into her, it produces the same effect as carelessly dropping it. In other words, you might as well finish your lunch and hope nobody's noticed that you've just killed a semi-innocent woman.

The power-ups appear randomly on the lower cliffs. You can stop the water from rising momentarily if you grab the giant drain plug before it disappears. It will sit there for a few seconds or just an instant, like any bonus object. If a new brick is just emerging onto the upper cliff, the power-up will vanish, since it can't coexist with a brick on the same side of the screen (unless you're carrying one or the other). This unfortunate timing is all I can think of that might have been rectified if Frye had continued fine-tuning the game.

Activate a power-up by dropping it onto either upper cliff. The drain plug is a spot-on inclusion; it really helps after the first few levels, when the water's rising faster and you have to work quickly. The red octagon is a stop sign that temporarily keeps Mary from running all over the place. Thankfully, she'll continue to climb higher when given the opportunity. The numerals that sometimes appear in lieu of the helpful things are mere score bonuses. 1 means 100 points, 5 means 500, etc. These must be placed on the upper cliffs like the proper power-ups.

When you've completed four levels and started over with the first type of brick (on what can be considered the second macro-level), new objects are introduced, including the physics-defying golden brick. This briefly allows you to drop the normal bricks through Mary without hurting her. Its gleam evidently captures her attention, and she finally thinks to wander in *front* of the falling heavy things, just to get a better look. It's not long before she starts to panic again and assumes a vulnerable position.

A megaphone would have been a useful power-up. "Quit moving around down there, will you? Do you want to get out or not? In order for me to help you, Mary, you'll have to help *yourself*. Just feel lucky that I've taken the bait off this hook!" If this is indeed a fishing line, it sure is strong. Call the construction companies! I have a way to save them a hell of a lot of money.

An oil can is added later in the game, and this grants faster movement for a while. Also available from time to time is an extra Mary. That's right: She has several identical sisters (and perhaps one confused brother). If a sibling shows up to watch Mary having all of this trouble and doesn't bother to help, you can alleviate your remorse the next time you slip up and let the current girl drown. You have a spare! Just throw *her* into the water and resume from there.

The bricks are shaped differently from level to level, and every kind but the first appears in two forms that vertically mirror each other. This variety lends the game a great deal of longevity, as they fit together in less and less obvious ways. The ol' synapses fire fast as you try interlocking the sections in an escalating manner, especially when you've arrived on the fourth level and they *all* exist. A narrow half-brick now joins the rest; this is helpful when you have gaps to fill.

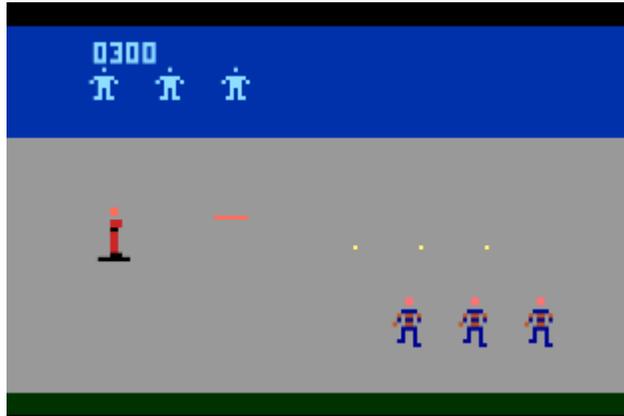
As I've made almost painfully clear by this point, I love twists that are introduced when their games have proceeded for a while, and which simply but significantly alter one's playing style. A new obstacle arrives on the third macro-level, in the form of an airplane. The pilot appears to be rather sadistic, as he merrily flies right into your chain, causing you to drop the brick that you're currently dangling. Maybe the beneficiary of Mary's life insurance has a pilot's license. In any case, you can take hold of the plane and drop it into the water. Let someone else save *that* jerk.

It's intriguing to ponder how useful the older graphical styles can be. They make things possible that would never come off on a modern console or computer. Mary is pixelated. She doesn't look the slightest bit real. Can you imagine this game with Twenty-First Century graphics? It would be horrifying. The pressure would be so tremendous that you'd hardly even feel like you were playing a game. Erring just once would give you nightmares for a month. In this context, the 2600's capabilities are far in advance of anything recent.

Thank you for playing *Save the Moron!*. If you've enjoyed this game, you may enjoy *Defender*, in which the people below don't even have the sense to go inside.

Many thanks to Matt Reichert, whose *Atari Protos* website answered some of my questions about *Save Mary!*'s history and power-ups.

Sorcerer / Fire Fly (Mythicon, 1983)



The three games released by Mythicon went for ten bucks a pop. This was meant to be a bargain price, but it exceeded the American average a couple of months later, when nearly all tags were slashed. Well, good try, fellas.

I bought *Sorcerer* and *Fire Fly* (sequenced here according to model number) at Kay-Bee Toys when they were still fully priced, thinking that I was getting quite a deal. A few hours later, I had to conclude that it was more entertaining to look at the detailed illustrations on the cartridges themselves than to play the games.

On *Sorcerer's* first screen, you bounce around and try to grab an erratically flying pancake, which you subsequently use as something of a magic carpet. After exiting to the right, you find yourself playing a shooting game in which you confront a single enemy per screen, notwithstanding his common appearance as three creatures who move and fire in tandem. When you shoot one of these freaks, he turns into a treasure that you can pick up for points. Now you're in pause mode, as nothing else happens until you enter the next screen.

You can move all over the playfield, but you can't walk or fly onto the previous screen, and you're only able to fire horizontally, unless you're lined up vertically with the current enemy. So forget about clever shot timing. After a few of these encounters, you start over, but the pancake has been replaced with an attempted lightning storm. A bit of careful pacing and a lot of luck will get you past this, after which a treasure will fall from the curiously isolated cloud.

There's not much substance to pass judgment on, really. The game almost doesn't even exist. This makes the company's name commendably suitable. It might have been the only software house in history whose founder, manager, designer, coder, tester, receptionist, accountant and janitor were all the same guy.

You simply traverse the screen repeatedly, keeping the joystick pushed to the right unless you feel like lingering for the occasional midair firefight. It's like a primitive screen-saver that you have to operate manually. The only groundbreaking feature seems to be the random-music generator. It sounds as if someone has dropped several flutes into a blender.



Fire Fly is *Sorcerer* with a black background and different sprites. You can fly right away, so there's no pancake. Instead, a Pixie must be rescued from a lethal, conveniently bullet-sized insect who flutters chaotically around her. There's no deliberately darting past him, so you can swoop down and hope to grab the Pixie by accident, or you can ignore the whole affair and exit screen right.

Now you seem to be facing the Great Pumpkin. Break Linus's heart by turning that glowing grin into a wincing piece of plummeting debris. Until you reach the Pixie again, you play what amounts to *Sorcerer II*. A meteor shower replaces the lightning storm, since the night sky is cloudless.

So that's been Linus's problem all this time. He should have been waiting in a flower garden during the summer! Anyway, in spite of the fact that you're riding a massive fire fly, you turn into the dead-*Sorcerer* graphic when you get killed. It's fun to push the controller diagonally upward and make your carcass float until the CPU rouses itself from its Mythicon-induced stupor and realizes that you're dead. Perhaps the game should have been given the more general title of *Bug*.

To wit, not only are these games poorly conceived, but they're poorly programmed as a bonus – for no extra money! I'm being pretty harsh on Bruce de Graaf, but whenever something cries "cash-in," and business decisions have wholly superseded artistic ones, it fire-flies me.

Mythicon's third game, *Star Fox*, is actually its own program. And it scrolls! In both directions! Surely a momentous step – just before the company went under. Your objective is to snatch pixels from the permanent dust storm at the bottom

while battling airborne baked potatoes. You're doing this to gradually widen your spaceship. Well, now I'm just making things up. Wouldn't that be cool, though? *Find Your Own Pixels*. A game by the janitor.

If you should ever happen to be injured, or you eat a lot of fast food, you'll still be able to play video games when you're in the hospital and drugged up so much that you can hardly move. Just ask someone to bring over your Atari 2600, hook it up and plug in a Mythicon game. At least you'll be sort-of playing, until you recuperate enough to move on to something more exciting, such as *Canyon Bomber*.

Toyshop Trouble (Atari Age, 2006)



I know what you're thinking. I'm a creepy writer that way. You're thinking that it's about time I covered the boundless present-manufacture genre. I certainly concur. This relatively contemporary game by John Payson, Zach Matley, Bob Montgomery, Nathan Strum, Thomas Jentzsch and others fuses numerous qualities that contribute to a consistently high level of enjoyment, and my favorite – originality – is one of them.

There's definitely trouble in this toyshop. Some goofy elf has painted all of the toys light gray. This was possibly his idea of an artistic, anti-consumerism statement. Just the same, your own elf has taken it upon himself to provide the world's kids with a colorful Christmas after all, so he's trying to redecorate everything properly.

December 25th is approaching, however. This might not appear to be a major concern, as the game begins on the first of the month; but the days are freakishly short at the North Pole this year. They each last from twenty-five to fifty-eight seconds, and probably a tad longer thereafter. So far, I've only been able to reach the 12th. In effect, the date is a clever device for keeping track of how many waves have been cleared.

As all good level- or wave-based games do, this one gradually eases you into the action. At first, only toy fire trucks emerge onto the five alternating conveyor belts. In case you've managed to forget which color is suitable for such a vehicle, you can touch one – or any of the upcoming gifts, for that matter – with your very mobile elf in order to see a depiction of the finished product beneath the score.

To paint an object, plow into the appropriate box o'color among the eight choices to the sides, thus covering yourself in chemical splendor. Then push the fire button and make contact with the item in question. When you tint something correctly, a boingy sound is heard, signaling its completion. It will then disappear off the end of its belt, rather than wrapping back onto it as usual.

Holding down the button also makes you run, so the goodies can be colored swiftly. The trade-off is that the belts grow ever more crowded with vastly varied objects, leading to some circuitous movement between those that you wish to avoid painting unbecomingly (a squirty sound helpfully indicates that you've made a mistake). Whereas releasing the button slows you down, it also usefully leaves unchanged any toys that you happen to collide with on the way to your actual targets. The symmetry between game-play ideas is brilliant.

Following the first fleeting day, you're contending with more than one present at a time. The fire trucks are initially joined on the conveyors by trumpets. These are in toy form as well, one assumes, although it's feasible that someone has forgotten to educate this elf on the proper care of brass instruments, including the part about not painting them yellow. The third and fourth of December respectively add Godzillas for greening and Imperial Walkers for whitening. At least the game has finally moved on to toys for us older men.

Beginning with the candy canes of December 5th, a cool twist is introduced: New items require two colors apiece. In compensation, they're added to the game half as frequently. The first wave to feature such a toy is always easier than the second, as the conveyors in the latter are more diversely filled. (Hopefully, the candy canes are plastic; this elf doesn't look like the kid-hating type, but then, his trade is in painting what he's given, not poison control.)

Before each level, its new item is displayed, bearing the proper color(s). The candy canes illuminate the designers' exceedingly astute approach to the difficulty curve. These earliest two-pass objects need colors that you'll be using on the fire trucks and Walkers anyway. The pirate ships that turn up on the seventh each call for one repeated hue (white) and one that's newly utilized (brown).

The rockets that arrive on December 9th are finished when they're red and blue, i.e. likewise old and new. When you've completed enough of them, you're given the opportunity to fire it at the slacker who started this mess in the first place. (Not really. Still, it would be fun.)

By this point, a game that has started out deceptively simple has become a humorously frenzied race amid slowly moving, innocently inanimate toys. It's all too easy indeed to impulsively resort to running from palette to target and back, instead of forcing yourself to recognize that slowing down now and then will increase your chances of beating the clock, as a lot of time can be consumed by remedying astray paint strokes. Allow for a bit of momentum; you can't turn or stop on a dime.

Finally – at least "finally" with regard to how far I can get at the moment – the Lincoln Log cabins of the eleventh are green and brown, making brown the first

recurring shade that's only used on doubles. Any wrongly coated toy must be embellished from scratch. You can thank the little snot who had the audacity to ask for a two-colored present. How spoiled can you get?

I've read in the instructions that the colors on later items must be applied in particular sequences; so despite its outward cuteness, this is not a game for children. Its eventual complexity would make more kids cry than a rerun of the *Star Wars Christmas Special*.

Whether played in December or July, *Toyshop Trouble* is a surprisingly gripping homebrew whose challenging tests of alertness and coordination are disguised with charm, and whose fastidiously worked-out details grant immeasurable longevity. Free up some time, because it takes none to get hooked.

So does this poor, overworked elf ever get a present of his own? I can take a great guess at what he'd like more than anything: a Zippo for dealing with Christmas lists.

The Atari Eight-Bit Computers

DungeonLords

(ANALOG Computing, Issue #67: December, 1988)



This is a rarity among the countless type-in programs that appeared in magazines from the 1970s through the '90s for various eight-bit computers, as it's an immensely fun game without any glitches. My guess is that programmer Brian Bradley said to himself, "*Tutankham* is a great game in some ways, but it would be even better if you could fire in four directions instead of only two, and it weren't unreasonably difficult."

That had always been my assessment as well, so I was delighted to have stumbled upon his clone. The levels are smaller than in the aforementioned '82 Konami and Stern arcade game, but the character movement and scrolling maze are extremely fluid.

The best kind of imitative game is one that's more fun than the original. You can indeed fire in four directions in *DungeonLords*, and this of course precludes the need for the maze-clearing Flash weapon in *Tutankham*. Your objective is to grab all present keys, which unlock the door(s) blocking your northeastward exit to the next level. You can optionally grab some or all of the dollar signs that are scattered throughout each maze.

The exit from every fourth level is replaced with a prisoner, who must be rescued before you can leave (back through the northwestern entrance now). Presumably because they're giant keys, you can only carry one at a time, and they serve to obstruct you – if you already have one – as well as the assorted ducks, snakes and baby elephants. Well, that's what they look like to *me*.

In fact, as I prefer to dream up the plot instead of sticking with the story that someone has provided (arbitrarily, as that someone is usually not the designer or programmer), your character has left a bunch of money in his multi-level

basement. The weird pests have long been neglected, and they've not only reproduced in ridiculous numbers, but evolved to the point at which they've learned how to build teleportation booths.

So what do we learn from this? Don't leave your money and keys scattered recklessly around a large, underground area. That's just asking for trouble in Game Land.

At least there's surprisingly good lighting, and you've brought some kind of magical, unlimited-ammo gun down here with you. It can be fired with remarkable rapidity, and the game's sheer playability largely depends on this. Bradley was conscious of getting some additional, significant control details right. Many programmers fail to realize, or become too rushed to address, the fact that even maze games (and others that involve only four directions of player movement) should contain the recognition of diagonals, making unbroken transitions between cardinal directions possible.

The player shouldn't have to hurriedly center the controller between right angles. If transitions are acknowledged in the code, he can change direction even if he attempts a turn before actually reaching it. By way of handy example, arcade *Pac-Man* allows for this.

DungeonLords does as well, and it's a good thing, because it takes full advantage of the high speed afforded by machine language. It's also the kind of game in which you can move and fire in different directions, or fire without moving, as long as you're holding down the button. The superb control is one of the most instantly noticeable strengths of this well balanced game.

Amazingly, the random element is here as well. Each level's layout and placement of keys and dollar signs (literal ones – they even light up until you darken them with greed) is different in every game. That's some serious programming. When you play for the first time, bear in mind that whereas the initial sequence of mazes imposes little difficulty, the second entails a very steep increase in bad-guy traffic.

I wonder if Bradley went on to work at a software company. Depending on which one it was, it may have represented a step down, regarding the amount of time that he could spend on getting the details right. I wasn't able to find any information about him or other games he might have written.

Granted, this game has a curious title. The creatures don't seem to be lording over any dungeons. I, however, am the Basement Monarch.

Gold Mine (Spectravideo, 1983)



I tried for quite a while to find the fun in this rare, cartridge-based game, as it looks like there should be a lot of it. I ended up enjoying myself in a way, laughing heartily at the mixture of endearingly earnest designer efforts and regrettably inept game-play planning. The protagonist is given all of that space to run and climb around in, but he doesn't have to travel any farther than the nearest accessible platform to repeatedly raise the score, and raising the score is all that there is to do.

Don't begin the game until you've prepared yourself to meet the first complicated challenge: locating the bank. If the skills that you've developed prior to tackling this game include knowing how to read, well done – you've overcome the preliminary obstacle and you're ready for round two, in which you're wisely abstaining from robbing said bank, helping yourself to the gold buried beneath it instead. For unknown reasons, whoever has concealed it down there has conspicuously carved it into the shapes of several dollar signs.

To celebrate your discovery, you've dressed yourself in golden clothes and painted your entire head likewise. If you grab one of the gaudily sculpted pieces, you'll see at the bottom that you've collected a certain dollar amount in gold. You can climb up to the bank and slam yourself against the wall if you'd like to change the "Collected" amount to a "Deposited" one. It's an odd method of banking, but it seems to work for these desert folk. The business doesn't have the brainiest of owners; if he'd bother to look out the window, he'd see a couple of ladders sticking out of the ground, and arrange for his retirement a few enlightening seconds later.

It's funny to picture some hopeful company chief choosing the perfect site for his bank without even being conscious of it. But then, it's also the perfect site for a pet shop; while it's unclear how long the overlooked mine has been there, it's

become infested with bats, oversized spiders, apparent mongooses and, in spite of the clear absence of water in this locale, crocodiles.

Your character can fall from any height inside the mine without becoming a golden stain on one of its surfaces. Nevertheless, he's not really cut out for this type of undertaking, as he has somehow lived long enough to learn the value of gold, but not how to jump. A better way of starting his fortune might be to climb back up to that bank and apply for a job.

I can understand his excitement, though. He plainly believes that the gold he's found has been enchanted by some means, as it appears to regenerate at the moment it's deposited. What's more likely is that the bank people are perfectly aware of their subterranean back-up vault, and that they're putting it right back where it belongs every time it's brought in by this destitute sap with no spring in his step. Only pity prevents them from having him arrested, possibly along with the entertainment. Things surely get humdrum at a bank in the wilderness.

In light of the jumping incapacity, the only real strategy is to watch the creatures' unvarying, screen-wrapping patrols and time your platform access accordingly. Since the gold incessantly pops right back into place, there are no true levels to beat, and there's nothing to stop you from extracting and depositing the uppermost piece over and over again. Gold salvaged from the lower rows is worth more, but the ten-dollar portion at the top involves almost no risk. When quite a lot of dough has been cashed-in, it stops reappearing until you've collected all of it. By this point, however, the game has grown a bit tedious.

What the unidentified programmer – or maybe just the manual writer – had in mind was a sanctioned, post-earthquake retrieval of the bank's dribbled riches from the overrun sewers below; but the hapless mine-raider narrative was more amusing to write about, not to mention more in keeping with the title. All in all, playing the game doesn't make for much fun, except while making fun of it. In that respect, it's pure gold.

Shadow World (Synapse, 1982)



This Mike Potter game is original enough to be engrossing based on its own merits, even given the obvious *Defender* influence. You're indeed responsible for defending Shadow World, the only planet where shadows are, for some reason, green. No Humanoids wander here, though. Your rivals are targeting the terrain itself.

The first perceptible element that separates the game from its forerunners is that the playfield scrolls upward and downward, in addition to the usual sideways directions. The area is more extensive horizontally, but the vertical openness adds an appealing dimension.

The manual is nowhere to be found online or off, so it took me a while to figure out how to advance beyond the first wave. I made sense of it eventually, and I'm reasonably certain that I've even determined the story line. If I haven't gotten it exactly right, it makes no difference to the actual game-play. I tend to make up my own expositions anyway (I recommend this extra entertainment when it comes to any game). As far as I can make out, you're piloting a giant shoe. It's of a different kind than you're probably used to, as it's capable of rapid fire. Just hold down the button and zip toward your bizarre adversaries.

While flying past the world of green shadows one night, you realize that it's under attack! This is merely a matter of bad timing on your part. It never fails, does it? You try to get home after a long day of living inside a big, stinky shoe, and you happen to notice an entire planet that needs saving. But you don't whistle innocently and discreetly fly away. You're braver than that. After stopping to tie your space laces, you prepare to fight for the Shadow World!

Shadow of what? Why, the planet in *Defender*, of course. But again, there's plenty of inventiveness here. You take off from your massive shoebox within a safe zone, next to a chopper that belongs to the second player if he exists. The

first thing that you have to know is this: In one of the purple lakes is a magical fish. See how great video games are? In what other context could I share such an observation and trust the reader to find it perfectly plausible?

There's almost always a robotic bird skimming the planet surface. When he encounters the fish, he grabs it and heads for one of the large, diamond-encrusted kites that have appeared in the sky. The kite will then slowly descend until it lands or you destroy it. You can tell when one of these main antagonists has begun its descent: Musical beeps are heard around the world, with each one lower in pitch than the last.

If the kite winds up landing entirely in the water, it doesn't survive; but if it's touching enough land, it comes to rest and opens at the top to become a bad-guy fountain, gushing evil bow ties that don't seem to realize they're in the wrong game. Get back to *Megamania!*

Once the kite has settled, you can no longer shoot it. (Well, you can shoot it all you like. It won't do you any good, but knock yourself out.) Now you have to fetch the magical fish yourself, fly to the landed kite and hover above the opening until it closes. It's difficult to time this so you don't collide with one of the regularly emerging enemies, but if you lose a shoe, your new one will continue glowing with fish power.

It's more enjoyable to destroy a kite that's still floating above the landscape, awaiting seafood delivery. Simply fire at it until your swift lace-lasers break through its fluctuating diamond hull and it explodes. Then point and laugh. "Time for you to go, kite! Your string's hanging." Their collective destruction is fairly easy to pull off at first, but preventing their ground arrivals becomes more difficult as the waves progress and the kite count increases. The best approach is to destroy as many as you can while they're still high up. If five of them manage to land intact, the planet will be reduced to a mere shadow of its already shadowy self.

The kites themselves send out the robotic birds, but they more frequently eject small, nasty antennae that turn the sky into something of a minefield. These encumber your navigation and occasionally fire at you. Perhaps they're actually emitting television signals, attempting to make you so lethargic that you won't worry about the planet anymore.

You possess no Smart Bombs, but pressing the space bar teleports you back to the shoebox. If you're quick, then, there's always a safe way to escape: Turn your shoe into a sneaker! In any case, it blows up if you try to land on any part of the planet's surface. See what happens when you don't spring for thick soles? Fortunately, you've happened to bring along an extra pair.

The status bar refers to the kites as "Pods," but I know an enormous, diamond-encrusted kite when I see it! They're just calling themselves Pods to throw me off. But it won't work. They can't walk all over *this* shoe. I've figured them out. For instance, you've beat the wave when its designated amount of kites has been eliminated (or plugged up). An additional kite will appear above the planet, incrementing the Pod count on the status bar, if you haven't been quick enough and an extant kite has begun its descent. The bar also indicates the amount of active kites – landed ones, that is – that require corking.

Shadow World is an exceptional game with novel objectives, dozens of on-screen foes, fast movement and nonetheless immaculate collision detection and control response. For all it owes to the *Defender* paradigm, it exhibits several imaginative ideas. And in spite of the swarms of antennae, bow ties and satellites, Potter has managed to avoid frustrating the player with relentless avoid-the-many-dots tedium. Or high-heel ships.

Star Trux

(Atari prototype, 1983)



This speedy, solid game of memorization and navigational skills is played often in the Chris Kingdom. It's so '80s, incidentally, that the title is misspelled with an X.

I'll give any substantially original game a huge chance, in terms of working out how it's played and trying to become proficient. For reasons most certainly based in the fear of freshness felt by supervisory swine, *Star Trux* went unreleased, despite its evident completion. It's available for emulation, so I can play it, and that's all I truly care about. It's not as if the absence of a manual will keep me from colorfully describing the premise; and this delightfully abstract game is ripe for the brain-picking.

A large rocket is having intactness problems, but conveniently enough, it's only missing the evenly spaced innards whose gaps you can see in the screen shot. When you've filled them, it launches. Now you're off to the next level, having secured a reputation as the galaxy's go-to rocket finisher.

Alternatively, a shuttle full of interstellar passengers is marooned, on account of the Regularly Spaced Parts-Eating Jerx of Planet Things Named with Xs. In either case, the hull has been thoughtfully stripped away from the pertinent places. You're piloting a space shovel, seen at the lower left, and this can scoop any part out of the void and push it around. One random opening at a time will display the shape of its necessary component. Find a matching one and ram it in. If you take a long time, a different breach will reveal its own missing metal gut.

Every so often, your assistant, the space trucker, whose vehicle appears to the right above, races by and delivers parts to your general vicinity. Sometimes, he gets careless and flies right into your shovel, obliging the use of one of your two remaining back-ups. A great twist is that you can't tell which parts are inside the pink cartons of vacuum-proof, super-thick space cardboard until you bump into

them. Remembering the contents of as many on-screen cartons as you can is therefore a clever constituent of the game's challenge, as the space trucker is a tireless worker and the area quickly grows cluttered.

In the screen shot's upper left corner is the bothersome space janitor, whom you and the trucker have never gotten along with. He bounces across the playfield once in a while, destroying several cartons along the way. This is helpful when he removes a few identical components, making the memorization factor a bit easier; but it's usually unpleasant to watch a few of your potentially level-beating parts getting violently cleaned from the cosmos, especially if one of them is your shovel.

Now and again, that widely recognized celestial phenomenon, the Slow Upward Movement of a Few Things for No Apparent Reason, kicks in. Cartons will float toward the top of the screen for a brief period. This is another beneficial space-tidying occurrence, because the vortex opposite the planet surface wipes out everything that touches it. As for the parts that you reckon you'll need sooner or later, simply push them away from the central area to improve their likelihood of survival.

In the passenger-craft version of the circumstances, each level has a sad ending. Once you've inserted the final piece of shuttle, its pilot fires it up and flies it, seemingly unaware, right into the lethal vortex. But, you know...it's kind of funny, too.

Another facet of the game's excellent equilibrium is your adjustable velocity. You move faster while you're holding down the fire button. The catch is that you can only convey parts at your normal shoveling speed.

An instrumental rendition of the "Have you played Atari today?" jingle is piped out before each new level. That ties up the suited-swine aspect nicely. No wonder the programmer has kept himself anonymous; they made him stick a commercial in there. It's unrelated to the game-play, naturally, so I'm not grumbling too loudly.

Star Trux integrates randomness extraordinarily well, and maintains the elusive balance between puzzle elements and flying around really fast through space. It's engaging and unique, and those who decided to keep it off the shelves were a bunch of dorx.

The Atari Jaguar

Cybermorph

(Attention to Detail / Atari, 1993)



This is my favorite Jaguar game, at least among those without versions on other platforms. It occasionally ties with *Tempest 2000*, depending on the day. I loved this pack-in as soon as I played it, having purchased the discounted \$35 console at Kay-Bee Toys in August of '97.

Some of the comments that I've read about this game over the years are preposterous. First of all, you can turn off the bald chick's voice. Doesn't anyone read manuals? Hell, that's always been part of the overall experience for me. Back in the '80s in particular, I never knew when another game would be forthcoming, so I got all that I could out of the latest retail windfall granted by my folks. Besides, I wanted to make sure I wouldn't miss something that wasn't immediately noticeable.

As I was saying, you can mute Skylar. Admittedly, it wasn't the most creatively judicious designer decision to subject the player to the sardonic question, "Where did *you* learn to fly?" with every bounce of his ship off a mountain; but she can be silenced in finest Orwellian fashion with a couple of button-pushes.

Speaking of the buttons, and in fact the whole controller, it's one of the most comfortable I've ever used. Disregarding my big hands, it's become dishearteningly apparent that the default activity of people with no real problems is to endlessly seek things to whine about. The Jaguar controller is disparaged nearly as often as *Cybermorph* itself, which matters to the non-suggestible player not one jot.

Some have compared the game with SNES *StarFox* (titled *Starwing* in Europe), but this is groundless. While they both involve simulated 3-D, *StarFox* is merely a shooting gallery with a forced scroll; you can't change directions. It's essentially a rehashed *Space Harrier*. I find most games like that to be monotonous, as there's no real freedom. In *Cybermorph*, you can stop, turn to any heading, fly

somewhere else and return to find the same foes, objects and structures that you've left there.

So it's more akin to *Doom* in a spaceship than a wallpaper game, as I call any scrolling shoot-'em-up that doesn't allow the player to turn around. You can completely orbit any of *Cybermorph's* numerous planets on whichever trajectory you like. Each world harbors a particular amount of pods that must be rescued, enemies that can be thoroughly eliminated, and even buildings that can all be demolished. The power-ups are very easy to select and use, so you can concentrate on the action rather than the controls.

Similarly to beating any of the best first-person levels in Game Land, it's with some reluctance that I depart from each of this game's beautiful worlds. Every idyllically unrealistic, video-gamey landscape of spherical pixelation, devoid of "modern" pretense, reminds me that there's an abundance of worlds left for game-makers to conjure, far-fetched environs that perhaps currently simmer in several young minds as I type, and which will flower if only those fresh intellects can resist their own penchants for impressionability.

Maybe games like *StarFox* are perfect for players who like to be told where to go. Granted, its Nintendo 64 sequel – called *StarFox 64*, if you can imagine that – includes a multi-player option. If you're into that sort of thing, *Cybermorph* isn't going to do you much good. (Nor would it if you were comparing it with Mythicon's unrelated *Star Fox* for the Atari 2600, but that would also call for the comparison between you and a weirdo.)

I'm sappy about the Jaguar anyway, as it was the first platform on which I played *Doom*. This must have been in late '97. Incidentally, original PC engine coder John Carmack wrote that adaptation. To this day, *Doom* is my favorite first-person game. Well, if I want to be nitpicky, *Doom II* is, because of the Super Shotgun. I've been enjoying the PC version for ages, owing to the countless homespun maps available.

Also in the late '90s, I liked *Alien vs. Predator* enough to beat it. I've recently returned to it and found it surprisingly clumsy. Regardless, I can see myself getting back into it when I next find the patience to spend a couple of weeks mapping a single game.

Wolfenstein 3-D and *Iron Soldier* are even better, but the latter contains what I refer to as Indefinite Bad-Guy Addition. No matter how many choppers I've wiped out, they continue to materialize while I'm trying to explore and devise some strategy toward my objective. I view that sort of thing as a massive cop-out, which isn't to mention the tedium involved. But I won't pretend that I wasn't wearing a wide smile and wider eyes when I first watched one of those skyscrapers crumble to pieces. I'd never seen anything like that. Atari, you'd done it again. I don't care what anyone says.

(Yes, I'm aware that Eclipse actually designed *Iron Soldier*. But Atari published it. So there.)

The Commodore 64

Crazy Sue Plus

(Bomico, 1993)



This is professedly the sequel to a similar game from the same year. The programmer understandably kept himself anonymous in each case. Rather than a numeral, the word *Plus* has been tacked onto the title. In addition to being crazy, she now possibly has the 'Flu.

As you can see, Sue is crazy indeed. She's painted herself entirely blue. Regardless, now that I've tried the game out, I've realized that it's not titled correctly. It's actually *Super Mario Bros. 947* (at last count).

It's the sort of game that you've practically already played by looking at a screen shot. I was sufficiently curious to take a closer look anyway. That's how it always starts. You'd think I'd have learned by now, when it comes to crazy girls.

To be honest, I've only included the game here to make these jokes. I would never play in earnest, as there are no sounds – only music. I always find that unforgivable. Sound is such a significant game element.

It's also one of those games in which you take too long to die. I don't like that in real life, either; do you? So let's get back to taking our fun seriously!

Dino Eggs

(Micro Fun, 1983)



This phenomenal David Schroeder creation was originally written for the Apple II. I've never played that version, but I can't imagine that it's nearly as good as the C64 adaptation. I'm basing this guess on my mercifully limited experiences with Apple products of any kind (unless one counts the Beatles' label). The game was converted by the awesomely named Leonard Bertoni. I could tell right away that a fellow Italian had programmed it; the ledges look like pepperonis.

YOU...are Time-Master Tim. (Hokey, *faux*-operatic music) In a world. One man.

That was my trailer for *Dino Eggs*. I hope you liked it. Anyway, this is one of those games that beckon viscerally whenever you even happen to think about playing them. One of the reasons I love it, and something that certainly sets it apart from all other single-screen platformers of the era, is that everything on the playfield is placed randomly, from game to game and level to level. No ledge layout or dinosaur-egg arrangement is ever repeated. Schroeder and / or Bertoni managed to achieve this while ensuring that every ledge could be reached in one way or another. Masterful.

The game demonstrates one of the most successful combinations of action and puzzle elements that I've ever encountered. At first glance, it can be mistaken for yet another simple climbing scenario; but reaching the top or filling in the ground with the dirt on your shoes (for instance) is not your objective. Instead, you're tasked with stealing as many eggs as possible before exiting each level.

If you wish to play the game "normally," simply grab up to three eggs at a time by standing above them, pushing downward and pressing the fire button (once per egg). Then walk to your portal, seen at the lower right in the screen shot, and use the same controller combo to warp away. Your portal will vanish and reappear in

a different, random spot. You'll be empty-handed again, having received points for the pinched eggs. No omelets in Tim's future, though – this is a rescue mission, time traveler!

As explained in the scrolling storyline on the title screen, you're taking the eggs (and hatchlings) in order to deposit them in a safer era – one in which you haven't unintentionally spread the measles. This sort of thing reminds us that Doc Brown's warnings should always be heeded.

Notice that fire burning near the top. If you don't start one within about thirty seconds – or less, on later levels – the gigantic dinosaur mother will show up and try to flatten you. You'll see a warning message and, after a few more seconds, a giant leg. It will emerge from the top border and move swiftly downward, stomping the ledge that you're standing on. The leg's X position is indiscriminate, but sooner or later, your luck will run out. The risk of being turned into Tim-ato sauce is reason enough to get a fire going the instant you can.

If you want to play in the especially involved way that the game allows for, maximizing your score and thus your extra Tims, kindle as many successive fires as possible throughout each level: two or three, depending on how many pieces of wood are available. Drop a piece in your chosen spot, go get another one, and drop it on top of the first. You should only have to start one fire from scratch; you can add an extra piece of wood as each blaze nears exhaustion, bringing its single-digit countdown back up to 9. If you let it reach 0 and burn out, you'll have to start over by combining two pieces, shortening the amount of time in which you can safely remain on the level.

When a fire's time indicator has fallen to 1, the flames are replaced with smoke. The dino mom continues to stay away until it's completely out, but the site can now be traversed without losing a Tim. This is when the next piece of wood can be dropped onto it. Upon its return to 9, it won't become deadly again until it reaches 8 and the smoke is once again replaced with flames.

I head for the fire when its timer has dropped to 2, so I have time to reach it before it hits 0. Another good strategy is to drop as much timber as you can near the existing fire while you're waiting for eggs to hatch (see below), so you won't have to take a wood-gathering detour later, when other things might be pressing.

Choose a location for your consecutive fires that you won't require later passage over. The top ledges are usually the best, as there can be no misstep from above to send you into the flames. Granted, you can jump over a fire, even adding wood before it reaches 1 if you like. This is tricky, however, as you have to line yourself up perfectly. There's no sense in creating an unnecessary hazard. (You can't start fires at the tops of ladders, so at least there's no chance of accidentally blocking yourself from climbing.)

Once the fire's been sorted out, the high-scoring player will allow baby dinosaurs to hatch instead of simply stealing all of the eggs as quickly as possible. The reason I've just typed five paragraphs on the subject of arson is that prolonging the current level's fire-time allows you to capture most – and sometimes all – of the babies that can possibly surface, increasing your score immensely. The real incentive is that you're given an extra Tim every 200 points. (This game involves low scoring, but it's all relative to itself, of course.)

Chris's Nature Tip! Employ the same tactic when you're out camping. Take some time to explore the area and locate the top of the screen before you get your campfire going.

Back to the game: Oddly enough, it begins on Level 0. Early on, pieces of wood are seldom concealed by egg sacs (those things that look like colorful meatballs), which, as you might have guessed, typically harbor eggs. As the levels progress, there's ultimately more wood to be had than what's immediately visible.

Any creature that travels into the flames will die – apparently, they haven't evolved eyes yet – so you're safe from the spiders that irksomely leap from the very top of the playfield if you're standing directly below the fire. You're also protected from everything but the dino mom when you're standing inside your portal. Spiders that land on you there will die, boosting your score by an enormous single point apiece.

Other life forms gradually appear. Visible in the screen shot is a slithering piece of prehistoric spaghetti. Flying chunks of Parmesan appear later. (I'm just running with the Italian-food thing. Consistency is good in a book.) Collision won't kill you right away; the percentage readout in the lower left corner will begin to count down. It will head back upward, stopping when it peaks again, if you can make it back to your portal before it hits 0%. Just stand inside until you're completely healed. Otherwise, you'll devolve into a spider.

Now, *that's* some shaky evolutionary theory. Perhaps there's something Tim isn't telling us. Maybe he's really Spider-Man! He doesn't die from long falls, so who knows? In any case, touching a creature kills it, so at least it won't annoy you any further. Colliding with *two* before returning to the portal causes the percentage to decrease twice as fast, and so forth. The initial countdown speeds up as the level advances. Upon contact, you also lose any eggs you're carrying, and this slightly reduces your score. Baby dinosaurs stay in their cages, however.

On that subject, after a baby has hatched, jumping over him surrounds him with a magical fence of sorts. He'll then warp away when you do. In the meantime, the enclosure protects him from you. Touching a free hatchling will kill him and affect you as if you've run into a meanie.

The babies hatch at random. Only one at a time, free or caged, can occupy each row of ledges. A maximum of three can exist simultaneously. They're not harmed upon contact with any of the other creatures. Take care not to drop an egg sac onto any hatchling, however, or you'll squash him. If you've decided to situate the fire on a lower ledge, a falling sac will extinguish that as well. You can kill one of the living foods (okay, okay – they're supposed to be various forms of primeval life) with a sac from above.

All of these intricacies add up to a very elaborate, compelling game. It's as though Schroeder thought of everything. The rather simplistic-looking platformer turns out to be a graceful operation of carefully worked-out details.

Here's a good extra tip: Before or just after you light the first fire, move any existing eggs from your chosen ledge. If one of them cracks open while you're elsewhere, the baby will eventually wander into the flames and get roasted. They're not very good without marshmallows to allay the bitter aftertaste. "Move" is the operative word. Again, if you're score-minded, you should actually warp away with as few eggs as possible. Since you can drop anything you're carrying, simply disperse the eggs evenly among the lower three rows.

It's a good idea to relocate any eggs found at the top anyway. When you're trying to grab them (or cage babies) later, you won't have time to get out of the way if a spider happens to leap while you're strolling just beneath him. Spiders crawl back and forth above the highest ledges, finally jumping at random. As the level number rises, they deliberately target you more frequently. No matter how far you've progressed, you'll want to spend as little time as you can manage on the top row.

Through Level 2, try to push all of the sacs away promptly, exposing any hidden eggs and increasing the hatching odds. Also, when the last fire goes out and the mother shows up, you won't want to take the extra time to search under sacs that might hide nothing at all. Releasing upper sacs knocks off any that are suspended directly below.

Occasionally, all three babies will come out of their shells fairly quickly. At other times, the waiting can try your patience; but you can use this opportunity to move timber closer to the fire, as noted above. A hatchling will erratically meander on his ledge, but if you're sharing it with him – as opposed to simply inhabiting the same overall row – he'll head toward you, making himself easier to hurdle.

Return to your portal once you've trapped three hatchlings inside their shimmering playpens. When you warp out, they'll disappear and raise your score by six, eight and twelve points, respective to the order in which you've caged them. Now up to three more can hatch. Loose brood will still be there when your portal rematerializes.

Warping while carrying wood will destroy it. If you try to use the portal when you're empty-handed and no kids are incarcerated, you'll be asked if you'd like to leave the cliff (end the level). Attempting to warp a second time means "Yes." You'll advance to the next, differently colored assortment of ledges, eggs and sundry, but you'll lose points for any eggs left behind. If they're all accounted for, however, you'll receive 10 bonus points. Starting on Level 9, these rise to 50.



The spiky thing dangling from this ledge is a Power Flower. (That's really what it's called in the manual. Too cool.) Picking this up will increase your carrying capacity from three eggs to six. This helps when eggs remain but your last fire has gone out. Once the dino mom is at large, as it were, you'll want to leave the cliff quickly. The Power, which doesn't occupy inventory space and therefore can't be dropped, is also very useful on higher levels, when you want to *minimize* the amount of hatched eggs, due to the kidnapping spiders mentioned below.

If you collide with one of the nasties, you'll lose the Power and your maximum load will halve again; but if you avoid this until you pluck a second Flower, your limit grows to nine. This is difficult to pull off, as only one Flower appears per level. It usually doesn't turn up at all until you're a couple of levels in.

When the fires are gone and you're making your way back to the portal for the last time, stick to the extreme left and right sides of the screen, so you can dodge the giant leg by wrapping to the other side. This can be timed, as the leg appears at uniform intervals. There's even a genuine safe spot: You'll never be crushed while you're standing within the border, bisecting yourself between screen edges. One never sees half of a giant leg. And this drives dino dads *wild*.

Speaking of dads, where has this one gone? Has he left her to raise them on her own? Can even dinosaurs chase off their men by nagging? If he were here, he'd probably help me out. "Yeah, get some of these kids outta here, will ya?"

Anyway, the dino babies are more afraid of their mother than anyone is. Eggs won't hatch unless there's a fire keeping her away. I suppose it's feasible that they're simply attracted to the warmth, but it's hard to tell, as they can't talk yet. What's certain is that they also can't wrap between the side borders like you can.

From Level 3 onward, a spider will land on any ledge that he happens to drop past if an unbound hatchling wanders there. If you don't stop him, he'll carry out

an abduction and resume his descent with the dino pup in his clutches, ultimately carrying him off the cliff – i.e. beyond the bottom of the screen. You'll lose ten points this way, as if you've trod upon the baby or mushed him with an egg sac. (The latter can occur even when he's caged.)

Ten-point losses are huge in this game. For reference: After waiting for as many hatchlings as three fires have allowed, caging at least five sets of three, my highest score at the end of Level 0 has been 165. If you even surpass two digits before Level 1, you're doing well.

Curiously, a baby will march right up to a landed spider. So that's how it is. The kid forgets all about poor Tim and heads straight for the creep, who I guess is saying, "If you come with *me*, you'll get candy and toys, and you'll never have to go to dinosaur school." Cruel bastard.

Spiders bug me. I don't have a phobia or anything; there's just something wrong there. Never mind the wannabe octopus legs. A spider has eight eyes. That's just wrong. What is it, an alien? I don't know what these spiders want with the infants in the first place. Do they eat them? Then why doesn't Tim eat them himself, if he's secretly a spider, instead of trying to be Mr. Liberator? So many mysteries to be solved in *Dino Eggs!*

Starting on Level 3, then, your priorities change. Rapidly grab and warp away with all exposed eggs. From now on, you'll usually only need to start one fire per level, as you won't be waiting around for maximum hatchery. Dislodge a sac only when no eggs remain in view. When you get down to a single ledge's worth, you can wait for one hatchling at a time if you wish, since you won't have to roam far. If a kidnapping does take place, jump through the spider's single strand of webbing to kill him. The freed baby will land on the next ledge down.

If there's still a fire burning on any level when the eggs are gone, postpone your departure and linger on a middle row, hunting spiders! They each yield only one point, but this adds up throughout the game, compensating for any points lost upon creature collision or child bereavement. Besides, there's great satisfaction in breaking a web and watching a spider fall to his death. Did ya hear that, Mr. Spider? If that *is* your *real* name!

Level 9 repeats indefinitely. Two simultaneous fires are now required to ward off the primordial pedicure. The mom presumably has too many calluses by this point to fear just one. (Tim really should have worn a pointy hat.)

You'll be given enough wood to achieve this, but it's a precarious undertaking anyway. I generally just stay alive as long as possible. No matter where the portal appears, there's usually sufficient time to collect the nearest eggs, as they're now plentiful.

Dino Eggs is one of the greatest single-screen platform games ever written. It's up there with *Miner 2049er* and *Bounty Bob Strikes Back!*, which is saying something, and it's infinitely more interesting than any game that might feature, say, the evolutionary descendents of dinosaurs and giant spiders: gorillas and short, fat men with mustaches.

L.E.M.
(Floopy, 1986)



I'm including this apparently public-domain French game by Bernard Larquey because I found myself spewing convulsive laughter upon trying it out last year, while I was scrolling through the *GameBase 64* library.

As you know, many a manual begins with, "YOU...are [character name]." I've always gotten a kick out of that. In the scrolling obstacle course through which you descend in this game, you're in control of the Lunar Excursion Module – or perhaps I should say *a* Lunar Excursion Module, as I've never seen photographs of our particular moon that reveal enormous leaky faucets or oversized bricks suspended on what appear to be clotheslines.

I've also never encountered a picture of Earth's own L.E.M. in which it looks like this game's variant; check out the screen shot. In fact, the point at which I started laughing was when I said to myself, "YOU...are an oven. We're sorry. You should have bought a different game."

It went on from there, of course: "Bake your way through dozens of levels in this exciting blah blah blah!" (Hey, if you can't have fun in your own company, whose *can* you really enjoy, right?)

Raid on Bungeling Bay (Broderbund, 1984)



The evil Bungeling Empire figures into other Broderbund games than this one. I suspected early on that it was somehow even involved in the *Print Shop*. In any case, one gets the impression that whenever people on planets far away from ours try to have a good time, the Bungelings show up and make everyone sad, and they all awkwardly call it a night and go home. It seems that you can't do anything anymore without some damn Bungeling ruining it for everybody.

And is there any worse feeling than when you notice that some Bungelings are moving in next door? *There* goes the neighborhood. They're not even required to register themselves as an Evil Empire. But in this Will Wright game, you can fly to their very bay, and even raid the place. Serves 'em right, too.

The C64 version of *Raid on Bungeling Bay* is the only one I like. The NES adaptation, which Wright didn't write (I couldn't resist), isn't much fun. It doesn't even include the radar. According to him, it was the first third-party game available for the Famicom, the Japanese edition of the NES, so it sold well over there.

Owing to the prevalence of disk piracy, he earned hardly any *Raid* royalties until the Famicom conversion was out, after which he could afford to take the necessary time to write his next C64 game, *SimCity*. The idea for that one had occurred to him during his creation of the *Raid* landscapes in his homespun graphical editor. *SimCity* isn't my type of game, but a multi-directionally scrolling shoot-'em-up definitely is.

Speaking of duplicating our friends' floppies (to impress the chicks, surely), I took the time to figure out how to play several games without instructions during the 1980s and '90s, as many of us did. We learned through trial and ass-kicking. For me, *Dino Eggs* was one such game, and this was another. They've been favorites ever since. *Raid on Bungeling Bay* is a solid, extremely well done game with all of the details fleshed out and no weak points.

Well, maybe there's one, but it has nothing to do with the game-play itself. When you've won, your remaining "lives" count for far too many bonus points apiece. I only occasionally bother to care about my score in any game; it's all about in-the-moment fun, and certainly not frustration. But the player who does care will find the *Raid* scoring system rather unbalanced. When he's lost a single Helicraft, he's unlikely to surpass his old high score if the game was previously beat with no losses. This is trifling and atypical, though.

The Bungeling Empire has gone and built itself six factories in assorted colors. They all manufacture anti-aircraft guns, tanks, boats, jet fighters, bomber planes and radar dishes. These things exist to protect the factories in various ways. Typically circular Bungeling logic.

The factories are situated on five large islands that cover what appears to be a small planet, as you can fly all the way around it in just a few seconds. You lift off from your carrier, which starts at a random longitude and slowly drifts northward along the main channel. The latter stretches between the two north-to-south island strips. At any time, coming back and landing gets your Helicraft's damage repaired and its nine bombs restocked.

As you can imagine, the anti-aircraft guns and jet fighters shoot at you. You sustain about 30% of your maximum damage when one of their missiles hits you. As your damage increases, the screen's border changes from greenish to yellow to red. A dependable strategy is to head back to your carrier immediately upon exceeding 10%. And I don't mean your mail carrier! This is no time to send away for cheap catalogue items! I mean the big, floating one, because your damage can add up startlingly quickly, and you'll gradually fly slower as a result. While you begin with a relatively generous five Helicraft, there's no way to acquire an extra.

If you ever find yourself at 100%, at least you'll have time to try steering your wildly spinning vehicle over the nearest factory. Crashing onto it will inflict substantial harm, even wiping it out if you've sufficiently increased its own damage with your bombs. (Sadly, if you crash into the water, you don't get to Wade in Bungeling Bay.)

The game features *Asteroids*-style controls: Left and right rotate your Helicraft, upward accelerates it and downward slowly does the opposite until, if you choose, it stops and hovers. It fires straight ahead when you briefly push the button, whereas dropping bombs and landing entail holding it down for about a second. The radar is instantly comprehensible, and the arrow in the lower left corner indicates the direction toward your carrier at all times.

Even the minor game elements are superbly thought out. The boats that each factory dispatches are colored to correspond with it, and they carry supplies. Evil

supplies. The more numerous the boats of a certain color, the faster they repair the damage that you've wreaked upon their factory, allowing new defenses to be built more quickly.

While they're nowhere near as common, the tanks are the land-based equivalents of the boats. Both make for great target practice, but neither one poses much direct harm. They don't expel projectiles; their muzzles flash, usually costing you only 1%. You've got bigger fish to fry in this bay!

The white planes are the jet fighters. They orbit your Helicraft in wide circles and fire straight missiles. The black aircraft don't fire; they intermittently pair up and bomb your carrier. When you're notified that this is taking place, fly to the carrier's aid right away. It can withstand quite a lot of bombs before it sinks, but it will then take along all of your reserves, as well as any chance at repairs. You make the bombers go away, of course, by yelling at them out your Helicraft window. "You kids stay away! Can't you read the sign? *Keep Off the Carrier!*"

Not really. The vehicles, guns and radar dishes are taken out with single shots, and they're not all present when the game begins. They accumulate slowly at first, and production hastens as you destroy more factories.

One of the islands is especially distant. It lies on the planet-side opposite from your carrier's channel. It's shaped like a backward, lowercase R. You're advised to bomb its factory to bits before any other. It's the most perilous to sustain damage near; vanquish it while it's still scarcely fortified, preventing a risky trip back to your carrier later in the game, when you'll have to fly past abundant anti-aircraft guns and fighter planes. Also, blowing up any factory requires no more than your first load of nine bombs when the game is young.

Provided that nothing else demands your urgent attention, shoot all remaining installations on the island whose factory you've just demolished. Anti-aircraft guns that are allowed to survive will eventually replace their straight missiles with the heat-seeking kind. The radar dishes enable the fighters to locate you promptly; and when those things attack you, they're real pains in the rudder.

Once you've destroyed the factory specified above, the only island containing two of them is a fittingly immense one to make safe for flying over. When it's been secured, you can land without threat in the enemy airfield near the northern shore and steal a load of bombs. When repairs are necessary, however, the carrier's your only prospect. (There's a second airfield elsewhere, but only enemy planes can land on that one.)

The first wave of black and white aircraft is launched about a minute after you've done away with your first chosen factory. Whenever you spot a landed, reloading plane, take a second to turn and blast it. This will keep it from bugging you when it's airborne in a few seconds.

If you've destroyed four factories quickly enough (you're certainly helping to cut down on this planet's pollution), one more can be razed before the adversary that I've yet to mention is fully assembled: the battleship. Head straight toward it the moment you're alerted to its completion, making a stop only if you're not carrying at least eight bombs. Given enough time, it will reach and destroy your carrier.

While it's in view, the battleship fires one heat-seeking missile after another. It's dangerous to share the screen with it for more than a second. Here's my tip for bombing it into oblivion: Align your craft with the long, horizontal, battleshippy line on the radar. Approach it from the south, as its missiles are always fired northward. Zoom straight ahead at top speed, dropping a bomb onto the ship every time you fly over it. Eight bombs will sink it, but it's easily missed, so timing is crucial.

The missiles have to be out-flown at your highest speed. Keep flying northward, repeatedly wrapping the battleship back into view. You'll have to adjust your course slightly after each pass or two, as the ship is slowly gliding to the west. Break off the attack for a visit to the carrier only if you've run out of bombs or taken more than 10% damage. Otherwise, stubbornly keep up the bombardment until you see the congratulatory message that alerts you to the battleship's demise. Aww...and it was the only one they had! Too baaad.

Prior to the battleship's completion, its slow construction throughout the game is not delayed by the removal of the nearby factory. You can bomb its harbored parts from time to time, preventing its launch altogether, but it's fun to have an additional big thing to destroy. It's just a way to *extra*-beat the game, you know? Incidentally, it's worth 5,000 points – as much as each factory and surviving Helicraft.

An interesting aspect of the game is that just before beating it, you can keep it going as long as you like, at a low level of risk to your Helicraft. When you've cleared off all of the islands but one, new threats will only arise if you give the last plant time to be repaired. You've even got a way to keep it from producing new defenses. When any factory is close to annihilation, it will stop emitting smoke. If you leave it alone for a while, its stacks will become active again. Shortly thereafter; its first wave of ground and air defenses will materialize.

It's enjoyable to recurrently bomb the factory back to its smokeless state and hunt down the few enemies whose creation you've decided to allow. And if you don't get cocky about evading missiles, you can rack up quite a score. It's still a risk-versus-reward venture, but the risk has been drastically reduced. There's no reason to be Afraid of Bungeling Bay.

When you finally eliminate the remaining factory, everything goes into slow motion for some reason. After the factory's explosion runs its course, your

surviving Helicraft are counted for points, and you're treated to a proper game ending that makes you feel like the Broderbad-ass you are. First, you make the front page of the *Daily News*. It's about time we've got some non-spun current events to read about, right? The article even specifies how many intact Helicraft you're left with. It calls them Wildfire Attack Copters. They're Helicraft in the manual, but the other term's cooler.

Then you're given a Parade on Bungeling Bay! (It actually appears to take place in a crowded city, but I couldn't pass that up.) There you are, seated high in a convertible, waving at the scrolling crowd...of course, you might be the one driving instead. It's not made clear. All of the fireworks that you haven't destroyed are set off; the factories were surely packed with them, considering the dramatic, drawn-out explosions.

This game is a designing and programming achievement. What makes this especially evident is that *beating* it feels like an achievement, no matter how many times you've Played on Bungeling Bay.

The Commodore VIC-20

Scorpion

(Dragonfly / Tronix, 1983)



This is my favorite of all VIC-20 games that aren't found on other platforms. Another *Scorpion* exists for the same computer, but it's just a *Centipede* rip-off. While the scrolling maze in this one evokes traces of *Rally-X*, the game-play and objectives are highly original. The arachnid you're controlling has the ability to stay still, to begin with; and he's not simply evading pursuers like a sissy. He's agreeably offensive indeed, as his tail fires deadly, incredibly rapid bolts over his head.

Adventurous exploration is combined with multi-scrolling gunplay, and the sum is greater than the VIC-20 has any right to execute. YOU...are the Scorpion! Not just a scorpion, mind you. *The Scorpion*, which means that everything else...is the dead thing!

To be honest, I'm not crazy about the whole "It's good for *this* computer" passive-praise thing, as one can always fire up another machine if he's not interested in the characteristics of the one he's using; but this game manages to move swiftly and smoothly, regardless of the VIC-20's lack of hardware sprites. The graphics are heavily modified ASCII characters, and considering that every object is therefore restricted to skipping from screen space to space, the absence of collision-detection discrepancies and slow-down is impressive.

Jimmy Huey must have learned exhaustively about the computer before writing his game. Accordingly, the limits of the hardware didn't get in his way. He worked within them and even used them in the game's favor. The necessarily choppy character movement was minimized, and he designed the graphical interplay to take that potential inelegance into account, rather than pretending in vain that it didn't exist. His interesting color combinations might have had a lot to do with the appearance of fluid movement.

Note the Scanner to the right. It's helpful, but it only displays your actual prey, disregarding the other enemies and the maze walls. It's provided to vaguely indicate the locations of your principal targets, but it doesn't dispel the need for deft navigation. The game still comprises a splendidly ferocious treasure hunt, and the Scorpion is so tough that his prey is amphibious. Yes: I'm afraid he eats frogs. But you don't have to watch that part. He brings them home and stashes them first.

Above the scanner is the Air Gauge, which causes one to assume, given the color of the maze passages, that this is a tomato soup-dwelling Scorpion. The diminishing air amounts to a time limit, but it can be continuously topped off by shooting the mysteriously prevalent bear traps. Those are the light-blue things in the screen shot. They could be dentures, I suppose, depending on who's tried this soup. The giant diner might have noticed things moving around in it, which caused his teeth to fall right out. In any case, your character can hold his breath for quite a while.

Each wave begins with four frog eggs scattered throughout its particular labyrinth. The frogs emerge one by one, and it's not long before they're all hopping around in random directions. They hop right past the tadpole phase, in fact. We're talking about some aggressive frogs. You usually have time to drag a couple of eggs back to your hollow – whence you've started out, but which doesn't appear on the Scanner – before they hatch.

Once a frog has liberated himself, shooting him merely stuns him. Your projectiles destroy everything else, as it's not on the menu. All creatures are lethal to the touch, apart from unconscious frogs. Seize a stunned greenie by colliding with him, and drag him to your home before he wakes up. You can always knock him out again, of course, but there's a good chance that he'll leap right onto you if he comes to. When you make contact with your starting position, you'll be rid of him.

I wonder what he's thinking upon awakening. Maybe his first utterance is, "I love what you've done with the place!" Then he realizes where he is. At the least, you'd better have frog-safe cupboards. He must be trapped down there somehow; otherwise, he'd just jump right out. Force yourself to ignore his pleas from below: "Piggy! Piggy?" Sorry, Kermit. I know that it's not easy bein' lunch. You've simply sung one bad cover song too many, pal. Your number's up.

You can destroy an egg in lieu of picking it up, but this is detrimental if you're hoping for a high score. It grants only 50 points, as opposed to 400 for the first stored egg alone. Notice the Next Egg box to the lower right; the amount doubles whenever you've collected one. Maybe frog eggs are especially tasty after they've been marinating in tomato soup for a while. Very occasionally, you'll have time to tow all four eggs home before their shells begin to crack.

In spite of this, I've noticed that I wind up with a higher score after stunning and stashing most of the frogs instead of racing around to grab as many intact eggs as possible. This is probably due to the longer amount of time I've spent in each wave, killing bad guys. Knocking out a frog is worth nothing, but hauling and squirreling him earns 300. Near the top, you're told when your next extra Scorpion will be awarded.

Get this: While you allow the frogs to remain conscious, they randomly lay indestructible worm eggs. Either Huey knew a lot more about programming than biology, or these frogs are very, very sick. Cook 'em well, Scorpion. Anyway, the segmented worms typically prefer to crawl along the maze walls. A single shot will wipe one out.

Newer, trickier types of soup-dwelling creature appear as the waves go on. One of these bounces diagonally from wall to wall and reacts to your blast like a Pod from *Defender*, splitting into more dangerous meanies who, in this game, resemble amok power tools. The Lily-Pod (aren't I witty? Ahem) is deviously frog-colored, so you can't continue to fire blindly at green things without pausing to ensure that you want to. Eventually, enemies arrive who actually have the nerve to fire at you. That's surely no way to get on your good side!

The randomness of the incubating-frog locations is simulated; this is obviously better than no kind at all, even if it's unlikely that any player but the most obsessed would remember each wave's unique egg layout. There are many variations to choose from if you've grown so accustomed to the default arrangements that the hunt has become a predictable, connect-the-dots affair.

When you've just loaded *Scorpion* into memory, every egg in Wave 1 is in the same position as in the last game you've played without resetting. The Wave 2 arrangement is different from the first, but it's the same Wave 2 as before, and so forth. For an entirely separate set of egg layouts, simply play more than once without turning off the computer. At any time, pressing F1 to reset the game changes each wave's configuration. They all retain their individual mazes. I've found no limit to the different Wave 1s, etc. There might well be one, but it's immaterial by this point.

As usual, the minute details add up. I applaud the fact that running into a wall doesn't cause you to turn automatically, as it does in other games with similar movement schemes. You simply stop until *you* decide where to go from there. Even familiar elements mingle in ways that make this the only game of its kind. Its re-playability partly pivots on the ample randomness; as just one example, the amount of time for which any given frog remains egg-bound or subsequently dazed varies widely.

Scorpion is a perpetually fun game with fantastic pacing and suitably proportioned interrelation between its several characters and items. I also like the

changing maze from wave to wave. The only shortcoming is that you can't move diagonally. You don't really have to, however, in view of the consistently high speed and immediate control responsiveness. I'll rarely forgive diagonal deficiency, but it doesn't seem to matter here.

What probably saves it is the *recognition* of diagonal movement: You can smoothly transition between right angles without centering the controller halfway through. I've brought this up more than once throughout the book, but such carefully deliberated controls are always worth pointing out. In too many games, character movement halts (or erroneously continues in its original direction) when the controller isn't briefly released between cardinal directions. *Bravo*, Jimmy Huey! Now please explain why you have two first names.

The Odyssey²

Killer Bees

(Philips / Magnavox, 1983)



This is one of the few Odyssey² games that I consistently enjoy playing. On the American box, the title is followed by an exclamation point, which is obviously intended to fill onlookers with alarm and make them run away screaming. Perhaps this curious marketing decision partly explains Magnavox's low sales at the time. Good. More cartridges for us. *We're* not afraid.

Killer Bees feels good to play, it's viscerally transfixing, and, in spite of the title, it's devoid of bugs. It uses the strengths of the console, rather than having been designed separately and then forced around the weaknesses. The limitations aren't fought; they form the very playing style, and the result is a fast, well balanced battle between bees, other bees and people with toilet seats for heads.

K.C. Munchkin! and *K.C.'s Krazy Chase!* are good games as well, but they're among those in which movement is restricted to invisible grid squares. Your character can only truly move from position to position, and this makes split-second actions, such as, for instance, turning, extremely tricky. Regardless, there are many fun things about those two games, and along with the excellent *Turtles* arcade translation, I'm sure that I'll get to them in an upcoming book.

The Odyssey² was called the Videopac in Europe and a couple of other places. There's no exclamation point on the non-American box. I guess they didn't feel one was needed. It was enough to simply declare: *Killer Bees*. It's merely observational. People can take action as they see fit. There's surely no need to panic about mere insects if some actual wars have taken place in your neighborhood.

There's no punctuation on the title screen, either, and this is what I always go by: the intention of the programmer. Of course, the name was simply preferable to *Killer Pixels*. And the swarms of enemy pixels will kill yours indeed. They'll kill 'em

dead. If you *let* them. But you can kill them back! This is a strength I look for in any game with killer things in it. As with most O² games, no other versions were made. I like to feature games that are unique to their platforms, provided that they're also favorites of mine. This Robert Harris creation is unique in many other ways as well. I've never played anything quite like it.

And if you're expecting honey, you're in for a surprise. Utterly notwithstanding its infrequent firepower, this is a furious action game that eases you into the overall mechanism and then encourages your unfaltering attention.

Your white swarm of mighty pixels is slowly diminished whenever the evil green swarm touches it. So you'll want to avoid that bustling splotch of mucus as you pursue and gradually sting to death the unfortunate chaps with the toilet-seat heads. Each of these steadily slows as you make contact. He's finally replaced with a gravestone, which is rather thoughtful of somebody.

I'd hate to have *that* job. Running out there every time some dope drops over and hastily digging a grave wouldn't be as much fun as doing the actual killing. A beekeeper's life is a hard one. Maybe that's the second player's role in the hidden cooperative variation. You can just hear the arguments: "*You* be the gravedigger! I played him *last* time!"

The tombstones serve as obstacles. They don't obstruct either kind of bee, but rather your disturbingly shaped victims, whose routes around the screen are thus contracted. Since the various beings in Game Land aren't religious, each headstone merely contains a pixel, which is entirely fitting for a dead graphic.

I'm not sure what these people did to deserve to be stung to death, but considering their heads, worse things could certainly happen to them. If you've crippled one and then broken contact, he'll slowly recover until he's back up to speed. They all accelerate throughout each wave anyway, as it begins to occur to them: "Hey! These nutty bees are trying to *kill* us!" The quickening can make for a comically frantic chase around the playfield when the wave's almost over, especially if the toilet-heads and your pixels have each been reduced to one. You often have to be particularly careful just before flushing that last guy.

The requirement to avoid contact with the green bees doesn't preclude your ability to take them out. Yours are the even more immediately killing type, as two blinking, red guns, or perhaps armed *Breakout* bricks, appear along the side borders when you've forever halted one of your prey. These follow your Y position, so you can line them up and zap the snot bees with ease. The multi-language version of the manual calls this screen-crossing blast the Sting Ray. Clever, right?

At first, only two enemy swarms can coexist; these eventually become three. The green bees move around randomly, but the succeeding blue ones attempt to

protect the toilet-heads. They're replaced much later by red bees, the sharpest-witted: It actually occurs to them that it might be beneficial to chase you.

More than one swarm can be exterminated with each Sting Ray. Wiping out two or three at a time is quite satisfying, and in later, more frenzied waves, it can even cause you to start talking to the screen. "Now you're *dead*, ain't ya! Oh, wait. You can't hear me. You're *dead*. Ahhh ha ha ha ha haaaaa!" There's always time for evil laughs in video games.

Typically for an O² game, this one grants you a single life. Your swarm of twelve bees makes this more reasonable than usual, however; and no matter how many you've lost, you begin each wave fully pixelated. If you're interested in maximizing your score, kill only one toilet-head at a time. As this always recharges the Sting Ray, you can fry the present enemy bees before slaying another hapless victim. Killing two toilet-heads in a row wastes a firing opportunity in between.

More to the point, this improves your chances for survival, as the replacement swarms start off harmlessly in the cubbies surrounding the playfield. (Beehives just weren't going to happen on the dear old Odyssey².) They take a second to emerge and fly around, so you can blast them before they even leave home. That's how tough you are. Come on – don't be modest. You know it's true. Hey, I can relate.

Admittedly, this only applies to the side homes. The gun-bricks don't reach the penthouse at the top. Once you've eliminated all of the toilet-heads, you still have a second or two to zap any rival bees that remain on the playfield. Then the CPU realizes that the wave has ended and moves you along.

The game entails some fairly complicated scoring. At the end of each wave, you receive a bonus for the amount of remaining pixels in your swarm, multiplied by the wave number, minus the stripes on each enemy bee you've killed, divided by the amount of letters in your mother's maiden name...I'm exaggerating, but not as much as you might think.

Killer Bees is an imaginative and riveting game, smooth and speedy and floaty. It's fun to track one of the unlucky bipeds and just stay on him until he's dead. Now, I expect some congratulations for resisting the temptation to use the word "beeline" anywhere in this chapter. Oops!

The Mattel Intellivision

Dracula

(Imagic, 1983)



I've never been terribly interested in vampire fiction, but I recently tried this game for the first time, as I'm ever curious about old ones with which I have no familiarity. You, too? It's fun, right? Acquainting myself with something that I had no access to when it was new, and when games themselves were relatively young, with nearly every idea overlapping uncharted territory to some degree, remains a fascinating indulgence. They're obviously not all going to be magnificent and long enduring, to put it mildly; but the hit-or-miss potential is part of the fun.

To ensure that I don't give up on a game that doesn't grab me right away, I try my best to find something positive about even the most apparently insufferable case. At the very least, I can appreciate the accidental humor in its weak points. I'm not stating that Alan Smith's *Dracula* is awful – it's not – but it's also not especially enjoyable. The game beyond the game is often in thinking up ways to make fun of its deficiencies. I've done this since I was a kid. Why stop now?

Dracula is a vaguely isometric, side-scrolling biter that takes place in an endless electric storm, explaining why none of the lights work. The windows are all dark in the township through which the actual playfield – the sidewalk – extends. We're probably not missing much in those windows. It's a pretty dead town; it's filled with graveyards.

When you spot a passerby, attempt to collide with him and time your button-push to bite him. You don't drink his blood or kill him or anything; you turn him into a 50. Unschooled as I am in vampire lore, I've heard of no *Dracula* incarnation who craves transforming innocent people into numbers. Maybe this is actually his cousin, Count Mathula.

I was irrationally excited to discover that I could knock on the doors. Given the scarcity of victims, I had some fun walking from door to door, knocking in a cruel

and wicked manner before running away and sniggering. Sometimes, instead of being a fiendish prankster, I'd see an opportunity to invent dialogue. How interactive! I like that in a game. This one was truly more sophisticated than I'd given it credit for. I took advantage of the extra feature: "Good evening. I'm from Nosferatu's Witnesses."

You'll occasionally encounter a dog who's taking himself for a walk. If you try to bite him, the role reversal doesn't sit well, and he somehow causes you to walk slower for a long time afterward. It's possible that he chomps your foot, but this isn't graphically made apparent. I'm sure that it's explained in the manual, which I would normally read before playing seriously; but in this case, why spoil the fun? Left to my own devices and my scant knowledge of the Count's legend, I've ascertained that he's allergic to the sun *and* dogs. Of course, he might be walking slower because he's trying to scrape something off of his shoe.

When I tried another button, I was delighted to see my character turn into a bat! I had a good time flying around, yelling into people's windows, until I was chased by an airborne, blood-soaked handkerchief. I decided to resume human form before realizing that I probably needn't have. Such an item would surely be more appetizing to a true vampire than numbers on the sidewalk.

After a while, I found myself at a loss regarding how to complete what had been designated Night 1. I tried stepping into one of the cemeteries, and lo and behold! I turned back into a bat and went to sleep. So that's the object of the game? To take a nap?

There's *some* challenge, as the people who happen to be out on such a nasty night run away from you; so they seem to know that you're unfriendly. Why they don't all bring their dogs along for protection against vampires is beyond me.

(Here's a disclaimer: I'm aware that you have to bite a certain amount of people and get back to your crypt before 6:00 A.M., and that the hankies and dogs are supposed to be vultures and wolves. Stake-throwing constables chase you at higher difficulty settings; your bites momentarily paralyze them, but munching a civilian with the alternate button turns him into a zombie, who's maneuvered with the second controller and utilized to chase the cops away. Sometimes, my pre-manual impressions simply make for more entertaining reading.)

Um...also, the scrolling is very smooth. Good job, Alan Smith! That's some smooth scrolling! Yes, indeed! Now please have a word with the people who ported *Zaxxon*.

Microsurgeon
(Imagic, 1982)



I've mentioned that I love exploration-based adventure games. For some reason, searching for things, finding them and destroying them – or using them to advance in some way – is a paradigm that I find gratifying. By "adventure games," mind you, I don't mean computerized role-playing games. I'm glad so many of them exist, as they clearly bring great pleasure to a lot of people. To me, however, they bring monotony, no matter how diverse the scenarios. This frame of mind concerns their nearly universal, ceaselessly replicated turn-based action.

In countless games that center on RPG elements (*I'm* not going to count them, anyway), you can't properly begin to explore, or even depart from the village / town / inn / dairy farm / brothel, until you've visited the Person Who Knows What the Plot Is. He's always centered against one border, and upon enlightening you, this Oddly Benevolent King / Wisest Sage / Wizard with the Tallest Hat / Master Postman / Chief Restroom Attendant advises you to go outside and ask pedestrians for things that will help you, in the event that you ever get to leave. If he were truly in charge, he could surely get them to stop by with these items, but he wants you to do all the work.

So now you've got to walk around and pester complete strangers until you've acquired the Magical Sofa Cushion of Protection, the Enchanted Soap Dish of Infinite Storage and the Spork of Infected Wounds. Now you can get going! You can even begin to explore – for two seconds. Then you're halted by what amounts to a dice-rolling phase. I can buy bones and a notebook if I want to get into that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, I find role-playing games to be a lot more fun in real life. (What an ironic sentence.)

I'm not talking about *real* real life, of course. Can you imagine strolling right up to some guy on the street and demanding that he hand over whatever he's carrying? While you're unarmed, I mean? It wouldn't even work with broads, no matter how charmingly you might behave. "Open your purse. I need some coins for my journey. It's important to our entire block that I succeed. Hey! Put away the

pepper spray! I'm telling you, the president sent me! *The president sent me!*" Talk about rolling the dice. You'd *have* to leave town at that point, I would think.

One of my favorite Intellivision games is *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, which was eventually subtitled *Cloudy Mountain* in order to differentiate it from its sequel, *AD&D: Treasure of Tarmin*. Curiously, the former is not an RPG. It involves exploring networks of subterranean caves; each of these lights up to reveal its shape and contents when you enter. It's an exceedingly appealing movement scheme. The ROM was the first in an Intellivision cartridge to surpass four KB (it had six).

That game has already been covered extensively, however – especially in online films. While I'll probably discuss it in a later book, along with my favorite shoot-'em-up on the console, *The Dreadnaught Factor*, I'm prioritizing rarely featured games, as well as a handful of new takes on unquestionably familiar ones.

Another favorite is Richard Levine's *Microsurgeon*, an exploration game in its own right. It happens to take place inside some guy's body, but I'll take uninterrupted-by-dice adventure wherever I can find it. It was later converted for the Texas Instruments 99/4A and the IBM PC, Jr., making it the game released for perhaps the weirdest particular combination of platforms in history. My ongoing fondness for the game is partially due to my finally fulfilled, decades-long curiosity, as I only saw screen shots back in the '80s, in *Electronic Games* magazine and so forth. It looked quite different from anything else, very strange and very neat-o.

I didn't own an Intellivision as a kid. When I read anything about it or saw stills, I wondered how a video game could possibly take place inside what appeared to be a vivid anatomical model. Even now that I've learned how to play it and found it to be pretty damn good, it continues to hold that intrigue. The strengths outnumber – and in any case, outweigh – the weaknesses and slight graphical hiccups.

Several of the system's games are sufficiently good, in terms of originality and well balanced elements, to make the controller's quirks worth dealing with. *Microsurgeon* is one of them; it's an interesting, inspired game that's easily fun enough to return to now and again. (By the way, the company's name sounds like the word "imagine." This is merged with "magic." I've heard it mispronounced, and while it's not a terribly significant detail, I just wanted to get a snooty correction in here.)

You don't actually play as a shrunken surgeon; it's not quite *Fantastic Voyage*-like that way. You endeavor to heal the patient from within by remotely controlling an injected, miniscule vehicle: the Robotic Probe. You're not only a doctor, then, but an electronics hobbyist as well. You're certainly not messing around. You

shoot everything that's ailing the chap. That's one way to go about it, I suppose. You then leave it to another doctor to deal with the hemorrhaging.

I wonder if one can buy remote-controlled, robotic probes in real life. You could play some awesome pranks. "That's funny. I could have sworn I was lactating for a second, there."

I prefer to start the game by pressing 6 on the keypad. This sets the difficulty to Intermediate and confronts me with a random patient: The particular configuration of things from which he's suffering is different during every game. When I care about my score, I keep resetting until I see an overall condition of Serious or Critical on the Status Screen that opens the game. The worse off the poor guy is at the beginning, the higher the final tally, provided that his death is prevented in between.

The Power readout on the same screen is essentially the amount of time remaining. It counts downward throughout the game, but except on very rare occasions, it's extremely fair. More power than the normal, time-based kind is lost, however, when the Probe collides with one of the nasty things afflicting the patient.

The objective is to restore all of the internal conditions listed on the Status Screen to Good. The state of each gut that doesn't start out that way is either Fair, Serious or Critical, depending on the patient number (chosen randomly or not). Each condition gradually improves as you blast more of its associated physiological bad guys. If you're not fast enough, the items that don't read Good will steadily worsen; but those that are indeed fully healed won't deteriorate again.

After Critical, the gut or biological facet becomes Terminal, indicating that it's dead or defunct. Naturally, your finishing score decreases quite a bit in this case, and as far as I'm concerned, it means that the game hasn't genuinely been won, despite your ability to continue playing. Maybe your assistants just stick the patient into the freezer when you've only saved bits of him. Waste not, want not, right?

When the game begins, note which things are Critical and plan to head for their related meanies first. Pressing 1 switches to the body interior; the Status Screen can be checked at any time by pressing 2. During the game-play itself, screen-sized portions of the body scroll into view as you move around. I recommend pressing 0 right away. This speeds up your Probe, which is the small, white diamond near the center. (Ouch. There must be a lot of scar tissue inside this guy at the end of the game.)

You've got two speeds to choose from, but why the slower one would ever be preferable is anyone's guess. The slow-down that occurs when there's a lot of

animated, on-screen illness makes the control receptivity sluggish enough. As with shortcomings in other games that are generally fun, one can get used to it. In fact, I'll get this deficiency out of the way, so that we can get back to kickin'... well, healin' ass. The lag affects your Probe's responsiveness along with the collective game speed. You'll sometimes find yourself overcompensating while attempting to stay within the veins, arteries and pools of lymphatic fluid to which you're restricted (the red, burgundy and orange routes, in other words), and wind up ramming the Probe into the far "wall" when things speed up again, triggering an attacker in the form of a white blood cell.

Whenever you travel outside of the designated paths – slowly through bone, for instance, or into one of the background areas of mysterious bodily blackness – at least one of these cells will float onto the screen and try to crash into you, reducing your power if it succeeds. To prevent this, you're obliged to stop and shoot it (well, cure it until it's dead).

"Designated paths": My odd wording has activated my smart-ass gland. "Okay, folks! During our tour of the innards, please stick to the designated paths, or things will get gross pretty quickly. Note the sign – you have to be this short to be allowed into the patient. And *no graffiti!*"

Roaming phagocytes be damned, it's often more expedient to slog through the substances that you're not supposed to touch. You move more slowly, but it still beats adhering to the appointed passages when they take you the long way around. With some practice, it's easy enough to zap the intermittent white blood cells. Each of these will only change direction once, if it's failed to collide with you during its first body-crossing.

While we're on the subject, there's some pseudoscience here, as real white blood cells will only try to fight off biological intrusions. Then again, people aren't really shaped like this inside. It's a good thing. Imagine trying to get comfortable at bedtime. To be honest, considering the way in which the patient's guts are arranged, he has far more problems than we can possibly fix with a tiny robot.

The bottommost item on the Status Screen, denoting the inclusive level of infection, obviously isn't a gut. That represents the amount of bad bacteria plaguing the body. There's no mistaking these crawly things (one of which is seen to the extreme right in the screen shot). The patient appears to have swallowed a bunch of green spiders. Maybe he was hoping to acquire super powers and missed some crucial points.

Your default weapon is the Ultrasonic Ray. You blast nearly everything with this, including the white blood cells and the slanted gray things, which are lumps of cholesterol. This isn't the good kind that you receive from eggs, so its elimination improves the heart's condition. It's found blocking arteries throughout the body,

but the stomach and brain usually contain the highest concentrations. The patient has been thinking about fast food far too frequently.

The collision detection between your Ray and the cholesterol (as well as the tapeworms mentioned below) is...extremely unhealthy. It's another thing that you can get used to. The trick is to fire diagonally at each gray lump, so that your shot travels through it for the longest possible time. The chances are thereby higher that your Ray, which actually takes the form of a projectile, will still be in contact with the cholesterol when on-screen objects are next checked for collisions. The delay is presumably a byproduct of the game's busy, memory-intensive display. (The problem exists in emulation as well as on real hardware, to judge from the online films that I've watched.)

Healing the lungs entails shooting the tar deposits within. The guy's not a smoker; he sniffs tar. It's a new trend among impressionable people. When both lungs have been suitably cleared out, their mutual condition will progress to Good, leaving you free to deal with the other horrific things inside this out-of-shape man. In truth, a cigarette would be a tremendous alternative to whatever he's actually been doing to himself.

The kidneys are the rounded sections that look like cozy parks through a bird's eye. Stones need *somewhere* to take their kids on weekends, after all. Nevertheless, they must be shot, sparing the patient extreme urethral discomfort in the future; this is the part of the game in which you truly feel like a hero. Likewise, stones can plague the nearby gall bladder, which looks like a swimming pool that's been used by a lot of kids. I'll leave it at that.

To improve the condition of the brain, you'll want to zap every existing tumor (note the gray splotch to the left) – often about 80,000 times apiece, as they each involve multiple shots *and* try to grow back right away. Your default weapon reduces a tumor's size as you shoot it, but you have to do this repeatedly from a short distance if you don't want to lose a lot of time. (Well, either they're tumors, or this guy's been shoving baby squid up his nose.)

To give the intestines a hand (as it were), shoot the tapeworms lurking therein. Mercifully, the playfield doesn't scroll below that. Things could become very unsettling. I'm almost certain that there's no air-freshening weapon I haven't noticed. And we can all feel grateful that there wasn't a sequel. Where could Levine have gone from here? *Microsurgeon II: Colonoscopy*? I'd hate to see *that* box art.

You've got two other weapons at your disposal; all three are selected via the keypad. Launch antibiotics to wipe out the bad bacteria described above. These pests remain stationary, but they erratically appear and disappear. They prolong the game more than anything else, as you have to shoot them twice a day for a week.

Aspirin, your third type of artillery, is required only for eradicating the very occasional virus that flies swiftly toward you from one of the borders. It looks like you're throwing a tiny pill at the light-green creep, and there's a capital A within, just so it's perfectly clear what you've discharged. Thankfully, there's no detection problem with the white blood cells or viruses. Since they're moving, they were wisely prioritized in the program.

Those two varmints burrow nonchalantly through all of the guts between themselves and your Probe. Considering the damage this must cause, the patient's insides are surely full of holes by the time he wakes up. At least, I *hope* he's been anaesthetized. On the other hand, if he's conscious while all of this is going on, he probably just feels a bit itchy.

You don't want to leave the body until the condition of everything inside it is Good. If you're playing for score, exit through your facial orifice of choice, rather than simply puncturing the skin elsewhere. In spite of the allegedly microscopic dimensions of the Probe, the latter kind of departure takes away points. The nose is my favorite means of egress. Even at my age, anything that looks like a cartoon booger is funny.

Adding to the humor, your score is displayed as a bill given to the patient at the end. Depending on the difficulty level you've selected and how well you've done, it can stretch to nine digits. When he's seen it, of course, you have to operate again.

I have a lot of fun playing *Microsurgeon*, which is obviously all that counts. Sometimes it's cumbersome, but it's thoroughly inventive. I doubt very much that it was designed to teach anatomy to young people. Maybe Levine doesn't like kids, and was simply trying to give them nightmares. Speaking of him, you can see his first name just below the head. That's the most easily found Easter egg I've ever seen.

The game contains some crafty sound effects. For instance, the lungs respire and the heart beats as you approach that general region of the body. It's also nifty that even in the variations without chance conditions, your slimy targets are positioned randomly, bound only by the guts they belong in (when applicable) and their movement or materialization patterns.

There's no liver problem to contend with, so at least drinking is *one* thing this guy hasn't done to himself. Even before taking a look at the final score, one feels the urge to lecture the patient: "Take better care of yourself, will ya? You should have *seen* it in there! I couldn't make heads or tails of things. Try to develop some better dietary habits, at the least. You appear to be an intelligent man, given that your brain's bigger than your stomach and intestines put together."

Space Hawk (Mattel, 1981)



Before I go any further, I should probably make it clear that I genuinely like the Intellivision. To be more precise, some of its games are among my favorites. It seems to be even more difficult to proficiently program for than the Atari 2600; but as with any platform, if the coder really knows what he's doing, and he's taken the time to learn about all of the graphical display peculiarities, efficiency tricks, etc., some outstanding gameness can result.

The Intellivision's control quirks are hardware-based and therefore not programmer failings. Each of the keypad buttons, for instance, must be held down for nearly half a second to register. I've found this to be true on the real hardware as well as the emulated kind. It doesn't occur persistently, however; it seems to depend on the timing of the I/O cycle. If a game successfully draws the player in, he can obviously learn how to compensate in his playing style. Any inherent Master Component limitations are well complemented by its strengths when the latter are exploited by the game in question.

Now that I've gotten that out of the way, choppy scrolling is typical of games on this system and the otherwise great ColecoVision, with the rare exception proving the rule. This reprises my point (in the *Frostbite* chapter) about the pervasive underestimation of the Atari 2600. During the '80s, the superior graphical abilities of the Mattel and Coleco consoles were widely publicized, often serving as the only arguing points for swaying players from Atari.

However, while the higher resolutions have always afforded better screen shots – perfect for magazine advertisements – the smooth movement, solid mechanics and instant control responsiveness in most 2600 games produce more fluid graphical interaction, thereby yielding more visceral and gracefully executed game-play, even with scrolling disregarded. Such things aren't observed in a stationary image, of course.

For those reasons, I even prefer Mattel's own conversions for the 2600 (under the M Network imprint) to their Intellivision counterparts. I can think of a few of

you cats who'd like to slap me for typing that – or jovially elbow me, albeit hard enough to break a rib – but try playing some of the adaptations just before the originals, and let me know what you think.

This is all not to mention that the VCS joystick, model CX-40, is the best single-button controller ever designed. If you disagree, you're probably one of those guys who hold it funny. Don't grip it in a fist shape, or move it around with the tips of your fingers. Hold it in your right thumb web, with the pads of your other fingers resting along the top edge of the base. Support the base from beneath with your left hand, firing with that thumb. You're welcome.

I hasten to admit that there's usually a trade-off when one opts for an equivalent 2600 game. In *Astroblast*, for example, there's less room in the sky for the falling deadly things than in *Astrosmash*, so there's not as much time to take aim or get out of the way. This is especially troublesome when the general speed increases. Also, I can't fire up the 2600 to play *Shark! Shark!*, *Beauty and the Beast*, the superior version of *Atlantis* or the marvels discussed in the previous chapters.

Again, I love several Intellivision and ColecoVision games. There are many remarkable things about each console, and they both persist as sources of fascination for me. It's just that I've never quite fathomed why some folks will actually argue about across-the-board superiority. It's a game-by-game consideration; lists of specifications are ultimately irrelevant. People don't seem to notice that they're heatedly regurgitating marketing rhetoric that was originally designed to part them from their cash, irrespective of game quality. But I'm probably being judgmental. Awesome.

I presumed for years that the title *Space Hawk* referred to the player's character. While the idea of commanding a hawk that didn't have to breathe was always intriguing, I didn't get the opportunity to play the game until the late '90s. I was surprised to find myself in control of a man who had screwed up so drastically that he found himself floating alone through space. As there was no spaceship in sight, this had evidently not been part of whatever the plan was.

Shortly thereafter, I realized that I was playing an *Asteroids* clone. Every system needed one, apparently, along with its own *Space Invaders*, *Breakout*, *Pac-Man* and, for some reason, *Poker*. I use the term "clone" in this case instead of "rip-off" because Bill Fisher and John Sohl's Intellivision game isn't quite the same as *Asteroids*. The astray-naut doesn't fire at successive waves of drifting boulders and intermittent ships, but rather deadly bubbles discharged by a massive, ever resurrected hawk. (They *look* like bubbles, anyway...)

The poor guy also has to contend with his allergy to hawks, or at least space ones, considering the lumpy, green splotches that he's expelling in lieu of missiles. Two giant boogers at a time can exist in the cosmos, as astronomers have been telling us for ages.

In fact, there's a lot to learn from this game. Upon thrusting forward, we discover that space scrolls (which I've always suspected), and that hawk droppings in zero gravity behave much like asteroids, except that they can each be wiped out with a single hit, regardless of size. Later in the game, they continually change colors and can only be destroyed when they're green. A wholly invulnerable kind eventually turns up. One wonders what the hawk's been eating.

But then, I'm only guessing that they're droppings. Maybe he's trying to build a space nest! In that case, my astronaut is the cruel one, trying to hit the poor thing three times instead of figuring out how to get home like he should be doing. The hawk has simply mistaken him for a large piece of straw. The luckless bird could also be thinking, "Wait – what the hell am I doing in space? I'm a *hawk!* That'll teach me to fall asleep while I'm flying."

What's indisputably clear is that hyperspace costs points, space is filled with countless bits of multicolored breakfast cereal, and there's no controller button to release a space chicken for luring the hawk. I'm sure of this. I've tried them all.

Star Strike (APh / Mattel, 1981)



Certain '80s game designers knew their clientele quite well. Making the most of the same kids' continued interest in *Star Wars*, Mattel Electronics arrived at *Star Strike*, which would turn out to be maniacally praised (although only by George Plimpton).

In spite of the name, your objective is not to strike a star. Why, you could burn your knuckles clean off that way. As you can see, you're actually attacking the Planet of Well Kept Lawns. It's not exactly a windshield shoot-'em-up, as I like to classify games such as *Star Raiders*. You can see your spaceship in front of you as it flies along a trench, which scrolls toward you in simulated jumpy 3-D.

Sinkholes pass below at regular intervals. Plugging up five of these with your bombs will blow up the planet, preventing its evil caretakers from launching a horrible chunk of compost at planet Earth and somehow destroying it, which definitely won't help Mattel's sales! So be careful.

Come to think of it, you and the console that you're playing on will be obliterated along with the rest of the planet. This will cause the universe to disappear in an irreconcilable paradox, so you're assuming a lot of responsibility merely by starting the game. Super-Deluxe Strategy-Clue Tip-Hint: The Force won't help you.

You only get one ship. (Was this originally an Odyssey² game or something?) The hyphen that seems to be stubbornly following you is your bombing site. You can also fire straight ahead, and I mean literally; the enemy landscapers who try to thwart your mission aren't vulnerable until they're directly in front of you, overlapping their sprites with yours. The lack of consideration for your personal space is incredible.

When one of them rams or shoots you, you're forced downward for a moment. If you're already flying low, you'll meet your demise on one of the Well Kept Lawns.

Evade your rivals until they overtake you and turn light blue; then line up and mow 'em down. (Asthmatic wheezing) The flora's strong with this one.

As you're subsequently damaged, your movement speed steadily decreases. Malfunctioning lasers are next, followed by the loss of the helpful beep that alerts you to an approaching sinkhole. Finally, the controls temporarily reverse. This is so annoying that I'd rather just lose my ship.

With all due respect to Brett Stutz and the late, great Hal Finney, the men who created the original game, David Akers's Atari 2600 version is a bit more fun. It might not look quite as good, but the sprites move more smoothly, making your ship easier to maneuver.



The planet that you're raiding is no longer orbiting a moon, Death Star-style; the scenario is otherwise the same. Shadows have been added, making one wonder if the enemies are headed for our star after all. Their ships now alternate with comets that inflict comparable harm, but which obviously don't fire.

The loss of one of the Intellivision's fire buttons is handled well: If your altitude is low enough, you'll drop a bomb instead of firing to the fore. In this rendition, Earth doesn't explode when you've taken too long; it just flashes a lot. I guess the enemy landscapers have decided to simply *cook* our planet. I hope they eat around Los Angeles! Alien indigestion is not a pretty sight.

The Texas Instruments TI-99/4A

Munch Man / Munchman II

(Texas Instruments, 1982 / Triton, 1987)



I've recently played this computer's token *Pac-Man* rip-off for the first time in thirty-two years. It's the lone piece of TI software that I can remember from the whole of the '80s. A friend of my mother's lived in a different part of the Albuquerque suburb called Taylor Ranch from ours, and I was once brought along on a visit. Her only son was a couple of years younger than me, and hopefully still is. At some point in that slightly awkward process called "making friends," Aaron showed me the TI that was hooked up to a television in his room.

I was captivated by any computer that I encountered in those days, so I was eager to check out whatever he cared to demonstrate. I believe that *Munch Man*, whose name I'm separating into two words to reflect the title screen rather than the packaging, was the only non-educational game that he had. We sat there throughout our mothers' visit, playing what struck me as a laudable version of a certain, unmistakable arcade game, especially as compared with the Atari VCS translation that I had at home.

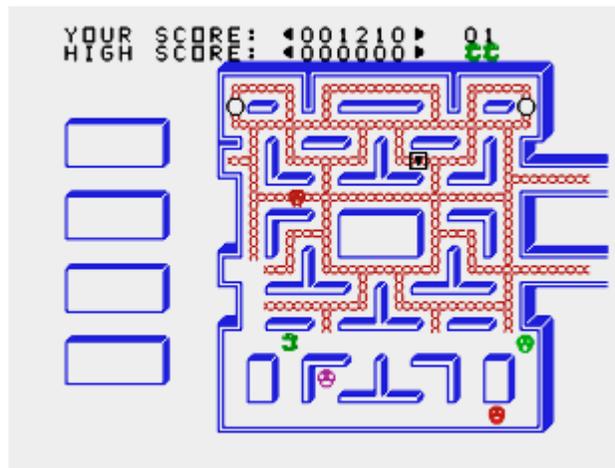
In the rare event that *Munch Man* arose in conversation or media during the intervening years, all that I could keenly recall were the TI logo-shaped Energizer equivalents. Upon firing up the game again in 2014, my first thought was that there was very little to munch. Then I realized / remembered that it was a maze-filling game instead of a maze-clearing one.

As the Munch Man, your menu consists entirely of the logos and, while you're suitably empowered, your four adversaries. Most of the time, you're evidently constructing an extremely long, ridiculously complicated fence. The reason for this is uncertain, as it doesn't appear to do any good. The multicolored Chinese stars that pursue you are always brazenly rolling along its barbed top. In any case, your character isn't so much a Munch Man as a Carpentry Man. The

correct term would be "Carpenter," I suppose, but that presumably didn't sound like an exciting game title.

You finally measure up to your publicized name when you devour Texas and the consequently blackened Chinese stars. A person with a strange appetite, this Carpenter. An element from *Ms. Pac-Man* is incorporated: the two screen-wrapping tunnels. The maze doesn't change from level to level as in that arcade sequel, but the enemies do. This is a neat, original distinction, even if it's purely aesthetic. Added to this are the displayed bad-guy point values in the studio apartments whence emerge the Chinese stars, the rubber ducks in the second maze, etc. The game continues to keep count even if you've eaten another Texas, provided that your predatory powers from the prior one haven't expired.

This is a first-rate rendering of *Pac-Man*, faultless and agreeably challenging. It even contains a logos-only bonus round. I wonder why the caring, selfless people at Atari never tried to get it removed from the shelves. Maybe they did, and I've just never read about it; or perhaps the carpentry element threw them off. This was undoubtedly what TI had in mind when Jim Dramis, the game's programmer, was asked to revise the prototype, which did in fact include dots and Energizer-looking circles.



The inaccurately titled *Munchman II* – boy, can I be a hairsplitter – was completed by former TI employee John Phillips five years after the release of the original (which is a funny word, in this instance). It was distributed by Triton, a company that was currently licensed to produce hardware and software for the officially abandoned computer. The earlier game was the first that Phillips had bought for his own 99/4A.

You're now playing as a fully committed Munch Man, and you're not impressed with the handiwork of the previous character. You consume the fence that winds through the two adjoined mazes on separate screens. I greatly enjoy this clever approach to the *Pac-Man* model.

To travel between labyrinths, you can pass through one of the tunnels or collide with the randomly moving teleport. The latter acts as a handy means of escape if it's nearby when you find yourself trapped by two of the four skulls that now chase you. It also sends you safely to the far side of the opposite maze. There are four power-ups on each screen, but they're not shaped like Texas. They more closely resemble Zimbabwe.

It might seem as if eight chances at retaliation would make the game too easy to be much fun, but there's a shrewd catch: The effects of an Energizer by Proxy cease when you switch mazes. This element, as well as the immediate appearance of the skulls behind you when you've taken a tunnel, has probably been implemented to keep you from abruptly reversing direction and re-entering the screen that you've just left. I'm not sure why that would be a problem, exactly, but Phillips's ploy certainly works. Something that I really like about both games is that the protagonist moves faster while he's energized.

The potentially greater difficulty of this follow-up, attributable to the reduced leg room – well, mouth room – is balanced with less astute enemies. They often seem to move around arbitrarily, albeit at relatively high speeds. They change as in the first game; after you de-fence the first binary playfield, you face what are clearly wayward parking meters.

Munchman II works just as well as its predecessor, since the mechanics haven't been tinkered with. The so-called Tournament Mode is a superfluous addition; it merely slashes your life count from three to one, and omits the extra mobile mouth gained per 10,000 points. But the doubled maze is an inspired renovation, even taking into account the vertical, much more *Pac-Man*-like layouts.

I can confidently recommend each of these exquisite replicas. What I cannot recommend is going anywhere near Munch Man's lavatory for a few hours.

Starship Pegasus

(Milton Bradley prototype, 1983)



Not a bad idea: Partially plagiarize Midway's 1980 *Space Zap* coin-op, give the player guided projectiles, and add enemy ships that can actually, you know, fly.

Two attackers simultaneously enter through different corners of the screen, bound for their respectively opposite borders. If you allow them to survive long enough, they'll become three and then four. By that time, the first two will have flown past their midpoints, so they'll be harmless, as they don't have guided shots like you do. Enemies only fire when they're aligned with your starship – i.e. centered to the north, centered to the west, etc. This raises a significant question: Are there compass directions in space?

It doesn't take long to pick up the optimal technique: When a new ship joins the festivities, promptly fire at it, steering your shell to intercept it before it gets halfway across the screen. If you're too late to prevent its missile from launching, fire a straight shot in defense. Now, if you're score-minded – and your attention isn't required elsewhere – guide a final shot toward the baddie, painfully interrupting his departing trip. It sure is fun to throw curveballs using explosive shells.

The enemies clearly need to get their engines fixed, though. They wobble slowly on snake-like routes as they fly along their particular borders. Trying to aim with such inconsistent propulsion must get rather irritating. No wonder they decided to be bad guys. If I were them, I'd leave stationary starships alone and attack the mechanic to whom they all bring their ships.

Your starship looks more like a fancy kitchen tile than a winged horse. I'm not familiar with the language spoken by space interior decorators, however. "Pegasus" could very well mean "gigantic tile with a vaguely American-Indian pattern." But what would the odds of that be, really?

The expected nonconformist spacecraft turns up periodically, orbiting your outpost from progressively shorter distances before crashing into it. It can withstand three blasts before it blows up, changing colors with each hit. This enhances player involvement even further beyond the *Space Zap* scenario.

The extra opponent is more akin to an oversized spinning top than the Tie Fighter imitation in the arcade game, but it breaks up the repetition nicely. Steering your shots toward it while intermittently protecting yourself from the other ships' missiles can make for some hilariously manic but undeniably exciting combat.

Following the spinning individualist's explosive performance, an undeclared second wave begins; two ships will now fly closely together along each perimeter. In the wave after that, three can coexist on each flank, and so forth. Sometimes, they enter from opposite sides, safely passing each other in the middle (and most likely waving to one another out their windows, the cheeky vermin) as they both fire at you.

While playing this bafflingly unreleased treasure, which was projected for early 1984 distribution by Texas Instruments itself, I've found that I definitely prefer the *Space Zap* paradigm when it features moving enemies and guided shots. I also take pleasure in the Gorfian firepower. That's my term for the ability to fire again without waiting for the preceding shell to hit a border. The button can be pushed at any time to terminate the first shot and dispatch another.

Programmer Steve Zello did an excellent job, and he heeded the finer points, devising cool explosions and a justly measured difficulty curve. Another reason I like this game is that I've gotten formidably good at it. If anyone happens to be flying a ship that's shaped like a spinning top, bottle opener or set of bicycle handlebars, he'd better stay away; I'll neatly dispose of him with the slightest hand movement. Hey, if you can't take the heat, stay off the kitchen tile.

TI Invaders

(Texas Instruments, 1981)



Why not wrap up – for now – with a frequently overlooked version of the first arcade game to trigger the influx of such machines into public places other than arcades, and the first to make coin-op manufacture appear worthwhile to companies that had previously shown no interest.

It's safe to say that without 1978's *Space Invaders*, produced by Taito and distributed in the West by Midway, most of the games in this book wouldn't exist. Toshihiro Nishikado's creation had spider-web influence on electronic entertainment. And without *Breakout* by Nolan Bushnell, Steve Bristow and Steve Wozniak, or for that matter Atari's overall trailblazing, Nishikado's aliens would have stayed at home. And without etc., etc.

The TI-99/4A's obligatory *Space Invaders* is called, logically enough, *TI Invaders*. Programmer Garth Dollahite did a fantastic job, retaining the original number of trespassers and even adding some minor frills that didn't intrude upon the familiar action. Instead of trying to compete with the 224 game variations (if one counts the difficulty switches) in Richard Maurer's outstanding Atari VCS *Space Invaders* conversion from a year earlier, Dollahite settled on offering two starting levels of difficulty: Merely Aggressive and Downright Nasty. Well, since I'm given the choice, I'm obviously going to opt for the former. Why torture myself, right?

The character you're playing is apparently a brilliant engineer. He's rigged three giant ear-droppers to discharge unlimited missiles. His timing is fortunate, as fifty-five impressively color-organized aliens are marching slowly across the sky, descending a bit and reversing direction every time they reach one of the side borders. They're not carrying protest signs, though; they're marching on the offensive, as they're quite taken with the idea of conquering your planet.

Of course, it would be interesting to see their demonstration signs. "Less Restricted Movement for the Rainbow Coalition." "Down with Screen Overlays." "Blow the Whistle on Kee Games."

Their strutting accelerates as you thin them out. If you permit even one of them to land, the invasion will finally end, but not in your favor. Given the game title, they may well be assaulting Texas Instruments itself. Maybe Dollahite wasn't fond of his employee benefits.

Four cushiony, gradually dissolvable shields keep the alien bombs (and your missiles) at bay. Develop the self-protective habit of gliding just beneath one of these blockades after each shot, as you won't be able to fire again until your prior missile hits something or exceeds the screen-top. You have rapid fire – technically, anyway – so another reliable tactic is to protrude about halfway out, keeping the button held down to eradicate the greater part of the alien column directly above. Begin to their extreme left or right, forcing them to take longer to traverse the playfield as their procession narrows.

The Yellow Saucer that replaces the coin-op's Mystery Ship is worth more points when it's shot closer to center, and it flies more slowly above the incursion than its arcade counterpart. Between the jolly but alien-blood-spattered parades, you manage to catch a Red Saucer off guard while it's having a leisurely flight over an unpopulated region of the planet. It's worth more every time you shoot it, but you're thereby helping it to get away from you, as it turns around and rises a bit with each hit. This phase is similar to the bonus round in Sega's *Carnival*.

When you finally miss, the pathetic, embellished dinner plate flies off the screen, to the great relief of its pilot (despite its plainly indestructible porcelain), and you roll away to find another invasion to spoil.

When a bomb drops onto your dropper, the mutilated husk of your precious invention slinks to the lower right corner of the screen, awaiting its reconstruction at your next 10,000-point interval. This can occur indefinitely, but after your assistants assemble a back-up dropper from scratch when you reach 3,000, they goof off for the rest of the game. Once the invading fleet inevitably wins the day, you can take some solace in the fact that your lazy helpers are massacred along with everyone else.

As in Nishikado's own precious invention, you can destroy the invaders' bombs. As in no version that I'm aware of, the types of alien are steadily supplanted by new ones, beginning with the top row of the third squadron. Those former centipede heads have become unsettlingly orderly snow shovels.

I have fun with this take on the old slide-and-shoot standby. Even in view of the enduringly mind-re-blowing innovations of the '80s and '90s, there's really nothing

like going back to where everything started. And we shouldn't forget the impact that TI's microchips had on video games in general.

However, all of those exceptional men and groundbreaking companies could have concocted as many new contraptions as they liked. It took our patronage to keep the games coming, and our everlasting enthusiasm to ultimately make them into classics.

Epilogue

Optimism

A few months ago, I was searching online for a video that demonstrated a particular '80s game. One of the search results was a commercial about it. I've never liked those old TV ads. If we players wondered why we were considered nerdy and infantile by other kids, we needn't have looked beyond the condescending way in which our passion was publicized.

I clicked on it anyway, as I hadn't seen it before. Maybe I hoped that it was different from the demeaning toddler fodder that I remembered. It wasn't, so I only watched for a few seconds. But I noticed another video in the "related" links to the right: a collection of various, non-game commercials from the early '80s. I thought, *This'll be a trip*, and selected it.

I figured that it would be amusing to revisit some corny ads that I hadn't seen in thirty-odd years. My kid ears had surely picked up plenty of them; the TV was always on at our house. I only bothered watching that infernal box of light when the *Bugs Bunny / Road Runner Show*, *The Jeffersons*, *The Dukes of Hazzard* or, latterly, *Knight Rider* was on. Later, as a teenager, I limited myself to the *Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* and *Late Night with David Letterman*. I don't get channels these days. This isn't some bid for superiority. I just like doing other things.

While watching the compilation, I was astonished at just how many of the ads I vividly remembered. I have an uncannily good, almost creepy memory anyway. This might be the result of keeping all of my brain cells alive, or simply refraining from demarcating my life with a wife-and-kids chapter. Forgetting nothing isn't always a good thing. You've heard the expression "It seems like only yesterday" half a million times, but you don't know the half of it.

There was one commercial that I re-watched a few times. It was about Corn Flakes, of all things. It's curious how something held in contempt – advertisements of any kind, in my case – can adopt a sepia luster as it ages. Once in a long while, it even takes on implications that were never gleaned by spectators at the time, and certainly weren't intended by the salesmen.

The singers hired by the agent hired by the marketing firm hired by Kellogg assured my eight-year-old self and my forty-two-year-old self at the same time: "It's gonna be a great day!" Do you remember that one? In America, at least, it was ubiquitous. I sat at my desk, put off work even longer and gazed at the images on my monitor.

A man stares out his kitchen window at the glimmering welcome of the morning. A little girl is overjoyed by the simple act of pulling on her shirt. A woman beams directly into the camera, daring the viewer not to beam back.

I spent the rest of the day in an uncharacteristic melancholy. I wasn't ill-tempered; I just felt *weird*. I knew that this had arisen from the Kellogg spot, or perhaps the whole compilation, but I couldn't figure out why. This was an uncomfortable feeling for a guy who likes to know himself well. Besides, it was just a dumb *commercial*. Anyone who thinks that those reflect reality must be new to television viewing. Or eight years old.

When I got home that evening, I ate dinner, walked out into the beautiful Albuquerque nighttime, lay on a grassy hill near my apartment, stared at the stars and thought about it. I dug into my synapses with a ruthless trenching tool. I made myself tell myself the truth. I hope that you agree with what I concluded. It's somewhat presumptuous, as it involves almost all of us.

The '80s are commonly associated with optimism. People around my age pine for bygone days that were always full of hope. In the Western World, anyway, this was exemplified by real people as well as those in popular media. We currently discuss the terrible loss of this exuberance, this enthusiasm for being alive, this confidence in ourselves, in our countries, in our futures. The latter were filled with shiny new technologies that hummed with the harmonized promise of an even better world.

Yet the headlines often read nearly identically to those from a quarter-century later. During Reagan's presidency, for instance: "Worst recession since the Great Depression." It's always been a useful grabber, since it rhymes. And mushroom clouds always seemed to be growing just over the horizon. The Pac-tinted glasses block these discolorations from the merry morning view.

The optimism that we remember was really there, though. We *did* feel that hopeful, that strong. Our minds aren't lying to us. There's a reason behind their insistence on evoking the positive aspects of our '80s lives, and skipping over the media-fueled fears like mouse pointers on video sliders. Our minds aren't deteriorating, either. They're just trying to tell us something.

Gullibility loses its humorous edge when it significantly affects one's life. Deep down, we know better than to make ourselves easy to frighten. The optimism hasn't gone anywhere. It's still here, and it's very much alive – because *we're* still here. It's not as if we've exchanged our brains for new ones that are powerless against downloaded anxiety updates from strangers.

In fact, our brains work marvelously on their own, when we let them. They can be our salvations or worst enemies. In spite of the time that's passed, we're still *us*. It's just that we've momentarily allowed ourselves to be talked into living in fear

and at each other's throats. Dread has been normalized, when in reality, it's not a normal thing for a human to live with. But this can all be reversed with a mere decision. If I can get it through my head, you unquestionably can.

We're the '80s kids, damn it! We created worlds to play in by improvising outside with rocks and sticks! We identified with explorers, commandos and Ninjas, not talk-show hosts! We learned how to program computers, and kept an entire industry alive through its weakest moments! We're really going to let all of that be reversed, and allow ourselves to be corralled in spook-houses and divided with hopscotch chalk by the wealthy opportunists among us? *We're* to be programmed now?

On the subject of programming, I'll remind you of something else that you already know, whether you've chosen to ignore it or not. No television station is in the business of accurately and impartially reporting the news to you, any more than a radio station's business is to play music or talk shows that its managers honestly hope you'll enjoy. A mainstream magazine doesn't deal in articles that its editors are excited to share. They're all in the *sponsorship* business. They'll say, play and print whatever they believe will draw the most people, so they can use the numbers to charge their advertisers prime rates. "News" websites aren't essentially any different.

The very idea of honesty is laughable. The goal is to convey any news, whether spun, exaggerated or outright fabricated, that will be stirring enough to keep you tuned in. And I'm sure you've noticed how well fear sells. The implication is, "Join us again tomorrow to find out what else you should be on the lookout for!" I'm not a rap listener, but I dig what Chuck D. said years ago: "Don't believe the hype."

It's mystifying that so many otherwise intelligent adults have been persuaded by merely charismatic commentators to rigidly take sides in all aspects of their lives. Those hosts are actors. You know this. Nobody is that inflexibly extreme. They simply have to oppose everything put forth by the "other side" to keep their jobs. The end result is always tremendous negativity: "How dare they." "They can't possibly." "They have no right." I wish with all my heart that normally sharp folks would stop being so suggestible.

Observed from just a single step back, the disputes with which we're meant to use up our limited time are very silly, considering that there's room for everyone. I don't "lean" to the left or right, myself – I lean back. I don't trust *any* of them, and I don't bother breathing their hot air. Politicians are concerned with their bank accounts and reputations. Our childish spats are useful to them, as they keep us divided.

Even recent history confirms that any organization interested in gaining power over a populace will use the dependable divide-and-conquer tactic. It wouldn't work on well educated, generally *optimistic* people, so it's much more practical to

keep us separated by our quarrels, distracted by our fears, doped by our Dr. Pushers and docile with our cell phones.

You don't have to fall for any of it. No society is made up of anything but individuals such as, to name two, me and you. You can make the decision to wake up tomorrow with the firm belief that you're going to have a wonderful day, a wonderful year, a wonderful decade. You don't have power over everyone's world, but no one except you has power over yours. What's allowed into your mindset is up to you alone. If you have kids, you can inspire either optimism or pessimism. Their little antennae are up, and they're getting their outlooks and personalities from your mood and behavior more than your words. Compare yourself to your parents for an example.

People who you desperately want to prove wrong, who you believe are somehow ruining your life with decisions about their own, and whom you choose to consider rivals because they've fallen for different worries from yours: Do you think that they might all just be doing their best, like you? Please contemplate the possibility that others aren't really affected when you're grumpy about how they live or what they believe. It can fill your own life with frustration, however.

I'm not approaching you on a high horse. It took years for this stuff to dawn on me. Think of it this way, if it lowers your defenses a bit: I'm sharing secrets that you already know. In our younger days, we didn't care what our friends thought of the president. It didn't seem to matter much to our folks, either. Not enough to ruin their own friendships.

Our favorite books weren't full of blame and bondage. Our favorite games didn't come packed with sexual politics and melodramatic betrayals. Our favorite songs weren't thick with bullets. Our favorite movies weren't ugly with nihilism. From one individual to another, why should it be any different for us now? Says *who*, you know? Please don't forget to wash behind your fears. Only good things can come from embracing the overriding, matter-of-fact view that every day is going to be better than the last.

If you're a younger reader, please remember that anything you do entirely for approval or acceptance from others is destructive to yourself in some way. If others claim to be your friends, it's *you* they're getting, period – not some version of you who's more like them. And if your parents haven't already made this clear, those wretched "fashion" magazines are to be avoided. People get paid a lot of money to make you feel like you're not good enough just as you are. The ads inside will, conveniently enough, show you what to buy in order to cover up your face, change your hair, compress your body, ruin your legs and even stick holes in your skin. None of this lets you show yourself kindness or self-value. It's all garbage. They're lying to you. So are the actors on so-called reality shows. You're not always being "judged." In fact, I might have gotten this backward; you may have to remind your parents about this stuff.

No matter what your age, I can safely guess that near the end of your life, you're not going to say to yourself, "I should have worried more." I'll even use the audacious G-word and guarantee that you won't say, "I regret that I didn't make more people feel bad."

And what's known as escapism isn't purely the evasion of reality. When it's interactive, it can clear our heads, hone our problem-solving skills, sharpen our observational aptitudes and give us feelings of triumph and satisfaction in a world that constantly tries to convince us that neither feeling is within reach. Games can make us feel like brilliant thinkers, like warriors, like champions – even after they're switched off.

It's gonna be a great day, if that's your decision. You can start on another life whenever you wish. Here's to the next 10,000th point, my friend.

**Extra Bits That Don't Fit Anywhere Else in the Book,
and Which I Probably Won't Even Include in the Table of Contents**

All featured games are the properties of their current trademark owners.

All screens have been captured and refined by Chris Federico.

Utterly-Unrelated-Stuff Department: If you'd like a CD copy of my latest album, *Replacing the World*, complete with cheesy packaging, send me your address.

The Humanoid must not escape