

# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



## Where the Action Is

One of video games' greatest attractions is that they provide a test of both mental and physical abilities. Even the most bombastic blast-'em up requires brainwork to master. If one put all home-arcade programs on a continuum in which one end represents mentally stimulating games and the other extreme is occupied by physically stimulating ones, most computer simulations and video games would fall somewhere in between. This month we'll slide toward the physical end of this spectrum and give the joysticks a workout with a batch of action contests.

**Mega Force** (20th Century-Fox Games/Atari 2600) brings to mind the trend toward movie/video-game crossovers, one of electronic gaming's hottest topics. Parker Brothers' "Empire Strikes Back" cartridge was the first attempt to translate from the silver screen to the game screen. It was a solid effort, but overshadowed by Parker's nearly simultaneous release of "Frogger," one of the most popular arcade-to-home translations yet produced. Not all subsequent film/game crossovers have been as logical as that first one. A few are downright ludicrous. Some licenses—"Pink Panther" (U.S. Games), "Yogi Bear" (Mattel), "E.T." (Atari)—are reasonable, but the notion of turning *Kramer vs. Kramer* or *Marathon Man* into video games is far less appetizing. Software publishers have turned good films into bad video games ("E.T.") and good films into good video games ("Tron").

"Mega Force" was a megabucks film project by Hal Needham, best known for *Smokey and the Bandit* and stunts in a zillion action yarns. In it, mercenaries ride super-cycles which can fire lethal blasts from a cannon mounted on the handlebar, and even fly! With its arsenal of shticks ripped off from *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Magnificent Seven*, "Mega Force" was despised by critics and ignored by the public. However, the same concept that created a box-office dud turns out to be perfect as the premise for a video game. The concept of



The idea in 'Mega Force' is to protect your own white-towered metropolis from the assault ships of the ebony enemy.

flying bikers duking it out with heat-seeking missiles and assault ships from the ebony-spined enemy city, while protecting your own white-towered metropolis, was a natural.

The player's goals are self-evident. You must use the joystick to steer your five super-cycles, available one at a time as the previous one expires, to keep airborne defenders from getting past you with their deadly cargos of bombs bound for the alabaster minarets of home. At the same time you must shoot your way across—and over—the multiscreen scrolling playfield so you can wreak havoc upon the enemy's capital.

The action never lets up for a second. Just when you think you might catch a little breather, the warning "Defend" appears on the screen and it's time to brace for another attack by the assault ships. What makes this good game truly great, however, is the way it looks. Watch the wheels of your on-screen chopper transform into a rocket cycle as you take to the air. This is state-of-the-art for the 2600, and such images generate tremendous excitement during play. Pulse-pounding action and eyeball-popping graphics—a winning combination!

After publishing a spate of video-game sleeping pills like "Demons to Diamonds," "Yars Revenge," "Math Grand Prix," and "E.T.," Atari has shown new life of late. Titles such as "Defender" and "Berzerk"—pretty solid action hits in their own right, come to think—have given fans hope, but the company's cartridge operation came off the

critical list only when its new Boston design team began producing home editions of coin-op hits like "Vanguard," "Ms. Pac-Man," and "Phoenix."

The VCS version of **Vanguard** (Atari/Atari 2600) does a remarkable job of reproducing the thrills of the original coin-op scrolling shootout. Players use the joystick to pilot the Vanguard, which can travel horizontally and vertically, through a series of "waves." Triumph in one trial causes the game to display an overhead view of the next before the action heats up again.

The ship fires automatically in two directions, but also shooting along the perpendicular axis requires some joystick manipulation. All this firepower is needed to conquer such foes as Harley Rockets, the spike zone, and the aptly-dubbed "Bleak" zone, in which can be found the bizarre "Kemlus." You can hitch a ride on one of these nasties, but the dying creature will devour the Vanguard if the pilot attempts to blow it up when it is above or below the craft.

This cartridge's graphics are surprisingly good—all the more so in light of the number of different waves of action. Although the simplification of visuals will be obvious to anyone with a good recollection of the play-for-pay machine, the VCS edition undeniably captures the essence of the commercial arcade title.

**River Raid** (Activision/Atari 2600) is the first video-game cartridge to credit the work of a female programmer. But if you expected Carol Shaw to churn out a cotton-candy confection, your male chauvinism is showing. The aerial view of the mighty North/South river, with its crowded banks and warship-filled waters, is certainly attractive—but no one will ever confuse "River Raid" with "Strawberry Shortcake Meets the Smurfs." This is hang-onto-your-joystick action at its most relentless. The idea, for one or two sky jockeys, is to streak up the river staying just above the level of the lapping waves so you can strafe enemy planes and ships that bar your way.

This is no high-altitude bombing run either. Your fighter plane is so close to the surface that failure to steer a proper course will send your ship crashing down in flames on one of the steep



banks. In fact, you're flying so low that to get from one wave/segment of the river to the next, you'll have to blast apart one of the bridges that periodically span the waterway. All this fire and movement drains your craft's power, but that can be replenished by flying over one of the fuel dumps, which may otherwise be blown up for bonus points.

Even the sound effects are well-integrated into game play. You'll feel genuine nail-biting tension when the klaxon sounds to indicate that you're about to run out of fuel. "River Raid" is ripsnorting hairy-chested action in cartridge form.

### Computer Alley

Although many think of computer games as being somehow more cerebral than console video games, the stereotype is only partly accurate. Contests for the brain such as military simulations and fantasy adventures are certainly more numerous for computer systems, but there are also plenty of action programs for these same machines. Let's boot up a couple, eh?

Even if you've never read a Keith Laumer science fiction yarn about the super-tanks of the future, **Bolo** (Synergistic Software/Apple II/48K disk) is bound to prove a treat for electronic tankers looking for something new. It simulates combat within a macro-maze between player-directed tanks and a

*It's tanks vs. factories in 'Bolo': means of destruction vs. means of production.*



steadily increasing number of dumb-but-deadly tank-drones produced by factories situated at various points within the serpentine corridors. To advance to the next level of play, the tank

commander must use one or more of the allotted five Bolo units (received one at a time during the course of play when the previously active super-tank meets destruction) to blow up the six

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factories in each maze. The longer a production plant remains in operation, the more robot tanks it pumps out, so speed is essential.

Before the start of play, the computerist gets a chance to select one of nine skill levels and one of five maze densities. The high-score feature makes no distinction between various combinations of settings, and shutting off the computer wipes out all the top totals in memory. The neophyte must begin with a maze density of 1 or 2. Steering with the joystick isn't too hard, but movement is fast and takes some practice. Otherwise, there's a good chance that you'll squander one or more of your Bolo tanks by letting them blow up in a collision with one of the walls.

Since the Bolo driver can't see the whole maze, the control panel is the focus of attention. It shows the amount of remaining fuel, relative position of the Bolo within the overall labyrinth, and location (by quadrant) of the still-functional drone factories. It's always in view just to the right of the main display, and you'll refer to it often.

"Bolo" can start slowly, particularly at the lower difficulty and density settings, but patient action fans will be rewarded with a contest as rich in blazing combat action as in strategic subtlety.

**Wavy Navy** (Sirius Software/Apple II/48K disk) is a successful cross between combat and invasion genres. It delivers an excellent variety of action with a design just different enough from the norm to keep veteran home arcaders on their toes. The game gives one to four players the opportunity to ride the ocean waves and do battle with an armada of planes and helicopters.

The pitching and rolling of the waves, further complicated by the appearance of floating concussion mines during the difficult waves, makes it almost impossible for the gamer to precisely position the horizontally mobile vessel at the bottom of the screen so it can fire upward at the formation of aircraft that cruises back and forth across the sky. Instead, "Wavy Navy" calls upon the competitor to fire and move simultaneously and unceasingly throughout the game. Stand still for an instant and if a kamikaze plane doesn't plow into your P.T. boat from above, a mine will put a hole in its hull from below. And that's not even to mention the enemy helicopters, which drop a whole rack of bombs on the boat whenever they descend to sea level amid a cacaphony of rotor blades.

"Wavy Navy" can be played using the keyboard, an Atari joystick with Joyport, or a standard Apple-compatible paddle. The two-voice soundtrack can come from the Apple II as with most disks, or it can be switched to the cassette port for connection to audio-system speakers.

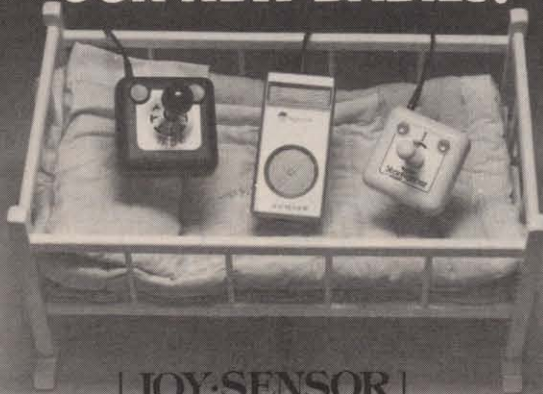


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