



David Stone

REPORT FROM THE HARD SIDE

I would like to congratulate Jack Tramiel, Atari Corp's owner and chief executive, on making the late spring delivery of the new 32-bit, ST512 Atari computers to retailers throughout the United States, just as he announced back in January. I would like to -- but I can't. Once again, Mr. Tramiel has announced, and missed, a product shipment date.

If you were hoping to play the ST version of "M.U.L.E." any time soon, you can put down that joystick. The new date for the shipment of the ST machines is now late summer. You guess which year.

A couple of facts underscore the probability that Atari will not be releasing the new machines within the next few months. One is that Tramiel is still up in the air about which ad agency to use to introduce the new products. One source reports that Atari has recently dropped its long-time, California based ad agency and is now courting the New York agency that formerly had the Commodore account. Without an agency, let alone an advertising campaign, it is highly unlikely that any new product is going to be released soon. [Ed. Note: Less than 24 hours before this issue went to press, Atari announced that they had hired a new ad agency and that they would be spending an incredible ten million dollars on advertising before Christmas.]

Another tell-tale sign that no product shipment is imminent is that there have been no announcements of any new distribution agreements between Atari Corp and any major department stores. One theory for this is that Tramiel is having second thoughts about the viability of relying on the computer-illiterate salespeople found in most department stores to sell sophisticated computers and peripherals.

"Atari watching" can be more fun than the soaps, but in the long run the false starts and product delays have got to be bad for Atari's credibility. However, Tramiel, as former head of Commodore, has an incredible track record. So, nobody, even the most skeptical, can count Tramiel out until he counts himself out.

Meanwhile, amidst spurts and lurches of a faltering Atari Corp, new games for the Atari only trickle in. And, the trickle is likely to stay a trickle until Atari shapes up and ships out (new product, that is).

REPORT FROM THE SOFT SIDE

Two of the more interesting games for the Atari that have recently trickled into CGW headquarters are Six Gun Shoot Out and Gemstone Warrior, both from SSI. Six Gun is complex

enough to entertain a war gamer, and simple enough that it can be played and enjoyed without paying strict attention to all the numbers and formulas that affect the action. But I want to spend what "time" I have left in commenting on Gemstone.

Gemstone Warrior (GW) is a "conversion" game formerly available only on the Commodore and Apple. Its humble beginnings, however, do not detract from its playability. Overall, I found GW challenging and just different enough not to duplicate the action of other games in my rather large collection of action and adventure games.

The title "Gemstone Warrior" may be a somewhat misleading. "Warrior" implies that your objective is to fight. Not so -- although a lot of fighting goes on. Gemstone Quest would have been closer to the mark since your objective is to retrieve the five segments of the Gemstone from the foe infested depths of the caverns and mazes of the underworld.

The underworld is made up of dozens of colorful scrolling caves and mazes that range in size from about two screens by two screens, to three by five. The scrolling effect is continuous but not particularly smooth. Because of the large number of screens and connecting passage ways, map making is imperative each time you play.

Your choice of weapons is simple: crossbow and arrows or fireballs (like grenades). Since you can only carry a limited number of these weapons, you will find it essential to continually search for rearmaments. The best strategy early in the game is to keep the crossbow ready and save the fireballs for the more wicked foes (i.e., those that usually take three or more arrows to kill).

The inventory items that you find by searching coffins and chests add interest, and some small amount of humor to the game. Some of the items include poisons, elixers, magic freeze wands, invisibility spells, and mysterious ancient objects (that look uncannily like diskettes) that have unknown powers. Since you can have only one of these items ready to use with a single keystroke, it's important to anticipate your needs and have the appropriate object ready.

The foes of GW are well animated and include the standard variety of ghosts, skeletons, squiggly blobs, and birds of prey, plus a variety of other lesser-known, but just-as-feared demons. These foes get harder to kill the deeper you go into the underworld. So, you may find a strategy of "shoot everything that moves" used early in the game soon gets changed to "run first, shoot only if you have to".

A clever design feature allows either keyboard or joystick control for moving, shooting, searching, and adding items to your inventory. However, the keyboard is required for "using" an item (such as drinking a regenerative potion). I found the keyboard controls, especially for diagonal shooting, "too creative" to easily master. And, because the action is "real time", keeping both hands on the joystick at all times, ready to fight or run, is much easier and faster than keyboarding. The only caution here is that if you use the joystick do not forget about your inventory of spells that can be used only via the keyboard.

GW has a save game feature which in the instruction booklet sounds like normal save game. However, a word of warning about this particular "save game" is in order. It is more like a "pause to disk" feature than a save game that might be found in most adventure games. What this means is that even though you can save a current game to disk, if you are killed you cannot retrieve it. After you are killed, you are immediately taken to the "high score" screen to record your name. Subsequent attempts to retrieve your last "save" will not work.

The few drawbacks of GW, such as the necessity of using both joystick and keyboard (or of learning to move and shoot from the keyboard) in a real-time situation and the somewhat unusual save-game feature, are far outweighed by the game's superior combination of action and adventure. Since the top scores are saved to disk, GW is not likely to start collecting dust immediately after the first time you retrieve the five Gemstones.

[Ed. Note: Actually, the "dead is dead" feature of Gemstone Warrior is a refreshing change from the more common practice of either resurrecting the character within the framework of the game or allowing the user to hedge against the grim reaper with the save game routine. We have never liked the flippant way death is handled in most adventure games: "Oh dear, you have died! Well, never fear; death isn't real. You can simply rise from the dead! Resurrection is as common as dirt around here!"]