

# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Computer and Video Games

by Bill Kunkel and Arnie Katz

## Video Games Live!

Is there a place for the video game in the age of computers? That question has become more and more popular lately. In light of the mortality rate for cartridge manufacturers, it's only natural for dedicated gamers to wonder if the end is near.

However, though sales of computers and their programs rose dramatically last year—and will continue to soar in 1984—not all video-game consoles have yet been relegated to America's closets. Nor are they likely to be in the near future.

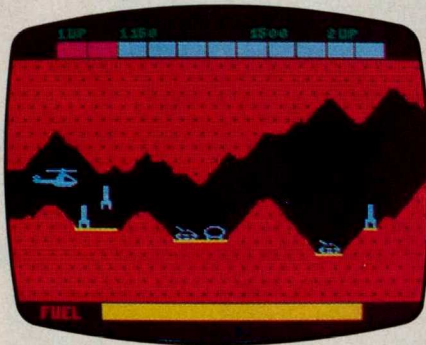
The main reason is the availability of "third wave" systems like the Atari 5200 and Coleco ColecoVision. Now priced as low as \$99 (for the ColecoVision), these fun machines can present games that boast graphic splendors and intricate play action on a par with the latest computer-game disks. The main difference between video-game and computer systems is that the latter's full keyboard makes possible a wide range of player input, opening the way for the creation of strategy and adventure titles that go beyond the action-dominated world of video-game cartridges.

Video games will likely find a secure niche within electronic gaming rather than fading away entirely. Just as video games eclipsed standalone games back in 1978-80, computer games are now supplanting video games as the hobby's cutting edge. Yet there's still a place for standalones. Similarly, computer games will seize the reins before the end of this year, but video-game paraphernalia should still have a prominent place.

Why should video games persist? Of the many reasons, the main one is that such systems still represent an outstanding entertainment value. Though the computer appears well on its way to becoming an integral part of the living-room "entertainment center," many second and third sets will continue to have video-game systems connected to them.

Here's what's new in recently published games for the ColecoVision and Atari 5200.

**Miner 2049er** (MicroFun/ColecoVision), a multiscreen climbing game, is



*Color, six game variations, and nine skill levels make up for 'Q\*bert's' nagging diagonal joystick orientation; but watch out for Coily the Snake.*

*Blast brigaders will have their hands full with 'Super Cobra' (left), but the Parker Brothers design wastes the second of the Atari 5200's two action buttons.*



a superb example of what is possible with the top-of-the-line video-game systems. Mike Livesay has done a solid job of adapting Bill Hogue's original design, even adding an extra, 11th screen that puts this cart one-up on the other versions of this popular contest. The object is to guide Bounty Bob safely over a series of playfields, each representing a different station in the mine. Bob must explore every inch of each station in his quest for the nefarious Yukon Yohan before an onscreen timer counts down to zero. Mutants spotted around the playfield can eliminate one of the player's three "lives" with a single touch, though Bounty Bob acquires brief immunity by touching one of the bonus objects.

The ColecoVision joystick is apt to cause a few control problems. Precise positioning is required to make Bob climb or descend a ladder, and that's not an easy task with the somewhat cumbersome ColecoVision stick. The speed of the action is also a bit fast. This is especially noticeable in the movement of the mutants, which shuttle back and forth nervously throughout the game. The quicker pace also has the effect of making the ColecoVision edition of this home-arcade classic one of the most challenging on the market. "Miner 2049er" earned the 1984

Arcade Award as "Electronic Game of the Year." Play a couple of rounds with this ColecoVision cart and you'll know why it's a favorite.

All versions of **Q\*bert** (Parker Brothers/ColecoVision) are afflicted by the same nagging problem: it is necessary to orient the controller diagonally so that movements of the stick correspond more closely with the antics of the block-hopper on the screen. Once players grow used to this quirk, however, they'll find the ColecoVision cartridge packed with the same color-changing fun as Myster's renowned coin-op.

All the elements that make "Q\*bert" popular can be found in this edition. As the player bounces the onscreen character from block to block on the pyramidal playfield, a variety of adversaries led by Coily the Snake attempt to keep hose-nose from changing all the blocks to the same color. There are six game variations: three one-player and three two-player, with a total of nine skill levels in each. The greater the difficulty setting, the faster the action moves and the more often Q\*bert must pounce on a block to recolor it properly. This is one of the best editions of "Q\*bert" around, comparable to those created for the leading home-computer systems.

Hop onto your winged steed, check your armor, and prepare to risk life and

limb in **Joust** (Atari/Atari 5200)—an electronic mounted clash of arms. This faithful rendition of the Williams play-for-pay machine gives one or two players the chance to see how they'd fare in a fantasyland where knights cross swords in midair.

The foreground of the "Joust" playfield is occupied by horizontal planes which offer landing spots for the knights. The background is an inky black that throws the characters into sharp relief. And what characters they are! The player directs a fighter riding an ostrich against multicolored villains mounted on buzzards. Each rider is armed with a long jousting lance. The winner of each confrontation is the rider who is highest in the sky at the instant when the lances meet. Buzzards sometimes leave behind an egg. The ostrich rider earns bonus points if he collects it in time to prevent the birth of a new buzzard.

As the action progresses, the once-solid ground at the bottom of the screen becomes submerged in a bubbling lava pit. Not only is falling into the fire instant death for any combatant, but the inferno is home to a grotesque creature which reaches out to snatch any being who flies too close to the flames. If the knight survives several waves, action moves to the "egg screen." Each ledge holds several eggs which the rider must collect before they hatch. The higher the skill level, the rougher the job. Its brand of medieval fantasy made "Joust" a coin-op winner, and the engaging theme has done much to make this game equally successful on the home front.

Next up is **Super Cobra** (Parker Brothers/Atari 5200). Parker Brothers is one of several companies that make games for both of the top "third wave" systems, and this monodirectional scrolling shootout proves that the company is adept at producing winners for both machines. The player takes command of a supercopter right out of *Blue Thunder*—but guiding even such a powerful weapon through the onscreen gauntlet of computer-controlled defenders will tax the skill of even the finest joystick wielders.

An onscreen gauge monitors the helicopter's progress across the multi-screen landscape. Travel over the plains is simple, but wait till you've got to steer through the cramped labyrinth tunnels bristling with surface-to-air missiles. One excellent feature imported from the arcade version is that it is possible to start a new game where the previous one finished. This allows even the worst player to see the game's varied visuals right to the end of the distance bar by dint of dogged persistence.

The home arcader maneuvers the copter using the joystick to adjust the

speed of the scroll and the flying machine's altitude. The crux of "Super Cobra" is learning to pilot the craft like an ace. Only practice will enable the craft to successfully negotiate the high-speed drops and turns of some of the passageways.

The only serious flaw in this otherwise wonderful action program is that Parker Brother's designers didn't take full advantage of the 5200's capabilities. The system's twin action buttons could've given the player the option of separate firing for bombs and missiles, as in the coin-op. Instead all weapons

are controlled by a single button, with the other remaining unused. Why? The controllers used with such computers as the Commodore 64 and Atari 800XL have only one action button. Evidently the desire to maintain general uniformity among various editions led Parker to avoid programming this extra dimension into the 5200 cart. (Surprisingly, the edition Parker is preparing for the ColecoVision will boast this dual control feature.)

That limit aside, 5200 "Super Cobra" is a visual feast—and a banquet for members of the blast brigade. **V**

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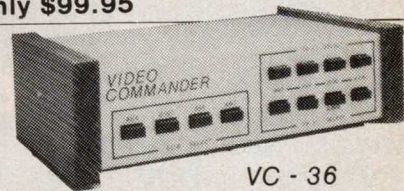
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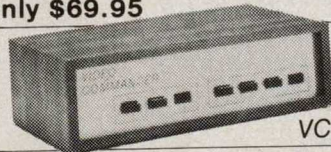
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