

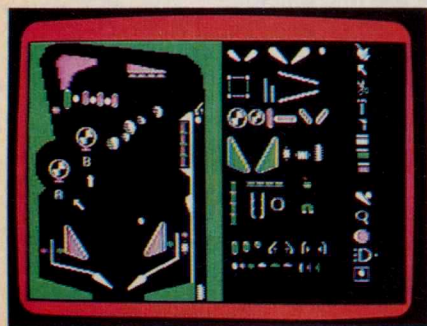
Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



From Pinball to Purgatory at Electronic Arts



'Pinball Construction Set' by Bill Budge

Devoting a whole installment of "Arcade Alley" to the products of a single software publisher isn't our normal operating procedure. We're taking this unprecedented step because we believe that this first batch of game programs from a new group, Electronic Arts, is unusually high-quality, and we want to make sure that readers of VIDEO who own Apple and Atari computers get the good news as quickly as possible.

And the news from Electronic Arts is definitely positive. No game-maker has ever made its debut with such a collection of topflight titles. Founded by former Apple executive Tripp Hawkins, Electronic Arts is pledged to create games that make maximum use of current computer capabilities—and to continue down this road when the next jump in resident memory size takes microcomputers to 500K-1000K.

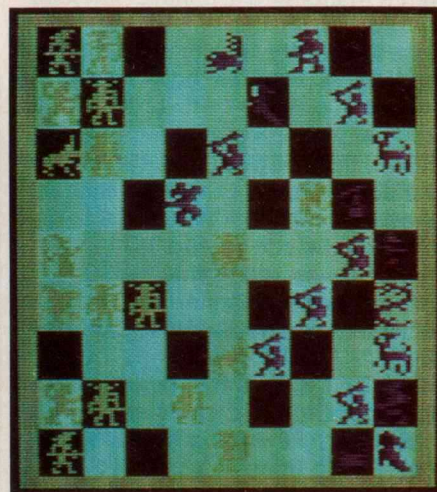
Electronic Arts' working setup diverges markedly from the norm. All designers operate as freelancers, backstopped by a producer assigned by Electronic Arts. The producer shepherds the project from start to finish; his duties include getting the game creator special assistance in areas such as graphics, sound, and animation. Packaging also stamps Electronic Arts as a breed apart. Each disk comes in a double gatefold album. The album jacket is liberally decorated with four-color artwork and photography—generally with an extra tidbit or two, such as an interview with the designer.

Before fellow cynics in the audience start chanting "you can't tell a book by its cover," let's get down to the games themselves.

Even the world's best programmer couldn't make the Apple version of **Hard Hat Mack** (Electronic Arts/Apple II/48K disk) look and play like the version designed for the Atari computers. The latter systems possess capabilities, particularly in the areas of graphics and on-screen motion, that the Apple can't match. With that aside, let's hear a big round of applause for designers Mike Abbot and Matthew Alexander: "Hard Hat Mack" is indisputably one of the finest programs ever made for the Apple. It features charming cartoon visuals, plenty of sound effects, fluid joystick response, and three playfields.

To discharge his duties, Mack the construction worker must also avoid collisions with vandals who want to wreck the building and OSHA representatives who wish it to sink beneath the crushing weight of bureaucracy. On the first playfield Mack must pick up girder sections, fit them into gaps in the crossbeams, and use a riveting gun to permanently fix them in place. An elevator on the left provides an express route to the fourth beam. When Mack hops onto the jumpboard on the right, it catapults him back up the screen to the next highest level (unless he jumps from the top, which lands him on the lowest level). Collecting tool boxes is the main job on the second screen. Mack moves between levels by leaping onto a girder hauled up and down the center of the screen by a hoist. And to finish the third screen, Mack must take the steel blocks scattered around the playfield and drop them one by one into the rivet machine. Movement is accomplished by a conveyor belt and a pair of springboards.

The computer randomly juggles the starting positions of key objects (like the girders on the first screen). This keeps the game from settling into a rut, since a strategy that works once won't necessarily succeed again. And "Hard Hat Mack" has one option desirable for—but seldom included in—multi-scenario games: you can start play on any of the three screens. Once a player masters the girder-placement phase, for example, it can be skipped altogether in future games. This is a "must"



'Archon' by Free Fall Associates

buy for Apple arcaders.

Axis Assassin (Electronic Arts/Apple II/48K disk) has only one discernible problem: its name. Despite the obvious and misleading connotations of "Axis," this is a semi-abstract target-shoot in the "Tempest" genre—not a World War II spy adventure. What makes "Axis Assassin" outstanding is that creator John Field took the basic idea of a perimeter shoot-out that uses a succession of geometric playfields and added new strategic and tactical vistas.

The most obvious difference between "Tempest" and "Axis" is that the on-screen shooter in "Axis" can freely range over the entire field instead of just hugging the rim. "Freely" is a relative term, however, since enemy spinners cover the action area with webs that block movement until the player blasts them away. The second major departure is that a player can hoard the single pulse bomb acquired at each level until it is complete, then detonate it just as the image of the hated Master Arachnid appears in the second scenario. This scenario takes place inside the Master Arachnid's nest and, if the effort is successful, allows the home arcader to acquire an extra reserve shooter-ship.

"Axis Assassin" generates an intense level of excitement, especially after the player works through the first few levels. There is an initial choice among three levels of difficulty, and even the

easiest setting hardly rates as a walk-over.

The basic theme of **Archon** (Electronic Arts/Atari 400-800-1200/48K disk), a one- or two-player electronic board game, is the age-old struggle between the forces of light and darkness. The armies of night and light are arrayed at opposite sides of a chesslike board and then moved from square to square by each player in alternating turns, one move per turn (as in chess and checkers). "Battles" are somewhat abstract, though less so than in chess. Instead of the attacking piece automatically supplanting the defender, the two warring

units are transferred to a tactical battlefield. Each human player (or one human in solo contests with the computer) uses a joystick to control his unit during these showdowns, and it isn't impossible for the weaker piece to turn the tables on the more powerful one through superior tactics.

The board on which strategic moves are made is not static like a conventional checkerboard, and plays a major role in the conflict. Certain squares alter their hue at every turn, cycling between light and darkness. Should a contest develop over one of these squares, the piece whose color most nearly matches

the square will have a defensive advantage over its rival.


To win the game, the forces of light or darkness must occupy five squares designated as power points for a full turn, or else eliminate the opposing side entirely. The computer is a tough-as-nails foe and can wipe a novice off the board with surprising ease. The machine displays a sadistic tendency to crush the opposing side one unit at a time instead of occupying the power points for a quick win, so a timely resignation is sometimes the only way to avoid an excruciatingly prolonged drubbing.

The toughest part of putting across a new chess-type game is getting the prospective players to sit down and study the rules. The design team of Jon Freeman and Ann Westfall built lots of player aids right into their program just to avoid this obstacle. For instance, when a player covers a piece with the cursor (which signifies an intention to move it), a summary of its powers automatically appears on the screen directly below the board. And when a piece has moved the maximum number of squares, the fact is noted on the display and the computer prevents the unit from proceeding farther for that turn.

No review could possibly do more than hint at the manifold excellences of "Archon." It is truly a landmark in the development of computerized strategy games.

With the **Pinball Construction Set** (Electronic Arts/Atari 400-800-1200/48K disk), Bill Budge (who designed "Raster Blaster") gives even non-programmers everything they need to "grow their own" video pinball game. This remarkably clever and easy-to-use program was previously available only for the Apple, but this new edition extends the fun to owners of the Atari family of microcomputers.

Just about everything is handled through joystick control. The player uses one of several cursors to move flippers, bumpers, and other pieces of pinball gingerbread from a parts box on the right side of the display to the empty pinball table on the left. These parts can be positioned, painted, and sometimes reshaped using the cursors. There's even a special mode for testing a design before you're finished with it! Depending on the skill of the "designers," the "Pinball Construction Set" can produce high-quality pinball video games. One company has published a couple of disks containing games produced with the "PCS." So if you like the idea of creating electronic games as well as playing them, the "Pinball Construction Set" is the doorway to a new world of stimulating entertainment.

This quartet of programs is only part of the Electronic Arts line. By the time this issue hits the newsstands, the company hopes to have at least twice that number of titles in stores. 

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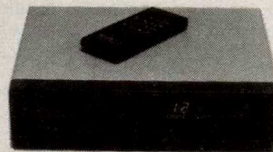
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