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Subject: Did a vigilante ROM leaker go too far to ?preserve? a lost Atari ROM?

Posted by [Anonymous](#) on Mon, 03 Jun 2019 13:56:28 GMT

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Originally posted by: John Geoffrey

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Did a vigilante ROM leaker go too far to ?preserve? a lost Atari ROM?

Long hoarded by collectors, Akka Arrh prototype is now part of MAME.

by Kyle Orland - Apr 26, 2019 12:30pm CEST

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Your mission... should you choose to accept it...

Paramount Pictures / Aurich Lawson

Earlier this month, the digital preservationists at The Dumping Union made an important announcement in the world of arcade game emulation. The collective had gotten its hands on a ROM image of Akka Arrh, an extremely rare Atari arcade prototype and one of the most prominent remaining cabinets that had, to that point, never been available through emulation on MAME (the Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator).

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That alone would have been notable news in the world of gaming history?the Dumping Union suggested as much by titling their forum announcement "Sit down on the toilet before reading this or else you will shit your pants." But the story might require another round of toilet sitting, because what started as a rare-game reveal has turned into a credible "heist" tale, perpetrated by an alleged MAME vigilante, no less.

A bit of history

The story of Akka Arrh (also known as Target Outpost during development) dates back to 1982, when the game was created by Atari's Dave Ralston and Mike Hally, who would go on to work on plenty of well-remembered arcade games for the company (the title is supposedly a mangled initialism for "Also Known As Another

Ralston Hally"). After a small test-market release in 1982, Akka Arrh's rotational take on Missile Command's trackball targeting was reportedly deemed too complicated for the masses at the time. So even though Akka Arrh was practically complete and had its own unique cabinet art and design, wide release was scrapped in favor of more promising Atari titles.

The existing test-market prototypes were at some point rescued from the refuse of Atari's warehouses?likely during or after the company's spectacular crash?and over the years made their way to the hands of some extremely private arcade-cabinet collectors. Only three such cabinets are believed to exist, and only two are registered in the Vintage Arcade Preservation Society's census of nearly 8,500 collectors.

A demo of Akka Arrh being played via MAME.

Perhaps because of that rarity, the ROM chips comprising Akka Arrh's game program had (until recently) never been publicly dumped and cataloged in the Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator's massive database. That's bad for the historical preservation community, but it could be good for the value of these extremely rare machines. After all, collectors might not be willing to pay quite the same premium for a rare cabinet if they (and anyone else) could just play the same essential game on an emulator.

But Akka Arrh's few owners haven't hoarded the rare game completely to themselves. The cabinets are occasionally set out for free play at conventions like California Extreme, which provide the only public opportunities to experience the game. Still, many in the emulation and preservation communities have expressed dismay over the years that such a singular piece of Atari history is essentially inaccessible to all but a few very private collectors.

A shady tech?

All that context should highlight just how big a deal it was to finally see Akka Arrh dumped and playable via MAME earlier this month, 37 years after it was made. But where exactly did that ROM come from, and why was it dumped now?

The Dumping Union's CEO, who goes by Smitdogg online, says only that the dump came from an anonymous donor. But a MAMEWorld forum-goer with the handle "atariscott" had an explosive accusation on that score (emphasis added):

There were only three machines ever built. All are in high-end collections. One collector had a tech come and work on some of his games. The unscrupulous tech copied the ROMS without permission. The game was not broken and not one he was supposed to "fix." The owner is reviewing a couple of months of security video to see if he can catch him in the act. This is the first time that someone has actually had the balls to steal ROMS from a collector.

Without context, there are reasons to be skeptical of this story. For one, the accusation is the only post from "atariscott" on the MAMEWorld forums. The account behind it, though, was created back in 2005, which would be a pretty long setup for a random troll.

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Safe Stuff / Internet Archive

Two Akka Arrh cabinets, as they looked in the collection of Scott Evans.

Atariscott is also the public Internet handle of Atari collector Scott Evans, who uses it to post on otherretro game forums online (as well as Instagram). And Evans is in a good position to know something about the state of Akka Arrh preservation, being well-known in the collecting community for owning a number of rare arcade prototypes over the years. That list at one point included not one but two Akka Arrh cabinets (at least one of which seems to have been sold to another collector since then).

Evans also owned two cabinets of Marble Man, the prototype sequel to Marble Madness which is seen as another "undumped" grail inaccessible to the emulation community. And then there's Bradley Trainer, a version of Atari's Battlezone modified for US military training. Evans apparently discovered the only known extant cabinet for that "next to a dumpster outside the closed offices of Midway," as the story goes.

Aside from cabinets, Evans also collects Atari information. He recently donated a nearly complete set of Atari arcade source code to The Strong Museum of Play, also apparently sourced from Midway's garbage. Evans has also maintained an online clearinghouse of classic Atari arcade information, first at Safestuff.com and later at AtariGames.com.

Is it true?

If the "atariscott" posting on MAMEWorld is Evans, there's ample reason to give credence to his story. Evans has not responded to multiple requests for comment from Ars Technica via a variety of contact methods.

But that forum post is not going up in a vacuum. One well-placed arcade collector with direct knowledge of the extant Akka Arrh cabinets and their owners (who asked for anonymity to "avoid burning bridges") told me "it does sound like this really happened." That source tells me that the victim of the alleged theft is sharing essentially the same story as atariscott with other Akka Arrh owners (who, unsurprisingly, all know each other).

"They were told it was theft from the tech who had access, and apparently there were rumblings about this tech being shady ahead of this release," the collector tells Ars. "It wasn't their board that was dumped, but [they] were pretty upset when the ROMs were released, given the rarity of the machine."

It's far from direct evidence or on-the-record testimony confirming the "unsolicited repair tech copy" story. But this might be the closest we're able to come for now, given the insular and secretive world of rare arcade collecting.

And just because the story is being passed around this world doesn't mean it's true, either. The "theft" could be a cover story for an Akka Arrh owner (past or present) just deciding to release his own ROM dump voluntarily, for instance.

Arcade Heroes blogger and arcade owner Adam Pratt has his own take, which he shared with Ars:

As it comes across online, it sounds like something is missing... That a technician would come in to a collection to fix something else, break into the Akka Arrh machine, pull out all of the ROMs, burn them one-by-one (which requires a ROM burner and a computer), then put everything back unnoticed doesn't seem plausible to me. Chances are, [Evans] or one of the other two collectors happened to have backed up the ROMs when they first got the machine and that backup either got out, or one of the collectors finally decided to anonymously upload the ROMs.

Does it belong in a museum?

An Akka Arrh prototype is seen as part of Joe Magiera's collection

at about 12:24 in this video from 2014.

Story or no, the allegation alone has refocused a long-running debate in emulation circles. Is there a moral imperative for collectors of rare games and prototypes to release their code for the good of preservation? And if they refuse, is there any ethical argument for literally sneaking into a private collection to make an unsolicited copy of the game for posterity?

"All the ROMs are way past their lifespan for holding data," Dumping Union's Smitdogg writes in a MAMEWorld post. "It's amazing that the data can still be extracted if the ROMs are original. A miracle. The first thing any sane tech would do is dump the ROMs. It's amazing to me that people think they own the data on these, like [they] own the copyright."

Dumping the ROM, Smitdogg argues, just makes Akka Arrh "identical to every other game that has ever been emulated in the past 25 years."

Others disagree. "If what he alleges is true, the collector who was allegedly bilked has every right to be absolutely furious," MAMEWorld user Mooglyguy said. "A person's private goods, acquired through private transactions, are sacrosanct. We can sit here and dither about moral imperatives as they pertain to preserving history, but at the end of the day, these collectors either need to come around to the Kindergarten-level concept of sharing on their own, or they need to be left well alone. Forcing their hand, so to speak, is an incredibly bad look."

And just because a game isn't available to the emulating public doesn't mean an individual owner isn't protecting it for history. As Evans himself put it in a 2009 forum post, "everything does not need to be in MAME for it to be 'preserved.'"

If atariscott's story about the Akka Arrh ROM is true, Pratt says the repair tech's actions were "the right thing to do, but the wrong way to go about it." On the one hand, Pratt says he's "happy that the game will be preserved and more available." On the other, "there is a level of trust you put into someone to come in and work on your games."

It has yet to be proven whether the MAME release will even reduce the collectible value of what are still some extremely rare prototype cabinets. "In my view, Akka Arrh's presence on MAME won't diminish the value of the existing machines," Pratt said. "If anything, it will probably enhance it, since more people will

know about it now."

"Arcades are more than just the software," he continued. "When cabinets are specially tailored to a game experience, it makes that game stick with you more than playing a digital-only game on Steam... Akka Arrh's cabinet is unique, so if I ever had the chance, my preference would be to play it on the original cabinet over emulation any day."

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