

## THE BLUE SCREEN

Last of the ColecoVisionaries?  
by Nathan Kozlowski



Last month, I became a charter member of the ColecoVision Video Club (got the official letter to prove it) and it only cost me \$60 to secure a spot within this elite group. Now the average person (aka: my wife) would probably think I'm crazy to pay what I did for a few pieces of paper, some stickers, and a membership card, but most of you reading this can probably relate to my desire of picking up this fairly uncommon item. Besides, I reasoned with her, I could easily get my money back (and maybe a little more) by reselling it if I were so inclined. There's no question that this is true, however one wonders who would buy it and for how long would I be able to name my price?

We've all seen how much the classic gaming community has grown and it's safe to say that the demand for items related to classic video game systems is stronger now more than ever. It's interesting to see the average ColecoVision game (mint-in-box) go for prices that compare to when it was initially released and often more. Some of my friends still wonder why I pay \$35 for the latest Opcode or AtariAge ColecoVision game when I can get the current systems' games for half that price or less. The average person is really never going to understand our actions, so it's safe to say that the majority isn't contributing to this current growth.

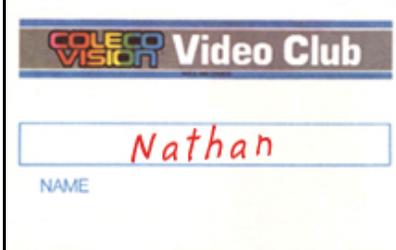
It's us, those you grew up with our Ataris and ColecoVisions, who are helping to give classic games new life. For many of us, we put away these consoles years ago, but thanks to the internet, and our increasing salaries, we have the interest and money to once again invest in our childhood diversions. It's amazing to see how much our 20-plus years old electronics are currently valued at and, while money isn't everything, this directly relates to the number of people who are interested in buying and making new products for our favorite systems. No one can deny that today is great, but what does tomorrow hold? Who's going to want my ColecoVision or my copy of Spectar when I'm gone? Will our children have any interest in our old games or will they, at our age, be busy scouring the internet for a complete-in-box Playstation One?

Maybe it doesn't matter. After all, we are just talking about electronic distractions. However, the fact remains that Eduardo won't be around forever. At some point the programmers will tire and become involved with other things that will take up their free time. In fact, many of us will probably do the same. And that's okay. I'm not here to disappoint you or get you down.

My point is that I believe we are at the peak of the classic gaming rebirth and I encourage everyone to relish in all the great things that are currently happening; in how they continue to bring us enjoyment from our past interests. The future will change everything and how the ColecoVision gets through it will be up to you. Do you pass it down to your children or does it get sold to pursue other journeys? There's not a correct way to handle it and no one knows their answer until it's time. All I know is that in March of 2006, I finally became a charter member of the ColecoVision Video Club.

We are pleased to announce the creation of the official ColecoNation forum. With this discussion group, we hope to generate and support various on-going topics regarding the ColecoVision and the articles found within ColecoNation. The forum's goal is to be a place where you can go to interact with ColecoVision fans all over the world. Also, it will be the best source for up-to-the-date news and information on the latest developments with our favorite system. Many have demanded an active forum devoted to the ColecoVision and here's your chance to make it real. Only with the ColecoNation's support will this endeavor be successful, so be sure to sign up today.

Visit the forum at: <http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/ColecoNation/> [02]



ColecoVision Video Club Membership Card

## The ColecoNation Forum

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**THIS JUST IN...**

Send your news items to:

[ColecoNation@yahoo.com](mailto:ColecoNation@yahoo.com)**SAME AS IT EVER WAS?**

Lady Bug

Send your reviews to:

[ColecoNation@yahoo.com](mailto:ColecoNation@yahoo.com)

Cucumber Level [Coleco]

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**Spec-tar-tastic!**

Spectar is now on the shelves and you can get a copy of your very own from the good people over at AtariAge. Scott Huggins (Astro Invader) brings another arcade classic to the ColecoVision with this excellent translation of the intense maze game.

**A Magical Tree For Every Home!**

Opcode Games and Eduardo Mello are feverishly making copies and they will soon be available for purchase from both AtariAge and NWCGE. Make sure to reserve your copy of this great climbing game today.

**Good Deal Games Return!**

Good Deal Games is re-releasing its ColecoVision games at CinciClassic. Fifty copies of Game Pack #1 and #2 (Daniel Bienvenu) and Cosmo Fighter 2 and 3 (Marcel de Kogel) have been produced. Also, this is the first time Cosmo Fighter 2 has been put on cartridge. Check with GDG to see which ones are still available.

**VGC #5 Hot Off The Press!**

Video Game Collector #5 is out with the Intellivision being the featured console. A review of It's Only Rock 'N Roll (by our own Nathan Kozlowski) can also be found within its pages. Check out the latest issue at classic gaming retailers everywhere.

**AtariAge Sale!**

From now until the end of April, every homebrew game at AtariAge is on sale. Pick up those games that you've been meaning to buy and save twenty percent.

Lady Bug was the arcade game that no one had ever heard of, but the ColecoVision game that everyone loved to play. However, does everyone think eating their digital vegetables was as much fun yesterday as it is today?

**Nathan Kozlowski** ~ Most of the ColecoVision games that I had as a kid were actually pretty tough to play, that is, except for Lady Bug. Lady Bug seemed to possess the right amount of challenge that a young kid, like myself, required. I played this game more than all the others combined, but I would usually stop at the "Onion" level and instead start again. That was the level when the bugs were on crack and I had no desire to try and deal with those speed demons. Today, I enjoy Lady Bug just as much as before and now I've learned how to win on the faster levels. Also, I still get as excited when I spell "Special" now as I did 23 years ago.

**Ryan Cote** ~ My first taste of Lady Bug was on my friend's ColecoVision system. I could not get over the fun and challenge of the gameplay. I used to get super excited over spelling SPECIAL (I still do to this day)! Years later, I still enjoy the game very much. Back then I never did see the game in the arcades, but through emulation I was able to see for the first time what the arcade version looked and played like. What a fantastic job they did back then to recreate it for the home version! If you are just starting out collecting ColecoVision games, this game should be in the top ten.

**Joe Blenkle** ~ Lady Bug is one Coleco game that has stood the test of time. The game is very close to its arcade counterpart and closely replicates both gameplay, sound, and graphics. It's one of the better conversions that Coleco did and is still fun to play. When I finally saw the arcade version, I was struck by the closeness of the Coleco version. And unlike some other games, Lady Bug plays really well with the standard Coleco controller. In all, this game is hard to quit playing once you get going as it becomes faster and more and more challenging with each level you progress through. It rates as one of the best Coleco games of all time.

**Next Issue: Zaxxon** In under 125 words, let us know how Zaxxon compares now to when you were a kid. The deadline's June 1st so get going! [\[03\]](#)

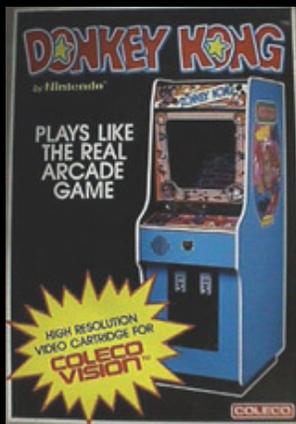
## COLECO CHAT

Dave Johnson  
by Nathan Kozlowski

Dave Johnson's Website  
[www.davej.com](http://www.davej.com)



Smurf [Coleco]



Donkey Kong [Coleco]

Dave Johnson was the Director of the Video Graphics department at Coleco Industries from March 1982 to July 1985. While at Coleco, he helped design and produce over 100 video games for the ColecoVision ranging from Donkey Kong to Spy Hunter. Today, Dave is involved in a wide array of interactive media projects and was nice enough to answer our questions about his days in Hartford.

#### Nathan Kozlowski\_ How did you initially end up at Coleco?

**Dave Johnson\_** I started in 1982, shortly after the ColecoVision concept was introduced at Toy Fair. I had no previous video game experience but not many people did at that time. I had studied computer graphics at Syracuse University and owned an Apple II computer. I guess that qualified me for the position of Art Director. The job was listed in the New York Times. I was living in NYC at the time and first met with Eric Bromley in the Coleco showroom at Toy Fair. Coleco was showing several bogus-looking videos of their new video game system and tapes of the Zaxxon and Donkey Kong coin-ops. I had never considered working for a video game company and thought that I would eventually work in television or film.

#### NK\_ What were your first impressions of Coleco and the ColecoVision?

**DJ\_** I was very suspicious. The demos that were shown at Toy Fair were laugh-out-loud phony animatics of cardboard figures jumping around the screen. I think the fact that I pointed this out to Eric Bromley at my initial interview may have helped to secure the job. Since I was originally from Hartford, I was familiar with Coleco and thought of them as a cheesy toy company that manufactured small backyard pools, which was not too far off the mark. It was only after I saw an early demo of Smurf that I realized the ColecoVision's graphics capabilities and was won over.

#### NK\_ What projects were being developed when you first started at Coleco?

**DJ\_** When I started, the console was still under development. The chipset had been defined and they were writing the OS. The first six cart titles had been determined and licenses had been purchased. As I recall, Donkey Kong, Ladybug, Mousetrap, Venture, Cosmic Avenger and Smurf were the first six.

#### NK\_ What were some of the first projects that you worked on?

**DJ\_** When I started, some of the graphics for Donkey Kong had been developed but they had to be re-worked many times. As Art Director, I was also responsible for managing the art department so that took a lot of my time. I was basically involved, in some form, with the development of graphics for all of the early games. Smurf was pretty time-consuming for the Art Department since it was an original game and fairly graphic intensive.

#### NK\_ Since it was Coleco's first original game, was there a lot of pressure put on Smurf to make it as amazing as possible?

**DJ\_** Smurf was probably one of the most difficult games to develop for two reasons. One, because it was an original game and two, because it was one of the first and we were still learning about the capabilities of the hardware. The biggest problem for a game like that was memory constraints.

#### NK\_ Was your department also responsible for the design of the printed material associated with the games?

**DJ\_** Coleco had a very large creative services department that was responsible for the packaging, advertising and promotional materials. We would supply screen art which was typically pretty bogus because we had to supply the art long before the game was completed. There was another department that worked on instruction booklets, but they were written by people from ARD. Both of these departments worked on materials for all of Coleco's products, not just video games.

#### NK\_ What was it like working at Coleco?

**DJ\_** The headquarters were originally in one small building in Hartford. We were there for about a year before moving to much larger offices in West Hartford. [\[04\]](#)

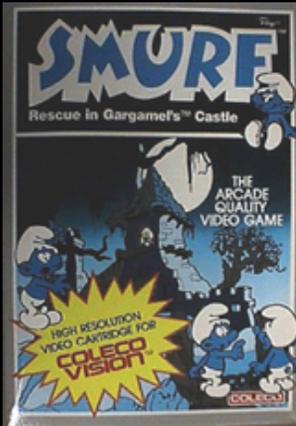
# ColecoNation

## COLECO CHAT

Dave Johnson [continued...]



Ken Uston Blackjack/Poker [Coleco]



Smurf [Coleco]

The department I was in was called Advanced Research and Development and was run by a VP named Eric Bromley who was adamant about keeping the ARD group free from interference. Eric ran a very tight ship and there was a great deal of overtime in the early days in order to have the console and some carts ready for the first Xmas season. It was not unusual for me to get a call in the middle of the night from a programmer who couldn't find a particular graphics file or needed to have some graphics reworked. Luckily, I lived nearby. All-nighters were not uncommon but there were rarely any problems with motivation, working late or getting the job done. We were having fun.

The in-house staff was about 10 artists, 10 game designers and 10 programmers in the beginning. Some of the programming was outsourced to a couple of small software houses but the game design and graphics were kept pretty much in-house.

**NK\_ How large did the ARD group get at Coleco's high point?**

**DJ\_** I can't say for sure, I know the entire company reached 700 employees. I'm pretty sure ARD stayed well under 100 people.

**NK\_ Who were some of the people that you regularly worked with at Coleco?**

**DJ\_** The ARD group consisted of three basic divisions, Software, Game Design and Graphics. As head of the graphics department, I worked with just about everyone in ARD. Paul Jaquays was my counterpart as head of game design and David Hwang was head of software. There was also a small hardware group responsible for the design of the original console run by Rob Schenk. An educational software group was added later.

Most of the game designers were from the Dungeons & Dragons world. The graphics department was a mix of locals and New Yorkers. The software group was mostly locals with some MIT talent being imported later. It was a very young group overall with most people in their twenties and early thirties. There was a plenty of interaction between the groups and a great deal of mutual respect.

**NK\_ Was there a prototypical method used when designing a game at Coleco?**

**DJ\_** There were three basic disciplines in the development of a game whether it was an original or a knock-off. The game designer was responsible for producing the main document describing how the game would work. It was a thick, 2-inch bible that described every possible action in the game. The artists would produce the graphic elements, based on this document and/or the coin-op version. In the beginning, the graphics were produced on graph paper since there were no appropriate computer-based design tools available. These were then handed over to the programmers who would make it real. It was fairly iterative with a substantial amount of revision. There were also several regular outside developers who handled the programming on projects when we were booked up. When a license to a game was purchased, it was spread as thin as possible and produced for all three systems. I remember being shocked to learn that the Atari version of Donkey Kong outsold the entire ColecoVision catalog because the installed base was so much higher. All of the games developed for Atari and Intellivision consoles were programmed out-of-house but the graphics and game design for those games were usually by us.

**NK\_ What parts of a game's design process were you involved in?**

**DJ\_** The arcade knock-offs did not require much design, only editing of features and very detailed documentation. Original games were designed by the game designers although all ideas were welcome. Sometimes ad-hoc meetings would spark a concept that would be used in the game. I oversaw the design of the graphics.

**NK\_ In general, how were the arcade games translated to the ColecoVision?**

**DJ\_** When the rights to a game were purchased, we would get a coin-op unit and not much else. We had a roomful of machines known as the game room. Of course, they did not require quarters and one of the first things anyone in the game division would learn was how to trip the coin lever to rack up the game credits. [\[05\]](#)

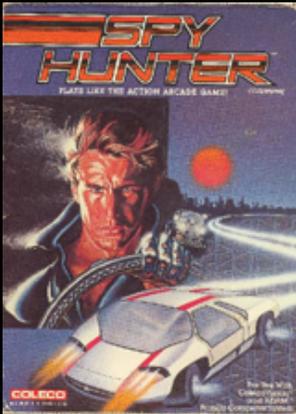
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## COLECO CHAT

Dave Johnson [continued...]



Spy Hunter [Coleco]



Spy Hunter [Coleco]

We were never given source code or any other documentation. The basic technique for documenting a game was to have one person play it while another videotaped it. We never even did a direct video feed because it was better to zoom in and get close-ups of the actual pixels. Someone would just stand over the player's shoulder with a video camera. Keep in mind that the games, both coin-op and console, were written in assembly language and were running on different chipsets so any code conversion was pretty much out of the question.

Although the original claim was that the ColecoVision games were "just like the arcade" there were substantial differences. Most arcades used a monitor with a vertical aspect ratio (a TV turned on its side) and we had nowhere near the memory, resolution or number of colors available on the arcade machines. So, levels and intermissions were deleted, characters and backgrounds had to be completely redrawn and game logic had to be simplified.

Needless to say, some people became quite good at some of the games and they would be pulled from their desks in order to demonstrate or discover a feature that could only be seen at the higher levels. In the old building, the games were all housed in one tiny room filled wall-to-wall with dozens of coin-op video games. It actually became a problem on weekends with people sneaking into the building to play games and security guards caught climbing over the partitions in order to get in.

**NK\_ Typically, how many from each division worked on a game?**

**DJ\_** It was pretty much one person from each discipline. The programmers were a bit more organized and would designate various tasks with a team approach.

**NK\_ Once a game was finished, who tested the game?**

**DJ\_** We eventually had some full-time game testers, but the game designers and basically everyone would play and test the games.

**NK\_ What was the timeframe usually given to the design of a game?**

**DJ\_** A game usually took 3-4 months to develop. The only games that I remember having an especially intense schedule were the first six that were released simultaneously with the console.

**NK\_ How do you think Coleco differed in operation from the competition?**

**DJ\_** Keep in mind that all of these companies were in constant flux so it's difficult to pin down specific operations. I can't say much about Intellivision but it was well-known that, after Warner Brothers purchased Atari, the majority of the programmers bolted and formed Activision. My impression was that this group of programmers also functioned as game designers whereas Coleco separated the two disciplines. My guess is that Coleco had this model because it's was difficult, especially on the east coast, to find a game designer who also knew how to program.

Also, there was a bit of an East Coast vs. West Coast mentality and Coleco was somewhat isolated from the more prolific West Coast video game community. I went to one early game development conference in LA and was received somewhat reverentially by the competitors because everyone wanted to work on the ColecoVision hardware. I also remember being asked to leave the Intellivision booth one year at CES, but that was standard procedure and I know that our trade show reps treated my counterparts with equal disrespect.

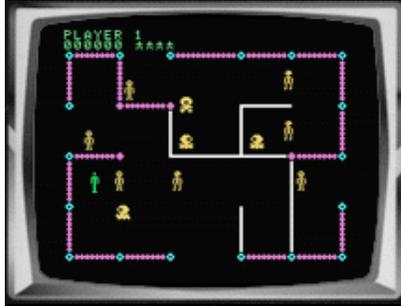
**NK\_ Why do you think there was a more collaborative approach to game design at Coleco? Was it due to the ColecoVision being more advanced?**

**DJ\_** On the contrary, the Atari 2600 was a very difficult machine to program. ColecoVision was based around the TI graphics chip which had hardware sprites and other features that made it a much easier machine to work with. The fact that the graphics were more sophisticated meant that you needed talented artists to take advantage of the capabilities. Eventually, all game companies ended up with a similar approach. [\[06\]](#)

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## COLECO CHAT

Dave Johnson [continued...]



Frenzy [Coleco]



Super Game Module Prototype [Coleco]

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### NK\_ Who got to decide what original games were going to be made?

DJ\_ It was pretty much a marketing decision, especially in the early days. Smurf was made because Coleco had the right to Smurfs for just about everything. There were Smurf sleds, swimming pools and bicycles, so why not a Smurf video game? At the time, the toy industry was moving to a heavily licensed based approach to all products. Even the blackjack game had a name attached to it, not that anyone had ever heard of Ken Uston...

### NK\_ Were you involved at all with the licensing process of the arcade games that Coleco translated to the ColecoVision?

DJ\_ The first round of games were already licensed when I arrived at Coleco. The decision on what games to license was made jointly by the head of ARD and the head of the marketing department. I remember flying back from a coin-op trade show with George Kiss (then, the head of software) and spending the majority of the flight begging him to buy the rights to Spy Hunter. I was like a kid begging for a Christmas present, which I did receive.

### NK\_ What were some of your favorite ColecoVision games? In your opinion, which games did not turn out well?

DJ\_ That's a very difficult question because it's so hard to separate playing the games with developing them. By the time a game was completed, anyone involved was usually hoping to never see it again. With that in mind, I think Smurf was pretty cool and groundbreaking. It was the first side-scrolling game and wonderfully non-violent. I thought Frenzy was the best translation. I thought the Super Action Controller was ill-conceived with way too many buttons.

### NK\_ Did you attend the industry trade shows?

DJ\_ I attended all of the trade shows, with CES and Toy Fair being the big trade shows for us. We eventually fell into a formal process to prepare for the shows. One of the lead programmers, David Schultz, had developed a powerful animation interpreter that allowed artists, and myself, to develop simple demos of potential game titles.

The weeks prior to CES were a frenzy of production, so that Coleco could show these games to buyers from the major retailers. There were two reasons for these demos. One: to scare the competition and impress buyers with the sheer volume of titles we had in the pipeline. Two: If enough units were purchased at the show, the game would go into production. If the retailers didn't show any interest, the title would be dropped. That's why people see so many "unreleased" titles. The fact is most of them never existed as finished products.

The actual experience of attending the trade shows varied with Coleco's fortunes. There were years where a Coleco badge meant automatic invites to the best parties on yachts in the harbor and other years that were not so much fun.

### NK\_ The animation interpreter sounds interesting. Were only non-playable demos created by it?

DJ\_ The demos could be burned to a cartridge and would run on any ColecoVision. I think there was some interactivity added later. It was the basis for our graphics development software.

### NK\_ So were retailers the main group that determined the fate of a game or were other test groups used?

DJ\_ There was some market research done, but if the wholesale buyers didn't want a game, it was dead. There was market research done for the educational software.

### NK\_ Were you involved with the design of the hardware or accessories?

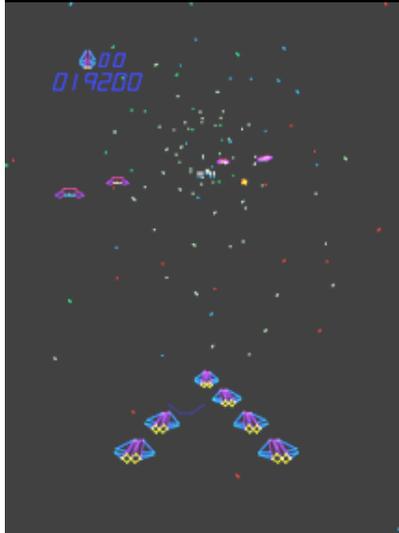
DJ\_ The hardware group was very close to and an integral part of the rest of the game group. Any expansion modules were usually tied to a game, so the design team was always involved in the development. [\[07\]](#)

## COLECO CHAT

Dave Johnson [continued...]



ColecoVision Title Screen [Coleco]



Tac/Scan arcade [Sega]

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**NK\_ Were you involved with the ADAM computer? At the time, what was your opinion of Coleco's move towards the computer?**

**DJ\_** Everyone in ARD was involved in ADAM in some way. In hindsight, it's easy to say that the ADAM was misconceived, at best. At the time, all the market research, not to mention Wall Street, said that ADAM was a great idea. To be honest, I never really felt a "move away" from ColecoVision. Cartridges were still being produced and the software between the two systems was somewhat interchangeable. ADAM was just a ColecoVision with a keyboard, mass storage and a printer.

**NK\_ How did the infamous delay at the start of Coleco games come about?**

**DJ\_** I distinctly remember Eric Bromley standing at my desk, counting down the amount of time that he thought the ColecoVision logo should remain on screen before the game started. It had nothing to do with loading VRAM or other nonsense. It was a purposeful delay for branding purposes. We all make mistakes.

**NK\_ Can you talk about the projects at Coleco that never saw the light of day? Which of these projects made it to the working prototype phase?**

**DJ\_** There were many demos and a few games brought to completion that were not brought to market. I think Tac-Scan was completed but not released (Frank Lam is still bitter about that one) and there may have been a few others. I know there were a few versions of arcade knock offs that were developed for the other systems but not released, because it was decided that the hardware couldn't support the game concept and graphics. I remember a version of Zaxxon for Intellivision that was exceptionally lame.

The super module was an interesting project that seemed to generate a lot of rumors and controversy. My recollection is as follows: The expansion module was basically a "stringy-floppy" wafer storage device that had been around as a third-party, less expensive alternative to floppy drives for the Apple II computer among others. It was a tiny tape cassette that would stretch out after repeated use and proved to be completely unreliable.

We had developed several "super versions" of the popular games that contained levels and intermissions scenes that had been left out due to cartridge space restrictions. Keep in mind, the expansion module added nothing to the capability of the basic console except more storage. Think more, which is not necessarily better.

With Toy Fair rapidly approaching, the hardware team suggested an interim solution that would allow the expansion module to be demonstrated. The prototype expansion module was filled with banks of ROM containing three of the super games. When a salesperson wished to demonstrate a particular game, they would insert a bogus wafer that contained one byte of data repeated over and over that stated "PLAY DONKEY KONG". That one byte was enough to bank select to the correct ROM set and the super game would play. Those same games, with the extra levels and intermissions, were eventually released for ADAM on more reliable cassette tape.

**NK\_ Were the three games Donkey Kong, DK Jr., and Buck Rogers? Did Super Smurfs ever get developed?**

**DJ\_** That sounds about right. I remember various incarnations of a Super Smurf on the drawing board but I don't think it got very far.

**NK\_ There's been hope to find a working super module prototype, but it seems the only "working" one was just a mock-up. Do you know how far along the Intellivision adapter was developed?**

**DJ\_** I think there was a working prototype but it was decided that it wasn't going to be a big seller. It was a learning experience for all of us. The cost of designing and programming a game or even a piece of hardware was minor, compared to the costs of manufacturing and distributing the physical unit. I know it was disappointing for the artists to see their hard work go to waste. [\[08\]](#)

## COLECO CHAT

Dave Johnson [continued...]



Super Donkey Kong Jr. [Coleco]



Tunnels and Trolls demo [Coleco]

**NK\_ Since the cost of design was so low, was there ever any speculative game design done?**

**DJ\_** There were several games that seemed to be in some form of pre-development for years. A D&D type game called Tunnels & Trolls and a military strategy game are a couple that I recall. We never began an arcade knockoff until the license was secured and the machine was in house.

**NK\_ What were the highlights and lowlights of working at Coleco?**

**DJ\_** In the beginning, no one knew if the product would be successful or even noticed by the public. Atari seemed like an incredibly successful product and it was hard to imagine how a little toy company from Connecticut could compete. It was very rewarding to see ColecoVision take off. The lowlight was the company's location. I was originally from Hartford, had lived in New York, and desperately wanted to be back in NYC where I now live.

**NK\_ How long did you work for Coleco? What were the reasons for you leaving?**

**DJ\_** I was there about 4 years. I was let go, along with everyone else in ARD, when Coleco decided that there was no future in video games.

**NK\_ Did it come as a surprise or was everyone sort of expecting it?**

**DJ\_** It had been coming for a while.

**NK\_ What were some of the last games you worked on?**

**DJ\_** There was a version of Super Gorf, which I don't think was ever released. There were some educational software projects based on children's books notably the Berenstein Bears, Richard Scarry and Dr. Seuss.

**NK\_ If the video game crash never happened, how long would you have continued to work at Coleco?**

**DJ\_** That's hard to say. It was a fun job but, believe it or not, I was a pretty tired of cranking out video games after 4 years.

**NK\_ Was there anything that you took with you when you left Coleco?**

**DJ\_** I did take some cartridges of some of the trade show demos and the animation tool, but they are long gone.

**NK\_ Do you own a ColecoVision today?**

**DJ\_** No, I kept mine around for several years, but Manhattan living does not afford the luxury of much storage space. I was very happy to discover the various emulators available online and was able to get screen shots to use in my portfolio. I am waiting for the ColecoVision version of Atari 10-in-1 TV Games. WTF?

**NK\_ Do you still keep in touch with anyone from your Coleco days?**

**DJ\_** I am in touch, tangentially, with the game community and get occasional news about the old gang. I am still good friends with Debra Doorack (formerly Martorelli) from the educational software department. I worked on several game projects with artist Frank Lam in the late 90's and I get sporadic emails from artist Debra Lazarus.

**NK\_ How has your career path been influenced from working at Coleco?**

**DJ\_** Prior to Coleco, I had assumed that working with computer graphics meant developing 3D graphics for film or television and linear media. Working on computer games at Coleco showed me the potential for interactive media, which I still find fascinating and has proved to be a much more interesting career.

**NK\_ Thanks for taking the time to talk with us about your days at Coleco and for helping to make the ColecoVision our favorite system.**

You can check out Dave Johnson's website at [www.davej.com](http://www.davej.com). [09]

# ColecoNation

## IN PLAY

### Spectar

by Nathan Kozlowski



programmer: Scott Huggins  
 publisher: AtariAge  
 developer: Exidy  
 packaging: Joe Kollar  
 release: 03.2006  
 players: 1-2  
 controller: Joystick



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Back when you were a kid, do you remember looking through the ColecoVision game catalog and wondering when all those great arcade games were going to come out? We had never heard of many of these games, but we were disappointed just the same when many of those listed never made it to the stores. Well, over twenty-three years have gone by and now one of those lost classics has been finally realized for the ColecoVision. Spectar, the 1980 Exidy arcade game, has recently been completed by Scott Huggins and published by AtariAge.

In this latest ColecoVision challenge, you control a Wummel (not a three-armed Muppet, but actually a combat vehicle) as it races through the city of the Spectars. Why, do you ask, must you use a Wummel as you travel through this emerald city? Well, it seems that the streets are full of Ramships that have nothing better to do then crash right into you. Plus, if you stick around long enough, a Spectar appears whose sole goal in life is to hunt you down and destroy you. Supposedly the Spectarians act this way because deep down they're evil, but it's more likely due to you stealing their energy stars (which are required to complete a level).

Surviving in Spectar is a difficult task, but the unique gameplay and levels makes this game enjoyable and very addictive. It takes a bit to get the hang of how your Wummel moves, but it won't take long to be an expert with the controls. While you use a joystick in Spectar, you could almost swear that it was a roller ball that you were using. You move by pushing the controller in the desired direction and the longer you hold that direction the more your speed increases. The speed variations that you experience as you go straight, turn, and reverse adds a level of strategy that makes Spectar unique among the other maze games out there.

The game features eight different levels, each with unique looking Ramships and barriers. Additional barriers are randomly added at the start of each level that break up the regular grid and create dead ends, essentially making no two mazes the same. Graphics are brilliant throughout the game with the Ramship variations and explosions being the two most noteworthy examples. I found that every time I plugged the cartridge in, it was difficult to turn it off regardless of how many games I had played. One feature, a head-to-head option, would have been an amazing addition to the game. If a sequel is ever made, allowing cooperative or head-to-head play (like in Omega Race) should be a number one priority.

While your adversaries will constantly torment you, you can't help but admire their unique personalities. The Ramships seem to be standard cannon fodder, but the more you shoot, the faster and smarter they get. You often need to make split decisions about whether you should blast them or deftly avoid them, because either way you'll face a different opponent. The Spectar's behavior is just as interesting. The moment that a Spectar appears in the maze, its focus is on shooting or ramming you. It's almost humorous to watch the little green guy frantically move across the screen, bumping into walls or Ramships, and trying to blast through them to get to you. Enemies that can act and react makes this game truly special.

Spectar's one weak point lies hidden within the programming. There are some minor bugs within the game (most have no effect on the play), but there is one that sometimes makes for an unexpected death. Warp zones announce the entrance of Ramship and Spectars. There are times though when the warp zones aren't visually present, but the enemies still appear. When this occurs, it is impossible to know where they will enter the maze and if they'll appear right next to you. It's worth noting that the bug happens rare enough to ever significantly influence the outcome and is no reason to avoid purchasing this well-designed game.

If you're a fan of maze games then you'll definitely want to pick this one up. It has all the positives of a Pac-Man or Lady Bug, plus it allows you to stop running from your pursuers and give them a face full of missile. Scott Huggins has outdone himself with another accurate translation of a forgotten arcade classic and has finally brought Spectar to the game libraries of ColecoVision fans everywhere. [\[10\]](#)

# ColecNation

## IN PLAY

### Magical Tree

by Nathan Kozlowski



programmer: Eduardo Mello  
 publisher: Opcode  
 developer: Konami  
 packaging: Dale Crum  
 text: Jess Ragan  
 release: 02.2006  
 players: 1-2  
 controller: Joystick



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With an official release only occurring in Japan in 1985, one would assume that Magical Tree must be one of the rarer games in the MSX library. However, it quickly spread through Europe via imported copies and has since become one of the most popular games for the system. After much anticipation, Opcode's Magical Tree made its ColecoVision debut at this year's NorthWest Classic Gaming Enthusiasts Expo and now everyone has the chance to see what all the hub-bub's been about.

In Magical Tree, you are Apache Kid, the youngest, smallest member of the tribe. However, what you lack in stature, you make up in insane jumping skills (we're talking NBA talent here). Apparently there's a very big tree in the middle of the forest and rumor has it that a mysterious castle sits at its top. Seeing how everyone else in the tribe was acting like a pansy and refusing to check the tree out, you decide to show them how its done and set off to reach the tree's top.

The journey up the tree is divided in to stages and once you reach a new stage's starting point, you'll never fall past it if you were to miss a branch or jump. Falling is the least of your problems though, since this will not kill you but only set you back. The real issues are the inhabitants of the tree. Apparently, numerous animals live in the tree and they don't take kindly to visitors. Avoiding the touch of the owls, caterpillars, and cocoons are critical, because they (along with the occasional lightning bolt) will kill you and take you to the beginning of your current stage.

Considering the long trek required to reach the top, you'll be disappointed to learn that you only get three lives. Not to worry, more can be earned by reaching specific point totals. Also, when you eventually use up all your lives, the game allows you to continue at whichever stage you left off. Both are nice features of Magical Tree, because very few will be able to complete the mission without some extra help.

Magical Tree progresses at a nice pace, which adds to the overall enjoyment of the game. While you instinctively want to race up the tree's branches, no time limit is forcing you to do this and you tend to be rewarded more for climbing the tree at a slow and cautious speed. The more points you earn the more lives you will be rewarded with, so take your time and get the treasures and gems that are found in every stage. Also, make a point to knock the owl out with an acorn. It's not a required action, but it'll give you some points and, more importantly, it's fun to do.

It's the game's humorous side that really makes it fun to play. Most of these touches are subtle and inconsequential to gameplay, but all make this game truly unique. The owl-hunting with the acorns is one example, but essentially everything Apache Kid does adds amusement to the challenge. Everything from his little dance after every stage to his facial expressions when he's hanging from a branch are all nice touches that give the kid a personality that the player is able to relate to. It's also difficult to get frustrated when you die or take a big fall, since the kid's humorous expressions during these events lessen the gravity of the situation.

Magical Tree has many strong points, but monotony is its one weakness. The detail and vibrancy of the game's graphics are some of the console's best, however the music gets old fairly quick. The sound effects are solid; it's just that the short-looped melody adds more distraction than enjoyment. No complaints can be found with the gameplay, the flexibility of control and movements (jump, climb, and hang) enable you to effectively take on the game's challenges. Unfortunately, the diversity of obstacles is limited and the length of your journey is quite long. Climbing is great, but after a while you wish that both the course and the enemies would change up a bit.

Magical Tree is another solid game from Eduardo Mello, with gameplay and graphics that make it a standout in the ColecoVision library. Not only is the game fun to play, but it has qualities that appeal to a larger audience. It offers a challenge that is difficult enough for the classic gamer, but approachable to those who normally shy away from the intensity found in your average arcade game. Make your hippy neighbor proud and do some tree-hugging of your own with Magical Tree. [\[11\]](#)

## Diagnosing the ColecoVision 2 by Michael Dullum

Viking Video Games  
[www.vikingvideogames.com](http://www.vikingvideogames.com)

If you read the first installment of my column, then you've learned about the problematic issues with the console and even ways to remedy these issues. Wait, you didn't read part one of this article? Do yourself a favor, check out part one in the last issue, and then come back. For those of you who did your homework and are up to speed, let's finish where we left off; the ColecoVision's power supply.

So you've successfully cleaned and refurbished your console's cartridge slot and On/Off switch, but you're still experiencing problems with your console. Perhaps your console won't turn on or maybe static appears and the screen jumps around a bit. These can all be symptoms of a bad power supply or its connector. If you're getting a jumpy or fuzzy picture, jiggle the power supply's plug where it connects to the rear of your ColecoVision. If this highly "so-phis-ti-ma-cated" diagnostic technique makes the picture better or worse then you've got a poor connection between your power supply and your console.

Examine the sockets on the power supply's plug and the pins on the console's power connector port. If they appear to be discolored or corroded this could be your problem. Apply the same cleaning techniques I described in part one (see, I told you that you should have read part one first) to both and recheck your console's picture. If the picture is still poor, the sockets on the plug could be worn out due to thousands of insertions and removals over the last 24 years. If this is the case, then there isn't much you can do with them. Try applying a thin layer of solder onto your console's connector pins to "thicken" them, thus allowing a better connection to the now worn out and oversized sockets. Apply some soldering flux onto the pins, heat them with your soldering iron, and apply a small amount of solder to each pin and retry the connection. You are looking for a nice snug fit when the plug is inserted into the socket. If it's still a bit loose repeat the steps to apply a bit more solder. Just proceed slowly so that you don't make the pins too thick to slide into their mating sockets.

So you've tried everything I've taught you and still nothing. If you just can't get anything besides a black screen, then you should check your power supply to see if it's the culprit. The ColecoVision power supply is an odd duck to say the least, it outputs (+)12V, (+)5V, and (-)5V. Use a multi-meter to check the power supply's output for the proper output voltages (the pin-out is located on the power supply's label). If you are not getting the appropriate readings then the power supply is your problem. However, even if you do get the proper voltages, your power supply may not be able to supply the proper amperages necessary. I've personally seen plenty of power supplies that read proper voltages, but can't power up a console. Unfortunately you can't just go to Radio Shack and buy a replacement, but there are usually plenty of them up for auction/sale on Ebay.

Coleco produced two different power supplies for their 110VAC North American ColecoVisions. First is the infamous "wall brick" that came with their U.S. consoles (part# 55416). Secondly, there was the Canadian variant that allowed the "brick" to sit on the floor and had connector leads at both ends for connection to your wall outlet and the console itself (part# 74942). Now aside from where they rest (on the wall or the floor), these two power supplies are identical and inter-changeable. You can get yourself a used power supply and test it to see if it will power up your console, but this can lead you down a painful road of purchasing power supply after power supply in an attempt to find one that will work with your console.

The alternative is to build yourself a brand new power supply. Triple output power supplies that can provide the required voltages and amperages do exist. All you need to do is find one that meets the power requirements, install it into an electronics enclosure, and wire it for the ColecoVision. The easiest way to do this is to cut the wired plug from your non-working Coleco brand power supply and wire it to your new power supply. I've built myself one this way and I use it for all of my bench testing. I also use that same type of power supply for my Internal Power Supply mod where I install a power supply within the console. Well now that we've got your system up and running, next issue we'll take care of those controllers. [\[12\]](#)



Coleco Power Supplies



Custom Power Supply



Internal Power Supply Mod

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## ADAM Then and Now

by Joe Blenkle

Portions of this article were used with the permission of the ADAM News Network.

# ColecoNation

The Coleco ADAM computer was introduced in the early 1980s at the same time as the Texas Instruments, Commodore, and Kaypro computers. The thing that made the ADAM so appealing to the masses, however, was the fact that it came with a letter-quality printer and built-in word processing software (buggy as it later turned out to be) at what was then a reasonable price.

The ADAM is an 8-bit computer with a Z80 processor chip, 81k of onboard memory, internal digital cassette data drive, attached daisy wheel printer (also housing the power supply for the system); all interconnected with a series of separate processor chips in the cpu, keyboard, printer and data drive circuitry. When introduced by Coleco, the system was ready to use right out of the box; whether you bought the stand alone version or the version that attached to your ColecoVision system.

The computer system included a built-in word processor - SmartWriter, a blank storage tape, and a game tape, Buck Rogers. Shortly after introduction, Coleco added 5 1/4" disk drives, a 300 baud internal modem (remember, this was the eighties), a 64k memory expander and numerous new programs - SmartLogo, ADAMCalc, CP/M 2.2 and game cassettes and programs.

When Coleco orphaned the ADAM in early 1985, third party developers took over. They introduced speech synthesizers, 80 column video, serial/parallel interface cards for faster modems and dot matrix printers, bigger memory cards, larger disk drives, a midi interface, and separate power supplies. As the nineties came along, more products were developed along with new software and a new TDOS operating system as a better running CP/M system with more accessible memory, etc.

There are still many people loyal to this 20-plus year-old computer. Today's ADAM users have memory expanders available up to 1 meg, serial modems with speeds to 9600 baud, clock interface cards, hard drives of MFM/RLL and IDE types accessible to 60 megabytes, and disk drives from 360k up to 1.44 meg. Also, there is an ADAMSERVE program to "take over" an IBM compatible computer and use its peripherals (disk drives, printers, etc). A dedicated core group of users attend an annual convention, ADAMCon. The 18th meeting will be in the Chicago area in July.

The software selection is good with many "Super Game" versions of ColecoVision favorites, including Super Donkey Kong, Super Donkey Kong Jr., Super Zaxxon, Dragon's Lair, Super Subroc, 2010 Graphic Text Adventure, and more. Others such as ExperType, SmartFiler, RecipeFiler, Videotunes (a music program for both ADAM's sound chip and midi interface), and others are both useful and educational.

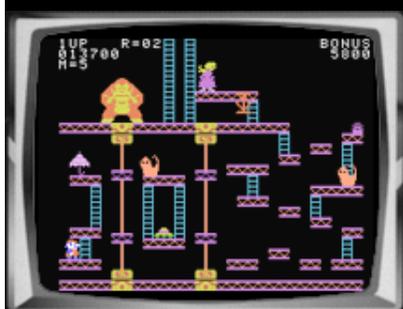
Sadly, hardware failures are inevitable. I've been lucky. As an original ADAM owner the only failure I've ever had was a sound chip which went bad. Even I, who never used a soldering iron before, was able to restore my ADAM to full functionality. I think that was one of the appeals of the system; it was easy to experiment with and understand. Today, I own three ADAM systems. It never hurts to have a spare!

However, thanks to Marcel de Kogel the ADAM will live forever. Back around 1997 Marcel developed ADAMEm, a full-fledged emulator for the PC. ADAMEm does almost everything a real ADAM can do. The only significant exception is it does not emulate ADAM's modem or other related devices. It can run virtually all ADAM software and ColecoVision cartridges. The emulator simulates having two tape drives, up to four disk drives, and a variable sized memory expander. Best of all, ADAMEm outputs to your PC printer, so you can use the software which utilizes ADAM's printer. What amazes me most about the emulator is the fact that Marcel did not have an ADAM when he developed the software!

ADAMEm is DOS based, but the easier solution is to use the ADAMEmMam front end for the emulator which gives it a Windows interface. If you've never got a chance to use the real ADAM, give it a try. It's a great way to expand your ColecoVision experience and it gives new legs to our favorite gaming machine.



ADAM Family Computer System [Coleco]



Super Donkey Kong [Coleco]



Dragon's Lair [Coleco]

### ADAMEm Distribution Site

ADAMEm emulator and utilities  
[www.komkon.org/~dekogel/adamem.html](http://www.komkon.org/~dekogel/adamem.html)

### ADAM News Network

ANN software disks for ADAMEm  
[ann.hollowdreams.com](http://ann.hollowdreams.com)

### ADAM Family Computer System

ADAM newsletter (1984-88)  
[www.sacnews.net/adamcomputer](http://www.sacnews.net/adamcomputer)

### ADAMCon 18

ADAM user convention  
[www.adamcon.org](http://www.adamcon.org)  
[www.geocities.com/bonag\\_3](http://www.geocities.com/bonag_3)

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