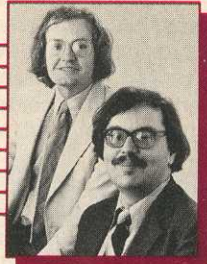


# Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Video Games

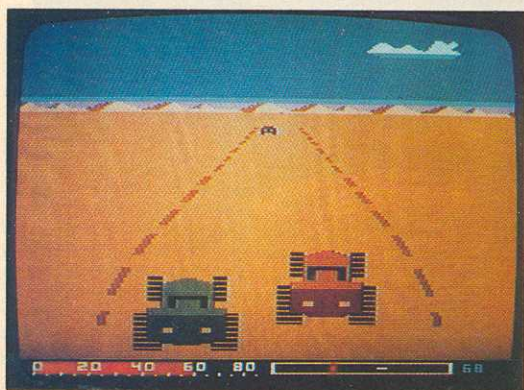
by Bill Kunkel & Arnie Katz



## Zapping for Truth and Justice



*Innovative audiovisuals and play-action make 'Astro Chase' a distinguished shootout.*



*Somehow, 16K of memory manages to contain the ribboned road and scrolling mountains and clouds of 'Baja Buggies.'*

The residents of "Arcade Alley" love those oh-so-charming "cute" games, with their eye-popping graphics, as much as anybody. But sometimes it's fun to put the more delicate contests aside, roll up your sleeves, hook up that gourmet joystick with the top-mounted action button, and wreak devastation among the evildoers.

There's something intensely satisfying about scouring the universe clean of malevolent monsters, aliens, and nasties. These shoot-'em-ups are a socially acceptable way to exorcise the violent impulses buried deep (maybe not so deep) within us all. Zapping everything that moves is, after all, OK when done in the name of justice.

This month we'll examine several cartridges for the Atari 2600 video-game system and a couple of contests for the Atari 400/800/1200XL computers. They have one element in common: they provide relentless action from the opening shot to the moment when the last defender gives up the ghosts. Some, like "Baja Buggies," also boast state-of-the-art audiovisuals, but the play-mechanic is the main attraction. Let's start with a few cartridges de-

signed for Atari 2600 (VCS) and the Sears Tele-Arcade.

**Vanguard** (Atari/Atari 2600) is a scrolling shootout and a marvelous home-arcade translation of a machine that sucked up quarters like a vacuum cleaner for Centuri in commercial fun palaces during 1981 and '82. Atari hasn't always done a good job on licensed titles, but this one is entirely worthy of the play-for-pay device that inspired it. The anonymous Atari designer made elegant simplifications in the graphics to create a cartridge that conjures memories of the more complex arcade version. This looks like "Vanguard," something that can't always be said of coin-op translations for this popular system.

Even more important, it has the same breathtaking action that longtime fans of "Vanguard" affectionately recall. The arcader wields the joystick to steer a heavily armed craft through a succession of scenarios which culminate in a showdown with the alien mastermind Gond. On the way, your ship must use a combination of firepower and deft helmsmanship to get through the Mountain, Rainbow, Stick, Striped, and

Bleak zones in one piece. The front cannon of the good ship Vanguard fires automatically. Quadradirectional firing is also possible by flicking the joystick in the desired direction. And if you swoop down on the energy pods in the Mountain zone, the ship will briefly become energized and can destroy enemies by ramming them.

This is the first cartridge with a "continued play" option. After the gamer loses the final incarnation of the ship, a message appears on the screen asking whether the arcader wishes a re-start or would prefer to begin again with fresh supplies from the point at which the round ended.

Then there's **Robot Commando Raid** (U.S. Games/Atari 2600). All is quiet as day breaks over the war-torn village, but it isn't long before the sound of approaching helicopters fills the air. Soon, enemy whirlybirds begin crossing the screen, dropping android soldiers by parachute. The arcader commands an anti-aircraft battery located at the center bottom of the screen. Using the joystick to aim the barrel and the action button to fire, the player must attempt to shoot down the helicopters, robot troops, and occasional heavy bomber as waves of attackers assault the town.

When a robot warrior lands, he will usually destroy a portion of one of the buildings in the little town. If a paratrooper comes to earth on top of a completely ruined structure or on open terrain, he will begin excavating a tunnel to undermine the gun. Sooner or later, the robot army will successfully burrow its way beneath your mighty weapon and put it out of commission. The trick is to see how long you can battle against overwhelming odds. Once things really get rolling, the pace of the battle is just incredible—ample proof that even electronic war can be hell.

**Ram It** (Telesys/Atari 2600) comes from a publisher best known until now for games that add the spice of humor to the action, like "Cosmic Creeps" and "Communist Mutants." Graphics are attractive and serviceable, but "humorous" is hardly the right word.

Players use the stick to move the duodirectional shooter vertically along a line that bisects the playfield. Both edges of the display are lined with small blocks, each a different color, stacked one above the next with a small space

separating each bar from the ones immediately above and below it.

Every bar starts growing toward the center of the playfield at the start of the game. The only way to chop a bar down to size is by blasting it using the shooter. If the gamer whittles a bar down section by section until it vanishes, that bar is then inoperative. On the other hand, if two parallel bars meet in the middle, the shooter can no longer move past the point of intersection. In some variations it is possible to blast an entire block out of existence with one shot, but this doesn't make "Ram It" any more sedate.

The longer the game continues, the faster the colored bars grow. Once "Ram It" works up a good head of steam, there are few one-player games that provide such continuous excitement.

**Baja Buggies** (Gamestar/Atari computer systems/16K/disk) was born at Arcade Plus, the company that made such a splash in the computer gaming world with the maze chase "Ghost Hunter." When Arcade Plus suddenly folded last year, the cream of that company's designers formed a new software house. Under the Gamestar aegis, "Night Rally"—a proposed Arcade Plus racing entry sort of like "Night Driver" (Atari/Atari VCS) with hi-res graphics—was entirely reconfigured.

The result is "Baja Buggies," the best auto-race computer game available for any existing system. Night has become day in this version, and the turbo-style racers are balloon-tired dune buggies screaming down a winding desert drag-strip. The contest is concerned primarily with position: A radar screen is displayed in the lower right of the playfield with one dot to indicate the player's position and a second to mark the current leader. As cars are passed, the gamer's car improves position.

Play is controlled not with paddle controllers, but with the joystick. The buggy will always drift if left to its own devices, so the player must monitor the left and right sway of the auto. "Baja Buggies" is a treat to watch with its clean wide-open graphics, but also a revelation to play, simulating driving (especially racing) better than some far more sophisticated controls can. Audio is a steady rumbling undertone. The scrolling mountains and clouds as well as the ribbon-like highway itself are remarkable, especially given that this wonder was squeezed into the minimum 16K to allow play on all Atari computers.

The only quibble is that when the player finally whips A.J. Cactus and company fair and square, he gets no audiovisual reward. Beating these customers is no easy task, and when the computer trumpets don't sound—well, you may feel a bit unappreciated. You *will* be able to engrave your *nom de*

game, and score can be recorded on the disk's vanity board which appears at the end of each contest.

**Astro Chase** (First Star Software/Atari computer systems/32K/disk) is from Fernando Herrera, who gained a small cult following with "Space Chase," his innovative early classic for the Atari computers. His big step forward, however, came with the program he designed for his learning-impaired son, "My First Alphabet." It won the first Atari Star Award from the company's Program Computer Exchange.

Copping that prize established Herrera as a major creative force in the Atari computer-software field. Then he joined forces with Pona Star, a small film company previously recognized primarily for *The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia*, and they established the first video-game/moviemaking crossover firm. The company, dubbed First Star after its prized designer, will make films that involve video games, which will then be released as games—sort of like *Tron* gone all the way. The initial offering from this ambitious company is Herrera's revolutionary "Astro Chase," a state-of-the-art space shoot-out with enough challenge and audiovisual frills to occupy the skill and imagination of any gamer.

The game opens with the first of seven interludes. From the end of a futuristic city block a space ace comes strutting from the house closest to us. Parked in front is an armed flying saucer. The space soldier moves underneath his craft, throws his home planet Earth a salute, and is beamed aboard.

The scene then shifts to the ship in space. The Earth is the largest object on screen and the focal point of the game. The pilot must protect his planet from the squadrons of invading aliens that pollute this sector of space. Full 360-degree scrolling allows the defender to venture out after the enemy in any direction. In fact, using an innovation First Star has dubbed "single thrust propulsion," the ship can move in one direction, lock on course, and then fire in any direction desired—even backwards.

Don't stray too far from Earth, however; the alien ships are not nearly as deadly as the floating space mines they loose in the direction of our home planet. Should a mine hit *terra firma*, the entire planet explodes in a burst of color and motion heretofore unmatched on any home game. Save the Earth, however, and you will star in those alternate intermissions mentioned earlier. In one a limo appears, the pilot boards, and he is taken off-screen in a parade complete with both the Army and Navy.

Played to the tune of "The 1812 Overture," "Astro Chase" is indeed a blast—a revolutionary game with graphic achievements of stunning virtuosity. ▼