

# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



## We Still Want Action

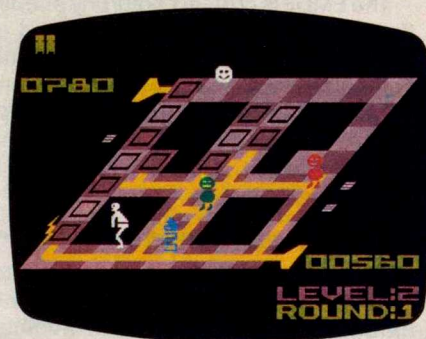
Sure, there's a surge of interest in strategy games, computer adventures, and the like. But action games are very much where it's at, even in the home-computer age. Games that primarily call for quick reflexes and fast thinking are more popular among computer arcaders than all other categories combined.

Many videophiles who are moving up to computers from video-game systems wonder whether leaving behind the lower-powered fun machines also means bidding farewell to the thrill-a-second pace of electronic-action contests. Relax, fellow members of the blast brigade, there are plenty of arcade-style action games available for the popular makes of microcomputer.

The main difference between the typical video-game cartridge and the average action-oriented computer disk is that the latter frequently feature "action and . . ." That is, the huge memory capacity of personal computers lets the designers embellish the basic play-mechanic—just about the whole story in many action video games—with additional complications that force the player to use the brain as well as the joystick.

This installment of "Arcade Alley" will tiptoe past the video games—they'll get the spotlight next month—and concentrate on some of the slambang computer games that have been hogging screen time around here lately.

**Buck Rogers, Planet of Zoom** (Sega/Atari computers/Cartridge) crosses slalom skiing with a vertically scrolling shoot-'em-up. As Buck Rogers, the player guides a starfighter over the nearly featureless surface of the planet Zoom, moving the ship with the joystick. The idea is to pass between as many pairs of pylons as possible, destroying or avoiding enemy craft as seems best, until Rogers' ship gets through the fourth mini-phase and has the inevitable confrontation with the alien mothership. Destroying this craft sets the skill level ahead by one and restarts the four-phase cycle.



*'Buck Rogers' is good quick fun; 'Megamanla' has never looked better; 'Julce' is a high-tension game.*

Pushing the joystick forward speeds up the player's starfighter. The faster the ship goes, the more efficiently it uses fuel. Since power is in limited supply, home arcaders will want to race through the successive gauntlets as rapidly as possible. Unfortunately, once the game moves to the second skill level, failing to pass between the pairs of pylons carries additional danger. Missing a gate leaves the starfighter in position to be menaced by missiles

which the pylons fire toward the edges of the screen.

"Buck Rogers," based closely on the version Sega produced as a coin-op in 1982, isn't overly taxing mentally, but it can be rousing good fun when you're in a mood to see (and hear) things happen in a hurry.

**Megamanla** (Activision/Atari computers/Cartridge) shows how much the video-game and computer-game divisions overlap at times. This edition of "Megamanla" is visually enhanced, but otherwise is hardly different from the program Steve Cartwright produced for the 2600 in 1982. Activision believes that many computerists will be just as charmed by this futuristic nightmare in invasion-game form as video-gamers were. Fact is, "Megamanla" never looked better. It is now possible to clearly distinguish what each wave of attacking objects is supposed to represent now that the game is running on a system with enough resolution to present a radial tire that really looks like one.

**Julce!** (Tronix/Commodore 64/Disk) is one of the most charming things in the recent spate of pattern-shifting games—a program guaranteed to give game-loving C-64ers a real charge. The player uses the joystick to hop the on-screen hero, Edison, from block to block on the circuit board playfield. When Edison has connected every square, the current pulses across the screen—and Edison must begin again on a different, and more difficult, circuit board.

Thwarting this grand design are, most principally, the Nohms. These creatures enter the screen at the playfield's top edge and then hop around until they sail off the bottom. If a Nohm touches Edison, the supreme circuit-rider melts into a puddle right before the player's eyes. Other major dangers include the Killerwatt (a homing-target version of the Nohm) and Flash (who disconnects every circuit over which he passes).

The rules of this solo contest are de-

ceptively simple, but then, so are the regs for most of the classic action games. "Juice!" snaps and crackles like a high-tension wire.

**Mr. Robot & His Robot Factory** (Data Most/Atari computers/48K disk), Ron Rosen's climbing and jumping game, bears some resemblance to "Miner 2049er"—at least during the opening stages of play. But the 22 screens of action are sufficiently different from the earlier design to represent an enthralling new test of skill. The computerist maneuvers the cute Mr. Robot around a rainbow-hued playfield packed with such features as escalators, sliding poles, teleportation stations, bombs, and the dreaded alien fire. Contact with one of these incandescent nasties costs Mr. Robot one of the five lives with which the player begins the game. As in "Miner," the goal is for Mr. Robot to traverse the entire playfield, picking up all the available power pellets before moving on to the next one. This arrangement is not only visually pleasing, but greatly reduces the chance of walking your character off the edge of a cliff in a misguided effort to make sure that every inch of territory is covered.

The programming skill evidenced in the preparation of "Mr. Robot" is awesome. Ron Rosen has concocted nearly two dozen intriguing playfields and developed a simple-to-use system that lets the players themselves design new playfields when the old ones no longer prove stimulating. What this game lacks in stark originality, it more than makes up for with polish.

**Centipede** (Atarisoft/Apple II/48K disk) is a game that almost never fails to please, whether it's a coin-op in a family amusement center or a cartridge for one of the low-end video-game setups. In this case, the graphic limits of the Apple crimp the style but do not damage the essence of this invasion game set in a magic garden.

The Apple-gamer controls the gun at the bottom of the screen, moving it left or right to fire upward at multi-segment centipedes and other critters who are moving down the screen. "Centipede" also allows a small measure of vertical movement, which can be a real help in avoiding the pounce of the spider or even a collision with a centipede segment that gets past the player's barrage of fire.

One disappointment is that the game doesn't operate well with the TG Products trackball controller. This is a shame, for "Centipede" was originally designed for just such a command device. (Possibly a different make of trackball would be less sluggish, but it's unlikely.) In any case, this edition of "Centipede" is capable of keeping any dedicated bug-bopper happily patrolling for pests for hours, when played with a regular Apple-compatible joystick. 