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5th Anniversary Special: "The Video Age ...

August 1984

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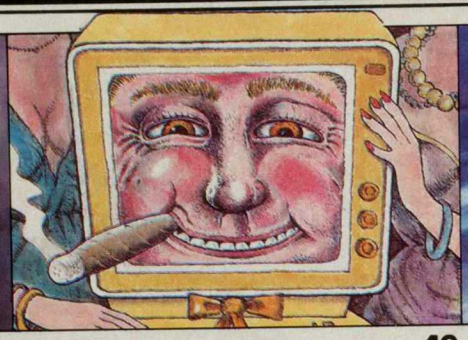

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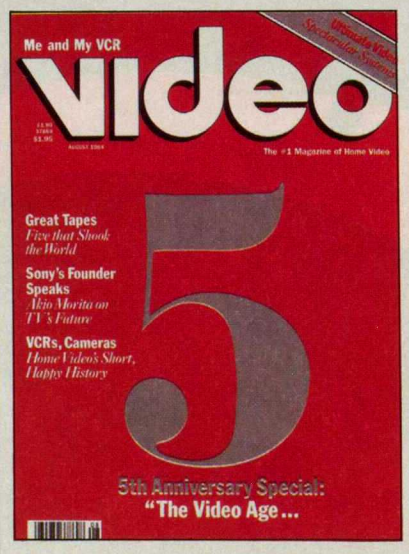

About the Cover. Champagne corks pop, the front-loader sucks in a cassette. Happy birthday to us! Welcome to our 5th anniversary party.

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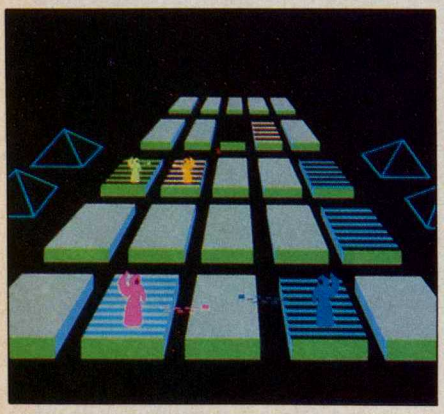
Electronic Games

State of the Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



'Silicon Warrior' (Epyx) mixes strategy with a challenge to gamers' dexterity; the 'intelligence' of the typical computer game leaves designers plenty of room for subtlety and creativity.

You might say we grew up together. The first issue of VIDEO Magazine hit newsstands around the same time programmable video-game systems began to sell in sizable numbers. Roughly 20 percent of TV-owning households have bought game systems since 1979. Gaming crazes and blockbusters may come and go (for a survey of five truly influential games, see "Big Games," elsewhere in this issue)—but it's clear that the gaming hobby itself is part of our way of electronic life.

Yet today, as the magazine celebrates its fifth anniversary, it's clear that the golden age of video-game systems is over. The computer disk has caught the fancy of players who cut their home-arcading teeth on video-game cartridges. Home computers, primarily in the $500-to-$1500 range, have caught up to video-game machines in sales and should take the lead early next year.

This massive shifting of gears, which first became evident in mid-1983, has turned out to be a jolting process. Many publishers who swarmed into the then-booming video-game field in 1982, armed with little more than a few half-done games and a prayer, learned that it's easier to talk about overnight success than to achieve it. Lacking both managerial depth and financial resources, many firms folded up their tents the first time their wares failed to receive an enthusiastic reception from players. Even large companies weren't immune to the upheaval, which has come to be known as the Big Shakeout of 1983. Mattel, North American Phillips (Odyssey), and 20th Century-Fox are only three of the big outfits that never found a secure niche in video gaming.

The rise of the video-game system contained the seeds of its downfall. The first time a player plugged a cartridge into the slot of a home-arcade console, it was already inevitable that such devices would eventually have to give way to authentic home computers. Several factors support this seemingly fatalistic view.

The most important is that the technologies used to create video-game machines and computers are essentially the same. When the Atari VCS and N.A.P. Odyssey[2] made their debuts in 1978, they represented the best effort of existing computer technology to produce a device which the average middle-class family could afford. And, as everyone knows, computer technology has raced ahead. Scientific breakthroughs, improvements in manufacturing, and the economies inherent in large production runs have pushed the computer lightyears beyond the programmable video game. The microcomputers of 1984 not only easily outperform the relatively primitive video game—they are more than a match for the multi-million-dollar behemoth computers which once filled whole rooms.

To consider the situation from another angle, video-game systems created a demand for sophisticated electronic entertainment which they couldn't entirely satisfy. The first video-game cartridges contained 2K bytes of programming. Competition forced manufacturers to boost the memory of "second generation" video games to 4K. A few video-game cartridges like "Asteroids" (Atari) have employed tricks such as bank-switching to create an 8K cartridge. The typical computer game, in contrast, is generally a disk with 48K of machine language programming. Even computers with a cartridge slot as well as a connection for a program recorder and/or disk drive are working with software that contains 8K to 16K of programming—and that figure will continue to increase.

So the average computer game is 4 to 12 times more complex and detailed than the usual video game. This gives designers an opportunity to inject much more subtlety. Whereas the video game has always had to stick pretty close to straightforward shoot-'em-up action, the advent of the popularly priced microcomputer has opened fresh vistas for software designers.

Sales of home-computer systems are expected to pull roughly even with those of video-game machines this year—and should pull out in front by a significant margin next year. Assuming that six-to-eight million American families follow through on their intention to buy a computer in 1984, there'll be as many computers installed as there were video-game consoles at the peak of cartridge fever, at the end of 1982.

Although business, educa-

tion, and other programs all have an audience, games account for at least half of all sales of microcomputer software today. And despite marked growth in all categories, entertainment software is likely to maintain, or even increase, its dominance. The reason: consumers return to buy games more often than with any other category of software. Once a computerist buys a word-processing program, for example, he or she is unlikely to need another one in a hurry—but buying an adventure game is no bar to buying another adventure next month when the first has ceased to be a challenge.

Action games haven't disappeared since the computer eclipsed the video game, but they've changed. The meat-and-potatoes of video games—a joystick-controlled cursor, for selecting targets for the missiles launched with the action button—has become the exception rather than the rule. Action contests like the 1984 Arcade Award winner as Computer Game of the Year, "Lode Runner" (Broderbund/most computer systems), blend real-time excitement with an opportunity to plan and execute complex strategies. But although arcade-style programs account for as much as 45 percent of microcomputer-software sales, the "brain game" categories are showing the most dramatic increase in popularity. Computer owners are more mature than video-game buffs, and those with age-faded reflexes are naturally more intrigued by games where fast thinking plays a larger role than fast fingers.

Adventure games now account for nearly one-third of software sales. Action-adventures such as "Gateway to Apshai" (Epyx/Atari home computers, C-64) and "Return of Heracles" (Quality Software/Atari home computers, C-64) have taken the spotlight from the text-only and illustrated adventures which dominated in 1983, but the genre's real future undoubtedly lies in adventures which blend prose-quest richness and scope with exciting visuals and action-game pace, such as "Ultima III" (Origin Software/Apple, Atari, C-64) and "Questron" (Strategic Simulations/Apple).

Animation has already appeared in some adventures such as "Mask of the Sun" (UltraSoft-Broderbund/Apple, C-64) and "The Dallas Quest" (DataSoft/C-64). Although both are primarily illustrated with still drawings, the day isn't far off when increased microcomputer memory will permit designers to create adventures with dozens of animated sequences instead of just a few.

Strategy contests, especially those that permit the players to enter commands via joystick or other hand-operated control device, are also hot this year. "M.U.L.E." (Electronic Arts/most computers) and "Pipes" (Creative Software/C-64 and VIC 20), both hits in 1983, paved the way for such titles as "Silicon Warrior" (Epyx/Atari comput-

ers), "Run for the Money" (Scarborough/Apple), and "Seven Cities of Gold" (Electronic Arts/Atari home computers) this year. Military and financial strategy games of more conventional stripe are also gaining steadily wider acceptance.

The current king of the sports game hill, "One on One" (Electronic Arts/Apple, C-64), uses the highest degree of machine intelligence yet incorporated into a home electronic game. The on-screen hoopsters really move and shoot like their real-life counterparts, Larry Bird and Julius Erving, in this intense half-court basketball program. Look for expanded use of machine intelligence in 1985 releases from companies such as Synapse, First Star, Electronic Arts, and other top-notch software houses.

LaserVision games are one innovation scheduled to reach the gaming public late this year or early in 1985. Several systems, including Coleco's Adam and Atari's new upgradable 7800, already have provision for disc-player interface, and many companies are known to be working on developing recreational software for the LV videodisc format.

The "big three" of home-computer hardware—Apple, Atari, and Commodore—should maintain that position despite the activities of high-powered companies like IBM and Coleco. The introduction of the featherlight Apple IIc, generally compatible with other consoles in the "II" family, has given new impetus for publishers to add to the already enormous software library serving this group of machines. It'll probably take until late next year, but the IIc's 128K memory capacity is sure to entice some designers to produce "next generation" programs.

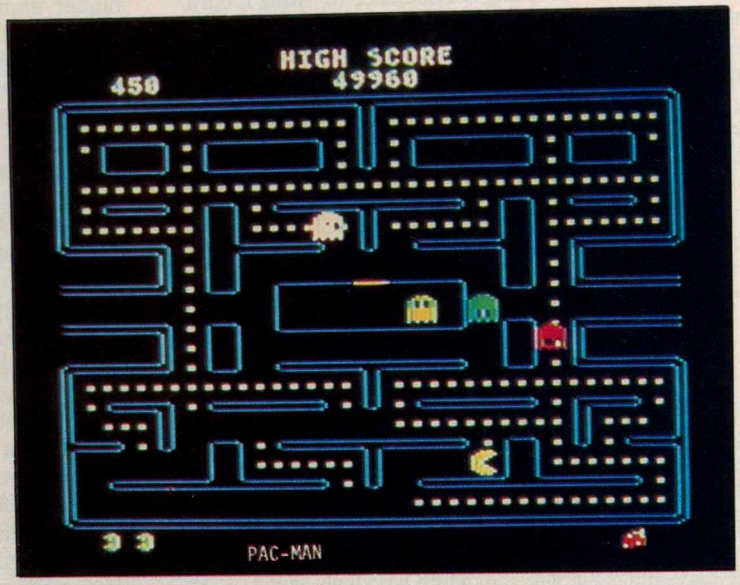
New methods of adding RAM right along with game ROM, so far evident only in a handful of video-game cartridges from Avalon Hill and CBS Electronics, should also begin affecting computer software soon. Some game inventors believe this is the best way to improve visuals in computer-cartridge programs.

The trend toward original designs, as opposed to games transported from the nation's coin-op palaces, is intensifying. Too many pay-for-play contests come up pale and simple in the home setting. Some games based on big-deal licenses are certainly in the cards, but no manufacturer suffers from the delusion that a license that's not turned into a genuinely solid and playable game stands a chance in the competitive environment of 1984.

The only really safe prediction about electronic gaming is that the hobby, which currently involves more than 40 million people on a regular basis in this country, is going to grow even more in the future than it has in the past. Electronic gaming has emerged from its "fad" era and become a widespread leisure activity on a par with stamp collecting or amateur photography.

BIG GAMES

Five that Made the Difference



Nonviolent and cute, 'Pac-Man' hooked women on gaming.

The electronic-gaming industry often has been likened to film and records as a "hit driven" business. This accurately reflects the impact new releases have on a business in which the shelf life of a programmable video-game cartridge can frequently be measured in months. The greater richness and depth of computer entertainment programs has given many of them longer life, but the accent remains on the new. Deep thinkers in the world of leisure hold that success breeds success, that one hit puts folks in the mood to buy another.

Yet even in the short history of electronic gaming—it's been only a dozen years since Nolan Bushnell marketed the first successful coin-op video game, "Pong"—some games have transcended their brief moments of sales supremacy. These games, perhaps only because they appeared in the right place at the right time, have exerted a profound effect on the entire pastime of electronic gaming. Here, then, are the electronic games that had the "right stuff" to map the direction for the entire field.

Pong is the strangest case in the annals of video gaming. Nolan Bushnell's creation is so primal that its simple play mechanics made it almost a generic name for all electronic contests involving a ball and paddles. What many gamers don't know, however, is that Ralph Baer of Sanders Associates created a ping-pong-like game for TV play prior to Bushnell's. It was the basic program for the maiden Odyssey system, the world's first video game. There was an out-of-court settlement over the matter of creative similarities, however, and "Pong" became the game of record, as even Baer readily attests. "I remember seeing it everywhere—especially in airports," the father of video gaming remarked. "People traveling here and there would stop and play it, and I think that exposure proved important."

"Pong" not only ate a lot of quarters—it was the genesis for Atari and an entire field of hardwired ball-and-paddle systems. "Pong" alone propelled the entire video-game industry, such as it was, for almost half a decade. By 1978, however, the American consumer had said its goodbyes to Mr. (dedicated) Chips. Most of those early video games were collecting dust in hall closets. It remained for a Japanese-spawned craze that would eventually dwarf even Godzilla to rouse the dormant interest in electronic games.

Space Invaders was video gaming's answer to the Beatles. News of this incredible electronic entertainment that was eating away at the foundations of Japanese society filtered slowly into America. Wild (but true) tales of the Nipponese government being forced to mint vast quantities of two-yen coins to sate a mind-blown nation of video-game junkies began to reach these shores by 1977.

Taito, a small-time maker of Pachinko machines (then the pinball machine of Japan, now an answer in a trivia quiz) was about to cash in its chips when research and development produced this masterful contest in which rows of descending aliens fired torpedo-like weapons at a besieged human player whose only defense was a trio of destroyable bunkers and a horizontally mobile laser cannon. It was, what-you-call, a "hot number."

Bally/Midway picked up the U.S. rights and soon "Space Invader mania" zipped through the U.S. like a light saber through butter. Standups, sitdowns, mini-cabinets—it came in all shapes and sizes, and sold in every format for which it was produced. Alas for Taito, "SI" had little copyright protection and flat-out cover versions appeared for every video-game and computer system known to man, with generally little or no financial recompense to Taito. Atari did pick up the home rights, however, and its "SI" tournaments were PR events of astronomical magnitude.

"Space Invaders" fits an interesting mold within which the other games on this list can also easily rest: it spawned a

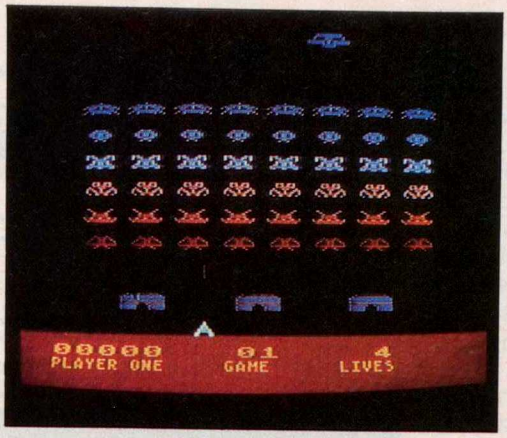
By Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz

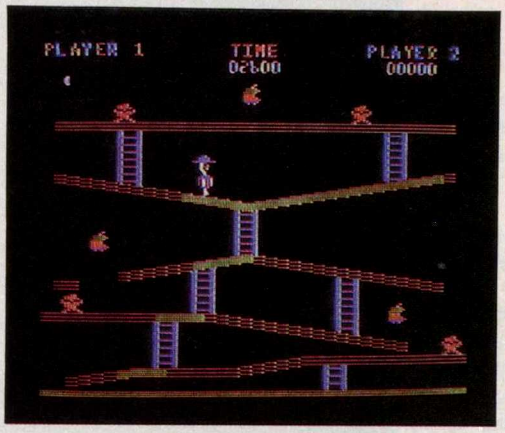
genre. Games in which the play mechanic consists of a horizontally movable cannon firing up at objects in a shooting-gallery scenario are legion, and will probably remain so as long as people use a joystick. (Oddly enough, however, in its initial incarnation in the arcades, "SI" 's cannon was moved back and forth by a pair of direction buttons. The first major video-gaming phenomenon to use a joystick was yet to come.)

At first **Pac-Man** didn't look like a landmark. Bally President Stan Jarocki admits, "When I first saw it I thought, 'Who needs another maze game?' " Despite his misgivings, Stan knew "Pac-Man" had something. It sat in arcades for months in its drab yellow cabinet, drawing first a cult and later entire regiments to its deceptively simple concept: You used a standard four-way directional joystick to steer a gobbling creature through a maze filled with dots. Pursuing the gobbler were four varicolored ghosts. These ghosts could in turn be consumed by Paccy once he ate one of the four on-screen "power pills," which performed a Popeye/Spinach transformation for a short period.

"Pac-Man" proved to be seminal not only in establishing the maze-chase game as a genre, but in its ability to draw women to video gaming. Before "Pac-Man" appeared on the scene, arcades were macho madhouses filled with laser-wielding video badasses. "Pac-Man" was nonviolent, unthreatening, and fit the easy-to-learn/difficult-to-master guidelines that defined most coin-op success stories. It was also cute. The music, the graphics, the entire concept of conspicuous consumption enchanted and tempted women to electronic gaming in droves for the first time. What they learned, however, was that once your feet got wet, those blast-'em-up scenery-chompers could be interesting in their own right. The audience swelled, creating the megabuck industry that existed for almost three years on the success of this game alone.

Zork, on the other hand, wasn't only a horse of a different color—it was hardly a horse at all. Who actually wrote *Zork* is an interesting question, sort of video gaming's response to the mystery over which authors comprised the fellow we call Homer. It existed on an MIT mainframe for years and years, with various hands adding and subtracting and streamlining as it passed along the electronic grapevine of Computerville. Like the great oral tradition of storytelling, it passed from user to user until Infocom eventually yielded up the proper version we know today.





'Space Invaders' (top) struck like lightning; 'Miner 2049er' was a stroke of marketing genius.

"Zork" is a "text adventure." That means it's like radio theater for computers. Players are presented with a situation and can then ask questions and give directions to the computer. Most text adventures have been puzzle-filled quests involving map-drawing, saving-to-disk, marathon think-tank sessions, and other great traditions—all of which seem to be directly traceable to "Zork." There are now three "Zorks," and I can't think of a single computer that doesn't have its own version.

"Zork" redefined the concept of what comprised a "play session." Playing this program was much closer to sitting up at night with a mystery novel, in which you, the reader, had a direct relationship to the plot. The game not only created a new genre—including the Scott Adams line and such recent successes as *Ultima, Witness,* and *Wizardry*—it gave intellectuals a type of electronic entertainment to call their own. In the end, it may prove to have been the most meaningful program ever written.

Miner 2049er is, at this writing, the last word in world-shaking game programs. "Miner" is important for several reasons. For one thing, it established the genre of the multiscenario game, and greatly widened the perspective of home gaming.

But "Miner" will almost certainly be best remembered for its innovative marketing. Created initially for the Atari computers, it was simultaneously licensed *by system* to virtually every home video-game and computer maker walking, crawling, or tunneling beneath the earth. This was the first arcade action game that did not spring from the arcade parlor. The old practice had been for the coin-op company owning the rights to a hit game to sell one company exclusive ownership of the title. Thus, unless you owned an Atari system (as Atari often reminded you), you couldn't play "Pac-Man." "Miner" was the first egalitarian video game, and that helped make it a hit.

And that's it: five games that shook the world. Shake it they did, and each with good reason. But once the shaking stopped, a lot of games fell off the edges. The electronic gaming industry has already had its shakeout, with only the strongest companies surviving—and many people feel that, as with the Beatles, there will never be another, say, "Pac-Man."

Only time will tell.