

# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



## Ropin', Ridin', and Skatin' with Activision

The watchword in the programmable video-game field for 1982 is coming in loud and clear on all channels: software. After all, what good is having a machine that uses interchangeable cartridges if there isn't a large and growing supply of exciting new games?

The emphasis on software is especially pronounced with the Atari VCS. Atari will release the equivalent of a game a month under its own label, plus one or two that will be sold exclusively at Sears under the Tele-Arcade brand name, such as the already available **Stellar Track** and **Steeplechase**.

A new outfit, Imagic, plans to issue up to six titles for the Atari VCS and Mattel Intellivision systems. There are also juicy rumors circulating in video-game circles that some of the biggest names in the toy and game industry are eagerly eyeing the Atari player pool with ideas of getting into the software business, possibly as soon as the 1982 holiday season.

Meanwhile, Activision, the company that inspired the outbreak of software-mania when it began producing games for the VCS more than a year ago, is hardly resting on its laurels. The California-based company continues to show the way for all present and future independent video-game software suppliers. Activision's two newest releases epitomize the qualities that have contributed to the popularity of previous offerings—high-quality animated graphics and streamlined play-action—while incorporating some new ingredients into the success formula.

**Stampede**, the creation of Arcade Award-winning designer Bob Whitehead, has such charming visuals that many players will be surprised to find a highly challenging contest. This thrilling representation of ropin' and ridin' offers a graduated range of skill levels from hard to hardly possible.

Gamers direct a horizontally mobile cowboy located at the left side of the playfield with the joystick. When the game begins the electronic cowpoke spurs his steed into a loping gallop, lariat whirling above his steed. At the same instant a herd of varicolored "dogies" starts sprinting toward the right edge of the field. The on-screen range rider eventually overtakes the steers. The constantly moving fence in the background gives an impression of breakneck movement to the chase.

The cowboy can deal with the animals in two ways: by either lassoing them for points by pressing the action button or gently nudging them forward with the horse. The arcader must at all costs prevent the dogies from scampering off the screen. The game ends when three escape the playfield, though the game awards a bonus cow every time the arcader tallies 1000 points.

As difficult as it is to cope with the numerous steers, "mavericks" create the real crises. These black-hued strays stand facing the cowboy instead of running with the herd. They must either be roped—which accumulates bonus points—or they'll disappear off the screen, sure as shootin'.

Activision has achieved fame and fortune by accepting the risk of marketing new and unusual games instead of taking the safer path of publishing graphically stunning but ultimately derivative versions of proven sellers. Although "Stampede" is one of the few recent releases for the VCS to contain only 2K of read only memory (ROM) it is a brilliant illustration of what a little programming savvy and a lot of imagination can produce. It convincingly demonstrates that expanding memory isn't the only way to create solid, playable games.

**Ice Hockey**, the latest creation of Arkie Award-winner Alan Miller, is yet another example of Activision's innovative approach to programmable video-game software. Along with last year's **Championship Soccer**, it proves that cleverly conceived sports simulations can work on the Atari VCS.

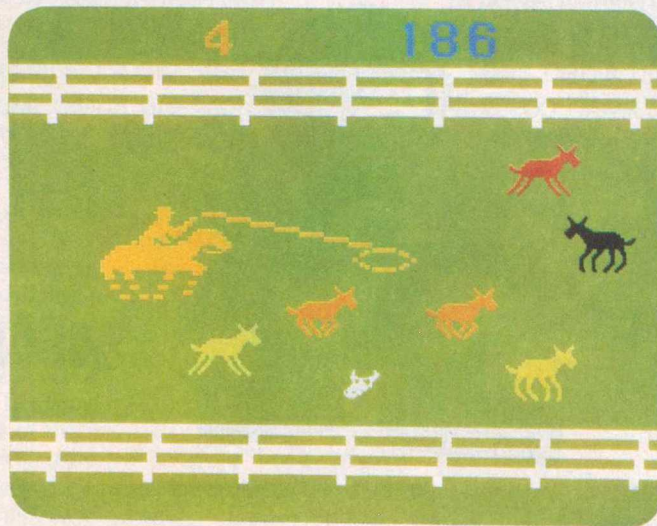
Miller's 4K-memory version of the world's fastest team sport limits each side to two skaters. The forward enjoys free run of the entire rink, while the defenseman/goalie is restricted to the home half of the ice. Possession of the puck is indicated by its placement on the hockey stick of one of the on-screen competitors. Each human coach has direct joystick

control over the electronic athlete closest to the puck, while the VCS handles movement of the off player.

When the all-important rubber disk is in the possession of a player, it automatically slides up and down the blade. Pressing the action button permits passing or shooting. The puck's position at the time the button is struck determines its direction of flight: straight ahead, left, or right.

The visual presentation softens the traditional overhead view of the action with a slight three-quarters perspective that gives the coaches the best of both approaches. But the most obvious de-

Bob Whitehead's 'Stampede': the visuals are charming and the challenge is great.



parture from the real-life sport in Activision's "Ice Hockey" is the total absence of anything resembling law and order inside the boards. Miller's creation is played without benefit of referee or linesmen, giving the skaters on both teams the opportunity to trip, slash, and otherwise commit mayhem with even more impunity than is enjoyed in today's National Hockey League.

This does not mean, however, that play automatically degenerates into a video-game version of the movie *Slap Shot*. The occasional well-placed trip is well and good, but the only way to win is to blend goon-squad tactics with more traditional hockey virtues of dexterous puck-handling and pinpoint passing.

Another important feature that separates Activision's "Ice Hockey" from most other video-game renditions of team sports is that it can be played solitaire as well as head-to-head. In fact, humans will generally take their lumps against the machine, at least the first few times. Effective programming makes the Atari play like a combination of Wayne Gretsky and Billy Smith, and simply flattening every-

## Activision has succeeded by marketing new and unusual game programs

thing that moves like the old Philadelphia Flyers will hardly stop the hail of pucks plunking into the net.

"Ice Hockey" shows that a video game doesn't have to open with the singing of "O, Canada!" and "The Star-Spangled Banner" to qualify as a reasonably solid simulation. This cartridge reproduces (if simply) most of the elements that characterize the sport. And what more could an ice-happy arcader ask for, eh?

Lovers of electronic games who haven't picked up VIDEO magazine's stablemate, *Electronic Games*, are missing the only newsstand publication devoted exclusively to their favorite hobby. Inspired by overwhelming reader reaction, Reese Publishing Company has given the green light to increase *EG* to bimonthly publication.

Each issue of *Electronic Games* is crammed with full-color stories and features about every aspect of electronic arcing from programmable video games and home computers to stand-alone devices and commercial amusement centers. Your masters of ceremonies are the familiar pair of Kunkel and Katz from "Arcade Alley."

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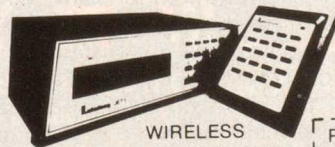
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