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INTERVIEW
Luca Antignano

Luca has been active on the emulation scene for a decade, most notably simulating the popular Nintendo Game & Watch titles.

He is also one of the world's most knowledgeable CreatiVision experts, assisting in preserving the rare console and its place in history forever!

MT> Your handle is "MADrigal." What is the history behind the name?

LA> "Madrigal" was the name of the male elf character I used for role-playing around 1994, when I discovered the "true" Dungeons & Dragons RPG. In 1998 I started my handheld simulation projects. I needed to find myself a cool nickname, so I used that name simply because I liked it a lot. I wasn't actually aware that a "madrigal" is a sort of medieval poem. I chose the name because it simply sounded nice, although some people thought I was a female because of that nickname! "MADrigal" (with block letters) stands for "mad madrigal"... that's all! :-)

MT> Exactly how many Game & Watch simulators have you coded?

LA> Let me check... I think 49... no, it's 48. The 49th game is still "work in progress". It's almost done, but I need some concentration and spare time to complete it.

Ah no, actually the number is not exactly 49. I also started a simulator for "Grillo Parlante" (the Italian version for Texas Instruments' "Speak & Spell") but never actually completed it.

Then I also coded 3 other simulators, but that's another story, and it's quite interesting: I was contacted by a *large* U.S. toy manufacturer a couple of years ago, and was asked to design a few handheld games they actually produced. They are on sale now! I was paid to design the games, code them and produce the "demo versions". The demos were then studied by the licenser, along with the game algorythms I supplied them. Then they actually produced them on real hardware. It was real fun for me and I was even been paid for this!

MT> What other projects have you worked on over the years concerning emulation or otherwise?

LA> Soon after becoming "famous" as a Game & Watch simulators programmer, I was invited to join the Emuita.it team. I am still a part of that community. Emuita.it is the largest Italian emulation site - and it's been one of the very best emulation websites around for long time.

Then in 2000 I founded the "CreatiVEmu Team" with very talented programmer Roberto Ventura (author of Ghosts'n Goblins, SEGA System 8 and Just For Fun emulators) and my long-time friends Giovanni Ortu (author of "CvEmu2" creatiVision emulator) and Simone Congiu. We gathered a lot of information on CreatiVision and then published the information on our website. We dumped many ROMs, and supported Roberto - who coded the emulator in very short time though never released it publicly. The website lived a couple of years, then went offline due to EmuHQ (our host) breakdown.

In 2001 I designed, programmed and web-mastered "Nintendo Zone", one of the most innovative, beloved and popular websites in Italy, totally devoted to Nintendo consoles (N64, GBA, GC, DS). I also joined the Zzap!Raine staff as designer, graphic artist and co-webmaster, and then designed "Game & Watch Mania", one of the most popular websites devoted to Game & Watch handhelds, even featuring almost all existing simulators for them.

Then around 2003 I stopped with emulation all of a sudden. It took me 4 years before deciding it was time to kick it again. I re-designed the CreatiVEmu website and continued coding handhelds simulators. I released a dozen of new games and updated around 20 older ones in around 3 months. Then I thought it was time for me to learn some C in order to peek into the "FunnyMu" emulator (the most popular creatiVision emulator by Australian programmer Paul Hayter) source code, that's written in C (I just knew BASIC and Pascal/Delphi). I added many features, fixed a bunch of bugs and coded an user-friendly interface to the emulator, and I'm quite proud of it.

MT> Why do you think that the CreatiVision was only released in Europe, Australia, Asia, and Africa?

LA> Well, let's say that it was sold worldwide except America - this sounds better hehe! Most people think that it was just sold in those countries where they use "PAL" as the standard TV system - but that's not correct, since creatiVision was also sold in Japan - where they use "NTSC" system.

Well, the truth is: creatiVision could have been sold worldwide if VTech, the producer, could have found more distributors for it. CreatiVision was distributed by a variety of companies: Cheryco in Japan, Zanussi in Italy, Sanyo in Germany, Dick Smith Electronics and Hanimex in Australia... and there's more in the other countries! At those times, electronic furnitures/tools brands, like Zanussi and Dick Smith

Electronics, decided to enter the home videogaming market. So they needed to choose "the best possible" system that wasn't already distributed in their countries. Atari and Mattel were already sold everywhere in the world, so there was little chance: CreatiVision, Arcadia 2001, Astrocade... no other remarkable console systems. Some other distributors chose to import home computers - which were much more expensive than CreatiVision and other gaming consoles.

For example, I think CreatiVision wasn't imported in U.K. because Sinclair computers were already such popular, and people weren't very interested in "new" or "foreign" gaming consoles anymore. The American market was also full of good gaming systems as the Atari 2600 and Mattel Intellivision. Then the Colecovision came immediately after CreatiVision - and they have almost identical hardware and capabilities.

Yes, I think the release of Colecovision is the main reason why CreatiVision didn't sell in America.

MT> Okay, brag time. Tell us all about the CreatiVision multicart?
LA>Sure. The Multicart is the only existing homebrew hardware for the CreatiVision system. It was designed by Giovanni Ortu and I around one year ago. We had been discussing making it in the past, but we weren't "ready" then - for various reasons.

At first we thought that we would just make 3-4 copies for us and our friends. Then we got so much feedback and requests by our friends all over the world, so we decided to make a true "deluxe" production: not just a naked PCB with an EPROM, but a true collector's cartridge with shell, numbered box, manual, overlays and a presentation letter. Many buyers also asked us to sign the carts boxes - that was very funny. :-)

MT> Tell us about all the crazy steps that you had to take to make the first and only homebrew CreatiVision release. Were there any roadblocks where you thought you might have hit a dead end in producing the multicart?
LA> At first I gave Giovanni my CreatiVision console - because his had been broken since the 80's! Then we studied the CreatiVision hardware in order to understand exactly the way it access the cartridge EPROMs. It was quite easy because we had studied it before, in 2001, so we just needed a few more details.

Giovanni attempted at building a prototype cart on a hole-board and we got it working in just an afternoon! The first prototype included only 4 games on a 128 KBytes EPROM driven by a 2-way DIP-switch.

After such a success, we became immediately aware that the Multicart was soon to become a hit, and we decided to build 100 copies + a bunch of "promo" versions to give to important contributors to the project.

While Giovanni kept on developing another "larger" prototype, I designed the box, modeled the shell on a CAD software (I'm architectural engineer, so I'm quite trained with that sort of modelin) and created the manual, etc. I also asked many collectors to send us a bunch of original (and rare!) carts for ROM-dumping. So we put our hands on really rare items as the "Werben Informieren" German sampler and the "Stone Age" game. I even had time to hack a BASIC version in order to have it run much faster than usual (based on Mr. Barry Klein's documents), translate the German sampler into English, and make a ton of fixes here and there to the whole project.

Then we requested many pricing quotes to Chinese producers of metal moulds (to build the cart shells), Italian PCB producers and print factories, U.S. EPROM and other electronic parts sellers, etc.

In the end we spent a great deal of money to build all the carts - well over $4,500 U.S. Dollars. We are very proud of this project because we sold the carts at a very reasonable price and received a load of positive feedback by all buyers - that was our main goal :-)

MT> Many systems in the past have been inappropriately labeled a hybrid between a computer and a video game console. In your opinion, is the CreatiVision a computer or a game console?
LA>It's a true hybrid! 100% hybrid! Really!

Even though the BASIC was released, on cartridge, around a year after the console, CreatiVision was designed to be both console and computer from the very beginning!

The console shell has two sliding panels (one on each left and right sides) which can be removed in order to allow the user to connect peripherals such as a custom cassette recorder, memory expansions and a parallel interface. Even a"ColecoVision Expansion Module" was sold for the Laser 2001 Computer model even though it was originally designed for use with CreatiVision. Also, the joysticks are made of half a keyboard with an additional stick. That was a very clever idea, wasn't it? :-)

Lastly, early pictures and flyers show the "CreatiVision System" with planned modem, floppy disk drive, printers, many programming manuals, etc...so I have no doubt: it's a true hybrid! :-)

MT> What is your personal favorite CreatiVision Game?
LA> Hm... never thought of it... I like **Sonic Invaders** verymuch because of its incredible "2 players versus" mode which is very very funny! Last May at the Italian "Video Games History 2008" fair, we had the world's first "CreatiVision tournament." Attendees played **Sonic Invaders** in versus mode, and they were extremely satisfied with it! Winner got a special edition Multicart with VGH2008 stickers, special contents and manual, etc.

MT> Was the death of the CreatiVision a result of the competition or the great videogame crash of '83?
LA> I don't think the CreatiVision's demise was connected to the crash - cause or as an effect. I mean, the "big crash" happened in U.S.A., and here in Europe we didn't even noticed it very much. I have loads of Italian magazines from early 80's to 90's, and besides them writing of "Mattel is having hard times with Intellivision" or "E.T. is a failure in the U.S. market"... there's no articles concerning a "crash".

By the way, what you say is partially wrong. CreatiVision didn't "die" in 1983, it was produced and distributed up to 1985/86. For example, when in May 1985 Dick Smith Electronics decided to stop selling it, Bente International became the new distributor in Australia, and they kept on selling consoles and cartridges for around 1 more additional year.

Here in Italy, Zanussi started selling CreatiVision in March 1983 and stopped around June 1984 - not because of the "videogames crash" but because of the "Zanussi crash"!!!

In Sweden, CreatiVision was first imported in late 1983, and it kept selling up to 1984 and maybe even later...

I think the "shortest life market" was the Japanese one: the system was sold in 1982 only. No idea why, because I have no contacts with Japanese collectors to help me with that part of the story. :-\

MT> Would you consider making a new multi-cart for homebrew games created by the Basic cartridge in the future if such a community were to suddenly emerge over a quarter decade later?
LA> Before doing such thing, I would love to have some time to make a "menu-based" Multicart. This would allow the user to select the games through an on-screen menu instead of operating the DIP-switch. Not very "necessary" but "cool" indeed!

The problem is that there's little requests for Multicarts because the CreatiVision community is very small - less than 100 persons - and most of them already bought the "Multicart 1.0"... so there's no real need of a new one with just a new on-screen menu but no other games.

Your idea of the BASIC programs... well there's many problems.

Firstly the CreatiVision BASIC language is totally crap! It's darn slow, it's not "tokenized" and listings can't exceed 9 KBytes of ASCII data, that's a very very small amount of memory - around 1/10 of the Commodore 64 BASIC capabilities. At least it has cool commands to read joystick inputs, define graphic characters, play sounds, etc... but it's not enough.

Secondly, BASIC programs are stored in video RAM instead of CPU RAM. This means that it would require a major effort in coding some special software capable of reading text data from some USB stick and then poking it into video RAM with all the needed data structure... And of course we'd need a hacked BASIC with some additional parser in order to allow the user to select which listing he wants to load/store... yes that would be cool, but I'm not capable of such miracles yet! :-)

A more realistic idea would be to include homebrew games/tools coded in ASM, taking advantage of the real hardware capabilities. Modern homebrew programmers would be able to design games with the exact same quality as Colecovision or MSX.

Good Deal Games would like to thank Luca and his partners for helping keep an
obscure system like the CreatiVision alive. GDG's primary mission is of preservation,
and Luca's projects certainly adhere that goal. We salute you!

If you have questions for Luca,
you may e-mail him at: lucantignano@gmail.com.
or visit his websites: www.madrigaldesign.it/sim/ and www.madrigaldesign.it/creativemu

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