Arcade Alley

Electronic Games

Computer Diversions Reviewed

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz

'One on One' (from Electronic Arts) pits Larry Bird against Dr. J. to see who's King of the Court.

The classics remain the classics, even in the fast-changing hobby of electronic gaming—but the new games generate the excitement, especially when so many new entries are significantly advancing the gaming state of the art and introducing novel play-mechanics.

Right now home arcaders are reveling in the first golden age of computer gaming. The frenetic machine-buying of 1982-83 has subsided somewhat and now game publishers are showing what they can do for relatively new microcomputer systems like the Atari 800XL and Commodore 64. So this month let's leave the video-game consoles in the closet and focus exclusively on new computer games.

One on One (Electronic Arts/Apple II series) isn't the *best* new game of the year, but it might turn out to be the most important. No previous action-sports program gave the computerist a chance to manipulate anything more complex than an animated cursor in the approximate shape of an athlete. For although this head-to-head battle between Julius Erving and Larry Bird for hoop supremacy has the pace of an action contest, the on-screen figures are coded to behave like their real-life counterparts.

The phrase "machine intelligence" takes on concrete meaning when you're struggling to contain the machine-directed Dr. J. or

Bird even at the easiest of the four skill settings. When you control Larry Bird, you'll have to deal with Erving's greater speed, fancy moves, and deadly inside shot. If the Doctor's fate is in your hands, you'll come up against Bird's strength, stamina, rebounding, and perimeter shooting touch.

The subject here is half-court basketball with one player on a side. The game can be played to a predetermined point total—"21" is traditional —or as a four-quarter game with a choice of period length. Animation is fluid and intricate. Each competitor has a full range of moves, which you as coach initiate by working the joystick. For instance, hitting the action button quickly causes a man dribbling the ball to spin 180 degrees.

You'll have a chance to admire the slick moves, even when the computer is ordering them for your opponent, thanks to an "instant replay" feature. When the program judges that either side has made an outstanding move, it reruns the action—just like on television. There's even a provision for shattering the backboard with a ferocious slamdunk.

Head-to-head action is also possible with the Apple version, using one of the accessories which allows for attachment of a pair of Atari-compatible sticks in place of the conventional 20-pin command device. EA editions for other systems will undoubtedly offer the same choice of solo or two-player action.

"One on One" is a breathtaking programming achievement—and a riveting game.

Silicon Warrior (Epyx/Atari computers) offers gamers an intriguing blend of

strategic thinking and hand-to-eye challenge best described as an electronic version of Tic-Tac-Toe. Set in fabled Silicon Valley (the area near San Francisco where many computer manufacturers settled in the late '70s) some hundred years in the future, players are assigned a color signifying their status as a member of an electronic royal family—either the House of Pong, House of Adam, House of Apple, or House of Peanut.

The action takes place on a grid-like playfield comprised of unprogrammed silicon chips, which are represented by uncolored blocks set in a five-by-five configuration. The gamer's color-coded warrior enters the action on a random chip along with one to three opponents, which can be computer or player controlled. The object is to program a vertical, horizontal, or diagonal row in your family's color. Warriors program a chip simply by moving onto it with a tap of the joystick. If a rival warrior encodes a blank chip, you can unprogram its color by moving your surrogate onto the spot and then *re*program it with your color by teleporting off and then onto it a second time. "Glitches," signified by a "black hole," often turn up in place of a blank chip to harry players.

"Silicon Warrior" offers gamers a trio of speeds and seven game variations, including an option for more aggressive thrill-seekers: the

silicon soldiers can be armed with laser weapons that destroy enemy programmers. When played at faster speeds or with three or more warriors, "Silicon Warrior" is a frantic exercise for quick hands and facile minds— with chips being programmed, unprogrammed, and reprogrammed at a frenetic pace. The ultimate object is ambitious enough to keep anyone fascinated.

Does the stock market look like easy pickings? Try a few games of **Millionaire** (Blue Chip Software/Commodore 64) before risking your bucks on Wall Street. This simulation doesn't include every little nuance of stock trading, but does offer enough detail to suggest what you'd face if you switched to legal tender. "Millionaire" is a solitaire strategy program played in weekly turns. Once the universe is ordered, a 10-minute process, the player buys and sells stocks and options of 15 actual companies. The program starts the player at week 14, to establish each issue's performance trend, and gives the investor until week 91 to pyramid the $10,000 starting stake into a cool million bucks.

Relying on guesswork earns little more than a quick trip to the electronic poorhouse. The gamer must carefully study the stock and option performance information, consult the financial newswire, and repeatedly review his own portfolio before committing himself to a transaction. The display screens containing vital information in graph or chart form are called up by typing in a command when prompted by the screen. You can look at the data for as long as required, but common-sense rules circumscribe the trading a player can do until he or she has accumulated enough net worth. This keeps the full complexity of the simulation from bombarding the player right at the beginning of the action, thus promoting faster-than-expected play.

Of course "Millionaire" is a long game no matter how you slice it. Fortunately, the program has provision for saving a dozen or so games in progress. Status can be saved after every turn, so that players can approach "Millionaire" in two four-turn hunks.

One of this program's limits is the absence of multiplayer action. Each investor wrestles with a unique stock-market environment, so it's even hard to directly compare the performance of two different players. Weak visuals are another deficiency. The depiction of the graphs, in particular, could have been more eye-catching.

These flaws aside, "Millionaire" succeeds admirably in simulating the uncertainty and volatility of the stock market. It's the kind of deep-think contest that armchair electronic strategists are bound to adore. **V**