

Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney

Armchair Athletes Sports, Mattel-Style

Adapting team sports like football and baseball to the home arcade frequently poses severe problems for electronic game manufacturers. Yet the tremendous popularity of such software keeps designers hunkered over their work tables till the wee hours thinking up ways to translate the color and excitement of the "real thing" to the home screen.

With the capabilities of an authentic minicomputer at their disposal, Mattel designers have overcome many of the difficulties that have plagued previous attempts to create arcade sport contests. In fact, sports cartridges are the heart and soul of the company's lineup of games for the recently released Intellivision modular computer system. Virtually overnight, Mattel has seized leadership in the home arcade sports field.

The major problem with sports games boils down to control. How can one contestant effectively direct the on-screen actions of nine baseball or eleven football players simultaneously?

Thus far, designers have developed two possible solutions. The first, often used by Atari and to a lesser extent Magnavox, favors streamlining the sport. This means stripping it down to a few basic elements instead of trying for a comprehensive simulation. The result is a cartridge that mimics the flavor of a sport without realistically reproducing on-the-field action. Atari's **Home Run** baseball is a fine example of how well this impressionistic approach to sports can work.

The chief alternative involves transferring much of the responsibility for what's happening on the video screen to the machine. In both Bally and Magnavox **Football**, for example, player-control automatically shifts from the quarterback to the pre-programmed wide receiver as appropriate, while the system itself moves the rest of the offense around the gridiron.

Judging by the initial trio of sports cartridges we're reviewing this month, Mattel's design staff is firmly committed to the latter method. Their games achieve a high degree of realism without greatly sacrificing playability by letting the arcader make

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and easy to learn, but the games themselves take plenty of practice to play skillfully. The best advice is to try the slowest game speeds first and gradually increase the tempo as the control routines become second nature.

Major League Baseball (2614-0920A). Virtually all video game companies offer baseball, because it has proven to be the easiest team sport to transform into electronic form. Good as some of the other manufacturers' cartridges are, however, the Mattel version simply blows them away.



Intellivision's sports games "achieve a high degree of realism."

the most important decisions and assigning much responsibility for maneuvering the video athletes to the computer.

The unique hand controllers described in last month's *Arcade Alley* make this approach entirely workable. The keypad-action button-direction disc combination helps players juggle a wide range of variables even when the action gets fast and furious. Beginners may find it annoyingly necessary to glance away from the screen to input their moves just when their attention is needed most desperately, but the logical organization of the Mylar keypad overlays cures this problem with time. Players will only have to look away from the playfield occasionally once the game mechanics are mastered, since "touch keying" isn't really all that hard to learn.

This brings up an important warning for prospective players: Don't expect to become an instant expert. The rules are clear

The system's extra computing power makes it possible for batters to either swing for the fences or lay down a bunt and for runners to advance after a sacrifice fly, take leads, steal bases, or even get picked off if they become too reckless. For the first time in home arcade history, you can hit and run, rattle the enemy hurler with flashy base-running, and even try a suicide squeeze!

On the other hand, Intellivision **Major League Baseball** puts less emphasis on pitching than most other baseball games. The manager of the team in the field presses a spot on the edge of the direction disc to select the pitch: 12 o'clock is a smoking fast-ball, 6 o'clock is a lazy cange-up, while 3 and 9 o'clock produce, respectively, inside and outside curves. Would-be Ron Guidrys will probably prefer video baseball games that permit com-

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plete control of the ball's flight from the mound to home plate, but Mattel's version does yield a wide enough variety of pitches to keep most of the hitters honest.

The only other flaw in an otherwise ideal program is that all batted balls are grounders and must be handled accordingly. Unlike other games, however, all fielders are movable. The manager presses the picture of the player on the overlay whom he wants to move and then uses the direction disc. To throw the ball, just push the spot on the overlay that corresponds to the desired destination, and the computer takes over.

NFL Football (2610-0920A) will make video arcade lovers think they've died and gone to Super Bowl heaven. No other video football includes the variety of plays found in this cartridge. Coaches can choose from among 160 offensive combinations and 10 different defensive formations.

As with most other home arcade versions of football, the coach can actively move only one player at a time, while the machine takes care of the rest. On offense, this means directing the quarterback until he passes, at which point control automatically switches to the receiver. What makes **NFL Football** so different is the amount of pre-programming the coaches can use to guide the rest of the team.

During the huddle, the coach of the team with the ball punches in the type of play (run, pass, or kick), one of the nine possible formations, and if it is a pass, the identity of the receiver and the zone of the field to which the quarterback will direct his aerial. At the same time, the other coach chooses one of the defensive sets, though the game provides the chance to call a defensive audible to alter the alignment at the line of scrimmage.

The sole controlled defender must be used carefully. An occasional blitz keeps the other team honest, but too much gambling gives too many scoring opportunities. Occasionally, the computer-operated defensive men will pull off great plays when the human coach bungles, but it isn't wise to count on it.


NBA Basketball (2615-0920A). This one will have fans cheering from the moment the two three-man teams lope onto the court for the opening tap until the final whistle. The trapezoidal playfield gives coaches a court-side view of the action; grandstand, scoreboard, and functional 24-second shot clock set an appropriate stage for four quarters of basketball.

The passing system is superb. The keypad overlays display each team's offensive half-court divided into nine zones. Pushing a zone on the keypad sends the ball to the designated spot. The computer directs one of the passer's teammates there to catch it, if possible, which im-

mediately switches control to that player. Coaches can tell which on-screen man is under their direction at a glance, since players turn a darker color to reflect such active status.

On defense, the gamer moves only one man, but the computer-controlled ones more than hold up their responsibilities. They go for the steal, try to block shots and, in general, make life miserable for the team with the ball. When first learning the game, don't be surprised if the computer-run men turn in most of the outstanding plays.

The offensive team can choose either a set or jump shot, with the computer determining success based on court position and type of shot. Blocking can be murderously effective, so a wise coach keeps a finger poised on the proper key whenever the other team has the ball.

Strategy is the same as for genuine basketball: pass to the open man, work for a high-percentage inside shot, and get back quickly on defense. The only elements this game lacks are free throws and free agents. There's also no video version of Darryl Dawkins to smash your backboards, but don't bet that the wizards at Mattel aren't already working on it. 

Nautilus Complex

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hips and thighs, eat right to keep fit, or prevent sports injuries. Videocassettes compatible with today's recorders will be on the market next year. NTN will also produce a series of sports training tapes for weekend, college, and professional athletes. Top pros from all sports will talk about proper training techniques, particularly how to lose fat and gain strength using Nautilus machines, plus give flexibility drills and instruction in honing skills. The tapes take viewers through specific body movements—perhaps showing them how to put more power into their first serve. Freeze frame and slow-motion special effects give them time to compare themselves with the top athletes on screen. "Most people exercise to play or run better, or to handle the stresses of everyday life," Farnham says. "We're going to grab them in their living rooms and have them grunt and groaning into the 21st Century."

Video equipment will also help orthopedic surgeon Michael Fulton do biomechanical research at the next-door Orthopedic Clinic of Lake Helen. The young sports-medicine specialist just reopened the clinic, which had been moribund for a year and a half as Nautilus searched for the right person to run it, Farnham says. Special video effects will aid Dr. Fulton's work in the human-performance laboratory and two Olympic-size swimming pools being built by Nautilus to study athletes' physiological profiles and potential for injury.