

Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



Smurf & Ladybug from ColecoVision

In the previous "Arcade Alley" we dealt entirely with the newest contender in the parade of programmable cartridge video-game systems, the ColecoVision. No system introduced since the Atari VCS in 1978 has had more effect on the electronic-gaming hobby, taking the "arcade experience" into the player's home.

ColecoVision has created a tremendous stir by packing one of the hottest titles around, Nintendo's "Donkey Kong," into the system's packaging. But what initially seemed a crazy giveaway proved instead to be the perfect showcase for the ColecoVision "experience."

Last time around we discussed "Cosmic Avenger" and "Venture" in addition to the classic climbing game already men-

tioned. Now let's examine the remainder of the initial five games Coleco made available with the system's debut. **Ladybug** an arcade closet classic; **Smurf** is potentially the hottest video game on the market today.

When Universal introduced **Ladybug** into arcades at the end of 1981, it did not exactly take the world by storm. The game was too complex, too demanding to be a coin-op megahit. Superficially resembling the dozens of "Pac-Man" clones that glutted last year's arcades, "Ladybug" faded into the background, written off as "another maze chase." Coleco was not daunted. As with Exidy's "Venture," an arcade failure because it was ahead of its time, Coleco saw that the potential for

"Ladybug" as a home game was considerably greater.

Imagine a maze-chase game with all the high-speed action and thrills of "Pac-Man" combined with strategy-oriented play and pinball-style bonus features. Players maneuver anywhere from three to five (depending upon difficulty setting) lady insects around a wild mouse of a playfield patrolled by eight species of enemy insects. These nasty bugs originate from the vegetable garden at the center of the screen, with each progressive level offering a new delectable. The ladybug must avoid contact with both the insects and the poisonous skulls that dot the playfield (equally fatal to the enemy bugs) and try to consume the tiny flowers that fill the corridors.

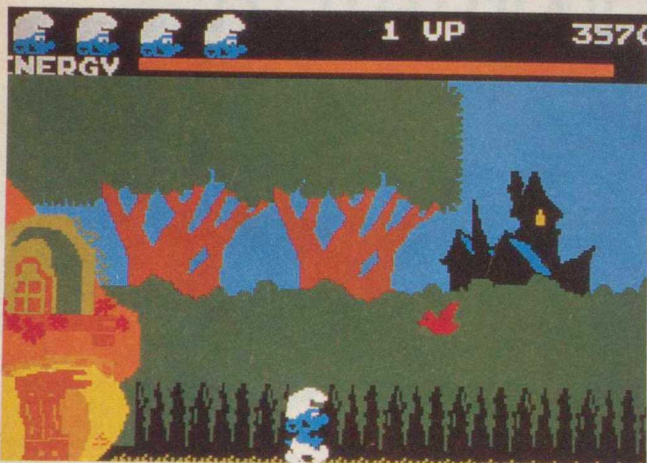
Enemy insects emerge from the garden one at a time. The perimeter of the field is surrounded by a dashed line with a glowing cursor moving continually along it. Each complete trip around the border releases a new insect—up to four. The light line travels faster in each scenario. Once the four insects are freed to patrol the labyrinth, the bonus veggie turns visible and can be snatched by a bold ladybug for extra points. (Copping a vegetable also freezes all hunter insects in their tracks for the few precious seconds needed to make an escape.)

What makes "Ladybug" great are the color sequencing and the revolving turnstiles that form portions of the maze. The color sequence works like this: To the right of the maze are three horizontal strips reading (top to bottom) "Special," "Extra," and the multipliers "2X, 3X, 5X." Before the beginning of each round, the number of skulls, blue hearts, and letters appearing on the upcoming field are displayed.

On the playfield are three hearts. If the ladybug eats them while they are in the blue phase, their scores are multiplied accordingly. The letters comprising "Extra" must be eaten while yellow and "Special" during the orange period. Orange lasts very briefly, yellow a second or two, and blue for quite awhile. Spelling out "Extra"

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'Ladybug,' a flop in the arcades, has lots of potential as a home game. It's a maze chase that comes with strategic play and bonus features.



Will the Smurfly hero escape the deadly hawks swooping from the skies to reach the castle and save (who else) the Smurfette?

Sound of Stereo

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heads—in the guardband—is not erased, and that unerased portion of the old audio track can sometimes be detected as a faint background sound when the stereo tape is later played back on a mono VCR.

When dubbing audio only, remember that you can take the sound from either a stereo FM receiver, through the audio input jacks, or use the mic inputs to provide a voiceover of your own. You can even place a musical background track on one channel while simultaneously recording narration on the other track using the audio-input jack for one channel and the mic-input jack for the other.

You'll have to experiment a bit with this technique to match the levels so that the musical soundtrack doesn't overwhelm the narration or vice versa. Remember to turn down the volume on your TV set when doing audio dubs from a microphone, to prevent the annoying feedback of sound through the TV's own speaker system. If your stereo VCR doesn't have a headphone jack, perhaps your TV set does (though that would be monaural). If so, you can plug a small set of headphones into that and gauge the effect of the composite soundtrack.


Stereo Camera Recording

Making stereophonic videotapes with a camera is easy. On most stereo VCRs you'll have to use a separate AC adapter to power the camera. Plug the camera into the AC adapter and then connect the video patch cord from the adapter to the video input on the VCR. Now plug two microphones into the mic jacks provided on the stereo VCR. Be sure to position the mics so that each one records a different aural component of the scene you're taping. There won't be much of a stereo effect if the mics are too closely together—both sides of the soundtrack would seem the same.

A few stereo machines, especially the JVC HR-2650 portable (the only stereo portable so far), have built-in camera jacks. In this case no AC adapter is necessary, and if you have a stereo-ready video camera (such as the JVC GX-S9U) you can plug the two microphones into the camera instead of directly into the VCR. But with any other video camera that doesn't feature two separate audio channels, remember to bypass the camera's built-in mic and plug the microphones

directly into the VCR instead.

Stereo Video's Future

You may wonder why all but one of the VCRs we examined for this article are in the VHS format and why more stereo Beta VCRs aren't now on the market from Sony, Toshiba, Zenith, Sanyo, and NEC. The answer is called Sony AFM, sometimes known as Beta Hi-Fi, a radically new stereo recording system that promises to revolutionize Beta recording. But Sony and Beta licensees are keeping information about their new breakthrough under wraps. VIDEO expects to have first official word of the development, as well as a detailed explanation of how it works, in a future issue. 

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wins the gamer a bonus bug; filling up "Special" sends the ladybug on a vegetable pig-out. Carrots, radishes, mushrooms, *et al* begin popping up in the otherwise deserted maze at random points for a limited time, with bonus points to the bug controller who gets 'em all—a pinball-style innovation that's marvelous fun.

The turnstiles, on the other hand, give the game its strategic depth. The ladybug has no power pill—the worn-out device copped from "Pac-Man"—that would allow her to turn on her attackers. She must depend strictly on her wits and her ability to move the double-door right-angle turnstiles that fill the maze. The hunter bugs can neither move nor pass through these turnstiles. With a little practice, arcaders will soon become masterful at flipping these little passageways open and closed.

This home translation offers sound and graphics that equal, if not actually surpass, the original. "Ladybug" should finally receive the attention it has always deserved. One complaint: As with a few other ColecoVision titles, the movement control is stiff and somewhat jerky. Gamers who own custom joysticks may want to experiment with alternative controllers for better command over play.

Smurf is the only one in Coleco's first group of games not derived from an existing coin-op, though it certainly wouldn't be shocking to find a program this good in a family amusement center. With the best audiovisuals in the entire line, this one should captivate kids while


providing a stiff challenge for older gamers.

The player maneuvers the Smurf hero through what amounts to the video-game equivalent of a Saturday-morning cartoon show. After leaving his charming cottage, the Smurf must walk down the road and, at all difficulty settings other than the practice game, dodge menacing hawks that swoop from the skies. The gamer can have the true-blue hero duck under the hawk or try to leap over it by pushing the joystick in the appropriate direction. (Players are advised to keep their feet on the ground during this phase of the game since a timely bow of the Smurfy head is almost always successful in avoiding the beak and claws.)

The appearance of the first fence signals the start of the second scenario in which the Smurf must leap a variety of barriers on the way to Gargamel's Castle to rescue the Smurfette. Each jump is rated as a 200- or 300-point leap right on the screen in tiny numerals that don't detract from the beauty of the scene. The lower hurdles can be overcome with a single leap, but the taller ones require a warmup hop before you can gain enough altitude. Prepare for frustration until you learn to accurately judge how close to the barrier you should stand when trying to hurdle over it. Bumping into a fence or some such object ends the round and puts a replacement Smurf into play.

The next phase takes the hero into a cavern where there are stalagmites to leap. The audio is sophisticated—the sounds accompanying each leap are muted echoes. Providing an extra bit of trouble is the bat, which can kill the Smurf hero with a touch. Leaping over them is probably the best strategy. You'll want to hurry through the cavern as fast as possible—it is the most dangerous playfield in the game.

Beyond the cave lies the road to the castle, followed by the fortress itself. The hero moves from room to room, leaping over the deadly spiders, to the accompaniment of ominous organ music. Once the Smurfette is spotted, it's time for a tricky double jump. The first hop takes the Smurf to the top of a 300-point giant skull, while the second puts him on the same ledge as the princess, who immediately gives him a kiss to signal the successful completion of the quest. Of course, since this is a video game, the action resumes from the beginning at a more dangerous difficulty level.

If ColecoVision emerges as the great home game system of the mid-1980s, "Smurf" will certainly be one of the main reasons. 

**Red Cross.
The Good Neighbor.**

