

The New Atari

The 1984 Summer Consumer Electronics Show

by Arthur Leyenberger

The Consumer Electronics Show is a twice-yearly event at which manufacturers of electronic products display new products and announce what will be forthcoming in the following months. The show is held in Las Vegas in January and in Chicago in June, and is attended by close to 100,000 people each time. The June show is especially important, because new products are announced that will become available for the Christmas buying season.

Currently Atari is down to under 1000 employees, from a high of over 7000 in 1982. Alay Kay, Chris Crawford and long-range research and development are no longer part of our favorite company. There is continued talk of a buy-out by Phillips Corp. But just when many people thought that Atari was down for the final count, along comes the 1984 Summer CES, in which Atari rolls out their new products and their new corporate identity.

There is no doubt that *Atari* is an emotional word for most of us. Our love/hate relationship goes back many years. Being loyal Atari enthusiasts, we continue to hope that Atari will eventually come out with a series of computers and peripherals that will again lead the industry. Only this is not to be, at least not in the way that we have wanted. Based upon what was seen in Chicago, Atari has become primarily a publisher of software and a marketeer of hardware. This is not necessarily bad; it just means that Atari will no longer be a full line company with long-term hardware and software research and lengthy product development cycles.

If you look at the products announced at CES, the company's new direction is readily apparent. Atari even billed their opening press conference, held on the first day of the show, as "June 3, 1984, the day the future began." Let's take a look at the new products and see what the new Atari has to offer.

Hardware

Although Atari wasn't openly showing the 1450XLD computer and the 1090XL expansion box, they did have them available for viewing by third-party software developers. The 1450XLD is no longer being called that but is simply referred to as the new high-end computer. Currently scheduled for a late fall introduction, the new machine will have 64K of RAM and will be compatible with existing Atari software and peripherals, at a cost of under \$1000. It will contain a built-in double-sided, double-density disk drive capable of storing 352K bytes on a disk. The disk drive is connected directly to the processor bus, which means it will operate five times faster than other drives using the serial I/O interface.

The new computer contains a built-in 300 baud modem and a speech synthesizer rumored to be better than the one first shown a year ago. Also, telecommunications software and a mini-database called The **Grapevine** are built in. One of the uses of the **Grapevine** is allowing customers to receive customer service information via their computers. The new computer was said to be "70 to 80 percent compatible" with the IBM PC.

The 1090XL Expansion Box was also shown to software developers. It will have five expansion slots and contain a 64K RAM card. This will increase the memory of a 600XL to 64K (80K bank select) and an

800XL or high-end computer to 128K. Atari is supposedly working on an 80-column video card, a clock/calendar card and a CP/M card.

The most exciting piece of hardware introduced by Atari was the **MindLink** system. This device is composed of a headband connected to an infrared transmitter and a receiver that connects to a video game or computer up to 20 feet away. Using electromyogram transducers, the headband can detect minute electrical energy generated from the muscles in the forehead. By tensing and relaxing the muscles in your face and forehead, you can control a computer or video game screen without using a joystick. The **MindLink** will sell for approximately \$100 and, initially, be available for the BCS [Archiver's note: VCS?] and 7800 video game this fall. The computer version will be available in early 1985.



7800 ProSystem

Atari was showing two **MindLink** VCS games. One, **Bionic Breakthrough**, was the familiar **Breakout** game with the paddle at the bottom of the screen controlled by your forehead. The screen changes color and the player is rewarded with higher point totals as he or she relaxes during the game. Interestingly, if the infrared beam is broken when a person walks between you and the receiver, the game instantly pauses. Likewise, if the phone rings, just get up and answer it, and the game will wait for you.

I was able to try the game for about fifteen minutes. By the time I finished, I was playing fairly well. With continued practice, I think I could get used to this unique input device. Anyway, I was impressed with **MindLink**. With a hands-free input like this, who needs a mouse?

There are many possible applications for **MindLink**. Software planned by Atari covers a range of areas, including relaxation, education, ESP and thought games that rely on memory and intuition, biofeedback and relaxation. The product manager of **MindLink** told me that it would eventually gain serious computer application software. Its use by physically impaired persons would be a major breakthrough. In a word processing program, for example, with some clever programming, **MindLink** could be used for two-dimensional cursor positioning by a quadriplegic.

Atari was also showing the 7800 ProSystem and the computer keyboard upgrade for it. The keyboard will operate with 4K of RAM and is expandable to 20K. It is compatible with Atari home computer peripherals but not with existing computer software. The 7800 will list for \$150 and should be available in July. The computer keyboard will probably cost less than \$100 and be out by the end of the year.

Software

Five software titles were announced for the 7800 computer keyboard. They include a terminal program, word processor and BASIC. **AtariLab** and **Typing Tutor** will also be available. Prices were not disclosed.

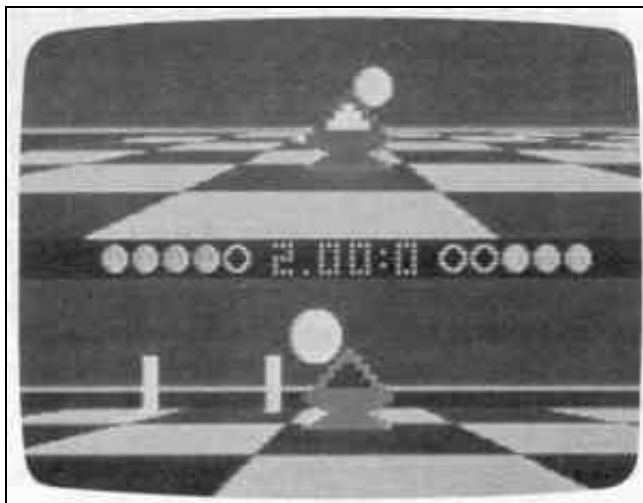
A dozen new Atarisoft titles were announced for other computers, including their first educational program, **Typo Attack**. Atari plans to add educational software to its already extensive list of game titles under the Atarisoft label.

New life was pumped into the aging VCS video game system with the introduction of the "superchip" technology series of games. VCS games in this series have upgraded graphics due to the increase in ROM (read only memory). Instead of the previous 8K maximum, superchip VCS games have 16K of ROM and a special interface chip. New VCS titles include **Track and Field**, **The Last Starfighter** (based on the recent film), **Jr. Pac-Man**, **Millipede**, **Stargate**, **Crystal Castles** and (David's) **Midnight Magic**. These same titles have been announced for the 5200 game and computer.

The two new Lucasfilm games were being displayed on the 5200 and 7800 video games and the computer. The graphics in both games are excellent -- outstanding when seen on the new 7800 system. Lucasfilm's computer division used sophisticated animation techniques and graphics technology to develop these games, and it really shows.

Ballblazer is a futuristic, high-speed soccer type of game that uses a split screen to convey the action. Each of the players gets their own unique first-person view with a three-dimensional perspective. The music that accompanies the game is an improvisational jazz score that is as innovative as the game play. The other Lucas title is called **Rescue on Fractalus**. Here, you navigate your Valkyrie Fighter through the treacherous canyons of Fractalus in search of downed pilots. A first-person viewpoint is used for the flight simulation, and fractal geometry effects the three-dimensional random graphic sequences.

The theme of this particular Consumer Electronics Show seemed to be educational software. Atari fell in line with a series of new educational titles, some of them very well done. Under the Atari Learning Systems umbrella, several series of programs were announced for a wide range of ages. The **Milestone** series represents top of the line educational software from Atari. The previously announced **AtariLab Starter Set** (temperature module) and **Light Module** lead off this educational line. With these two products, the home computer science student can learn about temperature and light by conducting experiments and completing workbook exercises. They are geared for elementary and junior high school students.



Ball Blazer [Archiver's note: Actually "**Ballblazer**" (one word)]



Escape from Fractalus [Archiver's note: Actually "Rescue on Fractalus"]

Find It! is a group of computer activities designed for the development of visual perception skills. Ranging from simple to moderately complex, these allow young children to participate in such tasks as finding the animated figure in a crowd, matching geometric shapes or solving visual puzzles. **The ABC of CPR** is the first entrant in the home health software library, focusing on the basics of health/medicine. The first of a two-part tutorial is titled *First Aid*. This program is intended to build awareness and background information as a prelude to formal training in medical assistance. Graphics, sound and animation are used to teach first aid techniques to both children and adults.

Wheeler-Dealer is a simulation of an automobile assembly plant, aimed at children twelve and older. Supply and demand economics are taught by setting up and maintaining a profitable business. The player actually designs and assembles vehicles, acquires raw materials and selects staffing and pricing, based upon options given for maximum profitability. Up to four players can compete in this simulation, which even includes price freezes and strikes.

The Simulated Computer uses a computer to show what goes on inside a computer. While not a new title -- Atari bought this one, as they did several others-- **Simulated Computer** lets the user program a see-through mock-up of a computer system, then see the results of each action as the computer carries out the program. Turtle designs and sound effects can also be achieved with this program designed for children ages 10 and up.

Telly Turtle is the next in the series. It is a pictorial pre-Logo version of the turtle graphics concept. There are four levels available, with the top level being a true programming language. Once this level is mastered, the user would continue on to Atari Logo.

All of these educational titles will be available for other computers in addition to the Atari. Apple, Commodore and IBM computers will be supported. In addition, **AtariLab** will become available for other machines as well.

The most exciting Atari educational programs announced were the "Futuremakers" series. There are two initial titles, aimed at ages 10 to adult, that deal with the space program. **This Is Ground Control** is a simulated voyage through our solar system. The journey involves spacecraft design, course planning and flight operations -- as you deal with the principles and technical constraints of real space travel. Excellent graphics, using a three-dimensional view perspective, create a feeling of actually being out in space. Planet fly-bys are unreal.

Through the Starbridge is the other title and incorporates fact and science fiction, as you travel the

universe and explore everything from black holes to quasars to aliens. Theories and facts about physics, logic, chemistry, mathematics and astronomy all blend together to make this program educational and entertaining.

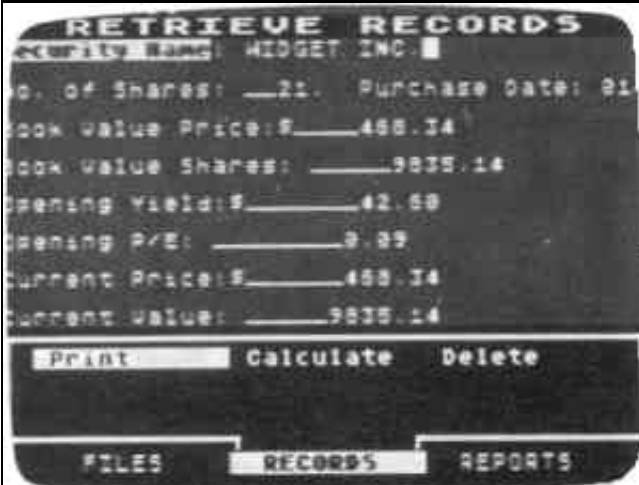
Both of these "Futuremakers" titles share several elements. A heads-up display is used to present the view out of the craft's window, with 3-D animated graphics of planetary approaches and swing-bys. A joystick, lightpen or touch tablet may be used as the control. The game can be saved to disk for future continuation. Random start-up scenarios present the user with a different identity and a different set of parameters each time the program is used.

These programs appear to be excellent. Only demos could be seen at the show but, as mentioned earlier, they were very impressive. **This Is Ground Control** and **Through the Starbridge** will be available by September and will sell for \$39.95.

The SYN-series -- **SynCalc**, **Synfile+** and **Syntrend** -- were present but not prominently displayed at CES, since they are already on retailers' shelves. Synapse created the three programs exclusively for Atari and announced them a year ago. **Proofreader** is a revised spelling checking program for the Atari, similar to APX's **Atspeller**. Expect to see it soon.



Syntrend, Synfile+, and SynCalc

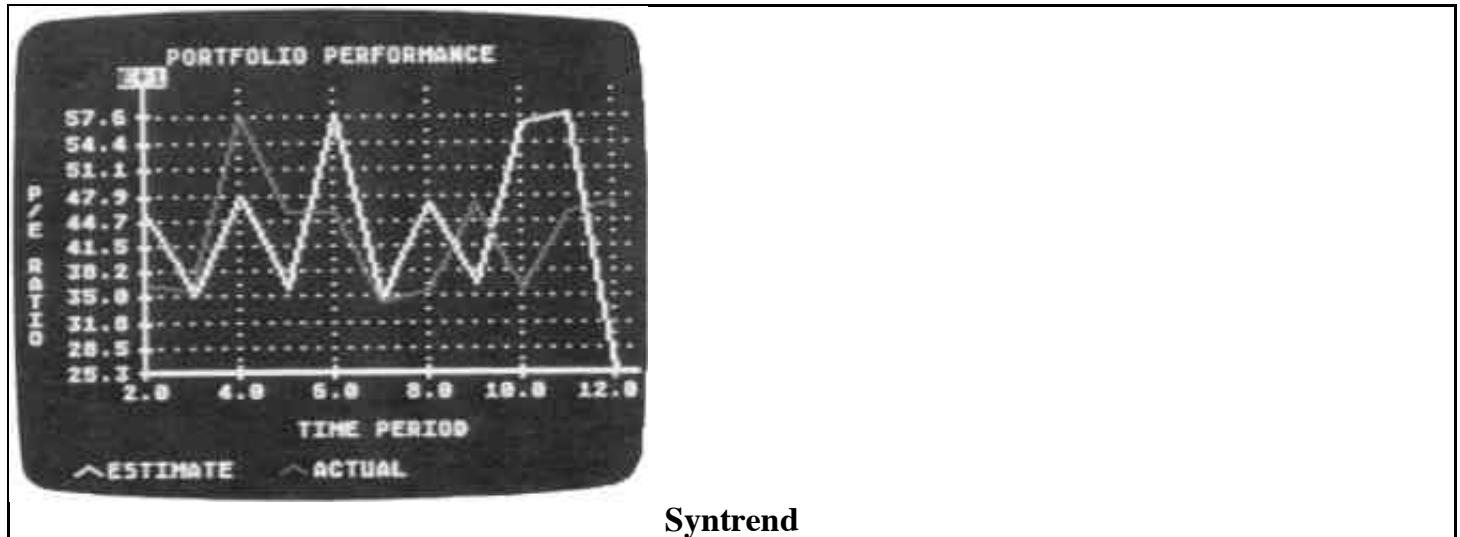


Synfile+

Additional game titles for the computer include: **Gremlins** (based on the hit movie), **The Last Starfighter**, **Hobgoblin** (Atari's first text-adventure game, tentatively titled), **The Final Legacy**, **Track and Field**, **Crystal Castles**, **Pole Position II**, **Elevator Action** and **Jr. Pac-Man**. Most of these games will be

available in the third quarter of 1984.

As you have seen, Atari announced quite a few new products at the Summer Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago. Many of the products were not developed in-house, but, rather, were purchased or licensed from the outside. Almost all of the software that was announced will become available for other computers. Even hardware products like **MindLink** and **AtariLab** will eventually find their way onto such computers as Commodore and Apple. This is in keeping with Atari's new role as a publisher and marketer.



During discussions with Dave Ruckert, Vice President of Marketing for Atari, I discovered that the decision to actually go ahead with the high-end computer (1450XLD type) and the expansion box was made with the advanced user in mind. According to Rupert, if it wasn't for the continued input and support from individuals, user groups, Compuserve users and other dedicated users, these products would not have made it.

Perhaps Atari *does* listen, after all.

Other software

Much of the software introduced by third-party suppliers at CES was either educational, not for the Atari, or both. There is no space here to list all of the additional software that was seen for the Atari, however, two new software products from one supplier were very impressive.

Batteries Included is a Canadian company that, until now, has produced software for the Commodore 64. Their C64 word processor, called **Paper Clip** has been a top seller. Now they have announced an Atari version of **Paper Clip** that may become the ultimate word processor for the Atari. It is impossible to describe all of the features of this product, so I will just mention a few.

Paper Clip is compatible with standard Atari DOS files and is the first word processor to interface with Atari's new 80-column card (presumably Atari's new **Super AtariWriter** will, too). The program disk comes with over fifty printer configuration files, and each one may be further customized. A macro command allows a single keystroke to enter and display a set of repeatedly used strings of text -- or even entire sentences -- at any point in the body of the text. There is on-screen display of up to 132 columns, which can be formatted to 80 columns with the print preview command. Finally, there are dual text windows which allow the simultaneous editing of two files, plus cut and paste transfers from one file to another. **Paper Clip** for the Atari will list for \$89.95 and be available during the second half of 1984.

The other product announced by Batteries Included is called **Homepak**. This \$49.95 program is really a combination of three programs in one: a smart telecommunications program, an information management system and an easy-to-use word processor. **Hometerm**, the telecommunications program, features X-Modem protocol for exchange of data between computers, bulletin boards and data banks such as CompuServ. Features such as an on-screen clock and unlimited capture buffer make this a very promising program.

Homefind is the information manager which lets the user employ English language commands. For example, I may store an item like this: "Atari's chief executive officer is James Morgan." Later, I can simply ask, "Who is James Morgan?" and I will see displayed on the screen, "Atari's chief executive officer."

The third program in **Homepak** is called **HomeText**. While not as sophisticated as **Paper Clip**, this straightforward word processor offers many features -- such as cut and paste, mail merger (with **Homefind**), headers, footers and page numbers.

Batteries Included looks like a company that is headed for success in the Atari market, based upon the first two products they were showing. Best of luck to them and other software companies that continue to support the Atari computer and the Atari computer user.

PostScript

No description of a Consumer Electronics Show is complete without mention of the one product that was the undeniable hit of the show. In this case, it was the Amiga personal computer. While not specifically an Atari product, the fate of Atari users and future Amiga PC owners seem likely to be intertwined. Here's why.

With a Motorola 68000 CPU, 128 bytes of RAM [*Archiver's note: I assume that should read "128K bytes of RAM"*], very high resolution graphics, built-in disk drive, modem, NTSC (television), composite and RGB outputs, this machine makes Apple's much-touted Macintosh look primitive. Its IBM compatibility, 16-bit operating system and phenomenal sound and graphics features could make this the graphics computer of the 1980s that we've all been waiting for.

The Amiga PC wasn't being shown to the public, but I was able to sit in on a brief demo. For owners anxious for Atari's next generation graphics machine, the Amiga isn't "next generation" but the one after that. Priced under \$2000, it should be available by the end of the year. Personally, I can't wait.

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