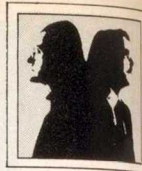


Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney, Jr.



Lure of the Labyrinth

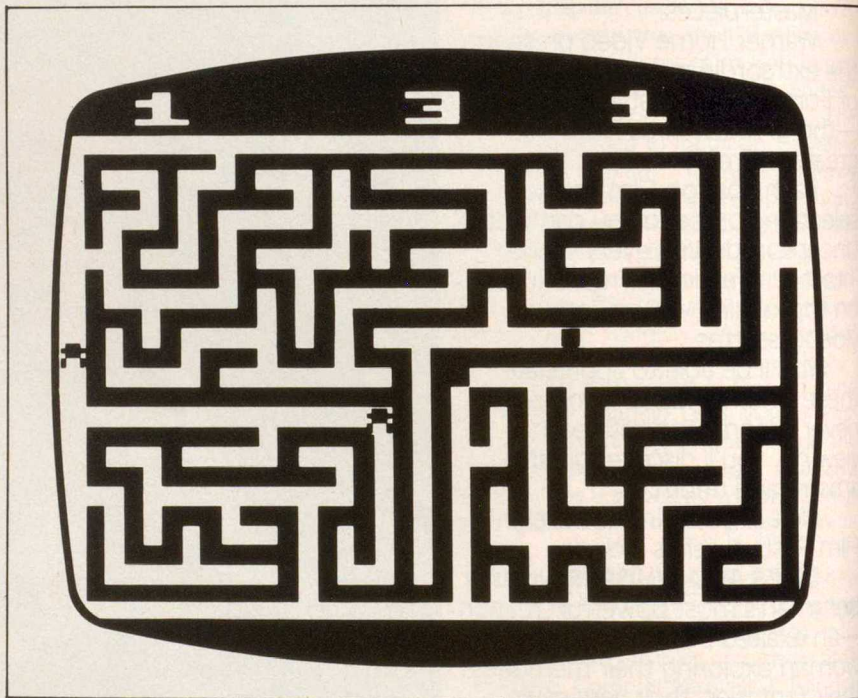
Exploring Maze Games

If you're a typical "Arcade Alley" reader, chances are that you've taken a few enjoyable cracks at solving mazes. There's something timelessly fascinating about laboriously ferreting out the single correct serpentine passage from a tangle of false starts and dead ends.

The maze was as well-known in ancient Athens as in modern-day America. The Greeks of the Golden Age took great delight in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, in which a mighty hero must negotiate a labyrinth to find and slay the man-beast at its center. These days, folks enjoy mazes in many forms, ranging from paper-and-pencil games and three-dimensional puzzles to the "house of mirrors" found in just about every amusement park and carnival. Even role-assumption fantasy games like "Dungeons & Dragons" are, at bottom, little more than extremely clever mazes with lots of imaginative embellishments.

Designers of cartridges for programmable video game systems have not entirely resisted the compelling lure of the labyrinth. Although mazes *per se* are much less common in the home arcade software catalogs than "Pong" variants and sports simulations, there are a few of them. Games as otherwise diverse as "Combat" and "Adventure"—both from Atari—use mazes and maze-like elements. Truth to tell, however, makers of home arcades have generally slighted maze-loving players. The main reason VIDEO hasn't bestowed an Arcade Award for Best Maze Game is that there haven't been enough contenders for the honor in either 1979 or 1980. But if the current trend continues, this might not be true in 1981.

Suddenly, software suppliers have discovered the maze, recently releasing several cartridges wholly or partially using the principle of the labyrinth. We reviewed one of the best, Atari's "Dodge 'em," in a previous installment of "Arcade Alley." This time, we'll look at a couple of brand



Atari's "Maze Craze" is the latest offering in a new spate of video maze games.

new video maze games and an older one that set the stage for the current explosion of interest in this kind of cartridge.

Atari's **Slot Racers** (CX 2606) has virtually nothing to do with either slot cars or racing of any kind, but ranks as the most important of the classic labyrinth games. It's a fast-moving head-to-head thriller that requires quick thinking, and even quicker manipulation of the joystick. This a-maze-ing cartridge is a triumph despite the patent absurdity of the situation it propounds. Players drive on-screen cars through a byzantine network of city streets, taking potshots at each other with missile launchers mounted on the automobiles' front hoods.

As with most Atari software, options abound. There are four different street-map mazes, an equal number of car speeds, and several ways to handle the missiles. One set of variants has missiles which are faster than cars and can automatically turn corners to pursue them. A

second group of contests gives the cars a chance to accelerate out of harm's way. The third batch includes missiles that won't navigate corners, making it necessary to get your foe in the direct line of fire before pressing the action button and loosing a rocket.

Steering, especially in games with fast missiles, is more than just an annoying complication. Many times a driver can avoid a rocket with a well-timed turn that would otherwise blow the car to scrap metal. It takes a little practice to push the joystick at just the right time, but the results are well worth the extra effort.

Maze Craze (CX 2635), a new release from Atari, invokes the labyrinth in its most familiar guise. The designers have deftly built onto this basic puzzle structure, adding the tactics of pursuit and avoidance and a madcap race for the playfield's only exit.

Subtitled "A Game of Cops n' Rob-

continued on page 110

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Arcade Alley

continued from page 18

bers," the game has arcaders portraying video lawmen patrolling a rabbit's warren of semi-deserted streets. Depending upon the variant selected, cops strike either to catch unarmed robbers or to avoid armed ones—and then reach the safety of the exit. The computer depicts all criminals as free-roving cursors, but there's quite a difference between the two types of felons. A police officer can arrest an unarmed crook, but if the blue knight runs into the more lethal variety, he's likely to get a stunning knock on the head.

The cartridge offers four speed options ranging from plodding to greased lightning to keep pace with the increasing skill of players. Since the street mazes are randomly generated, there's no danger (or hope) of becoming even slightly familiar with the multitude of possible city maps. Sound effects do a great deal to enhance the illusion: hollow footsteps echo as the video flatfoots prowl the pavements in search of wrong-doers. A cop hitting a dead end causes a signaling bump, and there's a thudding crash when a weapon-toting baddie gets the best of a man in blue. The unit also gives a satisfying electronic titter of triumph when the first policeman successfully escapes through the exit.


The cops-and-robbers metaphor does, admittedly, wear thin at times. After all, police officers aren't supposed to run away from crooks, whether or not they're armed. But once you explore some of the fiendishly clever options, such little details become irrelevant. If you like mazes, you'll go crazy over "Maze Craze."

Take the Money and Run (AJ 9412), from Magnavox, is an entirely original and completely captivating maze game for the Odyssey² system. Most design elements are "right off the shelf," but Magnavox has created a charming explanation for the sizzling on-screen action.

Each player begins the adventure with a stake of \$500,000 in the labyrinthine kingdom of Keynesium. They need every penny of it in order to reach the game-winning goal of amassing \$1 million. Arcaders not only compete against each other, but also against the system itself—computer-controlled robots representing positive and negative Keynesian economic factors. Brightly-colored robots symbolizing income, reward, and investment can add to a player's bankroll, while the darker-hued automatons, which stand for expenses, theft, taxes, and inflation, trigger a subtraction from the hoard. The idea is to capture the brightly-colored robots as quickly as possible while keeping the darker ones at arm's length. The faster a player catches up with a positive factor, the more it's worth. On

the other hand, the longer it takes the negative robots to nail their quarry, the less effect they exert.

The playfield maze isn't overly complex, but navigating it is no cinch either. Since the robots are smaller than the on-screen players, they can move freely through even the tiniest corridors. Arcaders, meanwhile, must constantly hit the action button to make their players duck their heads to squeeze into tighter passages. Unfortunately, this cuts speed by one-third, giving the dark robots a fine opportunity to do their deadly work. Although earning a cool million is the stated goal, we recommend that first-timers start off with a lower figure. Until the game is mastered, it may take longer to earn a million bucks in "Take the Money and Run" than it does in real life.

Players of all ages should enjoy this cartridge, but we especially recommend it for younger gamers. It's one of the few video games that successfully blends a little education with a high degree of entertainment. 

Electronic Soapbox

continued from page 50

for the audience it does attract. In the middle-class community of Endwell, New York, where 40 percent of the homes are hooked up to cable, a controversial PTA meeting about television violence was videotaped by the local access group. Before cablecasting the tape, the PTA alerted parents in its newsletter. So while the meeting was attended by only a few dozen active parents, several times that number watched the presentation at home.

When public access programs are aimed at a special audience, producers can attract a bigger audience if they publicize their program through a newsletter, special mailing, newspaper notice, or bulletin board posters. A weekly program based on a special interest can become the central focus of a related organization after a few months. The least effective form of publicity is the rolling "teletype" message on a blank cable channel, because most people who watch this are already interested in access programs.

Public access arrangements vary from community to community. In Binghamton, New York, the cable operator accepts prerecorded 3/4-inch U-Matic videocassettes and plays them Thursday nights on a vacant channel. In San Diego, California, the cable operator lends out two portable U-Matic video recorders with color cameras, microphones, and lights, has a color studio available for public use, and provides access to a U-Matic electronic editing system at a local library. There are also Betamax and VHS decks available for dubbing. Between these two extremes,