

COLECO VISION





From the same company that would inflict the Cabbage Patch Kids upon the world, the ColecoVision entered an industry on the verge of collapse. **Damien McFerran** speaks to the man behind the machine that could have ruled the world

There are some striking similarities between the ColecoVision and Sony's all-conquering PlayStation.

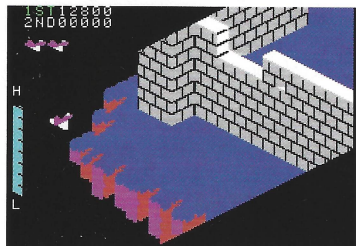
Both machines were released by companies that nominally operated outside the videogame industry – Coleco began life as Connecticut Leather Company before moving into children's toys, and Sony was, and still is, a purveyor of consumer electronics, movies and music. Both platforms were also more powerful than their closest competitors and relied heavily on third-party licences, with Coleco signing up some of the best arcade titles of the era, while Sony secured victory with the assistance of talented studios such as Namco, Square and Konami. However, it's there that the similarity ends: while the PlayStation went on to dominate the 32-bit era, the ColecoVision's potential was stymied by the videogame crash of the Eighties – a cataclysmic event brought on by market leader Atari's poor business strategy.

The ColecoVision hardware was the brainchild of Eric Bromley, a talented designer and engineer who had previously headed up R&D divisions within various coin-op firms, the most notable of which was Midway. He was in between jobs when Coleco's Mel Gershman asked him to come in for an interview. "He hired me within 15 minutes of my arrival," beams Bromley today. Coleco's output at that time was mostly electronic toys and play equipment, the former being something that caught Bromley's eye. "Coleco made one of my all-time favourite games: Rod Hockey," he explains. "They also made swimming pools, Holly Hobbie ovens, girl's playhouses, and various types of snow-riding items." However, with videogame sales booming and millions of dollars up for grabs, Coleco was looking to enter the market with its own home machine; the company knew the potential because it had already

tentatively dipped a toe in the water during the Seventies with a range of handhelds and a simplistic TV game.

"The game with which we had our initial success was Telstar, which was promoted in 1976 as the first arcade home videogame under \$100," says Bromley. The talented designer had an even grander vision in mind, but bringing it to fruition was difficult. "Coleco CEO Arnold Greenberg and I desperately wanted to make an arcade-quality, cartridge-programmable videogame," states Bromley. "I had started to do the preliminary design and costing for the ColecoVision three years – maybe even more – before its debut in 1982, but it was always shot down as too costly. Marketing a product at a magical retail price point was the key to everything Coleco produced; it was their mantra. Our team had developed a design around a Texas Instruments video chip and a sound chip from General Instruments, but it was RAM-intensive and therefore way above the cost limits." With the profit margin being the deciding factor, the situation remained static until 1981. "I picked up a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* and saw an article about how the cost of RAM had declined," explains Bromley. "I retrieved the latest cost analysis and substituted the new pricing. It came very close to the target price point. I ran to inform Arnold Greenberg and burst into his office without even asking his secretary; before he could react I showed him the new figures. Ten minutes later we were working on a new project with the working name 'ColecoVision'. We were going to find a really good name for it as soon as we could show something to our sales and marketing people." They never came up with a new moniker, and the working title stuck.

With the financial resources in place to make his dream a reality, Bromley set about engineering what would be considered the most powerful gaming machine of the period. "The key to the ColecoVision was that this was the first home videogame that could display



By picking up cutting-edge titles such as *Zaxxon*, Coleco was making a bold statement about the ColecoVision.

and update the entire screen at almost arcade resolution, which in 1982 was 256x192 pixels, and at the same time move objects around at a speed that would test the hand-eye co-ordination of teenagers," he comments. "In order to do that, we needed to employ an array of RAM chips, which could create a graphic matrix, which was then sent out to the TV. Texas Instruments' chip was extremely clever – it could move a limited number of foreground objects very rapidly on a second layer over the background without redrawing the entire screen. Both layers required RAM, but with cheaper RAM we could produce arcade-quality games rendered by a console that could be sold to retailers for under \$130."

Bromley was the perfect person to tackle such a project because he was a keen arcade gamer himself and instinctively knew what was required to replicate the thrills generated by cutting-edge coin-op hardware. "I was a coin-op alumnus," he says. "I knew almost everyone in the business and had access to the top people in each company. We

knew that in order to sell the console we needed to have a cartridge library – and thus began the licensing frenzy. I introduced Coleco's head of licensing Al Kahn to many of the coin-op game companies. He would spearhead the licensing while my team developed the console that could render them. I was part marketing and part design."

Arcade titles of the day had the power to make or break new home hardware – a fact that Bromley was acutely aware of, because acquiring killer titles was all part of his overall strategy for the ColecoVision. "Originally, I had two games in mind; if we could get the rights, we could blow everyone out," he states. "The first was *Zaxxon*, a 3D game which was one of the best-earning titles at the time. The other was *Turbo*, one of the best driving games ever – at least in the early Eighties. I would have liked *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man*, but Atari had already gobbled them up. I argued against doing 'knock-offs', which was the custom of many home game companies at the time. I urged Arnold Greenberg to pay for the licences. Besides being the right thing to do, I argued that if we paid for the actual arcade game title, we did not have to describe the game or wait for customer word of mouth to promote its virtues. Just say *Turbo* or *Zaxxon* and every kid would know what you were talking about and immediately want it."

This approach – which seems obvious today but was considered high-risk at the time, hence the

“We wanted to make an arcade-quality videogame, but it was always shot down as too costly”

SPECIFICATIONS

Year released: 1982

Original price: \$174.99

Associated magazines:
ColecoVision Experience

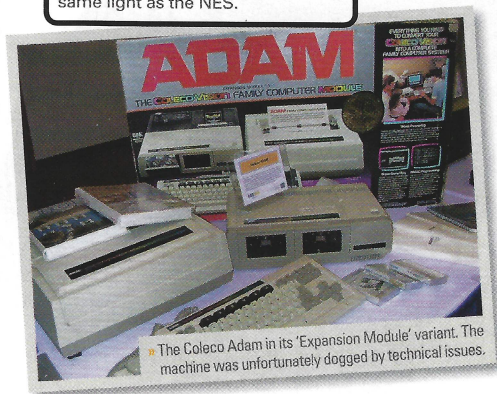
Buy it now for: £40+

Why the ColecoVision was great: More powerful than its rivals and combining arcade-quality games with the tantalising promise of expandability, it's little wonder that the ColecoVision sold impressively when it was released. Official coin-op conversions of massive titles such as *Frogger*, *Zaxxon*, *Donkey Kong* and *Turbo* were light years ahead of what was available on the Atari 2600/VCS. Had the videogame crash not happened when it did, chances are Coleco would still be around and its console would be viewed in the same light as the NES.

proliferation of clones based on famous coin-op machines – had a two-way advantage. "When a toy company promotes its home games, usually months later than the arcade introduction, the TV ads and publicity create new interest in the original arcade game," elaborates Bromley. "Because we often could not completely fit most games onto a cartridge, the kids went back to the arcades to see all the levels and features not found in the home version. Thus, we created an amazing commercial symbiosis: because the kids already knew what the game was, home sales didn't ramp up; they exploded. Thanks to that explosion, the

media covered the products and prolonged the revenue stream at the arcade venues. Both the coin-op operators and manufacturers benefited from this exposure."

However, despite Bromley's hard work and the creation of a visionary business strategy that had the potential to make the company millions of dollars, the plug was very nearly pulled on the entire ColecoVision project. "Even at a very late date, Coleco's



The Coleco Adam in its 'Expansion Module' variant. The machine was unfortunately dogged by technical issues.



RETROINSPECTION: COLECOVISION

sales and marketing was about to drop the product," he remembers with a grimace. "I had to privately talk Arnold Greenberg into going forward. My argument was that the Atari VCS/2600 and Mattel Intellivision could not do either *Zaxxon* or *Turbo* in any way close to the ColecoVision, which had twice the horizontal resolution of the Atari VCS and half again that of the Intellivision. Atari was using what was essentially a chip that directly wrote the screen on the fly; thus, any complex graphic would take too long to be displayed. Add to that speed limitations that made it impossible to render graphically interesting objects fast enough to create hand-eye co-ordination difficulties. It just could not be accomplished with Atari VCS technology. The Intellivision had even more issues. It used General Instruments' five-chip set with several chips used to write different sectors of the screen. There were extensive restrictions on moving from one sector to another, creating problems moving objects diagonally over the boundaries."

Bromley was very aware of the Intellivision's limitations because he had a hand in developing the hardware inside the rival console, as at one point Coleco was about to snap up the chipset itself. "I helped develop the chipset and its operating system," he reveals. "After spending almost two years working with General Instruments, trying to fix a myriad of problems, I suggested that Coleco walk away from it. We did, and much to my amusement Mattel bought it. I was wild with glee.

We knew that we could be vastly better than our competitors and they couldn't fight back."

Bromley's unwavering faith in his creation paid off, because the ColecoVision eventually made it into production. The machine's raw graphical power and clear technological advantage over the competition helped it sell 2 million units before the world came crashing down in 1983, but possibly the biggest contribution to the ColecoVision's success was the game that was given away free with each console: Nintendo's *Donkey Kong*. The story of how Coleco came to acquire this highly desirable licence from under the nose of the incumbent Atari is the stuff of videogame folklore, and Bromley is more than happy to exclusively reveal the entire gripping saga.

"It all began with a business trip to Kyoto," recounts Bromley. He was in Japan to meet with Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi. "It was late afternoon when we were allowed to enter the supreme chamber. The room was one quarter the length and width of a football field and was completely done, floor to ceiling, in matched teak panels. I don't recall as much as a clock or any picture on the walls. The only thing that broke up this expanse was the doorway opening, one eight-foot desk in the centre of the room with nothing on it but a pad and pencil, two plain wooden chairs set in front of the desk and one very tall-backed leather chair behind it. When we entered, we were the fifth, sixth and seventh objects in the room. I

sat down in the left-most chair in front of the desk, and my friend, translator and mentor in all things Japanese, Makihara-san, sat next to me. Yamauchi-san's aide said 'Yamauchi-san will be in shortly,' and then, right on cue, he made his entrance. He came into the room via the parting of the wall behind the desk, which we soon realised was a door disguised as a panel. I then noticed that our entrance way was no longer visible – apparently all doors to this room were panels, or vice versa. I fully expected that behind every panel in the room was a samurai warrior ready to pounce, lest I make the smallest mistake in etiquette!" The intense formality of the setting was clearly intended to intimidate those who arrived at Nintendo's offices

Community

THE BEST COLECOVISION WEBSITES



ColecoVision Zone

www.colecovisionzone.com

■ A superlative ColecoVision reference site with complete listings of games, a collection of vintage TV commercials, original documents, and photos of rare prototypes. The textual information is ably supported by some brilliant photographs and you can even browse issues of the short-lived *ColecoVision Experience* magazine.

ColecoVision.dk



ColecoVision.dk

www.colecovision.dk

■ A Danish fan site that has a particular focus on the budding ColecoVision homebrew scene. As well as plenty of information about the console, it's also the home of CollectorVision, a group of coders that is producing games for the machine. A legally dubious version of *Mario Bros* is the most impressive effort, and more titles are promised.

THE BEST GAME IN TOWN JUST GOT BETTER.

When you own a ColecoVision, you own a powerful computer system that can play any game you want to play. And all the new game modules you see here are just the beginning. There's still an amazing amount of software that will allow you to play the ColecoVision just as long as you want to play.

The Super Action Controller
Only the most precise controller has ever been made. It's the only controller that can be used to play any game you want to play. It's the only controller that can be used to play any game you want to play.

The Super Game Module
Boost the memory of your ColecoVision to play the memory intensive games you want to play. The Super Game Module is the only module that can be used to play any game you want to play.

The Super Roller Controller
Rolling over the controls of your ColecoVision is a new experience. The Super Roller Controller is the only controller that can be used to play any game you want to play.

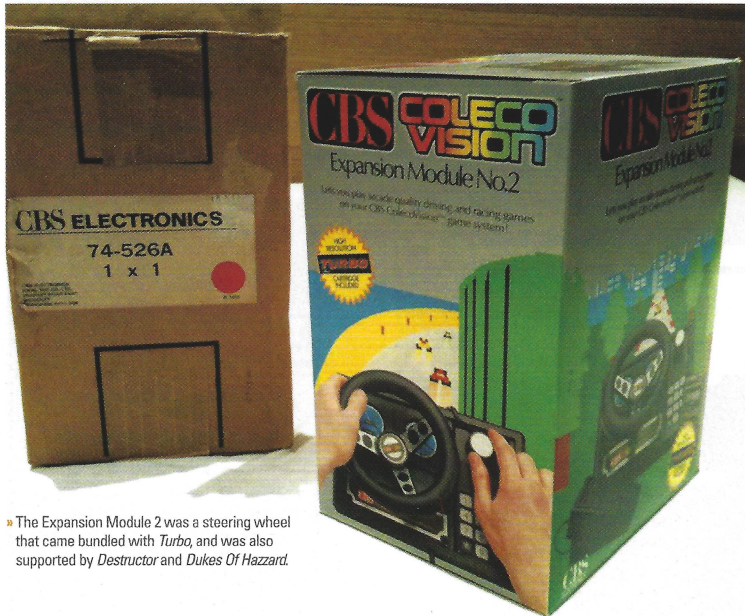
The Super Driving Module
Take your ColecoVision to the next level with the Super Driving Module. It's the only module that can be used to play any game you want to play.

The Super Game Module
The Super Game Module is the only module that can be used to play any game you want to play.

ColecoVision

This advert was released late in the console's life and shows the Super Game Module, which was never released.

RETROINSPECTION



► The Expansion Module 2 was a steering wheel that came bundled with *Turbo*, and was also supported by *Destructor* and *Dukes Of Hazzard*.

to do business, and the mind-games from its president continued as the discussions progressed.

"Yamauchi-san seemed not to understand a word of English," explains Bromley with a wry smile. "Every word we said was translated. A year later I found out that he understands English extremely well." Other nefarious tactics were employed to ensure that the Japanese firm was always in the strongest position. "I learned never to tell Yamauchi-san the correct day or even time of our departure," says Bromley, "because he played an effective negotiating game. He continuously discussed non-essential items and held back important responses, then, when there was very little time before we had to leave to make the train back to Tokyo, he began the real negotiations. At this point there was a terrible pull to give in

► This portable ColecoVision was produced by legendary hardware modder Ben 'Ben Heck' Heckendorn.



on any remaining points in order to make the train. Thus began my first lesson in commercial samurai strategy: always lie about when you must leave!"

Bromley returned to Nintendo the next day to resume negotiations, and it was on this fateful visit that he stumbled across the game that would become the ColecoVision's secret weapon. "We were shown some very unexciting videogames, as well as some handhelds that were very popular in Japan, but I felt these wouldn't work in the US," remembers Bromley. "Afterwards we had an informal late lunch at the headquarters. It was a very simple Japanese meal, not meant to impress. I enjoyed it thoroughly. After trying lots of unknown stuff – I ate these things with the conviction that they did not want me dead, and besides, they also ate it – I accepted many cups of tea, after which I asked about using the bathroom." What followed is probably the most famous trip to a toilet in videogame history.

"It turned out that the bathroom was on the floor above," explains Bromley. "I decided to find it alone, and when I came out I passed an open door that displayed a familiar silhouette – the standard upright cabinet seen in all videogame arcades. I turned on the light and there, for the first time, was *Donkey Kong*, complete with a picture of a gorilla on each side. I fell in love right there, no question." Bromley knew this title – which was hitherto unknown in the West – could be the game to propel his console into the public consciousness. He also knew he had to act fast. "A meeting was arranged for the next day," he reveals. "I said I wanted the rights to *Donkey Kong*. I didn't want Atari to find out about this



game. After a lengthy conversation, Makihara-san told me that Yamauchi-san wanted a \$200,000 advance and a \$2 per unit royalty. It was around 10am and Yamauchi-san knew that I needed to catch my train, so then he added the kicker: the \$200,000 must be wired to his account by midnight, or it's not a deal." The odds were most certainly against Bromley. "The most Coleco had ever paid for an advance for any licence up to then was \$5,000," he says. "Also, they never, ever paid more than five per cent of their selling price; the worst case would be about 90 cents. Now because of the need to wire the money before 12am Tokyo time, I needed to take the next available train. I would have to call as soon as I got back to my hotel in Tokyo, which would be in the afternoon and therefore wake up Arnold Greenberg in the US, the only one who could authorise an immediate wire transfer. I was to call him at home, wake him up, and then ask him to wire \$200,000 for a game he has never seen or heard of. If that wasn't bad enough, he then has to agree to more than twice the usual royalty amount!"

Bromley stayed firm, spurred on by the fact that he knew that *Donkey Kong* would be a smash hit once Western gamers laid eyes on it. "Upon my return to Tokyo, I called Arnold Greenberg from my room – I was shaking a little," he admits. "It was about four in the morning and I got: 'Whaaaaa? Do you know what time it is?' I referred him to a conversation we had days before with marketing and sales; we all agreed we needed a really spectacular game to bundle with the ColecoVision console to create an impact. I then told him of the conditions: \$200,000 advance and the \$2 per unit royalty. I said: 'I have found that game.' To my surprise, all he said was: 'Is it really that good?' I told him that it was as good as *Pac-Man*. He asked what it was called and I uttered '*Donkey Kong*'. Silence. For the first time

Variants



ColecoVision

■ The original machine was launched in 1982 with *Donkey Kong*. 500,000 units were sold, largely on the strength of this conversion. The all-important expansion slot offered the ability to upgrade, but sadly the console was discontinued in 1985.



ColecoVision Adam

■ The Adam came as an expansion for the core console or a standalone computer, capable of playing ColecoVision cartridges and more. Defects plagued the machine and it was discontinued in 1984; Coleco lost a reported \$80 million on it.



Super Game Module

■ The final expansion module was effectively an upgrade to boost its power. Similar to Nintendo's Famicom Disk System, games came on high-capacity 'wafers', with more memory for bigger games. *Super Donkey Kong* was planned, but the module never made it out.



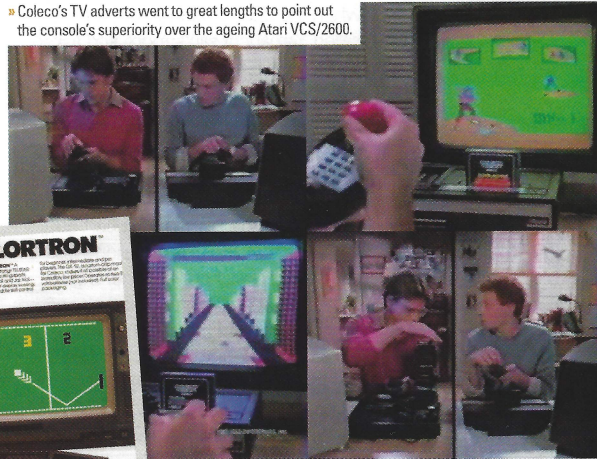
Dina 2-in-1

■ A clone of the ColecoVision and Sega SG-1000 produced by Taiwan-based Bit Corporation, this machine had a cartridge slot for each format. The pads were more traditional, and the ColecoVision's numerical keypad was moved to the main body.

I realised how silly the name sounded. What seemed like an hour later he said, 'Okay. Let's do it,' and said he would wire over the money as soon as the banks opened that day." Bromley had just secured the home console rights to one of the hottest games of the Eighties – or at least, he thought he had, until the saga took an unwelcome twist thanks largely to the Japanese way of doing business.

"Legal contracts were not something that was part of Japanese culture at that time," he explains. "We were going to create the agreement over dinner. Makihara-san, who at this point was accepted as official translator for both sides, started the negotiations and wrote down six or seven points on a cloth napkin. I forget how many points we ended up with, but when translated into English on still another napkin, I could read them all without unfolding it. We had a deal. I took my \$200,000 napkin and went home." Upon returning to the US, Bromley began to have doubts about the strength of the deal he had just secured. "In the electric buzz of Tokyo, my linen napkin – now valued in the millions based on sales projections –

► Coleco's TV adverts went to great lengths to point out the console's superiority over the ageing Atari VCS/2600.



seemed adequate. I can't remember the look on Coleco's in-house attorney's face when I pulled out the napkin, because I didn't want to see it. I tried to explain that this is how the Japanese do business: you all get high on sake, write down the points that matter, and try to get up in the morning without a hangover."

Bromley's sudden apprehensiveness was well founded; at the next Consumer Electronics Show, the house of cards very nearly collapsed completely. After months of trying to get Nintendo to

sign a contract that was legally binding in the eyes of US law, Coleco finally got Yamauchi to agree to hand over the vital document at the company's CES booth. Needless to say, it didn't exactly go according to plan. "His daughter Yoko spoke to me and said that Yamauchi-san had given *Donkey Kong* to Atari," says Bromley with a face that still displays the pain of the moment. "I froze. *Donkey Kong* was going to be the ColecoVision anchor. All our marketing plans were placed around that game. I was in a cold sweat. I sat down in my room and was thoroughly depressed for about two hours. I think it was 10 or 11pm



Collecto-Vision

Because the ColecoVision made such an impact at the time with its arcade-quality visuals, it's perhaps not surprising to learn that a sizable collector's market has grown up around it today. ColecoVision fanatic Ole Nielsen – the man behind ColecoVision.dk – vividly recalls the day his obsession started. "It was love at first sight," he says. "For me, it was primarily the graphics, tunes, and realistic game sounds the machine could deliver." The inherent appeal of the machine is amplified by the fact that it's ideal for people looking to build a complete anthology of titles in a short space of time.

"The Colecovision is perfect for collectors," states Junior Tétreault, founder of ColecoVision Zone. "The game's library is not too big – around 125 titles – and most of the games are fun." That said, there are a handful of super-rare carts that continue to elude devoted ColecoVision addicts. "Xonox games are hard to find," reveals Tétreault. "The company released 12 games and most of them are very bad and didn't sell well. Two of the double-headers, *Tomarc The Barbarian* and *Motocross Racer* and *Sir Lancelot/Robin Hood*, are the rarest. The late release of *Tournament Tennis* by Imagic, when the console was almost discontinued, makes this game a sought-after title. The four educational games made by Fisher-Price – *Dance Fantasy*, *Linking Logic*, *Logic Levels* and *Memory Manor* – are almost impossible to find boxed. Ironically, the most common cartridge, *Donkey Kong*, is also the rarest boxed game in North America. The cart came with the console without a box but the game was also sold as a standard retail release."



“Yamauchi wanted a \$200,000 advance. The most Coleco had ever paid for an advance for any licence up to then was \$5,000”

DAVE JOHNSON

Director of video graphics, Coleco



■ How did you become involved?

I was working in New York as a graphic designer but, having studied computer graphics, I was looking for an opportunity to work in my field. I answered an ad and met with a headhunter who set up an interview with Eric Bromley, the head of electronic games at Coleco. He was in town for Toy Fair, an annual industry event.

■ What did you think of the ColecoVision when you first saw it?

My first exposure was at the aforementioned Toy Fair during my job interview. There was a video wall showing mock-ups of animated cardboard cutouts. I knew enough about video, animation and computer graphics to realise that the mock-ups were fake and I pointed this out to Mr Bromley. He then pointed to one video of a Smurf running across a side-scrolling background. It was clear that this was real and was several notches above the existing home game systems.

■ What did your role involve specifically?

I ran a department of artists who were responsible for the development of graphics for all of the games. Day-to-day involved visiting every artist and offering suggestions, technical help, art direction, options and so on. I worked, hands-on, on several games when there was time.

■ What was it like working at Coleco at this time?

It was a group of very talented, super-smart, very motivated people. At the beginning, we didn't know if the product would be a success, but it was great fun in any case. As the product took off, it was very rewarding. But, by the end, we were all a little tired of the place.

■ How did you go about converting arcade hits to the machine and what kind of support did you get from the original developer?

The deals with the coin-op manufacturers were usually a mystery to the design group, especially in the beginning. A new machine would appear from Japan and we would set to work studying it. We had no support from the manufacturers and, at that time, code was not at all portable. We would find someone who had a knack for the game and spend hours videotaping every level. Game designers would then sit, review the tapes and document the gameplay. The artists would reproduce the graphics.

■ You also created original titles for the console. How did the design process differ from the coin-op ports?

A similar production process as in the ports in some respects: a game design document, a set of graphics. The creative process, in some cases, was slower and more involving. *Smurf* was the first. Eric Bromley was the lead on the project. I have to give him credit with inventing the side-scrolling concept. I'll take credit for the idea of points as you pass certain hurdles. Seemingly simple concepts but they were new at the time.

■ Is it true you personally asked for Coleco to secure the rights to convert *Spy Hunter* because you were such a fan of the coin-op?

There was an annual trade show where coin-op manufacturers showed off their wares. I went with George Kiss, the head of software development and also my boss. I remember begging him on the plane home to buy the rights. I was like a kid asking for a Christmas present. I really thought the music was hot; the game itself was not that interesting. We did get the rights but who knows if my request had any effect.

■ Why was there such a long pause before each ColecoVision loaded? Was this a technical thing?

No, no, no! Please put that rumour to rest! One day, Eric Bromley stood at my desk with a bunch of marketing execs and watched a simulator of the console. They had their watches out and counted down, deciding how long the opening screen should last. It was all about branding. The later versions of the operating system fixed that, but it was too late.

when the depression turned to anger. I called Yamauchi-san's room and asked to talk with him. His daughter answered and said that he had gone to sleep and was not to be disturbed; she said it very politely and I hung up. But I got still angrier at having my dream disintegrated by Atari's money, so I called again. She answered and I poured my heart out; I told her how the ColecoVision was my dream, how I put together a great team to build the best home videogame console ever and that *Donkey Kong* would look like crap on the Atari VCS. I guess she liked me because she asked if I could be there in 15 minutes. It was apparent that she was my ally – she believed me that this was not just a product, but also my dream. I had someone who believed what I said about the virtues of the ColecoVision and could relate them to Yamauchi-san as no one else could." With Yoko Yamauchi's assistance, Bromley's passion clearly shone through, because he was again granted the domestic rights to the game – this time in a legally binding sense.

With the *Donkey Kong* saga at an end, the ColecoVision had a game that proved just how powerful the machine was. By this point Nintendo's title had become a worldwide smash. Released in August 1982 and bundled with *Donkey Kong*, the machine would find its way into half a million American homes by Christmas of that year.

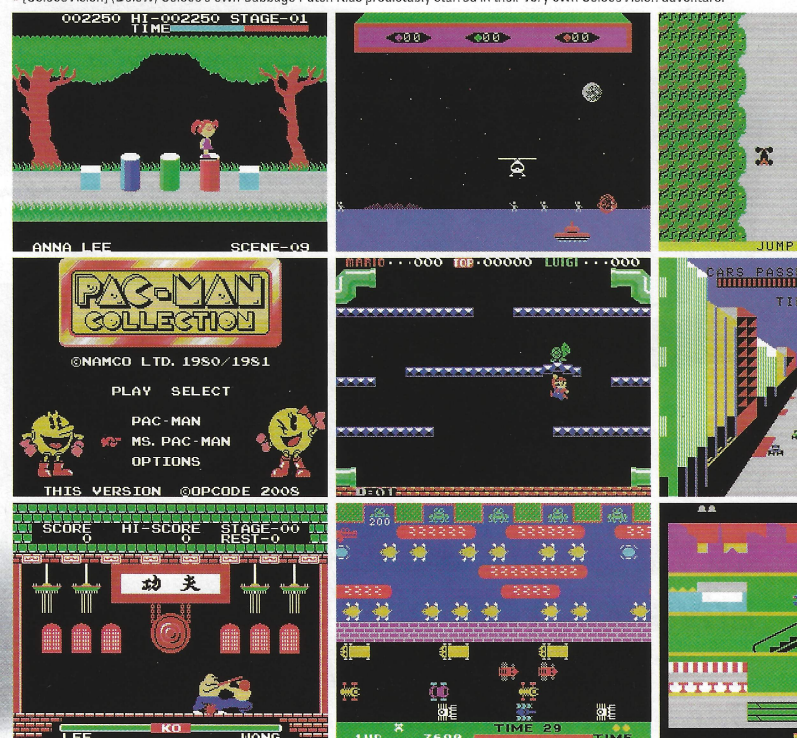
Expandability was the key reason for the ColecoVision's admirable

performance at retail. "There were two reasons why the ColecoVision expansion slot was carefully placed in the front," explains Bromley. "It was the key to our differentiation from other manufacturer's products. When we showed the 'beauty shot' in our ads we did not need a second picture to show it. It was always there; it promised to take you to exciting, unknown realms. That alone sold a lot of ColecoVision consoles. Secondly, it was a promise that everyone could soon have a real computer just by adding a module to the videogame console."

The ColecoVision Adam was supposed to be this home computer module, but it morphed into a fully fledged machine in its own right. "We created ColecoVision's operating system and the expansion slot connector for, among other things, the Adam computer. It was part of our plans from day one. The Adam was originally a keyboard with a deck that extended about two inches beyond the function keys containing the other computer circuits. It fit snugly against the console at the same height." The Adam's story is too lengthy and remarkable to cover in depth here, but suffice to say that it wasn't the success that Coleco had envisaged. However, the expansion slot was invaluable for other uses.

"We were the first to make home videogames to closely resemble current arcade games," states Bromley. "But if we were to really push that claim, we needed to have a steering wheel controller – complete with gear shift

► [ColecoVision] (Below) Coleco's own Cabbage Patch Kids predictably starred in their very own ColecoVision adventure.



ColecoVision Reborn

SCORE: 00001 TIME: 00116



The ColecoVision may be nearly 30 years old, but that doesn't mean that games aren't still being cooked up. Thanks to the internet, a solid development community has sprung up and released several notable titles on the console.

"In 2009, *Mario Bros*, *Pac-Man Collection*, *Ghost 'N' Zombie*, and *Ghostblaster* were released by homebrew programmers," says ColecoVision Zone's Junior Tétreault. "A new expansion module is planned for some time this year, which will allow more sophisticated games. This will help the ColecoVision community to grow and will encourage people to rediscover the console they played 25 years ago."

Fellow ColecoVision enthusiast Ole Nielsen is an active part of this revival; he's involved in CollectorVision, which is the group responsible for many of the aforementioned new releases. "What appeals to me today is the homebrew games that many talented people have chosen to create," he says. "When the game is finished, they sell them complete with box, label and manual – just like an authentic ColecoVision release." As a gamer who has experienced the machine both in its prime and more recently thanks to its revival, Nielsen admits that it's the console's intrinsic appeal that keeps him coming back for more. "For me, it's still engaging regardless of whether the game is from the early Eighties or is a newer title, which attempts to replicate the experience."



A massive thank you to **Andy Wareing** for kindly lending us his **ColecoVision**

and an accelerator – the ability to attach realistic weapons and the flexibility to match future arcade game controls. The expansion slot was a way to get beyond the 'joystick and button' control system. We also marketed a track ball controller and a 'Super Controller' for boxing and baseball games, which could control four or more objects at once. This was originally designed with 'tactile feedback' – a feature that could not be engineered at the time."

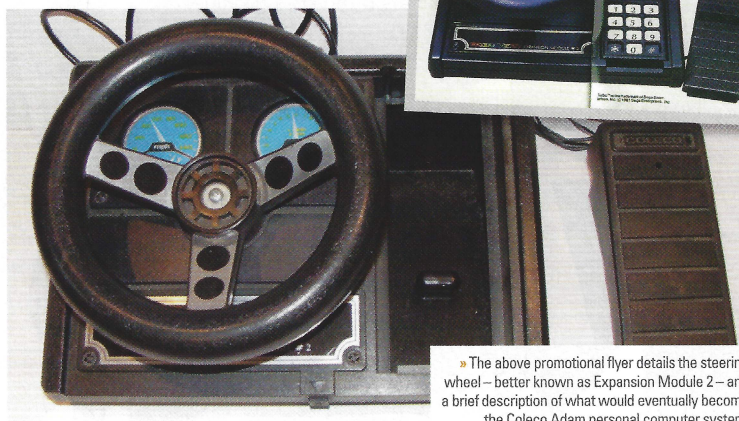
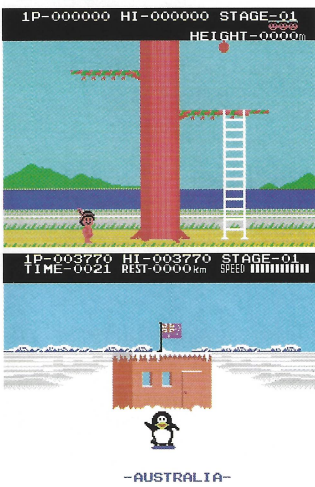
Arguably the most intriguing hardware add-on was a module that allowed ColecoVision owners to effortlessly increase their software library – providing they had owned an Atari VCS previously. "We had one of our better engineers work secretly on a circuit that would render Atari cartridges on the ColecoVision," Bromley recalls.

"The idea was if a kid already had those Atari games they could use them on the ColecoVision. This would counteract the parent's mantra: 'But you already have a videogame console.' The kid could say: 'But I can still use my old cartridges.' After several months of development, we finally saw the finished VCS player circuit and it worked perfectly. However, the module was more expensive to build than the actual Atari VCS was to buy. We toyed with the idea of buying Atari chips from one of their secondary suppliers, but that idea was dropped very quickly."

Atari took legal action when the module hit the market, but because it was possible to assemble a VCS-compatible device using standard parts, it was ultimately unsuccessful – although a royalty agreement was eventually put in place between the two firms.

Early in 1983, the ColecoVision passed the 1 million sales marker, and had the industry stayed buoyant, Coleco would have almost certainly been in with a chance of becoming the number one hardware manufacturer in the States. Sadly things didn't stay the same; the infamous crash of 1983 put the industry into a nosedive and all of Coleco and Bromley's hard work was ruined.

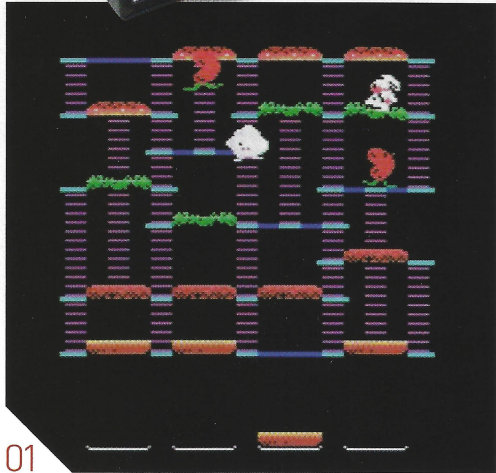
The company staged a retreat from the videogame arena, moving back into children's toys – the most notable range being Cabbage Patch Kids. "They bet on plush, Nintendo bet on electronics and video," says Bromley with a shrug of the shoulders. "Nintendo hung in until videogames took off again, while the Greenbergs instead blamed myself and the other ColecoVision guys for the failure; all the guys who took them in 1976 from bankruptcy to a million-dollar company and in the next eight years to almost a billion." However, even cute fabric babies couldn't save the firm's bacon. "It only took a couple of years after we left to get back to bankruptcy," Bromley comments. "If Coleco hadn't given up on videogames – crash or not – it would have been here today instead of Nintendo."



The above promotional flyer details the steering wheel – better known as Expansion Module 2 – and a brief description of what would eventually become the Coleco Adam personal computer system.



PERFECT TEN



01

BURGER TIME

- » RELEASE: 1984
- » PUBLISHER: DIGIMAX
- » PRICE: £10+
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: DEFENDER

01 One thing that constantly impresses with the ColecoVision is the sheer number of excellent arcade ports that are available for it. Coleco's port of *Burger Time* is easily one of its best, and the end result is an incredibly faithful conversion of the cult arcade coin-op. Animation throughout is superb, with the large, well-animated sprites rarely suffering from flickering, while the gameplay is extremely close to its arcade parent. Pete doesn't feel quite as fast as he did in the original game, but a choice of four difficulty levels and excellent, tight controls ensure that *Burger Time* will be a game that you'll constantly find yourself returning to. Highly recommended.

FORTUNE BUILDER

- » RELEASE: 1984
- » PUBLISHER: COLECO
- » PRICE: £40+
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: MOUSE TRAP

02 Predating *SimCity* by a good five years, *Fortune Builder* is an extremely polished sim that proves that there was more to Coleco's machine than just arcade conversions. Initially you're presented with a large space of land, but you're soon able to build a staggering range of items, ranging from simple roads to apartments and even casinos. The aim is to ensure that your city reaches a certain value, but your success can be hindered by random events like rampaging termites. For all its addictiveness, *Fortune Builder* really comes into its own with the addition of its insanely polished two-player mode that allows you to compete or work together in order to make the best city.



02

GORF

- » RELEASE: 1983
- » PUBLISHER: COLECO
- » PRICE: £7+
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: ILLUSIONS

03 As with every other official port of Jamie Fenton's coin-op, the ColecoVision version is missing the 'Galaxians' stage. That omission aside, this is nevertheless an excellent arcade port and is miles above anything on similar consoles at the time. It's missing the cool speech from the original, but otherwise the sound is strong, mimicking its arcade parent. Visually it's also impressive, with well-detailed sprites that perfectly capture the spirit of the arcade hit. Best of all, though, is the gameplay. Yes, the missing stage is a pity, but the excellent collision detection and controls certainly make up for it.

TURBO

- » RELEASE: 1982
- » PUBLISHER: COLECO
- » PRICE: £20+
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: MR DO!

04 The astonishing *Turbo* can only be played with the ColecoVision's steering wheel controller. With that caveat out of the way, let's examine one of the machine's most impressive games. While not a racing game like other titles on the system – you're simply rated on how many other cars you pass – *Turbo* remains one of the best examples of the genre. Not only is the sense of speed sensational, but the graphics are phenomenal, with huge buildings that other racers of the time could only dream of. An unforgettable experience and easily one of the ColecoVision's best ports.

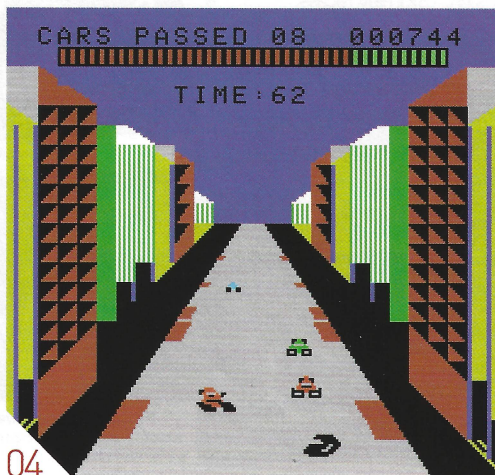
RIVER RAID

- » RELEASE: 1984
- » PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
- » PRICE: £13+
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: PITFALL!

05 Activision released plenty of its Atari games on the ColecoVision, with many of them being superior to the 2600 versions. *River Raid* is no different, and even after a quarter of a century, this port remains brilliant fun. The sprites are more refined, the scrolling is smoother and everything feels that little more polished. Ultimately, however, it's the enduring gameplay that grabs you, and *River Raid*'s blend of strategic shooting – blowing up fuel barrels gives you points, but reduces the available fuel – and hectic blasting ensures that you'll never become bored of it.



03



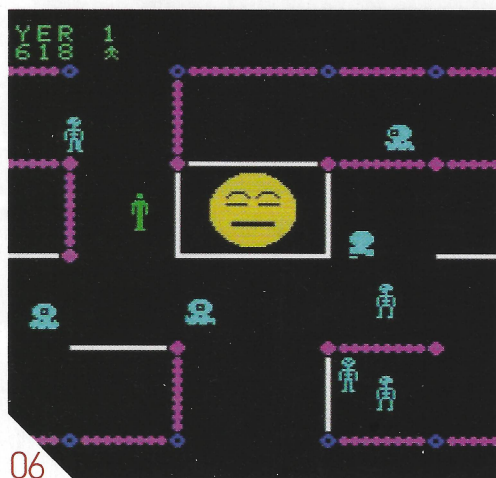
04



05

GAMES

If you want excellent arcade ports and original content, this really is a console you should own

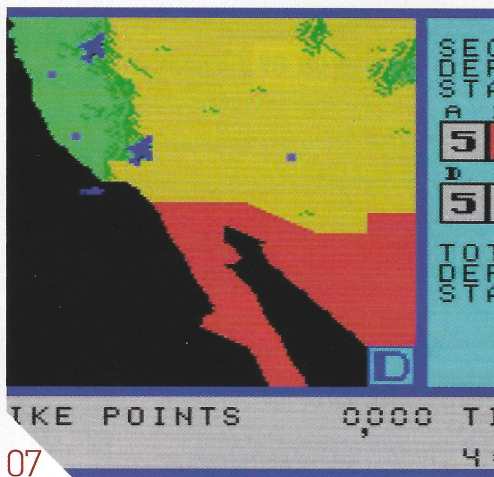


06

FRENZY

- » RELEASE: 1984
- » PUBLISHER: COLECO
- » PRICE: £13+
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: LOOPING

06 *Frenzy* wasn't ported to many home systems, but as we mentioned in last month's issue, the ColecoVision version really is an impressive port. The controls are responsive, allowing you to navigate each room with ease, and collision detection is as tight as a proverbial drum, while the AI ensures that you'll find plenty of challenge. Graphically it delivers thanks to a minimum amount of flicker, authentic sprites and solid animation of the lead character. Ultimately, though, it's *Frenzy's* frantic gameplay that will keep you returning. Another great game that shouldn't be missed under any circumstances.

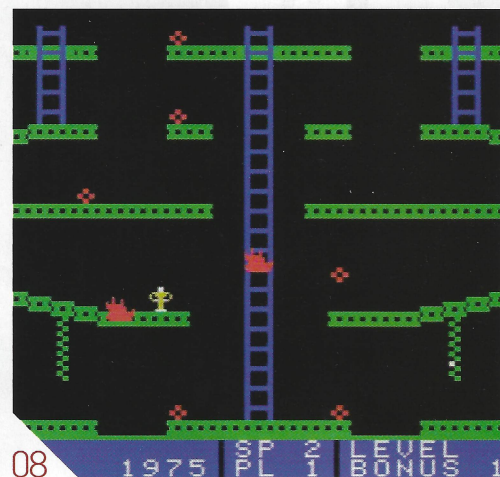


07

WARGAMES

- » RELEASE: 1984
- » PUBLISHER: COLECO
- » PRICE: £20+
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: SUPER ACTION FOOTBALL

07 With so many great arcade ports, it's refreshing to add an original ColecoVision game to the list. The nearest descendent to *WarGames* is Atari's *Missile Command*. The difference here, however, is that you're defending the United States, and you have to nip between each section and see off the incoming missiles. The end result is an amazingly hectic experience that really cranks up the tension as you desperately try to fend off increasingly tough waves of warheads. The aesthetics are fairly simplistic but you'll be having so much fun that you simply won't care.



08

JUMPMAN JR

- » RELEASE: 1984
- » PUBLISHER: EPYX
- » PRICE: £15+
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: GATEWAY TO APSSAI

08 Yes, the conversion of *Donkey Kong* is impressive, and yes, *Miner 2049er* is extremely polished, but this superb effort from Randy Glover and Chris Capener is definitely our favourite ColecoVision platformer. The visuals are pretty uninspiring, but it matters not as the frantic gameplay is absolutely sublime. There are 12 stages to make your way through as Jumpman bounds across each stage in his pursuit of bomb. It may not be the most jaw-dropping-looking ColecoVision title, but in terms of gameplay it's virtually unmatched and a must for platform fans.



09

PEPPER II

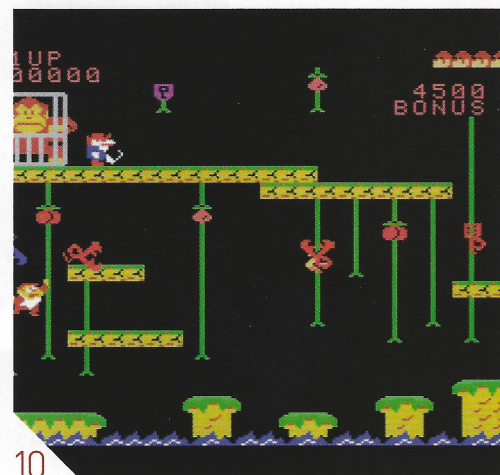
- » RELEASE: 1983
- » PUBLISHER: COLECO
- » PRICE: £10
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: Q*BERT

09 Think of a cross between *Pac-Man*, *Qix* and *Amidar* and you'll have something in your mind's eye that quite possibly resembles *Pepper II*. A port of Exidy's 1982 coin-op – we've no idea what happened to the original *Pepper*, or if it even existed – each screen is full of mazes and enemies and is highly reminiscent of Konami's excellent *Amidar*. The difference, however, is that if you re-cross a line you've re-painted it will open up again, which adds a great level of strategy to proceedings and is further enhanced by the fact that you can actually play across four different stages at the same time. Yes, it's another arcade port, but another we heartily recommend.

DONKEY KONG JR

- » RELEASE: 1983
- » PUBLISHER: COLECO
- » PRICE: £10
- » BY THE SAME PUBLISHER: DONKEY KONG

10 *Donkey Kong* may have been a pack-in and a huge success for Coleco's marvellous machine, but we actually prefer *Donkey Kong Jr*. It's missing one of the levels from its arcade parent, but this is another predictably good arcade conversion that has you scaling chains as you try to rescue your dad from an irate Mario. Gameplay is extremely smooth; the large visuals do a great job of capturing the cartoony sprites of the arcade original, while spot-on collision detection means that you'll never lose a life unless you messed up yourself. It's not quite arcade perfect, but this is another cracking conversion that leaves the Atari 2600 effort on the starting blocks.



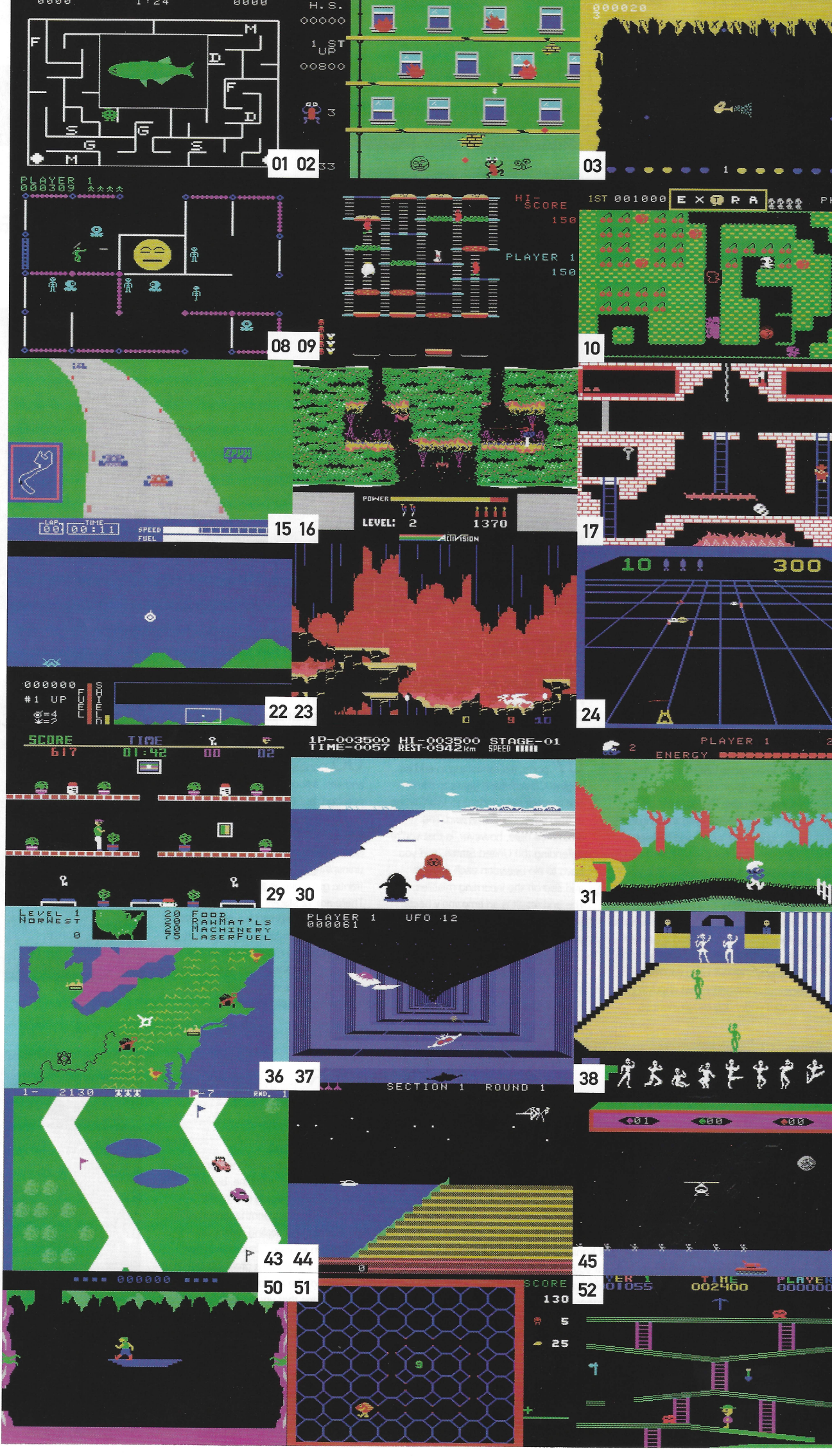
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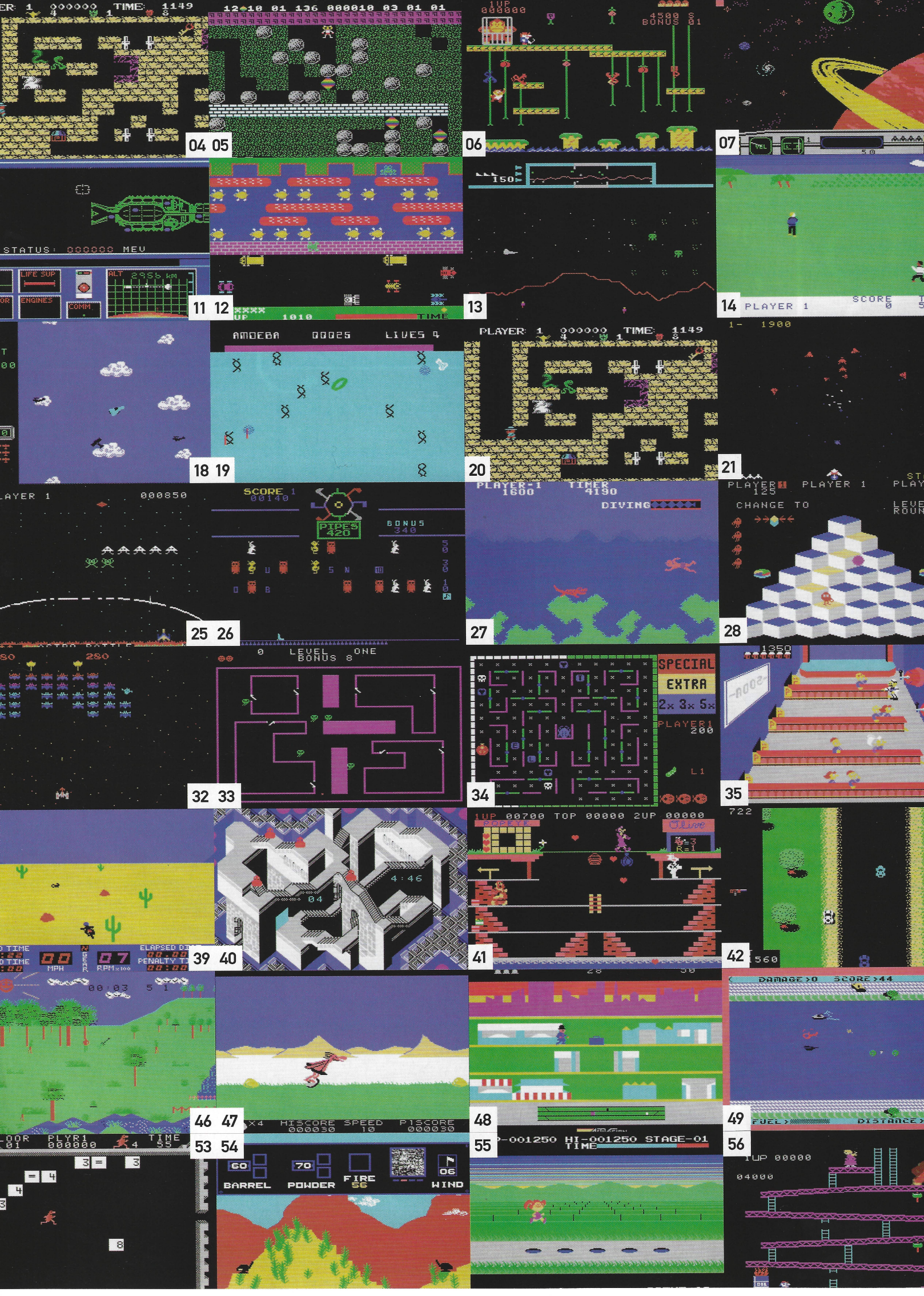
COLECOVISION

and the rest...

A powerhouse when it came to spectacular arcade conversions, Coleco's machine also boasted plenty of original games. Here are just a few of its best...

- 01 ALPHABET ZOO
- 02 FRANTIC FREDDY
- 03 SLURPY
- 04 TUTANKHAM
- 05 BOULDERDASH
- 06 DONKEY KONG JR
- 07 MOONSWEEPER
- 08 FRENZY
- 09 BURGER TIME
- 10 MR DO!
- 11 2010: A GRAPHIC ACTION GAME
- 12 FROGGER
- 13 DEFENDER
- 14 CHUCK NORRIS SUPERKICKS
- 15 PITSTOP
- 16 H.E.R.O.
- 17 MONTEZUMA'S REVENGE
- 18 TIME PILOT
- 19 EVOLUTION
- 20 TOURNAMENT TENNIS
- 21 GYRUSS
- 22 VICTORY
- 23 WING WAR
- 24 BEAM RIDER
- 25 GORF
- 26 CARNIVAL
- 27 JUNGLE HUNT
- 28 Q*BERT
- 29 THE HEIST
- 30 ANTARCTIC ADVENTURE
- 31 SMURF: RESCUE IN GARGAMEL'S CASTLE
- 32 GALAXIAN
- 33 VENTURE
- 34 LADY BUG
- 35 TAPPER
- 36 WAR ROOM
- 37 BUCK ROGERS: PLANET OF ZOOM
- 38 DANCE FANTASY
- 39 MOTOCROSS RACER
- 40 ILLUSIONS
- 41 POPEYE
- 42 SPY HUNTER
- 43 UP 'N DOWN
- 44 JAMES BOND
- 45 CHOPFLIFTER
- 46 ROBIN HOOD
- 47 BC'S QUEST
- 48 KEYSTONE KAPERS
- 49 AQUA ATTACK
- 50 TOMARC THE BARBARIAN
- 51 AMAZING BUMPMAN
- 52 MINER 2049ER
- 53 WIZARD OF ID'S WIZ MATH
- 54 ARTILLERY DUEL
- 55 CABBAGE PATCH KIDS: ADVENTURES IN THE PARK
- 56 DONKEY KONG





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