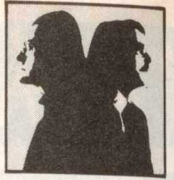


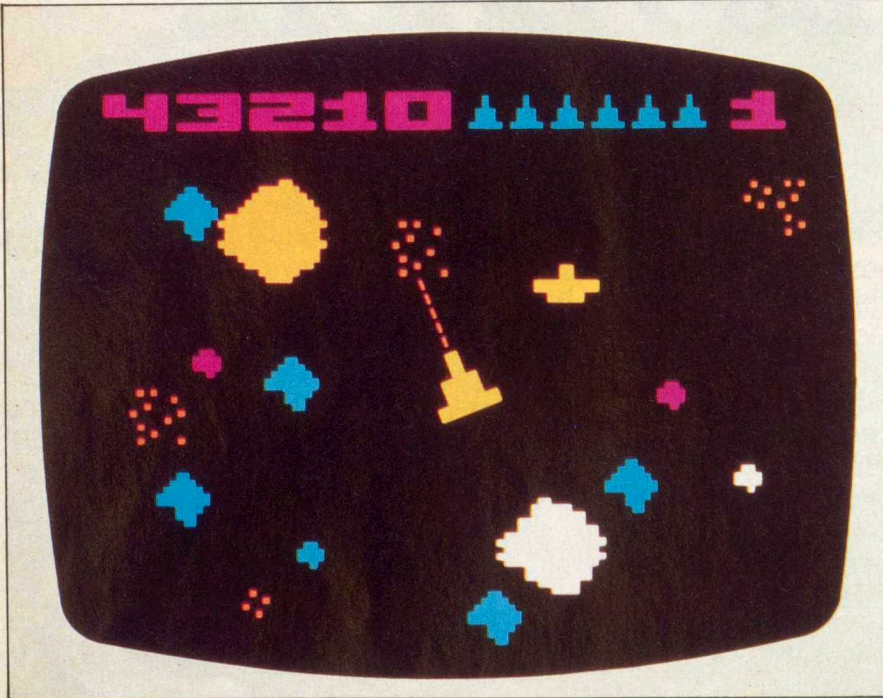
Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney, Jr.



The Third Annual Arcade Awards



'Asteroids,' VIDEO's Game of the Year, is loaded with intriguing options, including fast and slow space rocks, hyperspace, and shields, all in color.

Any discussion of the video-gaming year just ended is bound to run out of superlatives in short order. It was that kind of year. Never before has the electronic-arcade field witnessed so many technological and design breakthroughs. And the flood of new cartridges introduced for all major programmable video-game systems is similarly without parallel in the hobby's brief history.

That's certainly delightful news for the millions of Americans who now own and play these games, but it does create some problems when it comes to the 1982 Arcade Awards ("Arkies"). This is the third year that VIDEO—this time joined by its new stablemate *Electronic Games*—has sponsored these awards to honor excellence in the electronic-gaming field, and the competition for the 13 Arkies proved unbelievably intense. There were two, three, or even more worthy candidates in every category, and a few titles that might have walked off with the honors last year didn't cop even an honorable mention. The plethora of outstanding new games is the best thing that could've happened to electronic arcading. It shows that

the manufacturers, far from resting on their laurels, are continuing to innovate and explore.

Before proceeding to the awards, let's run through the ground rules. Games introduced into national distribution during 1981 are eligible, except for a few 11th-hour entries that will be held over for consideration next year. No one title can be awarded more than one Arkie, although multiple honorable mentions are possible. Note that this year, for the first time, there are four Arcade Awards for the best in computer gaming. All right now, let's break out the prizes!

• Video Game of the Year: **Asteroids** (Atari).

The most anxiously anticipated video game of all time proved to be well worth the wait. Atari's VCS version of its coin-operated smash is both a magnificent game and a technological achievement of the first order. After prototype versions of "Asteroids" drew negative response, the sorcerers of Sunnyvale reworked the whole thing, developing a special process that "fools" the VCS console into reading programs twice as long as what was pre-

viously thought possible.

The result is a cartridge loaded with intriguing options. Both hyperspace (from the coin-op original) and shields (introduced on "Deluxe Asteroids" in commercial arcades in 1981) are offered, and there is a choice of either fast or slow space rocks. In the excellent fast mode the asteroids respond to the player's fire. When the ship shoots an asteroid from the left side, for example, the fragments spin off toward the right. This creates a cosmos of wildly drifting space debris that closes on the gamer's ship from every conceivable direction.

The VCS cartridge even adds color to the game, an element missing from the commercial-arcade quarter-snatcher. The package is further enhanced by the most distinctive sound effects this side of "Space Invaders." "Asteroids" is a masterpiece. Honorable Mentions: **Quest for the Rings** (Odyssey), **UFO** (Odyssey), and **Missile Command** (Atari).

• Most Innovative Game: **Quest for the Rings** (Odyssey).

Even in a year distinguished by so much ingenuity, "Quest for the Rings" stands out like Charlene Tilton at a spinster's convention. Odyssey designers have charted a bold new path for video games by blending on-screen action with aspects of the traditional board game. The brilliant synthesis enriches "Quest" with more depth, detail, and complexity than any previous cartridge for this or any other programmable video-game system. This is the first of a projected series, and it has set an enviable standard of excellence for the titles to follow.

Fighting the forces of eldritch evil is the theme of "Quest for the Rings." Two players each choose one of four different characters and work cooperatively to find and capture the mystic rings hidden beneath the various castles shown on a colorful mapboard provided with the cartridge. A unique feature is that the location of the treasures and monsters is completely programmable before the start of each game. Every element of "Quest" is absolutely first-rate from the animation of the various creatures to the clean rules. "Quest for the Rings" is not only marvelously innovative, it is an outstanding video game. Honorable Mentions: **Freeway** (ActiVision) and **Asteroids** (Atari).

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- Best Competitive Game: **Tennis** (ActiVision).

Al Miller's "Tennis" is as far removed from the primitive "Pong"-style games from which it derives as gasoline is from the dinosaurs. The trapezoidal court furnishes a realistic illusion of depth while allowing arcaders complete freedom in positioning their electronic racketeers. Played at either skill level, "Tennis" is nearly always a hard-fought contest in which glorious comebacks from the brink of defeat can and do happen. Accurate aim counts much more than fast reflexes, giving more methodical players a chance to taste victory against the kings and queens of hand-eye coordination. Honorable Mentions: **Ice Hockey** (Mattel) and **Warlords** (Atari).

- Best Solitaire Game: **Missile Command** (Atari).

As with all the great single-player contests, "Missile Command" delights the senses and challenges the reflexes. Vivid graphics including a color-changing background help maintain involvement in this struggle to defend six Earth cities against a rocket attack from space. Atari introduced a new approach to game variations in this cartridge. Instead of offering different play options, each variant slightly increases the speed of the attacking missiles and therefore the difficulty of the game. Thus it is possible for the solo arcader to precisely tune "Missile Command" to an appropriate skill level every time. There's even a super-easy version for the young kids so they won't get left out of the fun. Honorable Mention: **Dodge 'Em** (Atari).

- Best Science Fiction Game: **UFO** (Odyssey).

Odyssey designers have always had a special affinity for science-fiction themes, and this cartridge is definitely one of their greatest triumphs. Arcaders maneuver a Federation flying saucer around a playing field clogged with three distinct types of unidentified flying objects. Many just drift aimlessly through the void, but some home in on the arcader's craft and a few actually fire deadly laser weapons. Fast action is the hallmark of "UFO." It's a rare gamer who can keep the spaceship from disintegration for more than a few minutes. Honorable Mention: **Laser Blast** (ActiVision).

- Best Sports Game: **USAC Auto Racing** (Mattel).

This is the racing game even those who hate motor sports ought to love. Forget about the boring time you had steering car-shaped blips around a simple oval, this is true blood-and-thunder racing. Drivers choose from a selection of vehi-

cles with different acceleration, cornering, braking, and speed characteristics and guide them around a variety of beautifully rendered courses. Although "Auto Racing" is a solid competitive game, it shines especially brightly as a solo contest. Multi-lap races against the clock are fast, thrilling, and thoroughly enjoyable. Honorable Mentions: **Championship Soccer** (Atari) and **Tennis** (ActiVision).

- Best "Pong" Variant: **Warlords** (Atari).

Here's something really new and different in "Pong"-style designs. "Warlords" blends elements from "Breakout" with the more traditional ball-and-paddle games to produce a cartridge that delivers plenty of on-screen excitement for up to four gamers. The cartridge employs a medieval setting as a basis of a four-way free-for-all as players attempt to batter down the walls of their opponents' castles and slay the monarchs inside. Being the last surviving warlord earns gamers a point, and winning five such battles wins an overall victory. Honorable Mentions: **Blockout/Breakdown** (Odyssey) and **Whizball** (Zircon).

- Best Audio-Visual Effects: **Kaboom!** (ActiVision).

The world's only video-game software company, well-known for the beautiful simplicity of its graphics, hit the mark dead-center again with "Kaboom!" From the smirk on the mad bomber's face when he gets one past the arcader to the sinister hiss of the incendiary devices he lobs over the wall, this Arkie winner is a feast for the ears and eyes. The game concept is not startlingly new—the coin-op favorite "Avalanche" is similar—but the whole thing is carried off with such *elan* that "Kaboom!" has become an instant classic. Honorable Mention: **Quest for the Rings** (Odyssey).

- Best Commercial Arcade Game: **Pac Man** (Namco/Midway).

Only moderately successful when first introduced, "Pac Man" caught fire last summer. It has zoomed to the top of the popularity charts and several home versions are already climbing up the best-seller lists with more on the way. Created by Japan-based Namco, which gave arcaders "Galaxian" in 1980, "Pac Man" gobbles up quarters under the Midway banner in this country.

"Pac Man" is an offbeat hit—it has no aliens, explosions, or multiple playfield changes like most other popular machines. What it does possess is a fascinating game concept, charming graphics, and a curiously strong appeal to female arcaders. Honorable Mentions: **Battle Zone** (Atari) and **Defender** (Williams).

- Computer Game of the Year: **Star Raiders** (Atari).

No question about it, "Star Raiders" is easily the most dominant piece of game software extant. This space-war simulation blends strategic and tactical modes into a masterful brew that's as close as

we'll ever get to blasting into space to save the universe. An arcading epic, "Star Raiders" embodies state-of-the-art design that lifts it above the hundreds of excellent computer games released during 1981. It conclusively refutes the idea that a richly complex game must compensate by being visually dull. "Star Raiders" treats gamers to both pulse-pounding action and all the bells and whistles anyone could desire.

- Best Computer-Action Game: **Jawbreaker** (On-Line).

This is a must for "Pac Man" fans lucky enough to own an Atari 400 or 800 computer. This time, the arcader steers a set of on-screen teeth through a candy store, gobbling the goodies and avoiding the bullies. Energizing jawbreakers are strategically spotted around the colorful store and, when eaten, allow the choppers to turn on the bullies and send them scurrying for cover. When every tasty morsel has been devoured a toothbrush enters the playfield, polishes the teeth, and readies things for another romp through candyland. And until you've heard the opening theme song, a computer version of "The Candy Man," you ain't heard nothin' yet.

- Best Computer Sports Game: **Computer Baseball** (Strategic Simulations).

Statistical-replay table sports games have enjoyed a large and enthusiastic following since the mid-1950s. Now Strategic Simulations has brought the concept to computer gaming in an attractive and easy-to-use form. Would-be Casey Stengels and Earl Weavers can choose from among 26 of the greatest teams of all time or make up their own all-star squads using the simple instructions provided with the game. "Computer Baseball" can be played by two, or the computer will be only too happy to direct the opposing nine in a solo contest. A well-executed on-screen diamond shows the positions of the fielders, indicates whether the batter is left- or right-handed, and displays the foot-speed of any base-runners.

- Best Computer Adventure: **Empire of the Over-Mind** (Avalon-Hill).

It took Avalon-Hill, the leading maker of adult-strategy games, a little while to get the hang of computers, but "Empire" shows the company is on the right track now. Although it superficially resembles earlier text adventures, "Empire of the Over-Mind" offers the game a breadth of options not found in the more linear contests in which obstacles must be overcome in more-or-less exact sequence. There's more than one way to vanquish the nefarious Over-Mind, which means that the game can still be enjoyed even after it is solved the first time.

This 40K program, available for most of the popular microcomputers, is a journey into the land of imagination that should keep would-be heroes highly entertained for a month of play sessions. 