

BADGE OF THE ULTIMATE STAR JAM FIGHTER

CHAPTER 4: THE STAR JAM KID

Mr. Gruffy didn't have a joystick, so Markaius had to go on the internet to find what he needed. As he searched for arcade parts, he came across a forum called *The Arcade Game Builder Forums*. It even had a forum for buying parts. He eagerly signed up for it, deciding on the monicker "StarJamKid" in honour of his game. Considering some of the Terms of Service were in bold, he decided to read them all. He looked at the clause that said asked posters to check their posts for grammar and spelling before posting. Once his account was confirmed and fully set up, he posted in the *Introductions* subforum.

[1] Star Jam Kid Here!

StarJamKid (Newbie Forumite)

Hey, everyone! I'm Star Jam Kid. I'm trying to keep a real old arcade game working cause everything is breaking. Would like help find parts and ways to beat game.

Between looking online for arcade parts (most of which were horribly expensive), he kept refreshing the forum. He grinned as he saw a new reply.

[2] Star Jam Kid Here!

Lord_Danloc (Elder Moderator)

Good to have you on board, Star Jam Kid. Your name reminds me of a game I played many, many years ago. What kind of parts are you looking for? Are you looking for parts to restore the cabinet to its original glory or do you just want to finish the game? If it's the former, you have to ask whether you'll get your money's worth. In the latter, you have a lot more options for parts.

Are you crazy? Is that your problem?

[3] Star Jam Kid Here!

StarJamKid (Newbie Forumite)

I just want to fix it so I can get 100% on the game.

[4] Star Jam Kid Here!

Lord_Danloc (Elder Moderator)

Then, like I said, you have a lot more options, because you simply want the cabinet working. Have a look down in our Parts: Sale And Seeking forum, and all the best.

Are you crazy? Is that your problem?

In the *Parts: Sale And Seeking* forum, he scrolled through various posts before finding one that looked promising: a user by the name of Moolah_Hunter had a joystick for sale.

[1] Blackstone Manor Skullhead Joystick For Sale

Moolah_Hunter (Elder Forumite)

New old stock joystick with skull head for Blackstone Manor Cabinet. \$150 firm.

That price seemed kind of high, and Markaius wouldn't have replied at all to the thread—except for a term that he didn't understand.

[2] Blackstone Manor Skullhead Joystick For Sale

StarJamKid (Newbie Forumite)

What does "new old stock" mean?

About 30 minutes (and two music videos) later, he checked on the thread to see if there was a reply. There was, along with a private message.

[3] Blackstone Manor Skullhead Joystick For Sale

Moolah_Hunter (Elder Forumite)

Serious inquiries only, please.

Private Message: If you don't know, shut up.

Moolah_Hunter (Elder Forumite)

Don't waste my time with stupid questions. I have reported your post to the moderators, and I hope the ban teaches you a lesson.

Markaius logged out with a lump in his throat. So much for a forum being a good idea; less than an hour and he was already about to be banned.

At suppertime, he only picked at his meal, which his parents quickly picked up on.

"Something wrong, son?" asked his dad.

Markaius just sat there and shook his head, forcing himself to eat. After dinner, he went out for a bike ride, sighing.

He hadn't realized how far he'd ridden until he found himself near Willow Clearing Computers & Electronics. He was surprised to see a light on and the open sign still on at this hour, so he tried the door and found it unlocked. The door chimes jingled as he entered. Maybe Mr. Gruffy would tell him.

"Ey! I'm closed. Didn't yer see the open sign is off?" called Mr. Gruffy from within.

"It was still on, Mr. Gruffy," said Markaius.

There was a moment's silence. "Oh. Then pull th' chain on it t' shut it off. Did yer need owt?" He sounded annoyed.

"I just... wanted to ask a question."

"Can it wait? I'm up to me bloomin' ears in a project."

"Can I help at all?"

There was another silence. "Actually, yes. Come back 'ere."

Markaius went into the back, and saw electronic pieces scattered across a workbench. "Yer can get me a bloody screwdriver. 'Ead looks like a blinkin' X"

Markaius hadn't heard such language from Mr. Gruffy before, so he simply went to get one. He saw one that looked like a "plus" sign, but if he turned it a little, it did look like an "X". He brought it over. "Thank yer" said Mr. Gruffy as he went to work, growling out things that would earn Markaius a mouthful of soap if he said them at home. "I need solder" said the badger.

Markaius went, but saw two rolls. "Um... skinny stuff or fat stuff?" he asked.

"Aaah, what the blinkin' bloody blazes are yer yammerin' abo—" Mr. Gruffy turned around with a growl, then saw the two rolls Markaius was holding. "Oh. Skinny." Markaius put the other one back and brought it over. As Mr. Gruffy continued fixing, he continued calling out for more and more parts, in particular capacitors. He'd even say the specs, and Markaius did his best to comply, although a few times he got it wrong, earning an irritated growl and a testy correction from the badger. Markaius didn't dare complain. But finally, Mr. Gruffy started putting pieces back together and bolting them into place. Finally, a very old refurbished computer sat on Mr. Gruffy's desk. "Bloody 'ell!" he growled. "Every bloomin' capacitor ready t' burst! I tol' Rijk 'e needed t' replace 'is bloomin' computer, but 'e insists 'e can't because only this relic will work wi' 'is blasted stone-age inventory program! I've tol' 'im 'e can get way better, but bloody Dutchman: Wooden shoes, wooden 'ead, wouldn' listen!" He looked up at Markaius as he relaxed with a sigh. "Thank yer! Yer were a big 'elp, really. So, what did yer want t' ask?"

"It's kind of a stupid question..." said Markaius.

"Well, ask away, an' I'll try not t' laugh."

"What's 'new old stock'?"

Mr. Gruffy blinked. "'Oo told yer that was a stupid question? That's not stupid at all! What it is, is when yer've got some items that 'ave sat in a ware'ouse a long time an' never got sold. Often, it's owt nobody makes anymore. In fact... Come int' storage."

As the two went towards the store room, Markaius looked at the various electronic devices in Mr. Gruffy's shop, some in various stages of disassembly, some seemingly ready to be sold. Finally, they entered the store room. Mr. Gruffy chose three boxes that looked old and immaculate at the same time and set them on a shelf where Markaius could easily see them.

"This one is a nixie tube. It's got a bunch of filaments in th' shape o' numbers, and it'll light one o' them. Used for ol' numerical displays. This 'ere is a dekatron, basically a counter. An' this is a vacuum tube, yer see 'em in a lot of old electronics. Even in some newer ones, too, fer various reasons. They must have sat in a warehouse fer over fifty years. I order 'em in because Lansden Metals an' th' gas plant an' a couple power stations all use 'em, an' they all got reasons they can't replace 'em." He set them back in their containers. "The company that made those is long out o' business, but they made 'em by th' thousands while they were still around, and there's 'undreds still sittin' in ware'ouses, original packagin' an' all waitin' t' be sold. *That's 'new old stock.'* Plain an' simple."

Markaius breathed a sigh of relief at the straight answer. "Thank you, Mr. Gruffy."

"Any time, pup. An' thanks fer yer 'elp."

"Where's Russ?"

The older badger shrugged. "Surfin' down at th' river. 'E's not sure 's can learn th' trade an'... well, I've 'ad to accept that 'e might not 'ave th' 'ead for it." He sighed. "Yer might want t' get 'home, b'fore yer parents start lookin' f'r yer."

Markaius pedaled back home, feeling better. When he got back home, he checked his email to see how long he'd be banned for—only to see the only emails from that forum were notifications of private messages. When he entered his username and password into the forum login screen, he discovered he hadn't been banned (at least not yet) and that he had a few private messages from various members of the forum defining "new old stock" or giving him links to sites that explained the concept.

Private Message: Answer to your question.

Sk8man_J (Young Forumite)

New old stock is stuff that's not made anymore but hasn't been sold yet. Oh, and don't talk to Moolah_Hunter, he's a jerk.

Private Message: Answer, and ignore the butthats.

Gaias_Gamyr (Known Forumite)

New old stock: Stock that's not manufactured anymore, but hasn't been sold yet.

Also, don't let Moolah_Hunter get under your skin. As his (its?) name suggests, all he cares about is money. I don't think he's ever played a video game in his life.

Private Message: Heya, pupster!

Lord_Danloc (Elder Moderator)

Hey, StarJamKid. New Old Stock is unsold stock that's been in a warehouse for ages. Also, if you need a term defined, the General Arcade Talk forum is the place to ask. :-)

PS: I recognized your e-mail, Markaius. Tell Uncle Lawry and Aunt Doris Kraggan says hi, willya pupster? :-)

Markaius blinked—Lord Danloc was his big cousin Kraggan! Maybe this forum wouldn't be so bad after all. He quickly typed back.

Private Message: Re: Heya, pupster!

StarJamKid (Newbie Forumite)

Hey, Cousin Kraggan! I'll do that! Yeah, I just got a Star Jam Fighters game---from what I've read, its called a cabinet? Do you have any pointers on beating The Dorogrim Entity? Or finding any of the side quests? And I was looking for a joystick.

And I was worried I'd get banned for asking that question.

Private Message: Re: Heya, pupster!

Lord_Danloc (Elder Moderator)

I had no idea there were any cabinets left; I found evidence of maybe 20 cabinets being sold ever? And it's been a long time since I played it, and all I did was beat the main game. Sorry, pupster, can't help you. Maybe take what worked on other bosses, or don't attack until you see the boss's pattern.

Or you could do something totally stupid for a laugh and see if that works! :-D

I do recall Star Jam Fighters was the worst kind of flop. If you get 100% on the game, you'll pretty much be the only one to ever do it.

SkaVenJerSam might be your best bet for a cheap price, but just post in *Parts: Sale And Seeking*, and hopefully someone will have something to offer.

Best of luck!

P.S. No, you won't get banned for asking a simple question. Don't worry. :-)

He then went to *Parts: Sale And Seeking* and posted his request.

[1] Star Jam Kid Seeks Joystick!

StarJamKid (Newbie Forumite)

I'm looking for a joystick for a Star Jam Fighters cabinet by Characo Games. I've got a picture of the original joystick here.

As his post included a picture, it required a moderator to clear it, and Lord_Danlock did so within a few minutes. About 10 minutes after that, he got a reply.

[2] Star Jam Kid Seeks Joystick!

SkaVenJerSam (Trusted Dealer)

You are in luck! That type is pretty generic, so getting a replacement should be easy. I have a couple examples here I took out of scrapped cabinets. I did test them, so these DO work. I can send you one for 5 bucks + shipping.

Just remember I took them out of *scrapped* cabinets. My signature reads "You get what you pay for" for a reason. ;-)

You get what you pay for.

Markaius went to accept—then paused. He didn't have a credit card. Which meant he'd have to ask his mom or dad. Finally he made a decision, and went downstairs to his parents. "Dad? Can I ask a favour?"

"It's 'May I ask a favour,'" Doris reminded her son.

His ears drooped slightly, then said, "Well, it's really big so... July I ask a favour? Or even Christmas I ask a favour?"

His mother gave the tip of his ear a light pinch, sighing.

"What's the favour?" asked Lawry.

"I want to buy a joystick from someone I met online, and I was wondering if you could help me. I'll pay you back!"

"We'll make it simple: This comes out of your allowance. And I will be the one going through the buying process. Deal?"

"Deal."

Lawry wanted to make sure this wasn't some scam, so he went to the computer with his son to make sure. Upon the revelation that Lord Danloc was in fact his nephew Kraggan, Lawry called him and put him on speakerphone.

"Hello?" came Kraggan's voice.

"Hey, Kraggan. It's your uncle Lawry."

"Hey, Uncle Lawry! What's up?"

"My son plans to purchase an item off something called *The Arcade Game Builder Forums*. I'm looking at the thread right now, titled 'Star Jam Kid Seeks Joystick,' in a forum called 'Parts: Sale And Seeking'. And a joystick for five dollars seems too good to be true."

"Oh, yeah. I'm a moderator there. If you see a post by Lord Danloc, that's me. Okaaaaaayyyy... yeah, here's the thread. Oh! Oh, good, SkaVenJerSam answered it. She's a hyena and she plays up her scavenger heritage by going through dumps and recycling depots, and taking the stuff there apart for anything she thinks might work. She sells the parts that are still good for really cheap, or she'll build something out of those parts and sell that for cheap. She's probably got a hundred joysticks he's pulled out of dumped arcade cabinets that she's had for decades. If you just want something at rock bottom prices, she's the one to go to."

"And what about the longevity of her wares?" asked Lawry.

"Her signature reads 'You get what you pay for' for a reason. She won't sell you something she knows won't work or is on the point of failure, but she won't make any guarentees that what she sells will still work next month. For a lot of people, that's fine."

Lawry turned to Markaius. "Well, it's my credit card, and it's not fine with me. You're not buying something that might break next month. You will tell her so, and you will find a better source. Kraggan, thanks for talking with me."

"Hey, no problem. If you have any questions, just let me know, okay?"

"Will do. Goodbye, Kraggan."

"G'by, Little Uncle."

While they said their goodbyes, Markaius was typing in his reply.

[3] Star Jam Kid Seeks Joystick!

StarJamKid (Newbie Forumite)

Sorry, but Dad said I have to look for a source for better parts. Since I have to use his credit card, I have to do as he says.

A little while later, he saw the reply.

[4] Star Jam Kid Seeks Joystick!

SkaVenJerSam (Trusted Dealer)

Hey, StarJamKid! I totally understand. If you look in the pinned threads, one is a listing of new old stock sources, one is a listing of manufacturers that still make arcade cabinet parts. All the best!

You get what you pay for.

Markaius called his dad in once again. Lawry looked at the links and clicked on a few, nodding in approval. "Scuse me," he said. Markaius let his dad sit in his computer chair, and Lawry decided on the source he deemed most reliable, and bought a joystick from there. Then he turned to Markaius. "Until you're old enough to have a card of your own, this is how it's going to be. You can ask for what you want, but I decide where to buy it. I don't want you getting ripped off. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

While Markaius waited for his joystick to arrive, he once again studied *Repairfur's Complete Arcade Guide* to see how to replace a joystick. After two weeks of worried waiting (and lots of floor-pacing) the package finally arrived. Markaius once again went to work on his cabinet (this time using his dad's plug lockout instead of a mere sock). He found the steps in the book fairly easy to follow and was surprised how little time it took to finish the job. Grinning broadly, he put the cabinet back together, removed the plug lockout, and restarted the game.

"ENTER THE FRAY!"

He grinned, starting from the beginning, whizzing his way through the first four levels—but in **Black Hole Accretion Disc**, he got lost. Growling, he sought a way out and stumbled upon a space station in the disc. The screen went blank for a moment, then a cutscene began.

MICHELLAPLACE OBSERVATORY

IN THE BLACK HOLE ACCRETION DISC, YOU'VE COME ACROSS
MICHELLAPLACE OBSERVATORY, WHERE SCIENTISTS STUDY THE BLACK HOLE.
UNFORTUNATELY, THEY'VE BEEN BOARDED BY SPACE PIRATES WHO WANT TO USE
THIS AS THEIR BASE.

THE HEAD SCIENTIST BEGS YOU TO TRY TO CLEAR OUT THE
PIRATES.

BEGIN >>>

Markaius looked at the game in confusion as the sidequest began. He thought he'd been playing a space shooter, not a side-scrolling beat-em-up. He silently thanked Kraggan for letting him play his vast collection of old computer

and emulated arcade games, since many of them were of this unexpected genre.

Well, now he knew why this game had *two* rows of buttons: top was for punches, bottom was for kicks. The “Michellaplace Station” sidequest was a simplified version of the beat-em-up games in his cousin’s collection; there were no weapons and only three kinds of enemies besides the miniboss of this sidequest. Once he’d adjusted to the sudden genre shift, he bashed his way through an army of mooks and goons, managed not to hurt too many of the scientists running around, and defeated the miniboss with but a sliver of a health bar left.

THE PIRATES ARE DRIVEN OFF THE STATION AND FORCED TO FLEE
BACK TO THEIR SHIP! WELL DONE, YOU HAVE SAVED THE SCIENTISTS ON THE
STATION!

IN GRATITUDE, THEY UPLOAD A MAP OF THE ACCRETION DISC FOR
YOU TO FOLLOW.

TAKE A PHOTO OF THE “MICHELLAPLACE STATION” BADGE SCREEN
WHEN YOU COMPLETE THE GAME!

CONTINUE >>>

After the brief cut scene, Markaius saw the outline of a map overlaid on the screen, showing where he was and which path he needed to take through the obstacles of the accretion disc. Unfortunately, he couldn’t get used to how the map moved with his ship and he found himself caught by the black hole. As the great black void filled the screen and his spacecraft spiralled to its doom, he sighed in dismay, but at least he’d pulled off what Kraggan had not: beaten a sidequest. Now all he had to figure out was how to reliably get there and back again.

And how to get to the other sidequests, too.

Through the summer and into the next school year, Markaius became a familiar sight at Willow Clearing Computers & Electronics. Every day he’d drop by after school and small odd jobs around the place like helping Russ with inventory or restocking shelves for which Mr. Gruffy would give him some small payment, or, when he wasn’t doing such things, watching Mr. Gruffy fix computers and other electronics, listening in on the lessons Mr. Gruffy tried to give Russ, or reading through Mr. Gruffy’s very extensive magazine collection. Then about suppertime, he’d go home, have supper, do homework, and have a game. He’d imposed upon himself the rule that he would not practice a side quest until he found its point of entry, and so far he’d found four others, along with the quickest way to Michellaplace Observatory (or “Station”; the game seemed unsure which it was).

"Boarding Action", another side-scrolling beat-em-up in **Port Invasion** by deliberately going to the damaged bay doors; "Captain Malevolas", a one-on-one fighting game which was entered by docking the large, indestructable ship in **The Red Star Gauntlet**; another other fighting sidequest called "Naraashun's Challenge", which took place on a strange-looking planetoid in **The Infected Nebula**; and landing on the flat spot of the white asteroid in **The Living Asteroids**. While he failed *miserably* at this sidequest, at least the construction of the cabinet now made sense.

Speaking of the cabinet, it seemed determined to deny him his goal by disintegrating before his very eyes. One day, he started it up, and discovered that one of the speakers had suddenly decided to sound horrible. He removed the offending speaker and brought it to Mr. Gruffy's shop along with the manual (just in case it was important). Mr. Gruffy was happy to show him how to read the various specifications on the manual and choose the correct speaker for the cabinet.

Two days later, he returned to purchase a replacement for the other speaker.

Two weeks later, he'd come to his dad, cash in paw. "Dad... would you please use your credit card for me again? I need to buy two red arcade buttons. I've checked them both, and they work only some of the time."

Lawry gently took the bills from the youngster's paw and held them up. "You know, this makes me proud of you. This right here tells me that you understand that your mother and I aren't able to pull money out of thin air, and that you understand that your personal projects and hobbies will cost you. Because you've demonstrated you understand all this, let's buy some arcade game buttons."

Lawry and Markaius went onto the same site they'd bought the joystick from. Markaius showed the microswitch buttons he needed, but Lawry then pointed out they could get the microswitches themselves for less. Markaius realized his dad was right—all he really needed was the switches. Once the purchase had been made, his dad counted through the bills and handed back the change with a smile.

While he awaited the switches to arrive, he decided to use the level select screen to practice **The Albino Asteroid**. Again, he failed over and over. He checked the manual for any clue what would be going on, and finally used the Control Testing dongle to check it out. After only about a third of the shots registerd, he slumped his shoulders. Even the light gun wasn't working properly. It was time to sign out *Repairfur's Complete Arcade Guide* once again.

After a quick visit to the library, he asked his dad if he could use his dad's toolkit with the little screwdrivers and the plug lockout. His dad, curious, got the items, then watched as his son took apart the light gun. When Markaius had trouble keeping the book open, Lawry pressed down on it to keep it to the

right page. "That little sensor looks kinda crooked, don't you think?" asked the older dog.

Markaius looked at it, looked at the diagram in the book, and nodded. He carefully moved it back into place, put the gun back together, then went back to the test screen. This time, the light gun worked flawlessly.

Lawry clapped Markaius on the shoulder. "Well done, son!" he said. "I think you have time for a game."

Markaius again selected **The Albino Asteroid** to try his luck once more.

THE ALBINO ASTEROID

YOU HAVE LANDED ON THE FACE OF THE MINORGH PLANETOYD'S MALEVOLENT GUARDIAN, THE ALBINO ASTEROID. IT HAS ENSNARED MANY ASTRONAUTS HERE FOR ITS OWN DARK AMUSEMENT. DEFEAT ITS MINIONS, SAVE THE ASTRONAUTS, AND END THIS VILE BEING'S REIGN OF TERROR!

It had, indeed, been the gun that was holding him back. While he didn't land every shot, he managed to complete the level and destroy the massive rock monster that rose out of The Albino Asteroid's surface and served as its miniboss.

SUCCESS!!!

THE AVATAR OF THE ALBINO ASTEROID CRUMBLES, AND THE GROUND BEGINS TO CRACK. THE ASTRONAUTS YOU SAVED FLEE TO THEIR SHIPS, AND START BLASTING OFF. YOU MAKE IT TO YOUR SHIP IN THE NICK OF TIME AND TAKE OFF AS THE EVIL LIVING ROCK CRUMBLES TO DUST BELOW YOU.

When the cut scene ended, he was back in **The Living Asteroids**, and the white asteroid that had plagued him throughout the level disintegrated into a cloud of pixels, making the level much easier—especially the boss, which was now bereft of its annoying shield.

The day after this victory, his switches finally arrived, and Markaius was once again in the increasingly-familiar interior of his cabinet.

As he worked, he could hear his mother out in the hall, talking to his father. "Lawry, I'm worried. That machine is becoming an absolute money pit!"

"Nothing he's bought thus far has been that expensive, and hobbies cost money. It's their nature."

"It's taking over his life! He practically *lives* at the computer shop these days. He only stays long enough to watch Jaykan until we arrive, then off he goes!"

"I'd rather him be there than a lot of other places I could name. And besides, if that was taking over his life, his marks would have *tanked*. Last I

looked, they were better than they've ever been!"

"True..." his mom sighed. "Just... worried about where his obsession will lead."

Markais flattened his ears as his parents talked. Why couldn't Mom understand how important it was he get the badges? That he finally impress Kraggan? And besides, that game had given him a refuge from another problem: Russ was pulling away from him.

It had started small—less banter between classes, less talk at lunchtime. The previous week, Russ had barely said hi to Markaius, and even sat by himself at lunch, refusing to go near Markaius. No matter how much Mark tried to talk to him, it seemed he had pissed Russ off, and he didn't know why.

And then came the worst night of his life.