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# THE BLUE SCREEN Of Pyramids and Pitfall! by Nathan Kozlowski HOT Imhotep - Early Architect David Crane - Early Programme <u>0</u> - 1 - <u>2</u> - <u>3</u> - <u>4</u> - <u>5</u> - <u>6</u> - <u>7</u> - <u>8</u>

## ColecoNation

When I'm not occupied with ColecoVision-related activities, I'm busy toiling away at my job as an architect. And sometimes, when I'm stuck drudging through a somewhat mindless task, I'll start to notice things. For example, one thing I've noticed is that the architect and video game programmer have traveled down a similar evolutionary path. Architects were originally viewed as the master builder. They were involved with every phase of a structure (whether it was a pyramid or temple) from its design to its construction. Similarly, programmers, in the days of the ColecoVision, were in charge of every element of a video game. They had total control of the gameplay, graphics, and sound. It was their game, just like it was the architect's building. However, few today can truthfully make this statement.

Increases in the technology and scope of projects have required programmers to work in teams in order to create games for today's more advanced game systems. While these group endeavors may generate a very detailed and sophisticated project, the games often lack a sense of personality or character due to the faceless design team. This is a major reason why classic gaming systems continue to have a strong, loyal following within the programming community. The simplicity of their hardware enables games to continue to be created and controlled by an individual programmer. This total control over vision, design, and production is why many programmers continue to put time and effort into these older consoles. The programmer's devotion to the classics is made real through these new video games for old systems.

Most classic gamers buy and play games on out-dated systems because they still feel nostalgically connected to them. However, these connections alone are not enough to keep us interested in our ColecoVisions and Ataris. We continue to be enthralled by these machines because of the work of today's classic programmers. We appreciate their solo endeavors and recognize the effort that was put into their accomplishments. We understand the sacrifices that they make to create these games and share in the excitement that they have towards them. People will always admire success through individual achievements, regardless of the profession, and this is why programmers of classic game systems will always have a strong following in the contemporary video game world. We need to continue to support these classic programmers and encourage them to continue to further develop our favorite systems. Give them a big hug the next time you see him/her or, at the very least, buy one of their games. I'm sure they would greatly appreciate either one.

It turns out I'm not the only one that used my imagination to put a personal spin on video games. I posted the question on the AtariAge forums and here were some of the responses. Thanks to everyone for their replies.

**JB** ~ I forget how old I was at the time (probably 5 or so), but I gave all of my ships in MineStorm unique pilot names. The three greatest space-faring warriors to ever live were Buck Rogers, Captain Kirk, and Santa Claus.

**Figgler** ~ I created an entire wrestling league with WWF Wrestle Mania for NES. I made elaborate story lines and even tracked win-loss records on paper. While walking to school, I'd imagine the interviews and promos the wrestlers would give in anticipation of more matches after class that day.

**Lord Thag**  $\sim$  I always would have these internal dialogues when I play shooters, Xevious and Zanac in particular. I always used to imagine these evil overlords being amazed that my one-man fighter was pummeling through their defenses.

**Mos6507** ~ I used to create a pseudo cockpit play area when I played space games like Asteroids, Star Voyager, and Starmaster and then try to fill in the gaps to pretend I was in Star Wars or Star Trek. [2]

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This month we've got an exclusive interview with Eduardo Mello, the madman behind Opcode Games. He's already given the ColecoNation amazing games like Space Invaders Collection, Sky Jaguar, and Yie Ar Kung-Fu and he's far from calling it quits.

Nathan Kozlowski\_ What's your background as a video game programmer? Eduardo Mello\_ I started programming computers back in 1984, mostly BASIC stuff. Then I started to learn Z-80 assembly language when I got my first MSX in 1986. I made several experimental projects back then, but no full game. In 1990 I started high school and graduated as a computer engineer, mainly due to my videogame passion. My first full game was Space Invaders Collection for the ColecoVision which I started in 1997, but put on hold several times until I finally finished it in 2003.

#### NK\_ What's your background as a video game player?

**EM\_** Well, this all started around 1982, I believe. I was introduced a little late to videogames. Before that I was into movies, but once I had my first contact with arcade games I fell in love. So back in 1982, I was a little Brazilian kid living in a very small city. I had never heard about Atari or anything else until that year, except for playing a Pong-like device a few years back. Then suddenly the first arcade machines started to show up in my town. Games like Pac-Man, Donkey Kong and Kangaroo. I spent many hours watching people play, as my approach to videogames was strangely platonic. Then in the following year I played a home videogame for the first time, a ColecoVision. I had a friend in school and his parents had a lot of money, so the little guy was flooded with all sort of cool, expensive stuff like state-of-art videogames and toys. Of course he had a VCS too, but I played it only after playing the ColecoVision. He was trying to impress me, but surely I would have been impressed with the VCS since I had never seen such toys before!

#### NK\_ When did you first get a ColecoVision system?

**EM\_** The first videogame I got was an Atari 2600, since my parents could not afford to import a ColecoVision. In 1986 I got my first computer as it was common sense since videogames were dead. It was a MSX and I stayed with it until its death in the early 1990's. Then I moved to Nintendo stuff. I just got my first ColecoVision in the late 1990's, when I started to program for it. It was one of my childhood dreams that I had not fulfilled yet, so I didn't think twice when I had the chance to get one. Today I have several consoles, including one sealed in the box!

### NK\_ What are some of your favorite ColecoVision games?

**EM**\_I like the early games the most. Zaxxon, Venture, LadyBug, and Turbo are all favorites. I also love the Atarisoft titles (I really think the people who programmed them were the best ColecoVision programmers ever, which is a bit ironic) and some newer titles like Tapper and Spy Hunter. Some games from Parker are nice too. And of course Konami stuff is a must. It's too bad that so few ColecoVision users had the chance to play them (Antarctic Adventure and Cabbage Path Kids).

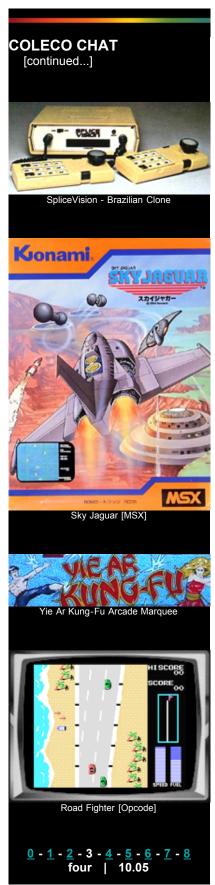
NK\_ You seem to have a strong affinity towards Konami. The majority of your ColecoVision games are from them. Any reason why you're such a big fan?

EM\_ Probably it has something to do with my MSX inheritance. MSX and Konami were almost synonymous and in fact once Konami left, the MSX died a quick death. In my opinion no other company understood the TMS9918 video IC so well and, most important, no other company had such a high quality and consistent library.

## NK\_ What game systems do you currently play on and/or collect for?

**EM\_** I have some modern Nintendo stuff, but to be honest they are currently collecting dust. My current main interests are classic, pre-crash systems, though I don't have the time to play them every day. My collection of classic systems is fairly large, with a lot of stuff for the 2600, 5200, ColecoVision, Intellivision and Odyssey2. I am very proud of my Atari 2600 collection, with over 300 games (which were all bought sealed in box) and lots of hardware, including a sealed VCS. [3]

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## ColecoNation

NK How does the classic gaming community in Brazil compare with the American version? Can you find a lot of pre-crash consoles and games there? EM\_ Brazil was a strange place in the early 1980s. We were under a military dictatorship and importing electronic goodies was illegal. Brazilian companies were also forbidden from licensing foreign technology or forming joint-ventures. However, simply pirating foreign technology was okay, because the government was too stupid to check for similarities. One was just required to fill a few forms stating that he/she had created the device and that was all. No further questions were asked. However, as ironic as it sounds, trademarked names were still protected. So one could copy a VCS, but not use the Atari name. And that was the way that a few companies found to release officially licensed videogames here. The 2600, Intellivision and Odyssey2 all got official releases, though the consoles and cartridges were assembled here in Brazil using mostly imported parts. The Odyssey2 was released first and got a lot more attention then it got in the US. But once the 2600 was released (both the original and the many pirated versions), it became the dominant platform and stayed in production for almost 10 years! The ColecoVision never saw an official release, but got a clone named SpliceVision which is very hard to find today. Since it was never well represented here the ColecoVision fan base is small, though the few individuals who collect for it are very proud of their collections. My collection is limited to imports only, though I've still kept my first Brazilian Atari and carts.

#### NK\_ What inspired you to create new ColecoVision games?

**EM\_** Well, I had been dreaming about programming a videogame since I first played one. My career choice was influenced by them. But when I was high school, videogames were already too sophisticated to be created by a single individual. So I took my interest back to old machines, mainly the ColecoVision. I could have gone back to the MSX, but it was clear to me at that point that videogames, not computers, were my home and the place where I wanted to be.

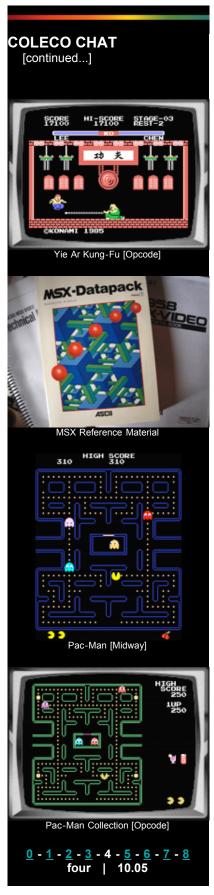
## NK\_ What inspired you to bring Space Invaders Collection to the CV? How about Sky Jaquar and Yie Ar Kung-Fu?

**EM** The decision to program Space Invaders hit me during the time the first arcade emulators were coming out. I had dreamed about porting arcade games for many years, but wondered how one could create a faithful port if those classic arcade games couldn't be found anymore? Emulators were even better than the real machines from my point of view, because I could not only watch and play the game but check the actual game code. So since the ColecoVision was "the arcade quality" system, I decided to start with Space Invaders because I thought it would be a nice simple arcade game to start with. Boy was I wrong! But once Space Invaders was working, I decided to add Space Invaders Part II, since I realized that if Space Invaders had been released back in 1983, it would have been too small of a game. The idea to port Sky Jaguar and other MSX games came from a friend of mine. He was trying to port Road Fighter for the ColecoVision, but was having all sorts of problems. Then he requested my help and after checking the code for about 10 minutes I could already tell what the problem was: Road Fighter was using more than 1KB of RAM, which is the total RAM memory inside the ColecoVision. My first question to him was: how didn't you see that in the first place? The answer was quite simple and helped me realize what was wrong with his approach: he built a C program to port the literal code of MSX games to the ColecoVision. To show him that it wasn't the right way to do things I ported Sky Jaguar, one of my favorite MSX shooters. With Yie Ar Kung-Fu, I decided to go a step further, adding stuff which wasn't present in the original version like the two-player mode and the revamped Lang. Coincidentally, I managed to port Road Fighter.

## NK\_ It seems that there's a deliberate effort by you to create games that will help diversify the ColecoVision library.

**EM\_** When choosing which MSX games I would port, it only seemed natural that I would pick the best of each genre. But it is inevitable that a few overlaps will take place down the road. [4]

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## ColecoNation

**NK\_** How have your games been received by the classic gaming community? **EM\_** So far the sales have been okay, though nowhere near the level of SIC. There are almost 200 copies of SIC out there so far, while Sky Jaguar has sold almost half of that and Yie Ar Kung-Fu almost a fourth. In Yie Ar Kung-Fu's case, that is the minimum amount that I need to sell in order to break even, though I still hope it will sell twice as many copies in the medium to long term.

NK\_ Many of the MSX games that you've published or are working on are based on arcade games. Have you ever played the arcade version of these games or are your games true MSX translations?

**EM\_** Well, many of these games are just rumored to exist in arcade form (Sky Jaguar and Knightmare). Others are well known arcade classics (Yie Ar Kung-Fu, Road Fighter or Gradius), but Konami took many liberties when porting them. Probably they were more concerned with producing the most playable possible games for the MSX platform, instead of the most faithful arcade port possible (which is my approach when porting games like SIC or Pac-Man Collection). It can sound a bit paradoxical at first, but these games are so well executed that I can't help but admit that Konami made the right decision when porting them.

NK\_ Please describe the process that you go through in programming games for the CV. Is it fairly consistent or does your approach change depending on the game?

**EM\_** It depends on the game. Arcade games require a specific approach, while MSX games use another. Of course arcade games are harder to port, since they were targeted to a completely different hardware, while the MSX hardware is fairly similar to the ColecoVision. Arcade ports require detailed study of the original code, and then I need to port each individual routine in order to keep the gameplay intact. I think I partially reached this goal with Space Invaders, but with Pac-Man Collection I feel I have perfected things. From a gameplay point-of-view, one can't see the difference between it and MAME. I have learned a lot here and hope to use it with my future arcade ports. But coding is just part of the job. Planning is also very important and also time consuming. A well planned port will reduce the chances of unpleasant surprises during the coding process and save me from the threat of a major rework. Sometimes, if you make a mistake early on and don't realize it until late in the process, the required time to change things would be so considerable that you would rather give up before having to rework everything.

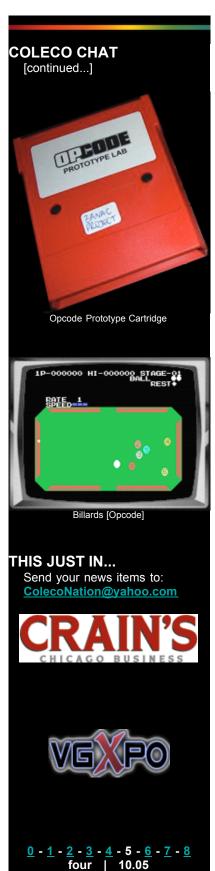
NK\_ What are the main factors that prevent a MSX game from being directly ported to the ColecoVision? What adjustments must the programmer make to overcome these factors?

**EM\_** Memory management is probably the biggest challenge. The MSX standard dictated 8KB minimum RAM while the ColecoVision has just 1KB of RAM. Sound and interrupt handling are other major issues. There isn't one universal rule on how to port games. You need to disassemble them, understand the program logic, and then make any necessary changes.

NK\_ With Space Invaders and Pac-Man, it seems that you've created games for the ColecoVision that look and play exactly like their arcade originals. How do you explain your success with this, when so many of the Coleco arcade translations from the 80's have failed?

**EM\_** Easy. I am not under time and budget constraints. Still, I believe there was a cultural thing with arcade ports during the pre-crash era that made companies believe that people would be happy with ports created by simple observation of the original game. This sometimes led to terrible gameplay. The biggest shift in paradigm introduced by the NES was that many of its arcade ports were based on actual arcade code and this way they were more faithful to the originals. Even if one doesn't have access to the original code it is still possible to produce a killer port, but in this case he/she is going to need extra time (which means the total development costs will increase) and then we are back to our original problem. So not being under constraints here is very important. [5]

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## ColecoNation

## NK\_ Do you receive any help/guidance as you program or is it usually a solo venture?

**EM\_** So far it has been solo, since there aren't many ColecoVision programmers working with assembly language. I believe most CV programmers use C, because there are many graphic and sound libraries already available. I think that is a nice way to work, since you can produce a lot of stuff quickly. But unfortunately it wouldn't work for what I am currently doing. I need a level of control which C isn't able to offer.

#### NK\_ Are there any hidden easter eggs or bugs in Sky Jaguar and Yie Ar Kung-Fu that you want to reveal to the readers?

**EM\_** I believe the bugs which existed in the original MSX games were all removed, though there could be a few which I didn't notice. No kidding, I removed lots of small bugs from each game, from small graphic glitches to major programming errors. Maybe they are too subtle to be perceived, but you can spot most of them if you look carefully. Easter eggs? Well, the original MSX version of Yie Ar Kung-Fu is hidden inside the ColecoVision version. I am not going to tell you how to enable it, but it is fairly easy to find.

## NK\_ Yie Ar Kung-Fu was originally planned to have Billiards included on it. What happened?

**EM\_** I changed my mind in the last minute. Two things bothered me: Billiards had nothing to do with Yie Ar Kung-Fu so why attach both games together? The second one was, since we are trying to pay homage to both the ColecoVision system and Konami it wouldn't make a lot of sense to me if we simply stuff a cartridge with as many games as possible. It would mean that we are trying to make it a selling point. It wouldn't be homage anymore. It would be more like a marketing ploy. I am not against the idea of creating a multicart, but I believe it would be more interesting if at least the games are somewhat related in theme.

This concludes the first part of our interview with Eduardo Mello. Be here next month when we'll be talking with Eduardo about the business of homebrews, the new and exciting games that he's been working on, and the already infamous Super Expansion Module projects. Don't miss it!

#### ColecoNation infiltrates respected Chicago business journal!

If you happened to pick up the September 19th issue of Crain's Chicago Business, you're probably quite dull but you'd also have spotted an article that mentioned ColecoNation and quoted its editor, Nathan Kozlowski. The weekly business journal featured an article about River West Brands and its new Coleco products. Nathan was one of two "experts" that were asked to give their analysis of the company's current endeavors with the Coleco brand name. Surprisingly, the big shot, toy industry analyst's opinion was very similar to Nathan's blurb (and we only pay him in peanuts!). If it'll tickle your fancy, you can read the full article by clicking <a href="here">here</a>.

#### ColecoNation needs reporters for Philadelphia vgXpo!

The Philadelphia vgXpo will be held November 12th and 13th at the Fort Washington Expo Center and ColecoNation needs reporters to cover the event. If you're planning to attend and would like to report on its events, then send us an email at ColecoNation@yahoo.com and we'll give you more specific details on what we need. We've already had great reports on past shows (the Classing Gaming Expo and Dallas vgXpo) and now you have the chance to contribute. [6]

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## IN PLAY

Reversi + Diamond Dash by Nathan Kozlowski



programmer: Daniel Bienvenu publisher: AtariAge creator: Goro Hasegawa packaging: Tony Morse release: 09.2004 rom size: 24k players: 1-2 controller: Joystick



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# ColecoNation

Reversi (also known as Othello) was invented in Japan in 1971 by Goro Hasegawa. Inspired by the 19th century European "reversi" and the ancient Japanese "go," the modern version was named after William Shakespeare's play Othello: The Moor of Venice which was written in 1603. In 1977, the first World Othello Championship was held at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo and it's been an annual event since its inception.

Nintendo released an arcade version of the game in 1978 titled Computer Othello. Both the Atari 2600 (Othello in 1980) and Mattel's Intellivision and Aquarius (Reversi in 1981 and 1984 respectively) had home versions and international gamers found editions of Othello for their Arcadia 2001, Interton VC4000, and Sega SG-1000. Daniel Bienvenu created a beta version of Reversi for the ColecoVision in November 2003 which was made available in ROM format. He teamed up with AtariAge in September 2004 to bring a refined edition of Reversi to cartridge format. The game package made its debut at the 2004 Oklahoma Gaming Expo and it also included Daniel's submission for the 2004 MiniGame Competition, Diamond Dash.

Reversi is a game of strategy where you match wits against either a computer or another human to see who can capture the most pieces on the board. Each player takes turns placing discs on the board, capturing rows of opponent's pieces when they are flanked on opposite ends by two of yours. Whoever has the most pieces on the board once it's full, wins.

In Diamond Dash, you're a treasure hunter dynamiting your way through a mountain in the hopes of finding a huge stash of diamonds. You've got a limited amount of time and explosives at your disposal and if you don't find enough treasure to open the mine door, then you'll be trapped within the belly of Mother Earth forever.

Just like peanut butter and jelly, Reversi + Diamond Dash make a great team. Both are challenging strategy games that are a nice break from the intense shooters and climbers that the classic gamer is often faced with. Some days we just need to take a break from saving the planet from destruction. These two games provide this much needed rest. Reversi's six different skill levels provide multiple challenges and, once you've beaten around the ColecoVision for a while, you can allows try the two-player option and get destroyed by your spouse (at least that's what happens to me).

The gameplay runs smoothly except when you're playing the computer at the most difficult skill level. At this level, the computer analyzes each potential move, as well as future moves, each time it has a turn. While this provides a more tougher opponent, it also makes the game move along at a snail's pace and is very painful to play. Stay away from this level and you should be okay. The graphics are clean and crisp, but the navigation icons are a little too generic. The arrow and hourglass works for Windows, but it would have been nice to have had an interface that was more unique to the ColecoVision.

Diamond Dash is a great puzzle game with simple, addictive gameplay. It gets very difficult, though, and is near impossible once you need to collect all the diamonds to clear the level. Slightly increasing the player's odds for success (more bombs or less diamonds) would allow each game to last longer, making it perfect.

Sometimes you just need to stop and smell the roses and Reversi + Diamond Dash is a great way to do just that. Those looking for another intense arcade challenge may find the pace of these games a little too slow, but that's what makes them worth purchasing. Both provide intense challenges that require more brain power than fire power. [7]

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## ColecoNation

Pieces in Reversi change possession very often during the match and you should worry more about strategy over always having the majority of discs. Corner positions are keys to success. Once played, they remain immune to attack and create anchors for new offenses. Since the corner positions are so important, you should always avoid occupying the spots diagonally next to the corners. Another strategy is to restrict your opponent's mobility. The ideal strategy is to cluster your pieces in the middle and force your opponents on the edges. Having a small number of pieces on the board will also decrease the moves the other can make. As with any strategy game, be sure to look ahead and plan your attacks.

There's not too many secret tricks to Diamond Dash, due to the simplicity of the game. However, at the beginning of the round, set off a bomb right by the door in order to create a easier escape route. The path behind you slowly closes up during the round of play and that initial bomb will help keep the entrance relatively clear for a longer amount of time.

The ColecoVision was well represented at the first annual Dallas Video Game Expo, held at the Dallas Convention Center in downtown Dallas. The AtariAge booth had several homebrews on hand for sale and to be tried out. AtariAge set up a kiosk representing the recent port of Spectar. They do an amazing job of marketing and presenting its homebrew products.

Frank Emanuele's CVDRUM DX2 homebrew was also on display at the AtariAge booth. The software can be used to make quite complicated and layered drum patterns. Also shown was the CVSYNTH homebrew (also by Frank) that is a full blown synthesizer. Imagine the possibilities of using both of these gems together to compose a full ColecoVision tune (or a full album!). The sounds coming out of these two homebrews were really nice.

Also on display was Eduardo Mello's (Opcode Games) fantastic Ms. Pac-Man port to the ColecoVision. The sites and sounds of this thing are dead on and it quite possibly could be the best arcade port to the ColecoVision ever. Next to this was Eduardo's Pac-Man. Like Ms. Pac-Man, Eduardo has truly pulled off a most amazing arcade port.

Finally, there was a programmer discussion forum that I participated in. That was really neat and a lot of people were there to ask questions about our current and future projects. People are just rabid about the Atari 2600, but it was nice to see interest in the ColecoVision. The expo wasn't too hectic and was very fun to attend.

As a service to ColecoVision fans and programmers everywhere, ColecoNation is having an election and only you can make it a success! We're asking each and every one of you to let us know:

# What are the top three arcade games that you most want to see translated to the ColecoVision?

Once you've numbered your top three choices (with the first being the most desired), either send us an email or post your vote on the AtariAge forums (the topic is located at: AtariAge Forums > Gaming General > Classic Gaming General > "Vote: Most Wanted Arcade-to-ColecoVision Conversion"). The more votes we have, the more informed the programming community will be about what the ColecoNation wants. So please participate and look for results in next month's issue. [8]

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# ColecoNation

In the spring of 2004, a magazine dared to go where few had gone in over twenty years. The goal was to publish a monthly, full-color classic gaming magazine. And you know what? They succeeded! Well, it lasted only two months, but it was a success while it lasted.

Manic Games covered all the classic gaming consoles, including the more recently retired systems. It also featured interviews of programmers that were/are involved in the design of classic games. The first issue featured an interview with David Crane who discussed in detail the story behind the creation of Pitfall! The second issue sported a one-page review of Turbo.

Both issues included a price guide which included the ColecoVision system. While only the rarer games are listed, prices are given for various conditions (loose, complete, and new). Manci Games showed promise and ambition, but for a number of reasons was not able to stay alive. You can still purchase the two issues from their website for \$5.99 each. Check them out and maybe one day they'll put out that much anticipated July 2004 issue.

If you've visited Coleco.com or ColecoVision.com recently, you've noticed that they've finally been updated. The site welcomes visitors with a barrage of photos that makes one wonder what Coleco is actually selling (my votes were jeans, cola, or some new iPod). Once the photo shot is over though, the products are vividly displayed. River West Brands is the current owner of the Coleco and ColecoVision brand names. They've teamed up with Techno Source to put out a series of sport video games (handheld and TV plug-in-play). They are also working with Gagwear to put out a collection of t-shirts bearing the Coleco logo alongside vague images of video game scenes and characters. The video games are all basic sport games which hearken back to the early days of Coleco electronics. However, the people over at River West promise us that new products related to the ColecoVision are coming soon and we can only hope that these will continue the tradition and excitement of the original. The current collection of Coleco games are available at a variety of stores including; Target, K-Mart, Wal-Mart, Toys-R-Us, and KB Toys.

#### **COLECO CHAT**

Opcode Games www.opcodegames.com

#### THIS JUST IN...

Crain's Chicago Business www.chicagobusiness.com/mag

Philadelphia vgXpo www.vgxpo.com

#### **IN PLAY**

AtariAge | Reversi www.atariage.com

Daniel Bienvenu's ColecoVision HomePage www.geocities.com/newcoleco/

2004 MiniGame Competition www.ffd2.com/minigame

#### **ROVING REPORTERS**

Dallas vgXpo www.vgxpo.com

#### **VOTING BOOTH**

AtariAge Forums www.atariage.com

#### **IN PRINT**

Manci Games www.mancigames.com

#### **MISCELLANY**

Coleco www.coleco.com

Techno Source www.technosourceusa.com

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