

KILOBYTE MAGAZINE

2020/1

COMMODORE HISTORICAL SOCIETY · NEW 9PIN JOYSTICKS · ATARI FLASHBACK X · KICK-START OR FULL STOP? · METALSTORM (NES) · PLANET DEATH (GB) · AND MORE ...



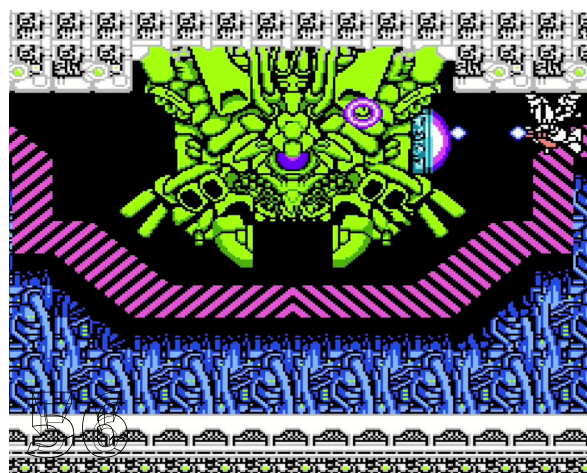
8BIT
ONLY



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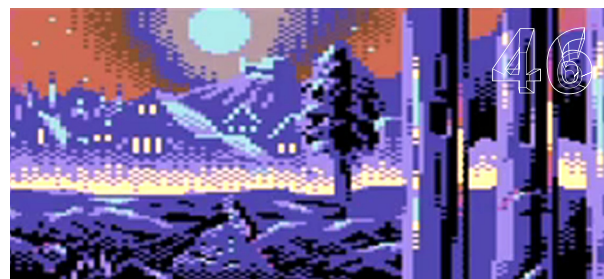
Planet Death on Gameboy takes you back to a Galaxy far, far away.

AND MORE!

KILOBYTE MAGAZINE'S

GEM AWARD

for games with exceptionally clever concepts, great playability and/or impressive technical features.



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DISCOVER

THE ART OF FLOPPY DISK SLEEVES



Photo: bk

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A HISTORICAL

WHAT DRIVES DAVE MCMURTRIE TO COLLECT AND



- Expandable up to 512K
- Compatible with Commodore 64 Software and Peripherals

PRESERVE COMMODORE'S HISTORY



Did you know that Commodore was not only into typewriters in the early years, but also into photocopiers? That they licensed adding machines from Ricoh – in fact one of their most famous ones is designed by a former Ricoh guy? And can you name their revenue for every year since they enlisted in the stock market? Well, Dave McMurrrie can. He knows the history of Commodore inside out and went on to form a group on facebook, the Commodore International Historical Society, which drew the attention of several former Commodore employees who shares inside information, old photos and some anecdotes. It is a great place to hand out if you're into the company with the iconic chickenhead logo (that has actually nothing to do with a chickenhead). But who is the 48-year old guy behind this and what drives him? Let's see.

Dave, what is your connection to Commodore and when did you get first in touch with their computers back in the day?

I have no connection at all. I've just had an interest in the company since my childhood. The first computer I ever touched was in elementary school. It was a TRS-80 but I don't remember which model. My school had exactly one computer that was in a small closet with three chairs. The desk was only wide enough for two people to sit at, so one person

had to shoulder surf. You had to request permission to use it, but two of my friends and I were the only people who ever used it. The first computer my parents ever purchased for me was a Texas Instruments TI-99/4A. I didn't have that long before I heard other kids at school talking about the C64. I couldn't imagine having 64K memory! I don't recall exactly what year my parents finally relented and purchased a C64 for me, but I'm guessing maybe 1983 or 1984.

Why did you feel the need to gather people who preserve the historic side of things rather than the technical?

My father owned a small business when I was younger. Because of that I've always had an interest in business. I had a subscription to a couple of computer magazines back in the 80s. At one point I remember learning about Jack Tramiel from a magazine article and he seemed like the most interesting guy to me. The Internet wasn't a consumer thing back then, so I was fairly limited in what I was able to learn about the man at the time. But I remember that when anyone would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I'd always answer with, "The CEO of Commodore." Cue the 1990s and I was working midnight shift as a computer operator at a local university. That gave me an awful lot of free time in between dealing with



Photo: Dave McMurtrie, Commodore Historical Society



tape mounts and jobs abending on the mainframe, so I made judicious use of my employer's library resources. I used that time to do as much research about Jack Tramiel and Commodore as I possibly could. I compiled a fairly large database of events related to Commodore's history into a timeline, but lacking formal training I didn't include any type of bibliography. So, that's what started my desire to learn everything there is to know about Commodore as a company. Here's an example of a comp.sys.cbm posting from me in 2009 where I mentioned my interest in the business side of the company.

That's a couple of years after Brian Bagnall's book and there was already some material collected on different platforms, Commodore.ca being one of them, for example.

I was ecstatic when Brian Bagnall's first book came out. If you consider the relatively tiny bit of Commodore insider information I was able to gather using library resources, imagine how amazing it was to read Brian's book for the first time! I've been a fan of many Commodore websites over the years, too. zimmers.net was holy ground to me. Despite all the great information about Commodore that's been out there for us to enjoy for years, one of the biggest areas that wasn't well-documented in Commodore's history was the extremely early

history. That's where I began my focus. I started by tracking down sources for copies of Commodore's annual reports and purchasing all of them. Then I began to reach out to government agencies where Commodore did business and purchasing all of Commodore's corporate filings. The Commodore Interna-

tional Historical Society Facebook group came about out of my belief that there were former Commodore employees who probably had huge stashes of old, internal documentation that would eventually be thrown away and I wanted to save it if I could. I reasoned that drawing former Commodore employees to a



Photo: Dave McMurtrie, Commodore Historical Society

Commodore enthusiast website or forum was a tall ask. I mean, if there was an enthusiast website about a company I worked at 20 years ago, I probably wouldn't have any desire to join it. I assume most former Commodore employees are the same. There are a few like Bil Herd and Dave Haynie who do take part in regular discussions on Commodore forums. For us fans, that's a rare treat. My goal in creating the Facebook group was to be able to draw in former Commodore folks who wouldn't find the barrier to entry to be too high, given that they're already logging on to Facebook anyway.

Did you ever try to contact Jack Tramiel or Manfred Kapp directly at some point? Or the descendants of Irving Gould?

Definitely not. I've been very careful about respecting people's personal boundaries. My devotion to Commodore by no means gives me the right to invade someone else's personal life just because of their association with Commodore.

I saw that several former Commodore employees joined your group on facebook and even shared some nice insights and stuff never seen before, which is truly an awesome accomplishment. Andy Finkel, Michael Tomczyk, Gail Wellington and even Leonard Tramiel. Did you just search for

them on Facebook and asked them one by one to join the group?

When I first started the group, that was exactly what I did. I didn't get a very good hit rate, though. I don't recall the exact order of Commodorians joining our group either, but it seemed to take a while to get things rolling. I recall that for several months I felt as though the initial idea was flawed and nobody would be interested. We were most fortunate that a few Commodorians, without me even asking, began to invite other former Commodorians to the group. There was somewhat of a snowball effect in that manner. Tangentially related, it hasn't just been difficult to attract former Commodorians who are willing to participate, it's also difficult to retain them in the group. If you look at the Facebook group rules you'll notice that they're pretty strict about not harassing former Commodorians. We have unfortunately lost a few key members due to being barraged with friend requests and private messages asking them to purchase items they have posted.

Did you actually ever meet one of them?

I have not yet met any of them in person, but VCF East is around the corner and I hope to meet a few folks there. A few former Commodorians have invited me to contact them over the past few years and I

have graciously accepted those offers. In a couple cases I feel as though I've gained new personal friends. I will forever cherish the conversations I've had with those folks. It always amazes me that people who haven't worked for Commodore in 30 or more years are willing to take time out of their busy lives to talk with me, share memories with me and spend their own money to send Commodore items to me for preservation.

Speaking of items: how large is your collection actually? I mean hardwarewise and with regard to printed material?

At last count I had around 100 Commodore computers. I don't collect any other brand. I picked up a couple large lots in the 90s and early 2000s when people were literally throwing them away, so there's not a lot of money invested. I also have typewriters, adding machines, calculators, etc. I even have a Commodore thermostat installed at my home to keep us warm. All the stuff I scan, I send back to the original owners when I'm done, so I don't retain any of that. I do have a couple boxes of manuals, books, advertisements and such. Maybe three or four boxes. There's nothing really interesting among my personal documentation.

And are you aiming for a museum all about Commodore or

planning to give the stuff you cannot put online easily to a museum at some point? If so, which one?

I'm 48 now. I've promised my extremely tolerant wife that once I reach the age of 60, I will begin to sell off my collection. I assume if I reach 60 I'll begin to second guess that (laughs).

Did you ever think of writing a story about the early years of Commodore before? Or did Brian Bagnall maybe even contact you with regard to his research?

I've been asked several times. I don't believe I have the skills necessary to write a book. I'm good at doing the research and making it available for others. Maybe one day someone with better writing talent can use some of my research. And I've never spoken with Brian. He seems to have done quite a fine job of researching on his own. Maybe the only thing I could offer is that a lot of his information came from interviews, where my research has been solely focused on original documentation.

Is there an item in your collection that took the most effort to get?

The original corporate filings for Commodore from 1958 and the Everest corporate filings from 1955 were difficult to procure, and I

received the Commodore ones on microfiche, the Everest ones on paper. I get far more excited when I find esoteric Commodore documentation than I do over the hardware even. My holy grail will be to exactly nail down the earliest years. Various interviews with Jack Tramiel leave some of these early events unclear. Or at least, I haven't been able to back anything up with documentation yet. Jack Tramiel enlisted in the US Army in January, 1948. After two years in the Army he was discharged and started his first office equipment business in 1950. After about six months in business he was called back into active duty due to the Korean war and had to close that business. I don't know what the name of this company was. In 1952, Tramiel was discharged from the

Army and then at some point later purchased Singer Typewriter Company which was located at 562 E. Fordham Rd in the Bronx area of New York. Unfortunately, there are still many holes in our knowledge here. The New York department of state has no documents about Singer Typewriter Company. We've found advertisements to substantiate its existence, but nothing beyond that. Also, in other interviews and documentation, Jack Tramiel talked about working for a typewriter repair shop where he was able to secure an Army contract for the owner of the company, then quit when he wasn't rewarded for doing so. I **think** that was A.C.E. Typewriter (which is where Tramiel and Kapp are supposed to have met), but I don't know where that fits into the timeline.



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STIFF COMPETITION

HYPERKIN'S ATARI-COMPATIBLE JOYSTICK – WORTH A SHOT?



Photo: bk

A new joystick for your 9pin consoles and home computers for less than 20 bucks? Well, is it worth a shot? We bought one of Hyperkin's new retro joysticks for old systems and found out if it's a real Trooper or a lame pooper. First of all: The box You'll get the joystick in a small cardboard box that is so small that you can't help but wonder if the stick insite is inflatable – no way that they fit it in there. But they did. A word of warning to all you collectors out there: You need to be very careful when opening up the small box. It turns out to be rather difficult to unbox it without damaging the thin cardboard. So if you think of repacking your joystick after every use and put it in a shelf – don't. Be glad

you got it out there once without too much hassle if you're lucky, put the box in your shelf and don't think about putting the joystick back in there. That being said, let's turn our attention to the stick itself. It looks like one of your old Atari joysticks if it played the role of Twoface on Batman. Or Phantom of the Opera. Well, you get the idea. It looks like a cross-breed between a plastic case and a fake woodgrain application. But the latter is naturally only a sticker that is applied on top of the joystick. Of the two I actually bought, one had an edge peeling off slightly. You can even see the thin white line where they bent the sticker according to the trademark edges that all Hyperkin products

have. Despite fearing that the sticker might wear off pretty quickly, it did not. And that after some excessive gaming sessions with the Atari 2600 and the C64. But eventually, it might. But being only a sticker, one can be certain that the retro community will find a replacement once this becomes a common issue.

Enough with the decals. You'll have noticed that it comes with two fire buttons, but they are functioning as one. The advantage this design gives you: It's comfortable used either left- or right-handed. That's also the case thanks to the edges Hyperkin took off. Where you're classic Atari stick would hurt your hand after holding it for a while, this one remains

comfortable. Nice! And how does it compare to the original? Well, it is actually heavier than the good old CX40's, allowing for a firm stand on any table, also thanks to the non-slippery rubber feet on its underside. Steering with it feels a lot more precise than with the CX40, which has kind of a mushy feel to it. It's not necessarily bad, as we've been used to that, but compared to this, the Trooper feels like a precision joystick. And the cord – how can we not talk about the cord? It's huge, allowing you to sit three meters away from the device you plug the joystick into. That's almost the length of two Amstrad CPC464! Just kidding, of course. Maybe one and a half.



When comparing it to the new CX40 that comes with the Atari Flashback X, which is also covered in this issue, the Hyperkin owns the new Atari stick. It's cheap, feels unprecise and you use it in constant fear of breaking it. The Hyperkin on the other hand seems to be quite sturdy, but I would not necessarily want to use it for continuous Decathlon sessions, although it might even be able to cope with that. As you can see in the photo on page 17, you can un-

screw both sticks from the joystick base, and those parts look pretty much identical and are interchangeable. Which might come in handy at some point in the future when you'll get those Atari Flashback X packages thrown after you and want to repair your Trooper. However, it remains to be seen if this will be a part that is prone to fail at all. My guess at this point: nope. So let's dig deeper and take a dive inside. Four screws are standing between





Photo: bk

you and the guts of the Trooper – so you won't need your scalpel. But you will need something to carefully peel of those two rubber feet below the two visible screws to get it open. Inside, no surprises are waiting for us: A single sided circuit board, some rubber domes for firebuttons and the stick, some small plastic parts and that's about it. The part that makes contact if you move the joystick itself looks like what you can also find inside of your original Game Boy's D-pad. And this is just about the same mechanic here. The rubber domes are tight enough to allow for a nice feedback that's not as snug as the Competition Pro's micro switches, but it is surprisingly

firm nonetheless. And keep in mind that this joystick is available for 17 EUR or around 19 USD, which is – in my humble opinion – a very nice price for such a device, all the more so considering that the selection of new joysticks is somewhat limited. Of course Hyperkin released the Trooper to accompany its Retron 77 Atari-style console and improved on the original joystick design that came bundled with the system. And although I have no sample of that first series, I really don't need one as well. Because this here is absolutely sufficient for most games on 8bit systems. It would not want to trade in a Competition Pro or The Arcade for it, but it's a great addition. (bk)

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ON THE COUNT

ATARI'S FLASHBACK RETRO-CONSOLE GETS ITS



OF TEN

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TENTH ITERATION. WOW. IS IT A KEEPER?





Photo: bk

The Atari Flashback. It was the first of what we now consider to be a common phenomenon called mini consoles. So in a way, Atari pioneered in the world of video games once more. Well, in some very small way at least. While the first Flashback that came out in 2004 in the US looked rather like a miniaturized version of the wedge-shaped 7800 and came with the joystick that nobody ever liked playing with (CX24), the second time around one year later Atari actually put out a second version that looks like a small woodgrain VCS. And to make sure that it looked like a cheesy toy, they even managed to give it those big red and yellow buttons that guaranteed an overall design experi-

ence of something you would expect to get when ordering a Happy Meal at McDonald's. It took them 14 years and eight revisions to finally release something that actually looks like a decent mini console with the Atari Flashback X that was released in late 2019. Gone are the yellow buttons in favor of tiny shiny switches like the original console had. Nice. It comes bundled with two CX40 style joysticks that actually both (!) work on your original Atari 2600 – so yes, they kept the 9pin ports. That is a nice touch, although the sticks are not that great compared to their ancestors which actually hold up quite nicely. With the new joysticks, you use them in constant fear of breaking them. They feel cheap, light

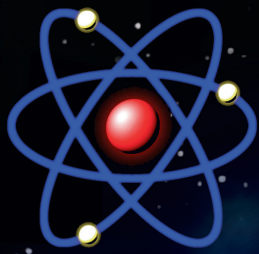
and unprecise and I for one could not stop thinking about when one of them would snap and I did not want to try them out on Decathlon. If you want a new Atari style joystick that feels better than the original, then the Hyperkin Trooper is the one for you. But since you can use these ones here as well, you might want to pick sets of the Flashback up as soon as they'll be thrown out for next to nothing to keep the sticks and maybe improve them. Someone might find a way to do that. Coming back to the console itself: It looks nice, but AtGames, manufacturer of the console, was seemingly less bothered with making the actual Atari playing experience as retro as the outside of the console.

It starts with the background music when browsing the menu. This has nothing to do with Atari VCS sound. And yes, those tunes might sound a bit squeaky by today's standards, but if you're really bothered by that then you miss the point of this whole system. Which is also what happened with some of the games. If you select Space Invaders and expect some good old VCS style game, you're in for a disappointment. It's not even the exact arcade version, but something more to that extent. Which raises the simple yet fundamentally obvious question: Why? Especially when Missile Command and Asteroids, for example, are the actual VCS versions. And then there is Frogger, which is also not the original At-



ari 2600 version of the game. Even more strange: on the two aforementioned examples, the console seem to start a different emulator as you'll notice when pressing the menu button in the game. It just does not look like the other menus and does not care if you switched on the scanline option or not. Speaking of which: Such a feature is standard nowadays and it looks ok, but really nothing to write home about. A variety of scanline filters to choose from would have been nice. Thankfully, all games are displayed in 4:3 and not 16:9. Who would want to play that way anyway? Exactly. Interestingly, the console accepts paddles, so you can actually play games like *Kaboom!* or *Breakout* like they were meant to be played – paddles of course not included. The selection of games is indeed nice and there are many titles that defined the 2600, especially from Activision, but also some great Parker games on here will keep you entertained. A nice and small addition to the library are some homebrew games from recent years. One thing I will add regarding the games here: There is still no sign of the Atari *Pac-Man*, which most certainly is due to licensing, but come on: If you can manage to put *Pitfall* and several other Activision games on here, why not that yellow gobbler? I did notice a small input lag and moreover joystick commands not being registered at all. Which might be due to the fact that the joysticks

are cheaply made and should be used with more force than I am willing to apply. Testing them out on the real Atari 2600, directions also seem to get lost. And here the sticks really show how bad they are with regard to precision. If you want to play a game of *Pac-Man*, better be prepared for a game of chance. So all in all, this is fun for about an hour if you really want to dive into the system. Needless to say that you can jailbreak it and put more ROMs on there. As it does not have an SD card slot, you'll have to open it up for this, though. Whether that is worth the effort is up to your preferences. If you are looking for a way to connect your original Atari to your HDMI television, there are other ways with better results than this. Sadly, this system does not feel like it's made to be enjoyed as long and as intensely as the original VCS. As mentioned before, *Decathlos* might be the last game you play with those joysticks, and the funny thing it: They had no problem putting that on in the library of the system. All in all, this version means a small progress for the Flashback line of consoles, and who knows if it will be the final installment in the series. Interestingly, the price of the Flashback X dropped very quickly after its initial release so it is very common to find them for 30 or 40 bucks (as of this writing) whereas you might have a difficult time finding the predecessor for the same amount. Neither one is recommended. (bk)



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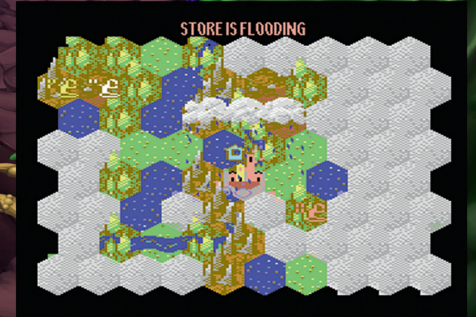
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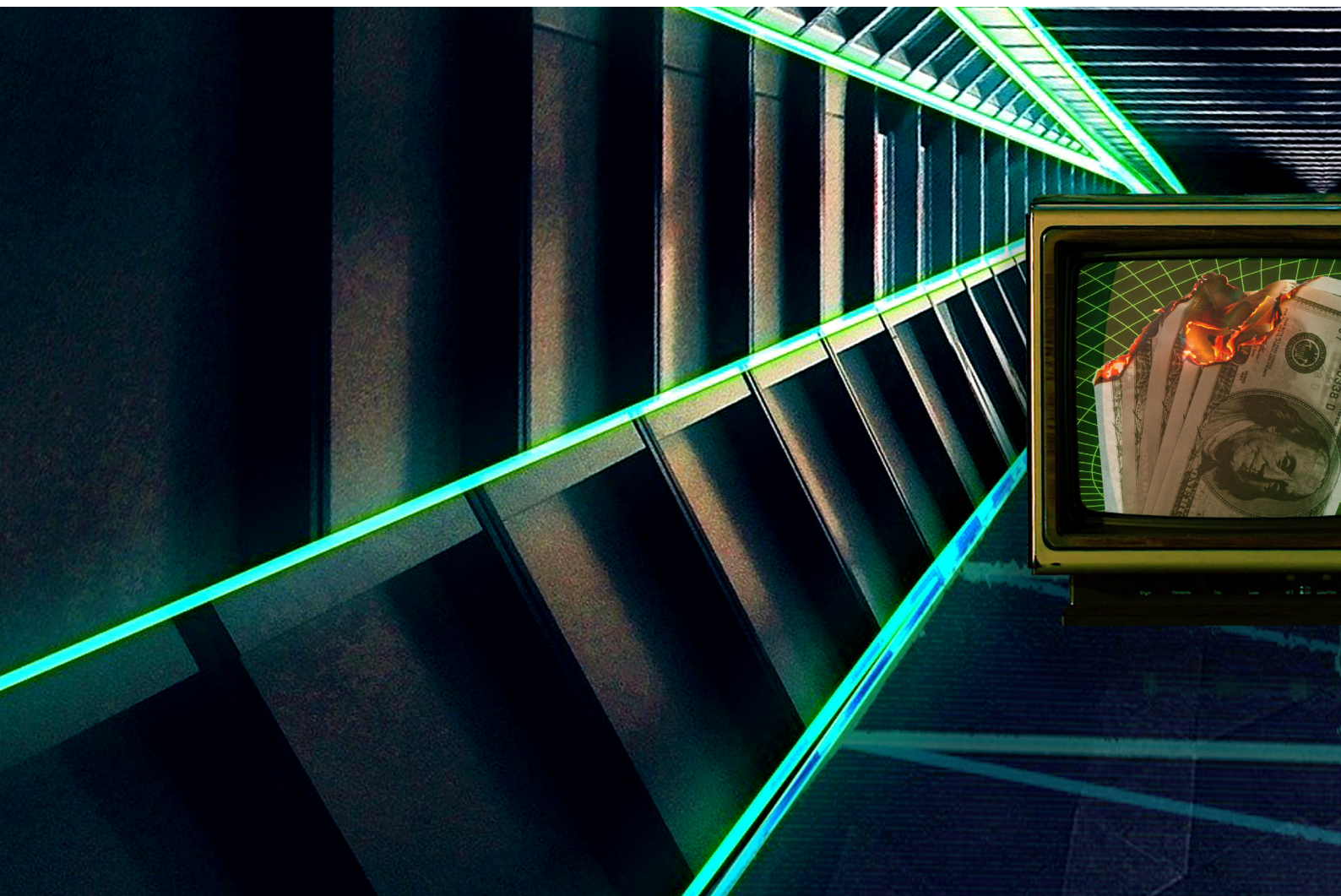
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Ah, the joys of crowdfunding. Discover a nice project, throw your money in the hat, wait a while et voila: At some point in the future nice stuff will arrive at your door-mat. Or in your mail inbox. Isn't this a great time to live in? Well, yes. But with regard to crowdfunding projects, it's not always sunny in Retro-fornia. So in this article we will take a look at what one of the biggest crowdfunding platforms actually provides – as there still seem to be many uncertainties regarding this – as well as look at some examples of

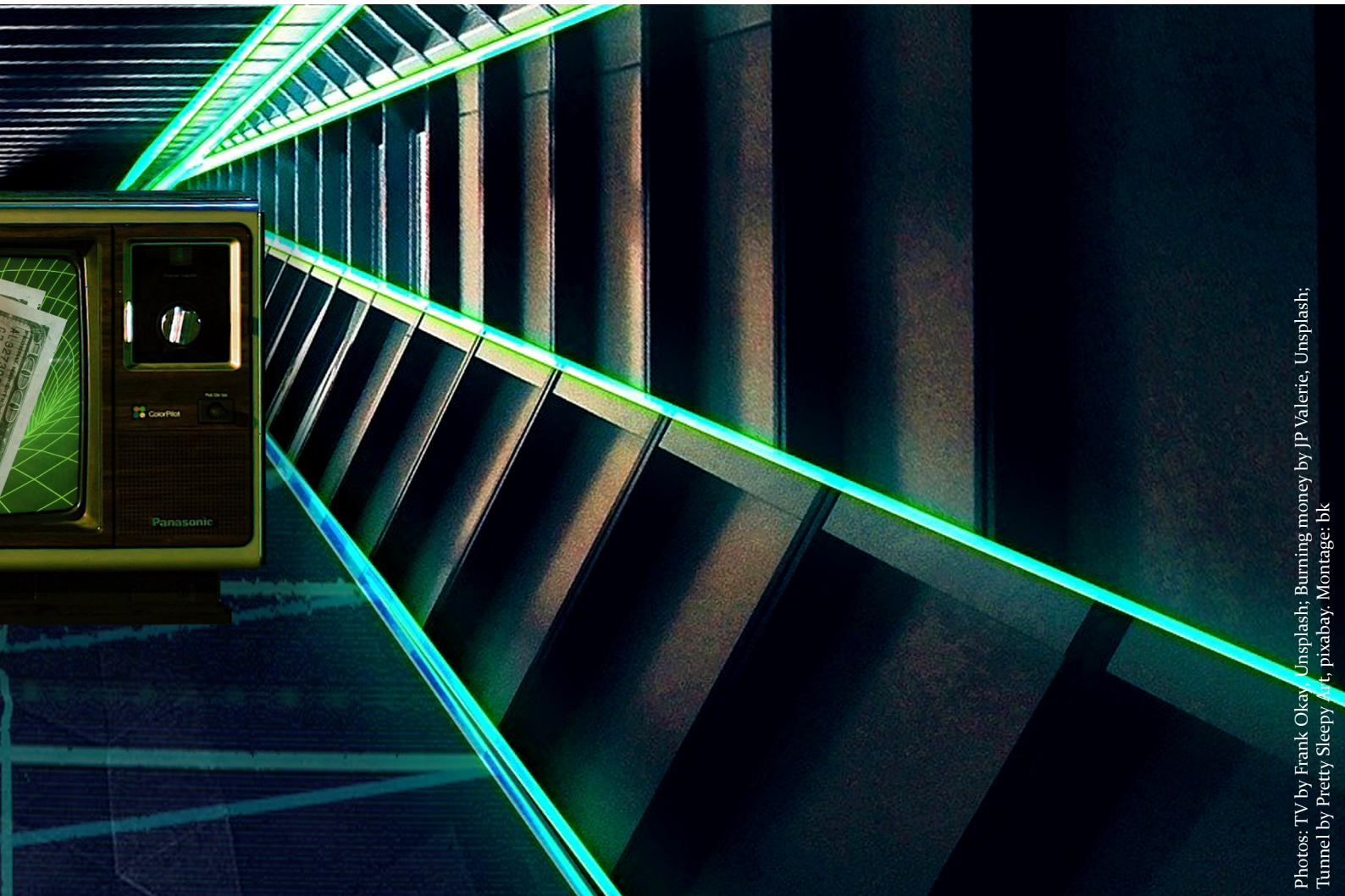
the great products that came out of it, and the ones that did not make it (yet, hopefully).

So first of all, there is a common misunderstanding amongst Kickstarter backers. By supporting a project – and Kickstarter makes this very clear – one does not buy any form of equity interest and cannot force the project owner to release anything at all. Yes, you read that right. The ownership of the creative work remains with the project owner. Moreover, Kickstarter states very clearly that they are neither

OR FULL STOP

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ASPECTS OF CROWDFUNDING



Photos: TV by Frank Okay, Unsplash; Burning money by JP Valerie, Unsplash;
Tunnel by Pretty Sleepy Art, pixabay. Montage: bk

responsible for projects nor that they can research if a project starter is actually capable of realizing their project. In their understanding, ultimately, it is the supporters who determine whether a project is worth being done by deciding to finance it or not. In fact, on their help page, Kickstarter goes into detail as to what is expected of a project starter. He or she is obliged to bring his project to the end he has promised. But there is always the possibility that something unexpected happens that will prevent the

project starter from fulfilling his project as promised. And because, as they stated before, Kickstarter will not check the background of the project starter, they recommend you to do so very thoroughly and gauge the associated risk. So how can one be sure that a project will get finished the way it was promised to? Well, regarding to Kickstarter, if the project starter did not take his project seriously, he would risk his reputation. The solution is only trust in projects from people who have already shown that they are

able to succeed with their creative vision in one way or another. So does all this mean that people could basically start a campaign, cleverly pretending to be able to do this or that, and then ultimately take the money and run without delivering anything? Well. Kickstarter themselves have little leverage over project starters in terms of financial penalization. They cannot and will not organize or initiate a refund of any sort for failed projects. The most they can do is continuously reminding project starters to post updates,

to answer comments and complaints from the backers, and ultimately ban them from starting a new campaign on Kickstarter and limit their account access drastically. So basically, all a project starter needs to do is to keep their backers rudimentary updated and explain the delays they encounter. If they do not state their project as failed, Kickstarter, as they explain on their page, seems to have no means and no intention of investigating the issue further. That is underlined by what they state on their help page with regard to proj-



ect starters that just seem to do not want to update their backers on Kickstarter: “In some cases, creators may move their communications off of Kickstarter after their project ends, or they may be more responsive elsewhere. In light of this, see if the creator might have listed their own website, social media pages, or a direct email address in previous updates or in their creator bio. We recommend reaching out to a creator through their own website or social media as a next step.” This is the answer to the question: What to do if you still haven’t heard anything after reaching out to a creator. So if even Kickstarter tells you: “Well, have you tried turning it off and on again”, you know how little they really seem to care.

IN CASE OF SUSPECTED FRAUD _____

If the worst case happens and backers suspect fraud, they can of course bring the case to court. The first time this happened successfully was in 2015 against the project owners of Asylum Playing Cards. And not because they had not delivered, but because they had not delivered on time. A US court sentenced them to pay for the legal costs and compensation to the backers, which amounted to double the sum they collected with their campaign. So while project starters may not be intimidated by being sanctioned by Kickstarter, they are not above the law. However, going down this path is very difficult, time-consuming

and – for people without legal insurance – basically a big risk to lose more than what they paid for in the campaign. There is another way, however. The US Federal Trade Commission published a post on their blog on May 2019, advising consumers to avoid crowdfunding scams: “If you’re thinking about contributing to a crowdfunding campaign, take a minute to research the creator’s background and reviews before you pay. For example, has the creator engaged in previous campaigns? How did those campaigns turn out?” It’s the same advice even Kickstarter gives. However: “If you learn about a crowdfunding scam: Report it to the Federal Trade Commission. Report it to your state Attorney General. Warn other people by commenting on the creator’s profile on the crowdfunding site.”

For some backers, it seems that a serious amount of crowdfunding campaigns have become scams. But is that true? The University of Pennsylvania conducted what is known as “The Wharton Crowdfunding Study”, for which they surveyed 500.000 backers on the platform. The result: 65 percent of them agreed that they received their awards on time. Roughly 17 percent of the backers did get anything, be it because the project starters admitted that their projects failed or because they never send anything out to the backers. So while more than half of the participants of this

study got what they expected, a significant percentage of them did not. Take a look at your own project log on the platform – if I compare this result to mine, it matches. Of the ten projects I backed so far, seven delivered as promised, one with some delay. Three didn't deliver anything at all.

But there is an important difference between failure and fraud. Every user of Kickstarter should be aware of the fact that they take a gamble with every single campaign they support. Kickstarter is not a shop and there is no guarantee that you will get what you pay for, only probabilities. That being said, it is difficult to prove that a campaign did not succeed because of bad faith on the project starter's part, as it might

indeed be just an idea that did not pan out the way the starter imagined it. So as you see, there are different sides to the story. Just be aware that every dollar you spend on Kickstarter is a gamble. And with this background, let us look at some of the most popular retro Kickstarter projects. The ones which succeeded and the ones that ran into difficulties. Let's take a closer look at them and analyze what went wrong and learn how difficult such ventures can be for both sides, creators and backers alike.

DREAMWORLD POGIE _____

Philip and Andrew Oliver, better known as "The Oliver Twins" amongst gamers and fondly remembered for their Dizzy series of games, thought it was worth a shot



Photo: The Oliver Twins, Dreamworld Pogie Kickstarter campaign

to finally publish their game Dream-world Pogie for the NES back in 2017. Offered to Codemasters back while the NES was still on store shelves, the publisher decided not to follow through and the game got canned. So in January 2017, the Twins started their Kickstarter campaign with support by Chris Wilkins (Zzap! and Crash Annual, Story of C64 in pixels et al.) and aimed for a goal of 6.000 GBP. The game was already finished at that point and it was all a question of production. Perks started with a signed NES cartridge of the game for the region you lived in (PAL-A, PAL-B or NTSC) and would be ready to ship in February 2017. Expecting to hit the target just in time, they did not expect what happened next: they received more than four times the money they were looking for. It was an amazing thing to watch while it went on, and everyone was very upbeat that an unreleased game of a franchise no one knew on a platform that was out of date for more than two decades would do this well. And the heart-warming thing that was the icing on the cake: Philip and Andrew Oliver donated their share of the proceeds of this game to UK's Special Effect, a charity "that uses specialist technology to enhance the quality of life of people of all ages who have severe physical challenges, whether as a result of a disability, traumatic injury or debilitating illness." Despite the demand for the game being higher than what they

expected, the team made sure to keep backers updated with the progress of things. The survey was sent out in February and the games shipped from May to June to all backers around the globe.

Following the success, they Oliver Twins released other Pogie games for the NES on Kickstarter as well, which all did great. Chris Wilkins went on to do 17 more projects on Kickstarter, all of which succeeded and delivered their perks.

THE MASTERTRONIC ARCHIVES

Mastertronic is a name most of 8bit gamers remember, be it for their good games or the many, many mediocre or dull ones they put out on a budget back in the 80s. Their iconic logo, a stylized "M" made from blue, red and yellow vector lines, is as retro as it gets. So when Anthony Olver from Canberra, known as Player One Books, started his book campaign "The Mastertronic Archives" as ultimate game collector's guide in May 2016, it attracted some interest. Half way through, the campaign had collected 58 percent of the funds needed, and it didn't look as though this book was going to happen. However, Anthony added some nice perks (USB cassette with label and case reminiscent of the classic Mastertronic tapes, signed postcards of former Mastertronic programmers) for collectors and with this, the project got funded in June 2016, collecting nearly 37.000 AUD. What

THE MASTERTRONIC ARCHIVES

THE ULTIMATE
MASTERTRONIC GAMES
COLLECTOR'S GUIDE

a ride. KILOBYTE MAGAZINE was in on the hype train back in the day, including a double-sided article about the then still running project. It all looked so good. So many former Mastertronic people were involved, so what could go wrong? The expected delivery was set to be one year after the successful funding: June 2017. Surveys went out and Anthony kept people informed on the progress in August and December, claiming the Mastertronic titles included in the book was around 550 individual games in total. The next update came in April 2017. The project starter thanked everyone for their patience and well wishes, as he had undergone an operation and moreover a close family member was fighting a terminal illness. All more than understandable, as the backers

agreed. In June 2017, he sent out a patch of Kane postcards signed by the original developer John Darnell. The next update followed in October, as Anthony's situation did not take a turn for the better after his operation, stating that he can't give an estimate as to when the book would ship: "Sorry that it is not good news in terms of delivery time-frames, but I want to reassure you all that I am totally committed to completing these and many other books once this rough patch has passed." In February 2018, Simon Plumbe took over the updates without any explanation of introduction of himself. It was around this time that some backers wondered where this was going. But as shortly afterwards a little surprise followed in form of a free copy of the

PDF “An Illustrated History of Game Controllers Volume 1” to all backers, it looked like this campaign was taking a turn for the better now. First preview of the book’s pages started to show up in June 2018 and Anthony took over the update section again. And then, in July 2018, this message was a warning signal of what was to be expected down the line: “With immediate effect I am stepping down from the creative team behind The Mastertronic Archives”, wrote Simon Plumbe. “Without going into too much detail, I believe that my role with the book has been hindered in recent months and information has not been flowing to myself as frequently as it used to reavardire the creation of the book. While I would

love to have posted daily with progress reports and updates I simply haven’t had the information to do so. I have also had people making complaints to me regarding other Kickstarter campaigns and with these not being addressed I don’t feel comfortable any more supporting one project while others are being unfairly ignored.” This certainly was a wake-up call to all backers. The last official update from Anthony was in October 2018. After that, only silence followed. The book is not completed and nothing was heard about it till today. Communication by Anthony Olver has dried up completely since then. His website playeronebooks.com is down and his Twitter account @player1books hasn’t got any up-



Photo: Giacomo Vernoni VIC-20 visual history Kickstarter campaign

dates for two years. Backers still comment on the project over at Kickstarter, mostly with mixture of apathy and gallows humor. But then again, there might be a light at the end of the tunnel for Mastertronic fans, as Chris Wilkins asked for interest in a book about the company and its games over at his Facebook page. So while the money for this project might be gone, there still might be a book about Mastertronic some day. We will see.

COLECO AND THE VIC20

Now one could argue that Player1Books did not have anything to show for as his campaign started. In fact, his joystick book was not finished at this point. But there are projects where Kickstarter newcomers deliver amazing products, as the following two examples show – both are books. One is “Commodore VIC20 – A Visual History” by Giacomo Vernoni and the other one is “Coleco – The Complete History” by Antoine Clerc-Renaud. Both were set out to deliver their respective books in 2016, and both projects followed through. The highest pledge available alongside the

Coleco book included a custom ColecoVision console including all necessary cables. Only five people were able to pledge for this, and there were indeed problems with the finalization of the custom design, with Antoine apologizing to backers in August 2017. He was also hoping to get this sorted out by the end of the same year. There are no newer updates to be found and as no one of the backers was complaining in the comments, either he refunded the five people or he indeed managed to pull that last pledge off. Antoine was taken by surprise by the interest in his story as well: He was aiming for 5.500 CAD for his project and ended up receiving around 18.000 bucks. Thankfully, he started researching for his project as early as 1996, collecting all the magazine articles, books and archive snippets that he could get hold on. He had a clear timeline, a solid structure and some chapters written, only some interviews to do and make everything ready within half a year. And sure enough, he did it! After the successful funding in late November 2015, the first draft was ready in early April 2016 and in August, the print-

Photo: Antoine Clerc-Renaud
Coleco Kickstarter campaign



ed books and the PDF versions shipped. Antoine kept his backers well informed about the progress along the way.

Giacomo Vernoni started his campaign in May 2016. The book should have been ready by November 2016, but he did not quite match that date. It took him a little bit longer to fulfill his promise due to the printer having a backlog, but he made clear and transparent that he did everything possible to get it done. And when a backer asked for more regular updates, he stated: “It sounded rude to me but maybe he’s right: you all bought a book in advance and prefer to have more frequent updates. Rest assured that all my free time is spent on this project.” So he delivered spreads of what the backers would get, despite having ruled out publishing spreads when his campaign started. Giacomo Veroni felt obliged to continuously earn the trust of his backers and delivered in early January 2017.

There are many things that can go wrong with creative projects. Some people underestimate the work necessary to complete their work. Life-changing events can take place that result in delay. Sometimes even a serious illness hinders project starters from fulfilling their dream – and without a doubt these projects are all the dream of their creators – to come true. But people get that, if it is communicated accordingly. Which brings us to the last project

that is the elephant in the room of Kickstarter retro projects which you cannot neglect. It is also an example what happens if not only ones life gets in the way of fulfilling a promise made, but if also communication from the creators dries up. Everything led to a stange toxic mix of backers feeling betrayed on one side, and the creators feeling wrongly accused. It is time to talk about *Stirring Dragon’s Unknown Realm*.

UNKNOWN REALM _____

When the campaign started in December 2016, it looked more than promising. A new fantasy role-playing game for PC and C64 that was inspired by one of the most iconic RPG series of the 80s everyone knows: *Ultima*. Bruce and Laura Gottlieb presented their idea with so much passion and showed a campaign that was so thought-through that it not only achieved its original funding goal, but exceeded it by far, luring in even Chris Huelsbeck to deliver some SID tunes as stretch goal. Instead of around 65.000 USD, the duo collected an astonishing amount of more than 126.000 USD, later adding some more to that with *Megafounder*. A true 8bit game that’s open-world, turn-based and exploration-focussed, with some nice glimpses of what was waiting for backers in the video and even including a detailed budget overview so everyone knew how much money was going to be spent on production and operation, physical



Photo: Stirring Dragon Games Unknown Realm Kickstarter campaign

rewards, fees, taxes and so on. Within a year, the game would be ready to ship, as it seemed to be well into development at that point already. “We have been working on this game full-time on the last few years”, Laura states in the video that still is online at the campaign site on Kickstarter. Moreover, Bruce adds: “We’ve also built our own custom 8bit game engine and created our own cartridge for the Commodore 64.” And: “We’ve turned to Kickstarter now to complete the remaining stages of production for Unknown Realm. The reality is: There is significant manufacturing and production cost involved with bringing a game of this scale to life. And that’s why we’re asking for your support.” It all sounded awesome, so the word spread around quickly and

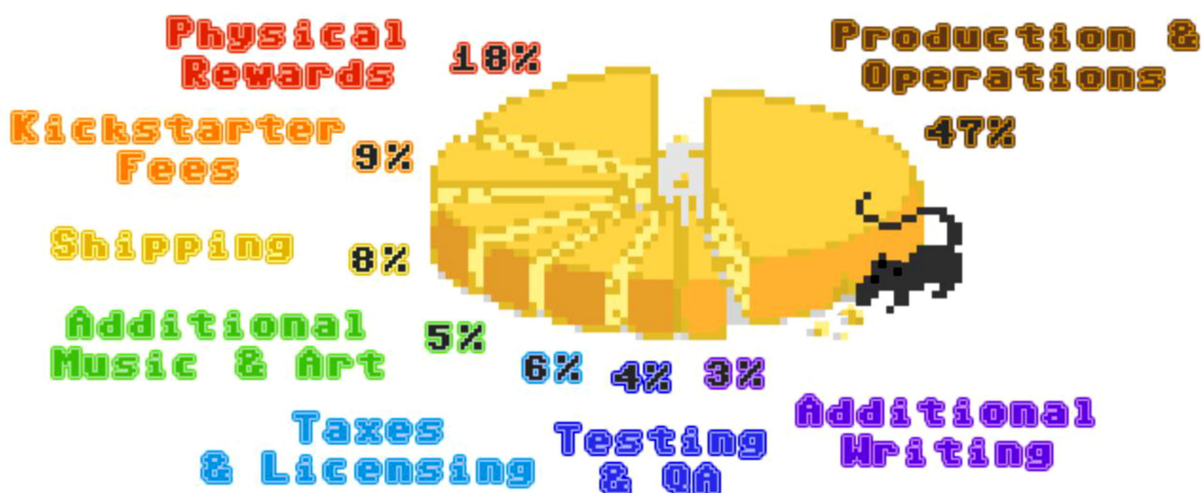
many C64 owners and RPG fans were more than glad to throw their money in the hat to see it come to life. After all, Bruce Gottlieb had shown a very early version of the game and its engine the Commodore Vegas Expo 2012. And as the project launched, the Kickstarter site stated the following status of the game: “Our custom built game engine is currently in an alpha state as is our enhanced retro PC platform that will be used to run the game on modern systems. We’ve created approximately 90 percent of the 1500 graphic tiles along with many of the NPC portraits for the game. We’ve completed approximately half of the game music and plan on collaborating with additional musicians to complete the remaining songs plus modern versions to fully

utilize our hybrid-soundtrack technology. The game itself is currently in a pre-alpha state and nearing feature completion.”

Although backers had little luck finding out more about the team via Google, there were some things to be discovered. According to Moby Games, Bruce was at least involved in three major game projects: He was an engineer for the PC adventure Obsidian that released in 1997, he was the lead programmer for NHL 2001 and senior software engineer for Traxxpad: Portable Studio that came out in 2007. Although his short bio in the campaign does not name these games, the publishers he worked for certainly match. So there was even less room for doubt. He knew what he was doing, everything was going full-steam ahead. And indeed it did. The updates kept rolling in at least once a month. In May 2017, Stirring Dragon posted: “Quest journals are now in production and expected to be finished by the end of May. Same

goes for the remaining tavern dice and Realm Stones.” But while in August everything seemed to be going according to schedule, there was radio silence until November 2018 when the first disruptive news hit backers: “By this point, you have probably figured out that our release plans need to change somewhat from our initial estimated delivery dates and schedule. [...] Our current plan is to release the game digitally in Spring 2018 and we anticipate shipping out physical rewards a few months after that.”

The next update came along in spring 2018, stating that it would even take longer because the young family had to move unexpectedly due to their landlord, but then did not after all, also because of their landlord’s decision. From then on, updates dropped in sparsely. Apart from a call for digital art submissions and a season’s greeting, nothing else was said that year about the progression of the game. Then in May 2019, they announced that they



would have to move after all, and the plan was “to have the digital game released within a year.” It is certainly understandable that such an event will postpone everything else you’re wanting to do, especially in America where there is no real social security like in many European countries that a family can rely on in such troubled times. But it is also understandable that backers asked for updates, not because they did not believe the duo, but because it seemed strange to get info once every five or six months. Even if it was as little as sharing how difficult it was to move a home in a short amount of time, or how to set up the dev equipment in the new home, some words about the tools Bruce used or really anything mildly related to the project. But nothing came along, until in January 2020, Stirring Dragon asked the provocative question: “Are you with us?” Now the first thing I thought after reading the headline was: Okay, it took them a while, but now I’m going to read some update on how they are and how far the game is. Of course I’m still with them!” But it turned out to be the strangest update by them so far. They right away stated that they scrapped an update that was more than seven pages long which they were going to post originally. Which is kind of an odd start to an update after half a year of silence. Reading on, one learned that they moved to Idaho and were adjusting to their new home there, which is fine. But

then they asked their backers for additional financing. The supporters would receive exclusive behind-the-scenes videos. “We need at least 50 percent of our backers to pitch in. We are relying on each of our fans to let us know that you’re with us on this”, the update stated. And it left many baffled, but kept on: “We would obviously love to have all of you share in this part of the journey



with us, and be able to show you more of the behind-the-scenes part of our work on this last leg, but we know realistically this plan won’t make everyone happy.” What a strange thing to say, really. Certainly the majority of the backers on Kickstarter would have loved regular updates because they longed for that for some time now. So making most people unhappy by not posting

updates because that would not make everyone happy seems like a illogical thing to say. And it certainly did not sit well with backers to read that they basically had to put in more money into the hat of the devs to get the updates they longed for, because life came in the way of the young family who moved to Idaho. It is indeed understandable that a small indie developer does not have



“access to the same funding options that larger studios have, nor the financial safety net of other revenue streams coming in to help us weather the storm”, as they put it. True. But after the sparse updates of the past and little to non progress shown or told about the game, is it really any wonder that some backers got furious if the first thing they read in the new year basically was:

We need more money so you will get updates and we might finish the game in 2020? There was no pie chart like the one in the original campaign stating how much additional money they needed nor a roadmap telling backers what next steps needed to be taken to get this game finished. It came across like a slap in the face even of the more patient fellows. After all, everyone received a free digital Yule Log disk for the C64 and there was some more music by Chris Huelsbeck to listen to. Now the really funny thing is that Stirring Dragon maintain a Twitter account where Bruce Gottlieb tweets about his work on the game every now and then. There are only glimpses to be seen, but it was at least something. If you made it through all the nuggets of wisdom which sometimes felt like most of the Kickstarter backers were rather ungrateful and toxic, that is. His account is currently private, so you can't take a look there, even if you wanted to.

From there on, the supporters of the game parted into two groups, basically: the backers who are not willing to spend additional money for the game, and the ones who continue to support Laura and Bruce and thus get to video-chat with them. If the communication with Kickstarter backers was neglected to this point, with backers going as far as asking for a refund, from now on the climate in the comments really got ugly with next to none positivity

spread at all. Intentional or not: It seemed that once Laura and Bruce collected the believers around them, they left the rest of the backers behind. An update was promised in mid January following the first behind-the-scenes one for the chosen few, but as of the third week of May 2020, nothing happened there. So what did the exclusive circle get to see and talk about? Well, it took me some questioning, but I got some info from a few participants. You got to see two parts of the CommVex video where Bruce first presented the game and answered some questions of the audience. At this point, as we learned from the video, he said that the game engine of this version was about 90 percent complete, but this was a whole other beast. In 2012, he was thinking of a disk-based game, not a cartridge one – so that statement, although it has made its way in several forums since then, can't be applied to the current game at all. Guild members, as Stirring Dragon calls them, learned also that Bruce is working on an auto-save feature and that we wonders if it was really worth all the trouble to invest a lot of time in a proprietary C64 cartridge format.

Well, I really wanted to hear Laura's and Bruce's side of the story. As early as January 2020, I asked Laura to answer some questions which I list below, with early April as deadline. I promised her that her answers would not be altered and if short-

ened, she would be noticed. But I did not receive any answer to my mail, sadly. Here are my questions:

1. Your campaign was an enormous success over on Kickstarter. How did you and Bruce feel after it was certain that you could proceed with your vision?
2. What were some of the major roadblocks along the way that led to the delay of the game?
3. Only a fraction of the reactions towards your campaign is visible online. How would you describe the community's reactions during the first announcement that it would take longer than expected to finish the game?
4. You chose not to disclose details via Kickstarter in the process of development. A decision that brought you a lot of criticism from some backers. So why not change that?
5. How do you cope with negative feedback in general and how does it affect your work?
6. A lot of backers have been asking for a status update on the game. As of now, this question remains unanswered. Can you tell roughly how far the project is right now?
7. How would you describe the cooperation with Chris Huelsbeck and Vanja Utne?
8. What do you wish for with regards to the communication with backers?
9. Do you read all the comments on your Kickstarter project page?
10. If you were to do it all over again,

would you? And why or why not?

I feel obliged to tell you that I backed this project. And I feel quite honestly abandoned as one of their original supporters. You might get why that is. But I also feel obliged to try and see things from their perspective as well. A lot of frustration has built up on both sides, but the emotional level of things only shows how invested backers and creators are into this game. There are arguments that I cannot get behind or understand, but one thing is for certain: There is a misunderstanding about what Kickstarter is. It is not a shop. None of the backers bought the game. With your donation, you supported an idea. No backer has the right to demand the source code nor other intellectual property of Stirring Dragon. No one invested in this, nor did their creative work become commons because of that. Always keep that in mind. Moreover, life can easily interfere with your plans, as we all have to experience during this ongoing global pandemic, showing us that there are more important things to care for. That the family had to move was a big step, even more so if you have a whole household to take with you. And from their standpoint, which they made very clear from the very beginning of the campaign, a sizable portion of the money collected would go into production and operation. Now it takes them longer than expected to follow through

with their plan of working on this game full-time plus the move that took a bite out of that cake for sure as well. In this situation, it most certainly did not help that people started to complain and bark at them in the comments or via mail. So if I could make one suggestion, it would be this: Both sides bury the hatchet and let's start over. This campaign and all the dust it stirred up is really about communication. Tell people how you feel, don't tell them why they are wrong. Get some common ground, post an update that will pacify the sceptical ones and reignite the passion of the ones longing for an update. I would love to see this one take a turn for the better. And in crowd funding, it's basically all about three very important things: communication, communication, communication. (bk)

FINAL NOTE

Just on the last day finishing this issue, Stirring Dragon Games announced via Kickstarter that they would have a virtual „coffee with the devs“ on Saturday, 30th May, starting at 8:30 AM pacific time. This is good news, but it's too late to cover this here. Hopefully, this will bring the aforementioned fresh start to bring devs and backers back together.



Photo: Stirring Dragon Games Unknown Realm Kickstarter campaign

SOMETIMES, YOU CAN BE LUCKY

TEXAS INSTRUMENTS BASIC COMPUTER 99/2



Photo: Joshua Grimm

Business is war. That was what Jack Tramiel said back in the day when he was at the helm of Commodore. During the home computer wars which he started, many companies took a financial hit. It even damaged Commodore itself, as would turn out in 1985, because the company was thriving on a razor-thin margin. However, it worked. And it forced several companies out of the market. Like Texas Instruments, who were busy keeping up with the price cuttings

of Commodore for their Model TI 99/4a. In early 1983, Texas Instruments were showing their new entry model 99/2 at the Winter-CES, but production was cancelled before it even came to market. Or was it? Every once in a while, this machine appears here and there, only few are known to exist. And if you saw one, you would probably never suspect it to be a pre-production model. It does not look like a prototype at all, and if you got one in a nice box with accompanying ads, what

would you think? Where would one even stumble upon such a treasure? Joshua Grimm was looking for nothing particular when a post on OfferUp caught his attention. An online marketplace similar to Craigslist. He was intrigued by an iMac and some other computing stuff that came in a box, and as he went there to fetch it, he bought the 99/2 along with it. Posting a photo of his haul on Reddit, Joshua got a lot of reactions – not only about the nice iMac, but many users were asking for more photos of the Texas Instruments

computer, being dwarfed in comparison to the Mac on the photo he took of his car's trunk. And that sure drew some attention. "It was purchased from one of the designers on the project", Joshua told KILOBYTE MAGAZINE. "I believe he was given a unit on completion of the project and held on to it for all these years. If you saw his collection of items, you wouldn't be surprised. He has taken care of so many cool pieces." It was only after Joshua posted the photos that he discovered just how rare this machine is, especially



complete in box. It looks as if this computer was hardly ever used. And the new owner wants to keep it that way. “ Joshua described the seller as a nice gentleman who seemed to be eager to tell his story. So I kindly asked him to forward my request for an interview, which he did. Sadly, that led to nothing until now. There certainly is a fascinating story to be told here, but that may be one for another day.

But even without the interview, this is an amazing find. It shows just how far Texas Instruments was into the production of the machine before pulling the plug. At the time, the

99/4 was selling for the price they had in mind for this one, 99 dollars. Competition with the VIC20 and the C64 was just too stiff for TI, who withdrew from the home computer market altogether in October 1983. Looking at the cardboard box and the styrofoam, you can tell that they already had invested seriously in everything needed for this one to go live. The clearest indicator is the computer itself: It’s clearly made from professional molds that were about to spew out tens of thousands of cases for this. At the backside of the unit, all ports are labeled – this is not your typical improvised pro-



Photo: Joshua Grimm



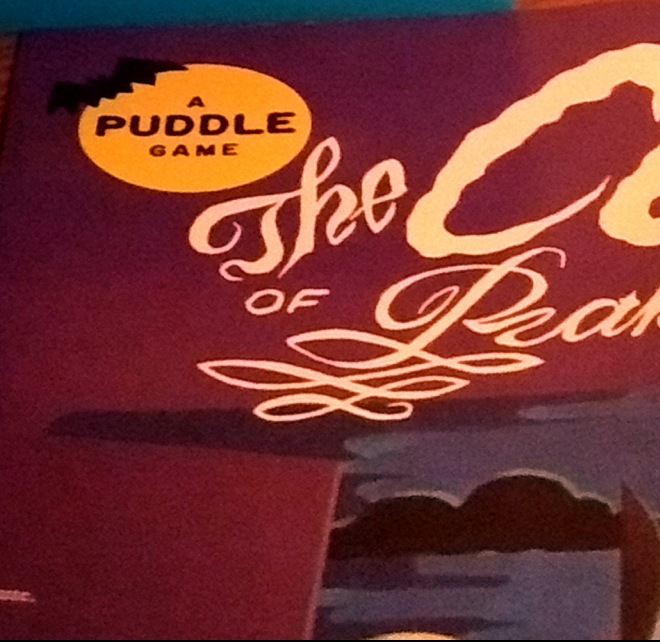
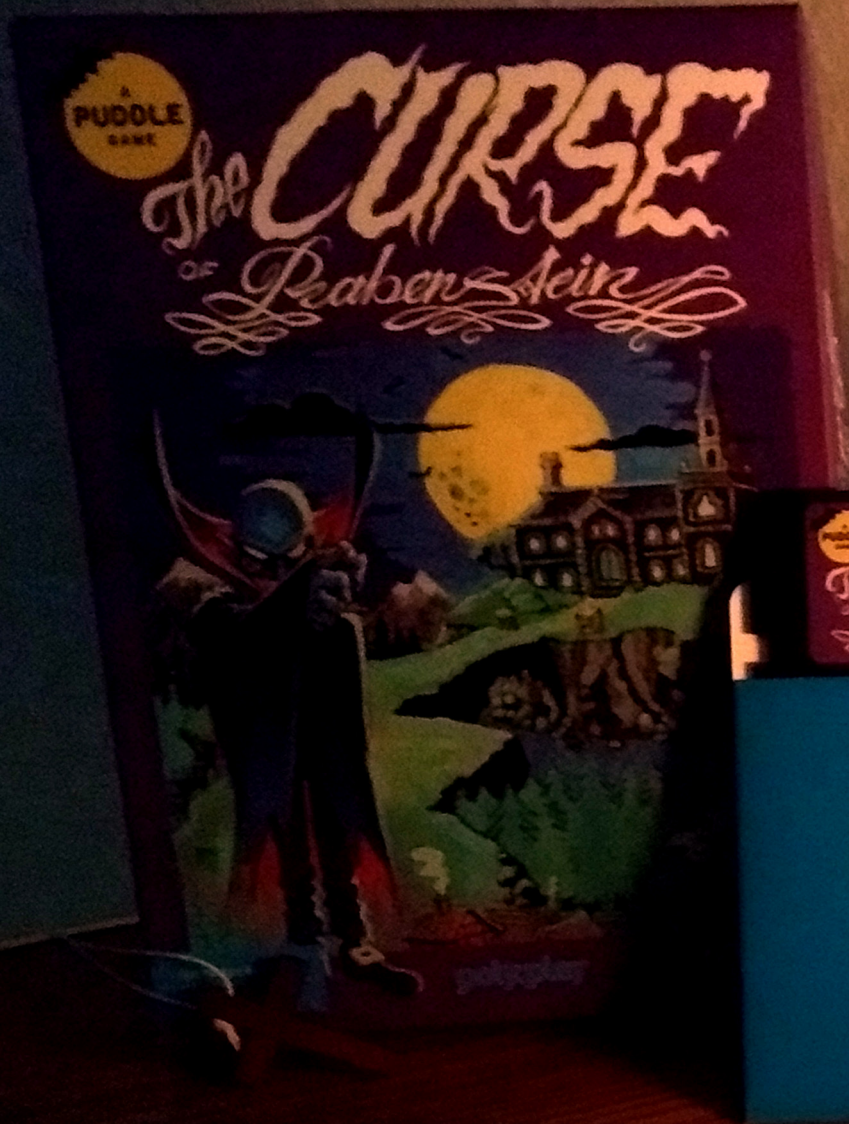
Photo: Joshua Grimm

prototype, this is the real deal. It certainly hurt TI to withdraw a product that was this far, but at the time, it certainly was best for them to take this hit and not build up any further losses by launching what would have probably not exactly been a winning horse. Computer & Electronics stated in their June 83 issue: “Known in some circles as the Great White Hope because of its cream-colored appearance, the 99/2 from Texas Instruments seems to have everything it takes to dethrone the current champ. [...] These obvious strengths, however, do not guarantee success. Sometimes it takes more than impressive stats to become a champ.” The article concluded: “Our guess is that the 99/2 has enough class to make a strong showing, but not

enough to dethrone the champ.” By that time, the price of this computer almost certainly had to be reduced to 69,95 or even less mere months after it would have come out. It was an interesting idea for TI to branch out their line of computers around the 99/4a, but it was hopeless. All that remains is a small computer with great expectations put into it, that did not sell at all or in very limited quantities. It’s next to impossible to find one of these nowadays. But someday, as proven by Joshua Grimm, you can get lucky. Not everything is happening on ebay or large auction houses where pieces of computer history move for five or even six figures. Sometimes, it’s the small ads that make collector’s happy. Even today. (bk)

VAMPIRE HUNTER

THE CURSE OF RABENSTEIN (C64 ET AL.)



IONS
S. L. Over loading

Commodore Amiga
Insert the game diskette. Rabenstein will auto-execute.
Atari ST



When talking about Creatures of the night, most people will not think of KISS but rather Vampires. And without a doubt there was one man that inspired our fantasy with his written fiction: Bram Stoker. His character Dracula has become the prototype for vampires ever since Stoker published his now famous book with the same name in 1897. Not only did he inspire books, but also many video games, some of which tried to recreate the atmosphere of horror and realism that the original did so well. Castle of Terror is among the well-known, yet frustrating examples when it comes to adventure games with a fitting setting. Both, the novel as well as the adventure game from 1984, have without a doubt been inspirational to Stefan Vogt and his new adventure “The Curse of Rabenstein”, which is available for free or as boxed copy from Polyplay for many 8bit and 16bit platforms. I took a closer look at the C64 version and the first thing you will notice about this compared to his earlier work (Hibernated 1) is that it features some nice graphics. The version for the ZX Spectrum does not, but he thought about a nice little graphical addition that will still make this game look nice. The one thing missing from all versions alike is a musical tune that would underline the atmosphere. But you can't have it all, can you? Also, this game was not made with The Quill, but using DAAD. But enough with the



programming tools and on to the game itself. It takes place in 1862, 35 years before “Dracula” was first published. You are a doctor on his way from Zurich to Strassbourg and take a short break in the Black Forest – or so you think. And it doesn’t take long for strange things to happen: while stretching your legs and strolling through the woods like one does on a dark and foggy night, you experience a very strange encounter: the ghosts of two Roman legionaries pass right through you and if you have not guessed it, you can now be certain that strange things are going on here. So you follow a path that leads to a village the coachman can’t

find in his map and so it begins. The Curse of Rabenstein is as straightforward as it gets for an adventure. The descriptions of everything you see in the current scenery you’re in are very detailed. You can examine many things, talk to different persons and you will understand what is expected of you rather quickly. For me, everything was very clear except for one occurrence. So here is a vital tip for you: not only can you talk to people, but also show things to them. Think about this when you’ll meet a certain person in this game that offers you help. And don’t spend too much time figuring out how to light a certain path you



might think will let you progress – it won't.

The dense atmosphere and great writing make for a very pleasant and entertaining experience. The style of the writing is even appropriate for the epoch of bourgeois realism depicted here: good and bad don't come in various shades of grey.

The reasonable individual, doing the ethical thing, will prevail. And the setting, taking place in a small village, radiating a mixture of feeling at home and yet in a strangely foreign place at the same time, also fits very well into this. Too bad the game does not take very long to get through once you got the hang of

it. I counted 20 different pictures of settings. So although it is recommended to draw a map, you won't need one to remember where to do what. This is mainly due to the game being neatly arranged. You won't have to go back from screen 18 to screen one to pick something up that only then spawns there, thus forcing the player to spend more time loading settings and prolonging the overall experience needlessly. No, Sir. And also, as mentioned before, because you are told what to do either quite clearly or you can deduce what is expected of you by pure logic. And what more can you ask of an adventure? Right.



There are no all-too difficult puzzles here and thanks to great descriptions, you will not get stuck for too long. Just remember to examine everything and take whatever you can carry with you, because you will need it.

There is also a counter that tells you how many turns you used, but it is kind of confusing because I could not determine whether it is there to nag me or has any influence of the outcome of the game. I for one felt rather dumb after having a three-digit count in there for having tried a lot of things (including the game's reaction to swear words, of course) while having only seen six settings. But it might inspire other people to find the shortest way possible to get to the end and compare their turns like highscores. Adventures and speedruns – do these two things even get into the same sentence? Well, who knows.

So whom is this game for? Quite obviously, if you are a fan of interactive fiction, you will enjoy *The Curse of Rabenstein* very much. But if you have not played many adventures yet and want to know what the fuzz is all about, this is exactly the right game for you to delve into the realm of computerized fiction. *Rabenstein* is well-presented, available for nearly every oldschool platform you can think of except of maybe calculators. It is not frustrating at all, very well written and won't take a week to play through. In fact, you can do it in under two

hours in your first sitting, reading all descriptions, admiring the graphics and following the clues given to you, using logic and the things everyone knows about vampire stories. And if you like those long-teethed suckers, the game has a nice little ending for you that will remind you of *Stoker* and perhaps even raise a smile from you.

If you buy the physical copy from Polyplay, you will get the game on disk for the system of your choice, with the C64 and Plus/4 versions combined on two sides of one floppy disk, together with a nice poster, a wooden crucifix like the one you'll find in the game, a sticker, a SD card with the disk image and a nice manual that tells you everything you need to know. And with a height of 21,5 centimeters, the purple box will fit nicely next to many other adventure titles in your collection like the ones from *Rainbird*.

I personally like the attention to detail that went into this game, allowing for an immersive experience. The only thing that kind of disturbs me here is the count of my turns. The game would be better off without it in my humble opinion, but that's all I can say about what's not to my liking. You should definitely give this game a try. Go over to Stefan's Twitter [@8bit_era](#) to learn more about the making of the game and visit his [itch.io](#) site to grab your virtual copy or go over to Polyplay to get physical. (bk)

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52 BACK TO THE PAST

INTO HINTERLAND WORLD (C64)



GEM AWARD
2020

This game came out of nowhere.

There was no preview, not an announcement, it just was released. And what a pleasant surprise it was that Abyss Connection had for C64 users. Into Hinterland World is a horizontal Shmup that takes probably the most inspiration by IO, but delivers a unique playing experience with an interesting story to it. So let's begin with that:

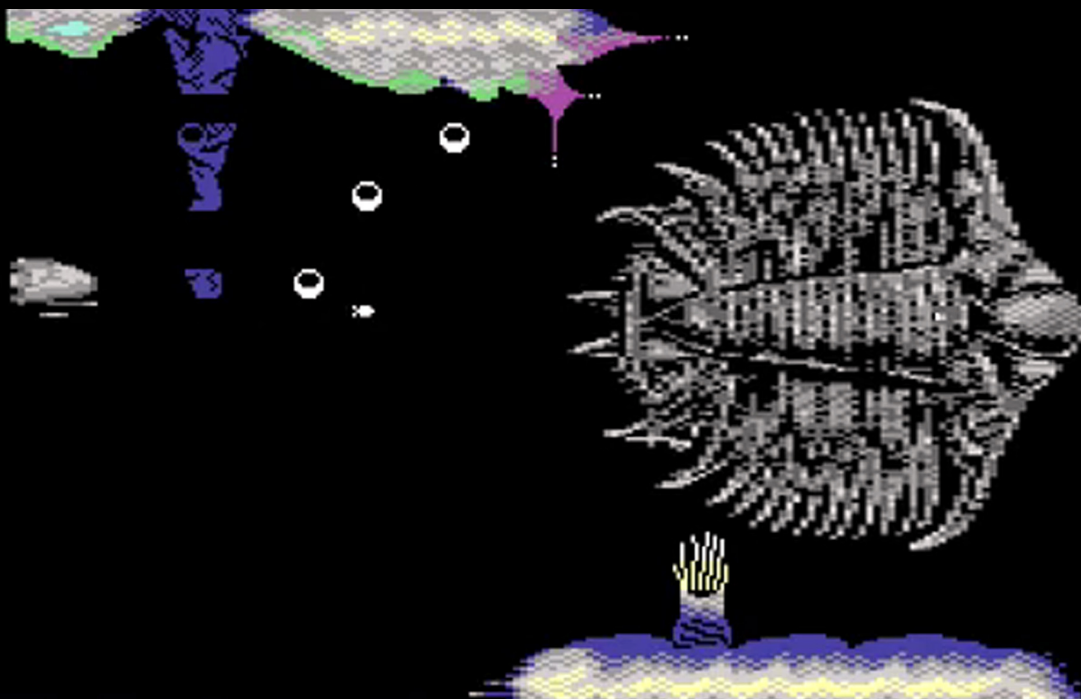
In the year 2085 90 percent of all lifeforms on earth became extinct by environmental catastrophies. The planet was covered with epidemics and diseases. Mankind was in danger like never before in its history. A small group of scientists concluded that the only solution for these problems could be found in the past. So they began to collect and analyze gene material from all geological eras. And now you have

to go back in time and collect all energy capsules. Oh, and in case you are wondering: No, you are not going back in time in a DeLorean. Your vessel of choice is called the "D14 Zeitgeist".

You start off in a narrow pathway without any weapons. It's the timewarp tunnel you have to pass through without touching any of the walls and avoid laser gates. It's not the easiest start of any game, but it's not too difficult either. However, it might get frustrating to die at the same spot towards the end again and again. But don't throw your joystick away yet. It's the first and last time you'll have to pilot through this timewarp. And the levels waiting for you are not colorful, but can also be destroyed for the most part if you have the right weapon. Haven't seen this feature in a Shmup on the

C64. All your weapons have German names: Irrlicht, Lichtmeer, Nordlicht, Lichtfinger, Flankenschlag, Wirbelgleiter, Vollstrecker. Only the last one is able to destroy nearly every in your sight, including the background of the level. But as you find only one or two energy capsules per level, you won't see much of that at all – only if you play a trained version. At the end of each level, a boss is waiting for you. And boy, are they large. This part brings back memories of Katakis. Fight against a giant jelly fish in Cambrian, 542 million years ago. Then a massive Trilobite in the Ordovician 488 million years ago. After that, the Silurian follows, 444 million years ago. And another big Trilobite is waiting for you at the end of that level. If you manage to get through this one, your text time warp mission will just tell you: Gene

flow. In this dark underwater world, what seems to be an amphibic robot machine waits for you. And then you're off to the final stage: Devonian, 416 million years ago. Here you have to fight against a giant fish head, after which you'll progress to Cretaceous 66 million years ago and – well, it ends on a bitter tone. Into Hinterland World is a very special Shmup, delivering a unique and atmospheric setting that is accompanied by a great soundtrack by fieserWolf, background and Henne. You will need some patience for this game, but it is worth your while. Too bad it only has six levels. Well, five really, if you don't count the first timewarp flight, which I'm inclined to consider only a warm-up. It's so colorful and imaginative, so strange and yet so familiar that you can't allow yourself to not play it. (bk)



FIX IT FELIX JR. (C64)



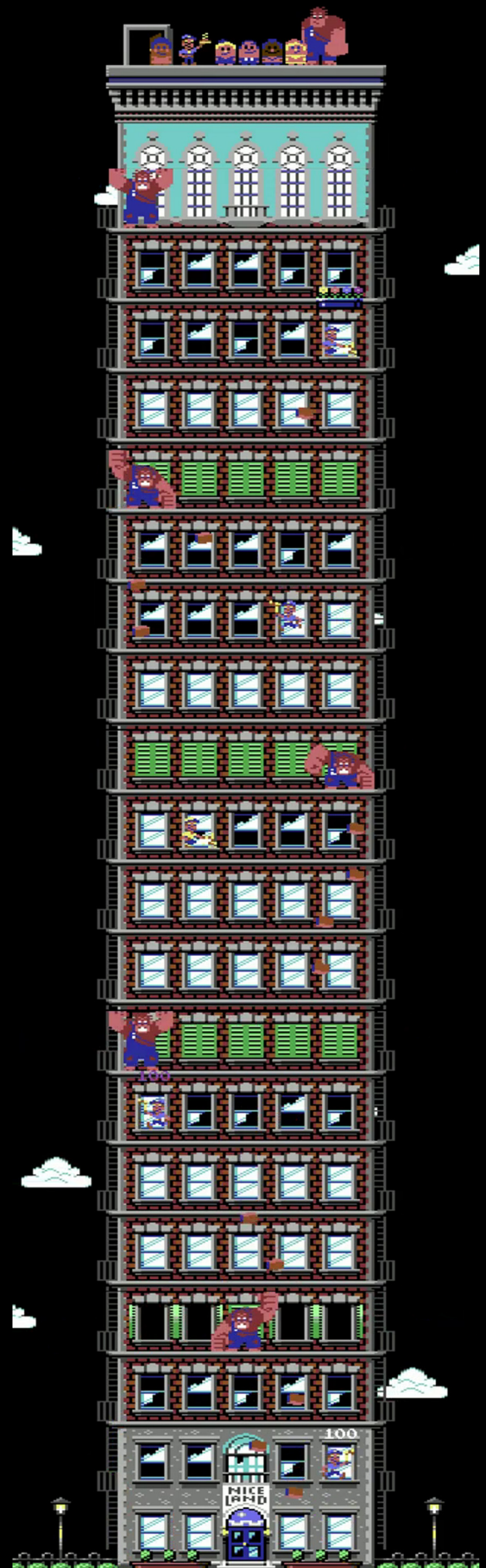
Well, that's one hell of a nice version C64 users got here. Fix It Felix Jr. on the breadbin is a real treat, including lovely graphics, speech samples that are actually not only understandable, but next to crystal clear. But maybe the nicest thing about this game is that it is offered on itch.io by brokenbytes for whatever you feel like paying for it. Even noting, if that's your choice. However, Fix-It Felix Jr. is a Charity project. The game is free to download, but every donation will go straight to UNICEF, which is a really nice thing to do. And within 24 hours, brokenbytes collected and donated 750 GBP – this is impressive for a digital only C64 game, even

more so as it can be downloaded for free.

For those who are not familiar with the background of a game: It started as a mock-up in the Disney movie “Wreck-it Ralph”. Good old grumpy Ralph was the antagonist in this fictional videogame from 1982 that was a smash hit, but led not exactly to a graceful celebrity status for poor Ralph. It's clearly inspired by Donkey Kong gameplaywise. Instead of barrels, Ralph stomps bricks out of a building which Felix, controlled by the player, has to avoid while fixing all the broken windows and thus advancing to the next stage. The skyscraper has five levels, after which Felix will reach the rooftop and is



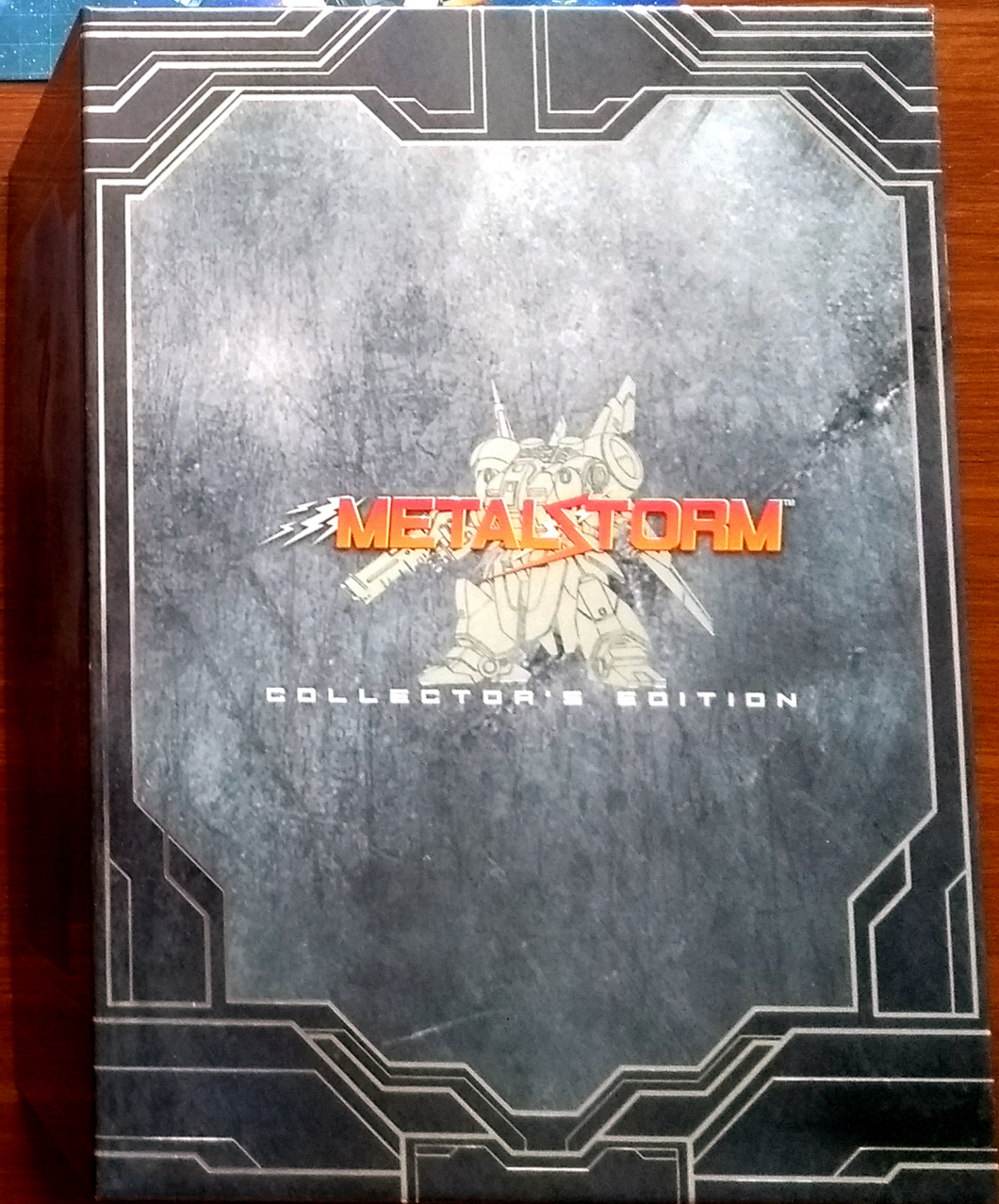
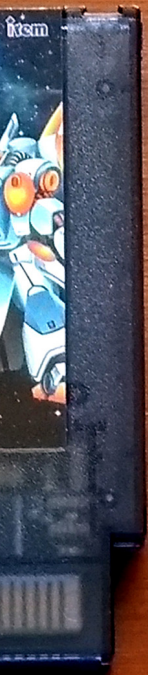
celebrated by the thankful residents just before they push Ralph over the edge – and the game starts over with increased difficulty. A classic high-score game that has been released on the NES and Mega Drive before years ago. This version really lets the C64 shine thanks to the fine SID tune and speech samples mentioned earlier. When you hear things like “Hey, you moved my stump!”, “I’m gonna wreck it!”, “Fix it, Felix!” and “I can fix it!”, it just makes you feel great. And it’s a clue as to who is the author. His last game, Planet Golf, also featured some rather impressive speech samples, while the game itself divided players into those who liked the physics-emphasized gameplay with rather primitive graphics and the ones who could not get themselves to play that for very long. Here, Antonia Savona programmed a hit and must-play for every C64 owner out there. It’s just fun to play, easier to progress in than Donkey Kong and has so many nice touches to it. Like the birds flying by which you have to avoid. Or flower boxes that will hinder your jumps to the next story. The graphics by Steven Day, better known as STE’86 amongst C64 sceners, and the catchy tunes by Saul Cross add enormously to the overall design and make for a very entertaining game that not only your children will like. You will enjoy the hell out of it, too. So roll up your sleeves, grab your hammer, hear the cry of those poor residents and go fix it, Felix! (bk)



COLLECTIBLE

METALSTORM (NES)







STORM
GUNNER
M-308
CUSTOM
HEIGHT 3.0 M
WEIGHT 1.5 t
G-REV SYSTEM
EQUIPED

In 29 years, a lot can happen. That's nearly three decades. In this time span, no less than six console generations have emerged. The widespread use of magnetic media got obsolete and even optical media seems to be fading away slowly, but certainly. And it just so happens that it took Irem 29 years to get out their international release of a game that debuted in 1991 on the Famicom in Japan: *Metalstorm*. Originally only released in the land of the rising sun and in 1992 also in North America, this gem of a game never got a PAL release. High time to change this, thought Retrobit and teamed up with Irem to put out a big box collector's edition including the game for the NES – for all regions. So if you haven't heard about the game until now, you are forgiven. But from now on, you have to know that it exists! We bought (!) the big collector's edition and took a look at the stuff you get for your money, including the game itself.

UNBOXING

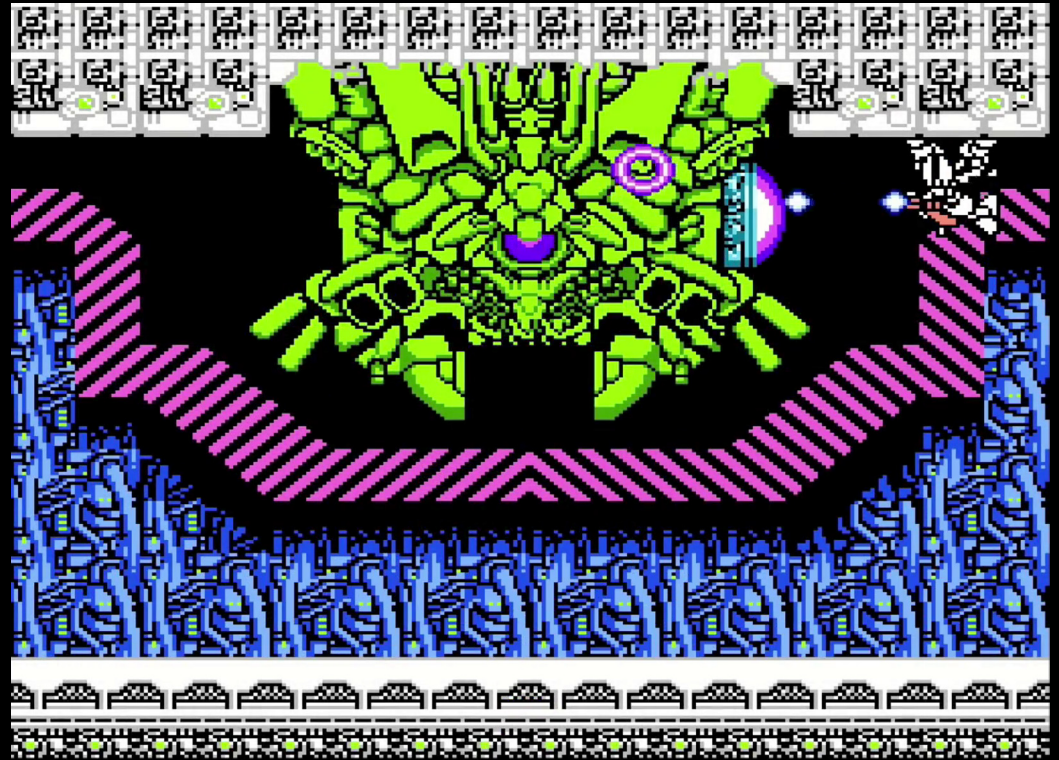
So at first glance, the box seems to be pretty unspectacular, to be honest. A white sleeve is covering up all the good stuff inside. On it is the giant picture of the M-308 Gunner, an all-purpose combat robot with a specially equipped gravity control device that happens to be the main protagonist of the game. But it doesn't look very special. In fact, it comes across rather cheap, so the best you can do is open it up

and see what's underneath this box that could also easily be mistaken for some type of DVD box with an anime series you've never heard of. Once you lifted the cover, things start to look a whole lot nicer: A greyish box with marble grain, silver linings around the edges and an embossed *Metalstorm* logo await. Once you've seen that, you'll never put the cheap white sleeve over it again, I bet! Now this is a box that will catch some attention in your collection. It fits nicely either next to your loose cartridges or next to your other boxed games. It just comes in the right size to fit both, which is very thoughtful. After opening this box up and removing the thin tissue paper that stands between you and the stuff inside, you are greeted by a small and boxed figure of the M-308 Gunner that fits nicely next to your unboxed amiibos, if you happen to have any. You will notice that the painting job on it is average, but you would not expect the quality of Neca or Hot Toys here, right? Right. Next to the cute robot you'll also find what is probably one big pin of it that would pull your shirt down if you'd actually ever wear it. And then you notice that all of this is inside another box that you can lift up to get to the game in box itself, which rests neatly below all of that stuff. This is sealed and looks like they took the original boxart of the North American version, put in some Konami box-flair, polish it up a bunch, emboss the logo, and make

you wonder why there are only so few new games coming out for the NES today. This is really nicely done, and a look inside will finally reveal the game cartridge in a transparent blue case (an exclusive for the PAL region, color might vary in North America), a full-color manual and a poster with – you guessed it – the M-308 gunner on it. They even thought of placing the good old styrofoam inside that alle the original NES games had back in the day. Well, not the environmentally best way to do it nowadays, but it's all about authenticity here. The manual is printed on a thick paper that feels well-made, but the two-sided poster has some grainy look that has either to do with their source material or

they were actually deliberately going for some kind of retro look here. I am not entirely sure if I like this or not, but since I'm not going to hang it up somewhere, I will not spend much thought on it. Just be aware that it might look a tad different from what you'd expect. And finally, there is an envelope that holds your authenticity certificate and tells you which number of the 3.000 made copies of this set you call your own. For all of this, you'll have to pay around 70 USD or EUR. Considering that standard NES carts cost about that back in the day and also taking into account what you get here for your money, I think that this is absolutely worth the price if you collect NES stuff.





GAME ON

This cartridge will play on your original NES as well as a Retron HD, if you happen to have only that, and also most (if not all) other emulator consoles. But no matter on which hardware you choose to play this game on, you'll instantly wonder why it never got a PAL release. I've got no clue either. Anyway, let's start with the story: It's 2501 and mankind had ample time to finally make their greatest wish come true: Turn planet Pluto into a gigantic laser weapon to defend against – well, whatever might be out there. But behold, something goes wrong and the laser gun turns against our own solar system, targetting Earth. So the player takes control over the M-308 gunner and gets into the machinery to turn on its self-destruct system

before it can fire. It's a good thing that even 500 years into the future, large weapons take like forever to power up. Makes you kind of wonder if they would really be any good in case they had to be relied on to work as intended, but anyway. What makes this game stand out from the beginning is the intro, explaining the story, as well as the graphics and sound that were really impressive for the NES even in 1991. The player sprite is quite big, well animated and goes up in an anime-like explosion once you take a severe hit. And you will see that a lot. Thankfully, there is a password system so that you can skip an already completed level the next time you play the game. It's a tough game that will challenge you to learn certain enemy patterns like in Mega Man, however it's not

as frustrating as Capcom's Blue Bomber is at times. And after all, the really clever concept of changing the gravity so you can run on the ceiling brought something new to the NES conceptwise. And this idea ages very well. Moreover, this game is kind of self-explanatory: Even without reading the manual, you'll rather quickly figure out what to do and how to progress at certain areas, as the game gives you incentives with items you'll first think of as unreachable – so you mash the buttons until you change gravity. And after that Eureka moment, the game really shifts from another nice Run'n'gun to an awesome experience that's unlike any other game on the system really.

Thankfully, Retrobit chose the Japanese version for their international release, as this comes with a nicer looking color scheme than the US version and the intro without the atmosphere would simply not be the same. All in all, this is a must-have for NES collectors, if only in the much cheaper standard version.

NEXT UP

Retrobit is already working on another Irem game that did not get an international release: Hammerin' Harry. In this fun action-platformer you must guide carpenter Harry and his trusty hammer through five action-packed levels. Currently, the company does not state a publishing date and it is unclear whether it might get a release in 2020 at all. (bk)



DEATH PLANET (GAME BOY)



Does *Death Planet* remind you of something? Just the name itself? Okay, maybe this does ring a bell: You fly with your spaceship through a tunnel towards the center of a giant space station (“That’s no moon!”) to destroy it. Still no idea? Well, me neither. I mean concept-wise, who could have thought of that before? It’s not like there are any shiny robots with trashbin-looking companions in there or people living so far in the future that 70s

hairstyles are actually a thing again. Seriously, though: The story will not win any awards for its creativity. Which is fine, this is an action game after all. But why bother presenting us with a whole screen about a story of a galactic empire and a rebel alliance? The opening could just have been: “Death Planet. I know what you think of now, and it’s exactly right. So why not press any button and get on with it? Right! Still reading? Press a button NOW!”

But where *Death Planet* really shines is thankfully the gameplay. This is a nice little 3D flight game where you have to avoid hurdles and different heights before crashing into them. A shadow on the ground and two notches at both sides of the screen will help you determine your position as looking at you ship from behind is not always the best way to progress. And boy this is fast: we're racing through the Death St – I mean Planet with whopping 60fps. And things get difficult rather quickly after level 1. But the controls

are thankfully precise. And inverted, like you'd expect from any flying game. If you don't like it, you can also fly up and down by pressing A or B. And what else makes this game stand is the awesome soundtrack by Thomas Jansson. If for no other reason, his tunes alone will keep you wanting more and more. And the game is for free over at itch.io – here is the link. But you can also order a real cartridge for your trusty old Game Boy over at Catskullgames – you'll find them here. Nice job everyone! (bk)

Finding the game too difficult? Then it's a good thing you've got unlimited lives for these five levels. So the only thing standing between you and the ending is your ability to cope with frustration. Yay!





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