

THE MAKING OF...

MULE

The dictionary defines a mule as the commonly sterile offspring of a donkey and a horse. In 1983 Electronic Arts defined M.U.L.E. as a "Multiple Use Labour Element". While John Szczepaniak simply believes M.U.L.E. is a damn fine game that everyone must play. This is a look at the game with contributions from those behind Ozark's aforementioned masterpiece.

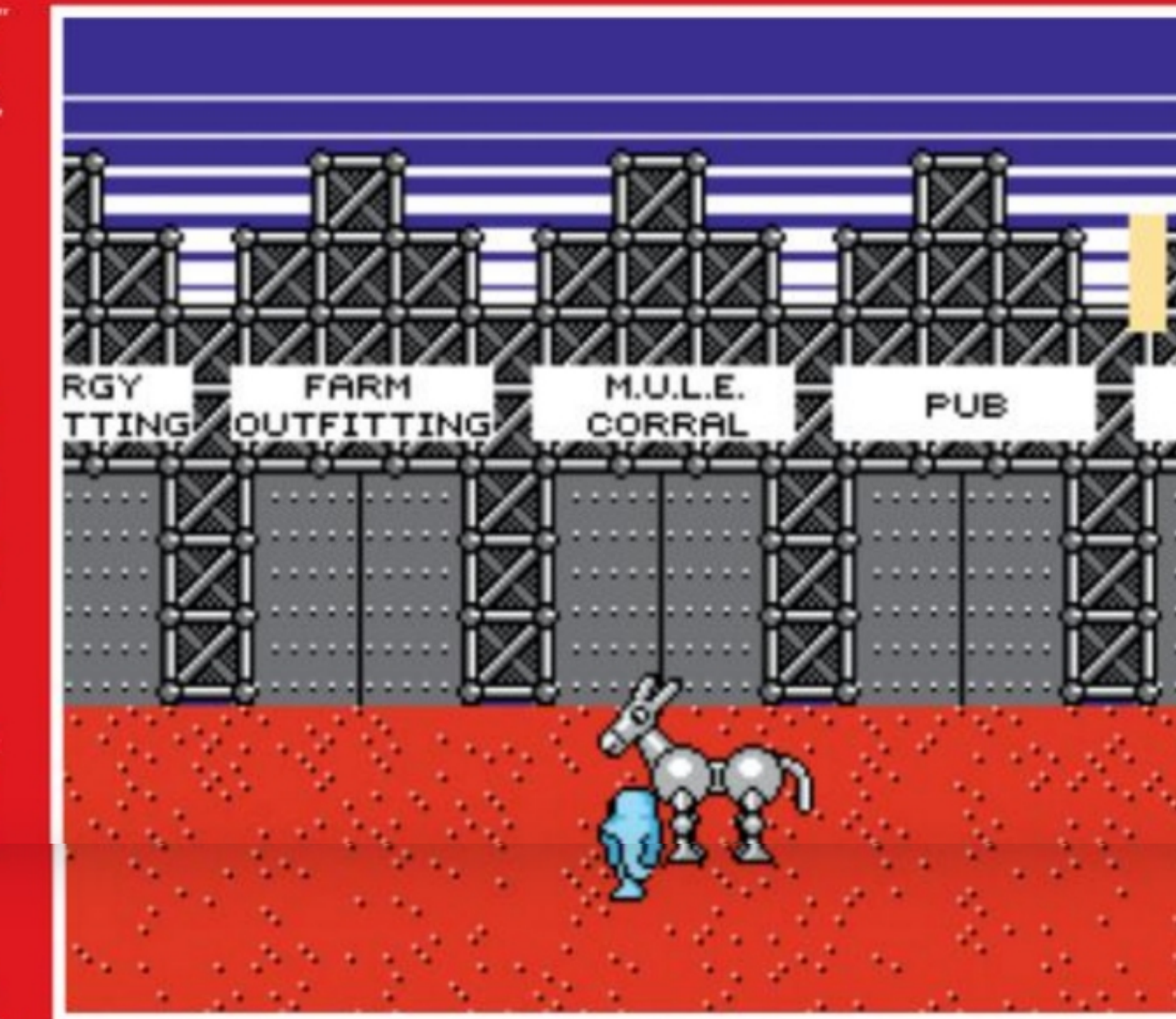
"DESPITE BEING MORE THAN 20 YEARS OLD, M.U.L.E. WAS CONCEIVED FLAWLESSLY, AND APART FROM ITS VISUAL MINIMALISM CAN STILL STAND UP TO MODERN TITLES"

status as a "cult classic". The "album cover" he refers to is the Atari 800 version, which was later, converted to the Commodore 64, and then later still, the NES.

M.U.L.E. isn't easy to classify or explain, which was a reason for its lack of commercial success. At its most basic M.U.L.E. is a four-player, sci-fi themed, real-estate based, resource-managing, strategy (ish) trading game, with gambling, auctioning and an old fashioned Wampus.

Each session consists of 12 rounds divided into 3 phases. Firstly an initial land grab where the fastest fingers (or those in last place) get the best areas, one for each player per turn out of 45 available plots. Occasionally additional land is auctioned to the highest bidder. In phase two, each player has a limited time to perform various actions, like buying M.U.L.E.s, fitting them with equipment for one of four tasks, then placing them in vacant plots. After this, these industries begin "producing their crop", based on several factors. The third phase is the most exciting, as it works on the competitive animal in everyone. Surplus production can be sold, while players with a deficit can buy, either through general sales or private auctions. In theory everyone should end up evenly balanced so the colony can thrive, but when people duel for first place it's not so simple.

Trip played a key role in designing the economics, and explains, "the key principles were supply and demand and how they affect pricing; economies of scale and how they affect output and costs; the



The NES version, while adequate, is not as good as the original. Towns have unnecessary scrolling which ruins the balance and pacing, not to mention the M.U.L.E. design isn't as good

learning curve theory of production and how it increases efficiency at a certain rate based on experience. In the game, one of the great strategies was to organize a way to control the market for Smithore by dominating production while withholding supply from the market. This would drive the price way up. We also increased the marginal rate of return as your experience of producing a certain [thing] went up. This gave you an incentive, like a real business, to specialize in certain areas and become the leader."

This, combined with perfectly simple controls and human interaction, gives M.U.L.E. its explosive long-term magnetism. Indeed, M.U.L.E. only comes alive with human players. The amount of tactics are endless. You can create a Smithore monopoly, then release all remaining M.U.L.E.s. Without selling Smithore to the store no M.U.L.E.s are produced, which can either lead to personal

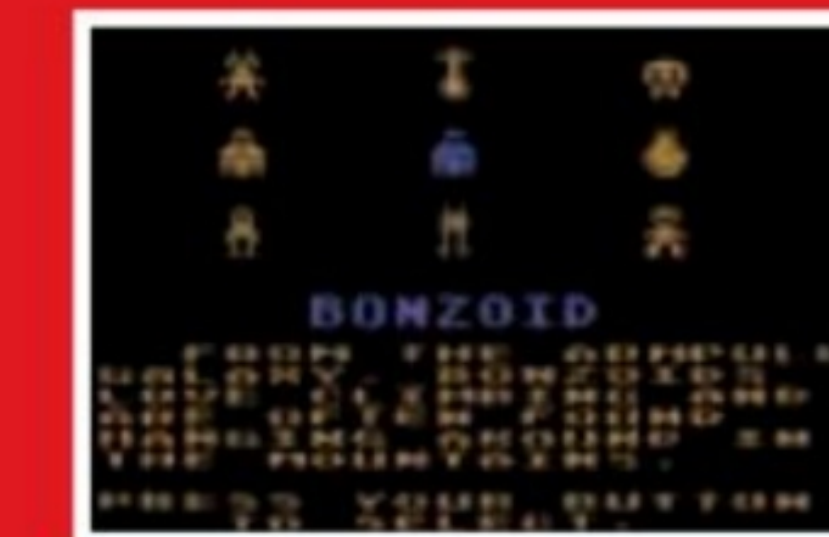
victory or the colony being doomed. Families who'd agree all morning to co-operate are, come the afternoon game, all out for revenge because someone who didn't need it bought the store's last food units, and won't sell to anyone. The game constantly evolves and demands regular on-the-spot adaptation, sneak deals, and even double crossing. The resulting experience is intense, especially with four friends, and can never be summed up definitively in words.

Despite the deliriously powerful nature of M.U.L.E., its origins at the dawn of the Eighties were low-key. Having previously been involved in the publishing of "Cartels and Cutthroats", Trip Hawkins wanted to make an improved version. Unable to buy the original's rights, he tracked down its creator in Arkansas, Dan

For some there is a sliding scale of quality with retro games; the further back the more spread out the timeless classics become.

Looking purely at the home market in 1983, one might have difficulty finding a game not only fondly remembered but also one that remains supremely playable today. Despite being more than 20 years old, M.U.L.E. was conceived flawlessly, and apart from its visual minimalism can still stand up to modern titles. In fact the multi-player ethos it championed decades ago has now become a focus for all hardware manufacturers. It is also disturbingly addictive.

Unsurprisingly it received acclaim at the time from critics and was inducted into Computer Gaming World's Hall of Fame. Today it remains a (mostly forgotten) cult classic, yet despite the accolades it did not sell well, as Senior Director Trip Hawkins tells us. "Commercially, M.U.L.E. bombed. It sold (around) 20,000 copies. The album cover and name were confusing and failed to explain the beauty of the game. It won more awards than any other EA game, including Game of the Year in Japan! But hardly anyone bought it. We were all very disappointed that the public couldn't fathom M.U.L.E., because all of the developers and employees and critics thought it was the cat's meow." This combination of high quality and industry praise, coupled with very low sales, likely led to the slow building of a fan community over the years and its



There are eight separate characters to choose from; shown here is the Borzoid. Humanoids are for a challenge. Flappers for novices, and Mechatrons for the computer. Everything else is roughly equal

IN THE KNOW



- PUBLISHER: ELECTRONIC ARTS
- DEVELOPER: OZARK SOFTSCAPE
- RELEASED: 1983
- GENRE: MULTI-PLAYER STRATEGY
- EXPECT TO PAY: £30-£50 (DISK) £5-10 (TAPE)



For the colony to succeed, the combined total of the 4 player's scores must exceed 60,000, while the one with the highest individual score will become the exalted colony leader



The transport ship drops you off and returns 12 months later, but there are also random events like thieving pirate ships, crop ruining pestilence, earthquakes, meteor crashes, even M.U.L.E. tap-dancing

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JOE YBARRA ON PLAYTESTING

"Right about the mid-point when it was getting playable, I started my several hundred hour journey of testing. Many nights I'd come home from work and fire up the Atari 800, with my two-year-old daughter on my lap holding the joystick that didn't work, while I was holding the joystick that did work. I'd get eight or ten games in, and would do that for three or four months, trying to work out all the kinks. I remember a lot of nights staying up until two am playing *M.U.L.E.* and thinking, 'Wow, this game is good!' And then thinking, 'Gee, I wish the A.I. would do this.' (I'd then tell these things to Dan.) A couple of days later I'd get a new build and be back with my daughter on my lap, once again testing and checking to see if it worked. I believe, *M.U.L.E.* was the most tested and best-balanced game that EA produced for many years. That was because there were lots of people that really loved that game, and put a lot of love and attention into it."

"IT WON MORE AWARDS THAN ANY OTHER EA GAME, INCLUDING GAME OF THE YEAR IN JAPAN BUT HARDLY ANYONE BOUGHT IT" TRIP HAWKINS

Bunten. "[I] asked him if he was interested in having me fund an entirely new game. I had specific direction on user interface, player choices, and degree of difficulty. I also wrote the manual. Dan agreed and he got his group together [Ozark Softscape], and they came up with the concept of the robotic *M.U.L.E.* on the sci-fi planet. They were truly among the nicest people I've known. Down-to-earth, unpretentious, also very creative and professional. Bill was a sociable guy who was fun to hang out with. Alan was a quiet and solid technical guy. Jim was more of a management type. Dan was the key designer/programmer, and leader of the group. They got inspiration for the visuals from the Imperial Walkers that had debuted in the second *Star Wars* film that had come out [recently]. The *M.U.L.E.* was cute and the theme song that introduced the game is one of the all-time best."

Trip also wanted *M.U.L.E.* to aid learning, long before "edutainment" had negative connotations. "Consumers would learn at the same time they were having fun, because they're thinking and getting their neurotransmitter connections made, but also because the topics and subject matter are worth learning about. You cannot play



Land auctions are tense, since more land gives a huge advantage. Though selling valuable plots can be an easy way to quickly earn big money.

M.U.L.E. without inadvertently learning as much as a college Economics 101 course would teach you." This learning was not forced, but rather a side effect of the immense fun being had.

Joseph Ybarra, a long-time producer for EA who worked on other notable titles such as *The Bard's Tale*, elaborates on those early days. "In the fall of 1982, I became the producer at Electronic Arts for Dan Bunten. On my first day on the job at EA, the total headcount was seven people. Trip held a draft of prospective developers amongst the three producers. We randomly chose the draft order, and I picked third. I was left with selecting our only remaining developer, Dan Bunten. We all started from the premise that the only successful game based on money, had been *Monopoly*. There were a lot of board game elements we wanted to incorporate into the design of *M.U.L.E.* Of course at the time we didn't know it was going to be called *M.U.L.E.* We had no idea what this game was going to be like. What we had was a template, based on work that Dan had done previously. We would look at

those products and ask what do we want to do with something that was essentially a financial game." Mr Ybarra also spoke of the development time, roughly 6 months from October 1982, up until around May 1983 when it launched.

Jim Rushing, a key member of the original team, explained another side to development. "That was back when a team of four people could actually make a game that a lot of people wanted to play. Like my, I guess you could call it my "day contribution", was



A promotional image from the early days of Ozark Softscape, taken from the Dani Bunten memorial website: www.anticlockwise.com/dani/index.htm



The biggest problem with the NES version is that the map screen doesn't show critical information regarding a plot's future potential productivity. This makes strategic planning needlessly difficult.

the auction sequence. I designed it and programmed it. But we had these design sessions and we would sit around the table and just talk about the game. Everyone would have ideas, and contribute ideas. Undoubtedly Dan was the creative genius behind everything. I wouldn't want to take any of that away from Dan. But, having said that, it was very democratic in the sense that if I, or Bill, or someone came up with a good idea and the group thought it was a good idea, we would do that. It was just a very tight, trusting group of four guys, as you can imagine."

During the interview we asked if anything had been left out. "There has been so much discussion on the net, with tribute sites and people trying to design 'M.U.L.E. Two Point Oh'. They come up with a lot of good features, but I don't know... There's something that to me says the simplicity of the original *M.U.L.E.* is hard to beat. We did have some stuff that we couldn't get to, obviously every game development team does. But to tell you the truth I can't really think of anything large that we were not able to do, or that we had to set aside. We were pretty happy with the game."

Jim also shared some trivia, "The working title of the game for quite a long time was "Planet Pioneers," while the "planet" IRATA was "Atari" spelled backwards. The *M.U.L.E.* came from the concept of the old Wild West (circa 1800s),



"IN MEMORY OF DANI BUNTEN"

It would be impossible to talk about *M.U.L.E.* without mentioning Dan Bunten.

Jim Rushing, key team member, recalls, "I feel really fortunate to have worked with Dan Bunten. He was such a cool person on so many different levels, and he really, really had a passion for gaming, and he had such a great innate sense of what was fun. He was the genius behind the whole thing."

Trip Hawkins also speaks fondly, "Dan had a background in architecture so knew how to organize and plan a software system. He was a good leader because he had the right values. He cared about people and was very kind, and had a big personal commitment to innovation and using games to promote social interaction and learning."

Joe Ybarra adds, "Dan was tremendously respected in the company. More than just respect, I think he had the love of most everybody there as well. His character and the way he interacted with people, and the values he represented; we all felt very special at having that relationship with Dan and the rest of the team."

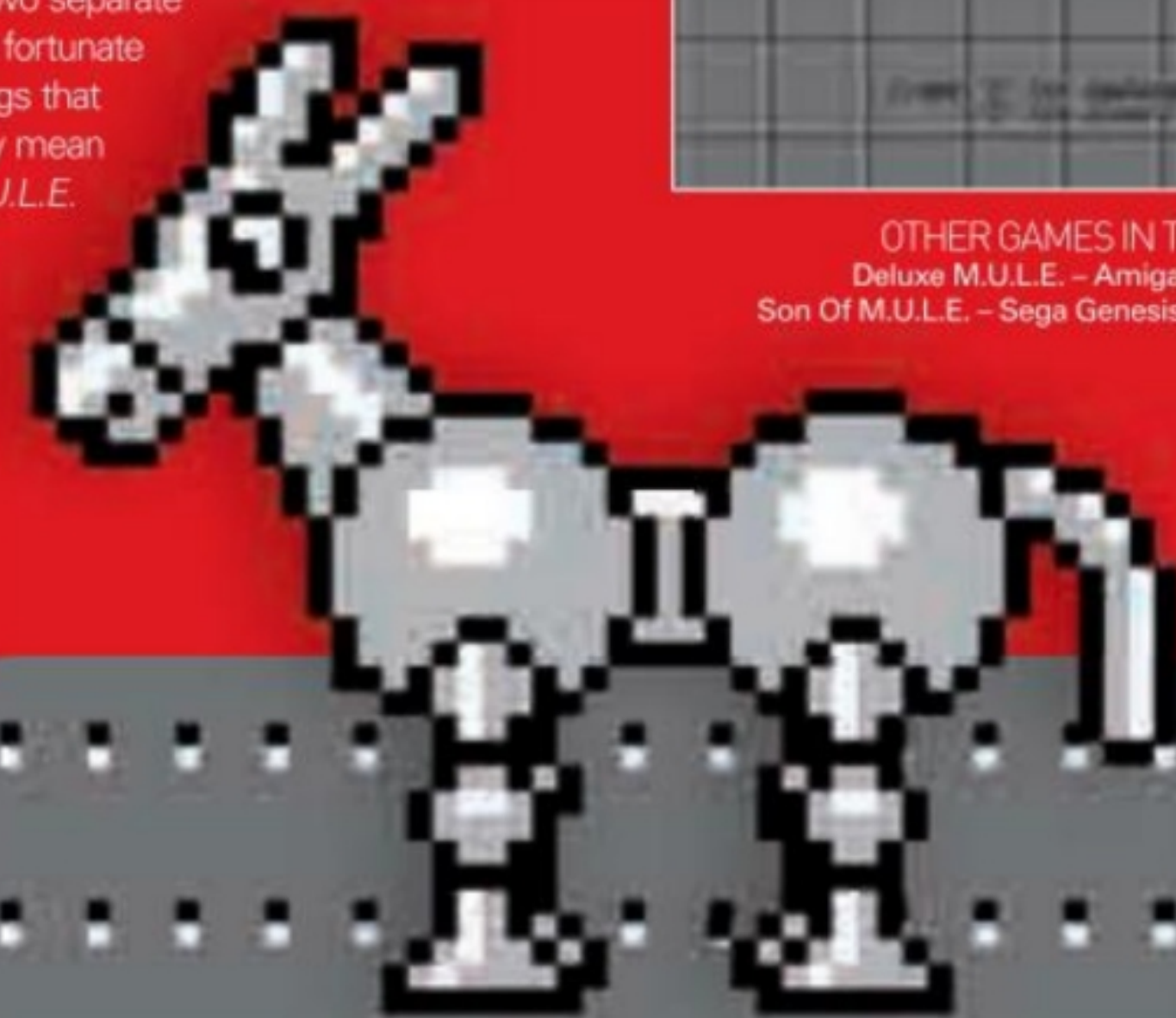
Daniel Bunten, born 1949, was the mind behind *M.U.L.E.* and other multi-player games. In the early Nineties Dan changed his name and gender, undergoing surgery to become Danielle Bunten Berry. But her commitment to gaming remained strong. She passed away in 1998 due to lung cancer. We recommend visiting the online memorial: www.anticlockwise.com/dani/index.htm

where you could strike your fortune with "forty acres and a mule..." and was also influenced by a Robert Heinlein science fiction story. While the *Wampus* was a tribute to the very ancient 'Hunt The Wampus' game in BASIC that we played when we were learning programming."

But what about the playtesting hours mentioned in the insert? Trip reveals "[The 3500 number from the liner notes] is probably tongue in cheek and a wild guess. But the truth is of course that there was a ton of testing! This was one of our first games and it was fun to play, so it got "tested" a lot."

It would not be an exaggeration to say that *M.U.L.E.* acts as a modern day fable against the dangers of greed and selfishness, since taking too much throws the entire system out of balance and everyone loses. But what about the future? Could *M.U.L.E.* be re-released on things like Xbox Live Arcade, considering that the rights reverted to Dani's family? Not to reveal too much, but we were informed of two separate and fortunate things that may mean *M.U.L.E.*

OTHER GAMES IN THE SERIES:
Deluxe *M.U.L.E.* - Amiga (unreleased)
Son Of *M.U.L.E.* - Sega Genesis (unreleased)



DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

WHEELER DEALERS

APPLE II
YEAR: 1978

CARTELS & CUTTHROATS

SYSTEMS: APPLE II
YEAR: 1981

THE SEVEN CITIES OF GOLD

SYSTEMS: APPLE II, C64,
ATARI 800
YEAR: 1984

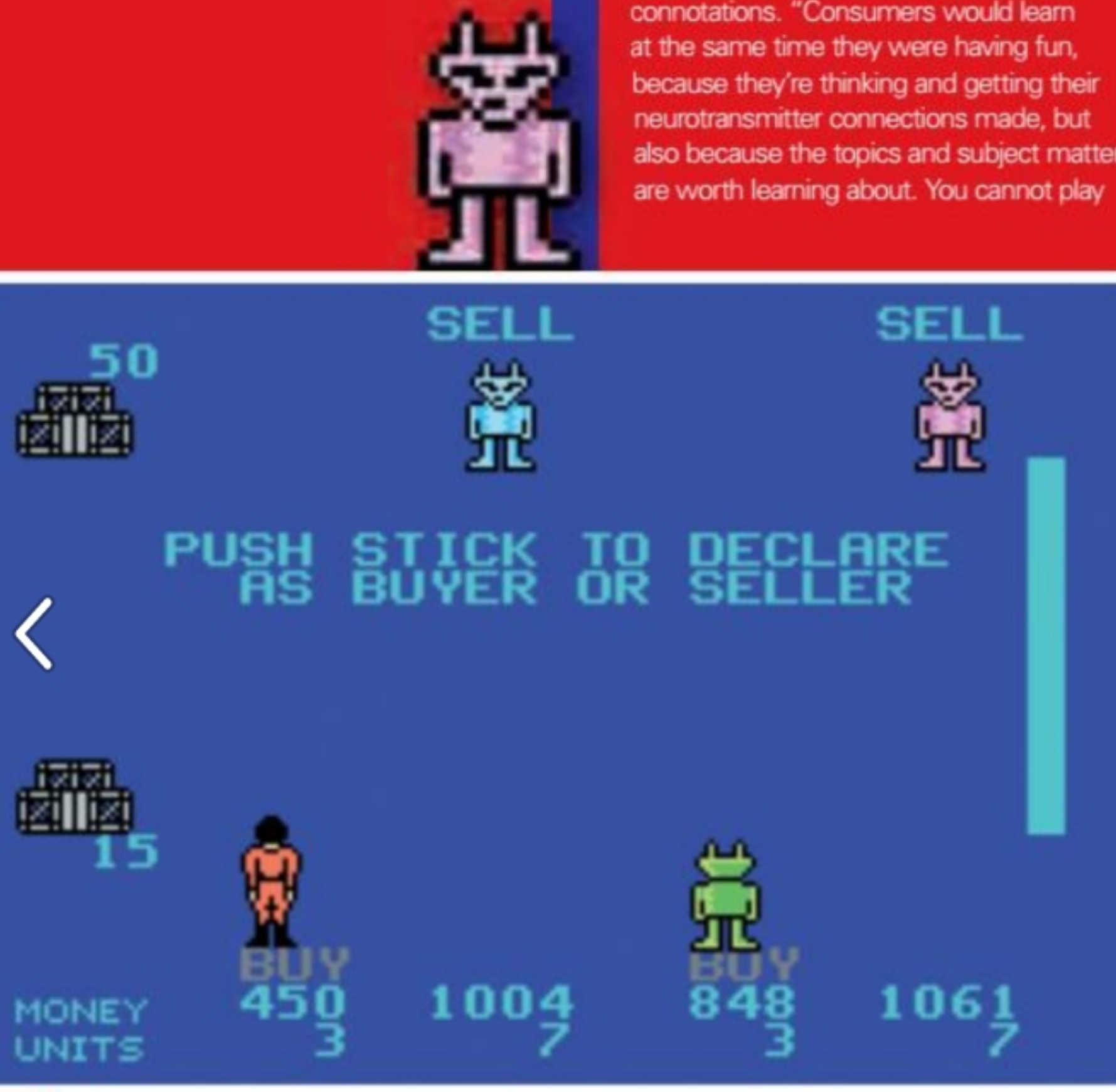


Having two plots of land side by side with the same industry increases their rate of production, as does having 3 or more anywhere on the map. Having 3 side by side results in unprecedented levels of production.



In the town you can buy a *M.U.L.E.* from the available amount (which increases when Smithore is sold), and kit it out for farming, mining (Smithore or Crystite), or energy production.

MANY THANKS TO JIM RUSHING, JOE YBARRA AND TRIP HAWKINS FOR THEIR INVALUABLE ASSISTANCE. THANKS ALSO TO CHRISTIAN SCHILLER FOR ASSISTANCE AND PROVIDING EXCLUSIVE IMAGES. BE SURE TO CHECK OUT HIS ASTOUNDING TRIBUTE SITE, WWW.WORLDOFMULE.NET



Strategy existed in every aspect of *M.U.L.E.* - even buying and selling had to be carefully deliberated.