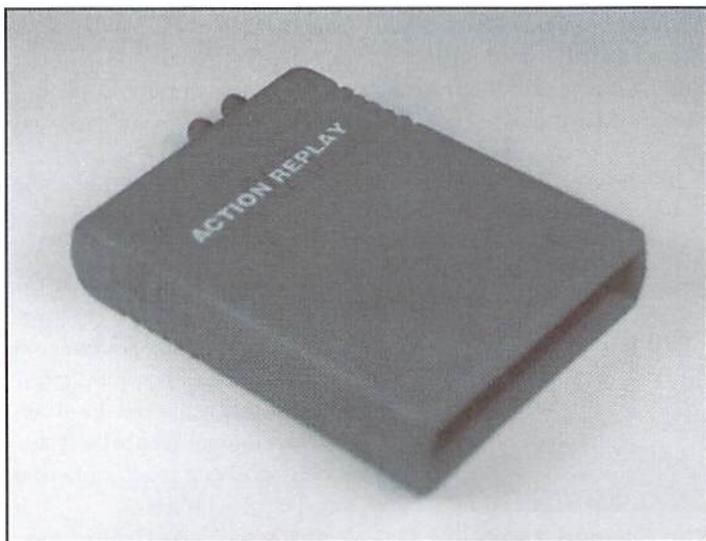


HARDWARE

IN REVIEW

ACTION REPLAY Datel's Swiss Army Cartridge



Action Replay v5.2; \$59.95; Datel Electronics, Ltd.; Distributed in North America by Creative Micro Designs, Inc., P.O. Box 646, East Longmeadow MA 01028, 1-800-638-3263.

The folks at Datel Electronics Limited realize that game playing is indeed a serious business. Like a knight in shining armor, Datel comes to the rescue of frustrated Commodore game players with the Action Replay cartridge.

My favorite type of game is one consisting of a myriad of successive levels containing rewards of unique new graphics and music. Of course the game should also be challenging. These games leave me with a burning desire to experience all of their many levels. Unfortunately, my gaming abilities rarely agree with my ambitions and I tend to end up

frustrated. Now, thanks to the assistance of my little red Action Replay cartridge, there's hope!!!

Upon opening the Action Replay package my first thought was, this looks cool. I enjoy gadgets, and that's exactly what the Action Replay cartridge resembles. As I stated above it's contained in a red plastic cartridge, but the addition of two red buttons protruding from its rear right throws it into my "gadget" category. The inner button is called the Freeze button, and the outer one is the Reset button.

The Reset button provides its user with access to the Startup Menu. The Freeze button is used to interrupt normal operation of the computer and to display the Freeze Menu.

First of all, to use the cartridge, it must be inserted into the

Commodore's expansion port. Pressing F3 resets the computer, making the cartridge seemingly invisible to the computer. The Startup Menu disappears and the normal cold start Commodore screen appears from which you can then load your favorite program.

Startup Menu

There are a few items on the Startup Menu you may wish to use. First is the Configure Memory option. This option is used in conjunction with yet another great Action Replay feature - its backup utility. You'll need to activate this option prior to performing any backups with Action Replay. This option will fill the computer's memory with a single byte value to make the Action Replay's Backup Compaction System more efficient.

Secondly, you'll surely make use of the utilities listed under F5. Here you can find the utilities needed to format a disk, copy a file, or copy an entire disk. It's great to have all these utilities only a keypress or two away.

Last, but not least, F7 installs Action Replay's fastloader. This is really handy if you don't already own CMD's Jiffy DOS. Life will never be the same once you've used a fastloader. The fastloader can load a 200 block program in approximately 9 seconds. However, I tried the fastloader out on a few of my commercial games and experienced some incompatibility problems. You'll find this to be a very common

problem among all of the popular fastloader programs.

Freeze Menu

The Freeze Menu may be activated at any time by a quick press of the Freeze Button. This is where you'll find a host of nifty utilities hiding out just waiting to be called into action. Included are utilities designed specifically to ease some of your gaming frustrations, along with other extremely useful graphic and programming utilities. Due to the gaming nature of this review, I will only briefly explain those utilities not directly related to gaming though they are just as powerful, if not more so.

Poke Finder

As an avid game player, I am addicted to Action Replay's Poke Finder utility, so much so that the cartridge has found a permanent home in my expansion port. With many games, once you've lost your last life you must re-start the game from the beginning. This is frustration to the max! Now there's a way to end this aggravation by using the Poke Finder to locate the right code to poke into memory, providing you with infinite lives. I figured this would probably require some long drawn out process; surprisingly, it's very easy to use!

First of all, with the cartridge installed, load your game. Once game play has begun, note the number of lives remaining, then

quickly press the Freeze Button. The game play will be interrupted and the Freeze Menu will appear. Press the X key to activate the Poke Finder. After a short pause, one of several possible messages will appear. The most desired message displays one or more pokes and informs you these pokes have been installed. Another message may request you to continue game play, lose one life, and return to the Poke Finder. This does not point to a failure, it simply means the computer needs to dig just a bit deeper. I've had successful results after receiving both of the above messages. The third message, of course, will state the Poke Finder utility has aborted due to its failure to locate the poke.

If the Poke Finder is successful, it not only lists the pokes on the screen for you, but it also installs them so you may continue on with your game. Press F3 to continue game play, exactly where you left off! It can't get much easier than this.

According to the manual, Action Replay's Poke Finder has a success rate of 80% and claims to be more successful with older games.

Pokes & Parameters

Sometimes Commodore magazines will publish "Cheat Pokes & Parameters" to provide game players with infinite lives, a stopped timer, and disabled sprite collisions. These tricks can be entered through the Freeze Menu's Poke and Parameters options. Both of these options are very easy to use. Though they are very simple, they open a whole new world as far as game playing is concerned.

Sprite Killer

The Sprite Killer utility is used to disable collisions between two sprites, between sprites and background data, or both. You can then return to game play and (if successful) bumping into that evil monster sprite will no longer result in the loss of a life! I found that the Sprite Killer utility wasn't quite as successful as the Poke Finder. This is due to the fact that what may appear

to be a sprite may actually be user defined characters or programmed using coordinate information versus the VIC system. When this is true, the Sprite Killer will have no effect on the game. The Sprite Killer is more successful with older Commodore games.

Graphic Utilities

Several handy graphic utilities are also available from the same Freeze Menu. You may have wondered how magazines are able to grab screen shots directly from all those great games. Action Replay provides one such means for grabbing screen shots although, it can only save Multicolor HiRes screens. Once the desired screen/picture in your program appears, freeze the screen with the Freeze Button. Once the menu appears, F7 can be used to view the frozen screen and the S key allows the same screen to be saved to disk. Pictures can be saved in the following formats: Blazing Paddles, Koala, Advanced Art Studio, Artist 64, Vidcom 64, and Image System. If the format you prefer is not listed above, I'd recommend saving it as a Koala file. There are many Koala conversion utilities available on BBS's and Online services. One thing to keep in mind when saving any graphics from commercial programs is that these graphics should be treated the same as any other copyrighted program. They should be kept only for your personal use and enjoyment.

Frozen screens can also be dumped to the printer with the Print Dump option. This option works with any graphics mode, but the best overall results will be obtained from multicolor bitmap modes. The Printer Dump is unable to print any sprites contained in the frozen picture. Colors are represented as shades of grey.

Disk Utilities

Action Replay contains a backup utility that should only be used for personal backup copies of commercial software. Like the rest of its utilities it is also very easy to

use. First, from the Startup Menu, select the Configure Memory option. Once the program to be backed up is running, press the Freeze Button and Action Replay's compactor will then go into action, then the program will be ready to be saved to disk. Backups can be loaded from disk without the use of the Action Replay cartridge by adding a special "loader" to the same disk. Complete and thorough directions are contained in Action Replay's manual.

The Freeze Menu also allows a directory of your current disk to be viewed without disturbing the contents of your computer's memory. This is great for those games that require more than one sitting to complete. It allows you to break out of your program, load up a directory, and then return to your program where you left off.

"AS AN AVID GAME PLAYER, I AM ADDICTED TO ACTION REPLAY'S POKE FINDER UTILITY..."

Programming Utilities

Of course Action Replay wouldn't be complete without a couple of utilities to satisfy the programmer. Both a Sprite Monitor and a Machine Code Monitor are available from the Freeze Menu.

The Sprite Monitor allows any sprites in memory to be displayed on the screen. Seven sprites at a time may be viewed. The Sprite Monitor contains options which allow access to any of the computer's 4 video banks, displays of sprites in either Standard or Multicolor modes, saves of the current sprite to disk, loading of any previously saved sprites into the current sprite position, and the removal of the current sprite which makes it invisible. After doing all this, you may even return to the program. For all you programmers out there, the uses of this utility are almost endless.

The Machine Code Monitor is available from either the Freeze Menu or from Fastload. While in a game or any program, the extended Machine Code Monitor allows the

contents of memory (screen, stack, and zero page) to be scrutinized. Of course the memory will resemble that of the program at the time it was frozen with the Freeze Button. Changes may then be made and will be included when the program is restarted or saved. If you plan on using the Machine Code Monitor you should be thoroughly familiar with the 6502 assembly language. Action Replay's manual contains a summary and a description of the commands which can be used with the ML Monitor.

In Conclusion...

The Action Replay Cartridge is available from Creative Micro Designs for \$59.95. Is it worth it? Well, when you consider the fact that a Machine Language Monitor alone sells for approximately \$20,

and a Backup/Compression Program such as Mad Man's CKit retails for \$39.95 along with the fact that the Action Replay cartridge contains both of these valuable utilities plus more... it's a great investment! Right now, due to differences in U.S. copyright laws, Creative Micro Designs is able to provide the full-featured version (5.2). Because the current version overseas is actually version 6 but doesn't have as many features, CMD adds a bonus disk from Datal containing additional graphic and demo utilities making this an even better deal!

I may not be a programmer but everyday it seems like my computing knowledge increases, along with my needs for more powerful utilities. All of Action Replay's utilities are very easy to use and I know it will be a long time before I manage to outgrow them. And the best thing is... they are all contained in one place... a little red cartridge!

- Sherry Freedline

