

Arcade Alley

by Bill Kunkel & Frank T. Laney II

A Critical Look at Video Cartridge Games & Programs



BALLY PROFESSIONAL ARCADE

- Gunfight
- Checkmate
- Scribing
- Brickyard/Clowns
- Seawolf/Missile
- Football

Anticipation ran high when the Bally Manufacturing Co. announced the debut of its Professional Arcade—or “Fun and Brains” as Bally dubbed the device. Gamers felt there was much reason to hope, since Bally has long reigned as the king of the amusement arcades.

Although the system is state-of-the-art in many respects, we found it something of a disappointment. It would be grossly unfair to label the Professional Arcade a failure, but it is less than a total success from the gamer's point of view. Most of the games are good, but they could have been better with just a little more design work.

Of course, Bally's system does much, much more than “just” play games. In effect, the Professional Arcade bridges the gap between game-playing machines and true home computers. A separately available module teaches the user a simple computer language that opens the door to a wide variety of applications. Bally owners with sufficient skill can even invent their own video games!

So it's important to remember, when

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reading this column, that we are evaluating the unit primarily as a home arcade. Those looking for easy entry into the world of home computing may well find that the Bally system is their best buy. See the VideoTest section, starting on page 24, for a review of the Professional Arcade by Berger-Braithwaite Labs.

One unusual feature of the Professional Arcade is that it is pre-programmed to play three games and function as a calculator. Since these programs are, in effect, part of the basic system, they are the logical place to start this examination of software.

GUNFIGHT is a two-player game as good as anything you'll find at the local amusement arcade. In fact, the commercial version has long enjoyed great popularity among gamers.

The home game makes maximum use of the Bally controller; players move their gunslinger with the joystick, aim with the paddle, and fire by squeezing the trigger. Gunfighters get six shots per round, and a 10-second reload cycle activates whenever one or both exhaust their ammo. A different field, with a varying number of obstacles, appears for each scoring set. Players can cover behind

trees, cacti, and even a lumbering covered wagon.

The well-animated gunfighters are relatively small compared to the size of the field, producing more fluid action than similar cartridges from other manufacturers. It's hard to devise a pat strategy for a game in which each player's actions so directly affect the other's moves, but “keep covered” makes a good beginning. The gunfighter who fires a hail of six bullets will score few hits—and will have ten agonizingly long seconds to contemplate his rashness.

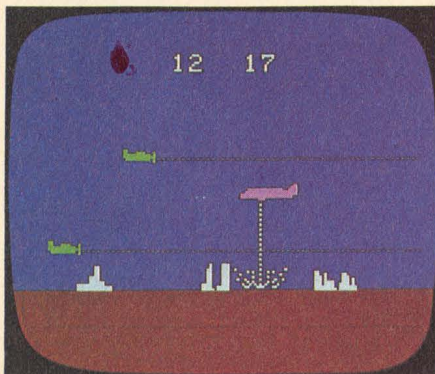
CHECKMATE, players steer their symbols across the playfield, creating serpentine lines on the screen. The object is to avoid crashing into any line or the boundary of the field. Averting a crash scores a point, and the cartridge program allows the players themselves to decide how many points constitute a complete game. We found that two out of three 11-point games makes a fair contest.

Checkmate is that home arcade rarity—a game playable by more than two at a time. Even better, it's one of the few multi-player games that uses the joystick. (Bally sells extra controllers for use by the additional players.)

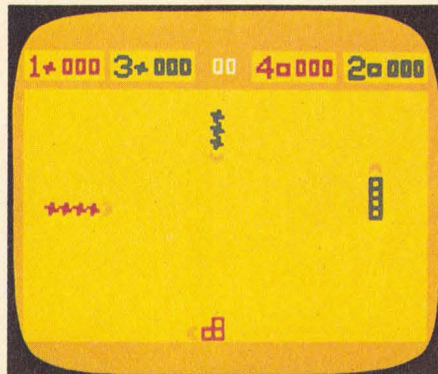
Simply trying to outlast your opponent is not as effective in Checkmate as it is in other, similar games. Steering is so easy that good positional play generally beats manual dexterity. Always pre-empt as much of the screen as possible during the first few seconds, since most rounds end when a player runs out of maneuvering room after getting blocked into a small section of the field.

SCRIBING, though not technically a game, deserves special mention. For our money, it's the best video drawing program available. Using the joystick to paint

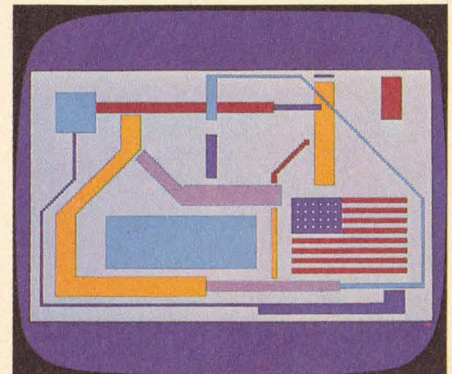
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Missile



Checkmate



Scribing

Arcade Alley

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and the keyboard to alter color, brightness, and hue, some electrifying visual effects are possible. For a pleasant diversion, let one player handle the joystick while the other works the keyboard.

Now let's turn to a few of the additional cartridges available for use with the Bally Professional Arcade. They retail for \$20 or \$25, and most have two games on a single cartridge.

BRICKYARD/CLOWNS (Videocade 2004) features two entertaining variations on the standard ball-and-paddle theme. In **Brickyard**, two players alternate attempts to score points by blasting a multi-layered wall. When the screen is cleared the machine automatically sets up a new target wall, the number of rounds pre-set by the players. Bally adds an extra strategic dimension by having both players pound away at the same wall, making them compete directly against each other for scoring opportunities.

Quick reflexes are more important than the anticipation of rebound angles, since

the ball takes some funny bounces after striking certain bricks. For best results, work on the bricks at the edges of the screen so that the ball quickly tunnels through. Once a ball is behind the wall it will rattle around, scoring points in bunches.

Clowns substitutes a teeter-totter for the paddle, a clown for the ball, and rows of balloons for the bricks—with fantastic results.

Clowns dance in to the calliope strains of *March of the Gladiators* and hop into space from platforms situated a quarter of the way up the screen on both sides. When the clown finally leaps into space, players try to catch him on the vacant end of their movable seesaws, sending his partner flying into the air to break balloons. The closer to the fulcrum of the teeter-totter the falling clown lands, the straighter the other one ascends. When arced into the air at the right angle, a clown can swing from balloon to balloon, bursting a whole run in a single flight.

Enchanting graphics and background sounds make this an ideal game for younger arcade addicts. But anyone who doesn't like this one should have his plug pulled.

SEAWOLF/MISSILE (Videocade 2002) is for arcade fans with a military bent. **Seawolf** combines outstanding graphics with chillingly realistic sound effects. It pits submarine against submarine in a race to sink the most battleships, tankers, and P.T. boats with non-guided projectiles. After firing a barrage of four torpedoes, each player must complete a 4-second load cycle before his sub is again ready to deal out computerized death.

Missile, on the other hand, is a rather straightforward and visually tame program. Each player moves a launcher along a horizontal axis and fires guided missiles at an array of airborne targets. A few more variations, such as different size and speed missiles, would greatly enliven this game.

The final bars of the National Anthem fade, the crowd roars, and it's time to play Bally **FOOTBALL** (Videocade 3002), one of the most exciting and true-to-life video sports games we've seen.

Between plays, the scoreboard flashes vital data: time remaining in the 4-minute half, score, down, and yards to go. The offense then secretly selects a play from a list that varies with down and field position. This is primarily a passing game, though an end run is possible in short-yardage situations. The graphics are superb, with the line of scrimmage always near the center of the screen, and the cheers and chants of the crowd keep the excitement level high. (Playing area is effectively increased by showing only the needed portion of the field at any one time.)

Although the game is easier to play than it might at first appear, it isn't the sort