

The Return of the Commodore 64?

It holds the Guinness World record for best-selling single computer model of all time, so who had a Commodore 64?



My family had one when I was growing up, and I enjoyed playing hours of games on it. I remember how novel it was that we could create a sign, card, or banner on the computer and then print it out – complete with pixel-riddled graphics and what-do-you-call those side strips on the paper with the holes in them that you tear off and either discard or twist them together and make art out of them. My uncle had a subscription to Loadstar, which was a Commodore club of sorts – he would get magazines and new games monthly in the mail. I used to love some of those Loadstar games, unfortunately, I can't find them to play on emulators now. I really enjoyed an Activision game called Toy Bizarre, and my all time favorite game for the Commodore 64 was Maniac Mansion – I was addicted to it until I won it, and then I had to go back and win it with all the different character combinations. They did make a version of Maniac Mansion for the original Nintendo, but I was biased toward my Commodore version. I always thought that game would make a great movie (think Clue), and when I was younger, I tried to write the game into a novel but never finished it.

So what's got me thinking back to the 80's days of the Commodore today? I came across an article on cnn.com about how advance orders are being taken for the resurrection of the

Commodore here in 2011. It's being made to look just like the Commodores of the 80's, but it will have today's computer capacities since the '64' in Commodore 64 referred to the unit having 64 Kilobytes of memory – about the equivalent of one long email, according to the article. If you'd like to read the article, [click here](#).

Next On Dancing With The Stars...

One of those rare amusing email forwards caught my eye, so I'll share. Besides, my last post was kind of a downer; here's something funny to counteract it:

Next Season on Dancing With The Stars:



Exporting Fun

Here in 2010, everyone knows that it's becoming more and more common for the United States to export jobs to countries where the labor is cheaper in cost.

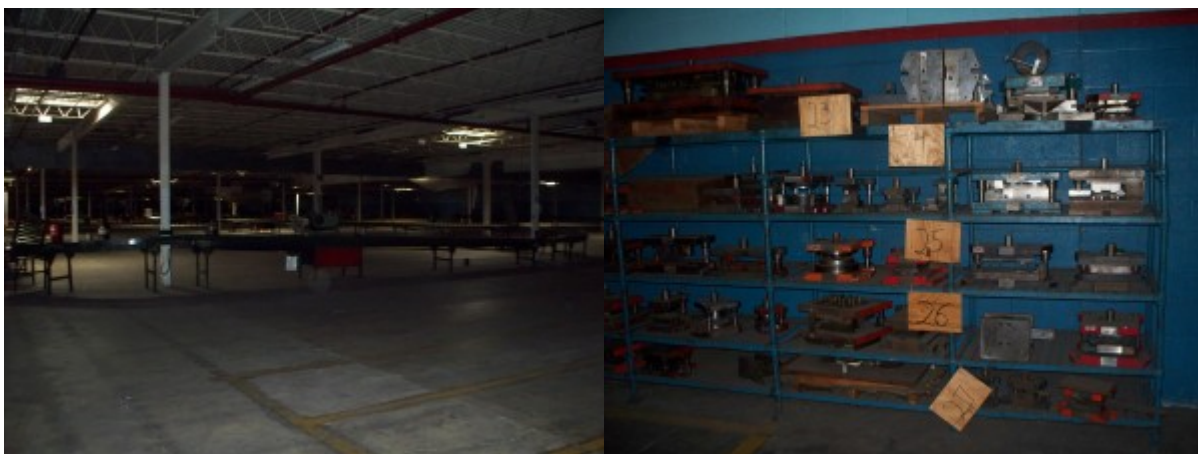
Locally, my area used to be well known for producing no less than three types of goods: automotive products, toys, and candy. Because of the free-falling economy and other things, the demand in the automotive industry has plummeted, and I don't have a desire to go into further detail about that in this blog post. Fortunately, all seems to be well in our local candy factory, and the sugary sweet aromas still float upon our breezes every day. But much like many of our automotive-oriented factories, business at the local toy factory is not going so well. What once was a thriving complex of bustling office buildings, manufacturing facilities, and distribution warehouses crisscrossed with train tracks and semi trailers for shipping has become an almost ghostly graveyard of quiet emptiness.

Recently, I had the opportunity to glimpse the inside of one of the old manufacturing facilities for a company called Ohio Art, who is probably best known for creating the timeless toy (or so it was once thought to be) – the Etch-A-Sketch.



Who can blame a struggling company for trying to cut costs just to stay above water, and Ohio Art cut its costs (and

almost a hundred jobs) about 10 years ago when they moved their production lines to China. Now the sprawling complex, split down the middle by the aptly named "Toy Street", sits mostly empty with the company leasing some of the large space to other companies while other areas are used by local organizations. I couldn't resist the opportunity to snap a few pictures, especially for those of you who are ghost hunters. I'm not really inclined to believe in paranormal phenomena, but for the two days I worked in the abandoned Ohio Art warehouse, I could have convinced myself that we humans were not alone. Beyond the creepiness that comes from being in a humongous (and I mean HUMONGOUS) abandoned manufacturing facility, there were plenty of strange noises: creaking, clanking, dripping, whooshing, you name it. There were random tickles on my arm, brushes on my back, and taps on my shoulders (many of which were later attributed to rogue cobwebs and the like, but those explanations ruin my ghost story don't they). Not only that, but when production was moved across the globe to China, many old machines, mechanical parts, and things like employee safety signs were left behind, seemingly testaments to the millions of toys that were birthed here and long forgotten.





The emptiness of Ohio Art is a sad thing; not only for the surrounding community who lost all those jobs and for the executives who had to make those tough decisions, but also as a sign of our country's fledgling economy. If you'd like to read more about how Ohio Art's production line was moved to China (and about how conditions aren't always what they seem for Chinese workers), I found [the following article](#) pretty interesting, and you might also:

Ruse in Toyland: Chinese Workers' Hidden Woe

By JOSEPH KAHN

Published: December 7, 2003

SHENZHEN, China— Workers at Kin Ki Industrial, a leading Chinese toy maker, make a decent salary, rarely work nights or weekends and often "hang out along the street, play Ping-Pong and watch TV."

They all have work contracts, pensions and medical benefits. The factory canteen offers tasty food. The dormitories are comfortable.

These are the official working conditions at Kin Ki as they are described on paper – crib sheets – handed to workers just before inspections.

Those occur when big American clients, like the Ohio company that uses Kin Ki to produce the iconic toy Etch A Sketch, visit to make sure that the factory has good labor standards.

Real-world Kin Ki employees, mostly teenage migrants from internal provinces, say they work many more hours and earn about 40 percent less than the company claims. They sleep head-to-toe in tiny rooms. They staged two strikes recently demanding they get paid closer to the legal minimum wage.

Most do not have pensions, medical insurance or work contracts. The company's crib sheet recommends if inspectors press to see such documents, workers should "intentionally waste time and then say they can't find them," according to company memos provided to The New York Times by employees.

After first saying that Kin Ki strictly abides by all Chinese labor laws, Johnson Tao, a senior executive with the privately owned company, acknowledged that Kin Ki's wages and benefits fell short of legal levels and vowed to address the issue soon.

He said that the memos might have reflected attempts by factory managers to deceive inspectors, but that such behavior "did not have the support of senior management."

William C. Killgallon, the chief executive of Ohio Art Company, the owner of Etch A Sketch, said that he considered Kin Ki executives honest and that he had no knowledge of labor problems there. But he said he intended to visit China soon to "make sure they understand what we expect."

Etch A Sketch is the same child's drawing toy today that it was in 1960, when Ohio Art first produced it in Bryan, Ohio. But efforts to keep its selling price below \$10 on shelves at Wal-Mart and Toys "R" Us forced the company to move production to China three years ago.

Today the same toy is made not just for lower wages, but also under significantly harsher working conditions. Kin Ki's workers, in fact, are struggling to obtain rights that their American predecessors at Ohio Art won early in the last century, though the workers are without the aid of

independent unions, which remain illegal in China.

China now makes 80 percent of the toys sold in America, according to United States government figures, and no industry here has come under greater pressure to adhere to global labor codes. Kin Ki and most other big producers open their doors to foreign inspectors to assuage concerns that products used to entertain children in rich countries are not made under oppressive conditions in poor ones.

But that goal conflicts with price pressures in commodity industries like toys, where manufacturers command no premium for good labor practices. China alone has 8,000 toy makers competing fiercely for contracts by shaving pennies off production costs.

Kin Ki stays competitive, workers say, by paying them 24 cents an hour in Shenzhen, where the legal minimum wage is 33 cents. When the Etch A Sketch line shut down in Ohio just after the Christmas rush in 2000, wages for the unionized work force there had reached \$9 an hour.

Chinese workers say the company also denies them legally required nonsalary benefits and compels them to work 84 hours a week, far more than the legal maximum, without required overtime pay.

"I keep this job because my parents and my daughter depend on the money I earn," said one migrant worker, who if named could lose her position for talking about the company. "No one likes to work in these conditions, but I have no choice."

Etch A Sketch has had rare longevity in the toy world. Baby Boomers used them as children and now buy them for their own families by the millions.

The toy survived into the electronic age because of nostalgia and clever promotions. But its appeal has continued, in part, because it keeps getting cheaper to own. It sold for \$3.99

when it was introduced. If it had kept pace with the consumer price index over its 43 years, it would retail for \$23.69 today instead of \$9.99.

Mr. Killgallon and his brother, Larry, who is president of Ohio Art, said in an interview that their efforts to reduce costs ran out of steam by the late 1990's, in part because of soaring health care expenses.

The logic of overseas production grew irresistible, as wage rates and shipping costs fell and quality improved, they said. An Etch A Sketch made in China and delivered to the company's warehouse in Bryan was found to cost 20 percent to 30 percent less than making it in Bryan. Moving the full line to China meant laying off about 100 people.

"We tried hard to make this work in Bryan," Larry Killgallon said. "But we looked at the numbers and we realized that we had to move."

Since early 2001, Etch A Sketches have been made in the village of Da Kang, a dusty enclave on the outskirts of Shenzhen, near Hong Kong. Once a farm region, the area has been overtaken by white-tiled factories and itinerant laborers. Landlords scrawl their phone numbers on the walls of old farm homes, like commercial graffiti, for workers who want to rent rooms. The village planted roses and marigolds to beautify the roadside, but the fallout from factories and construction sites has colored them gray.

High walls surround Kin Ki's production lines and warehouses. Dormitory windows are covered in chicken wire. Workers must enter and leave through the guarded front gate.

The factory, workers say, operates with the intensity of a military campaign. Production starts at 7:30 a.m., and, breaking only for lunch and dinner, continues until 10 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays are treated as normal workdays, so a work week consists of seven 12-hour days.

That far exceeds Shenzhen's regulations. The authorities have set a 40-hour, five-day work week, like the United States. Local rules allow no more than 32 hours of overtime per month, which must be compensated by paying time and a half on weekdays and double time on weekends.

Kin Ki set a much lower pay scale, workers said. It pays just 1.3 times pay base for any overtime, weekday or weekend. Workers say their monthly paychecks would more than double, to about \$200 from around \$85, if the company paid legal wages.

The work itself can be draining and tedious. Unlike Ohio Art's factory, Kin Ki uses few machines to offset manual labor, and it needs three or four times the number of workers casting plastic molds, painting parts, and attaching the strings and rods that operate the drawing mechanism of the Etch A Sketch. But Kin Ki workers say it is the pay, not the task, that upsets them.

"Most of us would work long hours willingly if we were paid according to the law," said one employee. "The way things are now, we can shut up or leave."

Some workers took action against the factory last June and July, refusing to work unless the company raised wages. They also demanded that the daily diet of boiled vegetables, beans and rice be improved and supplemented more often with pork, fish or some other meat, which they say is served just twice a month.

The company responded by raising wages by a few cents a day, workers said. The canteen allotted each worker an extra dish each day, though no more meat.

But managers made "fried squid" of two workers they singled out as strike leaders, workers said, using a popular term for dismissals.

The company acknowledged having significant labor problems. "I know that I need to increase wages and to comply with the law," Mr. Tao said. "I have the intention of doing this and will raise all wages in 2004."

He also acknowledged that workers had gone on strike. But he denied that Kin Ki had dismissed the two ringleaders. He said they "were well known troublemakers" who left the factory of their own accord.

Whatever Kin Ki's intentions are now, company documents show that it has been paying below-regulation wages – and seeking to fool foreign clients – for years.

One memo preparing workers and supervisors for an inspection in September 2001, urged workers to help the factory "cope with clients."

"Foreign clients made unattainable demands during previous inspections, including on limiting overtime," the memo said. "But when you think about it, you come from all over the country to make money, not to rest."

A more recent memo, issued to prepare for an inspection that took place on Nov. 26, urged workers to memorize false numbers for wages and working hours to reflect Shenzhen's regulations. The memo promised bonuses to workers who responded as directed when approached by inspectors.

Workers said the elaborate ruse had one happy result. Because few of the employees have legal work contracts on file, the factory must pretend that its work force is smaller than it is when inspectors visit. On such days most of the factory's 850 workers get a rare treat: a day off.

On Nov. 26, with an inspection under way inside the plant, workers congregated in their rented homes or food stalls to eat, chat, smoke and gossip.

"I thank the inspectors for one thing," said a Kin Ki worker from rural Sichuan. She was crouching over a bucket of cold water in the warm afternoon sun, washing her hair. "I needed a rest," she said.

What Did Porky Pig Ever Do To You?

The following news story caught my eye because well, let's be honest – any sort of physical comedy involving someone in a big mascot costume is funny.

Ok, so it's not funny when someone gets hurt; I stand corrected. Best wishes to Ms. Porky Pig for a speedy recovery. From suburban Chicago's newspaper, [The Daily Herald](#):

Two employees of Six Flags Great America turned against a coworker dressed as Porky the Pig on Monday after posing for a photo with her.

Dmytro Petrychenko, 19, and Taras Sikalchuk, 20, were visiting the park on their day off and were seen slapping a woman dressed as Porky Pig in the front and back of her head multiple times, according to Gurnee police. Both men are from Waukegan, reports indicated.

The men were apprehended, removed from the park and issued local battery citations by Gurnee police.

The victim was taken to a first aide station after complaining of a headache and neck pains. She was treated and released, according to a Six Flags spokesperson.

Kind of reminds me of the Sausagegate incident of 2008...

You Can't Name Your Baby That!

I found this article on [cnn.com](#) a few weeks ago detailing the laws that foreign countries have about baby names. That's right – here in the fifty nifty United States we have the freedom to name our kids pretty much whatever we want, but in other countries, they actually have strict laws specially crafted regarding this kind of thing. I found the following article interesting and amusing, and at the same time, I gratefully celebrate the freedoms in my country. And an interesting note – this blog post is being written by the mother of a little girl named Disney... I couldn't help but notice in how many of the following countries my sweet little Disney's name would have been rejected.

For the article in its entirety, [click here](#).

1. Sweden – Enacted in 1982, the Naming law in Sweden was originally created to prevent non-noble families from giving their children noble names, but a few changes to the law have been made since then. The part of the law referencing first names reads: "First names shall not be approved if they can cause offense or can be supposed to cause discomfort for the one using it, or names which for some obvious reason are not suitable as a first name." If you later change your name, you must keep at least one of the names that you were originally given, and you can only change your name once. Rejected names: "Brfxxccxxmnpccclllmmnprxvclmncckssqlbb111163 (pronounced Albin, naturally) was submitted by a child's parents in protest of the Naming law. It was rejected. The parents later submitted "A" (also pronounced Albin) as the child's name. It, too, was rejected. Also rejected:

Metallica, Superman, Veranda, Ikea and Elvis. Accepted names: Google as a middle name, Lego.

2. Germany – In Germany, you must be able to tell the gender of the child by the first name, and the name chosen must not be negatively affect the well being of the child. Also, you can not use last names or the names of objects or products as first names. Whether or not your chosen name will be accepted is up to the office of vital statistics, the Standesamt, in the area in which the child was born. If the office rejects your proposed baby name, you may appeal the decision. But if you lose, you'll have to think of a different name. Each time you submit a name you pay a fee, so it can get costly. When evaluating names, the Standesamt refers to a book which translates to "the international manual of the first names," and they also consult foreign embassies for assistance with non-German names. Because of the hassle parents have to go through to name their children, many opt for traditional names such as Maximilian, Alexander, Marie and Sophie. Rejected names: Matti was rejected for a boy because it didn't indicate gender. Approved names: Legolas and Nemo were approved for baby boys.

3. New Zealand – New Zealand's Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act of 1995 doesn't allow people to name their children anything that "might cause offence to a reasonable person; or [...] is unreasonably long; or without adequate justification, [...] is, includes, or resembles, an official title or rank." Officials at the registrar of births have successfully talked parents out of some more embarrassing names. Rejected names: Stallion, Yeah Detroit, Fish and Chips, Twisty Poi, Keenan Got Lucy, Sex Fruit, Satan and Adolf Hitler. Approved names: Benson and Hedges (for a set of twins), Midnight Chardonnay, Number 16 Bus Shelter and Violence.

4. Japan – In Japan, one given name and one surname are chosen for babies, except for the imperial family, who only

receive given names. Except for a few examples, it is obvious which are the given names and which are the surnames, regardless of in what order the names have been given. There are a couple thousand “name kanji” and “commonly used characters” for use in naming babies, and only these official kanji may be used in babies’ given names. The purpose of this is to make sure that all names can be easily read and written by the Japanese. The Japanese also restrict names that might be deemed inappropriate. Rejected names: Akuma, meaning “devil.”

5. Denmark – Denmark’s very strict Law on Personal Names is in place to protect children from having odd names that suit their parents’ fancy. To do this, parents can choose from a list of 7,000 pre-approved names, some for girls, some for boys. If you want to name your child something that isn’t on the list, you have to get special permission from your local church, and the name is then reviewed by governmental officials. Creative spellings of more common names are often rejected. The law states that girls and boys must have names that indicate their gender, you can’t use a last name as a first name and unusual names may be rejected. Of the approximately 1,100 names that are reviewed each year, 15-20 percent of the names are rejected. There are also laws in place to protect rare Danish last names. Rejected names: Anus, Pluto and Monkey. Approved names: Benji, Jiminico, Molli and Fee.

6. China – Most new babies in China are now basically required to be named based on the ability of computer scanners to read those names on national identification cards. The government recommends giving children names that are easily readable, and encourages Simplified characters over Traditional Chinese ones. Parents can technically choose the given name, but numbers and non-Chinese symbols and characters are not allowed. Also, now, Chinese characters that can not be represented on the computer are

not allowed. There are over 70,000 Chinese characters, but only about 13,000 can be represented on the computer. Because this requirement is a new one, some citizens are having their name misrepresented, and some have to change their names to be accurately shown on the identification cards. Rejected names: “@”: Wang “At” was rejected as a baby name. The parents felt that the @ symbol had the right meaning for them. @ in Chinese is pronounced “ai-ta” which is very similar to a phrase that means “love him.”

Bingeing Bieber?

Those who know my family are aware that we have a son named Beeber, pronounced the same as the last name of that popular young male singer, Justin Bieber. But my son got his cute little nickname from his big sister, who was not even 2 years old when he was born – she could not say his real name, Christopher, and so “Beeber” stuck. That was way before Justin Bieber became so popular, I might add...

So now that my disclaimer is out of the way, I can share the following story, which has nothing to do with my son Beeber and everything to do with Justin Bieber. A few weeks ago, someone spotted Justin Bieber drinking beer at a bar, so they called the cops to report underage drinking because apparently Mr. Bieber is just a teenager. But when the cops showed up and ID'd Mr. Bieber, they found that the “underage drinker” was a 27-year-old **woman** named Katie. Given the pic below, honest mistake, don't you think? That would be Katie on the left and Justin on the right.



(Thanks to tmz.com for the story and picture)

That Candle Smells Like WHAT?!?

Something to put on my birthday list?



The White Castle slider-scented candle. That's right... if you are familiar with [White Castle restaurants](#) and their famous products, be warned – they have made a White Castle-scented candle. Yes, the steamed onion scent of the famous little burgers can now be brought into your home!

According to an article that ran on [nydailynews.com](#):

“The candle has a top note of diced sweet onions and crisp pickle, the middle notes are beef patty, cheese and ketchup,

and bottom note is a warm burger bun. It all comes together to create this amazing aroma of a White Castle Slider."

Ok, so I don't really want the White Castle scented candle for anything other than a conversation piece. I am curious about how it smells, but for my birthday I would much rather have a terrifically fun weekend, which is always probable thanks to my wonderful family and the awesome local 4th of July events that are usually planned. On my birthday, the 3rd of July (please don't remind me that I share my birthday with one of my least favorite actors), we will probably catch some fireworks somewhere, as that is one of my favorite thing to do every year. Since the 4th of July is on a Sunday this year, we will be going to church, so we have to find a way to get out to the airport as well for the annual fly-in breakfast which is always a lot of fun. After church, probably during the little dude's nap, we have a lot of packing to do for a super-fun week in the woods of southern Indiana with the extended family – more about that when we return in a week or more.

HAVE A VERY HAPPY AND SAFE 4TH OF JULY WEEKEND!!!

HAPPY BIRTHDAY AMERICA!!!



Death By Hollywood

There has been a rash of celebrity deaths lately – Art Linkletter, Gary Coleman, Dennis Hopper, and Rue McClanahan (second to last survivor of the Golden Girls) to name a few. As with many celebrities, circumstances surrounding some of these deaths have been quite out of the ordinary.

Dennis Hopper was in the midst of a frantic and nasty divorce when he lost his battle to cancer. His wife is currently battling for her share of the estate – seems the pre-nup stipulated that the couple be married AND living together at the time of his death. She contends that living in the guest house on the same property IS living together...

I listened to the 911 call from Gary Coleman's wife, and it's creepy to say the least. I've never heard a person so cold – “send someone quick because I don't know if he's going to, like, be alive.” And that she can't help him because she “doesn't want to be traumatized right now...” and “I've got blood on myself, I'm gagging, I can't deal.” Me, me, me. So WOW. Does Shannon (aka Mrs. Coleman – well, not really... as it turns out, there was a secret divorce back in '08) have something to hide? My guess is that she is digging herself a deeper hole with every press conference, er, day that goes by... It's especially interesting how she is quick to do press conferences, shooting a video for tmz.com just one day after her ~~husband's~~ er, roommate's death. You can listen to Shannon's refusal to help Gary [here in the sad 911 call](#), and [here is a link to the video](#) shot a day later when she contradicts herself – in the 911 call, she says she can't help Gary because she has seizures so she can't drive, whereas in the video, she says that Gary has done nice things for her, like buy her a car. So... why would he buy her a car if she can't drive? Oh, and not a tear has fallen from Shannon's eyes publicly since Gary's death. Something's fishy here, and Ms. Price's penchant for being in the spotlight is going to be

the catalyst to her unraveling, it seems.

Last night was the first night I was able to spend at home in a long time. I was excited to see that the Cubs had a night game, and I was looking forward to getting to sit and watch my first entire baseball game since opening day... but I had read the schedule wrong – actually I've been a day off all week. My husband being off work on Memorial Day got me a day behind, and then somehow I overcompensated and got a day ahead in the later part of the week. Just the latest on a lengthening list of stupid things I've done lately – where is my brain? So anyway, baseball-gameless, I decided to watch some “junk tv” – whatever I could find in useless reality shows or documentaries. I was looking for “Fantastic Houseboats”, but I couldn't find the Travel Channel (have I mentioned that I never watch tv? I don't even know what our channels are! Well, I know Noggin, PBS, and Nickleodeon by heart, but nothing other than kids' channels...), so I ended up watching something called “Jail” that was really a Cops knock-off and then an interesting show on E! – 20 Most Horrifying Hollywood Murders. Ah, celebrity gossip meets true crime = perfect junk tv! It was quite interesting; though I had already known about most of the cases which included: Nicole Brown Simpson, Bonnie Lee Bakley, Rebecca Shaeffer (an 80s tv star that was murdered by a stalker, how sad), Dominique Dunne, Bob Crane, Sharon Tate, Black Dahlia, Tupac Shakur, Biggie Smalls, and Jose and Kitty Menendez. I did miss a little bit of the show, but I kept waiting for the Phil Hartman case to come on – I thought that would be considered ‘horrifying’ as he was unexpectedly murdered by his cocaine-addicted wife Brynn who then committed suicide. Perhaps it was one of the 20 on the show and I just missed it? And the show also spotlighted something I'd like to try if I ever find myself in Hollywood again: the [Dearly Departed Tours](#). The name speaks for itself. I have a macabre sense of curiosity that way, which is also why I'd like time someday to delve into Steven Bochco's (famous producer who gave us NYPD Blue, Hill Street Blues, and

Doogie Howser, MD) first attempt at a novel – where I got the title of this post. Found Death By Hollywood at the Dollar Store and it looked worth a buck to sit on my shelf for years until I had the time to read it.

So anyway, lots of death in Hollywood lately, and it's sad. Even for those of us with somewhat morbid curiosities; there were still people behind the celebrity facades, and their loved ones left behind are hurting. No matter to what degree of fame they rose, they were all human beings, so how could their deaths be anything but sad?

The Return Of Captain EO

This one is for fellow Disney fanatics – I just read an article about the return to Disneyland of the 17-minute Michael Jackson 3D video, [Captain EO](#). I never got to see Captain EO; my first time to Disney World was in 1992, and the attraction was either broken down during that visit or we just weren't interested in seeing it; I don't remember. By the time I grew up, started my family and began our traditional Disney World vacations, Captain EO was long gone and replaced by the 3D interactive attraction Honey, I Shrunk the Audience.

Captain EO replaced Honey, I Shrunk the Audience at Disneyland in Anaheim, California and opened today. The futuristic short film stars Michael Jackson and Anjelica Huston; it cost about \$30 million to make and also boasts the creative team of director Francis Ford Copolla and executive producer George Lucas. When it was shown at the Disney theme parks in the 80's and 90's, it was the most expensive film ever made (costing \$1.76 million **per minute!**). As of its opening today at 10am, there were many fans lined up to see it. No word on

whether Captain EO will return to Epcot in Disney World, Orlando Florida, but if it does, I might like to check it out, despite how much I will miss the always fun Honey, I Shrunk the Audience.

[poll id="16"]

Bohemian Rhapsody By The Muppets

Came across this funny rendition of the Queen song Bohemian Rhapsody the other day. I don't know about you, but the Muppets always make me smile!