Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney

Sport Fan's Delight

Skiing, Volleyball, Hockey

One area in which programmable home arcades clearly boast an advantage over the commercial variety is sports games. It's not because the people who own the nation's electronic fun palaces harbor an unreasoning hatred of athletics. The noticeable scarcity of sports-oriented machines in public arcades is largely a matter of economics.

Operators of commercial arcades must collect a veritable torrent of quarters to

abstract type of electronic game such as Space Invaders. It's true that a single inning of video baseball doesn't take much time, but string nine of them together to make a complete game and you're talking about at least a half hour.

The manufacturers of software for programmable home video games are under no such constraints. In consequence, all the major suppliers have plenty of cartridges aimed at sports-loving arcaders.
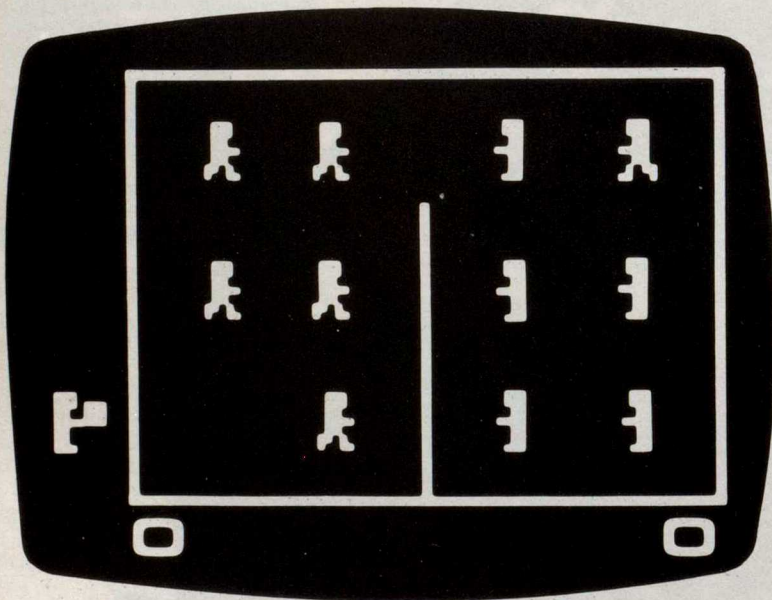
Magnavox's Volleyball has a variable skill level keyed to the ability of the player.

meet overhead expenses and still make a decent profit. The only way an arcade can achieve this high volume is by fostering a rapid turnover of customers. This, in turn, forces a decided emphasis on games of short duration. An arcade that allows its customers to play a coin-operated machine for 15 or 20 minutes at a stretch on only a single quarter would soon have a "for rent" sign plastered to its front door.

Apart from a few exceptions like skeet shooting, most sports simulations take significantly longer to play than the more

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Skiing (AV-480), the latest offering from ActiVision by ace designer Bob Whitehead, gives stay-at-home ski bums everything they'd normally find out on the real slopes except wind burn and snow bunnies. There are already several creditable electronic ski races on the market, but this may well be the most realistic and exciting simulation of the sport so far.

The program's 10 variations, divided evenly between slalom and downhill courses, encompass an unlimited variety of runs. Games one through four challenge arcaders with a series of slalom courses of ascending levels of difficulty, varying the number of gates that must be successfully negotiated and increasing the

steepness of the slope to speed up the run. Games six through nine do essentially the same thing for the downhill, sending the on-screen skier careening down a hill dotted with obstructing trees and treacherous stone outcroppings.

Variations five and 10 pose the severest test of skill, pitting the player against courses which are new and completely different in every game. The difficulty switches provide the ultimate challenge, since they can make it harder for the skier to stay on the course and dodge the obstacles.

The on-screen scoring is similar to the format ABC used in its televised coverage of the Lake Placid Winter Olympics. In the slalom, for example, a digital clock ticks off elapsed time while a counter subtracts the gates as the skier passes each one. Hitting a gate won't stop a run, but it does incur an automatic five-second penalty.

Even more than the visually arresting graphics and the swooshing sound effects, it's the control system that makes Skiing so fascinating. Moving the joystick points the tips of the skis, and they, in turn, determine the path of movement for the on-screen athlete. Pushing the stick to either the left or right turns the skis away from vertical alignment in the desired direction. The longer the stick is pushed, the closer the skis come to the horizontal plane.

Maximum speed is attained when the skis point straight down the hill. On the other hand, wheeling them around to the horizontal brings the racer to a complete stop.

Control is feather-light. A tap on the joystick will be sufficient to reorient the skier sufficiently to make all but the sharpest turns. A little practice at the slowest speeds should enable arcades to find the proper touch after a couple of runs down the slope.

Players confident of their ability on the slope are invited to join ActiVision's own ski team. To qualify, a player must complete a slalom run using variation three (an expert hill with 30 gates) in less than 28.2 seconds. Those beating that time are encourage to take a photo of the TV screen and send it to ActiVision, 759 E. Evelyn Ave., Sunnyvale, CA 94086, to take their deserved place in the Alpine pantheon.

Volleyball (AA 9422), from Magnavox, proves that a cartridge can be a bad simulation but an excellent game. Volleyball is a not-very-realistic version of the indoor sport most arcaders will remember well from high school gym classes and innumerable nudist magazines.

Unwary players may be deceived by the perspective of the playfield. What at first glance looks like an overhead view of a regulation volleyball court with two teams of six arrayed in the traditional two rows of three is a side view with two vertical colums of three players each per team.

The joystick moves and positions the team as an integral unit. The direction in which a player is traveling when intersect-

ing the ball determines the path of flight. Pushing the "action button" at the instant contact is made produces a deadly spike—boosting the ball's speed and sharpening the angle of its trajectory.

Magnavox has recently remedied its previous lack of solitaire cartridges by providing one-player options on all of their newer arcade-style games. Volleyball is the company's first sports cartridge that includes both one-and two-player variations. The computer is a stimulating opponent with a variable skill level keyed to the ability of the player. A solitaire contest will rarely be decided by more than a couple of points.

The best strategy is to position your team so that the top player in the front row blocks the space above the net. This facilitates quick return of the opposing team's shots and yields many opportunities for effective spikes. Since there's no limit to the number of times a team can hit the ball before sending it over the net, maneuvering for a really good shot is a game-winning tactic.

Hockey (1114) is another "instant classic" from Mattel Electronics for use with its modular Intellivision system. Despite the fact that each team is composed of only three skaters and a goalie, instead of the usual complement of six, this cartridge emphasizes aspects of the rink sport that other videogames all too often gloss over or neglect outright.

The most important of these is the checking game. A defender can use his stick to send a puck-carrier sprawling on the ice, and gain possession. The same tactic can also be used when the two teams are attempting to muscle each other around the net, but the computerized "referee" may detect such an infraction and send the offending skater into the penalty box for a couple of minutes. Since the ref only calls about one out of every three potential penalties, most coaches will want to dare such goon tactics occasionally to keep the other side from getting too complacent.
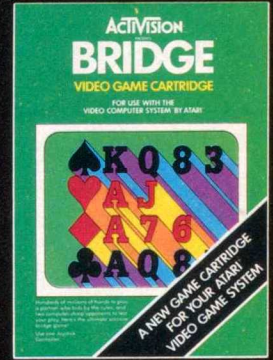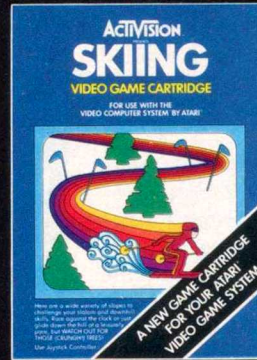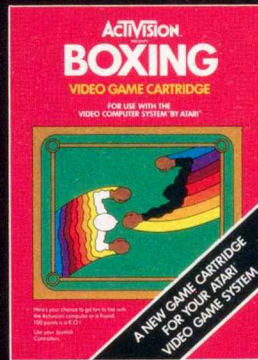
Another bold innovation is that the computer directs both goalies. This eliminates the problem of having to switch control from the skating team's captain to the goalie when the opposing side is close to a score. In practice, the goalies in this game are harder to bet than just about any human opponent. To score, a team must keep shooting, blasting rebounds back toward the net again and again. Once the netminder makes a sprawling save he is, just like in real hockey, much more vulnerable. Defense-minded arcaders may want to keep a skater back to help guard the goal crease.

Movement accurately mirrors real on-ice action. Players skate faster in a straight line and slow accordingly when making a turn. Add a simple-to-use passing and shooting system, appealing visuals and appropriate sounds, and the result is a hockey buff's delight.
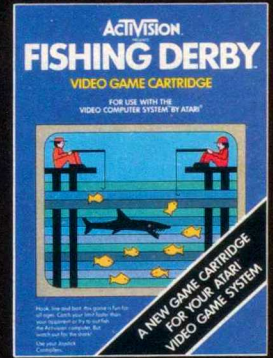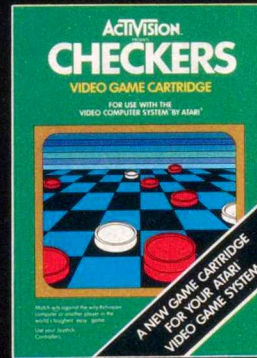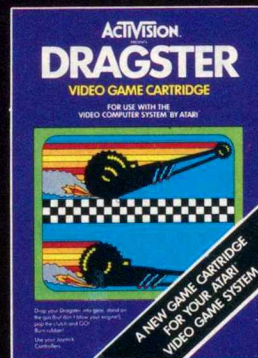
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