

# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

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## Cosmic Swarm, Space Jockey Debut

If all the plans announced so far come to fruition, we're going to be up to our armpits in video games. For instance, there may be as many as 100 new cartridges for the Atari VCS available this year. That would more than triple the size of the game library for that popular system.

Of course, making ambitious plans and carrying them through aren't quite the same thing. Some potential video-game makers will undoubtedly get scared off by the competition or stumble over some other obstacle long before their games reach the public.

But our hunch is that a surprisingly high percentage of the games sneak-previewed over the last year or so will see the light of day. Two companies that promised VCS-compatible cartridges have just delivered their first titles, so let's look at these new entries from CommaVid and U.S. Games.

**Cosmic Swarm** (CommaVid/Atari VCS) could be called a workmanlike video game. The graphics, though entirely adequate and serviceable, aren't pretty. The sounds suit the game perfectly, but won't blow video-gaming veterans out of their chairs with surprise. So what rescues "Cosmic Swarm" from being just another decent game? Its ingenious play mechanics.

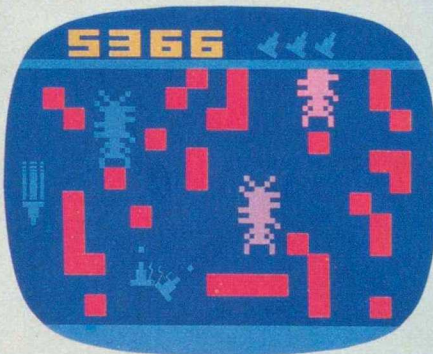
Gamers command "Asteroids"-like spaceships, available one at a time during the course of the game, using a highly original control system. Holding down the action button allows the pilot to rotate the ship in either direction using the stick. Releasing the button fires the craft's front-mounted laser cannon. When the action button is not pressed, the stick governs the spaceship's horizontal and vertical movement on the screen.

The arrival of one or more space termites begins the action. The intergalactic insects carry blocklike nest components with which they attempt to fill the entire playfield. If the ship touches either a space bug or its nest material, the craft is obliterated and replaced by a reserve spaceship. Three rounds constitute a complete

game, though bonus ships may be earned.

The laser cannon can easily zap one of the bugs, but the nest segments pose a more nettlesome problem. They are invulnerable when they are their normal green color, so the player must attempt to hit the nest particle while a termite is actually toting it. This energizes all blocks on the screen, turning them a bright red to signify their new status. While in this state, nest blocks are vulnerable to the ship's laser fire. The nest segments stay red until the player shoots a space termite, something the arcader will be forced to do before very long.

Just to make things a little more difficult, the spaceship must periodically dock to restore depleted energy. A trilling



'Cosmic Swarm': not especially pretty—but, ah, you should see how it plays.

alarm signals the appearance of a docking craft from either edge of the screen. The gamer must then align his craft with the mothership and dock before it exits the playfield. If the player fails to dock or accidentally destroys the mothership, the game immediately ends.

Because the action is non-repetitive, "Cosmic Swarm" is suitable for long gaming sessions. Its biggest challenge is to master the steering and firing, because you must glide through some mighty tight spots on the way to rolling up a big score.

"Cosmic Swarm" is an excellent first effort from CommaVid. Recommended.

With "Defender" sucking up quarters at

a furious pace in the commercial arcades, it was only a matter of time before the first scrolling shootout reached the home market. **Space Jockey** (U.S. Games/Atari VCR) is an outstanding example of the breed.

The Arcader uses the joystick to maneuver an attack saucer which enters the fray on the left side of the screen. A variety of armed and unarmed targets zoom into view from the righthand edge and head toward the saucer. Tanks, jets, prop planes, and helicopters can all fire at the arcader's ship, while lesser-value objects such as balloons, trees, and houses are passive targets that serve mainly as obstacles.

The human pilot begins the game with a complement of three saucers, useable one at a time. Scoring 1000 points earns an extra attack craft. There are 16 game variations, though most players will want to concentrate on the full-featured choices. In game 16, for instance, the enemy ships move randomly, collisions with the targets destroy the saucer, and the player's ship can move horizontally as well as vertically. Another option allows for steerable missiles much in the manner of "Air-Sea Battle."

One design flaw mars an otherwise excellent cartridge. It is possible to tote up 20,000 points or even more by keeping your saucer in the lower lefthand corner of the screen and holding your finger down on the action button to produce rapid fire. Fortunately, this is correctable by putting the righthand difficulty switch in the up position to allow the enemy weapons to fire more often. (It could have been corrected altogether if the saucer disintegrated when it touched the line representing ground terrain.)

This glitch aside, "Space Jockey" is first-rate action from start to finish. The visuals are especially charming. The helicopter blades spin and the balloons float through the air with gravity-defying realism. This fine cartridge gives Atari-VCS owners a chance to sample a kind of play action not previously available with the system. 