



Zircon Resurrects Channel F

If the video-game industry ever awards medals for perseverance, our nominees would be those hardy souls who remained loyal to Channel F after its apparent demise a few years ago.

When Fairchild Electronics introduced Channel F in 1976, it was the world's first fully programmable video-game system. Not only did it enable pioneering arcaders to assemble a home game library on ROM cartridges; it also placed variables like playing time, number of participants, and speed under the arcader's direct control for the first time. Using a then-sophisticated screen-mapping technique, Channel F enhanced its titles with graphics significantly better than anything else on the market at that time.

Fairchild sold an estimated 300,000 systems, but decided to throw in the towel when Atari and Magnavox (now Odyssey) entered the field. This left Channel F owners holding the bag with a "dead" programmable for which no additional game cartridges would be made. Last year, however, Channel F partisans received something even better than a medal: they got a circular from Zircon International informing owners everywhere that Zircon had purchased Fairchild's entire hardware and software inventory.

This included the second-generation Channel F II, a souped-up version of the original that Fairchild had designed just before deciding to stop marketing the

system altogether. Zircon not only priced this improved machine at under \$100 but it also offered to let owners of the original Channel F trade their old systems for new ones for \$69.95. Even more important, Zircon announced the reintroduction of the entire Channel F software catalog. The new supplier even had a few new titles to gladden the hearts of long-suffering Channel F-ites, games that Fairchild had developed but never brought to market. This mailing has proven so successful, according to Zircon's Bob Johnson, that Zircon will soon augment the existing two dozen Channel F games with new titles of its own.

The Channel F System II itself is remarkably durable and attractive. The sleek console features a power control, a reset button, and a bank of selection switches that govern time, mode, pause, and play start. The most unique feature of the system is its controllers. Each consists of a pistol-grip handle with a triangular top-piece. This knob can be twirled left or right, lifted up or pushed down. This permits it to perform up to eight control functions for any given game. Lacking some of the refinements introduced by later entries into the home programmable video-game market, Channel F games can't match the eye-popping high-resolution graphics of newer software. Yet the games are good solid designs with entertaining play-action. The line includes

a pleasant mix of one- and two-player contests, so it is equally suitable for solitary and head-to-head play. Two games come with the system, "Pong"-type affairs titled **Tennis** and **Hockey**.

Videocart 1, which comes packed with the Channel F, includes a quartet of electronic diversions: **Tic-Tac-Toe**, **Shooting Gallery**, **Doodle**, and **Quadroodle**. "Tic-Tac-Toe" pits the arcader against the computer in the classic time-passer. The automated opponent hardly qualifies as "user friendly"; whenever it wins a round, it prints out an insolent "you lose, turkey!" to rub it in a little. "Shooting Gallery" is a deceptively simple game. The target moves at a steady speed down the right-hand side of the playfield, but the arcader's firing paddle pops up at random points on the screen. The fired pellet travels perpendicular to the paddle's orientation, so success depends on timing the shot and the angles just right.

"Doodle" and "Quadroodle" are video-drawing programs. Electronic Leonardos can use the former to "paint" one line at a time on the screen. Three different brush sizes and an equal number of paint colors—red, green, and blue—are offered. As the name implies, "Quadroodle" divides the field into four sections. A line drawn in one quadrant automatically appears in the other three. The program, which is otherwise the same as

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Introduced in 1976, the Fairchild (now Zircon) Channel F system offers a versatile mix of entertaining action for one player or two.



pick from his Warner catalog, and he gets them for you within 48 hours.

If this scheme works, Warner says, you and I will benefit in various ways. Copies will be of better quality because replacing worn-out and defective rental tapes will not cost the retailer anything. The retailer's temptation to duplicate in the back room and deal you a bootlegged copy will be removed. Many more outlets—newsstands, grocery stores, gas stations, cleaners, drugstores—can now rent programs. Warner will advertise, ship, promote, and do everything necessary to get us into outlets that Warner signs up as rental agents. The threat to retailers is that

if they don't go along, Warner will surround them with rental-agent competition. Of course, there is no guarantee that this won't happen anyway.

Because Warner will be handling all this lock, stock, and barrel nationwide, Warner says it can put more special-interest material into its catalog. Warner says it's in a position to carry the kind of programs nationally that local retailers avoid. I'm not so sure about this. The overhead and return on investment required for the kind of operation Warner is talking about is enormous. I'm convinced that truly specialized programming is best handled by mail-order independents. What

Warner is really referring to is getting off the hit-movie kick.

Warner is biting off a big mouthful. While it was known that Warner (like others) was moving toward rental, the surprise is that Warner says it will never, ever sell. That has got to change. I thought (and still do) that Warner would first rent-only but eventually add sale when a given title makes its inevitable way into some form of electronic transmission where it would be up for grabs for home recording.

Warner has overreacted. Given time, I'm certain Warner will change its tune. But until that time, keep your Warner titles under lock and key. "10" has become hot in more ways than one.



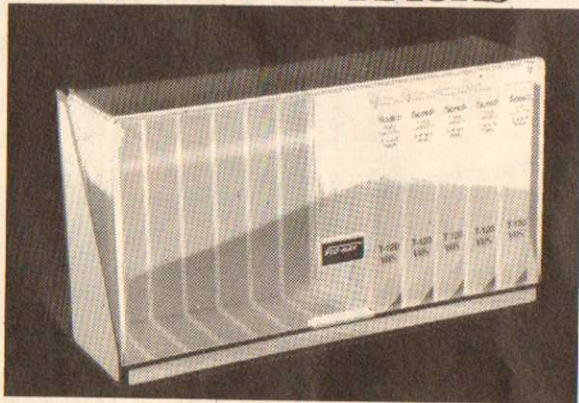
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Arcade Alley

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"Doodle," was a pleasant surprise: it's actually one of the most sophisticated sketching games available for programmable video-game systems.

Slot Machine (Videocart 22) is as good as any of the one-armed video-game bandits offered for rival home-game machines. Attractive graphics almost on a par with Intellivision's visuals are enhanced by clicking and whirring sounds as the arrays of symbols spin in the three windows of the faithfully rendered gambling device. A player starts the action by setting the size of his bankroll, making a bet, and setting the slot in motion. The cartridge offers two options for stopping the spin and determining the winner. The first simply lets the system itself halt the machine after a random time interval. The second and more interesting choice permits the players themselves to put the brakes on each window by pressing down the controller knob, adding an additional dollop of involvement to a contest that is a bit more passive than most gamers really like.

Video Whizball (Videocart 20), which picked up an Honorable Mention for "Best Pong Variant" in this year's Arcade Awards, is a real one-of-a-kind cartridge. There's nothing else quite like this one on the market. "Whizball" can be played solitaire against the Channel F or head-to-head with two players. Each side controls a vertically movable firing paddle that shoots "whizballs" across the screen, either straight ahead or at an angle. The target for these pellets is a huge floater generated by the system. By hitting this balloon-like target, it is possible to drive it across the playfield into the opponent's goal. Of course, the competition is also slinging whizballs to send the floater in the opposite direction.

The real fun starts when up to four of

the weightless boulders are programmed into the Channel F for simultaneous play. A quartet of these big dumb things bouncing around the screen can wreak more havoc than a hockey team at an ice show. A key strategic element is that hitting an enemy's paddle with a whizball causes the victim to disappear from the screen for a brief penalty period. Needless to say, this represents a prime scoring opportunity for the arcader whose paddle is still functioning.

Galactic Space Wars/Lunar Lander (Videocart 23) is a good try, but the primitive technology of the Channel F system confounds the designer's best in-

tentions. This was one of the titles awaiting release when Fairchild unplugged Channel F, and Zircon has presumably marketed it to remedy the lack of a space game in the cartridge lineup. "Galactic Space Wars" is the better of the two. It incorporates some fairly inventive elements including horizontal and vertical alignment settings for tracking the alien ships. Although the graphics are acceptable, they can't really compete with the visual wizardry of current state-of-the-art space shootouts. "Lunar Lander," on the other hand, is a near-total washout. The pale images seem to disintegrate on screen, and spaceship manipulation

is unwieldy. Would-be Channel F star warriors might do better to wait for Zircon's upcoming "Galactic Intruders," a "Space Invaders"-type contest that should satisfy any Channel-F'ers who yearn to defend the civilized universe against extraterrestrial menace. **V**

Videology

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use include electroluminescent panels, gas-discharge or plasma panels, liquid-crystal displays (LCDs), groups of light-emitting diodes (the LEDs of early calculators), and other exotic materials. The manufacturing techniques necessary to create a flat TV panel are analogous to those for making transistors. Just as with transistors and chips, the so-called "learning curve" of semiconductor manufacturing will increase flat-screen resolution and lower the price.

Small black-and-white mini-TV receivers will most likely appear for sale this year. The need to upgrade picture-tube technology has spurred manufacturers on both sides of the Pacific to research new kinds of visual displays. At the same time, the needs of the burgeoning electronic-calculator/computer industry and the electronic-game sector have created demand for video-like displays on hand-held electronics. These black-and-white displays are virtually miniature video screens. Items like Mattel Electronics' new "Computer Chess" and "Grand Prix" from Entex offer detailed LCDs with video realism.

Taking that one step further, Sinclair Electronics and Toshiba have produced working prototypes of pocket TV sets that will be available in a couple of years. Toshiba has taken LCD technology and packaged it around a miniature set with a two-inch screen. The small size enhances the flat-screen image. The LCD approach is more acceptable in a small size, the picture having the greatest perceived resolution because the matrix is too small to be apparent. The Toshiba prototypes, shown as combinations of VHF/UHF TV sets with AM radios and digital clocks, need so little power that a shirt-pocket TV would play four to six hours on one set of lithium batteries. Hitachi is also working on an LCD pocket TV using AA batteries.

These LCD sets should reach the consumer during the next 18 to 24 months at a cost of \$300 to \$400; the price is expected to drop with mass production. Much sooner, the Sinclair 2700 Microvision will be available at half the initial price of the Japanese LCD units. Sinclair does not use flat-screen technology, having opted for a unique ultra-miniature picture tube. This special tube shoots the image

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