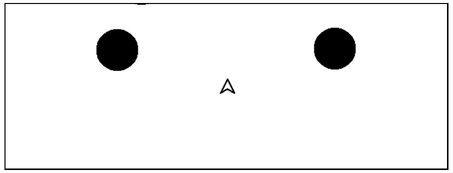
Space Rocks!

A review by Damian Walker of Ben Vaughan's Astrocks, an Asteroids clone.



One of the Asteroids clones on the EPOC platform, Astrocks is a piece of shareware by Ben Vaughan. I installed it on my trusty Ericsson MC218 to see how it plays.

The game which inspired Astrocks is Asteroids, a simple but addictive arcade game that appeared in about 1980. You control a ship sitting at the centre of the screen, which you can rotate left and right. You can also propel the ship forwards with thrusters. Floating about the screen are a number of asteroids, which you shoot with torpedoes. When you hit large asteroid, it splits into smaller pieces, which split up again upon being hit. Only the smallest pieces will dissipate entirely when you shoot them, and in the mean time, all these rocks are dangerous to your own ship. The object of the game is to clear the screen of asteroids, at which point a more frantic field of asteroids will appear. The original arcade game was notable for its use of a vector screen, which was monochrome but extremely smooth compared to the more usual raster screens. There are no pixels on a vector screen, just perfectly smooth lines.

Astrocks is designed for the Psion Series 5. There is also a version for the 5mx, but smaller screens like those of the Osaris and the Revo are not supported. The game plays in letterbox mode on a Series 7.

The presentation of the game is of varying quality. The title screen, as with many of Ben Vaughan's games. looks professional, with a large 3D font. speech is featured, and a female voice announces the name of the game when you first start it up. but the graphics of the game itself are very simplistic. They don't resemble the vector graphics of the original arcade machine, but instead use black circles of varying sizes for the asteroids, and a geometric design—also black—for the ship. The graphics are clear, except for the bullets the ship fires, which I found hard to see. In-game sound is limited to an explosion when your ship is destroyed, but there are not sounds when firing or when asteroids are hit.

There game features the usual options, for turning sound on and off, and for redefining the keys. In play, the game is very much like the original: the method of controlling the ship is the same, as is the way the larger asteroids split up when you hit them. An addition to the original game is the Rock Guardian, which appears when there is only one asteroid left, and chases you around the screen until the level is finished.

I've already mentioned that there are two versions of the game, one for the Series 5 and another for the 5mx—this is how Astrocks copes with machines running at different speeds. Unfortunately the game doesn't respond to system events, so you'll have to make sure you it's not running if you want to make a backup, or to install something using PsiWin. It does, however, use standard EPOC menus and dialogues to navigate through the options.

This is a serviceable version of Asteroids which you might want to try out, and is still available for registration too. But I'd recommend looking at other versions of asteroids too, before laying out any registration fee.

By	Ben Vaughan
URL	www.bjv.btinternet.co.uk
Licence	Shareware
Compatibility	S5/5mx
Rating	☆☆☆

EPOC ENTERTAINER

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This month... Backgammon

In this month's issue I review one of my favourite games, Backgammon by Purple Software. Regular readers have seen previous reviews of Purple Software games, and it will come as no surprise that this one meets with my approval! I look in addition at two other games, Wrippers and Astrocks.

Also in this issue is the start of a new programming tutorial. Spurred on by interest in the Animating OPL tutorial, this month I'll look at monitoring the keyboard, so that we can turn the aimless wandering of the bouncing ball into something that a player can control.

If you have any comments, questions, or contributions about *EPOC Entertainer*, then please get in touch at the address below. I look forward to hearing from you.

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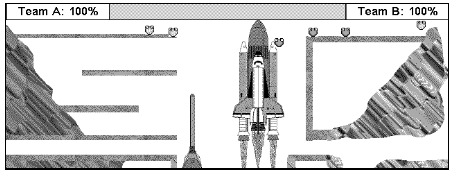
Wrippers Almost Reviewed

Damian Walker attempts to review the shareware game Wrippers, from Palmscape.



I had intended in this issue to review the game Wrippers, a Worms-like game by Palmscape. Worm and its look-a-likes are probably the pinnacle of development of artillery-type games, where you have to set the angle and power of your weapon, adjusting from one shot to the next as your ammunition falls short or overshoots the target. In Worms you have several characters, who can move about and change weapons.

Wrippers was released as shareware, and from the screen shots I took for the EPOC32 Game Base, it looked very promising, But instead I've had to curtail my reviewing efforts and write instead a mini-review. The reason for this is that the game is rather cripple-ware than shareware, as I found when I tried to test it out. The game plays for about a minute or two, before announcing that “you've had your fun,” returning you to the system screen. This is not long enough for any kind of evaluation; I barely had time to choose my weapon and fire off a round before I was hastily escorted out of the game.

For those who like Worms type games, I would recommend instead trying ZherØes by Neuon, which I hope to review in a future issue.

By	Palmscape
URL	www.bioeddie.co.uk
Licence	Shareware
Compatibility	S5/5mx
Rating	N/A

Turning the Tables

a review by Damian Walker, of Purple Software's Backgammon game.

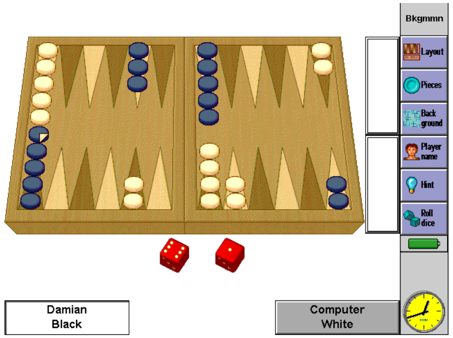
Backgammon is one of the oldest board games that we still play today. The game of 30 pieces on a board of 24 points appeared in the time of the Romans, and was called *tabula*, or tables. Since then, the game has undergone lots of variations, and as with the chess board, other games have been invented that use the same pieces. But the most popular variant is Backgammon, whose rules were settled by about the 17th century.

For those unfamiliar with the game, the rules are simple. It is a race to get your 15 pieces from their starting positions, around the board to the end of the course, according to the rolls of two dice. Players race in opposite directions and may knock their opponent's pieces from the board. They can protect their own pieces from capture by piling them up two or more on a *point*, as the playing spaces are called.

There is only one version of Backgammon available on EPOC32, and that is straightforwardly called *Backgammon*, by Purple Software. The game has been taken over by ZingMagic and is offered by them free of charge.

The presentation is up to Purple Software's usual standard. The presentation is good, with adequate graphics but minimal sound. The graphics don't aim at photographic realism, but are instead clear shaded line graphics, with an attractive 3D option, and choice of piece styles and backgrounds. Sound is limited to blips when the player tries an illegal move. The user interface in general, though, follows all EPOC32 conventions and makes the regular Psion user feel right at home.

Backgammon is a highly playable game. While often dismissed by aficionados of games like chess, because of its use of dice, a good player will win four out of five games against a beginner, by virtue of skill. The fifth game will serve to keep the beginner's interest in the game. As with all good traditional board games, one might play this again and again without tiring of it.



There is a good array of options with this version. Beginners may obtain hints and retract mistakes. There is a computer player with selectable skill level, and one can watch a demonstration game or use the software as a virtual board for two players. Although national and historic variations of backgammon are not properly implemented, some which adopt the same rules with an alternative starting position can be played with the Set up Board option. The regular rules of backgammon are implemented with complete accuracy.

This particular game runs on all EPOC32 machines, with the exception of the Osaris. A colour patch is available to make the best use of the Series 7 display. As an application, Backgammon behaves flawlessly, not hogging the machine, but responding to events such as closure from the system screen. It runs very speedily, though the colour version at least takes up a good chunk of memory—1M of disk space and a further 800K when running.

In conclusion, Backgammon comes highly recommended to anyone who likes traditional board games and may sometimes lack a human opponent.

By	Purple Software/ZingMagic
URL	www.zingmagic.com
Licence	Freeware
Compatibility	Revo, Geofox, S5/5mx, S7/netBook
Rating	☆☆☆☆

Taking Control

The start of a new programming tutorial, by Damian Walker

In the recent *Animating OPL* tutorial, we explored the use of sprites to create animated graphics. But there was no player interaction, the viewer being content merely to watch the bouncing ball until boredom sets in. In the series *Taking Control* we'll further develop that demonstration so that it responds to keyboard input, moving the ball in the direction we want, rather than on its current inevitable path.

To follow this tutorial, you'll need to have the *Bouncer* files from the *Animating OPL* tutorial, and you'll also need to have the OPL editor installed. This is built into all machines but the Revo, for which you'll have to download it. All the necessary files are available from the *EPOC Entertainer* web site.

We have already used some rudimentary keyboard control, using the *KEY* function to momentarily scan the keyboard for the Escape key. Now we will use the same mechanism to scan for other keys, and then look for even better methods more suitable for games programming.

To begin with, we need to remove the code from *Bouncer* that gives it its constant diagonal path. To do this, edit the *MoveBall* procedure to read as follows:

```
PROC MoveBall:
  LOCAL start&,current&,n&,
                 ⬀usecs&,progbegin&
  LOCAL movex%,movey%
  progbegin&=DATETOSECS
                  ⬀(YEAR,MONTH,DAY,
               ⬀HOUR,MINUTE,SECOND)
  DO
    start&=DTNow&:
    IF spritex%+movex%<0 OR
       ⬀spritex%+movex%>gWIDTH-16
      movex%=0
    ENDIF
    IF spritey%+movey%<0 OR
      ⬀spritey%+movey%>gHEIGHT-16
      movey%=0
    ENDIF
    spritex%=spritex%+movex%
    spritey%=spritey%+movey%
    SPRITEPOS:(spritex%,spritey%)
    DO
      current&=DTNow&:
      DTDATETIMEDIFF:
          ⬀(start&,current&,n&,n&
            ⬀,n&,n&,n&,n&,usecs&)
      DTDeleteDateTime:(current&)
    UNTIL usecs&>=125000
    DTDeleteDateTime:(start&)
  UNTIL DATETOSECS(YEAR,MONTH,
       ⬀DAY,HOUR,MINUTE,SECOND)
                ⬀>=progbegin&+60
  GIPRINT "Demonstration
                     ⬀finished"
ENDP
```

The edited sections have been underlined, so that you can find them more easily. What the procedure now does is to bounce the ball on the spot for 60 seconds, then print a message to the effect that the demonstration is completed. Control will then return to the *Bouncer* procedure, which will carry on to finish the program.

Note that we use *DATETOSECS* for the 60 second timer, rather than *DTDATETIMEDIFF* as for the split second timer. *DATETOSECS* is much simpler, but we couldn't use it for split second timing as it deals only with whole seconds.

In the next issue we'll look at expanding our use of the *KEY* function to control the ball during the running of the program.