

Product Information
Published by: 90003inc.
181 Eglinton Ave. E.
Suite 305
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 1J4
Phone: (416) 487-1777
Fax: (416) 483-20004
Email: <dean@9003inc.com>
Web: <<http://www.aquazone.com>>
Street Price: \$30 US

System Requirements
Macintosh with 33 Mhz 68040 or Power Mac
256 color-capable monitor
8 MB RAM
CD-ROM Drive
System 7.0 or higher
9 MB available hard disk space

As a child, I had an imaginary friend. I presume that other ATPM readers could make the same admission. I avoided the "Pet Rock" phase of decades past. I am a bit too old to become attached to a Tamagochi key chain pet. These attempts at artificial life and companionship will seem trite next to the "Virtual Reality Aquarium" designed by two Canadians. Arka Roy and Ron Dicarlantonio have returned triumphant from Japan, where their product that has become a cult classic. For the record, Aquazone™ is not to be confused with the moderately convincing "After Dark" aquarium screen saver originally developed by Berkeley Systems.

quazone™ is a user-generated aquatic environment where a variety of species of fresh water tropical fish are selected to exist, school, be born, fight and die. The fish are there for you to nurture as you would live fish in a real world aquarium. The Aquazone™ CD-ROM offers you the option of building a full screen aquarium from the gravel on up.

Our fascination with “artificial life” ranges from Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein to HAL in Stanley Kubrick’s film 2001:A Space Odyssey. Given this rich history, attempts to develop “Digital Life” on the personal computer are not that difficult to accept. Electronic Arts, a software company that offers Mendel Insectoid™, has attempted to create an artificial life situation called “Galapagos.” Be aware that this product is more of a game than an exercise in cultivating artificial intelligence.

Installation of Aquazone™ is a snap. Insert the CD, double-click on the “Installer,” and a dialogue box pops up for you to choose a folder. Currently, my aquarium occupies 16.2 MB (for 44 items) on my hard drive. The hard drive space needed for your aquarium will depend upon how many fish and accessories you choose when creating your special ecosystem.

You can choose among six predetermined aquarium scenarios or build your own customized environment from a variety of interesting backdrops, aquatic plants, driftwood, gravel types, and other interesting accessories. Next, you release fish into the tank. The original CD contains four species of fresh water tropical fish. Mainstay species are Neon Tetra and Leopard Catfish. The CD offers two “bonus” species: Angel Fish and Black Molly.

A set number of fish for each species can exist in the aquarium. Once that number of individual fish have died, that is it. There is no resurrection. Nurture these fellows with tender care! Other species and accessories can be purchased and downloaded from the Aquazone™ Internet site. No more bringing home goldfish in water-filled plastic bags from your local pet shop!

According to the developers, each fish has been engineered with “...Digital DNA, ensuring that every fish will behave with individual characteristics.” No two fish are alike and no two owners can have the same aquarium. Furthermore, each species requires specific living

conditions. Food, heat, water changes, medication, filtration, and light conditions must be altered to fit the needs of each species of fish your aquarium harbors.

Aquarium activities continue around the clock, 24-hours a day. Whether or not your computer is on or Aquazone™ is up and running, life in the watery depths continues unabated. Heaven forbid that you have to take a vacation! If so, be prepared to return to an aquarium replete with fish exhibiting the “belly-up” behavior.

In case you are clueless about raising and caring for fish, the CD contains an “A-Z Library.” Books in the Library include: The “Aquarist’s Dictionary,” which deals with the nitty-gritty physical aspects of the ecosystem you have created; and “Breeding,” which provides insight into creating fish from the egg stage. Several books on “Aquarium Setup, Layout and Maintenance” are integral to setting up the conditions and aesthetics of your fish tank. The topics covered in “Fish Feeding” and “Disease and Medication” are rather obvious. The latter is invaluable. The “A-Z Tropical Guide” lists the species of fish available, with good coverage of their origins, history, ease of breeding, and maintenance. The books are all well-written and well-illustrated and are valuable for their easily accessible educational content.

Minor nuances add to the attraction of Aquazone™. You can increase the speed of the program if you want to view accelerated development of your fish and their progeny. The water filter makes a soothing bubbling sound (although it can be turned off). The cursor becomes a tiny hand when you position it over the aquarium “glass.” You may then tap on the glass to attract the attention of your fish. As in real life, they scatter as quickly as possible or just ignore you!

This is definitely not a software title for those with little patience or a low attention span. You have to learn which fish are compatible with other fish and differing environments. Aquazone™ offers both an educational and emotional experience. You can name your fish and follow their progress, breed fish from eggs, and enjoy a peaceful break from the trials and tribulations of everyday life. It is easy to see why this product is a smash hit in Japan, yet such a slow starter in North America. Traditionally, Japanese culture has valued pure aesthetics, beauty, and psychological satisfaction, whereas we North Americans always want to know what it can do for us or want lots of action. Perhaps we can learn to slow down, smell the roses, and watch our water-bound companions live out their lives in serenity.

Copyright ©1998 Robert Madill, <rmadill@atpm.com>. Mr. Madill is a professor of Art and Architectural History on the faculty of Architecture at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Manitoba.