

# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney, Jr.



## 'Quest for the Rings' and 'Asteroids': Holiday Classics

"What do you buy for the home arcader who has everything?" With the 1981 holiday season barreling toward us like a runaway freight train, more than one VIDEO reader is undoubtedly mulling over that problem with mounting desperation.

If the person to whom you'd like to tender a present happens to be a co-author of "Arcade Alley," you've got a big job ahead of you. On the other hand, any other game-lover should pose only a minimal problem. Just gladden the heart of that favorite gamer with one of the dynamite new cartridges video-game manufacturers are introducing this season for precisely that purpose.

Since many gamers will be making some pretty important buying decisions in the next month or so, we'll take time from stringing flashing Christmas lights

across "Arcade Alley" to tell you all about two of the most fantastic cartridges ever offered to home arcaders. And the best part: they're so new that no electronic gamers on your gift list will have had a chance to buy them yet.

"You are about to become a legend in your own time," begins the instruction booklet for **Quest for the Rings** (Odyssey). It could just as easily have read "you are about to play an instant classic" because this marvelous new cartridge for the Odyssey<sup>2</sup> has "super hit" stamped all over it in gold letters. "Quest for the Rings" boldly ventures where no video game has gone before. For the first time, designers have blended aspects of the board game and the video game to produce a vigorous new hybrid unlike anything ever seen in home arcading.

This one-to-three player contest chal-

lenges gamers to find and capture the 10 magic rings which the malevolent Ringmaster has hidden deep beneath some of the 23 castles shown on the beautiful colored mapboard that comes with the game. This Sauron-like incarnation of evil has not left his valuable treasures unguarded either. All manner of fell creatures from barbaric orcs to fire-breathing dragons inhabit the deep labyrinths where the rings reside, and the monsters' only goal is to prevent adventurers from completing their quest. The idea behind the innovative hybrid format is to shift certain jobs that the Odyssey<sup>2</sup> system would otherwise have to handle onto the shoulders of the players. Adding human brainpower to the equation makes it possible to create a home-arcade game more complex than previously attempted.

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**'Quest for the Rings', from Magnavox's Odyssey series boasts innovations that make it a unique home-arcade challenge.**



pression on the surface of the tube than it can handle. This can cause the image of the bright light source to "burn" into the surface of the tube, leaving its mark long after the camera has been aimed somewhere else. If the light is bright enough the damage can become permanent. Newer camera-tube designs, such as the Hitachi Saticon tube, used by Hitachi and several other companies under license, eliminate much of the "lag" problem. And still other newer designs, such as the Hitachi MOS camera, which uses a metal-oxide semiconductor target instead of a vidicon tube, are virtually burn-resistant.

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To insure that every session of "Quest for the Rings" is completely unique, a gamer assumes the role of Ringmaster. Using an attractive set of printed wooden tokens, the Ringmaster decides which castles will harbor rings and/or monsters. The monsters and treasures are represented by small tokens which fit invisibly under the larger ones symbolizing the citadels. The reverse side of each castle marker shows which of the four different kinds of labyrinth is beneath it. Enter the good guys. Two arcaders have free choice of any of four different heroes, each with a special power. They may be selected in any combination, but arcaders must take care to pick ones that work well together because "Quest" is a game of teamwork. Players cooperate rather than compete against each other to complete the mission.

The character choices are: the warrior, who wields a magic blade; the wizard, who can cast spells; the chameleon, who can become invisible and undetectable to the monsters when he dons a mirror cloak; and the phantom, who can walk through walls at will. The heroes move around the mapboard, roving from place to place in search of the 10 mystic prizes. Whenever the pair land on a castle, the Ringmaster consults the tokens on that spot and keys in the appropriate information as indicated by a special overlay which fits on top of the Odyssey<sup>2</sup>'s diaphragm keyboard. (If there are only two players available, one doubles as the Ringmaster and lets the other choose which direction the team takes on the map.)

Even this lengthy description barely scratches the surface of "Quest for the Rings." If you only buy one Odyssey cartridge this year, this is definitely the one to get.

**Asteroids** (Atari) is the single most eagerly awaited cartridge in the history of video gaming. Even Atari was astounded when retailers began taking \$5 deposits

on the title as far back as last Christmas. The huge advance orders for "Asteroids" compelled the manufacturer to increase its ROM-cartridge production capability to handle the demand. Atari previewed the VCS version of its coin-operated champion at several trade shows early in 1981—to mixed reviews. Despite the addition of color, the home edition looked a bit ragged and play was far from perfect.

The main barrier was the quadrascan system used by the commercial-arcade machine. Coin-op "Asteroids" features space rocks moving onto the screen from all directions at varying speeds. The VCS cartridge, limited by the rasterscan system used by TV sets, had to settle for bisecting the field, with asteroids on the left side moving upward while meteorites on the right moved down the screen. The illusion did not impress many. Not wanting to disappoint its millions of fans, Atari sent the game back to the design department for more work. The company's creative staff rose to the occasion by developing a bank-switching technique that fools the VCS into reading twice as much game program as experts had previously thought possible.

The cleaned-up and refurbished VCS "Asteroids" is a major triumph. The graphics are crisp, the action is fluid, and the options include both shield and hyperspace. The asteroids move at either of two speeds. At the faster one, the game has all the frenetic excitement of its coin-op cousin. Playing with the difficulty switches set to the "A" position adds the complication of deadly UFOs which zip onto the screen when least expected to further increase the thrills. Asteroids streak all over the field as those clever folks at Atari make us forget we're playing a cartridge with far less programming than the big commercial-arcade devices. The space debris starts at the outer edges of the playfield and slowly edges toward the center, like the walls closing in on the heroine in an old horror movie. The illusion is truly masterful.

The verdict: "Asteroids" for the VCS system is fantastic. It boasts the most distinctive sound effects since "Space Invaders," sharp graphics, and arcading action that never quits. It's no accident that Atari has already announced that "Asteroids" will be the game used in this year's nationwide VCS tournament. Any Atari VCS owner who has ever fed a pocketful of change into an "Asteroids" or "Deluxe Asteroids" machine in the local electronic-game palace should consider the home version a high priority.

So make a friend happy this holiday season. And as long as you're buying, pick up another for yourself. After all, every gamer needs a treat, and this four-star introduction from Atari certainly fills the bill.



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