

Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney

Faster Than A Bullet Atari's Super Game

The Atari Video Computer System is not quite up to home videogame state-of-the-art in its technology, but there's no doubting its popularity. Atari is making the top programmable arcade in the under-\$400 market.

There's also no denying that the company has won its current leadership position by defeating some fierce competition. Several games boast greater computing power, a couple are more attractively designed and at least one, Bally, features more vibrant color graphics than Atari.

Still, it is Atari that has acquired the reputation as the arcade addict's first choice. The reason: Atari makes more, and on the whole, better game software than any of its rivals.

Atari's games have a distinctive look and style that veteran players instantly recognize. Typically, the cartridges are easy to learn, but challenging to master. This results in videogames which can be played again and again without going stale.

Versatility is another big plus. With its line of 30 cartridges, Atari offers more different games than any other company. The availability of four controllers assures that game mechanics vary from cartridge to cartridge instead of falling into a repetitive pattern.

Another prime contributor to Atari's success is the presence of so many solitaire games in its software selection. You can play a few hard-fought games against the machine even when you can't dig up a human foe.

Accordingly, the proprietors of "Arcade Alley" have decided it's high time to examine some of the games Atari has introduced since our first look at the company's system last year.

Superman (CX2631) ushers in an exciting new era for home arcades. One round will convince any player that always-innovative Atari has done it again.

Put simply, there's no other videogame remotely similar to this one. The only pos-

sible comparison might be to the complex simulations that have entertained computer freaks for the last decade or so.

This solitaire game casts the player as Superman patrolling the city of Metropolis. When the on-screen character flies, runs or walks off the screen, the machine shifts to a view of an appropriate city block. In addition, four subway stations lead to an underground network that helps Superman crisscross the city fast as he fights for truth, justice and the American way.



Players begin the game by flying Superman to the phone booth where changes to Clark Kent. When he approaches the Metropolis Bridge cloaked in his secret identity, he sees disaster strike! A squad of nasties led by Lex Luthor blows the bridge to smithereens and then escapes, the foul deed complete.

Superman's mission: round up Luthor and his five henchmen one by one, cart them off to jail and then reassemble the bridge. The job done, Superman must return to the phone booth, change to Kent and walk over to the *Daily Planet* to file his story. A timer ticks off the seconds to give players a gauge of their performance

as a superhero.

Four kryptonite satellites launched by Luthor to seek out and weaken the man of steel complicate the task. There must be a romantic in the Atari game design department, since Superman can only regain his powers after he's zapped by the satellite by touching Lois Lane... (Fortunately for our hero, not to mention the nerves of harrassed players, Lois pops up automatically in the game every time Superman is attacked by a satellite.)

As if all this weren't enough, a pesky little helicopter zips overhead, trying its best to help Superman. More often, though, it just gets in his way by removing pieces of the Metropolis Bridge before the caped crusader can get it reassembled.

When you think you've got the superhero business down pat, Atari has two devilish options waiting in the wings. One doubles the speed of all crooks and satellites, though they don't achieve the rate of a speeding bullet, while the other removes the advantage of having Lois Lane pop up instantly to restore Superman's powers. These two variants will more than double the time it takes to successfully carry out a mission.

Strategy hints aren't as easy to formulate for this cartridge as for some of the more straightforward ones like *Breakout* or *Surround*. Players won't need super dexterity to win, but a super memory for visual landmarks is a terrific asset. A rudimentary knowledge of the Metropolis subway system, for example, sharply cuts the time spent flying on patrol. This, in turn, reduces Superman's exposure to those dangerous kryptonite meteors, increasing the odds that he will get a crook settled behind bars without interference.

A place in the Video Arcade Hall of Fame seems assured for this exciting new game cartridge. All the true arcade addict could desire would be several more along the same lines.

Bowling (CX2628) is an enjoyable version of a sport that is perfectly suited to the video arcade format. Atari's entry offers a long horizontal lane with a cartoon bowler that can be moved vertically for aiming the shot. Three different ball formats are available: straight, curve (the player can alter the ball's direction just once) and steerable (the player controls the ball during its entire roll down the alley). The curve is the most realistic, but the somewhat jaded residents of "Arcade Alley" have gravitated toward the steerable.

Complete automatic on-screen scoring is one of the game's best points. The section at the top of the playfield not only shows the frame-by-frame line score, but indicates whether the bowler has made a strike, spare or suffered an open frame each round. And as in real bowling, the player who gets a strike or spare in the 10th frame is awarded the appropriate number of bonus rolls.

Deft animation greatly enhances the

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game while supplying a realistic touch. Whenever the on-screen bowler knocks down all the pins, he jumps into the air with a victory dance. When you've got the little bowler doing a jig in every frame, it's time to use the difficulty option which results in a lot more heartbreaking splits.

One way to improve this solitaire or two-player game would be to add a little on-screen beer dispenser.

Purists may claim that **Miniature Golf** (CX2626) doesn't faithfully imitate the real sport, but most arcade addicts will be having too good a time with it to care. This intriguing game of obstacles and angles combines elements of billiards, bumper pool and miniature golf to create a challenging game for one or two players.

The nine-hole course places a wide array of stationary and moving obstacles in front of would-be Arnold Palmers. Players use the joystick controller to position the square clubhead for each shot.

The club's angle to and distance from the ball determine the direction and force of the stroke. A good hard shot may result in a hole-in-one or it can send the ball careening wildly around the green, leaving the golfer even further off the mark than when started.

Video Chess (CX2645) is a reward for Atari owners who have thus far resisted the lure of stand-alone computerized chessplayers. The cartridge, which sells for \$40 instead of the \$20 tag on most other Atari software, can give even the best player a challenge.

Video Chess offers eight levels of play, including one designed to help beginners learn the basic rules. The difference among levels is that the computer gets progressively more time to develop its move. The game responds within 10 seconds at level 1, but the machine is allowed to ponder for up to 10 *hours* per move at level 7.

Mastering play mechanics is easy. The player uses the joystick to position over the piece he desires to move. After pushing the red button to engage the mechanism, the player guides the piece to its new square.

Atari *Video Chess* even has some features that aren't found on all the stand-alone units. It castles and captures *en passant*, and it won't let the human player blunder into an illegal move.

Surprisingly, Atari left out one variation which would have been very useful. There

is no provision for using *Video Chess* with two human players letting it simply replace a regular set of chessmen and board.

That aside, *Video Chess* is a game that even the lowliest pawn pusher should find rewarding for many hours of enjoyment.

