From The Editor

As far as I know, this is the first issue of a newsletter devoted exclusively to the Bally Professional Arcade (also known as The Astrocade) since 1984, when the highly regarded *Arcadian* newsletter stopped publishing. With classic gaming seeming to be more popular than ever, I can't believe that there isn't already a Bally newsletter somewhere, after all *The 2600 Connection* was started in 1990-- ten years ago! So then, here we have a newsletter devoted to the Bally Astrocade. Oh come on! In this day and age? The machine is dead, no one uses it, no one even cares!

If you said these things, I would be tempted to believe you, for that is the situation that I observe around me. Even in classic gaming circles, this magnificent machine seems to always be, at best, on the back burner. While the machine does seem to garner respect for its' early place in videogame history, it hardly does get the real recognition that it deserves. If one considers the Atari 2600 to be king of the classics, then the place the Bally has fallen to must certainly be the slave's quarters. This should not be!

There are a number of reasons why the Bally has not caught on in the classic gaming world. First off, and probably most importantly, it just was never as popular as the Atari 2600, the Intellivision, or even the Odyssey 2 for that matter. Without someone having a fond recollection of the system, there would be little reason for a gamer to "discover" this system for the first time. It might happen accidentally, as it did for me, but with the rarity of the Bally, it is unlikely that anyone not searching for it would just bump into it accidentally. Second, there is the fact that it doesn't have a huge collection of cartridge titles. Must it be that the measure of a system's success has to be the amount of cartridges that can be attributed to it? Under normal circumstances, this would seem valid, for the more cartridges a system has, the more titles there are to choose from, and thus the more chances of quality titles existing for gamers. This is the case for all the classic systems (and current systems as well), but the Bally Arcade is a special case. For it was intended to also be used as a low cost computer, and thus there is a version of BASIC for it. And it is this BASIC cartridge that changes the rules; it is this simple ROM that changes *everything*.

The Bally is not the only classic system that puts the ability to program into the hands of the gamer. The Atari 2600 also has a version of BASIC called, appropriately enough, *BASIC Programming*. The Odyssey 2 has *Computer Intro!*, which allows machine language

programming. The Intellivision has the keyboard add-on, and it contains BASIC too. So why the big difference between these other systems and the Bally? For one thing, the Bally has the ability to save the programs that are written to cassette tape. While the add-on for the Intellivision does allow this, the 2600 and Odyssey languages do not. Without the ability to save programs, one loses all the work that they perform at each programming session. But that isn't all, one can not trade programs with friends if there is no way to distribute them on cassette. Sure, one could send someone a hand-written program, but it just isn't the same.

The Bally was advertised as a 4k machine, but only 1.8k of RAM is available from BASIC. For the Bally, even in it's day, this wasn't known to be generous programming space. There is no way to avoid it, 1.8k of RAM is practically nothing, but BASIC users made use of it as best as they could. Some of the games written by users and published in the *Arcadian* and *Cursor* (AKA The *BASIC Express*) newsletters are quite good.

If you think that the cartridges are difficult to find for this system, then imagine trying to unearth a collection of BASIC cassettes that still work! It is a difficult task to say the least. Thus, it is the aim of this newsletter to provide the help that Bally owners need. Continuing issues shall outline ways in which a community can be formed to help preserve what already does exist for the Bally Astrocade

Obviously though, if no one cares about this system now, then no one is going to want to contribute effort to preserve it. As already mentioned, the Bally does not have the user base that other systems enjoy. So, I have decided that the first mission of this newsletter is to provide people with reasons to want to pitch in. I shall push this system. I will show the reasons why the Bally deserves to be restored to a higher status then it now affords. With this issue I'll start off with a brief history of the machine that could have been so much more.

-- Adam Trionfo

The Bally Professional Arcade: A Synopsis
By Adam Trionfo

To understand why I feel so strongly about keeping the spirit of The Astrocade (originally known as The Bally Professional Arcade) alive, it is essential to know the beginnings of this machine. The history of the system is a long and complicated story, and a summary doesn't do it justice (especially one *this* short), but one must start somewhere, and it seems that a summary is the best place to begin. Like any synopsis, I am not going to be covering every facet of history, but rather just that which seems to be essential to the comprehension of a gaming platform that seems to have been snubbed by history.

I'm giving myself away here by saying this, but in many ways the Bally system really resembles the life history of the Amiga computer. They were both machines released far ahead of their time to audiences that did not understand the raw ability, the power that lay waiting inside the plastic and metal casings. While the Amiga did have the spotlight for a little while, the Bally never really did. Nowadays there are people who grumble under their breath that the Amiga "should have controlled the market." Well, the same can be said of Astrocade (hereafter referred to as the Bally). The Bally should have eaten the competition for dinner: but there were problems from the very beginning.

When the Bally was announced in 1977 (and released in 1978), it had, without a doubt, the most sophisticated graphics on the market. There simply was no real competition from any other manufacturer. Unfortunately, due to poor production, poor design, and rumored use of Z-80 CPUs that were seconds, the early release of the Bally was just plagued with failed motherboards. Simply placing your Bally on the living-room rug for a few hours of play would most definitely make it overheat and die. Bally eventually warned against this, but it was to little, too late. I have read in various places that between 70% and 90% of all early Bally's were returned! I find these figures difficult to swallow, but the return rate was obviously high enough that many venders simply decided to drop the Bally from their inventory.

Another problem that plagued Bally (the company) was that they simply could not deliver what they had promised. When the Bally was first released, it was said that an "add-under" was going to follow soon. The "add-under" promised more RAM, access to floppy drives, and best of all, a full-size typewriter-style keyboard. This prompted many people to buy the Bally in the first place, but the unit's delivery date was pushed back further and further, and was never actually delivered. These failing promises also prompted venders to drop the Bally. Years later, an add-on called the Z-Grass was released in very limited quantities that did much (or more) of what Bally's "add-under" promised, but by then the Bally was already swamped with competition from other manufacturers and hardly anyone but Bally owners noticed the arrival of the Z-Grass at all.

The Bally did not have support from third party vendors for some time (and even when it did, these were basically Bally only companies), but there was an immediate start of support for the Bally by user groups and newsletters. I am unaware of any other similar type of happenings so early on in the world of consoles. *The Arcadian*, a popular newsletter, was first published in November 1978 (though previous newsletter-type information had been distributed previously to a few people). This newsletter supplied an ample amount of information for those wishing to tinker with the Astrocade. Before long this publication was the lifeline for Bally owners. It might well be considered the reason that the Bally was able to resurface semi-successfully some years later under control of another company called Astrovision.

With information culled from various areas, it is my hope that I can contribute a small part to the history of videogames by allowing others to be witness to, and interact with, the Bally Astrovision- perhaps the best kept console secret around.

Stay tuned for more!

Bally Information Overload! Your Help Needed!

By Adam Trionfo

I'm Ready!

You have heard enough, armed with a brief history of the Bally, you are eager to plunge into the depths of Bally-land. But where do you begin, what do you do-- I mean, how do we get the ball rolling? It is a good question, and this article will hopefully lead the way so that those of us who are interested in either playing games, or programming the Bally can get off to a good beginning.

Let's Get Started!

I know what you are thinking; Bally hardware is hard enough to find, now where am I supposed to find information regarding this system? Ah, that question is the simplest question to answer. The place to get Bally information is from me, as I have a Bally information overload!

For three years (1980-1983), a man named Richard Houser had a catalog that listed software and hardware exclusively for the Bally. The catalog was called The Source, and was mentioned several times in early issues of Electronic Games. It was a great resource for Bally users, and Richard worked hard to get the Bally's public domain software organized.

Well, as it happens, Richard Houser has given a great gift to me: his entire collection of Bally hardware, software and information. There is no way in the world that I can keep this all to myself. I could also not bare to part with such great classic hardware. So what is a man to do? I couldn't just let the stuff sit in storage while there are other users of the Bally that would be interested in such a treasure trove of information. Honestly, there is no way that I could sort through all this alone, but then I realized that I don't have to.

When I began publishing a newsletter called *Orphaned Computers & Game Systems* in 1994, the Internet, while common enough among hard-core computer users, was not really in general public use. With the popularity of the World Wide Web and Netscape, that all changed. Soon the media got wind of what was going on, the Internet became "the super-information highway" and the rest is history. Without the Internet, and more specifically the WWW, it is difficult to enjoy using classic game consoles and computer systems such as the Bally without excerpting maximum effort. I would like to create a resource for Bally information, as there simply is not one available already. The information that does exist seems to primarily be from the Bally FAQ, which, while accurate, is in dire need of a major overhaul and update. Until I received the documentation bestowed upon me by Richard Houser, I simply had no idea that there was so much Bally information available!

What Will It Take?

The first major step in the right direction is to begin with a list of what documentation I have available to me. I feel strongly that this is the proper way to begin a journey that will lead to an eventual depository of Bally knowledge on the Internet. I would also like to point out some of the substantial gaps that need to be filled by the readers of this newsletter.

Following that, I would like to begin transferring data from cassette to either wav format or MP3 format for later loading into BASIC. I experimented with this before, and it works very well. These file transfers are a time consuming process, but the reward is that the Bally community will be able to enjoy the vast library of BASIC and machine language software not available on cartridge! And let me tell you something, you will be amazed at some of the quality software that you never knew existed!

So, What Documentation Do I Have?

The goal I have in mind is to eventually enter all of this data into PDF format via scanning and typing, and above all else, careful error checking and editing! This data-entry will be a very time consuming process, full of dullness and pure drudgery, but one that will be for the benefit of all those who care about the Bally.

Here is the list, hopefully the following items can all be entered with the help of some very nice classic gaming folks out there. This list is far from complete, and I will have to rely on readers to fill in missing items.

1. Arcadian newsletter (complete collection)
2. Bally On-Board ROM Subroutines
3. Bally Service Manual
4. Bally Sourcebook Fall 1980
5. Bally Sourcebook Fall 1981
6. Bally Sourcebook Summer 1981
7. Bally System Description (Tech paper)
8. Blue RAM Owner's Manual
9. Blue RAM Super-Extended BASIC 1.0 manual
10. General Video Assembler manual

11. Home Video Game Burn-in Tester (Docs and source)
12. Home Video Game System (300 pages By Bally on Bally)
13. Language Control Structure (on Zgrass)
14. Peek N' Poke Booklet
15. Preliminary AstroBASIC Manual
16. SPECTRE Handle manual
17. Various Game Instructions
18. Viper 1, and Extended BASIC, User's Manual
19. Z-Grass Manual

Alright Then, What Do We Need?

The largest omission that I can see is that I do not even have one copy of the newsletter *Cursor* (AKA *The BASIC Express*). Richard Houser did have every single issue of this excellent newsletter, but unfortunately it was thrown away accidentally a few years ago (But not before I had the chance to read it and appreciate just how good it was). I'm not really sure what else I am missing. I do know that there were some books written on programming the Bally. It is my hope that a few readers can help find and add to this Bally archive.

Forging Ahead

How is all this information going to be gathered together and passed around to people who are willing to help with this project? Everything is going to be based around the web, mail and email.

Every Bally system that I have come across has had a BASIC cartridge, but none have had the manual. This makes using Bally BASIC nearly impossible. I think that it would be best to convert to PDF format all issues of The Arcadian and BASIC manuals first. They are the best resource that a Bally owner could ask for-- and right now these items are in the hands of the few. I would like to see this documentation available to anyone that wants it.

A Bally CD: The Ultimate Goal

There is a goal that I have in mind. I brought it up a year ago in the very last issue of *OC&GS*, but the idea has not faded. It would be nice to eventually have all this data on a quality CD-ROM disk. This is not something that can happen overnight, there is a lot of work that needs to be done before anything this grand can ever materialize. It is also not something that I can do alone. I need help from as many people as possible. Without people contributing effort to the task of building an effective and useful Bally archive, nothing will ever become of the CD-ROM disk. It will be nothing more than a pipe-dream.

Contacting Me

The best way to contact me is through my email address- orphaned@hotmail.com. I am interested to know what people are able to contribute to this large project, and look forward to hearing from people soon. There is so much information to be gathered together that every bit of help towards assembling material together will be greatly appreciated-- and will also be recognized and acknowledged. I hope to hear from you soon.

Bally BASIC Overlay

Since the Bally has a calculator style keypad (instead of a qwerty keyboard), it requires the use of an overlay. The overlay is placed over the keypad, and the colors indicate what each shift key does when pressed before another key. If you print this overlay out on a color printer, you will have an exact duplicate of the essential overlay that comes with each Bally BASIC cartridge. If you decide to print this out on a B&W printer instead, then you will have trouble differentiating the shift keys. Either way though, it is much better than nothing at all.

That's It

So ends the first issue of *Bally Alley*. I hope that for those who were interested enough to read this far that it has been worth the effort. I shall be continuously posting updated information to the *Bally Alley* website, so look often to make sure that you don't miss out on anything new!   -- Adam Trionfo