

MG: Fair Game

by Ross Scott Rubin

Arcade Packs: The Good, the Cheap, and the Jerky

For those of us too old to remember Abba and the Apple II (no, it wasn't a biblical movie), few experiences were as delightful as taking a couple of quarters down to the neighborhood arcade. In those halcyon days, imagination was a commodity and MIPS a sacred resource. The games that dominated the era have become the stuff of legend — Defender, Asteroids, Missile Command, Galaxian, Tempest, Centipede and others. Every cash cow bore a new genre. The time when coin-ops furiously cloned each other in the pursuit of creating the ultimate mutilation marathon was a blissful eternity away.

Time Simulator. As you read in this space last year, Microsoft sought to capitalize on all the nostalgia from the days when DOS users had to issue about 47 commands to delete a directory by releasing Microsoft Arcade for Windows (this was obviously before they hired all the high-priced marketing talent to come up with such compelling monikers as "Bob"). Arcade was a faithful if uninspiring recreation of five Atari classics — Asteroids, Missile Command, Centipede, Tempest, and Battle Zone. For all its flaws, we were disappointed there wasn't a Mac version. Now we're disappointed that there is.

Microsoft has proven that their world-class development environment is capable of taking any Windows product and making it worse on the Mac. Compared to Microsoft Arcade, Word 6.0 is a zephyr. This might be almost excusable if the Redmond company was trying to port something that had been hot in the arcades for the past decade or so. Most of these games, however, go back 15 years! That's 4 BM (Before Macintosh).

Arcade is also proudly unaccelerated for Power Macintosh. We can see the Intel ads now. "If you think Pentiums can't divide, check out how we handle Centipede."

If longing for these Atari classics is really getting to you and you can't find any 7800 systems at the local flea market, take solace in that some games have survived Visual C++ better than others. Battle Zone was such a turtle in the arcades that it hasn't suffered much, and Missile Command's graphics are so clunky that the game's action remains intact. But even Asteroids, whose vector graphics seem laughable when compared to Ambrosia Software's Maelstrom (or even the old Megaroids that ran on the fat Mac) creaks in Arcade.

By far, the most horrendous port is Tempest, which is too jerky to be playable. Compared to the classic freeware game Arashi, Tempest is an embarrassment. You better scoop up your copy of Arashi now before Atari's legal eagles soar down on the rest of the online services and ftp sites and snatch it up. Or maybe Microsoft will simply acquire Arashi and sell Tempest to WordPerfect.

[Eclipsing Microsoft](#). Now, before all you Microsoft fans (please, not everyone at once) defend Arcade, we point your attention toward Digital Eclipse (510/547-6101), a company previously known for making PowerBooks faster. The company has acquired rights to three Williams classics — Defender, Robotron, and Joust — and recreated them for the Mac. Defender and Robotron were the ultimate twitch games of their generation. It was amazing how people could even remember where all seven buttons were in Defender, much less use them to “roll over” the machine.

While Microsoft has digitized sounds from the Atari classics, Digital Eclipse actually runs the original arcade code through an emulator it has developed. But don't let the “e” word scare you off. The Digital Eclipse games are as fast as a greyhound and as faithful as a retriever. The company has also done an admirable job in melding the Mac interface with that of the old games. You can even hit secret codes to tweak the games just like arcade owners did.

Digital Eclipse has created a well-done (if disk-hogging) Director presentation that opens the door of their Digital Arcade and places you in front of the machines. Games you haven't purchased appear as being out of order. This was an amusing way to start the games the first few times before ending up as Trash filling, but we're eagerly looking forward to Digital Eclipse taking on more Williams classics, like Sinistar.

The one complaint about the Digital Arcade series is that, if you wanna play, you got to pay. Each separately sold game sells for \$30, about what the whole Microsoft Arcade pack costs. We wouldn't argue that each game is five times better than the Microsoft games, but \$90 can buy you a pair of modern games that blow these 15-year old games back to the past.

The last Mac arcade pack is called Mac Arcade Pak (guess those old Microsoft marketers found jobs after all). The MacSoft collection is a slightly updated package of shareware of varying quality. Highlights include Patriot Command (a nice Missile Command clone), HemiRoids (a fast-moving Asteroids variant) and what had been called Tetris Max before the Tetris folks found out about it. Just to keep you honest, it also includes Movod, which, of course, never was in the arcades. Those of you who have seen these fine free and shareware efforts online will be nonplussed. Still for \$19.98 on the street, it's a convenient way to save some download time for the Internet access-challenged and ensure that quality shareware game developers get their due.

If you want to pick a pack of games for someone who doesn't have ready access to online services, Mac Arcade Pak is a good deal. At the other end of the spectrum, Digital Eclipse's Digital Arcade series of Williams classics are unmatched at bringing back the thrilling days of yesteryear. Microsoft Arcade, however, packs a different kind of nostalgia. It plays like it's running on the original Macintosh.

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