

review: Digital Arcade Series

by Ivan

Type: Arcade

Publisher: Digital Eclipse Software (800/289-3374)

Retail Price: \$49.95 per game

Street Price: \$26.95 per game

Requires: 256-color Mac (but will not run on the following: Color Classic, LC, LCII, Performa 200/400), 2 MB free RAM, 2 MB free HD space per game, 3 MB free RAM, System 6.0.7 or later

Protection: None

lashback: 1984 or “How I spent my misspent youth.”

In 1984, I was 16, in my last year of high school, and scheduled to take the PSAT exam (a sort of practice test for the SAT exam). On the day of the exam, I arrived early, so I went over a few blocks to a corner candy/magazine store where I frequently played Star Wars, my favorite coin-op arcade game. I plunked in a quarter and proceeded to kill time. But on that day, something special happened. On that day, I merged with the machine. I didn't just play the game, I was the game. I had achieved something akin to that rare state of being that Hindu gurus spend lifetimes searching for.

I had always been good at this game, but now I was great. I reached my first ever multiple millions score, and passed level after level. Time also passed. Despite my status in arcade nirvana, I kept an eye on my watch. I started maybe an hour before the test. Soon, there was only a half hour to go. Then just 10 minutes. 5 minutes. No minutes. OK, so I'll be a few minutes late, I thought — people are still just filing in anyway. Two hours later, I had missed the exam completely, but I was still playing on that same quarter. As Darth Vader once said, “The circle is complete. Now I am the master.” Not long after that, the Star Wars machine was hauled off (due to lagging profit margins, I'm sure) and replaced with a Sinistar machine, which became another of my favorites. I plugged almost as much time and money into the new machine as I had the old.

Obviously, this article isn't about Star Wars or Sinistar, and it's certainly not about my

missed PSAT exam. However, it is very much about wasted youth. I, and others my age, were the first arcade generation. We remember the very first arcade games as toys from our youth, and as we matured, those games grew more complex and challenging. We threw away countless hours and plugged untold quarters into those games. It was a relationship whose bonds were even stronger (and stranger) than the one we had with television. Like any other generation, as we grew older, we finally gave up the toys of our youth (and passed them on to the next generation of zoneheads), but always kept a place for them in our hearts. Later, we would look back and fondly remember those toys. Though many of us have continued to play computer games, which continue to grow increasingly complex, it's just not the same. Those coin-ops were almost like a drug addiction. Now, we're more mature, more sophisticated. We have jobs and families and responsibilities. For us, computer games remain a wonderful source of entertainment, but we don't waste our lives on them (I hope!). But there's always that glimmer of nostalgia. . .

eeding and capitalizing on that nostalgia, Digital Eclipse has reintroduced three classic arcade games. Now you can play Defender, Joust, and Robotron, all by Williams Entertainment, on your Mac, in their absolutely original incarnations. These games are not cheesy reprogrammed versions, but the actual originals running in full emulation on the Mac. Thanks to a brilliant emulator, they run at blazing speed with their original colors, sounds, and action exactly reproduced. OK, I admit that by today's standards, these games are hopelessly outclassed. We are after all talking about 16-color, low-res graphics. But that's the whole point: these are the original games, just as we remember them. While

none of these game are among my top favorites, I still spent enough money on each of them to remember them fondly. And even by today's standards, they're still tough, challenging games.

For those of you whose memories need a little refreshing, or for those of you who weren't around to remember, here are the games in a nutshell. . .

Defender. Most arcade games are variations on just a few simple themes, and can be traced back to common progenitors. Space Invaders was the first bottom-to-top-shooting-at-aliens game. Donkey Kong was the first platform game. PacMan was the first maze game, etc. Well, Defender is the granddaddy of all sideways scrolling games. There've been a couple of shareware versions of this (in fact, one of the first games I ever played on the Mac was Defender), but none of them stand up to the true original. In Defender, your goal is to save humanity from marauding alien invaders. If you fail, the humans are carried off and converted into mutants, which return to join the attack against you. Dozens of different enemies and a 7-key layout made Defender incredibly challenging (IMO, anyway), with fast & furious action. Fortunately, all the games in the Digital Arcade series include keyboard customization, so if you sucked at it then (like me) because of the complicated key layout, you might finally be able to get that high score you always dreamt of.

Joust. Joust is a unique game that doesn't quite fit into any of the conventional themes. In Joust, you control a flapping, ostrich-like bird with a mounted rider, where your goal is to use your jousting pole to knock similar riders off their mounts. A fairly simple concept, but complicated by gravity and momentum, platforms that serve as both landing stages and obstacles, pools of lava wherein live lava trolls which reach up and grab low flying riders, and, of course, the ever popular "Unbeatable?" Pterodactyl, whose unnerving screech is a harbinger of certain death. (Back then, I never did hear of anyone beating the pterodactyl. But while playing this version in two-player mode by myself, I once saw the pterodactyl somehow destroyed by the inactive second player. I haven't been able to duplicate the feat.)

obotron. Robotron is another game that doesn't quite fit into any of the conventional themes. In Robotron, you're dropped into a flat arena, where your goal is to save humanity (again) from marauding robots gone berserk. Fail, and the humans are either flattened by hulking steamroller-like robots, or turned into mutants (a la Defender) who join the attack against you. The game includes a wide variety of enemies which completely surround you on all sides at all times, making for a very fast paced game, since there's nothing between you and destruction but your gun. The original game was played via dual joystick control — one joystick for movement, the other for firing — which gave excellent control over the character. And you needed it, being constantly surrounded. Unfortunately, that makes this particular game slightly weaker on the Mac, since keyboard play doesn't allow the same kind of twitchy response that Robotron's dual joysticks required. But otherwise, it's still a great trip down memory lane and a dangd tough game.

An Industry Like Any Other. These three games also have one other very interesting thing about them. Since they're 100-percent ports of the original games, they also include all the back-end operations that we, the players, never got to see. Options to make the games easier or more difficult, to change the attract mode message, to wipe all the high scores, and also stuff like time-to-money ratios and other accounting information used to keep track of profits.

The Star Wars machine I mentioned earlier was presumably hauled off because I could monopolize it for hours on one quarter, and the store owners weren't making any money off it. But shortly before that, I came in one day to find the game slightly harder. A couple of specific variables had been changed. While I was dumb enough to miss my PSAT exam for playing the game, I was at least smart enough to realize that some option in the guts of the machine had been deliberately changed. Now, years later, I'm absolutely fascinated with what's revealed in these games. It's a look behind the scenes at the entire coin-op industry, which clearly is a business like any other, in business for one thing and one thing only, to make money. It's almost worth the price of any one of the three games just to see this stuff. Of course, you can also use these options to cheat your pants off, and that's not a bad thing either.

[ottom Line](#). If you're like me, and you wasted half your youth playing coin-ops, you'll almost certainly get a kick out of these games. Unfortunately, they're all sold separately at nearly thirty bucks a pop, which is kind of steep for a nostalgia trip, especially when you could buy a copy of Marathon and several network serial numbers with the money. But if you don't mind the price hit, I say go for it. If you weren't around back then to remember the games, they still offer pretty intense arcade action that any twitch will enjoy.

[What Next, Digital Eclipse?](#) Out of curiosity, I called Digital Eclipse to see what plans they had for future ports. According to the rep I spoke with, right now they're resting from the effort of porting the first three games, and preparing to do PC versions (score one for our side — it's always nice when we Mac folks get something first). After that, who knows. "Any chance of seeing Sinistar?" I asked. The answer was that they could do it, but haven't definitely decided to. They are aware that it's a hot topic of conversation on the net. For those of you who are dying to see Sinistar ported, you should call or write Digital Eclipse directly at any of the addresses below. Maybe if we flood them with mail, they'll decide it's worth the effort.

Pros

- Really brilliant emulator makes for games as fast as the originals
- Back end game options offer a fascinating look behind the scenes at the coin-op industry
- Customizable keyboard layouts

Cons

- Not up to today's graphic standards, but who cares?
- Kinda pricy at close to \$30 a pop