

Arcade Alley

A Critical Look at Computer and Video Games

by Bill Kunkel and Arnie Katz

Keystrokes To Adventure



Quality Software's 'Return of Heracles' lands adventurers in ancient Greece.

Adventure programs account for nearly one-third of all computer-game sales, and that percentage is inching up year by year. Computerists, on average a bit older than their video-gaming cousins, are looking for games which test the head as well as the hand, and the adventure fills the bill. Then, too, those who live by the joystick must perish by the joystick—in plainer English, everyone's reflexes deteriorate with age. Many a gamer in his or her twenties has found the adventure-game category an antidote to shrinking success in blast-'em-ups.

Adventure games come in four basic formats, though each publisher has a few flourishes to contribute. Text (or prose) adventures leave much to the player's imagination by including no illustrations. Action adventures are a hybrid form in which the gamer moves the on-screen character with a joystick instead of typing orders on the keyboard. Illustrated adventures provide a drawing, generally in hi-res and color, of each scene in the game with accompanying text printed at the bottom of the screen. Animated adventures present some or all information to the players via animated sequences rather than still pictures.

With the exception of action adventures, these games generally proceed in more or less the same manner. The computer presents information about the current situation, the player types in

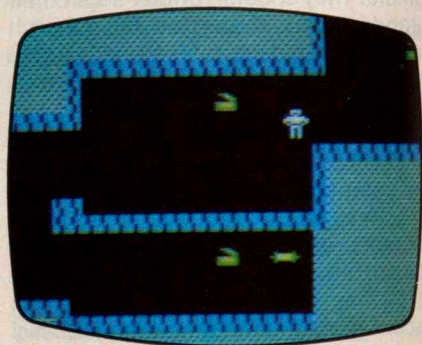
a command that reacts to this new information, the machine determines the consequences of the interaction between the situation and the player's orders and displays the results. One such turn succeeds the next until the player either achieves his goal or perishes in the attempt. Since even all-star adventurers seldom resolve the game in a single play session, most adventures can save a game in progress, and some can save several uncompleted contests simultaneously so that members of the same household can delve into the same adventure without interfering with each other.

Let's look at the state of the art in this gaming genre.

Gateway to Apschai (Epyx/Atari computers) is a descendant of one of the first popular adventure programs, "Temple of Apschai." Epyx has refined the original action-adventure concept, spruced up the game with better visuals, and created this 16K cartridge—in which the goal is to delve into an eight-level dungeon in search of a hidden passage to the famous holy place, scene of the earlier title.

The control scheme uses the joystick to move the on-screen character, and a combination of the action button and four special keys on the right side of the computer keyboard to do a surprisingly wide range of tasks. The Start key sets the character to use a sword or fire an arrow; the Select key does things like check the character's health status, inventory equipment and weaponry, drop items, and descend to the next lowest level. The Option key allows the player to move items from storage to readiness. To make any of these choices, hit the appropriate key until the desired function appears on a status line beneath the main screen display, then press the action button on the joystick to enter the order.

This setup has good and bad points. The biggest defect is that the player must sit right up close to the computer during the game to work the joystick



Epyx's 'Gateway to Apschai' combines arcade-style immediacy with strategy.

and press the function keys. (Of course adventure gamers generally have to sit at the keyboard anyway since most such games use typed-in commands.) The major plus is that the would-be hero can perform a variety of tasks without need to either learn a complex system of keystrokes or type every move into the machine. "Gateway" thus gives the gamer the same feeling of immediacy as an arcade-style action contest, while posing the same sort of mental test as a pure strategy program. Real-time execution requires the player to be quick-witted as well as canny since the monsters keep moving even if the digital warrior is paralyzed by the operator's momentary indecision.

"Gateway" provides an overhead view of the multi-room maze, but only rooms and corridors actually explored are depicted. Unless one finds a secret map, it is impossible to know what lies in unknown territory until one plunges into the labyrinth's uncharted section. The player's warrior must search each level, fighting or dodging an assortment of monsters along the way, to find the magical item and other aids which may eventually make it possible to storm the deepest level of the dungeon and find the passage to the temple itself.

Epyx deserves the victor's garland for refurbishing a classic concept. "Gateway to Apschai" is a must for adventure-gaming fans, and even hardcore action

lovers may find it likable. The Commodore 64 cartridge is just as good and highly recommended.

Return of Heracles (Quality Software/Atari computers) poses the question: must a great artist be prolific? The career of Stuart Smith is a powerful argument for quality over quantity. Though he's produced only two disks (the other is 1982's "Ali Baba") Smith is a contender for the title of top gun in adventureland.

"Heracles" doesn't quite make the leap from action adventure to animated adventure, but comes close. Up to four gamers individually direct one or more characters using a clever joystick-actuated control system on a mission to complete the legendary Twelve Labors of Heracles. Heroes and heroines travel around a map of Greece and surrounding lands, visiting famous places to gather loot and information or performing one of Zeus' assigned tasks. The many dangers found along the way, usually hostile beasts and warriors, fit in with the theme of the game, as does the musical accompaniment. Movement takes place in alternating turns—not simultaneously and in real-time, as in an authentic animated adventure—but lots of on-screen movement maintains high excitement. "Return of Heracles" is clearly the best action adventure available today.

Though mythology figures in **Crypt of Medea** (Sir-Tech/Apple), the program is more similar to "Raiders of the Lost Ark" in concept. The protagonist in this illustrated adventure must solve a succession of puzzles to escape from the often baffling crypt.

Puzzle dungeons are a form as old as computer gaming itself. While "Crypt of Medea" suffers from all the expected drawbacks of this type of contest, primarily the claustrophobic feeling of having to do everything in one immutable progression, it is a good first adventure. If you've never played an adventure game—or if you've tried and failed to get past the first stumbling block in other programs—"Crypt" is just what the (witch)doctor ordered.

Extra credit goes to the superb rules manual. Linda Sirotek gently guides the tyro through all the basic elements of adventuring, even providing actual examples of play that give insight into how to unravel the program's numerous logical puzzles. Pages of hints and solutions to sticky situations at the back of the booklet help those who can't progress unaided.

Will experienced quest-gamers enjoy "Crypt of Medea"? Those who like the puzzle-solving aspects of adventure games probably will, though others should instead investigate the same publisher's "Wizardry," which emphasizes fighting and action and allows for more freewheeling play. 