

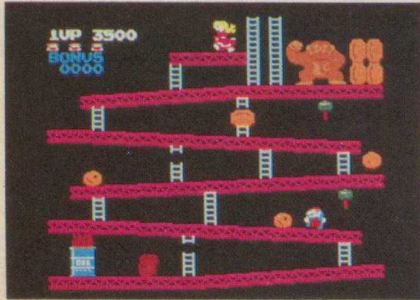
Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

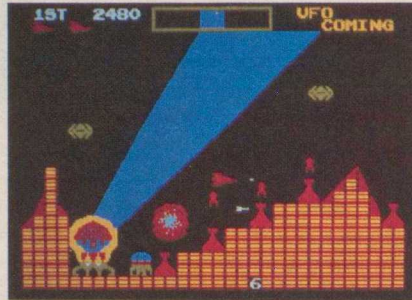
by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



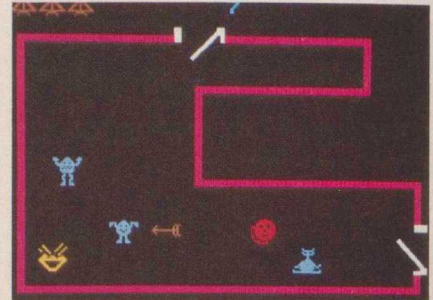
ColecoVision—The New State of the Art



Donkey Kong



Cosmic Avenger



Venture

Eager anticipation has filled the hearts of gamers since Coleco began demonstrating its "third wave" video-game system at major trade exhibitions about 18 months ago. The machine, ColecoVision, appeared to promise much though the details have proven sketchy enough to encourage all kinds of speculation about what the home arcade would actually be like.

Now we know. A package containing a ColecoVision console and three cartridges recently arrived here at "Arcade Alley." After giving them the usual rigorous playtesting, the easiest way to sum up our findings is to say that awe has replaced anticipation. Though it may be dangerous to make sweeping predictions about a whole system based on three games, it is hard to keep enthusiasm for this product within reasonable bounds. The cartridges are that good, that entertaining.

Rather than continuing to wax ecstatic, let's get down to cases.

Home versions of **Donkey Kong** (Coleco/ColecoVision), a Nintendo coin-op smash, are popping up everywhere. This officially licensed edition is the best of the lot. The ColecoVision cartridge pares away a few frills like the animated sequences that occur at the beginning of each game and between the individual display screens, but the essential play routine is largely intact.

The arcader assumes the role of Mario, an intrepid maintenance engineer who must scale a half-completed building to rescue his kidnapped girlfriend from the giant gorilla Donkey Kong. The ape attempts to stop Mario on the first screen by

rolling barrels along exposed girders. Mario must either avoid these obstacles or leap over them by pressing the action button at the proper instant. Hammers are positioned at various points along the climb. If Mario obtains one, he has a few seconds of immunity from the barrels and can smash them for bonus points.

The action moves farther up the building once Mario reaches the top of the initial display screen. The second scenario requires Mario to remove the bolts holding the huge ape's roost in position. Semi-intelligent fireballs block the way and must receive the same treatment as the barrels. Removal of all the bolts automatically switches the action to the final phase. Our hero must ascend to the top of the screen by using the elevators already operating in the half-finished building.

Mario trots along a girder when the player moves the joystick to the left or right. To climb a ladder, the arcader spots the on-screen character on the bottom rung and then pushes the controller stick directly away from him or herself. Descending is done the opposite way. The arcader can select one- or two-player mode and choose from among four levels of difficulty before starting a new game. Information is easily entered using the keypad. Pushing the asterisk replays the same game variation, while pushing the "#" key summons the menu so the player or players can pick a new set of variables.

Sound and graphics are exemplary. It's hard to believe, when studying the screen, that one is playing a video game rather than a highly advanced computer simulation. The colors are deep and rich, and the

movement of figures like Mario and Donkey Kong is so smooth that it's almost like watching an animated cartoon.

"Donkey Kong" is a real grabber that will make most electronic gamers go ape.

Next up is **Cosmic Avenger** (Coleco/ColecoVision). Scrolling shootouts appear to be the coming thing now that the frenzy over maze-chase games has begun to die down. Games with bidirectional movement like "Defender" (Atari), "Chopper Command" (Activision), and "The Empire Strikes Back" (Parker Brothers) are already popular. Now it's the turn of the one-direction scrollers in which the player's ship must run a multi-scenario gauntlet. Though the action in "Cosmic Avenger" is not as free-ranging as in contests in which the ship can scroll left as well as right, the game packs more than enough excitement in its three screens to satisfy any lover of arcade-style action games.

In the level-one-difficulty version the player commands a fleet of five fighters, available one at a time. Pressing the left-side action button permits the craft to drop a bomb, while depressing the right stud fires a laser blast directly ahead. Both operations can be performed simultaneously—a good thing, because there's no shortage of enemies hoping to turn your ship into a heap of scrap metal.

There are three phases. Successfully negotiating all of them earns the gamer the right to start all over again. The first scenario sends the player streaking over a futuristic city bristling with all kinds of defenses. The player can monitor the whereabouts of the laser-firing flying

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saucers on a small radar screen located at the top-center of the field, but the heat-seeking missiles launched from the ground give no such warning. Sometimes, only a burst of forward speed can help the human pilot outrun death. Unfortunately, this also speeds up movement of the UFOs, so it hardly rates as a free ride.

After the city comes a series of plateaus patrolled by missile-firing tanks. Slow speed and low altitude are the keys in this situation. Stay behind the tanks and pick them off like sitting ducks while they're crossing the mesas. Of course, it is still necessary to avoid the swopping UFOs and their deadly fire. The player's craft enters an underground channel following the skirmish with the tanks. Underwater missiles, mines, and torpedo-firing submarines are the main dangers though reduced visibility is also a handicap.

There is no limit on available fuel or ammunition, so "Cosmic Avenger" is definitely a game for blast-'em-up fans. You'll have to keep moving and shooting right from the opening seconds or the manifold dangers will quickly overwhelm your single ship. Primarily a solitaire contest, "Cosmic Avenger" is also playable by two arcaders, each completing a round at a time in rotation. Of the four difficulty levels, the top one offers a much greater challenge than the introductory setting, so this game cannot be mastered in the first week. The beautiful graphics do credit to the Universal-produced coin-op on which "Cosmic Avenger" is based. Great fun.

Some coin-oppers thought Exidy's action-adventure game **Venture** (Coleco/ColecoVision) was a little out of place in commercial arcades because its complex play routine and strategies took longer for players to learn than the typical quarter-snatcher. "Venture" seems most at home as a ColecoVision cartridge. Here, it may finally achieve the tremendous popularity many think this design richly deserves.

The arcader uses the joystick to maneuver Winky, the bow-armed on-screen adventurer, through the corridors and rooms of a multi-story dungeon. Winky is depicted as a tiny cursor when in a hall but turns into an irresistably cute character once he actually gets into one of the four rooms on each floor. Each room contains a treasure and a set of guardians. Winky must snatch the prize while fighting or dodging the monsters. Each kind of creature has its own mode of attack, so the action is reasonably varied as the rooms are explored. Beautifully executed

background music sets a brisk pace and makes events seem even more exciting.

Some rooms, such as those with moving walls or monsters that appear only after the prize is seized, are devilishly tricky. You can't ponder too long, though, because tarrying draws the attention of the green-faced hall-monsters. Unlike the room guardians, these nasties are totally unkillable. They must be avoided in the corridors, and when one actually enters a room in search of a lackadaisical Winky, a bloody end is virtually assured.

Three cartridges, three hits—a fine start for a new system. The next 12 months will tell whether or not Coleco can maintain this torrid pace and challenge the biggies for supremacy. If arcaders can expect this kind of quality, don't bet against it. 