Video Review

THE WORLD AUTHORITY ON HOME VIDEO

$1.75

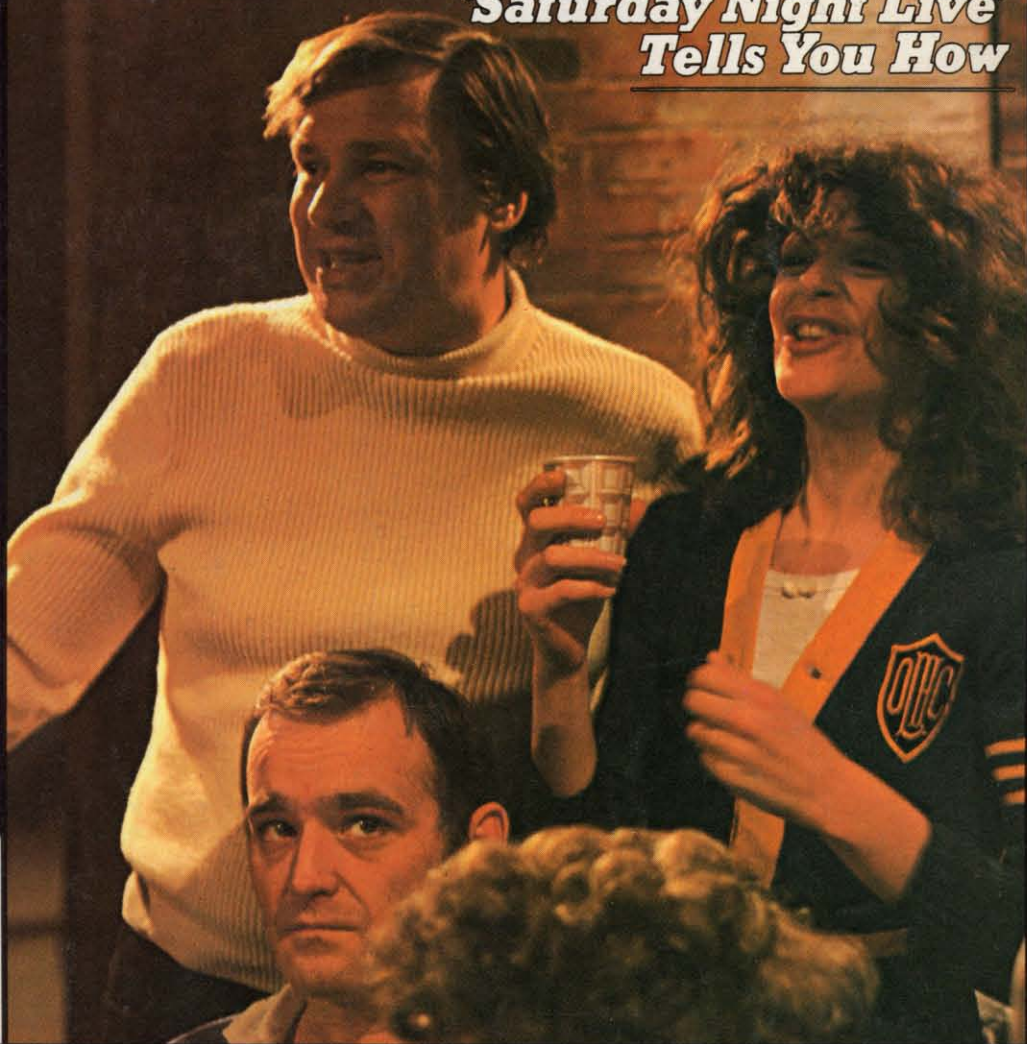**Test Report:**
Sony SL5600 VCR

Test Report:
Sampo 7509
Color TV

Test Report:
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VIDEO PIRACY:
The Industry Fights Back

DECORATING WITH VIDEO

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Video Review

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Programming your own games

Even untrained video game buffs can program their own games on this home computer.

For video gamers who shy away from the subject of personal computing, I bring heartening news: Using the easy-to-understand BASIC language of APF's well designed Imagination Machine, it's not at all difficult to begin writing your own video-game programs within the first hour or two of operation. Recently I did just that with no prior experience, and I am more than satisfied with creating games to fit my personal taste, games that reflect *my* interests and *my* sense of humor.

Your Own Programs

Video-game designers write programs on computers and store them on tape; manufacturers select the games they will mass-produce and sell on cassette and cartridge tapes based on decisions by their marketing departments. Obviously, you can't always get exactly what you want from a video game—unless you've considered learning to

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write your own program, in which case you've probably also realized that computers and their accoutrements can be difficult to work with, limited in what they can do or very expensive to own.

This is where the Imagination Machine fits in—and for under $600. Half of the system is a home-video-game center and half is a programmable home computer. Coupled, they become a do-it-yourselfer's dream for creating, storing and replaying original games of your own making.

Baseball Winner

First let's examine the video system, since it can be purchased alone for about $275. The MP-1000 unit is attractive, lightweight and small enough to fit on top of a portable TV. Two handheld controllers are attached by six-foot cables, so you can play from the comfort of your easychair. With the birth of the system, APF has introduced only nine game cartridges ($19.65 each), but these actually contain 20 different games. Besides, I can tell you how to create your own games.

In software, one of APF's best efforts is undoubtedly its *Baseball* cartridge—even people who don't like the sport will play this game

again and again just to see the teams running on and off the field at the end of innings. Seriously, the game is well animated by computer art figures, and provides as much room for strategy as for laughter.

Before throwing a pitch, the fielding player can either "shade" the outfielders toward right or left field or play a batter "straight away." Add to this a good variety of subtle and tricky pitches and the defensive player has a good deal of control. The four positions of the joystick give the pitcher a fast ball, slow ball, curve and slider that can be used in combinations to throw knuckle balls, change-ups and even something that looks like a spitball! The shortstop and second baseman are outstanding fielders and will fiendishly tag out a runner at third on a fielder's choice. The advantages with the batter include drawing walks, scoring from third on a last-out ground ball, hitting the ball in any direction, and the fact that the outfielders cannot move once the pitch is thrown.

Block That Punch

Right behind *Baseball* in popularity comes the *Boxing* cartridge—an action-packed 15 rounds of slugging it out with the computer or another player. In either case, the computer takes into account the number of punches connected and the degree of aggression shown by both fighters, and awards each round accordingly. The joystick controls a right jab, a left block and the forward/backward peddling of your boxer. Hint: Learn the blocking punch first—if you get hit five times without landing a punch, you are knocked out.

Other cartridges—*Brickdown, Blackjack, Casino, Catena (Othello), Hangman, UFO* and *Pinball*—and the different games on each are good, but also fairly standard.

What's truly fascinating is the addition of the computer that gives you the ability to create original

GAMES...

games. It has a 53-key typewriter using a unique system for entering command words in BASIC—don't be put off by the word; it's a simple language for communicating with the computer and is an acronym for "Beginner's All-Purpose Symbolic Instruction Code."

Imagination Machine and add-ons: from bookkeeping to baseball.

The Imagination Machine has capacities for 9,000 bytes of RAM and 14,000 bytes of ROM. And additional memory units, a printer, a mini-floppy disk and a MODEM telephone hookup are available to expand the system. APF sells half a dozen preprogrammed cassettes ($30 each) from Checkbook Balancing to Electronic Easel. However, it is usually more practical to write your own. The built-in cassette deck lets you store hundreds of programs and graphic displays.

How to Program

So how do you "talk" to the computer and create a game? For example, let's use a simple program I wrote after one hour of studying the BASIC language booklet supplied by APF. It's a game in which one player tries to guess a number from 0 to 100 that the computer randomly selects in memory.

Numbering my steps by tens, I began using statements that the computer would respond to. Typing PRINT causes the computer to print whatever follows the command. So the first few steps introduce the game and ask if the player needs instructions. Using an INPUT statement, the computer waits for a "Y" or "N" response from the player. If "Y" is typed, the instructions appear on the screen; if not, the computer skips ahead to begin the game, selects a random number and asks the player to input a guess. It then compares the guess to the original number and

reveals whether it was high or low. After this, the computer is told the appropriate message to print on the screen. So I created my first computerized video games in less than an hour.

Thumbing through the BASIC instruction manual, I found a chapter on plotting machines. A 16x32 graph shows the screen divided into 512 boxes, each of which can be subdivided into four smaller boxes and filled in with one of eight colors. There are instructions for drawing lines, creating shapes and plotting coordinates into a program. Paydirt!

Now I could try a more advanced project like *Hangman*, illustrated so that each time a player guesses a wrong letter another part is added to the body until the player is hanged. My roommate suggested I was biting off more than I could chew. Three hours later he was swinging from the end of my colorful hangman's platform, unable to guess the word "obnoxious" within the required number of turns. Already I had created a video game using only a few hundred steps, and 9,999 steps are available. I began to think about the expander modules.

To give you an idea of the depth and range of the games that you can program with no prior computer experience, here are some well-known examples: *Craps, Slot Machine, Dice, Poker, Roulette, Blackjack, Othello, Mastermind, Checkers, Logic Puzzles, Math Quizzes* and many other versions of popular board, word and number games.

Running Scared

Obtaining preprogrammed cassettes through clubs or computing magazines is no problem. Also, Tab Books has a number of titles containing "ready to run" game programs that you can copy or modify to suit your own taste. You will quickly learn to modify all PRINT statements you use, so that the computer takes on some of your personality. At the end of all my game programs, if the player chooses not to play again, the computer types: "Oh, scared, huh?"

Want to reread this and ponder creating your own video games a little longer? Oh, scared, huh?

End of run. □