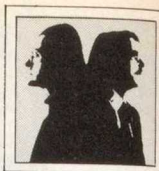


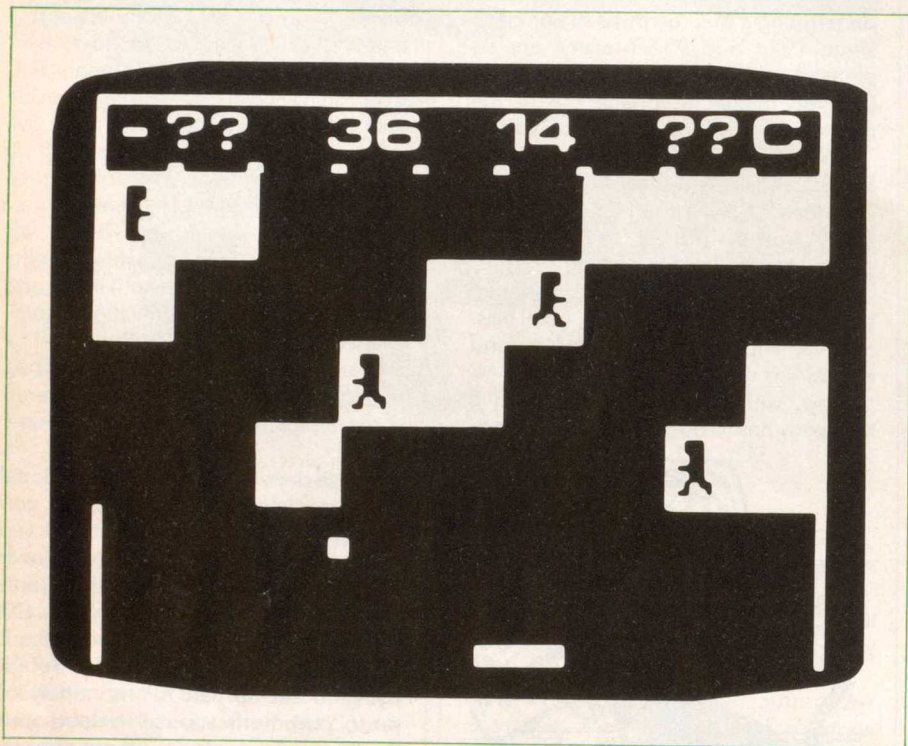
Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs

by Bill Kunkel & Frank Laney, Jr.



'I Want to be Alone' Solo Video Games



With Magnavox's *Blockout*, players must chop through a demon-inhabited target wall.

Quite a few of the gamers we've encountered during our monthly strolls down "Arcade Alley" suffer the same chronic frustration: finding enough opponents to slake their thirst for endless hours of play.

It can really be a problem. As many readers will testify, it isn't always easy to find someone brave enough to accept the challenge and pick up that other controller.

And it's even harder to locate someone of approximately equal ability to ensure an enjoyably even match. An arcader with average videogaming skills often bores the good players while frightening off the bad ones.

Solitaire cartridges offer an obvious solution to this dilemma. It's simple enough, when human foes are scarce, to plug in a solo program and battle it out with the machine. Of course, a good player will regularly defeat one of the lightly powered

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programmable home arcade systems, but at least the unit never sulks or buries you under a pile of alibis after each drubbing.

There is a catch. Some of the most popular videogames — the sports simulations immediately spring to mind — are generally not available in one-player versions.

Atari took into account the need for play-alone games when it first marketed its programmable system a couple of years ago. It included one-player options in as many of its early releases as possible. Thus lonely Atari owners could while away the hours with such exciting programs as "Surround," "Air-Sea Battle," and "Breakout." Other companies proved a hair slower on the uptake, but Magnavox in particular is now doing an outstanding job of catering to the solo arcader.

In fact, the Magnavox Odyssey² has brought new flexibility to solo play in the last year or so. When one of the company's newer cartridges is activated, both sides'

competitors appear on the screen and wait for further instructions. If the lefthand player engages his joystick while nothing happens on the right, the system automatically assumes control of that side — or vice versa. If no human player enters the fray, the Odyssey² console will conduct a game against itself.

This is a significant step forward. The arcader may choose which role he will assume in any given solitaire contest. And watching the machine handle both sides at once lets the arcader sit back and study a game's strategic nuances.

All three of the cartridges we cover this month — one from Atari and two from Magnavox — are recent arrivals for the arcade addict in search of solitary recreation.

Blockout/Breakdown (Magnavox AA 9427), the company's first attempt to produce a ball-and-paddle type game, is an ingenious and entertaining variation on a time-tested videogame theme.

In "Blockout," players use blockbusters (balls) to chop through a multi-colored target wall, one block at a time. A horizontally movable paddle, dubbed the power bar, keeps the blockbusters rebounding toward the wall.

The target is not, however, without its defenses. A "demon" inhabits each layer and can magically rebuild demolished blocks.

The player manipulating the power bar has only 90 seconds to clear a pathway to the top of the playfield. By including a time limit and allowing an unlimited number of blockbusters, Magnavox's designers have attempted to compensate for the deficiencies of the joystick as a controller for this type of game. The main drawback is that it takes a lot longer to move the power bar the width of the field with a stick than with the more conventional paddle. On the whole, it's a reasonable compromise.

But it's the pesky demons that give "Blockout" its spice. In order to restore a damaged block, a demon must first make physical contact with one of its power sources, located at the extreme ends of each row. If a block on which a demon is standing gets smashed, the creature tumbles into videogame limbo, reappearing after a brief time penalty.

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even the best up-converters are not quite good enough. So I have kissed my programmability and remote control good-bye. But this radical rejection of technology should not be necessary elsewhere in the country.

In sum, planning of current and future needs is essential. Conveniences—do you want a programmable VCR? a remote control set?—are the second set of choices. Can you live with a less than perfect signal, and thus with black boxes that may degrade picture quality slightly? Do you or will you subscribe to an encoded pay channel? Are you going to tape movies for keeps? (If so, the signal must be as good as the cable company can deliver, and that's your choice.) And finally, how simple do you want to keep your system? These are real issues in hooking up to cable.

The cable industry does not want to face the more exotic problems of videophiles. In talks with people in the industry, I've found the trend is to improve the quality and number of signals and deliver them to consumers through profitable cable company equipment. (Rentals of the converters and speciality hookups are profit-makers for these firms.) TV and VCR manufacturers are concerned about videophiles' problems but unable to act because of differences in cable systems around the country and the relatively low penetration of the service—only 20 percent of American households are cable-wired.

As for "cable-ready" TVs, these only work on some cable channels and do not decode any special pay-TV channels. They cannot solve all cable problems, and their reception of cable channels will not in any way improve your VCR's ability to record off the air. Remember VCRs record from your antenna or cable directly, not through your TV receiver.

Thus, for the foreseeable future, it's up to each subscriber to create his own cable/video system. And perhaps, as the black boxes improve, so will the situation.



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In the two-player version, gamers alternate directing the power bar and the demons in successive rounds. But when you're alone, the Odyssey² makes a dandy opponent, particularly when it takes charge of the defenders.

In "Breakdown," the point is to obliterate an entire wall in just 60 seconds. It's not quite as difficult as it sounds, since the blockbuster doesn't stop after pulverizing the first block it hits. Instead, it continues to wreak havoc until the player is unable to make it ricochet off the power bar.

"Breakdown" is a great deal faster than "Blockout," and the demons have the extra speed necessary to keep pace with the ac-

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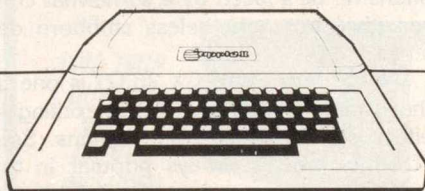
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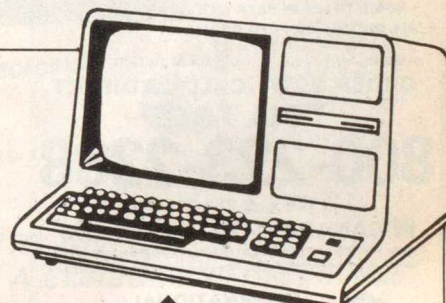
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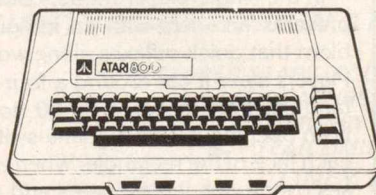
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tion. They zoom along their walls, rebuilding the blocks twice as fast as in "Blockout."

One serious strategic flaw mars this variant: A block containing a demon that is in direct contact with its power source cannot be destroyed. Thus the defender can always avoid defeat.

Electronic Table Soccer (Magnavox AA 9423) brings a long-time commercial arcade favorite to the home screen. In the original mechanical game, each "coach" controls a team that is aligned in columns and fastened to a series of free spinning rods. By a combination of sliding the rods and twisting the handles, it is possible to pass the scaled-down soccer ball from man to man or attempt to kick one into the goal for a score.

The Odyssey² electronic version features six on-screen athletes per team: three midfielders, two strikers, and a goalie. Each of the joystick's three horizontal positions — left, right, and center — establishes control over a different column of players. Vertical movement of the stick will cause the appropriate line of players to move from sideline to sideline. Coaches pass and shoot by hitting the action button and pointing the joystick in the desired direction.

Magnavox enhances this video version by simulating the effect of spinning rods. It's not very functional, but it sure is pretty. Teams whirl happily, accompanied by a merry clicking sound, whenever they score a goal.

The solitaire game holds up well. The machine is capable of mounting a crafty attack that may utterly disarm the novice. And when the human coach goes on the offensive, he's faced by a somewhat conservative but nonetheless stubborn defense.

Dodge 'em (Atari CX 2637) is one of those rare videogames that is exciting in either one- or two-player versions. Solo "Dodge 'em" is always popular in the coin-operated fun palaces, and the home arcade version is a solid bet to win similar acclaim.

In the single-player mode, "Dodge 'em" presents arcaders with an intriguing problem that quick reflexes alone won't solve. Players steer a car around a four-lane rectangular track covered by 80 dots. There is an opening permitting lane-switching on each face of the rectangle. When a car passes over a dot, it disappears and a point is scored. By periodically changing lanes, drivers can clear the board.

The complication is a second, computer-controlled auto that zips around the track in the opposite direction. The crash car's sole reason for existence is to smash the player's vehicle to smithereens. If the driver doesn't carefully plan lane-to-lane movement, the crash car swerves in such a way as to make a head-on collision inevitable. A crash ends a round, with three rounds constituting a game.

Perceptive arcaders will quickly grasp the necessity of treating this as a topological

problem. Developing a pre-planned route that clears the dots with the shortest possible ride will pile up the points. Unfortunately, this strategy will only work twice. After the player sweeps the track clean of dots for the second time, the machine adds another crash car. Avoiding both of them simultaneously takes nerves of steel — and split-second timing in the use of the controller's action button, which can double a car's speed.

The early stages of each "Dodge 'em" game can become predictable as players perfect a "best route" approach. Once the second car appears, though, it transforms the cartridge into a slam-bang battle of wits pitting man against machine. It's a battle most solitaire-minded arcade addicts will want to fight over and over again. **V**

Big Screen TVs

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made of an aluminum foil (with a structural backing) specifically designed for projection television. (Some materials used in the past were originally intended for such items as illustration boards and brochures.) The coating is resistant to chemicals and abrasion, so the screens stand up against fingerprints, moisture, and blistering. They are also easier to wash; most household cleaning detergents can be used.

These screens are also designed to allow the light to blend together to minimize color shift, a color difference in the same image viewed from varying angles. (For example, seen from one spot, an object may look pink; walk to the other side of the screen and it will appear blue.)

Re-engineered rear-projection screens have helped make major performance improvements in this kind of system. Older models had limited light distribution that caused "fall-off," or darkening at the edges of the picture when viewed from an angle more than 20 degrees off the center axis of the screen. New screens increase the viewing angle up to 40 degrees off-axis with no appreciable fall-off. This has been accomplished by combining a new Fresnel field lens—a series of concentric prisms molded into the rear of the screen that distributes light more evenly across the screen—with a lenticular lens element on the front of the screen, which spreads light over a wider viewing angle.

In addition, picture wash-out has been cut down by using a special diffusion compound of acrylic, bulk diffuser, and other materials to scatter the light, retaining contrast and rejecting room light. The diffuser is built right into the surface of the new screens, unlike the painted coating used in earlier systems. And since there is no coating on the hard plastic screens, they can be washed (with liquid soap detergent) without any threat of abrasion.

Improved technology isn't the only reason major companies have entered the