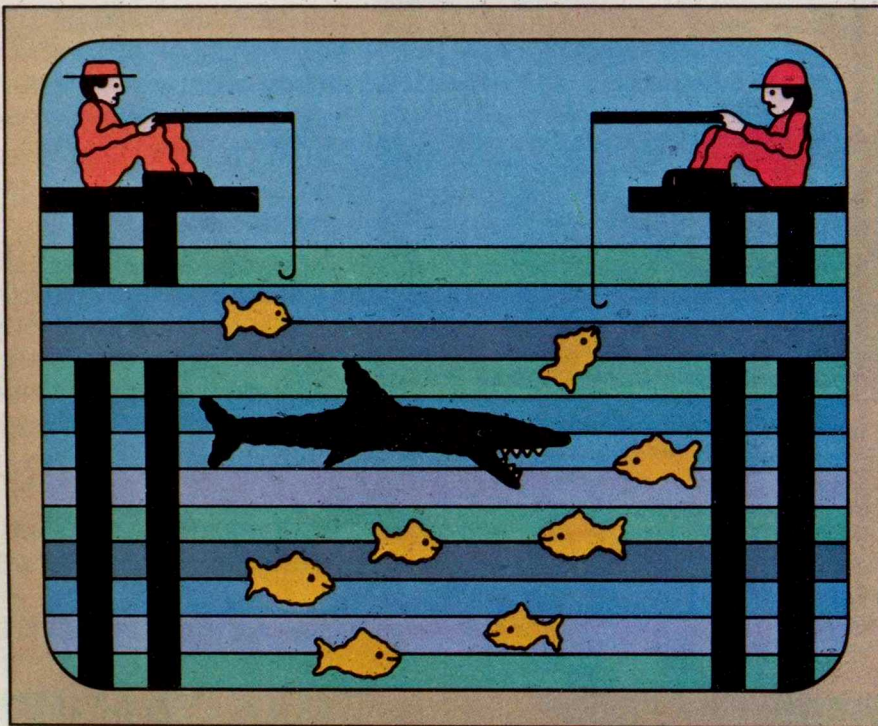# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney

A New Era Begins

Activision Exploits Atari's Success

Fishing Derby, from Activision, is one of four new games compatible with the Atari system.

Hardware is certainly important, but there's no denying that it's software that makes the world of programmable video games go 'round. In view of the excellence—and essential parity—of all the currently available systems, it is obvious that the quantity and quality of cartridges made for each brand of home arcade are paramount in the minds of players. And, of course, nothing builds the arcader's enthusiasm faster than a clutch of exciting new electronic games.

The four new cartridges we're covering this month are even more exciting than usual. In fact, they represent a significant milestone in the history of electronic games for the home screen. For the very first time, an independent supplier is marketing software designed for use with an *existing* home arcade system.

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Activision, Inc., based in Sunnyvale, California, has elected to enter the video game field with a four-cartridge line compatible with the Atari machine, the most popular unit at the present time, with more than 2,000,000 sets now in use. Activision's president, James H. Levy, makes no bones about the fact that producing software for other video game systems definitely figures in his company's future plans. Levy hopes to develop Activision into an electronic publishing company which would make software for all home arcades that are in widespread use in this country.

Even if Activision's initial releases hadn't been good—and they are all solid, playable games—the sudden appearance of an independent software source would have to rank as headline news for gamers. Other, similar video publishers will spring up in the wake of Activision's success. Not only will competitive pressures tend to insure

products of high quality, but the increased number of suppliers will give the home arcade owner the chance to select from literally hundreds of programs instead of just a handful.

It's something of a shame that Activision's packaging is closely modeled after Atari's, since several other suppliers are now using much better storage box configurations. Perhaps the company will eventually develop its own standardized carton once the line has grown sufficiently.

The instruction folders, on the other hand, definitely break new ground. Each rulebook credits the designer of the cartridge and gives the creator a full page to comment on the game's finer points. Players not only get a better feel for the men who make the software, but they also get an opportunity to learn about the rationale behind the various elements that comprise a game. Sometimes, knowing the designer's intentions can help guide you toward winning strategies that might not otherwise be immediately apparent.

Since four former Atari senior designers form the core of Activision's R&D staff, it's hardly surprising to find a number of similarities between the two companies' approaches to software. Both lines feature thoroughly tested games that emphasize solitaire as well as head-to-head competition. Activision cartridges are more ornate graphically, slightly elaborating upon the design simplicity that characterizes Atari products to yield a distinctively attractive look.

Boxing (AG 002) demonstrates Activision's willingness to strike out boldly in new directions. Players use the joystick controllers to direct the on-screen pugilists, colored black and white for easy identification, around the ring, which is viewed from an overhead perspective. To prevent **Boxing** from becoming needlessly complex, the computer takes charge of punch selection. The arcader decides when to throw leather by pushing the action button, but the machine then chooses the appropriate blow based on the relative positions of the fighters within the squared circle.

Rounds last only two minutes rather than the regulation three, but this proves to be a kindness to the players. Only Rocky could go a full 15 without needing a thumb transplant. The fistic action is so intense that many will require a rest period between rounds. We found that three rounds for a preliminary, five for a main event, made good matches.

The best tactic, as drawn from real boxing, is to stick and run. Keep jabbing—and try to dance away from your foe's long-range punches. One thing's for sure, flat-footed sluggers won't win many bouts in Activision Boxing.

Once an opponent is immobilized—against the ropes or in a corner—close in for the kill by keeping the action button depressed to pound out devastating combinations. Knockouts, which occur when a

boxer scores 100 points' worth of punches in a single round, are very rare. If your boxer tallies less than 50 points in two minutes, it indicates the need for a lot more aggressiveness in the ring.

Dragster (AG 001) is the least of the four Activision releases. Trying to screen down a measured mile track for time makes an interesting premise, but the clumsy play mechanics are annoying.

The problem is that the design is ill-suited to the Atari control system. The joystick functions as a combination clutch and shift, while the action button regulates speed. Unfortunately, it is just about impossible to achieve the necessary gradations in speed using what is essentially an on-off switch.

Dragster is undeniably clever and, with a lot of patience, is probably fun. We feel that many arcaders would do better to investigate other Activision cartridges first, however.

Checkers (AG 003) brings one of the world's classic strategy games to the home screen. Activision's version features solitaire play at three skill levels and will also function as an electronic board for a pair of live opponents.

The higher the skill level, the more time the computer takes to formulate its moves. At the "novice" level, the machine considers its next play for five seconds or less, but it may deliberate for up to four minutes in an "expert" contest. Thus, beginners can finish a solitaire game in just 15 minutes, but experts should allow closer to two hours for a match.

This cartridge will give just about any checkers player a good tussle. The machine's only real weakness is that it lacks the killer instinct. It sometimes hangs back from delivering the *goup de grace* during the endgame, giving the human player an occasional chance to weasel out of impending defeat.

Fishing Derby (AG 004) is one of those rare video games that should prove enchanting to the whole family—even those without lightning reflexes. Easy to learn

straight from the box, it offers youngsters better animation than Saturday morning TV and provides adults with a subtle game of skill.

The playfield depicts fishermen sitting on docks located at the extreme left and right sides of the screen. In the rippling water below, fish swim back and forth at varying depths. (The deeper the fish, the more points are earned by landing it.) Moving the joystick from side to side extends and retracts the anglers' fishing poles, while shifting the joystick up and down raises and lowers the lines. Players reel in their catch by either pushing the action button or slowly coaxing the fish to the surface.

Sound easy? It would be, except for the shark that constantly patrols the waters between the docks. His favorite pastime is gobbling up your catch, and he's so fast that any fish that even grazes a rear fin is instantly eaten. The essence of winning strategy is to delay reeling in a prize until the shark is safely headed away from your pier.

Imaginative, colorful, and fun, **Fishing Derby** is one more reason for Atari owners to applaud Activision's debut on the video game scene. **V**