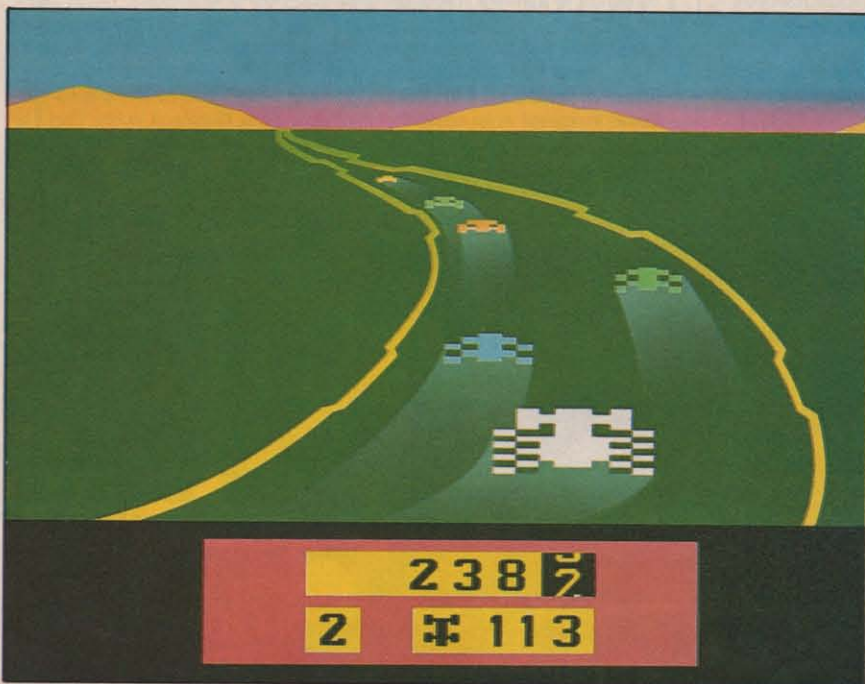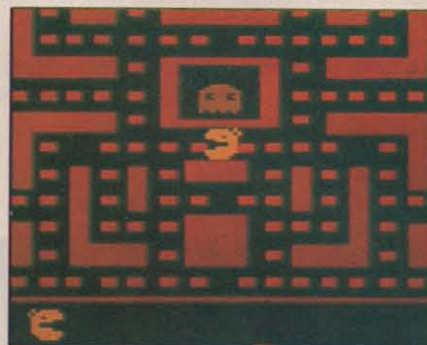# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz

Spinoffs — New Tricks for Old Games

Activision's 'Enduro' (above) and Atari's 'Ms. Pac-Man': new tactics and superior graphics revive two established genres.

Electronic gaming is seldom dull, and those who fret that boredom may eventually overtake the 40 million Americans who avidly play coin-op or home electronic games can relax. New games popping up for game systems and home computers guarantee continued high excitement.

The most potent harbinger of good things to come is that few new titles are cynical ripoffs of established games. True, many individual programs have appeared within such popular genres as the scrolling shootout, maze chase, and climbing and invasion categories, but game producers are making a sincere effort to avoid sliding into the oh-so-seductive "me too" trap that throttled the popularity of coin-op pinball. There's a crucial distinction between a game that's an unmitigated ripoff and one that's just in the same genre as an existing program. "Miner 2049er" for example is but one of a host of climbing and jumping games which have come out in the wake of "Donkey Kong" 's immense success. Yet anyone who tries a few rounds of "Miner" will quickly realize it calls for an entirely new set of tactics than those used in "Kong."
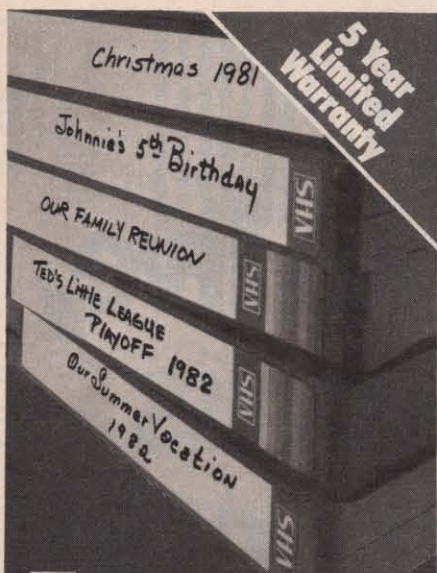
This month's "Arcade Alley" concerns games which either add something novel to a longstanding genre, or strike out in new directions. First we'll check out a maze-chase and a car-racing game (both designed for the Atari 2600) which are bound to give their categories a new lease on life.

At last, redemption! With the publication of **Ms. Pac-Man** (Atari/Atari 2600), the home version of Bally's much-loved sequel to "Pac-Man," Atari has helped restore its image as a producer of top-of-the-line cartridges. Where Atari stumbled badly with the 2600 edition of "Pac-Man," this time it has struck the bullseye dead-center.

"Honey don't you know, I'm more than 'Pac-Man' with a bow!" crows Ms. Pac-Man in TV ads for the cartridge. And she isn't bluffing—every facet of the home version rings true to its multiscreen coin-op inspiration. Ghosts have moving eyes, a cartload of bonus objects dances across the screen at appropriate times, and there's even an attract mode in which four ghosts dance in a circle around the glamorous gobbler. The player's joystick control of the on-screen heroine is fairly smooth, particularly when compared to the erratic stick response in Atari's "Pac-Man." Cornering can still be a bit of a sweat, but hardly a major problem.

"Ms. Pac-Man" 's playfield features do much to open up play, and they break out of the limited pattern-conscious strategy that marred both coin-op and home versions of "Pac-Man." The extra escape tunnels in particular provide many strategic alternatives lacking in the older contest. And bonus items don't unfailingly appear in the same place every time (just south of the ghosts' pen). Deciding whether to chase or ignore each new bonus object is now a prime consideration. So if you enjoy maze-chase action at its finest, be sure to make a date with "Ms. Pac-Man."

Enduro (Activision/Atari 2600) makes it easy to believe that a system like the 2600, invented to play simple games like "Pong" and "Combat," could present a full, rich contest. "Enduro" is a first-person racing game created along the lines of coin-op extravaganzas like "Turbo" (Sega) and "Pole Position" (Atari). It's a visual delight, packed with just about every graphics trick in the programmer's book plus a few conjured up expressly for the occasion.

The electronic driver begins the competition in the first—and easiest—heat. The computer constantly tracks and reports the distance traveled in miles and the position of the player's car relative to the other vehicles in the race. Pressing the action button controls speed, suiting "Enduro" to the

widely available gourmet joysticks that feature a top-mounted button. The acceleration increases as long as the home arcader holds the button down though pulling back on the stick allows fast braking for sudden stops and slowdowns. The course of the race car is controlled with horizontal movements of the joystick. Play action is so realistic that electronic drivers will practically feel the tug of inertia as their cars spin around a sharp turn. And despite the lack of a steering wheel, the simulation is satisfying.

But what will really make most gamers' enthusiasm hit on all eight cylinders is the way "Enduro" looks. The race begins at high noon with a cheery sun in a blue sky, but the blue turns to vermilion and then magenta as the golden orb sinks slowly toward the horizon, and after dusky twilight comes inky night. You'll have only the lights of oncoming cars to guide you as your machine gamely hugs the treacherous highway. Even the approach of dawn doesn't end the danger. Rather, it ushers in a pea-soup fog. This miasmic mist enshrouds the course so thoroughly that only the cars directly ahead are visible.

Crashing stops the player's car cold, and getting back into the action means generating fresh momentum from square one. In "Enduro" (as in most games of this type) it is often better to cut speed and avoid a time-wasting crash than just barrel down the road at full throttle. The finish is exciting: a siren wails its warning as the player frantically floors his pedal in order to pass the last few cars noted on the on-screen countdown indicator. Scoring a successful heat means you're ready to step up in class and try some *serious* racing.

"Enduro" is awesome; it combines excellent play action and graphics that challenge even the majesty of Colecovision's "Turbo"—wheel, pedal, and all. This singular programming feat is the slickest, fastest-moving cartridge ever released for the Atari 2600.

Things are just as exciting over in the computer division. This month we'll examine a program for the Apple that does something new with the invasion-game format, and another disk for the Atari 400/800/1200 XL computer systems that presents unusual challenges.

The rather prosaic name of **A.E.** (Broderbund/Apple II/48K) cloaks one of the best shoot-'em-ups published in 1983. The situation seems fairly dire at the start of the opening round: maintenance robots have gotten out of control and are cleaning planet Earth to death. The player must force these immortal automatons back bit by bit until they are pushed so far from Earth that it will take centuries for them to clean their way into our corner of the universe. The arcader must pull off a "perfect attack" to progress from one scenario to the next, which means wiping out an entire wave of metal monsters without losing the cannon based along the bottom of the screen.

The chief innovation in "A.E." is that the assaulting androids swoop and soar across the screen in a painfully hard-to-hit pattern. The fluid movement of the targets is an elaboration on the play action "Galaxian" introduced to the invasion game. But this time the entire attack wave is in constant motion, not just a small number of divebombing monsters breaking off from an essentially stationary formation. The maintenance robots perform their aerial acrobatics in single-file, like airborne serpents—often to their disadvantage, for it is possible to detonate a chain reaction that eliminates most of a deadly string by hitting one of the attackers at or near the head of the line.

"A.E." is a triumph, mainly because it breathes new life into the tired invasion-game genre. Its fast-paced play action poses an entertaining challenge to arcading's best marksmen.

Mar Tesoro (Synchro/Atari 400-800-1200) may be the finest example of a life-simulation computer game. Players function as skippers of salvage vessels and, based on a small starting stake, comb the deep for gold and other valuables. Players may use their modest supply of cash to buy gear from an on-screen menu before getting into the game itself.

Available equipment ranges from essentials like scuba gear to a genuine diving bell (for experienced, wealthy players only). The best investment is to hire a historian, a handy guy who can evaluate the worth of whatever you haul up from the ocean. But first-time explorers will probably want to stick with scuba gear and confine their investigations to the shallows just offshore. After you've accumulated treasure that can be sold, you can afford some fancier equipment, and your ship can then venture into areas where more valuable treasures may be found.

The position of the ship is charted on an overhead on-screen map and moves with flicks of the joystick. In fact all commands are entered using the joystick, which makes "Mar Tesoro" surprisingly easy to play for so rich a program. Once the ship takes up the desired position, the display switches to a side view to monitor the actual dive. Remember that diving too deep with inadequate gear will give your treasure hunter the bends! Other factors can affect the cooperativeness and competence of your crew, such as how fairly you distribute the accumulated booty.

"Mar Tesoro" certainly doesn't have the excitement level of the latest scrolling shoot-out, but if you want something different to test your wits, this game takes the prize. **V**