

# Manbow2

<b>Title:</b>	<b>Manbow2</b>
<b>System:</b>	<b>MSX2</b>
<b>Memory:</b>	<b>64kB</b>
<b>Sound:</b>	<b>SCC/PSG</b>
<b>Medium:</b>	<b>512kB ROM</b>
<b>Price:</b>	<b>€ 27.50</b>

## One

The roots of Manbow2 date back to early 2005, a time where game programmer Bart van Velzen was still fiddling with BASIC in order to create his dream shooter. One can still trace back topics in the development section of the MRC related to all this. And the remarkable part of this story is exactly that! In just a few years a BASIC programmer turned into an assembly coder. Many MSX'ers on our forums helped him to improve his skills, and while not everyone always believed he could really make it, it didn't stop him from trying. With that, the unusual project Space Manbow 2 kept the crowd occupied. In September 2006, the two RenovatiO members Bart van Velzen and Abi van Tamelen and their project -then called- Manbow2 moved to TNI. Less than three months later the project parted from TNI again, while Bart and Abi would remain to be TNI members.

And finally there it was! Sunrise released this highly anticipated game on the MSX fair in Bussum (The Netherlands), a game that pretends to be the follow-up on one of the greatest Konami games ever - as acknowledged by many fans: Space Manbow. And indeed, the game's intro is a straightforward continuation of the story from '89. Before we go into the pit however, let's start at the surface and go through the whole experience of the game's outside to its inside.

## Sad But True

Speed was of the utmost importance. Sunrise announced their stock for the MSX fair in Bussum was limited, so we had to be fast in order to get our hands on a copy of the game. As you see, we managed to do just so. One of the first things that catches the eye is the professional looking box the game is sold in. It's a DIN-A5 size cardboard box in full colour, pretty much unlike we're used to see for any MSX release. Inside there is another piece of cardboard in which the cartridge is tightly placed.

The second thing to catch the eye: there is no manual and the cartridge case is blank - there is no label. According to Sunrise, these two items weren't available just yet and as soon as they were finished, they would be sent by mail to the various customers. This gives rise to question: shouldn't the game's release have been stalled for a next MSX fair, so the release would be complete?

On to the cartridge case. It seems the cartridge cases haven't been (newly) produced: clearly the outer shell shows marks and stains. Later on, we heard that these stains come from the prototype mold used to create the cases, and that the cases *are* in fact brand new. The case's surface feels smooth and clean. When the label would have been in place, the stains would not be noticed anyway, so we'll live with it.

Of course, the rise or fall of a game shouldn't depend on what's available at release time, so we move on.

## The Struggle Within

As the cartridge is popped in the reviewer's MSX turboR FS-A1ST and the lights are hit, the anxious wait to start playing begins. It's striking that the game feels like *loading*. Unlike any other cartridge game that has passed the reviewer's eye, it actually takes a while for a screen, level, or whatever else to appear. It is assumed that the game's contents have been compressed in order to save space, allowing it to fit on a 512kB/4Mbit ROM. The decrunching times are fortunately not frustrating long, and anyone would have what patience it takes to see what's coming.

And what came? Funny thing is, that the opening screen simply says *Manbow2* in very nicely detailed graphics. No sign of publisher/creator whatsoever. Suffice to tell: the game has been made by TNI/RenovatiO and published by Sunrise, which is all we need to know! A couple of seconds later, two options are shown: either start or continue a game. A two-player option would have been nice to have, but alas. Of course, the third option is chosen: waiting for a demo to take off.



*Manbow2 – Title screen*



*Manbow2 – Intro*



## Enter Manbow

...And indeed. After a couple of instants, an intro demo starts to play. The story continues where Space Manbow left off: Kliever has just destroyed Manbow, but part of it was barely alive. Now it insists on revenge and destroys Kliever's home planet. Nevertheless, his son is there (you!) and comes to save the world!

In comparison to the intro of its ancestor Space Manbow, Manbow2's intro feels kind of slow and doesn't make as much of a statement, or impact if you will, as the game of '89. Be that as it may, it's nice the developers decided to create an intro in the same style as Space Manbow's. Nevertheless, a game like this doesn't need much of a story. It's the action that counts. The game is started.

A particularly cool detail here is a sampled(!) voice saying *start!* You start wondering... this can't be just PSG. The case is reviewed: it says *SCC* as well! Yes, a true SCC chip is incorporated in this cartridge game!

The game starts off with our ship flying left to right on the screen, caught up by rock debris. After the controls are handed to the player, it's up to him to avoid getting hit by the flying rocks. This is more difficult than it appears, because the ship handles really slow in the beginning. Of course, speed-ups can be collected throughout the game in order to make the ship handle faster. The first set of enemies encountered seem not much of a trouble. At least, nothing the cool shoot'em-up player can't handle. Compared to Space Manbow, the enemies seem to have more intricate moving patterns, which makes it particularly interesting and more difficult to beat any level. Moreover, the more you progress, the harder the game becomes - retroactively. This will be explained later, however.



*Manbow2 – Level 1*



The advancement system in any Konami shooter game consisted of red capsules that could be collected to a) gain optional weapons in the Gradius series and b) gain a more powerful main weapon in the Space Manbow game. Occasionally, a blue power capsule would pop up which would instantly destroy all foes visible at that time. Here, in Manbow2, they serve another purpose. Atop the screen are two gauges, the upper one stating *Power* and coloured red, the lower one stating *Resource* and coloured blue. Power seems clear enough: as the gauge grows when red capsules are collected, the

main weapon will steadily power up. The use of the resource gauge is still a mystery. This is where the game's manual would have come in handy. Towards the end, both turn yellow as they max out. Clearly, both capsule types have to be collected whenever possible. A shocking revelation overcomes you as you play the first level. The only collectables here are the red and blue capsules, and the incidental speed-up, depicted by the same icon as used in *Space Manbow*. After beating the first boss, you realise how it all works: you can pick your desired upgrade in the next level and you can choose between an extra life or an extra continue as well.

## Battery

After a set of the common *Game Over* screens, the *continue* option is put to the test. A new menu pops up, containing three positions to start from. Initially, save slot one is used for the first game played. Detailed here is the number of lives and credits (which can be used to continue when all lives are lost) and the available weapons unlocked throughout the game. Starting one of these games will put you back in level 1, but aside from being able to collect red and blue capsules and speed-ups, the saved weapons can now also be collected. The reviewer's come as far as to collect *Rapid Fire* (Autofire in the save menu), *Redpower*, *Missile*, *2x Option*, *Napalm* and several lives/credits.

Here is the nice part: even when switched off, the cartridge will remember the weapons collected. Either some kind of battery-powered S-RAM or some re-flashable memory have been put on the cartridge's PCB. It can't be told, really, as the cartridge was left at its best state: unopened.

A summary of the options we've seen: the *autofire* option will allow you to keep button A depressed for auto-fire. Pretty obsolete on a turboR, which has a rensha slider - so don't choose this one if you have a rensha slider at your disposal! *Redpower* will supply you with an initial load on the red gauge. Your main weapon will already be of some significance when the game's started and you haven't accumulated any red capsules yet. *Missile* yields the well-known ship extension we all have seen throughout Konami's shooter series. It has to be collected first, however and it is depicted by the common icon 'M', known from *Space Manbow*. *Option* has to be collected before use as well, identified by the icon 'O', similar to -again- *Space Manbow*. It can be selected twice, and its behaviour differs slightly from the prequel. When it is collected from the top (i.e. you're flying down, collecting it), the option will be located underneath the main ship and vice versa. So you really should consider how it's put to its best use beforehand! *Napalm* is a missile extension. It can be picked up after *Missile*, by again picking up an 'M'. Again collecting an 'M' will give back ye olde *Missile*. Furthermore, we've seen, yet not tested, *Hawkwind*. Both *Napalm* and *Hawkwind* are known from e.g. *Salamander*, where the first gives a big blast on impact, destroying anything that comes near the explosion, where the other one can climb against walls. This feature of the game really inspires you to keep on playing and collecting all extensions possible!

Starting a new game will now ask for a save slot to overwrite. So be careful not to select your precious, full weaponrack! It occurred to us that selecting *start* quickly

results in a textual change to *erase savefile*. This is not shown very clearly, because it scrolls off the screen pretty quick. The first time it was encountered it resulted in disorder - all previously collected weapons had to be re-conquered!



*Manbow2 – Upgrade/unlock system*



## **Manbow2 Medley**

The music, in short, gets monotonous easily. In every level we've seen so far (1 up to 6), the same PSG/SCC instruments are used. It's pretty difficult to identify the level-music combination. Don't get it wrong: the music is not bad at all. But it's not just good either. The title screen is silent, which is not what we're used to these days. Admittedly, Space Manbow was just as quiet. And of course, the latter didn't have those cool samples that this Manbow2 has. The intro tune is pretty similar to the one used in Space Manbow, which is nice, considering this is a follow-up on that game.

The SCC/PSG balance is a subject often argued about. Due to design differences, this balance varies between the various MSX models. Some say the turboR has the best balance, others think it doesn't get better than the Philips NMS 8245. Fact

is, the game has been reviewed from a turboR point of view and we got the feeling that the SCC suppresses the PSG volume-wise. We could not hear whether or not PSG contributed to the music, or if it was only utilised for sound effects.

## The Thing That Should Not Be

Rumour has it that the main screen mode used is graphics mode 4 (*SCREEN 5*), a bitmap mode. This is unlike Space Manbow, where graphics mode 3 (*SCREEN 4*) was used, which is a character-based mode. Of course, the latter imposes a severe colour limitation of two colours per eight pixels, whereas in bitmap mode, pretty much everything is allowed. A character mode is intrinsically faster than a bitmap mode. This had its advantages in Space Manbow, where pretty much everything on screen moves - remember the tank vehicle in the first level? The ground, wheels and anything else had some kind of motion. This hits Manbow2 in the back, as limited movement is allowed in order to keep the game running smoothly. Nevertheless, a great job has been done on the code. That stems from the multi-layer star and debris scroll from the first level in Manbow2. But, once in the cave part of that level, everything's stuck in its place. Except of course, the enemies and a palette trick in the background.

Colour-wise, the game could have been more varied. Compared to Space Manbow, where everyone had major jaw-drops because of the graphics in any level, in Manbow2 graphics get monotonous. For example, level 1: the majorities there are yellow and gray blocks, and the occasional black to green/red palette trick. In level 2 the majority is gray and brown and that's about all. One really wonders whether or not graphics mode 4 is right for this game. Admittedly, some colour sequences could not have been made, i.e. it would be slightly less detailed, but that's not an issue anyway because: level of detail is not necessarily correlated with level of variety. Furthermore, many of the graphics are identical to the graphics in Space Manbow. For example the ship and extension icons. Didn't these deserve a redraw in order to be original? All in all, the majority of the graphics, just like the music, lack the Konami-feel. And that type of feel is what a game like this really needs and deserves.

Using graphics mode 3, larger in-game movements are allowed. Once again, Space Manbow is involved, where already in the first level gigantic armour-plated copulas turn towards the player's ship in order to shoot it down. Manbow2 on the other hand, uses sprites for enemies. Virtually every enemy is 16 by 16 pixels, only some of them are a multitude thereof. This cuts down on the variation, moreover as most enemies have the same colour. Then again, an abundance of enemies has to be coped with, so one is really focused on surviving rather than spending time to identify variation. As said, the enemies follow intricate paths trying to destroy the vastly outnumbered player, but we still feel the enemy variation could have been improved a little.



*Manbow2 – Level 2, Androgynus style!*



A minor bug struck us: somewhere near the end of level 4, the screen fades out in order to get to the boss creature. Not all colours fade to black and an ugly screen wipe can be seen. This should have been polished up. Furthermore, in level 3 many sprites flicker. This is probably due to some sprite interleaving trick in order to get them all on screen. Especially there, when lots of bullets fly on screen and the usual enemies keep bugging you, you can see the scroll becoming chunky and the borders are not properly redrawn. This is probably not where your attention should be, but we insist on finding all things good and not-so-good about this game!

## **Through The Never**

Strangely, the game tends to get easier the further we come. The first level is reasonably difficult but certainly not too hard. It all seems well-balanced. At the end of level 1, there's a boss creature similar to the final boss in Space Manbow: a bullet-shooting eye. You get to destroy it easily and you're starting to feel good about yourself. No pain, no gain: next is the real boss! It shoots out a big laser, bullets from several



cannons and at the end large balls and what-not. It seems indestructible, until you fly towards its main weapon. It shoots and you seem like killed.



*Manbow2 – Level 1 bosses*



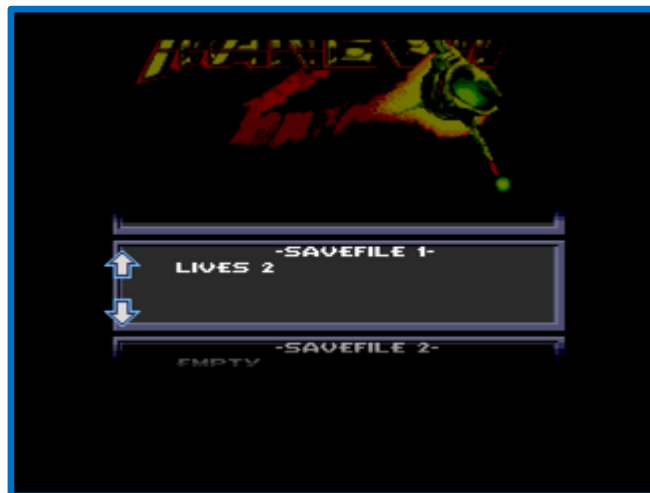
Nevertheless, you're in level 2 now. From here, it's a pretty smooth ride to the end, where you've got to fight some big worm. Next up is the planet level. Personally I found this the hardest: enemies are flying you at a fast pace, lots of planets obstruct your path and mines are placed all around. Shoot them and be out of the way or blown to bits! Level 4, 5 and 6 are then too easy. The reviewer got out of credits and lives at the boss creature though, so beyond this point, you'll get to know nothing from us. Whenever a saved state is loaded, it seems that the first level gets increasingly difficult. The rock debris is a clear example: it seems that there are an awful lot more rocks you'll have to avoid!

Moreover: after having died in level 6 and started all over again (but using the already unlocked weapons) the game doesn't only *seem* harder, it actually *is* a lot harder! Avoiding the rock debris is a tough challenge of its own, and then the level's just getting started! The palette trick mentioned earlier, was some part of the background flipping from black/gray to green. Well, now it turns red too, occasionally. And guess

what - touching it means instant death. Also, the level 1 boss is a tad harder to beat. But there's nothing a *Napalm Missile* can't beat, of course. This whole feature of unlocking weapons (and lives/credits) and making the game harder on-the-fly, is one of a kind. It will surely inspire you to get a shot at beating the game again, once you've finished it. It will be a lot harder though, so be prepared!



*Manbow2 – Continue options exhausted*















*Manbow2 – Unlocked weapons are reclaimed by save file!*

We think it's all pretty well-balanced, and people with former experience on shooters shouldn't have much of a problem getting far in the first two hours of playing. Whenever a level is easy, the harder the boss creature will become, so don't claim we didn't warn you!

## ...And Justice For All

Cutting a very long story short, we'll resume with a characteristic pros and cons list. Hang on:

-  Cartridge release!
-  Nice box
-  Weapon unlock/variable difficulty feature
-  Well-balanced difficulty
-  Samples
-  Save games on cartridge
-  Price
-  Absent label and manual
-  Stained cartridge case
-  Monotonous music
-  Enemy variation
-  Several unpolished game details

And now comes the question: is this game, Manbow2, a worthy Space Manbow follow-up? We leave the answer up to you. It's certainly a fun game to play, and it should be in anyone's collection. The game has got great playability, but we found both the music and the graphics inferior to Space Manbow. It doesn't look bad, but the graphics could have really been more versatile, given the fact that the developers chose for a bit-mapped graphics mode. Having said that, here is our score list:

<b>Game Concept:</b>	<b>75%</b>
<b>Graphics:</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>Sound / Music:</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>Playability:</b>	<b>85%</b>
<b>Lastability:</b>	<b>85%</b>
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<b>Overall Score:</b>	<b>75%</b>

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