In This Bone-Chilling Issue:

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AMI Tech-Gazette

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Who Are We?

The Ami Tech Gazette aims to give you news, opinions, and musings on the Amiga computer and its relations, as well as other nostalgic things, with the feel and personal touch of your classic local user group newsletter.

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Editor Realities

As we jump into the Halloween season, (or out of it, depending on when you read this) we think about scary things. When you get to be my age, the things that are considered scary might be different than those of the younger folks. I was born in 1971, the same year "Computer Space", the first commercial arcade video game was produced. In a sense, my life has run parallel to the developing world of consumer computers and video games. My family had an Atari VCS in the late seventies, before the home version of "Space Invaders" made it cool. I moved on to 8-bit home computers like the Commodore 64 while dealing with Apple II and TI-994A systems at school. I bought a Nintendo Entertainment System with my own money. Toward the end of the eighties, my lobbying paid off and my family got me my first Amiga computer, which changed my life as I learned how to combine creativity and computers in many different ways. As I got older, and went to college, I took bigger and better Amiga systems with me, smugly using newer models and software than my school's computer lab had at the time. I experimented with early online communications, like dial-up bulletin board systems, with modem speeds that forced me to think twice about whether I had the time to download a 200 kilobyte file or not. I didn't have genuine internet access until I was an adult, at least technically, back when basic web pages, Email, and usenet news groups were considered the height of online discourse. I discovered online scams and phishing schemes back when they were new and uncommon, sometimes by stumbling head-first into them, which would require a change to my passwords or banking accounts. I'm a lot smarter about such things now, thanks sadly to personal experience. Now I live in a world of ubiquitous high-speed internet, social media, and streaming video, even on a phone. It shows how much of a hold that stuff has on life in general that I can barely conceive how I ever managed to live life before the internet, even knowing that I survived roughly half my life having no internet at all.

Knowing what I know now, and living the life I've led, what scares me is the thought of being a child growing up in today's technological environment, or to raise a child in such an environment. I had the benefit of the world of computer and communication tech growing up at roughly the same rate I was. I have no idea how I would have handled it if everything available today was available to me back then. It's potentially very damaging to have unlimited access to unlimited information, or misinformation, or supportive communities, or toxic, predatory communities, or high-def pornography. I was only able to access those things when I was old enough to handle them, and I still made plenty of mistakes. I don't envy any parent who has to tightly control their children's access to the internet and do their best to keep them safe from cyber-bullying and online predators of all stripes, or just keep them from spending all the family's money on in-app purchases on their favorite games. I never had to deal with all that, at least not to the extent everyone has to today, and to me, that's scarier than any hockey mask-wearing horror movie monster. Happy Halloween!

Eric Schwartz

Brought to You by Amiga
"Shallow" Games (written by Eric Schwartz)

It's no secret that games have moved a lot of hardware, be it consoles, computers, and arcade cabinets. Generally, game software tries to mix a strong audiovisual presentation with compelling gameplay, though the two factors aren't always in balance. In the early days, gameplay had to do most of the heavy lifting as the graphics and audio hardware of the time were limited in the type of sounds and images they could produce. There weren't that many games (yet) which caused people to go "Yeah, it doesn't play so great, but LOOK at it!" Perhaps the earliest examples were arcade video games which used laserdiscs to stream video footage as part of the experience. Probably the best known of these was Dragon's Lair, an interactive cartoon featuring

theatrical animation from the Don Bluth studio. The game itself was a matter of watching the on-screen video and moving the joystick or pressing a button at the appropriate time, or else our protagonist Dirk the Daring loses one of his lives. It mostly boiled down to trial-and-error, memorization, and timing - occasionally cryptic and frustrating, but someone who has all the inputs memorized can blaze through the entire game in a matter of minutes. It was not all that much fun to play, but it was a lot of fun to watch, so much so that arcade cabinets often mounted a secondary monitor on top to show off the action to the people gathered around. Such was the nature of these laserdisc games. They could deliver stunning visuals, (basically anything that could be recorded on video), but their very nature limited how players could interact with what they see, and limited the types of games that could be made.

Fast forward a couple years, and home gaming on consoles and computers has supplanted the arcade as the dominant source of video entertainment. The games and computers of the time could offer impressive graphics and sounds, but with limited screen resolutions and color palettes, no one was likely to mistake them for reality. The first Amiga computers came into this environment in 1985, as perhaps the first home system to offer full-color graphics and digital stereo sound in one package. It took time to get going in gaming, with most of its first titles not showing off what the Amiga could really do, being conversions from 'lesser' systems or just programmers not yet getting the hang of the hardware. One of the first games to properly show off the Amiga's capabilities was the home port of the Atari arcade game "Marble Madness", which managed to be near-indistinguishable from the arcade version, at least visually. Perhaps the first gaming 'killer app' for the Amiga would be one of the first releases from a fledgling game company called Cinemaware, called "Defender of the Crown". At the time, it was a revelation like nothing else, drawing more from classic movies than video games (hence the company name), with a cinematic presentation and stunning graphics from artist James Sachs. As a game, it could be considered somewhat shallow, combining

board game like elements with short skill game vignettes. One might argue that the Amiga version was not the best Defender of the Crown, as it come out first and was rushed to

production, while later versions for other systems had more time to tweak the gameplay for a more balanced and fun experience. Still, the Amiga version was one of the best looking, and best presented, and that was enough for many.

Another Amiga gaming 'killer app', possibly one of the biggest, came from the developer Reflections, and published by Psygnosis, and that was "Shadow of the Beast". It was a game that wowed everyone who saw it at the time, with its stunning, fast-moving visuals, and smoothly scrolling backgrounds, featuring many layers of parallax for an illusion of three-

dimensional perspective. The audio presentation was also unlike what most expected from video games then, with realistic digitized sound effects and mournful music with liberal use of a simulated pan flute replacing the common beep-boop chiptunes of the early days. It was another game that was amazing to look at, and was a wonderful demo of capability that sold many an Amiga. Many objective reviewers would tell you Shadow of the Beast was less impressive as a fun game, being brutally difficult with enemies and traps that are unavoidable if you didn't already know they are coming, as well as being impossible to complete if you don't do the right thing or have the right object at the right time, with little to clue you in until you're already past the point of no return. The game made for a stunning technical demo, but definitely had issues for those who wanted to just enjoy playing it. Later sequels in the series would change things up a bit and address the balance, exchanging a bit of the flash for a slightly better-designed play experience.

I opened this column with laserdisc arcade games like Dragon's Lair. There were some early attempts to approximate the look and feel of Dragon's Lair for home systems, but machines like the Commodore 64 or NES were not cut out to recreate the fully-animated visuals from the laserdisc. The Amiga, on the other hand, was the first home computer to bring Dragon's Lair home and recreate the approximate game play and visual style of the

arcade, thanks to the Amiga's affinity with full screen graphics and animation. It was limited compared to the arcade version, cutting the resolution and several scenes in order for all the data to fit on six floppy disks, but it was still undeniably Dragon's Lair at home, and not a different style of game using the same characters. The game design itself was as shallow as ever, but the point was it was now available without two quarters per play. Later Dragon's Lair would be ported to other computers and consoles, with greater fidelity to the arcade version as the technology got better, with CD and DVD drives, and video hardware that can decode digital video in its sleep. The Amiga paved the way, however. So today, when you're playing a game that works more like watching a movie with limited interaction, or you see reviewers writing more about polygon counts, texture resolution, or real-time rendering speed than how fun the game is to play, you can thank the Amiga for its outsize contribution to that paradigm, for better or worse.

The A500 Mini (part 2)
Written by Michael Barclay

Trying this again. I had been doing a write up for AMiNIMiga version V101 and when I had it mostly done. When of course AMiNIMiga-v202F gets released. Lets see if I can get this out before he releases v303!

First you will be needing a few things. I recommend having them before getting started. Go to https://www.aminimiga.com/ The Downloads section has the torrent for a 7z zip file named **AMiNIMiga-v202F.7z.torrent** You need to remember or write down the password for the zip which is "topbanana" (without the quotes of course) The password is right under the torrent file on the page. You will also need a 32GB USB thumbdrive. They recommend a high quality "SanDisk Ultra USB 3.0" I don't know as the Amiga500 mini has a 3.0 port as the connectors aren't color coded for it but it doesn't hurt to use such either. The drive needs to be formatted Fat32. There is a program that requires a larger drive and I'll get to it later. However even the 64Gb drive needs to be formatted Fat32. I don't know how to do that to be honest. A program named Rufus is mentioned but I don't have or know it. You will also need files from Workbench 3.1. It gets these from a workbench 3.1.adf. I think Amiga Forever as well as the AmigaOS 3.5 and 3.9 cds have them. I have all 3 of those. I forget if I got the file from them if I'd made the copy some time ago from the numerous 3.1 disks I have. It's not hard to get them legally and I do recommend having adf of all the AmigaOS 3.1 disks. You will also need kickstart roms. The easiest way is to get them from the A500Mini itself.

Unzip the AMiNIMiga-v202F.7z archive directly to your fat32 formatted USB drive. Most programs will ask for the 7z password. This will set up all the folders and files from it. Be aware that it does take a long time to unzip it. Just wait it out. The structure in the drive should look like:

ADF (Folder)
AGS (Folder)
AMiNIMiga (Folder)
Extra CFGS (Folder)

Extract-Roms
THEA500 (Folder)
Aminimiga-V200.LHA
Aminimiga-V200_ol.LHA
autorun.inf
icon.ico
Instructions.txt

ReadMev200F.txt

Your Workbench 3.1.adf needs to be named Workbench31.adf and you copy it to AmiNIMiga/Hardfolders/Shared/

The author recommends using Extract-Roms which is included in this. It will load extra rom files as well but they don't seem to be an issue and the ones you need are properly named and there. Plug the dive into the A500mini and turn it on. Using the carousel go to the USB drive and open it. With the game controlled go to the Extract-Roms folder and open it. There are 2 files there. Select the one named Extract-Roms.lha with the A button and the run it pressing Home on the game controller. You'll get a few flashes and such and when it halts at a black screen the roms will have been copied to the: THEA500/whdboot/save-data/Kickstarts/ folder. Some ask if this is legal. You bought the A500Mini and it's only copying them from it. The author states "you have payed good money for these ROMs and own them now."I would advise against sharing them with others, but they are yours to use.

At this point I would also advise restarting the A500Mini. Go back to the USB drive and select Aminimiga-V200.lha and run it with the Home key as well. Here things get a bit silly but are fine. The author has added some lines that will ask if you have copied Workbench31.adf to the shared folder. And then "Well did you?"once you answer that, It will say it's looking and if the file is in place it will say it found it and start setting the files it needs up. From here it launches into Aminimiga-V202f and you have a working Amiga. There are a large number of games and programs. The software is in demo, older versions or it's fully "abandonware".

Some personal advice here. "I have this running with a wireless mini keyboard. The micro keyboard I use for my Raspberry Pi for hotkeys. Using this is a pain in the butt if you want to do any serious typing. (I don't type well with my thumbs) I don't know how easy finding a regular wireless one is for the mini (I don't like wireless) but the wired ones I borrowed from my other systems, all seemed to work. I'll end up buying and switching to one later.

Something else we found out. If you use some-

thing like Finalwriter, DeluxePaint, Brilliance and so on... Copy your saved files from them to the shared folder on the workbench. The Workbench31.adf file and Rom folder are there too. It seems to be about the only real way to move them from the drive to other systems.

All this should be fairly easy.. Now for the "I haven't done this and I'm not really sure" part of the report. AmiNIMiga-v202F comes with AGS. The instructions say it's AGS2 1.5 WHD1-3.hdf. This is what I have installed on mine. From what I can tell, there is a more complete package of AGS2. To use this on one drive you will need a 64Gb drive formatted Fat32. I've never done that before and I can't get to the updated version as it is on a "facebork" group and I don't have an account there. If you want to know more about AGS2 and download the whole package you will need to check out the AGS2 Facebook group at:
 https://facebook.com/groups/1144009169831106 .

As I've been writing this another development has been underway. It will allow you to get the A500 mini on the web. Rather nice since there is quite a but of net software on the Mini. You will need a specific type of USB adapter and another program I'm still trying to figure out. I doubt you'll have blazing speeds as it is ethernet through USB, but it would be fun to work with at some point. Should I get the parts together I'll write something up on it.

For now enjoy your new emulated Amiga and explore the many games, demos and programs that comes with this.
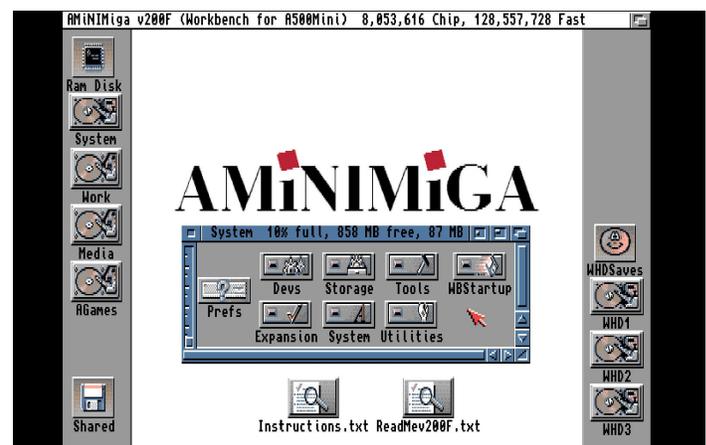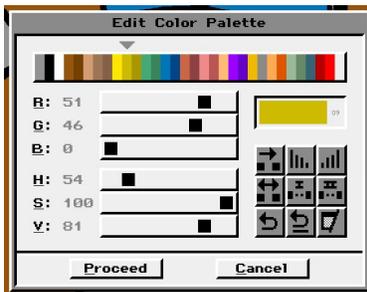
The Graphics Workshop
With Eric Schwartz

Episode 2: The Value of Stencil

If you've been following the previous episode in this series, you'll know we are starting out our cartoon art projects with clean (or as clean as possible) black & white line artwork. Now the next step is to add some basic flat colors to our line drawing. To that end, we will be loading our drawing into a paint program. I will be using Personal Paint 7 by Cloanto, but other software, such as Deluxe Paint or Brilliance will work equally well. Personal Paint, or Ppaint as I will be calling it, is what is known as an 'indexed color' paint program, capable of working in a maximum of an 8-bit palette, for up to 256 colors total. This may seen to be a terrible limitation, but there can be advantages to working this way, and this has been a common form factor for graphic work over decades, and is still applied to pixel art for video game graphics and the like. When working with an indexed color palette, each slot in the palette has its own color value which you can modify as you see fit, and then change again later if need be. For example, if you have colored part of your image red, then later decide it should instead be purple, or green, you don't need to paint over that area. Instead you can open the color palette and change that red to a different color, and all parts of the image using that color will be changed along with it. This can be very useful if you wish to modify the color scheme of an image quickly, or modify the palette to figure out what color(s) look best while viewing the results in real time with your actions. That's not to say these things can't be done using full/true color graphics software, but it usually involves a greater number of steps to accomplish.

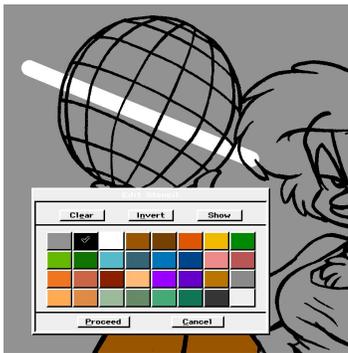Once you have loaded in your line art, you should make sure it is set up the way you want it. As loaded, (if set up as it was in the previous article) the linework should come in as a 2-color (1-bitplane) image. It's not necessary to do so, but I like to make sure the 'white' of the page is first in the palette, or color 0, and the 'black' of the lines second, or color 1. This can be done by opening the palette and swapping the colors around so each is where you want it. This may leave your image looking like a white-on-black photonegative. If so, after closing the palette, you can right-click on the 'color' menu and choose 'remap', which will reorder the image to appear as it did before you changed the palette. Now we are ready to set up the image for coloring. Right-click on the 'project' menu, and choose 'image format', which brings up options to change the screen mode for your image. There shouldn't be any need to change anything other than increasing the number of colors. To make it easier to keep track, I try not to use more colors than I think I will need, and for this project, I will choose 32 colors, which was the maximum for older OCS/ECS chipset Amiga systems. Confirm as needed, wait a few seconds, and you should be greeted with your same artwork, but a much broader range of available colors at the side of the screen. If you wish, you can start putting together the colors you plan to use for your image, and organize the palette. You can do this however you like, though I tend to group them together by colors. All the blues grouped in one place, the browns elsewhere. Don't worry if everything isn't set up exactly the way you want it ahead of time. As I said earlier, the nature of the indexed palette allows to easily change the palette as you need later, and your image will follow suit.

Once you have some colors ready, you can start playing 'coloring book' with your line drawing. Typically, you would use the flood fill tool, which resembles a pouring paint bucket, to fill the internal areas of your drawing with color. There are a few pitfalls to watch out for during this process. Firstly, any given area must be completely enclosed for the flood fill to work properly. Otherwise the fill color will leak out into the adjoining areas, possibly the whole screen. Gaps in your lines can be tough to spot and plug, as they can as small as a single pixel wide. The

same goes for those tiny unfilled straggler bits that appear in thin spots or corners, which can be as small as one pixel too. Thankfully, we have another tool which can be very helpful and versatile in this situation, and that is the stencil. Right-click the "color" menu, and go to "stencil", then "edit" in the sub-menu. A new dialog box appears showing your full color palette. You can then click and mark the colors you want to be part of the stencil. Like a simpler version of the 'alpha channel' seen in other software, the stencil masks out the colors you mark, protecting all pixels in those colors from being painted over while the stencil is active. For the sake of this job, you only need to select the color used for your outlines, then click 'proceed'. With the drawing outlines now masked out, it becomes much easier to deal with problems like tiny areas or gaps. You can choose an appropriate brush from the top corner, and with a drawing or line tool, you can close those gaps and tiny open areas. With the outlines masked, it will appear as if you were drawing under your lines instead of painting over them, and your lines will be protected from any unintentional missteps when drawing or filling areas with color. If you need to paint over your lines for any reason, you can turn the stencil off and on again either through the "color > stencil" menu, or by simply hitting the "~" (tilde) key on the keyboard. A small symbol appears in your screen title bar to indicate if the stencil is active or not. This makes it possible to put together your fills and color work quickly, without requiring pixel-precision to avoid coloring over your lines unnecessarily.

When you have your areas filled the way you want them, there is one more fun thing you can do using the stencil. Sometimes you might wish to have something more complex than basic black outlines around your drawing. You might want colored outlines, or lines that match or complement the color of the area they surround. Perhaps you want to eliminate a visible line separating two colored areas. With your stencil, this can be done without much fuss. You can bring up the same box used to create the stencil in the first place, and modify/reverse the colors protected, or more simply, use the right mouse button menus, choosing "color > stencil .> invert". (the stencil needs to be active for this to work correctly) Now, your outlines are the only part of the image you can paint on, and the rest is protected. If you wish to change sections of your lines for a more complex or subtle appearance, you can. For example, If I have a blue shape in my image, I might change the lines enclosing it to a darker shade of blue, which can provide a more subtle and appealing look than having hard black outlines around everything. You can draw thin lines across the sections you wish to change the color of, then flood-fill them, or just use a fat brush and paint over them by hand/mouse if you like. As always, the point is to find a method that works for you and your style, and let the Amiga and the paint software help you get to a complete flat-color cartoon image. Don't forget to save your work!

Tune in for our next installment, when we will work on more complex shading options for our cartoon-style image.

Eric Schwartz

Retro Review

Classic Arcade Ports (Amiga, various authors)
Review by Eric Schwartz

I've been a fan of older 'classic' arcade video games for a long time. While I can appreciate games from many different eras, I grew up on the games of the early eighties, (and a few from the late seventies) and those are the games I hold dearest in my memories. Most of them fell under the basic trope of "simple to understand, difficult to master", which was always a big appeal to me. In the early days of computers and home console gaming, many of those arcade games received official ports to home systems, or thinly veiled unlicensed clones. Home versions of the games people played in the arcades were big business either way. As computers and consoles moved into the 16-bit era and beyond, the older game of bygone eras, while still popular, held less commercial influence. No one is likely to pay the same price as a high-profile modern software title to play the same Pac-Man that could be played in 1980 - perhaps as part of a classic compilation, but not on its own. In more recent times, the more common ways to play classic arcade titles on home computers is through emulation, using arcade ROM images and software such as MAME, or, if you're running an unaccellerated Amiga system that can't quite handle emulation at full speed, a direct port of the games, usually unofficial and unlicensed, but still very close to the original source material. Some of these Amiga arcade ports are very recent, others have been around a long time. Most are available for free, or for a modest shareware-style donation. Some are built from the ground up, while others adapt the original arcade code. One thing I've noticed when reviewing some of these games is, when a classic game is recreated so accurately, the smaller differences and deviations tend to stand out even more when you see them. If someone plays an Atari 2600 version of an arcade game such as 'Space Invaders' or 'Missile Command', they expect differences and compromises, as the 2600 hardware can't be expected to recreate most 1980s arcade games with perfect accuracy. The Amiga doesn't have the same limitations, so the bar is set much higher, and it's easier to nitpick when some detail is different when it doesn't need to be. Here is a small selection of some classic arcade ports to the Amiga, some new, some not. The common thread for all of them is they try to recreate the arcade experience at home, are created by a single author or small team, and they are all free, or at least extremely affordable. The are far more similar titles available than the ones I've been able to personally play and review here, so I urge you to check out and search out your own favorite classics.

Donkey Kong (Bignonia, 1993)

This one is a bit of an outlier in this list, as it is really more a port of the Commodore 64 version of Donkey Kong (particularly the version published by Atarisoft) in all its wide glory, looking a bit like when a standard-def display is stretched out on a widescreen monitor. The gameplay is good enough, again more akin to the C64 than arcade. This port also adds a few extras not seen elsewhere, such as an exclusive fifth level which appears if you collect enough items in the other four screens, and silly extra graphical touches, such as Donkey Kong bobbing his head when Mario jumps, or damsel-in-distress Pauline's dress gradually shortening as the level timer runs down, until she appears in complete, barely legible pixelized nudity. Not the most accurate port, but charming in its deviations.

Amoeba Invaders (Late Night Developments, 1987)

The presentation and visual interface is dressed up somewhat, but the game itself is pure Space Invaders. This game is notable in that it can run from workbench and multi-task, running on its own screen. This is a very old game now, and while it will run on newer and expanded Amiga systems, it may be prone to graphical glitches when doing so.

'Cabaret' Asteroids (Vertical Developments, 1991)

The original arcade machine used a black and white vector monitor, which takes a hit when translated to a 320x256 PAL Amiga screen mode, but otherwise, it looks, sounds, and plays very much like the original. There is even a small Easter Egg when hitting the right key will change the credit line to "©1979 Atari Inc."

Ms. Pac-Man 500 (JOTD, 2021)
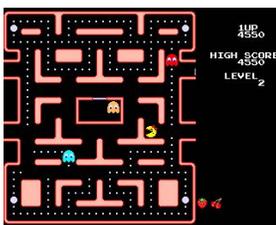
Like most of JOTD's arcade ports, this is based on genuine arcade code, so it looks, sounds, and plays very accurate. I did find some strange anomalies, however, such as all the ghosts disappearing from the screen for an instant whenever one is eaten, the bonus fruits bouncing through the maze with odd timing, or Ms.Pac herself pointing downward when caught by a ghost. These do not affect play in any way, but they are minor distractions to what might be an otherwise perfect recreation.

Invaders (Kim Fastrup Larsen, 2005)

There are multitudes of Space Invaders clones available on the Amiga, some with their own takes on the concept, others trying to be accurate to the original 1978 arcade game. This version falls closer to the latter category, looking and playing almost exactly like the arcade, down to the 'attract mode' with the various invaders messing with on-screen text. I think perhaps the colors are a bit more vibrant than feels accurate, however, but that's nitpicking.

Xevious 1200 (JOTD, 2023)

I have some doubts that it's actually necessary, but this port requires an AGA Amiga, as the graphics are more detailed and elaborate than something like Pac-Man. Xevious is a pioneer of the vertical scrolling shoot-em-up genre, where you can shoot at targets in the air, or bomb ones on the ground, so a controller with at least two fire buttons is recommended, but not required. Playing on my A4000/060, it runs fine, but I did run into the occasional bit of flicker or visual artifacting. This can also play two different arcade variations, standard and "Super Xevious".

Pengo 500 (JOTD, 2023)

Like other JOTD arcade ports, Pengo adapts code directly from the original arcade version. It also offers a few options, starting with different difficulty levels and background music, based on the different variants and regional versions of the arcade machines. I find the title protagonist to be difficult to control at times. I'm not sure if the issue lies with my joypad controller, or the game code not handling the occasional diagonal control input well. I suspect a combination of the two. Otherwise, it plays well, and very accurate to the source material, although the intermissions between rounds run by at an over-accelerated pace.

Tiny Bobble (Abyss, 2020)

This port of "Bubble Bobble" is notable because there already was an official commercially-released Amiga port of the game back in 1988. That version was more than adequate, but Tiny Bobble improves upon that version in nearly every way, smoother, using more screen real estate, very playable, and supporting two-button controllers. While it's not an exact match to the arcade version, nicer in some ways, falling short in others, it's still probably the best and closest-matching version available for the Amiga.

As I said, this is just a sampling of the arcade video game ports available for the Amiga, and there are many more available out there, both commercial and freeware. Many of the ones I've listed here work best as a WHDload install, and in PAL screen mode. If you're a fan of the classic video games, there's a lot out there to find and enjoy.

Links:
https://jotd666.itch.io/ (arcade ports by JOTD)
https://whdownload.com (pre-packed WHD game installs, including Asteroids and Donkey Kong)

News and Views
Relayed by Eric Schwartz

Amiga shows in the USA and Germany

October was the month for Amiga shows, with "Amiga 38" being held in Mǒnchengladbach, Germany early in the month, and "AmiWest" in Sacramento, California later on. Be sure to search out reports and video coverage for both shows to learn what's new in hardware and software on two continents. Especially notable at the Amiga 38 show was a large display from the Apollo team, makers of the Vampire system and related hardware.

New A600GS system from Amigakit

AmigaKit ltd has been demonstrating their "A600GS", an ARM-based system geared toward Amiga gaming, similar in concept to the 'A500 Mini', but a bit more generalized and versatile. There will be a base model, and a "GS+" model, with greater memory and storage, and more ports for more varied usage. Exact pricing and availability are yet to be determined. Also to be determined are its exact advantages over something like the A500 Mini, as the GS does not have a replica case or controller design, or something like a Raspberry Pi or mini PC with Amiga emulation. Time shall tell.

Nostalgia Bait
From Eric Schwartz

When I was a very young person, Halloween was not quite the same thing it is today. I remember the holiday being primarily for the children, though that might be a perceptual bias, as I happened to be a child at the time. Nowadays, Halloween seems to attack on three main fronts. There's the drive for people to decorate their homes almost as elaborately as they might during the Christmas season. I don't remember that being so common years ago, save for the occasional hand-carved jack-O-lantern. The second thing that seems to have grown in popularity in recent years is the evening Halloween party for the adults, where they get together and drink heavily, wearing costumes the kids wouldn't, such as "slutty tax accountant". The third prong of the Halloween attack is the most long-lived in my memory, and that's the activities for children, such as trick-or-treating door-to-door in costume. Looking around now, the kids have it pretty good when it comes to store-bought Halloween costumes. They can dress up like their favorite TV character or superhero, with musculature sculpted right into the suit. In my day, if you couldn't convince your family to make a costume for you, the typical store-bought fare was one of those thin plastic masks with the elastic band that wraps around your head, and a vinyl smock to 'complete' the illusion. You might not be so lucky as to be Superman or Batman with a cape and symbol across your chest. Instead you might have to settle for a flat mask and a smock with your hero's name and portrait printed on the front. In any case, the goal was to go from house to house in costume, with your bag or basket, trying to amass as much candy as possible in the available time. Today, trick-or-treat is a very regimented affair, with rigidly set times, and every group of children accompanied and supervised by at least one parent to keep everyone safe. That's definitely not the way I remember it. In my time, many kids, myself included, would run around wildly with no adult supervision to speak of, trying to hit as many

homes as possible for the biggest candy haul, well into the night. Looking back, it seems like a miracle we survived. I don't want to be one of those people claiming it was a "simpler time" or a "better time" back then, or even a safer time. I think it was just more a matter of fewer people being aware of the potential dangers of the environment and the people in it. Seeing the way Halloween activities are done today makes me think about the way things were when I was a child running around the neighborhood, and, upon reflection, I think - yeah, we were pretty dumb back then.

Magazine Recap
**Antic's Amiga Plus** (Antic Publishing, 1989-1990)
Written by Eric Schwartz
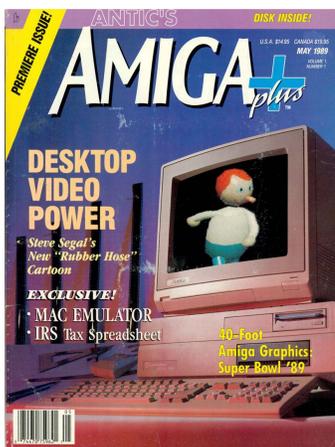
The late 1980s were something of a wild west period for Amiga publications in North America. With the release of the new 500 and 2000 models in 1987, the Amiga platform saw some of the highest sales it would achieve, both here and in Europe, and several new magazines popped up, trying to cut off their slice of the pie. Sadly, the market did not quite expand large enough to support all these new publications, and most of them dropped off soon after, mostly leaving the mags which were already established before the surge of newcomers. One of those short-lived publications was Antic's Amiga Plus, notable for a couple reasons. One was the name behind it, as Amiga Plus was a spin-off from the original Antic magazine, which exclusively covered Atari home computers. (and named for a primary graphic chip in the Atari 8-bit line) Another was that it took a similar approach to British Amiga mags of the time, and included a floppy disk with free Amiga software, which wasn't the norm for US-based Amiga magazines of

the time, giving it a much higher cover price of $14.95. Whether it was due to the high price, or it was just unable to grab a foothold against the more established Amiga magazines, Antic's Amiga Plus only lasted for ten bimonthly issues, or a little less than two years, with the last couple issues putting photos of attractive women on the cover, in what might appear to be a cynical last-ditch effort to boost sales.
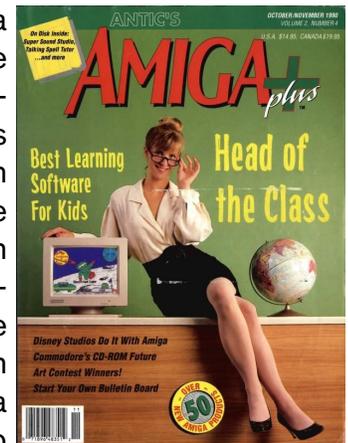
Retro Review
Pitfall II: The Lost Caverns
(Activision, Atari 2600, 1984)
Review by Eric Schwartz
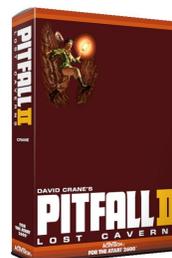
The original Pitfall!, created by David Crane and released in 1982, was a pioneering example of the modern 'platform game' where you play a protagonist who runs and jumps his or her way through a sprawling environment full of hazards that spans many screens. It would become one of the best known and most popular games of all time for the Atari console, but I'll let you in on a little secret - I never found Pitfall! all that much fun personally. Once you develop the skills to competently avoid most obstacles, I found it became repetitive and boring, and morphs into a chore of planning out a route to grab all the treasure within the game's time limit. Some people really enjoy that style of play, but not me. I find the sequel, Pitfall II, also from David Crane, to be a much more interesting and enjoyable game. It's also quite technologically advanced for its time, containing some additional hardware to expand the game's capabilities beyond what an Atari 2600 can normally do. Unfortunately, it was released as the North American video game market crash was in full

swing, and did not match the sales of its predecessor as a result. Most people who have played Pitfall II were more likely to have played one of its ports to other systems, such as the 8-bit computers from Atari or Commodore. My own first experience with the game was the Commodore 64 version, but it's not very different from the original Atari version, offering only minor cosmetic improvements, which is true for most ports of the game (the main exception being the Atari computer version, which adds a secret extra level.)

When you first start the game, Pitfall II looks nearly identical to Pitfall 1, but once you delve below the surface level in the game, you see the similarities are mostly surface-level as well, as you find a network of caverns that extend far underground, areas with water you can swim through, and large open-air spaces you can either descend in a diving jump or ascend with the aid of a balloon, for a good deal more variety than the first game. The goal of the game is the same - pick up as much treasure and other objects as you can, to get the highest possible score, but how Pitfall II goes about it is different. Unlike the first game, there is no time limit, and no 'lives', at least not in the traditional sense. Instead, there are red markers scattered through the map which act as checkpoints, and if you should collide with a hostile creature, instead of losing a life, you will be transported back to the last checkpoint you touched, losing points depending on how far away the checkpoint was. An unskilled or unlucky player might bring their score down to zero, but the game is only over once the player wins it, or they choose to stop. While this game doesn't have the deadly pits, crocodiles, fires, snakes, and rolling logs of the first game, it introduces its own menagerie of creatures, including flying bats and vultures, jumping frogs, waterborne electric eels, and the return of the scorpions from the first game. Each of these moves in

their own pattern, which is avoidable once you understand how. The most challenging are probably the birds and bats, as Pitfall Harry is unable to duck, so you have time your run under their bobbing flight path precisely. The primary goal to win the game is to find and rescue Harry's niece Rhonda and the Scooby-Doo-esque cowardly mountain lion Quickclaw, characters originally introduced in the Pitfall segment of the "Saturday Supercade" cartoon. You are also looking for all the gold you can find, and a large diamond, which increase your total score, but are not required to win the game. The idea is to explore and find all the treasures and rescues scattered around the map, avoiding mistakes such as falls or running into dangerous creatures, to achieve as close to a 'perfect' score as possible. It's extremely challenging to do a perfect run, but quite rewarding if you can pull it off, more so than scoring a perfect run in the first Pitfall game, in my opinion.

Like most Activision games, the presentation is very polished. The display is colorful and carefully organized to prevent any flickering objects. The graphics are detailed, at least within the capabilities of a 2600 game. The real star, however, is the soundtrack, in that there actually is one. While some Atari 2600 games have music, Pitfall II takes it to an entirely new level, and in fact part of the custom hardware added to the cartridge expands the audio capabilities of the console. The game has an adventurous theme tune that runs through the game, with variations. When Harry picks up a treasure, the music picks up tempo and gets more bombastic, and if Harry falls to a creature, the music shifts to a slower-paced, 'sad' version of the tune. There is also an alternate, yet very familiar tune, which plays when Harry is riding a balloon. Other Atari games may have music, but Pitfall II's soundtrack is much more reminiscent of the kind from games that would come on later videogame consoles like the Nintendo

NES. The entire experience, from gameplay to visuals and sound, is polished to a fine sheen, like many Activision products of the era.

Pitfall II is a bit of a special case in Atari game cartridges. Its release shortly before the market crash makes it more rare and pricey than many other carts, especially its predecessor. The extra hardware in the cart also means it's not as commonly emulated, or supported by flash memory multi-carts as less complex games. It is one of those kind of games that, once you have beaten it, you may feel less compelled to come back to it again, unless you're the type to invest a lot of time into putting together a perfect-scoring run. Still, as Atari 2600 games go, it's a pretty singular experience, and I find it has much more to offer than the original Pitfall game, both in presentation and variety of gameplay. Everyone should try it once, if they can.

(**Protip:** Near the start of the game, if you exit the first body of water to the left, there is a rat which will run at you and push you back into the water. When you approach the endpoint of the game, where Quickclaw is, if you run to the right, you can approach the same rat from the opposite side, and pick it up for a big point bonus.)

Retro Review
Wheeljack (Transformers: Prime, 2012)
Written by Eric Schwartz

As the world has changed over the years, so have toy companies in their efforts to adapt to a world where children seem to grow up ever faster, and video games on and off of mobile devices take greater mind and market share away from more traditional playthings. More frequently, toy companies have expanded into media of various kinds, working to leverage their well-known brands into other areas. We've seen it recently with a live-action Barbie movie in the theaters, not to mention seven (so far) big-budget Transformers films raking in billions in box office at their peak. What's not as well known is the short time Hasbro had their own cable TV channel.

Working together with Discovery Communications, Hasbro took a controlling interest in the former "Discovery Kids" channel, rebranding it as "The Hub Network" in 2010. Having their own channel gave them an outlet to show their new (and classic) toy-related programming free from dealing with the scheduling whims of other kids channels like Cartoon Network. Naturally, there were cartoons to promote the then-current toy lines such as Transformers, G.I. Joe, and more. Perhaps the one with the most reach or notoriety was "My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic", which caused the term "Brony" to come to general knowledge. Unfortunately, while some shows were successful, the Hub channel itself was not, with low ratings and ad revenue, thanks in part to not being available as default on many cable TV systems, and many potential advertisers of toys and other children's products being wary of buying ad time on a network run by the competition. Hasbro gave up its controlling interest, and the Hub network ended in 2014, the channel reverting to "Discovery Family", though some of the shows remained. Another popular cartoon from the Hub was "Transformers: Prime", a CG animated cartoon that drew a lot of inspiration in visuals and tone from the live-action Transformers movies of the time, and this toy comes from the line connected with that series.

Wheeljack from Prime is based heavily on his namesake from the original 1980s toy line and cartoon, but is also its own thing in many ways. It starts as a futuristic-looking white racing car, with decoration in red and green. It's a rather striking mode, and gives away little to no indication that it might turn into a robot, even if you examined the car's underside. It rolls nicely, though there is very little ground clearance, especially if you store the weapons underneath the car as shown in the instructions. Transforming the car to robot mode is not too complex, but does involve a few interesting twists and turns not often seen in a toy of this type. The result is

a robot mode which, while taking visual inspiration from the 1980s version, is much more stylized and dynamic. The stance is broad, with long arms that give off a bit of a gorilla vibe. Articulation and posing is quite good, even compared to Transformer toys available today, with ball joints in the hips, ankles and wrists. The only things notably lacking are any kind of rotation in the waist, or the upper arms, though the jointing in the shoulders mitigates this to an extent. You can get some impressive poses out of this toy either way. Prime Wheeljack comes with two swords which can be held , stored underneath the car form, or placed into slots in the robot's backpack, which gives the impression of a back-mounted scabbard. There is very little friction in these slots though, so the stored swords can fall out easily if you move the toy around or flip it over. The arm articulation complements the swords well, and can make for some dynamic stances if you are so inclined.

Overall, Transformers: Prime Wheeljack is a product of its time, with a style matching the show the character comes from, and some design awkwardness to go with it. Regardless, it's still a very strong design, both visually, and as a toy, matching or exceeding similar toys released ten or more years later. It's definitely worth getting if you're a fan of the character or the series. It's not very difficult to find despite its age, and can be had for a reasonable price, depending on how picky you are about whether it is in package or loose, though be aware that there are several different toys of this character, one smaller than this 'deluxe-class' figure, and another from the later "Beast Hunters" line, which has different mold details and weaponry.

The Canine Perspective
With "Dayton" Duke

This is a strange time of year. It's a time when the small humans dress funny and wander away from their homes. Sometimes they'll come to my home and ask my human for bits of food called 'candy'. He even gives it to them, just because they asked. I totally understand, because I usually get food if I beg for it too. Once in a while larger humans, called 'teenagers', show up begging for candy. My human seems to be annoyed by this, saying the way they dress up is 'half-assed', but I can't tell the difference. Sometimes I get to go out on the leash and meet the visitors. It's funny - most of them are a lot bigger than I am, but they get nervous when I run up to say hello. Seems like the larger teenager humans are more scared of me than the small ones, which is weird. I wish I could try some of this candy my human keeps giving away, but he doesn't let me have any, because it's "choklit", whatever that means. Whatever it is, it smells pretty good. Probably just another one of those things the humans want to keep to themselves.

- Duke

YouTube Links of the Month

10MARC - The AmiWest 2023 Report
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmhhEYx2RQM

Covering the AmiWest show in Sacramento. Always an enjoyable watch if you're an Amiga fan wanting to know what's new.

Paper Melon - Replacing tech with Transformers
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXjRqsxmESc

Not everyone knows that some Transformers toys are also working electronic devices. I might not recommend using them as your 'daily drivers', however.

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HAPPY HALLOWEEN
'09EWS