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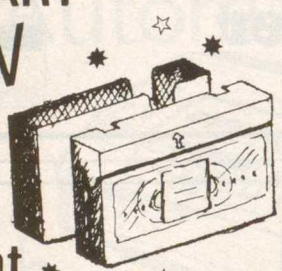

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Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank T. Laney II

MAGNAVOX ODYSSEY²

- **Speedway**
- **Spin-Out**
- **Crypto-logic**
- **Baseball**
- **Cosmic Conflict**

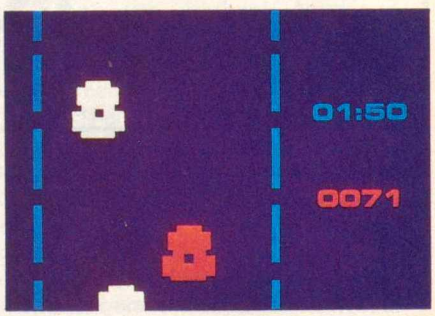
Pioneering doesn't always turn out to be an advantage—as has certainly proven to be the case with Magnavox in the area of home arcades.

It was that company's "pre-wired" Odyssey that paved the way for today's sophisticated programmable game machines and did much to create enthusiasm for home arcades, but that early unit was undeniably riddled with design shortcomings. It was the competitors, who flooded the game market in the wake of the trailblazing Odyssey and offered more technologically advanced units, who captured the lion's share of the business.

Odyssey² is the first programmable game machine from Magnavox. But rather than charge in blindly again, the company has evidently labored long and hard to create a truly outstanding state-of-the-art home video arcade. In fact, this machine may well be the best value in its price class (it retails for $179.95), and it boasts features previously found only on more expensive units.

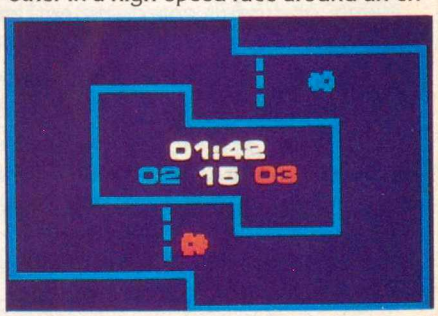
The **SPEEDWAY/SPIN-OUT/CRYPTO-LOGIC** game comes packed with the Odyssey² and is a good showcase for the machine's capabilities. The trio of contests provides a pleasing variety of action well calculated to whet the arcade addict's appetite for more.

Speedway is a home electronic version of the driving game that has been a staple of amusement arcades for several decades. Competing against a two-minute time limit, the player steers an auto down a road to score points while attempting to avoid time-consuming crashes with oncoming cars. There is a choice of two game speeds, but the slower one is too easy to use except as a learning tool.



Driving in the fast lane is another matter. Players will be hard-pressed to score more than 4200 out of the possible 5000 points before time runs out. Zigging and zagging back and forth across the road may look like the best route to a high score, but most drivers will find hugging the right shoulder of the road to be more productive in the long run. Go full speed at all times and concentrate on whipping around cars rather than braking to avoid them.

Spin-Out pits two players against each other in a high-speed race around an enclosed track. There is a good range of game variations for this one: two speeds, two different race lengths, and a pair of raceways. It is strongly recommended that players practice with the slower speed

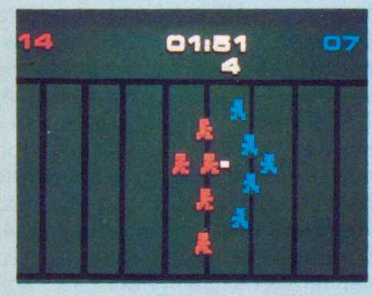


Bill Kunkel is a N.Y.-based writer and veteran video game hustler. Frank T. Laney II is a freelance writer specializing in pseudonyms.

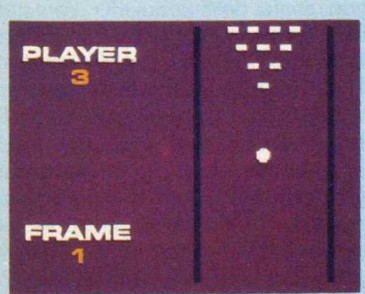
until they can zip through fifteen laps in about three minutes before trying the fast cars. Though Spin-Out is best with two players, you can drive solitaire too, playing against the clock.

Crypto-logic is a variant of Hangman. One contestant encodes a word or phrase and the other player attempts to dope it out letter by letter. The person who deciphers the message in the fewest tries is the winner. This game might be an easy way for parents to help their school-age children with their spelling.

MATCHMAKER



FOOTBALL



BOWLING

Some Other Games Offered by Magnavox

BASEBALL is the closest thing to the national pastime ever offered to home video game enthusiasts. The Odyssey² version simply provides more options for both fielding and hitting teams than rival baseball cartridges.

Pitching is an important part of the game, though it is not completely dominant as in some arcade baseball games. You can throw curves, change-ups, fastballs (not recommended since the machine is no Nolan Ryan) and screwballs. It's even possible to hurl a baffling knuckler by rotating the joystick in a tight

(continued on page 84)

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type of integral photography system.

Integral photographic systems do not require the use of lasers, and they are easy for computers to work with, so they will probably see a wide application as soon as they are fully developed. No such devices have been built in the U.S., but ITT holds a patent for one variation that was intended to be used as a radar display.

Even as early as the first several years of the 1980s, the TV networks will have the capability to start broadcasting in stereoscopic 3-D, which you can watch wearing special glasses. In the meantime, the X-ray technicians, professional computer operators, and electronics engineers will be getting their hands on fancier, expensive 3-D sets for non-commercial use. As is usually the case, not too many more years will pass before the video games people and the home computer companies, and maybe even home video oriented companies, get their hands on the new technology. So by the turn of the century you might be watching the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders dance on your living room rug, or turning your den wall into a picture window behind the Yankees' home plate. 3-D tennis, anyone? V

Arcade Alley

continued from page 73

circle to the left or right immediately upon releasing the pitch.

The team in the field may position the three outfielders prior to making a pitch, and the joystick reverts to controlling the same trio of players should the batter hit the ball. Infielders are stationary, but they will catch balls hit in their direction.

Once a fielder gets to a batted ball, his throw can be directed to any base at the fielding team manager's option. (Habitually throwing behind the runner is a sure ticket to a lopsided loss, just as in real-life baseball.) The ability to control throws to the bases makes it possible for Magnavox to give the team at bat several baserunning choices. Runners can advance after a long fly ball or even stretch a hit by taking the extra base.

Unfortunately, all runners must either advance or hold their bases in unison. For example, with men on first and third, a long fly out may well not score the lead runner, because the one on first, automatically forced to bolt for second at the same time, would be a sitting duck. It's also much easier for an outfielder to make such a play at second in this game than in real baseball. This is worth keeping in mind if you don't want your team's big inning to be nipped in the bud by reckless baserunning.

The cartridges, retailing at $19.95, feature a pleasing mix of games, including several challenging math and word contests. The major gaps in the current software line are the total absence of paddle games—Odyssey ² uses the joystick for everything—and a scarcity of solitaire games. Periodic new releases may eventually solve these problems, however.

COSMIC CONFLICT is a classic space battle that brings the flavor of *Star Wars* to the home screen. In this solitaire contest, the player is captain of a spaceship cruising a galaxy filled with tempting targets and merciless enemy starfighters. The mission: destroy the ten transports and five guarding starfighters before expanding your ship's energy supply of 1000 megajoules. Ordinary spaceflight costs 1 megajoule a second, each burst from your laser cannon uses 10 megajoules of power, and it costs 50 megajoules every time your defensive screen saves you from disintegration at the hands of an onrushing starfighter.

The two types of enemy ships, transports and starfighters, pose vastly different problems. As the player steers his ship "up" or "down," transports enter from the left or right and cross the viewscreen. Though the transports zip by at a variety of angles, all will eventually cross the screen horizontally if players keep steering in the same direction long enough. Shooting at a transport while it diagonally bisects the screen burns up megajoules at a furious rate—and the chance of scoring a hit is slender. Remember, a missed laser blast equals 10 full seconds of space cruising. Squandering three or four shots on each defenseless transport will leave the player short of power near the end of the game.

The starfighters, on the other hand, are far from defenseless. Equipped with warp drive, they materialize on the screen to a blaring buzzer and a flashing "alert" sign, and rush the player's ship from a bewildering variety of directions. The starfighters will close and fire unless the player takes suitable evasive action. (A starfighter can't destroy your ship outright, but the 50-megajoule cost every time defensive shields energize is penalty enough in a time-limit game like this.)

At the end of each game, when the enemy is destroyed or there's no more power, the computer flashes an appropriate message from Star Command. Losers are forced into retirement or called home for a court-martial, while successful star pilots get a pat on the back and, sometimes, a promotion to commodore.

The best strategy is to eliminate transports as the chance for an easy shot arises while hunting for starfighters, particularly easy-to-track ones heading right for your position. Don't be afraid to evade a starfighter that is approaching from an unhittable angle, since avoiding use of the defensive shield is the key to winning.

Wiping out the entire enemy fleet with 400 or more megajoules remaining in the energy supply is an excellent game. Pulling off the same trick while burning 300 or less power units is a feat worthy of Luke Skywalker himself. V