Yes, it's true… many, too many years, have been passed since my first announcement about a possible A8B version of John Kutcher's masterpiece 😬
There are different reasons for this long wait, and among them, the fact that sometimes we have to face difficulties and commitments that cannot be ignored or put aside… But now, let's take a look at some history on the genesis of this A8B version of

Space Taxi for

In 2013, I regained some time and space to be able to resume my old passion for the fantastic Atari machines. I owned and used many Atari over the past decades and, among them, my first 800XL, personally purchased in 1984 and still perfectly working 💪
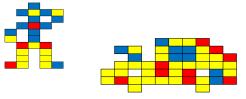
In the latter part of the 1980s, I also created and distributed some titles for Atari 8 Bit (i.e. White Circus, Hypnotic Land, Conquer the Crown) programmed in machine language using rudimentary tools such as BBK Monitor… it was not possible to use macros or labels and the input of commands and data related to graphics and sound, was done sequentially and manually. In addition, there was no Internet, and finding information and documentation was almost impossible.
Now, on the other hand, we find ourselves in a completely different reality, with fantastic tools at our disposal, very reliable emulators, the opportunity to program in Windows and then transfer the code to real machines, virtually endless documentation, and several communities of enthusiasts and experts Atarians ready to collaborate…a programmer's heaven🤩

Therefore, mainly as an exercise and 'gymnasium' to put my hand on Assembler programming again, I decided to try to convert for Atari 8 Bit some levels of the well-known C64 game, Space Taxi that I had always liked very much but which didn't exist for my beloved Atari.

Honestly, I had no intention or pretension of succeeding 100% also because it was a game in high resolution, with 16 colors on the screen, dozens of different levels, lots of sprites moving at once, and, most importantly, the very famous human voice that had amazed Commodoreans all over the world back in the day... Hey Taxi!

In summary, I had to face considerable challenges and unavoidable decisions... the first was to opt for a lower resolution in order to have at least 5 colours per screen (which I would later increase using programming techniques such as DLI).
Obviously, the forced choice to forgo high resolution mode, could have also affect playability and fluidity of movement but the result of the first experiments was encouraging 😎

No problem with the creation of the 'physics' of the game, the menus, the management of the first logics (what happens if I land and there is or there is not the customer, how I have to count the score, how I manage fuel consumption, etc.) and in the creation of first, simple levels.
When I got to the 6th level (Taxi Pong), however, I ran into the huge problem of moving objects other than the Taxi and the little man for which I had already used all the available players/missiles... The same problem would have recurred even more heavily in level 8 (Crossfire) and some later levels where the objects moving at the same time were really too many 😱
Due to the lack of free memory available and trying to avoid a software sprite routine in character mode, I decided to use in levels with many sprites a hybrid character/bitmap mode in order to manage the movement of objects in a simpler (or less complicated) way.

I proceeded in this way until the end of the 24 levels + 1, having a lot of fun looking for solutions to the various problems that each level posed: the black hole attracting the Taxi, the turbo speed consuming more fuel, the level with the magnets in inverted gravity, etc.
Please, remember that I never, in any way, imported, took or converted data or routines from the original program... I've always enjoyed trying to recreate Space Taxi simply by observing what was happening in the Commodore version.

At this point, the game was more or less almost ready but the difficulty was much greater than in the original, partly due to the Taxi's movement, fairly precise but somehow slow response. 🙄
And of course, voice synthesis was still missing

The problem related to difficulty, has been solved by reprogramming the movement/gravity routine and slightly modifing some points of the screen where, also due to the lower resolution, the Taxi's passage was really difficult. About the voice synthesis, however, the idea was to give up, raise the white flag and distribute the A8B version without the famous and much-appreciated speech... but my friend Filippo Santellocco gave me the solution, suggesting me to contact the excellent programmer Janusz Chabowski, who had already included voice synthesis in his wonderful A8B version of Bosconian.

Janusz provided me with a few lines of sample code and some tips for creating samples in the right format and… finally, even on the beloved Atari you can now listen:

Hey Taxi!

Naturally, the various sampled phrases take up a lot of RAM (around 32Kb) and the only solution was using the memory banks in the Atari 130XE. On smaller machines, however, the 64Kb are enough to run the game absolutely identically but without the speech synthesis.
Space Taxi even runs on the glorious Atari 800s with 48💪
In addition, this version automatically adapts the color palette to ensure a good result with both the European PAL and the American NTSC standards.

Finally, in order to avoid any problems with the publication of the A8B version of Space Taxi, I contacted its magical creator, John Kutcher. He has been very kind and helpful in giving his permission for a free distribution of my Atari version 🎉

Now, before you get to the section with my advices on how best getting through the various levels of Space Taxi, I would like to point out that I am well aware that this version is not perfect… there may be bugs (which could be fixed), there are differences from the original one, there is no multi-player mode (I don't see any need of it, by the way), the quality of the voice synthesis has been improved, we can think about Hi-Scores and loading screens different from the original but looking better, there may be a cartridge version in the future, and I am open to any comments and suggestions.

However, I am not a top level 'Atari Guru' programmer… I know I still have a lot to learn.
I did it almost all by myself, piece by piece, step by step and I'm asking nothing in return.

❤️

I am very proud of my achievement

Andreatari

Thank you very much to:

Filippo Santellocco (Philsan) and Simone Guidi for advices, support and beta-testing
Janusz Chabowski (shanti77) for the important speech synthesis help
John F. Kutcher for the availability and permission to publish the A8B version of Space Taxi
James Earl O'Brien for the fantastic World Premiere of Space Taxi on ZeroPageHomebrew

SPACE TAXI A8B – SCREENSHOTS AND LEVELS

LOADING SCREEN

The loading screen was deliberately recreated to be as similar as possible to the C64 original. The only exceptions are the Atari logo on the body of the Taxi and the loading bar ☺

A brand new picture is not excluded in the future.

TITLE SCREEN

Title and MUSE logo in character mode and the middle area in hires, give the basic information about the game and are the background to the small looping animation.
Press fire to go to the selection menu and push the Joystick up to open the Hi-Scores table.

SELECTION MENU

The menu allows you to choose the type of game: each shift (morning, day and night) has increasing difficulty and consists of 8 levels which, if completed, return a reward screen and close the game.
There is also the chance to try the 24 levels in a single round from 1 to 24 or in random order… completing all 24 levels in a single round, it gives you access to the 'Mystery Screen' ☺

To get the same colored menu of the original Commodore version also in the Atari, I made extensive use of DLI and P/M. Don't forget that in this screen there is an option to activate a 'cheat' mode..

1 - SHORT-N-SWEET

This first level is very simple, there is only one Pad on which to land, and you can use it to practice the Taxi's movements. Once you have picked up the little customer, landing carefully with the Taxi's landing gears open, you can take off to exit through the gate in the top of the screen. Attention… In the whole game the landing gears open prevents the Taxi from moving sideways.

2 – THE BEACH

The second level presents no particular difficulty too, but you start to face the passenger asking to reach the different Pads.
Obviously the customer will have to be taken where he wants to go and, in order to get high scores, you will have to try doing it as quickly as possible and with soft landings.
High speed landings causes bouncings or even the loss of the taxi even if the landing gears have been properly opened.
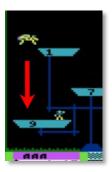
3 - SKY SCRAPER

The 5 pads in this level, let you improve your technique in moving between obstacles and in landing accurately and smoothly.
As you may be have already noticed, the first Pad to land on when you reach a new level is always the Pad number 1. After the first delivery, all the existing Pads will be involved in random order, either starting or landing.

4 - TAXI TRAINER

It is no coincidence that this level is so called… there are in fact no less than 9 pads (the maximum possible number) and, for the first time, a platform dedicated to refuelling. For the latter, the suggestion is to use it only in case of low fuel and trying to refill just the quantity necessary to complete the level because refuelling will cost you money.

I want to highlight the troubles in reaching the Pad 9. A tip, which can also be used in later levels, could be to stand still in the right vertical position, open the landing gears and then control just the vertical speed because, as you may remember, with the landing gears open the Taxi can NOT be moved horizontally.

5 – BEANSTALK

This is a very nice level with an interesting trick ☺
In the beginning, the plant has only one branch and the only Pad where the passenger can be delivered is number 1. Gradually, anyway, the plant grows up to a maximum of 9 Pads, which will all be involved as starting or delivering points. However, if we are able to complete our first delivery accurately and quickly, the plant will not have time to

create further Pads and the passenger could appear again on Pad 1 asking to leave the level immediately. But pay attention… you must be precise too, because (and this always applies) the little man cannot appear if the taxi occupies his space. You will therefore have to land letting the customer to reappear on the same pad. With a bit of practice this becomes quite easy.

6 – TAXI PONG

A nice level in which a moving object appears for the first time in addition to the Taxi and the customer: the Ping-Pong ball.
With its trajectory and bounces on the paddles, it's really a tricky obstacle. Don't be in a hurry during the landings. On the contrary, wait for the safest moments. Atari's color graphics made it possible to have a nicer and more defined net design than the original Commodore version… remember that this is the first level where the graphics modes are mixed: above and below in multicolored font, in the central area where the ball is moving, in multicolored bitmap.

7 – TELEPORTS

In this level, you have to hit the purple markings in order to be teleported between the different areas containing the five pads. Just as in the original Commodore version, the destination Pad is chosen randomly, but with a preference towards the areas that are currently the requested starting or delivering points.

You have to pay special attention leaving Pad 3 and exiting the level.

8 – PUZZLER

The eighth level closes the 'Morning Shift' and requires some practice before you can manage it easily. By touching the white dots, you can close/open the gates between the various areas but, understanding the sequences necessary to open the right path to the chosen destination, could not be easy. I underline that you shouldn't have to worry too much if, once landed, some of the open gates will be closed again. It will be always possible to reopen them by touching the correct spots in the proper sequence but… watch out for fuel consumption!

These are the effects of the different white buttons on the gates:

- Centre left: opens/closes the left gate of area 3 and both gates of area 1
- Centre right: opens/closes the upper gate of area 4 and both of area 1
- Upper right: opens/closes the lower gate of area 1, the upper of area 2 and the right of area 5
- Upper left: opens/closes the right gate of area 4, the lower of area 5 and the right of area 3
- Central: opens/closes the upper and right gates of area 3, the left of area 2 and the lower of area 1

9 – CROSSFIRE

The first level of 'Day Shift' is not easy at all… avoiding the bombs fired by the two cannons, with 6 trajectories and 3 different speeds, it's not a joke. In particular, remember not to stand on pads 2 and 6 because the bombs might hit you anyway, also if you're landed yet.

With a bit of practice, you will find out which are the safe places to wait for the right time to land on the different Pads.

10 – SHOOTING STARS

Shooting stars falling down from the sky could hit your Taxi even if it's landed on some pads. However, it's possible to avoid the impact by quickly moving the Taxi in the wide sky. Pay attention to the shooting stars during passenger pick-up and drop-off operations in Pad 1, 2 and 5… as written, you could be destroyed also standing on a Pad.

I remember that there would be also a refueling Pad but usually, there is no need to use it (fortunately, because the refueling Pad is not really easy to reach).
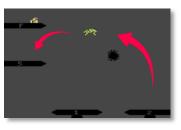
11 – MAGNETS

In this level, the gravity that normally pushes the Taxi downwards is temporary reversed. The large magnets hanging above, in fact, attract the Taxi and you will have to balance their effect using the Joystick. In particular, the landing is done by forcing the Taxi to move down. In case of collision, in this level the Taxi won't fall as usually happens (in inverted gravity it could not fall…), but it simply explodes.

12 – BLACK HOLE

It could seem to be easy reaching the 5 Pads in this level and, in case of need, there's even a refueling pad. But don't be fooled… the black hole in the center of the screen will try hard to catch the Taxi.

My suggestion for you is to use the black hole as a buoy around which to move. Do not fly close to the hole but rather go around

it and use it to be pushed towards your destination by balancing the gravity affecting the Taxi's movements. Once the exit door is open instead, try to stop the Taxi in the central area above the black hole and avoid lateral movements.

13 – TURBO-CHARGED TAXI

In this level 13, you really have a turbo Taxi! I can just recommend you to use small and controlled movements of the joystick to avoid the Taxi gains high speeds and loses control. And of course keep an eye on the fuel consumption, which in this level is really exaggerated. If necessary, you can refuel the Taxi in the proper, dedicated Pad

14 – SPACE MINES

7 Pads plus a refueling one in this level… of course you won't have to crash into the colored 'gems' but, attention, that won't be enough!

In fact, each gem is connected to the others of the same color with an invisible barrier that the Taxi cannot cross without exploding and crashing. You will have to

find the best, shorter and safest way to avoid these barriers and reach the destination.

15 – ELECTROIDS

In level 15 there is just one Pad to reach but to do it, you will have to cross four electrified lines that have moving gaps. I suggest you not to be in a hurry and to go through them once at a time, even stopping between the sparks to position your Taxi as best as you can. With a little practice, it will be easier to do it than to explain it.

16 – BLIZZARD

One of the most beautiful and challenging level! Strong gusts will not only bend the tree tops according to the direction of the wind, but will also dangerously affect the flight of your Taxi.

In addition, a lot of snowflakes falling from the sky will represent a difficult obstacle in reaching the Pads.

Landing on Pad 2 will be a challenge indeed, although fortunately in the lower areas, sheltered by logs, you will be protected from the wind and its effects on the Taxi.

17 – INTERFERENCE

This level, which opens the 'Night Shift', in my opinion is the most difficult one in the whole game. Flying at radars level will disrupt the Taxi's movements, and while in the upper pads this could simply be a bother, going through the gap that gives access to the lower caves Pads will be downright tricky. Sometimes, it could be

convenient to 'block' the horizontal movements by opening the landing gears, temporary landing on Pad 5 before attempting the descent to the caves (where the radars have no effects).

18 – TAXI MAZE

Level 18 includes no particular difficulties and a bit of patience and control of the Taxi movements should be enough to reach the level's only Pad and to head towards the exit following the mandatory path. Special attention should be paid to fuel consumption, which does not leave too much room for unnecessary time wasting.

19 – THE SWITCH

If it feels like having a déjà vu, you're not wrong... this level looks identical to the 3rd one, the Sky Scraper, but the differences are not limited to the really annoying 'acid' colors... the joystick controls also change. To go upwards, for example, you have to pull the stick downwards because pulling it upwards would cause the Taxi to move to the right instead.

In a few words, pay attention to the Taxi's responses to learn and practice how to use the joystick.

20 – FAST BREAK

The 20th is one of the most beautiful level to look at and, to be able to reproduce the multicolored vertical bars of the original version, an extensive use of DLI, VBI and P/M has been made. In terms of difficulty, the playing field has some Pads at the top, others at the bottom and there are a couple of rules to follow to move between the two zones: the side gates allow you to go downwards while the central one allows you to reach the upper zone but only if you pass through the gate at full speed… you got it right, you'll have to launch yourself through the gap very fast and without worrying about what will happen because the Taxi will stop just beyond the gate and you will resume moving normally. If you try to pass at a slower speed through the middle gap, the taxi will be bounced back down.
In case of running out of fuel, you'll be able to refuel landing on the proper Pad.

21 – REBOUND

The playfield of this level is continuously crossed by fast-moving balls which, as you will soon realise, won't destroy your Taxi if they collide with it. But attention… they are not as harmless as they might seem. Once the Taxi is hit, it will 'bounce' in the opposite direction and with equal speed. This is quite dangerous because the sloping walls separating the various Pads don't facilitate movements.
The suggestion is, if possible, to avoid collisions with the balls and to proceed at a quite slow speed in order to be ready to correct your movements in case of collision.

22 – SHIFT-O-RAMA

Getting through the moving colored blocks to reach the 7 Pads in this level will not be easy at all. To decrease the difficulty of this level, I have intentionally reduced the size of the larger blocks but there isn't so much you can do about it… only with a bit of practice you will be able to move in synchrony with the blocks waiting for the right moment to go up or down.

23 – LASERS

"I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate"…
Well, you absolutely must avoid these rays, and I would say that the best way to do it, is not to be in a hurry but to move to cross one ray at a time, just immediately after it's disappeared.
As often happens, patience is a strong virtue.

24 – ON THE MOVE

A spectacular level where the 7 pads plus the refuel ones will move dragged by powerful metal chains. Obviously you will have to land on moving Pads, but this will not be the greatest difficulty… to move between the various floors you'll have to go through narrow passages that will periodically be closed by chains. You'll have to move with extreme caution and also paying attention to the fuel which won't certainly be enough to complete the whole level without at least one refueling.

? – MISTERY SCREEN

13 DLIs and 3 different character sets for this mysterious level that will be playable only completing in a single round all 24 levels of the three shifts. The sprites defending the 3 Pads of this level celebrate as many masterpieces of the software house MUSE, which published Space Taxi back in 80s. A not so difficult level but a great satisfaction for you to reach the end of the game, before the congratulations screen.

☺ - CONGRATULATIONS

A Typical final scene that is 'gifted' to players able to finish any of the game rounds: morning, day, night or complete. Here the final score is also calculated adding money according to the number of Taxis left available.
If the final score is higher than at least $50 and is within the top ten performances, it will be possible to save it.

SAVING HI-SCORES

If you achieve a score good enough to enter the top-ten, you'll get a simple screen where you will be able to enter a name up to 16 alphanumeric characters long, which, along with the dollars earned and the type of 'shift' played, will be saved to disk.
Saving via emulator could require enabling the specific virtual disk write option.
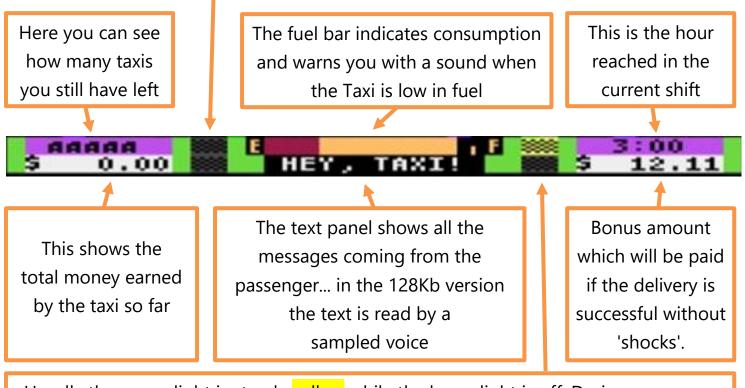
VIEW HI-SCORES

From the title screen, it will always be possible to call up and consult the Hi-Score table to find out who has set the best scores and is rightfully part of the 'immortal cabbies'.

☺

SPACE TAXI A8B – CONTROL PANEL

Here's some useful information to make a good use of the control panel:

These two alarms give information about the speed taxi is falling... in normal conditions the upper light flashes light blue and the lower light is off. If the speed is at risk, the color changes to yellow and if you are going really too fast, the upper light goes off and the lower light flashes red.

Here you can see how many taxis you still have left

The fuel bar indicates consumption and warns you with a sound when the Taxi is low in fuel

This is the hour reached in the current shift

This shows the total money earned by the taxi so far

The text panel shows all the messages coming from the passenger... in the 128Kb version the text is read by a sampled voice

Bonus amount which will be paid if the delivery is successful without 'shocks'.

Usually the upper light is steady yellow while the lower light is off. During passenger boarding and alighting, the upper light goes off while the lower light is steady red to indicate that the take-off is not permitted..

Remember to keep always under control the fuel level and try to make soft landings because the normal ride prices ($5 per delivery, $10 if you change level) can be increased by the bonus amount displayed in the bottom right corner of the control panel only if your customer is satisfied. Landing on a Pad other than the one requested will reset the bonus. If possible, avoid hitting the customers because in addition to making him 'disappear' you will be fined $10.

Never land if the alarm in the bottom left-hand corner flashes red, even if you have correctly opened the landing gear.

Last but not least, you have the opportunity to win an extra 'Taxi' for every $200 earned and up to a maximum of 7. Drive carefully and...

Enjoy Space Taxi for A8B ☺