

# the Atari Quest

An • ULTIMATE • GAMER • Exclusive

by Chris Bienick



It all started just a few months ago as I was doing some research for a project involving classic video games. While sorting through some old magazines and press releases from the early '80s, I came across an Atari brochure that I picked up at the 1984 Summer Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago. The list of upcoming cartridges for Atari's Video Computer System (or VCS, also known as the Atari 2600) was fascinating—given that several of the featured games were never released—but the thing that really caught my eye was the back cover, which was devoted entirely to a seemingly revolutionary Atari peripheral called the MindLink. It appeared to be a sort of visor that—when strapped to your forehead—allowed you to control a video game with some type of electrical impulses from your brain, or possibly your eyebrows.

By coincidence, ULTIMATE GAMER Executive Editor Jim Loftus was on his way to Atari for a press event just a few days later. When he asked me if there was any information I needed from Atari that he might be able to get on his trip, I showed him the MindLink brochure and jokingly asked if he could find somebody who knew what it was, how it worked and why it was never released.

During his day at Atari's offices in Sunnyvale, Jim happened to wander outside for a cigarette and was soon drawn into an informal conversation with Jeff Minter and John Skrch, both of whom were taking a break from the press event going on inside the building. Minter is the talented designer/programmer who developed the Jaguar's **Tempest 2000** and Jag CD **Virtual Light Machine**, and Skrch is Atari's director of software development—he's also been an Atari employee for 13 years. On a whim, Jim brought up the MindLink, fully expecting blank stares and shrugged shoulders, and was shocked when Skrch revealed that he has a working MindLink prototype in his possession!

After further questioning, Skrch admitted that many of Atari's top-secret projects and never-released games still exist today. He also thought that he might be able to dig up the legendary Atari 5200 version of **Tempest**, which was on Atari's release schedule for years but had never been seen outside of the company. Some

game historians refer to this mysterious cartridge as the Holy Grail of video-game collecting; upon hearing that Skrch might have a prototype copy, Minter—who obviously has a great interest in **Tempest**—coughed, "Ho, ho! I'd love to get my hands on that!"

We know that a lot of ULTIMATE GAMER readers feel the same way, so Jim and I packed our bags and returned to Sunnyvale, where Skrch was kind enough to share a few pieces of the long-lost legacy of Atari with the world for the very first time....





# CHAPTER 1:

THE QUEST BEGINS

Like most archaeological expeditions, The Atari Quest got off to a great start when the smog-bound rush-hour traffic of L.A.'s 405 freeway kept me from the airport until 20 minutes after our flight took off—with Loftus on board, naturally. When I finally arrived at Atari H.Q. on Borregas Avenue, John and Jim were already headed outside for their first cigarette break.

Surrounded by smoke, I asked Skruch how he came to be Atari's unofficial museum curator. He explained that—upon joining the company in 1982—his primary responsibilities involved the AtariSoft line of computer software, which consisted of games that Atari had created (or

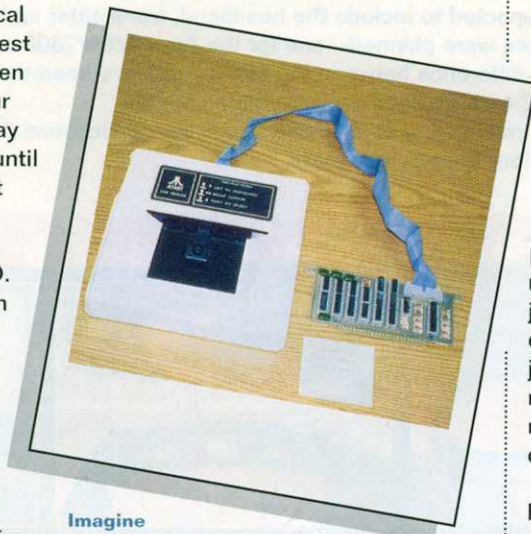
owned the rights to) and were being translated for play on home computers other than Atari's own. However, just after ex-Commodore kingpin Jack Tramiel bought the company in 1984, the collapse of the video-game industry triggered a reduction in Atari's staff; of its approximately 10,000 employees, only 150 remained at

the end of the year. "There were a lot of 'Black Fridays' back then," Skruch admits. Given that there were dozens of products which were in development at the time of the "downsizing," Skruch soon became involved with trying to identify and catalog the various projects and prototype cartridges that remained and determine if any of them could be completed.

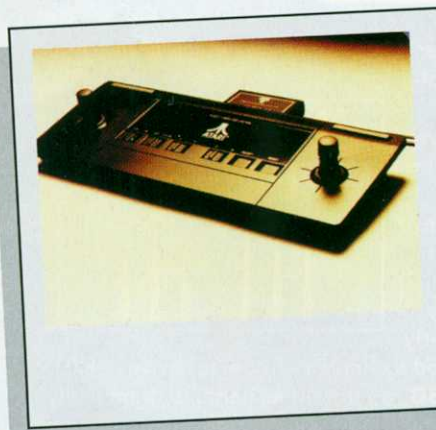
The VCS version of **Road Runner** was a good example. The game's programmer,

Bob Polaro, had been forced to abandon the project in 1984, but remained with the company and eventually worked on software for the hand-held Lynx when Atari purchased the rights to the machine from Epyx in 1988. One day, as

Skruch was testing an incomplete prototype copy of Road Runner that had been salvaged from the "crash" of 1984, Polaro saw the game and commented, "Hey, I programmed that!" In fact, he had a more complete version of the game at home. Polaro was asked to finish the game, and the result is considered in some circles to be one of the best VCS cartridges ever released.



Imagine a cross between a standard mouse and a graphics touch tablet. That's the Atari Tab Mouse, a clever—if bulky—input device designed for use with the company's home computer line. This peripheral was never released.



This previously unpublished photo shows a prototype VCS that was designed by Atari's New York R&D lab in 1982. It was deemed impractical because the built-in joysticks were not detachable from the base unit.

# CHAPTER 2:

THE STATE OF THE ART  
FOR THE STATE OF YOUR MIND

As promised, Skruch produced not one, but two MindLink peripherals from his office. One was a worn-looking—but supposedly functional—prototype; the other, a sleek, black plastic mock-up of the final production model. Of the latter, Skruch recalls, "I distinctly remember a former Atari Vice-President standing in front of a group of third-party publishers at the CES and saying, 'You guys really should be developing games for this thing,' just as this headband came loose and slipped down over his eyes." Still, he insists that the project was canceled mainly due to its suggested retail price being too high (in the \$70-\$80 range), not because of the industry's lack of faith in Atari's claims of the MindLink's abilities.

What exactly were its abilities? Think of the MindLink as a high-tech version of the VCS "paddle" controller. Instead of a knob attached to a variable resistor, the MindLink could calculate a character's position on the screen by measuring the electrical resistance between three sensors which are in contact with the player's forehead while wearing the MindLink. That being the case, only "paddle"-type games were designed to be used with the peripheral, including a skiing game and a **Breakout** variation which Skruch referred to as "**Bionic Breakout**," but is in fact identified as **Bionic Breakthrough** in Atari literature from 1984.

The MindLink headband was connected by a cable to an infrared transmitter box. Powered by a 9-volt battery, the transmitter sent information up



This page from Atari's 1984 sales brochure mentions several interesting facts about the ill-fated "4th Quarter" launch of the MindLink, including some kind of coordinated promotion with Lucasfilm.



## CHAPTER 2 (continued...)

to 20 feet away into a similar-sized "receiver" box which was connected by a standard controller cable to the joystick port on the VCS. The planned MindLink package was expected to include the headband, transmitter and receiver, as well as a Bionic Breakthrough cartridge. Two distinct packages were planned—one for the Atari 2600/7800 and one for Atari's 8-bit home computer line—but we suspect that the only difference between the two would have been the pack-in game, which, in the latter, would obviously have been a version of Bionic Breakthrough for the computer.

Sadly, this revolutionary input device was never released, and all of the promising applications that it could have made possible have been lost in the halls of video-game lore for over ten years.



The working MindLink prototype, complete with infrared transmitter and receiver.



A mock-up of the finished MindLink design; this is one of several demonstration models which were assembled for the 1984 Summer CES.



These exclusive photos show how the sensors on the underside of the prototype MindLink (top) differed from those of the production model (bottom).



Skruch dons the pre-production MindLink get-up. Hey, John, are you sure there isn't a copy of BIONIC BREAKTHROUGH in the cabinet in that back room?

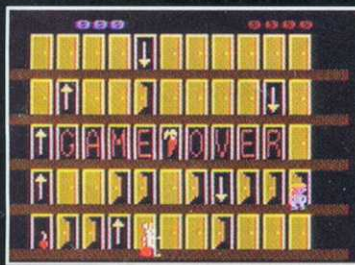
## CHAPTER 3:

### THE LOST 5200 GAMES



#### LOONEY TUNES HOTEL

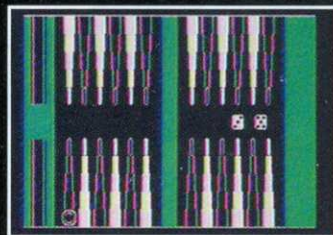
By the mid-'80s, Atari had forged Acclaimlike licensing agreements with big-leaguers like Disney, Warner Bros. and the Children's Television Workshop to create games that featured recognizable cartoon characters. **Looney Tunes Hotel** is a puzzle/platform adventure that closely resembles the arcade game **Elevator Action**—which, incidentally, Atari had just licensed from Taito. You play as Bugs Bunny, and you must travel from door to door in the hotel, rushing from one elevator to the next as you avoid the bombs of Elmer Fudd and the misguided wrath of the Tasmanian Devil (inexplicably referred to as simply "Devil" on the game's title screen.)



#### MICROGAMMON SB

This prototype cartridge is essentially an electronic version of the board game Backgammon. It's not the greatest-looking one we've ever seen, either; the screen is drawn in

the 5200's high-resolution graphics mode, which unfortunately allows just two colors, white and black. Clever programmers knew how to exploit the fine horizontal resolution of this particular mode to create artificial shades of green and purple on the 5200 and Atari computers; the XL/XE versions of the early **Ultima** games were good examples of how to do this skillfully. **Microgammon SB**, on the other hand, is graphically unappealing. Hey, there are good reasons why some of these games were never released....



#### MEEBZORK

A bizarre-looking shoot-'em-up that plays like a defective version of Sega's **Buck Rogers** coin-op. Instead of a sleek spacecraft, however, the cursed 5200 joystick is used to



control what looks like a Galapagos turtle. This prototype cartridge is obviously unfinished, which is a good thing for former 5200 owners, who may have been swayed by the game's appealing title had it reached store shelves. (Yeah, right.)



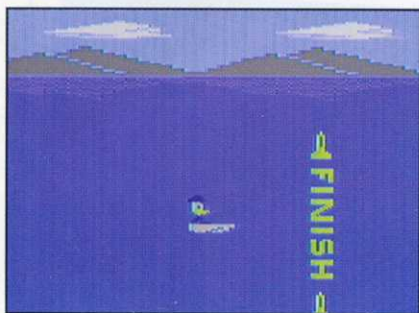
# CHAPTER 4:

THE LOST 2600 GAMES



## DONALD DUCK'S SPEED BOAT

Disney's marvelous mallard starred in this prototype racing game, which plays like a cross between a sideways **River Raid** and the original **Pitfall!** adventure. Copies of this unfinished cartridge have been circulated by collectors, but final packaged copies do not exist.



## SPORT GOOFY

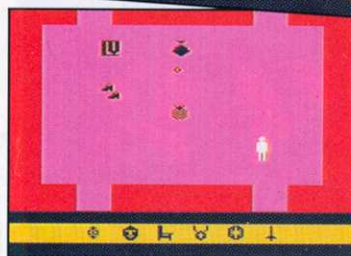
Atari's Disney license threatened to bring this olympic-style contest to the 5200; unfortunately, the incomplete version Skruch showed us seemed to have just two events: a rough high-diving scenario and a **Q\*Bert** variation in which Goofy gets to pop a thousand Mickey-shaped balloons. Some clever animation is included—a parachute pops out of Goofy's back just *after* he's crash-landed on a floating platform—but the game just didn't measure up to its promising full-color title screen.



## SWORDQUEST: WATERWORLD

Final packaged copies of **SwordQuest: Waterworld** do exist, but they're extremely difficult to find; it's one of the most collectible VCS cartridges ever released.

We asked Skruch about the famous four-part **SwordQuest** series of adventure games—and the high-profile contest that offered valuable, jeweled prizes to those who were among the first to complete each chapter—and he offered the following anecdotes: After the Tramiel takeover, many of the company's loose ends were simply left hanging. The ongoing **SwordQuest** contest was immediately deemed to be the responsibility of "Old Atari," a company so carefree with its expenditures that it actually had a *psychic* on retainer. Only the first two games in the series (**Earthworld** and **Fireworld**) had been published—and the contest prizes related to those titles had been awarded at the time of the takeover—so, as a gesture of good will to its customers, "New Atari" closed the door on the **SwordQuest** promotion by sponsoring an event in which players competed for less valuable prizes by playing prototype copies of **Waterworld**. Skruch also hinted that Atari never even started to develop the fourth and final game in the series, **SwordQuest: Airworld**.



## DUMBO'S FLYING CIRCUS

Yet another by-product of the Atari/Disney licensing agreement, **Dumbo's Flying Circus** is actually a very challenging action game in which Dumbo must fly around and collect balloons, saving friendly clowns from falling to the ground and avoiding the projectiles fired by evil clowns who ride unicyles across the ever-descending high wire.

This prototype game seems to be complete, and it's a shame that it was never released; we were pleasantly surprised by the excellent controls, the fluid animation of Dumbo's flapping ears and the variety of different clowns that appear as you progress through the game.



## RABBIT TRANSIT

Hello, what's this? This incredibly fun and playable prototype cartridge seemed familiar, and for a good reason: The game was released for use with the Arcadia/Starpach Supercharger, a VCS peripheral that added extra RAM to the machine's internal limit and read games that were stored on standard audio cassette tapes. Skruch seemed genuinely baffled when we identified this one. What was Atari doing with a prototype version of a non-Atari game, particularly one that has never previously been seen in cartridge form? The world may never know.





# CHAPTER 5:

## A TEMPEST IN A TEAPOT

First, the bad news: Skruch was mistaken when he said he thought he had a copy of the Atari 5200 version of the classic arcade shooter, *Tempest*. The good news was that he did have an unfinished prototype of *Tempest* for the VCS! This cartridge was, by far, the most significant find of the day. Unlike the 5200 *Tempest*, this 2600 adaptation was never announced to the public as a project in development; most video-game collectors and historians will no doubt be surprised to learn of this important

discovery. Currently, Skruch's copy is the only one known to exist in the world.

The idea of cramming the arcade game's crisp vector graphics, resonant soundtrack and hellishly addictive gameplay into a tiny

which might have helped to duplicate the control scheme of the arcade game. (Come to think of it, the free-spinning VCS "driving controller" would have been perfect, since it can be twirled endlessly in either direction, just like the original *Tempest* control knob.)

In any case, playing the VCS *Tempest* prototype was quite a rush. The graphics are blocky, the sounds are primitive and the controls are sluggish and imprecise; definitely not a lost classic. However—to the programmer's credit—even this one simple stage somehow manages to capture an identifiable bit of the essence of the *Tempest* play mechanic. Both Jim and I agreed

that—with a few more stages added—we probably would have been happy with this crude version of the game back in 1983. Hell, if Atari could sell zillions of copies of that

abominable **Pac-Man** conversion (which Skruch affectionately refers to as "*Flicker-Man*") then maybe a 2600 *Tempest* wasn't such a bad idea.

**Speculation:** Is it possible that *Tempest* was being considered as a premium cartridge to be sold only through the Atari Club

magazine? Consider that the game's official product number in Atari's record books is CX2687. This closely follows CX2683

(**Crazy Climber**) and immediately follows CX2685 (**Gravitar**) and CX2686 (**Quadrun**); when these games were originally released in 1983, all three were special Atari Club premiums, available only by mail through Atari direct. Twelve years later, nobody seems to remember exactly what the company had planned for *Tempest*.

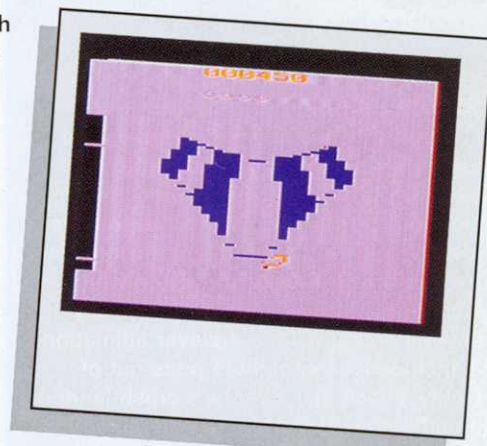
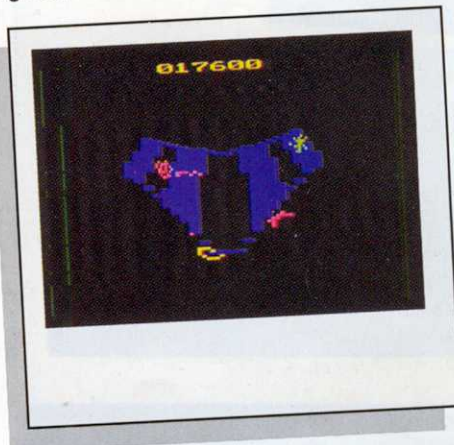
**TOP:** This one-of-a-kind *TEMPEST* prototype cartridge has a faded white label upon which some Atari employee had the foresight to scribble the words "Save—Important."

**BOTTOM:** Seen here for the first time anywhere is the title screen from the lost VCS version of *TEMPEST*.

64K 2600 cartridge seems absurd, and it is. Whoever programmed this skeleton of a game must have come to the same conclusion, because he or she only put in one screen; it's a rough approximation of the coin-op's V-shaped stage, but the playfield resembles nothing more than a pair of striped undershorts. Four game variations are available, but we couldn't spot the difference between them except for the number of lives you start with (five in the odd-numbered games and three in games 2 and 4.) Players can earn one extra life for every 10,000 points scored. Holding the button down gives you auto-fire, and the Super Zappers are triggered by pointing the joystick up and pressing the fire button.

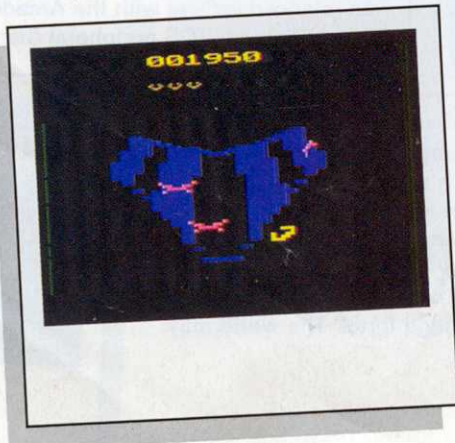
We were surprised to discover that the game is controlled with a joystick and not the widely-available VCS paddle controller,

This stage repeats itself endlessly; it's the only screen in this unfinished prototype.



**TOP:** The crackling Sparks don't appear until you've cleared several stages.

**BOTTOM:** Holding the joystick Up and pressing the action button triggers a Super Zapper!



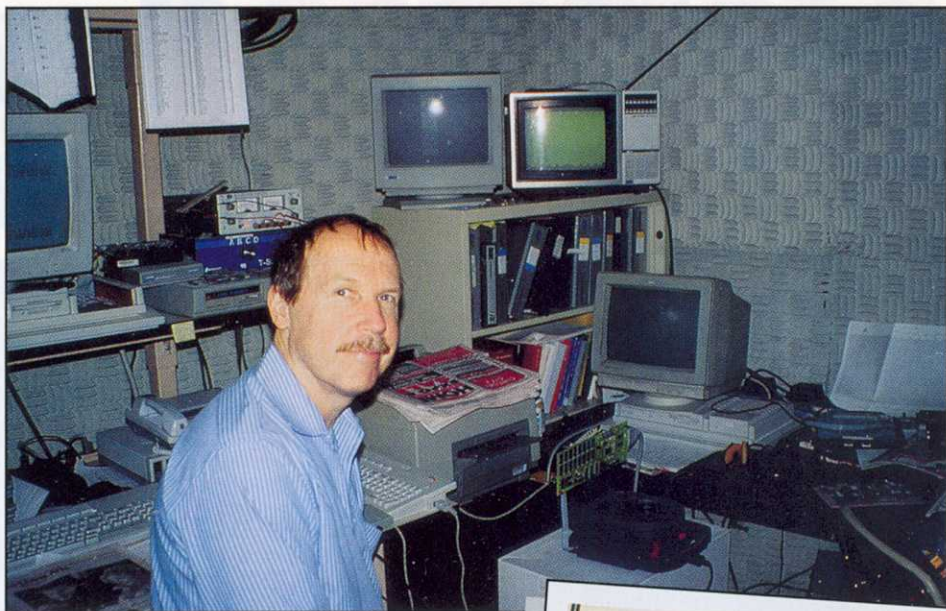


## CHAPTER 6:

EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

On our way out, Skruch introduced us to Dave Staugas, an Atari engineer who also happens to have been the programmer of two noteworthy VCS cartridges, **Millipede** and **Krull**. As fate would have it, Dave was hard at work on a software emulator which will allow the Atari Jaguar to play 2600 games stored on CD, just as Activision's popular **Action Pack** series does for PC CD-ROM systems. Yes, Atari plans to release collections of classic VCS titles on Jaguar CD; however, Skruch unofficially mentioned the possibility of putting "six or seven" games on each disc, which seems ludicrous when you consider that the entire VCS library of 500-odd games could easily fit on a single CD.

Regardless of Atari's marketing plans, we think the VCS collections will be a perfect complement to the company's **2000** series of classic game upgrades for the Jaguar. Hey, wouldn't it be great if each disc included an unreleased VCS gem like *Tempest*, **Donald Duck's Speed Boat** or any other lost title—**Elevator Action**, **Zookeeper**, **Garfield**, **Sinistar**, **Honker Bonk** or even **Save Mary**?



**ABOVE:** Atari software design engineer Dave Staugas, seen here with some of the equipment he's using to develop the Atari VCS emulator for Jaguar CD.

**RIGHT:** We spotted this creamy gray-and-blue Jaguar controller in Dave's office; according to Skruch, it's a leftover from some product tests that Atari conducted in mid-1993 before deciding on the Jaguar's final color scheme.



## EP7LOGUE

At the end of the day, Jim sat down on on the cement planter in front of the Atari building to enjoy another (cough) cigarette. I was too excited to sit; after all, how many people in this world can say that they have actually had an Atari MindLink controller strapped to their heads? Waiting for the cab to pick us up and return us to the San Jose airport, we were both lost in nostalgic thought, and Jim didn't even see the very short, bald-headed man who quietly walked out of the building, carrying a satchel in both hands as he climbed into a modest-looking burgundy-colored car and drove off. We never made eye contact, but he just looked so familiar that I had to step inside and speak to the receptionist. She confirmed that it was indeed Jack Tramiel who had just walked between us. The elder Tramiel is retired now, and it's said that he only comes into the office about once a month. His cameo appearance at the end of *ULTIMATE GAMER's* Atari Quest came as a fitting end to a very strange day; I saw it as a sign, but I'm not sure of what.

