

Insights and feedback on THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD and WIZARD OF WOR (coin-op)

by Tim Duarte

This article could have also been titled:

“How to play the THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD (Bally Astrocade) and WIZARD OF WOR (coin-op) on the cheap”

I’ve recently become extremely interested in the Bally Astrocade computer videogame system. I’ve been listening to podcasts like the INTELLIVISIONARIES (for the Intellivision) and the COLECOVISIONS PODCAST (for the Colecovision) and the SELECT GAME podcast (for the Odyssey2) And then I discovered there was a podcast about the Bally Astrocade called the ASTROCAST.

I also discovered that there was a community forum dedicated to the Bally Astrocade on Atariage.com. I later discovered that the moderator of the forum was Adam Trionfo, an old friend I used to correspond with about videogames via the U.S. mail over 20 years ago! This was the “good old days” before the internet. Adam and I “go way back.” We both published print newsletters about videogames in the 1990’s. Adam published ORPHANED COMPUTERS AND GAME SYSTEMS (a newsletter about various consoles) and I published 2600 CONNECTION (a newsletter with a sole focus on the Atari 2600 videogame system). We started corresponding again. This time it was electronically and not through the U.S. mail. We “talked” about the good old days of classic videogames, the games we enjoyed playing, our families, and more. Hard to believe it has been so many years. Time goes by fast.

I’ve told Adam that I have wished to contribute in some form. I told him I was interested in the Bally Astrocade and its games. I’ve always rooted for these underdog systems like the Bally Astrocade and the Magnavox Odyssey2. Some small problems: I didn’t own a Bally Astrocade. And I am a Bally Astrocade “virgin!”



A few weeks later, Adam asked me if I would provide some feedback and my insights on THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD, which is the Bally Astrocade’s home version of WIZARD OF WOR, for their Astrocast podcast which spotlights this game cartridge. The February 1983 issue of Video magazine has an article called “Arcade Alley: The Fourth Annual Arcade Awards.” In the article, THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD gets the following praise: “ [it is] the finest cartridge ever produced for [the Astrocade]” That is high praise. More to come on this.

I knew I had a daunting task that stood before me: finding a Bally Astrocade. Adam informed me that this would be tough. The hardware is rare and pricey, too. Sure, I could look on ebay and overpay. There are some systems out there for sale, but they are likely to be in need of repair and may or may not even work. I also learned through the podcast that many of the Bally Astrocade consoles were prone to overheating issues and problems. I would also need to find THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD on cartridge. I would plan on getting a complete, in-box copy, so I could get the full effect of what it was like to buy the game.

I came up with an idea to solve these predicaments: emulation. Again, Adam was a big help and he pointed me in the right direction. The plan was to use MAME, a free program that is a Multi Arcade Machine Emulator. MAME was easy to download and install on my Windows 10 laptop. Kudos to Adam once

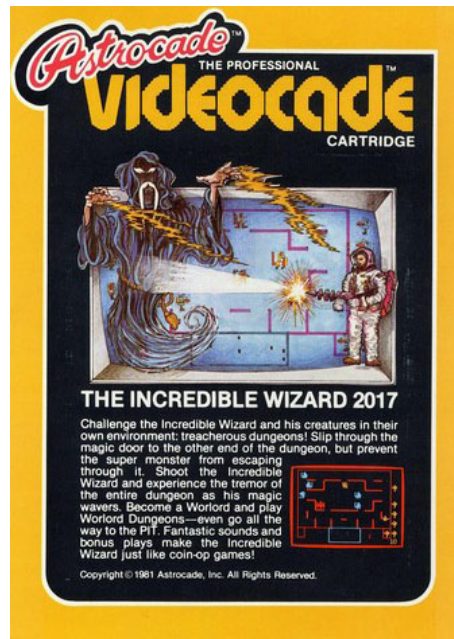
again for providing the necessary Astrocade system files and helping me in setting it up correctly so that the Bally Astrocade is enabled, recognized, and configured as a system under the MAME emulator software.

The unique Bally Astrocade controller would also be a challenge. If I could find one, I discovered it would work with MAME under emulation on a computer, pending that I purchased a device called the Astro-daptor. I could not locate controllers locally and I did not want to pay a small fortune for genuine Astrocade controllers on ebay. I wasn’t going to be able to experience the unique controller with the small paddle on top. I settled for the next best thing that I knew I would be comfortable with under emulation: the standard Atari 2600 style joystick (the CX-40). Fortunately, I already own a USB-based Atari 2600 joystick that I use for the excellent STELLA Atari 2600 emulator and the O2EM Odyssey² emulator. The beautiful thing is that MAME recognized it, so I was all set to enjoy some games. Almost.

MAME was working fine, but something was missing : the Bally Astrocade files needed for MAME to emulate this system. I sent Adam a message, and he pointed me to his fine web site <http://www.ballyalley.com>. There’s a section on emulation and the first file in the list is the Bally Astrocade ROM collection. It’s everything you need. As I listened to Adam and his co-host Chris discuss the game SEA DEVIL, I really wanted to check this game out. To my good fortune, SEA DEVIL was included in the ROM collection. Looking further down the list of games to choose from, I spotted THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD, which is essentially WIZARD OF WOR. I shared the news with Adam that I was excited to finally check out this game. I have great memories of my teenage years playing the arcade coin-op of WIZARD OF WOR at the Brunswick

bowling alley in Fairhaven, MA. I later enjoyed playing the game at home when I bought the Atari 2600 version which was licensed by CBS. It was OK and I thought it did a pretty good job at capturing the essence of the game. I later owned the Atari 8-bit version which was licensed by Roklan and played it on my Atari 800XL computer. One day, a friend of mine in high school named Paul, who also was an Atari nut, handed me a box of about ten 5.25" floppy diskettes that were "chock-filled" with video games. WIZARD OF WOR was on one of those diskettes. I couldn't believe that some "pirates" found a way to illegally copy all of these games that I was now the owner of. There must have been over 100 games and I didn't pay one cent for any of the games! I take that back. I did have to drive to K-mart to purchase a box of floppies so I could make a set of copies of these diskettes for myself before I had to give them back to Paul. I was pleasantly surprised and happy with this version of WIZARD OF WOR because the graphics were upgraded and I didn't see the flickering that was on the 2600 version. To be honest, I really didn't care about the flickering. I was happy because my friend Scott and I could play simultaneously without having to go to the Fairhaven bowling alley to play the coin-op arcade game of WIZARD OF WOR.

Why wasn't the game released as WIZARD OF WOR? I have a theory. When Bally wanted out of the videogame business, they sold the system to a company called Astrocade. I am assuming that they way the new company handled the licensing of the game was to slightly change the name of the game. THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD is different enough, yet it is still similar enough so that a game player may know what it actually is. Yet the manual does state that it is "licensed from Bally / Midway Mfg. Co. and based on the original © "Wizard of Wor" game done by Dave Nutting Associates (A Bally Co.) Why they could not use the name WIZARD OF WOR still remains a mystery. Perhaps we will find out if we can interview the programmers and / or key people that were involved.



It is interesting to note that Astrocade also may have escaped an expensive licensing fee by also naming their GALAXIAN clone as GALACTIC INVASION.

So how is THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD? In baseball terms, I think this game is a "home run" that gets "knocked out of the ball park." Take my word for it: It is an EXCELLENT translation of the arcade coin-op. Don't believe me? The 1982 issue Video magazine's Guide to Electronic Games described THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD as "a near-perfect translation" of the arcade original. Again, more high praise from the press. It is a game that really makes the Bally Astrocade shine.

Adam and I were also fans of another print newsletter called DIGITAL PRESS, which was published by Joe Santulli. (Yes, Joe also got bit by the same newsletter bug that had bitten Adam and I) In the January / February 1996 issue of DIGITAL PRESS, Joe reviewed the game and gave it an overall rating of 10. Wrap your brain around that rating again. Sink it in and absorb it one more time: a 10 out of 10. That is extremely rare for a game to receive such an honor.

I'm not going to go into a full-fledged review of THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD for the Bally Astrocade. Instead, here is Joe Santulli's "glowing" review of the game. It is a "must" read. Do you hear me?

There have been very few games over the years that have shaped an entire video game generation (specifically, my circle of gaming friends). **John Madden Football** for the Genesis was one of them. **Rocky Super Action Boxing** for the ColecoVision was another. To a lesser degree **NHL Hockey** for Genesis and **TV Sports Football** (remember that one, Mr. Annick?) for the Turbografx-16 did the same. It doesn't take long to figure out that they're all sports games though. The only house-rocking NON sports game that I can truly say made us understand each other as gamers is this little ditty called **The Incredible Wizard**, or, as it was known in the arcades, **Wizard of Wor**.

"Never trust Santulli" became the slogan amongst the Ringwood clan of video game players where I grew up. It was developed after several gamers, thinking they were involved in a cooperative match of worling slaying, were "inadvertently" shot in the back when they crossed my path. I developed this little strategy after realizing that other players were not only stealing MY points, but were worth more themselves than the denizens of the maze we were supposedly out to defeat. Even more importantly, I could ALWAYS predict where that other player was going to appear again after he died, and with five of them lined up to go that was five times that many points I could have in my till. Call me greedy, but that strategy eventually caught on with just about everyone else I ever played this game with, including recent friends who were introduced to this game in the past month while I was preparing this review. By the way, the "strategy" of using the other player as point-bait has stuck with me into my adult life. **Streets of Rage** and **Gauntlet** has shown a new crop of gamers a different side of me ("heh heh, deal with it!"). I am happy to say that my wife shares this strategy with me, and our game sessions together make the Civil War look like a carnival game.



I wish I could tell you how many different mazes there are in the game. I can't. It's not that I haven't tried to count them, there's definitely more than eight. It's just that we so rarely even get past the third screen blasting the hell out of each other that the other creatures in the maze become more of a distraction than a goal. The two-player strategy in this game can really get intense! Because you can only have one bullet on the screen at a time, you have to plan carefully where and when you want to execute the other player. Once done, you can lurk outside of his little cubbyhole where he will pop out for his next "life". He can wait there for ten seconds, leaving at any time, but is then forced into play by the computer. It's often that two or three more lives will be lost to the lurking player, but eventually one of those damn worlunks will happen by and catch him off-guard, then it's out of the hole and back to the hunt. What a game. What a damn good game.



Oh yeah, about the game. Well, the premise might be clear by now if you haven't already played it. You and another player (there is a one-player mode, too) work to clear the maze of wandering Garwors, Burwors, and other creatures with "wor" in their names. Once they're disposed of, a really fast Worluk darts around the maze trying to get out. You get a bunch of points for shooting it, plus the next level becomes double points. Randomly, the Wizard himself appears, fires a bullet, then disappears again. This repeats until he either kills or is killed by a player. There's a really cool flashing effect when you kill the Wizard, and an even cooler bonus (he's worth twice as much as the Worluk, and an additional double score multiplier goes into effect for the next level). In fact, this is one of those games that fairly awards points, so if you win, you're probably the better player and not just some lucky punk. For some reason, the Astrocade version awards points at 1/10th of the arcade value, so the Worluk is only worth 100 points versus 1000 on the arcade and other systems. The best score I could manage was 13790, which seems really low, but I was on the 13th board.



Here's the really amazing thing: The game was produced in 1981. 1981!! If nothing else, this game proves the superiority of the Bally Astrocade over its competition (this was the same year Atari released the laughable Pac-Man for the VCS). You would never have seen graphics as good as The Incredible Wizard on an Atari 2600 game at that time, and Odyssey2 NEVER reached this level. In fact, CBS released Wizard of Wor for the Atari 2600 a few months later, and although it is more colorful, it is also a flickerfest with bulkier and less detailed characters. The Astrocade version features subtleties that were largely ignored by most developers at the time, such as the recoiling of the gun when a shot is taken, the messages (GET READY/GO and ESCAPED appear in dramatic fashion), and the really wild sounds that top just about everything from the time. It wasn't until almost two full years later, when Wizard of Wor appeared on the Atari 5200, that a graphically superior version could be played. But then, you have to work with those damn non-centering controllers - a real problem on precision maze

games like this. Again, the Astrocade version reigns supreme. I suppose if the game wasn't as good as it is, even the two-player shootout that ensues might not have made it the showstopper it was.

The Incredible Wizard is one of my top ten "classic" games of all time, so it gets the ever-so-rare TEN rating from me. Plugging it in again after years of dormancy didn't stifle the fun, the action, or the memories behind this gem.

Graphics: 9, Sound: 9, Gameplay: 10, Overall: 10

(This review originally was published in the January/February 1996 issue (#28) of the Digital Press newsletter.)

Part of my amazement in this game is the attention to detail that the programmer took in making this port of the WIZARD OF WOR game. In order to fully understand this, I felt the need to make some "nose to nose" comparisons of the arcade coin-op of WIZARD OF WOR and the home port of THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD.

This would pose yet another problem for me: There were no arcades local to me that featured a coin-operated version of WIZARD OF WOR. I looked on ebay to see if any were being sold. Negative. Just parts. I bet a working coin-op machine is not cheap.

I turned to emulation once again to solve the problem. Adam came through for me again, this time sending me a ZIP file of the WIZARD OF WOR coin-op arcade machine files needed for emulation under MAME. All I had to do was to move the ZIP file into the ROMS subfolder under the main MAME folder. Run MAME, choose WIZARD OF WOR, and voila - I'm playing the arcade coin-op of WIZARD OF WOR in all it's glory. The look, the sounds, the feel - it almost all came back to me. I say almost because it felt like something was indeed missing. The screen looked right, my USB Atari joystick was working in MAME, and the sounds from the were playing... in the arcade WIZARD OF WOR, the eerie four-note "Danger Ahead" tune from Dragnet. (the ominous "Dum - - - de - DUM - DUM") plays Shoot the WORLUK and you'll be treated to a DOUBLE SCORE DUNGEON (where point values are doubled). The fifth note of the "Danger Ahead" tune is played here. In the Bally Astrocade's INCREDIBLE WIZARD version, it's

always the four notes played on the GET READY screen and then the fifth note is played on a GO screen.



But then it hit me... I remembered that the Wizard spoke in this game. After doing some research on the interwebs, I found the samples of the voice files needed for the WIZARD OF WOR. I downloaded them and moved the ZIP file into the SAMPLES subfolder under the main MAME folder. Ran MAME again and low and behold - the Wizard of Wor is speaking! Technology can be amazing...when things work!



I found a listing of all the things that the Wizard of Wor can say while you are playing the game:

A few more dungeons and you'll be a worlord.

Ah good, my pets where getting hungry. ha ha ha.

Ah you thought you could but I'm the dungeon master. Ha ha ha ha.

And my teleporting spell can be even faster. Ha ha ha ha.

Another coin for my treasure chest.

Another worrior for my babies to devour.

Are you fit to survive the pit. Ha ha ha ha.

Be forewarned, you approach the pit. Ha ha ha ha.

Bite the bullet worlord. Ha ha ha ha.

Bite the bullet worrior. Ha ha ha ha.

Burwor hasn't eatin anyone in months. ha ha ha ha.

Burwor, Garwor, and Thorwor, will do you in.

Burwor, you are in the worlord dungeons.

Come back for more, with, The Wizard of Wor. ha ha ha ha.

Deep in the caverns of wor you will meet me worrior.

Deeper ever deeper in to the dungeons of wor. Ha ha ha ha.
Fear, I draw near, each time I appear. ha ha ha ha.

Find me, The Wizard of Wor.

Garwor and Thorwor become invisible. ha ha ha ha.

Garwor, go after them.

Get ready, worrior.

Hay, Your space boots untied. Ha ha ha ha.

He he he ho ho ho ha ha ha ha, that was fun.

Hey, insert coin.

Hurry back, I can't wait to do it again.

I am The Wizord of Wor.

I'll fray you with my lightning bolts.

I'm out'a spite. ha ha ha ha.

If you can't beat the rest, then you'll never get the best. Ha ha ha ha.

If you destroy my babies, I'll pop you in the oven. ha ha ha ha.

If you get too powerful, I'll take care of you myself. ha ha ha ha.

If you try any harder, you'll only meet with doom. ha ha ha ha.

Keep going, and you will find me.

Kill Worluk for double score.

My babies breath fire, worrior.

My beasts run wild in the worlord dungeons. Ha ha ha ha.

My creatures are radioactive.

My magic is stronger then your weapons, worlord.

My magic is stronger then your weapons, worrior.

My worlings are very very hungry. Ha ha ha ha.

Now you get the heavyweights.

Now you know the tast of my magic, worrior.

Now your only chance is your dance. Ha ha ha ha.

One bite from my pretties, and you'll explode. Ha ha ha ha.

Oops, I must have forgotten the walls. Ha ha ha ha.

Remember, I'm the wizard, not you!

Say it again, Woryer fear, I draw neer, each time I apear. Ha ha ha ha.

So you've come to score in the world of wor. Ha ha ha ha.

The dungeons of wor await your return, worrior.

The Wizard of Wor thanks you.

Thor, Bur, Gar dinner's ready. Ha ha ha ha.

Thorwor is red mean and hungry for spice food.

Wasn't that lightning bolt delicious? Ha ha ha ha.

Watch the radar, worrior.

Welcome, to my world of wor.

Were are you going to hide now. Ha ha ha ha.

Worlock will escape through the door.

Worlord maybe you'll see me again.

Worlord, while you developed science, we developed magic.

Worlord, You won't have a chance for your dance. Ha ha ha ha.

Worlord, Your path leads directly to the pit. Ha

ha ha ha.

Worrior, now I'm getting mad.

Worrior, while you developed science, we developed magic.

You are in, the dungeons of wor.

You can start anew, but for now you're through.

You know you can do better, worlord.

You know you can do better, worrior.

You will never leave wor alive. ha ha ha ha.

You'd better hope you don't find me, The Wizard of Wor.

You'll get the arena. Ha ha ha ha.

You're asking for trouble, worrior.

You're off to see the wizord, the magical Wizord of Wor. ha ha ha ha.

You've just been frayed by the Wizard of Wor. Ha ha ha ha.

Your bones will lie in the dungeons of wor. ha ha ha ha.

Your explosion was music to my ears. Ha ha ha ha.

A funny observation: My mind can only vaguely recall hearing the voice of the Wizard at the Fairhaven bowling alley all those years ago. I think I remember that he spoke, but there was too much other noise there among us. The sounds of the competing nearby arcade machines, the chatter of people around us, and the crashing noise of a bowling ball hitting bowling pins made it all the harder to hear the Wizard. It wasn't an important feature of the game for me. The voice of the Wizard is only present on the arcade coin-op. The voice of the Wizard is absent in the Bally Astrocade version of THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD. It's a feature that really isn't necessary.

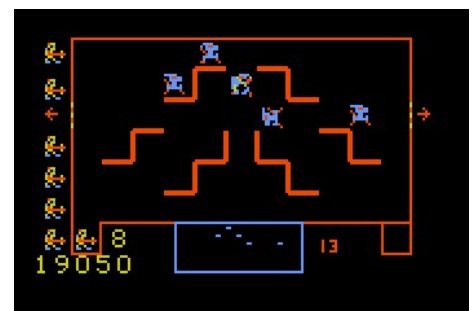
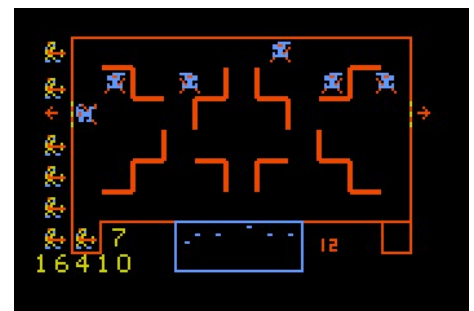
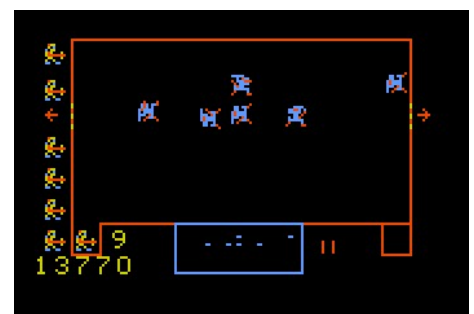
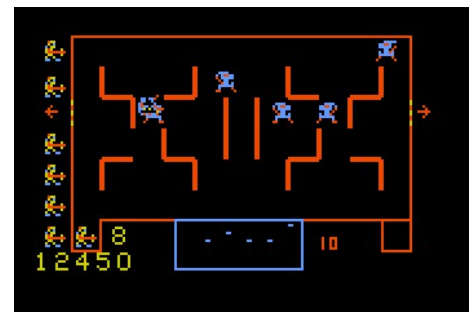
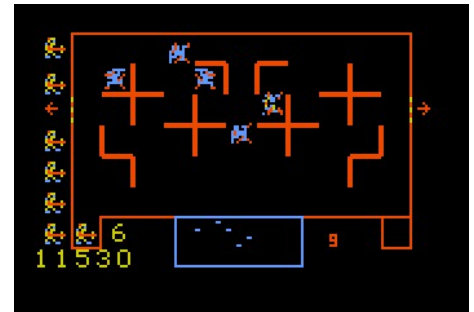
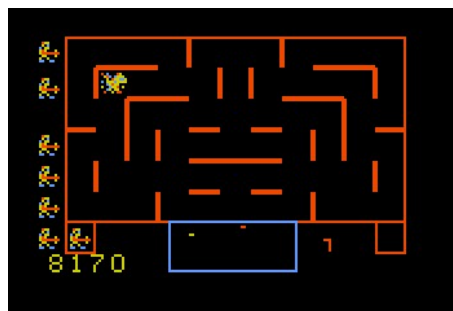
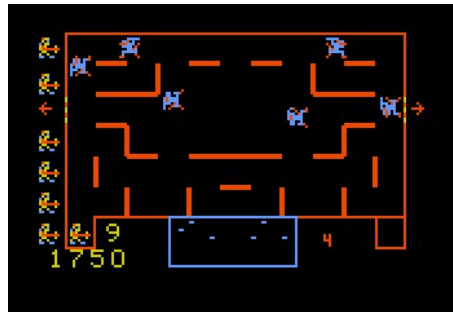
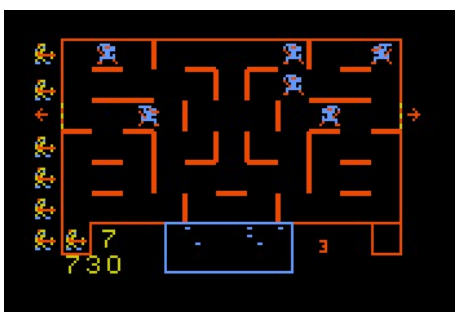
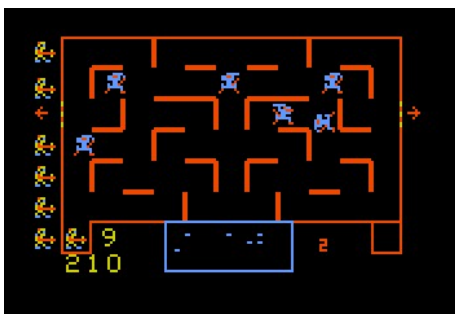
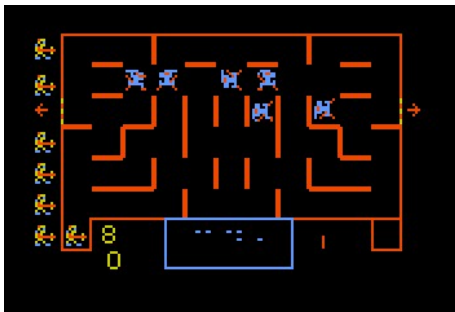
One other side note: There has been some mention on the Atariage forums under the Odyssey2 section about a port of WIZARD OF WOR for that system. It would be ideal because the hardware has VOICE capability. Nothing has materialized other than binary ROM of a game that just has a static playfield that does nothing. More promising is a discussion about a port for the INTELLIVISION on the very active Atariage INTELLIVISION forum. That platform would also produce a fine

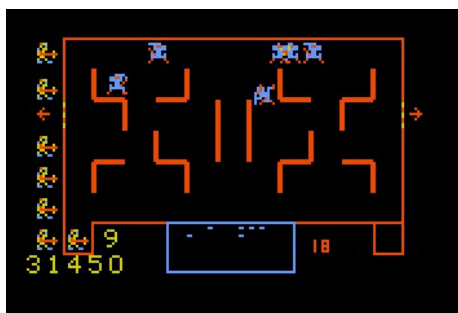
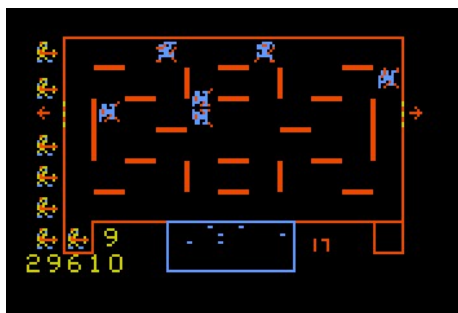
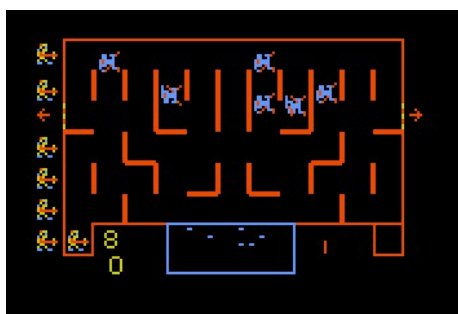
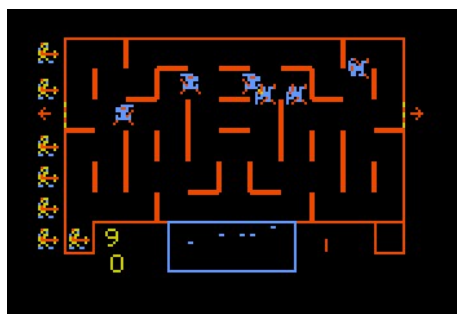
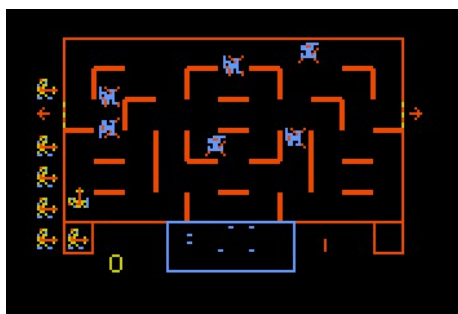
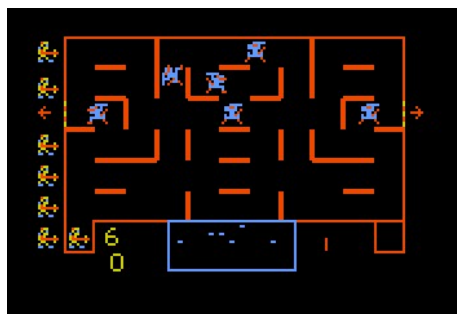
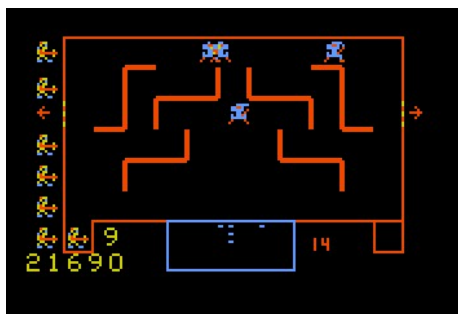
version in my opinion. The Intellivision also has a voice module as well that could be utilized. Stay tuned!

Both games mainly only use the three primary colors for the sprites— red, blue, and yellow. Sure, black is a background. Other colors are used in the game and are “cycled” when you successfully shoot the Wizard. When you shoot one of the monsters, they turn into a mess of red, blue, and yellow pixels. I think that’s kind of cool. In other games such as SPACE INVADERS, the enemy just disappears. I like that effect.

The arcade version has a pretty starfield background. The Astrocade does not. I don’t think this is really needed. This is not a big drawback.

I ran out of time to do a screen-by-screen comparison of the levels to discover if there were differences in the mazes. Check out Adam’s screen shots of 20 different mazes of THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD:





I wanted to play in two player mode again. I obtained a second inexpensive (but brand new) RETROLINK USB joystick controller for \$9 on ebay. It was brand new and it did the job. Both THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD and the WIZARD OF WOR coin-op running under MAME recognized the second joystick and allowed simultaneous two-player action. Yes! Now I needed to find another victim, I mean, player... I recruited my 11-year old son Christopher and introduced him to the Bally Astrocade (he didn't know it was running under emulation) He just thought it was another computer game. I gave him some basic instructions: Shoot the monsters. I'm the blue warrior and you're the yellow worrior. We can work together or we can play against each other. Adam told me I would learn a lot about my son when you play this game. He shot and killed me as soon as he had the chance. He did not want to work together. He wasn't really as impressed with the magic of this game as his father is. But that's OK. Everyone has different tastes. We played for a while. I think I can get him to play it again with me. (We have also played SHARK! SHARK! on the Intellivision together in the past.) I think he prefers talking on his headset with his friends, playing SURVIVE THE ARK on his XBOX ONE. Someday he will appreciate the classics. (I hope). You can learn a lot about your friends and family with this type of game. Give it a try!



Oh, one other note about MAME and the WIZARD OF WOR arcade coin-op: You need to press 5 for a one player game at the beginning INSERT COIN screen and / or you need to press 6 for a two player game at the beginning INSERT COIN screen. If you pick a one player game in the the WIZARD OF WOR arcade coin-op, the computer will control the second player / worrior.



In the Astrocade's THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD, you can also choose 2 players even if you do not have another player. He will get pushed into the dungeon and will basically be a sitting duck for the other monsters or yourself to kill. If you choose a one player game, the second player / worrior is absent from the game. So if you're going to be playing solo, you may as well choose 2 at the number of players screen and go and kill that sitting duck right away and take the advantage and score those easy points!

I had a lot of fun with the MAME emulator and the Astrocade version of THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD. I mean, I have become a *huge* fan of this game. I can't get over how good it is... In my notes, I told Adam that it was becoming my favorite game of all my systems! Adam told me "That's quite an impressive thing to say! The Astrocade version is really good - and it's neat to see someone (me) experience it for the first time and feel the same way as most people felt picking it up in 1982. I never owned an

Astrocade until the 1990s, but it impressed the hell out of me back then (and it still does now)."

THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD has its own charm, and I was not able to try it out on real hardware. The experience of playing the WIZARD OF WOR arcade coin-op was also great... but it is not the same experience as playing the game in a bowling alley, inserting an actual quarter or token into the machine, and hearing the other surrounding sounds... It's hard to describe but the experience was very satisfying with both games under MAME.



So there you have it. The neat aspect to me is that I was able to play and critique both games – THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD for the Bally Astrocade and the WIZARD OF WOR arcade coin-op – in the comfort of my own home, without spending a dime. Or should I say, a quarter... Ha ha ha ha! (Well, I did have to buy a second USB joystick, but that's about all!)

Do I want to get a Bally Astrocade now? Sure... if the price is right. I will check out the other games that this sleeper of a system has. Emulation is nice and I recommend it, but if possible, I'd like to have the real thing.

Another mystery: I had always believed THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD was programmed by an individual named Bob Ogden. The instruction manual states it was created by Tom McHugh, Scot Norris, and Julie Malan (with creative consultation and in conjunction with Action Graphics Inc. (Could this be Bob Ogden's company ?)

Addendum: I just found out about a hack of the Atari 2600 version of WIZARD OF WOR that has been in the works. The original game released by CBS is 4K in size. A 16K version is available for download on atariage.com:

<http://atariage.com/forums/topic/209266-wizard-of-wor-2-the-arena/page-10>

It features the starfield background, the GET READY / GO text, and more enhancements. I just tried it out quickly on my Stella Atari 2600 emulator. I like it, but guys, can you do anything about the flickering? Maybe it will take some magic, but I'm sure these talented programmers will find a way to eliminate that nasty flickering when too many objects appear on the screen at once. Until then, I'll stick with my Bally Astrocade version of THE INCREDIBLE WIZARD.



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For more information:

2600 Connection web site:
<http://www.2600connection.com>

Orphaned Computers and Game Systems:
<http://www.orphanedgames.com>

Intellivisionaries podcast:
<http://www.intellivisionaries.com>

Colecovisions podcast:
<http://colecovisionspodcast.blogspot.com>

Select Game podcast:
<http://www.thelogbook.com/selectgame>

Astrocast podcast:
<http://ballyalleyastrocast.libsyn.com/podcast>

MAME (Multi Arcade Machine Emulator):
<http://www.mame.net/>

Astro-daptor:
<http://www.2600-daptor.com/Astro-daptor.htm>