

# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



## Pacman: Was It Worth the Wait?

Ever since "Space Invaders" made the switch from success in the commercial amusement centers to even greater popularity as a home video-game cartridge, manufacturers have looked to the nation's coin-op fun palaces for new game designs. This search has become particularly intense during the last 12 months in response to the current arcade craze.

Atari has a considerable advantage over rivals in the home video-game field because the company also operates a coin-op division. "Asteroids" and "Missile

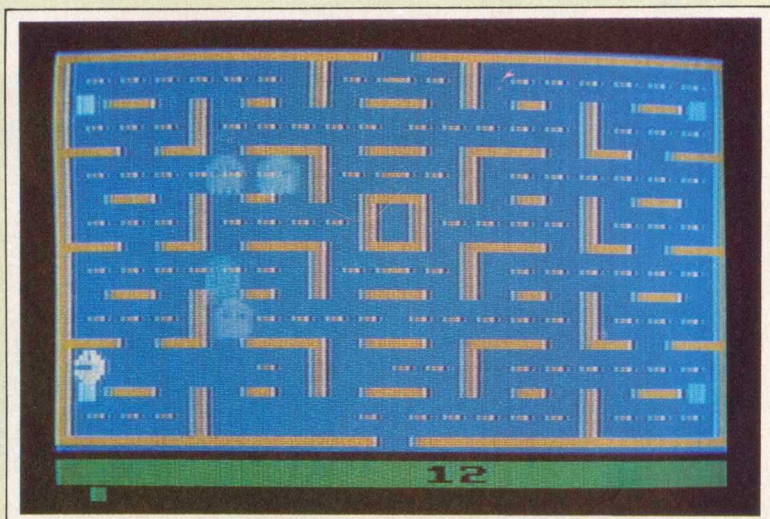
Command" are prime examples of games that Atari marketed first in the amusement centers, then in cartridge form for the VCS with stunning success.

This month we'll look at a pair of new Atari VCS games that previously appeared in coin-op form. One is, if anything, better than the quarter-snatching original. The other has little more in common with its coin-op ancestor than a name.

Atari must hope owners of its VCS are so delighted to finally get a gobble game—and the undisputed king of the maze-chase contests, at that—that they will overlook the shortcomings of the VCS-compatible **Pac-Man** cartridge. Unfortunately, those who can't evaluate "Pac-Man" through lover's eyes are likely to be disappointed.

As with the "Pac-Man" coin-op machine, gamers use a joystick to steer a ravenous gobble through the corridors of the mazelike playfield. The pathways are lined with pills which are eaten up for points. Four power pills, one in each corner, give the pac-man extra strength when he eats them. Thus energized, the gobble can turn the tables on the quartet of goblins that ordinarily pursue him and snack on them for a hefty bonus score.

One notable shortcoming of the home version is that it has almost none of the cute graphic trimmings that make the coin-op version so charming. And there is no real attempt to mimic the quarter-



Son of 'Pac-Man' isn't exactly a chip off the old block—it's missing things.

snatcher's audio accompaniment, so those who enjoy hearing the "Pac-Man" theme or the distinctive "ooka-ooka-ooka" will still have to visit the arcade.

Also failing to put in an appearance is the progression of highly symbolic bonus items. The VCS "Pac-Man" uses a blue dot inside an orange circle to represent all bonus targets, and the value remains 200 points per bonus object throughout the game.

The goblins also suffered in the transition. For example, their eyes simply rotate among four positions instead of indicating the direction of future movement as in the coin-op device. This robs the players of one of the original game's most important visual clues. You won't be able to figure out where "Speedy" is heading just by reading his glance. Actually, all four goblins in the home game could be nicknamed "Blinky" because they flash on and off constantly, making them harder to see.

On the other hand, VCS owners who just want a nice little maze-chase contest reminiscent of the celebrated coin-op "Pac-Man" will enjoy this addition to the Atari game library. Joystick response is somewhat stiff when the cartridge is played at slower speeds, but using variations like game number three will help work out the kinks in the control system.

Summing it up, how much an arcader likes or dislikes Atari's "Pac-Man" will de-

pend on how attached he is to the original. Coin-op purists may be offended by the liberties taken in the adaptation, while home video-gamers may well be delighted. Atari's "Pac-Man" is challenging, and there are a few visual pluses such as the excellent rendering of the gobble itself. Yet the overall effect of the cartridge is not quite what electronic-game fans have come to expect from Atari.

**Super-Breakout** (for the Atari VCS) is, on the other hand, terrific. Those who adored coin-op "Super-Breakout" and the Atari 400/800 editions will be pleased to hear that the VCS cartridge is superior to all previous versions. Not only does the VCS "Super-Breakout" present Standard Breakout, Cavity, Double, and Progressive in all their glory, the designers have added a new dimension: an incredible variety of funny electronic musical notes that should please even cynical arcaders.

Standard Breakout is little different from the venerable VCS cartridge of that name except that the field resets with a new wall every time the previous one is wiped off the screen. Just carve a breakthrough at the extreme left or right edge of the field and watch the points accumulate. The key to Double is to avoid the temptation to use the upper paddle in the set. Playing mostly with the lower one affords a split second of extra time to react to ricochets.

When playing Cavity, try not to release both extra balls simultaneously. The best idea is to break them out of their prisons inside the wall from the top, producing an instant bonus breakthrough. The important thing to remember when playing Progressive is to avoid hitting the top of the playfield when it is clear of bricks. Doing so cuts the size of the on-screen paddle in half and makes it much more difficult to score.