

# 18th January The BackBit Cartridge - A New Way To Enjoy Your Commodore 64

## INTRODUCTION:

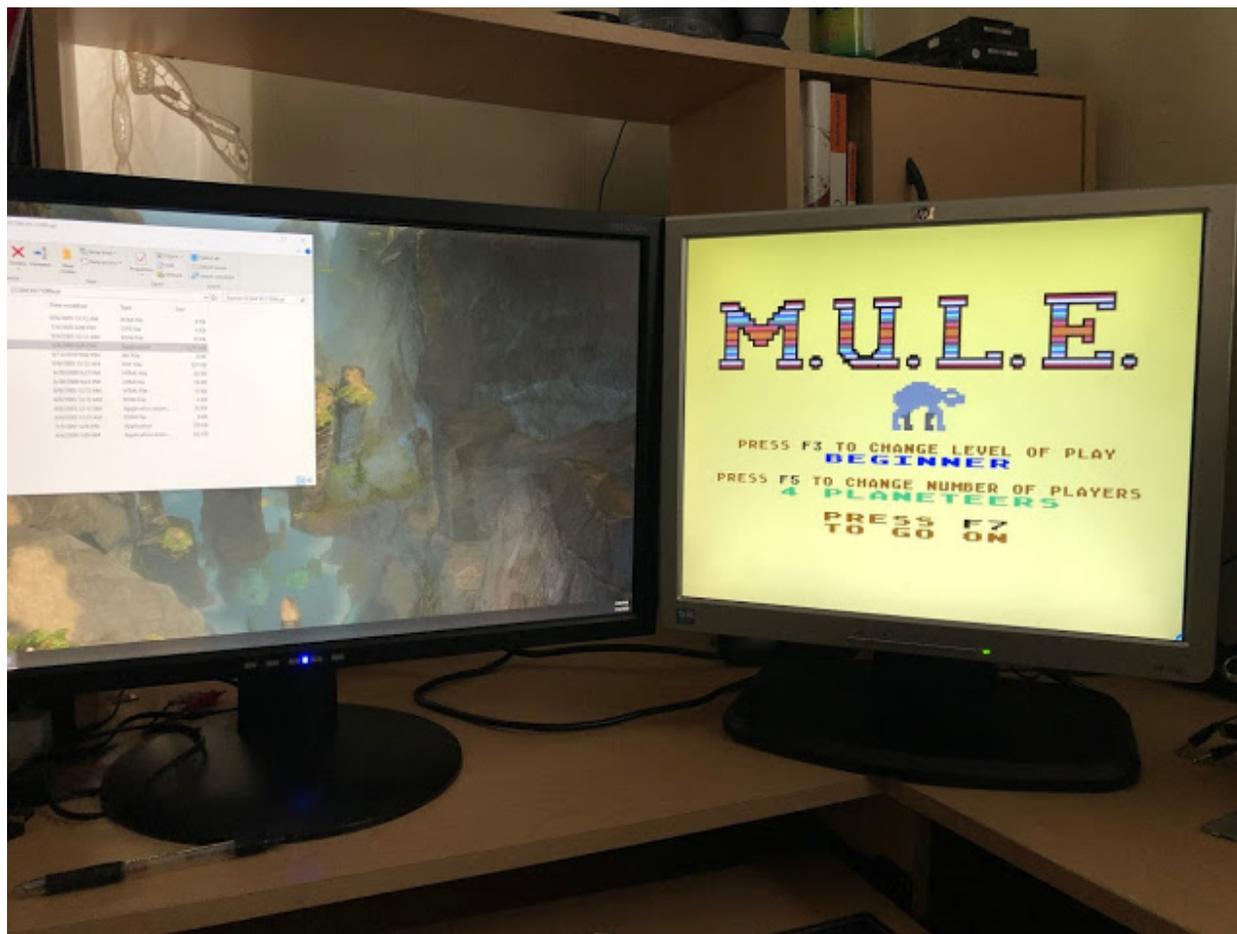
A few months ago, I got a serious bite from the nostalgia bug and went in search of a way to bring my old Commodore 64 back to life. My fondest memories of the machine are playing games like *Summer Games II* or *The Great American Cross Country Road Race* with my friends during my teenage years. Great times.



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Digging my Commodore 64 out of storage and firing it up for the first time in years.

Over the past 30 or so years, I've certainly played these games from time to time on an emulator on my PC, using WinVice or CCS64. But, emulating the games and playing with a keyboard isn't the same experience as sitting down in front of a real CRT screen with an authentic Commodore 64 in front of you and a responsive joystick in your hand. I was looking to replicate the experience of my youth. Only a real machine would do. But, I had been spoiled by how fast C64 games loaded on my PC.



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Replicating C64 software on a PC can be fun, but it will never live up to the excitement of using real hardware.

I remembered back in the 1980s how long it took for the games to load. When I was younger and had a lot of time on my hands, it didn't matter that it might take four minutes just to get to the loading screen and another three minutes to get into the actual game (if you were lucky). We used to joke that you could start the game loading, have time to make a sandwich, eat the sandwich, check the weather and sort your laundry and still have two minutes to spare.

Sure, the rich kids spent money to buy *Fast Load* cartridges that cut the disk access times down, but not all of us could afford such luxuries. Not to mention that those old disk drives could get fussy when they got hot. I had seen a game not load correctly from time to time, only to be fine the next time I loaded it like nothing had happened. Well, if I didn't damage my disk in the process (I was quite the clumsy teenager).



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Both old and new options in Fast Load cartridges exist for the C64.

We just dealt with these problems and hoped for the best. But, that was a different time. In this day and age of SSD hard drives and on demand video, I certainly don't have the patience to spend 7 minutes for a game to start. So, the first thing I did was set out to find solutions to these issues. Certainly, by the year 2020, someone had come up with something that could help, right? Right?

As it turns out, the answer was yes. And, to my surprise, there was more than one way to combat these problems.

This review is about the option I ultimately decided to pursue.

### **ENTER THE BACKBIT CARTRIDGE:**

The cartridge came to my attention on the Lemon 64 Forums (<https://www.lemon64.com/> [<https://www.lemon64.com/>]), where the developer (with the username Evietron) had mentioned several promising features of the cartridge. Compared to other solutions that existed (like the SD2IEC drive), it only required that you use the cartridge slot instead of hooking up to several ports to power the device. The load times were said to be blazingly fast, where under optimal conditions a game could be fully

loaded in a second or two. That sounded amazing, and I was hooked on the notion that I could play a game using real hardware (with an actual SID chip) and still get speeds equal to a PC emulator.



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Commodore 64 with the BackBit cartridge (for comparison)

The cartridge also promised to support a number of common disk, tape and cartridge image types popular with emulators (D64, D81, CRT, PRG, P00, etc). This would make running the software even easier. It even has its own format (BBT) that could support up to 4GB of data in a single image, which I assume was for multi-disk games or huge collections on a single disk.

But, I was wary that it might be too good to be true. Often, these kinds of things never live up to the hype. Still, I wanted to find out so I purchased a BackBit cartridge and crossed my fingers.

### **MY WEEK WITH THE BACKBIT CARTRIDGE:**

The BackBit cartridge arrived a few days later. When I opened the package, I was greeted to a bright red square with a button on the back and a bold “BackBit” embossed across the top. The feel of the cartridge was pretty solid but light in my hands. It felt well constructed and in my testing it slid both in and out of the cartridge slot pretty easily.



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Close-up of the BackBit cartridge and included cable used to update the firmware.

I'd done my research while the cartridge was on its way, so I had an idea of what kind of games were going to work with it. More on that later. I popped the games I had prepped onto my 1 GB microSD card (the cartridge supports up to 32GB cards) and fired it up.

My Commodore 64 lit up with a glorious red screen that said "BackBit" and then put me into a menu system that allowed me to select files. The menu system is fairly intuitive, though referencing the online documentation will help some users to figure out the advanced options. Not everyone will need those options, but it's nice to have them. I do wish that the cartridge had come with a small printed instruction booklet, but the documentation can be found online at the website where it's sold.

The function keys allowed me to do various things with the files I put on the card, like erase them or rename them, both of which are handy options to have available. There are also options to set a particular file to automatically start whenever you turn on the power to the C64. This will be handy for someone who needs that to do something like load up a certain cartridge every time. I can see using it to emulate a *Fast Load* or *Dead Test* cartridge, for example.

But, you're probably wondering how it works with the games themselves.

The good news is that with the right games, it's amazing. I sent a video to a friend showing him how fast it could load the disk version of the game *M.U.L.E.*, and he was quite happy to see that the load time was about 1 or 2 seconds. Seriously. From the time I clicked the button on my joystick to the time I saw the yellow opening screen was that quick. (Check out the video below!)

To be fair, some games are slower than this. This really isn't the fault of the BackBit cartridge, though. Some games have annoying load screens or text screens or menus you have to fuss about with. Some games also take a bit longer to load up due to things they do in the background that have nothing to do with disk access times. Some games are just stubborn. And yet, they are still multitudes of speeds faster than they would be with regular floppy disk access times.

All told, with all the prep I did and with games I had pulled from the Internet that were made for BackBit, I had around 400 games that were instantly loading, working fine, and had me up and playing like I did in my youth a long time ago. It was a delight.

## THE DOWN SIDE

Now, it wasn't all sunshine and roses. While it was awesome that I had those 400 or so games running smoothly, there were a lot of games that were on my essential list that I wanted to have at my fingertips. At first, I was disappointed that so many of them weren't working when I tried them, using the D64 images I had on my computer hard drive. I was getting a bit worried.

However, it turns out that if you start asking the right questions and looking around a bit deeper, you can sometimes find exactly what you want. Sometimes, you can find more than you asked for. A day after wondering if I'd be stuck with just those 400 games, I was pointed to a collection of games that worked for BackBit, and after combining it with my own library, discovered I now had 1,300+ working titles in a very short time. I continued to dig and found even more things through testing that worked great.



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Getting "Defender of the Crown" working on the BackBit cartridge

Do I have every game I want? Well, almost. There are some multi-disk games that I still haven't managed to get working yet. As more BackBit cartridges are sold, more people will probably continue to work on these missing titles and get them out into the wild for the cartridge. So, it's only a matter of time before most of these things are working as expected.

As for my essential collection (games I absolutely must have), there's only one that I haven't been able to get working...and the kicker there is that the game in question (*Karateka*) actually does work on BackBit, but not for me. It's something weird with my particular machine that chokes it; because the same file works for other BackBit users just fine. So, I can't blame the cartridge for that.

## THE UP SIDE

As of early 2020, the BackBit cartridge is still in its infancy. But the future is bright. The developer (Evie Salomon) continues to push out firmware updates with regular frequency to both add features and fix bugs. For example, a user asked if the cartridge could support the Commodore 128 machine (which is also capable of playing C64 games in its special "64 mode"). That functionality is now present and is being actively pursued.

According to the developer, the hope is to continue to improve software support and that content developers will sign on to create exclusive content for the cartridge. There are several users who are creating game packs that will include hundreds (maybe thousands) of games compatible with the device.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

So, if asked if I would recommend the device, I absolutely would. Everything from the active firmware development, to the speed at which games load on the system and the fact that this solution only utilizes the cartridge slot just screams at what a great buy it is. It didn't take me long to accumulate 1,300+ working games for the device and I like that when I turn the C64 on, the thing just works. It's not fussy and there's no arcane commands I have to learn to type to use it. I just pick my title (either with the joystick or by typing the first few letters of the game with the keyboard) click the button or press Return and I'm off to gaming heaven.

At this point, I don't think it's something I can live without. I even made a second optional purchase of a BackBit Button, which is a special button that attaches to the cartridge by a cable so that you can click it to go back to the main menu immediately (even when in the middle of a game). The cartridge has a button on it that does this for you, but now I don't have to lean forward as much; because I have an alternate and easier way to handle it. Plus, I liked the cartridge so much that I wanted to support the developer even more (and that says something).



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My current setup with the BackBit button attached to the cartridge.

While there are features of the BackBit I haven't used yet, there are a couple that sound intriguing. Apparently, the cartridge has the ability to "rip" a disk image from a real C64 disk if you have a drive attached to your system. It can also do the reverse and "burn" a disk image back to a real disk. That seems like a handy tool to have, and I can't wait to put it to use at some point.

All I know is that the BackBit is one of the best things I ever bought for my Commodore 64.

## MORE INFORMATION

If you want to find out more about the BackBit cartridge, or even order one, go here:

<https://www.backbit.io/> [<https://www.backbit.io/>]

Note: I'm told that as of the writing of this review, you can use the code FREECASE to get a free case for the cartridge. (Disclaimer: Good while supplies last, applies to any BackBit bundle which includes a case).

Posted 18th January by Unknown

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