ColecoNation

THE BLUE SCREEN
ColecoVision vs the Arcade
by Nathan Kozlowski

Coleco's Game Option Screen

Donkey Kong [Coleco]

Venture [Coleco]

ColecoVision regulars know what the "blue screen" signifies. You've endured the 12-second wait and that flash of azure means it's time to defend the planet, save the girl, or one of the many other challenges you've experienced in the arcade. After all, this is why you choose the ColecoVision, for it's promises of arcade grandeur. You wanted to believe Coleco, but you were inevitably disappointed. However, I've come here today to say that it's okay. The ColecoVision will never give us a perfect arcade experience and we shouldn't demand it. Why? Aside from the obvious technical issues there's two reasons. One, the experiential gap between the arcade and the console is too great to bridge. And two, a "perfect" arcade translation is often not the best version for a home system.

The version you play at home will never seem quite the same as in the arcade. That's because the controllers you're using work and feel different. The sound quality seems weak when it's not booming into your ears. Even the simple fact that you're sitting down, without a crowd, and not inserting a token to start the game affects your experience. Just as the movie theater experience with a home theater room is hard to achieve, playing an arcade game on a home console will always seem different. In spite of all this, however, we still enjoy playing translations on our ColecoVisions. Coleco versions of Donkey Kong and Gorf are still fun games in their own right, even if they are missing levels or have diminished graphics.

Arcade games are designed and programmed to make money. Obviously they need good gameplay and graphics to become popular and in demand, but arcade manufacturers do not want a game that most anyone can play for an hour with one token. They want an arcade game who's gameplay will start at a easy level only long enough to get the customer addicted and then significantly increase the difficulty so that he/she will lose and put in another coin. Because of this capitalist desire, most arcade games are very hard for many and near impossible to the casual arcade visitor. One example is Space Invaders, which starts the invaders high at the top and by the second level drops them down to the bottom, dangerously close to your base.

On the other hand, console-based game companies make money by selling copies. A lucrative game for a console is one that appeals to a large audience of many different skill levels. A game with only one skill level will only interest so many people, that's why Coleco released their games with four difficulty options (some like Gorf, Pepper II, and Omega Race even specifically noted that arcade difficulty set at level 3). Not all Coleco games pulled off the varying levels of challenge (some game's options differ little, some too much), but they allowed a larger audience to enjoy them. Other additions that make console versions more enjoyable (but may make the game easier) are pause and multiple extra-lives features. Both wouldn't be allowed in arcade versions, but enable home players the ability to go deeper into their favorite games.

Sometimes elements of gameplay should be removed, not added to the home version of arcade games. Games like Venture and Tutankham have frustrating controls and they should have never been literally translated to the ColecoVision version. Improving the mobility in Venture and allowing four-direction shooting in Tutankham would make these games much more enjoyable. Sound and graphics shouldn't necessarily be sacred as well. The upcoming release of Spectar will have more vibrant colors than the arcade version. The programmer, Scott Huggins, decided to make this improvement to better show off the capabilities of the ColecoVision.

So don't be discouraged if the younger sibling can't keep up with his elder. The ColecoVision is doing its own thing and its just as great. I'm going to appreciate and evaluate the games on their own merits and not by what is being played in the arcades. So how do you see it? Send a email our way and let us know.   [2]

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COLECO CHAT
Scott Huggins [Part One]
by Nathan Kozlowski

Astro Invader Marquee

Astro Invader Arcade

Astro Invader Box

When he's not busy programming new games for the ColecoVision, such as Astro Invader and Spectar, Scott Huggins is holding down a day job and talking with us about everything from his proud mother to that punk Tom Petty.

Nathan Kozlowski_ What's your background as a video game programmer?
Scott Huggins_ When I was young, I was enamored with trying to program a computer as early as 1981 (when I was 12 years old). I programmed Basic on a Xerox CP/M computer. It was awful. Then I got a Commodore 64, and that was it. I learned 6502 assembly language and did some pretty nifty stuff. I got my feet wet with "real" machine language coding. I did raster interrupts, character redefinitions, hardware scrolling, programming the very excellent SID chip to make really good sound effects. Then I got bad grades and mom took it all away from me. Fast forward to January 2000 and I discovered emulators...

NK_ What's your background as a video game player?
SH_ My mom got us an Atari 2600 in 1979. I couldn't believe it. My sister and I fought over that thing constantly. The game, Adventure, scared us. The red dragon was something like the horror movie The Exorcist. Whenever it came on the screen, we would scream. It was awesome. By 1982, the ColecoVision came out and I had extreme envy going on. People at school sort of forgot about the 2600 and made fun of me for always talking about it.

NK_ When did you first get a ColecoVision system?
SH_ I first got one in April, 2000. We couldn't afford one in 1982, when I was 13. Boy, did I want one. I couldn't believe the kiosk at Sears that I played it on. It had Venture playing. Wow.

NK_ What are some of your favorite ColecoVision games?
SH_ Galaxian (still amazed how beautiful this game is, it's more fun than the arcade to me), Lady Bug, and Centipede. Frenzy with the Super Action Controllers is so arcade like! Montezuma's Revenge is very good. For homebrews, it's Space Invaders Collection.

NK_ What game systems do you currently play on and/or collect for?
SH_ I love the 2600 still (hey, you never forget your first). Obviously, I have a lot of Coleco stuff. I have nearly every game released for it. I have a ramcart (very similar to a Cuttle Cart), courtesy of CPUWHIZ from AtariAge. I have bought some homebrews for the CV as well as a bunch for the 2600. I also collect for the Vectrex.

NK_ What inspired you to create new ColecoVision games?
SH_ In January, 2000 when I discovered emulators, I started to reminisce about those assembly programs I did for the C<64 and wondered if it would be possible to re-kindle that. I also started to look at CV games and wondered how they did all that. I searched the internet. Nothing. I found (finally) a basic technical document about the CV and read it over and over. It explained the characters, sprites, sounds chip, video ram, and had a very basic memory map. It didn't help. Well, in late 2002, I found Daniel Bienvenu's site. That was IT!!! He had some great documentation and then I found the coleco programming group on yahoo groups. I read everything Daniel had on his site and got really pumped. Joined his programming group and immediately started asking questions. Eduardo Mello (Opcode) responded as well as Daniel and several others. I felt at home and was just so excited to get moving along. Funny thing was, my early CP/M knowledge paid off, as there existed a CP/M emulator where you could code your programs in C and compile them to Z80 machine language. I chose that route over z80 assembly language. As I progressed, I would post demos and ask questions. Everyone was very encouraging. [3]

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Phoenix Title [Huggins]

Phoenix [Huggins]

Phoenix Mothership [Huggins]

NK_ How many active ColecoVision programmers do you know of?
SH_ I know of about three and a half. There's me, Eduardo (Opcode) Mello, Daniel Bienvenu, and Guy Foster. Guy has released a very nice demo that shows off the sounds and video capabilities of the CV. I'm pushing him to try to put together a game, but life sometimes gets in the way I guess.

NK_ Had you programmed anything before Astro Invader?
SH_ Yeah. When I "thought" I had a handle on ColecoVision programming (very naive), I decided to try and port the arcade game, Phoenix. Umm, not something a beginner should try. I actually got about 60% done. Daniel and Eduardo gave me a lot of encouragement, but I bit off too much. It will never be continued. What a mess that code is. But, it really helped me (albeit painfully) learn the ropes, so to speak.

NK_ Phoenix! Any chance you'd give a second attempt at programming that?
SH_ Ha! I go back and forth from time to time on that one. The code is awful. Maybe I should just release the rom image just so people can see how it was going? To do it right, would take nearly a complete re-do. I think someone like Opcode should take on the project. He could do a fine job on something like this.

NK_ What inspired you to bring Astro Invader to the CV?
SH_ First, I always thought it was so cool that the CV had so many very obscure arcade ports. I mean, Lady Bug is far from a "classic" arcade game. And, PEPPER II??? What the heck? But they are such fun games and all of them have value. It connected with me. Astro Invader just seemed a natural fit. Second, I remember vividly playing Astro Invader with my sister at the local arcade in 1980. We loved it and preferred it over Space Invaders. Then it appeared in the Tom Petty music video, "You Got Lucky". Did you know that? He knocked it over. I couldn't believe that. It sort of disturbed me. I loved that game. I just wanted to pay tribute to Astro Invader and I hope others will "discover" it this time around. It's very, very underrated.

NK_ I've got to admit, I never heard of the game, let alone played it. It's pretty fun, very challenging. What's your current high score on the CV version?
SH_ I got 16,080. I think if you can get 8,000, you are doing quite well. The bonus at 10k is really hard to attain, but I wanted to keep it like the arcade version. If you read the "strategy" hints on klov.com, that will boost your scores up quite a bit. The same strategy for arcade will work for the CV version. You have to know how to get maximum points for shooting the saucer.

NK_ Please describe the process of programming Astro Invader for the CV.
SH_ I am a Software Engineer during the day. It's so boring. Pretty much all the coding these days is so high-level and business oriented. I get my "charge" by doing stuff like Astro Invader. I understand the software design process. To this, there was NO design. I sat down and just for kicks tried to redefine the character set and place the basic shapes on the screen just to see what it would look like. It looked good, so I tried doing some basic animation and it looked good. All of this took place in about 4 hours! I got fired up. I got it done pretty quickly. About 6 weeks, start to finish. I think all the failed attempts at Phoenix and other projects helped me learn so much about the ColecoVision, that I had a pretty good bag of tricks by the time I started Astro Invader.

NK_ So, do your coworkers think you're crazy when you tell them what you've been programming on the side?
SH_ Some think it's very interesting. Some think I'm a complete nerd. Those particular guys are the corporate types, really into "climbing the ladder" and working 60 hour weeks. Those guys are incapable of "thinking outside the box." They lack creative energy. Strangely enough, my mom was really excited about it. She bought one to show to relatives.   [4]

ColecoNation

Astro Invader [AtariAge]

Astro Invader [Stern]

NK_ It's my understanding that you programmed Astro Invader by playing the arcade version, studying the characteristics and patterns of the game, and then programming your own version from scratch. If this is true, then how did you program the higher levels of the game that you weren't personally able to reach on the arcade version?

SH_ Well, there are no higher levels. It's an even/odd thing. Screens 1,3,5,7, etc., have the invaders alternating sending five invaders filling up the left columns and then sending five invaders to the right columns, back and forth. No "AI" so to speak. The even levels (2,4,6,8, etc.) are much trickier. Most of the invaders are sent to whichever side of the screen your ship is. So, it's very easy to get trapped on the far left or right because the columns fill up faster depending on which side of the screen you are on. And the speed of the invaders leaving the "mother ship" increase on each level.

NK_ What are the noticeable differences between the arcade and ColecoVision versions of Astro Invader? Why were these differences necessary? The major difference that I have noticed (by comparing screenshots) is that the playing field is shorter. Did you slow the enemy ships down to accommodate for this shortening or is the CV version actually more difficult a version?

SH_ The aspect ration is the only major difference. The width of the playfield is exactly the same as the arcade, but the height was impossible to attain. Since your TV is horizontal and the arcade game was vertical, I had to compromise. Basically, if you look at the arcade version, your ship is much farther from the columns (that hold the invaders) than the ColecoVision version. And yeah, I did slow them down (only a tad) to make up for this.

NK_ Did you receive any help/guidance as you programmed Astro Invader or was it a solo venture?

SH_ Yeah, Eduardo (Opcode) gave me the sounds for the saucer in Astro Invader. I spent about 5 days straight trying to code something that sounded good. It was awful. I emailed him. He cheerfully agreed to help me out. I am indebted to him for that.

NK_ Are there any hidden easter eggs or bugs in Astro Invader that you want to reveal to the readers?

SH_ No easter eggs. Bugs…well, one. It does not in any way affect the game play. It's a visual bug that is extremely hard to reproduce, but as the demo screens execute and you press '5' on the controller to 'insert coin', occasionally part of the Stern Mother Ship will remain on the screen. However, once the game begins, the screen is cleared and that is it.

To be continued... Be here next month for the second half of Scott's interview. We'll be discussing the other side of getting Astro Invader out on the shelves (graphic design and production), as well as Scott's future programming plans and his opinions on game design and the future of the ColecoVision.

This year's Classic Gaming Expo is in San Francisco on August 20th and 21st and we won't be able to make it to the big show. So, we're looking for some roving reporters to cover the event. If you're interested in writing an article about the ColecoVision-related items and topics that were found at CGE 2005, then drop us an email and let us know that you want to contribute to ColecoNation. Contact us at ColecoNation@yahoo.com, grab your paper pad and camera, and get to work!   [5]
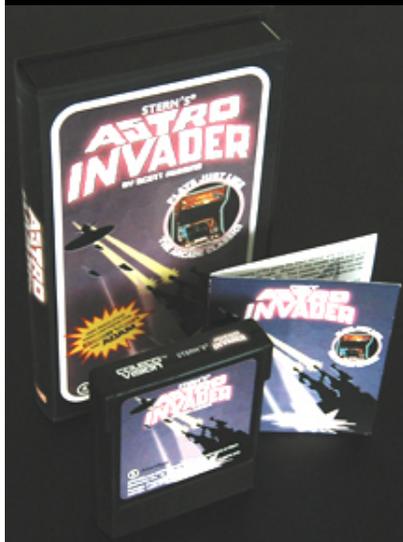
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IN PLAY
Astro Invader
by Nathan Kozlowski

programmer: Scott Huggins
publisher: AtariAge
developer: Stern
packaging: Joe Kollar
release: 06.2005
rom size: 32k
players: 1-2
controller: Joystick

The Astro Invader Package [AtariAge]

Making its debut at the Oklahoma Video Game Expo in 2005, Astro Invader is a translation of the Stern arcade game. It was originally released in Japan in 1979 with the title "Kamikaze." The Leijac Corporation (later know as Konami) licensed it to Stern in 1980 and Astro Invader became the company's first release. The Arcadia 2001 is the only other console known to have a version of the game and had a non-U.S. release in 1982. Brian Miller set the official arcade world record at 39,880 in 1983.

In Astro Invader, Earth has gotten in trouble and once again your its only hope (that crazy planet). This time around you've got to deal with suicidal aliens who attack you by killing themselves. Plus, there's the saucers that menacingly descend downwards and the mother ship that you never fight. However, if you're thinking that this is going to be a cakewalk then you'd be very wrong. Those crazy invaders are going to give you a couple of migraines before it's all said and done.

The game is set in some kind of galactic arena where the top half of the screen is a network of columns that the alien invaders fill up before they attack. The Stern mother ship (an indirect clue of Stern's desire for world domination?) sends out the aliens at a progressively faster pace the longer the battle lasts. When the aliens fall, they use their patented "splat" attack to destroy you. While they prove deadly if you're near them when they make impact, the real threat are the saucers. Regardless of where you are on the screen, if the saucer reaches the bottom then you're done.

You may be wondering right about know if those pansy invaders are ever going to fight like a man and try and shoot you. Well, the answer's "no." They must have left their lasers at home, because all they do is fall to their deaths (hence the original title, Kamikaze). Due to the invader's characteristics, the game has a very different feel than most space shooters like Space Invaders and Galaxian. Strategy and timing is more essential in Astro Invader than a quick trigger figure. In fact, frustrating as it may seem, you'll never even get to shoot the majority of the alien invaders. Most of the time you'll be dodging them as you attempt to take out the descending saucers.

Astro Invader proves to be a tough challenge and very difficult to master. A sure sign of a tough game is a low arcade high score and this has one of the lowest around. Consider yourself a pro if you can last long enough to get the extra base at 10,000 points. Casual gamers can quickly get frustrated with the game's difficulty. Varying skill options would have been a nice feature to appease those who aren't as foolhardy as the die-hards. Adding the pause option and high score list were great additions. Also, it's nice to see that there's a two-player option, so that we can make our significant others enjoy in the fun.

The sights and sounds are very reminiscent of the other arcade games of its time and add to the intensity of the game. The increasingly faster beeps and blips correspond to the movement of the aliens and their "splats." Add this to the flashes of red that fill the screen every time you die and you're sure to raise the old blood pressure in no time fast. Joe Kollar does a great job of putting a contemporary twist on the original arcade graphics for the game's graphic design. The packaging is at the high level that we've come to expect of AtariAge produced items, aside from the hairy patch on the back of the cartridge (somebody needs a shave).

If you're a fan of Space Invaders and want something similar, but with a strategic twist, then get Astro Invader. If you're a fan of the carnival-type skill shooters and want something with an outer space flavor, then get Astro Invader. If you think games with "splating" aliens are for babies, then go play your Playstation punk. But get Astro Invader, anyway. Scott Huggins has put together a fine product on his rookie outing and deserves all the credit.   [6]

ColecoNation

CV TACTICS
Astro Invader

Astro Invader [AtariAge]

The ColecoVision version of Astro Invader shares some of the same strategies as the arcade game. Count the number of shots you take between each saucer to earn the maximum points possible. If you shoot the saucer on your 3rd or 11th shots you'll get 200 points. On the 7th shot you get 300 points and on the 15th shot you'll get 400. Just remember that the shot count resets every time you shot a saucer. The saucer's appearances have a method to their madness. Memorize this pattern so that you'll always know where that bugger will appear (C is center, L is left, and R is right): C-L-R-C-R-C-L-C-C-R-L-C-R-R-L-L. Lastly, the aliens' behavior is also deliberate. On the odd levels, the aliens fill the columns in an ordered fashion from left to right and back. On the even ones they follow your base and fill the columns on the side that you're on.

Always try and keep the two columns, on each side of the center, clear so that you'll have some room to maneuver. Also, don't always rush over to shot the saucer. Take some shots at clearing the columns as you make your way over, this will give you some time to get away from the aliens after you've blasted the saucer. Whatever strategies you use to take on the Astro Invader, remember to have fun and good luck.

VOICE OF THE NATION
Send your emails to:
ColecoNation@yahoo.com

Got a ColecoVision story that you want to share with the world? Want to give your opinions of our little webzine? Well get in line, because this is the place. Here's the first two right now.

Mark Weber ~   I feel the same way about the ColecoVision. Back in the early 1980's when I was a young teenager my parents bought me an Atari 2600 with a few games. I couldn't complain because it was the only home gaming system I knew and could play the games as often as I wanted (after homework was done). Besides, I was spending tens of dollars each week on arcade games at the local 7-11 and my parents knew the Atari was a cost effective way of solving that problem. A year or two later the ColecoVision came out and the advertisements on TV were cool and a lot of kids at school were talking about it. One hot summer day me and my family dropped by my (spoiled) cousin's house and I finally got to see the ColecoVision in action, and man, it was like dying and going to heaven! When I saw Zaxxon, Venture, Mouse Trap, Ladybug, Carnival, Donkey Kong with 3 big screens, and Turbo with the wheel I was totally addicted. That day, me and my cousin spent the whole afternoon and evening playing those games. It was one the those precious childhood memories you cherish! About 5 years ago, I finally bought a ColecoVision system with a bunch of games through eBay. Getting hooked on video games all over again, I have at least one copy of almost every game made for the system, many still sealed in the box. I still play the thing at least a few times each week. I think it has the best versions of Qbert, Galaxian, Frogger, and Popeye, along with superb versions of many other classic arcade games. I honestly only like playing classic arcade games and never really got into the NES, SNES, Genesis, etc. - even though I still hold on to those systems. Anyway, I just wanted to say that I agree 100% with your article and will always support the ColecoVision system too!

Patrice Mallette ~   I'm writing to thank you for your review of Sky Jaguar. The ColecoVision has always been my favorite gaming system since that Christmas of 1984 in Montreal, Canada (I was 13). As a kid, I had about 12 games. Two years ago, I started collecting CV games on eBay. I'm now the proud owner of a cool 100-titles CV library, including all the titles that I had played at neighbors and friends and always wanted. I've bought every Opcode Games so far and they have always delivered. I think it's awesome that games of that level of quality are developed on the ColecoVision. Thanks again for bringing the CV to life in your column. I appreciate it.   [7]

ColecoNation

IN PRINT

Video Game Collector
by Nathan Kozlowski

editor: Zach Meston
published: Quarterly [2004 - now]

Video Game Collector is a quarterly magazine dedicated to the art of collecting video games. They cover all systems, extinct to current, but have a strong focus on the older systems which often draw the collector's attention. Various information and reviews are provided of games and systems running up to the Playstation, but they conveniently have neglected the ColecoVision.

With three issues under their belt, the folks at VGC have reviewed games from every classic system and most neo-classic ones, yet the CV remains unmentioned. The only section (so far) that has included the ColecoVision is the comprehensive price guide, which lists values of cartridges and complete-in-box games. They list all the "officially" released games from 1982 to 1984, but it would be nice to see values for the many homebrews and prototypes that have popped up over the years. The first issue does feature an article on cleaning your games that provides helpful tips for keeping your systems in working condition, but this is the only article from the magazine's brief history that relates to the ColecoVision. Video Game Collector is a great addition to the classic gaming community, but as of now, lacking in CV coverage.

MISCELLANY

eBay Assortments

You may not realize this, but eBay has more for you, or the Coleco-centric in your life, then just over-priced video games. A whole bunch of ColecoVision related items are popping up on the auction site on a regular basis. Not all these items can be found in eBay stores, but they're easily found in auction listings every week.

Game Again is in the video game clock business and one of their items is a ColecoVision wall clock. This 9" diameter clock features images of the system and its games and is available for $8.99 (+ship).

Gamers Zone Club pride themselves in their video game logo decals. They sell a 1.5" by 6" vinyl decal of the Coleco logo for $3.50 (+ship). It comes in a number of colors (red, white, black, blue, green, yellow, silver, and gold) and is reported to be able to withstand up to five years of outdoor use.

Geek Zone T-Shirts sells shirts that are adorned with logos of all your favorite classic consoles and computers. They make a white ColecoVision t-shirt that'll cost you $10.99 (+ship) from their eBay store or a starting bid of $9.99 (+ship) from the auction.

REFERENCE

Visit these links for further info on this month's articles and topics.

II. Coleco Programming Group games.groups.yahoo.com/group/colecoprogramming
II. ColecoVision Revival Website [Guy Foster] www.montrealbbs.com/colecorevival
II. Daniel Bienvenu's ColecoVision HomePage www.geocities.com/newcoleco/infoen.html
II. Opcode Games [Eduardo Mello] www.opcodegames.com
III. Classic Gaming Expo 2005 www.cgexpo.com
IV. Arcade Flyer Archive www.arcadeflyers.net/?page=flyerdb&subpage=thumbs&id=80
IV. AtariAge www.atariage.com/store/product_info.php?products_id=310
IV. Game FAQs www.gamefaqs.com/coinop/arcade/data/566501.html
IV. Killer List of Videogames www.klov.com/game_detail.php?letter=A&game_id=6948
VII. Video Game Collector Magazine and Price Guide www.vgcollector.com
VIII. Game Again search.ebay.com/_W0QQfgtpZ1QQfrppZ25QQsassZgameagain
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