Super Gifts for Gamers

Activision has turned the 10 events of the Olympic 'Decathlon' into a rich and versatile cartridge by that name (left). Free Fall Associates' 'Murder on the Zindemuef' (above) really puts the mind to work.

'Tis the season to be jolly here at "Arcade Alley," so we've taken time out from game-playing to do our annual round of holiday shopping. Like us, you probably have people on your list who are tough to pick gifts for, so this column is devoted to a quartet of new games that are guaranteed to please your home-arcading friends.

Perhaps the greatest compliment a reviewer can pay Decathlon (Activision/Atari 2600)—a monumental new cartridge by David Crane—is simply to describe it. Heralded by the Olympic music theme, the traditional torch-bearing runner jogs across the track as night lights glow and the crowd cheers to begin the festivities. What follows is an absolute triumph of imaginative programming—a complete video simulation of the 10 events which comprise the Olympic decathlon.

Up to four gamers can participate in this simulation of one of the most grueling tests in all of sports. There are video versions of various running events and such field favorites as the javelin, pole vault, shot put, and discus. And the movement system is unique: the home arcader moves his character by whipping the joystick shaft left and right as rapidly as possible. The faster you move the stick, the faster the digital Olympian shakes his booty. After hours of finger-cracking strain, the proprietors of "Arcade Alley" have developed a new technique that maximizes game performance while helping players save valuable fingers for later use.

Just form a "V" symbol (or peace sign), slip the joystick shaft between your index and middle fingers, and tap it back and forth as fast as desired. This should reduce wear and tear on the joystick as well, and that is a sensible precaution with this title.

A meter at the bottom of the playfield fluctuates to track current speed, and with practice, most players will be able to get their surrogate runner hustling along at a respectable clip. This is important because two of the three running events are dashes which must be run at top speed from start to finish, though the 1500-meter race requires strategy. Our advice is to move along at a fairly gentle pace for the first 1300 meters and then gear up for a final all-out burst to the wire.

The heaving events—javelin, shot put, and discus—call for some finesse. Start the approach slowly, and then increase speed so that the electronic athlete is traveling at top speed when he reaches the line. This gives your toss the maximum possible benefit due to momentum.

Many will find the jumping events hardest to master. As in real-life tournaments, the bar in the pole-vault and high-jump events starts low and is raised bit by bit as rounds of competition are completed. In the game, each player has three chances to clear the bar at the current height. A successful jump or vault causes the bar to rise 02 meters.

Even a year ago, who could've imagined a single 2600-compatible cartridge with 10 events? "Decathlon" is a masterwork.

Tutenkham (Parker Brothers/Atari 2600) is a superb translation of Stern's coin-op oddity—an adventure game for the 2600 and, soon, for other popular vid-game and computer systems as well. While the 2600 edition is hardly a visual clone of the original, its pared-down graphics are attractive and serviceable. More important, the play-action is fascinating enough to hook the player the first time and subtle enough to invite frequent replays.

The arcade starts with three explorers and an equal number of "laser flashes," which wipe the screen clear of all antagonistic beastsies. This powerful weapon must be used with discretion, however: even Lloyds of London wouldn't give a farthing for an explorer who enters chamber four on level three without a laser flash in reserve. The explorer has the additional protection of a gun, but he can fire only horizontally and dangers approaching from directly above or below pose a lethal threat.

The playfield scrolls vertically, sending the archaeologist further into the depths of the Egyptian tomb. A good sense of direction is a major asset, for the explorer moves along secret passageways that transport him through walls. You must scoop up all the hidden treasures while avoiding a hideous fiend at the hands of the endlessly spawning monsters that infest the labyrinth. It is vital to locate virtually...
“Stellar 7” is a severe test for even the most skillful home arcaders, and its varied action makes it a particularly satisfying game for solo players.

Assume the identity of one of eight famous detectives to solve the Murder on the Zinderneuf (Electronic Arts/Atari Computers/32K disk)—a 1930s-style murder mystery set on a trans-Atlantic dirigible flight. One of the sixteen passengers has been killed and, as the sleuth, you must roam the skyship and be on the alert for clues and opportunities to question the fifteen suspects.

There is a definite space element—it takes some joystick jiggling to make sure your detective meets only the suspects you want to interrogate—but Murder on the Zinderneuf is mostly a brain-stretcher. To identify the killer and build a case that can stick in court before the mighty craft docks requires clear, logical thinking and (possibly) a dash of good fortune. One of the best aspects is that the game can be played over and over again: it generates a different mystery each time, with an excellent chance that most of what happens will make some kind of sense.

As we go to press, “Murder on the Zinderneuf” is compatible only with the Atari, but should be available in versions for many of the other popular microcomputers in time for gift-giving. Though the other versions may not equal the visual statement of the Atari edition, there’s little reason to believe that Electronic Arts will do less than its usual outstanding job.

“Murder on the Zinderneuf” is as entertaining as it is innovative, and it’s one of the most distinctive titles to be published this year.

Coming Next Month!

‘Arcade Alley’ is pleased to announce that starting next month, for the next two columns, we will be presenting the 1984 Arcade Awards. Next month’s column will be on videogame cartridges, and the one after that will be on computer software.