

Episode 2: Halfway Point

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Greetings, fellow Retrochallenge Enthusiasts!

Today's update marks the halfway point in this month's RetroChallenge. I expect that the organizers have gotten sick of my Twitter updates and video submissions by now, so I'm going to concentrate on editing my software and posting a few "how to" entries over the next couple of weeks. I promise, no more pictures of broken plastic dongles on twitter.

Despite the overall tank-like construction of the Documation M200 Card Reader, the plastic and rubber components have not aged well. After making repairs to the blower and vacuum system today, I got it to pick a few cards. That's when the rubber rollers in the photoelectric card scanner decided to finally disintegrate. Any restoration of this machine is going to require the ability to repair or re-manufacture the rollers and other "soft" parts of the reader. I don't presently have the tools or expertise to undertake those repairs.

Likewise, the IBM 024 Keypunch is in a pretty sorry state of affairs. The Selenium Rectifier is not a component that you can easily find. The tubes on the wiring diagram don't match the tubes in the machine, and I'm still clueless when it comes to logic levels in the 150 volt range.

On the upside, I have working tape punches and readers that are just dying to get a real workout! I even found some Mylar tape on eBay for making durable copies of some program tapes that I have. The tape punches and readers will figure prominently in the next few weeks as I put together my "batch processing" dream system.

Likewise, on the software front, I have a microcontroller programmed to read Hollerith data and send it down the RS-232 Pike to just about any computer I choose to use. This can read switch inputs just fine and might even enable the construction of a simplified card-reader using paperclips or some flexible metal contacts for input. I'm also looking at a complementary system to output 12-bit code from RS-232 data so I can punch cards as well as read them in.

The time and labor intensive optical scanning of cards works better than I anticipated, and using the software from Michael Hamilton I've been able to interpret a little over 2,500 cards containing BASIC games that were keyed in from David Ahl's "Basic Computer Games" back in the early 1980's and loaded into the UNIVAC 90/60 at Edinboro State College. A video of the card-scanning process has been uploaded to Youtube and is available at this time. Assuming I can get them edited to run in a slightly more modern BASIC interpreter, we may see some gameplay over the next couple of weeks.

Finally, since my PDP-11 is balking at running DOS/BATCH for some reason, I need to put together a different system for my "mainframe." This might end-up being as simple as the Apple II+ since it has the I/O bandwidth to spare and a charming 1970's sensibility when it comes to the operating system.

That's the current summary of my progress for the moment. Best of luck to everyone else taking part in this year's festivities!

Good night for now!

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